

# Hellenistic Pottery – Content and Methodology

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*In memoriam Pia Guldager Bilde*

The short paper I wrote thirty years ago as an initial attempt to trace the means and methodologies of the study of Hellenistic pottery in the Aegean made me aware of the difficulties inherent in this archaeological material.<sup>1</sup> The known literature of the day was, as a rule, cited only “indicatively”, as an example of the numerous pottery finds from an excavation; there were very few papers focusing primarily on the topic with clear research aims. Even so, early research on Hellenistic pottery was not devoid of innovations and exemplary studies. It was an astute pair of pioneers in this field, Homer and Dorothy Thompson, who in the years between the world wars disclosed the potential of this abundant Hellenistic material, as brought to light by the excavation of the Athenian Agora, and who proposed the basic methodology.<sup>2</sup> Their approach has continued to be used up to the present, with admirable studies by, among others, R. Howland, L. Talcott, V. Grace, and S.I. Rotroff.<sup>3</sup> With the publication in the 1950s of the results of major excavation projects in the Hellenistic cities of the East – Tarsus, Samaria, Sebaste, Cyprus – came a new style of research, highly detailed and

analytical.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 J. Schäfer formulated some noteworthy general observations on the character of Hellenistic pottery, sparked by the publication of a representative group of vases from Pergamon.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in Hellenistic pottery increased in the 1970s, resulting in the publication of the finds from Hama, Ephesus, Pergamon (Asklepion), Corinth, etc., in all their abundance and with all their particularities, in a series of papers that are still being discussed, and indeed in a most exhaustive manner.<sup>6</sup> The general principles of the study and theoretical consideration of Hellenistic pottery were discussed for the first time in a detailed and precise fashion at seminars hosted by the CNRS in Lyon. In the proceedings of those seminars J. Morel, P. Leveque, and Ph. Bruneau outlined and defined, for the first time, the historical aims of that study.<sup>7</sup>

The next step came in 1986 with the initiative of a group of Greek archaeologists who, in response to the need for tools with which those excavating Hellenistic sites could impose order on the frequently vast volumes of pottery unearthed by their excavations, sought to gen-

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1 Δρούγου 1983, see also Drougou 1997.

2 Thompson 1934; Burr-Thompson 1952; 1954; 1957; 1959; 1962; 1963a; 1963b; 1965; 1966a; 1966b. Burr-Thompson's ten articles on Hellenistic terracotta and pottery were reprinted with a foreword by S.I. Rotroff in 1987, see Thompson *et al.* 1987.

3 Howland 1958; Grace 1956; Grace 1974; Sparkes & Talcott 1970; Rotroff 1982; Rotroff 1997; Rotroff 2006; Hayes 2008. Numerous additional published studies on the Hellenistic pottery from the excavation of the Athenian Agora constitute an astonishingly rich and solid archaeological base for the study of that period.

4 Crowfoot, Crowfoot & Kenyon 1957; Goldmann & Jones 1950, 149-178; Vessberg & Westholm 1956; Papanicolaou-Christensen & Friis Johansen 1971. This short list is merely indicative and can be expanded by including works from the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For further bibliography see Vlietinck 1981.

5 Schäfer 1968, who defines certain basic characteristics of this research. Meanwhile, the excavation of Pergamon yielded a wealth of Hellenistic material; cf. related studies published by e.g. Ziegenhaus & De Luca 1968 and De Luca & Radt 1999.

6 See *supra* notes 4 and 5. Also Bruneau *et al.* 1970; Edwards 1975; Mitsopoulou-Leon 1991; Geissner 1999. See also *infra*, notes 7 and 8.

