ISIS AND MITHRAS ON ANDROS

Some considerations

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Plates CCLXVI-CCLXX

For all who are engaged in the study of oriental religions in the Roman Empire the importance of Palaiopolis, the ancient capital of Andros in the Cyclades, is considerable because of the existence there of traces both of Isis and Mithras. This has been known for long. The Andros version of the aretalogy, or the Praises of Isis, has been made available through the exertions of Curtius, Ross, Sauppe and Peek.\(^1\) Over sixty years ago Sauciuc published an inscription which is accepted as proving that a Mithraeum was constructed at Palaiopolis at the beginning of the Third Century A.D. by M. Aurelius Rufinus, an evocatus in the Praetorian Guard. With the natural enthusiasm of the archaeologist on the brink of new discoveries, Sauciuc could write in 1910: "Wir hoffen, dass alle Schwierigkeiten einer systematischen Grabung der antiken Stadt Andros doch einmal sich werden überwinden lassen mit Rücksicht auf der Erfolg, der hier zu erwarten ist."\(^2\) Nevertheless, never since then has the hope been realised. Despite recent efforts on the part of the writer of this article, the spade has still to be thrust down into the earth along the Palaiopolian Wall in a trial dig to find out, if possible, just where the Cave of Mithras was constructed and dedicated by Praetorian Mithraists in the reign of Septimius Severus.\(^3\) The presence of the Egyptian and Persian divinities on

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\(^1\) Peek, in his introduction to his *Isishymnus von Andros* (1930), acknowledges the work of his predecessors. About the German's careful study of the inscription old Lukrezis has spoken glowingly.


\(^3\) Expectations of a trial dig, which at the beginning of 1976 seemed extremely likely, have not been fulfilled. This, in spite of the kind intervention by Prof. Vermaseren himself in a letter to the competent authority: "Excavations might be of high importance, because characteristic traits of the cult in Greece might be revealed as well as data about the conditions by which it spread".
Andros seems strangely ignored. Neither Isis nor Mithras is named by Leekley and Noyes in their recent account of archaeology in the Cyclades when reporting on Andros.4

During several visits to Palaiopolis in the company of an Andriote friend, Mr. M. G. Dimitriadis,5 the present writer has obtained at first hand some facts which deserve consideration in a preliminary study of the two cults and their inter-relation. Till excavations are actually undertaken, theorizing about the position of Isis and Mithras on Andros is hazardous. Nevertheless, the pioneering excavations by Kontoleon in 1956, which revealed the ancient Agora by the sea shore,6 encourage hope of further digging in the area of the Porta, and the expression of speculative thoughts about what is extant above the ground.

Palaiopolis is situated about half way along the west coast of Andros at the foot of the island’s highest peak, the Kouvara.7 I agree with the view of Sauciuc, who follows Miliarakis and Philippson, that the ancient city of Andros occupied the same site.8 Its topographical security and the fact that it faces directly towards Attica must have made it important in classical and Hellenistic and Imperial times for maritime trade and so for the reception of foreign cults.9 Sauciuc’s ground plan (Fig. 1) shows very clearly how steep the terrain is. Le Bas called Palaiopolis “a huge amphitheatre”, a city “built upon terraces which fell down step by step to the sea”.10 Here perhaps is the reason for the long neglect of such an important site, although the topography and stratigraphy of the whole area had been carefully considered years ago by the three scholars already mentioned.11 In 1880 it was

4 Archaeological Excavations in the Greek Islands (1975), Dorothy Leekley and Robert Noyes.
5 My debt to his intimate knowledge of local conditions and to his sharp eye and keen brain cannot be easily put into words.
7 Sauciuc, Andros (1914), p. 6, where the bibliography is given.
8 Sauciuc, p. 8.
10 In RA (1946), p. 281. The whole sentence is interesting: “C’est au pied de ce vaste amphithéâtre qu’un paysan, en feuillant le sol, découvrit, il y a quelques années, une chambre souterraine ...”
11 Sauciuc, pp. 5ff. with the documentation.