

RARELY EXHIBITED GREEK POTTERY

Part II: Archaic-Hellenistic (550–30 BCE)

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Black-Figure and Red-Figure Pottery of the Archaic and Classical Periods

For over two centuries, black-figure and red-figure techniques dominated the decoration of fine Greek pottery. The black-figure technique was invented and popularized by the Corinthians in the seventh century BCE, but it was their Athenian neighbors who perfected it in the following century. In black-figure technique, silhouettes of figures, objects, and decorative motifs were created using iron-rich clay *slip* (liquefied clay), which turned black during firing by manipulating the kiln's oxygen levels. Before firing, details were added with a sharp instrument used to scratch through the *slip* to the surface of the vessel. In the last quarter of the sixth century BCE, some potters began to experiment with painting the background with *slip* and keeping the figures the natural color of the clay. In red-figure technique, details had to be painted with fine brushes rather than rendering them by incision. Ultimately, the red-figure technique became the favored of the two, and black-figure disappeared. By the end of the fourth century BCE, red-figure style also went out of fashion, giving way to plainer ornamentation, often on glossy black wares.



Black-Figure Plate

Greek, Archaic, ca. 550 BCE

From Euboea (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (72.23)

Just under 5.5” in diameter, this small plate features a griffin, the mythical creature that was a hybrid lion-bird. Although the plate may have had a practical function in life, the griffin probably served as a protective talisman in the grave. Pottery was regularly interred with the deceased in graves, probably as a gesture of sentiment. But certain symbols, like monsters, may have been intended to ward off evil.



Black-Figure Kylix (drinking cup)

Greek, Archaic, late 6th century BCE
From Attica (Greece)

William and Anna Weinberg Purchase Fund (66.11)

The *kylix* was the standard wine cup of the Attica region in this period. *Kylikes* came in various sizes and illustrated a wide variety of imagery. This example shows two satyrs, followers of the wine god Dionysus, prancing around a date palm. The objects in the bottom zone of the scene are difficult to identify (two drinking horns?). With a diameter of about 6.6", this *kylix* is among the smaller varieties of the vessel.



Black-Figure Eye Kylix (drinking cup)

Greek, Archaic, late 6th century BCE

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (57.4)

“Eye Cups” were painted with pairs of eyes on their exteriors, sometimes in addition to other figures. Scholars suggest that the eyes, ear-like handles, and base resembling the line of a mouth, particularly when the cup is tilted up by a drinker, were meant to look like a mask, the purpose of which was to ward off bad luck. This cup has the face of Medusa in its interior, a symbol that could also serve a protective function. The vessel’s exterior illustrates the hero Herakles engaged in combat with two opponents, an Amazon (pictured) and a male figure (not pictured). In addition to black, other colors such as white and a red-violet (often used as a highlight), gained popularity and were used on this cup. The cup’s diameter of 8.25” is considerably larger than the previous examples.



Black-Figure Lekythoi (oil vessels)

