

The lower city of Olbia: Occupation and abandonment in the 2nd century BC

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Intro Slide

Olbia in the 2nd century BC is rarely portrayed in very positive light. Accounts tend to highlight the abandonment of low-lying areas of the urban zone around the middle of the 2nd century. The epigraphic record is filled with deeds of euergetism responding to the latest crisis. Attacks, control by foreign rulers, and the presence of foreign garrisons dominate the historical narrative. Often such desperate times for a city are a boon for archaeologists. The sack of Athens by the Persians is certainly the best known example... OK perhaps Pompeii is better known.

SITE SLIDE

In the case of 2nd century Olbia, however, there is no specific event and hence no specific date that can be assigned to the abandonment of the area under consideration in this paper: the Lower City, northern sector (NGS from here on). The area is labeled on this satellite image along with the temenos and agora areas that will be mentioned again later in this paper. On the right you see a state plan of the NGS excavations. Without a specific historical event linked to the abandonment of NGS, we are dependent on the archaeological evidence for writing the story of this sector. In the past, the abandonment of NGS has been placed in the middle of the 2nd century. In this paper we largely agree with this basic picture but we add numerous refinements to this narrative. In brief, the evidence of independently datable material shows plentiful material dating to the 140s, and later 2nd century finds provide a terminus post quem ca. 100 BC for the clean up and leveling of the area. The latest datable objects point to a very late date for the abandonment of the sector, but did life continue as normal all the way up to that point? After the opening survey of the independently datable finds from the mid to late second century, we attempt to answer this question by patterns in the overall late Hellenistic assemblage, patterns in chronologies of abandonment elsewhere, and the archaeological contexts of these latest finds.

EXTERNALLY DATABLE ARTIFACTS

Classes of artifacts whose dates may be derived from sources independent of the record at Olbia itself provide the primary evidence for the history of occupation and abandonment of NGS. The most precisely datable of these artifacts are the Rhodian stamped amphoras and the coins. Other more generally datable artifacts include the amphoras without stamps; the mouldmade bowls; the imported black-gloss and west slope decorated pottery; and the lamps.

Rhodian amphora stamps

The fragments most securely dated to the later 2nd century are the Rhodian handles with eponym stamps.¹ The graph shows the numbers of eponyms assignable using Gérald

¹ The later periods of the Rhodian stamp chronology have not received as intensive consideration as periods Ib-IV; for the later periods, see Finkielsztejn 2001 and Fautores conference paper.

Finkielsztejn's chronology to each decade of the 2nd century (there are none assigned to the last decade hence its absence from this graph). Two points of particular importance are the peak in the 150s and the rapid decline through the 140s and 130s to an absence of eponyms assignable to the 120s.

Rhodians elsewhere at Olbia

The recent publication of finds from the Temenos area at Olbia includes comparable Rhodian eponym stamps, again with a relatively strong presence in the 150s with far less representation in subsequent decades. The closed deposit of the cistern from the temenos area, published by Levi in 1965, has an earlier peak of Rhodian eponyms in the 170s with the latest two names datable to the 150s and 140s respectively. Such scarcity cannot be blamed on a drop in Rhodian production in the latter half of the 2nd century, since John Lund's work shows clearly continued production on the island in these decades.

Rhodians at Pontic sites

The drop at Olbia also cannot be dismissed as the impact of fewer Rhodian amphoras reaching the Pontic region in general. In an earlier conference on Pontic chronologies hosted by our research center, the Niculae Conovici documented the continued, if admittedly reduced, Rhodian presence at various Pontic sites. In regards this graph, one should note that each site's data points indicate the number of eponym stamps assigned to that decade as a percentage of the total eponym stamps found at the site. Hence the many early examples at Kallatis have the inevitable effect of much lower percentages later on. Pointing in the same direction are the many Rhodian eponyms published by Yuri Zaytzev from Scythian Neapolis. The chronological pattern of Rhodian amphora imports at NGS appears best treated as a real, local problem; and consideration of further datable artifacts only reinforces this point.

