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Hellenistische Häuser und ihre Funktionen

Internationale Tagung Kiel, 4. bis 6. April 2013

herausgegeben von
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Annette Haug
Dirk Steuernagel

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Features of Hellenistic Housing at Megara Hyblaea. Insights into Recent Works on Early Excavations

Frédéric Mège

Megara Hyblaea is a Greek colony located on the eastern side of Sicily about 20 km north of Syracuse, on a rocky plateau bounded by two rivers on its north and south sides. Although the precise date has has been topic of debate[1] several times (750 BC or 733 BC), its foundation occurred anyway in the second half of the 8th century, thus making of Megara Hyblaea one of the very first Greek foundations in Sicily. Growing quickly, the city gave birth a century later to a subcolony on the south coast, at the frontier of the Punic territory: Selinus. This part of its history ended in 483 BC when Gelo of Syracuse deported its inhabitants. Remaining then empty and abandoned, Megara Hyblaea is supposed to have been occupied again[2] only in the second half of the 4th century by people brought in by Timoleon of Corinth. The city was eventually sacked in 212 BC by the Roman leader Marcellus. Modern research really began with the excavations of Paolo Orsi from the late 19th century to the 1920's and they were resumed in 1949 by the French School at Rome[3] until the early 1990's. This first stage of the dig has eventually taught us many things about the Archaic Megara[4] but has left other periods neglected. These are the object of the works started in 2006 by the French School at Rome, under the scientific guidance of Henri Tréziny. As it generally happens with the remains and the artifacts coming from early excavations, research is often complicated by the lack of an archaeological context. The only solution is thus to lean on typology and relative dating, a loose chronology which sometimes can be fastened with absolute dates or firm hypotheses.

This article will describe more specifically the features of housing in Megara Hyblaea between the 4th and the 2nd centuries BC that is, broadly from the times around the arrival of Timoleon to the decades following the conquest of Sicily by Rome. But before that, the great historical lines of this period need to be sketched through a description of the urban context.

First of all, the new findings have led to the conclusion that the usual dates of 483 and 212 BC, although being crucial and essential, did not lead to the complete interruption of life which is traditionally thought to have happened. The joint study of the architectural structures and of the pottery[5] teaches us that the site was re-occupied in the 5th century, after a probable hiatus of about one generation, and that the city was not completely destroyed in 212 BC. Nor did the years around 340 BC witness a complete restoration of the city due to Timoleon, as it is often assumed. As far as it is possible to assess, Megara Hyblaea was almost continuously occupied during the Classical and Hellenistic periods by at least a small group of people who chose to settle down in a restricted area around the ancient agora (fig. 1). Concerning the urbanism of this time, the first thing to notice is the permanence of the road system. The layout of the main streets has generally been preserved[6] and has barely changed over the centuries. A few Archaic roads have been blocked by the construction of buildings while the layouts of some others have been modified. The second point concerns the dating of the fortifications and the Doric temple. The construction of the temple has been assigned, based on stylistic criterions[7], to the reign of Hiero II of Syracuse (270/69 – 215 BC) while the fortifications used to be dated either to 214 BC[8] or to the times of Timoleon[9]. A new examination of the sherds found in the foundation trench of the fortification wall during the 1957 excavations tends to date it in the first half of the 3rd century BC. Furthermore, the ceramic evidence coming from the backfilling of a well located on the footprint of the temple indicates the same chronology, the second or the third quarter of the 3rd century BC.

Fig. 1: Map of the agora area between the late 4th and the late 3rd century BC

Fig. 2: Detail of the 3rd century BC agora area (in pale grey, structures of the early Hellenistic period)

The consequence for the chronology of the urbanism is that the buildings aligned along the intramural ring road and those organized around the temple must belong to the same time span. Moreover, every structure erected inside the intramural ring road or built over the fortification wall clearly pertains to a period when the fortifications were not used anymore, that is after the Roman conquest of the city in 212 BC. Another aspect of the urbanism can be observed on the southern and eastern side of the Hellenistic agora where several kilns have been found and where a metal workshop has been recently[10] identified, all clues for the existence of a craft district in this area. The archeomagnetic dating[11] of two kilns and the ceramic evidence lead to think that these kilns could have been abandoned before 250 BC. As a matter of fact, the disappearance of this workshop district might be the consequence of a monumentalization of the agora area, an urban program promoted by Hiero II[12] including the Doric temple, the new North *stoa*, the statue bases, the emphasis of the old *heroon* and, in the background, the fortifications (fig. 2). This set of new hypotheses helps to figure out the different urban phases of Megara after the Archaic period. First, in the 5th century (and probably a part of the 4th), a reoccupation of the Archaic constructions with a few new buildings; second, in the 3rd century but maybe already initiated at the end of the 4th, a brand new urban plan in the agora area taking little account of the Archaic one; third, at the end of the 3rd century, the destruction of the fortification wall, followed by the extension of the houses and structures over the limits of the precinct. This chronological framing is the one in which the following developments about domestic architecture will be plotted.

