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## ORNAMENTAL TRADITIONS IN LATE HELLENISTIC TABLE WARE FROM MYRMEKION

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*This article examines the Hellenistic ceramic assemblage from Myrmekion preserved at the National Museum in Warsaw, formed during excavations in Crimea in the 1950s, with particular attention to fragments of painted table ware from the Late Hellenistic period. Their vegetal decoration reflects both local Bosporan traditions and broader artistic influences.*

**Keywords:** *Hellenistic period, Northern Black Sea region, Bosporan Kingdom, Myrmekion, table ware, plant motifs.*

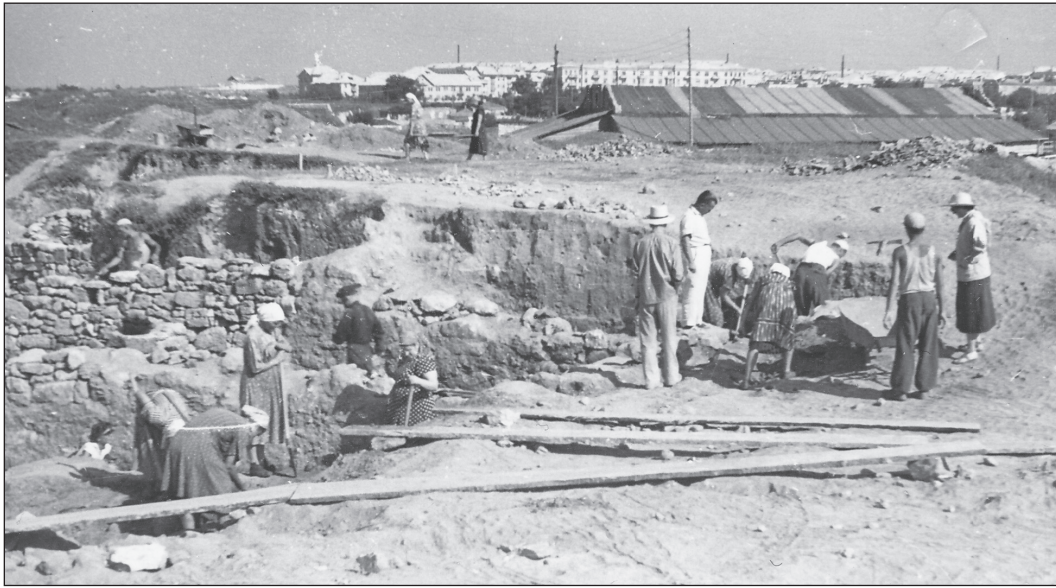
**Introduction.** The Late Hellenistic period in the Northern Black Sea region was marked by significant political and economic transformations that directly affected the material culture of local centres. The Bosporan Kingdom, which included eastern Crimea and the Taman Peninsula, was one of the largest states in the region, where elements of Greek peripheral culture survived for several centuries. The study of the materials from the Bosphorus makes it possible to trace the adaptation of panhellenistic models alongside local innovations, particularly within domestic categories such as table ware.

During this period, it is traditionally represented by both imported categories and local products that not only imitated Attic or Asia Minor prototypes but also embodied distinctive local features. Of particular value in this respect are fragments of painted vessels preserving decorative elements that diverge from classical Attic conventions and thus allow for the identification of stylistic traits characteristic of local production. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to analyse the ornamental repertoire of painted table ware from the

Bosphorus and to determine its place within the decorative traditions of the Northern Black Sea region and the Mediterranean during the Hellenistic period. The objectives of the study include the characterization of morphological and technological features, analysis of the painted decoration, identification of stylistic parallels, and refinement of the chronology of the assemblage.

One of the key sites for the present research is the insufficiently studied ceramic assemblage from ancient Myrmekion. This centre belonged to the so-called small cities of the Bosporan Kingdom and was founded by colonists from Miletus at the turn of the first and second quarters of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Vinogradov 1999, p. 288). Geographically, Myrmekion was located approximately 4 km east of Panticapaeum, the capital of the Bosporan rulers. Today, the site is located at Cape Quarantine within the city of Kerch, on the shore of the Kerch Strait.

