

Saffron - The history of the world's most expensive spice.



The story of the miracle spice over the last 4000 years. *Crocus sativus* as the engine of an econom.

Part 1 The birth of the Saffron trade in the Meditteranean

The history of Saffron goes back many thousands of years. In caves in what is now Iraq archeologists discovered that cave dwellers have used the powerful orange colour of the Saffron stigma as component of their paint.

The first images of *Crocus sativus* Saffron flowers we know of have been found on earthenware pots in Minoan palaces. The oldest, well-known image can be seen on a pot that was made around 2000 – 1800 BC, so 3800 to 4000 years ago.



Frescoes in the Minoan palaces of Knossos on the island of Crete and Akrotiri on the island of Santorini North of Crete date from around 1650 BC. We see a goddess who is offered a sacrifice of the new harvest. Several women are harvesting Saffron on other mural paintings. Another woman uses Saffron to color her lips, possibly in preparation for a religious ritual.



A reconstruction drawing of a room in the complex of Akrotiri, where several walls had frescoes with Saffron flowers and plants on them, as shown in the following pictures.

The goddess in this scene oversees the harvesting of the Saffron. This fresco makes clear how important Saffron was to the Minoan civilization.



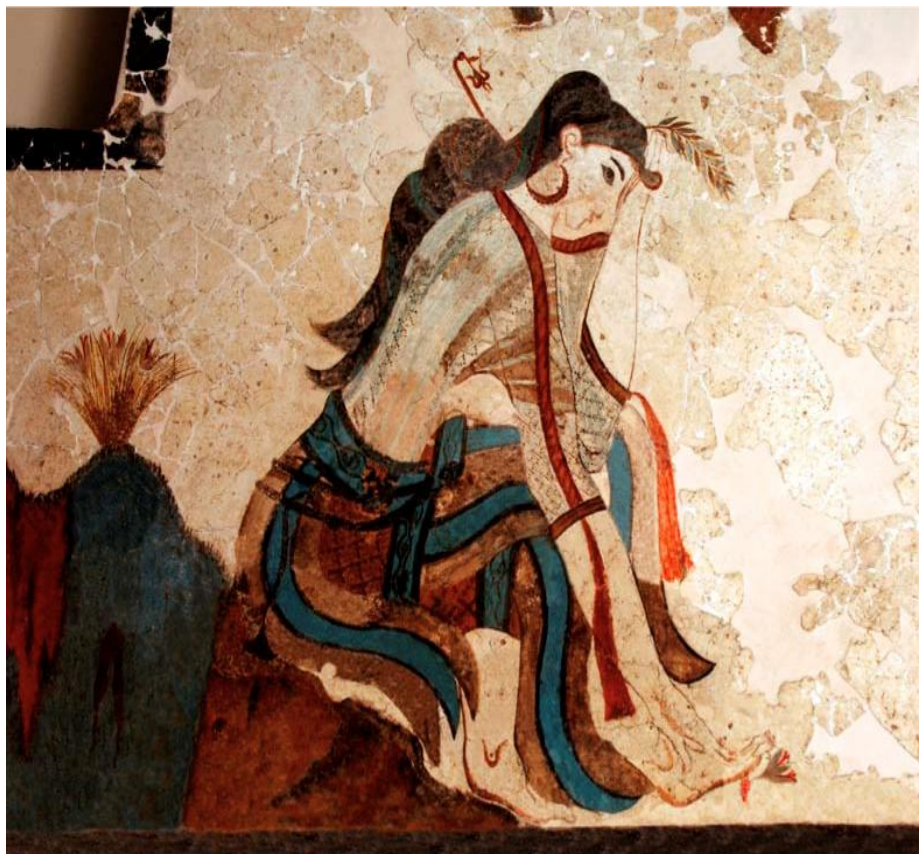


A female Saffron plucker empties a basket of freshly picked Saffron flowers. A blue monkey, representing a mythological animal, offers fresh Saffron to the goddess.

