[title]Bronze Vessels from the Acropolis and the Definition of the Athenian Production in Archaic and Early Classical Period

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[A-head]Abstract

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The study of a substantial quantity of bronze vessels fragments from the Athenian Acropolis provides an opportunity to define better the characteristics, the chronology, and the diffusion of the Athenian bronze vessel production from the late sixth to the mid-fifth century BC.

[main text]

In the study of Greek bronze vessels of the Archaic period, important comparisons are always offered by the fragments found during the excavations carried out on the Athenian Acropolis. Until now, these fragments were known mainly from some incomplete publications of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.[[1]](#endnote-1) To fill this gap, we studied the bronze vessel fragments found on the Acropolis more systematically and completely. The results of this research[[2]](#endnote-2) make it possible to draw some conclusions about the extent and features of the Athenian bronze vessel production during the Archaic and Classical periods.

Thanks to a fruitful collaboration with the National Archaeological Museum at Athens, it was possible to examine the previously published pieces and to widen the research to include many other fragments housed in the Museum storerooms. In all, 1,135 pieces were cataloged. Most of them are solid fragments such as handles (852) and feet (144), while just a few are complete or at least partially preserved vessels (3 basins).[[3]](#endnote-3)

All of the examined pieces were catalogued according to a new typological scheme for each group of objects, highlighting the presence of basic forms and many formal and decorative variations, allowing for more nuanced observations on the style and recurrence of certain elements. For many pieces, formal characteristics made it possible to attribute them to specific shapes: basins (425 fragments), tripod ring bases (100), kraters(3), hydriai (23), *kalpides* (31), *lebetes* (16), oinochoai(19), paterae(38), plates or lids (17), and situlae (4). For many of the fragments (460 handles in the shape of mobile rings, handle attachments, and feet), the original shape remains undetermined; they could have belonged to any of a variety of vessels.

Referring to the full publication (Tarditi 2016) for comments on individual pieces and on the numerous typological variants that were identified, we prefer here to present our conclusions about the pieces attributed to local Athenian workshops, discussing the features, chronology, and diffusion of this production of bronze vessels.

**[A-head]Bronze Vessels of Athenian Production**

In the group of examined fragments from the Athenian acropolis, more than six hundred pieces (631) have been recognized as Athenian products.[[4]](#endnote-4) For those with decorative elements, this attribution is based on several formal and stylistic features, while for the great quantity of plain fragments or those with basic and easily reproducible decorative motifs, the attribution to a local Athenian production is justified simply by noting the large number of specimens of a given type attested among the materials of the acropolis, significantly more than in any other Greek context or in areas within the Greek cultural sphere.

The stylistic or formal characteristics recognized as typical of the Athenian bronzes have been recognized on several pieces found in other sites (32 from Athenian demes or Attica; 167 from other areas) or of unknown provenience (40).[[5]](#endnote-5) In all, including pieces from the acropolis and those found in other areas, today we can attribute to Athenian workshops at least 870 pieces, enough to get a better definition of the chronology and diffusion of this high-level production.

**[A-head]Style, Shapes, and Decoration**

Athenian bronze vessel production seems to have the same mix of high quality and innovation that characterizes all the handicrafts at Athens in Archaic and Early Classical times. Common traits seem to be the high level of workmanship, outstanding originality, and freedom in the re-interpretation of the usual decorative repertoire.

The basin and the related ring base, usually a tripod, is the most prevalent form, reflecting the importance of this shape in the furniture of Greek sanctuaries and in domestic life, as they were used for many different functions. Peculiar to the Athenian production are some variants in the shape of the handles: extremely numerous are those made from a simple rod, bent at the top to make a triangular form, generally with plain attachments, simply splayed or with a pentagonal section (**fig. 24.1**).[[6]](#endnote-6) This variant is only sporadically attested in other areas, while the many centuries of examples found on the acropolis clearly indicate its local origin.[[7]](#endnote-7) Other variants of handles also seem to be typical of Athens: the tracery-worked type (**fig. 24.2**)[[8]](#endnote-8) or those shaped like plain rectangular plaques (**fig. 24.3**).[[9]](#endnote-9) Yet another type shows a characteristic attachment to the basin, with arched side extensions ending with many variants of the flower or “rosette” motif (**fig. 24.4**).[[10]](#endnote-10)

Very numerous too are feet in shape of lion’s paws: these are either high and decorated at the top with palmettes (**fig. 24.5**), or low and decorated with Ionic capitals. Found always alone, they could have been joined to a variety of objects, such as basins, plates, or wooden boxes.

