

BROKEN POTTERY AND THE HABITATION HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL BOEOTIA (GREECE)

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RÉSUMÉ : On aspire à présenter avec cette recherche une classification typologique et chronologique des céramiques médiévales et post-médiévales en Grèce centrale, datées du VIIe au XXe siècle. Le matériel utilisé dans cette étude est découvert en ramassage de surface dans le sud-ouest de la Béotie par le « Boeotia Project » (Cambridge ; Durham). Les fragments de céramique médiévale et post-médiévale de cette prospection sont d'une quantité et qualité extraordinaire. En outre, le matériel de survey peut être comparé avec les céramiques médiévales et post-médiévales trouvées dans les fouilles stratigraphiques menées à Thèbes, le chef-lieu du Béotie.

The Boeotia Project

Since the Boeotia Project started its intensive survey in this Central Greek region under the auspices of the Universities of Durham and Cambridge (UK), many hitherto unknown Medieval and Post-Medieval sites have been recorded and some 12,000 Post-Roman sherds have been sampled¹. During the 16 years of fieldwork, most of the survey has been carried out in an area of some 55 square kilometres in south-western Boeotia, more or less around the modern villages of Mavrommati and Askra (Fig. 1-2). In addition, since the late 1980s a second but much smaller survey area has been opened up in the far northern borderlands of the province, near the village of Pavlo (Bintliff, Snodgrass 1985; Bintliff 1996a; 1996b).

In the course of the Boeotia Project a total of some 60 square kilometres of the region have now been surveyed. Until now, some 300 rural sites were discovered, and complete surface surveys of four urban sites were carried out. One of the remarkable findings of the survey is that sites from the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods are ubiquitous in the research area. Especially compared to other regions of Greece, these sites are abundant in diagnostic and well-preserved surface finds of the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. Noteworthy is also the fact that this inland region has seen a relatively fair amount of imports from Italy and Turkey.

In view of the quantity and quality of the finds, Boeotia is thought to be a promising test case for the typo-chronological study of Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery in Central Greece, ranging all the way from Early Byzan-

tine times to the Early Modern era (7th-20th centuries AD) (Vroom 1997). In many archaeological projects all over the Mediterranean, the awareness of the importance of this material has increased dramatically over the last couple of years, but its diagnosis is still severely hampered by a lack of knowledge and of up-to-date publications.

The starting point for my research is the fact that some sites in Boeotia have apparently been inhabited continuously throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages until Modern times, while other Post-Classical sites were inhabited during short and clearly limited periods of time. This provides the possibility to combine the ceramic data from all these sites in a regional typo-chronological seriation. One of the more exciting prospects of my research is to deduct from this seriation a "floating chronology" for Medieval and Post-Medieval Boeotia from the 7th to the 20th century AD.

Of vital importance for the construction of this floating chronology are three unique factors: 1. the outstanding quality of the Boeotian Post-Classical survey ceramics; 2. the quantity and regional distribution of the material over some 74 different sites; 3. the fact that the Boeotia Project has surveyed distinctive one-period sites with well-defined chronological boundaries.

The Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery

Among the various pieces of pottery sampled on the surface of the Medieval and Post-Medieval sites in Boeotia, one can, for instance, distinguish for the Early Byzan-

1. My special thanks go to the Boeotia Project and its co-directors, Professor Dr John Bintliff (University of Leiden) and Professor Dr Anthony Snodgrass (University of Cambridge), for inviting me to study and publish the Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery sampled during the survey. My research is supported financially by the Leverhulme Foundation (UK).

