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Evidence of Transformation: The Early Iron Age Aegeanizing Pottery Assemblage at Alalakh

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Abstract

This article presents the canonical locally made Late Helladic IIIC and Aegeanizing pottery found at Alalakh within the context of the full 12th century ceramic assemblage. The discovery of this particular type of pottery could be used to argue that there may have been people at Alalakh who came from the Aegean, but it also could have been the result of local people imitating habits, cooking styles and re-cipes of the Aegean alongside their native ways. The paper will focus on the changes that occurred in the local ceramic assemblage and specifically on how the assimilation of a foreign style ware affected the local tradition, contributing to the creation of new habits and new identities in a period of struggles and transformations.

1. Introduction

Tell Atchana, the ancient city of Alalakh, is located on the Orontes River near the southern edge of the Amuq plain and within the district of Hatay, modern Turkey. It is a long mound of 22 hectares (Yener *et al.* 2000: 169). The first settlement on the mound should possibly be dated to the Amuq J period (c. 2200–2000 BC), and the site was continuously occupied from the beginning of the Middle Bronze I (c. 2000– 1800 BC) to the end of the Late Bronze Age IIA period (1400–1300 BC[2]; Yener 2005: 101), with only a small area around the temple still in use during the 12th cen-tury BC (Yener 2013; Horowitz 2015: 160).

The northwestern end of the mound is designated as Area 1 and contains the palaces, temple, forts, a city gate and other royal buildings excavated by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley (Woolley 1955). The renewed excavations (2006–2015) have con-centrated in Areas 1, 2, 3, and 4 and revealed contexts dating to the Middle Bronze Age I, Late Bronze Age I and II and Iron Age I and II (Horowitz 2015: 154).

The continuous occupation of the site ended at some point in the 14th century BC and recent findings confirmed the 13th century to be characterised by an ephemeral occupation period with few remains. In the course of recent excavations, it has been discovered that fragmentary mid 12th century Late Helladic IIIC (LH IIIC) pottery is present in the topsoil in almost all areas of the mound. Immediately beneath that topsoil in Areas 4, 3, 2 and 1-south lie late 14th and very early 13th century contexts, which is Alalakh's Period 1.

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2 This paper is not meant to make any statement on the absolute chronology of Tell Atchana.

At the moment, intact Iron Age contexts have been discovered only in two squares, both of them located in Area 1, where there is post-Bronze Age deposition below the topsoil (Fig. 1). Square 32.42 is located stratigraphically above Alalakh's great Period 2 Fortress (Akar 2013; Yener 2013: 20) and square 42.10 is located im-mediately south of Woolley's temple, on the highest part of the mound and contigu-ous with Woolley's excavation.

2. The Late Bronze/Iron Age transition

The transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age in the Near East in the 12th century BC is a crucial juncture for the history of the ancient world. The crisis of the 12th century BC completely reshaped the organisation of the Near Eastern states, together with the material culture, the distribution of settlements and the social and cultural ideology of that time. Unfortunately, very little information is available about the collapse of the Bronze Age political systems. The period following this collapse, the 12th century BC or early Iron Age, is known as a dark age because of the lack of epigraphic sources. Recent analysis of the material culture and especially of the ceramic sequences has brought into question the old reconstructions and has led to progress in the development of more coherent chronologies. Effectively, the new findings suggest that the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age transition need no longer be considered as a gap in our knowledge. Within the material culture there are generally more elements of continuity than of actual break, even though it is undeniable that the beginning of the Iron Age was a period of change.

In particular, the transition between the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age in the Amuq Valley has remained elusive to scholars until recently. New excavations and the publication of old materials are shedding light on this period. Particularly, the Amuq Valley Regional Project survey documented the increase in the number of settlements during the Iron Age and showed the continuity of sites that survived the passage from the Late Bronze into the Iron Age (Verstraete and Wilkinson 2000: 192). Furthermore, the analysis of archaeological materials recovered by the Alalakh Excavations project is providing a new set of data related to this transitional period.

3. The Iron Age levels at Alalakh

Square 32.42/52 lies directly on the ruins of the Period 2 fortress dated to the third quarter of the 14th century BC. The Iron Age remains above the fortress are shallowly situated below the topsoil and poorly preserved. An Iron Age II building has disturbed the 12th century surface to its south, where partly restorable LH IIIC Middle vessels of a domestic assemblage were found, and therefore the layers belonging to the 12th century context here are poorly preserved and mixed into the topsoil due to the downward slope of the mound in this direction. It is a building made with filled casemate spaces and an inner space with an in situ pithos jar and an exterior space. In these contexts,

sherds dating from the Early Bronze Age to the Iron II were found re-employed as building materials in the Iron Age II structure. We initially thought to have found Handmade Burnished Ware alongside the Late Helladic IIIC pottery (Yener 2013), but it now seems more likely that these are Early Bronze Age cooking pots.