The survey of the remains has led to the identification of three different ways to build foundations and three main types of construction techniques for the upper part of the walls. It has allowed the observation that certain techniques used in the Archaic period had completely disappeared while others had come up. Generally speaking, Archaic walls were built in dry masonry technique whereas clay mortar was used by the Hellenistic masons; simultaneously, two-skinned walls become very common while they were practically nonexistent in the previous times.

The first type of footing uses a previous wall as a support, with or without an intermediate layer of earth packed with rubbles and sherds (type F1, see fig. 3). The second is characterized by the presence of a leveling course in massive masonry of blocks of fairly homogeneous dimensions. This course can either lean on a horizontal course of smaller blocks, or more often on a pile of rubbles forming a spread or a shallow footing (type F2). The third type does not show any real transition between the foundation and the upper part of the wall: in this case, the masonry of the footing is built rather carefully with rubble (type F3, see fig. 3). Two of our three types of walls are two-skinned, with their inner facing made up of a pilling of small rubbles and tiles sherds. In addition, all the elements are bound together by a clay mortar. The masonry of the outer facing makes the difference between both types. With the first type, the outer facing is built with ashlars of almost homogeneous dimensions organized in regular courses. Nevertheless, the most common case is a worse version of the former, using irregular ashlars, so that there are frequent joggles between the courses (type M1, see fig. 3). The second type is very characteristic and did not exist in the Archaic buildings. It is a "panelled masonry" that is, a construction involving a few "edgewise soldier blocks" and several courses of smaller ashlars in between (the fillings). The examples found in Megara generally have no more than three edgewise soldier blocks in a wall plane and irregular fillings (type M2, see fig. 3). Finally, the third type of wall radically differs from the two others: it consists of one-skinned walls in heavy masonry with dry-laid blocks of different width and length (type M3). The plastered walls are very rare on the site, although the kind of inner facing in rubbles and tiles pieces suggests that plastering was common. The few fragments we can observe today are simple and plain. They are constituted of one single layer of a lime mortar (see fig. 5a), sometimes with an addition of crushed brick. Among the materials used for the construction of walls, the local sandstone was the most popular. It is found in every building of the city, at every period, and could easily be found on the site and in the surroundings. But the inhabitants of Megara Hyblaea had at their disposal a very good white limestone (also known as 'Melilli's white limestone') only a few kilometers away. However, this material seems to have been used mainly in the Hellenistic period, for instance in the fortifications, in the temple and in the Maison **49**,19 (article of Annette Haug and Dirk Steuernagel). Surprisingly, as far as we know it from the early excavations, no traces

