RETHINKING EARLY IRON AGE ATHENS:
NEW FINDS FROM THE AREA OF THE ACADEMY OF PLATO

The rescue excavations of the last two decades in Athens added new important archaeological evidence, which is being only gradually, if at all, digested and incorporated into recent studies. Scholarly interest mostly focuses on the abundant funerary remains, even though domestic architectural finds, dating to the 8th century, are not absent. Except for the Agora, the area south of the Acropolis, extending to Kynosarges, the north slopes of the Areopagos and the area east of the Kerameikos seem to have been inhabited.

Although mostly known for its Late Classical and Roman history, as reflected on its name, the Academy of Plato, one of the oldest and now among the most depressed neighborhoods of modern Athens, is of immense importance for the study of Early Iron Age Athens. The excavations of Phoivos Stavropoulos under the auspices of the Athens Archaeological Society in the 50’s revealed the Geometric past of the area with the “Sacred House”, marked as the most significant discovery. This structure is a rare example in the Attic landscape and unique, since almost solely made of mudbrick. Although assigned a cultic function by its excavator, its character puzzled scholars until very recently, especially due to the lack of a detailed publication of the relevant finds. The completion of the study of the clay material from the site in combination with the thorough study of the excavation diaries questioned the ritual character of the edifice, while urging the need for the re-examination these remains. In this frame, the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens, undertook a small-scale excavation of the “Sacred House” in 2015, after a request of A. Mazarakis Ainian, which preceded its “re-burial” as part of an enhancement program of the area.

This paper presents the results of this excavation, which succeeded in enlightening the function of this edifice. The new archaeological data, combined with the re-evaluation of the Geometric material and the documentation of the old excavation, showed that the “Sacred House” should be better conceived as part of domestic complexes, which belonged to a wider habitation nucleus, which was inhabited for a short period, spanning the second half of the eighth century BC. The domestic character of the remains is well verified by the type of the related clay vases, and the numerous clay spindle whorls.
The reconstruction of a Late Geometric hamlet at the site of the Academy only a few kilometres far from the centre of Athens is an important new addition to the list of the sparse domestic architectural remains of the last decades of the 8th century known from Athens. As such, it supports the model of dispersed settlement pattern for the early polis. The architectural remains throw some more light on the components of the LG Attic domestic clusters, which included not only houses, but also industrial structures, such as a pottery workshop and burial grounds. This habitation nucleus must have been occupied by an extended kinship group, whose members resided and then buried in the close vicinity, as indicated by the discovered small clusters of children and adult burials.

More interestingly, the site seems to have served as a lieu de mémoire, a place thus with intense mnemonic significance. The choice of this specific location for the foundation of the edifices does not seem to have been accidental and unrelated to the prior domestic and funerary uses of the site, going back to the Early Helladic and Protogeometric periods. Its significance is further indicated by the discovery of an extended cult deposit in its close proximity. This location must have acted as a “memoryscape”, carrying a mnemonic significance, charged with the memories of the older ritual and funerary practices taking place in its close vicinity and reinvented within the framework of the ideology of a kinship group, playing a vital role for its identity.

Dr. Alexandra Alexandridou
Scientific Collaborator
CReA-Patrimoine
Université libre de Bruxelles

Dr. Maria Chountasi
Independent Researcher