Pottery to the people. The production, distribution and consumption of decorated pottery in the Greek world in the Archaic period (650-480 BC)

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I Introduction
I.1 Pottery to the people: general aims

The title of this study suggests its essence: pots and the people behind them. These people, in fact, form the main focus: producers, transporters, merchants, and consumers. Thus the study examines how Archaic Greek pottery went from the workshop to its use context or, seen from another perspective, how those in the Greek world who needed pots managed to get them, through producers and distributors, and then used, offered and buried their vessels, finally leaving them behind. By considering the entire path from the clay pit to the abandoned sherd, this study tries to explore the reciprocal interconnections and influences of production, distribution and consumption in the framework of society. The final recipients of the pots were at the end of a long chain of processes which, in my opinion, needs to be viewed as a whole within its cultural and social contexts.

The title refers not only to Antiquity, however. Part of my inspiration lies in the sense that modern scholarship has centred too much on the pottery itself and not enough on the people. More than two hundred years of scholarship, while producing immense knowledge about shapes and decoration, even about possible usage, offers surprisingly few insights into the people who actually made the pottery, or handled it and looked at it. What did they do with their pots, how and why? How did they regard and appreciate these vessels? Such questions are of course among the most difficult archaeologists can ask, and although this study surely cannot answer any of them definitively, an attempt to restore the pottery to the people originally involved, to remove it from the realm of lifeless abstractions, seems the necessary first step towards that end.

I.2 Pottery, without the people: history and present state of Greek ceramic studies

The study of Greek pottery has always been dominated by the art history of Greek vase-painting, the most important issues being style and iconography as well as the classification of excavation finds and their presentation in museums. More prosaic subjects like the practical uses of vessels, production technology and distribution patterns were certainly not overlooked, although they were most often considered secondary. In fact, it seems that, in the course of the 20th century, the more Greek pots were viewed as works of art instead of derivative craft products, as they were earlier often regarded, the less they were seen in the light of production, distribution, use and the people involved.1 Only a few specialised approaches, like scientific research on production technology, continued to be applied, partly because they could support art historical arguments.

The result of all this, combined with the limitations of the evidence, is that our knowledge of the issues explored in this study is rather patchy and of uneven quality and depth. For instance, we know quite a lot about kiln firing techniques and the layout of pottery workshops, but hardly anything about the scale and organisation of production. Similarly, although present-day distribution patterns have received intensive study, little attention has been given to the question of how the pottery actually arrived at its destinations. From the consumers' perspective, a lot has been said about the possible uses of individual shapes, but few observers seem to have taken the trouble to look at the actual functional contexts, that is, the excavation assemblages in which the...
pottery was discovered. Further, the questions of who actually used what kinds of pottery, where and when, have neither been satisfactorily addressed. In short, the people behind the pottery have been lost.

In many respects, moreover, the information we purportedly know about ancient Greek pottery supplies frustratingly few answers to the kinds of questions asked here. All too often studies regarding the users and use of pottery focus instead more on the interpretation and appreciation of the figured decoration by its ancient makers and viewers — despite the fact that the basic questions of whether the ancient consumers actually took notice of the figurework and tried to understand the painted scenes have not yet been sufficiently examined: it is simply taken for granted that they saw and understood. If the actual function of the pottery is touched on at all, an iconographical analysis usually forms the starting point.  

All this strikes me as peculiar, especially since many pages of intricate discourse are often needed to explain iconographical details or the exact meaning of rather complicated scenes and sometimes obscure mythology. Although it is likely that many Greeks knew their myths well, at least in oral form, and although it is conceivable that many ancient owners looked more closely at their pottery than most of us do, perhaps even better than many present-day collectors of Chinese porcelain, Meissen or Delft ware, iconographical studies of Greek pottery, in my opinion, tend to overestimate the knowledge, interest and curiosity of ancient consumers. The thin line between a historical analysis relating an ancient object to its own cultural context and art criticism regarding the object more in the light of contemporary appreciation and scholarly discourse than in that of ancient realities, is often inadvertently and all too easily crossed in ceramic archaeology.

Stylistic studies of Greek pottery have similarly esoteric tendencies. On the one hand, stylistic classification is regularly reduced to a nearly abstract device used to produce dates and provenances needed in the interpretation of excavation data, while on the other hand stylistic grouping and dating sometimes become autonomous fields of study, especially in monographs or articles on individual painters.  

