

# *The archaeology of the aniconic churches of Naxos*

James CROW  
Sam TURNER

## **Abstract**

Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει το σύνολο των πρώιμων μεσαιωνικών κτισμάτων της Νάξου, με σκοπό την ανάδειξη της σημασίας τους στην μελέτη της αρχιτεκτονικής, της αρχαιολογίας και της ιστορίας της τέχνης των βυζαντινών Κυκλάδων, καθώς και του ευρύτερου βυζαντινού κόσμου. Η πλούσια κληρονομιά των βυζαντινών εκκλησιών στον ελληνικό κόσμο έχει προ πολλού αναγνωριστεί. Ως αρχαιολόγοι τοπίου ενδιαφερόμαστε να παρουσιάσουμε επίσης το πως αυτά τα θρησκευτικά οικοδομήματα, που εντοπίζονται γεωγραφικά σε μια πληθώρα θέσεων και καλύπτουν χρονικά μια μεγάλη περίοδο, μπορούν να εμπλουτίσουν τις γνώσεις μας γύρω από τους οικισμούς και το τοπίο του νησιού. Μια τέτοιου είδους αρχαιολογική προσέγγιση προσφέρει δυνατότητα επεξεργασίας της «στρωματογραφικής» διάστασης πολλών ανεικονικών διακοσμήσεων, οι οποίες είναι εμφανείς στις παλαιότερες στρώσεις ζωγραφικού διακόσμου, τόσο στη Νάξο, όσο και αλλού, συμβάλλοντας στον προσδιορισμό του συγκεκριμένου διακοσμητικού στυλ στην πρώιμη μεσαιωνική περίοδο, πριν από τα τέλη του 9ου αιώνα. Το σχετικό υλικό από τη Νάξο εξετάζεται σε συνδυασμό με πρόσφατες δημοσιεύσεις αντίστοιχων διακοσμημένων κτισμάτων από την Ελλάδα και αλλού. Το άρθρο συνοψίζει τις αλλαγές στην χριστιανική αρχιτεκτονική, από την περίοδο της ύστερης αρχαιότητας μέχρι την μεσαιωνική περίοδο και εξετάζει το ιστορικό υπόβαθρο των εν λόγω κτισμάτων, καθώς και την ερμηνεία της ανεικονικής τους διακόσμησης. Ιδιαίτερη έμφαση δίδεται σε ομοιότητες με αντίστοιχα μοτίβα στην υπόλοιπη Ελλάδα, ενώ αντικρούονται οι απόψεις ορισμένων ερευνητών που υποστηρίζουν ότι τα ανεικονικά μοτίβα αντανakλούν έλλειψη φαντασίας και ευφυΐας. Τέλος, εξετάζονται η κατάσταση και η θέση των επιλεγμένων ναών, πολλοί εκ των οποίων είναι απομονωμένα ναύδρια στην αγροτική ύπαιθρο, και ιδιαίτερα υπό το πρίσμα του μεγάλου νέου οχυρωμένου οικισμού του Κάστρου Απαλίου του 7ου και 8ου αιώνα. Οι ναξιώτικες αυτές εκκλησίες αποτελούν ως σύνολο μια αξιοπρόσεκτη πηγή για την μελλοντική μελέτη της βυζαντινής αγροτικής ζωής και πίστης. Παρατίθεται, επίσης, κατάλογος γνωστών κτισμάτων με τη σημαντικότερη σχετική βιβλιογραφία.

## **Introduction**

The papers in this volume are able to demonstrate the exceptional wealth of early Christian and medieval church architecture across the island of Naxos.<sup>1</sup> Outside Greece this rich heritage of ecclesiastical buildings is less frequently acknowledged, although there is wider recognition of the significance of

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1. This essay is a revised and updated version in English of the paper presented at the Geneva Conference on Aniconic Art in 2009, see Crow and Turner (2014), we are grateful to the editors of that volume for permission to revise that article.

