

THE LACONIAN INFLUENCE ON THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF ANCIENT KYTHERA

Since ancient times the island of Kythera is known for the worship of the goddess Aphrodite, and also for the myth that connects the island with the birth of the goddess. This myth goes back to the Phoenician presence on the island (Herodotus 1.105) and it was accommodated into the Minoan worship of the Great Goddess-Mother. Until recently Aphrodite was the only known deity worshipped on the island, however further research showed that the gods of the Laconian pantheon were worshipped in almost all the sanctuaries on the island due to the long-lasting presence of the Spartan element (fig. 1, 2).

In the following pages I present all the sanctuaries we discovered, which are dated after the conquest of the island by the Spartans in the end of the 6th century BC, and had a functioning life of varying length (fig. 3).

1. The sanctuary of Dioskouroi in Palaeokastro

The ancient city of Kythera was located on the hill of Palaeokastro (fig. 3/1). Recently, on the top of the hill, almost 200 m west of the fortifications, professor I. Petrocheilos (Petrocheilos 2004, 453-460), from the University of Ioannina, uncovered a sanctuary of a female deity that very probably belonged to the “Celestial” Aphrodite.

A Christian temple of Sts Cosmas and Damianos is located on the highest point inside the fortified city, built on the columns of an ancient temple. An inscribed relief¹ found in the surrounding area refers to the existence of a sanctuary dedicated to Dioskouroi (Castor and Polux) there, while the change of the worshipping area itself into a Christian temple of the two saints pleads for the opinion that the ancient temple was dedicated to Dioskouroi (Petrocheilos 1984). It is known that the ancient temple dedicated to Dioskouroi in the Roman Forum changed into the temple of the Sts Cosma and Damiano in the Christian era. It is known that Dioskouroi were the heroes/gods, protectors of Sparta and it is natural that after the conquest of Kythera in the 6th century BC the new dominants imposed their cult as the main cult on the island, after that of Aphrodite.

¹ National Archaeological Museum of Athens, cat. no. 1437; IG VI, 937



Fig. 1. The island of Kythera in the Mediterranean Sea. (Großer Historischer Weltatlas, 1. Teil, Vorgeschichte und Altertum, 6. Aufl., Bayrischer Schulbuch-Verlag, München 1978, pl. 44.



Fig. 2. Lakonia and Kythera. (Großer Historischer Weltatlas, 1. Teil, Vorgeschichte und Altertum, 6. Aufl., Bayrischer Schulbuch-Verlag, München 1978, pl. 26).

2. The sanctuary of Alea in Palaeopoli

After a rescue excavation that took place in 1999 in the area of Palaeopoli (fig. 3/2), in close vicinity to ancient Skandeia, where the ancient harbour of Kythera was situated, an open roofed cave was found where a sanctuary dedicated to Alea (Tsaravopoulos 1999, 261-264; Μιχάλακας 2000, 91-100) was located. Alea was a pre-Hellenic goddess worshipped in Arkadia and Laconia, who in the Hellenic twelve god pantheon became “Alea” Athena. Very well known is the temple of “Alea” Athena in ancient Tegea, in Arkadia dating to the 4th century BC. It is also known that an important temple in the city of Sparta was dedicated to “Alea” Athena.



Fig. 3. Map of Kythera with the location of the ancient sanctuaries found on the island: 1. sanctuaries of Aphrodite (?) and Dioscouroi, 2. sanctuary of Alaia, 3. sanctuary of Herakles 4. sanctuary of Apollo Carneios, 5. sanctuary of Asklepios, 6. sanctuary of Poseidon Gaieochos .



Fig. 4. The sanctuary of Heracles in the limestone quarry.



Fig. 5. The relief of Heracles found in the area of the limestone quarry.

The sanctuary of Alea in Kythera functioned, as it seemed from the excavation, from the end of the 6th until the middle of the 4th century BC, and even though it was in close vicinity to the ancient harbour it functioned as a rural sanctuary.

3. The sanctuary of Hercules and the sanctuary of Apollo *Carneios* in Palaeopoli

In the area of Palaeopoli, east of the ancient harbour installations a number of large limestone quarries are located. In one of these, towards the modern village of Avlemonas, there is a rock cut niche where a relief of Hercules (Tsaravopoulos 2000-2003, 207-208) was found (fig. 3/3, 4, 5), dating to the Roman period. It is known that the Spartans considered Hercules their ancestor, but also Hercules was conceived as the protector god of quarrymen. Thus, the presence of a cult place of the hero inside the quarry is absolutely logical.

