

A Beginner's Guide to Greek Pottery

This guide is designed to give basic information on the identification of Greek pottery in small collections in Britain. It gives basic information on the form and function of different pots commonly found in British collections, using objects from the British Museum as examples. To gain further information on each of the objects used as examples in this guide, search the object number under each of the objects in the British Museums Online Collection Database: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/>. All images are © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#) licence. Other Museum databases are available, but the British Museum's is the most comprehensive for this type of material.

Where was it made?

Greek pottery was made in a variety of different cities (the Greek word being 'poleis'). Each of the different cities produced pottery in different styles, and from different clays. Given the different colours of the clays found in each of these cities, pots are easily identifiable based on their colour. The most common types are listed below.

Athenian

Pottery from Athens is characterised by the distinctive 'red' and 'black' colour of its decoration. The 'black-gloss' of Athenian pottery is particularly hard and shiny, and of an overall high quality.

Athenian pots can be decorated in three main way:

- 1) Black gloss ware - where the vessel is entirely painted black with no ornamental or figural decoration
- 2) Black Figure - where the figures are painted with black slip, and details then incised through the paint
- 3) Red Figure - where the background is painted with black slip, and the figures left bare, leaving them the red colour of clay.

Black Figure is earlier than Red Figure, which we think was invented around 520BC.



Black Figure Athenian fragment, c. 550BC
1886,0401.1195



Athenian Black gloss cup, c. 420BC
1864,1007.1579



Corinthian

Corinthian pottery is characterised by a yellow/creamy colour of the clay. The figures are always painted in black (Black Figure), and are often adorned with 'secondary slip', including red and purples.

The most common types of Corinthian pots are small vessels. Corinth was a major exporter of perfume in the ancient world, and these vessels were usually used for perfumed oils produced in the city.

The most common type of vessel is the aryballos (round spherical pots with wide flat mouths), but other shapes including cups (the technical term being kotyle), and jugs (oinochoe) are also common.

Corinthian pottery is commonly decorated with animals and hybrid creatures, but images of soldiers (so-called hoplites) are also common, and distinguished by their round shields.



Corinthian aryballos, c. 600BC
1888,0601.651



Corinthian kothon, c. 550BC
1772,0320.500

East Greek

Pottery made in 'East Greece' (the area of modern day Türkiye and its nearby islands) is characterised by a pink clay colour, which is typically painted over with a white or creamy slip. East Greek pottery is typically decorated (like Corinthian pottery) with animal scenes, and hybrid creatures.

The most common animal to be found on East Greek pottery are goats with long horns, leading to the term 'Wild Goat Style' being used for early forms of this pottery.



East Greek fragment, c. 600BC
1888,0601.557.c

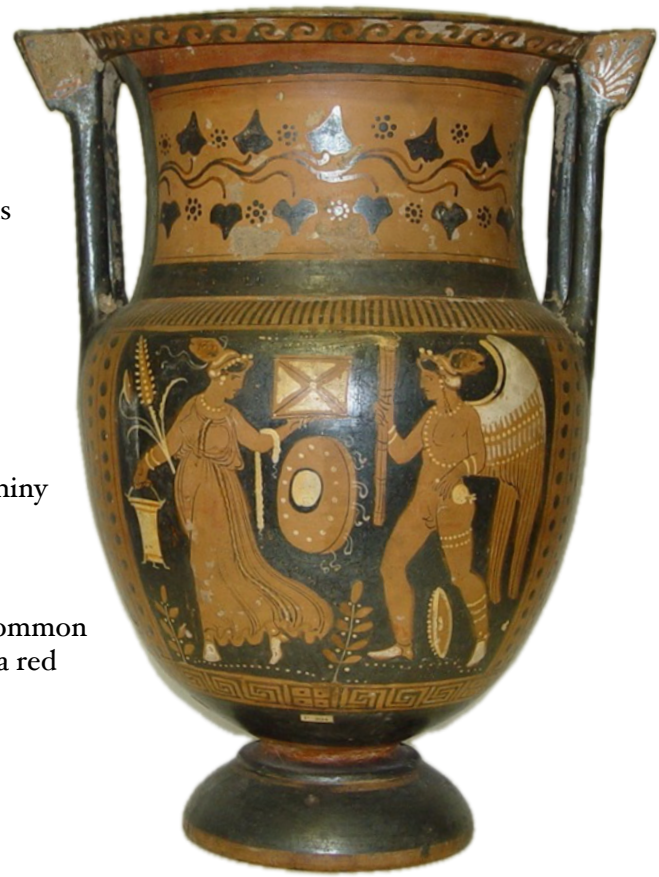
South Italian

South Italian pottery is very similar to Athenian pottery - it is typically also red and black (and always in the Red Figure or Black gloss rather than Black Figure technique).

