

The Historical Context of Settlement Change on Naxos in the Early Middle Ages

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Abstract

Το Κάστρο Απαλίου, το οποίο υπήρξε προφανώς η πρωτεύουσα της Νάξου από τον 7ο αιώνα μέχρι τη Φραγκοκρατία, είναι ο σημαντικότερος μίας ομάδας βυζαντινών οικισμών στη κεντρική ορεινή περιοχή του νησιού, οι οποίοι χρονολογούνται από την αρχαιολογική έρευνα στους 7ο – 9ο αιώνες. Η σχέση αυτών των οικισμών με τις αρχαίες εγκαταστάσεις στην παραλία είναι ασαφής, όπως και η αιτία της ίδρυσής τους, καθώς δεν υπάρχουν γραπτά τεκμήρια.

Ωστόσο, αποτελούσαν μία σημαντική επένδυση – σε υλικό, εργασία, οργάνωση, και ιδεολογία (στην ανεικονική διακόσμηση αρκετών ναών) – που καθιστά πιθανόν ότι ιδρύθηκαν με πρωτοβουλία της αυτοκρατορικής εξουσίας, ως ανταπόκριση στις νέες πολεμικές συνθήκες που επικρατούσαν στο Αιγαίο μετά την αραβική κατάκτηση της Μέσης Ανατολής και της Βόρειας Αφρικής. Παρόλο που η κρατική επένδυση αγνοείται από τις λίγες και λακωνικές γραπτές πηγές της εποχής, προκύπτει από τα Χρονικά του Νικηφόρου και του Θεοφάνη ότι η κεντρική κυβέρνηση έδινε σημαντική προσοχή στη κατάσταση των Κυκλάδων, για στρατηγικούς, οικονομικούς και πολιτικούς λόγους, ιδιαίτερα κατά τον 8ο αιώνα. Τα νησιά του Αιγαίου βρίσκονταν αντιμέτωπα στους αραβικούς στόλους που προορίζονταν για τη πολιορκία της Κωνσταντινούπολης ή απλώς για τη λεηλασία των παραλιών. Μαζί με τις παραλιακές περιοχές των ηπειρών, συνεισέφεραν ουσιαστικά στην ναυτική άμυνα του κράτους, στο σημείο που οι δυνάμεις που διέθεταν η Στερεά Ελλάδα και τα νησιά ήταν ικανές να απειλήσουν σοβαρά τη Κωνσταντινούπολη, όταν εξεγέρθηκαν κατά του Λέοντος Γ' (727). Οι ίδιες δυνάμεις έλεγχαν τη θαλασσινή διαδρομή από τη Σικελία στην πρωτεύουσα, που αποτελούσε κατά τη διάρκεια του 8ου αιώνα την κυρία εφοδιαστική και εμπορική αρτηρία της αυτοκρατορίας. Το κύρος του αιγαιακού χώρου φαίνεται έμμεσα από τρία γεγονότα της βασιλείας του Κωνσταντίνου Ε' (741-775): (α) ο μετοικισμός πληθυσμών από την κεντρική Ελλάδα, την Πελοπόννησο και τις Κυκλάδες για την επανακατοίκηση της Κωνσταντινούπολης μετά το θανατικό του 747, (β) η πρόσληψη μαστόρων από τον Ελλαδικό χώρο για την επισκευή του υδραγωγείου της Πόλης (766), (γ) η επιλογή μίας Αθηναίας ως νύφης για το διάδοχο του θρόνου (769). Αυτό που δεν φαίνεται καθόλου στις πηγές είναι η συγκεκριμένη συμμετοχή της Νάξου στα γεγονότα, αλλά ούτε καν σε ποιο βαθμό το νησί υπήρξε στόχος των αραβικών επιθέσεων, πριν από την αραβική κατοχή της Κρήτης (827-961), η οποία αύξησε σημαντικά το κίνδυνο σε όλο το παραλιακό χώρο του Αιγαίου.

