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# KALAVASOS-KOPETRA

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**F**resh out of the classroom and beckoned by the long mild days of early summer, we returned to Cyprus this year for our fifth season of work at the Late Roman settlement at Kopetra. In previous years our museum-sponsored project explored this small, previously unknown community by surface survey and selective excavation. Preliminary results revealed a settlement of perhaps five hectares that stood atop a high ridge overlooking the Vasilikos Valley, about halfway between the island's south coast and the present village of Kalavasos. Between 1987 and 1990 we traced the general outlines of this small Late Roman settlement and discovered two basilicas that served its residents in the sixth and early seventh centuries. This year we completed work at the second basilica and undertook trial excavations in three other parts of the inhabited site.<sup>1</sup>

Area II lies at the apparent south edge of the Kopetra ridge (Fig. 1). Broad wheatfields stretch outward to the south and east, while to the west and southwest the ground drops away to the Vasilikos watercourse. This low uncultivated knoll first attracted our interest in 1989, and our trial excavations quickly identified the presence of a small basilica. Over the last three seasons the building and its history have slowly emerged.

Figure 2 records the final excavated state of this structure. While available time and property boundaries limited the extent of work, we can now reconstruct the basilica's plan to measure about 17.0 x 10.4 meters. All three aisles stood at the same level and originally carried floors paved with gypsum slabs, the local *marmara*, which were mostly pilfered from the nave at a later date (Fig. 3). To the east opened the broad central apse of the sanctuary, with small niches recessed in the thickness of the east wall of the side aisles. The narthex lies beyond the limit of excavation to the west. A long narrow space extends along the south flank of the basilica at a lower level; its rounded apse indicates that it once served as a separate chapel. A small trapezoidal room stands behind the apse wall, between this chapel and the main apse.<sup>2</sup>

This year we clarified the chronology and decoration of this church complex. The basilica and its side chapel were apparently built in the early or mid-sixth century. In this phase cylindrical gypsum piers separated the aisles and supported the pitched timber roof. A mosaic decorated with interlaced circles and squares covered the bema floor, while

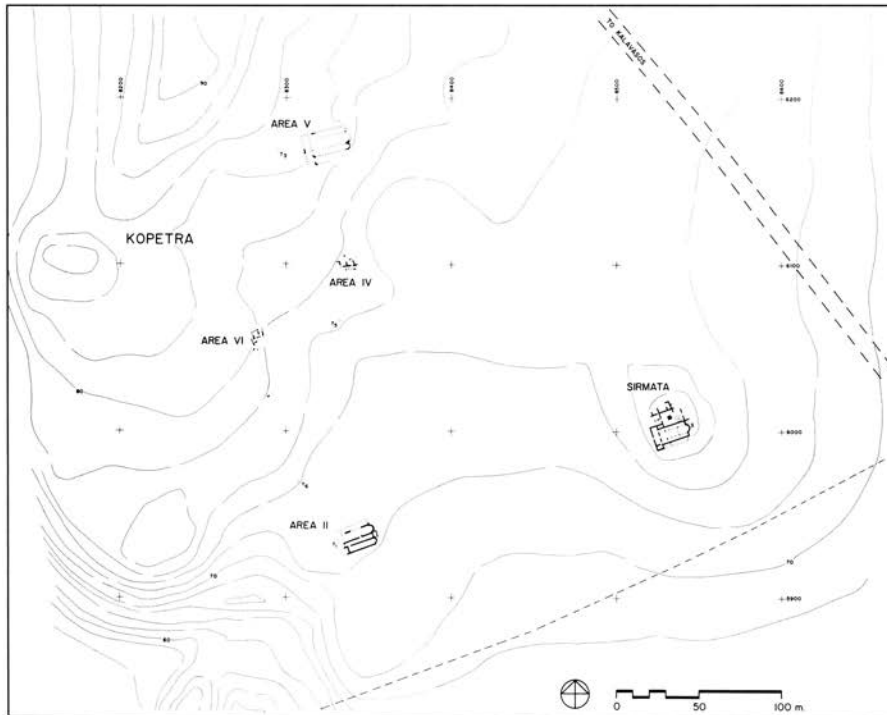


Figure 1.  
Kopetra,  
topographic  
plan with  
excavated  
remains.

