Archaeological data on the foundation of Megara Hyblaea. Certainties and hypotheses
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Conceptualising early Colonisation

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eds

Contextualising early Colonisation II
Conceptualising early Colonisation
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La texte est un résumé des principaux apports des publications des fouilles de Mégara Hyblaea, examinées à la lumière de travaux récents encore inédits. Le plan d'urbanisme de MH est structuré sur deux grandes rues Est-Ouest, A et B, dont nous savons aujourd'hui qu'elles sont parfaitement rectilignes de l'Agora à la fortification occidentale. Aucune des deux ne semble directement en relation avec la porte Ouest. Les lots (oikopeda) sur lesquels sont construites les maisons sont à peu près égaux. La mise en place du plan d'urbanisme est un acte cohérent qui comprend aussi l'agora et se date vers la fin du VIIIe s., même si la documentation archéologique est encore très partielle pour la moitié Ouest du site. On suppose dans la deuxième moitié du VIIIe s. une phase préalable à la mise en place du plan, que l'on appelle « phase des campements ». L'espace urbain est séparé du territoire (chora) par une fortification construite entre la fin du VIIIe s et le début du VIIe s. av. J.-C. Dans l'chora, les tombes les plus anciennes (deuxième moitié du VIIIe s.) semblent déjà occuper l'emplacement des nécropoles archaïques.

Megara Hyblaea was founded, according to Thucydides around 728 BC, some twenty kilometers to the North of Syracuse, on a coastal site, almost completely flat. According to the literary sources, the Megarians settled on fields given to them by the Sicule king Hyblon. Rather than in Pantalica, as suggested by L. Bernabò Brea, we think today that king Hyblon and the Hyblaioi resided in Villasmundo, less than 10 km to the Northwest of Megara Hyblaea. The site contains a fortified village from the end of the Neolithic Age, excavated by P. Orsi, then by G. Vallet and Fr. Villard, and more widespread traces of occupation from the Eneolithic period and the Bronze Age. But the Megarian plateau did not seem to be occupied at the time of the Greeks' arrival.

Delineated in the North by the valley of the Cantera river and in the South by the torrent of the « small San Cusmano », the site is a vast limestone plateau of triangular shape. It is divided on the sea side by a natural depression, the Aremide, in two parts, called conventionally the "Northern plateau" and "Southern plateau", but both plateaus are united in the Western part (fig. 1).

After the work of F.S. Cavallari and P. Orsi at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries (fortification, necropolis, sanctuary), the archaeological exploration of the city and of its necropolis only resumed in 1949 with the intervention of the École Archéologique de Rome.
In the wake of the archaeological publications of Georges Vallet and François Villard, and in particular the monumental Megara Hyblaea 1 published in 1976, with architect Paul Auberson, the field researches have been limited to a series of drillings in the central depression and on the Southern plateau. Other work in 2005-2006, still unpublished, in collaboration with the Soprintendenza archeologica per la Sicilia Orientale, has been focused on the identification of the ancient Neolithic ditch and on the exploration of the central depression. Megara Hyblaea is, with Naxos and Heloros, one of the rare Sicilian cities from the end of the 8th century which has not been covered by a modern town, and the only one which has been explored archaeologically fairly extensively. It still constitutes today a unique case.


Fig. 1: The street network of Megara Hyblaea. In green, excavated areas; in red Neolithic ditch. Both circles indicate the changes in orientation of the streets A and B.
concerned the Canteralighthouse in the North- 
Hamlet of the Archaic and Hellenistic city (I.
Grenié), the West gate of the Archaic com-
port III (Treziny), the Northwest angle of the
Archaic city (M. Musumeci). Geophysical
prospection, begun in 2008, enable to com-
plete the layout of the streets on the North pla-
quet of the city. The streets C1, D1, D2, D3
include few entirely new data; the unit is either
to express as simple and as closely as possible
the archaeological data in our possession today
to reconstruct the genesis of a colonial city from
the end of the 8th century BC.

