

The churches of Kastro Apalirou

During the recent survey and documentation work at and around Kastro Apalirou 7 churches have been documented, 2 inside, and 5 outside the walls in the immediate vicinity of the *kastron*. This article will present what we now know about three of these churches and their immediate environment, Aghios Giorgos and a small double-aisled church inside Kastro Apalirou and a large extramural church immediately to the southwest of the only gate in the town.¹ The three churches discussed here are not only different in location, size and building technique, they have also been documented in quite different ways. Work at Aghios Giorgos was carried out according to standard archaeological documentation strategy on standing building remains, while a small-scale excavation was carried out on the small double-aisled church. The large church outside the Kastro has not yet been possible to study in detail, mainly because building debris covers the entire building, making any detailed study of the masonry, mortar and building technique difficult. These different strategies mean that while we can suggest dating of both construction and collapse for the small double-aisled church, we can only give a relative dating for the different phases in the Aghios Giorgos-complex and not even that for the extramural church. Even though numerous questions still remain concerning all three churches, the following description and discussion will hopefully make these important monuments of Kastro Apalirou more accessible for the scholarly community.

The Aghios Giorgos-complex

The largest and most visible of the churches in and around Kastro Apalirou is undoubtedly the large complex known traditionally under the name of Aghios Giorgos. There are no historical sources for this name, but popular tradition holds that the patron saint was St. George and as one of the most important military saints such a dedication is certainly appropriate for the main church of a *kastron*. As one of the best preserved structures in Kastro Apalirou, the church of Aghios Giorgos was known, and partly studied, before the Norwegian project. It is mentioned briefly by Mastoropoulos,² and it has also been discussed more recently in more detail by Aslanidis.³

¹ The other extramural churches are included in J. Crow and S. Turner's article in this volume.

² Mastoropoulos, 2206, 152-153.

³ Aslanidis, 2014, 52-59.

Aghios Giorgos and its setting

This church-complex is located in the northern part of Kastro Apalirou, which we believe was enclosed from the rest of the kastron by a series of cisterns in the west and perhaps also by a small, and not very well preserved wall to the south. The main entrance to this area was through an opening between two of the large cisterns in the west, which could perhaps be closed by a gate and therefore function as an inner wall of defence. Through this entrance, one would have seen the western entrance to the church-complex to the southeast, which is now completely collapsed. Apart from the complex of Aghios Giorgos, there are few well-preserved buildings in this part of Kastro Apalirou. There are, however, two freestanding cisterns west of the church, two small cisterns to south and three to the north that probably point to more buildings than are preserved now. A small cistern joining the southern wall of the church complex, as well as the peculiar cylindrical and very small cistern on the southeastern corner of the main apse of Aghios Giorgos (see further below p. 00) most likely collected water from the roof of the church itself. It is possible that the two cisterns to the west⁴ and the cistern in the small bath house right to the west of the church complex were also fed by rainwater from the roof of the church.

The northeastern part of Kastro Apalirou is the only one inside the town with a reasonably large, level ground. This was partly accomplished by levelling out the crest running north-south along the summit of the kastron and partly by filling out the areas towards the fortifications to the east. In a collapsed section of the fortifications to the north-east of the Aghios Giorgos-complex we have observed how the interior face of the fortifications have been filled up with soil to create a platform for the church and the surrounding area. It must be assumed that this leveling of the area was carried out after the fortifications were constructed to create the necessary level space for the major church of Kastro Apalirou.

Structure of the complex

Aghios Giorgos is composed of a cluster of structures and the relative chronology between the different parts is not completely clear, mainly due to building debris covering the floor surface. The entrance to the church from the west is almost completely collapsed and makes a

⁴ Aslanidis, 2014, fig. 13 reconstructs one of these cisterns as forming part of the narthex of the church. This is possible, but not certain.

reconstruction of this part of the building difficult, for this reason we cannot for example be certain whether the church had a narthex or not.⁵

The main part of the complex is a double-aisled church (building A and B), with arcades separating the main aisle to the south from the narrow northern aisle (B).⁶ Another church, or chapel, is located immediately to the south (Building F, width 5,00 m, length 13,50 m). It is a single aisled structure, located at a slightly higher level than the double-aisled church to the north. To the north of the double-aisled church two chapels (Buildings C and D) at an oblique angle were added at a later date and an inserted doorway in the northern wall of the double-aisled church gave access to these two later chapels. Finally, a barrel-vaulted room was constructed to the north of the apses of the double-aisled church (Building E).