The archaeological investigation of Kastro Apalirou, which has made significant advances even since the conference of April 2014, has proved beyond doubt that the site was a major new urban foundation of the early Middle Ages.¹ This town was modest by the standards of ancient cities in earlier

1. Hill, Roland and Ødegård (2016); Hill, Ødegård in this volume.

centuries, but it nevertheless represented a major investment in the fortified urbanization *ex nihilo* of an inhospitable, waterless hilltop, supported by the intensive agricultural colonization, largely through terracing of the surrounding land. Such an initiative can only have been decided at the highest level of government, in response to a major security crisis that can broadly be identified with the Arab invasions of the 7th and 8th centuries. Yet the exact timing is still far from clear, and in other respects the discoveries at Apalirou raise more questions than they answer. Did the new settlement immediately become the island's new capital, and to what extent, or by what stages, did it involve the abandonment of the ancient city at Chora? Where was its outlet to the sea? More generally, was it typical of the transition from *polis* to *kastron* in the Aegean world, or was it an exceptional development, reflecting the strategic importance of Naxos in the empire's maritime defences? A problem here is that the comparative material comes overwhelmingly from the mainland areas and the large islands of the Eastern Roman Empire. There are numerous narratives of the transition from the urbanised landscape of Late Antiquity to the ruralised landscape of the Middle Ages in Asia Minor, Syria, Mainland Greece, Macedonia, the central Balkans, Cyprus and Crete.² There are no such studies, as far as I know, for the Aegean islands, apart from Aegina,³ and this is largely because the Late Antique cities of the archipelago are almost completely undocumented. This was clearly a world of numerous harbours and Early Christian basilicas in close proximity. But to what extent was it a world of cities, like the mainland areas of Greece and Asia Minor? Or do we need to revisit the coastal cities of the mainland, and envisage a widespread dispersal of urban functions, including elite residences, trade and fortification, away from the traditional urban cores?⁴

In Naxos, the end of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages is very clear, in Kastro Apalirou and the network of extraordinarily well-preserved early medieval rural churches on the island's interior. The beginning of the process, however, is as yet largely invisible in the archaeological record. As for the decisive transitional moment, only one thing is entirely certain: Apalirou was built, and its site was chosen, for serious defence against attacks from a seaborne enemy. There was no serious maritime threat to the Aegean coasts and islands during the first six centuries AD; piracy, apparently, was dead, and the Vandal raids of the 5th century hardly touched the Eastern Mediterranean. The Aegean was literally a political and military backwater that did not make the news, and one might be tempted to see this as one reason why cities are so invisible in the Late Antique Aegean area: they did not need to concentrate within the massive fortified circuits that became a standard feature of all mainland cities from the 3rd century.

All this changed in the 7th century, when the Aegean became the invasion route for the war fleets of Arab expeditions aimed at the conquest of Constantinople.⁵ At the same time, given the empire's marginal presence in the Balkan Peninsula, the Aegean provided the sole line of communication between Constantinople and southern Greece, and from there to all points further west, in a period when the empire's territories in the Western Mediterranean — in Italy, North Africa, and above all Sicily — constituted a not inconsiderable part of its resource base.⁶ The sea and its islands thus acquired an unprecedented strategic and commercial importance in the 7th and 8th centuries. This importance, as documented in the written sources and in seals, is the wider context in which the early medieval settlements of Naxos should be set.

Naxos is actually one of the very few Cycladic islands, if not the only one, mentioned by name in a 7th-century text. The text is a letter written by Pope Martin I (649-655) describing his journey in 653

2. For a brief survey of the literature see Magdalino (2015).

3. Felten (1975); Pennas (2005), pp. 8-15.

4. As noted in recent studies of both Balkan and Anatolian sites: see e.g. Dunn (2006); Veikou (2012); Niewöhner (2006); Niewöhner *et al.* (2013).