the surviving corpus of decorated medieval churches and especially the examples of aniconic decoration.<sup>2</sup> This neglect in the wider scholarly community has been aggravated, especially over the past two decades, by the concentration in most publications concerning medieval Naxos with the treasures of Byzantine art history apparent from extensive campaigns of cleaning and restoration by the Byzantine Ephorate of the Cyclades, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. We also welcome the recent restoration and cleaning programmes at Taxiarchis Monoitsia and Agia Kyriaki near Apeiranthos. But Naxos' ecclesiastical heritage extends beyond a corpus of decorated churches, it incorporates a diverse range of buildings, many undecorated but no less deserving of study which can contribute to a wider understanding of the settlements and landscapes of the island and with implications for the study of Byzantine rural communities beyond. Recent studies have estimated that there are at least 148 religious buildings dating from the Byzantine or Frankish times, of which 48 have been dated to the period from 500-900.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is concerned with those Byzantine churches on Naxos where there are surviving programmes or traces of aniconic decoration and where the forms of construction and their context suggests a date from before ca. 900. In the title of the paper, 'Archaeology' is chosen quite deliberately, instead of the terms 'architecture' or 'art history', which might be expected, partly because the authors have defined themselves as archaeologists rather than as architectural or art historians. In particular we understand our approach as archaeological since we aim to contextualise the Naxian churches within and as a component of their society and landscapes, considered over a long time scale from the early middle ages until modern times. Our involvement with these buildings arose from a research project conducted at Newcastle University in 2006-07, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This pilot study aimed to explore the potential of Historic Landscape Characterization (HLC) for understanding Mediterranean landscapes and we developed two case studies, one in Turkish Thrace and the second on Naxos. HLC is a technique which was first developed in Britain and has found wider application by landscape archaeologists throughout north-western Europe concerned with both the study and the management of historic landscapes. For our project, we selected a part of Turkish Thrace because of Jim Crow's established field work concerned with the Anastasian Wall and the aqueduct system of Constantinople. Naxos was chosen because of the large number of standing Byzantine churches set throughout diverse landscapes across the island. From this initial project we have so far published three studies.<sup>4</sup> The investigation did not involve conventional fieldwork, it was essentially a desk-based assessment utilising high-resolution satellite images and digital map data to provide a digital surface model of the two pilot studies, and in the case of Naxos we were also able to utilise archival reconnaissance air-photographs taken by the Royal Air Force in 1943. The latter were especially useful as they were able to provide a base-line for subsequent changes of land-use across the island. Within the GIS of the central part of the island which formed our study area we also set about providing a database of the published evidence for the Naxian churches with the longer term aim of studying these buildings in the local and wider landscape, and land-use and settlement context.<sup>5</sup> In the current article we aim to assess briefly the significance of part of the corpus of Naxian buildings which may be dated to the

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2. Chatzidakis (1989); Brubaker and Haldon (2001), for the wall paintings pp. 19-28, and for observations on the architecture of the churches by Robert Ousterhout, p. 5; for a wider range of examples see Lafontaine-Dosogne (1987); and most recently Panayotidi (2013), Theocharopoulou (2014); and more specifically considering the Naxian examples in Pennas (2014) and Martiniani-Reber (2014).

3. These estimates are based on the studies of Dimitrokallis (2000), first published without notes as a weekend supplement in *Kathimerini*; and Masteropoulos (2006); see now Dr Klimis Aslanidis' extensive study in his doctoral thesis (2014a), and the summary of his research included in this volume. See comparable studies for Andros collected in Pallis (2016), and especially the Early Christian centrally planned building of Agios Ioannis Theologos at Ano Korthis, pp. 65-94.

4. Crow and Turner (2009); Turner and Crow (2010); Crow, Turner and Vionis, (2011); see also Turner and Crow (Forthcoming a; Forthcoming b).

5. We are grateful to Dr Athanasios Vionis for collating the database of the churches.

early medieval period and to consider their significance to architectural, art historical and archaeology studies of the Byzantine world.

In 1968 George Dimitrokallis published a note in the *American Journal of Archaeology* drawing attention to the significance and extent of both the architectural and artistic remains from the island of Naxos.<sup>6</sup> His more detailed study specifically concerned with the architecture of the churches was published in 2000 and provides an extensive bibliography both for architectural and art historical studies from the island.<sup>7</sup> The remains of Byzantine-period wall paintings have received greater attention and the introduction and main synthesis (published in both English and Greek) was edited by Professor Manolis Chatzidakis. It includes short studies and colour illustrations of the principle churches with surviving aniconic decoration, such as Panagia Protothronos, Agios Ioannis Theologos at Adissarou, Agia Kyriaki and Agios Artemios.<sup>8</sup> An important addition to our knowledge of both the architecture and wall paintings is the recent guide published by George Masteropoulos, a former member of the Byzantine Ephorate.<sup>9</sup> Archaeological investigation has been more restricted but ceramic surface surveys have been undertaken by Dr Athanasios Vionis in the vicinity of a number of the aniconic decorated churches, including Agia Kryiaki near Apeiranthos, which are currently in preparation for publication.<sup>10</sup> In 1933 Kalogeropoulos had estimated that there were 35 'unknown' Byzantine churches on Naxos,<sup>11</sup> but as observed above this figure has now been supplemented to at least 148 overall, of which 48 examples may be dated before 1000 AD and of these perhaps 21 are recognized to have some form of aniconic decoration. Despite the relative size of Naxos in comparison to the other Cyclades these numbers far exceed the density of early medieval churches from other parts of Greece such as Crete or the Mani, and may in future studies draw comparison with the rock-cut churches of Cappadocia. For the question of the chronology of the Cappadocian aniconic paintings some scholars propose a date in the iconoclast era.<sup>12</sup> Others, notably Lesley Brubaker, argue however that the historical circumstances of the Arab raids throughout the 8th and early 9th centuries make it inherently unlikely that Cappadocia was the centre for the extensive artisanal activity represented by the aniconic decorated churches.<sup>13</sup> More recently in his seminal study of Byzantine Cappadocia, Robert Ousterhout adopts a similar argument following the research of Maria Xenaki, summarised in her discussion of the church of Karşıbecak.<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of this article, the period from the end of late antiquity to the Middle Byzantine period (600-900) will be referred to as 'early medieval' to differentiate it from later periods. It is not the purpose of this study to reassess in any detail the current art historical debate on the date of the aniconic decoration; instead we wish to review the evidence for early medieval buildings which can then be set into a wider investigation of the history of land-use and settlement from the end of antiquity to modern times. For a landscape archaeologist, what is especially valuable is the quantity of these sacred buildings, their wide dispersal in a variety of settings and the broad chronological range evident from architectural, art historical and archaeological evidence.

