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EARLY BRONZE AGE SICILIAN GEOMETRIC DECORATION: ITS ORIGIN AND RELATIONSHIP TO VESSEL FORM

Susan S. Lukesh

On the one hand, this essay owes everything to R. Ross Holloway with whom I have worked and studied for close to 35 years, specifically to his ready ability to entertain new ideas and ways of approaching the material we have excavated together. On the other hand, I am indebted to Joseph Masheck, Professor of Fine Arts and Art History at Hofstra University, without whose advice and ideas this specific piece might not have seen the light of day.

Introduction

The hallmark painted geometric decoration of the Early Bronze Age Sicilian Castelluccian pottery offers fertile ground for a variety of studies, and the site of La Muculufa in south central Sicily, excavated in the early 1980s, with over 100,000 sherds recovered – roughly 30% of them with painted decoration – provides an especially rich collection of material.

These fragments of pots, and the whole pots which were slowly and painstakingly put together, have furnished insights into the Castelluccian culture in south-central Sicily and the network of communities from which these and related objects were recovered. Some of the sherds from La Muculufa have formed the basis of my own attribution of a body of work to one recognizable prehistoric artist, called the Muculufa Master.¹ The study of these ceramics has also contributed to our growing understanding of socio-political organization in Early Bronze Age Sicily and the Salso River Valley and provided the potential for well-defined chronologies.

And, finally, the study of this body of material has also brought me to consideration of the origins of the Castel-

luccian motifs. Others, too, have considered possible origins of the motifs on this pottery. In particular, Sluga Messina² has found parallels to a number of Castelluccian motifs in the eastern Mediterranean, especially, she concludes, in the interior regions of Greece and Asia Minor, rather than in material from the coasts or outlying islands. She traces specific motifs to Iran and Asia Minor, for example the 'sun' or 'eye' and the hook/spiral (Fig. 1 & 2). Frankly, the very expanse of the area and the lack of precise chronological connections argue against drawing any significant conclusions.

Additionally, Sluga Messina has suggested that the 'Castelluccian' motifs used by modern day Algerian potters on their pots trace their history back through the millennia although the significance of the symbols has been lost. While this is possible, unless an unbroken history of use can be demonstrated, I believe that similar motifs do not necessitate a similar origin. I have argued in another forum that the common use of simple motifs around the world need not indicate a common origin.³ And just as I would not argue that the pattern of a row of filled triangles below a horizontal band on the rim of a Pueblo pot from the 15th–16th centuries A.D. derives from those same Castelluccian motifs (on a pot of similar shape), so I am unwilling, on the basis of evidence to date, to ascribe all the

¹ Susan S. Lukesh, "The La Muculufa Master and Company: The Identification of A Workshop of Early Bronze Age Castelluccian Painters," *Revue des Archeologues et Historiens d'Art de Louvain*, 2, 1993, p. 9–24.

² G. Sluga Messina, *Analisi dei motivi decorativi della ceramica da Castelluccio di Noto (Siracusa)*, Università degli studi di Trieste, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Istituto di Archeologia (Roma, 1983).

³ S. S. Lukesh, *Reflections on Castelluccian Material and Future Research Directions*, in Brian E. McConnell, *La Muculufa II Excavation and Survey 1988–1991: The Castelluccian Village and Other Areas*, *Archaeologia Transatlantica*, XIII, 1995, p. 185–210.

correspondence noted by Sluga Messina to direct origin in the eastern Mediterranean.

The last argument of Sluga Messina's regarding the motifs of modern day Algerian potters is reminiscent of Alois Riegl's vision of an unbroken historical continuity of an underlying core of fundamental motifs and his refusal to allow the derivation of some geometric motifs from the techniques of production and the nature of materials despite the evidence of natural parallels. Riegl presented his argument in a series of lectures delivered during the winter of 1890/91 at the University of Vienna and subsequently published in 1893 in *Stilfragen*⁴ where he argued for an historical development of ornament and against an origin which would allow the spontaneous appearance of motifs around the world. To account for such a spontaneous appearance of geometric motifs one might have to turn to a common, non-ornamental inspiration, such as textiles, basketry and wickerwork and to this Riegl was opposed.

Despite the strong case Riegl made for separating the origins of geometric design in general from weaving and basketry, there remain clear instances when specific origins can be argued, and consideration in this essay is of one instance when material and technique (here textile, basketry and wickerwork) stimulated decoration schema in another medium (Castellucian painted pottery). These results, I argue, in the hands of at least one artist (the Muculufa Master) produced a product which far surpassed the mere reflection of the original source of inspiration and succeeded as true art. It is a consideration of this point, the possibility of just such an origin and its translation to the medium of ceramics, that is the subject of this essay.

Semper & Riegl

Let us turn then to Alois Riegl and his book *Stilfragen* (published originally in 1893 and most recently in English translation in 1992 with excellent annotations by David Castriota) in which he argued against the belief that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and technique. This belief developed from the work of Gottfried Semper who, Riegl acknowledges, argued only that material and technique played a role in the genesis of art forms.

⁴ A. Riegl, *Problems of Style Foundations for History of Ornament*, translated by Evelyn Kain, Annotations and Introduction by David Castriota, Preface by Henry Zerner, 1992.

