

Some Observations and Thoughts on the Approach of Local Economies and (Micro-)Regions based on Ceramic Production, Circulation, and Consumption in Late Antique Boeotia

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Late Antiquity can be characterised as a period of substantial socio-economic change.¹ Changes in imperial administration, taxation, and legislation, the expanding roles of the Church, and wandering crowds of violent ‘barbarians’ are in the literature commonly seen to have affected the character and operation of late antique settlement- and socio-economic systems.² At the same time, however, it appears to be the case that the ways, in which such events, processes, and changes crystallised on the ground and shaped socio-economic development or (in the common (neo-institutional) terminology of today) economic performance varied on the local scale.³

This is not different for the area that was already in antiquity known as Boeotia in Central Greece. Boeotia might be seen as a ‘region’, on the basis of certain general characteristics of the landscape, the development of a certain regional awareness into (long-lived) institutional structures (the Boeotian League) by the mid-5th century BCE, and the observation that ‘Boeotia’ still in some way existed in the geography of the later Roman Empire.⁴ When we turn more specifically to trends in late antique archaeological data, we indeed see certain ‘shared’ developments in Boeotia. For instance, urbanscapes see changes in their outlook and character, while the countryside gets repopulated and agricultural production appears to intensify.⁵ Yet, alongside these ‘shared’ changes (that are also identifiable elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean), there are convincing indications for variety in natural landscapes, the operation of more local socio-economic systems, and/or different exchanges and interactions throughout the area on a (micro-)regional level.

This paper aimed to contribute some snapshots that highlight that socio-economic activities, developments, networks, and/or something which we might call ‘performance’ can diverge considerably within areas that are traditionally seen as some kind of region. This includes Boeotia at large and on a smaller spatial scale also individual Boeotian cities and their territories (*chorai*). Especially for the Late Antique period, which is for Boeotia characterised by a relative silence of the historical sources, archaeological data provide an ample base of evidence to explore the diverse, fluid, and changing character of local economies and the ways in which economies were functioning in space. By building upon the ceramic data that were generated by the long tradition of the Boeotia Project field surveys since 1978,⁶ this paper took upon this potential of archaeology to contribute to debates on the (changing) characters of local late antique economies. The surveys of urban Thespieae, the Valley of the Muses, and Tanagra and its surroundings

were taken as comparative cases for this paper. These surveyed areas were selected on various grounds that appear in some way relevant for any study on ancient economies. Firstly, these areas are situated in different parts of Boeotia in landscapes with their own character (fig. 1). Secondly, the main centres of habitation in these areas (Askra vs. Thespieae and Tanagra – a large town/small village vs. nucleations with ‘urban’ features) appear different in character and had different settlement histories. Thirdly, ceramic studies reveal that these areas housed flourishing late antique ceramic industries and were both participating in larger networks of exchange, though in different manners.⁷ In the remainder of this paper, the four main aims and messages that were preached for in this paper will be specified and fed with ceramic evidence to provide some snapshots of the complexity, diversity, and fluid nature of ‘the’ ancient/late antique economy.

