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Middle Iron Age Pottery from the Lower Vardar or Amphaxitis Region

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Ceramic finds from the 7th and 6th centuries BC in the valley of the River Vardar, especially the Lower Vardar, include not only typical handmade pottery from the Iron Age but another type of ceramic with high quality painted decoration and archaic features. The quality of these ceramics identifies this local culture as superior in relation to other Iron Age cultures in the Balkans (Fig. 1).

These pottery vessels were shaped on a potter's wheel from purified baked clay ranging in color from ocher to light red, with a visible gray core in the cross-section. The pottery was decorated with linear motifs—horizontal stripes—painted in dark matte red to brown, mostly around the rim, neck and shoulder. The surface of the pottey was covered with the *engobe* or clay slip, which gives an additional, almost metallic gloss. It was specifically expressed during the VI century when, despite the ocher production also appear gray baked vessels (Fig. 2).

Such linear ochre painted pottery produced with the use of a potter's wheel has long been identified as having originated from the Ionian Islands, from the island of Rhodes, or simply from eastern Greece.¹

Intensive research carried out in the region of Valandovo and Gevgelija during the 1980s and 90s revealed the importance of such ceramics as an aspect of the Iron Age material culture of the local archaeological sites known as the Lower Vardar or Gevgelija Group.²

The Lower Vardar Group comprises sites along the valley of the River Vardar (*Axios*) from Demir Kapija all the way south to the sea—in fact to the mouth of the river in that time on the territory of the ancient region of Amphaxitis. During the 7th and 6th centuries BC, this area attained an extremely high level of dynamic economic and cultural development. Many of these sites have been excavated and are now well known—most of the sites being necropolises with unified burial customs containing rich findings from that time.³

1 Vasic R., 1976; Pasic R., 1976; Parovic-Pesikan M., 1986; Vasic, 1987; Babic S., 1990.

2 Mitrevski D., 1997, p.119

3 Vasic R.1987, 701; Mitrevski D., 1997, 82; Pavlovski G. et al, 2007.



Fig.1 Some of the basic forms of Lower Vardar or Amfaxidis ocher pottery from the VII century BC

Linear ochre painted pottery has an important, even dominant position in the cultural inventory of these necropolises, giving the group its special and distinctive feature (Fig.3). However, many elements necessary for its full evaluation still remain unknown. For a long time such vessels were known only as burial goods, thereby limiting opportunities to determine their true archaeological and cultural value. There was insufficient information with which to identify the precise territorial and chronological distribution of such pottery, its purpose and typological development. And there was no information as to the exact relations with other cultural manifestations of the time in which they were created. Finally, there was no confirmed information as to the centers where such pottery was manufactured.

Over the past twenty years, however, new finds and new archaeological sites with findings of linear ochre ceramics have been discovered in the Lower Vardar Valley, especially in the Valandovo and Gevgelija region.⁴ These have considerably increased our knowledge of such pottery, providing much more extensive evidence on which to base our analysis of these ceramics and our identification of the Lower Vardar region as its home territory.

During the High iron Age from the 8th to the 6th century BC, necessary conditions were created throughout the valley of the River Vardar to achieve a rise and expose local cultural values. New settlements were established and large necropolises organized, contributing to the manifestation of a strong and fully developed local Iron Age culture. In this framework, the Valandovo and Gevgelija region has a notably

⁴ Ristov K., 1993; Videski Z., 1999, 91; Mitrevski D. et al, 2005; Huseinovski B., 2005 ; Mitrevski D., 2010.



Fig.2 The basic forms of Lower Vardar or Amfaxidis pottery from the VII-VI century BC

high concentration of finds, mainly necropolises. Fifteen different necropolises have been researched within this area alone, covering no more than 30 km in diameter. Over six hundred graves have been explored in this area, not including the well known necropolises found in the south, especially in the region of Kilkis (Chauchitsa, Bohemica, Kozlu Dere, etc.).⁵ Burials in all these necropolises do not come out from the frameworks of VII and VI century BC.

Linear ochre painted pottery occupies a dominant place among the grave goods found in these necropolises. It appears as a highly unified phenomenon with unique chronological, typological and cultural values throughout the whole territory of the Lower Vardar region. It has been connected to unique burial forms, as well as to the only material culture of that time. Thus it is considered the most standard part of the burial inventory (Fig.3). There is almost no burial site that does not include two or more such ceramic vessels. A typical set of burial goods, regardless of the character and rank of the deceased, appears to have included a jug and a deep cup with one or two vertical handles, with an evident tendency to include such a ceramic set in every single burial. The jug was probably used to add liquid while the cup or *caniharoi*-shaped pots were intended to hold food. In children's burials, the jug was often replaced with a smaller jug in the form of *olpes* or *gutusis*. In rare cases when some of a usual wheel made burial pots is missing, that same form could be replaced by another, appropriate but handmade vessel.

