

# A spolia ostotheke from Metropolis and Early Christian burial traditions

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## Abstract

This article examines the different uses made of a marble ostotheke (ossuary) that was discovered in 2021 during archaeological excavations in and around the church in the Araplıtepe district, near the ancient city of Metropolis. Information about the chest's original use as a funerary object and its production date and ownership is followed by a discussion of its recycled (spolia) use as a sedimentation tank on a water channel, and by an explanation of its third and final function. A bronze lamp discovered inside the ostotheke provides important clues about the object's final use and its relationship with its surroundings. Christian burials in and around the church dating to as early as the fifth to sixth centuries AD also provide insights into these processes. This ostotheke, which served a variety of functions from the second to the seventh centuries AD, shows that objects made in Roman times might continue to be used in different ways for a long time thereafter. This article therefore examines the ostotheke as a reflection and extension of the changing needs of people and communities over time, rather than simply as a carved marble object.

## Özet

Bu çalışma, Metropolis Antik Kenti'nin Araplıtepe Mevkii'nde yer alan kilise ve çevresinde 2021 yılında sürdürülen arkeolojik araştırmalarda tespit edilen mermer bir ostotheke'nin farklı kullanım süreçlerini ve yöntemlerini konu almaktadır. Ostotheke'nin bir mezar anıtı olarak üretim tarihi ve kime ait olduğu gibi asıl kullanımına yönelik bilgilere değinilmiş, ardından da spolia buluntu durumundaki su çöktürme/dinlendirme havuzu işlevi değerlendirilmiştir. Ayrıca son kullanım evresinde üçüncü bir işlevle alandaki fonksiyonu üzerine açıklamalar yapılmaya çalışılmıştır. İçerisinde bulunan bronz bir kandil, ostotheke'nin son kullanımı ve çevresiyle olan ilişkisinin aydınlatılması açısından önemli ipuçları sunmaktadır. Kilise ve çevresinde MS 5.–6. yüzyıldan itibaren başlayan Hristiyan mezarları da bu sürecin anlaşılmasına katkı sağlayan unsurlardır. MS 2. yüzyıldan, en erken MS 7. yüzyıla kadar çeşitli fonksiyonlarla kullanıldığı anlaşılan ostotheke sayesinde, Roma Dönemi'nde üretilen bir eserin sonraki uzun süre boyunca farklı işlevlerle kullanımının devam ettiği anlaşılmıştır. Bu açıdan çalışma, ostotheke'nin sadece mermer bir yontu olarak değerlendirilmesinden çok, onun kullanım ömrünün toplum hayatındaki ihtiyaçlara göre uzatılmasını ve buna bağlı olarak dönüştürülmesini açıklamaktadır.

Spread out over the summit, down the sides and around the base of a hill located between Yeniköy and Özbey in Izmir's Torbalı township, the ancient city of Metropolis was situated in Ionia (Figs 1–2). The earliest settlers here were undoubtedly attracted both by the fertility of the Torbalı plain immediately below, and by the abundant water of the Cayster (ancient Kaystros) river nearby (Aybek, Arslan 2023: 17–18). The site's 1,500-year unin-

terrupted preservation of its identity as a city is also due to the economic prosperity made possible by its location. Prior to Metropolis, the two most important settlements in the region were the Dedicik-Heybelitepe mound, located 2km south of the city, and the Bademgediği mound (Puranda?) located 7km to the north (Meriç 2004: 25–34). Although habitation at Metropolis can be traced back to the Early Bronze Age with the help of small finds, the site



Figure 1. Aerial view of Metropolis (© Metropolis Excavation).

can definitively be considered a planned city only from the third century BC onwards. The oldest architectural remains from this period are the ashlar masonry city walls enclosing the acropolis, a bouleterion and stoa in the city centre, and a theatre on the southern hillside. During Roman times, Metropolis expanded into the plain below, and the process was accelerated with the addition of bath complexes, an agora, civil residences and villas. Another factor that always contributed to Metropolis's urbanisation is its proximity to Ephesus, only 30km away. Metropolis prospered due to its location on the principle route between Smyrna to the north and Ephesus to the south, making it a natural stopping place for trade caravans and travellers. Metropolis remained economically well off for some time into Late Antiquity, but the city began to decline from the seventh century AD onwards. The advent of Christianity at Metropolis led to the construction of a bishopric church during this period. This church, located in the Araplitepe district of the site, is where the ostotheke that is the subject of this article was found. Apart from the church, the Byzantine period at Metropolis is also attested to by farmhouses and workshops that were discovered amidst major

structures from earlier times, such as the theatre and baths. The construction of a medieval fortress in the Late Byzantine period is the final phase of the urbanisation process at Metropolis. After the region came under Turkish control, the ancient city was abandoned and settlement shifted entirely to the surrounding plain.

