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## T H E S S A L O N I K I   B E F O R E   C A S S A N D E R

*“Some retreat  
into the past,  
others return  
far in the future”  
-Orestis Alexakis,  
“Adagio”, Υπήρξε  
(Ed. Apostrophos,  
1999, p. 165)*

### **1. Introduction to the geography of the region and its pre-Cassandrian settlements**

A. The land between Mt. Olympos and the Halkidiki that surrounds the Thermaic Gulf is characterized by a low coastal area, a plain extending inland that is hilly in places, becoming semi-mountainous and then mountainous as it moves further inland. The area is also made up of the valleys of the Peneios, Aliakmon, Loudias, Axios, Gallikos, and Anthemus rivers, as well as many streams (map 1).

The basic natural and unchanging factor that has operated throughout the history of this region has been the Thermaic Gulf, known to Hecataeus, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Strabo. Amydon on the lower Axios during the Trojan War, Therme during the Persian Wars, the events of the Peloponnesian War and then the Thessaloniki of Cassander and the Macedonians owed their development to their strategic and vital location vis-à-vis the Thermaic Gulf, to their role as the terminus and staging-point for land and sea routes, and to their management of the region’s economic resources (agriculture, animal husbandry, forest timber, gold, and bronze).

The Thermaic Gulf was always an important point of reference for shipping, trade, colonization, and geopolitical developments relating to the Kingdom of Macedon. Ancient authors refer to the Thermaic Gulf and its regions (e.g., Therme, Methone, Pydna, Potidaea) by reason of historical events like the Persian

Wars and the Peloponnesian War. They also provide geographic details when including the Thermaic region in a *periplous* (e.g., Hecataeus, Strabo). The texts of Herodotus and Thucydides are especially interesting in that they record the extent of knowledge on the part of other Greeks about the regions around the Thermaic Gulf and Macedonia during the Archaic (700-480 B.C.) and Classical (480-323 B.C.) periods.

B. During the Bronze Age (3000-1100 B.C.), the basic choices about habitation sites in the eastern zone around the Thermaic Gulf emerged (fig 1). Independent settlements were established at *toumbes*, rising on naturally fortified sites and at the edges of plains close to streams. Quite a number of these settlements would have a long-lived presence in the region, down to the 4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. During the Late Bronze Age (1550-1100 B.C.), old and new settlements strengthened the control-points for agricultural and animal production, and the passages for exchange and trade. For these, the estuaries of the Axios, Gallikos, and Anthemus rivers were preferred. Mycenaean pottery finds attest to activity along the coasts, and to changes within these communities, such as the activation of local leaders and aristocratic groups.

During the Early Iron Age (1100-700 B.C.), old settlements were expanded or new ones founded, creating elevated mound settlements (Gk. *τράπεζες* = *trapezes*) (figs. 2-3). It would appear that the structure of these early cities was organized around the geopolitical gathering together of several settlements, and the economic preeminence of certain sites vis-à-vis others. Details of innovations and cultural changes have been traced in settlements and cemeteries:

- a. Between the Axios and Gallikos rivers.
- b. Between the Gallikos and Anthemus rivers.
- c. Between the Anthemus river and the promontory of Megalon Embolon.

The development of production, the circulation of goods, and the techniques of navigation during the Bronze Age (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.) and the early Iron Age (1100-700 B.C.) influenced contacts and relations among political entities established around the Gulf's perimeter, into the center of which flowed the river Axios.

The phenomena of colonization in the wider regions of the Thermaic Gulf between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. coexisted with those brought about by the

locally and regionally-organized societies, which developed into eponymous residential centers and areas known to Herodotus in his description of the Persian campaigns. Mende, Sane “in Pallene”, Lipaxos, Combreaia, Lisai/Aisa, Gigonos, Campsa, Smila, Aineia “in Krousis” (Crossaia) are referred to as “neighboring”, while on the Thermaic Gulf itself are noted the settlements of Therme, Sindos and Chalastra of Mygdonia as far as the Axios, which divides the region of Mygdonia from Bottiaia, and thence to Ichnai and Pella.

The incorporation of colonies and mixed settlements by the “autonomous” or “semi-autonomous” societies of the zone around the Thermaic Gulf, the Mediterranean dimension of commercial activity in the wider region, the powerful presence of Ionians, Persians, (possibly) Phoenicians, Athenians, and finally, Macedonians clearly demonstrate the Gulf’s strategic importance in both economic and political terms.

The town planning of a number of settlements around the Thermaic Gulf, with both public and private structures and a cultural homogeneity (made clear in burial customs) created throughout the region during the Archaic and Classical periods confirms the crucial role of the region, which abounded in agricultural products, gold, and craftsmen, in the areas of both production as well as trade.

