

Old Pots, New Ideas: An Introduction

*“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact”
Sherlock Holmes, The Boscombe Valley Mystery
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (2007: 487)*

The aim of this book is to study the social and economic causes behind the development of Corinthian painted pottery between the last quarter of the 8th c. BCE through the end of the 6th c. BCE. This is a period of intense competition in the pottery market, with several centers such as Athens, the Argolid, Ionia and Laconia manufacturing fine and utilitarian wares. Only Corinthian ceramics, however, achieved a widespread distribution, being commonly recovered at archaeological sites from the shores of the Black Sea to Sicily and Etruria. This distribution has been equated in scholarship to the economic success of these wares as a commodity, and no other pottery tradition, until the advent of the Athenian Black and Red Figure styles, gave the impression of exerting such a domain of the market.

Despite the importance given in the traditional historiography to Corinthian fine wares as a marker of an extensive trade network centered at Corinth (e.g. Salmon 1984), we do not know much about Corinthian pottery manufacturing during the Archaic period (c.800-480 BCE) beyond the evolution of its decorative styles. Thus, this work intends to move the focus from the external market of Archaic Corinthian pottery, which has been extensively analyzed in the historiographic literature of the period, to the center of production of these wares, Corinth itself, in order to achieve a better understanding not only of the commodity but also of the craftsmen that produced them and the society in which they lived and that constituted their primary and most immediate market.

The use of geographic references in the construction of typologies of any kind might sometimes cause problems to the researcher, who needs to devote some effort to present the datasets in a clear manner that avoids confusion between concepts. This is the case for Corinthian pottery and Corinthian style pottery. In this book I use Corinthian pottery to refer to all commodities manufactured in the pottery workshops of the city of Corinth, regardless of the time and period, as opposed to Corinthian style pottery, which refers only to a specific type of decorated fine wares. Corinthian style, on the other hand, is only one of the several different pottery styles developed and produced at Corinth during the Archaic period, others including the Protocorinthian, Subgeometric or Linear styles. Thus, I use the expression Archaic Corinthian pottery when referring to the totality of manufactured vessels in Corinthian workshops during the period of study of this research. Finally, and adding more difficulties to this problem, there is no guarantee that all pottery identified as produced at Corinth was exclusively manufactured there, since several settlements along the shores of the Corinthian gulf and the Ionian islands possess deposits

of clays chemically indistinguishable from the Corinthian ones. I revisit this issue several times in this book and especially in its conclusions, but it is important to point out, from the beginning, that all artifacts analyzed here have been recovered by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA) from their excavations at the site of Corinth.

In order to explore the technological questions at the core of this research I have used the technological choices of the potters as a mode of inquiry in order to explore the transmission of skills inside a workshop not only as a functional but as a social element as well. Although pottery production started and still exists in some cultures as a part-time household activity, the development of specialized workshops in all Greek poleis during the Archaic period indicates for most scholars not only a full time commitment but also a deep involvement in many aspects of the poleis' economies (Amyx 1988; Amyx and Lawrence 1996; Boardman 2001; 1998; Cook 1972; Beazley and Payne 1929; Stillwell 1948; Stillwell et al. 1984).

To be a potter at Corinth from the late 8th c. to 6th c. BCE required a lifetime commitment and a community of practice where apprenticeship of the techniques and the symbols used in decorations (shapes, designs and patterns) could take place. Thus, the study of Corinthian pottery is a technological as well as a social investigation. The craftsman was required to make a series of decisions that determined the final product, some of them conditioned by the characteristics of the raw materials available, but he was also in constant dialogue with the community that defined the potter and his production as Corinthian, because it was within this community of producers and consumers that he learned which technical decisions would lead to a genuine Corinthian-made pot (Michelaki 2006; 2008). The skills acquired would also adapt to the demands and tastes of their local consumers. In addition, long distance trade and the success of the Archaic Corinthian wares also led to the development of new pottery designs that did not have their roots in the local community but in the preferences and needs of people distant from the cultural environment of the potter. This symbolic exchange makes pottery a global commodity that transcends the boundaries of the local and even regional communities.

