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*In memory of Alina Kalophonou, a member of our team,
who left this life before her time*

Settlement patterns and landscape in the coastal area of Patras. Preliminary report

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Introduction

The survey in the coastal area of Patras in the N. Peloponnese is part of a larger research project intended to cover W. Achaea, which is separated from E. Achaea by the massive ranges of Panachaïkon and Erymanthos. The survey is diachronic and interdisciplinary. Begun in 1986, it is conducted under the responsibility of the Centre for Greek and Roman Antiquity of the National Research Foundation and the Ephorates of Classical and Byzantine Antiquity of Patras. Its first goal is the location and description of evidence of human activity in a geographical region about which very little is known. We utilize all kinds of archaeological evidence and the written tradition for a better understanding of the character and development of the settlements and their various interrelationships over the centuries. The study hopes to contribute to an understanding of the mechanics of space organisation and development, and eventually to provide the basis for an economic and social history of the region.

The natural landscape, by R. Dalongeville (URA 913; CNRS, Maison de l'Orient, Lyon)

The region of Patras (from the mouth of the Peiros to Cape Drepanon) has a widely varied landscape made up of the Panachaïkon highlands, the coastal front slope which falls abruptly to the sea, a narrow coastal plain, and pebbly riverbeds deposited by strong torrents. All these characteristics have contributed to form a very special area (fig.1). The mountainous hinterland (Panachaïkon, Patero, the Therianon–Alissos plateau) rises to about 2000 m. Because of the immediate proximity of these heights to the sea, the slopes are very steep even if the altitude is not great. The substratum is jurassic limestone (400 m thick), of eocene flysch made up of very thick sandstone and fine sand and clay pliocene marine deposits. The coastal front slope varies in elevation. In the Alissos and Therianon areas it is only 100 m high. Inland, close to Patras and especially beyond the town of Rhion, its altitude varies between 400 and 700 m. Its course depends on the major strike-slip faults oriented WNW-ESW; a different element in the Patras area is oriented SW-NE. The coastal front slope almost reaches the sea, except to the S and E of Patras where it is a few kilometers inland, giving way to a plain of sorts. Its formation depends partly on the sea (plio-pleistocene terraces) but it cannot be considered a cliff because of the continental erosion and tectonic activity that are responsible for its morphology to a greater extent than is the sea. There is virtually no coastal plain. Beyond the town of Drepanon to the S and E, and beyond Paralia to the S and W, many coastal rivers left some adjacent alluvial cones; occasionally they coalesced. The coastal plain is narrow, dented, and eroded by the river. In the Patras area between the cape of Patras and the Manolias River, the coastal plain widens because large rivers such as the Glaukos, the Diakonares, and the Elikistra laid down deposits, mixing alluvial cones with terraces in a wide formation of pebbles, sand, and clay. These river-beds cut deep (some 10 m) into the deposits. This is, therefore, a low deposit plateau or a piedmont plateau, rather than a plain.

The region provides a good example of what is known as “la mobilité des paysages méditerranéens”. All the local superficial lithological facies are prone to erosion; landslides are common. The Panachaïkon is scored with deep faults, which help explain how easy it was for the surface material to become unstable; also responsible are steep slopes with insufficient woodland and cover, and soils unable to retain water.