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An Assimilation Cut Short: The Emerging Minoan Thalassocracy of 1628 B.C.

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**An Assimilation Cut Short:
The Emerging Minoan Thalassocracy of
1628 B.C.**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Classical Studies: Ancient Societies at
Vassar College*

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Introduction

The evidence of a so-called Minoan culture on Bronze Age Crete has left a fascinating and beckoning legacy in the archaeological record. Unable to translate Linear A, and flummoxed by an almost complete lack of military evidence, historians and archaeologists have been grappling with the task of untangling Minoan civilization for nearly a century. Perhaps most intriguing about Bronze Age Crete is its place in the larger geopolitical sphere of the Aegean. Minoan influence can be seen through the Cycladic islands as well as on mainland Greece,, hinting at a complex economic balance that held until an eruption of enormous magnitude ended the 2nd Palace Period on Crete. Before the destabilizing volcanic event that shifted power over Crete into Mycenaean hands. However the extent of Minoan influence remains tantalizingly unclear.

In examining this period of economic stability, scholars have developed the notion of a Minoan thalassocracy governing the functioning of a system of trade routes connecting the two largest Aegean Bronze Age powers through the Cycladic islands¹. Though both Minoan and Mycenaean materials have been found at the majority of Cycladic Bronze Age settlements, the architectural and artistic flavor of such sites, particularly in the southern Cycladic islands, have led many towards a

¹ Dickinson, 194
 Branigan 22-33
 Forsyth, 40-42
 Knappett, Nikolakopoulou, 1-42
 Dow, 3-32

tidy explanation of the Cycladic Islands as Minoan Colonies.² The political state of the Bronze Age Aegean may tempt us to attribute a modern understanding of “colonialism” to the Cycladic islands, and the lack of written records or political documents forces scholars to rely upon less precise interpretive methods when interpreting the Bronze Age. Thus, this so-called ‘Minoanization’ presents a challenging task for archaeologists looking to define a political landscape for the Bronze Age Aegean.

Ultimately the material evidence fails to confirm any rigid definition for the political state of the Cycladic islands compatible with our contemporary political vocabulary. Carl Knappet and Irene Nikolakopoulou (K&N) conclude in their article, “Colonialism without Colonies” that Minoanization represents “a form of colonialism within a shared cultural milieu.”³ This assertion fails to clarify the problem of defining governing power in the Cyclades in the Bronze Age, however it appears to be the best definition of the understanding of the political process by which sites were “Minoanized” that can be articulated with confidence. Ultimately, theirs is a theory of “object led acculturation”⁴ that, while incompletely answering the questions that I am investigating, illuminates the material record as the richest source for information concerning the interaction and political relationship between Minoan and Cycladic cultures. It is important to leave contemporary political bias by the wayside when attempting to decipher Bronze Age cultural exchange, and if we

²Doumas, 150

Branigan, 22-33

Dow, 3-32

Sakellarakis, 81-99

³ Knappet, Nikolakopoulou, 40

⁴ *ibid*

are to make archaeologically appropriate deductions based in the material record, we must be careful to only compare contemporaneous material.

The settlement of Akrotiri on the island of Thera stands out as the logical location from which to focus the question of the Cycladic islands' relationship with the Minoan civilization on Crete as its art, architecture and material wealth draw most prominently on Minoan tropes of all the Cycladic islands – a reassuring discovery considering that Thera resides in closest proximity to Crete of all of the Mediterranean islands and therefore would be a likely candidate for a Minoan colony or bastion of Minoan cultural influence. Of all the murkily defined Bronze Age cultures, Akrotiri stands to be the most promising example of a potential Minoan “colony.” In this context, the term “colony” will refer to a state culturally distinct from, but politically controlled by Minoan power,, or a settlement of completely Minoan origin found outside of Crete. And while this interpretation can be made to fit the archaeological record at Akrotiri, it may not be the best fit and has thus inspired deeper inquiry into the nature of the relationship.

Due to the illegibility of Linear A, the window into the Minoan Bronze Age is distinctly limited. And while art and architecture provide tempting, often useful, and readily accessible means by which to compare and connect Crete to Akrotiri, the analysis that can be drawn from such exercises is by its very nature imprecise. When determining the phases of Cretan and Thera culture that align at the time when Minoan material is most prevalent across the Cyclades, and thus Minoan influence over the Aegean may be said to be in its prime, the world of the domestic and mundane proves to be significantly more precise. Minoan loom weights, Linear

A script, and other domestic objects such as skillfully crafted stone basins are scattered across the Cyclades. This certainly implies a degree of interaction, but it is the abundance of not only Minoan pottery, but mimicry of the Minoan pottery style that is best equipped to bring to light the time period in which Crete shared an established economic and possibly political or cultural relationship with the Cyclades.⁵

Knappett and Nikolakopoulou make a careful analysis of the pottery at Akrotiri that offers an alternative to a model that places conquest at the forefront of cultural exchange in the Bronze Age Aegean. Rather than taking the existence of Minoan pottery at Akrotiri as indicative of a hegemonic presence, they assert that the infiltration of the Minoan style through economic contact was the spark that ignited the progression towards Minoanization. This model seems to more accurately reflect an archaeological record of the gradual integration of Minoan goods into the Theran quotidian than the notion of an invading Minoan, imperial force bent on conquest.

Knowing that pottery, in its ability to create a relative timeline through the development of the craft, will provide a handrail as we dive into the task of defining the period during which contact between Minoan Crete and Akrotiri is most significant, it would be prudent to provide a rough outline of the character and quantity of Minoan finds at Akrotiri as best evidenced by the most recent

⁵ *ibid*

Dickinson, 108-109, 242-245

Forsyth, 41-42

Doumas

Knappett, Nikolakopoulou, 1-42

excavations on Thera. The Early Minoan Period, heralding the rise of the 2nd Palatial Period, marks the beginning of evidenced contact between Crete and the Cyclades.⁶ In this period a widespread acceptance of ceramic forms develops across the Aegean, and the Cretan cities of Mochlos Palaikastro and Zakro mature into full-fledged port towns.⁷ While trade and contact are readily evidenced in the Early Minoan Period, it is not until the Middle Minoan period that Minoanization as a potentially colonial agent begins to take root.⁸ The 2nd Palatial Period was a time of great development and innovation, as the formerly isolated palace states display evidence of cosmopolitan leanings. The invention of the pottery wheel accelerated the proliferation of Minoan styles and by the Late Minoan period, Crete's presence in the Aegean is undeniable.⁹ Whereas the Early Minoan period saw Cycladic goods heading primarily north, the coinciding Middle Minoan III and Middle Cycladic periods saw Cycladic goods making their way south to Crete, implying that the Cycladic people were either recreating Minoan style vessels or were reusing previously acquired Minoan material as a means by which to transport goods.¹⁰ 2nd Palatial Period Crete was certainly a player in the economic culture of the Aegean, however the control that Crete exerted over islands participating in the system of trade remains a compelling question. And while the scope of material finds serves to limit the temporal boundaries of interaction between the two sites, I believe that the question of the political relationship between Crete and Akrotiri will be best

⁶ Dickinson, Doulas

⁷ Branigan, Forsyth,

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Knappett, Nikolakopoulou

¹⁰ Forsyth, 30-39

addressed by isolating and analyzing the moment in history when the two cultures seem most entangled with one another.

Ultimately, I will argue that the destruction of Thera, which I will date to 1628 B.C, interrupted the process of Theran acculturation. The tantalizing image of a Minoan thalassocracy was left by a civilization just coming into its geo-political dominance and as such the evidence left behind is that much more compelling and potentially confusing. With the bulk of their political and religious iconography, as projected through art and architecture, taking root in the soil of their nearest neighbor, the Minoans will emerge not as bold colonizers, but as a highly powerful, specialized, and influential culture that could not help but ~~to~~ rub off on their peers. Certainly there were advantages that came with an association with Minoan culture, and the people of both Akrotiri and Crete may have seen their place in the world as a reflection of the natural order of things, the will of their gods, or just smart politics. In a world where the sacred was political and vice-versa, colonization may take on the flavor of missionary work, however I believe that the road to Theran assimilation into Minoan culture was made more smooth by a common, overarching religious dogma in the Bronze Age Aegean. It is this commonality coupled with the technological achievement of the Minoans in the 2nd Palatial Period that confirms their level of influence and the ease with which it spread across the Aegean. With this in mind, Akrotiri is not a Minoan colony, but rather the first of potentially many islands to be consumed by the growing strength and prosperity of Crete.

Chapter 1: Isolating and Defining the Period of Greatest Interaction Between Crete and Thera

In determining the nature of the relationship between Akrotiri and Minoan Crete, and thereby imagining Minoan influence over the Aegean, it is first necessary to define the moment at which the interplay between the two cultures was at its most dynamic. The destruction of Thera precipitates and predates the fall of the 2nd Palatial Period on Crete and thus provides a perfectly preserved window into the so-imagined Minoan “colonial” period at its height.¹¹ Unifying the chronologies of both Crete and Akrotiri around the catastrophic eruption of Thera will provide a period of comparison best suited to interpreting the nature of Minoan influence at Akrotiri. However, isolating the correct historical phases as represented by the archaeological record that represent a unified moment in the absolute timeline between Akrotiri and Crete is a task that is yet to elicit consensus from the scholarly community¹². In the following paragraphs I will attempt to synthesize the archaeological evidence and its scholarly interpretations to define a coherent and compelling timeline for the interactions that have been classified by some as the Minoanization of Akrotiri.¹³ In marking these temporal boundaries I hope to centralize the discussion of Minoan influence over the Aegean around the time of

¹¹ Luce, Bolton, 9-18
Branigan, 22-33
Forsyth, 60-61, 70, 103, 114

¹² Ibid

Luce, Bolton, 9-18

¹³ Dickinson, 245-247
Branigan, 22-33

the cultures greatest prominence so as to best reflect the most complete imagining of the Minoan Bronze Age.

The Destruction layer at Akrotiri is a particularly appealing choice as the site is preserved in a state that has not been made more complex by continued habitation. Furthermore, ramifications of the volcanic event at Thera were so powerful that they disrupted Minoan culture; ultimately destabilizing Crete to such a degree that Mediterranean power would shift to the Mycenaeans of the main land for the duration of the Bronze Age. This decline would suggest that Minoan whatever Minoan Thalassocracy may have existed, or whatever reach their culture had across the rest of the Aegean would be diminished by Crete's decline. Thus focusing on a time contemporaneous with the eruption of Thera on Crete becomes the ideal choice for isolating the height of Minoan power and influence in the Mediterranean. Placing the eruption at the apex of Minoan cultural dominance in the Aegean and accepting it as the catalyst for Minoan decline, sets a point to which both relative timelines on Thera and Crete can be traced. This point of convergence allows for the timelines to be set parallel to one another, thus highlighting the phase at Akrotiri during which Minoan power in the Aegean was at its height and the relationship between the two sites can be presumed to be most developed. Scientific advances in archaeology such as Dendrochronology and the analysis of ice core samples have allowed the date of the Eruption to be precisely marked during the year 1628 B.C. Applying the parallel relative timelines to this knowledge confirms that Thera erupted during the nascent days of the Late Minoan IB (LMIB) pottery phase, and established the waning days of the Late Minoan IA (LMIA) phase as the

period of time during which Minoan power was most potent in the Aegean¹⁴. The chart below asserts the timeline that will characterize the analysis of art, architecture, and archaeology herein.

<u>Approx. Date B.C.</u>	<u>Cretan Phase</u>	<u>Theran Phase</u>
<i>2000-1900</i>	Middle Minoan IB-IIA	Middle Cycladic (early)
<i>1900-1800</i>	Middle Minoan IIB-IIIA	Middle Cycladic
<i>1800-1700</i>	Middle Minoan IIIB	Middle Cycladic (late)
<i>1700-1628</i>	Late Minoan IA-IB	Late Cycladic I-II
<i>1628-1450</i>	Late Minoan II-IIIA	Late Cycladic (early)
<i>1450-1200</i>	Late Minoan IIIA-IIIC	Late Cycladic III

It is with this context in mind that I will confirm my choice for an absolute date for the eruption of Thera, compose relative chronologies for both Akrotiri and Crete that are compatible with this date, and set them parallel to each other in order to define the site of Akrotiri as it remains preserved as the ideal window into the spread of Minoan culture throughout the Aegean.

Technological advancements have reinvigorated the search for an absolute date to which the destruction of Akrotiri can be attributed. Through Dendrochronology (the practice of using tree rings to create a chronology) and the Analysis of Ice Core samples (the practice of reading a chronology from the stratification of ice that has remained frozen since and can be traced back to the desired period of study) archaeologists have reliably dated the eruption to 1628

¹⁴ This is consistent with the widespread, post-Minoan Bronze Age destruction of 1200 BC

BC¹⁵, however this date conflicts with Bronze Age scholarship that dates -through pottery chronologies, Egyptian King lists, and other comparative methods – the destruction of Thera to the period between 1550 and 1450 BC.¹⁶ J.V. Luce is a proponent of this relative, low dating, and while I am unwilling to turn a blind eye to the hard science, I admit that his interpretation of the sequence of the eruption and its dating relative to the culture on Crete is too compelling to ignore. The intermingling of material evidence from both cultures allows for a relative timeline to be established with confidence, however I contest that this chronology has been fixed against inappropriate absolute dates. We do no harm to the timeline of the Bronze Age by dating the eruption of Thera to 1628 BC through Dendrochronology and ice core samples. In fact, this date places the end of the Minoan pottery phase in line with the eventual Mycenaean dominance and allows the Greek Dark Ages the space to breath and emerge from the mysterious collapse of 1200 B.C. Thus I advocate for 1628 BC as the absolute date of the destruction but embrace Luce's relative chronology. Surely, this is a bold move, as pushing the destruction of Thera back to 1628B.C. extends the reign of Mycenaeans on Crete and further removes the Greeks of the Dark Age from Minoan evidence and influence. Despite these consequences, the scientific evidence is so compelling and provides such an invaluable and precise dating mechanism that it is worth refitting an equally compelling relative chronology so that they might coexist, forming a highly defensible chronology of Bronze Age Crete. Furthermore, disrupting the chronology

¹⁵ Phyllis K. Forsythe mentions the scientific advances that have influenced her dating of the destruction layer at Akrotiri as well as the basic theory behind the methods. Forsyth, 60-61, 70, 103, 114

¹⁶ Luce, Bolton, 13

following the decline of Minoan culture, while historically significant, will not muddle interpretations placing Crete against her contemporaries, and as such I am comfortable moving forward fitting the archaeological evidence on Thera and Crete to the absolute eruption date of 1628 B.C.

