

Island responses in the Byzantine Aegean: Naxos under the lens of current archaeological research

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Abstract

Η ιδέα της «νησιωτικότητας» και η ιστορική πορεία των νησιών του Αιγαίου αποτελεί σημαντικό πεδίο έρευνας κατά την τελευταία δεκαετία. Η Ο βαθμός της «απομόνωσης» νησιωτικών κοινοτήτων ή της συμμετοχής τους σε εμπορικά και πολιτισμικά δίκτυα αποτελούν ενδιαφέροντα θέματα διερεύνησης για κάθε περίοδο. Η ιστορική πορεία και η τύχη των νησιών του Αιγαίου κατά την πρώιμη Βυζαντινή περίοδο, ή κατά τους λεγόμενους «μεταβατικούς» αιώνες (7ος-10ος αι. μ.Χ.), δείχνει ότι τα νησιά του Αιγαίου, κυρίως οι Κυκλάδες, αποτέλεσαν νοητό σύνορο μεταξύ δύο μεγάλων δυνάμεων: των Βυζαντινών και των Αράβων. Σκοπός του παρόντος άρθρου είναι η μελέτη αυτής της περιφερειακής γεωγραφικής ζώνης μεταξύ Βυζαντινών και Αράβων, προκειμένου να διερευνηθεί τις δυναμικές, την προσαρμογή, τις ταυτότητες και θέματα πολιτισμικού υβριδισμού νησιωτικών κοινοτήτων στη μακρά τους διάρκεια (*longue durée*), στο ιστορικό και τοπικό τους πλαίσιο. Αξιολογώντας το διαθέσιμο αρχαιολογικό υλικό από τη Νάξο, επιχειρείται η διερεύνηση της πολιτισμικής έκφρασης των Κυκλαδιτών και ο βαθμός επιρροής τους από το Βυζαντινό κέντρο της Κωνσταντινούπολης και τις υπόλοιπες Λατινικές κτήσεις στο Αιγαίο και την Ανατολή. Η αρχαιολογία του τοπίου, τεκμήρια για την οικιστική εξέλιξη, όψεις του υλικού πολιτισμού (όπως μνημεία και κεραμικά ευρήματα) και δείγματα μνημειακής τέχνης από τη Νάξο, αξιολογούνται προκειμένου να διερευνηθεί η δυναμική, η προσαρμογή και η διαμόρφωση νησιωτικών ταυτοτήτων στο πλαίσιο των πολιτικο-οικονομικών συνθηκών που διαμορφώνονται από τον 7ο ως το 13ο αιώνα στο Αιγαίο. Όπως καταδεικνύει το ίδιο το διαθέσιμο υλικό, τόσο η Νάξος, όσο και άλλα νησιά των Κυκλάδων, χωρίς εμφανείς απευθείας σχέσεις με διαδοχικά αυτοκρατορικά κέντρα, κατέστησαν περιοχές διαπολιτισμικών επαφών και ανταλλαγών παρά πεδία διαμάχης μεταξύ ανταγωνιστικών ομάδων και αυτοκρατοριών (π.χ. Βυζαντινών, Αράβων, Λατίνων) από την περίοδο της Ύστερης Αρχαιότητας (5ος-μέσα 7ου αι.), στον πρώιμο Βυζαντινό Μεσαίωνα (ύστερος 7ος-μέσα 10ου αι.), τους μέσους Βυζαντινούς χρόνους (ύστερος 10ος- πρώιμος 13ος αι.) και την περίοδο της Λατινοκρατίας (13ος-14ος αι.).

Introduction

The Mediterranean seascape comprises islands that are regarded as a coherent human environment.¹ The reference to the Aegean Sea in the Ottoman period as Adalar Denizi or Sea of Islands illustrates this point in the best possible way.² The concept of insularity can be examined both as a world of isolation and as

1. Braudel (1972), pp. 149-50.

2. Bostan (2000), pp. 93-98; Constantakopoulou (2007), p. 1.

one of integration, that is, both as environments separated and bordered by sea in the Braudelian sense of the word, and as stepping stones' of inter-regional and inter-cultural contact between neighbouring lands and empires.³ The definition of 'isolation' may have been experienced differently between islands, although it is doubtful that complete isolation was ever felt in the Aegean Sea (**fig. 1**).⁴

The geographical distinction between Mainland Greece and the Aegean islands or between islands and island-groups did not necessarily exist in the mentality of medieval islanders, since political boundaries kept changing over time. Larger islands in the Cyclades such as Naxos and Paros, for instance, were important city-states during the Classical period whereas they were perceived as islands of little significance within the vast Byzantine or Ottoman Empire. Nearly all imperial or colonial powers (to a greater or lesser extent) left their mark on the island landscapes and townscapes, visual art and material culture.⁵ Other large islands, such as Euboea, Chios, Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus, played a key role in the expansion of colonial and imperial power during the Byzantine, Crusader and Ottoman periods; the formation of at least religious identities can be read through the distinctive architectural stamp left by successive powers and empires. Crete, for example, was chosen by the Arabs as their Aegean base of operations; Rhodes prospered by becoming one of the main ports of Aegean commerce under the Hospitaller Knights of St. John; the history of contemporary Judaism may have been different if Naxos had eventually housed the Jewish Diaspora in the 16th century according to Joseph Nasi's plan.⁶

Islands, especially those in the Aegean, are reported to have suffered hostile enemy attacks from the sea on repeated occasions. The Arabs are said to have ravaged the Aegean throughout the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries in their attempt to expand their empire along the Mediterranean coasts. The Latins conquered the islands in the early 13th century in order to establish a colonial and commercial empire and control maritime routes. Islands, however, could also be perceived as territories of 'safety', away from the centre and the oppression of empires.⁷ Michael Choniates chose the island of Keos as his place of self-exile and retreat in the early 13th century, close enough to Attica for him to supervise the affairs of his diocese but at the same time far enough for him to continue his education without the intrusion of political affairs raised by the centre.⁸ Specific Aegean islands were reserved by the Byzantine authority as the destination par excellence for political exiles from the 8th to the 12th century, namely Samothrace, Thasos, Lesbos, Rhodes, Tenedos, Chios, Samos, and Kos.⁹ According to Christie Constantakopoulou, lack of any reference to the Cyclades in this list of prison islands serves as evidence for the supposition that the Cyclades acted as 'the frontier between the Arab threat and the world of Byzantine sovereignty, and did not fit exactly the profile of islands under central control'.¹⁰

It is within such peripheral or buffer zones that this contribution examines the dynamics, responses, identities and issues of cultural hybridism of island communities within their individual local and historical contexts, taking a *longue durée* stance. Using Naxos as a case-study, this paper focuses on the Aegean periphery in order to observe the degree to which islanders took on the identity of Byzantine and Latin centres respectively and how far they were integrated into the imperial constructs.¹¹ Landscapes and settlement research, aspects

3. Braudel (1972), p. 150; Malamut (1988), p. 10; Constantakopoulou (2007), pp. 2-3.

4. Kolodny (1974), p. 134.

5. Chaniotis (2008), pp. 83-105; Georgopoulou (2008), pp. 107-22; Anastasopoulos (2008), pp. 123-36.

6. Christides (1984), pp. 105-6; Luttrell (1978), pp. 198-201; Sarris (1990); Stancioiu (2009); Vionis (2012), pp. 45-46.

