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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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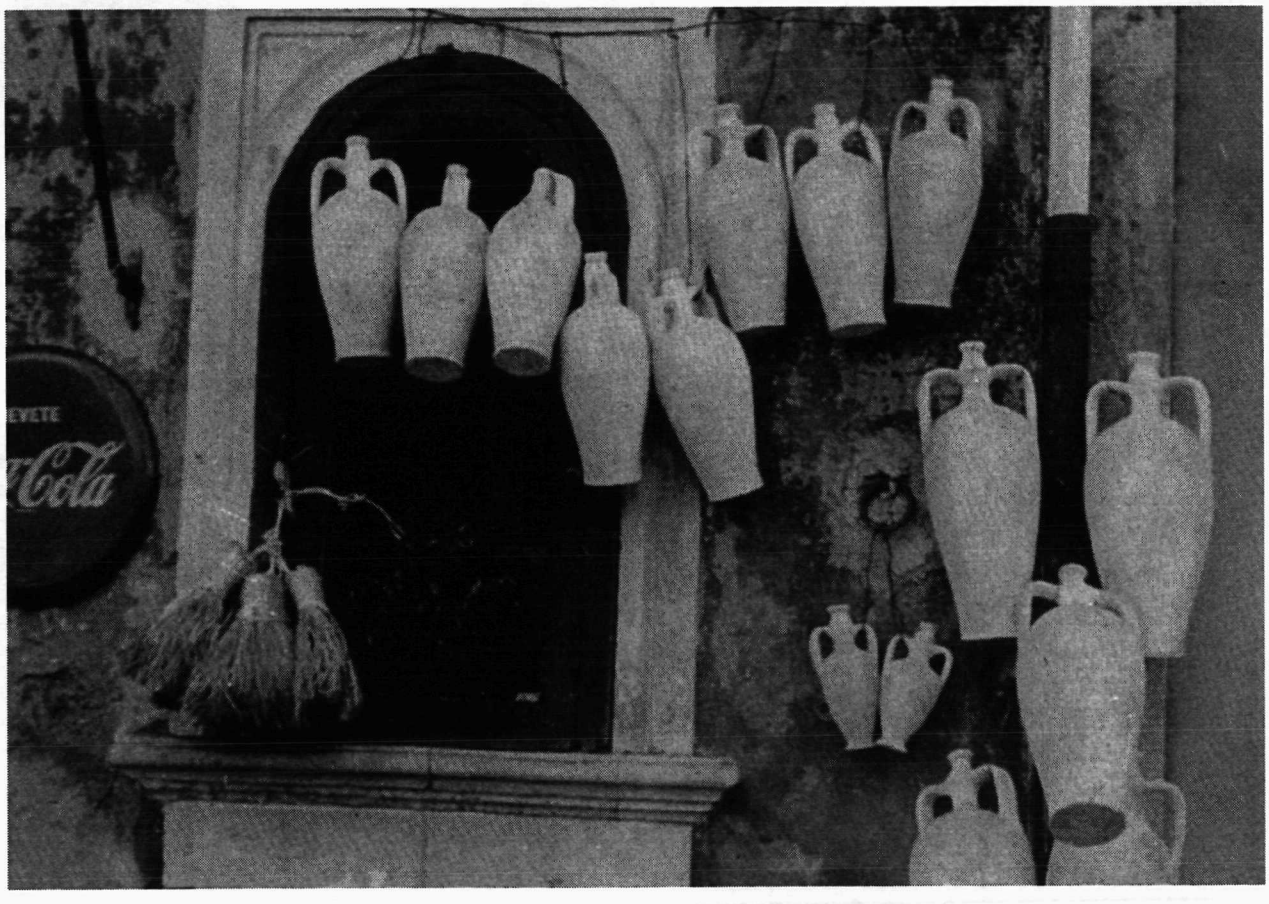
XXIV Conclusions: a general view and detailed insights combined



The picture of pottery distribution offered by the various kinds of direct and indirect evidence presented in the previous sections is a somewhat confusing mix of glimpses of precise details and broad, very general overviews. The detailed insights given by the Ahiqar scroll, trademarks, shipwrecks and orations relating to bottomry loans all show complex and highly organised ways of trade, usually involving small and mixed cargoes which seem sometimes to pass through many ships and hands before arriving at their destinations. Yet the broader views supplied by the distribution and consumption patterns reveal, at first sight, hardly anything of comparable complexity. The spread of Greek decorated pottery over much of the Mediterranean seems to have been quite uniform and regular.

