

COARSE WARE FROM THE MIDDLE HELLADIC SETTLEMENT OF ASPIS, ARGOS: LOCAL PRODUCTION AND IMPORTS

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Although coarse wares constitute a fairly high proportion of the ceramic assemblage in most Middle Helladic (MH) settlements, they have received much less attention than the various categories of semifine and fine ware, such as the monochrome (“Grey” and “Yellow Minyan”, dark burnished) or decorated (matt-painted, Lustrous Decorated) wares. The latter show much greater variability and therefore their study may provide some insights into the social structure and economic organization of the MH communities.² However, as coarseware vessels are almost exclusively utilitarian pots, and for this reason less dependent on *fashion* than table ware, we could assume that every variation in their shape, size, repertoire of forms, clay composition, spatial distribution, etc., may have economic or social significance, as it may reflect significant variation in basic practices such as storage, food processing, cooking, etc. Therefore, the study of coarseware assemblages from chronologically well-defined settlement deposits may shed some light upon aspects of MH life that are still obscure.

It may therefore be interesting to present – albeit in a preliminary fashion – the coarse wares from the stratified MH settlement of the Aspis in Argos, where excavation has recently been resumed. I shall discuss in this paper the characteristic features of these wares, as well as their typology, their place of production and their contexts of use and consumption. Yet I must stress that this study is still in progress, and that therefore my observations have a provisional character and may need to be modified substantially in the future.

1. THE EXCAVATIONS

1.1. Vollgraff’s excavations (1902)

The Aspis hill is the lower (ca. 90 masl) of the two hills that tower above the city of Argos on its northwest outskirts. It was first excavated in 1902 by Wil-

helm Vollgraff, a Dutch scholar and member of the French School at Athens, who soon afterward published the results of his investigations in a rather summary fashion in two articles in the *BCH*.³

These first excavations focused on three areas (Fig. 1): the central area (I), around the chapel of Ayios Ilias, on the top of the hill; the eastern area (II), further down, which is the largest one; and a third area, on the southern part of the plateau (III). In the first two sectors, Vollgraff excavated a dozen “pre-Mycenaean” houses, several sections of two supposedly concentric walls that he interpreted as prehistoric fortifications, and remains of Late Classical/Early Hellenistic constructions: an imposing polygonal defensive circuit with rectangular towers and a triangular salient on the northeast side, and several houses of the same period. In the third, southernmost sector, all the remains, namely a big rock-cut cistern and a rectangular building, belonged to the historical period.

For the purpose of this paper – and of the one by Philippa-Touchais in this same volume – we may recall two points from Vollgraff’s excavations.

First, the excavator realized only after the excavation was completed that there were two pre-Mycenaean architectural phases in the settlement. As he candidly confessed in a footnote,⁴ he owed this observation to W. Dörpfeld, who visited the site and drew his attention to the existence of “un plancher d’argile battue, qui appartient . . . à une maison de la couche inférieure”. It was by then too late to distinguish the finds and to attribute them to the two phases. Nevertheless, the fact that Vollgraff noticed the existence of at least two pre-Mycenaean stratified levels is important, even if he himself could not make much use of his observation. One of the main reasons underlying our decision to resume the excavations at the site was to clarify the sequence of the habitation layers in the Aspis.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this meeting for their invitation and generous financial support, and to Sofia Voutsaki who kindly checked the English text.

² PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS 2002, 2.

³ VOLLGRAFF 1906, 1907.

⁴ VOLLGRAFF 1906, 45 n. 1.

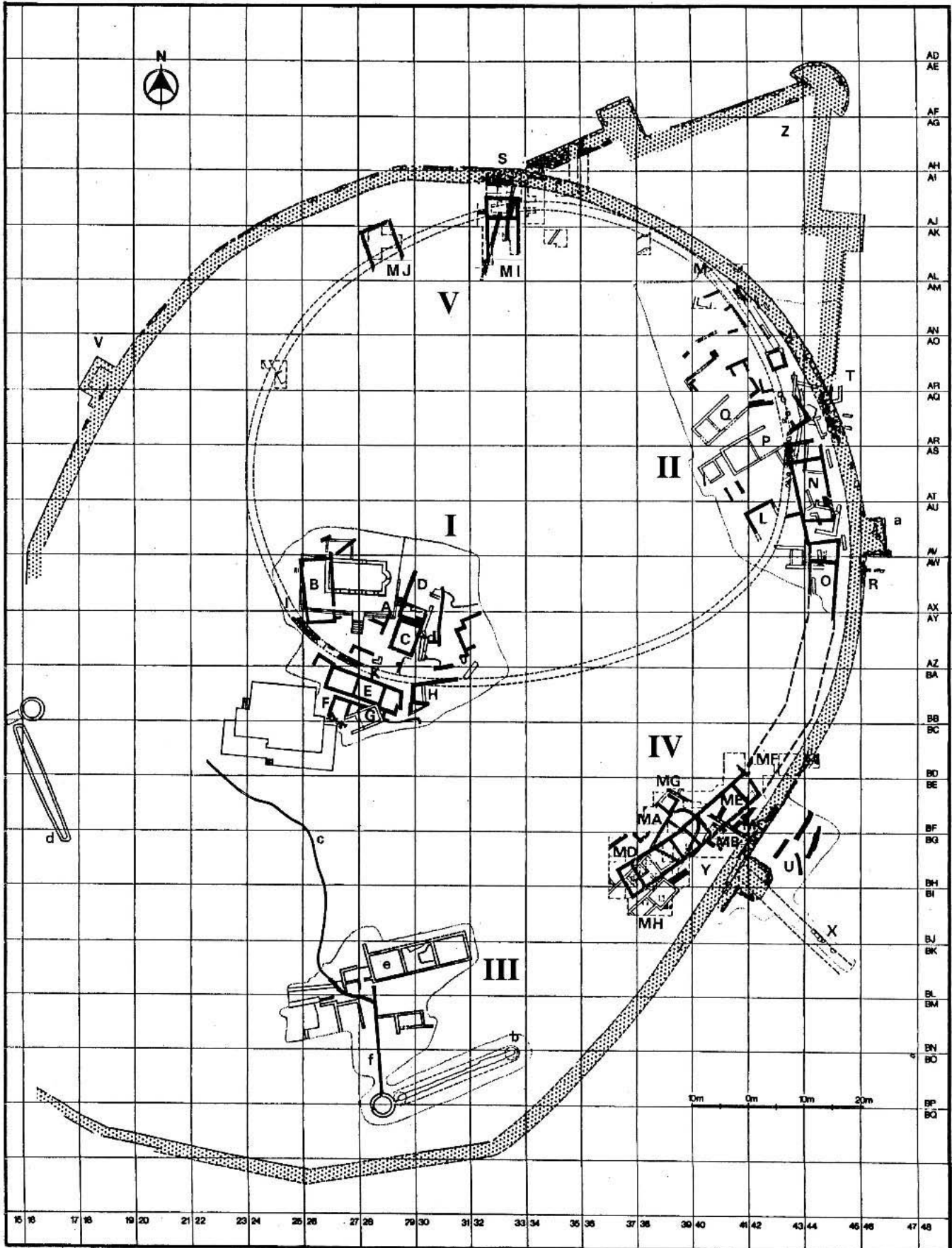


Fig. 1 Argos, Aspis Map of the site

Second, Vollgraff divided the ceramic assemblage into seven categories. The first, and according to Vollgraff the most abundant at the site, is coarse ware. In terms of frequency, matt-painted comes second; it is followed by Argive Minyan (dark burnished), Grey Minyan, incised coarse ware, red monochrome and, finally, Minoanizing ware, represented by only one fragment in Vollgraff's excavations.⁵

1.2. The new excavations (1974–1990)

Excavations on the Aspis hill resumed in 1974 and virtually ceased in 1990.⁶ Since then, fieldwork has been restricted to cleaning operations, the excavation of fallen balks, the conservation and restoration of the prehistoric walls, and more recently the construction of retaining walls in order to consolidate trench sections in the southeast sector.⁷

The new excavations focused on two areas (Fig. 1). In the southeast area (IV), deposits were thicker and stratification more complete, and we were therefore able to distinguish five main phases of habitation, three of which belong to the MH period. In the north area (V), we hoped to come across the older “circuit wall”, the existence of which Vollgraff had postulated. However, we found no trace of such a wall. Instead we came across two layers of MH habitation, which obviously correspond to the two older layers in the southeast area. We also found remains belonging to the historical period.

