

Cities in the Greek World



Prof. dr. John Bintliff has carried out a series of urban surface surveys of cities in the province of Boeotia, Central Greece. During the 1980's and 1990's in collaboration with Anthony Snodgrass of Cambridge University, the small town of Askra, the medium-sized towns of Haliartos and Hyettos, and the large town of Thespieae were surveyed. Since 2000 a new Boeotia Project, in collaboration with Bozidar Slapsak (Ljubljana University), has investigated the medium-sized city of Tanagra and is currently surveying the large town of Koroneia. He has also written numerous papers on the Greek city in theoretical terms.

The current work at Tanagra and Koroneia is published in preliminary form annually in the journal *Pharos*. Papers of the Dutch Institute in Athens.

What is its aim? In the earlier Project we had shown that most ancient cities of our region lay in farming land, where our chosen method of mapping and analyzing broken pottery on the surface gave excellent results for reconstructing the historical development and size of those urban foci, as it did also for rural villages and farms of all periods. But since the previous Project it has become clear that the nature of the discipline of Archaeology in Europe is rapidly changing direction. Whereas when we started the first Project the chief aim was pure research, to find out more about the past in a region, now we see that the countries of Europe are faced with the great problem that there are far too many archaeological sites for them to deal with by excavation, but yet some kind of systematic study of them is needed to make decisions about the preservation and management of those considered to be of particular importance. But without excavation how do we know which are heritage treasures? Or if we leave as many sites as possible as protected monuments, unless we have already studied them through fieldwork, how can we give the public useful information about them to justify their conservation?

The general trend has been to limit the excavation of archaeological sites to the minimum, where the destruction of all or part of a site is unavoidable in the context of modern road and house-building, etc. But as for the vast majority of sites in the landscape which ought to be evaluated for protection programmes, and presented to the public, other means must be found to tell their story, or estimate their boundaries. Here our new Leiden-Ljubljana Project comes to the fore, as it is precisely this kind of

approach we are developing for the ancient cities of Boeotia, and which we believe can be extended to landscapes throughout Southern Europe.

Boeotia is still essentially a farming region, and most of its 15 ancient cities lie in cultivated landscapes, at risk from building or road construction and from modern intensive agriculture. Yet the fact is that no-one has ever been able to excavate an entire city in Greece or elsewhere in the Mediterranean, since it would take an impossibly long period of time and untold financial investment. Excavations at ancient Corinth in the south of Greece for example go well back into the 19th century but still only part of the town has been uncovered. So what can we do with these major heritage sites today? The Leiden-Ljubljana Project is designed to point the way forward for Greece.

Our first target in the Ancient Cities of Boeotia Project has been in a district not studied by the previous Project, Eastern Boeotia, and in particular the city of *TANAGRA*.

In many ways it represents a very good test case for the new heritage needs of Europe. Tanagra was a town of medium importance in Classical Greek and Roman times, but its origins have been shrouded in mystery, and the same goes for its fate in the 1500 years between Late Antiquity and the modern village some 5 kilometres from it which bears its name at the presentday. In order to make this large site interpretable for the local public and in future for tourists, we need to be able to tell its story much better. Secondly, the city has never had significant excavation, so its plan and development are poorly understood. A rather disastrous episode in the 1950s saw a water canal dug through its uppermost sector without archaeological control, which led to a decision to protect the entire area enclosed within its still visible 4th century BC city walls. No building or farming can be done since then inside the walled area, and it is only prevented from turning into woodland by a resident flock of goats grazing the surface. On the one hand then it is ideal for our aims, as it will not be dug in the conceivable future, and too little is still known about the monument to enable a good presentation to be made for educational and touristic purposes. On the other hand, it has not been cultivated for two generations, and is covered even in high summer by low scrub, so that our normal methods of collecting surface ceramics and mapping architecture on the surface are unusually tough to apply in this case. Nonetheless, no-one but a handful of archaeologists know where the city lies, there is no sign advertising its presence, let alone a board with a plan and text for the wayward tourist, and local



farmers are sufficiently unaware of the extent and importance of the site to still empty domestic rubbish and building debris onto its surface.

