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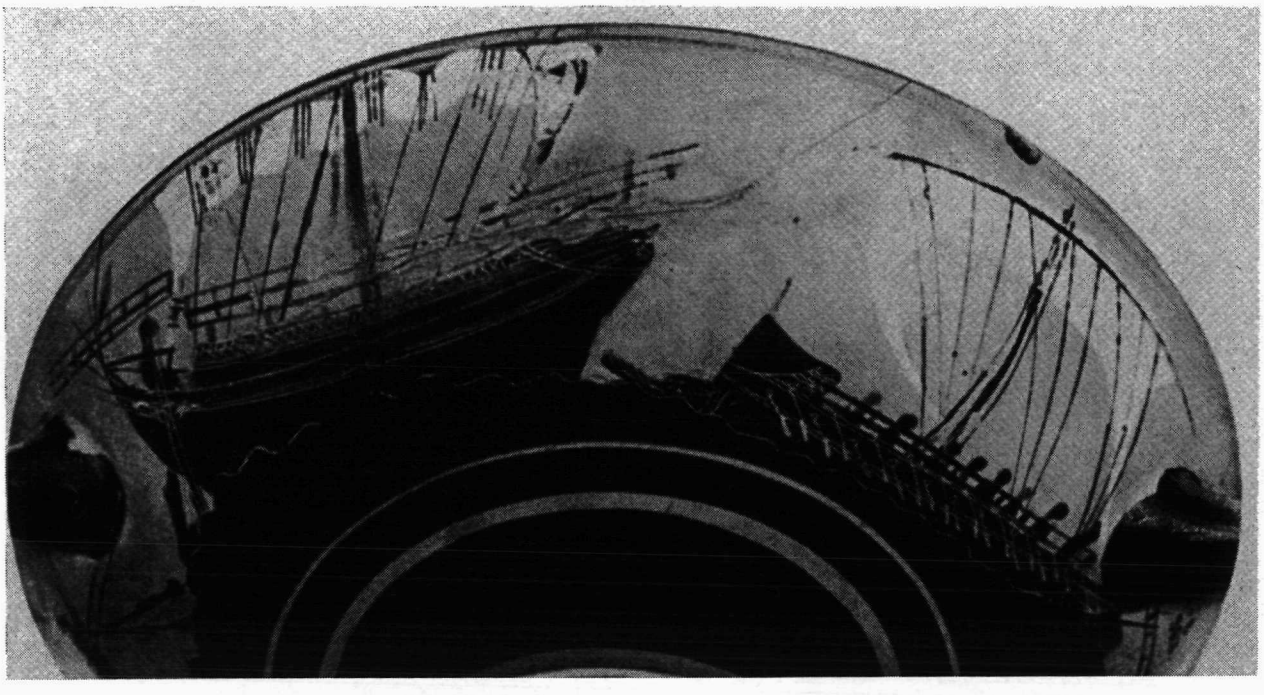
XXI Pottery and sea trade: the ancient written sources



Compared to the minimal amount of direct archaeological evidence for ancient pottery, the written sources are even less informative. Ancient writers and historians generally cared little about what we call economic processes or distribution networks, especially if a simple commodity like pottery was involved. Pottery as an item of overseas exchange is mentioned only once, indirectly: Herodotos tells that Attic products, including pottery, were prohibited from entering the sanctuaries of Demeter and Persephone in Argos and Aigina.[1448] Although these sanctuaries have not been excavated, and there is no archaeological confirmation for any such boycott elsewhere, the statement makes clear that pottery distribution was not simply a matter of financial profit alone, as would be tempting to think from a modern perspective. Otherwise, however, Herodotos's report is of no use here.