The sequence in the southeast sector may be summarized as follows:

Phase I (which corresponds to stratum 5, found directly on the bedrock) dates to the Final Neolithic period, as the pottery belongs almost entirely to the heavily burnished monochrome class, found also in some deposits in Lerna I.⁸

Phase II (corresponding to strata 4b–c) is the earliest MH building level. While only one or two wall sections could be connected with this phase in the southeast sector, considerable amounts of pottery were recovered and allowed us to date this phase to MH IB–II.

Several constructions belong to the subsequent phase III (stratum 4a). The best preserved among them is an apsidal house. The phase is firmly dated to MH IIIA because of a fine Yellow Minyan cup found

in a cist tomb dug in the floor of this house and sealed by a wall of phase IV.⁹

In phase IV (strata 2–3; this phase is missing in the north sector) there occurred some interesting changes. The construction of a row of similar long tripartite buildings following the contours of the hill and at least partially surrounding the settlement marks a radical change in site planning. According to the pottery (namely matt-painted and Yellow Minyan), this phase is dated to MH IIIB, but does contain a few LH I elements. In later periods, from the Mycenaean to the Classical, the hill seems to have been abandoned or, to be more exact, to have been used only sporadically.

Phase V (stratum 1) corresponds to the reoccupation of the hill at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century B.C. after a long period of virtual abandonment. The polygonal circuit wall was built in this period.

The sequence of MH pottery, as established during the new excavations, allows us to complete, refine and correct Vollgraff's observations. Regarding the comparative frequency of the various categories, our excavations confirmed that coarse ware and matt-painted ware are in fact the two most abundant categories. However, coarse ware comes second in terms of frequency, rather than first, as Vollgraff had suggested. In fact, during each of the three phases, matt-painted averages up to 35 percent of the entire ceramic assemblage, whereas coarse ware hardly reaches 28 percent.¹⁰

It must be recalled that the classification of the pottery from the new excavations is based on morphological and technological criteria. About 20 classes were distinguished and those, in turn, were grouped into three broad categories: coarse domestic wares, monochrome burnished wares and painted pottery. About 100 sherds were selected and submitted to chemical analyses at the Demokritos Centre, under the supervision of V. Kilioglou, and to petrography analyses undertaken at the Fitch Laboratory of the British School in Athens by V. Kiriati and I.K. Whitbread.¹¹

2. PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL

The ceramic material from Aspis does not differ significantly from the coarse wares of most MH sites,

⁵ VOLLGRAFF 1906, 8, 30.

⁶ TOUCHAIS 1975, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1990, 1991; PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS and TOUCHAIS 1997b.

⁷ PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS and TOUCHAIS 1996, 1997a, 2000, 2001, 2002.

⁸ TOUCHAIS 1980b.

⁹ TOUCHAIS 1978, 800, fig. 39; cf. DIETZ 1991, 162, fig. 48 (MH IIIA, AB-1).

¹⁰ PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS 2002, 4, table 1.

¹¹ KILIOGLOU *et al.* 2003.

neither in terms of technique nor in terms of morphology. However, the Aspis material has two important advantages: first, it comes from stratified deposits, and, second, some sherds have been submitted to physico-chemical analyses, which is rather exceptional for MH coarse ware. Therefore, this material can elucidate the development and function of MH coarse ware, especially since there are only a few sites where this category has been carefully studied: Kiapha Thiti,¹² Pefkakia,¹³ Tsoungiza¹⁴ and Nichoria.¹⁵ Some information is available from Lerna,¹⁶ but very little can be gleaned from older excavations.¹⁷

Under the general term “coarse ware” we include several ceramic groups that have certain shared common characteristics: the use of gritty clay with medium coarse to coarse temper; manufacture by hand, and not with a potter’s wheel; a treatment of the surface (by smoothing or burnishing) that leaves it somewhat uneven; a range of shapes intended mainly for storing and cooking.

Among the coarse wares from Aspis, we distinguish three main groups. The first two (GR1 and GR2) are very similar in terms of visual appearance (red-brown, sometimes grayish surface, often mottled) and choice of shapes (small and medium-sized pots). They are in fact so similar that we did not distinguish them during the first excavation seasons. It is only at the end of the 1980s, when Carol Zerner drew our attention to the presence of gold mica spangles in the clay of a fairly large number of pots, that we decided to separate these two groups. As a result we have no reliable statistics for the distribution of the two groups prior to 1989. Unfortunately, the coarse wares recovered after this date represent on average less than 15 per cent of all the coarse wares found during our excavations.

The third group (GR3) is very different from the first two and is much rarer. The surface has a light (buff, greenish) color and the vessels have very thick

walls. All are huge storage vessels, the fragments of which were occasionally used to cover infant burials.¹⁸ In this paper, I shall focus on the first two categories and leave aside this last group.

2.1. Local coarse ware (GR1)

2.1.1. Fabric

According to the macroscopic examination, the fabric is gritty and not very hard-fired; the walls tend to split and the fracture to exfoliate. The color of the surface is usually red-brown, often with a variegated aspect. It is smoothed, or more often burnished with a hard tool that leaves visible marks.

Three sherds from this group have been analyzed. They display a considerable chemical and mineralogical diversity. However, they also show significant similarities with a small number of coarse pottery samples analyzed from Lerna.¹⁹ This similarity seems to support the local production of the majority of the coarse pottery.

2.1.2. Quantitative data

Coarse wares constitute about 28 percent of the total ceramic assemblage during the first two MH phases, and decrease slightly, i.e., to 25 percent in the last phase (MH IIIB).²⁰ As the ware GR1 is the most frequent among the coarse wares, we assume that it is locally produced. As far as we can tell, in phases II and III it represents about 80 percent of all the coarse wares.²¹ For phase IV we lack accurate data, because this phase is found only in the southeast sector where excavation had more or less ceased by 1989, when we started distinguishing between GR1 and GR2. There are some indications of a slight decrease in the numbers of GR1 during the late phase, but this is far from certain.

As pointed out above, the total number of sherds belonging to ware GR1 cannot be established with precision, but it can be estimated at ca. 21,000. From

¹² MARAN 1992b, 144–7 (Kochgeschirr, Gattung B4; Vorratskeramik, Gattung B5), 185–8 (Goldglimmerkochgeschirr, Gattung D3).

¹³ MARAN 1992a, 138–46, 188, 198.

¹⁴ RUTTER 1990, 449–52.

¹⁵ HOWELL 1992, 45–6, 48, 55–6, 64–5, 68–9.

¹⁶ ZERNER 1978, 186–90.

¹⁷ Mainly from Korakou (BLEGEN 1921, 30–1), Asine (FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 280–3, 294–5; NORDQUIST 1987, 49, 52; DIETZ 1991, 54, 69–70, 90–1, 101–2), Argos/Deiras (DESHAYES 1966, 131–2), Asea (HOLMBERG 1944, 102–10), Malthi (VALMIN 1938, 304–7), Athens (IMMERWAHR 1971,

66–8), Eleusis (MYLONAS 1932, 80–6) and Eutresis (GOLDMAN 1931, 175–81).

¹⁸ TOUCHAIS 1978, 801.

¹⁹ KILIKOGLU *et al.* 2003, 133.

