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The Roman countryside in Central Greece: observations and theories from the Boeotia Survey (1978-1987).

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14. THE ROMAN COUNTRYSIDE IN CENTRAL GREECE: OBSERVATIONS AND THEORIES FROM THE BOEOTIA SURVEY (1978-1987)

John Bintliff

INTRODUCTION

The data base I shall use in this paper will be that collected since 1978 by the Boeotia Project, a field survey of a major region in central Greece, carried out by the Universities of Bradford and Cambridge under the co-directorship of myself and Prof. Anthony Snodgrass (Bintliff, 1985; Bintliff and Snodgrass, 1985, 1988a, 1988b).

The modern province of Boeotia is almost identical to the ancient tribal region, having a surface area of 3,800 km². Since the first field season we have examined 40 km² of countryside in the southwestern sector of the region (Fig. 1). From 1979 to 1984 fieldwalking took place in a large block of countryside surrounding the ancient cities of Thespieae and Haliartos. A remarkable density of rural settlements was identified, as well as a previously unknown town site that has to be the community of Askra, a satellite town of the city state of Thespieae. In 1985 we turned our



Fig. 1 The area of the Boeotia Survey (1979-1986) and the sites recorded.

attention to these three urban centres, in expectation that a detailed survey of their surface pottery would provide an interesting comparison with the changing distribution of rural sites in their dependent territories.

Askra, the 'village' of the poet Hesiod, was a *kome* within the territory of Thespieae, and its area proved to be 11 ha. The site of Haliartos, a city of the Boeotian League, was probably as much as 50 ha in extent. Finally, the site of the more important city of Thespieae extends well over 100 ha.

ARCHAIC, CLASSICAL AND EARLY HELLENISTIC PERIODS (c.600–200 BC)

The distribution of rural sites (Fig. 2) shows a formidable density of settlement, entirely consonant with the flourishing picture of classical Greek civilization available from the historical sources. Almost all these sites are small farms, the remainder being rural hamlets and sanctuaries. The town sites offer the same picture of cultural climax. At Haliartos, the plot of individual sherds is dense throughout the city area. At Askra, there is dense occupation and very few modern fields without evidence for contemporary activity. Finally, at Thespieae (Fig. 3) finds from almost all the 598 town samples suggest a very extensive community.

The historical picture of this era as the climax of Greek city state life, and especially for the 4th century BC as a time of very high population density in Boeotia, is fully borne out by rural and



Fig. 2 The Boeotia Survey: Archaic-Classical-(early) Hellenistic sites.