Currently, the debate over the dating of the Thera eruption hovers around whether it occurred during the Late Minoan IA (LMIA) phase or the Late Minoan IB (LMIB) phase¹⁷. At first glance, the material at Akrotiri most closely resembles the LMIA pottery phase influencing Doctor Sinclair Hood to assert a timeline in which Mainland Crete flourishes into the LMIB after Akrotiri is buried during the LMIA.¹⁸ By Hood's account, the destabilization of Mainland Crete is obliquely determined by the eruption on Thera but more wholly credited to foreign aggression from the Mycenaeans on the mainland.¹⁹ However, Thera's ash with a particular refractive index²⁰ and evidence of natural disaster found in the LMIB layers on Crete cast suspicion on Hood's conclusions.²¹ Thus, the task of determining a relative chronology for Crete initially rests upon the interpretation of volcanic ash from Thera that is evidenced in Minoan soil. Ultimately, the evidence on Crete suggests a destabilization that is tied materially and chronologically to the eruption of Thera and denies the likelihood of outright Mycenaean conquest. First and foremost, Accepting a LMIA eruption cannot account for the abundance of Ash and tephra in the LMIB layers on Crete. The findings of Dr. and Mrs. Vitaliano reveal that 70% of

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Hood 98-106

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Luce, Bolton, 14

²¹ *ibid*

soil samples taken east of Sitea contained evidence of Thera ash and 50% west of Sitea showed the same.²² Thus, the eruption of Thera is certainly contemporaneous with the layers on Crete in which the tephra particles are evidenced. In light of this information, it is necessary to reconcile the discrepancy in pottery phase between Crete and Akrotiri with the geological evidence that places ash from Akrotiri's destruction in a stratigraphical layer believed to have occurred decades into the future. The solution, as I will show, arises from reexamining the boundaries of the relative chronology of the two sites and accounting for the cultural, physical, and economic separation that differentiated Akrotiri from Crete in our imaginings of the city just prior to its destruction.

The relative chronology at Akrotiri is dependant on the timeline established for the island's destruction. Determining the number of eruptions, and the amount of hours, days, or even years separating the initial, warning earthquake and the final eruption of Thera not only creates a workable timeline for Akrotiri, but also provides a mold into which the chronology of Crete may be made to fit. Though some argue for two separate discharges of the Thera volcano²³, Luce's findings convincingly support a model, which advocates for a single, massive eruption in the immediate wake of a foreboding earth quake on Thera. It is clear that the people of Akrotiri were able to evacuate their city following the geological warnings of the active volcano, however evidence of vegetable, humus material in the "soil" between the earthquake damage and volcanic ash layer has led Luce to investigate the

²² The Vitalianos' analysis of tephra on Crete, though inconclusive and perhaps not tailored to address my area of inquiry provided J.V. Luce with an excellent catalyst to spur his curiosities and inform my interpretation of the destruction layer at Akrotiri Vitaliano, 19-24

²³ C. Doumas 1974, 110-115

duration between these seismic events²⁴. The growth of vegetation would seem to advocate for a lengthy interlude between quake and eruption, as the time it would take for plant life to take root would advocate for at least months of delay. However, soil analysis provides an ingenious answer to this puzzle that allows for a more immediate catastrophe. First undertaken by Dr. J. Money, Luce reinvigorated the project with the addition of a soil sample of reddish color taken from the destruction layer on Thera in 1968.

Table 1: Analysis of Samples from Thera

<u>Sample</u>	<u>Alkali-soluble humus (mgs./gm.)</u>	<u>Phosphate as P₂O₅ (mgs./gm.)</u>	<u>Ferric Iron, Fe₂O₃ (mgs./gm)</u>
A.1 (clean pumice, Money)	Nil	Trace	1.2
A. 3 (brownier, humic material, Money)	8.2	0.2	3.55
L. 1 (reddish-brown material, Luce)	2.0	Trace	3.8

The findings revealed that though the samples were pollen-free (and therefore unlikely to be representing live vegetative material) there was indeed vegetative material in the soil layer, however it could easily be attributed to the plant matter used in creating mud bricks, thus describing this soil layer as the decayed remnants of architectural structures²⁵. Despite identifying the soil layer as refuse from the initial seismic activity on Thera, the question of it's reddish color owed to its concentration of Ferric Iron precludes Luce from making an immediate

²⁴ The period of time between the earthquake and the eruption of Thera is particularly important because a large gap between the events would provide an entirely different interpretive baseline for the evacuation of Akrotiri as well opening questions regarding Crete's response to such warning signs. Luce, Bolton 10

²⁵ Luce, Bolton, 10

conclusion. Chemical analyst, Dr. Cornwall of the London Institute of Archaeology explains that a fresh eruption would produce ferrous, rather than ferric, iron which is green, rather than red in color, and that in order to account for the red color in the soil the layer would have had to have undergone the often lengthy process of oxidation. Luce, however, is vindicated in this matter as the intense heat from the descended tephra layer would be sufficient to oxidize the ferrous compounds into their ferric cousins²⁶. This scientific evidence coupled with the tendency of vegetative soil to appear specifically in locations that would have been occupied by mud brick advocates for a short delay between the foreboding quake and the ultimate volcanic destruction of Thera.²⁷ This rejects the idea of a dormant “ghost town” at Akrotiri for any significant period of time in the interim between the earthquake and the eruption, and allows for the impact of the eruption to fit more immediately within the timeline of the evacuation and the following destabilization of Crete.

Guided by Luce’s explanation for the circumstances surrounding the Destruction of Thera, the question of its effects on the destabilization of Minoan Crete in the 2nd Palace Period can now be attended to. In order to fit the chronology of the decline of Crete into that of the Destruction of Thera, it is necessary to establish the nature of the events that precipitated the fall of Minoan culture. Archaeological evidence on Crete certainly advocates against the possibility of a violent destabilization, while supporting claims that set the eruption of Thera as the primary destabilizing event for Crete. Considering that the magnitude of no volcanic

²⁶ *ibid*, 11

²⁷ Doulas, 1974, 111

event has approached Theran levels in all of recorded history, that Bristle Cone Pines as far North as Ireland display stunted growth as a consequence of the disaster, and the archaeological evidence of Crete's decline, it is difficult to imagine the destabilization of Crete as not being tied to this natural disaster in at least some capacity. The Widespread and simultaneous nature of the decline advocates for the involvement of large scale, natural forces rather than an invasion especially when taking note of the limitations of naval prowess and available population for the hypothetical Mycenaean host. Furthermore, the sudden absence of agriculture on the entire eastern half of the island (of Crete) is a fitting consequence of an eruption of Thera's magnitude²⁸. The lack of unburied bodies in destabilized Cretan cities also speak to natural intervention (as natural disasters allow a society to bury their dead where invasions do not), and sherds of pottery from the same pot found at great distances from each other²⁹ suggest a Crete that was first, and necessarily, weakened by a natural disaster and then fell pray to Mycenaean conquest³⁰. Taking into account the presence of Theran ash on Crete, and the widespread natural ramifications of the eruption, the eventual decline of Minoan society on Crete can be attributed to the same cataclysmic event responsible for the destruction of Akrotiri. Attributing Cretan destabilization as such, the height of civilization at Akrotiri coincides with the apex of Minoan power in the Aegean.

Accepting the short temporal gap between the earthquake and the eruption (perhaps as short as 2 weeks) and that the destruction of Thera was the

²⁸ Page, 11-12

²⁹ Seager, 23

³⁰ Luce, Bolton 11-12

precipitating event for Minoan decline, the disparity in phase between the pottery findings at Akrotiri and the pottery surrounding the ash deposits on Crete must be reconciled in order to preserve the chronology. While not nearly as well represented as it is on Crete, the LMIB “Marine Style”, which featured naturalistic depictions of aquatic life on wheel crafted vessels³¹ is evident on Akrotiri³². The samples are of an immature quality and are not portrayed on the vessel shapes that have been classified as LMIB on Crete, but they do allow us to understand Akrotiri at the time of its destruction as being contemporary to LMIB Crete. The Marine Style shows itself on a table painted with dolphins and seaweed covered rocks as well as in the representations of dolphins in the miniature fresco of the West House and the swallows of the Spring Fresco³³. Kathleen Bolton supplements Luce’s conclusions by noting that at a site on the scale of Akrotiri such examples may be sufficient enough evidence that Thera was running concurrently with LMIB Crete³⁴. The Marine Style came into prominence and was most prominently manufactured at Knossos³⁵. The nascent nature of the style would likely classify vessels decorated as such as luxury items and thus they would be less likely to appear in abundance in the distant and less opulent Cyclades. If this logic holds, it also stands to reason that such luxury items, if they existed at Thera at all, were likely to have been taken by evacuating citizens for safe keeping. Knappett and Nikolakopoulou defend the early LMIB dating of the eruption via their examination of the presence of the Marine Style at

³¹ Dickinson

³² Luce, Bolton 13

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*, 17

³⁵ Knappett, Nikolakopoulou

Akrotiri, noting that despite Akrotiri's small scale it's elite residents would still have (limited) access to and ambition to own fine Minoan wares³⁶. Thus, fine art need not entirely trickle into Akrotiri, placing the Marine style in the category of the avant gard and as a rare, but plausible possession of wealthy Therans. Furthermore, the LMIA findings at Akrotiri display an exceptionally mature style that supports the notion that the LMIA style had been firmly established and perfected at Akrotiri³⁷ while the LMIB style began to spread throughout the Aegean. Finally, the amount of LMIB pottery found on Crete in the period leading up to the destabilization layer is meager enough to espouse suspicion of whether or not Crete could be said to have yet fully entered the LMIB period³⁸. Thus, I am confident in accepting an LMIB Destruction date for Thera and raising the chronology to place the Early LMIB phase at 1628 BC in accordance with modern, scientific dating methods, and accepting LMIA as the height of a stable, Minoan Bronze Age Aegean on the brink of an unforeseen volcanic destruction, and will search therein for evidence of a Minoan Thalassocracy. This chronology allows Akrotiri to be an important player within the "Minoan economic orbit"³⁹ during Crete's most prosperous and last distinctly Minoan phase, thus providing the best vantage point from which to untangle the political landscape of the Bronze Age Aegean.

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ Luce, Bolton 12

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Forsyth, 41

Chapter 2: An Architectural Analysis of Akrotiri in Reference to the Architectural Language on Crete

In attempting to draw a conclusion about the nature of the relationship between the port town of Akrotiri on Thera and the Palatial Minoan society on Crete, I believe it is relevant to begin with an examination of the apparent Minoan architectural influence evidenced at Akrotiri. Though the settlement at Akrotiri is considerably smaller in scale than the palaces on Crete, more than any other Cycladic settlement, Akrotiri strongly echoes Cretan palatial architectural tropes in signifying places of presumably religious/political (both can certainly occur concurrently) significance. These similarities will anchor my claim that the comparison is worth being made and will, to my mind, confirm that a connection exists between the sites. However, a mere connection cannot address the nuances of Minoan influence over the Bronze Age Aegean and as such I purport to use the unyielding remnants of architecture at Akrotiri as the first stepping stone on a path towards greater clarity concerning the question of Minoanization. Though architectural evidence must not be taken without an interpretative grain of salt, the fact remains that the ruins of Akrotiri represent evidence that can be confidently attributed to the Therans, and examined as fixtures of both daily and ceremonial life. Additionally, It must be noted that any site will have a unique architectural flavor determined by the availability of materials and local traditions⁴⁰, the architectural evidence at Akrotiri so strongly advocates for a complex relationship with Crete that it warrants closer examination.

⁴⁰ In his article, McEnroe attributes some of the material differences between Crete and Thera to the availability of natural resources at both sites. McEnroe, 14

Doumas explains that Minoan influence began to rear its head architecturally in the Cyclades during the Late Cycladic period.⁴¹ Since settlement of Thera is evidenced far earlier, the addition of Minoan architectural flair speaks to an evolving Akrotiri. Whether a Minoan influenced architectural program was mandated, mimicked, or adopted subconsciously, a turn towards Minoan architectural tropes surely speaks to a growing relationship between Crete and Akrotiri in this period, and thus my investigation into the architectural connections between Crete and Akrotiri is confirmed in its efforts to focus on the period leading up to Akrotiri's destruction.

Architectural tropes are so pertinent to a comparative study of ancient civilizations as the limits of technology and dictates of style evident at a given sight speak towards an architectural status quo. Thus, these tropes stem from a common or cultural understanding of construction methods and/or stylistic choices embodying the social, political, and even religious expectations of the people who employ them. As such, in this chapter I will conclude that the degree of communication and commonality between the palatial and domestic architecture on Crete and that on Akrotiri is sufficient evidence of prolonged contact and coexistence between at least certain individuals from these cultures. Akrotiri could not have been built if not for the knowledge of Minoan architects who either personally oversaw the construction of the port town, trained Theran architects, or influenced Therans who were able to travel to Crete for a long enough time and under peaceful enough conditions to allow them to return to Thera and implement

⁴¹ Doumas, 1983, 43

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⁴² *ibid*

⁴² *ibid*

the ambassadors of the Minoan cutting edge to the modern world. Sprawling, rich, and sophisticated, it is no understatement to label Minoan palatial architecture enormous. Sites dominated by labyrinthine palaces boast multi-storied buildings of limestone, alabaster and gypsum made from skillfully cut Ashlar blocks with large windows, expansive storage magazines, decorative columns, grand stairways and sophisticated drainage systems; but they gain their distinctly Minoan flavor through architectural elements such as pier-and-door partitions, lustral basins, light wells, and horns of consecration⁴³. Figure 1 displays the layout of the grand palace of Knossos on Crete, with its labyrinthine sprawl and dominant central court. Contemplating the image above, one can easily imagine an archaic Greek traveler mistaking the extensive storage magazines for a labyrinth and generating such classical myths as Theseus and the Minotaur given that the scale of Knossos is uncontested among its architectural peers. And while nothing on Akrotiri can hope to rival Knossos, by examining the monumental, palatial architecture here, one can best train their eye to find vestiges of Minoan culture in the Cyclades. Knossos represents the height of Minoan innovation both technologically and stylistically, providing examples of the hallmarks of Minoan architecture in their greatest form,

⁴³ Nearly every account of Minoan Palaces, specifically Knossos, offer up a similar list of noteworthy and defining features. Dickinson's nearly complete survey of the Bronze Age is sufficient for an overview, though Dumas' careful archaeological study of Knossos is also worth consulting. Dickinson 147-149, 247, Mosso, 64, 81, 120 Cotterell, 151 Higgins, 44-45 Dumas 1983, 53-54 Dickinson, 147

and as such provides an ideal type-site in which we can recognize the tropes of Minoan architecture.

Pier-and-Door Partitions, also called polythyra⁴⁴, are arguably the most obvious and easy to identify element of Minoan construction. Ingeniously serving multiples functions as walls, windows, room dividers, and structural supports, they consist of segments of interior wall that can be swiveled in order to create varying amount of open space within a grand Minoan chamber. They may be exterior walls that pivot to become windows or interior walls that pivot to open up a chamber to larger or smaller audiences, and by virtue of their form they can do the work of columns in holding upper stories aloft without compromising the flexibility of a space. As innovative as they are elegant, pier-and-door partitions at Knossos not only enabled the functional flexibility of space, but also enabled spaces to perform a paradigm shift of sorts, with one set comprising the exterior wall of the throne complex (*items 10&11*) allowing it to transform from private space to an open pulpit from whence Minoan leaders might address the public assembled in the Central Court.⁴⁵ Beyond serving as markers of Minoan architecture, the pier-and-door partitions also speak to the values and customs of Minoan culture as one in which, at least at times, the public gaze was welcomed into otherwise potentially private spaces. Thus I shall not only look for the presence of pier-and-door partitions at Akrotiri to signal Minoan influence, but also for architectural choices that blur the distinction between public and private spaces.