Since 2000 our joint university team, under the administrative umbrella of the Dutch Institute in Athens (NIA), with the enthusiastic support of its director Gert Jan van Wijngaarden and his team, and with the exceptional constant help and support of the County Archaeologist (Ephor) for Boeotia, Prof. Vassilis Aravantinos, has conducted four seasons of fieldwork at the

city and in its surrounding countryside. Our large field team of Dutch, Greek and Slovenian staff and students are accommodated at the Evangelistria Ecclesiastical Research Centre due to the enthusiastic support for our work by Bishop Hieronymus of Livadhia and his personal assistant Mr. George Kopanyas. As of 2004 we are in the study and checking or problem-solving stage for the Tanagra phase of the wider Project, so that it is timely to offer a provisional overview of what has been achieved so far.

Firstly at the *City* of Tanagra. We divided the surface into a giant grid of study units, in each of which we trained our student helpers to recognize surface pottery fragments between the low scrub plants covering the site, and record stone blocks from the city's buildings and streets. For each grid unit we have counted the density of broken pottery on the surface and collected a sample for dating and functional analysis: what periods are found in each small part of the City, and what kinds of pottery are there – domestic, public, religious, industrial, burial. The analysis of all these many thousands of potsherds is still underway, and here I must introduce the staff members responsible: the counting and collection of the grid finds was controlled by myself and Dr. Kostas Sbonias (Corfu University). The creation of detailed surface maps and their placing of all the finds into the computer records is the responsibility of Emeri Farinetti (PhD student, Leiden). The prehistoric pottery is studied by Dr. Kalliope Sarri (Athens), the Classical Greek by Dr. Vladimir Stissi (University of Amsterdam), the Roman ceramics by Prof. Jeroen Poblome (Leuven University) and finally the Medieval and Postmedieval by Thanassi Vionis (PhD student, Leiden). It appears that the first settlement at the City site is a small Neolithic (early farmers) village, followed by similarly small settlements in all phases of the subsequent Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age. Although there are some large and rich cemeteries in the Tanagra region in the Late Bronze Age or Mycenaean era, these turn out not to belong to the City village as sometimes hypothesized, but to larger and more important settlements lying both by the modern village of Tanagra several kilometres to the west of the City, and near the modern villages of Agios Thomas and Kleidi some kilometres south of the City.

Indeed the ancient City does not begin either in the post-Mycenaean Dark Ages but can first clearly be recognised at the dawn of Greek history, during the Late Geometric and early Archaic period around 700 BC, when the first textual references to a town fit with the earliest graves in its surrounding cemeteries (excavated over a long period before our Project began). We do not yet know how large the first, early historic (Archaic and early Classical era) City was, as the overlay of the buildings of the next 1000 years of the City have left little surface architecture of that period and only scant small pieces of pottery for us to find on the surface. Indeed when we found prehistoric pottery or such early historic finds, it is usually because later citizens of the Hellenistic and especially Roman periods dug down into older levels of the town to find mud for their houses or reset foundations, in the process disturbing earlier levels of occupation and bringing old potsherds into later levels. The first clear idea of the size of the City comes in the early 4th century BC. Here we can introduce the hero of earlier work at Tanagra, the American scholar Duane Roller. In the 1970s and 1980s he brought a small team to Tanagra and painstakingly mapped the visible surface architecture, including the City walls, and created a highly plausible plan of the main street lines and houseblocks of the City as it was set out in a complete gridplan replanning which

he dated to this century (see particularly Roller, 1987). Following ancient descriptions of the City, he was able to confirm that the Acropolis with the main public buildings and market-centre or Agora lay not in the highest, southernmost sector of the City, but two-thirds of the way from the north wall to the south wall, where a marked ridge crosses the whole site from east to west and interrupts the otherwise sloping trend from south the north.

Our surface finds remain too rare to say much about this Classical Greek town so far, and far more informative have been the remarkable results of the Ljubljana team under the direction of Prof. Slapsak and using the technical excellence of his chief geophysicist Dr. Brane Music. The application of subsurface prospection without destructive excavation offers one of the other major ways – beyond surface pottery and architecture study – in which we can study the history of an archaeological site without digging it up. Combining different methods of detecting walls and ditches and industrial installations underground, - electrical resistance, magnetic anomalies, radar signals, one can produce maps of roads, walls, kilns, etc of astonishing detail and clarity. In the case of Tanagra, almost the entire 30 hectare walled town has been studied through geophysics, and we can now test the hypothetical street and house block plan of Roller against the subsurface realities. It turns out that the streets running at regular intervals north-south in Roller's plan are indeed as he suggested, but his east-west regular avenues are often not quite where he claimed. Furthermore his location for the central square or Agora seems incorrect, and it lies a good deal further west and nearer one of the major City gates.

