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Chloe Lovelace

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, jross26@vols.utk.edu

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Swallow Imagery in the Spring Fresco

CHLOE LOVELACE

Advisor: Dr. Aleydis Van de Moortel

The Spring Fresco, or the fresco of the Room of the Lilies, from the Delta Complex at the Late Bronze Age site of Akrotiri is considered to be the first painting of a nature scene in European art history. With this has come significant analysis of the fresco, which covers three walls of the small room. There has been much discussion regarding the room’s purpose and the iconographic meaning of the images in the fresco, especially in regards to the flying swallows. Initially thought to be birds in courtship, the birds are now thought to be engaging in behavior that is much more substantive. Present scholarly opinion is divided about whether they display parental or combative behavior. However, neither of these explanations fully accounts for all the bird behavior depicted in this room or for the birds’ relationship to the other components of the painting: the lilies and the multi-colored rocks. Moreover, neither interpretation accords well with the purported cultic function of the room. This paper seeks to offer an alternative explanation of the swallows and the lilies as representations of the cycle of life. This interpretation accounts for all of the swallow and lily images in the room and it fits its cultic context much better, thus providing a deeper and more holistic understanding of the entire assemblage.



Introduction

The town of Akrotiri on the Greek island of Thera in the archipelago of Santorini was destroyed by a volcanic eruption early in the Late Cycladic I phase. Its inhabitants deserted the settlement for safer grounds, anticipating the eruption, and all that is left are the material remains of a once-thriving Cycladic culture. Because of the town's Plinian demise, Akrotiri is the most well-preserved site of the Bronze Age Aegean. Excavations from 1967-1975 led by Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos brought to light the vibrancy of the town, in part as a result of the discovery of a myriad of frescoes located in various buildings of the site. Because of their natural preservation and the concerted efforts of Marinatos and his successors, Akrotiri allows archaeologists and art historians to search for consistent decorative motifs and iconography throughout the town, as well as trace the cultural relations between the Cycladic peoples and Minoan Crete. There are several complexes with wall paintings in the town, including the West House, House Beta, *Xestēs* 3 and 4, The House of the Ladies, and the Delta complex. The Delta complex (partially shown in Fig. 1) is architecturally unremarkable and provides little new information regarding Cycladic daily life not already exhibited by the West House and the *Xeste* complexes. However, artistically, it houses one of the most important frescoes in Akrotiri, named the Spring Fresco by Marinatos, or the Room of the Lilies.¹

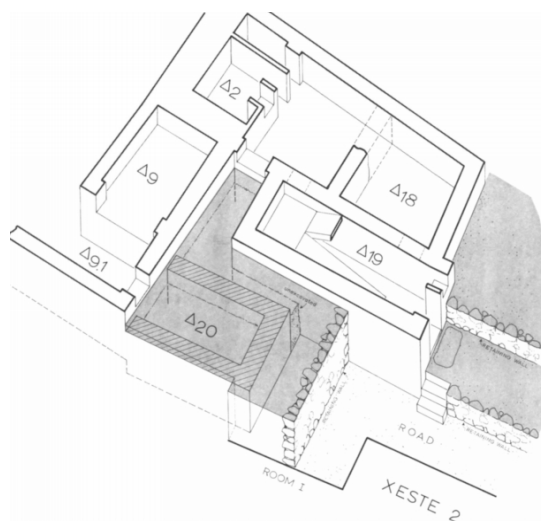


Fig. 1: Map of the Delta Complex at Akrotiri (Palyvou 1986: 190, Fig. 9).

