



THE PYLA-KOUTSOPETRIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT: A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT PYLA-VIGLA, A FORTIFIED SETTLEMENT DATING TO THE HELLENISTIC ERA

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ABSTRACT

Since 2003 the Pyla-Koutsopetria Archaeological Project has systematically investigated a small region near the modern village of Pyla in southeastern Cyprus. Within this study region, the Hellenistic site of Pyla-Vigla is set atop a promontory of the same name, a toponym meaning “lookout.” Dating to the late 4th and early 3rd centuries B.C., the site was founded and occupied during a turbulent period in Cypriot history, one that saw the transition from rule by local city kingdoms to outright foreign imperial domination. Pyla-Vigla represents a key strategic position for warring Hellenistic kingdoms with interests in Egypt and those seeking to achieve superiority in the eastern Mediterranean. Recent archaeological work by the Pyla-Koutsopetria Archaeological Project has shed light on the lives of those living at a Hellenistic fort in Cyprus. Documenting sites like Vigla provides a valuable perspective on day-to-day life in the armies that shaped the Hellenistic world.

Since 2003 the Pyla-Koutsopetria Archaeological Project (PKAP) has systematically investigated a small coastal region near the modern village of Pyla in southeast Cyprus.¹ Situated on the east side of Larnaca Bay within the Dhekelia Sovereign Base, the study area measures 101 ha and is bounded by the tourist districts of Larnaca in the west, the coastal highway in the south, the Dhekelia firing range in the east, and the U.N. Buffer Zone in the north (Figure 1). Using intensive pedestrian survey, remote sensing, subsurface coring, geophysical prospecting, and, more recently, small-scale excavation, PKAP has made significant progress in documenting and contextualizing a

series of coastal communities dating from the Late Bronze Age to Late Antique periods. These communities dominated the major thoroughfare linking Kition and Salamis, the largest ancient cities in the region. Earlier archaeological investigations within the PKAP study area focused on an Early Christian basilica near the coast and the Late Bronze Age site of Pyla-Kokkinokremos.² Such investigations demonstrated that this area sustained settlement throughout antiquity beginning as early as the 13th century B.C.

The 2008, 2009, and 2012 field seasons focused on the hitherto undocumented Hellenistic site of Pyla-Vigla (henceforth Vigla) set atop a promontory of the same name, a toponym



Figure 1: Map of Cyprus showing the location of the PKAP study area. (B.R. Olson)

meaning “lookout.” Reaching 55 masl, the steep southern, eastern, and western slopes provide an easily defensible location and advantageous views of the entirety of Larnaca Bay and the coastal plain below (Figures 2 and 3). Its strategic location, a fortification wall, the presence of weapons, and the nature of the settlement demonstrate the site’s military function. Furthermore, the architectural, ceramic, and numismatic evidence date the most significant occupation of Vigla to the late 4th and early 3rd centuries B.C., which is a period not well understood in Cypriot history and one that reflects the transition from rule by local city kingdoms to outright foreign imperial domination. The purpose of the current investigation is to present the results of the 2012 excavation season at Vigla and to discuss the cultural and social context of those living at a Hellenistic fort in Cyprus based on data collected during all three seasons of targeted excavation and a preliminary analysis of the excavated material. The 2012 field season involved opening four soundings (EUs 14, 15, 16, and 17) to address problems raised by previous geophysical survey and small-scale excavation in 2008 and 2009. Our goals were to ascertain whether monumental architecture stood on the height

of Vigla by ground truthing geophysical survey and to determine the date and nature of the occupation of the site.

The site, like the British Dekhelia Cantonment on which it stands, represents a key strategic position for regimes with interests in Egypt. In the Hellenistic period, it is impossible to separate the region of Pyla-Koutsopetria from the efforts of both the Antigonids and the Ptolemies to achieve superiority in the eastern Mediterranean. For the Antigonids, the site of Vigla was both a backdoor to the port city of Salamis, which faced Syria and the base of Antigonid power. For the Ptolemies, like the British two millennia later, the south coast of Cyprus was a key jumping off point to Egypt as well as a commanding position to control large-scale maritime movements in the eastern Mediterranean more broadly.

