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The archaeological context

The excavations at the Hill of Agios Georgios, Nicosia, from 1996-2010 have revealed remains from several periods in the long history of Nicosia and have provided considerable information concerning its development, hitherto not adequately documented by archaeological evidence.

The prehistoric (Chalcolithic) and later (Byzantine and Medieval) remains will not be discussed in this article, which will be focusing primarily on the Archaic period, the chronological context of the silver coin hoard found in 2006. The hoard, the oldest found as yet in Cyprus constitutes significant evidence not only for the numismatic history of Cyprus but also for the history of Nicosia itself and its possible identification with Ledroi, one of the city-kingdoms of Cyprus, traditionally considered to have been located near or in Nicosia.

Remains of the Hellenistic settlement were revealed, which seems to have been bound on the west by the river Pedieos and to have extended further to the east and the north. It was built on a plan consisting of building complexes, parallel streets on an east-west direction terminating at a long wide street from north to south. Within the complexes evidence for various activities such as weaving, metalsmithing and ceramic production was found. An inscription reading Φιλαδέλφου Αραιόνης, terracotta figurines, and other cult material indicate continuity in religious practices on the site from the Cypro-Archaic period.

Structures of the Archaic period were found, heavily compromised by the later overlying phases throughout the site. On the corner of Skyros Street and Demosthenes Severis Avenue remains were found of a rectangular building, subdivided into at least three smaller units; the central, more spacious one, entered through a courtyard paved with large irregular slabs. Signs of fire were traced on the walls and floor of this phase. Pits dug into bedrock, both inside and outside the building, contained pottery dated to the Cypro-Archaic II period and, mostly fragmentary, terracotta figurines. Its function will be determined once the study of all the material from this structure is completed but it would not be unlikely that it may have been a sanctuary.

Finds in the area were generally few, consisting of broken stone grinding tools, fragments
of coarse clay vessels with low walls, a few loom weights and small deposits of ochre, all indicating activities that were linked to production.

Similar remains were also noted in Areas III, VI and XV, and consist of only short stretches of interior walls and a large number of pits which contained cult and workshop material. In Area III, the eastern slope of the hill, several stone-lined pits were found filled with large quantities of ashes, animal bones, and fragmentary terracotta figurines (a chariot model, a mask, and so on). A little further up, on the summit of the hill (Area IV), pits cut into the bedrock, some stone-lined, also contained fragmentary terracotta figurines, below a floor surface. The structure to which it belonged must have been destroyed during the levelling for the construction of the Anglican church directly above.\(^5\) Pits were located throughout the entire excavated area (Areas X, XII, XIII and XIV), some plastered with clay and others containing ashes and traces of heavy burning, which may have originally been used as furnaces or kilns and were later reused for the deposition of occupation debris. Within them stone tools (for grinding and crushing) and loom weights, as well as a variety of raw materials for the manufacture of clay, stone or metal objects were found. A preliminary assessment of the contents of the pits indicates that the earliest material consists of a few sherd of pictorial pottery in Bichrome Ware of Cypro-Archaic I\(^6\) but for the most part, the pottery dates to the Cypro-Archaic II or the early part of the Cypro-Classical period. Impressive architectural members, some reused in the later walls, indicate the former presence of substantial structures. It is evident that a total reorganisation of the settlement was deemed necessary in the 4th century BC. The eradication of the remaining structures and the extensive scatter of terracotta and stone figurines may thus be explained. Fragments of larger stone sculptures were noted, reused as building material or discarded in the fill, and several fragments of oversize terracotta figurines, in conjunction with architectural material, clearly indicate the presence of one or more sanctuaries in the area in the Archaic and Classical periods.

The most common types include heads of women wearing a headdress, wreathed youths, flute players, draped figures holding votive objects, doves, lions and sphinxes. Several figurines of varying sizes of a horned male figure seated on a throne flanked by rams seem to be of particular importance.\(^7\) There are also numerous unfinished statuettes which, together with the unworked limestone slabs arranged in piles, found at various points of the site, and the multitude of unidentifiable unfinished stone artefacts, indicate that the manufacture of stone cultic objects may have been one of the occupations of the inhabitants, from the Archaic period onwards. Amongst the votive objects, there are numerous stone altars, some with incised and painted decoration. There is a range of types
of terracotta figurines of the Archaic period, such as male figures with pointed - or other types of - hat, riders on horseback, warriors on chariots, female figures holding a child, playing the tambourine, and, in one case, upholding her breasts. Also common are terracotta figurines of bulls and horses. Most of the figurines were made in the “snowman” technique, a method later supplanted by the use of moulds, as indicated by the terracotta mould of a face, found in one of the sewage channels. Unfinished specimens, misfired or deformed wasters and pieces of unfired pottery confirm that industrial activities included the manufacture of terracotta figurines and perhaps pottery. Pieces of unfired pottery and unfired clay found in the tombs of Ayioi Omoloyites further corroborate the evidence from the corresponding settlement.

