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PERCEPTION AND VALUE OF THE FRESCO IN THE BRONZE AGE AEGEAN

*Sarah J. Giffin**

The fresco served an extraordinarily important role during the Aegean Bronze Age not only as a marker of wealth and form of elite consumption, but also as a ritualistic tool and creator of cultic space. However, while there is a wealth of literature present concerning the presence of frescoes and speculations about the symbolic nature of their depictions, there is very little information about the effects of the fresco as an active agent upon a passive viewer. This study delves into the nature of the Bronze Age Aegean fresco as an active media differentiating itself from small-scale ceramic artwork through its ability to physically surround and incorporate the viewer into the narrative. The paper first discusses the origin of the fresco, followed by a breakdown of the two major forms of perspective used in Bronze Age Aegean frescoes: the “cavalier perspective” and the “incorporative perspective”. Finally, case studies of each perspective are analyzed to demonstrate the effect of the fresco upon a passive viewer and to show the subtlety of the perspectives themselves. This analysis of the Bronze Age fresco as an active agent capable of effecting the emotions of human observers provides a new level of fresco interpretation rarely before considered by archaeologists and art historians.

Subject categories: Classics; Classical Art and History

Keywords: Fresco; Bronze Age; Aegean; perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The Aegean frescoes of the Middle and Late Bronze Age constitute some of the greatest examples of the complexity of Bronze Age Aegean artwork. The color palette, naturalistic and human depictions, and the artistic expertise needed to create these frescoes demonstrate both the creativity of the artists and the advanced nature of the cultures that produced them. Great diversity exists among the frescoes of Minoan and Mycenaean Greece, ranging in size from the miniature friezes of Akrotiri, to the large-scale ritual scenes decorating the walls of the cult center in Mycenae, to the monumental artwork of figures processing around the courtyard at Knossos. From these paintings, inferences can be, and have been, made concerning the ritual and cultural practices of the Aegean cultures in which they were found, such as the significance of religious symbols and figures,¹ house structures,² and even clothing and hair styles.³ Although not as plentiful in the archaeological record as ceramics, the fresco still acts as an important indicator for the development of artistic technique among pre-historic cultures in the Mediterranean.

Despite the quantity of research written about the frescoes themselves and about the people who made them,⁴ I have found nothing in my research that fully discusses the emotional effect of the fresco on the viewer. I found this to be a most disappointing

¹ Chapin, Anne P. "Reinvestigating the Iconography of Room 31 at Mycenae". Unpublished manuscript. 12/8/2009.

² Pavylou, Clairly. 2005. "Architecture in Aegean Bronze Age Art: facades with no interiors" in *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. Ed. Lyvia Morgan. London: The British School at Athens. Pg. 185-198.

³ Davis, Ellen N. 1986. "Youth and Age in the Theran Frescoes" in *American Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 90, No. 4. Pg. 399-406.

⁴ The amount of research about frescoes extends far beyond what is found in the works cited for this paper. Sir Arthur Evans has excellent descriptions of the frescoes found at Knossos in his excavation publications as a primary source of evidence (Evans, Sir Arthur. 1930. *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*. London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd.), and the research done by the late Mark Cameron, especially as analyzed by others in *Aegean Frescoes: A tribute to Mark Cameron* serves as very good secondary and tertiary sources.

development, as frescoes were meant to be seen, whether in an outdoor, public setting, or in a secluded, ritual context. As such, the frescoes' purpose as an active agent acting upon the viewer is inherent to the nature of the fresco. Due to this active role of the fresco, the artists who made them utilized certain stylistic methods in order to accommodate the imagination of the viewer. As frescoes were subject to the architectural confines of the medium upon which they were painted, such as the presence of doors, windows, corners, and the overall size and shape of the room, the painter had to utilize these limitations as a part of the spatial shape of the fresco to help convey a story or message to the observer. Unlike pottery painting, which is limited to a relatively small vessel, the walls of rooms (and therefore the physical confines of space) allow the fresco to have the capacity to physically incorporate the viewer within the painting, or to surround the viewer with a narrative. Thus, while a ceramic vessel must be looked *upon* by the viewer, with the pictorial narrative space being limited to a single point manipulated by the observer, a fresco is viewed as if from within as the medium surrounds the observer with the narrative scene. The observer interacts with the subject matter of the painting by becoming a part of the environment of the scene.

As a result of the visual nature of the fresco it became a form of conspicuous wealth both within and outside of mainland Greece and the islands, as it imparted value to the decorated space because of the exoticness of its depictions and the difficulty of its manufacturing technique. Early Near Eastern palaces commonly used stone reliefs as regular decoration, as seen in the extensive narrative reliefs in the Assyrian palace of Assurnasirpal II in Nimrud.⁵ The Egyptians also decorated their walls with frescoes, but used the *al secco* technique on dry plaster or white limestone.⁶ The *al fresco*

⁵ Pittman, Holly. 1996. "The White Obelisk and the Problem of Historical Narrative in the Art of Assyria" in *The Art Bulletin*. Vol. 78, No. 2. Pg. 334-355.

⁶ Hall, H.R. 1914. "The Relations of Aegean with Egyptian Art (Continued)" in *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*. Vol. 1, No. 3. Pg. 197-206. Hall refers to the technique as distemper *painting* in which wet pigment with a binding agent was applied to a dry wall.

technique on the other hand, in which pigment was applied directly onto wet lime plaster, was distinctly Aegean and sometimes improperly reproduced in non-Aegean areas. Some Near Eastern⁷ examples of the *al fresco* technique show mistakes in production, such as the application of pigment onto dry plaster for only a portion of the fresco due to the plaster's drying too quickly.⁸ Thus, the fresco was difficult to produce, and was limited to a small set of skilled artisans, highly prized and controlled by the Near Eastern elite because of the value of their technical knowledge.⁹

Although they were painted in Near Eastern and Egyptian contexts, environments very different from that of Greece, Aegean frescoes retained many of their Minoan/Mycenaean characteristics to a point that some naturalistic frescoes in these areas portrayed plant and animal species that were non-native to the geographic location of the fresco. With this idea of value ascribed to the distinctly Minoan/Mycenaean design and technique, the concept and motifs of the Aegean fresco could have been a traded commodity throughout the Mediterranean region, moving from place to place without the physical exchange of the wall. As a result, it became an example of a traded idea bought and sold as an intangible resource within the mind's eye of the artist.¹⁰ Although many speculations have been made regarding the ethnicity of the fresco artists in the Near East, and no scholarly paper on the topic seems to be

⁷ The Near East refers to the geographical and cultural area which includes those civilizations in what is now modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. These civilizations were culturally distinct from Egypt, and are therefore included within a separate category.

