



Different Shades of Grey Minyan: Dissecting an “Iconic” Ceramic Class of Middle Bronze Age, Mainland Greece

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ABSTRACT

The Middle Helladic Grey Minyan ware is usually assigned with archetypical features, including the systematic use of the potter's wheel. However, because of the significant variation observed, terms such as “True Grey Minyan” and “Imitations of Grey Minyan” were commonly applied in order to emphasise the differences, which, nonetheless were never systematically analysed. The main subject of the present paper is to highlight the differences existing in the potting traditions of Grey Minyan in two nearby regions, namely the Argolid and Attica, which seem to belong to different cultural spheres, given the divergence observed especially in the shape repertoire. The identification of different production and consumption practices is obviously related to different cultural phenomena, as evidenced through (a) the production of similar wheel-fashioned and hand-built Grey Minyan shapes in Attica, and (b) the introduction of foreign potting traditions, namely wheel-fashioned Grey Minyan pots, which are completely alien to the local, handmade ceramics of the Argolid.

1. Introduction

Grey Minyan is considered an emblematic ceramic class of the Middle Helladic (hereafter MH) period (ca. 2100–1700 BCE) in mainland Greece. It is a ceramic tradition particularly related to central Greece, mainly Boeotia, where it was first recognised by H. Schliemann, during the Orchomenos excavations back in the 19th century, and named after the mythical king Minyas (Sarri, 2010a, pp.55–56). Because of the radical changes that took place in the material record towards the end of the Early Helladic (hereafter EH) period, which are traditionally described in terms of backwardness, Grey Minyan was not simply considered as a new ceramic trend of tablewares but as a product of the new population that had just arrived, the first ancestors of the Greeks, according to the cultural-historical approach (Blegen, 1928; Haley, 1928; Caskey, 1960; Syriopoulos, 1994, pp.771–775; for a latest overview of the matter, see also Dickinson, 2016). Although the MH material excavated at Orchomenos had to wait for a century to be fully published (Sarri, 2010a), the

characteristics of Grey Minyan as first described in some detail by E. J. Forsdyke, namely the use of fine clay pastes, the grey colour throughout the section due to the reduction firing, the nicely burnished surfaces with the so-called “soapy texture”, and the systematic use of the potter's wheel, became archetypical (Forsdyke, 1914, pp.129–130; Wace and Blegen, 1916–1918, pp.180–181). Consequently, any variation observed that could not fit into the above criteria – especially in terms of the use of the potter's wheel – was considered to represent an inferior product, an imitation of the “True Grey Minyan” (Zerner, 1993, p.43; Sarri, 2010b).

Modern research though emphasises that regionalism was a significant component of the MH culture, with variability being particularly expressed in ceramics (Rutter, 2007, p.36; Voutsaki, 2010, p.100), something that could explain the inability to produce a uniform nomenclature, the necessity of which has been recently proposed (Gauss and Lindblom, 2017). Therefore, any distinction made between a classic example of quality and a less carelessly made “replica” seems arbitrary and pointless. Common interregional cultural traits did exist, and the production of well-burnished eating and drinking pots fired in a reducing atmosphere

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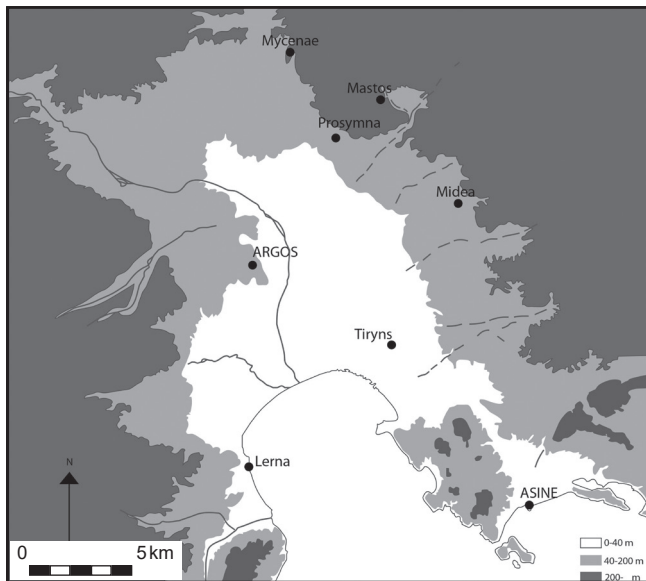


Figure 1. Distribution of main MH sites in the Argive plain (the Argolid); sites discussed in text are indicated with capital letters (map created by A. Balitsari).

was one of them, shared by many subregions of the Greek mainland. However, the production of Grey Minyan was not necessarily a routine only done one way.

The main subject of this paper is to provide a preliminary overview of the differences existing in the potting traditions of two nearby regions, namely the Argolid and Attica

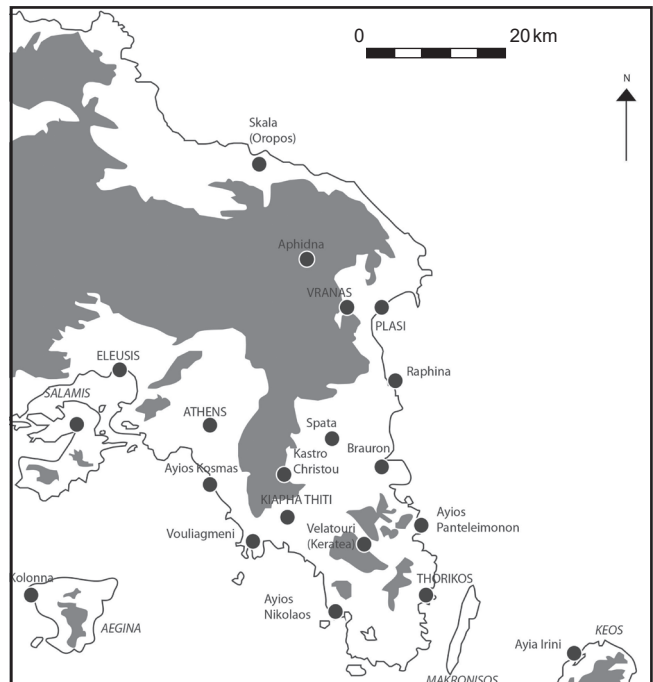


Figure 2. Distribution of main MH sites in Attica; sites discussed in text are indicated with capital letters (map created by A. Balitsari).

(Figures 1–2), with special emphasis placed on the use of the potter's wheel for the production of Grey Minyan, which will be here preferably called Grey Burnished (hereafter GB)