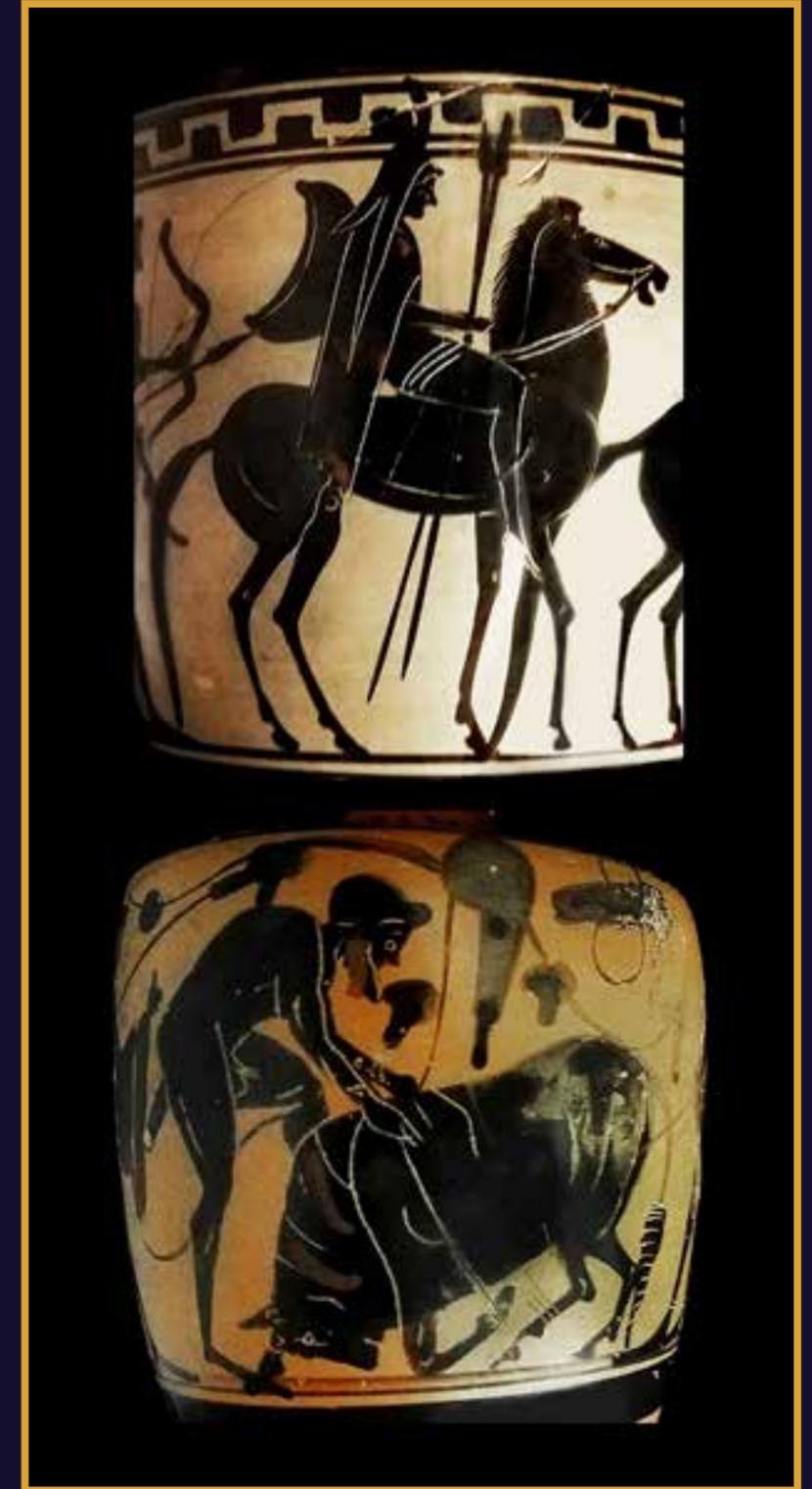
Lekythoi evolved into tall, slender vessels by the Archaic and Classical periods. Like the *kylix*, they came in various sizes (largest of this group: H. 12.5”). They contained oil, perhaps scented, which could be used for anointing the body after death, and the vessels were frequently placed in graves. Though some *lekythoi* show funerary imagery, many illustrate other subjects. These examples show (from L to R) a procession of Persians, a charioteer approaching a seated man, and Theseus subduing the Bull of Marathon. *Lekythoi* are not exclusively funerary; they are also found in domestic contexts. Three different artists painted these vessels. The “Diosphos Painter” was a pupil of the “Edinburgh Painter,” whose most well known vase is in Edinburgh. The third example with Theseus is linked in style to a vase in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

Greek, Archaic
Late 6th century BCE
By a follower of the
Diosphos Painter
Pottery
Museum purchase (59.59)

Greek, Archaic
Late 6th century BCE
By the Edinburgh
Painter
Pottery
Museum Purchase (67.47)

Greek, Archaic
Ca. 490 BCE
Class of Athens 581
From Attica (Greece)
Pottery
Museum purchase (57.9)

Details of the above vessels reveal the fine lines incised into the surface of the vessels with a sharp instrument to create the details of the figures and other objects. The three colors used—black, white, and red-violet—are also clearly visible in these enlargements.





