

# Continuity and change in the ceramic assemblage from Metsamor between the 10th and 7th centuries BCE (new data from the 2021 season)



**Abstract:** The morphology and distribution of what is considered as a local pottery assemblage from the Iron I and Iron II phases, which in Metsamor is part of a larger cultural phenomenon designated as the Lchashen–Metsamor pottery horizon, is the subject of continued discussion in terms of its continuity and change. This presentation, expanding on previous, preliminary research (see Iskra and Zakyan 2019; 2022), considers the input of new findings resulting from an examination of the results of the most recent excavations by an Armenian-Polish team, concentrated on phases of peak development (V and IVb) and gradual decline of urban life (IVa) in the Iron Age at this fortress site in Armenia. The discussion also contextualizes current knowledge of the presence of Urartian Red Burnished Ware in the Metsamor settlement, especially during the initial phase of Urartian presence, that is, in Phase IVa.

**Keywords:** South Caucasus, Iron Age, Urartian pottery, Lchashen–Metsamor pottery

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## INTRODUCTION

Persistence of indigenous cultural traits in the face of an encroaching, external, sophisticated imperial culture is a significant issue when dealing with the archaeology of imperial landscapes and peripheral societies (Düring and Stek 2018; Tyson and Hermann 2018). The greatest potential for such studies, due to their nature, lies in large datasets, such as pottery assemblages, which offer an opportunity for examining coexistence and diffusion between cultures referred to as local on the one hand and imperial on the other. In this context, continuity or change observed in the repertoire of local vessels can be perceived as cultural markers of the impact of imperial policy on indigenous society at a time of conquest and political domination. In many cases, demographic change due to the expulsion of one population and the arrival of deportees from other regions is marked primarily in the pottery (Itach, Zelig Aster and Ben-Shlomo 2017). However, the continuity of established pottery traditions in settlements or regions under imperial rule can tell us more about the limitations and attractiveness of imperial culture outside the heartland of the empire (Hunt 2015).

The case study presented here sheds light on the socio-cultural relations in the Ararat Plain in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, when the region was under the political and cultural influence of the Urartian Empire. Despite a fairly substantial literature on cultural relations between indigenous societies and the Urartians (Biscione, Hmayakyan and Parmegiani 2002; Köroglu 2012; Ristvet 2018;), a sur-

prisingly small number of studies includes a ceramological perspective when dealing with this issue (Avetisyan 1992; 2009; Avetisyan and Bobokhyan 2012; Avetisyan et. al. 2021; Hmayakyan 2002). Moreover, even when pottery is considered, the material is mostly restricted to finds from fortresses and burials, constituting thus barely a fraction of what could be found in the outer towns or unfortified settlements. In other words, pottery assemblages from inside Urartian citadels (such as Arin Berd and Karmir Blur, for example) should not be treated as representative of settlement in general, mainly because the repertoire is biased toward standardized forms of imperial ceramics (table- and kitchenware) used by a regional social elite. The case of burial assemblages, especially those belonging to the common people, is somewhat different, but even then, the selection of forms does not reflect typical household pottery distribution. By contrast, undisturbed deposits from areas of settlement offer a huge variety of pottery forms and functional types of vessel pottery used by commoners, representing the majority of the population at a given site. Consequently, the development and distribution of local and imperial pottery should be analyzed from this perspective, since it is more reasonable that the real impact of Urartian policy and culture on the indigenous population of the Ararat Plain will be reflected in this approach.

The outer town in Metsamor, explored by the Armenian-Polish Archaeological Expedition, is currently one of the main sources of information about the

urban and social make-up of the region during the Early Iron Age (Iron I), and the adaptation of indigenous settlements to the Urartian governance system during the Middle Iron Age (Iron II). The importance of the site is threefold: an undisturbed and fairly well recognized stratigraphic sequence from the Iron Age; a rich and diverse pottery assemblage from household and burial contexts; and the longevity of archaeological research carried out on the site. Moreover, the results of recent excavations (Jakubiak et al. 2018; 2019) have demonstrated that the Urartian conquest of the northern part of the Ararat Plain in the beginning of the 8th century BCE apparently did

not affect Metsamor. This changes profoundly our perception of the relations between the allegedly local population and the Urartians in Metsamor and can lead to completely new interpretations of available data.

The issue has already been signaled by the preliminary results of ceramological research conducted by the Project team between 2018 and 2021 (Iskra and Zakryan 2018; 2022), but it is the recent discoveries made in the 2021 season that have proved particularly significant for a discussion of the continuity and evolution of a local pottery tradition from the Early Iron Age (Iron I) in a later period, that is, in the Middle Iron Age (Iron II).

## STRATIGRAPHY

In the course of excavations since 2013 the Project has established a continuous stratigraphy from the 11th century BCE to the 6th. The pottery discussed in this paper comes from the Iron Age I–II periods, which are represented at the site by Phases V and IV. These phases were identified already in the 2017 and 2018 seasons. Two subphases of Phase IV, a and b, were further distinguished, reflecting changes in the occupation of the settlement in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, whereas the current, eighth season of excavation has yielded new data, providing absolute dates for Phase V.

A well-preserved structure (S21) with five stone column bases, assigned to Phase V, was found west of the main trench [Fig. 1]. The shape and arrangement of the stone bases, among others, actually suggested a late date for the structure, at least in the late Iron Age

(Iron III), but a much earlier dating, indicated by a well-preserved ceramic assemblage collected from an intact floor level, was confirmed by the radiocarbon dating of a sample from a burnt wooden beam [Fig. 2:a] in the range 1002–828 BCE (sample Poz-148671, 2-sigma date [95.4%] [Fig. 2:b]). The date is consistent with the range obtained for samples MKL-4320 and GdS-4175 collected from structure S17 [Fig. 2:c,d], and the two structures actually share a closely similar pottery assemblage. The S21 collection, which is one of the best preserved and undisturbed household pottery assemblages ever recorded in the Metsamor settlement, is thus securely dated to the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, directly preceding the establishment of the Urartian Empire in Metsamor.

