Comparing Innovative Strategies. Serial Production of the Paestan Workshop of Asteas and Python and Etruscan ceramica sovraddipinta

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Repetitiveness in ancient vase-paintings has often been interpreted as a sign of a lower quality and an indicator of a decline in craftsmanship. In accordance with our fellow speakers in panel 3.18, we would like to offer a new perspective. This paper discusses Paestan and Etruscan figured vases, both produced in approximately the same period (4th to 3rd century BC) and roughly in the same area.¹ By comparing them, we examine which factors might have promoted the apparent serialization of these vases, and to what extent their repetitive vase-paintings resulted from serial production processes. When discussing the phenomenon of serial production, it has to be taken into account that the levels of production and reception are two sides of one coin.² Therefore, we examine the technical aspect of the production process and the standardization of the iconography, while considering their ancient reception context and use as far as possible.³

The Workshop of Asteas and Python in Paestum

Asteas and Python were the only painters, potters, and/or workshop owners in South Italy who signed their products. We know of twelve vases signed with " $A\Sigma\Sigma TEA\Sigma$ $E\Gamma PA\Phi E$ ", and only two with the name of Python. Dale Trendall identified about 400 vases so close in shape and style that he attributed them to these painters. As far as the provenances are known, the vases made by Asteas and Python are distributed mostly within the area around Paestum along the Tyrrhenian coast, and show the patterns of a local production. The closeness of style and motifs between the works of both painters suggests that they were collaborators sharing a workshop in Paestum, and that Python was the colleague and successor of Asteas.

The specialty of the Paestan workshop of Asteas and Python are not only signed vases with elaborate paintings, but also a huge number of smaller pots showing one, two, or three figures. ¹⁰ The design of these vases is highly homogenous, and it made John Beazley assume "well-drilled associates" within the workshop. Trendall identified "stock figures" which may indicate a serial production.

A close examination of Paestan vases reveals that the figures show around 20 different poses,¹³ but only a few of them appear regularly. The most common ones are a standing figure in three-quarter view, sometimes leaning on a staff or *stela*, and a sitting figure with the legs seen in profile and the torso in three-quarters (fig. 1).¹⁴ Figures standing in profile, walking in three-quarter view (fig. 3),¹⁵ and putting one leg on a rock or volute and leaning forward (fig. 2),¹⁶ are less common, but still appear rather often.



Fig. 1: New York, MET 1976.11.5, back; Paestan bell-krater, 30.7cm.

The painters preferred some of these poses for certain figures: standing and walking poses in almost profile view are usually used for youths and satyrs (fig. 3).¹⁷ Dionysus and young women mostly sit on rocks or volutes (fig. 1).¹⁸ Nonetheless, the use of poses is flexible. For example, the pose of a figure that puts one leg on a rock, leaning forward and resting one of its arms on the bent knee is applied to a satyr, offering something to Dionysus (fig. 2); it can also be used for a woman holding an egg or a cake towards a young man, or to Dionysus himself. While only satyrs, *papposilenoi* and *erotes* rest their hands on Dionysus' lap, and are thereby slightly bowing forward,¹⁹ Python uses the same pose for a woman leaning against a *louterion*.²⁰

Regarding the position of the arms, the painters chose between approximately 30 different movements with both arms moving independently, nearly doubling the number of variations. However, there are still preferred combinations. The most popular ones are: (1) both arms bent with palms turned upwards (figs. 1 and 3) and (2) one arm bent with palms upwards and one arm kept close to the body. The painters additionally



Fig. 2: New York, MET 1976.11.5, front; Paestan bell-krater, 30.7cm.

varied the arm movement with the object they added in white color: a hand with palms turned up may be empty, may hold an egg/cake (fig. 1), a bowl, or a bracelet. A hand close to the body may hold a *thyrsus*, *situla* or *kantharos*, or simply be empty.

If we move from the category the figure belongs to – Dionysus, satyr, woman, *eros*, etc. – to the pose and consequently to the movement of arms, the number of possible variations grows. A close look at the vase-paintings shows that this is rooted in the production process: the figures were made in several steps. First, there is a blurry sketch to prepare the rough outline of the figures, choosing the group and the pose. These lines are only visible on the original pots and should be studied further. Second, the painter added black glaze, defining the outlines, the hair and the borders of the drapery. Third, fingers, muscles, and the details of face and body were drawn with relief lines. Fourth, small objects and jewelry were added in white and often red color. This color is mostly lost, but its shadows are still visible on the original vases.