While classification remains, of course, a primary means of interpreting archaeological data on Greek pottery, it is regrettable that so little of the results are employed to increase an understanding of its production and distribution. For example, the hundreds of items attributed to the late Attic black-figure Haimon Painter play a prominent role in discussions about the chronology of the early 5th century and the interpretation of several interesting excavation assemblages in Athens, Spina, the Near East and Egypt, even though we do not seem to know what the stylistic attributions imply. Were all these vessels really decorated by one person? And if so, in what kind of an establishment? As long as we remain ignorant of such basic matters, it can be wondered whether much classification of this sort is not dangerously artificial.

Such matters are all the more acute since particularly in specialised stylistic and iconographical studies classification for its own sake seems too often to be the aim, and the grouping of items in combination with only some stylistic and iconographical descriptions seems to be accepted as a reliable starting point for understanding and studying 'artistic personalities' which, as a result,
lack sharp definition. Indeed, it is precisely in this kind of ‘biographical’ study that the lines between present-day stylistic categories and the actual ancient framework in which the pottery originated become most blurred, as scholars tend to ignore the premises, sources and consequences of their classification systems.

Of course, the study of Greek pottery has not remained entirely limited to the more traditional kind of art history. As will be clear in the following, the last forty years have witnessed a strong interest in the study of the organisation of production and the pottery distribution networks. Once again, however, the pottery itself often seems a means to an end and becomes somewhat overlooked in the process. In many socio-economic studies it is considered exemplary, as an illustration of the social status of a typical craft product or as a guide fossil in studying broad trade patterns or international political relations. On the whole these approaches, though offering useful general information, rarely improve our understanding of pottery in its own right.

Quite often, moreover, pottery is simply cited to demonstrate general assumptions or theories about economy and society, like David Gill and Michael Vickers’s suggestion that Archaic-Classical Greece was a very wealthy society which had much gold and silver. In such contexts there is often little space for exploring new data or for controlling preconceived assumptions based on general viewpoints. Even a well-known and acclaimed study of pottery production like Karim Arafat and Catherine Morgan’s is more a reinterpretation of well-known data which sets out from a particular ‘new’ view of Greek economy and society than a really fresh look at possible problems and evidence. Such broad approaches also tend to loose sight of the practical aspects of pottery production, distribution and consumption, especially when issues like the status of products and the organisation and social positions of makers and users are at stake. Precisely as in the traditional stylistic and iconographical treatments which continue to dominate Greek pottery studies, many attempts at revision turn the subject into an abstraction, risking to lose view of the individual maker, distributor or user.

That said, it is definitely not the case that Greek pottery studies are in a desperate state, or that the tendency towards abstraction has produced only arid, esoteric scholarship. Far from it. The many different approaches and debates stemming from the variety have probably made Greek pottery studies more lively than ever before, and the continuous stream of publications provides much new data and fresh insights, of which I have made grateful use in my work. Now only the people need to be reintroduced into the picture. Moreover, precisely the combination of many new interpretations from different viewpoints and the continuously growing amount of excavated evidence furnish opportunities to test current assumptions and explore new hypotheses. This would not only be useful for increasing our knowledge and understanding of an important craft and its role in ancient society, but could surely also reveal information applicable to stylistic and

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7 See e.g. Bakr 1981; Böhr 1982; Burow 1989; Prange 1989; Oakley 1990; Kunisch 1997. Of course, more self-conscious monographies, which do try to relate style explicitly to the historical reconstruction of workshops and to the ways artisans worked, also exist: see e.g. Lezzi-Hafter 1976; 1988; Brijder 1983; 1991; 2000; Buitron-Oliver 1995; Tosto 1999.


iconographic studies of Greek pottery as well as to socio-economic examinations of Greek society and perhaps even to analyses of historical events and developments.

I.3 What questions? What pots? What people? The selection of my data set

Obviously, all the points sketched above cannot be set right at once. It is more difficult than it might first seem to go back to the basics of pottery production, distribution and use and to understand the considerations of producers, distributors and consumers. Many data on common matters like pottery transport or the use of vessels in domestic life are simply not available. On the other hand, the wealth of potential evidence available is so great that not all of it can be taken into account in a single study. Moreover, it would be foolish to try to address all the possible issues relating to the place of pottery in the Greek world at once. Therefore I have limited my range of categories of evidence by selecting a series of related themes, concentrating on the status of pottery as a craft product in the day-to-day life of a large part of the Greek population, from producers to consumers.

