

Investigating ceramic differences during the early Neolithic in the south-eastern of Albania: the settlements of Podgori and Pogradec



Archaeology

Keywords: early Neolithic, south-east Albania, Pogradec ceramic, Podgori ceramic, chronology, cultural groups.

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Abstract

The underwater research and test excavations carried out in the western side of the Lake Ohrid introduce new evidences of prehistoric settlements from Neolithic to late Bronze Age. The new data and the pottery assemblage obtained from the test excavations in Pogradec suggest its occupation during the late phase of the Neolithisation process. The calibrated dates from Pogradec (southern coast of Lake Ohrid) and Podgori (Korça basin) provide approximate rating, showing that these two sites are almost contemporary. On the other hand, the study of ceramics does not support the apparent similarities. This paper attempts to revise the chronological sequence of these settlements throughout the Neolithisation process, by reviewing the pottery main characteristics.

Introduction

A considerable number of early Neolithic settlements have been discovered almost in the entire territory of Albania. The calibrated dates and the cultural material provide a relative chronology of early Neolithic period dating from 6,400 to 5,600 BC.

The studies of early Neolithic in Albania have been mostly based on the pottery examination and classification: its typology, decoration and morphology.

The multidisciplinary studies and radiocarbon dates of the early Neolithic period are obtained initially from the excavations in the Konispol cave¹ and lately from the excavations in the settlements of Vashtëmi² and the Blaz, Nezir and Këputa caves³. Coring provides new evidences about radiocarbon datings (¹⁴C) from Podgori, Rajcë and Pogradec⁴.

In order to obtain more data about the early Neolithic site of Pogradec, for the first time a test excavation was conducted in 2016⁵. The calibrated dates from this excavation are not yet available.

The goal of this article will be to analyse the ceramic from Pogradec and Podgori. Both sites are in close proximity in terms of geographical position and absolute chronology (Fig.1). The calibrated samples from Podgori confirm two dates: 6000 BC and 5600 BC; the carbon samples

¹ Petrusso *et al.* 1994.

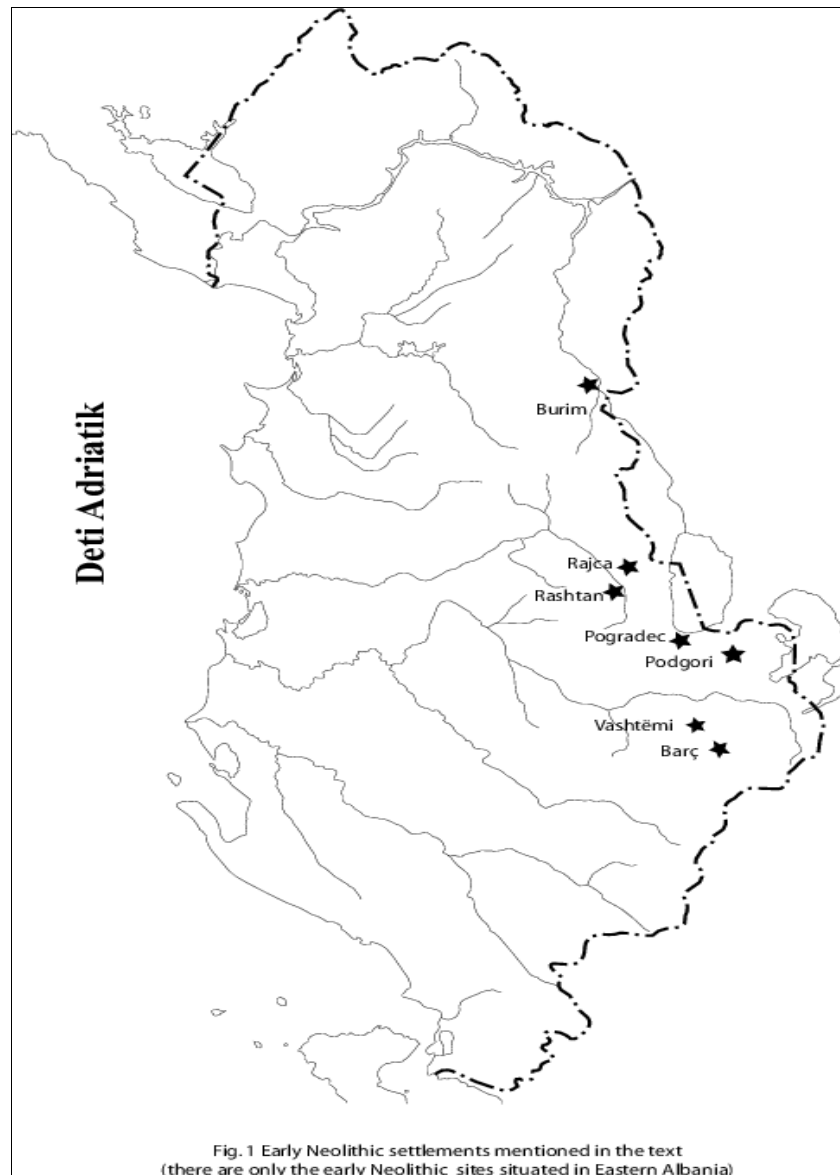
² Allen, Gjipali, 2013, p. 37-53.

