

Emerging Evidence for Neolithic Ithaca

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Abstract

The article presents new evidence for the Neolithic habitation on Ithaca, consisting of ceramic and stone finds, recognised among material from the University of Ioannina excavations at the site of Agios Athanasios-School of Homer in the northwest part of Ithaca, Greece. The new Neolithic site is considered within the wider cultural context of the Ionian Islands, in the late 5th/4th millennium BC. Our current knowledge suggests a permanent Neolithic occupation at the site, as opposed to seasonal occupation or to a special purpose occupation. The Neolithic people at the School of Homer may have been part of a dynamic network of Late/Final Neolithic installations in Western Greece, engaging themselves in inter-regional communal connections along the routes of the most ancient seafaring in the Ionian Sea.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to highlight a new Neolithic site, of the late 5th/4th millennium BC, in the north/northwest part of Ithaca, in the southern Ionian Sea. It is the first Neolithic site to be adequately documented in northwest Ithaca, one of only two certain instances on an island which was long absent from the maps of Neolithic Greece (Fig. 1).

On the evidence from older and more recent excavations and surveys, this well-harboured part of Ithaca, at a crossroads of Ionian sea-routes and with arable lands in a hilly landscape, seems to have played a pivotal role in the island's trajectory; it exhibits a remarkably long and continuous record of habitation, with a dense and varied pattern of centralised urban life, spanning the period from the Final Neolithic to Roman and including the flourishing Mycenaean palatial phase (14th–13th c. BC).

The new Neolithic finds (pottery and lithics) have been recently identified amongst the rich multi-period material from the University of Ioannina excavations (1994–2011) at the site of Agios Athanasios (Kontorli-Papadopoulou 2017), locally known as the School of Homer already since the very beginning of the 19th century and the time of Lord Byron's visit to Ithaca in 1823 (Gamba 1825, 27). The material is presently under fuller study within a composite on-going project run, since 2018, by the University of Ioannina (Y.G. Lolos), the Ephorate of Kephallenia and Ithaca (G. Grigorakakis, E. Papafloratu) and the Municipality of Ithaca (D. Stanitsas).

In the context of the aforementioned project, this paper has been conceived as an initial concise presentation of this new north-Ithacan Neolithic site within its cultural environment and with a view towards a definitive publication of all the available data in due course¹.

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¹ On the history of archaeological research in Ithaca, see Kalligas 1979; Souyoudzoglou-Haywood 1999, 93–95; Sbonias 2007.