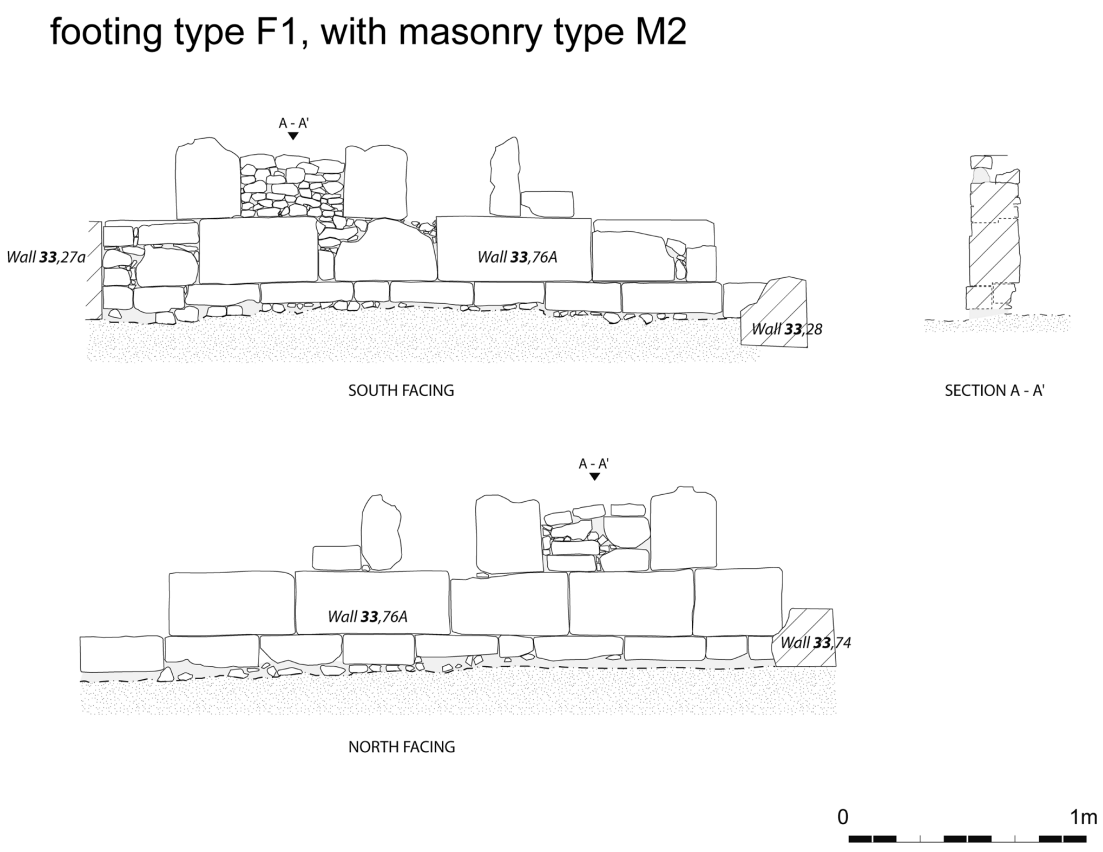


Fig. 3: Walls typology

of mudbrick have been found. Having said that, in absence of any evidences and despite its widespread use in the ancient Greek world, we must cautiously assume that the architecture in Megara was one of stone.

A detailed study of the thresholds[13] has shown that there was only one type which was used in the civic buildings of the Archaic period. This type was no more present after as four new types had made their appearance. A fifth type, type e, was probably already in use in the Archaic period and remained in use in every period. Because of its plain shape, this type represents the most obvious solution for a doorsill (see fig. 4c). Type a is characterized by a rather large and deep groove cut into its tread, whereas type d has two sockets at each end of the tread. As a matter of fact, most of those seems to have been transformed to receive a door mechanism based on pivots and pivot holes (see fig. 4a). Furthermore, the two versions of type b, with their shallow channels meant to insert the pivots in the pivot holes, were specifically designed to receive this system (see fig. 4b); this very peculiar kind of threshold was well represented at Morgantina[14] in the 3rd century BC. Thus, we have suggested that the type b-thresholds of Megara could have appeared within the same time span, and that type a and type d have started to be modified on that occasion. Last came type c, with its long slot cut on one side of the tread to receive door shutters (see fig.4d). The comparisons with Morgantina, Delos or Pompeii tend to prove that this mechanism was invented by the Romans: as far as we know, it is only found in Roman contexts and it was specifically made for the purpose of shop gates. The same remark already made regarding the materials of the walls can be made for the thresholds: indeed, the samples in white limestone were rather rare and late.

Of every kind of pavements present in Megara, only a few can be found in houses. For a start, earth-packed floors are nowadays very rarely visible on the site [15], although their broad presence is not to be doubted: as a matter of fact, it is the scarcity of the 'constructed floors'[16] in the Hellenistic houses which is a better clue to the existence of earth packed floors. The so-called 'cement floors' all use lime as a binder, mixed with two possible sorts of aggregate: limestone powder or broken brick. The observation of the section of these pavements shows that they were always composed of three of the four 'Vitruvian canonic layers' (see fig. 5c), namely the *statumen*, the *rudus* and the *nucleus* (the *pavimentum* is lacking). The mix including limestone powder results in a white mortar that was spread on the ground and smoothened; as far as we can see today, these pavements were left blank, although nothing excludes *a priori* the use of a colored paint (see fig. 5a). The other type, commonly called *opus signinum* or *cocciopesto*, was sometimes decorated with *tesserae* of white marble in rather plain patterns (see fig. 5b). Generally speaking, cement floors are very rare on this site and give the impression to be a late addition to the features of houses. In fact, the same can be said about paved floors, for very few of them are associated with a domestic context. When existing, they either consist of stone slabs pavements or tiled floors; in case of the latter, the floor tiles are fairly big and laid down without mortar or they are made of tiles' sherds cemented together (see fig. 5d). These paved floors rested directly on the natural ground.

