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The excavation of the ancient site at Neo Rysio, Thessaloniki

Abstract

This paper presents for the first time the results of the archaeological excavation that has been carried out by the International Hellenic University since 2016 at a flat-top site at Neo Rysio, Thessaloniki. On the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia", as the site is called, the excavation is gradually bringing to light the architectural remains of an ancient settlement situated at a strategic position, with a significant view towards the Thermaic Gulf and the Anthemous valley. Based on the portable finds, mostly pottery, both local and imported, we can claim that the settlement in question seems to have been inhabited in the Early Iron Age and the Archaic period.

Key words: Ancient Macedonia, Greek Archaeology, Thessaloniki, Neo Rysio, Early Iron Age, Archaic period

Introduction

When Cassander decided to found Thessaloniki (which he named for his wife), in 316/5 BC, the place he chose for the site of the new city, although in many respects a highly advantageous situation, had never before been inhabited. This, however, was not the case with the broader surrounding area: between the Axius River in the northwest and the western coast of the main body of Halkidiki in the southeast, more than 90 sites of settlements and installations have been identified within an average radius of 20 km from the Thermaic Gulf (fig. 1). These sites were inhabited in the prehistoric, ancient and Byzantine periods, the earliest among them already in use in the Middle Neolithic Period, namely in the sixth millennium BC. Some grew up on flat land but mainly they were developed on mounded or flattened tells, either artificial or natural, primarily for defensive reasons, for want of built fortifications. In Macedonia, these habitation sites are usually classified as *toumbes* (mounded sites) or *trapezes* (flat-top sites).

The vast majority of these sites have not yet been systematically archaeologically investigated. As things currently stand, excavations have been carried out at fewer than 10 settlements, while almost 20 have been studied through more limited trial or rescue excavations. From the pottery sherds that have occasionally been collected during surface surveys, it appears that most of these settlements were founded in the late second or early first millennium BC, and in general continued to be in use during the whole of the first millennium BC, some of them even into the Christian era.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that of all these sites, those whose names have been ascertained through ancient written or epigraphic sources – like Aeneia, near modern Nea Michaniona, and Thessaloniki itself – constitute a small single-digit number. Conversely, there are several names of ancient settlements mentioned in the sources which it has not yet been possible to connect with any of these archaeological

sites, among them the cities of Kissos and Gariskos¹. This is due on the one hand to the limited archaeological activity and on the other to the fact that ancient Greek literature, or at least that which is preserved today, appears to have been rather sparing as regards events occurring in the area around the Thermaic Gulf.

This is reflected in the fact that there is only one source mentioning the founding of Thessaloniki, a city that would soon become a local metropolis and later the capital of a Roman province: this is Strabo's *Geography*, written about three centuries after the event. According to the author, Cassander created the new city in a way familiar to Hellenistic rulers, namely by bringing together populations from 26 neighbouring settlements in a synoecism (Strabo 7 fr. 21, 24). These settlements were situated in the NE Thermaic Gulf, including the southern coast of Crousis (NW Halkidiki).

Nevertheless, despite this big gap in our knowledge, the mere fact of the existence of so many prehistoric and ancient settlements in a horseshoe-shaped strip roughly 100 by 20 km is undoubtedly significant and indicative of the area's potential to provide the prerequisites for the economic growth of a settlement, as well as its defence. Taking into account all of the above, it becomes obvious that the systematic excavation of a site at the head of the Thermaic Gulf is extremely important for the investigation of the ancient history of the area around Thessaloniki.

The excavation

General characteristics

Such an excavation has been carried out by the International Hellenic University since 2016 at a flat-top site near Neo Rysio, about 17 km south-southeast of Thessaloniki (fig. 2). The "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia", as it is called, lies about 500 m SSE of the modern village of Neo Rysio, and about 1700 m N of the modern settlement of Kardia (nr. 78 on the map of fig. 1). The administrative boundaries of the two villages, today both belonging to the Municipality of Thermi, cross the Trapeza and are responsible for its compound conventional name, as opposed to the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio", less than 500 m away, at the southern end of the homonymous present-day village.

