The Pnyx in the History of Athens

PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. II

The Pnyx in the History of Athens

Proceedings of an International Colloquium Organised by the Finnish Institute at Athens, 7-9 October, 1994

Edited by
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HELSINKI 1996

ISSN 1237-2684
ISBN 951-95295-3-5

Printed in Finland by Vammalan Kirjapaino Oy, Vammala 1996

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Archaeological Research on the Athenian Pnyx

P.G. Calligas

To the south-west of the rocky height of the Acropolis there stretches a series of low hills known as the Hill of the Muses, the Hill of the Pnyx and the Hill of the Nymphs (Plan 1). This series of hills is separated from the western foot of the Acropolis by a small valley between the Areopagus and the Pnyx. In ancient times this little valley and the slopes surrounding it pulsed with activity, as proven by the earliest excavations in the area: streets, houses, workshops, and places of worship were identified, stretching from remote antiquity to the Late Roman period. This little valley joined together the three most important areas of the ancient city of Athens: the Acropolis (the religious centre), the ancient Agora (the commercial centre) and the Pnyx (the centre of political life).

These nuclei of life and power in the ancient city have, however, been the object of uneven treatment by modern archaeological investigation. During the earliest excavations on the Acropolis during the 1880s, the Greek Archaeological Service uncovered evidence which elucidated many of the problems connected with the history of the Sacred Rock. These large-scale excavations added immensely to our knowledge of antiquity by providing a wealth of new information about ancient Athenian religion and art. Subsequently, in the ancient Agora, the systematic excavations of the American School, which began in the 1930s and continue to this day, have uncovered the true nature of the administrative and commercial hub of the ancient city with an immense trove of archaeological data about the daily life of its citizens.

On the other hand, the third important site, the Pnyx, the place of assembly of the citizens of Athens where issues facing the polis were debated and political decisions were made, has not, paradoxically, received the same attention from modern excavators.

Lord Elgin's contemporary and fellow-countryman, George, Earl of Aberdeen, was the first (in 1803) to excavate on the slope of the Hill of the Nymphs facing the Acropolis. The slope was under cultivation, but near the level summit of the hill Aberdeen's search revealed the rock scarp, the bema sculpted from the rock, and small niches in the scarp, which indicated that ex-votos were dedicated here. It was here that Aberdeen discovered a total of 12 small inscribed marble tablets dedicated to Zeus Hypsistos. These inscriptions eventually found their way to the British Museum, where they remain today. Even at this early date the configuration of the area around the bema made it recognisable as the Pnyx

of ancient Athens.[1]

After the liberation of Greece from the Turks, and in the expectation that Athens would be proclaimed the capital of the new state, a number of people sought to buy property in the still small city. Among them was the Austrian ambassador von Prokesch-Osten, who purchased the region of the Pnyx from its Turkish owner in 1832. Eventually, in 1857, the land was given by the ambassador's son to the Greek government.[2] In 1842 King Otho had already laid the foundations of the National Observatory (designed by Th. Hansen) on the summit of the Hill of the Nymphs. At the same time, in 1842-1843, a small excavation is recorded behind the Pnyx.[3]

In 1862 the German, E. Curtius, began the first systematic excavations on the site. He uncovered and painstakingly cleaned the colossal semicircular retaining wall, the rock scarp on both sides of the bema and the level surface above it. He also published some of his conclusions.[4] Curtius's trenches were reopened in 1882-1883 by the Americans, J.M. Crow and J.T. Clarke, who published their observations under the title "The Athenian Pnyx".[5] In 1898 R. Zahn of the German Archaeological Institute opened up some small trenches, probably in the area of the ancient walls.[6]