Unlike the other construction elements presented here, the coverings were of course not found in place. At times, huge layers of tiles have been mentioned by the excavators and logically interpreted as the result of a roof collapse but it is impossible today to link a certain type of tile to a particular building. The sole presence of a very typical yellow slip on some tiles led to classify them as Hellenistic. However, a comparison with the different types of tiles found in the Hellenistic *Casa dei Leoni* at Epizephyrian Locris[17] demonstrates close similarities with those Megarian tiles. In Megara, the main choice of the constructors was apparently the Corinthian roof: the pan-tiles are flat and have a rounded side border while the cover-tiles have a polygonal section (see fig. 6a), albeit the 'mixed system' or 'Aeolian-Sicilian roof' perhaps was also represented, as shown by the presence of curved cover-tiles (see fig. 6a). In any case, no curved pan-tiles are known so far, so that the Laconian roof seems to have not been in use at these times. The very few examples of ridge tiles have a saddle shape with two or three rounded mouldings on one end (see fig. 6c).

The water supply in Megara was made easier by the abundance of groundwater and this is probably one of the reasons why the first colonists chose to settle here. It explains why so many wells can be found on the site and why there was no need for cisterns or tanks. Dug in the bedrock and going down generally to a depth of 7-8 meters, the wells could have a monolithic puteal (see fig. 7a right; fig. 7c), but they could also get at

