

Pottery from the Sanctuary: A Question of Function



Figure 2. Restoration of Figure 1.
Drawing by Mary Moore.

Figure 1. Fragment of an Attic black-figure vase by Kleitias, ca. 570 B.C. Poseidon faces Zeus (missing but labeled IEVZ) whose thunderbolt is partly preserved at the right edge. Such imports, finely made and expensive to transport, were highly valued in Cyrene.

Moore, in Lowenstam et al. 1987, cat. no. 257; max. dim. 6.3 cm

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The Sanctuary of Demeter was filled with dedications, special gifts offered by worshipers, likely with the thought that a pact was being made: I give to the deity, may the deity give to me in return, or, as the deity continues to give to me, so I shall continue to give to her. All of the statues and statuettes, the terracotta figurines, and many of the other valuable objects found in the excavations can clearly be regarded as dedications to the divinities (see Kane, Uhlenbrock, Warden, and Buttrey, this issue).

But what of the pottery? Unlike statues or terracotta figurines, pottery in its original function is utilitarian. It is drinking cups, dishes, storage containers, and cooking pots—mostly for handling food and beverage. If the pottery found at Cyrene served these purposes, what precise activities called for its presence in the sacred grounds of Demeter? And why was so much of it left behind—much more than can be explained by occasional breakage?

The vases, or rather the fragments of vases (Fig. 3), found by the thousands in the Sanctuary force us to ask what they were meant for. Were they simple utilitarian utensils or were they meaningful gifts to the goddesses? Perhaps they were both: some might have had a utilitarian function while others were dedications. Or perhaps the same vase first served a useful purpose and then was left in the Sanctuary as a gift dedicated to Demeter and Kore.

It is difficult to judge the ancient mind here. Our modern holy places give us little help in judging ancient practices since today we tend to keep places of worship meticulously well swept. Gifts are deposited in the bank, and utensils when no longer usable are put out in the trash. Some answers, however, can be found, and others can be guessed at.

We do know, for example, that food was ritually eaten in Greek sanctuaries. Remember the Apostle Paul's caution to the Christians at Corinth: "If a person with weak

Figure 3. Laconian sherd finds from the Sanctuary in storage; included is a sherd from the vase shown in Figs. 12,13.



character sees you sitting down to a meal in a heathen temple—you, who 'have knowledge'—will not his conscience be emboldened to eat food consecrated to the heathen deity" (I Cor. 8.10). At least forty dining rooms were found in the Demeter Sanctuary at Corinth where ritual meals were consumed for centuries using pottery cups and dishes.

But the pottery at Corinth's Demeter Sanctuary also included thousands of vases of miniature size. These were clearly brought only as gifts since they are too small to serve any useful purpose. One vase type in particular, the so-called *kalathiskos* or "little basket," must have been thought especially appropriate: over 2000 *kalathiskos* bases were excavated in the first month alone. Countless more were found over the following ten seasons.

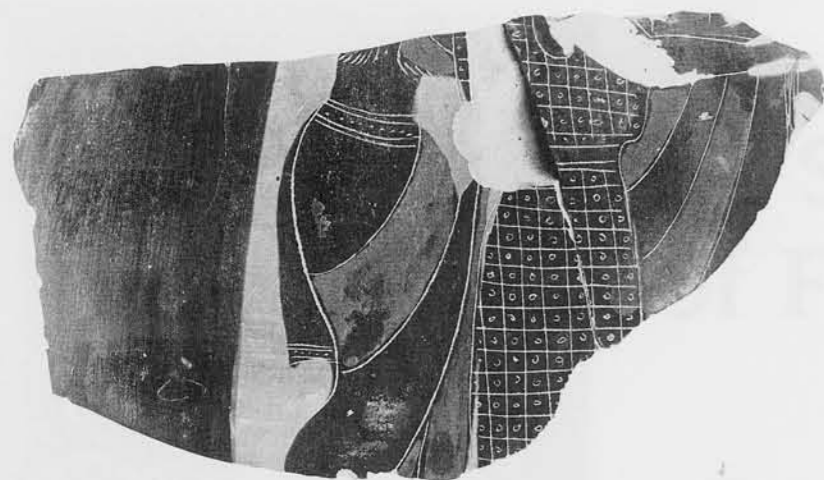
So what can we say about the pottery finds at Cyrene? We need to

look closely at the material itself.