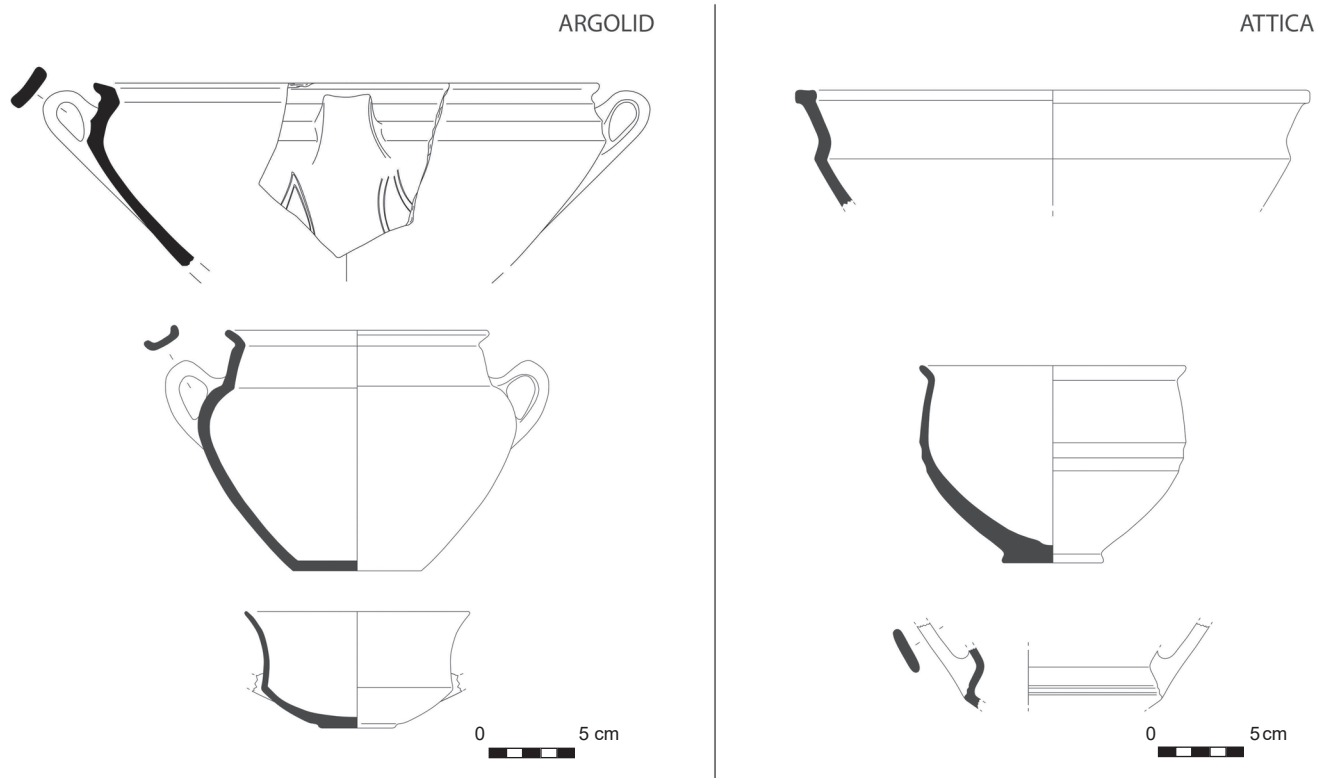


Figure 3. Typical shapes of GB from the Argolid and Attica (drawings by A. Balitsari and Y. Nakas).

(see also Balitsari, 2019, p.481)¹. Although the study of the potter’s wheel in the preceding EHII–III (ca. 3100–2200/2100 BCE) period has made significant progress (Choleva, 2012; 2018; 2020), the use of this tool in the MH period has not yet been satisfactorily explored, despite the crucial role of this era for the technological developments attested during the Late Helladic (hereafter LH) period, when the potter’s wheel was assumed to be more systematically used for the production of Mycenaean ware (Prillwitz, 2020), although detailed studies of forming techniques were largely lacking (Berg, 2013) and have only recently appeared (Rutter, 2017; Choleva *et al.*, 2020).

The present analysis is focused on the Argolid and Attica because they seem to belong to different cultural spheres, as is easily observed through the differences expressed in their preferred wares, as well as in the shape repertoire of the GB of each area (Figure 3). In brief, NE Peloponnese, including the Argolid, is characterised by greater variation in the surface treatment of their ceramics, with painted wares prevailing, while plain burnished pottery is much more common in central Greece, including Attica (Philippa-Touchais and Balitsari, 2020). These variations are apparently related to different eating and drinking practices. However, further substantial differences in the material record cannot be established, because of (a) poor preservation of the MH remains, (b) the preliminary and often short character of many publications, and (c) the lack of systematic research of the Middle Bronze Age in the Greek mainland, which is less appealing compared to other periods and areas of the Bronze Age Aegean, like the synchronous Middle Minoan civilization.

2. Methodology, aims & theory

The present analysis is of a preliminary character, and the ultimate goal is not to provide a detailed map with specific *chaînes opératoires* attested to in the GB pottery, but to approach statistically the relative percentages of handmade and wheel-thrown or wheel-fashioned GB pots per site and region. Taking into consideration the socio-technical

requirements of a specialised manufacturing process (Roux, 2016, pp.101–103), such as the adoption of the potter’s wheel, the emerging pattern(s) can thus be used, firstly, as a starting point for future and more detailed studies, and secondly and more importantly, to challenge traditional approaches, according to which GB could be more or less successfully copied by any potters who, it is suggested, have only needed to have sight of some arbitrarily-assumed exemplary final product derived from somewhere else (*i.e.* Boeotia) to be able to reproduce it perfectly.

The above simplistic perspective cannot be considered valid any longer, since technological practices are now considered to be deeply socially embedded. Although their transmission happens through networks of close interaction, this dissemination does not follow a linear development according to which up-to-date, more efficient, and less energy- and time-consuming technologies will easily spread because they are improvements (Choleva, 2020, pp.1–2). More importantly, the physical presence of a master and an apprentice is a prerequisite for particular perceptual motor-skills to be developed, those that are related, for example, to the clay preparation, the firing methods (Fowler, 2016, p.480), and more importantly the forming techniques, particularly those linked to the potter’s wheel (Roux and Corbetta, 1989). Therefore, despite the dearth of other evidence and the overall problems of research, the comparative study of the potting practices applied in the production of the GB in the Argolid and Attica provides firmer ground to establish the sociocultural boundaries existing between the subregions of the Greek mainland during the MH period.

The study was based on hands-on experience with GB pottery from settlement contexts in the Argolid (Argos) and Attica (Marathon-Plasi, Athenian Agora, Thorikos); it also took into consideration the available evidence from related researches conducted on nearby MH sites, including Aspis and Asine in the Argolid, and Marathon-Vranas in Attica. GB was organised in subclasses according to macroscopic fabric groups; the visually-distinct features on the walls and sections of the sherds of each subclass were examined in order to distinguish between handmade (namely coil-built) and wheel-thrown or wheel-fashioned pots. However, on the one hand, the fragmentary character and poor preservation of the material, particularly the small size of sherds, obscures the identification of properly wheel-thrown products, which can only be hesitantly recognised. On the other hand, the

¹ The attributive MH (*i.e.* MH Grey Burnished) could be used to avoid confusion, when also dealing with other grey wares of the Aegean, like the Anatolian grey ware (Pavúk, 2007).

Table 1. Main diagnostic features and corresponding forming operations of wheel-fashioned GB pottery (after Choleva 2012, pp.356–357, table 8).

Diagnostic features	Forming operation
Stretched surfaces	Shaping with RKE
Uneven wall thickness	Shaping the roughout with RKE
Horizontal and parallel striations	Thinning the rough-out with RKE
Oblique surface discontinuities and bulges	
Linear grooves between zones of coil joints	Thinning and/or shaping the roughout with RKE
Concentric or spiral undulations	
Fissures along section	Joining the coils with or without RKE

