

# Messene and the Changing Urban Life and Material Culture of an Early Byzantine City in the Western Peloponnese (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Century)

In his 2010 book »The Inheritance of Rome« Chris Wickham argues that there is a current historiographical problem for people working on the Late Roman and Early Medieval period: »the more attached historians become to continuity (or to »transformation«) rather than to sharp change, the further they diverge from archaeologists«<sup>1</sup>. This sounds especially truthful for archaeologists working in the field and studying sites and settlements during their change from Late Roman to Early or even Middle Byzantine times. This is not to say of course that there are no indications of continuity in the archaeological record, but the picture coming from excavations is full of these »strange« and atypical new arrangements characterizing a sharply changing world<sup>2</sup>.

Such is also the case of the settlement of Messene in the southwestern Peloponnese in Greece (fig. 1)<sup>3</sup>. Messene is well known as an important Hellenistic urban site of the Peloponnese that kept much of its central economic and »political« position in the region in the Roman period<sup>4</sup>. Pausanias, the famous Greek traveler who visited the city in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, described it in detail and was able to see most of the architectural and sculptural monuments that were already antique by then and that signalled the city's glorious past and maintained its monumentality to his day<sup>5</sup>. Buildings like the Theater, the Temenos of Asclepius with its Doric temple and the numerous oikoi all around or the Stoas of the Gymnasium all embellished with statues and inscriptions, marked the urban landscape of Roman Messene (fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>. All these monuments gave prominence to the town's distinct urban identity,

even in a period of regression that characterized many of the inland Peloponnesian cities in the time of Pausanias<sup>7</sup>.

But the uninterrupted urban life of ancient Messene came to an end in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the Hellenistic and Roman monumental buildings saw their final use during these years, and destruction or abandonment marks extensively the archaeological horizon immediately after. The abrupt break has often been commented on. Initially it was connected with Alaric's invasion of the Goths into the Peloponnese in 395-397<sup>8</sup>. Lately a Gothic invasion to Messene has been largely ruled out as a cause for the destruction, and the archaeological data point more to a link with the great earthquake of 365 and its seismic sequence<sup>9</sup>. This process is best shown by the case of three large and luxurious urban mansions, Late Roman *domi*, that stood in different locations of the city center and that were destroyed most probably by the earthquake of 365 or soon thereafter never to be built again<sup>10</sup>.

It is only around the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century that we can observe a reorganization of urban space in Messene and it is during this period that we can trace substantial construction taking place again in the city<sup>11</sup>. Also most of the historical information on Early Byzantine Messene originates in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, although it is still limited and offers only a generic picture of the city, typical for the period<sup>12</sup>. Messene figures as a non-negligible »urban« center of the SW Peloponnese and was amongst the region's important cities at the time. During this period Messene appears in two sources: it is first mentioned as the seat of a bishop who was

1 Wickham, Inheritance 9.

2 Archeological finds have greatly influenced the longstanding historical argument between »continuists« and »destructionists« in Late Roman (or Late Antique) and Early Medieval European history, the best example being the 2005 work of Ward-Perkins, Fall. A more incisive general picture of this transition with breaks and continuities is presented in Wickham, Framing 711-759. A recent general overview of the Late Antique debate in the essays published in Lizzì Testa, Late Antiquity.

3 For the study of Early Byzantine Messene I am indebted to the constant encouragement and support of Petros Themelis, the director of the Messene Excavation and Restoration Project. A much earlier version of some ideas on the rural character of Early Byzantine Messene have been presented in Tsivikis, Messenē.

4 For a recent and thorough overview of the history of Roman Messene and its monuments see Themelis, Messenia under Roman rule 89-110. – Themelis, Messene. Hellenistic to Roman 540-556.

5 Pausanias, Periegesis 4,29-33.

6 Themelis, Messenia under Roman rule 89-110. The interpretation and reconstruction of excavated sites based on the historical narrative of Pausanias has a

long-standing tradition in the historiography of classical archaeology having caused many events of over-interpretation: Stewart, Pausanias 231-261.

7 Alcock, Messenian Past 142-153.

8 Avramea, Péloponnèse 47. – Papachatzis, Pausanias 114. – Chrysos, Vēsigothoi 181-191.

9 The connection with the 365 earthquake was first proposed in detail by Themelis, Prōtovyzantinē Messenē 40. – A detailed note on coin circulation of this period before and after the events by Sidiropoulos, Kykloforia 101f.

10 Three Late Roman urban *domi* have been excavated in Messene's city center and all present the same picture of destruction in the 360s-370s: a) the *domus* north of the Gymnasium (Themelis, Prōtovyzantinē Messenē 32f.), b) the *domus* east of the temenos to Asclepius (Themelis, Prōtovyzantinē Messenē 25-27. – Deligiannakis, Statues 387-406. – Tsivikis, Ethnikoi 279f.) and c) a newly excavated *domus* with possible Christian use west of the theatre (Tsivikis, Ktērio 112 f.).

11 Themelis, Prōtovyzantinē Messenē 34-36. – Sidiropoulos, Kykloforia 101f.

12 All Early Byzantine sources on Messene are catalogued in Avramea, Péloponnèse 183 f. cat. no. 201. – Some further Middle Byzantine references to Messene in Anagnostakis, Sēmeiōseis 69-79.



**Fig. 1** Messene, aerial photo of the northern part of the center of the town. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).

present at the Ecumenical Church Councils of Ephesus (449) and Chalcedon (451)<sup>13</sup> and secondly Messene was included in the imperial catalogue of cities compiled by Hierokles in the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>. All these should signify that Messene had some importance, if only local, in the geography of inland Peloponnese, and was still considered a city by its contemporaries, whatever that meant in the new realities of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Often, archaeology is used just to complement the historical picture, but the case of Messene offers a quite distinct understanding as archaeology defines our understanding of the settlement; the topography of the city center changed, large civic monuments fell into disuse and the Early Byzantine inhabitants found new and original ways to utilize space and material as various productive installations are introduced almost everywhere in the old city center<sup>15</sup>. Churches and cemeteries also emerged in the old city center, though it is doubtful

that this happened before the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>. From this larger transformation, here we will focus mainly on the process of change we conventionally refer to as *ruralization* and which in our case translates into the gradual change of use of urban space into an agricultural setting<sup>17</sup>.

