

MYTILENE, THE AEOLIC WORLD, AND BEYOND

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Abstract: *The paper discusses late Bronze Age history of Lesbos when it was part of the Hittite world, the arrival of the Greeks on Lesbos in the 8th c. BC, and the archaeological and historical remains of the Archaic period, especially the characteristic Aeolic grey wares made and exported, and events linking Lesbos with Sparta and Egypt.*

One of the defining material characteristics of the Aeolic world of the northeastern Aegean is the use of a grey ware pottery (often called Aeolic *bucchero*) whose origin appears to go back to the Middle Bronze Age¹. Pierre Dupont is one of handful of scholars in the world pushing our knowledge of that ware ahead in the 21st century. I first met Pierre in Lyon in 2005 when I gave a paper there about our work at Mytilene. Since then he and Vasilica Lungu have worked nearly every year on the enormous body of material we found in excavations in the castle and near the North Harbour between 1984-1990, and it is a pleasure to offer this small tribute to him.

In 2008 Brian Rose published a significant lengthy article in *Hesperia* which pulled together the evidence for a likely much later presence of Greeks in the Aeolic world than previously had been assumed by most archaeologists and historians². Several years later at the annual meeting in Chicago of the American Philological Association Annette Teffeteller organized a modestly attended panel on a snowy morning which examined principally from a linguistic viewpoint the whole question of what was going on in the northeastern Aegean at the end of the Bronze and start of the Iron Age. In many ways both were expanding on material presented back in 1995 in a long article by Nigel Spencer in the *Annual of the British School at Athens* entitled „Lesbos Between East and West“³.

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¹ BAYNES 2000.

² ROSE 2008.

³ SPENCER 1995a.

Spencer had also published that year a detailed gazetteer listing hundreds of sites on the island and the dates associated with them⁴. I had hoped that our own excavations (funded by the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada under the auspices of the Canadian Institute in Greece) at two sites in Mytilene at different times between 1984 and 2009 might have added more archaeological material to this discussion. Unfortunately it did so only in a negative way, i.e. hardly any material appeared before the great age of the city at the time of Sappho and Alkaios at the end of the 7th century BC.⁵ I would like to look at these studies of the Iron Age period in the NE Aegean again, to consider other activities on Lesbos, and to demonstrate the range of Mytilene's trading activity in the age of the tyrants.

The island of Lesbos is one of the largest Greek islands, third in size after Crete and Euboea; it is a rich well-watered land, especially in its eastern and central areas, and one whose history to the present day is closely tied to events on the Anatolian mainland opposite. At the end of March, 1987, for example, Greece and Turkey were almost at war over oil exploration in the waters off the island while ten thousand years ago Lesbos was in fact part of Anatolia until rising waters at the end of the last ice age created the present narrow strait between them. There has always been a scholarly gulf as well between literary and archaeological evidence for the Iron Age history of the island. References to the island of Lazpa in the Hittite archives have long been taken to mean Lesbos and in 2008 Hugh Mason pulled together much of this material in an article called "Hittite Lesbos" from a conference on „Anatolian Interfaces“⁶. Dr. Spencer, however, seems to have been the first to point out that the archaeological evidence from the island points to a far different early history than the accounts by various older and more recent scholars based on various ancient Greek authors have always assumed. The generally accepted version since the 19th century has been that Boeotians and Thessalians migrated to Lesbos in the 11th c. BC bringing Greek language and culture. Thus the Aeolic dialect was thought to have close connections with the speech of these areas of the mainland. Recent linguistic studies by different scholars have cast considerable doubt on this scenario: Holt Parker's article on the Aeolic dialect in the same issue of *Hesperia* as Rose's is particularly useful⁷.

The generally agreed interpretation of the Hittite archives at Hattusas appears to demonstrate a Mycenaean presence, giving way later to Hittite, on Lesbos as early as the 15th c. BC although there is little evidence for what happens over the next few centuries⁸. As Rose points out there was a sort of *koine* in the northeastern Aegean centred perhaps on the Troad. Some Mycenaean pottery has been found in various places on the island and the *Iliad* (24.544) calls Lesbos a distant point in Priam's reign. To my knowledge, however, nothing has been found connected with the Anatolian mainland. The situation reminds me of

⁴ SPENCER 1995b.

⁵ For reports see WILLIAMS & WILLIAMS 1991.

⁶ MASON 2008.

⁷ PARKER 2007.

⁸ WEEDEN & ULLMANN 2017, p. 273-274; TEFFETELLER 2013.

another area in which I have worked, the Caribbean, where domination of islands rotated among European powers for several centuries and where the American defeat of Spain at the end of the 19th century resulted in both actual occupation of former colonies like Puerto Rico or virtual control as in Cuba.