A distinguishing characteristic of the early wall paintings of Naxos from elsewhere in Greece and the wider Byzantine world is the frequency of multi-layered mural decoration, providing a 'stratigraphy' which situates the aniconic episode in the longer-term sequence of church decoration. Professor

6. Dimitrokallis (1968).

7. Dimitrokallis (2000).

8. Chatzidakis (1989).

9. Masteropoulos (2006), this work provides an extensive illustrated gazetteer of the churches of Naxos, including much unpublished information.

10. The preliminary results are noted in Pennas (2014), p. 173.

11. Quoted in Dimitrokallis (1968), p. 283.

12. See for example with references Thierry (2014).

13. Brubaker (2004).

14. Xenaki (2014); Ousterhout (2017) pp. 198-204 for discussion of non-figural art in Cappadocia.

Charalambos Bouras has written of this: ‘One feature of some assistance (in architectural chronology) is the wall painted decoration of the interior of the churches, the motifs and style which define a more convincing chronological sequence, though without any certainty in its assessment. Aniconic decoration is convincing evidence for dating a number of little churches in Naxos, Karpathos and Mani, as well as some monuments of Thessaloniki in the periods 726-782 and 815-843.’<sup>15</sup> While we may caution against such confidence in dating the wall paintings, the stratigraphic principle is well expressed.

An example of such a sequence is presented in the Byzantine Museum at Athens where the three successive layers rescued from the now-drowned church of the Koimisis at Episkopi in Evrytania (central Greece) are imaginatively displayed in three dimensions.<sup>16</sup> There, as with most of the Naxos examples, the aniconic phase precedes the two later periods of wall paintings, although the decorative wall motifs which are very closely paralleled in the church Agios Artemios on Naxos are also associated with the figure of Christ on the cross.<sup>17</sup> On Naxos, the second figural phase of various churches is considered to date at the very earliest to the 10th century or later; this can provide a valuable *terminus ante quem* for the aniconic phase or ‘event’. The two exceptions are Panagia Drosiani where the earliest phase of decoration has been dated to the decades before or after 600, later overlaid by painting of the 12th century,<sup>18</sup> and secondly the Panagia Protothronos in Chalki where the first phase in the apse is considered on stylistic grounds to date to the 6th century succeeded by an aniconic phase of large crosses with fishes and bread in the second phase.<sup>19</sup> Protothronos lies at the centre of a large village and is a significant survival from late antiquity since it is an example of the conversion of an Early Christian basilica of conventional form into a centrally domed long-axis three-aisled building, a phenomenon common across the Byzantine world.<sup>20</sup> The presence of a large basilica church at Chalki which has evolved architecturally through the medieval period and into modern times implies continuity of a significant settlement, whereas at other Early Christian basilicas the religious presence was often maintained by small, single nave chapels set within or over the ruins of the former basilicas.<sup>21</sup> The sequence of wall paintings from the church, whatever their exact date, argues strongly for continuity at Chalki, unlike the major 6th century church of the Katapoliani on the neighbouring island of Paros where the church is described as abandoned and partly ruined in the life of Saint Theoktiste of Lesbos.<sup>22</sup> Across Naxos the earliest churches are represented by either newly-constructed basilicas, similar to Chalki or in three instances, as temple-church conversions: at *Portora* in Chora, overlooking the port of the island’s capital, where the *hekatompedon* temple shows traces of conversion into a church;<sup>23</sup> at Yria in the immediate fertile hinterland of the ancient polis; and at Gyroulas near Ano Sangri, where the temple of Demeter was converted into a basilica with two major phases and was later replaced by a small rural chapel dedicated to Agios Ioannis Theologos.<sup>24</sup>

15. Bouras (2006), pp. 43-62, quotation from p. 54; fuller references to these examples are found in Lafontaine-Dosogne (1987).

16. See the welcome publication of the wall paintings from the church of the Koimisis at Episkopi, Theocharopoulou (2014) where the earliest phase is dated to the 9th century.

