The Roman City of Abdera and Its Territory

Constantina KALLINTZI

Abstract: In this paper we shall discuss the presence of the city of Abdera in the Roman period, as known by historical sources and archaeological evidence. Many sectors of the Roman city and its cemeteries have been revealed through excavations, but unfortunately, due to the continuous habitation in the same area, the construction phases overlap. However, a satisfactory view of the urban plan and the arrangement of the cemeteries is available, while the ceramic and minor objects provide information about everyday life and the economic activities of the population, as well as their burial customs. Alongside the excavations, surface surveys have been conducted in the territory of Abdera, which have provided data for the settlements, the rural facilities and the villae rusticae around the city, as well as the adverse effects of the construction of Via Egnatia. Nevertheless, despite the existence of architectural remains of the city’s buildings and a significant amount of other archaeological artifacts, the Roman period of Abdera has not been studied in depth. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to research towards this direction.

Key words: Abdera, Topeiros, Via Egnatia, asty, residences, road system, water supply, drainage, cemeteries, chora

INTRODUCTION

The Roman period was for Abdera (Kallintzi 2007; IThrAeg, 164-167) a time of progressive decline, which saw this once wealthy and populous Thracian coastal city descend into poverty and obscurity. It is also certain that this decline had started earlier. A number of factors, among which Roman invasion and the gradual conquest of the region predominated, slowly created the conditions for this negative development. For this reason, the discussion will include the Middle and Late Hellenistic period, during which the presence of Rome in the region was evident. Late Antiquity will also be discussed, whose early stages comprise the following situation, although without a clear borderline.

The available archaeological material used derives from the asty, its cemeteries, and the chora.

The examination of this material faces many problems, most important of which being the scarcity of evidence in ancient literature or inscriptions, something even more apparent in the later periods. The same accounts for the archaeological data. Excavations in layers of the periods under discussion have been conducted mainly in the city. Most of them are located in the western part of the southern enceinte (figs. 3, 4, 5), while the rest of the material originates from surface surveys. Moreover, although excavations have provided sufficient evidence regarding urban planning, they do not cover the research gaps. On the one hand, the available material has not been studied to the same extent as that belonging to previous eras. On the other hand, continuous habitation in the same area for about eight centuries has complicated...
the sequence of the building phases, while the heavily disturbed layers obscure the clarification of the situation.

However, in recent years there has been some progress. In 2011 a doctoral thesis on the archaeology and historical topography of the *chora* of Abdera was completed (Καλλιντζή 2011). In 2015 the Ephorate of Antiquities of Xanthi inaugurated an intensive surface survey project throughout the city, its cemeteries and country sites (Καλλιντζή et al. 2015). Finally, Maria Chryssaphi, an archaeologist of the Ephorate, is working on her PhD thesis concerning Roman Abdera. It is expected that these studies will provide answers to many of the questions researchers are facing today.

**Observations**

Before proceeding, the following remarks should be made on issues that will recur in the paper:

Abdera was undoubtedly one of the most powerful cities founded on the Thracian coast during the second Greek colonization. Its economic growth was based on trade and agriculture, as a fertile country supported it.

Its historical course is characterised by strong contrasts, with periods of prosperity alternating with periods of decline. Of particular importance is the fact that after the middle of the 4th c. BC the city had to be transferred to the south (fig. 3) (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1085-1087, 1099-1100; Καλλιντζή 2012, 136).

The Romans appeared in the region in the late 3rd c. BC, firstly as economic factors and later as a political and military force. Roman interventions escalated in the 2nd c. BC and for Abdera these developments led to a long descending route that eventually resulted in a full decline and loss of identity.