A closer look at the find patterns makes clear that the simplistic models of transport and trade adopted in some recent studies of pottery distribution may not be adequate. The fine dispersion of the finds suggests that distributors had the physical means and the necessary information to penetrate their ground well. This is confirmed by the existence of regional and local variations within general find patterns, which indicate that distribution was far from haphazard, and could even be carefully planned, while the sudden changes within individual site assemblages strongly suggest that it must have been quite a dynamic activity as well. Lastly, we note that different kinds of pottery like kitchen wares, local and imported black gloss and figured vessels each have their own geographical spread: generally, the finer the pot, the wider its distribution. Yet, since these different kinds of pottery are found in more or less similar functional assemblages in comparable contexts (houses, sanctuaries, graves) all over the Greek world, it seems likely that pottery distribution involved several interacting networks of different scale and extent.

Unfortunately, it is as yet difficult to connect this complexity, which seems to be hidden in our general view, with that which is more clearly visible in the detailed glimpses. Part of the problem is surely a consequence of the biases in our evidence. Shipwrecks are few, and the various written sources are clearly linked to relatively sophisticated ways of transport and trade, which are likely to have coexisted with simpler enterprises leaving no written trace. It is precisely the latter about which we also know hardly anything from other sources like archaeology and general historical information. Indeed, our limited knowledge of the organisation of transport and trade in general is another major difficulty in connecting the scraps of evidence into a coherent set of hypotheses.

To some extent, however, the above-sketched picture can be filled in if one allows for wider speculation. It seems that the hidden complexity of the general distribution patterns is at least partly related to variation in the organisation and scale of transport and trade. Specialised, narrowly directed trade, as documented possibly by trademarks and more firmly by vessels aimed at a particular market, like Nikosthenic amphorai – both phenomena are, however, exceptional and small scale – seems to have existed beside more casual enterprises. Similarly, traders who travelled as ships' passengers and carried small batches of pottery, comparable to the 'ἔμποροι' described in texts about loans (and perhaps visible in shipwrecks with mixed small cargoes), evidently operated at the same time as or even alongside larger-scale entrepreneurs like the owner of the load of the Pointe Lequin 1a wreck and perhaps Sostratos. Some of these bigger traders may not even have travelled themselves, if my interpretation of some of the trademarks is right. In any case, trademarks, shipwrecks and written sources strongly suggest there was little connection between the origins of goods and that of the ships and the people trading them. Archaic and Classical Greek trade seems to have been an international activity, hardly influenced by polis boundaries and politics.

The existence of varied trade arrangements may also be indicated by the differentiation in the distribution patterns of the diverse kinds of pottery. The more limited geographical spread of simpler wares could probably be realised by means of less elaborate distribution networks than those required for the widely distributed figured wares. 'Minor' figured wares, on the other hand, seem to have been niche products, which may have travelled in very specific ways. The destination obviously played a part as well: the contrast between the small range of Attic imports

in peripheral Spain and Bulgaria and the much wider range in Etruria must relate, at least partly, to the circumstances of distribution. As argued above, moreover, the differences between more or less contemporary assemblages within Etruscan or Greek importing areas, and even in individual places, might be rooted in local or regional redistribution networks which linked up with the international traders.

This brings us to my final point: much of the apparent complexity and refinement of the pottery distribution 'system', with its fine penetration of markets, dynamism and variation, may, in fact, result simply from the small scale and fragmentation of the individual operations that made up the overall trade and transport networks. A single ship, and not even a large one, loaded almost exclusively with pottery (the Pointe Lequin 1a wreck) and individual traders regularly supplied by a few workshops and serving only small areas (as documented by the 'main line' trademarks) constitute the largest enterprises that can be recognised, but they seem to be exceptional. It was more likely the rule that smaller batches of a few dozen or perhaps a few hundred pots, probably passing through several ships, underwent sequences of transactions along irregular routes. In fact, precisely the scattered nature of pottery distribution (and the accompanying financial and physical risks) may lie at the heart of its apparent effectiveness, perhaps because it was a self-evident and flexible means of meeting the varying, quickly changing demands of consumers and of dealing with the plethora of different pots on offer at the many workshops.