²⁰ At Nichoria, coarse ware constitutes ca. 45% of the entire ceramic assemblage during MH I, ca. 31% during MH II and ca. 55% during MH III (HOWELL 1992, 50, 64, 68, 204, fig. 3.83). At Kiapha Thiti, the proportion of coarse wares within the entire assemblage (without class B5; see above, n. 12) varies between 15 and 27% (MARAN 1992b, 144, 186).

²¹ Not 90%, as stated erroneously in KILIKOGLU *et al.* 2003, 133.

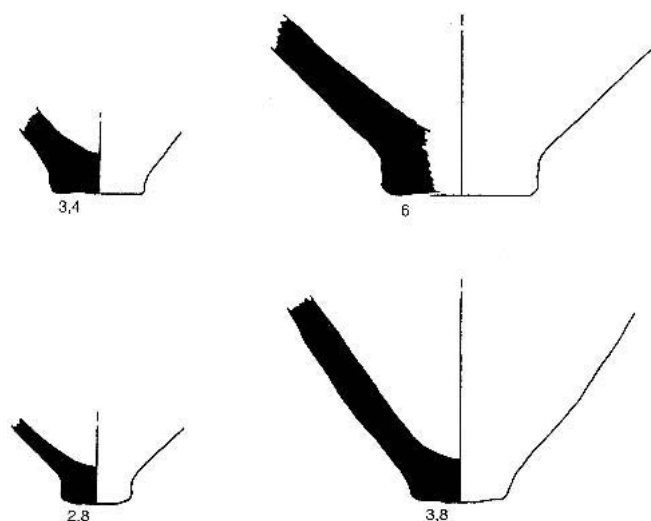


Fig. 2 Bases of ovoïd wide-mouthed jars (GR1)

those, about 800 fragments and two complete vessels were retained for further study.

2.1.3. Shapes

The range of shapes is relatively limited, with a predilection for deep and somewhat closed profiles. The most popular type is the *wide-mouthed jar*, which is usually between 25 and 40 cm high, with a rim diameter measuring between 15 and 30 cm. This type, which was already known from Argos²² and is widely attested at most MH sites throughout the period,²³ has a deep ovoïd body, a relatively small flat base (which is sometimes very small and thick) (Fig. 2),²⁴ and a more or less broad everted rim terminating in a rounded, thickened, flattened or thin lip (Fig. 3). The only completely preserved vessel (used as a container for an infant burial in the southeast sector; Fig. 4)²⁵ has no handle. However, many fragments of this type have elliptical lugs, or more or less projecting plastic features. These often take the form of an inverted horseshoe (Fig. 5)²⁶ that may be used as a handle, but they may also be purely decorative, as in the case of knobs or horns. Statistical data show that this type represents between 50 and 70 percent of the vases in this first group. A preliminary estimate of the mini-

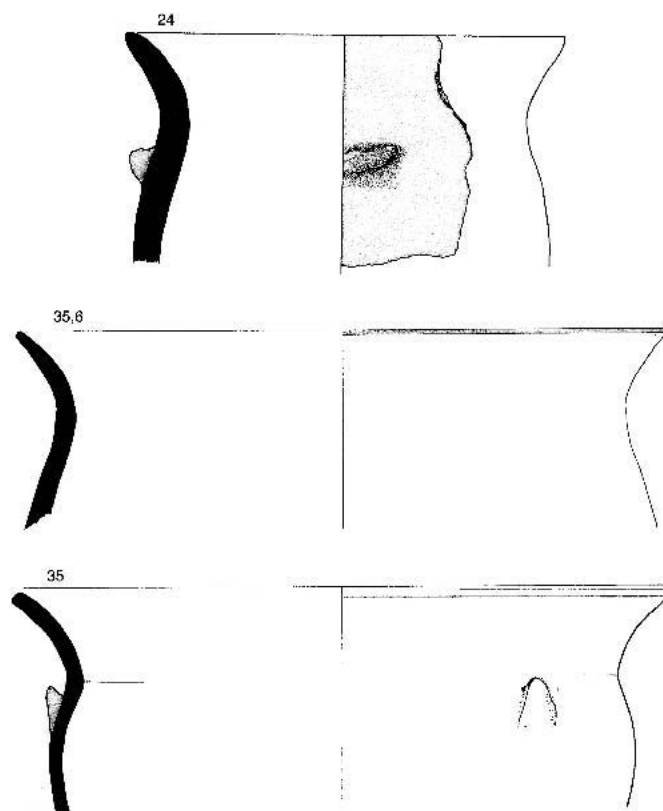


Fig. 3 Rims of ovoïd wide-mouthed jars (GR1)

imum number of vessels of this type yields about 120 items – a fairly high number – for the two sectors as a whole. The type is present throughout the three habitation phases and its relative frequency among the coarse wares seems to increase slightly and consistently. But neither the breadth of the rim nor the profile of the lip seems to have any chronological significance, since all variants appear during all three phases. This variation is therefore to be better interpreted in terms of function – or it may perhaps be attributed to differences in the potters' skills.

The presence of about 70 vertical broad handles suggests that a fairly large number of these jars were in fact *handled jars*. Most of these handles have a more or less cylindrical section, but there are about 20 examples of strap handles, sometimes with broad vertical grooves down the back.²⁷ At least some of

²² DESHAYES 1966, 131, pl. XXXVII.4.

²³ For instance, at Korakou (BLEGEN 1921, 32, fig. 46), Asine (FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 280, fig. 193.9, 10), Lerna (ZERNER 1978, figs. 2.16, 5.24, 13.12, 14.10, 16.15, 19.10–2), Kirrha (DOR *et al.* 1960, pl. XXXVI.15), Athens (IMMERWAHR 1971, pl. 25.362), Pefkakia (MARAN 1992a, pl. 8.4).

²⁴ Cf. RUTTER 1990, 449 (“thick-walled foot”), fig. 18.104–8;

HOWELL 1992, 129, fig. 3.4 (P2078), 150, fig. 3.26 (P2359) (MH I), 188, fig. 3.66 (P2719) (MH II), 202, fig. 3.80 (P2866) (MH III).

²⁵ TOUCHAIS 1976, 757, cf. FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 280, fig. 193.8; ZERNER 1990, figs. 1–6, 8.

²⁶ Cf. RUTTER 1990, fig. 18.102, 172.

²⁷ Cf. RUTTER 1990, fig. 18.172, 173.

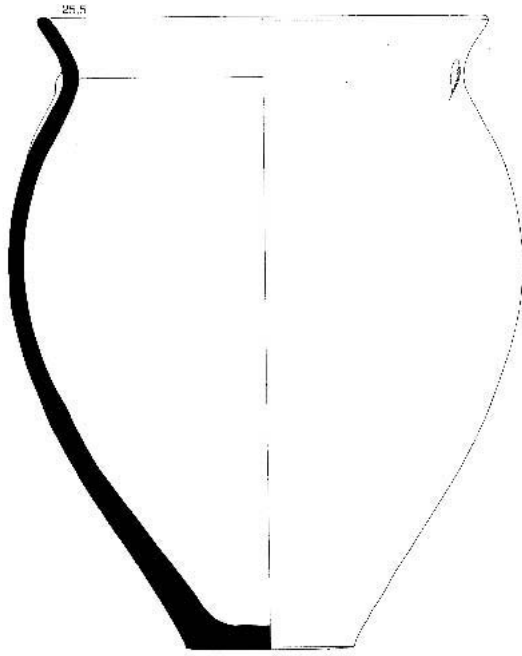


Fig. 4 Ovoid wide-mouthed jar (GR1)



Fig. 5 Inverted horseshoe-shaped lugs and plastic ornaments (GR1)



Fig. 6 Rims of small jars or cups with rounded body (GR1)