17. Theocharopoulou (2014), pp. 79-85, fig. 10, 13; for comparable examples of ‘almond-rosettes’ (*Mandelrosette*), see Brubaker and Haldon (2001), pp. 27-28; on Naxos these are best illustrated from Agios Artemios and Agios Ioannis Theologos in Martiani-Reber (2014), fig. III, 13-16. The same motif is now apparent from the recent cleaning and restoration of the church of Agia Kyriaki near Apeiranthos.

18. N. Drandakis in Chatzidakis (1989), p. 26.

19. See Panayotidi and Konstantellou in this volume, also N. Zias in Chatzidakis, (1989), pp. 42, 43, fig. 28, plan on p. 32.

20. See discussion in Ousterhout (2008), pp. 87-91.

21. The location of the surviving Byzantine churches and their significance as a way of defining continuity of ‘Byzantine Greek’ communities on Naxos in the 17th century is discussed in Slot (1991), pp. 203-204.

22. However, such negative views are questioned by Caraher, (2010), pp. 241-54, esp. p. 247; see Gregory (2006) for wider issues concerning real and imagined Aegean insular landscapes.

23. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 11, with references note 3.

24. Phase plans of the temple and church are reproduced in Dimitrokallis (2000), fig. 5, 6; the chapel has now been relocated on the site in order to facilitate the anastylosis of the classical temple, cf. Dimitrokallis (2000), fig. 3; a final report will be published in 2018, Lambrinouidakis *et al.* (forthcoming).

The remains of a number of Early Christian basilicas are found in the west of the island: inland from the main town of Chora at Agios Stephanos Fraron,<sup>25</sup> where the remains of a Middle Byzantine cross-in-square church overly traces of the earlier basilica. To the south of the capital and inland from the bay of Plaka, a single chapel of Agios Matthaïos marks the location of an earlier basilica attested by a range of architectural sculpture.<sup>26</sup> Within the interior of the island an Early Christian basilica has already been noted as the primary phase of Panagia Protothronos in Chalki, later transformed into a significant domed basilica; however, examples are also known in more remote locations. Beside the Hellenistic tower at Cheimarros there are traces of a basilica, overlain by two small single-aisled chapels, one of which is dedicated to Zoodochos Pigi.<sup>27</sup> In the district of Kaminos in the far south of the island, the cross-in-square church of Agios Ioannis Theologos overlies a three-aisled basilica, supported by piers.<sup>28</sup> From their form and architectural sculpture these basilica churches conform to types of buildings known throughout Greece and the Balkans,<sup>29</sup> but also found extensively in southern Turkey where they are frequently associated with the surviving traces of late antique villages and larger settlements.<sup>30</sup> None of the Early Christian buildings on Naxos can match the architectural complexity or rich architectural decoration of the Katapoliani church on the neighbouring island of Paros,<sup>31</sup> and with the exception of the Protothronos in Chalki, all the examples discussed so far are known from excavations or architectural fragments. One problem in tracing the evolution or transformation of building forms is the relative uniformity of construction techniques apparent from the large number of standing buildings. Although the walls of many of the medieval and later buildings are obscured by plaster and whitewash, from a large number of examples it is clear that the walls were generally built of mortared rubble work. There are only rare instances of the use of cut stones or other specific building materials which could provide some broad indication of the periods of construction.<sup>32</sup>

In previous architectural studies of the island's churches a distinction was made between Early Christian basilicas considered to date from the 5th to the early 7th centuries and the later Byzantine basilicas which are recognised as a separate 'class' of buildings considered to be later in date. In practice, many of these latter structures are comparable in size and basic plan to the buildings already discussed, although a distinguishing feature is the use of piers, rather than columns between the nave and side aisles and the appearance of apses at the end of the north and south aisles, rather than a single centrally placed apse. This strict typological approach may be questioned and other criteria need to be used;<sup>33</sup> for the purpose of the discussion we would like to propose that at least some of these buildings should be considered as potentially falling within the early medieval period. Two churches are especially deserving of attention. In the district of Tragaia, to the west of the village of Chalki, are two well

25. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 11, fig. 8; Masteropoulos (2006), no. 13, p. 101, plan fig. 59; see Bilis and Magnisali in this volume; Dimitrokallis also notes the possibility of Early Christian origins at Agios Theodoros beside a beach, near the north-west tip of the island, (2000), p. 11, 16, fig. 9; see also the recent study by Roussos

26. Dimitrokallis (2000), fig. 20; Masteropoulos (2006), no. 123, pp. 208-209, fig. 163, 164.

27. Masteropoulos (2006), p. 207, no. 115-16; excavation of the adjacent olive-press has produced pottery dateable to the 8th century, see Vionis *et al.* (2009), pp. 154, 156; the authors also note similar pottery from the converted temple site at Gyroulas, near Ano Sangri; see the forthcoming publication of Professor Lambrinouidakis and others.