The Greek and Roman periods in the history of the city extend from the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Throughout this period, Myrmekion experienced phases of prosperity and decline. With regard to the Hellenistic period, which is the focus of the present study, it should be defined here in terms of specific historical events in the city's history. It began around the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, following the reconstruction of the city after the fire of the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and lasted until the second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. At this time, the Pontic king Mithridates VI Eupator came to power in the Bosporan Kingdom, and protracted wars with Rome followed. Conflict with local authorities, as well as the destructive earthquake of 63 BC, led to a crisis in urban life at Myrmekion (Гайдукевич 1959, с. 6).



**Fig. 1.** Fieldwork at Myrmekion, 1956 (?) (photo from the private archive of Zofia Sztetyłło)  
**Рис. 1.** Польові роботи на Мірмекії, 1956 (?) (фото з приватного архіву Зофії Штетилло)

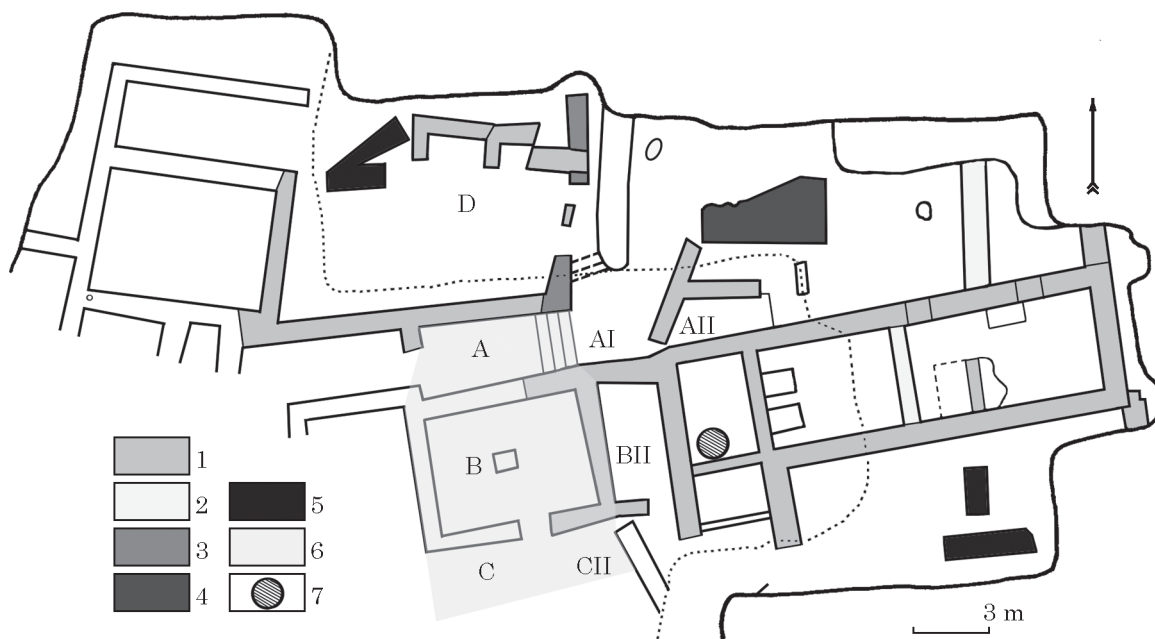
The history of archaeological research on the Bosphorus, and on Myrmekion in particular, covers approximately two centuries. In 1820, Paul Dubrux and Ivan Stempkovsky prepared the first schematic plan of the city. The first small-scale excavations were carried out here by Alexander Lyutsenko in 1863. Over the following fifty years, research at the site remained sporadic. Systematic excavations began in the 1930s, with an interruption during the Second World War. During this period, cultural layers dating from the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD were uncovered (Гайдукевич 1959, с. 3—15; Scholl 2014, s. 118—140). The Hellenistic period is particularly well represented, marked by local development of viticulture (Гайдукевич 1949, с. 169).