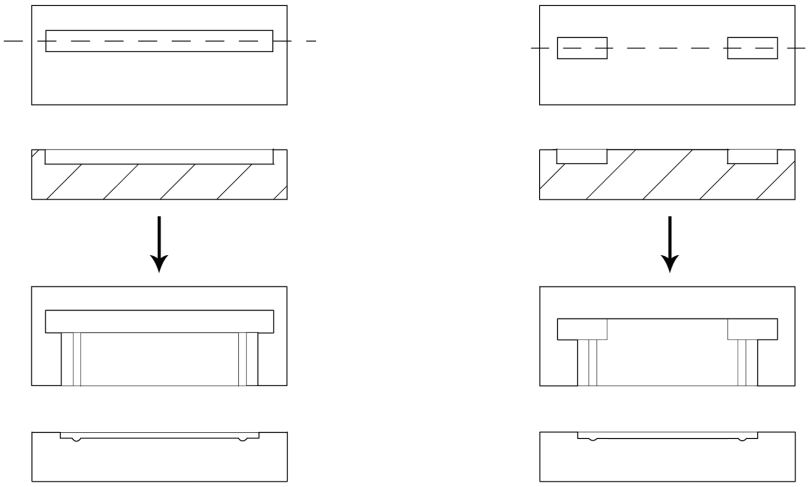


Fig. 4a type a type d

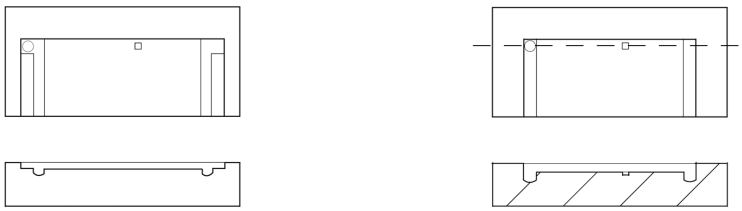


Fig. 4b: type b

Fig. 4c type e with tread Archaic type e

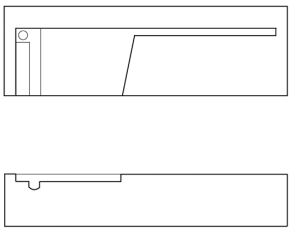


Fig. 4d: type c

Fig. 4: Thresholds typology

Fig. 5a

Fig. 5b: opus signinum 14p2 with patterns in white tesserae

Fig. 5c

Fig. 5d : tiled floor 21p1

Fig. 5: Constructed floors

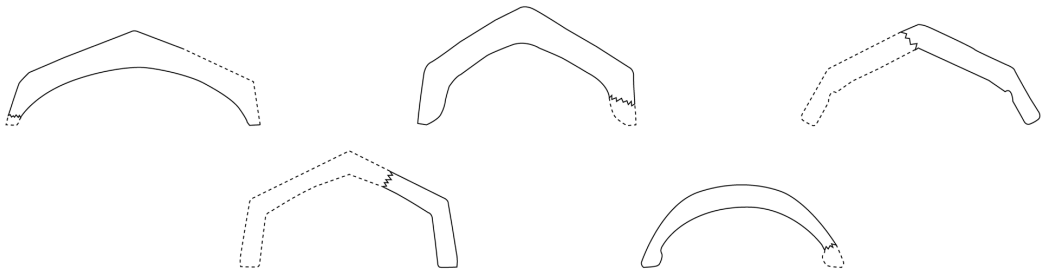


Fig. 6a: cover tiles

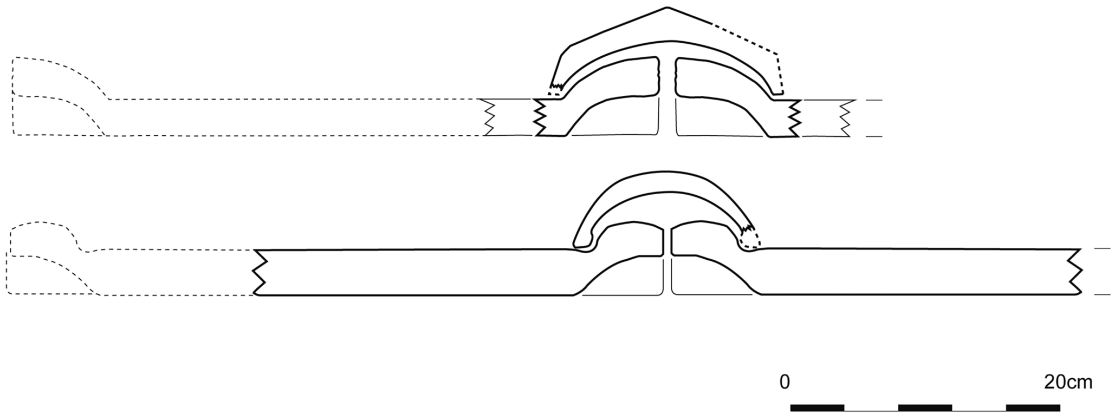


Fig. 6b: propositions of associations pan/tiles/cover-tiles
lenghts of pan-tiles are hypothetical

