

NEOLITHIC SHERDS FROM THESPIAI

(PLATES 86-87)

NEAR the site of ancient Thespiai, on the south bank of the river Thespios opposite Eremokastro, there is a low mound which marks the place of a pre-historic settlement. As early as 1920 it was known to Professor C. W. Blegen, who first showed it to me. In recent years members of the American School have stopped there several times and have gathered samples of the fragmentary pottery that lies scattered over its whole surface. The piece illustrated on Plate 86 was picked up in October 1950 by Mr. Charles Fleischmann, who presented it to the School's study collection in Athens.

This fragment, which measures about 0.065 m. by 0.08 m., comprises only a small part of the rim and side of the vessel, a jar or deep bowl, which was originally some 0.18 m. in diameter at the lip. The rim was folded over by the potter and pressed against the outer side to form a thick roll. The shoulder is gently convex. Light reddish-brown clay makes up the biscuit, which is firm and well baked. The surfaces, unslipped and incompletely burnished, are pitted here and there with minute cavities from which presumably bits of vegetable matter were burnt out in the firing.

The top of the rim is decorated with short slanting lines which appear to have been impressed rather than incised. Immediately below, on the exterior, is a representation of a human face. The brows are heavy, ending at either side in projections that are almost hornlike. The forehead, where the brows meet, is unnaturally prominent and forms a sort of lug; the nose is disproportionately small. Eyes and mouth are formed by lumps of clay, deeply cut with horizontal slots and slightly worked. Bulbous eminences on either side of the mouth portray the cheeks.

Below and to the left of the face (as we see it) traces of another plastic element are preserved: a ridge running almost horizontally, then curving downward and meeting some further bits of modelling near the break. These features may have been merely decorative (cf. Kunze, *Orchomenos* II, pl. XIV, 3a) or perhaps represented part of the human figure: one of a pair of arms coming in from the sides of the pot.

For all its crudeness, the face has character and individuality. Its remarkable forehead and cheeks, the eyes so fashioned that the upper lids cast deep shadows, the narrow mouth with lips thrust forward and parted, all together produce an expression that is strange and arresting. How much of the total effect should be attributed to the deliberate intention of the artist, how much to chance and primitive

intuition, it would be rash to guess. Enough here to observe that the workmanship is deft and quick; it betrays no fumbling or hesitation, and is far from being naive.

There can be little doubt that the pot was a local Boeotian product of the Neolithic period. The color and texture of the clay, the pitted surface and the burnishing (clearly visible on the interior, Plate 86), are features characteristic of that age; sherds of the same ware are plentiful in Thessaly, at Orchomenos, at Chaeronea, and on the surface of this very site (e. g. Plate 87 Nos. 19, 21). No exact parallel for the Thespian face is yet known, but in style it may be compared with some of the idols found by Tsountas (*Dimini and Sesklo*, pls. 32-35) and by Wace and Thompson (*Prehistoric Thessaly*, figs. 74b, 76f, 77d, 91b and d, 114). The eyes of these, "blobs of clay with a gash in the middle," are like the Thespian's, but their noses are in most cases large. Tsountas illustrates one fragment of a pot with human features, from Sesklo (*DS*, fig. 228), but notes that its position in the strata could not be certified. Among the face pots from Troy (which belong to the Early Bronze Age) there are general resemblances but nothing that looks quite like our fragment.

A selection of Neolithic sherds picked up at the Thespian mound is shown on Plate 87. Wares of the early and late phases are represented: red, brown or black on buff or tan (Nos. 1-4, 6-8, 10-12); purple on tan (Nos. 9, 13); polychrome (No. 5); black and brown wares with incised, burnished and ribbed patterns (Nos. 14-18); plain burnished and coarse fabrics (Nos. 19-24). Present also, but in almost negligible quantity, are fragments assignable to the Early, Middle, and Late Helladic periods. Several stone celts and rough pounders or grinders, as well as numerous flakes of obsidian and flint, have also been found. A few fragments of archaic wares, probably datable in the seventh century, and considerable numbers of later Greek and Roman pieces occur, especially on the eastern side of the hill, toward the Classical site.