It is distinguished by being slightly less 'red' than Athenian pottery - typically South Italian pottery is more 'pinkish' or 'yellowy' than Athenian pottery.

The black glaze on South Italian pottery is also usually less shiny or hard than on Athenian pottery, and overall has a 'duller' appearance.

It is worth noting that South Italian pottery is much more common in regional collections than Athenian pottery, so if in doubt, a red and black vase is more likely South Italian than Athenian.



South Italian krater, c. 320BC
1859,0216.108



South Italian jug, c. 320BC
1928,0117.70



South Italian plate, c. 320BC
1978,0415.56

What was it used for?

Vases had multiple different functions. This part of the guide will run you through the different shapes, and how they were used in the ancient world.

Krater

Kraters are large pots, and were used in the ancient world for mixing wine and water (wine was usually diluted before it was drunk). Kraters come in different styles, but the most common is the simple bell-krater (which are most commonly South Italian rather than Athenian).



South Italian krater, c. 320BC
1957,0212.1

Skyphos (cup)

The skyphos is a deep drinking cup with two handles towards the top of the body. The base is flat, and the skyphos does not have a stem, unlike the kylix (see below). These cups were used for drinking wine. The skyphos is usually South Italian, rather than Athenian.



South Italian skyphos, c. 320BC
1981,0421.1

Kylix (cup)

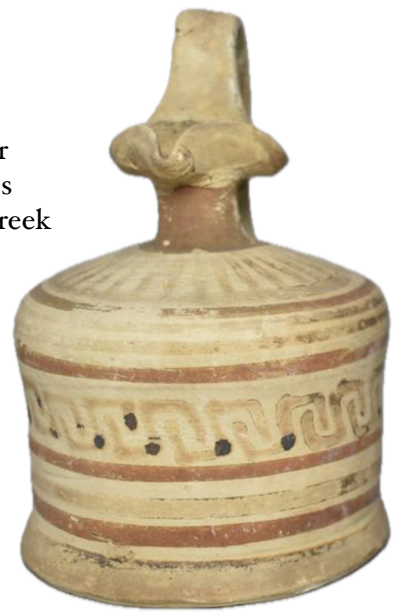
The kylix is another type of drinking cup, but unlike the skyphos, is rendered with a tall stem. The body is usually thin, and the handles are long and extend from the middle of the body. The kylix is usually Athenian, rather than South Italian.



Athenian kylix, c. 450BC
1814,0704.470

Oinochoe (jug)

The oinochoe looks like a modern jug, with one long handle behind the body for pouring. Often, the mouth of the oinochoe is rendered with three rounded flares (this, we describe as 'trefoil'). These jugs were made across the entirety of the Greek world - to tell where it was made, you will need to look at the clay colour.



Corinthian oinochoe, c. 550BC
1931,0216.1

Hydria

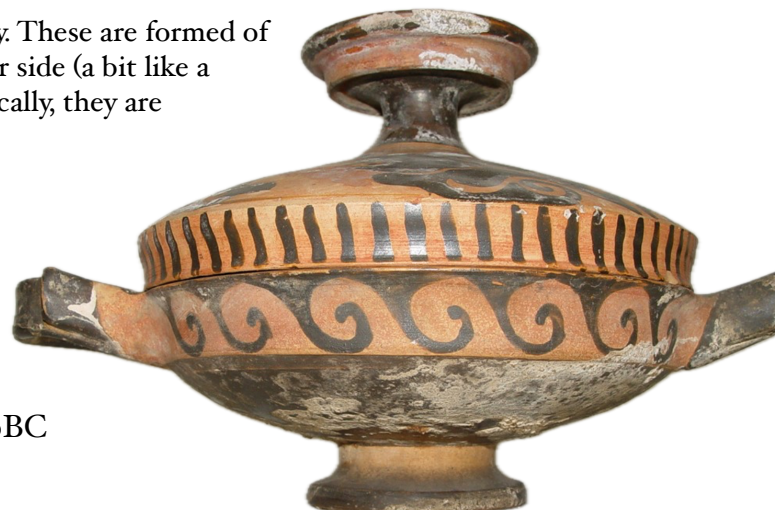
The hydria has a distinctive shape - wide body, thin neck, two handles either side of the body, and one jug-like handle at the back. These vessels were used for carrying and pouring water.



