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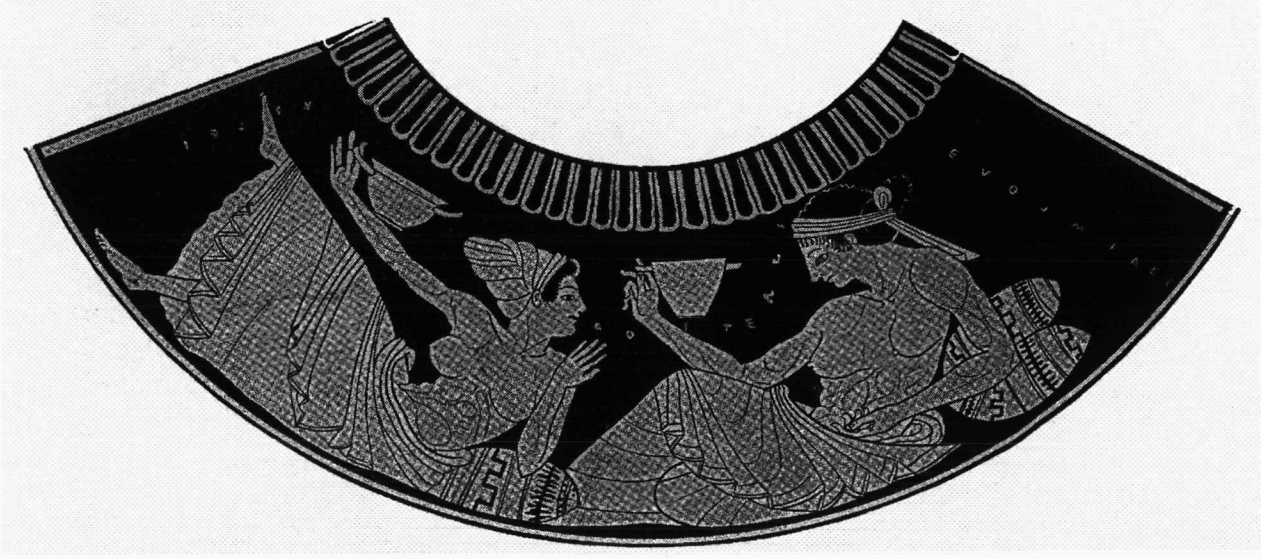
XVIII Conclusions: pottery as a semi-luxury



In the patterns of pottery consumption treated in the preceding sections two aspects stand out. First, the amounts involved are large: for most of the Archaic and the Classical periods even decorated and/or imported pots are quite common across the Greek world. Both the moderate prices of Attic pots at the workshop, as documented by price graffiti, and the substantial presence of Corinthian and Attic figured pots in most of the studied site assemblages seem to confirm that fine pottery was a commodity within most people's reach. Even if the finest wares, particularly figured ones, would probably have been too costly for daily use by most people it seems that large sections of the Greek world could afford imported black gloss or simply decorated vessels for ordinary dining, drinking, feasting and offering as well as some figured pottery for special occasions at home, in sanctuaries and at funerals. At the same time, the omnipresence of fine ware hardly suggests that it was an object of disdain; instead it would seem that it may often have even been considered desirable by elite consumers, who surely also possessed more luxurious (metal) tableware and other kinds of vessels, and spent large sums on bronze and marble votives and lavish grave decoration and furnishings.

Second, in every chronological, geographical and functional context the consumption patterns of these ubiquitous pots are always marked by a combination of very stable and universal phenomena in combination with more dynamic developments. The division between stability and dynamism seems to follow a very clear line. Functionality, or rather the contrasts between the typical uses of the different kinds of pots, forms the stable dominant, whereas development is seen in the rapid changes conspicuously related to less tangible considerations in pottery consumption: aesthetics and status – the word 'fashion' comes to mind.

The stable factor comprises four basic consumption patterns which change only slowly or not at all from the early Archaic period to at least Classical times, but probably beyond. The main one, which also seems to determine the other three, can be found in the distinctions between pottery assemblages from domestic contexts and, probably, feasting remains at sanctuaries on the one hand, and votives and grave gifts on the other. The latter show far more fine and decorated pottery in a wider range of wares and shapes, whereas a more restricted range of plain and black wares form the bulk of household pottery and apparently feasting assemblages as well. The decorated and, particularly, figured pots which dominate the grave contents and which are relatively important in large sanctuaries, but which form only a negligible proportion of domestic assemblages, obviously represent the luxury ware, at least in relative terms.

