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

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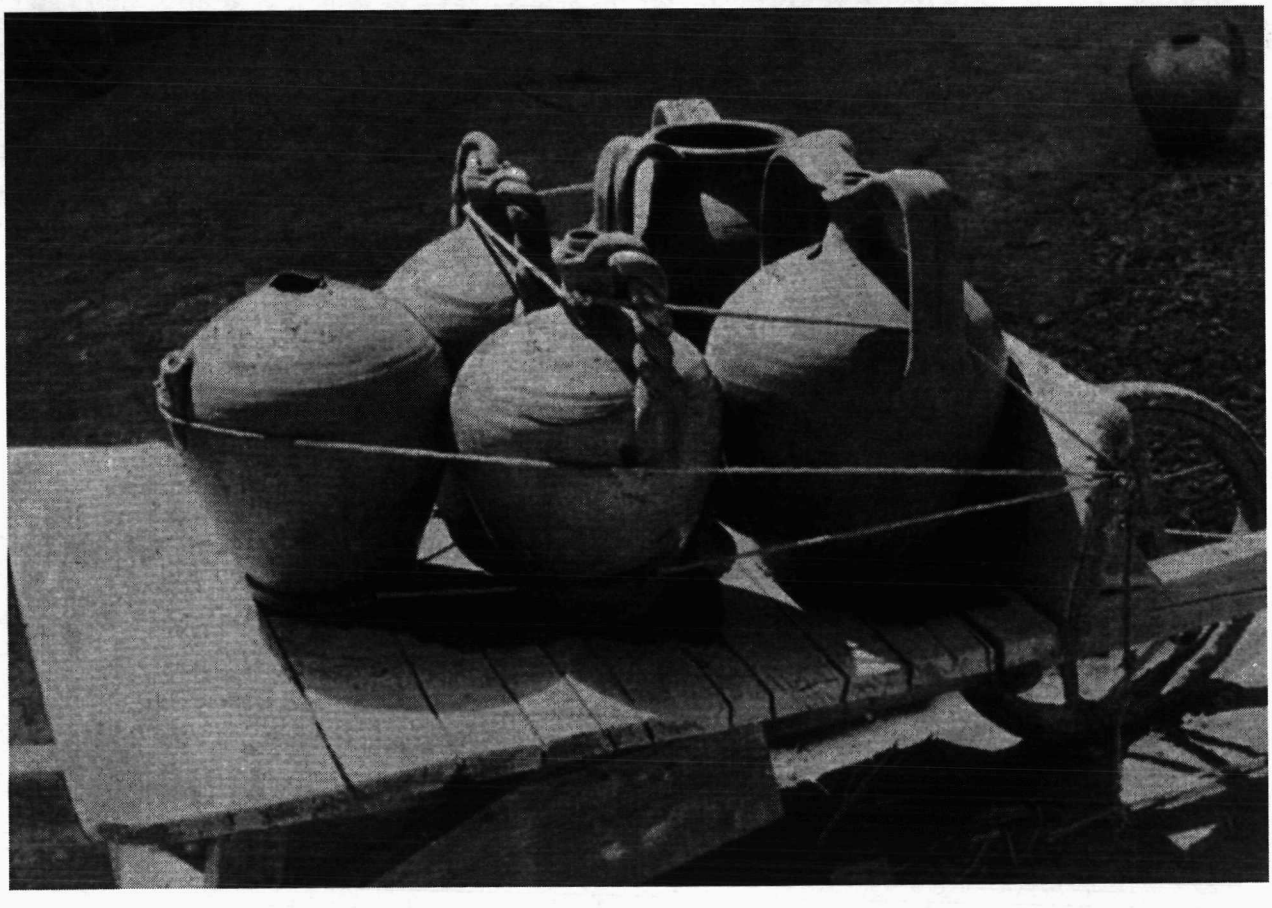
XIX Introduction: from pottery distribution patterns to the organisation of transport and exchange



XIX.1 Pottery distribution as a process: grasping the evidence of pots in transit

Trade or, more neutrally, exchange, has in some way been an issue in the study of Greek pottery almost from its beginning in the late 18th century, when people started to wonder where these wonderful vases found in the graves of Etruria and Campania actually came from.[1325] Since then, questions of provenance and distribution have always attracted attention, though often as a backdrop to stylistic studies. True studies of pottery distribution were rare.[1326] Nevertheless, from early on, find patterns were used, more or less ad hoc and quite roughly, to trace the origin of fabrics of yet uncertain provenance, or as indications of trade routes and colonisation. Much scholarly effort was also invested in connecting distribution patterns to historical events or developments.[1327] The results of these approaches were rather impressionistic, as conclusions were based on small numbers of objects from the few sites which at the time were well known.