ARCHITECTURE

The excavations conducted on Vigla in 2008, 2009, and 2012 consisted of 10 small soundings (Figure 4), and provide evidence for at least four major phases of occupation: two phases date to the



Figure 2: Photograph of the Vigla plateau looking north. (B.R. Olson)

Hellenistic period (Phase 1 and Phase 2); a third likely dates to the Roman period; and a fourth represents modern land use primarily associated with agricultural activities. These successive occupations have left nearly two meters of accumulated soil sitting atop bedrock. As we have documented all the phases elsewhere,³ our comments here will focus specifically on the Hellenistic occupation.

While small fragments of Iron Age pottery were found scattered throughout the ridge, the earliest and most substantial architecture is consistently associated with the early Hellenistic period. Excavation has revealed several floor surfaces comprising at least two major phases of habitation. The first phase (Phase 1) occurs in the majority of Vigla excavation units and consists of stone socles for mudbrick walls and packed earth and clay floors set immediately on bedrock, which was partially exposed across the plateau during the earliest period occupation. Packed earth subfloors served to level irregularities in the bedrock and, judging by the absence of ceramic roof tiles, the structures were most likely covered with a thatched roof. A preliminary analysis of the ceramics, coins, and diagnostic metal implements dates this occupation from the end of the 4th century to the early decades of the 3rd century B.C. Consistent deposits of charcoal, red soil, and

ash indicate a violent destruction at the end of this first phase.

Excavation documented a second major phase of Hellenistic occupation (Phase 2), evident in the presence of a second floor surface in most of the trenches. That the ceramic assemblages from this new occupation are indistinguishable from the previous phase (see below), indicates that occupation resumed shortly after the destruction of the first occupation. The inhabitants refurbished preexisting buildings, leveled destruction debris, and laid new floors over the rubble of the previous occupation. The new inhabitants also built walls of mudbrick set on stone socles and laid floors of packed earth above lime-based beddings (Figure 5).

This reconstruction is necessarily tentative and simplifies the complexity of habitation cycles documented at the site. In two trenches, for example, we have evidence for additional modifications. In EU 6, a 1.5 × 3 meter unit situated along the fortification wall on the east slope, excavators recorded a plastered mudbrick wall below the Phase 1 floor surface. In EU 14, a 2 × 3 meter unit placed in the middle of the plateau (Figure 4), a compacted earthen floor (Figure 5) was recorded at an elevation 10 cm below the highest level of bedrock. Such modifications may represent the ordinary processes of occupation over time and may not necessarily indicate a major third phase at the site.



Figure 3: Photograph from Vigla overlooking the site of Pyla-*Koutsopetria* and the coastal plain. (B. R. Olson)

A CLEANING DEPOSIT

The most important feature discovered during the 2012 season was a large deposit of pottery placed within a slab-lined pit constructed against the northern fortification wall (Figure 6). Measuring approximately 9.75 m in area, the deposit represents one of the most significant assemblages of early Hellenistic pottery found on Cyprus because of its size, state of preservation, variety, and, most significantly, the integrity of the deposit. Excavated in EU16 during the 2012 season, every diagnostic artifact from the deposit was pulled, counted, weighed, and characterized in 2013. Individual forms were identified using the standard typologies of late Classical through Hellenistic ceramics for the eastern Mediterranean.⁴

Preliminary analysis shows that the earliest date of the earliest ceramic form is 350 B.C. The latest possible date of the latest form extends into the 1st century B.C., but the absence of eastern sigillatas, which circulated widely on the island beginning around 150 B.C. as well as so-called Hellenistic color-coated wares that began to circulate as early as the early 3rd century, suggest that the terminal date of occupation is ca 250 BC, *before* these industries developed. We have confidence in this assessment as eastern sigillatas and Hellenistic color-coated wares appeared in large

numbers at the nearby sites of Panayia-Ematousa, Kition, and Salamis and in the immediate area of Pyla-*Koutsopetria*.⁵

Comparing the assemblage from EU16 to those excavated elsewhere at Vigla encourages an interpretation of the pit as a deposit left by a single phase of cleanup in the reoccupation of the site after the end of Phase 1. Numerous forms were found in EU16 that were also found in the first phase of deposits in other Vigla excavation units. These include Attic *kantharoi*, Attic *echinus* bowls, small flat base bowls, and small flat base bowls with sharp carinations. The date of the EU16 pottery is also similar to other units. Yet, there were forms and other artifact types found in EU16 that do not occur elsewhere. These include painted kraters, large bowls, certain cooking ware shapes, an incense burner, gaming boards, large quantities of basket-handle amphoras, miniatures, stamped amphora handles, and generally higher quantities of amphoras and cooking wares. Such a discrepancy suggests that the EU16 deposit represents a mixture of cleaning debris associated with the previous occupation (Phase 1). The identification of multiple ceramic joins across all levels of the deposit bespeaks a single depositional event at the start of Phase 2.