³ Richter *et al.* 2014, p. 73-75; Hauck *et al.* 2016, p. 114-115.

⁴ Allen, Gjipali 2014, p. 109; Gjipali 2016, *in press*.

⁵ Andoni *et al.* *in press*.

from Pogradec also provide two dates: 6000 BC and 5800 BC⁶. However, the study of pottery suggests the possibility that these sites do not fit into the same chronological sequence.



1. The early Neolithic settlement of Pogradec

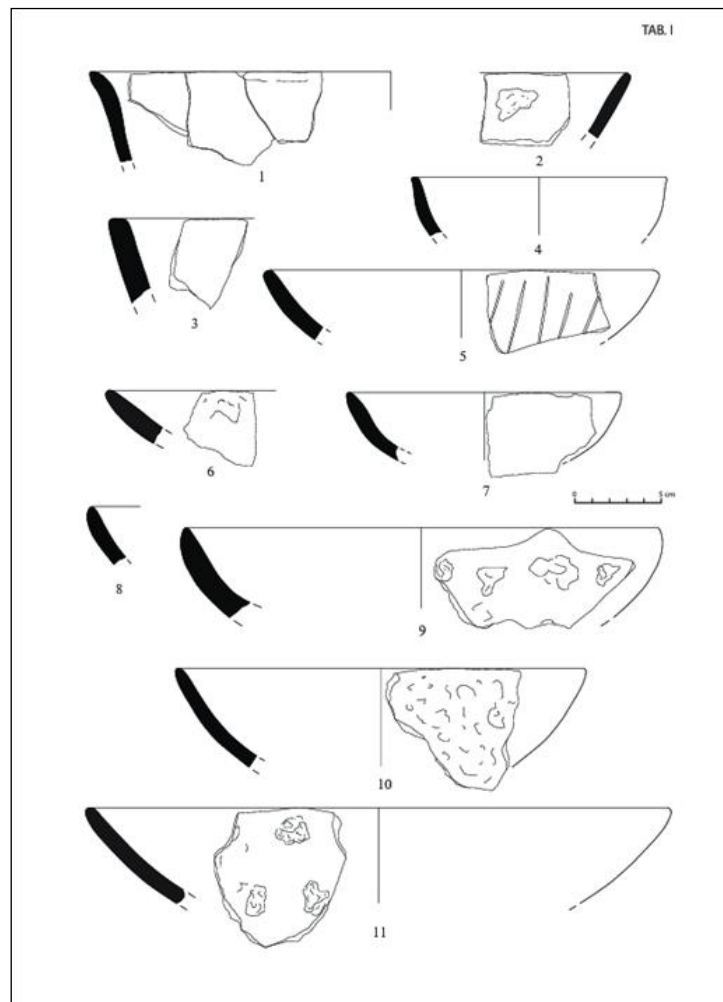
A large number of potsherds were found in the cultural stratum of about two meters deep. The typology and decorative system of pottery reveals a distinct phase during the early Neolithic for this site.

