

The churches of Kastro Apalirou

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Abstract

Πριν από τη διεξαγωγή της πρόσφατης έρευνας πεδίου στο Κάστρο Απαλίου, μόνο μια εκκλησία, αυτή του Αγίου Γεωργίου, ήταν γνωστή στη θέση. Έχουμε πλέον καταγράψει και τεκμηριώσει επτά εκκλησίες, τόσο εντός όσο και πέριξ του οικισμού. Στο παρόν άρθρο παρουσιάζονται και εξετάζονται τρεις εξ αυτών. Πρόκειται για το συγκρότημα του Αγίου Γεωργίου στο βόρειο τμήμα του οικισμού, μια μικρή δίκλιτη εκκλησία κοντά στη νοτιότερη κορυφή του Κάστρου Απαλίου και μια μεγάλη εκκλησία, στα νότια του οικισμού, εκτός των τειχών. Η εκκλησία του Αγίου Γεωργίου είναι μια σύνθετη κατασκευή, με αρκετές προσθήκες και μετασκευές. Η χρονολογική σχέση ανάμεσα στα διάφορα τμήματα του κτίσματος δεν είναι σαφής, λόγω κυρίως της συσσώρευσης υλικού προερχόμενου από την κατάρρευση του ναού, γεγονός που δυσχεραίνει τη λεπτομερειακή ανάλυσή του. Τόσο η πολυπλοκότητα, όσο και το μέγεθος του ναού, καθιστούν τον Άγιο Γεώργιο ως μια από τις σημαντικότερες εκκλησίες της Νάξου. Όσον αφορά στην μικρή, δίκλιτη εκκλησία, η κεραμεική που προήλθε από την ανασκαφή του 2015-2016 υποδηλώνει μια σαφέστερη χρονολόγηση του ναού, η κατασκευή του οποίου ανάγεται στην χρονική περίοδο από τα μέσα του 6ου αιώνα έως τα τέλη του 7ου αιώνα. Η εκκλησία εγκαταλείφθηκε στον ύστερο 12ο ή στον πρώιμο 13ο αιώνα. Η μελέτη της μεγάλης εκκλησίας που βρίσκεται εκτός των τειχών του οικισμού είναι δυσχερής, λόγω της συσσώρευσης οικοδομικού υλικού προερχόμενου από την κατάρρευση τμημάτων του κτίσματος εντός αυτού, γεγονός που δεν επιτρέπει την πλήρη ανάγνωση της κάτοψής του. Πρόκειται για μονόκλιτη εκκλησία με προσκτίσματα στη βόρεια πλευρά της. Μια οικία με εσωτερική στέρνα βρίσκεται ακριβώς κάτω από την εκκλησία προς τα δυτικά. Παραμένει άγνωστο το εάν τα κτίσματα συνδέονται μεταξύ τους και εάν μπορούν να ερμηνευθούν ως μοναστήρι. Οι τρεις αυτές εκκλησίες διαφέρουν μεταξύ τους ως προς την κάτοψη και το μέγεθος, δίνουν όμως μαζί μια καλή εικόνα της εκκλησιαστικής αρχιτεκτονικής στον οικισμό του Κάστρου Απαλίου.

Introduction

During the recent survey and documentation work in and around Kastro Apalirou, seven churches have been documented: two inside and five outside the walls in the immediate vicinity of the town. This article will present what we now know about three of these churches and their immediate environment: the large complex of Agios Georgios; a small double-aisled church inside the walls at Kastro Apalirou; and a large extramural church to the southwest of the only gate to the town.¹ The three churches

1. The other extramural churches form part of J. Crow and S. Turner's current survey of the lower settlement known as Kato Choria.

discussed here are not only different in location, size and building technique, they have also been documented in quite different ways. Work at Agios Georgios was carried out according to normal archaeological documentation practices on standing building remains, while a small-scale excavation was conducted in the small double-aisled church. It has not yet been possible to study the large church outside the town in detail, mainly because building debris covers the entire building, making any examination of the masonry, mortar and building technique difficult. These different strategies mean that whilst we can propose a date for both the construction and collapse of the small double-aisled church, we can only give a relative dating for the different phases of the Agios Georgios complex, and none for the extramural church. Even though numerous questions still remain concerning all three churches, the following description and discussion will hopefully make these important monuments of Kastro Apalirou more accessible to the scholarly community.

