

Interpreting Social Changes Through Ceramic Manufacture: A preliminary analysis of Late Iron Age handmade Thracian ceramics

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The region of ancient Thrace presents an excellent case study for the interpretation of cross-cultural interaction. The establishment of foreign settlements or colonization across the Mediterranean during the fifth to the second century B.C.E. and the reinterpretation of cross-cultural relationships have been widely studied. However, the effects of intercultural interaction on non-elite indigenous Thracians have received less attention. The works of ancient Greek and Roman authors, as well as the archaeological record, identify the region as a place of bilateral exchanges, where ideas, goods, and people flowed between the indigenous Thracian populations and the Greek settlers during the Late Iron Age. Through the use of ceramic analysis, this study investigates the way indigenous peoples experienced, understood, and dealt with such interactions. A preliminary study of non-elite handmade Thracian pottery was analyzed through visual inspection during the 2016 field season. The results, revealing changes in identity through changes in ceramic technology, are presented here.

An Evaluation of Greek Colonialism

“(The Greeks are) like frogs around a pond,” said Plato, “we have settled down upon the shores of the sea”¹. Beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. culturally Greek speaking peoples began migrating out of rocky mainland Greece and settling into every niche of the Mediterranean, from the Iberian Peninsula to the shores of the Levant. Evidence of international contact during the Iron Age comes from foreign objects found across the Mediterranean. This may be initially ascribed to eighth century gift giving between elites rather than established mercantile networks as the distribution is limited². By the end of the eighth century however, there is clear evidence of an increase in the volume of trade between foreign entities. The increase is especially prevalent in ceramic forms that would have carried organic products such as olive oil or wine. The regularity of the trade identified in the archaeological record through consistency in quantity and material suggests the development of a mercantile system. Colonization then may have arisen out of the desire to broaden mercantile networks and create more financial opportunities for Greek traders³.

The movement of the Greeks between the eighth century and the second century B.C.E. has traditionally been known as the age of Greek colonialism. Traditional interpretations of Greek colonialism either portrayed indigenous peoples as eagerly accepting Greek styles and ways of life, or identified changes in Thracian material culture as signs of forced cultural adaptation⁴. In recent years, however, new theoretical approaches have arisen, challenging the projection of modern concepts on to the past. Postcolonial studies, emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, focus on the reevaluation of colonial encounters through

individual agency, resistance, and cultural hybridity⁵. ‘Hybridity’ as a theoretical concept in cultural and postcolonial studies over the last decade has been defined as, “the creation of new transcultural forms within a contact zone produced by colonialism”⁶. It has also been defined as involving, “processes of interaction that create new social spaces in which new meanings are given”⁷.

The archaeological study of a colony, its existence and its transformation, can reveal processes of broad social constructs that are relevant to the creation of meaning and cultural order in society⁸. The maintenance of cultural structures, such as power relations in creating interaction networks, is an ever-changing activity, which does not necessarily cohere to a one-dimensional avoidance or acceptance of change. Cultural contact is ongoing and continually contributes to the creation of memory over time that serves to authoritatively rework long-term cultural structures for individuals as well as groups⁹.

Colonies represent important areas for archaeological study because they have the potential to show so much about cultural identity, memory, and how culture may have changed as the result of colonial encounters¹⁰. The colony is one of the places where a new collective memory can be created. Humans try to make sense of the world and their surroundings in a way that is logical consistent with a particular cultural system. This is partially done through the creation of meaning, which is linked to particular objects within a society. Objects are integral to the process as extensions of the human body and as part of the meaning packages that help to make the world stable and knowable¹¹. The human responses to interaction are meaningfully constructed and objects serve as the principle, but not the only, channel of exchange and redefinition

of value. Each party involved in the cultural interaction operates in accordance with their own cultural understandings of the world.

Generally, Postcolonial studies tend to lack an analysis of material culture¹². Postcolonial theorizing tends to invoke material culture but does not necessarily analyze the actual material culture. Material culture plays a critical role in colonial contact zones because it frames day-to-day realities of individuals' lives in cross-cultural interaction situations. In some cases, this can be shown through the unusually strong and inevitably visible differences between indigenous and colonial material objects¹³. Such changes may be revealed in areas of Greek interaction. Recent excavations in ancient Thrace are leading to new understandings of Greek migration and multicultural interaction during the Late Iron Age.

