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A CLOSER LOOK AT RED POLISHED PHILIA FABRICS. INQUIRING INTO CERAMIC UNIFORMITY IN CYPRUS, CA. 2500-2300 B.C.

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The beginning of the Bronze Age period in Cyprus (ca. 2500-2300 BC) is typified by a long series of changes in every aspect of the island's material culture, the introduction of new technologies and the intensification of interaction within the island, and between Cyprus and other neighbouring lands (Knapp 2008; Bolger 2007; Peltenburg 2007; Webb and Frankel 2007; Webb *et al.* 2006; Frankel 2005; Frankel 2000; Webb and Frankel 1999; Frankel, Webb and Eslick 1996). Especially within the island's setting, the strong interactive schemata are first and foremost substantiated by a homogeneous culture across the island, without any significant regional variants.

During the Philia period, minor differences in style recorded in site assemblages are blunted by a strong ceramic tradition, which is evident across Cyprus from north to south. Red Polished Philia ware (hereafter RPP) is the predominant type of pottery during the Philia period; a very distinct type of pottery, easily distinguished by reference to shape, fabric, and surface treatment. In particular, the typological, stylistic and fabric distinctiveness of RPP (Fig. 1), primarily seen in the highly lustrous red surfaces, the regular presence of burnishing marks, the restricted number of shapes (for full account of RPP shapes see Webb and Frankel 1999, 15-16; Frankel and Webb 2006, 92-98), and fabrics of soft grade in hardness, characterised by the distinct presence of grey and brown inclusions and small voids.

This island-wide homogeneity of the RPP assemblage prompted Manning to ascribe the ware to "specialised production associated with the emergent elite" (Manning 1993, 48). According to the scholar, "the marked uniformity of fabric [...] reflects the rise of one dominant specialist production centre exporting all over the island or the spread of a specialist type and technology across the island as a valued prestige assemblage" (Manning 1993, 48; also Manning and Swiny 1994, 166).

However, unpublished petrographic data⁽¹⁾ from Kissonerga *Mosphilia* (Robertson 1989), electron microprobe analysis on samples from Marki *Alonia* (Summerhayes *et al.* 1996), and petrographic and INAA (Stephen 1998a, 141-144) on samples coming from various sites dated to the Philia period indicated a chemical differentiation between samples from different sites, and suggested local manufacture or a multi-centric production of RPP pottery (Stephen 1998a; 1998b).

These earlier petrographic and chemical studies explored issues related to the provenance of the Philia fabrics, but failed to address issues of equal importance, related to the technology of their production and the degree of variability within individual site traditions. There is a total lack of information regarding the technology used in the production of Philia pottery with explicit references to fabric. Therefore, this project was designed to address the Philia pottery's morphological uniformity (or variability) on strictly technological terms and define the exact technological similarities or differences within and between site assemblages. This technological assessment is an essential prerequisite in validating, explaining and justifying the degree of uniformity of the Philia pottery.

In their 1999 publication *Characterizing the Philia facies*, Jennifer Webb and David Frankel provided a gazetteer of Philia sites, recording all sites where Philia material has been found. Using this gazetteer as a guide, eight Philia sites were selected for the collection of eighty-eight RPP samples, representing the main regions of the island where Philia material has been recorded (Fig. 2). It should be highlighted that the samples included in this study exclusively belong to the RPP class of pottery as defined by Frankel and Webb (1999; 2006) and

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which corresponds to the standard Red Polished (Philia) ware as defined by Peltenburg *et al.* (1986, 37). Both open and closed shapes were included in the sample, as well as small and large vessels.

Petrography, ED-XRF and SEM-EDS were used for a combined physicochemical study of the RPP samples. An overview of this physicochemical study has indicated that there are at least four different fabrics comprising the analysed RPP sample, and even so, the recording of outliers suggests that Philia fabric variability must have been even greater. From the four fabrics identified using petrographic analysis, three fabrics are distinguished by their calcareous clays, probably natural blends procured from alluvial deposits by riverbeds. Calcareous fabrics dominate also among the outlier samples (Fig. 3).