Athenian hydria, c. 350BC
1885,1213.29

Lekanis

These vessels were commonly produced in South Italy. These are formed of two pieces, a body and a thin stem with handles either side (a bit like a kylix), and a lid, usually with a round flat handle. Typically, they are decorated with female heads either side of the lid.



South Italian lekanis, c. 300BC
1814,0704.548

Pyxis (box)

These are usually small round vessels with lids, used for holding trinkets and dedications. They are fairly common, often Athenian, and are often decorated 'hastily'.



Corinthian Pyxis, c. 550BC
1867,0508.855

Plate

This shape is easily recognisable - a flat round pot, like a modern dining plate. They were often used in the ancient world as dedications (sometimes plates preserve two holes at the top, pierced through the wet clay, for suspension in a sanctuary)



Athenian plate, c. 520BC
1877,0930.9

Alabastron

These long vessels get their name from the stone counterparts on which the pottery versions are based. Typically, alabastra are Corinthian, but Athenian examples are also common.



Athenian alabastron, c. 450BC
2025,5022.1

Lekythos

These small pots come in a variety of forms, but the most common are the squat lekythos (with round dumpy body, flat base, and long neck with a single round handle at the back), and the shoulder lekythos (with a round base, conical shaped body, long neck and single handle). These vessels are extremely common, and were used for containing funerary oil (often, Greek graves contain many hundreds of lekythoi, hence their ubiquity in collections).



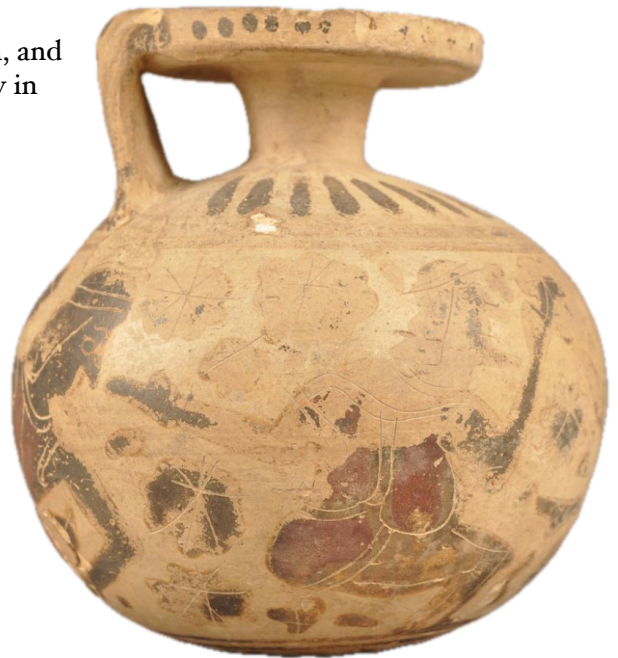
Athenian squat lekythos, c. 420BC
1864,1007.1488



Athenian shoulder lekythos, c. 500BC
1824,0501.7

Aryballos

As noted above, this shape is almost exclusively Corinthian, and is recognisable for its round body, which usually fits snugly in the hand. These vessels were used for perfume.