Square 42.10 was opened in 2012 as close as possible to the temple area first excavated by Woolley (Woolley 1955: 33–90). The square was opened in order to further understand the nature of the Bronze Age and Iron Age levels at the site. Excavations in 2012 and 2014 have yielded three architectural phases dating to the Iron Age, which is Period 0 in the general sequence, above a fourth phase dating to the late 14th and early 13th century BC. This last phase is the only phase in the square to have closed architectural spaces and room inventories, which likely coexisted with the Level 1 Temple at the time of the Hittite king Mursili II (1321–1295 BC) due to the discovery of a sealing belonging to Prince Tudhalyia, a nephew of Mursili II, and his wife, Princess Asnuhepa (Yener *et al.* 2014). The related pottery assemblage is coherent with the date based on the local ceramic seriation, Mycenaean LH IIIA2 and IIIB and Nuzi ware.

After the collapse of this building, a long period of abandonment is evident before new settlement appeared over the weathered ruins containing LH IIIC Middle Developed pottery. This pattern is coherent with every area of the site in lacking the bulk of the 13th century and the earlier 12th century BC.

The most ancient Iron Age occupation of this area is Phase 3[3] within the square. It consists of two successive outdoor surfaces (a and b). While during phase 3b the outdoor area's function is more enigmatic, with scattered pyrotechnical features, the following phase 3a included two large plates in situ and therefore it seems to have belonged to an open area for domestic tasks such as food preparation and consump-tion. One fragment of an LH IIIC Middle Developed deep bowl in wavy line style found in phase 3b has given us a *terminus post quem* to this first Iron Age stratum of Alalakh, and it is consistent with the sequence in square 32.42/52.

In the following phase 2, the occupation of the area becomes even more scattered with an outdoor surface and a few disturbed stone installations. The analysis of the pottery assemblage continues to suggest the activities of food preparation and consumption.

4. The 12th century BC locally made LH IIIC and Aegeanizing pottery

The pottery coming from the Iron Age contexts and from the topsoil in other parts of the mound consists of locally made LH IIIC pottery and Aegeanizing pottery found together with local painted pottery and local plain pottery. I distinguish the canonical Aegean LH IIIC pottery from what I consider Aegeanizing pottery, which includes

3 The Local Phase system at Tell Atchana is used to track occupational phases in each square and begins with Local Phase 0 for topsoil.

hybrids that cannot be considered canonical LH IIIC style pottery and that show Aegean features on local shapes.

The first LH IIIC pottery at Alalakh was found and also published by Woolley (Woolley 1955: pl. CXI), however, Woolley's complete faith in the Sea Peoples nar-rative caused him to bend the evidence, allowing only that there might have been a squatter phase in the mid 12th century BC.

Generally, the local pottery inventory of these 12th century BC contexts shows strong elements of continuity with the local Late Bronze Age II assemblage.

4.1 The locally made Late Helladic IIIC pottery

The most visible change in the 12th century pottery assemblage at Alalakh is the appearance of the locally made LH IIIC pottery. This group of vessels is clearly inspired by Aegean LH IIIC types, and it mostly consists of open shapes along with a few jugs, some cooking pots and dippers, comprising a typical domestic assem-blage.

4.1.1 The shallow angular bowl

The most common 12th century locally made LH IIIC shape is what in Aegean ty-pology is called the shallow angular bowl (Mountjoy 1986: 153), and it is the local imitation of Furumark Shape (FS) 295. It corresponds in the Alalakh typology to the rounded bowl and carinated bowl (Horowitz 2015: fig. 7.6–9–10). It may have a flared, everted, tapered or a straight rim and it has loop (ribbon) horizontal handles attached just below the rim and sometimes a gentle carination at mid-body.

