

# Hellenistic Ceramics from Phalasarna Found from 1986-1990

## Introduction

The stromatographic dating of Hellenistic ceramics from Phalasarna (Figure 1) constitutes a relatively easy problem, given that both in 66 AD and 365 AD large earthquakes raised the western side of the island of Crete by 6-9 meters.<sup>1</sup> These earthquakes were accompanied by huge waves, often called "tsunamis", which covered the region with a distinctive 20-50 cm thick layer.

Fortunately, the bases of the monuments, which were filled with rubble that included ceramic fragments at the time of construction, were little damaged by the seismic events. These monuments include defensive walls and towers, and serve not only to date the periods of habitation, but bear witness to the strength and influence of Phalasarna, which receives only brief mention in written history.

The most important element in the town's economic life was the harbor<sup>2</sup> (Figure 2) which was almost completely artificial, and has largely been preserved. The ancient geographer Skylax, whose *Periplus* is dated to around 350 BC, informs us of the ancient city of Phalasarna and its closed harbor<sup>3</sup>. We therefore know Phalasarna as one of the oldest towns on west Crete, and that by 350 BC it was an important naval power. It was completely destroyed by the Romans in 67 BC, during the campaign of Pompey the Great and Metellus against the pirates of the Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>.

The layout of the harbor and the buildings that surround it—four defensive towers, two artificially cut channels connecting it to the sea, walls, quays, and an artificial lagoon—display the Cretans' deep knowledge of harbor works. Simultaneously, the site provides one of the rare sources of Hellenistic pottery from Crete, including items both for everyday use and with ritual significance. These ceramics not only make it possible to date the construction of the town's fortifications, but provide information on trade relations with other cities in the Mediterranean, and on the artistic and cultural development of Crete.

## Circular Tower

This monument is one of the defensive towers of the ancient harbor. It was excavated in 1986 and 1987<sup>5</sup> (Figure 3).

<sup>1</sup>P. A. Pirazzoli, J. Ausseil-Badie, P. Giresse, E. Hadjidaki, M. Arnold, "Historical Environmental Changes at Phalasarna Harbor, West Crete", *Geoarchaeology* 7. 4 (1992) 371- 392.

<sup>2</sup>E. H. notes: I began excavating this site in 1986 as part of my Ph.D. dissertation under Frank Frost. I eventually convinced him that the seaside bushes covered a harbor, and we then worked jointly on the site from 1987—1990. Frank not only brought students and financing, but his daughter to help dig. I have continued work on the site since 1990.

<sup>3</sup>Skylax 47; J. O. Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge 1948) 88.

<sup>4</sup>Strabo, 10.4.9; Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, Pompey*, 24,1; F. J. Frost, "The Last Days of Phalasarna", *Ancient History Bulletin*, 3 (1989) 115-117; Elpida Hadjidaki, "Hellenistic Cretan Piracy", in *Historical Essays in Honor of Dimitrije Djordjevic*, Ed. R. B. Spence, L. L. Nelson (New York 1992) 51-62, figs. 1-5.

<sup>5</sup>E. Hadjidaki, "Preliminary Report at the Harbor of Phalasarna in West Crete", *AJA* 92 (1988) 468- 474, figs. 11-13; F. J. Frost, E. Hadjidaki, "Excavations at the Harbor of Phalasarna in Crete: the 1988 season", *Hesperia* 59.3 (1990) 515-517, fig. 2.

It is a circular tower with a diameter of 9 meters. Its interior is divided into four quarters by two supporting crosswalls. During the construction of the walls, the interior of the four quarters were filled with a coarse earth that is a mixture of fragments left over from stoneworking, broken ceramics, bones, and other useless items thrown inside in order to support the tower. This technique of tower construction in antiquity is described by the historian Philo of Byzantium in his work «Μηχανική Σύνταξις»<sup>6</sup>, whose writing is dated to the third century BC. One of the quarter sections of the tower which was excavated down to the natural stone base, revealed hundreds of ceramic fragments, some local and some imported, bearing witness to the distant trading relations of Phalasarua and verifying the information of Skylax. These sherds constitute a closed collection of finds and are the major contributor to the chronology of the site. They are dated to the second half of the fourth century BC, and include items such as handles and bodies of amphoras of Chios (Figure 4 and Figure 5), Rhodes, Mende, Peparethos, Kos, and Thasos (Figure 6). There are many black-glazed vessels, including kraters, skyphoi, and bowls as well as other unglazed vessels for everyday use.