7. Constantakopoulou (2007), pp. 119-20.

8. Angold (1995), pp. 207-10; Kaldellis (2009), p. 145.

9. Malamut (1988), p. 175.

10. Constantakopoulou (2007), p. 133.

11. Some of the data and results discussed here derive either from my published work, or are the result of collaborative efforts with various individuals and institutions, to all of whom I am most grateful. I am indebted to Dr Ch. Pennas (former director of the 2nd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities), D. Chatzilazarou, M. Vogkli and M. Tsafou (archaeologists, Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades), with whom I collaborated in the framework of my part-time employment in the Hellenic Ministry

of material culture (such as buildings and ceramics) and the visual arts on Naxos are evaluated in order to examine and appreciate the dynamics, local responses and negotiation of cultural identities in a continuously changing political, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic local environment. As will become clear through the material evidence briefly presented and discussed below, Naxos, with no obvious direct relations with the successive centres of imperial power, became a zone of cross-cultural interaction rather than a cultural barrier between antagonistic empires (e.g. Byzantines, Arabs and Latins), from Late Antiquity (5th-middle 7th centuries), through the Byzantine Early Middle Ages (late 7th-middle 10th centuries), and into the Middle Byzantine Age (late 10th-early 13th centuries) and the early Latin era (13th-14th centuries).

Late Antiquity

The Cyclades remained participants in the cultural well-being of the Eastern Mediterranean, retaining –in a sense– existing traditions prior to the Arab presence in the Aegean. The period between the 5th and middle 7th centuries was a time of relative prosperity and stability for most of the Cyclades, with coastal settlements functioning as processing and exporting centres. The same level of prosperity has also been noted in other regions of the Aegean.¹² Archaeological survey work on the islands has shown that most settlement sites of the period were located close to the coast, and their centres were focused on a nearby basilica church. The Cyclades acted as island supplier stations of commercial importance within the Eastern Roman Empire. The majority of the population resided in villages and small settlements scattered in the countryside as well as in flourishing maritime market towns with access to regional and international trade.¹³

Plentiful material evidence for settlement continuity, interregional and international trade, as well as a well-organised Church administration,¹⁴ all testify to control by the imperial administration and transregional links between the Constantinopolitan centre and the islands. Those links with the centre and Christian identity are evidenced on Naxos from an early period; the island possesses an extensive corpus of churches, almost unique in their chronological range in the Byzantine world. More interestingly, there is a significant number of early Christian basilicas, both on the coast and in the interior valleys of the island, not only attesting to a great degree of prosperity in Late Antiquity,¹⁵ but also to the emerging Christianised rural landscape of the island.

An important input in the field of Byzantine sacred landscapes was made recently by the application of the method of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) in the case of Naxos.¹⁶ The Byzantine churches of Naxos occur in all types of landscape locations, from plains to mountain peaks. The densest clusters are found inland, in the fertile plains of Drymalia and Sangri, but others lie in mountain villages and valleys, on ridges and hilltops, and on coastal plains and cliffs. Although a few churches stand on prominent ridges, most are sited in valleys or on low hillsides, like the cluster of early Christian churches in and around the plain of Drymalia, which include the Protothronos of Chalki, Agios Isidoros of Rachi and the Taxiarchis of Rachi (**fig. 2**).¹⁷

The pilot study on Naxos reveals that some of the oldest surviving Byzantine churches not only lie

of Culture in 2006.

12. Bintliff and Snodgrass (1985), pp. 123-61; Bintliff (1999), pp. 15-33; Davis *et al.* (1997), pp. 391-494.

13. Vionis (2012), p. 31.

14. Fedalto (1988), pp. 218-19, 223.

15. Vionis (forthcoming a).

16. The landscape data about the application of HLC in Naxos derive exclusively from the study published by J. Crow, S. Turner and A. Vionis; Crow *et al.* (2011), pp. 111-37.

17. Crow *et al.* (2011), pp. 111-37.

within historic villages, but also at the heart of significantly productive agricultural zones. These both lie at the intersection between areas of historic arable farming and the rough grazing ground beyond. What HLC suggests is that they have been ‘boundary’ churches for many hundreds of years, perhaps even since they were first constructed.¹⁸ This establishment of churches on the edge of communities or even in difficult-to-reach locations, as in the area of Rachi in the centre of Naxos for example, acted as boundary churches and gave the community a shared identity tied to ownership of the landscape (**fig. 2**).¹⁹ Those basilicas, with no fancy decorative elements, were not necessarily meant to impress the passer-by or confirm the already established Christian identity of the local population, but signified a local response and emphasised the community’s rural territory (**fig. 3**).

It is obvious that churches, the most important element of Christian urban topography at least in Late Antiquity, played a vital role in expressing and confirming identities in peri-urban, suburban and rural environments. Those identities were related not only to Christianity and faith, but to a whole lot of other aspects, such as political power, landed property and settlement control. The fact that basilica churches in Late Antiquity form a wider network of interconnected Christian structures between the city or town (e.g. Episcopal basilicas or cathedral churches), the immediate *chora* (e.g. parish churches or cemetery chapels), and an extensive countryside (e.g. monastic establishments, hilltop chapels, village churches, boundary churches) is more than confirming a sense of continuity in ancient traditional practices, although in a new, monotheistic context.²⁰

Certain details in the decorative programme of some of those churches on Naxos have an interesting story to tell in terms of the relationship between centre and periphery. Some ecclesiastical paintings comprised the visual expression of serious ongoing theological debates about the natures, energy and wills of Christ (preoccupying the ecclesiastical circles of the time at Constantinople). The double portrait of Christ (depicting Him both as a young and mature man), painted on the dome of the church of Drosiani in Naxos, for instance, has been dated to the 7th century, and it is said to echo the local awareness and response to monothelism.²¹ On the northern conch of the same church (**fig. 4**), the image of standing Christ in the composition of the Deisis is flanked by Virgin Mary and King Solomon on His right, and a female saint (identified as the personification of ‘the Church’) and John the Baptist on His left.²² The inscription by the Virgin mentioning Hagia Maria (ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ) is perhaps another indirect reference to miaphysitism, although ‘Santa Maria’ was a common reference to Virgin Mary in Western iconography.

The archaeological evidence and samples of religious architecture and art on the island in Late Antiquity point towards an intriguing phenomenon: the constant commercial/economic and spiritual contact between Naxos and the imperial centre as well as other peripheral or island zones on the one hand and the formation of a distinctive ‘island’ artistic character on the other. Although there is no fixed line between *style*, *identity* and *meaning*, the fact that examples of Early Byzantine monumental painting on the island find parallels in other regions within and outside Constantinople and the Aegean may indicate that island communities remained rather flexible and open to cultural dialogues with regions outside the imperial sphere of influence.

18. Crow *et al.* (2011), pp. 111-37.

19. Similar conclusions have been reached in the case of the Christianisation process of the Peloponnese, see Sweetman (2010), pp. 228-29.