⁸ Pfalzner, Peter. 2008. "Between the Aegean and Syria: The Wall Paintings from the Royal Palace of Qatna" in *Fundstellen: Gesammelte Schriften zur Archäologie und Geschichte Alt Vorderasiens ad honorum Hartmut Kuhne*. Ed. Dominik Bonatz, Rainer M. Czichon, and F. Janoscha Kreppner. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

⁹ Brysbaert, Ann. 2008. *The Power of Technology in the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean: The Case of the Painted Plaster*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

¹⁰ This statement does not assume the use of a modern day capitalist market system. However, as Renfrew eloquently explained it, "prehistoric trade must be thought of, not as we think of modern trade as an exchange among professional tradesmen with surpluses and major economic goals, but rather as a system of simple and mutual exchange between entities" (Renfrew 1969). Therefore, artistic ideas could reasonably have been as much a traded commodity as material goods with the artist as the vehicle of movement.

complete without some sort of supposition. However, it will not be addressed in this paper as I would like to focus solely on the impact of the fresco, itself, and not on the unanswerable inquiry of human transmission. For indeed, while the artist may have been the living raw material for the creation of frescoes outside of Greece, he was merely a mode of transportation for the intangible idea of design that was the end result desired by the elite of the Aegean.

CERAMICS AND THE FRESCO: THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUE AND TRANSITION OF AGENCY

Before discussing the nature of the fresco, it is necessary to first discuss its possible origins. Two schools of thought exist regarding the origin of fresco depictions in relation to pottery painting. The first, as interpreted by Evans and earlier archaeologists, suggests that fresco motifs predated their corresponding pottery designs, thus leading to the transmission of motif from wall to vessel.¹¹ In this case, ceramic artisans would have seen the designs that were originally painted on the walls of houses, and then interpreted them within a ceramic milieu. Thus, the first abstract depictions would have been adapted from a flat surface to a curved one.

Upon closer consideration, the movement of design from pottery to fresco is a more reasonable interpretation. Walberg argues that not only do the abstract designs characteristic of Kamares Ware (MMIA, ca. 2100 BCE) show up on frescoes during the MMIIIB period (ca. 1700 BCE) at the earliest,¹² but that the apparent “floating” quality of the early fresco designs, which consist primarily of spirals, exists because of the transmission from rounded vessel to flat wall. In this case, designs such as repeating

¹¹ Walberg, Gisela. 1986. *Tradition and Innovation: Essays in Minoan Art*. West Germany: Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein.

¹² This may be argued to be an accident of preservation, although it is equally plausible that the lack of evidence simply means that earlier examples never existed in the first place.

spirals and curved reeds were used to accentuate the circumference and bulging of ceramic vessels. As soon as these three dimensional elements are removed from the shape of the vessel and transplanted onto a two dimensional surface, the designs would appear to be “floating” or seemingly random as decorative elements. However, they are not random since their original purpose was to decorate a rounded object. This can be seen in the Flying Fish Fresco (Fig. 1) from Melos, in which the fishes’ groundless positioning and the circularity of their movement through their “yin and yang” like arch would have been used to accentuate a rounded object, like a vase.¹³

I also believe that another indicator for the transmission of design from ceramic to fresco is the inherent value of the design itself. Pictorial decoration on pottery could have been used as a symbol highlighting the importance of the function of the vessel, as design has been associated with pottery used in ritual contexts.¹⁴ Like the use of fine, decorated china during the holidays, decorated pots would have been reserved for special occasions, be it times of symbolic, domestic, or ritual importance. This can be seen, or rather not seen, in the collection of sherds taken from the Petsas House at Mycenae.¹⁵ The collection of Petsas House sherds contains a wide array of plain, *undecorated* pottery fragments, with the very rare piece of decorated ware. However, what reconstructed decorated ware there is among the lots, the shapes of these pots are limited to intricate styles: the stirrup jar, the rhyton, the amphora. These jars must have been reserved for special purposes, as their use would have been unreasonable within an everyday domestic context that primarily required open-mouthed vessels (i.e. kylikes, conical cups, etc). Most of the vessels are closed mouthed jars, which, while they would have been useful in storage and not in domestic processes, are far too small

¹³ Walberg, Gisela. 1986.

¹⁴ French, Elizabeth. 2006. “The Functional Contexts of Pictorial Pottery at Mycenae” in *Pictorial Pursuits: Figurative painting on Mycenaean and Geometric pottery*. Ed. Eva Rystedt and Berit Wells. Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen.

¹⁵ Personal Communication, Kim Shelton.

to store anything for a prolonged period of time. One could also reasonably assume that the owner of such a jar would not want to put it into storage, where its decoration could not be seen or appreciated. Examples of storage pithoi do exist from Room Y in Petsas House.¹⁶ Not only are they significantly larger than the decorated fine ware found in the same building, but they are also much thicker walled, coarser with visible inclusions, and undecorated (although this might have been an accident of preservation). Therefore, the decorated closed mouth jars must have been used for special purposes, as they are too fine and unreasonable to have been used for either storage or domestic use.

On the other hand, the exceedingly common undecorated ware found in Petsas House consisted of pottery that would have been used in the everyday domestic life: conical cups, kylikes, and carinated bowls. Since Petsas House was most likely a pottery factory as well as a residence, the sheer volume of undecorated ware indicates that the everyday demand for common domestic ware was much higher than decorated specialized ware.¹⁷ Thus, decorated ware must have been of special importance, as its rarity within both the domestic and manufacturing contexts combined with its continuation of production would suggest a greater value.

As a result of the high value of decorated ceramics, the design drawn upon it would have both imparted value upon the vessel and received value from it. This is somewhat tautological, as the motif both gives and takes value to and from the ceramic and so it is difficult to tell which held value first. However, what is important is that the concept of painted decoration, whether patterned or pictorial, was a visual symbol of value as a vessel became more valuable because of the presence of painted decoration, and the decoration became more valuable due to its medium's use in special contexts. Therefore, as painted decoration was transferred from ceramic to the walls of

¹⁶ Personal Communication, Kim Shelton.

¹⁷ French, Elizabeth. 2002. *Mycenae: Agamemnon's Capital*. Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, Ltd.

a room in the form of the fresco, the idea of value would have been transmitted along with the design, imparting value to the space that contained it. Thus a transfer of meaning occurred, as the space was made more valuable by having decoration painted within it, much as ceramic was made more valuable with the use of painted motifs. As time went on and fresco designs became more and more separated from the pottery designs from which they originated (i.e. moving from abstract representations to figural representations), the value of the painted design would have remained inherent to the fresco. Thus the importance of the fresco, and therefore the space, would have disassociated from the original pottery motif that gave it meaning.

