

# Late Roman/Early Byzantine archaeology in Greece: a ‘gateway’ to the Period of Transformations

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## Abstract

*Working on the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period in Greece was, in the early 1990s, a quite lonely occupation. Since then, an important amount of data has been accumulated which has not been yet totally exploited. Although a significant amount of field work has been done in the last 20 years, the published data remain few. Some of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine urban centers excavated from 1990 up to now will be briefly discussed in order to examine the transformations of the urban landscape and the contribution of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period to the formation of a new model for cities. The article begins with a brief history of research.*

## Keywords

Late Roman/Early Byzantine Greece – field archaeology – Period of Transformations.

## Introduction

In this article, I will examine the way the archaeological remains of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period have been considered from the time of creation of the Greek state until the end of the 20th century. The loneliness of the path followed by the researcher focusing on Late Roman/Early Byzantine field archaeology in Greece was something I experienced many times,<sup>1</sup> as did many Greek or non-Greek colleagues working on the period between the 4th and the 7th centuries AD in the early 1990s. Most specialists of the ancient world call the period being on the verge of ancient and medieval times, Late Antiquity; for their part, most medievalists do not consider it as actually belonging to the medieval era. The

<sup>1</sup> For an autobiographical note on this matter see Petridis 2013, 11–12.

monuments of this era, although discovered in considerable numbers already in the 19th century, only occasionally attracted the interest of specialists.

### The fate of medieval antiquities during the 19th and first decades of the 20th century

This was the fate not only of Early Byzantine but mostly all medieval antiquities of Greece for more than 150 years. The destruction of Byzantine remains was general during the first attempts to establish urban planning in the small Greek cities of the first independent Greek state. In Athens, among the churches standing at the moment of the city's liberation from the Turks, some of them dating to the Byzantine period, more than 50% were destroyed during the very first years. The triumph of Neoclassicism in the private, but especially in the public buildings, overshadowed any architectural form reminiscent of Rome or Byzantium. The only exception, the *Ophthalmiatreio* (Eye Hospital) in Athens (Figure 1), used architectural elements inspired by Byzantine architecture. The architect of its first phase (1847-1854), Hans Christian Hansen, succeeded in creating a strong contrast with the neighboring Neoclassical Trilogy (the Library, University and Academy) and the Catholic church of St Denis, also built in a Neoclassical style.

Although partial protection of Byzantine antiquities was established by the Law of 1834, it took decades before archaeologists and architects of that time stopped neglecting the Byzantine monuments.<sup>2</sup> The excavations carried out in the late 19th century in most of the well-known archaeological sites, such as Olympia or Delfi, are characterised by a sort of contradiction: they uncovered thousands of square meters dating to the Late Roman period, but these lack serious scientific treatment. In some cases, these monuments were destroyed to allow research into their lower layers or to facilitate the admission of visitors. This was the case, for instance, with some of the Late Roman buildings discovered at Delfi by the '*Grande Fouille*' (1892-1903).<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, inspired by political (more precisely 'patriotic') or theological motives, some scholars turned their attention to the medieval period. On their initiative, societies for the promotion of Medieval Studies were created, such as the *Βυζαντιολογική Εταιρεία*, or the *Εταιρεία Βυζαντινών Σπουδών*, in 1909 and 1919 respectively.<sup>4</sup> A few years earlier, in 1884, Georgios Lampakis, as a forerunner,

<sup>2</sup> Gratziou 2006, 37. For the way Byzantium was treated by the Modern Greek state see also Ricks & Magdalino 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Petridis 1997, 682 n. 4

<sup>4</sup> Kiousopoulou 2006, 33.



