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## Cronache – Scavi e Ricerche

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**Cronache di Archeologia**  
**Scavi e ricerche 4**



# Archaeological research in Molossia: The Upper Acheron Valley Project.

## Preliminary results

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### Introduction

The project, entitled: *Archaeological research in the Upper Acheron valley*, stemmed from the desire to initiate a new research in the Molossian area by means of an interdisciplinary and international approach. The project is in fact based on a collaboration agreement between the Hellenic Ministry of Culture (represented by the Emeritus Director of Antiquities Dr Varvara N. Papadopoulou) and the University of Catania, a collaboration in which the Polytechnic University of Bari is also actively participating. The project is also supported by the municipality of Dodona and the inhabitants of the communities located along the valley, namely Si-strouni and Romano. Their help has been crucial, providing, among other things, exceptional accommodation at the Monastery of Metamorphosis of Sotiras (figs. 1-2).

It was in this atmosphere of active sharing and collaboration that the project began<sup>1</sup> (fig. 3). As the aforementioned area have not been properly investigated so far, the project aimed not only to trace the historical-archaeological dynamics, but also to develop a holistic approach to the reconstruction of

the ancient landscape in its diachrony. Hence one of the objectives of the project was to gain a deeper understanding of how the Upper Acheron valley has been exploited over time, by identifying the different settlement dynamics within this stratified landscape. The purpose of this brief contribution is to report the preliminary results of the research.

### The upper Acheron valley: the topography

The upper Acheron valley lies between the Souli Mountains to the west and the Tomaros and The-sprotikà Mountains to the east, just before the point, at which the river reaches the Glyki plain, before flowing into the Gulf of Ammoudià, at the Ionian sea. In particular, the southern boundary of the research area can be identified with the site of Paleochori Botsari, that lies within the borders of Ioannina Prefecture (fig. 4).

This part of the valley, has never been fully investigated, as it lies away from the tourist routes, especially after the construction of the motorway network; actually it represents one of the major routes, that connects the coastal area with the epirotic inland<sup>2</sup>, along with the passage through the territory of Lakkasouli<sup>3</sup>, the valley of the Xiropotamos, and the sites traditionally identified with Bouchetion (Kastro Rogon) and Batai (Kastri Rizovouni), as well as with the other route to the west of the The-sprotikà mountains<sup>4</sup>. In the northern part, one can

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1 In addition to the authors of this paper, the members of the mission, thanks to whom it was possible to achieve the results presented here, are: Vasiliki Giannaki and Athina Zogaki, archaeologists (Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina); Giorgos Kyrkos Conservator (Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina); Marco Chiricallo, Gianluca Ranieri (Polytechnic of Bari); Davide Falco (Unitelma Sapienza); Francesco M. Ferrara (independent researcher); Helena Catania (University of Messina); Sofia Bulgarini, Mattia Catalano, Giovanni Catania, Elisa Lanzafame, Emiliano Giudice, Irene Maccarrone, Marcello Napoli (University of Catania); Nicolàs de Montis (University of Almeria).

2 ANDREOU 1997, p. 104.

3 KONSTANTAKI 2013, pp. 121-146.

4 DAKARIS 1971, pp. 11, 27, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 59, 61, 63, 72-79, 88, 82, 94-95, 99, 113, 134-191



Fig. 1 - Romanò. The Monastery of Metamorphosis of Sotiras, viewed from the southwest. In the background is Mount Tomaros.



Fig. 2 - End-of-mission photo with the mayor of Dodona, at the Monastery of Metamorphosis of Sotiras.