The Norwegian team has in an earlier publication classified some of the main masonry types encountered in Kastro Apalirou.⁷ The masonry in the Aghios Giorgos complex mainly present 3 groups, namely:

1. Uncoursed and undressed stones with extensive use of smaller, flat stones and tiles for support and stability. The stones are often worked to form a fair faced outer surface.
2. This type is in many ways similar to the preceding ones, but it is randomly coursed and has tiles replacing or supplementing the use of flat stones in between.
3. Larger and more regularly hewn stones, particularly in corners and gateways with little visible mortar on the surface of the walls.

It should be added that mortar is almost always used sparingly at Kastro Apalirou, for quite obvious reasons; sand and lime would have to be transported to the mountaintop and water must also have been a valuable commodity. In Aghios Giorgos, however, mortar has been used more extensively than in many of the houses in the Kastro and particularly in masonry type 1 and 2, while it has been used only in the core of the walls in type 3. Masonry types 1-2 are mainly present in building A, B, E and F, while the last type is characteristic of building C and D.

Building phases and relative chronology

⁵ The existence of a narthex is suggested in the reconstruction by Aslanidis, 2014, fig. 15, but it is not certain.

⁶ Total length preserved is 20,50 m, the width of the main aisle is 4,00 m. and the width of the narrow northern aisle is 2,60 m.

⁷ Hill, Roland, Ødegård, 2016.

A detailed relative chronology of the Aghios Giorgos is not possible, since the structures have never been thoroughly cleaned and building debris removed. It is for this reason impossible to establish the relationship between the double-aisled main church (building A, B) and the chapel to the south (building F), since they do not share a common wall and the entrance part in the west of both buildings have collapsed. We can only assume that they were at a later stage connected through a stairway in the western part of the complex. Building F bears clear signs of being rebuilt by a strengthening of the inner walls, probably connected to the insertion of an apse in the east and the construction of a barrel vault and a dome over the central part of the aisle. The lower part of the vault is visible both on the southern and northern walls of the building and springs from a horizontal layer of regular pieces of slate.

Also the main part of the complex, building A and B, the double-aisled central church, shows signs of reconstruction, modification or repair. This is evident in the insertion of piers along both the southern and northern wall of the main aisle. These piers are in two or possibly three different phases and are probably connected to different roof-constructions or repairs. It is possible that the interior was once covered with a barrel-vault, which at a later stage was reconstructed with a dome over the central part of the aisle.⁸ In one of these reconstructions of the roof, arches were inserted between the main aisle and the northern and narrow aisle. These arches were constructed with far more use of broken tiles than in the rest of the building. Also the northern narrow aisle (2,60 m. wide) shows signs of repair or reconstruction through the addition of 6 corresponding piers, presumably inserted to strengthen a new barrel-vaulted roof.

The two chapels C and D were at a certain stage added to the main complex and communicated through a doorway in the north-western wall of the double-aisled church. As mentioned above, the building technique is different, with consistent use of larger and more regularly hewn blocks in corners and gateways and mainly in alternate directions, as headers and stretchers. The two chapels are joined to the main complex in an oblique angle, presumably because a rocky outcrop to the north and the general topography made a regular plan difficult. Both chapels had apses, the northern one clearly inserted at a later stage. There are no internal piers in the two chapels and they were presumably roofed by barrel-vaults.

⁸ Aslanidis, 2014, 52 and fig. 18, mentions finds of voussoirs of volcanic stone from the dome.