#### **The historical background and topography of the excavation site (Araplitepe church)**

The church where the ostotheke and bronze lamp were found is located in the Araplitepe district, on the northeast side of the hill on which the city is located. Archaeological excavations in this area began in 1990 and continued intermittently until 2005. They resumed in earnest in 2021 as part of an expanded new project. Architectural evidence indicates that the Araplitepe church had a triple-nave basilical plan with an east-west primary axis. So far, excavators at the site have uncovered parts of the church's northern and southern walls and a section of the apse at the east. The outlines of the structure can be identified using existing measurements and the high-lying bedrock in the west. The bedrock formation extends north-south

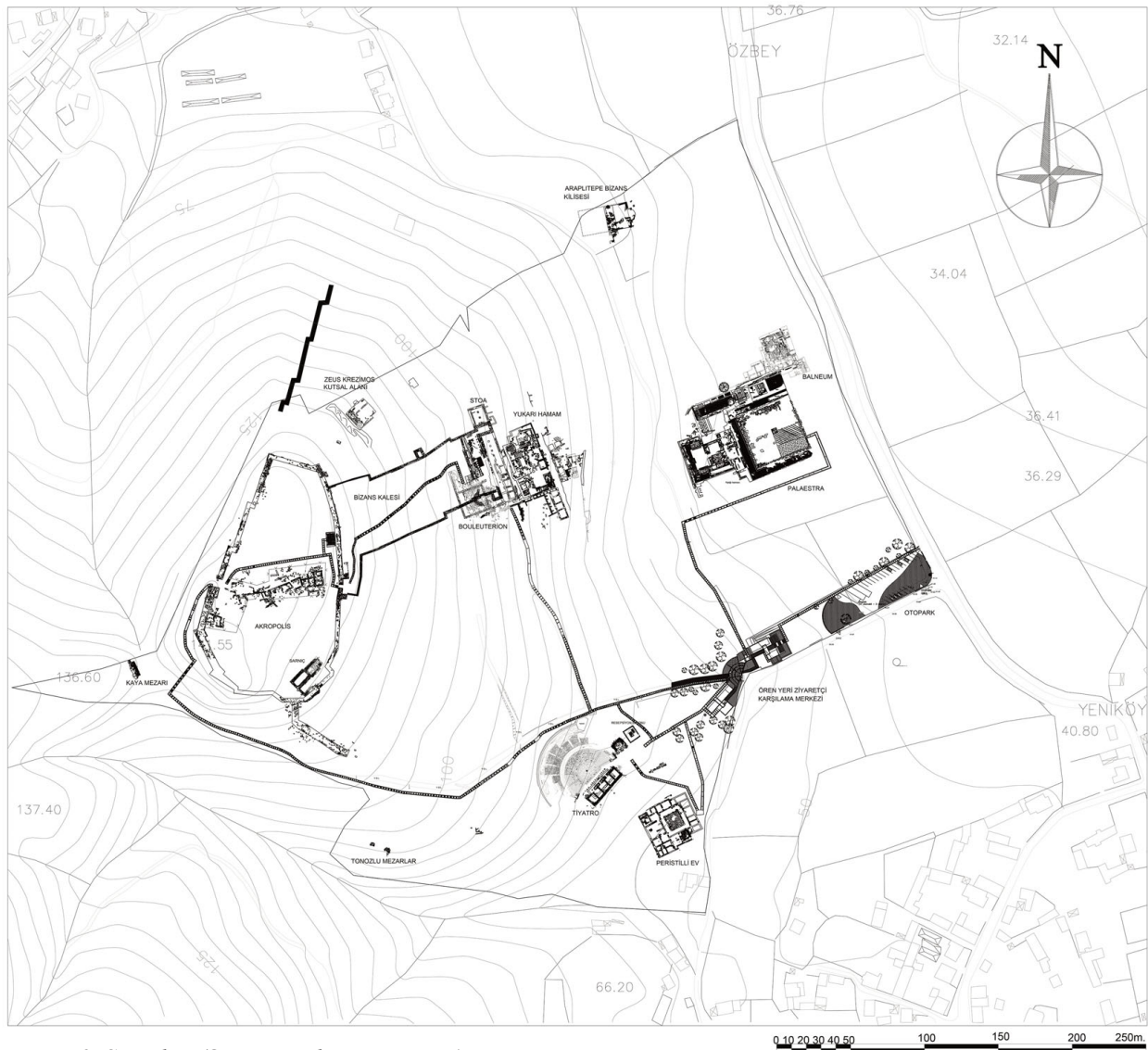


Figure 2. Site plan (© Metropolis Excavation).

and is visible on the northeastern side of the Metropolis hill. The fact that the foundations of this house of worship were anchored in the bedrock is interesting inasmuch as the same technique was used in the much earlier Zeus Krezimos cult area that was unearthed in 2015.

The construction of this church used a large amount of building material scavenged from Metropolis's Hellenistic and Roman-period structures (spolia), the majority of which consisted of statue pedestals bearing inscriptions and marble slabs. All the available evidence suggests that the church could not have been built before the fifth century AD. That dating is consistent with the sixth-century date ascribed to the Metropolis church in Hierocles's list of episcopal churches (Hierocles *Synecdemvs* 660.9). Archaeological evidence indicates that the original church remained in use throughout the Byzantine period. However, during Late Byzantine times,

the dimensions of the church were reduced and only the central nave continued to be used. After the structure ceased to function as a house of worship, the area around the church became a cemetery, into which were incorporated earlier burials.

### The archaeological context

The Christian identity of Metropolis was greatly enhanced by the emergence of this part of Asia Minor as a major pilgrimage centre, and by the construction of monasteries across Mount Galleion, which extends south and west from the city as far as Ephesus. Saint Lazarus (AD 968–1054), a stylite, is known to have preached in three great monasteries on Mount Galleion (Aybek et al. 2009: 20). This fact provides evidence that Metropolis remained an important locus of Christian worship for about eight centuries without interruption.



Figure 3a. The Araplıtepe church and its surroundings (© Metropolis Excavation).

