

WHO MADE THE POTS? PRODUCTION IN THE MIDDLE HELLADIC SOCIETY *

My aim here is to ask not when and from where, but rather how and who - and I am afraid that I am not going to come up with any answers. The discussion is based on the Middle Helladic pottery in the Argolis, although I know that for many the Middle Helladic is the poor, isolated, uninteresting transport route between the evolving complexity of the EH and the rich splendours of the shaft grave period. But, after all, it was during the Middle Helladic period that many of the innovations were introduced that were further developed during by the Mycenaeans. It is easy to underevaluate the complexity of the period from the heights of Mycenae or the House of the Tiles, but suffice it to say here that exchange in the Middle Helladic period consisted of many trade networks on various levels ¹. Studies of the Middle Helladic trade have concentrated on the interregional exchange ²: the Western string ³, the route Kythera-Argolis ⁴, Aigina ⁵ as the hub of several networks. Regional and sub-regional networks are less explored, and production is usually passed over very quickly. Pots seem to produce themselves and pass traits and styles to each other without the mundane intervention of humans.

Attempts to define production modes include models ⁶ which monitors parameters concerning economy (such as time and number involved, level of organisation, availability of

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- 1 As seen from the varying pottery assemblages, including quantities of imported material, in the contemporary sites of Lerna, Asine, and Tsoungiza, cf. J. RUTTER, "Review of the Aegean Prehistory II: The Prepalatial Bronze Age of the Southern and Central Greek Mainland", *AJA* 97 (1993), 745-797, esp. 780f.; also C. ZERNER, "New Perspectives on Trade in the Middle and Early Late Helladic Periods on the Mainland", in C.W. ZERNER & P. ZERNER eds., *Wace and Blegen: Pottery as Evidence for Trade in the Aegean Bronze Age, 1939-1989* (1993), 39-56; J. RUTTER, "Pottery Groups from Tsoungiza of the End of the Middle Bronze Age", *Hesperia* 59 (1990), 375-458, esp. 453f. (Tsoungiza); G. NORDQUIST, *A Middle Helladic Village. Asine in the Argolid* (1987); S. DIETZ, *The Argolid at the Transition to the Mycenaean Age. Studies in the Chronology and Cultural Development in the Shaft Grave Period* (1991).
- 2 What Rice calls "macroprovinces" as opposed to "microprovinces": P. RICE, "Evolution of specialized Pottery Production, a Trial Model", *Current Anthropology* 22 (1981), 219-240.
- 3 J.L. DAVIS, "Minos and Dexithea: Crete and the Cyclades in the Later Bronze Age", *Papers in Cycladic Prehistory (UCLAMon 14, 1979)*, 143-57. For further references, see ID., "Review of Aegean Prehistory I: The Islands of the Aegean", *AJA* 96 (1992), 699-756, esp. 706-708.
- 4 C.W. ZERNER and J. RUTTER, "Early Hellado-Minoan Contacts", in *Thalassocracy*, 776-780 with references.
- 5 RUTTER (*supra* n. 1, 1993), 776-780 with references.
- 6 See e.g. S.E. VAN DER LEEUW, *Studies in the Technology of Ancient Pottery* (1976); ID., "Pottery Manufacture: Some Complications for the Study of Trade", *Pots and Potter. Current Approaches in Ceramic Archaeology (UCLAMon 24, 1984)*, 55-70; ID., "Towards a Study of the Economics of Pottery Making", *Ex Horreo* 4 (1977), 68-76; ID., "Dust to Dust: a Transformational View of the Ceramic Cycle", *Many Dimensions of Pottery. Ceramics in Archaeology and Anthropology (CINGVLA 7, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Albert Egges van Gitten Instituut voor prae- en protohistorie 1984)*, 135-162. Van der Leeuw's model has been used with modifications by C. Perlès for Neolithic Greece: C. PERLÈS, "Systems

raw materials, seasonality, status etc) as well as technology (such as techniques, tools, kilns, range of pottery etc). The models are all evolutionary - production is seen as evolving from simple handmade household production for own consumption to complex industrial production for commercial purposes. The states in these models are of course to be considered as points in a continuum and since various scholars work with different material they naturally tend to emphasise and further develop the states that are important to their material and period.