Deep streams hug the site on both east and west, while passing very near the western one is another stream, which is one of the branches of the river that flows into the sea just west of Thessaloniki's airport and could be one of the candidates for identification with the Rechios River mentioned by Procopius (*De aedificiis* 4.3.27-30).³ The "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia" covers an area of about 1.4 hectares and its oval shape is almost aligned with the north-south axis (fig. 3). It comprises two levels, conventionally called "Upper" and "Lower" Trapeza (fig. 2) and resting on a

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¹ For Aineia, see Tiverios, 2008: 28–31, with the relevant bibliography. Gariskos' location is unknown. For a number of other settlements several locations have been proposed, some of them plausible, but this is an issue that continues to be debated. Chief among them is the debate concerning Thermi, on which see Tiverios, 2008: 26–28. For Kissos, see most recently Manoledakis, 2007a; for Apollonia, see Manoledakis, 2007b. For suggested identifications of other towns, as well as for other towns in the area, see Hatzopoulos, 1996; Flensted-Jensen, 2004; Tiverios, 2008.

² L. Rey, a French archaeologist who was with the British-French forces camped in Thessaloniki between 1916 and 1918 and the first to locate the Trapeza, called it *Karadjali* (Rey, 1917-1919: 137), a name also preserved later (Soueref, 2011: 117). This is a distorted –as Rey heard it – form of Kara Tsohanli, which was the name of Kardia in the Ottoman period, when it was inhabited by Muslim Yuruks.

³ Manoledakis, 2017: 81-90, 114.

broader base. The site's highest point, on the SE end of the Upper Trapeza, has an elevation of 136.7 metres above sea level. In its north part, the Upper Trapeza is at an altitude of 126 m, which means that it declines to the north. The elevation of the Lower Trapeza varies respectively from 134 to 123 m, and thus the average difference between the two levels is about 3 m. The almost 8-shaped Lower Trapeza has a maximum length of 213 m and a maximum width of 27 m.

Especially remarkable, compared to the rest of the tells around Thessaloniki, is the view the Trapeza afforded its inhabitants, which is unobstructed in all directions necessary for a settlement: towards the sea, the whole Anthemous valley with all its settlements, and the fortress on the summit of Mt Hortiatis, the significance of which for the entire area is attested from the Archaic period to the Middle Ages. Looking at the tables ranking the ancient settlements' visibility to other (contemporary) settlements, one sees that our site was consistently among the top three during its whole period of habitation. The impression created by this remarkable view is that the settlement on the Trapeza had an indisputable strategic importance.

The second particularity of our site is the form – divided into two levels – that it currently presents (fig. 2), for how and when it took shape is shrouded in obscurity. What cannot escape the attention is the fact that parts of ancient built constructions protrude over a long part of the slope surrounding the Upper Trapeza (fig. 4). These could belong to buildings that collapsed when the level was destroyed (perhaps due to quarrying), or to a construction that partly surrounded the upper level, or even a combination of both. Whatever the case may be, we have conventionally and for purely practical reasons termed this natural and built structure between the Upper and Lower Trapeza the "enclosure', due to the impression it gives of encircling the former.

Although known for about a century, the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia" has never been systematically investigated. Limited surface surveys were occasionally conducted, yielding a few pottery sherds dating from the Late Bronze Age to the Classical period. In 2016, when the International Hellenic University excavation began, the north part of the site was densely covered with bushes, providing a misleading image. It was only with the total clearing of the site that its global form and potential were revealed. The whole site – both the Upper and the Lower Trapeza – has now been surveyed, a considerable part of the "enclosure" has been cleared and cleaned, while excavation work has been carried out in four areas of the Upper Trapeza and one of the Lower.

The survey

Despite their surface character, the finds of the survey were not only unexpectedly rich but also provided a very indicative image of the chronology of the site, especially in the Early Iron Age and the Archaic period, since they represented most of the categories that would appear during the excavation. As expected, pottery prevails: hand- and wheel-thrown, plain, monochrome, grey, eggshell, but also decorated. In

⁴ Soueref (2011: 117) speaks of a "double Trapeza (Upper and Lower)", but is referring to Rey's distinction (1917-1919: 137) between our Trapeza and the plateau directly to its south, separated from it by a depression.

⁵ Manoledakis, 2007a: 44–48, 92–95· 2008: 22–31.

