

Ceramic Repair, Secondary Use, and Recycling in the Ancient Mediterranean: Exploring the Social and Economic Significance of Reused Pots

In recent decades, the practice of reuse has been studied more intensely by scholars wishing to understand the values and everyday experiences of ancient peoples. Ceramic repairs have slowly gained traction in the field as material culture that can show the ways in which human and object histories inform one another. Unfortunately, mended pots have long been ignored by archaeologists in their excavation reports, drawings, and analyses. In fact, there have been surprisingly few case studies on the subject because early archaeologists often supposed that the randomness of vessels occasionally breaking, and even less frequently being repaired, did not warrant significant discussion (Cleal 1988: 140). Eventually, ceramic repairs began to gain attention amid discussions of museum restoration practices, the philosophy of false “authenticity,” and ancient technologies. Soon enough, scholars such as Theodore Peña (2007) began to analyze the cultural biography of these objects using systemic and diagrammatic approaches. Even though these models include a lot of conjecture about numbers, they did help visualize the decision making process behind repair, reuse, and discard practices in the ancient world. Additionally, some scholars published case studies on repairs or reuse in which they solely examine pieces available in a particular museum or at a specific site. Nonetheless, many archaeologists continue to neglect the implications of reuse on the social and economic context of their finds.

While it is true that the lived experiences of the vessel owner and the pot itself can vary greatly on a case by case basis, this paper argues that common practices of repair and reuse can illuminate some shared value systems driving these behaviors within the ancient Mediterranean. By reflecting on the processes for repairs, the evidence for reuse, and the conclusions from

various case studies, this paper reveals that ancient peoples often repaired, reused, and recycled certain vessels for their relative economic, sentimental, or aesthetic value. Throughout the life of the object, it was imbued with sentimental or aesthetic social meaning dependent upon its form and function. This is especially the case for decorated or distinctive fine ware vessels that are easily recognizable within social settings, such as symposiums. However, to my knowledge, there is no evidence within classical archaeology to suggest that certain pottery artifacts held symbolic value necessitating repair or reuse. This is due to the emphasis on ritualistic breakage, object “death,” and final deposition that distinguishes their religious and ritualistic regional practices from others, such as the traditions in the Peruvian Andes and Western Africa in which fragments of the ceramic vessels deliberately broken after someone’s death are used in temper to be incorporated into a new vessel (Miloglav 2020: 121).

Furthermore, understanding the causes for vessel breakage and the requirements for repair/reuse can help inform a study of the parsimonious and preservative economic values driving the practice of reuse. Vessels could fracture due to weaknesses during the production, accidents during transport, the wear and tear of frequent use, or through deliberate action. In a slim number of cases, the vessels could be repaired using adhesives or fillers such as bitumen, gypsum lime paste, tree resin, or animal protein glues. Cordage or metal clamps, staples, rivets, sheets, and tenons could be used in a variety of drilling and patching techniques for a more structurally sound solution. Analysis of the frequency of breakage, the accessibility of replacements, and the rarity of repairs can elucidate when the cost of the repair was economically worthwhile for the uselife of the vessel. Additionally, the materials and complexity of the repairs or reuse provide insight into the hands and agency behind these occurrences. Despite this paper opening up the discussion, conclusions about labor specialization, industry standardization, and

methodized techniques must remain inconclusive and conjectural until more evidence comes to light.

In an effort to bridge the gap between broader scientific approaches and localized case studies, this paper utilizes material evidence to tease out common value systems influencing the end of a pot's life cycle. Moreover, the different emphases placed on the preservation of form and/or function informs the stages at which certain actions can be predicted. By analyzing the behavioral practices of breakage, repair, secondary use, and recycling, this paper outlines the conventional intersectional dynamics governing the use and reuse of ceramic materials.

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