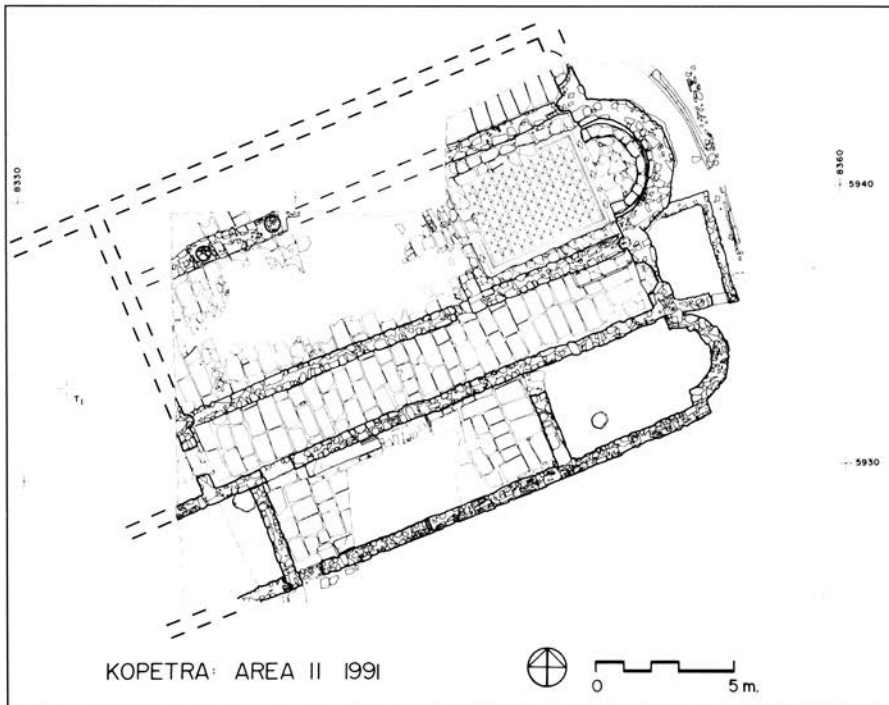


Figure 2.  
Kopetra,  
Area II, state  
plan of  
excavation.

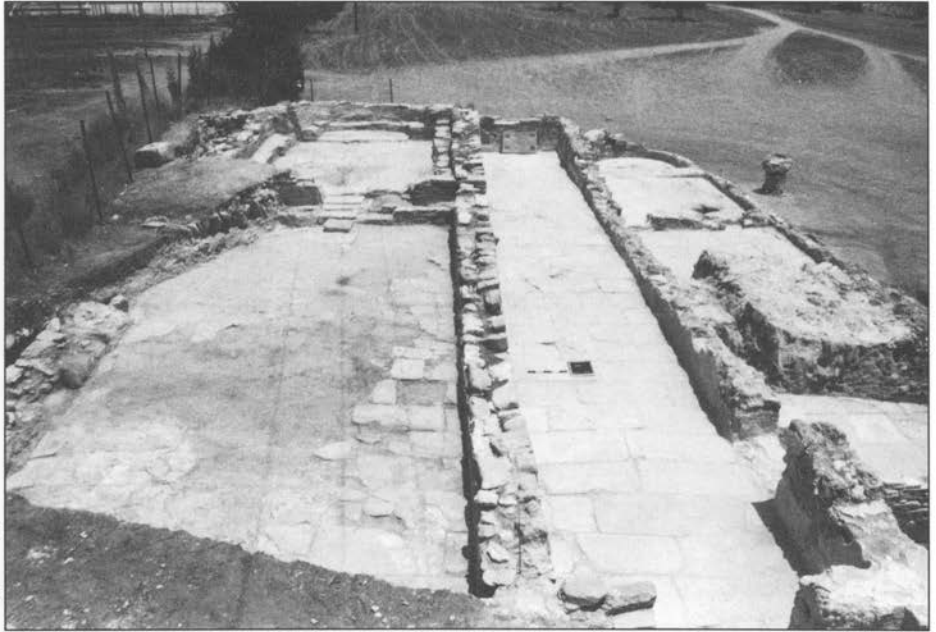


Figure 3.  
Kopetra,  
Area II,  
view of  
excavation,  
looking  
northeast.



