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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ancient Greek Pottery: Places Where They Were Found and Historical Contexts

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Abstract

This article includes a scientific analysis of Ancient Greece's role in the development of humankind, the advancement of crafts and pottery, as well as the history and geographical distribution of Greek vases. The article provides detailed information about the ethnographic origins of Greek ceramic goods, the conditions of their production, their historical and geographical boundaries, and also about finds from tombs. The main purpose of the study is to examine the history of Greek vases and their relationship with other cultures. In this scientific work, the social, economic, and cultural significance of Greek vases is also considered.

KEYWORDS

Ancient Greece, crafts, pottery, Greek vases, ethnographic origin, historical boundaries, geographical distribution, tomb finds, social significance.

INTRODUCTION

We know that Ancient Greece occupies an incomparable place in human development and in the emergence of early statehood. In addition, certain types of crafts there developed at a high level—particularly the sector of ancient pottery-making that produced vases flourished. This is because there was high demand for them in the ancient Greek trade network, in local economies, and in everyday activities, and this demand steadily increased. All the positive factors mentioned above require a detailed scientific analysis of Greek vases: we should discuss in what conditions and in which regions they were found. Furthermore, we need to precisely determine their historical and geographical boundaries.

The question of whether primitive ceramic objects found on Greek soil can, strictly speaking, be called "Greek" at all may seem somewhat paradoxical. Next, we will focus on the question of the ethnographic origin of these ceramic objects; according to some scholars, these items were not an invention of the Greeks, but rather an intellectual achievement of an Eastern people—like the Phoenicians. However, for our present purpose, the most important point is that it constitutes a stage which takes place in the Greek territory and which we cannot ignore when studying the development of Greek pottery, because its influence is clearly evident in the pottery types of later periods.

Considering another boundary of the topic, we observe that almost all of the latest vases belonging to the period of decadence were produced in southern Italy or in Etruria. Yet in almost all of them, signs of Greek influence are so noticeable (regardless of the degree to which they are distorted or faded) that we are compelled to think that they were made by Greek artists who survived in the Magna Graecia colonies, or at least by local craftsmen who directly imitated the Greeks. We can define our historical boundaries approximately from 2,500 years ago (the early pottery period of Crete, Cyprus, and the Hissarlik hill) to around 200 BCE—meaning the period when production of painted vases ended against the backdrop of the growing strength of Roman rule. Earlier, it was thought that around 186 BCE a senatorial decree

(a law prohibiting the holding of Bacchic rituals in Italy) put an end to this craft, but this view is not strongly confirmed by facts. Instead, it seems it ended "naturally" on its own, because relief work in terracotta and metal became increasingly popular.

After establishing the historical boundaries, the geographical factor remains: we must examine—based on archaeological or other evidence—how far Greek civilization had spread in that period. Besides the Greek mainland and the islands of the Aegean Sea, we can also consider the entire region of Asia Minor to some extent as Greek; however, in practice, the Hellenized (Greekized) area is only a narrow strip along the western coast, and we cannot work with pottery found in other parts of the country.

In the northeast, Greek colonization reached as far as other locations in Kerch and Crimea; these sites were called, respectively, by the ancients "Panticapaeum" and "Bosphoros." In the eastern Mediterranean, the island of Cyprus deserves special attention. On the other hand, many vases were also found in Egypt—mainly from two Greek settlements called Naucratis and Daphnae. Moving west along the North African coast, there was also the Greek colony of Cyrene, which is likewise a productive area for excavations.

The remaining territory is covered by the island of Sicily and the peninsula of Italy up to south of Bologna. Greek vases were sometimes found in Spain and in Gaul (that is, in the northern part of France and Italy)—for example, it is known that primitive Greek ceramics were found around Marseilles (Massilia), and also in Sardinia. However, the sites in the western Mediterranean are mainly limited to southern Italy and as far as Etruria. In fact, until relatively recent years, these areas had been almost the only source of information about Greek ceramics, which we mentioned earlier.

In general, it can be said that all Greek vases were found in tombs, but the circumstances of their discovery vary depending on location. Next, we will discuss the features characteristic of ancient tombs, as well as differences among tombs in Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and other places.

In these conditions, fully preserved vases are found very rarely. They are usually broken and survive because they were discarded as refuse, thrown into pits and cavities. One notable example is the remarkable collection of fragments found on the Acropolis in Athens.

Greek tombs are generally not very distinctive: most often they are small, intended for a single burial. This situation may partly explain why the vases found in many Hellenic (Greek) regions are relatively small in size. In the early tombs in Athens and Corinth, ceramic objects were found in much deeper layers under the ground. The six oval (vault-like) tombs inside the circular area in Mycenae are very large, and there were many painted vases. In the National Museum in Athens, one can view an exact reproduction of the contents of the sixth tomb discovered by M. Stamatakis in 1878. Here, there are also reproductions of other Greek tombs characteristic of the fifth century BCE: they include lekythos vessels related to burial rites, and show how vases were placed around the corpse.