⁶ See Donati and Manoledakis, forthcoming.

⁷ Rey, 1917–1919: 137–138; French, 1967: 14, 60; Grammenos, Besios, & Kotsos, 1997: 22–33, nr. 44 (Kardia)· Soueref, 1996: 445; 2003: 38–40· 2011: 117–124.

the latter case, the decoration can be geometric, banded, relief or incised. Fragments of pithoi and big vases like amphorae and oenochoes, frequently with double or twisted handles, are quite numerous, while iron and stone objects (e.g. loom weights and pestles), bones and seashells are not absent (fig. 5). The vast majority of the finds belong to the Early Iron Age and the Archaic period (see more below on the chronology of the site).

The "enclosure"

Since 2016 a large part of the slope surrounding the Upper Trapeza has been cleared, from the middle of its western side to its SE part. In the rest of it erosion is so extensive, due to vegetation or subsidence or destruction of the built structures, that there is no point in continuing this activity. Nevertheless, these 150 out of the total 450 metres of the "enclosure" that have been cleaned give a quite uniform and thus indicative image of it.

The lower zone consists of the bedrock, which is visible to an average height of 1 m. Over almost its entire length, the bedrock displays traces of cutting, probably quarrying, and a toothed shaping. More often than not, sections of masonry appear over the bedrock. In some cases two walls of different phases can be discerned as having the same direction as the bedrock. The lower, older, one usually consists of big polygonal worked stones, the upper and more recent of small field-stones, irregularly placed (fig. 6). It is, however, worth noting that occasionally there is a concentration of stones, mainly quoins, which seem to protrude from the "enclosure" and belong to walls perpendicular to it, of about 0.5 m in width. This image is visible especially in the southern part of the "enclosure", where there are parts of at least three walls that seem to have continued outside it but were demolished with the destruction of the Upper Trapeza there (fig. 4 – see more below, about Cuts G3-4).

The finds from the cleaning of the "enclosure" include the above-mentioned categories encountered during the survey and, additionally, fragments of Attic SOS-type amphorae, parts of millstones, as well as iron blades and tools, such as wedges that are probably connected to stone quarrying, of apparently unknown period.

The image of the "enclosure" described above is disturbed every now and then, mainly on its western side. One might mention, for example, the reservoir hewn into the bedrock – a circular structure with a diameter of about $1.10\,\mathrm{m}$ and a rim worked around its upper part (fig. 7). Then there is the pit containing a lot of pottery – an ovoid cavity cut into the bedrock, about $0.60\,\mathrm{m}$ deep and with a diameter of $0.70\text{-}0.80\,\mathrm{m}$. In addition, pithoi and other big vases occasionally touch the "enclosure".

The Upper Trapeza

But the most remarkable part of the "enclosure" is undoubtedly the middle of its western side (Cuts D/E11-13), where a smooth declination from the Upper to the Lower Trapeza is observed (fig. 8). On both sides of this declination, which seems to form a sort of inlet in the "enclosure", a shallow round recess is found in the bedrock, while very close to the north side four steps in the rock are clearly visible. All this had initially led to the suspicion that there had been some sort of access between the two levels of the site.

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⁸ Both recesses have the same diameter (0.30 m) and almost the same depth (about 0.20 m). The bedrock in between is smoothed.

However, the continuation of the excavation work here may point towards a different conclusion. Since the third year of the excavation, several parts of walls belonging to buildings have been revealed, some of which run parallel to the "enclosure", and would thus hinder access from the Lower to the Upper Trapeza. So far fourteen walls have been unearthed, delimiting at least eleven rooms (fig. 9). This new image could replace the theory of a passage connecting the two levels with the probability that the specific location was the site of a multi-chambered building complex, of which the rooms that were closest to the slope were lost when it was destroyed. Special mention should be made of the existence of at least two different building phases, since in some of the rooms two different floors have come to light.

Especially noteworthy in this central section is Room A1, measuring 2.70 x 2.40 m (fig. 10). All over it, the earth displays remnants of clay masses, on some of which imprints of branches and reeds are visible. At the centre of the room, an irregularly shaped pit was excavated, on the bottom of which the bedrock bears several round and ovoid hollows. Many vases were found in it, in quite good condition, together with more pottery fragments, iron tools, bones, and clay masses (fig. 11). Touching two of the room's walls are constructions with adobe walls and feet. One of these is conical, with a diameter of about 0.24 m, and the other ovoid (fig. 12). No traces of burning were detected either in or around them; however, three almost whole vases and a big loom weight were found near the former, while generally the room yielded a relatively large quantity of pottery, as well as stone and metal tools.

