

## Testing the Hinterland: The Work of the Boeotia Survey (1989–1991) in the Southern Approaches to the City of Thespiai

By John Bintliff, Phil Howard, and Anthony Snodgrass, with contributions from Oliver Dickinson, Mark Gillings, John Hayes, Robert Shiel, and Joanita Vroom (McDonald Institute Monographs). Pp. xviii + 320, figs. 454, tables 47, CD-ROM 1. McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge 2007. \$130. ISBN 978-1-902937-37-3 (cloth).

In the late 1970s, survey archaeologists in Greece began recording artifacts in ancient landscapes outside the confines of rural sites. The Boeotia Survey was one of the first projects to adopt an “off-site” approach that included counting the total number of artifacts in the countryside and, by the late 1980s, collecting representative artifact samples and analyzing their chronological and functional character. *Testing the Hinterland* offers an early glimpse of the potential of such off-site approaches for understanding past settlement and land use.

This volume is the first installment of the final publication of the Boeotia Project, which ran consecutive fieldwork and study seasons from 1978 to 1997 between the modern villages of Aliartos and Thespias in central Greece. In certain respects, it is the fruition of the steady output of publications since the early 1980s, including some 100 articles and book chapters, a dissertation, and three books by 30 different authors on every aspect of regional history and archaeology (313–16). This study, however, has a particular spatial focus in the southern hinterland of ancient Thespias (the Thespias South/Leondari Southeast sector, an area covering 5.2 km<sup>2</sup>), where three years of survey (1989–1991) recorded 18 sites and off-site scatters—a small fraction of the total survey area (50 km<sup>2</sup>) and the 250 rural sites. Bintliff and Snodgrass have written almost all the text in the volume, but Howard produced

most of the 500 figures and tables. The authors make significant use of chapters on soils and agriculture by Shiel and Stewart; topographic and visibility analysis by Howard; ceramic analysis by Dickinson, Hayes, and Vroom; and GIS work by Gillings and Howard.

In a sense, the clear focus of *Testing the Hinterland* is a detailed analysis of 18 sites in the Thespias South/Leondari Southeast sector. While site gazetteers have long been a central feature of survey volumes, this production is on a completely different scale, with more than 50% of the 320 pages of the work devoted to narrating the history of individual sites. Chapter 6 and appendix A together allot, on average, 10 pages of discussion per site in the form of “cultural biographies,” which document on-site and off-site artifact patterning per period, chronological and functional characteristics, and diachronic narrative interpretations, among other topics. Hundreds of figures—topographical maps, contour density maps, and site grids—and dozens of tables accompany the text and are integral to the presentation of the sites’ histories. The CD-ROM included in an insert at the back of the volume contains spreadsheets that catalogue some 5,000 artifacts found in gridded collection at the sites and several hundred off-site finds sampled in the transects. And much of the concluding discussion in chapters 9 and 10 narrates the history of this landscape by reference to individual sites.

In other respects, however, what makes this volume unique is the substantive and methodological attention it gives to off-site scatters within a continuous carpet of artifacts. As the authors discuss in chapters 2–5, regional projects in Greece have often counted artifacts off-site but have not generally dated these artifacts and, consequently, have been unable to relate off-site finds to contemporary on-site finds. Regional projects have instead focused their interpretations on sites defined by high overall density of artifacts and formed by overlays of different periods, some of which were deposited not during episodes of occupation but by nonhabitation activities such as manuring. The authors introduce a more sensitive chronological reading of the landscape in two ways: first, by adopting an approach called “residual analysis” (26–37), which relates the pottery of each period at each site to the overall background densities of the surrounding district and thereby assesses the plausibility that, for example, three Roman sherds found at a site actually represent habitation and are not merely background scatter; and second, by examining intrasite spatial distributions of artifacts per period to determine whether those artifacts have the discernible patterns of occupation. This intensive analysis allows the authors to disentangle truly off-site (non-occupational) material from occupational debris found at sites (see table 10.1 and final interpretations in ch. 6).