The most catastrophic event for the city occurred in the summer of 170 BC (Diod. 30.6; Liv. 43.4.8) when it became a target of the combined forces of the Romans and the Pergamenes who conquered it. Abdera was occupied by the Roman praetor Lucius Hortensius, with the help of troops supplied by the King of Pergamon Eumenes II. The *asty* was taken over and was completely destroyed, while its leaders were killed and many residents were sold as slaves. After actions taken by the Abderitans and the Teians, the Senate of Rome tried to reverse the negative results, without any real success (Loukopoulou / Parissaki 2004, 308; IThrAeg, 191-197, E5; IThrAeg, 197-200, E6). This notorious incident marked the beginning of a long decline which continued in all the subsequent periods.

During the following centuries, Abdera was not included in the Roman territory until the 3rd c. AD, but was under the ‘free city’ political regime (Diod. 31.8. 8; Liv. 45.29.5-6; IThrAeg, 138, 165 [for 167 BC]; IThrAeg, 326 [for 148 BC]; Plin. *NH* 4.2.42-43 [for 46 AD]). However, despite this privileged political state, the city never fully recovered.

Another catastrophe that influenced the urban development and life of the inhabitants was the repeated flooding of the Nestos River after the 2nd c. AD (Κουκούλη-Χρυσανθάκη 1988, 58). This caused considerable damages to the existing buildings, especially those located in the western enceinte area (fig. 5) and also filled the coastal zone with alluvial deposits. The floods also resulted in the gradual filling of the harbour, the rise of the ground level, the change of the *asty* plan and the formation of marshes.
Archaeological data / discussion

Asty

Buildings

The plan of the *asty* during the Hellenistic period is well known: a four-sided enceinte surrounded building units arranged according to the Hippodamian system (*fig. 3*) (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1178). However, it is difficult to follow the chronological development of the buildings, as the number and the extent of the actual interventions on the buildings are not known. It would be expected that the ‘demolition’ of the *asty* in 170 BC would be visible or at least detectable. However, as mentioned above, the limited data prevent this.

Among the public spaces of the period, the *Agora* is known, mainly from the epigraphic evidence of the 3rd and 2nd c. BC (*IThrAeg*, 193, E5, l. 37; 198, E6, l. 22; 201, E7, l. 40). It has been proposed that it was located at a central point of the enceinte. However, it is easier to discuss the location of the commercial agora in an *insula* that included shops (*fig. 4, # 1*), where, apart from the numerous products, five fragments of stone measurement blocks for liquids (*sekomata*) have been found (Λαζαρίδης 1960, 72-81; Καλλιντζή 2011, 1100).

The theatre, mentioned in an inscription of the 2nd c. BC, has been located (*fig. 3, # 7*) and excavated, but it is destroyed to a great extent (Τριανταφύλλος 2004, 266; Καλλιντζή 2011, 1102-1104). The figurines
of actors, along with several other pieces of evidence, point to its operation in the Hellenistic period.

Our knowledge is also limited regarding the cults and the sanctuaries. The theater itself, but also other monuments indicate the cult of Dionysus, which continued until the 3rd c. AD, when a building for his worship was constructed by the head of a Dionysian association (ThrAeg, 218-219, E18, l. 6). During the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods, the worship of other deities is documented archaeologically (Cybele, Hero Horseman, Zeus Eleutherios and Rome). The common priest of the last two had the position of the eponymous archon (ThrAeg, 221-222, E 21, E 22).

