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Changes in Town and Country in Late Antiquity and into the Early Medieval Period in Greece and the Aegean Islands

Abstract

The Greek Aegean in the Late Roman era (5th-mid-7th centuries AD) offers a degree of uniformity, developing further the novel urban and rural patterns that mark the previous Imperial centuries. Characteristically small towns with fortifications and lavish Christian monuments are surrounded by commercial villa estates, while populations shrink drastically from the mid-6th century. In the 7th-8th centuries fundamental regional divergences appear. Most of mainland Greece is lost to the Eastern Roman (aka Early Byzantine) Empire based at Constantinople, the largest towns and coastal ports excepted, following waves of Slavic settlement. A second model is found on the Aegean Islands, where reduced populations largely survive Arab raids and alien settlement through settlement displacement and negotiation. A third model is represented by the large island of Crete, free from invasion until Arab conquest in the 9th century, ironically when a revived Eastern Roman (Middle Byzantine) Empire regains control of the mainland and remaining Aegean Islands. This paper will present the evidence from archaeology for these scenarios, varying in time and space.

Introduction

The trajectory from the Late Roman into the Early Medieval centuries in Greece follows diverse pathways according to the various main regions: the mainland, the Cyclades and the great island of Crete. Each, however, offers insights into the processes of societal and economic transformation under pressure of wider and dramatic historical events.

Crete

Let us start with Crete: Uniquely of our three case-study regions, the island remained under the control of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire right up to its surprise conquest by Andalusian Arabs around 825 AD. We have then an excellent opportunity to observe the

island community's adaptations to internal and external transformations.¹ Lacking the forceful impact of Arab or other invasions and colonisations until the dawn of the Middle Byzantine era, one might expect to see a flourishing Late Roman society continuing as before, in contrast to other Byzantine provinces. Crete had, however, already been massively transformed under the Roman Empire: the number of its towns was halved,² and progressively its countryside was dominated, especially in Late Antiquity, by villa estates and tied peasant labour. A major earthquake in 365 AD gives a glimpse into urban life beneath its rubble. At the island capital of Gortyn the stage buildings of the theatre had become a stable, while the cavea was a workshop for masons, cutting up public statues for marble slabs; the stadium was abandoned, although a hippodrome will stay in use into the 6th century. A restructuring of urban space here is a familiar Mediterranean story throughout the Late Imperial era, and so are two other features of the city: a set of new, impressive Christian basilicas appeared in the 5th century, but excavations reveal a dramatic contrast between elite townhouses and impoverished dwellings and workshops for the rest of the inhabitants. The dichotomy will sharpen through the 7th-8th century, the Early Byzantine era. At the same time the density and form of urban occupation alters: whereas an elaborate system of fountains in the Lower Town seems to respond to a dense block of settlement in the 5th-6th centuries, in the 7th-8th it appears that the 'island town plan' has emerged, with severe population decline leading to several islands of occupation clustering around the fountains. Social divisions are even sharper: these occupation islands seem to have been made up of wealthy urban villas and ghetto-like residences of the poor, including cemeteries. Meanwhile in the 7th century the Acropolis is rewalled and was probably the residence of the religious and military authority – a *kastron*.

At Gortyn the former governor's palace was taken over by olive-oil production and grain-stores, and an elite townhouse has storage amphorae in its cellar and sheep in its courtyard. Zanini suggests that the collapse of the commercial export economy of Crete, with the breakdown of secure maritime trade, led the urban elite to shift from a macro-economic focus, to a micro-economic focus, retaining wealth through a dominant hold on the internal agricultural economy – an increasingly insular inversion.³

By now the loss of the Byzantine provinces in Egypt, North Africa and the West Mediterranean had rendered Gortyn's south coast location unsuitable – the remaining Byzantine focus lay in the Aegean looking towards Constantinople, or along the south Anatolian coast: probably in this era the island capital was moved to the port city of Heraklion on the north coast. By the Arab invasion, Gortyn may well have been abandoned.