The fruit of the authors’ analytical labors is an extremely nuanced interpretation of the distribution, function, and chronology of settlement and land use between the prehistoric and Medieval periods. Although much in the concluding chapters is familiar to survey volumes generally—cycles of settlement expansion (Late Neolithic–Early Bronze Age, Classical–Early Hellenistic periods, Middle–Late Roman periods, Middle Byzantine period) and contraction (Middle Bronze Age–Geometric period, Hellenistic–Early Roman periods, Early Byzantine period), land ownership, catchments and environmental niches, and demographic estimations—the discussion is rooted in sounder chronological analyses, detailed site biographies (ch. 6, appx. A), the context of soils and agricultural potential (ch. 7 [Shiel and Stewart]), and topographical analysis (ch. 8 [Howard]). Prehistoric material, for example, consists of only low-density scatters of pottery and lithics documented at sites through intensive gridded collection. In

some cases, there is clear intrasite patterning that encourages interpreting these ephemeral remains as small vanished farmsteads, probably of Late Neolithic–Early Bronze Age date, reduced by long-term taphonomic processes (13, 17, 129–31). For the Classical to Early Hellenistic landscape, the authors suggest three zones of land use: a ring of burial spaces closest to the city, a zone of hamlets and larger estates, and occasional family farms in the outer belt. Manuring zones are postulated within 2–3 km of ancient Thespiiai, believed to be deposited by commuting urban dwellers practicing intensive cultivation. The authors contrast this pattern with the Late Roman landscape that lacks low-density manuring carpets altogether but has large estates farther from the city (155–66). These later Roman urban laborers lived in Thespiiai and practiced less intensive cultivation and subsistence farming in their own fields (to which they commuted) while also working the estates of the landed elite.

These interpretations depend ultimately on the project’s methods, procedures, and analytical principles, as well as assessment of the occupational biographies. Discussion of the procedures is at times undeveloped. The functional analysis of farmsteads (ch. 5), for example, would have benefitted from a systematic discussion of the artifact signatures of all interpretive categories: storage buildings, hamlets, villages, sanctuaries and shrines, cemeteries and burial places, and even manuring carpets. The brevity of methodological discussion is surprising: how were sites defined during survey and how were site boundaries fixed? The distributional maps of off-site artifacts plotted by period are useful but do not include the location of contemporary sites (figs. 4.4–4.10). A “Read Me” file would be quite useful in navigating the CD-ROM and explaining the various tables and fields abbreviated in the spreadsheets, and the inclusion of an actual database would be immensely valuable in permitting readers to query the results. Table 4.2 gives percentages of period breakdown for off-site finds per district (26), but would a more sensitive analysis of off-site periods by feature sherds vs. body sherds, or fine wares vs. coarse wares, change these proportions? More thorough discussions would help the reader evaluate the volume’s interpretations.

It is worth visiting one substantive issue here. In *Testing the Hinterland*, we find the “manuring explanation” an enduring thread of discussion central to the argument about

Classical settlement and land use patterning around Thespiai. Given the importance of the explanation for the overall argument, I would have expected fuller updated summaries of the original articles than the short discussions contained in the introductory chapters. Some of the text itself appears a bit dated (references to works published before 2000), with the result that the authors have not absorbed into their discussion more recent supporting and critical scholarship on the topic. In many respects, the argument for manuring, as restated in this volume, depends on original observations concerning halos, low-density artifact zones, and the use of manure as fertilizer in antiquity. However, the authors do offer a major advance to their argument in the form of GIS analysis that examines off-site manuring scatters in terms of ease of access and topography (25–6; ch. 8). If the authors hope to settle the debate over manuring for the Boeotia pattern (9), they might consider moving beyond the original arguments about halos and apply other forms of GIS analyses to their rich data sets. It is now relatively easy, for example, to map the distribution of tiles across the landscape (an artifact less likely to be spread through manuring) or to compare the characteristics of site assemblages (e.g., fine wares, coarse wares, and kitchen wares) with their associated low-density scatters. Such distributional analysis could help rule out the possibility that some of the “off-site” material

actually represents, for example, ephemeral Classical habitation.

In the end, *Testing the Hinterland* is significant for demonstrating the analytical potential of using intensive artifact-level data to produce more nuanced studies of settlement and land use. Many survey archaeologists will lack the energy to produce the kind of lengthy occupational biographies found in this volume, but no project can ignore the observations the authors have made about the chronological makeup of sites and their off-site patterning. In the long term, this volume not only marks the first in a series of similar volumes by the Boeotia Project but should serve as a model publication for the new type of survey project in Greece: the off-site and siteless regional survey with its analytical focus not so much on multiphase sites but on their underlying temporal layers that appear most visibly through database queries and high-resolution spatial analysis. Even if these analyses come at the cost of time investment, they are likely to contribute a great deal more to our understanding of the diversity of settlement and land use in the various microregions of ancient Greek countrysides.

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