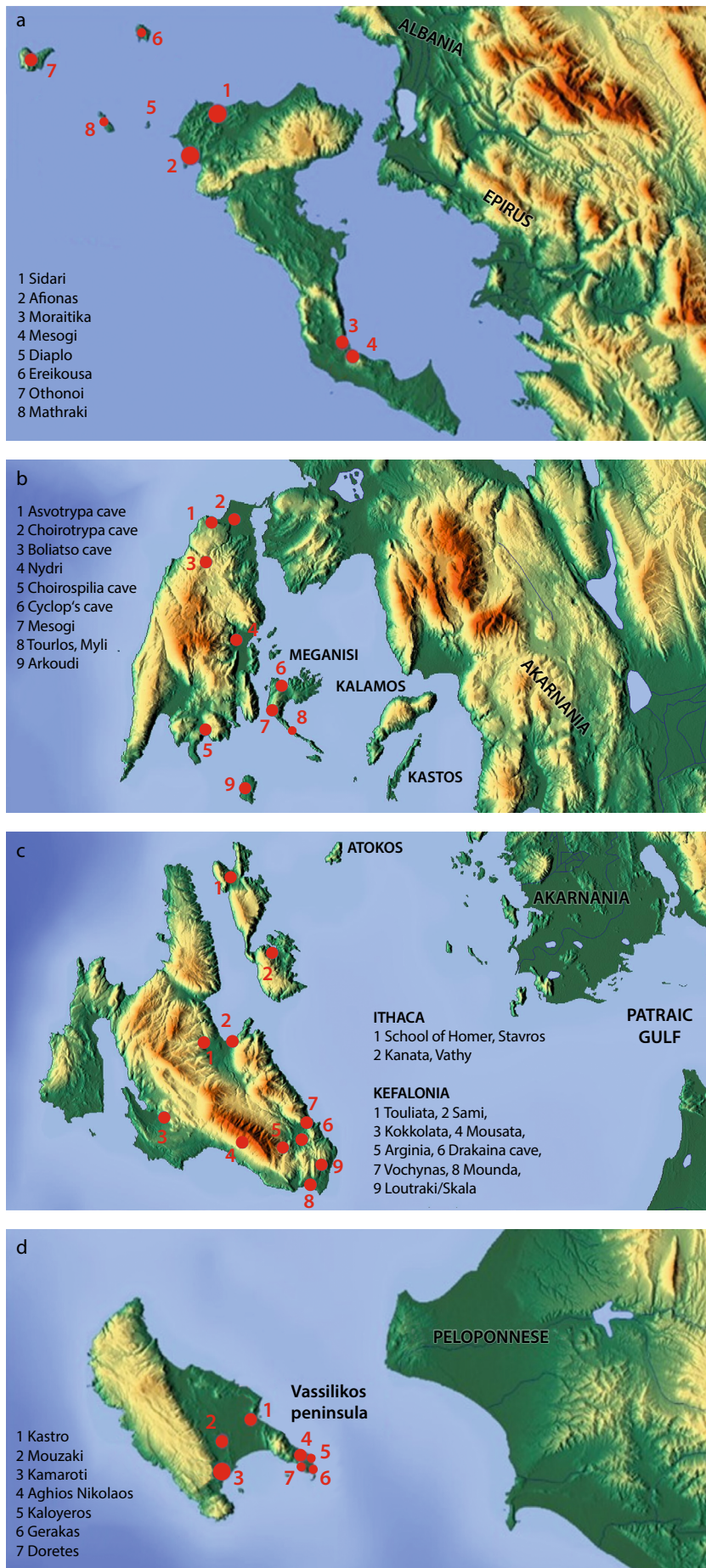
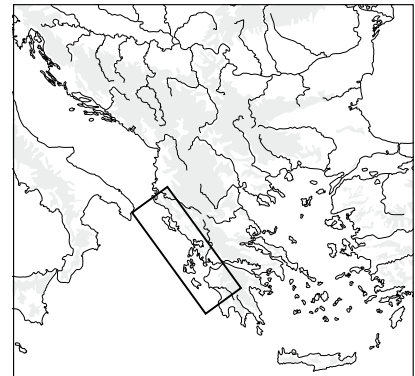


Fig. 1. The Ionian Islands: a Corfu and the Diapontian Islands; b Leukas and the Inner Archipelago; c Ithaca and Kefalonia; d Zakynthos (Graphics: A. Tsonos).



The geographical and cultural context

Apart from the new site at the School of Homer, located at a medium altitude (180 m a.s.l.), the other known Neolithic site is found at Kanata, on a slope in the east part of the modern town, above the inner Bay of Vathy, in southern Ithaca (Figs. 1c; 2). The Final Neolithic material (pottery and flint tools) in the area of Kanata were found during rescue excavations or surface collections and come from secondary contexts. Certainly the favourable natural features of the basin of Vathy would have enabled the local community to get involved in agriculture, stock-breeding and fishing (Basakos/Paschalidis 2001, 313–314; Livitsanis 2013, 99–102; A. Sotiriou, pers. comm). To add further, with regard to northwest Ithaca, worthy of mention is also the possible occurrence of Neolithic sherds among material recovered from Sylvia Benton's pre-war excavations at the coastal cult cave on the Bay of Poliss (Souyouzoglou-Haywood 1999, 7; 95).