The Archaic Period (600-480 B.C.)

Athenian Black-figure Pottery

The Athenian black-figure vases provide the best evidence for use of pottery as votives or gifts in the Demeter Sanctuary. Close to 300 individual vases are represented among the fragmentary finds, spanning a little over a century, from just after 600 B.C. to ca. 480 B.C. A high percentage of these vases from Athens are large in size—*amphoras*, *kraters*, and *hydrias*. They are too large to be used simply as containers for the normal small donation of agricultural produce to the goddesses, and too expensive to leave behind other than purposefully as votive gifts.



By the mid-6th century Athenian black-figure was the finest and most popular kind of pottery produced in Greece. It no doubt was highly valued in Cyrene since it was imported from so far, in such large amounts, and in such unwieldy shapes. Furthermore, a large number of these vases are by the best Athenian black-figure artists, including Kleitias, Lydos, Exekias, and the Amasis Painter. Two examples will serve to demonstrate both the high quality of the vases dedicated in the Sanctuary and the tantalizingly fragmentary state of the finds.

The first, a beautiful fragment just over 6.3 cm across, comes from a large closed vase by Kleitias, painted ca. 570 B.C. (Figs. 1, 2). The exact shape of the original vase is not known for certain but carefully painted inscriptions tell us that two of the greatest Greek gods are shown, Poseidon and Zeus. This helps identify the divine attributes held in their left hands, a dolphin for Poseidon and a thunderbolt for Zeus. But the key to identifying the myth is lost. Who is the woman whose hand Poseidon grasps with his right hand? Until she is identified, one can only guess at what scene is depicted here.