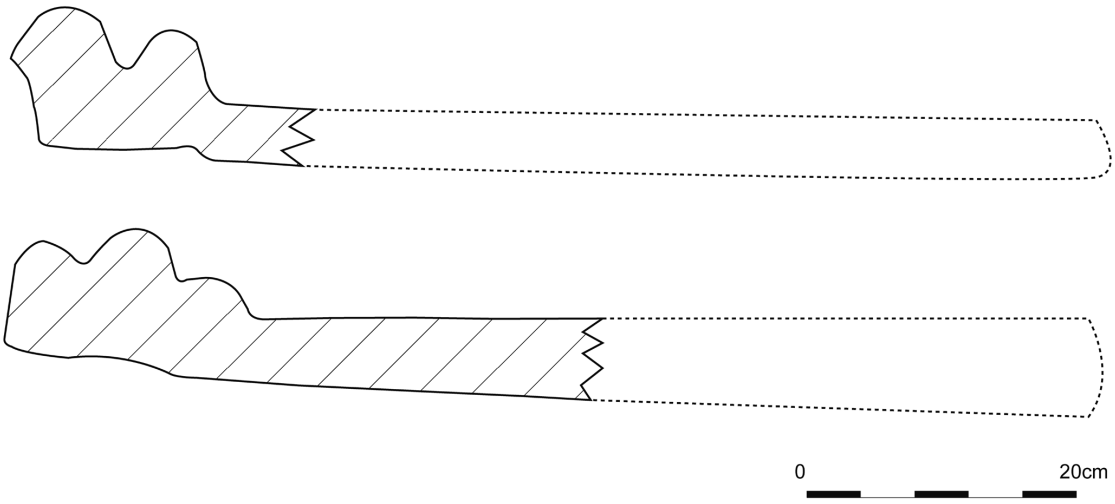


Fig. 6c: ridge tiles; lengths are hypothetical

Fig. 6: Roof tiles

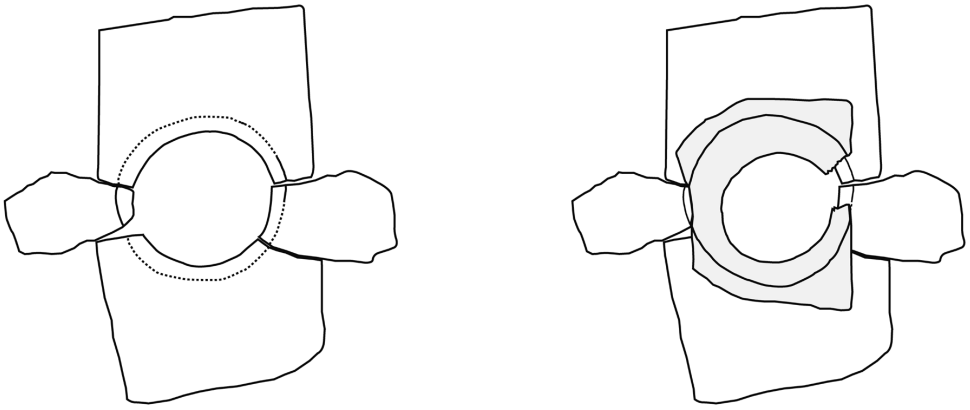


Fig. 7a: well 58,30, first state left, second state right

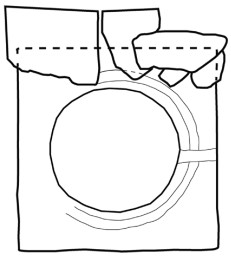


Fig. 7b: well with grooved slab

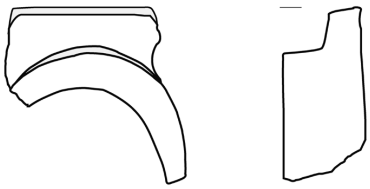
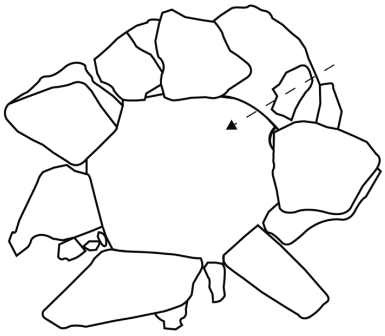


Fig. 7c: monolithic puteal of the well 23,43



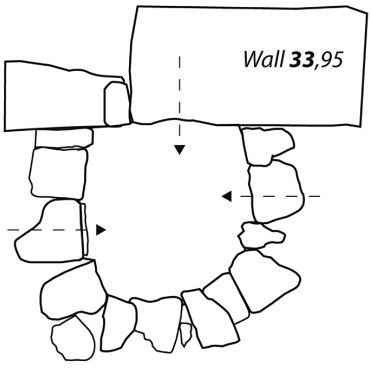


Fig. 7d: cesspit in the courtyard of a house (left); cesspit 33,94 in the street C4 North (right)
the arrows indicate the probable income of the sewage

Fig. 7: Hydraulic equipments

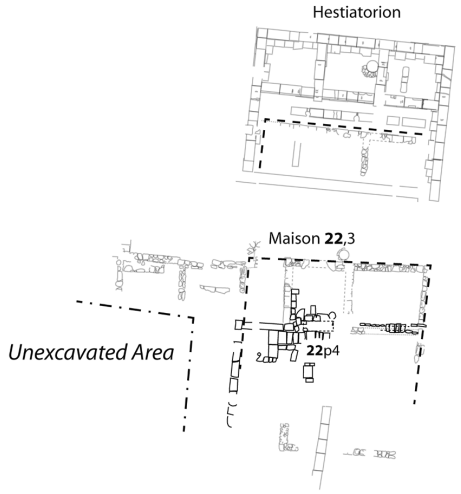


Fig. 8a: first state, with structures reusing the remains of the 6th century hestiatorion and the Maison 22,3, construction of the stone slabs pavement 22p4

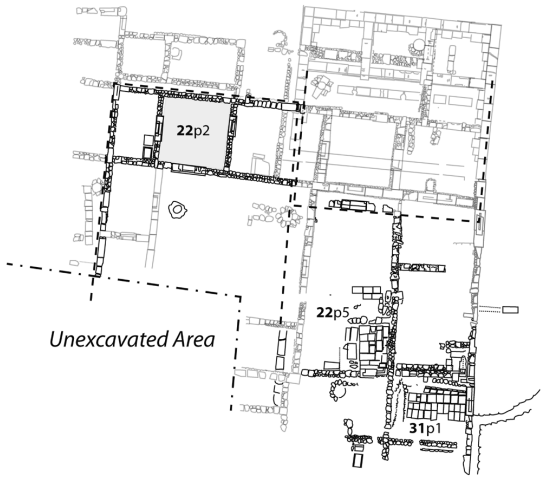


Fig. 8b: second stage, with the construction of the stone slabs pavement 22p5 above 22p4, the stone slabs pavement 31p1 and the cement floor 22p2

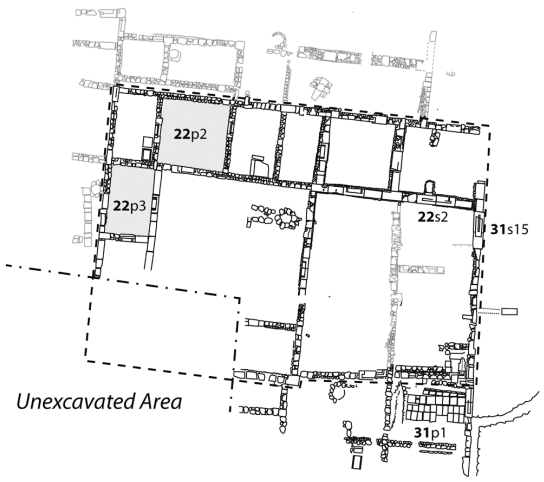


Fig. 8c: third stage, with the double courtyard, the construction of the opus signinum 22p3 and the two type c thresholds 21s2 and 31s15