A sherd coming from a krater showing a youth playing a double flute, especially the technique for rendering his fingers, is reminiscent of Attic prototypes<sup>7</sup> (Figure 7). The same can be observed on other sherds coming either from skyphoi that have black metallic glaze<sup>8</sup>, or plates with free palmettes encircled by a ring of ovules (Figure 8). The latter design appears at the end of the 5th century BC in Athens, and continues until the middle of the 4th century BC<sup>9</sup>.

All of these ceramic items, given the architectural context in which they were found, date the construction of the round tower to around 335-330 BC.

### Square Tower

The objects located on the exterior of the square northwestern tower (Figure 9), which was excavated in 1988 and 1989, provide several characteristic examples of pottery of the Hellenistic period<sup>10</sup>. Outside the building we found sherds from large fluted vessels with stamped emblems, medallions, and white decoration of the West Slope type. These items are only representative, since excavation at this location has not been completed. A complete discussion of the finds will be given upon termination of the excavation.

Especially interesting are the sherds of a fluted vessel with white decorations of berries (Figure 10). This sherd, found in 1990, also contains a representation either of Hercules wrestling with the Lernaian Hydra, or of Jason wrestling with the Dragon of Kolchidas (Figure 11). It has a black glossy surface and is made of pinkish-yellow clay with mica particles (Munsell 7.5 7/2). The production of this deeply fluted sherd with rope-type handles was probably carried out in a Cretan workshop before 250 BC<sup>11</sup>. Adjacent to the sherd we found

<sup>6</sup>Philo of Byzantium, *Μηχανική Σύνταξις*, 79.1-6; text in Y. Garlan, *Recherches de Poliorcétique grecque* (Paris 1974) 291.

<sup>7</sup>Olynthus XIII, D. Robinson, *Vases found in 1934 and 1938*, 1950.

<sup>8</sup>Agora XII, B.A. Sparkes, L. Talcott, *Black and Plain Pottery of the 6th, 5th, and 4th cent. B.C.*, Princeton 1970. vol. 2, fig. 4, plate. 16 (342, 348); *Hesperia* XXII (1953) plates 29, 30, 38 (134).

<sup>9</sup>Agora XII, B.A. Sparkes, L. Talcott, *Black and Plain Pottery of the 6th, 5th, and 4th cent. B.C.*, Princeton 1970. Vol. 2, p. 29, plate 59 (1028).

<sup>10</sup>F. J. Frost, E. Hadjidaki, *Hesperia* 59, 3 (1990), pp. 517-524, figs. 3-10, plate 79: a-d.

<sup>11</sup>T. Dohrn, "Schwargefirnisste Plakettensvasen", *RM* 97 (1985), p. 110.



a silver tetradrachm of Argos with the characteristic AP (Figure 12), and the upper body of a wolf. This coin was probably cut between 282 and 228 BC<sup>12</sup>.

Under the coins we found many pieces of deep thin-walled skyphoi with images in relief. The themes displayed include winged Eros (Figure 13) in the midst of rich decorations of plant life as well as war scenes (Figure 14). These sherds show similarities both in form and in representations with skyphoi with embossed decoration from the Athenian Agora dated to the middle of the second century BC<sup>13</sup>.