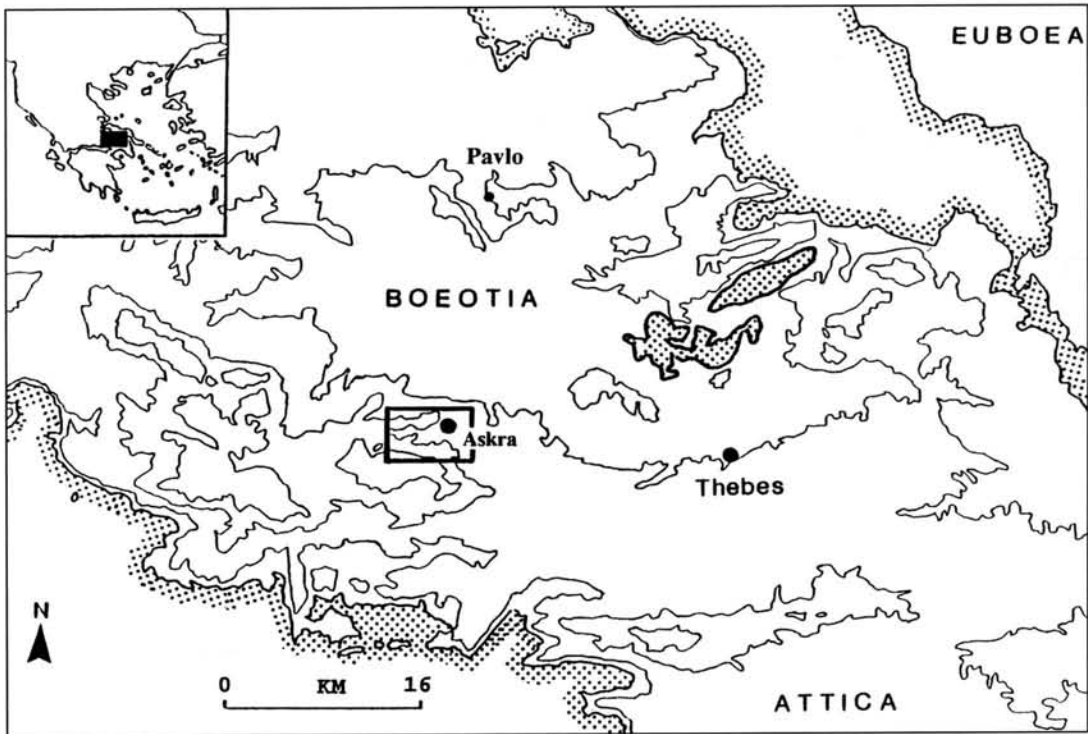


Fig. 1. Map of Boeotia, Greece, with approximate position of the Valley of the Muses (one of the research areas of the Boeotia Project).