Fig. 3: New York, MET 62.11.3, back; Paestan bell-krater, 37.1cm.

The uniformity of the decoration does not result from a loss of creativity but is rather a strategy of the painters to guarantee both an economical production and an attractive as well as aesthetic product.²¹ Even if we find vases that are nearly identical in terms of figures and ornaments, as is the case with two cups in the Louvre,²² there is still variation. The vases appear uniform, but not monotonous.

A youthful Dionysus regularly appears in the imagery, and thus scholars proposed a connection between these vase-paintings, the use of such vases as grave goods, and a chthonic character of Dionysus in South Italy.²³ However, the figures are well-mannered, young, and they wear jewelry and elegant drapery. Women are only rarely depicted as maenads, but usually as well-clothed women, often additionally wrapped in a cloak. *Erotes* and birds, sometimes in windows, and naked women at the *louterion* refer to the erotic sphere.²⁴ It is obvious that beauty and youth are the key-concepts behind the imagery, not the wild nature of the Dionysian sphere.

But why were these simple, Dionysiac compositions so successful? I assume it was the high degree of polyvalence offered by the images: the slight eroticism of the scenes and the happiness and joy Dionysus symbolized, no matter whether in the underworld or in life, are aspects one may associate with the images.

Thus, the homogeneous vase-paintings do not stand in contrast to the heterogeneous character of Paestan society.²⁵ The potters created vases which offered different readings to the viewers (and customers), depending on their background knowledge and expectations. In doing so, they sparked an interest within different groups of Paestan society and created attractive products.

Etruscan ceramica sovraddipinta

Another good example for a possible serial production in Italic Hellenistic pottery is the Etruscan *ceramica sovraddipinta*, also known as "vases with decoration in superposed colour", ²⁶ or "overpainted ware". ²⁷ This technique emerged in Etruria around 490/480 BC²⁸ as an adoption of the Attic so-called Six's technique, ²⁹ which was one of the several different innovations in vase painting of around 530 BC. ³⁰ While its production was relatively small in numbers and short-lived in Athens, it became popular in Etruria and only fell out of use at about 270 BC. ³¹

For the 5th century, only a relatively small production volume can be observed. Usually assigned to two main groups (the Praxias and Vagnonville Group),³² these vases are mostly individual pieces that show a broad variety of topics and designs. During the 4th century, however, different groups of vases came up that, although differing from each other, are fairly homogeneous. Examples are the so-called Sokra Group,³³ the Phantom Group,³⁴ *skyphoi* of the group Ferrara T585,³⁵ Etruscan *glaukes*,³⁶ and the so-called *pocola*.³⁷

These vases were manufactured in a chain-like production process with the same or different craftsman working on the different stages:³⁸ first the formed and dried vases were completely covered in black glaze, then dried again before the actual picture was painted onto the glaze. This picture could either be elaborate or fairly simple. Details were incised so that the glaze or the clay ground emerged, or they were added in additional colours, though vases without extra details exist as well. The vase was then fired in the well-known three-phase firing process.

This paper will focus on the Sokra and Phantom Groups as they are good examples for the incremental changes towards a serialized production of pottery.

The Sokra Group is named after a kylix from a tomb of Falerii Veteres that bears the letters Σ OKPA under its foot, presumably a signature and short for Sokrates. In 1978, Giampiero Pianu attributed more than 124 pieces to the group, 105 of which were kylikes. Today, a significantly larger number is known, and it is believed that vases of this group were produced in more than one centre and at various workshops. Still, most of them follow a specific schematic design that could be varied, for example by changing the number of figures in the tondo, by attributes or

by painting a horse, *hippokampus*, centaur, or Pegasus instead of the human figures. The dating for these vases is controversial: I suggest they range from approximately 380 to at least 330 BC. 42

These vases show clear evidence for the beginning of a serial production: they mostly have the same shape and show decorations from a pre-selected set of patterns that changed little over time (e.g. three \rightarrow one figures). While a large range of different motifs for the tondo is preserved, we also know of vases with pictures that differ only in detail. Similar to the Paestan workshop of Asteas and Python, the painters had a repertoire of motifs they chose from.

