

Aegean Frescoes and Their Correlating Myths

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Myths provide insight into a culture's perception of the human condition. The study of mythology offers anthropologists insight into past societies' cultures and beliefs, and helps archaeologists identify the context of an archaeological site. In this project, Dr. Mazow and I hypothesized that Minoan and Mycenaean frescoes might illustrate earlier versions of classical Greek myths. We analyzed two frescoes, one from Mycenae and one from Akrotiri, and suggested they depict the Weaving Contest between Athena and Arachne, and Demeter and the Descent of Persephone, respectively. While research on the textile-related activities conducted in the fresco-decorated rooms is continuing, we propose a few ideas about the relationship between the visual presentation of the myths and the rooms they decorate.

Through literature reviews and museum visits, we identified repeating patterns in the visual (e.g. Greek Pottery) and written (e.g. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) descriptions of these myths, particularly regarding specific symbols associated with main characters, actions and events. References describing excavation of the archaeological sites in which these frescoes are present and written studies or interpretations of these frescoes were also included in the written mediums analyzed. Museum visits aided in the gathering of visual mediums of the myths themselves and the central mythological characters present. The creation of a database was used to successfully organize gathered information and to draw connections between sources. Although not all elements in the frescoes could be identified in the later mythic stories, the identified patterns compared well with the fresco imagery. The following figures are included to provide visual understanding of the case studies.



Figure 1. 1st Case Study: Fresco in Room 31 at The Cult Centre at Mycenae, 1250-1180 BCE



Figure 2. 2nd Case Study: The Adorants Fresco at Xeste 3, Akrotiri, 1500 BCE

The first case study was based off of the fresco in Room 31 at The Cult Centre at Mycenae, dated to 1250-1180 BCE. Depicting two women facing each other, the hypothesized myth is believed to be the story of Athena and Arachne. The story tells that Athena, goddess of war and weaving, challenging the boastful mortal Arachne to a weaving contest. After being bested by Arachne, Athena turns her into a spider, destined to weave forever. The above methodology allowed for the resulting parallels. Firstly, Athena is identified as the woman on the

left due to her significantly larger stature, godly style of robes and the presence of a combat or weaving sword. In visual mediums a larger stature was typically used to depict someone of higher status, usually a god or goddess. That being stated, the fresco depicts one large female and one smaller, so presumably a goddess and a mortal. Athena is further distinguished by her distinct and detailed robes, and the weapon within her hand. Athena in visual mediums was always depicted with a sword of some sort to allude to her as both goddess of war and of weaving. Arachne is then identified by her mortal stature, and her holding a tool of some sort, and although not well preserved, based upon the shape is likely to be a form of weaving technology. Lastly, another connection would be examples of the weaving contest in other media. Typically when the myth of Athena and Arachne is depicted, figures face each other as if in combat with Athena to the left and Arachne to the right, each woman holding a weaving tool. This can be best exemplified in the Aryballos from the Corinth Museum dated to 580 BCE, where the two women stand in front of a loom with Athena on the left and Arachne on the right. This fresco of study follows this pattern.

The second case study involves The Adorants Fresco at Xeste 3 at Akrotiri dated to 1500 BCE. The hypothesized myth of Demeter and Persephone tells the story of Demeter, goddess of agriculture, mourning the loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades, god of the underworld, and in doing so prohibits the earth from growing vegetation. She searches for her daughter with help from Hekate, an elder goddess of cross roads. A deal is reached allowing Persephone to split her time between the living and the underworld, with each time she returns to the underworld, Demeter mourns her, causing winter. During the process of research various parallels were drawn. First being that the age of the three women in the Adorants fresco identified based on hairstyle and difference in dress, matches with the ages of the three main goddesses within the

myth. Reading from left to right the first woman referred to as “necklace bearer” is the eldest and the last woman or the “veiled women” in the youngest. Hekate in our myth is the eldest goddess and we believe to be the woman on the far left. Not only is the age of the first woman a parallel but also the presence of the necklace within her hand acts as another clue that points to this woman as Hekate. In Homer's *Hymn to Demeter* he states that Hekate was present with a “splendid headband” upon meeting Demeter to suggest the goddess knew where Demeter’s daughter had disappeared too. In this fresco the woman is holding a necklace or garland of some sort reaching towards the middle figure, which could potentially be this headband Homer refers to when telling the myth.

