

Organization of Space in the Countryside of Attica: a New Potters' Workshop in the Ancient Deme of Aixonides Alai

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Introduction

The archaeological site of Aghios Nikolaos Pallon in the area of Voula (Attica) comes under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Culture-Ephorate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands. Since 2011 systematic excavation has brought to light substantial antiquities that cast light on our understanding of life in the coastal demes of Attica. Ongoing research testifies the site's use from the Classical period up to Byzantine times. The site falls within the geographical boundaries of the ancient deme of Aixonides Alai.¹ The earliest remains on the site are a burial enclosure and an ancient road of the 4th century BC. In Late Antiquity operated a ceramic workshop comprising three kilns and a spacious residential area. Finally, during the Byzantine period two small churches were erected on top of the Classical enclosure and the workshop. Both belong to the type of basilica. Various ancient marble elements have been used for their construction (fig. 1).²

The place name "Aghios Nikolaos Pallon" (meaning in English Saint Nicholas of Pallon) is preserved mainly through oral testimonies. No written sources exist to offer evidence of the name's actual origins. The same place name appears on Kaupert and Curtius Attica Maps,³ while a similar name, "Paloi", is known on the island of Nisyros. In terms of etymology, it may originate from the rephrasing of the word "παρ' αλών", that means "by the sea", or even from the Latin word "palus", which means the post used to tie the ships on a pier. Both interpretations are directly related to the proximity of the site to the sea.

The Ceramic Workshop

Following a rather popular practice of Late Antiquity, in Late Roman times a ceramic workshop is established at the area once occupied by the burial enclosure of the 4th century BC. Two kilns (1 and 2) are built within the boundaries of the abandoned enclosure, while the north wall of the enclosure is used as Kiln's 3 south wall. This reorganization of space is a common phenomenon throughout Greece. Similar establishments of ceramic workshops in areas formerly used as burial grounds or domestic activities have been excavated in Kotzia Square, in the area of Acharnian Gates in Athens⁴, in Chalkida⁵, Pella⁶ and Sindos⁷. A similar example is the burial enclosure revealed during the excavation of the "EVANGELISMOS" Station of the Athens Metropolitan Railway.⁸

