

Minoische Bild-Räume: Neue Untersuchungen zu den Wandbildern des spätbronzezeitlichen Palastes von Knossos

By Ute Güntel-Maschek. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2020. Pp. xii + 643. ISBN 978-3-947732-91-3 (hardcover) \$78.10; ISBN 978-3-947732-90-6 (PDF) open access, <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.497>.

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Fragmentation and degradation are inherent difficulties in the study of Aegean wall painting. The evidence is often scarce, and the physical damage that certain colors have undergone may obstruct an objective appreciation of their original appearance and meaning. Research in this field has progressed immensely over the last few decades. On the one hand, the development of noninvasive methods of investigation of the pictorial surface and new pattern matching techniques have allowed both the documentation of iconographic elements that were not previously visible to the naked eye and the facilitation of the search for joining pieces. On the other hand, there is increased awareness of the benefits of interpreting Aegean wall paintings as integral parts of the built and living space within their broader social and cultural context (see, e.g., L. Morgan, *KEOS XI: Wall Paintings and Social Context. The Northeast Bastion at Ayia Irini*, INSTAP Academic Press 2020), as well as exploring their emotional and expressive content. These investigations have gradually led to a more integrative and holistic understanding of the past dynamics of Aegean Late Bronze Age representations (F. Blakolmer, ed., *Current Approaches and New Perspectives in Aegean Iconography*, Aegis 18, Presses universitaires de Louvain 2020).

The book under review, based on a doctoral thesis submitted in 2012 at Heidelberg University, offers another welcome addition to the current literature on Aegean wall painting. The author reexamines the iconography of a well-known corpus of Minoan wall paintings from the Monopalatial palace at Knossos through the lens of a novel methodological and theoretical approach, unfolding around the key notion of *Bild-Räume* (in literal translation “image spaces”). Güntel-Maschek introduces the compound word, and uses it throughout the book, in order to exploit and explain the intrinsic relationships

between space, people, activities, and things and specific iconographical choices, as they appear on the preserved fragments recovered in three key areas of the palace: the Corridor of the Procession Fresco, the halls and hallways of the east wing, and the throne room.

Güntel-Maschek’s monograph is organized into six parts: an introduction, a general discussion on the “Minoan culture of images” (*Bildkulturen*) from the Neopalatial to the Final Palatial period, a chapter explaining the concept of *Bild-Räume* and the methodological approach adopted by the author, three thematic chapters, and a conclusion. A case-study approach is adopted by the author, with each of the main three chapters of the book dedicated to a specific area of the palace and its pictorial *decorum* following a similar structure of analysis based on four steps: the first step provides an overview of the architectural history of the built space; the second step is a detailed analysis of the most dominant iconographic elements in the preserved wall paintings of each area, which stresses the dynamic relationship between context of viewing and image content; in the third step the author tries to explain why and through which process specific pictorial elements were chosen for the walls of each place; in the fourth step, through an integrated approach to architecture and decoration, the author links the architectural space and its *decorum* with real people, activities, and paraphernalia.

The first case study deals with the wall painting fragments from the Corridor of the Procession Fresco in its Monopalatial phase (figs. 4.18, 4.19). Large-scale processional frescoes form one of the most frequent themes in Aegean iconography, and the participants are usually interpreted as elite members of Minoan and Mycenaean societies. Despite abundant literature devoted to the topic, open questions as to the intrinsic meaning of the

processions remain: the status and function of the participants, their human or divine nature, and the identification of the transported equipment. In this chapter, Güntel-Maschek places emphasis on the function of the corridor as a transitional area for the participants in a real procession and their interaction with the visual event, likely to enhance the feeling of their physical involvement in similar events taking place inside the palace. Contrary to previous studies, the author maintains that the composition did not focus on a single figure placed in the middle of the preserved fragments (166–74). This reinterpretation relies on an overlooked piece of evidence provided by a slight rise in the ground level on which the figures are placed, which, according to the author, was meant to suggest a low step. Therefore, the female figure on the east wall, hitherto considered as a centrally positioned goddess, priestess, or queen, is now identified by Güntel-Maschek as the leader of the last sequence of the procession, who presents a fringed textile to the group of palatial officials placed in an elevated position (figs. 4.16, 4.17), denoting the superior role of the palace in the event. This detail, which becomes highly important to the author's analysis and argumentation, is visualized through a computer-aided reconstruction of the examined fragments (fig. 4.5).