7 Leveque & Morel 1980; Leveque & Morel 1987. See also Blonde *et al.* 2002; Abadie-Reynal 2003.

erate a broad discussion on the problems of Hellenistic pottery, and especially those of chronology. Before long this discussion had assumed the form of international meetings, held in different parts of Greece at intervals of three to four years.<sup>8</sup> These meetings focused primarily on the question of chronology, which indeed continues to serve as the starting point for this endeavour. The meetings also elicited a variety of other related topics and questions that today constitute the core significance of this pottery, including the morphology, use and dissemination of clay vessels, workshops, technology and the economic value of pots, as well as the relation of pots to the high art of the Hellenistic period. These scientific meetings amassed a vast quantity of excavation material, most of it from Greece but also, as is acknowledged directly in the published proceedings, from elsewhere around the Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup> This of course led to a new set of questions relating to the inventorying, description, classification and geographical location of pottery manufacturing. Today, the published proceedings of these meetings form a corpus of some twenty volumes, a significant and solid starting point from which to explore the everyday life of the Hellenistic world.

With the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came a steadily growing interest in the study of Hellenistic pottery, evidenced in both the publication of primary excavation material and in theoretical papers. The parallel development of research into metalwork and ancient technology of the Hellenistic period has made a decisive contribution to the synthesis of a richer and more detailed picture of the minor arts of the Hellenistic age, a period with many cultural aspects that are still far from clear.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to argue that, as regards its chief characteristics, Hellenistic pottery is no different from that of

any other age, but this would be a frivolous generality. In reality, the special features of this pottery, and especially considered as a “*koine*” widely used throughout the geographical space of the far-flung Hellenistic world, with its powerful kingdoms, great trading centres, and populous cities with their remarkably multi-cultural lifestyles, are both numerous and readily distinguishable.

The first step and essential starting point in the study of Hellenistic pottery is to date it. This is of course crucial for any ancient object, but perhaps even more so for Hellenistic pottery, because it has the potential to enable the contextualization of a great mass of archaeological material from the Hellenistic age. Only in this way is it possible to classify it with any certainty and, ultimately, to understand it: sets of excavation finds sealed by a sudden catastrophe, or by a single, unique and unrepeated human action, e.g. a burial, constitute an essential and useful unit for examination. The next step is to identify contexts where objects with a particular chronological value exist, such as coins and lamps. In an attempt to describe these conditions, the author of this article and Ioannis Touratsoglou devised a general system of excavation sets with their corresponding features (cause and content).<sup>11</sup> A number of important side issues arose, however, for example the particular data of the coinage of each era and the country or agency that minted them. The example of the coinage of the Macedonian kings is characteristic, because the coins issued by the kingdom’s highest authorities permit the “safe” dating of the other finds in the same set.<sup>12</sup> It is obvious, however, that, in areas where the circulation of coins was slow (or has not been sufficiently studied), it is not easy to estimate the date of Hellenistic pottery on the basis of numismatic evidence.

8 To date a total of nine meetings have been held: Ioannina 1986, Rhodes 1986, Thessaloniki 1991, Mytilini 1994, Chania 1997, Volos 2000, Aigio 2004, Ioannina 2009 and Thessaloniki 2012.

9 Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting, Ioannina 1986 (Μαργακού *et al.* 1989), proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, Rhodes 1989 (Δρούγου *et al.* 1990), proceedings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, Thessaloniki 1991 (Δρούγου *et al.* 1994), proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Mytilini 1994 (Αρχοντίδου-Αργύρη *et al.* 1997), proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Chania 1997 (Δρούγου *et al.* 2000), proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Volos 2000 (Δρούγου *et al.* 2004), proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Aigio 2005 (Δρούγου *et al.* 2011), proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Ioannina 2009, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting in Thessaloniki are forthcoming.

10 Contemporary publications of material provide many starting points for the discussion of general historical or cultural phenomena of the Hellenistic age, which has added a considerable number of new works to the bibliography. Cf. Rostovtzeff 1941; Pekary 1979; Guldager Bilde 1993; Green 1993; Bilde *et al.* 1996 (with bibliography); see also Ogetenced 2002; Κωτίτσα 2006; Blonde 2007; Τουράτσογλου 2010 (with bibliography); Drougou & Touratsoglou 2012b (with Greek bibliography).