A common recipe is used for the production of these fabrics, which includes the use of fine clays, vegetal temper, and low firing temperatures, which did not exceed 750-800°C. There are neither indications for mineral or rock tempering, nor any detailed refinement procedures. On the other hand, the clays used for the production of the ceramic slips are non-calcareous, iron-rich, and well-refined. These observations apply for all samples from all sites, and made with different fabrics. Nonetheless, the mineralogical and chemical analyses have shown that there is one fabric, namely fabric I, for which the scale of distribution is evidently greater than that of any other fabric.

The mineralogical identification of fabric I is one of the most significant outcomes of this research project. This is the broadest fabric group identified, accounting for 75% of the RPP samples under study, from all sites, from Vasilia in the north, Marki and *Ayia Paraskevi* at the centre, to Kissonerga in the south. Fabric I is a calcareous fabric, for the production of which the established RPP recipe is followed, but which is however differentiated from the other identified fabrics due to the prominent presence of metamorphic rocks and the very restricted presence of igneous inclusions, indications that the location of raw material resources was not in the vicinity of the Troodos pillow lavas. Most importantly, fabric I is characterised by a distinct presence of chert and other quartzitic inclusions, which are not found in any of the remaining fabrics (Fig. 4).

In addition, fabric I seems more homogeneous than the other fabrics. The vessels made with fabric I are not only mineralogically easily distinguished from all the other samples in thin section, but the population of samples made with fabric I presents low standard deviation values when its elemental composition is evaluated. The mineralogical and chemical uniformity of the RPP samples made of fabric I suggests that the corresponding vessels were either made by a single production centre, or by a number of production centres exploiting the same raw material resources.

The rest of the recorded fabrics share a common characteristic: as indicated by petrography, they all present igneous components in their composition, mainly in the form of basalts. The presence of igneous components in the composition of these fabrics suggests that the raw materials for the production of all these fabrics, and corresponding vessels, were collected from the vicinity of the Troodos pillow lavas, where basalts are the most common rocks. All samples composing fabric groups II, III and IV come from Marki, with the exception of one sample which comes from *Ayia Paraskevi*. Considering the mineralogical characteristics of these vessels in association with their place of recovery, it is possible to argue that these were produced and distributed within the regional context of the south-central zone (*cf.* Webb and Frankel 2008). The inclusion of a sample from *Ayia Paraskevi* in fabric group IV is especially interesting, as it strengthens the regional character of this fabric.

Philia ceramic uniformity is likely to have been the outcome of two specific factors; the employment of a common recipe for the production of almost identical pottery across the island, and the existence of a large-scale distribution network directed by a specific centre or cluster of centres across the island. Both presuppose a regular flow of interaction between different parts of Cyprus, and a uniform Philia culture across much of the island. The spread of the Philia culture into dispersed and topographically separated regions and, most significantly, the maintenance of cultural uniformity are remarkable.

The selective preference of calcareous clays, rich in carbonates, may be perceived as a conscious technological choice, a part of a *habitus* (Frankel 2005), acquired through experience, supporting primarily the functionality of the final products. This technological uniformity, coupled with the restricted stylistic and typological repertoire, could also be considered as a form of communication and social marking, which may have facilitated the exchange of information and fostered a sense of social and cultural identity between the widespread Philia communities (see also Webb and Frankel 2008; Frankel and Webb 2006; Webb and Frankel 1999).