Mid century coins

The majority of the 2nd century coins that could be studied from NGS, 27 of 39 specimens, comes from three different coin types all bearing the abbreviation ΒΣΕ/ΣΒΕ – these are represented by the top and middle coins on the slide. While these had been dated in the past to the first half of the 2nd century, the current chronology of the stylistically similar Athenian New Style tetradrachms encourages the dating of these types to the late 160s or even more likely in the 150s. Hoard evidence related to a Chresonesan die engraver likely responsible for one of the Olbian examples with the head of Artemis – at the bottom of this slide – supports this chronology.

Later coins

Slightly later coins, numbering only 9 examples, date to the 140s, and one of these with Herakles, club and ΕΙΡΗΒΑ, at the top of this slide, represents a type later countermarked as during the reign of Skilurus. There are no coins dating to the reign of Skilurus, perhaps in the 130s/120s studied from NGS. The numismatic record picks up again with Olbian coins of Mithradates VI with three examples likely dating to the first quarter of the 1st century, one example is illustrated here.

Coins and Rhodian stamps slide

The chronological patterns of the Rhodian eponyms and the coins are strikingly similar. In both cases, a peak in the 150s is followed by decline into the latter decades of the century with slight resurrection only at the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 1st centuries. We now add to this pattern through other datable artifacts.

Northern Peloponnesian amphora

Three different imported amphora classes bring further independent evidence for mid 2nd century activity.

First, a form that was produced across the northern coast of the Peloponnese closely resembles amphoras of Brindisi; however, their fabric tends to be much browner and coarser, and there are minor differences in the forms of the rim and arrangement of the handles.² While some examples may date as early as the middle decades of the 2nd century, jars of this type are most often encountered in deposits closed at the end of the 2nd century or slightly later.³

Punic and Italian amphoras

The Punic amphoras from NGS show the typical short, widely flaring neck, elaborately modeled rim, long tubular body, vertical handles, and a long, hollow stem toe. Despite variation in form and fabric, all examples from NGS are well-paralleled at the pre-146 BC houses on the Byrsa at Carthage.

Two groups of late Hellenistic/Republican amphoras from Italy are present, neither in any great numbers. First, a group in volcanic sand-tempered Campanian fabric represent a transitional phase from the latest 'Greco-Italic' form to the earliest Dressel form I. The necks are not quite as tall as is commonly seen in the various, fully developed Dressel I variants. The NGS examples show taller proportions and more upright, taller rims as compared with examples from Carthage.⁴ Instead, the NGS examples are better matched in the mid to late 2nd century 'interim period' deposit at Corinth,⁵ where I.B. Romano has suggested a date in the 130s for the Italian amphoras.

Slightly later than these are the Adriatic Italian jars referred to as Lamboglia type 2. These may date as early as the first half of the 2nd century; however, in the eastern Mediterranean they are most commonly found in contexts dating very late in that century or the early decades of the first century BC.⁶

Mid-century mouldmade bowls

Another class of ceramics that brings external chronological evidence are the mouldmade bowls. Approximately 60% of those studied were imported from Ephesos, so the

² For the kilnsite at Sicyon I thank Yiannis Lolos and Andrei Opait for information; the kilnsite at Aigio is mentioned in REF and the material is on display at the museum at Aigio – this material may all be somewhat later than the examples at Athens and Olbia, but the forms are closely related in the treatment of the toe and rims. The northern Peloponnesian predecessors of this type may be seen in the latest Hellenistic Corinthian Type A' production, see Koehler 1978.

³ Athenian Agora Sullan sack contexts provide frequent examples; see too from Thessaloniki...etc.

