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Changes in cityscapes of the Late Antique Cyclades (4th – 6th c. AD)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores aspects of urban transformation in the Cycladic islands during Late Antiquity (4th–6th c. CE), a period marked by shifting political, religious, and economic landscapes across the Eastern Mediterranean. Moving beyond outdated narratives of decline, the study highlights the continuity, adaptation, and resilience of Cycladic urban centers in response to broader imperial dynamics. Drawing on a wide spectrum of archaeological evidence, it examines how coastal cities such as Paros, Naxos, Andros, and Melos redefined their civic spaces, elite structures, and religious identities. The 4th c. CE witnessed a complex interplay between Roman traditions and emerging Christian influences, as evidenced by monumental private residences, the repurposing of civic spaces, and continued elite investment in urban life. In the 5th–6th c. CE, Christianization became a defining force in reshaping cityscapes, with churches constructed in symbolically prominent locations, often repurposing earlier temples or *agorae*, thus transforming the religious and social fabric of Cycladic cities. The article also highlights the Cyclades' role in Eastern Mediterranean trade networks, using ceramic assemblages from the port of Parikia to demonstrate sustained commercial exchange with Crete, Asia Minor, Cyprus, and the Levant. These findings underscore the Cyclades' integration into broader economic systems and challenge perceptions of insular marginality. By focusing on localized processes of transformation, this study views the Late Antique Cyclades as dynamic arenas of cultural negotiation and urban innovation. It argues for a more nuanced understanding of insular urbanism, where adaptation, connectivity, and identity were continuously reshaped in response to changing imperial conditions.

1. Introduction

The archaeology of Late Antiquity has witnessed a major resurgence in scholarly interest over the past few decades, particularly in the study of urban environments (Grig, 2013; Lavan, 2001; Lavan & Bowden, 2003; Rizos, 2017). Moving beyond earlier narratives of decline and collapse, current research emphasizes transformation, adaptation, connectivity, and resilience within Late Antiquity cities. The period between the 4th and 6th c. CE, long regarded as a transitional phase between Classical Greco-Roman Antiquity and the beginning of the Byzantine Middle Ages, is now increasingly recognized as a time of dynamic change marked by evolving forms of urban life and spatial organization. Key processes, such as the transformation of the urban elite, the construction of Christian basilicas, the abandonment or conversion of pagan temples, and the reorganization of public and civic space, are understood as reflections of shifting social, religious, and political priorities. These developments illustrate the emergence of new urban identities and lived experiences. Importantly, cities continued to function as social, economic, and administrative hubs, albeit in ways

that challenge earlier classical models.

Contemporary archaeological theory increasingly highlights the need for localized and contextualized interpretations of these complex socioeconomic phenomena, foregrounding the role of human agency, regional specificity, and the materiality of urban life. The idea of urban development has been broadened to include different ways in which people use and shape space, recognizing that cities around the Mediterranean have developed in many different ways. Within this framework, urban landscapes are no longer seen as static backdrops but as dynamic arenas shaped through ongoing interaction among communities, institutions, and material culture.

In this context, the group of islands known today as the Cyclades offers particularly fertile ground for understanding the complexities of insular urbanism during this period. Archaeological evidence suggests that, far from being marginal, many Cycladic cities experienced relative prosperity and stability between the 4th and 6th c. CE. Both earlier and more recent excavations, surveys, and individual studies have significantly expanded the body of data relating to the Late Antique phases of urban settlements, religious architecture, infrastructure, and domestic

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life across the islands.

This paper adopts a synthetic and comparative approach to examine key aspects of the complex and regionally varied processes of urban transformation in the Late Antique Cyclades. Engaging with themes of insularity, resilience, connectivity, and cultural integration, it investigates how Cycladic urban centers responded to and actively shaped broader dynamics of change in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, the concept of “cityscape” is employed as an integrated analytical framework encompassing both the physical urban fabric (i.e. architectural layout, buildings, infrastructure, and spatial organization) and the socio-spatial dynamics that shape and give meaning to that fabric (i.e. patterns of use, social interactions, institutional presence, and symbolic functions of space). In this sense, the term captures the dynamic relationship between the built environment and social practices in the urban context.

The study focuses on the port cities of Paros, Naxos, Andros, and Melos (Fig. 1), which provide the most comprehensive and well-

documented archaeological evidence, including architectural remains, material culture, and spatial organization. Concentrating on these major Cycladic centers allows the analysis to identify overarching patterns alongside localized trajectories in urban adaptation, while maintaining a coherent comparative framework. Evidence from other islands is considered where available, but these four islands offer the most robust datasets for tracing the processes under discussion. In the absence of systematic harbor studies, this study integrates a diverse array of material evidence, including ceramic assemblages, architectural remains (both secular and religious), epigraphic, sculptural, and numismatic data, alongside settlement pattern analysis. Crucially, it seeks to re-center the lived experiences of urban populations, whose perspectives are frequently marginalized in favor of typological or monument-focused interpretations.



Fig. 1. Map of the Aegean Archipelago showing the principal islands that form the focus of this study.

2. The Cyclades in the broader historical and geopolitical context

To elucidate the development of the urban landscape in the Late Antique Cycladic cities, it is first necessary to situate these islands within the broader historical and geopolitical framework of the period. The reorientation of the Roman Empire toward Constantinople in 324 CE constituted a decisive transformation with profound implications for the Aegean archipelago. This shift was not merely symbolic; it fundamentally reconfigured patterns of long-distance trade, fiscal flows, and logistical networks, channeling resources toward the eastern provinces and the Danubian frontier and positioning the Aegean as a central hub within imperial supply and distribution systems (for a detailed socio-economic history of the Cyclades in Late Antiquity see Roussos, 2017, pp. 30–36). Consequently, a hierarchical network emerged, structured around Constantinople, underpinned by robust regional production in the Aegean, and regulated by active state intervention, notably through the *annona* system (Abadie-Reynal, 1989).

Recent archaeological and settlement studies reveal complex and differentiated patterns across the major Cycladic islands, which must be interpreted within the broader political and economic landscape of the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean. Paros and Naxos, for instance, exhibit economically dynamic coastal urban centers coexisting with dense networks of inland and littoral settlements, reflecting high levels of rural productivity and market-oriented activity (Roussos, 2017, pp. 289–291). Comparable patterns are evident on Melos, Keos, Andros, and Thera, suggesting that these islands participated in a coordinated regional system shaped by both local production and imperial imperatives (Renfrew & Wagstaff, 1982, p. 145; Cherry et al., 1991; Gerousi, 2001; Bevan & Conolly, 2013). This configuration mirrors broader trends across the insular eastern Mediterranean. The Dodecanese, Crete, and Cyprus exhibit analogous dynamics, characterized by economically active communities in both urban and rural contexts (Deligiannakis, 2011; Coutsinas et al., 2022, pp. 392–397; Panayides & Jacobs, 2023).