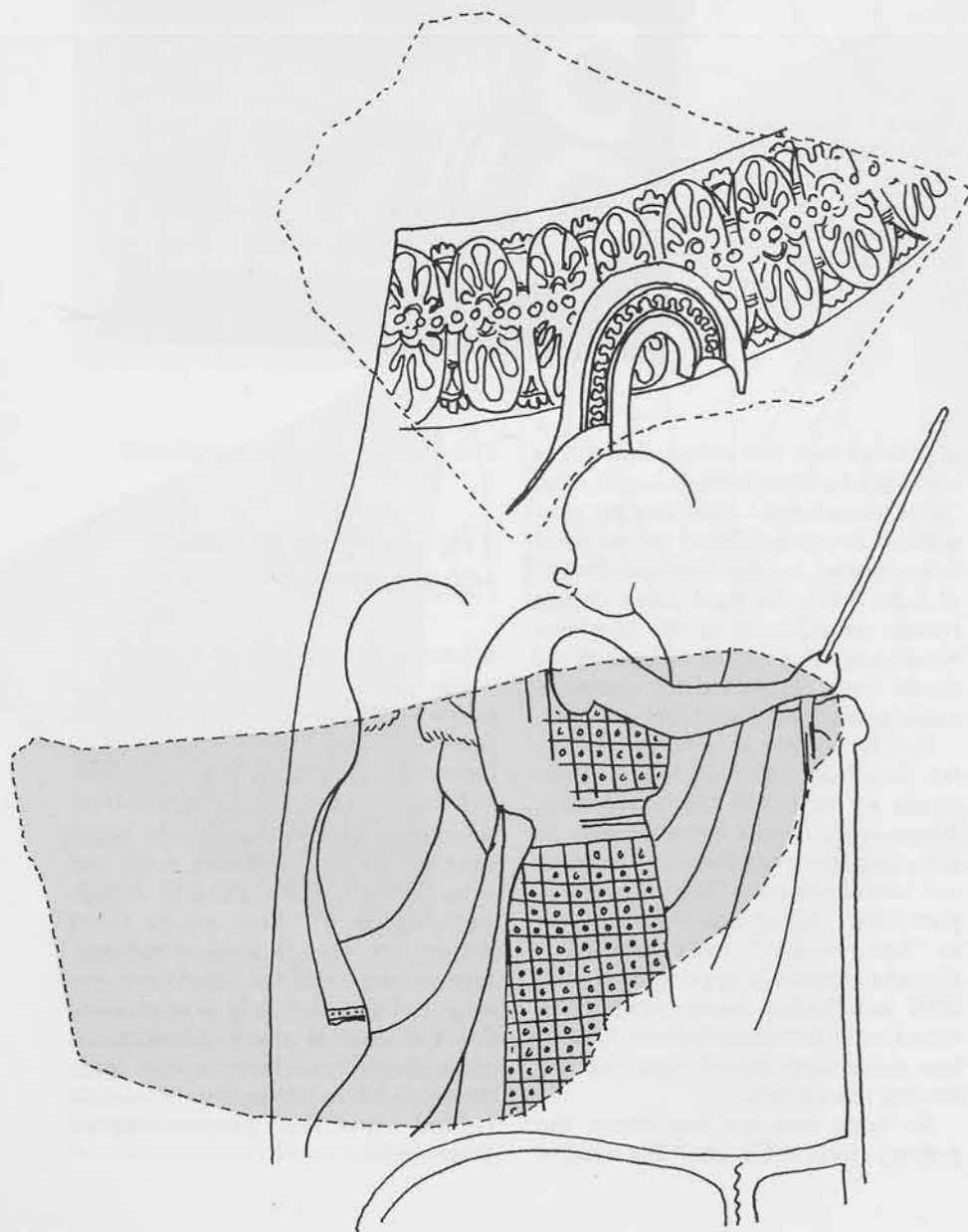
The second example includes two non-joining fragments from a belly amphora by the best black-figure artist known, Exekias (Figs. 4, 5). This find is especially fortuitous since fewer than 40 vases by this great painter have been found anywhere. In this case the myth portrayed can be identified. The scene depicts the goddess Athena taking the mortal

Figure 4. Fragment of an Attic black-figure belly amphora by Exekias, 540-530 B.C. Athena, wearing a helmet, stands in a chariot with Heracles (robe at right). A bearded Dionysus (?) stands behind them. Fewer than 40 vases by this finest of Athenian painters are known. The fragment attests to the high quality of vases present in the Sanctuary.

Moore, in Lowenstam et al. 1987, cat. no. 31; max. dim. 13.2 cm

Figure 5. Restoration of Figure 4.

Drawing by Mary Moore



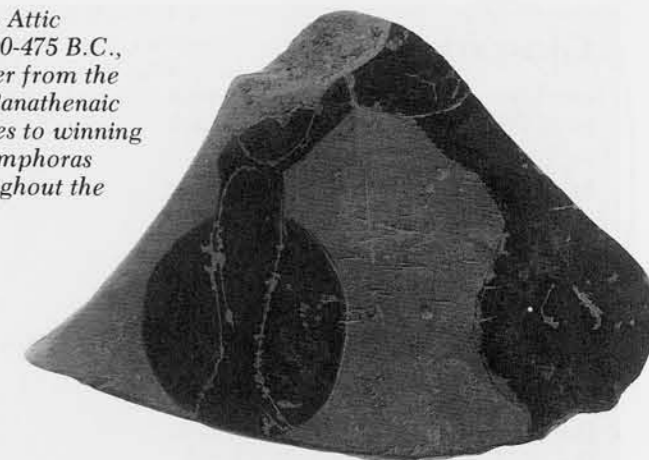
hero Heracles to Mt. Olympus to join the company of the gods. The preserved parts show Athena standing in the chariot with Heracles beside her and another god, probably Dionysus, standing on the ground behind them. This vase, though hardly revealing Exekias' great talent, does help us reconstruct a missing piece from his great calyx krater (located in Athens) decorated with the same scene. Since Exekias always varied his paintings to some extent even when depicting the same myth, it is regrettable that more of our vase was not preserved.

