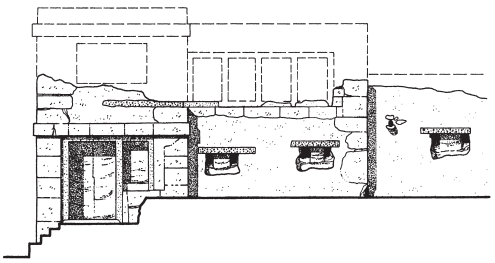
Akrotiri Thera

An Architecture of Affluence
3,500 Years Old



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Akrotiri Thera

An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old

by
Clairy Palyvou

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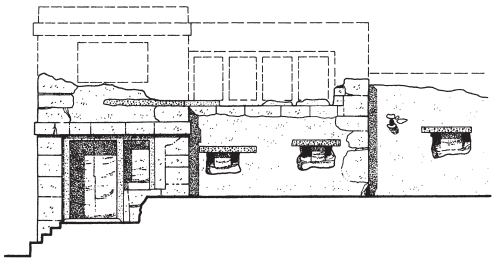

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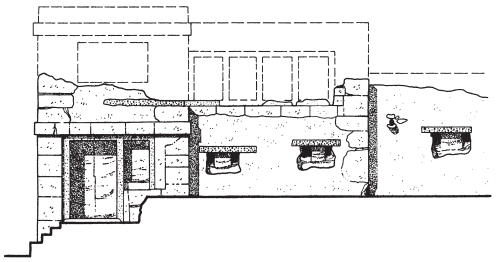

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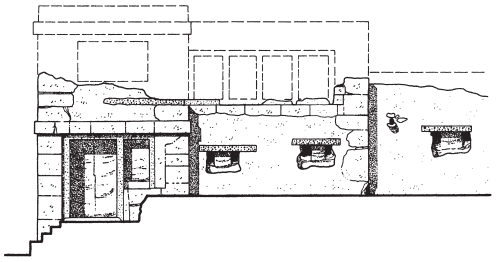

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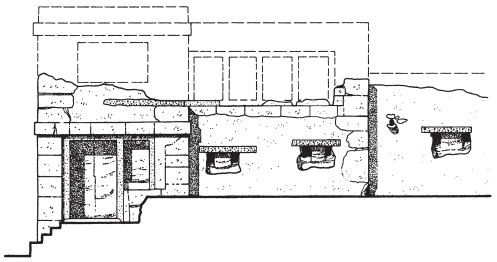

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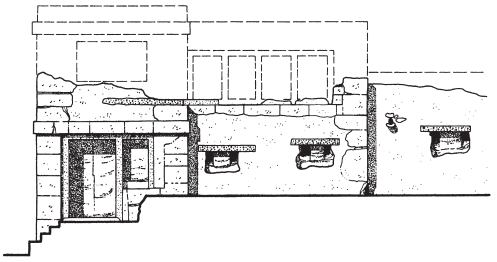


Preface

My first year at Akrotiri was 1977, when I was invited by Professor Christos Doumas who had recently taken over the direction of the excavation after the fatal accident on the site of the first excavator, Spyridon Marinatos. My duties as an architect were multifold from the beginning, but they basically revolved around two tasks: documentation drawings and restoration work.[1] Both of these tasks demand a thorough knowledge of the history of the specific site and its broader region. I soon found myself racing with time in an effort to learn as much as possible—in as short a time as possible—about the Aegean Bronze Age civilization. The first years were a period of informal, albeit thorough, studies in Aegean archaeology. In the field of Aegean architecture, the required knowledge had to be built piece by piece, because there was hardly any comprehensive work on the subject—and one is still lacking. Invaluable companions during this period were the pioneer works of J.W. Graham and J.W. Shaw.[2]

The site itself—a book in vivo—was a true revelation, and by being constantly present during the dig, I learned what no book can teach: the agonies of the archaeologists, the goals and methods of their work, and the fascinating process of interpretation that starts from the moment the spade hits the earth. I also realized the enormous responsibility of all those who work on the site. Doumas used to say "a dig is by definition an act of destruction," and I, too, became anxious to record through my drawings as accurately as possible the "crime" I was witnessing, just as the archaeologists by my side were eager to record their point of view in the daybook.[3] These first drawings, like the daybooks and the photographs, will be the "eyes" to the past for future generations.