Taken together, the eastern Mediterranean islands functioned as dynamic subregional hubs of economic, social, and cultural interaction, forming interconnected microcosms embedded within, and actively contributing to, the wider Late Antique socioeconomic network. Their development was shaped by the interplay of maritime connectivity, regional production, and the structuring influence of imperial economic mechanisms.

Within this framework, the small cities of the Cyclades (Fig. 1), typically located in lowland coastal zones, with the notable exception of the mountainous Thera, functioned as central socioeconomic, administrative, and religious hubs operating across multiple scales (Roussos, 2017). At the local level, these port cities served as principal nodes within the internal settlement networks of each island, concentrating production, governance, and market-oriented trade. At a broader scale, their port facilities functioned as critical nodes within regional and interregional maritime networks, simultaneously serving as export points for locally produced goods, import hubs for foreign commodities, transshipment centers, and trade stations that facilitated the circulation of goods, people, and ideas. A comparable pattern is observed in Crete, where the multifaceted functions of port cities enabled the integration of the entire island into the Late Antique maritime economy, thereby fostering tangible economic vitality among local populations (Roussos, 2023). Framed by these dynamics, the Cycladic cities emerge not merely as passive recipients of external trends but as active agents within local and Mediterranean networks. The following chapter examines how, in the 4th c. CE, these urban centers navigated continuity and change, negotiating adaptation, elite agency, and the persistence of civic structures in response to evolving political, economic, and social pressures.

3. Urban transitions in the 4th c. CE: continuity, adaptation, and elite agency in the Cyclades

Archaeological and epigraphic data from the cities of the Cyclades that can be securely dated to the 4th c. CE is limited and fragmentary. Nevertheless, a small body of evidence offers a preliminary glimpse into the urban topography and life during this period. An important honorary inscription from the city of Paros, dedicated to the emperor Constantine I and dated between 317 and 337 CE (IG XII, 5269), provides valuable insight. The Parian dedicators refer to their city as “the most splendid city of the Paros citizens”, a title widely attested during the Roman Imperial period (1st – 3rd c. CE). It is worth noting that in the Cyclades this designation was also used by the citizens of Melos (IG XII, 3 1119) and, possibly, of Andros (IG XII, 5758) during the Roman Imperial period.

At the same time, Constantine is honored as the “lord of the sea, the earth and all human beings”, a highly conventional imperial epithet of the 3rd and 4th c. CE, employed by numerous cities across the Empire. Inscriptions bearing this or similar formulations are particularly common in the 3rd c. CE, with examples attested in Asia Minor, mainland Greece, Thrace, the Aegean islands, and Egypt, whereas surviving examples from the 4th c. CE are comparatively fewer. Such a dedication would be inconceivable without the presence of an urban center characterized by active civic life, functioning institutions, a local elite, and sufficient municipal resources to commission such an inscription. Moreover, it indirectly suggests that the city of Paros retained elements of its traditional institutions and preserved a monumental urban landscape into the early centuries of Late Antiquity.

At the same time, archaeological evidence from cities such as Naxos and Paros indicates changes in urban organization. The 4th c. CE witnessed a reconfiguration of urban planning in several port cities of the Cyclades, marked by the construction of both large elite residences and more modest dwellings. The elite residences, often situated in prominent urban locations, were lavishly decorated and reflect both social stratification and the evolving urban fabric of the period. At the southern foot of Aplomata hill in the city of Naxos, excavations have uncovered the remains of a substantial residence adorned with mosaic pavement, including a depiction of a Nereid riding a sea-bull, and wall frescoes (Kontoleon, 1961, 1963; Lambrinoudakis, 1993, 1994) (Fig. 2). Stylistic and iconographic analysis suggests that the house's initial phase dates to the 4th c. CE (Kontoleon, 1961; Lambrinoudakis, 2018). Aplomata Hill likely constituted a desirable residential area at this time due to its elevated position, which offered extensive views of the sea, the harbor, and the islet of Palatia.

Paros provides another instructive case. Excavations within the main church of Ekatonapiliani (Fig. 3) revealed that the spacious Christian religious complex (discussed in the following chapter) was erected on the same site as an earlier, extensive building that also featured a richly decorated figurative mosaic pavement (Orlandos, 1963, 1964, 1965a, 1965b). The preserved fragments depict scenes from the Labours of Hercules. This structure has been tentatively dated to the early 4th c. CE and originally identified as the *palaestra* of a Roman *gymnasium* (Orlandos, 1963). More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this interpretation, arguing that the available space is too limited for a *palaestra* and suggesting instead that the remains belong to a large and opulently decorated urban *villa* (Müller, 2003). Its location, less than 150 m south of the port, supports its identification as part of a prestigious residential quarter. Proximity to key commercial and administrative areas would have made this location particularly attractive for elite residents seeking both visibility and accessibility.

These examples from Naxos and Paros correspond with broader patterns across the Aegean world, where Late Antiquity witnessed the widespread construction of elite urban and rural *villas* (Bintliff, 2012). In the Cycladic context, the emergence of large, richly decorated private residences in coastal cities reflects the continued prominence of a local urban aristocracy. Such residences functioned as visible expressions of



Fig. 2. Map of the modern Chora of Naxos showing the sites of the ancient city that form the focus of this study.

social and economic power, enabling members of the elite to assert their status and wealth, often in deliberate contrast to lower social groups who were economically, politically, and socially dependent upon them (Uytterhoeven, 2007, pp. 41-43). The owners of these houses were likely wealthy landowners controlling extensive estates in nearby fertile coastal plains or merchants engaged in trade activities. At the same time, the persistence of pagan iconography in the mosaics of Paros and Naxos underscores the enduring vitality of traditional Roman cultural forms in these coastal urban centers throughout the 4th c. CE.