During the Archaic (700-480 B.C.) and Classical (480-323 B.C.) periods, up until Thessaloniki’s founding by Cassander (late 4th century B.C.), there were scattered settlements large and small lying between the river Axios and Nea Michaniona that are being explored through excavation. These comprised the organic parts of urban cores developed along Greek lines (e.g., houses like those at Olynthus and in central and southern Greece, Greek-type grave goods), close by points offering good harbor (figs. 4-5). There are references in the ancient texts to the Eretrian colony of Dikaia, to Therme “of Greeks from Thrace” (or “of Greek Thracians”), and to “Greek” Aineia, and there is mention of both cities (Gk. πόλεις) and towns (Gk. *πόλίσματα*). Among these were (maps 1-2):

a. Chalastra, into which were most probably gathered settlements and rural lands between the Axios and Gallikos (ancient Echedoros) rivers, south of Pikrolimni.

b. Sindos and Therme, to which in all likelihood belonged the control of sites between the estuaries of the Gallikos and Anthemus, west of the mountainous bulk of Hortiatis.

c. Kissos, in which it appears that settlements and elevated sites were included up to the foot of Hortiatis.

d. Dikaia, originally an Eretrian colony, whose precise location has not yet been identified, but which probably controlled the coast of Krousis and lay between two other Eretrian colonies, Mende and Methone.

e. Aineia, on the promontory of Megalon Emvolon, and Tuzla, where there was a well-known Sanctuary of Aphrodite.

C. It should be noted that the harbor of Therme – in our case, during the Archaic and Classical periods (700-315 B.C.) – was the most important in the wider region. For this reason, the gulf within whose eastern recesses Therme was situated was called the “Thermaic”. Herodotus’ testimony about the regrouping of Xerxes’ military forces at Therme (480 B.C.) demonstrates its critical importance. By “Therme” was also meant the coastal region between the Echedoros (Gallikos) and Anthemus rivers, within which lay Karabournaki, Toumba, and the zone occupied by the later city of Thessaloniki. Most of the settlements in this area were included in ancient Therme.

Thucydides stressed the presence of the Athenians in Therme. From the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., however, Philip II entirely dominated on land and in the Northern Aegean, restricting the Athenians first outside the Thermaic Gulf, and then outside the Halkidiki.

## **2. The synoecism of the city of Thessaloniki**

When it was founded in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century (315-305 B.C.), Thessaloniki and its countryside included (map 2):

a. The coasts of the ancient regions of Mygdonia and Krousis, between the estuary of the Axios and the promontories of Megalon Emvolon or Megalo Karabournou or Nepolo (the Lighthouse of Angelochori) and Tuzla (Nea Michaniona), where there were situated the ancient sites of Chalastra, Therme, Gareskos, and Aineia, among others.

b. The countryside stretching inland as far as the mountainous mass of Hortiatis, where among others there was the ancient site of Kissos and its semi-mountainous continuations towards the Northwest (Pylaia, Polichne, Oraiokastro,

Pentalofos, Nea Philadelphia) and the South (the hills of Kalavros and ancient Krousis).

Strabo (VII. 21 and 24, cf. Dion. Halic. I.49) notes that among those towns that were weakened by Cassander in order to contribute their populations and aristocratic families to the founding of Thessaloniki were Apollonia, Chalastra, Therme, Aineia, and Kissos: “he joined about 26 of the towns in Krousis and the Thermaic Gulf into one”. The lands of these small cities also comprised the countryside and fields of the large new city.

316/315 B.C. – according to others, 305 B.C. – is considered Thessaloniki’s founding year. The new city was dedicated to Thessaloniki, wife of Cassander and half-sister of Alexander the Great. Thessalonikeia/Thessaloniki gathered within its walls the officers and probably the landowners and professionals, together with their families, from the settlements along the eastern shores of the Thermaic Gulf, between the river Axios and the promontories of Aineia.

The development of Thessaloniki and its harbor in economy and trade cut off the jurisdictions of the remaining towns scattered along the coast, which were already subject to the Macedonian kings, and the new city replaced Therme in strategic importance. Hellenistic Thessaloniki, with its administrative centralization to the Southwest in the Macedonian capital of Pella, would in time prevail as the metropolis of the Northern Greek region. The system of government inaugurated by Cassander with the founding of Thessaloniki, in the place of Therme and Cassandria, and in the place of the deserted Potidaea, rendered these towns subordinate, auxiliary, or insignificant. Essentially, they strengthened with their aristocracies and urban work dynamic the economy and the more secure administrative and military seat of the central harbor in the Thermaic Gulf.

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