5. See in general Ahrweiler (1966), *passim*, esp. pp. 17-53.

6. Prigent (2006); Prigent (2010), pp. 157-66; Brubaker and Haldon (2010), pp. 490-3.

from Rome to Constantinople, where he had been brought under arrest to stand trial for treason.⁷ The voyage from Calabria to Constantinople took three months, most of which were spent in navigating, evidently in the face of the *meltemi*, through the “very many islands” along the route. Martin mentions Naxos because here they were held up long enough for him to be allowed off the ship, for the first and only time, in order to take “a bath two or three times” and to rest up at a hostel in the town (*apud urbem ... in hospitio quodam*). So we learn from this letter that Naxos was a port of call on what Michael McCormick has called “the ancient trunk route” linking Italy and Constantinople,⁸ and that ships put into it because it had a town, surely the *Chora*, with facilities that voyagers could use while waiting for the *meltemi* to subside. However, we cannot assume that the route through the islands was always the same, or that Naxos was always the most important station. The itinerary of another Pope, Constantine, mentions Kea as the place where he was met in 710/711 by Theophilos, *strategos* of the Karavisianoi, the war fleet that had been set up to defend the Aegean against Arab attacks.⁹

Pope Martin I travelled to Constantinople in the last year before the Arab naval offensive penetrated the Aegean. In 654-5, the Arabs annihilated the Byzantine navy led by the emperor Constans II in person in a battle off the coast of Lycia, and they launched a combined land and sea operation against Constantinople, which was miraculously saved by a sudden storm in the Sea of Marmara that destroyed the enemy fleet.¹⁰ It was evidently in response to these events that Constans II created the new fleet and naval command of the Karavisianoi with its base on the island of Samos.¹¹ The following years saw a lull in the fighting because of the first Islamic *fitna*, but when Moawiya, governor of Syria, emerged victorious from the civil war (661) and established the Umayyad Caliphate at Damascus, he resumed the offensive on both land and sea. Once again the ultimate objective was Constantinople, which was now subjected to a sustained blockade and siege, with the Arab fleet wintering in the Sea of Marmara until it had to withdraw, with heavy losses, in the face of an energetic counter-attack that used the new Byzantine secret weapon of Greek fire.¹² The first Arab siege of Constantinople is traditionally dated to 674-678, but earlier dates have been proposed, and the most recent proposal argues in great detail, on the basis of Arab sources, for 669.¹³ What is certain is that after the defeat of this offensive, more than thirty years passed before the Umayyads were ready to try again.¹⁴ The failed siege of 717-718 was famously a turning-point in the confrontation between Christendom and Islam, and the last Islamic attempt to capture Constantinople before the Ottomans.

It is hard to determine the impact of the Umayyad naval offensives on the western and central Aegean area. All the evidence for occupation, destruction and counter-offensive relates to the coasts and islands of the eastern Aegean that lay along the invasion route.¹⁵ There is no evidence, or reason to suppose, that the Arab fleets deviated from their main war objective, which was the conquest of Constantinople. The Cyclades were logistically and strategically peripheral to this goal. Any raids they launched on these islands would have been incidental diversions, and any damage that the islands sustained would have been incidental and superficial. Anticipation of an Arab attack might have prompted defensive measures, such as the construction of fortifications and places of refuge. However, the enemy action as such was unlikely to have been on a scale to have caused great alarm or a major dislocation

7. Pope Martin I: Neil (2006), pp. 172-83; cf. McCormick (2001), pp. 483-8.

8. McCormick (2001), pp. 502-8.

9. McCormick (2001), p. 503.

10. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 345-6; Mango and Scott, p. 482. Sebeos, *Armenian History*: Thomson, comm. Howard-Johnston, I pp. 143-6, II pp. 274-6. Cosentino (2007), pp. 586-593.

11. Here I follow the dating of Pryor and Jeffreys (2006), p. 25, and Cosentino (2007), pp. 601-3.

12. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 353-4; Mango and Scott, pp. 493-4.

