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Survey at a complex urban site

By John Bintliff, Emeri Farinetti, Božidar Slapšak and Anthony Snodgrass



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with contributions from
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Contents

Contributors viii
Figures ix
Tables xv
Preface xvii

Chapter 1 Introduction: the survey of the city of Thespiai 1

Chapter 2 The site of ancient Thespiai and the early travellers 5

Chapter 3(a) Interpreting the density and period map series: methodology 19
- Introduction: the site in its setting 19
- Choosing the methodology of the Thespiai city survey 23

Chapter 3(b) Interpreting the density and period map series: the analysis 35
- Data recovery and diagnosticity 36
- Summary pie-charts: initial considerations of their significance, with charts and keys in chronological order 39
- The sector analysis 44
- The question of sample size in urban survey 48
- Making a virtue out of error: lessons from duplicated collections 48
- Investigating the structure of the Greco-Roman city 51
- Re-reading the maps 56
- Preliminary observations on the distribution of finds 63
- The categories 'Weathered' [W], 'In' [I], 'Out' [O] and 'Slope-wash' [SW] 63

Chapter 3(c) Interpreting the density and period map series: the final period maps 65
- The prehistoric sequence 66
- The historical Greek periods 85
- The Roman and later periods 114

Chapter 4 The architectural survey 141
- Part I: the architecturally diagnostic fragments 143
- Part II: the evidence for the city's defences 165
- The Thespian theatre: by Uroš Kirn 174
  - Methodology 176
  - The study area 176
  - Applications of the three-dimensional model 178
  - Conclusion 181
- Part III: other discoveries made by the University of Ljubljana team (with an Addendum by members of the 9th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities) 183

Chapter 5 A brief history of independent Thespiai 199
- Boeotia and Thespiai in Archaic times 201
- Boeotia and Thespiai after the Persian Wars, 479–379 BC 205
- The period of the 'Theban League', 378–338 BC 210
- The period of the 'Hellenistic League' 213

Chapter 6 Thespiai: the epigraphic city down to 171 BC 219
Robin Osborne

Chapter 7 The Roman fate of Thespiai (171 BC – fourth century AD) 231
Christel Müller
- Thespiai in the aftermath of the Third Macedonian War (after 168 BC) 231
- Thespiai and the representatives of Rome 234
- The people: Greek Romans and Roman Greeks 236

Chapter 8 The history of Thespiai and Boeotia from Late Antiquity to the Frankish period 241
Athanasios K. Vionis and Chrystalla Loizou
Late Antiquity (fifth to mid-seventh centuries AD) 241
The Byzantine Early Middle Ages (mid-seventh to early ninth centuries) 244
The Middle Byzantine period (mid-ninth to early thirteenth centuries) 247
The Late Byzantine/Frankish era (early thirteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries) 250

Chapter 9 Thespia – Zogra Kobila – Erimokastro – Kaskaveli in the Ottoman Period, according to unpublished or little-known Ottoman Administrative Sources 255
Machiel Kiel
Dara 264
Tatize 264

Chapter 10(a) The Neolithic site at the Thespiai Magoula 267
Kalliope Sarri
Survey seasons and collections 267
Distribution 267
Pottery classification 272
Methodology 273
Neolithic pottery groups 273
The pottery sequence 277
The Neolithic figurines 279

Chapter 10(b) The Bronze Age pottery 281
Oliver Dickinson

Chapter 11 The pottery of the Early Iron Age to the Hellenistic periods 287
Vladimir Stissi
Data quality, possibilities and difficulties 290
Chronological overview 292
Conclusions 315

Chapter 12 Urban Thespiai: the Late Hellenistic to Late Roman pottery 317
Philip Bes and Jeroen Poblome
Methodology, chronology and terminology 317
The data: quantitative and qualitative dimensions 320
An outline of ceramic trends 322
Functional zoning: ceramic assemblages and use 338
Conclusion 348
Acknowledgments 349

Chapter 13 The Byzantine to Early Modern pottery from Thespiai 351
Athanasios K. Vionis
Chronology and terminology 351
Pottery fabrics and production 356
Functional categories by period 363
Concluding remarks 374

Chapter 14 The coins of Thespiai 375
Catherine Grandjean
Coins of the Boeotian Survey: Thespiai, Haliartos and Hyettos 375
Other coins discovered at Thespiai 378
The monetization of Thespiai 381

Chapter 15 Conclusion 387

Bibliography 391

Index 413

Appendices on CD

1. Remaining period maps (Ch.3)
2. 1985 pottery database spreadsheet (Ch.3)
3. 1986 pottery database spreadsheet (Ch.3)
4. The 'Rome Catalogue' (Ch.4)
5. Pottery catalogue to accompany Chapter 12
6. Catalogue of Byzantine to Early Modern pottery to accompany Chapter 13

