The Footsteps of Artemis

Denis Knoepfler

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
—**Constantine Cavafy**[1]

Some archaeological discoveries are a matter of luck. The construction crew unearths an unexpected site; an artifact is discovered by accident. If luck does what luck can do, it does so rarely. Searching an area for a particular town or building, archaeologists normally turn up nothing. Despite their importance in antiquity, several Greek temples have defied archaeologists. Two of the main sanctuaries in ancient Boeotia, dedicated respectively to Athena Alalkomenia and to Athena Itonia, remain undiscovered.[2]

Until recently, the same was true for a temple dedicated to Artemis, and known to have existed from the seventh century BCE in the ancient city of Amarynthos on Euboea. Mid-nineteenth-century historians knew that the sanctuary was significant in Greek life: ancient documents described it as a place for worship, meetings, and political announcements, as well as for the display and storage of decrees and treaties. The possibility that some of these documents might still be in the ruins tantalized both archaeologists and historians, whose search extended over two centuries.

The sanctuary was finally identified in 2017 and the temple itself found two years later.

The location of ancient Amarynthos is described in two texts surviving from antiquity—one by Strabo, a first-century native of Amaseia in Asia Minor, and the other by Ptolemy, a second-century Greek with Roman citizenship who lived in Alexandria. Both geographers positioned Amarynthos in relation to the city of Eretria, but at vastly different distances. Strabo placed it seven stadia, or less than 1.5 kilometers, from Eretria's city wall.[3] Ptolemy put it at approximately fifteen kilometers.[4] Scholars favored Strabo, who seemed to have visited Amarynthos and its sanctuary.[5] Ptolemy hardly left Egypt. There is no evidence that he knew Amarynthos had a temple dedicated to Artemis.

Later texts made little reference to the location of Amarynthos until the Italian Renaissance. The name made a timid reappearance on maps of Euboea, then called Negroponte, produced for navigators in the eastern Mediterranean.[6] But these indications were not precise enough for archaeologists to locate the sanctuary's remains.

A serious search for the Amarynthion, as the sanctuary is called by Strabo, began in the nineteenth century. Following Strabo's directions, archaeologists from various European nations began digging in the immediate vicinity of ancient Eretria,[7] at a site partially occupied by the village once known as Néa Psará, which is now the modern town of Eretria.[8] In the peneplain extending east of Néa Psará, blocks from what appeared to be a large ancient structure bulged from the ground here and there. But archaeologists were troubled by the discovery of marble reused in some Byzantine chapels about ten kilometers east, near the ancient village of Vathia. The marble bore dedications to Artemis, to her brother, Apollo, and to Leto, the goddess who, pregnant through Zeus, gave birth to these twin divinities. Had the ancient Greeks built a subsidiary sanctuary in this area?

As archaeological activity became professionalized toward the end of the nineteenth century, excavation companies, acting in an official and collective manner, replaced individual explorations. Projects progressed much more quickly. A German team excavated Olympia in 1875; soon after, the French excavated Delos and Delphi; the Greeks did the same with the Acropolis of Athens and many other sites. In 1881, the eminent Hellenist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff called for the Eretrian Artemision to be found. In 1891, the newly established American School of Classical Studies in Athens undertook to clear several important buildings in the Eretria acropolis, including a theater, the temple of Dionysus, and the gymnasium. They also undertook the first study of its rampart, the wall from which Strabo had given the distance to Amarynthos.

Digs near the eastern city wall of Eretria remained fruitless, and by 1900, Greek archaeologists and epigraphers—Konstantinos Kourouniotis and Dimitrios Stavropoulos in particular—began to doubt Strabo's

description.[9] They wondered if they should not shift their attention to Vathia and the coastal area near it, where inscriptions had been found that referred to Amarynthos and the Artemision. One was a fully preserved decree from the people of Eretria at the beginning of the reign of Alexander the Great instituting a new contest in honor of Artemis. The stone had been found reused in a village in the center of the island. Another, discovered around what was known then as Kato Vathia, or Lower Vathia, was a partially preserved treaty between the cities of Eretria and Istiaia, dating from the end of the fifth century BCE. Both documents specified that they were to be displayed in the Amarynthos sanctuary. Two kilometers away, in a coastal hill region called Paleoekklisies (the Old Chapels), Kourouniotis found a symbolic symbol that had clear links to Artemis and also to Apollo: a block of marble shaped like a sugarloaf, sitting on a base and covered with a net carved in relief.[10] It was a replica of the *omphalos*, or Navel of the World, located near the Temple of Apollo at Delphi; a similar object was depicted in relief between Apollo and Artemis on an inscription currently held at the Archaeological Museum of Eretria.