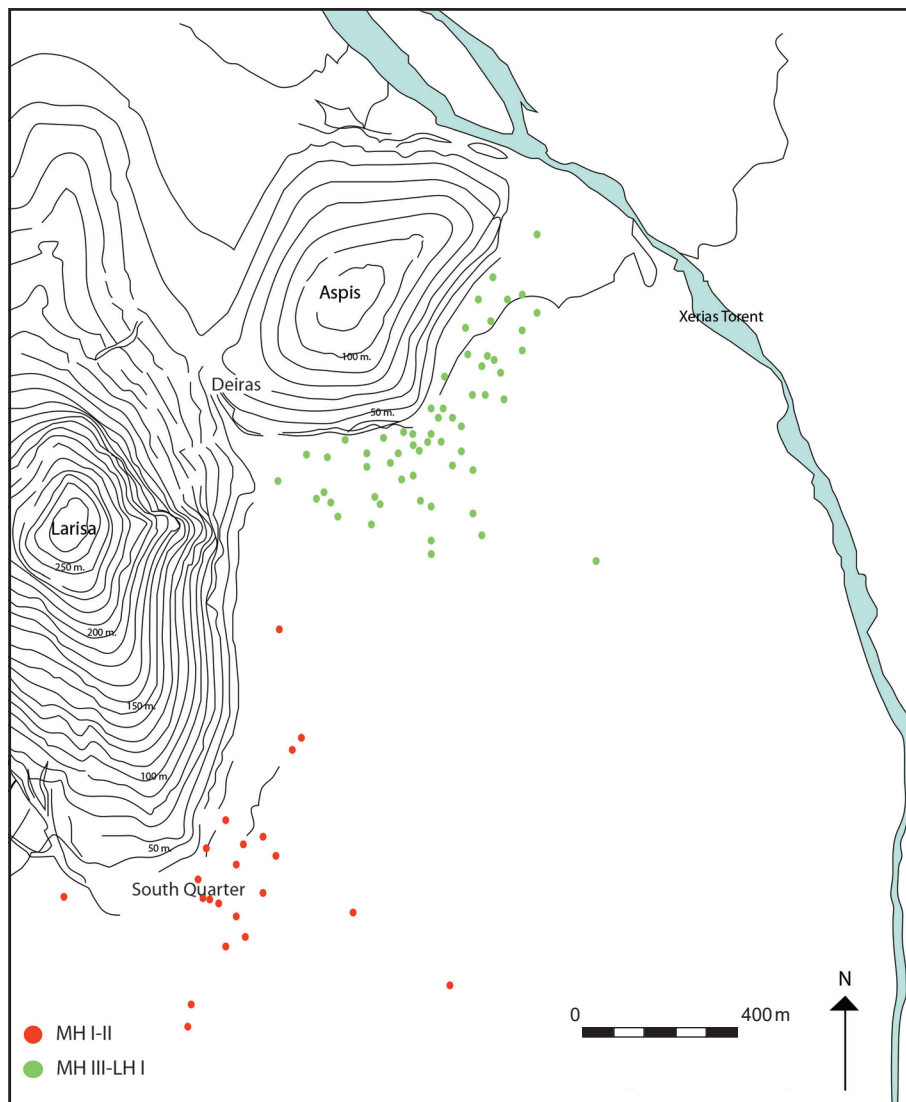


Figure 4. MH habitation districts in Argos (map created by A. Balitsari).

Table 2. Main diagnostic features compatible with wheel-throwing and/or wheel-fashioning techniques (after Choleva 2012, p.354, table 6).

Diagnostic features	Wheel-throwing or wheel-fashioning technique	Wheel-fashioning technique
Stretched surfaces	+	
Concentric or spiral undulations	+	
Horizontal and parallel striations	+	
Uneven wall thickness		+
Oblique surface discontinuities and bulges		+
Linear grooves between zones of coil joints		+
Fissures along section		+

generic term “wheel-fashioning” is mainly applied, when the main diagnostic features argue for joining and thinning the coils, and shaping the roughout with the help of a potter’s wheel, as described namely in methods 3 and 4 in the four-type classification system proposed by Roux and Courty (1998, pp.750–751, tables 1 and 3), and further applied by Choleva in the study of EH and LH pottery (Choleva, 2012, esp. pp.352–358; Choleva *et al.*, 2020, pp.227–229)

(Table 1). Particularly the coexistence of stretched surfaces indicative of strong wall modification with the help of rotative kinetic energy (hereafter RKE) with other features incompatible with thoroughgoing wheel-throwing was the main criterion for distinguishing wheel-fashioned pottery (Table 2). Nonetheless, further distinction between the two methods was not pursued, as it goes beyond the general aims of the study. Intense burnishing, though, frequently

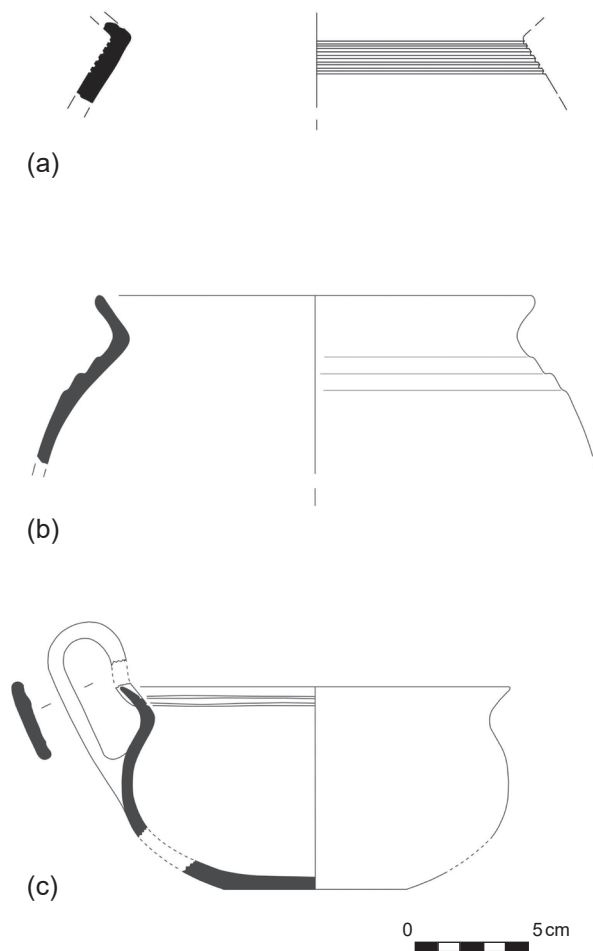


Figure 5. GB bowls from South Quarter in (a) fine grey, (b) semi-fine grainy, and (c) semi-fine with black inclusions fabric (drawings by Y. Nakas and A. Balitsari).

creates certain obstacles as it masks surface features related to forming techniques. In a few cases some kind of rotational movement might have also been used for the finishing of rims and shoulders, as indicated by the creation of parallel grooves and incisions. The term “wheel-finished” is potentially applicable, but these features might have also resulted from the steady hand of a potter with the help of a simple turntable; therefore, the particular specimens were preferably classified as handmade.

3. The Argolid

3.1 Short historical background and results of research

Compared to other areas of mainland Greece, the MH period of the Argolid in the northeast Peloponnese is much better explored. This state of research is an immediate consequence of the early attention attracted by the later prosperous Mycenaean civilization that emerged in sites, which were already and uninterruptedly inhabited from the beginning of the MH period. The most significant MH settlements developed around the Argive plain, which remained the nodal point for the entire Bronze Age. Asine apart (Nordquist, 1987), the other major centres with stratified evidence of continuous habitation, such as Argos and Lerna, are still largely unpublished, while Mycenae (Shelton, 2010), Tiryns (French and French, 1971) and Midea (Demakopoulou and Divari-Valakou, 2010), which later developed into major palatial centres, only poorly preserve evidence of MH stratified contexts, mostly because of latter disturbances, especially of the intense building activity.

Special emphasis will be placed on *Argos*, where the author had the opportunity to examine unpublished material

