Under the Auspices of Aphrodite Euploia: Port Infrastructure and Urban Transformation at Elaiussa Sebaste from the Hellenistic to Byzantine Age

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From the Hellenistic period onwards, the coastal city of Elaiussa Sebaste was one of the most important centres of Eastern Rough Cilicia. It was favoured by the presence of two ample and sheltered port basins and by their close integration with the road network which connected it to the other coastal cities and to the inland agricultural villages (fig. 1). The settlement, dating from the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 1st century BC, played over time two main roles, as a place of clearing of the agricultural resources of the inland and as a commercial and military harbour.¹

As attested also in the contemporary sites of Cilicia, the first settlers' choice was aimed at exploiting the peculiar geomorphology and the strategic advantages granted by the presence of a rocky promontory, which was raised over the surrounding coast and thus easily defensible (fig. 2). Thanks to such a position, the city was able to control not only the narrow coastal plains and the road network, but also the two ample and deep bays located between the promontory itself and the mainland, which were connected to one another by a narrow isthmus.²

The geological and archaeological investigations have provided data for outlining the processes of development of the port basins, which at present are quite completely silted in, as well as their transformations over time.³ The northern harbour, which was naturally sheltered and hidden by the steep slopes of the promontory, was exposed to winter winds and to prevailing sea currents; it was larger than the southern one, which was, on its own hand, exposed mainly to the south-western winds. The two harbours must have extended as far westwards as the mainland's lowest spurs, where the coastal road led across.

The maritime vocation of the city is well documented, starting from the late-Hellenistic times, by the coins struck in this period both in the Seleucid and the municipal mint; they represent a goddess standing on a ship's wheel, probably to be identified with Aphrodite Euploia, along with the symbol of *aphlaston*.⁴

At that time, the settlement was confined to the promontory, whereas a cliff necropolis extended along the rocky slopes of the mainland. The polygonal walls scattered on the promontory – some of which pertaining to the city fortifications – might date from this time, as well as some of the structures suited for productive activities (pits, wine- and oil-presses etc.).⁵ For this period, there is no evidence available about the configuration of port basins; in comparison with other Hellenistic sites of the region, it could be assumed that the city exploited the natural landing places, without actual port infrastructures.

The literary sources provide few information about the history of Elaiussa during the 1st century BC, to such an extent that we are not able to assess if in this period Elaiussa

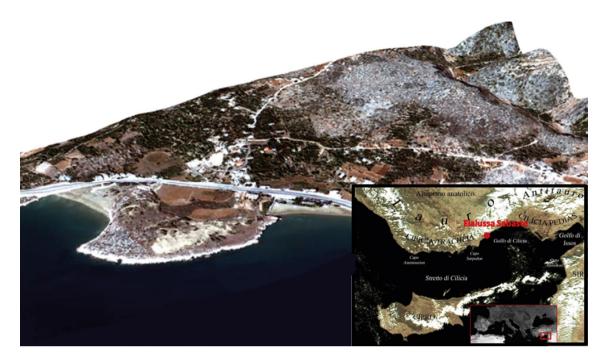


Fig. 1: Geographical location and 3D view of Elaiussa Sebaste.

had been part of the Olbian state, nor if it had been involved in the phaenomenon of Cilician piracy, as suggested by Plutarch (Pomp. 28.4) and Strabo (12.1.4). However, according to Strabo himself (14.5.6) and Josephus (AJ 16.4.6), around 20 B.C. Elaiussa passed under the control of Archelaos of Cappadocia, who renamed it "Sebaste" in honour of the Emperor and built there his residence.⁶

From the Augustan age onwards – and mainly after the reorganization of the province of Cilicia in 72 AD – the maritime and commercial role of Elaiussa increased progressively in importance.⁷ This statement is clearly attested not only by the quotes in the anonymous *Stadiasmus Maris Magni* (172–173) and Oppianus' *Halieutika* (3.205–210), but also by the coins struck both in the Antonine period and during the 3rd century AD, which documented the achievement of honorific titles, respectively, of *Metropolis paraliou* and *nauarchis*.⁸ As for the latter, it has been suggested that it could be linked to a possible role of Elaiussa as seaport of the Imperial navy based at Seleucia Pieria.⁹

