

The “global” and the “local” in the Aegean Bronze Age: The case of Akrotiri, Thera

Antikleia Moundrea-Agrafioti

The author is Assistant Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology, Department of History Archaeology and Social Anthropology, University of Thessaly, Greece. After undergraduate studies in History and Archaeology at the University of Athens she obtained her Masters as well as her Ph.D degree in Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Paris X, Nanterre in 1981. Her research interests focus on Aegean prehistory, spanning the Palaeolithic to Late Bronze Age, the prehistoric stone and bone technology, the obsidian characterization studies and the material culture issues, the interaction between technology and prehistoric communities and aspects involved in the contextual analysis. Her current fieldwork interests concern survey and excavation involving new technologies. Since 2005 she is the Director of the Zerelia Excavations Program, of the University of Thessaly. She has a long affiliation with The Akrotiri Thera Excavations since 1983. On the site she is involved in the excavation, study and publication of stone tools industries, and the database and GIS applications. Dr Moundrea Agrafioti is a member of the World Society for Ekistics. The text that follows is a slightly revised and edited version of a paper presented by the author at the international symposium on “Globalization and Local Identity,” organized jointly by the World Society for Ekistics and the University of Shiga Prefecture in Hikone, Japan, 19-24 September, 2005.

Introduction

Today there is animated discussion about the “global and the local,” taking as reference point the world-planet. If we consider this binome in a past period of history, what could be the meaning of the “global/local” discussion?

The concept of globalization, as this has emerged in the contemporary world over the past 50 years, seems at first glance to be unsuitable for application to a past society, and even more so to a prehistoric society. It presupposes the information society, modern media of communication, homogenization of needs, behaviors, the economic system and the market, digital technologies and the abolition of nation-states. However, if we move away from the contemporary planetary

concept of global and consider that there is a historicism in the manner of defining these generalizing concepts (each culture can define, understand and experience the local or the global in a different way), then our need to use generalizations may be useful as a legitimate perspective for investigating issues of flow and diffusion of the material culture in the past, without the anachronism presenting an obstacle.

We should state from the outset that in this perspective there is considerable analogy between today’s discussion on the “local/global,” which is the subject of the present meeting, and issues which have long been raised in the domain of archaeology, although in other terms, such as local/international-cosmopolitan, center/periphery, world-systems, and so on. From the 1970s onward, with the appearance of processual approaches in the discipline, these binomes have been employed in the debate of a pivotal question for archaeology, which is integral to the sciences of the past: How is cultural change interpreted and what does cultural transmission mean?

To simplify and summarize the major debate on this issue, we would say that the interpretations that have been proposed follow two modes:

- If the cultural change emerges as a long-term process of social and economic development, it is a *local* phenomenon. *Change* “emerges” through historical processes and human agencies which bring about transformations in a pre-existing state of the local society;
- If the change is the outcome of diffusion or transfer of cultural models, it is a short-term non-local phenomenon.

The “local” is replaced by exogenous elements, which enter in various ways (migration, population movement, colonization, diffusion of ideas, transmission of technologies, exchange systems, trade, exogamy, etc.). The causes of change in this case are “shifted” from the local to the peripheral or the international, when the stimuli originate from interactions with dominant cultures, core regions, strong centers-states.¹

It is interesting that in these two perspectives, both - of evolution, in which the “local” is transformed through endogenous processes into “central,” and - of diffusion, in which the “local” is transformed into “peripheral,”

a spatial, we would say cartographic, conception of culture and of the interaction of cultures prevails. Societies are approached as incorporated in small (local), medium (regional) or large (international/global) scales of geographical space, or as modes of a “center/periphery” scheme in which the spatial levels are contained the one within the other, like Chinese boxes: at the center is the strong cultural core and on the periphery are the dependent and distant, geographically and culturally, societies.

Obviously, the functionality of these theoretical schemes is effective when we remain at a general level, and when we do not doubt the extent to which static, geo-political subdivisions, useful for generalizing approaches, were equally distinct in the prehistoric societies. If we adopt in our discussion, for example, a bottom-up approach, and we put at the level of locality and in micro-spatial contexts of the built-environment (fig. 1), at the level, for example, of a prehistoric settlement in which the spatial units are characterized as sanctuary/palace/household, private/public space, ritual/secular, etc., the content of

the concept "local/global" can be involved in diverse ways with the buildings and the subdivisions of these (storeys, rooms, etc.), the open spaces (squares, streets, courtyards, etc.), the different social groups (in relation to gender, age, kinship, social status, etc.) or the different activities in the space, in relation to the calendrical cycle (rituals, banquets, religious feasts, etc.). At a level of social relations, the concepts local and global are not only spatial, and it is possible that they function jointly in the cultural arena, in producing, negotiating or legitimating specific social roles.

