

Multiple aspects of reuse in Middle Byzantine glazed pottery from Argos

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Abstract: The study of reuse in Middle Byzantine glazed pottery, albeit in its infancy, explores a practice that may sometimes be hard to interpret but that can offer us interesting evidence about the domestic economy and practices of the time. Meanwhile it implies the value ascribed to this pottery by its owners, mainly due to its being glazed and decorated.

Key words: Domestic practices; reuse; glazed pottery; Argos; 12th – early 13th century

Resumen: El estudio de la reutilización en la cerámica vidriada bizantina media, aunque incipiente, explora una práctica a veces difícil de interpretar, pero que puede ofrecernos interesantes indicios sobre la economía y las prácticas domésticas de la época. Al mismo tiempo, implica el valor atribuido a esta cerámica por sus propietarios, debido principalmente a que estaba vidriada y decorada.

Palabras clave: Prácticas domésticas; reutilización; cerámica vidriada; Argos; siglos XII - principios del XIII

Despite its many interesting aspects and its various socioeconomic connotations, the issue of reuse of Byzantine glazed pottery has not yet been the subject of thorough research and publication (On this subject see lately Yangaki, 2018: 136-147; Vuković and Bikić, 2022). Its documentation is also hampered by the fact that we often do not know the second or even the original use of a vessel and we can only speculate based on common sense, while in many cases it is not clear whether an alteration in a vessel was made with a view to reuse or simply for maintenance purposes (On a methodological approach to these issues in Roman pottery see the important monograph by J.T. Peña, 2007).

Notwithstanding these obvious difficulties, the rich material of Middle Byzantine glazed pottery from Argos offers us some interesting cases of reuse as well as maintenance of glazed pottery (see also Vassiliou, 2021, vol. I: 207-210). The most well-known practice associated with maintenance and sometimes reuse of pottery since antiquity is the connecting up of the broken parts of the vessel using metal clamps or wires or other material including leather or plant fibre (On this practice in antiquity see Peña, 2007: 232-249; Rotroff, 2011; on Byzantine pottery see Yangaki, 2018: esp.

136-147). It could be argued that these repaired vessels might have continued to be used, though perhaps only for solid foods (Papanikola-Bakirtzi, 2005: 128) or for the decoration of the house.

In the Middle Byzantine glazed pottery found at Argos this practice is not very common, as evidenced to date in the following wares: Measles (3 specimens), Green and Brown Painted (2 specimens), Slip Painted – Dark on Light (1 specimen), Fine Sgraffito (1 specimen) and Champlévé (1 specimen). In all these examples this practice is attested solely by the repair holes, mainly of small diameter, detected mostly in the body of the broken vessels (bowls or dishes) (Fig. 1) and in fewer cases in their base (Fig. 2), while the binding/bracing material is not preserved, as is more usually the case (On a Slip Painted bowl where the metal clamps are preserved see Papanikola-Bakirtzi, 2005: 124-125, 128, fig. 13). Here it should be mentioned that in an excavation at Argos (Palaiologou plot) a significant number of lead joints have been found and the excavators assume that there must have been a small workshop mainly used for repairing pottery (Bakourou and Tsekas, 1999: 224). However, the dating of these lead joints is not



Figure 1. Argos, Fine Sgraffito Ware, 2nd quarter – mid-12th c.