Figure 1. The Byzantine-style Eye-Hospital in Athens  
(<http://ebooks.edu.gr/modules/ebook/show.php/DSGL106/282/2021,6897/>)

founded the first Society of this kind: the *Χριστιανική Αρχαιολογική Εταιρεία*.<sup>5</sup> The initial objectives of the Society were the preservation of Christian monuments and the collection of artefacts in order to found a Museum of Christian Archaeology.<sup>6</sup> He was motivated by his deep Christian faith and the necessity of preserving the remains of the first centuries of Christianity ‘...for the Glory of the Church and of the Homeland’.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he took many photographs during his journeys and collected thousands of items, dating mainly to the Early Byzantine period (Figure 2). These items would come to be the main core of the collections kept in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens.<sup>8</sup>

The first decades of the 20th century were marked by a couple of field archaeologists, Georgios and Maria Sotiriou.<sup>9</sup> They travelled through the newly extended

<sup>5</sup> The Christian Archaeological Society remains still the most active scientific society for the promotion of archaeology and the history of art of the Medieval and Post-Medieval period in Greece (see its website: <http://www.chae.gr>).

<sup>6</sup> Byzantine & Christian Museum 2007, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Gratziou 2006, 39-41.

<sup>8</sup> Konstantios 2004, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Konstantios 2006, 67-68.



Figure 2. African-type lamp bought by G. Lampakis in Rome  
(Gratziou & Lazaridou 2006, 229)

country – in some times only for a very short period, as in the case of Efesos – digging up monuments of the Early Byzantine period or restoring them, as was the case with the Early Byzantine basilica of St Demetrius at Thessaloniki which had been partly destroyed by the fire of 1917.

### Late Roman/Early Byzantine archaeology during the 20th century

However, despite the thorough excavations that uncovered remains of the period under discussion, one may wonder whether the Late Roman or Early Byzantine archaeology of Greece did really exist during most of the 20th century. Late Roman/Early Byzantine remains were under the responsibility of Classical archaeologists or historians of Christian art. In the meantime the exhaustive and almost exclusive study of frescoes and of religious architecture by many generations of Greek archaeologists and art-historians left no place for the study of secular monuments and objects of everyday life. All these were very often interpreted through the scope of religion. For instance, almost all the huge urban villas constructed near churches were considered as *episkopeia*, bishop's palaces. Likewise, all the sigma-shaped tables were considered to be offertory tables (*mensae martyrum*), the buildings in which they have been found were classified as churches and their everyday use in non-religious context was totally neglected.<sup>10</sup> This was also the

<sup>10</sup> For a short discussion on this subject see Chalkia 1987-1988, 104.

attitude of most scholars towards decorated lamps, since they often tried to detect a Christian symbol in every humble animal depicted on their disc.

A decisive turn to the study of material culture was manifested in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> The archaeologists of that generation were the first to undertake general studies of topography and pottery or to detect social phenomena in the changes observed through archaeological remains. Some years later, the study of technical procedures in the manufacture of the early Byzantine objects has been introduced. Considering the dating, stylistic criteria gave place to more concrete criteria. The Late Roman period offered a large spectrum of study possibilities, as in many places the architectural remains of that period were well preserved.

A new reality in the Greek archaeological landscape regarding the treatment of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period arose in the 1990s. Systematic excavations and extensive or intensive surveys were then undertaken, conducted mainly by foreign but also by some Greek institutions. These efforts resulted in a number of publications, unfortunately not as many monographs as one would wish, but at least a considerable number of articles on various Late Roman/Early Byzantine sites or regions of Greece.

### Late Roman/Early Byzantine archaeology during the last 15 to 20 years

Some older fields of work, such as topography and especially pottery, came to be in fashion in the last 10 to 15 years, reflecting the determination to study aspects of everyday life and the transformations of urban and rural landscapes. Monographs on pottery published after the year 2000 concern the sites of Eleftherna,<sup>12</sup> Halasarna,<sup>13</sup> Argos,<sup>14</sup> Athens,<sup>15</sup> and Delfi,<sup>16</sup> other monographs on architecture and topography of that period concern Thessaloniki<sup>17</sup> and Argos.<sup>18</sup> Collective studies, such as the volumes on Early Byzantine Eleftherna<sup>19</sup> and *JRA Supplement 42*<sup>20</sup> are very helpful for anyone working on this period; one should also not omit historical monographs like the book of the late Anna Avramea on the Peloponnesus,<sup>21</sup> or

<sup>11</sup> I am referring, among others, to some innovative works of Charalambos Bakirtzis, Jean-Pierre Sodini and Jean-Michel Spieser.