Although there is a general problem in recognizing ceramic assemblages of the Early Byzantine era in the Aegean, apart from generally rare finds of certain amphorae and fineware, elsewhere on Crete a similar story is likely: towns are abandoned or shrink, rural populations decline due to the recurrent plagues from the 6th through to 8th centuries, and Arab raids and temporary occupations through the same period show a failure of community security. The reaction appears to be twofold: populations increasingly move to fortified *kastra*, either the acropoleis of shrunken or abandoned towns, or fortified hilltop villages such as Polyrrhenia.

¹ Cosentino 2019, Tsigonaki 2019, Zanini 2019.

² Karambinis 2022.

³ Zanini 2019.

The 9th century Arab conquest brought new challenges to the archaeologist: as on Malta, while texts give general details, material culture has posed problems in finding evidence for the one and a half century of the Emirate of Crete. The lack of interest from prehistorians and Classical archaeologists has played a dominant role, but actually Randazzo's recent summary of the evidence offers a persuasive and intriguing explanation.⁴ At the Islamic island capital of Heraklion, typical 9th-10th century Islamic tablewares have been uncovered, while in its near hinterland at Knossos the so-called 'Arab Building' yielded complementary storage and cookware ceramics. In the countryside the few sites datable to this period hardly offer Islamic finds (Vyzari, a settlement on an abandoned basilica is an exception) and at the Eastern Crete small coastal site at Priniatiko Pyrgos only 9th-10th century Byzantine pottery is found. Extensive excavations at other sites lack Islamic finds. In contrast, the findspots of coins minted by the Emirs are common, indicating a highly monetized economy even in the countryside. The finds cluster in fertile agricultural areas and along routes, arguing for an intensive farming economy.

Sources indicate that the Islamic population was largely resident in the towns of the island, and required a large rural Byzantine population to pay taxes and to support it agriculturally. Randazzo argues that the density of coinage, the virtual absence of Islamic ceramics outside the capital and a few other settlements, and the signs of contemporary Byzantine ceramics in rural sites, points to a two culture model: the Islamic population fully immersed in interregional forms of Arab material culture, the indigenous population persisting in a Byzantine cultural milieu. The coins and the necessary relation of economic dependence form the primary bridge between the two societies.

The Cyclades

These islands shared in the vigorous revival of trade in Late Antiquity, once a major part of the flow of Mediterranean shipping was reorientated to Constantinople from the 4th century AD. The various Arab expeditions against the capital in the 7th-8th centuries took the Western Anatolian coast route, so the Cyclades were largely spared devastation, but with the 9th century capture of Crete the military situation was transformed, and according to Vionis it is likely that at least some islands, such as Naxos, while spared physical occupation, were obliged to pay tribute to the Emir of Crete.⁵

As on Crete however, the decline of Mediterranean trade in the Early Byzantine period, following the major loss of provinces from the Byzantine Empire to the Arabs, the massive population losses due to plague in the same centuries, the flight of the curial elite to safer fortified cities, and the ever-present threat of Arab and also Slav raids on the mainlands, all led to similar adaptations by the islanders.⁶ Although activity continued in the 7th-8th centuries at some traditional coastal towns, in the 7th century a rash of new fortified *kastra* emerge in characteristic locations, for example Oria on Kythnos.⁷ A genuine network, probably instituted and encouraged by the state, consisted of defended upland towns – *kastra*, replacing the

⁴ Randazzo 2019.

⁵ Vionis 2012.

⁶ See for a general overview Crow, Hill 2018.

⁷ Veloudaki 2019.

former coastal polis towns, and military forts on small islets or other coastal locations – *phrouria*, for example on Ios. Veloudaki notes the following for the new fortified towns:

- a/ founded in the 7th-8th centuries
- b/ remote defensive hill locations with substantial fortifications
- c/ good views to sea and land routes
- d/ visually linked to each other for signalling of threats

The last points are confirmed by Roussos' GIS analysis of the spatial control exercised by the overlapping viewsheds of the new inland and upland town *kastro* of Apalariou on Naxos, replacing the ancient coastal polis centre of Naxos; the military fort of Paleokastro islet opposite Ios; and the islet fortress of Viokastro off Paros. The coastal forts were staging points for the Byzantine Aegean fleet.⁸

State sponsorship of these realignments was driven by the essential need to ensure safe navigation and supply lines through the Aegean to the capital and the Balkan armies. The relocation of the main settlements on the islands was however associated with other fundamental changes, reflecting the wider shift from a predominantly macro-economic to a rising micro-economic focus in the surviving Byzantine provinces: Roussos has argued that a Late Roman Cycladic commercial economy with a strong export component was replaced with a more autarchic economy focussing on agricultural production and consumption within each island.