It was his followers, dubbed Semperians, who turned it into something absolute. Riegl proposed in *Stilfragen* to "address the most fundamental and harmful of misconceptions and preconceptions that hinder research"⁵ and suggested that he would "demonstrate that not only is there no cogent reason for assuming a priori that the oldest geometric decorations were executed in any particular technique, least of all weaving [in which term Riegl included basketry], but that the earliest, genuinely historical monuments we possess in fact contradict this assumption."⁶ This attempt to eliminate "the one principle that has ruled the entire field of art theory for the past quarter century: the absolute equation of textile patterns with the surface decoration or ornament"⁷ in some ways succeeded far too well, inhibiting attempts to search in specific instances for such an equation. Riegl states in the introduction to his book that he wishes "to reduce the importance of textile decoration to the level it deserves."⁸

Ultimately, of course, Riegl was arguing for the case of progressive development of ornamental patterns, according to principles of historical methodology and in such a fashion as to reflect relationships and interactions among historical communities. He mentions the "haste of scholars to assure us that they would never be so foolish and naive as to believe, for example, that one culture could have ever copied a 'simple' meander band from another [and their] repeated apologies whenever they do venture to assert even a loose connection between, shall we say, the stylized two-dimensional vegetal motifs current in two geographic areas."⁹ He suggests that the "materialist interpretation of the origin of arts is nothing other than Darwinism imposed upon an intellectual discipline."¹⁰ Semperian thinking, he argues, has led to insistence

- that the few basic motifs of the Geometric style occur in the same manner among practically all prehistoric and contemporary primitive cultures in Europe and Asia, in Africa as well as in America and Polynesia and

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

- that therefore the Geometric style originated spontaneously throughout the entire world and
- that its origins must be a common source in all cultures – hence textiles which people share in common.

Although, in fact, Riegl (and Semper) believed that technique and material played a formative role at a more advanced stage but not at the very inception of artistic activity, Riegl's eloquent argument in this volume has led to an insistence, in some areas, that motifs never originated independently and spontaneously but always derived from other areas. Here specifically I reference the Sicilian Bronze Age, the study of whose decoration patterns has led some to conclude that some complex patterns *must* have been influenced by similar ones discovered among their neighbors in the eastern Mediterranean, implicitly supporting the belief that nothing originated in Sicily – it was all derived from their neighbors to the East.

The strength of Riegl's argument against techno-materialist origins for geometric patterns led to the denial, in some circles, of techno-materialist origins for any instances of geometric patterning. One of Riegl's aims in his volume was to disprove the techno-materialist origin of geometric decoration in general; my purpose here is not to prove Riegl wrong but simply to consider a possible direct association between textile, basketry, and wickerwork and Sicilian Early Bronze Age Castelluccian ceramic decoration. This painted decoration remains, I believe, as a reminder of the origin of the motifs (much as Petrie found vestigial handles in painted wavy lines on an albeit strategic part of a pot). I argue further that the subsequent development of these decoration patterns in the work of the Castelluccian painter, the Muculufa Master, far surpassed the limitations of influence from textile and basketry production and became art. This final point is one which might have allowed Riegl to accept a technical-materialist origin of some geometric decoration as it demonstrates convincingly the artist's ability to break the bounds of craft production and create something attaining to fine art.

Castelluccian motifs and techno-materialist sources

Flinders Petrie, whose presentation of the vestigial handles I just mentioned, was a contemporary of Riegl. Riegl was born in 1858 and died in 1905; Petrie, born five years earlier

in 1853, outlasted him by far, living until 1942. As the Edwards Professor of Egyptology at University College, London, Petrie delivered a course of lectures on Egyptian Decorative Art which were published in 1895.¹¹ This professorship was created and Petrie appointed after Amelia Edwards' death in April 1892, and so Petrie must have delivered these lectures within the next couple of years, just a few years after Riegl delivered his lectures in Vienna. In Petrie's lectures, he proposed to limit his "view to the historical development of the various motifs or elements of decoration."¹² Although Petrie made no attempt to propose a history of ornament or even Egyptian ornament, he subscribed to a view with which Riegl would have agreed: "It is very difficult or almost impossible to point out decoration which is proved to have originated independently, and not to have been copied from the Egyptian stock."¹³ In support of his argument against continual re-invention of motifs, he writes "The very fact that the locality and date of an object of unknown origin can be so closely predicted by its style and feeling in design, is the best proof how continuous is the history and evolution of ornament, and how little new invention has to do with it."¹⁴ Nonetheless, he indicated his belief that, "the influence of the modes of work in weaving and basket-work have had much to do with the uniformity of patterns in different countries."¹⁵

This small volume of charming lectures was reissued in 1972 and provides an interesting counterpoint to Riegl, interesting especially since both men discuss the work of the American W. G. Goodyear who, in his book *The Grammar of the Lotus*,¹⁶ was the "first to argue that all antique vegetal ornament, and a good deal more, was a continuation of ancient Egyptian lotus ornament."¹⁷ Apparently Riegl and Petrie were unaware of each other's work at this time.

¹¹ W.M.F. Petrie, *Egyptian Decorative Art: A Course of Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution*, 1895.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8–9.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5–6.

¹⁶ W.G. Goodyear, *The Grammar of the Lotus. A New History of Classical Ornament as a Development of Sun Worship*, 1891.

¹⁷ Riegl, *cit.* in note 5, p. 7.

As we move into considering the reflections of weaving, plaiting and basketry as well as other natural forms in Castelluccian painted decoration, it is useful to consider briefly the specific parallels offered by Petrie.