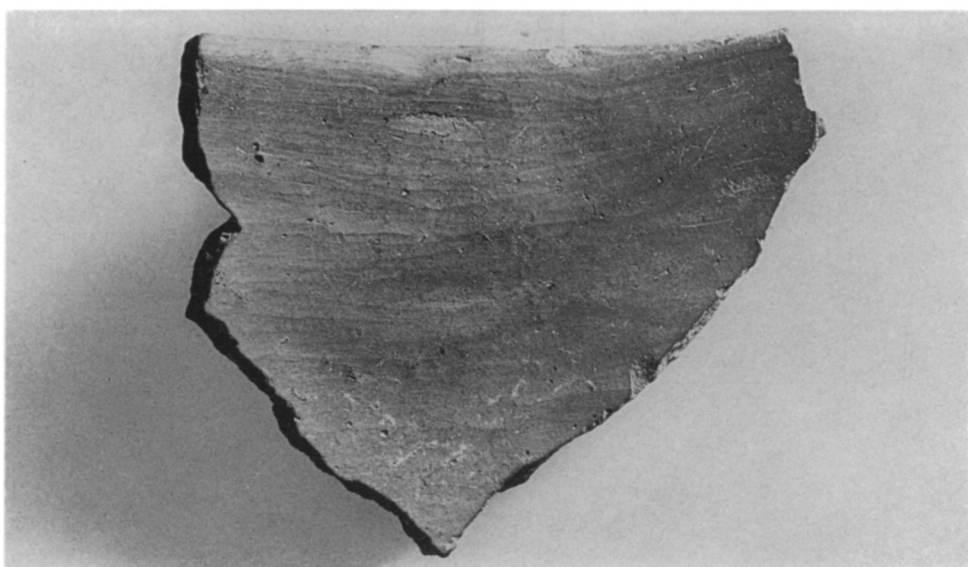
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AT ATHENS

