

On the Road to Reappraisal: The Economic Importance of Land Transport as Evidenced by the
Late Roman Ceramics from the Panayia Field, Corinth

This paper argues for a reappraisal of the economic potential of land transportation in the ancient world, at least on the regional scale, based on the study of the Late Roman ceramic finds from the Panayia Field in Corinth, Greece. Earlier, “primitivist” scholars of the ancient economy such as M. I. Finley and A. H. M. Jones used primary sources such as Diocletian’s Price Edict to severely deemphasize the role that land transport played in the ancient economy. The potential of land-based distribution networks for other time periods and areas of the world has been explored elsewhere (for example, Horden and Purcell 2000; Hirth 2013), but modern scholarship focused on the Greco-Roman world continues to avoid addressing the role that land transport, on any scale, played in the ancient economy, with the result that long-distance maritime transport is often over-emphasized.

Although the city of Corinth continued to remain a hub of long-distance distribution throughout the Late Roman period, the study of the ceramics recovered from the excavation of the Panayia Field resulted in the characterization of both the various regional and local ceramic wares which regularly appeared as well as the probable networks through which they travelled. Although some of these smaller networks certainly traversed coastal routes and crossed the Corinthian and Saronic Gulfs, a large amount of the distribution of vessels manufactured in Northeast Peloponnesian cooking fabric (hereafter NEPcf) was certainly conducted over land in order to supply various inland sites in the Corinthia and Argolid.

NEPcf is the most common ceramic fabric encountered in Late Roman assemblages at Corinth. Although used primarily for cooking wares in the late 4th century, by the 7th century manufacturers utilized this fabric for nearly all cooking and plain wares found, as well as a large

number of amphoras. Given the consistent level of standardization, its manufacture was clearly organized according to D. P. S. Peacock's (1982) model of a nucleated workshop, implying a single workshop, or tight group of workshops, operating within a defined infrastructure. Vessels in NEPcf were certainly distributed to Isthmia, Corinth, and Nemea in the Corinthia, as well as to the site of Pyrgouthi, situated in the Berbati Valley near Mycenae, where the vast majority of Late Roman pottery is in this fabric. This ware may also have appeared in Argos during this period. As the manufacturing site of these vessels has yet to be determined, some degree of coastal transportation (as suggested by Slane 2014) may have been a factor in their distribution; however, their penetration to the inland, rural sites of Nemea and Pyrgouthi could only have occurred over land. Previous studies exploring the land routes linking the Corinthia and Argolid (Wiseman 1978; Sanders and Whitbread 1990; Marchand 2009) provide some insight into how this ware may have been distributed.

In summary, a single workshop utilizing a single, standardized fabric was supplying this region with an array of high-quality, utilitarian ceramic products. The distribution of vessels in NEPcf represents a significant component of Late Roman Corinth's everyday economy, and that of the northeastern Peloponnese generally, which cannot be ignored if one is to attempt an economic analysis of the city or region. The fact that this ware travelled over land forces the reassessment of blanket statements that claim the economic impracticality or insignificance of land transport. This case study illustrates the regional importance of such land-based networks which, in the aggregate, would have accounted for a significant aspect of the ancient economy as a whole.

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