Meanwhile, the spatial redefinition of civic spaces further characterizes Cycladic urbanism in this period. Archaeological evidence from Naxos suggests that during the 4th c. CE, the former public space of the ancient *agora*, along with the adjacent burial area (the tumulus of the ancestors) in the modern district of Grotta, was completely transformed into a residential quarter for the Late Antique city, a process which had begun during the 3rd c. CE (Kontoleon, 1966, 1967, 1970; Lambrinoudakis, 1979, 1988, 1991) (Fig. 2). Over the course of the 4th c. CE, the *agora* lost its role as the civic heart of the city and was gradually replaced by more modest domestic structures, effectively becoming a residential neighborhood. A similar pattern may also be discerned in the case of the ancient *agora* of Palaiopolis, on Andros (Palaiokrassa-Kopitsa, 2007, 55). The abandonment and transformation of the sites of ancient civic administrative centers, notably the *agora*, constitute a widely attested phenomenon across both major and minor

urban settlements during the Late Antique period. Although the trajectory of this process exhibits considerable regional variability, with some *agorai* experiencing decline earlier and others persisting into later phases, its onset can generally be traced to the 3rd-4th c. CE (Saradi, 2006, pp. 235-252; Le Quéré, 2011, pp. 335-337).

At the same time, in the city of Naxos, there is clear evidence for the expansion of habitation along the coastal zone of Grotta (Kontoleon, 1972, p. 143; Lambrinoudakis, 1978; Lambrinoudakis, 1979; Lambrinoudakis, 1980; Lambrinoudakis, 1981; Lambrinoudakis, 1982), in the modern areas of Plithos and Katsagra, and on the slopes of Aplomata Hill (Kontoleon, 1966, 1970; Lambrinoudakis, 1976) (Fig. 2). A comparable pattern is also observable in the ancient city of Melos, where evidence suggests a possible expansion of the urban layout beyond its earlier boundaries (Renfrew & Wagstaff, 1982, p. 145). The same pattern of urban expansion beyond earlier limits, dated between the late 2nd and the 4th c. CE, has been documented in several coastal cities of North Africa (Leone, 2007). However, the cities of Naxos and, possibly, Melos appear to have experienced urban expansion in the 4th c. CE, in contrast to broader patterns observed in the Aegean world. Archaeological evidence suggests that the enlargement of cities is not a consistent pattern in the evolution of the urban space across the Eastern Mediterranean. Excavated urban contexts often present a contradictory picture: on the one hand, traces of economic growth with the erection of extensive religious monuments; on the other, clear evidence of the urban

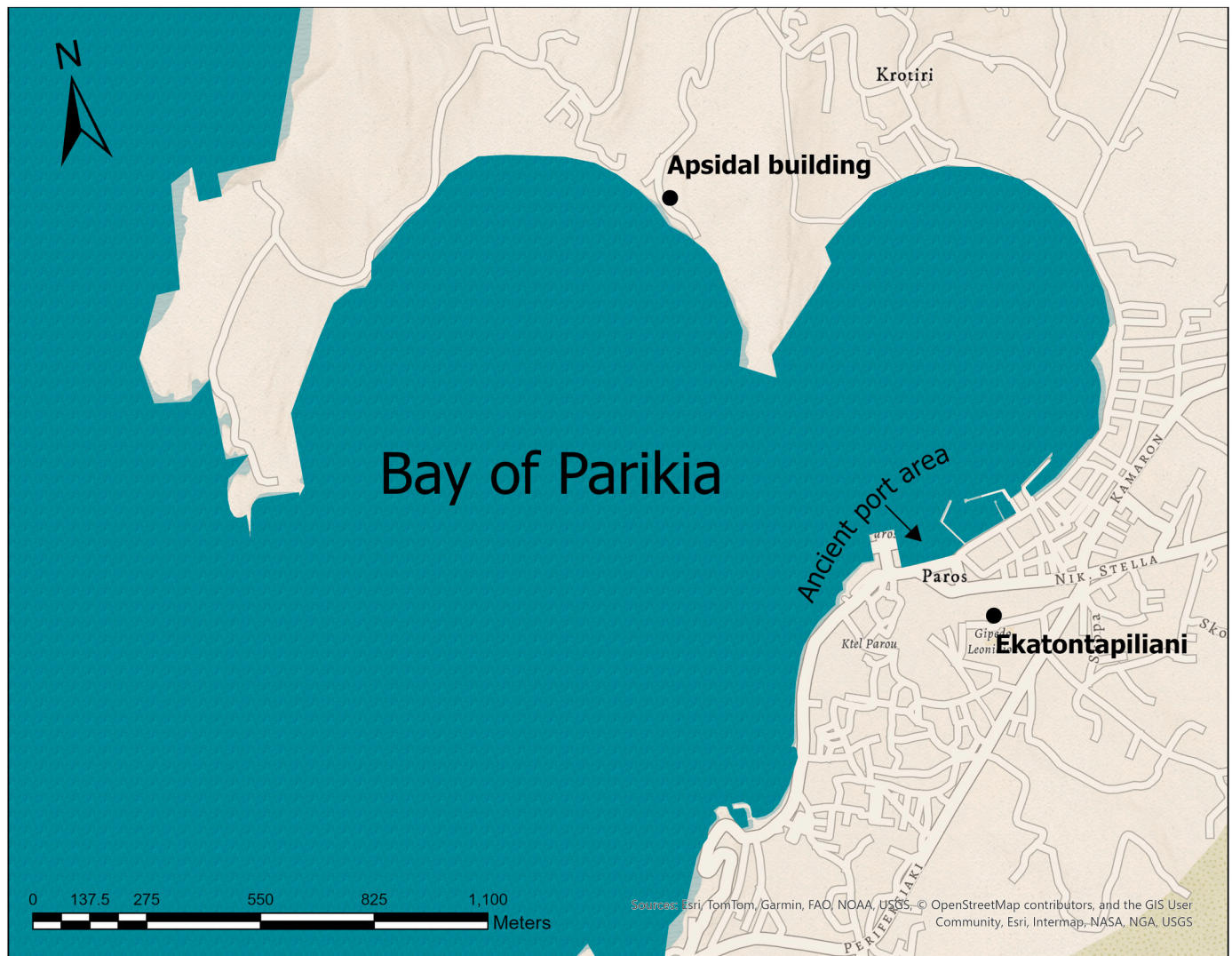


Fig. 3. The religious complex of Ekatontapiliani and its relationship with the port area.

landscape's reduction. Cities such as Hyettos and Thespieae in Boeotia (Bintliff, 2014; Bintliff et al., 2007), the provincial capital of Corinth, and nearby Sikyon in the Peloponnese (Slane & Sanders, 2005; Tzavella et al., 2014), for instance, experienced dramatic shrinkage during Late Antiquity. Nonetheless, in the broader Mediterranean context, the pattern of enlargement and renewal of the urban environment is not an uncommon phenomenon.

