

# Southern Italian Protogeometric pottery in the Final Bronze Age through the prism of Roca Vecchia

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## ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the appearance of Southern Italian Protogeometric (SIP) within the Final Bronze Age by means of a key site for understanding the developments in the central Mediterranean, Roca Vecchia. In the aftermath of the establishment of Aegean-inspired ceramic tradition, a transition occurred by the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. This led to the development of SIP pottery, a locally produced class that is characterised by refined clay, matt-painted decoration, and technological advancements such as the use of double-chamber kilns. Here, the chronological and cultural context where SIP emerged is explored, outlining both technological and stylistic features, considering geometric painted motifs and specialised vessel shapes. The study examines SIP pottery within broader Mediterranean interactions, pointing out the influences outlined by Mycenaean traditions. Therefore, SIP pottery from Roca Vecchia can be considered one of the most exhaustive assemblages in terms of analysis of the evolution of pottery craftsmanship, mobility of artisans, and the socio-economic networks within the Final Bronze Age in Southern Italy.

## KEY WORDS

Roca Vecchia; Southern Italian Protogeometric (SIP); Bronze Age; pottery; technology; decoration; Aegean.

## DOI

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## AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MACRO-PATTERN

After the end of the Middle Neolithic a considerable change in pottery production occurred in continental Southern Italy. Painted decoration seems to have disappeared completely for a few millennia. Unpainted pottery dominated continental Italy and when Lustrous decorated Aegean type pottery first arrived in Southern Italy, it clearly stood out from the local background.

Primarily on a visual basis (a sensorial aspect often neglected by archaeological enquiry, see SKEATES 2005), but also, as it is well known, from a technological standpoint, these productions were essentially different from the usual *impasto* (the standard southern Italian unpainted coarse pottery) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. Their difference resided primarily in their use of refined clays, of a rotary device for their forming as well as, most notably, of their painted decoration (BORGNA – LEVI 2015). By the 12<sup>th</sup> cent. BC the trajectory of Aegean type ceramic was about to end, only to trigger the emergence of a new entirely local class of pottery: Southern Italian Protogeometric matt-painted (SIP), the earliest attestation of a local matt-painted pottery in southern Italy. In this paper we will explore the emergence of this specific ware, highlighting its specific cultural and chronological context, as well as the unique nature of this ware. In doing so we will use the archaeological record of the site of Roca Vecchia (**Fig. 1**),

a site whose crucial role in the connections and development of pottery technology of the central Mediterranean has been repeatedly recognised (see IACONO 2019). Roca has produced one of the largest and most diverse assemblages associated with this specific class of pottery. Through this prism we will try to understand some of the main features of this production to the west of the Adriatic Sea.



Fig. 1: Aerial view of the site of Roca Vecchia.

## POTTERY TECHNOLOGY WITHIN THE LATER PHASES OF THE BRONZE AGE (LATE MBA–FBA)

Matt-painted pottery of the Final Bronze Age did not represent the first instance of a similar kind of productions. Indeed, matt-painted wares are part of a broad phenomenon that emerged already during the first part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in the broad area around the Balkans and the central Mediterranean (HOREJS 2007). Because of their date and origin these ceramics circulated during the early stages of maritime interaction between Mycenaeans and Southern Italian communities. Already during the beginning of the MBA, matt-painted sherds have been identified in assemblages of exogenous material at places like Vivara, or Roca<sup>1</sup> while, a complete vessel has been recovered among the grave goods of the central tomb of the Torre Santa Sabina tumulus near Brindisi (LO PORTO 1986; JONES *et al.* 2014). At this point in time, matt-painted pottery is just one of the many pottery styles circulating in late MH and early LH and its attestation to the west of Greece is sparse at best (MERKOURI 2010). Almost all of these early vessels are imports, and no local production for this class of material seem to be well established in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment and development of frequent contacts with the Aegean triggered multifaceted processes of technological transformations that have left important traces in the ceramic production of peninsular and insular Italy in the later phases of the Bronze Age.

The period between the late MBA and the FBA sees the introduction and subsequent spread of a range of fine classes that can be defined as Aegeanising, exhibiting an uneven spatial and temporal distribution. The range of pottery wares, in terms of their similarity to Aegean

1 An overview of previous finds is in JONES *et al.* 2014. The presence of a fragment of matt-painted has also been recently claimed at Pietraperzia near Enna in Sicily, but the piece is very small and hardly diagnostic (GIANNITRAPANI – IANNI 2020, 120, fig. 19).

2 But see the isolated exception of Grotta Pino at Sassano (JONES *et al.* 2014, 199).

models, is as follows: Italo-Mycenaean pottery, wheelmade pottery, *pithoi* (*dolia* in Italian literature) with raised bands or grooves, followed by large basins with conical-ovoid bodies, and, finally, SIP pottery.