Of course, this general pattern is not entirely straightforward. Particularly sanctuaries constitute a somewhat ambiguous category. Some, including many of the most prestigious ones, seem to have attracted relatively little pottery. At the other end of the status spectrum many minor and/or small sanctuaries have yielded large quantities of black and plain pots, but hardly any decorated wares. And even at 'richer' sanctuaries, with considerable amounts of decorated pots, black and plain pottery is not only found among remains of ritual meals, but also seems to form the commonest, and presumably cheapest, votives. Especially plain miniatures are often found by the thousands. In graves the situation is much clearer: the use of simpler pots is largely limited to a traditional core of usually one or two vessels which are evidently linked, either symbolically or functionally, to funerary rites. Lastly, it can be noted that decorated pottery in houses is mainly related to drinking, i.e. the most prestigious domestic activity, best visible to outsiders.

This specific role of decorated pottery in domestic assemblages is one facet of the second stable factor in pottery consumption patterns: kinds of pottery are often related to the social requirements of the context in which they were used. In other words, there is correlation between the desired status and the appropriate ware. Thus decorated pots occur mainly where they can be displayed and seen: symposion vessels in houses, votives in temples, and grave gifts (which were presumably visible at, even some time before, the funeral). However, in more private contexts, such as the kitchen, or at the family dinner or more intimate or ritual occasions like temple feasts

(presumably for restricted groups only) and funerary ceremonies simpler pottery was apparently considered good enough, in some cases even prescribed by tradition. As can be expected in the Greek male-dominated world, it seems that the contrast between the more private and the more public spheres is partly gender based: most of the best pottery was meant for the men's world.

It is probably along these lines that explanations for the prominence of the simpler kinds of votives can be found. As remarked above, it is striking that most sanctuaries with large pottery assemblages belong to goddesses, with Demeter and Kore figuring especially prominently. That the cults of both these divinities would attract relatively more women than men is obvious, but regarding the find patterns of votive pottery it may also be relevant that both goddesses seem to be mainly concerned with personal matters: family, private life, work. Particulary at smaller sanctuaries (in general), the offering of votives may have had an intimate character which was not so dependent on the status of the offering; perhaps restraint was even deliberately sought. In contrast, sanctuaries with predominantly better wares, like the Athenian Akropolis, Thasian Artemision and Samian Heraion, often seem to enjoy a more official and public position, and above all a location which was clearly visible and readily accessible. Yet even here many dedications, for example the potters' votives treated in chapter IX, apparently refer to personal wishes and gratitude. One may speculate that the evident rarity of pottery at the major 'male' and Panhellenic sanctuaries reflects the combination of the cults' less private character and greater prestige.

Indeed, the practical functions of the pots in question were probably of secondary importance in the choice of specific wares in a given context. Although the typical ranges of shapes in houses, sanctuaries (divided into votive and feasting assemblages) and graves differ somewhat, the differences seem to be largely independent of the frequency of wares and the quality and amount of decoration. The same shapes occur in simpler and more elaborate versions, and the overall appearance evidently determined where and when a specific vessel was appropriate. All this is clearly illustrated by the pottery related to drinking which typically accounts for at least half of the pottery assemblages in any context (apart from some votive deposits). The composition of this large section of pottery varies along the lines just sketched: relatively more 'better' vessels in graves and among dedications, relatively less in houses and, possibly, feasting remains. Only kitchen and storage pottery, which is mostly restricted to houses anyway, forms a strictly functional category which is never decorated and rarely fully glossed.

Nevertheless, despite the prominence of what may described as 'social choices' in pottery consumption, shapes and their practical functions are not entirely irrelevant. Some correlation between status, use patterns and find contexts is, in fact, the third stable factor in ceramic assemblages. Apart from the standard 50% or more of drinking vessels and larger pots associated with drinking in any context (which might reveal some differentiation upon closer examination), we again see a distinction in shape range between, on the one hand, domestic pottery, possibly accompanied by feasting assemblages, and, on the other, votives and grave gifts. The key distinction seems once more to be functionality versus display. Even if it may appear self-evident that coarse and banded kitchen and storage pots are not suitable as votives or grave gifts, the point remains that finer dining pottery is also very rare outside houses. Apparently, 'eating', whether at home, at funerals or at the sanctuary, was not considered an activity appropriate for display, which may also explain why tableware for eating, at least until far into the 5th century, was rarely decorated with figurework or imported. However, typical votive and burial vessels, like small oil containers, miniatures and the category of luxury household shapes defined by me (pyxides, perfume dispensers), even if rather infrequently met, are not exceedingly rare in domestic contexts. They seem to have played a practical role in daily life, although people naturally needed fewer of them in the household than the large numbers discovered in some temples and graves, where they appear to have not had any usefulness. In sanctuary and funerary

assemblages the prominence of shapes that are relatively rare in 'real' use contexts would only have underscored the special nature of votives and grave gifts.

