

STYMPHALOS, A CITY IN ANCIENT ARCADIA

STYMPHALOS, UMA CIDADE NA ARCÁDIA ANTIGA

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to address introductory topics about the Arcadian city of Stymphalos, by exposing a brief history of the archaeological excavations carried out at the site.

Keywords: Stymphalos; Arcadia; Archaeology.

RESUMO

Este artigo pretende abordar tópicos introdutórios sobre a cidade arcadiana de Stymphalos, através da exposição de uma breve história das escavações arqueológicas realizadas no local.

Palavras-Chave: Stymphalos; Arcadia; Arqueologia.

Some 600 metres up in the mountains of the northeastern Peloponnese are the remains of the small Arcadian city of Stymphalos. Excavations by the Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens (now the Canadian Institute in Greece) between 1994 and 2005, uncovered many areas of a little known and modest town, which owed the fame it has to Herakles' deed of killing the Stymphalian birds there. The town lies at the northwestern edge of Lake Stymphalos, a shallow body of water that occasionally disappears in dry years. Small-scale excavations by the Greek archaeologist Anastasios Orlandos in the 1920s revealed a few areas of the site but were published only in brief reports. In 1982, the Greek Archaeological Society allowed the Canadian Institute to begin a three-year programme of survey across the site as

part of a joint project that included the nearby medieval monastery of Zaraka. In 1993, the Society turned all rights of excavation over to the Institute, and then, our digging began.

Our teams excavated fourteen different areas of the city within fortification walls that surrounded an area approximately 800 by 800 metres as well as a temple and cemetery site two kilometres north of the city. Topographic and geophysical survey work in the 1980s had established that the city had been laid out on a regular orthogonal grid plan (the so-called Hippodamian system) likely around 375-350 BC after the Spartan defeats at Mantinea and Leuctra. According to the travel writer Pausanias, there was an earlier city in the area but it is not certain where it was located. Our excavations sought to recover as much as possible of the history of a town that appeared only occasionally in historical sources. We chose a number of areas to uncover which, we thought, would give us information about such subjects as religious structures, public buildings, houses, city defences, and cemeteries. We also hoped to establish a pottery chronology for the area and to determine how long the city existed. In all these areas, we had considerable success but, of course, much remains to be learned.

Orlandos had cleared a small area at the western end of the low acropolis that dominates the site on its southern side; foundations of a small late classical temple and an adjacent building have always been visible there but he did not investigate them. This site proved to be the richest of the areas we dug and has recently been published. Although the architecture was modest, the small finds were particularly abundant: for example, the site provided one of the largest collections of bronze jewelry found anywhere in Greece, offerings of the women of the city. Fragments of gold and silver jewelry suggest that there were richer dedications that were long ago plundered. Much to our surprise, we also found over a hundred projectile points from arrows and catapult missiles, many of which came from a destruction level that covered the area. It is likely that Stymphalos was “collateral damage” in the Roman

conquest of the area during the Achaean War (149-146 BC); a counterfeit Roman silver coin of 149 BC found in the lower site seems to confirm this hypothesis. Certainly all the other finds, especially the pottery (long petalled moulded bowls), cluster around the middle of the second century BC. Thereafter this part of the site was largely abandoned apart for small-scale use (first and second century AD lamps), perhaps for religious purposes.

The temple itself was a modest building about 11 m. by 6 m. constructed from the local limestone. A series of orthostates supported mud brick walls which were decorated with red painted plaster and which supported a tile roof. When the building burned and collapsed the remains covered parts of two marble statues, a late archaic kore and a life sized temple child of fourth century BC date. Such korai are rare in the Peloponnese and it is remarkable that it was brought to the temple as much as 150 years after it was made. Temple children are rare too and its presence suggested a goddess connected with child raising. Artemis is the divinity particularly associated with Stymphalos but Pausanias records that her temple (still not found) still existed in the mid second century AD. Orlandos found a fragmentary inscription (now lost) dedicated to Athena Polias near the site; for some time we thought the temple might have been hers but now are more inclined to see it perhaps belonging to Eilythyia. Our colleague, Professor Gerald Schaus, who supervised the excavations in the area and who edited the publication found a graffito preserving some of the letters of her name.

