

1 Aegean Monkeys and The Importance of Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration in Archaeoprimatology: A Reply to
2 Urbani and Youlatos (2020).

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13 14 **Abstract**

15 In replying to our 2019 publication: “A New Identification of the Monkeys Depicted in a Bronze Age Wall
16 Painting from Akrotiri, Thera,” Urbani and Youlatos (2020) argue for the traditional identification of the
17 monkeys depicted on the north and west walls of room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera, as
18 vervet monkeys (Fig. 1). Their argument is based largely on previous scholarship and their analysis of
19 monkey morphology as it appears in the Bronze Age artwork. Here, after clarifying some misconceptions and
20 misquotations, we thoroughly contextualize the wall painting in question, emphasizing the importance of
21 collaboration between disparate disciplines for a multifaceted and rigorous approach. The nature of the item
22 in question is key in this reply: we are studying artwork. Because this is a cultural representation of monkeys
23 rather than a study of live primates or preserved specimens, consideration of artistic choice, color
24 conventions, and the agency of the artist are important for answering the questions raised by Urbani and
25 Youlatos, stimulating further cross-disciplinary discussions.

26
27 Keywords: Langur; Bronze Age Aegean; Art; Exchange; Indus

28 29 **Introduction**

30 We are grateful for Urbani and Youlatos’ (2020a) reply to our article regarding the possible identities of the
31 monkeys depicted in room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera (Fig. 1) and their *Antiquity*
32 publication (2020b), as they contributed a general summary of previous scholarship that we did not have
33 space to include. We published our results in a primatological journal to encourage conversation among
34 specialists who are qualified to examine morphological traits of the depicted primates, not previously done

35 for Aegean Prehistorians. Because previous claims regarding the possible identities of the monkeys were
36 made in archaeological and art historical publications, little opportunity for fruitful discussion among
37 primatologists was possible. Here, we clarify the misconceptions and misrepresentations in Urbani and
38 Youlatos' reply, then consider the nuances of reading Aegean wall paintings, focusing on the blue color of the
39 monkey.

40

41 **Misconceptions and Misrepresentations**

42 Urbani and Youlatos state that we rely only on tail carriage to propose the langur identity (2020a, p. 2). They
43 describe the tail carriage of both langurs and vervet monkeys, concluding "none bears any inverted U-shaped
44 tails and/or tail tips touching or reaching their bodies, a unique tail posture in langurs," (2020a, p. 2-3). They
45 argue that the facial markings, features, and "orange and reddish-orange" eyes better suit the vervet species
46 (2020a, p. 3). They also suggest that we identified all Aegean monkey iconography as langurs. This
47 misrepresents our article in several ways.

48 First, we propose the langur identity *only* for the monkeys from Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at
49 Akrotiri, Thera. We stated that we do not assign new species identifications to other fragmentary Aegean wall
50 paintings of monkeys. We acknowledged the possible baboons identified in several previous publications. We
51 are not comfortable proposing new identifications for extremely small items that lack adequate features for
52 accurate attributions, or highly fragmentary wall paintings lacking integral details of the primate's
53 morphology. Nevertheless, glyptic art specialists have previously identified monkey images on small media as
54 Hanuman langurs (Barnett, 1973; Van Buren, 1939).

55 Second, we considered multiple morphological traits when examining the wall painting. Media
56 coverage in several publications oversimplified the argument by focusing on the animals' tails (Wu 2019;
57 Powell 2020; Marshall 2019; Whipple 2019). We considered only the traits visible from the original
58 fragments of the painting and not the reconstructed portions. Of eight possible individuals depicted, the tails
59 of five are reasonably well preserved (Fig. 1a, b). The extreme U-shaped position of the tail that Urbani and
60 Youlatos argue should be represented if these are indeed langurs may be preserved in the fragments to the
61 far right of the north wall; they may simply be reconstructed in the wrong position in relation to the (almost

62 completely reconstructed) body of the monkey (Fig. 2). Similarly, monkeys with no tail fragments preserved
63 may also have exhibited such a posture, as no two monkeys seem identically posed.