Understanding Interaction Through Material Culture

The Thracians did not have a written language and did not keep any records about themselves. The written records about them consist of names, dates, and locations of events deemed important by ancient Greek and Roman authors. For that reason the cultural identity of the Thracians is relatively unknown except through material culture excavated by archaeologists.

The production and consumption of material culture are heavily impacted by interaction. "Culture is constructed through consumption"¹⁴. This implies that, in the first place, objects materialize cultural order or render abstract cultural categories visible and durable. They also aid in the negotiation of social interaction in various ways and structure perceptions of the social world. The systems of objects that people construct

and/or consume serve both to instill personal identity and to enable people to locate others within social fields¹⁵. Consumption is a process that is highly structured working to continually materialize cultural order. An examination of consumption and agency theory allows archaeologists to understand the ways in which alien objects or practices were transformed or rejected¹⁶.

Ceramics are ideal for this interpretation because ancient potters, whose style was likely defined by the skills of the individual potter and by the market demand, made them based on cultural identity factors. These associations can be interpreted from them. Consumers can drive changes in ceramic technology, decoration, and vessel form. Through the examination of such changes, an archaeologist can attempt to interpret the degree of collective agency and social change that may have occurred as the result of intercultural interaction. When ideas of colonialism and acculturation are replaced with postcolonial theories, changes in material culture are allowed to reveal more about the conscious choices made by individuals within a society. The examination of indigenous Thracian handmade ceramics from an archaeological site called Emporion Pistiros in Thrace provides a better understanding of the situation.

The Site: Emporion Pistiros

Archaeologists discovered an inscription, now called the Vetren inscription, in 1990 and Domaradzki published the translated text in 1992. The inscription was discovered around 2 km north of the modern village of Vetren, Bulgaria in a Roman station known as Bona Mansio. The traces of mortar remaining on the stone suggest that it had been brought from another site to be used in the Roman construction, which was not uncommon

during the formation of the Roman Empire. A fifth century settlement near the town of Vetren in Adjijaska Vodenitza was quickly identified as the site mentioned in the inscription, which became Emporion Pistiros (see image 1)¹⁷.

There is some disagreement about the nature of occupation at the site and the ethnic group that initially established the location. One major argument is that the actual site would have represented strictly Greek culture because the Thracians would have been kept outside of the city wall¹⁸. The excavations, however, reveal both Greek and native material culture showing that both occupied the site. Before the discovery of the Vetren Inscription the first excavator M. Domaradski believed that the site was a royal residence for a local ruler in the Odrysian Kingdom. The royal residence hypothesis was generally considered an inappropriate analysis of the site by the late nineties¹⁹.

Tancheva (2007) went on to show that the site underwent significant changes in terms of economic structure after the Macedonian conquests when the Greek population from Apollonia was resettled in the Thasian peraia on the North Aegean coast. Similar practices are attested to at Kabyle during the Roman period, which had a dedicatory inscription dated to C.E. 144 demonstrating that the town was reorganized around the influence of foreign craftsmen similar to Pistiros²⁰. It can be asserted then that the development of crafts and trade operations was facilitated by the arrival of non-Thracian people and that the site had Thracian occupation prior to Greek colonization.

Emporion Pistiros is an urbanized settlement that represents an important commercial and cultural center set in the heart of indigenous Thracian territory, in southwestern Bulgaria. The site is located some 150 kilometers from the Aegean and separated from it by the

