

Across Larnaka Bay: Recent Investigations of a Late Antique Harbor Town in Southeast Cyprus

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I. Introduction

Since 2003, the Pyla-*Koutsopetria* Archaeological Project (PKAP) has explored a 5 square kilometer area of the coastal zone of Pyla, the village located 9 kilometers northeast of the center of Larnaka (ancient Kition). The center of our fieldwork has been the Late Roman site of *Koutsopetria* where in the early 1990s the Department of Antiquities excavated a small part of a well-appointed Early Christian basilica complex revealing wall painting, moulded gypsum architectural decoration, and *opus sectile* floors. A subsequent reconnaissance survey of the surrounding coastline noted the significant concentration of architectural fragments and ceramics from the Late Roman period in the area. As a result, in 2003, a group from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, University of North Dakota, and Messiah College began a program to document the site in greater detail. Over the last 5 seasons of fieldwork, PKAP has documented this extensive assemblage of archaeological material as well as the visible architecture, environmental resources, and proximate hinterland of this substantial coastal site. One important conclusion of our research that we wish to highlight today is that *Koutsopetria* represents a type of site poorly researched in the Late Antique eastern Mediterranean—coastal towns of a middling size, situated in status and size somewhere between smaller villages and larger *polis* centers, garnishing real wealth and presumably economic independence. The size and material from our site clearly reinforces the burgeoning image of a prosperous island during Late Antiquity, and also confirms that the prosperity persisted well into the 7th century even as the political situation in the Eastern Mediterranean deteriorated. That *Koutsopetria* town flourished in the hinterland of ancient Kition, across Larnaka Bay, also speaks directly to the relationship of town and territory and the "fate of the ancient city" in the period of Late Antiquity.

II. Site Description

The site of *Koutsopetria* has numerous environmental advantages which made it an ideal location of settlement in the Late Roman period as well as earlier periods. It sits adjacent to a low-lying coastal area that geological investigation by Professor Jay Noller of Oregon State University and the Cyprus Department of Antiquities have identified as an infilled

embayment. While we currently await the analysis of a series of deep core samples extracted in 2006, the results of our survey in the area give us confidence that this area did serve as a harbor during the prehistoric and historical periods. A series of imposing coastal heights—Vigla, Mavrospilos, and Kokkikokremos—dominate the embayment and site. Today these abrupt coastal ridges provide spectacular views across the bay to Larnaka, and form a natural northern border to the site. Inland and to the east of the coastal plain and ridges lie the fertile red soils of the Kokkinochoria which must have brought the same agricultural prosperity to the region in the past as it does today. This environmentally well-endowed micro-region has only escaped the frantic touristic development of the modern Cypriot coast because the entire coastal region of Pyla falls within the Western British Sovereign Area – an area administered by the British government and leased to the British Ministry of Defense who use it for firing ranges. Notwithstanding the modern use of this territory, the fertility of the soils, the prominent coastal heights, and the embayment—existing at a local crossroads of land and sea—present an environment capable of sustaining settlement. The archaeological evidence bears this out; in addition to the Late Roman remains, chance finds have confirmed an important Classical and Hellenistic presence on Vigla and excavations have revealed prosperous Late Bronze Age sites at Kokkinokremos, Verghies, and Steno.

The archaeology, topography, and political geography of the coastal region of Pyla offered a fruitful opportunity to study a Late Antique site in terms of the long-term use of its immediate micro-region. Moreover, the site's coastal position near a probable ancient harbor suggested that it would also have benefited from access to maritime exchange networks, which recommended an understanding of *Koutsopetria* in terms of its various spatial relationships, including the city of Kition across the bay, coastal and inland regions of Cyprus, and other provinces of the Mediterranean. Consequently, we developed an interdisciplinary archaeological project with the overall aim to document the material culture at *Koutsopetria* and compare it to the finds from other coastal sites both on the island and throughout the Eastern Mediterranean more generally.

III. The Archaeological Survey

The core of this research was an intensive pedestrian survey begun in 2004 and continued each year since, which was designed to sample for artifact density and to collect a representative sample of the material present on the surface in order to assess functional and chronological variation. We established a grid of 252 40 x 40 m grid squares over the entire region of *Koutsopetria* with the exception of the infilled harbor which we surveyed using

larger units. We used 4 fieldwalkers spaced at 10 m intervals to sample 20% of the surface for artifact density. We also instructed each walker to collect every unique artifact seen in order to sample the kinds of artifacts present in each unit.

Our first four seasons of fieldwork focused on the narrow and gently undulating coastal plain called *Koutsopetria*. Our goal for this phase of the project was to determine whether the material on the surface was contemporary with the 7th century material found in the early Christian basilica excavated in the early 1990s,¹ and to determine the extent of the site on the coastal plain.