The other architectural features included a simple altar east of the temple and a rectangular building just northeast of it. The latter structure consisted of a porch and a main room but later had annexes added on its north and west sides. It possibly served as a priest's dwelling and as a place to store offerings to the goddess. The west annex had a series of 22 conical loom weights of Hellenistic date on its floor; it may have served to produce cloth for the sanctuary, perhaps to cloth the cult image.

A second major of excavation was the lakeside plain east of the acropolis. Parch marks in the soil and geophysical survey revealed traces of a regular street system with

roads six metres wide and blocks over a hundred metres in length. Building foundations were less than half a metre below surface although excavation was often difficult because of the high water level in the soil. We noticed from the electrical resistivity survey that one of the roads had structures built out into it, something that was not likely to have happened when the city was intact so we chose to dig across a street, a block of houses, another street, and part of a second block. Unlike the situation at other orthogonal sites like Olynthos and Halos, however, the remains were complicated: it is clear that there was some Roman period reoccupation of the site after its rough handling in 146 BC. We uncovered the remains of two (or possibly one large) Roman villas that dated to the late first century BC and that were abandoned after an earthquake in the 30s AD. The presence of a well preserved spatha or cavalry sword, a round shield and a dagger, suggested that it might have been the home of a retired Roman veteran, a cavalry officer given an estate in the area during the great Augustan settling of veterans in the northern Peloponnese (especially at Corinth and Patras) after the battle of Actium in 31 BC. Some of the rooms were especially well appointed with plaster walls drafted to look like marble paneling (First Pompeian Style). Pottery smashed in ways typical of earthquake damage suggested the date. We also found the decayed wooden remains of a door fitted with dozens of bronze decorative studs. No human remains or objects of value were found; however, so it is likely the site was cleaned out after the earthquake. Only pottery, including some Arretine wares imported from Italy, and a few small finds remained. No one settled the site again, at least in the southern area that we dug, but Pausanias indicates there was at least a modest human presence at the temple of Artemis. The major activity in the Roman period was the great aqueduct of Hadrian built in the 120s to carry water from the lake down to Corinth, the thriving Roman capital of the province. We located over half a kilometre of underground and arched constructions that carried the water across the lake plain to a great tunnel at the southeastern corner of the valley.

The Roman rebuilding and the constant overrunning of the site by the lake's waters (at least in the last century or so when the level of the lake was artificially raised for a new aqueduct to Corinth) did extensive damage to the earlier Hellenistic remains at the site. We were able; however, to uncover parts of several houses and at least one well, which indicated the city had a solid urban structure with well-built houses (mud brick on rubble stone foundations). It was also clear that there were occasional problems with flooding: a road surface had been paved with broken pieces of pottery to deal with mud and down the centre of another road; a massive drain had been added to supplement the shallow narrow drains on one or both sides of the city's streets.

Another area of importance that we investigated was the city walls, towers and gates. Much of the foundations of the mudbrick circuit is still visible and we filled in missing portions by resistivity survey. Arcadia was famous for its mercenary soldiers and one of most important surviving writers on defences and siegecraft was a 4th c. BC Stymphalian, Aeneas Tacticus. It was not surprising therefore, to find that the relatively simple system of walls reinforced with semicircular and rectangular towers was reinforced by the end of the 4th century BC by three special artillery towers and a courtyard gate similar on a smaller scale to the famous Arcadian Gate at Messene. The circuit nevertheless was quite simple and most of the gates were simple overlaps of the walls, at times supported by a tower; a similar system was found at Mantinea, not far south of Stymphalos. The wall was generally about three metres across with no traces of a ditch in front.

The artillery towers were interesting: two of them replaced earlier and smaller towers in order to provide flanking fire along the western and southern sides of the city. One was hexagonal but the other at the highest point of the city was rectangular with thick mudbrick walls still preserved at lower levels; they may have cushioned the impact of catapults mounted on the tower. Similarly the new southeastern gate was a much more sophisticated entrance than its predecessor. Orlandos had not noticed

there were remains of a simpler gate at the site on this corner of the city, perhaps leading out to the road to Phlious, the next polis east of Stymphalos. Two other gates appear on the south side: one near the large quarried area in the centre of the south side of town is a simple opening in the circuit wall while another is at the end of a long ramp leading up from the lakeside to an upper level of the acropolis. It is noteworthy that a long stretch of the city wall on its northern side is completely missing above surface; it is possible that the stones here were robbed out in the 13th century to build the nearby Cistercian monastery of Zaraka half a kilometre to the north. Certainly, there was extensive use of recycled blocks from ancient Stymphalos in the abbey church walls.