The dark brown engobe pottery, which is present since the establishment of the site, take the place of the classical red monochrome: only few sherds represent the red monochrome pottery.

⁶ Gjipali, Allen 2013, p. 40.

The ceramic develops the typical round forms of the early Neolithic, presenting also a scarce number of carinated forms. The most represented types are the unrestricted cups and bowls (Tab. I, 1-11) and the neck jars. The barbotine surface treatment is present in various types of vessels, even on the bowls with flaring walls that resemble more to the plates (Tab. 2, 6, 9-11). Vessels usually have flat bases. The handles mostly represent big knobs, pierced horizontally or vertically.

The pottery in the settlement of Pogradec is not diverse in decoration categories. The barbotine constitutes the mostly used surface treatment and is the main feature of the pottery. About 1/5 of all the ceramic assemblage consists on barbotine surface. It can be found with all its styles since the establishment of the site. Among the impressed decoration vessels only the fingernails or finger pinching have been identified. The impressed motives are dense and organized in vertical rows. Vessels with plastic decoration are represented by using line sections and small rounded section. The incised decoration consists in deep parallel lines covering the surface of the sherd (Tab. I, 5).



2. The early Neolithic settlement of Podgori⁷

The ceramic shows a very good quality since in the beginning of deposit layer; it is usually red slipped, highly burnished and sometimes sheen or matte. The red monochrome category is prevalent until the end of the settlement.

It is certain that the pottery of the settlement of Podgori provides all the features of the early Neolithic ceramic. The round shapes and the design syntax rank this settlement in a very close cultural analogy with the most represented cultures of early Neolithic in the Balkans.

The restricted bowls are the most common type (Tab. II, 3, 5-6, 9-10). Hole-mouthed jars are another representative type coming after the restricted bowls, less preferred for painting; these forms are mostly preferred for *impresso* decoration. This type is present all over the cultural layer. Neck cups and neck jars (with not very long necks) constitute the third type after the hole-mouthed jars. This type presence increases during the last levels of the cultural deposit.

The bowls and cups (unrestricted forms) with flaring walls are less preferred in Podgori. The plates and the vessel of S-profile, have a limited use.

Bases are ring-shaped, slightly convex at the bottom (Tab. II, 7). All other types of bases of the early Neolithic are also found, but in a limited quantity. Three and four legs base examples, known by Anzabegovo-Vršnik cultural group⁸, also exist in Podgori.

The vessel knobs and the pierced lugs are not very common (Tab. II, 2).

The red monochrome ceramic is very diverse, not only for the style and the composition of the painting, but also for the polychrome painted category (Tab. II, 4, 8, 11). The latter is an important and differential element in comparison to the settlements of early Neolithic in the Balkans, where this category of ceramic has been classified to the late early Neolithic (SC IIIb or spiraloid A)⁹. Both, polychrome category and the white on red are found from the earliest levels of the cultural deposits until the decline of the settlement, but the polychrome do not have the quantity of white on red. The white on red slipped is the most representative painted category in Podgori (Tab. II, 1-3, 5-7, 9-10). The motives are mostly solid and linear. The white on black is also present. The monochrome black slipped is very well burnished and shiny.

The *impresso* decoration is the second most frequent surface treatment after the painted one. The impression made by an instrument is more frequent than that with nail or fingernail