It is well documented that many pagan temples were repurposed as churches during the Early Byzantine period, with places of pagan worship being given a Christian makeover (Yıldırım 2021: 390). A prime example of this is the conversion of the so-called Serapis temple in Ephesus, a city with which Metropolis had close and lasting sociocultural ties, into a church in Late Antiquity (Alık-Yazıcı, Üreten 2020: 468). The church designated 'EA' at the site of ancient Sardis was originally a basilica that was converted into a church, and its pagan tombs and sarcophagi were reused for Christian burials (Buchwald 2015: 91). Although the Araplıtepe church is located in an area on the northwest hillside that once was home to pagan sacred sites in Metropolis, there is currently no clear evidence that it had a temple or basilica predecessor. During the Christian period, the area around the church also served as an important cemetery. The presence of

Christian burials in the ancient Zeus Krezimos cult area west of the church, as well as the discovery of traces of sweetgum tree resin (presumably used in funeral ceremonies), provide further evidence of the development and spread of Christianity at Metropolis. (Aybek, Arslan 2020: 124–26).

Investigations of burials at and near the church have shown that the area was used for this purpose from the Early Byzantine period onwards. The grave types and goods found at the site indicate that the graves were in use until the late 13th century (Fig. 3a–b). These graves are simple trenches dug into the earth. They all have an east-west orientation. The dead were laid out in a supine position with their head at the western end and their hands joined over their chest. Interred bodies were covered over with bricks or slabs of slate (Aybek, Arslan 2020: 125, fig. 19). In the Late Byzantine period, the area of the church

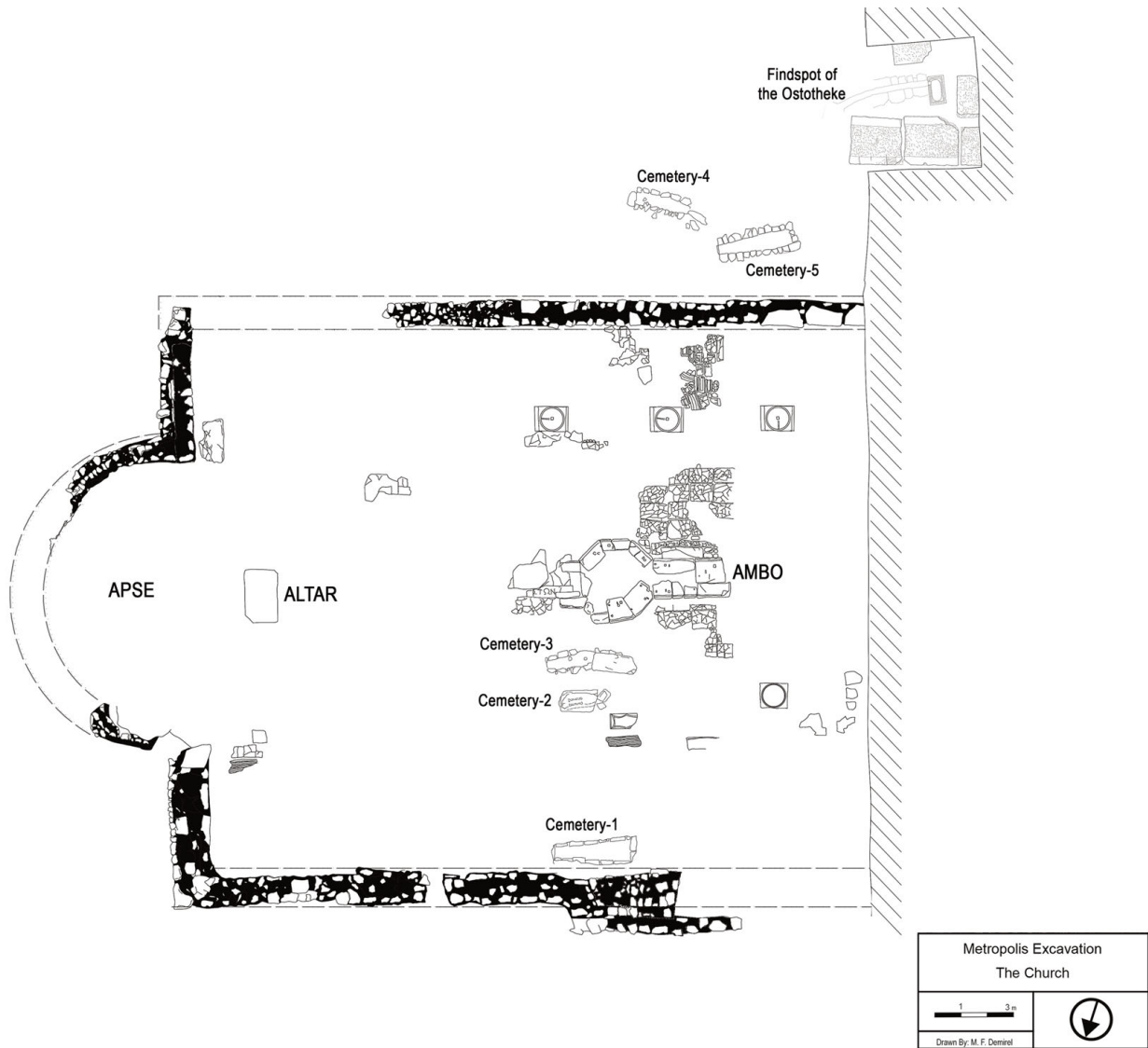


Figure 3b. *The Araplitepe church and its surroundings* (© Metropolis Excavation).