Corinthian aryballos, c. 550BC
1877,0930.5

Kothon

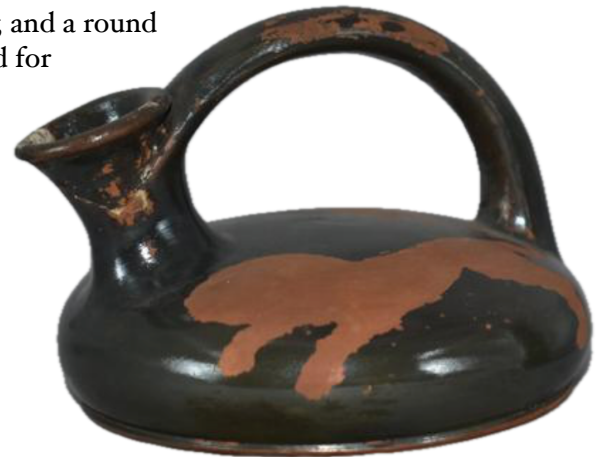
This shape is also almost exclusively Corinthian. The kothon has a round flat body, flat base, and single handle on one side. The top of the kothon extends over and into the body. The exact purpose of the kothon is not known, but it is possible these vessels were used for incense.



Corinthian kothon, c. 550BC
1859,0216.102

Askos

These closed vessels have a handle over the top of the close body, and a round protruding mouth at 45 degrees to the body. These were also used for perfumed oils, and are commonly produced both in Athens and Southern Italy.



Athenian askos, c. 400BC
1824,0501.44

What does it depict?

Greek pottery is famed for the variety of images it depicts - from everyday scenes to mythological stories. Identifying these images (or iconographies) is often challenging, but certain 'stock' images are extremely common on Greek pots. The most common are listed below.

Satyrs and Maenads

Satyrs are the half animal half human creatures that are associated with the god Dionysos. They are identifiable by their long pointed ears, snub noses, hooves and tails. Maenads are the female followers of Dionysos, typically accompanied by satyrs, and sometimes holding the 'thyrsus' (a long stick with a pinecone on the end). Because most Greek vases were used for wine consumption, and Dionysos was the god of wine, satyrs, maenads and the god himself are some of the most common scenes on Greek pottery.



Maenad and satyr on an Athenian
lekythos, c. 500BC
1864,1007.217

Symposium/Komos

The symposium (Greek drinking event) was the primary intended function for most Greek vases - as such, vases commonly depict the symposium. Following the symposium, drinkers would often walk around the city drunkenly, on a procession known as the komos. These figures are commonly wearing garlands, and carry vessels for drinking such as cups and kraters. Symposiasts are typically shown reclining on couches (known as klinai) which is how food and drink was consumed in Greece.



Symposiasts on an Athenian kylix, c.
520BC
1836,0224.211



Komasts on an Athenian cup fragment, c.
550BC
1886,0401.1158

Mythological Scenes

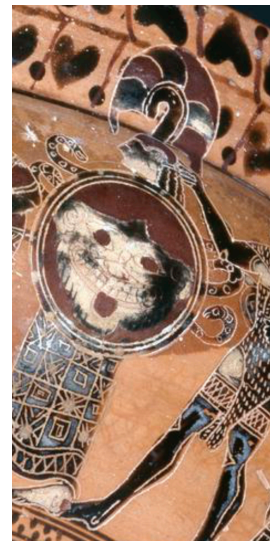
Greek vases depict many different types of mythological scenes, some of them extremely complex. However, some of the figures commonly found on vases are easily recognisable on vases, and from these identifications, the myth becomes easier to identify. The most common figure is Heracles, recognisable by his knotted club and lion-skin cape. Another common figure is the Amazon, recognisable as women dressed as warriors. Gods and goddesses are recognisable by their 'attributes': Athena her spear, helmet and snake headed aegis, Dionysos his drinking horn, beard and often accompanied by ivy and vines, and Nike by her wings.



Heracles



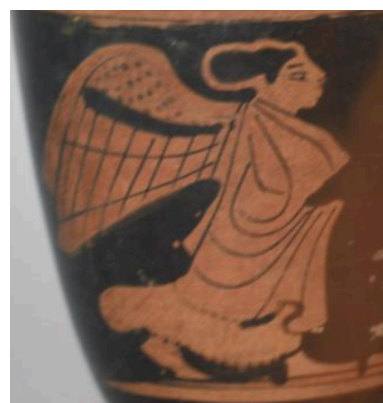
Amazon



Athena



Dionysos



Nike

For a more comprehensive database of different images and iconographies, see the Beazley Archive Pottery Database: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/searchOpen.asp#aHeader>

For more information, or if you would like help identifying objects in your collection, contact the CCN - connectingclassicalcollection@gmail.com