### Necropolis

The necropolis of the ancient city is located on the north side of the harbor, and extends to the east where it covers a large area of about half a kilometer in width. Since 1837, when ancient Phalasarna was rediscovered<sup>14</sup>, until today approximately ninety graves have been excavated. All of them have been dug out during rescue excavations, and the greater part of the necropolis has been left untouched. The graves are mainly of a rectangular type, dug from the ground or cut into the natural rock. A smaller number of the graves are burials in a pithos or a smaller vessel. Although the majority of the finds dates to the Hellenistic period, there are also graves dating to the Archaic and Classical periods, containing vessels imported from Athens and Corinth<sup>15</sup>. In 1986, a group of graves was excavated, consisting of three inhumations and two cremations. The offerings that were placed in the graves included two red-figured pelikes (Figure 15 and Figure 16), a one-handled bowl (Figure 17), and within it a miniature skyphos (Figure 18) decorated with rays on the base. Also found were an oil lamp (Figure 19), a lekythos (Figure 20), and a chytra (Figure 21), all dated to between 330 and 320 BC.

The pithos was lying on its side (Figure 22). Two short and flattened handles started under the lip along the short neck, ending on the round shoulders. The long body was beautifully decorated by seven carved parallel bands ending in a small foot. The lip was thin and flattened, with a rectangular cross-section. It is worth noting that the clay and carved decoration on the large burial pithos is identical to one of the sherds found in the fill of the circular tower, and which belongs to the rim of a pithos (Figure 23). The clay of the vessels from this group of graves is clean, usually well fired and easily abraded, and in several cases contains small amounts of mica. The color is pinkish yellow or brownish yellow (Munsell 7.5 YR 7/6). We believe that these graves and their offerings date to the same period, and that the offerings were fabricated in local workshops at the same time as the great defensive works in the harbor.

Thus Phalasarna between 350 and 320 BC was economically strong, possessed already workshops for the manufacture of vessels, had cut its own coins<sup>16</sup> (Figure 24), and was busily in the midst of strengthening its fortifications.

<sup>12</sup>Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, *Cabinet des Medailles, collection Jean et Marie Delepierre*, plate 60, nos. 2266-2279, Paris 1983.

<sup>13</sup>H. Á. Thompson, D. B. Thompson, S. I. Rotroff, *Two Centuries of Hellenistic Pottery* (Princeton 1987) 328-458.

<sup>14</sup>R. Pashley, *Travels in Crete 2* (London 1837) 64-69; Ô. A. B. Spratt, *Travels and Researches in Crete 2* (London 1865).

<sup>15</sup>L. Savignonné, V. De Sanctis, "Esplorazione Archeologica delle Provincie Occidentali di Creta", *Mon. Ant.* 11 (1901-1902), ó. 364-386; Y. Tzedakis, "Antiquities and monuments of West Crete", *AD 24* (1969) Chronika, pp. 433-434.

<sup>16</sup>N. Svoronos, *Numismatique de la Crete Ancienne* (Macon 1890) 268-271.

## Discussion

Surveying the collection of ceramic items gathered until today in the vicinity of the ancient city of Phalasarna and its necropolis, one finds that the clay with which they were produced is clean, gray brown or pinkish yellow, with pink or gray shadings, contains small amounts of mica, and ranges in tint through Munsell chart numbers 10YR 7/2,7/3; 5YR 6/6, 6/8,7/6; 7/8; 7.5YR 5/2,7/2,7/4, and 7/6<sup>17</sup>. These Munsell chart numbers overlap in many cases with those assigned to Attic clays. It seems that already from the fourth century, Phalasarna had workshops that could produce clay vessels similar in quality and technical characteristics with those of Athens. Furthermore, the dates of the graves are identical with the date of massive fortification of the harbor. Phalasarna between 330 and 320 buried many of its citizens, while thriving economically, and simultaneously strengthening its already well-fortified harbor.

What was happening? It is very likely that this period saw revolution and independence of Phalasarna from the neighboring Polyrrhenia<sup>18</sup>, which had dominated the area during the Classical period. Skylax knew of the existence of Phalasarna and its closed harbor around 350 BC. His testimony leaves no doubt that during the mid fourth century BC the town was already strong. In the 30 years following his writing, during which the present defensive towers were built and the bulk of graves found so far were dug, the town reached its peak. It was during this period that constructions of the town flourished, including maritime buildings and artworks. They were greatly influenced by Attic designs, but with local modifications.

