THE ATHENIAN POTTERY TRADE
The Classical Period

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Athenian pottery travelled far, and often in quantity. The limits of distribution range from Spain through central Europe, South Russia, Persia, and along the North African coast. On some of the more receptive sites, especially in Italy, we may judge the results of this trade not merely from sherds but from hundreds of complete vases. These vases, and even small fragments, are easy to recognize, and their shapes and decoration have been studied in such detail that dating is closer than for any other artifact of the period, while even potter and painter can often be identified, sometimes named. Through most of the period the Athenian studios had no trading rivals in decorated pottery in the Mediterranean world. Their products seem to offer an almost ideal subject for a study of trade, but can we do more than list and number finds? Can we learn about the mechanics of trade? Does it reflect wider historical issues?

Our sources and the possibilities they offer are, in fact, very limited, and I fear that the general tenor of this paper is likely to be pessimistic. Here I shall try simply to indicate what the sources are, how they might be used, and what some of their limitations appear to be. I make no claim of originality in this, but simply offer food for thought, and perhaps some answers to those who expect too much of us.

In the extant works of ancient authors the pottery trade is barely mentioned. This is, at any rate, a sorry source for information about trade, and we learn so much about the trade in grain in the later...
Classical period only because of legal disputes over bottomry, which occasioned surviving inscriptions. We hear as little about trade in metals (other than precious metals) as about trade in pottery, yet for earlier periods we have become accustomed to believing that metal trade was vital and politically influential, and this could hardly have been less true in the Classical period.

We can learn something of the organization of the Potters' Quarter in Athens itself from study of the vases, and a useful survey of this evidence appeared in 1972 by the late T. B. L. Webster in his Potter and Patron in Classical Athens, which is based on the lists in Bentley's great works; but this is not trade, Graffitii (scratched) and dipinti (painted) on the vases offer an opportunity for closer inspection of the way the pottery was handled for the export market, a study revived now by A. W. Johnstone's forthcoming book which replaces Hacki's study of 1908. Graffiti also tell us something about prices and it might seem possible to calculate with some accuracy the cash value of the export trade. Estimates of the proportion of the whole original production which has survived and been identified in excavations are bound to be very imprecise and a figure of one per cent may be optimistic. Bentley notes that some Athenian potters of the Archaic period were wealthy enough to make expensive offerings on the Acropolis, and it is clear that in the Classical period there were no doubt some tycoons in the pottery industry, but their wares were progressively less prized, and from the known prices it seems clear that this was unlikely to be a trade which would have attracted state attention or required special regulation, and that in glass or silver.

Professor Webster suggested that there was a brisk second-hand export trade in Athens, aimed principally at Crete. He thought that whole dinner services were ordered for specific symposia and that these, once used, would be shipped off. This, he thought, would explain the appearance on vases of the koiades names, congruent with contemporary Athenian youths on their beauty, and of no interest or significance to any Greek purchaser. True; but the inscriptions are discreet and may not have been designed for more than the admirers of the pottery before it was sold, displayed in shops or studios near the Agora. At any rate, it can hardly have applied to the majority of the vases chosen for export. If so many of the vases were bespoke, so surely were the scenes upon them. But no intelligible pattern of choice of scenes seems to depend on, for instance, the period or shape of the vases we have become accustomed to believing that metal trade was vital and politically influential, and this could hardly have been less true in the Classical period.

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proportions, given the limitations of our sources. The first, descriptive table, shows the apparent overall production, and it is reassuring to observe that the record for finds in Athens itself is so similar. For the rest, I offer a few simple observations on what may be significant trends. On Greek sites and in Cyprus the number of Athenian vases is clearly declining immediately afterwards. The interest in Black Figure perhaps reflects more than conservation. After the Archaic there is a drop in imports to Etruria, and this downward trend persists into the 4th century, though hardly more rapidly than does home production. This fall-off after the Archaic, which is a well-known phenomenon for Etruria whose Etruscan contacts with the Greeks in Italy seem to have affected also relations with traders from Greece, was discussed by P. Giardino in an article in Cronache di Archeologia 8 (1927). Perhaps the Etruscans' declining interest in painted vases was also a factor. The contrast with the Greek sites in South Italy and Sicily is remarkable. Here the imports are sustained or even dramatically rise in the Early Classical period, but then fall away just as dramatically in the more southerly sites, Locri and Cella. There are one or two rosettes or special cases to note or attempt to explain: for instance, a virtual plateau of early 5th-century cups at Orvieto disturbs its otherwise Etruscan pattern. Bologna's chart looks odd mainly because the Archaic is more sparsely represented, but the Early Classical leap is notable and we shall return to it: then there is the decline, as in Etruria, but in Spina, where the city develops only after the Archaic, the import is sustained, even growing even when compared with overall Athenian production. This is not surprising given its apparent connections with Athens and the importance of the Adriatic route in the 5th century. In the east, Athens sustains its own import throughout, and the relatively much poorer record of Cyprus in the second half of the 5th century remotely attests the heavier hand of Persia in the island, probably reducing the conditions for demand rather than positively denying trade.