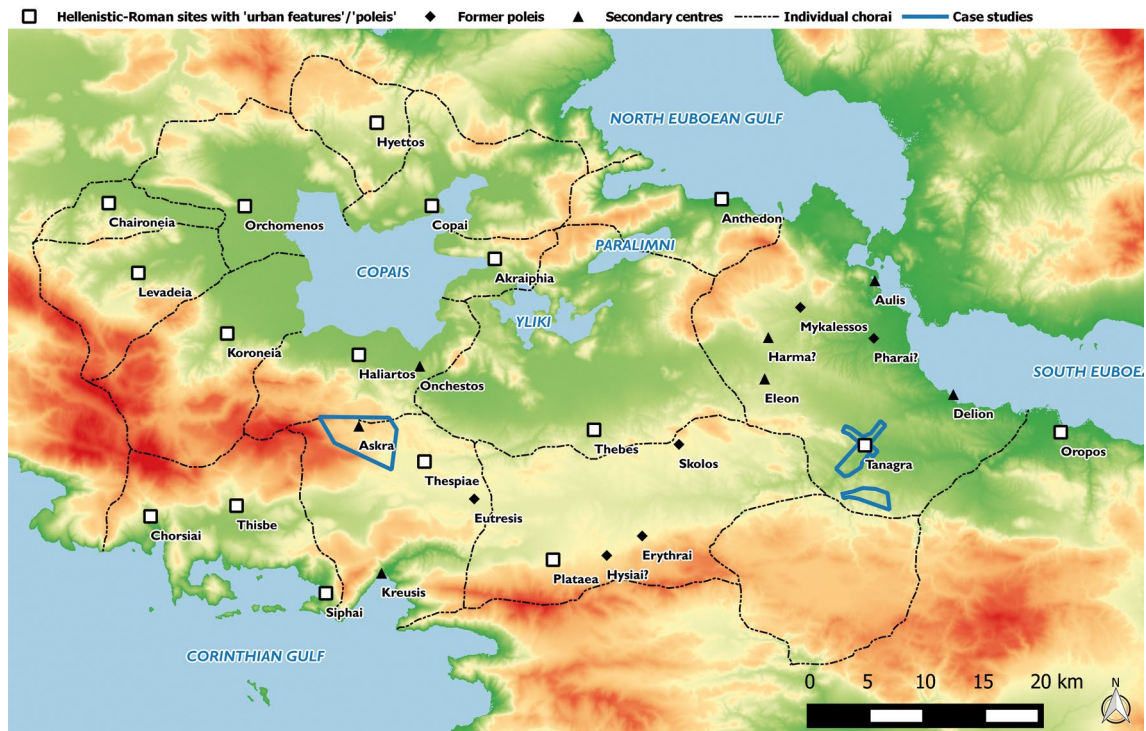


Fig. 1: Topographical (elevation) map of Boeotia and the location of the case studies (the chora areas and the maximum extent of (the now drained) Lake Copais are after Farinetti 2011). This elevation map is generated on the basis of version 1 of the ASTER EU-DEM raster dataset with a resolution of c. 30 metres.

(1) As a start, this paper aimed to illustrate the potential of ceramic-based quantitative analyses to explore economies in a diachronic way and on the very local scale. The methodological framework of the (Late) Hellenistic – Late Roman ceramic studies in the Boeotia Project provides many possibilities for exploration.⁸ By building upon the fabric, morphology, and surface finish of each individual surface sherd, a (rough or more

precise) provenance, chronology, and primary functional application can be ascribed or postulated. Alongside a better understanding of the ceramics under examination, this also provides rough proxies or parameters on the basis of which economies can be explored. For instance, the production of storage vessels in an area hints at the presence of a certain agricultural basis (or at least a certain need for (ceramic) containers), which on a basic level tells us something about activities that are commonly characterised as 'economic'.

When we make a step towards the data from Boeotia for some first comparative analyses, it becomes apparent that the number of storage vessels (and other categories with supposed primary functions) in fabric groups that can be associated with various Boeotian lines of ceramic production varies (in some cases substantially). For instance, the output that was generated by the Late Hellenistic – Late Roman potters in (or in the close proximity of) urban Thespieae comprises a comparatively small percentage of storage vessels: c. 23% of the sherds that were encountered in Thespian fabrics is identified as (table-)amphora, jar, and/or jug.⁹ For the fabric group associated with nearby Askra, which was produced some 6 km to the northwest, this percentage is with c. 42% (on a total of 454 sherds) much larger. It should be emphasised that Askran and Thespian fabrics are not easy to distinguish (macroscopically and chemically),¹⁰ which possibly colours these comparative figures in some way.¹¹ Nonetheless, these not unsubstantial apparent differences in the functional make up of these fabric groups, which both have their chronological point of gravity in the Late Antique period, are likely to reflect that economic activity in Askra and the surrounding Valley of the Muses was more geared towards agriculture. Quantitatively speaking, however, the figures for Tanagra appear most impressive: c. 75% of the 4,583 sherds in the fabric group that is associated with Tanagra and/or its hinterland is identified as a storage vessel, thereby reflecting the presence of a strong ceramic production, as well as a substantial agricultural basis, in this fertile corner of Boeotia.

