

Minoan Realities
Theory-based Approaches to Images and Built Spaces as Indicators of Minoan Social Structures

Workshop organised by the Graduate Academy “Images, Spaces, Ways of Life in Ancient Civilizations“ at the Centre for Studies of the Ancient World, University of Heidelberg, and by the Institute for Classical Archaeology, University of Heidelberg,
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In an archaeological discipline, in which written sources are missing or restricted to non-narrative purposes, any knowledge about social concepts of environment and interaction must be inferred from the material record. The Minoan culture that once constituted the population of Bronze Age Crete has left us with a magnificent but silent material record. The images and built environments can be regarded as the most important media to create meaningful settings and atmospheres that set the required structures for social interaction and communicated the reified ideologies underlying the reproduction of social reality and order.

Consisting of a quite limited and very repetitive repertoire of pictorial themes and motifs, Minoan imagery, however, provides a very selective view upon certain aspects of social reality. Judging from the spatial contexts of their appearance as well as from the pictorial themes, the images and represented aspects can be mainly attributed to the spheres of religious and ritual practice, ‚palatial‘ ideology and construction of social identity.

In architecture as well the Minoans used repetitive construction sets that were apt to present and communicate established social values and meanings. The addition of images and pictorial themes to certain architectural spaces transformed them into meaningful environments which, thus, formed the appropriate settings for particular social activities.

Based on these considerations, the workshop “Minoan Realities” offered an opportunity for researchers to present various methodological and theory-based approaches to Minoan images and built environments of Bronze Age Crete. The aim of these approaches was to evaluate and interpret images and built spaces as constitutive elements of living environments in which Minoan social structures are reflected.

In the introduction Diamantis Panagiotopoulos emphasized the current importance of approaches to both spaces and images which – since the spatial and the pictorial turn – are undertaken in various cultural sciences and should find application also in archaeological disciplines.

Ute Güntel-Maschek presented the workshop’s sociologically inspired background. Images and built structures are understood as constructive elements of the social environment that is shaped in order to convey meaningful structures for daily life according to the concepts of social reality. The archaeological remains of Minoan society of Bronze Age Crete are taken as a case study to present theory-based and methodological approaches to images and built spaces which aim at the interpretation of these as indicators of Minoan social structures.

Architect Clairly Palyvou from Thessaloniki, Greece, talked about the ways of creating illusionary spaces through the distribution of wall paintings at Akrotiri on Thera. She stressed that walking through the rooms of a building is, at first, a bodily experience. Wall paintings influence the atmosphere and, thus, the feeling one has when moving within the decorated rooms. Using the examples of the West House and building Xesté 3 she emphasized that the wall paintings are placed in relation to the bodily horizon of the viewer, and that the position of painted figures on the walls plays an important role in the processes of the viewer’s involvement with the depicted scenes.

Palyvou further called attention to the ways of connecting the illusionary space to the architectural room. This was done by using pictorial elements as interfaces linking the pictorial space with real architectural elements. As a result, the architectural environment is transformed into the illusionary space that forms the appropriate setting for the activities performed within the decorated room.

Quentin Letesson from Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, presented space syntax analysis approach to offer new insights into the distribution of decorated rooms within Minoan rural and urban 'mansions' or 'villas'. By using this method to determine the architectural situation and accessibility of these rooms he observed that the decorated rooms did not play a decisive role in the circulatory pattern of the buildings, as they were in most cases remote from the entrance. Furthermore, he stated that access to these rooms was easily controlled. Based on this evidence he concluded that wall paintings in 'mansions' were not primarily intended for being perceived by anyone visiting the building but were rather exclusively viewed and used by people having access to these inner rooms, i.e. by the inhabitants of the building or those controlling access to the building and its rooms, as well as by visitors being allowed to enter these restricted zones of the building.

Diamantis Panagiotopoulos from Heidelberg, Germany, stressed the perception and the role of the viewer of works of art. He presented a new method of categorising Minoan wall paintings in relation to their formal characteristics, their distribution, and the resulting impression on the viewer. He distinguished four categories defining the relation between the pictorial representation on the walls and the activities performed by the viewer within the room: affirmative images such as procession frescoes which are directly linked to the function of the room; contrasting images such as natural paintings that create heterotopias neglecting the architectural character of the room; complementary images such as those to be found in the Throne Room at Knossos, in which activities within the room are complemented by pictorial motifs; and, finally, images without any interaction with the viewer, this last category being mainly constituted by ornamental decoration such as bands or spirals. Allowing a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of wall decoration, this categorisation provides useful instruments for further analyses of the Minoan methods of creating meaningful environments for social activities.