With a robust assemblage of cooking wares, finewares, and transport amphora, as well as common utility vessels such as storage jars, water jugs, kraters, lamps, mortaria, and echinus



Figure 4: Map of Vigla showing the excavation units, fortification wall, and topography. (B.R. Olson and W.R. Caraher)

bowls, the EU16 cleaning deposit, though not *in situ* in the traditional sense, will serve as an invaluable proxy for active settlement at Vigla. The deposit contains the variety of material culture that one would expect from an active settlement and, more importantly, the assemblage was deposited and sealed in a short period of time.

THE MATERIAL EVIDENCE

Excavations at Vigla have yielded a material assemblage representing a little-understood period in ancient Cyprus. Although interesting pieces such as game boards, miniature ceramic vessels, and an incense burner were found, the numismatic, metal, and ceramic evidence have been, to varying degrees, preliminarily studied and the classes of material can be used to date and contextualize the site.

NUMISMATIC DATA

At this juncture the numismatic evidence from 2012 is currently under conservation and has not yet been made available. With a majority of coins coming from important contexts (floor surfaces, subfloor fill, and the cleaning deposit), they are poised to provide chronological information for all phases of occupation. A preliminary analysis of the available coins from 2008 and 2009 coins, produced three bronze Cypriot Alexanders minted locally from 332 to 320 B.C.⁶ The coins depict the head of Heracles on the obverse and Heracles' club, quiver, bow, and Alexander the Great's name in the genitive case on the reverse. The identification of the bronze Alexanders provide invaluable chronological information for the deposits associated with the coins.

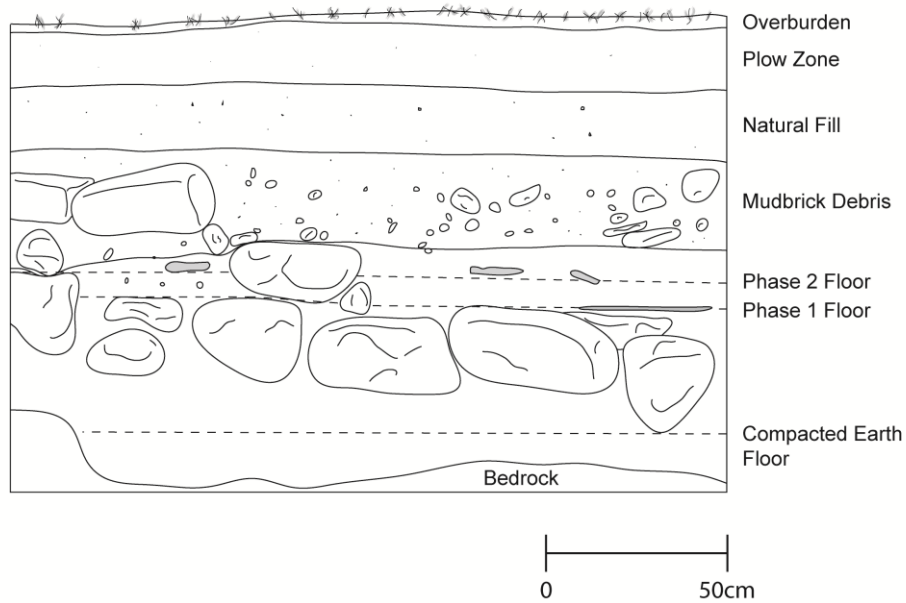


Figure 5: Stratigraphic profile of EU14's southern baulk depicting successive floor and subfloor levels. (B.R. Olson)