The first building phase of the Harbour Baths dates from the Augustan period; they are located on the eastern bank of the northern harbour, so that they were probably used by the people engaged in the port activities.¹⁰ The temple set on the wide rocky terrace which overlooked the southern harbour was erected during the 1st century AD as well. The topographical choice reveals the intention to project the temple towards both the inland and the sea, as an emblem of the new political and institutional order. The hypotheses put forward about the deities worshipped in the sanctuary, ranging from Poseidon to Aphrodite Euploia, strengthen the idea that it might have had a maritime

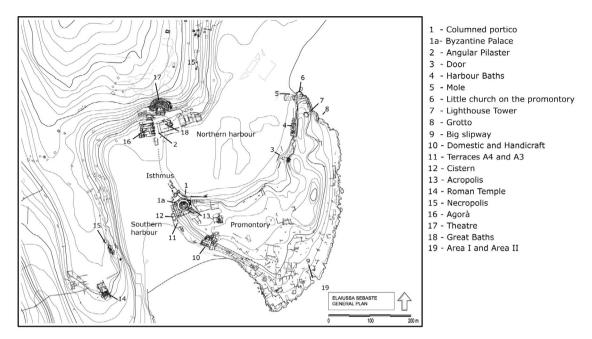


Fig. 2: General plan of the city.

significance, even if, according to a more recent hypothesis, the temple could have been dedicated to the Imperial cult as well.¹¹

After its integration into the province of Cilicia, the city was provided with port infrastructures and gained a monumental layout, which would be lasting, albeit with some transformations, until the end of the Roman age.

The functional division of the area into two different sectors, respectively focused on the northern and southern harbours, could be referred to the same phase. While the southern harbour played mainly a commercial role, the northern one had primarily a representative function, as outlined by the monumental layout of the surrounding buildings. Among them, the impressive colonnaded façade is particularly noteworthy: it was aimed at providing a scenic background for the northern harbour, as well as at monumentalizing the street which connected the mainland to the promontory¹² (fig. 3). The colonnaded façade was built during the 2nd century AD and perhaps dedicated under Septimius Severus;¹³ from the monumental and functional point of view, it was closely connected to the *opus quadratum* wall which bordered the coast of the mainland on the south side and opened towards the public quarter through an arch.

The researches carried out in Elaiussa have brought to light remains of moles and quays, built in *opus caementicium*, along the southern and eastern banks of the north basin. Although they have been so far partially investigated, we can identify a L-structure as pertaining to the system mole-quay which closed the entrance of the northern harbour and was connected by steps to the top of the northern edge of the promontory. The construction of the quays and the moles, which bordered the



Fig. 3: The columned portico facing the northern harbour.

southern bank of the harbour, is contemporary or slightly earlier than the erection of the colonnaded façade and the defensive city walls. The quay is lined by a course of limestone blocks, probably used as a kind of shuttering; in some instances, on their surface the holes of dovetail joints are still visible. The concrete surface of the quay must originally have been covered by limestone slabs, which probably were removed and re-employed in the Late Roman wall which closed the colonnaded façade.

The evidence brought to light along the banks of the southern harbour, though very scanty, points out to the existence of quays and moles as well; on the western edge of the promontory, they were related to warehouses complexes, thus testifying the prominent commercial role of this basin. An infrastructure likely pertaining to this system of quays has been unearthed along the isthmus, in the northern sector of the harbour: trapezoidal in shape, it has four steps made of limestone blocks, jointed one to another with mortar, covering an *opus caementicium* nucleus. The *tabulae lusoriae* carved on the steps, along with the traces of wear still visible on the surface, give evidence of the long and intense frequentation of the area.