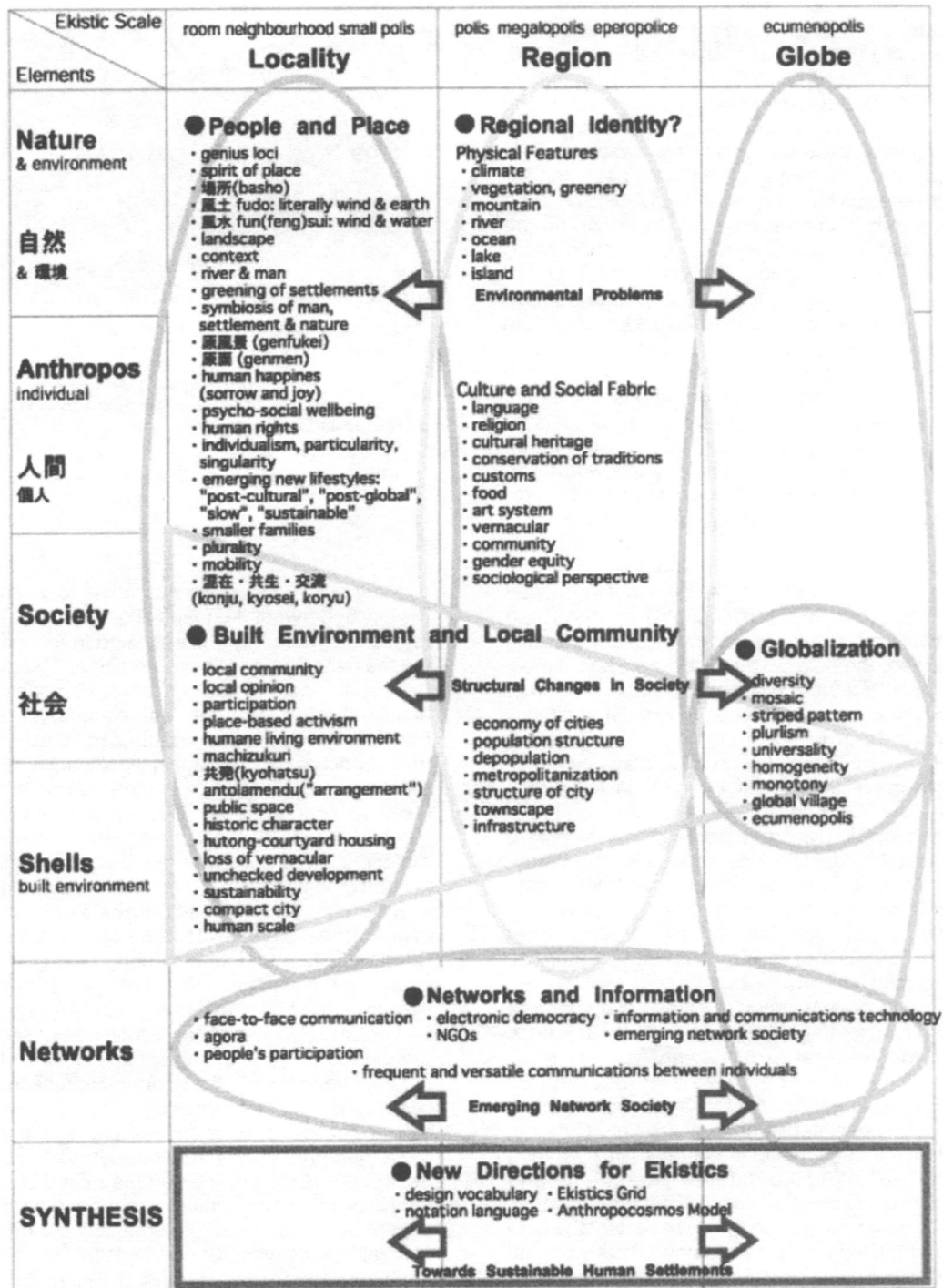


Fig. 1: Globalization and Local Identity: Sub-themes and keywords in the Ekistic Grid as revised on 14 September, 2005.

Akrotiri on Thera

In order to discuss these questions further, we propose to investigate, as a case study, an exceptional archaeological site, the Late Bronze Age city at Akrotiri on Thera, in the Cyclades, Greece.²

The prehistoric site at Akrotiri lies at the southern tip of the volcanic island of Thera, about 60 nautical miles north of central Crete (fig. 2). On this southernmost coast in the Cyclades, the first settlers arrived in the area of the present site of Akrotiri, in the fifth millennium BCE. There is no architectural evidence of the nature of the first settlement, but the artifacts found belong to the Late and Final Neolithic periods in the Cyclades.

In the third millennium BCE, there was an extensive settlement of the Early Bronze Age at the same site, in which the characteristic traits of the so-called Cycladic Culture (ca. 3200-2250 BCE) are much in evidence. This is an Aegean culture characteristic of the first complex Cycladic societies in the Aegean, based on the development of an “international spirit,” outcome of maritime trade with short-range rowing boats. The cross-cultural long-distance relations were based on the trafficking of raw materials (copper, silver, lead, obsidian³) and the founding of gateway communities in Crete and on the coasts of the Greek Mainland (RENFREW, 1972; RENFREW and CHERRY, 1986; BROODBANK, 2000). The Cycladic Culture of the third millennium BCE had distinctive local features (pottery, figurines, prestige objects, burial practices, techniques of extracting and working metals, obsidian, and so on). Despite the dynamism of this local Cycladic culture and the networks of interaction, of inter-island exchanges, if it is considered on the scale of a wider geographical region, it is included together with contemporary cultures of pre-Minoan Crete and mainland Greece, on the periphery of a world-system centered on the city-states of Mesopotamia, the Syro-Palestinian littoral and Protodynastic Egypt.

In the early second millennium BCE, the cultural dynamic in the Aegean changed. In Crete, the first palatial societies appeared, organized around palace complexes that functioned as centers for the collection and redistribution of products, and as seats of political and religious authority. Concentrated in the first palaces were the political and economic activities of a powerful local elite, of a “peer polity interaction.” Crete was now the dynamic core of the south Aegean world and directly influenced the Cyclades, which were transformed into a cultural periphery in relation to the Minoan Old Palace centers.

In the early second millennium BCE, an extensive Middle Cycladic harbor-town, with Minoan features, was founded at Akrotiri. Analogous Middle Cycladic harbor-towns, which were included within the communication networks of palatial Crete with the Aegean and the Greek Mainland, have been identified on two other Cycladic islands, at Phylakopi on Melos and at Agia Irini on Kea. The Middle Cycladic town at Akrotiri⁴ enjoyed a sustained heyday and over the course of some 150 years was transformed into a major Late Cycladic settlement, an extensive and densely-populated city close to a harbor to the south, a safe haven for the sailing ships of the Late Bronze Age. This Late Cycladic city at Akrotiri is very well-known archaeologically. Its area is estimated as exceeding 25 hectares, making it the largest port in the Cyclades in the late 17th century BCE. The evident wealth of the Late Cycladic city is believed to have been due to the large-scale seafaring and trading activities of its inhabitants (merchants and mariners), in relation to Crete, the Aegean and the Levant.