28. For Agios Ioannis Theologos see Dimitrokallis, (2000), p. 38, fig. 96-97; Masteropoulos (2006), p. 207, no. 122.

29. Čurčić (2010), p. 228 for comments on smaller basilicas.

30. For Cilician churches see Hill (1996); for a recent study of village settlements see Varinlioğlu (2007); see also discussion of the basilica of Tavşan Adası on the north side of the Bodrum peninsula, Ruggieri (1990) and Ruggieri (2005), where an aniconic phase is reported; and the churches on Gemiler Island see Asano (2010) with an extensive bibliography.

31. Čurčić (2010), pp. 236-37, fig. 250, 251.

32. Dimitrokallis (2000) and Aslanidis this volume.

33. 6th century basilicas from the eastern Aegean and southern Asia Minor frequently use piers rather than columns, the distinction is more likely to be a reflection of the resources available than a 'stylistic' or typological change, see note 30 above and examples from the Dodecanese, Deligiannakis (2016); compare also the use of piers in stone-built basilicas at the late antique and early medieval settlement of Binbirkilise in Lycaonia, see Jackson, (2017) and Restle (1966).

preserved basilicas, Agios Isidoros and Taxiarchis Monoitsia. Both are located on the west side of the small settlement of Rachi and HLC analysis clearly shows that they are both situated on a ‘boundary’ between the cultivated areas of terraces and oak trees extending eastwards to the main village of Chalki and the rough, rocky pasture rising towards the west.<sup>34</sup> Agios Isidoros, the northern church of two, is the best preserved. It is a three-aisled basilica with a narrow narthex and entrances on the south side. In its first phase, there were rectangular piers dividing the high nave from the side aisles, and it had a timber roof, indicated by a row of beam slots. In later phases the roof and nave walls were supported by a series of barrel vaults over the side aisles and central nave, and the space between the medial walls between the aisles and the nave was later supported by wide, lateral pointed arcades. Although the central barrel vault is shown by Dimitrokallis to be a uniform curve, in practice this also displays a distinctly pointed shape. As with many of the Naxos churches there is very clear evidence to show that the main windows were significantly narrowed over time.<sup>35</sup> No painted decoration survives, but there are fragments of relief carving probably deriving from a chancel screen, which is likely to be 6th century in date. Carved into the two lintels on the south side are naïve carvings of a cross and a chrismon, unlike other more conventional Byzantine carved decoration known from the island.<sup>36</sup> The second church of the Taxiarchis Monoitsia is less well preserved but has been recently subject to an extensive programme of restoration which has revealed early wall paintings, possibly dating to the Early Christian period. There are no traces of aniconic decoration and the primary figural decoration was later covered over. The aisles and nave are divided by arcades supported on rectangular piers. The arcade on the south side was blocked in the medieval period, presumably after the collapse or demolition of the south aisle.<sup>37</sup>

Aniconic wall decoration is found and recorded from a variety of types of buildings, the majority of which are single-aisled, often domed, churches. Three of the most complete examples with aniconic programmes are Agios Ioannis at Adissarou, Agios Artemios at Stavros and Agia Kyriaki near Apeiranthos.<sup>38</sup> However a number of other forms of churches preserve aniconic decoration, including the cave church of Panagia Kaloritissa<sup>39</sup> and the small cruciform church of Agios Ermolaos near Apeiranthos.<sup>40</sup> There is significant variety in the plan and forms of these buildings but overall the majority are small in size and many could be described as *erimoklisides*, isolated small churches often located outside the main villages and settlements.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the basilical churches of Protothronos in Chalki and an earlier phase of the monastery of Photodoti<sup>42</sup> aniconic decoration also survives at the basilica of Panagia Monastiriottissa near Engares in the north of the island.<sup>43</sup> (**fig. 1**) The church is in an extremely

34. See Turner and Crow (2010), fig. 2.

35. Dimitrokallis (2000), pp. 16, 19, n. 18, plans fig. 12, 13, 14, photographs fig. 15, 16, window detail fig. 196, 197; Masteropoulos (2006), pp. 171, 175, fig. 126.

36. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 69, fig. 229, 230; a simple cross is incised into the lintel of the nearby church of the Taxiarchis Monoitsia.

37. Tsafou (2015).

38. See Table 1 for a list of all aniconic and possible aniconic churches; the three main churches are discussed and illustrated in Chatzidakis (1989) pp. 50–65; at Agia Kyriaki the narthex and side aisle are secondary, see Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 44, fig. 112–116, see a discussion of architecture of this church and of other domed buildings associated with aniconic decoration by Klimis Aslanidis (2014b) and in this volume.

39. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 26.

40. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 27, fig. 47–51; Masteropoulos (2006), p. 219, fig. 29, fig. 117–78; aniconic decoration is also known from recent restoration work at Photodoti but remains unpublished, see Masteropoulos (2006), p. 209; Chatzidakis (1989), p. 11, alludes to aniconic decoration from the early tri-conch church of Panagia Drossiani but this is not reported in Masteropoulos.