<sup>12</sup> Yangaki 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Diamanti 2010a.

<sup>14</sup> Abadie-Reynal 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Hayes 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Petridis 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Nalpantis 2003; Marki 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Oikonomou-Laniado 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Themelis 2000; Themelis 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Lavan 2001, including a rich bibliography about Greek cities.

<sup>21</sup> Avramea 1997.

a more recent book by Helen Saradi,<sup>22</sup> an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Early Byzantine cities.

It is also noteworthy that regional or interregional studies appeared in the last fifteen years; they overcome the impasse of the autistic isolation of researchers totally devoted to one archaeological site, ignoring even the relations of their favourite site with the neighbouring or distant cities.

At the same time, the contribution of the 'hard sciences' opened new fields, specialists of Late Roman Greece becoming, after the prehistorians, among the first to seek answers in the methods of these sciences. Pottery analysis (petrographic and chemical) were carried out for instance at the sites of Thasos, Elateia, Delfi, Paros, Halasarna, but we still lack analysis from important production centres which would serve as reference points for all future analyses.

Conferences and Congresses organised in Greece, partially or fully focused on the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period,<sup>23</sup> offered the possibility to scholars, some of whom were only occasionally concerned with the period, to present their contributions. The publication of the proceedings remains in many cases the only published data of the discoveries from rescue excavations, with the exception, of course, of short excavation reports. More specialised articles can be found dispersed in the *Acta* of several Symposia, Conferences, Workshops etc; their number increased rapidly in the last few years with contributions by younger scholars.

If we move from systematic research to rescue excavations, we should underline the urban expansion of Greek towns, which went through a period of prosperity during all the 1990s and a part of the 2000s. This prosperity was expressed through the erection of new private houses and public buildings and the renewal of the civil infrastructure (roads, subways, drainage systems etc). These works necessitated hundreds of rescue excavations conducted by the Greek archaeological service all over Greece, which brought to light new evidence from the Late Roman period; remains of that time are often visible near the surface, mainly in the case of sites abandoned after the 7th century. Some of these rescue excavations lasted for years and are comparable to systematic excavations, in terms of the amount of money spent and the number of professionals involved; this is the case for instance of the excavations for the new Metropolitan Underground of Athens to which I will return later.

<sup>22</sup> Saradi 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Bakirtzis 2003; Themelis & Konti 2002; Bintliff & Stöger 2009; Papanikola-Bakirtzi & Kousoulakou 2010.

Regarding the new dynamism of the Greek archaeological service, it was enriched with new blood in 1993, 1994 and 2004 through competition, as well as in 2006-2007 through other procedures. This fact, in combination with 'the unprecedented challenge of the resources made available to the service for the first time thanks to the funds of the 3rd Community Support Framework' (CSF),<sup>24</sup> led to an outbreak of projects involving conservation, restoration, reconstruction, promotion, and, in the case of Athens, unification of archaeological sites. Some of them started already under the 2nd CSF, less successful in terms of absorbing funds than the 3rd CSF: the Monuments Measure of the latter absorbed actually 65% of the funds, while the Museum Measure 45%.<sup>25</sup> Among hundreds of such projects, only a few concerned the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, enhancing remains of that time.

I will mention only one, the restoration and landscaping presentation of Galerius' palace in Thessaloniki. The excavation of this complex began in the 1950s and continued until 1971, bringing to light a restricted area of the complex. Restoration started in 1996, funded by the 2nd CSF; in 2000, the restoration of two buildings covering a total area of 4000 m<sup>2</sup> was completed. In 2002, the monument was included in the 3rd CSF which funded the conservation of the ancient floors, the restoration of the baths and the Octagon and the landscaping of the entrance to the archaeological site (Figure 3).<sup>26</sup>

During the last 15 years, the Greek Ministry of Culture also organised interesting exhibitions including Late Roman artefacts; the most significant for the comprehension of everyday life was 'Όρες Βυζαντίου. Η καθημερινή ζωή στο Βυζάντιο' organized in the White Tower of Thessaloniki in the year 2001.<sup>27</sup> One should also take into consideration, that both the opening of most of the exhibition areas of the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki<sup>28</sup> and the reorganization of the exhibition areas of the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens<sup>29</sup> took place during the last 15 years. In both museums there are exhibition areas dedicated to religious life or everyday life of the Early Byzantine period.