If these observations include nothing particularly startling or inexplicable we may take comfort that the method is too misleading and even hope that refinement could offer results of more intimate values. It is a method more profitably applied to the, on the Archaic period, where the competition between different wares can be observed, as, for example, at Triora.

The second chart, showing the proportions of different, selected, popular shapes received by sites—All Red Figure regardless of period—is less satisfactory in many respects. Also, variables of date and region and a strict special finds disturb the patterns for most sites. Yet this is an interesting subject, and if customers' demand means anything, the pattern should reveal interest and images which we would expect to differ in different parts of the Greek world, and certainly between the Greek and barbarian worlds. Professor Dr. Vries has pertinent observations about the lack of oinochoai sent east (except to Anatolia) and suggests that in eastern symposiums they performed the function reserved for oinochoai in Greece. This is the sort of thing that an overall survey should draw

Our knowledge is as fully as we could wish.

There are at least two areas of study in Athenian pottery trade for which provisional statistics can be prepared which might prove of historical value. One is the volume of trade to a site in successive periods, compared with the record of other sites; another is the distribution of shapes. The distribution of scenes might be studied in the same way, but I dwell on the other two since it is possible to produce for them rough charts from which we can judge whether the wholesale current seems worth the effort, and with which we can speculate about the probable sources of error. The identification and acknowledgment of these limitations seems to me vital in such work. They introduce variables which it is impossible to quantify and it is only because the results nevertheless do seem plausible though not always deeply significant, that the exercise may seem worth pursuing by others, in greater detail.

This is not a novel study. Webster was interested in comparable problems in his book and Michael Eiseman has made some telling relevant observations. Short of the ideal, global survey of all museums and storerooms, we take our numbers where we can. Our obvious sample is in J. J. G. de Loks's lists of attributed vases. He was not an elitist in this matter, so we have the full range of decorated pottery, and he attributed a high proportion of known vessels—high in Red Figure than in Black Figure, which immediately presents one problem of adjustment, apart from the need to remember the Black Figure lekythos which he did not list but which appear in Haspels' work. For dating we can discern styles or groups belonging mainly to each of the quarter centuries from about 525 to 400. (We all accept too readily the tyranny of B.C. dating and I often think we might make fewer historical and art-historical errors if we reverted to dating by Olympiads.) In the first two quarter centuries, the phases of Late Archaic, there are both Black Figure and Red Figure to occupy us and the former cannot readily be divided. The next, Early Classic, may be relatively shorter and confuse our proportions, and it is hard to allow for the tail-end of Black Figure—I have ignored it to help compensate for the possibility shorter. The 'Classic' and 'Late 5th Century' in Beazley's terms, certainly do not occupy recent quarter centuries, but by this time, at around the 4th century when the production is waning, at least the general trend is clear and we need look only for local deviations. Divisions between periods are vague, the relative lengths of periods are even vaguer—why does it always look so much easier in praxiteles? Should we abandon the attempt, or hope that the errors will roughly cancel out each other? At least our failure may encourage others. Further pitfalls we need not dwell upon—mass finds of one date or type, perhaps from a sanctuary, which distort the sample; the excavator's choice of where to dig, what to throw away, what to publish (less inhibited now than it used to be).

Chart 1 presents the record, period by period, of some of the more promising sites. The numbers of vases included in each case vary considerably and proportions of the whole Athenian import are given for each period. The Black Figure has been spread evenly over the first two periods and the 4th century has been given one column to itself. We are looking for trends rather than absolute
Bologna, a rogue in the period chart, shows a liking for crackers, and a quick check reveals that this is precisely in the Early Classical period, where the site's import pattern seemed distorted, so this looks like a specialized interest in a limited period (or exceptional luck with ceramics of this period). On the Adriatic side, Adria is oddly more like Etruria than Spina, where there is not a notable interest in crackers and oinochoai, barely answered in terms of complete dinner services, by the number of decorated cups available. The pattern in Etruria is mirrored, incidentally, by the contents of the Florence and Villa Giulia [Rome] Museums. Sicily, by comparison, accepts few cups, many lekythoi, and the pottery is consistent but for Acras, interest in crackers. The Greek sites in Italy do without quite so many lekythoi, and all these western Greek sites are better customers for the larger closed vases and crackers than is Etruria.

Aampurai in Spain is more like an Etruscan site in its shape-import pattern than a Greek one, except that its imports are growing when the Etruscan are declining—suggests an extra and possibly revealing dimension to these charts, a combination of records of date and shape, which there is no time to pursue further here. At the other end of the Mediterranean Xanthos, the Lydian capital, is oddly like Etruria again in its tastes but at Al Mina, the Greek trading port on the Syrian coast, things are very different, more "normal" but for the massive import of crackers from the "Classical" period. Both sites lack olive oil, and if the absence of the olive oil is significant in the manner Professor de Vries suggests, then we must find another explanation for their absence in the West—if it is even possible to proceed further, other similarities or dissimilarities in the charts.

Even these summary and inaccurate charts provide many talking points. With a simple calculator, diligence, common sense, and even by the most precise of all commodities, time, could be refined. And with similar studies devoted to subject matter (where we need not feel obliged to find too many causes to factors at all) might yet rescue something of value to the economic historian, or at least to their understanding of the trade in the Classical world's most prolific and readily recognizable commodity.