1. The streets

The map of Megara Hyblaea is famous for
the trapezoidal shape of the agora, enclosed
between two networks of North-South streets,
the streets B in the East and C in the West and
major East-West streets, A in the North and B
in the South. The streets C1 to C3 are parallel to
one another (axial spacing of the streets 28 m,
insula 25 m) as well as the streets D1 to D10 in
the East (axial spacing of the streets 25 to 28 m,
insula 22 to 25 m). The width of the streets is
regular, around 3 m, except for the street C1
and the two streets A and B, between 5 and 6 m.
The streets C1 and D1, surrounding the public
square, join up in the North near the fortifica-
tion wall in a position where we can be tempted
to situate a “Marine gate”, connecting the city
with its harbor.
The East-West streets A and B have long
been considered to form the backbone of the
Northern planaration urbanization, but their layout
could not be delineated quite recently. Thanks
to geophysical prospection. In the North, the
street A is absolutely rectilinear towards the
West from its crossroad with the street D1, at
the Northeast angle of the Agora, up to the
archaic fortification, at the North of the site or 3
of the excavations of Cavallari. Street A runs
to the great sanctuary of the Acropolis, implanted on the levels of the Neolithic Age.
Be circumstantial, its width is not stable
to have extended beyond the fortification. Alien
to the South, the street B is also rectilinear
West from its crossroad with the street C1 in the “tempietto B” and runs along the
South side of it (which we already knew thanks to ancient excavations). It runs along a
straight line towards the West at least up to the
line of the ancient water supply, which for the moment
prohibits geophysical prospection. The Western
end of street B is not known precisely yet, but
we can say that, contrary to the hypothesis sug-
gested in Megara I (drawing 1), and as we envis-
aged already in Megara V, street B does not
extend towards the West archaic gate.

The groups of plots included between the
streets A and B, groups which, for convenience,
we shall call insulae, have all been built with a differ-
ent North-South measurement, but we have
also seen that their widths were variable, in any
case from one sector to the other, between 22
and 28 m, in an context of high regularity

1. Grenié et al., Megara V, p. 533, note 34, and drawing out of

258-259.

Grenié et al., Megara V, p.
534.
(parallel streets, groups of insulae of same width) and of irregularities (non-orthogonal system, variable length of the insulae) that we must endeavour to understand as the conditions under which the building plots were set up.

2. The lot-sizing procedure

The other major feature of the Megarian urbanism was indeed the existence of building plots, particularly clear in the sector of the Agora, but it can be seen also in all the other excavated sectors, both in the West portion of the North plateau and on the South plateau.7 In the sector of the Agora, the plots of the 8th century measure approximately 12.50m by 9.70m at the West of the square (group of the streets C), 12.45 by 11m at the East (streets D) in a sector which, admittedly, has hardly been excavated. On the South plateau, the plots seem to measure 11m (in the North-South direction) by 11m to 11.50m in the East-West direction. Comparable measurements are likely at the West of the railway, in a sector still little explored (streets E).

It has also been shown, and I shall not dwell upon it, that, if the plots from the late 8th century were not materialised by walls, all the houses from the late 8th century identified on the sector of the Agora or on the South plateau were perfectly aligned with the street network and integrated in the theoretical grid of the building plot, as it can be established for the 7th century. It should be reminded indeed that, contrary to what was suggested in *Megara Hyblaea* 1, the houses of the 8th century are never in the centre of a plot (fig. 2).8 It is hence certain that this land division was set up, at least in the two sectors mentioned, in the late 8th century. The insulae delineated by the streets were most probably major primitive plots, three or four in the late 8th century sector, and which were only subdivided in a second stage. The division into plots is primary and constitutes the base of the urban plan.9

The division into plots is primary and constitutes the base of the urban plan.10 The sizes of the plots vary between 110 and 140m², around 120m², and we think that the variations are not sufficient to say that these plots had different surface areas. It is undoubtedly the consequence of the difficulties encountered by the surveyors to set up a regular subdivision in a non-orthogonal space.

We understand in *Megara Hyblaea* 5 to offer hypotheses on the mode of construction of the plots, I shall add here that there are at least two ways of developing the plot, two "processes" I would say. The former (fig. 3a) consists of a base line (for example the street A or the street B) to carry out a measurement (for instance 11 m) along a determined axis (for instance the street D), with next, the drawing of perpendicular lines to the street D1. This method defines equal quadrangular plots, except at both ends of the insula, and because the streets are not orthogonal, causes on the median axis an offset which is all the greater since the angle of the streets is acute. In the cases observed, that offset varies between 0.5 and 1m approximately.

In the second process (fig. 3b), the method is the same as above, but lines are drawn parallel to the base line, which produces plots in the form of a parallelogram or of a trapezium.

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1. Strömberg, "Landsformgivning i Megara", *Megara Hyblaea*, p. 111, fig. 1
2. Gras and Tréziny, *Megara Hyblaea* 1, p. 126, fig. 34
3. Vallet, *Topographie historique*
4. On this score, see already Fossi, "Note di architettura" and Vallet, "Topographie historique"
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Fig. 2: The houses and the plots at the West of the Agora in the 7th century (insula 6); in black, layout of the houses at the end of the 8th century (see Megara 1, fig. 47, modified).