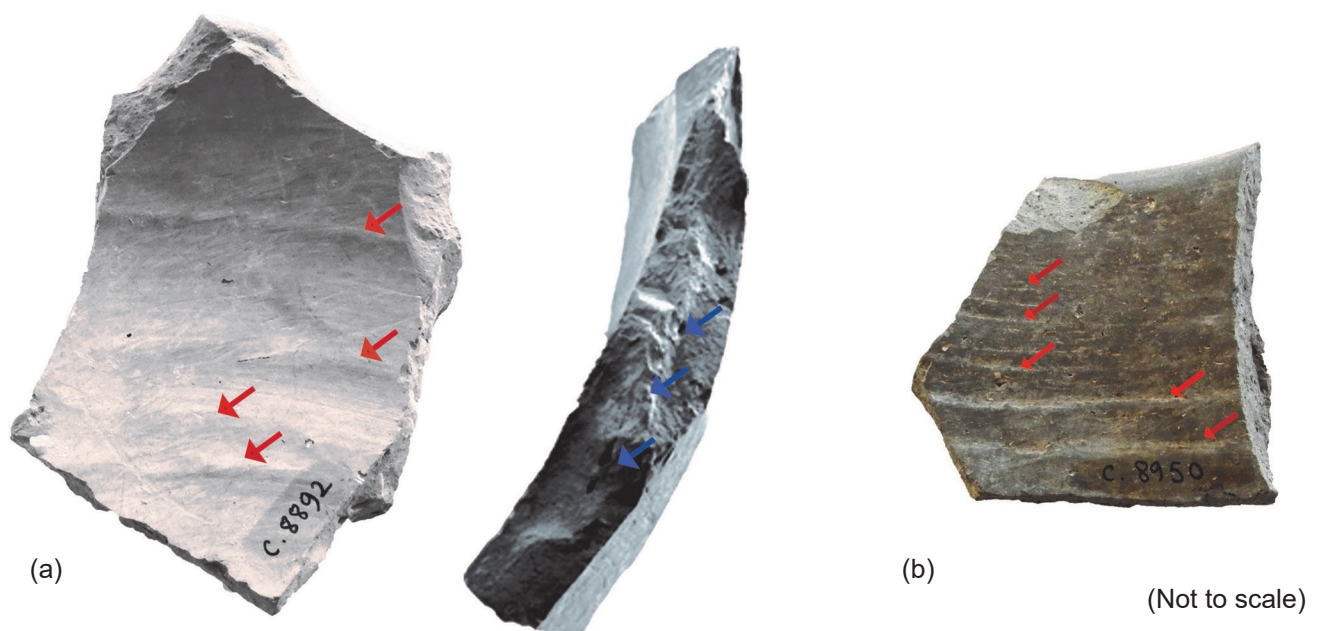


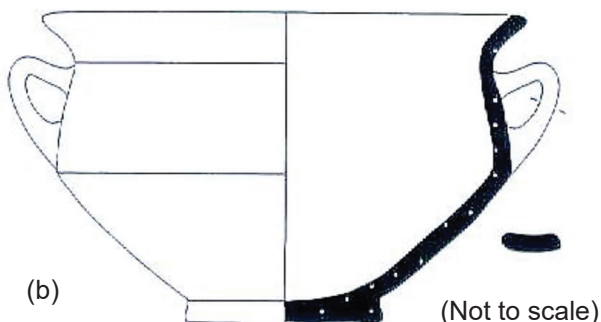
Figure 6. Handmade GB bowls from the South Quarter in (a) fine grey, (b) semi-fine grainy: nonstretched surfaces; coils visible on the interior (indicated in red); fissures along section (indicated in blue) (photos by A. Balitsari).



Figure 7. Handmade fine GB bowl from the South Quarter with nonstretched surfaces and irregular rim formation (photo by A. Balitsari).



(a)



(b)

Figure 8. GB bowls with an angular body from (a) Deiras (after Deshayes, 1966, p.37:5), and (b) Orchomenos (after Sarri, 2010a, pl.2:6).

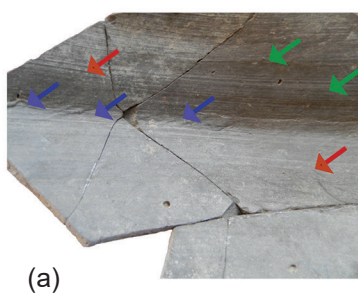
from stratified contexts. During MH I–II, habitation in Argos was dispersed, organised in different nuclei: on top of Aspis, on Larissa, in the ravine of *Deiras*, at the SE foothills of Aspis, as well as in the *South Quarter* of the modern city (Figure 4). During MH III–LH I, the settlement plan changed drastically; with the exception of Aspis, the other habitation districts were abandoned and the population was concentrated on the southeast foothills of Aspis, which also went through major reorganization (Touchais, 1998; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2015, pp.162–166; Balitsari, 2017, pp.119–121).

The material discussed here is dated to MH I–III early and derives from settlement and stratified contexts: from a household assemblage, conventionally termed as the “House of Pithoi” (Balitsari, 2019), and settlement deposits in the area of Aphrodite’s temple (“Aphrodision”) in the *South Quarter* (Balitsari, 2017; in prep.), and from the semi-underground house structure P1 at *Deiras* (Deshayes, 1966, pp.18–21). The GB was grouped in three subclasses according to fabric: (a) fine grey (MFG 7a), (b) semi-fine grainy (MFG 6a), and (c) semi-fine with black inclusions (MFG 3a)². Fine grey predominates (46–81%), and semi-fine grainy is also common (12–38%), although fluctuations in the relative percentages between subphases existed. Semi-fine with black inclusions is less popular throughout the period studied (2–4%)³. Similar shapes are attested in all three varieties, mainly bowls with an everted rim and flat base (Figure 5). In terms of the manufacturing process, the MH pottery of Argos, including the GB, seems mostly handmade, as indicated by the discontinuities on the surfaces, and the uneven wall thickness, from the use of coils. The latter are particularly visible on the interior (Figure 6), as well as in the irregular rim formation and unbalanced shape, in the case of some of the best preserved, (nearly) complete examples (Figure 7).

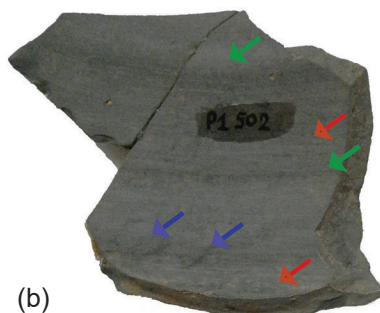
Wheel-fashioning methods, on the other hand, were only observed in a restricted number of pots (1–9%), mainly two-handled bowls with an angular body, drop-shaped rim and

² For detailed descriptions, see Balitsari, 2019, pp.482–484.

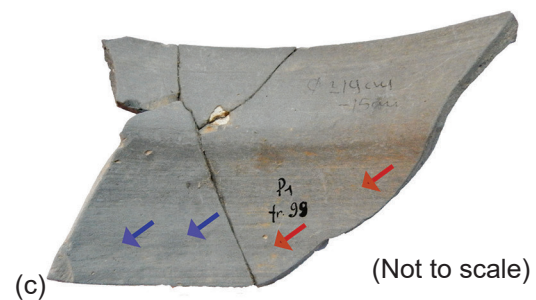
³ Percentages are estimated in the total number of GB sherds collected from MH I–III early deposits from the House of Pithoi (Balitsari, 2019, p.501, table 5), Square BB 33 in Aphrodision (Balitsari, 2017, vol. 3, p.26, table 36; Balitsari in prep.) and house structure P1 at *Deiras* (after personal inspection).



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 9. Fragments of fine GB bowls with an angular body from the South Quarter and Deiras with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: concentric undulations (indicated in green); oblique surface discontinuities (indicated in blue); horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in red) (photos by A. Balitsari).

ring base (Figure 8), which are closely linked to the potting traditions of central Greece, including Attica. These were mainly found in MH I late-MH II deposits. The prevailing features include stretched surfaces, horizontal and parallel striations usually observed on the interior, combined with oblique surface discontinuities, which correspond to the pressure exercised while joining and levelling the coils on a potter's wheel (Figure 9). The fabric of the specific vases is always fine but usually of a darker grey colour, with well-burnished but less shiny surfaces compared to the handmade fine GB pots. The petrographic examination, combined with a refring test of small chips, indicated the use of slightly different fine clay pastes, which are less calcareous, compared to the fine clays used for the handmade GB (Balitsari and Kiriati, 2019). A local provenance for these wheel-fashioned pots can neither be excluded nor reinforced, since the fine texture of the fabric does not really allow any safe correlation to a specific clay resource. So even if these bowls have been locally produced, they are not simply imitations, but are the product of a deeply rooted “know how”, and one which seems alien to local ceramic traditions.

For *Aspis*, the preliminary examination of the GB by M. Choleva suggested that it was equally handmade and wheel-fashioned, with the potter's wheel being incorporated into the manufacturing process in different, more or less complex, ways including the shaping of the roughout, the finishing of the rims and/or the upper parts of the containers, and the burnishing of the surfaces (Philippa-Touchais *et al.*, 2011, p.555). More information on the typology and the chronological distribution of both handmade and wheel-fashioned GB in Aspis is certainly needed.

In *Asine*, the pioneer research conducted by L. Spencer for pottery assemblages dated from EH III to MH II indicated that “wheel-formed” products constitute diachronically a minority ($\leq 7\%$), being often produced in fabrics, which are either non-local or of uncertain provenance (Spencer, 2007, p.146). Although classification according to ware was not of primary importance in this research, it is easy to assume that a significant amount of the wheel-fashioned pottery is related to GB (Spencer, 2007, pp.152–153). Unfortunately, further details for particular shapes and specific typological features remain unknown.

3.2 Discussion

Despite the lack of consistency in the evidence available so far, hand-forming techniques seem to remain popular in the Argolid. This is not in accordance with an evolutionary model, according to which the appearance of the potter's wheel in EH III should have “normally” led to the gradual displacement of handmade techniques in the course of time. The resistance of the Argolid to the potter's wheel in conjunction with the development of a shape repertoire, which is characterised by notable differences when compared to central Greece, indicates that the communities of the Argolid retained a distinct social identity expressed through specific choices in the production and consumption of ceramics.