On neighbouring Kephallenia (Kefalonia), at least nine sites represent the Neolithic period (Fig. 1c). Six of them – mostly open-air sites – are located in the eastern part of the island, either close to valleys, in order to exploit the natural resources, or at higher altitude and inside caves, from where the control of the sea and inland routes was safer (Moschos 2007, 282–287; 298; 320; Kourtessi-Philippakis 2014; Souyouzoglou-Haywood 2008; Sotiriou 2022, 65–68). The well-stratified Drakaina Cave has yielded varied ceramic assemblages and stone tools and artifacts carved *in loco* and deliberately fractured, perhaps signifying a place of symbolic activity (Stratouli 2007; Stratouli/Metaxas 2018; Stratouli et al. 2022). The distribution of the sites very close to the opening of the Gulf of Patras and opposite Zakynthos, Ithaca and the Akarnanian coast shows the clear extroverted orientation of the local communities in the development of the maritime contact networks, while the location of Arginia at a higher altitude (487 m a.s.l.) and the possible existence of a fortification wall there suggest the complexity in the social organisation of the island, especially during the Final Neolithic period, foreshadowing the urbanisation process of the Early Bronze Age (Sotiriou 2022, 66–67).

On Leukas five sites (Fig. 1b) have been identified in the eastern part (four caves and one possible open-air installation). The Choirospilia Cave is the most important site as it functions during the entire Neolithic period, presents intensive use and has yielded a variety of finds that indicate connections with the cave of Agios Nikolaos and the use of raw materials from the Plagia peninsula in Akarnania and also with sites in Epirus and Albania (Douzougli et al. 2008; Goessler 1927; Kourtessi-Philippakis 2008). Extensive surface survey in the inner Ionian Sea archipelago has resulted in the recognition of sites (e.g. on Meganisi) suitable for fishing and stone tools processing (Benton 1931–1932; Galanidou 2014; Galanidou et al. 2018, 452–453; Galanidou et al. 2022).

The Neolithic sites on Zakynthos are concentrated on the southeastern side (Vasilikos peninsula, Gerakas, Kastro), where the fertile lowlands and the proximity to the opposite coastline contribute to the creation of a particularly favourable ecosystem based on maritime communication and the exploitation of natural resources (Fig. 1d). The ceramic and lithic material shows affinities with the material from the Western Peloponnese and the other Ionian Islands (Kourtessi-Philippakis/Sorel 1996; van Wijngaarden et al. 2013).

On Corfu, the existence of two sites at the northeastern end of the island and two others in its southern part with a variety of finds, which cover most of the Neolithic period, emphasises the crucial position of the island in the system of communications with the Adriatic coasts (Fig. 1a). The well-stratified settlement of Sidari, especially, indicates clearly a northern cultural orientation and contacts with Epirus and Albania (Metallinou et al. 2009;

Sordinas 1969; Souyoudzoglou-Haywood 1999). The natural flint sources on the Diapontian Islands (Diaplo islet) are connected with a local Late Neolithic quarry (Papadea/ Georgiadou 2007; Sordinas 1974), while the activities of these insular Neolithic communities seem to have created an extroverted “small world” of interaction both with Corfu and the opposite coast.

On the whole, the Neolithic sites in the Ionian Islands appear to have been mainly in contact with the opposite Mainland coast, controlling both the local natural resources and the sea routes (Ferentinos et al. 2012; Tiné 2007; van Wijngaarden/Pieters 2017). The use of caves on the islands, and also at Agios Nikolaos on the Akarnanian coast (Benton 1947) demonstrates the complexity of the communities, with agriculture, stock-farming and fishing being their main activities. Local ceramic categories (impressed, engraved, incised, burnished, monochrome wares) create a common stylistic tradition, while local types of flint artifacts testify to the processing of lithics (Douzougli et al. 2008; Kourtessi-Phillipakis 2007; Stratouli 2007). The participation of the islanders in wider communication networks is evidenced by the occurrence of obsidian², of animal-shaped and anthropomorphic rhyta, Danilo scoops and polychrome pottery, both of Balkan and Adriatic type (Drakaina Cave, Mousata, Choirospilia, Afionas, Boliatso Cave) and *Urfirnis* pottery from the Peloponnese and Thessaly (Douzougli et al. 2008; Sotiriou 2022, 67–70; Stratouli 2007). Thus, the insular communities in the Ionian Sea, especially during the final phases of the Neolithic period, seem to have developed a clear local identity, which, however, had been in strong interaction both with the opposite Mainland coast and the wider communication networks of the Balkans, the Adriatic and the Aegean Sea.