Rock-cut tombs (rock-graves) are rare in Greece. The usual tomb form is a pit or trench dug into the ground, which is filled with earth or covered with slabs (for example, in Tanagra). Rock-tombs are found almost only in Asia, though some good examples were found in Kerch in Crimea. Larger tombs also occur in Rhodes, but the most typical tomb form there is a square room cut into hard clay; one enters it through a square vertical shaft and a doorway. They usually contain one burial, and around the body there are placed vases and terracotta figurines.

The famous scholar A. Biliotti also wrote in 1864, in excavation memoirs from Kameiros (Kameiros), about tombs where long pits were cut through earth (clay), covered with flat stones and forming a "vault-like roof." Others were simply openings cut from the surface of the rock, covered above with stones and earth. In the oval tombs of the first type, large jars or small vessels holding children's bones are often found. Almost all of these tombs yield Greek vases from many periods.

On the island of Karpathos, J. T. Bent encountered tombs containing ancient-period pottery. These tombs had two or three chambers and stone-made bench-like seats along the sides.

Cyprus tombs are especially interesting for two reasons: first, they display forms not found elsewhere; second, over different periods of Cyprus's history their size and character changed. In the earliest tombs of the Bronze Age (approximately up to 800 BCE), we see a very simple type: a plain pit-like depression "like an oven" several feet below ground level; there is also a short sloping passage (Spópos) leading to it. Such tombs are rarely found intact; more often their interiors are filled with collapsed earth, making it very difficult to reconstruct the original placement details. Each tomb usually

consists of several exported Mycenaean pottery vessels and many vessels made from local materials. The main ones are often hand-made and simple, with a rough appearance.

The rich necropolis of Enkomi is an exception. Here we find large tombs constructed of stone, with stone-built structures for the roof and walls. Sometimes Bronze Age tombs also appear in the form of deep wells.

In the Greco-Phoenician period (approximately 700–300 BCE), the "oven" type of tomb remains, but on a larger scale and located deeper; often entry is through a longer stone staircase.

In these tombs, local geometric pottery is usually very common—sometimes as many as eighty or even a hundred vases can be found in a single tomb. At Curium and other places, where Greek painted vases are present, they sometimes have the appearance of narrow and branching passageways.

Hellenistic-period tombs have a very complex character. In particular, in tombs of the Roman period there is a long, narrow "passage" (Spópos) that leads to a chamber nearly ten to fifteen feet (about ten feet to twenty, or even more). On its surrounding walls there are sarcophagi and niches. However, in these tombs, besides ordinary low-quality pottery, almost nothing else is usually found. The decline of painted vase production in Cyprus—since it ended like in the rest of Greece—is probably why this situation occurs. Often a single tomb is filled with pottery from different periods—especially in cemeteries such as Amathus and Curium. The finds cover all periods, which means the tombs were repeatedly reused for burials.

In Cyrenaica, tomb excavations were conducted by a gentleman named Dennis, and many Greek vases were found there. He describes them as follows: "Most of the tombs were buried in the rock, in the shape of a recess: 6 to 7 feet long, 3 to 4 feet wide, and 5 to 6 feet deep... Sometimes vases were placed in all four corners of the burial chamber, but this is rare; usually they were limited to two corners, and often to just one. The most typical place is the right corner near the head, where honors were given: the victor's Panathenaic vase, a ribbed amphora of glazed black ware, or more plain wine-diota-like vessels placed upright, with several small vases placed inside—or along its side/foot there is a row of small vases, which could be painted or black, or simple pottery, depending on the deceased's status. Sometimes small vases or terracotta figurines are placed on the sides of the tomb, between the head and feet of the body. But we never find vases placed on the deceased's chest or under his arms—something that occurs frequently in Greek tombs in Sicily."

Arthur Evans provided interesting information about tombs in Gela (Terranuova) in Sicily. He excavated many excellent vases from there for the Ashmolean Museum.

Chronologically, we can define their timeframe from the year when Gela was founded (589 BCE) up to the period when it was emptied by the Carthaginians (409 BCE). However, there are also tombs belonging to later periods—ultimately, in 284 BCE, the entire region was completely destroyed by the Mamertines.

In the earliest tombs of the B.F. vases (written in the text as B.F. abbreviation), skeletons were found. They were in the form of terracotta cists, with gable-shaped covers and a tiled floor. In the next stage, there were R.F. vases: their roof had a dome-like structure made of two pieces of stone. In this period, sometimes burning pits containing ash and bones were also found. The cremated bones arrived together with LEKYTHUS vessels and were placed in craters and covered with thin vessels.

White lekythos vessels were also found here. In some aspects they seem to compete with those from Athens; however, their themes are not related to burial rites but rather to everyday household life, and perhaps most of the B.F. too are locally produced like many of the B.F. and R.F. vases. In certain tombs where B.F. vases appear, they are found in the form of "chambers," which have cement-made dome-like roofs.

If we draw general conclusions, Greek pottery passed through a very long period of development and covered various geographical regions. In different historical periods it had its own distinctive forms and styles. Across all ancient Hellenic lands, Greek vases played a major role: by studying their use in everyday needs and their use in burial rites, we can say that Greek vases played an important role in the development of Greek society and provided momentum for the advancement of other crafts and industries.

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