The subject of the second case study is the *Bild-Räume* created in the halls and hallways of the east wing of the palace at Knossos, which are decorated with friezes of running spirals and figure-eight shields, recurrent iconographic topoi that characterize Minoan art. In this chapter, through an intensive survey of the existing evidence, the author revisits the original iconography of the Shield Fresco and proposes a new reconstruction for the positioning of the frieze with the running spirals at mid height in the main zone of the wall (311–16). Her argument is supported by the in-situ evidence of a frieze of running spirals positioned at mid height in the main zone of the wall of the Corridor of the Painted Pithos and in seal images (fig. 5.19), assuming, in both cases, a function of place indicator. This new arrangement would have generated an impression that figure-eight shields, like solid objects, were resting on the floor, positioned in front of the painted frieze with running spirals. The naturalistic scale of these representations may have further enhanced the interaction between painted motif and real-world human experience (fig. 5.14). The author stresses that the function and symbolism of the figure-eight shields evolved from the Neopalatial to the Monopalatial phases, shifting from a status object related to combat and hunting to an emblem also implying animal

killing or sacrifice. The role assigned to the use of specific iconographic elements in the visual communication of ideas and the interplay between mural decoration and spatial structure are further highlighted by the use of the double-axe motif and the friezes of running spirals in the decoration of buildings used for cultic ceremonies (Hall of the Double Axes, Queen's Megaron, and Queen's Bathroom). The author, after meticulous examination of the use of these motifs on the walls of the palace, on seal images, and on other decorated objects (e.g., the Hagia Triada sarcophagus, 337–39), suggests that their use was related to activities in the context of what is known as the cult of the double axe, in which members of the palatial elite participated.

In the third case study, the iconographic program of the throne room and its anteroom in the west wing of the palace is revisited, further developing ideas already expressed in a coauthored article dedicated to this subject in which both the archival data of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the archaeological remains at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum were integrated (Y. Galanakis et al., "The Power of Images: Re-examining the Wall Paintings from the Throne Room at Knossos," *BSA* 112, 2017, 47–98). Güntel-Maschek reflects on the throne's room *Bildkultur*, its architecture and various components, and on the throne's position, shape, and function as the seat of a high-ranking female, supported by the depiction of the incurved base and the palm tree. Effects of status and power were triggered by the axial arrangement of the mural decoration (griffins facing each other) acting as a frame for the physical presence of the enthroned figure, actively participating in the composition with the figural representations on the wall (J. Bennet, "Representations of Power in Mycenaean Pylos: Script, Orality, Iconography," in F. Lang et al., eds., *ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ ΑΡΙΣΤΕΙΟΣ: Archäologische Forschungen Zwischen Nil und Istros. Festschrift für Stefan Hiller zum 65. Geburtstag*, Phoibos Verlag 2007, 11–22). The author speculates on a possible relationship between the female occupancy of the throne and the survival of the palace of Knossos at the final phase of the Neopalatial period, and on the expression of a male authority or *wanax* in the anteroom, where seats of honor were installed. Tradition and innovation in the construction of palatial imagery during the different phases of the throne room are discussed with respect to the need for consolidation of power by the local elite and the importance assigned to ritual practices. One of Güntel-Maschek's most important conclusions here is that in the use of decorated objects with pictorial elements and motifs in

the Monopalatial period, the objects did not function as mere copies of larger-scale painted representations with the same iconographic elements and motifs, but rather as equally significant visual components in the demonstration of ideas, concepts, and activities of the members of the Knossian elite. Of most interest are figures 6.2, 6.3, and 6.6, which illustrate color reconstructions of the throne room in digital 3D models, viewed at different angles.

This book is the result of meticulous scholarship and vigorous visual analysis, aimed at a specialist audience. The author tries to provide the reader with a clearer picture of how and to what purpose and effect the pictorial elements had been positioned on the wall, in light of specific concepts of meaning (*Sinnkonzepte*) and structural patterns. However, despite the fact that the author adopts an integrative approach to the topic, sometimes with excessive emphasis on theoretical concepts, very little is said with regard to the artistic potential and the immersive quality of the examined paintings, thus neglecting the role that form and color may have played in the established iconographies. While one cannot help but acknowledge the great effort the author has put into dealing with such a multifaceted material, the very dense writing of the book, the use of complex words, sometimes with uncertain meaning, and the frequent repetitions containing the same information within a chapter render a number of passages hard to read (e.g., 4.5, 5.6). Furthermore, the graphics (figs. 3.1–3) and summaries at the end of the chapters do not provide sufficient clarity to the author's arguments. On the other hand, the

insightful branching tree diagrams of the book are particularly helpful in visualizing both interconnections and juxtapositions of the imagery on different types of visual artifacts (painted images, seals and sealings, weapons), showing similar iconographic motifs (figs. 4.9, 4.11, 4.14, 5.19, 5.24, 6.10, 6.15, 6.18).

Notwithstanding the high quality of the digital reproductions and reconstructions of the examined fragments that supplement the author's arguments, the total absence of photographic documentation of the painted fragments in the volume is regrettable. Given the fragmentary state of the murals and the poor preservation of their pictorial surface, the author's new interpretations would have gained much more credibility if the computer-generated reconstructions were presented alongside a robust photographic and imaging documentation of the archaeological evidence.

Despite a few failings, this is an important piece of research that provides a series of innovative interpretations and opens up new perspectives in the study of Aegean wall paintings and the iconographic meanings of Aegean art. The volume is supplemented by an index and a very substantial bibliography. Finally, an important asset of the book is its open access availability via the Heidelberg University Publishing open access platform.

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