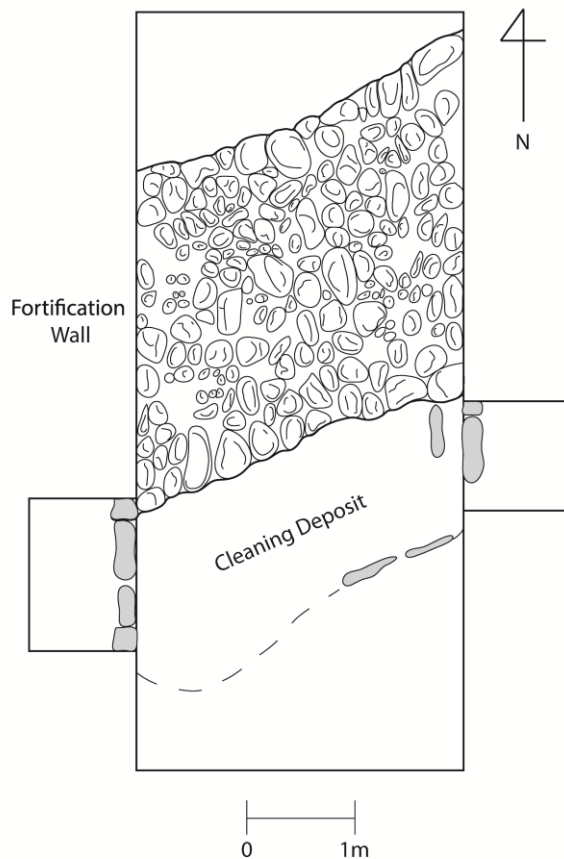


Figure 6: Top plan showing the slab-lined cleaning deposit in EU16 in relation to the fortification wall. (B.R. Olson and W.R. Caraher)

METALS

As early as the 1970s, scholars have commented on the abundance of metal artifacts found on the Vigla plateau and excavations support this observation.⁷ The more diagnostic objects recovered include an abundance of lead, bronze, and iron weapons. Of the leaden implements, sling bullets (*glantes*) and evidence of their manufacture were recovered throughout the plateau.⁸ The bullets, measuring on average $.03 \times .015$ m and weighing 30 grams, are a common artifact type of Late Classical and Hellenistic sites in the eastern Mediterranean that either housed soldiers or were besieged.⁹ One of the more interesting finds was a sling bullet with an inscribed name in the nominative case, Tharugos, and a symbol on the reverse, which, upon initial examination, appears to be agricultural in nature. This sling bullet, currently under study, contributes a new name to a corpus of sling bullets published some 30 years ago from the site by Nicolaou.¹⁰ Excavations also yielded bronze catapult bolts known as Tanged Bodkin heads, shafted bronze tri-blade arrowheads of the Scythian variety, tanged iron bi-blade arrowheads, and iron knife blades (Figure 7).¹¹ Although their forms changed little over time, all examples were available and common place in Cyprus during the 4th and 3rd centuries. With weapons attested using three different methods of production, casting at lower temperatures for lead using ceramic moulds; casting at higher temperatures for bronze in stone moulds; and forging for iron implements, a site as small as Vigla would not have the necessary resources to produce each variety, suggesting that the site was actively connected to either existing trade networks or some sort of industrial quarter.



Figure 7: A collection of lead, bronze, and iron military implements recovered during excavation. (B.R. Olson)

CERAMICS

The ceramic assemblages associated with Phase 1 and 2 occupational levels are domestic in character and also date rather narrowly to the late 4th to the middle of the 3rd century. Ceramic remains from both phases included cooking wares and a variety of imported Attic vessels, lamps (open and closed forms), and utility wares. Of interesting note is the size of vessels in use for the consumption of food. While small (less than 20 cm diameter) bowls with inturned rims are ubiquitous in the excavated occupational assemblages (Figure 8), large open vessels for table service are non-existent at this stage of analysis. A dining experience that consists of (1) small personal dining vessels, (2) closed cooking pots, and (3) casseroles without larger table service forms is indicative of an experience where food was transported directly from cooking vessels to personal serving dishes. The ceramics indicate that the inhabitants of Vigla engaged in a more mundane and isolated dining experience, as opposed to more elaborate, convivial, and interactive forms, all of which further substantiate the rather modest standard of living among Vigla residents.¹² Furthermore, with the presence of similar shapes, such as lamps and vessels used for consuming food (e.g. inturned rim bowls), in both locally procured fabrics and imported Attic wares,