The introduction of these classes marked a period of innovations in the ceramic tradition, these include the process of clay refinement, the employment of the wheel, and the firing of pottery in vertical double chamber kilns, where the load is kept apart from the fuel (BORGNA – LEVI 2015; JONES *et al.* 2014).

It is important to consider that coeval impasto vessels were most likely fired in pits or in small, single-chambered kilns, which were often indistinguishable from those used for food preparation. Thus, it is possible to fully acknowledge the extent of the technological choices involved in the production of these classes of fine (*figulina*) pottery, which are likely to be the product of specialised craftsmanship (BORGNA – LEVI 2015).

Although the distribution of SIP is predominantly Adriatic/continental, with numerous find spots along the Adriatic coast of Apulia as well as some finds more to the north, as noted long ago by Yntema (1990), the earliest attestation of this pottery is supposedly to be dated to the Ausonian I phase at Lipari (BERNABÒ BREA – CAVALIER 1980, 713; DE JULIIS *et al.* 2006, 59) a period generally considered to overlap with the RBA.<sup>3</sup> However, attestations related to this very early phase are essentially limited to the Lipari and possibly Milazzo (BERNABÒ BREA – CAVALIER 1992) areas detached from the bulk of the distribution of this sort of material that seems to be the Adriatic broadly intended, and need therefore to be taken with caution. We start to recognise actual assemblages of SIP only from the FBA (11<sup>th</sup> cent. BC) onward in most of the sites of southern Italy for which data related to this kind of material are abundant (see DE JULIIS *et al.* 2006 for an overview). The material from Roca discussed here comes from an abundant assemblage dating predominantly from an advanced Protovillanovan (FBA2) horizon (RONCA 2005; 2008; RONCA in press). The radiocarbon dates for these phases again fit into the 11<sup>th</sup> century (PAGLIARA *et al.* 2007, 356–357). For all absolute and relative dates cf. **Tab. 1**.

**Tab. 1: Comparative chronological table. Absolute dates based on C14. After IACONO 2019, 67.**

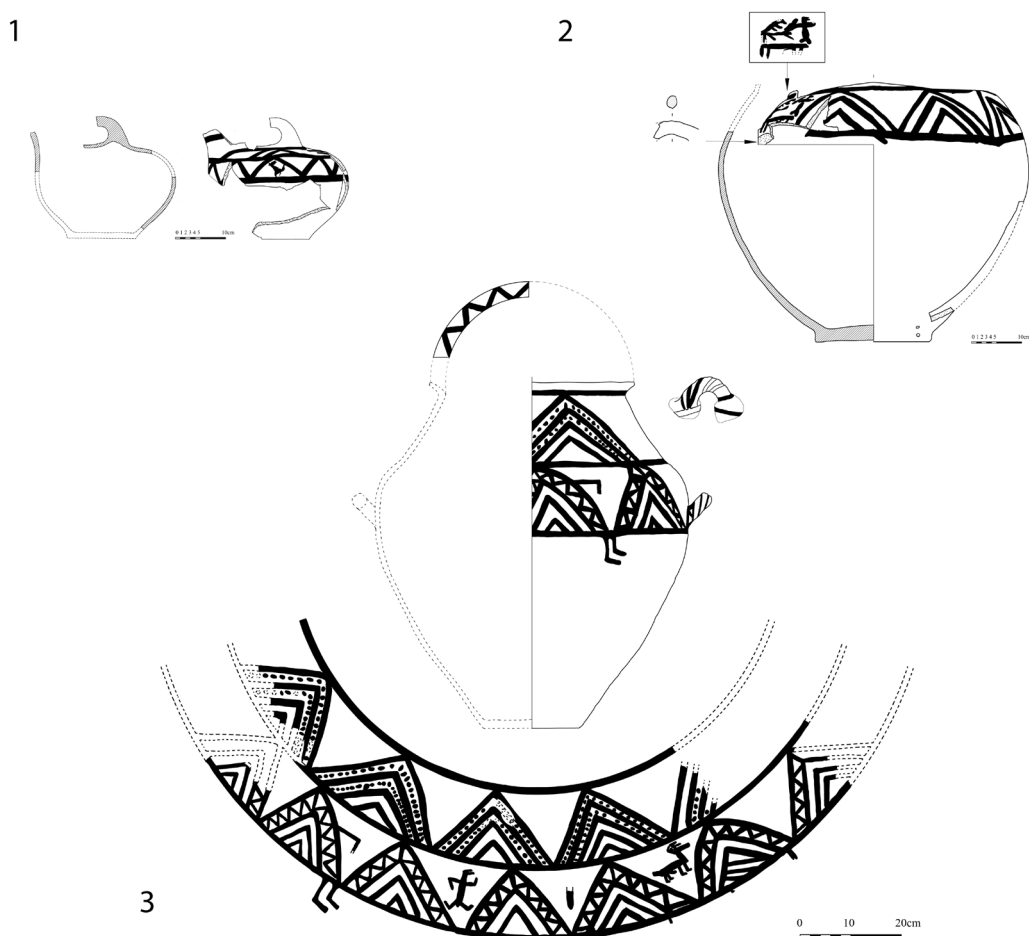
Apulia Cultures	Southern Italy	Mainland Greece	Absolute Years BC
Protoapennine	MBA1	LH I	1700–1600
		LH II A	1600–1460
Apennine	MBA2	LH II B	1460–1420
	MBA3	LH III A1	1420–1375
		LH III A2	1375–1340
Subapennine	RBA1	LH III B1	1340–1210
		LH III B2	
		Trans. LH III B2–C	
	RBA2	LH III C early	1210–1130
Protovillanovan	FBA1	LH IIIC middle	1130–1100
	FBA2	LH IIIC late	1100–1080
		Submycenaean	1080–1040