Figure 4.  
Kopetra,  
Area II,  
gypsum  
plaster  
eagle  
sculpture.

colorful figural mosaics occupied the semidome overlooking the sanctuary. Imported marble was used for a few furnishings, including the altar table. The building's interior decoration was completed by a remarkable cycle of sculpted gypsum plaster, or *gypsiplasia*, including the nave columns and capitals and the mold-made Theotokos panel discovered in 1990.<sup>3</sup> We now know that this scheme included other capitals, a series of small baskets, two large birds, probably eagles (Fig. 4), and a large leaping quadruped. Despite their battered condition these images attest a lively sculptural tradition that flourished in the valley during late antiquity.

All these fragments were built into walls that filled the colonnades in the late sixth or early seventh century. The partitioned basilica remained in use until the mid-seventh century, when both it and its counterpart at Sirmata were apparently

destroyed. Following a brief interlude, the Kopetra basilica's sanctuary was rebuilt as a small chapel. The apse wall was narrowed and the later walls rebuilt. A pair of low benches placed against the side walls faced each other across the roughly repaired mosaic floor. Immediately to the south a simple tomb was built of large *marmara* slabs in the south aisle, which perhaps functioned as a mortuary annex. A group of small hand-made

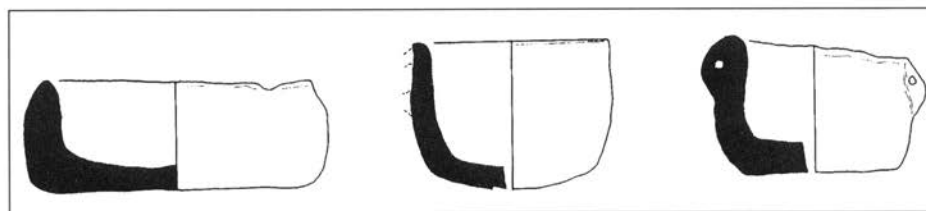
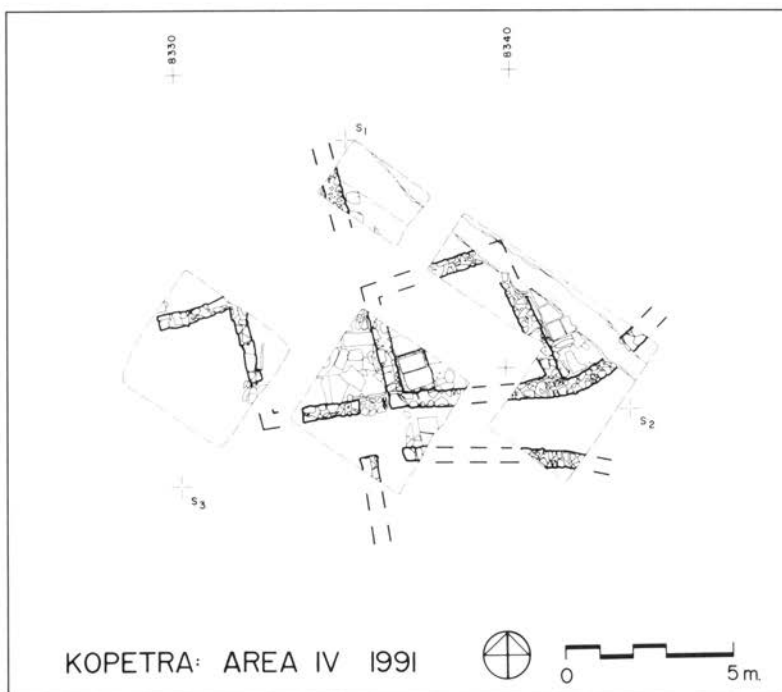


Figure 5. Kopetra, Area II, handmade vessels from late occupation phase.

bowls and hanging lamps come from this last phase of use, which may date to the eighth century or even later (Fig. 5).

In addition to completing work at Area II, our primary objective this season was to explore Kopetra's main habitation area. The results of our intensive survey encouraged us to excavate in



three different parts of the site in order to understand better its internal organization. Even though these limited trenches did not expose any complete buildings, their results add important details to our picture of the Late Roman settlement.