There has been much discussion as to what extent the Late Cycladic city at Akrotiri was a Minoan colony.⁵ This proposal represents the Cretocentric theories which argue that, after the appearance of the Minoan palaces, a Minoan thalassocracy existed in the Aegean and that Cretans settled at select-

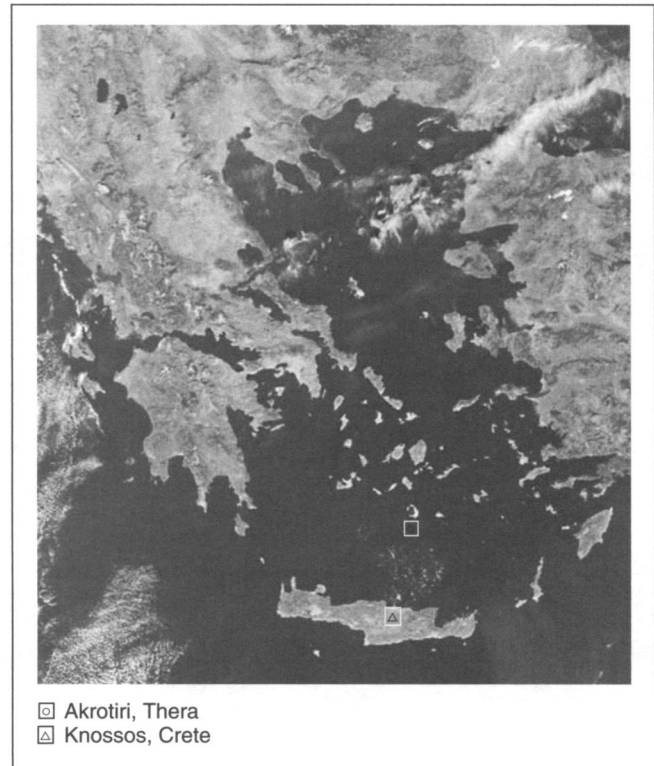


Fig. 2: Map of the Aegean – The site of Akrotiri on the south coast of Thera island, Greece.

ed sites in the Cyclades. According to a second hypothesis, the city underwent “Minoanization,” that is, new identities and relations of authority were created in the local societies during the period when Minoan dominance was at its peak in the Aegean region.⁶ In “global” terms, comparison of the material culture of Minoan Crete with that of the main Cycladic harbor-towns points to the pronounced Minoan influence in sectors of political or ideological significance. However, doubts have been expressed as to what extent this is due to colonization and to what extent the influences were sudden or the result of gradual long-term processes. The similarities in the material culture are attributed to phenomena of emulation of Minoan models by local elites and to phenomena of syncretism in which the local Cycladic traits were amalgamated with Minoan ones, creating the new Late Cycladic cultural identity. Both emulation and amalgamation are obvious in the urban planning, architecture, wall-paintings, religion, symbolic practices and, of course, technology (pottery, stone artifacts etc.).

The Late Cycladic city at Akrotiri was destroyed at its zenith, around the end of the 17th century BCE (c. 1630 BCE), by a natural phenomenon, the enormous eruption of the Thera volcano. The multi-storey buildings in the city were covered by a thick mantle of pumice and volcanic ash (pozzuolana), which prevented erosion of the ruins. These special conditions of destruction largely preserved the ruined buildings *in situ*, after the disintegration of their timber and perishable structural elements. As a result, the spatial contexts of thousands of moveable finds (vases, vessels, tools, organic materials, etc.) remained virtually undisturbed. This particular coincidence of circumstances gives archaeologists the opportunity of studying what is considered to be perhaps the key to understand-

ing the past, namely the “contexts” the structures and micro-structures of human activity in space, which at Akrotiri were “fossilized” immobilized, rather like a snapshot, under the ash fall of the Plinian eruption. The Late Cycladic city – in contrast to its equivalent of historical times, Pompeii – was found deserted of people. Nonetheless, clearly visible are the traces of their last activities, even of the gestures of the small groups that returned to repair their city, which had been damaged by the preceding earthquakes, prior to their final abandonment of it when the eruption commenced. The possibility of applying and testing the famous “Pompeii premises” when studying the ruins at Akrotiri is tempting, to say the least.

Excavations and material evidence

Forty years of excavations and research in the ruins at Akrotiri have given us insight into various aspects of the city’s society, economy and material culture.

The town and the buildings

The Late Cycladic city at Akrotiri developed on a long narrow promontory with houses, buildings or building *insulae*, whose entrances faced paved streets and squares, which followed the basic axes of circulation, with general orientation North-South (fig. 3).