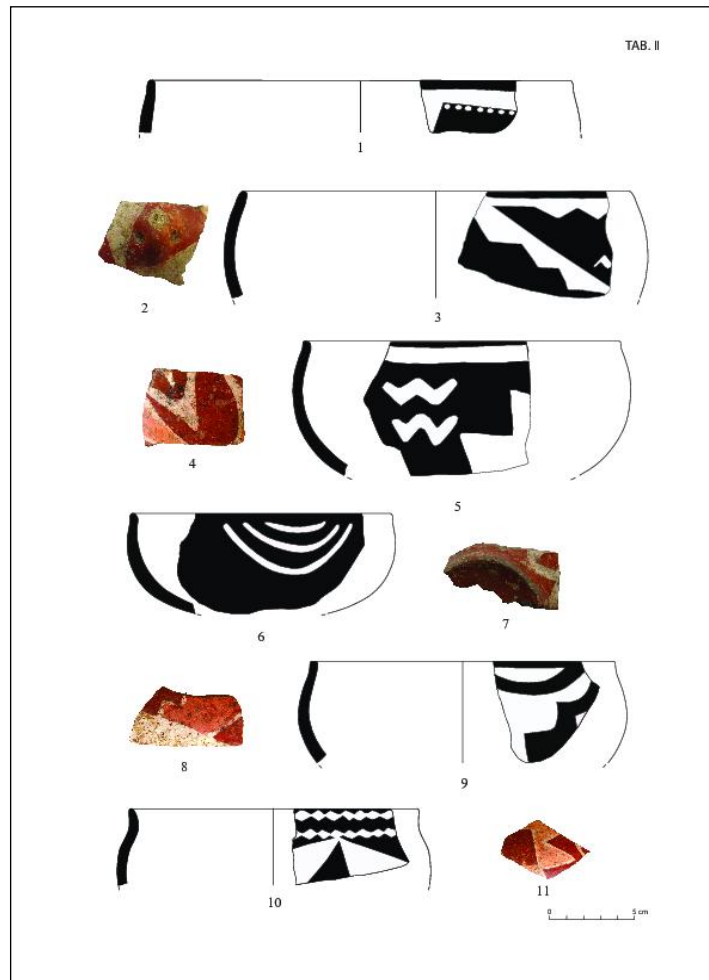
⁷ There are only summery publications about the settlement of Podgori, especially about the ceramic assemblage: Prendi 2008, p. 827-842; Korkuti 2010, p. 45-53; Prendi, Bunguri 2014, p. 102-127.

⁸ Garašanin 1982, p. 90.

⁹ Angeleski 2011, p. 116.

markings. The impressions cover the surface of vessels and the scratched motives are mostly in vertical lines (very rarely in horizontal).

The barbotine pottery is not present since the earliest levels of the cultural deposit and it is represented by a limited number of sherds. It is not a distinctive category in this settlement. The final levels of the deposit reveal also incised and plastic decorations, which are sporadically represented in the earlier levels.



Discussion

The study of the pottery of Pogradec and Podgori reveal some noticeable differences. These differences consist mostly in the typology and decoration which permit to make some chronological and cultural definitions.

As regarding the pottery of Pogradec the common types as unrestricted bowls and the neck jars are very similar to those of Rajca I¹⁰ and Rashtan¹¹. These settlements have almost the same geographical proximity with Pogradec as with Podgori.

The barbotine styles from Pogradec consist on the same vessel types as in Rajca I. The amount of barbotine sherds from both settlements constitutes approximately 1/5 of all ceramic assemblage. Coring provides 5,700 BC calibrated date for Rajca which matches very well with pottery assemblage. The same similarities of Pogradec and Rajca are noticeable as well in the settlement of Burim¹², particularly the use of the dark brown engobe.

The Pogradec ceramic is very similar with the ceramic of Barç I. The common features consist in the *impresso*, barbotine, carinated forms and the main categories of ceramic. The stratigraphy and the archaeological assemblage date Barç I in the last phase of the early Neolithic, after Vashtëmi and Podgori¹³.

Regarding the geographic-cultural area of early Neolithic, the cultural sequence of the settlements of Pogradec, Rajca, Rashtan and Burim is encountered in the eastern part of Lake Ohrid as well (Fig. 1).

The groups of pottery in the settlements of Zlastrana¹⁴ and Dolvo Trnovo¹⁵ are similar, but they vary from the content of the decoration category: in Zlastrana the *impresso* prevails whereas in Dolno Trnovo is encountered the white on red monochrome.

