



Summary :

One of the most serious and difficult issues while studying a specific culture is the mutual relations between a big city (polis) and a small country town. The latter was usually located near a big city and its economy was mainly based on agriculture. The relations between the chora and the polis in the Black Sea are rooted in the early settlements of ancient Greeks and the foundation of the first colonies.

Date

Antiquity

Geographical Location

Black Sea

1. Introduction

The relations between the ancient poleis of the Black Sea and their surrounding areas started as soon as the first Greek settlers landed on the coast and the first [permanent Greek settlements](#) were founded.¹ These relations depended directly on the ancient Greek colonization and the foundation of colonies in locations usually called “barbarian” by ancient writers. As a matter of fact, during the Greek colonization (between the mid-7th c. BC and the late 6th c. or even in the 5th c. BC), the relations and contacts between the Greek settlers and the native people played a catalytic role² in the future social, economic and political development of the Black Sea regions.³

2. Foundation of colonies

According to sources, the expansionary policy of the ancient Greeks, mainly in the Mediterranean but also in the Black Sea, had established certain rules concerning the foundation of Greek settlements in foreign lands, which in most cases were implemented. It included a fortification wall that ran around the settlement and provided protection and safety to the inhabitants. Then, the latter could divide and allot to themselves the settlements’ arable land, which extended beyond the walls and occasionally started immediately outside the walls. After this process was completed, the inhabitants chose a plot of land inside their settlement in order to build their acropolis and founded precincts dedicated to various gods.⁴ In certain geographical zones this process was modified, depending on the character of local conditions and the particularities of the expansionary policy followed by each metropolis.

On several occasions, the colony was founded in areas inhabited by native tribes, and was included in the territories of local states. However, ancient Greeks preferred to settle in areas where, according to evidence (written and archaeological), no previous habitation had been traced. Both cases appear in the Black Sea, where the arrival of settlers from Greece led to the establishment of peaceful or hostile relations with the natives. A quick look at the available material is enough to confirm these distinct forms. For example, it is known that the colonists of the Thracian coasts of the Aegean met strong resistance from [Thracian tribes](#).⁵ Perhaps the Thracians resisted the will of the Greek cities to expand their rural land in order to boost farming and production and provide food for their increasing population. This must have reduced free land, which had been previously possessed only by Thracian tribes.⁶

On the western coast of the Black Sea the [relations between Thracians and Greek settlers](#) probably followed a different path. In this region (as it happened in the entire Black Sea), when colonists founded their poleis, they chose naturally fortified sites and, therefore, access from inland was difficult, if not impossible. This fact on its own may indicate that the colonists took precautionary measures against possible invasions from the natives. Unfortunately, there are scarce written sources proving the hostile Thracian behavior and attitude towards the newly founded Greek poleis, unlike in the case of the Aegean Thrace. Archaeological findings from the western Black Sea show a generally peaceful and friendly [Milesian](#) colonization to such an extent that researchers even talk about occasional cooperation between colonists and locals in certain areas.⁷ This shows a mutual interest between colonists and the local aristocratic elite, which aimed to yield further riches due to transactions with the recently arrived inhabitants from [Ionia](#).⁸



As it is well known, extensive and interesting references to a similar cooperation between ancient Greek colonists and native people living in various Mediterranean regions are included in the works of a number of ancient writers.⁹ At [Histria](#), although the coastline had been uninhabited before the foundation of the settlement, the natives created their own settlement shortly afterwards, which once again proves the peaceful coexistence and spirit of cooperation between the two peoples in the Archaic period.¹⁰ Perhaps the persistence of ancient Greeks to establish trading transactions with the natives –of both the coastline and the mainland– made them to adopt a policy of friendship and coexistence, which was successfully followed in several other Mediterranean regions as well, like the Iberian Peninsula,¹¹ Emporion¹² and Marseilles.¹³ Symposiums attended by settlers and natives played a vital role.¹⁴

At this point it should be mentioned that the rural areas around the Greek poleis of the western Black Sea, which today belong to Bulgaria, have been researched less than their counterparts along, for example, the Romanian coast. As a result, while Bulgarian archaeologists are currently working and elaborating on the matter,¹⁵ their Romanian colleagues have made great progress on the specific field.¹⁶