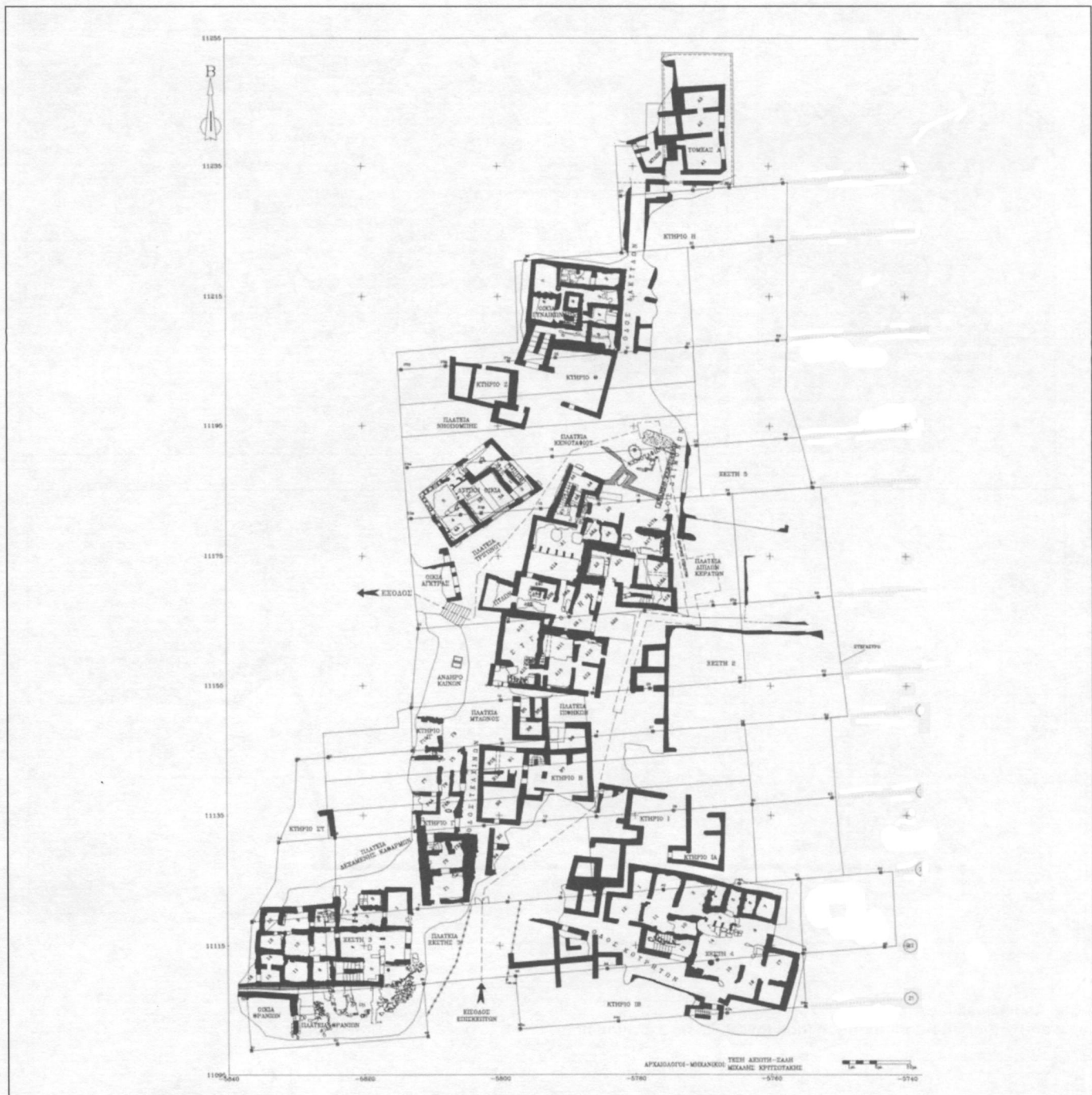


Fig. 3: Plan of the excavated area of Akrotiri, Thera, Greece. (Source: Akrotiri Excavations Archives).

The largest buildings were costly constructions with ashlar blocks of local tuff or ignimbrite and extensive use of squared beams of imported timber and local tamarisk wood⁷ (fig. 4). In the luxurious mansions there is obvious emulation and copying of high-status architectural practices, the models for which are encountered mainly in the palatial complexes of Crete. These buildings are considered as seats of administrative or religious functions; they embody the political, economic and religious power of the city. The ashlar building Xeste 3 exhibits clear elements of the Minoan architectural vo-

cabulary, such as the lustral basin—*adyton*, the separation of interior spaces by *polythyra* (pier-and-door partitions), which refer directly not only to the technical know-how but also to the reception of idiomatic religious behavior of clearly Minoan provenance (fig. 4).

The smaller buildings are less-expensive units in which there is limited use of imported timber and ashlar stone blocks (fig. 5). Predominantly two-storeyed and with flat roof, these buildings are thought to have been the residences of prosperous citizens, which combine domestic and workshop ac-

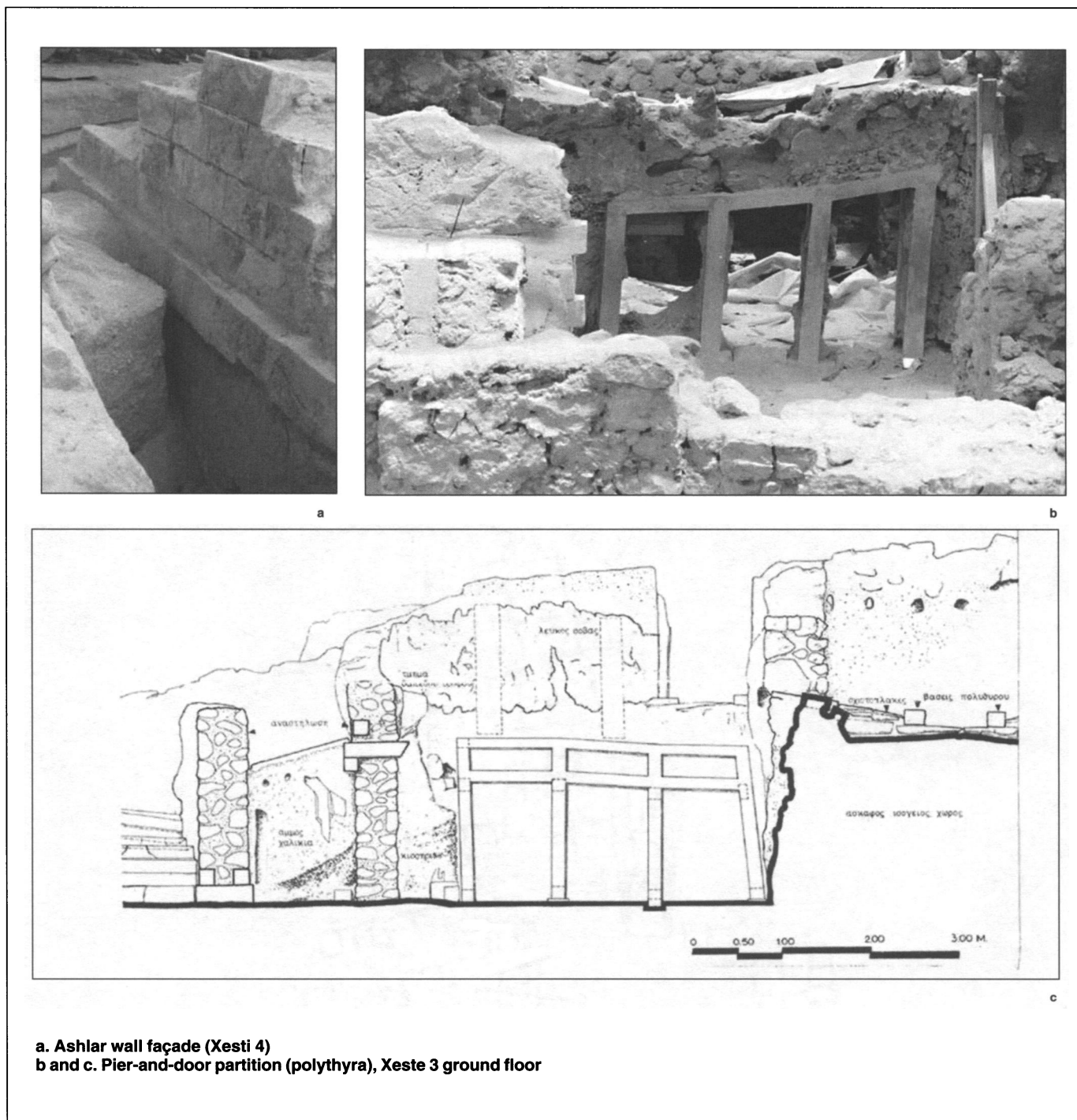


Fig. 4: Akrotiri, Thera – Ashlar Buildings. (Source: Akrotiri Excavations Archives).

tivities (storerooms for foodstuffs and tools, mill installations and facilities for looms) (fig. 5a). In the upper storeys there are wall-paintings and Minoan architectural features (*polythyra*, multiple windows) (fig. 5b). The local elements of the architectural idiom are more conspicuous in these buildings, but there is an overt mixing with Minoan models.

