Hammer and Anvil

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Middle Helladic Matt Painted and Dull Painted Pottery at Mitrou: an Important Distinction in Central Greece

Introduction

The Middle Helladic (MH) period on the Greek mainland (ca. 2050 – 1675 BCE) was a formative half-millennium following the widespread collapse of Early Bronze Age complex societies evident throughout central and southern Greece. In general terms, the early MH period was characterised by significant depopulation, particularly of the interior, with very little indication of craft specialisation or intensive trade. However, this period also saw the gradual evolution of important socio-economic and cultural structures that were instrumental to the foundation of the powerful Mycenaean palatial civilisation. As a period of transition, an investigation of these developments within the MH period is therefore essential for understanding the processes behind state formation and increasing social stratification. Ceramics

1 I would like to thank the Mitrou Archaeological Project and all of its generous sponsors and supporters. In particular, thank you to Nina Kyparissi-Apostolika and Maria Papakonstantinou, successive directors of the Ephorate of Lamia, as well as Stephen V. Tracy, Jack L. Davis and James C. Wright, successive directors of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, for their strong support of the Project over the years. In addition, thank you to the Alma Hansen Scholarship fund which supported me in large part while writing this article in Greece during 2014. Special thanks must be extended to Aleydis Van de Moortel and Eleni Zahou, co-directors of the Mitrou Archaeological Project, for allowing me to study the MH ceramics at the site and for their ongoing support. I would also like to thank Aleydis Van de Moortel, Jeremy Rutter, Salvatore Vitale, Bartlomiej Lis and Šťapán Rükl for reading portions of this manuscript and offering valuable discussion on this topic during my time at Mitrou. Thank you also to Anna-Phillippa Touchais and Gilles Touchais for showing me some of their material from Argos. Thank you also to the two anonymous reviewers who offered valuable insights and advice. Any mistakes or inaccuracies in the presentation of this material remain my own.

are important to this understanding due to their presence in almost all archaeological contexts and their use as objects in the everyday life of ancient peoples. Ceramics can also act as a relative dating method for archaeological contexts when there is an understanding of development.

However, until recently the MH period has been very summarily treated in comparison to the Early and Late Bronze Age. This is due to a comparatively small body of evidence from well-preserved contexts that can be used to draw conclusions and interpretations. This situation is beginning to change thanks to the publication of Middle Bronze Age sites with stratified material culture spanning the entirety of the period such as (but not limited to) the sites of Lerna in the Argolid, Pevkakia-Magula in Thessaly, Kolonna on the island of Aegina, Ayia Irini on the island of Kea, Phylakopi on the island of Melos, alongside large assemblages from Nichoria and

Figure 1: Mitrou and other Significant MBA Settllments
Ayios Stephanos in the southern Peloponnese (Fig. 1). These publications have facilitated a growing scholarly interest in the Greek mainland and Cycladic Middle Bronze Age leading to a number of breakthroughs.

Unfortunately, the situation in central Greece continues to be problematic. While it is likely to have been a particularly populated region during the MH period, the major excavated “type” sites in the region such as Eutresis, Orchomenos and Thebes all have inherent problems of stratigraphy and occupational history that have precluded even the most basic of developmental tools (a stratigraphically defined ceramic typology) from being established. As a result, the understanding of this important region has fallen far behind. One of the major problems associated with the lack of a complete MH ceramic sequence in central Greece is the poor understanding of the painted pottery tradition and how this developed over time. The newly constructed seven-phase ceramically defined sequence from the recently excavated site of Mitrou in East Lokris has provided the first opportunity to investigate how this tradition evolved over the entirety of the period. Importantly, the distinction between two types of locally produced painted pottery, known at Mitrou as “Matt Painted” and “Dull Painted”, is chronologically sensitive and is indicative of a shift to painted


4 Dickinson's five-fold division has yet to be fully published or described. O. T. P. K. Dickinson, The Origins of Mycenaean Civilisation, (Göteborg: Paul Åströms förlag, 1977), 17–21.
techniques more widely practiced on Aegina and in the Cyclades.

This article will discuss the problems associated with the study of the MH period within central Greece before introducing the site of Mitrou and its potential for making significant contributions to the resolution of many of these issues. The Matt Painted and Dull Painted pottery from Mitrou will then be described according to fabric, paint, morphology, style and chronological distribution. A further discussion of dull painted pottery and its wider geographic and chronological distribution on the Greek mainland will then follow, alongside some brief considerations of wider implications considering its presence at Mitrou.