Another room that deserves special mention is Room A8. Among its finds are six vases in quite good condition, a concentration of rather large loom weights (fig. 17), many shattered adobes (as is the case also in Room A6), and three bronze objects, part of a hair-slide and two copper pendants (fig. 13). Parallels of these last have been found in cemeteries in Thessaly (dated to 950-850 BC)⁹ and in Thermi (6th-5th centuries BC, according to the other finds), and are found in graves of adults as well as those of young girls. These bronze objects, combined with the loom weights, may, of course, be connected with women's activities. Finally, two excavations in the bedrock and several iron masses and foils were unearthed in Room A7, and many bones and seashells, as well as parts of a millstone and a whetstone in Room A9.

More to the south on the Upper Trapeza, in Cuts E/F7-8, we gain a good image of the settlement's town planning, since it is the only area where the existence of roads and intersections is clearly visible (fig. 14). To date a total of seventeen walls have been revealed, with an average width of 0.50-0.60 m and an average extant height of 0.50 m. They form at least eight rooms in four different buildings. The latter are separated by a large road, cleared over a length of about 11 m, the width of which varies between 2.30 and 2.80 m. Its direction is NW-SE. Three narrower roads intersect it at right angles.

It is worth noting that in some of the rooms two floors of different periods were revealed; this is, for example, the case with Room 1, where 0.20 m below the first floor an earlier one was found. The access to this room was probably from the large road to its east, as might be concluded from the concentration of flat stones suggesting a doorstep in the eastern wall. The assumption that this part of the site must have had at least two different building phases is reinforced by other observations as well. For instance, between Walls 4 and 5 of Room 2, the front of another wall perpendicular to

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⁹ Efstathiou-Batziou, 2011: 596–597 and fig. 7.

¹⁰ Moschonissiotou, 1991: 285, 292 fig. 6. See also fig. 2 on https://www.aigai.gr/www.aigai.gr/el/history/aiges/vergina.html.

them was revealed, which must belong to a later extension of Wall 6. This would mean that Room 2 was initially open, or even part of another road intersecting the large one, but was later enclosed, becoming a room in a building.

Inside several rooms in this section of the excavation, as well as on the roads, stone and adobe constructions have been found, as well as numerous finds, like fragments of Early Iron Age pottery, trade amphorae, stone and iron tools, bones and seashells.

Finally, two other areas of the Upper Trapeza have also been excavated, namely its northern and southern ends. In the former (Cuts A/B 23) four walls of the usual width (roughly 0.50 m) delimit four rooms. One of them, Room Γ 1, seems to have been much larger than the other rooms on the site investigated so far. It is 3.90 m wide, while the length of the inside walls usually varies between 1.50 and 2.50 m. In the northern part of the room two amphorae and a stamnoid vase were found placed in an excavation in the bedrock (fig. 15). They contained earth, pottery sherds, stones, bones and parts of adobes. The rest of the rooms yielded fragments of trade amphorae, geometric pottery, braziers, glass vases, as well as a grooved handle.

In the southern end of the Trapeza (Cuts G3-4), four walls delimiting at least three rooms have to date been revealed. The southernmost, Room B3, is partially lost, because of the destruction of the Lower Trapeza at this point. This explains the image of the "cut" walls that is visible in the southern side of the "enclosure" (see above): the concentrations of stones belong to the walls of these partly demolished rooms. However, Room 3 displays more interesting particularities: a large round stone with an elliptical shallow recess carved in its NA corner; and in its SW corner, a semi-circular construction with clay masses and fragments of four cylindrical clay objects.