At the level of architecture and urban planning, we could say that the management of building modes is in the hands of local artisans, who are familiar with and exploit to advantage the potential of the local materials. At the same time, they are

capable of responding to the demands of refined Minoan building standards, on small, medium and large scale. The local materials and the lie of the land on which the city grew up, the social conceptions and the canons regulating the function of public and private space, point to local idiomatic applications at the private and the public level, as well as to absorption of Minoan canons by local choices and local taste. Clearly, at the level of built space a cross-cultural identity is produced, which transforms the relations of dependence and domination of the global models.

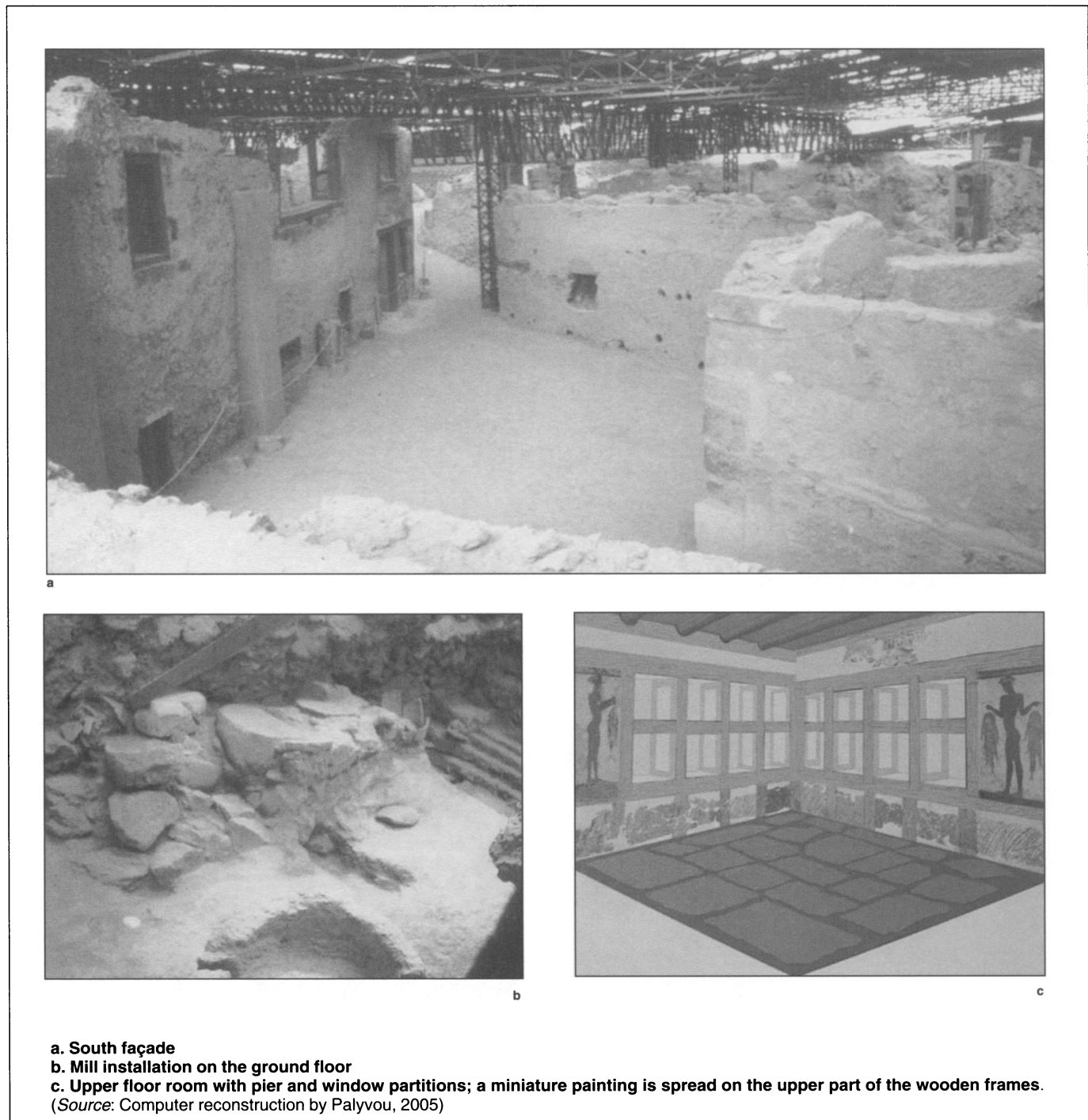
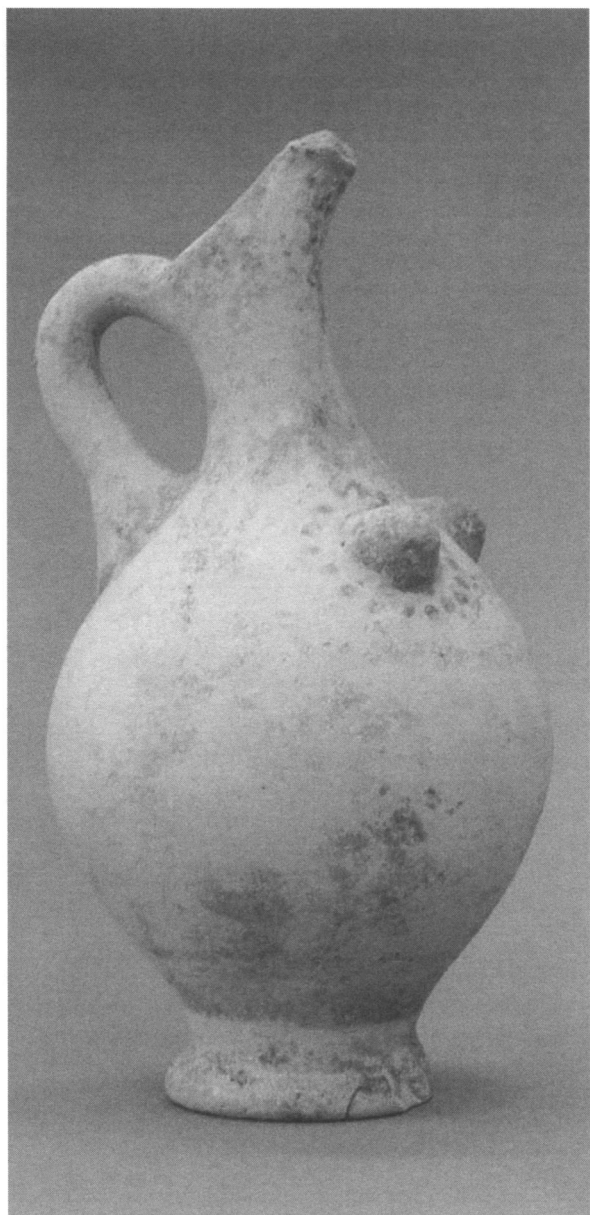