The site of Agios Athanasios-School of Homer

With regard to the site’s wider topography, the north part of Ithaca contains a distinctly fertile area between mountain masses, with arable lands in a hilly landscape, marked by the ridge of Stavros and the contiguous hill of Pelikata and provides access to three natural harbours: Polis to the west, Afales to the north and Frikes to the east (Figs. 2–3).

The archaeological landscape of the School of Homer has as its core an imposing mass of rock crowned with the ruins of a Hellenistic tower, half of which has been converted in modern times into the private chapel of Agios Athanasios (Fig. 4). This important north-Ithacan archaeological site is marked by the presence of an impressive architectural complex, consisting of strong buildings and other special structures, of varied functions, in

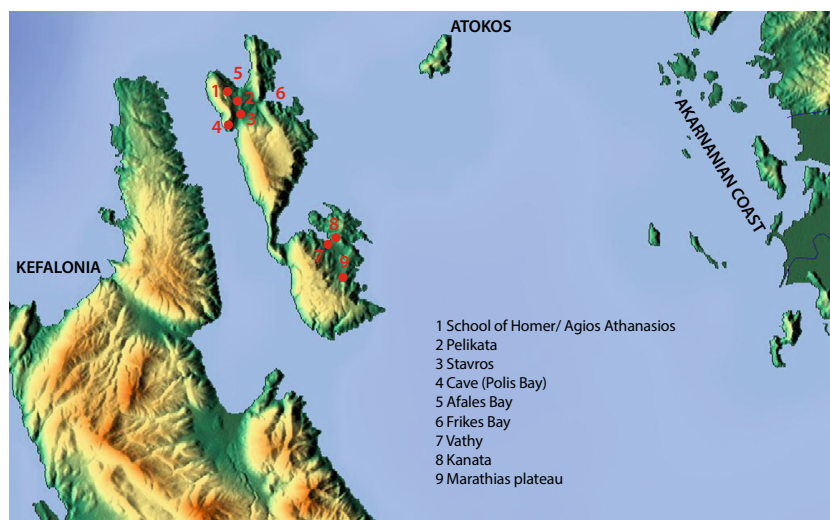


Fig. 2. Ithaca. Sites mentioned in the text (Graphics: A. Tsonos).

² Kefalonia: Munda, Skala, Drakaina Cave; Leukas: Choirospilia, Arkoudi; Zakynthos: Gerakas; Corfu: Sidari; see Galanidou et al. 2018; Kourtessi-Philippakis 2008; Moschos 2007; Sordinas 1969; Stratouli 2007; van Wijngaarden et al. 2006.

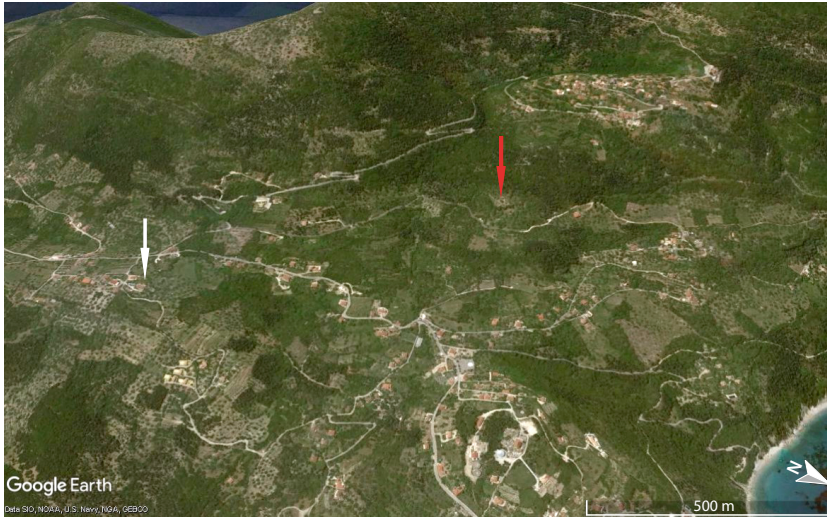


Fig. 3. Aerial view of an area of north-west Ithaca with the sites of Pelikata (white arrow) and the School of Homer (red arrow) (Photo: Google Earth image).

use especially in the early Hellenistic to early Roman and also Post-Byzantine periods, notwithstanding the evidence for the existence of earlier (Late Mycenaean) features at the site (Fig. 5). The excavated antiquities are mainly found on two terraces, above and below the rocky outcrop, but also at lower levels on the height's east and northeast slopes down to the so-called Circular Structure (Fig. 5,15).