Based on the evidence from the South Quarter and Deiras of Argos, wheel-fashioned pots constitute a minority, strictly related to the potting traditions of central Greece. These could either have been imported or produced by one or more potters initially trained in central Greece and later settled temporarily or permanently in the Argolid. The fact that the potter's wheel is strictly related to the specific shape of the two-handed bowl with an angular body, drop-shaped rim and ring base signifies that wheel-fashioning methods were not silent and were unlikely to have been easily overlooked by consumers. On the contrary, it seems that the wheel-fashioned material was closely linked to specific craftsmen and to a certain package of symbolic correlations, and this could explain (a) why the shape was not reproduced in a handmade version that would be probably less appreciated, and (b) why local shapes were not reproduced with wheel-fashioning methods. More evidence from Aspis will certainly provide us with valuable insights into the co-existence and integration of foreign and local traditions, especially during the later phases of the MH period, as well as into the potential inequalities existing in the supply patterns of imported pottery between the different habitation areas of Argos. The latter possibility is based on the divergence observed in the amount of Aeginetan and Minoan(ising) pottery, which is significantly higher in Aspis compared to the South Quarter (Balitsari, 2019, p.507, and n.138).

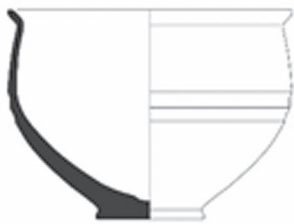
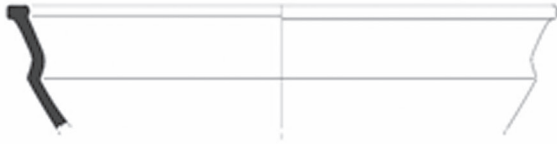
4. Attica

4.1 Short historical background and results of research

The MH period in Attica is the least explored compared to other prehistoric phases in the region. Long-lived settlements presumably existed, like Athens (Immerwahr, 1971; Balitsari and Papadopoulos, 2018; 2019; Venieri, 2020) and Eleusis (Mylonas, 1975; Cosmopoulos, 2014), though the stratigraphic evidence is scarce, because of continuous habitation in later periods and/or poor documentation of the excavation record of past decades. To give an outline of the available evidence, it is worth stressing the following:

- (a) EH III–MH I is only represented in an extremely limited number of sites by very little pottery, even fewer burials and no architectural remains. Consequently, the end of EH II and the transition of Early to Middle Helladic period (EH III–MH I) remains practically unknown (Balitsari and Papadopoulos, 2019, pp.135–138).
- (b) During MH II–III, the number of sites increased across Attica, although it never reached the density of settlements attested to during the earlier EH period, a situation that possibly reflects a more centralised model of habitation, which is also common for the Peloponnese (Papadimitriou, 2010, pp.246–248; Papadimitriou and Cosmopoulos, 2020, p.374). However, it is important to note that the majority of sites attributed to the specific period is only known through short reports or preliminary publications. Except for Eleusis, no other site has produced satisfactory evidence to reconstruct

ATTICA



Marathon-Plasi



Athenian Agora- Basileios Stoa

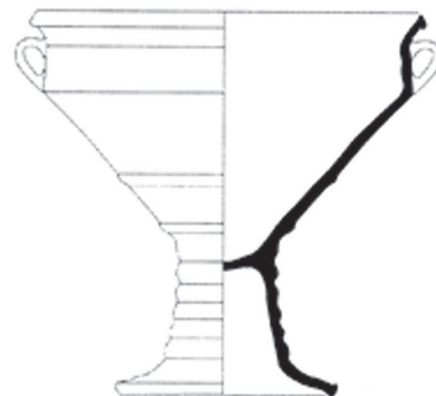
CENTRAL GREECE



Amarynthos (Euboea)



Mitrou (Phthiotis)

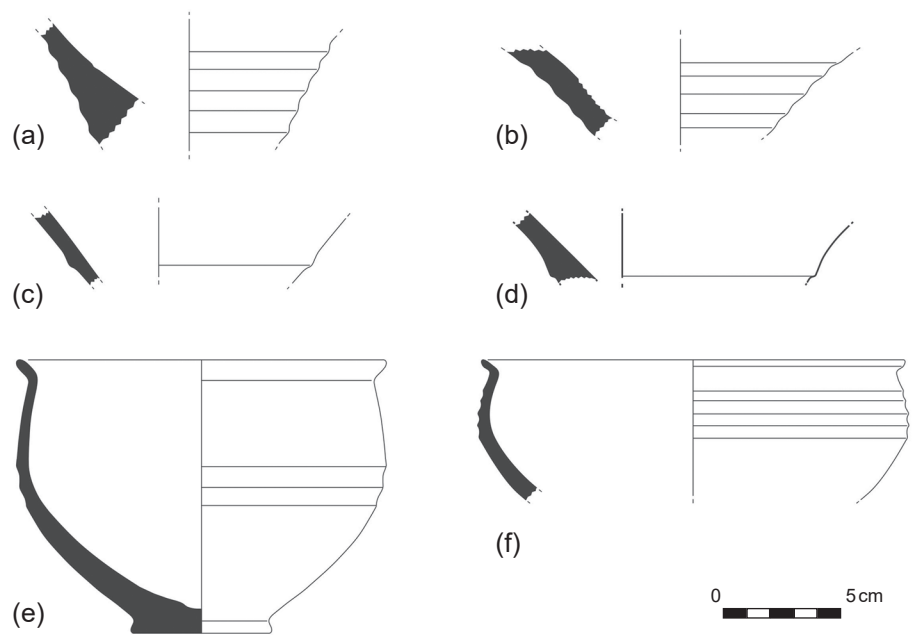


Orchomenos (Boeotia)

(Not to scale)

Figure 10. Typical GB shapes from Attica and other MH sites of central Greece (for Plasi: drawings by A. Balitsari; Athenian Agora: drawings by A. Hooton; Amarynthos: after Krapf, 2015, Figure 3:19; Mitrou: after Hale, 2016, Figure 14:30; Orchomenos: after Sarri, 2010a, plates. 8:20, 15:1).

Figure 11. Fragments of GB pots from Plasi in (a, c, e) fine grey, (b, f) semi-coarse with whitish inclusions and silver mica, (d) semi-fine grainy fabric (drawings by A. Balitsari).



settlement organization (Cosmopoulos, 2014). For Athens, it was recently suggested that habitation was organised in clusters around the Acropolis (Venie 2020, p.417), but again, no architectural phases have been distinguished.

- (c) As far as the transitional late MH-early LH period is concerned, except for the exemplary publication of J. Maran for the related deposits excavated at Kiapha Thiti (Maran, 1992), the existing picture of the dearth

of evidence from the rest of Attica does not change significantly. Even at Thorikos, which at this time became the most important centre of Attica (Papadimitriou, 2010, pp.254–256), because of its control over the Lavrion mines, and as is evidenced in the rich burial record of the site (Laffineur, 2010), settlement remains were not systematically explored and deposits were not always recorded in detail (Servais, 1967, pp.20–24; Papadimitriou, 2020).