13. Jankowiak (2013). Howard-Johnston (2010), pp. 226-7, 492-3, proposes 670-671.

14. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 384-99; Mango and Scott, pp. 534-50. Pryor and Jeffreys (2006), pp. 31-2.

15. See also Imbert (2013), 731-758.

in the settlement pattern. If anything, the news of the Arab failures before Constantinople would have induced a sense of security. The main impact of the naval warfare on the island populations is likely to have taken the form of increased fiscal demands, for the recruitment of crews and the levying of ships. Evidence is lacking, but it is reasonable to suppose that the imperial government, suddenly outclassed in 654-5 by an adversary whose power was as formidable at sea as it was on land, promptly reacted by massively enlarging the capacity of the imperial navy along all the empire's maritime routes. No coastal area can have been unaffected, least of all the largest, most productive and most centrally located island in the Cyclades.

There is no record of Arab naval activity in the Aegean in the century following the failed siege of Constantinople in 717-718. Yet the Aegean world, and especially the western part of it, impinged on Constantinople during the 8th century more than at any other time in the history of Byzantium, at least to judge from the main sources for the period, the histories of Nikephoros and Theophanes, who have more to say about the Aegean than any other Byzantine historian. They record the following information, which appears to derive from a common source:

- In the summer of 726 the submarine volcano of Thera (Santorini) erupted, spewing out masses of pumice and ash, making the sea too hot to touch and creating a new island. According to Nikephoros and Theophanes, the emperor interpreted this as a sign of divine displeasure at the veneration of icons, and started to have them removed.¹⁶
- In the following year the armed forces of the Greek mainland and the Cyclades rose in revolt against the emperor, in zealous reaction to his incipient iconoclasm, according to the chroniclers. They proclaimed a new emperor, Kosmas, collected a great fleet, and set out against Constantinople, where they arrived on 18 April. However, the forces stationed in the capital routed them with the use of Greek fire, and those who were not drowned surrendered to the emperor.¹⁷
- In 745-746 an outbreak of plague spread from Sicily and Calabria to Monemvasia, mainland Greece, and the adjacent islands (i.e. the Cyclades). The next year, the disease spread to Constantinople, where it caused great mortality.¹⁸
- In 754-755, the emperor Constantine V repopulated Constantinople with families brought from central Greece, the Peloponnese and the islands.¹⁹
- In 769 the emperor married his son and heir, Leo IV, to a girl from an Athenian family – the future empress Eirene.²⁰

From this information, we can make the following deductions:

- Not long after the deliverance of Constantinople from the Arabs, the central Aegean area was the scene of a natural occurrence that was interpreted as a manifestation of divine wrath – therefore, as a disaster. Although the Byzantine historians record only the psychological impact that was of interest to them because of their religious concerns, it is hard to believe that the eruption, as they describe it, did not also do considerable material damage. It must at least have disrupted shipping in the area, and it surely produced some sort of tsunami that inundated coastal settlements. It is thus very plausible that the massive rebellion of the local maritime forces less than a year after the eruption was a consequence of the disaster, but not

16. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 404-5; Mango and Scott, pp. 359-60. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 128-9.

17. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 405; Mango and Scott, p. 360. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 128-31.

18. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 422-4; Mango and Scott, pp. 585-6. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 138-41.

19. Theophanes: de Boor, p. 429; Mango and Scott, p. 593. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 140-1. Only Theophanes gives the date; Nikephoros narrates the event right after the plague.

20. Theophanes: de Boor, p. 444; Mango and Scott, p. 613. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 140-1, mentions only the birth of a son from the marriage. On Eirene, see Herrin (2001), pp. 51-129.