It is certainly difficult to elucidate the routes of interaction between the north and south parts of Cyprus, separated by the Troodos massif. Nonetheless, it seems that geography and distance did not act as impediments in this attempt to preserve cultural unity. Established inter-group relations, encouraged by the introduction of donkeys, structured a firm network of interaction, which may explain the widespread and unprecedented cultural uniformity which characterises these Philia settlements. It is in this context of regular relations

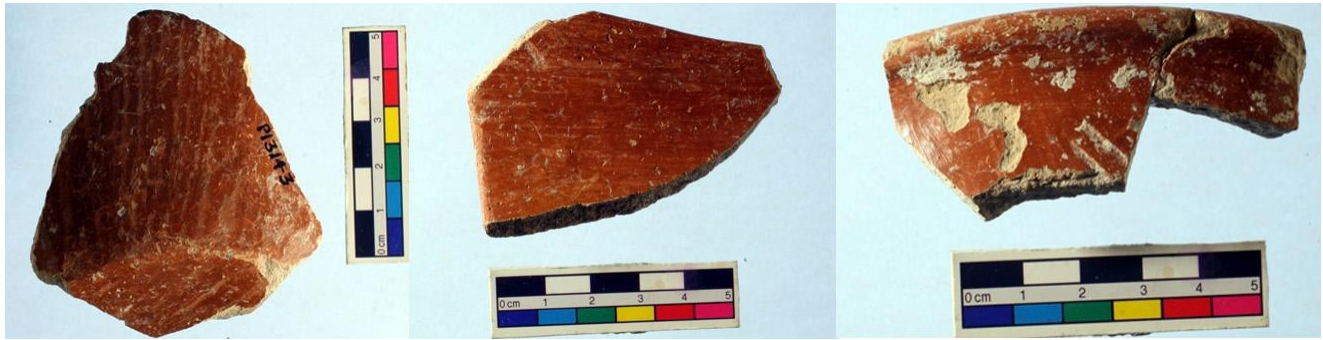


Figure 1. Red Polished Philia ware (RPP) samples from Marki Alonia.

