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A Mycenaean pictorial vase from Midea

Abstract

The Greek-Swedish excavations on the Mycenaean acropolis of Midea have brought to light a large amount of fine decorated pottery, which includes numerous fragmentary vases and sherds with pictorial decoration. This material has firmly established Midea as an important find-spot of figure-style pottery, like other great Mycenaean Argive centres, such as Mycenae, Tiryns and Berbati. This paper presents a remarkable pictorial vase recently found at Midea. It is a ring-based krater, almost completely restored from fragments, decorated with a row of six birds. The bird is a common motif in Mycenaean pictorial vase painting and also well attested on many other ceramic pieces at Midea, particularly the type of the folded-wing marsh bird. This type of bird is also popular at Tiryns, providing evidence that this category of pictorial pottery from the two citadels, dated to the LH IIIB2 period, was produced in the same workshop, which must have been situated at or near Tiryns. The abundant pictorial pottery from Midea and other significant discoveries at the site, such as monumental architectural remains and important finds, confirm the position of Midea as a great centre, alongside the other two Argive major citadels, Mycenae and Tiryns.*

Keywords: Midea, Argolid, fortified citadel, pictorial pottery, krater, birds, stylistic analysis

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The Greek-Swedish excavations inside the Mycenaean acropolis of Midea in the Argolid have brought to light extensive and impressive architectural remains over much of the site (*Figs. 1–2*). In addition, many other significant finds were retrieved, such as fresco fragments, seal-stones, objects of ivory, bronze and stone, precious raw materials and finished luxury objects, terracotta figures and figurines, as well as a large quantity of fine and coarse ware pottery. All these discoveries, together with Linear B-inscribed transport stirrup jars and nodules with seal impressions and Linear B inscriptions, demonstrate that Midea, the third of the great Argive fortified citadels after Mycenae and Tiryns, was an administrative and craft centre.¹

The large amount of fine decorated pottery from Midea includes numerous, albeit fragmentary, vases with pictorial decoration. This has firmly established the site as one of the most important find-spots for pictorial pottery production in Mainland Greece after Mycenae,² Tiryns,³ and Berbati.⁴ It is noteworthy that all these sites are in the Argolid and, more specifically, in the Argive Plain.

The pictorial pottery from Midea was found over most of the excavated areas of the acropolis, notably from the south-west area,⁵ the East Gate area,⁶ and the north-east Lower Terraces⁷ of the Lower Acropolis. The decoration of this material covers the typical repertoire of Mycenaean pictorial vase paint-

* It is both an honour and a pleasure to offer this paper to Prof. José Luis Melena, a most important scholar and a dear friend of mine, in thanks for his enormous contribution to the field of Linear B script studies and also for his unfailing interest and support for the excavations at Midea, and for our excellent collaboration in preparing *The Mycenaean World* exhibition presented in Madrid in 1992. As the author of the article I wish to thank the reviewers for their valuable comments, which helped to improve my study. I also thank the architect Dr Themis Bilis for the ground plan of the acropolis of Midea, Mrs Rebecca Tsembera for the drawings of the vase and Mr Kostas Xenikakis for the aerial photograph of the acropolis and the photographs of the vase.

¹ See Walberg 1998; 2007; Demakopoulou 2007; 2012; 2015, with references.

² Crouwel 1991a; Sakellarakis 1992, *passim*.

³ Slenczka 1974; Güntner 2000.

⁴ Åkerström 1987.

⁵ Demakopoulou 2006.

⁶ Demakopoulou *et al.* 2005, 31–34; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2008, 23–29; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2010, 25–31.

⁷ Fisher 1998; Fisher & Giering 1998; Fisher 2007.