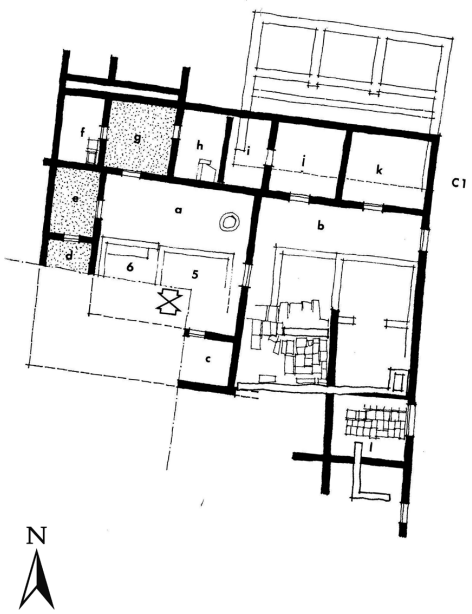


Fig. 8d: plan published in Vallet - Villard - Auberson 1983, 75

Fig. 8: Evolution diagram of the Maison 22,2

their mouth a big slab with the drawing hole cut in the center and surrounded by a circular groove for the insertion of a *pithos* (see fig. 7a left; fig. 7b). This being said, a study of hollow terracotta cylinders decorated with architectonic patterns is in progress. Generally interpreted as small altars (*arulae*), some of these cylinders might well have been also used as puteals. The management of the household wastes might have taken a more organized fashion in the Hellenistic period. The only known example of a proper domestic canalization was found in a house during the first campaign in 1949[18] and backfilled afterwards: it was a pipe apparently made of curved tiles put together underneath and above. It seems that some of these inner canalizations were connected to structures that are now interpreted as cesspits. Equipped with at least one opening for the incoming of the sewage, these cesspits are either found inside the houses or in the streets, next to the houses. Some of them are quite massive and constructed with big slab stones, while others are more modest and surrounded by a pile of rubbles (see fig. 7d).

The description of the construction elements has an end in itself for it concerns material which has never been studied and published. But the analysis of the features of the Hellenistic houses can also help to build some hypotheses about the identification and the evolution of these houses. For instance, let us consider the case of the Maison **22**,23 (see fig. 8). Located just south of the Archaic *hestiatorion* (and partly built over it), this house has first been described[19] by Georges Vallet. In his contribution, meant to be part of a guidebook, the author comments on the remains as they appear and makes some remarks about the configuration of the house. The interpretation of the area proposed here is more specifically based on the new researches on the construction elements and on the urbanization in Classical and Hellenistic times. Three main phases can thus be defined after the construction of the *hestiatorion* and the Archaic Maison **22**,3 in the 6th century BC. During the reoccupation of the site (ca. second quarter of the 5th century BC), new structures are built that are still following the Archaic orientations (see fig. 8a). Then a new organization appears, observable in a different way[20] to divide the urban space into plots (see fig. 8b). Finally, the third phase of the sector shows a plan of the Maison **22**,23 rather close to the one published in the guidebook of Megara (see fig. 8d). New rooms are constructed, the footprint of the house extends over adjacent houses and the ground plan is clearly organized around two courtyards (see fig. 8c). In absence of any stratigraphy and localization of the findings, it is unfortunately not possible to tell much about the function[21] of the rooms: we can only notice that the decorated rooms (cement floors and wall stuccoes) are on the western side of the house, around the western courtyard, and that the eastern part of the house might well have been devoted to commercial activities (presence of two type c thresholds). This organization pattern can also be observed in the Maison **49**,19, for instance (see Annette Haug and Dirk Steuernagel, this volume). Furthermore, this tendency to build double-courtyard houses and to potentially annex contiguous buildings in order to create a single one is typical of the Hellenistic era. Examples of this phenomenon can be found at Priene (see Frank Rumscheid, this volume), Solunt[22], Morgantina, at Epirus and in Southern Illyria (see Sandro De Maria and Sidi Gorica, this volume).