Agriculture, as always, remained the main productive sector for this inward-looking provincial settlement, and enough wealth was produced to sustain a relatively well to do community that still had access to distant markets, as imported pottery and the products that it accompanied continued to reach Messene at least up to the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. The presence of coins from Vandal and Byzantine Carthage and Gothic Rome also provide evidence of circulation of goods to and from the West<sup>19</sup>. Social stratification and organization of production in Early Byzantine Messene seems to have undergone considerable changes, though we cannot securely assume to what extent. The Late Roman elites who resided until the end

13 Avramea, Péloponnèse 181-184 cat. no. 201.

14 Avramea, Péloponnèse 108.

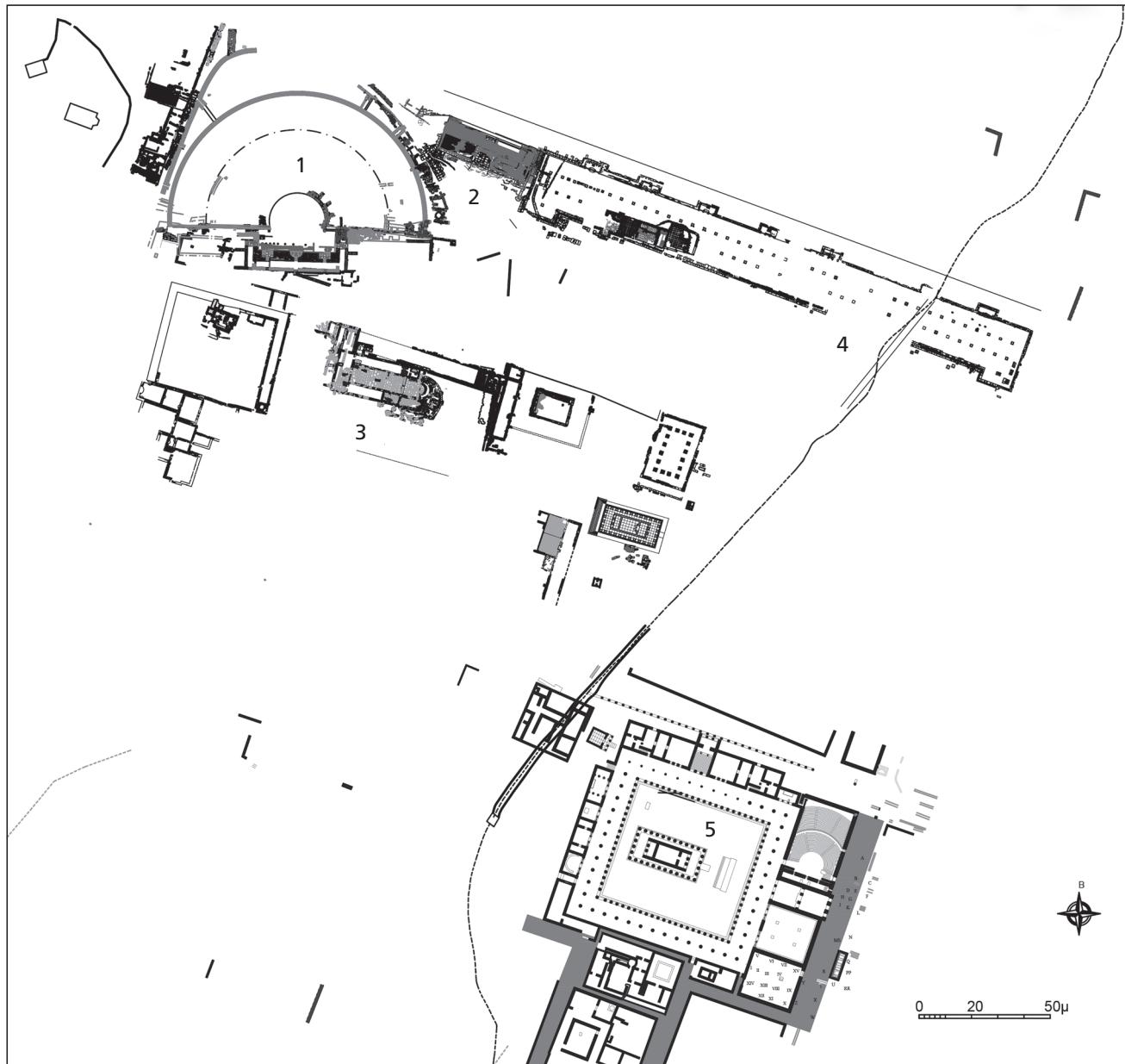
15 Bone object workshop: Vasileiadou, Osteina 504. – Glass workshop: Triantafylidis, Glassmakers 262-264. – General observations: Tsivikis, Messenē 62-71.

16 Three Early Byzantine basilicas have been located so far in Messene, but only the one located east of the Theater is fully excavated (Tsivikis, Messene Basilica 111-124). A second one is located in the middle of the Hellenistic agora known only by limited excavation in the area of its sanctuary and apse (Themelis, 2004 Anaskafé Messenēs 48f.). The eastern apse of a third basilica east of the Te-menos of Asclepius is partially still visible on the surface, but not yet explored.