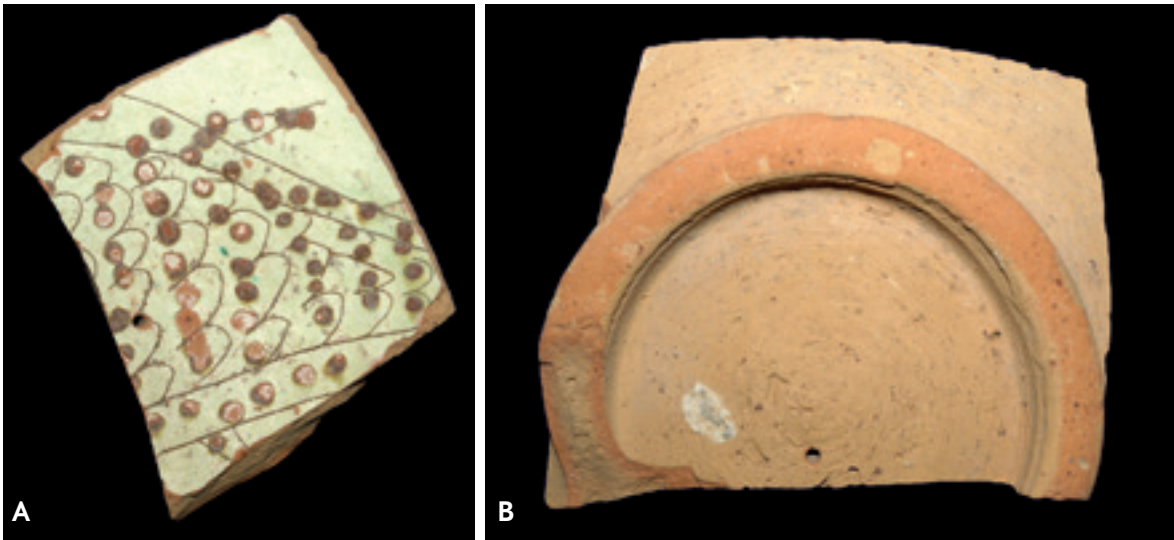


Figure 2. A-B: Argos, Measles Ware, 2nd quarter - mid-12th c.

clear (perhaps Early Byzantine?) and unfortunately it was not possible for me to detect them.

Observing these repair holes, it is evident that they were carefully made and in my opinion this suggests that they must have been made by specialists, perhaps potters or other craftsmen such as tinsmiths or tinkers. It could be also argued that in Argos, there were pottery workshops, which along with manufacturing and selling the ceramics, would have also served as repair shops.

What is more frequently found in the Argive material is a hole in the ring of the base of open

vessels. This practice has been detected to date in the following wares: Fine Sgraffito (28 specimens), Measles (26 specimens), Green and Brown Painted (17 specimens), Slip Painted – Light on Dark (5 specimens), Painted Sgraffito (3 specimens), Incised Sgraffito (1 specimen) and Undecorated/Monochrome Glazed (1 specimen). In Unslipped Glazed Red Ware, Slip Painted – Dark on Light, Spatter Painted and Champlévé it has not to date been detected. This also applies to Glazed White Wares, though these are in any case a rare find in the Argive material.