The Mainland

The situation on the Greek mainland diverged remarkably from that on Crete and the Cyclades. Society and economy began, however, in the same mode, with a flourishing commercial economy in the 4th-mid 6th Late Roman era, which had grown significantly since a stagnant Early Imperial period. Care has to be taken with these survey figures, as David Pettegrew has warned us that the much easier recognition of Late Roman amphorae and other ceramic types has exaggerated the scale of change and indeed the demography of Late Antiquity.⁹ On the ground, this criticism appears well-founded. In Boeotia, Central Greece (see *FIG. 1* for the areas covered by our regional survey project), the rural sites we discovered in the hinterland of ancient Thespiiai city, are large villas with little prestige evidence and a dominance of roofed buildings, storage and transport amphorae but without much domestic debris: we see these as estate centres with a dependent labour force, including workers based in the nearest villages and town.¹⁰

Moreover the town of Thespiiai, as is common throughout Greece,¹¹ had already shrunk to half the size of its Classical Greek predecessor in Early Imperial times, and despite being part of a vigorous interprovincial economy, in Late Antiquity it remained no larger than its Early Imperial predecessor. By the 5th century, the forum area had been converted into a well-built *kastro*.¹²

⁸ Roussos 2018.

⁹ Pettegrew 2007.

¹⁰ Bintliff, Howard, Snodgrass 2007.

¹¹ Karambinis 2018.

¹² Bintliff, Farinetti, Slapsak Snodgrass 2017.

The major cities of Late Antiquity show a similar story: Athens retreats behind its new wall of spolia, abandoning the ancient agora to form a shrunken city, but as in Gortyn, a dichotomy appears - outside we find elite townhouses and even a probably unfinished palace.¹³ In Thessaloniki, the construction of numerous splendid new Christian basilican churches is accompanied, as on Crete, with abandonment of parts of the urban fabric, yet many elite mansions are also recovered.¹⁴ Specialists in the Late Antique city, here as elsewhere, contrast the rather illusory Cities of Churches with the former poleis – the Cities of People.¹⁵

Corinth is an even more striking case-study: the Roman refoundation was perhaps a half to a third the size of its Classical predecessor, despite becoming a provincial capital.¹⁶ But the Late Antique visitor arriving at its northern harbour of Lechaion in Late Antiquity would be confronted by a striking contrast: at Lechaion a gigantic basilican church had been constructed around 500 AD, the largest of its kind in the Empire at that time, perhaps paid for by the Emperor.¹⁷ Yet proceeding to Corinth city, the same traveller would find only the shadow of a town – the forum abandoned and turned into a graveyard outside a small kastro – a town perhaps just one third of its Early Roman extent. Yet also in and around this kastro are semi-rural basilican churches, reminiscent of the island city of Gortyn.¹⁸ Continuing excavations both within the active Late Antique defence walls and beyond within the former and long-abandoned Greek city wall circuit have shed new light on the nature of Corinth in the final Late Roman and Early Byzantine era¹⁹ Valente summarizes these new insights as follows: over the 6th-7th centuries the forum lost its urban role and the heart of the town shrank. Nonetheless as a political centre Corinth survived, being the location of the new province (theme) for South-Central Greece (Hellas) from the end of the 7th century, then the administrative centre for the province of the Peloponnese from the late 8th century. In a similar transformation to Gortyn, whilst areas of the Late Roman urban core were becoming depopulated and deteriorated, there were created polycentric urban islands beyond this core based around churches and discrete pockets of housing and industry. With the renewed consolidation of Byzantine imperial power from the 9th century onwards (the dawn of the Middle Byzantine era), although the urban core remained within the small Late Roman enceinte, the polycentric extramural islands scattered within the far larger area enclosed by the long-abandoned Greek city wall circuit flourished, with evidence of local ceramic production and imports dated to this period.²⁰

The destructions on the mainland, caused by the Heruli, then the Goths, over the 3rd to 5th centuries were far from terminal. More influential was the same debilitating package we have seen already, the 6th-8th plagues, the winding down of the interregional commercial economy, and the abandonment by the curial class for safety in the largest cities. As on Crete, these were certainly enough to create the shrinking or abandonment of most Balkan towns and the gradual dissolution of their traditional urban fabric and public amenities.