was reduced when benches were installed on either side of the ambo, converting the space into a cemetery. The ambo's carved marble slabs were later used to cover graves, as they were no longer needed for their original purpose. Some of the graves investigated have revealed various grave offerings, along with skeletons. During exploratory excavations in the southern area of the church in 1990, a bronze censer (incense burner) was found at the feet of a skeleton, and a fragment of a needle at its head (Fig. 4). The censer has a hexagonal body and originally stood on three feet, only two of which have survived. Three pierced lugs are located on the rim, each aligned with one of the feet. Chains would have been attached to these lugs. The rim and base of the body are decorated with profiled sills (Waldbaum 1983: 99, pl. 37, nos 577–78; Crawford 1990: 99, fig. 566; Militsi 2012: 272, fig. 14; Altun, Erginer 2016: 557, 565, no. 15).



Figure 4. *Bronze incense-burner*. Izmir Museum 2001/80. H: 8cm, W: 7cm. 5th–6th century AD (by M. Yasa).



Figure 5. Christian-period grave containing a pair of horseshoes (© Metropolis Excavation).

Among other graves within the church area, a bronze ring was found in one and a bronze button or bead in another. In 2021, immediately north of the grave in which the ostotheke under discussion was found, investigators discovered two diminutive iron horseshoes that had been placed between the shinbones of the grave's occupant (Fig. 5).

On the southwestern side of the church, a bronze lamp discovered inside this repurposed ostotheke provides clues as to the final stage of the chest's use among the graves arrayed around it (Fig. 6a–b). In order to evaluate the different functions that were assigned to the ostotheke in its life course, and to appreciate the impact of spolia use in the historical process, one must understand the context-specific function not just of the ostotheke itself but also of other finds associated with it.

#### First use. The ostotheke of Atimetos

Ostothekeai were chests used to hold the cremated remains of the deceased (Çelgin 1994: 169). A well-documented Roman cultural practice and phenomenon, they are a common form of internment in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions of Asia Minor (Steskal 2019: 359). There is evidence that previously interred human remains were sometimes dug up and placed in ostothekeai so that the graves could be reused for new burials (Altun, Altun 2016: 498). The marble ostotheke discussed in this article was probably originally installed in a funerary structure elsewhere in the city before being used as spolia at the Araplitepe church. The most likely provenance would be a tomb located in the area on the southern and western side of the Metropolis hill that researchers have identified as a possible necropolis (Aybek, Arslan 2020: 115). However,

due to the relative ease of moving a marble chest of this size, the possibility that it came from outside the necropolis area cannot be ruled out (Altun, Altun 2016: 499–501). For these reasons, we cannot be certain about its original location. However, it is worth noting that another marble ostotheke (now on display in the Izmir Museum) was discovered not far from this one during excavations at Metropolis in 1990 (Fig. 9).

This ostotheke (Fig. 7) was discovered at Metropolis in 2021 and bears an inscription on its front that indicates its association with the tomb of Atimetos, who is identified as a Roman imperial official of Tiberius Claudius Germanicus (Boris Dreyer, pers. comm. December 2021). The bilingual (Latin and Greek) inscription is a single line carved below an elaborated garland on one of the longer sides of the rectangular chest. Ostothekeai with bilingual inscriptions similar to this one have been encountered at Ephesus (Thomas, İçten 1999: 552). Ostothekeai of this type share certain common exterior features. The fronts are elaborately decorated, while the shorter sides are only sketchily decorated and the backs are not finished at all (Figs 7–8). Together they make up a group of semi-finished ostothekeai that were produced especially in Ephesian ateliers (Thomas, İçten 1999: pl. 132, figs 1–3; 2007: 341, no. 2; Thomas 2005: 295, fig. 10.2; Büyükkolancı et al. 2010: 87–88, figs 1–2, 5; Koch 2010: 180, fig. 78; Yıldız 2021: 368, fig. 3a; 369, fig. 5a). Such a decorative treatment was likely motivated by economic concerns. Decorating only the visible front while leaving the sides and back unadorned would have significantly reduced production costs. The Atimetos ostotheke may therefore be attributed to the group of semi-finished ostothekeai decorated with garlands that were made in Ephesus. The earliest examples of these Ephesian ostothekeai date to the reign of Emperor Augustus, and the chests continued to be produced into the second century AD (Thomas, İçten 1999: 552). The decorative scheme of the Atimetos ostotheke's garland is somewhat unusual, however. In Roman funerary iconography, blossoms and plants symbolising spring and rebirth were employed in contexts associated with death. Meanwhile, Ephesian funerary garlands were typically decorated with autumn-harvested fruits such as pomegranates, figs and clusters of grapes, associating them with the end of life (Thomas, İçten 1999: 552). The Atimetos ostotheke garlands contain *both* roses and spring blossoms, and an autumn bounty.