64 Third, dark eyes and “conspicuous and visible ears,” occur in both taxa and do not aid this discussion
65 (2020a, 3). Perhaps the strongest distinguishing facial feature is the white band of hair crossing the vervet’s
66 forehead; langur’s facial hair is more uniformly white. Original fragments of only three monkeys’ faces are
67 adequately preserved to illustrate these conclusions. Finally, we clearly state that we considered the animals’
68 physical proportions and gestures in addition to facial markings and tail carriage.

69 In another misrepresentation, a quotation was changed. Our published statement reads: “Aegean
70 wall paintings typically lack this level of detail,” (2019, 1) and Urbani and Youlatos quote, “Aegean wall
71 paintings typically lack ... [ideal] level of detail” (2020a, p. 3). By adding “ideal,” Urbani and Youlatos change
72 the meaning of our sentence and suggest that we reference the *subjective quality* of the wall painting.
73 Removing this quote from context allows additional manipulation: our statement asserts that this painting
74 *preserves* many significant details illustrating the langur identity, and *breaks* with traditional understanding
75 of Aegean iconography.

76 Pareja’s quote from *New Scientist* is also taken out of context and used to suggest inconsistency
77 (2020a, p. 4). Currently, *direct* contact between the Indus and Aegean cannot be proven. No published
78 evidence indicates that Aegean people were travelling to the Indus (or vice-versa), but it is possible that
79 *indirect* exchange was taking place via the groups inhabiting the areas between them. Importantly, trade
80 indicates a formal and longstanding system that was regularly used and likely regulated. In contrast,
81 exchange indicates a more casual movement of goods, with or without a reliable infrastructure or route, and
82 may take place over several years or generations. Mesopotamia presents the clearest evidence for such
83 exchange (Pareja in press), particularly in light of studies like Pittman’s.

84 Urbani and Youlatos question our citation of Pittman’s work and discussion of Presentation Scenes.
85 They state that the Minoan carnelian seal showing a monkey and male figure resembles other Minoan art
86 (from the Aegina Treasure) rather than drawing upon eastern artistic traditions (2020a, p. 5). They argue
87 that artifacts from the Indus were misidentified as primates, and that this caused erroneous
88 “hyperdiffusionist suggestions concerning the alleged iconographic dispersion of monkey imagery from the
89 Indus River Valley to the far west,” (2020a, p. 7). They review and perpetuate several pitfalls of the traditional

90 approach to monkey imagery in the Aegean (2020a, b). To be clear: we state that the presence of Egyptian
91 connections with regard to most monkey imagery does not necessitate a *purely* Egyptian origin for the
92 monkeys in question. A deeper understanding of the relationships between these regions throughout the
93 Bronze Age is required to fully understand the ramifications of this statement.

94 Critically, Pittman’s work supports an Aegean-Indus connection by highlighting the appearance of
95 humanoid and hybrid creatures in seated postures from compartmented metal stamp seals (1984). Harper,
96 Aruz, and Tallon corroborate this pattern, stating that the motif of monkeys seated on stools like humans is
97 found as far west as Susa, which they then support with additional evidence for Susa’s well-documented
98 exchange with the Indus Valley (1992, p. 97). Pittman also discusses the cross-and-chevron motif in
99 Bactria/Marginalia (1984, p. 56); it appears first in the Indus, then in Bactria/Marginalia, then Mesopotamia,
100 Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia, before the Aegean. The motif serves as some of the evidence for Pareja’s
101 newest project: incorporating Egypt into the westward movement of Indus materials, products, and
102 iconography.

103 Additionally, Presentation Scenes (as seen on the Levantine seal from Mochlos) are part of a visual
104 tradition that comes from the east, as Collon highlights (1995, 2005; Pareja 2017, 2019). The Aegean
105 appropriation of the scene’s composition is integral to understanding Aegean monkey iconography. The
106 Offering to the Seated Goddess wall painting from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera, is an eloquent illustration of the
107 importance of different cultural elements’ confluence: an eastern composition, a deity bedecked in gemstones
108 and textiles that likely come from the Indus (Arnott in press 2020), an African monkey, and an Aegean style
109 and location (Pareja 2017, 2019). To deny the importance and longstanding tradition behind the scene’s
110 composition is neither simple nor elegant, nor does it constitute rigorous scholarship.

