

# The ‘Seated Woman’ of the Adorants Fresco from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera: Female Initiation or Non-Narrative Absorption?

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**Abstract** *Beginning with Nanno Marinatos (1984) and Ellen Davis (1986), the Adorants Fresco from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera, has long been interpreted as a depiction of a female rite of passage, or as a representation of different age stages of girls and adolescent females participating in an initiation ritual (Rehak 2007; Günkel-Maschek 2014, 2021). My critical view is based on three arguments. First, the rite of passage, as well as initiation into a cult, is transformative and thus a narrative-analytical model, which does not formally correspond to the non-narrative representative devices used on the Adorants Fresco. Second, even though initiation into adulthood is often assumed to be culturally universal, it does not correspond to some thematic restrictions present in Minoan visual culture: the absence of representation of male-female pairs, of women taking care of children, or of marriage. Third, the often-cited ‘historical’ evidence for the existence of Cretan rites of passage as preserved by Ephorus, which influenced Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s model of the Athenian ephebe as a Black Hunter (1986), follows the specific cultural agenda of the milieu of the Athenian Academy, and Vidal-Naquet’s method of structuralist substitution does not allow for assuming the historical existence of all the particular components. Based on these arguments, we cannot exclude the historical existence of Minoan rites of passage, but we can challenge their depiction on the preserved visual material, including the Adorants Fresco. As an alternative, I propose to focus more closely on representative devices, especially the impression of the Seated Woman’s absorption, and the suggested simultaneity of temporal relationships in the fresco.*

## Introduction: The Adorants Fresco as a Depiction of Initiation Ritual

As part of the decoration of Room 3 of the Late Bronze Age Xeste 3, Akrotiri, the Adorants Fresco (Doumas 1992, 136–145, figs. 100–108; Fig. 1) is generally interpreted as visualizing age-grades reaching from girlhood into full fertile womanhood based on cultural (hair arrangement, clothes; Davis 1986) and physiological signs (development of breasts, body posture, hair growth; Chapin 1997–2000; 2021, 28–30).

Two lines of interpretation have been developed so far; both involve an initiation scenario and overlap to some degree. The first is initiation into adulthood – a rite of passage – which is supposed to be either depicted on the fresco itself (Marinatos 1984, 64, 73–84; 1993, 203–209) or derived from the whole pictorial program of Room 3. In that case, the rite-of-passage interpretation is broadened to rituals of coming of age performed differently according to sex (Doumas 1992, 129–130; Morgan 2000, 940–941; Gesell 2000, 950–955) focusing on social constructions of gender (Chapin 2021, 33), possibly culminating in a marriage (Davis 1986, 402–403; Vlachopoulos 2007, 110), even of the whole group (Koehl 2000, 141). In theory this interpretation follows Arnold van Gennep’s (1960 [1909]) tripartite scheme of rite-of-passage phases of separation, transition, and reintegration, and the emphasis later put by Victor Turner (1969) on the middle phase of the liminal transformation. The critical moment of transformation is generally supposed to be represented by the Seated Woman, the middle figure of the Adorants Fresco (except for Vlachopoulos 2007, 110, who assumes she is more probably the initiator of the Veiled Girl on the right). The red sign on her feet is interpreted as blood, referring to



Fig. 1: Adorants Fresco (*the Necklace Swinger, the Seated Woman, and the Veiled Girl*), Xeste 3, Room 3, Akrotiri, LM I (after Doumas 1992, 136, pl. 100, courtesy of the Archaeological Society of Athens).

some kind of “bloody initiation” (Marinatos 1993, 206–209), menarche (Rehak 2004, 94), defloration (Davis 1986, 402–403), or marriage (Chapin 1997–2000, 13; 2021, 34; Koehl 2000, 140–141).