Only with the appearance of Beazley's work, compiling large amounts of Attic decorated pottery and the known provenances, did it become possible to look at distribution from a more reliable base of evidence, at least for Attic pottery, as the spread of Corinthian remains difficult to grasp. The publication of Beazley's lists in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a growing interest in the economies and societies of the ancient world as fields of study. This, in turn, was closely linked to a broader orientation of some ancient historians and Classical archaeologists towards the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology. By the 1970s, trade had become an important topic for those advocating more theoretical approaches to the ancient evidence, and pottery distribution patterns were again studied as evidence for wider issues which are barely documented in other ways, like the possibility of state control of maritime routes, or the effect of political events on trade.[1328] In some studies the new socio-economic perspective even merged with the old historical focus, leading to new insights into especially colonisation and international ties between places.[1329]

As a consequence of the traditionally 'embedded' nature of pottery distribution studies, however, the finds themselves were often transformed into abstract quantities, more or less detached from their manufacturers and find contexts, even if production and consumption were occasionally touched upon, and links between potters and traders were discerned. But the distribution process itself, the way pots moved between places has barely received any attention at

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[1325] E.g. Lenormant and De Witte 1844, VIII-XXVIII, LXI-LXII; Jahn 1854a, IX-X, XXI-LXXXV; Birch 1858, II 139-144; Dumont 1890, 3-12; Pottier 1896, 41-48; 1906, 604-607; Walters 1905, I 18-20; Hackl 1909, 92-93, most with references to earlier discussions.

[1326] Richter 1904-1905; Payne 1931, 181-209; Bailey 1940; Dunbabin 1948, 472-482; Clairmont 1955; 1956-1957; Roebuck 1959, 77-86. See also already Jahn 1854a, XXI-LXXXV.

[1327] E.g. Lenormant and De Witte 1844, VIII-XXI; Dumont 1890, 3-20; Pottier 1896, 41-45; 1906, 604-607; Hackl 1909, 92-94; Bailey 1940, 62, 64-66, 69-70; Clairmont 1955, 85-91.

[1328] Tronchetti 1973; Siegel 1978; Cook 1979; Giudice 1979, esp. 160-162; 1982, esp. 284: 1989, esp. 35-36, 43-46, 60, 80-82, 90-102; MacDonald 1979; Martelli 1979; 1985; Meyer 1980; Di Bari 1981; Torelli 1982; Zimmermann-Munn 1983, 1-29; Salmon 1984, 103-116; 2000; Nafissi 1989, esp. 72-76; Rosati 1989, esp. 25-26, 45, 81, 85-86, 97, 131; Kreuzer 1994; see also Bentz 1982, 151-160; Martelli 1989, 790; Small 1994, 53-58; Hannestad 1996, 211-213; Semeraro 1997; 2000.

[1329] Kreuzer 1994; Neeft 1995; Salmon 2000, esp. 246. See also Sheratt and Sheratt 1993.

all.[1330] This is regrettable, as what happened between a pot's leaving the workshop and its appearance in the place where it was found remains elusive, and should conceal some important clues about the organisation of production and the ways consumer demand was fulfilled, perhaps even created.

The neglect of pottery distribution seems all the more odd in view of the extensive scholarly debates concerning trade routes and the prominence of some cities as centres of commerce and as the home bases of traders.[1331] Much of the evidence in these discussions is ultimately based on the distribution patterns of fine pottery. But if such pots are indeed a reliable guide to exchange in general – which remains to be seen – they cannot offer meaningful information as long as we do not even know how they were moved around. Only if we have an idea, however tentative, of the ways they could be exchanged, transported and made known to consumers, can the find patterns serve as evidence for economic and social interpretations of pottery exchange, which, in turn, may then offer starting points for a more general historical analysis.