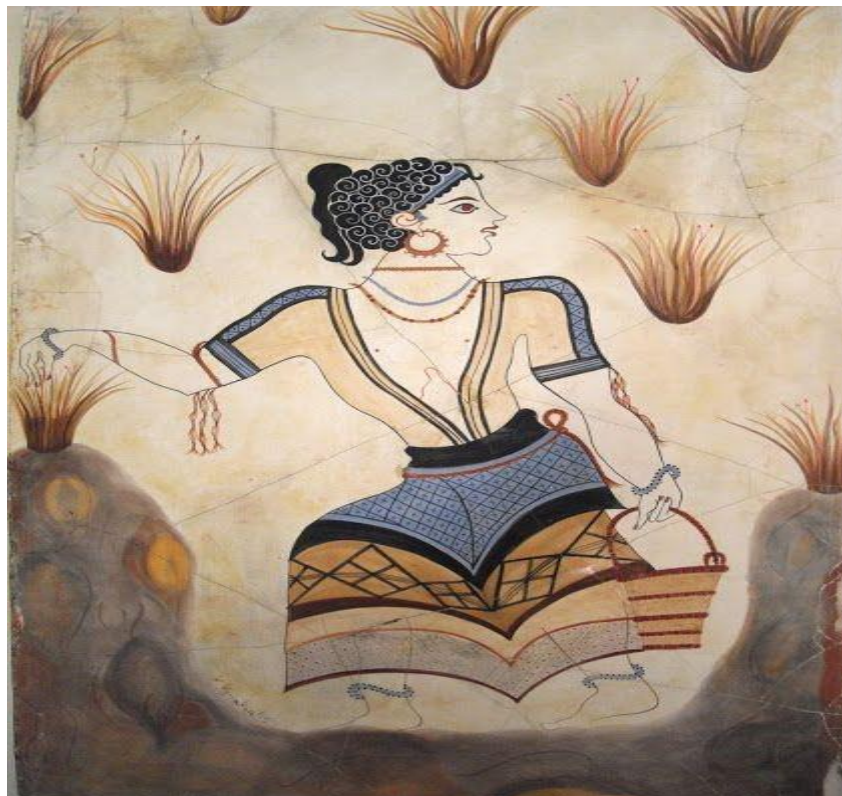




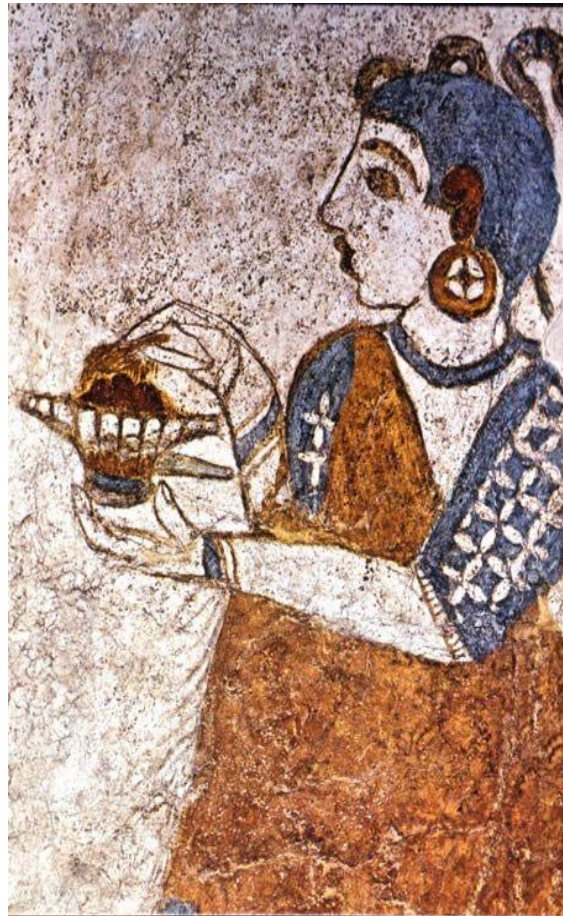
It is assumed that it is the same goddess, in this scene sitting on a rock, who is injured at her foot. Her blood runs into the Crocus flower and makes the stigma red. There might be links here with other Greek mythological stories about the origin of the *Crocus sativus*.



The following scene, called "The Saffron Harvesters", once again demonstrates the importance of Saffron on the island of Santorini to the north of Crete.



In this scene, a priestess (or maybe an "ordinary woman") holds a bowl of Saffron in front of her. The lips are coloured with Saffron, as are the ears.



Excavations in the entire area around the Mediterranean show that Saffron - along with tin - was the main trade product of the Minoan civilization. The wealth of the inhabitants of Crete and surrounding islands was therefore based for a considerable part on Saffron.