20. Vionis (forthcoming b).

21. Ghioles (1998-1999), p. 65.

22. Drandakis (1989), p. 19; Pallas (1989-1990), pp. 129-31.

The Byzantine Early Middle Ages

The centuries that followed this period of prosperity form a rather problematic age, as securely dated evidence for religious and secular life in rural areas is quite limited. In the course of an extensive survey carried out around Early Byzantine churches on the island of Naxos in 2006, the identification of pottery fragments (amphorae, table vessels and cooking pots) dated to the late 7th, 8th and 9th centuries testified to the existence of small and large settlements associated with the ecclesiastical monuments.²³ Interestingly enough, habitation sites of this period are not merely restricted to the interior of the island but have been identified also close to the coast, a picture that contradicts traditional historical views about desolation of coastal regions and retreat of populations to mountains and island interiors during the Byzantine Early Middle Ages.

As I have argued elsewhere,²⁴ an evaluation of the material culture (ceramics and numismatic evidence) of this period from Naxos in comparison to other published examples from Constantinople, the Aegean islands, Cyprus, Crete and the coasts of Mainland Greece and Asia Minor reveals another ceramic *koine* and testifies to the presence of the Byzantine army in the Aegean, and the existence of a regional network of communication with the imperial centre (**fig. 5**). How would such a pattern have emerged if the two antagonistic powers of the period, Arabs and 'Byzantine' islanders, were *not* communicating and compromising? In another island-context and on the level of everyday life, it is interesting that in Cyprus, during the so-called 'condominium years' in the Byzantine Early Middle Ages, Arabs and Byzantines lived together 'in peace and harmony' in cities such as Paphos and Salamis/Constantia, as witnessed by Willibald, an English pilgrim who visited the island in 723 and paid his respects in the church of Agios Epiphanius at Salamis/Constantia.²⁵

An illuminating piece of information about the state of affairs in the Aegean at that time comes from John Kameniates, who mentions that in 904 Naxos paid taxes to the Muslims of Crete.²⁶ It seems that the Arabs had come to stay; they founded their base in the Aegean and were preparing to build a new Empire, not solely on raiding, looting and booty, but also according to an organised plan. A conqueror would probably not continuously plunder his subjects if he needed to extract taxes from them; the conquered, on the other hand, would need cash to be able to meet their tax obligations. Cash could only be acquired by carrying out a form of interregional trade, by exporting agricultural products and/or other commodities within as well as outside the various zones of the Byzantine Empire. The aforementioned ceramic evidence and pottery *koine* testifies to all that.

The dating and the source of inspiration of the aniconic fresco decoration found in some of the churches on Naxos²⁷ has been regarded as problematic, while some recent studies have pushed their chronology to the period between the late 9th and first half of the 10th century and have detached their artistic repertoire from the traditional non-figural iconoclastic context.²⁸ The artistic influences seem to agree both with Byzantine trends (on the basis of parallels from Byzantine manuscripts of the late 9th and 10th centuries) and Arab influences (such as the birds with ribbons around their necks from the church of Agia Kyriake Kallonis), which may have entered the Aegean repertoire through the medium of textiles (**fig. 6**). It is noteworthy that Byzantine historiography and hagiographical sources refer to island environments (such as the Cyclades and Cyprus) as safe, anti-iconoclastic grounds,

23. Vionis (2013a), pp. 29-31.

24. Vionis *et al.* (2009), pp. 154-56; Vionis (2013b), pp. 114-15.

25. Mogabgab (1941), p. 1; Talbot (1954), p. 161; Foulis (2003-2004), p. 127.

26. Christides (1984), p. 165, n. 64; Vionis (2013b), pp. 115-16.

27. Chatzidakis (1989), pp. 50-65; Brubaker and Haldon (2001), pp. 24-28.

28. Brubaker and Haldon (2001), pp. 24-28.

where iconodules found refuge in times of stress caused by iconoclast *strategoï* and emperors.²⁹ Once again, Naxos and the Cyclades can be recognised as belonging to a ‘peripheral’ or ‘buffer’ zone between the iconoclast imperial centre and the ‘retreat territory’ of the littoral Aegean, enjoying a degree of freedom from central state control.

I would argue that the above-mentioned evidence points to material connectivity and religious affiliation with Constantinople, resulting in maintaining the ‘traditional ties’ with the imperial centre. Meanwhile, it also points to an intense encounter with new people and accommodation of new artistic trends from the Arab world, resulting in economic stability, survival and possible hybrid forms in art. Thus, the islands seem to have acted as the frontier between the Arabs and the world of Byzantine sovereignty, having become a zone of cross-imperial interaction rather than a cultural barrier between antagonistic empires.³⁰

The Middle Byzantine Age

The period that followed the era of transition and transformations has been characterised as a time of great Byzantine accomplishments.³¹ The increase in island population and the rise of settlement or resettlement of certain islands signify the beginning of this new era for the region. The Arab geographer al-Idrisi, who travelled among the islands in 1153/4, refers to a network of flourishing, well-populated towns across Mainland Greece and on various large and small Aegean islands.³² Concentrations of Middle Byzantine surface ceramic finds on the islands of Melos and Keos possibly indicate a dispersed settlement pattern.³³ In Byzantine Naxos itself, a great number of new churches (**fig. 3**) signify extensive rural settlement and agricultural intensification.³⁴

The ceramic finds from the island of Naxos, as well as from the rest of the Cyclades and other Aegean islands, Mainland Greece, southern Italy, Asia Minor, Cyprus and Constantinople share obvious common features in decorative styles, shape, and certainly function (**fig. 7**).³⁵ The limited range of Middle Byzantine amphora types and shapes found in every corner of the Byzantine world testify to the re-establishment and intensification of commercial communication and exchange between Constantinople and the aforementioned regions.³⁶

29. Theophanes Continuatus, ed. Bekker, pp. 63:15–64:18 and 74:6–75:6; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, eds. Mango and Scott, p. 614.

30. Vionis (2013b), pp. 116–17.

31. There is a long bibliography one can cite here for the recovery attested archaeologically in this period, especially on the basis of results from intensive surface surveys in the Aegean. See Cherry *et al.* (1991); Mee and Forbes (1997); Bintliff (2000), pp. 37–63; Armstrong (2002), pp. 339–402.

32. al-Idrisi, ed. Jaubert, pp. 121–32, 286–303; Laiou and Morrisson (2007), p. 131.

33. Wagstaff and Cherry (1982), pp. 136–55; Cherry *et al.* (1991), pp. 351–64.

34. Vionis (2012), p. 33; Vionis (2013a), p. 31.

35. Vionis (2001), pp. 84–98; Vionis (2012), pp. 229–34.

36. The quantities of one particular Middle Byzantine amphora (*Günsenin III* or *Saraçhane 61*) found at Constantinople, Boeotia in central Greece and northern Keos in the Cyclades are overwhelming. See Hayes (1992), p. 76; Vionis (2008), pp. 36–40; Cherry *et al.* (1991), pp. 355–57.

