

SHAPES, STYLES, AND TERMS

Pottery was the super stuff of the ancient world! With little access to glass and no plastic, a waterproof material that could be made into any shape was perfect for every carrying, storing, and serving situation.

Pottery is created from clay mixed with water. Clay occurs naturally in the ground in many areas. Potters refine the clay in water and then shape it with their hands or on a potter's wheel. They might add decoration with slip – very runny coloured clay – or by making incisions with a tool. Once it is ready, the soft clay will be heated at a very high temperature, with the potter controlling how much air gets to it while it heats. The heat causes the clay to fix hard and makes the object waterproof.

Each patch of clay has its own chemical make-up that gives it a particular colour and makes it behave in a particular way. That chemical make-up has a distinctive chemical signature (such as more or fewer iron particles). These can be identified with a microscope. Sometimes it is even clear enough to see with the eye. Archaeologists use this sort of analysis to confirm where a vase was made.

"Pots" and "vases" are essentially the same thing. Ancient Greek pots are more often called "vases" because talking and writing about them developed amongst art historians, who have traditionally called skilfully produced clay containers "vases".

Between the eighth and third centuries BCE, skilled potters in the Greek world and beyond created pottery for their own communities and for export. Greek potters made vases according to a range of widely used shapes. This volume focuses on vases made in the following shapes: amphora, hydria, and bell krater.

Shapes

Amphora

An amphora (plural amphoras in English, or amphorae, from Latin; *amphoreis* in Greek) is a two-handled, lidded vase with many uses. The name comes from ἀμφί (*amphí*) – ‘on both sides’ (like “amphitheatre” or “amphibian”), and φέρω (*phérō*) – ‘carry’ (as in “pheromone”). The handles and lid made the amphora perfect for carrying or storing goods such as wine, oil, honey, grain, or olives.

Amphorae come in different sizes and with some variety in their shape. Rough, undecorated ones with pointed bottoms were used for transporting goods over long distances, sometimes on boats. Finer, decorated ones were in use in the home. These include the belly amphora, with the handles on a single-piece vase which is wide in the middle and narrower at the top and bottom. We also find the neck amphora, which has a similar narrow-wide-narrow shape, but with a separate section added to extend the neck of the vase upwards.

You will find the amphora shape in the *Heracles and the Erymanthian Boar* animation: <https://www.panoply.org.uk/heracles-and-erymanthian-boar>.

Hydria

The hydria (plural hydriai) is another common shape. The hydria’s name comes from its use – carrying water (ὑδωρ; *hýdōr*). These vases have a rounded body and a neck which either sits atop a curved upper body or between wide shoulders. Water is heavy, so to lift or pour the water carefully, a hydria has three handles: horizontal handles on either side for carrying, and a vertical one on the back for pouring. The third handle means that there is no space for decoration on the back of the vase, so we tend to find one image on the front, and perhaps one on the shoulder.

Hydriai are often fairly large as it was efficient to bring as much water as a person could carry in one go between the water source and the home. We know from the images on vases that fetching water from a spring or a well was typically a woman’s task. A hydria might sometimes be used for other purposes, such as collecting voting ballots or holding a deceased person’s ashes.

You will find hydriai in the animations *Sappho Fragment 44: Hector and Andromache – A Wedding at Troy* (<https://www.panoply.org.uk/sappho>), *Libation* (<https://www.panoply.org.uk/libation>), and *Iris: Rainbow Goddess* (<https://www.panoply.org.uk/iris-rainbow-goddess>).

Bell Krater

The krater's name also comes from its purpose, being related to the verb 'to mix' (κεράννυμι; *keránnymi*). Kraters were used at symposiums for mixing water and wine together. A krater has a wide belly, a wide mouth, and two side handles. The bell krater has a rounded, bell-shaped body, with two horizontal handles half way up the sides. Volute kraters, column kraters, and kalyx kraters have slightly different shaped bellies and larger handles in different positions. Kraters might also be used as grave markers or containers for ashes.

