



Greek Vases

Intro Guide

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Introduction

Vases comprise the larger corpus of material evidence from ancient Greece. This is not only due to the durability of fired clay, but also to the fact that vase production and use was particularly abundant, ranging from simple undecorated pottery intended for daily use to painted masterpieces of the highest artistic quality. The presence of pottery in excavation sites facilitates the dating of finds and contributes to our better understanding of religious or funerary practices and customs. The painted scenes on vases provide us with thousands of beautiful images of life and myth that have proven invaluable for our better understanding of Greek culture. Like a window to a world over two thousand years ago, they show us how the ancient Greeks lived their daily lives, how they worshiped their gods and mourned for their dead, how they fought their wars and imagined the great heroes and mythical beings whose stories still fascinate us today.

Use and Shapes

Greek vases serve a variety of purposes. They are used for food preparation and cooking, eating and drinking, storing or transporting foods and liquids. They can serve as grave markers and tomb offerings, function as

containers for personal use (usually for items of feminine toiletry, [perfumed] oils, trinkets, or ointments), as well as used in rituals.

Basic shapes:

- Alabastron: container for perfume oils
- Amphora: storage vase for liquids and solids
- Aryballos: small container for (perfumed) oils
- Cup: drinking vessel
- Hydria: water-jar
- Kantharos: drinking vessel
- Krater: vase used for mixing wine with water for the symposium
- Lekythos: Container for (perfumed) oils, popular tomb offering
- Loutrophoros: ritual vase used in weddings, also has a funerary function
- Oinochoe, chous: pouring vessels
- Phiale: used for making libations (drinks poured out as offerings to the gods)
- Pyxis: ceramic container with lid for personal items (often items of feminine toiletry)
- Skyphos: drinking vessel

For more details on the various shapes, their use and characteristics, see <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Shapes> (with extensive bibliography).

For a basic reference book, see G. Richter and M. Milne, *Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases* (New York, 1935).

Chronology

- Protogeometric and Geometric period pottery (1000-700 BCE): geometric patterns, human and animal figures gradually introduced from 900 BCE onwards
- Archaic period pottery (700-480 BCE)
 - Orientalizing period pottery (7th - 6th centuries BCE): oriental (Eastern) influences; Proto-Attic pottery: produced in Athens/Attica during the Orientalizing period, characterized by

the popularity of floral and animal motifs (although human figures are not absent).

- o Black-figure pottery: figures in black against a red/bright orange background. Predominant style during the Archaic period. Invented in Corinth during the early 7th century BCE. Introduced in Attica at c. 630 BCE.
- Red-figure pottery (c. 530-300 BCE): reversal of black-figure, red figures on a black background. Invented in Athens. Primary pottery style during the Classical period (480-323 BCE).

For a timeline and more details, see:

<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Techniques-and-styles/Chronology-Athenian-Pottery>

Techniques

Black-figure vases:

- Vase surface coated with clay slip
- Figures and motifs drawn by incision
- Decoration covered with clay slip mixed with alkaline minerals
- Firing process in three stages resulting in black-figure scenes
- Some painters added white, red or purple pigments to emphasize specific details

Red-figure vases:

- Drawing figures and motifs
- Undecorated surface of vase coated with a black slip of clay
- Firing process produced red-figure scenes

White-ground vases:

- Vase surface coated with special clay free from iron oxides, resulting in a white surface
- Scenes were painted on the white surface of the vase, using a variety of colors (polychrome decoration)

The most famous white-ground vases are the Athenian white-ground *lekythoi*, the special funerary vases used by the Athenians during the fifth century BCE. They were oil-containers exclusively used as grave gifts.

Subjects

A wide variety of subjects are depicted on vases. Daily life scenes are popular, providing us with valuable information on various aspects of everyday life in ancient Greece. Alongside the peaceful domestic scenes we find images of warfare, hunting, education, symposia (drinking parties), working men, housewives attending to their household chores, playful children, athletic competitions and training, horse and chariot races, religious festivals and rituals, sacrifices, weddings and funerals, etc. Equally popular are scenes of mythology, especially the Homeric Epics, Hercules and other famous heroes, mythical battle scenes, and so on. The scenes are often associated with the shape and function of the vase: funerary subjects for funerary vases, wedding scenes for wedding vases, sympotic images for vessels used in the symposium, etc.

