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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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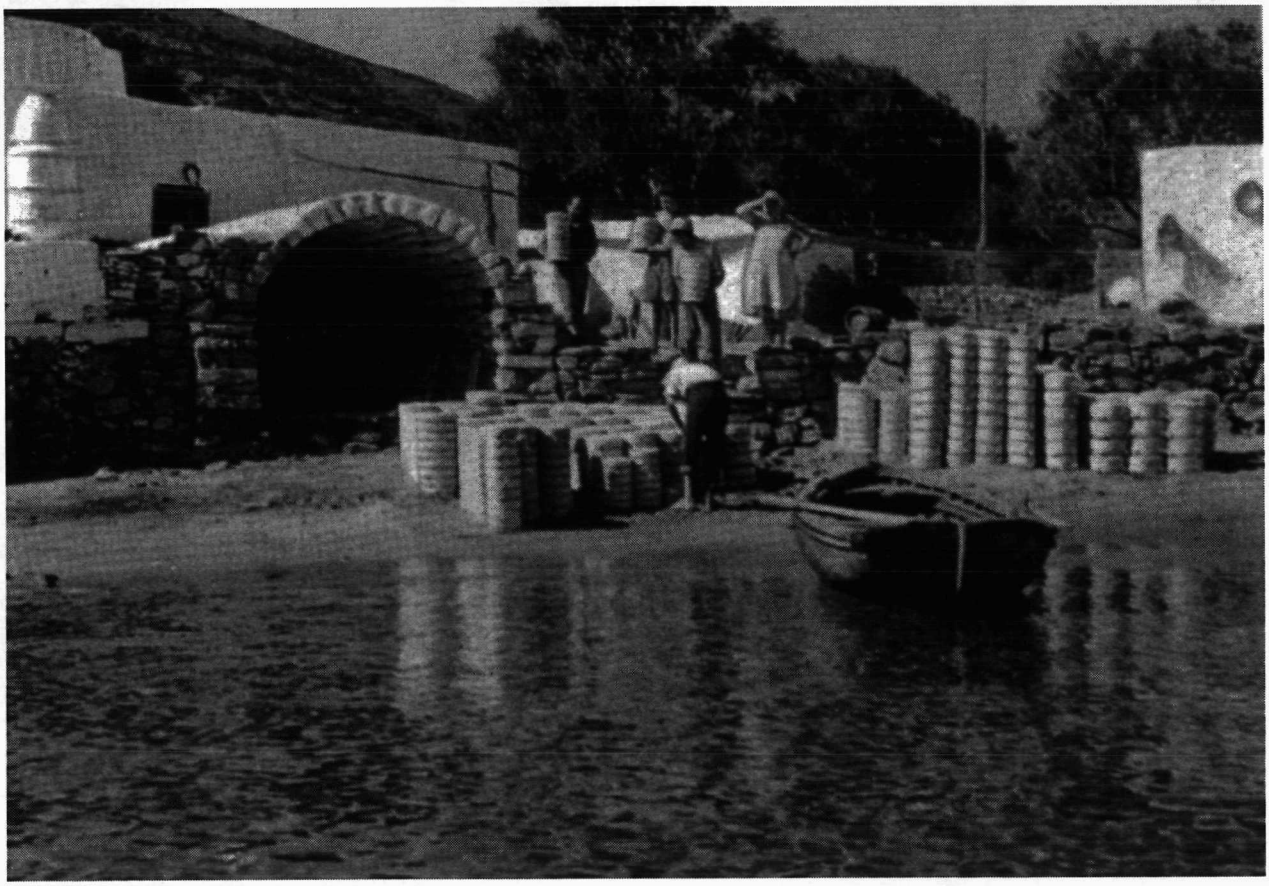
XXIII Patterns of production and consumption as evidence for distribution



XXIII.1 What can consumption tell us?

Although supply and demand could not have been so closely and directly linked as in modern economies, in the relatively small-scale societies of ancient Greece the interaction between production, distribution and consumption must have been quite tight. Besides the general distribution patterns, the more detailed data on consumption studied in the preceding part of this study offer good evidence of the organisation and effectiveness of the distribution system.