Petrie addressed the sources of decoration (geometrical, natural, structural and symbolic) and in his consideration of structural decoration he points out how the pots drying in the sun before firing in Egyptian pottery yards of his day are held together by rough palm fiber cord. Out of the accidental marking on the clay from the cord, he suggests, came a pattern he terms the twist or guilloche (Fig. 3), which he derived from the rope pattern rather than a "chain of coils or wave patterns." Ever the archaeologist, he develops from the evidence of screens behind the figures of owners of early tombs the idea that some patterns were made "by binding the fibers into bundles, and so making a kind of open work, which may well have led to the pattern of connected rhomb (Fig. 4)."¹⁸ Certainly we see such patterns on Castelluccian pots. In the first instance cited, Petrie has translated a marking made by production techniques to a later pattern; in the second he found the inspiration for a pattern in basketry or wickerwork. The checker patterns of geometric design, ubiquitous to Castelluccian pots, derive, according to Petrie, unmistakably from plaiting and weaving, a source of inspiration I am convinced served the Castelluccian potters as well.

Feathers and the variety of their forms, Petrie argued, are "one source of simple pattern that has been little noticed."¹⁹ He offers a number of examples of feathers, three of which find immediate reflection in Castelluccian pottery (Fig. 5 corresponds to Fig. 6 and 7; Fig. 8 and 10 correspond to Fig. 9 and 11, respectively). He traces a history of decorative feather motifs on Egyptian material from the obvious to examples where the pattern was corrupted and the origin as featherwork probably lost.

Finally, I mention Petrie's derivation of rhombic-form frets from basketwork, as seen in the screen behind a figure at Giza (Fig. 12), and his attribution of the development of frets to the translation of spirals to textiles (and basketwork). The source of the spiral has been attributed, Petrie related, to the development of the lotus pattern although, he added, it is known in every variety of treat-

ment without any trace of connection to the lotus.²⁰ Certainly it is seen on Castelluccian pottery (Fig. 13 and 14). Petrie, in his discourse on the spiral, offers a small vignette which tells much about his approach to interpretation of symbolic meanings:

It has been said to represent the wanderings of the soul; why, or how, is not specified; nor why some souls should wander in circular spirals, others in oval spirals, some in spirals with ends, others in spirals that are endless. And what a soul was supposed to do when on the track of a triple diverging spiral, how could it go two ways at once, or which line it was to take – all these difficulties suggest that the theorist's soul was on a remarkable spiral.²¹

But we need not rely on Petrie's work to find possible sources in weaving, plaiting and basketry for many Castelluccian motifs (nor, in fact, on Castelluccian pots to demonstrate other such borrowings). Recourse to current texts on weaving, plaiting and basketry gives us any manner of parallels. I illustrate a few here.

Wickerwork as illustrated in *The Complete Book of Baskets and Basketry*²² shows us a simple wavy line pattern (Fig. 15) which is echoed on many Castelluccian pots (Fig. 16). From baskets again we see patterns formed when bases are created (Fig. 17 and 18); these are echoed repeatedly in the painted patterns on the inside of pedestalled bowls (Fig. 19) as on the bottom of pots (Fig. 20). Plaiting as opposed to coiled, rush or twined baskets offers some very expressive examples, one in progress (Fig. 21) and one complete (Fig. 22). Petrie's own plates of decorative patterns of the ancient world²³ gives direct parallels (Fig. 23 and 24). And basketry knots (Fig. 25) are also reflected in ancient patterns as Fig. 26 shows.

An example of twill patterning (Fig. 27)²⁴ can be placed beside a fragment from La Muculufa (Fig. 28) which seems a direct reflection of the pattern.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² D. Wright, *The Complete Book of Baskets and Basketry*, 1983 edition published by David & Charles Inc., North Pomfret, Vermont.

²³ W.M.F. Petrie, *Decorative Patterns of the Ancient World*, re-edition 1995.

²⁴ S. Glashauser and C. Westfall, *Plaiting Step-by-Step*, 1976.

¹⁸ Petrie, cit. in note 12, 94.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

And when we turn to band weaving²⁵ we can see how the small looms used for weaving long strips would generate patterns readily paralleled in the painted patterns of Castelluccian pottery. This illustration of eight different band patterns (Fig. 29) finds easy reflection on Castelluccian pots. The pattern third from the left finds direct comparison with the motif on the neck band on a fragmentary cup (Fig. 30). The sixth pattern from the left is a ubiquitous Castelluccian neck pattern as well as for 'supports' of the bowl on many cups; see, for example, Fig. 31 and 32.

And finally the pattern of hatched diamonds in a row (Fig. 33) produced on a compact inkle loom is found throughout Castelluccian painted decoration (Fig. 34 and 35).

Other than the example of the fiber cord on drying pots, Petrie offers no way in which or reason for the sources he cited to be translated to geometric motifs in other media. I have presented specific illustrations not because I believe that those who decorated Castelluccian pots were bereft of imagination and required inspiration from another medium but because I believe that the decorative motifs from weaving and wickerwork were intimately tied to the pots. In the first instance, ceramic vessels performed a similar function to baskets – carrier of foodstuffs. In the second instance, I suggest that woven or wickerwork bands surrounded the necks and supported the bodies of Sicilian Early Bronze Age pots at one point in their history and so the decoration patterns and schema became associated with these pots, long after the original association may have been lost.

The Muculufa Master

But if we can be convinced that one source of inspiration for Castelluccian painted decoration is the materials and techniques of weaving and wickerwork, I also suggest that in the same Castelluccian painted pottery we see instances when the use of these motifs has far surpassed the original inspiration and produced painted pots approaching art.