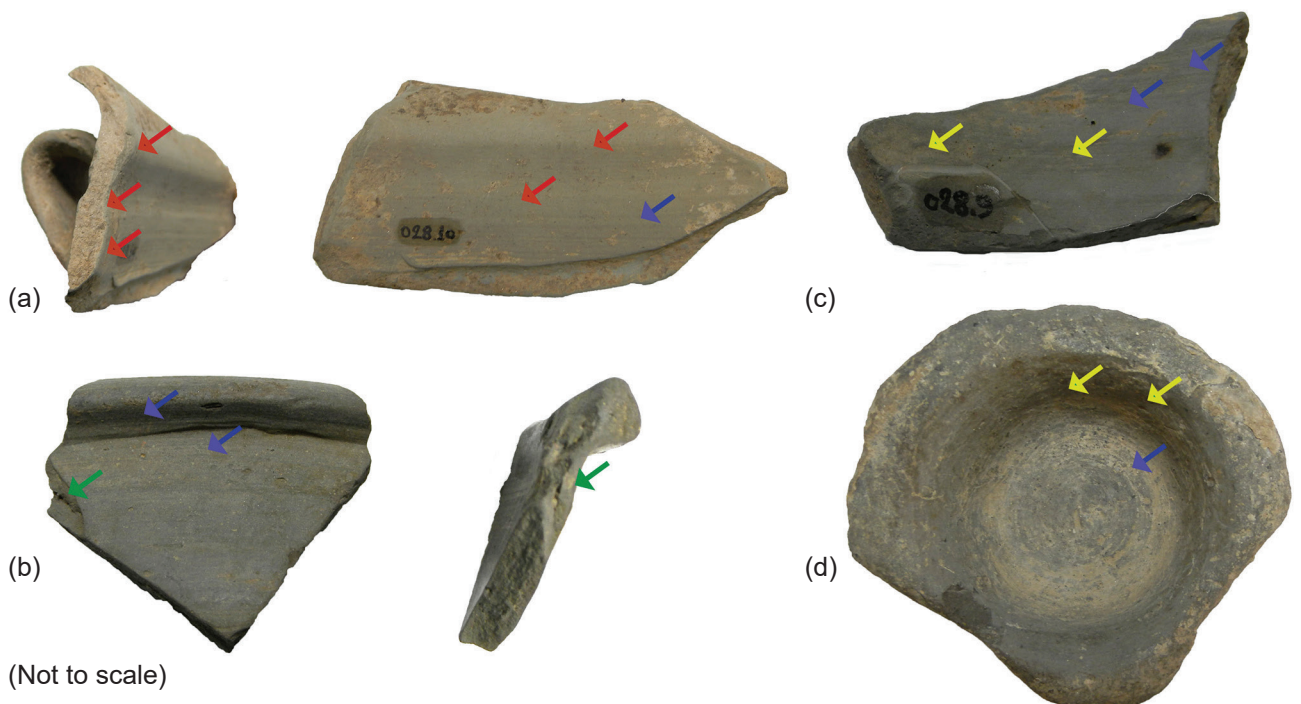


Figure 12. Fragments of GB pots from Plasi in (a–c) fine grey and (d) semi-coarse with whitish inclusions and silver mica, with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: concentric undulations and uneven wall thickness (indicated in red); horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in blue); fissures along section (indicated in green); oblique surface discontinuities (indicated in yellow) (photos by A. Balitsari).



Figure 13. Fine GB bowl from Plasi with evidence of wheel-fashioning method: uneven wall thickness (indicated in red); horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in blue); spiral undulations (indicated in green) (photos by A. Balitsari).

It is thus instantly clear that the MH cultural changes, including the development of potting traditions, are difficult to track and organise within the traditional tripartite scheme (*i.e.* MH I, MH II, MH III). Inevitably then the

chronology of pottery and related finds is usually established based on parallels from stratified contexts in other areas. Also, compared to the Argolid, Attica is characterised by a significant geographical segmentation with plains being divided off by mountains and ridges. A preliminary overview of the potting traditions in various Attic sites revealed (a) a complete accordance of GB in terms of shapes with central Greece's standards (Figure 10), and (b) interesting regional differences related mainly to external contacts, especially with Aegina and Keos (Philippa-Touchais and Balitsari, 2020, pp.387–393, 395). However, a close study of the technology of its manufacture is certainly needed in order to shed light on potential differences in the potting traditions exercised, as well as the interregional contacts that might have developed. Here is presented an overview for the GB from some major centres of the MH period, Marathon (Plasi, Vranas), Athens and Thorikos, which are currently being studied by the author as part of her post-doctoral research.

The *Marathon* plain is located on the north-eastern coast of Attica at the entrance of the Euboean gulf. The MH period is represented by both settlement and burial evidence. At the coastal site of *Plasi*, settlement remains were uncovered in the late 1960s (Marinatos, 1970a, p.5; 1970b, pp.153–154; Mastrokostas, 1970), but systematic exploration did not start until 2015 by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The settlement remains include among others an impressive fortification wall, a large rectangular building, the so-called “Megaron” of Plasi, dated to MH II–III (Polychronakou-Sgouritsa *et al.*, 2016, pp.307–310), and two contemporary pottery kilns (Kapsali, 2019). Other rectangular buildings, including a second smaller Megaron to the north, have also been unearthed, though their excavation, and the study of the associated deposits, has not been completed yet. Here we will focus on the deposits from the interior of the first Megaron, currently being studied by the author.

The GB can be divided into three subclasses according to macroscopic fabric features: fine grey, semi-coarse with whitish inclusions and silver mica, and semi-fine grainy. All varieties are represented in common shapes, mainly goblets and bowls (Figure 11). Unfortunately, because of the later use of the area as a burial ground, during the transitional MH III–LH I (Polychronakou-Sgouritsa *et al.*, 2016, pp.310–311) and the Geometric period⁴, in addition to the proximity of the MH remains to the modern ground surface, significant disturbance has been caused and the pottery has largely suffered from wear and extreme fragmentation. The following observations though can be made:

- (a) The fine grey variety is the dominant subgroup of GB (88%). The wheel has been commonly used for its production and it seems that it was introduced from an early stage in the procedure, namely from the joining of the coils. This observation is mostly based on the uneven wall thickness, the fractures along sections and the surface discontinuities observed combined with the

⁴ See: <https://www.marathonexcavations.arch.uoa.gr/index.php/geom-cemetery>.

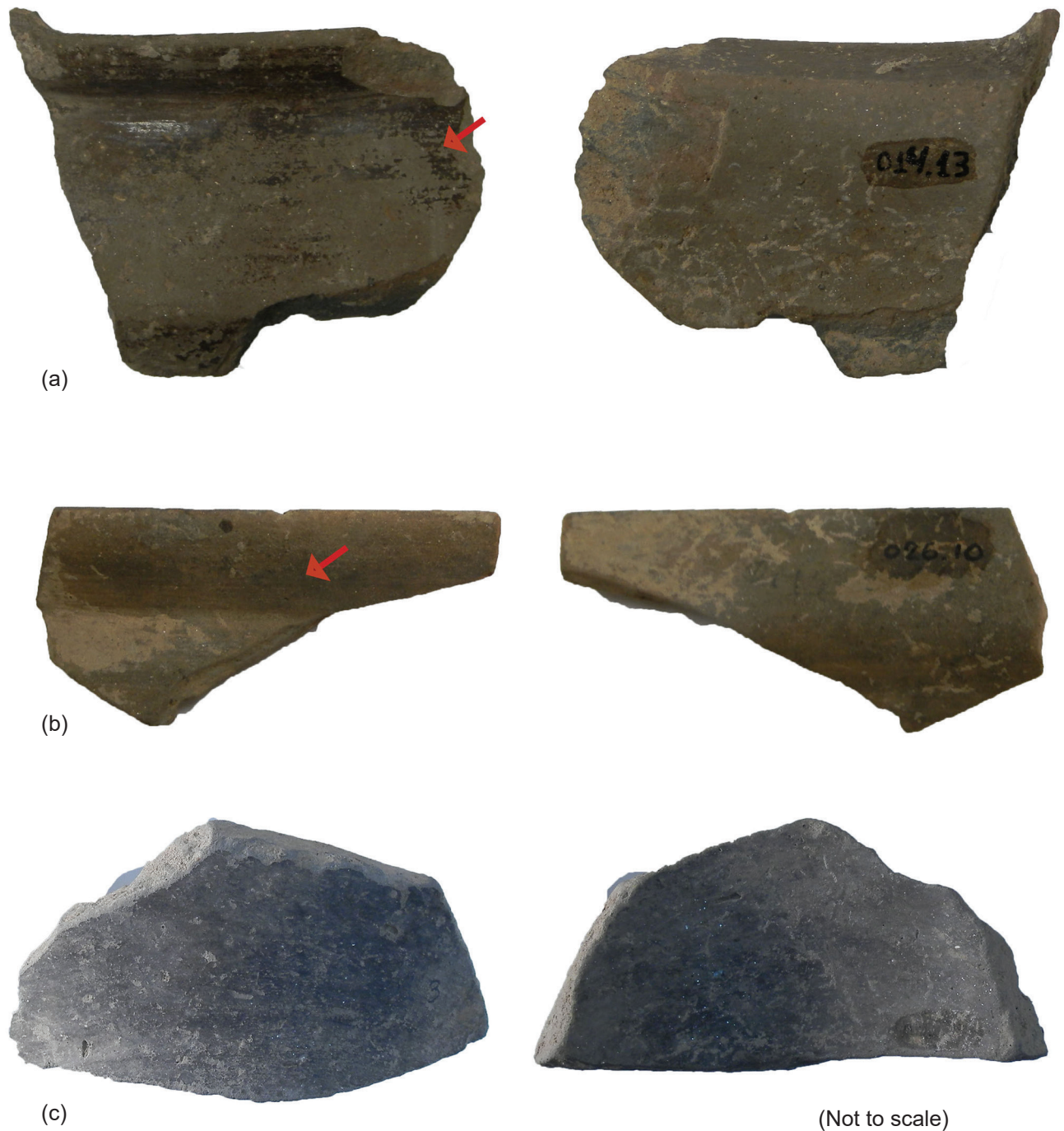


Figure 14. Fragments of GB pots from Plasi in (a) semi-coarse with whitish inclusions and silver mica and (b–c) semi-fine grainy fabric with no apparent wheel marks. The few lines barely visible on the exterior surface correspond to burnishing marks (photos by A. Balitsari).

stretched surfaces, and the typical striations created during rotation.