The Agios Georgios complex

The largest and most visible of the churches in and around Kastro Apalirou is undoubtedly the large complex known traditionally under the name of Agios Georgios (**fig. 1**). There are no historical sources for this name, but popular tradition holds that the patron saint was St. George; as one of the most important military saints, such a dedication is certainly appropriate for the main church of fortified town. As one of the best preserved structures in Kastro Apalirou, the church of Agios Georgios was known, and partly studied, before the Norwegian project. It is mentioned briefly by Mastoropoulos² and it has also been discussed more recently in more detail by Aslanidis.³

Agios Georgios and its setting

This church complex is located in the northern part of Kastro Apalirou, which we believe was divided from the rest of the settlement by a series of cisterns in the west and perhaps also by a small, and not very well-preserved perimeter wall to the south. The main entrance to this area was through an opening between two of the large cisterns in the west, which could perhaps be closed by a gate and therefore function as an inner wall of defence. Through this, one would have seen the western entrance to the church complex to the southeast, which is now completely collapsed. Apart from the complex of Agios Georgios, there are few well-preserved buildings in this part of Kastro Apalirou. There are, however, two freestanding cisterns west of the church, two small cisterns to the south and three to the north that probably point to more buildings than are preserved now. A small cistern adjacent to the southern wall of the church complex, as well as the peculiar cylindrical and very small cistern on the southeastern corner of the main apse of Agios Georgios most likely collected water from the roof of the church itself. It is possible that the two cisterns to the west⁴ and the cistern in the small bath house right to the west of the church complex were also fed by rainwater from the roof of the church.

The northeastern part of Kastro Apalirou is the only area inside the town with a reasonable extent of level ground. This was partly accomplished by levelling out the crest running N-S along the summit of the site and partly by filling in the areas towards the fortifications to the east. In a collapsed section of the fortifications to the northeast of the Agios Georgios complex we have observed how the interior

2. Mastoropoulos (2006), pp.152-53.

3. Aslanidis (2014), pp. 52-59.

4. Aslanidis (2014), fig. 13 reconstructs one of these cisterns as forming part of the narthex of the church. This is possible, but not certain.

face of the wall was filled with soil to create a platform, but we cannot be certain that this was done before the construction of the church. It should perhaps be assumed that this levelling of the area was carried out after the fortifications were constructed to create the necessary space around the major church of Kastro Apalirou.

Structure of the complex

Agios Georgios is composed of a cluster of structures and the relative chronology between the different parts is not completely clear, mainly due to building debris covering the floor surface (**fig. 2**). The entrance to the church from the west is almost completely collapsed, making a reconstruction difficult, and for this reason we cannot for example be certain whether the church had a narthex or not.⁵ The main part of the complex is a double-aisled church (Building A-B), with arcades separating the main aisle to the south from the narrow northern aisle (B).⁶ Another church, or chapel, is located immediately to the south (Building F, width 5.00 m, length 13.50 m). It is a single-aisled structure, located at a slightly higher level than the double-aisled church to the north. To the north of the double-aisled church two chapels (buildings C and D) at an oblique angle were added at a later date and an inserted doorway in the north wall of the double-aisled church gave access to these two later chapels. Finally, a barrel-vaulted room was constructed to the north of the apses of the double-aisled church (Building E).

The Norwegian team, in an earlier publication, classified some of the main masonry types encountered in Kastro Apalirou.⁷ The masonry in the Agios Georgios complex mainly present three groups, namely:

1. Uncoursed and undressed stones with extensive use of smaller, flat stones and tiles for support and stability. The stones are often worked to form a fair faced outer surface (**fig. 4**).
2. This type is in many ways similar to the preceding one, but it is randomly coursed and has tiles replacing or supplementing the use of flat stones in between (**fig. 5**).
3. Larger and more regularly hewn stones, particularly in corners and gateways with little visible mortar on the surface of the walls (**fig. 6**).