The excitement of my first visit to Xeste 4, once I realized that I was actually walking on the third floor of a building erected 3,500 years ago, has remained almost intact to this day. It only grew stronger as my eyes began to "see"—that is, to understand—the astonishing amount of architectural design involved in this building operation and the fine technical specifications guiding this work. Furthermore, the modernity of this 3,500 year-old architecture has never ceased to fascinate me. The use of timber impressed me more than anything else: the "unknown hero" as I dubbed it—unknown because so little has survived of its substance, and a hero because it carries, indeed, a large part of the loads of the edifice.

The small group of scholars that worked under the direction of Christos Doumas rapidly grew. Each new member brought his (mostly her, actually) own "dowry" to the site: yet another point of view, another expertise according to the field of specialization, and a new methodology. The time we spent together each summer was a

most fruitful, albeit tantalizing period. Our varying interests, our different goals, and different tools of thought were favorite topics of discussion during the evening hours of relaxation on the veranda of the guesthouse or on the long walks to the nearby village of Akrotiri.

A collective vision of prehistoric Akrotiri was being gradually pieced together. As I was formulating my thoughts about the bustling city and its exquisite houses, other colleagues would add to the picture: Iris Tzachili would provide the looms to manufacture the magnificent dresses described by Christina Televantou; Tania Devetzi and Antikleia Agrafiotou offered the tools, the stone vessels, and the implements to prepare the meals, for which Anayia Sarpaki, Katerina Trantalidou, and Lilian Karali could provide fascinating details; Marisa Marthari, Angelia Papagiannopoulou, and Litsa Katsa would tell us about the ceramic products of their households, and Anna Michailidou would weigh and measure their contents; Christos Boulotis would unfold the hidden messages of the magnificent wall paintings; and Peggy Sotirakopoulou would give us a glimpse of the remote past of this amazing place.[4] And others who later joined the group, too many to mention, would each add yet another stitch to this fascinating, colorful canvas of history. Very seldom, indeed, does an archaeological site present its story in such a vivid manner.

The laboratory for the restoration of the wall paintings was a great school. We all have immense admiration and gratitude for the restorers. Personally, I not only learned much from them, but I am deeply indebted for the undreamed gifts they offer me. Thanks to their work, I can complete many missing parts of the buildings on my drawings. The restored wall paintings of the upper floors of Xeste 3, for example, provide the "skin" of walls that have entirely collapsed. On this skin, I can read the height of the upper floor, the positions and dimensions of doors and windows, even the exact place and outline of each beam of the ceiling.

Akrotiri is a book of pictures with no captions. These captions we all strive to add, each from our own point of view, so as to arrive at a better understanding of the otherwise silent remains of a magnificent civilization. The excavation at Akrotiri—one of the most important worldwide—is a collective work led by Greek colleagues, and it will surely breed many generations of scholars to come. The work is time consuming and tantalizing but, as with every primary research, it is very rewarding. The first generation of scholars—to which I belong—has to a large degree fulfilled its mission of presenting the results of a long-term study. Many doctoral theses have been completed during the past years—though very few have been published—and numerous papers have been contributed to international conferences.

Marinatos' annual reports, *The Excavation at Thera,* vols. I–VII, remain an important source of information regarding the individual finds and the development of the dig for the period of 1967–1974, followed by the yearly reports by Doumas in the journal *Πρακτικά της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*. Doumas' book, *Thera, Pompeii of the Ancient World: Excavations at Akrotiri 1967–1979,* London 1983, is the only comprehensive work on Akrotiri. It is a synopsis of some of the main conclusions by the multi-disciplinary research group working under his direction. The architecture of Akrotiri is, naturally, only briefly discussed. My own doctoral dissertation, *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας: Η οικοδομική τέχνη,* Athens 1999, was published by the Archaeological Society at Athens. The book, in Greek, is a detailed account of the materials and building techniques applied at Akrotiri, but it does not include other aspects of architecture.