(2) This paper aimed to highlight the different and changing ways, in which areas in Boeotia were tied up in larger webs of interaction and exchange. Although ceramic-based patterning only provides us with a snapshot of some kind of interactions and/or material traces of the exchanges of some type of products, quantified insights regarding the provenance of pottery from individual sites or areas hold much potential for the exploration of past economies. On the simplest level, the number of sherds in individual fabrics or the percentages of local, Boeotian, and imported ceramics can be compared, providing a rough sketch of the spectrum of pottery that was in circulation at any place (and span of time). Within a proper framework, such insights can feed several lines of exploration, including assessments of the 'self'-sufficiency of communities regarding the provisioning of ceramics or agricultural goods and the exploration of flows of exchange, spheres of interaction, and the places of individual sites in larger networks. The potential of detailed explorations of ceramic circulation is increasingly shown. Studies by Bes, Lund, Malfitana, and Bonifay, for example, respectively highlight that

individual areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, on Cyprus, and on Sicily have their own 'profiles' in terms of the circulation of imported pottery, which appear to be far from stable over time.¹²

The ceramic evidence for the circulation of goods from farther afield throughout Boeotia appears not different in this respect: the circulation of imported tablewares and amphorae varies considerably from area to area, as well as in time.¹³ Exemplary are the differing trends in the presence of African Red Slip Ware (ARSW) in Tanagra and Thespieae, as these vessels reached this latter site in substantially smaller quantities after the late 4th–early 5th century, whereas these Tunisian tablewares identifiably circulated in Tanagra into the 7th century CE.¹⁴

(3) A third and related aim of this paper was to illustrate the different ways and quantities, in which imported ceramics not only reached certain areas in Boeotia differently, but also individual zones and rural sites within the *chorai* of urban centres. While cities and their hinterlands certainly appear to have been part of the same spheres of circulation/exchange (on the basis of the analysed ceramic spectrum), the urban collections from Boeotia are generally comprising larger quantities (and also a larger variety) of imported pottery. To continue with an already discussed example, the absolute quantities of ARSW and the relative presence of these vessels (in percentages of the total number of tablewares) in the Valley of the Muses and Askra is much smaller than in nearby Thespieae and on the 'rural' sites closer to this urban centre.¹⁵ By extension, the circulation of these imports in the Valley of the Muses appears to have been even more focused within the limits of the early 3rd/4th and late 5th century CE than in Thespieae, while other imported mid-late Roman tablewares (i.e. Phocaean Red Slip Ware/LRC) remain to be identified for this vale.¹⁶

At least instinctively, such observations suit analyses and explorations along the lines of so-called fall-off curves, the locations of market places and consumers, and/or market integration. I do, however, believe that there is more to such differences in circulation on the very local scale, including factors, processes, and explanations that touch upon consumption preferences and the usage of ceramic material culture in socio-economic(-cultural) display. Although particularly consumption preferences, related dynamics that are commonly characterised under the umbrella of 'identity', and also the active role of material culture in shaping the actions of agents are traditionally not often analysed as part of 'economic archaeology', there are also for the highlighted examples reasons to do so. To highlight this line of thought, I would like to shortly discuss the work by van Oyen, who argued that particularly high-quality (imported) tablewares might not only commonly have arrived or passed through a city, but might also have been 'perceived by its consumers as "coming from the city" – as an urban commodity'.¹⁷ The factors that would initiate the process of seeing such goods as 'urban' do not necessarily differ from the lines of explanation that were noted at the start of this paragraph. Yet, it should be clear that the extra quality and meaning that such goods might have had for the ancients could potentially have coloured ceramic distributions

in their own right. More importantly, such meanings might well have differed from place to place. Also in terms of socio-economic(-cultural) display, the role and meaning of goods might differ considerably on the local scale, which might on its turn shape ceramic circulation(-consumption) patterns. Tensions between ‘supply’ and ‘demand’, ‘wants’ and ‘the capabilities of individuals to satisfy those wants’, and also the way, in which wealth is distributed across communities might, for instance, differ from place to place (and throughout time). This will likely have resulted in situations, in which good X was perceived as an ‘elite good’ in community or area A, but a good that was acquired and consumed across broader echelons of society in community or area B.