Fig. 3 - The research team during the survey at the Vereniki site.

identify the area of today's Tyria as a key junction point. This sector, in fact, stands as an important crossroad connecting multiple valleys and thus numerous passages. In particular, to the west there is the route that leads to the plain of Paramythia; to the north there is the passage to the valley where the Zalogitikos river flows, which allows access to the Kalamàs valley, one of the most important routes in ancient Epirus<sup>5</sup>. Finally, to the east, there is the passage between Kourenta and Tomaros mountains, which leads to Dodona plateau<sup>6</sup>, continuing further to the north-east, at the Ioannina basin. The latter is about 30 km away from the Acheron valley as the crow flies. It is interesting to note that even today Egnatia motorway, which runs from Igoumenitsa to Ioannina, passes through Tyria (fig. 5).

This topographical introduction immediately gives an idea of the strategic importance of this valley for the local network, especially in connection with the sanctuary of Dodona. Indeed, one of the most frequently used routes towards the Dodona sanctuary, must have been via Bouchetion on the northern shores of the Ambracian gulf, up the upper Ache-

ron valley and, having passed the Tomaros massif via the pass at Achladees, continued along the upper Louros valley behind Kopani<sup>7</sup> (figs. 4-5).

The valley has been investigated both by Hammond and Dakaris, in the late 60's<sup>8</sup>. Thanks to their fundamental work, a series of fortified sites have long been known, dated generally to the Hellenistic period along with scattered finds, dated to the Roman and Byzantine era. In the years that followed, the local Ephorate of Antiquities contacted rescue excavations in various sites<sup>9</sup>. However, despite the crucial importance of this valley, no systematic study has ever been carried out, neither of the whole area, nor of individual sites, many of which are now difficult to reach.

It is within this framework that the present project was conceived and developed; its main objective is the reconstruction of the settlement patterns of an area that in ancient times experienced a massive programme of a fortification network, through the construction of a system for controlling/ protecting

5 DAUSSE 2018, pp. 995-996.

6 HAMMOND 1967, p. 19.

7 HAMMOND 1967, pp. 172-173, 696 e 700, map 18; HAMMOND 1997, p. 16. See also DAKARIS 1971, p. 187.

8 HAMMOND 1967; DAKARIS 1960; DAKARIS 1972.

9 DAKARIS 1960; VOKOTOPOULOU 1968; PAPADOPOULOU 2022; Αρχείο ΕΦΑΙΩΑ (Archives of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina).