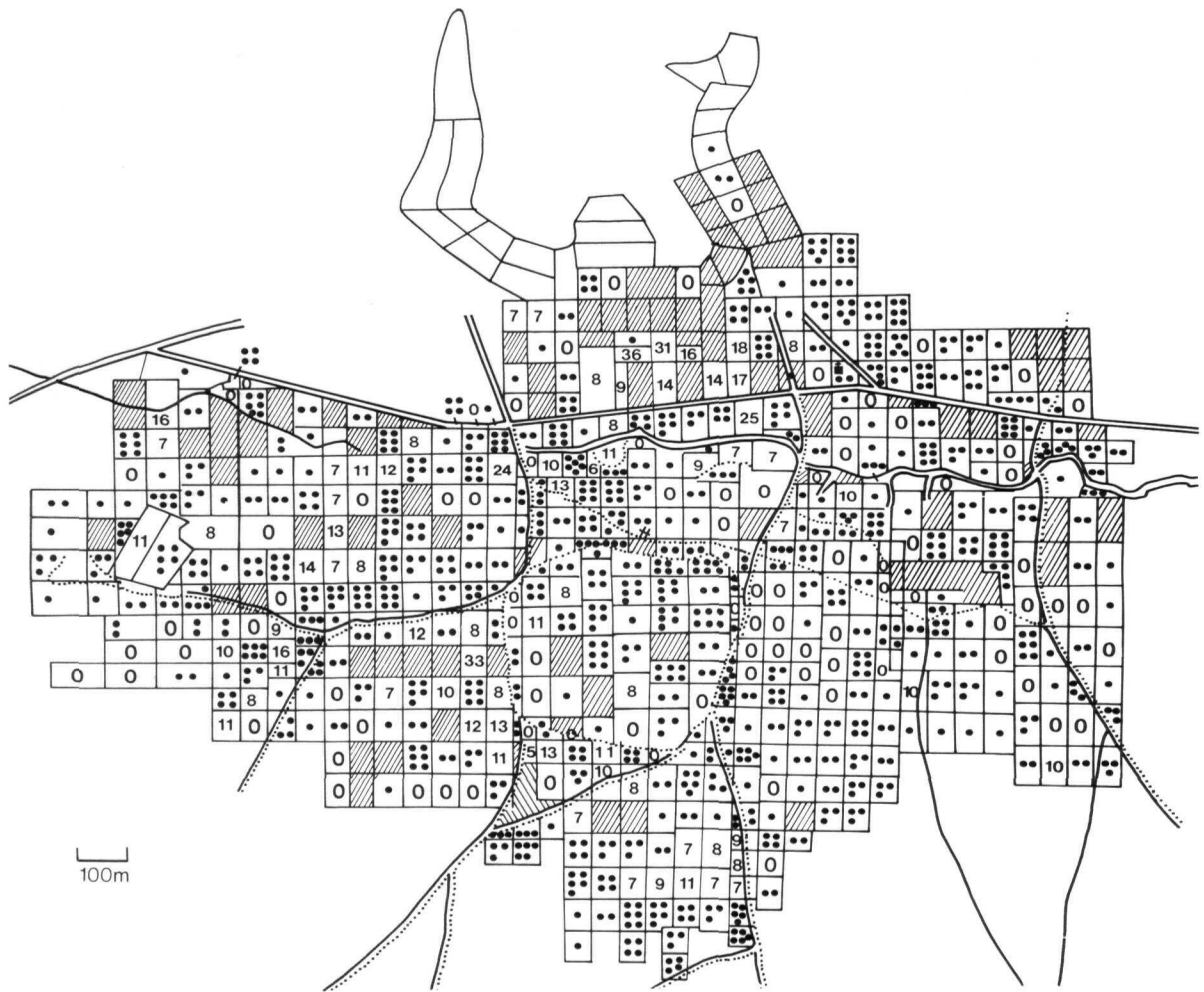


Fig. 3 Surface pottery at the city of Thespieae (Classical-early Hellenistic periods). Individual sherds are shown by solid circles, and in multiples by numbers, all by grid unit. Grid units with a zero have no definite finds of the period. Shaded areas were inaccessible.

urban archaeology. Indeed we have suggested elsewhere that this demographic climax was seriously beyond the landscape's capacity to support it in the long-term (Bintliff and Snodgrass, 1985).

LATE HELLENISTIC AND EARLY ROMAN PERIODS (c. 200 BC – AD 300)

The rural settlement of this era (Fig. 4) exhibits a severe contraction. The number of occupation sites is greatly reduced, and at many activity for this period is only slight. The decline is most notable in the northern zone, which belonged to the city of Haliartos. Here some 7 out of 10 outlying sites of the classical and early Hellenistic period seem to have become deserted between c. 300 and 100 BC.

At Haliartos itself there is a huge drop in surface finds of the later period, but the city was destroyed by the Romans in 171 BC and our research suggests that it was not significantly reoccupied. There is historical evidence for a relocation of the surviving population, which we have suggested may refer to a 5 ha minor urban site 2 km to the east.

The reduction in rural settlement is also pronounced throughout the territory of Thespieae. At Askra we see a much reduced area of intensive occupation. Thespieae (Fig. 5) likewise demonstrates a clear urban contraction, with occupation concentrating on the sector enclosed by a late antique wall and part of the site to the east of the wall.

Several inscriptions from particular years in the 3rd century BC and the early 2nd century BC indicate some sort of crisis in Boeotia. A strong clue that these events were part of medium-term trends comes from the history of Polybius, who lived through the latter part of this period:

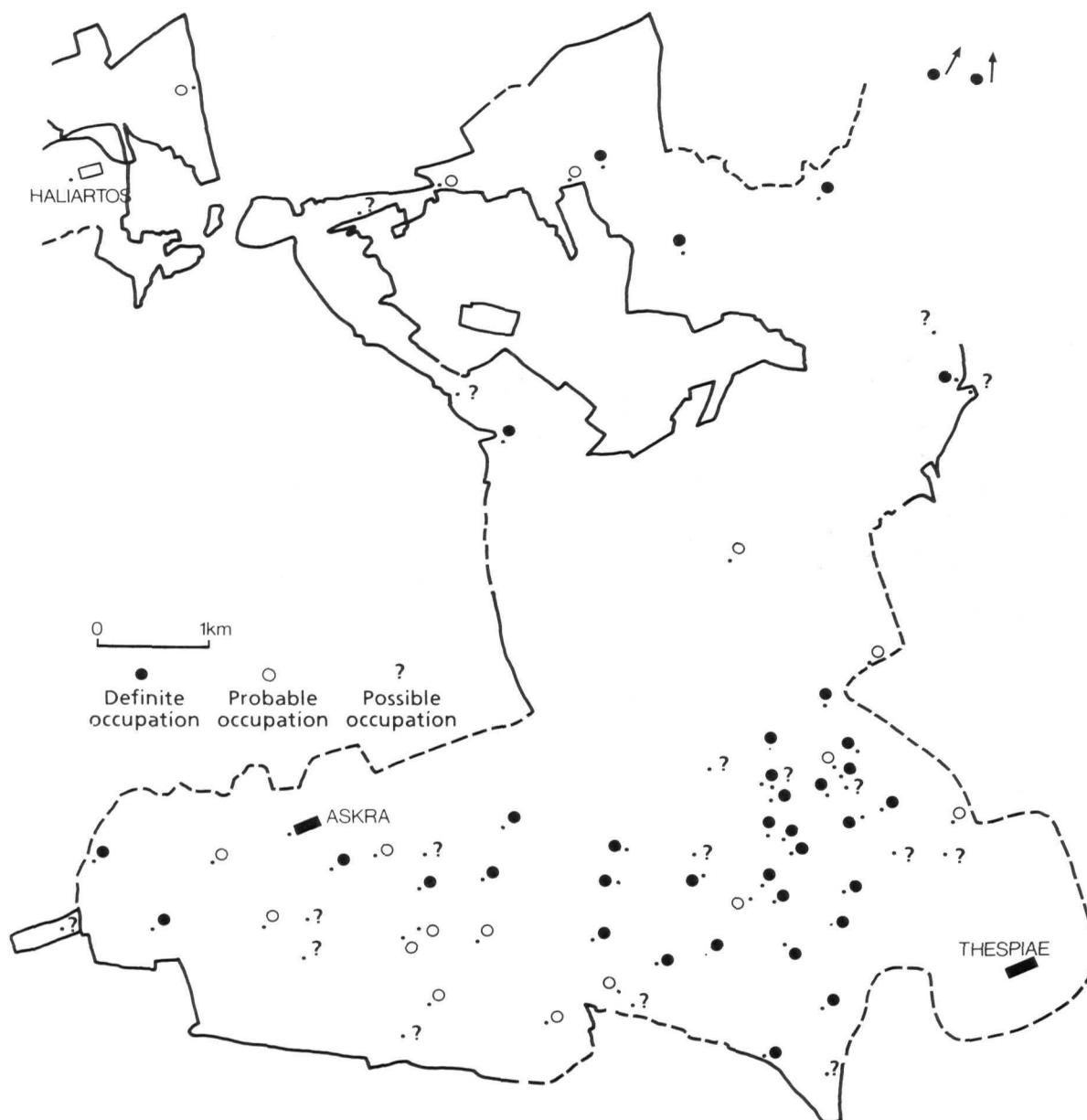


Fig. 4 The Boeotia Survey: late Hellenistic-early Roman sites.

“For many years Boeotia had been in a morbid condition very different from the former sound health and reknown of that state . . .

. . . In our times the whole of Greece has suffered from a shortage of children and hence a general decrease of the population, and in consequence some cities have become deserted and agricultural production has declined, although neither wars nor epidemics were taking place continuously” (*History*: XX,4; XXXVI,17).

Polybius believed that these elements of crisis had a direct cause in the moral degeneration of the Greeks since the 4th century BC, but even in his account there seem to be underlying factors involving class conflict, demographic collapse, poverty, agricultural decline – elements detectable also in our event-based inscriptions.

The ultimate confirmation that Boeotia had undergone a genuine decline during the Hellenistic age is provided by Strabo’s *Geography*, although his derogatory statements about contemporary Boeotia are largely confined to the condition of its cities. Pausanias, whose *Description of Greece* was written between the AD 150s and 170s, takes for granted that settlements of the classical period had become, in his day, merely “ruins”; it is the second-order towns in particular that receive this