In the western part of the southern enceinte, excavations have revealed mostly residences (figs. 3, 4, 5). The most common type is characterised by a central courtyard, a peristyle, and surrounding rooms. The initial construction of those buildings in the 4th c. BC is followed by phases of repair and abandonment, while during the 2nd – 3rd c. AD several of them were reused. A typical example is House #6 in fig. 4; it was constructed in the 4th c. BC and was reused with some modifications in the late 2nd – early 3rd c. AD, and finally in the 4th c. AD. Similar are the cases of neighboring houses (fig. 4, ## 5, 7; fig. 5, # 1) (Kalantzi 2011, 1109-1112). The insula east of them (fig. 4, # 2) was inhabited from the late 1st c. BC to the end of the 3rd c. AD (Athanasiou / Kalantzi 2009, 458). Building # 3 in fig. 4 dates to the Late Hellenistic – Imperial period (Athanasiou / Kalantzi 2009, 458-459). During the 1st c. AD, due to the Pax Romana, the city wall (fig. 4, # 10; fig. 5, # 4) was used as a quarry for building material. Then, buildings were constructed outside it and towards the seashore (fig. 4, ## 11, 13, 14, 15; fig. 5, ## 5, 7). The repeated floods covered all the buildings with a thick layer of sand and resulted in the relocation of the asty towards the west. In a stratigraphic trench (Kalantzi 1991, 460) in the interior of the wall (fig. 5, # 3), layers of a massive flood were detected. These layers that probably date to the 4th c. AD, covered all buildings in the area with a thick layer of sand.

A cluster of houses of different plans, built in a random arrangement to the west of the wall, was constructed in the 3rd–4th c. (fig. 4, ## 1, 5). In this area, there is evidence for workshop activities during the Imperial period. The first is a layer with abundant marine shells, mainly murex, which points to the existence of a purple dye processing...
workshop. The second involves a polygonal structure with a floor and walls covered with clay slabs, which was interpreted as a cistern or a workshop laundry. Other small-scale structures also comprise workshop evidence (Athanasiou / Kalinitzi 2009, 456-457).

Next to the wrecked ancient wall, a bath complex was constructed, with a long operation life spanning from the 1st to the 4th c. AD (fig. 4, # 13; fig. 5, # 7) (Kalinitzi 2011, 1125).

Road system

The Hippodamian system was maintained in its original form until the 1st c. BC. In the early Imperial period, the roads became narrower, but their original pattern (fig. 4, R; fig. 5, R) was preserved. The system was abolished during the Late Imperial period (Kalinitzi 1991, 460-461; Triantaphylllos 2004, 265-266; Kalinitzi 2011, 1178-1187).

Frequent interventions were conducted in the urban network for its maintenance. Successive road layers of the Imperial period are observed at the crossroads between buildings #5 and #6 in fig. 4.

At some point during Late Antiquity, in the area of the gate, the road surface elevated and the width of the street was reduced by half (fig. 5, R). This probably happened to meet the new needs of the population concentration in this area, which required an extension of the structured space. These repairs also denote a state care for the maintenance of roads.

Water supply – drainage

The asty of Abdera did not have a central water supply system (Kalinitzi 2011, 1155-1158). The water supply of the houses was conducted through wells placed in the courtyards.
Unlike water supply, there was an organised drainage system (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1159-1160) of rainwater and effluents. Most of the related data date in the Hellenistic and subsequent periods. The rainwater was drawn from the houses with open stone channels, which collected water from roofs. This was then driven out into the streets either directly or via covered pipelines. Throughout the streets, stone built pipes covered with stone slabs led the water off the city, to the sea. At the crossroads between buildings #5 and #6 in fig. 4 one of these pipelines is distinguished.

Relocation
From the 3rd c. AD onwards population gradually moved towards the hill of the ancient Acropolis (fig. 3), where a walled settlement was eventually formed. This settlement later evolved into what is known as the Byzantine Polystylon.

Cemeteries
From the 6th to the early 3rd c. BC, the cemetery of tumuli was in use, covering an extended area in various directions outside the city walls (figs. 2, 3) (Kallintzi 2004; Kallintzi 2006; Καλλιντζή 2011, 1211-1219).