The following phase, IVb, coincides with Urartian imperial presence at the

site. Recent excavations inside House II uncovered undisturbed layers yielding the earliest evidence of a coincidence of local pottery and Urartian Red Burnished Ware. Pottery deposits assigned to Phase IVb are associated exclusively with a stratified horizon of thin clay floors found in Rooms S12, S13, S15 and S19 of House II [Fig. 3]. The earliest of these earth floors is superposed on oc-

cupation layers associated with Phase V. The absence of a transitional layer of fill appears to confirm undisturbed occupation of at least part of the building from pre-Urartian to Urartian. The relative thinness of cultural layers associated with Phase IVb, especially in room S13, is striking, at least compared to the preceding phase. Provisionally, it may be concluded that the building was only briefly inhab-

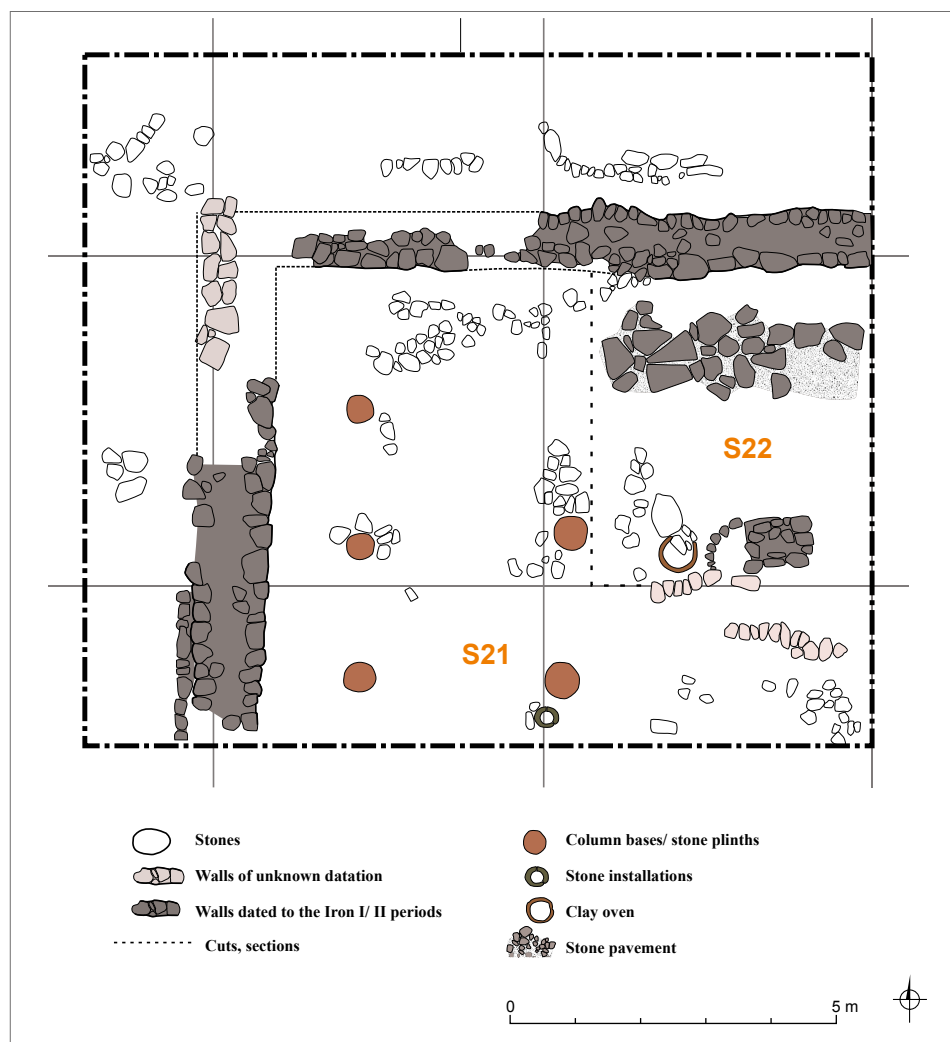


Fig. 1. Plan of structures S21 and S22 (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | drawing M. Iskra)