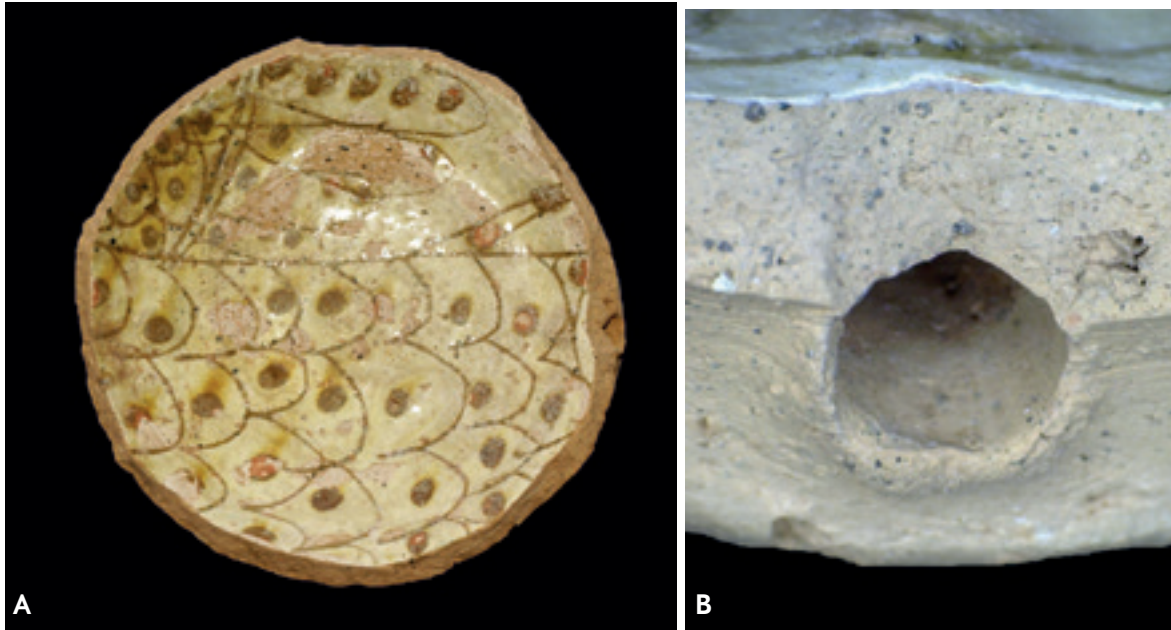


Figure 3. A-B: Argos, Measles Ware, 2nd quarter – mid-12th c.

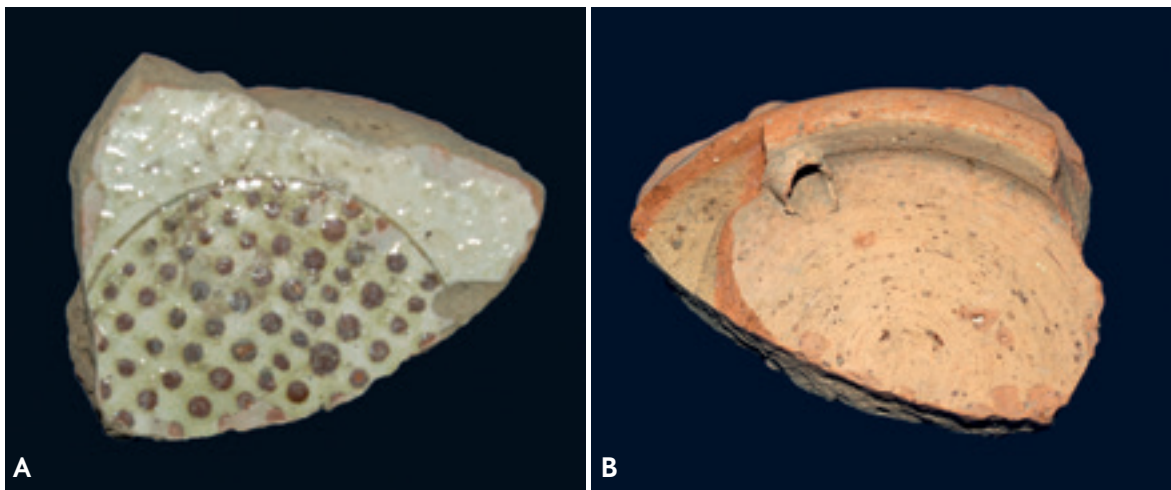


Figure 4. A-B: Argos, Measles Ware, 2nd quarter – mid-12th c.

Taking a closer look at these holes it is obvious that some (if not most) of them must have been made when the vessel was manufactured (Fig. 3B), mainly working from the outside to the inside (Fig. 4B). As for their exact purpose, they are unlikely to have been intended for repairs, given that they do not seem to connect the existing sherd with another broken piece (Fig. 5). A likely explanation is that these holes were used for hanging these vessels on a wall (perhaps using a loop of string or wire) for the decoration of the house. This was a well-known practice until recently, above all

in Greek villages and islands (see indicatively Korre-Zografou, 1995). Apart from decorative purposes, this practice also served to protect the vessels, which would have been better protected from accidents when hung up (Sanders, 2013: 2) Interestingly enough some vessels were pierced in the ring base, despite the fact that they had obvious flaws in their initial manufacture (e.g. being overfired, or having flawed or unsuccessful decoration etc.) (Fig. 6) (I should point out that suspension holes are not typically considered to belong to the subject matter with which I am concerned in this paper; however, I