The bottom corners of the front of the ostotheke are carved to resemble cuboidal feet. The base between the feet is bevelled, as is common in Ephesian ostothekeai of this type. The front of the chest is decorated with a central, full-faced bukephalion (head of an ox or bull) flanked by garlands. The elaborate and detailed decoration on the

front of the chest contrasts sharply with the much less elegantly carved sides. Each garland terminates with a ram's head carved in profile at the upper corner. The central bukephalion is depicted in great detail, with prominently bulging eyes, menacing eyebrows and sharply pointed elongated horns, between which is set a pair of floral decorations. The tips of the horns are bridged by a broad ribbon tied in a bow. The treatment of the ram's heads on the corners is no less detailed. Eyes and eyebrows are sharply delineated. The inward-curving horns are carved with parallel ridges to accurately represent actual bone structure and the forehead shock of wool is realistically depicted. The ram's heads are topped with the same tied-bow motif as the bukephalion. Each animal's head is flanked by a pair of descending ribbons that emerge from beneath the garlands. The garlands themselves consist of various plant and fruit motifs running between top and bottom borders of overlapping triple-leaf motifs carved in the lower relief. Among the decorations that may be identified in the high-relief garlands are grape clusters, pomegranates and figs. These are accompanied by pine cones, acorns, leaves, and flowers or rosettes. Some of the flowers and rosettes in particular are deeply pierced with finely drilled holes. Running beneath the garlands is a single-line inscription identifying the tomb's occupant: ATIMHTO•TI•CLAVDI•GHRMANICI•DISP•. Based on stylistic considerations, this object most likely dates to around the middle of the second century AD, which is towards the end of the production of such ostothekeai at Ephesus. Although Ephesus-made ostothekeai and another ossuary discovered at Metropolis (Fig. 9) share many features in common, their workmanship sets them quite apart from the much more richly decorated Atimetos example, whose delicate motifs are separated by deeply carved channels and linked together only by the thinnest of bridges. The stone-carving technique used on this ostotheke is characteristic of a style that did not become widespread until the second century AD. The lower-relief decorations of the ostotheke shown in Figure 10, on the other hand, are more representative of Ephesian atelier examples from the reign of Emperor Augustus. This raises the possibility that the Atimetos ostotheke (Figs 7–8) is not from Ephesus at all. Indeed, other than the evidence of such masterful craftsmanship, the chest's dimensions are inconsistent with Ephesian atelier production.

#### **Second use. A spolia ostotheke settling tank on a water channel**

The Atimetos ostotheke was discovered on a water channel running east-west and passing 6.10m from the north-western side of the church (Figs 6a–b, 10). Excavations undertaken to trace the course of the channel exposed

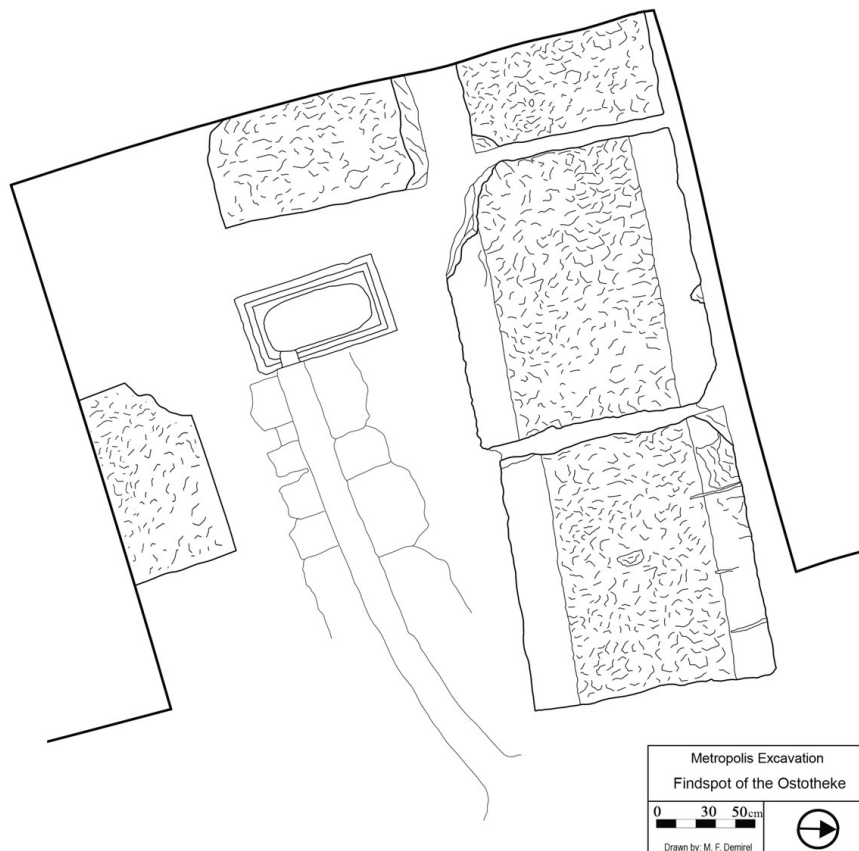


Figure 6a–b. The water channel and position of the spolia ostotheke (© Metropolis Excavation).





Figure 7. *The Atimetos ostotheke (front)* (© Metropolis Excavation).

2.40m of the line, up to a point where it was disrupted by deformation. The channel is 14cm wide and 13cm deep. It was carved directly into the bedrock and covered by square tiles arranged over it and along its sides (Fig. 10). Before reaching the ostotheke, water flowed through a carefully laid-out channel of rectangular marble building blocks. These blocks were spolia themselves, their surfaces having been shaped and aligned so as to facilitate the water's flow. The ostotheke's cover is missing. The chest was found buried so that its upper edge would have been flush with the ground. Water from the north would have filled the tank, which held it for a while so that debris, sediment and other particulate matter could precipitate. The water would then continue on its way south in a somewhat purified condition. The downstream face of the ostotheke was deliberately breached to allow the water to flow through. The traces of the sinter formed by the water in the ostotheke over time indicates that the canal performed this function for many years (Fig. 8).