11 Drougou & Touratsoglou 1991; Δρούγου & Τουράτσογλου 1994.

12 See *supra* notes 10 & 11 and Lauter-Bufe 1988.

Lamps in a pottery assemblage can also help to date the whole context, although their evidential value must be assessed very carefully. The systems of lamp types that have been created on the basis of finds from major excavation sites, such as the Athenian Agora, Corinth, Delos, etc., can be of considerable assistance, at least in their own region. This typology does not remain constant over a wider geographical area, however; in remote production centres the types gradually change, and often have to be re-dated. The affinity identified between, for example, Macedonian and Attic pottery of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC highlights a whole series of peculiarities, including imitation of Attic models and survival of traditional local shapes.<sup>13</sup> Although there is a wealth of material from the Hellenistic world, no systematic theory exists for the dissemination and the commercial value of lamps. It is noteworthy that the mould-made lamps, although they seem to be a dominant species in the late Hellenistic period, have not received the same attention as, for example, contemporary relief vases. Wheel-made lamps dominated the Greek world until the 2nd century BC, after which time they quickly gave way to mould-made lamps.

There is one more important element that can be studied for its reference value for dating purposes, albeit with greater difficulty than the rest: habitation complexes.<sup>14</sup> These are associated with very different conditions from sets of grave goods as regards their formation. While it is hard to integrate them into a chronological system, they can nonetheless provide fundamental assistance towards an understanding of many other manifestations of the life of a settlement. Large sets of ruins, such as the destruction layer at Olynthus,<sup>15</sup> generally signal major historical or natural events in the life of a city or settlement, for example its founding or destruction. The finds associated with events that have a longer time-span are more varied in form and in the duration of their use. The example of

Olynthus is instructive: the extensive destruction layer that covered the ruins of the houses of the “Hippodamian” city can safely be ascribed to its destruction by Philip II of Macedon (346 BC). David M. Robinson’s monumental report on the excavation of the site focused on the destruction layer, which contained a wealth of finds of clay vessels of various types, which were products of both Attic and domestic manufacture, thus permitting a more reliable means of dating.<sup>16</sup> As research progressed, however, chronological uncertainty remained, since the foundations of the brick walls and the ruined floors permitted few distinctions. Later research overturned earlier conclusions, such as the dating of the “pre-Persian” and “pseudo-Cypriot” vases.<sup>17</sup> Today, with our broader and richer knowledge of dated sets from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and especially those from the Athenian Agora, we can conclude that the destruction layer at Olynthus does not mark the final end of that city, since some of its inhabitants continued to live in the general locality even after it was levelled. Comparisons and revisions were made on the basis of the known chronological data of the Athenian Agora. However, the progress of research into the Hellenistic pottery of other parts of the Hellenistic world led to a further revision of the interpretation of the destruction layer at Olynthus. S. Rotroff made similar observations concerning the pottery from the Chatby cemetery, one of the cemeteries of Alexandria in the early years of its founding, and re-opened the question of dating sets of grave goods.<sup>18</sup>

The chronology of the set of clay vessels from the large Macedonian Tomb II in the Great Tumulus at Vergina, the ancient city of Aigai, generated much discussion and provoked many objections (Fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> The main reason for these objections was the ascription of the tomb to Philip II of Macedon, who was murdered in 336 BC. The historical event was not, however, taken into account in the dating

13 See *supra* n. 3. Also, for lamps and their imitations, see Δρούγου 1992, 17-9 and more generally Scheibler 1976; Bruneau 1980. Blonde 1983. The exceptional difficulty of the task of classifying the lamps can be readily appreciated from the example of the finds from ancient Olynthus, given the parallel presence of local and Attic products and imitations (see *infra* n. 15).

14 See Drougou & Touratsoglou 1991

15 Robinson 1933; Robinson 1950; Robinson 1952. Cf. also Rotroff 1990; Rotroff 1997.

16 See *supra* n. 15.

17 See Τρακατέλλη 2009.

18 See Rotroff 1997, 29-31.

19 Δρούγου 2005; Rotroff (2007) suggests a different dating. Rotroff 1984, 543-54; Gill 2008. See also Hatzopoulos 2003, 129-30, who supports the initial dating and the identification of Tomb II in Great Tumulus of Vergina.



