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Stamped pottery from Tigranakert in Artsakh

Armine Gabrielyan

The stamped pottery is of great significant for the research of the material culture of the antique (1st century BC - 3rd century CE) period of Tigranakert city in Artsakh, former Nagorno-Kharabakh Autonomous Region. It is distinguished by the variety of forms and styles, including coloured, black, white, polished, stamped, and decorative carved examples.¹ The present article aims at presenting diverse traits of the stamped type pottery in Tigranakert.

Distinctive examples of the stamped pottery decorated with interior 'clusters' from this site include cups, drinking vessels, bowls, and goblet fragments (Figure 1/1-9, 11). They come from the citadel (hereafter Cit.), northern fortification wall (hereafter NFW), and 'Antique district' (hereafter AntD). We call these vessels cluster-bearing, due to the conical, stamped designs with sharp bottoms and small circles inside that are most probably representations of grape clusters.

The vessels, as a rule, are black and very polished. Where the sherds are broken, the clay is grey, homogeneous, well-refined and blended, and evenly baked. The baking was done mainly in a restorative anoxis baking environment.² In order to make the exterior of some of the vessels reflective following this process, leather, wooden, or stone polishers were used twice. A diorite polisher was found along with a cluster-bearing vessel fragment in the Late Hellenistic layer of the antique district (Tigr. 2013, AntD/87).

An analysis of over thirty examples of cluster-bearing vessels reveal that the craftsmen of antiquity utilised at least nine stampers in order to create the conical clusters that contain from three to eleven grapes that are arranged in different ways (for example, in the case of six or eight circles). In a few cases, clusters that contain the same number of grapes have arranged them in different ways. However, despite the diverse samples noted above, there have been no pottery stampers discovered. It is possible to picture what they looked like based on their depiction in famous

¹Gabrielyan 2017: 372-383.

²The petrographic analysis was done by the late Alla Mnatsakanyan, leading researcher of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia's Institute of Geological Sciences in 2013. We used her handwritten calculations.

Western antique monuments. In order to be utilised comfortably, the stampers had long handles, which sometimes had one or two carved usable ends (Figure 2/1-2).³ The stamped designs were made while the clay was still in a moist, soft state.

Horizontal stripes are found 1.5-2 cm below the inner lip of the polished, black vessels around the perimeter of the vessel and 1.5 cm apart, with the stamped clusters between them running horizontally and equidistantly all the way around. Sometimes two rows of cluster-bearing rows can be found in the same vessel. In these cases, the first row is located very close to the lip of the vessel, as in the case of one of the drinking vessels (Figure 1/3). The second cluster-bearing rows are located near the base of the vessel, underlining the bottom. In some samples, the lip of the vessel is underlined with a very soft, carved stripe (Tigr. 2012, AntD/11, 14, 19, 25, 34, 84, 103, etc.). There are also examples where the lip is shaped into the form of a rivulet (Tigr. 2014, AntD/24, Figure 1/5). Generally, the clusters are stamped in a straight row, but there are some vessels where the upper row near the lip is stamped in a staggered fashion in two lines (Tigr. 2011, Cit./73, 2012, AntD/11, Figure 1/4).

In 2017, a unique pottery sample was discovered in the first antique district that differs from the descriptions provided above. It is the final known example of the cluster-bearing group of pottery from Tigranakert (Tigr. 2017, AntD/2, Figure 1/9). Right below the lip of this vessel, within two stripes that run horizontally around the perimeter are stamps of leaves in a line (either grape or ivy leaves). Below that is a row with the aforementioned cluster-stamped design. Unfortunately, only one half of one of the clusters is preserved, with the sharp end of the conical design pointing upwards. It seems as though the craftsmen here deviated from the design of the others.

The elegant execution of the design of the polished black cluster-bearing vessels, with a dense coating of black salve and polished, leaving a lacquered impression, gives these vessels a unique beauty. This implies that they were made for a particular purpose. While most of the samples are glossy, some of them are dull and unpolished. On the latter vessels, the clusters are somewhat carelessly stamped, causing the grapes to be unclear. The surface of one goblet found in the antique district is so damaged that the layer of black polish has been completely worn away. This cluster-bearing vessel's worn surface and the existence of a hole near the bottom show that the vessel was used for a long time and was repaired during that time (Figure 1/6).