17 The process of *ruralization* in Early Byzantine cities occupies a central position in the discourse on urban evolution in Byzantium. It dates back to an early phase of understanding the Byzantine cities (Ostrogorsky, Cities 65), but recently it has progressed and with the explosion of archaeological research has been a very useful analytical category (Brubaker/Haldon, Byzantium in the iconoclast era 531-572. – Niewöhner, Urbanism 46-48) even though sometimes the ruralization discussion is still identified as an obsolete Marxist preoccupation (Curta, Postcards 93-95).

18 Yangaki, Late Roman Pottery 769-776.

19 Sidiropoulos, Kykloforia 104.



**Fig. 2** Messene, topographical plan: **1** Theater; **2** Arsinoe fountain; **3** Christian basilica; **4** Agora; **5** temenos of Asclepius. – (Plan Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).

of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in lavishly decorated urban villas (*domi*) in the city center cannot be discerned any more, and most of the known housing units of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century are humble houses occupying the space of old public monuments (fig. 3)<sup>20</sup>. Accordingly, the monuments with which these upper aristocratic classes identified themselves through the act of patronage and by holding civic offices were now being systematically dismantled and reused for their materials.

The recycling of ancient building material in Messene, although it occasionally happened already from Roman imperial times as in most ancient cities, grew into proper spoliation and quarrying activity from the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Theater of the city we can follow the course of work in some detail, as the excavations uncovered what must have been an organized working site (fig. 4)<sup>21</sup>. The seats from the cavea and the architectural members from the Roman *scenae frontis* were rolled down to the orchestra, where they were divided, and grouped and then forwarded for different possible uses depending on their size and material. We can discern the different procedures of stone-working connected with the Theater quarry: carving of new architectural members like the capitals for the nearby Christian basilica (fig. 5), using intact pieces or cutting them down into smaller ashlar stones to be used as building material (fig. 6) or finally burn-

20 Themelis, Prōtovyzantinē Messēnē 35-38.

21 Themelis, Theatra 10-18.



**Fig. 3** Messene, aerial view of the Early Byzantine housing neighborhood on the East of the temenos of Asclepius, upper side is North. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).

ing good quality marble and limestone in a limekiln erected on the outside retaining wall of the theater (fig. 7)<sup>22</sup>.

Out of these specialized processes, it is especially worth noting the complex and specialized process of lime production from marble and limestone. A permanent kiln used periodically was constructed, open on top, where the marble and limestone to be burnt was piled up like a dome in order to allow the fuel to be amassed and replenished in the special furnace underneath<sup>23</sup>. The whole activity would need about a week of constant refuelling and then cooling to obtain the final product, the quicklime, a substance that was still in need of tertiary processing in order to be usable later. It is possible that another circular construction excavated a few dozen meters south of the lime kiln could be identified as a lime mixing pit, the spot where quicklime mixed with water becomes usable lime (fig. 8)<sup>24</sup>. Lime production and marble burning is usually categorized under the processes connected with building and construction<sup>25</sup>. But lime was also of paramount importance for agriculture, as it was used – and still is – as soil fertilizer and in many different ways in gardening, viniculture and fruticulture<sup>26</sup>. In a Byzantine compilation of agricultural lore of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the *Geoponika*, various

**Fig. 4** Messene, the Early Byzantine quarry at the orchestra of the theater. View from West. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



22 For the quarry Themelis, Theatra 12. – For the re-carved capitals of the basilica Penna/Lampropoulou/Anagnostakis, Glypta 375-392, – Tsivikis, Messene Basilica 112-118.

23 Dix, Lime 331-345. – On Late Roman kilns recycling older material some further reading in Munro, Lime Kilns 50f.

24 Themelis, Isis 104 fig. 15b.

25 On limekilns in Thessaloniki: Antonaras, Thessaloniki 19. 93-97. – One of the best documented limekilns of the period remains the one excavated in Crypta Balbi in Rome in a context probably of the 7<sup>th</sup> century: Sagui, Crypta Balbi 345-350.

26 Hughes, Environmental Problems 120f. – Jashemski, Gardening 433. – Postan, Medieval Economy 57f.



**Fig. 5** Messene, Early Byzantine impost capital from the basilica of the theater. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



**Fig. 7** Messene, Early Byzantine lime-kiln in the theater's outer wall, view from North – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



**Fig. 8** Messene, Early Byzantine lime-pit in the temple of Isis, view from West. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



**Fig. 6** Messene, marble column from the theater's *scena frons* with evidence of re-cutting. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).

different uses of agricultural lime are discussed: as a fertilizer for fig trees<sup>27</sup>, for wine-making<sup>28</sup>, for disinfection from ticks<sup>29</sup>, or even as bait for fishing<sup>30</sup>. So, we should consider alterations and interventions in the city of Messene like the erection of the limekiln in the Early Byzantine period not solely as an indicator for the recycling of older building material, but also as a marker of agricultural expansion inside the old city center.

## Downtown Water-mill

The emphasis on agricultural exploitation and cultivation in areas previously considered to be downtown in the Roman city of Messene is visible in many additional ways. The complete remodeling in the 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century of one of the main monumental fountains of the city, the Nymphaeum located in the area of the Agora, into an overshot water mill is one of the best pieces of evidence for this new con-

27 Geoponica 10.45.8.

28 Geoponica 7.8.6.

29 Geoponica 13.15.4.

30 Geoponica 20.41.1.



**Fig. 9** Messene, aerial view of the Arsinoe fountain, upper side is North. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



**Fig. 10** Messene, the Early Byzantine water-mill, view from the East. – (After Reinholdt, Brunnenhaus fig. 90).

dition, and can serve us well as a case study for analyzing the change (fig. 9)<sup>31</sup>.