Area IV is a low clearing on the east edge of Kopetra some 150 meters north of the Area II basilica. An irrigation trench cut through the vicinity in 1986 revealed a number of structures that we sought to clarify. Opening six small adjoining trenches we found a group of flimsily-built walls that apparently sheltered both domestic and industrial activities (Fig. 6). A narrow alley runs through three of our trenches and once provided access to two separate buildings of irregular plan and uneven construction. The building north of the alley comprised at least six trapezoidal spaces; the best defined of these has an interior area of 13 square

Figure 6. Kopetra, Area IV, state plan of excavation.

Figure 7.  
Kopetra,  
Area IV,  
view of  
excavations,  
looking  
north.

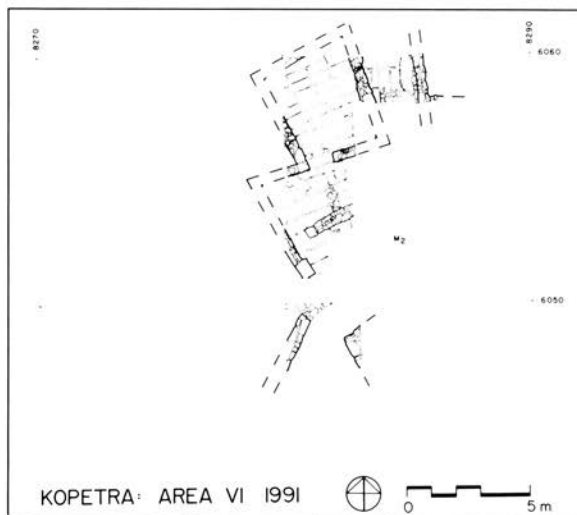


Figure 8.  
Kopetra,  
Area VI,  
state plan of  
excavation.

large and well-built complex of uncertain function. Figure 8 records the excavated features, which include at least three rooms that once crowned this low, stepped terrace. To the north stands a small, nearly rectangular room of 12 square meters. This small room opens through a narrow doorway onto a larger paved space of perhaps 30 square meters. A narrow corridor with floor drain extends along the east side of these spaces at a lower level. The thick surviving walls are carefully mortared and may have supported an upper story (Fig. 9). Plastered wall surfaces and carefully fitted *marmara* floors attest the building's solid construction, which more closely resembles Kopetra's

meters. Closer study of this structure revealed a series of successive floors that were occupied in the sixth and seventh centuries (Fig. 7). The discovery of a stone pressing bed and several weights suggests that wine or olive oil was produced in the vicinity.<sup>4</sup>

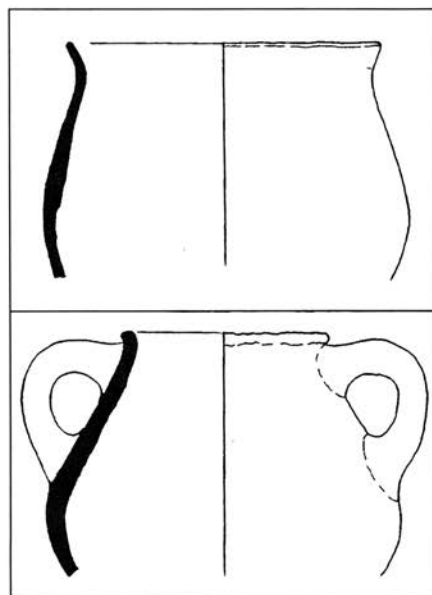
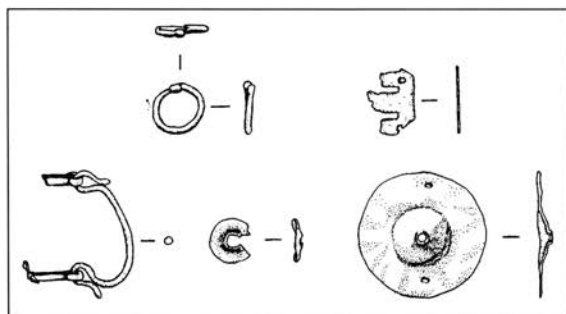
About 60 meters southwest of this complex stands a rocky escarpment that we designated Area VI. Over a three week period we opened a line of small trenches to explore part of a





Figure 9.  
Kopetra,  
Area VI,  
view of  
excavation,  
looking  
south.