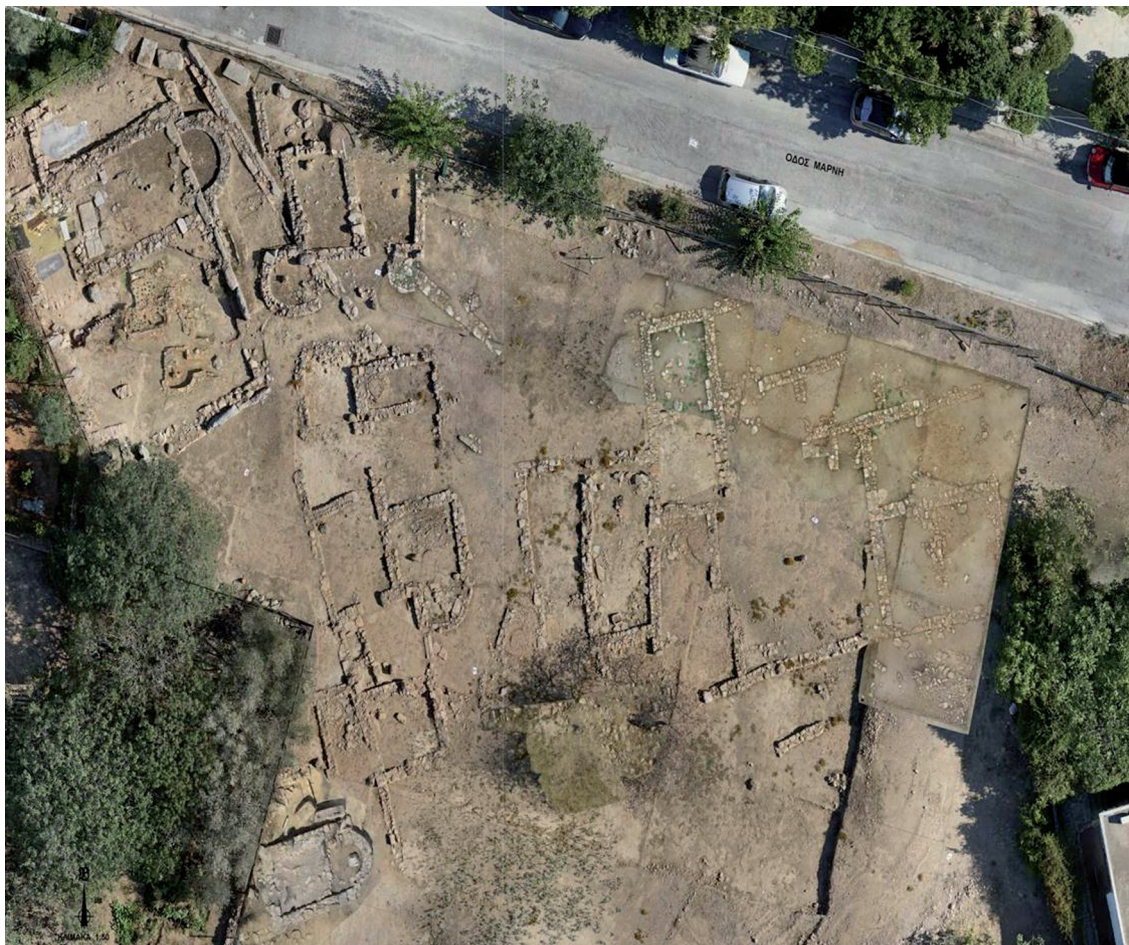


Fig. 1: Aerial photo of the site

The largest kiln (Kiln 1) is almost square in ground plan (2,50 m × 2,40 m) (fig. 2). It is classified to the first subtype (IIa) of two-story, updraft rectangular kilns with central pillar.⁹ The subterranean combustion chamber is dug in the natural bedrock, its perimeter walls are mainly coarse-clay and mud made, enforced with brick and tile fragments. The floor is simply plastered over with clay mortar. The support is placed centrally and is made of a combination of broken sherds, tiles and mortar. From this pillar spring two arches which rest on the side walls. This system supports the overlying, partially preserved, perforated clay floor (eschara), which is made out of coarse clay with a greenish color. The ventholes (d. 0.10 m) are arranged in rows. The vaulted upper chamber is not preserved. The praefurnium (stocking channel) has the form of a narrow brick-built vaulted corridor, projecting out of the east side of the kiln.

This type of kiln became popular in the Roman period, as revealed by the excavation at the Kotzia Square in Athens with its twenty-seven rectangular kilns.¹⁰ Another kiln of this type has been found in the 4th century AD ceramic workshop excavated in the



Fig. 2: Kiln 1

area of the Piraean Gate of Athens¹¹. Rectangular kilns remained in use during the Late Roman and Early Christian periods and were abandoned in the late Early Christian times.

Kiln 2 (1,30 m × 1,60 m) is classified to the first subtype (Ia) of two-story, updraft circular or elliptical kilns with central pillar (fig. 3).¹² The firing chamber was mainly underground in an elliptical pit with sides reinforced with bricks or mud-bricks and coated within with thick layer of watery clay or mud, 'cemented' during the firing of the kiln. The floor is simply plastered over with clay mortar. The non-preserved perforated clay floor (eschara) was overlaid on two brick-built arches, rest on a simple pillar roughly at the center of the combustion chamber. The entire supporting system is made of bricks and mortar. Three preserved pipelines enabled the circulation of the air. The praefurnium (stocking channel) is opened at the east side of the kiln and has the form of a narrow brick-built corridor.

This type of kiln is the most popular, not only in Greece, but in all Mediterranean potting cultures. Its construction and morphology were evolved during the Late Roman period. However, during the Early Christian period the number of known examples de-



Fig. 3: Kiln 2

creases. In the complex of Kotzia Square, out of the 27 furnaces only 2 are of a circular plan.¹³

Kiln 3 is almost square in ground plan (2,50 m × 2,50 m). Its entrance is at the east side.¹⁴ It is not yet excavated but some of its pipelines are visible, as well as traces of fire and layers of ashes.