A chief aim of my selection has been to base myself on a diverse and rich, but at the same time manageable and therefore relatively compact, collection of data. Focusing on the role of manufacture and transport, selling, buying and handling pots as among the activities of daily life to which people gave little thought seemed a good means of achieving this goal. These topics make it possible to present a coherent but varied picture of the place of some kinds of pottery in Archaic Greek economy and society, drawn from a wide range of data. They moreover form a distinct set of themes which can hardly be studied independently of each other, as they provide reciprocal evidence: conclusions on pottery production have their bearing on distribution and consumption and vice versa. Indeed, the find patterns, which form an important category of evidence concerning pottery distribution, are ultimately the result of producers supplying consumers and are therefore treated last. Only by looking at the whole chain of processes, from beginning to end, can we best understand the separate links.

A common approach that I deliberately avoid is intricate iconological interpretation and the related tradition of associating the imagery on pots, and thereby the use of figured vessels, with the artistic, intellectual and ideological world of the elites. I largely ignore these matters not because I consider them irrelevant or uninteresting, but because I think they have been overrated, to the detriment of the more down-to-earth subjects of pottery production and use. It can further be noted that traditional art history illuminates only a bit of ancient life related to a small section of the population. Instead I set out to make visible people and aspects of life which are normally left concealed in classical scholarship. To a degree, this surely has to do with the absence of evidence, as has often been repeated, but it also reflects the continuing biased assumptions of scholars, even after the impact of Marxism and sociological and anthropological approaches.

The focus on the more practical aspects of pottery in daily life also has a simpler explanation: it is the field I know best and it provides an approach which can be based on relatively straightforward evidence. Pottery production can be traced in excavated workshops, pictures on pots and plaques and, for some facets, signatures and attributions; and of course, the pots themselves are a primary source. Consumption has left less direct trails, in the form of used pottery in situ and evidence about prices and the economic status of pottery and vessels made of other materials. The distribution process is perhaps most difficult to grasp, as it is ephemeral by nature; nevertheless, its results are obvious from the distribution patterns of excavated pottery and, more directly, from trade inscriptions and a few shipwrecks. In addition, written sources tell about potters, pots and trade, albeit sparsely. In contrast, the art history of pot-painting must rely on very little such direct archaeological evidence beyond the painting itself, links with 'high art', and written versions of some of the depicted stories. If not the images themselves but the
perception and use of pottery and its painted images are at stake, these kinds of evidence hardly bring us very far. Perhaps surprisingly, the basics of pottery in daily life can be approached with less difficulty and from a closer vantage point.

As just remarked, depending on the questions posed and the available material, I combine historical, epigraphical, art historical and more strictly archaeological methods of enquiry. Sometimes they follow well-trodden paths regarding familiar issues and objects. But quite often I explore new, sometimes uncertain terrain, in which little investigation has previously been done, especially concerning the interpretation of workshop sites and in situ find assemblages. In any event, the results can be checked by the reader because by far most of the study is based on published finds: it seemed unnecessary, too time consuming and wasteful to return to the same finds in storerooms as long as primary publications contain so much information that has barely been thought about.

The division into the topics of production, distribution and consumption thereby gives the opportunity to exploit various categories of evidence, each answering different questions and supplementing each other. Images, inscriptions and excavated workshops offer insights into the practical organisation and scale of production in general, but hardly into the output of individual workshops, and they tell little about the motivation and the social position of manufacturers. Regarding pottery consumption, the excavation assemblages and price inscriptions studied below reveal detailed views of the roles and status of various kinds of pottery as well as good insights into quantitative consumption patterns, although the precise use of individual vessels in many contexts remains unclear. As some categories of data extend over time, they can also give the opportunity to trace developments in consumption patterns. These changes, in turn, have implications for the way pottery was supplied by producers and distributors. Alongside all this, the limited direct evidence for pottery in transit, consisting of traders’ inscriptions and shipwrecks, affords quite valuable, close views of actual practices. The latter evidence is unique, as excavated workshops and use assemblages, as a rule, were not frozen, as it were, at a particular moment of activity, like a sunken ship, but deliberately destroyed and/or abandoned.

Together, therefore, production, distribution and consumption comprise a broad range of perspectives regarding not only the scale, organisation and practical methods and effectiveness of supplying users with pottery, but also the ways vessels were used, by what kinds of people, in what quantities, along with the social and cultural connotations. All this also helps to bring the general position of pottery in the social and economic life of the Archaic Greek world into partial view.