Fig. 5: Akrotiri, Thera – The West House, a free-standing two-storeyed ordinary building. (Source: Akrotiri Excavations Archives).

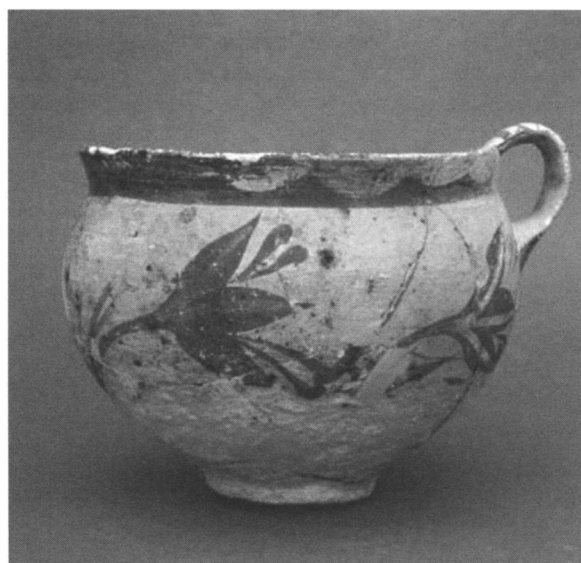
The material culture

Other practices in which the relationship of the local to the global is imprinted display analogous characteristics. The particular relationship of the society at Akrotiri with maritime trade is evident in the presence of exogenous products from Crete, the Levant, the Cyclades and the Greek Mainland. The imported “exotica” were produced in a widened periphery but were consumed uniformly in the settlement, since uneven spa-

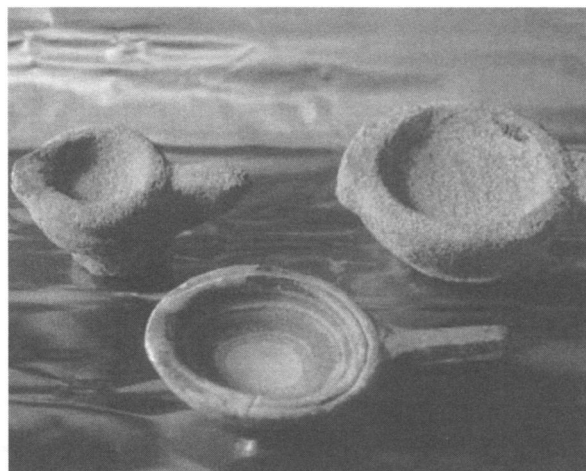
tial distributions have not been observed in the excavation. However, the imported objects are few and usually luxurious. They were perhaps acquired in processes of gift exchange and functioned as objects of individual or social status/prestige. Several of them are ritual vessels, of clay or stone. The local pottery imitations are numerous, attesting to the transfer of models in the shapes and the decoration of the vases made in local clays, while an independent Cycladic repertoire of shapes also exists for ritual and domestic vessels (fig. 6).



a



b



c

a, b, c. Local

Fig. 6: Akrotiri, Thera – Luxurious pottery and stone vessels. (Source: Akrotiri Excavations Archives).

It is systems of representation which reflect best issues relating to cultural identities and conceptions. At Akrotiri we have large areas of wall-paintings in a good state of preservation, in all the buildings excavated to date. These murals usually adorn grand rooms in the upper storeys of residences, and the upper storeys, the staircases and the ground floors of buildings intended for administrative-religious use, such as those of ashlar masonry, the so-called *Xestēs*. Specialists have an-

alyzed in breadth and in depth the subjects of the Theraan iconography, placing emphasis on the iconographic and stylistic links between the Theraan wall-paintings and the stylistic conventions and symbolisms of the Minoan world, or the wall-paintings known from the other harbor-towns in the Cyclades.⁸ In the wall-paintings at Akrotiri a particular Theraan style has been identified, distinctive of which is the use of the white ground and the emphatic presence of naturalistic subjects,