In what concerns the academic world, since the early 1990s, in the academic world, many steps were taken towards a new, broader understanding of the Byzantine era. Our own teachers were the first to emphasize the importance of formerly underestimated periods, such as the Late Roman and encouraged us to

<sup>24</sup> Association of Greek Archaeologists 2007, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Association of Greek Archaeologists 2007, 18, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Association of Greek Archaeologists 2007, 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> Papanikola-Bakirtzi 2002.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.mbp.gr>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.byzantinemuseum.gr>



Figure 3. Galerius' Palace in Thessaloniki: the Octagon after restoration  
(Association of Greek Archaeologists 2007, 60)

focus on them, through courses and the experience provided by excavations. In our turn, following their example, we initiated our students into a fruitful dialogue with this period, insisting on new subjects and on the study of unpublished material. It is noteworthy that five new PhD candidates were accepted for the academic year 2011-2012 for subjects dealing with the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, just from the Department of Archaeology and the History of Art of the University of Athens. The material culture of this period was, and still is, the subject of specialized courses and seminars. Finally, the renewal of the academic staff in the last 12 years has placed five specialists of the period to academic positions respectively in five Greek universities.

As we can see, something has definitely changed during the last 15-20 years in the way we perceive Late Roman archaeology in Greece. A period lacking identity some three decades ago, became a field of specialization within the wider domains of Roman and Byzantine Archaeology. One might, therefore, wonder if everything is so exciting and positive in Late Roman/Early Byzantine archaeology in Greece nowadays. The answer is *no*. Many questions have not yet been examined satisfactorily. The first and foremost reason for that is the huge quantity of discovered yet unpublished material from many sites waiting to be studied already

for many years. The second, equally important reason, consists of the fragmentary archaeological data from sites partially studied and published.

However, it is worthwhile to briefly examine some of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine sites excavated in the last 15 years in order to understand the progress in our knowledge of the period. Due to limits to the length of this article, I will not refer to any surveys, although their contribution to the recognition of the urban and rural landscape is crucial,<sup>30</sup> nor to systematic excavations in prestigious sites, well-known for their Roman and Early Byzantine period finds, such as Corinth or Philippi. I will only focus on newly discovered sites and on sites not clearly related in the collective sub-conscious to the period under question.

### Key sites

#### *Athens*

I will start with Athens because the case of the Greek capital is representative. More than any other city, it reflects the two faces of urban expansion: on the one hand, a great number of rescue excavations providing new evidence for many periods; on the other hand, only a few cases of preserved secular ruins and a very fragmentary image of the ancient town. Athens is very famous for its antiquities, but certainly not for those dating to the Late Roman period. At the same time, most of the funds spent on the amelioration of Greek infrastructures have been invested here, in Attika. Among others, two great projects are closely related to the archaeology of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period: the construction of the Athenian Underground and the New Acropolis Museum.

Started in 1992 and ended in 1997, the excavations conducted on the occasion of the construction of one of the most important works of the last decades in Greece, the Athenian Underground, provided the opportunity to gain some more parts in the jigsaw of Late Roman Athens. Earlier rescue excavations in plots all around the modern city's centre, as well as the systematic excavations of the American School of Classical Studies in the Agora and on the Areopagos, and those of the German Archaeological Institute in the Kerameikos, offered a fragmentary idea of the Late Roman town: urban villas, of course not all of them to be considered as Philosophical Schools, a few public buildings in the new centre east of the Classical Agora, workshops, installations of various types and a fortification protecting only a small part of the town, called 'Late Roman wall'.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance, Bintliff 2012, 353-363.