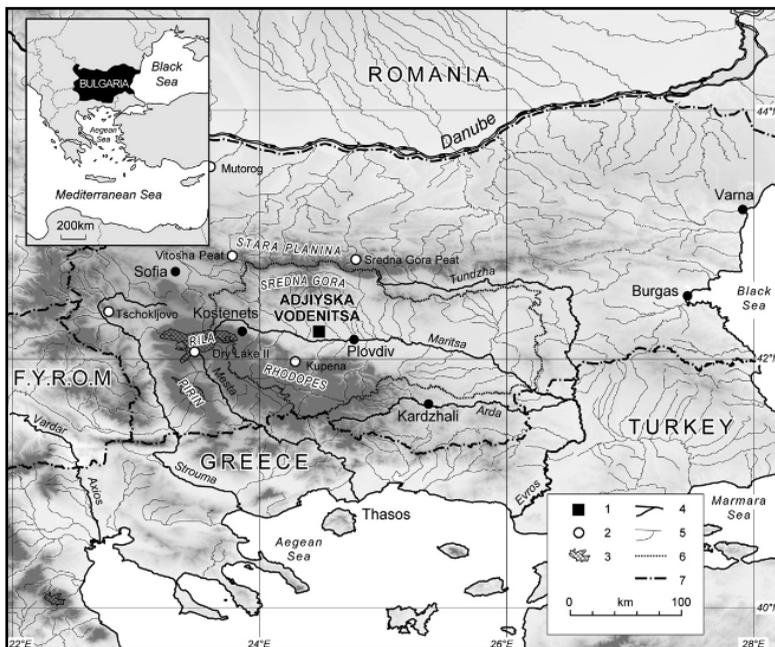


Figure 1. Map showing the location Thrace and specifically Adjijaska Vodenitza also known as Emporion Pistiros (Chiverrell and Archibald 2009).

Rhodopes mountain ranges²¹. Greek merchants, traveling by boat up the ancient Hebros River from the Aegean, established the fortified city with Greek style architecture in the fifth century B.C.E. A place of cross-cultural exchanges, the site remained active until its decline in the second century B.C.E.

There are several likely motives for the foundation of the site in this particular location, which was strategic and beneficial to both the Greeks and the Thracians. It is located in close vicinity to mineral deposits including copper, iron, and gold. The site was located strategically on the river at a place where several roads crossed leading in all directions. The river was navigable by small boats and Pistiros wagons were used to transport goods further inland²². Emporion Pistiros seems to have been created under a treaty produced in 431 B.C.E. between Sitalkes, the Odrysian Thracian king, and the Athenians. The treaty created an “Athenian-Odrysian Axis”, which was equally beneficial for both sides²³. The Vetren inscription is a product of the treaty, which allowed the Odrysians to extract tribute from the Greeks.

The accepted name of the site includes the term ‘emporion,’ which refers to a market center established by Greeks for the sole purpose of trade²⁴. The site plan reveals that it was likely designed based on Greek architectural styles, most notably the wall around the city, which was uncommon in Thrace before the arrival

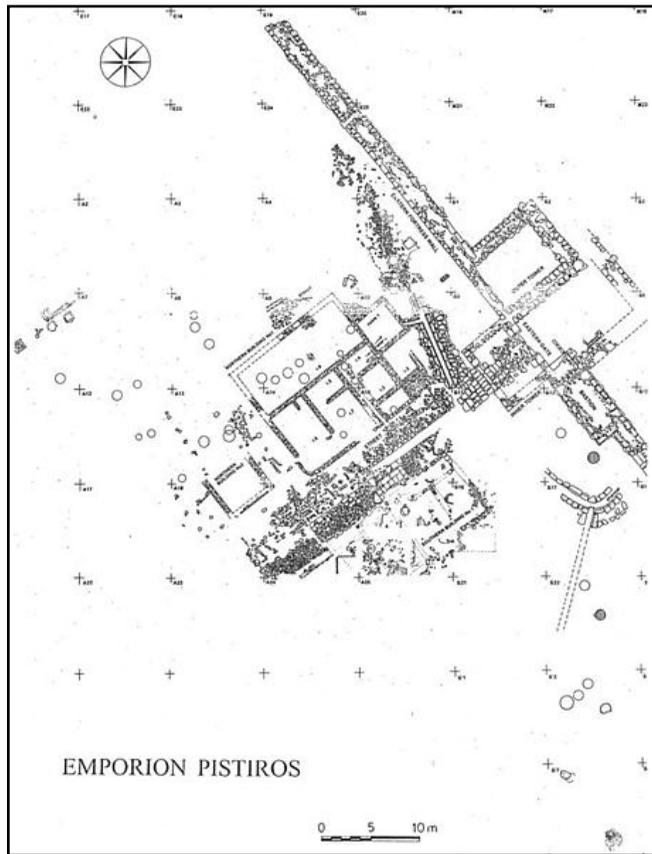


Figure 2. Site map of Emporion Pistiros (Bouzek, Domaradzka, and Archibald 2002).