Red-Figure Kylix (drinking cup)

Greek, Early Classical, ca. 450 BCE

By the Curtius Painter

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Chorn Memorial Fund (66.2)

The “Curtius Painter” painted in Athens in the workshop of the “Penthesilea Painter,” who may have been his teacher. The former, known for a famous *kylix* illustrating Achilles and Penthesilea, was a finer painter than his associate, but the latter was competent, albeit less imaginative and detailed. Here, however, he illustrates an engaging and energetic boar hunt around a *tondo* (central medallion) with two gossiping boys. The exterior scene may represent a *palaestra*, a place where young men exercised and were educated. The six figures in this scene, however, are not as well drawn. The diameter of this cup, nearly 10”, makes it among the larger versions.



Red-Figured Skyphos (drinking cup)

Greek, Early Classical, ca. 450 BCE

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (60.24)

Though known from many Greek sites around the Mediterranean, owl *skyphoi* are synonymous with Athens and its patron goddess. The cup illustrates two symbols sacred to Athena: the owl and the olive. The owl was Athena's sacred bird (as the eagle was to Zeus), and Athena created the olive tree as a gift to the Athenians. The production of oil from olives became a mainstay of the ancient Greek economy.



Red-Figure Bell Krater (wine mixing bowl)

Greek, Classical, ca. 425–400 BCE
From Attica (Greece)

Weinberg Fund (92.85)

Functioning like a punchbowl, the *krater* held wine, which was diluted with water and sometimes enhanced with additional flavorings. *Kraters* were used at symposia and perhaps other gatherings, and the vessel had a very long run in Greek culture. *Krater* imagery varies, and this example shows a Pyrrhic dance, a war dance described by authors such as Homer, Plato, and others. The dance was performed to music and simulated the steps made to attack enemies and avoid their weapons. Athena herself did the dance, and the woman on the Museum's *krater* may be “playing” the goddess.



Red-Figure Chous (small pitcher)

Greek, Late Classical, 400–365 BCE
From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (58.7)

The *chous* (from Gr. *choe*, “pour”) is a miniature pouring vessel about the size of tabletop creamer. Children in various activities are typically illustrated on *choes*, and scholars suggest these children were participating in the Anthesteria, an Athenian festival celebrating the arrival of spring and the opening of new wine. The *chous* may have been given as a souvenir for children’s events, though symbolic of wine and the pouring of libations by adults at the festival. On this example, a boy is probably running a footrace toward a goalpost.



Black-Glazed Kantharos (wine cup)

Greek, Late Classical/Early Hellenistic
Ca. 330 BCE

Probably from Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Museum purchase (59.36)

Though red-figure pottery dominated the Classical period, other types of pottery, often plainer in decoration, began to gain popularity by the later fourth century BCE. Glossy, “black-glazed” wares were among the newer creations. Covered in a black slip produced by manipulating kiln oxygen levels, the cup once also had red coloring in the grooves, now only faintly visible. The handles are decorated with two stylized, heart-shaped ivy leaves, a symbol of the god Dionysus. A very faded white garland once embellished the handle zone on each side.





“Calenian Ware” Black-Glazed Guttus (oil vessel?)

Ca. 350 BCE

From Cales (Campania; Italy)

Pottery

Museum purchase (68.132)

Ancient Cales was originally founded by indigenous Italic peoples but later fell under Greek influence. The black-gloss pottery style and the Classical head, perhaps representing the god Hephaestus, show the Greek influence in the region. The *guttus* (from Latin for “drop”) was most likely for dripping small amounts of oil, perhaps on altars, or during other aspects of ritual. Though *gutti* are known by their Latin name, they are most prevalent in Greek and Greek-influenced culture of southern Italy.



Hellenistic Pottery

By the fourth century BCE, Greeks had already colonized portions of Asia, North Africa, and Western Europe but Alexander's campaigns brought Greek culture as far as Central Asia and Northern India. The Hellenistic period thus denotes the spread of Greek culture more widely than any previous colonization. Many scholars begin the period with Alexander's death in 323 BCE, but Greek culture had been spreading for several centuries by that time.