Below left:  
Figure 10.  
Kopetra,  
Area VI,  
various  
bronze finds.



basilicas than the residential or industrial buildings at Area IV. Occupation levels contained abundant pottery, glass, and several small metal artifacts (Fig. 10). The quantity of fine ceramic and glass wares in particular suggests that the Area VI building may have played a specialized consuming role in the settlement's economy.

Considered together with the substantial building remains, these small finds might reflect activities of either a public structure or private townhouse, perhaps that of a local landowner. At a somewhat later date two poorly built walls subdivided the larger space into three smaller units, and the entire complex suffered extensive damage around 650. Handmade cooking pots and bowls found in the latest levels attest the continued use of the sector into the late seventh or even early eighth century (Fig. 11).<sup>5</sup>

Figure 11.  
Kopetra,  
Area VI,  
handmade  
cooking pots  
from late  
occupation  
phase.

Figure 12.  
Kopetra,  
Area V,  
state plan of  
excavation.

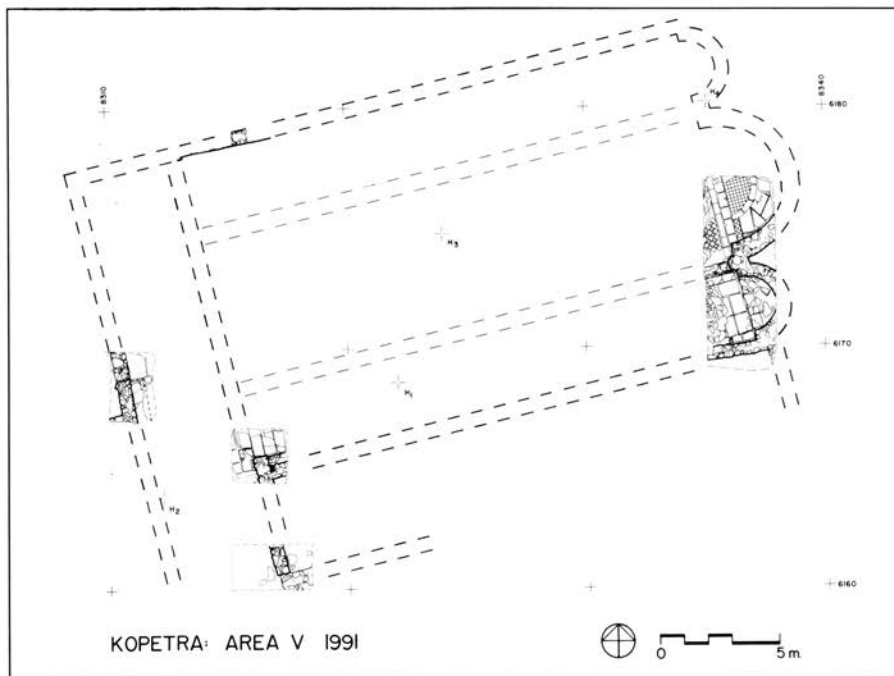


Figure 13. Kopetra, Area V,  
view of central and south  
lateral apses, looking south.

Our final locale for excavation was Area V, a low terracing along Kopetra's northern edge, 60 meters north of Area IV. In previous seasons we noted an abundance of roof tiles, mosaic tesserae, and even fragments of marble opus sectile scattered across the recently leveled surface of a small olive orchard. By opening five small trenches amidst the fledgling trees, we established the function and general outline of Kopetra's third basilica. Figure 12 summarizes the known features and their likely relationship. At the east end of the terrace we exposed about half the central apse, which has an estimated diameter of 5 meters. Opus sectile appears in the floor of the sanctuary. The small exposed portion of the bema floor employs a network of large diagonally placed squares alternating with horizontal rows of smaller squares. The center of the apse contains a grid of large octagons with small diagonally set squares in the corners (Fig. 13).<sup>6</sup> Surrounding this central zone



is a 0.9 meter wide band of plain *marmara* slabs, atop of which may have stood a wooden clergy bench, or *synthronon*. The semicircular south apse faces onto a side aisle paved with large slabs of gypsum, which presumably reflects a similar arrangement to the north. During excavation we found the sanctuary filled with loose tesserae from the mosaic that once occupied the semidome. Over 20 meters to the west two small trenches revealed the basilica's opposite wall and narthex, together with a low bench built along the latter's outer wall. A surviving fragment of a perpendicular wall suggests the northern limits of the building and establishes its approximately 21 by 13 meters dimensions. A final small trench located the southwest corner of a space that apparently lay along the basilica's south flank.

