

Change of the Function of the City Insula during the Late Roman Period: The Case of the Late Roman Insula from Maloutena District in Nea Paphos (Cyprus)¹

Julia Mikocka

Introduction

The late Roman insula (fig. 1) is situated on the so-called Maloutena Plateau in the southwestern part of the ancient city Nea Paphos.² Surveys show that the oldest structures in this part of the town date to the late Classical period.³ It is possible that during



Fig. 1: View on the North-Eastern House and the House of Aion.

the Hellenistic period the residential insula existed there. The reconstructions of the Villa of Theseus in the end of the 3rd century and in the 4th century AD and expansion of the building to the east required the construction of the new street on the north-south axis.⁴ The construction of this street, in the 4th century AD, has created the late Roman insula. Not long after the erection of the street the House of Aion was built. The North-eastern House was built roughly at the same time or not long after.

Research

It is assumed that the northeastern part of the late Roman insula served as a residential complex. The building located in the southern part is the so-called House of Aion, named because of the great mosaic in the main room with a representation of the Greek god of the time, Aion.⁵ Other panels portray Leda and the Swan, Hermes and a young Dionysus, Cassiopeia, Apollo and Marsyas, and Dionysius with a thiasos. The building was called “house” during excavations in 1980s. Initially its location in the residential part of the ancient city indicated to this interpretation. But architectural plan, decorations and specific elements suggest that it could have served public functions.

The *triclinium* in the so-called House of Aion was not typical for a private residence. *Triclinium-vestibul* complex was accessible directly from the one of the main streets in the ancient city, called B,⁶ which ran from the west to east, and led from the residential district to the Paphos harbor (fig. 2). This part of the House of Aion was adorned with a monumental facade towards the main gateway.⁷ The room with paintings of extraordinary quality, representing Apollo and the Muses, was excavated. The floor of this room and of an adjacent long corridor could be made of wooden beams with an empty space beneath the floor (fig. 3). This is not typical for the architecture of this region. In the eastern end of this corridor, above the preserved cistern vault, was the threshold to the vestibule. At the threshold, on the side of the corridor, a goat skeleton was found. Perhaps this area was used for rituals.

In the area of the late Roman insula unusual features, not seen before in other buildings from the area of Nea Paphos, were indicated. The plan of these two buildings did not correspond to the typical layout and plan of a house known from other examples from Nea Paphos.⁸ The divisions in this insula run along the urban area, rather than across it. This issue is interesting in the context of location the House of Aion in a representative part of the city and in the immediate vicinity of the Villa of Theseus, the largest residential building in Cyprus, where 100 rooms were found. It is assumed that this building served some official function. Of particular importance is the fact that at the time when the House of Aion still functioned, the quarter in which the late Roman insula was located had already been abandoned.

