



In Search of the Lost Temple. The Sacred (?) Landscape of the Hinterland of the Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion (location Latsithkia, Limassol District, Cyprus).

Kourion, located on the southern coast of Cyprus, according to the tradition recorded by Herodotus (5th century BC) was founded by colonists from Argos in the Peloponnese. The city was the capital of one of the most important Cypriot kingdoms, although its greatest development occurred during

the Roman domination. Kourion gained importance in the 3rd century AD when it became the seat of a bishopric. The long-standing tradition of settlement in this region was supported by the city's convenient location on fertile alluvial lands, with easy access to water provided by rivers flowing down from the nearby Troodos Mountains. An additional advantage was the developed agricultural base and abundant forests, which constitute one of the key natural resources of Cyprus, already referred to by Homer as Hylissa ("woody"). It is therefore not surprising that already in the 8th century BC, two kilometres west of Kourion, a sanctuary of great significance for Cypriots developed, initially dedicated to the male fertility deity known as Hylates (Greek: Hyle = forest). During the Ptolemaic period, his name became the epithet of Apollo, the protector of forests, and the area of the sanctuary was rebuilt. The reconstructed buildings visible today come from the next phase of the sanctuary. During the Roman period, in the 1st century AD, the complex underwent a major expansion, which gave a monumental character to this important Cypriot place of worship. The prosperity of the sanctuary and the nearby city was ended by an earthquake in 365. The temple was severely damaged, and the city of Kourion never regained its glory, while the bishopric was moved to the nearby town of Episkopi.

Since Luigi di Cesnola, the American consul in Larnaca, rediscovered the city and the sanctuary in the mid-19th century, Kourion has been a regular site of research. However, interest was largely limited to the coastal settlements along the ancient road to Paphos. In the 21st century, in-depth topographical studies have begun, with an important component in landscape archaeology, taking into account the various aspects of human-environment interactions. However, previous research has primarily concentrated on the Kouris River valley to the east, leaving the inland area to the northwest relatively unexplored. It was in this less-studied region that, toward the end of the 20th century, discoveries were made whose significance appears to extend well beyond a deeper understanding of Kourion's rural hinterland.

In 1997, Cypriot archaeologist Dr. Eleni Procopiou found and recorded 48 architectural elements on one of the hills located inland, approximately 1.5 km from the aforementioned temple of Apollo Hylates, including fragments of capitals, bases, cornices and an altar. All the artifacts were found scattered across a gently sloping hillside with a south-western exposure. Given the site's proximity to the temple of Apollo and the stylistic resemblance of the architectural elements to its decorative features, the location was interpreted as a quarry where stone for the construction of the renowned sanctuary was extracted and initially processed. A stylistic and technological analysis of the architectural elements transferred to the local museum in Episkopi, conducted several years later, suggested that all the components likely belonged to the decoration of a single public building. This structure, however, exhibited proportions and decorative details distinct from the nearby temple of Apollo. In 2024, a reconnaissance survey was conducted to investigate the hypothesis of an unknown temple at the site, recording additional decorated stone fragments, evidence of stone extraction, and three tombs with arcosolia. Preliminary topographic analysis underscored the site's potential significance, highlighting its strategic position at a crossroads likely following ancient routes, its prominent, sloping terrain, visibility from surrounding areas, proximity to arable lands, and access to water resources. These factors raised new questions about the site's function. Several indicators suggest the existence of a previously unidentified sanctuary, potentially dedicated to an agricultural deity, given its environmental context. Furthermore, the variety and distribution of other traces of human activity, though not yet securely dated, indicate that the area played a complex role in the religious and economic life of ancient Kourion. The project aims to reconstruct the cultural landscape of this region using advanced methods of archaeological prospection, remote sensing, and data visualization, supported by research in libraries, archives, museums, and field surveys.