⁴ Byrsa volume and Romano

⁵ Romano

⁶ The type is extremely common in Athens in contexts related to the Sullan sack; further examples are published from the destruction level at Pella from ca. 100 BC (see Akamatis...) and very late Hellenistic contexts at Ephesos (Bezeczky 2004 etc....).

chronological evidence surveyed by Christine Rogl is directly relevant here too. These examples from a deep fill in one room typify the mid-century bowls. Alongside rare Attic and occasional Pergamene products, most belong to Rogl's first two chronological groups, the South Gate workshop (first half of the 2nd century BC) and early pieces from the PAR monogram workshop (c. 166 BC-100 BC), such as the large part of a bowl with an acanthus-vine scroll left, a lower body fragment also of this workshop with rounded, imbricate petals, and a minute fragment of a Pendant Semi-Circle (PSC) bowl of the second quarter of the 2nd century. The fill also includes two fragmentary bowls in all likelihood from Kirbeis' workshop. The Kirbeis group bowls, argued earlier to be of Pontic production, provide complementary chronological evidence since their dates in the second and early third quarter of the 2nd century are derived from datable sequences of motifs and styles among the Aegean producers, especially Pergamon⁷ and Kyme.⁸

PSC bowl

This very well preserved pendant semi-circle bowl best illustrates the mouldmade bowls datable within the third quarter of the 2nd century.

Long petal bowls

Similar or slightly later dates are indicated by these long-petal bowl fragments. It should be noted, however, that very few of these are found in discrete 2nd century BC contexts.

Roulette bowls

Late 2nd and early 1st century roulette-decorated Knidian bowls are the latest datable imported pieces.⁹ A large fragment of a net pattern bowl, with joining fragments from widely separated excavation contexts may belong to the latest Ephesian workshops.

Campana A slide

Two other distinct groups of imported table wares, Italian Campana A group and the so-called Hellenistic colour-coated ware A, provide further chronological evidence for strata of the 2nd century. The Campana A ware, the more narrowly datable of the two groups, consists mostly of bowls and plates, but some fragments of jugs have also been found. Five plates are decorated with a stamped tulip motif.¹⁰ This motif developed from having very clearly marked and separated leaves in earlier examples to later stereotyped and rudimentary versions. The earlier types have been found at Carthage, as illustrated in the lower right, and hence date before 146 BC.¹¹ A lower date for bowls bearing this stamp is provided by a destruction layer at Scythian Neapolis dated to 135/131 BC.¹²

Colour coated ware

⁷ De Luca 1968; 1999.

⁸ Bouzek & Jansová 1974, 22, 38.

⁹ Four pieces were found, only one (1992-740) hardly Knidian but a colour-coated imitation from elsewhere, was found in a context (Basement 343). Further three fragments were found in Houseblock VI* in 2000 and 2002: 2000-1175 (Knidian); 2000-1176 (Knidian); 2002-741 (Knidian?).

¹⁰ (91-665, 93-898, 92-614, 91-675)

¹¹ (Morel 1990, 19-20, pl. 1. 2;

¹² Zajcev 2005, fig. 3, 25; 4, 14

Formateret: Engelsk
(Storbritannien)

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Krzysztof Domżański has recently drawn attention to the extensive distribution of colour-coated ware in the Black Sea region including Olbia, where the best examples come from the mid 2nd century temenos cistern fill.¹³ The ware is currently regarded as Rhodian. Domżański has noted that the identification and precise chronology of this ware is still difficult, but he has suggested that much of this material was Rhodian in origin, with reference to visual and chemical comparison to the clay fabric of Rhodian amphora.¹⁴ Possibly rates of production and certainly the intensity of exports were in decline during the second half of the 2nd century. Hence these pieces from NGS are most likely to date near the middle of the 2nd century if not earlier.

Mid century west slope

West Slope style decorated black gloss pottery fills out the remainder of the datable imported tableware and reinforces the emerging chronological pattern. The amphora fragments and the upper kantharos fragment here are identifiable as Pergamene production and are datable to middle or third quarter of the 2nd century with reference to that site. The larger kantharos fragment is only more generally datable and may extend later.