The sherds found within the fill in sections of the round tower demonstrate the extent of trade with distant towns. There are far too many pieces to discuss in detail, but the wine amphora sherds<sup>19</sup> demonstrate trade relations with the islands of northern Greece<sup>20</sup>, and the western Mediterranean. Most islands had strong merchant fleets, but it is perfectly possible that the trade was conducted with Cretan ships. A stone inscription found in the region of the harbor, shows a representation of the nymph Phalasarne accompanied by a warship (Figure 25). This inscription, which dates to around 300 BC, demonstrates the nautical tradition of the city<sup>21</sup>.

The fragment of the lip of a pithos found in the tower fill is identical to the large burial pithos excavated in 1986. Both finds have wide carved bands. Decoration with carved bands on Crete during the early Hellenistic period is known on the southeastern coasts of the island, in the region of ancient Ambelos<sup>22</sup>. However, the example from Phalasarna is unique among finds that have been published to date. This design does not appear to bear Attic influence, but instead has a prototype in archaic Crete.

<sup>17</sup>See M Scordou, "Red-glazed pelikes from the region of Kissamos", *Hellenistic Ceramics from Crete* (Hania, 1997) 36-61; S. Markoulaki, "Vessels with engraved emblems from west Crete", *Hellenistic Ceramics from Crete* (Hania, 1997) 72-106.

<sup>18</sup>E. Hadjidaki, C. Iniotakis, D Sotirakis, "Engraved representation of warship from west Crete", *Enalía* IV. 3,4 (1996), 38-41.

<sup>19</sup>V. R. Grace, *Amphoras and the Ancient Wine Trade* (Princeton 1961); J. Y. Emperer, Y. Garlan, "Imitations et Raisonnement Archeologique: A propos des Amphores de Rhodes et de Delos", *BCH* 13 (1986) 69-79, figs. 1-6; A. Doulgeri-Intzessiloglou, Y. Garlan, "Vin et Amphores de Peparethos et d'Ikos", *BCH* 114 (1990), 373, fig. 7.

<sup>20</sup>E. Hadjidaki, "Underwater Excavations of a Late Fifth Century Merchant Ship at Alonnesos Greece: the 1991-1993 Seasons", *BCH* 120 (1996), 561-593, figs. 1-33.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, note 18.

<sup>22</sup>P. N. Papadakis, AD 41 (1998) B2 *Chronika*, 562.



The period between 350 and 320 BC is stamped with Athenian influence, especially in the designs chosen to decorate the red-glazed pelikes. These attractive vessels were made in local workshops where the potters had great success in copying Athenian prototypes. The results are impressive, and compete in quality with Attic vessels. The existence of pelikes created in local workshops proves that ceramic artists of the island were keeping up with artistic developments in Athens even before the Hellenistic period.

The relations of Athens and Phalasarna and the influence of the one city on the other are also witnessed by finds from the child's burial (Figure 17 and Figure 18). The one-handed bowl is probably Athenian, as evidenced by the fine glaze, the clay, and markings underneath. The skyphos found inside it is stylistically very similar, but from the clay is more likely to be local. This is an archaeological find that demonstrates that Crete took part in the general development of late Classical and Hellenistic artistic expression, and was not absent from it as has generally been thought. In some cases, the Cretan designs are simply excellent copies of designs well known from elsewhere. In other cases the designs have few direct parallels. The decoration of the peliki which shows winged Eros chasing Mainades is an example of the first case. As an example of the second, one can take the pelike depicting Arimaspos. The only parallel for this masculine bearded figure is on a Greek vase in the British Museum (Calvert collection) of unknown origin.