It should be added that mortar is almost always used sparingly at Kastro Apalirou, for quite obvious reasons; sand and lime would have had to be transported to the mountaintop and water must also have been a valuable commodity. Clay and earth are used also as bonding material in many structures, and sometimes the outer layer is mortar but the inner fill is earth/clay.⁸ In Agios Georgios, however, mortar has been used more extensively than in many of the houses in the town and particularly in masonry type 1 and 2, while it has been used only in the core of the walls in type 3. Masonry types 1-2 are mainly present in buildings A,B, E and F, while the last type is characteristic of buildings C and D.

Building phases and relative chronology

A detailed relative chronology of the Agios Georgios complex is not possible, since the structures have never been thoroughly cleared and building debris removed. It is thus impossible to establish the relationship between the double-aisled main church (Building A-B) and the chapel to the south (Building F), since they do not share a common wall and the west entrances of both buildings have

5. The existence of a narthex is suggested in the reconstruction by Aslanidis (2014), fig. 15, but it is not certain.

6. Total length preserved is 20.50 m, the width of the main aisle is 4.00 m and the width of the narrow north aisle is 2.60 m.

7. Hill, Roland, Ødegård (2017).

8. See Hill in this volume.

collapsed (**fig. 3**). We can only assume that at a later stage they were connected by a stairway in the western part of the complex. Building F bears clear signs of being rebuilt by a strengthening of the inner walls, probably connected to the insertion of an apse in the east and the construction of a barrel vault and a dome over the central part of the aisle. The lower part of the vault is visible on both the southern and northern walls of the building and springs from a horizontal layer of regular pieces of slate.

Also the main part of the complex, Building A-B, the double-aisled central church, shows signs of reconstruction, modification or repair. This is evident in the insertion of piers along both the southern and northern walls of the main aisle. These piers are in two or possibly three different phases and are probably connected to different roof constructions or repairs (**fig. 4**). It is possible that the interior was once covered with a barrel vault, which at a later stage was reconstructed with a dome over the central part of the aisle.⁹ In one of these roof reconstructions, arches were inserted between the main aisle and the northern narrow aisle (**fig. 5**). These arches were constructed with far more use of broken tiles in the masonry than in the rest of the building. The northern narrow aisle (2.60 m wide) also shows signs of repair or reconstruction through the addition of six corresponding piers, presumably inserted to strengthen a new barrel-vaulted roof.

Two chapels, C and D were added at a certain stage to the main complex, with communication through a doorway in the northwest wall of the double-aisled church. As noted above, the building technique is different, with consistent use of larger and more regularly hewn blocks in corners and gateways and mainly in alternate directions, as headers and stretchers (**fig. 6**). The two chapels are joined to the main complex at an oblique angle, presumably because a rocky outcrop to the north and the general topography made a regular plan difficult. Both chapels had apses, the northern one clearly inserted at a later stage. There are no internal piers in the two chapels and they were presumably roofed by barrel vaults.

Finally, there remains Building E in the northeast corner of the complex. The function of this room, which is situated at a lower level and only preserved to about 1 meter in height, is unclear. The external walls are quite massive, almost 1 meter wide, and enough is preserved to suggest that the building was covered by a barrel vault. This vault probably carried an external stairway which gave access to a doorway in the northeast corner of the double-aisled church.

The eastern exterior face of the complex is reasonably well preserved, with the imposing central apse with its two large windows. Unfortunately they have both collapsed, but their lower width seems to be around 0.80 m. The adjacent apse of the smaller, north aisle was clearly constructed at the same time, since some larger stones in the masonry project into the next apse, but the single window in the north apse is smaller, with an exterior lower width of about 0.40 m. Seen from the east, the exterior face of the church actually appears as a three-aisled basilica, since a small, half-circular structure has been inserted on the southeast corner (**fig. 7**). This is undoubtedly a cistern due to the presence of reddish hydraulic mortar on the inside, and must have been fed from the roof of the double-aisled church. The shape of the cistern is peculiar, and how water flowed out of the cistern and to where is unknown. The visual appearance of the eastern end of the church may also have been of importance and may be the reason behind this peculiar addition to the building.