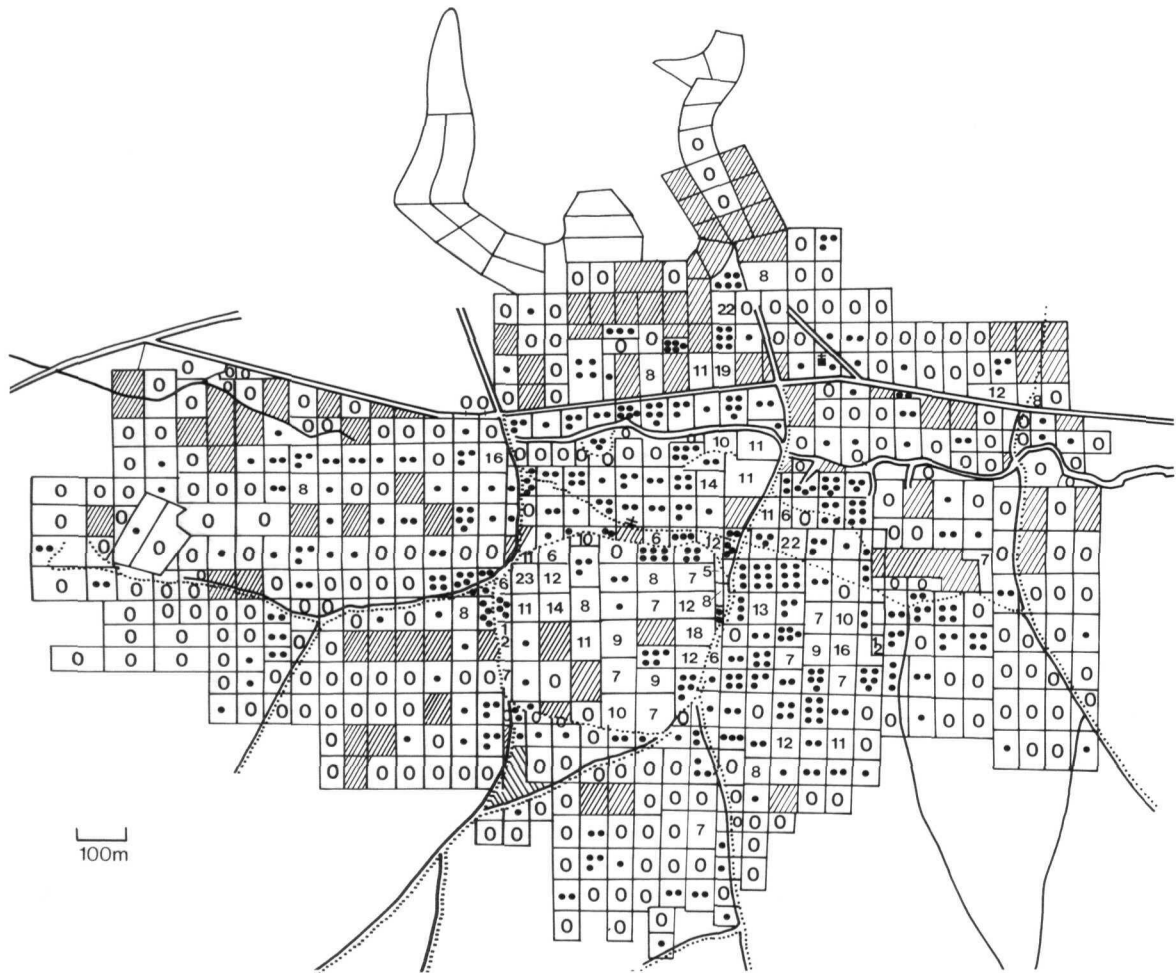


Fig. 5 Surface pottery at the city of Thespieae (late Hellenistic-early Roman periods). Conventions as in Figure 3.

description. Pausanias seems to find substantial communities established in most of the major Boeotian cities. Civic inscriptions of Roman imperial date from Boeotia suggest a measure of urban recovery.

Kahrstedt's study (1954) of economic conditions in Greece under the Roman empire concluded that large areas of Boeotia had been turned over to Imperial and other large-scale estates, with some of the lesser towns being replaced by such estates. Our early and late Roman rural sites are certainly almost invariably several times larger than the average classical farm, ranging from estate centres around 2,500 m² upwards to a minority of smallish villages of 1 or more ha. in size.

LATE ROMAN PERIOD (c. AD 300–650)

The distribution of settlement (Fig. 6) shows a dramatic recovery of population, particularly in the *chora* (territory) of Thespieae. The pottery from rural sites is dominated by forms which point to the 5th to 7th centuries as the climax within this phase. Something like two-thirds of our Classical sites were now reoccupied, nearly all after intervening desertion. A handful of fresh sites appears, to give a total distribution almost as dense as in classical Greek times. Haliartos obviously had not recovered its urban status; indeed, the thin scatter of sherds representing this period need reflect little more than a small farming site. Its probable replacement community nearby, 5 ha in area, was, however, flourishing at this time. Askra had become once again a large urban focus, with intensive occupation. At Thespieae the much larger size of the town at all periods enables a localization of pottery exclusively datable to the early half of this phase (c. AD 300–500) which we shall term mid Roman. The areas indicated for this subphase (Fig. 7) are exactly those to which the town was confined during the early Roman period. Significantly there is an inscription referring to



Fig. 6 The Boeotia Survey: late Roman sites.

a major rewalling of Thespieae in the 4th century AD. The comparatively limited defensive enclosure would be appropriate for the shelter of a town population confined to the walled sector and an adjacent eastern suburb, together with a rural population still perhaps at the same reduced level as in early Roman times.

Turning to the picture for the late Roman era as a whole, and bearing in mind that the ceramics are typified by 5th to 7th century AD forms, we see a much more extensive community, with significant reoccupation of the site limits of Thespieae (Fig. 8). Gregory (1984) has argued that the *polis* tradition of the eastern Empire proved a source of strength. Certainly the dense resettlement of the northern limits of the territory of Thespieae suggests a recovery for that city and its dependent 'village', Askra. Conversely, the failure to resettle more than one of the 8 small Classical sites of the Haliartos southern borderlands may point to the weakness or even absence of a central authority in the *chora* of Haliartos.

We can relate this late Roman revival, especially for the phase following the sack of Rome, to a general flourishing of settlement in the east Mediterranean lands. Well-published examples include the cities of Asia Minor and the expansion of village life in Syria and Israel. (For recent discussions, see Kennedy, 1985, 1987; and Rosen, 1987.)