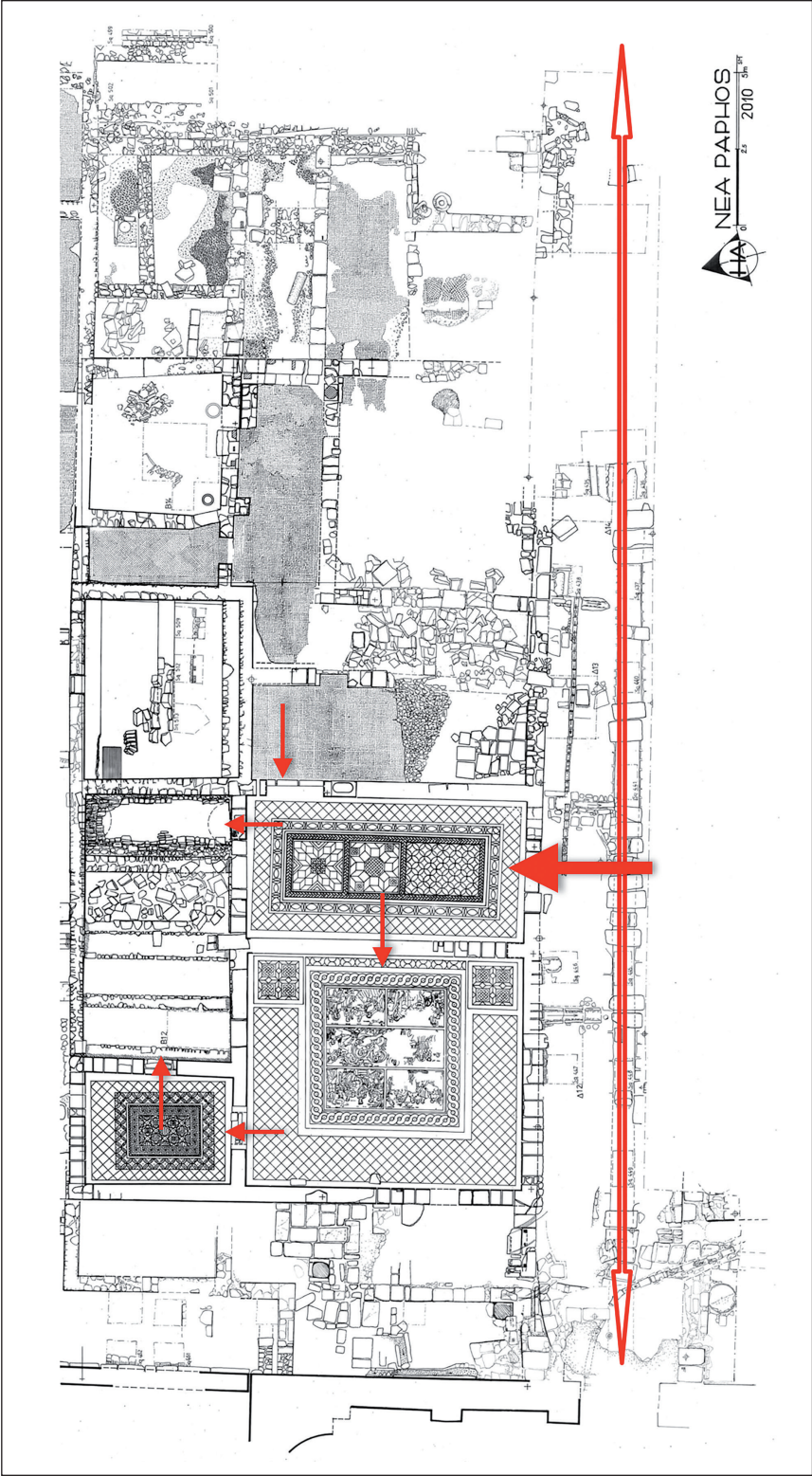


Fig. 2: Plan of the House of Aion with marked W-E street and communication inside the building.



Fig. 3: Room with paintings representing Apollo and the Muses and with benches supporting wooden floor in the House of Aion.

Conclusions

The late Roman insula was erected in the district, which functioned as residential part of Nea Paphos during Hellenistic and Roman periods. Previously, in this part of the city several houses existed. In the 4th century AD, when the late Roman insula was erected, in this district only the Villa of Theseus functioned (fig. 4). Other residences, such as the so-called Hellenistic House, the House of Orpheus and the House of Dionysus were destroyed and could be abandoned. The southern part of the insula was of a semi-public character. The so-called House of Aion could be interpreted as seat or meeting place of religious-philosophic community. It is difficult to determine the final habitation period of this area, although the latest fragments of the pottery date to the 6th and 7th centuries AD.

During the 4th century AD the character of the residential district in Nea Paphos was changed. Most of the residences were destroyed and probably abandoned. Citizens had to gather in other parts of cities. The public and representative functions of the other buildings from the city were concentrated in the Villa of Theseus, which was located close to the city harbor. From the second part of the 5th century AD the Villa of Theseus gradually falls into ruins. Of particular importance is the fact that at the time when the buildings in late Roman insula still functioned even the Villa of Theseus had already been abandoned.

The late Roman insula indicates that in the late Roman period public, sacral and religious buildings developed in the city. The mostly abandoned residential area communicated with the harbor. It seems that the inhabitants gathered more around the city port and in building of semi-public, religious character.



Fig. 4: The late Roman insula and the Villa of Theseus.

Notes

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² Medeksza 1992, 82.

³ Green 2010, 116.

⁴ Daszewski 1997; Medeksza 1992, 5–8. 36–37. 42–45. 64–65. 69.

⁵ Olszewski 2013, 207–239; Olszewski 1990/1991, 444–463; Daszewski 1985.

⁶ Meyza 2010, 229–238.

⁷ Brzozowska-Jawornicka 2016, 160–164.

⁸ Daszewski 1998, 129.

Image Credits

All figures by author.

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