Fig. 3: Lot-sizing procedures: a - at the East of the Agora, insula 18 (Procédé n°1); b - at the South of the Agora, insula 9 (Procédé n°2).
which are all equal, except perhaps at the end, without any offset on the median axis, which might form a broken line. This method was apparently used in the North (insula 10) and in the South (insula 10) of the Agora and perhaps in the sector of the streets E at the temple of Apollo (insula 15).

The existence of circular platforms in certain plots of the habitation of the West of the Agora has aroused all the more interest, since similar constructions were discovered more recently in Selinunte. They were construed in place of houses, in the honour of the ancestors, probably of ancient date (late 8th century for the platform 13, of Megara Hyblaea), and postulated with the setting up of the building plots.

3. The chronology of the implantation

As we saw, in sector of the Agora and on the South plateau, the setting up of the street network and the subdivision certainly dates back to the late 8th century. In the Western part, to the West of the railway, the small extension of the excavations does not enable a sound conclusion. A number of houses found during the excavations or through geophysical prospections suggest that the Western part of the site was already inhabited in the 7th century. As for the end of the 8th century, the pottery is abundant and we noted that the majority of the Thapsos cups published in Megara 2 in 1964 originated from the excavations of the 1950s, before the beginning of the exploration of the Agora district. The excavation of 2006 on the carriage gate of the Western rampart has again delivered a few human fragments (just one Thapsos cup).

But to this day, as well with large stones (“mur à orthostates”, type 1 of Megara 1), characteristic of that period, has been found in the portion of the city. To be specific, I am not saying that the Western half of the city was not occupied at the end of the 8th century, but only that the current state of researches does not provide us with the archaeological evidence. The recent development of the geophysical prospections on sites like Selinunte or Megara Hyblaea demonstrates (for Selinunte) and suggests (for Megara Hyblaea), that there was no significant space left void intra-muros, with the exception of the Agora and of certain sacred spaces. As for stratigraphic verifications, this is valid for the end of the period beginning of the 5th century in Megara Hyblaea, end of the 5th century in Selinunte) and obviously does not say anything of the ancient phases.

Besides, even if the space was divided from the late 8th century, it is probable that certain plots were not immediately occupied but kept as reserves, whose legal status would be interesting to know.
4. Districts, villages, encampments

It has been attempted once to explain the variety of the orientations of Megarian urbanism with reference to the Megarian Komai attested by the sources. Today, this hypothesis has been abandoned, and we prefer to emphasize the unity of the Megarian society, even if the presence of several groups of other ethnic origin can still be contemplated.15 But it has also been suggested that the urban plan of Megara Hyblea took some time to be set up, and that it had been preceded by a "proto-colonial" implantation, also called "encampment phase," several types of evidence can be related to the "encampment phase." First of all, post holes recently found by L. Guzzardi under the Cantera lighthouse, whose dating is unfortunately quite uncertain (Neolithic? Bronze Age? Geometric era)?16 Subsequently, bottle-shaped silos, abandoned or transformed in the first half of the 7th century.17 These silos, whose date is quite difficult to fix, were grouped near the Agora or in the settlement area in the Southwest. They were quite probably prior to the installation of the urban plan (last quarter of the 8th century) and we note with interest that both groups are quite close to the inflection points of street A in the Northeast and of street B in the Southwest. Finally, ceramic material listed in the past by Fr. Villard18 seems to date to the middle of the third quarter of the 8th century, which could be backed up by the recent re-examination of certain material of the Southern necropolis.19 Perhaps, one has to imagine during this "encampment phase" several groups of Latins ("agriburg", which probably ought to be situated rather in the sector of the Archaic Agora) implanting Megara Hyblea and starting points for plotting axes of the urban plan. We agree here with a hypothesis already formulated in particular by A. Di Vita20 but limiting it to the ancient phase, prior to the setting up of the urban plan.

5. Agora and sanctuaries

Fr. de Polignac has suggested that the major public areas of the city, the agora and the sanctuary of the North-West, were only organized around the middle of the 7th century. Formerly, the city would have been surrounded by a corona of sanctuaries.21 We suggested in Megara 5 that the sanctuary of the North-West was probably older than the 7th century and probably implanted at the centre of the Neolithic village whose contour (ditch and agger?) was still visible at the Greeks' arrival.22 The geographical location of the first place of worship ("sanctuary") and the delineation of the temple would then be attributable to the first settlers, perhaps during the setting up of the urban plan, dated even during the "encampment phase."23
As for the agora, which occupied the Northern half of the trapezoidal space between the streets A, B, C1 and D1, it was limited to the South by a line perpendicular to street D1.24 This line cannot be the result of the construction from south of the insulae C1, D1, B1. On the contrary, it is the starting point of a contemporary construction from the North (fig. 4). The shape of the agora hence resulted from a contemporary construction of the urban plan. Obviously, this does not rule out that its monumental arrangement and the definition of its functions are the result of a gradual construction during the 7th century.25

6. The Megarian urbanism

We have used on several occasions the expression "urban plan" to designate the land division. Indeed, we cannot consider any longer the Megara Hyblaea plan as a simple division into "rural plots" and "urban plots".26 You imagine that the similar delineation of the streets is an ancient layout, subdivided in a second stage. The aim of the primary division of the ground into 120 to 150m² plots was to build houses. They were oikopeda, and not gepeda.27 This was indeed an urban plan inasmuch as it allowed to define plots for building urban houses and not fields to cultivate corn or vineyards.