A detailed chronology of the Agios Georgios complex will depend on further work and the clearing and removal of collapse and building debris. Comparisons with the plans of other churches on Naxos are not easy to make, since the complexity and size of the Agios Georgios complex is unusual. If the double-aisled church was originally preceded by a narthex, the E-W length would have been around 20 meters, while the average length of Byzantine churches on Naxos is between 6-8 meters. Even a large church like Protothronos at Chalki, believed to be an episcopal church, has a length of 14.70 meters,

9. Aslanidis (2014), p. 52 and fig. 18, mentions finds of voussoirs of volcanic stone from the dome.

making it considerably smaller than Agios Georgios.¹⁰ Similarly, the very different Agios Mamas, associated with the 10th-century Bishop Leo, measures 9.60 x 8.00 m.¹¹ Clearly, the Agios Georgios complex stands out in both size and complexity from these and other churches on Naxos, showing the economic and political importance of Kastro Apalirou. Based on comparison with other, better dated churches on Naxos, an initial construction in the 7th century seems likely, with further rebuilding and additions in the 8th-10th centuries.¹²

The small double-aisled church

During the first seasons of archaeological documentation of the visible structures of Kastro Apalirou between 2010 and 2014, a small double-aisled church was discovered near the south summit of the urban area. The structure was not initially identified as a church, since the building was completely filled by debris and soil, but during a particularly dry autumn in 2013, two apses were clearly visible as soil marks. On removal of vegetation and closer inspection, it was possible to suggest a plan for the building, with two aisles ending in apses of about the same size and a probable narthex at the western entrance (**fig. 8 and fig. 9c**).

The Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades and the Norwegian part of the Kastro Apalirou project decided in late 2014 that a small-scale excavation could be attempted at the site. Excavation was mainly undertaken for two reasons. Firstly, we needed information on building phases and absolute chronology, and secondly we wanted a suitable test-case for undertaking the first excavation inside Kastro Apalirou, which is a challenging site where all equipment, food and water would have to be carried up every day, finds brought down to the Museum in Chora and soil and building debris deposited safely and inconspicuously near the excavation. Excavation began in the spring of 2015 and concluded in the summer of 2016 with a total of about 15 working days. Because of the small team involved (4 persons) it was decided to concentrate on the north aisle, which was cleared down to the floor level in about two-thirds of the room (**fig. 9b and fig. 9b**).¹³ Although we only obtained information for the north aisle, an area in front of the south aisle was also cleaned and it is clear that we are dealing with two separate structures, constructed side by side and with no internal communication. There are several examples of double-aisled churches on Naxos, but usually there are doorways or arches linking them, like Agios Georgios discussed above, Agios Georgios Lathrinou or Agia Kyriaki.¹⁴ There are a few examples of chapels side by side without communication, such as the two small churches near the Cheimarros tower, which are also similar in size to our church, but this is not the norm.¹⁵ It should be added that the relative chronological relationship between the two aisles, or chapels, at Kastro Apalirou is not clear.

Excavation focused on removing the collapsed roof and walls of the church that had filled the remaining walls to a height of 1.4 m above floor level. The nature of the collapse material was chaotic and suggests that the building fell into ruin over time and did not collapse in one single event and in one single way: the roof material, mainly irregularly hewn local stone, in many cases still preserved in sections with mortar, was in places the top layer in the collapse, and in other places the bottom layer,

10. See Panayotidi and Konstantellou, this volume.

11. Aslanidis (2014), pp. 191-200; Mastoropoulos (2006), pp. 113-15.

12. Aslanidis (2014), pp. 2-59; see also Aslanidis this volume with comparative scale plans of the Naxian churches.

13. The following is based on reports, plans and photographs by David Hill and Hallvard Indgerd, as well as personal inspection.