This cluster of clues suggested that the Artemision was near Vathia, at the other end of the plain from Eretria. The suggestion was reasonable, but it would take another century to prove it. The Balkan Wars, the First World War, and then the troubled situation of the 1920s made archaeological activity of any scale impossible. In 1934, a German epigraphist and connoisseur of Euboean antiques, Erich Ziebarth, came across yet another inscribed stone mentioning the Artemision.[11] Like the others, this one was found near Paleoekklisies. At other times, this beautiful inscription would have caused a resurgence of archaeological interest, but Greece was attacked by Italy and occupied by Germany during the Second World War, and then embroiled in civil war until 1949. The country was left bloodless. It was impossible to consider putting even the least expense toward looking for a ruined temple, buried for almost two millennia. Their hands tied, archaeologists considered Ziebarth's discovery to be yet another wandering stone, as beautiful pieces of marble were frequently moved from their original location by later builders or collectors. Indeed, there was reason to believe this was the case, since the stone was broken and had evidently been removed from its base. Towards the end of the 1950s, Sir John Boardman pleaded for the digs to return to the suburban area apparently designated by Strabo.[12]

In 1964, a team of Swiss researchers led by Karl Schefold were tasked by the Greek Archaeological Service with excavating the buildings of ancient Eretria. These archaeologists were aware, of course, that the location of the Artemision of Amarynthos was problematic. Fully occupied by the excavation of the urban site, they did not have the leisure, or, moreover, the permission, to search for the elusive Amarynthian sanctuary. This did not prevent some of them from guessing. One team member, Olivier Reverdin, believed that the sanctuary must lay some 1,200 meters from the eastern gate of the city, at the site of what was then an oratory named Aghia Paraskevi built on top of ancient and Byzantine ruins.[13] As a young doctoral student, I agreed that the site was a seductive prospect.[14] But it quickly became clear to me that this hypothesis was wrong.

I was engaged in research for my dissertation, which aimed to solve a geography problem suggested by passages in Books IX and X by Strabo—the existence of Old Eretria, or *Palaia Eretria*, which was apparently distinct from the city whose remains were being excavated by the Swiss team.[15] According to most scholars, New Eretria stood on the site of the historical city and Old Eretria, near Vathia. I could not avoid the enduring problem of the sanctuary's location. In the summer of 1969, my wife Martine and I began systematically exploring the vast territory that ancient Eretria had ruled. For a good part of the 1970s and 80s, I collected clues that would prove that the Artemision could not be on the outskirts of Eretria.[16] I presented these in 1988 to the *Académie des Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres* in Paris.[17] Among my arguments was the fact that Herodotus described Eretria in great detail in 490 BCE, but never mentioned a temple dedicated to Artemis. In addition, Strabo described a military parade of sixty chariots, 600 cavalry, and 3,000 hoplites moving between Eretria and Amarynthos. It would be impossible for a group of this size to form a procession over barely 1.5 kilometers. Moreover, a good number of inscriptions testifying to the Artemision had been discovered *east* of Eretria, and whether these were wandering stones or not, they highlighted a circumscribed area of dissemination. The center of that area was not Eretria but Palaioekklisies. That location was more than ten kilometers from Eretria, roughly in keeping with the distance that Ptolemy had given.

Finally, there was reason to think that the inaccurate location Strabo provided for Amarynthos was due to a scribal error.[18] Strabo's *Geography* Book X survives through only late Byzantine manuscripts. This source is much more recent than the sources for the first nine books, and as a result, it is also more susceptible to errors. The manuscript states that Amarynthos lay *hepta* (seven) *stadia* from Eretria. An earlier manuscript may have used not the spelled-out number *hepta*, but the symbol Z in uppercase or ζ in lowercase—*zeta* being the Greek for seven. Lowercase *zeta* looks similar to the lowercase letter *xi*, ξ, which has a value of 60. Sixty stadia, or slightly less than eleven kilometers, is the exact distance from the Eretria wall to the western edge of the Palaioekklisies hill. It is possible that the scribe who copied Strabo's Book X misread the symbol ξ and recorded ζ, generating the misinformation that had put archaeologists on the wrong track for more than 200 years.