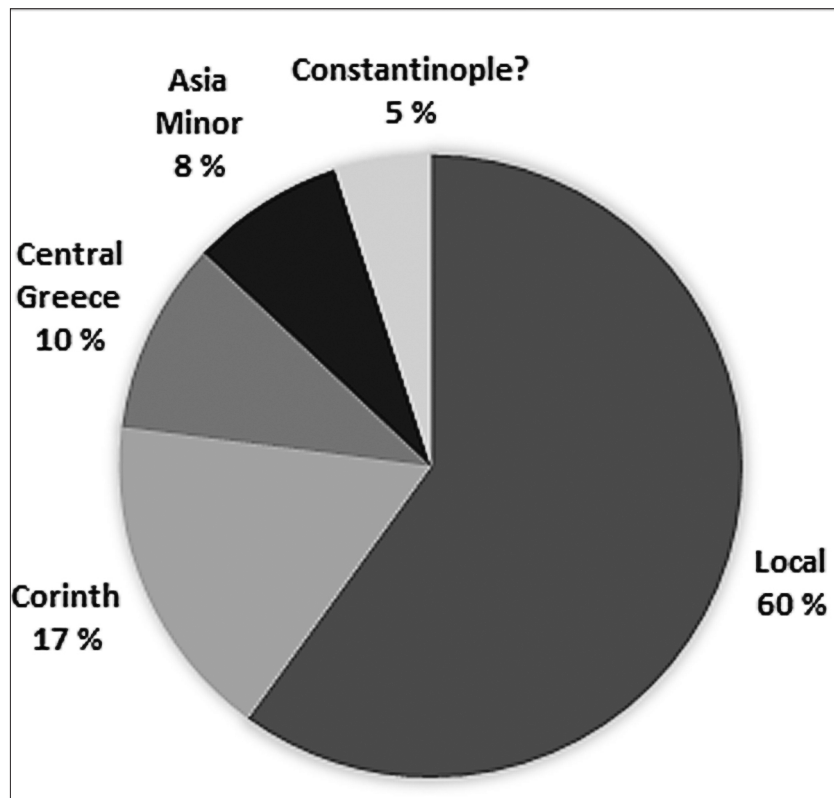


Figure 7: Local and imported Middle Byzantine glazed table pottery in the Aegean islands (based on published evidence collected and evaluated by the author)

Ecclesiastical architecture and monumental painting in churches of the period on Naxos and other Cycladic islands, might, once again, provide hints about imperial impact and cross-cultural interaction in the Aegean.³⁷ Thirty-six new churches were constructed between the middle/late 10th and late 12th centuries on Naxos, nineteen of them with layers of frescoes of the same period, while another eleven churches of earlier centuries were decorated with new layers of Middle Byzantine fresco painting (fig. 8). The political developments of the period on the Aegean littoral played a crucial role in this. After the reacquisition of Crete in 961 (and later on, Cilicia, Syria, Cyprus and Aleppo)³⁸ by the (subsequent) Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) and the restoration of an intense sea-borne traffic between Constantinople and the Aegean regions (as also illustrated by the aforementioned material culture evidence), the Byzantine central administration invested in the construction of monumental defence outposts, monasteries, and churches on several islands,³⁹ in the framework of a revived imperial propaganda for the resurgence of political, economic, ecclesiastical and cultural links with the periphery.

37. Vionis (2003), pp. 193-216. Vionis (2012), pp. 42-45.

38. Gregory (2005), pp. 237-40.

39. For representative examples of important churches and monasteries erected during this period on the Aegean littoral, see Maguire (1992), pp. 205-14; Bouras (1997), pp. 121-30.

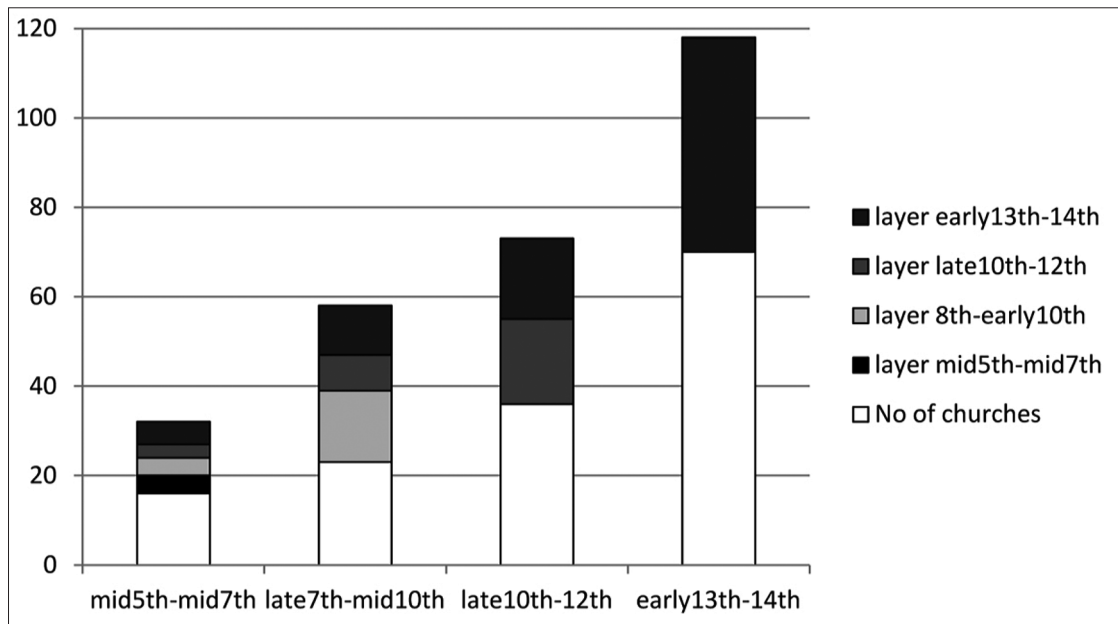


Figure 8: Graph showing the number of churches built per period on Naxos and the number of dated and published frescoes (graph by the author)

The stylistic details and the overall iconographic programme of such public spaces of cult in the Byzantine provinces of the late 10th and 11th centuries exhibit an archaizing manner, close to regionalism and ‘conservatism’.⁴⁰ This trend indicates the revival of an old and long-established practice of religious artistic expression in the Byzantine periphery during the post-Iconoclastic era. The austere and hierarchical style of many examples of figurative Middle Byzantine fresco painting in the provinces in general and on the Aegean islands in particular does not necessarily imply a provincial backwardness but ‘compliance with the Byzantine revival style of their time’, which was first developed in Constantinople itself and heavily relied on pre-Iconoclastic models.⁴¹ Thus, Constantinople acted as the source of inspiration for Naxos and other Aegean islands independently, and metropolitan trends blended with local elements through secular and religious channels of contact.