14. Agios Georgios Lathrinou: Aslanidis (2014), pp. 218-22; Agia Kyriaki in Apeiranthos: Aslanidis (2014), pp. 151-58.

15. It should also be said that the small double church at Pyrgos Cheimarrou was constructed inside an earlier, and far larger, Early Christian church, see Ohnesorg (2012), pp. 104-105.

and no single direction of fall was prevalent. Since there were no clear stratigraphical divisions in the fill, it was all excavated as one stratigraphic unit, with the exception of the soil immediately above the floor level, which was excavated as another unit, below the collapse but above the floor. Some fragments of marble blocks and finely cut pumice stones with plaster still attached, presumably from the apse semi-dome, were also recovered from the fill during the excavation. The marble blocks were clearly *spolia*, including several fragments of door sills, which must have been carried up to Kastro Apalirou from an abandoned settlement on the plain below.

The floor level consisted of clay, flat stones and bedrock, and aimed simply to create a fairly level surface. This level was reached in about 2/3 of the building, the rest remains unexcavated. There are two corresponding recesses in the wall on the south and north side. Mortared benches were inserted in these recesses, but no further refinements of the inner building have been encountered. The southern part of the apse was exposed and a fine, but thin mortared surface appeared, but there are no signs that it had ever been decorated or painted.

Chronology and collapse

The presence of mid 6th-late 7th century AD ceramics as building material points to a construction of the small church during these centuries and consequently at an early period of the town itself. The 11th or 12th century glazed pottery on the floor level, on the other hand, gives a clear *terminus post quem* for the collapse of the church, and shows a probable use-life of more than 500 years. The two pedestal vessels in glass and glazed white ware, both of which could be either lamps or chalices, may well belong to the equipment of the church.¹⁶

Interestingly, a number of ovicaprid bones were also found on the floor. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that the building went out of use before it collapsed, providing shelter for animals. This is indeed the situation even today; carcasses and bones of sheep are common enough in many of the still-standing cisterns at Kastro Apalirou. If this interpretation of the bone finds is accepted, we may not only assume that the church went out of active use, but that the area was completely abandoned well before the building collapsed.

The newly discovered extra-mural church

As fieldwork expanded beyond the fortifications of Kastro Apalirou to include the terraces and associated structures on the slopes to the west, remains of a church were found outside and about 120 meters to the southwest of the only gate in the fortifications. Even though only a superficial documentation and mapping has been undertaken so far, the remains are important for their size, character and particularly for their close proximity to the fortifications.

The church sits on a long and distinct terrace wall that runs N-S along almost the entire hill below the fortifications. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this terrace carried a section of the main route to the gate of the town, and even though no traces of the road itself are evident today, it is likely that a route branched off just outside the gate to reach the church along the terrace. The location is in itself interesting. While the town is located on a steep, narrow ridge running N-S, the west slope is so steep that any large buildings oriented E-W would be impossible. But the slope is less steep on the southwest shoulder of the hill. Here it was possible to quarry into the hillside and construct a terrace that could

16. For documentation and a discussion of the finds from the excavation of the double church, see Indgjerd in this volume.

accommodate a large church oriented E-W. Building debris and vegetation covers the building so only what can be seen on the surface has been documented.

The main part of the structure is possible to identify as a single-aisled church with a wide narthex to the west,¹⁷ (**fig. 9**) but there are remains of attached buildings to the north, and there is also a separate structure with a cistern to the west on a slightly lower level, buttressed by another terrace running northwards and parallel to the terrace on which the church was constructed. We cannot at this stage be certain whether these different structures are functionally and chronologically connected, but together they do form a nucleus of buildings immediately outside the walls.

The church itself is preceded by a wide narthex, so much wider than the aisle that we originally thought this was a three-aisled basilica. The large terrace that runs in front of the narthex created an even bigger platform around the front of the church, which must have been an imposing and highly visible building seen from below (**fig. 10**). We have no indications yet for the interior organization of the narthex such as columns or arches.