Besides the thematic selection, this study also has a specific chronological focus. As is well known, the Archaic Greek world of ca. 650-480, which is the period of this study, saw pottery production and export flourish as never before and as rarely afterwards in the western world. The large amounts of high-quality pottery from Archaic Greece, particularly the decorated wares, have been exceptionally well studied. Hundred thousands of vessels and fragments have been meticulously classified and treated in detail in extensive museum and exhibition catalogues, monographs and excavation reports. Although the very common plain, banded and black wares have largely been neglected, Archaic Greek pottery still forms the best available set of data for any study of pottery in the ancient Mediterranean. Regarding its contexts of production and use, written sources contain a reasonable amount of information and the archaeological finds are quite rich; both have received close study, so that we know much about the Archaic Greek world and its arts and crafts in general. In addition, excavation reports allow for detailed consideration of the position of pottery in the larger material culture.

Another strong point of the Archaic period is the wide dispersion of certain wares (as imports) and decorative styles (through imitation and migration) which enable the archaeology of Archaic Greece to transcend the traditional Athenocentric view of Greek culture and to look at the larger
ancient world, comparing phenomena and developments in different places. The extent of the Greek world, which by the mid 7th century included many colonies as far afield as southern France and the Black Sea coasts, but mainly in southern Italy and Sicily, presents a broad panorama of a society or group of societies which in many respects were culturally and socially quite homogeneous, but which has considerable space for local peculiarities and preferences.

The non-Greek world (Etruria, indigenous Italy, France, Spain, but also the Near East, inland Asia Minor and much of the Black Sea region) is mostly excluded from this study, despite the fact that much Greek pottery has come to light in these places. A study of the use of Greek pottery by other peoples would entail an examination of the reception and perception of Greek culture in several diverse societies with divergent levels of social organisation and material culture. This would have little to do with the pottery itself, at least from the Greek point of view, and require specialised knowledge of different Mediterranean cultures. In addition, the geographical distances as well as the psychological differences between non-Greek consumers and Greek producers guaranteed that Greek pottery would doubtless have always been more exotic and exclusive outside the Greek world than in most Greek places, even those on the periphery. In comparison with the average situation in Greek regions, the pottery imported into non-Greek regions may have played a different role in the consumption patterns of the recipients and have interacted differently with the local products which must often have been quite unlike their Greek counterparts. Moreover, the differences in the use of vessels and the preferred shapes would cause additional complications. However interesting comparisons between pottery consumption in various Greek and non-Greek societies would be, I leave the subject out of consideration.

On the other hand, I occasionally overstep the chronological limits of the study by including some Greek evidence from slightly before or after the Archaic period. This happens partly out of necessity, as some categories of sources, for example inscriptions, furnish much more information directly afterwards. Similarly, a few kinds of material, like metal vessels, are hard to trace in the Archaic period, but much more easily before and after it. When a degree of continuity or continuous development seems likely, or cultural or functional contexts seem comparable to those of the Archaic period I have not hesitated to include especially 5th-century material, as it enables me to enrich the picture of the Archaic Greek ceramic world considerably.

Needless to say, the combination of approaches involving a variety of evidence from very many publications of unequal character and quality to address a series of different but related issues has inevitably resulted in complexity. Many specialised readers may not be familiar with aspects of the discussion or find it hard to recognise supposedly familiar categories of evidence owing to the way I treat them. I hope they will understand that only such a degree of complexity can give due attention to the variety and wealth of the issues explored.

1.4 Pottery and the people: placing ceramics in their social and economic contexts

To place pottery in the wider context of society some general information is of course required about the social, political, economic and cultural structures and developments of the Archaic Greek world. As far as overall historical events are concerned, there are not many notable difficulties, even though many specific details are disputed, only vaguely known or entirely out of our view. Non-evenemental history, however, is problematical as the ancient written sources tell

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11 See, however, chapter XXII.

us very little about general social and economic developments, and archaeology, anthropology and sociology fill this gap only partly, as will become clear below. In fact, as said, pottery is itself sometimes adopted as the vehicle for exploring broader cultural, economic and social issues.