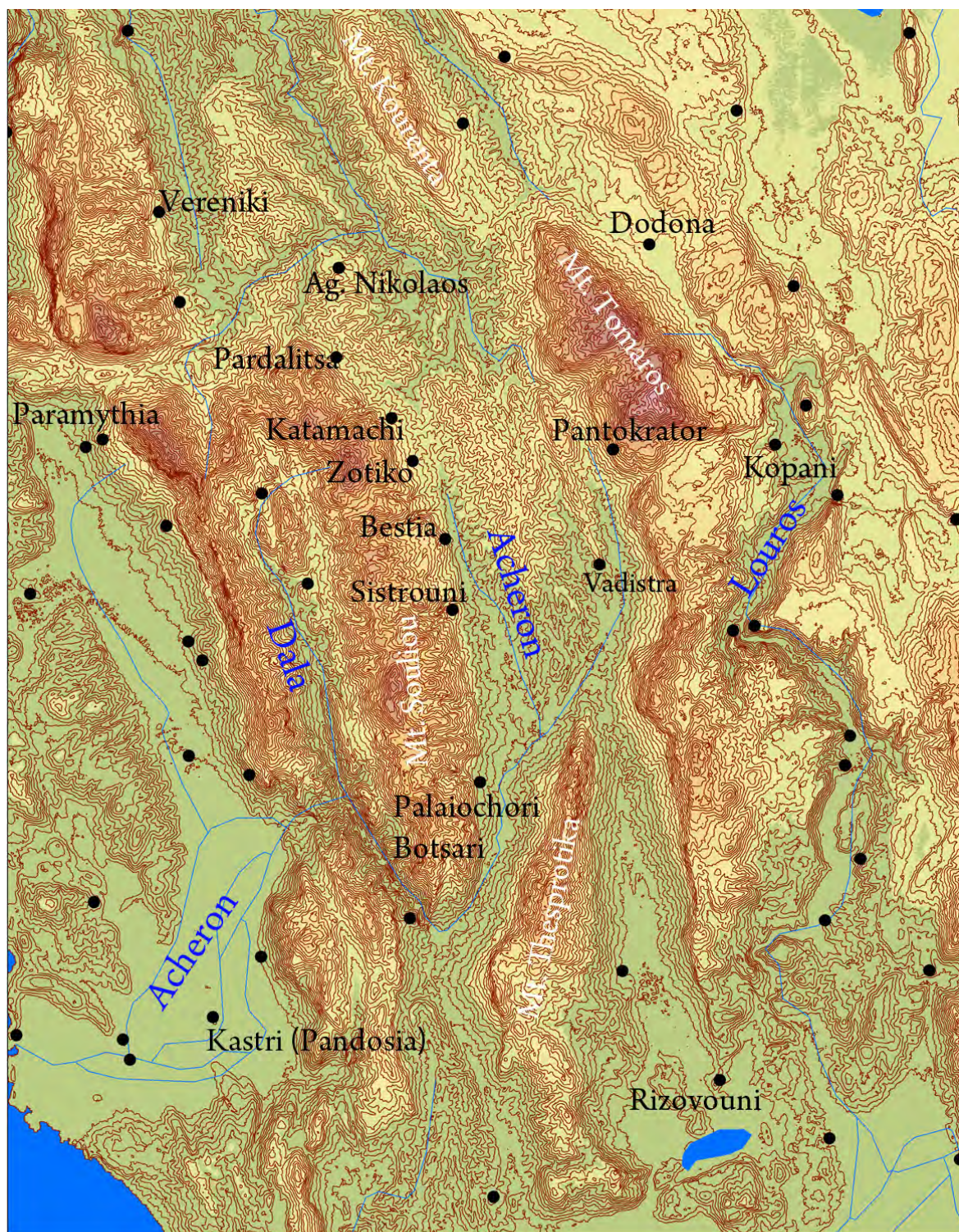


Fig. 4 - Map of the Upper Acheron Valley showing the sites and places mentioned in the text (by G.M. Gerogiannis).