The church itself is a wide single-aisled structure, 9.50 x 3.50 m, with two massive piers on the interior (**fig. 11**). As the eastern part of the church is filled with a greater quantity of debris than the western, we cannot yet know whether there were two more corresponding piers further east. If this was the case, one might posit a central dome, such as in the church of Agios Ioannis Adissarou around 2 km further west. This is perhaps likely, since the two visible piers would otherwise be difficult to understand structurally. There are, in fact, several features in common with Agios Ioannis Adissarou, such as the ratio width to length, although this newly discovered church is slightly larger.¹⁸ Only few traces of the apse remain above ground, the exposed sections present a slight curve upwards and thus we may assume that the floor level must be considerably lower down in this eastern part of the building. The apse is without clear indications of mortar or stucco. There seem to be remains of an opening towards the north adjacent to the apse. This opening gave access to another structure which can only be traced in outline, but which definitely had a very small apse on its east end, towards the church. Furthermore, a small square cistern can be discerned on the northeast corner of this structure. There also seems to be a square room to the west, aligned with the church. Both rooms to the north of the church are very poorly preserved on the surface; we have no certain indication of the thickness of the walls nor how the rooms communicated. We do not even know where the main entrance to these rooms was.

The structure situated slightly lower to the west is composed of a solidly built rectangular building with an attached rectangular cistern to the west. The plan has a lot in common with the houses of Kastro Apalirou. Both this possible house and the church were evidently made in conjunction with the large terraces leading northwards, but we do not yet understand the relationship between these different structures. The building technique is, however, similar in all structures. The walls are generally very solidly constructed, with large and well-hewn blocks and mortar mainly on the interior of the walls. The masonry can be compared with type 3 described above in connection with Agios Georgios (**fig. 6**), used for the later phases of the church complex there.

The combination of what could be a dwelling and the church with its attached buildings could perhaps point to a monastic complex, but this remains uncertain until further documentation and studies are undertaken. The very wide narthex (9.00 meters) covers not only the entrance to the church (**fig. 12**), but also conceals from below the adjacent rooms to the north of the church. This suggests that there was a unified design and that the plan deliberately exploited the imposing terrace and lofty location of the church.

17. The aisle is 9.50 m long and 3.50 m wide (internal measurements), while the narthex is 9 m wide and 2.00 m long.

18. Agios Ioannis Adissarou measures 2.70 m x 7.85 m, see Aslanidis (2014), p. 163.

The three churches discussed in this chapter present a substantial addition to our information on Kastro Apalirou. Agios Georgios was clearly the main ecclesiastical centre of the town and may have been part of an administrative seat in the northern section of the town. The sheer size of the main building, the double-aisled church, is a good indication of its importance as the primary church for a sizeable population, and the other parts of the complex may for instance have been associated with patronage from the elite. The excavation of the small church in the southern part of the town is interesting primarily for the resulting chronology, which gives us evidence for the construction, abandonment and subsequent collapse of an important building such as a church. This is the first structure of Kastro Apalirou that can be firmly dated and as such has important consequences for our understanding of the establishment and planning of the whole town. It must be assumed, for instance, that the quarrying of the hill and the general layout of the town with its terraces would have preceded the actual construction of buildings such as this. And finally, the newly discovered extramural church is an important link between the fortified town of Kastro Apalirou and the lower town.¹⁹ Its proximity to the walls, as well as its size and associated buildings, shows us that the suburban area of Kastro Apalirou was an important and integrated part of this extraordinary Byzantine site.

19. Where up to five churches have been identified, see article by Manolopoulou *et al.* in this volume.

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Figure 1. Agios Georgios complex seen from the south.

