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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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Publication date
2002

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Stissi, V. V. (2002). *Pottery to the people. The producttion, distribution and consumption of decorated pottery in the Greek world in the Archaic period (650-480 BC)*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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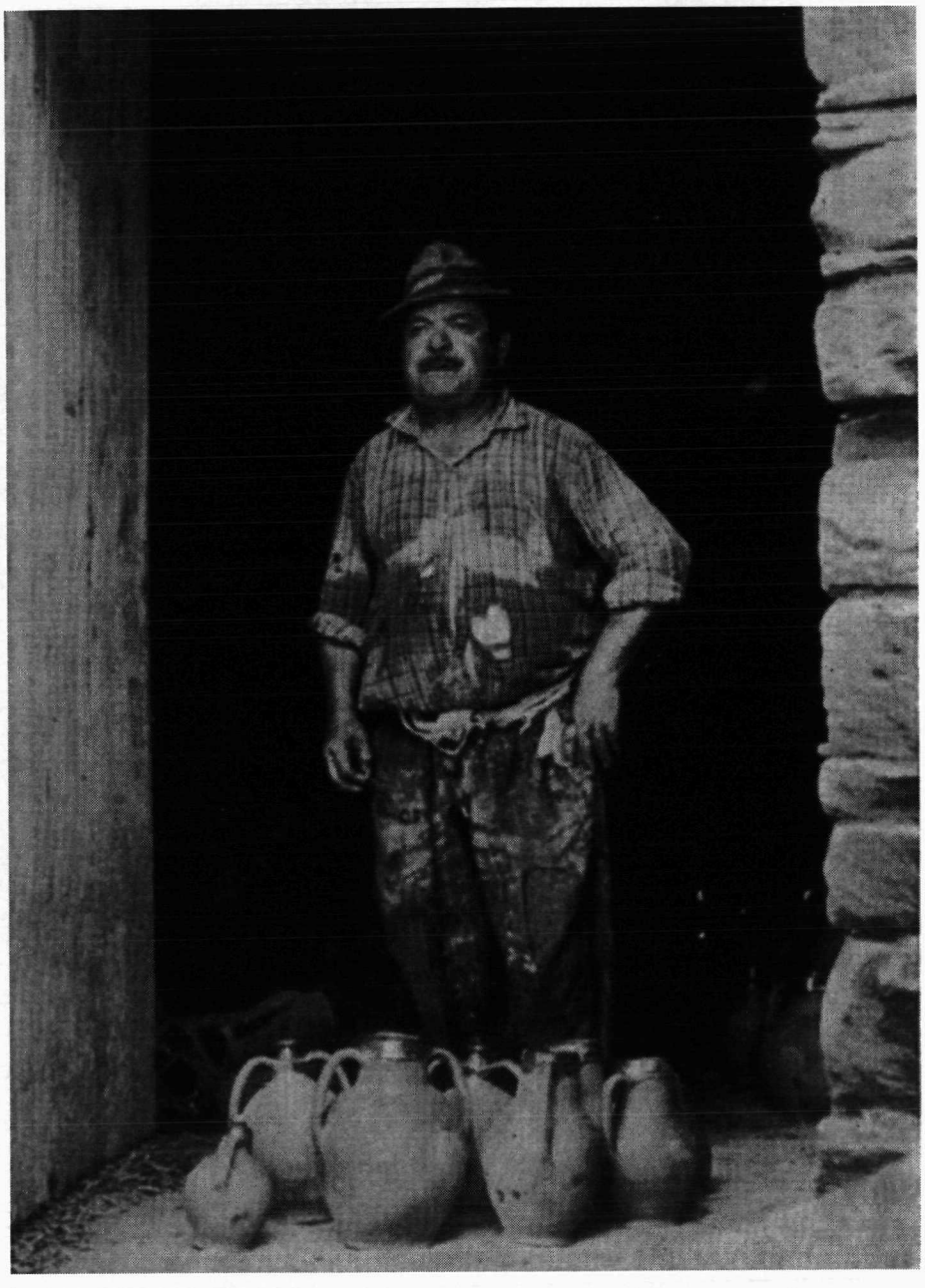
XXV General conclusions



XXV.1 Pots and economical models: looking between extremes

A summary conclusion cannot easily be drawn from the wealth of evidence reviewed in this study, as it has clearly emerged that variety and complexity are essential concepts in understanding Greek pottery production, distribution and consumption. Even apparently simple episodes in the process from workshop to final deposition often turn out to involve extensive and sometimes intricate networks which may undergo fast developments and can occur on a large scale which is hardly visible when looking at detailed bits of evidence. Small workshops often form large kerameikoi, mixed loads of small amounts of different pots may be part of major streams of distribution, and archaeological assemblages of thousands of pots seem to comprise very small sets and even many items which were purchased individually. Internationally distributed fine wares appear and then vanish; regionally or locally made plain and black wares show more stable patterns of production and consumption, but their uses closely mirror those of imported figured and black pottery.