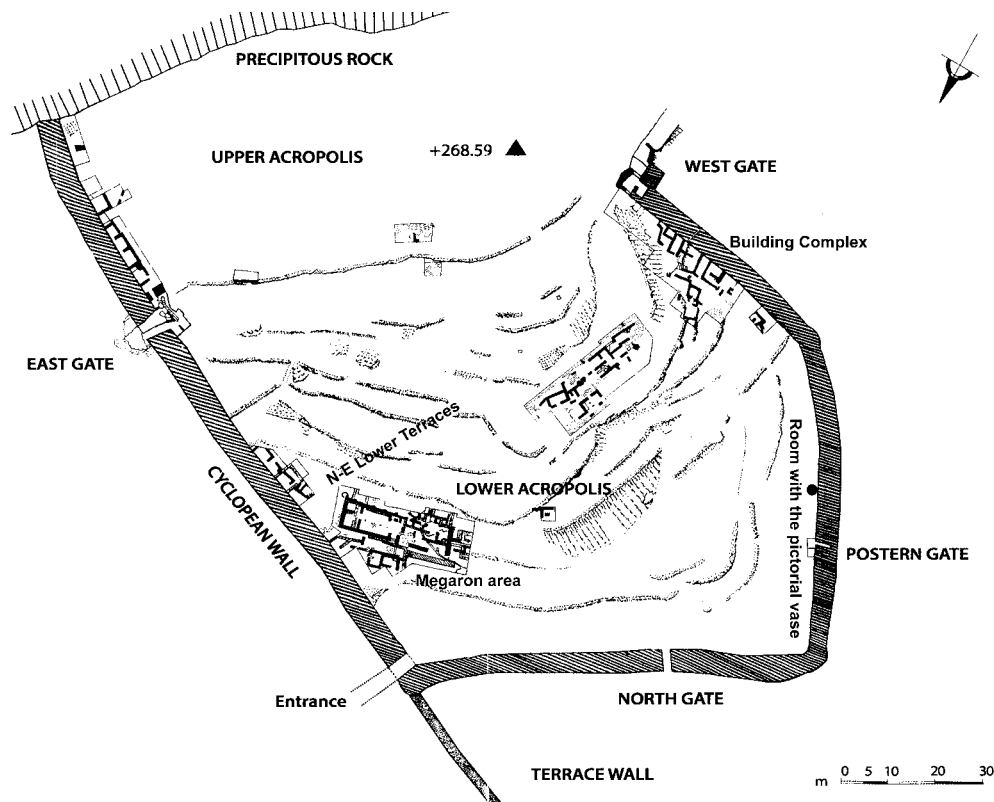


Fig. 1. Ground plan of the fortified area of the Mycenaean acropolis of Midea. Illustration: T. Bilis.

Ground plan of the Mycenaean Acropolis of Midea.



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of the fortified area of the Mycenaean acropolis of Midea, looking south. Photograph: K. Xenikakis.

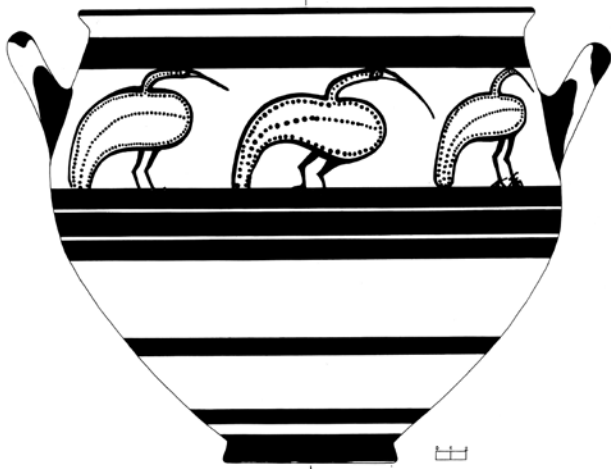


Fig. 3a. Drawing of the Mycenaean pictorial krater from Midea (1st face). Drawing: R. Tsembera.