Late 3rd – second half of the 2nd c. BC
At the end of the 3rd c. BC the cemeteries were transferred to the west of the abandoned northern enceinte (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1219-1222). The first burial area was excavated in the northwest end (fig. 2, # 1; fig. 3, # 1). The practice of tumuli was abandoned and the tombs were constructed on the building remains (Samiou 2004). The second burial area was located further south (fig. 2, # 2; fig. 3, # 2) (Λαζαρίδης 1965, 459).
Two other burial sites have been located towards the northeast (fig. 2, # 3) (Καλλιντζή 2011, 884-887) and the north (fig. 2, # 4; fig. 3, # 4). In the last site, a grave of the early 2nd c. BC was excavated (Καλλιντζή 1997, 864; Καλλιντζή 2004, 264-267), which is of particular interest, as it bears evidence for its association with the events of 170 BC. The fact that it belongs to a 25-year old military man, apparently noble and educated, crowned with a golden wreath, leads to the assumption of him being one of the city’s defenders, possibly a leader, honored by the City.

1st c. BC – 2nd c. AD

Evidence concerning the location of the cemeteries in the late Hellenistic and the early Roman period is very scarce (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1223-1224). It is believed that the limited cemeteries of the period reflect a decrease in the population due to the destruction caused by Hortensius. The area in the northwest end of the northern enceinte (fig. 2, # 1; fig. 3, # 1) must have still been used, albeit sporadically, as indicated by the grave stelae dated to the 1st c. BC found there.

Around the 1st c. BC – 1st c. AD significant changes occurred in the grave sites. Evidence suggests that the area to the west of the southern enceinte began to be used (fig. 2, # 5; fig. 3, # 5). Outside the western gate, a funerary monument (fig. 4, # 12; fig. 5, # 6) was erected (Λαζαρίδης 1965, 456) which had the form of a small temple on a built base, with four sarcophagi in its burial chamber.

For the period of the 2nd c. AD the evidence are even fewer and limited to grave stelae (IThrAeg, 227-228, E29; 246-247, E66; 247-248, E67).

3rd – 4th c. AD

During the 3rd – 4th c., after the disasters caused by the aforementioned flooding and relocation, the western part of the southern enceinte, in the gate area, and a large area to its west (fig. 2, # 5; fig. 3, ## 5, 6; fig. 4) were abandoned and converted into a cemetery. The tombs were placed densely among the ruins (fig. 5) (Καλλιντζή / Χρυσάφη 2010, 395). This cemetery was initially pagan, but later on became Christian.

Chora

Hellenistic times

The chora of Abdera was a narrow zone of land with a width of about...
13-14 km surrounded by waterlogged lands, unsuitable for habitation (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1300-1318). Although its dimensions varied during various chronological periods (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1318-1340), its general boundaries were the River Kossynthos, Lake Vistonis, the Thracian Sea, the River Nestos and the Rhodope Mountains.

There is compelling archaeological evidence regarding the chora during the Hellenistic period (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1334-1337): settlements or small-scale residential installations, surviving from the Classical times, remained the same or were extended. In the early stages of the period, several farmsteads are met, which are reduced towards its end. There are also cemeteries, mostly tumuli. The dimensions of the chora do not seem to have changed in comparison to the previous period, although a sparse expansion to the northwest is detected, with indications that the Abderitans occupied an area in a distance of 21 km from the city. Two incidents of the 2nd c. BC, concerning the chora, the fact that it attracted the interest of the Odrysian King Kotys (Loukopoulou / Parissaki 2004, 308) and the requirement of Hortensius to pay 100,000 denarii and 80,000 modii of grain, suggest that the country was productive and its exploitation by the Abderitans was active and profitable.

Between 148 and 120 BC Via Egnatia was constructed (Παρισάκη 2002-2003, 354-357; Δώλος 2008), crossing the area along the foothills of the Rhodope Mountains. Along its axis, a dense network of stations and all kinds of facilities were installed, followed by a multitude of economic and other activities. Land transportation rose against maritime transport, and the city of Abdera could no longer participate in the new economic scene, resulting in its isolation. In this context comes the end of its autonomous coinage dated in the first half of the 1st c. BC, which confirms its economic and political decline (Chryssanthaki 2004, 317).

