

LUXURY IN RED: EXPLORING FINE RED BURNISHED WARES IN MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN CERAMIC PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

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XIV Congress on Medieval and Modern Period
Mediterranean Ceramics of AIECM3
Ravenna, 18-23 November, 2024



The Armenian Highlands, strategically located at the crossroads of East and West, played a pivotal role in facilitating cultural exchanges. During the High Middle Ages, a distinctive cultural synthesis developed through these interactions, merging the finest traditions of various ceramic centers. Prominent Armenian production centers, such as Dvin and Ani, emerged as leading hubs of ceramic craftsmanship, rivaling the major ceramic productions of the Middle East.

This poster explores a distinctive type of Armenian medieval ceramics within the framework of ceramic production and technology, notable for its unique technological features and consumption patterns. These ceramics consist of fine pottery with surfaces coated in red slip (including tints of brown) and burnished to a gloss. This technological tradition has roots in Armenian ceramic production since the Early Bronze Age and was highly prevalent during the Urartian (9th-7th cc. BCE) and Classical periods. Beginning in the 10th century, this type of fine ware became common, continuing the traditions of earlier periods.

Map source: Google Earth (modified by author).



Fig. 1 - 10-11th century red burnished tablewares, featuring also various decorative techniques. Dvin, Ani, Yeghegis.

Initially produced as bespoke items for wealthy elites during the 10th-11th cc., production expanded in the 12th-14th cc. to include a broader range of wares, such as storage jars, cooking pots, and oil lamps (Fig. 1). This shift reflects changes in social dynamics and consumer preferences. These luxurious tableware items were widely distributed across Armenia and neighboring regions, including Georgia and Azerbaijan, but their use remained confined within the Caucasus borders.



Fig. 2 - 11-13th cc. stamped pithoi. Dvin, Ani, Metsamor.

Within the group of red burnished wares, a distinctive type of pithoi (*karas*) was identified, used as tableware during feasts (Fig. 2). Dating to the 12th-14/15th centuries, these vessels maintained their basic shapes and decorative styles, though later examples show modifications and less artistic refinement. The stamped belts are adorned with depictions of animals - such as goats, deer, wolves, lions, birds, and camels - alongside human figures, plants, and geometric patterns. These decorations were created by rolling cylindrical stamps or applying round stamps for rosette imprints.

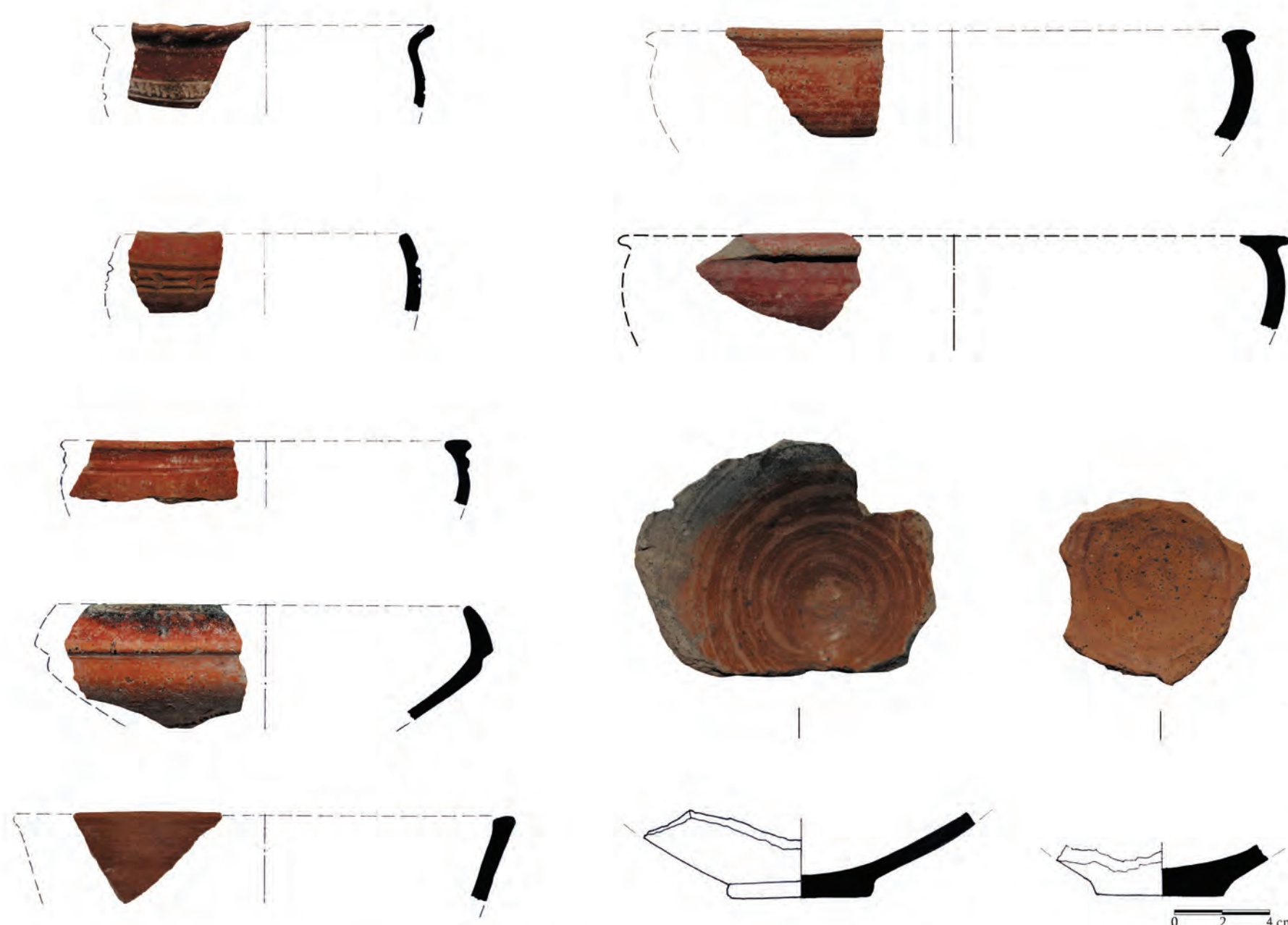


Fig. 3 - 12-14th cc. bowls from different medieval sites.

