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A Roman 'House' in Mytilene

by Caroline and Hector Williams¹

Finding an appropriate topic for an article to honour Catherine and Don leads to an *embarras de richesse* of possibilities. We have chosen this one both because it includes areas of both their interests (erotica and lamps) and because they joined us at Mytilene (Lesbos) for parts of several study seasons while Don was working on the lamps. The building in question is a well-appointed Roman peristyle structure of early Severan date near the North Harbour of that metropolis; it seems to have fallen on hard times in its last period of use in the late 3rd to mid 4th century after Christ and its possible final use is the subject of this paper².

Mytilene has been surprisingly neglected by scholars in spite of its importance as one of the major cities of the north-eastern Aegean and the fame of its local poets Sappho and Alkaios. Apart from a German study of the island in the late 19th century there has been little systematic work on Lesbos, especially for Roman times (Koldewey 1890). In the Julio-Claudian period in particular the city enjoyed close relations with the ruling dynasty; more dedications to Augustus and his successors have been found in Mytilene than anywhere else in the Greek East, for example (Vermeule 1968, 204-5)³. In 1986 the Canadian Archaeolo-



Fig. 1 — Mytilene from the south, showing the flat built-up area over the former channel.

gical Institute at Athens in collaboration with the 10th Ephoreia of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities began a joint excavation of an important site on Nikomedia Street 100 m or so from the ancient shoreline⁴. A season of earlier salvage excavations in 1960 by Seraphim Charitonides had revealed there structures of some interest, but his discovery of the well known 'House of Menander' on the western slopes of ancient Mytilene and then his subsequent death in an automobile accident prevented any fur-

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² For preliminary reports see Williams & Williams (1987a, 1987b). We thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding our work at Mytilene and our colleague, Mme Aglaia Archontidou, Ephor of Antiquities, for her support since our work started on Lesbos. We also acknowledge the support of the then Mayor of Mytilene, Mr Stratis Pallis, and the Council and the Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens for its assistance in various ways. Annual reports appeared in the journal *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical View* from 1984-1991.

³ Others have been found since then.

⁴ We acknowledge with gratitude the generosity of our co-investigator, Mme Aglaia Archontidou, and her staff at the K' Ephoreia. The site itself is an irregular quadrilateral between Dikili and Nikomedia Streets. Landfill along the south side of the harbour has somewhat diminished its original size and moved the sea's edge further from our site.

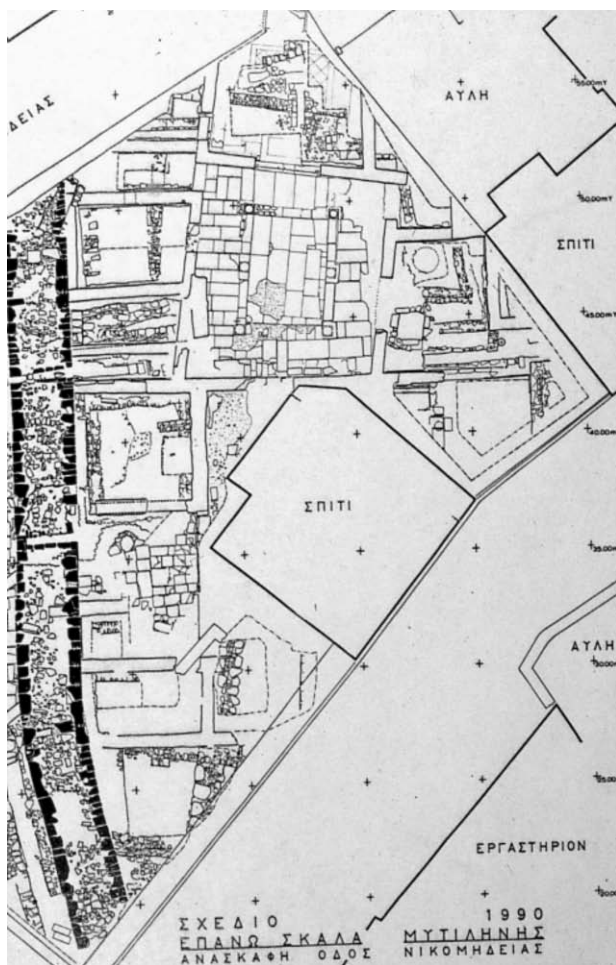


Fig. 2 — Plan of the site, with the city wall to the left.

ther investigations at the site (Charitonides 1961). The site is a complex one of many periods of use and our excavations every year from 1986-1990 revealed much about it.

