

# Archaic and Classical Abdera: Economy and Wealth by the Nestos Riverside

Constantina Kallintzi – Merkouris Georgiadis – Eurydice Kefalidou –  
Kyriaki Chatziprokopiou

## The City

Abdera was founded in the broader context of the colonization of Aegean Thrace during the Archaic period as a colony of two neighbouring coastal Ionian cities, successively: Clazomenae (mid 7<sup>th</sup> century BC) and Teos (mid 6<sup>th</sup> century BC).<sup>1</sup> The selection of this particular site was dictated by economic factors, since the area was rich in metals, timber and horses, its fertile plains were ideal for the cultivation of vines and cereals as well as for animal breeding, especially cattle and sheep, and finally, it was easy to obtain slaves from the Thracian hinterland.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the site had a gulf protected from the winds and the privilege of being near to the then outfall of river Nestos and to the end of the land passageways leading to the hinterland. The early habitation site (“North Enclosure”) is ca 1 km<sup>2</sup> in size, and protected by a large fortification wall (fig. 1-A).<sup>3</sup>

Political factors played an important role for the second wave of colonisers because the Teians left their homeland due to the Persian expansionism. One of the first things they did was remodelling the fortification walls along the route of the earlier wall (with some modifications), emphasising the importance of security against the Thracians. In the last quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC a sanctuary just outside the walls, possibly dedicated to Demeter and Kore,<sup>4</sup> was elaborated with a monumental staircase and probably a building (fig. 1-B). This type of monumentalisation reveals the economic success of the Teians already from their first generation. In the same period a shipshed, specialised for warships, was constructed at the northeast edge of the harbour, parallel to the city wall at a distance of 6 m (fig. 1-C).<sup>5</sup>

During the Megabazos’ campaign in 512–510 BC<sup>6</sup> Abdera came under the Persian rule that lasted until 476/475 BC. The port of Abdera acted as a base of the Persian fleet, while in 479 BC the city of Abdera had the economic capability to host Xerxes and his large army.<sup>7</sup> Soon afterwards, an enormous supply of clastic sediments from river Nestos was observed in the port facilities suggesting that a process of port silting was under way.<sup>8</sup> A strong water break has been constructed in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BC; large unworked boulders of granite were employed probably coming from the northern part of Xanthi and the Rhodopi mountains; moreover, two main local sandstone (psammite) quarries were also used in this period (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup>

For the rest of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Abdera was allied to Athens and became democratic regarding its political system.<sup>10</sup> The list of the Delian League members (last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC) shows that Abdera paid the second highest tax to the alliance thus suggesting the particular wealth of the city.<sup>11</sup> However, the Abderitans were always at



Fig. 1: Abdera: The Sanctuary of Demeter (B), the city walls (A) and the shipshed (C).

the mercy of environmental changes caused mainly by the Nestos river delta, which finally turned the entire gulf into marshland by the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Consequently, at the late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC the initial site was abandoned and the city was transferred in the so called ‘South Enclosure’,<sup>12</sup> where a new harbour was constructed.

The evidence discussed here combines old and new data, the latter stemming from a new period of research for the city of Abdera and the Xanthi District that began in 2015. The “Archaeological Project at Abdera and Xanthi (APAX)” aims to study the city and *chora* of Abdera in its regional context. The expedition is a cooperation between the Xanthi Ephorate of Antiquities, Prof. E. Kefalidou (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens), Dr. M. Georgiadis (Catalan Institute of Classical Archaeology), and specialists from Greek and foreign universities.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Surrounding Area: Farmsteads and Graveyards**

Despite the tension between Greek colonists and the indigenous Thracians from time to time, which are reported by ancient written sources, farmsteads were established outside the city walls.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon appears already in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in accordance to similar examples from southern Greek *poleis*. A new concept of exploiting





Fig. 2: Abdera: A local sandstone (psammite) quarry.

the landscape and its resources, the ancient *chora*, was preferred during the Classical period. There is a discussion whether these structures acted as permanent habitation sites or not, but the remains (storage pithoi, amphoras, loom weights, grinding stones, etc.) suggest that household production was taking place there, while the presence of slags argues that, at least occasionally, industrial activities happened there. The farmsteads show that a new economic model was opted for exploiting the land and processing the agro-silvo-pastoral produce closer to their production area.