Although it remains very incompletely excavated, the north basilica closely resembles Kopetra's other churches. All three buildings used a three-aisle plan, were constructed of gypsum mortared rubble, and carried a timber roof covered with similar tiles. Each basilica apparently had a long flanking space lying along its south side, which may have served as a chapel or mortuary annex. Apart from these similarities, the Area V basilica was the largest and most splendid of the three churches known at Kopetra. Its area of almost 280 square meters compares with approximately 177 square meters at the south basilica and 143 square meters at Sirmata. The estimated nave diameter of almost 6 meters gives the north basilica the broadest proportions of the three. The north basilica alone has projecting apses facing the side aisles instead of inscribed niches.<sup>7</sup> Opus sectile, perhaps the most luxurious of floor materials found in Cyprus, appears only at Area V.

While these observations suggest an early construction date for the north basilica, its later history resembles that of Kopetra's other churches, including their mortuary functions. One of our western trenches housed an adult male burial in front of the central doorway from the narthex. Apparently contemporary with the basilica's construction, this grave was built over at a later date when the nearby pier was enlarged and a low bench built against the south wall. In a still later phase of use the south colonnade was at least partially filled in, a practice noted in the other churches around the end of the sixth century. In its final occupation phase a rubble packing filled the south apse, raising its surface almost 1.0 meter above the floor. A fresh coat of plaster reflects a continued interest in maintaining at least this one corner of Kopetra's grandest basilica.

These isolated glimpses beneath Kopetra's rocky terrain offer a diverse picture of this Late Roman settlement. Our topographic survey suggests the extent of the small community that stretched 250 meters along the lower slopes of the ridge, sheltered from the sharp updrafts of the central valley and facing the gently rising hills to the east (Fig. 14). Approaching the village from the southeast, the visitor in the late sixth century first



Figure 14.  
Kopetra, south  
edge of inhabited  
site, looking east  
across Area II  
toward Sirmata.

passed by the low outlying hill of Sirmata. The buildings perched conspicuously atop this mound likely sheltered a small monastery, which would have been a major landmark of the valley. Walking two or three minutes beyond Sirmata one found the settlement itself, its north and south limits marked by basilicas that rose to greet the visitor. With white plastered walls reaching through their tall clerestories to support red terracotta roofs, these two churches would have been prominent features of the Late Roman settlement, visible throughout the village and from across the valley. Together, they announced not only the piety of the community but also its relative affluence by reflecting a significant surplus of wealth available for their construction.

Between these churches lay the houses and workshops of Kopetra's inhabitants. Near the urban center stood one prominent structure, solidly constructed on a low terrace with its upper story overlooking neighboring houses. Narrow alleys linked other quarters on Kopetra's lower slopes, where people lived and worked in small ramshackle structures, undaunted by occasional fires or earthquakes. Across the inhabited area stood small presses for olives and grapes, reflecting the town's predominantly agrarian base.

Kopetra's economy in late antiquity probably resembled valley life in other periods since prehistory. The settlement's modest size, open siting, and rural orientation suggest a culture based on farming and mining. In addition to olives and vines, fruit trees and cereal crops became especially important to the Byzantine economy following the loss of Egypt to the Persians in the 620s. Cereals, citrus, grapes, and olives were likely cultivated here and across the island. Three kilometers up the valley at Spilios are copper mines, which in late antiquity were probably owned or leased by local landowners and worked

by Kopetra's residents. Building materials came from nearby sources: the local clay for roof tiles and storage vessels, and for walls and floors gypsum quarried from a large outcropping some 100 meters to the northeast. Many of these materials were processed at Kopetra itself, where we have evidence of olive pressing, copper working, tile manufacturing, and skilled sculpture in gypsum plaster. The successful exploitation of local resource is best seen in the building of multiple churches and their decoration in mosaic and imported marble. Such building projects embody tangible assets that were retained locally instead of being absorbed by such large nearby cities as Amathus and Kourion, as was often the case elsewhere. The valley's economic surplus also appears in goods and ceramic containers imported from other eastern Mediterranean centers.