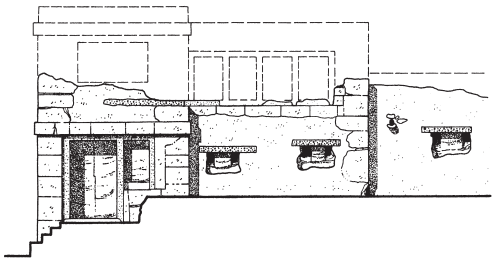
It was long felt that an English edition on the architecture of Akrotiri, dealing not only with the building technology, but also with issues of typology, form, and function, would be welcomed. The present book is, thus, an attempt to provide the reader with an overall picture of the architecture of Akrotiri, including an outline of its town plan, a description of the individual houses, and a discussion of its relationship with Crete and its neighbors in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The book is based on personal observations and experience obtained over a fifteen year period (1977–1992) of work at the site as the architect of the Akrotiri dig. The comparative work referring to Crete and the other Cycladic islands, on the other hand, owes much to the work of eminent scholars and excavators of Aegean Bronze Age sites. To these colleagues and friends, I am deeply indebted.

Since 1992 much has been done, especially in regard with the management of the unearthed material. Excavation, on the other hand, was rather restricted, basically in the area of Xeste 4.[5] Since March of 1999, the site of Akrotiri has been going through an overwhelming transformation. A new shelter is being built that will transform the excavation into an in situ museum. The one hundred or more trenches dug for the pillars of the new shelter, in the form of "rescue excavation,"[6] have yielded valuable information, especially regarding the earlier phases of the site. The nature of these finds, however, especially in regard to the architecture, is highly fragmentary and dispersed. Pending the study of this material, which has been undertaken by a younger generation of scholars, this book is confined to the last phase of habitation and the uniquely preserved houses that we see today.

Preface Notes

1. Palyvou 1977; 1978; 1988.
2. Especially their fundamental works: *The Palaces of Crete* (1972) and "Minoan Architecture: Materials and Techniques," *ASAtene* 49 (1971).
3. On the architect's contribution to archaeology, see Palyvou 2003.
4. The reader is referred to the works of these scholars for a comprehensive view of the Theran world. A place to start would be the Theran Conferences (Doumas, ed., 1978; Hardy et al., eds., 1990) as well as Doumas, ed., 1992c and Danezis, ed., 2001.
5. Doumas 1993: 172–176; 1994: 163; 1995: 130–132; 1996: 250.
6. Doumas 2000: 34–35.



Acknowledgments

The scientific work carried out at Akrotiri is a large scale and long-term interdisciplinary enterprise. Those who work with the material from the site, therefore, are well aware that their work is closely interrelated to the work of many others, and that in this relay-race many more will join forces. In this context I am indebted to all the colleagues working at Akrotiri, to the director and coordinator of the excavation, Prof. Christos Doumas, and to the Archaeological Society at Athens. For the past several years much copious work has been carried out in order to record and organize the diverse material from the dig. Thanks to this—and to the new technology that has invaded our archives—I acquired digital copies of almost all the photographs included in this book, with amazing speed and efficiency. For her support during this procedure, I am obliged to Tania Devetzi, heart and soul of the excavation office for many years now, and to Dimitris Sakatzis and Lucy Valassi, who helped with the preparation of the photographs.

The drawings are almost all my own, and many of them are published in my book *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας: Η οικοδομική τέχνη*, Athens 1999. There are several new drawings as well, prepared specifically for this book, such as the general plans of the site and the ground floor and first floor plans of the best-known houses. These were redrawn (and corrected many times) by architecture students, Maria Karamanou and Penelope Titoni, whom I thank for their patience. The superb three dimensional computer restorations of the West House included in the color plates were made by the architect Apostolos Kassios. They are part of his post graduate dissertation, which I supervised at the Aristotle University of Thesssaloniki (2004).

Last but certainly not least, I am indebted to INSTAP for its generous support and especially to Prof. Philip Betancourt for his support, his wise advice during the preparation of the material, and his generosity in spending so much of his time to check the original manuscript and improve my English.