Finally, there remains the mysterious building E in the north-eastern corner of the complex. The function of this room, which is situated at a lower level, is quite unclear, and is only preserved to about 1 meter height. The external walls are quite massive, almost 1 meter wide, and enough is preserved to suggest that the building was covered by a barrel-vault. This vault probably carried an external stairway which gave access to a doorway in the north-eastern corner of the double-aisled church.

The eastern, exterior face of the complex is reasonably well preserved, with the imposing central apse with its two large windows. Unfortunately they have both collapsed, but their lower width seems to be around 0,80 m. The adjacent apse of the smaller, northern aisle was clearly constructed at the same time, since some larger stones in the masonry project into the next apse, but the single window in the northern apse is smaller, about 0,40 m lower width (on the exterior face). Seen from the east, the exterior face of the church could actually appear to be a three-aisled basilica, since a small, half-circular structure has been inserted on the south-eastern corner. This is undoubtedly a cistern due to the presence of reddish, hydraulic mortar on the inside and must have been fed from the roof of the double-aisled church. The shape of the cistern is very odd and how water was conducted from the cistern and where is completely unknown. The visual appearance of the eastern end of the church may also have been of importance in this rather strange addition to the building.

A detailed chronology of the Aghios Georgios-complex will depend on further work and the cleaning and removal of collapse and building debris. Comparisons with the plans of other churches on Naxos are not easy to make, since the complexity and size of the Aghios Giorgos-complex is unusual. If the double-aisled church was originally preceded by a narthex, the E-W-length would have been around 20 meters, while the average length of Byzantine churches on Naxos is between 6-8 meters. Even a large church like Protothronos at Chalki, believed to be an episcopal church, is with its length of 14,70 meters considerably smaller than Aghios Giorgos.⁹ Similarly, Aghios Mamas, associated with the bishop Leo in the 10th century, measures 9,60x8,00 m.¹⁰ Clearly, the Aghios Giorgos-complex stands out in both size and complexity from these and other churches on Naxos, showing the economic and political importance of Kastro Apalirou on the island. Based on comparison with other, better

⁹ See Panayotidi/Konstantellou, this volume.

¹⁰ Aslanidis, 2014, 191-200, Mastoropoulos, 2006, 113-115.

dated churches at Naxos, an initial construction in the 7th century seems likely, with further rebuilding and additions in the 8th-10th centuries¹¹.

A small double-aisled church

During the first seasons of archaeological documentation of the visible structures of Kastro Apalirou between 2010 and 2014, a small double-aisled church was discovered near the southern summit of the urban area. The structure was not initially identified as a church, since the building was completely filled by debris and soil, but during a particularly dry autumn in 2013, two apses were clearly visible as crop marks. On removal of vegetation and closer inspection, it was possible to suggest a plan for the building, with two aisles ending in apses of about the same size and a probable narthex at the western entrance.

The Ephorate of Antiquities of the Cyclades and the Norwegian part of the Kastro Apalirou-project decided in late 2014 that a small-scale excavation could be attempted at the site. Excavation was mainly undertaken for two reasons. First of all, we needed information on building phases and absolute chronology. But we also needed a good test-case for undertaking the first excavation ever inside Kastro Apalirou, which is a challenging site where all equipment, food and water would have to be carried up every day, finds brought down to the Museum in Chora Naxou and soil and building debris deposited safely and inconspicuously near the excavation. This small church would be a good test case for all questions. Excavation was started in spring 2015 and concluded in summer of 2016 with a total of about 15 workdays. Because of the small team involved (4 persons) it was decided to concentrate on the northern aisle, which was cleared down to the floor level in about two-thirds of the room.¹² Although we have only obtained information on the northern aisle, an area in front of the southern aisle was also cleared and it is clear that we are dealing with two separate structures, constructed side by side and with no internal communication. There are several examples of double-aisled churches on Naxos, but usually there are doorways or arches between the aisles, like Aghios Giorgos discussed above, Aghios Giorgos Lathrinou or Aghia Kyriaki.¹³ There are a few examples of chapels side by side without communication, like the two small churches near the Chimarros-tower, which are also similar in size to our

¹¹ Aslanidis, 2014, 52-59.