No traces of early Greek colonization (7th c. BC) have been found on the eastern coast of the Black Sea,¹⁷ probably due to the strong resistance by the locals, while a permanent Greek presence in the region may be detected from the turn of the 6th c. BC.¹⁸ However, as regards the settlement of Ochamchire (Gyenos?), the available evidence reveals a peaceful habitation of the Greeks in the namesake bay. Perhaps the natives cooperated and coexisted with the settlers in the newly built Greek settlement from the very beginning.¹⁹

Archaeological research has not gone too far on the southern coast and, therefore, any relations between Greeks and barbarians during the colonization cannot be confirmed. However, it is certain that the first Milesian settlement of Sinope at the isthmus of Boztepe is dated to the last third of the 7th c. BC.²⁰ According to archaeologists, the main reason why ancient Greeks did not manage to settle in the southern Black Sea before the mid-7th c. BC was the strong presence of [Cimmerians](#) in the region.²¹

Researchers tend to ascertain the tense or peaceful and friendly relations between the two groups judging from whether fortification walls or other protective fortifications were built in the settlement right from the start. In case ruins of a fortification wall constructed circa the foundation of the settlement are found, the hostile attitude of the natives towards the colonists should be taken for granted, as the wall was built to protect the settlement from invasions. As regards the northern Black Sea, all researchers agree that the relations between the colonists and the locals or nomads living there seem to have been friendly and peaceful in the beginning.²² This is due to the fact that no fortification works have been discovered in the ancient Greek settlements so far, particularly with respect to the first decades after the Greek colonies were founded (590 BC), as it happens with [Olbia](#), [Panticapaeum](#), [Myrmekion](#), [Kepoi](#) and so on.²³ Today, scholars believe that during the appearance of the first Greek settlements, the [Scythian tribes](#) must have been engaged in building their own settlements in the area. Perhaps that is the main reason for the peaceful habitation of the Greek settlers in the Cimmerian Bosphorus.²⁴

3. Polis and Chora

[Theodosia](#) (Kaffa) could be an example, as, according to archaeological evidence, the chora of this polis was first inhabited by Scythians and representatives of the so-called Kizil-Koba culture (the Taurians of southwest Crimea) at the turn of the 5th c. BC, after the Greek colonists settled there.²⁵ The foundation of Theodosia must have played a decisive role in the arrival of Scythian and Taurian populations in the chora of the polis.²⁶ The same conditions probably prevailed in the regions of the lower Dnieper and Bug rivers (Borysthenes and Hypanis in Antiquity), where the polis of Olbia was later built by Milesian colonists. According to archaeological evidence, no barbarian settlements existed there when the Greek colonists arrived.²⁷ Archaeologists today believe that the citizens of Olbia never lived near a barbarian settlement, with the exception of the considerably distant Scythian settlements in the region of the lower Dnieper in the Hellenistic years, as well as the settlements of the Tcherniakhov culture in the region of the lower Bug River. The latter started to appear in a period when the chora of Olbia was in decline. At the same time, it is believed that there is



no evidence proving the view that nomadic barbarian tribes possibly lived in the region.²⁸ On the whole, the chora of Olbia directly depended on the polis. As a result, its rise and fall brought about the development and decline of the chora, respectively.²⁹

More specifically, as regards the chora of Olbia, excavators divide its development into three main periods. The first started in the second quarter of the 6th c. and ended in the first third of the 5th c. BC. During this period, the polis of Olbia appeared, the state of the polis was formed and Olbia became an urban center. By the second half of the 6th c. BC Olbia was in the middle of its chora, reaching its heyday circa 470-460 BC, when approximately 110 new settlements were founded.³⁰ The second period of development for the chora of Olbia was in the Early Classical period and lasted for only a few years until the late 5th c. BC. The third period started immediately after the previous one ended, lasting until Zopyrion's campaign (331 BC). The polis enjoyed its maximum prosperity, though the chora never reached the developmental heights of the Archaic period. There is evidence that the settlements built in the Archaic period were destroyed because of the activities of Zopyrion's army (one of [Alexander the Great's](#) generals).³¹