The Middle Helladic Period in Central Greece

The major excavated sites in central Greece that have revealed large quantities of material include Eutresis, Thebes and Orchomenos. More recently and (still essentially unpublished), the site of Medeon has also provided some important material. However, all of these sites suffer from problems, which have served to obscure a complete understanding of MH development, including the painted ceramic tradition.

Eutresis in south-central Greece has extensive MH architecture along with large quantities of ceramics and three separate building phases. Through synchronisations with other Middle Bronze Age ceramic assemblages on the mainland, Maran has shown that all three of these phases belong to the latter part of the MH period and even to the earliest parts of the Late Helladic (LH) period. This means that Eutresis, while occupied during the Early Helladic (EH) and LH periods, was abandoned during the early MH period and cannot fully contribute to an understanding of diachronic developments.

Thebes, potentially one of the largest LH settlements on the mainland and possibly also a dominant population centre during the MH period, is situated directly under the modern town, which means that it is accessible to archaeologists almost exclu-
sively in the form of rescue excavations. This has resulted in a number of small and disparate excavated areas scattered throughout the town without a clear understanding of their spatial relationship. The MH material from Thebes itself is also under-published, and the bulk of the Theban MH material remains without analysis. From the limited information available, MH ceramics are particularly represented at the Panayiotopoulou-Papayeoryiou excavation (site II, 8). However, this pottery is once again of an advanced MH date, similar to that seen at Eutresis and in the latter phases at Lerna and Pevkakia-Magula, and while there is some scattered evidence for earlier MH pottery from other plots, it is not well represented overall.

Unfortunately Orchomenos, which also may have been a major population centre, suffers from more significant problems than either Thebes or Eutresis. Following Schliemann's excavations in the 1880s, a number of campaigns were conducted mostly during the early twentieth century which recorded stratigraphy that revealed material from EH, MH and LH layers. While the EH and LH material was published early in the twentieth century, the MH material was only recently analysed by K. Sarri. By the 1990s, only small amounts of the original excavation documents survived and the majority of the pottery can no longer be assigned to their original

14 Sarri, Orchomenos IV.
contexts.\textsuperscript{15} While Sarri has made an attempt to reconstruct the original typology, the information for Orchomenos’ stratigraphy is simply not sufficient to clearly attribute the bulk of the pottery to an architectural phase with certainty.\textsuperscript{16}

More recently, the site of Medeon located on the southeastern edge of the Copais plain has revealed three successive MH building layers along with five intramural cist graves.\textsuperscript{17} Medeon therefore provided the first opportunity in central Greece for secure data grounded in stratigraphy. Preliminary analysis of the material has suggested that the MH habitation levels at the site are all dated to the later part of the MH period.\textsuperscript{18} The early MH period is therefore also apparently absent and Medeon cannot be used to produce a complete pottery sequence.

Thus, the lack of a ceramic sequence based on complete stratigraphic evidence and spanning the whole of the MH for central Greece has been the primary problem inhibiting the understanding of the region and its place within the wider MH world. Ceramicists in key areas like Boeotia have relied on stratified typologies from distant sites like Pevkakia-Magula in Thessaly and Lerna in the Argolid, or on material from partially published sites such as Lefkandi on Euboea in order to interpret un-stratified material. However, particularly with regards to painted pottery, the MH period throughout the mainland is characterised by a high degree of regionalism and is further complicated by the occasional imitation or emulation of extra-regional pottery styles.\textsuperscript{19} This means that inter-regional comparisons are of limited use.

