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BIRD'S EYE VIEW: Aerial photo of Yeronisos



'A magical place'

YERONISOS DIGS CHAMPION ECO-FRIENDLY ARCHAEOLOGY

By **Bouli Hadjioannou**

Yeronisos Island, one of the truly virgin sites of Cyprus, could serve as a model for an eco-friendly archaeological park, with a virtual-reality museum situated just across the water at Ayios Georgios tis Peyias.

The latter could also be part of a nature hiking trail linking sites of ecological and archaeological interest from Paphos to the Akamas – a Cyprus version of the Inkan trail of Peru.

These were a couple of ideas floated by New York University Professor Joan Breton Connelly at a lecture delivered at the old Paphos Bishopric recently. The US archaeologist, who has been coming to Cyprus since the early 1980s, was presenting some of the findings of the NYU team at Yeronisos – holy island in Greek.

History and geography have combined to make this archaeological site particularly special and the team's efforts have focused not only on the antiquities but the distinct flora and fauna that make up a micro-ecosystem.

Uninhabited since Byzantine times, Yeronisos

stands apart not only because of its finds – including the 1993 discovery of an ostracon which identified the god worshipped there as Apollo – but as the subject of pioneering eco-archaeology that has attracted international attention.

It is, as Connelly said in her lecture, an island beyond an island, a magical place preserving a truly ancient landscape.

"The view is exactly the same as that seen by the first men and women who came to Cyprus 10,500 years ago.

"Steep cliffs and strong currents discourage sightseers from travelling out to the island, and so Yeronisos has remained one of the truly virgin sites of Cyprus, untouched, unspoiled, and seldom visited, except for fishermen and strong swimmers," she said.

The New York University Yeronisos Island Expedition has been excavating there since 1990. Sensitive to the ecological significance of the site, it undertook a slow, sequential progression of excavation seasons over the past 22 years, separating them with non-invasive survey and study seasons and utilising relatively small dig teams.

"Uninhabited since Byzantine times, Yeronisos remains an unspoiled natural setting, one of the last naturally protected nesting sites for birds, including the yellow-footed gull, rock doves, jackdaws, swifts, and cormorants or shags," Connelly told her audi-

ence.

And she added: "We have thus pioneered eco-archaeology, integrating environmental and archaeological fieldwork toward the goal of preserving both the natural and cultural resources of Yeronisos."

From the first season, the team included staff ecologists while the New York University students have participated in turtle watches across the bay at Toxeftra.

"During the winter, Yeronisos looks more like Ireland than the arid Mediterranean rock it becomes in summer months.

"In the wet days of early spring, we have collected, recorded and photographed plant samples, pressing the specimens and taking them to the Centre for Agricultural Research in Nicosia for identification, as well as to the herbaria of Kew Gardens in London, where the world authority on the flora of Cyprus, Desmond Meikle, came out of retirement to help identify the Yeronisos plants."

Before breaking ground, the team had in hand a distribution map of the flora of Yeronisos, enabling it to replant the island, should it be necessary following excavations.

Plants include: field marigold, wild oats, mastic tree, soft storksbill, poppy, Persian cyclamen, scarlet pimpernel, Naples garlic, leek, broomrape, and wild asparagus.

"We have developed a strategy for promoting an



TREASURE: An amulet with the inscription *Mina*



TEAM EFFORT: The dig team

atmosphere of "cohabitation" with the resident bird population and for limiting the footprint of our archaeological research on Yeronisos: both on the ground and in the air.

"This includes best practices in scheduling dig seasons in between nesting seasons, wearing of earthenware, building of temporary landings and camouflaged shelters, backfilling trenches to allow for regeneration of plants for natural nesting cover, as well as for the protection of rubble walls.

"We train all team members in rubble wall consolidation, under the expert tutelage of Dr. Paul Croft of the Lemba Archaeological Field Station, so that we can 'preserve as we go' in the course of excavation.

"Paul has undertaken the monumental labour of reconsolidating the ancient terrace walls of Yeronisos that are tumbling down into the sea, thanks to wind and water erosion, seismic tremors, and age."

Just as it has served as an example of eco-archaeology, Yeronisos could become a model ecological and cultural park to be 'visited' through a virtual reality museum at Ayios Georgios that would make use of digital technologies to enable visitors to walk through the ancient buildings of Yeronisos via computer screen.

Other ideas are a community archaeology programme involving locals of all ages in the work, as well as developing a nature/culture hiking trail to link sites of ecological and archaeological interest across western Cyprus.

While such ideas may belong to the future, the more immediate priority is to ensure protection of the landscape and environment.

Evidence of occupation

The team's work has established three prominent periods of occupation on Yeronisos separated by long periods of abandonment. Each preserves evidence for the sacred or symbolic nature of activity on Yeronisos:

1. The Early Chalcolithic for which they found a stone figurine of a female deliberately deposited in a sealed pit, filled with ash, stone tools and beads, dating to ca. 3800 B.C.

2. The late Hellenistic, for which they found an important sanctuary of Apollo established in the first century B.C.

3. The Byzantine period, for which they found a 6th century church, cistern, and domestic complex, all reused and reinhabited during the 13th century.

Yeronisos was not always an island; it was connected to the mainland by a land bridge at least as recently as the Chalcolithic period. Bones from fallow deer, including hooves and other inedible parts that would not have been brought over by Chalcolithic picnickers, signal that deer walked onto Yeronisos in the fourth millennium B.C.

It was also during this time that people, probably from the nearby communities at Lemba and Kissonerga, came out on the promontory with pottery, chipped stone, and

SANCTUARY: Yeronisos view from the east



ground stone tools.

In 1997 the team found a significant deposit, intentionally sealed beneath boulders, and placed in a pit measuring 110 cm in diameter. The findings include a stone female figurine.

That Chalcolithic female figurine sits just 0.30cm beneath stone jar lids inscribed with Christian crosses.

At some point in the Bronze or Iron Age, the land bridge collapsed and Yeronisos became an island. But, without a water source, it was an unfriendly place for human habitation.

Then, in the first century B.C., someone or a group of individuals, directed huge amounts of money and resources to Yeronisos, establishing a wholly new sanctuary, complete with Ionic temple, pilgrimage facilities, and a cistern. On the south central side of Yero-

nisos, Connel said the team has unearthed a broad complex of rooms measuring roughly 4.5 metres square, the dining and dormitory facilities for pilgrims worshipping on Yeronisos.

Here they discovered quantities of wine jugs, drinking bowls and cups, gaming boards and dice for passing leisure hours on Yeronisos, and coins, dated mostly to the reign of Cleopatra and her son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion, in the third quarter of the first century B.C. With the defeat of Cleopatra and Marc Antony at the Battle of Actium, their subsequent deaths in 30 B.C., and the murder of Caesarion, Cyprus returned to Roman rule and resources for Yeronisos dried up. In 15 B.C. its buildings were completely toppled by an earthquake, never to be rebuilt.

But during the 6th century A.D., it seems that clergy from the Byzantine Basilicas at Ayios Georgios, ventured out to the island to establish a small community, a place of reclusiveness and contemplation. Sixteenth century maps show a church on Yeronisos labeled "S. Zorzi," or, St. George.

Cobannel's team believe it has found the remains of this Church, or at least the vaulted undercroft of the narthex of a 6th century chapel at the easternmost tip of the island.

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