Despite the importance of pottery production in Archaic Corinth, we still do not know much about the manufacturing techniques and the life conditions of the potters, nor the role they played in society. Understanding the manufacturing process contributes to the study of the social status of potters within any class hierarchy,

because if their identity is materially transmitted within the workshop, then the study of their technological decisions can help us trace not only their commodities but also whether they formed a community within Corinthian society. The results of this research can therefore enhance not only our knowledge of Archaic Corinthian pottery but also, and more importantly, our understanding of the social and political organization of Corinth. This period, in the words of Anthony Snodgrass (1980, 13) was bounded by two revolutions: a structural revolution in the 8th c. BCE that resulted in the creation of the polis as the main political unit of the Greek communities, and a cultural revolution in the 5th c. BCE that culminated into the Classical period. The Greeks during this period were involved in a process of colonization that reached from the Black Sea to the NE of the Iberian peninsula, putting them in contact with a variety of cultures that influenced and enriched their own material culture, and Archaic Corinthian pottery was at the center of this exchange of commodities and ideas.

Pottery, as any other technology, is not only material but also social in nature, reflecting aspects of society but also playing an active role in it. This concept has been extensively studied both by sociologists (Lemonnier 1993; Mauss 2006) and archaeologists (Arnold 1988; Arnold, Neff, and Bishop 1991; Longacre, Xia, and Yang 2000; Schiffer 2010; 1995b; Silva 2008; Walker and Schiffer 2006). In order to achieve the desired results of this work it is necessary to define a theoretical framework that encompasses both the technological and the social and economic aspects of the manufacturing of Corinthian pottery during this period. The knowledge of the technical and social signatures, that is, the material and social characteristics that define what a Corinthian pot is, were transmitted within the workshop from craftsman to apprentice. These groups, called techno-communities by Schiffer (1995b) and communities of practice by anthropologists like Lave and Wenger (1991), are characterized not only by their common share of a craft or profession, but also by how the information, techniques and experiences are shared within and among groups. These communities are not necessarily related to a specific location: a Corinthian potter may belong not only to the social and political community of Corinth, but also to a broader technological community of potters in the Mediterranean.

The understanding of the manufacturing process is not, however, the end goal of this research as much as a first necessary step upon which to build upon the economic implications of this commodity in the markets of Archaic Corinth. Since the 1980's there has been a heated debate, mostly centered on Athenian pottery, on whether decorated pottery, always referred to as vases, were a luxury good and an artistic achievement (Boardman 1987; Cook 1987) or a cheap copy of more expensive metal models (Gill and Vickers 1990; Vickers 1985). As stated above, commerce is one of the central topics upon which historiographic and archaeological research of Archaic Corinth have focused. Its apparent success as a trade center during this period has been justified by the existence in the archaeological

record of numerous finds of painted pottery decorated in Archaic Corinthian styles in many assemblages across the Mediterranean. Some scholars, however, have questioned this success, since it is based solely on the ubiquity of these wares. Arafat and Morgan (1989; see also Shanks 1999) have called this model the "economic determinism of Corinthian trade", a monodic answer to justify the historiographic construct of a successful Corinthian market during the Archaic period. Whether their critique is correct or not, it is clear that pottery is at the center of the debate, and a research like the present one in which a stylistic approach is combined with a technological approach can provide better models in terms of manufacturing costs than those based solely on the artistic nature of the vases. It may not be a final solution to the debate, but it is an inference to the best explanation (*sensu* Fogelin 2007) that can help us to open future research venues in which the multiple aspects involved in the production of pottery are better represented.

In order to present the results pertaining to all the different aspects discussed in this research I have divided this study into six different chapters. After this brief introduction, Chapter 1 presents the archaeology of the polis of Corinth during the Archaic period (c.800-480 BCE), characterized in the traditional historiography by the colonial expansion of the city to the west and the oligarchic and tyrannical regimes under which Corinthian trade flourished. This historiography (Dunbabin 1948; Hall 2007; Salmon 1984) has usually relied on historic sources written several centuries after the events they describe, making it difficult to assess how accurate these narratives actually are. While the general historical timeline is not put into question, this work tries to emphasize the importance of the archaeological record generated by the annual excavations that, since 1896, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens has been carrying out at Corinth. Both history and archaeology provide the background against which the work of the Corinthian potters took place.