A long section of the late classical city wall runs through the western side of the site, which suggests that the original channel that divided the island part of the city from the mainland must have been nearby (Figs 1-2). Longus at the opening of *Daphnis and Chloe* speaks of bridges of gleaming white stone that linked the two sections and in fact arches of one such bridge were found several hundred metres south of our site⁵. By Roman times, however, the city wall seems to have partly disappeared and some of its blocks may have been recycled into new neighbouring buildings. The channel itself continued to exist until the early 16th century.



Fig. 3 — View of the site.

The site itself proved to be a multi-period one with remains extending from the early 20th century back to at least the 7th century BC. A Greek stable, soap factory and public latrine (post 1912), an Ottoman cemetery complete with vampire burial, and a few medieval scraps overlay the area. Most conspicuous, however, were the well preserved walls and courtyard of a peristyle building of Roman imperial times. The presence of the cemetery (attested in the German plan of 1890 and by several fragmentary inscribed Ottoman tombstones found in our excavations) over the building ensured preservation of walls up to 2 m height in places. Recent salvage excavations by the K' Ephoreia in the northern area of the city have demonstrated that there was a considerable number of such well appointed buildings in 2nd- and 3rd-century Mytilene, most with figured mosaics and some with wall paintings⁶. Even 40 years ago another salvage excavation by Charitonides revealed the well known late 3rd century House of Menander with its many unusual mosaic scenes from various plays of the Hellenistic Athenian writer (Charitonides *et al* 1970).

The building in question seems basically to be a reconstruction and expansion in the early Severan period of a smaller Augustan structure (Figs 2-4)⁷. Because adjoining streets, lots and houses still cover parts of the building, a final assessment of its original function and size is difficult. It could have been the house of a well-to-do family, the offices of a guild or of a professional orga-

⁵ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 1. Although discovered over twenty years ago the bridge remains unpublished but visible under a modern building across from the ruin of a large early 19th-century mosque.

⁶ Published briefly in Archontidhou (1999).

⁷ The date is based on an analysis of architectural forms; excavation under the floors on two sides took us immediately back to an Hellenistic structure of unknown purpose while under a third side we encountered a mass of fill apparently brought in from an Hellenistic industrial dump to level the site. It included remains of pottery and figurine manufacture (moulds), bronze working (crucible with slag), horn and bone working, and even dyeing (numerous murex shells both crushed and pierced for removal of dye-bearing glands).

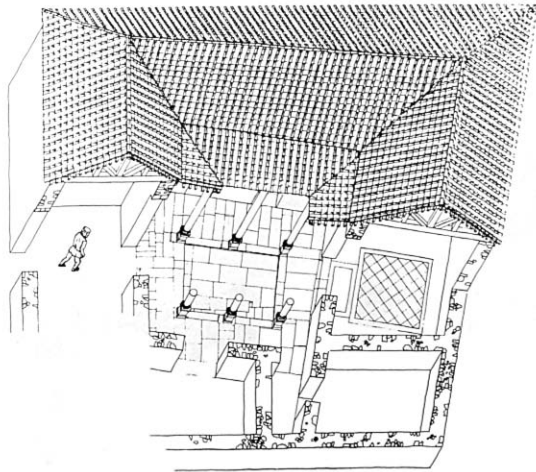


Fig. 4 — Restoration of the building.

nization, or even a public structure like the harbour master's office. A group of rooms was laid out around a central courtyard that was paved with marble and had a drain tucked away on the west side to carry off rain water. The courtyard was colonnaded with Ionic columns standing on high plinths. The large room on the south preserved extensive traces of painted wall plaster on its east and north walls; the decorative patterns were mostly simple and linear⁸. The large room to its east originally had a floor paved with fine stone slabs, all of which had been removed; only their traces on the well mortared setting remained. At a late point in its history its wide door on to the colonnade was blocked by a dry stone wall of neatly worked small rectangular blocks. Continuing counterclockwise there is a smaller room with Roman walls built on Hellenistic walls which in turn rest on archaic walls going back to the late 6th century BC; strangely, no traces of the original floor to go with any of them survive, which suggests that floors were of earth. Beside this room is a narrow corridor with a drain running its length. The west side preserves parts of rooms at a slightly higher level with a bit of plain white mosaic still remaining in one corner.



