

Excavations at late Roman Kopetra (Cyprus)

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One of the dominant themes of Roman archaeology has been its historical focus on the city as the fullest expression of classical culture. Over the last 20 years, the growth of regional survey work around the Mediterranean has significantly enlarged this discussion to include the Roman countryside with its scattered rural components. Following their initial identification, these smaller settlements of the high and late empire are receiving increased attention through intensive sampling and surface reconnaissance. The exploration of the late Roman settlement at Kalavassos-Kopetra in Cyprus illustrates this synthesis of multi-level survey and excavation in the study of a provincial island landscape.¹

A new late Roman settlement

The presence of a habitation center at Kopetra was first noted in 1978, during the systematic prospection of the Vasilikos valley, and subsequent survey has confirmed its rank as one of the largest Roman sites in the area.² The Vasilikos river defines a widening trough that drains the southeast uplands of the Troodos massif towards Cyprus' southern coast, which it reaches near Zygi about half-way between the modern cities of Limassol and Larnaca. The location known as Kopetra stands atop a bluff ridge above the east bank of the river, about 4 km from the shore of the Mediterranean. In the upper valley about 5 km beyond Kopetra are the extensive copper ore deposits in the region of Spiliou, which were worked from antiquity until 1976.³ The broad Kopetra plateau looks across the coastal plain and up the valley to the village of Kalavassos. Its gently-sloping terrain is today mostly covered with wheatfields dotted with carob and olive trees, and punctuated by several small uncultivated mounds. Abundant pottery, tile, and building debris cover the surface.

Four seasons of survey and excavation of the Kopetra area offer a preliminary picture of this previously unknown late Roman settlement. Beginning in 1987, the intensive survey of the site has clarified the limits and internal structure of local habitation. Despite an apparent lack of perimeter walls or clear boundaries, the distribution of pottery and architectural debris suggests that the community occupied a total extent of about 4 ha., within which there were areas of greater and lesser building activity. The highest sustained densities of artifacts are found along the Kopetra ridge, which seemingly comprised the center of late Roman habitation. Apart from scattered Chalcolithic and Archaic materials, survey artifacts suggest that Kopetra's period of greatest activity occurred in the 6th to early 7th c. Conventional dating of the fine wares, predominantly Cypriot red slip (56%) and Late Roman C wares (33% by count) assigns almost 80% of identifiable forms to c.550-650.⁴ Guided in part by this overview, excavations have turned to explore two sectors at nearby Sirmata and at Kopetra itself.

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 - 2 I. A. Todd, "Vasilikos Valley project: third preliminary report," *JFA* 6 (1979) 284; id., "Vasilikos Valley project, 1977-1978: an interim report," *RDAC* 1979, 32; M. C. McClellan and M. L. Rautman, "The 1987 and 1988 field seasons of the Kalavassos-Kopetra project," *RDAC* 1989, 157-66.
 - 3 For an introduction to the geography of the Vasilikos valley, see B. Gomez, J. Hanson and M. Wagstaff, in I. A. Todd, *Vasilikos Valley Project 6: excavations at Kalavassos-Tenta 1* (SIMA 71.6, Göteborg 1987) 3-10.
 - 4 M. L. Rautman and M. C. McClellan, "The 1989 field season at Kalavassos-Kopetra," *RDAC* 1990, 231-38.