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Edited by

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Vasif Şahoğlu, Rıza Tuncel**

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The Asea Valley from the Neolithic Period to the Early Bronze Age

Jeannette FORSÉN

ABSTRACT: Renewed study of the finds from the old Swedish excavations at Asea Paleokastro in Arcadia, combined with an archaeological field survey conducted in the Asea Valley during 1994-1996, has provided new information about the area's settlement pattern during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods. Asea Paleokastro was probably settled during the Early Neolithic and seems to have remained occupied, with some gaps, throughout the Neolithic and EB periods. In the valley surrounding Asea Paleokastro the survey discovered several other sites of Middle Neolithic date, indicating a rather complex settlement pattern during this period possibly even pointing to social differentiation within the valley. A much smaller amount of Late/Final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age material was found in the survey, thus indicating either a decline/loss of settlements, or, a nearly total nucleation in the valley during these periods. These results are significant, not least for reflecting a radically different trajectory in settlement development compared to that witnessed in other areas of the Peloponnese, e.g. Southern Argolid, Berbati-Limnes and Laconia.

A renewed study undertaken between 1993-1994 of the prehistoric remains from Asea Paleokastro in Arcadia, excavated in the late 1930s under the direction of Erik Holmberg¹ from Gothenburg, Sweden, has shown that the acropolis in Asea was settled throughout most of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (EB) periods². Asea Paleokastro is a large, 250 x 100 m, conspicuously flat-topped hill with steep sides which has attracted settlers from very early times.

Splendid examples of EN pottery from Asea - by this, I mean more or less intact vessels - can still be seen today exhibited in the Tegea Museum in Arcadia. The most spectacular is a collared bowl painted with a pattern consisting of 13 rows of dark red triangles on a lighter red surface³. A jar (Fig.1) which was found intact, is likewise of EN date, and exhibits four lugs placed in two pairs. The painted exterior is mottled light red to brown to black and is well burnished⁴.

However, the overwhelming majority of the Neolithic material remaining from the acropolis in Asea consists of Middle Neolithic (MN) pottery of excellent quality. Comparisons with well dated MN pottery from Franchthi

cave in the southern Argolid suggest that four out of five subphases of the MN period are represented at Asea⁵. It is only the last subphase which might be missing, and this is in line with other results from the Peloponnese, where, apart from Asea and Franchthi, also Lerna, Ayioryitika and possibly Nemea show a hiatus in occupation towards the end of the MN period⁶.

The existing Late Neolithic (LN) and Final Neolithic (FN) pottery from Holmberg's excavations is very limited in number and this could be the result of later discards or other vicissitudes, (i.e. World War II). We know that the finds from Asea were transported on a flatbed truck to the museum in Nauplion prior to the war and that they were returned to Tegea at some point after the war - who knows under what conditions! It is therefore particularly noteworthy that in the 1994-1996 Asea Valley Survey, the finds of chipped stones around the Paleokastro indicates a particular emphasis on LN and FN date⁷.

The Early Helladic (EH) I period remains problematic mainly in one respect and that is that we still do not know what to look for as definitely "early" EH I in date as there now is a "late" EH I phase, tentatively identified

¹ Holmberg, 1944.

² Forsén 1996a, 41-72.

³ Holmberg 1944, 47 pl.II: a; Forsén 1996a, 50 nos.11, 51, fig. 2:11.

⁴ See also Holmberg 1944, 59 fig. 62b.

⁵ Forsén 1996a, 50-56, 58.

⁶ Vitelli 1993, 218.

⁷ See T. Carter, in: Forsén & Forsén (eds.) (forthcoming).

stratigraphically through excavation work at Kephalaria Magoula in the Argolid⁸. Asea Paleokastro is one of many sites, not only on the Peloponnese but stretching into Central Greece, where this so-called "late" EH I pottery is present⁹. Most subphases of the EH II and EH III periods are likewise well represented by material from Asea Paleokastro, the only possible gap being during the first, of three, subphases of EH III¹⁰.

Leaving the site of Asea Paleokastro behind, new data gathered in the valley around the acropolis of Asea can help us reconstruct the settlement pattern during the Neolithic and EB. In the Asea Valley Survey a total of 33 km² were intensively walked, 92 sites were registered, and material spanning from the Palaeolithic to the 20th century was collected¹¹. This material is now being studied by various experts, and some thoughts concerning the settlement pattern in the valley during the Neolithic and EB periods can be presented.

Every field below and immediately around the Asea acropolis, as well as on top of the acropolis, were searched intensively during the field season of 1995 with walkers spaced 1-2 meters apart¹². Neolithic and EB material were found in 13 and 23 fields respectively as indicated on Fig. 2. Interestingly enough it seems that most if not all of the Neolithic ceramic and lithic material found on the surface around or on top of the acropolis is of either LN or FN date, whereas the few sherds of MN Monochrome Urfirnis ware were found below the surface in a ditch recently dug west of the acropolis¹³. Is the apparent lack of MN Patterned Urfirnis ware below the acropolis fortuitous or does this reflect a possible social differentiation between the inhabitants living on

top of the rock and those living below? Only new excavations can shed light on this problem.