Lastly, the associations between the categories of decoration and finish and the spheres of consumption, as just sketched, are neatly mirrored in the divisions between the roles played by the 'major' international decorated wares (Attic, most Corinthian, some East Greek), the 'minor' international wares (Corinthian after the middle of the 6th century, most East Greek, Lakonian, colonial 'Ionian', some other widely distributed decorated wares, Attic black gloss) and regional and local pottery. Again, status, aesthetic quality and function seem to interact: except for assemblages in the main production centres like Corinth and Athens, the (relatively) best pottery in every context was always imported, preferably from one of the major centres. Moreover, the imports include a comparably high proportion of drinking and associated vessels, often in a limited number of shapes. In houses they occur in smaller numbers than elsewhere, whereas they are most frequent in graves. Only in some very simple sites is the upper category of decorated imports entirely missing.

The less elaborate pots from the major exporting centres, most of the 'minor' imported wares and the finest local decorated production may rightly be regarded as the daily fine wares which did well as table service, while also acting as votives or grave gifts, even if they were less prestigious than Attic and Corinthian figured imports. Despite the presumably moderate status of this category of pottery, it seems that consumers often had preferences for a specific shape from one production centre, like simple kotylai from Corinth or black kraters from Lakonia. The same may apply to banded 'Ionian' cups, either imported over great distances or manufactured regionally. All this can hardly have been a matter of functionality alone.

In contrast, the regional and local wares are mainly confined to shapes for practical use in households, sanctuaries and, sometimes, funerary rituals. As is well known, kitchen pottery belongs to this category, but also much ware for daily dining and drinking, vessels for feasting and communal symposia at sanctuaries and many of the simplest votive offerings consist of comparable simple black, banded and plain pots. Status is hardly relevant in these contexts, functionality mainly counts. Indeed, in exceptional cases some very specialised coarse pots like cooking vessels and mortars spread beyond their areas of manufacture because of their functional qualities.

Not surprisingly, the local and regional wares include the kinds of pots that show the fewest changes in consumption patterns, as the use of pottery in the household and at feasts would have remained almost constant over the centuries. It is in this unchanging core of practical contexts that the stable part of pottery consumption patterns is rooted. The 'dynamic' pole of consumption, on the other hand, is located among the more impressive vessels, particularly those with limited practicality or requiring less intensive use: votives, grave gifts, but also the symposion vessels at home. This side of consumption is heavily dominated by imports and decorated wares. Even though their numbers are not always so impressive, Corinthian, Attic and, to a lesser extent, East Greek figured pottery had a great impact on developments in decorative styles and preferences for shapes and iconography. The international wares introduced the changes in consumption patterns, which gradually trickled down to simpler pottery.

Some changes are quite deep: the relative frequencies of shapes, fabrics and decorative styles shift very quickly, especially among grave gifts and sanctuary dedications. Even the presence of pottery itself can strongly fluctuate in time. In some periods, for instance, pottery is almost entirely absent from graves and sanctuaries. Clearly, in these consumption contexts pottery is not a necessity but a commodity which can easily be replaced by other objects, made of different materials, belonging to a variety of functional and artistic categories. Bronze vessels, terracotta and bronze statuettes, even weapons, to name just the most important choices, all seem to have played a part comparable to that of pottery in burials and sanctuaries.

The driving forces and the exact workings of the trends in pottery consumption as a whole and the changes it underwent are difficult to grasp, as befits a phenomenon which seems to possess many traits of being subject to fashion. Although producers as well as consumers appear to have initiated and determined the course of some developments, the consumers seem to have been relatively more influential. Perhaps stimulated by distributors (see the next chapters), pottery buyers evidently picked out their preferred shapes, refusing others. The possible effects of practical circumstances on consumption patterns, like problems of transport and supply, political events and functional qualities, are rarely visible in the archaeological record and may well have been limited. In fact, taste, reputation and status must have been much more decisive for buyers' choices than the technical and functional qualities of the pottery itself.

Viewed as a whole, decorated pottery, seems to be a perfect example of what Lin Foxhall, in an important recent article,[1324] defines as a semi-luxury: a relatively simple and not very expensive product which, in its basic form, is a necessity, but which also offers a possibility for display and which can act as a special treat when unusually elaborate, especially if it is fine or has simply been brought from afar. Similarly to other semi-luxuries like imported wine, fine textiles, conserved foods and bronze vessels, pottery could be made and sold locally, but it was nevertheless often exported over long distances, in considerable quantities, for no obviously practical reason. Evidently consumers were eager to enjoy the added value of the semi-luxury version of a product which was familiar to them in a simpler form.

The varied appreciation of different kinds of pottery was not only influential on pottery consumption, but also acted as a crucial motor of pottery distribution. For if imported pottery lacked added value of whatever kind, it would never have replaced local and regional wares, and the need for an elaborate distribution network would not have existed – which brings us to the last part of this study.

[1324] Foxhall 1998.