Notably, a particular type of red burnished pottery prevalent in Vayots Dzor region during the 13th-15th cc. resembles pottery from Urartian period, suggesting a continuity of local ceramic traditions. This ware type accounts for 30-40% of the findings of sites in Vayots Dzor, based on data from the VDSRS project, compared to just 10-12% in contemporary sites from other regions of Armenia (Fig. 3).

Red burnished wares from Vayots Dzor encompass a range of vessels, including everyday tableware and large-sized items like jars, jugs, cooking pots, and basins. A distinctive feature is the morphological variation in bowl shapes; alongside the common hemispherical forms seen elsewhere, the Vayots Dzor assemblages include strongly carinated profiles (Fig. 4). Importantly, the prevalence and quality of this ceramic type in Vayots Dzor, suggests a localized taste that influenced production, contrasting with imported and locally produced glazed pottery. This supports the conclusion that local production corresponded to the local "taste" and was compatible with the "imported taste", especially expressed in glazed wares.

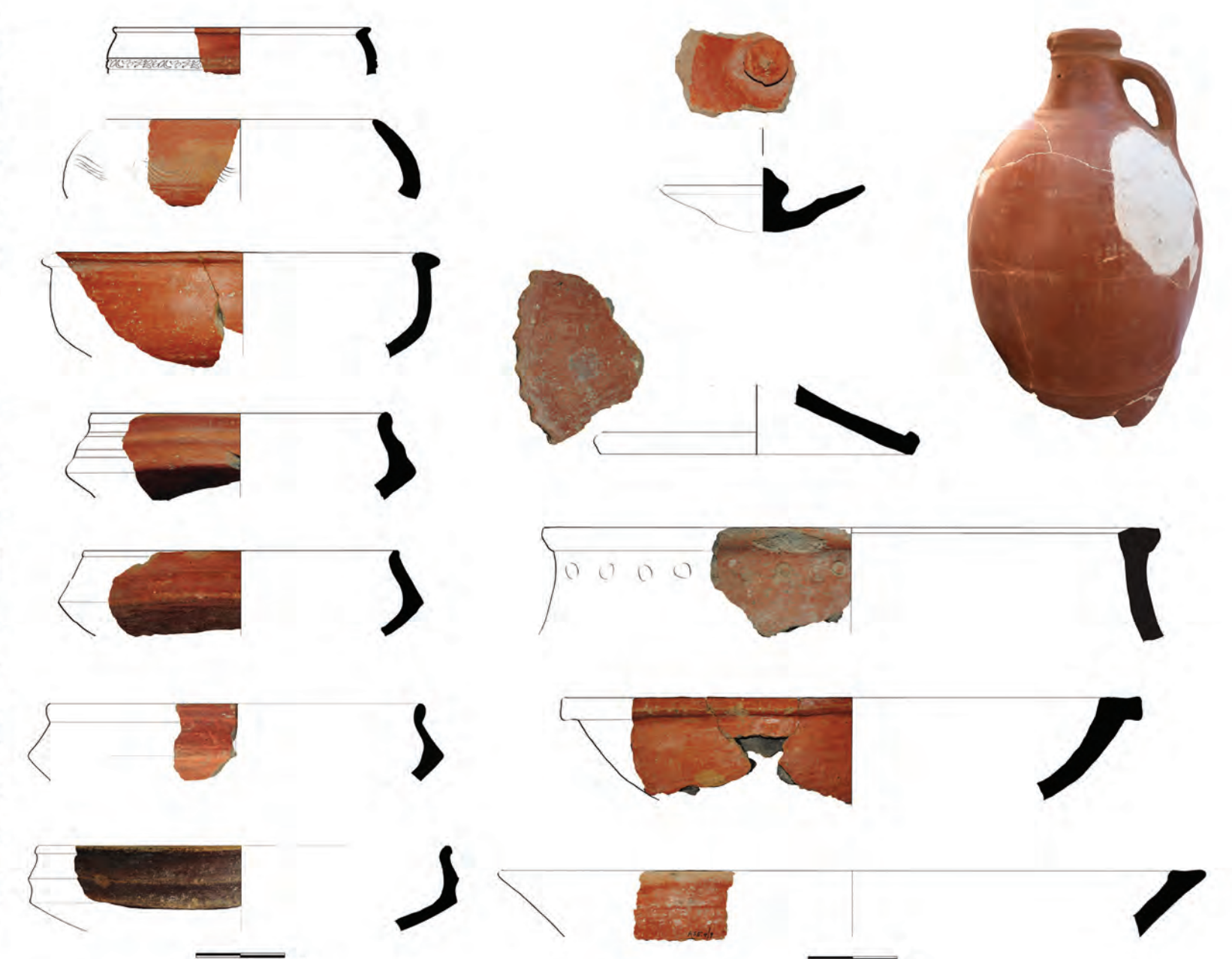


Fig. 4 - 13-15th cc. Vayots Dzor style red burnished wares.

By analyzing archaeological findings, this discussion offers new insights into the role of ceramics in shaping material culture, social identities, and cultural exchanges in medieval Armenia, highlighting the nuanced relationship between local production, consumer preferences, and broader social dynamics.

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This presentation is made possible with the support of Hovnanian Family Foundation.