The Lower Trapeza

A striking peculiarity of the Lower Trapeza is the number of mounds dotting most of its eastern side. One of them, about 1.5 m high, was selected for excavation, since it had yielded a lot of pottery during the survey. Fourteen layers have been removed down to the bedrock, each displaying more or less the same image: here and there some concentrations of roughly worked stones that initially created the impression of belonging to a construction but gradually turned out to lack any specific arrangement or cohesion. Nonetheless, all layers yielded large amounts of portable finds: fragments of hand- and wheel-thrown pottery, grey, banded, eggshell, geometric, and of Attic SOS-type amphorae, as well as stone tools, metal objects, parts of adobes, bones and seashells.

To date, no building activity can be substantiated in the Lower Trapeza. Most probably, the mounds in question were shaped by accumulation of stones and earth, which could be the result of either the quarrying of the Upper Trapeza's bedrock or illegal excavations, in both cases in unknown periods.

Some preliminary remarks

It is natural that the results of these first years of the excavation at the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia" have led to some preliminary assumptions, but have raised many more questions.

The excavation of the four sections of the Upper Trapeza covers quite a representative portion of it – both in its ends and in the middle – and thus I think that the composite image they provide, which is actually uniform throughout, is reliably

indicative as regards the use of the site. There must be little doubt that what we have before us is an inhabited settlement and not some sort of – perhaps military – installation. Both the architectural remains and the portable finds confirm this. We actually have a fairly indicative image of the town planning, as well as the arrangement and dimensions of the buildings, while finds like the numerous loom weights and the bronze ornaments, combined with the lack of arrowheads and other weapons, tend to imply everyday activities.

Furthermore, a remarkable consistency in the finds is observed all over the investigated site. The vast majority of the pottery dates from the Early Iron Age and the Archaic period (mainly 10th-6th centuries BC). The Late Bronze Age (1600-1100 BC) is also represented, though with far fewer sherds, while those from the Classical and Hellenistic periods scarcely extend into double digits. The majority of the vases are products of local workshops (figs. 16-17). Imported pottery is mainly from East Greece (trade amphorae, mostly from Chios), Attica (mainly SOS-type amphorae) and Corinth (fig. 18). Many of the local pottery categories are encountered also in several sites in central Macedonia as well as along the Axius valley. Other finds include fragments of stone and metal objects, such as tools and ornaments, spindle whorls and loom weights, bones and seashells.¹¹

Being unstratified, the afore-mentioned pottery categories can give only a broad chronology for the site. However, since the finds after the mid-late 6th century BC are extremely scanty, ¹² it would seem that the settlement was abandoned in this period. This means that it was not among the twenty-six settlements that, according to Strabo, were synoecized in Thessaloniki in 316/5 BC. Given the strategic importance of the site as described above, it is reasonable to ask what led the inhabitants to leave such a site, where they went, and why the site was never afterwards inhabited. While we are (at least currently) unable to answer such questions, it is worth noting a striking coincidence.

It is known that central Macedonia was inhabited by Thracian tribes until the Late Archaic period, when the region gradually passed into the hands of the Macedonians, who expelled the local Thracians (Thucydides 2.99; Strabo 7, fr. 36). It is not clear when the area east of the Axius River came under the control of the Macedonians. Several theories have been put forward, following the evidence from the written sources as well as the archaeological finds from graves in the wider area. Amyntas I, king of Macedon, offered the region of Anthemous (to the east of our site) to Hippias, who was expelled from Athens in 510 BC (Herodotus 5.94), and this indicates that the region belonged to the Macedonians, even if not completely, since in *ca.* 512 BC the Macedonian kingdom was made a Persian vassal state. ¹⁴ Therefore, Macedonian hegemony appears to have taken hold in the north-eastern Thermaic Gulf around the middle of the 6th century BC, that is, roughly at the time when our settlement was abandoned.

Whether this is mere coincidence or something more is unknown for the time being, and only continued research might be able to shed more light on the matter.

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¹¹ Most of these categories appeared already during the survey (see above).

¹² It should also be noted that there are no more recent finds which could denote any kind of use of the site in modern periods, as is the case with some other sites around Thessaloniki which have been used, for example during World War I by the allies as military camps.

¹³ See more recently Chrysostomou, 2018; Xydopoulos 2018; Saripanidi, 2019: 383-384, all with the previous bibliography on the debate.