3 The contexts (cuts BM 11-14 in the dromos of the  $\beta$  IV hut) which were recently re-examined has found them to be relatively trustworthy with some potential infiltration of earlier Milazzese material (CAPRIGLIONE 2024, 64–73).

## SOUTHERN ITALIAN PROTOGEOMETRIC POTTERY FROM ROCA VECCHIA

The following discussion will focus primarily on the technological and stylistic aspects of the SIP pottery assemblage from Roca without entering the discussion of its contextual dimension. This has been already discussed by some of us (IACONO 2019; RONCA 2021) as well as in the original reports connected with the relevant phases at Roca Vecchia (PAGLIARA *et al.* 2007; 2008; MAGGIULLI - MALORGIO 2011). In general, SIP seems to have replaced Aegean type pottery in terms of frequency although the latter class continue to be attested during the FBA phases (IACONO 2019, 171-177). According to the archaeometric analyses, the Southern Italian Protogeometric pottery from Roca was locally produced. It uses a purified clay; the ceramic body is mostly compact and homogeneous, with tiny inclusions and small voids rarely visible to the naked eye.

Contrary to the production in other sites in Southern Italy, where the use of the wheel is occasionally reported,<sup>4</sup> the SIP pottery from Roca always clearly appears to be handmade,



**Fig. 2:** 1 - Zoomorphic motif; 2 - Anthropomorphic motif; 3 - Deer hunting scene.

4 E.g. at Lipari (BERNABÒ BREA - CAVALIER 1980, 566), Termito (BIANCO - DE SIENA 1982, 75), Madonna del Petto (LAVIANO *et al.* 1995, 29-34), and Coppa Navigata (BOCCUCCIA *et al.* 1998, 252).

without any trace of wheel throwing, although it is likely that some kind of rotatory device was used for larger vessels to facilitate shaping. The outer surface of the vessels is almost always covered with a coating of thin-grained clay slip, which shows distinct signs of smoothing made with a cloth or a sponge.

The handmade manufacture is evident, it can be deduced from the asymmetry in the different parts of the body of the best-preserved vessels, from the variations in the thickness of the walls and from the preserved signs of digital impressions. It is not possible to recognise shaving of the interior of the vessel, a practice commonly attested in later geometric vessels arguably aimed at reducing the weight of the vessels.

SIP pottery was fired in double-chamber kilns at temperatures of around 900° (GUGLIELMINO *et al.* 2010), which ensured the strength and mechanical resistance of the artefacts. Firing in a well-controlled oxidising environment ensured a light and homogeneous colouring of the surfaces, ranging from whitish to beige, pink and orange.

The painted decoration of FBA SIP is composed of an opaque or semi-opaque wash, and it is typically characterised by its presence along a band in the upper portion of the vessel. In some cases, this decoration also extends to the upper surface of the rim. The colour ranges from orange to dark brown; the motifs are predominantly geometric and include – with many variations, compositions, and combinations – simple or concentric angles, concentric semi-circles, rows of dots, zigzags, chevrons, grids, parallel oblique segments. There is only one attestation for the chessboard, the vertical tremolo, the herringbone, the meander, and the criss-cross circle. It is also noteworthy that the anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and phytomorphic motifs are incorporated within geometric motifs (**Fig. 2: 2; 2: 3**). An urn is adorned with a schematic depiction of a deer hunting scene (**Fig. 2: 2**).

