The Christianization of the Cyclades: New Foundations

Summary of project: This research project centred around one key question – "How and when did Christianity spread to the Cycladic islands?". In spite of the inestimable global and historical significance of the spread of Christianity, no one has yet considered this question in detail. With the aid of my fieldwork partner Nefeli Piree Iliou, I focussed on finding the earliest Christian churches which were built on new land on six of the Cycladic islands (see below). These churches represent the main body of archaeological evidence for early Christianity, and offer a wealth of architectural, topographical and chronological information. After a very successful fieldwork trip, I applied the data I gathered to the research question, resulting in a complete findings report for submission to my supervisor. My main findings and conclusions are presented here.

Project Aims

- To study and locate early Christian churches on Delos, Folegandros, Sikinos, Tinos, Andros and Kea which were built on new land in the late antique period (4th–7th centuries).
- To visit and carefully record these churches using photography, GPS logging and context sheets during three weeks of fieldwork.
- To use this evidence (in addition to pre-existing reports and publications) to investigate the processes and chronology of Christianisation on the Cycladic islands.

These goals were successfully met. A total of forty-six sites were located and recorded during the fieldwork period. Of these sites, seven proved very promising and were considered in detail in my extended findings report.

Key Sites Located

Key sites, clockwise from left:
1. Vathyptamos basilica, Kea*
2. Palaiopolis basilica, Andros
3. Aghios Yiannis Theologos, Andros
4. Chapel of St John the Baptist, Tinos
5. Aghios Kyrikos, Delos
6. Episkopi 'mausoleum', Sikinos*
7. Church of the Panaghia, Folegandros

* Church on reused temple space, so not considered further

New Church Foundations Located

1. The Palaiopolis basilica, Andros
2. Aghios Yiannis Theologos, Andros
3. Chapel of St John the Baptist, Tinos
4. Aghios Kyrikos, Delos
5. Church of the Panaghia, Folegandros
6. Lines of visibility from the Church of the Panaghia

Conclusions

- The chronology of new church foundations
There is no discernible chronological distinction between the Christianisation of these six islands. Christianisation appears to be happening at the same time on them all. This suggests a high degree of connectivity and interaction between the islands, particularly from the 5th century. However, some variety in architectural form (compare fig. 2 and fig. 4) implies that the very earliest churches might have been built over or replaced.

- Strategic change as a driving force
The idea of deliberate and emergent change has recently been applied to Christianisation in mainland Greece.1 These two modes of change can be roughly described as 'top-down' and 'bottom-up/‘grass-roots’. It seems that both occurred during the Christianisation of the Cyclades. Local community churches were small and compromised on space and orientation (fig. 4), while more metropolitan churches were large, lavishly decorated and occupied prime ‘real estate’ (fig. 1). Both small congregations and wealthy authority sources were founding new churches, if in different ways.

- The significance of topography
A number of churches found were located in commanding, hill-top sites close to the sea and towns (fig. 5; also true of the chapel in fig. 3), suggesting that lines of visibility and an imposing architectural presence were key features (fig. 6). Only two were located within large urban centres (Aghios Kyrikos and Palaiopolis), which implies that proximity to a major settled Christian community was not the most important component in choosing where to found a new church.

Ultimately a range of interacting factors led to each new foundation, with no single, repeated process occurring.

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All photographs are my own. Map imagery from Google Earth.