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XIII Prices of pottery

Though perhaps not as all-determining as some might maintain, prices are inevitably a crucial factor which help to determine the status and prestige of products, including pottery. This is made clear by the intriguing way 19th and early 20th-century pottery studies treated the evidence for the monetary value of Greek pottery. The limited relevant data, mentioning prices and consisting of a few lines in literary and epigraphic sources and some graffiti incised underneath pots, were known from early on.[903] They clearly indicate that pots were comparable in price to daily necessities, like a few litres of olive oil, one week's soldier's ration of wheat or five liters of cheap wine, and that they were much cheaper than common craft products like shoes, clothes or furniture.[904] Yet most scholars continued to see Greek decorated pottery as a luxury article.[905] Some simply disregarded the evidence;[906] a few others dismissed it as irrelevant or argued that the graffiti had been misread and indicated much higher prices than generally thought.[907] Only a minority accepted the evidence at face value, frankly admitting that the pottery must have been cheap.[908]

The difficulties experienced by archaeologists in digesting the evidence for the prices of Greek pottery is directly related to the supposed relevance of monetary value to other issues. Apparently, low prices were thought to be indicative of low status, not only in Antiquity but also in the modern scholarly community. Status and prices, in turn, are bound up with the role of pottery as a craft product, which is related to issues like scale and organisation of production on the one hand, and the position of pottery in the consumer market on the other. The points at stake here are illustrated by Jan Jongkees' disbelief that prices could equal only a fraction of a daily wage, which he considered incompatible with the necessary production time – that is, the time needed to manufacture not utilitarian objects, but delicate, refined handiwork.[909]

However, precisely the fact that prices are linked to many non-economic, often immeasurable matters also makes it difficult to use them as evidence. To return to Jongkees: his disbelief is based on a comparison of prices with known wages. Such a comparison can only be valid if pottery prices were largely determined by 'hard' financial considerations like investment in labour, raw materials and installations.[910] But if demand, status or reputation were more determinative, as

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[903] See Brongniart 1854, 6-7; Jahn 1854a, CXXX-CXXXI; Birch 1858, II 38-41; Walters 1905, II 239-241; Pottier 1906, 689; Hackl 1909, 95-98; Perrot 1911, 368-370; Dugas s.a., 663.

[904] See for these prices, which are mostly based on late 5th and 4th-century evidence, Pritchett 1956, 184, 197-206, 211-212; Boardman 1988b, 28; Johnston 1996, 81-82. Olive oil was sold at 1-3 drachmai a chous (3.28 l.); wheat normally at 5-6 drachmai a medimnos (52.5 l.), which was regarded as 48 daily rations for a soldier, but 96 for his assistant; cheap wine typically cost 4 obols a chous. Recorded prices for shoes are 6 and 8 drachmai a pair; garments (tunics and cloaks, partly for slaves) range from 7 tot 30 drachmai; the second-hand furniture of the Hermokopidai, which does not seem to have been very luxurious, fetched from slightly more than a drachme for a stool to 21 drachmai for a chest.

[905] See Gill 1988b, 740; 1993; Gill and Vickers 1990, 5-6; Vickers and Gill 1994, 6-27.

[906] Birch 1858, II 67, 181-182; see 38-41. Brongniart 1854, 6-7 is pure fantasy.

[907] Walters 1905, I 43, 136; see II 239-241; Perrot 1911, 369-370, n. 3; Jongkees 1942; 1951.

[908] Pottier 1906, 689; Dugas s.a., 663; Richter 1946, 20.

[909] Jongkees 1951; see Amyx 1958, 306; Johnston 1979, 35.

[910] See Johnston 1979, 35.

often seen in the modern arts or crafts market, production costs might hardly have mattered.[911] Although the low recorded prices suggest that such less tangible factors hardly played a role in the 5th century, one cannot be sure about earlier periods, nor about large, quality pieces (in modern eyes, that is) which, never bear price graffiti.