Tanagra in Roman times naturally saw extensive rebuildings and modifications to its original 4th century BC gridplan. The almost complete townplan coming from the geophysics programme is gradually shedding light on this process. At first we had been very puzzled by the fact that Roller's first City plan seemed to show that the strongest surface architecture is indeed the Greek street and insula plan, as we were sure that there had been a further 1000 years of the City subsequently which ought to have seriously affected its survival. Also on the new geophysics' plots the dominant subsurface features remain that early plan, although one can now see many places where streets were blocked, or house blocks altered later to new purposes. The way to test this further has been shown by experiments conducted in 2003 by Bozidar Slapsak, where parts of the City were stripped of surface vegetation and all the now more visible surface wall-lines and loose architectural blocks were photographed, measured and described. It soon became clear that although the lines of streets and of many buildings in the house blocks remained even in Late Roman times the same alignments as in the original major replanning exercise of the 4th century BC, every wall had been rebuilt at a later stage.

The ceramics of the subsequent Hellenistic era are still rather rare and we cannot as yet tell much about life in the City then, although there is a humorous short account in the travelogue of Heracleides Kritikos from this time. The great 4th century BC plan and rewalling do attest to a large and wealthy City in Classical Greek times, and it is perhaps to the arrival of Roman power when we might expect some radical change in its prosperity. Previous work during the earlier Boeotia Project made it clear that ancient writers' emphasis on the decline of Southern Greece in the Early Roman Empire as far as population levels and overall economic output, seemed accurate when we observed the surface survey evidence for the shrinkage of urban areas as cities

such as Thespieae and Hyettos and the temporary or permanent cessation of occupation at the town of Haliartos and the village-town of Askra. We might expect that Tanagra could well have likewise shrunk in size and population. So far the pottery recovered from the City surface does indeed seem to be notably low for Early Roman times, but the analysis is far from concluded and there are problems with close dating of some pottery types with long lives well beyond this period.

There seems to have been certainly a large and busy City in the Late Roman period however (ca. 400-600 AD), as the vast bulk of all surface finds from Tanagra belong to Late Roman forms. This was also a time when Barbarian raids brought real insecurity to Greece, and we see a wave of refortification of cities throughout the province. The fact that Tanagra repairs its entire Classical Greek City walls suggests that at least now its population was considerable, as in other towns only a small area is walled (eg Thespieae in Central Boeotia, where only 12 hectares is surrounded by a new fortification, leaving a further 30 hectares of town outside, and a further 60 hectares of the former Classical Greek town which had been abandoned by Early Roman times and never reoccupied). On the other hand, most of the rubbish lying on the surface of Late Roman Tanagra is not normal household pottery but transport amphorae – large vessels for the trade in oil and/or wine, which leads to new questions for our ceramic experts. A possible explanation will be offered later in our review of the Tanagraian countryside.

As well as reconstruction on the spot of old street lines and houses, and the observed more radical changes of functions to streets and house blocks, there are also observable on the geophysical City plan some totally new architectural features which were the product of the Roman occupants. Most striking are a series of churches from Late Antiquity, especially a giant example from the Agora area. Traces also suggest that some Greek house blocks had changed use from equal-sized houses to dominating mansions for an elite by Late Roman times. As this work progresses, that is the final stages of the total geophysical plotting for the City, the analysis of the plans produced, and the localised ‘ground-truthing’ of these subsurface plans through surface cleaning and mapping, we hope to be able to tell much more about the scale and nature of the transformation of the Greek City under Roman rule.

Late Antique Tanagra had a bishop but the historic sources do not attest to the town after Late Roman times, and so far the Medieval or Byzantine sherds found over the City seem to betray no more than scattered farms. During the middle Ottoman Turkish period, of the 16th-18th centuries AD, a discrete hamlet was found lying on the Acropolis of the City, represented by a row of 4 interlinked longhouses in rubble construction, of traditional house type for this region, and a limited radius round the houses of ceramic rubbish from this period. Probably this represents a dependent serf-farm of *ciftlik* typical for this period in Greece.