Jugs with a cut away back side of the neck are a prevalent form in the local

⁵ Casson S., 1926; Ray L., 1932; Kilian K., 1975.

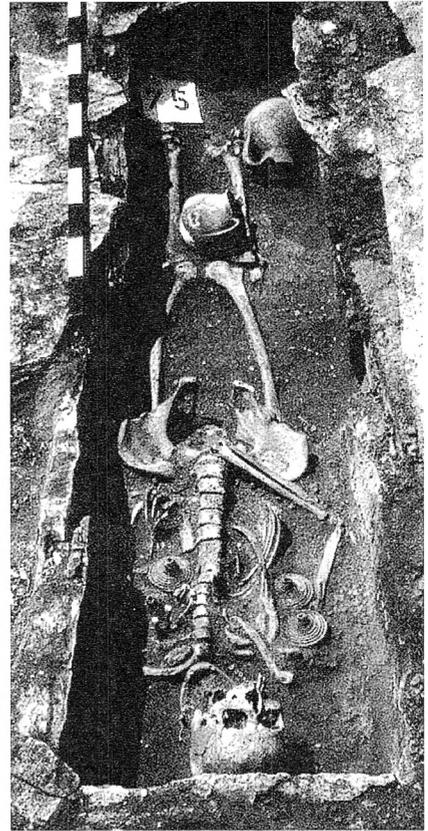
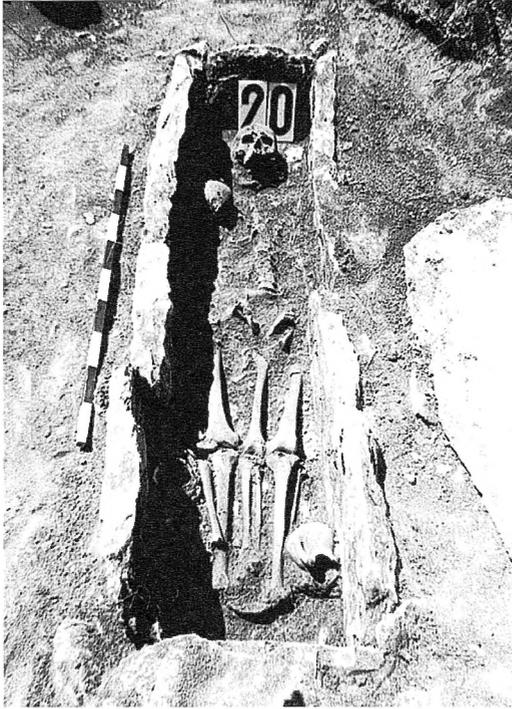