Red-figure pottery lingered as late as 300 BCE, particularly in the Greek colonies of southern Italy. That pottery is usually referred to as "South Italian," but it was made by Greeks working in Italy or by natives of Greek cities in Italy. Locals such as Calenians and Daunians added their own flare to the period's repertoire of pottery, but wares now labeled "Calenian" or "Daunian" still show heavy Greek influence. In terms of geography, "South Italian" should be understood as characterizing Greek pottery from the regions now known as Campania, Basilicata (ancient Lucania), Apulia, and Sicily, all of which were home to numerous Greek cities in antiquity. So large was this concentration of Greeks that Romans would call it "Magna Graecia" or "Greater Greece."

In addition to red-figure pottery, glossy black ware with less decoration continued, while figural decoration became more commonly represented in *relief* (raised on the surface rather than painted two-dimensionally). By the first century BCE, *sigillata* (stamped) wares were being produced on the Levantine coast. *Sigillata* ware demonstrates improved ceramic technology and thus finer pottery.



Red-Figure Rhyton (drinking cup)

Greek, South Italian, ca. 325–300 BCE
From Apulia (Italy)

Pottery

Gift of Professor William R. Biers (2006.10)

The *rhyton* had been in use in some parts of the Greek world over a millennium earlier than the date of the example here. *Rhyta* were primarily drinking vessels that usually terminated in an animal head; a griffin (a mythical creature) forms the end of this one. The lack of a base did not allow the cup to be set down, and thus a user may have had to drink the contents all at once or place the cup on a stand. A Roman fresco from Pompeii shows a *rhyton* on a stand.

On the neck of the cup, a woman's head is illustrated. The portrayal of women was quite popular in South Italian pottery (see below), but identities are often unclear. Suggestions about identification include goddesses, priestesses, religious devotees, or even courtesans.



Red-Figure Skyphos (drinking cup)

South Italian, ca. 325–300

Group of Vatican Y14

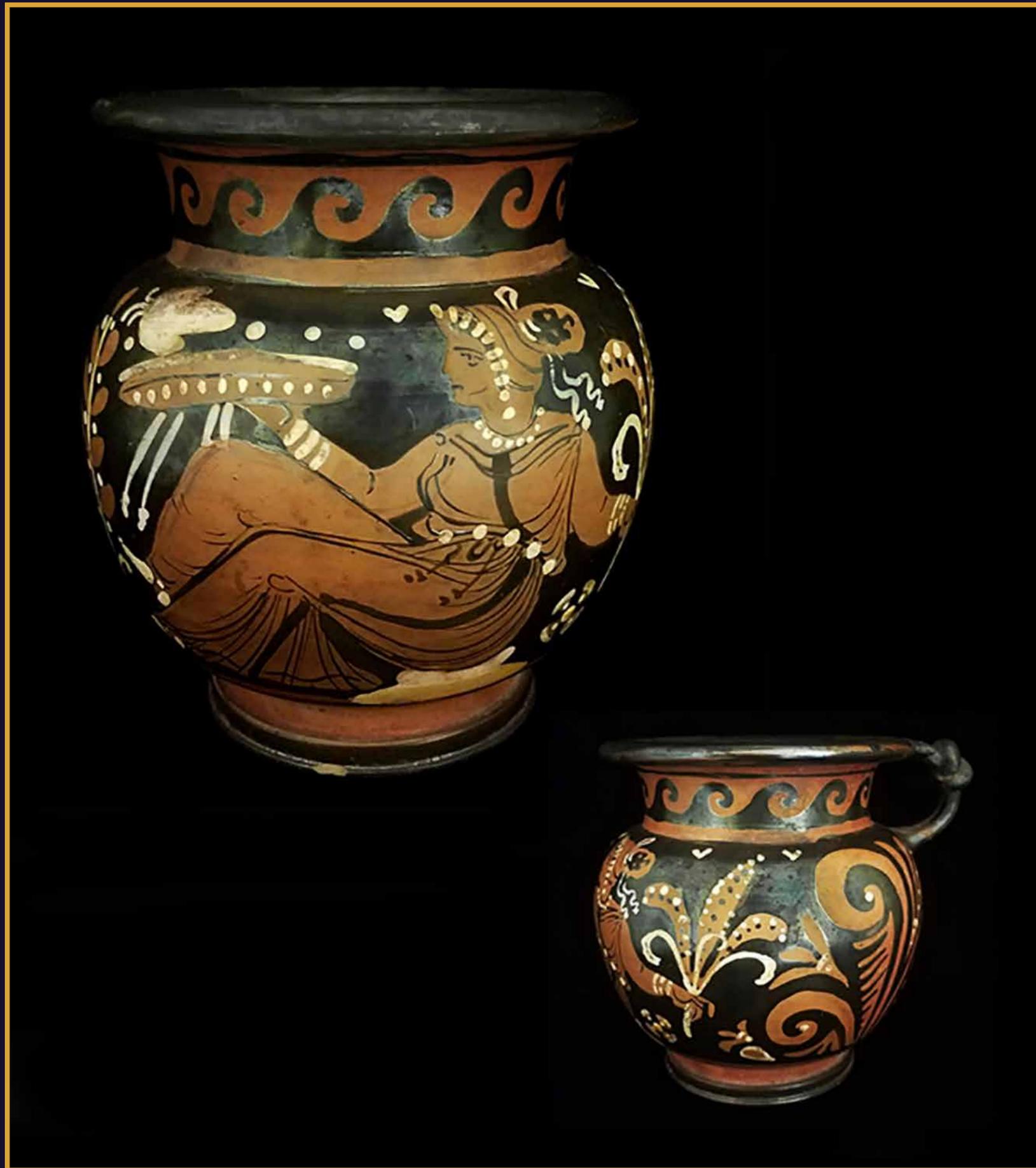
From Apulia (Italy)

