UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: J.M. Wickens, S.I. Rotroff, T. Cullen, L.E. Talalay, C. Perlès, F. W. McCoy (2018) Settlement and Land Use on the Periphery: The Bouros-Kastri Peninsula, Southern Euboia]

Stissi, V.

Publication date
2020
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Stissi, V. (2020). [Review of: J.M. Wickens, S.I. Rotroff, T. Cullen, L.E. Talalay, C. Perlès, F. W. McCoy (2018) Settlement and Land Use on the Periphery: The Bouros-Kastri Peninsula, Southern Euboia]. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, *2020*(3), Article 44. https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2020/2020.03.44/

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:11 Nov 2026

BMCR
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2020.03.44

Settlement and land use on the periphery: the Bouros-Kastri peninsula, Southern Euboia

Jere Mark Wickens, Susan I. Rotroff, Tracey Cullen, Lauren E. Talalay, Catherine Perlès, Floyd McCoy, *Settlement and land use on the periphery: the Bouros-Kastri peninsula, Southern Euboia*. . Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018. 274 p.. ISBN 9781784918194 £32.00.

Review by

Vladimir Stissi, University of Amsterdam. v.v.stissi@uva.nl

Table of Contents

Although several teams have done fieldwork in Southern Euboea (Central Greece) since the late 1970s, so far this has mainly produced preliminary reports and presentations, which are not always easy to trace. Some synthetic articles discuss specific themes or periods, but the volume under review here is the first elaborate and comprehensive final publication covering an entire survey area, and is therefore very welcome. It publishes fieldwork done between 1979 and 2004 on the southeastern tip of the island of Euboea, in the territory of ancient and modern Karystos. Lacking any official name, the area is called the Bouros-Kastri peninsula, after its two major modern settlements.

The main structure of the book is clear: after a general introduction, two chapters explain the geomorphological and historical background of the area. These are followed by an interpretative overview of the surveyed sites, with a focus on settlement and land use patterns; a chapter offering characterisations of the found artefacts; and, after a brief general summary and conclusion, a gazetteer containing descriptions of all the discovered sites (no offsite information was documented) and all recorded finds for each site, almost all individually catalogued and drawn. This set-up is straightforward and effective, and makes it easy to browse for specific information, while also allowing broad overviews, even if this is not a text easily read from cover to cover.

The introductory chapter 1 offers a summary of the history of archaeological research in the Karystos area and Southern Euboea more generally, with particular attention to the Canadian-American Southern Euboea Exploration Project (SEEP), to which the surveys in the Bouros-Kastri area belong. It ends with a short introduction to the fieldwork actually covered by the volume. The chapter also introduces the goals and scope of the project: to explore the history of settlement and land use of the area. This is done by mapping and cataloguing archaeological sites, but also the routes connecting them; all this is understood in close relationship to the main political and habitation centre of the area at Karystos. It is in this context that the survey area, which certainly is quite barren, is characterized as ‘periphery’, even though it borders two of the most important sea routes of the Aegean. Though this strategic position is given due coverage elsewhere, it is a bit understated in this introduction. More generally, the paradox of a periphery at major maritime crossroads receives less attention than one might wish, particularly considering the importance of ‘connectivity’ in recent scholarship. However, this is consistent with the lack of engagement with theoretical issues in this book.

The second chapter, by McCoy, offers a thorough overview of the natural topography, geology and tectonics of the area, enlightening the processes that formed the present

day landscape. It ends with a brief overview of natural resources and potential natural hazards. While offering much information and a setting for what follows, it is frustrating that the archaeological relevance of what is described remains almost entirely implicit. Moreover, most of the rather generic conclusions—that the soils in the area are infertile, water resources are poor, and there is an earthquake risk—were already quite obvious. More specific details relating to habitation patterns and sustainability of agriculture, shepherding and other subsistence activities are barely offered, which is disappointing in a book explicitly focusing on land use.

Archaeology does enter the picture in Chapter 3, which offers a chronological overview of the habitation history of Southern Euboea, from its first settlement in the Late Neolithic period till recently. Especially for the prehistoric periods (in practice Final Neolithic and Early Bronze II), the survey data are contextualized by comparisons with excavation finds from the wider area, and results from the other surveys of the SEEP and its spin-offs. For the historical period, written evidence (inscriptions, literary and historical texts) is taken into account, particularly to better understand the development of the two main sites of the area, Karystos and the harbour of Geraistos, but also to provide a more general historical framework of mainly the Classical and Hellenistic periods. A drawback of this approach is that most of the actual surveyed area, being a historical backwater, disappears from sight, just like issues of land use do; also, some of the discussion, like that concerning the urban development of Karystos, is hardly relevant to the Bouros-Kastri area.

The survey results come back into focus in the sections discussing the Hellenistic and later periods, for which little historical information is available. Only here are comparisons with results of survey projects in other parts of Greece offered, in discussions of the apparent depopulation of the area after ca. 275 BCE and the intensification of settlement in the Late Roman period, which both seem part of phenomena visible elsewhere in and around the Aegean. Unfortunately, remarkable

earlier local developments, like the absence of traces of Middle and Late Bronze Age habitation in most of Southern Euboea, and the concentration of settlement in Karystos and its direct surroundings during the Early Iron Age, are not contextualized in a similar way. The post-ancient periods, finally, are treated rather summarily, but that may be an understandable consequence of the general focus on earlier periods of the project.

