



Greek Fine Pottery in the Black Sea Region

Summary :

The use of Greek fine pottery in the Black Sea region has been thoroughly investigated. Archaeological excavations have brought to light Ionian, Attic and Corinthian vessels, of which the existence is attested by the Archaic period and it is persistent until Hellenistic times. These vases served different functions not only within the public but also within the private domain of their owners. Further research on fine pottery has also illuminated aspects of trade, cultural identity, choices and fashion within the Black Sea area.

Date

Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic periods

Geographical Location

Black Sea

1. Introduction-research questions

Pottery held a different degree of importance for people of the ancient world than it does for archaeologists, whose access to information relies to a great extent upon the state of preservation of material inorganic objects (since most of organic materials have decomposed) and upon the mute character of most of their documents, which only rarely bear inscriptions or graffiti. Although elements, such as dress, hair style, jewels and makeup, were much more important for self-identification and representation of ancient people, fine pottery vessels (used during symposia, other family and religious feasts and as offerings to deities) played an important part as containers for drinks and food as well as for various cosmetics and pigments. Drinking habits were facilitated through the use of fine Greek pottery and constituted an integral part of the Greek way of life in the colonial outposts. Fine pottery was also used in cult practices and burial customs.¹

Around 1980 when the author was compiling his notes (mainly taken in the seventies) for a general overview of Greek fine pottery in the Black Sea region,² he was not yet able to understand well many aspects of this field, having only limited access to the Mediterranean, and to those who worked there.³

Still, it should be kept in mind that much is uncertain even nowadays. Good clay could have been transported by ships to places where the local clay was poor. This was perhaps the case of Naucratis. Many still believe that part of Chian vases were produced there. Scientific analyses should not be overestimated; they also have their limits and the composition of at least two clays of the potter (one of them as the tempering) makes the degree of certainty of exact localization of the natural source of the final product in many cases questionable. Though much has been achieved in this field, many issues are still disputable. The number of samples investigated is relatively small, and much is still missing or has to be proved by other approaches.

2. Use of fine pottery in the Black Sea area.

In the Archaic times, drinking sets (consisting usually of six to eight cups, one or two **kraters**, an **amphora** and a pitcher) were mainly Ionian, and Attic as of the fourth decade of the 6th c. Corinthian pottery was mainly represented by containers of toiletries, while a smaller number of Ionian and Attic pieces followed. For the colonists the use of fine pottery from the motherland certainly contributed to self-identification in a foreign milieu, but fine pottery was also used -as part of a fashion trend- by their neighbours. It was sold as a market item and not made upon the clients' order, as toreutics and **jewellery** of rare metals. But even distant producers had some ideas of what might attract their customers in the Black Sea, and the merchants even more so. This explains the **griffins**, **Amazons**, and other allusions to Scythian or Thracian mythology and artistic taste on the Kerch vases. The Castulo cups were produced for long-distance transport, being less brittle than other **kylikes**. The neighbours of the Greeks had little use for toiletry vases (in the western Celtic world they were missing completely). Their main interest was in drinking sets: kraters, drinking cups and amphorae, while the richest **Thracians** and **Scythians** used **metal** vases.



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During the 5th and 4th century BC, Attic vases constituted the most common tableware, but still some containers of perfumes and other shapes followed Ionian tradition and make. While the best vases bearing figurative scenes were probably too expensive for small customers outside the main cities, the Black-Glazed and simply decorated pots came, even in small quantities, into many minor locations in the **chora** of Greek cities and outside in the hinterland. It could be maintained that in many places, such as Pistiros for example, there was an abundance of fine Greek pottery. But on the other hand even in big centres the common wares usually prevailed over fine vases to a great extent. Drinking from nice pots at feasts helped to entertain during commercial and political negotiations among the Greeks, and also with their neighbours. For the colonial Greeks, fine pottery from their motherland helped them to keep their cultural identity. For potters, especially for those in Athens in the 4th century B.C., the Black Sea was an important market. The neighbours of the Greeks preferred drinking sets to other kinds of pottery. Drinking cups used for funeral feasts and libations are common even in graves,⁴ while **lekythoi**, serving as containers for funerary ointments, are characteristic of Greek graves. There are still only few detailed analyses of use of Greek pottery in individual [houses/oikoi](#).⁵