- simply or primarily for the reason that the chroniclers allege. Rather, we should see the damage, both psychological and material, that was caused by the disaster as an exacerbation of an existing grievance – most probably of a fiscal nature.
- The Aegean coastlands of Greece and the Cyclades were capable of fielding (or floating) a naval force that had the motivation and the means to take on the regime in Constantinople and the defences of the city. In other words, the rebels had the forces and the confidence to emulate, if not the Arab invaders, then at least those recent usurpers who had come to power at the head of a fleet (Apsimar, Philippikos, Theodosios III).²¹ This says a lot for the economic vitality, the social solidarity, and the nautical professionalism of the coastal and island communities of the western Aegean. It also shows that the Helladic and Cycladic fleet was a major component of the Byzantine naval defence system. However, this fleet had apparently not been engaged in the defence against the Arab invasion of 717. It was also, clearly, not entrusted with the technology of Greek fire. Does this indicate some latent disaffection?
 - The spread of the plague in 746-747 followed the “ancient trunk route” from Sicily through the Aegean to Constantinople. As Michael McCormick has pointed out, it shows that this was an important trade route at the time, used for the bulk transport of grain that was infested with plague-bearing rats. Given that this epidemic had probably originated in Mesopotamia, and travelled to Sicily via North Africa, its itinerary to Constantinople no doubt indicates the extent to which Byzantine long-distance trade had shifted westwards, and favoured the ports of Greece and the Cyclades. This must have had some implications for the economy and settlement of the islands.²²
 - Despite having suffered from the plague, Greece and the islands had a demographic reserve that was capable of replenishing the population of Constantinople while still maintaining its military and fiscal obligations – unless Constantine V’s purpose in choosing people from this area was to reduce its potentially troublesome military capability. At all events, the transferred population must have included a high proportion of seafarers and workers in related trades. These people must also have retained family and business links with their homeland, links that would have contributed to stimulating the economy at both ends.
 - The selection of an Athenian bride, the later empress Eirene, for the heir apparent in 769 betokens an intention to bind the regime more closely to the area from which the newly transplanted settlers had come. It also, perhaps, reflects a lesson that had been learned from the rebellion of 727: the need to keep this strategically and economically important area on board the ship of state.

We are used to thinking of trade and shipping as marginal to the concerns of the Middle Byzantine state, and it has long been conventional to regard the dynasty of the iconoclast Isaurian emperors as principal agents in this process, as a regime that turned its back on its western provinces to concentrate on the defence of Anatolia and the promotion of an oriental ideology.²³ To adopt this perspective is to neglect the fiscal importance of Sicily, Calabria, the Aegean coastlands and the islands in what was left of the Byzantine Empire, and it is to read the sources for their ideological bias rather than for the information they provide in spite of it. This information suggests that the trade, shipping and human

21. Theophanes: de Boor, pp. 370, 379-80, 385-6; Mango and Scott, pp. 517, 528-9, 536. Nikephoros: Mango, pp. 8-9, 110-1, 118-9.

22. McCormick (2001), pp. 504-5. The commercial importance of the route has also been demonstrated by coin finds: Brubaker and Haldon (2010), p. 485.

23. Ironically, the most eloquent statement of this view was made by the historian who demonstrated the efficacy of the naval defence system organised by Leo III and Constantine V: Ahrweiler (1966), pp. 40-44; see also Ahrweiler (1975), pp. 25-29.

resources of the Aegean world were central to the existence of the empire in the 8th century, perhaps more so than they had ever been before or would be again. The effects of the Isaurian investment in the 'Aegean connection' can be seen in two pieces of indirect evidence from around the turn of the 9th century. One is the information, by Theophanes, that the leading merchant shipowners (*naukleroi*) of Constantinople were capable of making large returns on large capital loans:²⁴ these people are likely to have belonged to the second generation of the settlers from the Aegean with whom Constantine V replenished the population of Constantinople in 754-755. The second piece of evidence is the large jetty uncovered by the excavations at Yenikapı in Istanbul in 2008. The dendrochronology of its wooden components places its construction soon after 786, thus firmly within the reign of the Athenian empress Eirene; moreover, this major harbour construction was adjacent to the empress's palace complex, which included workshops, that she constructed and occupied at the Palace of Eleutherios.²⁵