- (b) Semi-coarse with whitish inclusions and silver mica fabric group, which is the second most representative (11%), has also produced similar evidence (Figures 12–13). However, there are few sherds with no evident wheel marks, suggesting that the potter’s wheel might have not been systematically used for the manufacture of the specific subclass.

- (c) Semi-fine grainy on the other hand, which is less common (1%), lacks entirely wheel marks (Figure 14).

Only a few kilometres away, a MH cemetery is located at the inland site of *Vranas*, where a stone-coated tumulus dated to MH I–II represents one of the earliest MH monumental burial structures of the Greek mainland (Pantelidou-Gofa *et al.*, 2020, pp.437–440). The pottery found inside the graves, as well as in the nearby deposits consists of significant quantities of fine GB (Pantelidou-Gofa *et al.*,

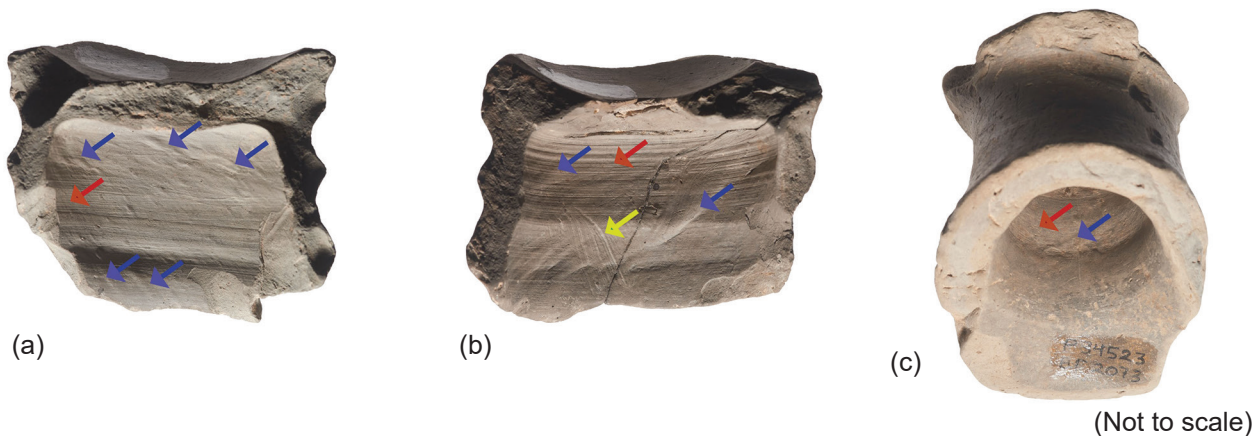


Figure 15. Fragments of fine GB pots from the Athenian Agora with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in red); oblique surface discontinuities (indicated in blue); burnishing marks (indicated in yellow) (photos by C. Mauzy).

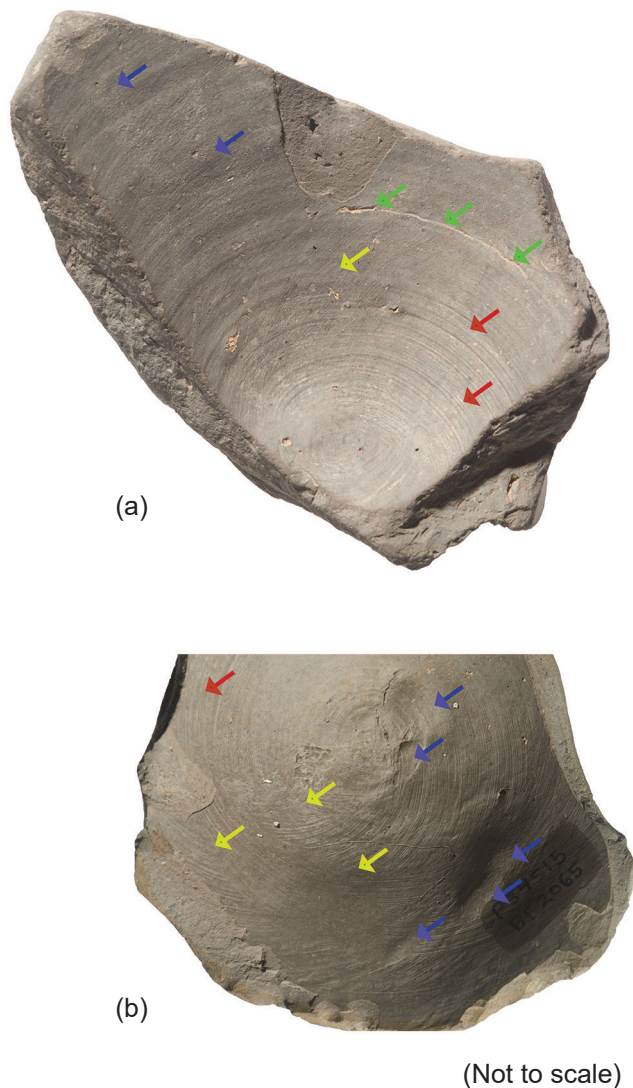


Figure 16. Fragments of fine GB pots from the Athenian Agora with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in red); oblique surface discontinuities and bulges (indicated in blue); linear grooves between zones of coil joints (indicated in green); burnishing marks (indicated in yellow) (photos by C. Mauzy).

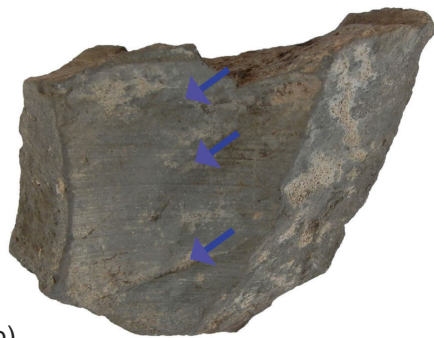
2016, pp.25–34). The close study of the technology, with special emphasis placed upon the intact vases from the graves, indicated that wheel-fashioning methods prevail, with the wheel being introduced also at an early stage in the manufacturing process (Pantelidou-Gofa *et al.*, 2017, pp.39–40). It should be stressed though that the fine GB of Vranas is quite soft, light grey and the burnishing seems more carelessly executed. In contrast, at Plasi, the GB is always hard-fired, well-burnished and exhibits more commonly darker grey hues. Semi-coarse and semi-fine varieties have not been recognised at Vranas.

At *Athens*, a MH II deposit excavated at the Basileios Stoa of the *Athenian Agora*, close to an empty and partly destroyed cist tomb of possibly MH date, was systematically examined and published (Balitsari and Papadopoulos, 2018). GB constitutes the majority of the assemblage, with goblets being the most representative shape (Balitsari and Papadopoulos, 2018, pp.228, 254, tables 1, 3). In this deposit, GB is strictly represented by a fine fabric with slight variations of colour, presumably because of the atmosphere and temperatures reached during the initial firing: macroscopic fabric group 1a is hard and dark grey throughout, while macroscopic fabric group 1b is light grey, sometimes medium hard to soft, with biscuit effect⁵. In terms of the manufacturing process, signs akin to those observed mostly in the fine GB of Plasi suggest that the potter’s wheel was also used during coil-joining (Figures 15 and 16). Proper wheel-thrown products may also be present (Balitsari and Papadopoulos, p.233, Figure 12). Other varieties of GB in coarser fabrics, as well as strictly hand-built specimens, were not observed. Fine GB is also attested in other deposits of the Athenian Agora, with many sherds being catalogued then as wheelmade (Immerwahr, 1971, pp.60–61, 76–78, nos.272–291), a designation which now creates reasonable suspicions for the possible identification of similar wheel-fashioning techniques. However, until there is full publication and systematic examination of related material from other assemblages, no pattern can be considered representative for the entire Athens.