Fig.3 Some graves and a part of Dedeli necropolis, near Valandovo

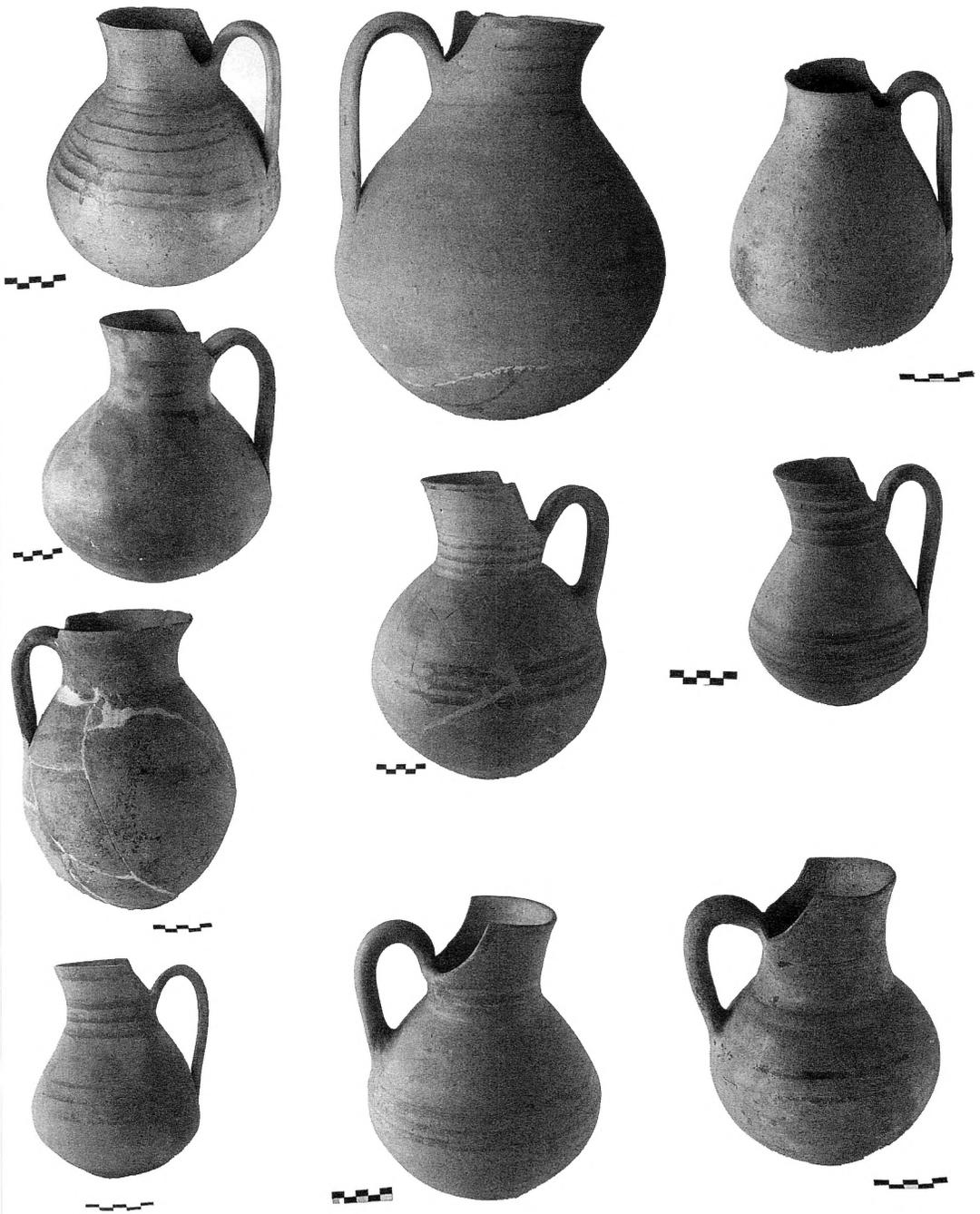


Fig.4 Some exemplars of jugs with an cut away back side of the neck as a leading form