It was not until the 1910s that any new excavations were carried out in the region of the Pnyx. Until then the only archaeological discoveries were some burials,[7] a few sculptures, including the well-known, half-finished, Lenormant Athena,[8] and several inscriptions, some of them carved into the rock itself at different places on the hills. Of these inscriptions the most important are: a) one which reveals the existence of a shrine of the Mother Goddess near the Chapel of Ayios Demetrios Loumbardiaris;[9] b) one which bears witness to the worship of Zeus[10] and c) one which testifies to a shrine of the Nymphs and Demos on the Hill of the Nymphs.[11] These inscriptions provide firm evidence for the existence of important sacred areas around the Pnyx. Of particular importance is the inscriptional evidence for the worship of the personified Demos of the Athenians which is now dated to the mid-5th century B.C., to which period is also dated the well-known boundary stone of the Pnyx (found in the area and now in the Epigraphical Museum).[12] This synchronicity supports the hypothesis that the state, during the period when Athenian democracy was at its height, sought to define systematically the boundaries of those parts

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1 For the excavations of George, Earl of Aberdeen, cf. Dodwell (1819), 401-405. For the twelve tablets found, cf. Smith (1892), 367-369, nos. 799-808 and *IG* II^2 4766 and 4798-4807.

2 Kaloyeropoulou and Proune-Philip (1973), λϵ΄.

3 For the founding and design of the observatory, cf. Papageorgiou-Venetas (1994), 34-35. For the excavation of 1842-1843, cf. Petrakos (1987), 29.

4 Curtius (1862), 23-28. Curtius did not, however, believe this was the site of the Pnyx. The landscape before Curtius' work is illustrated in the handsome waterpainting of the Swiss painter Rudolf Müller (signed and dated: Rome 1863), now in the Benaki Museum (inv. no. 25193) — cf. Tsigakou (1991), 30-31, no. 3. For an early description (from 1846) of the Pnyx and the great retaining wall, cf. also Koumanoudes (1990), 53.

5 Crow and Clarke (1885-1886), 205-260.

6 Jantzen (1963), 431-439.

7 P. Pervanoglou excavated tombs west of the Pnyx in 1860 (cf. Petrakos (1987), 43) and in 1862 (Pervanoglu (1862), 145-150). Also Soteriades excavated in 1898 Roman tombs on the Hill of the Nymphs (Kavvadias (1898), 12).

8 Athens National Museum 128. Cf. Leipen (1971), 3, figs. 1, 23, 63 with further references.

9 Skias (1899), 239-240, no. 2; Peek (1942), 149-150, no. 323; SEG XLI 121.

10 *IG* I^3 1055; Ritchie (1984), 163-167, no. TA 33 and 538-542, no. TA 112.

11 *IG* I^3 1065. For the sanctuary, cf. Kron (1979), 63-75. For Demos, cf. Alexandri-Tzahou (1986), 375-382.

12 EM 10069. For the findspot of the Pnyx horos stone, cf. Pittakes (1853), 774. For further debate on the boundary stone, cf. the references at *IG* I^3 1092 and Peppas Delmousou in this volume, 103.

of the city which were used for public and religious activities. The increase in population and building activity which extended throughout the area necessitated the precise definition of boundaries in the face of likely encroachments.[13]

Notwithstanding the importance of these finds, systematic excavation in the area was delayed and it was not until the 1910s that the Archaeological Society at Athens, under the direction of K. Kourouniotes, the Ephor of Antiquities, took up excavation on the Pnyx. Kourouniotes' excavations were conducted in the region of the auditorium in which the Assemblies were held and were based in a large trench at an oblique angle leading toward the interior from the large retaining wall. He determined the composition of the artificial fill and the existence of a second, older retaining wall which formed a smaller arc concentric with the larger retaining wall. Thus it followed, at this early stage, that there were two chronologically distinct periods in the large auditorium, each with its retaining wall. The precise chronological sequence, however, was still unclear, and Kourouniotes himself expressed reservations about the identification of the area as the ancient Pnyx, particularly because of the limited extent of the area which, in his opinion, covered an insufficient amount of space for the large public assemblies of the Athenians.[14]

The 1930s were the greatest period of excavation activity on the Pnyx, under the direction of the distinguished American archaeologist, Homer Thompson. Originally in collaboration with Kourouniotes (Plan 2) and later with R.L. Scranton and J. Travlos, Thompson excavated throughout the area — the auditorium, the retaining walls, the bema, and the upper terrace of the Pnyx. He also extended his excavations into the area of the Hill of the Nymphs and the Hill of the Muses.