41. Kalas (2009); Gerstel (2015), pp. 10–11; see also the examples of small churches with village settlements in the detailed survey of the environs of Kyaneai, in central Lycia, Kolb (2008); for a historian’s observations on the phenomenon of smaller ‘private’ churches in the Middle Byzantine period, see Neville (2004), pp. 126–28.

42. For Photodotis see Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 17, fig. 18–20; Pennas (2014), pp. 171–72; Masteropoulos (2006), p. 209, fig. 163–66; Aslanidis (2014), pp. 60–87.

43. Dimitrokallis (2000), p. 23, fig. 37–39; Masteropoulos (2006), pp. 93, 97, fig. 54; Aslanidis (2014), pp. 123–26.

poor state of preservation but the aniconic decoration survives in the ruined apse as the primary layer later hacked into by craftsmen laying the succeeding coating of plaster for painting. The building as it stands indicates several phases of rebuilding and additions,<sup>44</sup> but in size it belongs to the class of single-aisled basilica noted above. Of these structures, we have seen that the church of Agios Isidoros in Rachi displays fragments of architectural decoration and external carving indicative of either late antiquity or the early medieval period. The aniconic decoration from Panagia Monastiriotissa is also suggestive of an early date.<sup>45</sup> As observed before, a full discussion of the chronology and cultural inspirations of Naxian aniconic decoration remains outside the scope of the current paper. However it is worth commenting that the debate amongst cultural and art historians remains polarised, with some scholars recognising an association between the aniconic decoration in churches with the iconoclast policies of the Isaurian emperors, Leo III and Constantine V, and especially Theophilos, while others emphatically reject this connection.<sup>46</sup> In denying any such association Brubaker and Haldon have observed: ‘aniconic in general appears to signal an inability to fund (or find) a well-trained artisan as much as, or even more than, it is to indicate iconoclast tendencies.’ Whilst it is possible to question the direct association of Constantinopolitan policies with a local decorative phenomenon, from Naxos the surviving decoration at Agios Ioannis Theologos at Adissarou and the diversity of aniconic images seen elsewhere across the island hardly reflect the poverty of imagination and ingenuity as expressed in such a negative assessment<sup>47</sup> (figs. 2, 3 and 4).

Unsurprisingly many of these differences of interpretation arise from the chronological uncertainties which characterise the early medieval period. Compared with earlier and later periods, historical texts are more limited, inscriptions are rare<sup>48</sup> and the ceramic record which for late antiquity provides the archaeologist with a valuable chronological tool remains imprecisely understood. In such a climate of uncertainty it is easy to fasten onto ‘historical realities’ and to read texts too literally. One such problem which especially affects the early medieval history of the Aegean was the impact of Arab naval raiding and the growth of piracy in a sea formerly secured through the *Pax Romana*. How far the old security really existed has been challenged by Hordern and Purcell in their wide-ranging study of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>49</sup> Once Arab armies had secured the Levantine ports of Syria and Palestine and the harbour of Alexandria in 645, Byzantium faced for the first time a major hostile naval power in the eastern Mediterranean. The Arab fleets could threaten not only the coasts of southern Asia Minor but the capital itself, notably in two major combined naval and land sieges in 667-668 and 717. Both

44. Dimitrokallis (2000), fig. 39.

45. It should be observed however that at Agios Pantalemon Lakomersina near Danakos, Acheimastou-Potamianou (1986), p. 376, n. 105, here the aniconic decoration may be seen in the earliest phase of decoration, however it is succeeded by figurative paintings which are considered to date to the late 6th or 7th centuries, and therefore must be considered not to date to the 8th to 9th centuries; I am most grateful to Theodora Konstantellou for discussion and providing images of these decorative motifs. For the importance of 6th decorative (non-figural) forms in Justinian’s Great Church of Agia Sophia in Constantinople see now Tetriatnikov (2017).

46. The former view is clearly expressed in his introduction by Chatzidakis (1989), 11; and see especially the careful exposition by Acheimastou-Potamianou in Chatzidakis (1989), pp. 50-57; others attribute the works to a specific reign, Vasilaki-Karakatsani in Chatzidakis (1989), 63; for a contrary perspective see Brubaker and Haldon (2001), pp. 4, 24.

47. For an alternative perspective highlighting the decoration of Agios Ioannis Theologos as evidence for ‘une grande créativité’, see Martiniani-Reber (2014), pp. 82-84; see also the comments of Acheimastou-Potamianou (1986), esp. p. 374; for the complex theological and liturgical meaning apparent in imagery of the iconoclast age see the discussion of the mosaics of the church of the Dormition at Nicaea, Auzepy (2016), and for examples from Cappadocia, see Ousterhout (2017), especially images with ‘colourful decorative patterns and frequently jewelled crosses’, pp. 198-99, from Mustafapaşa and Kızıl Çukur, fig. 2.27, 2.28.

