

Rediscovering Kythera's Ancient Capital

By John Fardoulis

Something new took place in Kythera in July this year. An interesting and practical community-backed project which unified local residents with members of the Diaspora, and deeply involved; youth, culture, history, education, exploration and adventure.

A project that helped stimulate a thirst for both knowledge and adventure, through community supported archaeological excavations. Archaeology is far from new in Greece, but what was new, is the inclusion of the local community and members of the Diaspora in the project, both as sponsors and beneficiaries. Support involved more than just funding, but help with complete logistics.

Archaeologist, Aris Tsaravopoulos and a handful of Greek colleagues planned to survey a path along the side of a mountain where Kythera's ancient capital (Paleokastro) is currently buried; an arduous task considering how overgrown the area was with dense, inhospitable scrub. With the assistance of local residents Jimmy Galakatos and Kostas Moulos, a path was cut with chainsaws through the thorns and asphyxiating bushes, opening up a path within the bounds of where the ancient city of Cythera once existed on the side of the Paleokastro mountain.

Kythera's ancient capital was located at Paleokastro from approximately 600BC – 100AD. Even though the mountainside city was likely to have been populated by over 1000 people during this period, little has been done to explore what is now an overgrown, inhospitable part of the island - where walls and objects from the ancient capital are buried. Ancient text tells us that from sometime in the fifth or sixth century BC, Sparta sent out officials called 'Kytherodikai' to oversee the running of the island, as it functioned as a Lakedaimonian Perioikoi or outpost, guarded by a garrison of Spartan hoplites.

During these times, the city of Cythera, functioned as the island's capital, with Skandeia acting as the main port. The level of education about such a significant site is generally low, with many people confusing the name Paleokastro with Paliochora (the area ransacked by Barbarossa), which is a completely different settlement, miles away, and from a period approximately 1200+ years later.

If you imagine the way the current Kytherian capital, Hora seems today, but larger, housing more people, comprising of houses, shops and surrounded by a fortification wall, that's what the Paleokastro settlement was probably like for a period of at least half a century (more than double the modern age of Australia), 2500 years ago.

Little visible evidence is present above-ground, apart from approximately 2600 year old Doric columns in the church of Agios Kosmas, from a temple dedicated to the Dioskouroi, Castor and Pollux, the brothers of Helen of Troy, which once stood in the city. Plus part of a fortification wall along the Northern side of the mountain.

Ancient text tells us that Kythera was controlled by both the Athenians and Spartans at times while the city of Cythera was located at Paleokastro (from 600BC-100AD), with changeovers taking place before, after and during the Peloponnesian war. Kythera's location was strategic as both a military and trading outpost, pretty much a gateway to Greece from the Middle East and Africa – plus a vantage point for attacking Laconia (Sparta).

Walls and moveable objects discovered during the July 2010, dig suggest that excavations had uncovered items from approximately 100BC – 100AD, a changeover time between Classical and Roman periods. Little is known after the Roman period, until more than half a century later, a gap claimed by many as the Dark Ages for Kythera.

Sections of the mostly forgotten 2500+ year-old ancient Laconian-controlled capital were found, helping discover new evidence from ancient times. The team found walls, columns, coins, thousands of roof tile fragments, ancient ceramics and dozens of other different kinds of artefacts which were thought to be part of the Agora, or market place area of the city.

Members of the Kytherian-Australian community and a team of twenty full-time volunteers were assembled to assist archaeologists, with up to fifteen more daily volunteers helping most days, resulting in approximately 3780 man hours of volunteer labour. The full-time volunteers were primarily Greek archaeology students from Athens, with accommodation provided by Bishop Seraphim, Kythera's Metropolitani and Father Yiorgios from Avlemonas, organising for the team to stay at Agia Moni, a picturesque 170 year-old, mountain-top monastery. Kythera's Dimos (council) helped provide bus transport from the monastery to the dig site each day, with local supermarkets, bakeries and other businesses also supporting the team. It was a united, Kytherian-Australian coordinated effort, with a mix of local volunteers from Kythera, Athens and members of the Diaspora all pitching in to assist archaeologists.

Not only did volunteers and visitors learn about ancient Kytherian history (from the dirt up) but they got to participate in the discovery of it! Youth of today has been brought up with on-screen heroes such Indiana Jones and Lara Croft, so coupled with the intellectual/cultural stimulation and feeling of adventure associated with archaeology, the project created a melting pot of learning, excitement and intrigue, resulting in something truly special.

Hundreds of members of the public also visited the site on tours, many being Kytherian-Australian children. So the end result was an active, unifying, adventurous and intellectually stimulating project involving youth, parents and grandparents.

Opening a path to Agios Kosmas, a church built in approximately 1290AD, was an added bonus. This church is unique as it was constructed using Doric columns from approximately 600BC, from a temple in ancient city. Together with Bishop Seraphim and Father Yiorgios, the team organised the first church service held at Agios Kosmas in well over 100 years, creating history.

A presentation of what was discovered while excavating parts of Kythera's ancient capital and an outline of how "Community Supported Archaeology" might work in other parts of Greece will be held at Sydney University on the evening of **Wednesday November 10th**. 7pm for a 7.30pm start.

It's an interesting story, about more than just 2000 year-old artefacts but a way of unifying the community on many levels, engaging youth and providing a connection to ancient Kytherian heritage. Perhaps you'd like to join the team as a volunteer next year? Come along and find out how.