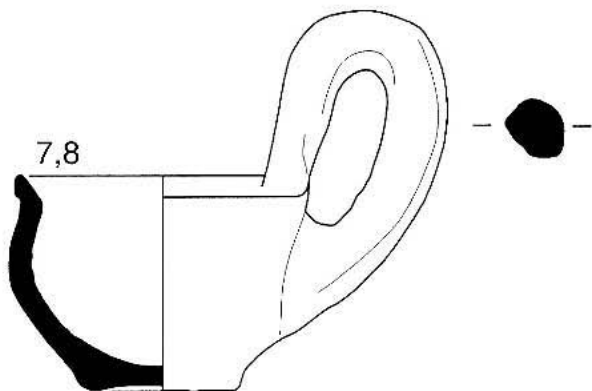


Fig. 7 Cup with high-swing handle (GR1)

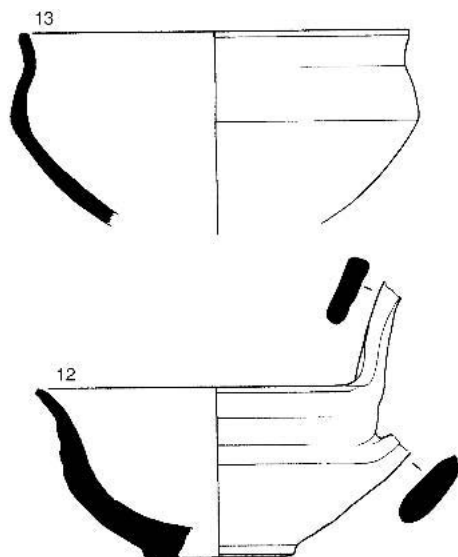


Fig. 8 Angular cups (GR1)

them are clearly rim-attached handles, but no fragment of rim with the adjoining handle has been found, and we therefore do not have a full profile of this type.²⁸ Horizontal handles, probably placed on the shoulder,²⁹ are much more unusual.

Rims similar to those of the wide-mouthed jars, but with a diameter smaller than 15 cm and handles thinner than the ones described in the previous paragraph, belong probably to *small jars* or *cups* with rounded body.³⁰ Nearly 40 fragments of such rims have been found, in equal frequency in the two sectors, and they cover a wide chronological range. Several of them bear a plastic knob on the shoulder (Fig. 6), a feature widely attested at other sites.³¹ The only complete vessel of this type, without a knob but with a high-swung handle (Fig. 7),³² was found in a grave together with a matt-painted cup.

Much more unusual are the *angular cups*, which seem to imitate Minyan types.³³ In fact, the majority have a dark surface and are fairly well-burnished; three of them have a high-swung strap handle, and one of them bears crudely executed grooves on the

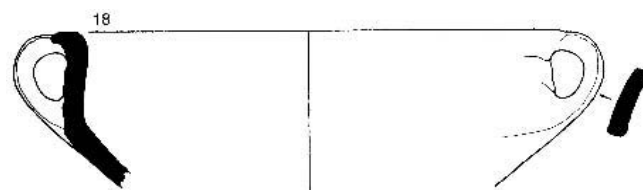


Fig. 9 Angular bowl or goblet (GR1)

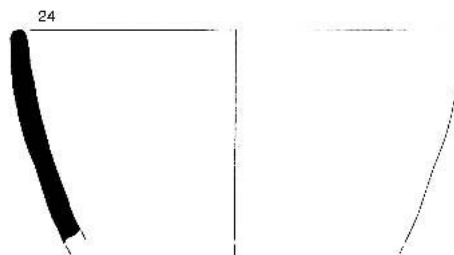


Fig. 10 Wide open bowls (GR1)

shoulder (Fig. 8). Fewer than ten fragments belong to this type; they were all found in the southeast sector, in MH IIIB contexts. Therefore, this shape is a late innovation.

Another type, which is quite rare, too, and also seems to imitate a Minyan form, is a sort of *bowl* or *goblet* with more or less carinated body and one or two small vertical flat strap handles below the rim (Fig. 9).³⁴ All seven fragments belonging to this type were found in the southeast sector, but their chronological range is wider than that of the angular cup, as it extends from MH IB–II to MH IIIB.

A different type, a *wide open bowl* with flaring and slightly incurved walls,³⁵ has the same chronological and spatial range. It is represented by a dozen rim

²⁸ The type is attested elsewhere: for instance, in Tsoungiza (RUTTER 1989, 19, fig. 7.18), Eutresis (GOLDMAN 1931, 178, fig. 246.3), Kiapha Thiti (MARAN 1992b, pls. 12.426, 17.557) and Pefkakia (MARAN 1992a, pls. 16.11, 117.2).

²⁹ Cf. GOLDMAN 1931, 176, fig. 244.1, 2; RUTTER 1989, 19, fig. 7.19; 1990, fig. 17.103.

³⁰ Cf. HOWELL 1992, 152, fig. 3.28 (MH I), 183–5, fig. 3.61–3 (MH II), 199–200, fig. 3.77, 78 (MH III).

³¹ For instance, Asine (FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 265, fig. 184.11 [MH I]; 283, fig. 194.5 [MH II]), Asea (HOLMBERG 1944, 104, fig. 102e), Kirrha (DOR *et al.* 1960, pl. XXXIX.21).

³² Cf. MYLONAS 1932, 83, figs. 60a, 61b; GOLDMAN 1931, 177, fig. 245.1, 2; HOLMBERG 1944, 105, fig. 103d, e; DOR *et al.* 1960, pl. XXXIX.18; ZERNER 1990, 27, figs. 15, 17.

³³ Cf. BLEGEN 1921, 30, fig. 44; IMMERWAHR 1971, 67.

³⁴ Cf. MYLONAS 1932, 84, fig. 62.4 (from a late MH context). The rare fragments of wide open “dishes” from Nichoria (HOWELL 1992, 203, fig. 3.81 [P2883, P2884]) are dated to MH III.

³⁵ Cf. MARAN 1992b, pl. 14.489.

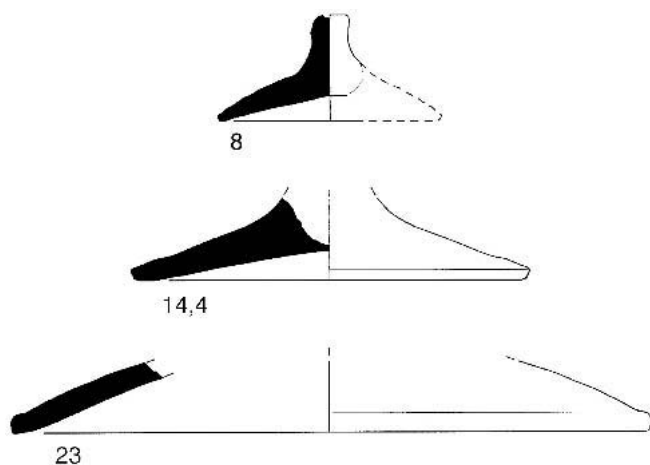


Fig. 11 Hollow-bottomed lids (GR1)

fragments (Fig. 10). None provide any indication about the existence, number and position of handles.

There are very few truly closed shapes in this group. In fact, only two fragments can be attributed to such types: one *beaked jug*³⁶ and one fragment of a *narrow-necked jar* with large flaring neck (not illustrated) similar to the one found in the Deiras MH installation.³⁷ The two Aspis fragments belong respectively to MH IIIA and IIIB context.

Finally, I should mention three hollow-bottomed *lids* (Fig. 11): a small one with a knob in the shape of a pyramid, and two medium-sized ones whose knobs are missing.³⁸

2.1.4. Decoration

Two decorative techniques are found in this group: plastic decoration and incision.