Additional appendix on CD:

7. Table of artefact density and visibility measurements for Thespiai City (Ch.3b)

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Chapter 15

Conclusion

The site of Thespiai fulfilled all our expectations, even if in some cases these were negative ones. The destruction, casual or deliberate, of virtually all its standing architecture had happened long before our arrival on the scene, to leave (as cited earlier) 'no site in Boeotia more depressing than Thespiai' (Fossey 1988: 136). Then, the pottery from the city site of Thespiai, with the sole exception of the Neolithic finds from the Magoula area, has been judged by our specialists to be exceptionally 'bland' (see p. 291), worn and fragmentary, even by the standard of surface survey finds. But one of our prime aims was to reconstruct the urban layout, and here worn pottery probably posed less of an obstacle than another ceramic factor, one by no means confined to Thespiai: the shortage of vessel-types that were diagnostic for burial (or indeed sanctuary) use. Again and again, whether with the Classical Greek *kantharos*, the Hellenistic *unguentarium* or the Roman lamp, a vessel-type commonly found in the grave proved also to be well-attested in domestic use. Hence the besetting difficulty of defining a cemetery zone, surrounding the built-up area, such as must have existed, and as we had hoped to detect.

Next, the application of various kinds of geophysical testing, which has since enjoyed some startling successes on the other urban sites studied by the Project (notably Hyettos, Haliartos and Tanagra) yielded very mixed results at Thespiai (Chapter 4, pp. 192–6). Then there was the problem of the fortifications: here we found, on the one hand, two sets of walls, many centuries apart in likely date, which are palpably present on the ground, yet not directly attested in any source for hundreds of years after their probable construction, down to recent times (the northern extension wall and the *Kastro* circuit); and, conversely, an earlier city wall whose existence is repeatedly confirmed in ancient accounts of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, but whose traces are utterly fugitive on the ground.

Each of these findings, including even the last one, is primarily a product of one and the same factor: the exceptional fertility of the terrain that forms the city site, which has led to its intensive agricultural exploitation at every period when it was not built up – conspicuously so at the present day. The greater part of the urban site is situated on the prime agricultural land of the luvisols: Soil 3 and (optimal for cereals and vegetables) Soil 4, in *Testing the Hinterland*, pp. 99–109 with Fig. 7.2, top right (Shiel and Stewart). Yet the same authors warn (pp. 103, 105) of one possible environmental threat to such a location, flooding and waterlogging; and, although the risk of this is now considered low, we have encountered, in the notices of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century travellers (Chapter 2, p. 12), reports of the marshy state of the ground. This intermittent flooding may well be responsible, not only for the quality of the stony and inferior riverine soil '5s' (*Testing the Hinterland*, p. 101), forming a strip across the low-lying parts of the city site, but also for the worn nature of so much of the surface pottery.

Such a choice of terrain, as the location for a major Greek city, has not very often been matched elsewhere. This can easily be explained in practical terms: not only is it wasteful of agricultural resources to build over some 100 ha of level and extremely fertile land, but further, such a situation is likely to offer very little in the way of natural defensibility. So we find the ancient Thespians using, in pre-Classical times, the rare expedient of an 'external acropolis' at Keressos; then, at some date before the later fifth century BC, building a city wall, even if its repeated destruction thereafter does not argue for a high level of monumentality; and finally, in late Classical or Hellenistic times, extending the fortified area, with

limited aspects of the urban occupation, across the Kanavaris river and up the steep slopes to the north, so as to enclose the high ground, some 50 m above the plain, where the modern village of Thespies stands. Here at last we see the Thespians conforming to more widespread ancient practice.

But all these negative aspects had their compensations, both for the ancient occupants of the site and for the present-day archaeologists investigating it. In antiquity, there was evidently enough fertile arable land left over to feed an indigenous population that grew steadily over the centuries that preceded its probable peak in the fourth and third centuries BC, whether or not the extended population and territory, which prevailed when the adjacent cities of Thisbe, Khorsiai and Siphai were absorbed, are included. Defence, however, was to remain a besetting problem for Thespiai, down to the time of the Mithridatic Wars in the first century BC, when an enemy siege was evidently successfully resisted.

