

McDONALD INSTITUTE MONOGRAPHS

An Age of Experiment: Classical Archaeology Transformed (1976–2014)

Edited by Lisa Nevett and James Whitley



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with contributions from
Susan E. Alcock, Giovanna Ceserani, Alexandra Coucouzeli, Thomas W. Gallant, Michael Given, Jonathan M. Hall, Paul Halstead, Sturt W. Manning, Ian Morris, Lisa Nevett, Robin Osborne, Sara Owen, Gillian Shepherd, David B. Small, Jeremy Tanner and James Whitley

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Chapter 10

Structural History and Classical Archaeology: 25 Years On

Lisa Nevett (The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Some 25 years ago, in a contribution to a book on the Annales School and archaeology which was edited by his long-time collaborator John Bintliff, Anthony Snodgrass argued that the real strength of classical archaeology lay in its ability to throw into high relief generational time – what Annaliste scholars have termed the *moyenne durée* or *conjoncture* (Snodgrass 1991). Snodgrass' argument was formulated in the context of the rapid rise of field survey in the classical world, of which he and Bintliff were – of course – leading proponents. As he pointed out, survey placed unprecedented emphasis on the Greek countryside and on continuities and discontinuities in settlement patterns and land-use from one century to the next, opening up a whole realm of new research questions. His argument was developed partly in opposition to previous tendencies in classical archaeology, in which scholars had tried to search the archaeological data for evidence of events mentioned in the textual sources – the Annalistes' *événements*, and it took advantage of one of the strengths of structural history – an emphasis on *histoire-pensée* or *histoire-problème* – an analytical, rather than chronological, form of history.

Bintliff's book was part of a wider debate among archaeologists about how Annales approaches might be useful in archaeology (see also, for example, the papers included in Hodder 1987 and in Knapp 1992). As many of the other chapters in this volume show, the study of change at the level of the *moyenne durée* continues to be a key aspect of classical archaeology today (and this reflects a more widespread phenomenon; see, for example, Cyprian Broodbank's monumental study: Broodbank 2013). Nevertheless, it is also arguable that archaeologists still pay less attention than they should to the question of time and its relationship with archaeological material. It therefore seems pertinent to reconsider Snodgrass' thesis in the light of more recent theoretical and methodological developments. I would like to suggest that the adoption of new field methods offers the potential to re-evaluate the contribution classical archaeology might make in relation to shorter time periods, refining our approach to one of what Snodgrass viewed as classical archaeology's two chronological 'extremes'. We cannot hope to create an equivalent of the kind of *histoire événementielle* formulated by historians such as Braudel (Braudel 1995, Part 3) or Ladurie (Ladurie 1980). Nevertheless, I think we can aspire to a different kind of short-term history, the study of how the economic and social lives of small groups of individuals unfolded over relatively brief time-frames. Using examples from the Classical city of Olynthos (Fig. 10.1), in this chapter I suggest that adding the identification of patterns over such a short period to those already discussed by Snodgrass, opens the door to a different way of conceptualizing time through the archaeological record. It enables us to study timescales of different lengths as part of a continuous, interlocking spectrum of changes moving at variable speeds, from the seasons of a single year through to the generations of an individual household. At the same time, I suggest that it encourages us to make an important distinction between linear and cyclical change.[1] I suggest that by looking at preliminary information from a new field project at Olynthos in combination with the more coarse-grained legacy data from extensive excavations conducted at the site between 1928 and 1938, this approach will ultimately lead to new insights into the society and economy of the city's inhabitants.[2]

Since the early 1980s, increasing amounts of attention have been devoted to the residential areas of Greek cities, and particularly to the houses themselves. The organization of space has been viewed as an index of patterns of social relations within households, including between the two sexes and

