

## SHIP REPRESENTATIONS FROM PREHISTORIC ARGOLIS (MH PERIOD)

Our knowledge on the beginnings of the construction of vessels in the Aegean can be based on the iconography, which in the earliest times is not satisfactory in general and especially regarding ships and vessels.

Although the earliest representations date from the early bronze age and appear on the so called Cycladic frying pans. It has already been said that the presence of obsidian, originating from the island of Milos, in the Peloponnese (Franchthi cave and preceramic strata of Dendra Midea) proves that the navigation in the Aegean begins before the 8th millenium B.C.

I am not a specialist in the problems of the navigation and the construction of vessels but the discovery of a middle Helladic jug found among several other finds on the top of a tomb No 140 of the tumulus Delta in Argos<sup>1</sup> has given me the opportunity to study the decoration on it, which includes seven vessels.

The vase is a small jug 10.5 cm high, offered to a very young girl buried in a shaft grave which dates from the middle of the seventeenth century B.C. It is decorated in dark on light.

Its decoration consists of bands and bands ending in semicircles around the neck. Then comes a row of six big double spirals representing obviously the waves of the sea. Just below and between the spirals are depicted seven small vessels in motion. Under the base of the handle there is a double circle, from which hang four long stemmed spirals. The design cannot be clearly explained. But could be possibly a kind of turtle or with less possibility a floating

structure seen from above.

The seven vessels are not identical. Although the general characteristics have much in common, each one presents differences in the details.

So, the number of oars, the height and shape of the prow or stern or stern and the position of the superstructure or sail vary.

The size of the vessels depicted is very small (about 1.2 cm each). The design is made with study and accurate hand. Although it is difficult for the painter to give details in so small representations, he is good enough to give us a legible profile of the vessels he could see sailing in the Argolic gulf.

Each vessel is depicted with its details and peculiarities. The bodies are thinner or thicker: the prows and sterns are flat, or crescent shaped, or angular, with or like a hook or a horn.

It is problematic the distinction between the prow and the stern when they are of equal height. If we could be sure that the superstructure is a sail, then the direction of the swelling of the sail cloth points out the prow. But the superstructure cannot be easily explained. The superstructure in discussion rises above the gunwale. It is semicircular inclining on one side. There is not a sign of a mast and one vessel only has an angular top.

Otherwise the superstructure could be explained as a cabin made of cloth or straw or wooden planks.

FIRST VESSEL (Phot.1 on the right side).

Prow and stern have almost the same height, thin body, gunwale rectilinear. Circular superstructure in the middle of the body. Six oars depicted (10 oars + the steering oar which is the shorter on the right). In this case the motion is towards the left. The prow is hook shaped, the stern like a horn. We have examples showing that the prow could be as well in the right side. (like the later example of Skyros).

VESSEL No TWO (Phot.2, left).

Thin body, flat stern, twisted in a shape of closed hook prow. Superstructure in the center. Seven lines (that means 12 oars + one steering - oar. The prow could end at a head of animal).

VESSEL No THREE (Phot.2, right)

Crescent shaped body - cabin position in the middle of body direction to the right 14 oars (8 lines the first on the left could be the steering oar).

VESSEL No FOUR (Phot.3, center)

Prow angular and high, stern lower and flat. Direction left. Six oars, superstructure closer to the stern. (10 oars + 1 steering - oar). It has a flat boat.

VESSEL No FIVE (Phot.3, right, Phot.4 left)

Like No 4 with thinner body, higher stern and seven oars. Superstructure as in No 4, (10 oars + 1 steering oar) type of EC. vessel on an askos from Orchomenos = the same prow in earliest time.

VESSELS No SIX and SEVEN (No 6 = Phot.4, center No 7 = Phot.4, right and Phot.1, left)

They have both thin crescent shaped bodies. The prows are higher than the sterns. No 6 is longer with 14 one steering oar. No 7 has 12 oars + the steering oar. No 6 has the superstructure higher than No 7. Both are closer to the stern.

Summarising we may distinguish five types of the oar - vessels depicted on the jug from Argos. 1) The first is the type of vessel No 1 like a hook and like a horn. 2) The second is the

type of No 2. One side like a hook and one flat. 3) The third of No 3 crescent - shaped. 4) To the fourth type belong No 4 and 5, one side rectangular and one rounded. 5) And to the fifth. No 6 and 7. Crescent - shaped but one side higher than the other.