The analyses of use of Greek fine pottery in other parts of the ancient world show that the finest pottery had some ritual function, though usually being much cheaper than metal vases.⁶ Fine Greek pottery was used at festivals, at holidays and feasts. **Pelikai** with cups were apparently also vases for libations for the dead. They are common in graves, as are the 'aquarelle' pelikai, made locally for funeral purposes mainly.⁷ Such cases were rare, except for the 'aquarelle' pelikai and some big Italiot vases of the 4th c. B.C. The proportional relations between Black-Glazed and Red-Figured pottery varied, but even in Athens the cheaper variety prevailed.⁸

3. Pottery and other phenomena: Trade, cultural identity

Pottery was not the most important commodity in overseas trade.⁹ Moreover, it was never the main cargo of the ships (that being [grain](#), wine, olive oil and other organic materials not preserved to us, besides metals and wood), but it also brought some profit to the captains and the crew.¹⁰ Whoever possessed wealth and ships could transfer anything anywhere, as the pseudo-Aristotelian Athenian constitution says, and already the Ulu Burun Bronze Age shipwreck documented this fact, as did all later shipwrecks of Archaic and Classical times as well. But nevertheless pottery usually shows the links with the centers involved in other commercial activities, as far as they produced their own good quality pottery, which was in demand.

In the Black Sea Region the picture of pottery distribution confirms that the main periods of intensive trade relations with the Greek cities in western Asia Minor were in late 7th - 6th century BC, and during the Middle and Late Hellenistic periods, while Athens took the most important position in trade with the area in the 5th, 4th and early 3rd century BC. This picture gained from the study of pottery can be confirmed by what we know from historical sources. But still in Roman times the natural close links with the eastern Aegean provinces persisted.

Much has been done in different parts of the Black Sea area, and, though the general overview of the situation will be now more complicated under present conditions than it was in the eighties, much knowledge gained at that time fits well into the present picture.

Pottery is not a specially important element in group self-identification even in our society (dress, hair style, make-up, houses, religion, language etc. are much more important), and it seems that only the first generation of settlers brought more pottery from their metropoleis, if, as at [Miletus](#), there was an important local school of pottery at that time. In Megara and her colonies this was certainly not the case. But still several generations of colonial Greeks showed some inclination to their Ionian tradition notably in cult, architecture and crafts tradition. The terracotta statuettes, connected to cult traditions, serving largely as dedications to divinities, clearly show this,¹¹ as do metal objects to some extent,¹² even those made for the Scythians.¹³ Transport amphorae were not very attractive aesthetically, but some sorts of wine may have been preferred by the clients. What was ordered, like expensive jewellery, had to respect the taste of the client. Whatever was brought by market through several hands was much less influenced by the final customer. In the field of fine pottery, whatever was of good quality and fashionable, was available everywhere.¹⁴

The [Black Sea colonies](#) and their neighbours, however, also showed a more general common presence of certain features in the pottery tradition. Even the Megarian colonies do not show much Corinthian pottery, except for containers of perfumes, and the



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tradition of local potters producing various categories of Ionian banded wares derived from another more general Ionian tradition in taste and dining customs.

Terracotta types kept Ionian traditions until the end of the 6th century BC, and later they shifted to Attic models; the sculpture and architecture followed the same path, even after some hesitation. The style of Scythian first class toreutics left Ionian artistic tradition and moved under Attic influence in the 5th century BC.¹⁵ Thus the pottery fashions followed in general terms those of other arts; the general cultural orientation was respected, though in many cases less pregnantly, as other artistic objects were considered more important for the cultural identity of those who ordered and bought them, as well as for the local producers.