Plastic decoration has been mentioned above in connection with the jars where it is widely attested. It consists mainly of knobs, horns and pellets. About 90 fragments bearing such ornaments were recovered; they were distributed equally between the two sectors. They show no significant chronological variation, with the exception of the inverted horseshoe (more or less pronounced), as all 15 recorded examples were found in exclusively MH IIIB contexts.³⁹

Other plastic ornaments, namely ribbon – plain (4 examples) or fingered (5 examples) – are much more

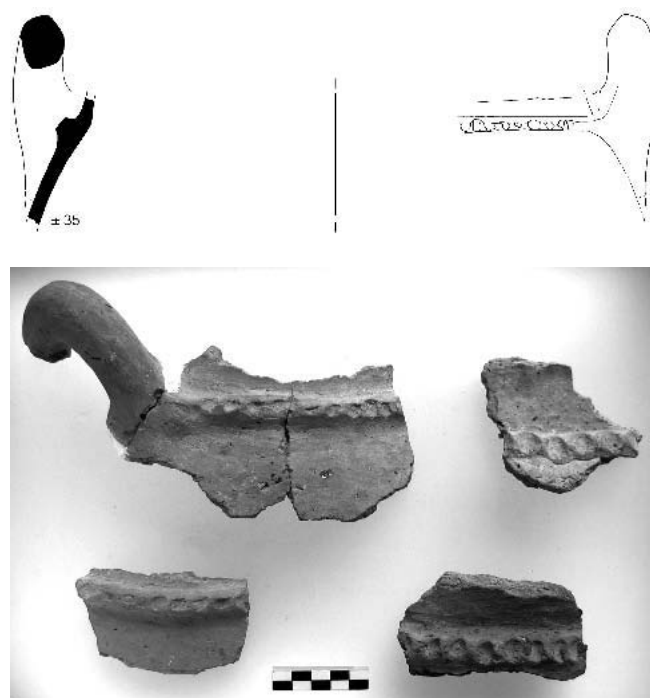


Fig. 12 Fragments of jars decorated with fingered ribbon (GR1)

unusual among Aspis material. They apparently decorated the shoulder of large wide-mouthed jars (Fig. 12).⁴⁰

About 100 sherds are decorated with incisions. Since we kept nearly all the incised sherds recovered (including body fragments), this number must be valid. Therefore incised decoration is represented on less than 0.5 percent of the local coarse wares. From these sherds a maximum number of approximately 15 vessels can be reconstructed.

As the fabric does not differ from the local coarse ware, we named this category GR1a. This ware is referred to in other publications, where it is extensively described,⁴¹ as “Adriatic ware”. The entire surface of the vessels is covered with incisions: horizontal, vertical and/or oblique parallel lines, which cross each other or alternate, or sometimes form the classical “fishbone” pattern (Fig. 13). Very few fragments deviate from this general decorative scheme: among them, a jar (belonging to a MH IB–II context) with horizontal lines alternating with rows of dots (Fig. 14).⁴²

³⁶ Cf. IMMERWAHR 1971, pl. 24.349, 350.

³⁷ In the Deiras this shape is reported as “exceptionnelle dans la céramique grossière”: DESHAYES 1966, 132, pl. XVIII.11.

³⁸ Cf. GOLDMAN 1931, 179, fig. 249; RUTTER 1990, fig. 18.100.

³⁹ At Nichoria, horseshoe-shaped lugs are apparently not attested before MH III (HOWELL 1992, 69).

⁴⁰ See, for instance, IMMERWAHR 1971, pl. 26.366; HOWELL 1992, 187, fig. 3.65.

⁴¹ VALMIN 1938, 287–90; HOLMBERG 1944, 106–10.

⁴² The same motif occurs at Nichoria on an everted rim fragment in gray-brown “fairly coarse fabric” from a MH I context (HOWELL 1992, 47, 129, fig. 3.4 [P2091]).

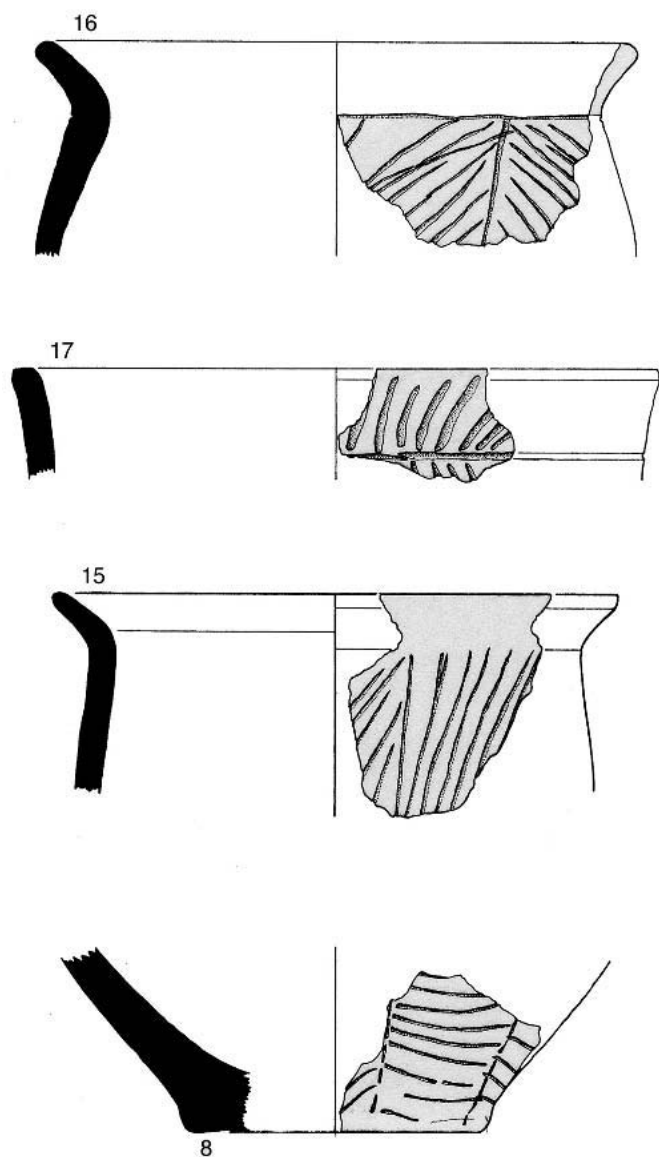


Fig. 13 Coarse incised ware (GR1a)

All the fragments of incised coarse ware seem to belong to medium-sized *wide-mouthed jars*, with or without vertical handle.⁴³ The few incised handles we recorded have a somewhat flat or rectangular, rather than cylindrical section.

It is worth noting that a relatively high proportion of the incised fragments (about 20 percent) were found in MH IB–II levels. This is not surprising, since at other sites (for instance, Lerna and Asine) this cat-

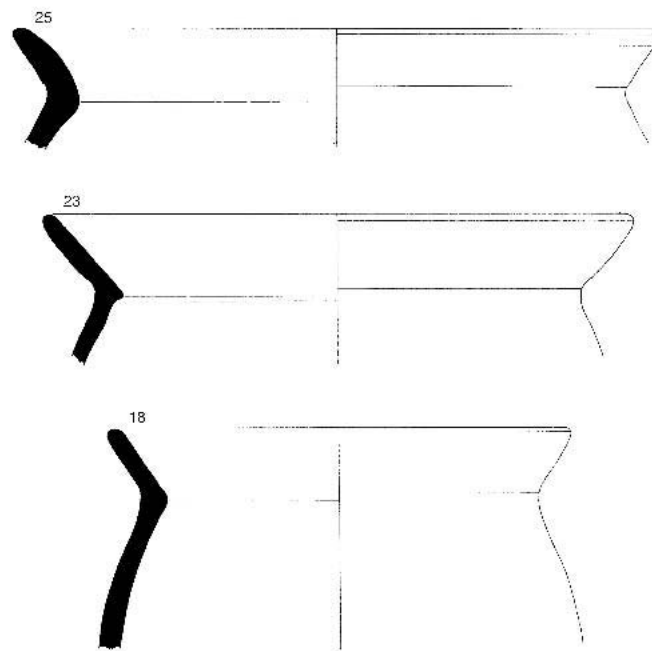


Fig. 14 Bowl in coarse incised ware (GR1a)

egory is present already during the transition from EH III to MH I. The Aspis evidence, however, shows that this class survives until MH IIIB, since almost 50 percent of the incised fragments found in the southeast sector belong to this late phase.