The second line of interpretation is more concerned with the institutional religious framework. The Adorants Fresco becomes part of the depiction of a ritual serving “affirmative and educational purposes” and “designed to prepare Theran girls for marriage and child-bearing” (Günkel-Maschek 2021, 305–306), while attending a crocus-gathering service to their tutelary goddess, who is compared to Artemis or Demeter (Rehak 2004, 91–94; 2007, 223–224 for Artemis; Vlachopoulos 2007, 111–116 for Demeter; see also Günkel-Maschek 2021, 305–306; 2014, 123–128). Such ritual form is derived from the ‘model’ offered in historical times by the cult of Artemis in Brauron (Rehak 2007, 223–224), generally interpreted as Athenian female initiation. Even in this approach, the Veiled Girl is detected as being in a “transitional state” from childhood to adolescence, the Seated Woman as “dramatically represent[ing] the social transition from adolescence to adulthood,” and Xeste 3 as functioning as a place for celebrating marriage (Günkel-Maschek 2021, 306–307). Moreover, the assumed reference to remote locations by the tree-shrine with bloodstained horns of consecration depicted on the adjunct wall, and the crocus-gathering depicted on the first floor (Günkel-Maschek 2021, 306), echoes the role played by secluded locations in models of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960 [1909], or Vidal-Naquet 1986 in Classical Studies).

In what follows, I will suggest, based on three different arguments, that these interpretations follow a particular model of ritual as if existing per se, which runs the risk of filling in the missing material based more on the modern theoretical model of a ritual than on actual evidence of Bronze Age cultural phenomena (see also Valentinová 2022, 190). First, initiation is a transformative and thus narrative-analytical model, but the non-narrative representative devices used on the Adorants Fresco do not correlate with it. Second, the existence of rites of passage is often assumed to be culturally universal, but it does not correspond with other cultural values represented by Minoan visual culture. Third, it is often argued that we have historical evidence for the existence of Minoan male rites of passage, as allegedly preserved by the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek historian Ephorus, which allows us to assume the existence of female equivalents. However, Ephorus’ testimony probably reflects his own cultural agenda and the very limited knowledge of the actual historical situation in Crete (not to mention the cultural situation in the Bronze Age). Based on these arguments, we cannot completely exclude the historical existence of Minoan rites of passage, but we can challenge their depiction in the preserved visual material, including the Adorants Fresco. As an alternative, I propose to focus more closely on the representative devices,

especially the self-absorption of the Seated Woman, and the suggested simultaneity of temporal relationships in the fresco.<sup>1</sup>

### The Intricacies of the Initiation Interpretation

#### *Missing correspondence with representative devices*

Even though ritual is nowadays often understood as a quality of action, or is described in terms of ritualization to avoid an image of a stable, fixed, and framed cultural phenomenon (Stephenson 2015, 3), this elusive concept is difficult to apply in the case of vanished cultures, especially when written narratives are missing. Instead, the popular model of ritual as transformative action is often applied precisely because it represents a highly fixed form tightly framed in terms of time, place, and symbolic expression.

Societies indisputably create various institutionalized processes to promote change – besides rites of passage and initiation into a cult, for example, there are healing ceremonies, funeral rituals, or magic (Stephenson 2015, 54). Up to this point, the transformation model is a valid research tool. However, scholarship has often assumed that based on the universal model of ritual as a transformative action changing state in a period of time – a model clearly expressed in van Gennep's sequence of separation/transition/reintegration – if we see two or even one 'phase' of a postulated ritual, then we can infer the rest. And, more importantly, if we see separate phases, we may infer the transformative dynamics. Framing is definitely a quality of ritual when enacted by its participants (Douglas 1966, 64; Handelman 2006); to use its model to frame material evidence may however be misleading (Valentinová 2022, 189–192).