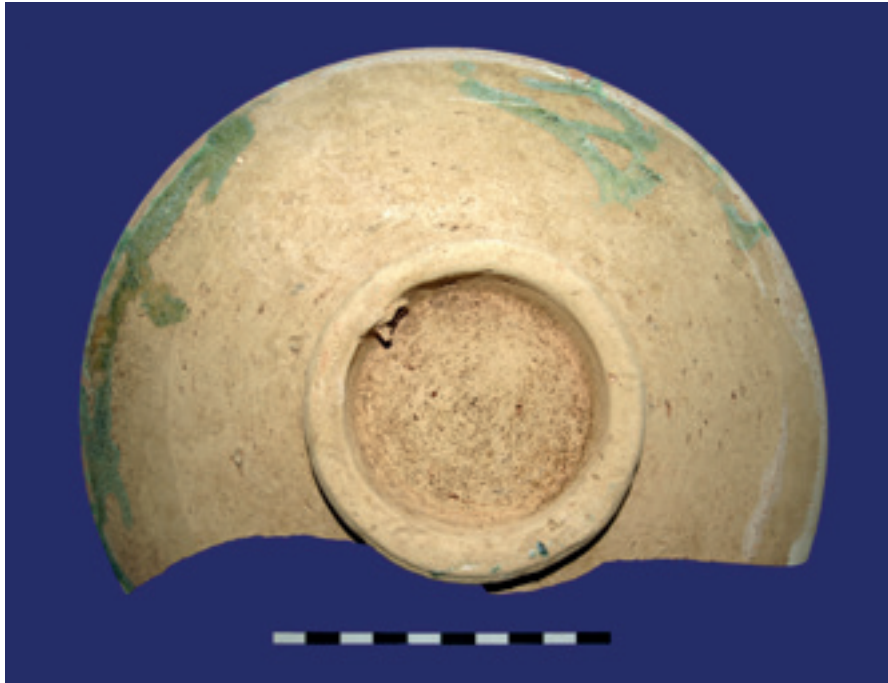


Figure 5. Argos, Monochrome Glazed Ware, 2nd – 3rd quarter of 12th c.

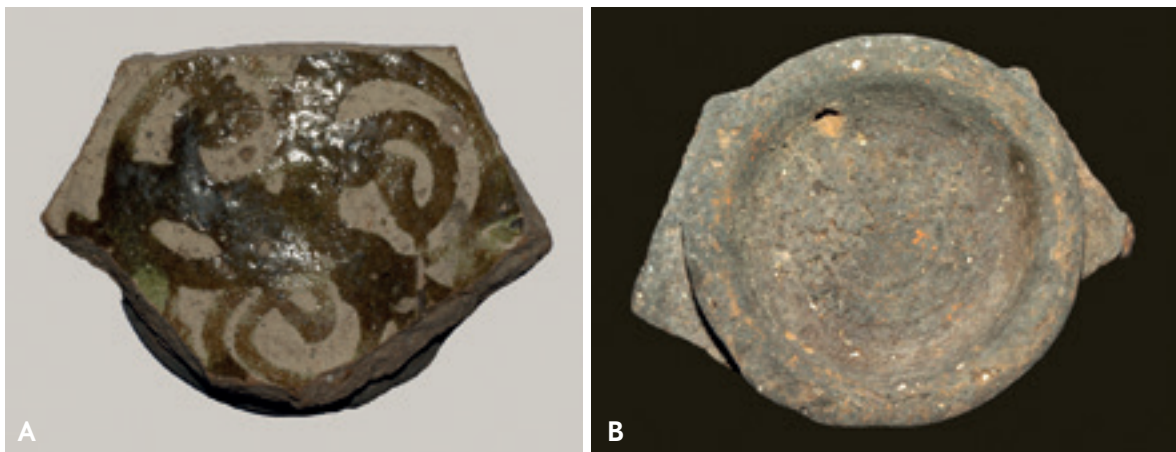


Figure 6. A-B: Argos, Green and Brown Painted Ware, late 12th – 1st half of 13th c.

have preferred to include them as they are technically related to repair holes and in any case we cannot exclude the possibility that broken vessels, given adequate processing, could have been hung up in order to decorate the house).

