Over the last 60 years, scholars of the Late Roman world have reconsidered the significance of catastrophic political or military events as the definitive markers in our chronological schemes. This, in turn, has discouraged the view of Late Antiquity as a period of crisis that ultimately terminated in this or that disaster. Instead, scholars have argued that Late Antiquity was a period of transition or dynamic transformation and have increasingly blurred the lines that define conventional periodization. The ancient world, it would seem, did not end, but was reconfigured and adapted.

Archaeology, of course, has played no small role in these changing attitudes. The most obvious contribution to a long Late Antiquity stems, in part, from the ever later drift of our ceramic chronologies bolstered by the steadily expanding body of carefully published excavations and surveys from across the Mediterranean world. This work, which is so impressively represented at this conference, has managed to distance archaeological narratives from political or military events. In Greece, for example, the Slavic invasion of the late 6th century no longer represents a catastrophic break and any number of urban and rural sites appear prosperous or at least viable into the mid-7th century. The evidence for the Islamic conquests of the 7th century in the Levant, as another example, remain ambiguous with some areas showing a rapid decline in the number of settlements, whereas other regions show little change or even expansion. In many cases, the material culture that plays such a key role in assessing the date and function of sites changes far more slowly than political or military events. On Cyprus, as this conference presupposes, the firm dates associated with the Arab Raids of the mid-7th century or the supposed depopulation of the island for the founding of Nea Justinianoupolis in 691 no longer mark a clear break in island’s material culture.

This is not to suggest that Cyprus did not see significant changes in the 7th and 8th centuries. The varied character and extent of these changes, however, provides another key context for understanding the long late antiquity on the island. For example, as Marcus Rautman has shown, the countryside appears to have endured significant depopulation by
the middle years of the 7th century. At the same time, urban centers appear to have continued and enjoyed ongoing prosperity with Paphos showing signs of an Arab population in the 8th century, Soloi preserving evidence for recovery after the Arab raids, Kyrenia remaining an important port for the Byzantine fleet, Salamis-Constantia and its neighborhood witnessing ongoing investment and rebuilding, and so on. Even urban continuity, however, is not a rule: Megaw argued that Kourion was abandoned after a late-7th century earthquake, Amathus experienced gradually declined with the site producing coins, seals, and ceramics only into the early-8th century, and Kition remaining largely unknown. Between the countryside and cities, ex-urban sites such as Ay. Georgios-Peyias appear to have declined in the 7th century.

[SLIDE] Another ex-urban site of Pyla-Koutsopetria, which Maria Hadjicosti excavated in the 1990s and a team that I co-directed with Scott Moore and David Pettigrew surveyed and excavated further from 2005-2012, also appears to have declined in the 7th century. Our work can add a bit more nuance and detail to the diverse narratives of change present on the island and provide a bit of context for our recent work at the site of Arsinoe in Western Cyprus.

Pyla-Koutsopetria is the coastal zone of Pyla Village approximately 10 km to the east of the center of modern Larnaka just within the boundary of the Dhekelia BSA. [SLIDE] The site is characterized by a narrow coastal plain backed to the north by the heights of Pyla-Vigla and the better known fortified Bronze Age site of Pyla-Kokkinorkemnos.

[SLIDE] Excavations by Maria Hadjicosti in the 1990s revealed the apse of an early Christian basilica as well as a two-story annex room decorated with frescos featuring Christian symbols. This excavated basilica is situated amid an expansive scatter of Late Roman ceramic material and exposed walls. [SLIDE x 2] The depressed, sandy area that makes up the southern part of the Koutsopetria plain was probably still an embayment in Late Antiquity. The coastal plain during the Roman period saw an expansion of activity which peaked during Late Antiquity. [SLIDE] We have argued that the increase in Late Roman activity at the site, corresponded with the Cyprus coming under the jurisdiction of the quaestor exercitus in the mid-6th century and the more systematic extraction of the island’s agricultural wealth to supply the Danubian legions. The massive quantities of LR1 amphora at the site as well as its rapid expansion in the 6th century nevertheless reflect island wide trends. Its embayment and hinterland was likely productive enough to support a prosperous coastal emporium where agricultural goods left the island and table wares, among other commodities, arrived for local redistribution throughout the 6th and early 7th century.