The greatest enemies of the first settlers, the Clazomenians, were the poor climatic conditions caused by the marshlands. The majority of early graves, situated very close to the city wall, consisted of amphora and pithos burials, few of which had burial offerings, mainly pottery, both local and imported (Corinthian and east Greek wares).<sup>15</sup> The relatively 'poor' grave offerings, keeping in mind that ca. 80% of the graves belonged to infants and young children, throw some light not only on burial practices but also on the level of wealth in the colony. Physical anthropology analyses demonstrated that people's diet consisted mainly of fish and secondarily of vegetables.<sup>16</sup> The adult skeletons suffered from vitamin C deficiency and both genders performed heavy labour. Many infants and children suffered from anaemia, scurvy



Fig. 3: *Chora* of Abdera: Two burial tumuli.

and childhood diseases, many of which can be connected with slow moving and often stagnant water and an environment full of marshland, an ideal context for transmitting malaria. The animal bones recovered belong mainly to sheep, goats and bovines. The latter along with horse bones provide an insight of the animals employed for traction in agricultural works.

The evidence from mid 6<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards graves suggests the introduction of new burial customs probably due to the Teian colonists.<sup>17</sup> Tumuli were erected and contained a number of graves, often for several generations (fig. 3). These significantly altered the flat, river and marshland landscape to one with many man-made hills visible to everyone. The bodies of the deceased were placed in terracotta or stone sarcophagi made out of sandstone. The sarcophagi were well-worked, heavy and expensive objects, which come into contrast to the limited rich burial offerings. Pottery, both local and imported, is the commonest offering. Thus, in the burial practices of this period the demonstration of wealth was low perhaps associated with the Teian burial customs or/and the democratic ethos of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC rather than the degree of economic power of the *polis*.

On the contrary, during the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC 22% of the graves contained jewellery.<sup>18</sup> In this period one third of the graves with jewellery included gold ones, revealing that wealth was clearly demonstrated within the burial practices. The *polis* may have become richer and/or it was easier to show the wealth of the individual more freely than before. Philip II and the Macedonian rule may have provided more peaceful conditions, in which the city thrived as indicated by the striking of the first gold coins in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, as we will see next.





Fig. 4: Silver and bronze coinage of Abdera.

### Other Evidence for Economy and Wealth

#### Metal and coinage

Abdera gained access to metal sources early on. These sources are not located east of Nestos River, but in the area between the rivers Nestos and Strymon, which was under the control of Thasos that acted as a competitor to Abdera. Thus, it can be deduced that the metal source related to Abdera was situated in the hinterland of Thrace, with which a close interaction had been established as the written sources reveal. These ties are highlighted by the acceptance of Nymphodoros of Abdera in the royal family of Sitalke, king of the Odryssians.<sup>19</sup>

Numerous metal slags were recovered in the northwestern and central-northern part of the *polis*, suggesting that iron was worked systematically in this region, while at least one kiln for producing bronze has been excavated as well.<sup>20</sup> This and other kilns could have been used for the minting of silver and gold coins. Moreover, some pieces of iron came straight from the iron ore demonstrating that some primary stages of metal production took place in the city.

The rapid beginning of the Abderite coinage already from the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC with heavy weight issues of octodrachms and tetradrachms suggests that the Teians established an important network of commercial contacts with the Thracians or/and the Thasians, who controlled the silver-bearing region and could



Fig. 5: Abdera: APAX survey: Relief terracotta sarcophagi (left) and architectural terracottas (right).

supply the colonists with the metal necessary for their monetary issues (fig. 4). The approximately seven centuries of its coinage (520/515 BC until the reign of Antoninus Pius, 138–161 AD) are divided into 14 periods, including silver, gold and bronze issues. During the first seven periods of the mint the city adopted different monetary standards, simultaneously in use: one for the silver coins of high intrinsic value (octodrachms and tetradrachms) destined for international commerce and one for the small denominations (drachms, tetrobols, triobols, obols and hemi-obols) destined for local transactions.<sup>21</sup> The civic numismatic iconography is characterised by an exquisite artistic quality and by a big variety on reverse types in contrast to the obverse, which almost always bears the main numismatic type, a griffin to the left.

The iconography of Abderite coinage draws on the city's religious cults, its geography and local products. Dionysos, the patron deity of the city and his attributes (kantharos, cup, krater, grape-cluster and ivy-leaf) imply the veneration of the god and emphasise the local wine production. The cultivation of grain in this "bountiful land" is represented by ears of corn on some coins of the sixth period (395–360 BC). Marine creatures like dolphins, tunas and seashells indicate the impact of the sea on Abderitan economic and everyday life. Finally, the depiction of horses, rams, bulls and goats refers the importance of livestock farming.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion: metal industry appears to be an important element of the local economy, and the river Nestos could have provided the necessary route for the dissemination of metals from their mountain sources to the port of Abdera and the Aegean.