Pottery

Museum purchase (60.14)

The *skyphos* originated in the Geometric period (900–700 BCE) and remained popular, though its shape evolved over time. This example is tall, delicate, and thin-walled.

The imagery on this cup may symbolize marriage. On one side is a winged Eros (a love god often cited as the son of Aphrodite); he holds a mirror, a symbol associated with nuptials. The other side shows a seated woman wearing a *chiton* (full length tunic) and elaborate jewelry while holding a *patera* (offering bowl) with plants in it. She may represent a bride making an offering for fertility. The nuptial imagery is somewhat ironic, given that the findspots for many ceramics are graves. If from a grave, was it the grave of a woman who died young, not long after marriage, or even before?



Red-Figure Mug

South Italian, ca. 340–320 BCE

From Apulia (Italy)

Pottery

Museum purchase (64.50)

Some of the same imagery from the previous example is repeated here: a seated, well-dressed woman holds up a *patera*. This one, however, also holds a large floral object. The *patera* indicates she is making a religious offering, but the meaning of the floral object is unclear. Flowers and other spring vegetation were often symbolic of rebirth and fertility. Though difficult to see on the previous *skyphos*, both vessels include highlights in white *slip*, such as the jewelry and beading on the *patera*. Ornateness of detail is characteristic of some South Italian pottery.



“Teano Ware” Black-Gloss Bowl

Ca. 300–275 BCE

From Tiane (Teano, Italy)