It should be stressed that a society may have several simultaneous modes of production; the existence of technologically advanced modes does not exclude the existence of the technologically very simple. Pots for exchange are, according to ethnographic comparanda, produced in all but the very simplest household production, where the products are also consumed by the household. Pottery production (as well as textile production) on a domestic scale has also usually been considered as a female concern, a production on an amateur level, technologically and aesthetically simple and crude and of little economic importance.

Household industry, the next step on the ladder of development, can be defined as the production of the amateur-woman household potter who, using simple technology, produces a few pots extra for barter within the immediate surroundings. But household industry may, in fact, also be a mode of production where the pottery is the major source of income for a household⁷ often in agriculturally poor areas. The pots are produced for trade, marketed through markets or itinerant salespersons. This type of production, then, is of fundamental economic importance for the producers themselves.

Not many attempts have, as far as I know, been made to evaluate the extent or importance of household production or industry in Middle Helladic Greece⁸. Most scholars seem to assume that pottery was produced by only professional specialists. The base for this theory is probably that since pottery made in the household, per definition, is technologically simple, it follows that technologically qualified pots must have been produced elsewhere. And since many of the Middle Helladic pots are of a reasonable decent and consistent quality, they could not have been produced by amateurish women potters in a domestic mode of production.

Which way does the production take from the household level according to our models? It may involve part-time specialists within a site, village industry, on behalf of all or some economic unities of the site, the products being partly consumed on the site, partly used in exchange systems. This seems to be what most archaeologists mean with "local production".

But who then made the pots for the major networks? Often the term "workshop" is used in this connection, i.e. an industry involving some investments in physical installations and organisation as well as more or less full-time (male) specialists, making pots specifically for the trade networks. But which and how much of these parameters are needed in order that we can talk of a "workshop"? The question is: how did a workshop function in the Middle Helladic society? As the property of individuals, entrepreneurs working independently of the village society and authority, or dependent on social units such as villages or elite groups? It

of Exchange and Organization of Production in Neolithic Greece", *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 5 (1992), 115-164. Cf. RICE (*supra* n. 2). Similar models have been put forward also by other scholars, e.g. for the Roman period, D.P.S. PEACOCK, *Pottery in the Roman World: an Ethnoarchaeological Approach* (1982), and northern China of 2500-2000 B.C., A. P. UNDERHILL, "Pottery Production in Chiefdoms. The Longshan Period in Northern China", *World Archaeology* 23 (1991), 12-27, to mention just a couple of examples.

7 For examples see e.g. PEACOCK (*supra* n. 6), 17-26.

8 H.B. Lewis discusses the early Mycenaean pottery production in *The Manufacture of Early Mycenaean Pottery* (Diss. Univ. of Minnesota 1983), UMI no. 8318093.

seems to me unlikely that any production could take place outside the basic social organisation of a society, which for much of the period was the small site, the village.

There are many examples of production aimed at trade being produced at the village level. The production may take place in one big site workshop, with large kilns and special installations, but might as well be a form of household production: small "workshops" or workplaces in several or every household, with substantial groups of the population, women, children and men, working in many small production units, on a more or less part-time basis, with a certain seasonality depending on the agricultural year. In the latter case the special installations would be few.

Groups of sites may concentrate on the production of certain goods (on the basis of things such as availability of raw-material, workforce, markets and know-how)⁹. Examples of such household and village production from fairly recent times in my own part of the world are furniture production, knitting and embroidery¹⁰. Such products are then often seen by the consumers as the product of one workshop.

A pottery example of this is the handmade dark burnished Jutland pottery, which in its heyday in the 18th-beginning 19th century was traded all over northern Europe as far as to Vienna from its production region in Denmark. The pots filled a number of utilitarian purposes, not only as cooking pots. This pottery was produced from the medieval period onwards as a household industry by women in an agriculturally poor area of Jutland¹¹. The only constructed installation device needed for the production was a smoking chamber; otherwise the workshop consisted of a wooden board over the knees, a cloth for finishing the rims while turning the vessel in the hands and thus giving it a wheel-turned appearance and a few tools. The pots were fired in bonfires of peat. In more recent times iron pans were used to put over the pots during the firing, in order to get a reducing firing condition. Earlier the pots were put inside each other with the largest upside down above the others.

In this case the products were identified by style and technique to their production units by the producers themselves and a few connoisseurs, but seen as a more or less unified class of goods by the consumers. In other cases neighbouring villages produce similar pots, but market them in totally different areas, so as to avoid competition¹².