¹⁴ Olbrycht, 2010: 343-345, This is the second of the control of the control

¹⁴ Olbrycht, 2010: 343-345. This indicates that Amyntas' offer had the approval of the Persians. See Hammond & Griffith, 1979: 55-59; Hammond, 1989: 42-43; Borza, 1990: 85-89, 118.

Equally, the investigation of the settlement's cemetery, the location of which is still unknown, would also offer some data on the identity of the settlement's population, which was most probably related to the Thracians.

Another puzzling issue is that regarding the morphology of the Trapeza, with its two levels. As mentioned above, over a long part of the slope surrounding the Upper Trapeza, the so-called "enclosure", parts of walls are visible, which seem to have continued beyond it but were carried away by the destruction of the Upper Trapeza (fig. 4). This image, in combination with the absence, at least for the time being, of architectural remains on the Lower Trapeza, tends to lead to the assumption that the Upper Trapeza covered a wider area over the Lower one at the time of its habitation. Could this area in fact be that of the whole site, meaning that there was actually one Trapeza? Looking at the current width of the Lower Trapeza, we observe that in the west it varies from 2 to 5 m, with the exception of the central part (about 10 m), and in the east it is on average 15 m. Consequently, while one could answer that question affirmatively as regards the western side, doing so for the eastern one would be much more difficult. It should also be noted that the - quite numerous - finds from the Lower Trapeza cover almost all the categories and chronologies of those from the Upper Trapeza. In any case, how and when the site assumed its current morphology remains undetermined.

Finally, there is no need to stress our total inability, at least currently, to make any suggestions concerning the identification of the settlement; or even to say whether it was one of several neighbouring unfortified (like this one) settlements aggregated to the same town, in the so-called *komedon* system, which appears from the written sources to have been rather common in the early historical ages. ¹⁵ The suggestion that it could have belonged to the city of Dikaia ¹⁶ cannot be confirmed.

What we can quite certainly claim is that the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia" appears to be a very promising archaeological site, the systematic investigation of which has just begun.¹⁷ Its continuation will, it is hoped, gradually increase our knowledge of human activity in the wider area around Thessaloniki well before that city was founded, namely in a period that for lack of textual as well as archaeological evidence remains quite obscure.

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¹⁵ For this type of town see Hansen, 1995, in detail; Nielsen, 2000: 138; Tiverios, 2008: 17, 27.

¹⁶ Soueref, 2003: 38-40.

¹⁷ The field season lasts about a month. During the rest of the year the archaeological material is cleaned, photographed, conserved and recorded. For the first biannual excavation reports, see Manoledakis, forthcoming a and b.

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Figures



Figure 1. Map of the Thermaic Gulf with location of settlements (after J. Donati and M. Manoledakis, created by J. Donati).



Figure 2. The "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia". View from the southeast.



Figure 3. Satellite image of the "Trapeza of Neo Rysio – Kardia". The four sections of the excavation on the Upper Trapeza are visible.



Figure 4. Detail of the "enclosure" surrounding the Upper Trapeza (western side). Parts of ancient built constructions seem to protrude over the slope.



Figure 5. Stone loom weight found during the surface survey.



Figure 6. Detail of the "enclosure" surrounding the Upper Trapeza (western side) with sections of masonry over the bedrock. Two walls of different phases can be discerned.



Figure 7. The reservoir hewn into the bedrock.



Figure 8. Detail of the "enclosure's" western side (Cuts D/E11-13), with the smooth declination from the Upper to the Lower Trapeza. The north shallow round recess is clearly visible.



Figure 9. Plan of the central section of the Upper Trapeza (Cuts D/E11-13).



Figure 10. Room A1 from the north.



Figure 11. Room A1 from the southwest: the irregular pit with some of its finds.



Figure 12. Room A1 from the north. The two constructions with adobe walls and feet are clearly visible.



Figure 13. Bronze objects from Room A8.



Figure 14. Plan of the section of the Cuts E/F7-8 on the Upper Trapeza.



Figure 15. Cuts A/B 23, Room Γ 1 from the south: two amphorae and a stamnoid vase placed in the bedrock.



Figure 16. Pottery fragments with geometric decoration.



Figure 17. Hand- and wheel-thrown vases of local workshops and two loom weights.



Figure 18. Fragments of imported pottery from East Greece (above, on the left), Attica (below, on the right) and Corinth (above, right and below, left).