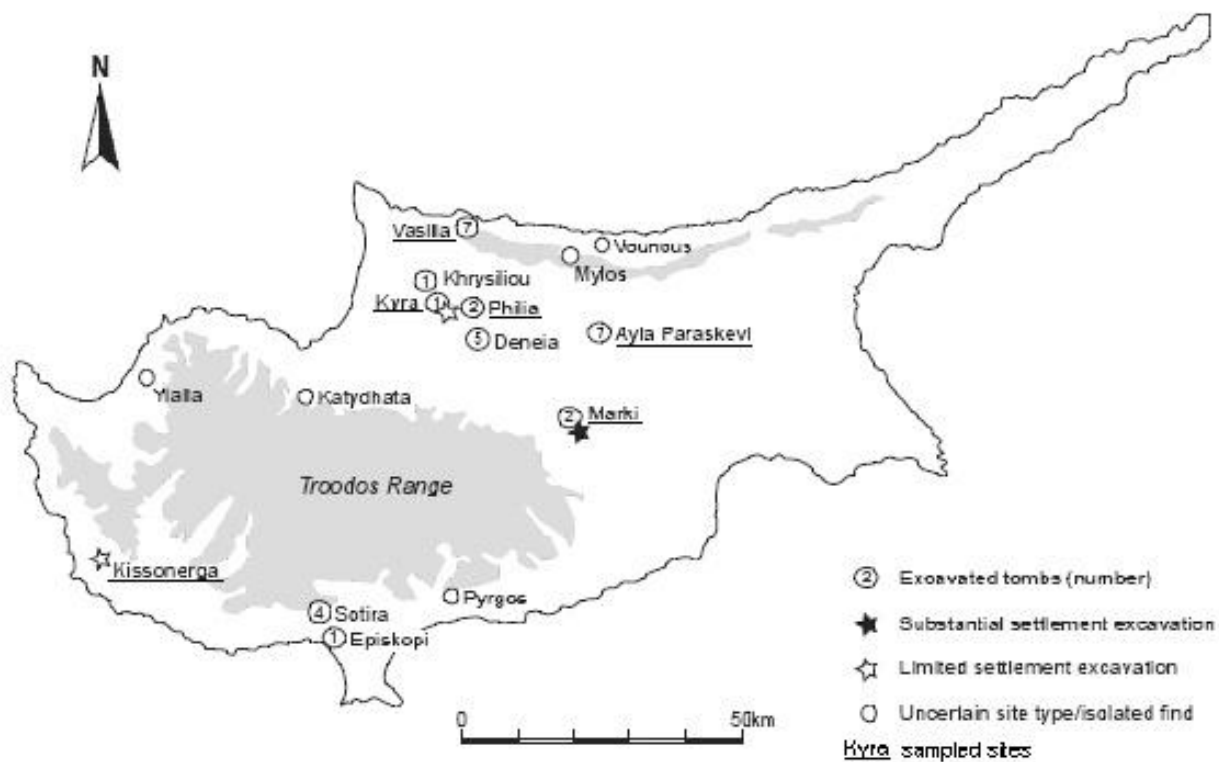


Figure 2. Map of Cyprus showing the location of sampled and other contemporary Philia sites (original map by Frankel and Webb 2006a, fig. 11.1, 306).

that the wide distribution of RPP vessels of fabric I should be understood. The existence of fabric I at all these different sites reinforces the argument for the existence of active interaction networks, literally surmounting physical barriers and contributing to the intra-island uniformity of the Philia material culture.

It is worth considering the mode of organisation of ceramic production that could have sustained this complex network of social contacts and pottery

distribution locally, regionally and inter-regionally. The sheer quantities of recorded pottery made with fabric I, recovered at sites across Cyprus, eliminate any arguments for household production during the Philia facies. At this stage, it cannot be argued with certainty where this centre or centres of RPP production were, due to our inability to sample the geo-environment of the northern part of the island. However, given the known cluster of Philia sites in the Ovgos valley, the material wealth of the Vasilia