The distinctions between household production, household industry and individual workshop or village industry thus are fuzzy to say the least. How should we describe the

9 See PEACOCK (*supra* n. 6), 17-19 for examples from Corsica, Spain and Portugal.

10 E.g. chairs from Östervåla, Uppland, knitting from Halland (part-time speciality of both men and women) and embroidery from Hälsingland, see A. M. NYLÉN, *Swedish handicraft* (1976), esp. 345. A chair from the village industries in the parish Lindome, outside Gothenburg, was recently offered for sale by Sotheby's New York for 3 000 to 5 000 US dollars (report by M. Artsman in *Svenska Dagbladet* 29/3 1994).

11 A. STEENBERG, "Handmade Pottery in Jutland", *Antiquity* 14 (1940), 148-153; ID., "Primitive Black Pottery in Jutland", *Folk-liv. Acta Ethnologica et Folkloristica Europaea* 3 (1939), 113-146. For a short description, see also PEACOCK (*supra* n. 6), 18f. The commercial success of the Jutland pottery did not mean any high status for either the pots or the potters. STEENBERG (*supra*, this note) cites a verse from *Die Heimat* 28 (1918), 11:

Kennst du das Land, von Gott veracht,
wo man die schwarzen Töpfe brennt,
wo man aus Holz die Schuhe macht,
und wo man Smör die Butter nennt?

For similar production methods, see O.S. RYE, *Pottery Technology. Principles and Reconstruction* (1981), 72, fig. 57, an example from New Guinea.

12 The Corsican potters from three neighbouring villages sold their produce in totally different areas, to avoid competition, PEACOCK (*supra* n. 6), 18, citing I. CHIVA and OJALVO, "La poterie corse à l'amiante", *Arts et traditions populaires* 7 (1959), 203-227.

Jutland potters? It is more a question of scale and emphasis of the production than any strict categories.

Mobile production units or itinerant craftsmen, I mention only in passing, would mostly also have had a base somewhere ¹³, as well as a route or network where they knew they could find buyers for their skill and avoid both competition and to infringe on the rights of other mobile craftsmen, which would be a potential conflict risk ¹⁴.

In discussions of production aimed at trade, technological innovations are stressed, such as the fast wheel, which enables an increased speed of production, which leads to increasing commercialisation, establishment of workshops and large-scale industry. This development is usually ascribed to men, with references to ethnographic parallels. I doubt this simple model. As Rita Wright formulated it in her recent interesting article: "At the heart of this reconstruction is the assumption that labour extensive activities with low yields are engaged in by (all) women, whereas labor intensive activities are innovative and lead to commercialization, the (exclusive) domain of men" ¹⁵.

But if we accept the common view that women were the potters in the household production, while the men took over and developed the technology and the commerce, the question is: how did the men learn to make pottery?

In pottery studies the interest is often concentrated to the specialist "potter", which is usually identified with the one person actually shaping the pot. It is, however, easy to find many examples where women are the professional potters in commercial production (as in the case of the Jutland pots). Here must be mentioned also one problem with the ethnographic studies, as Wright ¹⁶ and others have shown, is the well known invisibility of women. Another aspect is the term "specialist", which is usually equalled with "professional", that is a person who spends her full time doing one thing for a living. This seems to me rather an anachronistic view. Even the skilled master potters in the workshops at Thrapsano on Crete traditionally combined a few months of potting each year with agriculture which was the base for their economy ¹⁷. Instead we could better define the word "specialist" as a person of uncommon skill in one field, which she uses when appropriate or needed, whether on a full time basis or not ¹⁸.

But production involves a lot more than one potter. One and the same vessel may have been worked on by several individuals before it is finished ¹⁹. In many cases when there are male potters shaping the pots, women and children are regularly involved in the everyday production, from the collection of fuel to the painting and decoration of the products ²⁰. It is true that this work then often is considered unskilled and unimportant (even if the decoration

13 R. HAMPE and A. WINTER, *Bei Töpfern und Töpferinnen in Kreta, Messenien und Zypern* (1962); ID., *Bei Töpfern und Ziegeln in Süditalien, Sizilien und Griechenland* (1965); M. VOYATSOGLU, "The Potters of Thrapsano", *Ceramic Review* 24 (1973), 13-16, reports that the vendemia of the itinerant Thrapsano guilds lasted the summer months, mid-May to mid-September.