Fig. 1. Vergina, Great Tumulus, Tomb II (Philip B /tomb). Group of vases, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

of the vessels, which was done solely on the basis of the available research data for 4<sup>th</sup> century pottery. Each vessel, as a shape, had its own period of use, and in the end all the pottery seems to belong to the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Pottery alone, of course, cannot confirm a real moment in history, such as the death of a historical person. The reverse would seem more logical: that is, using historical events to help date the pottery. A continual down-playing of estimates for older known sets, such as that from ancient Stryme in Thrace, naturally makes all conclusions uncertain. The Stryme “salt-cellar”,<sup>20</sup> for example, was not found in the House of the Treasure-hoard (with the kantharos), but in a cut between that building and the Mosaics-House, and at a deeper excavation horizon. The data from the Athenian Agora, a very important *instrumentum* for the study of pottery, lose their absolute validity as one moves away from the geographical locus of Athens and Attica. The clay vessels from the tomb of

Philip are, consequently, dated on the basis of the entire tomb, while in reality the dating of this monument yields possibilities for the study of the pottery of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>21</sup> This is characteristic for many assemblages from the end of the same century (Figs. 2, 3).

Directly linking a category of pottery with historical events is more useful in developing an interpretation of it than in establishing a detailed and reliable chronology. These difficulties notwithstanding, however, only chronology can provide a solid base for the study of Hellenistic pottery, as astutely noted by S. Rotroff, who observes that “Quality does not decline uniformly and cannot be used as a criterion of date. For establishing a chronology the single most important element is the context in which it was found.”<sup>22</sup>

Compiling a series for a vessel shape on the basis of morphological similarities is an established means of indirectly dating a class or a particular shape.<sup>23</sup> As a rule, the

20 See n. 19, but see also Μπακαλάκη 1967, 28-30 fig. 13; Κωτίτσα 2006, 31

21 See n. 19.

22 Rotroff 1990, 177-8.

23 Rotroff 1982, 2-5.



Fig. 2. Vergina, Great Tumulus, Tomb III ("Prince's Tomb"). Group vases, last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.



Fig. 3. Vergina, Great Tumulus, Bricks- Tomb 1979 II. Group of vases, last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

next stage in the process is the important issue of identifying the workshops.<sup>24</sup> The prerequisites for identifying pottery manufactories in the context of the Hellenistic world and the extremely far-flung Hellenistic "market" are few and not obvious. Chronological information is, of course, essential, but so too are archaeometric and historical data. The mould-made relief vases are a case in point. Study of these vessels has shown that their dating, like their form and decoration, is closely connected with the technology used in their manufacture.<sup>25</sup> The same mould could be used for a fairly long time period; new moulds could be made from the old ones; and moulds were of course often taken from relief decoration on vessels, of clay or other materials. There is also some evidence that

moulds and stamps were traded. With this background, the dating of the relief vases proves to be a difficult task. Further, it is only natural that under the circumstances surrounding the dissemination of moulds, the decorative repertoire of relief vessels spread to all regions of the Hellenistic world and was repeated over and over again, with only slight variations each time, or even none at all. The use of moulds to produce clay vessels, while known from earlier periods, appears to have caused a minor revolution in pottery workshops. It changed the rate of production and, indirectly, the aesthetic appearance of the product. The criteria for the use of the mould are varied, and are associated with many other questions, such as the luxury sought after by Hellenistic societies

<sup>24</sup> Biers 1992, 79-85, 93-7.

<sup>25</sup> See Rotroff 1982. Ακαμάτης 1993; Hausmann 1996, 10-2; Ιντζεσίλογλου 2005; Ιντζεσίλογλου 2007.



Fig. 4. Veroia, Rock-tomb "Sanopoulos".  
Group of vases, 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

and the need for high volume in production.<sup>26</sup> It is clear, however, that while the study of mould-made pottery has made great progress in recent years, further research in the field is required.