Many uncertainties remain, however, even if pottery prices can be assumed to be related to production costs. Very little is known about labour costs in the Greek world, and nothing about the other expenses and investments potters made to keep their businesses running. Similar problems come into play on the consumers' side. It is relatively easy to compare the prices of pots to the scanty data on income, but this is only a first step. Apart from the obvious possibility that people bought more or fewer pots than they really could afford and would need, we know hardly anything about ancient consumption patterns in general, so that the relative role of pottery in the household equipment and budget can only be approximated. At this end of the economic chain, therefore, prices can offer only a rough indication of the groups who could afford a product or of the expense of pottery compared to that of other products. Status is a different and difficult question once again.

Prices, nevertheless, form the best available indication of the value of pottery and a good point of reference for other categories of evidence for pottery production. Despite the problems of interpretation, there is no better way to relate pottery consumption to wealth, for example. In addition, the social and economic roles of pottery and its status and appreciation as compared to vessels of metal or other materials must have depended, at least partly, on prices, and can most easily be grasped through financial figures. It therefore seems best to take prices as the starting point in this chapter.

This becomes all the easier now that the long-lasting discussion about the exact interpretation of Greek pottery prices has finally come to an end. Following important preliminary work by Darryl Amyx, Johnston's book on trademarks on Greek pottery[912] provides an authoritative list of prices drawn from graffiti underneath pots (Table XIII.1). Almost all scholars of the subject now base their calculations and discussions[913] on this list, to which some prices from sources other than graffiti, earlier collected by Amyx, may be added. Although additional price graffiti have occasionally been discovered, the general picture remains unchanged.

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[911] See Amyx 1958, 167.

[912] Johnston 1979, 33, with comment on 34-35. Amyx's earlier list (1958, 277) and comment (1958, 275-307) include some more prices noted in graffiti, convincingly dismissed by Johnston, and all the prices mentioned in other sources.

[913] Vickers 1984; 1985; 1990, 616-617; 1992, 54-57; Boardman 1988b, 30-31; 1988c; 1996a, 124; Gill 1988a, 176; 1988b, 739-740; 1988c, 2; 1988d; 1991, 31-32, 44; 1993, 453; 1994, 103-104; Gill and Vickers 1990, 3, 6; Sparkes 1991, 129-131; 1996, 143; Vickers and Gill 1994, 85-86; Scheibler 1995, 144-148; Williams 1996, 228. Paul 1982, 88-92, oddly enough continues to accept Jongkees's prices.

Table XIII.1 Pottery prices (in obols)[914]

Shape	500-480	480-430	430-400	other sources/dates
LARGE POTS				
RF column krater		3?; 10		
RF bell krater			3; 4; 4.5	
BG krater		9		
RF amphora	5; 7		6	
RF Nolan amphora		2; 3?; 3.5?		
BG Nolan amphora		15		
RF hydria	4?; 7	12; 18		
RF pelike		35	0.5?; 7	
very large RF lekythos	5?? (doubtful)	6?? (doubtful)		
MEDIUM-SIZED POTS				
RF? sky/RF skyphos	0.75; 1.2?	ca. 0.25?	0.5; 1?	0.3 (4th c.)
BG cup-skyphos			0.38? (or 4.8??)	
BG? bolsal			0.5; 0.57	
RF oinochoe			5	
ichtya		ca. 2		
askos			4	
guttus			1	
RF lekythos	0.67?	0.25; 2.5	5	
skaphis		3?		
SMALL POTS (all BG?)				
oxis			0.14; 0.15; 0.17	
oxybaphon			0.05; 0.06; 0.08	
lekythion			0.06; 0.67	1 (Aristophanes), with oil?
lekythis			0.08; 0.09	
pellinion			38	
BG lamp				0.1; 0.01? (4th c.)
UNKNOWN				
ly			ca. 0.5?	
bathy			35	
enthemata (set?)			3?; 6; 7	

[914] Based on Johnston 1979, 33, with additions from Gill 1987, 121-122; Johnston 1996, 83-85; 2000, 166-168.