The Spring Fresco was found in Delta 2, a small interior room in the north part of the Delta complex. It measures only 2.30 meters by 2.50 meters, and has a door flanked by a window in its east wall.² Because of its location nestled in between much larger spaces of the Delta complex and its thick walls relative to the other rooms,³ it is unlikely that the room was intended for frequent public use, as it would not have been fit for heavy foot traffic.⁴ The fresco covers the north, south, and west walls of the room and shows lilies blooming atop craggy multi-colored rocks. Among these flowers, there are swallows flying independently and in pairs (Fig. 2). The swallows are the main focus of contention in the modern debate about the iconographic meaning of the fresco. Originally considered by Marinatos to be mating birds,⁵ present scholarly opinion is divided about whether they display parental or combative behavior. Mary B. Hollinshead believes the birds show a display of affection only fit for the adult-fledgling relationship,⁶ whereas Karen Foster contends that the birds are engaging in aggressive behavior,

which may be symbolic of the potential violence of the overarching Minoan culture.⁷ None of these interpretations fully accounts for all of the bird's behavior or for their relationship to the other components of the paintings--the lilies and the rocks. This paper will offer an alternative explanation of the fresco. It will be argued that both the birds and the lilies are representative of the cycle of life, rather than of spring time. This analysis will incorporate the volcanic rock formations as well, which are often overlooked in studies of the painting.



2

Fig. 2: The Room with the Spring Fresco, or the Room of the Lilies (Morgan, 2005:Plate 1.2)

The appearance of the lilies lends the fresco an appearance of springtime imagery, which has contributed to a scholarly consensus that the room was likely used for cultic purposes, with the painting showing the “religious significance of the natural world”.⁸ This interpretation is already found in Marinatos’ excavation notes, which associated the nature of the painting with a spring festival worshipping the Spring Goddess of Nature.⁹ The notion of such a festival does not accord well, however, with the smallness and isolated character of the room, which had little room for many people to view or visit. Rather, it is more reasonable to assume that it served a private cultic function.¹⁰ The objects found inside the room, which included a wooden bed, vessels and vases of variable shapes and sizes as well as a leaf shaped knife and the handle of a bronze frying pan¹¹ are not intrinsically cultic items, and rather suggest a use as a domestic space. However, because of the room’s location on the ground-floor level, it is unlikely that it would have been constructed as a private domestic room, as all other domestic spaces in the town were located on the upper level of complexes.¹² Further, because of its elaborate wall decorations, it is unlikely to have been originally a storage space, even though storage spaces were located on the ground or basement floors. The Spring Fresco is the only painting of its caliber on a ground-floor level structure at Akrotiri. With the given evidence, scholars have concluded that room Delta 2 had initially been used as a cultic or religious space¹³ and then fell into disuse and became a storage area, either before or at the time of destruction.¹⁴ This conclusion seems to be the most plausible explanation for the array of materials found in the

room, and still allows for a cultic function of the wall painting.

Iconography: previous interpretations

Debate about the iconographic significance of the painting is directly associated with the room's function, as both topics inform one another. Spyridon Marinatos believed that the swallows in the scene were courting one another; the pairs of swallows were depicted in a ritualistic flight pattern whereas the individual birds were flying in search of prospective mates. His daughter Nanno Marinatos proposed that the room served a religious function by offering a beautiful place in which to contemplate thoughts regarding nature and perform cultic tasks, utilizing the nature scene as a backdrop.¹⁵ Images of birds are generally considered to carry religious symbolism in the Bronze Age Aegean. Sometimes birds are indicative of the presence of a deity, and this further contributed to the idea that the room served a religious purpose. However both interpretations focused only on the swallows and did not lead to a complete understanding of the room. Moreover, they took the Spring Fresco at face value as merely a tool of decoration. By assuming that the birds are in the process of courtship, the belief is established that swallows exist in the painting for whimsy, or for artistic license, rather than for an actual purpose. Since other paintings from Akrotiri and Minoan Crete are not primarily decorative, but intentional and symbolic, I believe that an interpretation of the birds as having a passive decorative function in the room would be inconsistent with the iconographic record of that time.

