

The Kastro Apalirou project

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Abstract

Σε αυτό το εισαγωγικό κεφάλαιο παραθέτουμε μια σύντομη περίληψη του ερευνητικού προγράμματος στο Κάστρο Απαλίου και των προκαταρκτικών συμπερασμάτων. Το Κάστρο Απαλίου ξεκίνησε να οικοδομείται στα μέσα του 7ου αιώνα και παρέμεινε σε χρήση, μέχρι την εγκατάλειψή του, κατά τον πρώιμο 13ο αιώνα, περίοδο κατά την οποία η Νάξος και τα γειτονικά νησιά περιέχονται στην κυριαρχία των Βενετών. Με βάση τα δεδομένα που παρουσιάζονται στη συνέχεια, το Κάστρο Απαλίου θα πρέπει μάλλον να θεωρείται αστικός οικισμός παρά φρούριο.

In November 2007 the Norwegian Institute applied to the Hellenic Ministry of Culture for permission to carry out archaeological fieldwork at Kastro Apalirou, Naxos. For practical and economic reasons, however, it was not possible to start fieldwork before October 2010. We are grateful to the Ephor of the 2nd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Dr Katerina Dellaporta, for discussions on how best to approach the start of the fieldwork.

No previous systematic archaeological fieldwork had been undertaken at Apalirou, though there are two descriptions by antiquarians; Sauger in the 17th century¹ and Zerlentes in the 19th century.² A further work by Fotheringham from 1915 on the Venetian conquest of the Aegean mentions the siege and capture of Kastro Apalirou by Marco Sanudo.³ Whilst these descriptions are important, the extent and the character of the site was unknown prior to the survey. A factor behind the lack of fieldwork at the site is that no contemporary historical sources exist for Apalirou; consequently the site was largely unknown outside of Naxos and rarely visited by researchers. This is compounded by the fact that the site's original name is unknown. The name Kastro Apalirou was first used by Robert Sauger, a Jesuit priest from the Monastery of Kalamitsa in an early 17th century work on Marco Sanudo and the formation of the Duchy of the Archipelago. Sauger himself considered the name to be a corruption of *Paleo-oro* meaning 'Old Hill',⁴ though Zerlentes considers this to be wrong and prefers to see the name as referring to *ἀπαλιρία* (*Rhamnus oleoides* Lin), a thorny bush prevalent across the mountain, which later became the vernacular name for the site. If this is the case, the original Byzantine name for the town is lost to us now. This fact, that a site of such importance can go unmentioned in textual sources

1. Sauger (1698/99).

2. Zerlentes (1902).

3. Fotheringham (1915).

4. Fotheringham (1915), p. 43; Sauger (1688/89); Zerlentes (1902), pp. 496-97.

highlights weaknesses in the historical material for the Middle Byzantine period outside of central and Imperial contexts. The role that archaeology must play in narrating Byzantine regional and insular history is therefore considerable. The only element of the Kastro that had been documented before the current project was the church complex of Agios Georgios.⁵ An additional factor contributing to the lack of knowledge about Apalirou is that the site is not easily visible in the landscape and access is difficult and involves a steep and difficult climb. In addition, early aerial photographs backed up by information from local sources suggest that until a fire some 15 years ago, greater vegetation cover would have made it more difficult to both visit Apalirou and see the ruins.

The fact that Kastro Apalirou has not previously been the focus of systematic archaeological study makes in many ways the interpretation and definition of the material easier as too often archaeological material and a project's energy is used to prove or disprove the standpoints and conclusions of previous researchers. In the absence of preconditioned concepts on the status and role of the site, any symbolism and status that might have been assigned has not coloured current observations and interpretation.⁶ Well-known and conceptually visible archaeological sites can present problems to the archaeologist as new interpretations will invariably need to confront public perception.

Kastro Apalirou was a fortified urban site founded in the mid-7th century and as such it is unique not only in the Aegean, but perhaps also in Europe as one of the few urban foundations during a period of crisis and retraction. The importance of Apalirou is that it presents a different view of the Early-Mid Byzantine reaction to the geopolitical events of the 7th century. The discussion on Byzantine urbanisation has traditionally been dominated by the fate of the polis: some have called the changes 'decline' whilst others prefer to use 'transformation'.⁷ Most of the archaeological and almost all of the historical material comes from the larger centres of Byzantine society such as Thessaloniki, Constantinople and Athens and has focused upon how long established urban communities faced the challenges of the 7th-9th centuries. There is perhaps one parallel to a new urban foundation at the end of Antiquity and beginning of the Middle Byzantine period in Hellas; Monemvasia. However, Monemvasia was a port and functioned at least later as an independent community, and was founded and driven by a different political structure than on Naxos. Moreover, the early phases remain obscured by later settlement that continues to the present day.⁸

The majority of the publications on Byzantine urbanism in the period 500-900 deal with urban transition from the polis to the medieval city.⁹ A focus upon existing towns, particularly in older works, invariably ends up projecting a sense of loss and societal downsizing from the large cities of antiquity to smaller Byzantine cities where architectural scale is gradually reduced as it goes forward.¹⁰ For Apalirou there was no transition of urban space from one to the other, in its design and layout the only variable the planners would have been confined by was topography. The structural remains of Apalirou are visible and unaltered which further adds to the unique situation of a fossilised 7th-13th century fortified town on a mountain top in the Aegean that has not previously been the focus of research.