Prize amphoras from the Panathenaic Games, held every four years to honor Athena at Athens, were unusually popular as gifts in Cyrene's Demeter Sanctuary. Fragments of 9 such amphoras were found during excavation. As many as 1500 prize vases, filled with valuable olive oil, would be awarded at a given Panathenaic Games. The victor in the men's sprint race, for example, probably won 80 such amphoras. These large vessels are decorated on one side with an armed Athena and on the other side with a scene of the athletic contest for which they were a prize (Fig. 6). An inscription on the side with the Athena figure states that the amphora is from the games at Athens. The contents of the amphoras were soon sold by the winners, and the jars themselves might also be sold. We know that when the disgraced Athenian leader Alcibiades and his friends had their property confiscated in 415 B.C., over one hundred empty prize amphoras were sold at about half a drachm each. (A skilled craftsman in 415 B.C. only made one drachm per day as a wage.)

Panathenaic amphoras enjoyed a wide distribution around the Greek world both because winners took them home and because they were valued as trade items. They turn up as proud possessions in graves, and many were dedicated in sanctuaries, such as that of Demeter at Cyrene. These special gifts to the goddesses were brought to the Sanctuary because of their prestige, not for the 10 gallons of olive oil which they once contained. The four imitations of prize amphoras which were found in the Demeter Sanctuary support this hypothesis.

Figure 6. Fragment of an Attic Panathenaic amphora, 500-475 B.C., depicting a discus thrower from the pentathlon event of the Panathenaic Games. Awarded as prizes to winning athletes, these oil-filled amphoras were highly valued throughout the Greek world.

Moore, in Lowenstam et al. 1987, cat. no. 72; max. dim. 7.3 cm



Corinthian Pottery

By far the most commonly imported fine ware pottery at Cyrene in the 6th century came from Corinth. Corinthian vase shapes are generally small if not miniature in size; the walls are thin and fragile, and painted decoration often flakes away, especially in harsh soil conditions such as at Cyrene. As a result, the preservation of these vases at Cyrene is poor. On the other hand, because there is so much Corinthian pottery and it is relatively datable, we find in it confirming evidence for the date of

"Prize amphoras from the Panathenaic Games...were unusually popular as gifts in Cyrene's Demeter Sanctuary."

the Sanctuary's foundation ca. 600 B.C., a good generation after the city itself was founded.

The shapes of Corinthian vases found at the Sanctuary also help suggest the use of the pottery in the Demeter cult. About one-third of the vases are miniatures, that is, tiny vases which served no useful purpose and therefore must have functioned only as little gifts to the goddesses. *Kotyles* (a type of drinking cup) and *hydrias* (water carriers) make up over 90 percent of these miniatures.

Another one-third of the Corinthian vases are containers associated with personal use (for example, perfumed oil containers and cosmetic boxes) which likewise cannot be associated with regular cult use and therefore must be regarded as straightforward dedications to the goddesses. Most of the remaining shapes were appropriate for serving and drinking wine or for holding food, but we do not know whether they were indeed used as such in the Sanctuary and then left behind as gifts, or whether they were gifts to Demeter and her daughter without ever having a practical function in the cult. Judgment must be reserved here.