Fig. 5 — Lamps.

The final phase of our building was evident from the excavated remains: times had changed. The peristyle colonnade appears to have been blocked up by crude walls built between the columns although many of them were removed by Charitonides before our work began. A crude stairway on the west side led either up to a second floor or part of the roof⁹. The floor was covered with a deposit in places 0.5 m thick of fallen roof tiles and other debris like many small fragments of painted wall plaster. Coins indicated the event happened around the early to middle 4th century with little apparently happening at the site until it became an Ottoman cemetery, probably in the 19th century¹⁰. Although John Hayes, following Charitonides' coin evidence which we have not yet been able to examine, suggests a date toward the middle of the century, we suspect in fact a somewhat earlier date, perhaps in the first quarter at the latest¹¹.

A variety of finds in the fill suggest the purpose that the building may have served. They include wine amphorai, bowls, including the latest known appearance of Çandarlı Ware in over a hundred different pails of pottery (Hayes 1972, 316-22)¹², dozens of bone hairpins, numerous astragaloi (pierced to be carried on a cord), and – most curious

⁸ This part of the site had been uncovered by Charitonides in 1960 but only partially excavated. Our joint project with Mme Archontidou uncovered the rest of the house, some foundations of Hellenistic buildings below it, and remains going back to the late 7th century BC west of it.

⁹ The presence of large quantities of roof tiles indicates a pitched roof, however. The stone and cement walls are sturdy enough to have supported a second storey.

¹⁰ We found a few later sherds of early to middle Byzantine date and a couple of coins post 4th century. The exact date of establishment of the Turkish cemetery is not clear; it does not seem to appear in an unpublished drawing of c. 1800 by Sir William Gell (now in the Greek and Roman Department of the British Museum; we thank Don Bailey for bringing it to our attention) but is clear on the German plan of 1890 in Koldewey 1890. The cemetery was vandalized some time after the liberation of Lesbos in November 1912; a soap factory, a stable and eventually a public toilet were set up on the site according to elderly local informants; we removed the toilet in the course of our excavations. The site is visible still with no buildings on it in an RAF aerial photograph of 1916.

¹¹ Our own excavations produced no datable coins from this level.

¹² Thanks to the generosity of the excavator, Seraphim Charitonides, John Hayes had the opportunity to examine much of the ceramic evidence from the site while preparing his study of late Roman pottery. He pointed out the late appearing Çandarlı Ware found with coins of c. AD 320-340 and some early 4th century African Red Slip Ware sherds. The material would benefit from further study as the pottery evidence seems earlier than the numismatic. Dr Hayes recently informed us (spring 2005) that his work in the Athenian Agora has revealed more Çandarlı Ware of the late 3rd-mid 4th centuries, confirming the Mytilene dates.



Fig. 6 — Çandarli ware bowl from abandonment levels, late 3rd-early 4th century AC. Diameter at rim 140 mm.



Fig. 7 — Cosmetic spatula (left) and hairpins.

– a number of disks from terracotta lamps with erotic symplegmata on them (Fig. 5). What is particularly unusual about the lamp fragments is the fact that they are all 1st century in date and appear to have been kept as someone's collection of pornography for nearly three centuries. A description of the different types of principal finds with brief commentary follows:

Amphorai: two complete transport amphorai and fragments of numerous others were found in the abandonment level. Generally dated to the later 3rd century/early 4th centuries CE these so-called Aegean or Kapitani II amphorai were a popular medium sized container of the



Fig. 8 — Astragali.

period (Robinson 1959, Group M, pl. 28, M237). Of particular interest was the lower part and toe of one such container with an inscription scratched on to it relating to *garum* (ΓΑΡΟΣ), the popular Roman fish sauce, which seems to imply that it was produced locally. Such light industry continued in the area until less than a decade ago when the local sardine packing workshops just outside the Lower Castle a few hundred metres away were finally closed down.

Fineware Bowls: most significant are complete and fragmentary bowls in what appears to be the latest appearance of an Aegean Red Gloss ware of the type traditionally known as Çandarli Ware (Fig. 6). It is clear from Hayes' study that these wares not only had a wide distribution but were also frequently produced locally. Our types include Hayes Forms 1-5, which generally are 3rd century elsewhere.