For our survey teams, the heavily cultivated, low-lying site generated pottery in quantities that we had only dreamed of in our earlier investigations of smaller sites: in such terrain, the plough-soil offers an almost inexhaustible reservoir of material from past occupations, in this case covering at least seven thousand years. It also offered better ground visibility, with fewer trees and less undergrowth, than in most other localities, urban or rural, that the Project covered. This made for speedier and more accurate assessment and selection of the finds. At longer range, too, good vision was an added bonus: there were almost always visible landmarks, in the middle or further distance, to facilitate field team alignments and overall orientation.

The worn and fragmentary nature of the pottery is to a limited extent off-set by the stone finds of architectural interest treated in the first part of Chapter 4, some of which are fairly well preserved - notably in the many cases where they spent much of the past 2000 years safely embedded in the *Kastro* wall. These give us confirmation that Thespiai possessed the attributes of monumentality that one would expect of a major Classical city: multiple traces of at least one monumental temple (probably the same Archaic one whose foundations were planned by P. Jamot in 1891), in the shape of large column drums (Sites 2, 2A.IV, 2B.I); a Doric frieze block from a probable *stoa* on the Magoula hillock (Site 30.I); threshold blocks that in some cases (Site 43.II and perhaps 4A.V) attain a length of nearly 2 m, a door-jamb as much as 2.5 m high (Site 42A.I), part of the foundation of a fine circular monument in marble with a restored diameter of at least 5 m (Site 7.I), a *voussoir* from a stone arch of more modest dimensions (Site 14.IV); a proliferation of column-drums, mostly unfluted and of small dimensions, which hint at colonnaded public spaces; a few grave-monuments and inscriptions of some pretension; above all a theatre, whose bare existence is attested in one ancient source and more or less confirmed by finds of the late nineteenth century, but about whose structure we have learned much more from the material evidence (Chapter 4, pp. 174–83).

Thinly scattered as they are across the landscape – it is well over a kilometre from the coffering slabs at Site 18 in the west to the easternmost collection of fine stones at Site 51 – these relics attest to the wide extent as well as the high quality of the built environment of Thespiai. The fact that we can in almost no case match any two pieces together, as definitely coming from the same building, merely confirms what a tiny proportion of the original architectural wealth our finds comprise.

The presence in the ancient sources of an at first tenuous, later at times more detailed narrative has provided, to say the least, a useful check on our archaeological conjectures. We have shown that some of these sources, even when contemporary, are to be treated with scepticism, such as the repeated claims of the Athenian orators Isocrates and Demosthenes (Chapter 5, p. 212) that Thespiai remained a deserted and unfortified city, years and even decades after the time of its known abandonment: neither is likely to have seen this for himself, and Demosthenes's motive for rhetorical exaggeration – to denigrate Philip of Macedon - is patent. Yet without the intermittent guidance of the true historians, Herodotus, Thucydides, the 'Oxyrhynchus Historian', Xenophon and Appian, our reconstruction of the development of Classical Thespiai would surely have gone astray, especially in matters of demography and military history. For the middle and later centuries of antiquity, the prolific inscriptions paint a strikingly positive picture of at least certain elements in Thespian society, in the shadow of Macedonian hegemony and later of Roman rule, when evidently some of the city's vitality - the more surprising in the light of its shrunken size and population – survived the loss of independence; just as the late sources, the Ottoman registers and the observations of the early Western travellers, have contributed decisively in shaping our vision of how the present state of settlement, in the immediate locality of Thespiai, has come into being.

Thus, even if the site of Thespiai did prove as resistant and inhospitable to investigation as had been feared, we believe that we have thrown some new light on each of the seven millennia of the city's life. For the historical periods, we have found a few tantalising traces that hint at buried remains of high quality, awaiting future excavators. We have also referred to

the lessons learned in the course of our work: many of these are likely to be applicable to the examination of other large urban sites in the Mediterranean lands, even allowing for the unusual nature of the terrain at Thespiai which may prove difficult to match elsewhere. The technical challenge of analysing surface survey data, from the pioneer days of Mediterranean intensive survey in the 1980s, has led to lengthy pondering of the comparatively little-researched issues of collection methods, sample size, period bias and the realization that, in addition to collecting surface ceramics, a battery of other methods – surface architectural survey, geophysics, discussions with local residents, incorporation of official and unofficial excavations – are required to establish a 'cumulative credibility' (to borrow a term from Stuart Piggott). Among the products of this work, the issue of sample size may prove to be the most important and far-reaching (Chapter 3, pp. 43–4, 48–51).

The results of this complex process of reconstruction can be most simply summarised in a table, recording the long-term changes in the extent, nature and demography of the successive settlements on the ancient city site (Table 15.1). A brief commentary or narrative can be added as a summary of the nature of settled life on or beside the city-site over some seven millennia.