As for the period between 250 and 175 BC, some interesting conclusions can be drawn from study of deep-fluted vessels with medallions. The main problem raised by the sherd displaying Hercules or Jason lies in the interpretation of the scene depicted on it. This scene is known from Cretan vessels, particularly west Crete. The Museum in Heraklion had until recently three whole amphoras from Phalasarna with ribbed walls and rope handles featuring the same medallion, and made from the same pinkish-yellow or light brown clay. Some believe it represents Hercules wrestling the Lernaian Hydra, and others believe it represents Jason wrestling the Dragon of Kolchidas<sup>23</sup>. Modern scholars such as Dorhn and Zervoudaki<sup>24</sup> have adopted the opinion of H. B. Walters<sup>25</sup> (1896) in favor of Jason, without however providing justification. In contrast scholars such as F. Courby<sup>26</sup>, F. Mayence, and V. Verhoogen<sup>27</sup> consider both interpretations possible, and acknowledge that the figure could be Hercules. Finally, J. Neils tentatively identifies the figure as Jason.

The beast in this medallion does look more like a dragon than a hydra, mainly since it has only one head. This argument favors Jason. On the other hand, Hercules is a common figure in Cretan iconography while Jason is much more rare. Furthermore, many coins from Phaistos<sup>28</sup> show Hercules battling a huge snake, and similar images appear in Cretan gems<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>23</sup>F. J. Frost and E. Hadjidaki, *op. cit.* p. 521, plate 79: d.); S. Markoulaki, *op. cit.*, 100-101, note. 46.

<sup>24</sup>I. Zervoudakis, "Ribbed vessels with stamped vessels and black figured hydrias from the collection of the National Archaeological Museum, *Hellenistic Ceramics from Crete, Hania* (1997), 112, fig 7.

<sup>25</sup>H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Greek and Etruscan Vases in the British Museum- Vases of the Latest Period*, vol. 7, London 1896, 242, no. G 29.

<sup>26</sup>F. Courby, *Les Vases Grecs a Reliefs*, Paris (1922), 209, figs. 33, 5.

<sup>27</sup>CVA 3 III N. Belg. 140, plate 2, 17c.

<sup>28</sup>J. N. Svoronos, *op. cit.* plate XXIV, nos. 12-13, 16-19, 22-23; plate. XXIII, nos. 7, 13.

<sup>29</sup>A. Furtwangler, *Die Antiken Gemmen Geschichte Der Steinschneidekunst*, vol. II, 92- 93, plate XIX, no. 3.

Dorhn suggests that this particular type of black-glaze amphora with ribbed walls and rope handles was produced on Crete until around 250 BC. The coin we found just below this sherd was cut between 282 and 228 BC, consistent with Dorhn's dating.

Another category of vessels found at Phalasarna are the molded skyphoi with representations of battle scenes or hunting scenes. Judging from the clay, we have examples both made in local workshops and imported from Athens or elsewhere. These vessels have iconographic similarities with Attic skyphoi found in the Athenian Agora which have been dated to between 220 and 170 BC. Most of the similarities occur in the secondary decoration, especially in horizontal spirals and heart-shaped patterns. However, the molded skyphoi from Phalasarna have some original designs, such as a criss-crossing pattern lying over battle scenes (Figure 14).

The clay of which these molded vessels are made is local, and the surface has a deep blue-black color. We believe that the majority of the molded skyphoi were made by Phalasarnian artists.

Overall, we observe a production of pottery at Phalasarna that stretches over 150 years, from 320 BC to 170 BC, starting with red-figured pelikes and ending with molded skyphoi. Conclusive dating of the period of production is still uncertain, because many phases of the excavation are not yet complete. The local workshops were able to supply Phalasarna with skillful pottery modeled on Attic designs, but usually modified for local tastes. It is even possible that the pottery was exported to Alexandria and elsewhere, but future work will be required to find if this speculation is correct.

