



Summary :

The Kerch vases represent the last bloom of Attic red-vase painting. Most of them have been unearthed in the area of the Kingdom of Pontus (modern south Ukraine and Russia). Their dating and attribution to specific vase painters is problematic. The Kerch style is a combination of a new pictorial expression influenced by monumental painting and sculpture within the confines of the traditional style. Its iconographic themes originate mainly from the mythology.

Date

4th cent. BC (374 - 331 BC)

Geographical Location

Panticapaeum (Kerch), Athens, Olynthus, Mediterranean Basin

1. General characteristics

The term 'Kerch vases' (or 'Kerch style vases') is conventional. It was used for the first time by A. Furtwängler¹ in the late 19th century to describe a group of [late Classical Attic](#) red-figure vases that had been discovered close to modern Kerch (Ukrainian Керч, Crimean Tatar Kerç, Russian Kerč), the ancient city of [Panticapaeum](#), and later by K. Schefold² widening the geographical confines including pottery found in the Taman Peninsula (Russian Таманский полуостров).

This term had been misapplied to describe 4th century red-figure vase painting in its entirety and today this term is no longer acceptable. The main argument against it is that it cannot describe the entire output of 4th century Attic red-figure vase painting, but only part of that production, which is indeed characteristic of the wider spectrum of finds in the region of the [Kingdom of Bosphorus](#) although similar pottery has been unearthed in other regions as well. The term 'Kerch vases' is now used to describe a style. Its basic characteristic is the high quality as compared to contemporary production and a predilection for certain pottery types and iconographic themes.

The so-called Kerch vases are dated to the 4th century BC and represent the last bloom of Attic red-figure pottery painting.

2. Stylistic features

Generally speaking, the Kerch style vases stand out for their carefully designed and intense patterns, the increased use of colour (white, yellow, gold, green and azure), relief and gilding as well as the special attention paid to decoration and details. In late Attic red-figure vase painting we see the combination of a new pictorial expression within the confines of the traditional style. Most vessels are rather hastily executed, while there are many specimens of exquisite quality.

With respect to the shape of the vessel vis-à-vis the decoration areas, we can observe that the surface of the pot is arranged in such a manner that the shape of the vessel maximizes the impression caused by the painted image. The lower cavity of the vessel's body is not decorated; on the contrary the depiction rests on a band of decorative elements which circles the vessel below its largest surface, so the lower part of the concave surface supports the well-defined



surface of the vase.

The depictions contain many figures and are not divided into smaller scenes but form a unitary whole. The main novelty pertains to the composition of the images. The figures within the representation are arranged in various levels, so that each has a stable tectonic place within the arrangement. While the depth is represented this is done without intensity. This illusion is not created as a result of using perspective techniques but through the posture of the figures. The figure groupings are not tight and are not located in the centre of the arrangement while in several cases they look away from the action taking place in the centre. The postures of the figures have been influenced by contemporary sculpture. They are graceful and full of movement but without tension. The spirit of the new era places the figures in the light and suspends them in the air, where they are left whirling.

Kerch style vases can be subdivided into three periods (Early, Mature and Later Kerch Period), yet there are no strict time limits and the ascription of vases to one of these period is not strict.

The quality of Attic red-figure pottery is rather low during the first quarter of the 4th century. From 380 BC onwards some vase painters give new life into the red-figure style. The Kerch style develops as the continuation of an earlier 'simple style' (within the confines of the style of the Jena Painter of and the Meleager Painter) with respect to the use of lines. However, the paint-brush becomes lighter and flimsier, while the relief line is abandoned (and becomes even more rare after the mid-4th cent. BC) while we see the generous use of white in order to raise or juxtapose figures in the arrangement.

Over time the design becomes freer, relinquishing the austere linearity of the earlier years. In the mid-4th cent. BC (Mature period) the outlines become fluid and the style more pictorial, as a variety of colours are employed and the shading is rendered using diluted glaze. From the mid-4th cent. BC onwards, the lines become shorter and often abrupt with respect to the outlining of bodies and creases of clothing, while the scenes contain more figures.

The last generation of vase painters in the red-figure style is somewhat less skilled. The figures are often elongated, the design becomes harder and cruder, while there is no more experimentation with colour and relief.

2.1 Painters and workshops

Most of the names of the painters are conventional, that is, they originate from specific figures on vases or from the place the pots have been discovered. The nomenclature of the artists was defined mainly by Shefold and Beazley who performed most of the ascriptions of the known vases.³

The most important vase painters of the early phase are the Helen Painter, the Hercules Painter and the Pourtales Painter, who lay the foundations of the new style. The mature phase includes, among others, the Hesperidae Painter, the Pomp Painter, the Theseus Painter and the Medusa Painter. Outstanding artists of the late phase are the Marsyas Painter, the Eleusinian Painter and the Athens 12592 Painter, whose works represent the apogee of the Kerch style and mark the last bloom of Attic red-figure vase painting. Other artists, like the Amazon Painter, the Filottrano Painter, the London E230 Group, the Otchët YZ Groups also belong to this period. The vase painters included in this last group produced a great number of low quality vases, which marks the end of this style.



3. Decoration and iconographical themes

The iconographical themes are reminiscent of those of the 5th century BC, although there are also scenes inspired by everyday life, with the exception of themes taken from the life of women, which are perceptibly fewer. We also have many depictions of erotic and mystical themes. The mythological themes are prevalent, though, as are scenes of rituals and battles.