Excavation inside the combustion chambers of the kilns revealed sherds of Late Roman and Early Christian periods, as well as teardrops, intact lamps, and part from the disc of a lamp bearing a cross. Based on their construction and findings, the kilns date to the 4th–6th century AD.¹⁵ So far there is no indication for the specialization of the production, but the different types of the kilns possibly served alternative productions.¹⁶ The spacious dimensions of the rectangular kiln 1 support the hypothesis that it was used for the production of building materials, like roof tiles and plinths. On the contrary, the smaller in size elliptical kiln 2 could have been used for the production of vases.

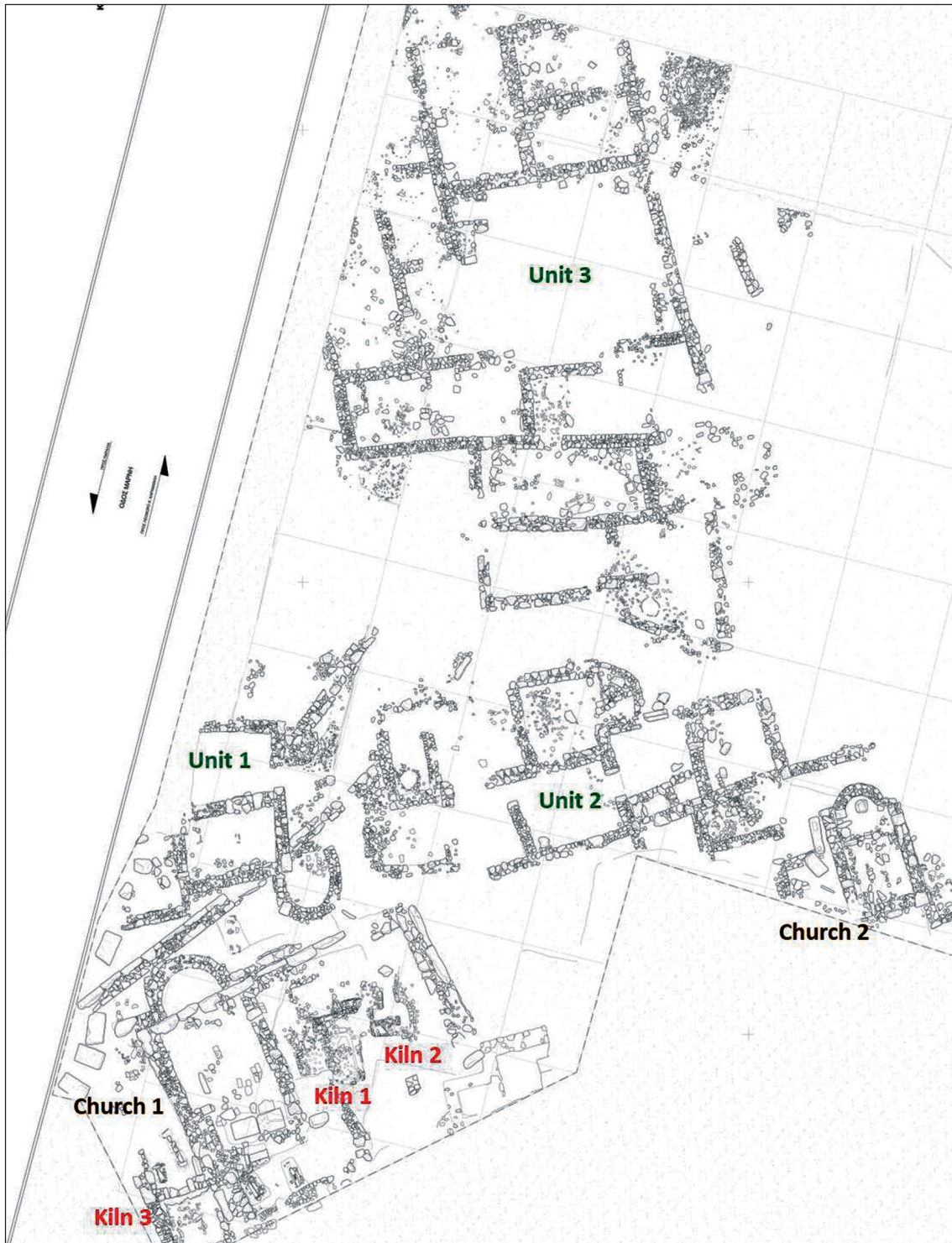


Fig. 4: Plan of the building complex

East of the kilns lies an extensive, partially excavated, building complex extending to more than 1200 m². It consists of at least twenty rooms, which are organized into three smaller units (1–3) (fig. 4). Unit 3 is the largest one, comprising of twelve rooms set around a central square courtyard.¹⁷

The walls of the rooms are built of medium-sized local stones, connected with soil. Clearly the builders have tried to form straight wall faces and a solid masonry. In all units, the rooms communicate with each other through doors. The complex has been built on top of layers dated to the classical period. Some of its walls rest on top of strong classical walls, while in some cases building material of the classical period has been re-used in the later walls, mainly as door-jambs and corner-stones. In some of the rooms storage pithoi have been found in situ.

Plain pottery was abundant at the site. Excavation revealed sherds from food-preparation and storage vessels, mainly amphoras, combed pottery, sherds bearing shallow grooves, beehive fragments, kiln teardrops, slags, iron and copper pieces. Both in the rooms of the complex and in the free spaces destruction layers were excavated comprising roof tiles and stones.

Following the date of the finds, the building complex should have operated at least by the 6th century AD. The type and the date of the finds from the complex suggest that it dates to the same period as the kilns and that it served as the residential area of the craftsmen.

Conclusions