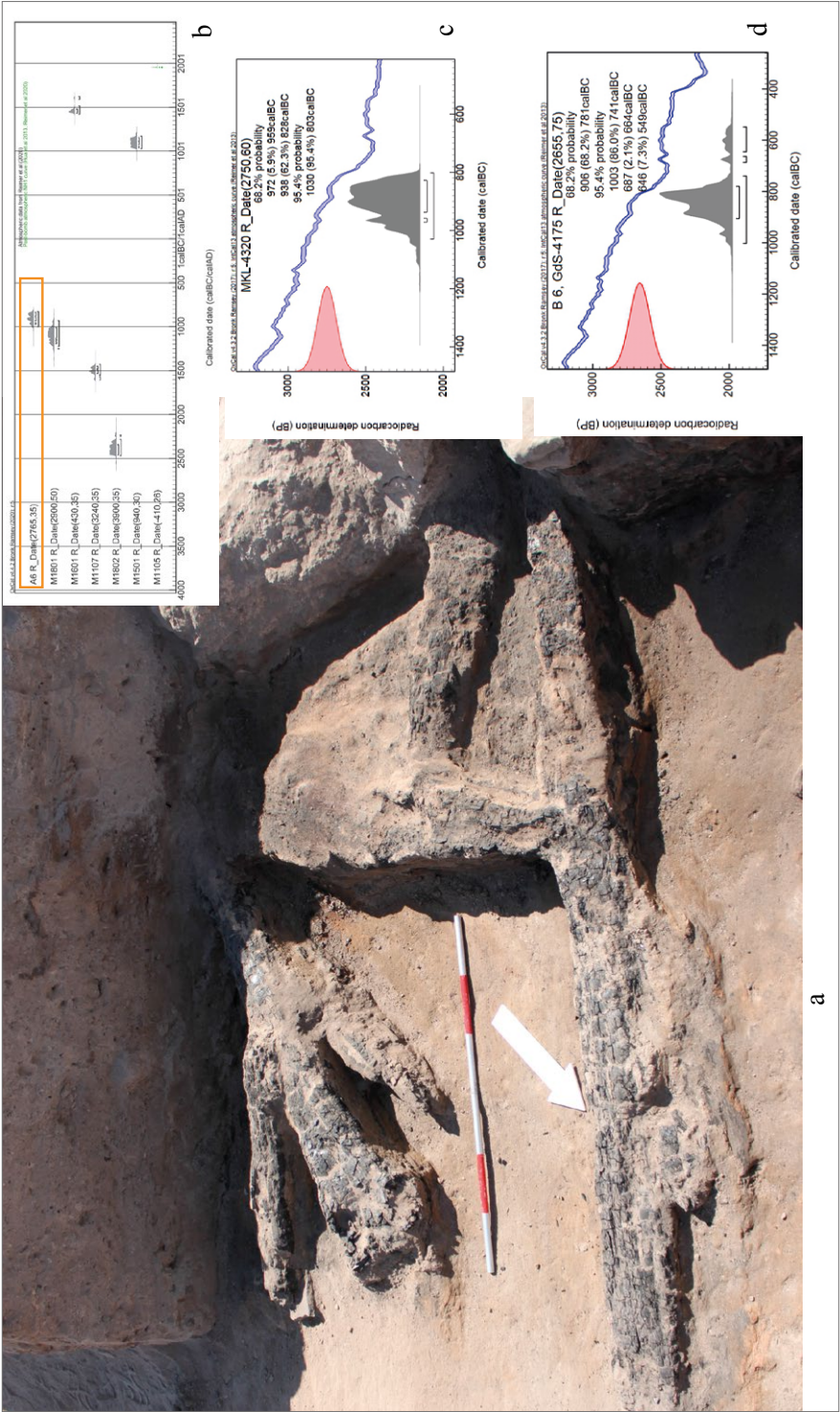


Fig. 2 Burned wooden beam from structure S21: a – view *in situ*; b – sample A6 from the wooden beam; c – sample MKL4320 from structure S17; d – sample GdS-4175 from structure S17 (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photo P. Okrajek; <sup>14</sup>C dating LAB)





Fig. 3. Plan of House II and adjacent structures (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | drawing M. Iskra)

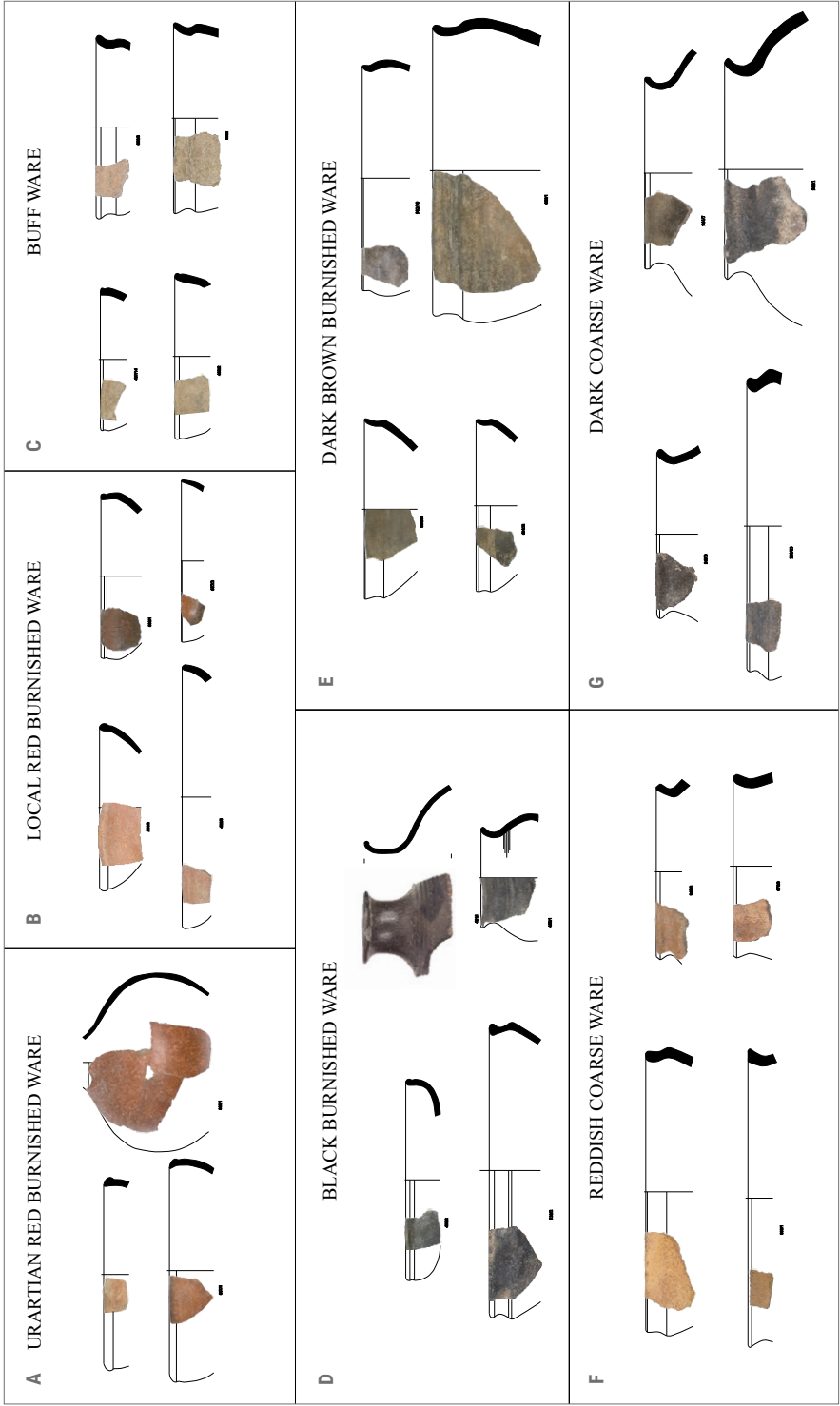


Fig. 4. Macroscopic ware groups dated to Metsamor Phases V–IVa (PCMA UW | (photos M. Truszkowski, drawing J. Pawlik, O. Puzskawicz)



ited in the 8th century BCE: the six overlapping clay floor levels recorded in S13 indicate occupation no more than two, maybe three decades long.