In the case of Naxos, continued investment in both the urban fabric and its immediate hinterland such as the restoration of the aqueduct, suggests a sustained phase of development extending from the Roman Imperial period into Late Antiquity (Roussos, 2017, pp. 169-189). On the other hand, the intensification of this process during the 4th c. CE may be linked to changing conditions in the Aegean Sea following the foundation of Constantinople, as well as to local efforts to reshape the urban landscape in response to new political and economic realities. Although the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record imposes some limitations, the combined archaeological and epigraphic evidence discussed above suggests that Cycladic urban environments in the 4th c. CE experienced both continuity and transformation. Coastal cities such as Paros, Naxos, and Melos largely retained their "pagan" character, sustained by active local elites and functioning civic institutions. Culturally, these insular urban communities remained closely connected to broader Roman cultural practices. At the same time, as vividly illustrated by the case of Naxos, urban topography underwent significant

changes, most notably the increasing privatization of public space, as domestic structures encroached upon areas formerly occupied by civic monuments.

The developments observed during the 4th c. CE suggest a phase of gradual adaptation rather than abrupt transformation. Urban life in the Cyclades remained largely structured around earlier Roman traditions, maintained by established local elites and characterized by the persistence of conventional cultural practices. Concurrently, emerging changes in spatial organization such as the increasing privatization of formerly public areas and the expansion of elite residential architecture, signal the onset of a protracted process of urban reconfiguration.

This pattern distinguishes the 4th c. CE from the developments of the 5th and 6th c. CE, during which more profound and structurally visible transformations occurred. In this later period, the rising prominence of Christian institutions, the redefinition of civic space, and the closer integration of the islands into the administrative and ideological framework of the Byzantine Empire collectively mark a distinct phase in the evolution of Cycladic urban landscapes.

4. Christianization and urban transformation (5th–6th c. CE)

The 5th and 6th c. CE marked a pivotal period for the radical transformation of the urban landscapes, civic life, administrative and religious structures, elite dynamics, and collective identities of the

Cyclades. It is within this timeframe that the multifaceted process commonly referred to as the Christianization of cities began to take shape in the insular urban environments of the region (Vionis, 2017). During this period, major administrative transformations fundamentally altered the physical character of ancient cities (Saradi, 2006, pp. 151–185). Cultural shifts, coupled with the increasing authority of the Christian Church, reshaped the values and priorities within the urban environment. A new upper class emerged, comprising state officials, local bishops, and clergy, largely disconnected from the social and cultural networks of the traditional urban aristocracy (Saradi, 2006, p. 185). Bishops, in particular, assumed prominent positions in urban centers, exercising not only religious and spiritual authority but also substantial civic administrative power (Saradi, 2006, pp. 181–184).

Consequently, the urban landscape of Late Antiquity underwent significant symbolic and aesthetic reconfiguration. Cities increasingly became dominated by expansive and elaborate Christian religious complexes, frequently incorporating *spolia*, material reused from earlier buildings. These large-scale construction projects clearly reflect the allocation of the financial surplus of the emergent elite. In the Cycladic cities, new Christian churches emerged as prominent landmarks, representing the most prestigious urban constructions and signaling the cultural and socio-political priorities of the Late Antique urban order. Analysis of the placement and distribution of churches within these urban areas, and their spatial relationships with pre-existing public monuments and civic landmarks, reveals the varied ways in which Christian architecture was incorporated into the Late Antique fabric of Cycladic cities. Urban Christian churches were most commonly situated in prominent coastal locations, often adjacent to city harbors. The phenomenon of situating basilicas in visually prominent or strategically significant locations, either within harbor precincts or on elevated coastal topographies, is a recurrent feature in the Late Antique Aegean insular landscape. This spatial strategy reflects not only religious and communal considerations but also a deliberate engagement with the surrounding maritime and terrestrial environment, projecting ecclesiastical presence and socio-political influence. The case of Crete exemplifies this trend, where basilicas are frequently positioned to both dominate the urban landscape and oversee maritime approaches, thereby reinforcing their visibility and symbolic authority within the Late Antique socio-religious milieu (Roussos, 2021, p. 30, map 11).

Urban Christian churches in the Cycladic city ports were either newly constructed or adapted from earlier polytheistic temples (Saradi, 2006, pp. 355–384). In many cases, their placement reflects a deliberate strategy to maintain the public character of urban space while aligning it with the ideological and functional requirements of the Christian era. Such site selection underscores the interplay between sacred architecture, landscape perception, and the socio-political fabric of Aegean communities during this period.

A particularly compelling example of the conversion of a polytheistic temple into a Christian ecclesiastical structure is found in the city of Naxos (Fig. 2). During the 5th c. CE, the large Archaic temple of Apollo, situated on the small islet of Palatia at the entrance to Naxos' harbor, was transformed into a Christian basilica (Roussos, 2023; Welter, 1924). This conversion represents a conscious reconfiguration and Christianization of the sacred landscape. The temple's commanding position overlooking the maritime channel between Naxos and Paros, its monumental scale, and its visibility from nearly every part of the city rendered it an ideal location for reinforcing the Christian identity of the urban community. The original pagan temple may have also served as a landmark facilitating navigation and maritime mobility, functioning as a visual reference point for sailors approaching the harbour. In this respect, its conversion into a Christian church during Late Antiquity likely preserved and enhanced this function, transforming it into a prominent symbol of the city's new religious orientation while simultaneously reinforcing its longstanding role as a navigational landmark within the seascape (Ekschmitt, 1993).

A more intriguing example can be observed in the Late Antique city

of Andros (Palaipolis). During the second half of the 5th c. CE, a Christian basilica was erected on the lower terrace of the ancient *agora*, partially incorporating a wall of the *stoa* (Ghioles & Pallis, 2018). The newly erected basilica not only occupied a significant portion of the former civic space but also expanded over the street that had once connected the *agora* with the harbour. Unquestionably, the basilica's central location reflects broader transformations in the urban landscape and in the identity of the local community, highlighting the increasing influence and institutional authority of Christianity. The church's sculptural decoration made the presence and authority of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy visually explicit from multiple vantage points, asserting ideological and political claims over the urban fabric (Ghioles & Pallis, 2018). Equally noteworthy is the continuous use of the site as a public space during Late Antiquity. As scholars have noted, Christian churches in this period were multifunctional spaces. They facilitated commerce, hosted administrative activities, served as centers for production and distribution, organized festivals and celebrations, and acted as venues for public announcements and gatherings (Saradi, 2006, pp. 385–440). In the case of Late Antique Andros, unlike the case of Naxos discussed earlier, the former *agora* maintained its civic character and continued to serve as the symbolic and functional heart of the city (Ghioles & Pallis, 2018), now redefined in accordance with Christian values and societal structures. A comparable example can be found in the city of Melos. At the site known as "Tris Ekklesies", situated on the slope above the modern village of Klima and corresponding to the southeast section of the ancient *agora*, a Christian cross-shaped baptismal font dating to the 5th c. CE was unearthed (Mackenzie, 1897; Ristow, 1998). The baptistery may have been part of a larger ecclesiastical complex established in the area of the *agora*.