Just as Riegl doubted "that weaving or textile art provided the immediate source for the Dipylon Style, since its decorative vocabulary can be traced back consistently in Greek vase painting to products of the tenth or eleventh centuries B.C.,"²⁶ so I would argue that the work of the

Muculufa Master was not directly inspired by weaving or wickerwork.

The pot illustrated here is the name vase of the Muculufa Master (Fig. 36). My identification of this painter followed the detailed examination of a number of reconstructed pots from La Muculufa and fragmentary vessels and sherds from other sites, Xiboli, Monte San Giuliano, and Casalicchio-Agnone. It was based on three critical points: design composition (structure), selection and interpretation of particular motifs (form), and execution of particular motifs (technique). The material reviewed permitted, for the first time, the identification of distinct hands among painters of Castelluccian pottery. Beginning with the name vase of the Muculufa Master, I identified fragmentary examples of pots which reflect the same selection of motifs, the same overall comprehension of balance in the design composition, suggesting a common set of structural rules, and even the same technique or execution of motifs. Fig. 37, a fragment of a smaller pot, illustrates, I believe, the hand of the Master on another pot – even in this small piece there is a sense of a very balanced composition and an equal if not greater sureness of hand. Figure 38 illustrates a fragment of an amphora whose motif selection and design composition strongly argue for the same workshop if not the same artisan as our Master. In addition, a group of fragmentary cups (Fig. 39 and 40), while not currently used to identify distinct hands, reinforces the close relationship among painters of pots found at La Muculufa, Casalicchio-Agnone, Xiboli, Monte San Giuliano, Canticaglione, and Canicatti, all sites in or close to the Salso River valley. Finally, Fig. 41 illustrates a partially reconstructed amphora whose composition is well laid out with alternating metopes of multiple angular lines and vertically positioned angular lines adorned with spirals rather than 'berries'. This second motif has three lines in the central panel or metope and only two on the left and right versions. As on the name vase, the handle area on the neck is solid black. The neck and body are delimited by a set of three unadorned zigzag lines; the body is filled with the same multiple line pattern used in the neck metopes; and the handle area on the body carries the hatched band seen on many vases, including the name vase.

²⁵ H. and S. Tacker, *Band Weaving, The Techniques, Looms, and Uses for Woven Bands*, 1974.

²⁶ Riegl, cit. in note 5, annotation I, p. 309.

The execution of the motifs, however, is less fine and the selection and organization of motifs less complex than on the name vase. In fact, the size of the metopes on the neck, which are filled with the same pattern on the lower body, changes the impression of the vessel to one primarily decorated with one motif, occasionally relieved by sets of zigzag lines; this is quite different from the design structure on the name vase. While this amphora was not executed by the Muculufa Painter, it is likely that it was created with the knowledge of the name vase tradition and the manufacturer's 'shop'; that is, the painter was familiar with the set of structural rules governing the design composition of the pots discussed above, as well as the individual selection of motifs. This amphora was executed much more quickly and much less expertly.

Conclusion

We have come a long way from pots whose decoration, I suggest, imitated or reflected basket precursors or ceramic precursors with basketry or woven supports. I have attempted to demonstrate how the techno-materialist sources for the antecedents of the Muculufa Master and Company have been translated in the hands of some talented artisans and developed well beyond their origins. And developed, in fact, into a class of painted pottery that takes its place beside some of the best of the Minoan, Mycenaean and Greek Geometric painted pottery.

The tradition of Early Bronze Age Sicilian painted pottery with the recognition of a master craftsman and his workshop enlightens us in terms of socio-political organization but also demonstrates the development of art in an early not yet well-known period. This tradition, I suggest to you, deserves a proud place in Bronze Age Mediterranean studies.

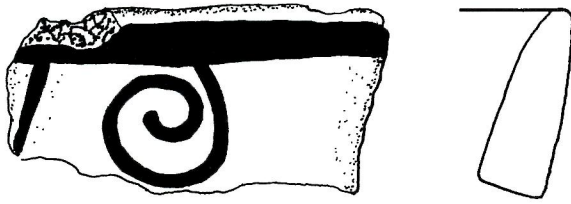


Fig. 1. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.

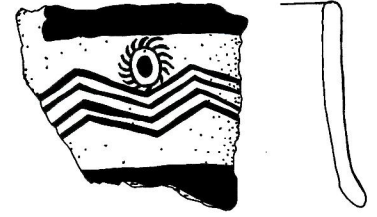


Fig. 2. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.



Fig. 3. Guilloche, after Petrie, Egyptian Decoration, Fig. 170.

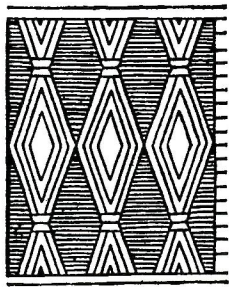


Fig. 4. Connected rhombs, after Petrie, Egyptian Decoration, Fig. 172.

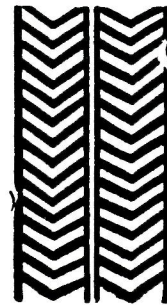


Fig. 5. Feather pattern from XIth dynasty coffin, after Petrie, Egyptian Decoration, Fig. 91.



Fig. 6. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.



Fig. 7. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.