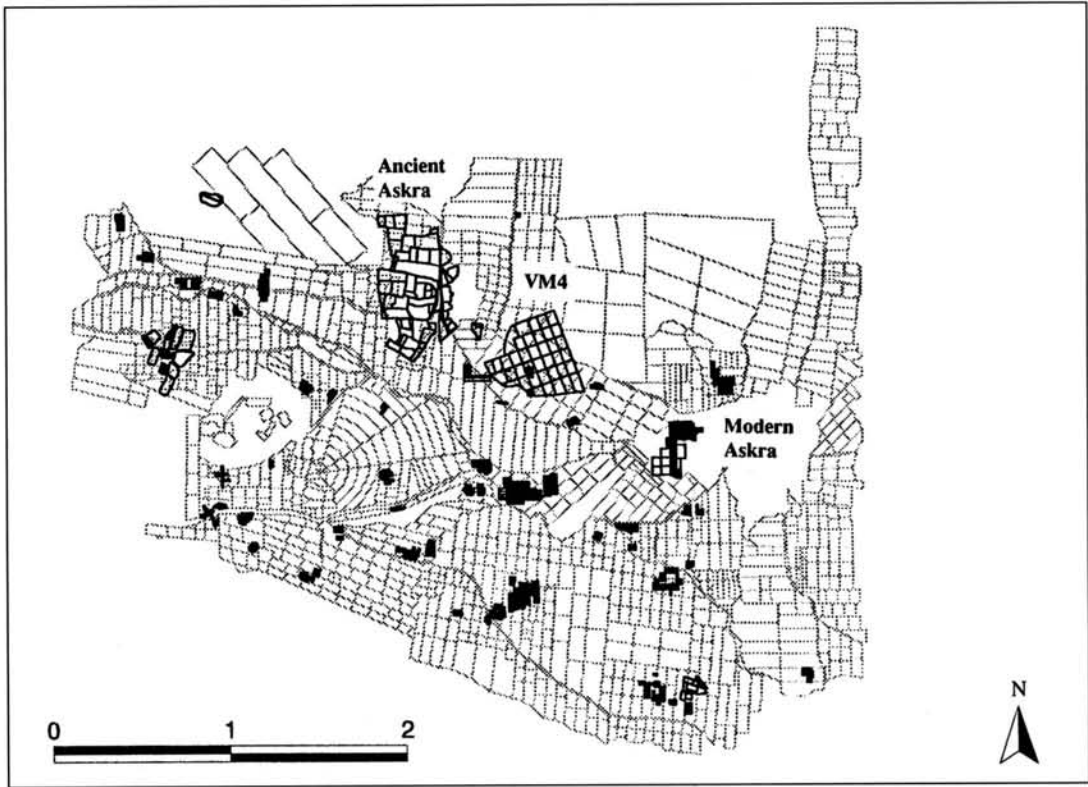


Fig. 2. Valley of the Muses, Boeotia: research area with site and off-site transects.

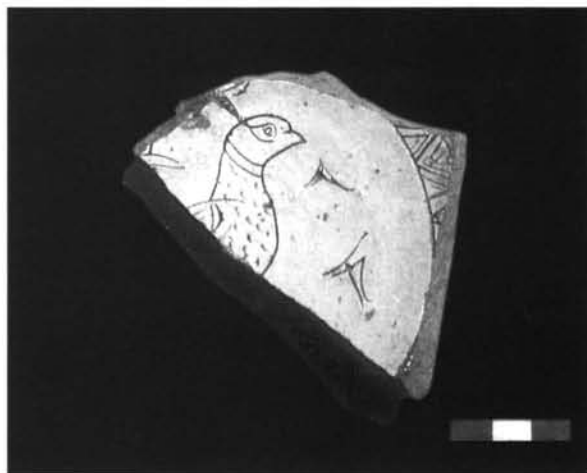


Fig. 4. Fine Sgraffito sherd from Boeotia.

Fig. 3. Unglazed small jug from Boeotia.

tine period (c. 7th-9th centuries AD): Late Roman Red Slip Wares (among which John Hayes identified a locally produced Red Slip Ware, the so-called "Askra Ware"), body fragments of grooved amphorae (probably of Late Roman 2 amphorae from the Aegean), a fragment of the so-called "Slav Ware" and an unglazed small jug (Fig. 3).

The written sources and archaeological data indicate that from the 11th century onwards Boeotia witnessed a period of prosperity, and that its capital Thebes became densely populated (Vroom, forthcoming). The material wealth of

11th-12th century Boeotia is reflected in the quality of decorated tablewares, found on various sites in the research area. These rural sites contain often several fragments of glazed chafing dishes in a red or white fabric, and many pieces of Green and Brown Painted Ware, of Fine Sgraffito Ware, and of Slip-painted Ware (Fig. 4-5). The fabrics, shapes and designs of these sherds show great similarity with the excavated pottery from Corinth (Morgan 1942).

Apart from these fine wares, the Middle Byzantine sites in Boeotia also produced a large amount of unglazed



Fig. 5. Slip-painted fragments.



Fig. 6. Unglazed incised jug fragment from Boeotia.

domestic wares, such as cooking pots, several amphora-types (e.g. *Sarāḥane* type 61), and pieces of unglazed, incised vessels (which are identical to the incised “lagenio” from Thessaloniki, published by Papanikola-Bakirtzi; *The Art of Sgraffito* 1999: 17, fig. 1). Interesting are also some fragments of unglazed, burnished jugs with a shallow grooved decoration (Fig. 6). These fragments display the same fabric, shape and decoration-technique of the so-called “Fine Orange-Red Burnished Ware” found in late 10th- to 11th-century deposits during the excavations at *Sarāḥane* in Istanbul (Hayes 1992: 50, fig. 18). A similar looking ware was also found in 9th- to late 11th-century deposits at the excavations of Corinth in Greece, and of Otranto in Southern Italy (Patterson, Whitehouse 1992: 125-126, fig. 6.15).