**History and Characteristics of the Collection.** A particularly notable episode in the history of research at Myrmekion was the joint Soviet-Polish excavations of 1956—1958 (fig. 1). The expedition was led on the Polish side by Kazimierz Michałowski and on the Soviet side by Viktor Gaidukevich. As noted in the memoirs of members of the Polish expedition, the teams worked in different areas of the site and employed different field methods, which facilitated an exchange of experience. Each year the excavations lasted for two months. In the following year, an exhibition dedicated to the results of the completed field season was held at the museum in Warsaw (Шолль 2021, с. 138—139). It should be noted that all these stages were well documented: exhibition catalogues and excavation reports were published in three volumes (Katalog... 1957; Michałowski 1958; Гайдукевич 1959; Pamiętnik... 1959; Sztetyłło 1976). In 1958, this practice of joint excavations came to an end for political reasons. Nevertheless, these short-term excavations in Crimea yielded remarkable ma-

terials that are now part of the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw.

Although the collection was formed on the basis of materials from only three field seasons, its principal characteristic may be described as its representativeness. The most numerous categories of material are pottery, which belongs to different chronological periods. The earliest finds were dated by researchers to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Typologically, the collection includes the following categories: transport amphorae, relief bowls, terracotta figurines, lamps, household items, cooking ware, and table ware. It divided into imported vessels and locally produced ceramics, to which the materials selected for this study belong. A substantial portion of the assemblage dates to the Hellenistic period (late 4<sup>th</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC), which is the second characteristic feature of this collection (Kotenko 2024, p. 80—82). This, however, may not fully reflect the actual proportion of finds from Myrmekion, as it rather represents the stratigraphic situation of a particular excavation area.

**General Characteristics of the Materials.** A group of painted table ware is of particular interest, although it remains insufficiently studied despite its widespread presence in Hellenistic layers of Bosphoran centres. Within the examined collection, it is represented by 43 fragments. Given the absence of complete vessels, a comprehensive morphological analysis is not possible. Therefore, the present study focuses primarily on the examination of ornamental compositions. Despite their fragmentary preservation, these materials allow the identification of morphological and decorative features that are typical of Bosphoran production (Kotenko 2025, p. 28). The fabrics of the fragments are composed of locally sourced clay and are characterized by a reddish to orange colour with minor limestone inclusions. They mainly belong



**Fig. 2.** Plan of the excavations at Myrmekion, 1957 (Sztetyllo 1976): 1 — 3<sup>rd</sup>—2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC; 2 — late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC; 3 — 2<sup>nd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC; 4 — 1<sup>st</sup>—2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD; 5 — 2<sup>nd</sup>—3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD; 6 — area of finds; 7 — wine press (3<sup>rd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC)

**Рис. 2.** План розкопок Мірмекія, 1957 (Sztetyllo 1976): 1 — III—II ст. до н. е.; 2 — кінець II ст. до н. е.; 3 — II—I ст. до н. е.; 4 — I—II ст. н. е.; 5 — II—III ст. н. е.; 6 — зона знахідок; 7 — виноробня (III—I ст. до н. е.)

to jugs and possibly, to bowls. The wall thickness varies from 0.4 to 0.8 cm, while the body diameter of the jugs may have reached up to 20 cm.

The archaeological context of this material is particularly interesting. The fragments selected for this study originate primarily from buildings A, B—BI, and C—CI (fig. 2), which were excavated in 1956—1957 (Michałowski 1958, s. 29—48; Sztetyllo 1976, s. 12). Within the building assemblage, they are situated in close proximity to the winery (fig. 3), which was in operation during the 3<sup>rd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC (Michałowski 1958, s. 48—64). This pottery was attributed to local production and dated to the late 3<sup>rd</sup>—early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC (Sztetyllo 1976, tabl. XI—XII). However, based on a number of analogies from other Bosphoran centres, a later chronology cannot be excluded, potentially extending to the entire 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Сокольський 1976, рис. 53: 6). This interpretation is consistent with other finds, including those from buildings C—CI, which could also date to the Late Hellenistic period. Consequently, it is possible to propose a later dating for local painted table ware from the Bosphorus, namely the 2<sup>nd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, in consideration of the long-standing local tradition of decorating table vessels.