The discovery of the ceramic workshop at Aghios Nikolaos Pallon points straight to the existence of an organized potters quarter in the area or at least to the operation of a single – but large – pottery workshop.¹⁸ The site meets the basic criteria for the establishment of a ceramic workshop: proximity to clay resources, availability of water and a favorable location vis-à-vis transport and trade routes.¹⁹ Its close proximity to one of the most crowded ancient roads that led from Athens to Sounion (the so-called *Astike Odos*)²⁰ and its immediacy to the sea should have favored the supply and distribution of products, as well as the development of trade with areas, but Attica. The rich water sources of the area in antiquity are implied by the modern name of the wider area that the sites belongs, “Pigadakia” that in Greek means wells, as well as by presence of reeds in the area of the archaeological site.

The discovery and ongoing excavation of the workshop complex at Aghios Nikolaos Pallon has significantly enriched our knowledge about the organization and the economy in a suburban area of Attica during Late Antiquity, since it is the first pottery workshop of that time known so far in the wider area of south Attica.

Notes

- ¹ Andreou 1996; Giamalidi – Ntaifa 2013.
² Lygouri et al. 2015; Lygouri et al. forthcoming.
³ Curtius – Kaupert 1895–1903, no. VIII.
⁴ Karagiorga 1988; Zachariadou-Kyriakou 1988; Zachariadou 2006.
⁵ Sampson 1987.
⁶ Lilimpaki Akamati 1993.
⁷ Despoini 1982.
⁸ Lygouri 1995, 30–32.
⁹ Raptis 2001, 167–169; Hasaki 2002, 168–169.
¹⁰ Zachariadou 2006, 316–317.
¹¹ Lygouri 1985.
¹² Raptis 2001, 159–164; Hasaki 2002, 154–155.
¹³ Zachariadou 2006, 317.
¹⁴ For square kilns see Raptis 2001, 165–168.
¹⁵ Hasaki-Raptis 2016 with a catalogue of Roman and Late Antiquity kilns in Greece.
¹⁶ Hasaki-Raptis 2016, 210–215.
¹⁷ Lygouri et al. forthcoming.
¹⁸ Hasaki-Raptis 2016, 214–215.
¹⁹ Hasaki 2002, 259–264.
²⁰ Kaza Papageorgiou 2009.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Photo taken by G.Asvestas. Archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands. – Fig. 2: Photo taken by G.Asvestas. Archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands. – Fig. 3: Photo taken by G.Asvestas. Archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands. – Fig. 4: Architect G. Orestides.

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