In the early 2000s, permission was obtained from the High Archaeological Council of Greece to conduct surveys at the foot of the Palaioekklisies hill. In 2007, not even two meters below the surface, archaeologists struck an impressive foundation that seemed to belong to a stoa, or portico.[19] In 2012, it was excavated, and in 2013, the portico that belonged with the foundation was found. In 2015 and 2016, a large building was identified behind the stoa, marking the eastern limit of the space. Finally, in the summer of 2017, many inscriptions were unearthed that proved what we wished to know: this site was the Artemision.[20] A piece of land had been purchased in what was estimated to be the center of the sanctuary. There, tiles were discovered bearing the stamp ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΟΣ. The tiles dated quite late, were perhaps created at the expense of the second-century CE sophist Herodes Atticus, who owned a hunting lodge in the territory of Eretria.[21] By the eastern portico, a double staircase of a dozen steps was found providing access to a sacred well. Marble pedestals used in this construction bore dedications to Artemis, Apollo, and Leto.

The same staircase yielded another treasure: a perfectly preserved treaty between Eretria and Styra, a small city in southern Euboea, from approximately 400 BCE. This document confirmed Strabo's testimony that the sanctuary was used to house political announcements.

Does this mean that the search is now over? I am old and satisfied with the results of the quest I began a half-century ago. But for younger archaeologists who continue to clear the site, the work is far from done.[22] There is still much to discover, thanks to land acquired through a generous grant from the Swiss government. The goal is to reach the sanctuary's outer limits, particularly its western facade, despite obstacles posed by modern housing. Once the form is uncovered, future investigations will address the sanctuary's history, from its most ancient stage to its metamorphoses through the Roman, early Christian, Byzantine, and Venetian periods. Archaeologists also hope to find the temple of the great goddess itself and the sanctuary's *propylaeum*, or entrance, and the sacred way sixty stadia long leading from Eretria.

Translated and adapted from the French by the editors.

Denis Knoepfler is the scientific director of the Swiss-Greek excavations of Amarynthos.

1. Constantine Cavafy, "Ithaka," trans. Edmund Keely, in *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
2. Similarly, inscriptions in Delphi indicate the existence of a temple dedicated to the goddess Demeter in Anthela near Thermopylae, along what is now the Athens–Lamia highway. A heavy layer of alluvium covers its potential site, and the exact location of the temple will likely remain unknown. Its architectural particularities can be known only from ancient inscriptions.
3. One stadium is between 180 and 200 meters. See Stefan Radt, *Strabonis Geographika* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002–2011). The best commentary for Book X is by François Lasserre, *Strabon, Géographie*, Livre X (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971), in French. For our purposes, nothing is to be gained from the recent, and disappointing, work of Duane Roller, *A Historical and Topographical Guide to the Geography of Strabo* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
4. For the *Geography* by Ptolemy, see the critical edition with German translation by Alfred Stückelberger et al., *Klaudios Ptolemaios: Handbuch der Geographie*, I–III (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2006–2009). On the data Ptolemy provides concerning Euboea, see Karl Reber, "Unbekanntes Euböa," *Antike Welt* 32, no. 5 (2001): 449–60, including a map showing the ancient coordinates (Fig. 15).
5. Strabo's visit to the Artemision is inferred—erroneously, as it turns out—since he wrote about two large public inscriptions that he said were there (Book X, chapter 1, of his *Geography*).
6. It also appears on the large wall map that adorns the reception hall of the Doge's Palace in Venice, as Sylvian Fachard has noted. Fachard was an early collaborator in the search for the sanctuary of Amarynthos and a former professor at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. He is now the new Director of the Swiss School for Archaeology in Greece.
7. The principal ones were the British colonel William Martin Leake, the Frenchman Jules Girard, the Germans August Baumeister, Conrad Bursian, Habbo Gerhard Lolling, and Ludwig Ross, and the Greeks Panayotis Eustratiadis and Alexandros Rangavis. Delphine Ackermann and Denis Knoepfler, "*La Région de Vathia/Amarynthos au miroir de ses premiers explorateurs: à propos d'une lettre de P. Revelakis à L.-F.-S. Fauvel (1816)*," *Antike Kunst* 52 (2009): 123–52.
8. Néa Psará was named in memory of the small island Psará, near Turkey, from which most of its inhabitants originated, survivors of the Chios massacre in 1822 during the Greek War of Independence.
9. They published various articles, in particular in the *Archaiologikè Ephemeris*, organ of the Archaeological Society of Athens.
10. It now flanks the entrance to the Eretria Museum.
11. The inscription dates from the end of the second century BCE. It was a decree of the city of Eretria, matching another complete copy that had been found almost a century earlier in Eretria. The decree honored Theopompos, to whom two statues had been dedicated, one in the Gymnase of Eretria