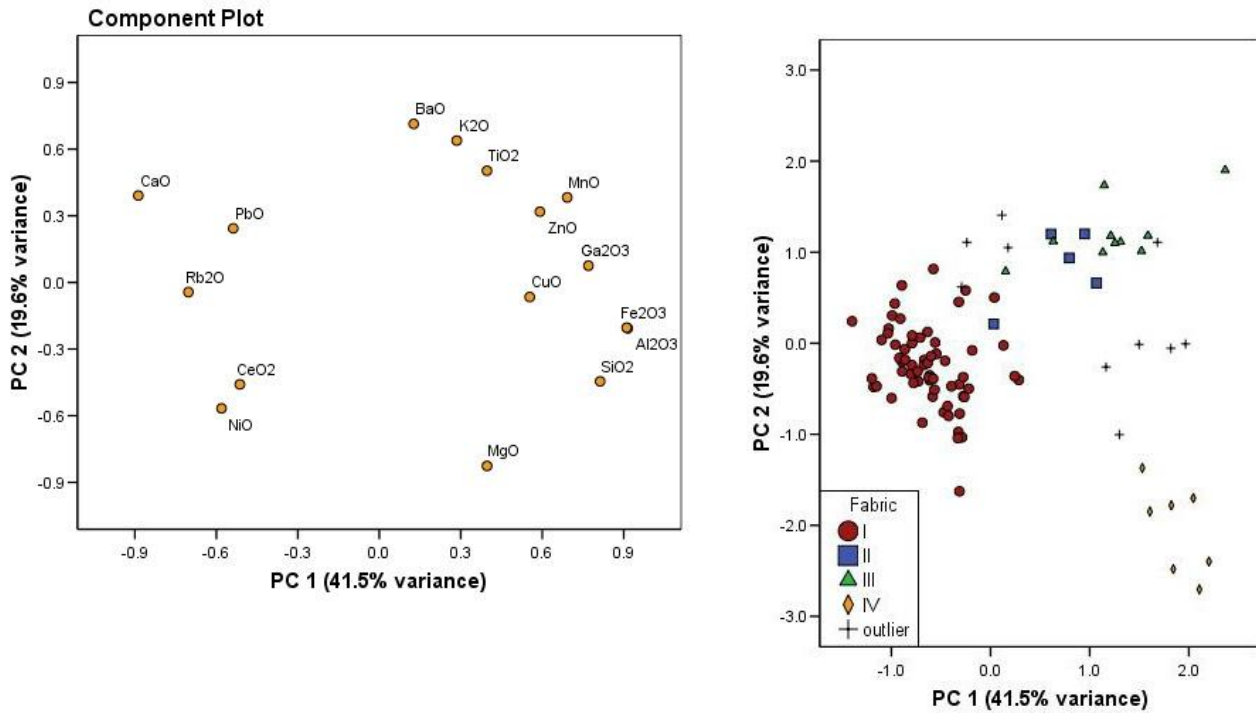


Figure 3. PCA based on the chemical analysis of the RPP sample by ED-XRF. The samples are marked according to the fabric group to which they were allocated by petrography.

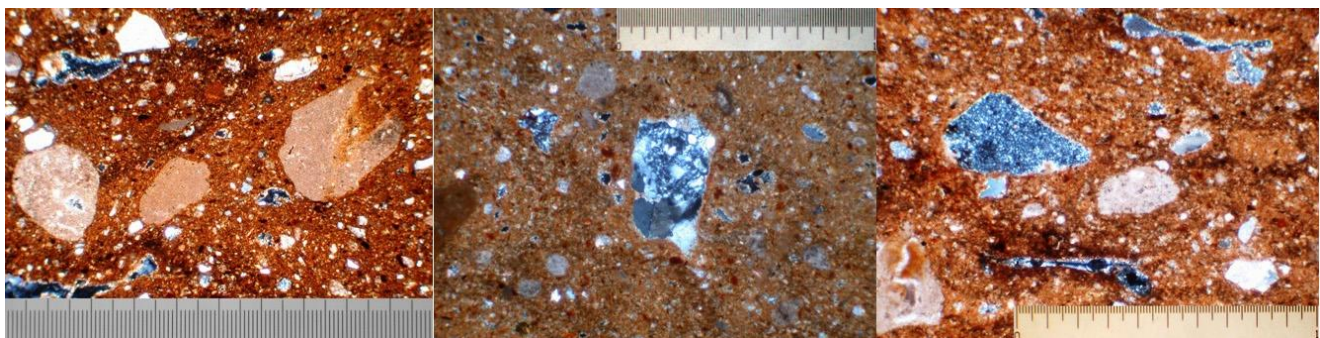


Figure 4. RPP fabric I (XP, full scale 1mm).

tombs in comparison with all the other excavated Philia sites, and taking into consideration that all samples from these sites are made with fabric I, it is possible to suggest that this production centre, or cluster of production centres, were located either in the Ovgos valley or on the north coast.

What is more noteworthy is the scale of production and distribution of RPP at this centre, or cluster of centres. Unfortunately, questions related to the organisation of ceramic production during the Philia phase, and in particular with regard to the existence of one large production centre or a cluster of centres, and the degree of specialisation cannot be answered at present. The macroscopic and physicochemical studies of the objects themselves do not allow us to

address issues related to the organisation and constitution of production units. Essential to this kind of discussion would be information collected from debris generated from production activities, as well as information related to the physical contexts from which the objects and the debris were recovered, information which is currently unavailable.

Nonetheless, we cannot underestimate the technological, typological, and to a large extent stylistic, uniformity that characterises the Philia pottery across the island. The Philia phase must have been a very dynamic period of Cypriot prehistory, during which larger settlements had in their disposal the required means (both natural and human

resources) for long distance contacts, supported by a very interactive internal network, sharing common cultural trends. While smaller settlements, such as Marki, produced their own products, they also acquired supplementary vessels from the larger settlements within the network. One centre or cluster of centres in the northern part of Cyprus, may have supplied much of the pottery for this homogeneous, unified system. Cyprus was not, however, able to sustain this degree of cultural homogeneity for long and it soon gave way, circa 2300 BC, to the pronounced regionalism which characterises the next phase of the Cypriot Bronze Age.

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1. By courtesy of Prof. A.H.F Robertson, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh and the Lemba Archaeological Project, Paphos, Cyprus.

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