The new findings have also helped to differentiate stratigraphically between the two phases IVb and IVa. The latter of the two has been associated with, most probably, seasonal occupation of subterranean buildings like S1, S3, and S4. Structure S18, fully explored in the most recent season of fieldwork, has added a new, paved type of subterranean building; remains of an-

other one (S23), built partly on the ruins of House II, were also recorded. It now looks that structures of this type were not as isolated as previously thought, but formed a rather dense architectural network, with evident vertical stratigraphy between them. Thus, the occupation of subterranean buildings at Metsamor appears to have lasted over generations rather than being a short-lived episode, a finding additionally confirmed by the pottery typology. Phase IVa can be dated to the 7th century BCE.

## POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE

### WARE

The term “local pottery” as used in this text denotes five macroscopic groups (wares) classified as the Lchashen–Metsamor ceramic horizon (Avetisyan 2009; Avetisyan and Bobokhyan 2012) [Fig. 4:b,d,f,g], whereas the term “imperial pottery” refers to a very standardized and characteristic group, known in the literature as Urartian Red Burnished Ware/ Palace Ware (Avetisyan 1992; Kroll 1976) [Fig. 4:A]. There is also another group (called here simply Buff Ware), which is very problematic in terms of its cultural attribution and affinity to the other groups [Fig. 4:C].

Differentiating between macroscopic groups in the Lchashen–Metsamor (L–M) ceramic horizon can be fraught with uncertainty during a regular hand-specimen examination. Because locally made products do not keep any particular standards, their study translates into problems with the accuracy of the ceramic sequence, frequent in the case of pottery classified as L–M phases 5 and 6. Moreover, the last

phase of development of the L–M ceramic horizon is still scarcely recognized. Most of the information concerning this phase is derived from an examination of either the burial assemblages from cemeteries located on the shores of Sevan Lake (Yengibaryan 2002; 2019) or unpublished material from the Karmir Blur settlement.

A percentage analysis of ware distribution between the phases in question demonstrates at least three significant changes in the Metsamor assemblage [Fig. 5]. First and foremost, is the drop in Black Burnished Ware and Dark Coarse Ware between phases V and IVb. In Phase V, the two groups made up more than three quarters (78%) of the pottery from the site, dropping to just half in Phase IVb. The second significant change between the two phases is a rise in Buff Ware and Reddish Coarse Ware in Phase IVb. Accompanying this growth is the appearance of Urartian Red Burnished Ware, which is not unusual in itself, given the fact that Phase IVb is chronologically connected with the

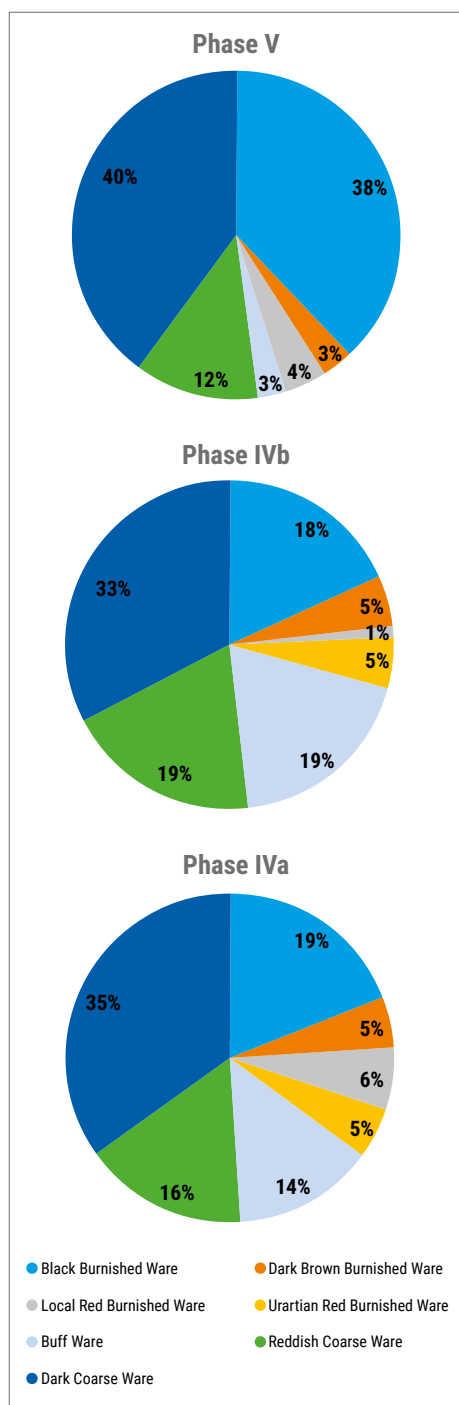


Fig. 5. Ware distribution in particular phases of the Iron I–II periods (PCMA UW | processing M. Iskra)

earliest stage of Urartian domination over the Ararat Plain, at the beginning of the 8th century BCE. The percentage distribution of wares in Phase IVb and Phase IVa is comparable, showing very little differences.

### TYPOMORPHOLOGY

Both continuity and change, the latter from slight to radical, can be observed when looking at the typomorphology of local pottery. Some functional forms, vessel shapes and decoration patterns are continued even as vessel quality and surface treatment demonstrate various degrees of change.

### Phase V

The pottery assemblages found in Phase V structure S21 and below the floor levels in House II are typical of the Lchashen-Metsamor Phase 5 from the early Iron Age (Iron I). The most characteristic fine-ware forms are the middle-sized and large bowls with straight or everted rim and small loop handles, placed either horizontally or vertically under the rim [Fig. 6:1–3]. Such vessels are often externally decorated with incised lines, radiating outward from the bottom, while the inside walls are sometimes decorated with a radial, burnished pattern. Other characteristic features include high quality firing in a reducing atmosphere and fine burnishing of black surfaces. Another bowl type from Phase V has a slightly inverted rim, vertical loop underneath, and a shiny black or brown surface decorated on the lower part of the vessel with a radial, burnished pattern [Fig. 6:4–6]. Both types of bowls were common in the settlement area as