and the other in the sanctuary of Artemis at Amarynthos. The pedestal of the first statue has already been discovered; the second remains tantalizingly out of reach.

12. See John Boardman, "Early Euboean Pottery and History," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 52 (1957): 20–23, for the attempt to refute the location of the sanctuary near Kato Vathia.
13. See Petros Thémélis, *Archaiologikè Ephemeris* (1969): 166–70. The oratory Aghia Paraskevi should not be confused with the town of the same name, near Athens on mainland Greece.
14. Reverdin's hypothesis was also endorsed in François Lasserre, *Strabon, Géographie*, Book X (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971).
15. "À la recherche de l'Ancienne-Érétrie. Étude d'histoire et de topographie eubéennes," abstract in *Positions des thèses de Troisième Cycle soutenues en 1970* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 335–36.
16. I had the privilege of collaborating with Reverdin in collecting written testimonies about ancient Eretria.
17. Denis Knoepfler, "Sur les traces de l'Artémision d'Amarynthos près d'Erétrie," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1988): 382–421.
18. By December 1969, I had already written to Karl Schefold telling him that we believed there was an error in *Geography*, due potentially to a scribe rather than to Strabo himself. The report is available in the archives of the Ecole suisse d'archéologie en Grèce (ESAG), at the University of Lausanne.
19. See the report on this campaign published in Sylvian Fachard et al., "Amarynthos 2007," *Antike Kunst* 51 (2008): 154–71. For a initial historical analysis of the findings, see Denis Knoepfler, *La Patrie de Narcisse: Un héros antique enraciné dans le sol et dans l'histoire d'une cité grecque* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2010).
20. The results of this campaign are presented in Denis Knoepfler et al., "L'Artemision d'Amarynthos (Campagne 2017)," *Antike Kunst* 61 (2018): 129–37. For the first synthesis of excavations, see Sylvian Fachard et al., "Recent Research at the Sanctuary of Artemis Amarysia in Amarynthos (Euboea)," *Archaeological Reports* 63 (2017): 167–80, doi:10.1017/S0570608418000121, and Karl Reber et al., "Auf der Suche nach Artemis: Die Entdeckung des Heiligtums der Artemis Amarysia," *Antike Welt* 4 (2018): 52–58. See also Pierre Ducrey, "Allocution d'introduction à la séance thématique célébrant la découverte du sanctuaire d'Artémis Amarysia (Eubée) par l'École suisse d'Archéologie en Grèce (ESAG)," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2018); Tobias Krapf and Karl Reber, "À la recherche du sanctuaire d'Artémis Amarysia: dix ans de fouilles à Amarynthos (Eubée)," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2018) 849–81; and Denis Knoepfler, "Amarynthos trente ans après: l'épigraphie a tranché, mais Strabon n'aura pas à plaider coupable," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2018): 883–953.
21. I discuss him and his activity in Euboea in "Hérode Atticus propriétaire et évergète en Eubée: Ene nouvelle inscription du Musée d'Érétrie," *Revue des Études Grecques* 131 (2018): 317–70.
22. Among these are ESAG's two scientific secretaries Tobias Krapf, head of the Amarynthos shipyard, and Thierry Theurillat, who controls the recording and the diffusion of the data from the excavation. Also involved are archaeologists Guy Ackermann, Philippe Baeriswyl, Sylvian Fachard, Rocco Tettamanti, Samuel Verdan, as well as Delphine Ackermann, Jérôme André, Chloé Cheseaux, Claudia Gamma, Daniela Greger, Cédric Pernet, Tamara Saggini, and many other young archaeologists, not to mention many technical collaborators and trainees. The Greek archaeological service is represented by the Ephoros Angeliki Simosi, with the epimeletria Olga Kyiazi, and by Amalia Karapaschalidou, former director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Euboea.

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