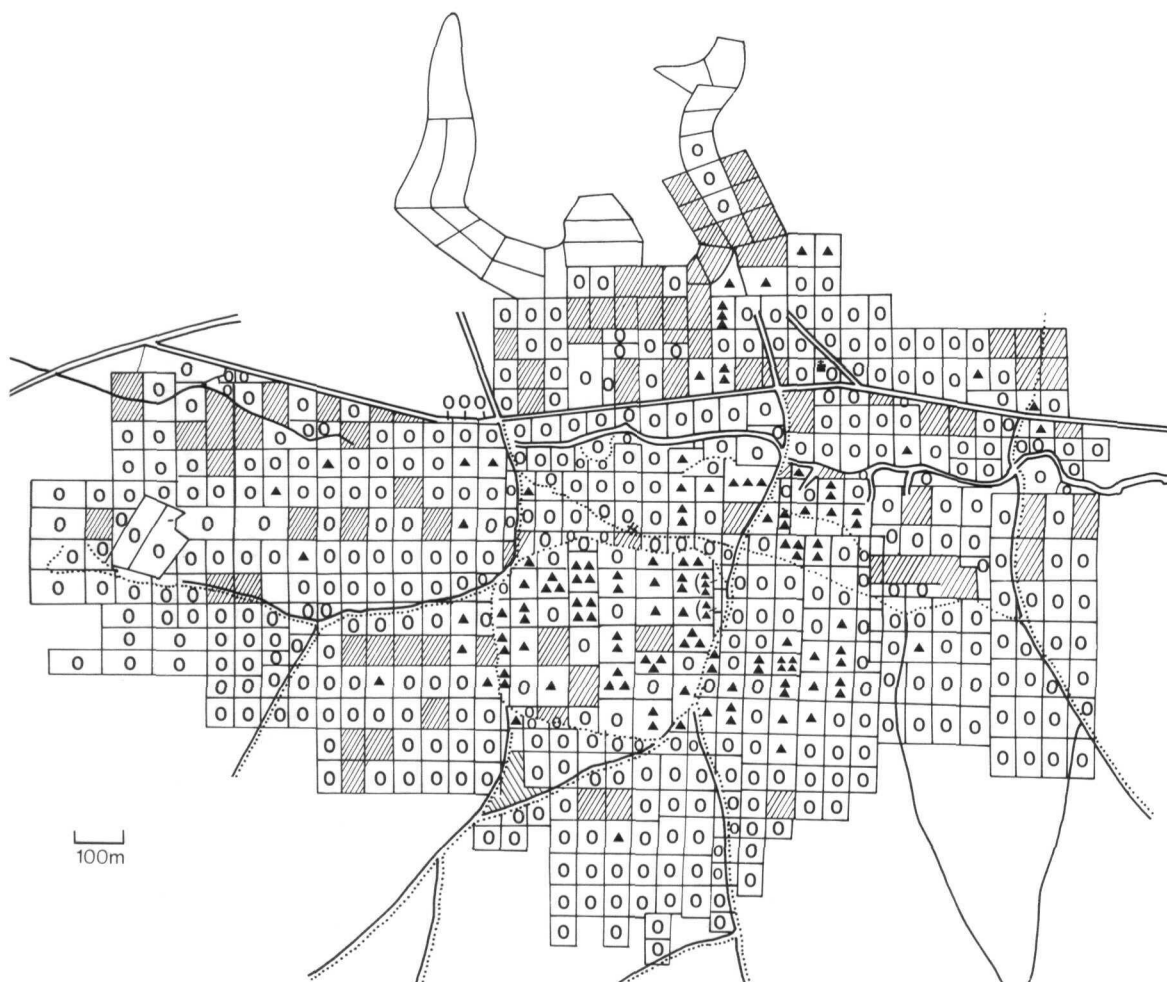


Fig. 7 Surface pottery at the city of Thespieae (mid Roman period). Conventions as in Figure 3.

DISCUSSION: COMPARING EAST WITH WEST

It is widely accepted that the late Republican and early Imperial period up to the crises of the 3rd century AD saw the climax of the western Empire, especially in Italy itself. From then on there are widespread signs of decay, both in many areas of the countryside and in the size and visible wealth of towns.

For early Imperial times, in central Greece at least, the climax of the west comes at a time of a virtually empty countryside and shrunken towns (though in the latter imports still accumulate and limited prosperity can be found archaeologically and in the written sources). From *c.* AD 300 onwards, and especially during the 5th-6th centuries AD, there are plentiful signs throughout the east Mediterranean of a flourishing urban and rural life, even of expansion of land under cultivation.

For the post-Roman era (beginning in the mid 7th century AD) I shall confine my eastern data base to Byzantine central Greece. Whilst in much of western Europe between AD 700 and 900 there are plentiful signs of revival and repopulation, culminating in the Carolingian Renaissance, we have in Greece the opposite, the most severe decline, a genuine Dark Age (early Byzantine), in which traces of human activity are minimal in countryside and rural towns alike (Fig. 9). Only with the latter part of the middle Byzantine era, the 11th-12th centuries AD, do proto-villages and hamlets grow to any size and number, before being taken over as expanding concerns by the Frankish feudal gentry after AD 1204. The Latin conquest is perhaps symptomatic of the more developed economy and surplus population produced by the earlier recovery of western Europe from the traumas of the collapse of Roman rule.