The fundamental result of these excavations was a clearer understanding of the sequence of phases in the area. The first phase (I) of the theatre-like area of the Pnyx is dated to the first years of the Athenian democracy (ca. 500 B.C.). For its construction the natural slope of the hill was utilised, with a view toward the Acropolis and the Agora. It probably held about 5,000 citizens. In the second phase (II) which was dated to 404/3 B.C. the semicircular retaining wall with its two stairways was constructed to support an artificial fill used for the auditorium. The new arrangement reversed the earlier direction and increased the seating capacity of the auditorium to 6,000. The third phase (III), dating from 330-326 B.C., is attributed to Lykourgos' ambitious building program which, however, remained only half complete. In this phase the capacity of the auditorium was increased to 13,500 by the construction of a large retaining wall with one stairway, an increase in the amount of fill and the cutting back of the rock scarp where the new bema was placed.[15]

Thompson's investigations extended to the upper terrace of the rock where, he hypothesised, was the site of the shrine of Demeter Thesmophoros: the Thesmophoreion of Aristophanic fame.[16] He also made note of and investigated the two stoas which enclosed the region to the south and west, and those portions of the fortification wall which are thought to be part of the well-known Diateichisma, built for the better protection

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13 For squatters on the edge of the assembly place see Ar. *Eccl.* 243-244. Cf. Thuc. II.17.1. For concern over boundaries see also Ritchie (1984).

14 Kourouniotes (1910), 127-136; Kourouniotes and Antoniades (1911), 106-109; Kourouniotes (1916), 46-47.

15 Kourouniotes and Thompson (1932); Dinsmoor (1933), 181-182. The third phase of the assembly place was first dated to the Hadrianic period, but later Thompson and Scranton (1943), 297-301, suggested a dating of this phase to the 4th century B.C. Cf. also Travlos (1971), 446-476; Townsend (1982), 229-233. The attendance figures given here are based on Kourouniotes and Thompson (1932); see, for further discussion, the next two papers in this volume.

16 Thompson (1936), 156-192. See also the theory of Romano (1985), 441-454.

of the city in this area. Here two gates opened in the wall: one called "the Dipylon above the Gates", located near Ayios Demetrios Loumbardiaris, and the second known as "the gates of the Melitidai", a name thought to be associated with the deme of Melite. It is assumed that the stoas were never finished and eventually were torn down, partly as a result of the building of the Diateichisma at the end of the 4th century B.C.[17] Thompson deposited the finds from his excavations in the Agora Museum and published detailed reports, mostly in the journal *Hesperia*.

Further investigations uncovered on the west slope of the Hill of the Muses an erotic inscription, carved into the rock, which refers to a 'nobly handsome Antinoos', although the inscription is dated to the mid-5th century B.C.[18] In the region of the gate near Ayios Demetrios Loumbardiaris in the 1950s a small naiskos was excavated and some burials of the 4th century B.C. From the remains of a cremation pyre emerged part of the lid of a red-figure lekanis now in the Acropolis Museum, attributed to the Wedding Procession Painter.[19] Some excavation work was also executed in 1948 by R. Young to the north of the Pnyx,[20] while at different times until 1984 the Archaeological Service excavated on the Hill of the Nymphs.[21] Finally the layout of the site was organised in 1982-1983 by the Acropolis Ephoreia under the direction of J. Travlos and the fencing was completed.