Contemporary or ‘novel’ iconographic trends can also be detected in monumental painting throughout the Byzantine peripheral zones from the late 10th century onwards. There was increased representation of military saints and armed archangels, transformed into aggressive warriors, prepared to meet the enemies of the Empire and its Christian identity in the battlefield.⁴² A number of surviving Middle Byzantine frescoes depicting armed archangels and military saints survive in several churches on the island of Naxos (e.g. in the northwest *parekklesion* of Panagia Protothronos,⁴³ in Agios Georgios Diassorites and Agios Nikolaos at Sangri). This artistic phenomenon signifies the need of Christian populations, living in the frontiers of the Empire and beyond, to protect themselves against their ‘infidel’ persecutors and express their military and cultural supremacy over Muslim and other neighbours.⁴⁴ In a period when Byzantium recovered some of the provinces lost in previous centuries to the Arabs, the Byzantines found ways to express their ‘cultural superiority’ and negative impression of Islam, through

40. Skawran (2001), pp. 75-83.

41. Skawran (2001), pp. 80-81.

42. Walter (2003).

43. See Panayotidi and Konstantellou, this volume.

44. See also Badamo (2011), pp. 179-239.

antagonism and, at the same time, through the selective appropriation of Islamic elements into their various forms of art.

At first glance, after Crete's reacquisition, Naxos, as well as its wider periphery in the southern Aegean, seems to have been fully incorporated into the Byzantine imperial sphere of political and cultural influence. The various aspects of material culture (such as ceramic tableware and amphorae) and their distribution all over the Empire from the middle 10th century onwards, point to a revived Byzantine *koine* through trade channels. Religious artistic trends point in similar directions, with Constantinople playing once again its metropolitan role as a source of inspiration. That having been said, it should be noted that islanders did not remain passive actors on the cultural stage of the period. Their geographic marginality, further away from direct central control, enabled them to develop a clear local identity, which we can see repeating itself on several other Aegean islands. Did such coincidence constitute 'an Aegean island-identity'? The sea surrounding Naxos functioned both as a filter of influences and as a means of keeping the island's cultural and trade networks with Byzantine and non-Byzantine neighbours alive.

The Latin era

According to Peter Lock, the task of planting colonies in the Aegean, after the capture of Constantinople by the Latins of the Fourth Crusade, was left to the 'young and the bold', such as Marco Sanudo.⁴⁵ Thus, in 1207, the Cyclades formed the Duchy of the Archipelago, with the island of Naxos as its capital. This was the time when the built space radically changed, from undefended and dispersed to defended and nucleated. Walled settlements appear on all Cycladic islands and their layout is directed by the topography. The only historical reference for the building of an island-*kastro* according to a plan is the *Kastro* of Naxos, designed to provide housing for a colonial minority and function as the administrative centre of the Duchy.⁴⁶

Varying types of settlement are the spatial manifestation of social structures and one cannot fix boundaries between social structure and its spatial elements, or similarly, one cannot ignore the social and cultural background which the Latins brought with them from their countries of origin.⁴⁷ In the plan of the town of Naxos, as in every *kastro* plan, the Cathedral and the main tower are located at the notional centre of the settlement, and all the roads lead to these two basic poles of attraction.⁴⁸ The domestic structures themselves within the town are facing towards the symbols of ecclesiastical and secular authority. It is generally accepted that the plan of island *kastra* is the material reflection of the Venetians' foundation of a political, social and ecclesiastical hierarchy in a foreign land, introducing values common in the 13th-century West.

It should be noted that the unpopular treatment of the lower social class by the *Angeloi* (ca. 1185-1204) and the special arrangement between the Latin lords and the local Byzantine *archons* provided suitable ground for the establishment of the Franks in the early 13th century.⁴⁹ How the peasant population who formed the majority on the islands, and who farmed the estates for Greek and Latin lords, felt about the new situation was nowhere recorded, while the Latins needed the support of the Greek *archons* for control over the peasant majority.⁵⁰ Archaeological evidence suggests that the

45. Lock (1995), p. 12; Vionis (2012), pp. 35-45.

46. Fotheringham (1915); Vionis (2012), pp. 88-89.

47. Ellenblum (1998), p. 13; Vionis (2003), p. 197.

48. Vionis (2003), p. 197.

49. Gounarides (1998), pp. 143-44.

50. Lock (1995), pp. 13, 277.

construction of Apano Kastro was completed in the first half of the 13th century with the intention to control uprisings by the Greek peasant communities in the interior of Naxos until the firm establishment of the Latin regime. But that it came to function as the focal centre of the inland villages (**fig. 9**), in a fashion similar to the *castellanies* of Venetian Crete⁵¹ or even as in neighbouring Paros, where survey around the *kastro* of Kephalos⁵² has revealed a series of dependent satellite hamlets and farms.

The presence of imported decorated table pottery, such as Miletus ware from Anatolia (14th-15th centuries) or tin-glazed Proto-Maiolica (13th century), Maiolica (15th-16th centuries) and Polychrome Sgraffito Wares (15th-16th centuries) from Italy, as well as Spanish Lustre Wares (14th-15th centuries) on islands such as Naxos and Paros,⁵³ points to the annexation of the area by Venetian merchants and to the development of intense trade channels and cultural networks between Italy and the Aegean (**fig. 10**). According to archaeological evidence, it seems that access to such expensive and imported objects was restricted, nearly exclusively, to members of the colonial administrative elite.⁵⁴

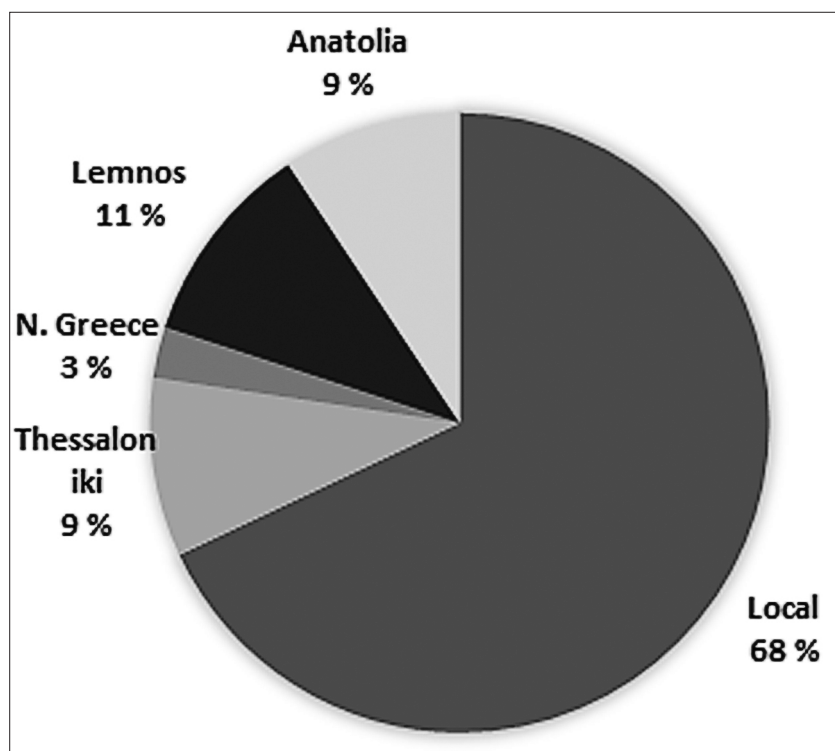


Figure 10: Local and imported glazed table pottery in the Cyclades (based on published evidence collected and evaluated by the author)

The growing number of Orthodox churches being built during the period of Venetian domination as well as related textual sources concerning the Cyclades and other islands seem to suggest that the Latin lords did not impose Catholicism on their subjects. In Naxos, where one finds a large number of dated inscriptions on decorative frescoes of the 'Byzantine style' dating to the second half of the

51. Vionis (2012), pp. 132-42; Svoronos (1989), pp. 1-14.

52. Vionis (2006), pp. 481-84.

53. Vionis (2012), pp. 240-44, 254.

54. Intensive surface survey on the *kastro* of Kephalos on Paros has revealed that all the *Maiolica* tableware imported from Faenza is to be found on the hilltop, where the lord's residence was located in the 13th-16th centuries. See Vionis (2012), p. 322.