It is time to turn to the *Chora* or *Countryside* of Tanagra, the area which in ancient times would have formed its supportive agricultural hinterland. Our experience in regional surface survey has shown that one cannot begin to understand either urban history or the history of the countryside unless you study both components of a past settlement system, since in pre-Modern times the two are interdependent aspects of a single society. It was clearly essential for us to sample areas of the farming hinterland, and between 2000 and 2003 a series of long and narrow strips of land or *transects* were chosen, running in all major directions out of the City, for distances of one to 3

kilometres, where we conducted field by field walking with student teams, counting and mapping the density of surface pottery finds and collecting samples for dating. Each team consists of some 6-9 students under a supervisor, and walks in a long line with each member some 15-20 from the next walker, so as to locate even small farmsteads.

Two kinds of information comes from such rural fieldwalking. Firstly we find isolated concentrations of pottery and sometimes also building material, which depending on the extent and quality of the finds can be interpreted as farms, villas or villages, or perhaps rural cemeteries. In between these foci of activity, especially in Boeotia, we find entire carpets of broken potsherds, at lower densities than material emanating from past settlements, but still significant enough to mark a major form of human activity. This latter kind of surface material is usually referred to as 'offsite pottery' and its characteristics in Boeotia are so clear that we can put a very likely explanation forward for its origin. At Tanagra this is as clear as anywhere else: the offsite pottery is at its highest density around the edges of the ancient City and then gradually declines in density with an almost perfect relationship to distance from the town. After some 2 kilometres it is very slight, or in steep terrain has disappeared. The material concerned is also uniformly in poor and very battered condition, quite different from the larger and fresher pieces we find over ancient farms or villages, where the occupation levels are being disturbed by modern ploughing or erosion. The amount of this material, since we count it, proves quite staggering, and this rules out other possible explanations – more than one piece of pottery for every square metre of countryside for the Tanagra rural areas we surveyed. This amounts to millions of pieces within a half-hour radius of the City! Taken together, these aspects of the offsite pottery argue for its origin in intensive agricultural manuring out of the City, with urban residents storing their rubbish for recycling out into the fields in order to enhance the fertility of their estates. The organic components have long since been absorbed into millennia of crops, so what we have left are the tough inorganic rubbish items – notably the ubiquitous broken household pottery.

It might seem that this evidence merely tells us that ancient Tanagraians were keen to get high yields from their farms, since before the Modern era chemical fertilisers were absent and over time fields tended to get less and less fertile with regular cropping in a dry Mediterranean climate. But the Boeotian offsite carpets hold a potential for more insightful conclusions: a sample of this material has been collected for dating, and we await with great interest when exactly this practice was common. In the largest city studied by the earlier Boeotia Project, Thespieae, the offsite carpets were almost entirely dated to the Classical Greek era, when the City was at its largest, and we could interpret this then as a symptom of population pressure. Eventually Thespieae's population crashed, as noted above, by the Roman era, and we suspect that declining crop yields played a major part in this. For Tanagra we are still working on the extent of the City between Classical and Roman times, and await results for the age of the offsite manuring carpets, so it will be of great importance to see if also here in Eastern Boeotia a similar crisis occurred, or whether intensification of land use occurred at a different period, and of course this ought to relate to the changing size of the City! The other feature of rural survey is the discovery of discrete foci of settlement or burial, or 'sites', and here the picture from the hinterland of Tanagra is also in agreement with that obtained earlier in our surveys of Central and North Boeotia. Prehistoric sites consist of Neolithic and Bronze Age villages at regular intervals of