Fig. 6: Abdera: APAX survey: Pottery fragments.

### Architectural Terracottas

Many fragments of relief antefixes, mainly of the palmettes-and-spirals type, and a few parts of relief simai, sometimes painted with various colours, have been found in certain parts of the city (fig. 5-right). The few simai could have belonged to public buildings but many of the antefixes can be connected with habitation areas. This type of embellishment may look peculiar for the private houses, which were constructed mainly by unworked stones and only a few worked sandstones have been recovered mainly as door frames.<sup>23</sup> Although their analysis is in a preliminary stage,<sup>24</sup> the use of ornate antefixes in the domestic architecture could have been an indication of economic success and wealth in the local society, or at least in some of its members, from the late Archaic period onwards.

### Pottery and Terracotta Production

The clay of most architectural terracottas, as well as their recurring ornaments, point towards a local production for many of these artefacts. The same is true for the largest part of pottery from the city and its graveyards, plain, relief and painted (fig. 6). Of particular interest is the relief ware, mostly dated to the late Archaic and early Classical periods. It is characterised by different shapes including louteria, perirrhanteria, stands, pithoi and deep bowls. Terracotta relief sarcophagi display close stylistic similarities with relief vases and were probably produced in the same workshops (fig. 5-left)<sup>25</sup>.



Fig. 7: Abdera: APAX survey: Stamped handles of transport amphoras.

Moreover, remains of clay kilns have been noted close to the port in the northwestern part of the city, as well as to the north end close to the city walls. These areas could have acted as industrial areas within the city, which certainly produced a variety of objects, including transport amphoras discussed next.<sup>26</sup>

### Transport Amphoras

Transport amphoras are a good indicator of economy regarding the production, storage and import/export of goods in a site. The detailed study of the amphoras from the 'North Enclosure' is in process (fig. 7).<sup>27</sup> Imported transport amphoras help to map out the intensity of trade that Abdera conducted with the world beyond it. About 80% of them has northern Aegean provenance, i.e. from the Chalcidice peninsula to the west up to the Dardanelles to the east. The commercial contacts extended at least occasionally as far as Heracleia Pontica and Sinope in the Black Sea. Large numbers (20%) come also from the east Aegean, where the two *metropoleis* of the city were located and as far south as Rhodes. Of great importance is the fact that there is strong evidence for a local transport amphora production of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, thus suggesting that there was a significant production of agro-silvo-pastoral goods. Moreover, the high concentration of transport amphoras in the northwestern end of the city may suggest the existence of storage buildings by the port that functioned from the 6<sup>th</sup> until the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, serving the needs of trade.





Fig. 8: Abdera: APAX survey: Loom weights (left) and grinding stones (right).

### Storage Pithoi and Grinding Stones

Parts of large storage pithoi have been found in certain areas within the city, apparently for the storage of large quantities of agro-silvo-pastoral produce, which the fertile plain of the broader area of Abdera would offer.<sup>28</sup> Grinding stones have been recovered in considerable numbers dispersed in Abdera (fig. 8-right). They have been identified primarily within the habitation areas and most of them seem to have been part of the *oikos* tools. They are either triangular or ovoid in shape and appear to have been made from volcanic stone, some of which could have been coming (via the sea) from Nisyros in the southern Aegean, while others have a probable provenance from the Rhodopi Mountains and could have come through Nestos' River transportation or following that route. Furthermore, the recovery of some Olynthus-type mills (made of volcanic stones from Nisyros?) argues that in specific areas within the *polis* a larger scale flour production was taking place as well.<sup>29</sup>

### Textiles

Clay loom weights have been found in considerable quantity scattered around the settlement (much like the grinding stones) thus suggesting that this was a common household activity which was important for the *oikos* economy and perhaps it was extended beyond it within the site (fig. 8-left) It also argues that there was locally enough available wool for making clothes, carpets, etc. Therefore it becomes clear that within the pastoral practices of this area, sheep was an important aspect, raised primarily for

their wool. Linen may have also been locally produced and used in the looms in order to produce garments. The sandy clay soil is ideal for such a crop, which could be found close to the Nestos riverbeds.