of Greek colonies (see image 2). Other Greek settlements became fully functioning poleis but there were no such plans for Pistiros. As an inland market, the site presents unique possibilities for studying the interaction between indigenous Thracians and Greeks because the colonists were isolated and in the heart of Thracian territory unlike coastal colonies. The site presents a case of multiethnic collaboration, with Greeks and indigenous Thracians living together and relying upon each other.

Change and resistance to cultural interaction/transformation can be interpreted through the analysis of ceramics created before, during,

and after the initial contact with Greek settlers because ideology is often revealed/expressed/manifested through manufacture and consumption. If ideological changes occur as the result of cultural interaction, then a change in manufactured goods might be expected to follow. For example, if the images of Greek gods from black figure ceramics were considered beautiful and desirable, then the local Thracian potter may try to imitate the style. To gain a better idea of the changes that may have occurred at Pistiros during the era of Greek interaction a small-scale preliminary research project was conducted during the 2016 field season.

The 2016 Preliminary Study

The primary goal of the 2016 study was to ask if ceramic technology and decoration changed at all during the period of Greek interaction. Subsequently, the study compared aspects of the ceramic paste, temper, decorations, and vessel function to make observations about changes over time. A visual analysis of technological choice was conducted on 116 sherds of indigenous Thracian handmade ceramics from Pistiros that were excavated between 2012 and 2015 by members of the Balkan Heritage Field School. The sherds represent all the phases of occupation at the site from its formation, height as a trade location, and its eventual decline. The materials studied came from areas inside of, and adjacent to, the fortification wall on the eastern side of the settlement.

A previous study conducted by the author examined the distribution of 2054 sherds of imported Greek black figure and red figure ceramics excavated from across the site between 1987 and 1997. The largest proportion of Greek ceramic fragments was discovered near the city wall and the eastern gate in units E19, E25, A5, B1, B2,

B6, B7, B12. The total number of red figure pottery found in this area represents 40.81% of the total red figure pottery found across the site. Similarly, the black glazed pottery found in this area represents 40.52% of the site's total black glazed pottery. The highest concentrations in this area are in units B2 and unit B7, which represent the outermost part of the entrance gate to the settlement showing that the area may have been where trade would have occurred (see image 3). The area analyzed during the 2016 project had few imported Greek ceramics; making it an ideal location to test the impact of cultural interaction on locally produced ceramics.

Statistically, the number of indigenous ceramics far outnumbers the amount of imported fine wares from Greece. Although the finds from the site include a large quantity of Greek imports when compared to other inland sites, the majority of the pottery found at the site was locally produced²⁵. In the first 11 years of excavation there were 337 identifiable pieces of black and red figure pottery from Greece compared to several thousand pieces of Thracian pottery²⁶. The number of imported black figure ceramics suggests that non-local ceramics were available in limited quantities, and that either Greeks or Thracians could have used them. However, local handmade and wheel made ceramics continued to be produced at a much higher rate. This continuation of local production shows that indigenous Thracian styles, clays, and techniques maintained value within Thracian society. It may indicate a rejection of Greek styles or could possibly reflect a gradual adoption of Greek styles by local potters. Adoption of non-local styles, forms, and materials could lead to attempts to imitate Greek imports and ultimately to the creation of a hybrid culture and practice of ceramic production and consumption.