The middle woman is seated in a crouched position, identified to be of middle age between all three figures, similar to the main goddess in our myth Demeter. Due to the position this woman is in and the mourning look she expresses, scholars when studying this fresco have labeled her “mourning woman”. Another parallel we’ve drawn is related to this crouched position the woman sits in, as when examining other visuals, there is a pattern of Demeter being seated similar to the case study. This can be seen in Fresco at Hagia Triada (1400 BCE) and in the Tomb Of Persephone at Vergina (4th c. BCE), where Demeter is seated in both these depictions. Scholars have identified a myrtle branch to be at the top of the mourning woman’s head and upon further research, we discovered myrtle was a symbol for Demeter in Greek mythology as it was believed to be auspicious for agriculture. An additional symbol of the myth is present here on the mourning woman, as scholars identified a pomegranate finial located on her dress. Pomegranates are a significant symbol within this myth as the story tells that Persephone while in the underworld consumed a pomegranate, and because she ate food of that realm, was then forced to return, year after year. The presence of two key symbols (the myrtle

branch and the pomegranate) as well as the age and position of the mourning woman matching with Demeter, have allowed us to draw conclusions that the middle woman may be the goddess Demeter, mourning her daughter's abduction as the myth tells.

The last woman or the veiled woman is deemed to be the youngest of all three women, as Persephone is in the myth since she is the daughter of Demeter. This young woman can further be identified as Perspheone because she is completely veiled. Within the myth, Perspoone is kidnapped by the god Hades to be taken as his bride, the veil on this woman in the fresco telling that story. Also, this woman is described as walking one way towards the fresco's perspective, yet turning back towards the other women in the fresco, and some scholars state this distinct position is to allude to her in two separate worlds. This aspect also matches with our myth as Persephone exists with both the mortal realm with her mother and the underworld with her kidnapper each year.

Based on Dr. Mazow's hypothesis, within both case studies parallels were able to be drawn connecting the frescoes to their suggested myth. The first case study with the Fresco in Room 31 at The Cult Centre at Mycenae and the myth of Athena and Arachne, the stature of the two women identifies a goddess and mortal, the presence of a weapon further identifies Athena, a weaving technology present in the mortal hands suggests Arachne, and the fresco follows the repeated pattern of Athena being placed on the left facing Arachne on the right. With the second case study being the The Adorants Fresco at Xeste 3 at Akrotiri and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the age of the three woman matching with the ages of the goddesses in the myth, the eldest woman presenting a necklace to the middle woman acts similar to how Hekate presented a garland to Demeter, the morning woman possessing two main symbols of the myth on her dress as well as her seated position matching other visual depictions of Demeter, and with the veiled

women alluding to Persephone's marriage to Hades, we hypothesize that this fresco tells the story of Demeter and the descent of her daughter Persephone. Examining both written and visual mediums over the last year has allowed us to draw these convincing parallels.

As an archaeological artifact, wall paintings provide information on a room's function, but because of their unusual preservation these frescoes have taken on enormous significance in the identification of room function. A ritual association is presumed between the painted images and the activities in the rooms. A great example is Demeter and Persephone, where older Hekate, mother Demeter, and maiden Persephone are transformed into images of life-cycle events with presumed activities including puberty and marriage rituals. Alternative interpretation involves image in connection with the activity area. This is further explained as an activity area is identified by the features and artifacts found in the room. When examining the two case studies, beginning with the myth of Athena and Arachne and the fresco from Mycenae, the presence of a central tub and hearth in the room suggest it as a locus of textile production. The relationship between the activity area and the wall painting centers on a weaving theme. With the case study of the myth of Demeter and Persephone and the Xeste 3 fresco, there is a large, stepped feature of unknown function, two tubs and a non-domestic artifact assemblage point to non-domestic functions, but the identification of specific activity is still unknown. A connection with textile dyeing has been proposed.

The parallels we've identified suggest that with the first case study and fresco from the site of Mycenae express the Weaving Contest between Athena and Arachne demonstrating a visual depiction of Ovid's 8th c. BCE myth circulated as early as 1250 BCE. With the second case study and the Xeste 3 fresco, the story of Demeter and Persephone demonstrates, a version of this myth was visually communicated as early as 1500 BCE. These interpretations connect

these cultures and time periods and shed light on previously unrecognized relationships between Late Bronze Age Minoan and Mycenaean culture and that of Classical Antiquity. The parallels also enable new interpretations to be proposed of the function of these rooms that consider all the artifacts and features found in the rooms. What we as anthropologists see as an archaeological site was once a room that served a purpose for past people who carefully selected a painting with intention and purpose. Recognizing these paintings within their mythological and cultural context allows archaeologists to better understand the nature of the site and the people who once dwelled there.

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