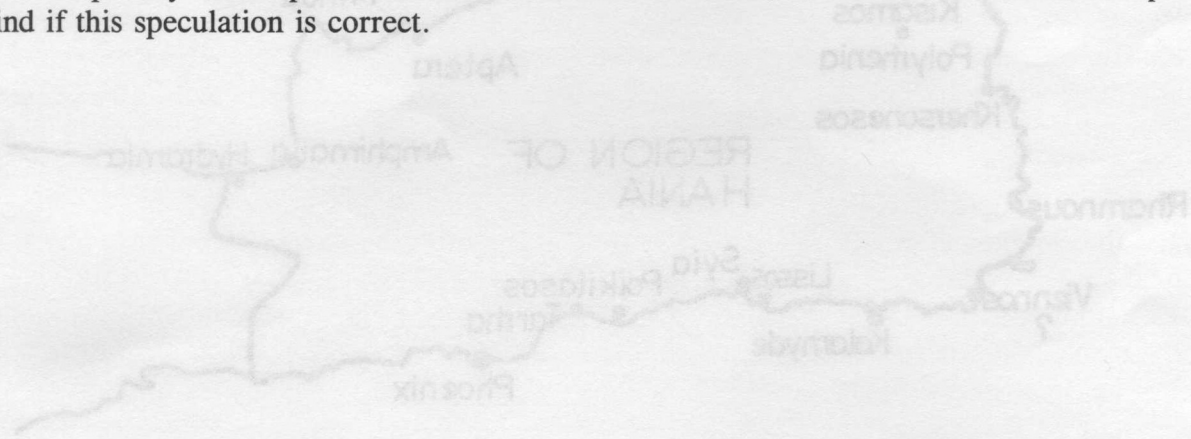


Figure 1  
Map of west Crete, showing location of Phalasarna.





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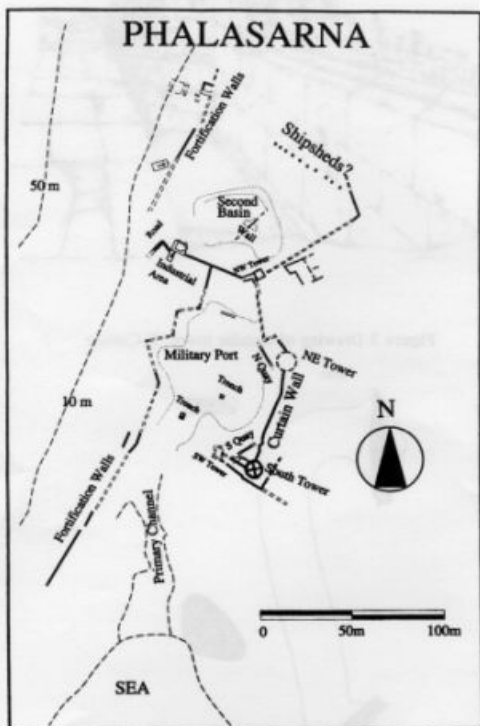


Figure 2  
Harbor of Phalasarua



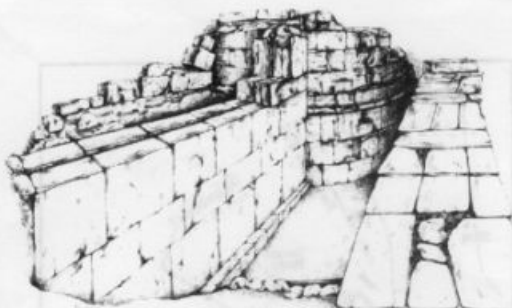


Figure 3 Drawing of circular tower, E Cassese.

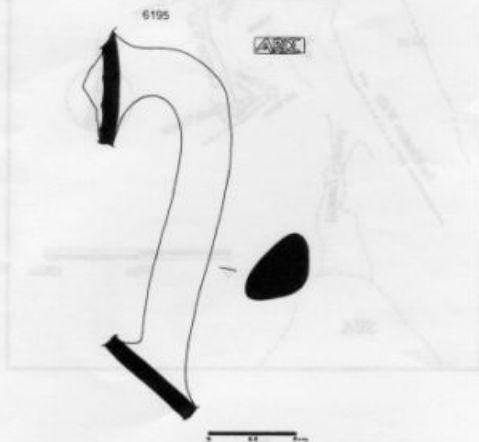


Figure 4 Handle of wine amphoras from Chios.