A notable feature of the Athenian bronze vessels seems to be the taste for figured decoration, which recurs on many different shapes. Examples include basin handles in shape of animals (lions, snakes, and lizards);[[11]](#endnote-11) patera handles in the shape of a kouros or lion (**fig. 24.6**);[[12]](#endnote-12) and oinochoai with a female bust on the upper attachment of the handle.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Many of these decorations were also used on bronze vessels made in other regions at this time, but those from Athens have their own stylistic character, which made it possible to attribute pieces found elsewhere to Athenian production. Very interesting, for example, is the frequent use of the lion motif. Well attested on Archaic Laconian vessels, it also had great success at Athens.[[14]](#endnote-14) It was used generally on attachments of mobile ring handles and on some handles of paterae*.* Particularly interesting are some basin handles of the *podanipter* type in the shape of lions attacking deer or of lions lying opposite a central flower (**fig. 24.7**);[[15]](#endnote-15) these are stylistically distinctive and have a wide geographical spread, from southern Italy to southern Russia.

A generally accepted opinion[[16]](#endnote-16) attributes to Athens the production of hydriaiwith a surmounting vertical handle decorated with a lion’s head on the upper end and a siren on the lower attachment, made from the end of the sixth century or beginning of the fifth down to the fourth century BC. The study of the bronze vessel fragments from the Athenian acropolis was an opportunity to verify this hypothesis, but only one pair of horizontal handles, probably from the same vessel, can be attributed to this kind of hydria*,* calling into question the attribution to Athens of the entire group. A subset of this hydria group,[[17]](#endnote-17) stylistically very homogeneous, is characterized by the presence of a lion’s head also at the lower attachment of the vertical handle: the significant similarities of this smaller group with some of the lions’ heads attributed to Athenian production[[18]](#endnote-18) allow us to propose the same artisanal context.

The Gorgon is another typical motif in figured decorations on Greek Archaic bronze vessels, well attested on Laconian and Corinthian pieces from the late seventh to early sixth century BC.[[19]](#endnote-19) As already noted,[[20]](#endnote-20) many aspects of the production of bronze vessels in Archaic Athens derive from Laconia and Corinth, often mixing stylistic details from both areas. Such is the case with the Gorgoneion, whose Athenian interpretation presents a mix of Laconian (tusks and one fold in the middle of the forehead) and Corinthian traits (hairstyle with short braids ending with an upturned strand and hexagonal face), creating from the middle of the sixth century pieces that are always elegant and organically composed. Examples thereof are the Gorgoneion on a lion’s paw foot from the Athenian acropolis;[[21]](#endnote-21) one that appears on the lower attachments of the handles of a *kados* inthe Steinhardt Collection;[[22]](#endnote-22) one on the handles of a krater in Munich;[[23]](#endnote-23) and one, slightly later, on a situla-krater from Stavroupolis.[[24]](#endnote-24) The Gorgoneion on an amphora-situla in New York;[[25]](#endnote-25) one on two *lebes* attachments; and one on two basin handles from the Athenian acropolis decorated with raised lizards[[26]](#endnote-26) seem more recent, with more humanized faces: they are so similar in style that it is possible they came from the same Attic workshop.

**[A-head]Chronology**

The fragments of bronze vessels found on the Athenian acropolis and attributed to local workshops are not very useful in defining the chronology of the Athenian bronze vessels production, as we lack of any information about their find contexts. The only thing known is that they were discovered during archaeological excavations carried out on the acropolis plateau from the first half of nineteenth century; the fragments were simply collected and stored, sometimes carelessly, in the Acropolis Museum.[[27]](#endnote-27) Stylistic analysis suggests that they are mainly from the Late Archaic or Early Classical period (late sixth and the first half of the fifth century BC); we could not with certainty ascribe any pieces to the late fifth or even the fourth century. As already proposed by André De Ridder,[[28]](#endnote-28) the *terminus ante quem* for the bronze vessels from the excavations of the acropolis could be the mid-fifth century.

The continuity of the Athenian production through the fifth century is well attested by pieces thought to be Athenian that were found in other areas and in different contexts, including in southern Italian tombs.[[29]](#endnote-29) Far less common are finds from stratigraphic contexts: we have just one from Olympia, for which individual finds can be tied to precise excavation data,[[30]](#endnote-30) and a couple of handles from Halae, in Boeotia, of the late sixth–early fifth century.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The quality and development of the Athenian bronze vessel production has been well defined by the recent work of Beryl Barr-Sharrar. She attributes to Athens the production of the famous Dervenikrater(now in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki) and the important series of Type-“A” kraters dating from the beginning of the fifth to the fourth century.[[32]](#endnote-32) The continuity of the Athenian production during the late fifth and fourth centuries is also attested by inventory inscriptions of the Acropolis treasure, made from the second half of the fifth century down to the end of the fourth, which mention many silver and even gold vessels belonging to the goddess.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The production of high quality bronze vessels continued into the fourth century and the Hellenistic period, when it reached a particularly high level of artistry within the refined stylistic *koinè* common to all the cultural centers of the Mediterranean. While it is very difficult to attribute individual pieces to a defined artistic area, it is nonetheless evident that the “Athenian” stylistic influence was felt on every figured decoration in the broader region, reflecting the circulation of styles, iconography, and probably also highly specialized craftsmen.