Another important aspect of the move from pottery to fresco is the change from an active, or dominating relationship, to a passive, or receptive relationship with the artwork. When the design was present on the outside of a pot, the viewer would have had a dominant relationship to the design. By being able to hold the pot in their hands, or in cases when the pot was very large just by being outside of the pot, the viewer would have felt in control of the vessel and its artwork. The viewer could affect the art by actively moving the medium around and therefore exerting a physical force upon it. However, when the design was transmitted onto a wall the viewer could no longer exert a force upon the medium. The design takes on a new meaning as it is transferred from a relatively small, and moveable item, expanded, and projected onto a large stationary medium. Instead, the artwork exerts a force upon the viewer whether it is by physically forcing the viewer to turn in order to see the space, or by psychologically affecting the feelings of the viewer. In addition, by moving the design from vessel to wall, the artist would be transforming the purely representational quality of pottery design into a more realistic depiction, simply by incorporating the viewer into the scene and enabling them to relate more directly to the subject matter. Thus, a passive relationship is created between the art, the medium, and the viewer. This change of agency would have enabled the artist to expand the medium of painting from simple

decoration to an interactive art form, both a narrative and even a learning tool as will be discussed later. The fresco represented an increase in artistic complexity, as the idea of the passive art form became an active agent.

DEPICTION AND THE VIEWER

As previously discussed, the fresco is an art form that is intended for a viewer. Because they are produced on walls, and most commonly the walls of enclosed rooms, frescoes can take on an encompassing effect, as they physically surround the observer with the scene. Thus the fresco has the incredible ability, unlike any other ancient art, to interact with and incorporate the viewer. Although the same can be said about sculpture and architectural relief, the fresco is unique in that it can incorporate without physically occupying the space of the observer. The fresco remains two-dimensional, but is still able to affect the viewer much as a three-dimensional depiction would. However, the force of the fresco as an incorporative element can change based on the way in which its story is portrayed.

There are two different ways of arranging narrative space in Bronze Age figural and naturalistic frescoes. The first way, most common among the miniature frescoes, is the “cavalier perspective”.¹⁸ In this style, depth is produced in a two dimensional space by creating the feeling of being both above the scene and horizontal to it at the same time. As a result, objects may be seen in profile, while their environment is viewed from above. This can be seen in the Flotilla miniature fresco from Akrotiri, in which a ship has dolphins both above and below it in order to simulate depth (Fig. 2).¹⁹ Both the ship and the dolphins are seen in profile, while the ocean stretches out as if viewed

¹⁸ Palyvou, Clairy. 2005. Ed. Lyvia Morgan.

¹⁹ Warren, Peter. 1979. “The Miniature Fresco from the West House at Akrotiri, Thera, and its Aegean Setting” in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 99, pg. 115-129.

from above. The artist intended for this scene not to be read literally, with the viewer thinking that the boat is in fact under the sea, or that the dolphins are lying on their sides, but rather that the boat is on open sea and is surrounded by dolphins. This style manages to combine both profile depictions and aerial views in order to create a two-dimensional perception of depth while still rendering the figures in full.

The “cavalier perspective” allows the viewer to take on an almost omniscient role in relation to the scene of the fresco. The viewer is both within the action, as he looks horizontally at the ship as if the ship were in front of them, and removed from the action as the cavalier perspective gives the feeling of being above the action.²⁰ As a result, the viewer exerts a power over the scene, taking on an almost god-like role as he is both among and above the figures at the same time. Although the same idea may be present on pottery, the length of the fresco along a wall, its small scale, the seemingly simultaneous actions of the continuous narrative, and its encompassing presence as a whole in a room makes this omniscience all the more powerful. While this omniscience does give the viewer a more active relationship with the painting, allowing them to feel physically above the scene and therefore able to manipulate it, the encompassing quality of the painting as a whole still makes the viewer a passive recipient. They are physically surrounded by scene, although they are above the action of the painting, and may be forced to turn around in order to see each scene separately, as demonstrated by the layout of Fig. 3. However, when seen as a whole as they stand in front of the fresco, the viewer is able to see the scene immediately in front of them and both the preceding and subsequent scenes in their periphery, and knows that the rest of the scene continues on before and after. In addition, the story depicted is lengthened much more than on pottery to include extended narratives, comprised of multiple sets of scenes separated in time and accentuated by the length of the narrative around the room, since the

²⁰ Walberg, 1986.

medium is both larger and more linear. The viewer in a sense “knows all” through the cavalier perspective, since they are able to see the scene as a whole, made easier by the small size of the figures in the painting.

In contrast to the cavalier perspective is what I will call the “incorporative perspective”.²¹ In this perspective, viewers are incorporated directly into the scene through the use of large-scale figures and the utilization of the entire space of the wall, such as the Crocus Gatherer fresco (Fig. 4) or the Spring Fresco (Fig. 5) both from Akrotiri. The viewer experiences the feeling of being included within the scene as he is standing in the room because one appears to be of equal size to the figural depictions. The viewer is therefore more able to relate to the action of the scene, and may even act as a participant within it. Unlike the cavalier perspective, which removes the viewer from the action because they are so much bigger than the figures, the incorporative perspective includes the viewer by making the figures appear to be of equal size. This will serve to be an important method in the teaching properties of the incorporative perspective as will be discussed below.

THE FRESCO AS A FUNCTION OF RITUAL SPACE

Because the “incorporative perspective,” as its name suggests, creates the illusion of being absorbed into the subject matter of the painting, it could have been used as a subliminal method of teaching ritual within the ritual space itself. The presence alone of a fresco within a ritual space would have implied value to the space, as stated in the

²¹ What I have named the “incorporative perspective” may sometimes be called the “worm’s eye view” by art historians (for a basic definition of the “worm’s eye view” see *The Oxford English Dictionary*). However, I have decided to use the name “incorporative perspective” as the name “worm’s eye view” disregards the importance of the individual’s inclusion within the scene. In addition, often in Minoan/Mycenaean art, when the “worm’s eye view” is used, the viewer is at equal height to the subjects in the painting, and therefore the illusion of looking up from below, inherent to the “worm’s eye view”, is lost. Therefore I find the term “incorporative perspective” to be a much more descriptive term for the effect that I am arguing.

section above on the transmission of value and agency. Observers would have already noted the importance of the space based on the use of fresco as a design element, so therefore the artist could have expanded the significance of the fresco by using it as an instructive tool to further the religious agenda of the space.

The use of the fresco as an instructive tool is particularly noticeable in the life-size processional frescoes present within religious structures or in large public spaces such as the "Procession" Fresco from the east wall of the west corridor entrance at Knossos (Fig. 7).²² Outside of the strictly Greek context, this same effect can be seen in the Minoan fresco found at the palace of Qatna in Syria, where large scale male figures are seen processing with pottery vessels.²³ Similar to the much later processional reliefs at the palace of Persepolis in ancient Persia,²⁴ the Minoan/Mycenaean processional frescoes would have served as a universal learning tool for the viewer, as they are found even outside of the Aegean, instructing viewers on how they were to proceed in approaching the subject of interest.