¹³ Camp 2001, Bintliff 2012a.

¹⁴ Velenis 1990-1995, Kourkoutidou-Nicolaidou, Tourta 1997, Bintliff 2012a.

¹⁵ Bintliff 2012b.

¹⁶ Romano 2003.

¹⁷ Rothaus 1995.

¹⁸ Slane, Sanders 2005.

¹⁹ Valente 2021.

²⁰ Valente 2020.

But the final blow came from a novel source, the large-scale expansion of Slav tribes from regions around the Baltic Sea.²¹ This began with raids and small-scale settlement in the late 6th century, but with the Imperial forces weak in manpower and distracted by war with Sassanid Persia, a full-scale colonisation of mainland Greece followed in the 7th century. The countryside was lost to Constantinople, which hung on to the larger fortified towns, and coastal areas protected by its Aegean fleet. Rather than witnessing an Islamic transition into the Early Medieval period, on the mainland we are looking for the material record of a Slavic colonisation and its aftermath.

Let me illustrate this period again through our own regional project in the province of Boeotia, Central Greece. The city of Thespiiai on our total urban surface survey has but limited traces for the Early Byzantine, 7th- early 9th centuries AD, with a thin assemblage of handmade and other ceramics and transport amphorae of this date, together with a lintel block of this age from a church within the Kastro.²² The town has disappeared into a village, and its open location may indicate a mutual coexistence of surviving Byzantine occupants and incoming Slavic farmers. A few kilometres away, the large village Askra, gains a new name around this time – Zaratoba, more directly implying a dominant Slavic presence – the place of the mountain.²³ The scantiness of clearly datable Early Byzantine ceramics at these locations, and the rare fragment of possible Slav handmade ware at Thespiiai, are taken by Byzantine ceramic specialist Vionis to suggest that both Slavic colonisers and indigenous peasants largely continued to rely on Late Roman ceramic forms perhaps till the end of the 8th century, together with occasional imports from Constantinople and elsewhere.²⁴ Certainly the high numbers of Slavs entering Greece according to the texts and political realities, is otherwise impossible to reconcile with the remarkably thin presence of specific ‘Slavic’ material culture in the archaeological record. Two genuine Slavic cemeteries recorded from the Olympia region are remarkable exceptions, with cremation urns and accompanying vessels typical for other regions of Slavic settlement in continental Europe, and there are more recent discoveries of similar cemeteries in the Peloponnese, such as at Asea and Makri in Arcadia, and further finds of Slavic ceramic types elsewhere (Sparta city for example).²⁵ If the thin scatter of possible Early Byzantine sherds across the site of the ancient city of Thespiiai, indicates the scattering of occupation, then the Kastro with its church may be peripheral to the domestic areas, which is perhaps a dispersed homestead pattern. This is confirmed when from the 9th-10th centuries onwards, the appearance of distinctive glazed and other typical Middle Byzantine ceramics allows us to see a sizeable, if two-focus, village in the far east of the former town, located around two Early Christian basilicas now transformed into smaller churches. Significantly we know its name is Erimokastro, the village near the abandoned kastro.

The mainland was reconquered by Byzantium during the late 8th century, and the Slavs were Hellenised to the point where their presence, apart from occasional personal names and more widely-scattered toponyms, along with some residual mountain communities mentioned

²¹ Koder 2020, Stouraitis 2020.

²² Bintliff, Farinetti, Slapsak, Snodgrass 2017.

²³ Bintliff *et al.* 2000.

²⁴ Vionis 2017, 2020.