In 2007 we expanded our investigation to include the abrupt coastal heights of Vigla, Mavrosipilos, and Kokkinokremos. Informal survey had revealed remarkably high levels of artifact density atop the ridge of Vigla and we were also aware of a partially published collection of metallic finds collected from the ridge top that included a large assemblage of inscribed Hellenistic sling pellets. These finds suggested, along with the name, that the height had both significant earlier phases and a military function at some point during antiquity. To document the material on these heights, we expanded our pedestrian survey and mapped thoroughly the coastal ridges' steep southern slopes which were strewn with enormous quantities of pottery.

Between 2003 and 2007, we complemented intensive survey with the analysis of finds from the excavated early Christian basilica, geological assessments, aerial photography, thorough recording of all features and buildings at the site, and, beginning in 2007, an intensive campaign of geophysical work (electrical resistivity) on both the plain and the ridges. Based on the variety of data that we have gathered, we hope to conduct limited excavations in several areas in 2008. We can summarize the results of our fieldwork as follows:

IV. Results

A. Ceramic Finds

First, in terms of the most common kind of material observed at the site—ceramic pottery—our field teams counted over 20,000 ceramic artifacts of which they collected about half. Over 80% of the analyzed pottery dates to the Late Roman period suggesting that our initial impressions of that period being dominant were correct. Indeed, the collected data indicates

¹ The evidence for this late date is numismatic. The effect of the Arab raids of 649 on Kition is not at all clear. For a brief discussion, cf. A. Papageorghiou, "Cities and Countryside at the End of Antiquity," in *Sweet Land of Cyprus*, ed. A.A.M. Bryer and G.S. Georghallides (Nicosia 1993), 38-39.

that Late Roman pottery extended over an area of 40 ha, incorporating all of the undeveloped coastal plain and some of the coastal heights as well. The survey, in other words, showed that *Koutsopetria* was an extensive site in Late Antiquity with abundant evidence for connections to the vital exchange currents of the period.

A discussion of finewares bears this out. The number of finewares for the Classical, Hellenistic, and Early Roman periods remain fairly low, but show a dramatic increase in the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period starting in the late 4th, early 5th centuries. The numbers of finewares continue to grow steadily through the 6th and 7th centuries. In fact, 61% of the datable Late Roman/Early Byzantine finewares are from the 7th centuries, with the most common forms being ARS 105, CRS 9 and 11, and PHW10. An examination of local wares, especially CRS, shows that they steadily increased from the 5th to 7th centuries, but that the number of the imported wares ARS and PHW fluctuated, with growth in the 5th century followed by a decline in the 6th century and then rapid growth in the 7th century. Compared to other surveys on Cyprus—particularly those of large sites at *Kopetra* and *Maroni-Petrera*—we have noted a far higher proportion of ARS and lower proportion of PHW. It is also interesting to note that our PHW is rather concentrated at the site, appearing in areas where ARS is less common.

Amphoras from all periods make up approximately 15% of our total quantity of pottery from *Pyla-Koutsopetria*. LR1 amphora presumably imported from the western half of the island, was the largest category of Late Roman amphora, accounting for 30% of the total amphoras from all periods;² surely the large numbers of LR1 amphoras at *Pyla-Koutsopetria* indicate the importance of the site within local currents of exchange of this type of vessel. Also present in significant, if lesser quantities, are Late Roman 2 amphora from the Aegean.

Finally, roof tiles represent 35% of all Late Roman material. The majority of tiles come from the fields immediately adjacent to the excavated basilica. The most distinctive shape are the large, heavy Corinthian style tiles which appear in a variety of fabrics, including one of a yellow color which has been associated with production sites on the Mesoria plain.³ This type of tile is not uncommon on other sites on the island and in shipwrecks off the coast, suggesting that such local production centers may have supplied many Late Roman building

² Hugh Elton, "The Economy of Southern Asia Minor and LR1 Amphorae," in Esparraguerra, Garrigós, and Ontiveros (eds.), *LRCW I: Late Roman Coarse Wares. Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean*, Oxford 2005, 691-692.

³ M. Rautman, *A Cypriot Village of Late Antiquity: Kalavassos-Kopetra in the Vasilikos Valley*, Portsmouth, RI 2003, 53-55, 213.

needs on the island. Their abundance at *Koutsopetria*, in any case, indicates coastal relationships with inland areas of the island.

It is also interesting to note the sudden absence of finewares from the 8th century onwards. In fact, the number of sherds of any type (coarse, cooking, or fineware) for the 8th to 14th century are very small. Perhaps this sudden and dramatic decline is indicative of the Arab raids of 649 which decimated the Cypriot coast and as a wealthy coastal settlement, Pyla-Koutsopetria would have been a tempting target for Arab raiders.

B. Features & Buildings

Beyond recording artifact distributions, our survey documented the distribution of features across the landscape. In fact, in the course of our investigations in the coastal plain alone, we recorded some 541 features, which included numerous cut gypsum, limestone blocks, column shafts, doorjams, olive press equipment, several building foundations, and cisterns. These, in combination with ubiquitous mortar, cobble, and rubble remains, indicate buildings distributed across much of the site as well as the general complexity and wealth of the ancient town.