Outside the actual city, we made a significant discovery during salvage excavations about two kilometres to its north beside the modern highway leading out of the village. Preparation of a building site revealed foundations as well as Doric architectural elements (column drums, architraves) from a substantial temple. Particularly striking were over twenty marble roof tiles that seem to have gone with the building. Marble tiles are relatively uncommon in Greece and their presence at a modest mountain town suggests an abundance of wealth there in the late classical period. We recovered little stratigraphic evidence at the site, which had been much altered in the sixth century AD, when it became a Christian cemetery. One grave contained a coin of Justinian datable to about AD 535.

It is striking that we have located five areas of early Christian burial from the late fourth-sixth centuries AD in different areas of the site. Inside the large artillery tower on the acropolis, there were simple inhumations as well as finely constructed tile lined graves (one containing a few fragments of human bone but a well-preserved skeleton of a medium sized dog). Several hundred metres to the north along the city's western wall at the other large rectangular artillery tower we found another group of burials. In front of the temple on the acropolis were remains of an infant as well as an adult burial. Moreover, at the eastern end of the acropolis there were several graves in

the shallow soil that covered the rocky area. We have not, however, found architectural remains of, for example, late antique houses or a church to go with the cemeteries, which may have belonged to individual families.

Perhaps the richest area of the site architecturally is the southern side between the city wall and the slopes of the acropolis. It was in this area that Orlandos did most of his excavating; he also published a plan of the structures he uncovered although he gave few details about them. They included a still functioning fountain house, a tholos like structure that might have been a heroon, a possible palaestra, an exedra, and a small temple. He also found a block of stone that had been hollowed out into a rectangle with an opening at the bottom; he called it a bothros for sacrifices but it is more likely to have been a klepsydra, one of few water clocks ever found in Greece. Our own work uncovered the scene building of a late classical/early Hellenistic theatre (previously unsuspected). Rock cut seating on the side of the acropolis immediately to the north had been earlier thought to be for a one sided stadium because the seats ran in a straight line along the slope.

Other areas of the site have also been excavated: on the flat top of the eastern acropolis, for example, we found poorly preserved foundations of late classical/early Hellenistic structures into which had been inserted early Christian graves in the fifth century AD. Of particular interest was the presence of a puppy burial in the foundations of one of the structures; with it was a late 4th c. BC black gloss cantharus.

In terms of human habitation in the area our most unusual discovery was a Middle Palaeolithic handaxe, datable to around 35,000 BC and likely from the Neanderthal culture; it turned up in road fill from the 4th century BC city and likely had been accidentally included in gravel drawn from a stream bank to build the street in the new city. We also found two green stone small axes of Early Helladic date in later contexts on top of the acropolis and on its southern side. The well-watered valley with an abundance of limestone shelters and caves likely made the area attractive to various settlers.

Study and publication of our work continues and it will make a substantial contribution to our knowledge of ancient Arcadia, an area that has not been well served by archaeology. Large amounts of both fine and common ware pottery are currently being studied; we have, for example, a substantial number of moulded bowls of the first half of the 2nd c. BC (including a fragment of a mould). The extensive ranged of coins from the 4th c. BC to early Byzantine times is giving us a good idea of Stymphalos' trade contacts: Sikyon, Phlious and Corinth are particularly well represented but coins from as far afield as Sicily, Carthage and the Middle East perhaps attest to the wide range of Stymphalos' mercenary soldiers in the late classical and Hellenistic periods. It is clear as well from occasional discovery of Mycenaean sherds that a Bronze Age presence lurks somewhere on the site. In addition, of course its modest fame rests on the 6th labour of Herakles, ridding the area of the Stymphalian birds.

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