A little more information can be got from the rare references in ancient sources to distribution processes or trade in general, though pottery is not named. However, few of these references regard the Archaic or the Classical period. Except for Homer, who is actually pre-Archaic, and Hesiod, the earliest relevant passages were written down in the late 5th century, and many are yet later. This poses some problems. Classical and later sources about the Archaic world are prone to be anachronistic, particularly on matters of daily life, and often contain fabrications. In my opinion, particularly late writers like Strabo (early 1st century AD) and Plutarch (early 2nd century AD) offer nothing for our purposes which can be relied on. On the other hand, Hesiod and, especially, Homer describe societies which seem far from the later Archaic world (say, 625-480) on which I focus. Moreover, exchange processes are only mentioned in Homer in a scatter of loose passages forming the background to the main themes and stories, and Hesiod gives no more than some practical and organisational details about shipping and selling.[1449]

Thus, Homer and, to a lesser extent, Hesiod mainly offer glimpses of attitudes towards traders and, possibly, of the social backgrounds of exchange processes, at least those related to the elites. The detailed implications of this information as evidence for early and later Archaic trade are a matter of fierce debate, which focuses on the role of aristocrats in trade and the economic importance of exchange processes. Especially the opposing views of Benedetto Bravo and Alfonso Mele have greatly influenced the dispute.[1450] Each of them, however, appears to rely too heavily on strict interpretations of the meanings of individual words, and combine the scatter of relevant phrases and stories in elaborate hypothetical reconstructions with little factual basis. As a result, they overlook the inconsistencies in the evidence and ignore the complexities of Archaic Greek society.

The difficulties encountered by Bravo and Mele in reducing the evidence to simple models plainly indicates that even early Archaic trade was not limited to one social group, nor confined to a single kind of transaction. Instead, aristocratic gift exchange and more profit-aimed trade by members of the elite, personally, as well as by poorer, less respected 'professionals' seem to have coincided from early on. Part of this trade, perhaps most, especially in the 6th century, seems to have been carried on by passenger-traders ('ἔμποροι' or 'φορτηγόι') who did not own a ship and were therefore dependent on others for transport.[1451]

[1448] Herodotos, V.88; see Cook 1959, 119.

[1449] *Works and Days*, 618-649, 663-694; see also 236-237.

[1450] Bravo 1974; 1977; 1984; Mele 1979; 1986; see also Humphries 1978, 166-168; Bravo 1983, 18, 24-25; Cartledge 1983, 7-12; Hahn 1983 30-31; Salmon 1984, 150-153; Möller 2000, 48-54, 57-60.

[1451] Bravo 1974, 126-131, 150-154, 163-169; 1977, 1-10, 24-51; 1983, 18, 24-25; 1984, 99-115, 119, 128-149; Mele 1979, 9-10, 13-17, 21, 40-46, 54-78, 88-95, 97-108; 1986, 67-84.

Moreover, it can be noted that, except for some exchange of metals and prestige objects, including slaves, exchange ('ἐμπορίη' or 'πρῆξις') in the world of Homer is limited to quality food and wine sought by aristocrats, while Hesiod describes only how to sell agricultural surplus – and refers in passing to drinking wine from Byblos.[1452] The narrow focus is surely due to the elitist bias of the writers, who were doubtless selective, favouring expensive things. Besides, they describe very little of the actual trade process and the non-aristocratic people involved, obviously again because such details were considered hardly relevant in poetry aimed at evoking the world of the upper classes.

Owing to the limitations of the Archaic sources, I shall here limit myself to the treatment of some direct evidence of trade from an official document of the early Classical period, the so-called Ahiqar Scroll, and to some passages in Herodotos's *Histories* (concluded in the 420s?) in which Archaic traders appear as secondary personages.[1453] Although Herodotos's stories were written relatively shortly after they would have happened, the details are not always definitely historically reliable. Similarly, his references to Archaic traders must be influenced by 5th-century events and life, and probably reveal less than we may think actually happened in the 7th-6th centuries.[1454] Even so, they offer a glimpse of a society relatively close to the Archaic world, and thus provide at least indirect evidence of the possibilities and impossibilities.