Most of the structure of the ancient fountain and Roman nymphaeum was dismantled after the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the material was reused in diverse buildings across the Early Byzantine city. At the southwest corner of the old fountain complex and at a much lower level of the slope a square room was erected built completely out of *spolia*, mainly fluted column drums and large ashlar stones (fig. 10). Inside the room and near its east wall a rectangular construction was uncovered that formed in its interior the area for the milling of grain. The mill-chamber and the grinder shaft and in the immediate area part of a round large millstone were also found. Careful examination of the construction and also of a series of built channels leading to the east side of the room led to the identification of this room as a mill (fig. 11)<sup>32</sup>. The millstones and the mill mechanism with its complex wooden cogging system would have been housed inside the room, making it the mill chamber. While outside the east wall the mill-wheel powering the mill was installed in a mill-pit between the rectangular building and a low wall running parallel that supported its axle. A specially built channel led the water from the spout of the old fountain located approximately 10m to the north of the mill-house to the mill-wheel itself. At the final stage the water was raised considerably above the mill by means of wooden conduits in order to increase the power of the falling water as it strikes the mill-wheel. The construction of this overshot mill can be roughly dated by a coin hoard excavated underneath its earthen floor in the late 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>33</sup>.

It has long been argued that changes like this mark the transformation from city to village, *ruralization* being the key concept. Analogous developments are also known from elsewhere in Early Byzantine Greece, the most famous example being the construction of three water-mills in the Agora of Athens at the very center of the ancient city, thus almost creating a millers' neighborhood<sup>34</sup>. The establishment of such productive infrastructure in the urban core of the city of Athens led the excavators to comment early on that the city had practically become a village<sup>35</sup>.

31 Thernelis, 1995 *Anaskafē Messēnēs* 56. – Reinholdt, *Brunnenhaus* 161-190.

32 The technical aspects of the mill are presented in detail in Reinholdt, *Brunnenhaus* 57-59.

33 Detailed presentation and further discussion of the hoard in Sidiropoulos, *Kykolofia* 105. It has also been suggested (Germanidou, *Watermills* 192) that the use of the Messene mill might extend up to the 9<sup>th</sup> century based on a later coin find of emperor Leo VI (886-912). Such an extended use, however, seems highly unlikely based on the extremely crude and makeshift construction of the mill-room that would make it very difficult to be in continuous use for three or four centuries.

34 A concise presentation of the mills from Athens with all the most recent bibliography by Germanidou, *Watermills* 188f.

35 Parsons, *Water Mill* 90. – Spain, *Water Mill* 335-353.

36 Belke/Restle, *Galatien und Lykaonien* 211.

37 On the finding and publication of the inscription, see Chastagnol, *Orcistus* 381-384.

38 Chastagnol, *Orcistus* 407-409. – For a recent and more complete presentation of the Orkistos Constantinian epigraphic dossier and its historical implications, see Lenski, *Constantine* 96-113.

The question becomes much more interesting if we widen our perspective beyond Greece. In early 4<sup>th</sup> century, Orkistos, a small town in mountainous Phrygia in Asia Minor<sup>36</sup>, petitioned officially the Emperor Constantine to be raised to the status of autonomous *civitas* (city). We are fortunate enough that the entire official portfolio of petitions and imperial decrees regarding the case was preserved inscribed in stone<sup>37</sup>. In the imperial rescript of 329/331 granting the request the *molinarum numerum copiosum* is explicitly cited among the city's amenities<sup>38</sup>. A number of water mills is also described by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus inside the walls of 4<sup>th</sup>-century Amida<sup>39</sup>. But we know that Amida (today's Diyarbakir in southeast Turkey) was an important city, and Orkistos definitely succeeded in its goal of getting promoted to the rank of *civitas*. Their water-mills inside the city, installations not much different than the ones we see in Messene and Athens, not only did not demote them but on the contrary, were considered an asset of their *urbanitas*<sup>40</sup>.

Besides their actual remains, water-mills can be found portrayed as a symbol of abundance in Late Roman and Early Byzantine art, like in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>-century floor mosaics of the imperial palace in Constantinople<sup>41</sup>. In one of the lesser known depictions in this imperially commissioned floor we can clearly see a building with a large vertical wheel<sup>42</sup>, probably depicting a water-mill with a wheel of the undershot type (fig. 12)<sup>43</sup>. Of course the water-mill(s) in the imperial floor of Constantinople is set in fantastic scenery somewhere in the country-side, but it might as well be just inside the walls of Constantinople, where we know that a large area between the Constantinian and Theodosian walls of the city was devoted mainly to farming with estates and gardens<sup>44</sup>.

The mechanics of the watermill were known to the Romans at least from the times of Vitruvius, but in Greece the watermill was imported very late and only in the Early Byzantine times, probably by the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>45</sup>. Even in Roman times it seems that the main means for grinding grain in Greece was still hand-mills or larger animal-powered mills following long-standing local economic traditions<sup>46</sup>.

So, the introduction in the city center of Messene (and Athens) of productive installations, water-mills in particular,

39 Wilson, *Amida* 231-234.

40 A general note on Byzantine mills in Decker, *Agriculture* 402-403; and a thorough bibliographical presentation of work on Byzantine watermills in Germanidou, *Watermills* 185-187.