Around this a religion seems to have been developed, in which Saffron plays a central role. The religious expressions show affinity with religious rituals that were performed in Egypt. This appears among other things from many murals and other images in Egypt.














The quantities of Saffron harvested are described in detail on more and more clay tablets from a little later time. Many clay tablets have been preserved because they are unintentionally baked during fires and volcanic eruptions.

There was a considerable fleet to trade:
















Saffron was so important at that time that people everywhere depicted Saffron: on murals, on pots, bowls and vases, and on clothes. Here are some examples from different periods of the Minoan Civilization:

TABLE 1. CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CROCUS MOTIF

MM IA-MM IB	 
MM II-MM III	 
MM III	   
LM IA	  
LC I and LM IA Sprouting Crocus	 

1. Footless goblet, Knossos. Moenigiano 1991, p. 222, fig. 23:23. Courtesy British School at Athens. 2. Cup, Knossos. *PM* II.1, p. 369, fig. 205. 3. Spouted jar, Vasiliki. *PM* I, p. 184, fig. 133:h. 4. Cup, Vrokastro. Hayden 2003, fig. 3:14. Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Press. 5. Pitharaki, Phaistos. Levi 1976, pl. LXXXIII:a. Courtesy Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene. 6. Pitharaki, Phaistos. Levi 1976, pl. 205:b. Courtesy Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene. 7. Bridge-spouted jar, Kamares Cave. Dawkins and Laistner 1912-1913, pl. X, bottom. 8. Globular rhyton, Phaistos. Levi 1976, pl. LXXXIV:c. Courtesy Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene. 9. Cup, Priniatikos Pyrgos. Betancourt 1983, fig. 7:28. Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Press. 10. Sherd, Zakros. Popham 1967, pl. 78:d, detail. Courtesy British School at Athens. 11. Sherd, South House, Knossos. Mountjoy 2003, p. 71, fig. 4:9. Courtesy British School at Athens. 12. Kymbe, West House, Akrotiri. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 3266. *Tðesa* VI, pl. 80. Courtesy Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού / Υπαιείο Αρχαιολογικών Πόρων. 13. Rhyton, Palaikastro. Sackett and Popham 1970, p. 218, fig. 9, left. Courtesy British School at Athens.

TABLE 1—Continued

<p>LM IB Crocus and Festoons</p>	 <p>14</p>	 <p>15</p>	 <p>16</p>
<p>LM IB Wavy Crocus</p>	 <p>17</p>	 <p>18</p>	 <p>19</p>
<p>LM IB Detached Crocus</p>	 <p>20</p>	 <p>21</p>	
<p>LM II</p>	 <p>22</p>	 <p>23</p>	 <p>24</p>
<p>LM II and Linear B</p>	 <p>25</p>	 <p>26</p>	

14. Jar, Tyllissos. *PM* IV.1, p. 286, fig. 220. 15. Conical rhyton, Palaikastro. Dawkins 1902–1903, p. 311, fig. 9. 16. Sherd, Kythera. Coldstream and Huxley 1972, pl. 54:164. Courtesy British School at Athens. 17. Sherds, Kythera. Coldstream and Huxley 1972, pl. 33:8, 9. Courtesy British School at Athens. 18. Cup, Aya Irini, Kos. Caskey 1972, pl. 95:H19. Courtesy British School at Athens. 19. Alabaster fragment, Knossos. *PM* II.2, p. 470, fig. 276:k. 20. Sherds, Kythera. Coldstream and Huxley 1972, pl. 33:3, 4. Courtesy British School at Athens. 21. Cup, Palaikastro. Sackett and Popham 1970, p. 218, fig. 9, right. Courtesy British School at Athens. 22. Cup, Unexplored Mansion, Knossos. Popham 1984, p. 161, pl. 148:1. Courtesy British School at Athens. 23. Sherd, Unexplored Mansion, Knossos. Popham 1984, pl. 96:b. Courtesy British School at Athens. 24. Detail of pxis, Unexplored Mansion, Knossos. Popham 1984, pl. 155:1. Courtesy British School at Athens. 25. Sherd, Unexplored Mansion, Knossos. Popham 1984, pl. 96:a. Courtesy British School at Athens. 26. Linear B tablet Np 85, Knossos. Chadwick et al. 1986, p. 44. Courtesy Cambridge University Press.