13th and early 14th centuries, churches were still being built or decorated with frescoes.⁵⁵ Seventy new churches were constructed (and forty-eight of them preserve fresco decoration) throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, while another thirty-four churches of earlier centuries bear layers of wall frescoes of the Frankish period (**fig. 8**). Many of them bear dedicatory inscriptions by Greek laymen and clerics; they feature a variety of styles, thus local workshops or painters can be distinguished.⁵⁶ This cannot be but the result of a period of relative stability, and a reflection of the Orthodox population's need to associate and link itself with Constantinople – rather than the imported Catholic ruling class – as well as the outcome of a more 'relaxed' and effective arrangement of Orthodox Church matters by the Latins.

A similar degree of accommodation of contrasting trends can be found in other aspects of material culture. The male and female attire of 13th-century donor portraits from Naxos and Paros reveal both an attachment to the Byzantine tradition and a cultural dialogue between colonisers and colonised, leading to the formation of a new local identity under the impact of the Byzantine imperial past and the effect of Venetian presence. The 13th-century female donor from the church of Agios Georgios Marathou (**fig. 11**) in inland Naxos, for example, is dressed in the 'Byzantine style' (typical in the 11th and 12th centuries).⁵⁷

As noted in the published literature,⁵⁸ donor portraits would remain until eternity, thus a donor would choose very carefully the way he/she would be represented and the social or cultural identity he/she would project. This is the case with other contemporary island communities, such as Crete, Rhodes and Cyprus,⁵⁹ where donors' attire reveals a conservative or 'Byzantine' character, especially in the countryside and amongst members of the Greco-Byzantine elite. Thus, it would seem reasonable for members of the Greco-Byzantine population of Naxos and other islands who were forced to retire to the countryside (leaving the town and ports to the Venetians)⁶⁰ to choose this kind of pictorial representation for themselves. On the other hand, a 13th-century male donor from the church at Protoria on Paros, wearing a 'Western-style' trapezoidal cap and a red garment (**fig. 12**), is depicted praying in a combination of the Orthodox (his hands raised in supplication) and Catholic (kneeling instead of standing) traditions.⁶¹ Compositions of this kind indicate the mingling of artistic modes of expression for populations engaged in trade and other activities (a predominantly male occupation) and the appropriation of the image of Venetian nobles and merchants.

The evidence from Naxos dated after the arrival of the Venetians testifies to a rather peaceful mingling of cultural expressions and a productive coexistence between local traditions and Western trends brought in by the colonisers. This can be considered as a process that gradually led to the formation of a distinct 'Aegean island-identity', which owes much to both Byzantium and the Latin West.

Conclusions

The story narrated by the material culture and the visual art of Naxos over this long period of direct or indirect Byzantine imperial control reveals a repeated pattern in Aegean island-behaviours. This story should be regarded as representative of many other insular regions in the Aegean Archipelago.

At first, examining 'imperial impact' under a deterministic factor, the geographical location and

55. Mitsani (2000), pp. 93-122.

56. Mitsani (2000), pp. 110-12.

57. Vionis (2012), pp. 337-38.

58. Kalopissi-Verti (1992), pp. 23-46.

59. Bitha (2000), pp. 429-47; Stancioiu (2009), p. 235.

60. Luttrell (1989), p. 153; Lock (2006), p. 436; Vionis (2012), p. 339.

61. Mitsani (2000), p. 115; Vionis (2012), pp. 337-38.

insularity of Naxos and other Aegean islands rendered them relatively independent from direct state control and also contributed to the formation of their distinctive local island-identities. This does not mean that Aegean islands formed 'closed systems' nor that they remained passive recipients in the wider constructs of imperial or colonial identities. To the contrary: the sea acted both as a filter of incoming political systems, artistic trends or *modes de vie*, and as a communication channel with neighbouring islands, nearby mainlands and subsequently the centres of state power.

What is certain is that the foundation of 'Orthodox-Byzantine' ideational identities in Aegean island-societies remained unchallenged throughout the period in question. This is clearly attested in religious art on Naxos, where archaic forms keep appearing over and over again as a reminder of the heritage of the Church and the Byzantine Empire. Secular channels of communications remained alive and never ceased to function as media for transferring objects from and to Constantinople, even during the so-called 'troubled' era of Arab supremacy in the Aegean.

The geographically peripheral location of the southern Aegean islands played, once more, a decisive role in the construction of local identities and responses. This peripheral zone acted as a ground for cultural mingling between antagonistic powers *beyond fixed boundaries* rather than as a barrier between antagonistic peoples and empires. The successful mingling of material-culture and artistic trends on Naxos or any other Aegean island resulted in a transformed island expression, being distinctively unique and having its roots within a local context. This is what we can call 'Aegean island-identity' or a 'local response' to external or imperial impacts and influences. The vital need of island populations in this 'peripheral zone' to survive in periods of uncertainty created paths for negotiation, compromise and cohabitation with the 'other' without losing consciousness of their identity and affiliation.

The following abstract from the travels of the French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort,⁶² who visited Naxos at the beginning of the 18th century, encapsulates the main points raised above. The reaction of the people of Naxos before the Ottoman tax collector would have been similar in the years of Arab presence in the Aegean in the 9th century, or in the period of Byzantine control in the 12th, or during the period of Latin rule in the 13th century.

At the arrival of the meanest Bey of a Galliot, neither Latins nor Greeks ever dare to appear but in red caps, like the common galley slaves, and tremble before the pettiest officer. As soon as ever the Turks are withdrawn, the Naxian nobility resume their former haughtiness: nothing is to be seen but caps of velvet, nor to be heard of but tables of genealogy; some deduce themselves from the Paleologi or Comnenii; others from the Justiniani, the Grimaldi, the Summaripas...