The new excavations revealed two kinds of urban contexts: industrial areas, such as a workshop of lamp makers in the Ayioi Asomatoi square near the Kerameikos, and residential areas, mainly from Syntagma square and the nearby National Garden. The excavation at Ayioi Asomatoi square revealed a kiln, additional structures, kiln supports, moulds and a considerable number of wasters, giving an almost complete idea of how a workshop of that time must have looked. Unfortunately, no photos or plans are available, except for one, a more artistic than scientific photo from an exhibition catalogue.<sup>31</sup> The situation is almost the same as far as the other excavations are concerned – those carried out in the Syntagma and Acropolis stations, the latter communicating with the excavations for the New Acropolis Museum. Most of our information comes from reports published in the *Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον* and two exhibition catalogues.<sup>32</sup> Ceramics from small contexts, mainly pits, are also briefly published in the proceedings of a pottery congress.<sup>33</sup> It seems that in Late Roman times the area of the New Acropolis Museum was occupied by luxurious villas, whose life apparently continued well into the 7th century.

Considering conservation, restoration and enhancement of ancient ruins, we must refer to an almost unknown and original experiment: the transport and exhibition in the open-air section of the Museum of Archaeology and the History of Art of the University of Athens, of some architectural remains discovered at Syntagma station. Among them is a thermal complex of the 3rd-4th century rebuilt in the 5th century AD (Figure 4).

### *Delfi*

It is well known that for each of the important established archaeological sites, more or less concrete images have been formed in the collective memory. These notions include an approximate idea of the period of flourishing, and also the moment of decline. The archaeological site of Delfi, one of the first excavated in Greece, is no exception to the rule.

Until the beginning of the systematic investigation of the Late Roman remains, in 1990, although buildings of that period were standing at a height of several meters, no one talked to the visitors about this period. The guides and the books intended for the broad public continued to maintain the view that with the closing down of the temple, Delfi too withered. It was considered to be more appropriate that a place so deeply influenced by the ancient spirit in every

<sup>31</sup> Papanikola-Bakirtzi 2002, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Parlama & Stambolidis 2000; Eleftheratou 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Papanikola-Bakirtzi & Kousoulakou 2010, 610-648.



Figure 4. Open-air museum of the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Athens; ruins coming from the Athenian Underground excavations (photo by N. Baka)

expression (religious, athletic, even political) would have died together with it. What modern research however has been able to show is that Delfi not only survived the transition from the old religion to the new one, but even was a flourishing city that had no need to envy other provincial towns of southern Greece. This new approach actually extends Delfi's occupation period for two and a half centuries, dating the end of the continuous period during which it was inhabited to c. 620 AD.

From 1990 to 1997, a team of the French School of Archaeology of Athens excavated the so-called Roman Agora, certainly the Forum of the Late Roman city, as well as a huge habitation complex, called the South-Eastern Villa or House C.<sup>34</sup>

The Roman agora is a secular building whose axis was slightly altered in the 4th century AD to adjust to the ancient Sacred Way. These interventions probably coincided with activities which altered the Sacred Way and turned it into a trade road. The South-Eastern Villa, just outside the ancient sacred wall, constitutes a typical example of a private building with reception rooms, storage rooms, accommodation rooms and small, but very elegant private baths. The picture is

<sup>34</sup> Petridis 2010, 23-31.



Figure 5. The South-Eastern Villa at Delfi (photo by the author)

enriched by other private villas of the Early Christian period, however of smaller dimensions.<sup>35</sup>

The most important elements of information on the history of Delfi in the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, and especially in the last period of the city, have been indeed provided by the excavation of the South-Eastern Villa<sup>36</sup> (Figure 5). Constantly increasing prosperity has been attested from the 5th through the 6th century AD. This is indicated by transformations of the house plan and the addition of other triclinia besides the original eastern triclinium. A first abandonment around 580 comes to interrupt these elaborations. A few years later, the rooms were transformed into workshops, with mostly ceramic production. A final abandonment of the place, which corresponds with the end of the city of Delfi, is observed around 620. The years between 580 and 620 bring an evident reduction of the urban fabric. However, the last quarter of the 6th century AD ceases to be the benchmark for the total abandonment of Delfi, as had been previously supported. On the contrary, the existence of workshops producing ceramics of the same type as those produced before 580, the import of ceramics that continued

<sup>35</sup> Petridis 2005.

<sup>36</sup> The results of this excavation will soon be published in Déroche et al. in press. See also Petridis 2010, 28-31.

albeit reduced, and the coins, prove that life in Delfi survived until the first quarter of the 7th century AD.