Only open containers that were intended to be used for liquid/wine consumption were stamped with clusters. The cluster-bearing goblets and cups speak to the fact that wine-making was already developed in Tigranakert. Other evidence of this includes a multi-cornered platform with a stone-carved pit wine-press discovered during the 2012 excavations on the eastern edge of the fortified district,⁴ the antique wine vessels discovered in every section excavated, coloured amphorae, and hundreds of goblet fragments, an elegant hanger of blue glass with grape cluster designs discovered in the antique first district (Tigr. 2017, AntD/1, Figure 1/10), as well as the remnants

³Corbett 1955: 173, Figure 1; Vernhet 1991: 23.

⁴Petrosyan *et al.* 2015: 88, Figure 44.

of smoked grape seeds (*Vitis vinifera*), which, after analyses, reveal that at least two types of grapes were harvested in Tigranakert, technical and table grapes.⁵ In this way, the cluster-bearing vessels of Tigranakert were created in formal, functional and ornamental unity.

Besides Tigranakert, no cluster-bearing vessel from this period has been excavated in Armenia.⁶ This fact, as well as the vast number of vessels from Tigranakert described above, together with the discovery of the diorite polisher along with one of them, leads us to the conclusion that the aforementioned polished black vessels were produced there. Another fact that supports this idea is that the results of the petrographic analysis reveal that the raw materials used to create the polished black vessels can be found in the surrounding area. According to A. Mnatsakanyan, it is possible to suppose that the raw materials used in the pottery came from the volcanic debris located to the west of Tigranakert in Karvachar (Lerkasar, Satanakar, Sevkar, etc.).⁷

Classical examples of interiorly stamped clay pottery are known from the Greco-Roman world from the 5th-4th centuries BC onwards.⁸ As a rule, they were stamped on black-varnished vessels - *kylixes*, *skyphoi*, *kantharoi* as well as on open vessels, the known motives of which were ovals, palmetes, lotus, rarely meanders, olive branches, ivy leaves and fruits.⁹ However, cluster-bearing pictures are not known among these examples.

During the 3rd century BC in the Hellenistic centres, we find good quality examples of glossy, black lacquer vessels. From the 2nd century BC, the quality of the black lacquer begins to decline and in its place we find brown or greenish-grey. At the turn of the 1st century CE, they are replaced with a red lacquer.¹⁰

Local imitations of classical black lacquer vessels were widespread in Transcaucasia in the 2nd-1st centuries BC. They disappear completely from the archaeological record in the first few centuries of CE.¹¹ G. Narimanishvili ties their appearance in Georgia to the Armenian king Artashes I's (189-160 BC) policy of expansion.¹² Y. Gagoshidze and G. Narimanishvili (following the former) find that the black polished pottery are of Phrygian origin, reaching Georgia as a result of migrations.¹³ Thus, there are no local fragments related to the pottery under discussion that have been unearthed in Georgia.¹⁴

⁵Petrosyan *et al.* 2015: 92. The archaeobotanical study was realised by Dr. Roman Hovsepian.

⁶The only known exception is a fragment unearthed in 2016 in Aghitu. According to the excavating archaeologist, Mkrtich Zardaryan, it was possibly imported from Tigranakert. We are very thankful to M. Zardaryan for providing us with this information.

⁷According to the results of the petrographic analysis done by A. Mnatsakanyan (manuscript).

⁸Talcott 1935: 476-523; Corbett 1955: 172-186; Hellström 1965: Plates 5-7.

⁹Corbett 1955: 172-186; Chechulina 2016: 58.

¹⁰Blavatskij 1953: 25-26, 241.

¹¹Gagoshidze 1979: 121; Narimanishvili 1991: 9, 86-87.

¹²Narimanishvili 1991: 86-87.

¹³Gagoshidze 1979: 121; Narimanishvili 1991: 86-87.

¹⁴As per a conversation with Yulon Gagoshidze (April 2018).

Black polished pottery of the Hellenistic period made with dark clay have been found in the Bosphorus, both in Greek and local settlements. I. Brashinski believes that these vessels were imported as a result of international trade.¹⁵

Black lacquer, cluster-bearing complete goblets in the style of those of Tigranakert have been discovered in Azerbaijan's Aghjabadi region, 40 km to the east of Tigranakert during the excavations of the cemetery of the Garakyobar (6th-1st centuries BC). While they are similar to the examples from Tigranakert in their form and details, the absence of any photos or drawings make it difficult to compare them with the pottery discussed here. According to F. Osmanov, similar stamped goblets are often found at Aghjabedi, as well as at other cemeteries of the Mil-Kharabakh steppe region in the Hellenistic period. Sadly, the researcher does not note the specific sites he is referring to. Comparing these discoveries to the Greek settlements north of the Black Sea, mainly the aforementioned pottery and that found at Nympei, the cluster-bearing goblets of Aghjabadi have been dated to the mid to late 5th century BC.¹⁶

Taking into account the fact that imitative examples of Tigranakert's antique pottery have been discovered at the site Garakyobar in Aghjabadi (richly decorated colourful pot-like vessels with nozzles, a few types of bowls decorated with horizontal lines, etc.), we consider the black polished goblets discovered in Aghjabadi to be exports from Tigranakert and the result of trade.