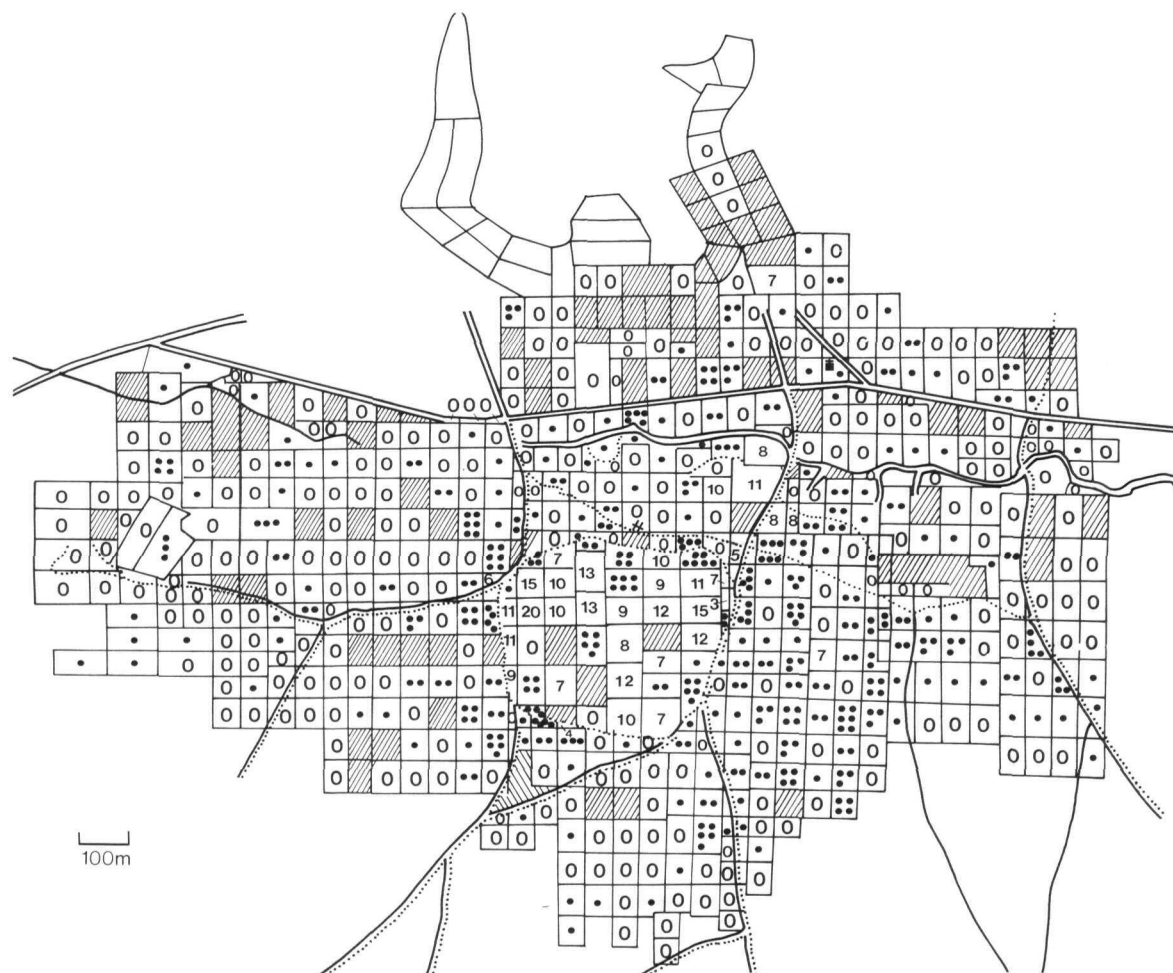


Fig. 8 Surface pottery at the city of Thespieae (late Roman period). Conventions as in Figure 3.

MODELLING PROVINCIAL CONTRASTS: LOCAL, REGIONAL AND MACRO-REGIONAL FACTORS

What can we make of the apparent out-of-phase relationship between the rise and fall of the western provinces and those of the eastern Empire? One could be tempted by a bipolar model, where the rise of the Roman empire based in Italy had fed upon the newly-conquered Eastern and African provinces, sucking them dry of their resources in food, minerals and manpower (a parasitic 'core-periphery' model). In the late Empire a more independent East and South entered into pronounced recovery and growth, precisely matched by the opposite symptoms of demographic and economic contraction in the European West. The temporarily-successful attempt by the eastern Roman Empire under the 6th century emperor Justinian to expand into Italy, north Africa and Iberia merely replayed the empire-building game, but from the opposite end of the pitch.

However, in considering this ebb and flow of power and economic prosperity over the centuries, the 'core-periphery' model makes, I believe, a false assumption: that a uniform political system implies a totally integrated economy and population balance. Within the early and then late Roman Empire the apparent 'health' of individual provinces varied markedly across the Empire and locally from century to century.