A problem with such studies – not only those taking pottery as their primary source – is that they must take account of the controversy regarding the nature of the ancient economy and the relation of economic factors to social and political life that permeates all discussions of what might be called the general conditions of life and society in the ancient Mediterranean. What started in the 19th century as a battle between modernists and primitivists has by now become a debate between formalists and substantivists, although the essences of the discussions remain largely unchanged. Even if in the meantime many variations and intermediary positions have been defended, a certain amount of dichotomy seems to remain unavoidable and continues to persist. On one side stand those who see the ancient economy as a somewhat simpler version of ours, comparable to that of the Middle Ages or even the Renaissance. In this vision, the economy is an independent phenomenon, ruled by the profit principle, market mechanisms, laws of supply and demand and the like. Accordingly, the production and exchange of craft products are considered important components of economic life, which could be large in scale.

The opposite position maintains that the ancient economy was strongly bound from the structures and organisation of society, and must always be seen as embedded in them. Consequently, purely economic thinking did not exist in Antiquity, and most or all decisions which we would view as stemming from economic factors would instead be based on other kinds of considerations. In this view, craft production and exchange played minimal roles, since ancient society was strongly agricultural, with only urban elites demanding some imports and locally produced luxuries, which, however, could often be realised by dependent labour, gift exchange or other non-commercial means.

Although the controversy has repeatedly been said to be superseded and extreme positions have indeed been abandoned, it is certainly far from dead. In fact, after more than two decades in which primitivism seemed to prevail, we now see a revisionist revival of what could be called moderate modernism, even if it is partly fed by primitivists adjusting their models. At the same time, it has become evident that the theoretical debate as such does not bring us much further and may even hamper ongoing research. Many observers feel the need to return to the evidence, to test old models and to discover new insights.

However, the problem is that case studies remain highly coloured by scholars' theoretical backgrounds and their positions in the debate. For example, Ian Morris criticises Edward Cohen's study of 4th-century Athenian banking for being too formalist and for neglecting the role of money.
in acquiring status and, in turn, banking as part of social and political life. At the same time, Morris himself seems to downplay the financial impact of banking, which freed considerable amounts of money for spending or investment, directly or indirectly stimulating production and exchange.

Regarding the material evidence, obviously those who envisage a society strongly rooted in agriculture, with a relatively limited role for exchange, will interpret archaeological finds rather differently from those who see urban-oriented economies marked by large-scale exchange over long distances. A clear example is the contrast between Arafat and Morgan’s above-mentioned view of pottery production, which is decidedly primitivist, and Robin Osborne’s self-consciously modernist interpretation of pottery distribution: Arafat and Morgan regard ancient potters basically as farmers who had the secondary occupation of producing small amounts of vessels, mainly for local markets or for export through (chains of) regional networks, whereas Osborne sees sophisticated directional trade of large quantities of pottery catering for specific overseas demand.

Chronological and geographical differences inevitably play their parts in these contrasting views: Osborne focuses on late Archaic Athens, while Arafat and Morgan also refer to Classical Athens and Corinth of the 7th and 6th centuries. Nevertheless, each interpretation is considered exemplary for other periods and places. In fact, Arafat and Morgan explain pottery production in Classical Athens as a slight variation of that in Archaic Corinth, while Osborne seems to imply that the export patterns of Archaic Corinthian could be predecessors of that of later Attic pottery. In each instance, the theoretical starting points have probably been too dominant, as observers largely agree that Archaic Greek society was not uniform and monolithic but showed much variation in its social and economic organisation. Even within short periods or at small distances people could be part of very different societies, and the same products could belong to very diverse social and economic contexts. Obviously, any consideration of the social aspects of material culture, including pottery, needs to recognise such variation and to avoid one-sided, all-encompassing answers.

Similar openness would, I think, help lead to solutions to the many problems regarding the series of approaches to ancient Greek society and economy which have emerged in the past decades. In line with this, I am consciously eclectic, drawing on notions and approaches which tend towards either the more modernist and formalist or the more primitivist and substantivist, depending partly on whatever evidence, in my view, leads to results and partly on what might be called intuition, however admittedly subjective it may be, which some might prefer to call prejudice. The results might sometimes appear contradictory, but I hope they will nevertheless leave more room for debate or rebuttal than the overly solid and self-fulfilling interpretations of material culture which tend to result from a too strong theoretical basis, as well as offer more food for thought than the highly descriptive and rather superficial studies still often presented by those who altogether ignore the roots of material culture in society and human life.

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19 Arafat and Morgan 1989; Osborne 1996b.


21 See e.g. Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977; Snodgrass 1980; Osborne 1996a; Morris 1998.