¹² The following is based on reports, plans and photographs of David Hill and Hallvard Indgjerd, as well as personal inspection.

¹³ Ag. Giorgos Lathrinou: Aslanidis, 2014, 218-222; Ag. Kyriaki in Apeiranthos: Aslanidis, 2014, 151-158

church, but this is not the normal situation. It should be added that the relative chronological relationship between the two aisles, or chapels, at Kastro Apalirou , is not clear.

Excavation focused on removing the collapsed roof and walls of the church that have filled the remaining walls to a height of 1,4 m from floor level. The nature of the collapse material was chaotic and suggests that the building fell into ruin over time and did not collapse in one single event and in one single way: The roof material, mainly irregularly hewn local stone, in many cases still preserved in sections with mortar, was in places the top layer in the collapse, and in other places the bottom layer, and no single direction of fall was prevalent. Since there were no clear stratigraphical divisions in the fill, it was all excavated as one stratigraphic unit, with the exception of the soil immediately above the floor level which was excavated as another unit, below the collapse, but above the floor level. Some fragments of marble blocks and nicely cut pumice stones with plaster still attached, presumably from the apse semidome, were also recovered from the fill during the excavation.

The floor level consisted of clay, flat stones and bedrock, the prime concern was evidently simply a fairly level surface. This level was reached in about 2/3 of the building, the rest remains unexcavated. There are two corresponding recesses in the wall on the southern and northern side. Mortared benches were inserted in these recesses, but no further refinements of the inner building have been encountered. The southern part of the apse was exposed and a fine, but thin mortared surface appeared, but there are no signs that it has ever been decorated or painted.

The ceramic evidence (H. Indgjerd)

During the work, all ceramic objects were collected and brought to the museum depository – a total of 1044 sherds. Due to the nature of the collapse, no stratigraphic division was made in the collection of the material, and the finds are registered by date found. In the database, feature-sherds were entered individually, described, photographed, and, in some cases, drawn..

Approximately one third of the sherds have clear signs of mortar or plaster attached to them, indicating that a large part of the material recovered had been used in the building of the church. In the collapse, more than 75% of the feature sherds have mortar attached to them, against very few of those sherds recovered from the floor. This reuse would allow for a date of the church construction based on the chronology of the pottery. Unfortunately, however, at

the present only a few of the ceramic objects have been securely dated, and a corresponding date for the church must be treated with caution.

The majority of the sherds have none or only few joining sherds in the collapse material, and have probably been used in the construction as broken fragments, or entered the assemblage as individual sherds. A large part of the pottery feature sherds are made up of amphora handles and handle roots, but also larger fragments of beehive wall are common.

The collected material includes 342 fragments of Ceramic Building Material (CBM) in the form of tile (*tegulae* and *imbrices*) and brick. The most striking feature of the CBM is the large variation in shapes and fabric. In combination with the frequent occurrence of mortar on break-surfaces, it must be concluded that they have been in secondary use in the church, in much the same way as the broken pottery reused in the building, and that the presence of roof-tiles cannot indicate a tiled roof.

The two most well-preserved vessels (2015-039 and 2015-040) have been identified as probable Spatheion 3 amphorae (Keay 26). These 'miniature amphorae', less than 50 cm in height and containing up to 3 litres, have been dated to the mid 6th – end of 7th c. AD, with the main production centre in Tunisia.¹⁴ Both were found close to floor level in the south-eastern part of the excavated area, and have mortar attached to their exterior surface. While it is possible that the bases and lower parts of the vessels are in the un-excavated part of the church, it seems more likely that only the upper parts were used in the construction as there are no non-joining sherds belonging to them in the rest of the trench.