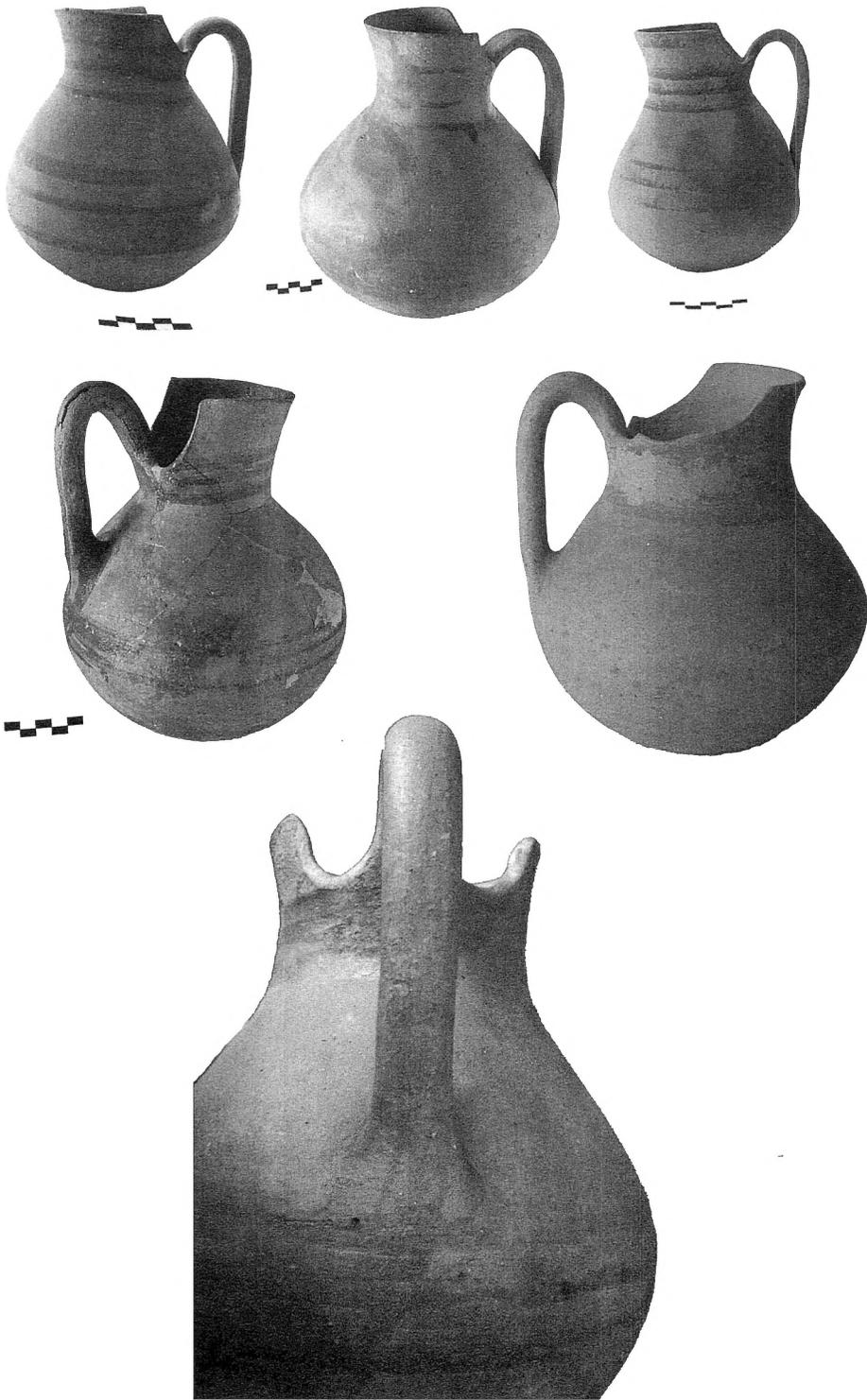


Fig.5 Some jugs with an cut away neck

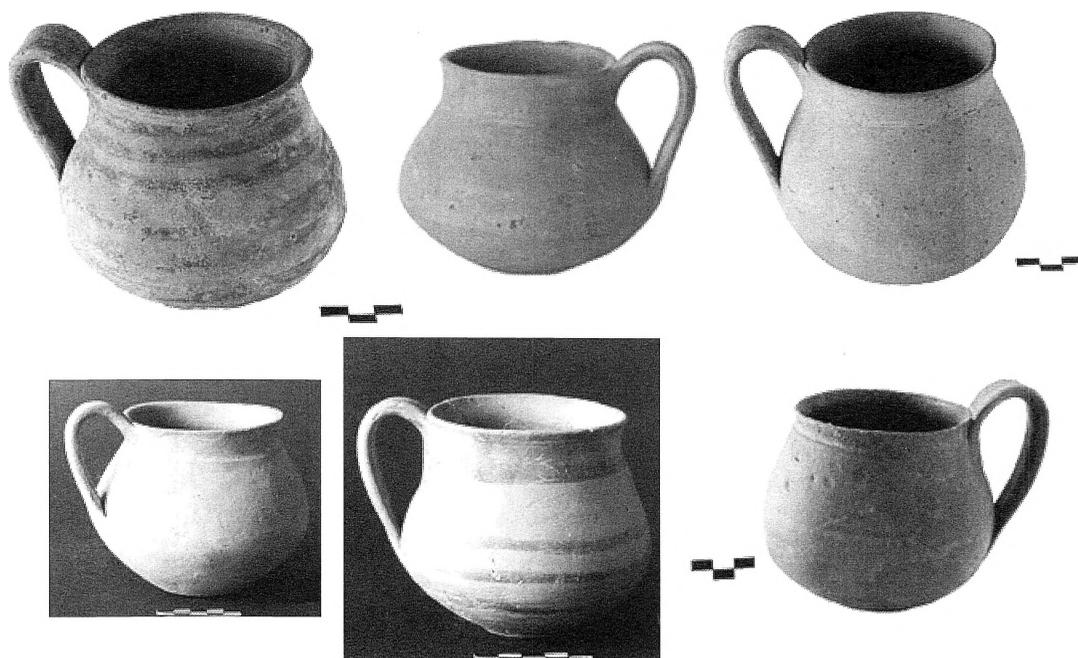


Fig.6 Some exemplars of the deep cups with one vertical hand

ceramography of the Iron Age. Linear pottery produced on a wheel and painted with ochre, differ considerably, however, from the jugs produced by other neighboring groups existing at that time (Fig.4 and 5). On the other hand, each finding of such jugs in the necropolises of the Lower Vardar represents a variation for itself. Among all the jugs found so far there are minor differences evident in size, in the quality of baking, the quality of painting, the thickness and disposition of the linear motifs, as well as the depth and angle of the cut-away back side of the neck (Fig.5). However, such differences do not necessarily have any essential chronological meaning. They were all used during the 7th and 6th centuries BC, and only in the course of the 6th century did jugs appear in gray baked production. Unlike the ochre baked jugs, the gray jugs were not decorated with painted strips but mostly with engraved lines around the neck.

At the end of the 6th century BC, jugs acquired more and more late archaic features: the cut-away neck of the jug disappeared and there began to appear the first classical forms of *oinohoi* with trefoil mouth, mainly in gray baked production.

Deep cups with one or two vertical handles are also an old form pottery known throughout the local Bronze and Iron Ages (Fig.6 and 7). In the Lower Vardar Group they occur together with jugs, initially only in an ochre baked version but later also in gray production. Whether they appear as a cup with one handle or as a *cantharoi* version with two vertical handles, they always accompany jugs in sets of ceramic grave goods and appear to have retained the same features and development throughout the 7th and 6th centuries BC. The first crucial typological change occurred at the end of 6th century when gray baked *cantharoi* appear to have become dominant, and which almost get more expressed late archaic profilation.

Much less common as archaeological findings are other forms of linear ochre painted ceramics with features of *olpei*, *gutosoi*, deep dishes, or bowls with high vertical or horizontal handles (Fig. 8 and 9). All share the same features of production