⁴⁴ Dickinson, 147

⁴⁵ Dickinson, 149



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Light wells (*Fig. 1 item 3*) are chambers without ceilings that were not meant for human occupation but rather to allow light to penetrate from above into the lower levels of a structure⁴⁶. Minoan architecture embraced a multi-storied approach and in buildings as large as Minoan palaces, light wells were a necessary solution

to the puzzle of keeping the lower levels of interior sections of the palace illuminated.⁴⁷ Lustral basins (*Fig. 1 item 12*), often lined with iridescent gypsum, consist of a sunken portion of a room set off by a balustrade and are presumed to have had a cult function.⁴⁸ Lustral Basins appear to have been integral to Minoan Architectural language as they are prevalent in all palaces and the majority of grand houses⁴⁹. At Knossos, the primary lustral basin can be found off of the main throne complex on the palace's west wing off of the central court. The basin allows light to spill into the chamber, playing off of the reflective qualities of the gypsum, but unlike a light well it's decorative embellishment and prominent location within Cretan homes and palaces suggests a functionality (likely religious) beyond the utilitarian. Though the exact importance of the Lustral Basin remains unqualified, it

⁴⁶ Forsythe, 83

⁴⁷ Dickinson, 146-7

⁴⁸ For a basic overview of Lustral Basins and their presumed functions see: Dickinson, 149, 151, 274

Doumas, 106, 125

Forsythe, 55-59

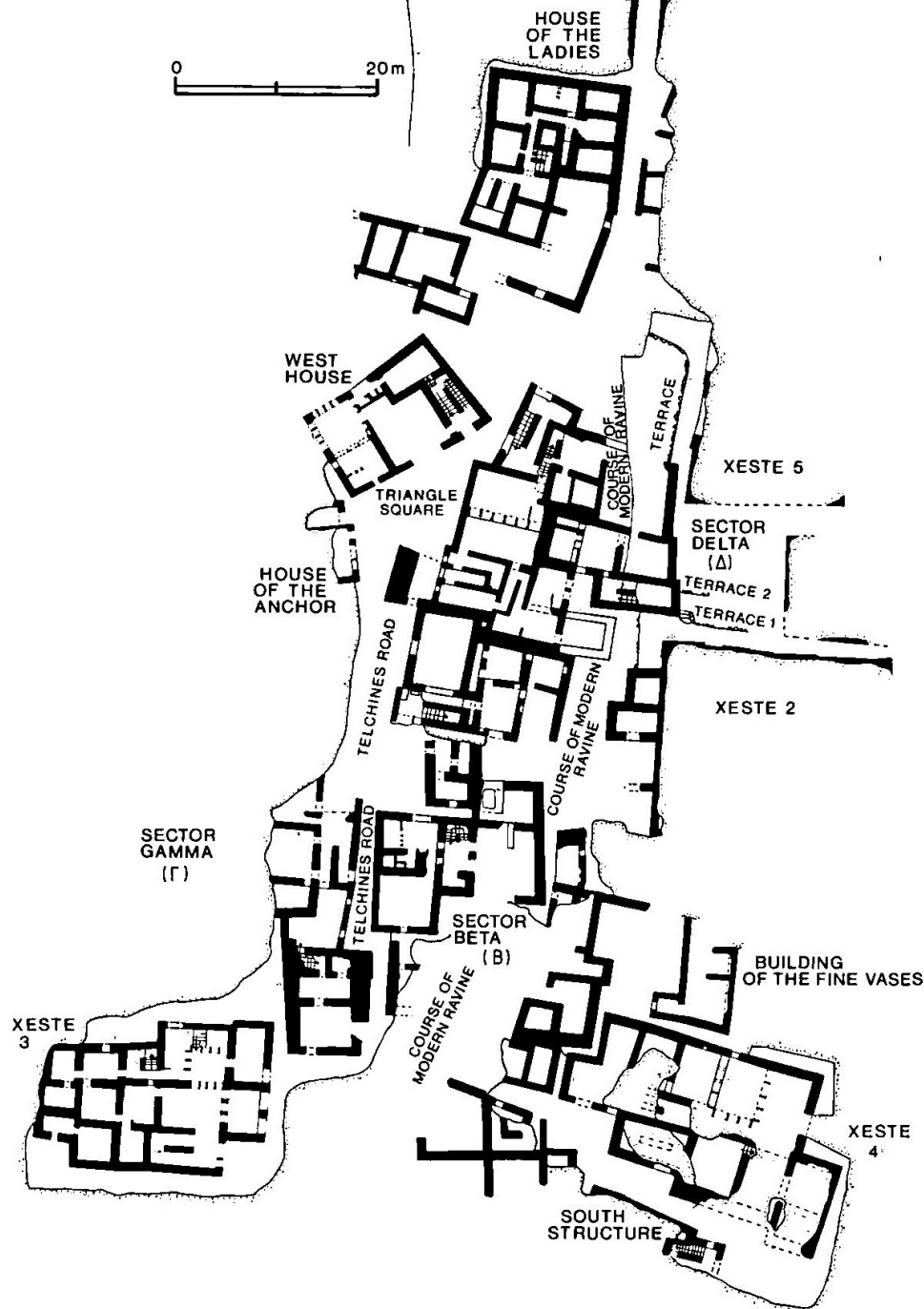
⁴⁹ McEnroe, 5

is distinctly Minoan, and basins of the type depicted in Figure 2 are only evidenced on Crete and Akrotiri, supporting a notion of Minoan influence at Akrotiri.

Furthermore, the presence of lustral basins at Akrotiri suggests that the Therans either have some shared cultural, political, or religious belief system that prioritizes the lustral basin, built lustral basins in order to impress an economically superior Minoan ally, were coerced into building these structures, or that lustral basins at Akrotiri represent the homes of occupying Minoan officers. Regardless of how you parse it, my assertion of contact, influence, and a significant, sustained cultural intersection holds and is bolstered by the echoing of Minoan architectural tropes at Akrotiri.

An additional, though typifying element of Minoan architectural embellishment, the so-called, iconic Horns of Consecration are a symbol that may be painted or carved in the shape of a bull's horns that have been taken as the predominate cult symbol of the Minoan culture and have been used to support theories of bull worship at Knossos as well as to further tie the site into the myth of the Minotaur. While these "horns" are possibly decorative, they were most likely tied to cult practices on Crete⁵⁰, and their appearance at Akrotiri further supports my emphasis on contact and emulation, and their symbolic power, whatever it may have been, cannot be disregarded especially when proudly displayed at a port town on an island of arguable and unclear affiliation with the Minoan culture. Each element of Minoan architectural style draws attention to Akrotiri's place in the

⁵⁰ for an overview of Horns of Consecration in both Minoan and Theran contexts see: Dickinson, 148, 177, 278
Forsythe, 43, 44, 56, 100, 101



Minoan world, however it is only by appreciating that larger distribution and architectural flavor of Akrotiri itself that one can more fully appreciate Thera's unique place in modern accounts of the Bronze Age.

Each of the aforementioned signifiers of Minoan architecture can be observed in some form at Akrotiri, and while this alone is intriguing, their distribution across the site advocates for the strong presence of Minoan culture at Akrotiri. Phyllis K. Forsythe is quick to bring attention to the proliferation of Minoan Architectural

Tropes, writing, “The architecture of Akrotiri...blends two traditions, one local, the other Minoan. The Minoan features include rooms with pier-and-door partitions, sunken chambers known as *adyta* or lustral basins, light wells and horns of consecration atop buildings.”⁵¹ The Xestēs, large buildings with prominent Minoan features⁵², all display fine ashlar work with structures built in the Minoan fashion with rubble, mud mortar and timber support beams to minimize earthquake damage, rising 2 or 3 stories, and boasting plastered walls and mosaic floors⁵³. Sewers strongly harkening to those found on Crete have even been excavated under the roads of Akrotiri⁵⁴, and Complex Alpha holds a storage magazine very much in the Minoan vein⁵⁵. Furthermore, masons’ marks, the stamp-like signatures of Minoan architects, give credit to craftsmanship within the town of Akrotiri just as in the grand palaces on Crete⁵⁶. Of Akrotiri, Forsythe confirms that features such as large windows flanking the doorway of many buildings, Minoan-style storage magazines, complex sewage systems, and some emphasis placed on communal squares – a thoroughly Minoan practice, reflect evidence of communication between the two cultures⁵⁷. Though similarities in construction material could be attributed to the availability of resources on these not-so-distant islands, the thematic and monumental architectural elements undoubtedly encourage an interpretation of Akrotiri that owes much to a Minoan legacy.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 44

⁵² *ibid*, 52

⁵³ *ibid*, 54, 60, 61

Dickinson, 147

⁵⁴ Dumas 1983, 50

⁵⁵ Forsythe, 84-85

⁵⁶ Dickinson, 152

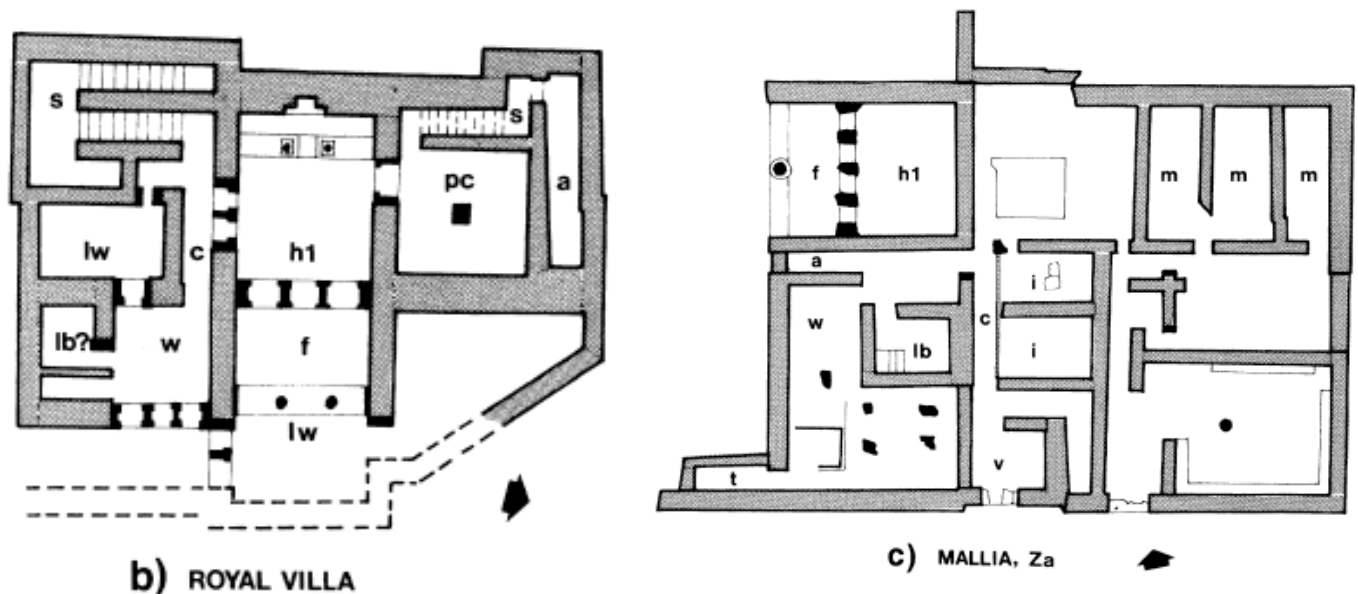
⁵⁷ Forsythe, 63, 66, 67 72

As I will highlight when examining specific edifices within the township of Akrotiri, Minoan palatial architectural themes are evident in Akrotiri to such a degree that denial of contact between the two sites is incompatible with the archaeological record of both sites. While the nature of this relationship may not be made entirely clear by the architectural record, the evidence of contact is certainly enough to validate further inquiry into the relationship between the Minoan culture at the height of its power and the islands that lay between her and mainland Greece. As revealed in Figure 4, Akrotiri consisted of complexes defined by an architectural jumble of rooms agglomerated one onto the other, and free standing edifices, which are named as in the case of the West House, the House of the Ladies, and the Xestes. This architectural plan speaks of a people, a culture, and a society that existed before the Minoans, but also of a society with much invested in mimicry of contemporary Minoan culture through architecture. Whatever autonomy Akrotiri held, the language of power, importance, and status as communicated by palatial architectural elements was heavily Minoan, and in light of this, the question of the nature of Minoan influence over Akrotiri becomes that much more enticing. The Akrotiri of the destruction level at Thera is heavily invested in the projection and employment of Minoan architectural tropes, a fact with near certain socio-political ramifications.

The simple acknowledgement of the presence of distinctly Minoan architectural elements becomes that much more compelling when examined beyond the palatial and the monumental. In his article, "A Typology of Minoan Neopalatial Houses," John McEnroe classifies Minoan houses contemporary with the period of

the destruction of Akrotiri into three architectural categories, which he simply labels Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3 (from most grand to least). This exercise is incredibly valuable to my examination of the Bronze Age Aegean as it will allow me to determine how faithfully Minoan patterns were being emulated at Akrotiri as well as allowing a glimpse into the economic posturing and stratification at work on Thera. A typology of Minoan houses provides a framework removed from the palatial example and closer to the humbler architectural scale evidenced at Akrotiri. Thus, when viewed in tandem, the connection between Theran and Minoan homes and palaces provides a more complete picture of Theran culture and its potential dependence on or derivation from Minoan culture. While the palaces provide a measure against which something's "Minoan-ness" can be gleamed, the houses of Crete come closer to establishing how things may have been on a mundane scale for the residents of Akrotiri. While it cannot be assumed that Minoan social stratification was echoed 1:1 at Akrotiri, McEnroe's examination of domestic architecture allows us to imagine Akrotiri in terms of its entire population rather than by the legacy left by her elite. Though there are bound to be differences between the lives a fisherman at Akrotiri and a palace dependent of Knossos, the similarities exhibited within their homes allows one to pick out elite versus mundane architectural themes and to determine the compatibility between hierarchy as evidenced by both cultures' architectural programs. It is through this examination that I will conclude that the typology of "domestic" architecture at Akrotiri draws so many cues from the Minoan example that Thera must be seen as being acquainted with Minoan culture, and that, furthermore, the population of

Akrotiri is likely to have been culturally similar to the Minoans. By virtue of exhibiting Minoan architectural strategies for stratification, and the prominence and prevalence with which Minoan palatial architecture is evidenced at Akrotiri, the distinction between cultures is hard to draw, and as such I will defend the notion of Minoanization at Akrotiri without yet feeling compelled to categorize this cultural assimilation as peaceful or aggressive; completed architectural projects say little of the climate in which they were built, however they do loudly proclaim the dominant cultural force of their time.