Whatever reason it was that forced the residents of the South-Eastern Villa to abandon it in the last quarter of the 6th century (most probably the inability to afford its maintenance), it did not give the final blow to the city. This must have come in the first quarter of the 7th century AD. The picture we have from the stratigraphy is that of a sudden abandonment of the place. From this point onwards, architectural remains as well as ceramics and coins (with few exceptions) disappeared completely. The combined evidence leads us to believe that an urban formation in the form of a city ceased to exist in Delfi. This was to remain so during the centuries to follow and lasted until the formation of Castri, which existed already in the 15th century; however, we do not know the exact date of its foundation.

The combined evidence offered by modern research, which has been presented in brief, converges at a point which leads to a picture of welfare and comfort in Delfi in the period from the 4th to the 7th centuries AD. This new picture is very remote from the impression established in people's minds of a ruined, deserted and forgotten place.

### *Thasos*

Almost the same image arises from another excavation whose more recent phase started in 2004 at the capital of Thasos island, Limenas. The city is well-known for the Greco-Roman phases since its foundation as a colony, its sanctuaries and houses having been thoroughly investigated. Recent research expands on earlier studies<sup>37</sup> in order to establish a map of the remains of its early Byzantine phase. The French School of Archaeology of Athens, the University of Lille 3 – Charles de Gaulle and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, the French CNRS and the two Greek Ephorates of Kavala joined their forces in a multidisciplinary project.<sup>38</sup>

The excavated villa (Figure 6), called *Domus 5*, was erected at the end of the 4th century AD; it covers more than a thousand square meters in surface. Its construction incorporated an ancient (probably public) building and blocked the passage through an ancient road leading to the theatre and the Acropolis: this phenomenon is often attested at that period, another well-documented example

<sup>37</sup> Sodini 1995.

<sup>38</sup> For the excavation reports see *BCH* 130 (2006), 688-689; *BCH* 132 (2008), 715-735; *BCH* 134 (2010), 523-544.



Figure 6. Domus 5 at Thasos; aerial view (photo by G. Naessens, Halma-Epel)

being House H at Delfi.<sup>39</sup> The eastern aisle of the house contained a large apsidal triclinium framed by rectangular rooms. A series of rooms with different functions was developed to the north, while a small thermal complex, originally covered with marble was situated to the south. A large part of the house, most probably the atrium, is covered by a neighbouring property, rendering the accomplishment of total excavation almost unfeasible. Internal decoration comprised frescoes, mosaics and sculpture. Exactly as in the case of the South-Eastern Villa of Delfi, a radical change is attested to the house around 570/580. It continues to be inhabited until around 620 AD, but some of the rooms seem to have been condemned and the diet of the population was based on hunting and shell fishing. The excavation of Domus 5, still in progress, will provide us with new data which will probably help us understand better the local end of the Early Byzantine period on the coastal sites of the island.

### *Louloudies*

Still in the area of Macedonia, this time in its central part, in Pieria, the site of Louloudies was excavated by the local Byzantine Ephorate from 1993 to 1997 during work for the new railway line between Katerini and Thessaloniki.<sup>40</sup> The site

<sup>39</sup> Petridis 2005, 200–202.

<sup>40</sup> Marki 2004; Angelkou 2004, 72 n. 1. Cheimonopoulou 2011; Angelkou 2012.

was probably the Roman *mansio* or *mutatio Anamon* and under the Tetrarchs became a local administrative and taxation centre. The bishop of Pydna was transferred to this small town after the Goths were allowed to settle in Pydna in order to end the siege of Thessaloniki. The new site, 80 by 90 m, was fortified with towers. In the era of Justinian, the bishop's complex lost its fortified character and expanded with the addition of a kind of industrial zone: wine presses, olive press, storerooms and shops. In the middle of the 6th century the bishop's complex was destroyed and only a part of the basilica's surface was reused, a phenomenon attested also in other cities like Fthiotian Thebes. The settlement continued however and intensified its economic activities with the addition of new storerooms. At the end of the 6th – beginning of the 7th century AD, probably after an earthquake, the bishop's complex was abandoned and dilapidated, but metal, glass and brick manufactures were established, probably for covering the needs of the inhabitants of the surrounding rural settlements. The place was definitely abandoned for unknown reasons in the second half of the 7th century AD. Louloudies is a particularly interesting site, not only for its complete investigation, but also for its continual transformation; it can be used as a model of a very small town and helps us greatly in our understanding of the economy of the period.