Another practice connected with reuse is the piercing of the bottom of the vessels. In the Argive material it has been detected in one Glazed White Ware IV vessel, three Green and Brown Painted and one Monochrome Glazed, which have a hole close to or almost directly in the centre of their base. The size of these holes varies, as does the care with which they have

been made (Fig. 7). As for their purpose, it is not altogether clear; perhaps they were used as strainers or funnels of some sort.

Several cases of reuse involve a decorative second use of preserved fragments. For example, there are open vessels in which only the base and lower walls survive and, at some point, when perhaps their upper (and more fragile) part was broken, the surviving walls were rounded down, retaining only the central decoration. This practice has been pinpointed in three specimens of Fine Sgraffito and one specimen each of Green and Brown Painted,

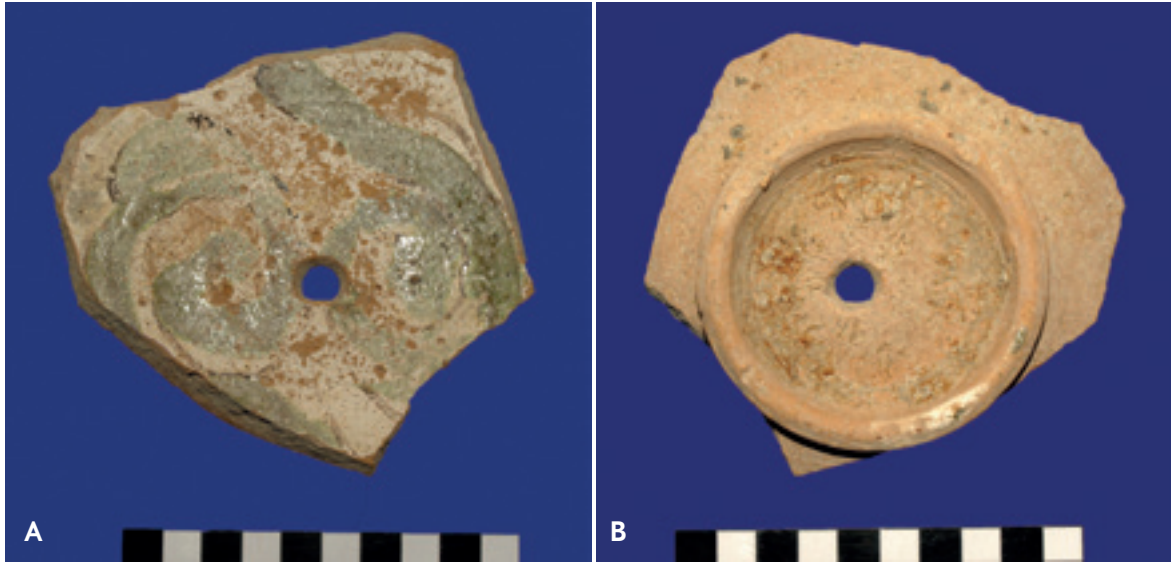


Figure 7. A-B: Argos, Green and Brown Painted Ware, late 12th – 1st half of 13th c.



Figure 8. Argos, Fine Sgraffito Ware, 3rd quarter of 12th c.

Measles and Incised Sgraffito wares. In a Fine Sgraffito specimen the rounding seems to follow the central medallion on the base (Fig. 8), while in a Measles specimen there is no such correspondence between the reshaping and the decoration (Fig. 3A); this may have been dictated by the initial point of fracture. The most carefully executed rounding was ob-

served in an Incised Sgraffito base (Fig. 9). The vessel's walls have been carefully rounded off to align with the central medallion and given a smooth beveled edge. I assume that this must have been done by a craftsman, perhaps in a potter's workshop. What is also interesting is that this specimen was found in a grave and must have been a grave offering.