A first fundamental conclusion is that difficulties or limitations of transport had little or no effect on pottery distribution, at least within the Greek world. The compositions of the individual assemblages treated above indicate that Archaic-Classical Greek pottery distribution was both comprehensive and finely spread over a wide geographical area, and that it operated on a large scale. Although relatively much imported pottery has expectedly turned up in coastal places, it occurs in some quantities even in remote uphill places like the Korykian cave. The locations of some ancient production centres (Scornavacche, but also Athens, and later Arezzo) as well as evidence from recent periods confirm that even with primitive means overland pottery transport was neither as difficult nor as risky as many seem to think. Evidently, the extra transport costs could be borne by consumers too.

Supply shortages or gaps in the distribution network cannot be discerned. Notwithstanding many local variations, at least in the Greek world, total assemblages, as they have come down to us, seem to be completely representative of the selection of pottery available in Antiquity, everywhere and in every context, with a wide range of shapes and functions, often determined, in part, by specifically local preferences. Imports frequently form a substantial portion of the pottery assemblages and, at least partly, cover most of the range of shapes. Even if the production centres where specific kinds of imported pots originated vary in time or differ between sites, this does not seem to affect the completeness of the vessel range: kinds of vessels which go out of use are either replaced immediately or not at all.

Thus, whereas most categories of pots are generally found everywhere in the Greek world, the selection at individual sites is more differentiated: assemblages of domestic areas, sanctuaries and graves each show specific patterns of shapes and decoration, though votive assemblages and grave gifts share some similarities. In addition, parts of pottery assemblages in houses and temples seem to have 'female' and 'male' connotations, each with their own characteristic contents. In addition, the find patterns of 'poor' and 'rich' sites of the same category can differ. All this is more remarkable than it may appear at first sight because it implies that an underlying system exists, whether conscious or unconscious. It seems that, without much effort, distributors could accommodate themselves to changes in the production supply or in the general demand and special preferences of consumers.

However, as all these special patterns are mainly a matter of relative differences only, distributors may have found it relatively easy to cope with variation and change in supply and demand: almost the entire range of wares and shapes turns up in most or all archaeological contexts, in varying frequencies, sometimes only occasionally. Even if we allow for some pre- and post-depositional confusion and uncertainty in the archaeological record, few shapes seem to be exclusively funerary, ritual or domestic. The most popular shapes are met in considerable numbers everywhere: drinking cups, associated serving and table vessels, oil containers, and the various pots here called 'luxury domestic'. Particularly the percentages of drinking vessels are strikingly regular across most sites, of whatever nature.

Of course, some kinds of vessels, such as miniatures, cooking pots and water containers, had a very definite purpose, which is reflected in the character of their chief find spots, but even these kinds are met in other contexts as well. The main variation regards their relative numbers. Although this might suggest that consumers sometimes had limited choices, it is more likely that the situation is blurred by the flexibility of pottery use: miniatures, for example, could be used as

toys or at domestic altars. Few shapes or kinds of decoration were not suited to more than one purpose.

From the viewpoint of distributors, the flexible functionality of many vessels and the combination of general and specific consumption patterns imply that some types of vessels could be traded everywhere, while others were saleable only at a more limited range of places. If, however, sale took place at a central point in the larger area to be supplied, for example at the harbour or in a special ceramic market, such limitations would hardly have mattered, as the customers travelled the last bit in the distribution network. To please the wishes of all consumers, a general mix of best-selling shapes and some of the more specialised kinds, as possibly discovered in the Pointe Lequin 1a wreck, would do fine. If, on the other hand, distributors came directly to sanctuaries or cemeteries either to sell their goods themselves or to supply local shops a more precise selection based on knowledge of local demand was needed. Particularly the continuing fluctuations in the demand for imports at sanctuaries and funerary sites, as documented by the find assemblages, would have tested a distributor's commercial skills.

Apparently, traders had enough knowledge of their markets to adapt to change, or perhaps even to stimulate some change themselves. Yet, as argued above, the varying popularity of shapes seems mainly to depend on consumer wishes, which can be linked to wider consumption patterns regarding other items as well as sometimes to changes in ritual and, perhaps, lifestyle. Distributors may well have tried to influence such developments, but the combination of internationally uniform long-term trends in the popularity of kinds of pottery and the great local variation in the finer points of consumption patterns suggest that their success was limited. In linking production to consumption patterns, pottery distributors thus appear to have had an exploring and mediating position rather than a determining one. The pottery that has been regarded as a special export product illustrates this well. Many distribution studies refer to shapes that were made especially for export to specific regions, that is, mostly Attic pottery sent to (sections of) the Etruscan market. Often these items, particularly Tyrrhenian and Nikosthenic amphorai and kyathoi, are seen as leading examples of the possible connections between consumers and producers through distributors. The latter are then considered the transmitters of their customers' (or perhaps potential customers') wishes by providing the producers with models and by guaranteeing their sales.[1512]