some half an hour apart, between which lie shorter-lived farms probably occupied by a single family. The Neolithic farmers lacked ploughs and did not obtain dairy products or wool from their flocks, and tend to be closely associated with the presence of well-watered valley soils where hand agriculture is most easily applied. In the Bronze Age the diffusion of ox-drawn ploughs and the knowledge of secondary products from domestic animals caused a massive explosion of settlement into the drier zones of the landscape and a general rise in population. As noted earlier, Tanagra City, which lies close both to the major river Asopus and at its junction with a lesser stream called the Laris, is a village focus in both Neolithic and Bronze Age times, with the nearest nucleated sites to it being by the modern village of Tanagra to the west, and at several foci to the south-west and south near the modern villages of Agios Thomas and Kleidi. Careful study of the pottery from our rural fieldwalking produced many very small farm sites along the major and minor streams near the City and in the soft-soiled interfluvies between them, fitting the changing models for settlement just described. The next major spread of settlement in the countryside coincides with the founding and rapid expansion of City of Tanagra, in Archaic and Classical Greek times, with a likely peak of urban and rural population around 400 BC as in the rest of Boeotia. We found a number of rural family farms and many small rural cemeteries. Usually the farms begin only some distance away from the town where it became worthwhile to live most or all the year rather than walk home every evening from one's estate to the town. But actually our Boeotian survey work and that of other intensive Greek surveys have shown conclusively that although the Classical countryside is full of farms and small villages, their total resident population cannot be more than 20-25% of the regional population, with the vast majority dwelling in the large and closely-spaced cities or *poleis* of this period. We are sure that the hinterland of Tanagra was then largely cultivated by citizens living in the town itself, at least up to a half hour radius or so, after which larger rural nucleations commonly appear, dependent villages or *komai*. This is precisely what we would expect when we recall that the manuring carpets spread out from the town for this distance and were the property of the town-dwellers, spread to fertilize their fields for the most part. The rural cemeteries of Tanagra are more common than elsewhere detected in Boeotia or other surveys, but we suspect that this observation derives from the notorious and long history of tomb-robbing by local villagers, searching among other things for the famous Tanagra terracotta figurines buried in Classical and Early Hellenistic times with their owners. The disruption caused by tomb-robbing still today litters the surface with the less desirable pots abandoned in the pillage. Nonetheless the extra visibility of the tombs tells us that probably in ancient times city landscapes elsewhere would have been filled with small cemeteries with and usually without associated farmhouses, marking ancestral estates.

In the final centuries BC and the early centuries AD, the times we know as Late Hellenistic and Early Roman, Boeotia goes into a general decline. At Tanagra specifically we cannot yet tell if the City shrank now, but in the rural hinterland there is certainly so far an absence of farms. Recovery begins in the Middle Roman Imperial era (ca. 200-400 AD) and peaks in a new florescence of rural sites in Late Roman times (ca. 400-600 AD). Now as elsewhere in Boeotia there is the appearance of numerous villas or elite farms in the landscape, larger and more elaborate architecturally than the small family farms of the Classical era. In the Tanagra rural survey we have so far studied four of these villas, and there are indeed signs from at least two of elite furnishings (fluted columns, window glass, mosaic floors). It is

customary to interpret this contrast as a shift by Roman times to a form of landownership favouring wealthier farmers over a previously dominant class of petty farmers. Indeed it is possible that the urban population at Tanagra may by now have formed a dependent labour pool working on these large estates, as salaried labour or sharecroppers maybe. This might explain why the citizens of Late Roman Tanagra used such numbers of locally-made food and drink containers (the large amphorae) which are normally reserved for long-distance trade. Maybe the pay for these workers came in the form of bulk supplies of wine or oil, part of the production destined largely for export from the region to the financial benefit of the class of magnates running this system?

If the City dies at the end of Antiquity, we would normally assume that life went on somewhere not far away. It is true that sometimes a great natural disaster or human catastrophe may empty a region of its human population completely, but this is exceedingly rare. More typically we expect that even if towns rise and fall, and overall population performs in the same way, some people will always be living in a district with good resources to make a livelihood – and Tanagra is at the centre of a very fertile area agriculturally with not too severe a climate. One of the main purposes of intensive rural survey is therefore to locate those places where occupation continues or shifts too when most settlements go out of use (Bintliff 2001), and this is the case at the end of the Late Roman era. We know that there were serious barbarian raids through Roman Greece from the 3rd through to the 7th century AD, and in particular numerous Slav tribes colonised the countryside in the late 6th and 7th centuries. In addition the bubonic plague may have cut the population of the Roman world by up to a half over the same period.

