

The Herakleion of Komi on the Island of Lemnos (Greece): Center of a Productive Landscape

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RÉSUMÉ

Le sanctuaire d'Héraclès se dressait sur le plateau d'une colline surplombant le profond golfe de Moudros ainsi que les principales routes de la région orientale de Lemnos, dans une position centrale par rapport aux vastes plaines cultivées et aux lagunes côtières. Les structures d'époque classique ont été identifiées au début du XIX^e siècle et visitées par A. Conze au milieu du XIX^e siècle, suivi par C. Fredrich C. Picard et A.G. Reinach au début du XX^e siècle. En 1939, la zone en terrasses des pentes de la colline a fait l'objet de fouilles par l'École archéologique italienne d'Athènes. Sur ces pentes est apparu à l'époque classique une κώμη (d'où le toponyme moderne Komi) attesté, comme pour le sanctuaire, également par des sources épigraphiques et habitée par des individus de différentes origines sociales (dont des étrangers et des métèques) liés aux activités commerciales du port, aux secteurs agricoles et miniers, ainsi qu'à une association religieuse connue sous le nom d'*Orgheones*.

Mots-clés : économie agricole, Herakleion, Lemnos, paysage productif, village de Komi.

ABSTRACT

The sanctuary of Heracles stood on the plateau of a hill overlooking the deep Gulf of Moudros and the main roads of the eastern region of Lemnos, in a central position in relation to the vast cultivated plains and coastal lagoons. The Classical-period structures were identified in the early 19th century and visited by A. Conze in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by C. Fredrich, C. Picard and A.G. Reinach in the early 20th century. In 1939, the terraced area on the slopes of the hill was the subject of trial excavations by the Italian Archaeological School in Athens. On these slopes a κώμη (hence the modern toponym Komi) appeared in classical times, attested, as for the sanctuary, also by epigraphic sources and inhabited by individuals of different social origins (including foreigners and metecrats) linked to the commercial activities of the port, the agricultural and mining sectors, as well as to a religious association known as *Orgheones*.

Keywords : agricultural economy, Herakleion, Komi village, Lemnos, productive landscape.

The sanctuary of Heracles in the village of Komi is located in the eastern district of the island of Lemnos, the eighth largest of the Greek islands and one of the largest in the northern Aegean, located 65 km west of the coast of Anatolia, facing the Dardanelles Strait and the Gallipoli peninsula.¹ In ancient times it most likely stood on the *plateau* of a long narrow hill east of the present-day village of Romanoù. From a geological perspective, this hill is part of a larger area with a pyroclastic sequence dating back to the Lower Miocene and developing mainly around the Gulf of Moudros. The sequence reaches its maximum thickness (160 m) precisely in the Romanoù area. The lower part of the succession is formed by whitish pyroclastic flows rich in lithic components with pumice clasts near the top, all within an extensive ash matrix. Ignimbrite, welded with gray or reddish collapsed pumice, sits above the basal sequence, which in this sector has a thickness of up to 10 m and extends over 2 km. Near the village of Romanoù the pyroclastic sequence is characterized by the presence of a pumice fall deposit covered by dark-coloured Strombolian-type deposits. South of Romanoù, the pyroclastic deposits are interbedded with continental sediments and contain abundant remains of plants and silicified woods.²

The *plateau* of the rocky massif of volcanic origin on which *Herakleion* stood is very significant geographically because from the top of this hill it is possible to observe a large part of the sea that surrounds the island: to the north, you can observe a large part of the coastline of the Gulf of Pournias and, in addition to seeing where *Hephaestia* and the extra-urban sanctuary of the *Kabeirion* stand, you can see the silhouettes of Samothrace and Imbros; to the east, the view extends as far as the Anatolian coast; to the south-west, the site dominates the entrance of the deep bay of Moudros with the islet of Koukonisi (fig. 1) as far as the island of Ag. Efstratios in the open sea; to the west you can even see the area around the *Kastro* of Myrina with the profile of Athos in the distance on the Chalkidiki peninsula.³ Furthermore, Komi was located at what was supposed to be the junction or crossroads of the main road system of the eastern district of the island: the hill is perfectly aligned on the western side with the axis of the main extra-urban road that left the city of *Hephaestia*, located at a distance of less than 10 km, and which connected the urban center with the port of Moudros; this road, whose progress we can trace from the distribution of tombs, up to Repanidi, probably continued along the same axis, like the modern road network, until Romanoù, near Komi, and then the large bay of Moudros, the main natural port of the island and one of the most protected in the entire Mediterranean.⁴ Ultimately, the locality, crossed over to the east by a stream that originates on the southern slopes of Mount Mosychlos (where, according to the myth, Hephaestus fell after being thrown down from Olympus) and which passes through the valley east of Repanidi up to Lake Chortarolimni, is situated in a central position also with respect to the large cultivated plains and coastal lagoons. From here the road to the important Varos plain headed westwards and leads to the wide plain of Atsikì, while to the east you could easily reach the marshy stretches rich in brackish water around Chortarolimni, Asprolimni and Alykì. From these assumptions it seems possible to deduce that the *kome*, with its sanctuary, constituted a sort of *central place*, a space which, due to its geographical position, «dava la possibilità di offrire servizi all'intero comprensorio, consentendo di minimizzare gli spostamenti e di non dover dipendere materialmente dalle città che, difatti, sorgono in aree piuttosto marginali rispetto alla propria *chora*, e a notevole distanza da quasi tutto il territorio agricolo».⁵

