

An excavation is no camping trip

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The Greeks were not always in such dire financial straits as today. But is it necessary to look as far back as these Bonn archeologists did in order to see a huge, flourishing Greek commercial area? They have just discovered a very large commercial area from the ancient Greek era during excavations on Sicily.

Led by Professor Dr. Martin Bentz, Bonn [archeologists](#) began unearthing one of Greek antiquity's largest craftsmen's quarters in the Greek colonial city of Selinunte (7th-3rd century B.C.) on the island of Sicily during two [excavation](#) campaigns in September 2010 and in the fall of 2011. The project is conducted in collaboration with the Italian authorities and the German Archaeological Institute. Its goal is to study an area of daily life in ancient cities that has hitherto received little attention.

"To what extent the ancient [Greeks](#) already had something like "commercial areas" has been a point of discussion in expert circles to this day," said Bonn archeologist Dr. Gabriel Zuchtriegel, a research associate who coordinates the Selinunte project together with Dr. Jon Albers from the Institut für Klassische Archäologie der Universität Bonn at the Chair of Prof. Dr. Martin Bentz. "A concentration of certain 'industries' and craftsmen in special districts does not only presuppose proactive planning; it is also based on a certain idea of how a city should best be organized – from a practical as well as from a social and political point of view. E.g., who will be allowed to live and work where?" The University of Bonn excavations are now contributing to finding a new answer to such questions.

Huge kilns, used communally

Concentration in a certain city district applied primarily to potteries in Selinunte, which were massed on the edge of the settlement in the very shadow of the city wall. "Consequently, their smoke, stench and noise did not inconvenience the other inhabitants as much," explained Dr. Zuchtriegel. "At the same time, this allowed several crafts-men to use kilns and storage facilities together." The excavations showed that the potters joined cooperatives that shared in the use of gigantic kilns with a diameter of up to 7 meters. The crafts-men's district in Selinunte probably stretched for more than 600 meters along the city walls and is thus among the largest ones known today.

The excavations are in the hands of faculty and students from Bonn and Rome – and they are exhausting. For excavations go on in August and September, when the heat reaches its peak - but in exchange, there is very little rain. "This work is a challenge for all involved," commented dig manager Bentz. "This is no camping trip." But for students, it is a great opportunity to learn archeological methods by doing. The Bonn researchers were surprised to find even older remnants of workshops

under the 5th c. kilns. While these finds have not been completely excavated yet, indications are - so the archeologists - that pottery workshops existed in the same location during the city's early phase in the 6th century B.C. This means that craftsmen were probably intentionally housed on the edge as early as during the design of the city, which was – like many colonies – planned on the drawing board.

Reconstructing the past

The finds from the craftsmen's district are not exactly treasures, but they are still valuable for reconstructing the past. In the early phase, widely ranging finds of clay vessels, tiles and bronzes – among them also imports from Athens and Sparta – indicate that living and work quarters were housed together. Over the course of the 5th century, the two areas were separated increasingly.

"We hope to improve our understanding of that in future," said Prof. Bentz. But so far, he continued, little was known about the social conditions prevailing during the founding of a colony. What was certain is that often, it was hunger and need that drove settlers to emigrate and found a new city. Why and under what conditions some of them became potters, other farmers, and others yet rich landowners who could afford to participate in the Olympic games – these are questions that the excavations can shed some light on.

Provided by University of Bonn

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