41 The two known examples discussed in detail by Wikander, *Water-Mill* 384-388.

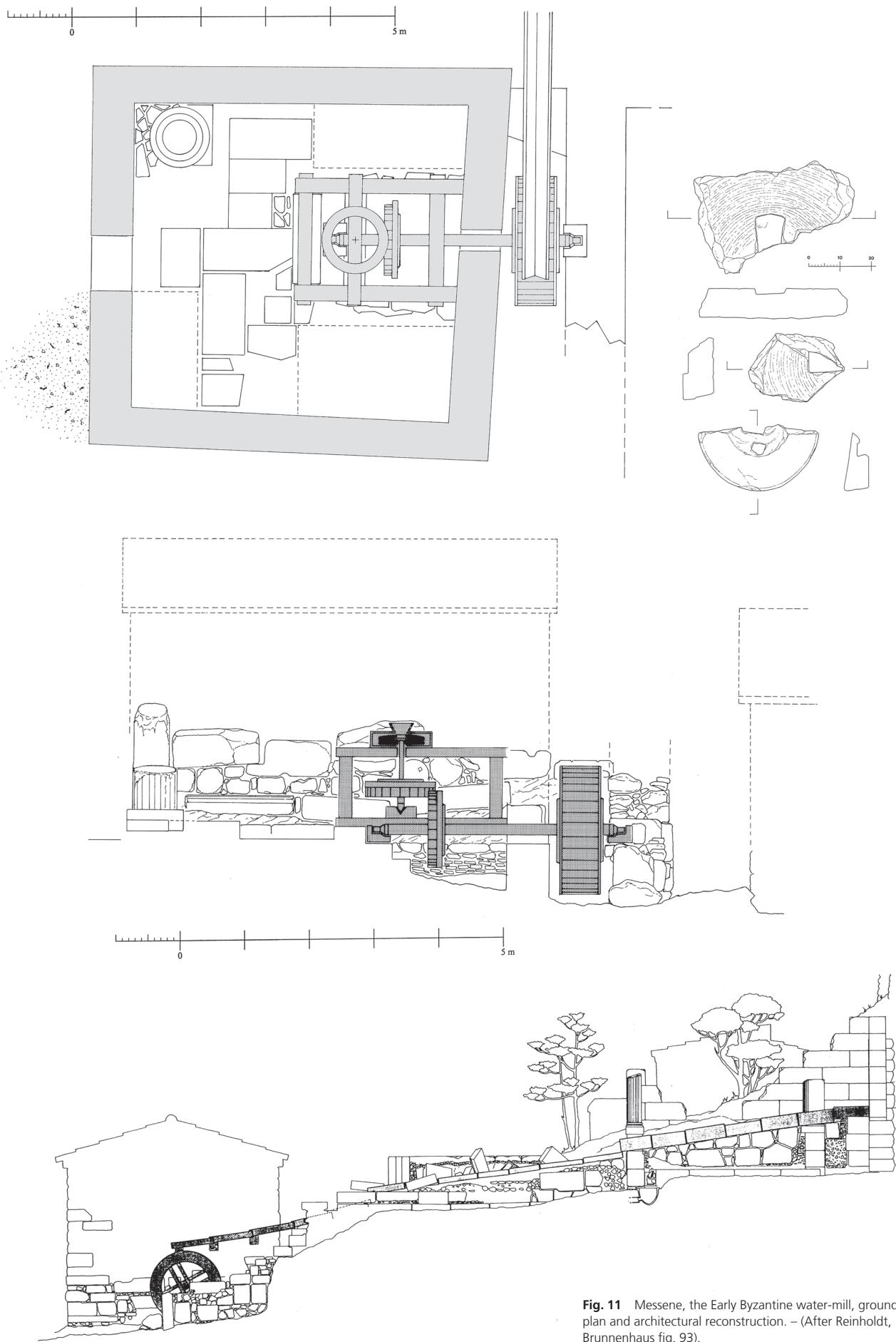
42 The depiction of the water-mill with the large mill-wheel is one of the least discussed scenes of the mosaics of the Constantinopolitan imperial palace, see Jobst/Erdal/Gürtner, *Palastmosaik*. The panel can be seen mounted on a wall in the museum, in publication it appears in Brett, *Water Mill* 354-356. More often another water feature depicted in the same mosaic floor perhaps portraying another type of water-mill, a horizontal one, is discussed, as in: Evans, *Byzantium and Islam* 8 fig. 5.

43 On water-mill typology see Wikander, *Water-Mill* 373-378.

44 Mango, *Constantinople*, 46-58. – Brubaker, *Constantinople* 33. – Koder, *Gemüse in Byzanz* 95-110. – Ricci, *Resilient Landscape* 125-138.

45 Germanidou, *Watermills* 199-200. – Raptis, *Watermills* 109-117.

46 Runnels, *Millstones* 127-130.



**Fig. 11** Messene, the Early Byzantine water-mill, ground-plan and architectural reconstruction. – (After Reinholdt, Brunnenhaus fig. 93).



Fig. 12 Constantinople, depiction of a water-mill in the imperial palace mosaics. – (Photo David Hendrix).

has for long been seen as a marker of decline and ruralization. But in this way the condition of the cities in early Byzantine times are not considered, but rather in relation to their Hellenistic and Roman pasts or even Constantinople itself – or better an imaginary Constantinopolitan model of ideal *urbanitas*. In this way, however, we fail to ask important questions about the realities of the Early Byzantine settlement: was there a change in the way that agricultural production was organized in this period? Did this correspond to different social organization or to demographic alteration? Did mechanical devices complement the loss of human labor? Or was the demand for foodstuff answered by the rise in productivity? And so forth<sup>47</sup>.

### Cultivating fields inside the city

But it is not only the introduction of the water-mill and its operation in the old center of the town that attests to the rural transformations in the life of downtown Messene. In

the 1960s during the old excavations by Orlandos and in the process of opening a drainage channel in the area north of the *temenos* of Asclepius one of the most interesting Early Byzantine inscriptions of Messene was found, unfortunately with no exact archaeological context recorded at the time<sup>48</sup>.