By the 7th century BC the island was shared by six different poleis: Mytilene on the southeast coast and always the most important, Methymna on the northeast, Antissa on the central north coast but abandoned after 167 BC, Eressos on the west coast, Pyrrha on the south shore of the gulf of Kalloni, and Arisbe just northeast of the gulf and also largely abandoned early. Surveys of one sort or another have taken place at all sites, especially by a German team under Robert Koldewey in 1885, but large scale excavations have only happened at the archaic Aeolic temple site at Klopedi, Mytilene, the late classical/Hellenistic temple at Messa, and at the famous prehistoric site of Thermi, 10 kilometres north of Mytilene⁹. The Archaeological Service has carried out rescue excavations at numerous other sites (some with Mycenaean remains) around the island but none has yet been published except for short reports in the *Arkhaiologikon Deltion* or the local journal *Lesviaka*.

The main published Iron Age material to date comes from Winnifred Lamb's excavations in the 1930s at Antissa on the north coast; German excavations at Pyrrha on the Gulf of Kalloni in 1908 have received also some attention. Both these sites yielded apsidal buildings as indeed has Mytilene. A salvage excavation near the North Harbour there in the early 1970s uncovered partial remains of what may have been an archaic sanctuary to the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele¹⁰. The site and its extensive Aeolic grey ware pottery have never, however, been fully studied or published. Arisbe, the least examined of the cities, however, offers much of interest from the plans of many houses so close to surface that site plans like one by Koldewey indicate they mostly seem to be of the *megaron* variety, i.e. a porch and main room. This type goes back to at least the Bronze Age and is particularly associated with EB Troy; the Arisbe examples are much later. Only small scale and basically unpublished excavations have ever taken place on Arisbe's bare hillside; it is worth noting that there is also an Arisbe on the coast of the Troad and the names may go back to Hittite times.

The horizons of Mytilene by the late 7th century BC, to judge from the literary sources, were broad: the poet Alkaios had a brother who may have served as a mercenary in Babylon and Sappho had one who did business in Egypt. Indeed her „invention“ of personal love poetry in Greek may owe something to earlier New Kingdom Egyptian love poems just as early Greek epic owed much to Mesopotamian stories. Sappho herself had connections with Sardis, and it is no accident that when forced into exile she sailed off half way across the Mediterranean to Syracuse.

Mytilene was part of the Greek consortium that set up the trading settlement

⁹ Klopedi: BETANCOURT (the results of recent large scale excavations at the site by the Archaeological Service are currently in press); Messa: KOLDEWY 1895; Thermi: LAMB 1936.

¹⁰ Further extensive recent work at the site by the Archaeological Service is now in the process of study and publication.

at Naukratis in the Nile Delta, a site that even produced a dedication on a Chiote bowl from the Mytilenaeans to Aphrodite. Their presence is also likely attested by the large quantities of Aeolic grey wares found at the site and currently being studied by a team at the British Museum. Spencer has pointed out the probability that only Mytilene became involved in production and export of pottery, especially amphorae and their contents (presumably wine) while the other poleis of the island focused more on internal matters. He makes a good case for the stasis evident in the poems of Alkaios to derive at least in part from the clash between traditional aristocratic families and the *nouveaux riches* merchants¹¹.

In terms of pottery a fine grey *bucchero*, typical from the middle Bronze Age on, is the commonest on Lesbos during the Iron Age and indeed continues into the classical period as the standard table ware of the island. An important Oxford dissertation on such grey wares was completed by Nicholas Bayne in 1963 but was published unchanged in 2000 in a German series¹². Research over the last decade by Pierre Dupont of the CNRS and Vasilica Lungu of ISSEE has firstly identified that some of the Aeolic *bucchero* found around the Black Sea likely originated in Mytilene¹³ although the monograph is not published yet. Their study of this pottery from the castle and North Harbour excavations we carried out at Mytilene are adding significantly to our knowledge of its later phases.

Our own work has produced enormous quantities from the 6th to 4th centuries BC (including wasters) and only latterly does black gloss pottery replace it in the archaeological record. The large amounts found in many excavations by the Archaeological Service will be an important resource once they have been studied and published, but the information available indicates it goes back to the Early Iron Age. Similarly studies by P. Dupont and V. Lungu of Lesbian amphorae¹⁴ have confirmed their presence from Sicily to Georgia and all around the Black Sea; in 2010 a publication of Lesbian material from Tel Qudadi in Israel suggested a date around 700 BC.¹⁵ It is the earliest attested date for an exported amphora although Abdera in Thrace has yielded Lesbian amphorae from the third quarter of the 7th century. There is also literary evidence for Lesbos' connection with the early history of the cult of the Great Gods of Samothrace. Thus it seems likely that Lesbos began to take an important part in the great Hellenic Renaissance of the 8th century BC.