Essential to this subliminal ritual agenda is the use of the life-sized, or sometimes greater than life-sized figures coupled with the "incorporative perspective" as opposed to the miniature fresco. The life-sized depiction of people would have created a more nuanced and subtle way of instructing the individual in their role within a ritual context by including them within a ritual scene. Although it is not direct participation but rather the illusion of participation, the viewer would be able to act indirectly in the scene, seeing how one is supposed to proceed up to the figure of interest, typically a deity, how they are to act in their presence, and perhaps even what they are expected to give as tribute or offering.

²² Hood, Sinclair. 2005. "Dating the Knossos Frescoes" in *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. Ed. Lyvia Morgan. London: The British School at Athens.

²³ Aslanidou, Katerina. 2005. "The Minoan Wall Paintings from Tell El-Dab'a/Ezbet Helmi: The Life-Size Male Figures." In *Aegeum: Emporia*. Vol. 25.

²⁴ Schmidt, Erich F. 1953. *Persepolis: Sculptures, Reliefs, Inscriptions*. Vol. 1. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

This characteristic of the fresco as a learning tool exemplifies the viewer's passive relationship to the artwork. The artistic depiction exerts a powerful force upon the viewer, not only affecting their feelings during the moment in time in which the individual is in the ritual space, but also affecting them long term by providing them with life instruction on how they are to conduct ritual in the future. The viewer is thereby acted upon by the fresco, taking on the role of passive student being instructed by the environment created by the artwork.

THE MINIATURE FRESCO: A CASE STUDY

In the next two chapters, I will analyze specific examples of both miniature and full-sized frescoes as case studies of the effects of perspective on the viewer. Although most frescoes are only fragmentary, and sometimes there is debate as to the location of the fresco on the wall, the visual and psychological impact of the fresco can still be surmised despite the paucity of evidence. Here I will discuss in depth two important miniature frescoes to the study of perspective: The Flotilla fresco from Room 5 in the West House at Akrotiri, and the Sacred Grove and Temple frescoes from Knossos.

Our first example of the miniature fresco is the Flotilla, or Naval Battle, miniature from the West House at Akrotiri (Fig. 2). Based on Warren's proposed reconstruction of the layout from the find sites of the fragments, the fresco seems to have been a continuous frieze above the windows and around three sides of the room, excluding the west side (Fig. 3).²⁵ The design of the fresco can be interpreted as a continuous narrative where "the parts are logically or psychologically dependent",²⁶ and possibly serves a poetic function, an artistic version of something similar to the *Iliad's* "Catalogue of

²⁵Warren, 1979. The lack of a western portion of the frieze may be because the wall fell outwards instead of inwards, thus preserving the fragments outside of the space where they have not been found yet.

²⁶ Ibid., 120.

Ships".²⁷ As the eye progresses from the northwest corner, where the narrative is thought to have begun, to the southwest corner, the scenery changes from the violence of a naval battle with drowning men, marching warriors, and a herd of cattle in a marketplace amidst the violence on the north wall,²⁸ to a peaceful river scene complete with river plants and running griffins on the east wall, and the travel of a fleet of ships from a riverside town to a home port with waiting people on the south wall.

The progression from violence to peace provides a narrative aspect to the composition, although the story line may not necessarily be linear. As the viewer would have been standing in the middle of the room, facing the east wall with the river scene, he would have been able to see three scenes at once: the river in their immediate vision, the violent scene in their left periphery, the peaceful scene in their right periphery. The small size of the miniature design would have enabled the artist to create a large story line that could occupy a relatively small space, both vertically and horizontally. As such, the cavalier perspective would have been an integral technique in creating the feeling of depth necessary to convey the completeness of the narrative. Thus the observer would have experienced the feeling of omniscience inherent to the "cavalier perspective". In addition to walking down the line in order for the viewer to "read" the scene, where one is only able to take in one portion at a time, in the continuous frieze it is possible for the viewer to experience the entire scene at once, both in his direct line of sight and in his peripheral vision. Thus, the viewer is able to know all in a single moment in time, as opposed to over a progressive period.

While both the north and south walls were the main narrative portions of the story, the river scene would have acted as a connective element. By creating a middle

²⁷ Morris, Sarah P. 1989. "A Tale of Two Cities: The Miniature Frescoes from Thera and the Origins of Greek Poetry" in *American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 93, No. 4. Pg. 511-535.

²⁸ Another fragment of a drowning man was found after the herd of cattle, further down the wall (see 8 on Fig. 2 diagram), although no surrounding scenery was found with the drowning man to provide context.

connective space that is seemingly unrelated to the main narrative of the fresco, the river scene would have added a feeling of circularity to the composition. Instead of the fresco abruptly transitioning from violence to peace, the two scenes are juxtaposed on opposite walls, surrounding the viewer but still connected by the shared border with the river scene. It is also important to note the location of the different scenes in relation to the entrances of the room (Fig. 3). The river scene was located above the two doorways of the room, while the battle and return scenes could have been seen through the doorways if the individual was standing outside of Room 5. Thus, the flotilla scenes would have acted as a way to attract the viewer's attention and draw him into the room. Then, as he entered, he would have been forced to turn around in order to see the entirety of the fresco. The fresco, therefore, was serving as an active agent in two ways by exerting a force on the viewer inside of the room by forcing them to turn, and outside of the room by drawing them in.

In addition, the scene appears to be unconstrained by the limitations of space as it disregards the presence of corners.²⁹ This further creates the feeling of roundness and continuation in the scene for the viewer. Although the motif may not be a linear story, as it progresses from point A on the northwest corner of the room to point B in the southwest corner, its physical ring quality encircles the viewer, and draws him into the scene as a whole. The roundness also adds to the illusion of omniscience for the viewer together with the cavalier perspective.

Unlike the Flotilla miniature, the Sacred Grove and Temple miniature frescoes from the Room of the Spiral Cornice at Knossos³⁰ add some complications to the miniature fresco and the idea of the "cavalier perspective". Based on Mark Cameron's reconstruction of the fresco (Fig. 10),³¹ the Sacred Grove and Temple fresco would have

²⁹ Warren, 1979.

³⁰ Hood, Sinclair. 2005.

³¹ As presented in Hood's paper "Dating the Knossos Frescoes".

wrapped around the southwest corner of the room, taking up the upper half of the wall. The scene shows what appears to be a crowd of people watching a dance ceremony within a walled area in the Sacred Grove miniature, while the direction of the heads in the Temple miniature suggests the crowd's focus on the central temple structure and the larger figures sitting on either side of it (Fig 8 and 9).