Returning to the case of Andros, the unique location of the *agora*, situated on a flat area by the sea in close proximity to the harbour, indicates a strong and enduring connection between these two key urban focal points. As has been suggested, the development of the *agora* was closely intertwined with that of the harbor, with both spaces evolving *in tandem*. The construction of a Christian basilica on the site of the *agora* in the second half of the 5th c. CE suggests that this functional and symbolic relationship persisted into Late Antiquity. From this period onward, the harbor, still economically active, remained directly connected to the city's new architectural and symbolic centerpiece: the basilica in the *agora*.

By the 6th c. CE, this synthesis of ecclesiastical and civic identity culminated in Paros with the erection of the monumental religious complex of Ekatontapiliani (Fig. 3). This ecclesiastical complex served not only the spiritual needs of the island's inhabitants but also fulfilled broader social, political, and symbolic functions. Its imposing architecture and strategic siting near the harbor signaled both local prosperity and integration within the imperial framework (Roussos, 2017). Paros, though small, functioned as a vital maritime hub, facilitating the movement of goods, people, and ideas across the Aegean (discussed in the following chapter). The erection of such a grand ecclesiastical complex likely drew resources from both imperial coffers and the new upper class, serving as a form of imperial and ecclesiastical propaganda targeted at local residents as well as visiting merchants, pilgrims, and seafarers. In this way, Ekatontapiliani operated simultaneously as a spiritual center and a symbolic outpost of imperial and local authority.

The prominent placement of bishops' and clergy monograms within the most visible areas of the nave of Ekatontapiliani during the 6th c. CE reflects the growing authority and centrality of the ecclesiastical hierarchy within the local community. By this period, the city's principal landmark had shifted from civic to Christian religious architecture, signaling the transformative role of the Church, and particularly of Bishops Hylasios and Georgios, in directing major urban building projects (Roussos, 2017, pp. 75–77, fig. 4.25–4.26). If Mitsani's hypothesis regarding the inclusion of administrative officials' monograms on the *templon* closure slab is accepted, the sculptural program of Ekatontapiliani may further illustrate the emergence of the new upper class,

wherein ecclesiastical figures and state representatives jointly acted as patrons, effectively supplanting the earlier civilian elite (Mitsani, 2006, pp. 87–88). This coordinated display of religious and imperial support underscores the consolidation of authority in a bipolar model of local governance, a relationship also physically manifested in the spatial interplay between Ekatontapiliani, as the locus of ecclesiastical power, and the city's harbor, representing state authority.

The transformation of the Cycladic cityscape in the 5th and 6th c. CE does not constitute a sharp rupture with the past; rather, it reflects a complex process of reappropriation of existing urban spaces, both public and private, and their adaptation to new ideological and functional realities. The examples from Naxos, Andros, Melos and Paros demonstrate that Christian architecture functioned not only as a space of worship but also as a medium for political expression, social integration, and maritime connectivity. These case studies collectively indicate that the Christianization of Cycladic cities was neither uniform nor predetermined but was shaped by local geography, imperial policy, and community agency. However, the inhabitants of the Cycladic cities in the 6th c. CE lived in an urban environment markedly different from that of the 4th c. CE. Furthermore, the transformations outlined above were not confined to the ideological and architectural sphere but were closely intertwined with the economic life of Cycladic cities. The prominence of harbor-centered urban planning and the strategic placement of ecclesiastical complexes underscore the continued importance of maritime connectivity. This connectivity is further illuminated through the material record, particularly the ceramic assemblages recovered from key port sites.

5. Harbours and connectivity: economic dimensions of urban transformations in the Cyclades

The concept of connectivity in the Late Antique Aegean should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon. It includes material evidence such as ceramics, coinage, architectural sculptures etc., as well as the movement of people, the transmission of ideas, and the diffusion of cultural practices. From Late Antiquity onwards, maritime routes linking Constantinople with the Cyclades, Asia Minor, mainland Greece, and North Africa sustained a complex system of exchange in which merchants, officials, soldiers, and travelers actively participated. Connectivity, therefore, is best approached as an integrated framework that brings together economic, social, and cultural dynamics (Roussos, 2017, pp. 27–30).

This broader perspective is particularly evident in the role of Cycladic port cities as nodal points within networks of movement and communication. Beyond serving as provisioning stations for long-distance trade, the islands were embedded within routes of pilgrimage and administrative travel, reflecting sustained and intensive mobility across the Aegean. Early Christian pilgrims *en route* to the Holy Land such as Saint Helena, Saint Paula (347–404), and Egeria (381–384), passed through Cycladic port cities (Roussos, 2017, p. 26). Concurrently, epigraphic evidence (*graffiti*) from Grammata on Syros and Gastria on Tenos, dated between the 4th and the first half of the 8th c. CE, attests to high levels of mobility across the Aegean Sea and to connections between the Cyclades and regions including Asia Minor, mainland Greece, and North Africa (Feissel, 1980; Kiourtzian, 2001).

At the same time, the presence of imported marble sculptures from Constantinople in Cycladic Christian basilicas, together with the influence of Constantinopolitan artistic models on local production, testifies to the wide diffusion of artistic values and to significant processes of cultural transmission (Roussos, 2023). Furthermore, numismatic evidence from several Cycladic islands points to sustained economic activity and participation in broader trade networks (Pennas & Samoladou, 2010).

Building on this broader framework of mobility and exchange, the ceramic record provides particularly concrete insights into the economic dimension of Late Antique Aegean connectivity. Among the various

categories of evidence, ceramics, owing to their durability, wide circulation, and well-established typologies, serve not only as indicators of trade but also as markers of changing cityscapes in the Late Antique Cyclades (4th–6th c. CE). Late Roman transport amphorae, the standard commercial shipping containers for a range of mostly liquid and semi-liquid goods, make up the bulk of the finds. They offer valuable insights into the broader economic and social developments of the period in question.

An illustrative example of this vibrant commercial activity is provided by the ceramic assemblage recovered during underwater excavations at the port of Parikia, the site of the ancient city on Paros (Fig. 3). The abundance of imported amphorae attests to dynamic exchanges between the Cyclades and major economic and production centers across the Eastern Mediterranean (Roussos, 2017, pp. 65–67).