The exact angle of the rim and wall is variable and the handles may be irregular and crudely attached. Up to now at Alalakh, it has been always found unpainted. It is very common in the 12th century and it seems to continue in the 11th century BC. One of the best examples is AT 18202.4 (Fig. 2.3). It has a flared rim and a loop horizontal (ribbon) handle roughly made and attached just underneath the rim. Un-like in Alalakh, the shallow angular bowl is not so commonly found in other sites of the northern Levant and Cilicia (Venturi 2007). The shape is well documented in the Amuq Valley in sites such as Tell Tayinat (Janeway 2011: fig. 1.7; 2.1, 7) and Çatalhöyük (Pucci 2013: fig. 6.3), but none has been listed in the bowl corpus of the Syro-Hittite expedition (Swift 1958: 66–67).

4.1.2 The deep bowl

The locally made LH IIIC deep bowl (Mountjoy 1986: 149) corresponds in the Alal-akh typology to the rounded bowl (Horowitz 2015: fig. 7.6–9). It usually has a flared or everted rim and short, horizontal loop handles attached to the body. It is most commonly found unpainted. This vessel presents a tapered rim, loop vertical han-dles and a rounded body. Only one example is painted in a LH IIIC Middle Devel-oped wavy line style (AT 19516.2: Koehl 2017: fig. 18.1.7) and a few examples are painted with horizontal bands (AT 11169.2 fig. 2.4). It is found in many sites of the

northern Levant and Cilicia during the Iron Age (Venturi 2007). Besides Alalakh, this shape is represented in the Amuq Valley (Swift 1958: fig. 20, 21) and it is found at Tell Tayinat (Janeway 2011: fig. 3.1, 3, 5) and in Çatalhöyük (Pucci 2013: fig. 3.1, 2, 6; 4.6, 10).

4.1.3 The one handled conical bowl

It is the local imitation of the Aegean shape FS 267. It has an everted or simple rim, a short vertical loop handle and it is slightly conical at mid-body (Mountjoy 1986: fig. 221). Usually it is unpainted like AT 11134.11 (Fig. 2.2), which has a simple rim and a very slight carination at mid-body.

4.1.4 The rounded/conical kylix

During the recent excavations at Alalakh, three kylikes can be identified in the local pottery assemblage. They have a simple rim, rounded body and vertical strap han-dles. They are local imitations of the Aegean shape FS 274/275 and have no surface treatment preserved. One of the best examples found at Alalakh is AT 11134.3 (Fig. 2.7).

4.1.5 The basin

This unique vessel (AT 2045.7; Koehl 2017: fig. 18.4.2; here Fig. 2.6) is a local imitation of the Aegean shape FS 294. It has a rounded conical body, low ring base and a wide, roughly made, horizontal loop handle attached below the flat rim. It is shallower than the Aegean examples and does not have a spout, showing a peculiar feature in the locally made LH IIIC assemblage. The vessel is painted with reddish/ brownish horizontal bands on the body's exterior and possibly also on the interior (the band is now mostly faded) and a wide wavy band across the handle.

4.1.6 The dipper

The dipper corresponds to the Aegean shape FS 236. The best example preserved in the locally made LH IIIC assemblage from Alalakh is AT 14999.1 (AT 14999.1; Koehl 2017: fig. 18.4.2; here Fig. 2.8), which preserves the lower end of a high swung loop handle attached to a hemispherical bowl.

4.1.7 The cooking pot

Cooking pots can be considered as a marker to detect any change in the way food was cooked (Spataro and Villing 2015: 12–15). During the Late Bronze Age, the typical cooking pot had a biconical body, flat base and folded over or rolled out rim (Fig. 3.1); at the end of this period strap handles started to appear, becoming more common towards the end of the Late Bronze Age. They are usually large sized.

Cooking pots found in the earliest levels of the Iron Age usually have a rounded and folded over rim, sometimes they have a hole-mouth shape (Fig. 3.3), and they may or may not have strap handles (Fig. 3.2). They are medium sized and evolved from the Late Bronze Age examples.

4.2 Aegeanizing pottery

As mentioned above, within the 12th century, we can list some unconventional shapes showing a mixture of local Late Bronze Age traditions and Aegean or non-local elements. The vessels showing this particular type of pattern recovered so far are mainly open vessels, particularly bowls with unconventional Aegean-style handles attached. Even if an Aegean origin or inspiration can be assumed for these vessels, they do not fit in the Aegean conventional shape catalogue and therefore they should be considered as hybrids. The presence of these particular types of vessels may be the result of on-going cultural interactions during the last phases of the Bronze Age and the early stages of the Iron Age.