Summarising the results of these analyses, we can conclude that:

1. Since the production of black polished pottery entailed more complicated technology and significant effort, they were perhaps more expensive and highly regarded. This probably explains the fact that fewer examples of black and grey pottery (9 %) have been unearthed from Tigranakert of those have been discovered, compared to red-pink (75 %) and yellow-brown (16 %).¹⁷
2. Standard, beautifully polished, high quality cluster-bearing vessels, in all probability were owned by the elite. Plain, dull, somewhat carelessly prepared ones were owned by the lower classes. Since cluster-bearing vessels have been unearthed in nearly every room of Tigranakert's antique district, it leaves the impression that they were of great importance to every class of the population. People of various social classes had to have a vessel of this type.
3. The black polished cluster-bearing pottery of Tigranakert are local imitations of classical black lacquer pottery. However, the depictions on them are local – no depictions of grape clusters have been found on pottery unearthed at sites in any other regions.
4. It can be considered a possibility that this was a type of pottery that had a specific ritualistic function.

The next group of Tigranakert's stamped pottery are those vessel fragments with a light red-pink ochre hue. The first example of this group is a vessel bottom that

¹⁵ Brashinskij 1980: 71-73.

¹⁶ Osmanov 2006: 69-75.

¹⁷ These statistics are according to the results of the 2015 and 2018 archaeological analyses.

is yellowish-brown, dull, and made of clay mixed with a small amount of sand. It is made up of two fragments that were excavated in the same location in different years (Tigr. 2015, NFW/10 and Tigr. 2017, NFW/27). Three trees or leaves have been stamped between concentric circles that run around the centre of the bottom to the edge. The depiction is made up of curved lines coming of an oval (Figure 2/4-5).

Another piece of pottery with this stamp has been discovered in the antique first district (Tigr. 2014, AntD/48). It is a fragment of the top of a closed vessel, light reddish-pink, and made of well-formed and evenly baked clay mixed with some sand. There is an evenly-spaced pattern of wedges carved from the neck to the opening. Below this a portion of the oval-shaped stamp of either a tree or a leaf facing downward is preserved (Figure 2/3). The surface features and especially the stamped patterns of these vessels are known from the Late Hellenistic layer of Nimrud in Northern Mesopotamia and dated to the 2nd century BC. Specifically, there is a three-knobbed large crock (H=56,5 cm, dated to 145-140 BC) with a lip decorated with a wavy design, with the top having circles that contain stamped designs horizontally in three lines and a protuberant row. Below the protuberant row, near where the top meets the vessel, is a row containing the stamps of the tree or leaf all the way around horizontally.¹⁸ Similar to the example from Tigranakert, there is a pink coloured bowl of excellent quality with a decorated lip with a row containing a carved patterned wedge design from the late Hellenistic layer at Nimrud (D=27, 2 cm).¹⁹

Examples of stamped pottery have been found in abundance at the site of Jiga Tepe in Bactria, in the III-IV horizons, which have been dated to the 3rd-4th centuries CE.²⁰ Most of the examples of closed vessels from Jiga Tepe also have horizontal stamped rows without strict boundaries and with various designs on their outside surfaces (leaves/trees, rosettes, with three branches. In general, the shoulders of the amphorae were stamped, or the wide area. The first motif, the tree, which is the most common, is sometimes interpreted as an ear of grain. G. Pugachenkova interprets it as a Greco-Bactrian palmette and notes that stamped pottery becomes very widespread in Bactria, especially on the pottery of the Kushan-Sassanian period.²¹

A bulla with four stamps of a tree or leaf very similar to the ones found at Tigranakert was unearthed at the excavations of the old Parthian capital of Hecatompylos (Qumis, Iran). A. Bivar dates it between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century CE.²²

As we noted above, the stamped palmette was a preferred and favorite motif of the classical Greco-Roman world.²³ In all probability, the tree or leaf stamped vessels are local imitations of late Hellenistic or Parthian pottery.