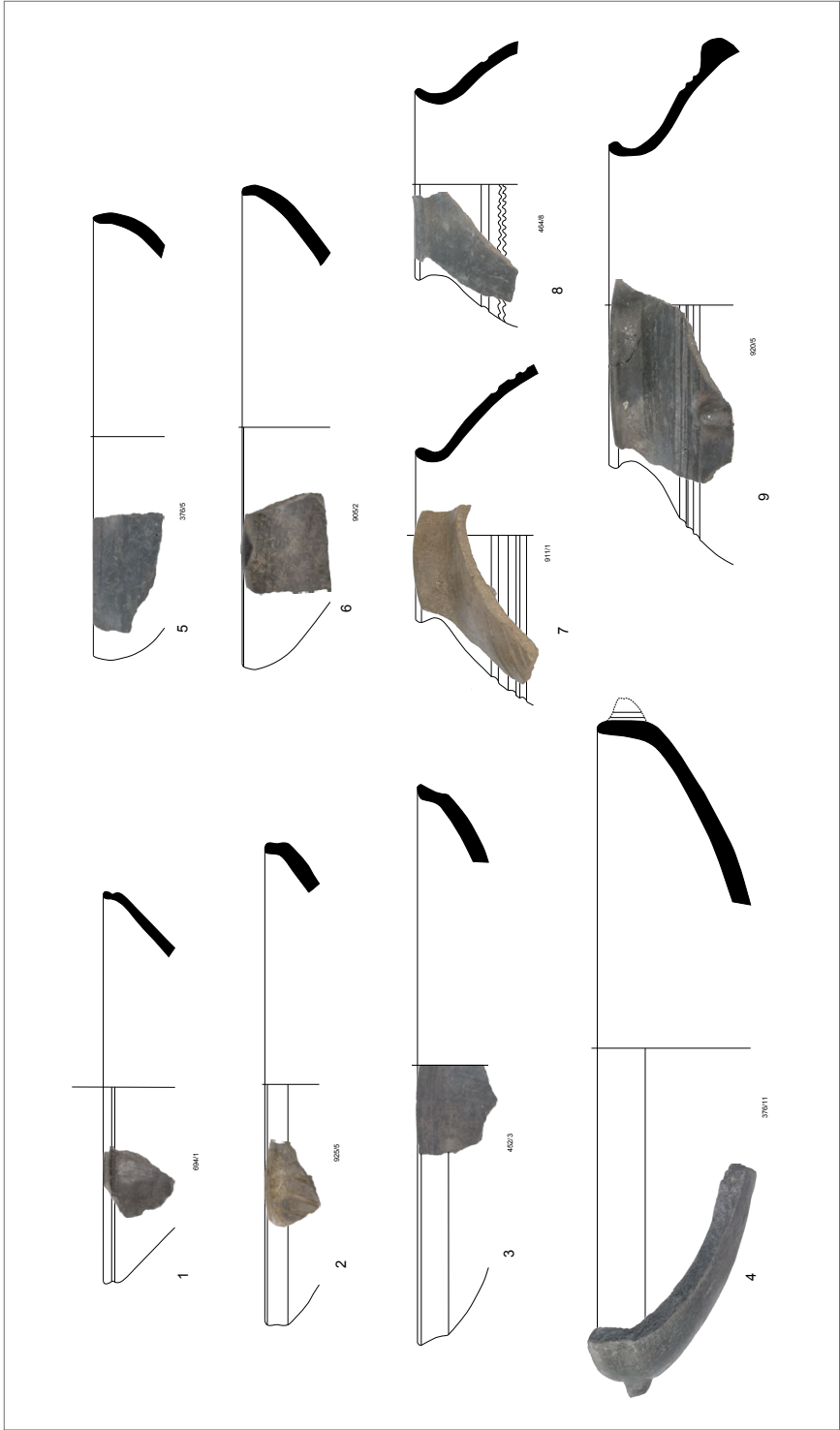


Fig. 6. Pottery assemblage from Phase V by type (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photos M. Truszkowski, drawing J. Pawlik, O. Puzskarewicz)

well as in the fortress and cemetery. They are also widespread at other sites in the Ararat Plain and the neighboring regions. Other common forms include large- and middle-sized jars characterized by a bulbous or globular profile, short neck with everted rim and rounded lip [Fig. 6:7–9]. Similarly to the bowls, the jars are mainly black or dark brown, with a finely burnished surface. They are usually decorated with complex incised patterns, consisting mainly of “hanging triangles” and horizontal or diagonal lines.

Coarse ware pottery is represented mainly by grey and dark brown jars with spherical or oval body, short neck, everted rim and rounded lip. The only decoration patterns on these vessels are impressed “fingernail” ornaments and horizontal or wavy lines.

### Phase IVb

Forms, shapes and decoration of coarse ware pottery from the previous phase is continued even as new forms of cooking pots and storage jars appear [Fig. 7:10, 11]. The most typical are large jars with short neck and slightly articulated rim, decorated with a combination of incised rope bands and impressed lines on the upper part. Alongside them are light reddish and buff neckless jars with oval body and everted rim, which are smaller and less decorated than their grey or dark brownish counterparts [Fig. 7:7]. Interestingly, the composition of both the dark coarse jars and the reddish and buff jars, examined by two different methods, is quite similar, the preliminary results of the pXRF method indicating a local origin of the fine-grained temper and ICP-MS giv-

ing comparable results. Another typical coarse-ware vessel type is a large black, or dark brown, unrestricted vat, characterized by a slightly everted and thickened rim, lack of decoration and poor quality of the outside burnish.

The most visible changes between Phases V and IVb are in the fine ware types. First and foremost, the decorated black burnished bowls and finely decorated jars with bulbous or spherical profiles were replaced by smaller types of undecorated bowls with straight rims and rounded lips, and by reddish or buff, grooved bowls with everted rims [Fig. 7:3,4]. Another new type is a simple small hemispherical bowl with pointed rim, sometimes ending in a rounded lip, resembling in shape and dimensions small Urartian bowls with reddish slip. Most spherical bowls have buff, orange or reddish, smoothed or burnished external surfaces which are never decorated [Fig. 7:1,2,5]. A dark reddish vessel of phiale-like shape with diagonal fluting as decoration is entirely unique.