Preliminary analysis of the material distinguished at least two types of Aegeanizing pottery so far: a rounded shallow bowl with stub loop horizontal handles (AT 11164.3; Fig. 2.1) and a flared hemispherical bowl with vertical loop handles (AT 18217.1; Fig. 2.5). Vessels belonging to the first category have everted and thickened rims. According to preliminary analysis, these vessels could have been inspired by LH IIIC types such as the deep bowl FS 284 or FS 285 (Mountjoy 1986: 148–149). However, the presence of the stubby loop horizontal handles defines them as non-canonical Aegean shapes. The comparisons can be found at Ras ibn Hani (Bounni *et al.* 1998: fig. 159.1–2; 162).

The rounded shallow bowl was present at Alalakh since the Late Bronze Age I period (Horowitz 2015: fig. 7.6; Woolley 1955: pl. CX), and therefore has a long history in the ceramic production of the site and the shape also seems to have been produced during the Iron Age. The presence of the horizontal loop handle is a clear sign that they were trying to imitate a LH IIIC shape, and the use of a common, well known shape such as the rounded bowl may demonstrate that they were trying to imitate a foreign shape.

Hemispherical bowls belonging to the second category of Aegeanizing pottery have a flared rim. They have at least one vertical loop handle attached to the rim and some of them may have had a second handle.

The finding of both the locally made LH IIIC pottery and the Aegeanizing pottery helps us to trace the process of evolution of the pottery from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age. From the preliminary analysis of these kinds of pottery, we can assume that in most cases the novelty of the vessels is the presence of the Aegean-like handles, but otherwise the shape is quite similar to the Bronze Age assemblage.

4.3 Functional analysis

I categorize the vessels belonging to the Iron Age local pottery assemblage at Alal-akh into four functional groups that mirror a simplified schema of the different steps of food provision (Skibo 2013). Besides the three main functions as defined by Skibo (processing, transport and storage), I add a fourth group, a consumption group, which

is employed for all activities such as eating, drinking, pouring and serving, which can be considered as part of the same performance of food consumption. Given the fact that the vessels presented in this article may be included in the latter category, I will mainly focus on food consumption.

From the preliminary analysis it is not possible to exactly establish a final production of the food processing in between the Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery assemblage. Vessels could have been used for many functions, sometimes different from the one they were made for; however, it is possible to observe a slow development of shapes, but not a change in cooking habits. As for the installations, at the moment no changes have been noticed from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age; fireplaces seem to be absent and tandır like installations were still in use.

As for the tableware, the Iron Age assemblage generally consisted of rim plates and shallow, rounded, hemispherical and flared bowls. The latter are found in many sizes and possibly the small sized ones, with a simple and flared rim, could have been used for drinking. This assemblage is not very different from the Late Bronze Age assemblage (Horowitz 2015) except for the new addition of Aegeanizing and locally made LH IIIC and painted wares and possibly a local evolution of the hemispherical bowl.

Analysing the two assemblages from the functional point of view, we notice that there is no change in the function, but only in the appearance. Cooking pots were already transitioning to a more hole-mouthed shape during Alalakh's Period 1 and loop handles started to appear in the 14th century BC. As a matter of fact, the percent-age of plates and bowls in the local pottery assemblage seems not to change from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age, and given this evidence we may not even consider a change in the food habits from dry to liquid. The amount of plates and bowls recovered throughout the Iron Age levels at Tell Atchana stay relatively constant, implying continuity in the way food was consumed. By the analysis of the cooking pots we might consider a change in the way food was cooked and in the recipes used, however, there is no evident change in the amount of plates and bowls retrieved in the Iron Age levels of Alalakh.

Some of the bowls presented are directly connected to Aegean traditions, but others show continuity or a connection with the Late Bronze Age II. The modification would thus imply a change in the appearance of the tableware, which might mean a change in fashion or an effort to imitate a foreign tradition while not changing culinary habits. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the contemporary appear-ance of a painted pottery tradition for open vessels. The major part of the bowls is unchanged, except for the introduction of the locally made LH IIIC and Aegeanizing shapes as an alternative, but not as a substitution for the local shapes. Most of the Late Bronze Age bowls are still part of the eating/drinking assemblage, thus demon-strating the absence of changes at least in eating habits.

No relevant changes in the functional composition of the eating/drinking/cooking assemblage can be observed. We cannot, at least at Alalakh, argue that a change of habits occurred during the end of the Late Bronze and Iron Age transition.