You will find a bell krater in the *Dionysus* animation: <https://www.panoply.org.uk/dionysus>. The decoration on the *Dionysus* bell krater includes an image of a kalyx krater.

Styles

Geometric

Geometric ware takes its name from a style of pottery that was produced between ca. 900 and 700 BCE, especially in Athens. These vases featured geometric patterns painted in black slip onto the lighter-coloured clay. The Greek key, also known as the meander, was the most common geometric pattern, although many others were used too, thought to have their origins in textile patterns. As this style progressed, artists began to depict animals, such as deer, goats, and horses. People began to be depicted with geometric shapes influencing the representation of their bodies, such as torsos represented by triangles. Processions and mourning scenes are the most common scenes in this style, although sailing ships and battles can also be seen.

Black-Figure

On black-figure vases, the vase has been created in a reddish-orange clay, and black slip has been added onto the surface of the clay to form the decorative figures. Details have been scratched into the black slip with a sharp tool, and other spots of red or white slip may have been used too. These figures are more realistic than the geometric figures, although the manner of representing people and animals is still very stylised. Scenes from mythology and of warfare were common in this style.

Red-Figure

On red-figure vases, the decorative figures stand out in the bright red of the clay against a black slip background. The image would be lightly sketched onto the clay first, then that sketch would be surrounded by black slip. More black slip and a sharp tool would be used to add further details. Scenes of mythology and warfare continued to be popular in this style, although depictions of everyday life now became more common too.

Who's on That Vase?!

Ancient Greek vases show an enormous range of scenes. That said, some myths, characters, and scenarios crop up more than others. The Ancient Greeks had many images of their gods and goddesses on their vases. We also see a lot of mythical heroes, such as Heracles, who became a god after performing his Twelve Labours, and Theseus, whom we often see fighting the Minotaur. Scenes from the Trojan War give us many images of Achilles and Hector, Odysseus, Paris and Helen, Memnon – King of the Ethiopians, Penthesilea – Queen of the Amazons, and many more. This volume contains guidance on how you can recognise some of these key figures.

Over time, scenes of everyday life became more popular. Particularly in red-figure ware, we find scenes of sacrifices, weaving, musicians, symposiums, theatre, sex, politics, sport, child care and play, and animals. Warfare never fell out of fashion as a subject for decoration. Occasionally we even see vases with scenes of people making vases! It is fairly unusual to see images of particular historic individuals. One notable exception to this is the poet Sappho. She was such a household name that people enjoyed having vases with her image. You can find an early example of a Sappho vase in this volume (see p. 70).

Other Terms

Attic: This refers to vases made in and around Athens. The name is taken from the Athenians' territory, Attica.

Apulian: Many Athenian vases were transported to Italy, where there was a big Greek population. Many communities in Italy began to produce their own pottery in the Greek style, including those in Apulia. Vases from Apulia are known as "Apulian".

Beazley: In this volume, you will see vases referred to by the number that they have in their museum catalogue and by a second number – its Beazley number. Sir John Beazley was the Lincoln Professor of Classical Archaeology and Art at the University of Oxford from 1925 to 1956. He used stylistic analysis to identify the work of Athenian vase-painters. His collection of photographs of vases formed the Beazley Archive. That grew into the online Beazley Archive Pottery Database, the world's largest database of Ancient Greek vases. This immense collection, operated by the University of Oxford, provides a valuable resource for studying ancient pottery. Vases in the database have a "Beazley" number as well as their local catalogue number, making them easier to keep track of. You can explore the database at <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/pottery>.



Figure 11: A recreation of someone decorating the *Heracles and the Erymanthian Boar* black-figure amphora. Image by Steve K. Simons. First published in Elizabeth Hale and Miriam Riverlea, *Classical Mythology and Children's Literature... An Alphabetical Odyssey*, Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2022. Compare it with a photograph of the vase on p. 195.