

the walls, and one room has just been uncovered which bears pasted paper depicting a number of curiously shaped and coloured turtles engaged in what look like human activities of a martial sort: aha ! the archaeologists have clearly discovered a religious shrine in which the inhabitants worshipped their warrior gods. Now, if only they could figure out the flowers depicted on the walls of the neighbouring room ....

Such a scenario may seem far-fetched, but this process of interpreting wall decoration to extract information about a lost culture is very common in prehistoric archaeology. For example, the Aegean Bronze Age ruins at Akrotiri on the Greek island of Thera have yielded a large number of wall-paintings, which, in the absence of written records, must be carefully scrutinized in order to gain information about the lives of the inhabitants. But such paintings are, of course, "silent" about their significance (one common dream of an archaeologist is to find a wall-painting with a descriptive label attached, preferably in English !), and archaeologists must do their best to "read" them from an iconographic point of view. The process is complex, and often very different interpretations of the same painting are published, leaving us to wonder which archaeologists (if any) are correct. Let's look at an example: the wall-painting called the "Gathering of Crocus" from a large mansion at Akrotiri.

#### Interpreting Bronze Age Flower Power

by P.V. Forsyth

The year is 3500 AD, and a team of archaeologists is busily excavating the buried remains of your 1993 house in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. So far, the entire area has yielded no written records at all (just some strange square, 3.5 inch objects with unreadable labels), and, as a result, the excavators are carefully preserving the wall decorations found, in the hope that these will enable them to interpret the function of the building. These wall decorations generally take the form of thin pieces of paper pasted to

As you can see from the sketch, there are five human figures depicted, all of them female: figure 1 seems to be picking crocus flowers to put in the basket lying on the ground to the right; figure 2 holds her basket, but is also picking crocus flowers as she looks at figure 1; figure 3 carries a full basket off to the left; while figure 4 (at the extreme left) is shown emptying her basket of crocus into a container on the ground. So far, there is nothing

to prevent this painting from simply depicting a group of women out gathering flowers on a pleasant summer day. But, to the right of figure 4 are three figures that make this composition much more complex: a monkey seems to be giving crocus stamens to a woman seated on a three-part structure that raises her above the level of everyone else in the painting; in addition, to the right of this seated woman a griffin is shown in an heraldic pose. Now what do we make of this wall-painting?

The architectural setting of the composition will offer us some help here: the painting decorates two walls of an upper floor room located directly above a "lustral basin" on the ground floor, and there is a general consensus among archaeologists that lustral basins ( really just sunken compartments approached by short flights of stairs ) played a role in Aegean Bronze Age religion, perhaps as places where special offerings or rites took place. So, if the painting on the upper floor is relevant to the lustral basin directly below (and that is a big "if"), it should depict a scene with a religious significance. Indeed, a number of scholars studying this painting have argued that the woman on the high seat is either a goddess or a priestess, to whom offerings of crocus plants are being made. (The presence of the griffin [a mythological creature], however, points more to a goddess than a priestess.) The result: here we have a wall-painting depicting a ritual activity performed only by women, during which they pick crocus and offer it to their goddess. The next question: what is the significance/importance of the crocus? Why not offer the goddess roses or petunias ?

One theory is that the saffron extracted from the crocus plant was very valuable to the inhabitants of Akrotiri: it served as a spice (and is still a very expensive spice today), as a dye for clothing, and even as a medicine; in this last role, safrol, a chemical extracted from the stamen of the crocus, is a known pain killer with narcotic properties. So now we can contemplate a new side of Bronze Age religion in the Aegean: the "recreational" use of drugs to induce an almost hallucinogenic state! Were these women "stoned", so to speak, for religious purposes?

Now you can see how far one can go in trying to extract meaning from paintings of this sort. The above interpretation may well be correct, but it may just as well be totally "out to lunch". All the archaeologist can do is try to interpret the data as best she/he can, and then let the fur fly in academic journals about who is right and who is wrong !

Now, I must get back to that strange turtle cult so popular in the religious life of the ancient Waterlooians...