McEnroe highlights the defining features of a Type 1 house as Elite space, or rather as containing architectural features associated with Minoan palatial architecture⁵⁸. such as Lustral Basins, grand halls, pier-and-door partitions and light wells. Unique to the Type 1 Minoan house is the forehall, a sunken space separating the main hall from a light well. The forehall (identified above as *f*) seems to be a

⁵⁸ McEnroe, 3

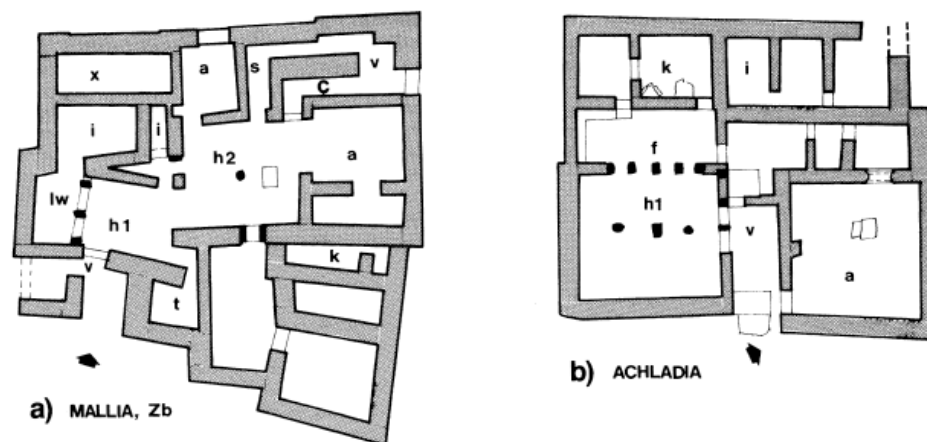
formal element that signals a certain level of status, much like a foyer or formal dining room formalizes the domestic trappings of modern society. Lustral basins, are typically associated with a room denoted “private”, and residential quarters are always found on the upper levels. Despite the fact that all of these features were necessary in order to classify a structure as Type 1, McEnroe notes that there was “no canonical arrangement of rooms” in Minoan architectural language,⁵⁹ and that instead certain rooms appear in blocks such as lustral basins and the so-called “private room”. Type 1 houses include the most individuality and variability between examples⁶⁰ –much like Roman villas – and candidates for this qualification at Akrotiri include: Xeste 3, the West House, The House of the Ladies, and Xeste 4. Though they may not all strictly include all of the aforementioned architectural elements, the similarities are convincing enough that accounting for distance and the relative size of Akrotiri as compared to Minoan palaces I would argue that the type one classification holds, and that the aforementioned buildings therefore represent Akrotiri’s take on the Minoan Type 1 home.

Given the structural similarities between Type 1 Minoan homes and the grandest buildings at Akrotiri it is arguable that the Xestes and the West House constituted elite space – a fact that will become more apparent when examining their decorative schemes beyond architecture. Furthermore, it is significant that the largest, most expensive, and most freestanding edifices at Akrotiri are signaling their wealth, sophistication, and devotion to Minoan cult through distinctly Minoan architectural tropes. Furthermore, much of Minoan palatial architecture is dedicated

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 6

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 14

to the public gaze or public gathering, and as such those Therans who could afford to indulge in Minoan palatially inspired projects were likely to hold both status and trendsetting power at Akrotiri. Lustral basins, gypsum, pier and door partitions particularly speak to the Minoan palatial tradition, and their inclusion at Akrotiri must mean that there is social, political, or economic value in communicating an understanding and possession of Minoan elite space. Thus the cousins of the Minoan Type 1 house at Akrotiri can be anything from the headquarters of a conquering Minoan leadership to the homes of Theran merchants looking to find respect from or a place within Minoan society to further their own ambitions. While the exact interpretation is elusive, there is no doubt in my mind that this commitment to architectural tropes extant nowhere in the Bronze Age Aegean other than Crete speaks to a significant relationship between Thera and the Minoan culture.



In contrast to the grandeur of the Type 1 house, the Minoan Type 2 house incorporates functionality with palatial elements where possible, and it is this multitasking that is particularly useful in interpreting the architectural evidence of Thera. The Type 2 house is characterized primarily by spaces seemingly devoted to

crafts such as pottery and textile making.⁶¹ Whereas the Type 1 house mimicked palatial architectural elements typically linked with cult, the Type 2 house adopts the workshop function. Type 2 houses may include some but not every Type 1 feature and cover such a large range of relative grandeur that McEnroe is tempted to break the category down into a subcategory that displays more Type 1 features (2a) and those that display fewer (2b)⁶². Unlike Type 1 houses, residential space may occupy the ground floor, however the more Type 1 feature evidenced the more likely that residential space will be found above ground level.⁶³ The largest halls of a Type 2 home will rarely feature polythyra or light wells, but were still likely not entirely private spaces. Though the presence of public space is a trait shared with the Type 1 home, the Type 2 home's need for public space within the domestic can most likely be attributed to the presence of the so-called industrial rooms unique to the Type 2 house⁶⁴. These workshop-like spaces determine the Type 2 house as an economic space and define the separation via vestibules from residential space⁶⁵. The vestibules delineate the public from the private spaces within a home and serve to remind the modern mind that conceptions of the domestic in the Bronze Age (and even into the time of the Roman Empire) were often tied to the economic. In conjunction with doorless space -basements, or ground floor rooms that may only be entered from above and were presumably used for storage, these workshops define the Type 2 house as mercantile. However the presence of large Type 2a

⁶¹ *ibid*, 7

⁶² *ibid*

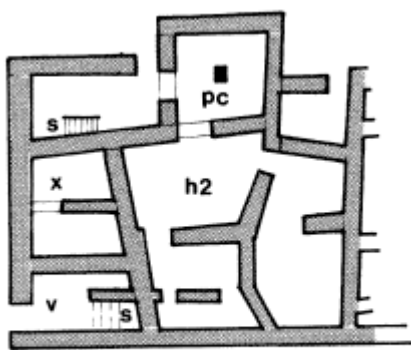
⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ *ibid*

⁶⁵ *ibid*

homes that boast elements of palatial architecture speak to the possible wealth of merchants in the Bronze Age economy, thus allowing for an interpretation of Akrotiri as a merchant town dominated by Type 2 houses⁶⁶. The fact that most structures in Akrotiri can fit into the Type 2 category shows the distinctiveness of the town despite heavy Minoan influence. One can imagine Akrotiri as a Minoan outpost with a distinctive flavor due to distance or a local culture with a stake in the broader economy of the Aegean and an understanding of the distribution of power in the region. The hypothetical Theran merchant, most likely due to proximity, was invested in pleasing and being culturally palatable to his Cretan clients. One can imagine this awareness of Minoan culture gradually leading to assimilation into the Minoan culture that provides the merchant his livelihood. As such, this merchant, and his home, might represent the place of Akrotiri in the Minoan world; an ally, a subordinate, and a cultural cousin. An interpretation of Akrotiri based solely in architecture cannot detail such a story with certainty, however the Type 2 Minoan house allows for a flexibility of our interpretation of Akrotiri's relationship with Crete.

Rounding out the examination of the non-palatial elements of the Minoan



b) PALAIKASTRO, Π 7-16

⁶⁶ ibid, 9

architectural lifestyle, the Type 3 house represents the smallest, least architecturally sophisticated, and least embellished Minoan domestic structure with its most significant feature being doorless space (labeled x

above).⁶⁷ Primarily constructed from local materials, McEnroe surmises that the proliferation of doorless space reflects the poverty and low status of the Type 3 Home. He explains that doorless space had likely been initially used primarily as a means of creating a base for a stable second story. As more sophisticated techniques like columns, pillars, and polythyra came into vogue, doorless space was no longer necessary, though certainly cheaper and easier to construct,⁶⁸ and as such survived among the lower classes. Doorless spaces were primarily used for the storage of grain, olives, and other necessary, generally edible products that were not the product of skilled labor⁶⁹. Few of the surviving buildings at Akrotiri fit a strict Type 3 definition due to the agglomerated architecture on the island, however such structures are likely to be found as the outskirts of the town continue to be excavated. Though Type 3 houses are not strictly exhibited at Akrotiri, there is certainly a fair amount of doorless space which -due to its use in the more affluent buildings of the town proper- suggests a relationship with the Minoan culture that predates the technological advances that allowed the culture to eliminate the use of doorless space for support of upper stories from their architectural repertoire. This is supported by the focusing of doorless space in the amalgamated buildings of the gamma and delta clusters near the triangular square, in the older section of Akrotiri. Though it is but a small piece of evidence, the use of doorless space at Akrotiri may suggest a lengthier relationship between Crete and Thera than previously imagined,

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 10

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 12

⁶⁹ *ibid*

further informing our perspective on the cultural exchange between the two locations.

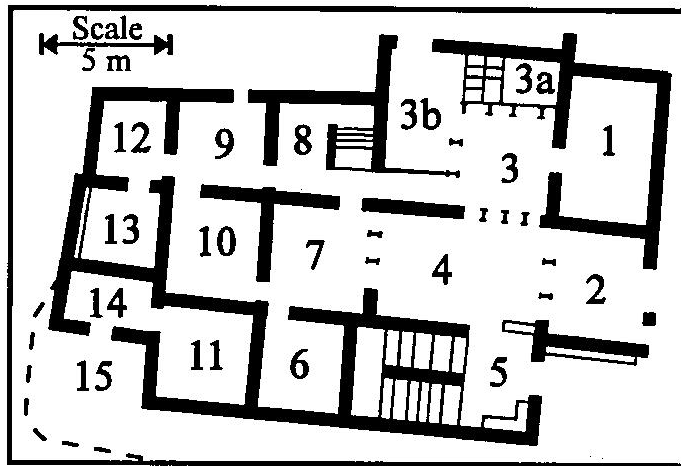


Figure 22: Xesté 3

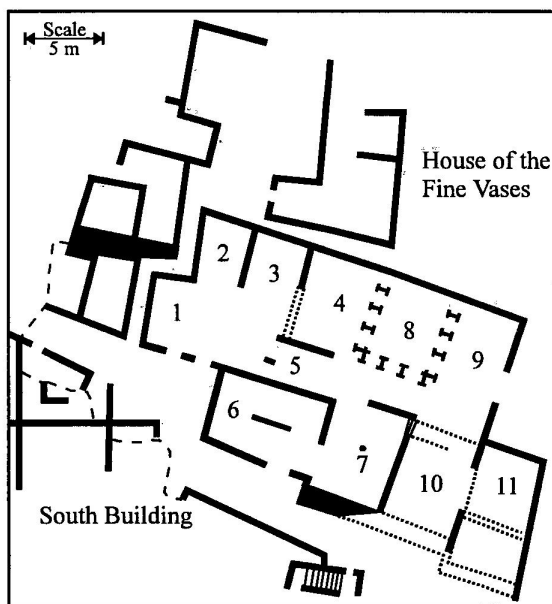


Figure 30: Xesté 4

The most prominent examples of Akrotiri's use of Minoan architecture come from the town's most elite and complex buildings. These buildings, known as Xestes, communicate a sense of cultural contact and knowledge without distinctly labeling

fitting a strictly Minoan label. The grand scale, pier-and-door partitions, and horns of consecration so powerfully associated with Minoan palatial architecture are evidenced within these buildings, strengthening the notion that the people of Akrotiri were aware of and invested in displaying the architectural language of the Minoans.

Between the ashlar masonry, polythyron complexes, and grand staircase, Xeste 4 may, as Forsythe argues, be the most palatial of all the structures at Akrotiri⁷⁰. It is also one of the newest edifices on Thera, and thus its potent Minoan influence can be seen to speak to the level of Minoan influence over the island at its time of construction – a time closest to the destruction period. It is not just the development of Xeste 4 that seems to show Akrotiri developing in a more Minoan direction, or at least in such a way that advocates for increased and intimate contact with the Minoan culture. Of the archaeological findings on Thera, Forsythe writes, “Thera reveals a more complex picture of dense and diffuse rural settlements, organized villages, hamlets, villas and isolated farms that echo the general settlement pattern of Crete.”⁷¹ She prefaces this, noting how the division of space within buildings speaks to a Minoan lifestyle, “Even the differing function of stories seems Minoan, with workshops and storerooms below and living quarters above.”⁷² Ultimately, the Xestes in their current excavated state reveal an understanding of and a familiarity with both Minoan architectural techniques and symbolic tropes of power and ceremony. Furthermore, their deployment at Akrotiri implies that these

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 88

⁷¹ *ibid*, 45

⁷² *ibid*, 44

symbols would have some meaning to the non-elites of Thera if only to delineate the elite class as other, or exotic.

The Xestes represent some of the newest construction efforts at Akrotiri and therefore provide a basis for deductions to be made about the relationship between Crete and Thera during Akrotiri's later days. However an examination of the architectural distinctiveness of some of Akrotiri's oldest structures is invaluable in

coming to conclusions about her original level of "Minoanness."

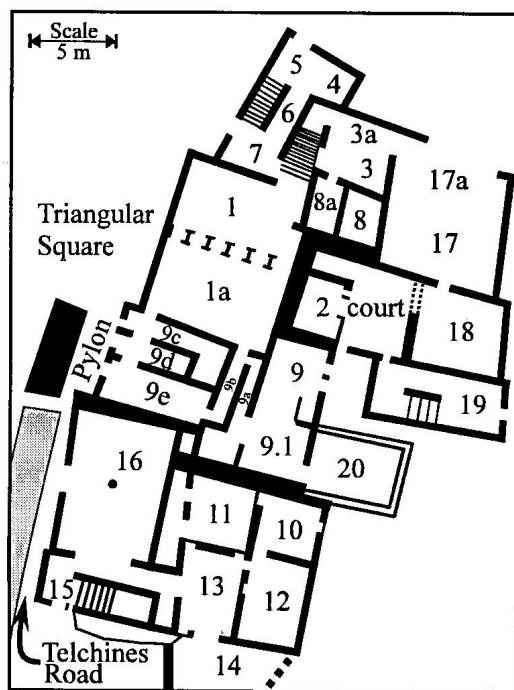


Figure 25: Complex Delta

Complex Delta perhaps best represents the original character of Akrotiri. The agglomeration of halls and courtyards and variously interconnected buildings speaks to an organic structural development and harkens back to the earliest days of settlement.⁷³ With some grander locations displaying elements like polythyra, plenty of doorless space, and various vestibules

delineating space, Complex Delta does little to echo Minoan architectural tropes through its layout and construction, nor does it present any architectural characteristics that are blatantly non-Minoan. While certainly providing ample cause to disqualify Akrotiri as a subjugate or even colony of the Minoans, Complex Delta underscores the fact that Akrotiri had an identity, at least at some point in

⁷³ Forsythe, 24, 65-66

history, that was independent or at least isolated enough to develop organically and in a manner unconcerned with the scope and traditions of its larger geographical orbit. It is unsurprising that this distinctiveness remains in the least grand domiciles at Akrotiri, as their inhabitants would have less cause to posture and place themselves within the Minoan symbolic language of power, and as such Complex Delta serves as a reminder of Akrotiri's separateness from Crete.