111 Our article does not address the Early Bronze Age (EBA) Anatolian Trade Network (ATN; Şahoğlu
112 2005) due to a limitation on length. The EBA objects we discuss clearly fit into the ATN, particularly in light of
113 the other high-value, exotic objects recovered and identified with a sort of early “Golden Age” in the Aegean
114 (Colburn 2008; Arnott in press, p. 13-14). Mesopotamia serves as such an integral part of this exchange
115 network that some argue it served as a middle-man between Egypt and Crete (Şahoğlu 2005). The Aegina
116 Treasure, which Urbani and Youlatos reference to argue against an Indus connection (citing figures as
117 monkeys that are either ape or human, as neither possesses a tail; 2020, p. 5), houses some of the earliest and

118 clearest evidence of Aegean-Indus exchange. Urbani and Youlatos fail to mention carnelian beads that were
119 shaped in the Indus, cut in Mesopotamia, then deposited on one of the westernmost Aegean islands by the
120 middle of the Early Bronze Age (Chakrabarti 1993; Reinholdt 2003). The Aegina Treasure shows not only
121 exchange, but also the *path* of exchange for these beads. Furthermore, a single collection of such valuable
122 objects from a variety of locations suggests a much larger Afro-Eurasian network (Colburn 2008). The earlier
123 examples of monkey and ape imagery fit well into the EBA ATN model, constituting an important addition to
124 the growing corpus of eastern finds from Crete reflecting its participation in this EBA network (Klengel 1984;
125 Lambrou-Phillipson 1990; Şahoğlu 2005; Shank 2005; Aruz 2008; Colburn 2008). This new discovery,
126 explored in Pareja (in press), constitutes another way in which our work contributes to and expands on many
127 much larger, trans-regional studies in prehistoric Africa, Asia, and Europe.

128 To dismiss the Late Bronze Age connections is to deny the existence of well-documented exchange
129 between The Aegean, Egypt, the Near East, Mesopotamia, Bactria, the Indus, and the smaller regions between,
130 known from more than a thousand years before the creation of the painting in question (Sarianidi and
131 Kowalski 1971; Pittman 1984; Harper, Aruz, and Tallon 1992; Aruz 2003, 240–243; Reinholdt 2003, 260–
132 261; Moorey 1994; Ratnagar 2004; Şahoğlu 2005; Colburn 2008; Kenoyer 1997, 2008; Kenoyer et al. 2013;
133 Groman-Yaroslavski and Mayer 2015; Pareja and Chapin 2020; Arnott in press). Some of these routes even
134 predate the Bronze Age (Wilkinson 2014). Evidence for such far-reaching exchange continues to accumulate
135 (Valamoti 2013; Jones et al 2015; Miller et al. 2016; Linares et al. 2019; Pareja and Chapin 2020). Pareja (in
136 press) details the evidence from texts, raw materials, and iconography that supports the movement of
137 monkey imagery between the Indus and Aegean from the Early Bronze Age through the eruption at Akrotiri
138 (beginning of the Late Bronze Age). These connections were thoroughly exploited by the time this wall
139 painting was created.

140 Finally, while we deeply appreciate critical engagement, we respectfully take issue with two points in
141 Urbani and Youlatos’ reply: first, the abovementioned misquoting and misleading use of quotes without
142 context, and second, the incorrect and biased use of such words as “alleged” and “myopic” which suggest that
143 our work is without evidential basis and singular in focus (Urbani and Youlatos 2020a, pp. 1, 8). These
144 features do not contribute to rigorous and respectful scholarly discussion and debate, and we do not
145 perpetuate their use.