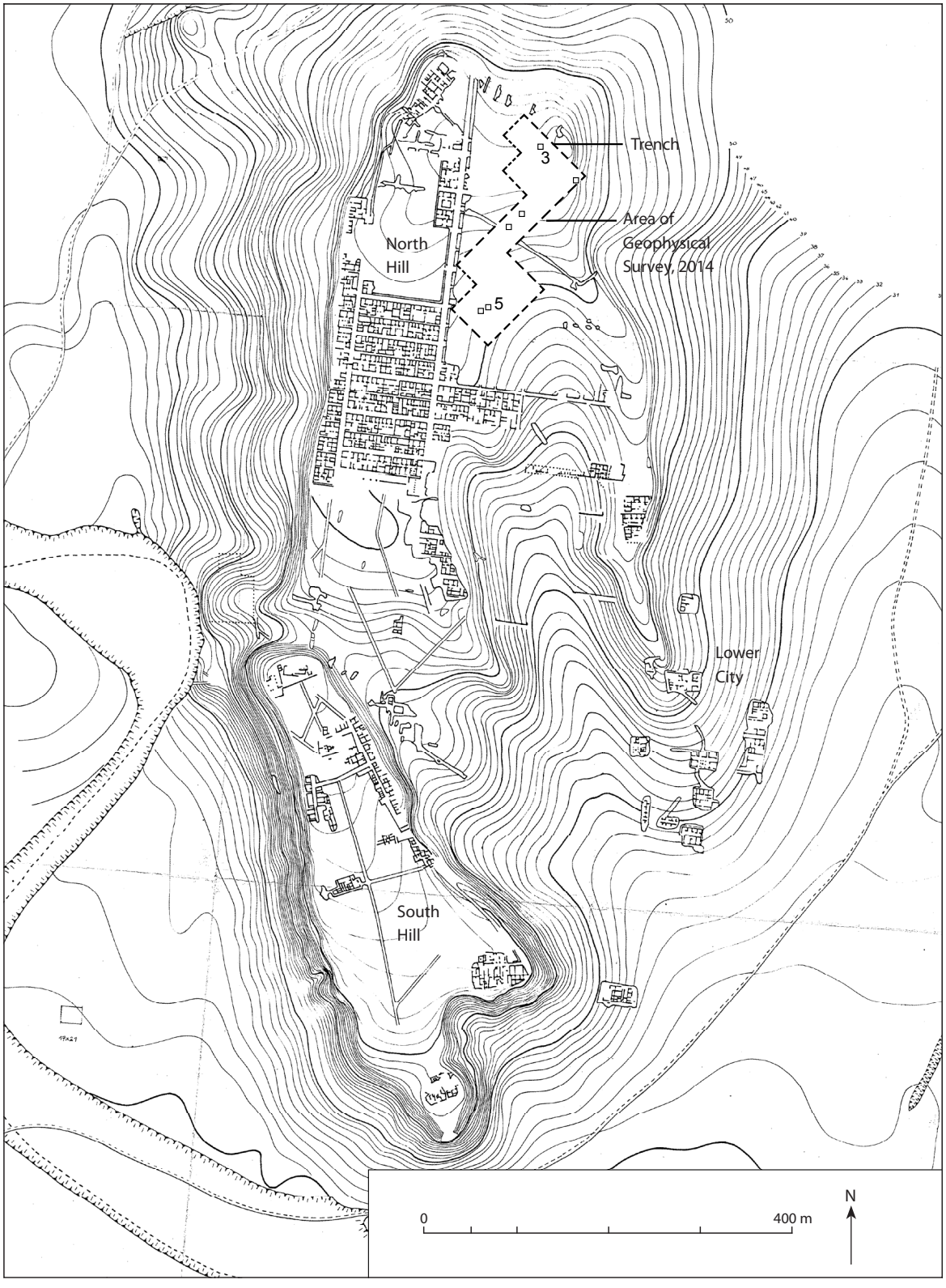


Figure 10.1. *Plan of Classical city of Olynthos showing the trenches excavated by David Robinson together with the locations of the Olynthos Project geophysical survey area and excavation trenches from the 2014 season (courtesy of the Olynthos Project: image prepared by David Stone).*