The Adorants Fresco does not display any narrative coherence as regards shared space, temporal relationships, inner communication, or the relationship with the beholder of the representation. Visual access to the Adorants Fresco was restricted to separate figures thanks to the wooden construction in front of it, as modeled by Ute Günkel-Maschek (2014, 119, fig. 2). Although viewed from below, where the lustral basin is situated, no internal communication between the figures is depicted, including views and body postures or other communicative body movements. Dumas (1992, 129) proposed that the shrine on the adjacent fresco is the focalizing point, but at least the Seated Woman does not seem to look in that direction; instead, she is absorbed in herself (see below). As there is no figure functioning as an internal focalizer and, as Anne Chapin shows in case of landscape representations, Minoan fresco painting omits any reference to the fixed point of the external viewer (Chapin 1995, 58–59), the structured relationship with the beholder of the representation is also absent (Valentinová 2022, 184–188).

Even though in general the missing narrative coherence of the Adorants Fresco was recognized repeatedly (Marinatos 1984, 74; 1993, 208; Vlachopoulos 2007, 112), it was paradoxically taken as an argument for the depiction of ritual (*cf.* Cain 1997, 146–150, 173). Andreas Vlachopoulos, one of the strongest proponents of the narrative interpretation of Thera frescoes as illustrations of some form of oral epic tradition, elaborates on this approach, suggesting that we are dealing here with a “composite scene articulated from three distinct episodes,” which form a “pictorial cycle around the transitional phases of girls into womanhood” (Vlachopoulos 2007, 111, 113). These 'episodes', which are entirely non-narrative, are thus supposed to be interlocked into the unified pattern of female life by the lost mythological narratives. As we do not have anything from the assumed Minoan mythological corpus, in order to 'read' the pictorial program, we must substitute it with Greek mythology. This is confusing, not only because another civilization is used for interpretation but mainly because there are no reasons to suppose that the fresco pro-

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<sup>1</sup> The general part of the first argument is developed in detail in Valentinová 2022, in which the author introduces an interpretive approach based on perception of the non-narrative dimension of Minoan fresco painting and methodological avoidance of culturally conditioned secondary narrativization that occurs when we are invited to

narrativize not by the operation of the original representational devices but by association with our own cultural contents (Valentinová 2022, 172). This paper presents an extended application of this approach to the *Adorants Fresco*.

gram of Xeste 3 functions as an illustration of narratives. As Svetlana Alpers (1983) showed in the case of Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century, instead of ‘reading’ and narrativizing, the cultural preference may well be for seeing and non-narrative representation (Valentinová 2022, 177–179).

Because narrative reading requires change, the model of initiation requires even existential transformation and the fresco depicts no change, the blood on the Seated Woman’s feet cannot be just blood. It must refer to something else. Since this else “is not explained visually” (Vlachopoulos 2007, 112), we intervene here with our cultural expectations of marriage, menarche, or hymenal blood. When we interpret a cultural representation, in this case a fresco, in such an intensive narrative way, without analyzing its narrative coherence, we open a channel for our cultural imagination to infiltrate the material we are studying in ways we cannot control. If we assume that narrative content needs narrative devices to be expressed, the fresco of the Enthroned Goddess may represent a transformative ritual, but the Adorants Fresco does not.

### *Missing correspondence with other represented cultural values*

The articulation of a linear progression of the life cycle is a feature resonating strongly with modern Western cultural experience. It is assumed frequently that rites of passage into adulthood occur in every culture, except, paradoxically, modern Western society, which allegedly desperately misses them. They are theorized as the main tool for inculcating society’s rules and values and integrating them with biological destiny. However, this assumption presupposes that all cultures perceive adulthood as the culturally most valuable and productive state; that in women’s case, it is marked by reaching full fertility, marriage, or childbirth (as opposed to a male’s initiation, which is more often connected with power, prestige, and political office); that transition into it is a critical process for the operation of the whole society and thus must be controlled by its authorities; and that individual identity can be shaped into a processual movement and narrated in that way.