By the middle of the 7th century, however, it appears that the settlement at Koutsopetria was in decline. Our survey produced very little material dating to later than the middle of the 7th century. A few example of Dhiorios type cooking pots, likely manufactured in the late 7th or early 8th century in western Cyprus, represent the latest material from the long late
antiquity at Koutsopetria. It may be that some fine wares, particularly the long-lived Cypriot Red Slip form 9 and its related late form of CRS10 could date to after the middle of the 7th century. We also had examples of Late Roman “C” Ware form 10, which are among the latest forms in this sequence. At the same time, the so-called CRS “well form,” named for its first appearance in a mid-7th century context at Anemurium, was not present at Koutsopetria, nor were the latest forms of African Red Slip. The latest types in the Late Roman aphora sequence such as LR7 and LR13 amphoras are also not represented in our survey or excavation. The sampling of Late Roman material from across the coastal zone of Koutsopetria, then, offers no evidence that the site’s mid-6th to mid-7th century prosperity continued in any significant ways into the later 7th or 8th century, and it would appear, on the basis of our survey, that Koutsopetria was probably abandoned or occupied only in a limited way.

The study of the excavations of Dr. Hadjicosti and our small team over the last two decades has done little to overturn this basic narrative, but adds a bit more nuance to Koutsopetria’s long late antiquity. Our work focused on disentangling the various phases associated with a two story annex room situated to the south of the basilica. While we were not able to produce a definitive date for the construction of the church (which is probably best dated to the 6th century on the basis of the arrangement of the apse and size), the careful study of the material, which is almost ready for publication, sheds light on abandonment as a process.

Maria Hadjicosti, on the basis of her excavations and study of the material at the site, suggested that the room, and presumably the basilica, was destroyed by the Arab raids of the mid-7th century. On the surface this seems entirely plausible for a coastal site. At the same time, our limited excavations in 2008 and study of the earlier excavations suggest that the building underwent a number of modifications and repairs over the course of the 7th century and prior the building’s final collapse. [SLIDE] At some point, the windows of the room were covered in thick plaster and some of the interior walls likewise received new coating and the roof underwent some repairs. A different kind of plaster, applied at a later date, covers a buttress wall which served to reinforce the building after it had become structurally compromised. Yet another later repair phase involved another episode of reinforcement suggesting that efforts to shore up the structure occurred throughout its life. The building’s final demise, which involved the collapse of the roof and the second story onto the first, covered a coin of Heracleius and a nearly complete ARS 105 plate on the floor of the room. By the time of the room’s collapse parts of its gypsum floor had been removed perhaps indicating that the room was no longer in use. The presence of the rims of Dhiorios cooking pots on the outside of the north wall of the room, tucked against the wall and covered in collapse debris, hints at the last activities associated with this space. The sequence of events demonstrate not a single episode of catastrophic abandonment, but a series of interventions at the end of the building’s life.

To be clear, nothing about the final phases of this building makes its demise at the hands
of Arab raiders impossible. On the other hand, the complexity of the building’s rather brief life, punctuated with major remodeling and at least two phases of architectural reinforcement and repair suggest a more complicated story. By the time of the raids, the building may well have been significantly compromised, or alternately whatever damage occurred to the building in the mid-7th century, did not mark the end of the building’s life but initiated a period of consolidation and perhaps even reuse that may have continued for another 50 years or so. Megaw noted a similar pattern of post destruction activity at the Episcopal basilica at Kourion associating late ceramics with salvage work at the collapsed church.

The point of this digression on the basilica at Koutsopetria, which on the opposite side of the island from Polis, is both to complicate the notion of abandonment on the island and to introduce another site as a point of comparison for our work at Polis to which I will now turn.

The village of Polis in the Chrysochous valley of western Cyprus traces it origins to the Bronze Age. It stands near where the Troodos mountains with their mineralogical resources descend to the sea. The modern Limni mines with their ancient predecessors provide a dramatic reminder of the significant role that copper extraction played in settlement. The modern village of Polis stands atop the Iron Age site of Marion which Ptolemy I destroyed in 312 and Ptolemy II Philadelphos refounded as Arsinoe in 270. During the Roman period, the city appears to have quietly prospered. It became the seat of a bishop in the Late Antiquity, and it remained a significant village into the Medieval and Modern periods. Nearly a century of excavation around the modern village of Polis-tis-Chrysochous has revealed considerable remains from the Late Antique period. At present, a team comprised of me, Scott Moore, and Amy Papalexandrou have been studying and publishing the architecture and ceramics from the various excavated areas. Unlike Koutsopetria, Polis experienced continuous occupation between the Roman period and Middle Ages. Like many urban areas on Cyprus, this continuity presents another opportunity to unpack the character of the long Late Antiquity.