The presence of a spolia ostotheke on a water channel is just one example of how Metropolitans reused the building materials of their predecessors and incorporated them into new structures throughout the city. Such spolia typically consist of architectural elements, some of which are inscribed. In rare cases, large fragments of statues and sculpture were also used as building materials in walls. The reuse of building materials was common in cities that had been continuously inhabited for as long as Metropolis

was. Economic considerations were the sole driver of these practices, and provide the historical context for the use of spolia as a building material. However ostothekeai are typically associated with funerary monuments, and their use as spolia in Metropolis is unprecedented. Another question that needs to be answered is when this marble chest from the second century AD was pressed into service, as spolia on a later-period water channel. While the reuse of architectural elements even from contemporary structures was not uncommon, the reuse of funerary objects *was*, especially if the object in question held the remains of a person who worshipped the same deities and shared the same culture and beliefs as the reusers. In Pagan-period Metropolis, tombs and graves were treated with the utmost respect and reverence. Thirteen funerary inscriptions from Hellenistic and Roman Metropolis document fines to be imposed or imprecations to be heaped on those who harmed or robbed a funeral monument in any way ([https://eden.wisski.data.fau.de/wisski\\_views/metropolis\\_inschriften](https://eden.wisski.data.fau.de/wisski_views/metropolis_inschriften)). The incorporation of a second-century AD ostotheke into a later-period water line may therefore be an indication that Paganism had lost all or at least some of its importance as a belief system. On that basis, it probably cannot be dated to earlier than the Early Christian period. However, even after the advent of Christianity, pre-Christian beliefs persisted to some degree for some time, and interventions into venerable funeral monuments associated with those beliefs would likely

have been discouraged. Archaeological finds from the area through which the water channel passes suggest that the church and its vicinity remained in use until Late Byzantine times.

**Third use. Graves and a bronze lamp: Late Antiquity and Early Christian funerary traditions and practices at Metropolis**

The ostotheke was found in a position that was consistent with its intended use as a settling tank on a water channel. There is no evidence that the object was ever disturbed after it was originally installed. However, when the tank was excavated, a bronze lamp was discovered inside (Fig. 6a). The lamp consists of two parts: a body and a lid. It was complete except for the pin that would have held the

two components together. The difference in colour between the two parts suggests that the compositions of their alloys are almost certainly not the same (Fig. 11). The body is rounded. The nozzle is long and upturned, terminating in a hexagonal ring that encloses a circular wick-hole. Each side of the nozzle is decorated with symmetrically placed ornamental volutes (Demirel-Gökalp 2002: 70). The keyhole-shaped pouring hole is fitted with a hinged lid that is surmounted by a tall, profiled knobbed handle. Opposite the nozzle is an oversized heart or ivy-shaped openwork-like ornamental handle that contains what appears to be a Tree of Life motif with incised branches. The underside of the lamp contains a socket indicating that it could have been attached to a stand or candelabrum. Objects similar to this



Figure 8. The Atimetos ostotheke (back, left side, from above, right side, front). Izmir Museum 2022/131. H. 30cm, W. 57cm, D.33cm (© Metropolis Excavation).

one are dated to the sixth and seventh centuries AD (Menzel 1969: 112, no. 693; Crawford 1990: 99, fig. 567. Papadopoulou 2005, no. 8; Fig. 10).

The lamp's features clearly date it to the Early Byzantine period, but its presence inside the ostotheke is a most extraordinary occurrence. Whether the lamp was deliberately placed in the ostotheke or not is uncertain. The lamp's upright position in the ostotheke when it was discovered suggests that its inclusion was intentional; however, the fact that the lid and lamp were found apart from one another casts doubt on this. Whether or not the lamp was placed in the ostotheke deliberately, the possibility that its presence is associated with the burials nearby must be considered. In Pre-Christian times, terracotta lamps were often placed in burials as grave goods. This

practice continued even after the advent of Christianity (Poulou-Papadimitriou et al. 2012: 391, 416), but that is not true of bronze lamps. Based on this, the discovery of the lamp in the ostotheke rather than in one of the nearby graves may be linked to funeral ceremonies and rituals in some way. The liturgical meanings and symbolic implications of continuously burning sources of illumination in Christian cemeteries may provide important clues about the purpose of this lamp.

Burial finds from Metropolis, especially those from graves in and around the Araplitepe church, offer insights into Christian funeral practices and traditions in Late Antiquity. Two of the most noteworthy grave goods from the church are an incense burner (Fig. 4, Meriç 1990: 238) and a pair of iron horseshoes (Fig. 5). Incense burners are



*Figure 9. An Ostotheke that found near close to the Church in 1990. Izmir Museum 21541. H. 26.5cm, W. 42.3cm, D. 35.5cm. 1st–2nd century AD (© Metropolis Excavation).*



Figure 10. The water channel and ostotheke in situ (© Metropolis Excavation).