48. There is no systematic study of the painted inscriptions from the aniconic churches and an analysis of the changing palaeographic forms may provide a clearer and objective indication of chronology, we are grateful to Dr Maria Xenaki for this suggestion.

49. Hordern and Purcell (2000), pp. 153-60.

attempts were defeated and it might be questioned how far there continued to be a regular threat to the archipelago of the Aegean before the capture of Crete by the Andalus Arabs in 826-827.<sup>50</sup>

Much of the current historical and art-historical discourse stresses the disruption attributed to piracy and the Arabs.<sup>51</sup> But the textual references are very limited, and historical interpretations are often selective and partial. Thus, in her discussion of the Aegean coastland and islands, H el ene Ahrweiler relates how Greece and the islands opposed Leo III's iconoclast policies and their unsuccessful and disastrous naval attack on Constantinople in 727. However she chooses to ignore that his son Constantine V repopulated Constantinople from precisely the same regions in 754/5 after the last, fatal iteration of the Justinianic plague in the city,<sup>52</sup> or the contribution of 'the 500 clay-workers from Hellas and the islands' drafted by Constantine V for the reconstruction of the Thracian aqueduct of Constantinople in 766.<sup>53</sup> No one can doubt the threats the Byzantine world faced throughout the 7th to 9th centuries, however they were not uniform and there needs to be greater care when invoking wider historic events to explain local often poorly documented narratives.

The effect of new sea-borne threats to the security of the island can be recognised in the great fortress of Apalirou located in the district of Marathos, on a south-western spur of the island's central mountain core. The rocky hilltop rises to a height of 474 m with extensive views across the south-west coast and towards neighbouring islands. The fortress is thought to have been abandoned following the Frankish occupation of the island after 1207 and comprises a well-built mortared circuit wall, with rows of substantial cisterns and extensive traces of dwellings on the summit and on the flanks of the hill-top.<sup>54</sup> Within a radius of three kilometres from Apalirou, in the district of Lathrino to the west and Marathos to the east and south are located several churches, including Agios Ioannis Theologos at Adissarou, displaying some of the most carefully articulated examples of aniconic decoration, and Agios Stephanos in Marathos.<sup>55</sup> On the summit of the fortress are the prominent ruins of the basilical church of Agios Georgios, in form and scale comparable to the structures of Agios Isidoris in Rachi and the Panagia Monastiriotissa near Engares. As yet none of these sites offer unequivocal dating evidence,<sup>56</sup> but the surviving traces of early carvings and aniconic decoration we have noted provide a strong indicator for an early medieval date which in turn enables us to begin to 'populate' the ecclesiastical landscapes of the island over time. In addition to the 21 churches with evidence for aniconic decoration listed in Table 1, we could add as part of this early medieval collection the churches of Agios Isidoros and Agios Giorgios at Apalirou Kastro, and probably also the converted temple church of Gyroulas where 8th century pottery is known.<sup>57</sup>

As a surviving assemblage of buildings predating ca. 900, this is a remarkable group both in number and variety. Archaeological studies of the Greek countryside aim to reveal the long-term history and human ecology through detailed surface survey and the collection of a wide range of artefacts.<sup>58</sup>

50. See Ahrweiler (1966), esp. pp. 38-40; Magdalino this volume.

51. See Christidis (1981) followed by many, including Mastoropoulos (2006), p. 41; see, however, comments in Crow, Turner and Vionis (2011), p. 116; for a recent discussion of the military and naval organisation of the empire at the time of Leo VI with a more positive reading of Byzantine naval capabilities, see Haldon (2014), pp. 89-118; esp. pp. 379-82.

52. Mastoropoulos (2006), pp. 43-44, Theophanes *Chron.* AM 6218; for Constantine V's transfer of the island and Greek population see Theophanes *Chron.* AM 6247. This action might indicate that some at least of the Aegean islanders had pro-iconoclast sympathies, although it may alternatively suggest that this remained a relatively well-populated region; see Magdalino this volume.

53. Theophanes *Chron.* A.M. 6258, for these works see Crow, Bardill and Bayliss, (2008), esp. pp. 19-20, 104-106.

54. Lock (1995), pp. 216-17; Mastoropoulos (2006), pp. 151-53, fig. 112, 113; see chapters by Hill, Odegard and Roland in this volume.

55. Others include Agios Stephanos in Kato Marathos, Mastoropoulos (2006), p. 153, which is described as having an initial aniconic phase as well as evidence of an earlier Christian structure.

56. See chapters by Hill, Odegard and Roland this volume.

57. See Lambrinouidakis and Ohnesorg (forthcoming).

58. The contribution of survey for the understanding of the late antique and later periods is discussed in Bintliff (2000).