## SHAPES ATTESTED

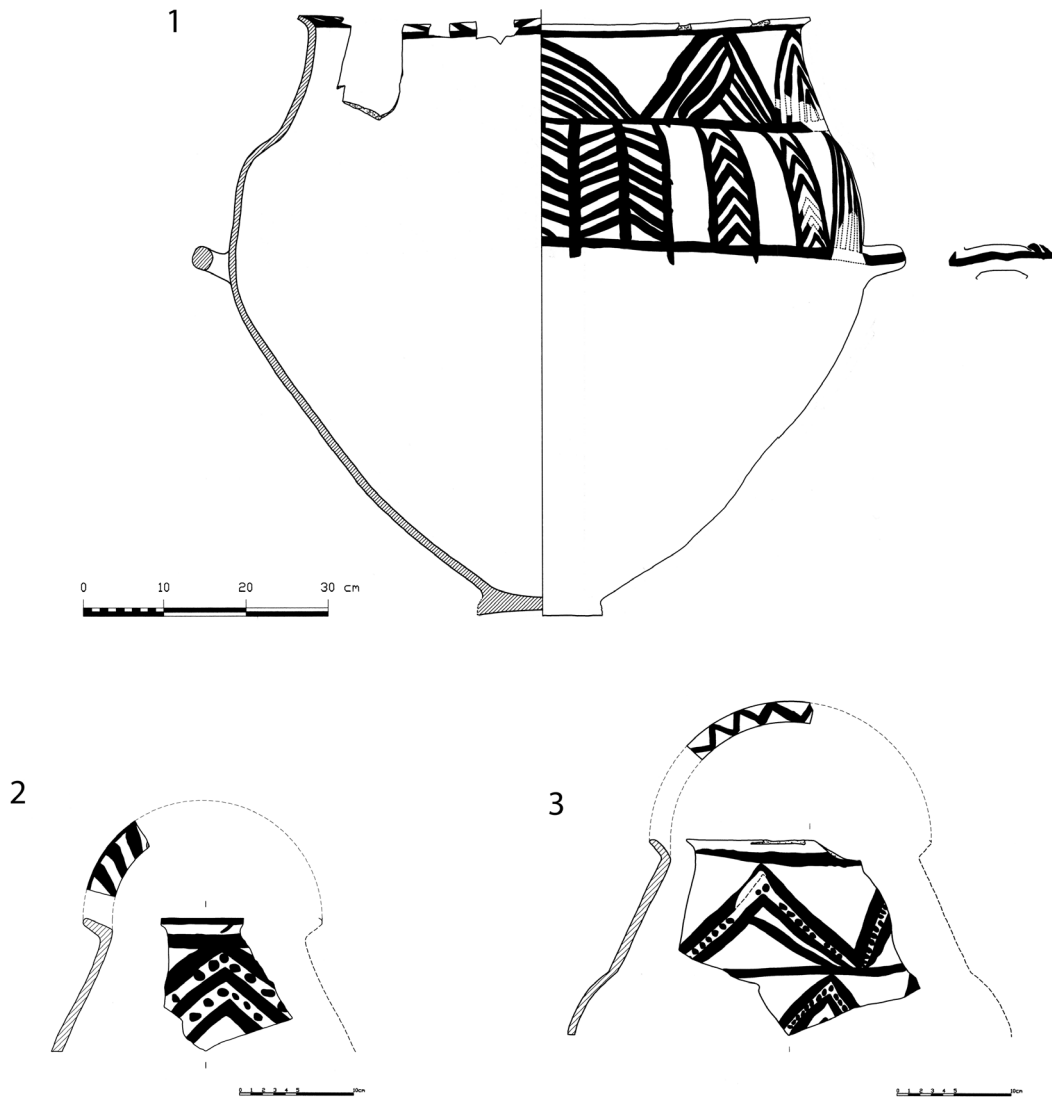
The SIP pottery shares some of the morphological (neck vessels, cups, bowls, jugs) and decorative repertoire with the coeval impasto pottery (similar geometric patterns are reproduced on unpainted impasto vessels through grooved decoration).

### CLOSED SHAPES

In terms of closed shapes, those more common are different kinds of necked vessels, often characterised by a rim that goes from horizontal to flaring or downturned. Such vessels are termed either *olle* when of medium size and globular body, and *urn* when larger in size and biconical body. Both shapes are often characterised by horizontal roll handles attached to either the maximum extension of the diameter or the lower part of the body.

Decoration is normally limited to the upper body of these vessels and normally involves geometric motifs such as triangles, dots, and a combination of the two. Panels are also occasionally attested in combination with the herringbone pattern (**Fig. 3: 1**). The rim is also decorated with either oblique strokes or zig-zags (**Fig. 3: 2, 3: 3**).

