

Work/Shop Till You Drop. Reflections on (Work)Shops and Associated People from Hellenistic to Roman Imperial Pisidia

Jeroen Poblome – Rinse Willet – Dorien Leder-Slotman

In geographical terms, the ancient region of Pisidia in SW Asia Minor is characterized by mountainous landscapes. The Taurus mountain range forms the backbone of the region, dominating its outlook, defining its Siedlungskammern and providing the framework for its ecological and climatological conditions. As with other mountain ranges, this setting is comparatively rich in a variety of mineral and natural resources, while the topography plays a strong role in its connectivity within and without the region, with few rivers, let alone navigable ones, and generally at a distance from the Mediterranean (fig. 1). In historical terms, Pisidia can be considered to be in a marginal position vis-à-vis the contemporary yet shifting centers of power of Hellenistic kings or Roman rule, in Republican or Imperial times. A result of these conditions is that ancient Pisidia is to be situated away from the socio-political poles of attraction of the time and outside of the core regions of exchange and trade.

From a long-term perspective, there will always have been kinds and types of artisanal activities, long before and long after the region was called Pisidia. Pottery production is an obvious testimony to this in the archaeological record, beginning in late Neolithic period and still continuing today. Apart from a range of domestic activities, related to textile production for instance, a typical community would have provided some quantity of work to a carpenter and a smith to build and maintain houses and buildings, and make and repair tools and equipment.¹ From that same long-term perspective, it is good to bear in mind that the history of the study region is mostly characterized by non-urban forms of community organization. In the case of ancient Sagalassos, one of the prime sites of urban development in Pisidia, the monumentalization part of urbanization was initiated around 200 BCE, following a period of political community formation. The site maintained central functions for its hinterland into middle Byzantine times, but the urban grandeur typically associated with classical antiquity had faded away already from the second half of the sixth century CE onwards.²

Even in periods when provincial towns dotted the Pisidian landscapes, the importance of secondary settlements and the role of the rural economy for the entire region is not to be underestimated. Agriculture was at the core of the Pisidian social metabolism, providing the framework of regional development. Production specialization, urbanization and colonization of new territories could foster development, in the sense of growth, in agricultural societies, but such were discontinuous processes, mostly limited to aggregate growth and not resulting in metabolic change of the social-ecological system. Additionally, taking the overarching concerns of the urban communities into account



Fig. 1: The urban centre of ancient Sagalassos in winter conditions.

related to food supply and generating revenue, the Pisidian context in general provided only modest options for artisans.³

Clearly, most options for these groups of people would have been available in an urban context. When urbanization happens, in Hellenistic and Roman Imperial times, the urban physical landscape represents mostly concerns for catering to the gods, defence of the own community and the organization of spectacles and festivals, apart from housing to be sure. Investments in the civic and commercial infrastructure in Pisidian towns also took place, to some degree, developing a built framework for the urban economic activities.⁴ Notable examples are the so-called Hellenistic Market Buildings, as identified in Pisidia at Sagalassos (fig. 2), Melli, Kapıkaya, Pednelissos and Selge, although recently the traditional definition of the function of these buildings has been deconstructed.⁵ A functional symbiosis with the agora seems to be in play, but it is quite unclear how the supposed commercial and storage functions of these buildings would have worked in detail and to which benefits for the poleis. The presumed functions also do not seem to have been continued in Roman Imperial times in all cases, without an alternative providing continuation of functions being available in the Roman urban spaces.

Urban craft industry originates in middle Hellenistic times, more or less in tandem with the process of urbanization. The installation of a limited amount of potter's workshops in the area of the later Odeion at Sagalassos serves as a case in point. The



Fig. 2: Remains of the middle Hellenistic Market Building(?) under excavation and conservation at Sagalassos. Remains of the original building formed part of series of transformations into late antiquity.

laying-out of this area went hand in hand with a developed chaîne opératoire and increased product differentiation, and these processes have been considered to reflect increasing complexity in society.⁶ In general, however, from an opportunity cost point of view, the urban craft activities implied a marginal, absorbable loss for the rural economy. The agricultural sector in any case allows for a certain range of opportunities at diversification of economic activities and the Hellenistic artisanal production seems to have fitted in this range. The process of urbanization in Hellenistic Pisidia, the contemporary constitution of chorai tied to these poleis and the development of institutions including markets improved the general functioning of society and the craftsmen finding their places in this developing constellation. There seems to be relatively more archaeology in Hellenistic Pisidia compared to previous epochs, which leads to the open question whether also a scenario of demographic growth is at play, or at least one of growing population concentrations. It is another open question whether these conditions of development actually equalled economic growth in this period. If such would have been the case, which is far from clear yet, there are in any case no indications available for per capita growth. This context was creating new possibilities, however, as is exemplified by a range of Hellenistic amphorae arriving at Sagalassos,

which is an indicator of the region opening up, at least to some degree, to new forms of exchange.⁷ This proceeded dialectically with the urbanization and institutionalization of Pisidia, and the early manifestation of social elites, creating possibilities for (urban) markets and, in the wake of that, for (work)shops.