5. Conclusions

The 12th century pottery assemblage is characterised by the coexistence of both local and foreign elements. Even through there are traces of foreign, especially Aegean, influence, the majority of pottery production during the transition from the Late Bronze to the Early Iron Age is characterised by a strong connection with the previ-ous Late Bronze Age local traditions. The appearance of the locally made LH IIIC and Aegeanizing pottery has often been related to the arrival of new peoples (Knapp and Manning 2016) and this question has been particularly relevant in the study of the 12th century BC in the northern Levant and also in the Amuq Valley (Harrison 2009: 187), but this interpretation cannot be easily reconciled with what was happen-ing during the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age transition at Alalakh.

The mound of Alalakh had been abandoned sometime at the end of the 14th cen-tury BC or early 13th century BC with only a small area, possibly related to the Temple, that continued to be occupied well into the mid 12th century BC. Alalakh seems to have been reduced to a small settlement, while the world surrounding the settlement was going through a period of crisis and change. Even if a change in the use of spaces can be noticed, the material culture was not affected to the same extent.

Some changes are noticeable in the pottery assemblage at Alalakh during the 12th century BC.

For instance, we can notice a gradual increase in drinking vessels, as well as the introduction of new shapes of Aegean origin. The increase in the presence of drink-ing vessels might be linked to the importance of drinking habits and activities, while the introduction of new shapes, of foreign origin, might be linked to a change related with social habits and the vessel's appearance.

Whatever happened at the end of the Bronze Age in the Amuq Valley, it did not prevent people from continuing to produce and use their own style of pottery and continue their traditional culture.

The appearance of locally made LH IIIC and Aegeanizing pottery was not neces-sarily linked with the settlement of new people in the settlement, especially if we consider that the pottery was assimilated into the local pottery assemblage.

Additionally, the production of locally made LH IIIC pottery cannot be inter-preted as import substitution for the Late Bronze Age Aegean pottery, as the vessel repertoire is radically different from the shapes that were imported from the Aegean in the preceding phases. It rather seems that people were using the pottery, including the LH IIIC and Aegeanizing pottery, as a medium to express differences between people rather than as a medium to express status.

It is indeed possible that there were new arrivals somewhere in the region, but the phenomenon of imitation or the use of imported pottery cannot always be linked with the presence of foreign people. Pottery has the capacity to cross borders and to convey special messages as a medium of cultural self-fashion and self-identification (Crielaard 1999: 63). In such a way, if we assume that at Alalakh the imitation of Aegean pottery shapes was not linked with the presence of foreign people, we may assume that people

from Alalakh decided to integrate some foreign features into the local pottery tradition in order to create new habits and a new community identity that may have been linked with the re-shaping and the creation of new polities in the region.

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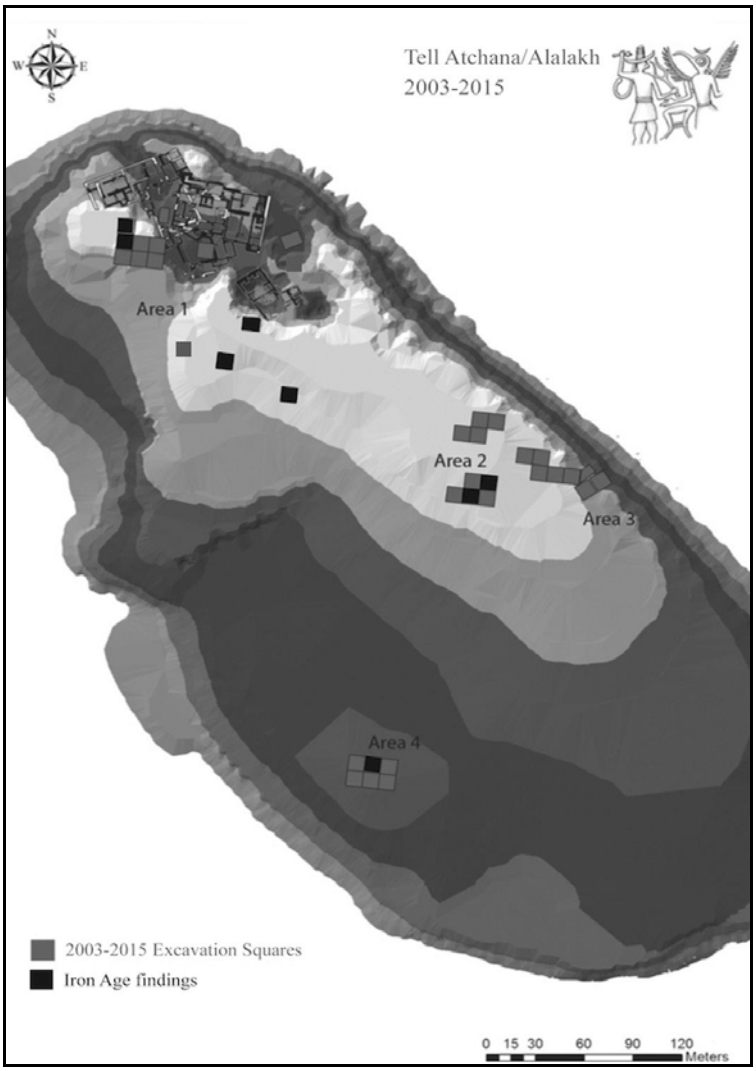