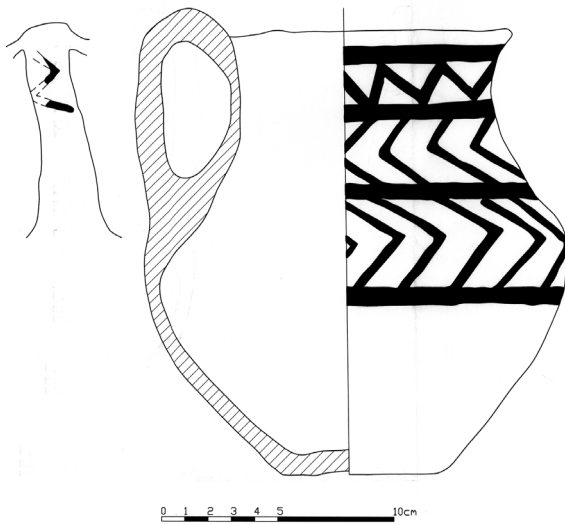
Jugs are also attested. It is interesting to note that this shape is not particularly well attested before the Final Bronze Age when we start to have its first attestations at Roca (MALORGIO – MAGGIULI 2011, 125). There seems to be a process of parallel development in both impasto and SIP, perhaps triggered by the earlier Aegean type production of this kind of vessel which are well attested in Apulia (e.g. GORGOLIONE 2002, 66, fig. 43, but Aegean type jugs are also present in the Aegean-type assemblage of Roca Vecchia e.g. PAGLIARA – GUGLIELMINO 2005,



**Fig. 3:** 1 - Herringbone pattern; 2 - Rim decorated with oblique strokes; 3 - Rim decorated with a zig-zag.

307). The only complete specimen for this vessel from Roca Vecchia is decorated with three superimposed orders of zig-zag and vertical chevrons (**Fig. 4**).

Fairly well attested are also other vessels whose function was possibly equally related to pouring. These are *askoi* (**Fig. 2: 1**). Askoid vessels have been part of the repertoire of impasto pottery of southern Italy since the Copper Age (COCCHI-GENICK 2014). However, from the MBA onward such vessels seem not to be attested in the Italian peninsula. As with jugs, it is extremely likely that also in this case, the initial input for producing similar vessels was re-introduced in the Southern Italian repertoire via connections with the Aegean world where the shape was present in various areas from LH I (at Lerna and Tiryns, see MOUNTJOY 1999, 83–84, fig. 11, 14). From a morphological perspective, they show similarities with Aegean *askoi* (FS 195) and with some samples found in the Aeolian Islands and eastern Sicily, as a probable



**Fig. 4: Complete jug decorated with three superimposed orders of zig-zag.**

result of contacts between the various areas, with the circulation of ideas and models. However, the decorative motifs that appear are those typical of SIP pottery.

They have a flattened globular body, a raised handle at the top and a sloping tubular spout set on the shoulder or at the point of maximum diameter; in one case there is a knob at the top. Decorative patterns, which appear at the top of the vase above the maximum diameter, include concentric angles, rows of dots, horizontal and vertical zig-zags. One spout is decorated with a chequered pattern, another with a grid. On the shoulder of one sample, within a triangular space, an apparently zoomorphic motif is inscribed, hypothetically interpretable as a stylised bird (**Fig. 2: 1**).