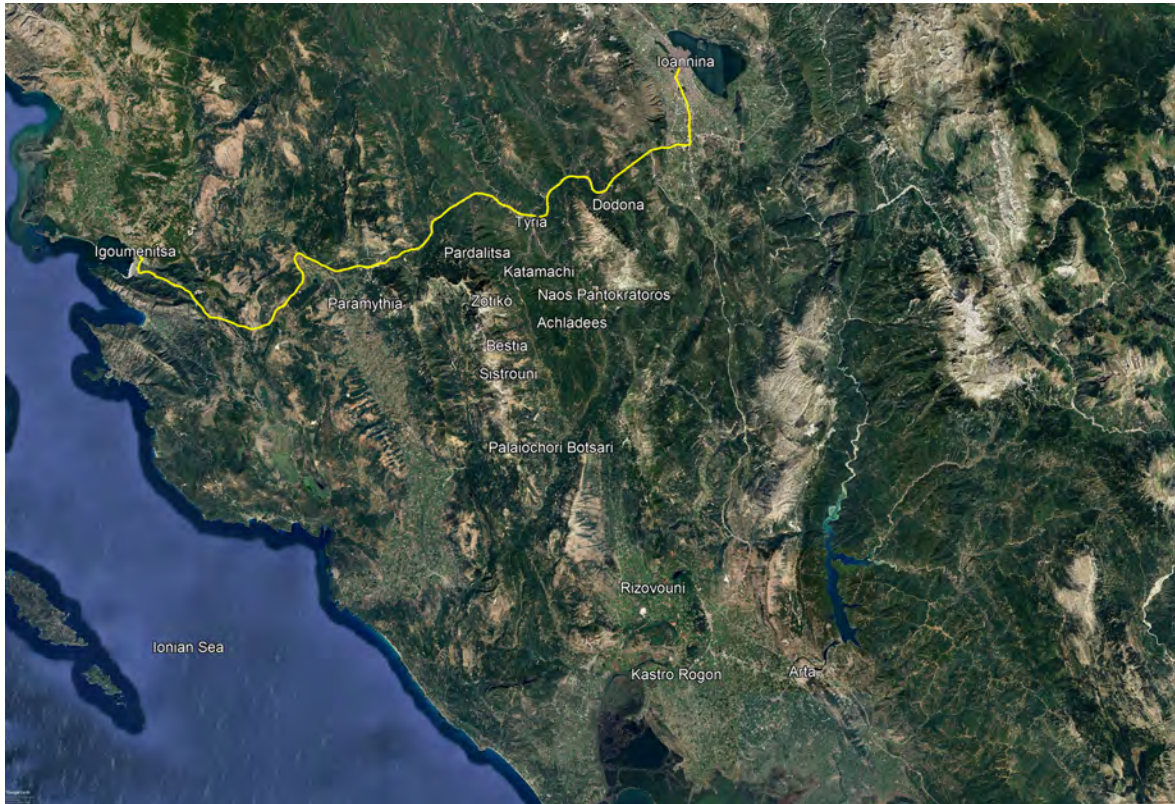


Fig. 5 - Satellite image from Google Earth showing the sites and places mentioned in the text. The Egnatia motorway is highlighted in yellow.

the road network and the main natural resources<sup>10</sup>. In fact, as with the entire Epirus territory, this valley is marked by a series of fortified sites, located both on the western side of the valley, i.e. on the Souli, and on the eastern side, on the slopes of Tomaros. In particular, from north to south, on the western slope are the fortified sites of Pandalitsa, Katamachi, Zotikò, Bestià, Sistrouni and Palaiochori<sup>11</sup>; while on the eastern slope there is fortified site above Achladees, on the slopes of Tomaros near the small church of Pantokrator<sup>12</sup> (figs. 4-5).

Our research is structured on two levels: a) the study of the territory through extensive surveys, along the upper valley of the Acheron and b) the strati-

graphic and topographical investigation of certain key- sites, like Sistrouni.

### Sistrouni

The starting point of the project is the fortified site of Sistrouni, which preserves an exceptional fortification (fig. 6). Around the site, moreover, numerous finds have been reported, including a *balaneion*, an early Christian Basilica, a coin hoard, and several tombs<sup>13</sup>.

In particular, a preliminary survey took place in November 2023, focusing on the site, which made it possible to obtain an initial documentation of the fortification and to identify the areas that deserved to be further investigated. The initial investigation of 2023, was followed by an excavation campaign that was carried out between August and September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> GEROGIANNIS 2022 and CHOINAS 2022, both with previous bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> There is very limited bibliography on these sites; see in particular, GEROGIANNIS 2021, pp. 251-253; PAPADOPOULOU 2022, pp. 184, 201-202, 231, 238-239, 262-263, with previous bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> ZACHOS, CHOINAS 2008, p. 774; GEROGIANNIS 2021, pp. 256-259.

<sup>13</sup> PAPADOPOULOU 2022, pp. 262-263.



Fig. 6 - Sistrouni. The fortified site viewed from the west.

### *The walls*

The initial analysis had already shown that the fortification has a total length of 460 m, surrounding an area of 0.84 hectares (fig. 7). The site has west-east orientation along a steeply sloping rocky ridge, at an altitude of 470 m that reached an elevation of 520 m on its highest point (fig. 8).

The walls are double-sided, filled with rubble and stone flakes. The entire southern section is 1.40 m wide, while the northern section reaches a width of 2.50-3 m.