For the post-Classical period on Naxos this has been restricted to limited surveys carried out on behalf of the Byzantine Ephorate at Agia Kyriaki and elsewhere as noted above. Such surveys are normally concerned with those fragments of the past found in the plough soil: potsherds, flints and spolia. Instead, on Naxos in the early medieval period, we possess a distribution of nearly two-dozen buildings reflecting the spiritual and temporal concerns of the Byzantine islanders. The locations of these churches and chapels potentially offer insights into changing patterns of settlement and how these communities negotiated with one another and with those unseen forces beyond the *chorio*.<sup>59</sup> The quantity of surviving buildings and their location raise a number of questions of scale and of ownership: do they respond to the needs of communities or reflect increasing patterns of personal devotion and patronage? How far do the differing distributions of Early Christian basilicas and later smaller churches represent changing places of settlement? Can they be seen to reflect communal and economic resilience in a period normally seen as in crisis and retreat? We always need to remember that they constitute part of a farming landscape which responded to the changing external circumstances; conditions which the historical sources only partially reveal for much of the Byzantine period. Beyond the islands, there is a wider question as to how far the density of aniconic decorated buildings apparent in certain places in Greece and often distant from major centres, including Naxos, the inner Mani, Evrytania and elsewhere constitutes a 'normal' pattern of devotional buildings in the rural Byzantine world. To these questions Naxos offers more, as George Anomeritis' souvenir album of aerial photographs from Tragaia demonstrates, for the churches themselves exist within landscapes of ancient oak and olive groves and of terraced fields and stone-walled enclosures.<sup>60</sup> These preserve a history of land-use and land-tenure, and the challenge of future research will be to integrate the exceptional resource of early Byzantine medieval churches and other monuments within the historic agricultural and devotional landscapes of the island.<sup>61</sup>

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59. See recent studies by Gerstal (2005), p. 166; Kalas (2009), esp. pp. 87-88, and Nixon (2006).

60. Anomeritis (2008), the volume is subtitled 'An insular sacred 'Mystra' in central Naxos'.

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**Table**

Church name	“Parish”	District	CHATZIDAKIS 1989	MASTOROPOULOS 2006
Agios Theodoros	Aggathiades	Aghia		Mast no. 11
Agia Kyriaki Kallonis	Stavromenies	Apeiranthos	Chatz p. 34	Mast no. 141
Agios Georgios	Apeiranthos	Apeiranthos	Chatz p. 30	Mast no. 130
Agios Ermolaos Kalava	Apeiranthos	Apeiranthos		Mast no. 132-133
Agios Georgios	Ropiki	Danakos	Chatz p. 36	Mast no. 127-128
Moni Christou Photodoti	Danakos	Danakos		Mast no. 123
Agios Pantalemon Lakomersina	Lakous	Danakos	Chatz p. 32	Mast no. 138
Agios Ioannis Theologos	Danakos	Danakos	Chatz p. 29	Mast no. 125
Panagia Monastiriottissa	Engares	Engares	Chatz p. 41	Mast no. 5
Agios Efstathios	Mikraria	Filoti-Aria	Chatz p. 21	Mast no. 112
Agios Dimitrios Chalandron	Chalandra	Kinidaros	Chatz p. 37	Mast no. 142
Agios Stephanos	Kato Marathos	Marathos	Chatz p. 18	Mast no. 67
Agios Georgios Melanon	Melanes	Melanes		Mast no. 36
Parekklisi Agiou Akepsima	Polichni	Plaka-Avlia		Mast no. 25
Agia Kyriaki Kechron	Tripodes	Plaka-Avlia		Mast no. 21
Prophitis Ilias	Messi Potamia	Potamia		Mast no. 32
Panagia Kaloritissa	Ano Sangri	Sangri	Chatz p. 11	Mast no. 55
Agios Nikolaos	Ano Sangri	Sangri	Chatz p. 12	Mast no. 41
Agios Ioannis Theologos Adissarou	Lathrina	Sangri		Mast no. 59
Agios Artemios	Sangri	Tragaia	Chatz p. 10	Mast no. 46
Agioi Apostoloi Metochiou	Akadimoi	Tragaia	Chatz p. 8?	Mast no. 90
Agios Ioannis Theologos	Kaloxylas	Tragaia	Chatz p. 6	Mast no. 92-93
Panagia Protothronos	Chalki	Tragaia	Chatz p. 1	Mast no. 77

*Table 1.* Churches with known and suggested aniconic decoration on Naxos  
(compiled by Dr Athanasios Vionis)



*Figure 1.* The church of the Panagia Monastiriotissa near Engares, successive phases of wall paintings with aniconic decoration in the earliest phase. (Sam Turner).



*Figure 2.* Agios Ioannis Adissarou with Kastro Apalirou in the background (Sam Turner).



Figure 3. Laser scan image of Agios Ioannis Adissarou (Alex Turner and Sam Turner, McCord Centre, Newcastle University).



Figure 4. Photographic view of the apse decoration of Agios Ioannis Adissarou (Jim Crow).