Another area in which Mytilene has produced significant remains although as yet unpublished in detail is the cult of Cybele. Our own excavations revealed that a sanctuary of Demeter and Kore on the eastern hill of the city had become also a centre of worship for Cybele by at least the 4th c. BC. Figurines like an image of the goddess on her lion flanked throne and a tile inscribed with the word ΜΑΤΡΩΝ and a stamped image of a herm of Dionysos (also found on her coinage) are our evidence. More significant for an earlier date for the cult, however, is the presence mentioned earlier of a sanctuary with an apsidal ended

¹¹ SPENCER 2000.

¹² BAYNE 2000.

¹³ LUNGU 2009; DUPONT 2009.

¹⁴ DUPONT 2011; LUNGU 2011.

¹⁵ FANTALKIN & TAL 2010.

building near the North Harbour, a site that in the early 1970s uncovered a crude statue of the goddess. The pottery from the excavation seems to have been entirely Aeolic *bucchero* although it has never been published apart for brief references in the *Arkhaiologikon Deltion* by the excavator Hatzi. If the original report is correct the site may among the earliest in the Greek world for worship of the great mother of Anatolia. New excavations by the Archaeological Service at the site could help confirm this possibility. A relief stele from Eresos in the Old Museum at Mytilene dated to early 7th c. BC is attributed to Cybele although it has not been published in any detail.

An interesting discovery we made at both our sites was large quantities of murex shells, source of the famous purple dye of antiquity. David Reese¹⁶ first examined this material briefly in 1987 and then Deborah Ruscillo Cosmopoulos¹⁷ carried out further studies in subsequent years. Large quantities of crushed shells or whole shells with a small hole for extracting the organs of the mollusc attest to what seems to have been a major industry from at least classical to Hellenistic times (we also found over 400 loom weights, some in 6th c. BC *bucchero*). As I noted earlier Hittite documents refer to the purple producers of Lazpa, perhaps attesting to major production of this valuable resource in the LBA.¹⁸

The earliest attested author from Lesbos in the early 7th c. BC is Terpander of Antissa, known for his musical as well as poetic work, and for his relationship with early Sparta. It is also evident, however, that he had close connections with Anatolia and his musical work likely in part was based on the rhythms of that world. These connections continued evident in his more famous successors, Sappho and Alkaios. It may be no accident that Orpheus has strong associations with Lesbos; his head, still singing, washed up on a beach near Methymna after his death at the hands of Thracian women. There is also evidence for an important oracle in his name near Antissa on the north coast of the island. It is perhaps worth noting that we have a number of 6th century Laconian sherds from 6th c. BC levels at our sites in Mytilene, some of which were published two decades ago by Gerry Schaus¹⁹ in another *Hesperia* article although the number is relatively modest. Laconian connections with the island continued, however, into later times there: men of Lesbos had the right to be the first poet at the annual Karneian festival at Sparta.

To end on a lighter note: a curiosity from the NE Aegean is the ancient beauty contest, the *Kallisteia*. The most famous of course took place on Mount Ida when Paris, passing his youthful years as a shepherd, received the apple of discord to award to the fairest of the three goddesses, Athena, Hera and Aphrodite. Perhaps it is more than of passing interest that on ancient Lesbos there was a famous beauty contest among the women of the island, an event to which Athenaeus (Athen. XIII 610) refers along with similar contests on the nearby island of Tenedos.

It is clear, I think, from what I have said that our knowledge of the Aeolic

¹⁶ REESE 1989.

¹⁷ RUSCILLO 2013.

¹⁸ SINGER 2008.

¹⁹ SCHAUS 1992; SCHAUS 2017.

world needs continuing reassessment as new archaeological evidence emerges — I might mention the recent discovery of 8th century levels on top of Late Bronze Age levels at the famous 6th c. BC Aeolic temple site of Klopédi. Eric Cline's new book — *1177 BC: the Year Civilization Collapsed* —, has made very clear the danger of looking for simple answers to complex questions and on Lesbos we have far less information than the areas of the eastern Mediterranean which he discusses.²⁰ The man we honour for his work in the Aegean and Black Sea has made ever more evident the complexities of the early history of the northeastern Aegean and the contributions that archaeologists can make to understanding it*.

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²⁰ CLINE 2014.

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