During the survey it was possible to identify three rectangular towers, located along the northern side. The first is located at the north-western end of the circuit, and is the tallest one (6x9.20 m). The second is located at the center of the northern section (4.50x5.75 m), bearing along its inner façade, a 1.55 m wide, entrance door. It should also be noted that the section between the first and second tower is further reinforced by a 3.20 m deep jog (fig. 7). The third tower is located at the furthest eastern point of the northern circuit, forming its extension. This tower, in fact, projects eastwards for 4 m, after which the curtain wall continues southwards.

The main entrance to settlement lies on the eastern sector, where the remnants of a monumental gate have been unearthed. While this had been noticed as early as the first survey in 2023, since the eastern sector is more accessible, it was only thanks to the excavation of 2024, that it became apparent that it was a bayonet gate, 2.80 m wide (fig. 9). Although there are still many issues to be clarified, it can be assumed that the access to the citadel followed the north to south axis. The entrance was protected to the north by a mighty wall preserved to a height of about 5 m, and to the south by a curtain wall. The entrance therefore consisted of a corridor 7 m long, which must have had two doors, one at the front, followed by the second door at the back, with two standing pillars. Near the southern pillar, two holes have been spotted, used to insert the door's closing beam. Unfortunately, it was not possible to reach the floor level, reconstructing thus the connection between the external and internal sections of the doorway. Hence it remains to be investigated, whether after the 7 m corridor, one had to turn westwards to enter or whether the ramp continued towards the south. On the southern part of the gate,



Fig. 7 - Sistrouni. General plan of the site (by M. Chiricallo, G. Ranieri).

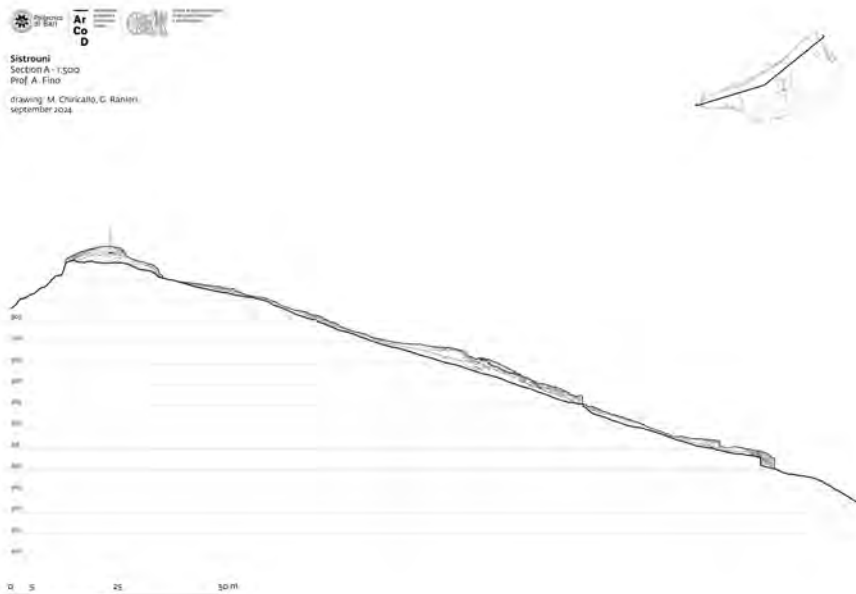


Fig. 8 - Sistrouni. West-east section of the site (by M. Chiricallo, G. Ranieri).



Fig. 9 - Sistrouni. Drone photo (from the east) at the end of the excavation of the bayonet gate.

at a distance of about 20 m the walls make a curve, and by continuing to the south-west, enclose the southern slope of the citadel (fig. 7).

The southern slope is the steepest and least accessible. The fortification wall follows the rocky terrain presenting an inward folding, almost at the middle of its length; at this point lies a secondary entrance, perhaps a minor gate, with an opening measuring 1.4 m wide. The gate must have contained a staircase or ramp, perhaps wooden, since the difference in height between the inner and outer levels is quite considerable.