On a large Hellenistic or Roman architectural member, that could not have moved far from its initial position, a Greek text in three verses was inscribed marking the secondary use of the stone. The inscription reads (fig. 13)<sup>49</sup>:

+ ὅρος Ἀνανίου πρ(εσβυτέρου)· καὶ/]  
ἀνάθ(εμα) τὸν παραυλακησ(τήν)  
καὶ ὅστης τὸ μεταστήση ἀνά(θεμα)

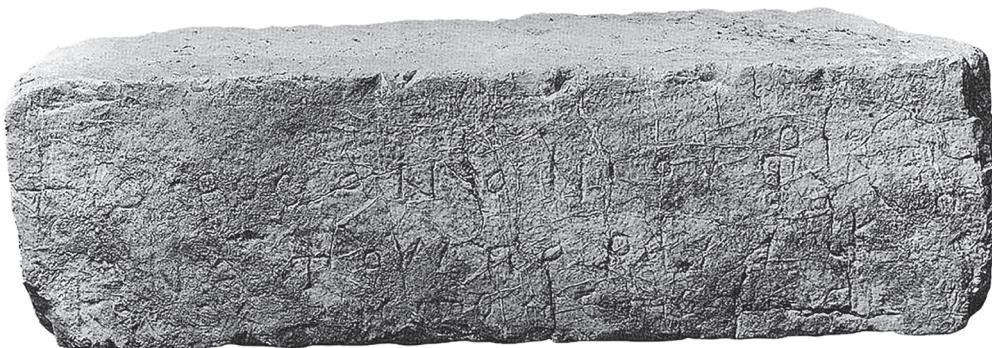
The text is the only non-funerary Early Byzantine inscription excavated in Messene and offers unique information on the evolution of the settlement<sup>50</sup>. It is actually a boundary inscription translating into: »(cross) boundary of Ananias pr[esbyter] / and damnation to the one who plows across the

47 For loss of human labor Harvey, Expansion 130-131. – For increased production Rautman, Daily life 181-183. – For technical advancement and socio-economic implications Wikander, Water-Mill 371.

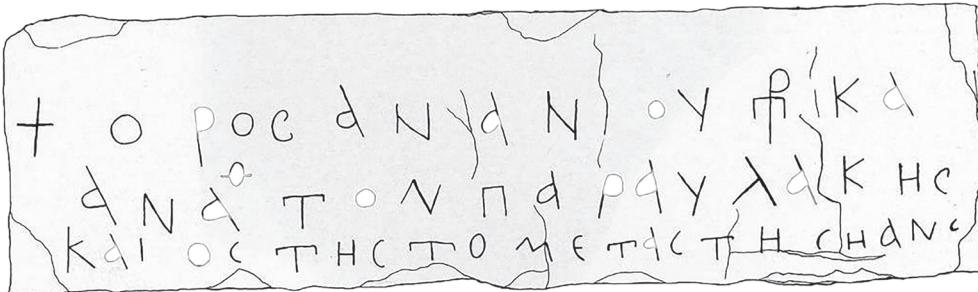
48 Orlandos, Messenē 100-102.

49 SEG 52, 418. – Bardani, Epigrafe 89f.

50 The up to date corpus of Early Byzantine inscriptions from Messene numbers a few dozens, all of them funerary texts: Bardani, Epigrafe 82f.



**Fig. 13** Messene, Ananias inscription, photo and drawing. – (Photo and drawing Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



boundary line (the furrow) / and to the one who shifts this (boundary)». The inscription had been dated initially by Orlando to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>51</sup>, later re-dated by Bardani to the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>52</sup>, while Dennis Feissel believes that it might even be closer to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53</sup>, if so, making it one of the very few epigraphical texts surviving from the Peloponnese of the transformative period<sup>54</sup>. Despite the relative uncertainty in its dating, we should stress that the inscription is clearly a creation of the Early Byzantine period, and it is connected with the changes taking place in the city in this early phase.

The area where it was found, immediately north of the *temenos* of Asclepius, the main cultic and civic hub of the Hellenistic and Roman city<sup>55</sup>, must had been one of the busiest and most densely built locations in the city until the 4<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 2). Immediately north of the *temenos* in Roman times stood the *Sebasteion*, housing the imperial cult, a building that probably underwent some major renovations with an addition of an open stoa in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps connected with the reign of the Constantinian dynasty<sup>56</sup>.

The discovery of the boundary inscription in the vicinity of the *temenos* of Asclepius and near the location of the Se-

*basteion*, suggests among other things that this wide area in the very center of the ancient city was already being systematically cultivated at least since the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. Although a singular find, the boundary stone of Ananias suggests that there would be more than one field in this area, with the stone marking a divide (wall?) between them<sup>57</sup>. We should imagine in the area a number of different fields, whose owners would compete for land and resources. Perhaps also the field would be equipped with water channels probably using water from the natural spring that also powered the water-mill further uphill. The inscription also offers us an idea of the identity of the owner of the field: the presbyter Ananias, a member of the priestly order, perhaps connected with one of the functioning nearby basilicas<sup>58</sup>.

It is not a matter of chance that in Early Byzantine Olympia, another known center of the Peloponnese and relatively close to Messene, intense characteristics of ruralization have been observed both in the material culture and the monumental architecture<sup>59</sup>. In Olympia again one of the most intriguing Early Byzantine inscriptions is connected with the cultivation of the land and the rural realities of the settlement. In what was probably the main church of Early Christian Olympia,

51 Orlando, *Messenē* 100-102.

52 Bardani, *Epigrafe 89f.*

53 Feissel, *Inscriptions 708.*

54 In the catalogue of known Byzantine inscriptions of the Peloponnese there is a gap in dated monuments between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century: Feissel/Phillipidis-Braat, *Inscriptions du Péloponnèse*.

55 Sioumpara, *Asklepios-Tempel 4-13.*

56 Themelis, *Prōtovyzantinē Messenē* 28.

57 The word παραυλακιστής is attested in texts already from the 6<sup>th</sup> c.: Bardani, *Epigrafe 89f.* It is very common in late Byzantine depictions of the Second Judgment: Liveri, *Georgika Ergaleia* 277 f.n. 10-15. – Kalokyris, *Krētē* 103 n. 4 proposes the alternative idea, followed by some in the bibliography, that

παραυλακιστής is the sinner who changes the flow of the water trenches in order to water his own fields, although this reading cannot be based to the known texts. – I would like to thank Vasiliki Tsamakda for discussing with me the possible meanings of the word παραυλακιστής.

