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 tente est un résumé des principaux apports des publications des fouilles de Mégare Hyblée, revus 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 une acte cohérent, qui comprend aussi l’agora et le sanctuaire. La documentation archéologique est encore très partiel pour la moitié Ouest du site. On suppose dans la deuxième moitié du VIIIe s. une phase préalable à l’insertion des maisons qui n’est pas encore occupée au début du VIIe s. av. J.-C. Dans la 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 kilometres to the North of Siracusa, 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 (as king Hyblon and the Hyblaioi resided in Villasimmins, less than 10 km to the Northeast 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 Arenella, in two parts, called conventionally “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 Française de Rome.
Française de Rome, in collaboration with the Soprintendenza archeologica per la Sicilia Orientale Megara Hyblea n., with Ivanov and Bellos, one of the rare Sicilian cities from the end of the 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.

In the wake of the archaeological publications of Georges Vallet and François Villard, and in particular the monumental Megara Hybleae 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.
concerned the Cantera lighthouse in the North- 
west angle of the Archaic and Hellenistic city (L. 
Guzzardi), the West gate of the Archaic com- 
pact (H. Tréziny), the Northwest angle of the 
Archaic city (M. Musumeci). Geophysical 
prospections, begun in 2008, enable to com- 
plete the layout of the streets on the North pla- 
eteau of the city. This presentation will then 
include few entirely new data, the aim is rather 
to expose as simply and as clearly as possible all 
the archaeological data in our possession today 
to reconstruct the genesis of a colonial city from 
the end of the 8th century BC.

2. 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. Geophysical prospections have 
shown that the streets C1 to 3 are parallel to 
one another (axial spacing of the streets 28 m, 
insulae 25 m) as well as the streets D1 to 10 in 
the East (axial spacing of the streets 25 to 28 m, 
insulae 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 
spaces, join up in the North near the fortifica-
tion wall, in a position where we can almost 
assume to create a "Marine gate", reconnecting the city 
with its harbours.

The East-West streets A and B have long 
held been considered to form the backbone of the 
Northern urbanism, but their layout 
could not be delineated quickly enough 
to graphological prospections. 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 
archaeological fortifications at the North (drawn at 3) 
of the excavations of Cavallari. Street A runs 
along the great sanctuary of the Northwest, 
implanted on the levels of the Neolithic Age. 
Based on current knowledge, it does not seem 
to have extended beyond the fortification. 
Alone to the South, the street B is also rectilinear 
towards the West from its crossroad with the 
street C1 in the "hypogeum B" and runs along 
the South side of it (which we already know 
thanks to ancient excavations). It runs along a 
straight line towards the West at least up to the 
limit of Antonio and Field, which for the moment 
precludes geophysical prospection. The Western 
end of street B is not known precisely yet, but 
we can say that, contrary to the hypotheses sug-
gested by Region I (drawing 1), and as envis-
aged already in Megara 1, street B does not 
extend towards the West archaic gate.

The North-East streets A and B, as well as the 
street C1, provide the backbone of the North- 
ern urbanism at the West of the Agora, which may suggest 
that they were set up in a single time, but they 
are not parallel, whereas their spacing varies 
from 160m at the compact to 110m at the West 
of the Agora at the street C1. Their orientations 
change at the front of the streets C1 and D1, but 
they always run close up to a theoretical spac- 
ing of 80m by the seaside.

The groups of plots included between the 
street A and B, groups which, for convenience, 
we shall call insulae, are built with a differ-
tent North-South measurement, but we have 
also seen that their widths vary, in any case 
from one sector to the other, between 22 
and 25 m. They are in fact clear of high regularity

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1. Cron et al., Megara 1, p. 120, note 22, and drawing out of text.
(parallel streets, groups of insulae of same width) and of irregularities (non-orthogonal system, variable length of the street) 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 other excavated sectors, both in the West portion of the North plateau and on the South plateau. 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 \textit{Megara Hyblaea} 1, the houses of the 8th century are never in the centre of a plot (fig. 2). 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 plots (plots), hence granted to the first generation settlers, and which were only subdivided in a second stage. The division into plots is primary and constitutes the base of the urban plan. The sizes of the plots vary between 110 and 160m², around 125m², 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 emphasised in \textit{Megara} 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 plots, 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 11m) along a determined axis (for instance the street D), with next the drawing of perpendicular lines to the street D. 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 baseline, which produces plots in the form of a parallelogram or of a trapezium.
Fig. 2: The houses and the plots on the West of the Agora in the 7th century (insula 6), in black, layout of the houses on 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 – 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 16) and in the south (insulae 4) of the Agora and perhaps in the sector of the streets 5 at the (insulae 6).

The existence of circular platforms in certain plots of the habitation 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 or in the honour of the ancestors, probably of ancient date (late 8th century, for the platform E.20 of Mégara Hyblaea), and prefigurated with the setting up of the building plots.

3. The chronology of the implantation

As we saw in sector of the Agora and in the South phase, the setting up of the street network and of 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 Mégara 2 in 1964 originated from the excavations of the 1950s, before the beginning of the exploration of the Agora district.1 The excavation of 2006 on the carriage gate of the Western rampart has again delivered a late circular fragment (Avesini 3, Thapsos cup). But to this day, no wall with large stones (“mur à orthostates”, type I of Mégara 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 archaeological evidence.