The Middle Helladic Period at Mitrou

The newly excavated site of Mitrou provides an important opportunity to remedy

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{15} Sarri, \textit{Orchomenos IV}, 8–10.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Sarri, \textit{Orchomenos IV}, 211.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Sarri, ‘Aeginetan Matt-Painted Pottery’, 159–160.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the problematic situation in central Greece. Mitrou is a small tidal islet in the Bay of Atalante, East Lokris, located on the Northern Euboean Gulf about 140 km northwest of Athens, 50 km north of Thebes and 20 km northeast of Orchomenos (Fig. 1). Although previously known by Greek archaeologists, Mitrou’s long occupation was first documented by the 1988–89 Cornell Halai East Lokris Project (CHELP) surface survey of the region conducted by J. Coleman of Cornell University and W. Murray of the University of South Florida, which made specific note of the excellent chronological continuity seen in the islet’s scarps. Mitrou was excavated from 2004–08 by the Mitrou Archaeological Project. These excavations qualified CHELP’s observations and provided a complete pottery sequence from the EH IIB period through to the Late Protogeometric period, indicating a long period of unbroken occupation that included the whole of the MH period. In addition to the longevity of its occupation, the site also portrays well-preserved stratigraphy and a

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fairly large amount of material. Mitrou therefore represents the first opportunity to develop an important relative chronological reference point for future studies in the region.

After a detailed quantitative analysis of morphological and stylistic trends within an assemblage of almost 4,000 MH feature sherds from stratigraphically secure deposits in two separate trenches (LE792 and LX784) located on opposite sides of the islet (Fig. 2), seven distinct ceramic phases of development have been identified (Tab. 1). These phases are grounded in superimposed stratigraphy and connected to architectural features such as surfaces and floors, walls, cist graves, pits, hearths, a partially preserved kiln and an oven. These phases can be synchronized with other Middle Bronze Age ceramic assemblages using detailed comparanda for morphological features also present at other sites alongside an analysis of over 300 non-local sherds. MH Mitrou was a trading post located on important maritime and land trade routes running along the Euboean

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24 For a detailed description of the methodology used in developing this typology alongside a presentation of the Fine Grey Burnished sequence (the dominant type of fine undecorated pottery throughout the period) see C. Hale, ‘The Middle Helladic Fine Grey Burnished (Gray Minyan) Sequence at Mitrou, East Lokris’, Hesperia (forthcoming). The full analysis of the Mitrou sequence along with a detailed description of the stratigraphy will be presented in the final publication of the Mitrou Archaeological Project and as part of my Ph.D. thesis at the University of Melbourne (C. Hale, ‘The Middle Helladic Ceramic Sequence at Mitrou, East Lokris: A Diachronic Quantitative Analysis and its Implications for Inter- and Intra-regional Interaction in Central Greece during the Middle Bronze Age’, (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, forthcoming).


26 Particularly with other central Greek sites, Ayia Irini, Aegina and Pevkakia-Magula. See Hale, ‘Fine Grey Burnished’; ‘The Middle Helladic Ceramic Sequence at Mitrou’.
Gulf which received pottery imports primarily from the islands of Kea and Aegina but also from the Argolid, Thessaly, Melos, Thera and the Dodecanese. This imported material provides a strong method for validating the Mitrou sequence and for placing it within the wider Middle Bronze Age Aegean chronology.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek Mainland</th>
<th>Mitrou</th>
<th>Pevkakia</th>
<th>Lefkandi</th>
<th>Lerna</th>
<th>Aegina</th>
<th>Eutresis</th>
<th>Ay. Irini</th>
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<tr>
<td>LH I</td>
<td>LH I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Ph. K</td>
<td>3. MB Bh.</td>
<td>VI</td>
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<tr>
<td>MH III (ends ca. 1600 BCE)</td>
<td>Ph. 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ph. 6 Late</td>
<td>VE</td>
<td>Ph. J &amp; K</td>
<td>V</td>
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<tr>
<td>MH II</td>
<td>MH Ph. 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ph. 6 Middle</td>
<td>VD</td>
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<td>2. MB Bh.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MH Ph. 6</td>
<td>Ph. 6 Early</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ph. I</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. MB Bh.</td>
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<td>MH Ph. 4</td>
<td>Ph. 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>MH I (begins ca. 2050 BCE)</td>
<td>MH Ph. 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ph. 4</td>
<td>VB</td>
<td>Ph. H</td>
<td>Missing</td>
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<td>MH Ph. 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ph. 3</td>
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<td>Ph. G</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>EH III</td>
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<tr>
<td>MH Ph. 1</td>
<td>Ph. 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>IV-V</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ph. F &amp; G</td>
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<tr>
<td>EH III</td>
<td>Ph. 2</td>
<td>IV Ph. 3</td>
<td>Ph. E</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IV Ph. 2</td>
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Table 27: Hale, ‘The Middle Helladic Ceramic Sequence at Mitrou’.
In particular, the Mitrou sequence allows for an unprecedented opportunity for diachronic investigation into the development of the MH painted tradition in central Greece, though care should be taken when applying the observations from one site to a region as a whole. The majority of the currently published painted pottery (mostly from Eutresis and Orchomenos) consists of material from the latter part of the MH period.28 The decorative traditions and painted techniques used during the early MH period, and how these traditions changed over time, are therefore poorly understood. Painted pottery represents a relatively small percentage of the Mitrou MH assemblage as a whole, but understanding how and why changes occur within this painted tradition is essential for understanding the MH period in central Greece. One of the major observations to come from the development of the Mitrou sequence is the identification of two very distinct categories of local painted pottery – namely “Matt Painted” and “Dull Painted” ceramics (Fig. 3). Such a distinction, while observed at other sites on the Greek mainland, has not been noted explicitly in central Greek material in the past, and may be an important chronological marker.