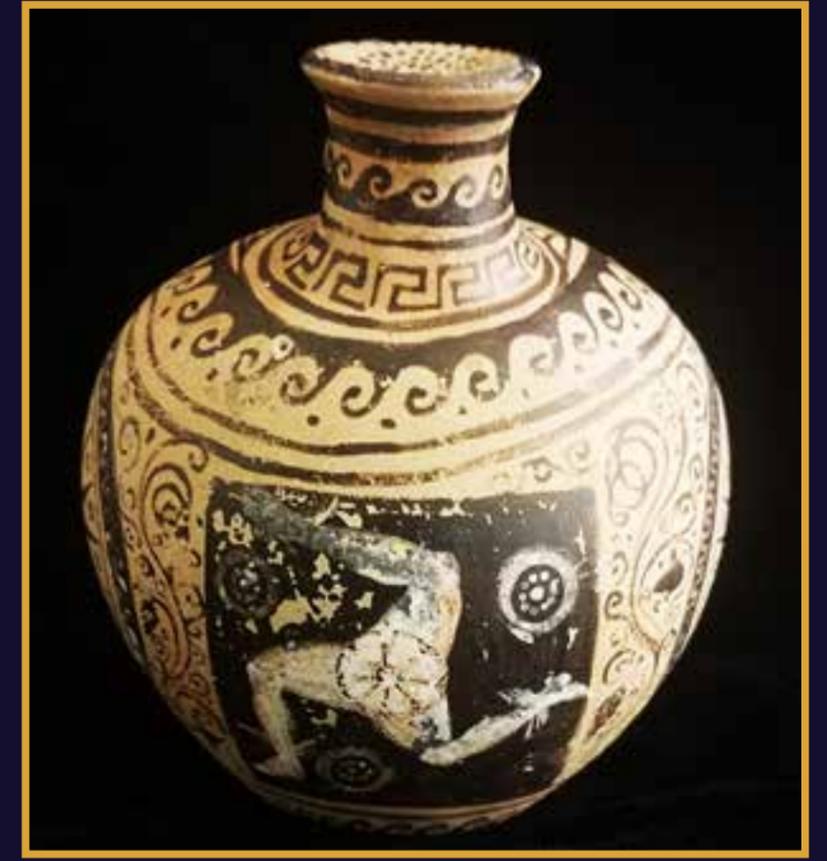
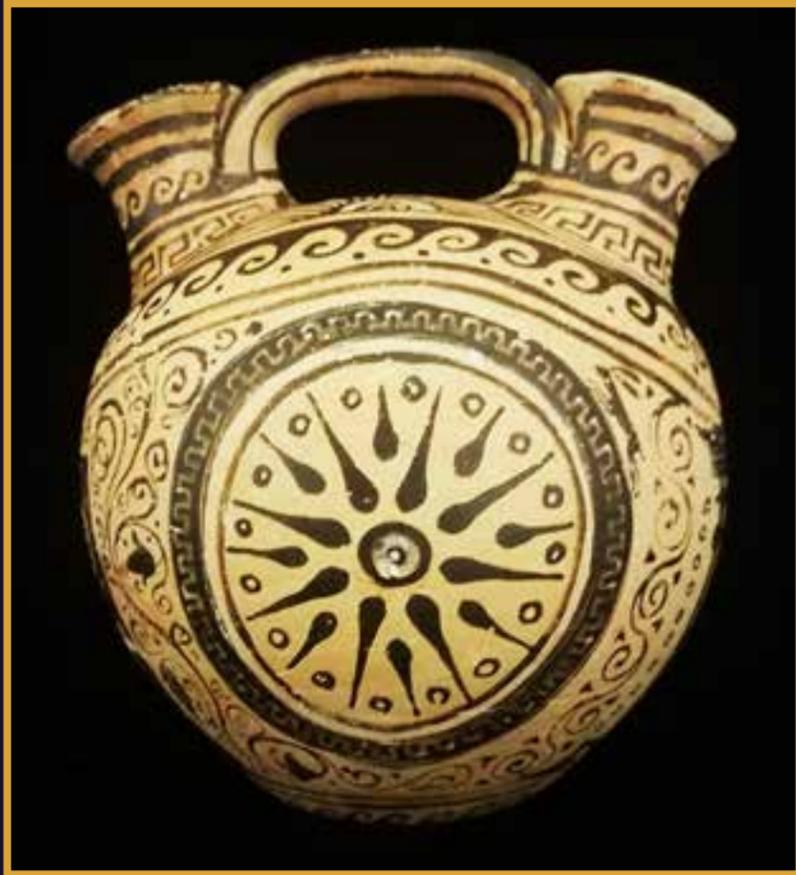
Pottery

Museum purchase (61.5)



European ivy (*Helix hedera*)

Like Cales (above), ancient Tiane was not originally Greek but fell under Greek influence. The city became a prolific pottery production center for the increasingly popular black-gloss ware. “Teano Ware” is the name archaeologists call the various shapes and decoration from the site. This bowl has stylized ivy garlands incised and painted around its interior, together with a circle of stamped decoration. A variety of ivy with a purple berry is common to Europe and the Mediterranean, and its similarity to the grapevine may explain its association with the god Dionysus. Followers of the god wore it in their hair.