In the first quarter of the century the iconography is wholly restricted to standard Dionysian scenes. Dionysus and Aphrodite are the two gods who appear most often, and when we have the depiction of other gods, the scenes belong to the Dionysian circle. Many scenes depicting wedding preparations belong to the Aphrodite circle, as they are idyllic in nature and the central female figure is represented in accordance with the iconographic standards used for the depiction of Aphrodite.

We also see a preference for eastern costumes and from the middle of the century we have depictions of [Amazons](#), griffins, and [Arimasps](#).⁴ Certain series of pelikes are decorated with large heads of Amazons, women, griffins and horses.

On the vases' other side, which is usually of lower quality in design, we have the depiction of youths attired in himatia and often the figure of goddess Nike among them.

4. Dating

The Kerch vases are generally dated to the period between 374 BC (date of death of the king of Cyprus Evagoras) and 331 BC (foundation of Alexandria in Egypt). The beginning of this production can not be accurately pinpointed, as the early style of the Kerch vases can not be safely distinguished from the earlier style of the red-figure style, the 'simple style'. The end of this output is marked by the discontinuation of the production of red-figure vases in the Kerameikos of Athens.

The absolute dating of 4th century BC vases is problematic. For the chronological order of the 4th century BC we resort to closed archaeological contexts, most important of which is that of Olynthus,⁵ which offers a basic dating point of reference in the mid-4th century BC. The most important, although not uncontroversial, source for the absolute dating of Attic vases of this period are the contemporary Panathenaic amphorae, which usually bear the name of the eponymous archon (this official's tenure was annual).⁶

The relative dating of the Kerch style and generally of 4th century BC pottery rests on the development of the shape of the vessels and the stylistic and morphological comparison of the iconographical depictions of the vases with works of sculpture, monumental painting, metalworking and miniature art of the relevant period, as these art-forms strongly influenced vase painting.

5. Finds and dispersion

The largest number of Kerch vases has been unearthed within the geographical borders of the Kingdom of Bosphorus



and mainly in Kerch. High quality vases originate from [Scythian tombs](#) in the surrounding areas. However, a limited number of finds, usually of low quality, have been discovered across the Mediterranean basin. In mainland Greece, Kerch style vases have been found in Attica (mainly in the Agora of Athens) and a large number of mass-produced, low quality pottery has been discovered in Olynthus. In Corinth, Boeotia, Crete and the Dodecanese there were local workshops imitating the prevalent stylistic trends. In [Rhodes](#), in particular, a large number of vases have been discovered in necropoleis, some of which are of high quality.

Etruria, the Greco-Etruscan cities at the mouth of the River Po (Adria, Bologna and mainly Spina), the southern regions of Italy, as well as Sicily have generally yielded very few Attic vases dating to the 4th century (which can be attributed to the cessation of intense commercial relations with the area following the end of the Peloponnesian War). The only areas of Magna Grecia in which a significant number of pottery from this period has been discovered is Campania (Cyme, Neapolis, Nola, Capua and elsewhere) and some cities of north Apulia (e.g. Ruvo). Sporadic examples have also been found in France, Spain as well as Northern Africa and the Cyrenaica, in the **commercial centre** of Al Mina (close to Antioch of Syria), in Alexandria of Egypt and in the sanctuary of Citium (modern Larnaca) at Cyprus.

The dispersion of the Kerch vases is usually attributed to the intensity of Attic trade during this period. It is also supported by the relocation of Athenian potters to various regions.

6. Shapes

The most characteristic shapes of the Kerch vases are those of the monumental style hydriai, the pelikai and the calyx kraters. The prevalent trend is towards slender shapes with curvier outlines; the lips of the vessels become wider than the opening of the handles and hang above the body, the handles become coiled and the neck becomes more tapered as does the foot of the pots. The body of the vessel also becomes elongated and now offers larger surfaces for decoration, while the shape is generally employed so as to intensify the impression caused by the depiction.

This gradual change of the particular features of the vessels gives a new look to already familiar types, yet it cannot be used as a safe criterion for their dating.

Other vessel types found are bell kraters, less popular are the column kraters, nuptial lekanides with a decorated lid (mainly in the first half of the 4th century BC), oinochoai, kotyles. Squat lekythoi and other small vessels and askoi are apparently not produced after 350 BC.

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1. A. Funtrwängler, *Die Sammlung Saboureff II*, (Berlin 1883-1887), pl. 66.68. The term is mentioned as 'Kertscher Vasenklasse'.
 2. K. Schefold, *Untersuchungen zu den Kertscher Vasen*, (Berlin 1934) and K. Schefold, *Kertscher Vasen*, (Berlin 1930), p. 5.
 3. The identification of individual artists and the dating of their output is problematic. Schefold determined some vase painters and groups. Beazley later accepted some of Schefold's artists but he altogether discounted certain groups and rejected several ascriptions.
 4. A people in Scythia, mentioned by Herodotus.
 5. Due to its complete destruction by Phillip II in 348 BC, it yields finds in destruction strata. (Every dated destruction stratum represents a *terminus ante quem*).




6. Robertson, M., *The Art of Vase-Painting in classical Athens* (1992); Greek trans. *Η τέχνη της αγγειογραφίας στην κλασική Αθήνα* (Αθήνα 2001), p. 384. The reasons why this comparison is not fully accepted pertain to the limited number of Panathenaic amphorae from this period and the fact that we have different styles, (red-figure and black figure).

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Glossary :

	emporion, the
Places where trade was conducted, usually small settlements of urban character on the borders or along the coasts and the commercial routes. With the same term are characterized the trade districts, the markets outside the walls of a city and/or settlements being themselves trade centers.	