This only seems strange if we are thinking of a modern national economy, where market forces and a constant flow of capital to the centres of power have the effect of involving all the constituent regions of a political unit in the grosser swings and dives of economic productivity. Some people try to portray pre-capitalist empires as if they were multi-national corporations or unified, centrally-directed, economic blocs. A great deal of evidence seems to run counter to such a view, suggesting that ancient empires were in many respects a good deal less complex than we often imagine from their imposing ruins. Rather than seeing an ancient empire as an organic whole, with Rome for example acting as a typical 'brain organ' and each limb dependent on all the others for

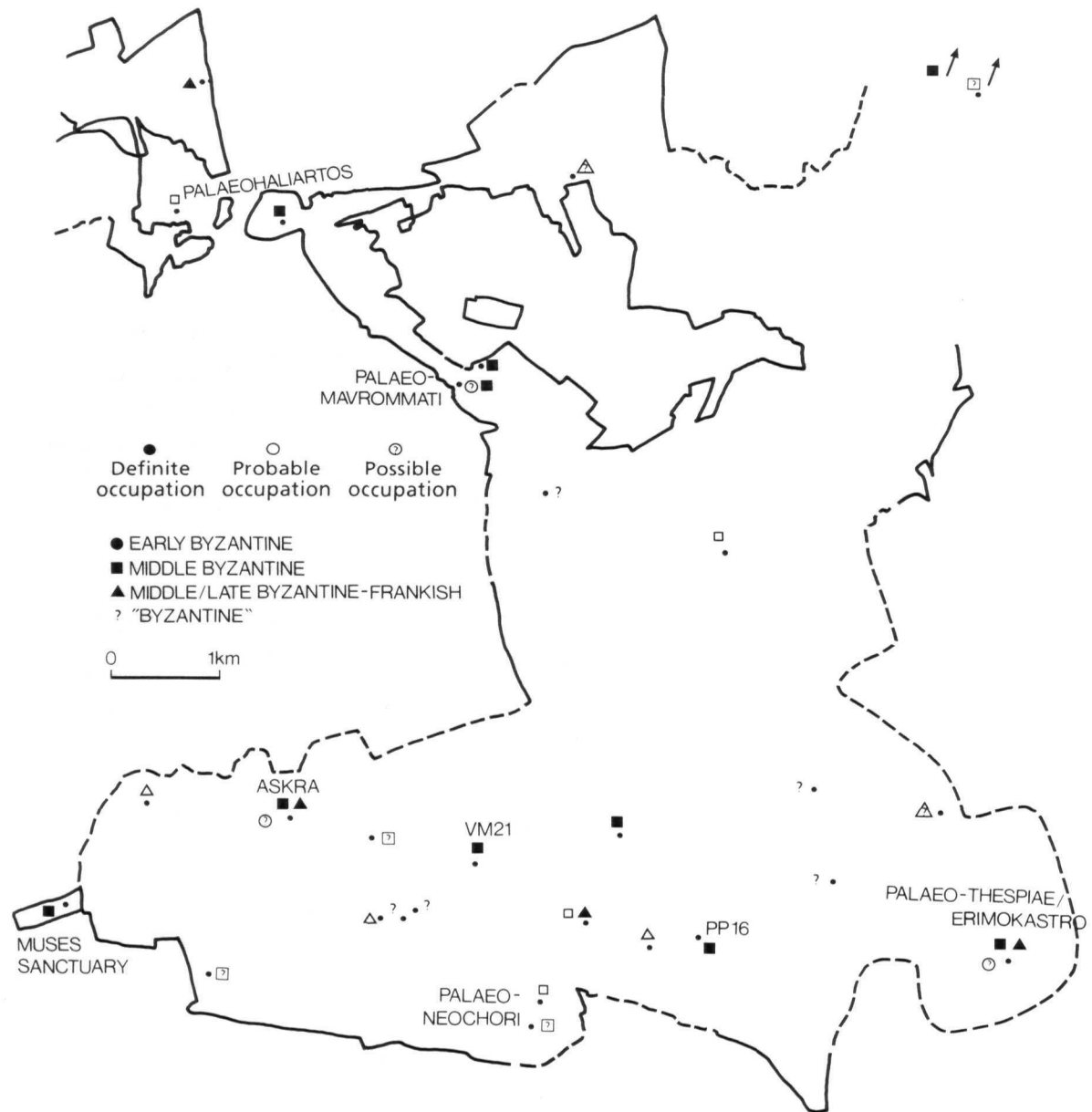


Fig. 9 The Boeotia Survey: Byzantine sites.

the flow of vital nourishment and preservation from disease, we should instead perhaps consider such empires as mechanical agglomerations of discrete regions, welded together by political forces but in important respects forming a series of semi-autonomous economies. Of course there were flows of tax to the centre and flows of exchange between provinces, but it could be argued that these were of less importance than the state of health of the regional, internal, economy.