**Matt Painted Pottery at Mitrou**

Matt painted ceramics from the MH period are perhaps one of the most difficult pottery groups to study within the Aegean Bronze Age, particularly from a typo-

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logical perspective and in regard to a classification system.\textsuperscript{29} This is due to a very broad diversity evident in pottery all over the mainland and in other regions.\textsuperscript{30} The “Matt Painted” category as defined at MH Mitrou refers to a dark black paint that does not have any lustre. This paint is likely to be manganese-based, as it has fired a consistently dark black-grey colour in an oxidised atmosphere,\textsuperscript{31} and is usually produced in a dark-on-light style on a very wide range of pottery with various surface treatments and fabric compositions (Fig. 3). It has traditionally been thought that the appearance of matt painted pottery during the MH period on the mainland represents a distinct break from the painted pottery traditions of the EH III period.\textsuperscript{32} The major difference is the switch from a lustrous, iron-based paint that was highly variable in colour (ranging from dull red to dark red to reddish-brown) and very difficult to produce with any consistency, to a manganese-based paint that does not mottle with variations in firing conditions.\textsuperscript{33} The reason for this shift has yet to be determined, but may be due to changing availability of raw materials. On the mainland, this change is best documented in the Peloponnese (particularly the Argolid) and on Aegina, but is not very well defined in central Greece.\textsuperscript{34}

Since R. Buck’s formative 1964 study of the subject, significant advances in our understanding of matt painted pottery have enabled a much more thorough understanding of regional diversity.\textsuperscript{35} Due to this diversity, analysing matt painted pottery

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Zerner, ‘Lerna. Part I’, 58.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Maran, ‘Aeginetan Pottery’, 167.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Gauss and Kiriatzi, Pottery Production and Supply, 192–3.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Rutter, ‘Some Comments’, 29–30; Gauss and Smetana, “Aegina Kolonna”. Note that this current paper argues that there was no such break in central Greece based on the evidence at Mitrou. See discussion below.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Recent contributions to the understanding of matt painted pottery on the mainland all of its diversity include, but are certainly not limited, to: H. B. Siedentopf, Mattbemalte Keramik der mittleren Bronzezeit, Alt-Ägina IV. 2 (Mainz am Rhein: Von Zabern, 1991); S. Dietz, The Argolid at the Transition to the Mycenaean Age: Studies in the Chronology and Cultural Development in the Shaft Grave Period (Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark, Department of Near Eastern and Classical Antiquities, 1991); G. C. Nordquist, A Middle Helladic Village. Asine in the Argolid (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1987); C. Zerner, ‘The Beginning of the Middle Helladic Period at Lerna’, (PhD diss.,
purely on the basis of surface treatment, shape, decoration and the colour of the fabric or surface is insufficient due to varying degrees of inter-regional interaction and the occasional imitation of extra-regional styles. Therefore, through necessity, any stylistic study of MH matt painted pottery in particular is intricately tied to the macroscopic and microscopic study of fabrics. As a result, the Matt Painted category at Mitrou is the most diverse ceramic category during the period in that it contains a number of sub-categories that represent imported pottery from a wide range of regions usually distinguished through macroscopic fabric analysis and different surface treatments. However, this paper is only concerned with the matt painted pottery which was produced locally (meaning somewhere in central Greece).