Fig. 11. Bronze lamp discovered inside the ostotheke. Metropolis Inv. 12087. H. 13.1cm, L. 20.3cm, W. 6.5cm. 6th century AD (by M. Yasa).

associated with liturgical rituals of all kinds, including burials, but they are not often encountered as grave goods. During a funeral ceremony, priests standing at the head and feet of the deceased would cense the laid-out corpse by swinging chain-suspended burners like this over it. The smoke of the burning incense was believed to aid the ascent of prayers to heaven, and its fragrance to protect against evil spirits (Akyürek 2010: 160). In Byzantine times, the first-century AD Zeus Krezimos sanctuary at Metropolis was converted into a Christian cemetery. Traces of sweetgum (*Liquidambar orientalis*) resin were found in a pithos located next to one of the graves. This resin is known to have been used as incense in funeral rites (Ürker et al. 2014: 82, 155; Aybek, Arslan 2020: 125). In 2021, a pair of iron horseshoes was found between the shinbones of one of the Araplitepe church skeletons. The objects appear to have been carefully placed vertically, with one closer to the feet than the other, and their branches aligned in the same direction (Fig. 5). The horseshoes are too small to have been functionally useful, and they lack nail holes, suggesting that they had symbolic rather than practical significance. Horseshoes were considered to be charms that could protect against evil spirits and bad luck (Lawrence 1896: 288). During excavations at the church, two more horseshoes were also found that are stylistically and proportionally consistent with this pair of objects. That horseshoes are still widely regarded as having apotropaic powers today is a survival of beliefs that led someone to place them in a grave in ancient Metropolis (Çıblak 2004: 112). Other finds, such as a bronze ring and a bronze object that was likely a button or a bead, also emerged during the course of excavating the Araplitepe church graves. Objects such as earrings, necklaces, finger rings, bracelets, buttons and beads are frequently encountered in Christian burials (Buchwald 2015: 156). They may originally have been tucked into or attached to the winding sheet; they may also have been intentionally placed as grave goods (Erdul-Mergen 2022: 62, 74). Rings are associated with a variety of meanings and uses, such as wedding rings, seal rings and key rings. They often were objects that the deceased had used while alive, and were placed in the grave with the intention that they would be carried into the afterlife (Otten et al. 2011: nos 10–12; Erdul-Mergen 2022: no. 199).

The use of lamps in Christian cemeteries had both liturgical and symbolic meanings. The liturgical functions of a bronze lamp placed inside a spolia ostotheke and used as a settling tank on a water channel may be difficult to discern. Yet, both lanternlight and candlelight are symbolically powerful in Christianity (Petcu, Georgescu 2017: 155), signifying both the sun and the Glory of Christ (Acara 2002: 23). Constantly illuminated spaces are a feature of Christian churches, monasteries and cemeteries (Acara,

Olcay 1998: 250). Among the abundant evidence of this practice that may be cited are handled lamp supports and fragments of glass lamps discovered around an apse-shaped grave in the course of the archaeological excavations of a Byzantine church in ancient Anaia (modern-day Kadikalesi). These lamps were presumably intended to serve as sources of illumination for the burial (Erdul-Mergen 2022: 487). Lamps were placed around graves and kept lit during ceremonies and observances in the Early Byzantine period (Poulou-Papadimitriou et al. 2012: 379). As evidenced by these and a host of other examples, the flame of a burning lamp had symbolic implications that transcended mere illumination (Acara, Olcay 1998: 250). As is the case with so many Christian religious and cultural practices, the origins of those implications can be traced back to much earlier Greco-Roman beliefs. In Pre-Christian times, lamps placed in burials as grave goods were believed to serve both as protection from evil spirits and as a guide for the deceased's journey into the afterlife (Şöforoğlu, Summerer 2016: 264–65). That belief provides historical insight into the symbolic role that lamps and their light played in Christian funeral practices (Sussman 1983: 233).

By examining the specific purposes of the ostotheke and bronze lamp, we may identify important connections to funeral practices. The burials found immediately around the ostotheke, as well as those known to exist in the vicinity, indicate that the area south of the church was gradually converted into a cemetery over time. The presence of a bronze ring and an incense burner in graves identified during excavations here also supports this view. It is probable that the area was used for funerals, and the lamp may have been kept burning during ceremonies or lit as needed. Excavations in the same area have also unearthed fragments of glass lamps. Immediately north of the ostotheke is a number of large spolia masonry blocks arranged in a regular pattern. Researchers are currently investigating whether this area was used for funerals. They are focusing on the possibility that the blocks may have been used as biers for coffins, or as benches for lamps and other necessities. A square-shaped chamber with a layout very similar to this was found at the entrance of a tomb associated with the Ayazma church in Assos. The large rectangular stone blocks in this chamber were definitely used as benches in this way (Böhendorf-Arslan 2016: 211). Given the important symbolic role that lamps played in Byzantine funerary culture in general, the lamp found inside the Araplitepe church ostotheke must have had a significant purpose. While no other bronze lamps have been encountered in the course of archaeological excavations in this area, another dating to around the same period was discovered amidst the ruins of the Roman-period baths and palaestra complex in the section of the site southwest of the church (Fig. 12; Atasoy 2005: 34, no. 64).

### Dating and interpreting the context of the find

The Araplitepe church, which was near the location where this ostotheke was discovered during excavations, was one of the most important buildings of Late-Antiquity Metropolis. The changing use of the ostotheke over time, from the Roman Imperial period to the Byzantine, sheds light on the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, as well as of historical processes in the city. While the in-situ finds uncovered in the course of those excavations provide important information about the context, particular features of the ostotheke itself deserve more attention owing to their extraordinary aspects. The fine craftsmanship of the ostotheke and the fact of its preservation point to Ephesian workshop production (Thomas, İçten 1999: 551; 2007: 337; Thomas 2005: 294–96). Ephesus was the region's chief processing and manufacturing centre, and objects similar to this ostotheke were exported not just to nearby cities like Metropolis but to overseas destinations as well (Koch 2010: 180, fig. 78).