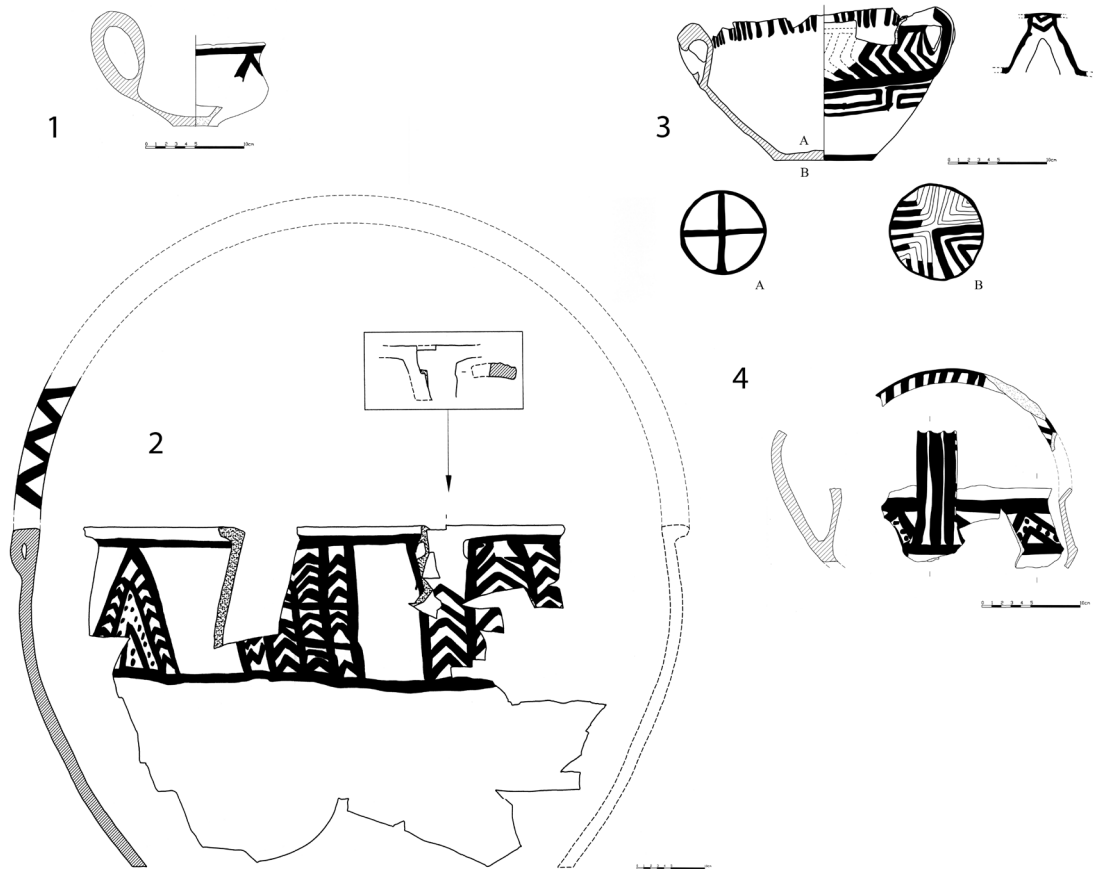
The contexts in which they were found, and their morphological characteristics, suggest that these vessels were used to contain and pour liquids; they are most likely to be part of the fine tableware with dark-on-light decoration, which had progressively replaced Italo-Mycenaean products, apparently also used in ceremonial contexts.

#### OPEN SHAPES

Among open shapes, carinated bowls seem to be more frequently attested than other shapes. They follow the same morphological variability of equivalent shapes in the impasto repertoire, although certain variants that are typical of the FBA2 repertoire at the site seem not to be attested in SIP. This is the case of cups with a separated neck (e.g. MALORGIO – MAGGIULLI 2011, 145, fig. 7: VIII).<sup>5</sup> More broadly, in open shapes the handle tends to be vertical but realised in different ways with a superimposed high-swung strap or roll handles (**Fig. 5: 1-3**) or smaller and attached to the rim (**Fig. 5: 2**), while a large carinated bowl with a double vertical converging triangular handle (**Fig. 5: 3**) represents a unicum. A high swung roll handle was attached to a dipper that represents the only example of a similar vessel recorded in the SIPG repertoire of Roca (**Fig. 5: 1**).

<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to highlight that it is still possible that some fragments currently interpreted as neck of *olle* with a rim that is not particularly developed, might have actually belonged to examples of similar vessels.

The rim can range from lipless to rounded to everted. Decoration-wise, open shapes tend to be decorated on the central portion of the external body above the carination although in some rare examples the decoration can extend to the stripe below the maximum diameter of the body (**Fig. 5: 3** which represent a unicum endowed with a meander motif virtually non-attested in SIP). The rim is also regularly decorated in a similar way to that of closed shapes.



**Fig. 5:** 1 - Vessel with superimposed high swung strap handles; 2 - Vessel with smaller handles and attached to the rim; 3 - Carinated bowl with a double vertical converging triangular handle; 4 - Vessel with a high swung roll handle attached to a dipper.

#### PITHOI (DOLIA) AND BASINS

Investigations into the levels of occupation of the large huts of FBA2 at Roca have led to the discovery of fragments of *pithoi* (*dolia* in Italian literature) and, to a greater extent, basins decorated with motifs clearly inspired by the repertoire of SIP pottery.<sup>6</sup> However, these FBA2

6 Besides Roca, occasional finds of fragments of painted basins, not always easily distinguishable from *dolia*, are reported at Broglio di Trebisacce (BERGONZI - CARDARELLI 1982, pls. 20: 10, 22: 8; BERGONZI - CARDARELLI 1984, pl. 34: 7; TENAGLIA 1994, 362), Torre Mordillo (BUFFA 2001, 269, fig. 91A), Madonna del Petto (Muntoni 1995, 190, pl. XXIX: 14), and Torre Castelluccia (GORGOLIONE *et al.* 1993, 88-92, pl. XLIX-L); a fragment from an unspecified site in the Materano area is in the Ridola

fragments present some fundamental peculiarities, the main one being the systematic use of a rotatory device in their forming (GUGLIELMINO 1999).