The hypotheses and results presented here show that reasonable advances can be made in the archaeological knowledge even without the yet crucial data provided by proper excavations. A careful examination of the remains, combined with the study of the old photographs, drawings and excavation diaries, can bring valuable informations[23] regarding the relative chronology and organization of the structures; whenever possible, this work of investigation can be significantly supported by the study of artifacts and by the application of other methods of analysis. In this way, the contribution of scientific methods like geophysical surveys and archaeomagnetic dating can be crucial too. Finally, these insights into works in progress allow us to draw some conclusions. In their conception, the buildings and the houses of this time, do not present peculiar tendencies and can be compared to some of their Sicilian counterparts, as we have seen in case of the ground plans. In particular, there are many points of comparison between the Hellenistic houses of Megara Hyblaea and the ones of Morgantina: may it concern the characteristics of the thresholds, in the construction techniques of the walls or in the typology of the pavements, we can perceive striking similarities[24] that could substantiate the idea of a monumentalization program promoted by Hiero II[25] in the cities of his realm. And still, the lavishness of the decoration and the technical level of the facilities in the Megar-

ian houses seem to be far beyond what was found in Solunt, Monte Iato (see Christian Russenberger and Claudia Mächler, this volume) or Agrigento[26]. This fact raises political, social and economical issues, the question being: "what could the status of Megara Hyblaea and its inhabitants be like between the 5th and the 2nd centuries BC ?". Hopefully, the works in progress will contribute to shed a light on these thorny problems.

Notes

1 This discussion is the topic of Vallet – Villard 1952.
2 See in particular Vallet – Villard 1958b.
3 The excavators then were François Villard and Georges Vallet, joined in 1964 by the architect Paul Auberson. In the early 1970's, a new generation of members of the French School has entered the team: Mireille Cébeillac, Michel Gras and Henri Tréziny, with the collaboration of the architect Henri Broise.
4 A short list of the main publications related to Archaic Megara comprises Vallet – Villard 1964; Vallet – Villard 1969; Vallet – Villard – Auberson 1976; Tréziny 1999; Gras – Tréziny – Broise 2004.
5 The ceramic studies in Megara are directed by Jean-Christophe Sourisseau (Aix Marseille Université), in the case of Classical and Hellenistic potteries with the collaboration of Pierre Rouillard (CNRS, Paris 10), Claude Pouzadoux, Patrizia Munzi and Laetitia Cavassa (Centre Jean Bérard, Naples).
6 These observations are confirmed in other parts of the Hellenistic town by the geophysical surveys conducted by a team of the Department of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bradford: Ian Armit, Chris Gaffney and Tom Sparrow. For the preliminary results see Tréziny 2012a.
7 According to the explanations of Malcom Bell III in Bell 1999, 259–264.
8 A hypothesis proposed in Vallet – Villard 1958a and Vallet – Villard – Auberson 1983, 173–174.
9 Karlsson 1992, 83.
10 After several soundings conducted between 2009 and 2011 by Benjamin Girard (Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier 3), Raphaël Orgeolet (Aix Marseille Université) and Stéphanie Wyler (Université Diderot, Paris 7). For the preliminary results see Tréziny 2012b.
11 A campaign of sampling has been performed in 2010 by Philippe Lanos and Gwenaël Hervé (CNRS, Institut de Recherche sur les Archéomatériaux). See preliminary results in Tréziny 2012a.
12 Further elaborations of these topics will be proposed in "Mégara 7. La ville hellénistique", under the direction of Henri Tréziny (in course of writing); preliminary results can be found in Tréziny 2011 and Tréziny 2012a.
13 Thresholds and floors in Megara Hyblaea were part of the subject of an academic work made by the author (Mège 2010).
14 These conclusions come from an article on the Morgantinian door sills (Kyllingstad – Sjöqvist 1965).
15 Actually, floors made of crushed pieces of sandstone have sometimes been reported during the excavations, and not only for the Archaic structures (for instance in Villard 1951). However, the search for these structures has led the excavators to cut through these floors and to remove them.
16 'Constructed floors' is the term I will use here to point out two categories of pavements: the floors made with a lime-based mix and the paved floors.
17 Barra Bagnasco 1992, 319–325.
18 Villard 1951, 22–23.
19 Vallet – Villard – Auberson 1983, 74–76.
20 This new conception of the allotment could imply a 're-colonization' and might tally with the one due to Timoleon.
21 And, as matter of fact, not much more than what Georges Vallet already concluded in Vallet – Villard – Auberson 1983, 74–76.
22 See Wolf 2003.
23 One potential factor which future work should consider is the number of houses that can be estimated for this period, as suggested by Monika Trümper on the occasion of the presentation of this paper.
24 A description and analysis of these architectural features can be found in Tsakirgis 1987, Tsakirgis 1989 and Tsakirgis 1990.
25 See Bell 1999.
26 See De Miro 2009.

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Figures

Fig. 1-2: H. Tréziny. – Fig. 3–7: F. Mège. – Fig. 8 a-c: H. Tréziny; 8 d: after Vallet – Villard – Auberson 1983, fig. 53.

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