Local matt painted pottery was produced in two different fabrics, possibly suggesting different methods or places of production. Generally, MH Macroscopic Fabric
Group 1 (MH-MFG 1) is a very fine fabric and well-fired with a hardness ranging from “hard” to “very hard” on the Mohs scale. The limited inclusions present within MH-MFG 1 range from rare fine silver (possibly mica) inclusions and very rare medium-coarse chalky white rounded to sub-rounded inclusions. A common sub-group, MH-MFG 1a, also includes rare medium-coarse black sub-rounded to sub-angular inclusions and very rare rounded matt reddish-brown inclusions. It is the most common fabric at MH Mitrou and is seen most often in the “Fine Grey Burnished” pottery (commonly referred to as “Grey Minyan”). However, unlike the Fine Grey Burnished material which fires varying shades of grey due to a reduced atmosphere within the kiln, the matt painted pottery in this fabric was fired in an oxidised atmosphere turning the clay pink (7.5YR7/4) to very pale brown (10YR7/4).

Petrographic and chemical analyses of similarly described fabrics at the contemporary sites of Kolonna, Eleusis and Thebes have led Gauss and Kiriatzi to conclude that their chemical and mineralogical composition does not match that of other locally produced pottery at those sites, but is very closely related to local fabrics of Orchomenos. This observation complements previous conclusions concerning the production of Fine Grey Burnished pottery. Thus, on present evidence, the region of Orchomenos located only twenty kilometres southwest of Mitrou seems to be the most likely source for this fabric type. Future petrographic and chemical analysis of the Mitrou assemblage will be able to further test this hypothesis.


MH-MFG 2 fabric is similar to MH-MFG 1 but is slightly coarser, generally not as well fired and is generally “hard” to “very hard” on a Mohs scale. Rare appearances of fine silver (possibly mica) inclusions and rare medium-coarse chalky white sub-rounded to sub-angular inclusions and consistent rare medium-coarse black sub-angular inclusions are apparent. However, the appearance of rare medium-coarse translucent angular inclusions in every pot belonging to this group sets it apart. An uncommon sub-group, MH-MFG 2a, shows similar characteristics but does not include medium-coarse black inclusions. Colour on matt painted pottery produced in this fabric is also similar to MH-MFG 1 pots and ranges from light red (2.5YR6/6) to reddish yellow (7.5YR6/6) indicating an oxidised firing atmosphere. A large number of pots were produced in this fabric at Mitrou including almost all of the “Fine Dark Burnished” category, the second most numerous fine undecorated type of pottery at Mitrou, among others. Morphologically, pots in this fabric also closely follow trends associated with MH-MFG 1 pots. Therefore, at this stage it is likely that this fabric is also a local product but possibly from a different workshop making use of different clay deposits. Future petrographic and chemical analysis will be needed in order to confirm this hypothesis.

The surface of matt painted pottery can be smoothed or wiped and can occasionally be coated with a thin pale wash, or can alternatively be heavily burnished. Many of these pots were evidently coil-built and hand-made though the occasional presence of shallow horizontal striations perhaps indicate that some pots may have been finished on the wheel. Decoration is typically executed in lines of varying thickness in a very dark brown to black paint, with simple rectilinear patterns and bands of triangles occasionally filled with hatching or cross-hatching (MH-P57; MH-P103; MH-P105; MH-P106; MH-P147; MH-P150; MH-P152; MH-P202; MH-P205; MH-P206; MH-P207). Sometimes these motifs are extended to form bands of “hourglass” or “butterfly” motifs that run around the shoulder of the vessel (MH-P104; MH-P208). Very occasional curvilinear patterns or more complex floating

40 The manufacturing method of MH pottery has recently come under scrutiny. See M. Choleva, ‘The First Wheel Made Pottery at Lerna. Wheel Thrown or Wheel Fashioned?’ , Hesperia 81 (2012), 343–381. It is very likely that most pots, particularly from the early stages of the MH period and possibly beyond, were all hand-made. Some specific categories such as Fine Grey Burnished or some specialised painted pottery may then have been finished on the wheel but were not necessarily fully wheel thrown. See also M. Choleva, ‘l’ Apparition et la Diffusion du Tour de Potier dans le Monde Âgéen’, (PhD diss., Paris l Panthéon–Sorbonne, forthcoming).

