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RESCUE EXCAVATION AT THE AGHIOS NIKOLAOS FORTRESS (STYRA): A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The imposing remains of the Aghios Nikolaos fortress are well known to the inhabitants of Styra. They lie near the summit of Mt. Kliosi and enjoy a panoramic view over much of southern Euboea. A topographical survey and short excavation were conducted at the site in 2004 and 2005. Results of the investigation suggest that the Eretrians, after the annexation of Styra, constructed the fortress at the beginning of the 4th century BC to guard the border with Karystos to the south. Evidence is also presented for a 5th century BC sanctuary that occupied the rocky plateau near the summit. The 4th century fortress was partly dismantled in Byzantine and later periods and the stones were re-used in later fortifications nearby.

KEYWORDS: Styra, Eretria, Aghios Nikolaos, Classical fortress, mountain-top sanctuary

INTRODUCTION

Following the field survey campaign conducted in 2004 on three sites in southern Euboea (Myrtia, Tsakaioi, Aghios Nikolaos) (Fachard 2005), we were able to conduct a small rescue excavation on the site of Aghios Nikolaos, a mountain top dominating the plain of Styra. It should be noted that this rescue excavation followed illegal digging observed on the summit during the summer of 2004.

The excavation took place in April 2005 with M. Chidiroglou (IA EPKA) and the undersigned as co-field supervisors. The present paper consists of a preliminary report. The final report, including the study of the pottery, will be published in the near future by M. Chidiroglou and S. Fachard.

POSITION

Mt. Kiosi (Koryphi, 682 masl) forms a long and high mountain barrier stretching over 15 km between the Euboean channel on the west and the open sea on the east. A fortress of the Classical period was built west of the summit, on a small saddle (648 masl). The position guards a strategic passageway over the Kiosi range and enjoys an exceptional view over Euboea, Attica, and the southern Euboean channel. To the north Styra, Myrtia, Zarakes, Mt. Mavrovouni, Aliveri, Mt. Servouni, and Amarynthos can be seen: on a clear day, Eretria is also visible.

To the south one can easily distinguish several valleys leading to the Aegean Sea, Philagra, Mt. Ochi, and parts of the territory of Karystos. To the west the southern Euboean channel, Rafina (ancient Halai), Marathon, and Rhamnous are visible. In the 4th century BC, the border between Eretria and Karystos was probably located south of the Kiosi range, Styra being one

of the Eretrian southernmost demes at that time (Reber 2002; Fachard 2009, 64-66).

THE FORTRESS

The plan of the fortress closely follows the outline of the ridge top (fig. 1). The bedrock ridge top provides a gap bordered on the west and east by the natural rock outcrops. This wide "passage" was then blocked by two walls constructed between the natural rock faces. The northern wall, orientated east-west, is 74 m long with a postern gate set in it and is reinforced by a small tower (4.20 x 3.47 m). The 2.4-2.5 m thick wall is double faced with packed rubble fill.

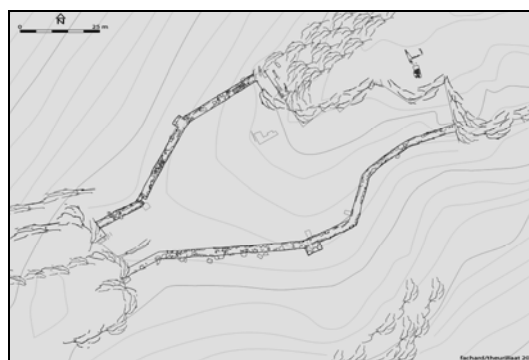


Figure 1: plan of the Aghios Nikolaos fortress

The postern, 1.25 m wide, is the only preserved opening of the fortress: it is well preserved compared to the rest of the northern section, reaching a preserved height of 4 m (fig. 2). To the south, the wall is 114 m long, with a width of 2.40-2.60 m and is defended by a square tower (5 x 5.05 m). The masonry is best described as being trapezoidal to polygonal. The fortified perimeter of the fortress reaches 310 m, enclosing an internal area exceeding 3500 m². In constructing the fortress the quarriers exploited the geological strata of the cipollino bedrock, extracting the blocks on site by carving the rock faces edging the plateau.