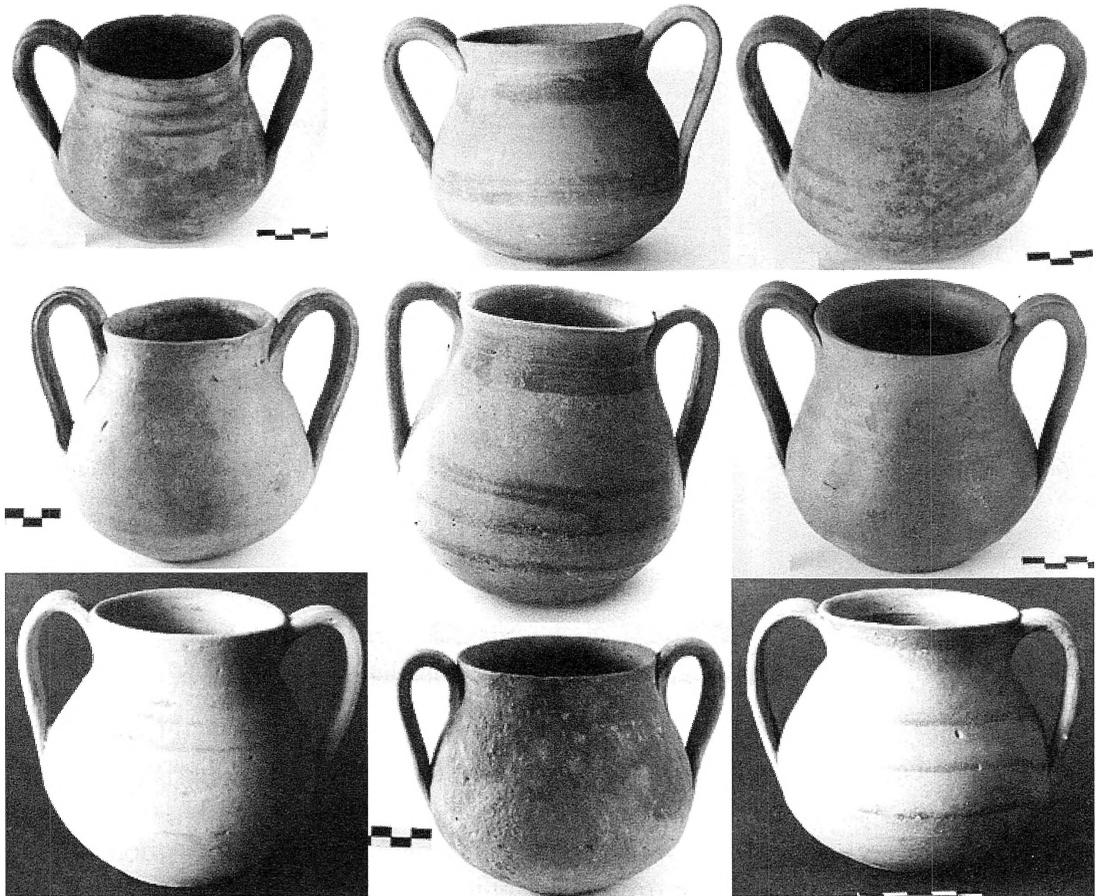


Fig.7 Some exemplars of the deep cups with two vertical handles

and development, as well as prevailing forms of jugs and cups. The use of such ceramics can be traced to as late as the very end of the 6th century, which appears to have been when most of the Iron Age necropolises in the Lower Vardar ceased to be used.

The situation with the findings of ocher – linear ceramics as a settlement pottery, is quite different. Ceramics in the layers from the full Iron Age, in the few investigated multilayered settlements throughout the Lower Vardar Valley, such as: Tumba Kastanas, Vardarski Rid Gevgelija, Isar-Marvinci or Gloska Chuka-Grchishte are in the largest percentage (about 80%) standard Iron Age hand-made pottery.⁶ However, together with it appears to be some findings of ocher-linear wheel made pottery. The occurrence of linear ochre painted pottery is as rare among the ceramics found in settlements as it is common in the necropolises. Thus it appears to have been primarily a ceramic form that was specially made for burial purposes.⁷

On the basis of the number of these vessels and their dense presence in all the necropolises, including even the poorest burial sites, as well as in the numerous variations of only a few basic shapes of such vessels, it is fair to assume that they were a local and very strong production. In favor of this hypothesis, there appear to be numerous examples of vessels with errors in the baking or in painting (Fig.5). For the

⁶ Hansel, B., (1989); Hochstetter, A., (1984); Papazovska, A., (2005); Mitrevski, D., & Temov, S., (1999), T.V-VIII; Mitrevski, D., (2009).

⁷ Mitrevski, D., (1997), p.120.