Besides its special position, with a broad view towards the fertile land, the site is found in close proximity to a natural spring (locally called Melanydros) at a distance of ca. 90 m to the south of it, while two others are known in the vicinity (Knauss 2006, 7; 9 fig. 7; Rennell Rodd 1932–1933, 18).

The new Neolithic potsherds and stone artifacts, discussed in this article do not occur in assemblages. They come from mixed contexts, with a wide (and separate) distribution over the whole excavated site, yet showing some concentration in Areas 1–2 (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Ithaca, School of Homer. Aerial view of part of the excavated complex, from the east/northeast (Photo: Th. Papadopoulos).

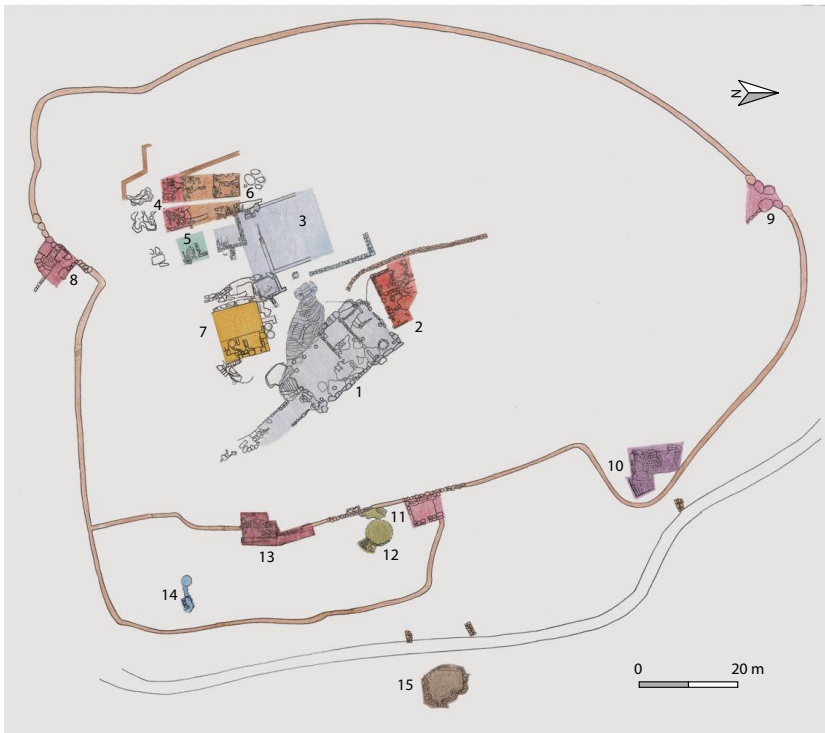


Fig. 5. Ithaca, School of Homer. General plan of the excavated complex; the colours refer to different buildings/elements (Graphics: L. Kontorli-Papadopoulou).

Lithics

The lithics from the School of Homer consist so far of 46 flint tools, belonging to the Late/Final Neolithic period in their totality (Fig. 6–7). The colours of the flint are white (Munsell white page, 9/N) and versions of grey/green (e.g. Munsell Gley 2, 10 G G/1 and Gley 1, 5/N-10 Y 5/1), as in the cases of the tools at Pre-Neolithic Marathias and Neolithic Kanata (Basakos/Paschalidis 2001, 313–314; Livitsanis 2013, 99). Since all the flint products have been found along with discarded parts and cores we can assume that the fabrication of the tools was made *in loco*, excluding the case of imported artifacts to the site.

Fig. 6. Ithaca, School of Homer. Selection of Neolithic flint artifacts. Note the arrow/spear head in the top left (Photo: A. Tsonos).