Interesting is the uncover of a cult place dedicated to Apollo *Carneios* in the area of another quarry in Palaeopoli (fig. 3/4, 6, 7) in short distance from the ancient harbour after a survey that took place by a research group from the University of Athens under the direction of prof G. Kokkorou-Alevra. The sanctuary was rectangular in shape, cut on the natural rock with a number of niches and with its entrance in the west (Kokkorou Alevra 2006). Apollo *Carneios* with his symbol, the triangular ram head (κάρνος=ram)², was particularly worshipped in Sparta.

4. The sanctuary of Asklipeios in the Monastery of St. Theodoros in Loutro, in the centre of the island

In the area of Loutro, where the Monastery of St. Theodoros is located today in the village of Aroniadika (fig. 3/5) a sanctuary dedicated to Asklipeios functioned in the ancient times with the Laconian name *Aiglapios*. Many sanctuaries of Asklepios, the god with the healing powers, that functioned as “hospitals” can

² Hesichius, lemma κάρνος



Fig. 6. The sanctuary of Apollo Carneios at Palaepoli in Kythera



Fig. 7. The niche with the triangular ram head, symbol of the worship of Apollo Carneios

be found from the middle of the 5th century BC in the whole Greek world. Their main characteristic is that they are almost all located next to areas with subterranean or over ground water streams. In Kythera the name of the sanctuary's location itself, Loutro (= bath), reassures it. There is a subterranean watercourse in this location that supplies the monastery with water until today.

An oinochoe with the inscription *ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΔΑΣ ΑΙΓΓΛΑΠΙΩΙ* (*Herakleidas offered it to Aiglapios*), found in the well of the Monastery, is dated to the end of the 5th century BC. In the area of the monastery among pottery sherds, dating mainly to the classical period, the lower part of a small statue of Asklepeios was also found (Tsaravopoulos 2000-2003, 208-210). It is characteristic that before the dedication of the Monastery to St. Theodoros that occurred after the 10th century AD, in the same area functioned, during the early-Christian era, a temple dedicated to St. Sergios and Vakchos who were known as healing saints.

Of course, the worship of Asklepeios is not characteristic only in the Laconian pantheon, but I mention it here because, in the only reference we have, the god is mentioned with his Laconian name.

5. The sanctuary of Gaieochos Poseidon on the islet of Mikri Dragonara (Antidragonera)

The sanctuary of Gaieochos (earthshaking) Poseidon, who was worshipped in Sparta as the god of earthquakes, functioned, as it was confirmed after a small scale but difficult excavation, on the small islet of Mikri Dragonara (Antidragonera) (fig. 3/6, 8), almost 500 m off the eastern part of Kythera. Among a large number of votive vessels and amphoras of the Hellenistic period, gems and coins were also found that came from 54 different cities and kingdoms from the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (fig. 9), from the coasts of Spain to the peninsula of Crimea and Egypt of the Ptolemies. The sanctuary functioned from the end of the 4th century BC to the beginning of the Imperial era.



Fig. 8. The islet of Mikri Dragonara as is seen from Kythera.

Poseidon, as Gaieochos (earthshaking) was worshipped in Sparta as the god of earthquakes and except for the city itself where a temple dedicated to Poseidon was located, there was also an important sanctuary in the Tainaron cape, where the great market of mercenaries was gathered (Diodorus 17.111.3) at the time.

The presence of characteristic sanctuaries of Laconian cult give a direct picture of the influence neighbouring Sparta had on the island. Except for the authority Sparta exercised on the island as the dominant power, it seems that Sparta also influenced the spiritual life of the Kytherians.



Fig. 9. Map of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea with the provenance of the non Aegean coins found on the islet of Mikri Dragonara.

Of course, the deities mentioned above have not only been brought in the Kytherian pantheon from the Laconian dominants, but, as we found out from the archaeological research that took place in some of the above places, their cult did not last for more than two or three centuries, while the cult of Aphrodite and her symbol, that of myrtle, surpassed the limits of antiquity. The island is protected today by the Virgin of the Myrtle (Panagia Myrtidiotissa).

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