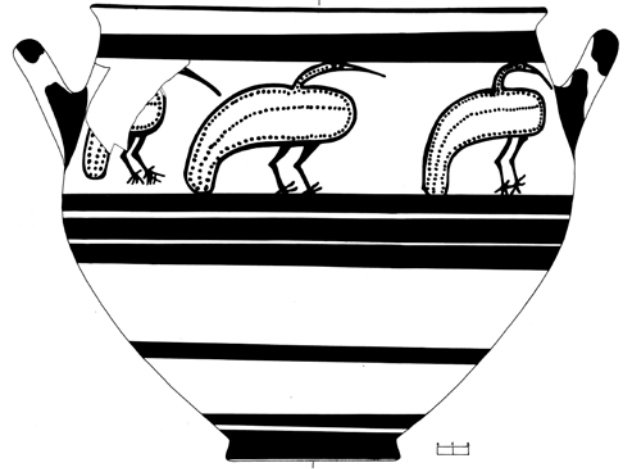


Fig. 3b. Drawing of the Mycenaean pictorial krater from Midea (2nd face). Drawing: R. Tsembera.

ing. The iconographic motifs are chariots with horses and drivers, possibly a figure of a helmeted warrior, animals of different species including bovids and bull protomes, stags and probably goats, as well as birds and fish. Recently, in 2014, during cleaning operations along the south-west section of the fortification wall,⁸ a small part of a room was uncovered adjacent to the inner face of the wall, near the Postern Gate (Fig. 1). A pile of pottery fragments was found in the disturbed upper layer of this part of the room. From the pile, a large pictorial krater has been almost fully restored from fragments, and small pieces of its rim and belly have been completed with plaster (Figs. 3a–c, 4a–b). No systematic excavation was conducted to reveal the entire area of the room and to investigate its stratigraphy. The other few sherds recovered were very worn and non-diagnostic. As a result, it was not possible to clarify the exact context of the vase and therefore to comment on its possible function.

This fine vessel with elegant figure-style decoration, which has enriched the corpus of pictorial pottery from Midea, can be described as follows:

Ring-based krater, FS 281,⁹ mended and restored.
H. 0.282 m, D. max. 0.30 m, D. rim 0.28 m, D. base 0.11 m.
Fine pinkish-buff clay, well-polished yellowish-buff surface, brownish-black paint. Deep semi-globular shape with incurving upper body, two horizontal loop handles, rim with rounded upper surface and low ring base.

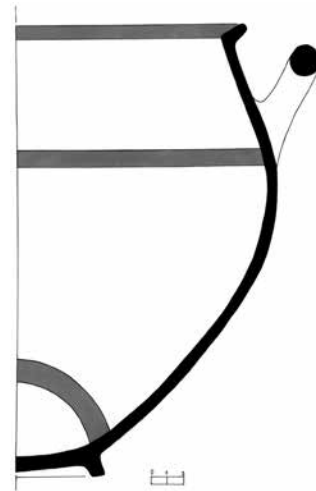


Fig. 3c. Profile of the Mycenaean pictorial krater from Midea (line drawing). Drawing: R. Tsembera.

Linear decoration inside; rim and base are painted solid; splashes on handles. Deep encircling band below rim, three medium encircling bands on the middle of the body below the handle zone, and two fine encircling lines on the lower body above the base. The krater is decorated on each face. On the upper body, between the upper and middle encircling bands, is a broad decorative zone in which is depicted a row of birds facing right. The birds, three on each face and in single file, are drawn in thick outline. They have long thin solid legs with articulated claws, most of them overlapping the first of the three bands below. The long neck of each is dot-filled and the head, which is disproportionately small with circle-and-dot eye, is set just below the rim band. Their beaks are long and thin. The body is rounded with a thick

⁸ After the systematic excavations in the acropolis of Midea (1983–2009), cleaning operations of the fortification wall were included in a wider project for the land-scaping and presentation of the archaeological site (2011–2015). This project excluded systematic excavations.

⁹ FS = Arne Furumark's shape number. See Furumark 1972 (1941).