A very different explanation is offered by Hollinshead in her 1989 article, "The Swallows and Artists of Room Delta 2 at Akrotiri, Thera."¹⁶ She argues that the swallows exhibit parental behavior rather than romantic love or courtship. Hollinshead specifically looks at the pair of birds on the north wall who are flying towards one another, beaks touching (Fig. 3). The bird on the left is nearly rolling over backwards with its feet pulled in towards its body—a physical indication of halt in flight. The bird on the right is slightly larger and is depicted a little higher on the wall, with its beak touching the beak of the bird on the left. Marinatos had considered this to be an image of courting birds. However, Hollinshead compares this image to that of two modern-day swallows interacting with one another (Fig. 4). The two birds are in the same position as the ones in the fresco but, rather than lovers, they are an adult and fledgling at feeding. Hollinshead believes that the beak-to-beak contact of the birds in the Spring Fresco is more consistent with feeding behavior than with mating.¹⁷

While Hollinshead's comparison with the behavior of modern swallows is certainly persuasive, her interpretation is not completely satisfactory as it focuses solely on this pair of birds and it does not account for the full context of the painting and the room. I believe that this parental relationship, if accurate, must be relevant to the rest of the room. While it could establish Delta 2 as a cultic area in a very general sense—i.e., the parent-child relationship creates a peaceful atmosphere and thus a room for contemplation—it does little to explain the rest of the painting. It does not account for the other pair of birds, the individual swallows, the rocks or the lilies.



Fig. 2. Delta 2: pair of swallows and lily, north wall. (Courtesy National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Fig. 3 : North Wall swallows (Hollinshead 1989: fig. 2)

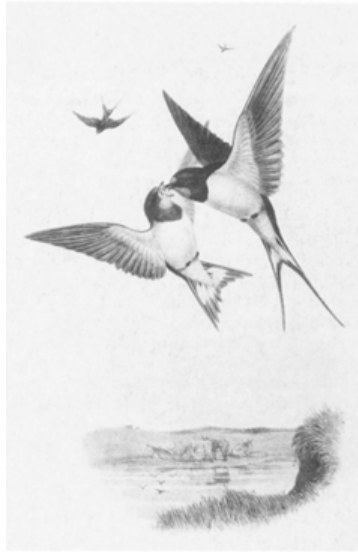


Fig. 4. *Hirundo rustica* feeding offspring. (After J. Gould, *Birds of Europe* [London 1966] 220, courtesy Littera Scripta Manet, Gorssel, Holland)

Fig. 4 : *Hirundo rustica* feeding offspring (Hollinshead 1989: fig. 4)

Another study of the behavior of the birds is undertaken by Foster (provide reference), and leads to a very different interpretation. Foster compares the pair of swallows on the west wall of room Delta 2 to a pair depicted in *Audubon's Birds of America* (Figs. 5-6). Both pairs are in a similar physical position, circling around one another in a swooping motion. Whereas Marinatos considered this another image of coquettish behavior, Foster states that the birds are interacting with one another in an aggressive manner, displaying behavior typical of a "feather fight".¹⁸ During the late spring and early summer, swallows engage in what biologists refer to as "feather fights", in which birds vie with one another for feathers so that they can pad their nests. These interactions are often violent and quick, with feathers exchanging beaks tens of times in a matter of minutes, and the victor claiming the feather in the end. Though there are no feathers evident in the fresco, Foster provides several possibilities for their former placement. Pale feathers could have been painted on the pale background and could have faded over time. Another possibility is that the 6 or 7 holes seen intermittently throughout the fresco, between the pairs of birds and among the lilies, could have been used to attach actual feathers onto the wall. There is even a potentially covered hole that is in the same location as one of the birds' beaks.¹⁹

Foster further contends that the other birds in the fresco are exhibiting aggressive behavior as well, through their aggressive flight patterns, which would not necessarily constitute a mating ritual.²⁰ Noting that swallows are regularly used as a motif in Bronze Age Aegean iconography and that no other frescoes shows them engaging in similar behavior, Foster proposes that the birds of room Delta 2 may symbolize the violence of Minoan aggressors, which is only vaguely referred to in the archaeological and artistic record.²¹