In contrast to the humble architecture of Complex Delta, the West House stands as an example of elite architecture from an earlier Akrotiri. Though Forsythe writes of the West House, "But what marks this structure as truly outstanding are the features that it shares with Minoan palaces and villas: in addition to wall

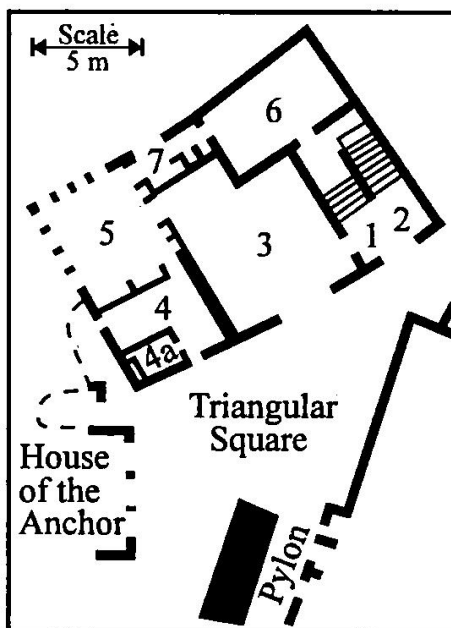


Figure 26: West House

paintings, there are polythyra, and adyton, and Minoan-like benches.⁷⁴ These features seem to have been overlaid on a structure that was not preoccupied with Minoan architectural standards. The West House resides on Akrotiri's most prominent square, aptly labeled, "The triangular square," on a skewed orientation, lending the square its shape, and while the rich, detailed frescoes and symbols of grandeur are prominent, the West House does not display the typical architectural features of the affluent Type 1

Minoan house despite its apparent prominence. Though the West House may shy away from lustral basins and light wells, it still echoes Minoan tropes of

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 55

Architectural power through its location on the square as well as through the broad window that would allow people in the square to gaze into the West House's most prominent and frescoed room much like the view to the throne room was left open at the palace of Knossos⁷⁵. These features alone, however, do not a Minoan palace make, and it can be argued that placing a prominent building on a prominent public square with a large viewing space would be a likely development for societies looking to craft public, ceremonial space even in isolation. The West House seems to represent Theran architecture that predates a significant Minoan influence. The presence of evidence of textile making, combined with the relatively simple shape and construction of the structure recommend an interpretation that allows the West House to maintain its original function as a purely Theran architectural effort while incorporating Minoan tropes. It would make sense that the wealth of a site of Akrotiri's size was not such that its people would see fit to tear down a building only to replace it with a more suitably Minoan edifice, and the West House's enduring presence at Akrotiri suggests that there was not a strong enough compulsion to erase markers of a distinct Cycladic culture. Thus, the West House serves to remind, much like Complex Delta, that Akrotiri had a history before contact with the Minoans and that Thera, therefore, could not be a Minoan-founded colony, however the surface details added to the West House reveal a commitment to Minoan symbology and culture that explains the distinct and deliberate Minoan influence on Akrotiri's later architectural projects.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 80

Ultimately, the architectural evidence at Akrotiri provides confirmation of a relationship between the people of Thera and the Minoan culture without being able to fill in a detailed account or precise timeline of the nature of the relationship. McEnroe offers, "By defining a large number of characteristics that apply to small houses as well as to the palaces and Type 1 houses, the typology provides a standard for the identification and measurement of Minoan Influence in the contemporary architecture of the islands.⁷⁶" Certainly, the appropriation of palatial architecture and its tactful and thoughtful deployment is enough to confirm that not only did those who inhabited Akrotiri at the time of its destruction have an understanding of Minoan architectural tropes, but they also had a functional understanding of how power was displayed through architecture on Crete. Therefore, the architects at Thera must either have traveled or originally came from Crete in order to so-faithfully replicate the palatial tropes with such finesse. Interestingly, the proliferation of doorless space at Akrotiri further opens the timeline of the relationship between these two potentially unique cultures, though the distinct architectural elements of Complex Delta and the West house muddle and complicate the question of Minoan influence in the earliest days of Akrotiri. Forsythe is keen to point out that the arrangement of storage magazines at Akrotiri could not support a redistributive government⁷⁷ such as that which was practiced through the palaces on Crete⁷⁸. The Minoans appear to have been a palace dependent society⁷⁹ whereas the many palatially inclined, haphazardly laid out, and seemingly self sufficient

⁷⁶ McEnroe, 15

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 92

⁷⁸ Mosso, 127

⁷⁹ Cotterell, 98

houses at Akrotiri do not even seem to, architecturally at least, indicate any one prominent building let alone a palace. The distribution of power that can be inferred from the absence of an architecturally dominant structure is not in keeping with the Minoan culture as it is evidenced on Crete and suggests an Akrotiri that communicates, trades with, and is likely allied with or subjugated to the Minoan culture, but that still maintains a semblance of autonomy. Certainly distance may weaken the influence of a Cretan government, but this discrepancy in projections of power should give enough pause to cause one to refrain from labeling Akrotiri a Minoan colony based on architectural information alone.

Minoan influence is all but certain at Akrotiri, however the shape, power, and employment of this influence remains mysterious. While architecture alone can provide similarities and points of contrast, it is difficult especially given the discrepancy in scale between Thera and Crete, to understand where architectural differences translate into cultural and political differences. This becomes even more difficult when taking Akrotiri as a settlement that had a unique identity before an eventual, and certainly potent, intermingling with the Minoan culture. With vestiges of the past preserved amongst the most recent, most Minoan architectural elements of Akrotiri, I am comfortable ruling out the possibility of Akrotiri as a colony founded by Minoans, but am hesitant to classify the shape and form of Akrotiri's governance and social structure at the time of the destruction.

Chapter 3: The Implications of Minoan Style Fresco at Akrotiri

Perhaps the most striking feature about Akrotiri is the abundance and quality of Minoan-style fresco that has been excavated and evidenced in every building complex at the site. The images depicted in the fresco at Akrotiri run an enormous range from pseudo-naturalistic landscapes to depictions of the divine. Fresco at Akrotiri was clearly valued and important, and certainly bore a significance beyond the purely decorative. In fact, the proliferation of fresco at Akrotiri has led some to classify the island as the focal point of artistic influence and expertise in the Cyclades⁸⁰. The Fresco program at Akrotiri undeniably confirms that the images at Akrotiri take large cues from the examples excavated at Knossos and throughout the rest of Crete. Minoan art, with its distinct style and iconography, while surely beautiful and skillfully executed, is representative of the cultural reach of the Minoan society. With much of the Minoan pictorial formula infiltrating into even the Mycenaean imagination⁸¹, the value of fresco's communicative powers in the Bronze Age Aegean and its interpretation as an instrument of cult, favor a potent Minoan influence. Furthermore, the presence of fresco almost exclusively in places of public gathering or worship at both Akrotiri and on Crete, confirms that the art is being deployed to similar ends at both sites.⁸² And though it may seem like a leap to concretely define all instances of fresco as instances of Bronze Age cult, as Anne P. Chapin writes of the people of Akrotiri, "to separate the 'sacred' from the 'secular'

⁸⁰ Dickinson, 165

⁸¹ Marinatos, 118

⁸² *ibid*, 117

may well have appeared incomprehensible to them.”⁸³ Frescoes were clearly used to mark religious space, to illustrate or provide context to ritual and ceremony, and were relegated to shrine-like spaces in both Minoan and Theran settlements⁸⁴.

It should not be too difficult to digest the notion that in the Minoan world, art and religion were inextricably linked. However the question of just how Minoan the fresco at Thera was speaks more directly to my inquiry as to the relationship between the two sites. Ultimately, my conclusions on the use of Minoan iconography and style at Akrotiri will paint a picture of a society on the brink of cultural assimilation. While the presence of Minoan-reminiscent cult at Akrotiri may be evidence of a common cultural ancestor predating both societies, an expression of Minoan conquest and hegemony, or the adoption of a superior power’s socio-political language in a bid to impress, the prevalence, centrality, and vividness of fresco at Akrotiri suggests that by the time of Thera’s eruption in 1628 B.C., her people were committed to the religion (and all of its rituals and ceremonies) evidenced in their wall paintings. With the time, expertise, and presumably high cost of integrating fresco so fully into their architectural program, the people of Akrotiri show a devotion to a Minoan cult unlike any other Bronze Age site. The artistic programs and unique architecture of the Xestis alone advocates for a culture deeply tied to the Minoan example. No other Cycladic island exhibits buildings of their ilk, constructed around Minoan palatial architectural features and finished with elaborate frescoes with such ubiquity as Akrotiri⁸⁵. And though the frescoes of

⁸³ Chapin, 64

⁸⁴ Marinatos, 32

⁸⁵ Chapin, 51

Akrotiri are not without Cycladic flavor, the overarching weight of Minoan influence cannot be ignored or denied and must inform our interpretation of the direction Thera may have continued to grow were it not for her untimely, cataclysmic end.

Before analyzing the function and implications of fresco at Akrotiri, it is first pertinent to note the typical conventions of the art. There is evidence as early as the Neolithic period of fresco style artwork on Crete.⁸⁶ The typical Minoan fresco has been produced on a layer of lime plaster that was painted upon before completely drying. Guidelines were pressed into the nearly hardened plaster with string and then painted over in a variety of pigments, leaving the blank, white plaster to serve as a background.⁸⁷ Figure painting is first evidenced at the turn of the LMIA period, placing the development of fresco, as it has been preserved at Akrotiri, in chronological synchronicity with potential contact between Crete and Thera.⁸⁸ It has been suggested that, due to its sheer abundance at the palace of Knossos, the art of fresco painting was perfected, taught, and disseminated from that focal point.⁸⁹ Considering the disparity in quantity and quality of fresco across Crete, Knossos' example suggests a small, highly specialized class of artists whose work and expertise was elevated and spread by the success of the Minoan palace. With wall painting on Akrotiri using the same techniques used on Crete,⁹⁰ and fresco placement, such as the use of miniature fresco as borders along the ceiling,⁹¹ following the same general standards, the connection between the art of Thera and

⁸⁶ Dickinson, 164

⁸⁷ Dumas 1983, 56

⁸⁸ Dickinson, 164

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 165

⁹⁰ Dumas 1983, 56

⁹¹ Dickinson, 165

Crete grows that much stronger. Thus, the volume of fresco at Akrotiri is evident of either the hiring or deployment of a Minoan artist, but more likely of an educated emulation and the growth of their own specialized artist class inspired by the success of the palatial program on Crete.

Stylistically, figures and creatures are typically depicted in a nearly naturalistic manner with creative liberties often taken to convey movement or to fit the dictates of the composition. Age is conveyed both through physical size and build as well as through a complex and distinct code of hairstyles.⁹² Shaved heads are depicted in blue on children and are accented by forelocks to depict age as well as, perhaps, one's status within the initiation process and hierarchy of the governing theocratic tradition.⁹³ Aside from subject matter, the wall paintings at Akrotiri were not constrained by frames, and were often seen to exist in interplay with their physical environment.⁹⁴ Ultimately, Minoan-style fresco falls into one of four categories: Miniature, landscape, life sized humans (and deities), and depictions of ceremony.⁹⁵ And while the style is readily identifiable and ripe for art historical conversation, the interpretive significance of fresco at Akrotiri lies largely in context.

In addition to the close thematic connection evidenced between Cretan and Theran frescoes, it is worthwhile to note that Minoan fresco seems to be taking many cues from the Egyptian tradition. Marinatos cites the "propagation of an ideology revolving around the ruler," depictions of ceremonies and rituals occurring

⁹² *ibid*, 89

⁹³ *ibid*

⁹⁴ Doulas 1983, 73

⁹⁵ Cadogan, 43-44

within the space in which they were painted, and the interplay between the subject of wall paintings and their architectural surroundings as tenets of Egyptian wall decoration emulated by the Minoans.⁹⁶ Latching upon these similarities, Marinatos extends her belief that there was no purely decorative Egyptian art to assign Minoan art a necessarily functional role as well.⁹⁷ Though the iconography of Egyptian wall art is far from congruous with that of Minoan and Thera fresco, the use of art to define and create space was certainly borrowed or at least influenced by the Egyptian model. For Thera Egyptian influence speaks to a relationship of cultural exchange with Crete, whose Egyptian dealings are significantly evidenced⁹⁸. Thus, Egyptian motifs at Akrotiri can be taken as Minoan motifs, linking the settlements in the chain of influence, particularly in the realm of art and iconography, that would spread across the Aegean.

Nanno Marinatos suggests that the presence of fresco is a certain indicator of the presence of a shrine. She associates such shrines not only with art, but also with the repeatedly evidenced presence of cookware and their locations off of public squares and among the peak sanctuaries on Crete.⁹⁹ Most interestingly, if Marinatos' claims are taken to be true, the deployment of fresco at Akrotiri would indicate the presence of one shrine within every building or building complex at the site.¹⁰⁰ Thus fresco, the contracting of which likely came at a substantial cost, would be (according to her theory) necessary in every Thera "home unit" and also limited to

⁹⁶ Marinatos, 32

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 31

⁹⁸ Forsythe, 38

⁹⁹ Marinatos, 22

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

the cult spaces designated by Marinatos as shrines. In this interpretive light, the fresco is almost exclusively an element of cult, tying the most sacred, important or pervasive elements of life at Akrotiri to the overarching organizational scheme on Crete. Regardless of how much Cycladic flavor was injected into the proceedings, the assimilation of Minoan iconography into cult (which was likely tantamount to political) space reveals a level of cultural exchange between Crete and Akrotiri that suggests a complex relationship.

Ultimately, I advocate that the fresco evidence on both islands argues for a similar, common religious tradition between Thera and Crete. From evidence of sacred cult meals to a shared architectural and iconographic language surrounding fresco, the significance of the symbolism and imagery evoked by fresco in both cultures is strong enough to suggest that Thera's adoption of Minoan religious practice as conveyed through fresco is evidence enough of enormous Minoan cultural influence of Akrotiri. And judging by Minoan and Theran fresco, priests were likely equivalent to nobility¹⁰¹. With Minoan fresco at both Crete and Akrotiri depicting figures painted larger and more centralized in the composition, the figures' privileged place within a hierarchy is readily apparent. Such depictions certainly are representing leaders, however the iconography suggests priorities in depicting elite people that might differ from those of the modern day. Furthermore, the priest figures glorified in fresco are never individualized to the extent that a unique person can be ascribed to the figure, which has led scholars to deny that either culture was invested in portraying or valuing individual rulers, but rather the

¹⁰¹ Marinatos, 26-29, Dickinson, 274, Dumas 1983, 125, Forsythe 101

concepts and power embodied by any ruler¹⁰². Regardless of whether the standards governing the depiction of elite individuals were more palatable to the natives of Thera due to a preexisting similarity to Minoan culture and religion, the non-individualized depiction of elite figures became the primary iconographic means by which both societies would identify their leader. This practice suggests either a complete Minoan hegemony at Akrotiri, or a large scale cultural assimilation in progress. The frescoes at Akrotiri depict the people of Thera as having a deep understanding of the significance and function of fresco and its value in promoting whatever “alliance” may have existed between the two parties.