Similar questions, which necessarily reveal the direct necessity of archaeometry and historical knowledge, are inherent in almost all categories of Hellenistic pottery. On-going research constantly raises new questions about, for instance, the role of economic and social history, but these matters cannot be discussed except on the basis of material that has been identified and dated. It is no longer possible for one or two examples of vases, or isolated sets of material, to provide answers to this whole spectrum of problems. It requires the whole wealth of pottery yielded by a specific Hellenistic location, as well as its relation

to the rest of the world. These research requirements can now be met by information technology, with special computer software programs that rapidly assemble all the necessary data. The creation of these programs would be of great significance to further research in this field. The study of the large number of vases and pottery sets can yield new information with value for the understanding of their commercial distribution and their position in everyday life. It is clear that statistical and digital processing can provide vital information concerning not only the nature of the geographical distribution of a vase class, but also of its numerical prevalence. Such new "tools" of research would most certainly prove useful for the study of the social and economic history of the Hellenistic world.

The above observations indicate just some the paths

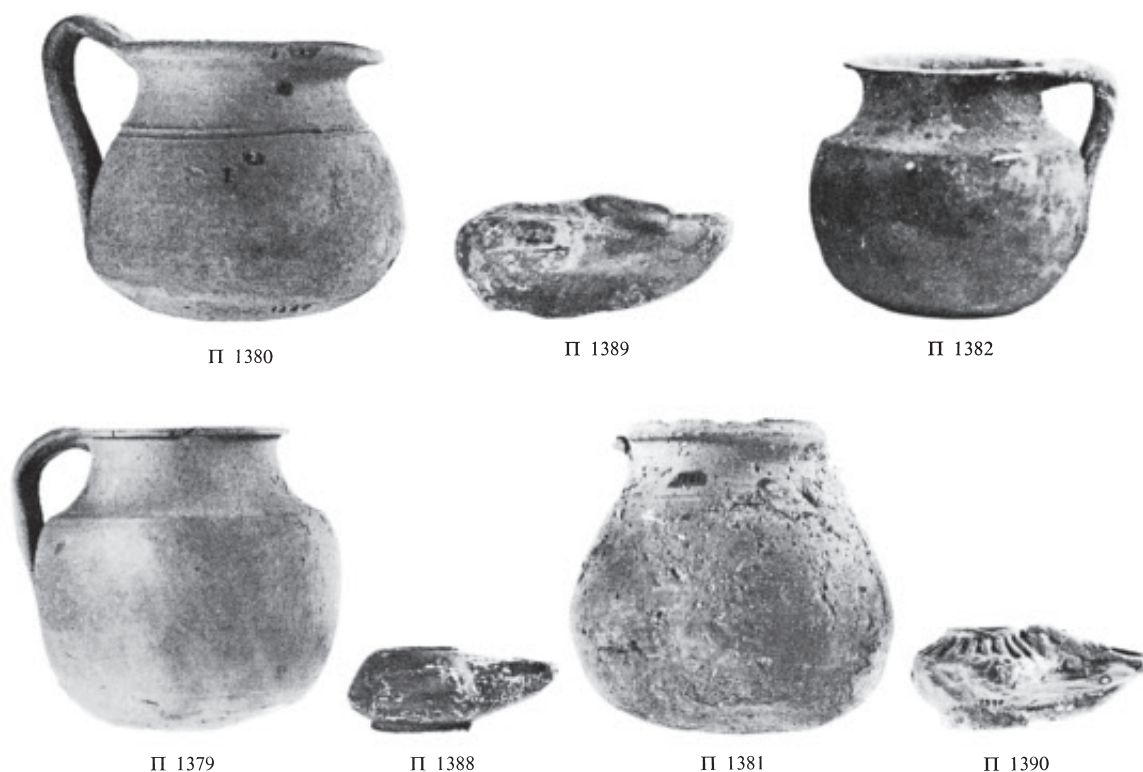


Fig. 5. Veroia, Rock-tomb "Thomoglou". Group of vases, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