This rest of this paper will focus on 30 years of work by the Princeton Cyprus Expedition along the northern edge of the ancient city. Princeton designated these areas as EG0, EF1, and EF2. Each of these areas produced architecture of the Late Roman period including two Early Christian basilica-style churches which we have designated the South Basilica in the area of EF2 and the North Basilica in EG0. Excavations in the area of EF1, which is between these two zones, revealed small building dating to Late Antiquity. The three areas stood along a bluff that overlooked the coastal plain. While the precise location of Arsinoe’s harbor remains unclear, it seems likely that buildings in EG0, EF1, and EF2 were visible from the sea and along the main routes into the city.
The area around the South Basilica, or EF2, preserved the intersection of two well-paved roads. A north-south running road likely ascends the slope of the coastal ridge from the plain below, and its intersection with an east-west running road was marked by a quadrifrons arch. This road system probably dates to the Roman period and included a series of pipes and channels designed both drain water from the roadbed and also to manage the flow of water away from the city and down the north slope of hill. It appears that the construction of the foundations of the quadrifrons arch interrupted drains on the north-south road required the installation of a new drain channelled water around the footings for the arch.

A small building situated along the north side of the east-west road that we have called the southeast rooms appear to be the earliest structure that is clearly associated with this road and may date to 1st c. AD. This is notable because most of the area of EF2 appears to have been leveled at some point after the 2nd century. An expansive level of fill dated largely through the presence of Eastern Sigillata A and Cypriot Sigillata appears consistently below Late Antique horizons under the basilica. This fill covered both a series of workshops of Hellenistic and Roman date as well as a kiln probably used in the manufacturing of lamps. While it difficult to know for certain, it seems likely that this fill served to level a natural drainage that ran through this area perhaps to forestall erosion in advance of redeveloping this district of the city. It is tempting then to imagine construction of the quadrifrons arch as dating to the reoccupation of this area at some point after the 2nd century when the southeast rooms were rebuilt and divided into two rooms facing the road. This may well mark the start of Late Antiquity at EF2.

The most prominent feature at EF2 from the Late Antique period is the south basilica which was probably built in the mid to late 6th century on the basis of the ceramics found associated with the latest levels beneath the church. A second phase, which involved the construction of a narthex and a south portico as well as the conversion of the the wood roof to a barrel vault, dates to after the mid-7th century AD. This dating derives from ceramics associated both with the narthex and the buttresses built in the nave and a much more robust assemblage of material from a massive rubble fill immediately to the south of the church that is contemporary with the south portico. We’ve argued that this rubble fill which covered the southeastern rooms may have served as a drain designed to stem the flow of water down the north slope of the hill especially since the church essentially spanned the natural drainage running down this slope. In fact, the location of the church spanning the drainage may well have led to the collapse of the church’s first phase sometime in the first half of the seventh century. Shortly after the rebuilding of the church after this collapse, the area around the building became a large cemetery which continued in use into the 11th or 12th centuries. In any event, we’ll return to this church and the second phase assemblage in more detail in a few moments.
[SLIDE] Some 100 m to the northeast of the South Basilica stands the small, multi-phase, structure in the area of EF1. Unlike EF2 or the nearby EG0, this site does not have pre-Late Roman phases and the building itself appears to be contemporary, or perhaps slightly earlier, than the first phase of the South Basilica. The site sits in a shallow depression on the neck of a narrow promontory which projects into the coastal plain to the north.

[SLIDE] On early maps, the promontory is marked as the site of an ancient slag heap and even today slag erodes from scarps of the modern road cut suggesting that at some point this northern area of the city saw dumping from nearby smelting operations. The presence of workshops in the Hellenistic and Early Roman levels at EF2 reinforces the impression that the northern edge of the city was the location of industrial installations.

[SLIDE] The initial phase of the building consists of four walls which define a hallway and part of a large room entered through a carefully cut doorjamb and doorway in the hallway’s west wall. A deposit just above bedrock and below a floor surface associated with the large room produced an assemblage of Late Roman pottery that included both domestic wares (cooking pots, utility wares, and table wares) as well as roof tiles and water pipes. The most diagnostic material consisted of Cypriot Red Slip fine ware, particularly Form 11 and K1/3 and Late Roman cooking wares. The fine ware dates to before the final quarter of the 6th century representing the latest material in the subfloor packing, and the Late Roman cooking wares, while less chronologically diagnostic, do not challenge this date.

[SLIDE] The second phase present in this area consisted of three walls of another large room that disturbed and overran the room in Phase 1. The most significant feature associated with this phase was the construction of three new walls. The Phase 2 walls are built at obviously higher elevation than the Phase 1 walls and use a significantly different technique although the some of the earlier walls may have continued to be at least partly visible throughout this period. The most imposing of the phase 2 walls was a substantial north-south wall which projects from the south scarp.

This phase also features a series of covered water channels. The excavation of the drain that runs across the northern part of the site produced an assemblage that seems slightly later than the subfloor packing associated with the first phase. The latest artifact associated with the construction of this channel is a CRS Meyza K3 rim which dates at Paphos from 530-680. The channel itself also produced a Byzantine piriform lamp dating to the Late 6th or 7th century. Cypriot Red Slip form 11 and 2 are also present as is the ubiquitous LR1 type amphora. This suggests that the channel ceased to function after the 7th century.