However, such 'market-aimed' pottery is, in fact, exceptional and was not noticeably successful: it forms a small part of the total Attic output only, and was made by a small number of producers. Moreover, some of it may not be 'aimed' at a single market after all: Tyrrhenian amphorai have now been found in several places outside Etruria[1513] and kyathoi, although inspired by an Etruscan shape, were soon used locally in Athens as well. Only the Nikosthenic amphorai, it seems, were exported almost exclusively to a specific place in Etruria, but although Nikosthenes's workshop may have thrived on them, no one bothered to copy them, and the demand for them evidently did not last long.

[1512] Webster 1972, 291, 295-296; Eisman 1974b; Rasmussen 1985; see also Boardman 1979, 34-35; Brommer 1984, 182-184; Martelli 1985, 180; 1989, 788-790; Hannestad 1988, 224; 1989, 126, 128; Scheffer 1988, 536-537; Rendeli 1989, 568-573; Kracht 1991, 65; Spivey 1991, 144; Osborne 1996b, 31-32, 38-39; Sparkes 1996, 162-164; Curry 2000, 81-85; Möller 2000, 46; Salmon 2000, 246; critical: Arafat and Morgan 1989, 337; 1994, 114-116; Gill 1994, 101-103.

[1513] See Curry 2000, 82 and Tables XXII.3; XXII.8.

Iconography aimed at a particular export market, which is less widely cited,[1514] presents a comparable situation. The only clear instance seems to be the dressed athletes seen in the so-called Perizoma Group.[1515] It is certainly un-Greek for athletes not to be completely naked, and their depiction in garments is probably adapted to Etruscan taste, though unnecessarily: Etruria is full of pots showing naked athletes; and the Perizoma Group had little influence on Attic pot-painting.

Other possible instances are doubtful, mainly because the geographical distribution of iconographical themes is hardly known, so that it is more or less impossible to recognise meaningful distribution patterns. Moreover, most potential cases regard standard iconography, that is, stock themes, which may have had a special appeal to certain groups of customers, but which are met in various places, for example, pictures of Aeneas which seem to be relatively more popular in Central Italy.[1516] Traders may simply have chosen the pictures they thought their clients appreciated most; and perhaps they asked painters to provide larger numbers of the same. But firmer statistical evidence is needed to ascertain the existence of such practices. In any case, it would have been easy for producers to meet such requests: they simply had to repeat the required pictures more often than they might have if there was no special demand. There is nothing unusual about all of this; after all, some shapes were more popular in one place than in another, and larger numbers of standard shapes would have been requested when demand peaked.

All in all, the kinds of vessels made specifically to satisfy particular export demands were extremely rare. If export pottery was made to order at all – and pre-firing dipinti and other inscriptions indicate it sometimes was – this normally had little influence on the repertory of shapes. Indeed, the rarity of special products geared to limited markets suggests that the role of distributors (or that of the consumers, if their choices decisively determined the nature of a distributor's supply) was limited to selecting and preferring shapes which the potters were generally offering, and that it was evidently uncommon for them to propose the manufacture of non-standard shapes. Producers seem often to have thrived on a few best-selling kinds of pots, which developed slowly. Consumers, for their part, could cause drastic changes in production and distribution by simply not buying certain kinds of pots, as very probably happened to Corinthian oil flasks in the 6th century. Aside from such passive selection, however, consumers evidently had few particular wishes, being contented, for the most part, with the usual range of pottery on offer.[1517]

XXIII.2 What can production tell us?

While those taking pottery from producer to consumer, near or far, were obviously dependent on the output of the workshops the manufacturers, in turn, had to take into account the wishes of those who bought their products, adjusting the scale and organisation of work and the range of products accordingly. In addition, the location of workshops and the personal contacts of potters may have stimulated demand. Many of the various issues of scale and organisation of pottery

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[1514] See e.g. De Vries 1977, 546-548; Brommer 1984; De La Genière 1988; MacDonnell 1991; Cristofani and Martelli 1996; see also Schauenburg 1960; Meyer 1980, 61-62.

[1515] MacDonnell 1991, 186-188; see also Webster 1972, 197; Brommer 1984, 181; Spivey 1991, 144.