Figure 5 Amphora toes from Chios.



Figure 6 Amphora toes from Thasos.



Figure 7 Krater showing a youth playing double flute.



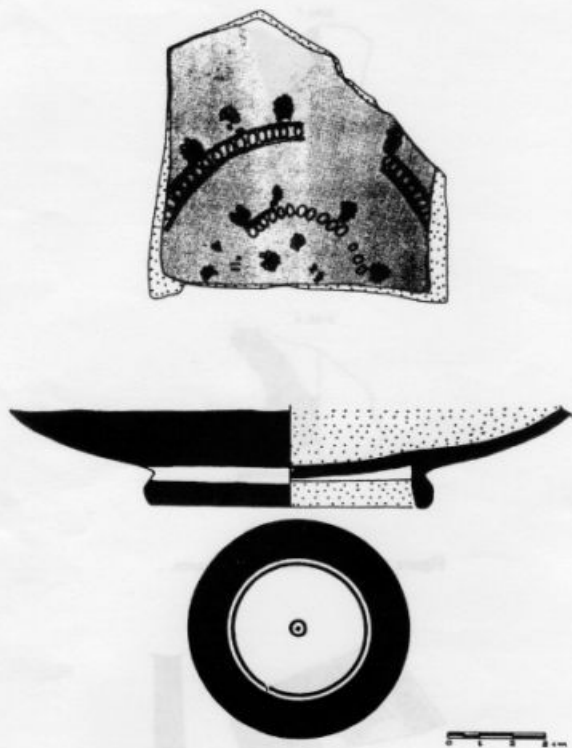


Figure 8

Plate with free palmettes encircled by a ring of ovules.

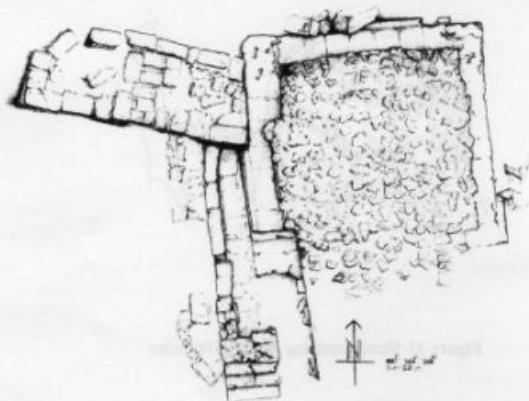


Figure 9 Drawing of square tower, E Cassese.

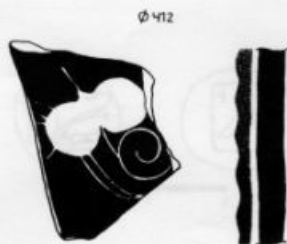


Figure 10 Sherd decorated with berries.



Figure 11 Sherd depicting Jason or Heracles.

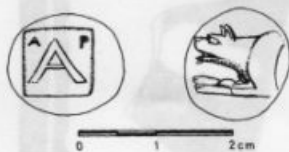


Figure 12 Tetradrachm of Argos.

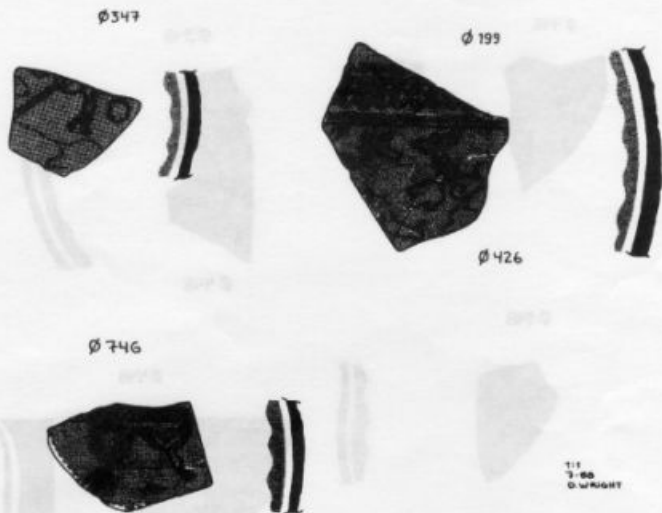


Figure 13 Sherds with flying Eroses.