From the gate, the walls follow the course of the rocky ridge, in a north-westerly direction, until they reach the highest point of the citadel, at the western end. At this point, the walled circuit makes a wide curve, which circumscribes the rocky ridge, reaching the north-western tower. The view of the Acheron Valley is excellent from here (fig. 10).

On the northern side of the circuit, a staircase was built next to inner face of the northern curtain wall; it was used to reach the wall walkway. The staircase lies near the second tower and continues eastwards for a length of 14 m and a width of approximately 1 m (fig. 11).

Regarding the construction of the fortification walls, at first it seemed that there were at least two different construction phases, based on building techniques: the first is to be detected along the northern and eastern sides, while the second, along the entire southern side and sporadically in the northern and eastern sections.

The main reason for this distinction was the different size of the stones they used as building material, as well as the apparent differentiation in the construction work (fig. 9). In particular, almost the entire eastern side was built with large-sized blocks (e.g. 1.10x0.40x0.30 m) arranged in polygonal and trapezoidal system; along the entire northern side, on the other hand, a mixed work of large and small-sized stones (e.g. 0.22x0.11x0.15 m) are to be detected. Finally, the southern side is made of small-sized blocks and only a few sporadic medium- and large-sized rounded cobblestones.

Having a closer look though, it seemed increasingly difficult to detect the existence of two phases except for small restorations in places, such as the narrowing of the door with the insertion of a wall structure. Currently thought, apart from these small interventions, albeit in a preliminary manner,



Fig. 10 - Acheron Valley viewed from the Sistrouni site. In the background, at the center, is Mount Tomaros.



Fig. 11 - Sistrouni. Northern section of the walls, viewed from the east. The arrow indicates the staircase.

it seems fair to question whether it is not possible to attribute a single phase to the construction of a large part of the complex. Several evidence support

this hypothesis: firstly, it was possible to verify that mortar is also present between the joints of the large blocks. Secondly, the fill between the two cur-

tain walls is to be detected in all parts of the wall circuit. Furthermore, whereas it had previously been assumed that the blocks were placed along the southern part of the walls or on the upper parts of the curtain for later reconstructions, the excavation has revealed that in some cases, such as at the gate, underneath the large blocks, built according to the trapezoidal system, there were smaller ones.

Meanwhile, the mortar found both in the bedding of the blocks as well as in the inner fill, is very crumbly and earthy. Even if the dating of the use of mortar to the Hellenistic period, could be seen with skepticism, we can always recall a passage by Philo, in which he emphatically points out the importance of using mortar in the foundations, not only to reinforce the foundations per se, but mostly to strengthen the upper structure of the building<sup>14</sup>:

“[79] <Philon to Ariston, greetings.> (1) < ... > First, it is necessary that those who are building towers <and walls>, once they have dug as far as rock or water or some (other) bottom and have safely firmed up this place as much as can be, should lay the foundations in mortar, in order that the (constituent) walls be not shattered within the foundations and the walls (as a whole) be not undermined”.

Of course future research will surely clarify these doubts, but at the moment it seems fair to point out the issues that need to be further investigated.

#### *Intra muros*

Given the steep slope of the rocky ridge, it is very likely that the entire settlement was organized in terraces. In fact, it was possible to identify several walls and alignments that can be interpreted, though poorly preserved, as terracing walls, built only by a few blocks and a maximum of two courses (fig. 7). The first of these walls is located to the east of the church of Saint John from which the hill has taken its name. Two more terrace walls have been identified further to the east, one of which is structurally linked to the northern curtain wall.