between individuals of differing social statuses.[3] While some of these approaches have taken account of modifications made to a structure through time (for example Foxhall 2000; Morris 1998, 16), many of them, in parallel with more traditional studies of the civic and residential spaces of Greek cities, have tended to see those spaces as static fossils (compare some of the criticisms made in relation to domestic architecture by Stella Souvatzi: Souvatzi 2008, 21–46). At first sight, Olynthos is an odd choice as a case-study for exploring approaches to time through archaeology because the work of the site's original excavator, David Robinson, fits squarely into this 'static' view of the urban environment. Robinson focused on reconstructing a single vision of the layout of the largest and best-understood settlement area, the North Hill. According to his model, the North Hill was first laid out on an orthogonal grid in the late fifth century BC and was abandoned in 348 BC, when historians record that Olynthos was sacked by Philip II of Macedon (Diodorus Siculus 16.53). This part of the city was thus thought to have been occupied for perhaps 80 years or three generations. Robinson nevertheless did not consider the possibility that the organization of space might have changed through time since he did not attempt to study stratigraphy or make any section drawings to show different occupation phases. These omissions severely hampered his investigation on the South Hill, which was much more difficult to interpret because it was occupied for a much longer period of time (in one preliminary report, for instance, Robinson refers to the occurrence of 'submycenean' or 'pre-Persian Olynthian ware' in large amounts, which he dates between 700 and 479 BC: Robinson 1932, 128). Again, he did not look in any detail at the stratigraphy of the deposits, resulting in an inability to understand the overall topography and history of this part of the settlement. In sum, through the techniques he adopted for excavation and the assumptions he made in his interpretations, Robinson showed an implicit disregard for evidence of change on the site's two hills, even though he did recognize a difference in their occupation dates.

Subsequent re-analysis of material from Robinson's excavations offers an indication that there is the potential for a more nuanced and dynamic view. For example, study of numismatic evidence by James Dengate and Nicholas Cahill has shown that, while the abandonment of the city is conventionally dated to 348 BC, there are coins belonging to the late fourth century BC among Robinson's finds (Dengate 1990; Cahill 2002, 50–7). But the scope these legacy data offer for detailed reconstruction of chronological phases is extremely limited. In his comprehensive reconstruction of the city's history, Cahill makes use of the chronology provided by these numismatic data in combination with historical sources in an attempt to restore some level of historical perspective (Cahill 2002, 34–45). Nevertheless, it proves possible only to construct a rather coarse-grained picture. How far, then, is it possible to put together a more refined understanding of the chronological dynamics of urban, and especially, private, space in the city of Olynthos?

Evidence for change from the archaeological material at Olynthos

Household level

At the scale of individual structures, there are hints in Robinson's evidence that alterations were made to the layouts of houses, where plans deviate from a more canonical arrangement, or where earlier and later walls can be seen at different levels. For example, on the North Hill, house A v 6 appears to have been expanded to a larger size than its neighbours at the expense of the adjacent house, A v 8, since the plot is wider than usual (*c.* 25 m instead of 17 m) and a foundation appears on the ground in the position where the boundary wall between two houses of typical size would normally be expected to lie.[4] This kind of evidence provides indications of changes in domestic organization which are likely to have taken place on the scale of generational time, perhaps accompanying alterations in the economic circumstances or size and composition of individual households through their life-cycles, or coinciding with the sale of a property – as is recorded on some *oune* inscriptions from the site (see Nevett 2000; Cahill 2002, 293–9).

Change at this kind of scale can also be seen in the results of preliminary electrical resistance survey work carried out at the site by the Olynthos Project in 2014 (Fig. 10.2).[5] For example, two houses which (using Robinson's nomenclature) correspond to B x 5 and B x 6, appear to represent part of a single complex comprising two plots joined back-to-back with a single large courtyard. Comparable findings also come from the excavations in 2014: for example, one of the trial trenches, TT03, located towards the northern end of the North Hill, showed that there were probably at least two successive occupation phases in this area, since a well-constructed earlier wall appears to be overlain by a later, more ephemeral one (Nevett *et al.* 2017). The work in this trench raises questions about the length of occupation here and suggests the possibility that the earliest levels might predate the laying out of the orthogonal grid forming the plan of most of the North Hill, since geophysics shows that this area lies beyond