With the incorporation into the Roman Empire of the region of Pisidia in 25 BCE, much of these local processes continued, whereas Rome also introduced some structural changes. The laying-out of the via Sebaste created improved conditions for connectivity, the foundation of a string of military *coloniae* implied immigration of new groups into the region introducing new social models à la romaine, but most of all there was the sensation of the *pax Romana*. Local and regional markets and fairs, both urban and rural, taxation, the organization of courts and to some degree religion and the socio-political ambitions of the local elites represented a framework of potential integration between towns and their hinterlands as well as between the local communities and the Roman Empire at large.

The archaeological and interdisciplinary record of the Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project has revealed many aspects indicative of increased production specialization in the agricultural as well as artisanal sector. Some degree of path dependency on earlier, Hellenistic patterns should be acknowledged, but much was also new, such as the installation of a sizeable potters' quarter in what would now become a veritable suburbium in the eastern parts of town.⁸ No doubt, this created opportunities for the craftsmen at Sagalassos and presumably also for those in the wider region, but to be sure contract/order/income instability possibly combined with winter conditions not conducive to year-round production meant that insecurity continued to be part of the artisans' lives. In this respect, a lot could have been at stake during the year markets or other, religiously tied festivals, such as the emperor's cult at Sagalassos, which on occasion brought throngs of visitors to the local communities. (Work)shops clearly needed to seize the moment when opportunities presented themselves. Other parts of the answer to managing insecurities was limiting investment in production infrastructure and the working of social buffering mechanisms by, for instance, placing the *familia* central to the production organization and giving importance to the functioning of professional associations. In the past years, a *schola* was identified and excavated in the Eastern Suburbium of Sagalassos, catering to the congregation needs of local associations and other parties (fig. 3).⁹ Third party or civic investment in specific economic infrastructure is also attested in the Pisidian towns, featuring market places, porticoes housing shops, the occasional *Macellum*, as well as institutional arrangements arranging exchange and trade. These initiatives did not form part of openly mercantile policies, however, and it is unclear to which degree these facilities would have made a difference in the quality of life of artisans.

The factor that perhaps made most difference to these artisans is how, from an opportunity point of view, the artisanal sector no longer acted within the margins provided by subsistence production. Most productive activities seem to have specialized



Fig. 3: Major changes to the presumed schola at Sagalassos. Left: original layout (blue) from c. 50 CE, with one single entrance from the north and the water infrastructure (green) against the back wall. Middle: layout after c. 100 CE, with an extended building subdivided into separate rooms (red), multiple entrances and a later added kitchen annex (yellow). Right: post-abandonment layout.

to some degree, and the entire system seems to have been made relatively dependent on the external markets of the Roman commonwealth. This affected the typologies of the range of local and regional products, consciously forming part of a larger whole or socio-cultural koine. The analysis of the tableware market in the Roman East based on Agent based Modelling further revealed how places, actors, produce and information were relatively integrated. In this respect, the type of market active in the Roman East is also of importance. Most material categories attest to the functioning of an oligopolitical system, in which basically few suppliers are catering to many customers at this integrated market level. Oligopoly aims at stable conditions or a zero-risk economy, with guaranteed sales for the few suppliers in the immediate, known environment and satisfied customers with a product of a constant quality level, compatible with the geographical and cultural koine. These conditions allowed Pisidian communities and their artisans a voice, fostered specialization and increased productivity.¹⁰

In more ways than one, the Roman imperial socio-economic system was different from that of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The monumentalization of the Pisidian towns and the contemporary archaeological record bears testimony to development and growth, also for the artisanal sector, at least in aggregate but possibly occasionally also per capita. The factors of peace and the integration with the Roman world were nothing but instrumental. Recent research, however, has indicated that energy availability in the contemporary social-ecological system was limited and data modelling made clear

that energy needs were exponentially higher in domestic contexts, compared to the combined energy costs of facilities such as bath buildings and banausic occupations. Other work on agricultural carrying capacities in the study region of Sagalassos pointed to the functioning of a similar structural brake on societal and economic development in the region.¹¹ The question of whether this system was sustainable as such has been answered (negatively) by the conditions and developments of late antiquity. The main open question is in how far the Pisidian pattern, displaying a delicate balance between potential and opportunities, and structural brakes within the own and the general Roman systems, should be valuable to approaching and understanding other regions in the ancient world. To be sure, life in the Pisidian (work)shops in Hellenistic and Roman imperial times will not necessarily have been easy, but conditions need not be considered as dire or desperate. As with most aspects of daily life of the ordinary townsfolk, risks were better avoided, but uncertainties were simply part of life.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the ERC funded project ‘Empire of 2000 cities’, the Research Fund of the University of Leuven and the Research Foundation Flanders.

Notes

¹ Duru 2008; Lefort 2002, 308–310.

² Jacobs 2013; Poblome et al. 2017a.

³ de Molina – Toledo 2014; Persson 2010.

⁴ Willet 2019.

⁵ Leder-Slotman forthcoming.

⁶ Poblome et al. 2013; Daems forthcoming.

⁷ Monsieur et al. 2017.

⁸ Poblome 2015; 2016.

⁹ Claeys – Poblome 2017.

¹⁰ Poblome et al. 2017a; Brughmans – Poblome 2016.

¹¹ Janssen et al. 2017; Van Loo et al. 2017.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Eşref Özülkülü. – Fig. 2–3: Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project..

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