146

147 **Color, Symbolism, and Agency**

148 Our project’s strengths come from the integration of seemingly dissonant disciplines. By pairing
149 primatologists, with knowledge of live animals (platyrrhines and catarrhines), with a taxonomic illustrator
150 and an art historian/archaeologist who can interpret ancient artwork, we have created a team that is well
151 equipped to explore the nuances of prehistoric depictions of primates. In contrast, Urbani and Youlatos’ reply
152 highlights the problematic nature of collaboration between individuals who work in similar fields
153 (platyrrhines) relying on traditional scholarship in other disciplines. Critically, we are studying art, and
154 failure to acknowledge the choices made by the artists is to deny them agency – their ability to craft the image
155 and choose its details. Some of these details rely on nuanced concepts such as color theory, symbolism, and
156 familiarity with the rapidly-emerging study of indirect exchange between the Indus and the Aegean.

157 When considering the monkeys in Bronze Age Aegean wall paintings, blue pelage is immediately
158 apparent. Urbani and Youlatos repeat traditional arguments about this phenomenon (2020a; 2020b). The
159 first states that the monkeys are blue because vervets have bright bluish/greenish skin that the artists
160 emulated. The blue skin of vervets is highly localized, occurring only on males’ lower abdomen and scrotum.
161 The rest of the skin is dark, and therefore should not be represented as blue. Furthermore, this argument
162 works *only* for attributing the vervet identity, but *all* monkeys in Aegean wall paintings are painted blue –
163 even those Urbani and Youlatos identified as baboons, which also possess dark skin. Why then would artists
164 choose to paint baboons an “incorrect” color? Urbani and Youlatos repeat a traditional theory: blue
165 “represented the green/gray scale as actual blue,” (2020a, p. 4; 2020b; Platon 1947; Doumas 1992; Morgan
166 2005), a convention that artists may have adapted from Egypt (Greenlaw 2011). They also claim that:
167 “Aegean artists most likely culturally lacked the color ‘blue,’” (p. 4) a theory so popular among art historians
168 (Gillis 2004, p. 58) that it appears in podcasts (Radiolab 2012). Although this idea is on the right track, it is
169 reductionist, lacking both nuance and contextualization within Aegean art.

170 The solution to the mystery of the blue pelage is both simple and elegant: blue is used symbolically in
171 these depictions, not realistically. Pareja (in prep) is developing our understanding of Aegean Bronze Age
172 color theory: a concept that is much explored for Egypt but remains critically lacking for the Aegean (this
173 theory was presented at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America). Blue pigment

174 illustrates many visual elements in Aegean painted plasters, including fish, dolphins, rock work, silver metal,
175 plants, feathers, blue- or purple-dyed garments, the people's shaved scalps (male and female, child through
176 adult), and monkeys. Aegean wall paintings are considered luxurious architectural dressings, reserved for
177 elite or important spaces, and therefore the imagery in wall paintings constitutes part of elite expression; it
178 features a visual vocabulary of identity, luxury, and access to rarity (animals, materials, objects, people,
179 perhaps even gods). This constitutes the first step toward better understanding the iconography of monkeys
180 as exotic, foreign, rare, and associated with elite lineage, networks, and identity.

181 The materiality of blue pigment is important: the pigment used to render the monkeys' color is
182 Egyptian Blue (frit), a synthetic compound created by the Ancient Egyptians, the name of which translates
183 as *fake lapis lazuli* (Cavassa, Delamare, and Repoux, 2010; Frison and Brun 2016; Becker in press). This
184 material is used to simulate the rare, valuable, luxurious material that comes from one place: Afghanistan
185 (Fig. 3). This raw material was one of (if not *the*) most valuable raw materials, and its appearance outside of
186 Badakhshan, Afghanistan is cited as evidence of the earliest indirect exchange between populations in Europe
187 and Asia; it appears in both the Indus and Bronze Age Aegean (Sarianidi and Kowalski 1971; Ratnagar 2004;
188 Wilkinson 2014; Pareja and Chapin 2020; Arnott in press; Chapin and Pareja in press).