41 All bolded MH-P numbers refer to catalogued items illustrated in Plates 1–6.
medallions appear on some vessels (MH-P107; MH-P149). The shapes made from local matt painted pottery include small kantharoi (MH-P106; MH-P205), goblets or bowls (MH-P103; MH-P104; MH-P105; MH-P147) and different types of jars and jugs (MH-P150; MH-P152; MH-P206; MH-P207; MH-P208). The local matt painted pottery is directly related to the plain “Fine Pale” category at Mitrou, part of which is commonly referred to as “Yellow Minyan” within some MH ceramic literature and which (as at Orchomenos and Eutresis) is quite often also decorated with matt paint.42

Importantly, at Mitrou, Matt Painted pottery only appears from MH Phase 4 onwards (equivalent to the beginning of MH II) and is increasingly common towards the end of the MH period (Tab. 2). In Mitrou MH Phase 7, the final phase of the MH period at Mitrou and equivalent to the very end of MH II and the whole of MH III, Matt Painted ware is the dominant decorated type of pottery for the first time and continues to persist well into LH I. This confirms Sarri’s recent tentative suggestion that matt painted pottery was not produced in central Greece until at least MH II.43 However, I argue here that the evidence from Mitrou (and perhaps from elsewhere in central Greece) indicates that Matt Painted pottery appeared as an alternative to previously ubiquitous Dull Painted pottery before becoming the dominant painted technique towards the end of the MH period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Dull and Matt Painted Pottery at Mitrou</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitrou MH Phase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Sample Size</td>
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<td>Local Dull Painted</td>
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<td>(%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local Matt Painted</td>
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<td>(%)</td>
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Table 2: Local Dull and Matt Painted Pottery Counts at Mitrou by MH Phase (inclusive of both feature and body sherds).

Dull Painted Pottery at Mitrou

Dull Painted ceramics form the dominant category of local decorated material at Mitrou during most of the MH period (Tab. 2). Dull Painted pottery appears in the EH III period but is most popular during the middle stages of the MH period (MH Phase 4 – 6) before being superseded by Matt Painted pottery in MH Phase 7 and largely disappearing by LH I. While it is very rare in comparison to undecorated plain pottery, due to its unique physical characteristics and limited chronological distribution, Dull Painted pottery can serve as a very good indicator of MH activity at Mitrou. This is particularly the case in earlier MH phases at Mitrou where local Matt Painted pottery has not been detected to date.

The Dull Painted pottery at Mitrou can appear in a number of local fabrics which suggests either multiple places of manufacture or varying processes of fabric preparation. In addition to pots executed in MH-MFG 1 and MH-MFG 2 fabric, Dull Painted ceramics were also frequently produced in MH-MFG 3 fabric which is medium-coarse, inconsistently fired and “hard” on a Mohs scale. MH-MFG 3 fabric contains rare fine silver (possibly mica) inclusions along with rare to very few medium-coarse white sub-rounded inclusions, very few medium coarse black sub-rounded to sub-angular inclusions, very few medium-coarse translucent angular to sub-angular inclusions and, most distinctively, rare medium-coarse to coarse reddish sub-angular inclusions. An uncommon sub-group, MH-MFG 3a, does not contain any medium-coarse black inclusions. Dull Painted pottery produced in this fabric ranges in colour from ca. pink (2.5Y8/3) to reddish-yellow (5YR6/6). MH-MFG 3 is a very common fabric at Mitrou and is featured in many of the storage and cooking pottery. It is therefore very likely a local product though future petrographic analysis will be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

The “dull” paint characteristic of this category is iron-based and thickly applied, standing out in relief from the vessel (Fig. 3). This means that it easily flakes off leaving ‘negative’ images of decoration on the surface that can make badly preserved examples difficult to identify. The colour of this paint varies, but typically ranges from a very dark red (10R3/6) to lighter, more orange-red (10R5/8) depend-

44 Dull Painted was first identified at Mitrou by J. Rutter, and I thank him for pointing out its significance.
ing on preservation, firing conditions, and the iron content in the paint, among other variables.\textsuperscript{46} This paint exhibits a very slight sheen that is not quite lustrous but is enough to distinguish the paint from other more typical manganese-based MH matt paints on close inspection.\textsuperscript{47} This sheen is not as intense as that typically seen on later Mycenaean Lustrous Decorated pottery.