62. Tournefort (1718), p. 168.

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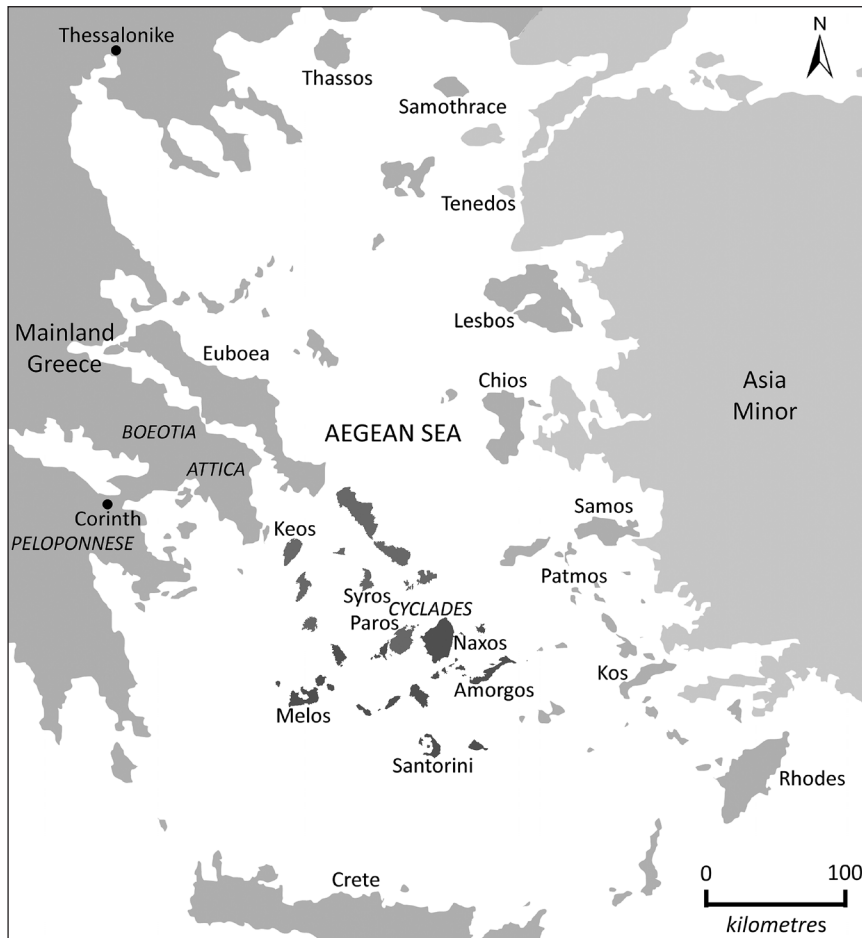


Figure 1. Map of the Cyclades and the Aegean Sea with place-names mentioned in the text (map by the author).

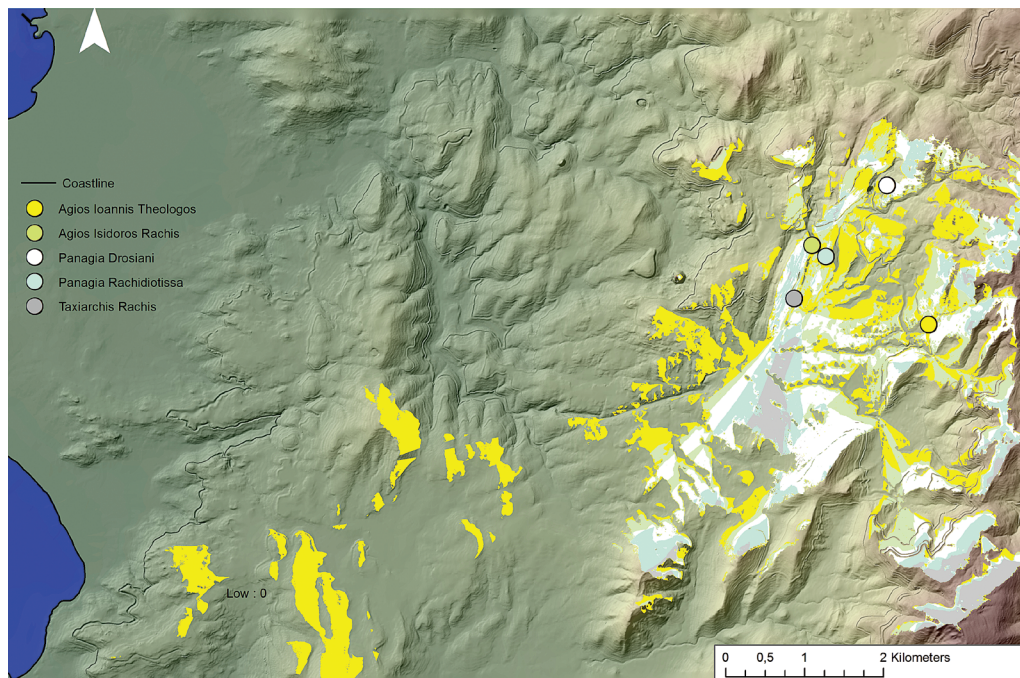


Figure 2. The churches of Taxiarchis Rachis and Agios Isidoros (and other early Byzantine churches) as 'boundary churches' between rough grazing ground and agricultural zones (map by V. Trigkas).

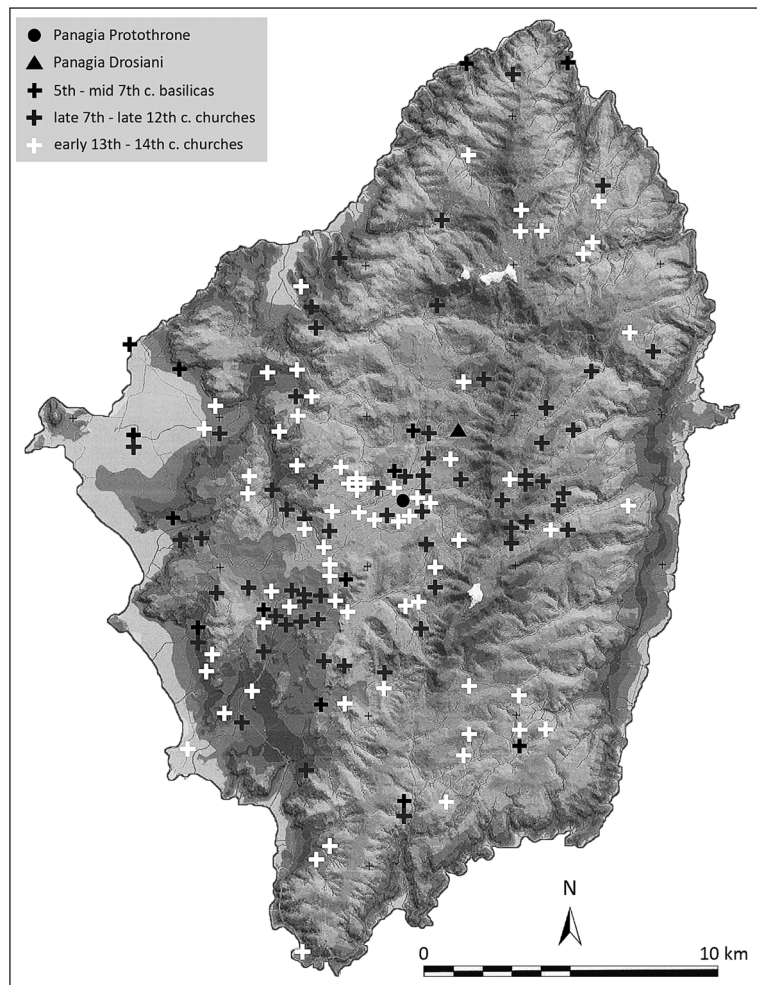


Figure 3. Distribution of Early (black crosses), Middle (gray crosses) and Late Byzantine (white crosses) churches on Naxos, including Panagia Protothrone (black dot) and Panagia Drosiani (black triangle) (map and data by the author).



Figure 4. The Deisis, northern conch of the church of Panagia Drosiani, Naxos (photo by the author).