Production areas

- Black-figure: Athens produced a great number of high-quality black-figure vases, which became very popular in the markets of the Mediterranean. Corinth, Boeotia, Euboea, Laconia, certain Ionian cities and colonies of Magna Graecia were also very important production centers of black-figure pottery.
- Red-figure: Once again, Athens was the leader in high-quality red-figure vases production and exports. Corinth, Boeotia, Euboea, Laconia, Crete and especially Southern Italy were also important production centers of red-figure vases.

For more details and an interactive map, see:

<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Interactive-map>

Potters and Painters

Sometimes we are lucky to have the signatures of potters and painters, thus allowing us to know their names and be able to attribute specific vases to them. Even fingerprints preserved in ancient ceramics can reveal the sex

and age of the potters who created them.¹ In most cases, however, we have to rely on attributions based on the personal style of individual painters. Painters whose names are unknown to us are given names associated with a famous vase that has been attributed to them or named after characteristic features of their personal style. For example, the Reed Painter is named after his habit of depicting reeds in the landscape; the name vase of the Achilles Painter is an amphora in the Vatican depicting the hero Achilles; The Berlin Painter's name comes from an amphora in the Berlin Museum depicting Hermes and a Satyr.

For a list of the most famous Athenian vase-painters with examples and photos of their attributed works, see:

<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Painters-and-potters>

For photos and information about famous Athenian vases that can provide a great introductory overview of Athenian vase-painting, see: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Key-pieces>

Vase Inscriptions

Inscriptions can be painted or incised on the vases. Painted inscriptions are referred to as 'dipinti,' while incised ones are 'graffiti.' The role of vase inscriptions varies:

1. Signatures of potters and painters
2. Name inscriptions (naming figures or even objects, which is often helpful for the interpretation and better understanding of a scene)
3. Speech (occasionally human figures are depicted saying something or even singing)
4. Inscribed messages for the user or spectator
5. Kalos inscriptions (praising the beauty of a male youth or—less often—a female)
6. Nonsense inscriptions (meaningless, merely decorative)

¹ See the relevant research by Julie Hruby, briefly described here:

https://www.academia.edu/31991029/Establishing_Quantifiable_Methodologies_to_Utilize_Fingerprints_as_Reflections_of_Ancient_Cultural_Practices

For vase inscriptions, see:

<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Introduction-to-Greek-Pottery/Inscriptions>

<https://www.avi.unibas.ch/> (online database of vase inscriptions)

Sir John Beazley and the Beazley Archive

Modern scholarship in the field of Greek pottery owes a lot to Sir John Beazley, Professor at Oxford University. A renowned world authority on Greek decorated pottery, he became known for his classification of vases by artistic style and for his attributions of vases to specific vase-painters.

Named after him and largely based on his personal archive of Greek pottery, the constantly expanding Beazley Archive Pottery Database by the Classical Art Research Center in Oxford is the most valuable resource for the study of Greek pottery. The electronic pottery database is freely accessible online: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/pottery>

The site also provides free online access to 154 digitized notebooks by J. Beazley: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/resources/Beazley-Notebooks>

Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum

Another valuable tool for the study of Greek vases is the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* (Corpus of Ancient Vases). A series of high-quality catalogs of the collections of vases from various museums in 24 countries. The project is ongoing with new volumes being published every year. It is also available online by the Classical Art Research Center and linked to the Beazley Archive Electronic Database: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/cva/Home>

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Common Abbreviations

BF: Black-figure

RF: Red-Figure

WG: White-ground

ABV: Beazley, J. 1956. *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters*, Oxford.

ARV²: Beazley, J. 1963. *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, 2nd edition, Oxford.

Para: Beazley, J. 1971. *Paralipomena*, Oxford.

Add²: Carpenter, T. et al. 1989. *Addenda: Additional References to ABV, ARV² and Paralipomena*, 2nd edition, Oxford.

ABL: Haspels, C. 1936. *Attic Black-Figured Lekythoi*, Paris.

BAPD: Beazley Archive Pottery Database (<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk>)

CVA: Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum

CAVI: Immerwahr, H. 1998-ongoing. *A Corpus of Attic Vase Inscriptions*.
<https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/attic/about.html>

AVI: Attic Vase Inscriptions (online database) <https://www.avi.unibas.ch/>

Appendix



Attic black-figure
Panathenaic Amphora,
c. 510 BCE. Horse race.
New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, inv. no.
07.286.80.



Attic red-figure column
krater, c. 430 BCE.
Horsemen. New York,
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, inv. no. 07.286.65.



Attic white-ground
lekythos by the Achilles
Painter, c. 440 BCE.
Funerary. New York,
Metropolitan Museum of
Art, inv. no. 08.258.18.