Some of the excavated pieces contain signs that are difficult to compare with depictions of animals or plants. They are stamped at different points on the vessels.

¹⁸ Oates and Oates 1957: Plate XXVII/4; Mallowan 1966: 307, Figure 296.

¹⁹ Mallowan 1966: 306, Figure 295.

²⁰ Pugachenkova 1979: 85-87, Figures 22-23.

²¹ Pugachenkova 1979: 85.

²² Bivar 1982: 161-176, Figure 6/ E4.

²³ Corbett 1955: 172-186; Chechulina 2016: 58.

The first example is a square stamp on the handle of a light reddish-pink vessel (Tigr. 2009, Cit./29) that consists of three straight lines in a caged pattern (Figure 3/3-4).

It is known that the handles of amphorae that were made for trading purposes were stamped. A few dozen amphorae with stamped handles that came from Rhodes (2nd-1st centuries BC), Kos (1st century BC – 1st century CE), Heraclea Pontica (1st-2nd centuries CE), and Athens (3rd-4th centuries CE) have been discovered at the surface and during excavations of the site of Artashat.²⁴ A handle with a square stamp of a depiction of a dog has been found at Avan (2nd century BC – 1st century CE).²⁵

Large wine jars decorated with stamped rows have been excavated at the site of Yervandashat in Armavir province of the Republic of Armenia in a wine storage area dated to the antique period.²⁶

The next example from Tigranakert is a reddish-pink fragment of a closed vessel that has a stamped relief (Tigr. 2014, NFW/26). The design has been stamped on a separate piece of clay that was placed on the vessel while it was still wet (Figure 3/4) This pottery was widely utilised in Bactria in the Kushan period.²⁷ A similarly stamped relief with a related motif was found on a nozzle fragment of spouted vessel unearthed at Tigranakert's northern fortification wall (Tigr. 2015, NFW/24, Figure 3/6).

A few more examples of signs have been found on the rims of wine jars unearthed in the past few years. The first one is a stamp impression of a rosette (Tigr. 2016, NFW/11 Figure 3/1). The second is a relief in the centre of the stamp, which is a schematic depiction of a vessel (Tigr. 2016, NFW/9, Figure 3/2).

These types of stamps may have been the personal signature of the craftsman. However, due to the small number of such examples, it is impossible to be certain.

Pottery with an abundance of stamped decorations was very common in the Urartian period. Regarding decorative stamps on Urartian vessels, F. Ter-Martirosov states that they may not have referred to the potter, but may have been symbols of particular gods of the Urartian pantheon.²⁸ As we noted above, there are a few other known examples of stamped pottery from other Hellenistic period sites in Armenia (Artashat, Avan, Yervandashat). In this context, the stamped pottery of Tigranakert is of prime importance. It reveals essential evidence regarding the trade and cultural contacts of the city, local cultural innovations, and the cultural role Tigranakert played in the region.

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²⁴ Zardaryan 1977: 270-271.

²⁵ Demirkhanyan 2010: 18, Plates 26/2, 63/1.

²⁶ Gabrielyan 2015: 117-131, Figures 11-12.

²⁷ Pugachenkova 1979: 85.

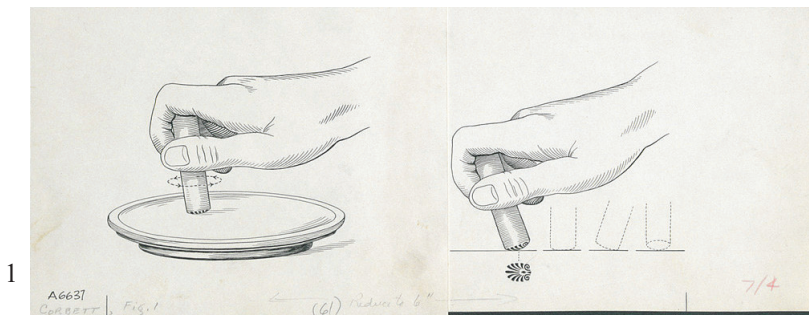
²⁸ Ter-Martirosov 2009: 127-145.