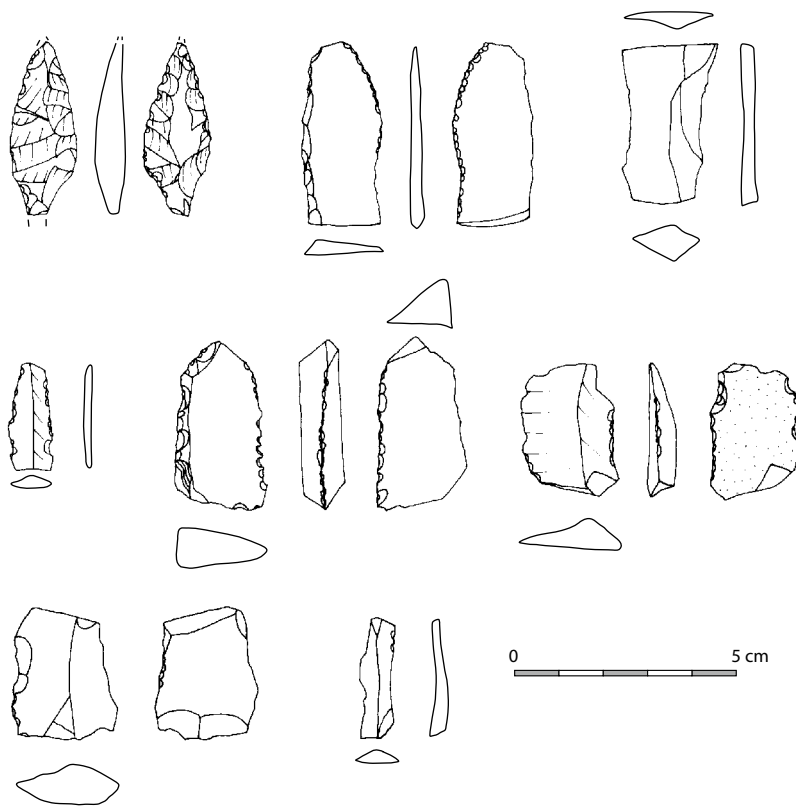


Fig. 7. Ithaca, School of Homer. Selection of Neolithic flint artifacts. The top row shows the three top left artefacts on Figure 6 (Drawings: S. Oikonomidis).

The tools can be distinguished in categories: one arrow or spear head, three sickle elements, four blades, one certain and two possible burins, nine cores and several discarded flakes, some of which with traces of elaboration³. The discovery of three blades with distinct traces of bifacial patination due to cutting grass or cereals (silica or sickle gloss phenomenon) is indicative of the agricultural use of these artifacts (Clemente/Gibaja 1998; Gurova 2016, 160–162).

The elaboration of the tools through percussion, thinning, shaping and smoothing demonstrates hand ability and technical experience by specialist flint knappers. Of note is the absence of Melian obsidian among the tools of the two Neolithic sites of Ithaca, possibly indicating lack of obsidian trade in the area. On the present evidence, the flint artifacts from the School of Homer are products of a local workshop using flint found on the island⁴.

Pottery

The pottery which has so far been identified in the material from the School of Homer is very fragmented and consists of ca. 90 sherds exclusively from semi-coarse and coarse pots (Figs. 8–9). The majority of the sherds belong to walls, whereas a number of them come from the rim, the base, or preserve part of horizontal crescent-shaped lugs and vertical strap handles. To judge from the preserved profile, diagnostic sherds come from open or wide-mouthed pots, bowls and pithoid pots.

A distinctive grog tempered fabric has been identified macroscopically in the bulk of the material; the fabric further contains gravel (up to 9 mm), which makes the paste rather friable. Only a few sherds lack grog; it is expected that the potters exploited local soils (of poor quality).

The surfaces of the sherds display a reddish to brownish-grayish colour, with a darker core and are generally smoothed, occasionally showing a slight burnish; only rarely has a dark brown slip been applied. Decorative

³ For comparable Late/Final Neolithic material including arrow heads/tanged points and blades/bladelets from Choirospilia and Drakaina Caves, see Kourtessi-Philippakis 2008, 169–171; Melfos/Stratouli 2016, 124–126.