Of particular interest is a fragmentarily preserved amphora identified as belonging to the MRC 2B/TRC 1 type (Fig. 4). This Cretan amphora type was first produced in the mid-3rd c. CE, with production continuing throughout the 4th c. CE and into the late 5th c. CE. Workshops have been located at Keratokampos, Gortyn, Dermatos, Makrygialos, and possibly Eleutherna (Le Quéré, 2011; Portale & Romeo, 2001; Yangaki, 2005). The amphora from Paros shows notable parallels with examples from Eleutherna and Gortyn, particularly in terms of shape and fabric, and may be dated to the 4th c. CE.

Another significant find from the ceramic assemblage from Parikia is an upper fragment of a Kapitān II-type amphora (Fig. 5). This type first emerged in the 3rd c. CE and remained in use until the early 5th c. CE, with a broad distribution across the Mediterranean (Peacock & Williams, 1986). Although the precise production center remains uncertain, possible origins include Aegean sites such as Kos, Samos, and Ephesos (Bezeczy, 2005; Riley, 1979). The Parikia fragment can be dated between the mid-3rd and the 4th c. CE (Reynolds, 2003).

Also present in the assemblage are two well-preserved fragments of the Agora M 235/M 327 (Robinson, 1959). (Figs. 6 and 7). This type achieved wide distribution in the 4th and 5th c. CE, particularly at major Mediterranean port cities. Suggested production centers include Crete and the Peloponnese, with Messene recently proposed as a possible source (Opait, 2014; Robinson, 1959). The Parikia examples find parallels in Gortyn, Athens, and Thessaloniki, dated to the 5th and early 6th c. CE (Portale & Romeo, 2001).

Particularly noteworthy are fragments from the upper parts of amphorae of the Agora M 273 (Fig. 8) and Opait E-III types (Fig. 9). Agora M 273 corresponds to a broad group of askoid-shaped amphorae that circulated widely across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea between the 4th and 6th c. CE (Robinson, 1959). The five Parikia examples

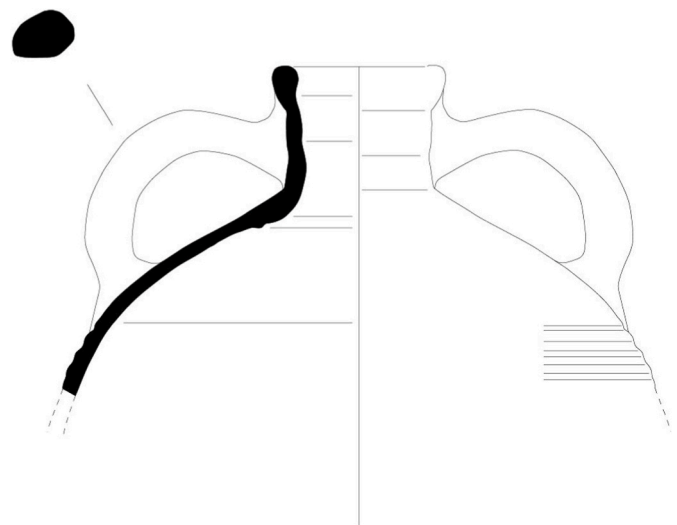


Fig. 4. MRC 2B/TRC 1.

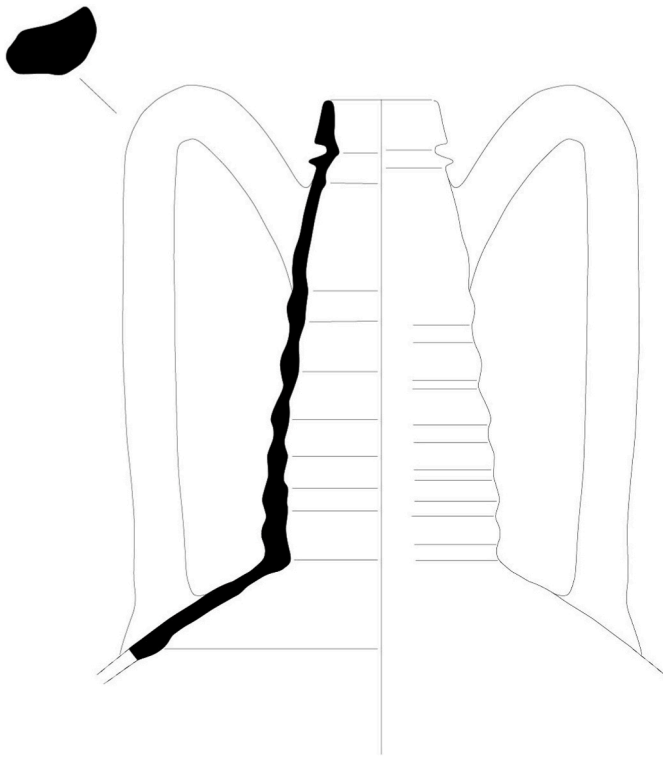


Fig. 5. Kapitän II-type amphora.

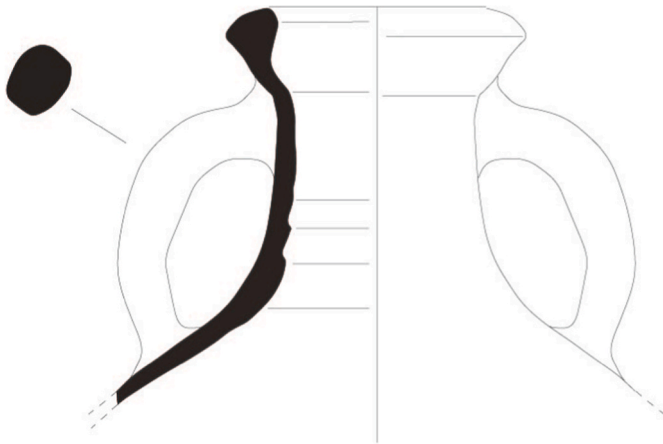


Fig. 6. Agora M 235/M 327.

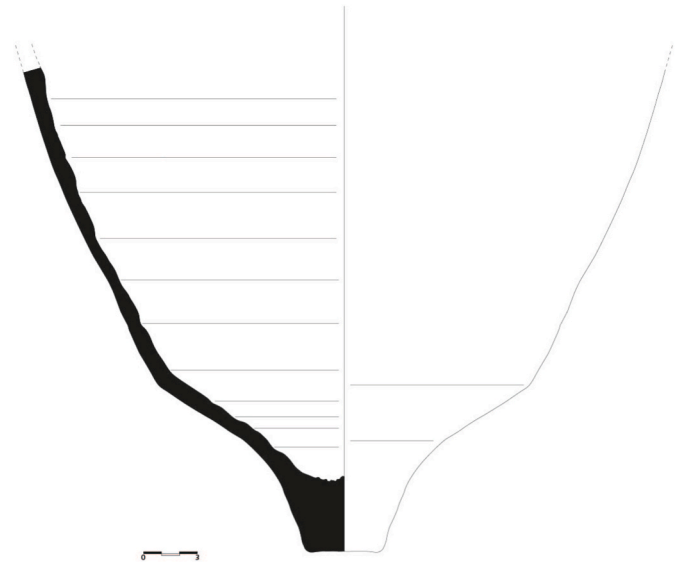


Fig. 7. Agora M 235/M 327.