The artefact was most likely originally from a funeral monument dedicated to Atimetos, as suggested by the epigraphic evidence. No such monument has been identified at Metropolis yet, but if it existed it would likely have been located in the necropolis on the city's western and southern hillsides (Aybek, Arslan 2020: 115). The precise positioning of the ostotheke when it was found suggests that it was transported there to be used as a settling tank on a new or existing water channel. There is insufficient evidence, however, to tell if this occurred before, during or after the construction of the church. The relationship between the channel and church is as yet unclear, and there may be no relationship at all. For example, the channel might have been associated with some other structure that preceded the church, in which case the most likely possibility is that the ostotheke was installed on the water channel some time before the fifth century AD. Assuming that the object was made in the second century AD for Atimetos, the possibility exists that it might previously have been used as spolia during the intervening three- to four-hundred years. It is reasonable to suppose that the Atimetos funeral monument was treated as a venerable object for as long as Paganism retained some influence in Metropolis, which is to say until the late third century AD. The 13 funerary stele inscriptions cited above, which are from Hellenistic and Roman Metropolis and document fines and imprecations, are evidence of efforts to protect the city's Pre-Christian burials ([https://eden.wisski.data.fau.de/wisski\\_views/metropolis\\_inscripfen](https://eden.wisski.data.fau.de/wisski_views/metropolis_inscripfen)). On these grounds, the earliest possible date for the reuse in Late Antiquity of the ostotheke as spolia on the water channel would be the fourth or fifth century AD. If, on the other hand, the channel was associated with the church, then the instal-



Figure 12. Bronze lamp from the Lower Bath-Palaestra Complex. Izmir Museum Inv. 25950. H. 7.1cm, L. 12.7cm, W. 7cm. 6th century AD (by M. Yasa).

lation of the ostotheke could have taken place at any time during the Byzantine period.

The presence and position of the bronze lamp inside the ostotheke might conceivably impart some ceremonial meaning associated with the conversion of the surrounding area into burial grounds after the channel ceased to have a function. The lamp, which is similar to other lamps dated to the sixth century AD, is thought to have been originally used in the church. This is supported by two facts: there is no evidence of the fitted candelabrum that would have been manufactured along with the lamp in or near the ostotheke, and fragments of such a candelabrum were found during excavations of the church. While we cannot be entirely sure when the ostotheke and lamp arrived here, funeral rites may have had something to do with it. With the aid of a bronze incense burner found in one of the church's graves and of a bronze ring encountered in another, we may say that these events transpired between the sixth and seventh centuries AD (Fig. 4). As is discussed in detail above, the functions and symbolic meanings of this lamp most likely are associated with funeral rites performed in the surrounding area. If that is the case then the lamp may have symbolised an eternal flame. The use of lamps and candles in the Early Byzantine period, and

their presence even as grave goods in some burials, may be a reflection of or a survival from Pagan beliefs (Petcu, Georgescu 2017: 155).

The particulars of the use and changing functions of this spolia marble ostotheke over at least eight centuries demonstrate that social and religious beliefs and practices at Metropolis also evolved over time in parallel with the attitudes of the day. A marble chest that once held the mortal remains of Atimetos was shorn of its funerary meanings and repurposed as a settling tank to clean water flowing through a manmade channel merely because of the object's rectangular form. Buried in the earth so that its upper edge was flush with the ground, neither the quality of the object's materials nor the excellence of its craftsmanship were of importance or concern to those who reused it. There are numerous examples of such repurposing at Metropolis and other ancient sites throughout the region, especially from the Roman Imperial period onwards.

When considered within the framework of the spolia tradition, the ostotheke's use as a functional component of a water channel can be seen as an instance of a funerary object being assigned a purpose for which it was not originally intended. Its new function can certainly be viewed

in the context of ancient spolia practices; however, the ostotheke's origins in pagan burial traditions raise additional questions that are worthy of consideration. For example, the repurposing of a pagan object in a space associated with a Christian church suggests potential extra-functional and symbolic meanings. Using a pagan (polytheistic) funerary object in a Christian (monotheistic) context invites interpretations of transformation or appropriation. After the Great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the culmination of Emperor Titus's siege of that city, it was looted and the spoils were carried off to Rome, with some of them being displayed there in the Flavian Templum Pacis. This act of despoliation has been interpreted as the transformation of objects that are meaningful to an alien belief system (Moorman 2023: 238–40). Such an interpretation reveals at the very least the surprisingly long history of different viewpoints surrounding the concept of spolia. That being so, one would not be amiss to consider this Roman-period ostotheke's many centuries of repurposing as a settling tank on a Byzantine water channel as the revitalisation or recontextualisation of an alien object that was 'tamed' by being transformed (De Jong, Versluys 2023: 7).

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like first to express their gratitude to Recep Meriç, who undertook the first scientific research in Metropolis in 1989, and without whom this study would not have been possible. Wishing to explore the archaeological context of the Araplıtepe district of Metropolis and the remains of the church there, Professor Meriç invited Christine Thomas to Metropolis to take part in the work there, which she did from 1995 to 2005. We thank Professor Thomas for her contributions to work at Metropolis in general, and for creating the data sets on which our study is based in particular. Her fundamentally important findings combined with the results of our 2021 excavations are what inform this paper. Our thanks go out also to officials of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism for authorising the conducting of excavations at Metropolis; to Robert Bragner, who served as our translator and English-text editor, and to all of the scholars, students and personnel involved in the ongoing archaeological research at the site.

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