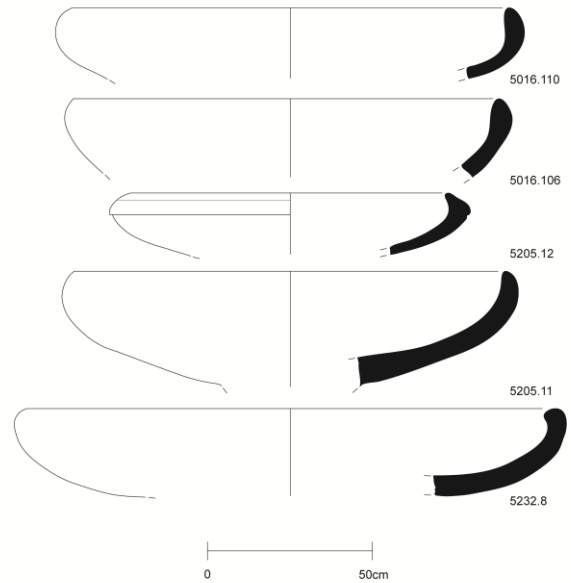


Figure 8: A representative sample of the shape and size of small inturned rim bowls found at the site. (B.R. Olson)

it is clear that, although Attic imports do not dominate the assemblage, those living at Vigla sought out imported Attic vessels and their imitations. All of this suggests that the community, while perhaps positioned to defend a vulnerable stretch of coastline, nevertheless participated in larger patterns of Mediterranean exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

While the rather substantial number of finds from construction, occupation, reconstruction, and cleaning levels identified in the 2012 excavations will require another full study season to disentangle, we currently hold that the architectural development of the site took place primarily during the early Hellenistic period. Our excavations at Vigla have produced no good evidence for architectural phases dating before or after this period, despite the presence of Late Bronze Age material at Pyla-Kokkinokremos, Iron Age pottery in the Pyla region, and the substantial town of Roman and Late Roman date in the Koutsopetria plain. Rather, the occupation appears to be narrowly focused on the 4th or early 3rd century, which is evident in coins of Alexander on floor surfaces and the ceramic assemblage. The early Hellenistic age is the most plausible period historically for the rapid process of construction, destruction, and re-occupation.

The abundance of military objects, low-level arms manufacture, presence of a fortification system, a utilitarian based ceramic assemblage, and small domestic quarters demonstrates that the residents of the Vigla height were engaged in military activities. The presence of an embayment at the site made this area a strategically valuable stretch of coastline.¹³ The massive investment in fortification would perhaps fit best into the last

years of the kingdom of Kition when the Antigonid-allied city attempted to secure its coastline from an anticipated Ptolemaic invasion. When the city fell to the Ptolemies, there was every

reason for the new rulers of the island to seek to defend an important coastal site that could secure overland routes to the flanks of Kition and Salamis.¹⁴

NOTES

- See, most recently, William Caraher, David Pettegrew, and R. Scott Moore, "Pyla-Koutsopetria Archaeological Project: Recent Work at the Site of Pyla-Vigla," *Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus* 2011, forthcoming A; William Caraher, David Pettegrew, and R. Scott Moore, *Pyla-Koutsopetria: Archaeological Survey of an Ancient Coastal Town*, forthcoming B. Earlier reports of the survey appeared in *Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus* in 2005 and 2007; *Near Eastern Archaeology* 71 (2008): 82-89; and *Bollettino di Archaeologia Online: Roma 2008 – International Congress of Classical Archaeology, Meetings between cultures in the ancient Mediterranean*, 2010, http://151.12.58.75/archeologia/bao_document/articoli/2_MOORE_et%20al.pdf.
- ² Earlier archaeological investigations within the PKAP study area focused on an Early Christian basilica near the coast and the Late Bronze Age site of Pyla-Kokkinokremos. For summaries of excavations at the Early Christian basilica, see the reports of S. Hadjisavvas in *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus* 1993, 70-72, and *BCH* 124 (2000), 692-693. For Pyla-Kokkinokremos, see Vassos Karageorghis and M. Demas, *Pyla-Kokkinokremos: A Late 13-Century B.C. Fortified Settlement in Cyprus* (Nicosia: Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, 1984).
- ³ Caraher *et al.* forthcoming A.
- ⁴ The standard typologies for 4th-3rd century pottery relevant to the Vigla cleaning deposit include Andrea Berlin, *Excavations at Tel Anafa, Vol. II, i.: The Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Plain Wares. Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* 102. (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1997); Heather Jackson and John Tidmarsh, *Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates, Vol. III: The Pottery. Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement* 7. (Sydney: MEDITARCH, 2011); Gunnar Lehmann, *Untersuchungen zur späten Eisenzeit in Syrien und Libanon: Stratigraphie und Keramikformen zwischen ca. 720 bis 300 v. Chr. Altertumskunde des Vorderen Orients* 5. (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996); Susan Rotroff, *The Athenian Agora XXIX: Hellenistic Pottery: Athenian and Imported Wheelmade Tableware*. (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1997); Susan Rotroff, *The Athenian Agora XXXIII: Hellenistic Pottery: The Plain Wares*. (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2006).
- ⁵ For Salamis see Laurence Jehasse, *Salamine de Chypre VIII. La céramique à vernis noir rempart méridional*. (Paris: de Boccard, 1978). For Kition see Laurence