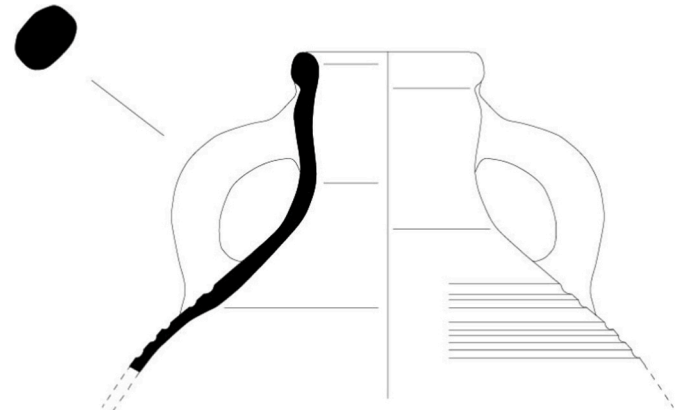


Fig. 8. Agora M 273.

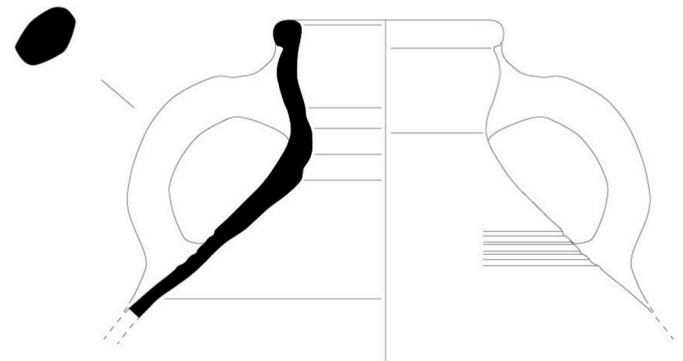


Fig. 9. Opait E-III types.

find parallels in Tarraco, Gortyn, and Athens, primarily dated to the 5th and possibly the 6th c. CE (Portale & Romeo, 2001; Robinson, 1959; Remolà i Vallverdú, 2000). The Opait E-III type shares a similar morphology with Agora M 273 but differs in having a more sharply concave neck before it meets the shoulder. Based on parallels from Scythia, the Parikia example may be dated to the 5th c. CE (Opait, 2004).

Among the broader ceramic groups represented in Parikia between the 5th and 6th c. CE are Late Roman Amphora (LRA) types 1 and 2. The LRA 2 type is the most numerous group in the Parikia assemblage (Figs. 10 and 11). No complete LRA 2 amphorae were recovered, but over 50 diagnostic sherds have been identified in Parikia. LRA 1, the most widely produced and distributed amphora type in Late Antiquity, constitutes the second most frequent group in the Parikia assemblage (Fig. 12). Recognized production centers include Cilicia, Cyprus, northern Syria, Caria, and Rhodes (Piéri, 2005). Numerous diagnostic sherds from the upper sections of vessels have been recovered.

Chronologically, this group spans from the 5th to the 6th c. CE.

Less frequent, but nonetheless significant, are fragments of LRA 5 (Fig. 13) produced in workshops in Palestine and Egypt in the 6th and 7th c. CE (Piéri, 2005). Finally, a distinct group includes Cretan amphorae of the TRC 4 type (Fig. 14), which first appeared in the late 5th c. CE and remained in production through the 6th and 7th c. CE (Portale & Romeo, 2001). The Parikia example closely parallels examples from Gortyn and may be dated to the 6th c. CE.

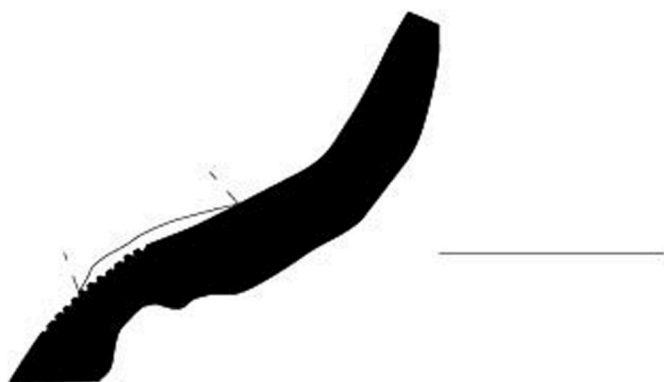


Fig. 10. LRA 2.

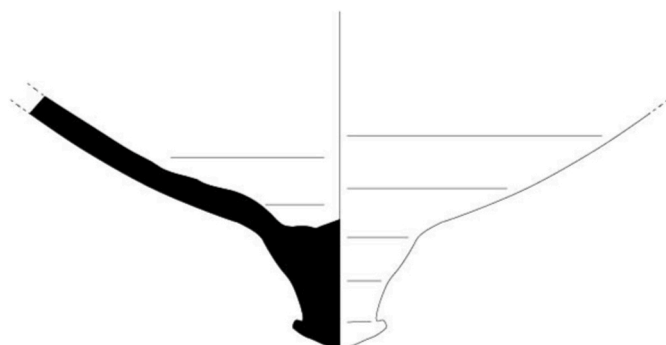


Fig. 11. LRA 2.

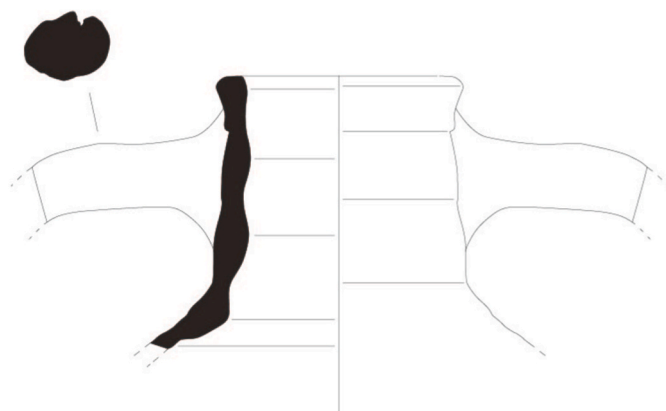


Fig. 12. LRA 1.