Even though our ideas about traditional cultural arrangements are undermined by the developing diversity of Western society, they persist as the building blocks of the theoretical models we develop for understanding foreign societies. Not surprisingly, the self-representation of the remote Minoan society does not correspond to these models. We have no iconographic evidence of a nuclear family (for the hypothesis that nuclear families were *not* the basic social units of Minoan society see Driessen 2010; Driessen and Letesson 2023) or man-woman pair, and the kourotrophos image seems to be deliberately omitted (Budin 2011, 269–299; Chapin 2021, 34). In such a society, it is rather unlikely that marriage played such a significant structural role. Blackwood (2005) argued against the centrality of marriage and the conjugal couple within the kinship and culture of matrifocal societies, pointing to the way the anthropological concept of marriage was traditionally structured around the ‘trope’ of dominant heterosexual men, thus creating an impression that other kinship structures are somehow incomplete. Using the examples of Afro-Caribbean and West Sumatran matrifocal societies, Blackwood shows that the heterosexual couple does not play a prominent role in these, and that, depending on their patterns of locality, marriage may only be a secondary, weak, repeatable, non-exclusive or easy-to-leave social bonding. Importantly, in these societies, male dominance is generally not translated into female dominance, which may also have a Minoan parallel, as representations of persons in authoritative body postures are rare. Given Minoan women’s privileged access to the products of the time- and capital-intensive textile industry, as testified by Theran frescoes, their economic independence and prominent access to wealth may also be expected. We do not have enough information to say what the kinship and social structures of the Minoans were. However, scholars such as Blackwood, when shifting the focus from gender, kinship, and sex to their social constructs warn against uncritically assuming the universal existence of the cornerstones of patriarchal societies. And these are exactly rites of passage as a society-controlled mechanism for producing and celebrating the readiness for marriage as the threshold of women’s lives.



Minoan society paid great attention to the pre-adult stage. Although Cretan depictions of adolescents cannot compete with the density of depictions from Thera, from the stunning bronze figurine of a crawling infant from the Psychro Cave to the boys depicted playing a game on the miniature fresco fragment from Knossos to the Palaikastro Kouros, Cretan artists also carefully observed the particularities of pre-adult physiognomy and postures (Rutter 2003, 36–43; Chapin 2021, 28–32). Images of girls are much less frequent, but they are present on gold rings (Rutter 2003, 42; Günkel-Maschek 2021, 308) and possibly also in the frescoes (for the hypothesis of young ladies of the miniature Grandstand Fresco being in the age of late adolescence see Chapin 2021, 29). Like the little attention paid to burials and burial rites, correlating with the absence of prominent individual figures, this may signal that it was not adulthood and the articulation of individual identity that stood at the center of cultural attention. According to Ellen Adams (2017, 221), the cultural focus could be very 'forward-looking'.

*Confused historical evidence for rites of passage in Minoan Crete*

The third reason for the endurance of the concept of rites of passage into adulthood in Minoan studies is its twofold connection with the theory of initiation developed in Classical Studies. Firstly, through the saffron motif, the fresco decoration at Xeste 3 has been associated with the cult of Artemis at Brauron ("Athens in historical times offers a model for interpretation of the prehistoric evidence", Rehak 2007, 223), which since Angelo Brelich (1969, 247–279) has been generally understood as an Athenian female rite of passage. However, the conceptualization of the Braurion cult as a rite of passage is not consensual (Faraone 2003, 43–68); it is difficult to transfer such a conception to Bronze Age Thera because of different representations of social organization (my second argument), and it suffers from the import of the motif of 'wilderness' and dwelling in remote places from Pierre Vidal-Naquet's Black Hunter model of Athenian male rites of passage (1986). Secondly, this very model of the Black Hunter is also supported by an uncritical reading of Ephorus, which, combined with a literal understanding of Vidal-Naquet's model, allowed Robert Koehl (1986, 2000, 2016) to conclude that the Chieftain Cup depicts a Minoan male initiation ritual that took place at the sanctuary at Kato Syme. This then became another argument for the analogous existence of Minoan female initiation.