14 [79] Φίλων Ἀρίστωνι χαιρεῖν. 1. <...> Πρῶτον μὲν δεῖ τοὺς οἰκοδομοῦντας πύργους <καὶ τεῖχη> ὀρύξαντας μέχρι πέτρας ἢ ὕδατος ἢ τίνος ἐδάφους ἀσφαλούς τοῦτον ἀποστερεώσαντας τὸν τόπον ὡς μάλιστα τιθῆ 5 ναι τοὺς θεμελίους ἐν γύψῳ, ἵνα μὴ ἔνδον τῶν θεμελίων οἱ τοῖχοι ῥηγνῶνται μηδ' ὑπορύττηται τὰ τεῖχη (tr. WHITEHEAD 2016).

Another terrace is located roughly halfway up the site and provides an idea of how the settlement must have been organized. In particular, some aligned structures can be distinguished, built with large blocks, which could probably have served both as terracing walls and as the foundation of a complex consisting of two large rooms placed side by side (fig. 12).

Although investigation is still in progress, the plan of the complex seems to recall similar examples known in Molossia, such as the rectangular structure located in the upper part of the fortified site of Episkopikò<sup>15</sup> or the more complex buildings of Megalo Gardiki<sup>16</sup> and Kastritsa<sup>17</sup>, which are also bear terraced formations<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, of special interest are the quarry marks on the surface of the rocky terrain of the site, as they provide evidence for the construction methods that they were used (fig. 13a). Similar marks have been attested in other fortified sites like Vereniki<sup>19</sup> and Dodona<sup>20</sup>.

#### **The survey**

Further investigations have been carried out at Vereniki and Bestià (figs. 4-5). Vereniki, a site located further north<sup>21</sup>, bears similarities with Sistruni regarding the construction technique of the walls, the use of limestone and, above all, in the structure of the bayonet gate on the north-western side, already documented by Hammond (fig. 14)<sup>22</sup>. Not far from the gate, it was possible to identify quarry marks, very similar to those in Sistruni (fig. 13b).

At Bestià it was possible to identify the exact location of the hitherto unknown site<sup>23</sup>. The site is located on a high rocky ridge, steep on all three sides except the west one. However, the site does not lie right across the Sistruni citadel, but it is situated

15 PLIAKOU 2007, p. 140, footnotes 344-345; GEROGIANNIS 2021, pp. 355-357; PAPADOPOULOU 2022, pp. 179-182, with bibliography.

16 PLIAKOU 2015, pp. 23-33.

17 YIOUNI, KAPPA, FAKLARI 2015, pp. 59-65; YIOUNI, FAKLARI 2018, p. 119.

18 PAPADOPOULOU, VASILEIOU 2022, with bibliography.

19 See below.

20 KATSODAS forthcoming.

21 PAPADOPOULOU 2022, pp. 146-147, with bibliography.

22 HAMMOND 1967, pp. 188-189; VLACHOPOULOU-OIKONOMOU 2003, p. 14.

23 PAPADOPOULOU 2022, p. 231, with bibliography.



Fig. 12 - Sistrouni. Terraced complex, viewed from the east, located in the central part of the site.



Fig. 13a-b - Quarry signs identified at Sistrouni (a) and Vereniki (b).

further back, towards the west (fig. 15). It faces the valley of the Acheron, but only partially, and it seems to have intervisibility only with the site of Pantokrator, located on opposite, on the slopes of Tomaros. Towards the west, on the other hand, which is the most accessible point, Bestià overlooks

a small plateau and a passage that could represent a crossing point, transversal to the Souli mountain range.

The site at Bestià, small in size (approximately 10 x 10 m), can therefore be interpreted as a small *phrourion*, a tower, placed to control these passages,



Fig. 14 - Vereniki. Drone photo of the bayonet gate.