Fluting can be considered as the most characteristic kind of decoration of local black burnished vessels from Phase IVb. It is common on cups with inverted rims [Fig. 7:6], but also frequent on the upper body of local jugs, these either without handles or with arched handles. The first type shows a close resemblance to black, burnished, handleless jugs from Phase V [Fig. 7:9], which have pear-shaped bodies and short funnel necks. Pitchers with arched handles and a light orange, smoothed surface constitute a completely new type without parallel in the earlier material. Some of the features resemble common reddish vessels from Urartian

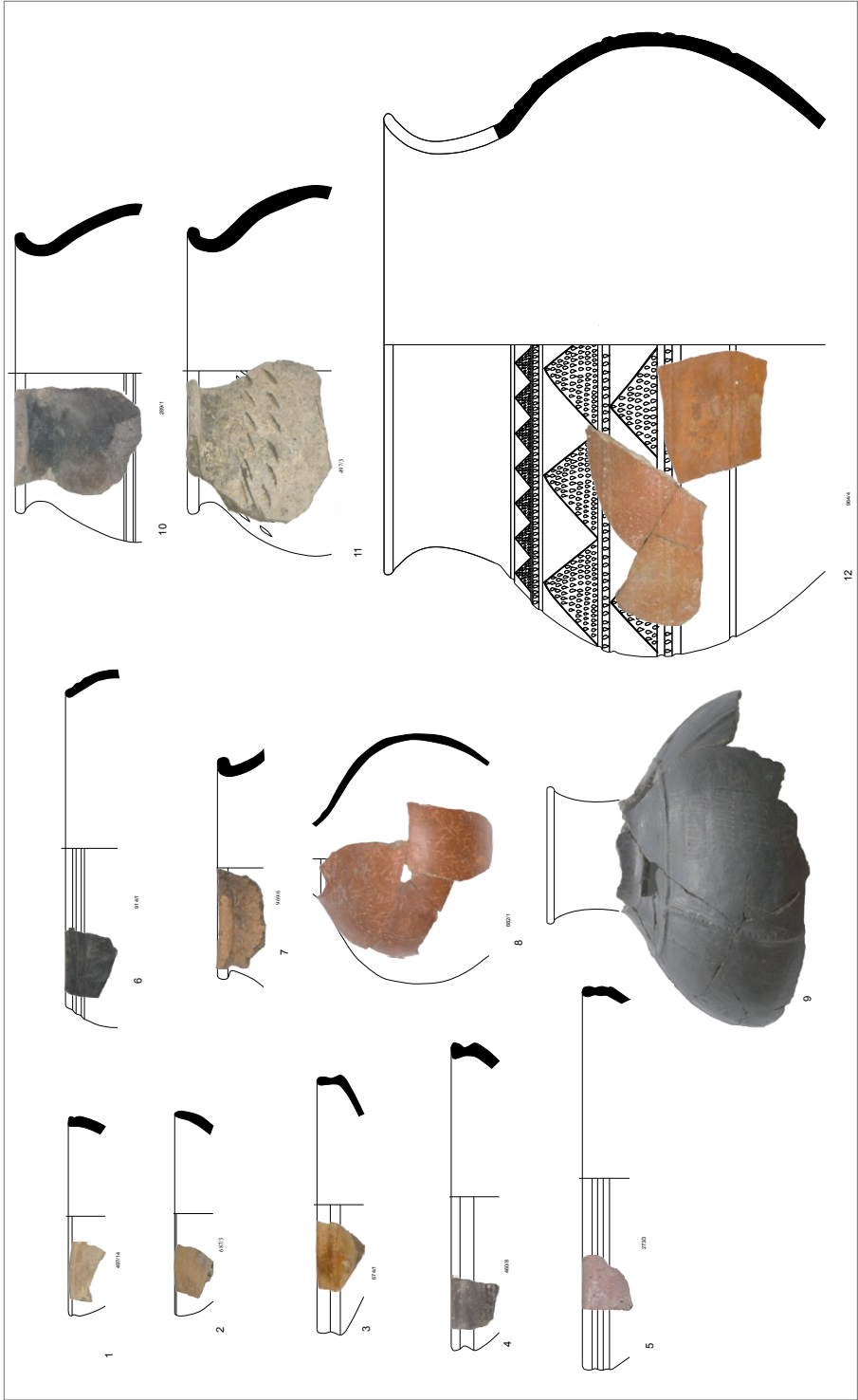


Fig. 7. Pottery assemblage from Phase IVb by type (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photos M. Truszkowski, drawing J. Pawlik, O. Puskarewicz)

fortresses, but the temper composition and type of handle are different.

Imperial/Urartian vessels from Phase IVb are represented mostly by oinochoe-type jugs [Fig. 7:8]. At least five jugs with dark red or reddish brown slip were found in the area of House II. They represent two main variants with ring-shaped bottom, spherical body and arched handle. One of them was even stamped, which is not a common feature on vessels found outside of the main Urartian sites. However, these jugs are the only examples of standardized imperial vessels present in Phase IVb layers; other standardized forms, such as bowls with inverted rims, torpedo jars, or pithoi with a fusiform body, are absent from the record. The missing large containers are especially symptomatic, since they could be proof that the settlement and fortress in Metsamor were probably not involved in the imperial administrative system.

A unique red slipped and burnished jar shares both traditional, that is, local and imperial features [Fig. 7:12]. It was found in parts in the earliest levels of Phase IVb in Rooms S13 and S19, thus it should be dated to the very beginning of the Urartian domination over Metsamor. The jar's uniqueness lies in its shape, resembling wide-mouthed jars decorated at the edge of the orifice with bull protomes and decoration consisting of at least three rows of incised triangles separated by bands with a "teardrop" ornament. Although the shape and the surface treatment of the vessel can be considered as a Urartian feature, the type of decoration could have local cultural connotations. Black burnished or red slip vessels with a similar type of decoration have been

found (Khanzadyan et. al. 1973: Pl. XLII; Avetisyan 1992: Pl. III.7, XVII, 3–5), but, interestingly, only on sites located in the Ararat Plain. Moreover, the jar from Metsamor was found together with a black burnished jug with a similar ornamented band on the upper body. Thus, if we consider this type of decoration as a local feature, then perhaps, we can perceive the "teardrop" ornament as nothing else but a stylized version of Urartian cuneiform signs.