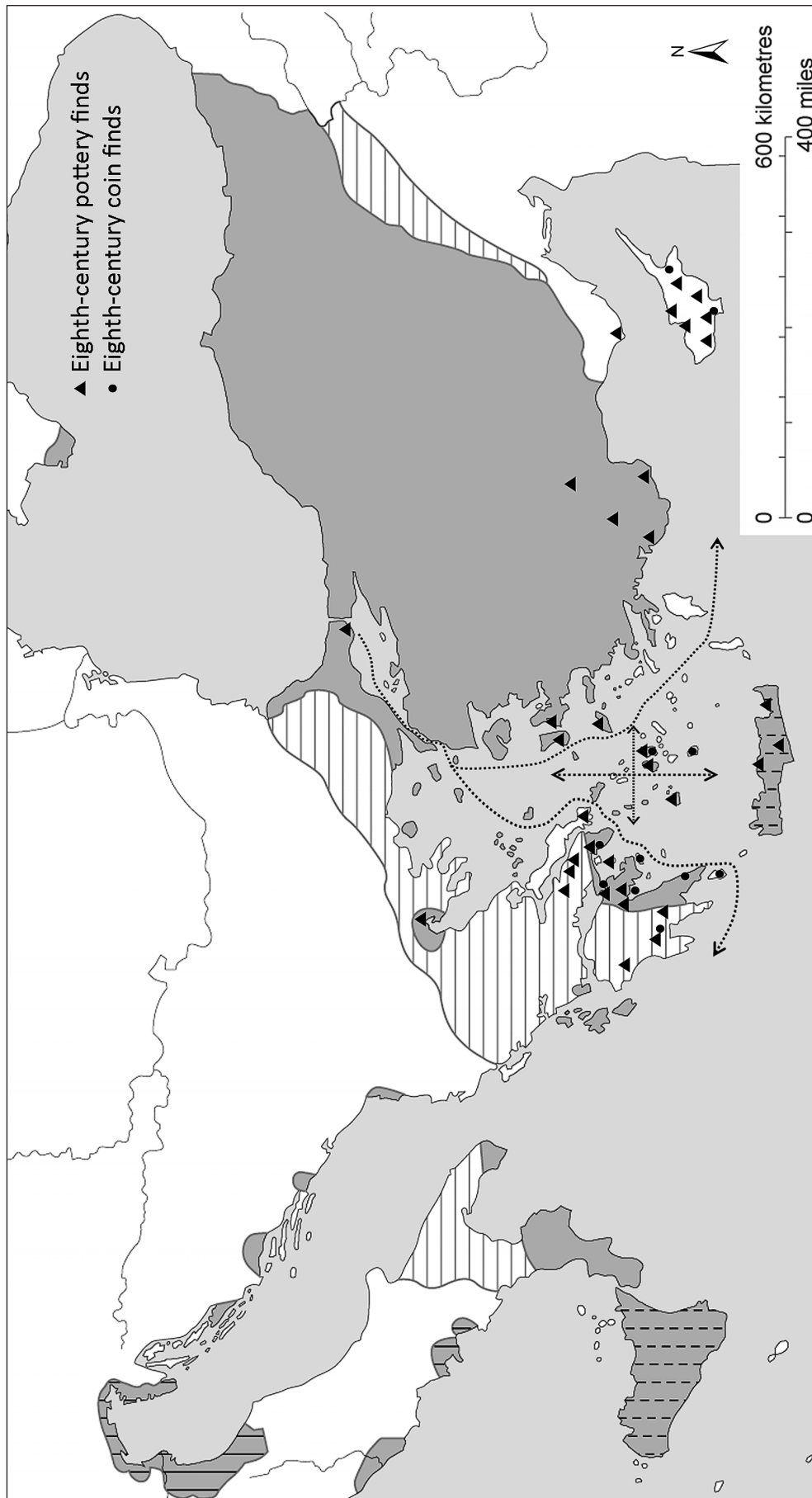


Figure 5. Map of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean showing the distribution of eighth-century pottery- and coin-finds (map and data by the author).



Figure 6.
Arabising' elements in Byzantine art. Birds with ribbons around their neck. Fresco from the church of Hagia Kyriake Kallonis in Naxos (photo by the author).

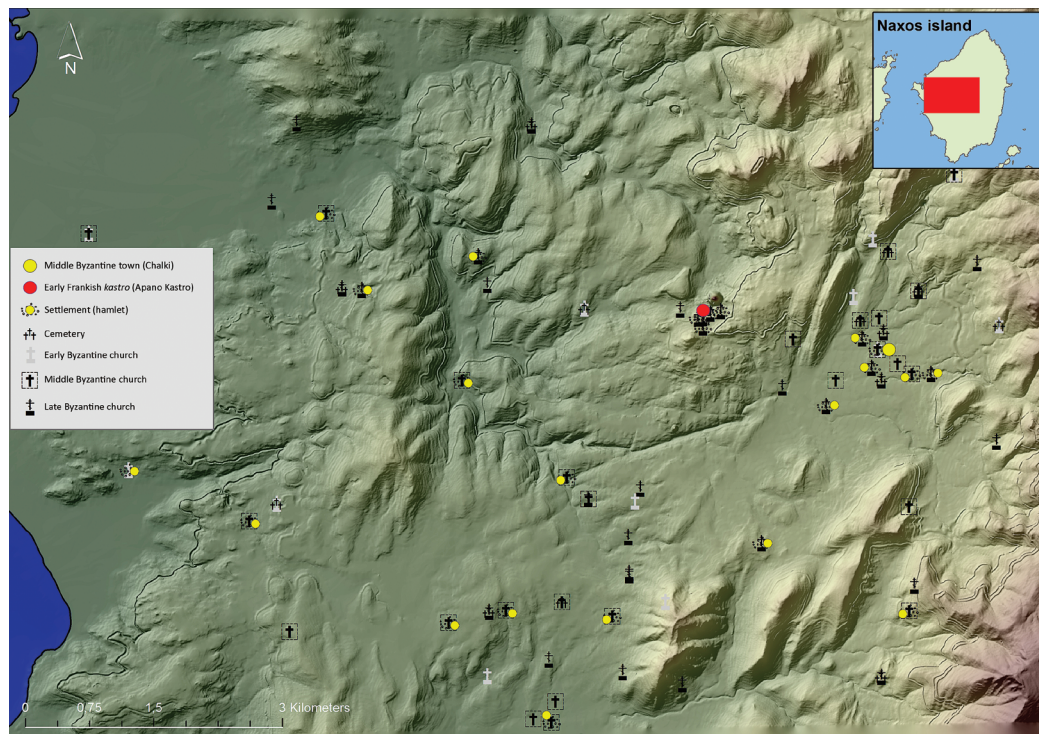


Figure 9. Map of the 'territory' of Apano Kastros in inland Naxos with its satellite rural settlements and the distribution of Early, Middle and Late Byzantine churches throughout the region (map by V. Trigkas and data by the author).



Figure 11. Female donor portrait from the church of Hagios Georgios Marathou in Naxos (photo by the author).



Figure 12. Male donor portrait from the church at Protoria in Paros (photo by the author).