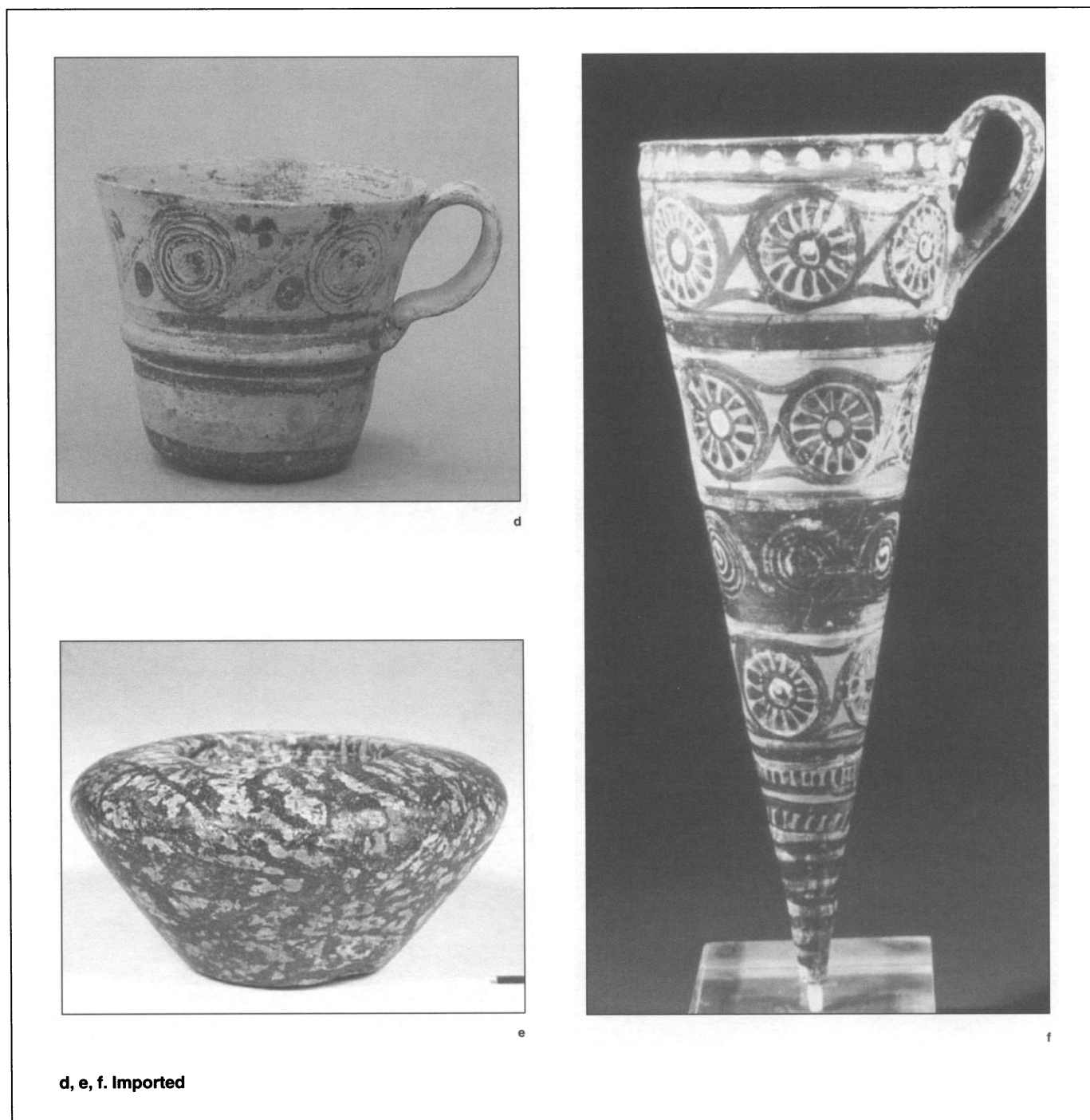
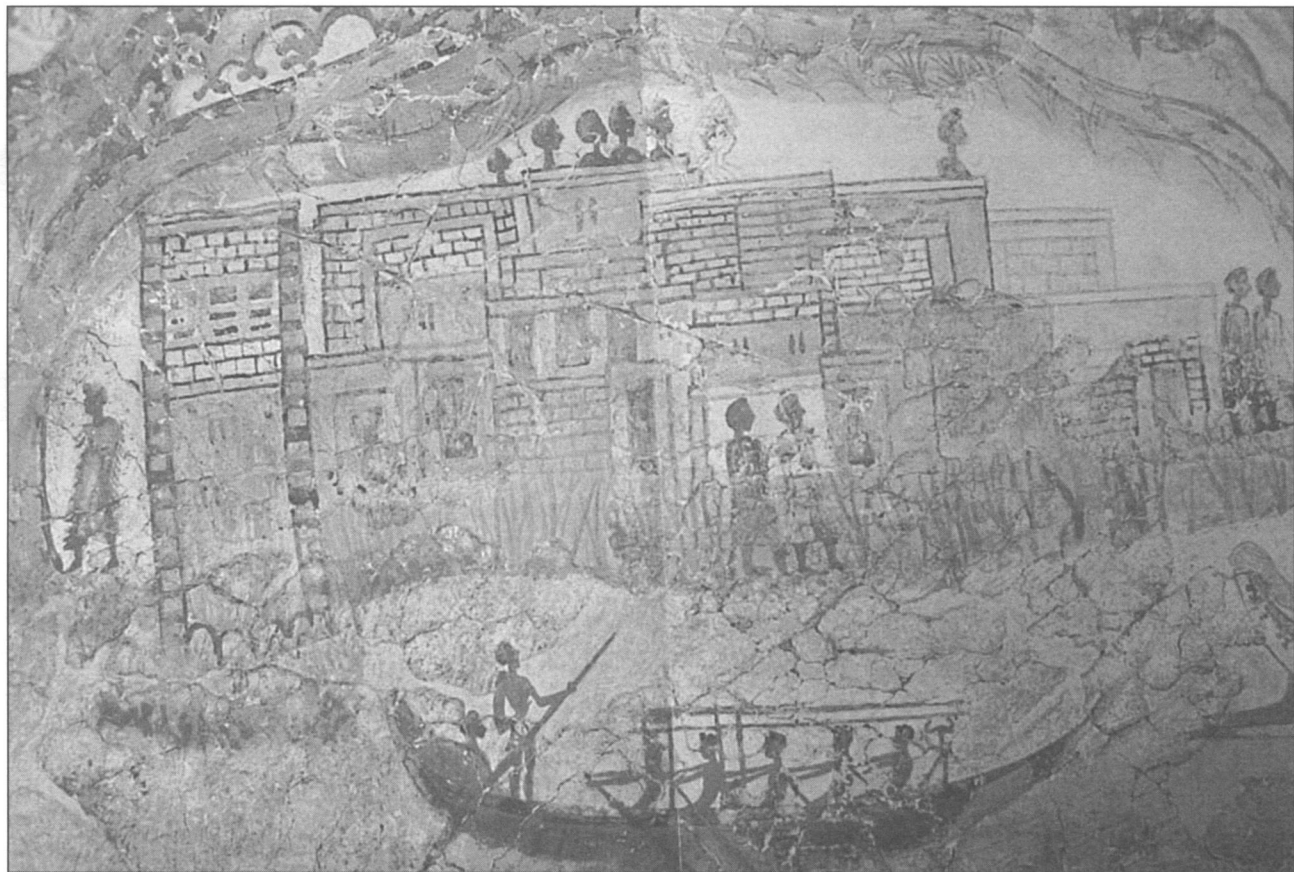


Fig. 6: Akrotiri, Thera – Luxurious pottery and stone vessels. (Source: Akrotiri Excavations Archives) (cont'd)



a



b

a. Aegean town

b. Exotic landscape

Fig. 7: Akrotiri, Thera – Miniature wall-painting from the West House. (Source: Doulas, 1992).