Of course, tracing pottery between workshop and consumer is not easy, as exchange and distribution are actions in time and space which rarely leave direct archaeological traces, and the find patterns of circulated pottery document only the last stage in a long chain of events. Parts of this chain are nevertheless traceable, as explained below. Shipwrecks and the short mercantile inscriptions on pots, known as trademarks, give useful glimpses of day-to-day aspects of pottery distribution. They reveal a bit of the work and life of the people involved, and of the practical and social circumstances of the distribution of pottery, thus bringing practical matters somewhat into view. In addition, shipwrecks and trademarks offer broad indications of the scale and organisation of pottery transport as well. Besides this first-hand evidence of transport in action, some of the scarce ancient written evidence of exchange practices in Archaic Greece supply more general and less direct insights into trade practices and the social background of traders. Next I shall look at the find patterns of mainly Attic pottery around the Mediterranean, collected from both a series of existing regional studies and the data presented in chapters XV-XVII (Tables XXII.1-10). Further background evidence collected above will yield fruit here as well.

Finally, after exploring the actual distribution process, I shall return to its beginning and end. Consumption patterns depend, among other things, on the products made available to consumers and on the ways they are provided. Similarly, scale and organisation of production, as treated in the first part of this book, are inevitably bound up with the subsequent process of distribution. Therefore the conclusions drawn in parts I and II are directly relevant to an understanding of what happened between production and consumption. Therefore, I shall present a synthesis of these conclusions in the light of pottery distribution, taking into account the more direct evidence presented in the now following chapters. This latter check may also help avoid the danger of circular reasoning, which is inherent when phenomena are so closely interwoven. But, most importantly, this synthesis of the interaction of consumption, production and distribution looks forward to my final general conclusions which place the data about pottery distribution in the perspective of recent general ideas about the role of exchange and the place of craft products in Archaic and Classical Greek society and economy.

[1330] Exceptions are Osborne 1996b, 38-39; Roller 1996; Domínguez Monedero 2000; Morel 2000; Salmon 2000.

[1331] Tronchetti 1973, 15-16; Giudice 1979, esp. 38-39; 1989, 27-36, 40, 43, 54-60, 71-91, 97-102; 1995, 165-171; 1996, 201-208; Martelli 1979, esp. 38-39, 47, 49; 1985; 1989, 790-791; Meyer 1980, 61-66; Di Bari 1982, 202-204; Nafissi 1989, 72-75, 77; Rosati 1989, 23-26, 37-38, 51-55, 60, 63, 134-135, 194-195; Arafat and Morgan 1994, 110; Kreuzer 1994; Roller 1996, esp. 93-94; Domínguez Monedero 2000; Morel 2000; Salmon 2000, esp. 242-244, 249; see also Hannestad 1989, 129-130; 1996, 211-213; Sheratt and Sheratt 1993; Small 1994, 53-58; Sheratt 1995, 140.

XIX.2 Pottery as the object of trade: complexity, status and profitability

Before I begin my analysis of historical and archaeological data on pottery distribution two relevant general issues need to be looked at. First, complexity. Exchange and distribution processes in ancient Greece may well have been less simple and straightforward than many scholars seem to envisage. Even leaving aside the role of political and social ideologies in what now would be called the economy, and overlooking practical problems like the absence of coinage in the Archaic period, the basic fact that we know so little about what happened between production and consumption should warn us against overly simplistic approaches. To realise this, one has only to start thinking about the possible steps gone through by a Greek pot on its way from producer to consumer.

In the simplest case a potter sold his products directly to a local customer who acquired them for personal or household use. Alternatively, the potter exchanged or sold pots to a middleman who passed them on within the town of production or outside it, even over great distances. Of course, this happened to a majority of Athenian and Corinthian fine wares, and is where complexity starts. How many of these exported vessels were actually brought by a single trader directly to the consumer? Needless to say, we do not know. If 'international' distribution extended overseas, surely a ship-captain was involved, merely as the overseer of someone else's goods or as a middleman who owned and exchanged the cargo. Overland, donkey or cart drivers would be involved. All in all, it is easy to imagine how pots changed hands during distribution, between the workshop and a long-distance trader, one ship and another, between ports or an overseas trader and a local or regional distributor at the ship's final port. Little effort is required to repeat or skip any number of these steps. At the end of the process, the consumer finally acquired the pottery.