Although there are enough reasons to approach archaeological (survey) data cautious in this respect (e.g. ‘are we really able to recognise the material traces of the very poor in the archaeological/surface record?’),¹⁸ it appears that matters of socio-economic display in some way colour ceramic consumption in certain settings in Boeotia. To stay with the now common example: those sherds of imported ARSW that reach the Valley of the Muses are in four out of six cases collected on sites that appear to have been inhabited by individuals that certainly not belonged to the poorest in society.¹⁹ To make a step to the survey collections from the non-urban sites in Thespieae’s ‘close hinterland’ (i.e. not more than 2–3 km from the city), it appears that such imported tablewares were not only identified in larger counts and percentages,²⁰ but also on more sites and on sites for which proxies for ‘status’ remain to be identified. An interesting exception in this respect appears to be provided by site LSE7, which is situated some 1,5 km south of Thespieae. Based on the relatively ‘poor’ encountered surface remains, this Late Antique site was interpreted by the surveyors as a place that saw ‘the presence of a great mass of tiled buildings here, with a villa complex at its heart, together with a village of probably dependent *coloni*’.²¹ Whether this reconstruction is exact or not, the inhabitants of this site appear to have had their own taste or preferences for tableware: ARSW and Western Anatolian were not identified in the surface collections, whereas the presence of five 4th–5th century Athenian/Attic red- or dark-slipped ‘flanged rim/high keel’ bowls with white-painted spiral decoration appears remarkable on a total of 13 collected Mid-Late Roman tablewares.

(4) Building upon some of the highlighted ceramic patterns and cases, the closing aim of this paper was to foreground ‘more endogenous’ or ‘internal’ processes and dynamics in an attempt to explain how and why socio-economic variety and change was shaped and touched ground.²²

Certain top-down initiated processes definitely trickled down throughout states or empires and others rippled out through ‘horizontal’ interactions that went beyond the sphere of local economies. I do, however, believe that there are enough reasons to be cautious with using terms such as ‘connectivity’ or ‘integration’ in explaining economic activity, development, and performance. I, at least, would like to argue that we should define such terms in a ‘light’ way (i.e. for integration, not a ‘uniform, pre-determined model’, but an ‘ongoing dialogue between local and global’).²³

Would something that we might call connectivity or integration look the same for each site or area? Probably not. Larger degrees of integration, high intensities of interaction, or more than incidental movements between sites might in some cases be accompanied by the exchange of goods or the spread of morphological and stylistic ideas and fashions, but less so for others (for a whole range of potential reasons). Case in point, is the observation that the story of ‘lesser connectivity or integration’ of the Valley of the Muses that can be written on the basis of the relatively low numbers of tableware imports is not echoed by the way in which tablewares that were produced in this vale circulated out of their sphere of production to other Boeotian sites (as well as Athens and Corinth).²⁴ By extension, other imports (in this case particularly imported Late Roman Amphora 2s) reached the Valley of the Muses not uncommonly, highlighting that also goods from farther afield found their way to this area. What we might learn from such observations is that the absence of late 5th–7th century tableware imports (at least for the Valley of the Muses) only appears to tell part of the story we try to reconstruct. In such cases, we should ask ourselves why it is that integration, connectivity, and/or socio-economic or cultural change are not materialised in the same way for each site? I believe that there will be not only one answer to this, in some way illustrating that a more thorough exploration of institutions (formal-informal and locally structured-locally structuring) institutions, as well as socio-economic, -cultural, and -ecological actions and interactions on the very local scale, are needed.

Notes

¹This paper was based upon the research that was carried out for the Ph.D. project of the author with the title ‘Shaping regionality in complex economic systems. Late Hellenistic-Late Roman pottery production, circulation, and consumption in Boeotia, Central Greece (c. 150 BCE–700 CE)’, which is currently in preparation to be published at Archaeopress (Peeters forthcoming). This thesis project was carried out within the framework of DFG Graduiertenkolleg 1878 ‘Archaeology of Pre-Modern Economies’.

²E.g. Jones 1964; Whittaker 1983; Liebeschuetz 2001; McCormick 2001; Sarris 2006; Cameron 2012 and Haldon 2015.

³Cf. North 1981 and North 1990. See Lavan 2015 for a bundle of important papers highlighting the complexity and operation of many local Late Antique economies.