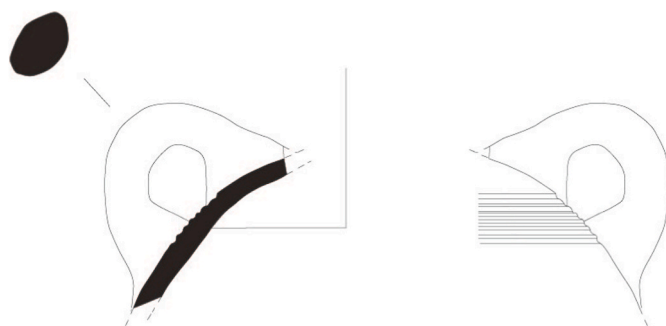


Fig. 13. LRA 5.

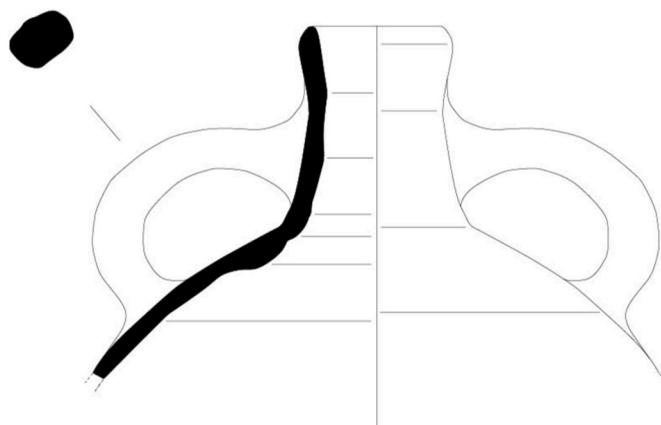


Fig. 14. TRC 4.

The material from Paros paints a vivid picture of commercial connection and economic vitality in the Cycladic ports during Late Antiquity (Fig. 15). The wide typological range and geographic diversity of imported amphorae types in Paros reflects the integration of the Cyclades into extensive trade networks that connected the islands with major centers of production and distribution across the Mediterranean.

However, while the ceramic record provides rich and tangible evidence for patterns of exchange and connectivity, the archaeological understanding of the Cycladic harbor infrastructure that sustained these networks remains considerably more limited. Despite recent advances, and with the notable exception of Delos (Nakas, 2022), comprehensive analyses of Cycladic harbors, addressing quays, warehouses, waterfront installations, and administrative structures in relation to urban spatial organization, remain extremely limited or absent. The available data are fragmentary and often inconclusive. In Paros, for example, the so-called “apsidal building” at Krios, located in the immediate periphery of the port city, is generally dated to Late Antiquity and has been variously interpreted as a *nymphaeum*, an *odeon*, or a *villa*. However, its precise chronology and function remain uncertain due to the lack of systematic excavation and adequate documentation. Recent studies have instead emphasized its position within the micro-landscape: the structure overlooks both the entrance to the bay of Parikia and the urban center, while remaining directly accessible by sea from the main harbor. This strategic location strongly suggests a functional association with maritime activity. It is therefore plausible that the building, located along the coastal periphery of the city, was connected to commercial or logistical operations, potentially serving as an auxiliary installation linked to the primary port infrastructure of Paros (Roussos, 2017, pp. 79–81).

6. Conclusions

The urban landscapes of the Late Antique Cyclades demonstrate a complex interplay between continuity and transformation, reflecting broader political, religious, and economic dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. The small Cycladic port cities experienced resilience and adaptability, maintaining functional administrative mechanisms while integrating new ideological and architectural forms into the urban fabric.

During the 4th c. CE, cities such as Paros, Naxos, and Melos retained elements of Roman urban tradition. Elite residences decorated with mosaics featuring pagan themes and honorary inscriptions indicate the persistence of social stratification and the active role of the local aristocracy in shaping urban spaces. At the same time, the privatization of former public spaces and the expansion of residential quarters reveal the beginning of a reconfiguration that anticipated the broader changes of the subsequent centuries. This period was marked by adaptation rather than decline or rupture, with cultural continuity coexisting alongside



Fig. 15. Map showing the island of Paros and the possible origins of the amphorae identified in the Parikia assemblage.

spatial and social reorganization.

The following centuries witnessed more profound transformations driven by Christianization, administrative changes, the transformation of the upper class, and new cultural trends. By the 5th and particularly the 6th c. CE, Christian basilicas were erected in symbolically prominent positions, often repurposing temples, *agorai*, or other structures, thereby redefining the spiritual social and economic landscapes of the Cyclades. The integration of the new religious buildings within the urban fabric, and their function as emerging public spaces and urban landmarks, reflects a new Christian articulation of urban space, marked by the assertion of a new urban identity and ideological hierarchy. Prominent ecclesiastical complexes illustrate the multiple roles of the Church, which controlled many urban socio-economic activities.

In this framework, economic and maritime connectivity remained central to the urban vitality of the Cyclades throughout Late Antiquity. Ceramic assemblages such as that of Parikia further illustrate the islands' integration into Eastern Mediterranean trade networks. The diversity and quantity of imported amphorae attest to connections between the Cyclades and Crete, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Palestine and other important centers in the Aegean, thereby testifying to intensive trade and exchange activities. Cycladic port cities such as Paros functioned not only as commercial hubs and export points but also as conduits for cultural transmission, administrative oversight, and human mobility, thereby reinforcing the interconnectedness of insular communities with

the broader imperial system.

Overall, the Late Antique Cyclades emerge as dynamic arenas of urban innovation and cultural negotiation. These small port cities were not passive recipients of broader changes but actively shaped and were shaped by political, religious and economic circumstances. The evidence discussed in this paper highlights the importance of localized, context-oriented approaches for a more nuanced understanding of insular urbanism and the processes of adaptation, resilience and connectivity that defined the lived experience of Cycladic communities in Late Antiquity. By viewing these transformations within wider Mediterranean networks, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of the progressive transition from ancient to medieval ways of life and mentalities.

Declaration of the use of generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative artificial intelligence tools solely for language editing, proofreading, and improving the clarity and readability of the text. Generative AI tools were not used to generate research findings, analyse archaeological evidence, interpret data, or make scientific or scholarly conclusions. The author remains fully responsible for the content of the manuscript, including the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and integrity of the work.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Ethical statement

This research did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or any personal or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. All necessary permissions for the study, including access to archaeological materials and sites, were obtained from the appropriate authorities and institutions where applicable. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of academic research and the principles of responsible scholarship.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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