### Greeks and Thracians

In the northern part of the Xanthi plain, both the ancient text as well as the archaeological finds, suggest that the area was controlled for most part of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC by the local Thracians.<sup>30</sup> Our ongoing survey has identified a few new sites, the largest of which share some common landscape features: They are located on slopes of prominent hills, in defensible positions, and they are extending to the lowland area around large streams. Moreover, the remains of slags strongly suggest the local working of metals as the historical sources have informed us. This also argues that they had a good contact and access to the metal sources situated in the mountainous part of Rhodopi. The rivers could have had a practical as well as a symbolic meaning to the Thracians for their everyday life as well as for the performance of rituals and cultic activities. Perhaps they had a different attitude towards streams and rivers in relation to the ones Greeks had.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusions

The local agro-silvo-pastoral produce and trade were the two basic pillars of the economy developed by the Greek colonists at Abdera. The access of metals through their contacts with the Thracians via inland and river routes was mutually beneficial for the two diverse cultural groups thus economy and trade played a central role in their interactions, relationship and prosperity. The sea remained the main route the Abderitans used to disseminate metals and other produce to the rest of the Aegean.

However, in the battle between the natural forces and human stubbornness, nature won. Nestos River gradually silted the port and led to the movement of the city at the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the south ('South Enclosure') in search with a better harbour, causing the gradual abandonment of the 'North Enclosure'. The unhealthy climate continued to cause problems to the local population until the Hellenistic period. Lucian mentions an incident of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC when an epidemic struck the city with the main symptoms being severe 7-days fever and delirium. In this framework, it is very probable that the poor climate, the environmental conditions along with the moisture created the myth of *avdiritism* (i.e. folly) a quite bizarre conception since Abdera was also the homeland of the philosopher Democritus, the "father of modern atomic science".

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Hdt I 168–169; Strabo XIV 1,30 (C 644). Tiverios 2008, esp. 91–99, 104–107; recently Kallintzi 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> Kallintzi 2011, *passim*; Kallintzi 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> Koukouli-Chryssanthaki 2004; Kallintzi 2012, 132–136.
- <sup>4</sup> Koukouli-Chryssanthaki 2004, 242–244; Motsiou 2016; Motsiou 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> Koukouli-Chryssanthaki 2004, 244–246. This harbour was functioning between 525/520 BC and 490/480 BC; Kallintzi (forthcoming) connected the construction of the shipshed with the Persian fleet.
- <sup>6</sup> Hdt. V 2, 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Herodotos (VII 118–121) who mentions that Abdera was one of the strongest cities in Thrace; also, Pindar (Paeon 2.60) praises its bountiful land.
- <sup>8</sup> Syrides – Psilovikos 2004.
- <sup>9</sup> Kallintzi 2021.
- <sup>10</sup> Diodoros XIII 72, 1–2.
- <sup>11</sup> Diodoros XIII 72, 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Kallintzi 2012, 136–139.
- <sup>13</sup> The project combines intensive surface survey, geomorphological studies and geophysical survey: Kallintzi et al. 2015, 2017, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> Kallintzi 2004; Kallintzi 2011, *passim*.
- <sup>15</sup> Skarlatidou 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> Agelarakis 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> Kallintzi 2006; Kallintzi 2007; cf. Samiou 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Kallintzi 2007.
- <sup>19</sup> Veligianni-Terzi 2004, 118 f. 122–125.
- <sup>20</sup> Metal ores and slags are being studied by Dr. N. Nerantzis.
- <sup>21</sup> May 1966; Chryssanthaki 2000; Chryssanthaki-Nagle 2007.
- <sup>22</sup> Chryssanthaki-Nagle 2018.
- <sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that marble is, so far, absent in domestic architecture and only rarely found in relation to public buildings.
- <sup>24</sup> They are being studied by Dr. D. Stoyanova.
- <sup>25</sup> An overview in Cevizoğlu 2004. It is being studied by K. Chatziprokopiou and Dr. N. Dimakis.
- <sup>26</sup> The pottery is being studied by Prof. E. Kefalidou, Dr. Ch. Kallini, Dr. J. Mourthos and Dr. P. Ilieva.
- <sup>27</sup> They are being studied by Ch. Tzochev. For their secondary use as burial urns: Skarlatidou 2010, *passim*.
- <sup>28</sup> For their secondary use as burial urns: Skarlatidou 2010, *passim*.
- <sup>29</sup> Frankel 2003.
- <sup>30</sup> Triantaphyllos 1990 & 1991.
- <sup>31</sup> Triantaphyllos 2009.



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