1 BIEL 2002, p. 211; FARINETTI 2013, p. 365; PANAGOPOULOS *et alii* 2013, p. 422. See also INNOCENTI *et alii* 2008-2009, p. 88.

2 INNOCENTI *et alii* 2008-2009, p. 91-92.

3 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 191 and 278.

4 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 280.

5 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 280.



Fig. 1: Lemnos, the Romanou plain and the gulf of Moudros taken from the eastern top of Komi hill (ph. D. Caruso, August 2023)

The powerful remains of classical structures, once visible on an esplanade at the top of the hill of the Komi massif but no longer distinguishable today, were already identified at the beginning of the 19th century. The first modern archaeologist to visit the island in 1859 was the young Alexander Conze, future director of the German Archaeological Institute. On 13 July of that year he crossed the dry surface of the salt lake of Chortarolimni, passing near the village of Komi but without staying there, on account of an expressed need to reach Kaminia.⁶ This was followed in 1904 by the journey of the epigrapher Carl Fredrich, who arrived on the island for the edition of the Lemnian inscriptions, volume XII, issue 8 (1909) of the *Inscriptiones Graecae* dedicated to the islands of the « Thracian Sea ». On this occasion he discovered some foundations in Komi, which measured 15 x 32 m, interpreting them as substructures of the temple.⁷ He was corrected by subsequent explorers, Charles Picard and Adolphe Joseph Reinach, young students of the *École française d'Athènes*, who in 1910 recognized in the surviving blocks identified by Fredrich the remains of a terrace that marked the boundary of the *peribolos* wall delimiting the *temenos*.⁸ These blocks were removed in subsequent years and reused by the village farmers to build sheds (already in 1918 Sealy complained that there was nothing left of the temple's foundations). Even the fountain that stood just beyond the ruins of the temple was demolished soon after.⁹ In 1939 some research was carried out by the Italian Archaeological School of Athens in the area where the remains of the village inhabited until the beginning of the 19th century still survive today: these investigations, however, according to the researcher Guido Libertini, gave few positive results for the oldest phases.¹⁰ During site tests carried out on three of the four terraces built on the south-eastern slope of the rocky hill, orthogonal walls were found. These defined courtyards and rooms built with peperino and sandstone ashlar, some of which had holes which served as *cardines*, the remains of *pithoi*, and sections of streets paved with stones and cobbles, one of which was

6 CONZE 1860, p. 120.

7 FREDRICH 1906, p. 251.

8 PICARD & REINACH 1912, p. 349.

9 SEALY 1918-1919, p. 168-169, fig. 10.

10 LIBERTINI 1939-1940a, p. 224; LIBERTINI 1939-1940b, p. 253.

2.10 m wide. These remains, never published, were not the subject of precise dating but it was recorded that some were apparently from « buona epoca ».¹¹