[1516] Schauenburg 1960; Meyer 1980, 61.

[1517] See Meyer 1980, 61-62.

production treated in the first part of this study are also relevant for the distribution process, discussed below, much of which is indeed archaeologically traceable.

At the very basic level of the general location and layout of workshops one already sees that visibility and accessibility to the trader and the consumer played their parts. The outward-looking location of many workshops, on clearly visible spots, along outgoing roads and sometimes near harbours, suggest, moreover, that they were not only oriented towards the adjacent town but also towards a wider area, be it the immediate vicinity or the whole Mediterranean. Although consciously aiming at outgoing long-distance trade was probably rarely a primary factor in deciding the placement of a workshop, the strategic placement of a pottery establishment would stimulate exchange, simply because it more easily brought the products to attention of customers.

Similarly, the spacious layout of many workshops, with much place for storage and, possibly, display, might indicate that often large amounts of pottery were available for sale or ready to be fired. Even if this had to do less with scale than with the organisation of production, which may have been geared to large batches of a limited, alternating range of products, buyers, including traders, had a good chance of finding the pots they wanted. Because the raw materials were cheap (and labour costs low) pottery would have been more suited to the maintenance of a large stock than, say, metalware, which would involve high financial risks.

The various layouts of potteries and the apparent links between the type of workshop (as defined in section IV.8) and location seem even more directly related to exchange systems. As is also clear from excavation assemblages, different kinds of pottery seem each to have their own distribution ranges, which appear to be related to specific modes or circles of production. Apart from some specialised shapes (like cooking pots), coarse and plain wares were made everywhere and usually distributed only locally. Black gloss was also produced in many places for local markets, although some of it seems to have travelled farther, regionally and even internationally. In contrast, decorated pottery issued from few workshops, and figured ones from a yet smaller number, with an increasing concentration of centres and internationalisation of production from the 7th until the late 5th century, when Attic rules. A general rule of thumb seems to be that the higher the appreciation of the aesthetic or functional quality of a kind of pottery was, the wider its distribution.

Moreover, the spread of workshop types suggests that the various kinds of pottery were connected with different local, regional and international distribution networks, although overlap certainly occurred. The very wide distribution of Attic black gloss, for example, seems to result from international traders adding it to their loads of figured pots after they discovered that it could successfully compete with typically regional products. This case, however, appears to be an exception in an otherwise quite stable pattern. Clearly, pottery distributors operated within a well-established system of exchange networks, directly tied to the organisation of production, comparable to that sketched by Peacock for the Roman world.[1518] In this regard, the positions occupied by Athens and, earlier, presumably Corinth were extraordinary, even if the wide-spread international distribution of some kinds of pottery existed since the Early Iron Age (and previously in the Bronze Age).

When considering the broad lines of pottery production and distribution as a whole, we must not overlook the small scale of the single production unit and the individual distributor. Depending on their wishes and needs, traders would usually be able to chose the desired items from a wide range of workshops of different types, which in many towns were apparently represented by several establishments each, often concentrated in a kerameikos. The evidence from excavated kerameikoi indicates that there was considerable overlap between the output of workshops. The same conclusion can be drawn from stylistic studies of Attic and Corinthian

[1518] Peacock 1982.

decorated wares: although some, even many workshops specialised in a few shapes only, their specialisations were hardly ever exclusive: particularly popular shapes like aryballoi, cups and skyphoi were turned out by groups of workshops at the same time. In such circumstances a buyer would never have trouble finding the desired pottery. The existence of many workshops in proximity may, in fact, have had the effect of guaranteeing that some manufacturer always had the needed product in stock.

Altogether, the many relatively small workshops of each kerameikos furnished a wide range of products in considerable quantities. As seen above, further specification of the production scale of both individual workshops and complete kerameikoi is difficult, but the amounts of remaining vessels, kiln sizes, the prices recorded in graffiti and ethnographic evidence all suggest that the output of Greek potteries, or at least those producing for more than their direct surroundings, was very large. Distributors apparently found no difficulty in coping with the abundant supply, and perhaps even stimulated large-scale production, if pre-firing trademarks indeed mirror commercial pressure. Although unique, the Pointe Lequin 1a wreck, with its large, specialised cargo in a rather peripheral area of the Mediterranean, is an additional indication of the capacities of interacting distributors and producers: even hundreds of vessels of a single shape could apparently be made, acquired all at once, and shipped far away.