How does this picture derived from the narrative sources square with the picture we get from the material evidence? That is for other, more competent contributors to this volume to decide. I will just venture two passing comments on the monuments and the sigillography. Regarding the former, the impression that the Aegean islands were flourishing during the period of first iconoclasm fits rather well with the presence on Naxos of several churches with aniconic decoration.²⁶ With regard to the sigillographic evidence, I note that following the introduction of the *basilika kommerkia* by Leo III in 730-1, we have precisely dated seals pertaining not only to the Aegean archipelago as a whole, but also to the *kommerkia* of individual islands: Milos (730/731 – one of the earliest), Andros (736/737), and most interestingly Milos, Thera, Anaphi, Ios and Amorgos, whose *kommerkia* are all named individually on a single seal of 737/738.²⁷

Conditions in the Aegean world changed drastically in the 9th century.²⁸ On the positive side was the recuperation by the imperial government of the hinterland of the coastal cities in Greece. Against this was the major disruption to maritime communications and coastal settlements caused by the revolt of Thomas the Slav and the resulting civil war, the progressive Muslim occupation of Sicily, the temporary Muslim occupation of parts of southern Italy, and, most serious of all, the seizure of Crete by a war-band of Arab exiles from Spain.²⁹ They and their descendants held Crete from 827 to 961, and during this time they made an excellent living by systematic raiding and extortion.³⁰ The coasts and islands of the Aegean were exposed to regular attacks; passive defence behind inland, hilltop fortifications, or payment of protection money were the only options available to the island populations. By the early 10th century, the inhabitants of Naxos, who were on the front line of the Cretan raids, had opted to pay tribute, but could they rely on being left alone?³¹ In the circumstances, Kastro Apalirou must have come in useful.

Do the foregoing observations allow us to be any more precise in suggesting a date for the settlement on Apalirou or in determining its place in the regional transformation of the ancient city? The lack of evidence for the Aegean being a perpetual war zone in the 7th and 8th centuries, or for its coasts and islands being exposed to annual raids before the Arabs acquired a permanent Aegean base

24. The tenth economic 'vexation' for which Theophanes criticises the emperor Nikephoros I (802-811) is that he obliged the richest *naukleroi* to take out loans of 12 lb of gold at an interest of 16.67%. Theophanes: de Boor, p. 487; Mango and Scott, p. 668.

25. Kuniholm *et al.* (2015), pp. 60-61; for the Palace of Eleutherios, see Herrin (1999), pp. 102-3; Magdalino (2007), no. I, pp. 23-5; no. 216.

26. See Ch. Pennas and J. Crow, S. Turner in Campagnolo *et al.* (2015), pp. 171-4, 193-204. See also Crow, Turner in present volume.

27. Brandes (2002), pp. 553, 555, 556 (nos. 211, 226, 229), and pp. 365-94 for the institution of the *kommerkia*.

28. See in general Treadgold (1988).

29. For a recent interpretation of these events, see Signes Codoñer (2014), pp. 183-214, 321-3.

30. On the Arab conquest and occupation of Crete, see Christides (1981 and 1984).

31. John Kameniatas, *On the capture of Thessalonica*: Böhlig, p. 59.

on Crete, seems to argue against the idea that the *kastron* was built as an immediate response to the appearance of Arab war fleets in the 640s and 650s. On the other hand, if the numismatic and ceramic evidence continues to accumulate in favour of a mid-7th century construction date, we may have to admit that the meagre textual evidence simply under-represents the scale of the initial Arab operations and the threat that the government of Constans II perceived in them. At the same time, we should consider whether the primary function of the *kastron* was to relocate and protect the urban elite of the island or to control the productivity of the rural population, as well as the security of the shipping routes between Sicily and Constantinople. To put it another way, was the government's priority on Naxos the erection of front-line defences, or the security of its taxation, supply, recruitment, and communication base in an area that was only marginally in the war zone? Either way, the function and status of Byzantine Apalirou must be understood in relation to the other settlements on Naxos and the wider nexus of the Aegean world.

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