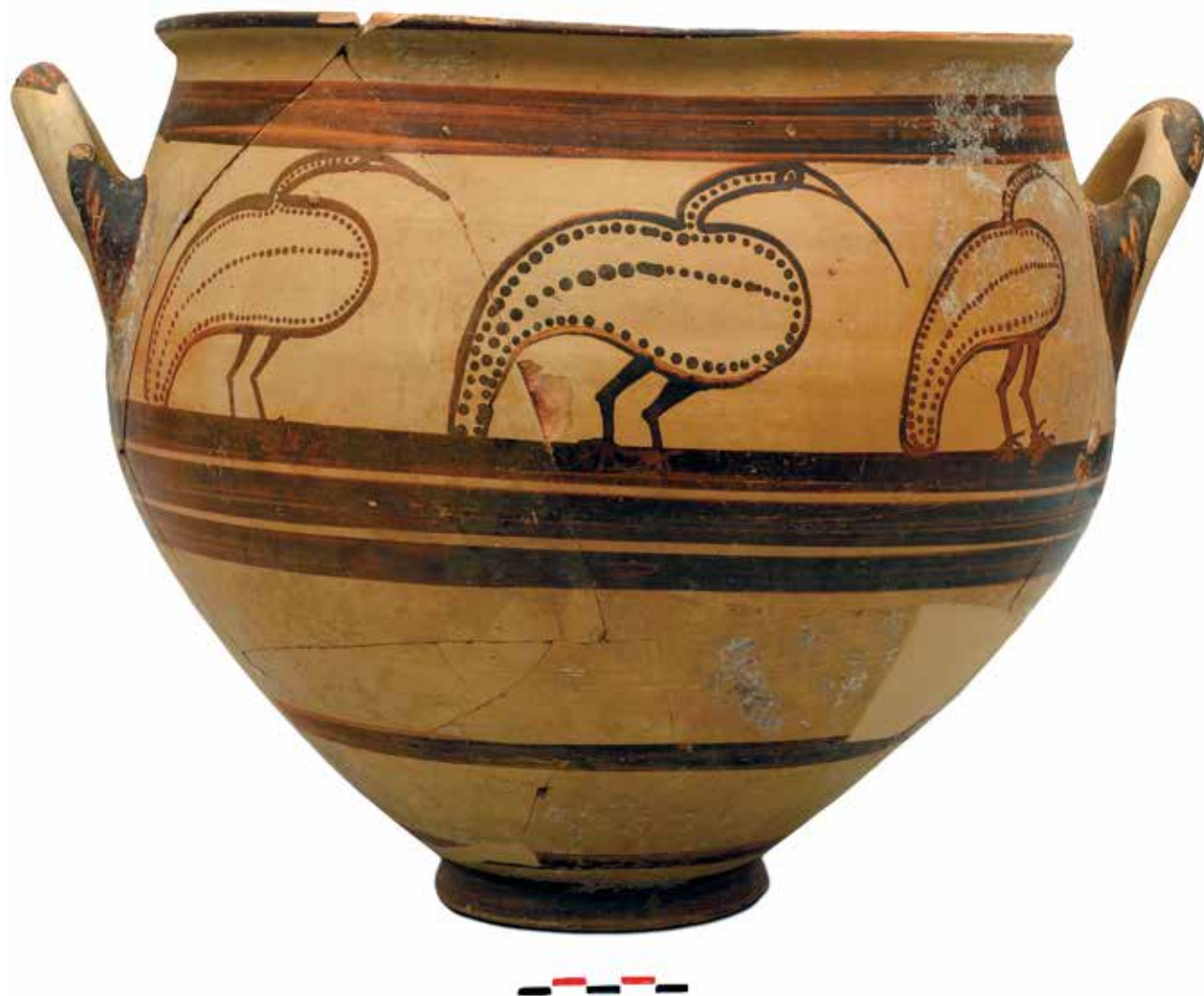


Fig. 4a. Mycenaean pictorial krater with a row of birds from Midea (1st face). Photograph: K. Xenikakis.

long tail, touching or overlapping the first of the middle bands below. The interior of the body is outlined in dots; an additional row of dots crosses the centre horizontally and follows the curve of the down-turned tail. As to the bird scene, noteworthy is the absence of other decorative motifs, even though filling ornaments are common in pictorial compositions.