The recent development of geophysical prospections on sites like Selinunte or Mégara Hyblaea demonstrates (for Selinunte) and suggests (for Mégara Hyblaea), that there is no significant space left void intra-muros, with the exception of the Agora or of certain sacred spaces. But to this day, no stratigraphic verifications, this is valid for the end of the period beginning of the 5th century in Mégara 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.


b. Gras et al., Mégara 5, p. 569.

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 existence of different Megarian groups or other ethnic origins can still be contemplated.\(^{15}\) That hypothesis has also been suggested that the urban plan of Megara Hyblaea 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 this “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 in the Northeast angle of the Agora (for three of them) or in the settlement area in the Southwest.\(^{18}\) 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. Villard\(^{19}\) seems to date to the middle or the third quarter of the 8th century, which could be backed up by the recent re-examination of certain material of the Southern necropolis.\(^{20}\) Perhaps, one has to imagine during this “encampment phase,” several groups of huts (or “villages”), which probably ought to be described rather as the nucleus of the urban plan than the “proto-colonial” implantation.\(^{21}\) These groups could be the starting point for plotting the urban plan. We agree here with a hypothesis already formulated in particular by A. Di Vita\(^{22}\) 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 6th century.\(^{23}\) Formerly, the city would have been surrounded by a corona of sanctuaries.\(^{24}\) We suggested in Megara 5\(^{25}\) that the sanctuary of the North-West was probably older than the 7th century and probably implanted at the centre of the Eneolithic village whose contour (ditch and agger?) was still visible at the Greeks’ arrival.\(^{26}\) The geographical location of the first place of worship (“temple B”) and the delineation of the temenos would then be attributable to the first settlers, perhaps during the setting up of the urban plan, maybe even during the “encampment phase.”\(^{27}\)
As for the agora, which occupied the Northern half of the proportional 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 street D1 to the North of the streets C1, B, and A, but, on the contrary, it is the starting point of other constructions from the North to the South (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 “allocation of plots” in opposition to a “true urban design”, nor imagine that the streets were not divided into two stages. The site of the primary division of the ground into 120 to 160m² plots was to build houses. They were oikopeda, and not gepeda.28 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 8th 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.29 Stability also becomes, 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.

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Fig. 4: The agora around 700 BC. The asterisks indicate places of worship, the black circles three silos in the Agora.

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25. We have incidentally suggested in Megara 5 that the public area of the Agora had extended first of all to the North of street A, in the Southern portion of the insulae 13 and 16, which probably contained places of worship. That sector became physically separated from the public square only when the Northern stoa was built.
27. Villard, ‘Le cas de Mégara Hyblaea’.
28. About this distinction and the meaning to give to geperedon (rural plot and not “small town garden”), see Megara 5, p. 533-534. Contra, Nenci ‘Oikopedon’.
7. The city wall

The excavations on the Southern wall have enabled to define three main phases of the city wall (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 earlier. 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 enclosure 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 above the rampart, it is not possible to specify the date of the first rampart further, which may hence be contemporaneous with the first town planning or slightly posterior (could be the case of the second gate). It might also consist of the first enclosures (see above) and might advance contemporaneity of the enclosures and the setting up of the urban plan. Consequently, as well 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 remote from the city and the fortification. Based on the current state of research, it is possible to date the first enclosure somewhere in the middle of the 7th century. The street network is contemporary with the Western gate.
of knowledge, no tomb originates with certainty from the intra-muros space, with the exception of four unpublished sets of the begin-
ning of the 7th century, from the central depression of the Arene, whose topographical sig-
nificance 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. **34 No tomb from Megara Hyblaea contains Thapsos cups, but this has no chronological meaning: the Thapsos cups were found in the settlement or in indigenous tombs, practically never in Greek tombs. **35 Certain tombs without material and some tombs at enchystrismos could be, as seen above, contemporaneous to the oldest pottery found in the city, and may therefore contemporaneously to the ‘encampment phase’. This would imply that the tombs of the first Megarians of the ‘encampment phase’ are already installed in the sector which will become the cemetery (or one of the cemeteries) of the city at the time of the first building plots. **36

9. The foundation of Megara Hyblaea and the Megarian ‘model’

In the late 8th century the site of Megara was occupied by an arurban type land division, maximal in its extent of dividing the land into small-sized plots, for accommodating houses. That land division may quite likely have crossed all of the sixty hectares of the arurban area, 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, i.e. the present or future fortification, whose date (between the end of the 8th and the midle of the 7th century) cannot be fixed with accuracy.

Despite the deficiencies of our documentation, the organisation of the space which can be seen clearly today (in the layout of Megara Hyblaea, note in its quite close plan of the layout of Ortygia at Syracuse at the end of the 8th century) **37 The same building plot system, probably expedient to divide parallel streets, but also originating from earlier planning systems (in ‘districts’), **38 It is the solution that seems to have been adopted in most of the known sites (with the exception probably of Leontinoi, due to a rugged topography) around the same time (end of the 8th century) and independently from the assumed origin of the first settlers.