Finally, as regards another region on the eastern edge of the Crimean Peninsula, where the polis of [Nymphaion/Nymphaeum](#) was built, there is no archaeological evidence supporting the presence of Scythians,³² although some archaeologists today believe that the presence of a pre-Hellenic settlement on the site of ancient Nymphaeum cannot be excluded.³³ The exploitation of the rural lands near the polis of Nymphaeum started immediately after the foundation of the settlement.³⁴ Another interesting case in the Crimean peninsula is the [Chersonesus Taurica](#), for its chora played a very important role. The fact that the most significant events of the economic and political life of the peninsula in the Classical and Hellenistic periods took place in the chora of the polis and directly depended on it is not a fortuitous event.³⁵ Archaeologists make a very clear distinction between the near and the far chora of the peninsula.³⁶

The absence of Scythians on the steppes of southern Ukraine in this period is also proved by the fact that only a small number of [Scythian tombs](#) have been discovered so far.³⁷ It should be noted that as regards the region of Crimea there is scant evidence available so as to suppose that no barbarians existed there in the late 6th c. BC.³⁸ At this point, another equally serious argument supporting the view that in the steppes of southern Ukraine, particularly in the lower Dnieper and Bug rivers, there were probably no settlements of natives throughout at least the Greek colonization in this region should be reported.

Although the forest steppes of southern Ukraine must have lacked settlements of natives, the colonists discovered such settlements to the north of the steppes –a long way from the coast, where Greek colonies were built, and from the very first moment the two groups cooperated and established commercial and friendly relations in the 7th and 6th c. BC, as evidenced by lots of archaeological findings.³⁹ Such settlements were, for example, Nemirovo, Belsk, Matronino, Trakhtemirov, Pastyrskoye, Kamenskoye, Zhabotin III and Sharpovskoye. Consequently, in case there were settlements in the areas near the steppes, the ancient Greeks of the lower Dnieper would not have to move to the north (in a distance of 400-600 km) in order to find permanent inhabitants and establish relations with them, while on the other hand, the vital importance the communication with local peoples had for the Greek emigrants becomes evident. This contemplation leads to the inevitable conclusion that the presence of native people could both play a decisive role in the selection of a settling site for the newcomers⁴⁰ and, as ascertained from the abovementioned evidence, affect the economic development of the future polis.⁴¹ When the colonists were on their way from the metropolis to the new land, they were fully aware that it would be impossible for their colony to develop without the presence of native peoples (future city-state).

That was the case mainly in the early period of the Greek cities, which lasted from the onset of colonization until the early 5th c. BC, when all the great Black Sea cities started to thrive, as it happened with Histria, Olbia, Panticapaeum, Kepoi, Apollonia Pontica, Heraclea Pontica at a later moment, Chersonesus and so on. The cases of Byzantium and Heraclea as well as the case of the [Kingdom of Bosphorus](#) are usually reported as typical examples of the development of the "polis-chora" system. The ancient writer Athenaeus⁴² reports that the polis of Byzantium treated the native Bithynians in the way the Lacedaemonians treated their helots. It is reported that in Polybius' times there was a part of the population dependent on the polis of Byzantium, which was called "λαοί/people(s)".⁴³

When it comes to [Heraclea Pontica](#), the ancient geographer Strabo says that the inhabitants of the polis had turned the native Mariandynoi into helots,⁴⁴ while the Greeks could sell them within their territory. [Strabo](#) also compares the situation in Heraclea with



that prevailing in Crete with the Mnoes and in Thessaly with the Penestai. According to modern historians, the relations between the Greek settlers of Heraclea and the Mariandynoi were described by the violent authority of the settlers imposed on native populations. This imposition resulted from Heraclea's expansionary policy in an attempt to expand its boundaries.⁴⁵ However, there is yet another view that questions the violent subordination of the Mariandynoi to the Greeks, while sometimes there is talk about an agreement between the citizens of Heraclea and the aristocracy of the Mariandynoi, which regulated the relations between the Greeks and the locals.⁴⁶