The birds of the Midea krater belong to the folded-wing bird variety, FM 7:16.¹⁰ This type is known also as “marsh or water bird”, according to the term used by Emily Vermeule and Vassos Karageorghis.¹¹ Fragmentary pictorial pottery with the same type of folded-wing marsh bird decoration has been

found also in Tiryns (Fig. 5). Heinrich Schliemann identified these birds as “swans”.¹²

The bird generally is a very common iconographic motif in Mycenaean pictorial vase painting and occurs on many vessels, amphoroid and mostly ring-based kraters and jugs, dated to Late Helladic IIIA2 (14th century BC) and, mainly, to Late Helladic IIIB–C (13th–12th century BC). Both these shapes, kraters and jugs, are the commonest in the Mycenaean pictorial pottery. But, there are also Late Minoan amphoroid kraters with bird pictorial decoration.¹³ Our vase from Midea

¹⁰ FM = Arne Furumark's motif number. See Furumark 1972 (1941).

¹¹ Vermeule & Karageorghis 1982, 102, 104, 215.

¹² Schliemann 1886, 353. See also Vermeule & Karageorghis 1982, 44, 104, 215, no. IX 109; Demakopoulou 1990, 364, no. 344; Sakellarakis 1992, 75, no. 139.

¹³ Crouwel & Morris 2015, 147, 171–172, 189–191.