⁴ E.g. as in the cases of Choirospilia Cave in Leukas and of Drakaina Cave and Arginia in Kefalonia, see Kourtessi-Philippakis 2008, 169–170; Melfos/Stratouli 2016, 122; Sotiriou 2022, 66.



Fig. 8. Ithaca, School of Homer. Selection of Final Neolithic potsherds (Photo: Chr. Marabea).

elements are also rare, consisting only of a relief (finger-impressed) motif. In general, the end result from the overall construction of the pots does not show any significant time expenditure.

The overall appearance of the Ithacan pottery, including the grog-tempered fabric, is in accordance with a widespread trend in the Final Neolithic pottery of the Aegean (e.g. Broodbank/Kiriati 2007, with further references). Also to this time frame points the dominance, or exclusivity according to the current status of our work, of coarse pottery, along with the presence of plastic decoration on pithoi/pithoid pots (e.g. Phelps 2004, 102; 112–120).

In a recently published project on Neolithic to Late Roman pottery from Ithaca and Kephallenia analytical results pertaining to the Neolithic period have been presented (Pentedeke et al. 2022). 21 Neolithic sherds from the area of Kanata-Palioroga at Vathy were subjected to petrographic analysis and refiring tests. 19 samples fall within the first fabric group of the project (Tcfs and chert fabric). The main inclusions (predominant to dominant) of this medium to coarse fabric are grog fragments, clay pellets and argillaceous rock fragments (ibid. 87). We expect that the Neolithic pottery from the School of Homer will be displaying comparable analytical properties.

In the wider geographic neighbourhood, the pottery from the new site at the School of Homer can be paralleled by pottery classes attested in a network of sites in the Final Neolithic period, comprising, among others, Drakaina Cave/Poros, Arginia and Mousata in Kefalonia (Stratouli et al. 1999, 276–277; Sotiriou 2022, 66–69), the caves of Choirospilia, Asvotrypa, Choitrypa and Boliatso in Leukas (Chatziotou 1999; Douzougli et al. 2008; Kalligas 1969; Kalligas 1970), the Agios Nikolaos cave near Astakos, Akarnania (Benton 1947, 181–182), Meganisi, near Leukas (Benton 1931–1932, 230–232), and also Agios Dimitrios, Cave of Nestor and Katavothra on the southwest side of the Peloponnese (Zachos 2008; Korres et al. 2014, 73–75; Lolos et al. 2020, 128–135), respectively.