Fig. 15 - Bestià. View from the west of the fortified site (at the bottom) and the upper Acheron Valley. In the background, at the center, is Mount Tomaros. The arrow indicates the pass, above Achladees, that allowed access to the Louros Valley and to the Dodona sanctuary.

communicating with the site of Pantokrator, which instead has visibility over the entire upper Acheron valley (figs. 4-5). Perhaps the presence of other for-

tified sites beyond these passes, towards the west, along the Dala valley, is not coincidental (fig. 4). This part of the valley is not included in our rese-



Fig. 16 - Sistrouni. End-of-excavation photo at the bayonet gate.

arch research. However, such considerations allow a new interpretation of the ancient road system as well as the detection of settlement patterns. In this sense, similar considerations could be made for Pardalitsa and Katamachi or for the eastern side of the Acheron valley, which still remains to be investigated.

A similar discussion can be made for Sistrouni itself. The large tower in the upper part of the town, seems that it was built to control not only the valley below, but mostly the westward passages (figs. 6-7); passages that run across the Souli mountain system and could perhaps constitute, like Bestià, transversal routes that lead to the Acheron and/or Dala valley and/or, even to the plain of Paramythia (figs. 4-5).

### Conclusions

Regarding the chronology of the architectural remains, it is too early to draw conclusions, especially since the few ceramic fragments found so far belong to plain pottery categories and bear no distinguishable features for placing them to a specific period. However, it is possible to place the fortified sites of the Upper Acheron valley and particularly Sistrouni in the *koine* of the Hellenistic period,

which, under the impetus of the Molossian dynasties, led not only to a fortified territory but also to a formation of new image of the landscape. From this perspective, the fortifications appear not only as a place of defense but as a new architectural element in a landscape that is modelled on the figure of the king and his power<sup>24</sup>; a power that manages the road system but also the most productive areas, hence the economy<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps the fortified site of Sistrouni, could also be part of this new territorial management constituting the dwelling or warehouses of the king's officials who controlled this part of the territory. A shaping of the landscape and a management system that seem, however, to have come to an end with the end of the Aeacid dynasty. Only research in the field will allow us to confirm or reject these hypotheses and/or find new fields of interpretation (fig. 16).

The starting point was the fortification of Sistrouni, but numerous archaeological remains from different phases are known around this site, all of which still require in-depth investigation.

24 GEROGIANNIS 2022.

25 CALIÒ, BRANCATO 2020.

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SUMMARY - The archaeological research project in the Upper Acheron Valley was initiated with the aim of conducting an innovative study in the Molossian area, adopting an interdisciplinary and international approach. The research is based on a collaboration agreement between the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the University of Catania. Since this area has never been properly investigated, the project seeks to reconstruct the historical and archaeological dynamics that have shaped its landscape over time. The main objective is to analyze the use of the Acheron Valley by studying the different settlement patterns within a stratified context.

This paper presents the preliminary results of the research, with particular attention to the stratigraphic investigations carried out at the fortified site of Sistrouni and the surveys conducted at the sites of Vereniki and Bestià.

RIASSUNTO - Il progetto di ricerca, intitolato *Ricerche archeologiche nell'alta valle dell'Acheronte*, è stato avviato con l'obiettivo di condurre uno studio innovativo su questa regione della Molossia, adottando un approccio interdisciplinare e internazionale. La ricerca si basa su un accordo di collaborazione tra il Ministero della Cultura Ellenico e l'Università di Catania. Poiché quest'area non è mai stata adeguatamente indagata, il progetto mira a ricostruire le dinamiche storico-archeologiche che ne hanno modellato il paesaggio nel corso del tempo. L'obiettivo principale è analizzare l'uso della Valle dell'Acheronte attraverso lo studio delle diverse dinamiche insediative in un contesto stratificato.

Con questo breve contributo vengono presentati i risultati preliminari della ricerca, con particolare attenzione alle indagini stratigrafiche condotte nel sito fortificato di Sistrouni e alle ricognizioni effettuate nei siti di Vereniki e Bestià.

*Keywords:* Molossia, Upper Acheron Valley, Sistrouni, fortified landscape.

*Parole chiave:* Molossia, alta valle dell'Acheronte, Sistrouni, paesaggio fortificato.