Near the *opus quadratum* wall, close to the Byzantine cistern, another concrete structure has been discovered: it leans against the regularised bedrock and it is probably pertaining to the same mole unearthed a little farther in the trenches dug for the geological investigations. As resulting from the same investigations, a second mole might probably have closed the large entrance of the bay.¹⁴



Fig. 4: The so-called Grotto.

Several installations likely related to the city's seafaring activities are further present along the eastern side of the promontory; though different in type, most of them are rock-hewn and attest to the present sea-level's fall in respect to antiquity. Among them, there are various stairways and a great four-sided slipway leading directly to the sea, in addition to various excavations of different forms and dimensions, which in some cases are of unknown function and chronology. The great slipway, well visible also from aerial photos, has the floor and part of the walls cut into the rock and most probably was a boat-ramp.¹⁵

Particularly noteworthy is the Grotto, which could be entered both from land and seaside and nowadays is partially submerged (fig. 4); rectangular in plan, it is dug into the natural bedrock and shows at least two distinct building phases, the latter of which likely datable to the Roman era. According to the most plausible hypothesis, it served as a cistern well for the collecting and storage of fresh ground water for the city itself as well as for the ships sailing along the coast.¹⁶ The presence of fresh ground water springs, certainly necessary for ancient shipping,¹⁷ is well known not only in other coastal sites of Cilicia,¹⁸ but also in Elaiussa itself, where another underwater spring is still active in the rocky coastal stretch which closes northwards the northern bay.¹⁹

What is most interesting is, however, the building situated on the north-western end of the promontory; due to its topographic position and type of structure, it might be probably identified as a Lighthouse Tower (fig. 5). Although it has been only



Fig. 5: The so-called Lighthouse Tower.

partially investigated, several building phases can be distinguished. During the last phase, the building shows a double perimeter wall, approximately circular in shape: the inner one is formed by two separate stretches of walls, which display different building techniques, as well as a pentagonal shape in the lower levels. It is very likely that this building served as a signal, as suggested by its strategic position and visibility from the sea. Other buildings of the city (such as the mentioned temple) could have fulfilled the same practical and symbolic function, that is guiding the ancient sailors.²⁰

The nautical needs, as well as the coastal and harbour configuration, let us assume the presence of one or two additional lighthouses, at least at the entrance of the northern harbour; we could assume that such an installation could set on the edge of eastern outer breakwater.

Both the geological and underwater researches confirm the development of Elaiussa in Roman times. The sediments of the northern harbour are important indicators of the intense anthropic activity which affected in this period the sea area facing the site.²¹

The preliminary underwater researches have allowed to identify an anchorage area, used as temporary mooring in roadstead from the Roman times until recent years, at the entrance of the southern bay, as well as a vast zone (Area I and Area II), where archaeological and modern materials have been dispersed out in the water in front of the promontory's slipway-ramp. The distribution of the findings (terracotta, stone, wood, metal) leads to believe that there are two distinct deposits, respectively dating to the Roman Imperial period (Area II, south) and to the Byzantine age (Area I, north): it is likely that they could have belonged to at least two shipwrecked cargoes, engaged in the cabotage trade. In the Area II, many terracotta artefacts (mainly amphorae), several stone elements and various construction materials and some metallic objects have been

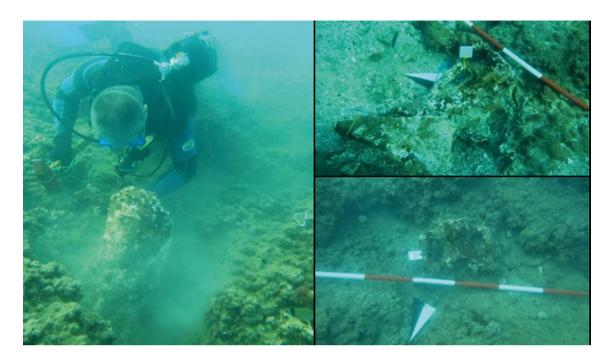


Fig. 6: Underwater activities: Area II.