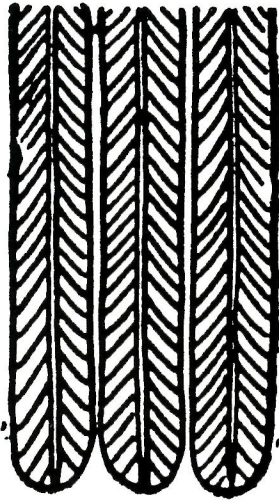


Fig. 8. Feather pattern from 19th dynasty coffin, after Petrie, *Egyptian Decoration*, Fig. 92.



Fig. 9. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.

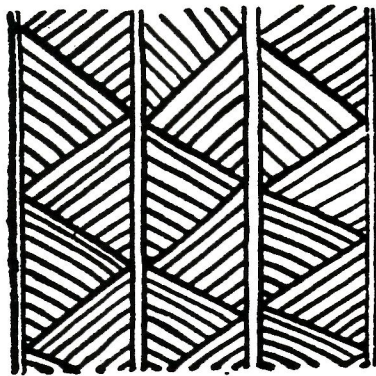


Fig. 10. Feather pattern from 19th dynasty coffin, after Petrie, *Egyptian Decoration*, Fig. 94.

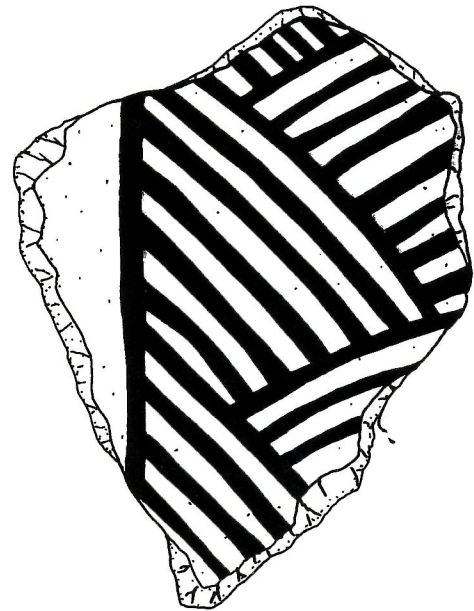


Fig. 11. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.



Fig. 12. Fret of rhombic form, 5th dynasty, after Petrie, *Egyptian Decoration*, Fig. 60.

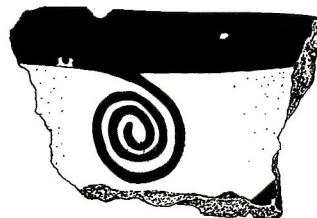


Fig. 13. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.



Fig. 14. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.

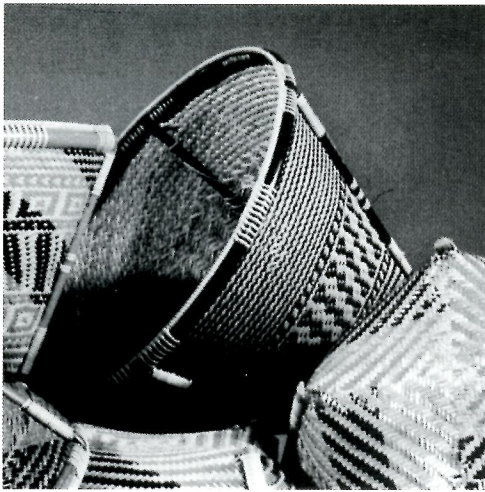


Fig. 15. Melanu baskets from Sarawak, Wright, color plate 2.

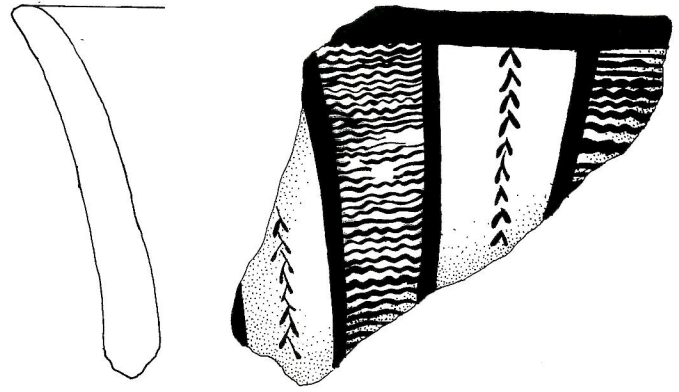


Fig. 16. Castelluccian sherd from foot of pedestalled pot, La Muculufa.

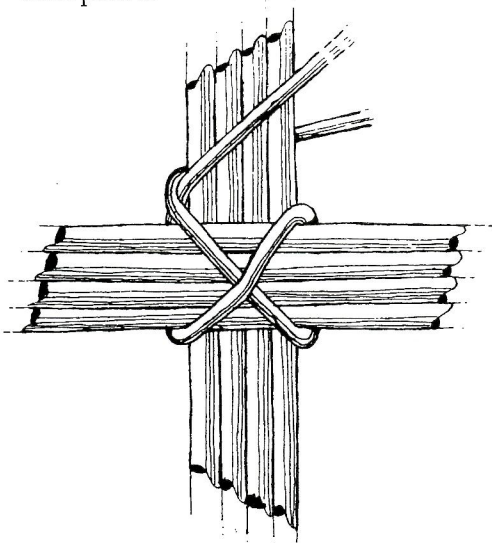


Fig. 17. Beginning weaving of basketry base, Wright, illus. 97.