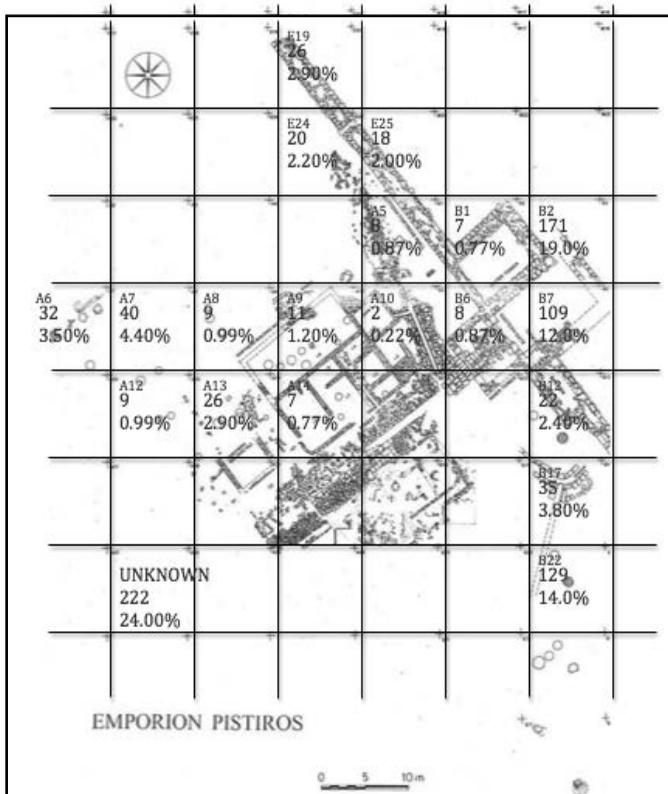


Figure 3. Emporion Pistiros site map with Greek red figure pottery distribution (Figure by author).

Discussion of Results

Certain diagnostic features remained constant throughout Greek interaction. Within the purely indigenous Thracian ceramics there was high degree of consistency in the shape of the vessels and their decorative elements. Of the ceramics surveyed for this study there were 43 rim sherds, 15 base sherds, 43 body sherds, and 15 handle sherds (see image 4). The general repetition of shapes between the individual pieces from different contexts and time periods revealed consistency in vessel form. The vessels examined in the study typically represented cooking vessels. They were thick bodied, meant to be heated, and had characteristic discoloration in areas where flames met the vessel. Of all of the sherds studied, 25% had representative burning and

13% possessed handles, a feature diagnostic of cooking or pouring vessels. The other common vessel shape is associated with drinking, including pitchers or jugs and cups used for the consumption of wine. The non-cooking vessels tended to have finer rims and round handles instead of flat ones. These two major vessel forms represent the dietary lifestyle of the Thracians before Greek interaction and the continuity of such practices after the arrival of the Greeks. Greek settlers may have also adopted and used indigenous Thracian ceramic styles and forms, showing the exchange of cultural elements (see image 5).

In addition to these formal consistencies, there was also continuity in the decorative elements of the Thracians ceramics. The typical geometric designs associated with Thracian

Late Iron Age ceramics include slashed incised lines, raised spheres, and checkered triangular patterns (see image 6). Of the ceramics analyzed, 24% had decorative elements designed into the clay body, including 10 with dashed lines, 16 patterned raised spheres, and 2 with checkered triangular designs. The designs were present on all of the different Thracian ceramic forms, even when the shape or material of the vessel changed. Decorative finishes added after the ceramics were fired are not common at Pistiros but they are present throughout ancient Thrace. The Thracians were known for gold and silver slip finishes on ceramics that have been interpreted as attempts to create ceramic vessels imitating metal vessels. This slip technology persisted throughout Greek interaction. Another

decorative element rarely found at Pistiros is the apparent attempt to replicate the Greek technique of black figure decoration. Such attempts are usually poorly executed and easy to identify as imitation wares. However, it is also possible that Greek settlers in the area may have produced the better examples of these pieces for their personal use instead of importing Greek fine wares.

The most noticeable change in ceramic production was the technology involved in their creation. The term technology refers to the different knowledge, skills, and tools

utilized in the manufacture of ceramics, including what type of clay is used, what elements are added to strengthen the body, how it is shaped, fired, and decorated. Early indigenous Thracian ceramics from Pistiros were handmade of grey clay, thick bodied, and poorly fired (see image 7). As Greeks moved into the area certain aspects of these technological choices changed. Imported Greek ceramics had thinner sections of red or orange clay, fine temper, and intricate decorative details. They were also wheel thrown and fired at high temperatures. The use of finer temper, higher firing temperatures,

and a pottery wheel indicate that new technologies were adopted by the Thracians, while the imitation of decoration styles and clay color further supports the idea that there was a desire to reproduce Greek materials.