The earliest available evidence for pottery prices is found in a few graffiti dating around 500. Most price graffiti are later, however, mainly dating from the second half of the 5th century. Two joking references to the prices of pots in Aristophanes's comedies[915] and sets of used pots recorded in the sales list of the Hermakopidai,[916] inscribed in stone, all date to the last decades of the century. It is uncertain, of course, whether these (often late) 5th-century prices can be accepted as indicative of the prices of pots in the Archaic period. The figures in Table XIII.1 differ considerably for similar pots; and, conceivably, the preceding century showed comparable fluctuations. The introduction of coinage during the 6th century is a phenomenon that should also be noted in this regard. If influential at all, it must have brought goods within easier reach of consumers. Moreover, one has to reckon with the possibility that 5th-century pottery production was more streamlined and on a larger scale than before, resulting in cheaper pots.[917] If so, pottery could have been relatively more expensive before the 5th century, although definite proof is not at hand. At any rate, if the prices in the table would be doubled or even trebled, they would still have been relatively low compared to those of metal vessels.

In brief, leaving out the extremes, one can conclude from Table XIII.1 that, on the average, a large pot like an amphora cost 3 to 6 obols or slightly more,[918] a medium-sized pot, say a jug, 0.5 to 1 obol, and small pots around 0.1 obol. It should be noted that these figures most probably refer to prices at the shop in Athens.[919] One may suppose that elsewhere workshops fetched comparable prices for similar pots, although the quality and reputation of Attic ware may have commanded a premium. On the other hand, the scale and organisation of production in a major centre like Athens possibly helped to keep prices down, whereas prices overseas or even outside the workshops in the production centres themselves, could be expected to be higher, perhaps considerably so.[920] Gill's suggestion, based on a doubtful reading of one rather unclear price graffito (?), that overseas prices for Attic pottery were lower than those at Athens itself[921] cannot be accepted. Nothing can be said, of course, about the additional costs of transport and trade, which are determined by too many untraceable factors.

The figures in Table XIII.1 are much lower than those usually given in earlier publications. For example, Webster suggests an average of 1 drachme for small pots and 2 for large ones.[922] However, even scholars who are aware of Johnston's list, sometimes present rather selective figures. Most strikingly, Boardman consistently chooses the highest prices in Johnston's list as a

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[915] *Batrachoi*, 1236; *Eirene*, 1202.

[916] Amyx 1958.

[917] See section VII.5 and Arafat and Morgan 1989, 336.

[918] See also Johnston 1991a, 228.

[919] Johnston 1979, 34.

[920] Johnston 1979, 34-35; 1991a, 226. See also Martelli 1979, 37-38; Salmon 1984, 113; Boardman 1988b, 32; Gill and Vickers 1990, 4; Sparkes 1991, 130; Johnston 1996; 2000, 166-168; Williams 1996, 230-231.

[921] Gill 1991, 38. See, however, Johnston 1996, 83-84; 2000, 166-168.

[922] Webster 1972, 8; see also his superseded treatment of the price graffiti on 274-279. Older references to prices: Jahn 1854a, CXXX-CXXXI; Birch 1858, II 38-41, 67, 182; Walters 1905, I 43, 136, II 239-241; Pottier 1906, 689; Hackl 1909, 95-98; Perrot 1911, 368-370; Dugas s.a., 663; Jongkees 1942; 1951; Richter 1946, 20. See also Paul 1982, 88-92.

base for further calculations and estimates of the status of pottery and the profitability of the pottery trade; the lower prices, though occurring more frequently, are only occasionally mentioned or are concealed behind the rather misleading remark that 'other prices are rather less easy to determine'.[923] Despite criticism by Gill, Boardman, in a following article, estimates the price of a kylix, which is not known from graffiti, at 1 drachme.[924] Though conceivable for large and elaborate specimens, the price of a krater or hydria does not appear to be 'fair if not modest'[925] for an average figured cup. Instead, as the various vessels priced below 1 obol seem smaller than the usual kylix and were probably mostly undecorated, a price of a few obols is probably realistic.