An additional example of the "polis-chora" system could be the kingdom of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, where the relations between the Greeks and the natives were established on a different basis. This was due to the limited land and the density of the settlements founded both on either bank of the Cimmerian Bosphorus and in the mainland, thus oppressing the "barbarian" population living there. The expansion of the chora of the Greek poleis in the kingdom of the Cimmerian Bosphorus led to the union of these poleis (perhaps following Scythian pressure).⁴⁷ The union resulted in the establishment of the said kingdom in 480 BC by the dynasty of the Archaeanaktids around the dynasts' base of Panticapaeum, which served as its capital.⁴⁸

All things considered concerning the system called "polis-chora" by scientists, the variety and multiple forms of this system's features can be easily discerned in the various regions the ancient Greek colonists, particularly in the Black Sea, reached. A common denominator in all cases is the fact that the foundation of every new Greek settlement should by all means be accompanied by the almost simultaneous foundation of the chora, namely the lands that were going to provide the emigrants with a commodity fundamental, according to Aristotle, to their subsistence away from home: self-supply, which would lead the polis to prosperity. In case these lands were occupied by natives, the colonists resorted to either violence against them or conciliatory solutions, which was most common in the case of the Black Sea. When the Black Sea cities started to prosper and their population was therefore increased, the rural areas should be expanded so as to meet the needs of all the citizens and the (mainly foreign) trade. As mentioned above, mainly from the late 4th c. BC onwards, the considerable expansion of the chora of a polis over the entire Black Sea – particularly to the north, east and west – led to deteriorating relations between the Greeks and the natives, who were oppressed by foreign peoples (like the Sarmatians, who arrived in northern Scythia from Central Asia at the turn of the 3rd c. BC) and felt insecure in an atmosphere of increasingly restraining activity and freedom.

Therefore, it is easily understood that the exhaustive study of the "polis-chora" system, on both specific (separately for each of them) and general level (comparative study of the separate regions) leads to very serious and critical conclusions concerning the Graeco-barbarian relations, the economic development of the cities as well as political life, which directly depended on the economic development of the cities.

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2. Кругликова, И.Т., *Сельское хозяйство Боспора* (Москва 1985), p. 249.

3. Kalojanov, S., "Les colonies grecques de la cote Thrace et le système Polis-Chora", in *Thracia Pontica III. Troisième Symposium International, "Les Thraces et les colonies grecques, VII – V s. av. n.e."*, *Sozopol, 6-12 octobre 1985* (Sofia 1986), p. 9.

4. Яйленко, В.П., *Греческая колонизация VII-III вв. до н.э. По данным эпиграфических источников* (Москва 1982), pp. 83-121.

5. Abdera was a typical case.

6. Petropoulos, E.K., *Hellenic Colonization in Euxeinus Pontos. Penetration, Early Establishment, and the Problem of the "Emporion" Revisited* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1394, Oxford 2005), pp. 122-123, 128-129, with references to relevant bibliography.



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9. Morel, J.-P., "Phocaeen Colonisation", in Tsetschkladze, G.R. (edit.), *Greek Colonization. An Account of Greek Colonies and Other Settlements Overseas I* (Leiden-Boston 2006), pp. 365-366, 375, 388-389.
10. Avram, A., "Histria", in Grammenos, D.V.– Petropoulos, E.K. (edit.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea I* (Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece 4, Thessaloniki 2003), p. 292; Avram, A., "The Territories of Istros and Kallatis", in Guldager Bilde, P.– Stolba, V.F.(edit.), *Surveying the Greek Chora. Black Sea Region in a Comparative Perspective. Black Sea Studies 4* (The Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Black Sea Studies, Aarhus University Press 2006), p. 63. A similar atmosphere also prevailed in the region of Orgame; see Manuçu-Adameş teanu, M., "Orgame", in Grammenos, D.V.– Petropoulos, E.K. (edit.), *Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea I* (Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece 4, Thessaloniki 2003), pp. 352-353.
11. Dominguez, A.J., "Greeks in the Iberian Peninsula", in Tsetschkladze, G.R. (edit.), *Greek Colonization. An Account of Greek Colonies and Other Settlements Overseas I* (Leiden-Boston 2006), pp. 434-435, 448.
12. Dominguez Monedero, A.J., "Греки в Иберии и контакты с туземным миром", in *Vestnik Drevney Istorii* (VDI) 4 (Москва 2005), p. 99.
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