Within the ceramics analyzed a marked change in the thickness of the vessels and the temper was noticed. The walls of the vessels became thinner and more uniform, while temper particles became finer, allowing for the observed thinning of the walls. This attempt to create slender, elegant pottery perhaps seems to represent an effort to replicate Greek examples imported from Attica. It may also speak to new techniques of ceramic manufacture taught to Thracian potters by Greeks. It is possible that the Greeks exposed the Thracians to different ways of preparing clay that removed impurities or large inclusions. They also may have taught them the size to which

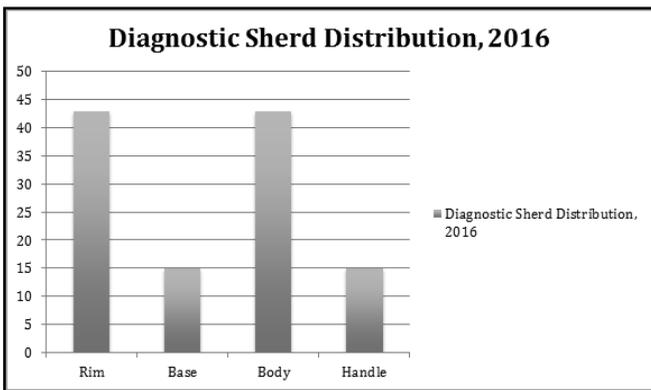


Figure 4. Graph showing the distribution of diagnostic vessel sherds from the 2016 study (Figure by author).

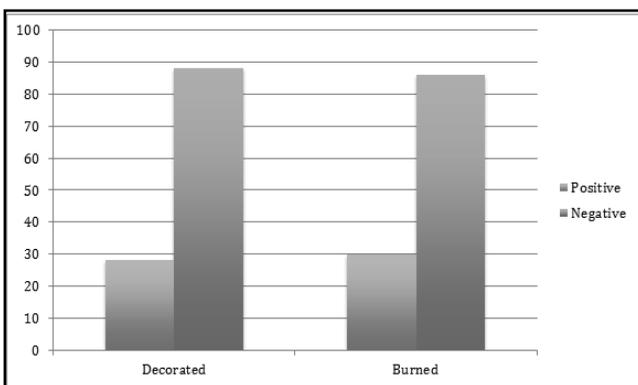


Figure 5. Graph showing the distribution of decoration types and use wear burning from the 2016 study (Figure by author).

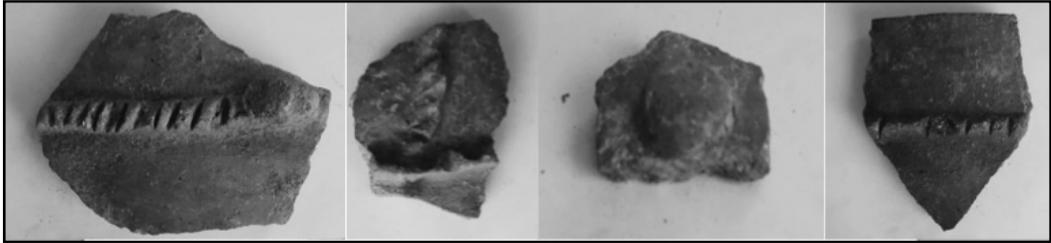


Figure 6. Image representing the different Thracian decorative designs (Figure by author).

temper should be crushed, such as grog from previous broken vessels, sand, or shells. This prevents vessels from shrinking without needing to create larger forms, which causes vessel walls to be thicker. Across Thrace potters also adopted wheel technology to form vessels, however it did not replace the handmade ceramics.

Planned Future Research

The preliminary studies of indigenous Thracian ceramics from an important site of long-term cross-cultural interaction revealed some consistencies and some changes in the formation of local ceramics during a period of Greek interaction in Thrace. The conclusions of the study allowed for the creation of broader research questions focused on the specific ways (processes through which) that ceramic technology is affected and transformed. However, analysis through visual inspection, measurement, and statistical comparison only allows for a certain amount of study. Further archaeological investigations will take place in order to gain a more encompassing and

testable theory about the changes that were observed through this preliminary study of Pistiros ceramics.

