

The “Science” of Archaic Pottery Production at Corinth

Before Athens overtook the market for painted pottery in the 6th century B.C., Corinth was the most important production center in Greece. Exported to virtually every corner of the Mediterranean, Archaic Corinthian pottery remains one of the best tools for documenting ancient trade and dating archaeological contexts. Moreover, Corinthian potters were lauded as great innovators in antiquity. As Pliny the Elder (*NH* 35.43.151-152) reports, it was Butades—a Sicyonian potter working in Corinth—who first produced portraits from clay and put masks on the gutter tiles of roofs (i.e. created antefixes). He also experimented with materials, adding red earth to regular clay and modeling with red chalk or clay. While Butades is a shadowy figure, production debris excavated in the 1930’s at the Potters’ Quarter at Corinth indicates that experimentation was, in fact, a regular part of the manufacturing process during the 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.

This paper presents findings from our ongoing project of reexamining material from the Potters’ Quarter for vestiges of Archaic pottery production, including misfired pots, test pieces, and kiln equipment. The imperfect or unfinished ceramics discarded by potters provide snapshots of transitory stages in the chain of production not otherwise evident from the finished pots that went to market. Such insights include the order of painting a vessel’s sides, the types of pots stacked together in a kiln, and the moments when failures occurred most often. Firing was the riskiest stage in the manufacturing process by far. The Pseudo-Herodotean poem “Kiln” tells us that potters faced perpetual threats from the demons of the kiln: *Syntrips* (Smasher), *Smaragos* (Crasher), *Asbetos* (Unquenchable), *Sabaktes* (Shake-to-Pieces), and *Omodamos* (Conqueror of the Unbaked) (Noble 1988, 149). Plaques with representations of potters working, such as those found in the votive deposits at Penteskophia outside of Corinth, visually express the potters’

belief that gods determined whether a pot would “turn a good black” (i.e. fire correctly) and “fetch the price asked” (Noble 1988, 149).

Whether divine providence figured into pottery manufacture cannot be known, but finds from the Potters’ Quarter reveal that the craftsmen, taking matters into their own hands, practiced an early form of the scientific method. Several unusual examples of repair and reuse offer rare glimpses into the decisions made in response to mishaps and inevitable accidents in the workshops. These instances of adjustments executed mid-process reveal that potters, aware of the properties of their materials and the nuances of their techniques, were adapted successfully to fluctuating conditions. They serve as reminders that, although the Corinthian pottery distributed throughout the Mediterranean in large quantities had a fairly uniform appearance, the potters were engaged in a constant process of trial and error. In this sense, we should envision not one Butades but workshops full of inventors who improvised with materials and techniques to perfect their craft and maximize their output.

Bibliography

Noble, J.V. 1988. *The Techniques of Painted Attic Pottery*, London.