

Red-figure lekythoi of Agrinion group from central Dalmatia¹

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Three red-figure lekythoi discovered in Issa and Pharos, Late Classical and Hellenistic Greek settlements established in the eastern Adriatic islands of central Dalmatia, can be attributed to the Agrinion group. Although all were conceivably associated with a funeral context, only the two from Issa were actually found as grave depositions on Martvilo and Vlaška njiva necropolis. The latter is especially important as it was documented with the rest of the funeral assemblage, found in grave 65. This paper discusses the Agrinion lekythoi from central Dalmatia, in the light of the available contextual evidence. In this way, it attempts to offer a contribution towards a better understanding of the distribution and chronology of these finds in the context of cultural interaction in the central Mediterranean region during the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic times, and explores their role within the local funeral customs, including a possible link between the depictions on Agrinion lekythoi and aspects of death rituals.

Keywords: Dalmatia (eastern Adriatic), Issa, Pharos, Red-figure pottery, lekythos, Agrinion group, burial assemblage

Among the diverse body of evidence of ancient ceramic wares discovered in the Dalmatian region of the eastern Adriatic, a small group of red-figure lekythoi stands out. Lekythos (Greek λήκυθος) was a type of ancient vessel, a flask of a kind used for holding oils and unguents, as well as other aromatic extracts. They had a prominent role in various aspects of the funeral rituals, and their appearance in grave assemblages, notwithstanding the symbolic function, can allude to the presence of oil. Lekythoi were also used in other types of everyday activities, especially in baths and gymnasiums. The development of this ceramic form can be traced from the 6th c. BCE to the early Hellenistic times, when lekythoi were in grave deposits and conceivably their function replaced by unguentaria (Rotroff 1997: 138). During this period, lekythoi were made in a number of different wares and pottery styles, most notably in black-figure, white-ground, red-figure, gnathia and other. Three examples of small lekythoi, painted in red-figure style, were discovered in Issa and Pharos, Late Classical and Hellenistic Greek settlements that came into existence on the neighbouring central Dalmatian islands of Vis and Hvar. Their morphological and stylistic similarities allow us to attribute these to the Agrinion group, as defined by Ian McPhee (McPhee 1979).

¹ It is a pleasure for me to dedicate this article to professor dr. sc. Mirjana Sanader, Chair for Roman Provincial and Early Christian archaeology in the Department of Archaeology of the University of Zagreb, out of gratitude for her extensive contribution to Croatian and therefore European archaeology. Like many colleagues, I was a student of prof. Sanader, and I am especially grateful for her guidance and support as a chair of my PhD committee. Although prof. Sanader dealt primarily with Roman and Early Christian archaeology, some of her numerous professional and scientific contributions are devoted to aspects in connection to the earliest urban settlements in Croatia, the Greek cities in Dalmatia. Therefore, the topic, discussing a facet of the material culture from Issa and Pharos, is deemed appropriate for this occasion.



Fig. 1 a-c. Red-figure lekythos of Agrinion group from Martvilo necropolis, Issa (Vis), Photo: Tonći Seser

Two Agrinion lekythoi were found in Issa on the island of Vis.² Both are associated with a funeral context, and served as grave goods. One example comes from a tomb discovered on the northern side of the southwestern Issean necropolis, known as Martvilo (Fig. 1a-c). This area of Martvilo was investigated due to construction works that took place in 1948, when the football playground was erected on the spot. On this occasion 10 tombs were discovered, but only a brief text and a few photographs are available as the accompanying documentation (Abramić 1949: 12; Čargo 2010: 63–66). The Agrinion lekythos is among the 39 objects, today kept at the Archaeological Museum in Split, that are set in connection with these tombs (Abramić 1949: T. III; Lisičar 1973: T. XIII; McPhee 1979: 159–160, nr. 21; Kirigin 2008: 95). Its detailed context, including the associated tomb and its funeral assemblage, remains, unfortunately, unknown. The second Agrinion lekythos from Issa was found in grave 65 on the eastern Issean necropolis on Vlaška njiva (Fig. 2a-c, 3). It was documented with the rest of its funeral assemblage, all discovered



Fig. 2 a-c. Red-figure lekythos of Agrinion group from Vlaška njiva necropolis, Issa (Vis), Photo: Tonći Seser.