The chronological sequence of the phases and the way in which the region of the Pnyx was used during the later Hellenistic and Roman periods is not clear, despite the careful excavations of Thompson and his colleagues. There are a number of problems that remain unsolved, whereas for others appealing solutions have been proposed. Thompson's suggestion that the Altar of Zeus Agoraios was originally situated on the Pnyx, and only later (in the 1st century B.C. or the 1st century after Christ) moved to the Agora, is a particularly intriguing one.[22] However, the dating of the worship of Zeus Hypsistos, which took place at the rock scarp, in the imperial period[23] should be carefully re-examined because it might indicate that the Pnyx was abandoned by then, since it is well-established that at this period other venues were used for citizen assemblies. The early finds of Kourouniotes — those which he illustrated — derive from the artificial fills and date to later historical periods (i.e. Roman). Furthermore, the dated finds are in line with Thompson's original dating of the large retaining wall to the time of Hadrian, although they do not coincide with his more recent opinion, which dates the wall to the end of the 4th century B.C., an opinion which is shared by Travlos.[24]

In any event, following the decade of the 1930s no extensive excavations were carried out in the region of the Pnyx. Important studies have of course appeared since then, but they are interpretative works based on the results of earlier excavations. It is obvious that new excavations are needed, along with measures to protect the exposed antiquities which have now been subject to decades of decay and are exhibiting marked signs of deterioration. It is also imperative that the auditorium of the assembly place be investigated again, at those points where the original fill is still preserved, as well as the structures

17 Thompson and Scranton (1943).

18 *IG* I^3 1403.

19 For the lid, Acropolis Museum 6475; cf. Valavanis (1991), 303, figs. 159β' and 162δ'. Generally about the Wedding Procession Painter, cf. Valavanis (1991), 296-312. For the excavations, cf. Meliades (1956), 265 and Charitonides (1979), 161-187.

20 Thompson (1949), 219.

21 Zachariadou (1984), 11 and Koilakou (1984), 60.

22 Thompson and Scranton (1943), 300, n. 38; Thompson (1952), 92-93; Thompson and Wycherley (1972), 161; Townsend (1982), 272-274.

23 Forsén (1993), 507-521.

24 Travlos (1971), 466-467.

which border the area on the south and west. The course of the walls, both the Diateichisma and the Late Roman ones, needs to be clearly determined, as well as the burial places which lie outside of them. Also in need of attention are the ancient roads which led to the demes of Koile and Melite. Parallel to this, the ancient habitations and workshops which encircled the Pnyx and the slopes of the surrounding hills and were themselves hewn out of the natural rock, need to be investigated. This area of habitation, which spread northward from the little valley, also needs to be carefully studied, in the expectation that it will add much new information about everyday life in ancient Athens.

Also in need of study are the morphology of the area and the way it was used during the Roman Imperial period, especially during the time of Hadrian. To his time should be attributed the large pediments with their luxurious vegetation decoration which were found on the Hill of the Nymphs and the handsome head, "the Athena of the Pnyx", which was found a short distance to the north of the large retaining wall.[25] The Late Roman wall — that ultimate memorial of the ancient world — also stood in the region of the Diateichisma and the East Stoa before the region was finally abandoned in the Middle Ages.[26]

All of these investigations are especially necessary today when the unification of the city's archaeological sites is being considered. These new excavations and the accompanying expropriation of land and new town-planning regulations which will close down a number of modern streets, will provide us with a clearer understanding of the heart of the ancient city — the pre-eminent religious centre, the Acropolis, the commercial centre, the Agora and the meeting place of the free and democratic Athenian people, the Pnyx.

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25 For the large pediments with luxurious vegetation decoration, cf. Börker (1976), 264-278. For "the Athena of the Pnyx" (Athens National Museum 3718), cf. Theophaneides (1930-31), 171-176, Karouzou (1967), 66 and Travlos (1971), 476, fig. 601.

26 For evidence concerning the Slavic destruction of A.D. 582, cf. the osteotheke and its contents excavated in 1947 in Sophroniskos Street on the east slope of the Philopappos Hill. Cf. Threpsiades (1971), 10-11, no. 2, fig. 1 and Metcalf (1962), 144-145 and 157. Metcalf wrongly believed that Sophroniskos Street was situated to the south of the Temple of Olympian Zeus. This mistake is repeated by Frantz (1988), 94.