Figure 10.2. *Processed earth resistance data from the North Hill at Olynthos, 2014 (survey and processing by Horsley Archaeological Prospection, image prepared by David Stone). Reproduced courtesy of Timothy Horsley and the Olynthos Project.*

its edge. This, however, is a question which can only be explored through further excavation.[6]

As well as attesting to change on a generational scale through alterations made to the organization of space, architecture also constitutes a frame within which shorter-term change must have taken place. A key challenge is to gather potential evidence for such change. In another of the Olynthos Project's trial trenches, TT05, a collapse or destruction level in one of the northern rooms of house B ix 6 had a variety of vessels scattered across what may have been a floor surface. At time of writing the exact nature of this context remains to be clarified by further work, but the assemblage appears to result from the time at which the house was destroyed, when the upper storey, or shelves on which the vessels were stored, collapsed (interestingly, they are mostly

oriented in a similar way, their bases towards the wall which defines the eastern edge of the context). Such deposits are, of course, very evocative of a single moment in time, but if the goal is to understand how a household functioned as a lived environment, how much can they tell us about the patterns of use of a room, as opposed to patterns of storage or the nature of the destruction of a house?

In order to address this question of spatial use more directly, it is necessary to explore new sources of information, including micro-archaeology. One avenue for analysis being pursued by the Olynthos Project is the study of micro-artefacts or micro-debris. Unlike larger objects found on house floors, which were most probably deposited just prior to, or even at the moment of, a house's destruction, micro-debris analysis focuses on the 'small things forgotten' – to use James Deetz's expression (Deetz 1977). At Olynthos these represent items of 3 cm in length or smaller and they fall into two distinct categories comprising either minute items such as glass beads, or, more commonly, fragments of larger items such as pottery vessels or animal bones which were broken in a particular location. Due to their size such items often escaped the attention of anyone cleaning the beaten earth floors which form the most common type in these houses, and were instead incorporated into the floor matrix, remaining as a testament to a variety of domestic activities. The process of recovering micro-debris requires the flotation of known quantities of soil from the floor, and sorting of the heavy fraction, once dry, to recover the debris itself. By looking at fluctuations in the quantity of material in the samples, it is possible to explore not only the range of activities in a room, but also the intensity of use. Such an approach has been highly effective in the context of Near Eastern settlements, revealing a range of patterns in the use of space in houses of Bronze Age date which also have earth floors (for example, Rainville 2005; Rainville 2012; Rainville 2015). In 2014 the micro-debris work at Olynthos focused on establishing background levels of material in the soil in a range of excavation contexts: subsequent analysis has focused on floor levels, providing an independent line of investigation into the range of uses made of different architectural spaces. At the same time, a programme of geochemical sampling has been put in place to identify residues remaining on or close to the floors from a variety of domestic or industrial activities. The results of this sampling are supplying complementary information about such activities.

Both geochemistry and micro-debris analysis view the range of activities taking place in a single space as a palimpsest – an accumulation of events which were in fact separated over time. One of the challenges this poses for a clear understanding of the organization of domestic activities is to disaggregate that palimpsest and look at how patterns of use may have changed through time. In order to address this problem the Olynthos Project is taking micromorphology samples – blocks of sediment which allow microscopic analysis of stratigraphic levels. Such work in residential spaces at Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites in modern-day Turkey, where the habitation structures also had earth floors, suggests not only that this enables floor levels to be distinguished from fills with more precision, but also that it can reveal changes in the use of space through time by highlighting differences in materials, grain structure and the compaction of a series of floors (Matthews 2012, Matthews 2005). The technique has proven particularly effective in combination with geochemical sampling (Milek 2007) and has had promising results at several sites in Greece (for example, Taylor and French 2013).