Our analysis indicates that at no time within the first 5000 years or so of human settlement on the later city site, from Neolithic times till the end of the Bronze Age, can the presence of anything more than a series of villages, with populations of less than a couple of hundred inhabitants, be inferred. Thus, the inclusion of Thespiai in the Homeric 'Catalogue of Ships', purporting to be a list of contingents present at the Siege of Troy (*Iliad 2, 498*), cannot stand as evidence for a Mycenaean dating of the passage. Indeed, the low density of later prehistoric sites in the areas covered here and more widely in Boeotia by our Project, even when allowance is made for under-representation attributed to the 'hidden landscape' factors of sherd survival and recognizability, or to subsequent disturbance and overlay by historical-period finds (Bintliff *et al.* 1999), points both to successful ecological sustainability,

Table 15.1. *The site of ancient Thespiai: the long-term changes in size, nature and demography of settlement. In 1934, Kobila/Kaskaveli was renamed Leondari, while Erimokastro became Thespies.*

Period	Settlement area	Nature of settlement	Suggested population	Adjacent settlements
Neolithic	1.25 ha	Hamlet	100?	
Early Helladic	?	Dispersed hamlet+farms?	Less than 200?	
Middle Helladic	?	Dispersed hamlet	Less than 200?	
Late Helladic	4 ha	Thin focal hamlet + farms	Less than 200?	
Early Iron Age to Early Archaic	Several ha rising to tens of ha	Hamlet cluster enlarging to a dense core town	A few hundred rising to several thousand	
Late Archaic to Early Classical	40 ha?	Medium-sized town	*c.* 5250	
Late Classical	57 ha	Large town	*c.* 7125	
Early–Middle Hellenistic	72 ha	Large town	*c.* 9000	
Late Hellenistic–Early Roman	34 ha	Medium-sized town	*c.* 4250	
Late Roman	30 ha	Medium-sized town	*c.* 3750	
Early Byzantine	?	Dispersed hamlet	Less than 200	
Middle Byzantine	5 ha?	Double focus village	*c.* 300	
Late Byzantine/Frankish	10 ha	Double focus village	*c.* 600	
Early Ottoman 15th–16th century	Abandoned			Kobila rising from hamlet to village, 75 to 225
Ottoman 17th century	2.3 ha	Double focus hamlet	*c.* 130	Kobila hamlet 140 Hill-top Erimokastro *c.* 130
Early 19th century	?	Hamlet	15–20	Kobila village ? Hill-top Erimokastro village 317
Late 19th century	Abandoned			Kobila=Kaskaveli village 404 Hill-top Erimokastro village 801
1928				Kobila/Kaskaveli 961 Erimokastro 1268

and to the absence of any stimulus to rural development associated with the rise of urban political foci in Boeotia during the Bronze Age.

Here and perhaps in most areas of Boeotia, this situation would seem to have continued in intensified form, through and beyond the Early Iron Age. To judge by our work at other ancient towns and in their territories, it was only in the Archaic, and especially the late Archaic, eras that a relatively dramatic rise in urbanization took place. This is followed, in the Classical and Early Hellenistic periods, by the growth of a proliferation of farms and villages in the hinterlands of these cities: Thespiai, as seen from the sample of its countryside published in our earlier *Testing the Hinterland*, offers a typical example here.

For the Late Hellenistic, Roman Republican and Early Imperial eras, our role has been to provide a novel commentary on the ancient literary and epigraphic sources, suggesting a pattern of élite prosperity in which the countryside was neglected, apparently to the benefit of the wealthier classes and to the detriment of the peasantry. For Late Roman times, a further stage in such a polarization can be inferred, both from the city and from its territory. Yet in the course of these eras, the urban area was shrinking steadily, to less than half of its Early Hellenistic extent.

With the Byzantine, Frankish and Ottoman to Early Modern eras, our narrative returns to following the development of a series of villages on and near the ancient city site, with a chance to match the archaeological surface finds with documentary records, variable in nature but cumulatively shedding much new light on rural life over this 1300-year span.

The Thespian urban landscape can now be seen as a remarkable microcosm of wider Greek prehistory and history, reminding us that analysis even of a lesser city – as Thespiai was for much, but in our view not all of its ancient history – can provide an unexpected depth to our understanding of the Greek landscape through time.



Boeotia Project, Volume II: The city of Thespiai

Few major Classical cities have disappeared so completely from view, over the centuries, as Thespiai in Central Greece. Only the technique of intensive field survey, carefully adapted to a large urban site and reinforced by historical investigation, has made it possible to recover from oblivion much of its life of seven millennia.

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