General Bibliography

References to ancient authors in the Proceedings follow the abbreviations of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*[2], with occasional expansion for clarity. The references to modern literature follow the Harvard system, giving only the author's name and the date of publication in the footnotes, whereas the full bibliographical references are printed in this bibliography. All abbreviations of serials in this bibliography follow the system used in *The American Journal of Archaeology* 95 (1991), 1-16.

In addition the following abbreviations have been used in the Proceedings:

IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Berlin 1873-
I.Iasos = *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien* 28.1-28.2. *Die Inschriften von Iasos* I-II, Bonn 1985.
I.Ephesos = *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien* 11.1-17.4. *Die Inschriften von Ephesos* I-VIII, Bonn 1979-1984.
SEG = *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden 1923-

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Fig. 57. Athens, Panathenaic Stadium and Theatre of Lykourgos, hypothetical view, *ca.* 329 B.C.

Fig. 58. Athens. Interior view of Compartment Wall on Mouseion Hill. Cf. Thompson and Scranton (1943), 326, fig. 36. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Fig. 59. Athens. Excavated section of White Poros Wall on the Observatory Hill (cf. Fig. 61b). (A) Curtain wall, (B) Spur wall. Cf. Thompson and Scranton (1943), 344, fig. 45. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Fig. 60. Athens. Tower W7 of White Poros Wall on the Observatory Hill. Rusticated panels with drafted margins. Cf. Thompson and Scranton (1943), 349, fig. 51. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Fig. 61a-m. Plans of spur walls discussed by L. Karlsson. All drawn to the same scale (1:200).

Fig. 62. View of inner side of city wall of Gela (at Caprosoprano), showing spur walls. Photo by L. Karlsson.

Fig. 63. View of inner side of city wall at Perge, showing vossoir arches on spur walls. Photo by L. Karlsson.

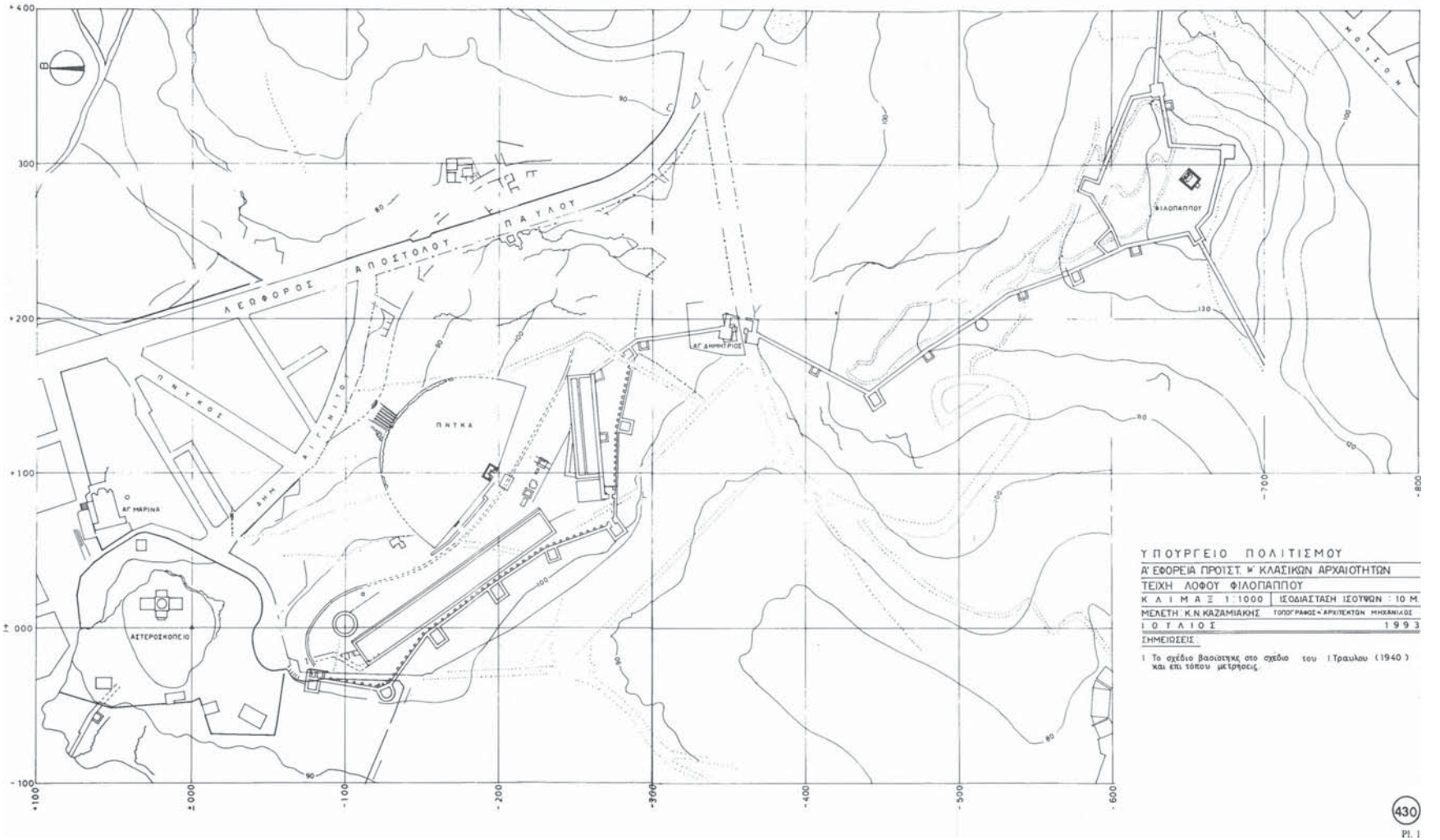
Fig. 64. Perge. Close-up view of masonry of round tower at main gate. Note the alternating layers of headers and stretchers (*la maniera romana* technique) and the panels of rustication with drafted margins. Photo by L. Karlsson.

