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The Experimental Survey Program, July 1999

Robert Schon, July 24, 1999

The EKAS experimental team spent the last 3 weeks conducting sherd seeding experiments in order to assess the effects of various visibility conditions on ceramic artifact discovery. What follows is a general schedule and outline of our procedures.

Sherd preparation at Isthmia. For the experiments, a total of 1,180 pottery sherds were prepared and processed as "seeds." Flowerpots and modern tiles were smashed up into sherds of various sizes. These sherds were arranged into groups: 1-300 and 1,001-1,180 are small sherds whose longest dimension (LD)[1] is between 20 and 50 mm. 301-700 are between 60 and 99 mm in LD. 701-850 consist of small tile fragments with a minimum length of 50 cm and a maximum LD of 123 mm. 851-900 are white glazed porcelain bits. 901 -1,000 are large tiles with a minimum length of 100 mm and a maximum LD of 175 mm.

Processing of each sherd consisted of: 1) Numbering 1 side with a sharpie and coating the number with clear nail polish in order to keep it from running. 2) Measurement of LD and classification into the groups above. 3) Munsell color readings for each sherd (facilitated by the fact that the pottery represents only a few different vessels). 4) Digital and color slide photography.

Once prepared, the sherds were organized into equivalent sets. A random number table was generated using Microsoft Excel and an equal number of sherds from each size class was selected. A total of 6 sets with 184 sherds in each were produced. Each set was divided into 3 subsets which correspond to the tenth's digit in the field experiment classification. (So, field 1 has 3 subsets of sherds- 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) Set 1 for each field consists of 100 sherds- 50 from the small category, 30 of the medium sherds, 10 small tiles, 6 large tiles, and 4 porcelain pieces. Set 2 consists of 30 sherds- 14 small, 7 medium, 3 small tile, 4 large tile, and 2 porcelain. Set 3 consists of 54 sherds- 16 small, 20 medium, 12 small tile, 4 large tile, 2 porcelain.

The next step was field selection. This season 4 fields with differing surface visibility patterns were selected for the seeding experiments. Field 1 is an olive grove with relatively high surface visibility (80% according to most walkers) but also high background scatter.[2] Field 2 consists of trampled wheat stubble (Visibility assessment 10%, in most cases) with light to moderate background scatter. Field 3 is a well tilled field with little or no background scatter and reported 90-100% visibility. Filed 4 is another olive groves with weedy soil (40-60% visibility) and very light background scatter).

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[1] Longest dimension (LD) measurements were used in order for us to avoid 2 measurements per sherd. LD will be used as an index of obtrusiveness. Ultimately, Surface area of each sherd will also be calculated.

[2] Background scatter consists of clasts in the soil matrix (primarily rocks) that may distract a fieldwalker's attention away from artifacts.

Field seeding: 3 passes 50 m long (45 in the case of field 3) were seeded in each field. Pass 1 is a high density unit with 100 sherds placed in a 50 by 2 meter swath. Pass 2 consists of a low density scatter with 30 sherds strewn in the 50 x 2 meter pass. In pass 3, we widened the swath to 4 meters (also low density) to test recovery rates of artifacts outside the 2 meter swaths we normally use at EKAS.

Sherds were strewn randomly for the most part, their locations measured, and noted as X and Y coordinates. 0,0 being the starting point of each walker's pass. Sherds were placed on the ground with some attempt to make them look like typical surface artifacts. A viscous dirt-water solution was prepared in the field prior to seeding and this solution was applied to each sherd to make it look authentically dirty. Extra attention was paid to the edges of the sherds to help disguise their "fresh breaks" which Lisa Wells pointed out may attract extra visual attention in the field.

The experiments: Fieldwalkers and Team Leaders from teams 1 and 2 each took a turn to walk all 12 passes. They were instructed to treat each pass as a normal DU. As they walked, they flagged all the artifacts they saw.[3] Members of Team X then collected the flags and recorded the serial number of the discovered sherds. For each pass secondary data was recorded: Field, Walker, Time of Day, Elapsed Time of Walk, Direction of Pass, Weather (sunny/cloudy) and the walker's assessment of Visibility and Background Scatter.

Following the completion of each field's testing. Team X returned to the field to recover the seeded artifacts- this is essential to ensure that each field walker had the potential to find the same sherds. Thus far, we have achieved 100% recovery of artifacts seeded in fields 1 and 2.

As of today, July 24,1999, all that remains is for team 1 to walk field 4 and for Team X to recover fields 3 and 4.

I have not yet been able to analyze or draw any conclusions from the data generated by the experiments, but will attempt to do so starting this week.

[3] Tally counts were taken of actual ancient artifacts but these figures will not be used for analysis.