[SLIDE] The final phase of Late Antique activity at the area of EF1 is perhaps the most interesting for gaining insights into the long late antiquity at Polis. This phases features the burial of a 25-30 year-old woman. The single grave appears to respect the line of the substantial north-south wall from Phase 2. [SLIDE] More importantly, the burial includes a lead seal apparently as a grave good. The seal features an eagle with outstretched wings on the obverse and the name of Stephanos on the reverse. Olga Karagiorgou has dated the seal to the late-7th century on stylistic grounds. While the name Stephanos is not rare, the seal
likely belonged to an illustrios of that name who produced several earlier sealings found on the island. The burial, of course, must be later than the imprinting of the seal. The appearance of seals in burials is rather unusual on Cyprus and it seem likely that the document upon which this seal was affixed likely had significance for the deceased. Its presence suggests that the burial dates to not much later than the sealing; perhaps the earliest decades of the 8th century. Another seal of roughly the same date appears in a later fill that covers the burial after the area’s abandonment.

The significance of this seal is that offers an early-8th century terminus ante quem for the abandonment of the building EF1 and its assemblage of ceramics. This assemblage includes over 850 artifacts from various secondary contexts and dating to after the 6th or 7th century but before the early 8th century when burials encroached on the buried site.

What is more interesting, however, is that the EF1 assemblage appears quite different from the material from the large rubble fill associated with the renovation of the South Basilica. The South Basilica assemblage contains a much broader range of material traditionally dated to the mid to late-7th century including CRS well forms, Dhiorios cooking pot forms, and LR7 and LR13 amphoras. (Absent from this assemblage is evidence for hand made or early white wares that appear elsewhere in assemblages of this date.)

In contrast, these forms are absent in the EF1 assemblage suggesting that the walls in this area and their ultimate abandonment might predate the appearance of CRS “well form” material on the island as well as Dhiorios cooking wares, the latest sequence of LR amphora, LR13 and LR7, the later forms of ARS (e.g. 105 and 106), and at the very beginning of the CRS8, CRS10, and Mayza K3 types. These types are both absent from the construction fills and the levels associated with the early 8th century burial and even the levels covering it.

That the EF1 assemblages, even those contemporary or immediately after the burials are strikingly different from the assemblages present in the level associated with second phase of the South basilica suggests that the modification to the South Basilica may date later than we have argued. In fact, it seems possible that the modifications to the South Basilica could be as late as the early or even mid-8th century which would allow for the more diverse assemblage of Late Antique material to develop.

The study of sites of EF1 and EF2 at Polis and the survey and excavations at Koutsopetria offer some useful perspectives on the long late antiquity on Cyprus.

First, the comparison of the various ceramic assemblages demonstrates how fuzzy our understanding of the 7th and 8th century remains. In many ways, the long late antiquity feels longer because we are are still groping forward toward the end, one assemblage at a time.

Second, Late Roman Koutsopetria and Arsinoe offer two different narratives of change. Both sites saw the construction of basilica-style churches as well as more modest buildings, and this alone is enough to support broader arguments for the general prosperity of settlement on the island. Attention to the excavated material at Koutsopetria demonstrates
the decline at the settlement may have occurred over a series of events rather than as a result of a single catastrophic intervention.

Parsing more carefully the Late Antique assemblages associated with the two sites at Polis allows us to observe a similarly nuanced understanding of change across the material culture, architecture, and landscape of the city. The activity along the northern edge of the city continued throughout the 7th century, and in the case of the South Basilica, into the 8th century with the modification, repair, and reconstruction of the building. Moreover, the appearance of burials at EF2 and in the final phase at EF1 (as well as at the North Basilica at EG0 which I have not discussed today) indicates that the area’s location at the margins of the ancient settlement continued to guide its use. Along similar lines, it is worth noting that both EF1 and EF2 appear to have experienced challenges with the flow of water downslope from the ancient city. This hints at potential changes to the urban grid and water management systems in the city during Late Antiquity. Some of this kind of change may be evident in EF2 when the quadrifron arch interrupted the street side gutter system of the north-south road through the area.

In effect, Polis and Koutsopetria paint a picture of the long late antiquity by emphasizing phases of indeterminacy, repair, and retrenchment made more complicated by the limits of our existing ceramic chronologies and archaeological concepts of abandonment and decline. By tracing the ongoing adaptation of sites as a critique of narratives that prioritized abrupt breaka in the history and material culture of antiquity, we open up new spaces for understanding the transformation of both the island and wider Late Roman world.