Later West Slope

After the middle decades of the century, there is a gap in datable West Slope pieces. At the end of the 2nd century the datable material shifts from an emphasis on amphoras and kantharoi to large kraters or basins and kantharoi. Hence, the latest three fragments of West Slope kantharoi find their best parallels in late 2nd or early 1st century pieces from Pergamon and Athens.¹⁵ Three fragments of West Slope amphoras, not illustrated, and these two krater or basin rims may be roughly contemporary or even datable to the earliest part of the 1st century.

Lamps

The final category of datable imports are the wheelmade and mouldmade lamps. The wheelmade imports are rare by this time, but there are five examples of Howland types 33 and 34 dated to the period 220 to 140 BC. After a gap in the datable imports between 140 and 120 BC, there are two Howland type 37A lamps dated 120-90 BC and two Howland type 35 of the late second to early first century BC.

Apart from a few Pergamene mouldmade lamps, which are generally datable from ca. 175 – 100 BC,¹⁶ the majority of the mouldmade imports could, on account of the

¹³ (Domżański 2007, including extensive bibliographical references)

¹⁴ cf. Élaïn 2000, 161-163, 165, fig. 5; Levi 1964, 253, fig. 15. For a further plate see Levi 1964, 169, fig. 40.2-3. However, it seems that the ware was produced in at least two different clays, since a brown clayed version also exists, see Pulak-Townsend 1987, 46; Młynarczyk 2002, 123.

¹⁵ 93-504 fragment of a baggy kantharos of Behr's phase 3, with spearhead necklace decoration, dated to late second to the middle of the first century, based on the pergamene West Slope material in Behr, 1988, 97-178. The second fragment 93-554 of an uncertain kantharos is decorated with the large leaf ivy garland, which appears in Athens in the last quarter of the second to the first quarter of the first century, Rotroff, 1997, 48. The last kantharos fragment 93-890 is a fragment of a hellenistic kantharos, dated by pergamene parallels to the middle of the first century, Behr 1988, 97-178; cf. S. Rotroff and Oliver, jr., A. The Hellenistic pottery from Sardis, the finds through 1994, Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, 2003, Harvard University Press, 46, no. 110.

¹⁶ (1990-219 ID 266 175-100 BC),

micaceous grey clay, come from Ephesos, where lamp production started around 150 BC. Even if these are not Ephesian products, their forms seem generally datable within the second half of the second century.

Summary slide

To sum up the argument thus far, the gap surrounding the 120s, most precisely visible in the Rhodian amphora stamps and datable coins, remains unfilled. On either side of this gap there are other datable 2nd century ceramic types, with most of the finds datable to the 150s through 130s. At the end of the century the datable material is generally less common, but the end of the 2nd century is consistently found in various classes of artifact. Despite the fact that some artifacts do date to the end of the 2nd century, there does not appear to have been a continuing, significant level of activity in the area after the 130s. There are simply too many expectable classes of late 2nd century artifacts that are too rare.

Knidian stamps

Not all rarities are related solely to the chronology of activity in NGS per se. For example, Knidian amphora stamps, so typical of late 2nd century deposits in Athens and Delos, are extremely rare at Olbia. But Knidian amphoras were exported westwards especially towards Delos and Athens; they are often rare along the coast of Asia Minor and into the Pontic region.

Eastern Sigillata A, another hallmark of late Hellenistic sites in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, also may not be very helpful as a significant absence. Our colleague, Valentina Krapivina will comment on the red slipped pottery from the Lower City, but thus far we are not aware of significant quantities. Such a rarity, however, seems typical of Pontic sites.

Lagynoi

More noteworthy is the extreme rarity of white ground lagynoi. A few fragments were found in NGS, but none in the nearly 500 discrete strata studied as part of our research. The Olbian necropolis does provide a few very nice, museum quality examples.

Late mouldmade bowls

The mouldmade bowl repertoire, despite its richness at the site, is strikingly different from better known assemblages that continue through the latter half of the 2nd century. Few bowls at Olbia show the long-petal decoration (2.3 %), contrasting with ca. 9.7% in the Magnesia Gate deposits and 10% in the Delos collection. This motif continued much longer than the period best represented at NGS. Similarly scarce are fragments belonging to Rogl's latest Ephesian phases of the first half of the 1st century BC. Roulette bowls, too, although present are perhaps not as numerous as might be expected.