14 PEACOCK (*supra* n. 6), 18; HAMPE and WINTER (*supra* n. 13); VOYATSOGLU (*supra* n. 13), 13.

15 R.P. WRIGHT, "Women's Labor and Pottery Production in Prehistory", *Engendering Archaeology. Women and Prehistory* (1991), 194-223, esp. 195.

16 WRIGHT (*supra* n. 15).

17 VOYATSOGLU (*supra* n. 13), 13.

18 The difference in definitions is reminiscent of the differences between men and women, as defined by modern psychology: men tends to concentrate on one thing at a time, while women easier can handle ten things at the same time.

19 C. KRAMER, "Ceramic Ethnoarchaeology", *Am. Rev. Anthropol.* 14 (1985), 77-102. Six craftsmen with clearly defined roles made up a guild of itinerant craftsmen of Thrapsano, Crete, in 1970: VOYATSOGLU (*supra* n. 13), 13.

20 WRIGHT (*supra* n. 15).

is important for the marketing of the pots), but this bias should be avoided by scholars studying the production in question. Discussions of the change of pottery production from pure household to fully commercialized production would, I think, benefit from more studies of production ways and methods. Maybe we may even get a better understanding of men's ways of learning the pottery trade. If many people, men and women, regularly are involved in the production on all levels, it is easier to understand that changing social and economic factors also give rise to changes, including those of gender roles, in production organisation.

I am not arguing that all Middle Helladic pottery production took place in a household industry situation, but rather that such a production mode, simple in organisation and installations, can be the source for technologically well made commercial goods, made by people that are specialists in the sense that they master the ceramic technology needed. Such a technology could well have functioned for part of the pottery production during the Middle Helladic period, while other pottery clearly are the products of more organized workshops. Certainly much more work is needed in order to begin to understand production in the Middle Bronze Age village society.

But the problem remains: how can we identify production? Installations, raw materials, tools, mistakes, scraps, all the traditional workshop remains are seldom found, and if much production was on the household or village level little may have existed and even less survived. There remains the pottery itself. Style and decoration are perhaps the parameters that are most often used for purposes of identifying workshops, perhaps in analogy to Classic pottery. But I would suggest that for much prehistoric pottery technical details of manufacture, ways of attaching handles and bases, and in firing the finished pot and building the pot in the first place, are of equal or even larger interest. All these aspects Carol Zerner in a recent paper has grouped together as "potting traditions" ²¹.

For example, our classifications into handmade and wheel-thrown actually say very little of what production processes are involved. The terms hide a number of techniques, which by themselves and in various combinations may be possible to ascribe to producers or workshops. For example, late Middle Helladic Aeginetan gold mica kitchen jars seem to have been produced by a combination of handmade body and an upper part and rim which seem to have been made on a turning device, probably on a turn-table (see illustration). On the previously mentioned Jutland pottery the wheel-turned effect of the rims was produced by shaping the rim with a piece of wet cloth while the pot was slowly turned in the hand. Similar techniques are known also from other parts of the world ²². Combinations of handmade techniques with the true wheel is also found. Pottery from Iron Age II in Jordan has first been coil built, then turned on a wheel to thin out the form ²³. More studies, through various analytical techniques, such as radiography ²⁴, may be useful for these purposes.

Let's now return to Middle Helladic Peloponnese to look at the two main groups of pottery, outputs of specialised production centres for the trade, as seen by *e.g.* their potter's marks. These are the Lustrous Decorated Ware ²⁵ produced in the southern Peloponnese and

21 ZERNER (*supra* n. 1).

22 See O.S. RYE (*supra* n. 11), fig. 57, for an example from Pakistan. Rye (*supra* n. 11, 66-83) also gives a good overview of various handmade and wheeled primary forming techniques, and how to recognize them.

23 W. GLANZMAN, "Xerographic Examination of Pottery Manufacturing Techniques: a Test Case from the Baq'ah Valley, Jordan", *MASCA Journal* 2:6 (1983), 163-169.

24 GLANZMAN (*supra* n. 23); C. CARR, "Advances in Ceramic Radiography and Analyses: Application and Potentials", *Journal of Archaeological Science* 17 (1990), 13-34, esp. 15-18; RYE (*supra* n. 11).