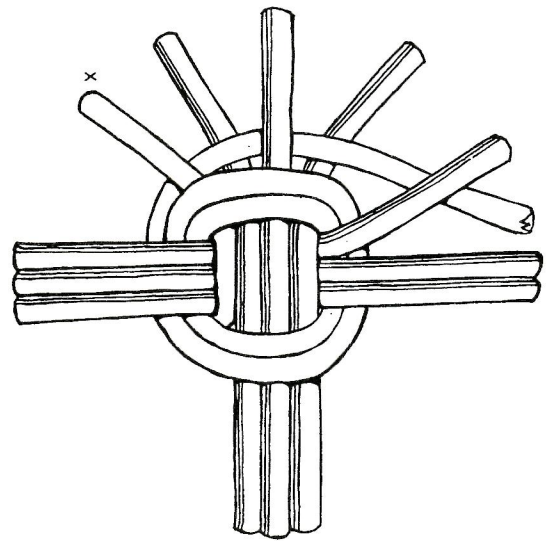


Fig. 18. Beginning weaving of basketry base, Wright, illus. 103.

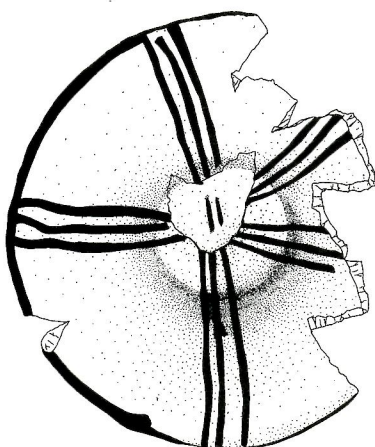


Fig. 19. Castelluccian sherd, inside bowl of pedestalled pot, La Muculufa.

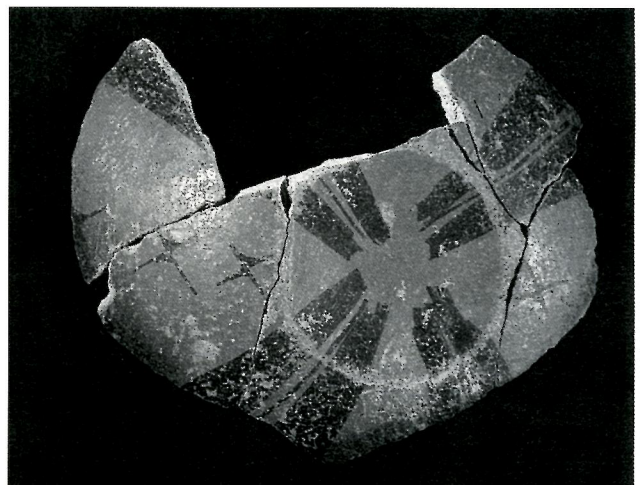


Fig. 20. Outside base of Castelluccian pot, La Muculufa.

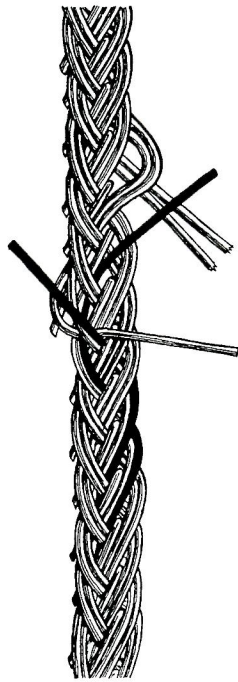


Fig. 21. Plaiting in progress, Wright, illus. 135.

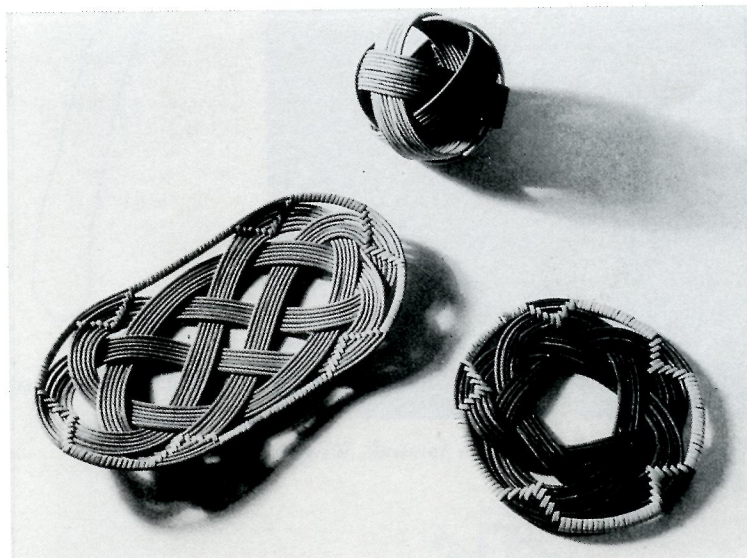


Fig. 22. Plaited basket, Wright, illus. 228.

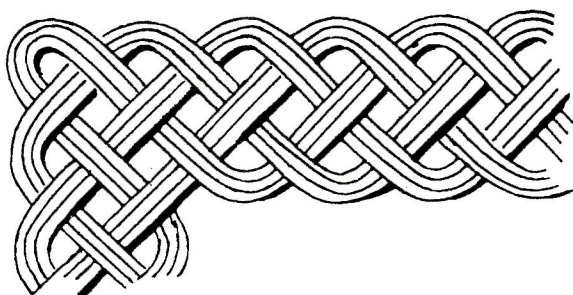


Fig. 23. Six twist from Kincizha, Dalmatia ca. 300 A.D., after Petrie, *Decorative Patterns*, XLIV H65.