Other Archaic Fine Ware Fabrics

A surprisingly rich variety of imported fine wares found their way to Cyrene's Demeter Sanctuary in the 6th century B.C. Since Cyrene did not produce any fine pottery of its own, it was a ready market for imports. What is noteworthy in the choice of imports is that the settlers tended to patronize the products of their homelands. We know from Herodotus that Cyrene was settled first by colonists from the island of Thera, but we also learn that at different times in its first hundred years, other settlers came from the Peloponnese, particularly Laconia (around Sparta), from Crete, and from other Greek islands, including Samos and Rhodes (see box in Uhlenbrock on the founding of Cyrene, and White's article "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture," this issue). It is gratifying to see that the pottery reflects this diverse background of

Glossary

amphora: a large closed vase with two handles; for carrying liquids such as wine

hydria: a large vase for carrying water

kalathiskos: "little basket"; a miniature open vase, too small to have a utilitarian function. Perhaps symbolic of the *kalathos* ("basket") used in Greek cult ritual

kotyle and **skyphos:** deep cups of similar shape with two handles near the rim for holding while drinking

krater: a large open vase used especially for mixing small amounts of wine with larger amounts of water



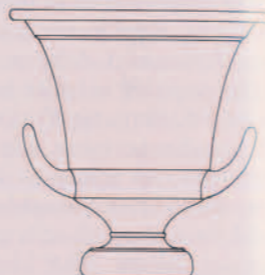
Kotyle



Skyphos



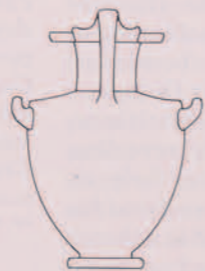
Column Krater



Calyx Krater



Amphora (Panathenaic)



Hydria



Kalathiskos



Figure 7. Laconian sherd probably by the Naucratis Painter, 565-560 B.C., depicting a seated female divinity holding a wreath with an inscription that uses two three-bar iotas (Ϝ). The three-bar iota is a non-Laonian letter form used in only a few places, one of which was Cyrene.

Schaus 1985, cat. no. 153; max. dim. 5.1 cm

the settlers, even in instances where the fine wares of the home states were almost never exported outside their own borders.

So we find a small but noteworthy quantity of Thera, Cycladic island, and Cretan pottery in the Demeter Sanctuary. Furthermore, although Laonian and East Greek pottery of different types is often found in small amounts on overseas sites, the great variety of these wares at Cyrene is unusual, due in part to this preference by settlers for home products. The import of East Greek wares in such variety was probably influenced by the presence of a Greek trading colony at Naucratis in Egypt. Naucratis was largely populated by merchants from the wealthy East Greek cities. We can imagine ships from Greece regularly sailing along the coast of Lebanon (ancient Phoenicia) to Egypt, stopping at Naucratis, and then with part of their cargo still aboard, continuing on to Cyrene before returning home to Greece.

With the exception of some vases from Laonia and some from Chios, these other fine wares are secondary goods. The decoration may at

times be colorful, but the floral patterns or occasional figure scenes are humdrum when compared with the artistry on the better Athenian vases.

The Laonian pottery at Cyrene is particularly noteworthy, both because of its surprising quantity, and because much of it takes the form of simple, black-glazed vessels which were rarely exported beyond Sparta's shores. One explanation for this might be the existence of a special trading relationship between Laonia and Cyrenaica. Another explanation might be the demand for pottery from home by Laonian settlers who surely must have made up a notable proportion of Cyrene's population by the 6th century.

Among the 220 or so Laonian vases published from the Sanctuary, fragments of 3 vases are highlighted here. Two of them (Figs. 7 and 8-9) were once decorated with a scene showing an important enthroned female figure (note the white hand preserved at the end of the throne's armrest on both fragments). In both cases the figure may be a goddess, possibly Demeter herself.

The first vase (Fig. 7) is by the earliest important Laonian black-figure artist, the so-called Naucratis Painter. Here, for the very first time, a vase by the Naucratis Painter has been found which carries an inscription. More surprising is that the inscription uses a non-Laonian letter form, a three-bar iota (Ϝ). This could mean that the Naucratis Painter was not a native of Laonia. He might have come from Corinth, for example, where the three-bar iota was used. His vase painting style certainly shows evidence of influence from Corinth. Other explanations, however, are also possible. Cyrene happens to be another of the few states which used a three-bar iota in its alphabet. Could the Naucratis Painter have decorated this vase especially for export to Cyrene, or did he learn to write from a Cyrenaican source? The non-Laonian iota continues to remain a puzzle.