Finally, the numismatic record shows a clear absence of either local or foreign coins datable to the last three decades of the 2nd century.

Summary so far

If we can, by combining what is present and what is absent, exclude a continuation of this assemblage into the last decades of the 2nd century, the question then becomes, at what point should we place the cut off date? At what point are there too few datable pieces, and at what point should we expect to see more of what is absent? Some guidance is provided by consideration of accumulation and discard patterns elsewhere.

Pergamon deposit

At other sites and in various other contexts, some decline in datable objects is often noted in the decades before the actual end of accumulation. For example, the large dumped accumulation of Rhodian amphoras downslope from Palace V on the Pergamene acropolis is dominated by Rhodian stamps of the 180s and 170s even though the actual cessation of accumulation did not occur until close to 160 or even later.

Thasos public well

Well or cistern deposits with distinct episodes of filling often show a similar decline in datable pieces before the latest objects. For example, the filling of the Public Well on Thasos shows the same drop-off in advance of the closing the deposit as at the Pergamon deposit even though the span of time in question is shorter. From the even broader perspective of a site overall, Gerald Finkielsztein found a very similar pattern of the bulk of the well-preserved amphoras at Maresha dating well before the site's abandonment near the end of the 2nd century.

Summary so far

It seems reasonable to suppose, on the basis of such examples, that debris often would accumulate in various discard piles around a city over the years and then at some point that debris would be collected and dumped as needed for landfilling operations. While some of the debris filling the Lower City houses may have or even clearly did accumulate in situ, another portion, perhaps the bulk of the above-floor fills would have been carted in – from where we do not know – and dumped over the site as needed. Older garbage had a better chance of entering the debris piles than newer garbage, and the very latest material would be the most rare.

The general patterns of discarded, datable material and dates of abandonment just described encourage the view that the land filling and leveling of the Lower City of Olbia did not occur until the last decade or so of the 2nd century, but the piles of garbage contributing the filling material ceased significant accumulation in the 130s. The process of abandonment and later leveling envisioned here is some elucidated by turning to the houses of NGS and their latest Hellenistic phases.

NGS Plan

The material dating into the 140/130s BC appears in numerous contexts across NGS; however, the nature of these find spots is not the same in all cases. In the central section of NGS, house blocks III and IV, most buildings preserve evidence for Classical or Early Hellenistic construction followed by continued Hellenistic occupation and modifications. Here, in each of the likely house blocks at least one room's deep late Hellenistic abandonment fill includes material datable near or even after ca. 140 BC. Such late

material is even found on the late Hellenistic occupation floor levels in all but one of the house blocks.¹⁷

Plan highlighting room 253

By far the best example of such an assemblage is found in Room 253 in the northwestern corner of block IV.

Room 253

A heavily repaired pithos and six nearly complete amphoras were all abandoned in this room at floor level. In terms of securely datable artifacts, we can highlight a Rhodian jar preserving the fabricant stamp of Imas of active in the mid 2nd century, a mouldmade bowl representing the early work of the PAR monogram workshop ca. 140 BC, and a Campana ware jug. Above this floor level deposit, as was typical of these two central blocks, was roughly two meters of late Hellenistic fill, at times with multiple fragments of the same vessel though rarely complete vessels.

NGS plan with Rhodian stamp locations marked

The most securely dated, latest objects in the deep fills in these two areas are the Rhodian stamp of Archibios, ca. 115 BC, in House IV-4, and the Rhodian stamp of Euanor, ca. 119 BC, in House III-2. These same rooms also contain very late fragments of west slope decorated pottery; in House III-2 a late West Slope amphora fragment and a kantharos fragment found at floor level.