Any reconstruction of pottery exchange and distribution and any interpretation of find patterns that does not take account of these theoretical possibilities runs the risk of becoming a phantom that simply confirms a priori assumptions. For example, Giudice's well-known studies and reconstructions of trade routes are implicitly based on the premise that a ship contained a cargo of pottery made by one workshop which was gradually unloaded during long coastal trips, going from harbour to harbour.[1332] But if cargoes consisted of pottery from various workshops, or if ships went straight from Athens to a single destination, many of Giudice's conclusions will have to be revised. Similarly, hypotheses on routes and provenances of sunken ships based on their cargoes usually start from the assumption that ships were gradually loaded (and unloaded) in a series of ports of call, so that the placement of the items in the ship and their combination correspond with a series of commercial points that can be connected on a map. If composite shiploads could be obtained all at once or packed in combinations at staple ports, such interpretations may be misguided.[1333]

In some instances, as will be seen below, archaeology may provide means of checking hypotheses and of limiting the range of possibilities. Yet many aspects of pottery exchange and distribution remain out of view. The limitations of our evidence cannot be overcome by simplifying positivism that eliminates alternatives, but should be integrated with flexible models of interpretation which give complexity its due. The interpretation of find patterns can make sense only if we accept the possible complexity of distribution and exchange processes.

[1332] Giudice 1979; 1982; 1985; 1989; 1995; 1996; for similar approaches see Tronchetti 1973; 1989; Di Bari 1981; Rendeli 1989; Rosati 1989; Kreuzer 1994; and for critical comments see Hannestad 1989, 130; 1996, 212-213.

[1333] See Long, Miro and Volpe 1992, 231; Kreuzer 1994, 104-105.

Besides the complexity of the distribution process itself, the second basic point requiring some attention is the role of pottery as part of the larger circuits of exchange and distribution of all kinds of products. For a long time it has been taken for granted that Greek pottery was a prestigious product which, being highly desirable, was an obvious and profitable item of trade, distributed in quantity.[1334] This is still a common view,[1335] even though many observers are now calling into doubt the role of pottery as a luxury craft product. The documented prices of pottery seem too low for that, and the amounts of exported pottery, at least on Greek sites, are rather large for an item which was exclusive.[1336] But despite the impressive quantities it is generally considered unlikely that pottery formed a truly substantial section of ancient Greek trade.[1337] Vickers and Gill have even gone so far as to argue that it was only transported as 'space filler' or 'saleable ballast', being, as it were, 'parasitic' on other goods.[1338] If so, it makes little sense to study pottery distribution for its own sake, since it would depend totally on the movements of other products.

However, wide differences divide the traditional view that an important trade in ceramic objets d'art existed and the supposed alternative vision of pottery distribution as wholly insignificant and parasitic. It is therefore worthwhile to take a closer look at the matter before I come to my analysis of the evidence of the distribution process. The qualifiers used by Vickers and Gill provide a good starting point. In the first place, pottery is simply not heavy enough to function as ballast, as conclusively demonstrated by Sean McGrail, a specialist on the matter. Moreover, as Boardman has rightly remarked, it is rather expensive for ballast.[1339] Apart from such considerations, it is doubtful whether the need to fill space would in itself have been enough reason for spending time and, especially, considerable human effort in carrying pottery on board a ship, then stowing and, later, unloading it.[1340] Why not instead ship another kind of product, either (supposedly) more saleable or more suitable as space filler? Quite obviously, no one in Antiquity would have taken the risk and spent the effort and time in shipping pottery if there was no prospect of at least some gain be it monetary or not.[1341]

Nevertheless, Gill and Vickers have elaborately argued that pottery could not have been a very attractive or profitable item of trade or transport.[1342] Gill has even cited a price graffito on the

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[1334] See e.g. Richter 1904-1905; Walters 1905, I 43-46; and the references in Gill 1988a, 175; 1993.

[1335] See e.g. Boardman 1980, 17; 1988b, 27; Salmon 1984, 106, 110, 113; Kracht 1991, 49; Kreuzer 1994, 128-129; Möller 2000, 46.

[1336] Gill 1988a, esp. 175-176.

[1337] See e.g. Snodgrass 1980, 127-128; Boardman 1987b, 293; Gill 1988a, 178-179; 1991, 29; Osborne 1996b, 39; Salmon 2000, 245.

[1338] Gill 1987, 123-124; 1988a, 176-178; 1991, esp. 29, 43; 1993. Contrast Boardman 1988b, 27-28; Salmon 2000, 251, n. 3: Möller 2000, 44.