The second vase (Figs. 8, 9) is probably by the Arcesilas Painter, arguably the best of all Laonian vase painters. Only six vases have been attributed to his hand, but one of them is the famous Arcesilas cup (see box), his name piece and certainly the most important vase preserved to us from Laonia (Fig. 11). The elaborate scene on the interior is the only Laonian depiction of an historical personage in a scene of daily life. Its composition, however, seems to be based on an Egyptian wall painting of Osiris weighing the souls of the dead. Our Demeter Sanctuary fragment is small (4.9 cm or less than 2 inches across), but great care was taken in rendering the half-moon decoration on the armrest, the beaded spokes below the armrest, and a cross pattern on the deity's dress, typical of the Arcesilas Painter.

The third example, a cup preserved in three fragments, has a unique scene (Figs. 12, 13). This cup, by a follower of the Hunt Painter, employs the unusual "porthole" composition; that is, you view the scene as if through a circular opening like a porthole, so that the figures on the left and right edges are partly cut off (see the horses on the left). The original composition must have shown one or two male figures in the center of the scene preparing to

Figure 8 (below). Tiny Laonian sherd (4.9 cm across) probably by the Arcesilas Painter, 565-560 B.C. (see box). The rounded white area on the upper edge of the sherd belongs to a woman's hand.

Schaus 1985, cat. no. 158



Figure 9. Restoration of Figure 8.

Drawing by Gerald Schaus



Figure 10a. Black-figure scene of women from an Attic "bilingual" (decorated with both black- and red-figure scenes) epinetron or terracotta thigh and knee protector of ca. 500 B.C.

Moore, in Lowenstam et al. 1987, cat. no. 251; max. dim. 7.1 cm



Figure 10b. Red-figure scene of dolphins from the bilingual Attic epinetron shown in Figure 10a.

McPhee n.d., cat. no. 130; H. 5.0 cm



Witness to History: The Arcesilas Vase

The scene on the Arcesilas vase has provoked considerable discussion even though its figures are carefully labeled. The kingly figure with ornate hat and scepter is named Arcesilas. This almost certainly is King Arcesilaus II of Cyrene whose reign is mentioned by Herodotus, and who lived at the very time that this vase was painted. But what is the white material being weighed and stored under the king's watchful eye?

Could it be wool, or even salt, as one observer recently proposed? A clue is given by the figure on the far right labeled *Sliphomachos*, probably meaning "silphium weigher." The material must be silphium, the famous plant harvested by Libyans and depicted on Cyrene's coin as the city's distinctive symbol (see box on silphium in White's "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture," this issue).



Figure 11. Interior of a Laconian cup by the Arcesilas Painter, ca. 560 B.C., in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Cyrene's King Arcesilaus II supervises the work of weighing and storing bags of silphium while sitting under a large sun tarpaulin.

Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris



Figure 12. Two fragments depicting horses from the interior of a Laconian cup by a follower of the Hunt Painter, dated 530-510 B.C. The figures are framed in an unusual "porthole" composition; one or two warriors, now missing, must have appeared in the cup's center.