25 Lustrous Decorated Ware: C.W. ZERNER, *The Beginning of the Middle Helladic Period at Lerna* (Diss. Univ. of Cincinnati, 1978), UMI no. 79-04772; EADEM, "Middle Helladic and Late Helladic I Pottery

the various gold mica wares from Aegina, defined by Zerner and others ²⁶. Both types are mainly made in traditional handmade techniques up to the Late Helladic period. Such conservatism, not unusual among potters, may well be a conscious and rational strategy ²⁷: some clays are better for handmade production than wheel-throwing and are well suited to the function of the pot. To refine them for wheel-throwing would be a waste of time and energy and give as result a worse product. Also, to wheel-throw coarse pots must be rather destructive to your fingertips, at least to start with. So if the production methods and organisation was well suited to the clays and the potter's purpose, and enough pots could be produced by these methods to meet consumer demand with the help of available transport means, why change?



Interior of an Aeginetan Gold Mica jar with a handbuilt lower and an upper part and rim probably made on a turn-table. From the Asine collection, Uppsala, As. no. 3384. Photo: O. Lindman.

Both types of ware then, have a traditional technique. In no case there is a reason to imagine a radically different or new type of production. This does not mean that the production was isolated and backwards. Lustrous Decorated ware follows, as Zerner ²⁸ has shown, the West Cretan styles, i.e. keeps in touch with modern styles. The pots show a technologically good and even quality with several "tricks", such as the way of fastening handles. The production site or sites is not known. The Aeginetan pottery also keeps in touch with modern trends, this time the stylistic development in the Cyclades, but it also is found in several various types and functions: as kitchen ware in e.g. the typical wide-mouthed jars, in the form of matt-painted and plain pottery as well as monochrome, usually red, burnished, in large quantities ²⁹. The quantities alone would imply several workshops.

from Lerna", *Hydra* 2 (1986), 66-68; EADEM, "Middle Helladic and Late Helladic Pottery from Lerna: part II", *Hydra* 4 (1988), 1-10, esp. 6-10, figs. 24-41; EADEM (*supra* n. 1).

26 Aeginetan gold mica ware: C.W. ZERNER (*supra* n. 25, 1978), esp. 148-150, 156-158; EADEM (*supra* n. 25, 1986), 58-74, esp. 64-66; EADEM (*supra* n. 25, 1988), 1-10, esp. 1-5, figs 1-23; EADEM (*supra* n. 1). See also J. MARAN, *Kiapha Thiti: Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen II.2: 2. Jt. v. Chr.: Keramik und Kleinfunde* (1992), 179-199, with further references.

27 P. RICE, "Change and Conservatism in Pottery-producing Systems", in S.E. VAN DER LEEUW & A.C. PRITCHARD eds, *The Many Dimensions of Pottery* (1984), 231-288.

28 ZERNER (*supra* n. 25).

29 For shapes, see ZERNER (*supra* n. 1 and n. 25).

But were the workshops in which these two pottery groups were produced of the same type? Are they products of the same kind of organisation and dependent on similar authorities? The regions of production were very different: the Lustrous Decorated ware from Southern Peloponnese perhaps in inland conditions, in an economy probably depending on agriculture, and whichever production could supplement it. Aegina, in contrast was the hub of probably several trade networks, with a production also in millstones and with a settlement which was proto-urban in character, a densely settled centre within a fortification.

The production in these two production localities would probably have been of different character. The Lustrous Decorated ware situation corresponds more to the production which is found as important supplement to the economy in areas of poor agriculture, at least initially, and perhaps as a type of village industry. In Aegina the economic importance of the pottery is somewhat difficult to evaluate. What was its relation to the millstone industry, to trading activities and income from transit trade? But in any case, the situation on Aegina suggests rather the existence of proper workshops, specialised in the sense that they concentrated on one type of Aeginetan ware. Such workshops would be the concerns of groups of the population, *e.g.* kinship groups/families, and more or less closely connected to the commercial centre at Kolonna. It is probably not a coincidence that Kolonna is one of the few sites where pottery kilns have been found.

It is interesting to note that throughout the Middle Helladic period the leading pottery industries in the Peloponnese are neither technologically nor (probably) organisationally very advanced. Rather, they are based on a knowledge and perfection of traditional techniques. Although more modern and technologically more advanced pottery, *i.e.* wheel-thrown, is being produced in the region, it did not threaten the two pottery producing centres, until the establishment of the large economic centres in the Late Helladic period. It does not seem that the availability of a technological refinement itself had any major impact on the Middle Helladic pottery production. The change to a mainly wheel-thrown pottery production in the Late Helladic period may instead be related to factors such as the appearance of new markets and new trade routes that was a consequence of the emerging Mycenaean society.

Gullög NORDQUIST