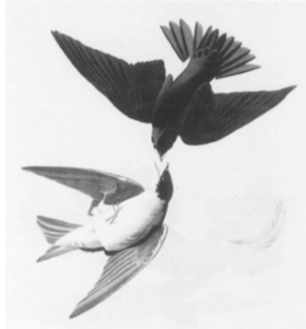


Fig. 8. Audubon's "Green-Blue or White-bellied Swallow," (After R.T. and V.M. Peterson, *Audubon's Birds of America: Baby Elephant Folio* [New York 1985] pl. 276, courtesy Abbeville Press)

Fig. 5: West Wall swallows (Hollinshead 1989: fig. 3)



Fig. 3. Delta 2: pair of swallows, west wall (Courtesy National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Fig. 6: Birds engaged in feather fight (Foster 1995: fig. 8)

While Foster, unlike Marinatos or Hollinshead, accounts for all of the bird behavior in the fresco, and her interpretation certainly raises an interesting perspective in terms of Minoan interactions with a Cycladic culture, she still does not account for the lilies or the rocks, nor does her view accord well with the purported cultic function of the room. The pair of birds featured in Foster's article very well could be engaging in a feather fight, but it is somewhat doubtful that this was a public display of Minoan aggression or violence because not many people would have seen this small interior room in complex Delta on a regular basis. Moreover, her argument intrinsically ignores the lilies because they are entirely non-violent in nature and thus do not fit the swallows' aggressive behavior. Her interpretation implies that the flowers and rocks were passive components of the painting rather than fully equal parts of the iconographic imagery. Further, her interpretation glosses over the debated cultic function of the room. Perhaps she implies that the room was serving a more violent cultic function than Marinatos' original interpretation of the room as a space for the Nature Goddess, but this opinion is never made explicit. The holes in the wall need not have held feathers; rather their arrangement indicates that they would have been used to support a shelf unit,^{22 23} or to hold heavy items on the wall.²⁴ Foster's suggestion that feathers may have been painted in a light color onto the pale background is not convincing, as it is inconsistent with the painting style of Akrotiri, which is bold and very clear, and with the good state of preservation of the fresco. .

A new interpretation: cycle of life and renewal.

In the following I want to propose an alternative view of the Spring Fresco from room Delta 2 as symbolizing the cycle of life and renewal. Both Hollinshead and Foster proposed plausible interpretations of swallow behavior based on modern comparisons. If we accept *both* scholars' views, then we have two categories of birds in the painting: those involved in a feather fight, and those engaging in feeding. There is a third category of birds as well, which has yet to be properly addressed: the independent birds flying among the lilies. While Foster tries to include these birds by insisting that they are just as visually aggressive as the pairings of birds,²⁵ this idea leaves something to be desired in terms of a consistent iconographic program among all components of the painting. Foster contends that the individual swallows are just as hostile as the pairs, though the implication is less obvious because it requires a subjective viewing of the birds' swooping angles and motions as particularly aggressive. Hollinshead, on the other hand, does not explore the individual birds at all.

My own interpretation incorporates both Foster's and Hollinshead's explanations regarding the behavior of the birds. According to a study performed at Cornell University, feather fights are primarily intended for padding the nests of fledglings, and the more padded the nest is, the stronger the fledglings will be, and the earlier the birds will leave the nest.²⁶ Thus the motivation for a feather fight is decidedly parentally based, as is the need to feed a fledgling. This means that the Spring Fresco shows two phases of growth for the birds: first, the birds are fighting over feathers for their offspring that is in the nest, and, second, said birds are feeding their fledglings that have already learned to fly but still depend on their parents for food. A third phase is represented by the individual swallows that are (in this scenario) birds who have fully fledged and are flying independently throughout the lilies, perhaps looking for mates. Thus the swallows represent three stages of the cycle of life. I believe that this interpretation is more appropriate for the entirety of the fresco and for its setting in room Delta 2. A decorative program depicting a life cycle would agree well with a cultic room as a spatial representation of peace and renewal.