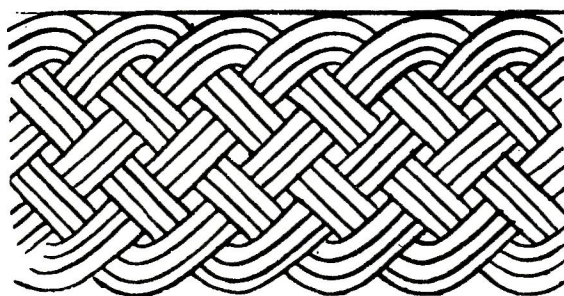


Fig. 24. Quadruple twist, Syro-Hittite cylinder, Petrie, *Decorative Patterns*, XLIV MHr.

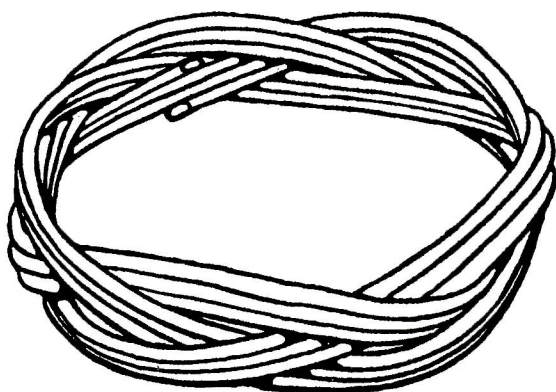


Fig. 25. Knot from sailor's or scout's lanyard, Wright, illus. 155.

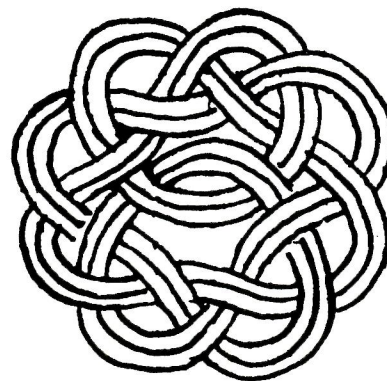


Fig. 26. Double twist, Canterbury, ca. 650 A.D. after Petrie, *Decorative Patterns*, XLII Fro.



Fig. 27. Antique domed basket with twill patterning, India, Glashausser and Westfall, p. 25.

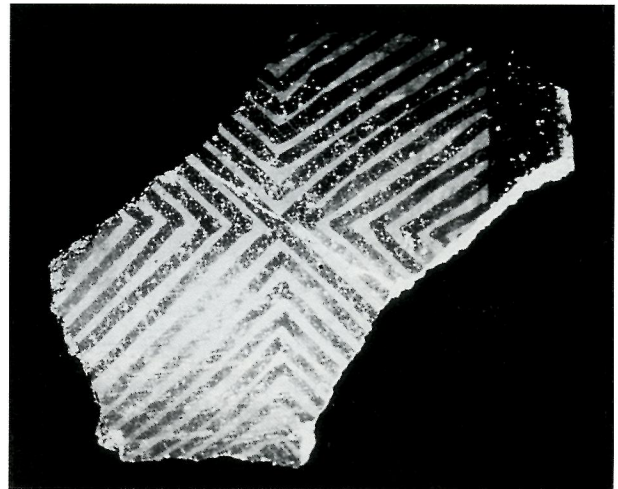


Fig. 28. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.

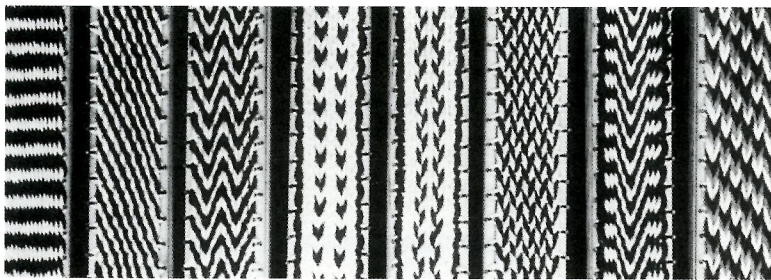


Fig. 29. Basic twining-loom band patterns, Tacker and Tacker, ill. 6-17.

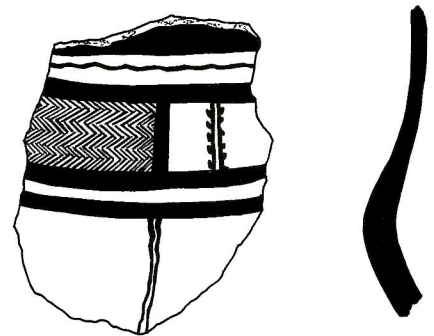


Fig. 30. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.



Fig. 31. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.



Fig. 32. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.

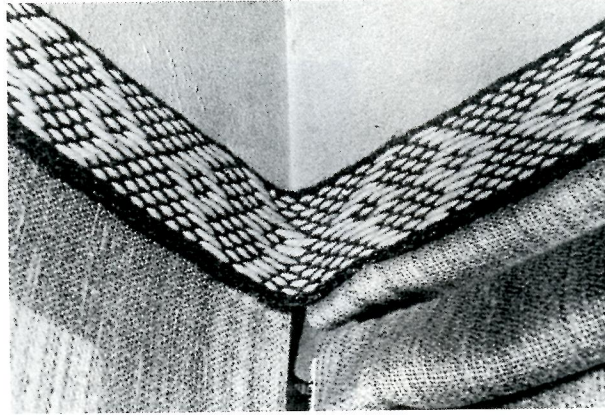


Fig. 33. Inkle band with pick-up design, Tacker and Tacker, ill. 8-17.

