

Crafting identities by fingernail designs on Greek Neolithic pot surfaces

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For Greek Neolithic scholarship, the pottery craftsman has long been impersonalised behind technological norms, skill and competence determinations, and cultural-stylistic packages. In review of this stance, the handmade Middle Neolithic (6th mil. BC) fingernail-impressed pottery excavated from the cave of Theopetra, major prehistoric site in central Greece, is a challenging ground for exploring personalised craftsmanship.

Almost 1000 pottery fragments from Theopetra cave have been decorated with fingernail impressions demonstrating a vase-to-vase variability of designs. More than that, certain pots demonstrate a range of variable patterns on their very same surface.

Distinct patterning is indicated from the varying depth, size, inclination, width, curvature, outline, and relief of every single fingernail impression, and from their varying group syntax in terms of intermediate space, linearity, and pairing or other combination of the individual impressions, as well as the extent of the entire pattern on the vessel's body and its location in association with certain features of the container's profile. Although I would not count individual craftsmen equal to the number of vases, I would challenge the hypothesis that a copious number of people was particularly involved in the fingernail-impressed patterning at the site of Theopetra.

If they were so many, would they have been all potters?

Implying from the extent of designs' variedness, non-craftsmen's involvement in the patterning of the fingernail impressions at Theopetra is possible: after the actual potter has finished with handmade formation of the vessel, following the processing of the claymass and the joining of the separate clay features to a full, standing vessel, the pot is there for any further marking as long as its clay is still workable and before it becomes hard dry, which would be soon. Family traditions of craftsmanship, socialising craftsmen in the workshop-household overlap of space where craftsmanship maybe performed as an open scene to the community, behavioural attributes of the social environment, such as curiosity, amusement, apprenticeship and experimentation by children or young learners, are occasions where outsiders might have been allowed, if not invited, to contribute to the crafting of the vessel with their immediate somatic touch.

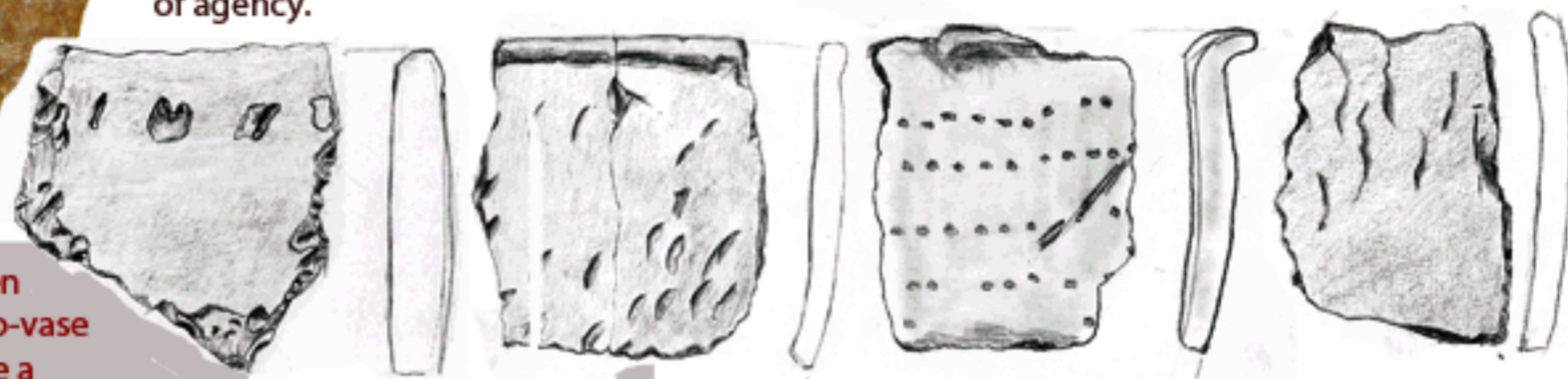
More than the mere pushing of the fingernail inside the soft clay, this physical touch would necessitate that whoever wishes to mark the designs, has a tight grip of the newly formed piece

Can this distinct morphology implicate individual cosmologies and personhoods, for either craftsmen or not?

How visible is the craftsman of Theopetra cave?

against the body and with hands, arms, palms and fingers actively supporting it, so that the symmetrical patterning around the pot's surface can be effectively accomplished. This is more than a physical contribution to a decorative process; it is in fact a social engagement with individual craftsmanship by wider society, and an appropriation of its context, as much as a sharing of the community's material symbols.

The SYNTAX of the fingernail motifs at Theopetra compares with a meta-textual 'script': the craftsperson would decide on the aesthetics, art and style of the 'script' by contextually and meaningfully modifying older ornaments under the instant stimulation of interactions rather than by applying normative design grammars. For example, when the craftsman replaced the actual fingernail with a pointed tool, he or she materialised one such 'shot' of agency.



BIOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY

The variable fingernail-impressions from the cave of Theopetra eloquently demonstrate shots from the craftsperson's biography, either the specialised potter or any invited contributor, rather than full life stories. The entire collection of vases from Theopetra occurs to me as a scene of frequent craftworking performances somewhere near the cave, where contextual identities and behaviours were materialised. The aspect of time in relation to personhood might be important for the decorator to immortalize for any future viewer: 'I was there when this vase was crafted' or 'I have made the designs on that vase'.

Although with instantaneousness, personhoods behind this particular pottery have acquired aspects of embodiment, performance, social sharing, signification, communication and narrating, stimulated by temporal behaviours and emotional attributes. In fact denoting oneself's ontology with the fingernail mark might render the vessel one's metonymy, and thus signify it with a role that can be more important than any functional, decorative, symbolic value, or any demonstration of the potter's skill.

The Neolithic craftsperson deconstructed!

As the vase is a palimpsest of people, the craftsman is no more the single and ultimate subject processing the artefact according to an operational sequence of prescribed stages. Neither does the craftsperson anymore survive as a standardized model of skillful manufacturer whose sole scope is to demonstrate competent skills for satisfying the community's rudimentary functions and strategic politics.