²⁵ Cf. Vida, Völling 2000, Valente 2021.

in later sources, was deleted from the revived Byzantine empire in its 9th-12th century climax.²⁶

The Slavic colonisation has formed a focus of debate in Greek historiography since the 19th century, tied closely to issues of Greek nationalism and a widespread concern to emphasize an unbroken continuity of Greek language, culture and especially ethnicity from Classical times to the present. Arguments continue in the scholarly literature about the Chronicle of Monemvasia with its dramatic narrative of Slavic conquests in the Peloponnese.²⁷ Two neglected points deserve attention in reviewing this debate.

Firstly, a great deal can be learnt from a very similar and much better-documented phenomenon which occurred across mainland Greece in the 14th-15th centuries, namely the Albanian colonisation.²⁸ Following massive depopulation caused primarily by the Black Death but also by endemic warfare over the 14th century, the Frankish then Ottoman rulers invited Albanian clans to repopulate the landscape. Thus the majority of villages in Boeotia, Attica and much of the northern Peloponnese find their origin as ‘Arvanites’ from this period. In the same way, the major depopulation caused by the plague which hit Greece in the later 6th century and recurred till the 8th, reinforced by major disruptive incursions by varied Barbarian groups, created a largely empty landscape suited to colonisation by expanding Slavic populations spreading across eastern and south-eastern Europe. There is no need to see this as a form of intentional military conquest, except where such settlement met local or state resistance. Mutual co-existence may well have been the norm in most districts, as was the case with the Albanian settlement some 600 years later.

Secondly, the Albanian settlers are clearly indistinguishable in their ceramics and house forms, at least in our closely-studied region of Boeotia, from what are well-documented contemporary surviving ethnic Greek, local Byzantine-origin villages. We have argued likewise with Athanasios Vionis,²⁹ that the Slavic settlers, although initially retaining their central-European forms of burial and burial ceramics, swiftly adopted local forms of material culture and hence soon became indistinguishable in terms of domestic archaeology from local populations – hence their almost invisibility on the ground.³⁰

Further evidence for this mainland sequence appeared in our surveys at ancient Tanagra, also in Boeotia (FIG. 1).³¹ Tanagra city already shrinks to maybe one third of its size by Late Roman times, but as expected, boasts several impressive new Christian basilicas from the geophysical survey by our Slovenian colleagues. Rare pieces of Early Byzantine ceramics show some limited occupation at the city in the 7th-8th centuries, probably little more than a village. A few kilometres away we found a clear kastro community, a fortified hilltop called now Kastri, which formed a refuge village of some size, which was probably walled in the Justinianic era. It continues in use in the following Early Byzantine period, as Vionis has shown from its distinctive finds.³² The parallels to the fortified shrunken towns and defended villages on Crete and the Cyclades are clear, but here the military threats came much earlier.

²⁶ Koder 2020.

²⁷ Anagnostakis, Kaldellis 2014.

²⁸ Jochalas 1971; Bintliff 1995, 2003, 2012a.

²⁹ Vionis 2017, 2020.

³⁰ A model also earlier promoted by Guy Sanders from the excavations at Sparta (Sanders 1995).

³¹ Bintliff *et al.* 2008.

³² Vionis 2017.

After the Byzantine reconquest, Kastri and Tanagra are abandoned, and a whole series of open villages and hamlets nearby take their place.

My final example from Central Greece is the ancient city and countryside of Hyettos (FIG. 1).³³ Our urban survey showed that the town shrank in size between Hellenistic and Roman times. Allowing for the usual problems of recognition of Early Byzantine wares, and of a likely continued use of Late Roman ceramic styles, there is again evidence for occupation of the Lower Town in the 7th-8th centuries, including a clear piece of so-called Slav Ware, but the Acropolis is not significantly refortified. The explanation here is found in the nearby rural hinterland, where two small and one large rural site with Byzantine occupation include positive and probable Early Byzantine pieces. A dispersed open settlement for this era suggests a lack of concern for the Slavic arrival – in contrast to the kastro of Kastri near Tanagra, and likely a local peaceful co-existence. As at Thespiiai, in the subsequent Middle Byzantine era it is not the ancient city core that revives, but one of these rural foci which will form its main replacement as a sizeable village.