2.2 Gold mica coarse ware (GR2)

2.2.1. Fabric

This group differs from GR1 in its method of manufacture and its fabric, which is not as coarse-tempered and contains sparkling inclusions of gold mica; as it has been widely described,⁴⁴ I shall not provide a lengthy description. The surface treatment is different from that of GR1: the vessels are usually well smoothed (perhaps by using a piece of cloth, or a brush?), but burnishing is rare. Traces of “wiping” are particularly visible on the inner face of the vessels. Firing must have been better controlled than in the local group, for the biscuit is harder and there is usually no difference in color between the core and the surface. In general, the profile of the vessels is more regular and their articulations at the rim and base sharper.⁴⁵

⁴³ See, for instance, GOLDMAN 1931, 179, fig. 250; HOWELL 1992, 55, 147, fig. 3.22 (MH I), 64, 182, fig. 3.60 (MH II).

⁴⁴ See for instance ZERNER 1978, 189–90; 1986, 65–6; 1988, 5; RUTTER 1989, 12; MARAN 1992b, 185–6.

⁴⁵ This point has been stressed by MARAN (1992b, 144–5).

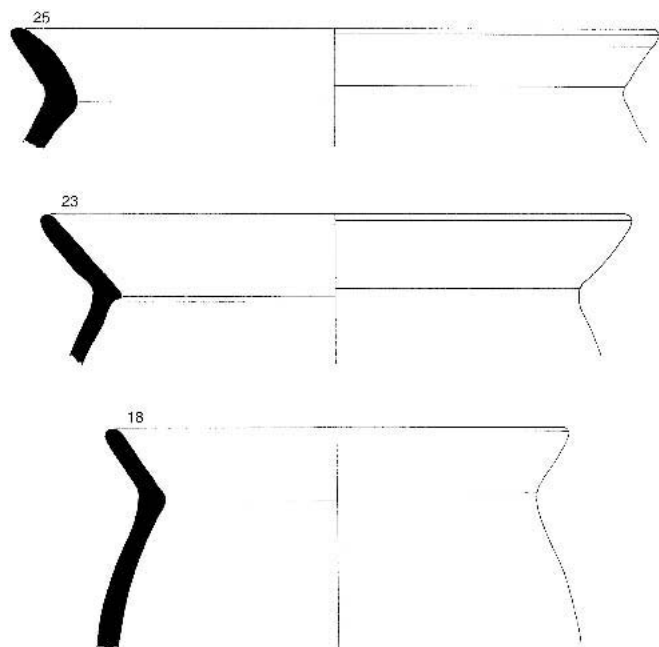


Fig. 15 Rims of ovoid wide-mouthed jars (GR2)

Three sherds of this group have been submitted to chemical and petrographic analyses. The chemical analysis shows that these fragments display a remarkable compositional homogeneity. The petrographic analysis has confirmed their Aeginetan provenance, on the basis of their volcanic inclusions and in comparison with pottery and clays from Aegina.⁴⁶

2.2.2. Quantitative data

According to the available statistical data – which, as I stressed earlier, must be treated with caution – this group represents about 7 percent of all the coarse wares in phase II, and about 14 percent in phase III. Within the total ceramic assemblage, the proportion of GR2 is less than 2 percent in phase II, and less than 4 percent in phase III.⁴⁷ For the reasons stated above, we have no reliable data for phase IV.

Nearly 500 sherds of this group were kept for study out of a total number that may not have exceeded 3,000. Only one complete vessel was found.

2.2.3. Shapes

The range of shapes is very close to those made in the local coarse wares.

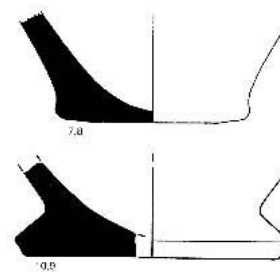


Fig. 16 Bases of wide-mouthed jars (GR2)



Fig. 17 Fragment of rim-handled jar (GR2)

Here too, the *wide-mouthed jar* is the most frequent type. It represents between 35 and 62 percent of the recognizable types in this group. The minimum number of vessels seems to vary between 60 and 70. In absolute terms this is, of course, smaller than the number of similar vases in the local coarse ware. It is, however, relatively high if one takes into account the relative frequencies of the two wares. From a typological point of view, the rim of the GR2 wide-mouthed jars is often not as broad as in those belonging to the local group, but in the GR2 jars the inner surface of the rim forms a sharper angle. The lip is generally rounded, but thickened or flattened lips are not uncommon (Fig. 15). One single example of a slightly concave inner rim, coming from a MH IIIB context, confirms that this is a late feature. Indeed parallels at Kiapha Thiti⁴⁸ and Korakou⁴⁹ date to LH I. The gold mica jars also differ in the form of the base. In this fabric, jars are often provided with a splaying flat-

⁴⁶ KILIKOGLU *et al.* 2003, 133.

⁴⁷ Quantitative data are available only from Kiapha Thiti, where the percentage of gold mica coarse ware is somewhere between 3 and 8% of the total assemblage (MARAN 1992b, 186).

⁴⁸ MARAN 1992b, 188 n. 375.

⁴⁹ DAVIS 1979, 251, fig. 11.245–9.

tened base, which sometimes forms a sort of flange on the edge. Raised conical bases also occur, while these are entirely absent from the first group (Fig. 16).⁵⁰ Finally, since no complete vessels of this type have been recovered, we do not know whether handleless examples (similar to those attested in the local coarse ware) exist in the gold mica fabric.⁵¹



Fig. 18 Rim-handled jar from HM floor deposit beneath the Aphrodision (GR2)

In fact, most of these jars were probably provided with one vertical handle from the rim to the shoulder, and they may therefore be better characterized as *rim-handled jars*. In the Aspis material this type is represented by one rim fragment with an attached handle (Fig. 17) and about 100 vertical roll handles (but not a single strap handle) that may belong – at least in part – to such vessels. One complete vase of this type has been found in the lower town of Argos, in connection with MH habitation remains excavated by F. Croissant below the Aphrodision (Fig. 18).⁵² This type – which is more frequently shoulder-handled – is widely attested at most MH sites, especially in late contexts, for example at Lerna,⁵³ Asine,⁵⁴ Mycenae (Circle B),⁵⁵ Korakou,⁵⁶

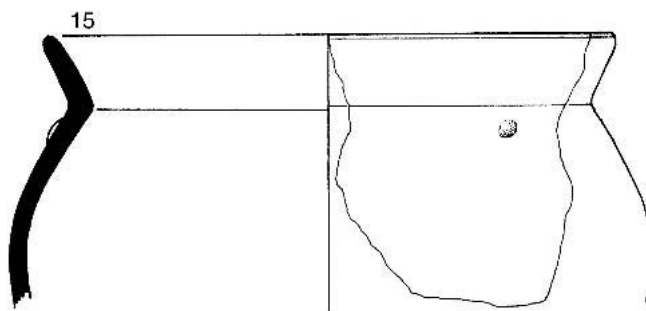


Fig. 19 Rim of small jar or cup with rounded body (GR2)