Therefore the concept 'primitive' certainly cannot be the key to defining the roles of pottery in Archaic and Classical Greek society and economy. Despite the general simplicity of the basic technologies and economic structures involved, it seems impossible to accommodate the production, distribution and consumption of pottery as traced in this study to a theoretical framework in which the Greek economy is embedded in social structures mainly centring around local agrarian production, basic subsistence and the luxury needs of small elites. The scale, complexity and dynamism of pottery production, distribution and consumption simply preclude this. Even if the financial weight of the economic activities related to pottery may have been relatively limited, producing pottery and bringing it to its consumers must have involved substantial numbers of people who partly or wholly made their living out of it, and the consumers of imported pottery were surely extremely numerous. In short, fine pottery and perhaps other non-essential craft products appear to have been less marginal and exclusive in Greek life than has often been assumed.

But this is not to say that the pottery industry consisted of large-scale entrepreneurs who operated in concert with sophisticated international trade organisations in a modern style market economy, as was often assumed before the ascendancy of the new primitivist orthodoxy of the last decades of the 20th century. Although traces of forces like supply and demand can be discerned in excavation data, and although pottery acquisition is likely to have been monetarised relatively early, traditional modernist views of the Greek economy are as incompatible with the evidence as the primitivist views that replaced them. Even apart from some often-mentioned general problems concerning the financing of investments and the amount of consumption, the limitations of the technological and organisational capacities of manufacturers and traders and the slowness and small scale of transport and communications could not have created the level of efficiency needed for a real market economy when it comes to pottery. In addition, consumer demand was obviously strongly guided by matters of status and social convention, possibly more than it is today, and in more ways, as is evident from the relative roles of pottery and metal, and the existence of persistent local ritual traditions in cemeteries and sanctuaries.

It therefore seems advisable to look between the extremes of primitive and modern, small and large, function and status, etc., for answers about the roles of pottery in society, the organisation of production and distribution, and the appreciation of pottery. As argued in the preliminary conclusions of the preceding sections, precisely the combination of apparent contrasts like small traders travelling long distances in large numbers or the integration of many small amounts of vessels of one kind into very large site assemblages seem to contain the crucial explanations of many seemingly difficult issues. Below I shall therefore propose some comprehensive conclusions from this perspective.

XXV.2 Scale and organisation

As repeatedly remarked above, the large amounts of pottery are basic to our view of it in Archaic and Classical Greek society: obviously there was very much of it, more than most of us can imagine, which implies steady production, a distribution network with substantial capacity and a high rate of replacement of at least a section of the pottery on the part of consumers. At the same time, the large flows of pottery going from producers to consumers seem to be extremely divided and varied. Consumers and traders thus drew on a large assortment of wares which, presumably, were acquired usually from many individual suppliers (manufacturers as well as middlemen) and often in very small numbers at a given time.

In this way the demand for large quantities of pots was filled by the combined efforts of many people operating individually – many more than is often thought, I suppose. Somehow, and possibly without much coordination, all the small units of production and distribution together made up for the lack of a strong, central organising force. Large-scale production and distribution surely also existed, at least in relative terms, but they could be applied only to the stable sections of the markets, in places with favourable conditions. Moreover, it is quite likely that in the last stages of such large-scale operations, when the pots actually reached the consumers, the level of organisation was reduced to its usually smaller size: at least some of the supply networks of imports at the final destinations of the major fine wares would have been in local hands.

Yet the multiplication of simple units of trade of differing size, though basically small, provided more than just a solution to the problems posed by large-scale output over a wide geographical area in combination with the limitations of the technological and organisational capabilities. The resulting variation in the nature of distribution and in the kinds of pottery produced turned out to be very successful, making Greek pottery – not only figured wares – one of the most widely distributed craft products of the pre-Roman Mediterranean. As already suggested, pottery must have been one of the most popular semi-luxuries of the Greek world, comparable in its degree of dispersion, though not in the volumes traded and financial impact, only to basic agricultural products like wheat, wine, olive oil and, perhaps, textiles.

But this success depended on more than effectiveness and the scale of production and distribution only. The ability of producers and distributors to cope with dynamic consumption patterns (which may well have been created in part by the producers and/or distributors themselves) also seems to play a key role in making pottery a semi-luxury article rather than, on the one hand, a purely ordinary, utilitarian product or, on the other, an exclusive luxury. Indeed, pottery, which unlike agricultural production is not subject to natural hazards, may have been the best possible commercial opportunity to exploit the wishes of large groups of consumers for novelties or, viewed from the opposite perspective, the best chance to trade a popular commodity from which consumers could derive some status and pleasure at a moderate cost. The diversity and small scale of the units of production and distribution thereby encouraged a flexibility of supply which could ideally fill consumer demand for distinction and variety. If a workshop, kerameikos or middleman no longer traded in the right items, many other players could quickly fill the gap, as the mid 6th-century makers of Corinthian figured wares and possibly some of the traders dealing in them must have experienced.