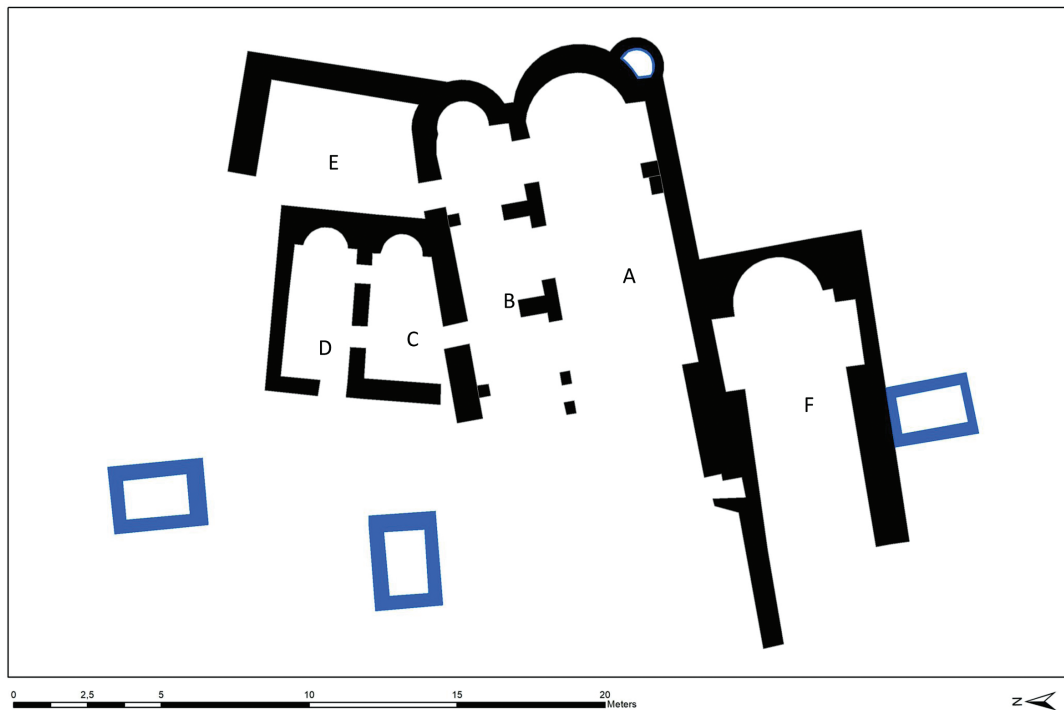


Figure 2. Ground plan of Agios Georgios complex.



Figure 3. Northern wall of Building E (left) and southern wall of Building A (right).



Figure 4. Piers inserted on the southern wall of Building A, probably connected to rebuilding the roof.



Figure 5. Arch inserted into the main aisle of Building A.



Figure 6. Northwestern corner of Agios Georgios complex (buildings D and C).



Figure 7. Eastern facade of Agios Georgios seen from the south, with the small cistern in the foreground.



Figure 8. The small double-aisled church and its location near the southern peak of Kastro Apalirou after excavation in 2016 (photo: H. Indgjerd).