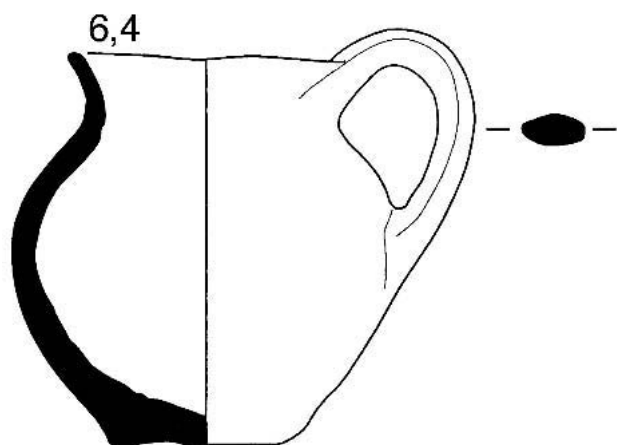
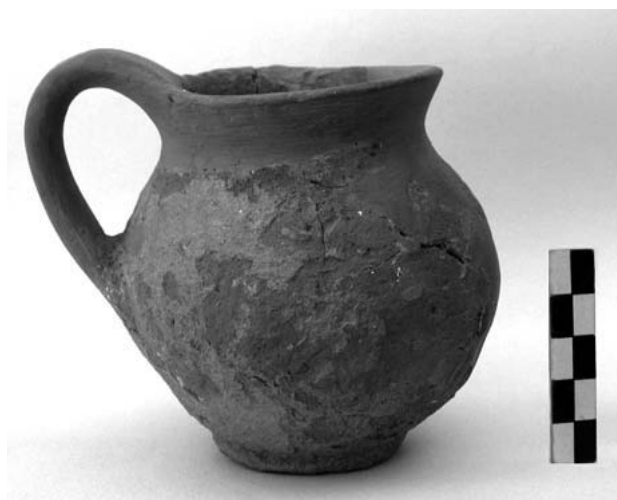


Fig. 20 Globular cup (GR2)



⁵⁰ Similar observations about the shape of rims and bases are provided in MARAN 1992b, 187; characteristic profiles in DIETZ 1991, figs. 24, 25.

⁵¹ The same question is asked by ZERNER (1988, 5) in connection with the material from Lerna.

⁵² Another almost complete example was found on the south-

east foot of the Aspis (Tzafas plot) in a MH III–LH I context (DIVARI-VALAKOU 1998, 91, 100, fig. 16).

⁵³ ZERNER 1988, figs. 20, 22.10.

⁵⁴ NORDQUIST 1987, 172, fig. 50.8.

⁵⁵ MYLONAS 1973, pl. 172b.

⁵⁶ DAVIS 1979, 251, fig. 11.240–1.

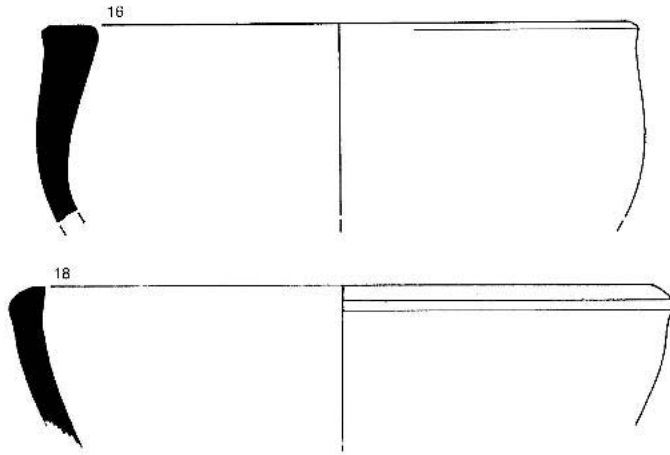


Fig. 21 Bowls with incurved or carinated walls (GR2)



Fig. 22 Small conical cup (GR2)

Tsougiza,⁵⁷ Kiapha Thiti⁵⁸ and Eleusis.⁵⁹ In the Aspis settlement it is found already in MH IB–II levels: a little more than 17 percent of the total number found belongs to these phases. The type becomes much more frequent during the two subsequent phases; the finds from Korakou and Tsougiza confirm that it remains very popular in LH I.

As in the first group, *small jars* or *cups* are the second most frequent type (Fig. 19). However, the total number of fragments and the minimum number of vessels are, relatively speaking, much lower (about 30 percent). These small jars usually have a sharply offset rim and one vertical roll handle,⁶⁰ but the only complete example (recovered from a grave)⁶¹ has a slightly concave everted rim and its handle is oval in



Fig. 23 Small flat-bottomed lid (GR2)

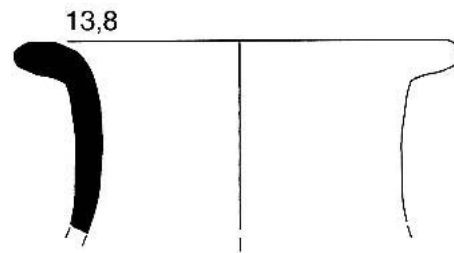


Fig. 24 Rim of necked jar (GR2)

section (Fig. 20). There is only one example, belonging to a MH IIIB context, of a ring handle set vertically upon the rim. This type of handle appears rarely in coarse ware,⁶² but is well attested in fine or semifine monochrome burnished or matt-painted cups from late MH contexts.⁶³ A characteristic feature of these small jars or cups is the presence of one or two small plastic pellets at the top of the shoulder (Fig. 19).⁶⁴

Approximately 10 fragments belong to *wide open bowls* with slightly incurved or carinated walls and thickened lip. Two of them are provided with a raised hoop handle,⁶⁵ found frequently in Minyan ware (Fig. 21).

The remaining types are represented by only one example each: a miniature *conical cup* with a vertical roll handle (Fig. 22),⁶⁶ a small flat-bottomed *lid* (Fig. 23),⁶⁷ a small fragment from a *strainer*⁶⁸ and two frag-

⁵⁷ RUTTER 1989, 18, fig. 6.17 (from LH I context).

⁵⁸ MARAN 1992b, pls. 6.220, 42e.

⁵⁹ MYLONAS 1932, 81–2, figs. 58, 59.

⁶⁰ Cf. ZERNER 1988, fig. 21.6–9; 1990, 28, fig. 21.

⁶¹ TOUCHAIS 1978, 800, fig. 40.

⁶² Examples in Korakou (BLEGEN 1921, 31, fig. 45 middle) and Eutresis (GOLDMAN 1931, 177, fig. 245.5, 6), most probably in gold mica fabric.

⁶³ For instance, at Asine (FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 273, fig. 189.1; DIETZ 1991, 163, fig. 48 [AB-7, 8, 12]) and Mycenae, Circle B (MYLONAS 1973, pl. 232 [L2-135]).

⁶⁴ Cf. FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 283, fig. 194.2–4 (gold mica fabric?); ZERNER 1988, fig. 21; 1990, 28, fig. 21.

⁶⁵ Cf. MARAN 1992a, pl. 12.23.

⁶⁶ Cf. ZERNER 1990, 27, fig. 14 (coarse burnished).

⁶⁷ Cf. FRÖDIN and PERSSON 1938, 283, fig. 194.6 (gold mica fabric?).

⁶⁸ Strainers or “brasiers” in coarse ware (not specifically in gold mica fabric) are reported from numerous MH sites, namely Korakou (BLEGEN 1921, 31, fig. 45), Eutresis (GOLDMAN 1931, 179, fig. 250.3) and Pefkakia (MARAN 1992a, pl. 62.9, 10).

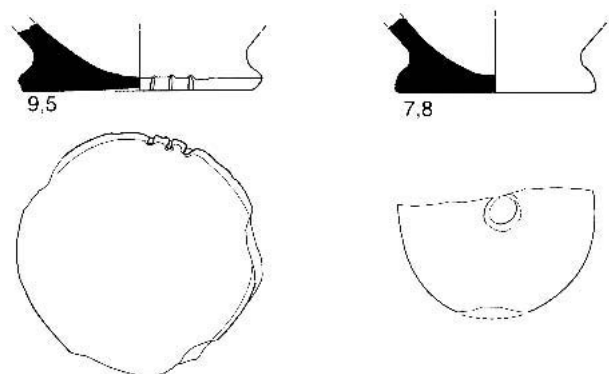


Fig. 25 Bases with potters' marks (GR2)

ments of closed vases: one from a *necked jar* (Fig. 24) and one that seems to belong to a *beaked jug* (not illustrated).