Figure 2: The postern seen from the north

THE EXCAVATION

Four trenches were opened inside the fortress, one at the postern, two perpendicular to the southern wall (where the sediments seemed thicker) and the fourth near interior long walls visible on the surface.

The trench at the postern gate did not reveal any information because the bedrock was reached after only a few centimetres. The trenches at the southern wall were more successful, allowing us to gather information about the date of the walls and the methods of construction. It appears that the builders first carved the bedrock in steps and then fitted the foundations of the wall directly on it. In the first southern trench, the interstices between the rock and the foundations blocks were filled with earth, stone fragments, charcoal and a few sherds, including the rim of a black glaze skyphos dating from the beginning of the 4th century BC, giving a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the fortress. This filling was covered with several layers and floor levels related to the wall. Another Classical sherd found associated with the wall foundations in the second southern trench supports the 4th century date.

The destruction of the fortress walls cannot be dated precisely. Nevertheless,

judging from a layer composed of fallen blocks and packed stones, it seems that the walls of the were destroyed in the Byzantine or Medieval period, probably by the removal of the ancient blocks for other constructions, in particular the Medieval castle of Larmena situated on the eastern part of the summit (Koder 1973, 68, 122-125). Finally, some walls belonging to internal constructions were excavated in the eastern part of the fortress. Unfortunately, it was not possible to date these walls.

REMAINS OUTSIDE THE FORTRESS

Other remains are visible along the plateau summit of Mt. Kliosi, east of the fortress. Two trenches were placed near the Aghios Nikolaos church (see Skoura 2003, 103-104), the first uncovered the foundations of the building on the bedrock while the second trench, situated between a cistern and the church, uncovered two walls, probably of classical date. East of this sector, the concentration of surface pottery is the thickest, testifying to a large chronological occupation: Prehistoric (obsidian), Classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine and Ottoman.

North of a rocky terrace, where the bedrock has been cut away over a large area, a thick accumulation of earth was excavated, revealing abundant material, including classical tiles and pottery. A large number of black glazed sherds were found, including the rim of a red-figured calyx krater of the end of the 5th century BC. The excavation showed that this *bothros* resulted from the cleaning of the plateau, probably in the Ottoman period. The fragment of a funerary or votive inscription, carved in a cipollino plaque, was found nearby: it displays the letters:].IPA[

CONCLUSIONS

The building of the fortress at Aghios Nikolaos can now be dated to the 4th century BC, thanks to the stratified pottery discovered during the excavation. It was around 400 BC that the region of Styra was annexed by the Eretrians, who probably constructed the fortress to guard and protect the new southern extension of their territory. However, the summit of Aghios Nikolaos was already occupied in the 5th century BC, as the remains of pottery and tiles clearly testify. The quality of the black-glazed pottery on this mountain top is surprising and could suggest the presence of a sanctuary. Two late inscriptions found on the slopes of Mt. Kliosi indicate the worship of Zeus: IG XII 9, 58 mentions *Dios Hy(psist)ou Sôtiros*; IG XII 9, 59 is inscribed

in a quarry and mentions *Zeus Hypsistos*. Since the epithet *Hypsistos* could fit a mountain cult at a summit, it is reasonable to suggest that the mountain was dedicated to Zeus. The god is often venerated on mountain tops (see Langdon 1976; Cook 1914; Cook 1925). *Zeus Hypsistos* seems also to have been worshipped in Karystos, according to Zappas (1981, 261). On the cults of the region, in particular Zeus, see Chidioglou (1996, 179-184). The remains on Mt. Kliosi suggest the presence of an important, probably religious, site belonging to the ancient city-state of Styra before its annexation by Eretria. Styra became a deme of the Eretrian chora in the 4th century, and its incorporation was followed by the construction of the Aghios Nikolaos fortress which guarded the southern border of the *chôra*.

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