Recording features on the southern slope of Vigla yielded some particularly exciting results in the summer of 2007—several traces of well-preserved fortification wall that appear to encompass the entire coastal height.⁴ The best preserved sections of wall comprise of two faces laid in irregular courses of local limestone generally less than a meter in length. Few stones show any signs of being worked. The core of the wall consists of cobble embedded within a fine-grained gypsum mortar visible along the entire course of the wall. This kind of construction technique, in combination with similarities between the mortar on the wall and mortar in the excavated Late Roman remains on the plain, suggests a Late Roman date for the entire fortification.

The wall traces the contours of the plateau just below the top. The longest stretch of the wall extends for nearly 125 meters along Vigla's southern face—some 80 meters of which preserved both an outer and inner face—enabling us to determine a wall thickness of nearly 2 meters. Erosion on the western and eastern sides of the hill has made the exact course of the wall difficult to discern, but the surviving fragments along the western side of the hill suggest that it took on a slightly concave shape to accommodate the shape of the height. On the

⁴ The basic works on Late Roman-Early Byzantine fortifications are: C. Balandier, "The defensive works of Cyprus during the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods (4th-7th century A.D.)", *RDAC* (2003), 261-273;

eastern side of the hill, the wall arcs from the northeast to the southeast where it joins the north face. At this point, set on the bedrock, there remains a short stretch of curving wall built of stones set in mortar but less than 1 m in width. While erosion of the bedrock has significantly changed the eastern slope of the hill, it is possible that this curving wall is the remains of a circular or semi-circular tower at the wall's southern most extent.

The northern face of the fortification appears to be the most complex architecturally, which must have to do with the gentler slopes at the northwest end of the acropolis—the natural point of access in antiquity as today. At the northwest corner of the fortification, we documented a substantial structure with a complex of walls with significant mortar and rubble core preserved; it is tempting to imagine them associated with a tower or gate set to defend the most likely route of access to the hill. Along the northern face, the most striking feature (visible especially in new aerial photographs taken over the summer) is a pair of parallel bedrock cuts arranged some 20 meters apart forming a dry moat along the northern approach to the Vigla ridge. A stretch of mortared wall set 2 meters back from the southern side of the bedrock cut runs parallel to the cut for nearly 5 m. While the northern face of this wall is lost and little of the core is preserved, its location suggests that it was topped by a wall approximately the same thickness as the wall running along the southern face of the ridge. The substantial taphros would have served to add height to the wall along its vulnerable northern face.⁵

C. Geophysical Survey

In addition to surface finds and recording features, we also implemented a major program of geophysical fieldwork summer 2007. Electrical resistivity work in several places in the coastal plain suggest rectilinear subsurface remains, but the more interesting results came from the height of Vigla which was subject to extensive (4800 sq. meters) electrical resistivity probing. Our preliminary analysis of the results has produced the somewhat surprising conclusion that the monument atop Vigla is an Early Christian basilica with an eastern apse, two clearly demarcated aisles, a western narthex and atrium, and a complex of annexes to the north of the body of the apse. The apse appears to have an interior diameter of around 5 meters which would make it similar in size to the apse excavated by the Department

A.H.S. Megaw, "Le fortificazioni bizantine a Cipro," *Corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina* 32 (Ravenna 1985), 199-231.

⁵ It is interesting that this width of approximately 20 m is close to the width recommended in both the anonymous 6th century manual *de re strategica* – 18.74 m – and the width of the taphros at both Constantinople and Carthage. Gregory, *Isthmia* V, 135-136.

of Antiquities on the plain below. The building is slightly over 25 meters in length (from narthex wall to cord of the apse) and slightly less than 20 meters in width. This marks this building as among the larger class of basilicas on the island; for example, it would be considerably larger than buildings at other rural sites, like Kopetra, and perhaps best comparable to Ay. Georgios-*Peyias* Basilica I. The ratio of length to width stands at around 1.3-1.5, which is also consistent with other basilicas on the island. In 2008, we hope to conduct limited trial excavations in this area to "ground truth" the geophysical results.

V. CONCLUSION

The abundant and wealthy finds from the site of Koutsopetria and Vigla will undoubtedly expand our understanding of the so-called "busy countryside" of Late Antique Cyprus. Like elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean, Late Antiquity no longer represents the end-game of antiquity, but rather a uniquely prosperous and culturally sophisticated transitional period. The site of *Koutsopetria* was undoubtedly dependent on the continued functioning of longstanding, trans-Mediterranean exchange networks. The concentration of wealth and monumental architecture, however, outside of the traditional urban centers on the island, suggest that some ancient patterns had begun to change in significant ways. The construction of churches and massive fortifications represented significant investments in the site and commitments to new institutions that stood outside the traditional urban based ancient hierarchies. How the site of *Koutsopetria* related in turn to Late Antique Kition, across Larnaka Bay, is a question that we will only answer with continuing survey and excavation.