Questions to be discussed and problems to be cleared and solved are: 1) The distinction between the prow and the stern especially when they are of equal height. 2) The explanation of the superstructure, which raises above the gunwale on the deck of the ship.

If we could recognize the sail in it we could easily solve the first problem, because the direction of the swelling of the sail points out the prow. But the superstructure cannot be easily explained. There is not a sign of mast and only the third vessel has an angular top. So the idea of a cabin is the best explanation because of the existence of oars, which make the presence of sail not necessary.

The oars are depicted as short lines below the body of the ships and they have been the only moving power for the vessels, as they are depicted. There are two vessels with six lines (that means 10 + one steering) two with eight (14 + one steering oar) and three with seven (12 oars + the steering one). All vessels depicted have been in reality of medium to small size (7.5 to nine meters long). They have been not small boats neither big ships.

The number of depicted ships, belonging to five different types and the ability of depiction indicates that the Argives in M.H. times were acquainted with ships, and seamanship.

Although miniature in size, the complete representation of seven ships contributes in our knowledge about the bronze age seamanship.

Usually we have fragments of pictures and our conclusions are partially based on imaginary more or less additions. In several cases — for example — the type of the ship is guessed by the scholar who is trying to reconstruct in one the fragmentary representations of two or more different vessels.

As it concerns the oars, paddles and sails, I believe that the presence of both oars and sail on the same figure of a ship is rare and exceptional.

Even in the Thera - frescoes, only one ship can be considered as a sailing boat and it had not oars. The rest are exclusively boats, specially decorated with garlands and festoons hanging from a central pole, probably for a religious ceremony or celebration. The heavy decoration of the bodies is suitable for this event and seems to come from a myth. There is certainly a mythic scene as occurs often in the representations of mycenaean frescoes.

The normal vessels are the smaller plain boats depicted in the interspace.

A number of normal vessels from the Bronze Age are depicted on a mycenaean vase from Thera. They look like the older ships from Aigina. But discussion on this subject is to take place during the International Congress for the Aegean area<sup>2</sup>.

**Dr. E. Protonotariou - Deilaki**

#### **NOTES**

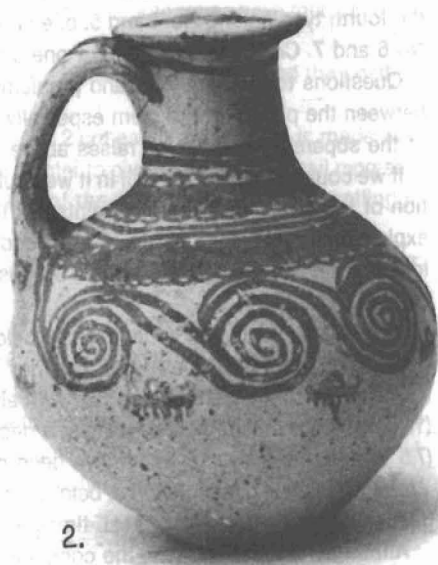
1. See E. Protonotariou - Deilaki, *The Tumuli of Argos*, Athens 1980 (in greek).
2. More details on the Argolic ships of the MH period and archaeological documentation will be reported at the forthcoming Congress on the Aegean.

#### **ILLUSTRATIONS**

The Middle Helladic jug of the tomb No. 140 of the tumulus Delta in Argos.



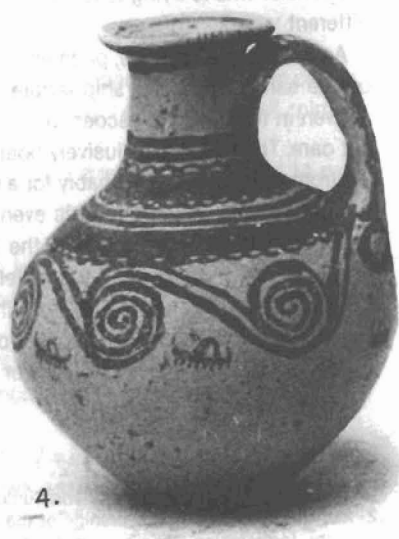
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