Sporadic deposits plan

House blocks II and VI, by contrast, show much more sporadic and isolated late Hellenistic material. In House block II, the best-studied houses II-5 and II-6 were already abandoned by ca. 200 BC and late Hellenistic levels are limited to rubble-paved areas, never within the defined rooms themselves. The only especially late piece from this area may be a northern Peloponnesian toe from fill over the large room 390 in House II-5, but many other finds over and amongst the stones of these pavements tend to date to the middle decades of the century just as was the case in the deep house fills in blocks III and IV.

In House block VI, there is more of the late material, but again, the finds tend to be limited to insubstantial fills. One such collection of late fragments, including a Rhodian stamp of Aristopolis, ca. 118 BC, appears in the southeastern corner of the block. Somewhat more substantial are the late 2nd century fills in a pocket in the bedrock, room 591 and in levels capped by a very late hearth 561 just to the north. Particularly in

¹⁷ Floors with mid 2nd century finds

Hearth 329

Context 217, room 368

Context 262 B 315

B 253 amphoras on floor level

Context 270 B280

Context 294 and 292 B 302 – only 140s material

Context 312 B 343 (very near floor level, and there is fairly late material in the corner bin, context 313 too)

Contexts 334 and 338, B 353

the case of hearth 561, the plentiful mouldmade bowls, including the large net-patterned fragment joining a smaller fragment from far to the northeast, are often later than those encountered elsewhere in NGS. This crossmend between two areas of the excavation is a rarity, but no weight should be placed on that fact since we only studied the material after significant selection processes modified the record. The crossmend does point towards the localized accumulation and spreading of this garbage over the sector as part of the abandonment and clean-up process.

Summary so far

The combination of these various ways of looking at the finds from 2nd century NGS results in the following picture. Accumulation of garbage slowed and ceased over the 140s and 130s as the houses in blocks III and IV were abandoned. While we cannot be sure where the mounds of garbage first lay, the already abandoned blocks II and VI to the north and south seem like good candidates; these houses had been filled in by the end of the 3rd century. A period of neglect followed for likely all the way to the end of the century; had there been significant life in the sector at this time we would expect much more from those artifact classes now noted as rarities. Near the very end of the 2nd century or even the beginning of the 1st century the central blocks too were filled in and the whole area was generally leveled. Joins found vertically through fills indicate the relatively rapid pace of this process; joins horizontally attest to the breadth of the effort.

Crises and Abandonments at Olbia

As we noted in our introduction, the 2nd century is often seen as a time of crisis at Olbia. Our research adds to this impression. Whatever factors encouraged the abandonment of this sector also encouraged the abandonment of other parts of the city: the cistern in the temenos was filled in perhaps slightly earlier; the Temple of Apollo was dismantled some time in the mid 2nd century since a stone from the building was used for a later 2nd century decree; a coin hoard from this mid-century period was found in the Agora. To these archaeologically attested indications of crisis, many of which were already highlighted by our colleague Valentina Krapivina in her earlier published paper on problems at Late Hellenistic Olbia, one can add the epigraphic references to attacks on the city and efforts at defense.

These symptoms of crisis are by no means strictly synchronous, yet it would be difficult indeed to argue for radically different causes for each one. And yet, it is impossible to specify one cause for these symptoms. Skiluros is the highest profile and to some extent the most appealing scapegoat, but one could endlessly consider other possibilities. Likewise, the specific catalyst for the leveling out operation around 100 BC is unknown, but it may be tempting to link this effort with activity at the site in the time of Mithradates VI.

Have we failed in our initial hope of contributing a fixed point to Hellenistic chronologies using Olbia tumultuous history in the 2nd century? Almost, but not entirely. We have presented the mix of imported, independently datable ceramic types that define mid-2nd century activity at Olbia. The pattern of presence and absence, commonality and rarity described here can be compared with other sites as a chronological point of reference. Our report on the NGS excavations between 1985 and 2002, now in

preparation, will add further components to this late Hellenistic assemblage as well as the material assignable to earlier phases of activity at the site.