For the ancient Mediterranean we can isolate three major factors at work moulding regional community life. First come local trends in population densities, tied to the expansion and contraction of local food-producing activity. These indicate the ecological health of the human communities in their environment, and to a significant extent can form part of longer-term, semi-autonomous agricultural and demographic cycles, or Braudelian *conjunctures* (Bintliff, 1990). Second are the locally-based 'modes of production', the ways in which local productive forces – land, labour and surplus products – are controlled and manipulated by different social groups within provincial society. In a major paper Wickham (1984) has highlighted the usefulness of keeping this factor separate from our third factor – the state's 'mode of production', the way in which the central authority draws on the resources of its provinces or hinterland to support its apparatus of officials, bureaucrats and permanent armed forces.

Such a model, with scope for semi-autonomous developments within the various provinces of the Roman Empire, may help to make sense of divergent developments over time, but does undermine our earlier suggestion that the swing of prosperity from East to West then East again is due to alternate parasitical exploitation. A more satisfactory solution might run as follows:

It can be argued for classical Greece (for example), that it underwent a dramatic phase of demographic and economic growth (Factor 1) between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC, which overshot available resources. The low population levels and political weakness of its city states in the late Hellenistic and early Roman eras were an inevitable result. External political control (Factor 3) acted as a secondary force inhibiting local recovery. It would seem to be a classic case of a medium-term agrarian cycle, and indeed we have been able to detect such cycles of expansion and contraction, or *conjunctures*, operating in the Boeotian landscape at wavelengths of 4–500 years over a far longer timescale. An element not mentioned in our historic sources but which must have played a potent role in the collapse of classical Greek society is the widespread evidence from environmental archaeology for a severe phase of soil erosion in Hellenistic times (Van Andel and Runnels, 1987).

For the early Roman era, Millar (1984) has argued that within the Roman state there existed a whole series of regional economies, fundamentally focussed on the older form of the city state unit; the state was burdening these cities with heavy demands from its inner and outer conflicts. This is Wickham's 'ancient mode of production' at the state level (Factor 3). At the local level (Factor 2), Wickham refers to the 'feudal mode of production', stressing the dominant role of local magnates in controlling surpluses and power. But whereas ecological and demographic health at the regional level (Factor 1) was good or at least safely above the level of collapse in the western provinces, in central Greece at least, local conditions were poor to catastrophic.

In the late Roman era we also find contrasting evidence. In the West, according to Wickham, there existed a disastrous local agro-demographic picture (Factor 1), unbearable state demands on the regions (Factor 3) to support its hopeless wars against the barbarians and rival emperors, and a great strengthening of the local 'feudal mode of production' (Factor 2), as local elites withdrew their involvement in the state mode, converting the free peasantry to serfs. Wickham sees this as the birth of the medieval economy at both local and state level.

In the eastern Mediterranean, however, the downswing whose effects are traceable from the 2nd century BC lasted some 500 years; we then observe a new cycle of recovery and growth in the late Roman era, from around AD 300, lasting (in some regions) into the early 7th century AD, in both town and country. In the middle of this upward movement in the cycle comes the career of that remarkable emperor, Justinian. His forceful personality is generally seen as responsible for a prodigious effort on the part of the eastern Roman Empire to reconquer the lost provinces in Italy, north Africa and further west. In so doing, he bankrupted his empire in manpower and resources. Yet at least in Boeotia, this traditional 'political history' approach must be set into a cyclical growth trend of the Braudel medium-term, creating essential possibilities for these short-term dramatic events.

For in the East, by the late Empire indigenous growth (Factor 1) had resumed and was to be sustained well beyond the collapse of Roman Italy. We see the same state pressure (Factor 3) but a much healthier local human ecology (Factor 1) and a greater commitment of the local landowner (Factor 2) to the city-state unit – and hence the survival of the Graeco-Roman way of life and landscape some two centuries after its collapse in Italy. Indeed when disaster does strike the eastern Empire, during the so-called Dark Ages from the mid-7th to 9th centuries AD, western Europe is emerging from the worst of its post-Roman Dark Age into a new and different civilization highlighted by the Carolingian Renaissance.

Yet, in adopting a model for the Roman empire of macro-regional contrasts, we must also certainly follow the additional lead provided by scholars who have been studying the differing micro-regional settlement histories of the Roman world. As Vallat has recently argued (1987), and Garnsey before him (1979), the regional model operates also within each province of the Empire. In Greece Boeotia provides the example of the separate fate of Haliartos from its neighbour Thespieae, both in town and country. And whereas the picture we find in Boeotia overall, of cyclical growth and decline, is matched in timing and shape by that obtained from the Argolid Survey in the northeastern Peloponnese (Van Andel and Runnels, 1987), other regions of Roman Greece seem to have experienced different fates. In Attica the important new South-East Attica Survey shows a classical cycle exactly 200 years out of place with Boeotia: growth from the 8th century BC, collapse by the fourth century BC, and an unprepossessing late Roman reoccupation of the landscape (after intervening decline) typified by pastoral enclosures – are these part of great *latifundia*?

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