Future archaeological and archaeometric analyses will focus on establishing a typology and seriation of the Late Iron Age indigenous Thracian ceramics from southwestern Bulgaria using multiple site types that represent different forms and intensities of interaction between Thracians and Greeks. Then, ceramic samples will be cut into thin sections and examined for details about the clay, the firing temperature of the ceramic, and post-creation heating. Inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry will also be used to obtain a chemical fingerprint of samples, which will enable clay sourcing. This will show whether the clay employed was local or imported and if the vessels were manufactured locally. Together, these techniques will reveal the extent and pace to which Thracian ceramic traditions changed due to Greek interaction, and in what aspects of ceramic production changes occurred. These potential changes can then be compared to changes in the types of food prepared in the

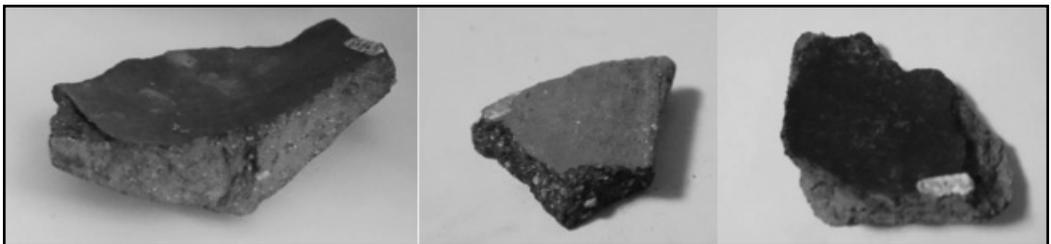


Figure 7. Image of different ceramic paste, temper, and use wear burning (Figure by author).

vessels themselves and consumed. Knowing the nature and extent of such changes can lead to a fuller understanding of non-elite Thracian identity during Greek interaction.

Conclusions

Trade throughout the Mediterranean during the Iron Age has been well documented in the archaeological record. One of the most thoroughly studied peoples of this period, the Greeks, traded across long distances and created settlements all around the Mediterranean. Traditionally, the establishment of Greek settlements in foreign lands has been associated with cultural domination and the enthusiastic acceptance of Greek materials or 'Hellenism'. The Greeks are considered colonists that conquered lands that possessed the most economic promise and subjugated the indigenous peoples. These concepts can be disproved through the analysis of the Thracian archaeological record, which speaks to a bilateral exchange of goods, ideas, and peoples.

The study of Thracian ceramics at an ancient emporion, or market center, reveals that some elements in the production and consumption of ceramics changed over time. These changes can be used to better understand the shifting identity of Thracians during this period of interaction. Future studies will utilize additional methodological approaches to help fully understand changes in ceramic material culture. Informing inferences about Thracian agency during the Late Iron Age, such investigations will lead to a reevaluation of colonial interpretations.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank the University at Buffalo's Institute of European and Mediterranean Archaeology (IEMA) for providing the funds for this preliminary research project, which has inspired my dissertation research. Also, thank you to Alexey

Gotsev and Archaeological Museum "Prof. Mieczyslaw Domaradzki", and Angela Pencheva and the Balkan Heritage Foundation, without whom this research would not have been possible.

Endnotes:

1. Durant 1939.
2. Malkin 2011.
3. Malkin 2011.
4. Attema 2008.
5. Gosden 2001.
6. Ashcroft and Tiffin 1998, 118.
7. Young 2003, 79.
8. Rogers 2005.
9. Stein 2005.
10. Rogers 2005.
11. Rogers 2005.
12. Gosden 2004.
13. Van Dommelen 2006.
14. Comaroff 1996, 20.
15. Baudrillard 1968.
16. Dietler 2005.
17. Demetriou 2012.
18. Hansen 2006.
19. Bouzek and Domaradzka 2008.
20. Nankov 2015.
21. Chiverrell and Archibald 2009.
22. Bouzek and Domaradzka 2008.
23. Bouzek and Domaradzka 2005.
24. Graham 1964.
25. Tsetskhladze 2000, Demetriou 2012.
26. Tsetskhladze 2000.

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