detected (fig. 6). After a preliminary analysis, the ceramic sherds seem to come from a wide area ranging from the West to the Syro-palestinian region and might date from $2^{nd}-3^{rd}$ century AD, with some later materials (such LRA1).²²

The significance of Elaiussa in Byzantine times, attested both by the literary sources and by the monumental development of the city, is a consequence of its full involvement in the productive system and commercial trade network of the Empire. In this period, the transmarine export of the Cilician products, documented by the spread of LRA1, played a leading role on the Mediterranean markets, perhaps because of a policy of Imperial promotion.²³

Between 4th and 5th century, the siltation process of the northern harbour started; it was probably caused both by a tectonic uplift (related to an earthquake) and an absence of dredging, as pointed out by the archaeological evidence and by the results of the sedimentological analyses carried out in the southern sector of the basin.²⁴ As for the archaeological data, about the 4th century AD, the colonnaded façade was closed to the outside by a wall made of limestone slabs, thus losing its monumental layout;²⁵ on the other hand, the Byzantine palace built in the 5th century got a predominant view on the southern harbour, as showed by the monumental prospectus with pavonazzetto columns set on this side (fig. 7).²⁶ The building of the palace led to the abandonment of the street running under the portico and furthered its probable relocation on a lower level, corresponding to the earlier quays, which had been then deprived of their original function because of the siltation of the harbour.

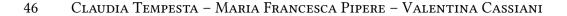




Fig. 7: Aerial view of the Byzantine Palace.

The concentration of the port activities in the southern harbour is attested by the development of the commercial area on the southwestern side of the promontory, as well as by the installation of several kilns where LRA1 were manufactured.²⁷ Such kilns have been discovered on the southern terrace of the domestic and handicrafts quarter (4th century AD) and in the stretch between this quarter and the Byzantine palace, as well as in the palace itself, where they were set after its destruction in the 6th century AD, but also on the other side of the basin, respectively nearby the south-western necropolis and close to the mouth of Kuru Paşa Deresi. The presence itself of such installations attests the continuity of use of the southern harbour, which then had to be not only equipped with landing and anchorage places for ships, but also connected to the roads coming from the inland.

The underwater researches confirm the vitality of the southern harbour during the Byzantine age. As already mentioned above, a deposit of Byzantine materials has been discovered in the Area I out in the water in front of the promontory's slipway-ramp and near the anchorage area out of the entrance of the southern bay. Limestone elements and ceramic sherds have been identified on the western side and beyond the southern edge of the promontory as well; they appear to be aligned with the eastern entrance of the southern harbour and could be related to a roadstead zone (fig. 8).

Summarizing, Elaiussa has always been a crossroad between land and sea-routes and a trade hub for the interchange between the agricultural products of the inland and the goods coming from the Mediterranean countries. Despite the considerable transformations which have affected the coastal landscape over time, the two natural



Fig. 8: Underwater activities: Area I.

harbours remained the hearth of the city-life and the junction of the urban and extraurban road-network, throughout the history of the settlement. Since its foundation, Elaiussa lived in a symbiotic relationship with the sea, through the interface formed by its two port basins, not only from a logistic and functional point of view, but also in a symbolic perspective.

Its maritime vocation has been well documented since Hellenistic period by the symbols and the types adopted on the coins; nevertheless, it has fully developed starting from the Roman era, when the city could enjoy the political stability and the prosperity resulting from its integration in the province of Cilicia. In this period, the two port basins were turned from natural anchorages to actual harbours, as attested not only by the functional infrastructures, but also by the impressive architectural complexes, which created a monumental waterfront along the shores of the northern bay. These complexes were mainly aimed at representing the political and economic status achieved by the city through its full integration into the Mediterranean trade network. The setting up and the following improvement of Elaiussa port system is to be read in the context of the strategical goals of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, intended to exploit and strengthen the role of Cilicia as a place of military recruitment and supplies. The huge amount of building materials and trained workforce required by these activities, as well as the consequently considerable costs borne, lead to believe that the Roman and Byzantine Imperial Houses were directly involved in this development process, along with the local leading classes.