Multiple arguments can be made about the perspective of the fresco. First, the "cavalier perspective" can be assumed, as for most other miniature frescoes, for the towering crowd of people, representing a wide expanse of watchers who have gathered around the temple and the arena to view the ritual. However, a more correct interpretation is the presence of bleachers, which the crowd would be sitting in, raising them up above the arena that they are looking down upon (Fig. 8).³² If the bleacher scenario is the case, which it more than likely is, this causes a complication in the relationship between the miniature fresco, the "cavalier perspective", and the incorporative perspective. In the case of the Sacred Grove portion of the fresco, the artist would appear to be utilizing the incorporative perspective, although it is a miniature fresco. As the crowd of people would rise above the viewer, accentuated by the progression of the crowd high up on the wall, the viewer would feel as if he is being looked down upon by the crowd of onlookers in the bleachers. No longer is the observer experiencing the feeling of omniscience, because he is no longer above the crowd, looking out over a wide expanse of people. Instead, he is looking upon a wall of observers across the arena, while also looking down on the ritual dance. It is as if he has become one of the people in the stands, incorporated into the scenery, and therefore a participant in the incorporative perspective. The fresco may also have the feeling of incorporation due to the size of the fresco. Instead of being a frieze strip at the top of the wall like the Flotilla miniature, the Sacred Grove frieze took up the entire top half of

³² Personal communication with Professor Crawford Greenewalt Jr.

the wall,³³ thereby creating a larger miniature fresco, and simulating the feeling of incorporation.

The Temple fresco creates a further problem of perspective for the viewer. Not only is he looking upon a crowd of people sitting in bleachers, but there are also two registers of people, causing a confusion of whether there are two different levels, or whether this is the “cavalier perspective”, and the upper set of bleachers above the temple represents a group farther away than the lower set (Fig. 9). The layout of the bleachers mimics the same use of the “cavalier perspective” found in an Egyptian New Kingdom depiction of a garden and a pond, showing a pool as seen from above, with a boat and people in profile, and surrounded by plants and trees that are laying flat and spreading outwards from a central focal point (Fig. 11).³⁴ The bleachers can therefore be interpreted in this same way, facing inwards towards the central temple like a theater but seen as if in an aerial view. The Temple and Sacred Grove Frescoes together in a single space would represent a complicated blending of both the “incorporative” and “cavalier perspectives”, both engulfing the individual through the perceived inclusion in the crowd and removing them with the use of an aerial view. Perhaps this is due to the ritual context of the fresco, as the “incorporative perspective” would allow the individual to be included within the sacred grove ritual, while the “cavalier perspective” would have allowed for the depiction of a large, ceremonial scene that would have otherwise been difficult to portray in a large scale fresco. This demonstrates the complexity of perspective in Aegean miniature frescoes: they are not limited solely to the use of the “cavalier perspective”, and may be incorporative in their own right.

³³ This assumption is based off of the reconstruction made by Cameron (Hood. 2005).

³⁴ Walberg. 1986.

THE LARGE-SCALE FRESCO: A CASE STUDY

Perhaps the most important quality of large-scale Minoan/Mycenaean frescoes is their ability to incorporate the viewer. However, it is interesting that most, if not all, large-scale frescoes lack the same narrative quality that is present in the miniature frescoes. Instead of showing a progression of scenes over what may be a linear story line, or a collection of interrelated scenes, as with the Flotilla miniature, the full-sized frescoes seem to show a single moment in time among which the viewer is standing. Because of this, one does not typically see large-scale narrative scenes presumably because there simply is not enough room for the size of the painting and the size of the space. A large-scale battle story would be far too overwhelming when taking up an entire room, and the space far too small to depict a complex narrative scene to scale. However, it can be argued that some of these single moments, as seen in processional depictions, can actually be seen as linear narratives, with each individual, or set of individuals, representing a step within a narrative process. These qualities will be investigated in the close examination of three large-scale frescoes: the Crocus Gatherers Fresco from Xeste 3 in Akrotiri, the Spring Fresco also from Akrotiri, and the processional figure from the Room of the Fresco (31) in Mycenae.

The Crocus Gatherers Fresco from the East Wall of Room 3a in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri serves as an excellent example of both the naturalistic depictions often seen in full-sized frescoes and of the snap-shot like quality of the “incorporative perspective”. In this we see a scene of women, or possibly young girls, picking crocuses on a hillside (Fig. 4).³⁵ There is a slight use of the “cavalier perspective” in the depiction of the plants behind the girls to create the appearance of depth, but overall the primary perspective used in the composition is the “incorporative perspective”. If the viewer were standing in the

³⁵Morgan, Lyvia. 2005. “New Discoveries and New Ideas in Aegean Wall Painting” in *Aegean Wall Painting: A Tribute to Mark Cameron*. Ed. Lyvia Morgan. London: British School at Athens.

middle of the room facing the east wall, it would appear as if he were standing amongst the crocus gatherers in a single moment in time. However, the inclusion of the north wall in the scene of the crocus gatherers adds some narrative to the relatively simplistic depiction of girls picking flowers (Fig. 5). Now, the crocus gatherers scene is no longer simply a pastoral representation of young girls in a meadow, but rather a part of a larger narrative of what may be an initiation rite, with a presentation to a goddess on the northern wall.³⁶ Thus, the viewer is incorporated into the ritual as a whole. They are both on the hillside with the two young crocus gatherers, and as they turn to the north, they are with the young girl as she makes a presentation to the goddess. Although narrative, it is not as extensive as the more complex narratives present in the miniature frescoes. Further, its full-size quality, and the use of the “incorporative perspective” allows the viewer to be drawn into the action of the scene, and feel as if they are both observing and participating in the action at the same time.³⁷

The naturalism of the full sized fresco as found in the Crocus Gatherers can be seen to a much greater extent in the Spring Fresco from Delta 2 in Akrotiri. In this full-sized fresco, all of the walls are taken up by a pattern of red and blue colored hills topped with three-stemmed plants (Fig. 6). Found in situ, this fresco motif takes up almost the entire wall, therefore encompassing the viewer with a landscape scene without the narrative present in the Crocus Gatherers Fresco. However, despite the lack of human representations, the power of the “incorporative perspective” is not lost in the Spring Fresco. Rather, the fresco seems to transport the viewer to another location, transforming an indoor space into an outdoor space. The Spring Fresco then becomes an eternal garden for the viewer, always present and always spring time because of its permanence, despite what the natural scenery is like outside of the space.

³⁶ Morgan, 2005.