Fig. 1 Tell Atchana Excavation Squares

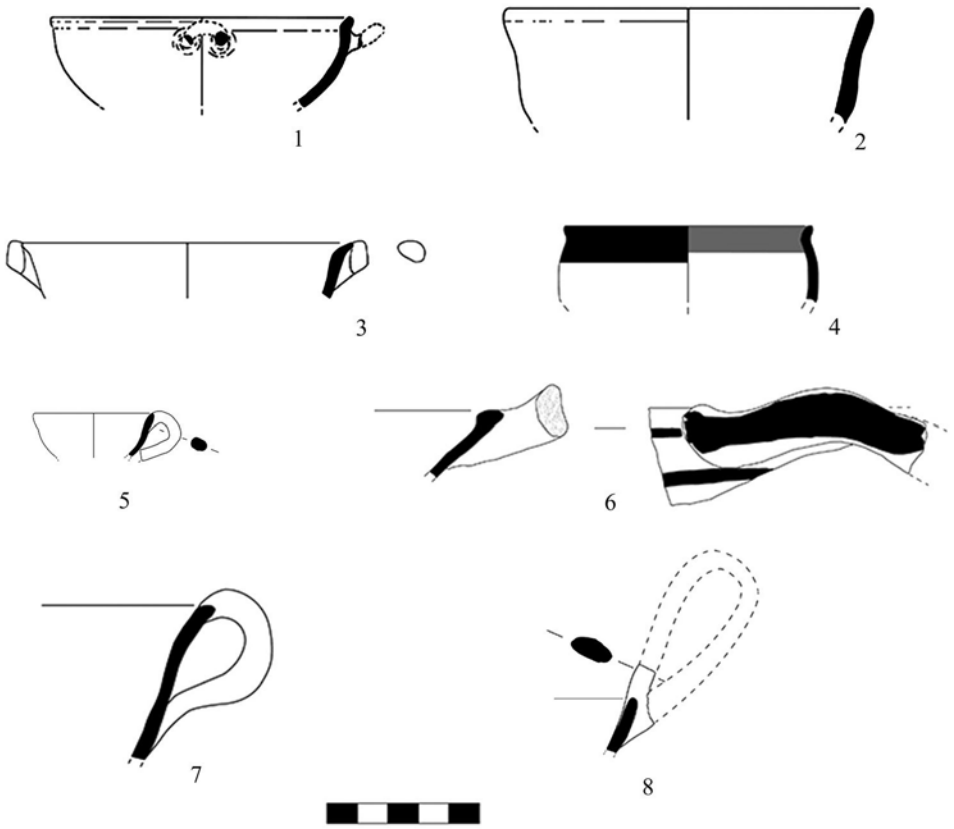

Fig. 2 Selected pottery from Atchana: 1 (AT 11164.3); 2 (AT 11134.11); 3 (AT 18202.4); 4 (AT 11169.2); 5 (AT 18217.1); 6 (AT 2045.7); 7 (AT 11134.3); 8 (AT 14999.1)

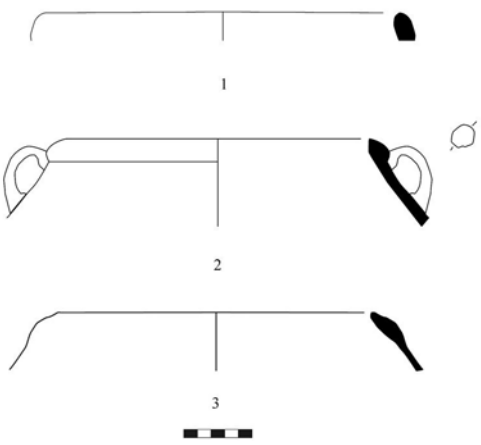

Fig. 3 Selected pottery from Atchana: 1 (AT 18249.2); 2 (AT 18017.3); 3 (AT 17717.1)