Schaus 1985, cat. no. 221; max. dim. left 10.1 cm, right 11.5 cm

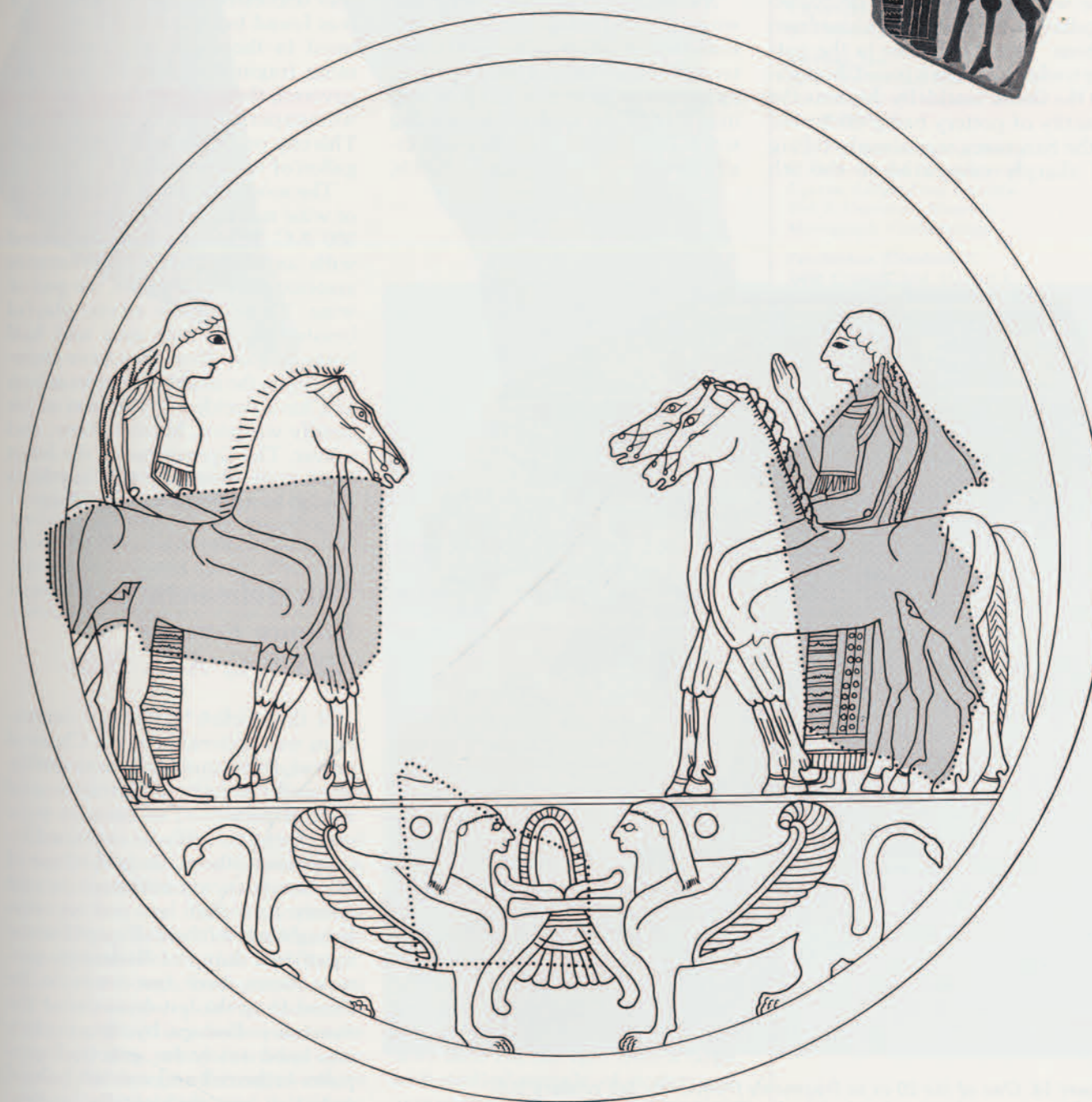


Figure 13. Restoration of the cup interior shown in Figure 12.

Drawing by Gerald Schaus

harness four horses to a chariot. Two women stand beside the horses to bid the warrior or warriors farewell.

The Classical Period (480-323 B.C.)

By the late Archaic period and throughout the Classical, the only fine ware pottery being dedicated regularly in the Sanctuary came from Athens. This dominance in the pottery trade by Athens is found throughout the Greek world. By this time the quantity of pottery being dedicated in the Sanctuary was already falling off sharply compared to the 6th

century. Nevertheless the Demeter Sanctuary yielded some very fine and unusual pieces in the red-figure style. Most common among the votive gifts of this period are large, heavy kraters used to mix wine with water for drinking parties. These were among the most expensive vases being made by potters. Accompanying them were a fair number of fine drinking cups.