³⁷ These observations about the Crocus Gatherers Fresco are drawn from personal experience in 2008 of seeing the full sized reconstructed frescoes in the Wall Painting Exhibition put on by the Thera Foundation in the P.M. Nomikos Conference Center, Fira, Santorini, Greece.

“The fresco, then, does not depict a particular season, but instead presents an eternal, highly idealized landscape that could suggest the supernatural power of divinity”,³⁸ implying a ritualistic context to the Spring Fresco and supported by the prevalent use of the color red.³⁹ Thus, the full-sized frescoes are able to transform an enclosed room into an open area by making the scenery appear life-size (or close to it) to the viewer.

A separate category of full-sized frescoes found in cultic contexts is the processional/ritual frescoes. One such fresco is the Room of the Fresco (Room 31) at Mycenae. Here, there is what appears to be a ritual depiction of a woman carrying sheaves of wheat accompanied by an animal, most likely a lion, and approaching what appears to be an altar with horn symbols. Above the altar, over an elevated platform are the bodies of two deities (Fig. 12).⁴⁰ This portrayal is most likely serving a ritual function due not only to the presence of deities and religious objects, but also because it is found within a known cult center in Mycenae. As such, the use of the large-scale fresco would have served an important function within the ritual context. As stated above, full-sized frescoes could have acted as teaching mechanisms for the intended viewer, instructing him on how to perform or think of ritual by incorporating him within it. In the case of the fresco from Room 31, viewers would see themselves as interacting with the deities portrayed. This would give a greater significance to the meaning of the fresco as it provides a visual link between the earthly ritual and the divine through iconographic interaction.

The Room 31 fresco may also be considered ritualistic because of the depiction of a door beside the two deities and above the processing woman, as determined by the presence of rosettes surrounding the doorway. It is believed that this doorway could be

³⁸ Chapin, Anne P. “Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age”.

³⁹ “The power of red as a color (blood; life) may explain the reason why red plasters are associated with rooms that tend to have some special significance related to rituals.” Pavylou, Clairy. 2005. *Akrotiri Thera: An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old*. Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press.

⁴⁰ Chapin, Anne P. 2009.

mimicking an actual door right next to the fresco that would have held a cult statue.⁴¹ Because the real door was artistically rendered and accompanied by figures performing a ritual action, the fresco would have acted as a sort of instruction manual, showing the viewer how one was to think of and approach the real door located right next to it.

It is interesting to note the size of the figures found in large-scale frescoes. All the frescoes mentioned above have figures that are either slightly less than full stature, or much less, as is the case in the Room of the Fresco. Pavylou describes this phenomenon as being the result of the portrayal of the “iconographic horizon”, or where the line of site is directed, in relation to the actual visual horizon of the viewer (Fig. 13). The iconographic horizon closely matches the actual horizon of the viewer, making the viewer better able to see the fresco naturally and associate with it more intimately.

If the iconographic horizon were higher and the viewer had to raise his head, then his attitude toward the picture would be that of subordination, and if the other way around, the viewer’s feelings would be those of superiority. This eye-to-eye contact explains why figures on a raised base end up approximately two-thirds of natural size.

(Pavylou. 2005. Pg. 163)

As the purpose of the full-sized fresco is inclusion rather than separation, as occurs in the miniature frescoes, it seems only natural that these frescoes should be placed primarily at the level of the viewer’s actual visual horizon. In the example of the fresco from Room 31, the iconographic horizon would have been looking at the figures above the altar platform, next to the mimicked door. Thus, the processing figure below the door would be much smaller than the deities next to it, as she is located below the ground line of the iconographic horizon. But perhaps her size is also important to her

⁴¹ Personal communication with Dr. Kim Shelton.

related role to the deities, as they must be larger than the processing figure since their roles as super human figures imply a larger physical size as well.

CONCLUSION

The viewer's perception of himself as a passive agent within the context of the fresco is an important aspect of Aegean frescoes that is incompletely explored, as seen by the lack of literature on the topic. However, this aspect is perhaps just as important to the fresco as the design itself, as the viewer's perception of self within the scene provides an additional dimension to the artwork of the fresco, transforming it from a passive art form to an active one. The use of the "cavalier perspective" in miniature frescoes gives the individual a feeling of omniscience, placing him both above and among the action at the same time, and allowing him to perceive the entirety of the story at a single point. This feeling of omniscience is further accentuated by the small size of the composition, as it pulls the viewer further away from the action, disassociating him by making him feel larger, and therefore above, the scene. Yet, the decrease in scale and their location higher up on walls did not necessarily imply a decrease in importance of the subject matter, "the small size and the limited space, however, means that much will be omitted; therefore the choice of what has to be shown is very important because it reveals the prevailing priorities as to the constituent elements of each item".⁴² Despite this, as demonstrated by the Sacred Grove and Temple Fresco from Akrotiri, not all miniature frescoes may have utilized the "cavalier perspective" alone. They may have combined cavalier with the "incorporative perspective" thereby serving as an example of a more subtle simulation of depth.

Contrasting with the "cavalier perspective" is the "incorporative perspective" where instead of pushing the viewer away from the action, the viewer is drawn into it

⁴² Pavylou, Clairly. 2005. Ed. Lyvia Morgan.

and incorporated within the subject matter. The viewer then becomes a participant in what is being depicted as opposed to an omniscient observer, and is better able to insert himself into the scene by his identification with larger sized depictions, and the location of the “iconographic horizon”. As a result, these large-scale frescoes, through the use of the “incorporative perspective” are able to act as teaching tools within a ritual context, instructing the viewer on how they are to act and proceed within a ritual space. Thus, both in the “cavalier perspective” and in the “incorporative perspective” the fresco acts as an active agent on a passive viewer; both physically and psychologically acting on the individual by surrounding him with the walls upon which the fresco is depicted, and by enabling the individual to imagine himself within the action or looking down upon the action. The fresco then becomes a powerful force, transforming space into an active agent simply through the use of two-dimensional figural depictions.

But what does this mean for the Bronze Age Mediterranean as a whole? Because of the powerful force of the Minoan/Mycenaean fresco upon the viewer, its exoticness of depiction, and its unique form of manufacture through the *al-fresco* technique, the Minoan/Mycenaean fresco acquired value and was traded outside of the Aegean as a form of conspicuous wealth. Examples of Minoan/Mycenaean frescoes are found in palaces around the Near East, such as at Avaris in Egypt,⁴³ Alalakh in Turkey,⁴⁴ and Tell Kabri in Israel.⁴⁵ However, they are found solely within palatial contexts, implying that the Minoan/Mycenaean fresco was an item highly valued by the elites of the Near East. “In societies with little economic stratification, individuals must rely on things like ritual action, ceremonies, art, mythology, etc. in order to establish their dominance over

⁴³ Bietak, Manfred. 1996. *Avaris: The Capital of the Hyksos. Recent Excavations at Tell el-Dab'a*. London: British Museum Press.