This urban plan is also striking because of its stability. The building plot established toward the end of the 6th century did not undergo any significant modification during the lifetime of the city, and its "rigidity" has been mentioned as one of the causes of the colonisation of Selinunte.28 Stability also because, if there are no major empty spaces inside the city, there were no suburbs outside the city. The separation between two divided spaces, city and countryside, was marked by a fortification at an early stage.
7. The city wall

The excavations on the Southern wall have enabled to define three main phases of the rampart (fig. 5). It was first of all a simple ditch together with an agger with an external facing, datable to the middle of the 7th century, at the latest, but which might be older. Then, toward the end of the 7th century the agger was completed on the city side with an internal facing. Thus, it became a wall with a double facing, of approx. 4 to 7m in width, sometimes more. During the 6th century, the rampart was rebuilt in heavy masonry. The excavation of 2006 on the West gate, already explored by P. Orsi, has fully confirmed these first hypotheses without enabling to specify the chronology. The first enclosures is certainly older than the second one (last quarter of the 7th century) and contemporary with the digging of the ditch, which was filled around the middle of the 7th century. In the absence of archaeological material inside the agger and of archaeological structures or levels showing the rampart, it is not possible to specify the date of the first rampart further, which may hence be contemporary with the first town planning of slightly prior to the mid-7th century. The second phase of the agger might advocate contemporary of the enclosures and the setting up of the urban plan. Conversely, as said previously, the hypothesis of a correspondence between street B and the West gate has now been abandoned.

8. Town and necropolis

The oldest tombs of Megara Hyblaea were found in the Southern necropolis (fig. 6). The largest groups are thus quite removed from the city and the fortification. Based on the current

Fig. 5: Sectional view of the West fortification at the driveway gate: in orange (1), first agger; in green (2), wall with a double facing of the last quarter of the 7th century; in light grey (3), wall with heavy masonry of the 6th century.
state of knowledge, no tomb originates with certainty from the intra-muros space, with the exception of four unpublished sets of the beginning of the 7th century from the central depression of the Arenella, whose topographical significance still remains to be verified. These would be isolated tombs anyway.

The material of the oldest tombs in the southern necropolis exists mainly of globular aryballoi from early Proto-Corinthian period,
which we suggest dating rather from the last quarter of the 8th century and the first quarter of the 7th century.¹³ One tomb from Megara Hybleae contains Thapsos cups, but this has no chronological meaning: the Thapsos cups were found in the settlement of an indigenous tomb, generally never in Greek tombs.¹⁴ Certain tombs without material and some tombs at enchrystrismos could be, as seen above, contemporaneous to the oldest pottery found in the city, and therefore contemporary to the “encampment phase.” This would imply that the tombs of the first Megarians of the “encampment phase” are already inscribed in the sector which will become the cemetery (or one of the cemeteries) of the city at the time of the first building plots.¹⁵

9. The foundation of Megara Hyblaea and the Megarian “model”

In the late 8th century the site of Megara was occupied by an urban-type land division, essentially on a grid system dividing the land into small-sized plots for accommodating houses. That land-division may quite likely have covered all of the sixty hectares of the archaic city, even if the state of the archaeological exploration does not enable to assert that it was the case everywhere. That “urban” space, inside which public areas (agora, sanctuaries) are delimited, is separate from the “rural” space or chora and from the necropolis by a boundary, the present or future fortification, whose date (between the end of the 8th and the middle of the 7th century) cannot be fixed with accuracy.

Despite the deficiencies of our documentation, the organisation of the space which can be seen fairly clearly today in the layout of Megara Hyblea, must be to a quite close of that most in Ortygia at the end of the 8th century.¹⁶ The same building plot system, probably, organisation along parallel streets, but also organisation along the main north-south axes, is to be seen in the necropoleis at Megara, too (so “dichotomy”).¹⁷ It is the solution that seems to have been adopted in most of the known sites (with the exception probably of Locri, due to a rugged topography) around the same time (end of the 8th century) and independently from the assumed origin of the first settlers.

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