In the western part of the valley (Fig. 3) not far north from what must have once been a large lake, the Alekaikos Kampos, there are three sites, i.e. S73, S63/S64 and S67, which seem closely related. They all are aceramic and have very little or no obsidian, but large quantities of chipped stones made of local raw material. They have tentatively been dated to a late EN or early MN period and the same conditions exist at least at one other site in the southern part of the Asea valley (S75 near the modern village of Papis). These are probably not settlement sites but special-purpose sites of some kind - perhaps hunting/gathering.

A conspicuous MN site is S15/S16 located next to a spring near Agios Athanasios of Manaris (Fig. 3). This site lies on the valley floor with finds spread out in about 10 or 12 fields. The sheer amount of MN pottery is impressive, both Patterned and Monochrome Urfirnis ware is present and there seem to be an unusually large percentage of so-called gouged bowls at this site, at least 16 individual bowls are identified¹⁴. Chronologically the settlements on Asea Paleokastro and at Agios Athanasios seem more or less to overlap, covering most if not all of the Neolithic period well into the Bronze Age.

The two sites S47/S61 were probably both parts of the same nucleus but given different numbers because the visibility and finds dropped to zero between the two areas (Fig. 3). This is a large MN site located in the western part of the Asea Valley around a spring near Agios Georgios of Athenaion. The picture which emerges for the MN period in the Asea Valley is that the settlers picked areas near the best water sources and the best soils presumably for agricultural reasons.

The setting of the LN-FN site S2 is unique for the Asea Valley, perched as it is on a strategic point of the Sombeti Mountain (Fig. 3). The character of the assemblage of obsidian tools found at the site implies that this was the

⁸ Dousougli 1987, 207.

⁹ Dousougli 1987, 208-219; Forsén 1996a, 59-60, 67, but see most recently Maran 1998, 8-9, concerning the dating of this material.

¹⁰ Forsén 1996a, 67.

¹¹ For a preliminary report of the 1994 season see Forsén et al. 1996, 73-97.

¹² Every field or subarea of Site 60, the Asea Paleokastro, were in this way "vaccumed" of potentially diagnostic artifacts.

¹³ The erosional process possibly reflected in this matter is being studied by the geologist M. Lavento.

¹⁴ I am grateful to E. Alram-Stern, who is going to publish the Neolithic pottery from the survey, for supplying this information.

location of a settlement perhaps with the purpose of controlling transhumance routes, thus reflecting a phenomenon which is well known for this area in later times¹⁵.

Finally let us consider for a moment the changing settlement pattern in the Asea Valley towards the end of the Neolithic and EB and compare it to other survey results in the Peloponnese. We can first of all conclude that the Asea valley does not have a dispersed settlement pattern during the FN and EH I-II periods; on the contrary, the settlement pattern is rather static and the same sites are inhabited, that is S60, S15/S16, S47/S61 and possibly S23 (Fig. 3). This is at variance with most other surveys, except in Pylos¹⁶ where the norm seems to be that a dispersion of sites occurred during the EH II period, at the latest.

However, every region in the Peloponnese where intensive surveys have been carried out and published shows a slightly different pattern. Thus the Nemea Valley in Corinthia has few FN and EH I sites, but shows a widespread pattern of sites during EH II¹⁷. In the Berbati-Limnes area in Argolid, the pattern changes from a dispersed pattern during the FN¹⁸ and EH I periods to a nucleated one in a late EH II phase¹⁹. The southern Argolid has few FN sites, but many EH I-II sites reflecting a widespread settlement pattern²⁰. In the Methana survey²¹ no FN site was found, contrasting with a dispersed settlement pattern during EH I, but nucleated in the following EH II period. In central Laconia, finally, the same picture emerges as in the Nemea valley, i.e. after a slow beginning during the FN and EH I periods, settlements spread out in the landscape during the EH II period²².

That the Asea Valley exhibits a slightly different pattern than that presented above has added one more link in the chain of evidence showing that different regions had, during the Neolithic and EB, different settlement patterns.

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¹⁵ The hypothesis of seasonal transhumant herding of animals during this period is not a novel idea, see Jacobsen 1984, 27-43; Chang & Koster 1986, 97-148; Halstead 1987, 77-87; Cherry 1988, 6-34; French (in this volume).

¹⁶ Davis et al. 1997, 483.

¹⁷ Wright et al. 1988, 609, 617 fig.11.

¹⁸ Johnson 1996, 37, 66.