38 sherds (2015-041) of a Late Roman Amphora 1 (LRA1), constituting the rim and upper handle, a lower handle attachment and several larger pieces of the body, also had mortar attached and must have been used as building material. The amphora has an approximate date in the 5th to mid-7th century. Together, these three amphorae could indicate that the Small Church was built in the 7th or 8th century AD, with the potential of being as early as the late 6th century.

On the floor level, below the collapse, were two glazed sherds belonging to different vessels. 2016-060 is a part of a pedestal foot in fine white fabric with green glaze (varying darker and lighter areas) on the exterior, on the resting surface, and on the lower part of the interior. The type parallels Hayes' Type 17 of Glazed White Ware II (GWW-II) from Constantinople,¹⁵ which are stemmed lamps or small bowls most common in the 11th and 12th centuries, but

¹⁴ Bonifay, 2004, 127–129

¹⁵ Hayes, 1992, 28–29

also existing in the 10th. 2016-061 is a body-shoulder from an open vessel in medium fine pinkish fabric with few reddish brown inclusions, which has a clear glaze with spots in green on both interior and exterior surfaces. This is probably a later form of GWW-II, dating to the 11th or 12th century.¹⁶

Also fragments of two glass vessels were scattered on the floor level, both in the eastern part close to the apse. 2016-066 consists of nine fragments forming the bottom and lower walls of what was probably a chalice or a lamp; a break surface in the centre of the base shows that the vessel had a stem. The lower part has been pinched in six places, creating a star-like pattern of ribs. Fifteen fragments, mostly small, belong to 2016-067, but less of its shape has been reconstructed. The vessel has a narrow rim and neck, and a rounded base, which seemingly also has a break surface that could suggest a stem. Neither of the glass vessels have been typologically determined or dated.

Chronology and collapse

The presence of 11th or 12th century glazed pottery on the floor level gives a clear *terminus post quem* for the collapse of the church, and shows a probable use-life of more than 500 years. The two pedestal vessels in glass and glazes white ware, which could both be either lamps or chalices, may well belong to the equipment of the church.

Interestingly, also a number of ovicaprine bones were found on the floor. The most likely explanation is perhaps that the building went out of use before it collapsed, providing shelter for animals. This is indeed the situation even today, carcasses and bones of sheep are common enough in many of the still standing cisterns at Kastro Apalirou. If this interpretation of the bones found is accepted, we may not only assume that the church went out of active use, but that the area was completely abandoned well before the building collapsed.

A newly discovered extra-mural church

As fieldwork expanded beyond the fortifications of Kastro Apalirou to include the terraces and associated structures on the slopes to the west, remains of a church were found immediately outside and to the southwest of the only gate in the fortifications. Even though only a superficial documentation and mapping has been undertaken so far, the remains are

¹⁶ Hayes, 1992, 18–19

important both for their size, character and particularly because of their close proximity to the fortifications.

The church sits on a long and imposing terrace wall that runs N-S along almost the entire hill below the fortifications. This terrace is the closest one to the fortifications, presumably for defensive reasons there were no terraces or other structures closer than about 25 meters from the wall. Quite likely this terrace carried a section of the main route to the gate of the *kastron* and even though no traces of the road itself are evident today, it is not unlikely that a route branched off just outside the gate to reach the church along the terrace. The location is in itself interesting. While the town itself is located on a narrow and steep top running north-south, the western slope is so steep that any large buildings oriented east-west would be impossible. But the slope is less steep on the south-western shoulder of the hill. Here it was possible to quarry into the hillside and construct a terrace to west that could accommodate a large church oriented east-west. Building debris and vegetation covers the building and we have so far only documented what can be seen on the surface.

The main part of the structure is possible to identify as a single-aisled church with a wide narthex to the west,¹⁷ but there are remains of attached buildings to the north, and there is also a separate structure with a cistern to the west on a slightly lower level and buttressed by another terrace running northwards and parallel to the terrace on which the church was constructed. We cannot at this stage of investigations be certain whether these different structures are functionally and chronologically connected, but they do together form a nucleus of buildings immediately outside the walls.