² The lekythoi from Vis were photographed by Tonći Seser, and the drawing was made by Jasmina Beneta. I thank them both.

during a rescue excavation that took place in this locality in 1983, as a response to the construction of Hotel Issa (Kirigin 1983). The third example forms a part of the Collection of the Dominican Monastery of St. Petar Mučenik (St. Peter the Marty) in Stari Grad on the island of Hvar (Fig. 4 a-c).³ Although the contextual evidence in connection to this artefact is missing, it is said to have come from the ancient Greek city of Pharos, that was established on the site of present-day Stari Grad (Kirigin 2004: 156, T. XXXI, F).

All three examples were made from light brown clay, Munsell 10 YR 7/4 (very pale brown), that was fine levigated and contains no visible inclusions (for Martvilo example see Čargo 2010: 66, 72). Their height is between 13.1 cm and 15.5 cm. The mouth flares outward, and is slightly offset from the neck, while the neck is similarly offset from the shoulder. A single strap handle connects the neck with the shoulder, on the side opposite to the main scene depicted on the body. The examples from Pharos and Vlaška njiva (inv. br. AMS 72362) have similarly shaped ovoid bodies and elongated necks. Their resemblance is further attested in the same decorative treatment of the neck and lower body. Both of the necks are adorned with so-called tongues, or elongated petals, while below the main scene, a frieze of double egg pattern with a dot to the right circumflexes the frontal side of the lower body.

The main scene and subsidiary motives differ. On the frontal side of the body of the lekythos from Vlaška njiva, the main scene consists of a representation of a female figure, sitting in a chariot pulled by two birds, perhaps geese. It may be a depiction of the goddess Aphrodite. The scene is flanked by spiral tendrils, with a tear shaped motif in between. The example from Pharos depicts a seated woman, to the right, with her face facing the opposite direction, holding what is probably a box in her hands. The subsidiary spiral tendril flanks the scene, with two additional motives in between shaped in the form of an hourglass. The lekythos



Fig. 3. Red-figure lekythos of Agrinion group from Vlaška njiva necropolis, Issa (Vis), Drawing: Jasmina Beneta.



Fig. 4 a-c. Red-figure lekythos of Agrinion group from Pharos, Photo: Eduard Visković.

³ I thank very much friar Mario Marinov for his permission to publish the lekythos from Pharos. The lekythos was photographed by Eduard Visković, whom I also thank very much for his help.

found on Martvilo necropolis (Inv. nr. AMS Fb 1415) has a somewhat more elongated ovoid body. The neck is decorated on the frontal side with four simple and rather hastily painted black vertical strokes. The main scene depicts a female figure seated on a chair to the right, holding a mirror in her left hand. The spiral tendril flanks the scene, while the band of egg pattern is replaced with a reserved strip. The examples from Pharos and Martvilo exhibit faint remains of added white on the figures.