189 The monkeys' blue pelage *enhances* their already-understood nature as foreign, exotic, eastern,
190 important, rare, and luxurious. The roles of animals in Mesopotamian *and Egyptian* culture as mystical
191 intermediaries – perhaps even partially or wholly divine – is clear. The same role is depicted in the Offering to
192 the Seated Goddess fresco, where a blue monkey makes an offering to a seated goddess on behalf of a young
193 woman. If all Aegean blue monkey imagery – whether showing baboons, vervets or langurs – is considered
194 together in this way, then the realistic color of part of one species of the animal is irrelevant to the color
195 chosen for most of their bodies in Aegean art, while it *is* relevant to their special roles, associations, and
196 symbolism (Pareja and Chapin 2020).

197 Artistic considerations account for some of the morphological trouble faced by Urbani and Youlatos:
198 we are studying artwork, not live monkeys. Artists typically choose frequently observed behaviors and
199 postures from *their* experience, rather than the scientifically documented range of possible poses and
200 behaviors, and some details *may* escape their notice or even be ignored. For example, the monkeys' eyes are
201 rendered with a brilliant yellow ochre, as opposed to a realistic but less striking red ochre. A second example:

202 individuals are sometimes shown with two left hands or two right hands in Aegean art, or even an awkward
203 and seemingly anatomically impossible appendage (Immerwahr 2005). Perhaps Aegean artists depicted what
204 they considered to be the most notable differences in the most prominent features, such as the tail and face,
205 rather than the color of the hands. The hands and feet of some of the monkeys from Room 6 of Building Beta
206 support this idea (Fig. 4), as these boot-like appendages are certainly not realistic. Similarly, the more
207 extreme range of tail movement may be of less importance to the artist than the most frequently observed tail
208 carriage: the S- or C-shapes.

209 Finally, Urbani and Youlatos miss important aspects of art history and archaeology: cultures both
210 adopt *and adapt* imagery, technologies, and other ideas from one another. We did not claim that the monkeys
211 in *any* Aegean art were identical to or rendered in the same style as any of the (few) Indus depictions of
212 monkeys. Aegean art appropriated the *image* of the live langur for their own wall painting, in their own
213 artistic style. Although some Aegean primate iconography directly quotes long-standing traditions in eastern
214 art, these pieces are not identical in appearance or interpretation.

215 Aegean depictions of monkeys belong to a larger, established Aegean canon of artwork that
216 emphasizes certain features and elements more than others. A deeper understanding of Aegean prehistory,
217 art, and archaeology enables a more thorough examination of – in this case monkey – iconography. This
218 image, from the Late Bronze Age, stands on more than 1,000 years of preexisting art, culture, and long-
219 distance exchange. The relationships between various regions and the Aegean did not *begin* during this
220 period but were already well established. To not only draw such parallels but more deeply explore them
221 requires familiarity with these other, far-flung regions’ artistic styles, symbolism, and general culture. Real
222 progress in such a multifaceted and complex field is more likely if we build interdisciplinary team of
223 specialists with a broader array of disciplines; in our case, we benefit from experts on catarrhine morphology
224 and behaviors, depiction with taxonomic precision, and historical and material culture.

225

226

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232

233 **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

234

235 **Ethical Approval:** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by
236 any of the authors.

237

238 **Figure Captions**

239 Figure 1a: Monkeys Fresco on the west wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image
240 granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri Excavations.

241 Figure 1b: Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image
242 granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri Excavations.

243 Figure 2: Detail of original fragments of monkey on far right from the Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of
244 Room 6 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. After Dumas 1992, 121, fig. 86.

245 Figure 3: Map of the Aegean, Egypt, Near East, Mesopotamia, and the Indus. Adapted from Google Earth.

246 Figure 4: Detail of Original Fragments of Monkey Feet from the Monkeys Fresco on the north wall of Room 6
247 of Building Complex Beta at Akrotiri, Thera. Image granted from the photo archive of Thera Akrotiri
248 Excavations.

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