

The pastoral landscape of Paliambela in Arethousa, northern Greece -from antiquity to modern times

by

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Fig. 1. Goats in the church area. Photo by the author.

Abstract:

The ruins of an Early Christian church at Paliambela were found in 1994 while preparing a new forestry road. The area is located 8 km. north of Via Egnatia, on the eastern slope of a river valley, which was a passageway from the coast towards north. The uphill location of the church is in contrast to the location of a Roman *villa rustica* on the plain in proximity to the river. Cist graves are located higher up the hill near the church.

Some decades ago, there was still a lot of water in the ravines flanking the site, but intensive modern agriculture has changed the natural landscape of the area. Pastoral economy is, however, still conducted in traditional ways in Arethousa. The continuation of pastoral economy from antiquity is attested by the bones of these species in the layers under the destruction layer of the Early Christian church.

The site of Paliambela was unknown for archeologists before 1994, when the ruins of an Early Christian church and cist graves were found while preparing a new forestry road.¹ Local people have always known that there are ancient ruins in the surrounding area, and they have found ancient coins, pottery and other material on the surface. The building stones of the church, taken from the destruction layer, had been used for simple animal shelters, and remains of their foundations were removed when the archaeological excavation was started. According to local tradition, this was a place where Alexander the Great rested with his men before continuing his expedition to Persia.

The area is located in ancient Mygdonia, 8 km. north of Via Egnatia, on the eastern slope of a river valley, which was a passageway from both the coast and Via Egnatia towards the north. The uphill location of the Early Christian church is in contrast to the location of a Roman *villa rustica* on the plain in proximity to the river, now used as a meadow. The cist graves are located higher up the hill near the church. It is possible that the church was built near an ancient sanctuary, since finds from the excavations of the church in 1999-2002² can be dated from the Late Classical-Hellenistic period to the Early Byzantine period, and miniature vessels from the Hellenistic period have been found in the mixed layers inside the church.

Some decades ago, there was still a lot of water in the ravines flanking the site of Paliambela, but intensive modern agriculture in the demos of Arethousa has changed the natural landscape of the area. Pastoral economy is, however, still conducted in traditional ways in Arethousa. Cattle-tenders take their cattle from the village to Paliambela, goats are pastured in the area, and wild boars are raised on the slopes around Paliambela. The continuation of pastoral economy from antiquity is attested by the finding of bones of these species in the levels under the destruction layer of the Early Christian church.

The excavation of the northern part of the church in August 2002 revealed an area for wine production,

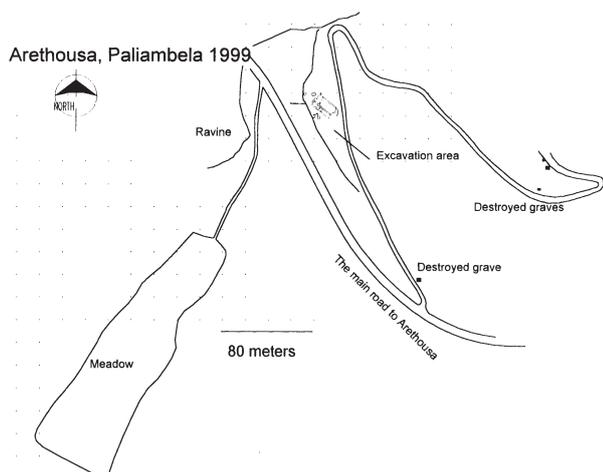


Fig. 2. The research area at Paliambela. (Per-Erik Egeback & Helmut Bergold 1999)

a hearth, seven large storage vessels, lots of pottery, amphora and pithos lids, glass vessels, knives and other metal tools, and over 15 kilograms of animal bones in the levels below the thick destruction layer of the church. The existence of two treading floors for wine production, storage vessels, as well as some grape pips give further support to the fact that the traditional name of the site, Paliambela, refers to viticulture in this area. Furthermore, this theme is represented in the *opus tessellatum* mosaics in the narthex of the church, decorated with vine scrolls and birds picking the grapes.

Different kinds of economic activities coexisted in Paliambela in antiquity. Agriculture, viticulture, fishing, metal and stone working, pottery and tile production were important parts of economy in this ancient site near Via Egnatia. The church was destroyed by the seventh century after Christ, probably through an earthquake. In the Byzantine period, the inhabitants had moved to fortresses that were easier to defend, but traditional forms of agriculture have continued to modern times.

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Arethousa, Paliambela 2002 Excavated areas

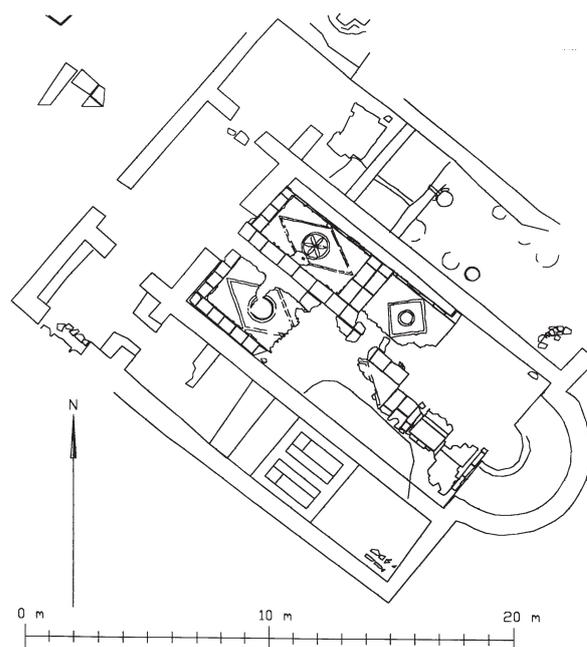


Fig. 3. Excavation area in 2002. (Timo Iopponen & Carita Tulkki)

¹ Adam-Veleni 1998, 351-365; Touchais 1999, 884; Blackman 2000, 83.

² See also Blackman 2001, 87-88; Karivieri 2001, 117-121; Karivieri 2002, 117-124.