Moreover, my interpretation applies equally to the lilies that are arranged atop the whimsical rocks throughout the room. The lilies, which display morphological characteristics of the white Madonna lily, but have the color of the native *Lilium chalcedonicum*,²⁷ likewise show the full cycle of life, and this in six stages: from closed buds to scarcely opening buds to half-open flowers, to fully grown flowers to wilting lilies with recurved petals and, finally, to the remnants of previous flowers depicted lower down on the racemes (Fig. 7).

Moreover, also the red color of the lilies may be symbolic for the cycle of life. As pointed out above, the lilies in the fresco are shaped like white Madonna lilies with upright flowers, but have the red color of the *Lilium chalcedonicum*, which is native to Greece and has drooping flowers.²⁸ If the artist had wished to depict red lilies, why did he not choose to paint the *Lilium chalcedonicum*? On the other hand, if the artist wanted to offset the white Madonna lilies against the pale background, he could easily have depicted their leaves with a dark outline, as he did with the swallows; or he could have painted the background red. Given those choices available to the painter, I believe that this hybrid representation of the lilies was deliberate. The red color used for the white Madonna lilies likely was symbolic, possibly referring to blood as a symbol of life. A similar significance may be attributed to the red paint in the frescoes of Xeste 3.²⁹ It is interesting to note that also the swallows of the Spring Fresco exhibit a hybridization of behaviors and physical appearances of several types of swallows. The symbolic significance of this mixing of bird characteristics is not immediately apparent.



Fig. 7: South wall lilies (Hollinshead, 1989: fig. 6)

Another curious aspect of the lilies is that most appear in groups of three racemes, except for two instances on the west and south walls, where lilies bloom in pairs.³⁰ Close inspection of these distinct groupings of flowers reveals that the same phases of growth are present in both the triplets and the pairs. The difference in the number of racemes appears to be merely indicative of the artist's concern to create proportionality in the room: the pairs of lilies are painted in narrower spaces of the walls where groups of three would have appeared crowded. Since there are no noticeable differences between the stages of growth of the lilies between the doublets and the triplets, their arrangement seems to be a stylistic choice rather than one laden with meaning.

The last elements of the fresco to be discussed are the multi-colored rock formations depicted on all three walls of the room. The rocks are largely overlooked in scholarly research. They are regarded as simply an artistic rendering of the volcanic formations of the island, and as predecessors to later depictions of rocks in nature.³¹ However, because of the highly stylized appearance of the rocks, we have to wonder whether they were meant to merely represent the Theran landscape or whether they, too, carried a symbolism of the cycle of life.³² The rocks are painted in blue, red, and yellow vertical bands that are repeated throughout the room in triplicate, much like many of the lilies. Two of the boundaries of colored bands correspond with the location of the pairs of swallows discussed earlier. The proposed adult-fledgling pair flies directly above a yellow-blue division, while the "feather fight" couple meets at a yellow-red junction. In contrast, the two lone birds are positioned in the middle of solid color sections (red and blue, respectively). It seems to me that these arrangements are deliberate. I propose that the different rock sections represent different seasons, whether actual weather seasons (e.g., winter, spring, and summer) or, more metaphorically speaking, the seasons of life (e.g., birth, childhood, and adulthood). Birds, like most animals, are seasonal creatures, with peak nesting and fledgling seasons followed by a period of independence that renews the cycle. The placement of the swallows in these different stages of life in conjunction with both the dynamic and static character of the rocks creates the possibility of a correlation between the two, which would support the idea of the fresco as a multifaceted iconographic depiction of the cycles of life and renewal.