The finds and the silver coin hoard

Excavations on a plot at the corner between Hadjopoulos and Nikokreon Street (CS XXI/54.2.1, plot no. 1221), evidently the extension of the same site to the east, have also revealed architectural remains of the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods. A wide wall in an east-west direction was noted, associated with pottery of the Cypro-Archaic II period [Fig. 1]. Two parallel walls from north to south direction probably divided walls of adjoining rooms. Parts of the floor and traces of hearths have been preserved on either side of these walls. The workshop remains again indicate activities related with metallurgy, while a number of unfired loom weights also provide evidence for the manufacture of clay objects. An imported clay lamp, amphorae and Attic pottery, amongst other objects, indicate contact with the outside world. A stone thymiaterion has also been found which is still without any parallels; it is in the shape of a bearded man standing in front of a tree trunk - with bunches of dates (?) hanging -, and holding a bunch in his left hand. On the south part of this area, a hoard of 36 silver coins was found just above bedrock [Fig. 2]; it was possibly contained in a purse of textile, as suggested by traces of cloth on some of the coins, and, although they seem to be redeposited as a result of modern disturbance, they most likely belong to the site, since nothing extraneous was noted in the hoard’s context. They are Cypriote sigloi, the largest coin denomination in Cyprus at the end of the 6th and in the 5th centuries BC and represent a considerable amount of money. Destrooper has calculated that each siglos may have represented the three days’ pay of a mercenary during the reign of Cyrus the Younger, and at the end of the 6th century BC the 36 Cypriote sigloi would have been worth at least 108 days’ or about three and a half months’ pay of a mercenary. Such an amount was clearly not for daily needs and may have been part of a deposit kept within an institution. It is the oldest hoard found in Cyprus as yet and contains
completely unknown as well as little known types and variations, thus providing the opportunity to enhance our knowledge on little known types.

Three coins bear test marks including a counterfeit plated coin [Fig. 3] which bears a simulated test mark. The test marks aimed at proving that coins were made of silver to the core, that is they were genuine [Fig. 4]. The test mark, however, on the lighter silver plated bronze coin was shallower so as to avoid disclosing its bronze core and betray that it was a forgery. Destrooper noted that it is the first time that genuine coins with test marks were found in the same hoard with a tested counterfeit, and this constitutes a strong indication for the existence of a sophisticated industry of counterfeiting as early as the end of the 6th, first half of the 5th century BC in Cyprus.

Three distinct obverse types are included in the hoard, representing the forepart of a boar on the oldest specimens, a type previously unknown in Cypriote numismatics, the head of a lion [Fig. 4] or the forepart of a lion in front of the forepart of a boar [Fig. 5]. The type portraying the combination of a boar and a lion jugate in profile to the left includes new variations and the sophistication of its design attests to the remarkable skills of the die engraver. On the reverse a rough incuse square or a regular incuse square includes a winged disc in sometimes new variations [Fig. 6]. The number of similar Cypriote syllabic inscriptions increased from one to 23 examples. The numismatic study indicated that this previously unknown coin type occurred on three examples in the hoard, all of them struck with the same worn obverse die and with only two dies used for their reverses, a good indication that the coins did not circulate far from the mint they were struck. In addition, they are unquestionably Cypriote, as they are engraved with Cypro-syllabic characters on all of the reverse and three of the obverse dies [Fig. 7].

The date of the coins is determined by the context in which they were found as well as by parallel occurrences in style, fabric and weight. Close parallels to some of the types were noted in the Asia Minor or the Anatolia hoard and in the Adana hoard, both buried about 500-498 BC. The circumstances under which the hoard of silver coins was buried at this time, a turbulent time in the history of Cyprus as it coincides with the revolt against the Persians, bears significant connotations for the interpretation of events on the site of the Hill of Agios Georgios and its possible identification with the ancient kingdom of Ledroi.

Historical Inferences

The results of the excavations and the finds on the Hill of Agios Georgios, in conjunction
with the evidence collected to date, have taken us a step further in the efforts to identify the elusive city-kingdom of Ledroi, with which the predecessor of Nicosia has been traditionally linked.