Among the finds from the early phase of Frankish rule in Boeotia, are Monochrome Glazed Ware, imitations of the so-called “Zeuxippus Ware”, Monochrome Sgraffito Wares, Brown and Green Sgraffito Wares and Polychrome Lead-glazed Ware type “RMR” from Southern Italy. They can be generally dated in the 13th century AD. After this period, there is a clear decline of the amount of ceramics on the Boeotian sites during the 14th and 15th centuries.

However, at the turn of the 15th century the numbers of sherds are rising again. In fact, the quantity and larger variety of ceramics in this time suggest that 16th-century sites in Boeotia experienced a “golden age” of population

growth and economic upsurge. Among the many finds of this period, one can distinguish Late Sgraffito Ware in a greenish or yellowish colour, Polychrome Sgraffito Ware (from the Veneto-region and local variants), blue-and-white Maiolica from Italy, a locally made type of imitation-Maiolica, a later type of Slip-painted Ware and Iznik Ware from Turkey (cf. Vroom 1998a for more information on these wares).

The population boom and increase of wealth at the beginning of the 20th century in Greece are closely linked to the different types of folk pottery that dominate the surface material on the Early Modern sites in Boeotia. Very distinctive are fragments of Transfer-printed plates from England and France, of *Çanakkale* Ware from Turkey, of *Didymoteicho* Ware from Thrace, of *Grottaglie* Ware from Southern Italy and its imitations from the island of Corfu (see Vroom 1998b with further literature). Among the coarser ceramics are various domestic wares from all over Greece (e.g. from Crete, Siphnos and Marousi in Attica).

Last but not least, the surface material also yielded a large fragment of kiln furniture with glassy residues on top of it, as well as a few unfinished products. This seems to suggest that there was local (glazed) pottery production in Boeotia.

Excavated material from Thebes

Additional data for the floating chronology of the Boeotia Project will be obtained from finds excavated in Thebes, the regional capital near the survey area². This city was during the Middle Ages one of the most important economic centres of this part of the Byzantine Empire – it may even be ranked third after Constantinople and Thessaloniki.

Special attention will be paid to the excavation of twelve rubbish pits and one well with Byzantine, Medieval and Post-Medieval finds in Pelopidou Street, in the city centre of Thebes (Vroom, forthcoming). During the years 1993 and 1994 the Greek archaeologists excavated at Pelopidou Street an area of c. 200 square metres to a depth of four metres. Fourteen rubbish pits and one well were discovered. Twelve of those pits and the well contained Post-Roman deposits. Only one Byzantine coin datable to the 11th-12th century was found during the excavation, but this was a stray find.

The rubbish pits varied in size from 90 centimetres to approximately 3 metres across. Usually they were just

2. The excavation at Pelopidou Street in Thebes was carried out under the direction of Dr V. Aravantinos, the Ephor of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities in Boeotia, and I am most grateful to him for permitting me to study and publish the Post-Roman finds from his excavation.



Fig. 7. Small Kütahya bowl from the excavations at Thebes.



Fig. 8. Local painted bowl from the excavations at Thebes.

holes dug in the sterile ground and then filled up with garbage. In some cases they were covered by stones. The fill in the excavated pits was usually grey to black or dark brown and much softer than the surrounding earth. Most of the pits were filled with kitchen waste, offal and construction debris.

The well had a circular stone wall of 20 centimetres thick and it is the only such structure in the excavation area. It is unknown whether it was in use as a well for water or whether it was specifically built for the disposal of garbage, similar to wells found in North-Western Europe since the 15th century AD.

The Medieval and Post-Medieval rubbish pits and well at the Pelopidou Street-excavation proved to have very mixed contents, except for six closed deposits: three from the Byzantine period and three from the Turkish period. The pottery from these pits offers an important stratified perspective on the material culture of Thebes and its region from the 10th till the 18th centuries. The finds suggest that prosperity blossomed at Thebes in Middle Byzantine and Early Turkish times, as is shown in the quality and variety both of imported wares (Fig. 7) and of locally produced pottery (Fig. 8). The fact that some unique items, such as fine tablewares from Iznik and Kütahya in Turkey, a double ivory comb and blue-and-white porcelain, were excavated from these rubbish pits even suggest a well-to-do urban background (see for more information on these wares, Vroom 1996; forthcoming).