According to Vidal-Naquet, in contrast to the Greek adult man – a hoplite warrior, husband, father, and citizen – the Greek adolescent boy in the period of 'ephebeia' is supposed to be a hunter in the wild, with ambiguous or inverted sexuality, and dependent on tricks and deception (1986, 106–128). Irene Polinskaya (2005, 85–106), however, showed that this cultural construction, and mainly the essential liminal experience of 'wildernesses' and of dwelling in remote locations, is visible only through the method of "structuralist substitution" of various elements of myth, ritual, and social custom and was not historically present in Classical Athens. Polinskaya showed that the frontiers of Attica, where the ephebes spent their two years of service, did not consist of empty mountain ranges but of a cultural landscape of urban settlements, villages, and isolated areas. If there was a motif of 'wilderness' present in Brauron, Thera, or Kato Syme, it does not seem to be analogous to Athenian 'ephebeia'.

There is, however, also a tacit evolutionistic dimension to Vidal-Naquet's theory. He suggested that the elements of his model once historically existed, according to the evidence from remote locations such as Sparta and Crete. Here, as opposed to the almost 'secularized' Athens, where the initiatory elements lose their 'original functional integrity,' archaic institutions are supposed to have been conserved (Vidal-Naquet 1968, 113–114, 144; also citing Brelich 1969, 227). We allegedly know this also from Ephorus, who, following his comparison of Cretan and Spartan customs, depicts the contemporary (4th century BC) Cretan ritual abduction of a boy by an adult male lover with whom he stays in the mountains for two months, hunting and feasting. After their return, the boy is rewarded with military equipment, an ox, and a drinking cup. Both the group of the man ('andreion') and the boy ('agele') are involved (FGrHist 70F149, Strabo 10.4.21; Vidal-Naquet 1968, 117). However, Paula Perlman (1992, 2000) has shown that the

narrative of the affinity between the ‘ideal’ Cretan and Spartan constitutions and the social organization popular in Athenian philosophical writings first emerged in the Athenian Academy, where the lack of historical and contemporary knowledge of the situation in Crete was compensated for by information about the Spartan colony of Lyktos. More than an anthropological report of the most primitive form of pederasty as part of a tribal initiation, Ephorus’s account is reminiscent of placing the idea of pederasty, which in contemporary Athens was seen as a kind of idealized tool of philosophical education, in a culturally distant space where it could serve as an ideal to which Athenian aristocrats could look when contemplating how politics and social relations could be better organized (Dodd 2000). From this point of view, the idea of rites of passage in Minoan Crete seems more like a by-product of the theorization of male rites of passage in Classical Greece.

### Interpretation: Simultaneous Aspects of Female Identity

If not rites of passage or age-based cult initiation, then what? Trying to avoid secondary narrativization of the material by a modern model of a transformative initiation ritual helps to remove the accretion of foreign cultural content but does not lead to any deciphering of the “true meaning” of the fresco. This approach, however, allows us to focus more on the relationship that the painting establishes with the beholder, and therefore with us as the beholders.

The Seated Woman is depicted from a three-quarter view, sitting in a rocky landscape among scattered clumps of crocuses. Our approach to her is restricted, as her inaccessibility is articulated through her body posture. One hand is held to her forehead, with the other hand resting on her leg; her right shoulder partially covers her chest and breasts. She does not look at us, nor is our gaze guided by another focalizing figure. She is absorbed in herself as Chapin (2001, 7) suggested, but is probably not in pain (see also Rehak 2004, 94; contra Marinatos 1984, 79 and Chapin 1997–2000, 7); her lips are open and she seems relaxed, whereas pain is accompanied by an increase in muscle tension (Fig. 2). If we look at her, as she does not return our gaze, we are also absorbed in her self-possession and elusiveness. The absence of a structured relationship between her and us, however, also keeps us, the viewers, at a distance (see also Valentinová 2022, 188–189).