Since the establishment of the Agrinion group by Ian McPhee in 1979, these lekythoi have been discussed in several publications. The current state of evidence indicates that various examples of Agrinion lekythoi were distributed in the central Mediterranean region, including the Ionian islands (Corfu, Lefkada), Epirus (Ambracia, Ioannina, Agrinion), the western Peloponnese (Olympia), Etolia-Acarmania (Stratos), the eastern Adriatic (Apollonia, Dyrrhachion, Issa, Pharos), southern and northern Italy (Heraclea Lucania, and Spina respectively) and the region of Sicily (the Lipari islands) (Aurigemma 1965: 131, tav. 160, b, second row, second and fifth lekythos from the left side; Brenabò Brea & Cavalier 1965: tav. XCII, 6; McPhee 1979; Pianu 1990: 34–35, tav. XIV, 4; Gliotta 1997: 93, 94; Andréou 2004: pin. 271–273; 2009: 131–132; Kirigin 2004: 156, T. XXXI, F; Hidri 2005: 101–106; Papadopoulos 2009; Pliakou 2009: 192, 193, pl. 1; Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: 248, 249; Čargo 2010: 72; Grazia Amore & Dimo 2010; Shehi & Tichit 2013; Paleothodoros 2015; Aggeli 2016). Ian McPhee suggested these lekythoi represent a local fabric from north-west Greece, but that their stylistic decoration drew inspiration from the Apulian red-figure production (McPhee 1979: 159–162). Several decades later, John Papadopoulos pointed out the possible influence of the Corinthian archaic production and suggested Ambracia as the most likely production site (Papadopoulos 2009: 239). Nevertheless, he did not exclude the possibility that the manufacture of the Agrinion lekythoi could have taken place in other localities as well, including Apollonia or Dyrrhachion in the south-eastern Adriatic (Papadopoulos 2009: 239). Ioanna Andreou also argued Ambracia as the most important workshop of this group, and in the same manner acknowledged the possibility of other workshops, for example, in Apollonia or Lefkada, which might have manufactured the same type of lekythos (Andreou 2004; 2009). She further on suggested small lekythoi from the Lefkania workshop (360–340 BCE) as possible prototypes (Andreou 2004), but Anthi Aggeli recently pointed out differences between the two groups, in the types of motives and their presentation (Aggeli 2016: 68). The city of Leukas (island of Leukas near Acarnania) was also considered a likely candidate (Pliakou 2009: 210), as were several workshops in the area of Acarnania and Aetolia (Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: 258). Local manufacture was assumed for examples found in graves of Apollonia (Grazia Amore & Dimo 2010: 389, 390). Based on their study on lekythoi from Artemision in Dyrrhachion, Eduard Shehi and Anne Tichit argued that the production of Agrinion lekythoi took place in the ceramic workshop(s) of Dyrrhachion, or that there were several interconnected regional centres where such artefacts were made (Shehi & Tichit 2013). Recent analysis by Dimitrios Paleothodoros concludes that there are currently five sites where the production of these vessels has been feasibly argued (Paleothodoros 2015). These are: Elis on Peloponnese, Ambracia in Epirus, Stratos in Aetolia-Acarmania, the Ionian island of Corfu and Dyrrhachion in the southern eastern Adriatic. In that light, he believes that there were probably several ceramic workshops that produced this type of lekythoi and moves forward to propose the city of Elis as the first and the oldest production centre, after which the manufacture of this type spread to other workshops along the Ionian-Adriatic vertical (Paleothodoros 2015). Anthi Aggeli publishes the lekythoi from Ambracia and considers them locally manufactured, but does not exclude other possible workshops in Apollonia or Dyrrhachion and Elis (Aggeli 2016).

Based on the available evidence it looks plausible that various interconnected workshops in the above-discussed central Mediterranean sites manufactured lekythoi that exhibit similar morphological and stylistic traits. However, considering the state of research, it is not possible, at the moment, to suggest the precise origins for the examples found in central Dalmatia. That being said, the lekythoi discovered in Issa and Pharos show clear analogies to lekythoi of this group found elsewhere. The example from Martvilo necropolis finds close shape comparisons in examples from Dyrrhachion, Forme 3 (Shehi & Tichit 2013: 121, 122) or Papadato in Aetolo-Acarmania and Ambracia/Arta in Arta, Epirus (Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: pin. 34, γ; Aggeli 2016: eik. 3, 1). A similar shape of the body witnessed in the other two Agrinion lekythoi from central Dalmatia can be observed in Dyrrhachion, Forme 7, although our examples have simple ring foot that is in Dyrrhachion represented only in Forme 1 (Shehi & Tichit 2013: 121, 122), as well as Strato (Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: pin. 33–35). The central scenes that decorate the frontal bodies of the Agrinion lekythoi most commonly show representations of female figures in various phases of the beautification processes. Mythological depictions of deities (e. g. Eros and Aphrodite) and