2.2.4. Decoration

Only plastic decoration is found in this group, consisting exclusively of knobs and pellets, placed on the shoulder of jars. Plastic decoration is therefore more standardized than in the first group.

2.2.5. Potters' marks

One feature specific to this group of coarse ware is potters' marks. The Aspis excavations provided four examples of such marks, all of them from the south-east sector. In three cases, all from a MH IIIB context, the mark is placed underneath the base: one or three small cuts along the baseline – which is quite frequent at Asine⁶⁹ and attested elsewhere as well⁷⁰ – or one small circle in the center (Fig. 25). In the fourth example, found in a MH IB–II context, the mark (two little cuts) is placed on the shoulder and combined with a plastic knob (Fig. 26).⁷¹ If we accept M. Lindblom's idea that some arrangements of pellets may be considered potters' marks,⁷² we could add one more example, also from a MH IB–II context: three pellets on the top of the shoulder of a jar, placed in such way that they resemble a human face (Fig. 27).

Though very few, these examples of potters' marks seem to confirm the observation made by Carol Zerner, namely that the marks are placed on the shoulder of the vases in the earlier MH phases and underneath their base during the later phases.⁷³



Fig. 26 Rim with potters' mark (GR2)



Fig. 27 Rim with pellets interpreted as potters' mark (GR2)

3. DISCUSSION

This brief overview confirms that the Aspis material shows no exceptional features. As the study of this ware is still at a preliminary stage, I shall conclude with a few remarks which, I hope, will provoke some further discussion.

The first point of interest is, of course, the existence of two groups of coarse ware side by side. Before I discuss this point further, I would like to stress the fact that – contrary to the impression one receives when reading publications of this material – distinguishing between the two groups with the naked eye, and even with the help of a magnifying glass, is often quite difficult, being dependent on the light, on the time of the day, and on the strength of one's eyes. For instance, most of the thick-walled feet belonging to jars recovered in the southeast sector display all the characteristics of the local fabric, and yet they contain fine sparkling inclusions that resemble gold mica, though the latter are usually much bigger. Further analyses are necessary in order to establish the exact petrographic composition of the fabrics.

The Aspis is not the only site where local coarse ware and Aeginetan gold mica coarse ware coexist.

⁶⁹ Fifteen examples (LINDBLOM 2002, 37–8, fig. 4.3).

⁷⁰ At Mycenae (Circle B, O 205, drawing in DIETZ 1991, 226, fig. 71 [KC–1]), Korakou (DAVIS 1979, 251, fig. 11.251), Kiapha Thiti (MARAN 1992b, pls. 20.663, 33.1011).

⁷¹ Cf. ZERNER 1988, fig. 21.4, 5; LINDBLOM 2002, 38, fig. 4.1.

⁷² LINDBLOM 2002, 33.

⁷³ ZERNER 1986, 65.

Among other sites excavated since the proposal of this distinction, or where material has been subsequently studied, Asine, Lerna, Tsoungiza and Kiapha Thiti provide at this point the best parallels. In Tsoungiza, Aeginetan gold mica coarse ware is reported as “extremely unusual”.⁷⁴ In the other settlements, the amount seems to vary between 1 and 12 percent, while at Asine, S. Dietz notes its steady increase from MH II to IIIB.⁷⁵ The data from Aspis seems to confirm this general pattern, although in terms of quantity, Aspis receives rather fewer coarse-ware imports than most other settlements.

In most of these settlements, it appears that the coarse vessels imported from Aegina are most frequently one-handed ovoid jars. This is the case also in the Aspis. But if one looks at the entire assemblage from the Aspis, two observations can be made. First, this shape is also the most popular one made in the local coarse ware. Second, the entire repertoire of the local coarse and imported gold mica wares is very similar, with the exception of some local (and late) improvisations in the first group.

I think that these two points are important. They imply that the mainlanders did not import special forms that they themselves were not producing, but almost exactly the same forms that they were making at home. The difference, therefore, may be a matter of quality rather than function.

This proposal confirms the suggestion that Aeginetan coarse vessels may have possessed some special properties or specific qualities which made them highly desirable.⁷⁶ It has been argued that their volcanic composition may have rendered them more resistant to thermal shock. As most of them are kitchen wares, this is a very plausible explanation. However, thermal properties are rather irrelevant in the case of table ware (of which there are only a few pieces). A higher degree of impermeability may also be proposed. In any case, further study, especially experimentation with making vases from Aeginetan clays, is needed in order to provide a satisfactory answer to this question. Chemical analysis using the chromatography technique could also provide some information on the possible function of these vases, which might have been special. At present, only one

sherd of an Aeginetan coarse jar from Aspis has been selected for such an analysis,⁷⁷ and the results are not yet available.

The possibility that the importation of Aeginetan coarse ware to the mainland may be attributed not only to utilitarian, but also to social reasons needs to be discussed. If a symbolic value, which has been proposed for the Aeginetan matt-painted ware,⁷⁸ seems rather improbable in the case of household vessels, it is possible that some kind of social value was derived from the possession of imported and easily recognizable kitchen vessels – in the same way as a Fissler or Lagostina saucepan may be valued by a Greek housewife today! There is, however, an important difference between the two Aeginetan imported series, the matt-painted and coarse wares. The study of matt-painted ware from Aspis has suggested that imports from Aegina tend to decrease from MH I to IIIB. We may therefore infer that imported types are progressively replaced by local ones.⁷⁹ In the case of coarse ware, the opposite trend can be observed, i.e., the number of imports increases, while similar types continue to be produced locally. In my opinion, this pattern strongly suggests a real *need* for imported coarse vessels; otherwise both series (Aeginetan matt-painted and coarse ware) would have undergone the same fluctuations.

In respect to the local coarse ware, it remains to be determined how “local” it is, first in terms of clay and, second, in terms of manufacturing technique. The physical and chemical similarities with some samples from Lerna suggest that the ware could have a regional rather than strictly local character. Here too, supplementary analyses are needed. In terms of shapes, the material from Aspis does not seem to reflect, for instance, the dichotomy that has been observed at Tsoungiza “between smaller rim-handled and larger shoulder-handled cooking pots”⁸⁰ – at least, it does not at the present stage of study. This might be a local feature, but the matter requires further study.

Finally, the Aspis material, despite the fact that it is well stratified, confirms the view that coarse ware offers very few clues relevant to internal subdivisions within the MH period. The apparent fixity of the

⁷⁴ RUTTER 1990, 421.

⁷⁵ See statistical diagrams in DIETZ 1991, 53, 59, 71, figs. 9, 13, 18.

⁷⁶ ZERNER 1993, 49–50.

⁷⁷ The analysis has been carried out by O. DECAVALLAS (PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS and TOUCHAIS 2002, 498).

⁷⁸ PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS, this volume.

⁷⁹ PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS 2002, 37–9; and in this volume.

⁸⁰ RUTTER 1990, 451.

types throughout the period can be clearly demonstrated. Since most of these vessels were used for storing food or for cooking, this fixity suggests that there were no significant changes in the diet and in the way that food was prepared, not even during the final phase, i.e., during the transition from the MH to the LH period. There is perhaps only one indication of new cooking practices, suggested by the presence, among the coarse ware from this phase, of one single foot from a tripod cooking pot.⁸¹ This piece appears

very exotic, not only because of its typically Minoan form, but also because of its fabric: it is the only fragment tempered with large quantities of silver mica inclusions.⁸² It confirms that Minoan cooking practices still had very limited impact in Argos during the transitional phase.

These are some of the questions that arise from the preliminary study of the coarse ware from the MH settlement on the Aspis. No doubt further questions will be revealed as research progresses.

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⁸¹ Already published by PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS (2000).

⁸² PHILIPPA-TOUCHAIS 2000.

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