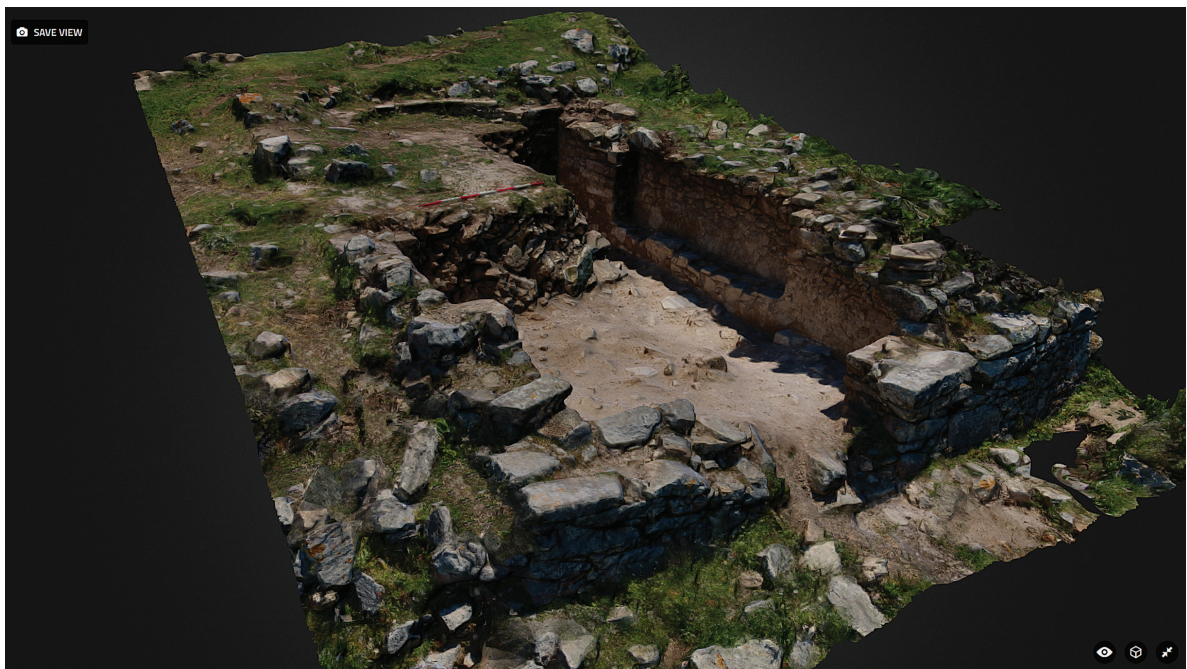


Figure 9. 3D photogrammetric view of the partially excavated northern section smaller church.



Figure 9a.
Photogrammetric plan of the excavated northern section of the small double-aisled church after excavation in 2016 (by H. Indgjerd).

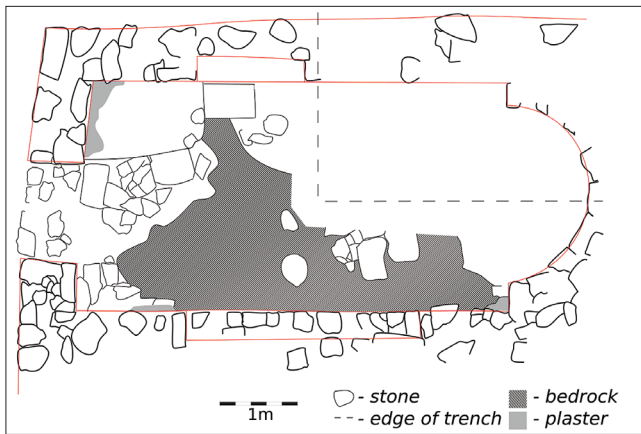


Figure 9b.
The excavated northern section of the small double-aisled church in plan (by H. Indgjerd).

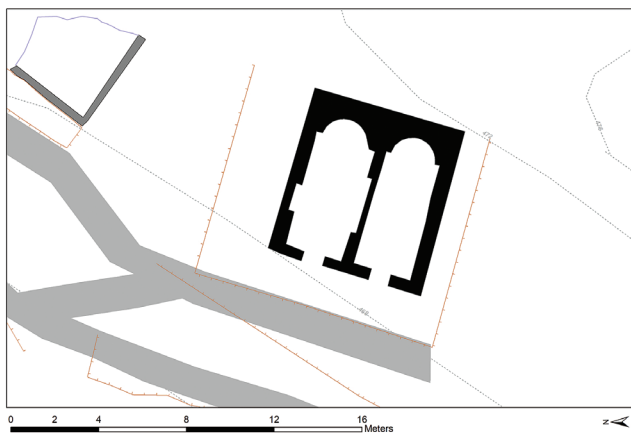


Figure 9c.
Plan of the small double-aisled church as surveyed before excavation.

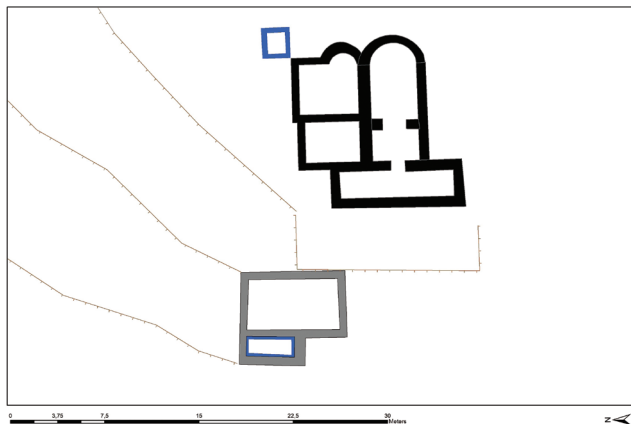


Figure 10.
Plan of extramural church complex.



Figure 11.
Terrace supporting house with cistern, below, and narthex of church, above.



Figure 12.
Main aisle of extramural church.



Figure 13.
Entrance to the main aisle of the extramural church, with remains of the narthex in the foreground.