The most common shapes are large closed vessels such as large jars or narrow necked jugs (MH-P1; MH-P29; MH-P51; MH-P55; MH-P102; MH-P144; MH-P198; MH-P199; MH-P200; MH-P201).\textsuperscript{48} Other less common shapes include large bowls with inward curving upper profiles featuring flat-topped and/or thickened rims (MH-P16; MH-P52; MH-P100; MH-P143; MH-P146). Unlike Matt Painted pottery, small open shapes are almost entirely absent. Most shapes portray horizontally attached handles that are trianguloid in cross-section (MH-P100; MH-P143).

The lack of parallel horizontal striations on any of these sherds and the uneven wall thickness on many examples, suggest that Dull Painted vessels were typically handmade, probably using the coil-built technique, but were not subject to any sort of wheel-finishing at any stage of the manufacturing process.

While examples are fragmentary at Mitrou, decoration is predominantly rectilinear, though on many roughly painted examples the motifs can be uncertain. Thick parallel horizontal and vertical lines, diagonal and intersecting lines, along with hanging triangles or chevrons filled with hatching or cross-hatching are the most common elements (MH-P1; MH-P15; MH-P16; MH-P29; MH-P30; MH-P52; MH-P53).


\textsuperscript{47} Zerner, ’The Middle Helladic Pottery’, 193; this has perhaps been overlooked in previous excavations where this category has been lumped together with the matt painted ceramics such as in D. French and E. B. French, ’Prehistoric Pottery from the Area of the Agricultural Prison at Tiryns’, in \textit{Tiryns: Forschungen und Berichte} 5, ed. U. Jantzen (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1959), 265, fig. 38:7 and J. Deshayes, \textit{Argos: Les fouilles de la Deiras} (Paris: Vrinn, 1966), 123–5, plate XV:7–19, plate XVI:1–19, plate XVII:1–7.

MH-P54; MH-P55; MH-P101; MH-P102; MH-P144; MH-P145; MH-P146; MH-P198; MH-P199; MH-P200; MH-P201). Curvilinear lines are extremely rare (MH-P100). Horizontal lines are typically placed on the rim and neck, on the shoulders and the lower body, but rarely near the base of large vessels. Patterns are mainly restricted to the shoulder and placed between two horizontal bands (one at the base of the neck and another at the base of the shoulder). Triangles may have slightly thicker outlines than the lines used on the interior hatching. Hatching is also sometimes used to fill horizontal zones. Some of the later bowls have striped rims, and at times this decoration continues on the interior of the vessel.

**Dull Painted Pottery on the Greek Mainland**

The term “Dull Painted” is not often used within scholarship and scant references can only be found within the Anglophone literature. It is possible that much of the evidence for this material from older excavations was lost due to its inherently rough and fragmentary appearance, or that it has not been accurately distinguished from other matt painted ceramics at many sites within central Greece. The term may have originated from the work of R. Howell at Nichoria in the southern Peloponnese, but was first used in print by J.B and S.H Rutter concerning the MH deposits at Ayios Stephanos in order to separate the “dull” iron-based paint material from other manganese-based “matt” paints. D. and E. French previously described similar material as a variety of matt paint and some of the material at Argos described by J. Deshayes and at Lerna described by J. Rutter may also be related. At Nichoria, Howell identified a type of painted pottery distinct from the other matt painted ceramics and this “thick-crusted, dull paint on generally large, thick-walled vessels” has the same morphological and paint characteristics as described at Ayios Stephanos and Argos.

Dull painted pottery at Ayios Stephanos is at its most popular in the MH II deposits, but has been noted in earlier deposits as well. It seems to be replaced by a type

