

Week 8 Practicum

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Figure 1: Vessel and scale

Part 1: Ceramic Manufacture and Materials Science

The vessel is a clay earthenware which is red in color, rich in iron, and such a color of clay is distinctive to Attica (Boardman & Schweizer). The potter likely crafted the vessel and foot on the wheel from one lump of clay. He opened a centered lump of clay into a thick-walled cylinder. Then he thrust his thumb into the inside of the wall and pushed downward in order to create the bottom of the container. This enclosed a hollow space under the floor, and the clay around it would become the foot of the pyxis. Then the potter shaped the concave walls and foot with a curved rib. A pressed thumbnail on the outer edge made the flange around the lip. After the vessel had dried a bit, the potter cut out sections in the foot to make it tripartite. The cap was likely thrown upside down without a knob. The very shallow

walls of the cap slant inward to continue the concave silhouette of the vessel's walls. The knob was probably also thrown on a wheel and attached with slip (Schreiber, 225-227).

The vessel has very fine inclusions, which seem almost too fine and which are homogenous and white in color. These inclusions seem too fine to be an intentional temper and are most likely a result of other minerals in the clay deposit that this piece's raw material was extracted from. In fact, Farnsworth mentions that Athenian potters rarely used temper but their clay has fine white mica inclusions which may be the inclusions seen in this piece. This is most likely the cause of the inclusions.

The vessel is decorated in the red-figure technique. Although there are no figures depicted, the raised brush lines of the frieze indicate that the pattern was painted on the vase after it was fired. The use of a brush to paint on a vessel is characteristic of red-figure. The black gloss that covers the rest of the vessel was created through the oxidation-reduction-reoxidation process. First the vessel is fired in an oxidizing environment, turning the reserved clay and gloss red. Then in reduction, the vessel turns gray-black, with the gloss sintering black. Finally in reoxidation, the unglossed portions of the vessel become red again, but the gloss, which had sintered, is protected from oxidation and remains black (Athenian Vase Painting)

The vessel appears to have a few different layers of damage. The most obvious is the large break in the wall of the vessel. This appears to have happened more recently than other breaks in the vessel and may have led to or happened after the object was put out of use. The lack of a large particle temper may have helped to prevent this crack from spreading and ultimately fracturing the piece as large temper particles tend to halt crack propagation (Ferguson). Other breaks include a large missing portion from the lower rim, which like the large break may have occurred after the object was put out of use, and a

smaller break in one of the vessel legs. This final break appears to have been repaired and smoothed over during use.

Part 2: Interpreting Ceramics Archeologically

The style of our vessel was an immediate indicator of its cultural origin. The “red figure” style, unique to Grecian and particularly 5th century Athenian pottery is well known due in part to the large number of vessels that have been discovered. Also, the assumption that this is an Athenian made vessel was reinforced by the fine white inclusions, which are characteristic of white mica in Athenian wares.

The style and form of the Pyxis classifies the vessel as 5th BCE century Athenian. The function of the Pyxis, namely to hold cosmetics, would have restricted ownership not only to those who could afford the vessel but to those who could afford the cosmetics that the vessel was designed to hold. As the Greek poet Eubulus alludes to in his 4th century BCE poem about the climatic difficulties of makeup use, the women who wore makeup would likely have spent most of their time indoors. This class of women likely didn’t work and had servants or slaves to do physical tasks.

"If you go out when it is hot, two streams of black make-up flow from your eyebrows, and red stripes run from your cheeks to your neck. The hair hanging down on to the forehead is matted with white lead." (Makeup - Fashion, Costume, and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear through the Ages)



The black, red and white substances Eubulus writes about were the common cosmetics of the day; any one of which may have been stored in our Pyxis. All these substances have specific and commonly used chemical and mineralogical substances. The black “eye shadow” was *Asbolos*- a mixture of charcoal or soot liley mixed with the common Grecian base of olive oil to form a paint or

Figure 2: 4th Century portrayal of Geecian rouge (Greek Fashion)

paste. Red “blush” was made from *miltos*-red ochre or *phykos*-beet root. The white “foundation” was a mixture of lead carbonate and lead hydroxide.

This Pyxis differs greatly from the other Pyxides in that it does not depict human figures. Of nearly 20 examples found only one other Pyxis did not have human figures. By comparison our Pyxis is rather plain and the ornamentation seems rather simple when compared with the intricately rendered scenes that adorn most other Pyxides. The characters represented in the more elaborate Pyxides are usually of goddesses or nymphs. The fact that our vessel is decorated with simpler geometric patterns could mean it was produced by a less skilled artisan or it was meant to be a more economical model. Closer analysis uncovers a slightly haphazard application of the decoration (Figure 3). This might be due to large-scale production- assembly line methods, or the work of an apprentice painter in a pottery workshop. It would seem that if this were a one-of-a-kind piece the painter would not have overlooked this detail. More examples from the archaeological record may help to support this claim. The pattern, what we are calling “egg and dot”, is derived from the “egg and dart” motifs that were commonly used in pottery and architectural work since at least the 6th century (Figure 4).



Figure 3: “Egg and Dart” pattern from a Hellenistic mold formed pot (Greek, Roman and Byzantine Pottery)



Figure 1: The painter missed most of the dots between the “egg” patterns at the base of the handle

This pyxis should not be categorized as a prestige item. While it is well crafted and its form is standard to other more obviously prestige pyxides, the surface decoration betrays a quick and sloppy painting job, done by a painter who was probably inspired by but not skilled enough to successfully duplicate the patterns produced on other ceramics. This is more likely a middle class, utilitarian cosmetic pyxis than an upper class pyxis or a pyxis used for religious purposes.

It is interesting that a pyxis used for personal cosmetic purposes would have little to no temper in its clay. More temper allows a clay vessel to be more resistant to cracking during and before firing (Ferguson). These characteristics would be useful for a vessel used mainly for personal purposes. The lack of temper is most likely the result of the Athenian style of ceramic making that did not rely of temper.

"Haven't you noticed how, in a craft like the potter's children serve a long apprenticeship, watching how things are done, before they take a hand in the work themselves?"

-Plato Republic 467A

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