Fig. 65. View of inner side of city wall at Side. Corbelled arches on spur walls discernible behind bushes. Photo by L. Karlsson.

Fig. 66. View of inner side of 13th-century city wall at Visby, showing Gothic pointed arches on spur walls. Photo by L. Karlsson.

Fig. 67. Main gateway through the Compartment Wall, with (1) original portions shown in solid black; (2) additions contemporary with the White Poros Wall distinguished by hatching. Cf. Thompson and Scranton (1943), 318, fig. 29. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Fig. 68. Tower W2 in the White Poros Wall, seen from the west. Cf. Thompson and Scranton (1943), 339, fig. 44. Courtesy of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ

Α' ΕΦΟΡΕΙΑ ΠΡΟΪΣΤ. Κ' ΚΛΑΣΙΚΩΝ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΤΗΤΩΝ

ΤΕΙΧΗ ΛΟΦΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΠΠΟΥ

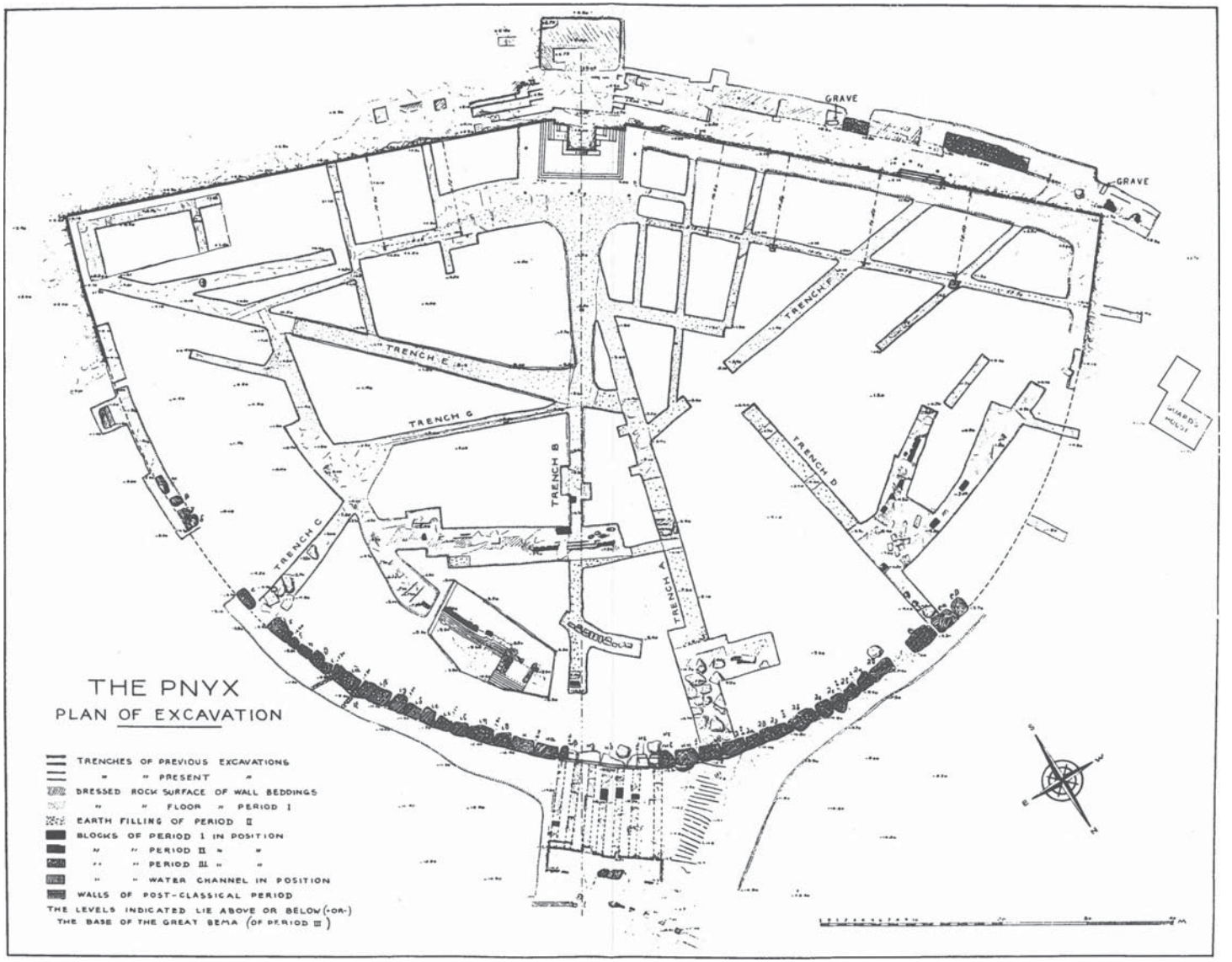
ΚΛΙΜΑΞ 1:1000 | ΙΣΟΔΙΑΣΤΑΣΗ ΙΣΟΥΨΩΝ : 10 Μ.

ΜΕΛΕΤΗ: Κ.Ν. ΚΑΖΑΜΙΑΚΗΣ ΤΟΠΟΓΡΑΦΟΣ-ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΩΝ ΜΗΧΑΝΙΚΟΣ

ΙΟΥΛΙΟΣ 1993

ΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΕΙΣ:

1. Το σχέδιο βασίστηκε στο σχέδιο του Γ. Τραυλου (1940) και επι τόπου μετρησεις.


GRAVE
GRAVE
TRENCH F
TRENCH E
TRENCH G
TRENCH B
TRENCH D
TRENCH C
TRENCH A
GUARD'S HOUSE
THE PNYX
PLAN OF EXCAVATION
TRENCHES OF PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS
" " PRESENT "
DRESSED ROCK SURFACE OF WALL BEDDINGS
" " FLOOR " PERIOD I
EARTH FILLING OF PERIOD II
BLOCKS OF PERIOD I IN POSITION
" " PERIOD II " "
" " PERIOD III " "
" " WATER CHANNEL IN POSITION
WALLS OF POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD
THE LEVELS INDICATED LIE ABOVE OR BELOW (-OR-)
THE BASE OF THE GREAT BEMA (OF PERIOD III)