Double-Spouted Askos

3rd century BCE

From Daunia (northern Apulia; Italy)

Pottery

Gift of Dorothy and Charles Mullett (84.17)

Dating back to the Bronze Age, the *askos* survived many generations, and this example is yet another form of the shape. Probably a local invention, the double spout allowed both filling of the vessel and straining (or restricting?) the liquid while pouring. *Askoi* are typically associated with wine, but the small size (H: 4.9") of this vessel may indicate a use for oil, perhaps for anointing the deceased before funerals (after which the vessel was placed in the grave?). Ornate decoration includes two interesting motifs: a 16-rayed Macedonian "sun" and a *triskeles* ("three legs"); the meaning of neither is clear in this context. They may have been imported motifs that are purely decorative here.



“Hadra Ware” Hydria

Greek, Hellenistic, 300–275 BCE

From Crete (Greece)

Pottery

Gift of Professor and Mrs. Chester G. Starr in memory of Elsa Nagel and Dorothy and Charles Mullett; Weinberg Fund (87.82)

Though the shape of this vessel is a water jar known as a *hydria*, “Hadra Ware” refers to cremation urns mostly associated with an ancient Alexandrian cemetery located in the El-Hadra neighborhood on the outskirts of the modern city. About 300 Hadra Ware vessels are known, but some come from places other than Egypt and from contexts other than funerary. Hadra Ware vessels are among the few vases of the Hellenistic period that continued the tradition of two-dimensional figural decoration. This example is decorated with wreaths only, but others feature animals, humans, or deities. Once thought to be locally manufactured, clay analysis has shown that Hadra Ware originated in workshops of central Crete.



Lagynos (wine vessel)

Greek, Hellenistic, ca. 200 BCE
Probably from Eastern Mediterranean
Pottery

Museum purchase (59.54)

Distinctly Hellenistic, *lagynoi* are tall and narrow-necked, with minimal decoration. The wreath, a continuous olive branch, is one of several motifs most frequently used on these vessels. The pale, buff clay beneath the white *slip* suggests an eastern origin, perhaps Cyprus. Some surviving examples have names painted on them; perhaps *lagynoi* were wine vessels meant for individual use at symposia. The word *lagynos* comes from the “glug-glug” sound the vessel made while pouring.



Relief Bowl (drinking cup)

Greek, Hellenistic, probably 2nd century BCE

Probably from Asia Minor (Turkey)

Pottery

Museum purchase (61.11)

Moldmade relief bowls were drinking vessels that grew in popularity during the Hellenistic period. Such bowls were made in stamped molds that produced embossed decoration, which imitated luxurious vessels in precious metals. The pottery bowls were thrown on a wheel while inside the mold, which yielded a smooth inner surface but allowed the exterior to take on the mold's patterns. The molds themselves were also made on the wheel and decorated on their interiors with stamps and tools. In addition to floral decoration, this example has a fanciful frieze of Eros figures confronting rampant griffins.



Silver Bowl from the Hildesheim Treasure

Roman, 1st century CE

Berlin, Antikensammlung

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildesheim_Treasure



Small Amphora

Greek, Hellenistic, ca. 300–30 BCE
Possibly from Pergamon (Bergama, Turkey)
Pottery

Museum purchase (61.47)

Figural relief is also known on other types of pottery in addition to the popular cups (above). Floral motifs and charioteers decorate this small, tabletop *amphora*, probably for serving wine. Some painted details completed the decoration.





Plate, Eastern Sigillata A (ESA)

Hellenistic, early 1st century BCE

From Tel Anafa (Israel)

Pottery

University of Missouri excavation (TA69P242)

The introduction of red-slipped ESA pottery in this period marked the end of black-slipped vessels. Improved technology, such as better mixing of the clay and more controlled firing, also produced higher quality pottery. Among the more popular shapes was the plate with upcurving rim. The standardized size and horizontal floor allowed them to be stacked for firing and in pantries. They also suggest a new form of dining in which diners served themselves from larger platters onto individual plates, replacing the tradition of eating directly from communal platters. *Sigillata* refers to the stamped and *rouletted* (circular) designs impressed into the surface. Excavated by the University of Missouri (later joined by the University of Michigan), a villa at Tel Anafa, in northern Israel, may have been among the first places to use ESA pottery. Though the villa's occupants were Phoenicians, ESA pottery was probably made by Greeks in Syria. The new pottery style quickly swept through the Mediterranean.