By the 7th century, political power and the institutions that wield it are increasingly mobile and able to react tactically to changes in regional politics such that a topographic shift occurs within settlement patterns as a number of new sites and forts appear in the Balkans, Greece and Asia Minor.¹¹ Kastro Apalirou should be seen within this context and the move from coastal locations to strategic fortified positions should be seen as an example of how politics within society had moved away from

5. Aslanidis (2014); Mastoropoulos (2006).

6. Kourelis (2012), p.198 has alluded to the difficulties of interpretation of Mystras and other such sites that can easily become "...a fantastic repository of national Hellenic veneration".

7. Veikou (2012).

8. Klaus, Steinmüller (2007).

9. Magdalino (2017); Zavagno (2009), p.4.

10. Ousterhout (1996).

11. Müller-Wiener (1986); Crow (2017), pp. 94-100.

the concept of polis, to a new medieval mentality. Sites such as Apalirou are important and should be seen in the light of a new urbanism representing a new social order; it is unhelpful therefore to consider these new sites in comparison to earlier poleis. Haldon points out that urban development in Byzantium was neither linear nor continuous and that fortified sites are often overlooked as a strategic response to catastrophic events and a changing political world, and not as urban developments in their own right.¹² However, Apalirou was more than a fortress, and as the survey has been able to demonstrate a large number of civilian and domestic structures dominate the settlement within the walls. Apalirou represents a shift of location from the old established urban centre of the island (Chora) that was first inhabited in the Bronze Age to the new site at Apalirou, at a time when the Aegean needed to defend itself for the first time since the Hellenistic period. This means that whilst we can place the changes in the 7th century within a wider regional context, we are not able to make significant comparison of the settlement at Apalirou with other sites in the same period.

The major questions that have been approached by the survey are: How should we define Kastro Apalirou? When was it founded? What function did it have within Naxos and the Aegean?

Defining Kastro Apalirou has been made possible through the survey; the main indices used are the extent of the site and the types of buildings contained within it. The scale of the intramural settlement, covering two hectares, is representative of a site that is more than a fortified refuge. What is more telling, though, is the type of buildings and the way that they are structured spatially across the site. The majority of the houses are domestic and private, fronting onto a system of terraced streets. In addition to this, the survey has found evidence for the processing of crops both within the walls and in connection to the agricultural terraces below Apalirou. These terraces are seen as having been laid out at the same time as the town and as an integrated part of the settlement.

Whilst the absolute dating of the individual structures remains to be undertaken, relative dating of the major phases points to a pattern that the street system and houses were constructed during the first phase, and that during a later phase larger structures and community cisterns were constructed. This second phase coincides with the extension of the defensive walls after the construction of a round tower at the northern point of the site. The survey therefore enables us to state with some confidence that a large institutional investment at Apalirou was made after the initial foundation of the settlement. However, these observations require that the terms 'domestic', 'private' and 'institutional' should be better understood within the context of the site and should not form the basis of a foundation hypothesis before a greater resolution within the chronological material has been generated.

Before the survey, only one church, Agios Georgios, was known inside the walls.¹³ During a presentation of the early results at the Naxos Town Hall in 2012, a question was asked by a member of the local history society: "If Apalirou is a town, then where are the churches?" Since then we have identified two new churches connected to the site, and at the settlement at Kato Choria below the site a further five new churches have been identified. There are now eight Byzantine period churches on the mountainside and it is likely that further churches will be found in time.

Agios Georgios is the largest church within the walls and together with its connected structures forms a complex that underwent development over time. In addition, a large extramural church is situated on the ridge to the southwest of the walls; this structure and connected house will need more work to clarify key details. Within the walls a small double apsidal church was identified after a period of heavy rain compacted the soil around what was previously surveyed as a rectangular structure. The northern room of the church has largely been cleared of stone to floor level and important dating material has been recovered. The chronology suggests that the structure may date from the 7th century

12. Haldon (2005), pp. 32-44; Zavagno (2009), p. 11.

13. Mastoropoulos (2006), p. 153 mentions three ruined churches outside the walls.

and was in use up to the final phases of the settlement in the 12th and early 13th centuries. The dates secured from the church have been used to confirm the period of activity for Apalirou from its foundation to its abandonment.

The defensive walls were the first elements of the town to be surveyed. They were largely constructed in one phase except for the round bastion to the north, a later addition which extended the area of the northern tip of Apalirou. In connection to this extension, several of the large community cisterns were constructed. These extensions should be seen as large-scale structural improvements that would have changed the character of the settlement from its early phase. We are as yet unable to date these phases absolutely.

The demise and abandonment of Apalirou is described in the only historical (though non-contemporary) description of the site. Roger Sauger's history of the establishment of the Venetian Duchy of the Archipelago describes how Marco Sanudo sailed to Naxos in the wake of the Fourth Crusade, laid siege to Apalirou and took control of the islands. The events took place around 1207. We have no reason to doubt the main details in the account. The survey has led to one observation that is certainly linked to the abandonment of Apalirou, and, we believe, should be seen as a statement by the new ruling Venetian elite that the town was not to be re-settled: all of the above-ground cisterns have systemically been destroyed in the same way by knocking a hole through the structures at the lowest point of the basins. We assume that this was undertaken by the Venetians in order to render settlement within the walls impossible. We have observed as well that the round tower has also been lowered in height, likely undertaken at the same time as the destruction of the cisterns. The surface ceramics, still under analysis, support the chronology suggested for the period of use at Apalirou, with a foundation in the 7th century and an abandonment in the early part of the 13th century. This is supported by random coin finds at the site, ranging back to the reign of Heraclius. Of interest is that Marco Sanudo and the Venetian forces saw the taking of Kastro Apalirou as being central to gaining control not just of Naxos but also the immediate islands. The following articles in this section present the results and observations of the survey so far.

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