**Surface Treatment.** The analysis of the material begins with the examination of vessel surface treatment. The assemblage is characterized by a coating whose colour ranges from reddish brown (fig. 4: 1—3, 5—10) to brownish purple (fig. 4: 4). Technologically, however, all fragments belong to a single tradition of coating the external surface

of vessels with slips (engobe). In terms of their physical properties, the slips are composed of fine-grained clays that are more plastic than the forming clay of the vessels themselves. As is well known, slips on ceramic vessels serve not only an aesthetic function but also a protective one, namely, the reduction of water absorption by the vessel walls. For this reason, vessels, whether unfired or already fired, were commonly coated with various clay-based preparations. As a primary decorative element, slips were rarely used. More often, they served either as a ground for painted decoration or to mask the natural colour of the ceramic body. Given the presence of painted ornament applied over the slip, it can be assumed that in the case of these vessels such a surface treatment fulfilled both functions. The observed variation in colour was influenced by technological aspects of the production process. In all cases, the mixture was prepared using ferruginous clay (with a high Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> content) combined with other basic components (Краснова 2017, с. 82—83). For the reddish-brown samples, a stable oxidising firing regime was most likely employed, whereas the brownish-purple coating may have resulted from an unstable or partially reducing atmosphere during firing.

**Painting.** A common feature of all the fragments is the presence of ornament executed in a dense white substance (fig. 4). It was evidently applied with brushes of varying thickness, which primarily depended on the size of the vessel and the chosen motif. Considering several production features (visible brushstrokes, uneven density in different areas of application, separation from the



**Fig. 3.** Winery and a complex of rooms, 1956 (photo from the private archive of Zofia Sztetyllo)  
**Рис. 3.** Виноробня і комплекс приміщень, 1956 (фото з приватного архіву Зофі Штетилло)

underlying layer), it can be argued that the white substance in this case represents paint. Typically, such paints were applied over the slip, after which the vessel was either not fired again or fired only at relatively low temperatures. According to ceramic traditions of different periods and regions, such mixtures were usually prepared using mineral pigments, most often calcium-based ( $\text{CaCO}_3$ ), which gave them their white colour (Atanassova et al. 2024). In eastern Crimea, they could have been obtained from local limestone deposits, which were widely available to the population and easy to process.

**Types of Motifs.** On the selected fragments, the motifs are comparatively simple and differ markedly from the artistic standards of previous periods. Nevertheless, they may be regarded as reflecting the specific techniques and aesthetic preferences of the Hellenistic period in the Northern Black Sea region. Predominantly, such locally produced pottery was decorated with vegetal ornament, including representations of grapevines, ivy, and dotted motifs. First of all, these motifs should be understood in the broader context of Greek wine-drinking culture, with which they are inextricably linked. Given that the analysed fragments belong predominantly to jugs, this association becomes particularly evident. Moreover, decorative schemes related to wine consumption were a common feature of sympotic pottery in earlier periods, indicating a degree of continuity in both imagery and cultural meaning.

The largest number of fragments show a stylized depiction of a grapevine — ampelos (fig. 4: 1, 2). This can be explained by the economic profile of Bosphoran settlements, including Myrmekion, where viticulture played a strategically significant role. It can be inferred that both the viticultural industry and the plant itself carried not only Panhellenic symbolic meaning but also an important role in the local context. As is well known, grapevine was not cultivated in Crimea as a domesticated plant prior to the settlement of the region by Greeks (based on data from the southwestern part of the peninsula) (Cordova, Lehman 2003, p. 1483—1501). In addition to its economic importance, grapevine was also closely associated with the religious sphere of local life in Greek mythology, grapevine held a symbolic connection to the god Dionysus. Several mythological narratives are connected to this plant, notably the transformation of Ampelos, a companion of Dionysus, into a grapevine (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 11). The myths also feature maenads, who were associated with grapes and winemaking, and one of the hamadryade nymphs was personified as a grapevine (ampelos).