Pithoi are characterised by their large, ovoid shape, with some reaching dimensions exceeding one metre in diameter and a capacity of several hundred litres. The production process, which involved the use of a clay comparable to SIP pottery, was complex and required a high degree of specialisation at all stages of the production cycle. The firing process is believed to have occurred in two distinct stages, preceded by phases of partial drying of the vessel's modelled portion. It is hypothesised that the firing took place in double-chamber kilns of considerable size, which may have differed from those utilised for other figuline ceramic classes. These characteristics are likely to have had a significant impact on the perceived value of the containers. In this respect, this impression is confirmed by the mending/restoration effected on these vessels which sometimes involved the usage of bitumen for waterproofing (GUGLIELMINO 2012; RONCA in press).

These large containers have close morphological affinities with each other. In fact, the same raw materials and techniques were used for the basins, which were geographically less widespread than the pithoi. They are indeed half-pithoi (**Fig. 5: 2**), as they are a faithful reproduction of the shape of the lower part of the dolia. Once the maximum diameter was achieved, a short, thick rim was moulded to complete the shape. The best-preserved finds show that they must have had two or more ribbon-shaped handles set between the rim and the wall.

The dolia of Roca, where this form is most abundantly found, are generally unpainted. Few fragments have been found of those decorated with incised versions of SIP motifs; the most diagnostic and best preserved belongs to the upper part of a vessel and shows traces of a zig-zag decoration on the upper part of the rim.

In contrast to the dolia, basins are not unpainted, but they always have a painted decoration. Sections originating from at least seven specimens have been reconstructed, found in different parts of the settlement. The decorative patterns cover the upper part of the vase and consist of concentric angles, zig-zags, chevrons, rows of large dots. It is of particular interest to note the attestation of a decorative motif, consisting of alternating semicircles and stacked triangles. This decorative pattern is analogous to the Mycenaean motif FM 43, concentric semicircles with a chevron fill (**Fig. 6**).



**Fig. 6:** Motif on a vessel from Roca Vecchia, similar to a version of the late Mycenaean motif FM 43 - concentric semicircles with chevron fill.

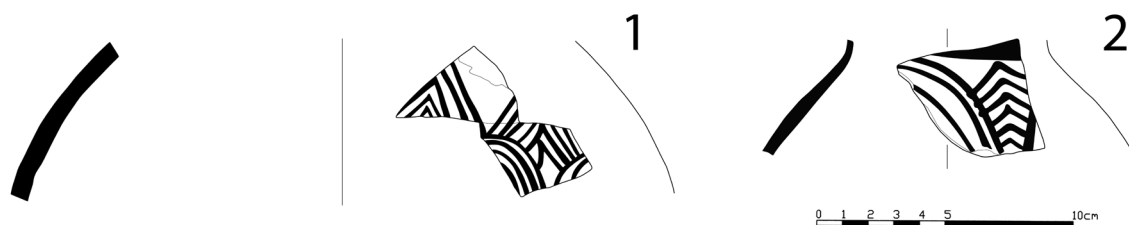
Museum (BIANCO - ORLANDO 1995, 178, fig. 4). Painted basins are attested in Torre Mordillo (BUFFA 2001, 269, fig. 91: B4), Torre Castelluccia (GORGOLIONE *et al.* 1993, 88-92), Punta Meliso (ORLANDO 1990, 12-16), and Otranto (ORLANDO 1994, 222, fig. 9: 4).

## CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER AREAS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The repertoire of SIP has some elements of overlap with coeval productions of late Mycenaean pottery, particularly those attested in the so-called West Mainland Koine. Many parallels have been already identified by Borgna (2013) with the corpus of this pottery known a little more than ten years ago. Within Roca's material, 'Western' influences can also be recognised in the cross-hatched triangles, which compare well with motifs (such as FM 61A) typical of LH IIIC Middle/Late, as well as those on the Protogeometric pottery of areas like the Ionian islands and Achaea (MOUNTJOY 1999, 425, 441; SOUYOUDZOGLOU-HAYWOOD 1999, pl. 18: A1480), while other motifs such as the so-called tremolo (i.e. vertical undulating lines FM53:12) are reminiscent of some versions of panelled patterns (FM 75), more generically datable between LH IIIB and LH IIIC. The special motif (**Fig. 6**) found only on a basin at Roca (see also RONCA 2005, pl. 67, 71) is similar to a version of the late Mycenaean motif FM 43 (concentric semicircles with chevron fill; e.g. MOUNTJOY 1999, 432, no. 109), again distributed primarily (although not exclusively) in Western Greece (e.g. PASCHALIDIS *et al.* 2018, 364, fig. 792: B6, B15), and to this extent it is worth noting that various versions of the same motif are also attested at Roca in the Recent Bronze Age in standard Aegean type pots (**Fig. 7: 1, 7: 2**).