⁴See Farinetti 2011 for an extensive GIS-based exploration of the Boeotian landscapes and activity herein. See particularly Mackil 2013 for a recent characterisation of the nature and the workings of the Boeotian League. See Martin – Grusková 2014, 108–109 for the notion of a certain ‘Dexippos, who for the fifth time held the position of arché among the Boeotians’. This Dexippos was a commander of the defensive forces at Thermopylae at the time of the Herulian invasions (c. 267–269 CE). See the inscriptions IG VII 24 from Megara and SEG 42.262 from Corinth (401/402 CE) for the grouping of the Boeotian cities as ‘Boeotian’. These inscriptions note that the cities are themselves responsible for the provisioning of taxes to the imperial horrea at Skarpheia (see also Trombley 1989).

⁵See Trombley 1989; Bintliff 2013 and Bintliff 2014 for discussion of these developments.

⁶ See Bintliff et al. 2007 and Bintliff et al. 2017 for the monographs of the surveys of urban Thespieae and its hinterland. The final publications of the surveys of other areas in Boeotia (including the urban centres and hinterlands of Hyettos, Haliartos, Tanagra, and Koroneia) are currently in preparation.

⁷ The ceramics from Thespieae, Askra and the Valley of the Muses were initially studied by Hayes in the 1980s-90s, after which a series of study-campaigns between 2008 and 2011 and 2014 and 2015 was devoted to the restudy of the ceramic material from Thespieae (Bes and Poblome), Askra (Bes) and the Valley of the Muses (Bes and Peeters). The ceramic analyses for urban Thespieae have been published in Bes – Poblome 2017. The ceramics from LSE7 in Thespieae's vicinity that will be discussed in this paper were restudied by the author in the framework of his dissertation. From 2001 onwards, the pottery from Tanagra and its hinterland has been under examination by Poblome and Bes, while the survey collections from this site were revisited by Peeters and Bes from 2012 onwards to catch up with more recent ceramological insights. Here, I would like to thank Philip Bes and Jeroen Poblome for their support and for providing me the possibility to also explore still to be published data that were generated by them within the framework of the Boeotia Project.

⁸ See Poblome et al. in Bintliff et al. 2004–2005 and Bes – Poblome 2017 for discussion of this ceramic methodology.

⁹ See Bes – Poblome 2017, 323 for the data for urban Thespieae

¹⁰ See Peeters in preparation for discussion and explorations of such Boeotian fabrics along the lines of portable X-Ray Fluorescence analyses.

¹¹ Some fabrics, which are also identified for storage vessels, 'fairly closely resemble the Thespian fabric group', though are not ascribed to this production (Bes – Poblome 2017, 327). Including or eliminating such bodies of ceramics from quantitative analyses when exploring 'local' (or 'close regional') production will in the end shape the results.

¹² Bes 2015; Lund 2015 and Malfitana – Bonifay 2016.

¹³ E.g. Willet 2012 and Bes – Poblome 2017, 327 f. table 12.8.

¹⁴ See Peeters 2016, fig. 2 and Peeters et al. forthcoming.

¹⁵ Peeters et al. forthcoming.

¹⁶ Peeters in preparation.

¹⁷ van Oyen 2015, 289.

¹⁸ E.g. Sanders 2016.

¹⁹ Flat slabs of marble, so-called 'nippled' tiles (not uncommonly retrieved in baths), and/or Hayes' identification of pieces of opus figlinum hint at certain architectural investments on these sites.

²⁰ Peeters et al. forthcoming.

²¹ Bintliff et al. 2007, 156.

²² E.g. Ma 2000, 113; Wickham 2005, 819 and Poblome 2014, 626–627 for similar expressions of thought.

²³ Witcher 2017, 36.

²⁴ Cf. Hayes 2008, 255; Slane – Sanders 2005, 262, 270; Hammond 2018, 683–684. Koroneia appears to be another Boeotian example in this sense: although preliminary checks of the database reveal that less than 5% of the total tableware count for the Roman period is constituted by imports (Cf. Bes 2015, 150), Koroneian tablewares (and other vessels) circulated in large numbers to Hyettos on the other side of the former Lake Copais (Bes – Poblome 2017, 325).

Image Credit

Fig. 1: by the author.

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