XXV.3 Status and appreciation

Although the detailed mechanisms and forces lying behind the changes in the production, distribution and consumption of much Greek fine pottery largely elude us, the repeated shifts as a whole perhaps form the most significant feature of the widespread export of Greek pottery. After all, its greatest diffusion was relatively short-lived: late 7th to the 5th century. One may conclude

from this that changing consumption patterns, like those discernible in pottery assemblages, also affected the relative position of pottery in comparison to that of other products which could play similar roles.

Much Greek pottery was, of course, exported before and after this period of about two centuries as well. Earlier, however, most imports seem to figure relatively less prominently in find assemblages, which also appear to be generally smaller and more uniform than later ones. The scale of Greek pottery export after the 5th century, on the other hand, may well be much larger than is currently generally thought on the basis of distribution studies of quality figured pottery: quite a lot of black gloss and red figure, much of it Attic, was still travelling beyond the local distribution circuits. However, these wares are less conspicuously present than their predecessors, and seem much more closely linked to utilitarian purposes or to very uniform burial traditions: they belong to more stable consumption patterns than the bulk of their predecessors. By the end of the 5th century, moreover, the role of fine pottery as a semi-luxury was evidently largely taken over by metal vessels and other relatively more costly or non-utilitarian items like terracottas, coins and jewellery.

This wider picture of the consumption of fine pottery and especially the major internationally distributed wares as a non-essential product subject to drastic changes of demand is fundamental in regard to the issues of status and appreciation. It makes clear that fine pottery was appreciated intrinsically, as a craft product, apart from its functional qualities or usefulness. As argued in the second part of this study, such appreciation of pottery is reflected in find assemblages as well: they show a clear division between pottery primarily for display (at symposia and ceremonies or as dedications) and that exclusively for use (in households and sanctuaries), with the pottery of the former kind being much more widely distributed.

XXV.4 Status, efficiency and risk

A rather different aspect of the status and appreciation of pottery can be seen in its trading position in comparison to that of other products. I have deliberately avoided this subject on a few occasions, since much remains uncertain. Even if it is clear that large amounts of pottery were shipped by sea and even transported overland, we have no idea how much of the relative total cargo it represented. In a given ship it seems not to have usually been much, but if nearly every ship carried at least some pottery, the transported volumes might have equalled those of some products usually traded in bulk, like conserved foods, textiles and perhaps olive oil.

Much has also been said about the dependence of pottery transport on that of other, more conspicuous commodities of trade. Perhaps the large amounts of cups in the Pointe Lequin 1a wreck show that pottery sometimes was important enough to influence a ship's destination. In any case, the likelihood that pottery was included in a majority of ships' cargoes, alongside any kinds of major goods, indicates that such dependence is not an especially relevant issue: because of its scattered production and distribution, pottery could and did travel freely in the whole trade network, and was indeed brought almost everywhere without any distinct limitations. But it cannot be decided here whether this was an effect or a cause of the popularity of export pottery.

Another open issue is the social status of potters. In the first part of this study I have shown that, as in so many other matters, the situation could vary considerably. It is difficult, however, to correlate such social variation with distribution and consumption patterns, even if it is obvious that the size and organisation of a workshop was related to the nature of its output. In Athens, for instance, stone dedications show that the most successful masters may well have attained considerable wealth, though perhaps not a very high social position; we know nothing about the possible social circumstances of potters elsewhere.

Nevertheless, it cannot be fortuitous that the Athens dedications occur at the time of the city's greatest exports of figured pottery. The success of pottery as a semi-luxury article brought money and expansion (in the form of an extensive Kerameikos) – but also the risk of abrupt commercial collapse, as the appearance and disappearance of exported wares illustrate. Dynamic consumption patterns seem to have gone hand in hand with sudden shifts between and within the production centres. Once more, it appears that the dispersion of production over many small units, which could easily multiply, and perhaps even migrate, resulted in a flexible and secure supply, with the potters exposed to the uncertainties of possible change – if this is not a confirmation of their low status, it at least suggests they occupied a rather secondary position in the socio-economic hierarchy.

XXV.5 Back to the people

Finally, I return to the title *Pottery to the people*. In view of this slogan many of my conclusions may seem rather abstract at first sight – but they are not, for as the preceding section argues even a concept like flexibility of production can be directly related to conditions of life of potters. In addition, scale becomes much more human when translated into the possible numbers of individuals involved and their effort and output; organisation is about people, and variety and changes are directly related to taste, appreciation and the social context of pottery use, that is, the ways pots were regarded.

In fact, I hope to have shown that pottery was made and distributed by considerable numbers of people who spent much time and exerted much effort in doing so. That everyone in the ancient Greek world needed pottery is, of course, self-evident, but I have tried to demonstrate that very many people also sought to acquire particularly nice, not necessarily functional pots for more or less special purposes, and that these pots themselves – not only the decoration they bear – are a rich primary source of information about many aspects of ancient Greece, of which I could explore only a few, from workshop life to consumer preferences for certain kinds of pots. If successful, I may somehow have brought these old pots back to life: perhaps I should even have inverted the title to read *People to the pottery*.