**Roman era**

During the Imperial period the landscape was dramatically reformed, as successive changes took place concerning the extent of the chora of Abdera. The foundation of Topeiros (fig. 1) and its upgrading by Trajan had immediate and multiple impacts on Abdera. Most importantly, Rome took from Abdera the northern part of the chora and gave it to Topeiros for the maintenance of Via Egnatia (Πολυχρονίδου-Λουκοπούλου 1989, 583; IThrAeg 255, 263; Καλλιντζή 2011, 1337). The territorial status was reinstated years later, under Hadrian, according to two boundary inscriptions (IThrAeg, 222-223, E23; 254-255, E78; 256, E79), which mark the northwestern border of the chora with Topeiros.

Observing the density of habitation in the north, the proposal of Louisa Loukopoulou for the formation of the chora of Topeiros towards the east of the asty and along the foothills of Rhodope can be verified (Πολυχρονίδου-Λουκοπούλου 1989, 577-599). It is also argued that it can be defined with some degree of certainty (Καλλιντζή 2011, 1337-1338). In this, seven settlements, seven minor installations, three possible stations of Via Egnatia and twenty-two burial sites are located. The Egnatia itself has not been traced, but its route can be reconstructed due to the presence of large burial mounds along the mountain range (fig. 1, dots).

The chora of Abdera includes three settlements, one of which, near Koutso (fig. 1, # 4), has been excavated (Τριαντάφυλλος 1973-1974, 810-813; Καλλιντζή 2011, 422-429), confirming the existence of a cemetery of the late 3rd – 4th c. AD. Moreover, there are twelve installa-
tions, the nature of which has not yet been determined.

The area to the north of the *asty* appears to have been very sparsely populated. This can be interpreted by the emergence and development of large farmsteads, as it is known that during the Imperial period the organisation of the *chora* changed and the class of landowners emerged. Besides, an important parameter of Roman policy was to concentrate the scattered rural populations in the major urban centers, like Topeiros. It is evident that, apart from the city and some settlements, the remaining population of the *chora* moved to Topeiros. After the reforms of Emperor Diocletian, the region of Abdera became part of the new province of Rhodope. Abdera was no longer a free city, and for that reason the concept of the *chora* ceased to exist.

**The area during Late Antiquity**

After the elimination of the *chora*’s existence, a new habitation period for the region begins. Changes in the administrative structure had an impact on the organisation of space. An increase in the number of small settlements is observed. Following the trend of urbanisation of the previous period, the opposite tendency appears, that of ruralisation of society. Changes in the natural environment, with the alluvial fillings in the areas of the estuaries of the Nestos and the Kossynthos (fig. 1, circles), offered new habitation territories, which the population exploited.

In the area of Abdera, the existence of at least two complexes of rural villas (Καλλιντζή / Χρυσάφη 2007) indicates the presence of large farmsteads (fig. 2, ## 6, 7; fig. 3, ## 8, 9).

In the northern part, near Kimmeria (fig. 1, # 1), a basilica, probably of the 6th c., has been located (Μακροπούλου 2010, 591; Καλλιντζή 2011, 277-284), indicating the presence of a settlement. The same accounts for the region of the River Kossynthos, near Vafeika (fig. 1, # 3), where a ceramic workshop was discovered (Καλλιντζή 2001-2004, 723; Καλλιντζή 2006; Καλλιντζή 2011, 349-354), Diomedia (fig. 1, # 2) (Καλλιντζή / Παπαδόπουλος 2007, 453), and Porto Lagos / Poroi (fig. 1, # 5) (Καλλιντζή 2011, 120-122).

When examining this period one should not lose sight of the fact that the foundation of Constantinople set a new order in the Aegean Thrace region: from the 4th c. AD it turns to the east, it receives direct light from its glamour and benefits from the roads that lead to it, while the structure of the urban network is now arranged with reference to the new capital.

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