Conclusion

In all three major regions of Greece, the revival in Late Antiquity, from Early Roman decline, is a partial one.³⁴ Towns remain small, and even the denser rural settlement patterns revealed by survey may not house large populations; their labour forces are often resident in shrunken towns and rural nucleations. The sprouting up of innumerable and often magnificent new basilican churches in towns and villages alike, and the opulent urban mansions in regional centres such as Thebes, represent a polarised society dominated by wealthy landowners and the Church, built on a hitherto unparalleled export-driven commercial agriculture fed by villas and tenant farms. This is a highly-unstable society and economy, a macro-economy in the model of Enrico Zanini,³⁵ and it rapidly begins to unravel as troubles increase, especially from the late 6th century. Dramatic depopulation, military insecurity, the progressive flight of the urban curial class, and the breakdown of the commercial economy see the end of the villa system, the widespread but not total retreat to urban and rural kastro, and scanty occupation in former open landscape locations on Crete, the Cyclades and the mainland. The economy reorients itself to a more micro-economic autarchic mode, although a small-scale continuation of imports from the capital and Italy³⁶ show that trade has massively diminished but certainly never ceased.

Into these depopulated and deurbanising landscapes appear two vigorous, aggressive and colonising populations from far afield: the Andalusian Arabs on Crete and the Continental Slavs on the mainland. Their plan of occupation is quite different: the Muslims on Crete preserve their distinct community by largely confining themselves to urban centres, nourishing the indigenous Byzantine rural communities to prosper, maintain their own customs and Byzantine material culture, and support the Emirate with taxes and agricultural surpluses. Their success seems manifested by a flourishing rural monetary economy and an absence in our

³³ Bintliff, Farinetti, Snodgrass, *in press*.

³⁴ Bintliff 2014.

³⁵ Zanini 2019.

³⁶ See now Randazzo 2022, *in press*.

sources of hints of revolt. A continuation of Late Roman ceramic styles enriched by rare imports from other parts of the Byzantine Empire, makes local populations nearly invisible so far. On the Cyclades, the Arab presence, in a precarious balance with a strong Byzantine fleet maintaining a semblance of Byzantine control, is even more light-handed: in return for tax to the Cretan Emirate the islanders are left alone to continue their largely autarchic economy, with just enough surplus to send both to Crete and Byzantium in kind or coin.

On the mainland, the Slavic colonisation is very different. Skilled farmers rather than urbanites,³⁷ they infill the mostly empty countryside, often settling amidst surviving Byzantine villages and largely peaceably at that. When some Macedonian Slavic tribes besiege the great city of Thessaloniki, other Slavs in Thessaly send food supplies to help the Byzantines. The Empire cleverly gave administrative titles to Slav leaders, as lead seals confirm, even when still independent from Constantinople.³⁸ With a few exceptions, rural material culture for both Greeks and Slavs would seem to be dominated by a continuation of Late Roman ceramic styles and a series of new shared Early Medieval forms, such as handmade wares and pattern-burnished wares, and occasional imports.

Ultimately neither the Arabs nor the Slavs would leave a lasting mark on the revived Middle Byzantine Empire in Greece, as it triumphantly reabsorbed the mainland, the Aegean Islands and Crete from the late 8th through the 10th centuries AD, washing everything it met and remoulding it into a new commercialised urban and rural economy. In contrast to the later Albanian colonisation, where the Ottoman Empire was underpinned by a multi-ethnic organisation at the community level, allowing Albanian villages to retain their language into the early 20th century, the revived Byzantine Empire aggressively and successfully promoted Hellenisation in language and local administration.³⁹ A uniform Byzantine material culture is found in a new norm of small towns and a village-based and for the time being largely independent peasantry. Significantly, the *longue durée* decline of the innumerable cities of Classical Greece through Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is symbolised by the fact that in Middle Byzantine times no longer is the city and its territory the basis for state taxation, but the village. Polis to Chorion indeed...

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³⁷ Malingoudis 1991.

³⁸ Curta 2004.