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49  Rutter and Rutter, *Transition to Mycenaean*, 13; J. Rutter, pers. comm., 2012; for close comparisons see especially Zerner, 'The Middle Helladic Pottery', 220, fig. 5.5.
51  Howell, ‘Pottery’, 43–204.
52  Zerner, ‘The Middle Helladic Pottery’, 193; Rutter and Rutter, *Transition to Mycenaean*, 23–6, table II.
of Lustrous Decorated pottery towards the end of the MH that was stylistically distinct. At Nichoria, dull painted material is noted in MH I deposits where it is almost twice as common as other matt painted ceramics but it is quickly replaced in later deposits by what Howell terms “Lustrous Decorated” paint. Although it is very rare and is not described in any great detail, decorated pottery with “red” paint on a pale background has been briefly noted at Eutresis and Orchomenos while at Lefkandi, Spencer has briefly alluded to “iron-based paint” on material dated to MH I and MH II. The rarity of potential dull painted pottery in these central Greek contexts is not incongruent with the observations at Mitrou. Even at its height, Dull Painted pottery at Mitrou represents less than 4% of the total ceramic assemblage, and towards the end of MH II and during MH III (the date for most of the material from Orchomenos and Eutresis) is replaced by much larger quantities of Matt Painted material.

Therefore, the dull painted pottery at these other contemporary sites in southern Greece (and perhaps central Greece as well) generally agrees with the behaviour of this category at Mitrou. The consistent appearance of Dull Painted material at Mitrou has extended the spatial distribution pattern of this material which was previously limited to the southwestern Peloponnese and perhaps the Argolid. Large quantities of Dull Painted sherds at Mitrou throughout the MH period (even in periods without significant imported material) and the macroscopic analysis of the fabric suggest that this type of pottery was locally produced in central Greece from the beginnings of the MH period. While Zerner has linked dull painted ceramics at Ayios Stephanos to distinct Cretan influences, the appearance of very similar material in large quantities from early MH phases as far north as East Lokris, alongside the near-complete absence of any other sign of Cretan influence, does not support this hypothesis. Rather, this pottery may accompany the first appearance of the so-called “Minyan” technological tradition during EH III and the early MH peri-

55 Spencer, ‘Pottery Technology’, 675; Sarri, Orchomenos IV, taf. 10:15; taf. 38:5–6; taf. 55:9, taf. 56:12–3; taf. 60:18, 23; taf. 61:9–12; Goldman, Eutresis, 144.
ods in central Greece, Thessaly, the Argolid and the southern Peloponnese. Some ethnographic studies in Africa have shown that potters are much more willing to adapt and change decorative features than forming or firing techniques. Alongside potential differences in the raw materials available, these potting traditions in central and southern Greece may have been variably affected through different patterns of inter-regional interactions resulting in distinctive painted traditions later in the MH period.

Conclusion

The ceramic sequence from Mitrou has enhanced our understanding of the painted traditions of MH central Greece. In particular, despite being a small sample and currently limited only to Mitrou, the pottery of the early part of the MH period has been documented for the first time. This analysis has distinguished two separate locally produced painted ceramic categories with very different chronologies. While Dull Painted pottery was apparent from at least the beginning of the MH period at Mitrou and persisted to the end, Matt Painted pottery did not appear until MH Phase 4, the equivalent of the beginning of MH II. Furthermore, Matt Painted pottery did not dominate the decorative assemblage until MH Phase 7 or the end of MH II. Parallels for the Dull Painted pottery at Mitrou have been noted at multiple sites in the southern Peloponnese and perhaps the Argolid. Descriptions of pottery at Eutresis, Orchomenos and Lefkandi suggest that local dull painted ware is also more prevalent in central Greece than previously thought. The detailed descriptions presented here of both the Matt Painted pottery and Dull Painted pottery at Mitrou will hopefully assist other researchers in central Greece in securely identifying any


potential Dull Painted pottery in their assemblages. Only then can MH ceramicists begin a conversation concerning the appearance of Dull Painted pottery, the implications of its presence in both central Greece and the Peloponnese, and the transition from dull painted to matt painted technology in central Greece as observed at Mitrou.
Plate 1: Mitrou MH Matt Painted Examples. MH Phase 4–6. Illustrations by Tina Ross
Plate 2: Mitrou MH Matt Painted Examples. MH Phase 7.
Illustrations by Tina Ross
Plate 3: Mitrou MH Dull Painted Examples. MH Phase 1–3. Illustrations by Tina Ross
Plate 4: Mitrou MH Dull Painted Examples. MH Phase 4. Illustrations by Tina Ross
Plate 5: Mitrou MH Dull Painted Examples. MH Phase 5–6. Illustrations by Tina Ross
Plate 6: Mitrou MH Dull Painted Examples. MH Phase 6 (cont.)–7. Illustrations by Tina Ross.