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XI Conclusions: pottery production as a large-scale phenomenon, hard-working potters and painters

The scattered evidence for pottery production in ancient Greece as presented above leaves a clouded and ambiguous impression. Much is unknown or still has to be sorted out; and it is often difficult to combine the various categories of data, which lead to different or sometimes even contradictory results. Therefore it is impossible to arrive at one general conclusion, or one sketch of the scale and organisation of Greek pottery production as a whole or of even Athenian fine ware alone. This is not only a matter of insufficient evidence, however, but also a reflection of ancient realities. As shown in the preceding section, Greek pottery making was a matter of many different workshops operating under varying circumstances and according to several modes of production in a dynamic economic environment. As a consequence, there is little room for general explanations.

It is nevertheless possible to discern some broad lines in the diverse evidence. The key notions are simplicity, quantity and variation. Simplicity: the excavated evidence, images of craftsmen at work and stylistic connections all suggest that Greek pottery workshops were simple establishments which had a basic layout, rather rudimentary technology and a limited level of organisation, leaving little room for individual specialisation on specific tasks or an extensive division of labour. Moreover, although some workshops appear to have operated on a comparatively large scale, this barely seems to be related to advances in technology or to greater sophistication in the organisation of labour. Apparently, 'larger' usually led only to 'more of the same'.

Another aspect of simplicity is that potters normally seem to have been hard-working craftsmen of low status with little formal education. Some may have been metics or slaves, and if the preserved dedications can be trusted, relatively few would have attained moderate wealth. On the whole, the organisation and status of Greek pottery production look comparable to that of more recent pottery manufacturers. This even seems to hold for a major centre of refined decorated pottery like Athens, where excavations, the self-portrayals of potters and painters and stylistic attributions contain few signs that point beyond the larger 'traditional' structures.

Quantity, however, reveals crucial differences between then and now, although not in the most obvious sense: the high output of ancient potters' workshops (inferred from survival rates and stylistic attributions) is still a feature of traditional pottery production today. Instead, the astounding point is the high number of workshops which can be inferred from excavations, stylistic attributions and perhaps literary references. Potteries were ubiquitous in the Greek world, and even small towns may have had a considerable potters' quarter. If we consider the low population density and the important functional role of ceramics, pottery production emerges as a quite prominent craft with a relatively conspicuous role in the non-agricultural sector of the economy.

Quantity is also an issue related to scale and organisation within the workshop. As mentioned, it appears that the larger establishments, compared to their smaller counterparts, made basically the same products only in higher numbers. Excavations have uncovered sites with multiple kilns and attributions reveal clusters of 'hands' which certainly exceed the scale of a traditional family business, as may also be confirmed by pottery production scenes. But any increase in scale seems to be limited by the simplicity of technology and organisation. Therefore an increase in the general scale of production led to the proliferation of fairly small workshops in a potters' quarter rather than to the enlargement of existing ones: what could not be achieved by the single unit was realised by the collective, with sheer numbers compensating for the technological and organisational limitations.

Finally, variation. The large number of small and simple production units, including many specialising in a limited range of forms or types of decoration, not only results in a highly varied output, but is a very diversified phenomenon in its own right. As explained, several modes of production were simultaneously operative in the Greek world, sometimes close to one another.

Similarly, the excavated evidence, pottery production scenes, names of artisans and stylistic analysis alike indicate that large and small workshops, some more or less specialised than others, some employing free craftsmen only, others also slaves, were all active in many different ways, while serving the same customers, merchants and traders.

As suggested at the beginning of this conclusion, precisely such variation seems to lie at the heart of the ambiguous picture created by the evidence. Moreover, variation may well form the crucial link between quantity and simplicity. By differing from each other in organisation, output and, within certain limits, size, simple and mostly small, but productive units could adapt to a large but unstable demand for a wide range of products of varied use, value and status. This flexibility, in turn, would help explain the continuous shifts in pottery shapes, major exporting centres and regional styles as well as the quick pace of stylistic change in general. Although altering circumstances must have made themselves felt, the system as a whole sustained itself by adjusting the balance between organisation and output, or rather between simplicity, quantity and variation, within and between workshops and production centres. Perhaps, therefore, 'dynamic' can be added as a fourth key notion which characterises Greek pottery production.