### Phase IVa

A significant change was noted in the imperial pottery assemblage from the next phase (IVa) of the settlement. Most of the red-slipped and burnished diagnostic sherds found in cultural deposits associated with the subterranean buildings belong to small bowls with inverted and thickened rim [Fig. 8:1–4], while there is no trace of oinochoe-type jugs. The bowl type from this phase is highly standardized in terms of dimensions, fabric and overall shape, with only slight differences in slip color and lip shape. According to Stephan Kroll, this type is widespread in fortresses founded by Rusa son of Argišti; hence it should be dated mainly to the first half of the 7th century BCE (Kroll 1976: 122–124). This could explain the lack of inverted bowls with thickened rim in Phase IVb, but the absence of oinochoe-type jugs in Phase IVa is still curious given the fact that this type was particularly widespread at sites like Karmir Blur, Bastam or Ayanis.

Other bowls from Phase IVa can be divided into two morphological groups: either spherical with pointed rims or carinated with everted rims. The first group

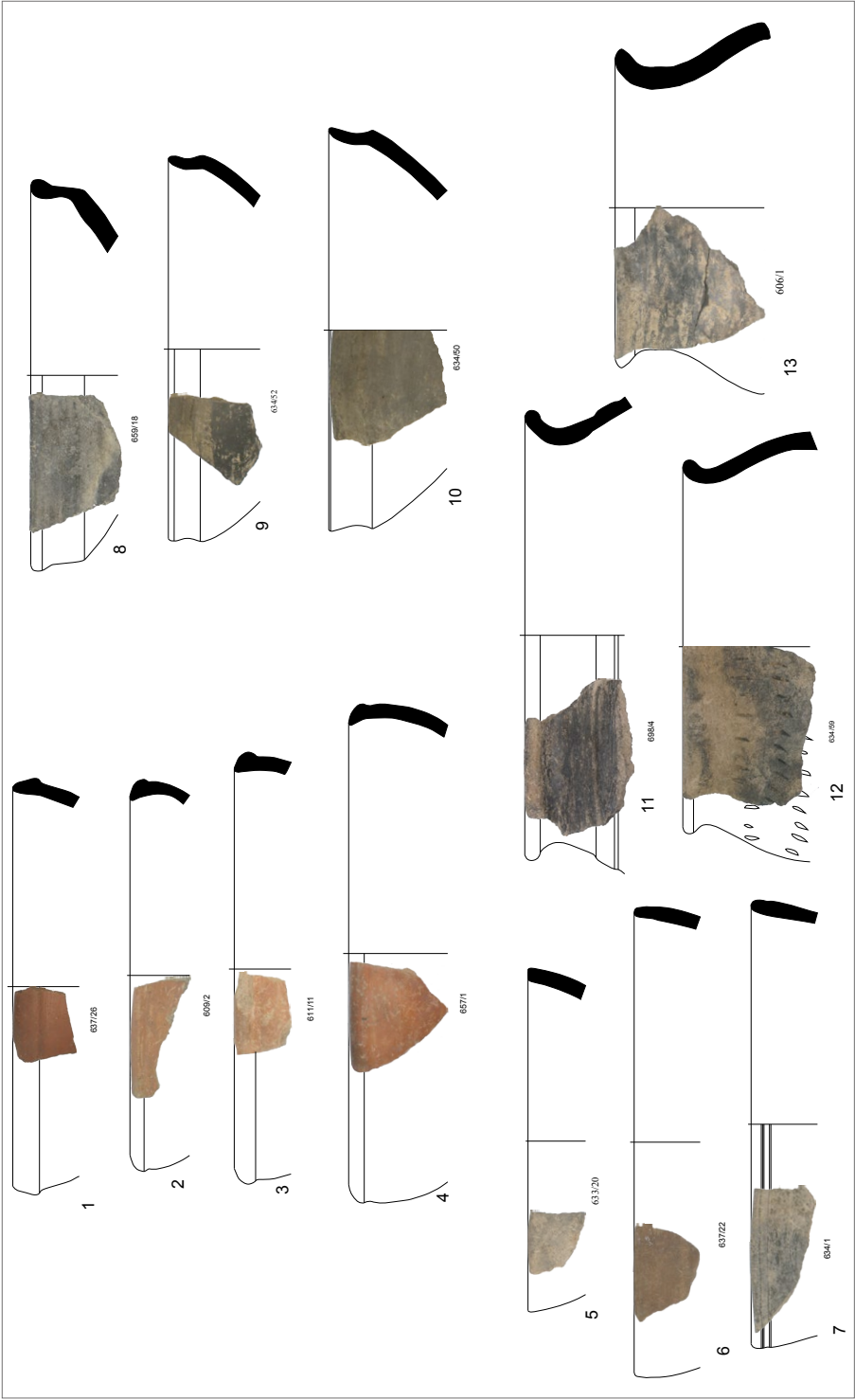


Fig. 8. Pottery assemblage from Phase IVa by type (University of Warsaw Metsamor Project | photos M. Truszkowski, drawing J. Pawlik, O. Puszczkiewicz)



consists of mostly light reddish and buff vessels with smoothed surfaces, however there are also types with the surfaces either red- or black burnished [Fig. 8:5–7]. All are undecorated, which is a very common feature among bowls from Phases IVb and IVa, classified as the Buff Ware and Reddish Coarse Ware macroscopic groups. The second group encompasses mainly black and dark brown vessels characterized by uneven reduction firing, low quality burnish and lack of decoration [Fig. 8:8–10]. Given their shape and type of surface treatment, it is very likely that the black and dark brown vessels from Phase IVa evolved directly from the small undecorated bowls with articulated rims that were widespread in Phase IVb.

In general, a gradual deterioration of surface finishing can be observed on the fine black and dark brown burnished vessels, at least compared to Phase V. This trend is seen on bowls, but also on other

forms, such as small jars and jugs, and it is limited to such elements as the quality of the burnish and decorative patterns. No more than 50% of the traditional ornaments connected with the L-M pottery horizon from the Iron Age were noted in the Phase IVa material. The most frequently occurring motif encompasses simple horizontal lines incised under the rim of small neckless jars with an oval body.