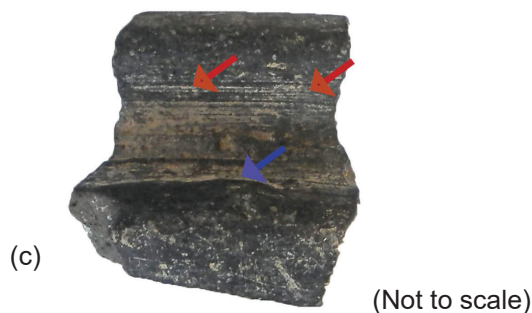
⁵ For more details, see Balitsari and Papadopoulos 2018, p.229–230.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 17. Fragments of GB pots from Thorikos in (a–b) fine grey and (c) semi-coarse with schist inclusions and silver mica fabric with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in red); fissures along section (indicated in green); oblique surface discontinuities and bulges (indicated in blue) (photos by A. Balitsari).

Thorikos is the third site to be discussed. As already mentioned, the settlement mainly flourished during late MH-early LH. However, there are substantial indications that habitation might have started earlier, possibly from the beginning of MH (Papadimitriou, 2020, p.466). The GB presented here comes from various assemblages, not necessarily stratified, and it is dated to MH II–III, according to the available parallels. The quantification attempted



Figure 18. Fragment of fine GB goblet from Thorikos with evidence of wheel-fashioning methods: evenly made horizontal ribs (indicated in green); concentric undulations (indicated in yellow); horizontal and parallel striations (indicated in red); oblique surface discontinuities (indicated in blue) (photos by A. Balitsari).

for its representation, can only be based on the settlement deposits excavated by the Belgian School in the mid and late 1960s (Papadimitriou *et al.*, in prep.). Fine GB prevails (93%), while a semi-coarse variety with schist inclusions and silver mica seems to constitute a small minority (7%). However, both fabric groups are associated with similar shapes, mainly goblets and wheel-fashioning techniques of manufacture as those encountered at Marathon and Athens (Figures 17–18).

4.2 Discussion

From the evidence above, it becomes clear that the Attic sites examined so far are set within the same and distinct socio-technological framework with regard to the production and consumption of GB, as indicated by the predominance of fine fabrics, the systematic use of wheel-fashioning methods, and the creation of similar shapes – with goblets dominating – intended to cover the same drinking habits. However, slight variations also existed and these are mostly seen in the quality of burnishing and the initial firing. Coarser clay pastes are also attested, but there is no strict relation between specific clay recipes, formation processes and final products of specialised use. On the contrary, both hand-built semi-fine/coarse and wheel-fashioned fine GB tend to cover similar consumption practices, and therefore any distinction

between them is strictly related to the production choices made by the potters.

The petrographic examination and the chemical analysis conducted at Vranas do not exclude the local/regional production of the GB (Pantelidou *et al.*, 2017, pp.45–47; Balitsari *et al.*, forthcoming). The assumption is further reinforced by a few special typological features shared with other sites of Attica’s east coast, mainly Brauron, such as the low foot and the incised shoulder of bowls (Philippa-Touchais and Balitsari, 2020, p.389). The same analyses at Plasi are definitely required to be undertaken in order to shed light on the provenance of its GB. A working hypothesis for explaining the variability particularly seen at Plasi would be that the settlement, because of its privileged position on the coast, was possibly subjected to more regional and external influences, compared to the inland community of Vranas.

The interrelation of the less fine varieties of GB at Thorikos and Plasi also demands further investigation⁶. Interestingly, fairly coarse to coarse, as well as handmade, GB is also attested at Eleusis (Cosmopoulos, 2014, pp.270–271), while in Kiapha Thiti, which is contemporaneous with Thorikos, GB is exclusively fine and probably entirely “wheelmade” (Maran, 1992, p.120), as in the case of the Athenian Agora. It may be assumed then that the production of semi-fine/coarse GB, handmade or wheel-fashioned, is allied to potting traditions shared between coastal sites, but this hypothesis needs to be further investigated by analytical methods and the detailed examination of more Attic sites.

5. Concluding remarks

This short overview underlines that any comparison made between the GB of two different regions can only be telling when substantial information is known for the entire technological sequence, including its typology, where the latter is particularly linked to consumption practices and local preferences. Therefore, GB can no longer be examined from the prevailing point of view of today, which is biased towards Boeotia’s so-called superior manufacturing standards.

The examination of GB in Attica indicated that the potter’s wheel was highly involved in the manufacturing process. Handmade GB did exist, but its typological similarities with its wheel-fashioned counterpart indicate that they were also produced within a common cultural framework. In the Argolid, however, the situation is reversed; GB is predominantly handmade, while the complex use of the wheel was only observed in a limited number of pots. The apparent techno-typological affinities of the latter

with central Greece’s GB indicates that the specific pots were either imported or produced by craftsmen who were familiar with the potting practices of a different cultural environment.

This situation though is not entirely new, since the very first appearance of wheel-fashioning methods during the EH III phase was also the “result of technical transfers from central Greece” (Choleva, 2018, p.229). Therefore, we could speak of a continuum of influences, which, nonetheless, never became so firmly established as to significantly affect local potting traditions. According to L. Spencer’s analysis, the striking resistance exhibited – not only – at Asine to the incoming device of the wheel and all the associated practices may be explained in terms of household-based production, as is indicated by the overall lack of technologically-sophisticated ceramics, and household differentiation sought through the diversity of the consumption choices (Spencer, 2007, pp.150–158). The latter situation has also been witnessed in Argos. In contrast, at Lefkandi, a type-site of central Greece, there is a growing specialisation in production and homogenisation of ceramic assemblages over the centuries, with the latter being closely related to a consumption behaviour in favour of communal cohesion (Spencer, 2007, pp.129–133). This picture certainly fits with V. Roux’s position, according to which the “non-transfer of the potter’s wheel could be explained in terms of polarisation between communities” (Roux, 2020). In other words, GB was not simply a product of imitation – because it was “fashionable” at that time – but was reproduced according to specific social structures and identities.

A last question that is worth exploring is the chronological context of the relatively higher occurrence of wheel-fashioned GB pots, during MH I late-MH II, at least in Argos. Interestingly, both the Argolid (Philippa-Touchais, 2007, pp.111–112; Spencer, 2007, p.149) and Attica (Gauss, 2020, p.614) witnessed an increase of Aeginetan wares from MH I late-MH II. Being visually distinct, Aeginetan pottery is generally a helpful indicator for reconstructing external contacts. It is thus possible that the appearance of wheel-fashioned products could be seen within a wider revitalization of the communication networks in the Argosaronic gulf that enabled the transfer of products and/or people.

This is, however, only a half-finished scenario with significant limitations that create some obstacles and gaps. Being overlooked in the research for many years, because of the remarkable poverty of the material culture, the MH period has yet to be systematically investigated. The development of pottery organised in conventional chronological phases needs to be updated and refined, given the significant degree of regionality that obscures direct comparisons between synchronous events. To accomplish this, well-stratified deposits are of primary importance to allow the close examination of the technological sequences. Especially as far as the use of the wheel is concerned, the investigation of the earliest MH period is a prerequisite to fully understanding the formation processes of potting practices after the end of the Early Bronze Age.

⁶ The petrographic examination and chemical analysis of selected samples from the Athenian Agora, Plasi and Thorikos is part of the author’s research programme, which is conducted at UCLouvain, in close collaboration with the Fitch Laboratory of the British School at Athens, and aims at the investigation of the cultural contacts developed within and beyond Attica during MH and early LH, with special emphasis placed upon ceramics.

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