The same is true of other motifs typical of Achaea (and particularly of its western part) such as the elaborated rosette (**Fig. 8: 3, 8: 6**; see MOSCHOS 2009, 288, fig. 40b; RONCA 2005, pl. 49; RONCA 2020, fig. 5), while the herring bone and net pattern (**Fig. 8: 1-2; Fig. 8:4-5**; see MOSCHOS 2009, 288 fig. 40d-e; RONCA 2005, pl. 18, 21) have a slightly wider diffusion within Apulia, but are essentially limited to Salento.

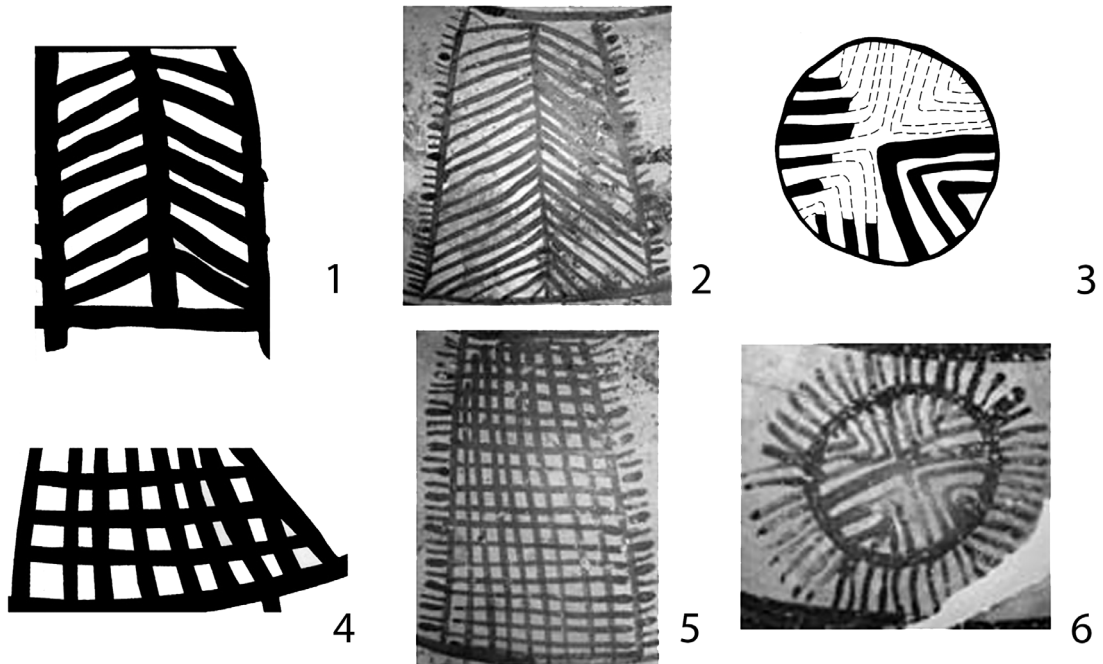
The sporadic emergence of pictorial representations previously mentioned (**Fig. 2: 2-3**) not only at Roca but also at Leuca, see ORLANDO 1997), includes figures and scenes, broadly reminiscent of the Silhouette Style typical of the later part of the LBA in Greece, and which, it has been suggested, were also produced in Achaia (CROUWEL 2009; MOSCHOS 2009).



**Fig. 7: Standard Aegean type productions that present similar motifs as SIP at Roca Vecchia.**

## CONCLUSIONS

The SIP repertoire at Roca Vecchia represents one of the richest assemblages for this kind of material in the whole of southern Italy. Through its lens, it has been possible to identify the peculiar path through which this specialised production has unfolded becoming accepted in southern Italy. Input deriving from both local traditions, and influences from other areas of the Mediterranean contributed to the coming into being of this fine ware. Because of its abundance, the material from Roca showcases features that are non-attested in smaller sets, such as human and animal figures as well as hunting scenes. Such scenes are eminently local



**Fig. 8:** 1-2 - Fish bone motif; 3, 6 - Elaborated rosette; 4-5 - Net motif.

in nature as the Aegean type pottery from southern Italy attests pictorial motifs only at the site of Termito in Basilicata (thus relatively distant from Roca Vecchia and without intermediate findspots). As has been suggested (BORGNA - LEVI 2015), the context of production for SIP is likely to go beyond the sphere of domestic production, and yet, as has been highlighted in the past (IACONO 2019, 191) at least in southeastern Italy, it might be possible that not only local workshops were responsible for the realisation of this pottery but also mobile craftsmen serving multiple locales. This can be suggested on the basis of the tight stylistic similarities as well as of the connection between SIP with dolia for which a model of travelling craftsmen has also been suggested. Only further research on the technology of this class of pottery might be able in the future to shed light on these questions.

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