Furthermore, as explained by Marinatos and Dickinson, the emphasis of landscape and nature, specifically certain plants such as lilies, papyrus, crocuses, myrtle and saffron cannot be merely coincidental.¹⁰³ Both the House of the Frescoes at Knossos and the landscape fresco in room 6 of the Beta complex of Akrotiri feature a scene of monkeys, myrtle, swallows, goats, and crocuses.¹⁰⁴ Clearly, these items in interplay with one another held a significance beyond the aesthetic that was worth repeating in two lavishly decorated rooms in homes that come from presumably different cultures. If we are to believe that Thera was every fully distinct and autonomous from Minoan influence, the fresco program at Akrotiri is certainly sufficient evidence for Minoan influence, and at least a valuable component in determining the parameters of Thera-Minoan culture and the extent of Minoan influence across the Aegean. And with Akrotiri being the only Cycladic

¹⁰² Marinatos, 119, Forsythe, 96

¹⁰³ Marinatos, 112, Dickinson, 47

¹⁰⁴ Marinatos, 116

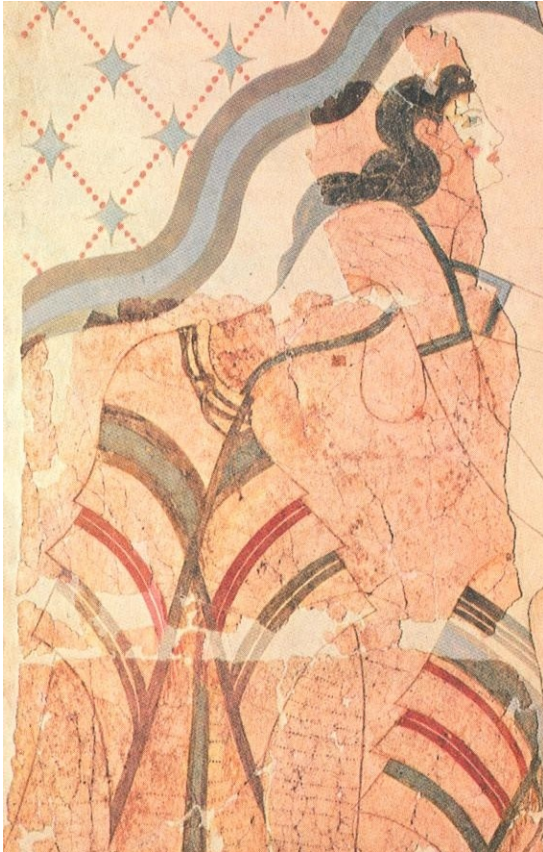
site to display fresco as ubiquitously as at Knossos, surely the relationship between Crete and her closest Cycladic neighbor is unique, powerful, and worth considering carefully when contemplating social politics and cultural hegemony in the Bronze Age.

Despite the nearly overwhelming similarity between the Theran and Minoan fresco programs, the quirks and contradictions present in Theran fresco suggest that Akrotiri's identity within the Minoan world was still, at least to some extent, its own. Most noticeably, the fresco of Akrotiri depicts aggression and competition in a way unprecedented on Crete¹⁰⁵. The room in complex beta depicting a pair of boxing boys as well as a herd of decidedly unfriendly looking antelopes introduces an entirely new flavor to the fresco technique in the grand Minoan palaces that avoids depicting images of conflict or confrontation.



¹⁰⁵ Marinatos, 108

In these images we do not only observe potential rituals of development or initiation, but also an expressiveness of aggression unique to Akrotiri. Through these “uncharacteristically aggressive” depictions of both nature and human behavior, the frescoes of Akrotiri set themselves apart and argue for a culture that,



at least at one point in time, existed independently of Minoan dominance. Of course, this is not to say that Minoans, by virtue of their typically peaceful frescoes, were a typically peaceful people, but rather to illuminate a facet of life ignored in Minoan art yet showcased in the frescoes of Thera. Another clue pointing to a unique, preexisting culture on Crete comes in the form of the attire of the women painted in the House of the Ladies. Though at first

glance she appears to be wearing the typical female Minoan costume of an open bodice and flounced skirt, closer inspection reveals that this woman’s skirt is no skirt at all, but rather a kilt secured to her form by a chord¹⁰⁶. While this may seem to be only a trivial divergence from Minoan standard practice on the surface, the potential implications of this alteration to the tradition garment are significant

¹⁰⁶ Marinatos, 101

when conceptualizing the relationship between Thera and Crete. This woman acts as a analog for the relationship between Crete and Akrotiri. She bears a remarkable similarity to her Minoan counterparts, however her unique detail sets her apart as an object of inquiry and as peculiarly other. If this depiction is taken to be representative of female ceremonial costume at Akrotiri, the addition of a flounced kilt reads as an alteration on a sacred tradition easily identified with Minoan ornamentation. Thus one may interpret the flounced kilt as emblematic of the Thera habit of adopting and integrating Minoan tradition into their own. While this may be reflective of hegemony or in service of flattery, the flexibility of Minoan tropes in Thera culture remains noteworthy and continues to drive my own curiosity and investigation.

While the subject matter of Fresco at Akrotiri may act as the subject of lengthy discussion, the decorative program in the town cannot be fully understood without examining the frescoes in context. By conceptualizing this images in the spaces in which they were intended to reside, one can more fully glimpse the import and function of fresco in the Minoanized culture of the Bronze Age Aegean. Frescoes adorn the lustral basins of Akrotiri, but this is not the case on Crete where they are lined with highly reflective and water soluble gypsum.¹⁰⁷ While this may simply speak to the unavailability of gypsum at Akrotiri, the choice to substitute the visually dazzling stone with equally visually dazzling fresco is significant. Fine, Ashlar masonry, wood paneling, or another means of embellishment could have been employed within Akrotiri's lustral basins, however her inhabitants chose

¹⁰⁷ Dickinson, 282

narrative fresco featuring human figures engaged in ceremonial acts to define their sacred space. Surely, the architects behind the pictorial program of Akrotiri were aware of the prevalence and importance and iconography of fresco on Crete, and chose it as the most appropriate decorative device in sacred space. Thus, through the prevalence of Minoan iconography and the deployment of fresco, we imagine a culture deeply influenced by a Minoan presence. However, the quirks and inconsistencies with Minoan artistic tropes remind us that Thera must have had an identity prior to Minoan contact that was preserved in the form of local flavor. In this light, the fluidity with which Minoan cult was able to wash over the Bronze Age Aegean without evidencing conquest begins to make sense and inform a more nuanced interpretation of Akrotiri.

While the connection between cult and fresco nearly invites itself to be made, the diversity and quantity of fresco at Akrotiri makes this conclusion, and its implications, worth further investigation. Of Minoan fresco Dickinson writes, “Fresco decoration largely reflects the conduct of important, multistage rituals for major festivals.”¹⁰⁸ Referencing the “Grandstand” fresco of the West Court at Knossos, and the murals of the throne room, he notes that fresco is virtually absent from those sections of the palace that cannot be tied to cult in some way.

Coming at fresco from another angle, one might contrast the highly stylized nature of Minoan fresco with the realism established in sculpted figures. Surely Minoans were able to evoke naturalism in their art, however their wall paintings

¹⁰⁸ Dickinson, 276

remain doggedly in a derivative of the more rigid Egyptian tradition.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps most striking is the tendency in both Minoan and Thera fresco to create hybrid versions of plant life. Papyrus with leafed stems, and crocuses that draw traits from multiple species seem to be more than the mere oversights of an uneducated or ambivalent painter. Instead, the enduring hallmarks of Minoan fresco evoke an iconographic language that can most convincingly be tied to cult practices and traditions.¹¹⁰ And though I have chosen to describe these artistic tendencies as “Minoan” they are clearly applicable to the wall paintings of Akrotiri as well, and interpretations that attribute frescoed space to cult space hold true on Thera as well. Cameron describes Bronze Age, Minoan fresco at Thera as a “Mural scheme [that] operated on two levels. It depicted 1) ritualized actual procedures conducted by human beings, and 2) mythological/theological incidents and concepts that gave rise to enacted ritual.”¹¹¹ With fresco so clearly acting as an agent of cult, and defining the functions of the spaces they adorned, the culture of Akrotiri opens itself to an alternative interpretive entry point. If Thera fresco can be tied to cult as well as to the attested Minoan iconography, then these frescoes provide a point of cultural and narrative connection and comparison.

The proliferation of goddess imagery, scenes of public gathering, rituals of initiation, and the lack of individualized figures all build an image of a society invested in the maintenance of a sacred tradition that transcends both time and individual ambition, and it is the unity of this iconography across both Crete and

¹⁰⁹ Chapin, 56

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ Cameron, 324

Akrotiri that ties them so tantalizingly close together. Imagining the Cretan example the “Magico-religious connotations¹¹²” of fresco reveal a culture in which, as Marinatos writes, “art was a representation of the collective values of the society of which the viewer was a member.”¹¹³ While this may conjure images of what might be described as a socialist theocracy, it is equally possible that fresco was a tool of an elite ruling class used to mark off space as not only a sacred, but also as politically important¹¹⁴ If this is the case, Theran fresco, while remaining a fundamental element of the culture at Akrotiri in LMIA, can also be read as a hegemonic tool of Minoan dominance or a scheme adopted by a cunning elite to establish their own superiority while maintaining a commonality with their more powerful neighbors to the south.

Though images of figures, particularly those depicting individuals engaged in ceremonial activity are tantalizing to the interpretive eye, even the frescoes depicting scenes that may seem more mundane or decorative hold valuable information that may inform our conceptualizing of Akrotiri. Of particular interest to Anne Chapin is the function of landscape frescos in Bronze Age cultures. Within the flora and fauna depicted in these lush scenes, Chapin sees evidence of a deeply iconographic religious tradition closely associated with nature and time.¹¹⁵ She, like Nanno Marinatos, believes that fresco was not wall paper and that the function of art trumped its aesthetic value in Minoan and supposedly Minoanized cultures.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Marinatos, 31

¹¹³ *ibid*, 33

¹¹⁴ Chapin, 54

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 59

¹¹⁶ Marinatos, 85

The depictions of plants from all growing seasons and climates in an “unnatural” combination speaks to the worship of a primal deity whose realm and power is not constrained by the mortal limits of time and space.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the prominence of such tropes at both Crete and Akrotiri implies at least a shared religious tradition and probably a shared corpus of myth and ritual.

While I believe that the cultic connotations of Minoan style fresco are undeniable, Forsythe is prudent to question whether *every* instance of wall painting need denote, as Marinatos would have one believe, a shrine or an exclusively ceremonial space¹¹⁸. Dickinson attempts to reconcile this concern by observing, “Strong indications that many, if not all, scenes involving humans had a ritual, ceremonial, or symbolic significance,”¹¹⁹ however Chapin’s analysis of landscape in Minoan art proves this notion to be naive. Instead, she addresses concerns over a hyper-sacred reading of Minoan fresco with an elegant metaphor. Likening fresco to a crucifix hanging, without further context, in a room, she explains that though the owner of this image need not be particularly religious, and though the space in which it hangs need not be a site of cult, the connotations of the cross are inextricably religious and its presence implies a familiarity with the dogma of the Christian church.¹²⁰ Seen in this light, Minoan fresco need not reject its sacred function in order to fit more flexibly into the multiple contexts in which it is found. Though fresco was surely integral to Minoan religion and public ceremony, its presence need only be a reminder of a familiarity and compliance with the

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 94

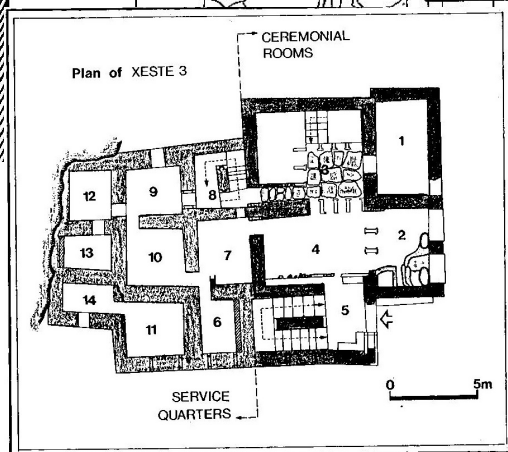
¹¹⁸ Forsythe, 64

¹¹⁹ Dickinson, 165

¹²⁰ Chapin, 56

governing socio-political order of civilization in order to be read as a herald of Minoan influence.

That being said, fresco at Akrotiri was surely a large player in sacred space, a fact clearly evidenced by the pictorial program of Xeste 3. While the *polythera* and *adyton* of Xeste 3 are its architectural focal points as well as references to Minoan palatial language of dominance and holiness, the building's frescoes are equally impressive, important, and relevant to a discussion of Thera's relationship with Crete.¹²¹



Located around and above the space that contained the lustral basin in rooms 3

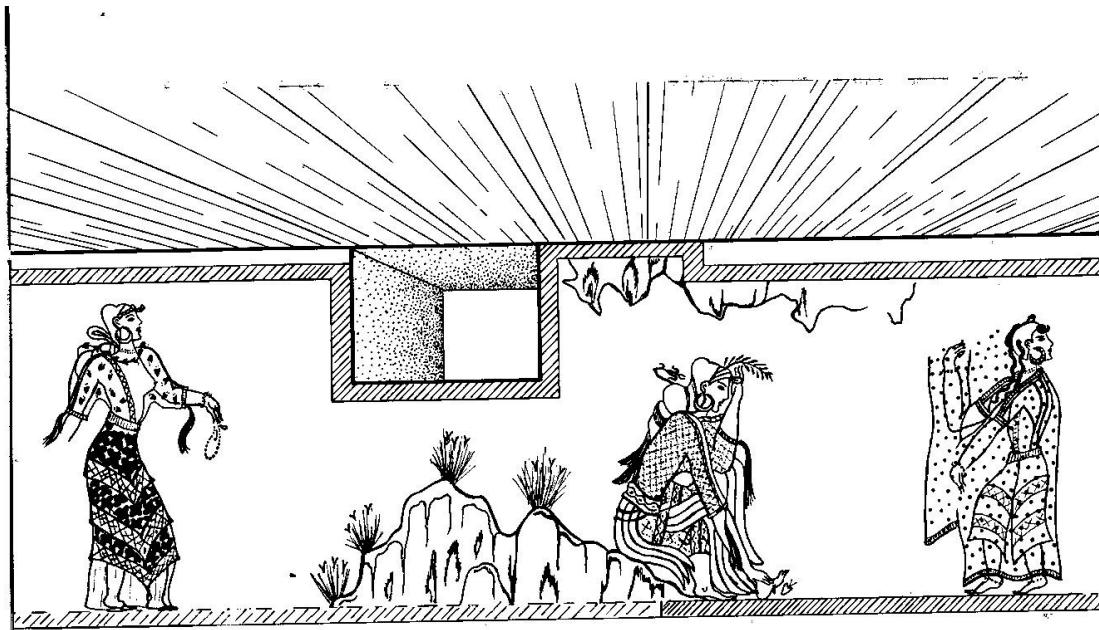
and 4, the frescoes of Xeste 3 depict ritual and religious scenes that bear similarity to similar scenes on Crete while maintaining a unique, Cycladic element. These images act as evidence as our best example of a unified

Minoan pictorial program¹²². The paintings depict a goddess and her otherworldly attendants on the floor above the *adyton* while a scene of ritual initiation adorns the walls of the lustral basin, which may be revealed and hidden via the manipulation of the Xeste's *polythera*.