The ceramic of Pogradec has as many features in common with the early Neolithic in Pelagonia valley, known as Velušina-Porodin cultural group¹⁶, as with that of the east coast of Lake Ohrid. As in Pogradec, Rajca, Rashtan, Burim, it is noticed here as well a limited usage of *impresso* surface treatment compared to the barbotine, the vessel shapes are very similar (some carinated shapes) and the types of pottery as well. Meanwhile, similarities on the far eastern area are encountered with the second phase of Anzabegovo-Vršnik cultural group¹⁷. Despite the similarities in typology and decoration, the ceramic of the cultural groups in Pelagonia and Ovče Pole are distinguished for the painted category and the classical red monochrome.

These categories constitute the main features of the Podgori pottery. The restricted shapes, especially spherical and semi spherical bowls and cups, raised on ring bases are the dominating

¹⁰ Gjipali 1997, pp. 25-57; Gjipali 1999-2000, pp. 29-74.

¹¹ Gjipali 1995, p. 17-53.

¹² Prendi, Andrea 2008, p. 672-676; Bunguri 2010, p. 44-67.

¹³ Lera 1993, p. 18-20.

¹⁴ Kuzman 2016, p. 26-28 (tab. I-III).

¹⁵ Naumov 2016, p. 14.

¹⁶ Simonska, Sanev, 1975, p. 72-82.

¹⁷ Garašanin 1982, p. 87-94; Jakimovski 2008, p. 45-53.

types in the settlement of Podgori. The hole-mouthed jars are as well very used, whereas in Pogradec they are less represented. The neck jars in Pogradec are present during the entire life of the settlement while in Podgori they prevail in a later phase. The most representing vessel bases are the low ring shapes, not frequent in Pogradec where the main types are the flat bases.

The ceramic assemblage of the two sites showing some features in common, which are in fact the main features of the entire early Neolithic period, as well as the C14 datings place the two settlements in a close chronology sequence. However, the fabric of pottery, its decoration varieties and the typology are different in each site. The barbotine which is most used in Pogradec has a restricted use and emerges only in the last cultural sequence in Podgori. Vessels with impressed decoration in Podgori consist mainly by scratching the surface with an instrument rather than the fingernails marking. The red monochrome very well polished and shine, of a very good quality, with their clay composition and fabric, the white on red category and the polychrome one constitute the main physiognomy of Podgori pottery. The cultural relevance of this site is not the purpose of this paper, but it is worth mentioning that its characteristics and all the above mentioned components seem to place it between Vashtëmi and Barç in the Korça plateau, whereas toward the east, in terms of relative chronology, it can be considered between the cultural group of Anzabegovo-Vršnik and Velušina-Porodin.

The types and motives used in painting were not taken into consideration in this paper, but it is important mentioning that they are almost the same, even though their composition differs. In south of Balkan the Podgori ceramic seems to be chronologically close with the early Neolithic phase II and III in Greece.

Conclusions

The ceramic assemblage of these two settlements highlights different cultural development, probably because of their time inconsistency. Regarding only the ceramic, Podgori stands between the cultural groups of Anzabegovo-Vršnik and Velušina-Porodin. Concerning the absolute chronology, Podgori might be as earlier as the actual dating of 6000, showing the classical phase of early Neolithic characterized by the dominance of the red slipped monochrome, painted white on red and polychrome painting. Its design consists in triangles, long and short zigzag segments, dots, wedges, straight and curved lines, etc.

On the other hand, the pottery of Pogradec preserves all features of a final phase of early Neolithic. The vessels with high neck, the category black to dark brown colour, the carinated forms and the barbotine surface treatment, and the other states mentioned above suggest a later date than 6000 BC.

In my opinion, the second dating 5800 BC obtained by the calibrated dates in Pogradec, fits better to the above analysis of the ceramic. Therefore, Pogradec and the settlement of Rajca I belong approximately to the same chronological sequence.

The future multidisciplinary researches and additional technical analyses of pottery in Pogradec and Podgori will define not only the absolute chronology and the earlier or later phases of these settlements, but will furnish the necessary data highlighting onto aspects of social, economic and cultural life during the Neolithisation process.

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