58 Tsivikis, *Messene Basilica* 111-113.

59 A more general description of the Early Byzantine settlement of Olympia in Sinn, *Antike Olympia* 228f. and Sinn, *Spätantike Olympia*, and Völling, *Greeks and Slavs* 303-323. – The most recent appraisal of published data on Olympia in the Early Byzantine and Transitional periods with a renewed synthesis in Lambropoulou/Yangaki, *Olympia* 317-354. The most concise presentation of Early Byzantine Olympia so far has just been published: Völling et al., *Olympia*.

**Fig. 14** Messene, Early Byzantine water channel north of the temenos of Asclepius. View from the East. – (Photo Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies).



the basilica established inside the »workshop of Phidias« probably built in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>60</sup>, a donor inscription mentions an *anagnostes* Kyriakos who offers the pavement of the church and bears the intriguing and extremely rare title *emphyteutēs tēs ktēseos*<sup>61</sup>. Although the meaning of that title has been much discussed, the exact role of the individual remains unclear. For our discussion, however, it is clear that one of the most eminent members of the Early Byzantine community of Olympia is again a person connected with the cultivation of the land, perhaps as a land-owner of an estate<sup>62</sup>. The heightened visibility of the presbyter Ananias of Messene and the *anagnostes* Kyriakos of Olympia underline the turn of these societies towards the rural aspect of life. Of course, agriculture as the foundation of their economies is not new for pre-modern societies like the Peloponnesian cities under discussion; what is new is the centrality of these processes in the life of the settlements and the pattern of rural attributes as the main distinctive characteristics for these provincial medium-sized Byzantine communities.

Returning to the inscription from Messene and its boundaries and channels dispute, it is interesting to see if we can detect any possible physical evidence of the described agricultural activity. Based again on archival material from the early excavations, we can observe in a photo from the late 1980s a – now lost – segment of a water channel in a post-Roman layer, running just above the 4<sup>th</sup> century layers connected with the remodeling of the stoa in front of the *Sebasteion* (fig. 14)<sup>63</sup>. Although we lack detailed information about the channel it seems highly possible that it might correspond to a watering channel connected with cultivation in this area, the same where the inscription of Ananias was also found.

Usually our observations of the remains of Early Byzantine agricultural activity are limited to the material culture and the equipment used for cultivation<sup>64</sup>. Noticing the evanescent remains of agriculture in the archaeological record and in field work is extremely difficult and needs very careful excavation and setting different goals, in order to discern the actual farming practices in context. But this does not mean that we

60 The 5<sup>th</sup>-century dating of the basilica of Phidias is largely based on the old 19<sup>th</sup> century Olympia excavation and the publication of Adler, Kirche 93-105. – A catalogue of more recent works on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century Olympia that uses the Adler dating for the basilica in: Baitinger/Völling, Olympia 7 n. 35. – A forthcoming new study of the building by the DAI Athens will re-examine the available data; see now Bauer et al., Kirche. – Based on the many similarities in the sculptural decoration of the basilica of Olympia to the basilica of the Theater in Messene dated firmly in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, one might consider the possibility that the Olympian monument might also be of later date. A later date has been suggested also by Lampropoulou/Yangaki, Olympia 319, based on observations by D. Athanasoulis.

61 The inscription from the Olympia basilica reads: Κυριακὸς ὁ εὐ/λαβέστατος/ ἀναγνώστης κ(αὶ) ἐμφυτευτή/ τῆς κτήσεος/ ὑπέρ σωτηρίας/ ἐαυτοῦ εὐχάμε/νος ἔκαλ(λ)ιέργη/ σεν τὴν στρώσιν. It was initially published in Dittenberger/Purgold, Olympia no. 656, and has been commented in some detail in Velisariou, Olympia 159-166 and Zoumbaki, Elis 55. Much more extended commentary in: Lambropoulou, *Emphyteusēs*.

62 Zoumbaki, Elis 55, connects *emphyteutes* Kyriakos to the Roman institution of *emphyteusis* and the effort by the authorities to bring back to cultivation de-

serted agricultural lands, in this case the old temple land. In the Early Byzantine context it is possible that *emphyteusis* might be connected with large-scale agricultural land exploitation and land rights offered by the state: Kaplan, Population 146-148. – Lambropoulou, *Emphyteusēs*.

63 Ancient Messene Photo Archive. This area of Messene had very shallow deposits as it was constantly washed away by annual torrential streams, making stratigraphic observations very difficult especially in the early days of the excavation.

64 Such an interesting find of metal agricultural implements comes from Early Byzantine Olympia: Völling, Hortfund 425-459; another such find this time from Crete has been studied from Early Byzantine Eleutherna: Brokalakis, Ergaleia 45-131; again from Olympia an Early Byzantine wine-pressing installation has been studied: Völling, Löwenköpfe 391-410; while one of the most spectacular finds of wine-production within the urban fabric comes from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century Amorium in Asia Minor where an entire neighbourhood had been transformed and housed more than eight distinct factory-buildings with specialized wine-presses: Ivison, Enclosure 47-50.

should lose our optimism as still there can be examples that verify the Messenian picture even from nearby sites, like in Nemea in the NW Peloponnese, where the physical evidence of Early Byzantine plowing of the land was uncovered, testifying that fields were practically inserted between the houses of the post-Roman settlement<sup>65</sup>.

## Conclusions

In the small patchwork of archaeological finds, buildings and processes from Messene and elsewhere in the rural Peloponnese described so far there seems to be an underlying pattern. As the building materials of the ancient edifices were being removed from monuments that did not serve any real function in the transformed Early Byzantine city, in order to find a better and more effective use, the same goes for assets like running water or fertile irrigated flat lands, which by then were regarded as natural resources that could not be solely dedicated or even wasted to civic embellishment. Our observations direct us to elaborate more on the sense of a preferable choice out of a multitude of possible ones, and to relate it to the material or immaterial profit to be gained in the investment of human work, raw materials and natural resources by these communities.