If therefore the demise of the City of Tanagra becomes understandable, can we test our working hypothesis that life went on somewhere not far away? In the 2003 season we studied a large village site at Agios Konstantinos a mere 2 kilometres south of the City. A very extensive Late Roman village was the main occupation period, but intriguingly the village was seemingly fortified on all sides, and our medieval ceramics' specialist Thanassi Vionis speculates that a few of the finds might just allow the refuge site to continue into the troubled, low population Dark Age era which succeeds Late Roman (ca. 600-900 AD). This is certainly the kind of scenario we might expect, and look forward to more work on the finds from this site, to see if this admittedly speculative and preliminary idea holds up!

More definitely we can match the historic sources well with the next phase of landscape occupation in the Tanagra hinterland. By the 8th century AD the Eastern Roman Empire, based at Constantinople, had reconquered the Greek countryside from the Slave, including Boeotia, and this ushered in a period of steady growth of rural population and at the major regional towns (such as Thebes in Central Boeotia). We can match this picture from Byzantine sources with the results of our rural survey around Tanagra – a whole series of small villages or hamlets was established at regular intervals of every few kilometres, datable by characteristic Middle Byzantine ceramics found on their surface to foundations in the 10th-11th centuries AD. These continue to flourish into the next period of Crusader feudal conquest of our region (13th-14th century). The advantageous location of ancient Tanagra City explains the fact that one such village is founded only a kilometre from the ancient town, by the rural church still standing from that village of Agios Thomas.

All the Byzantine villages disappear in the 14th century, and this can be related to the return of the Bubonic Plague and to the devastating wars between the Franks, the Byzantines and the Turks which left most of the southern Mainland of Greece cleared of population, which either retreated to upland villages in each region or was carried off into slavery. The first village tax records for Boeotia, in 1466, shortly after the Ottoman Turkish conquest of Greece, show vividly this absence of Greek settlements in the Lowlands and a small number of enlarged refuge villages in the hills of Boeotia. Eastern Boeotia with the large plains and plateaux around Tanagra is especially empty. To recolonise this landscape between 1400-1500 AD the final Frankish Dukes of Athens and then the Ottoman rulers invited large numbers of new settlers, from Albania, with the specific direction to locate new villages near abandoned ones from the previous settlement system. This is the origin of our modern villages at Tanagra (former Bratsi) and at Kleidi (Kleideti). After some 100 years of Ottoman rule, the peaceful conditions of the Pax Ottomanic saw population rise for both Greek and Albanian villages, as well as new village foundations. The Ottoman village tax record for 1570 shows this well [Figure 24]. Modern Ayios Thomas has a more complex history; it is rather recent, and was founded by villagers moving out of the mountains between Boeotia and Attica at the end of the Turkish era and after the War of Greek Independence, in the early 19th century AD. Before Thomas though a village existed at its own site, called Kelmendi or Liatani, and further south a small linked pair of hamlets called Kinos or Ginosati, now deserted. Our Project directs itself naturally to deserted villages where no overlay of modern constructions obscures houseplans and pottery finds of the pre-Modern era, and in 2003 we were able to plan the latest generation of stone longhouses at Ginosati and collect ceramics from the surface which fit the general 15th-18th century records for the village. It is important that we take the history and archaeology of traditional villages very seriously, since the roots of these farmers who work our landscape are quite different and in themselves very interesting and hitherto not the object of archaeological investigation. Based on our many years at deserted villages in the earlier Boeotia Project we can identify even domestic and coarsewares for periods of one to two centuries within the 1400 years of post-Roman life in Boeotia, whilst the combination of the Ottoman village records and later accounts from Western Travellers and 19th century post-Independence census and map records allows us to follow villages around the landscape over the long-term. The site and landscape of ancient Tanagra sees no tourists, and hardly any scholarly visitors. Yet we have been able to show that the town site and surrounding countryside contain in a microcosm many of the key developments in the story of Greek cities and rural populations, from the arrival of the earliest farmers from the Near East in the 7th millennium BC right up to the establishment of the modern villages of the district between the 14th and 19th centuries AD.

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The Preliminary Reports of the Tanagra Project have appeared in the journal of the Dutch Institute at Athens, *Pharos*, for the years 2000 and 2001 (volumes 8-9), and for the 2002 season the report will appear in the journal of the French School at Athens, *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellenique* during 2004. That for 2003 will be in *Pharos*.