The second category includes depictions of climbing ivy (fig. 4: 5—7). Ivy garlands were widely known in Hellenistic vase painting. According to evidence from Attic and Asia Minor table wares, this motif became one of the most recognizable in the West Slope style, which spread from the late Classical period onward. Ivy is also a typical at-

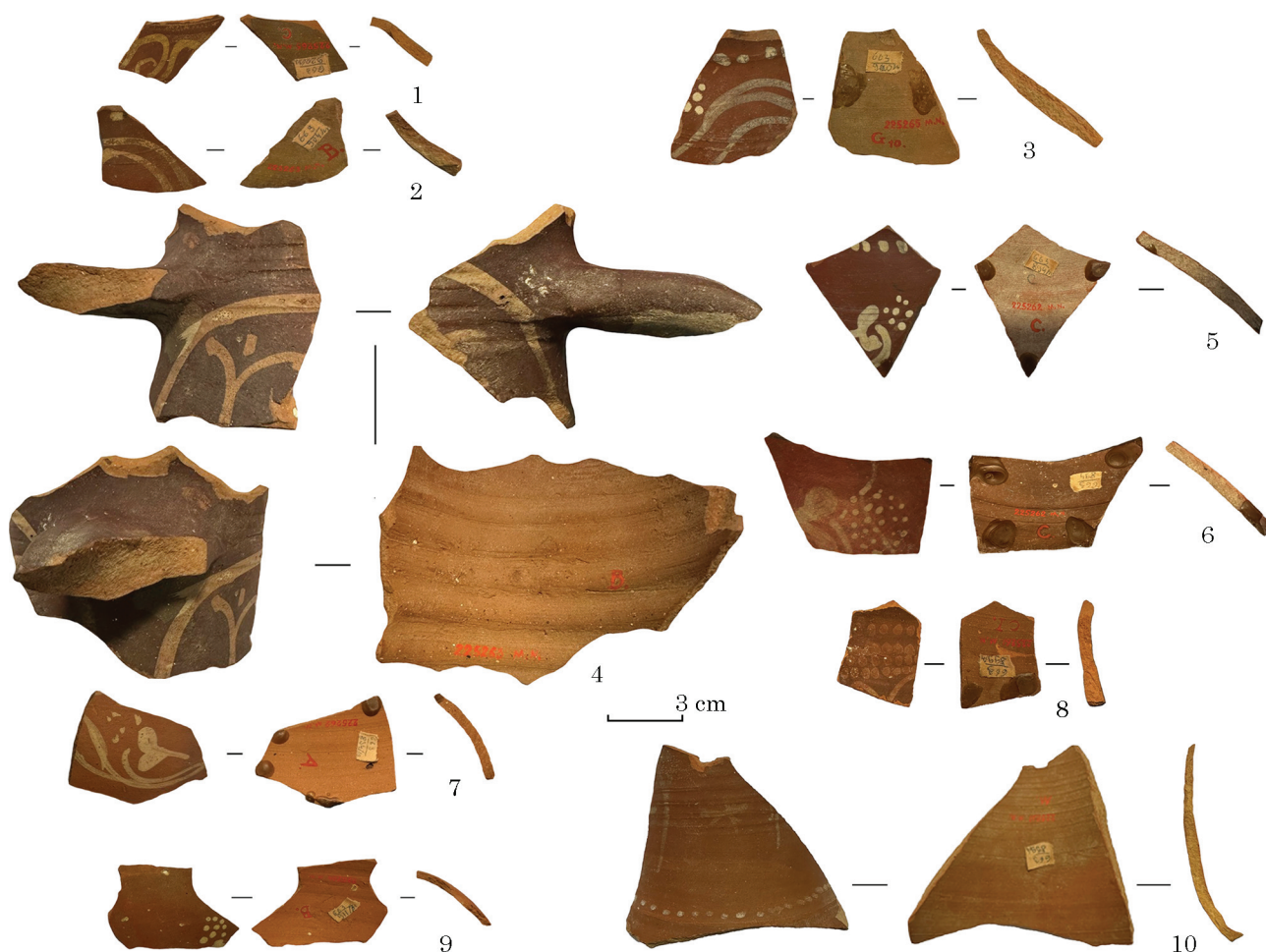


Fig. 4. Fragments of painted table ware from Myrmekion (collection of the National Museum in Warsaw)

Рис. 4. Фрагменти розписного столового посуду з Мірмекія (колекція Національного музею у Варшаві)

tribute of Dionysus. In the iconographic tradition of vase painting, the god's head was often adorned with an ivy wreath. This motif may have been symbolically transferred to ceramic ornamentation in the form of encircling garlands around the rims or along the bodies of vessels. The depiction is characterized by the presence of typical cordate leaves, which the plant produces only during its vegetative growth phase. It is also possible that ivy was well known to the Pontic Greeks, given the favourable climatic conditions of the region at the time, which were close to Mediterranean standards (Cordova 2015, p. 128—131).

As a supplementary element, in most cases, ornamental compositions include clusters or rows of dots (fig. 4: 8—10). These evidently also belong to the same vegetal motif and can be interpreted as a stylistic representation of grapevine inflorescences or ivy berries.

Considering the association of grapevine and ivy with the cult of Dionysus, several points should be noted. Various categories of archaeological evidence indicate that the popularity of this god in the Bosphoran Kingdom was strongly supported by socio-political factors. This support came from the ruling Spartocid dynasty and,

later, from the authority of the Pontic king. For example, at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, during the reign of Mithridates VI Eupator, the iconography of Dionysus and his attributes occupied a prominent place in local coinage, and the ruler himself adopted the sacred epithet Dionysus (Күзина 2008, с. 34—41). It is likely that the choice of this cult was influenced by its widespread presence in regions of Asia Minor and the Northern Black Sea, where Dionysus was regarded as a deity with pronounced soteriological and apotropaic functions. Thus, the ornamentation of local pottery should be considered not only as an aesthetic feature of everyday life but also through the lens of the syncretic Hellenistic worldview.