Notes

¹ The site has been excavated since 1995 by the University of Rome "Sapienza", under the direction of Prof. Equini Schneider and, then, Prof. Polosa. The results of the excavations have been collected in three monographs (Equini Schneider 1999, 2003, 2010) and in a guidebook (Equini Schneider 2008), as well as in the annual reports published in the Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı.

² For a historical and topographical framework of the settlement, Equini Schneider 1999, 33–43; Morselli 1999.

³ Pipere 2019, 371. For a general overview of the characteristics of the Cilician Basin: Arnaud 2005, passim; Öner et al. 2013; Özsoy – Sözer 2006. For the geological features of the site and its paleoenvironmental evolution, Toro – Di Filippo 1999; Melis et al. 2015 (with bibl.).

 4 On the civic tetradrachms, Houghton – Bendall 1988, 85-89, who date them between 93 and 80 B.C.; the same coin type appears on some royal tetradrachms struck on behalf of Seleucus VI in 95–94 BC, which Houghton – Moore 1988, 67 f. refer to the mint of Elaiussa.

⁵ Morselli 1999, 157–172; Tempesta 2013, 572–574.

⁶ Equini Schneider 2008, 1-4.

⁷ The reorganization of the province led to a rearrangement of the regional road system, aimed at fulfilling commercial, administrative and military needs, thus creating a road network which ran throughout the whole territory of Cilicia and connected the coast to the inland. On the road-system of Cilicia, in general Hild – Hellenkemper 1990, passim; French 1980, 698–729.

⁸ Tekin 1999, 56 f.; Polosa 2008, 169.

⁹ Equini Schneider 1999, 42 (with bibl.).

¹⁰ Spanu 2010, 400 (with bibl.).

¹¹ Borgia 2017 (with bibl.).

¹² Tempesta 2008, 97–104; Tempesta 2013, 577 f.

¹³ Borgia 2010, 29 (with bibl.).

¹⁴ Toro – Di Filippo 1999, 18–23.

¹⁵ Pipere 2019, 375.

¹⁶ On the Grotto, Pipere 2019, 375. On the karstic nature of the promontory and on the connections between the presence of fresh ground water and the cisterns of the city, Toro – Di Filippo 1999, 17. On the cisterns discovered in Elaiussa Sebaste, Spanu 1999, 83-94; Borgia – Iacomi 2010, 1041-1043; Falcone – Iacomi 2018, 47, fig. 2, 49–50.

¹⁷ Gianfrotta 2005, 31; Medas 2010, 348.

¹⁸ Taşkıran 1994, 52 (Korasion); Rebuffat 1999 (Narlıkuyu). Some modern toponyms of some coastal sites, such as Soğuksu, could be interpreted as a toponomastic consequence of the presence of fresh water in the sea.

¹⁹ Pipere 2019, 372.

²⁰ For preliminary reports on the excavation of the Lighthouse Tower, Equini Schneider 2014, 417; Polosa
– Oral 2018, 34. On the lighthouses, Christiansen 2014 (with bibl.); on the coastal tower between Elaiussa

and Korykos, Vann 1997, 264.

²¹ Melis et al. 2015, 579.

²² On the underwater researches, Pipere 2019, 372–375; preliminary reports in Equini Schneider 2014, 419; 2015, 566 f.

²³ Iacomi – Cassiani 2014, 9.

²⁴ Melis et al. 2015, 580.

²⁵ Tempesta 2013, 582 f.

²⁶ On the Byzantine Palace, Tempesta 2008, 104–113, Morselli – Ricci 2009, Cassiani et al. 2018.

²⁷ Borgia – Iacomi 2010; Iacomi-Cassiani 2014, 6. In general, on the LRA1 kilns discovered in Elaiussa, Ferrazzoli – Ricci 2010.

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