¹²¹ Marinatos, 14, Forsythe, 56

¹²² Forsythe, 59, Marinatos, 34, Cameron, 320

On the upper story, a figure recognized as a goddess receives offerings from a young priestess, which are delivered to her by the mediating force of her animal attendants. Meanwhile other females gather crocus blossoms for the goddess in various costumes and hairstyles denoting their age and status within Theran cult and society. The goddess rests on a tripartite shrine



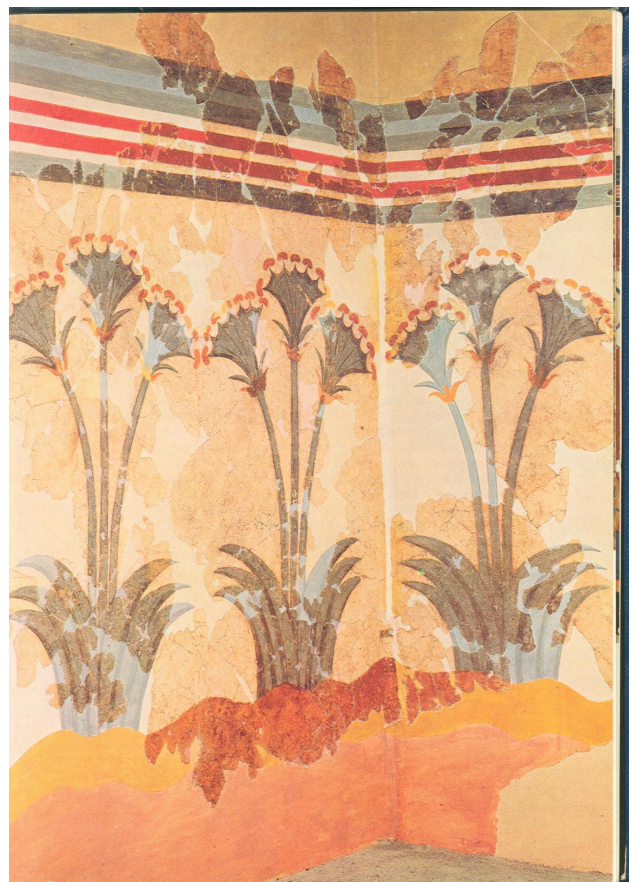
similar to those evidenced on Crete, attended by a monkey and a griffin, also sacred on Crete. Below, within the *adyton*, three women in differentiated styles of dress appear to be involved in a ritual bleeding in which the girl seated on the rock clutches her head in pain while staunching a wound on her foot as depicted above. Their age and status are denoted by the fullness of their breasts and the completeness of their costume. The wounded girl, seated on the rock with blooming saffron and bleeding from her foot is the primary participant within the ritual while

a younger, veiled girl watches on the right along with an older, already initiated girl on the left. Interestingly, were the *polythera* of the room to be shut, only the eldest figure would remain visible, suggesting something both private and powerfully sacred about the depicted scene.¹²³ Thus, in Xeste 3 the ground floor represents a concrete ritual practice localized on Thera, perhaps within Xeste 3 itself, while the upper story conveys an ideology and divine iconography common throughout the Minoan world.¹²⁴ From the example of Xeste 3 it is clear that Akrotiri was not without its unique features nor its own traditions. However, the prominence of the seated goddess and the degree to which she conjures up images of Minoan ceremony and divinity, implies a familiarity and engagement with Minoan religion. The seamless integration of Minoan religious iconography into Theran spaces suggests a spiritual commonality between the ancestors of both cultures.

Behind the visual splendor of Akrotiri's frescoes, lay the hands by which they were painted. The artist, though largely invisible comes out through the stylistic marks left within his/her work, and his/her identity and existence at Akrotiri raises questions about and provides potential insight into both the quality of life on Thera and her relationship with Crete. First and foremost, fresco at Akrotiri represents a certain form of

¹²³ Marinatos, 81

¹²⁴ *ibid*, 84



knowledge. Whether this is the knowledge of the natural world, Minoan iconography, or the method of producing fresco, the artists at Akrotiri were clearly skilled and learned in their art. While the artists of Akrotiri could have been slaves or tradesmen, Minoans or Therans, men or women, it is undeniable that their skill was a learned one.¹²⁵ Of course, this need not mean that fresco painting was formally taught, but rather that may have been adopted and worked at by the artists of Akrotiri to a degree that created a language and criteria surrounding the art. Such a situation would likely have given rise to an artist class or a succession of apprenticeship, and would represent the Theran understanding of a need to look as Minoan as possible. The best representation of the artist as an individual at Akrotiri comes in the form of fresco depictions of papyrus at Akrotiri. Though aesthetically pleasing, this depiction of papyrus is inaccurate, as the plant does not grow leaves from its stalks.¹²⁶ Thus, papyrus can be seen to hold an iconographic significance despite a likely complete absence of papyrus on Thera. In fact, the climate of Akrotiri was entirely inhospitable to the papyrus plant; the Minoans could barely get it to grow on Crete. Therefore it is likely that the iconographic significance of papyrus in Minoan and Theran fresco has been adopted and adapted from the Egyptian model.¹²⁷ Thus papyrus can be seen to act as something of an analog for the development of fresco as it appears at Akrotiri. Originating in Egypt, adopted and recast by Minoans, and finally mimicked by Therans. The Theran artist may have never seen papyrus in his/her entire life, and yet (s)he still knew to paint it. In the

¹²⁵ *ibid*, 117

¹²⁶ *ibid*, 96

¹²⁷ *ibid*, 94

realm of the fantastical this holds true for griffins. A common trope, but nearly always paired with papyrus,¹²⁸ the griffin indicated not only mythology, divinity, and grandeur but also Minoan flavor and the deliberate association with a greater power. The same holds true for creatures such as antelopes and swallows, of which there is no evidence on Thera,¹²⁹ and thus the Minoan artist appears both incredibly educated and notably ignorant, focused in his intentions yet unaware of his/her full context, and perfectly Thera.

The fresco evidence of Akrotiri suggests that there were multiple, likely specialized, artists whose hands and styles are distinctly evidenced in the site's pictorial program. This evidence is in contrast to the nearly perfectly homogenized

¹²⁸ *ibid*, 96

¹²⁹ Hollinshead, 340



fresco of Knossos on Crete.¹³⁰ This individuality suggests that Thera fresco, while likely completed in reference to Minoan culture was not instructed by a Minoan hand, or at least was not overseen and commissioned in the same manner as palatial frescoes. This interpretation suggests that fresco at Akrotiri was informed by the secondhand experience of Minoan art and that the people of Akrotiri were the agents behind the adoption of Minoan-style fresco. While it is still possible that the pictorial program at Akrotiri was imposed by a governing Minoan power, this would be an ill fit for the evidence, not only left by art, but also by the jumble of imitative architecture found on Thera as well. This evidence could possibly be read as representing a world where the price of fresco was so highly valued and the skill of the artist so renowned that a proper Minoan painter would not deign to leave Crete. With this in mind it is conceivable that Minoan conquerors and urban planners enlisted and trained less talented Thera artists to bring Minoan culture to the lands they culturally subsumed. However, given the function of fresco in Minoan

¹³⁰ Doumas, 74

culture that I have previously established, I would imagine that the Minoans would take this task seriously.

Regardless of how the craft of painting fresco was established at Akrotiri, it is clear that an artist class, consisting of multiple individuals existed on Thera. At Akrotiri, the specialization and individuality of painters is best evidenced by the fresco of swallows and lilies housed in room 2 of the Delta complex. The painter whose style is evidenced on the sparrows can be seen in the figures of Xeste 3 as well as in the depictions of Antelopes in the Beta complex. His hand is evidenced by an emphasis on outline and tapering lines.¹³¹ The unique identity of the painter of the swallows against that of the artist who painted the lilies is made even more blatantly by composition errors in which the swallows were in some places painted over with lily blooms.¹³² Furthermore, the artists would have had to have been working closely together as the lime plaster necessary for the medium would dry in a matter of hours before being painted on.¹³³ Ultimately this deliberate courting of two unique styles indicates a sophisticated expectation of art at akrotiri and a sustainable pool of artists from which to choose.¹³⁴ If Akrotiri held multiple artists, who may well have doubled as potters or decorators in other venues, her economy and security was surely such that she could afford to have citizens functioning outside of the realms of defense and agriculture. And judging by Thera's size and positioning in relation to Crete, unless she felt confident that her southern

¹³¹ Hollinshead, 339

¹³² *ibid*, 344-6

¹³³ *ibid*

¹³⁴ Doumas, 124

neighbors did not have, or had already exhausted any hostile intentions. She may not have enlisted so many of her small population as artists.

Much like in the realm of architecture, the fresco program at Akrotiri is an exercise in mimicry and influence with an undercurrent of unique cultural quirks. This is truer nowhere more than in the Xestēs of Akrotiri. Of these unique structures, Marinatos writes, “What is important about them, is that they reproduce the architectural arrangements of certain quarters of the Minoan palaces. This testifies to their import, function, and perhaps to their ultimate dependence on the palatial system.”¹³⁵ The Xestēs are reflective not only of Minoan, palatial pomp, but also of a vibrant Thera culture reinterpreted by a Minoan lens. The wall paintings of Thera call to mind a religiously assimilated, culturally distinct people with a vested interest in appeasing their contacts, and possible rulers in the Minoan community. Thus the Xestēs provide a grand space for Minoan cult practice integrating fresco to complete the effect, but in the process injecting them with Thera charms. It is worth noting that the fresco plan of Xeste 4, the newest of the constructions, is unattested. This building was certainly the most Minoan of all those excavated at Akrotiri, and at least embodied the Thera culture. Thus when the time came to sanctify space in the Minoan mode at Thera, the community prioritized those buildings that had been most integral to life at Akrotiri, creating an organic hybridization and beginning the course of assimilation.

In her considerations of the relationship between Crete and Thera, Phyllis K. Forsythe postulates that the Minoans may have held the Therans in a certain

¹³⁵ Marinatos, 14

position of awe due to the volcanic nature of this island they inhabited.¹³⁶ She suggests that Thera may have had a place in Minoan religion, supporting the claim that Akrotiri may have likely held religious beliefs compatible with those practiced on Crete. Thera certainly enjoyed a close and priveleged relationship with Crete, and while her culture may not have been a perfect Minoan reflection at the time of Thera's eruption, I believe that, given the bredth of Minoan style art and architecture at Akrotiri, that the island of Thera was well on its way to becoming politically, culturally, and theocratically Minoan.

¹³⁶ Forsythe, 101

Chapter 4: Contemplating Akrotiri in Reference to the Minoanized Island of Kythera

Off the southern coast of the Peloponnese lies the small island of Kythera. Though relatively unimportant historically, Kythera represents a significant opportunity for investigation into the culture of the larger Mediterranean world during the period of Minoan dominance. Due to its geographical proximity to both Crete and mainland Greece, Kythera provides a compelling location upon which to cast one's gaze when examining the extent of Minoan cultural dominance in the Aegean. Excavations have yielded both Minoan and Mycenaean finds on Kythera, with Kastri emerging as the focal point of Minoan influence. Although only 500 square meters have been excavated to date, Kastri is generally taken to be a Minoan colony.¹³⁷ Broodbank¹³⁸ suggests that nucleation around the site around the 2nd millennium B.C. is indicative of the cultural character of the island. He purports that the islands of the Aegean, by nature of their geographical constraints, would inevitably take up a common culture, thus making them more coherent as social units. Due to the limited technology of the Bronze Age, any island, via its isolated nature, was likely, as Broodbank suggests, to develop a common culture and unity. The fact that Kastri has been taken to be an intentional Minoan settlement project by the likes of Preston¹³⁹, would have far reaching consequences on my interpretation of Minoan influence at Akrotiri. Why should the evidence on Kythera advocate for colonization where the finds on Thera do not? In this section I will consider various interpretations of Kastri and determine whether or not certain

¹³⁷ Preston, 239-260

¹³⁸ Broodbank, 193

¹³⁹ Preston, 239-240

scholarly classifications of Kastri as a Minoan colony disrupt my conclusions concerning Akrotiri. Though I believe that the evidence at Akrotiri independently links Thera to Crete, it is worth examining the qualities that have promoted Kastri to the colonial status in the scholarly mind in order to illuminate the archaeological biases, namely the privileging of archeological similarities in cult and burial practice, that have influenced the interpretations of both sites. I will conclude that the evidence on Kythera does not advocate for a colonial relationship with Crete anymore than that which has been excavated on Thera. Despite certain resemblances, Kastri does not echo the iconography of the Minoan culture and, to my mind, is the product of a widespread Minoan religious influence over the Aegean rather than a cultural offshoot in the mode of Akrotiri.

What is it about the evidence produced at Kastri that has supported the notion of a colonial label that the evidence of Akrotiri does not offer? At Kastri, the presence of a peak sanctuary at Agios Georgios and evidence of Minoan-style burial practices have led scholars to apply a colonial label to Kastri¹⁴⁰. While the former is suggested through the miniature fresco, and the latter may presumably be evidenced just beyond the borders of what has been excavated at Akrotiri, these significant possibilities would defend the potential colonial identity of Akrotiri if held against the standards used to label Kythera. However, it seems to me that the interpretive framework that favors architectural evidence of Cretan cult and burial practices privileges the interpretations of Kastri's status in the geo-political landscape of the Bronze Age. The combination of Minoan palatial architecture and Minoan

¹⁴⁰ Broodbank, 194

iconographic fresco at Akrotiri may not provide evidence of peak sanctuaries or tombs, however they do provide a unique and equally relevant set of cultural comparisons that should not disqualify Akrotiri from the conversation regarding Minoan thalassocracy. I would not suggest diminishing the potential relationship between Crete and Kastri due to a lack of the type of evidence found at Akrotiri, and similarly do not believe that the excavations on Kythera provide the standard for the colonial label.

