

# A ceramic workshop for the production of LR 1 and LR 2 amphoras in Northern Greece

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The purpose of this study is to present a ceramic workshop unearthed during a rescue excavation in 2020 in the Palaiokastro region of Oraiokastro, approximately 25 km west of Thessaloniki, in the countryside of the Thermaic Gulf hinterland. Palaiokastro is situated at the foothills of the western part of Mt. Hortiatis, a short distance from the Gallikos River (Echedoros). The excavation on the Tziogli plot revealed several Iron Age graves and, unexpectedly, an early Byzantine ceramic workshop with at least two circular updraft ceramic kilns, occupying an area of at least 55 m<sup>2</sup> (fig. 2).

## Architectural remains

Three mudstone walls were unearthed, resting on the natural soil and angled to the east, forming Π-shaped masonry that defined an open-air courtyard area (fig. 2) with both kilns at the edges. Kiln 1 was located to the west (fig. 3). Only the footprint of its firing chamber and stoking channel is preserved, containing clay parts from its ruined walls (figs. 3-4).

Kiln 2 is situated at the angle of the walls to the east. It was built at floor level (fig. 4). The walls of its combustion and firing chambers are constructed of rubble stones bound together with numerous amphora sherds and clay. On its upper surface, a series of flat schist stones probably supported the upper domed part. No internal support was traced. In the firing chamber, large stones attached to the walls protruded along the two sides, perhaps forming a rough bench to support the perforated floor and confine the hearth. The stoking channel, with a series of flat stones on either side, was located in its western part. Small parts of rough clay and bricks in its inner filling probably belong to its vaulted roof. The stokehole was placed on its western side so that the same craftsman could stoke both kilns simultaneously.

The working space/courtyard during the production process was used as a refuse dump where hundreds of burned sherds were found. Two fragmentary LR2 amphorae were discovered in situ, cemented into the natural soil with lime mortar around their periphery and inner surface. A third amphora was found a little further to the north. They likely served for mortar storage, suitable for repairing defective products with lead joints (fig. 5). A set of iron knives was revealed close to Kiln 1 (fig. 6).

## Products

This workshop specialized in the production of LR 1 and LR 2 transport amphoras. From Kiln 1, an LR 1 amphora and a hybrid neckless storage vessel with horizontal handles imitating the LRA 2 type amphora, with a graffito on the shoulder (figs. 7-10), were found. From Kiln 2, an LR 2 amphora was reconstructed (figs. 11-12).

## Date

Based on the numismatic data, including a bronze nummus of Emperor Arcadius and a fragmentary lamp from the 6th century, it is likely that this workshop functioned from the first half of the 5th century until the early 6th century. It was then destroyed and abandoned during the invasions of the Avars and Slavs from the north.

## Discussion

This workshop lies a short distance from a fortified housing unit, an agricultural complex (farmstead) of a wealthy landowner in the suburbs of Thessaloniki, protected by a strong enclosure and a square tower (fig. 13). It comprised a peristyle courtyard with a well, a luxurious triclinium with mosaics, a bath with a praefurnium, a large storeroom with many pithoi in situ, and a wine press.

This farm-complex likely controlled the regional cultivable fields where olive trees and vineyards still grow today. Its owner exploited the fertile land, controlled the local inhabitants, and produced agricultural products, probably both wine and oil, as indicated by the manufacture of two types of local amphoras.

The Oraiokastro workshop adds an important production center to the historical map of the Aegean early Byzantine commercial network. Its location, a short distance from Via Egnatia—a strategically significant road running from the Adriatic coasts through northern Greece to the Bosphorus—is crucial for its potential marketability. Via Egnatia, apart from serving military needs, also facilitated the trade of various goods along its route.



Fig. 1. The workshop's location



Fig. 2. Plan of the workshop



Fig. 3. Kiln 1



Fig. 4. Kiln 2



Fig. 5. The cemented amphoras



Fig. 6. A set of iron knives

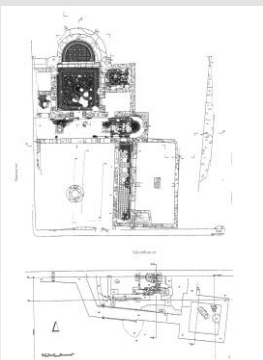


Fig. 13. Plan of Palaiokastro villa rustica

## The workshop's Products



Fig. 7. LRA 1 amphora from Kiln 1



Fig. 9. Storage vessel from Kiln 1



Fig. 11. LR 2 amphora from Kiln 2

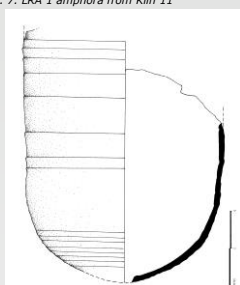


Fig. 8. LRA 1 amphora from Kiln 1

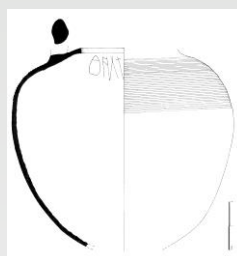


Fig. 10. Storage vessel from Kiln 1

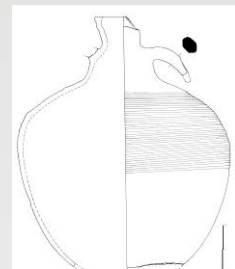


Fig. 12. LR 2 amphora from Kiln 2