### *Edessa*

Another example from the region of Northern Greece, so rich in excavations, restorations and presentations is the Early Byzantine part of the town of Edessa.<sup>41</sup> Systematic excavations carried out for a long period by the Ephorate of the region in a rural suburb, have revealed a street with porticoes, shops and workshops, storerooms, unidentified public buildings, all protected by a defensive wall. Alternating piers and columns support the arcades of the main street; 5.20 m large porticoes served shops and workshops. The finds are very interesting: among them a seal with a menorah and the inscription 'Θεώ δώρω' and a small column also decorated with a menorah prove the existence of a Jewish community in the town. A basilica has been excavated outside the walls as well as part of the necropolis, revealing the reuse of vaulted Hellenistic tombs. The original mosaic floors of the basilica have been replaced in a later phase by simpler slabs from various origins. From the end of the 6th century, a progressive shrinkage of the urban fabric is attested. People seem to have moved towards the fortified upper town, which will evolve in the next few centuries to the 'God-protected castle of Vodena' well known from the sources.

<sup>41</sup> Chrysostomou 2008, esp. 105-160.



Figure 7. The archaeological site of Edessa (Chrysostomou 2008, 21)

The funds of the European program Interreg III between 2005 and 2008 permitted the conservation, restoration and presentation of the lower part of the town around the porticoes (Figure 7); it constitutes a restricted but well documented commercial part of a medium-sized town of Late Antiquity.

### *Halasarna*

Halasarna was an insular site, on the south-eastern coast of the island of Cos. Some plots in the centre of the modern village of Kardamaina have been excavated by the Greek archaeological service, revealing the existence of a three-aisled basilica. Three other basilicas are reported. The main, systematic excavation has been conducted by the Department of Archaeology and the History of Art of the University of Athens since 1985.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the 29 years of excavation, numerous students of archaeology have participated in training there; some of them became specialists in the Late Roman period, researching for Master and PhD theses on the topography and on the finds from the site. An extended survey

<sup>42</sup> Kokkorou-Alevras et al. 2006; Kokkorou-Alevras et al. 2010.

around the excavated area and geophysical investigations have provided interesting support to our understanding of the history of the site.

The excavation started when the basement and the ground floor of a huge hotel were already built, destroying a great part of what proved to be the Hellenistic 'Sanctuary of Apollo' and an Early Byzantine settlement established above and next to the Hellenistic ruins. The settlement survived for four centuries, in two successive phases. Phase A is dated to the 4th century, reaches its peak during the 5th and ends its life suddenly at the middle of the 6th because of the earthquake of 554 AD, vividly described by the author Agathias<sup>43</sup>; in phase B the damage has been repaired and life in the city is continuous until the mid-7th century. Its final abandonment is maybe related to the Arab incursions of that time.

Houses, some of which were two-storied, terraces, streets, squares, work spaces mainly from the second phase of the settlement, as well as a burial complex used during both phases have been discovered. The finds include imported products, on the one hand, and local production, on the other, revealing new insights into the trade relationships between Kos and the centres of production and transport in the Mediterranean basin, relating also the island to the *annona* system. The most important of the local productions is the fabrication of amphoras of type LRA1 and LRA13.<sup>44</sup> Some of the latter ones bear stamps with monograms and emperors' portraits.<sup>45</sup>

### *Eleftherna*

I will close this quick survey with another insular site, Eleftherna in the Rethymnon district of Crete. A systematic excavation of the University of Crete, divided in three sectors, has been conducted there for more than 25 years, giving the opportunity of their first field experience to students and other young scholars. This excavation also gave birth to a number of monographs or collected studies covering a large spectrum of disciplines, from topography and pottery to anthropometric analysis and numismatics. From that point of view Eleftherna is one of the most exemplary excavations in the dissemination of acquired knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to most of the towns presented until now, Eleftherna was a rugged upland city developed over different neighboring plateaux. Important Early Byzantine buildings have been excavated on the hill of Pyrgi; two of them have a religious function. Traces of the violent earthquake of 365 AD are detected in

<sup>43</sup> Agathias, *Historiai* B, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Diamanti 2010a.

