

GROUP OF ACTIVITIES 3.1.B

SPECIAL RESEARCH ON KÜÇÜKYALI ARKEOPARK

The micro-history of one fragment of Istanbul's vanished urban cultural landscape, a fragment that revolves around one of the few surviving archaeological areas on its Asian side, is henceforth used to share a work in progress as a participatory experience of interpretation of Istanbul's contemporary megalopolis. The project presents summary and preliminary results of archaeological investigations conducted at one of the sites that prominently marked the Asian suburbs of Constantinople in Byzantine times, and that represented a distinctive feature of the pre-modern and modern countryside of Istanbul: the complex located in the neighbourhood of Küçükalyalı. However, the present setting of the site does not bear any visible hints of its former visual and architectural prominence. The focus here is thus on the novelty represented by both archaeological activities and the discoveries that have followed, leading to a newly acquired identity of the urban ruin. It is relevant to note the desolate conditions that defined the site at the beginning of our work. At that point, current residents of the area exhibited neither curiosity in nor general awareness of the site as a space of archaeological heritage. However, we have seen the progressive transformation of that indifference into broad community participation and interpretation.



View of the archaeological site from 1950's.

The neighbourhood of Küçükalyalı conserves the largest known surviving archaeological site on the Asian side of contemporary Istanbul. Presently tucked between rows of newly built apartment complexes, it covers a small area of roughly 4,000–6,000 square meters. In antiquity, the area was surrounded by pastures and green fields, likely extended closer to the Sea of Marmara, and was visible from the Princes' Islands. Ninth-century Constantinople, the time in which the complex was built, occupied only the region of modern Istanbul's historic peninsula; Küçükalyalı and its monastery lay in the immediate agricultural hinterland of the city. In more recent times and throughout the 19th century, travelogues and accounts by local residents portray a dynamic suburban environment with

places, customs, and rituals in dialogue with the several islands of ruins that defined the countryside. By contrast, the archaeological remains at Küçükyalı today form the only green space for a community of some 30,000 individuals, and are separated from the seashore by rows of apartment buildings, a train line, and the newly expanded Marmara seashore road.



The archaeological site today.

The archaeological area at Küçükyalı was identified at the end of a survey campaign in the late 1950s as the first Islamicate palace built in 9th-century Byzantium, but further on-site activities were halted for several decades as surrounding spaces grew into an urban extension of the city. While construction progressively obliterated ample but undocumented portions of the archaeological remains, structures emerging around an elevated ancient platform were spared by development. The site was thereafter left in a state of neglect, with continuous threats posed to its survival due to the absence of a protection status. Adequate zoning would have taken into account the existence of the visible architectural heritage, represented by the massive remains of the Byzantine-period cistern that defined the lower-level arrangement of the ancient platform.

It was not until 2001 that systematic archaeological activities resumed, in the form of a field survey, when, along with studies of collected data and research, a reassessment of the site's identification was proposed. What survived along with newly emerged remains at Küçükyalı was newly documented and identified as the monastic complex of *Satyros*, built by the eunuch patriarch and son of the Byzantine emperor Ignatios, between 866 and 877 CE, and known through textual evidence to have been the most lavish of the monasteries built by the patriarch⁸⁵. Despite the importance the remains carried in the history of Byzantine Constantinople, at the beginning of the survey season the site presented itself as an urban wasteland within a section of the city that had been transformed into a permanent construction site. From the outset of the project, it was apparent that archaeological research alone could not represent the project's sole priorities. Hence, archaeological knowledge and interpretation, and a wide range of on-site activities, developed in parallel with the evolution of the site's heritage value for the local public. Such value resided in an historic environment made more real by archaeological activities, combined with the social value represented by the accessibility of the area, as it was progressively turned from wasteland into an open historic and cultural environment.



Some of the findings from the excavation.