Figure 9. Argos, Incised Sgraffito Ware, 3rd quarter of 12th c.

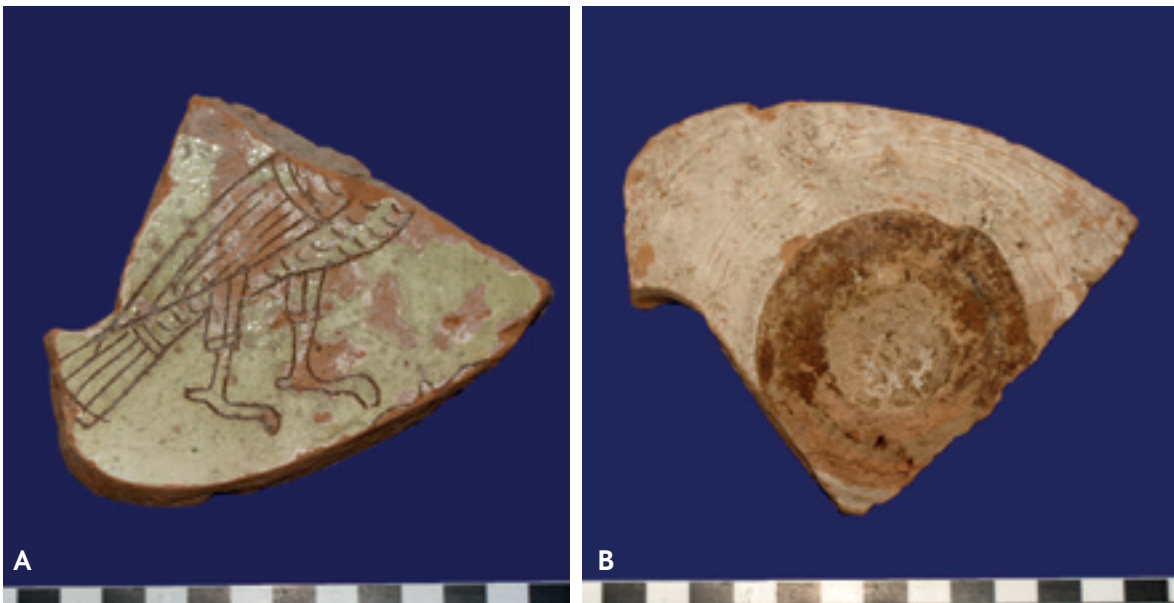


Figure 10. A-B: Argos, Fine Sgraffito Ware, 4th quarter of 12th c.

In a Fine Sgraffito vessel with figural decoration the ring base was removed, possibly because it had been broken and the vessel was given a second life as a decorative object (Fig. 10). Perhaps the preserved part of the vessel was laid on its side in a cupboard as a decorative element of the house.

Another case of reuse is attested in a Fine Sgraffito fragment where the background of the decoration was removed, so that only the central figural part was preserved (Fig. 11).

Finally, a probable second use is detected in the handle of a Fine Sgraffito lid, which, once the



Figure 11. Argos, Fine Sgraffito Ware, 3rd quarter of 12th c.



Figure 12. Argos, Fine Sgraffito Ware, 3rd quarter of 12th c.

lid itself was broken, could perhaps have served as a spool (Vassiliou, 2021: vol. II, 127-128 no. 338) (Fig. 12). It has the shape and the dimensions of a spool, while a rough attempt at rounding its lower surface is observed.

All these examples provide us with interesting data on domestic practices of the time. At the same time, they indicate the value of Middle Byzantine glazed pottery to its owners, who, whether alone or with the help of craftsmen, extended the life of these ceramics, providing them with an alternative and, in some cases, more idiosyncratic use.

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