It is hoped that Black Sea studies will be able to move safely between Skylla in only listing individual features, and the Charybdis of mere general theories. We all have to attempt to find an answer by induction from individual phenomena, as well as with respect for the laws of deduction from reasonable general space. It is here that individual answers should be sought, without developing premature hypotheses, as these may obscure the access ad fontes, necessary at any stage of study.

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1. This article constitutes a revised core of the present author's book on the Greek pottery in the Black Sea area, prepared in the late seventies and eighties, and published in 1990. The book was an outcome of a feeling that some kind of overall survey was necessary in order to achieve an understanding between the eastern and western scholars of that time. Now, nearly two decades later, much of this problem disappeared, but even this survey is necessarily a provisional one. For more detailed bibliography, cf. now Maffre, J.-J., Dupont, P., Siebert, J. et al. 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004 Bulletin archéologique – Céramique, *Revue des Études Grecques* 111 1998, 160ff. ; 115 2002, 216-621; 116 2003, 152-302 ; 117 2004, 140-320, Garland, Y. "Amphores et timbres amphoriques", Bulletin archéologique, *Revue des études grecs* 115, (2002), p.149-215; for the Black Sea area esp. the contributions there by P. Dupont.
 2. Bouzek, J. *Studies of Greek Pottery in the Black Sea area*, (Prague, 1990).
 3. We should, however, remember that there were many specialists in the seventies and eighties of the last century in the areas of the former Soviet bloc, who worked hard, had a profound knowledge and even if their terminology was not identical with what became better known later, their classification to groups and even to individual potters was basically correct in many respects. I relied on their works more than on those working in other parts of the world, who in some fields progressed further, but I should stress that without their devoted studies under very difficult conditions, the present picture would not be possible. Not all they said and wrote was definitive, but this also accounts for our present state of knowledge.
 4. Cf. now for ex. Chochorowski, J. et al. "Polnisch-ukrainische Ausgrabungen an dem antiken Fundstellenkomplex von Kořary bei Olbia", in: *L'Institut d'Archéologie de l'Université de Cracovie, Recherches archéologiques de 1993-1998*, (Kraków, 2004); Kitov, G., *Dolinata na trakijski care* (Sofia, 2003).
 5. "A survey of diagnostic examples of Attic Black Glazed and Red-Figured fragments from Adžijska Vodenica II, Oikoi A and B", *Studia Hercynia* VII, 2003, p. 71-77.
 6. For the comparisons of the Black Sea with other areas Bouzek, J. "The distribution of Greek painted pottery in the Mediterranean and in the Black Sea region: A comparison", in: Lévêque, P., Lordkipanidze, O., (eds.) *Vani* 6, 1996), p. 159-162, for Etruria cf. Reusser, Ch. *Vasen für Etrurien: Verbreitung und Funktionen der attischen Keramik in Etrurien des 6. u. 5. Jh. v. Chr.*, (Zurich, 2002).
 7. For distinguishing funeral pottery from those used by the living cf. Junker, K. "Symposiongeschirr oder Totengefäße. Überlegungen zur Funktion attischer Vasen des 6. u. 5. Jh. v. Chr.", *Antike Kunst* 45, 2002, p. 3-26
 8. Papanastasiou, A. *Relations between Red-Figured and Black-Glazed Vases in Athens of the 4th Century B.C.*, (BAR IS 1297), (Oxford, 2004)
 9. Bouzek, J. *Studies of Greek Pottery in the Black Sea area* (Prague, 1990), p. 94-98, similarly Fless, F. *Rotfigurige Keramik als Handelsware. Erwerb und Gebrauch attischer Vasen im mediterranen und pontischen Raum während des 4. Jh. v. Chr.*, (Rohden/Westfalen, 2002); for its share in overseas trade cf. also Reed, C.M. *Maritime Traders in Ancient Greek World*, (Cambridge, 2003).