From 2008 to 2010, thanks to collaboration with the Direction of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, the Küçükalyı ArkeoPark Project was able to add to its activities a full-fledged archaeological excavations program. Research began revealing the remains of a lavishly built complex with numerous previously unknown features, the most relevant of which is represented by the unexcavated remains of a large church, likely to represent the *katholikon*, or monastic church, that was carefully designed and prominently placed on a panoramic platform. The lower level of the platform was occupied by a rectangular-in-plan water reservoir meant to be underground at the time of its construction, and now partly accessible from a modern road at its western and shorter end. On the platform and to the southeast of the alleged *katholikon*, a funerary chamber leaning against the church was excavated. Review of textual evidence has assisted identification of the chamber's remains; provided valuable information about the deposition of patriarch Ignatios at this very funerary chapel after his death on October 23, 877, followed soon after by his sanctification; and added details about cult practices at the site during the Byzantine period. Ignatios was born in the purple and destined to succeed his father, Michael Rangabes the First (r. 811–813) to the imperial throne, but when, in 813, Michael Rangabes was overthrown, his three male children were castrated in the Imperial Palace and as eunuchs sent into monastic exile to the Princes' Islands. The monastery of *Satyros* built by Ignatios stood as a remarkable landmark in the outskirts of the capital city, facing the Princes' Islands, where the eunuch patriarch spent part of his life. It dominated its

surroundings and represented a notable sight to those traveling to the islands or east of Constantinople. The complex displayed architectural and decorative features that were innovative for a century, the 9th, that has left hardly any surviving traces in Byzantine Constantinople.

In 2009, the archaeological complex was named an Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture site, followed by the establishment of the Küçükaly ArkeoPark Project, which defines itself, in Turkey and abroad, as an interdisciplinary Byzantine-period urban-archaeology project aimed at fostering awareness and broadening knowledge about Constantinopolitan archaeology and the city of Istanbul's multiple pasts.

Archaeological activities at the site – the moments that mark recovery of ancient memories and presences, and that contribute towards crafting an historic environment – continue to be shared with the local community and others who are increasingly attracted by the materiality of archaeology on the Asian side of Istanbul in a location traditionally void of such evidence. An open-door policy with regard to archaeological activities in fact encouraged the development of a public sense of an historic material environment. The site is not closed within fences, and on a daily basis members of the international team offer guided tours of progress being made at the site. Some areas, though – such as spaces that might be sources of technical archaeological knowledge, including conservation laboratories, deposits of artefacts and some of the data-processing clusters – have been reserved to specialists with the intention of separating, when necessary, archaeology from heritage.



Photo from one of the guided tours to the site.

The beginning of each working season is marked by a series of community events, ranging from small artisanal markets, book stalls (the neighbourhood does not have a bookstore), and open-air concerts in the former Byzantine-period cistern, allowing the site to serve as a point of aggregation, an identifier of the community with the added value of representing an historical and cultural environment.

The ArkeoPark dig house – a large store at street level repurposed from its archaeological role – during the winter months serves a community of elderly women who, through a local NGO, participate in a literacy program that will lead to an official elementary school degree. At the same time, students participating in the program are introduced to the historical sites of Istanbul and to areas of the city that have always felt removed and out of their reach as women.



Women participating the literacy courses at the dig house.

In partnership with local elementary schools, the ArkeoPark has developed programs of hands-on archaeological exploration and heritage awareness. During the 2010–2011 school years, several thousand elementary school children spent time working in the dig house, exploring and discovering the excavation site, and at the small library inside the dig house. During the same school year, some of the city's schools for the visually impaired were encouraged to take their students to the site, where they were introduced to archaeology through a one-day sensorial project.

The Küçükyalı ArkeoPark is an urban archaeological project whose primary and most visible identity furthers work conducted by professional archaeologists, but also represents the only green »lung«, the only point of outdoor public aggregation, for tens of thousands of users. The green space's qualities are enhanced by its heritage connotation. Its community, or constituency, represents a crucial point of reference and progressively becomes its interpreter in multi-faceted ways.