In the course of the Pelopidou Street-excavation seventeen complete (or nearly complete) vessels were found in three rubbish pits which contained otherwise imported 16th- to 18th-century ceramics from Turkey (Fig. 9). The majority of the shapes indicate that the jugs were used for holding or serving liquids. The jugs stand firmly on a flat base and have spouts and handles. Liquids are drained off through the tubular spout, which is placed high up the shoulder. Most of the jugs are unglazed; sometimes they merely have a decoration of a pair of incised lines on the

upper part. Nevertheless, a few vessels from the pits are lead-glazed.

The provenance of these lead-glazed and unglazed jugs is yet unknown, perhaps they were locally produced. The large amount of discarded fragments of jugs from this type in one pit seems to suggest that a potter's workshop was near Pelopidou Street in Turkish times. The find of a potter's tool, a so-called tripod stilt, during an earlier excavation at Pelopidou Street seems to corroborate this conjecture (Theodorou-Mavromatidi 1995: pl. 18).

The picture of Thebes as a thriving and wealthy place in Early Turkish times seems to be in accordance with the census and taxation registers of Thebes from the 15th and 16th centuries. Thebes figures in these lists as one of the

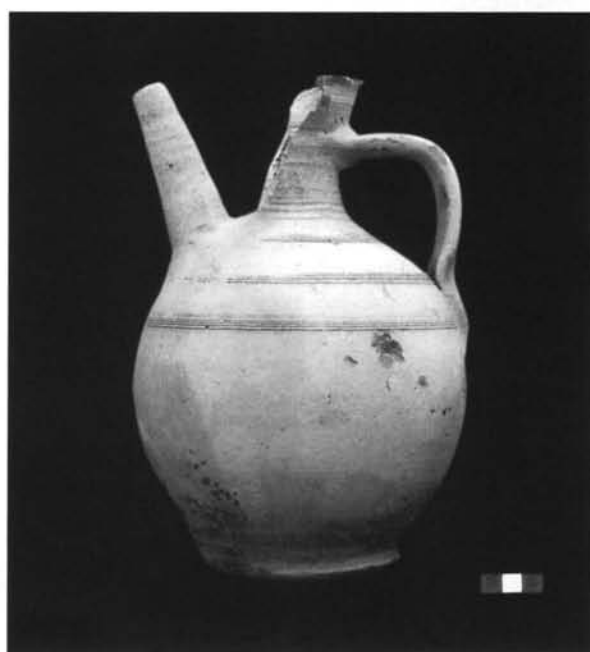


Fig. 9. Unglazed jug from the excavations at Thebes.

largest and most densely populated cities in Central Greece (Kiel 1992: 406 and table 3). The Theban economy was based on the production of wheat, wine, cotton, wool and silk and on the breeding of sheep. During the 16th century, cotton production rose five times and the production of wine and silk doubled, as did water mills, market dues and revenue of the public weighing house (Kiel 1990: 433 n. 8 and 446; 1992: table 5b). At the same time, Thebes produced in the 16th century its own school of icon- and fresco painters, whose surviving works can be found all over Greece (Kiel 1990: 431-433).

CONCLUSION

The results of the intensive survey in rural Boeotia executed by the Durham-Cambridge project seem to be in complete accordance with the results of the excavation of twelve rubbish pits and one well in the centre of Thebes. The pottery of the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods found in the urban context of Thebes and on the rural sites in south-western and northern Boeotia is quite similar, and clearly indicates that town and country especially prospered during the 12th century, as well as during the 16th century.

In short, the combined Boeotia-Thebes research offers a great opportunity to compare survey finds with excavated material from a major urban centre in Greece – and vice versa. The study of the survey finds may provide us with a much needed typo-chronology of Post-Classical wares in Greece and the Aegean area, ranging from the 7th up to the 20th century AD.

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