Michael Fried analyses Denis Diderot’s critique of 18<sup>th</sup> century French painting, which addressed the crisis of beholding and the need to “detheatricalize” it, thus excluding any consciousness of viewing from the representation. If the subject of the painting is represented as being oblivious to the surroundings and not exhibited to the beholder’s gaze, the effect of ‘absorption’ is produced. The intentional ignoring of the viewer is supposed to allow the painting to be convincingly accessed, helping to realize Diderot’s “supreme fiction” of the nonexistence of the viewer (Fried 1986, 103–104). One of the painters whose work Fried discusses in great detail is Jean-Baptiste Greuze, a French portrait painter of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The study of a young girl, *Jeune fille au ruban bleu* (Fig. 3; not cited directly by Fried), attributed to him, depicts her relaxed facial expression as devoid of any inner tension or any tension between her and the viewer. This French girl seems considerably more childlike than the Seated Woman of Akrotiri and has a slightly more fragile appearance. The representation of both, in the same way, however, does not allow the viewer to get too close to them, because they are not psychologically present (see also Fried 1986, 35). Nevertheless, they invite the viewer to be absorbed by their calmness and elusiveness.

In his urge to remove the beholder from in front of the painting, even more than depicting figures engaged in “absorptive activities”, Diderot emphasized the experience of nature provided by landscape paintings. These enrapture the observer to such an extent that they create the illusion of physically entering the painting. The observer is immersed in the landscape and thus disappears as an observer altogether (Fried 1986, 131). Even though the Adorants Fresco is primarily figurative, the rocks ‘hanging’ upside down from the upper frame, above the Seated Woman, may stimulate a similar effect of landscape immersion and strengthen the effect of absorption.



Fig. 2: Adorants Fresco, detail: the Seated Woman. Xeste 3, Room 3, Akrotiri, LM I (after Doumas 1992, 136, pl. 100, courtesy of the Archaeological Society of Athens).



Fig. 3: Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805, attributed to), *Jeune fille au ruban bleu*. Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts Paris, MR 177; D.1934.1.3, Photo (c) MBA, Rennes, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais, Jean-Manuel Salingue.

Together with the lack of articulation of temporal relations, this brings us to the idea of simultaneity. A similar principle has been earlier discussed in the case of the Minoan landscape paintings, the Monkeys and Blue Birds Fresco at Knossos, or the fresco cycle of Room 14 in the Royal Villa at Agia Triada. Here, different habitats are found side by side, with many species of plants that naturally flower in different seasons shown in full bloom. This “simultaneity of flowering” is interpreted by Chapin as alluding to the “totality of nature” (2004, 57–58; however, I do not agree with her conclusion that an “eternal, timeless landscape” is thus depicted [2004, 59]).

Although scholars assume that the fresco program of Room 3a in Xeste 3 depicts an autumn ritual, as autumn is the season for gathering saffron (Günkel-Maschek 2021, 304), it seems to me more likely that this activity is related to the first floor. In the Adorants Fresco, the main theme may be the simultaneous depiction of femaleness. Does the Veiled Girl represent girlhood and the Seated Woman a “bleeding woman”? We do not know for sure. But given the representative devices used in the depiction, it is more likely that an enduring condition is depicted rather than a transformative event. While landscapes may be endowed *also* with religious meaning, they should not be limited to it, and Chapin (2004, 62) cautions us against considering them as mere “devotional paintings” or “backgrounds of religious rituals.” Even in the case of the Adorants Fresco, rather than considering it a ritual illustration, we should accept what this cultural representation reveals about the ideas and values of this very different culture: that occasionally, simultaneity can be culturally more highly valued than processual movement.

## Conclusion

Instead of the transformation of individual women’s lives, the Adorants Fresco in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri may depict different aspects of female identity, arranged in a diagrammatic rather than a linear way. It displays female identity as almost fragmentary, absorbed into the landscape and the world. Do the depicted women perform ritual behavior? Without context, we do not know. But we can conclude that the Adorants Fresco does not depict a rite of passage, generally understood as a transformative ritual characterizing the critical passage into the most culturally valuable period of fertile adulthood. Instead of following this idea, in the future, we may focus more closely

on the fascinating dynamics between the non-narrative figural representations of the ground floor, the narrative fresco of the Enthroned Goddess, and the purely geometrical composition of the second floor of Xeste 3.

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