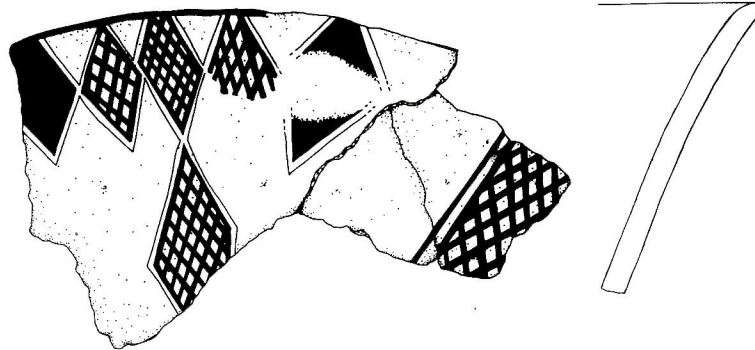


Fig. 34. Castelluccian sherd, inside bowl of pedestalled pot, La Muculufa.

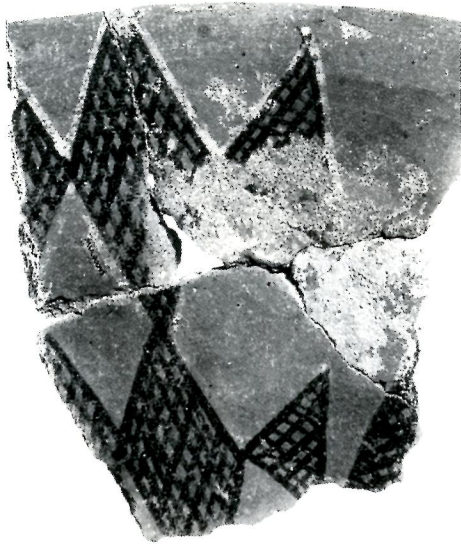


Fig. 35. Castelluccian sherd, inside bowl of pedestalled pot, La Muculufa.



Fig. 36. La Muculufa Master name vase.



Fig. 37. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.

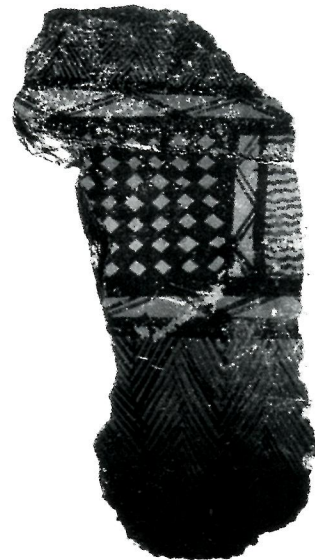


Fig. 38. Castelluccian sherd, La Muculufa.

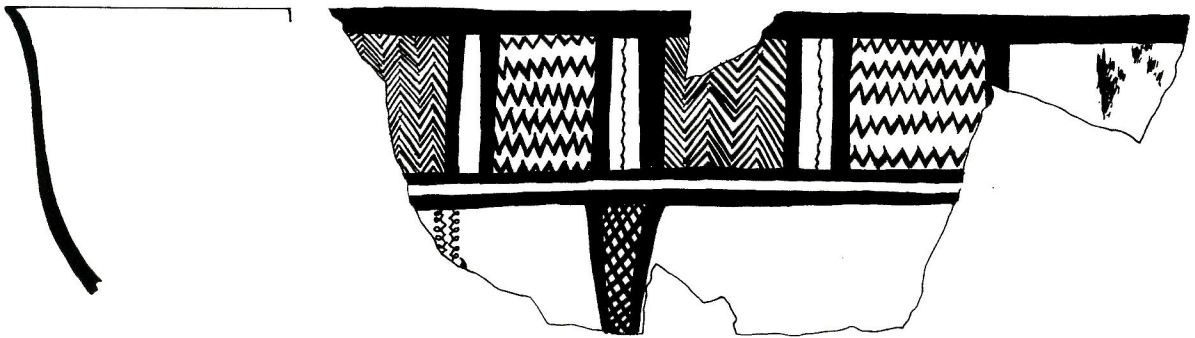


Fig. 39. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.

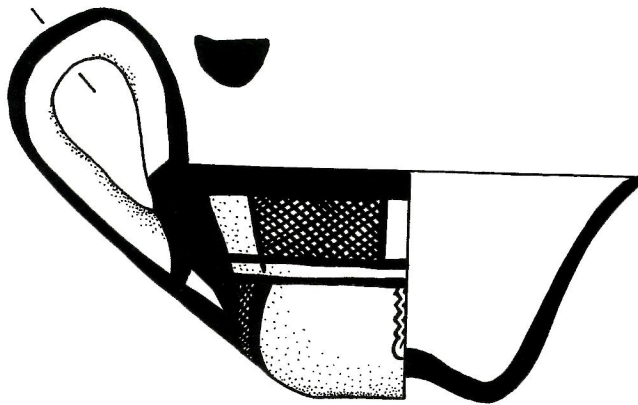


Fig. 40. Castelluccian cup, La Muculufa.



Fig. 41. Reconstructed Castelluccian pot, La Muculufa.