One last challenge at the relatively short timescale is to detect cyclical patterns. Changes in the use of space over the course of a day or a few days, such as the avoidance of specific rooms during particular hours, are likely to remain impossible to see. Nevertheless, changes taking place over a slightly longer period, such as flexibility in activities to take account of differences in the amount of warmth and sunlight available at different times of year, might potentially be glimpsed. One approach to detecting such patterns being used by the Olynthos Project is extensive flotation to recover macro-botanical remains, alongside soil analysis for phytoliths and starches, with the aim (among other things) of gaining insight into the seasonality of certain food preparation activities (for discussion of seasonality from such evidence, see Margaritis 2015). Again, the effectiveness of this approach will be clear once a wider area has been excavated to floor level, sampled and analysed.

In sum, by utilizing some of these relatively new analytical techniques, a small-scale spatial unit, such as an Olynthian house, offers the potential not only to address questions on the scale of the *moyenne durée*, but also to study patterns of activities carried out over the short-term, in a way which Robinson's original study, or even Snodgrass' discussion of the relative strengths of classical archaeology in structural terms, could not have anticipated because the techniques involved have been developed relatively recently.

Change at the neighbourhood, district and city-wide scales

In formulating its research design the Olynthos Project has been unusually privileged in gaining permission to undertake several different strands of fieldwork

simultaneously, which facilitates investigation of short-term activities as part of a more comprehensive 'nested' series of temporal and spatial scales, ranging upwards from the individual household through the neighbourhood and district to the city as a whole.[7] The study area encompasses not only the North Hill, but also the South Hill together with an area of the plain to the east below these two hills, where limited excavation by Robinson revealed that there was additional settlement during the earlier fourth century BC, although he did not reconstruct the layout of the area convincingly nor define its boundaries. A question remains, then, about the extent of the city at the peak of occupation, and about its relationship with the immediate hinterland. Even after only a single season, field walking to the east of the South Hill was suggestive:[8] as one would expect, a dense concentration of material (including a variety of special finds and an *in situ* pithos, as well as the more usual ceramics) falls off as one moves east across the landscape. But a further dense concentration of finds, including coarse wares and tile, on a ridge further to the east appears to be contemporary with the main occupation phase of the city. Robinson excavated a cemetery in this vicinity, but the range and density of material collected in the area in 2014 suggests the possibility of some kind of residential accommodation here as well.

At the scale of the settlement and its neighbourhoods, the Olynthos Project will eventually contrast study areas on the North and South Hills, looking at change through time and space within the community. At the time of writing, however, work has concentrated on the northeast area of the North Hill. A cursory glance at Robinson's plan of the city might suggest that there is relatively little to be learned about the topography of the North Hill: large-scale excavation here revealed about fifty complete houses, laid out in blocks of ten, along with the orthogonal grid of streets within which they were embedded. It suggests that this arrangement continues to the north and east of the large, open area excavation (blocks A ix to A xii, shown in Fig. 10.1). Nevertheless, closer inspection of that plan reveals that a significant amount of it is conjectural. Test-pitting and long, narrow slit trenches appear to have been used to explore the extent and regularity of the grid, but there are clearly areas, such as the extreme northern and southern ends of the hill, and the Lower City (Robinson's 'Villa Section') which do not conform to the grid. At the same time, the articulation between the North Hill, the South Hill and the Lower City is uncertain. This is particularly obvious when the relief is taken into account, which is difficult to do with a flat, two dimensional plan, but becomes much easier when a three-dimensional digital elevation model is created (Fig. 10.3). In the meantime the results of geophysical survey at the northeastern end of the North Hill suggest that, like its northwestern end, the regular grid of houses stopped with a single row of houses at row xi, beyond which was a collection of irregular buildings and open spaces (Fig. 10.2). A series of bi-polar magnetic anomalies in this area, visible in the results of magnetometer survey of the same area, are suggestive of intense burning. These initially suggested the possibility of industrial activity here, but a trial trench excavated over one of them (trench 3) revealed that this was actually a large pithos, still *in situ*.

Conclusion

Analogy with other societies – including our own – suggests that the use of space at Olynthos is unlikely to have been static throughout the period during which the two hills and their individual houses were occupied. Nevertheless, the archaeological methods and interpretative frameworks previously used to understand the city were incapable of exploring change at anything but the coarsest scale of resolution, through the expansion of the inhabited area over multi-generational time, or changes made to the architecture of buildings made over decades. The series of examples discussed here suggests that allowing for the possibility of a dynamic environment, while at the same time adopting methodologies designed to detect change, offers the possibility of reconstructing patterns of activity in much more detail. This can be seen at a series of interlocking spatial and temporal scales at the household, neighbourhood and district levels and from seasons, through years, to the lifetimes of the individuals and households occupying the structures (Fig. 10.4).