**Stylistic Parallels.** As noted above, the vegetal motifs in the painted pottery of the Northern Black Sea region show close parallels with those of the West Slope style. It was the most widespread mode of ceramic decoration in the Hellenistic period. Early Attic examples of this style (late 4<sup>th</sup>—3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC) were characterized by a glossy black-glazed surface and a refined manner of painting. In later products, particularly those of the so-called Pergamene type (2<sup>nd</sup>—1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC), these distinctive features grad-

ually disappeared. The surface coating gradually developed reddish tones, while the typical vegetal ornaments executed in white paint lost their earlier refinement. It is therefore likely that these categories of imported pottery in the Bosporan centres served as stylistic models, encouraging local craftsmen to imitate them and eventually to develop their own type of table ware.

Such imitation is also reflected in the pottery of other centres in the Northern Black Sea region. In particular, the local ceramic tradition of Tauric Chersonesos featured a closely comparable painted decoration, with the key difference being its inverted use of colour (dark on light). Such table ware is generally dated to an earlier period, mostly within the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. From here, it was actively supplied to centres of the northwestern Black Sea region, including Olbia, Tyras, and Nikonion (Kotenko 2024). Unlike the Bosporan examples, Chersonesian jugs were often coated with a light slip. Over such surface, vegetal motifs (grapevines, laurel sprigs, olive branches) were applied in red paint, frequently combined with linear bands (Kotenko 2021, с. 245—246). In this way, the centres of the Northern Black Sea region served as active hubs for the adaptation and transformation of Hellenistic decorative motifs within the periphery of the Greek world.

