

Island of Thera: New Story in Ancient Culture



M a r g a r e t W h e a t l e y

My new book came into form in a place that illuminates what it feels like to live in harmony with life and with each other: Thera Island in the Greek Aegean, near Crete. I didn't go to Thera (also named Santorini) to learn this—I innocently arrived on the island and was surprised to discover it. All I knew beforehand was that the island had been destroyed by a violent volcanic eruption around 1500 BCE. That eruption may have begun the end of Minoan civilization on nearby Crete, and might have destroyed Atlantis, according to the accounts of Plato.

But I was not prepared for the intense and joyful encounter I had with Thera culture when I walked into a museum shop that displayed the vivid wall murals that had adorned their buildings' interiors. I was surrounded by imagery that reflected deep harmony with life. Dolphins danced with ships, birds filled the air, and every scene was filled with flowers and animals. It felt as if I was looking at the Peaceable Kingdom where all creatures shared easily in life's pleasures. I recalled that Minoan culture was deeply feminine, led by women priests. I picked up a replica of their pottery and loved the round feminine shape of a jug where swallows flew in graceful arcs across the surface.

I felt such deep kinship with these artists and their joyous images that I needed to learn more. Who were these people who could stir my tired soul and awaken such keen curiosity to know more about their life? Here's what I learned.

Thera culture was its own unique expression of Minoan culture, a world that never fragmented nature from humans from art. Humans were not separate from the natural order. They didn't attempt to manipulate it, or to observe it from a distance. I found this difficult to comprehend, coming from a culture so fixated on separation and control, where art is something different than life, where humans stand outside life and seek to control it.

Minoans expected order to triumph over chaos because they lived close to life and knew life's cyclical nature. Cycles kept them from focusing on isolated events, or from thinking that life was always progressing. (These beliefs still can be found today in indigenous cultures or their traditions.) In the eternal, recurring cycles of life, incidents and dramas were of no consequence. Humans participated in a grand circular flow of life. People lived these cycles not as humans making history, but as humans living life. Nothing happened outside of or independent of the living world. People didn't visit "nature" as we do now. It was all one life.

Minoans knew life to be abundant. Their paintings express joyful awareness that the earth gives great gifts of fertility and blesses us with its beautiful diversity of animals, flowers and plants. Every painting celebrates this rich, gorgeous bounty.

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All of this ended with the volcanic eruption. An ironic end to a culture that loved life, but also a firm teacher to those of us who hope to cling to what we have. Nearly a thousand years later, Greek civilization reached its zenith in Athens, and set the course of Western Mind that we're still dealing with today. The Greeks fell in love with themselves, with the human form, with history, with heroes. In their love of human potential, they set us on a path where we forgot that humans exist within a greater cosmos. And today, it's hard to remember what it feels like to be a beloved partner with life.

As I sat on the rim of the caldera that ended Thera life, living the good tourist life, I discovered a civilization that embodied what I know. What the Therans knew, I know—that it is possible to live and work together in ways that bring out our creativity, that inspire us to do good work, that bring more harmony and pleasure to our relationships. And I know that we get into desperate trouble, as the Greek experience teaches, when we make ourselves the only focus, when we revere heroic leaders, when we treat life as something distant from us that we ignore and occasionally visit.

The certainty of cycles, the triumph of order over chaos, the diversity born from life's creativity, the innate artistry of each of us, the enduring beauty of the human spirit—these are what I write about. From Minoan times till now, the story hasn't changed. But it is important that we reclaim it and retell it before we are swept away by eruptions of our own making.

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Margaret Wheatley and Geoff Crinean will lead a module at the 2005 Authentic Leadership Summer Program, on "Radical Leadership: Ancient Wisdom for Solving Problems and Transforming Aggression."

Ancient Thera, New Teacher

The wind working its
way through ancient
cracks and ill-fitting doors pestered
me all night.

Now it is morning and
nothing has settled down the
wind refuses to clear a space
for contemplation. This is stormy

country, lost to fire and sea, buried by meters and
meters of hard pumice rain and heavy boulders,
the volcano falling into its

fiery heart and sea blazing in to fill the steaming
crater that once was island.
Gorgeous culture ended here.

Island home to painters who knew
no restraint who took ceremonial rooms and

made them come alive with color and
form bound by no convention
strong joyful brush strokes bringing

life to barren walls on barren
land their homes painted still today
reminding us of times when

dolphins danced with fleets and
swallows swept the wild sea air
with song. Even now when

it all collapsed and 2500 years of
grief and dust had to be gently cleansed
to see their life even now Minoan joy

is here and even now their happy
life lifts my human heart above
my own ruined time and

reminds me that life can be
good even when lived in the shadow of
what must destroy it.

They knew what was coming.

Many times tremors and ash
warned them to take their
treasures and flee yet they
returned to clean and

rebuild and recreate the life they loved

and then the volcano would
have no more of them and
Earth erupted with the violence
only found deep inside
creation. All fire the

blast blew black obsidian boulders like dust,
mythic energy reminding humans
how tenderly to walk
the earth that goes from beloved
to fire when it tolerates us

no longer.

Thera, Greece. May 2004

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