At the same time it may be possible to detect and distinguish between linear patterns (for example a change in the use of a space as an activity is no longer required or is assigned to somewhere else) and cyclical ones (for example the regular movement of activities back and forth between different spaces with the passage of the seasons and the changing light and heat which that entails). Thus, although the work discussed here is at a preliminary stage, when the evidence from the Olynthos Project 2014 season is viewed in the context of earlier work at the site, a new view of the city begins to emerge. Rather than simply offering a snapshot of a settlement used in a single manner during a relatively short span of time, the material reveals the potential to write a different kind of short-term history, one which could not have been envisaged twenty-five years ago. Thus, although

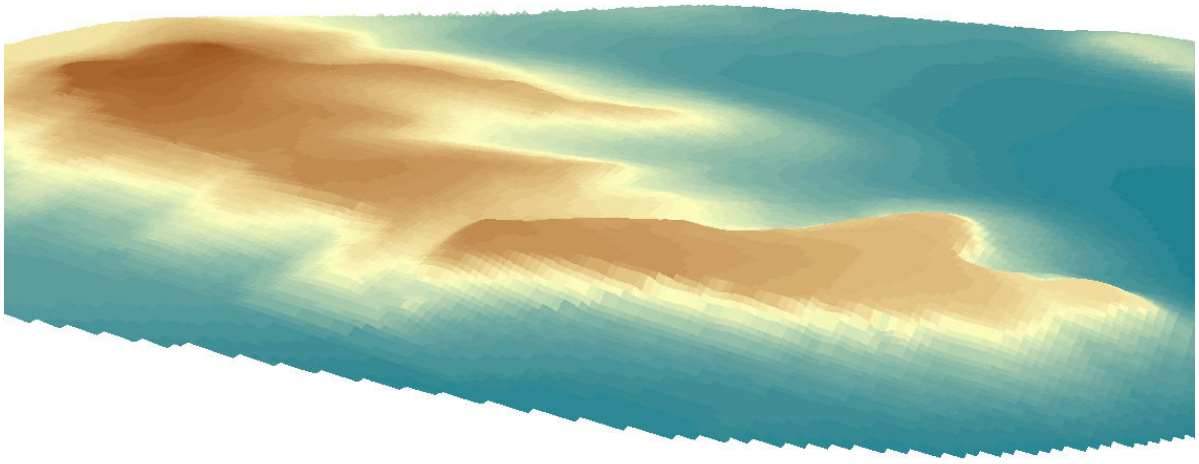


Figure 10.3. *Digital elevation model of the North and South hills of Olynthos viewed from the southwest (courtesy Olynthos project: image prepared by Andrew Fiasco).*