Among the dedications at Cyrene were several shapes particularly suited for female divinities like Demeter and Kore. One of these was an *epinetron*, a guard to cover a woman's thigh and knee while spinning wool. This Cyrene example is especially rare since it is "bilingual," that is,

decorated in both black- and red-figure scenes. Women at a fountain house in black figure decorate the side (Fig. 10a), while dolphins gambling in the waves in red figure cover the rounded knee section (Fig. 10b).

Almost one hundred years later, near the end of the 5th century, a very large drinking cup or *skyphos*, decorated by the Meidias Painter, was dedicated in the Sanctuary. It was found broken and widely scattered in the earth fill. Twenty or more fragments (Fig. 14) were recovered; these depict finely dressed women perhaps in a Dionysiac scene. This cup probably held almost a half gallon of wine when full.

The most interesting of the kraters or wine mixing pots dates to ca. 380-360 B.C. (Fig. 15). It is decorated with another group of creatures associated with Dionysus, the god of wine. These are the satyrs, playful beasts that are half man and half horse or goat. Here they have stumbled upon the mighty Heracles asleep and have decided to rob him of his deadly weapons, his club, bow, and quiver. The Cyrene vase is the latest known rendition of this myth to appear in Athenian vase painting.

The Hellenistic and Roman Periods (323 B.C.-A.D. 262)

If the decline in pottery dedications was noticeable in the Classical period, it became even more starkly apparent by the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The contrast is so clear that it can only be explained by supposing either a diminished use of the Sanctuary or a change in cult practice so that less pottery was brought and left here. Except for one significant dump of Hellenistic pottery, there were few vases to be found from the last centuries of the Sanctuary. Perhaps by then pottery was used solely for practical purposes in the cult and was left behind only if it was accidentally broken. Cups, dishes, plates, and bowls were the last fine ware shapes to be used in Demeter's sacred grounds.



Figure 14. One of the 20 or so fragments from a late 5th century B.C. drinking cup or skyphos by the Meidias Painter. The piece depicts one of the women followers of Dionysus, god of wine, participating in his celebrations. The cup probably held almost a half gallon of wine when full.

McPhee n.d., cat. no. 87a; H. 10.5 cm



Figure 15. Two fragments from an Attic red-figure krater or wine mixing bowl, dated ca. 380-360 B.C. Left: the bearded and wreathed figure of a reclining Heracles. In the upper righthand corner two hands attempt to steal away the sleeping hero's club. Right: two satyrs, the one to the left holding Heracles's bow and quiver. The scene on this krater is the latest known depiction of this myth to appear in Athenian vase painting.

McPhee n.d., cat. no. 38 a,b; H. left 7.0 cm, right 7.4 cm

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We return then to the question posed at the beginning. Were the vases buried in the Demeter Sanctuary mere cast-offs that once served a useful purpose, or did they have a greater significance as gifts? The answer for any individual vase is almost impossible to tell without an inscription from the dedicator. Generally though, both purposes can be seen in the pottery from the Demeter Sanctuary; some vases were used as they were intended—for eating, drinking, and storage—others were certainly dedicated as gifts to the goddesses, especially in the earlier centuries of the cult.

To conclude, the pottery found in

The University Museum's excavations at Cyrene is not well preserved as ancient pottery goes. It has taken a long painstaking effort to learn as much as we have, and much work remains to be done. On the other hand, the effort has been well rewarded. Despite being so fragmentary, the pottery itself is of high quality, and includes some fascinating pieces. It has certainly helped to provide firm guidelines for reconstructing the history of the Sanctuary and its cult. As an added bonus we have here for the first time a large, well-studied sample of pottery encompassing almost the complete range of wares used in the great city of Cyrene over an 800-year period of its history.

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