¹⁹ Forsén 1996b, 119.

²⁰ Jameson et al. 1994, 340-366.

²¹ Mee & Forbes 1997, 42-46.

²² Cavanagh et al. 1996, 1-16.

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List of Illustrations:

Fig. 1: EN jar from Asea Paleokastro. Scale 2:3.

Fig. 2: Asea Paleokastro with all subareas around the acropolis. The triangles represent Neolithic finds, both ceramic and lithic, of any subphase and the circles indicate Early Bronze Age pottery of any subphase.

Fig. 3: The Asea Valley Survey Area 1994 1996 (broken line) with Neolithic and Bronze Age sites indicated.

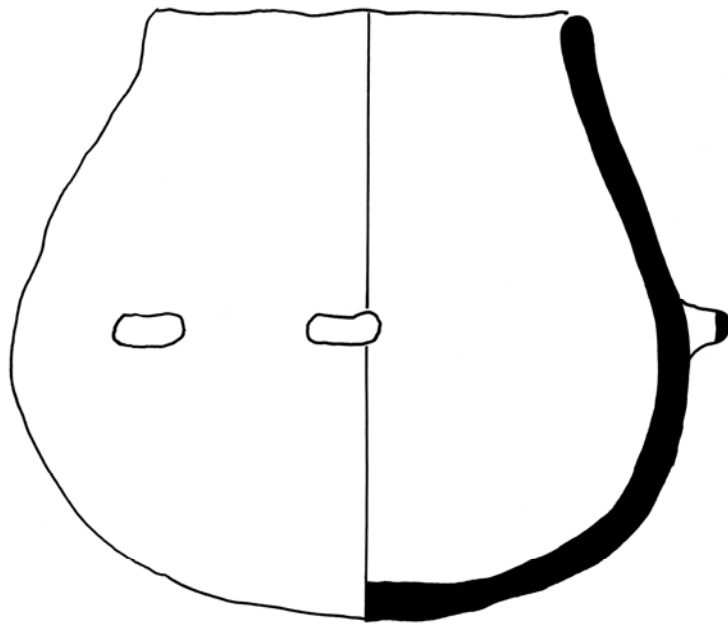


Fig. 1

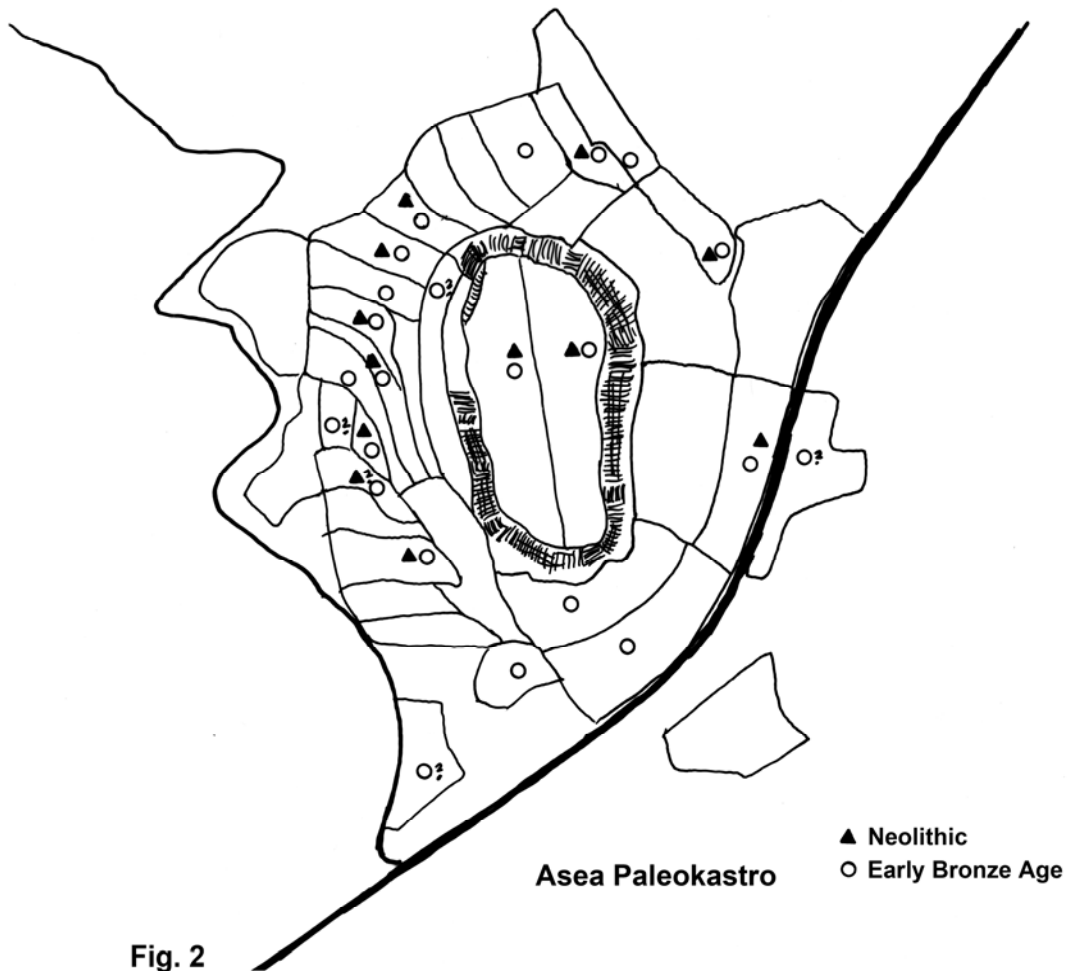


Fig. 2

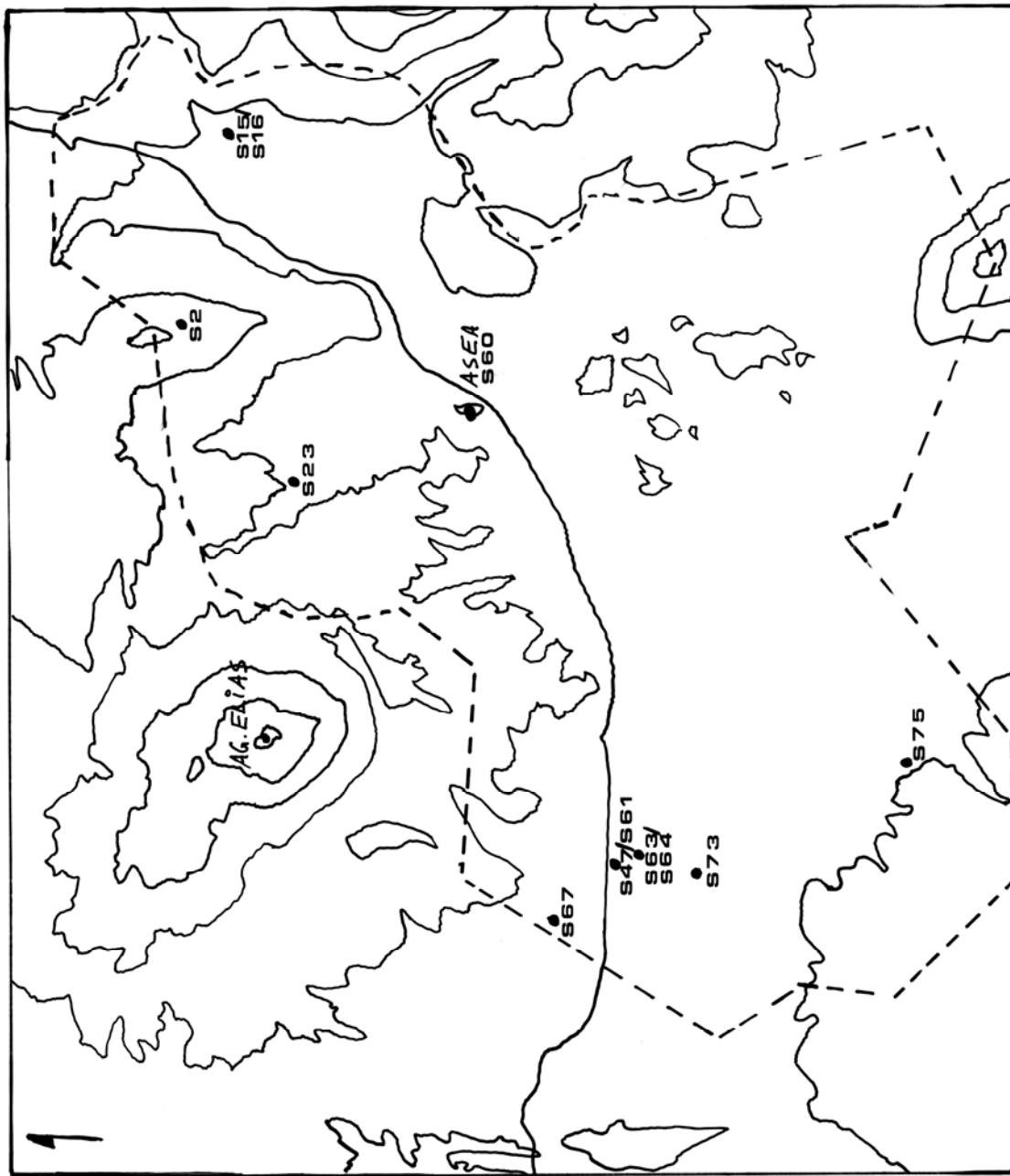


Fig. 3