<sup>45</sup> Diamanti 2010b; Diamanti 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Concerning only the Early Byzantine period of the settlement see: Themelis 2000 and 2004; Yangaki 2005; Tsigonaki 2007.

the buildings of the lower part of the town. The 5th and 6th centuries are hardly represented in this part and older interpretations spoke about a progressive decline and abandonment of the settlement during the second half of the 7th century. The recent archaeological research in the central plateau of Pyrgi however shows evidence of a new dynamic during the 7th and 8th centuries.

Cretan micro-geography and its interaction with historical circumstances can certainly explain the mechanisms permitting the survival of some Cretan towns after the 7th century, among them Eleftherna, the second best investigated city of the island after Gortyna.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusions

Putting together all these dispersed pieces of information I tried to describe above, could lead us to some general conclusions about the fate of Greek cities during the Late Roman period. I here summarize the knowledge deriving from archeological fieldwork, the conclusions of various research projects and the publications of the last 10 to 15 years.

We have certainly changed our perspective of the period between the 4th and the 6th century AD, which is henceforth considered as a period of continuous changes in the physiognomy of the cities and the countryside. These changes led to the development of some new urban or rural landscapes. It is obvious that a long and slow process took place, mainly in continental Greece. I will avoid the generally used shorthand term ‘from Polis to Castron’,<sup>48</sup> preferring to refer to a new model of the city: the Medieval or Christian city. Indeed, many long lasting phenomena reach their peak during the era of Justinian and their cumulative transformations continue from this time onwards:

- the abandonment and dismantlement of the ruined ancient public buildings
- the installation of professionals, houses and tombs inside these public spaces
- the transferring of the civic centre to new, unused spots of the towns
- the abandonment of the temples of the ancient religions
- the appearance of the Christian buildings replacing ancient sanctuaries or other public or private buildings
- the dramatic changes on the street layout and finally
- the collecting of ruins and the erection of new buildings

Hence, one may well assume that a starting point for transformations should be considered to lie in the second half of the 6th century, instead of the 7th century

<sup>47</sup> Tsigonaki 2012.

<sup>48</sup> As Curčić (2011) recently showed, ‘Poleis-Castra’ already existed in Roman times.

AD according to the view so far established. Indeed, by the second half of the 6th century, the abandonment of the luxurious villas and their division into smaller spaces or their reuse for professional purposes, the shrinkage of basilica surfaces and the construction of smaller cult spaces, the installation of necropoleis within the cities, the systematic recycling of building materials and the shrinkage of the urban fabric, the multiplication of the smaller settlements, all resulted in a new lifestyle, and eventually in a new period. The myth of the abandoned cities of the Greek mainland at about 580 (after the first attacks of the Slavs) can no longer be sustained, as can now be shown by the excavations in many Greek sites.

Although we are dealing with a kind of decline if we consider it through the scope of Late Antique urbanism, the end of the 6th century and the first decades of the 7th century should not be seen any more as the end of an era, but as the beginning of a new period lasting until the 9th century AD. The vitality of small peripheral towns, the interactions between them and the continuous activity of the great Mediterranean production centers stand as further proofs of the above observations. The period from the second half of the 6th to the 9th century can no longer be considered as the '*Grande Brèche*' as Zakythinos has called it.<sup>49</sup> It should preferably be called the 'Period of Transformations' instead of 'Dark Ages' or 'Transitional Period' as it is usually called.

We can therefore consider the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period (up to the middle of the 6th century AD) as a 'Gateway' to the Period of Transformations, an introduction to a new, different era. An era where changes would be long and sometimes silent in terms of archaeological or textual remains, but they will lead quite normally to what we call the main medieval period, without any external intervention, as happened in the West.

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<sup>49</sup> Zakythinos 1966.

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