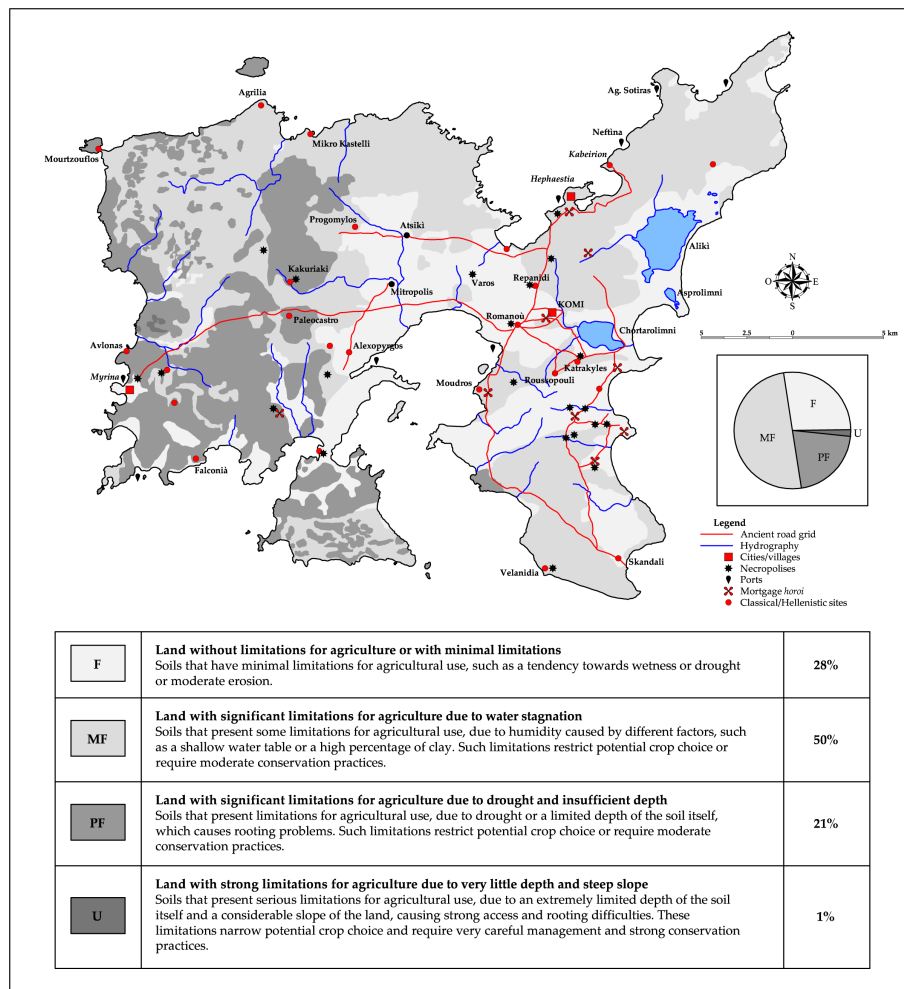


Fig. 2: Map of the island of Lemnos indicating the sites of the Classical-Hellenistic age and the ancient road network on the cartographic basis of the agricultural potential of the island (e-lab. D. Caruso, after FICUCIELLO 2013 and FARINETTI 2013).

On these slopes, a *κώμη* must have been built in classical times. Its sanctuary is also attested by epigraphic sources: on a mortgage *horos* found in this locality (*IG XII.8, 19*) the creditors are a group of *ὀργεῶνες* who met together at a *Herakleion* which stood near a *κώμη* to be located, probably, near the locality where the inscription was found because the site still retains the toponym of Komi today.¹² The "village" was therefore inhabited by individuals of different social backgrounds connected to the commercial activities of the port of Moudros, to the agricultural and mining activities of the *chora*, and to the religious association, the *Orgheones*. These associations, in fact, were among the oldest and most well-known religious corporations active in Attica alongside the *Thiasiotai* and, above all, the *Eranistai*, also known to have operated in Lemnos from another mortgage *horos* (*IG XII.8, 20*): the presence on this last *horos* of a legal guardian who headed the group suggests that this association was made up of members

¹¹ On the information taken from the excavation notebooks of Guido Libertini (*Taccuini Libertini* 1939, Italian Archaeological School of Athens archive), see FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 279.

¹² FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 277, with previous bibliography.

probably without full political rights (generally foreigners or metics) who were forced to rely on a patron.¹³ The *Orgheones*, like all the corporations and associations of Attica, were organized around a private cult, often with foreign heroes or divinities, frequently associated in Athens with places of worship dedicated to Heracles or Dionysus. Lemnos is no exception. Furthermore, they also appear as creditors in another *horos* from Moudros (*IG XII.8, 21*).¹⁴

The large bay of Moudros, the main natural port and certainly the most important on the island since very ancient times, was the port where commercial transactions managed by the merchants associated with the *Orgheones* corporation took place and where they shipped the grain to Athens as required by the famous law of Agirrius (374-373 BCE).

Komi hill, once immersed in the wooded landscape of deciduous oaks that characterized the eastern district of the island – as attested by the palynological analyzes conducted on the largest protohistoric site in the area, Poliochni¹⁵ – of which some strips remain in the wetlands of Alykì and Chortarolimni,¹⁶ saw its hinterland soon change appearance: the large swathe of territory including the plains of Varos and Atsikì with their high agricultural potential (**fig. 2**),¹⁷ exploited already in the archaic age and more in the classical age, with the conquest of the island by the Athenians, was systematically deforested to make room for the typical specialized crops of the Mediterranean triad. Around Komi hill, corresponding to the modern-day villages of Romanoù, Repanidi and Roussopouli, there was a proliferation of farms and rural sites in classical times; these fell within the *chora* of *Hephaestia*, providing the *asty* with food resources.