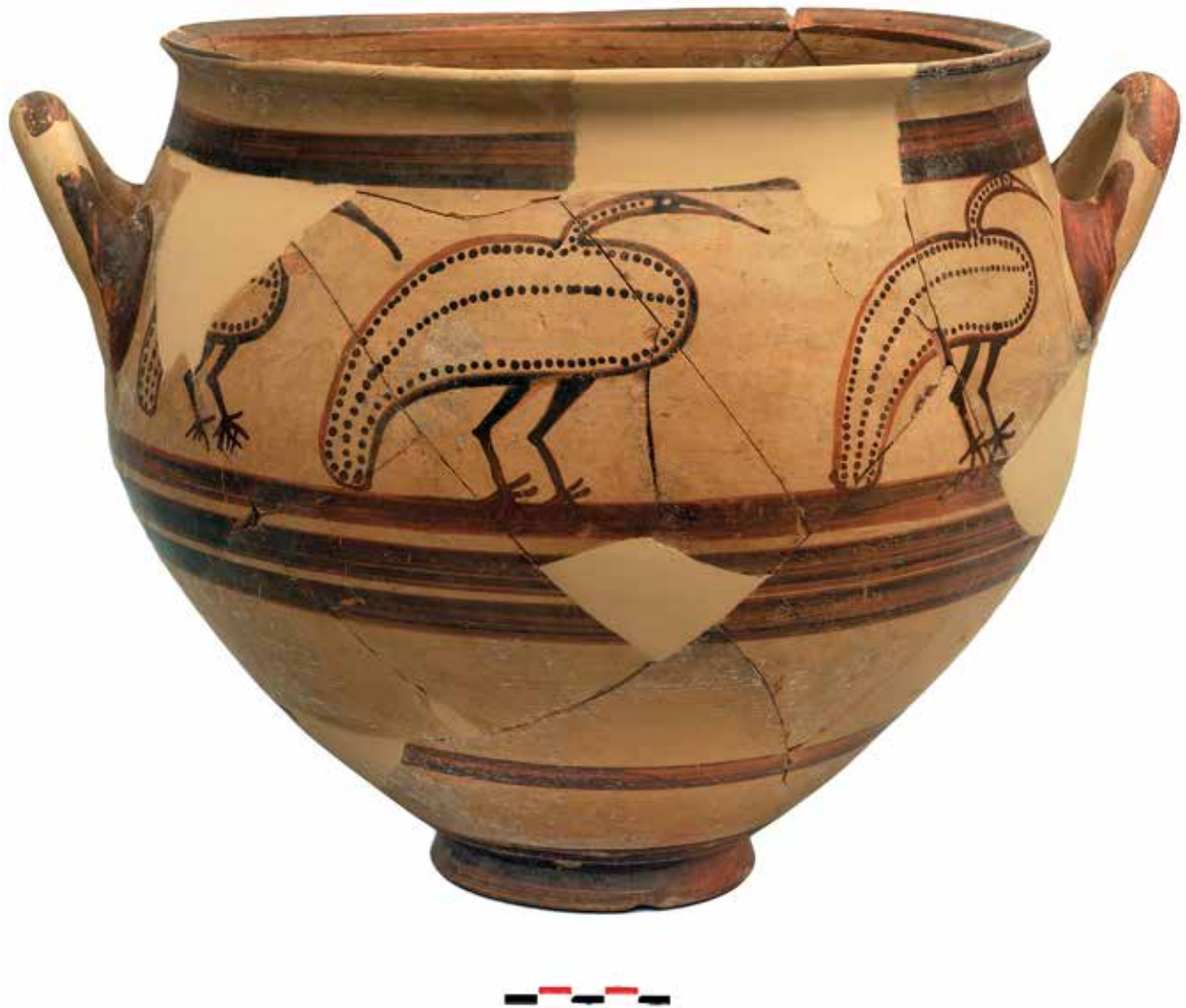


Fig. 4b. Mycenaean pictorial krater with a row of birds from Midea (2nd face) Photograph: K. Xenikakis.

is remarkable, not only for its interesting representation of a “bird procession”, but also because all but one of the depicted birds are intact. Usually, the pictorial pottery recovered from various sites is fragmentary and the birds or other motifs are often incompletely preserved. Plentiful pictorial pottery with bird motifs is attested at the important Mycenaean Argive centres of Mycenae,¹⁴ Tiryns,¹⁵ Midea,¹⁶ and Berbati.¹⁷ At

Midea the most frequent pictorial motif in the figure-style pottery with bird designs is the folded-wing marsh bird. In addition to our vase, numerous fragments with this type of bird decoration were recovered from other areas of the acropolis. A large assemblage of this category comes from the Lower Terraces and the East Gate area, including another significant ring-based krater (Fig. 6),¹⁸ which has been reconstructed on paper, and many fragments of kraters and other open vessels.¹⁹ The graphically reconstructed ring-based krater, also decorated with a row of similar folded-wing marsh birds, was found in a disturbed context in the area of the Megaron on the Lower

¹⁴ Crouwel 1991a, 22–23, 216–278 with illustrations.

¹⁵ Slenczka 1974, *passim*; Güntner 2000, 85–127, pls. 38–59.

¹⁶ Fisher 1998, 104–106, pls. 66–67; Fisher & Giering 1998, 109–113, pls. 64–65; Fisher 2007, 109–110, pls. 123–124; Demakopoulou 2006, 41–42, figs. 15, 25–28; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2005, 31–34, figs. 63, 67, 69; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2008, 23–29, figs. 50–52, 58, 68; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2010, 25–31, figs. 63, 73.

¹⁷ Åkerström 1987, 38–41, 64–65, pls. 37–43.

¹⁸ Fisher 2007, 109, fig. 123:1373, pl. 19:1373.

¹⁹ Fisher 1998, 105, pl. 66:115, 119, pl. 67:123–124, 127; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2005, 31, fig. 63; Demakopoulou *et al.* 2008, 28, fig. 68.



Fig. 5. Body fragment of a Mycenaean pictorial krater from Tiryns. Photograph published in Demakopoulou 1990, 364, cat. no. 344.

Terraces of the acropolis. It is very similar to our new krater presented here. Both vases have the same pictorial scene, which is a frieze of folded-wing marsh birds. The only difference is that some of the birds on the krater from the Lower Terraces have their neck and head bent down to the ground, as browsing birds. This means that there is some variety in the rendering of this kind of birds. However, the close similarity of all pieces with this type of decoration, found at Midea, is obvious from the bird bodies and necks outlined with dots, and from their similar long pointed beaks. It seems that they were produced in the same workshop and some of them could have been painted by the same hand.

It is notable that the pictorial motif of the folded-wing marsh bird, so popular in Midea, apart from a few pieces from Mycenae, is known only from Tiryns.²⁰ The Tirynthian fragmentary pictorial pottery with marsh bird motifs, mostly on kraters, closely resembles the pictorial pottery with the marsh bird iconography from Midea. The striking similarity strongly suggests that this category of pictorial pottery from Tiryns and Midea might have been made in the same workshop, possibly located at or near Tiryns. As in the other two palatial centres, Mycenae and Tiryns, the excavations in Midea yielded, in quality and abundance, fine decorated and plain pottery. Pottery workshops in Midea, however, have not yet been found.²¹ But it is noteworthy that recent clay provenance

analyses demonstrate that the clay of some Midea pictorial vessels comes from Mycenae/Berbati and Tiryns.²² Consequently their clay comes from the Argolid, where the relevant pottery workshops operated.

