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Alexandra Alexandridou, *The Early Black-figured Pottery of Attika in Context (c. 630-570 BCE). Monumenta Graeca et Romana, 17*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011. Pp. xlii, 252; 36 p. of plates. ISBN 9789004186040. $212.00.

Reviewed by Vladimir Stissi, University of Amsterdam (v.v.stissi@uva.nl)

Book titles do not always make a reader's life easier. Those expecting a study of early Attic black-figured pottery in its archaeological (that is, excavated) contexts will be highly disappointed by this book, which does not look underground very much: the 'context' of the title refers to contemporary Attic society. Even taking that as a starting point, however, and leaving aside the issue whether context in this sense is not a self-evident part of any early 21st century archaeological and/or art-historical study, I found that the title promised rather more than the book offers. The dialogue between pots and context remains quite one-sided, and the resulting worldview is rather 'ceramocentric'.

The titles of each chapter ('History of Research','Shapes', 'Painters', 'Iconography' and 'Distribution', with a short 'Ceramic Approach to Early Archaic Attika' as a conclusion) reveal very well what this book really is: a rather traditional, albeit very comprehensive, art-historical overview, with a twist. The framework comes directly from Beazley, the great inspirer of Attic pottery studies, but the 'traditional' typological, stylistic, and iconographic data are not only used to understand the pottery itself, but also to give some insights into the society that produced and used it. From this point of view, the book does a good job.

Indeed, the chapters on shapes, painters and iconography combine truly encyclopedic collections of information, mostly squeezed out of the existing literature, with some refreshing, more personal insights on various aspects of production and use. Alexandridou is very good at presenting the wide range of discussions and interpretations regarding every detail she treats, although the density of information will surely often overwhelm the non-specialist. Still, as usual in this field of archaeology, many of the interpretations and conclusions remain hypothetical or speculative. Moreover, rather than weighing arguments and choosing a side, Alexandridou seems to avoid taking one as much as possible, and leaves many discussions open. Wise, probably, but also somewhat frustrating to readers looking for specialist guidance and interpretation.

More problematic—and this brings me back to the word 'context' of the title—is that the traditional approach and the strong focus on existing literature and ongoing scholarly discussions often keep this study on old tracks, where new ones are within reach. A better look at context, in whatever sense of the word, could help explain many things, or deconstruct archaeological fictions. A few examples:

In the chapter on shapes, the kantharos, a relatively rare shape in Attica, but one of the more common drinking vessels in the rest of mainland Greece, is looked at from a narrow Attic perspective. Its origin is placed in the Late Protogeometric period, leaving aside earlier specimens and possible continuity as far back as the Middle Bronze Age further north (and west); likewise, Alexandridou discusses whether the early 6th century Attic kantharos shape

is a local invention or is derived from Etruscan or Boeotian examples. She does not take into account, however, the continuous popularity and development of the shape in Boeotia and areas further north through the Early Iron Age into the 7th and 6th centuries. Its present-day fame should not isolate Attic pottery from its artisanal context, which is not just local, but can be regional and even supra-regional, and may well place it in a periphery of a strong tradition in this case. In addition, Alexandridou's suggestion that Boeotian kantharoi, unlike Athenian, primarily served funerary purposes overlooks their frequent presence in sanctuaries. Further, since there is hardly any domestic evidence of the Archaic period from Boeotia (or Attica, for that matter) one can only speculate about the use of pots in the home.

More generally, the ambiguity of the functionality of pots almost exclusively found in graves or votive assemblages, with domestic contexts mostly lacking, is an issue occasionally touched upon but never really addressed in this book. In fact, Alexandridou seems to assume that, generally, votive or funerary pots before deposition must have been put to practical use according to the function 'implied' by their shapes, either in daily life or as part of ceremonies. I would argue that things must have been quite a bit more complex, but however we look at it, supporting evidence, preferably from archaeological contexts should have been offered. Without that, any assumption on ancient use of pots remains speculative.

This absence of archaeological context leading to missing evidence is a recurring problem, which can take different shapes. Sometimes, the evidence Alexandridou misses does not offer a positive contribution, but a negative one, deconstructing very speculative interpretations which nevertheless dominate the scholarly discussions in which she engages. Typical is her treatment of the famous Sophilos fragment, showing the funeral games for Patroklos, found near Pharsalos, in the quite remote inlands of Thessaly, but close to the area Achilles was supposed to come from. Alexandridou elaborately discusses the scene twice, offering various hypotheses on its local use and meaning, but, though mentioning the find spot, apparently did not bother to look up the (very summary) original publications of the excavation the piece was found in.[1] These make clear that in this case the find context, perhaps domestic, perhaps a sanctuary, possibly but not surely a predecessor of Classical-Hellenistic Pharsalos, offers no useful information, and any attempt to relate the scene to a local festival or cult is pure speculation. Not having a context can thus be helpful too, if one only bothers to check.

