

PRESS RELEASE

GERONISOS ISLAND EXCAVATIONS, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, 2011

The Ministry of Communications and Works, Department of Antiquities, announces the completion of excavations conducted by the New York University Geronisos Island Expedition. The 2011 four-week excavation, which began on May 21st, was conducted by a team of 17 excavators under the direction of Professor Joan Breton Connelly.

Geronisos, “Holy Island,” lies just off the coast at Agios Georgios tis Pegeias, Paphos District and was an important place of devotion and pilgrimage during the Hellenistic period when worshippers crossed the waters to visit its sanctuary of Apollo. In early Byzantine times, a Christian basilica was built atop Geronisos, a partner to the three basilicas that sit just opposite on the mainland at Agios Georgios tis Pegeias. Excavations by New York University have established that the island may have been regarded as “holy,” or at least as symbolically charged, already in the prehistoric period. A deposit of stone tools, a female figurine, and a bead was deliberately placed on Geronisos in a pit with ash during the early Chalcolithic period, around 3800 B.C.

During the first century B.C., according to the excavator, families may have brought their young sons out to Geronisos for special rites of maturation. A circular platform unearthed in recent seasons may represent a dance floor, the setting for boys’ choral dancing which was an integral part of education in Greek antiquity. Ostraka (inscribed pot sherds) recovered from Geronisos show the writing exercises of children learning their Greek letters, suggesting that a school for boys may have been part of the sanctuary operations.

This season, excavation focused in an area just to the east of the dining and sleeping rooms that comprise the domestic quarters of the pilgrimage facilities. During the 2009 season, three large pithoi were found in a row and a fourth great pithos was identified this year, positioned along the same axis as the other vessels. It is possible that the pithoi were used to collect rainwater from the roof of a building that rose from these foundations, as water was very scarce on this island that had no springs or wells.

The Late Hellenistic pottery recovered this season suggests that a diet rich in liquids, soups, and strained foods was enjoyed on Holy Island. The most unusual find of the season was a unique miniature “pinch pot”. It is clearly made by hand and probably was used as a votive offering or even as a toy.

There was extensive robbing of Hellenistic ashlar blocks from Geronisos during the early Byzantine period, no doubt for the building of the three great Christian basilicas on the mainland at Agios Georgios. Much of this season’s work focused on the careful digging and analysis of robbing trenches and the sorting out of phases for the Hellenistic construction and the Byzantine robbing of walls.

Architect Richard Anderson continued his massive work of preparing a 3-D digital survey of all architectural remains on Geronisos, using a total station laser theodolite. Wind and sea erosion of the cliff edges of Geronisos makes survey and mapping of the island’s remains all

the more urgent. Mariusz Burdajewicz of the Warsaw Museum undertook the drawing of all small stone architectural members recovered from Geronisos, as part of our ongoing efforts to document the full architectural footprint of the island.

Dr. Jolanta Mlynarczyk of the University of Warsaw studied and catalogued the Hellenistic ceramics of Geronisos, while Fulbright fellow Victoria Grinbaum completed her catalogue of the Geronisos amphorae, which find their origins in Cyprus, Egypt, Rhodes, Kos, and Italy. Dr. Paul Croft of the Lemba Archaeological Field Station excavated and trained students in the NYU Geronisos Island Archaeological Field School and Prof. Zoe Kontes of Kenyon University served as trench supervisor while Jason Ackerman prepared a new Geronisos Island Expedition website, to be launched later this summer under www.yeronisos.org.

Exploration, study, and preservation of “Holy Island,” a unique cultural monument of Cyprus that represents nearly 5000 years of human regard for “the sacred,” is critical at this time. Over-development of the coast of Agios Georgios tis Pegeias, especially at the ancient harbor of Maniki, threatens to destroy an ancient landscape held sacred by Cypriots from the Chalcolithic, through the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods.



Geronisos excavations: Dentilled cornice block