Most of the pictorial material with the marsh bird design from Midea was recovered from well-stratified contexts and can be dated to the Late Helladic IIIB2 period (second half of the 13th century BC). Other pieces, including our restored krater—which happens to be the best-preserved example of the corpus—, although found in disturbed contexts, can also be dated to the same period on stylistic grounds. It is interesting that similar pictorial pottery from Tiryns is also dated to Late Helladic IIIB2 on firm grounds.²³ The common marsh bird depiction in the pictorial pottery of both sites suggests a close relationship between Tiryns and Midea in this period. With regard to the subject of the bird decoration, the recent article by Julia Binnberg is interesting in suggesting that the majority of the bird motifs in the Mycenaean pictorial pottery are the “waterbirds”, closely associated with a landscape of plants (wetland).²⁴

The recent excavations in Midea, one of the great fortified citadels in the Argolid, have confirmed the power and wealth of the site. The impressive architecture with monumental structures, the rich array of finds and the evidence for the use of Linear B script demonstrate the importance of the site as a strong Mycenaean fortress during the Late Palatial period (13th century BC). Moreover, the copious pictorial pottery mostly recovered from the areas inside the fortification wall of the acropolis at Midea, as at Mycenae and Tiryns, provides evidence for the association of these ceramics with activities under the control of a centralized power, as at the other two citadels.

Apart from the bird krater presented here and the other fragmentary similar bird krater from the area of the Megaron, there is one other outstanding pictorial ring-based krater, albeit very fragmentary, decorated on each face with a procession of stags.²⁵ Its numerous fragments and sherds were found widely distributed in the area of the Building Complex west of the West Gate. This pictorial vase is a close counterpart to the intact krater from Enkomi, with the same scene of the stag procession.²⁶ These three significant figural kraters were most probably intended to be offered as gifts or to meet community needs.

²⁰ Slenczka 1974, *passim*, pls. 28–30; Güntner 2000, 96–101 (“*Motiv Vogel 34*”), pls. 42–46; Sakellarakis 1992, 75–76, nos. 139–142. See also Güntner 2006.

²¹ For the pottery workshops in the area of the Argive Plain with the great Mycenaean centres, see Demakopoulou 2006, 43. Also Mommsen

& Maran 2000–2001, 98, table 1, 102–103 and Demakopoulou *et al.* 2017, 23.

²² Demakopoulou *et al.* 2017, 26–27, 30, 42–45, figs. 5, 10, 17, 62–64.

²³ Güntner 2000, 96–101.

²⁴ Binnberg 2019, 67–68, 73.

²⁵ Demakopoulou 2006, 34–36, no. 4, figs. 8–9.

²⁶ Vermeule & Karageorghis 1982, 49, 203, no. V 54. See also Demakopoulou 2006, 35, fig. 10.