[1339] Boardman 1988b, 27-28; McGrail 1989; see also Salmon 2000, 245.

[1340] Boardman 1988b, 32.

[1341] See Johnston 1991b, 406-407; Kreuzer 1994, 106; Salmon 2000, 244.

[1342] Despite their use of the adjectives 'saleable' and even, 'profitable'. See Gill 1991, esp. 29, 35-38; Vickers and Gill 1994, 90-91 and also Boardman 1988b, 27-28.

bottom of an Attic pot which purportedly shows that its price in Cyprus equalled the wholesale price of similar pots in Athens, but both his reading and interpretation of the graffito are unconvincing.[1343] In any event, it could hardly have been standard practice to ship Attic pottery to Cyprus at a loss.

On the other hand, it is also difficult to prove conclusively that this was not done, as Boardman tried to do by comparing the value of pottery, on the basis of volume or weight, to that of grain, oil and wine. In his tables, the relative values of pots as a cargo turn out to be quite high; but Gill has rightly pointed out that some of the underlying calculations are at least doubtful.[1344] More importantly, both seem to ignore an important point, mentioned in passing by Boardman, but later convincingly stressed by Johnston: in trade, transport and selling, the intrinsic value of a cargo is not necessarily equivalent to its profitability.[1345] Cheap products like pottery would be not only more widely available, but also more easily marketable than luxuries, provided that the possibility of spending surplus income or wealth was not limited to the elites alone. Depending on conditions, it may be easier or even more lucrative to carry or sell simple items rather than luxuries, as many shopkeepers can testify.[1346] Quite important, though completely speculative, is the premium ancient customers were willing to pay for overseas quality pottery: perhaps pottery was a very profitable item of trade after all.[1347]

Besides value and demand, the possibilities of traders to choose specifically the kinds of wares they dealt with should also be considered. The availability of alternative products might have been more limited than we think, for many reasons. Some merchants could have literally been in the wrong place to buy more valuable or more profitable goods than pottery. As suggested by Johnston, Athens is an illustration: besides silver, which occupies relatively little space, and pottery, Athens had hardly anything of its own to offer to the many traders who must have supplied its large and relatively wealthy population.[1348] It can also be reasonably assumed that many traders simply lacked the financial means to invest in expensive goods. Moreover, it may well be relevant that pottery (and other craft products) do not deteriorate during transport, like foodstuffs, nor are they subject to the unpredictability of supply and demand typical of agricultural products. Pottery is a low-risk commodity.[1349]

Finally, there is the plain and well-known fact that Greek fine wares are found all over the Mediterranean and beyond, often in large quantities. Strangely enough, this point seems to be neglected or downplayed in discussions of production and trade. For different reasons, both those denying the profitability of pottery and those ascribing to its status as a luxury article seem to envisage smaller scale trading than probably took place. Indeed, as already argued in the previous chapter, fine pottery seems to be perfectly comparable to other common products which were

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[1343] Gill 1991, 38; see Johnston 1999.

[1344] Boardman 1988b, esp. 29-31; 1988c; Gill 1991, 32-35, 44-47; see also Kreuzer 1994, 106; Salmon 2000, 251, n. 4.

[1345] Boardman 1988b, 28, 32; Johnston 1995, 406-407.

[1346] See Boardman 1988b, 28: Johnston 1995, 407.

[1347] See Boardman 1988b, 28; Kreuzer 1994, 106; Johnston 1995, 406-407.

[1348] Johnston 1995, 406-407, contra Gill 1991, 39.

[1349] See Boardman 1988b, 32.

both locally produced and widely exchanged over long distances on a large scale, like wine, textiles, perfumes and pickled fish, Foxhall's category of semi-luxuries.[1350]

One may conclude that pottery transport was obviously a common enough activity in the Archaic Mediterranean, even though it may seem to resemble bringing coal to Newcastle or, for that matter, owls to Athens. And since the exchange of relatively simple, not especially expensive, but readily saleable semi-luxuries could apparently be an attractive commercial activity, there is no need to go to extremes and think of pottery as either saleable ballast or a desirable luxury article. In the following, pottery can and will be treated as a commodity like many others which were distributed through a complex network serving a large and varied clientele in different parts of the Mediterranean.

[1350] Foxhall 1998; see also Boardman 1988b, 32-33.