that research in Hellenistic pottery must take. At the same time, these general ideas outline a theoretical framework for drafting an "inventory" system. The design of a program in which the questions will elicit the distinctive character of the pottery and at the same time allow every element of data to be utilised has already been attempted by some researchers.<sup>27</sup> Similar or analogous analytical work may have been carried out for pottery in general, but the objective in this case is to distinguish particular features and make them usable. The structure of the set of material and the parallel analysis of the form and decoration of the vessel (art and technology) are the twin axes of a program currently under construction, involving: a) an analysis of the constituents of the set (excavation conditions, historical evidence, evaluation of coins, lamps,

etc., b) chronology, and c) analysis of the vessel on the basis of technology and decoration (cf. the assemblages as illustrated in Figs. 4, 5). The questionnaire, which can be used for any category of pottery, orients the observer towards a certain choice of questions, chronology and themes. The project leads to the fullest possible coverage of the material, so as to avoid the loss of such basic data as number, dissemination and repetition or chronological differentiation. The enrichment of the program with sets of section drawings and technical details clarifies our observations.

In the light of these observations, it is clear that what is being created is a dense network of data and knowledge, from which emerges a very characteristic picture, virtually a portrait, of the Hellenistic age: plentiful, cheap

<sup>27</sup> This author attempted, with the help of programmer A. Bellas, an ambitious project for a computerised inventory, which was unfortunately never completed. The program was able to incorporate a great number of aspects of Hellenistic pottery. We will hopefully be able to provide a full description of the program soon.

clay utensils for everyday use, imitations of luxuries, mass production, wide geographical distribution of types and categories, autonomous manufacturing centres. The luxurious living of the royal courts and other wealthy groups of society became a model for social aspiration.<sup>28</sup> The imitation of nature or major works of art, the free choice of decorative motifs from, for example, architecture or the theatre, the conscious inclination towards subjects drawn from the religious or political spheres: all these features of Hellenistic pottery perfectly accord with and express the Hellenistic world. Luxury and a cheap substitute for it, multiplication of form, imitation and variation are all familiar processes in Hellenistic societies. The pottery of the Hellenistic age, displaying all these characteristic features, proves to be common and uniform and at the same time different, depending on the tradition and the circumstances of each state or culture in the Hellenistic world. Its function overlaps with other art media, such as metalwork,<sup>29</sup> and at the same time develops, with the technique of moulding, a wholly new dimension of pottery manufacture. It is cherished even in the remotest corners of the Hellenistic world, thanks to trade and to the political and economic interdependence of that world, while at the same time it defines, in its own way, its nu-

merous economic centres. Attic production, representing the initial and early phase, and the groups of Eastern Terra Sigillata (ETS) in the late Hellenistic period that mark its conclusion,<sup>30</sup> together demonstrate a long and winding progress through the tradition of ancient pottery, of historical importance and corresponding value for its age. The study of Hellenistic pottery has revealed an impressive range of aspects of the economic and social life of the Hellenistic period with the purpose of emphasizing the importance of complex historical research, or better, of Cultural History in general. Important older, but mostly modern historians and archaeologists are currently developing remarkable new frameworks and perspectives. At the same time, it is obvious that the documented archaeological data and the corresponding findings of ceramics remain a constant and indispensable prerequisite.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rostovtzeff 1941, 652-3; Randsborg 1993. On the question of luxury, see Vickers & Gill 1994, 178-80; Hayes 1991, 183-90; Wallbank 1981; Pollitt 1986, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Kühnmann 1959; Pfrommer 1987.

<sup>30</sup> See *supra* n. 13 and Furtwängler 1990. For late Hellenistic pottery see *supra* n. 3 and esp. Rotroff 1997; Hayes 2008; Meyer-Schlichtmann 1988; Malfitana 2002; Lund 2005; Malfitana *et al.* 2005; Drougou & Touratsoglou 2012a.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. notes 10, 11, 28 & 30 above.



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