To RSVP call Kathy Samios on 02 9349 1849 or email john.fardoulis@gmail.com to reserve your place at the free lecture.

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Nicholas Anthony Aroney Trust and Kytherian Association of Australia.



Unearthing part of a 2000+ year old wall. Prior to the team of volunteers arriving in July, 2010, soil above this buried wall was blanketed in scrub, overgrown thorns and bushes with suffocating pollen. Now there's a walking path and buried walls from Kythera's ancient capital during the Classical period are starting to appear in test trenches.



This is how the path looked before it was cleared. Pretty much an 'Agrio' goat trail, littered with thorns and branches holding suffocating pollen.



Ancient Doric columns (from approx 600BC) were used in the construction of the church of Agios Kosmas which is located atop of the lower of the two mountain peaks at Paleokastro. They have been preserved inside the church which was built in approximately 1290AD, 1900 years later.



Pictured above with Aris Tsaravopoulos is Kytherian archaeologist Dr Stavros Paspalas, the Deputy Director of the AAIA with his mum and cousin.



Here professors and lecturers from the British School at Athens, University of Peloponnese, Nottingham University and the Institute of Archaeology, University College London gathered for a tour of the site. It is hoped to collaborate more closely with such people in aggregating more research on Kythera.



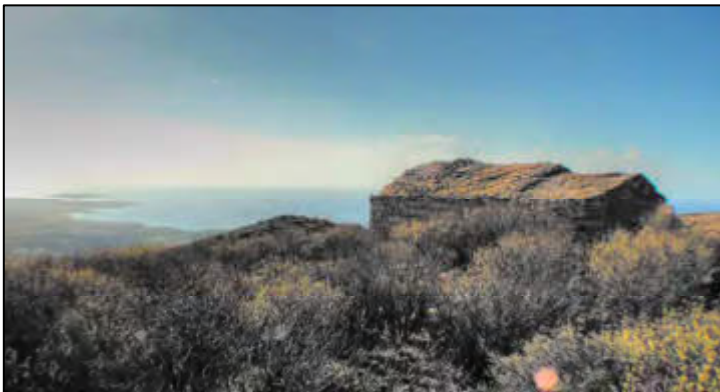
Volunteering is physically demanding but rewarding work.



The 720 year old church of Agios Kosmas, which uses 2600 year old columns to support its roof was brought back to life with a historic service held by Kythera's Metropoli, Bishop Seraphim and Father Yiorgios from Avlemonas.



This Laconian lion, currently located in Kythera's (closed) museum was thought to have originated from the Paleokastro located capital, first appearing there in approximately 600BC.



(Above) Agios Kosmas is an iconic church in an iconic, historically rich location – inside where the walls of the Laconian-controlled capital once stood.

(Right) Ancient 2600 year old Doric columns have been preserved inside Agios Kosmas due to being utilised as a load bearing part of the churches structure. Christian builders recycled the 1900 year older columns from an ancient Pagan temple to Dioskouroi, worshiped by the Laconian inhabitants nearly two millenniums prior to the construction of Agios Kosmas in 1290AD.





The project was about more than just 2000 year old artefacts. It brought together a lot of people. Above are visitors from Canada, England, America & Australia mixing with Greek archaeology students.



Teenagers, parents and grandparents – all searching for Kytherian history as part of both an adventure and cultural pursuit.

(Below) Kytherian-Australian, John Prineas tells how as a boy in the 1940's, he used to seek refuge (with his two goats) in Agios Kosmas when it rained.



One of the Greek archaeologists explains the process to some Kytherian-Americans.



A unifying element across Greek culture was experienced in general. The Arch Bishop of Kythera, Mayor, Deputy Mayor and a cross section of local residents and visitors are pictured at the blessing of the Agios Theodoros survey which also took place in July, 2010.



Here's part of a wall excavated in the first Paleokastro test trench. Some of the stones are quite well worked, suggesting an important building or structure.

It's too early to tell but we suspect it was part of a shop or building in the ancient market place (Agora).

Another theory is that it might also be part of some sort of fortifications.



Lots of roof tiles are wedged below it, hinting that this structure could have been built on top of an older building. We need to dig deeper to find out more.

It's believed that this level represents a period of approximately 100BC-100AD, and with ancient text affirming that the city was occupied in 424BC, an older building could well be located underneath.



Perhaps these stones are foundations for a different building. Even though only approximately five metres away from the first trench, stonework is less elaborate.



Coins found in Kythera during July, 2010. It will take time to conserve and identify them.



There's slight controversy regarding this coin from the Roman period. The initial impression is that it was silver plated (on bronze) during antiquity, to give the impression of being a silver coin. Perhaps an ancient forgery!



This object is extremely interesting. It's a lead sling bullet, a little larger than a fishing sinker of today, ammunition used with a handheld slingshot/catapult, a weapon of ancient snipers. They are said to have been able to penetrate armour from a distance of 160 metres.

It was found within the ancient city walls, raising the question regarding a potential unwritten conflict. This is definitely the kind of item to search for in future years.



Dozens of these amphora repair patches were found. In ancient times, when there was a crack in a large storage vessel, it would be repaired using lead - forming a clamp on each side, so the damaged area of pottery wouldn't break off.

Once a large amphora was repaired it could no longer hold liquid and was used to store grain and coarser items.

Finding a lot of these hints at the existence of a grain store in an ancient (Agora) marketplace. Or perhaps a repair facility within the city's commercial district.