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The Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos: Overcoming challenges in a lost landscape



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a multidisciplinary methodological approach to the study of archaeological sites with low visibility in the modern landscape. The urban expansion of many modern cities that have been developed very near or on ancient grounds has had a serious effect on the visibility of ancient sites. In addition, the unearthing of archaeological locales as a result of rescue excavations conducted by traditional means in the last hundred years and without the help of recent technological advances, also contributed to limited visibility of ancient sites on the modern landscape. This paper addresses this issue by focusing on an important archaeological site on the island of Cyprus, namely the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos, a significant funerary landscape in Hellenistic and Roman times. Rescue excavations back in the 1980s brought to light a plethora of burial architecture, of shaft and chamber tomb types. Despite detailed excavation records, information regarding the exact location and spatial distribution of these features is not available and is now lost forever since the modern city's urban expansion significantly altered the ancient landscape. The paper proposes a methodological approach to dealing with this issue that brings together traditional archaeological data, geo-data and modern geospatial tools. Even though the focus of this study is the Hellenistic-Roman necropolis of Nea Paphos in southwest Cyprus, the methodology could find wide application to low visibility archaeological sites throughout the island, especially where funerary landscapes are involved, excavated in the past under the form of rescue excavations.

1. Introduction

While the study of individual tombs located in Nea Paphos has received a lot of attention in the relevant literature, especially with regards to issues pertaining to surplus or rare tomb offerings and tombs wall painting decoration (Michaelides, 1984; Michaelides, 1990; Michaelides, 1991; Michaelides, 2004; Michaelides and Młynarczyk, 1988; Guimier-Sorbets and Michaelides, 2009), the overall funerary landscape of Nea Paphos has remained largely unexplored (but see references – Nicolaou, 1996; Hadjisavva, 1982; Młynarczyk, 1990). This study focuses on the funerary landscape of the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos (Fig. 1) through legacy archaeological data. For the purposes of this study 'Eastern necropolis' refers to the largest known part of the necropolis dating to the Hellenistic and Roman periods, even though the exact geographical extension of the necropolis remains at present unknown. The publication of the results of many rescue excavations that have taken place in the area over the last 35 years is expected to fill this gap in the future.

As stated by Witcher (2008) "by understanding the limitations of

such (legacy) data, it is possible to develop practicable field strategies for targeted resurvey to resolve such issues and bring about meaningful comparison". The investigation of the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos, though, is posing a significant research challenge since much of the archaeo-landscape is today lost, and therefore no kind of resurveying the area is possible. Material archaeological evidence, including tombs, wells and other architectural features, has been destroyed as a result of recent dramatic land use changes in the wider area of the modern city of Paphos. The urban expansion of the city (Lysandrou et al., 2015; Agapiou et al., 2015) and its associated intensive construction activity (Fig. 2) as well as significant pressure from modern agricultural activity resulted in the physical loss of much of the Hellenistic-Roman funerary landscape in the area. Also, the more lenient practices of the time, according to which looted or destroyed tombs that were deemed of no architectural merit were not to be preserved as a means, amongst others, of facilitating the modern development of the area, has further contributed to the physical loss of ancient burial architecture. The investigation of the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos is further hindered by the fact that, despite much information regarding various aspects of

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Fig. 1. Map showing the District of Paphos and Nea Paphos area. (a) Ancient town of Nea Paphos (b) Northern necropolis (including the ‘Tombs of the Kings’ cemetery) (c) Eastern necropolis, area under investigation (maps developed by A. Agapiou and V. Lysandrou).

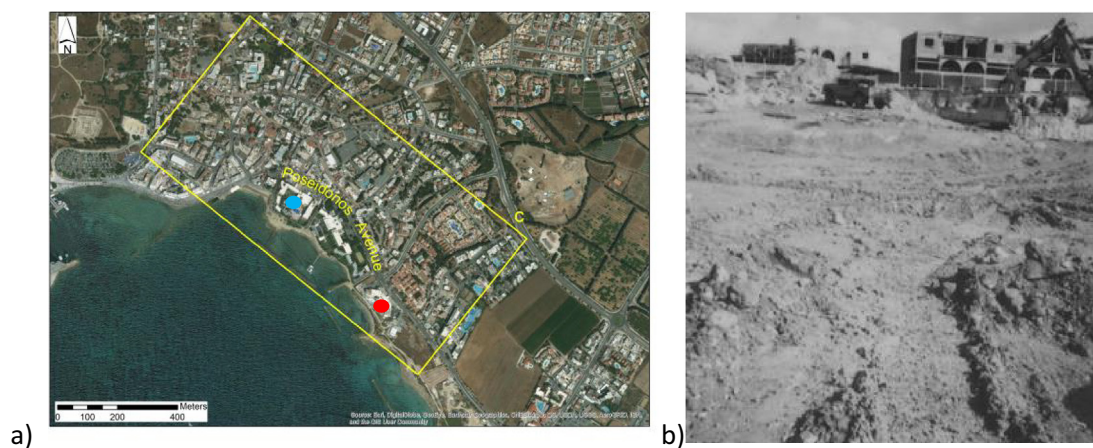


Fig. 2. (a) Eastern necropolis, area under investigation. Red dot refers to Fig. 5 below and blue dot to Fig. 6. Archival analogue photograph (1980s) of the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos. (b) The photograph portrays the concurrent acts of the infrastructural development and archaeological excavation (source: Prof. Michaelides excavation archive). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

the archaeo-landscape, data that would allow the identification of individual tombs and their exact spatial distribution on the area were not collected before the tombs' destruction. Subsequently, although a lot of information regarding the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos exists, spatial data is limited or anachronistic and therefore, need to be adjusted accordingly. Furthermore, much of the available data derives from a wide variety of sources necessitating their conversion into a ‘common language’ prior to their use. A common problem in the study of old archaeological material as this may be, the manipulation of vast quantities of such heterogeneous data posed a significant challenge in the study of the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos.

Recent advancements in the field of geo-sciences provide a means of addressing such challenges in archaeological research; this study utilises geospatial tools to tackle the low visibility of the Eastern

necropolis of Nea Paphos on the modern landscape. Geospatial analysis has been successfully employed in the study of funerary sites around the world (Fisher et al., 1997; Lageras, 2002; Löwenborg, 2009; De Reu et al., 2011; Merkouri and Kouli, 2011; Bongers et al., 2012; Garcia, 2013; Déderix, 2014; Lysandrou and Agapiou, 2015; Botturi, 2016), highlighting the validity of the proposed methodological approach. The limitations and potential of using legacy survey data within a Geographical Information System (hereafter GIS) environment is thoroughly explored by Witcher (2008).

This paper presents a methodological approach to the study of archaeological sites with low visibility in the modern landscape that can find wider application in archaeological research. The paper begins with a brief description of the available data regarding the regional focus of this study, namely the Eastern necropolis of Nea Paphos.

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