The best known site, excavated in 1939 by the Italian Archaeological School of Athens, is the Katrakyles farm near Roussopouli.¹⁸ Here the remains of a winery with jars for the conservation of the wine were found. It is a large circular pool with a diameter of 98 cm and a depth of 23 cm, inside a rectangular wall structure (2.03 x 1.78 m), flanked by an area enclosed by walls on three sides. Inside the courtyard, three large *pithoi* were inserted into the ground, reconstructed on the basis of the fractured bases.¹⁹ Furthermore, in the large alluvial plain surrounding the sanctuary, near the villages of Romanoù and Repanidi, numerous ancient rock installations used until modern times remain, some of which can be interpreted as *silos* (which could also be used for the conservation of salted products such as fish and meat) while others, similar to cellars (*patitiria*), could be linked with the fermentation of must (young wine)²⁰; similar remains, still visible (**fig. 3**), were identified and reported by Picard and Reinach in Roussopouli in 1910.²¹ This evidence would allow us to locate, in the area close to the sanctuary of Heracles near the port, a large area of agricultural production and storage which would have been closely related to the commercial activities which took place in the nearby bay of Moudros and which, evidently, involved the sale and marketing of wine, oil, cereals and other food products.

Another interesting fact is that the rocky area with pyroclastic formations gravitating around the sanctuary was also used for extraction purposes, as a source of building material: the presence of a stone quarry in the area is confirmed by its frequent use in the ancient artifacts of the island (among which we note the decorative elements of the great Hellenistic *Telesterion* of Chloi²² and the architectural elements

13 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 281, with previous bibliography.

14 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 281 and 288, with previous bibliography.

15 AROBBA *et alii* 2008, p. 143.

16 BELLAVIA & DI PASQUALE 2008, p. 239.

17 FARINETTI 2013, p. 365.

18 Quick notes in LIBERTINI 1939-1940a, p. 224; LIBERTINI 1939-1940b, p. 253.

19 MARCHIANDI 2002, p. 521-524, fig. 29; MARCHIANDI 2008, p. 107, plan at fig. 1.

20 FICUCIELLO 2013, p. 191, fig. 129 a-d, with previous bibliography.

21 PICARD & REINACH 1912, p. 343-346, fig. 20.

22 BESCHI 2004, p. 251-253, pl. XIX-XXIV, XXXIX.

reused as foundations of the paleo-Byzantine basilica²³ near the eastern port of *Hephaestia*), all made of a type of volcanic peperino, currently called “Romanou stone”, from the quarries located near the modern village.

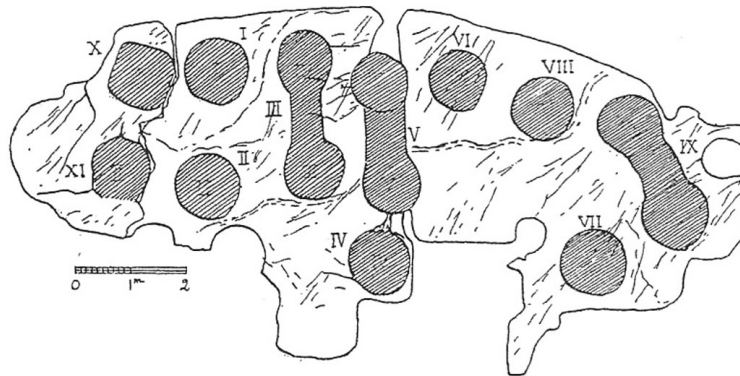


Fig. 3: Lemnos, Roussopouli countryside: *pithoi*-shaped rock works known as *patitiria* (from PICARD & REINACH 1912, fig. 20).

To complete this overview of local production, it may be noted that in ancient times Lemnos was widely known due to the vast salt lakes located in the *Hephaestia* district, along the eastern coast of the island (Alykì, Asprolimni and Chortarolimni). The proximity of the village of Komi to this natural source of sea salt would have allowed its extraction by simply scraping the salt from the rocky surfaces where evaporation would have left a deposit. In fact, the salting process for the preservation of food in ancient societies (as well as in modern ones) required the use of large quantities of this marine product.²⁴

In conclusion, the structures of the “village” of Komi and the sanctuary of Heracles have not been investigated archaeologically but, given their proximity to the coastal “market place”, it is likely that they had rooms for the storage of the goods produced in their district, complexes with sufficient capacity to welcome merchants and foreigners and structures for staff carrying out their duties in relation to commerce in the Moudros bay area.

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²³ DE DOMENICO *et alii* 2019, p. 498-500, fig. 5-6.

²⁴ CULTRARO 2013, p. 108.

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