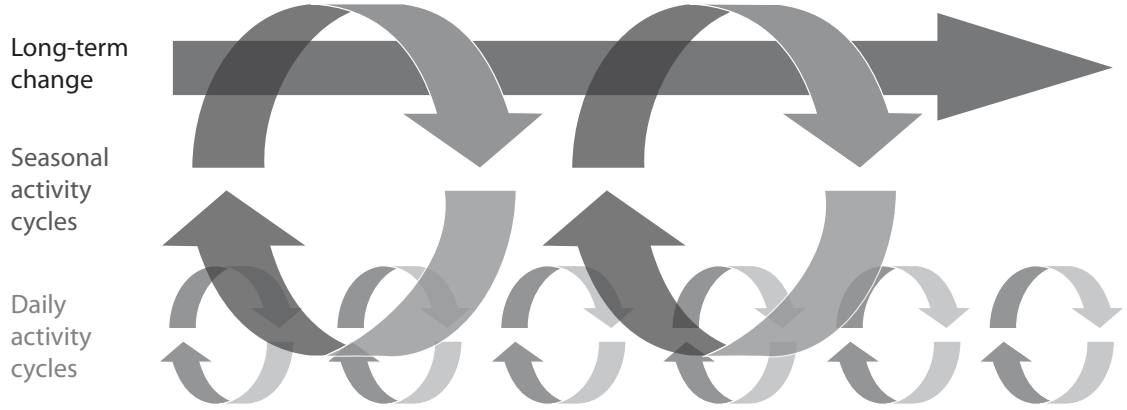


Figure 10.4. *Schematic plan of the passage of time showing interlocking patterns of different types and on different scales (prepared by the author).*

Braudel famously commented that 'Les événements sont poussière…' (see Wallerstein 1991, 188 note 3), archaeologists are increasingly coming to realize that that dust itself can be meaningful.

Notes

1 Although Gavin Lucas has argued that the distinction between these two is artificial (Lucas 2005, 93), I would suggest that in the context of an etic analysis of a single structure or site which is occupied for a limited duration, it is a useful one in enabling scholars to understand the different patterns of activity which led to the creation of a specific deposit.

2 The Olynthos Project is a multi-disciplinary collaborative project begun in 2014 under the auspices of the 16th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Archaeology and the British School at Athens. The examples discussed here are drawn from that first year's work. I thank the Hellenic Ministry of Culture for granting us permission for our work, and the Ephorates of Pella, Chalkidiki, Thessaloniki and Kilkis, together with the British School, for their support. I am grateful for the collaboration of my fellow project directors, Bettina Tsigarida and Zosia Archibald, as well as the many specialists and student volunteers taking part. In the context of the work discussed here I would particularly like to acknowledge the contributions of Timothy Horsley (geophysical survey), Kathleen Lynch (ceramic analysis), Lynn Rainville and Elina Salminen (micro-debris analysis), Charly French and Sean Taylor (geoarchaeology), David Stone (field survey and digital data) and Andrew Fiasco (geographic information systems). I would also like to thank Anthony

Snodgrass and several of my fellow 'Snodgrass Students' for their advice and support for the project. It seems particularly appropriate to discuss Olynthos in the present context since it represents a return to the topic which formed the core of my doctoral thesis written under Anthony's supervision.

3 The pioneering works were Walker 1993 (originally published in 1983); Hoepfner and Schwandner 1994 (originally published in 1986); Jameson 1990a and Jameson 1990b. These were built on by several in-depth studies including Nevett 1999; Cahill 2002; and Ault 2005, as well as in shorter works such as Antonaccio 2000; Westgate 2007; Nevett 2010 Chapters 2 and 3; and Westgate 2015.

4 For details, see Robinson and Graham 1938, 92–4 with Plates 95 and 96. Robinson and Graham suggest that the foundation wall results from a change of plan during the construction of the house, rather than from a later episode of remodelling, although they offer no specific evidence for this interpretation.

5 For details of the methodology and fuller discussion of the results, see Horsley and Stone's discussion in Nevett *et al*. 2017, 162–3 and 167–70.

6 A slot was dug against the face of the earlier wall in an effort to establish the relative sequence and dating before the end of the 2014 season, but the level of the foundation trench was not reached, so a more definitive interpretation awaits further fieldwork: see Archibald's discussion of this trench in Nevett *et al*. 2017, 170–2.

7 For the concept of 'nested landscapes' see Ashmore and Knapp 1999, where it is used in a social and physical sense, rather than a spatial and temporal one as here. The terms 'neighbourhood' and 'district' are used here to denote areas of the settlement of different scales, somewhat along the lines proposed by Smith and Novic (2012) who use them to denote, respectively, small, face-to-face areas of the community and larger, potentially administrative zones. In the case of Olynthos we cannot know whether there were administrative subdivisions of the settlement, but there are clearly larger spatial/topographic distinctions which can usefully be made alongside the smaller neighbourhoods formed by adjacent insulae.

8 For the methodology and fuller discussion of results of the work undertaken between 2014 and 2016, see Stone's discussion in Nevett *et al*. 2017, 191–3.

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