Besides the overall impression of prices and their averages, the fluctuations and differences in Table XIII.1 have also caused some debate. As to the fluctuations, Johnston suggests that prices were rather high for some time after 450, but decreased later, whereas Boardman speaks of a decrease in the course of the 5th century.[926] Wages offer some evidence for inflation during the decades after 450,[927] but the considerable variations in recorded prices go beyond likely rates of inflation and, above all, show no consistent pattern. Presumably, the changing prices reflect fluctuations in costs, demand or other untraceable factors like the destination of pots or some quality completely invisible to us.[928]

Apart from all this, quality may also account for the differences in the prices of contemporary pots. Size clearly plays a determining role, more so than one would expect: while the very small pots mentioned in the graffiti seem disproportionately cheap, the sales list of the Hermakopidai's property and some 4th-century inscriptions on large coarse pots found at Olynthos (Table XIII.2) show that very large containers were relatively expensive, with the price increasing at a faster rate than the size. The effects of other features like the amount of decoration, the quality of the finish and the refinement of the potterwork are less clear. Johnston and Boardman advance that a larger number of figures on a pot guaranteed a higher price, as can be demonstrated by comparing the few available prices of similar pots of the same period which show different numbers of figures or none at all. Gill disagrees, however, remarking that some of the higher recorded prices concern plain black pots.[929]

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[923] Boardman 1988b, 30-31. See also Boardman 1988c, 372 and, less extreme, Boardman 1996a, 124. Sparkes 1991, 130-131, is also remarkably selective, preferring the higher range of prices.

[924] Criticism: Gill 1988d. Reply: Boardman 1988c, 372-373; quote from 372.

[925] Gill 1991, 33-34.

[926] Johnston 1979, 35; 1991a, 226-228; Boardman 1988c, 372; see also Arafat and Morgan 1989, 336; Gill 1991, 31. Webster 1972, 274-279, further confuses the matter by suggesting that the high figures are the advertised prices and the lower ones the actual received payment. There is no evidence for such a hypothesis, however. See Johnston 1979, 40-41.

[927] Loomis 1998, 240-250.

[928] See Gill 1991, 31-32.

[929] Johnston 1979, 34-35; 1991a, 228; 1996, 84; Boardman 1988b, 30; 1988c, 372; 1996a, 124; Gill 1991, 31-32; Vickers and Gill 1994, 86; see also Webster 1972, 274-275; Gill and Vickers 1990, 4, 6; Sparkes 1991, 131; Scheibler 1995, 147; Williams 1996, 228.

Table XIII.2 Prices of pottery from the Hermakopidai sales and Olynthos[930]

Shape	415/4	mid 4th c.	other sources/dates
BRONZE, SECOND HAND			
thermanterion (kettle)	25 drachmai 2 obols		
BF, SECOND HAND			
Panathenaic amphora	2.4-3.7 obols		
COARSE, NEW			
pithos		31 dr. 1 ob. - 53 dr. 4 ob.	
kados			3 drachmai (Aristophanes)
lekane			1.5 obol (4th c.)
COARSE, SECOND HAND			
amphora	0.14; max. 3 obols		
phidakne	4-11 drachmai		
sipye (flour bin)	ca. 3.5-5 obols		
kardopos (kneading basin)	12 obols		
tripter (large basin)	10.3 obols		
eschara (brazier)	2 obols?		

Another problem raised by the conspicuous differences in price is the representativity of the data. This especially regards the four extreme peaks, which include the only fine ware known to be priced above a drachme: kraters of 9 or 10 obols and hydriai of 2 or 3 drachmai. Especially the last two amounts are problematically high, even if prices indeed peaked in the middle of the 5th century. Gill's suggestion that hydriai may have been relatively more expensive because they could not be filled with other pottery during transport sounds reasonable, but fails to consider that the same applies to amphorai and oinochoai, which are all 'normally' priced, just like, in fact, some hydriai.[931] It seems best to accept that the list of price graffiti contains some inexplicable figures and variations.

[930] Based on Amyx 1958, 277; bronze kettle on 218-219.

[931] Gill 1991, 34, see also 31, and Johnston 1979, 34-35. Webster's theory differentiating prices asked and received (n. 926 above) could offer a solution, but is unproven and improbable; see Webster 1972, 274-279; Johnston 1979, 40-41.