In the few Herodotean stories mentioning traders ('ἔμποροι' or 'ναύκληροι') they play quite a conspicuous role. The richest evidence is found in the foundation legends of Cyrene, relating to ca. 630. No less than three traders figure in it: first Kolaios, captain of a Samian ship heading for Egypt which eventually ends up in Tartessos (southern Spain). In Tartessos, Kolaios and his crew do such good business that they dedicate a 6 talent bronze krater, representing a tenth of their revenues, to Hera. Herodotos then compares Kolaios to Sostratos, son of Laodamas, from Aigina, mentioned above, the only trader known to have exceeded such a profit. Third, there is Themison, a Theraean trader living in Oaxos on Crete who is ordered through a trick of the local ruler Etearchos to drown the latter's daughter Phronima, but cleverly finds a way to avoid doing so.[1455]

A notable general trait of all three traders is their characterisation as independent, seafaring professionals. Kolaios is indeed described as 'ναύκληρος' (shipowner/captain),[1456] and Themison, though an 'ἔμπορος' (usually a passenger-trader),[1457] could hardly have been expected to drown Phronima from a ship not under his own authority. The 60 talents brought home by Kolaios and his crew and the even greater profit of Sostratos, though probably somewhat exaggerated, are enormous amounts, which suggest that Herodotos could envisage

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[1452] *Works and Days*, 589. For aristocratic trade see Bravo 1977, 2, 25; 1983; 1984, 100-102, 129-136; Mele 1979, 14-17, 40-46, 54-78, 92-93, 103-108; 1986, 71-78, 84-85, 102-107; Salmon 1984, 150-153; see also Hahn 1983, 31; Nafissi 1989 76-77.

[1453] Thucydides offers no such evidence. Although in his introduction, the 'Archaeology' (I.1-23), exchange and 'economy' play important roles, the information is too abstract and general to be of use here.

[1454] See Osborne 1996a, 4-15.

[1455] Herodotos IV.150-158; see also Snodgrass 1980, 138-139; Scheibler 1995, 154, 156; Osborne 1996a, 8-15 and, about Sostratos, section XX.2.c.

[1456] Herodotos IV.152; for the meaning of 'ναύκληρος' see Bravo 1974, 163-169; 1977, 26-30; Mele 1979, 95-97.

[1457] Herodotos IV.154; for the meaning of 'ἔμπορος' see Bravo 1977, 26-30; 1984 129-136.

traders as being very wealthy.[1458] Also revealing are the 'international' connections of these traders: Themison is a Theraean living on Crete, and, on their way, the Samian crew of Kolaios's ship helps Korobios, a Cretan.[1459]

On the other hand, it can be remarked that Kolaios, though originally heading for Egypt, seems to have had no fixed route or arrangements, and could easily sell his cargo in Spain and (presumably) pick up new goods there.[1460] It has been suggested that he was more a pirate than a trader,[1461] but this remains speculative. Another possible indication of a low level of specialisation is that the dedication of a tenth was made jointly by 'the Samians', namely Kolaios and his crew, so the latter may well have been more like partners or colleagues than just hired sailors.[1462] That crews were not necessarily composed of specialised seamen subordinate to a captain is perhaps confirmed by two more passages in Herodotos's *Histories*. In the account of the famous singer Arion being thrown overboard by the crew of the ship taking him to Italy nothing is said about a captain. Similarly, a captain is not referred to in the story about a Spartan ship's crew whom the Samians accused of stealing the large krater they were transporting as a diplomatic gift to king Kroisos of Lydia. Although unmentioned commanders could be behind the crimes in both instances, Herodotos's treatment of the stories suggests he perceived seafaring as a more or less collective enterprise, in which shipping and commerce combined to benefit (almost) all those on board.[1463]

Apart from the Spartan krater, which was probably not shipped on its own, Herodotos's seafaring stories remain silent on the kinds of goods transported, their value and the methods of exchange. The story about the krater, however, does suggest that even such a large and costly object could be disposed of easily (or at least it was thought), possibly simply by selling it in a large harbour. For other, more detailed historical information on Archaic-Classical shiploads and their destinations one can only rely on Athenian forensic speeches and a miraculously preserved document containing official records of duties paid by ships passing through a port in the Nile Delta.