**[A-head]The Diffusion Area**

Athenian bronze vessels were fairly numerous in some Greek sanctuaries, mainly in the Peloponnese: the greatest quantity comes from Olympia (26 pieces), but they are also well attested in finds from Perachora (17). There were far fewer in Argos (5) and Isthmia (4), which is surprising given their location on the road linking the Peloponnese to Attica (**fig. 24.8**).[[34]](#endnote-34) Athenian bronze vessels have a relatively small spread in mainland Greece, with the exception of the sanctuary of Dodona (8 pieces). Given the close relation between Athens and Delphi in the Archaic period, the lack of finds from this sanctuary is quite unexpected. However, the study of the bronze vessels fragments is still ongoing and it is possible that some change will occur.

For the northern Greece, the most interesting locations in the Archaic period are those in the northern Balkans, as attested by finds from some centers in Macedonia,[[35]](#endnote-35) the northern Aegean,[[36]](#endnote-36) and the interior of the Balkans.[[37]](#endnote-37) In the Peloponnese, Athenian bronze vessels are found only in sanctuaries and are connected with the attendance there of Athenians pilgrims, who were offering choice products from their city. In the northern regions, by contrast, the vessels are found only in burial contexts affiliated with land and sea routes followed by Greek goods, which were distributed and redistributed within trade networks since the sixth century.

The objects found in Macedonia and in the northern Aegean are more recent than those from the sites in the inner Balkans, dating from the beginning of the fifth century. This later chronology seems to revive the hypothesis that already in Archaic times goods were traveling by sea up to Chalkidiki, from whence they were transported overland on long routes to the interior regions,[[38]](#endnote-38) anticipating the future Via Egnatia. Judging from the chronology of the materials, it seems likely that during the Archaic period there was an established trade route by sea from the Peloponnese to Euboea, from there continuing by land: the route toward Chalkidiki must have developed only from the end of the sixth century. The Athenian commercial presence in the area became more intense after the conquest of Lemnos in 510 BC, establishing an outpost for further development of trade to the Black Sea.

Particularly interesting is the presence of a small but significant number of pieces attributable to Athenian production found in several towns along the coast of the Black Sea or just inland: there are two basins with handles in the shape of rectangular plaques—one from Solokha[[39]](#endnote-39) and one from Semibratnye[[40]](#endnote-40)—and at least two amphorae from Peschanoe,[[41]](#endnote-41) but probably also other vases, such as three *kalpides* and a basin on a tripod base.[[42]](#endnote-42) The presence of these objects is certainly related to Athenian interests around the Black Sea, the city’s main source of grain. The conquest of Thracian Chersonese in the mid-sixth century contributed significantly to the development of Athenian trade in this region and to the spread of valuable materials, which were used as articles of exchange particularly among the rich elites of the indigenous communities.[[43]](#endnote-43) The objects found in these regions appear to be contemporary with the Athenian pieces from Macedonian sites and Lemnos: it is likely that their distribution is linked to the presence of the same maritime trade-routes—running from Attica to the northern Aegean and from there up to the Black Sea—which ensured the circulation of high-quality products from Athenian workshops in those countries politically related to or dependent upon Athens.

Looking west, a significant presence of Athenian vessels is confirmed along the Adriatic coast, especially in the Apulian area, with more than twenty pieces. It seems evident that the distribution of Attic vessels (both bronze and ceramic) mainly follows the Adriatic route. In exchange for grain and other foodstuffs, Greek merchants traded their famous figured pottery and valuable bronze banquet furnishings, which were appreciated by the indigenous elites as a symbols of their full adherence to the model of the Greek-type symposium. The only difference between the two classes of materials is that bronze vessels stop at the Piceno, while the pottery travels on to the emporia at the mouth of the Po. Beyond the Marche region, further to the north, there are no finds of Greek bronze vessels, either from Attica or from other centers; they were probably “filtered out” by the Etruscans to protect their own well-established bronze vessel production.[[44]](#endnote-44)

The trade route from the Ionian Gulf to the interior of Basilicata is well attested. Athenian articles have been found at Metaponto and at indigenous settlements such as Botromagno, Braida di Vaglio, and Miglionico.[[45]](#endnote-45) Greek traders in Metaponto appreciated and distributed not only Attic figured pottery but also some fine examples of bronze vessels, not just Attic: from Metaponto, these pieces were distributed up the Bradano River.