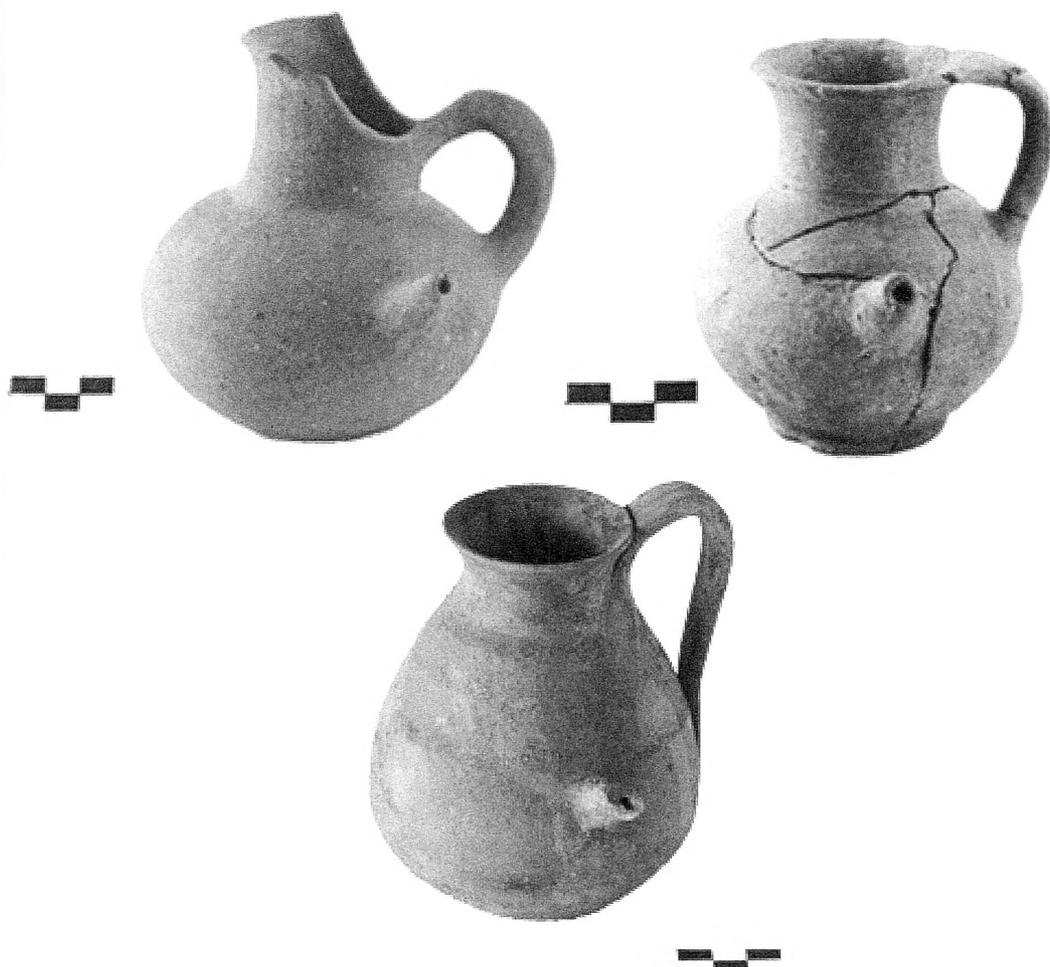


Fig.8 Some exemplars of the olpes and gutusoi

purpose of confirming this statement, we previously lacked only the specific kilns for baking such pottery in the region of the Lower Vardar Valley. This is precisely what was found last year at the site of Isar-Marvinci, near Valandovo.

Iron Age remains were discovered in 2010 in the course of research conducted into the Roman necropolis in Marvinci. Although substantially damaged by later Roman burials, several different Iron Age structures were documented, mainly parts of houses partly dug into the rocky terrain. The most important discovery, however, was a large kiln for baking ochre linear pottery (Fig.10).⁸ The kiln was completely carved into a rock, with a clay roof which would have been broken after each use of the kiln. The chamber has an irregular rectangular shape with dimensions of 2 x 1.80 m. Firebox continues in channels for air regulation and carved in the rocky terrain. Fortunately, the kiln was not emptied after its last use, so that the entire inventory, including pieces of the collapsed roof, was discovered in its original position in the chamber. Some thirty vessels—almost identical large jugs with cut-away necks—were found there (Fig.10).⁹

⁸ Krstevski, C., & Jakimovski, A., (2010).

⁹ The exact numbers of jugs in the kiln will only be known after the conservation processes is complete.



Fig.9 Some exemplars of deep dishes and bowls

Remains of other similar kilns were discovered in the same area of the site, though only certain parts of these have been documented due to the heavy damage caused by Roman burials. All of these kilns were dug into the natural rock and contained traces of strong burning inside. Thus it can be concluded that the kilns intended for ochre linear ceramics were part of the large Iron Age settlement, but in positions on the very periphery. About one kilometer south of the settlement and the location of the pottery kilns is located the appropriate necropolis of Lisicin Dol.¹⁰ More than 300 graves have been researched here, all of them from the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ.

Finally, it remains to answer the question as to the genesis of ochre linear pottery and the cause of its appearance and development in the Lower Vardar Valley during the 7th and 6th centuries BC.

At the current level of research it is evident that elements from at least three sides were involved in the creation of these ceramics.

Firstly, one needs to take into consideration the traditional ceramic heritage: deep cups and basic forms of jugs with cut-away necks had a long local tradition, dating back as far as the local Bronze Age.

On the other hand, in ochre-linear ceramics production there are some elements evident since the Aegean Bronze Age. These same elements, mainly in the painting system were accepted as influences dating from the late Mycenaean period within the

¹⁰ Videski, Z., (1999), p. 91; Mitrevski, D., (1999), p. 69



Fig.10 A kiln for baking ocher – linear pottery from Marvinci near Valandovo

local Vardar Valley or the so called Ulanci group of the Late Bronze Age.¹¹ Obviously, these elements, as an experience, were remained to be cherished during the Iron Age, until their incorporation into the new ochre – linear pottery.

The most important elements in the appearance of our pottery, meanwhile, were the impacts and technological benefits imposed from the archaic ceramics existing at that time in the northern and eastern Aegean regions. The region of the Lower Vardar Valley, being open to the south to the Gulf of Thessaloniki and especially to Chalcidice (Halkidiki), would certainly have had direct contacts with numerous Greece colonies in that area. From there, it would have been easier to spread experiences and ideas about local ceramic production with a set of archaic features.

In the neighboring regions of the Lower Struma and Nesta rivers, as regions with similar positions on the North Aegean coast as the Vardar Valley, a similar local reaction (production) in pottery is discovered. As in the Vardar Valley, several sites in these regions from the 7th and 6th centuries BC have yielded similar ochre pottery made on a potter's wheel, together with pottery kilns for its construction.