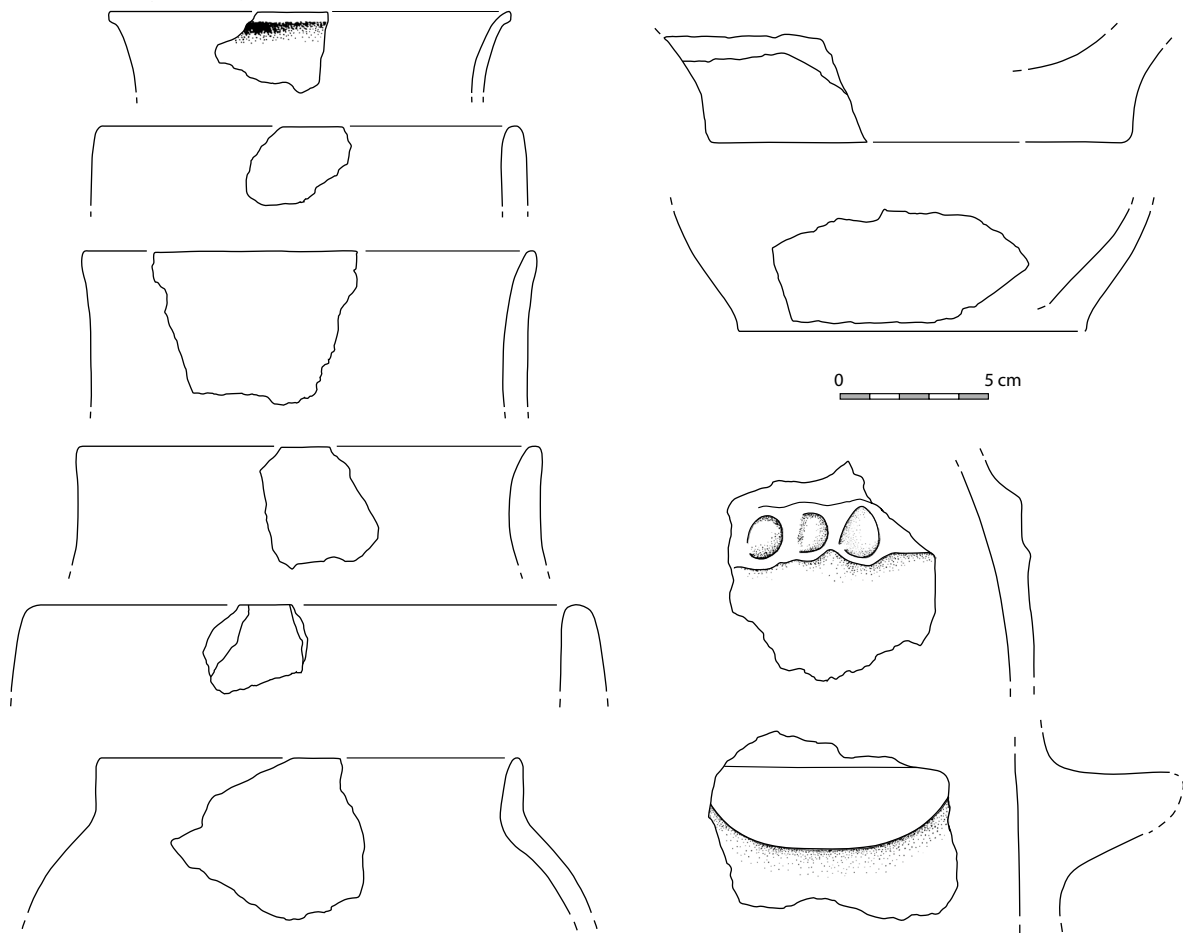


Fig. 9. Ithaca, School of Homer.
Selection of Final Neolithic potsherds
(Drawings: S. Oikonomidis).

Conclusions

On a local level, the existence of only two Neolithic sites on Ithaca, the newly documented site at the School of Homer-Agios Athanasios and that of modern Vathy, is certainly random, resulting from limited intensive surveys on the island and contrasts with the level of research in the rest of the Ionian islands. In other words, we are not as yet in a position to assess the distribution of Neolithic sites over the island and therefore to explore patterns of aggregation or dispersal in the last stages of the Neolithic period (e.g. Weiberg et al. 2019, 746–747; 753; 755). This current status, along with the nature of the Neolithic finds themselves (i.e. in a secondary context), render any attempt at providing a firm reconstruction of the sites' character rather hypothetical. However, we may hint at some points, considering their topography. Both sites (School of Homer and Vathy) have access to arable land and water springs and also favour animal husbandry since Ithaca is dominated by extended mountain masses. Access to the sea is easier for Vathy given to its closer proximity; the site of the School of Homer, despite being at some distance from the sea, may have been engaged in several sea routes towards the west, north and east. Our current knowledge suggests a permanent Neolithic occupation on both sites, as opposed to seasonal occupation or to a special purpose occupation.

The installation at the School of Homer seems to have been placed in a more strategic position compared to the one at Vathy. It is not perhaps accidental that the wider area of the School of Homer, including Pelikata and Stavros (Figs. 2–3), displays a long-lasting occupation record covering both the prehistoric and the historic periods. As such, the Neolithic people at the School of Homer may have been extroverted and part of a dynamic

network of Late/Final Neolithic installations in Western Greece, engaging themselves in inter-regional communal connections along the routes of the most ancient seafaring in the Ionian Sea.

Given that the earliest (Early Helladic II) phase of the nearby settlement at Pelikata dates from the mid-3rd millennium BC (Heurtley 1934–1935), the Neolithic evidence emerging from the School of Homer can now be safely used to extend the habitation record of North Ithaca by at least a thousand years into the island's prehistory and to open a new chapter of research.

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