animals appear as well (Andreou 2009: 132, AE 6707; Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: pin 33, 35, γ, 35, γ; Aggeli 2016: 68). Latter examples from Ambracia can have more than one figure (Aggeli 2016: 68), that has been used as an argument against the Apulian influence, where only one figure remained the tradition (Aggeli 2016: 68). The *Vlaška njiva* lekythos is decorated with a scene that most likely represents the goddess Aphrodite on a chariot driven by geese. This display is, for now, unique. However, there are other examples from Ambracia, which also depict a female figure that could be interpreted as the goddess Aphrodite (i. e. with swans, Aggeli 2016: 60, 61, eix. 3,2). The seated woman holding a mirror, as is the one on the *Martvilo* lekythos, finds analogies in examples found on various sites in NW Greece, such as the *Papadato* in *Etolokarania* (Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: pin. 34, γ) or *Dourouti* (Ioannina) in Epirus (Andreou 2009: 130, AE 6703, from grave LXXX, from grave LXXX), as well as in the *Apollonia* in modern-day Albania (Grazia Amore & Dimo 2010: 389, 1.170, from grave 9). A scene similar to the one shown on the lekythos from *Pharos*, a seated woman looking back and holding a box, has been documented on lekythoi originating from *Agrinion*, *Corfu* (McPhee 1979: 159, 4, 15) and *Dourouti* (Ioannina) (Andreou 2009: 131, AE 6705, from grave LXXX). The added white colour has also been recorded on various sites, including *Ambracia* and *Dyrrhachion* (McPhee 1979: 160; Shehi & Tichit 2013: 118; Aggeli 2016). Analogies can be established for the rest of the decorative motives as well. For example, the same neck decoration and the egg pattern on the lower body appear on numerous lekythoi of this group found on all the above noted sites. The neck decorated with simple vertical lines, appears as well, although apparently less frequently (Aggeli 2016: 74, eik. 5, 5667). The reserved strip below the main scene, as seen in the *Martvilo* example, has previously been noted on lekythoi found in *Agrinion* and *Corfu* (McPhee 1979: 159, nr. 7 and 14).

The date for the production and use of the *Agrinion* lekythoi seemingly falls within the 4th c. BCE. Several opinions, however, have been offered with regards to a more precise date of these vessels. The difficulties have arisen from the fact that many of the found examples come from museums, frequently without securely documented context and partially as a result of extensive looting activities documented namely in the Greek regions. In spite of that, recently obtained contextual evidence has shed more light on this aspect. When Ian McPhee studied these vessels he took into consideration the style and dates of the available contexts proposing a date range between the second quarter and the last quarter of the 4th c. BCE (McPhee 1979: 161). A recent study of red-figure ware from *Ambracia* conducted by Anthi Aggeli has brought forth that the production of *Agrinion* group lekythoi, at least in *Ambracia*, took place already from the beginning of the 4th c. BCE and lasted until the third quarter or the beginning or the fourth quarter of the same century (Aggeli 2016: 68). According to M. Grazia Amore & Dimo, the lekythoi of this group found in graves of the *Tumulus 9* and *10* in *Apollonia* should be dated from between the first half and the middle of the 4th c. BCE (Grazia Amore & Dimo 2010: 389, 390). Examples that were discovered in two necropolises in *Strato* have been dated to the middle of the 4th c. BCE (Stavropoulou-Gatsi & Tsantila 2009: 248, 249). However, the authors emphasise that no firm conclusions can be made as almost half of the graves were looted. Branko Kirigin suggested the second half of the 4th c. BCE as a date for the examples found in *Pharos* and *Martvilo* necropolis (Kirigin 2004: 156). This was recently supported by several examples discovered in well documented grave contexts from *Dourouti* (Ioannina) (Andreou 2009: 144; Pliakou 2009: 192, 193, pl. 1.). In southern Italy, one *Agrinion* lekythos was found in *Heraclea Lucania* (today the area of *Basilicata*), documented in a grave dated between 330 and 310 BCE (Pianu 1990: 333, 34). Among the central Dalmatian examples, only the one found in tomb 65 on *Vlaška njiva* can be studied with its fully documented funeral context. The grave, shaped in the form of a rectangle, was aligned with dressed stones, covered with two massive stone blocks. The funeral assemblage consisted of various shapes of ceramic vessels that include four oinochoe (one red-figure and three gnathia), five skyphoi (four black-coated and one red-figure), one small pelike (gnathia), three lekythoi (one red-figure, one gnathia and one Apulian black painted), two saucers (black-coated), one shallow bowl (black-coated) and one pyxida (plain), along with two strigils, five astragals and the remains of clothing (4 bronze fibulae). While the style of fibulae indicates local eastern Adriatic type of artwork (early *Baška* type of fibula), the pottery is imported, and based on style and form analogies seems to have originated from various workshops, including southern and northern Apulia and Picenum. On top of the grave cover several other objects were deposited as well. These include: a seated (thorned?) terracotta female figurine, an oinochoe (Alto Adriatico), two pelikas (gnathia), a skyphos (black-coated), pyxida (plain), lekane (Alto-Adriatico), strigil and a ring. The majority of the material is consistent with the date of the second half of the 4th c. BCE, while several objects could be dated to the early 3rd c. BCE as well.