Here again the water-mill of Messene can be a useful example. In this case, the decision to create it is not an issue only of technological advancement or loss, as technol-

ogy comes to answer special social and economic needs<sup>66</sup>. Multiple choices could have materialized during the process of transformation of the old Roman fountain by the Early Byzantine inhabitants, but only one was actually carried out. This should lead us to recognizing here, rather than a decadence of aesthetic architectural choices, a clear process of re-organizing production and favoring productive installations rather than investing in prestige and status monuments. All this activity in the Early Byzantine period corresponds to a level that Messene had not seen for centuries, the main difference being that though Hellenistic and Roman civic functions were most evident in their grandiose results, almost concealing the process of creating them, the Early Byzantine ones were all about the process itself, one almost bonded with the results.

In conclusion, I would argue that these indicators of ruralization that are only what we know from limited excavation unravel for us a completely different perception of what a city is. Here agricultural production is an active and lively part of the normal life of the settlement, incorporated into its fabric. An evolution that disrupts the antique equilibrium between *urbs* and *rus*, between city and countryside, between inside (the walls) and outside (the walls) towards a new equilibrium that we are still only beginning to understand. The result of this process still being contested for Early Byzantium (and Medieval Byzantium I would dare to add) if it should be categorized as a city, a town, a township or a village<sup>67</sup>.

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65 Miller, Nemea 1983, 77f. tab. 20e. 21b.

66 Wikander, Invention 109-111.

67 Haldon, Euchaita town to village 241-249.

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## Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

### Messene und das sich wandelnde städtische Leben und die materielle Kultur einer frühbyzantinischen Stadt auf dem westlichen Peloponnes (4.-7. Jahrhundert)

Eines der Hauptthemen bei der Transformation der spätromischen Stadt in ihre frühbyzantinische Fortsetzung ist das Konzept der Ruralisierung im bebauten Raum und der materiellen Kultur der antiken Städte. Unter Ruralisierung verstehen wir den allmählichen Eintritt in den öffentlichen Raum von Tätigkeiten und Räumen, die zuvor außerhalb der Stadt und ihrer Mauern angesiedelt waren und sich der landwirtschaftlichen Produktion und den entsprechenden Verfahren widmeten. Diese Praxis der Verländlichung des bebauten städtischen Raums ist jedoch immer noch nicht vollständig verstanden.

Die Untersuchung von Messene im Südwesten des Peloponnes, einer bedeutenden hellenistischen und römischen Stadt in der Provinz Achäa, die für ihren vergangenen Ruhm bekannt ist und in ihrem Wandel während der frühbyzantinischen Zeit einen ausgeprägt und stark städtischen Charakter aufweist, kann zur Klärung der Frage der Ländlichkeit beitragen. Messene verändert und transformiert sich vom 4. bis 7. Jahrhundert, vielleicht mehr als einmal. Das Ergebnis ist ein neuer Stadttypus, der seine Hauptmerkmale schon im 5./6. Jahrhundert formuliert, in dem der öffentliche Raum völlig anders wahrgenommen wird als nach römischen Vorstellungen, wobei sich eine große Verschiebung hin zu landwirtschaftlichen Prozessen innerhalb oder in der Nähe des Stadtzentrums vollzieht.

### Messène: l'évolution de la vie urbaine et la culture matérielle d'une ville byzantine précoce dans l'Ouest du Péloponnèse (4<sup>e</sup>-7<sup>e</sup> siècle)

La conception de la ruralisation dans le territoire occupé et de la culture matérielle des villes antiques est un des thèmes principaux dans la transformation de la ville du Bas-Empire à celle de l'époque byzantine précoce. Par ruralisation, nous entendons l'apparition progressive dans l'espace public d'activités et d'espaces situés auparavant à l'extérieur des murs de la ville et réservés à la production agricole et aux processus correspondants. Mais ce phénomène de ruralisation de l'espace urbain n'est toujours pas bien compris.

### Messene and the Changing Urban Life and Material Culture of an Early Byzantine City in the Western Peloponnese (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Century)

One of the main topics in the transformation of the Late Roman city into its Early Byzantine continuation is the concept of ruralization in the built space and material culture of old cities. By ruralization we tend to understand the gradual entrance within the civic space of processes and spaces previously limited outside the city and its walls, dedicated to agricultural production and relevant procedures. The practice though of rural intrusion inside the civic built space is still not thoroughly understood, and its temporal and geographical boundaries blurred, while the relevant discussion has nuanced the idea into far more than a simple urban/rural dipole.

The examination of the city of Messene in SW Peloponnes, an important Hellenistic and Roman city of the province of Achaea renowned for its past glory with a distinct and strong urban character in its change during the Early Byzantine times can help elucidating the ruralization question. Messene changes and transforms from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, maybe more than one time. The result is a new type of a city that formulates its main characteristics already by the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century where civic space is perceived in a completely different way than in older Roman attitudes, with a major shift towards agricultural processes taking place inside or near the city center.

L'étude de la ville de Messène, une ville hellénistique et romaine importante de la province d'Achaïe (Sud-Ouest du Péloponnèse), connue pour son passé célèbre et un caractère urbain très développé durant son évolution à l'époque byzantine précoce, peut contribuer à éclaircir cette question. Messène subit des transformations et évolue du 4<sup>e</sup> au 7<sup>e</sup> siècle, peut-être plus d'une fois. Il en résulte un nouveau type de ville qui affiche ses caractères principaux dès le 5<sup>e</sup>/6<sup>e</sup> siècle et où l'espace public est perçu d'une manière toute différente de la conception romaine, laissant une grande place à des processus agricoles à l'intérieur ou proche du centre de la ville.

Traduction: Y. Gautier