**Conclusions.** The study of historical collections remains highly relevant, as the accumulation of new materials provides opportunities to reinterpret artifacts and gain a deeper understanding of the material culture of Black Sea poleis. The collection of Myrmekion preserved at the National Museum in Warsaw currently represents the most comprehensive assemblage from the Bosporan Kingdom available for study. A systematic analysis of these materials reveals a range of research questions concerning the history of this part of the Greek world, from the Classical period to the Roman era. The ceramics examined in this study have provided new insights into local decorative traditions in Late Hellenistic pottery. As revealed, fragments of table ware, despite their relative typological uniformity, demonstrate regional distinctiveness in decorative details, compositional schemes, and painting techniques. The analysis of ornamentation demonstrates a close connection between local production and the broader artistic trends of the Hellenistic world, which should be considered within the framework of the Mediterraneanization of the peripheral regions of the Northern Black Sea (Cordova 2015, p. 203—214). Vegetal motifs, compositional arrangements, and colour schemes reflect the adaptation of West Slope traditions, which in the Bosporan context assumed simplified and generalized forms. At the same time, a distinct local style emerges, shaped by the technological features of production, the use of a dense dark slip, and contrasting white painting. The ornamental motifs, in particular grapevines

and ivy, can be interpreted not only as decorative devices but also as components of a broader cultural and religious context of the Hellenistic period. Therefore, the Myrmekion material from the Warsaw collection represents a valuable source for studying processes of transformation and local reinterpretation of ancient artistic models in the Northern Black Sea region.

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## ОРНАМЕНТАЛЬНІ ТРАДИЦІЇ У ПІЗНЬОЕЛЛІНІСТИЧНОМУ СТОЛОВОМУ ПОСУДІ З МІРМЕКІЯ

Статтю присвячено дослідженню елліністичної кераміки з Мірмекія, що зберігається у Національному музеї у Варшаві та яку було сформовано під час розкопок у Криму в 1950-х рр. Хоча колекція охоплює лише три польові сезони, вона є надзвичайно репрезентативною і включає кераміку різних хронологічних періодів. Значну частину матеріалу становить пізньоелліністичний розписний столовий посуд, який досі недостатньо вивчений у контексті історії Боспору.

Відібрані фрагменти походять переважно з будівель А, В—VI та С—СІ, розташованих поблизу виноробні, що функціонувала у III—I ст. до н. е. Посудини, представлені глеками та, ймовірно, чашами, виготовлені з місцевої глини з червонувато-оранжевим відтінком і дрібними домішками вапняку. Фрагменти характеризуються уніфікованим способом обробки поверхні у вигляді покриття ангобом, колір якого варіюється від насиченого червоно-коричневого до коричнево-пурпурового. Така варіація зумовлена технологічними особливостями виробництва, а не стилістичними відмінностями. Орнамент виконано білою фарбою, нанесеною поверх ангобу.

У декорі домінують рослинні мотиви, зокрема виноградна лоза, плющ і крапкові елементи. Зображення винограду відображає економічне та символічне значення виноградарства, а також його зв'язок із культом Діоніса, тоді як мотиви плюща мають паралелі в іконографічних традиціях стилю West Slope, які, ймовірно, були адаптовані на місцевому рівні. Усі ці мотиви також тісно пов'язані з грецькою культурою споживання вина та орнаментацією симпосійного посуду. Аналіз демонструє чіткий зв'язок між місцевим виробництвом і ширшими художніми тенденціями елліністичного світу, підкреслюючи процеси адаптації, наслідування та формування своєрідного боспорського стилю.

Отже, матеріали з Мірмекія є важливим джерелом для вивчення трансформації та локальної інтерпретації елліністичних художніх моделей у Північному Причорномор'ї, що дає змогу простежити технологічні практики та визначити ширший культурно-релігійний контекст епохи.

**Ключові слова:** елліністичний період, Північне Причорномор'я, Боспорське царство, Мірмекій, столовий посуд, рослинні мотиви.

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