Glasswares: no complete study has as yet been done of the hundreds of fragments of glass vessels from the site, but preliminary examination indicates that a good number of them belonged to drinking cups¹³. Indeed by the 3rd century it is likely that glass drinking cups had largely replaced earlier pottery varieties.

Bone objects: the level produced a considerable number of bone hairpins of different sizes as well as a few cosmetic implements (Fig. 7). Such pins are typical of Roman sites all over Greece with their long shaft and bulbous heads (Davidson 1952, 279-80)¹⁴. The cosmetic implements are more spatulate in form.

Astragals: astragals or knucklebones from sheep and goats, usually pierced to carry on a cord, were numerous;

¹³ Dr Jenny Price, University of Durham, is studying the glass from our other excavations on the acropolis.

¹⁴ There are also over a 100 (as yet unpublished) from the University of Chicago's excavations at Kenchreai, eastern port of ancient Corinth, where a substantial Roman brick building beside the harbour has been identified as a sanctuary of Aphrodite. See also Biro 1994, 30-35, for a useful discussion and illustrations of the 287 examples in the National Museum of Hungary.

they are very common finds at Roman sites (Fig. 8). While generally they were used for gambling they could be used for lot oracles.

Lamps: lamps from the level included a complete Athenian import of the first half of the 4th century CE and a probably local copy taken from a surmoulage as well as disk fragments from earlier lamps of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE (Fig. 5)¹⁵. Perhaps significant for the interpretation of the last phase of the building is the fact that a number of the representations are of erotic symplegmata. Three appear from 1st century lamps and one from a Corinthian import of the 2nd or possibly early 3rd century CE¹⁶. It seems at least possible that these images had been kept by an antique porn collector, only to be abandoned with the building. There is very little earlier Roman pottery from the site, a fact that suggests the lamps are not residual.

Sundial: an unusual discovery in the abandonment debris was about half of a small sundial in a coarse grey marble. It preserves a simple segment of a cone on a tenon-like stand and appears to have been designed for a different latitude¹⁷.

The above material certainly suggests a tavern with perhaps prostitutes available for the clientele. The main commercial harbour of the city in antiquity was a short distance away and indeed even until recently before the first steps of gentrification began the area (especially the lower castle or Kato Kastro) was notorious for the number of its brothels. In the past few decades it has been the large numbers of soldiers and sailors stationed on the island that perhaps accounts for the at times Felliniesque prostitutes occasionally visible. Recent years have seen a marked increase in the study of such facilities, especially in the Roman world at Pompeii where the evidence is most extensive¹⁸. Yet every town and certainly every port must have been well supplied with them in a variety of guises¹⁹.

Study and publication of the site are still underway, but we hope that this brief paper will bring another aspect of a most interesting but little known ancient city to the wider attention of the scholarly world.

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¹⁵ For an illustration of the late lamps see Williams & Williams 1987a, 1987b.

¹⁶ The Corinthian lamp is a rare example from the north-eastern Aegean of the fine products of this city which were exported widely around the Mediterranean; for a discussion see Williams 1981.

¹⁷ Dr. Roderick Millar is preparing the publication of the sundial and we thank him for allowing us to mention his discovery of the latitude problem. For a preliminary publication of the object see Williams 1989 and for a similar lamp from Kos see Gibbs (1976) 264.

¹⁸ For a recent bibliography see T. McGinn 2002, 43-46; particularly useful is his discussion of 'What is a brothel?' (11-13) and 'The purpose-built brothel' (13-15). See also McGinn 2004: note his discussion (p. 268) of the difficulty of interpreting the bejewelled skeleton of a possible prostitute recently found at Moregine south of Pompeii, and the difficulties of what is or is not a brothel at places like Rome, Ostia, Catania, Doura Europos, Ephesos and Sayala in Nubia (Ch. 8, 220-39).

¹⁹ It is amusing that Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* includes scenes set in a brothel in Mytilene, a rare reference to that town in English literature. The authors inadvertently lived in one (masquerading as an apartment hotel) for three weeks during our first survey season in 1983, but that story will have to wait for our memoirs. *Filles de joie* from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union now abound in town, it is said.