The Ahiqar Scroll, a poorly preserved papyrus recording import and export taxes, was found in Elephantine but refers to another harbour. It mentions 42 ships, of which 36 'Ionian', i.e. Greek, unloading and loading there throughout the ten-month sailing season of the year 475. Apparently depending on their size – there were two categories – the Greek ships paid taxes in gold (10 or 12 staters, 83.5 or 100.2 g) and silver (including some additional taxes totalling about 10 or 50 times as much as the gold, in weight). The presumably large ships had to pay a duty in kind as well, amounting to 21.5 jars of wine, 9.5 to 10.25 jars of oil, an additional quantity of oil, a wooden support and 30 empty jars. All this seems to represent a fifth of the total cargo (or its value?), which appears to be a more or less standardised percentage. In addition, the Greeks paid smaller

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[1458] See Harvey 1976, 210-211; Bravo 1977, 10; Scheibler 1995, 154.

[1459] See Humphries 1978, 165-168; Snodgrass 1980, 132-133; Cartledge 1983, 4; Salmon 1984, 150; Nafissi 1989, 73.

[1460] See Kreuzer 1994, 104.

[1461] Möller 2000, 54-55, 178.

[1462] Herodotos, IV.152; see Humphries 1978, 165, 168; Snodgrass 1980, 138; Scheibler 1995, 154.

[1463] Herodotos, I.24 and I.69-70. See also (on I.24) Humphries 1978, 168; (on I.69-70) Nafissi 1989, 73-74. It must be remembered that Hesiod's advice on seafaring (*Works and Days* 618-694) is seen from the perspective of a farmer owning his own boat and having access to a crew, presumably consisting of either friends or servants.

amounts of silver on the outgoing cargo, which consisted solely of natron (soda), at least as far as the duties were concerned.[1464] Although the exact origins and voyages of the ships and much about the loads and the duties remain unclear, the records confirm the importance of mixed loads, and show that even simple ceramic containers could be transported empty. The duties, which seem quite high in our eyes, were apparently not considered a problem. One ship even arrived twice during the same year.[1465] Another interesting detail is that ships were recorded by the names of their captains, which suggests that they alone were responsible for payment – which, however, does not necessarily imply that they also owned the complete cargo.

More information on practices of overseas trade is provided by Athenian forensic speeches of the 4th century, preserved among the (supposed) works of famous orators like Lysias, Demosthenes and Isokrates.[1466] Of course, this is rather late evidence to use in a study of the Archaic period, when exchange was probably smaller in scale, and its organisation less sophisticated. The introduction and growing use of coinage, which led to advances in banking and financing as well, must also have brought about major changes. In addition, the descriptions in the speeches of the transactions and trading voyages are not always easy to understand, partly because we lack much of the background information the ancient audiences had at their disposal, and partly because such legal pleas sometimes obscure or distort matters for the sake of argumentation.

Despite these objections it is worth noticing that the speeches mention many complicated features of trade and transport that rarely appear in the interpretation of archaeological evidence from the period. Ships are described as sailing empty or half-empty, and a cargo of Koan wine, picked up at Pantikapaion, is delivered at Theodosia, further south in the Crimea, that is, on the route back to Kos.[1467] It is also clear (once again) that most shiploads consisted of various goods, usually owned by several people: not only shipowners but also captains (who did not always own the ship), other crew members, passenger-traders and merchants who were not on board. In addition, the 'passengers' include agents who travel on behalf of others to acquire overseas goods, and traders who are temporarily without merchandise. The use of loans to finance voyages and cargoes and the existence of middlemen acquiring goods with others people's money sometimes further complicated matters.[1468]

Significantly, this very complex organisation of overseas trade is not purely a sign of development and sophistication. In fact, complexity seems to go hand in hand with a very small scale of operations: bottomry loans usually cover moderate sums, from 800 drachmai upwards, often half a talent (3,000 drachmai); the highest single transaction amounts to 2 talents, one combination to 7 talents.[1469] Whereas these sums were enormous in comparison to daily wages,

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[1464] Yardeni 1994, esp. 70, 72, 76; see also Johnston 2000, 168-169. An early 4th-century stele from Naukratis mentions an import duty of 10% on goods from Greece. See Gill 1991, 39.

[1465] Yardeni 1994, 69, table 2, captain Glaphyros. Possibly other ships also made more than one trip, as relatively few captains' names are preserved.