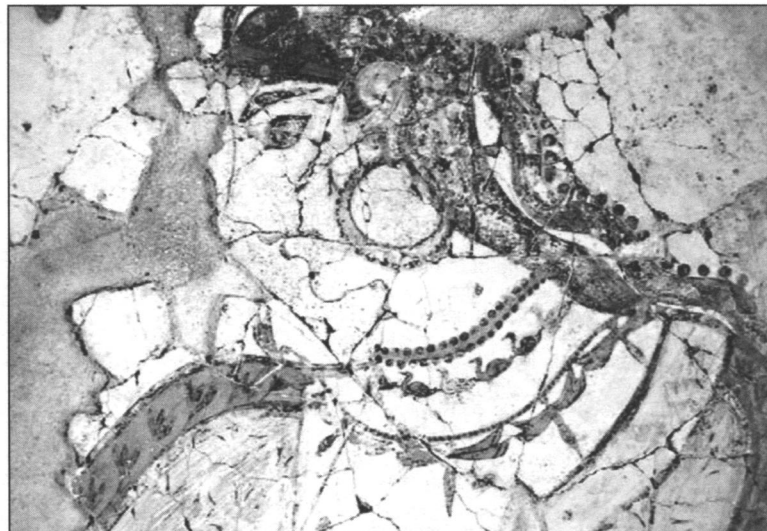
motifs and perceptions of nature, which are considered purely Cycladic. Many researchers agree in recognizing the representation of the Thera landscape and of naturalistic subjects taken from the experience of the seasons on the island, while it is suggested that the narrative miniature paintings and

the scenes in exotic landscapes relate to the overseas voyages of Thera seafarers, as well as oral epic narrations referring to events taking place in the wider Aegean world (fig. 7). In the religious subjects, such as the renowned representation of young girls gathering saffron and the offering of this



a

b



a. Saffron gathering scene

b. Goddess receiving crocus stigmas offerings

Fig. 8: Akrotiri, Thera – Xeste 3 wall paintings. (Source: Dumas, 1992).

to the “Potnia Theron” (Mistress of Animals), which is not associated with the adyton of Xeste 3, phenomena of syncretism or hybridism are observed. That is, there is conflation or co-existence of local customs, narrations and rituals, in relation to deities and ceremonials referring to a wider Minoan religious framework (fig. 8).

Conclusion

Returning to our initial ascertainties concerning the roles of the “local” and the “global” in cultural change, we have seen so far a few highly indicative examples of the different modes of interaction between the local and the global, each time, at the site of Akrotiri, and we have come to the conclusion that

phenomena of emulation and syncretism unite the two levels in a new shifting identity.

On looking back at the course of a prehistoric city, we realize that the relationship with the dominant Minoan culture cannot be attributed to 'colonization' and that the Late Cycladic harbor-town is not a gateway of Minoan Crete. The way in which the dominant exogenous cultural traits are interwoven with the local ones points to the gradual creation of a new local identity, through the coexistence of endogenous and exogenous elements which are involved in different ways in the social life of the city. The syncretism which appears to emerge from the interaction of two factors, the local identity and the culturally and economically powerful external model, is the result of a long process of acceptance and assimilation of the models. The socio-cultural dimension of diffusion phenomenon, which in our case we call "Minoanization," cannot be described with precision because we do not know who exactly were the key players in society (individuals, leadership groups, families, phratries, sacerdotal organizations, professional guilds, etc.). At the level of material culture, the phenomenon of amalgamation which we have called "syncretism," as substitute for "Minoanization," is most obvious in sectors relating to political and administrative structures, and to some religious practices. Technology, that is, the way in which technological models are put into practice *in situ*, through local materials, *habitus* and *savoir faire*, is the intermediary that enhances the visibility of the local.

In the prehistoric settlement at Akrotiri in the second millennium BC, emulative behaviors prevail, in which Minoan characteristics are copied and adapted to local mentalities (in architecture and in conspicuous material objects), while phenomena of syncretism hold away in iconography and the representational codes, conserving the presence of the particular local idiom.

Notes

1. Renfrew, 1972, 2004; Renfrew and Cherry, 1986; Kardulias, 1999; Kristiansen and Rowlands, 1998. Usually, the relations between global and local – regardless of the terminology used each time – are depicted theoretically by diagrams in the form of polygons, networks, dendrograms, ranked relations, overlapping circles, etc.
2. Marinatos, 1969-1976; Dumas, 1978-1980; Dumas, 1992; Hardy et al., 1990; Sherratt, 2000; Palyvou, 2005.
3. We know well mainly the imperishable materials, among the numerous perishable objects which will have been exchanged in the networks of inter-island trade.
4. We have minimal knowledge of the architectural remains of this phase at Akrotiri, because the site has not been uncovered on a large scale. At the end of the period the Middle Cycladic city was destroyed by earthquake, the ruins were cleared and the new Late Cycladic city was built on top of them.
5. This concurs with information included in the ancient sources, Homer, Thucydides and Diodoros Siculus, on the thalassocracy of Minos and the mythical Rhadamanthys.
6. Barber, 1987; Broodbank, 2004; Hagg and Marinatos, 1984; Marinatos, 1990; Shaw, 1978; Wiener, 1990.
7. We know well two big buildings with ashlar masonry, Xesti 4 and Xesti 3, which are at least two-storeyed with an overall roofed area between 950 sq.m. and 650 sq.m.
8. Dumas, 1992; Marinatos, 1990; Renfrew, 2000; Sherratt, 2000.

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