⁴⁴ Cameron, Mark. 1999. *Fresco: A Passport into the Past. Minoan Crete through the eyes of Mark Cameron*. Doniert Evelyn, Curator. Athens: British School at Athens, N.P. Goulandris Foundation- Museum of Cycladic Art.

⁴⁵ Feldman, Marian H. 2005. “Knowing the Foreign: Power, Exotica, and Frescoes in the Middle Bronze Age Levant” in *Proceedings of the 51st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Held at the Oriental Institute of Chicago July 18-22, 2005*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

others".⁴⁶ In the case of the fresco, it acquired a value to itself as it was used for economic purposes. They were, in a sense, markers of wealth for the classes that were able to afford them, a form of conspicuous consumption used to show social superiority through the ability to acquire the means to produce exotic frescoes.

The value of the Minoan/Mycenaean fresco is further exemplified by the use of distinctly Aegean motifs, such as plants and animals, in an unfamiliar context. For example, the frescoes from Palace F at Avaris have scenes of characteristically Minoan depictions; showing bull jumping, hunt scenes, maze patterns, and Aegean looking figures.⁴⁷ The presence of this very Aegean style demonstrates that the design itself was valued, not just the *al-fresco* process. As such, the "cavalier perspective" and the "incorporative perspective" were traded throughout the Mediterranean acting as an agent of the political agenda of the Mediterranean elite. The power of the perspective was heightened, not only in its incorporation of the viewer, but also through its consumption by the elite.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Chapman, John. 1998. "Objectification, embodiment and the value of places and things" in *The Archaeology of Value: Essays on prestige and the processes of valuation*. Ed. Douglass Bailey and Steve Mills. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports. In reference to the work of Bourdieu.

⁴⁷ Bietak, Manfred. 2005. "The Setting of Minoan Wall Paintings at Avaris" in *Aegean Wall Painting: A tribute to Mark Cameron*. Ed. Lyvia Morgan. London: The British School at Athens.

⁴⁸ Brysbaert, Anne. 2008. Pg. 39.

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REFERENCED FIGURES



Fig. 111. *The Flying Fish Fresco from Melos*

Figure 1. Flying Fish Fresco from Melos
(Fig. 111. Walberg. 1986)



Figure 2. Flotilla miniature fresco from the West House at Akrotiri. Detail to demonstrate the use of the cavalier perspective.
(Plate 38, *Aegean Wall Painting*, c.)

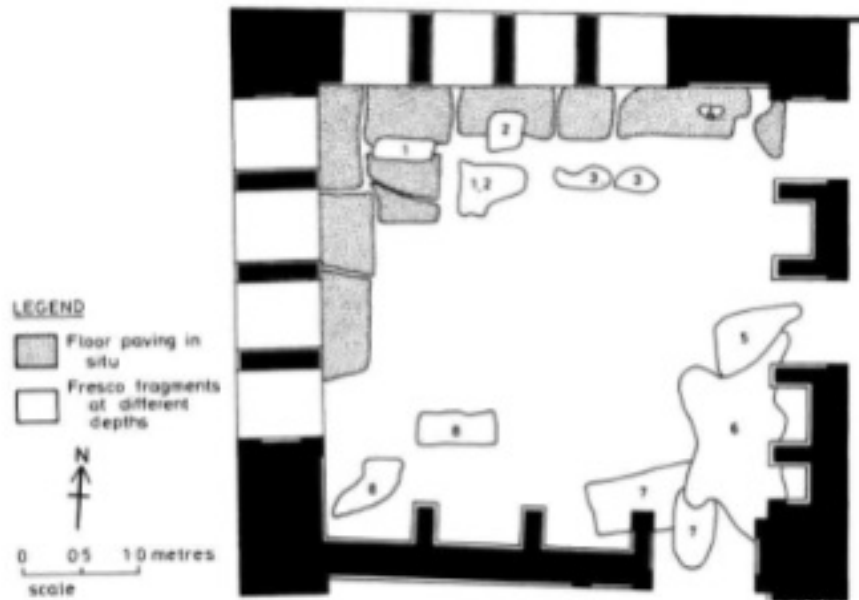


FIG. 1. Thera, West House, Room 5. Composite plan (after Thera VI plans 4-7) to show find-places of miniature fresco. 1: sea battle and drowning men. 2: marching warriors. 3: cattle. 4: drowning man. 5: river scene. 6: sea-shore, riverside town. 7: fleet. 8: home port.

Figure 3. Flotilla fresco fragments as found during excavation.

“Thera, West House, Room 5. Composite plan (after Thera VI plans 4-7) to show find places of miniature fresco. 1: sea battle and drowning men. 2: marching warriors. 3: cattle. 4: drowning man. 5: river scene. 6: sea-shore, riverside town. 7: fleet. 8: home port.”

(Fig. 1 in Warren, 1979)



Figure 4. Crocus Gatherers Fresco, Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera.

(Plate 22, *Aegean Wall Painting, a&b*)

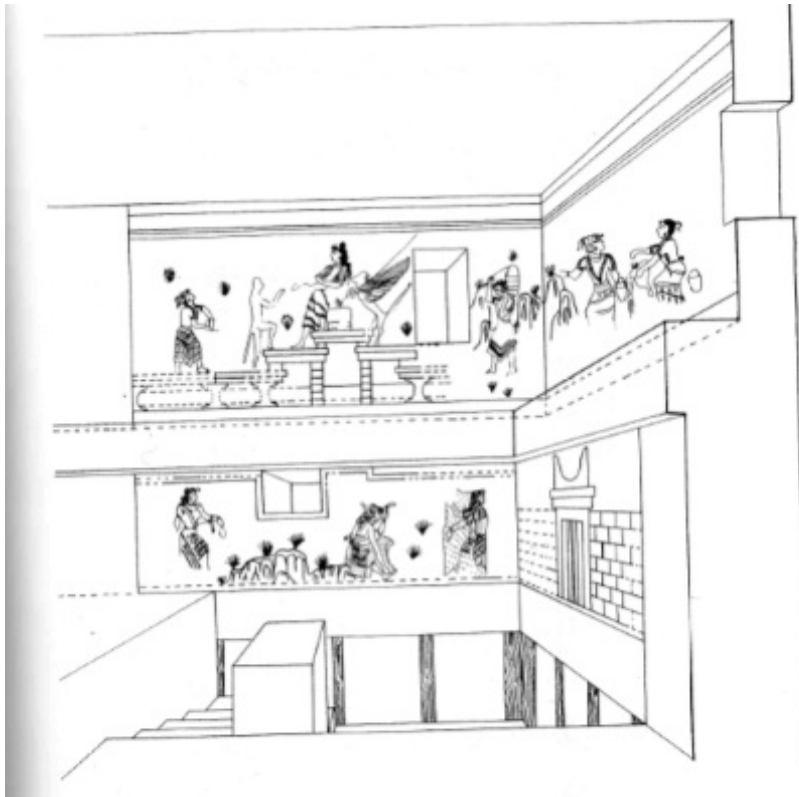


Figure 5. The Crocus Gatherers Fresco north and east walls as restored by Doumas.
(Figure 1.25 in Morgan, 2005)