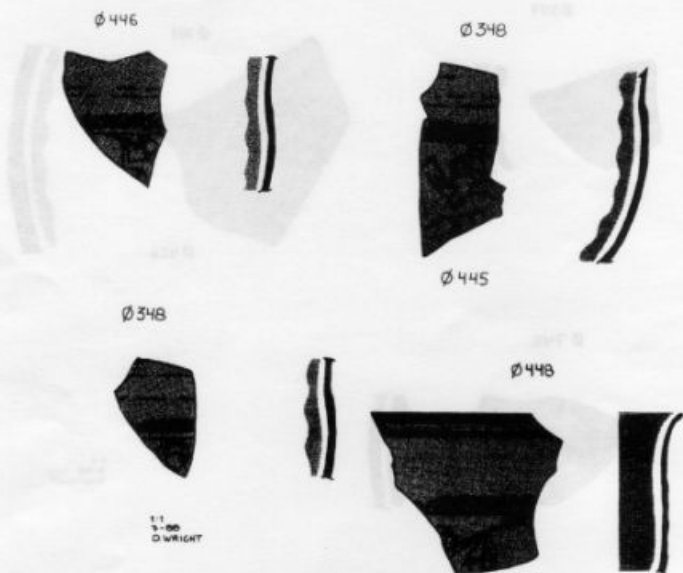


Figure 14 Sherds with war scenes.



Figure 15

Red-figured peliki with winged Eros chasing a maiden.



Figure 16

Red-figured pelike with bearded man.

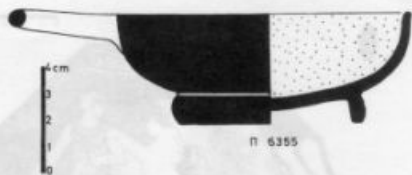


Figure 17 One-handed bowl.



Figure 18 Miniature skyphos.



Figure 19 Oil lamp.



Figure 20 Lekythos.



Figure 21 Chytra.



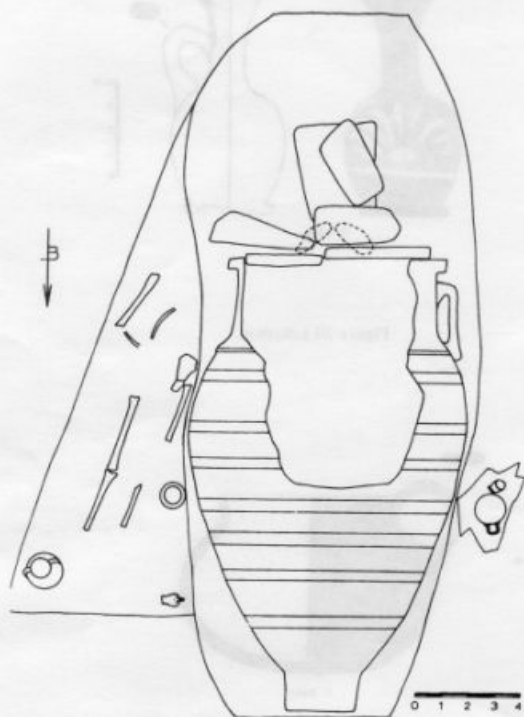


Figure 22 Pithos.



Figure 23 Rim of pithos.



Figure 24  
Phalasarne coin with  $\Phi$  on one side and dolphin on other.



Figure 25  
Stone inscription with nymph Phalasarne accompanied by a warship.