Although it may never be possible to prove this identification beyond doubt, several factors can be regarded as indicative and could, in due course, provide the necessary evidence to make a convincing argument for such an identification. The chronology of the initial foundation and the continuity of the settlement are important elements in determining whether this was the location of ancient Ledroi. Although remains dating to the time period of the creation of the city-kingdoms of Cyprus may have been obliterated by the later phases of habitation, the evidence at present does not seem to predate the Cypro-Archaic I period. No earlier tombs have been found at the cemeteries of Ayioi Omoloyites and, unless further excavations in Nicosia and particularly to the east of the Hill of Agios Georgios produce new evidence, it may be assumed that the cemetery and possibly the settlement of the Geometric period were located in the walled city, while the present settlement was established later, possibly in the later Cypro-Archaic period. The silver coin hoard, consisting almost certainly of royal issues from a possible mint nearby, dating to about 500-498 BC, the time period of the Ionian Revolt, as well as the inscribed Black Glaze cup mentioning the name of a prince, are the most significant testimonies.

The extent of the settlement and the associated cemetery is, in its own right, a significant factor. The excavated site has revealed only part of the settlement, which, as noted above, stretched north, east and south of the Hill of Agios Georgios. The Hellenistic settlement was constructed above, on a specific town plan that included an area defined for workshops, situated on the hill slope and close to the river. The plan provided for parallel roads, sewage channels and structures aligned between the roads. The considerably extensive cemetery was located to the south of the settlement.

The emerging evidence for a rearrangement of the site sometime after the Cypro-Archaic period may eventually refer to historical events and the political strife among the city-kingdoms at that period. Sparse remains of walls belonging to substantial structures dating to the Archaic period have been located throughout the site. Impressive architectural elements and numerous figurines of the period point to the presence of an important sanctuary with associated workshops. Further, the occupation debris of the period was placed in pits and included workshop materials, large numbers of stone tools, stone and terracotta figurines and loom weights. The later 4th century BC phase was built on top of this, reusing very little of the older structures but at the same time retaining their nature. The dearth of references to the city in the written records of the Classical period, unless
purely accidental, may suggest that it had diminished in size and was, possibly, incorporated into a more powerful kingdom. In the Late Classical period, its connections with the dominating cities on its east and west (Salamis and Soloi), indicated by the coins from these cities found in the excavations, as well as other stylistic similarities in other materials, may also be indicative of its role as a transmission centre en route to Salamis and Soloi and may perhaps explain a special emphasis placed on the site by the Ptolemies in the mid-2nd century BC.

In his recent study of the road system of ancient Cyprus, T. Bekker-Nielsen provides further support for the importance of this part of Nicosia in antiquity.22 Given the silence of the geographical sources with regard to Ledroi, he assumes, as others have also done, that the settlement was economically and politically dependent on another polis; he suggests Chytroi (modern Kythrea),23 lying “14 km or half a day’s journey” to the north-east, as the most likely candidate. Whatever the causes for its abandonment, it seems to have revived in the Early Christian period, and both the industrial as well as its religious role continued24 the ancient tradition. The location of Nicosia in the fertile valley of Mesaoria, its strategic position in the centre of the island linking the major harbours were determining factors in its establishment as the capital of the island some centuries later.
List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AR

Fig. 1: View of excavations at corner of Hadjopoulou and Nikokreontos streets (east extension of the site on the Hill of Agios Georgios, Nicosia).

Fig. 2: Hoard of silver coins from corner of Hadjopoulou and Nikokreontos streets (east extension of the site on the Hill of Agios Georgios, Nicosia).

Fig. 3: Silver coins with test marks.

Fig. 4: Counterfeit silver plated coin.

Fig. 5: Coins with representation of boar, lion and forepart of lion in front or forepart of boar.

Fig. 6: Reverse of coin with representation of winged disc.

Fig. 7: Reverse of coin with Cypro-syllabic inscription.
Endnotes

1 For earlier accounts on the history of Nicosia see Kyprianos 1788; Peristianis 1910; Maratheftis 1977.
4 Pilides 2003, 186, pl.1.1.
5 Pilides 2001, 82.
6 Pilides 2009, 51, fig. 1.
7 Pilides 2009, 57, fig. 9; Michaelides, Pilides, 33, fig. 51.
8 Pilides 2003, pl. 2.4.
9 Pilides 2004, 169, fig.7.
10 Hadjicosti 1993, 179 (T. 33 nos 12a and 14a-b; T. 34 nos 53a-d and 54), 188 (T. 35 nos 35 and 36).
12 Pilides 2009, fig. 8; Michaelides, Pilides 2012, 33, fig. 51.
16 Iacovou 2002.
18 Flourentzos 1981.
19 Pilides, Olivier 2008.
22 Bekker-Nielsen 2004, 184-86.
23 Apparently an independent polis in Ptolemaic and Roman times.
24 Pilides 2013, 243-252.
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