Linear ochre baked and matte painted pottery is a strong cultural phenomenon found the 7th and 6th centuries BC in the regions north of the Hellenic world, especially along the valley of the River Vardar (*Axios*). It gives the strongest mark of the local full Iron Age culture, providing the best expressing of its character and relations with the neighboring groups and archaic culture to the south.

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¹¹ Mitrevski D. 2003,46

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Резиме:

Долновардарска керамика од развиеното железно време

Во текот на VII-иот и VI-иот век п.н.е по долината на реката Вардар, особено во Долното Повардарие, покрај рачно изработената железнодопска керамика се јавува и друг вид на керамика, која со својата висококвалитетна изработка и боена декорација манифестира во основа архајски белези. Токму таа ѝ дава посебен белег и надредена позиција на локалната култура во однос на останатите железнодопски групи од внатрешноста на Балканот.

Моделирана е на грнчарско тркало од прочистена глина, со боја која варира од окер до светло црвена кога е печена, со сиво јадро во пресекот. Декорирана е со хоризонтални, мат боен ленти со темно црвено до кафеава боја, најчесто околу ободот, вратот и рамото на садот. Површината на садот е премачкана со разредена енгоба што се добива дополнителен, речиси метален сјај. Тоа е особено изразено во текот на VI-иот век п.н.е кога, покрај окер продукцијата, се појавуваат и сиво печените садови. Токму заради овие карактеристики, оваа окер печена керамика, изработена на грнчарско колце и лентесто обоена, беше определувана како островска, јонско-родска керамика или едноставно, како источно-грчки импорт.

Со интензивирањето на истражувањата во валандовско-гевгелискиот регион во текот на 80-тите и 90-тите години, сè појасно стануваше дека ваквата керамика претставува значаен сегмент во материјалната култура на локалната долновардарска или т.н. гевгелиска група на железното време.

На основа на бројот на откриените садови, нивното често присуство на

сите некрополи, дури и во најскромните погребувања, како и бројните варијации на неколкуте основни форми, лесно може да се заклучи се работи за локална и многу силна продукција. Како дополнителен аргумент кон оваа теорија е големиот број на садови со неправилности при печењето или сликаната декорација.

За да се потврди горенаведеното тврдење, недостасуваат само специфичните грнчарски печки на долновардарската територија. Токму ова беше пронајдено на локалитетот “Исар-Марвинци”, во близина на Валандово, за време на кампањата од 2010 г. Најважно беше откривањето на големата печка за окер-лентестата керамика. Печката беше целосно исклесана во карпа, со глинен покрив што бил кршен после секоја употреба на печката. Комората на печката има неправилна правоагол- на форма, со димензии 2, 00 x 1, 80 м. Од ложиштето продолжувале канали за регу- лација на протокот на воздух, издлабени во карпестиот терен. За среќе, печката не била испразнета после последната употреба, такашто целиот инвентар со колабира- ната калота е откриен во изворна положба. Дваесеттина речиси идентични сада беа пронајдени, особено поголеми бокали со косо засечена задна страна на вратот.

Во одговорот на што се должи појавата и развитокот на окер-лентестата ке- рамка во Долното Повардарие. Според досегашните истражувања, воочливо дека има најмалку три елементи значајни за креирањето на овој тип на керамика. Прво, треба да се смета за традиционално керамичко наследство од бронзеното време; основните форми на бокалите со засечен врат и кантаровидните садови имаат долга локална традиција, која датира од бронзеното време. Второ, во продукцијата на оваа керамика евидентни се и поединечни елементи од егејското бронзено време. Тие се негувале и низ железното време, како доцномикенски влијанија, кои биле инкорпорирани во новата, локална продукција на окер-лентестата керамика.

Сепак, како најзначајни се истакнуваат влијанијата и технолошките придобивки од истовремената архајска керамика од северно и источно егејската област. Долновар-дарскиот регион е отворен кој југ, особено со солунскиот регион и грчките колонии на Халкидик.

Во секој случај, окер печената, лентесто боена керамиком која е изработена на грнчарско колце претставува силен културен феномен од VII-иот и VI-иот век п.н.е во регионите непосредно на север од хеленскиот свет, посебно по долината на Вардар. Таа го дава најсилниот белег, изразувајќи ги во најчист вид белезите и карактерот на локалната долновардарска култура на полното железно време, како и нејзиниот однос со соседните групи, посебно со архајската култура на југ.

Драги Митревски