The church itself is preceded by a wide narthex, so much wider than the aisle that we originally thought this was a three-aisled basilica. The large and imposing terrace that runs in front of the narthex created an even bigger platform around the front of the church, which must have been an imposing and highly visible building seen from below. We have no indications yet on the interior organization of the narthex such as columns or arches.

The church itself is a wide single-aisled structure, with two massive piers in the interior. The eastern part of the church is filled with larger amount of debris than the western, for this reason we cannot yet know whether there were two more corresponding piers further east. If this was the case, one might posit a central dome, such as in the church of *Aghios Ioannis*

¹⁷ The aisle is 9,50 m long and 3,50 m. wide (internal measures), while the narthex is 9 m. wide and 2,00 m long.

Adissarou a few kilometres further west. This is perhaps likely, since the two visible piers would otherwise be difficult to understand structurally. There are, in fact, several features in common with Aghios Ioannis Adissarou, such as the ratio width and length, although this newly discovered church is larger.¹⁸ Only few traces of the apsis remain above ground, the exposed sections present a slight curve upwards and we may for this reason assume that the floor level must be considerably lower down in this eastern part of the building. The apsis is without clear traces of mortar or stucco. There seem to be remains of an opening towards the north adjacent to the apsis. This opening gave access to another structure which can only be traced in outline, but there was definitely a very small apse in the eastern end, towards the church. Furthermore, a small, square cistern can be discerned on the north-eastern corner of this structure. There also seem to be a square room to the west and aligned with the church. Both rooms to the north of the church are very poorly preserved on the surface, we have no certain indication of the thickness of the walls and it is also uncertain how the rooms communicated. We do not even know where the main entrance to these rooms was.

The building situated slightly lower to the west is composed of a solidly built rectangular building, with an attached rectangular cistern to the west. The plan has a lot in common with the houses of Kastro Apalirou and one of the large houses immediately inside the gate of the kastron presents a good comparison both in terms of plan and size. Both this possible house and the church were evidently made in conjunction with the large terraces leading northwards, but we do not yet understand the relationships between these different structures. The building technique is, however, similar in all structures. The walls are generally very solidly constructed, with large and fairly well-hewn blocks and mortar mainly in the interior of the walls. The masonry can be compared with no. 3 described above in connection with Aghios Giorgos (above p.00), which there was used for the later phases of the church-complex.

The combination of what could be a dwelling and the church with its attached buildings could perhaps point to a monastery-complex, but that must remain uncertain until further documentation and studies are undertaken. The very wide narthex (9,00 meters) covers not only the entrance to the church, but also conceals from below the adjacent rooms to the north of the church. This suggests that a unitary design was intended for the complex and that the plan deliberately exploited the imposing terrace and lofty location of the church.

¹⁸ Aghios. Ioannis Adissarou measures 2,70 m. x 7,85 m., see Aslanidis, 2014, 163.

The three churches discussed in this article present a substantial addition to our information on Kastro Apalirou. Aghios Giorgos was clearly the main ecclesiastical centre of the town and may have been a part of an administrative section in the northern part of the *kastron*. The sheer size of the main part of the building, the double-aisled church, is a good indication of its importance as the main church of a sizeable population and the other parts of the complex may for instance have been associated with patronage from the elite. The excavation of the small church in the southern part of the town is primarily interesting because of the chronology, which gives us evidence both for the construction, the abandonment and subsequent collapse of an important building like a church. This is the first structure of Kastro Apalirou that can be firmly dated and as such has important consequences for our understanding of the establishment and planning of the whole town. It must be assumed, for instance, that quarrying of the hill and general layout of the town with its terraces must have preceded the actual construction of buildings such as this. And finally, the newly discovered extramural church is an important link between the fortified town of Kastro Apalirou and the lower town.¹⁹ Its proximity to the walls, as well as its size and associated buildings, shows us that the suburban area of Kastro Apalirou was an important and integrated part of this extraordinary Byzantine site.

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¹⁹ See article by J. Crow and S. Turner in this volume.