Coarse ware pottery from Phase IVa consists mainly of middle-sized neckless jars that repeat in their shapes, fabric and decoration forms known from the preceding period [Fig. 8:11–13]. Yet the number of large storage jars in this phase is clearly limited. Apart from two storage jars from the very problematic (in view of the chronology) floor level of S<sub>1</sub>, vessels of this type do not seem to be used by the inhabitants of subterranean buildings S<sub>4</sub>, S<sub>18</sub>, S<sub>23</sub> and S<sub>24</sub>.

## DISCUSSION

The apparent architectural continuity of the outer town in Metsamor between Phases V and IVb must be factored in when considering the impact of socio-political changes occurring in the 8th century BCE on the circulation patterns of local and imperial pottery. The presence of a local population, still inhabiting the main domestic structures in the eastern part of the outer town, justifies continuous and unchanged production and use of black and dark brown burnished table vessels along with the “traditional” utilitarian pottery forms. In this regard, initial results of geochemical analysis (pXRF) of 60 pottery samples

show a largely heterogeneous elemental composition of the clay matrix of local vessels from the 10th century BCE to the 7th. This could indicate the use of the same sources of raw clay and the same fabric recipes for production of black burnished and dark coarse vessels for the better part of four centuries. Additional petrographic and geochemical analysis are needed to confirm this early assumption.

From a typo-morphological perspective, minor changes mark the transition from Phase V to Phase IVb as far as the local pottery assemblage is concerned. These changes concern mostly surface

treatment and decoration rather than shape or size. The most notable change is the disappearance of decorated, highly burnished bowls and handleless jugs, the principal types of table vessels in Phase V. It was not accompanied, however, by a massive introduction of new types of high quality vessels, even though Phase IVb is to be connected with the appearance of Urartian Red Burnished Ware at the site. The small percentage of this group in the ceramic assemblage as a whole, coupled with a sparse presence of red-slipped sherds in the middens or waste pits from Phase IVb, could indicate weak reception of this kind of pottery by the local population of Metsamor.

The appearance of this group was related to the role of the site in the regional economic network in the 8th century BCE, which directly affected the cultural exchange between Metsamor and neighboring imperial centres, such as Armavir/Argištihinili and Arin Berd/Erebuni. Based on preliminary results of geochemical analyses (ICP-MS, supported by pXRF), it can be assumed that the group of red-slipped vessels found in Phase IVb should be considered in its entirety as an import, even if its place of origin is still questioned. Given the epigraphic and archaeological evidence on trade and economic relations within the Urartian Empire, the most logical import route of Urartian Red Burnished pottery to Metsamor could be linked to the grain trade between the agricultural hinterland and the main Urartian fortress-cities. Although evidence abounds for intensive cultivation of the area around Metsamor at least since the Early Iron Age (Khanzadyan et al. 1973),

storage facilities that could be attributed to the Urartians have not been discovered hitherto in Metsamor. Neither have there been any finds of other standardized types of imperial utilitarian ceramics, such as torpedo-like jars, conical vats or cigar-shaped pithoi. While the fine, thick-walled, red-slipped pottery was one of the main manifestations of what could be called a state assemblage and, generally speaking, an assemblage characteristic of Urartian courtly culture, the concept of its exceptionality and elitism did not find breeding ground in Metsamor society. The most visible expression of this is a minute representation of vessels and other objects of imperial cultural provenience in local burials from the 8th century BCE. Even more so, there seem to be local imitations of Urartian Red Burnished pottery. In this regard, a typo-morphological analysis of Local Red Burnished pottery from Phase IVb did not reveal any “external” features of their shape, fabric or surface treatment that could be recognized as clear evidence of the influence of an imperial pottery tradition. Moreover, the unusual incised decoration of a red-slipped jar discovered in 2021 could be an indication of a regional style of some kind in the imperial pottery tradition, attributable to workshops in Armavir/Argištihinili where the bulk of vessels decorated with a similar incised pattern was found.

Another aspect related to Phase IVb is the emergence of Buff Ware (the discussion of this ware is beyond the scope of this article). This pottery group is hardly well described yet, but fragments of buff vessels found in household contexts of the outer town in Metsamor form a clearly

distinguishable group of ceramics. This group differs from the local and imperial pottery assemblage in shape, dimensions, fabric and surface treatment, hence it is tempting to speculate about the existence of a third potting tradition in the region during the early Urartian period. Unlike Urartian Red Burnished Ware, vessels with buff, pale and light reddish surfaces have local chemical fingerprints indicating that they were produced locally, alongside with the black burnished and dark coarse vessels. However, this group is present mainly in household contexts but not in the assemblages from local stone-cist tombs of the 8th century BCE. This observation could lead to two preliminary assumptions: either Buff Ware was considered as exclusively utilitarian vessels by the inhabitants of the outer town or it should be connected with the newcomers settling in some part of the outer town at the beginning of Urartian domination over the region. For now the cultural provenience of Buff Ware remains an open question and should undergo further study including data collected from other settlements in the region.

The abandonment of the main domestic structures of the outer town in Metsamor at the end of Phase IVb most likely triggered further changes in the local ceramic assemblage. With the in-

roduction of subterranean architecture, the population of the outer town presumably changed, and so did the economy and, to some degree, the material culture. Technologically and aesthetically, vessels used by the dwellers of the subterranean buildings are much closer to pottery produced by mobile people rather than a sedentary society. This translates into relatively low quality of execution and an absence of decoration on tableware from Phase IVa. Moreover, a mobile lifestyle had no use for large containers, such as pithoi, explaining their absence from the fill of the subterranean buildings. Nevertheless, the changes observed on black burnished and dark coarse pottery of the 7th century BCE should not be perceived as a new potting tradition associated with a culturally distant population migrating into the region. Based on data from other sites, such as Karmir Blur and Arin Berd (Fichet de Clairfontaine, Deschamps 2012; Martirosyan 1961: 101–103), it seems more likely that the observed transformations can be recognized as a continued evolution of the Lchashen-Metsamor ceramic tradition, reflecting socio-economic change in the life of an indigenous population rather than an influx of new ethnic elements at the end of the Urartian era in the Ararat Plain.

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