³⁹ Bintliff 2003, 2012a.

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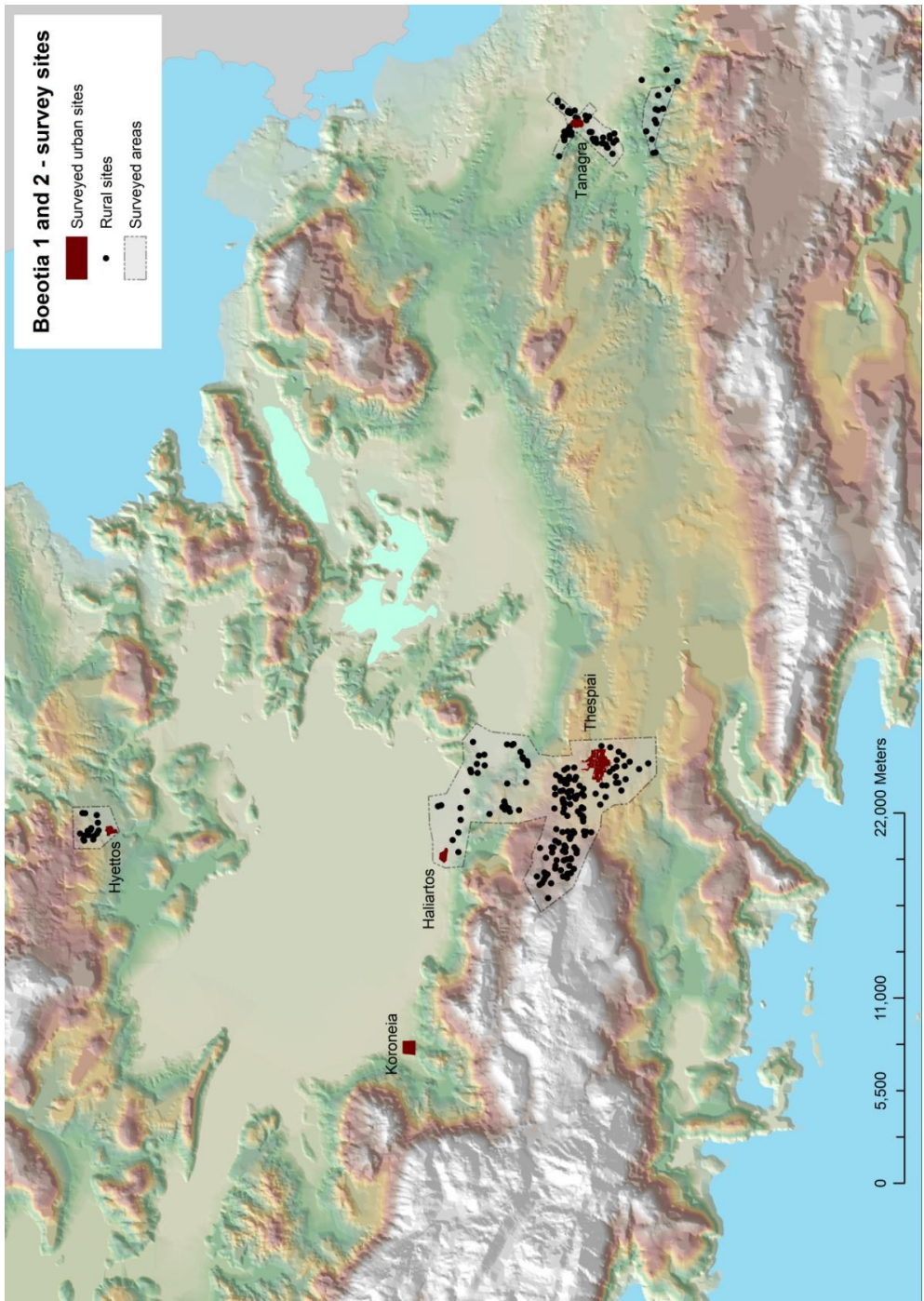


FIG. 1 – Ancient cities and their countryside surveyed by the Boeotia Project, Central Greece, between 1978 and 2012 (GIS by Emiri Farinetti).