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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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
couded 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.