Fewer examples are found along the Tyrrhenian coast of southern Italy and Sicily, from which we have just a few pieces of relatively modest quality: some pateraewith handles in shape of kouroi; a handful of precious pieces, such as the krater from Agrigento[[46]](#endnote-46) and from Locri;[[47]](#endnote-47) and the *podanipter* handle in the shape of lions attacking an animal, a fragment of which was found in Locri.[[48]](#endnote-48) We may suppose that, here too, the Etruscans exercised a “monopoly” on fine bronze production, especially from the end of the sixth century. At that time, the spread of Laconian and Corinthian bronze vessels was interrupted-- after they had been well attested during the middle decades of the sixth century--and Athenian production began to diminish. The distribution of Athenians pieces in southern Italy seems to stop altogether in the second half of the fifth century, probably reflecting a change in trade routes. However, exports of Athenian bronze vessels continued to reach the northern Aegean and Black Sea area, following in the wake of Athenian military and colonial activity and the onset of business relationships that could also ensure vital supplies of grain to Athens.

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2. Tarditi 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a complete list with inventory numbers, see Tarditi 2016, appendix 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tarditi 2016, appendix 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a complete list see Tarditi 2016, appendixes 3 and 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Tarditi 2016, Type Bh.2.I.A–B. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tarditi 2016, 243–45. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Tarditi 2016, Type Bh.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Tarditi 2016, Type Bh.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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11. Tarditi 2016, Type Bh.3.II. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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13. Tarditi 2016, Type Oh.1.A. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Tarditi 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Tarditi 2016, Type Bh.3.II.C.a–b. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gauer 1981; Vokotopoulou 1997, nos. 149–50; Tarditi 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Dodona, Athens, Archaeological Museum, Carapanos Collection inv. 22 (Carapanos 1878, 48, no. 22; tab. XVI, no. 4); Paris, Louvre, inv. Br 4643, catalogue on line; New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 1981.11.23, catalogue on line; Toledo (OH), Toledo Museum of Art, inv. 1964.125, catalogue on line. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I.e., inv. 7099, 7103, 7104, 7105, and 19997 from the Acropolis (Tarditi 2016, catalogue). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Stibbe 2000, 62-64; Tarditi 2016, 313–14. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Stibbe 2000, 57–99; Stibbe 2006, 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Tarditi 2016, catalogue, inv. 7080. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Stibbe 2000, 153–55. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Munich, Antikensammlung, inv. 4262. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Thessaloniki, Archaeological Museum inv. 5124. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Metropolitan Museum of Art inv. 60.11.2a–b, thought also by Stibbe to be Attic. Stibbe 2006, 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Tarditi 2016, type La.3 (inv. 7107 and 7116) and type Bh.3.II.D (inv. 7128 and 21463). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Tarditi 2016, chapter 1, 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. De Ridder 1896, xxiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. For example, the Princely Tomb at Sala Consilina and the tombs from the Rutigliano necropolis, of the late sixth to early fifth century BC, and those from Cavallino, Ginosa, Valenzano, Miglionico, Padula, and Botromagno, all dated mainly to the fifth century BC: for bibliography Tarditi 2016, 317. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
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31. Goldman 1940, 415. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Barr-Sharrar 2008, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Harris 1995, 1–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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36. Myrina on the island of Lemnos: nine handles and reel for *lebetes* (Marchiandi 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Trebeništa: three tripod bases (Filow 1927, 69, nos. 83 and 84; Vulić 1930, fig. 14; Novi Pazar: one *podanipter* (Vasić 2003, 132, figs. 92–94); Stobi: a basin handle (Stibbe 2003, 118, fig. 76). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Stibbe 2003, 89–110. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Boltrik, Fialko, and Treister 2011, fig. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Bilimovitch 1970, 132–35. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Reeder 2000, 193–204; Barone 2007; Treister 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Kalpides* and basin on tripod base(fig. 89)es of Corinthian Gorgionseum ( (ig.8, 2-3)eum (tropolita very and the lion protomeequal pieces- the athenian ar bead: Reeder 2000, 192–93; 195, no. 93; Treister 2010, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See articles in Trofinova 2007; Bosi 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
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