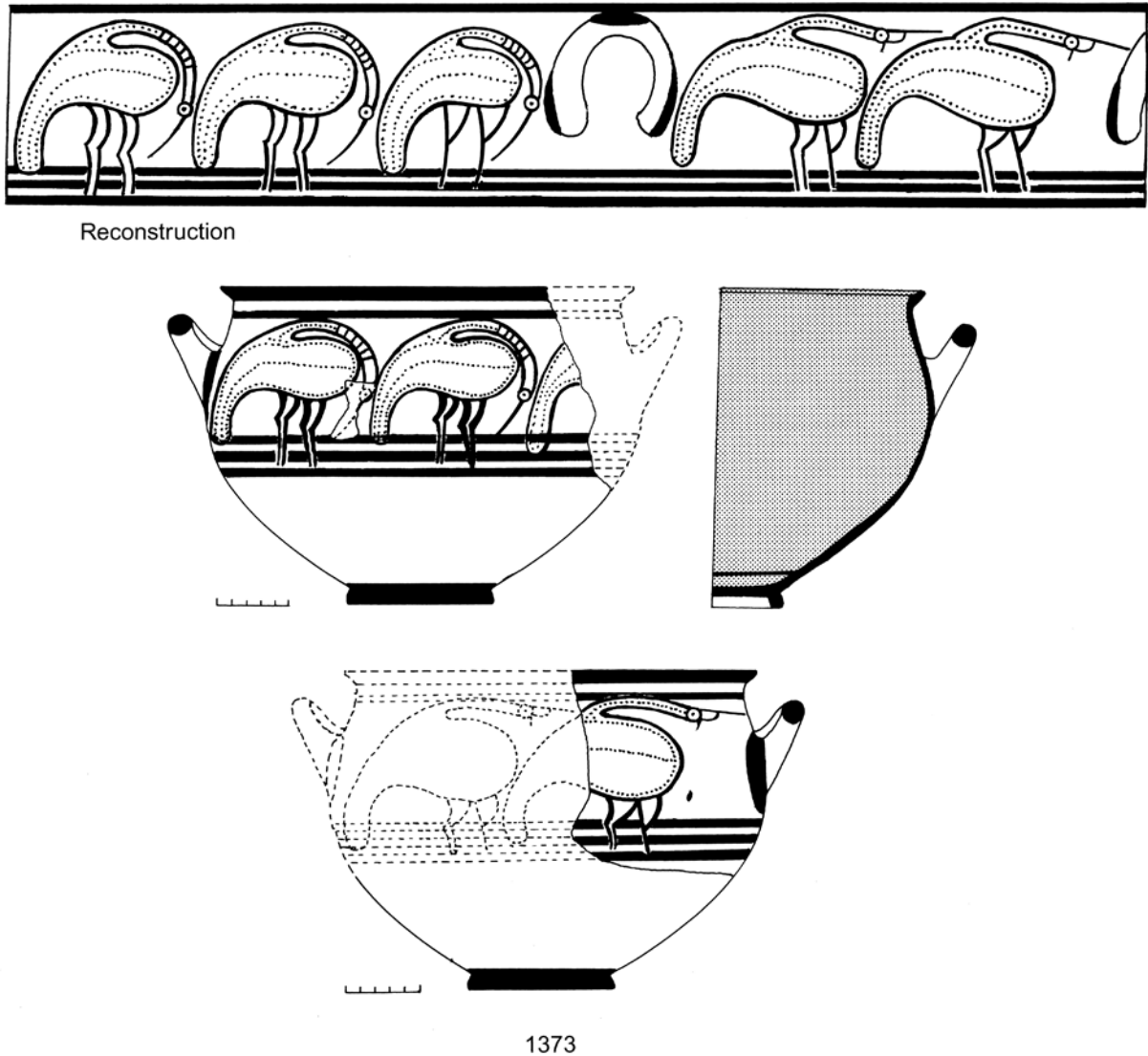


Fig. 6. Drawing of a fragmentary pictorial krater from the Megaron area of Midea. Drawing by Elias Markou.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of vessels of this specific category of pottery were produced for export, as is shown by their similarity to pictorial vases from Cyprus. Another fine piece from Midea, a jug with wavy-line birds,²⁷ has close counterparts found in Cyprus,²⁸ as does the aforementioned stagkrater. The workshops operating in the Argive Plain were evidently producing fine decorated pottery, including

remarkable pictorial vessels, many of which were destined for export to the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁹

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²⁷ Demakopoulou 2006, 32–34, no. 2, figs. 4–5.

²⁸ Vermeule & Karageorghis 1982, 51, 204, no. V 68.

²⁹ For the export of pictorial and other Mycenaean decorated pottery to Cyprus, in particular from the Argolid, see Catling 1986, 597–601; Crouwel 1991b, 52–53; Demakopoulou 1992, 147–148. See also Hankey 1993, particularly 103–105 and Demakopoulou *et al.* 2017, 22, 24.

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