[1466] Relevant speeches include Demosthenes 32; 33; 34; 35; 50; 52; 53; 56; Isokrates 17; Lysias 32; see also Cohen 1992.

[1467] Demosthenes 35.31-34; see Cohen 1992, 54-55.

[1468] See Cohen 1992, 44, 55-57, 146-149, 152-156. The most telling cases are Demosthenes 32.5-8; 34; 35.10-36; 56; Isokrates 17.1, 4, 8, 35-37, 42-43; see also Casson 1979.

[1469] 800 drachmai: Demosthenes 50.17, 34, 55; 1,000 drachmai: Demosthenes 53.9; 1,100 drachmai: Demosthenes 35.23; 2,000 drachmai: Demosthenes 34.6, 23, 25; 3,000 drachmai: Demosthenes 33.7; 34.4, 7;

they were greatly surpassed by the wealth of the elites, except for the last example. With good, large, decorated pots being sold in Athens at a drachme or more, many of these loans would not even suffice to fill a single ship with pottery.[1470] In view of this, it comes as no surprise that unambiguous evidence of someone owning more than one ship does not exist,[1471] and that bottomry loans usually covered only parts of shiploads. The 4th-century written evidence seems to corroborate the picture of fragmented, small-scale transport which emerges from most Archaic and (early) Classical shipwrecks. Apparently, the scale of exchange and distribution was limited by the means of the traders involved, the amount of risk they could take, and the demand they could rely on. Many complicated practices of trade and transport seem to result from this fragmentation and the necessity for cooperation to overcome it.

It should be taken into account, however, that the impression given by the forensic speeches must be biased due to their litigious nature. Complicated ways of trade involving loans and the dependence on others for investment probably resulted in more legal action of increasingly complex character than did more casual financial arrangements or more individual means of distribution. Traders operating with their own money, either travelling as 'passengers' accompanying their goods or owning their ships, will be markedly underrepresented in the available written evidence. In fact, the presumably large-scale grain trade to Athens, which must have involved many ships in the 4th century, hardly appears in the speeches. Nor is there any historical trace in the Classical period of large 'bulk-carriers' like the late 5th-century Halonnesos wreck which carried 4,200 amphorai (ca. 126 tonnes of freight) and probably hundreds of cups and bowls.[1472] Short-distance shipping and transport of craft products is also invisible in the written sources. All these probably belonged to less elaborate, but possibly still more secure, ways of distribution which may well have been relatively common, particularly in the Archaic period.

Although the organisational details of these means of distribution remain out of sight, the consistent picture given by shipwrecks, trademarks and earlier literary sources would seem to indicate that most pre-4th-century exchange and transport had the same small-scale, fragmented nature as the transactions known from the forensic speeches. Leaving aside scarcely documented large-scale transport, as evidenced by the Halonnesos wreck, changes in this area from the 7th to the 4th century appear to be more a matter of the gradually increased sophistication of financial practice and of organisation than of drastic institutional and technological developments. One may speculate, therefore, that the evident growth in volume of exchanged goods, including pottery, during the Archaic period stemmed more from rising numbers of traders and ships than from an increase in the scale of individual operations. If this hypothesis could be verified, it would offer a remarkable parallel to the situation at the pottery production centres where, over time, the workshops show more variation in collective number than in individual size.

35.8, 10; 56.3, 17; 4,000 drachmai: Demosthenes 33.6; 52.20; 12,000 drachmai: Lysias 32.25; 42,000 drachmai: Isokrates 17.42-43; 300 staters (= 1,200 or 6,000 drachmai): Isokrates 17.35-37. See Casson 1979, 26-27.

[1470] The rather small Pointe Lequin 1a wreck appears to have contained over 2,500 vessels (Long, Miro and Volpe 1992, 205; see Table XX.2); most of them were easily stackable cups though, very few were large closed shapes.

[1471] Cohen 1992, 43-44.

[1472] See Hadjidaki 1996; 1997. The 3,000 amphorai related to a fraudulent loan (of 3,000 drachmai) mentioned in Demosthenes 35.10 come relatively close, but were never transported. Although the lender appears to have been tricked and may have exaggerated his loss, the amount must have been thought to be credible.