Figure 6. Spring Fresco from Delta 2, Akrotiri, Thera.
(Plate 1, *Aegean Wall Painting*, 2)



Figure 7. "Procession" fresco, East wall of W. Corridor entrance, Knossos.
(Pg 229, *Fresco: A Passport into the Past*)



Figure 8. Sacred Grove miniature fresco, Knossos.
(Plate 10, *Aegean Wall Painting, 2*)



Figure 9. Temple Fresco, Knossos.
(Plate 10, *Aegean Wall Painting, 1*)

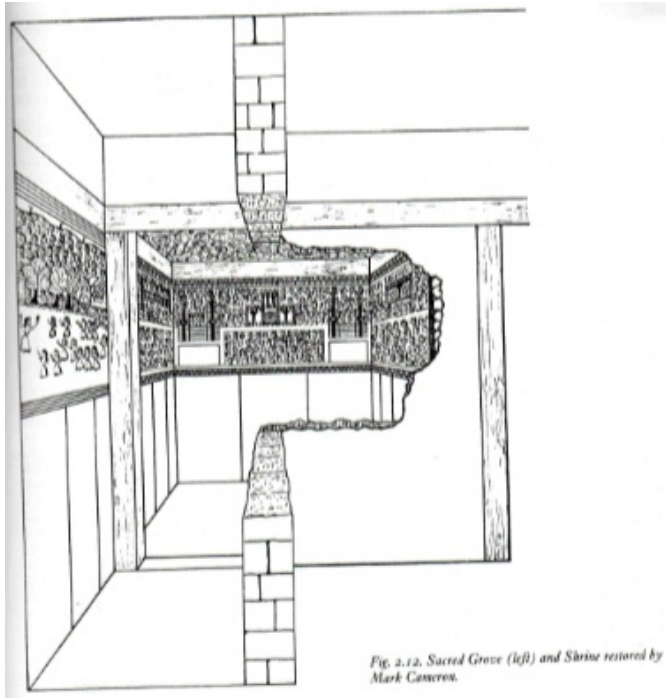


Fig. 2.12. Sacred Grove (left) and Shrine restored by Mark Cameron.

Figure 10. Sacred Grove and Shrine as restored by Mark Cameron.
(Fig. 2.12 in Hood, 2005)

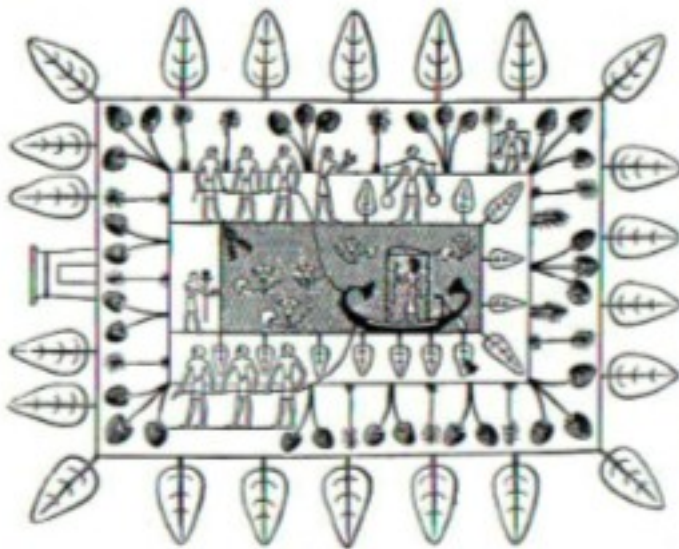


Figure 11. Egyptian New Kingdom park depiction.
(Fig. 142 Walberg. 1986)



Figure 12. Mycenae Room 31 cult center processional
(Plate 24, *Aegean Wall Painting, b*)

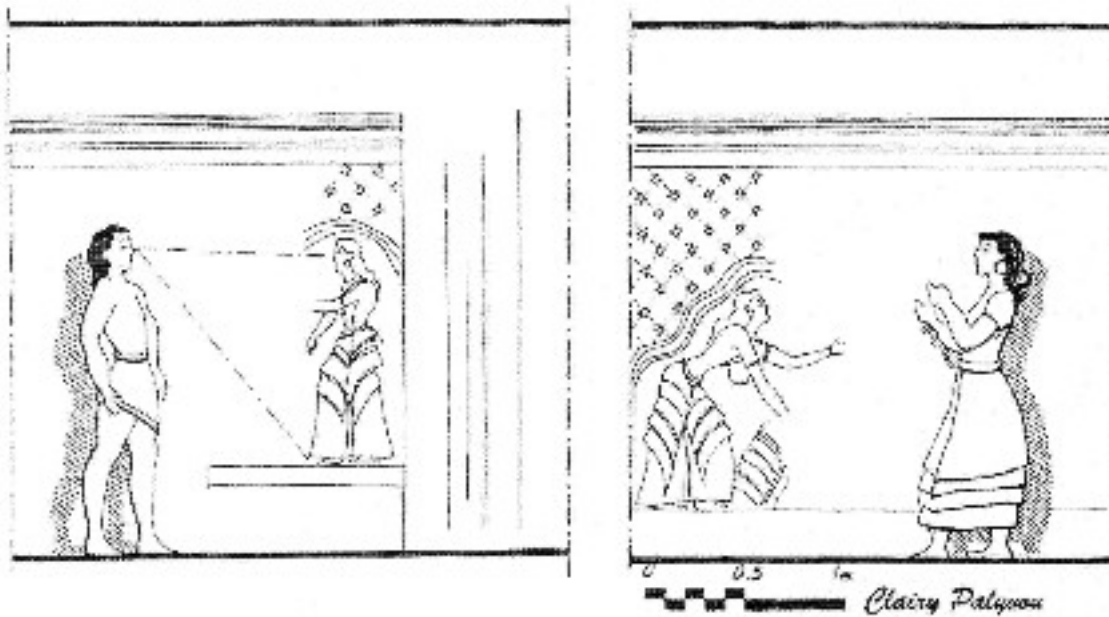


Figure 13. Iconographic horizon in relation to the actual viewer horizon.
(Fig. 242. Pavylou. 2005b)

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