Chapter 2 allows the reader to become acquainted with Archaic Corinthian pottery by presenting, on one hand, a summary of the history of the scholarship that for more than a century has advanced our knowledge of the artistic achievements of these craftsmen and, on the other hand, a synthesis of the traits that have allowed these scholars to organize and describe the evolution of the decorative styles of Archaic Corinthian pottery.

Chapters 3 and 4 present respectively the theory and methodology employed in the design and execution of this research. Chapter 3 covers the main theoretical principles that have defined this study, from the general premises of Behavioral Archaeology to the specific models of interpretation of ceramics in the archaeological record. The ideas contained in this chapter are organized hierarchically, distinguishing between theories that frame the research and theories that are used to answer specific questions of the study. The analysis of the role played by historical contingency will help to bridge the gap between

these theoretical models developed in anthropological archaeology and the historical approaches that define the interpretation of the past in Classical archaeology.

Chapter 4 summarizes the main analytical techniques and tools used in this work, paying special attention to the limitations imposed on the sampling strategy by the absence of clear stratigraphic records for the Potters' Quarter, the main manufacturing area of Archaic Corinthian pottery, as well as other areas of the site, such as the location from where the Penteskouphia pinakes (artifacts of the utmost importance due to their depictions of different steps in the process of pottery-making), were looted. In view of these limitations, the research methods were selected taking into account their suitability to the questions this work tries to solve, the problems caused by the recording techniques employed in the recovery of the finds, and finally by the regulations derived from heritage legislation on the handling and destructive sampling of archaeological artifacts.

Chapter 5 provides an extensive synthesis of all tests practiced in the pottery assemblage and the comparative collection of clays sampled in the vicinity of Corinth. These analyses include mechanical and chemical characterization of clays, analysis of toolmarks of the artifacts studied, the coefficient of variation in several parts of the profile of vessels to assess the degree of standardization in the productions of the workshops, and pXRF and multivariate statistical analyses of fabrics, pigments and glosses from finds recovered in several areas of the site. The results of all these tests indicate that, contrary to general belief, the manufacturing process of pottery and the development of the Black Figure technique revealed several significant differences compared to the previous local decorative styles as well as to other pottery traditions in Greece. The results of this book present a new scenario in which diversity and adaptation to local sources play key roles in the development of the different decorative styles.

Concluding this study, Chapter 6 contextualizes the main findings of this research into the larger questions addressed regarding the internal organization of the pottery workshops and their role in the Corinthian society of the Archaic period. Corinthian potters developed a singular style that ended up greatly influencing the rest of Greek wares, and it is within this historical and cultural singularity that we must understand Archaic Corinthian workshops. While the presence of these wares in the Mediterranean has been extensively analyzed, no effort has been made to understand them within their manufacturing context. Only a deep understanding of the relationship between the craftsmen and the community to which they belonged can provide us with the solid foundation necessary to carry out our analysis on a larger scale, beyond the borders of Corinth and to the broader trade routes of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Apart from the results pertaining to Corinthian pottery in the Archaic period, this work has also attempted to

create a new methodology that could be applied to other manufacturing centers in the Greek world. This future research would provide the possibility of comparing not only differences among workshops but also how ideas and techniques may have circulated inside and outside the Greek world. Trade and exchange among Greek poleis and other regions allowed potters with very different cultural backgrounds to be exposed not only to new decorative designs but also to new shapes and new functions for ceramics. By belonging to this network Corinthian and other potters were able to share a common technical and symbolic language regulated by their society, but at the same time to modify this language with the introduction of new ideas. The study of Archaic Corinthian workshops can help us to increase not only our knowledge of the economic aspects of Corinth but also the role craftsmen played as transmitters of symbols in their society (Shanks 1999).