Chapter 4 then looks more closely at the survey data themselves. However, both the sketch of general chronological developments in settlement patterns and the interpretation of the roles of the surveyed sites in relation to land use seem to be rather strongly rooted in the framework presented in the previous chapter. Interpretation of sites thus starts from the perspective of this bigger picture, rather than from the actual finds on the spot. While partly inevitable in view of the quality of the available data, particularly in those sites where find assemblages are meagre or absent (a large majority), some of the results are problematic in view of the supporting data. This is primarily a methodological issue: although the beginning of the chapter offers a brief explanation of the field methodology and the research approach of the book, both of which strongly centred on dating sites and establishing their function, it is nowhere explained how dates assigned to individual finds presented in the following chapter and the gazetteer—usually small numbers of sherds—produce the site dates, which often have a narrower chronological range than those of the finds on which they are based. Thus, only two of 38 sherds listed as ‘Archaic-Classical’ later on are connected to sites given an Archaic initial date, and a site (site 12) which yielded twelve ‘Archaic-Classical’ sherds (out of a total of 150) and some corresponding loomweights is listed as ‘Classical-Hellenistic’.

While at least a Late Archaic start of the exploitation of the Bouros-Kastri area is acknowledged in the text, the existence of a small, but far from negligible number of Middle and Late Hellenistic and Early Roman sherds, often accompanied by material with a generic Hellenistic and/or Roman date, is downplayed in order to maintain the

hypothesis that settlement in the area was reduced to a few coastal sites between about 275 BCE and the 3rd century CE. This certainly is a possibility, but excluding sites with 30-40% Hellenistic and/or Roman sherds (sites 7, 15, 23, 65, 74) from this overall story by placing them earlier or later calls for at least a discussion.

Unlike the approach to dating, the criteria used for functional interpretation of sites are explained, in a rather vague section of the text and in a clear table that shows how categories are defined. Yet, while probably correct, the conclusion that (excepting a few harbours, cemeteries and sanctuaries) nearly all sites are 'broadly agricultural-pastoral' (page 36) is hardly meaningful, and is usually not really supported by specific evidence—after all, most pottery found is primarily an indication of domestic activity. Besides this, this generalizing conclusion is at odds with the presence of a substantial number of towers in the area, if their suggested interpretation as watchtowers or lookouts is correct—which I think is open to debate.

The fifth and last full chapter consists of three separate parts: a general overview of the prehistoric pottery finds by period (by Cullen and Talalay), an analysis of the stone tools by assemblages (by Perlès) and a characterization of the historical pottery starting from shapes and uses (by Rotroff). Written by highly qualified experts, these are all very thorough, well-informed syntheses, which together offer an excellent introduction to the finds of the survey, and could be of great help to others publishing similar, often rather under-studied, material. Again, however, methodological reflection is missing, and the chapter as whole is neither coherent nor well connected to the general narrative of the volume, even though Rotroff in particular does focus on functional aspects.

Notwithstanding the lack of unity of the volume, the final summary in Chapter 6 neatly brings together the various chapters within the framework of the project's aims, but this only works because the presented results are so generic and smoothed out that little specific or surprising emerges. Perhaps we should not expect more from a total

collection of 1723 sherds, 117 lithics and limited amounts of other finds from 68 of the altogether 88 recorded sites or ‘find spots’.

A consequence of this small evidential base is that the gazetteer of sites and finds, although admirably precise, complete and systematic, is so factual that it indeed becomes an appendix, rather than the core of the book as one might hope. Most of the listed sites remain dots or at best roughly sketched structures on a map, rather than farms, hamlets or harbour towns, even where the generally clear descriptions and well-chosen photographs of sites and often their wider settings (undated but apparently made by Wickens in 2003-2004) do offer useful insights in their situation and landscape settings. It does not help that sizes, definitions and maps of sites are at best impressionistic, and even sites with substantial architectural surface remains are not precisely and fully mapped. Nor are there maps indicating the areas walked over by the survey teams, nor of the exact areas where sherds were collected, let alone quantitative data on find densities. Nothing of this is exceptional for Greek field surveys of the 1980s or 1990s, which were often informal and unsystematic, but one does expect a 2018 publication to address the interpretative problems raised by legacy data of this quality. I also find it surprising that no attempts seem to have been made to remediate some of the issues: producing a basic GIS and/or using and illustrating aerial photographs, even just those from Google or Bing maps, would not have been very difficult.

Many of these problematic aspects of the volume appear to go back to the chequered histories of both the survey and its publication. Fieldwork in the Bouros-Kastri area started as a one-man project by Don Keller in 1979-1981, was briefly continued in 1984, and then more systematically in small teams over a much larger part of the peninsula in 1989, 1990 and 1993. In 2003 and 2004 previously recorded sites were revisited by Wickens, who could not collect any new finds, but, already in 2007, did produce a version of the site catalogue. Cullen and Talalay were apparently involved in the project from early on, while Rotroff and Perlès were called in from 2003 to

study the finds, and McCoy only wrote his chapter in 2014-2016. Further explanation of the chronology and organization of the research and publication efforts is lacking. The labelling of the work as a study of legacy data (page 7) and hints in the footnotes indicate pre-2003 documentation was sometimes limited and problematic, at least by later standards, but such issues are not addressed more explicitly. Likewise, the bibliography suggests that most of the research and writing was completed by 2012 or even earlier, but this is not clarified anywhere.

All in all, this is a book that is both exemplary and rather problematic. Problematic, because much essential information is minimal or missing, but also because connections between finds and interpretation are not always convincing and clear, and serious methodological issues are not addressed sufficiently. The latter issue seems at least partly a result of the deliberate intention of the authors to avoid much theoretical reflection, which is regrettable, as working with legacy data clearly still needs this. Still, the book is also exemplary, because the team of authors has succeeded in squeezing an impressive amount of information out of a fairly limited dataset and in presenting this in a thorough, systematic and clear way.