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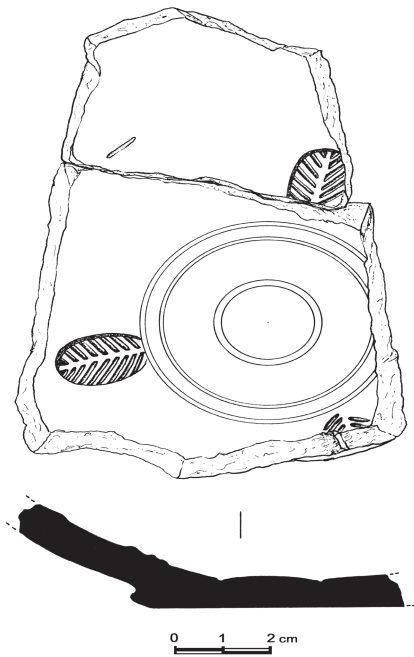
Figure 1.



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Figure 2.

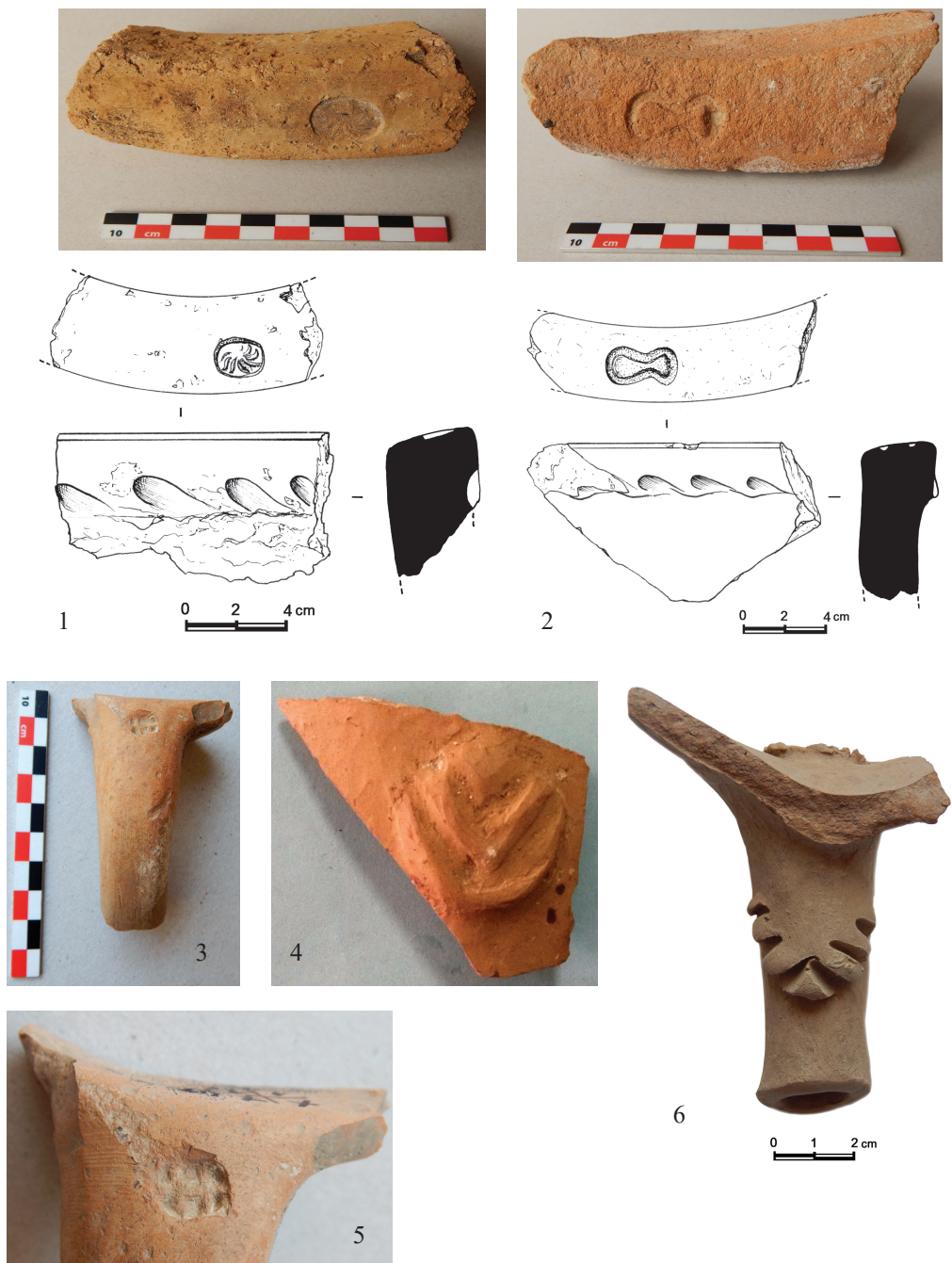


Figure 3.