- Jehasse, "La céramique attique à vernis noir de Kition de la fin du VI^e à la fin du IV^e siècle avant J.-C.," in Vassos Karageorghis *et al.* *Excavations at Kition IV, The Non-Cypriote Pottery*. (Nicosia: Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 1981): 75-99; Jean-François Salles (ed.), *Kition-Bamboula II. Les égouts de la ville classique*. (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1983); Jean-François Salles (ed.), *Kition-Bamboula IV. Les niveaux hellénistique*. (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1993). For Panayia Ematousa see John Lund, "Ceramic fine wares from the 4th century BC to the 7th century AD," in L. Wriedt Sørensen and K. Winter Jacobsen (eds), *Panayia Ematousa I: A rural site in south-eastern Cyprus*. (Athens: Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens Volume 6, 1, 2006): 182-230. For PKAP see Caraher *et al.* forthcoming B.
- ⁶ Similar Cypriot Alexanders were found at Paphos and Amathus. For Paphos see Ino Nicolaou, *Paphos III: The Coins from the House of Dionysos*. (Nicosia: Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, 1990): 7 and pl 1, nos 1623 and 4649 and for Amathus see Michel Amandry, "Le monnayage d'Amathonte," in Pierre Aupert and Marie-Christine Hellman (eds.), *Amathonte I, Testimonia 1: Auteurs anciens, monnayage, voyageurs, fouilles, origines, géographie*. (Athens: École française d'Athènes, 1984): 76 and pl 20, nos 134D 1 and 2.
- ⁷ Ino Nicolaou, "Inscriptiones Cypriae Alphabeticæ XVI 1976," *RDAC* (1977): 209-221; Ino Nicolaou, "Inscriptiones Cypriae Alphabeticæ XVIII 1978," *RDAC* (1979): 344-351; Ino Nicolaou, "Inscriptiones Cypriae Alphabeticæ XIX 1979," *RDAC* (1980): 260-266.
- ⁸ Brandon R. Olson, "A Contextual and Epigraphic Analysis of the Inscribed *Glandes* (Sling Bullets) from Vigla," in Caraher *et al.* forthcoming B.
- ⁹ Lead sling bullets have been found throughout the eastern Mediterranean including the sites of Olynthus, Stymphalos, Tel Akko, and Tel Dor: David Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus X: Metal and Minor Miscellaneous Finds*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941); Hector Williams *et al.*, "Excavations at Ancient Stymphalos, 1997," *Classical Views* 42 (1998): 261-319; Moshe Dothan, "Akko: Interim Excavation Report First Season, 1973/4," *BASOR* 224 (1977): 1-48; Dov Gera, "Tryphon's Sling Bullet from Dor," *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 153-163.
- ¹⁰ Nicolaou 1977, 1979, 1980; Olson in press.
- ¹¹ For Tanged Bodkin Heads see Simon James, *Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VII: The Arms and*

Armour and Other Military Equipment. (London: British Museum, 2004), for Scythian arrowheads see Brandon R. Olson and Tina Najbjerg, "A Deposit of Scythian Type Arrowheads from Polis Chrysochous (ancient Arsinoe)," *Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus* 2011 (In press); and for 4th-century Greek weapons in general see Robinson 1941.

¹² For ancient dining practices based on ceramic vessel size see Nicholas F. Hudson, "Changing Places: The Archaeology of the Roman *Convivium*," *American Journal of Archaeology* 114 (2010): 668-695.

¹³ Caraher *et al.* forthcoming B.

¹⁴ Caraher *et al.* forthcoming A.