The exception that proves the rule is Alexandridou's treatment of the graves of Vari. Here she has studied the old excavations, and that leads to some of the most enlightening conclusions of her study. Even though the basic information is not presented in this book, and I would have liked to have seen better plans and find tables, Alexandridou convincingly relates the Vari graves to local elites, and places them, somewhat more tentatively, in a local social context; moreover, in relation to 'localizing' consumption, she offers some good arguments for also locating a part of the production of early Attic black-figured pots around Vari and perhaps some other places in the countryside, and so outside the main centre of Athens. Even though attempts to differentiate producers within Attic production, and to relate Athenian potters and pots to those of surrounding areas are not new, relating these issues to find contexts, thereby bringing in the consumers, is a very welcome innovation. The final step, bringing in chemical analysis to offer more certain indications of provenance, is suggested by Alexandridou, but remains to be taken up by others.

In comparison to her successful close reading of the finds of the Attic countryside, the more general overview of the distribution of early Attic black-figured pottery in the final chapter is disappointing again. Tables and maps of finds are combined with hypothetical suggestions about the origins and routes of traders, mainly taken from previous studies, and based on tenuous historical data. The links between the pots (dots on the maps) and suggested distribution remain mysterious, also because the numbers involved are often very small and do not always seem reliable. A total of 5 black gloss pots of sympotic shapes for the

Athenian Agora (covering the 20 year period 600- 580), to take the most extreme case, cannot be taken very seriously, and I find a domestic provenance of about a third of the pots of sympotic shapes of the same period found overseas highly unlikely. Looking closer, and reading between the lines, it seems that many of these 'domestic' items come from large scale urban excavations, mainly in present day Italy and western Turkey. As far as I know, these sites have yielded very few closed domestic deposits of the early Archaic period. Most of the early black-figured pots and sherds must have come from secondary deposits, which of course do not necessarily have a domestic provenance. It seems Alexandridou has automatically counted every urban find not surely coming from a sanctuary as domestic, which is too simplistic in view of the difficult stratigraphy often encountered in urban excavations.

Unfortunately, I could not check my suspicion thoroughly because the full database on which the tables are based is not given, and the very elaborate catalogue following the main text does not offer any information on find spots beyond place names, barring exceptions like the Akropolis and the Agora – which are not unproblematic in themselves. In line with the rest of the book, the catalogue, which is mainly organized by shape, offers more Beazley than context: inventory numbers, an extremely summary description, a date and the basic publication reference. The shape-based organization, and the rather unclear (geographical) order for entries within each shape, make the catalogue rather user-unfriendly as a research tool. No references to the electronic Beazley archive numbers are given, which also makes life a bit more difficult for those looking for more information on specific items. Moreover, although the information listed is limited, the more than 1500 catalogue entries take up 62 pages, which is rather much compared to the 117 pages of main text. A more elaborate digital version, preferably combined with the database used to make the tables, online or on a CD or DVD or other device, would have been a more efficient alternative, and may have reduced the cost of the book. Perhaps some of the saved space could have been used to provide more illustrations – 60 figures (of which 4 site plans) and 6 distribution maps is not much compared to the size of the catalogue – while a few more detailed topographical maps, of Attica and the Vari area for example, would have been welcome too.

This brings me to a recurring finale in reviews of books published by Brill. The price is very high for this technically quite simple book without any high-quality illustrations. And the money clearly did not go into text editing: although the book is well-structured and very readable, the English is awkward here and there, and some mistakes and typos remain.

Yet, despite my criticisms, I think that this book deserves a wider audience than its price may allow. Alexandridou has written a very good introduction to the often neglected subject of early black-figured pottery in Athens and its surroundings, and offers many fruitful starting points for further research and discussion.

Notes:

1. See Béquignon, Yves, ***Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique***, 55 (1931), 450-522, 492-493 and Béquignon, Yves, Études thessaliennes, V, ***Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique***, 56 (1932), 89 - 191, esp. 90-114 and within that 98-99.

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