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10. For parallels in Dutch trade of the 16th and 17th century cf. Bouzek, J. *Studies of Greek Pottery in the Black Sea area* (Prague, 1990), p. 94.
11. In addition to previous studies, cf. now esp. Alexandrescu-Vianu, M. "Cronologia si tipologia teracotelor arhaice descoperite la Histria", *Pontica* 33-34, (2000-2001), p. 199-210.
12. Treister, M. "Ionia and the North Pontic area, Archaic metalworking: tradition and innovation", in Tsekhladze, G. (ed.), *The Greek Colonisation of the Black Sea Area*, (Historia Einzelschriften 121), (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 179-200.
13. Bouzek, J. "La réception scythe de l'art grec", in *Mélanges P. Lévêque III*, (Besançon, 1991), p.27-40.
14. The general picture has not changed much since my contribution to Vani 6 - Bouzek, J. "The distribution of Greek painted pottery in the Mediterranean and in the Black Sea region. A comparison", in: Lévêque, P., Lordkipanidze, O., (eds.) (Vani 6, 1996), p. 159-162, cf. also Wriedt - Sørensen, L. "Archaic Greek painted pottery from Cyprus, Naukratis and Tell Defenneh", in: Höckmann, U., Kreikenbom, D. (eds.), *Naukratis, Die Beziehungen zu Ostgriechenland, Ägypten und Zypern in archaischer Zeit*, Akten Table Ronde Mainz 1999, (Mainz, 2001), p. 151-162.
15. Bouzek, J. *Studies of Greek Pottery in the Black Sea area* (Prague, 1990), p. 103-185.

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	Bouzek J. , "A survey of unglazed and plain pottery from Adžijska Vodenica II, Oikos A.", <i>Studia Hercynia</i> , VII, 2003, 5-70
	Bouzek J. , "Pistiros: Verwendung und Lagerung der Keramik in den Oikoi eines griechischen Emporion in Mittelthracien, 5. bis 3. Jh. V. Chr.", B. Schmalz, M- Söldner (eds.), <i>Griechische Keramik im kulturellen Kontext. Akten internat. Symposiums Kiel 2001</i> , Münster 2003, 62-65
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Glossary :

	amphora, the from the greek words "αμφί"(on both sides) and "φέρω" (carry): vessel with long ovoid body and a considerably narrower neck made in various sizes from the smaller perfume oil container to the large storage receivers of liquids and solids. It stands on a small foot and it bears two invariable vertical handles on either side. Some of the distinguished types of the amphorae are these whose lower part is tapering to the point (narrow bottomed), the neck type, the Nicosthenian, the Nola, the Panathenaic, the Tyrrhenian, the SOS type.
	chora, the The agricultural land (including villages and land-plots) belonging to a polis. It was bounded with the polis on an administrative and economic basis.
	crater, the from the greek verb "κεράννυμι" (to mix). Big, open vessel for mixing wine with water. The wine was then poured into oinochoae. There are various craters' forms depending on body and handle shape: column-, volute-, calyx-, and bell crater. They were usually placed in the middle of the room where symposia were held-
	kylix, the The most essential ancient drinking cup. It bears a wide and shallow body raised on a stem from a foot. It always has horizontal handles disposed symmetrically, often swinging upwards . The interior, flat, round bottom of the vessel was used as surface for painted decoration. There are many different types of kylikes such as the Komast type, the Siana type, types A, B, C, the Droop and the Cassel cups.



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lekythos, the

A perfumed oil container with a narrow mouth and one vertical handle. There are lots of variants of this shape. They are predominant during the 5th c. BC. A common find is also the aryballoid lekythos with a globular and squat body. White lekythoi were used solely as votive offerings in burials.



pelike, the

another version of the amphora. It appears for the first time in 520 BC. It consists of a globular body, a short neck, a projecting thick rim, vertical handles and a short base. Due to its stability, merchants used to store in it valuable ointments for sale.