This brings us to the next questions, are these vessels associated with specific individuals? Notwithstanding the deposition of lekythoi in graves and their functional role within the burial ritual, is there also a connection between the depictions on Agrinion lekythoi and aspects of burial rituals? Can these be seen in relation to new conventional values brought forth by the Hellenistic period that refer to woman's beauty and the ideal of that beauty (Houby-Nielsen 1997: 244)? Perhaps it is not a coincidence that along with various female beautification scenes, some mythological depictions refer to the goddess Aphrodite, whose cult became very popular during the Late Classical and Hellenistic times, when she was also viewed as an incarnation of the new artistic and conventional values. If scenes were accompanied by symbolic messages that reflect cultural tendencies, was this meaning transferred along with the vessels themselves and understood by the new users? In order to at least partially answer this question, with regards to the central Dalmatia area, one would need to introduce all the available material evidence, which certainly goes beyond the scope of the current contribution. However, it would seem that in the case of Agrinion lekythoi we simply lack some crucial aspects of the contextual evidence to permit us to more closely examine its role within the burial ritual. Namely, to the best of my knowledge the only funeral context with known information about the sex of the deceased comes from Heraclea Lucania, where the Agrinion lekythos was deposited in the grave of a female individual (Pianu 1990: 34). The example from Vlaška njiva, unfortunately, does not offer new insights in this aspect. Grave 65 was documented in close special connection with another grave 65a. The individuals buried therein have been identified as an adult female and a male, but the available documentation does not permit conclusions on which should be associated with grave 65 and which with 65a.

The distribution of Agrinion lekythoi, and their use in burial rituals, is a faint reminder of cultural contacts that took place in the Late Classical and early Hellenistic period between the central Mediterranean regions. Although several lekythoi can hardly be considered evidence of regular trade, the area of central Dalmatia was certainly involved in various ways in these interactions, as implied also by other imports from Greece or strongly influenced by those productions (i.e. Miše & Touloumtzidou 2016: 304–307). The contextual evidence from Issa indicates the Agrinion lekythoi in central Dalmatia were associated with tomb assemblages of the second half of the 4th c. BCE, but conceivably towards its end (and the beginning of the 3rd c. BCE). In the context of burials, these lekythoi were functionally and culturally appropriated, and used by mourners (along with other artefacts) as symbolic objects from far away within the elaborated rituals influenced by multifaceted realities as a part of the emotional and social process through which death was confirmed as a reality.

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