PLATE 86



A



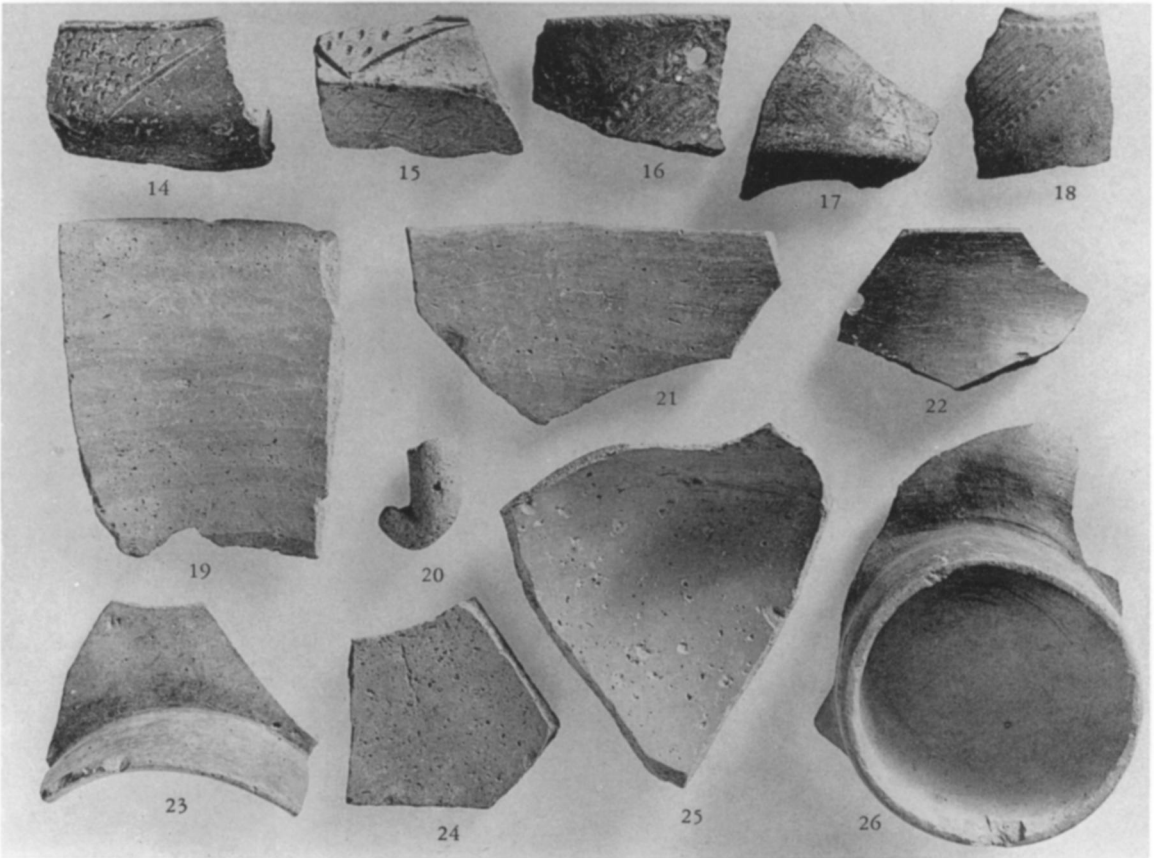
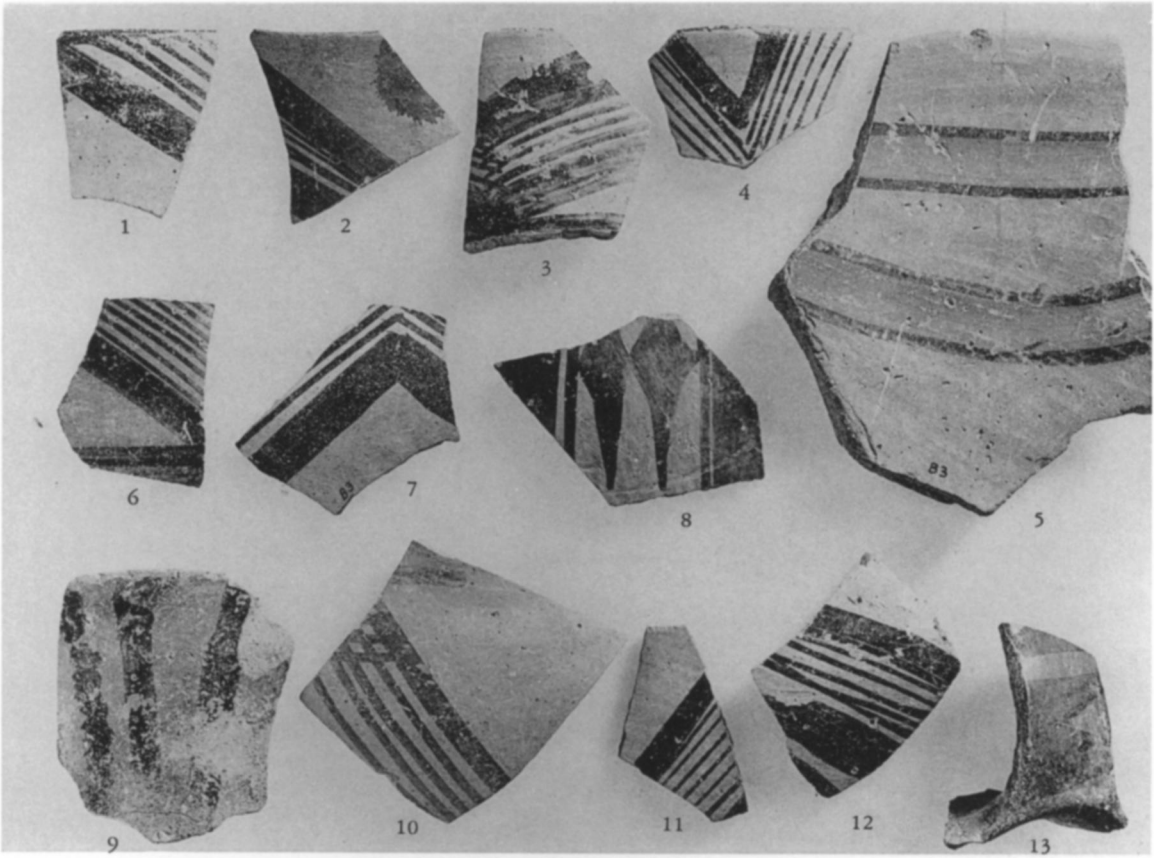
B



C

Neolithic Sherd from Site near Thespiai. A, Exterior; B, Interior; C, Profile (Drawn by Miss Marion Welker). Full size

JOHN L. CASKEY: NEOLITHIC SHERDS FROM THESPIAI



Fragments of Neolithic Pottery from Site near Thespiai. Scale 1:2

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