First and foremost, I am compelled to make Kastri's place in the discussion of Minoan thalassocracy comparable to that of Akrotiri by being careful to represent Kastri's "colonial" history and status as roughly contemporaneous with Thera's. Minoan pottery styles are prominent on Kythera as early as the Middle Minoan IA period, making Kastri one of the oldest known sources of Minoan wares outside of Crete. There is a disproportionate amount of Minoan archaeological evidence from the 2nd palatial period¹⁴¹, the supposed height of Minoan cultural dominance in the Aegean, and as such Kastri's archaeological timeline is in keeping with the wider conclusions that I have from the destruction level at Akrotiri. The Minoan presence was so prevalent at Kastri that it is likely that many of the Minoan style wares found throughout Kythera originated in workshops from Kastri rather than Crete¹⁴², much like at Akrotiri. While the fact that Kastri displays evidence of contact with Crete before a Minoan cultural influence is heavily felt at Akrotiri neither confirms nor denies the potential for a colonial relationship between any of the sites, the sudden

¹⁴¹ Broodbank describes the finds within the 500 square foot archaeological site at Kastri, noting the prevalence of Minoan wares dating to the 2nd Palatial Period Broodbank, 210

¹⁴² *ibid*

and rapid decline of the Minoan style starting in the early LMII pottery phase certainly is in keeping with the Theran destruction level that so disturbed Minoan culture¹⁴³. If Kastri were indeed a Minoan colony, its pottery record should, as it is, be coherent with the destabilization model that I have provided earlier whereas the onset of supposed Minoan cultural dominance at Kastri need not be contemporaneous with the adoption of Minoan tropes on Thera. Thus, through the pottery record alone, Kastri on Kythera and Akrotiri on Thera emerge as sister sites with one being characterized by distinct cult, and burial evidence and the other by architectural and artistic remnants. The presence of Minoan style peak sanctuaries and tombs has been sufficient to for some to warrant labeling Kastri a Minoan colony. While I may not be sympathetic to making this interpreting the presence of Minoan tombs and sanctuaries as proof of a Minoan colony, I hope to use the prioritizing of this type of evidence to illustrate the likelihood of such finds on Thera. In doing so I hope to make it clear that Kastri is no more or less likely given the archaeological evidence to warrant the label of colony than Akrotiri.

Having established my task in the preceding pages, I will now explain more fully the nature of the Minoanizing evidence excavated on Kythera. About four kilometers outside of Kastri, archaeologists have discovered a Minoan-style peak sanctuary at the otherwise unyielding site of Agios Georgios. Despite this distance from the site, Broodbank argues, it is still likely that the sanctuary serviced, and was perhaps even managed by, Kastri¹⁴⁴. The number of peak sanctuaries available on Crete suggests that these small buildings with undeniable cult significance were not

¹⁴³ Sakellarkis, 81

¹⁴⁴ Broodbank, 194

so numerous as to ensure that every Minoan settlement was guaranteed its own peak sanctuary. Peak sanctuaries seem to service multiple settlements, house few individuals and are characterized by votive offerings¹⁴⁵ along with evidence of possible human sacrifice. Peak sanctuaries held only a cult function and are interpreted as existing outside of daily, public Minoan life. Despite their potentially sordid purpose, the distinct form and function of the Minoan peak sanctuary is undeniably evident at Agios Georgios. Its distance from Kastri proper echoes the arrangement of peak sanctuaries on Crete and suggests the possibility that the sanctuary serviced multiple culturally Minoan populations of Kythera.

Sakellarakis is quick to attribute a Minoan identity to the sanctuary at Agios Georgios¹⁴⁶. Referencing horns of consecration, bronze double axes, and votive offerings in the same vein as those found on Crete¹⁴⁷ as well as the proliferation of scorpion symbology and a tablet inscribed in Linear A, he identifies the distinctly Minoan flavor of Agios Georgios. And if there was any further doubt of the sanctuary's Minoan character, the mortar used at the sanctuary dates to the LMIA pottery phase, confirming that this powerful symbol of Minoan cultural influence was erected at the height of Minoan power in the Aegean. Ultimately, Sakellarakis is convinced of the sanctuary as a representation of Minoan hegemony on Kythera, writing, "Agios Georgios is associated with Kastri in all those aspects which

¹⁴⁵ Sakellarakis describes jewelry, weaponry, and pottery Sakellarakis, 84-86

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, 83

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, 86

characterize peak sanctuaries on Crete: accessibility, proximity, general prominence, and visibility.”¹⁴⁸

Remarkably, the sanctuary at Agios Georgios is the first of its kind to be discovered outside of Crete.¹⁴⁹ This is remarkable because it blatantly ties Kastri to Minoan cult while strongly advocating for an interpretation that has the peak sanctuary form trickling out from Crete, and thus emphasizing the reality of Minoan influence in the Bronze Age Aegean. Its uniqueness alone may be the driving force behind Kastri’s characterization as a Minoan colony, however there is no strong guarantee that similar finds will not be made elsewhere in the Aegean as archaeological inquiry expands and refines its methods. Furthermore, the wealth of offerings at Agios Georgios far exceeds that of the sanctuaries on Crete. Sakellarakis suggests that this may be due to the security and import of Minoan Palaces over sanctuaries on Crete, and that the sanctuary on Kythera may also perform an analog palace function in its signaling of Minoan power.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, it is possible that the sanctuary was administered by proper Minoan priests and that they were therefore entrusted with the safe keeping of votive wealth rather than entrusting it in the hands of the islands natives. If this were the case, the notion of Minoan occupation of Kythera would gain a strong foothold. Finally, the wealth at Agios Georgios may simply be indicative of Kythera’s understanding of Minoan power and their desire to appeal to their military betters. By emphasizing Minoan rites and

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, 83

¹⁴⁹ Broodbank

¹⁵⁰ It is worth noting that since the peak sanctuary is doing the heavy lifting in terms of conveying Minoan dominance through architecture that the grand palatial architectural tropes of Akrotiri are not as prevalent at Kastri. *Ibid*, 193-194

traditions, the people of Kythera would perhaps gain favor in the eyes of the Minoans and potentially, eventually assimilate into the Minoan culture.¹⁵¹ Sakellarakis defines common cult practice as “one of the most essential characteristics of any new settlement.”¹⁵² This view favors a site like Kastri, and without comparable evidence, Akrotiri never stood of being similarly classified. Thus, Kythera, through the evidence of its lone peak sanctuary is labeled an indicator of Minoan colonization. Akrotiri is denied this label despite the very real possibility that a Theran peak sanctuary was likely destroyed in the island’s eruption. In fact, a peak sanctuary is said to be depicted within the Miniature Fresco in the scene purported to depict Thera.¹⁵³

Another avenue of exploration, also with close ties to cult and ritual, that has led to interpretations of Kastri as a Minoan colony is the study of burial practices on Kythera and how they relate to Minoan burial sites on Crete. Minoan tombs tend to have extramural chambers and they adopt the addition of assemblages, or additional rooms, in the 2nd palatial period. Style varies widely, but the Minoans are certainly not strangers to grand, monumental burial¹⁵⁴. Interestingly, the majority of all excavated mortuary material in the Aegean from the 2nd palatial period can be found on Kythera, generally centered around Kastri, with 23 extramural chamber tombs and 1 intramural cyst grave¹⁵⁵. Despite this relative abundance of information, the findings are far from complete or conclusive. It is suspected that

¹⁵¹ All postulations regarding the potential function of the peak sanctuary at Agios Georgios are attributed to Sakellarakis, 82-83

¹⁵² *ibid*, 82

¹⁵³ *ibid*, 93

¹⁵⁴ Preston

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, 241

each tomb excavated represents one burial amidst a cluster of tombs much like a cemetery¹⁵⁶, and we are as yet unable to identify or gender those remains that have been excavated. The nature and distribution of this evidence has left archaeologists at an anthropological disadvantage in studying the burial customs of the Minoans and their contemporaries - or possibly their subjects.

The tombs that have been excavated harken back to Minoan styles, though they have adopted a more rigid formula for the arrangement of the chambers that radiate off of a central chamber as compared to the more haphazard Minoan model¹⁵⁷. This difference in style is particularly frustrating when trying to date the tombs as many burials on Kythera cannot be classified as belonging to the 2nd palatial period on Crete, though they likely do, due to the fact that they do not possess features, such as the assemblage, that have been confirmed to have come into vogue during the 2nd palatial period¹⁵⁸. Furthermore, the earliest pottery remains found in the tombs surrounding Kastri only date back to the 2nd palatial period, suggesting that it is during this time that Minoan cultural elements had truly taken hold on Kythera.¹⁵⁹ Whether the development of Minoan style tombs was a result of prolonged cultural exchange, conquest, or colonizing, remains unclear. However the implications of shared burial customs have been seen as compelling enough to herald Kastri as a Minoan colony¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, 244

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*

¹⁶⁰ Sakellarakis, 83, Preston, 253

Preston urges that the pervasiveness of Minoan pottery styles and tombs across Kastri suggests that Minoan influence runs deeper than the copying of burial practices¹⁶¹. This is certainly true, however his explanation that such tactics were adopted by natives of Kastri hoping to curry favor with their Minoan colonizers, subjugators, or admired allies¹⁶² is a hasty conclusion to make. Ancient religion was typically ubiquitous and interchangeable across regions with many religions sharing a developmental predecessor resulting in cult similarities across distinct cultures, and even a willingness to recast the pantheons of polytheistic belief systems. Furthermore, the tombs could exclusively belong to Minoan leaders who took seats of power while remaining unavailable or prohibitively expensive for the subjugated natives of Kythera. The building of tombs could have been mandated by a Minoan ruling elite who believed that their methods of burial were spiritually more sound or physically more sanitary. Or, the trend could have been started by a wealthy and well-traveled citizen of the independent trading town of Kastri with eccentric taste and an inclination towards Minoan style. Essentially, the evidence of Minoan burial practice alone is not sufficient for calling Kastri a Minoan colony much like the evidence of palatial architecture alone at Akrotiri is not sufficient to make firm claims about the nature of Thera's relationship with Crete. I do not wish to deny Kastri as a compelling location in which to study Minoan culture, however I find it prudent to call into question the eagerness with which Kastri has been labeled a Minoan colony.

¹⁶¹ Preston, 255

¹⁶² *ibid*, 253

Ultimately, the designation of colony is an unimportant one in my quest to define the Minoan Aegean. “Colony” is a distinctly modern term that may be insufficient in classifying the socio-political landscape of the Bronze Age Aegean, and whether or not Kastri or Akrotiri fits the mold of a colony, they both certainly belong in a conversation about the scope and character of Minoan influence in the Bronze Age. What I hope to have proved through this chapter is that Minoan influence was undeniable in the Mediterranean during the height of Minoan power. Minoan architectural, economic, and ritual flavor was abundant across the Cyclades and the question of Minoan influence is almost irrefutable. However, the nagging curiosity remains as to the extent of Minoan *dominance*. It is my belief that the answers lie in the as yet untranslated records of Linear A scattered across the Aegean. However until then we must content ourselves by reading narratives out of the archeological record.

The example of Kastri shows a human, or at least a modern human, disposition to place weight on ritual or ceremonial similarities rather than aesthetic ones. I believe this is largely due to the modern, widespread availability of goods from across the globe and the prevalence of imitation and fabrication. One can replicate the architecture and embellishment of nearly any culture for a low cost, with little anthropological knowledge, and with little actual authenticity. Thus, the feats of art and architecture at Akrotiri may seem less impressive or indicative of true cultural communication. While replicas, particularly in the Roman world, would find a place and popularity in the ancient world, architectural techniques, and pottery and painting styles were akin to technological advancement in the Bronze

Age. Thus, the use of fresco and Minoan, palatial architectural elements at Akrotiri is indicative of just as much communication, interplay, and understanding of Minoan tropes as the presence of Minoan style tombs and sanctuaries on Kythera. The architectural and artistic style on display at Akrotiri represents a change in the lifestyles of the Thera people just as much as freshly adopted burial practices or forms of worship do at Kastri. It is not only the high likelihood of similar cult findings waiting to be discovered on Thera, that makes Akrotiri as much of a representative of Minoan influence over the broader Aegean world, but also and especially the projection of Minoan iconography that makes Akrotiri such a tantalizing point of study. While Kastri provides an excellent model to guide further excavation at Akrotiri it does not define or deny the criteria for measuring Minoan influence.

Conclusions

The contemplation of Akrotiri against the backdrop of a Minoanizing Aegean opens the door to a multitude of interpretive avenues. Given the Minoan character of much of the physical remains on Thera, it is undeniable that Minoan influence was felt heavily on its closest Cycladic neighbor. The people of Thera exhibit a familiarity with Minoan cultural, religious, and architectural tropes that would suggest either Minoan leadership on Thera or at least a strong incentive for the ruling class at Akrotiri to emulate Minoan style and court Minoan favor.

The architecture of Akrotiri so faithfully pays homage to the Minoan palatial scheme, that it is my opinion that the active political hierarchy at Akrotiri at the time of the sites destruction mirrored the governing structure on Crete. The deployment of Fresco at Akrotiri similarly references the artistic program at the grandest palatial Minoan site of Knossos. With fresco designating ceremonial space, the culture and religion of the Minoanized Aegean world, specifically at Akrotiri, can be taken to represent a widespread adherence to Minoan religious traditions.

While such aspects as the art and architecture at Akrotiri alone inextricably tie Akrotiri to a Minoan cultural identity, the fact that the height of Minoanization on Thera runs concurrently with the apex of Minoan power in the Aegean confirms that 1628 B.C. provides the ideal window into what may have been a Minoan thalassocracy. And though the evidence on Kythera and Thera alone cannot paint a complete picture of the Bronze Age Aegean under Minoan control, the sites provide a basis for conjecture regarding the scope of Minoan political power. With footholds in their nearest geographical neighbors, the Minoans appear to have held sway over

the Aegean in a manner that has yet to be emulated by subsequent cultures. By controlling ports and assimilating populations, the power of the Minoan culture was solidified and normalized throughout the Aegean.

Thus, Akrotiri's destruction provides a window into a site caught in the process of taking on a fully Minoan identity. While any preexisting settlement is likely to retain its own local flavor, the political and ceremonial status quo at Akrotiri broadcasts the potency of Minoan influence at the site. Having imposed their customs, beliefs, and technology on the people of Thera, the Minoans proceeded to occupy or obliquely govern Akrotiri until the population would become unrecognizable from those who inhabited Crete.

The commonalities between the cultures expressed at both sites through the archaeological record confirm a deep, nuanced and sustained history of contact and exchange. While Akrotiri may not have been a colony in virtue of the modern conceptualization of the term, it does represent the process and success of Minoan expansion in the Bronze Age Aegean. It is clear that Minoan naval superiority position the rulers on Crete to broaden the scope of their rule, however with the Cycladic islands already fostering unique cultures, conquest by assimilation seems to be the most plausible path towards Minoan cultural dominance in the Bronze Age Aegean given the population of Crete.¹⁶³ Thus, after years of interaction, Akrotiri would take on a Minoan flavor as either part of a natural cultural assimilation or by way of a calculated effort to adopt the cultural language of wealth and power of the time. Until Linear A makes itself understandable, the exact nature of Akrotiri's

¹⁶³ Professor Barbara Olsen, 06/15/2012

political relationship with Crete will remain ambiguous. However, I believe that the archaeological remains of Akrotiri are sufficient evidence to support the claim that Akrotiri was well on its way to fully assimilating into the Minoan culture.

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