Kopetra's modest provincial prosperity seems to halt abruptly around the mid-seventh century. Despite the 4 kilometer distance from the coast, five of our excavated quarters attest retrenchment followed by destruction around 650, which is reasonable to attribute to Arab activities in the area. The immediate result was the sharp contraction of settlement with only slight lingering activity at the site. As seen elsewhere around the island, local inhabitants apparently sought the relative safety of the upper Vasilikos catchment, where they could live hidden from coastal view and sheltered by the steep valley walls. Apart from a small chapel built within the ruined south basilica the townsite remained abandoned, its seasonally plowed rubble an enduring reminder of the community that briefly flourished here.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. This year's six-week field season took place in May and June, when the expedition codirectors were joined by William Andreas, Lisa Benson, Sebastian Heath, Susan Langdon, Sherry Fox Leonard, Danielle Parks, James Terry, and students from a field school sponsored by Boston University. From its beginning our expedition has enjoyed the generous support of the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia, to whose director, Morteza Sajadian, we owe special thanks. Funding this summer also came from the University of Missouri-Columbia's Research Council and the Weldon Spring Research Fund. Our work in Cyprus owes much to the interest and support of the Department of Antiquities and its directors. A high point of our season was a visit by Elektra and Peter Megaw, who generously shared with us their experience and ideas. Reports of

earlier seasons include "Cyprus at the End of Antiquity: Investigations at Kalavastos-Kopetra," *MVSE* 21 (1987), pp. 45-54; "Kalavastos-Kopetra, 1988," *MVSE* 22 (1988), pp. 51-63; "The 1987 and 1988 Field Seasons of the Kalavastos-Kopetra Project," *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1989), pp. 157-166; "The 1989 Field Season at Kalavastos-Kopetra," *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1990), pp. 231-238; "Kalavastos-Kopetra, 1989-1990," *MVSE* 23-24 (1989-90), pp. 14-29; and "Excavations at Late Roman Kopetra (Cyprus)," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 5 (1992), pp. 265-271.

<sup>2</sup> A similarly located annex survives at the extra mural basilica at Kourion; see A. Papageorghiou, "L'architecture paléochrétienne de Chypre," *Corsi di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina* 32 (1985), pp. 299-324, at p. 321, fig. 9. More elaborate spaces occur at the Kourion episcopal basilica and St. Epiphanius at Salamis.

<sup>3</sup> *MVSE* 23-24 (1989-90), figs. 11-13.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the materials of local olive pressing see now S. Hadjisavvas, "Olive Oil Production in Ancient Cyprus," *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* (1988/2), pp. 111-120.

<sup>5</sup> The cooking pots find their best counterparts in a series of handmade thick-walled vessels recovered from the destruction levels of the Kourion basilica; see A. H. S. Megaw, "Betwixt Greeks and Saracens," *Acts of the International Symposium "Cyprus Between the Orient and the Occident"* (Nicosia, 1986), pp. 505-519, at p. 512, fig. 8b. Our thanks to Peter Megaw for kindly reviewing the Kourion pottery with us. John Hayes discusses the material in his forthcoming report on the Kourion pottery.

<sup>6</sup> For opus sectile on the island see A. H. S. Megaw, "Interior Decoration in Early Christian Cyprus," *XVe Congrès international d'études byzantines, Athènes, 1976. Rapports et co-rapports* 5 no. 4 (Athens, 1976), pp. 1-29, at pp. 4-9. A fuller treatment is B. Michaelides, "The Pre-Justinianic and Middle Byzantine Opus Sectile Floors of Cyprus," *The Sweet Land of Cyprus: Proceedings of the XXVth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (Nicosia, in press).

<sup>7</sup> Other triapsidal Cypriot churches are found at Amathus, Ayias Trias, Ayios Philon, Kourion, Paphos, Peyia, and Soloi; see Papageorghiou, "L'architecture paléochrétienne de Chypre."