Conclusion

In sum, though at a first glance the fresco of room Delta 2 at Akrotiri is evocative of a vibrant spring, it has been proposed here that its imagery lends itself to deeper levels of interpretation. The birds, flowers, and rocks are all inherently filled with life and reveal something of the character of Cycladic culture. The blooming of flowers is generally associated with the renewal of spring; however, despite the growth of the lilies, the theme, I think, is not quite as superficial as “spring time.” The birds are almost certainly the focal point of the painting, adding depth and dimension in a way that neither the lilies nor the rocks, two-dimensionally plastered on the wall and unmoving in their relationship to one another, could provide. The birds interact with the scenery and allow the imagery to become active, rather than being passive representatives of the natural world. Clearly exhibiting behaviors associated with different parts of life and the growth cycle, the swallows set the stage for the other elements of the painting, which do the same. The lilies show several phases of growth all on the same plant and are portrayed similarly to the different life stages of the birds, which are also shown on the same visual plane. The association of the changing rock colors with the changing behavior of the birds allows the viewer to draw parallels between the decorative shifts and connect them to one another. Thus, I believe that the name, “Spring Fresco” does not aptly denote the meaning of the images in the room. Likewise, referring to it as the “painting from the Room of the Lilies” is unsatisfactory, as it places emphasis on the lilies without examining the other elements of the room. On the basis of my analysis, I believe it would be more appropriate to call it “The Fresco of Life.” If that name is not acceptable, I propose to call it “the painting from room Delta 2” until a more fitting title is found.

Endnotes

- 1 Spyridon Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV* (Athens: En Athēnais Archaiologikē Hetaireia, 1972), 22.
- 2 Ibid, 20.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Based on the assumption that the average person comfortably takes up about 12 sq. ft., the room could maybe hold 5 people at a time.
- 5 Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV*, 24.
- 6 Mary Hollinshead, "The Swallows and Artists of Room Delta 2 at Akrotiri, Thera," *American Journal of Archaeology* vol. 93, no. 3 (1989)
- 7 Karen Foster, "A Flight of Swallows," *The American Journal of Archaeology* vol.99, no. 3 (1995)
- 8 Livia Morgan and Mark Cameron, *Aegean wall painting: A tribute to Mark Cameron* (London: British School at Athens, 2005), 37.
- 9 Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV*, 49.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid, 20.
- 12 Ibid 49 and Christos Doumas, *The Wall Paintings of Thera* (Athens: The Thera Foundation, 1992), 99.
- 13 Sara Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1990) 48., Litsa Kontorli-Papadopoulou, *Aegean Frescoes of Religious Character* (Göteborg : P. Åströms förlag, 1996) 126-127, and Foster, "A Flight of Swallows", 413.
- 14 Doumas, *The Wall Paintings of Thera*, 99.
- 15 Nanno Marinatos, *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (Athens: D. & I. Mathioulakis, 1984) 94.
- 16 Hollinshead, "The Swallows and Artists of Room Delta at Akrotiri, Thera."
- 17 Ibid, 93.
- 18 Foster, "A Flight of Swallows," 414.
- 19 Ibid, 419-420.
- 20 Ibid, 413-414.
- 21 E.g., the presence of daggers in Early Minoan burials, the invention of the sword by Minoans, the warfare depicted in the miniature Ship Fresco from the West House at Akrotiri, the boar's tusk helmets painted in *Xeste 4*, the violent boxing scenes from House Beta, et cetera. All of these are violent aspects of societies which have carefully curated their cultural programs to be seen as peaceful, though Crete's pervasive cultural impact on the southern Aegean seems unlikely to have been exerted by a purely peaceful, cultic based society.
- 22 Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV*, 21.
- 23 If these were the holes intended for the shelf, it would have covered some of the focal points of the painting. One could argue that the shelf was created after the painting, and this would support the idea that the once cultic space fell into disuse and became a storage area before the town's volcanic destruction.
- 24 Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV*, 51.
- 25 Foster, "A Flight of Swallows," 413-414.
- 26 Ibid, 415.
- 27 Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age*, 47.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 A painting from *Xeste 3* show an injured maiden with a bleeding foot; the blood is also seen on the painting of a doorway with horns of consecration on another wall of the same room.

- 30 Doumas, *The Wall Paintings of Thera*, 100.
 31 Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age*, 46.
 32 Marinatos, *Excavations from Thera IV*, 53.

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