Fritz Blakolmer from Vienna, Austria, analysed the correlation between wall decoration and the small-scale pictorial decoration of seals, sealings, and other art forms. Based on the analysis of various pictorial motifs such as bull scenes, processions, or shields, which occurred both on walls and in small-scale images he made the following observations: the same pictorial themes were displayed on various media, but, due to size and form of the pictorial surface, different ways of rendering were employed; the execution of certain pictorial motifs as well as certain pictorial elements such as spiral friezes or wavy lines indicating terrain surfaces in small-scale representations point to the fact that these have been adopted from large-scale images depicted on walls and, more precisely, from the Minoan stucco relief; the fragmentary rendering of certain themes in glyptic images as well as the rather inappropriate format of certain depictions on vases point to the same interpretation. It is, thus, important to observe that the Minoans used various ways and various media to present and propagate their repertoire of ideational and ideological themes and concepts in various situations of social life and activity. As the Minoan stucco relief is an art form that mainly occurs in the palace of Knossos, it may be inferred that the ideas behind the images displayed on other media originated in – and were propagated by – the Knossian centre.

Ute Güntel-Maschek from Heidelberg, Germany, presented an approach to images within spatial contexts based on a combined theory of 'pictorial spaces' and 'images of space', and on the methodological approach used to apply this theory on Minoan images and spaces. Images occurring within spatial contexts are subjected to a formal and iconographic analysis to characterize their wider meaningful dimension; the latter is, then, re-applied onto the architectural space where the images occurred and conveyed a meaningful environment for these spaces and the activities performed within. Three pictorial motifs, the spiral, the 'sacred landscape', and the bull, were examined, and their spatial as well as their social and chronological contexts were interpreted from a new angle. The display of the spiral in the final palatial period is concentrated on objects of utility assigned to the male sphere of activity and military power, for which reason the spiral as décor element of hall systems is interpreted as marker of areas for performances linked to male affairs. The natural scenes in small chambers of the Neopalatial period are interpreted as sacred settings for ritual practices performed by female persons aiming at the evocation or worship of a divinity. The act of passing by the bull on the walls of Knossian entrance areas is interpreted as referring to the overpowering of the bull performed as part of rites of passage by members of the Knossian elite.

Jan Driessen from Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, proposed an ethnological theory of Minoan society being a matrifocal society, in which the residences of large families and the ownership-structures are centred on and around women. Based on this theory he analyzed images and architectural spaces with regard to the occurrence of women. From the pictorial evidence, in which representations of female figures outnumber those of male figures by far, it further becomes obvious that women played a major role in the performance of religious and ritual practices. The dominance of women is, therefore, an essential characteristic of Minoan visual representation and might reflect a female dominance in Minoan social structures.

Referring to architecture, Driessen proposed a distinction of male and female areas, the latter being recognisable, amongst other, by means of ritual areas such as the 'Lustral Basin'. These ritual areas – and, therefore, the female spaces of activity – most often occupy the remote parts of architecture, as can also be shown by access analysis. As this is a phenomenon well known from other premodern societies, a strict spatial division of the areas of male and female activity within Minoan architecture might be a hypothesis worth exploring further.

Conclusion: The workshop on "Minoan Realities" has shown that by using different approaches to images and built spaces, various and complementary results concerning the Minoan ways of creating meaningful social environments can be achieved. Many new insights have been gained concerning the design, perception and experience of decorated spaces, the providing of meaningful atmospheres for social activities, the propaganda of a Knossos-centred ideology, as well as the reflections, in images and architecture, of ideological and religious concepts and gender-related activities and performances.

It has become obvious that theories and methods informed by other disciplines find an ideal and promising field of application in Minoan Archaeology. Especially the lack of written sources leads to the need for applicable theoretical and methodological approaches that may be fruitful to understand and reconstruct how the social environment on Minoan Crete was created and used. These approaches may, then, also provide attractive alternatives for the study of Classical ancient life-worlds.

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Programme:

Diamantis Panagiotopoulos (Heidelberg)
Ute Güntel-Maschek (Heidelberg)
Introduction

Clairy Palyvou (Thessaloniki)
Wall-Paintings and Architecture in the Aegean Bronze Age: Connections between Illusionary Space and Built Realities

Quentin Letesson (Louvain-la-Neuve)
'Open Day Gallery' or 'Private Collections'? An Insight on Neopalatial Frescoes in their Spatial Context

Diamantis Panagiotopoulos (Heidelberg)
Aegean Imagery and the Syntax of Viewing

Fritz Blakolmer (Vienna)
Image and Architecture: Reflections of Mural Iconography in Seal Images and Other Art Forms of Minoan Crete

Ute Güntel-Maschek (Heidelberg)
Spirals, Bulls, and Sacred Landscapes. The Meaningful Appearance of Pictorial Objects within their Spatial and Social Contexts

Jan Driessen (Louvain-la-Neuve)
Cherchez la femme – Identifying Minoan Gender Relations in the Built Environment