The Phantom Group was named after the ghost-like figures on the bellies of the *oinochoai* of form VII, the shape most frequently used. ⁴⁵ Pianu ascribed 316 pieces to the group, 307 of which were *oinochoai* of form VII. ⁴⁶ 141 of them have a draped figure as their main painted decoration, and 22 show leaves or other floral ornaments. ⁴⁷ Findings of production sites prove that they were produced in various places in Etruria and Latium. ⁴⁸ Due to their reduced decoration, dating them is difficult but is usually set in the 2nd half of the 4th, sometimes early 3rd century, thus a little later than the Sokra Group. Phantom Vases like those of the Sokra Group were not only found all over Etruria, but also in Latium, Corsica (Aléria), and along the Mediterranean coasts of modern France and Spain. ⁴⁹

The decoration of the Phantom Group's vases is obviously standardized as well. With the draped figure as the chosen pictorial decoration, there was no need for pattern-book-like models. This explains the slight variations in their appearance that should not be over-interpreted. Whereas earlier *sovraddipinta*-vases could show mythological scenes or give at least a hint for the precise identification of the figures by showing attributes (as in the case of the Sokra Group), the draped figures of the Phantom Group keep only their semantic content, which could be enriched by the imagination of the viewers. ⁵¹

The question is, how to rate this development? Is it the result of standardization? Serialization? Of an impoverishment? Or of innovations? When seen through the lens of innovation theory rather than of art history, this development does not seem to be the result of poorer craftsmanship, but rather of an economization within the production process. This was rendered possible because of the structured workflow within the workshops. The organization of the production process with sequenced stages of production was accommodated to manufacture relatively large series of vases with similar characteristics. ⁵² As an additional advantage it allowed for enough flexibility to meet special requests.

A late group of *sovraddipinta*-vases, the so-called *pocola deorum*, shows this phenomenon quite well. They exhibit very diverse images and inscriptions that were addressed directly and specifically to deities like Fortuna or Volcanus, saying "I am the vase – *pocolom* – of/for Fortuna/Volcanus/…".⁵³ This proves that they were, if not commissioned, at least produced for a special use, occasion, or audience.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Paestan vases of Asteas and Python and the Etruscan *ceramica sovraddipinta* are not serial products in a strict sense, since exact copies do not exist. However, we understand them as serial products in a wider sense, because they were produced in a standardized production chain with several steps.

The Paestan workshop chose a limited range of motifs and figures, but the production process still allowed for a high variation in minor details. We interpret this as an innovative optimization: the vases might have become affordable to a broader audience, but still excelled in terms of quality and aesthetics.

With the *sovraddipinta*-technique, the potters could decide to paint the vase at a very late stage in the production process. All production stages were identical for the simple black glazed pottery, the stamped *petites estampilles*, and even the *sovraddipinta*-vases except for the last step, the decoration. Only shortly before firing it was necessary to decide which vases should receive the "special treatment" of stamping and/or painting in a very basic or in a more complex mode. This allowed for a facile coexisting production of very different vases and guaranteed a flexible and up-to-date planning in order to adapt the products to the current market.

In the case of Asteas and Python, the uniformity of the images arguably roots in a thematic focus on the Dionysian circle, which limits the choice of motifs and figures but guarantees a high polyvalence. The iconographic range of the vases in *sovraddipinta*-technique is even more reduced. However, this should not be understood as a gradual iconographic impoverishment. On the contrary, the motifs on these vases were open to different interpretations, also beyond Etruria.⁵⁵ From a technical point of view, the production process is much more sophisticated than in Paestum. One benefit of this chain-like production process was in fact that it allowed for both: series of vases with repeating design, and pieces for certain occasions that looked different (i.e. pieces of high individuality and "mass market products").

The change in the overall design of the vases through a production of standardized forms with more or less standardized painted decoration did not necessarily mean a loss of interest in more sophisticated decoration. Instead, it seems that the way viewers perceived the vases changed, probably as a consequence of the cultural changes during the 4th century BC,⁵⁶ at least in Etruria and Paestum.

Notes

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- ² See the introduction to this volume by Arne Reinhardt.
- ³ See Mariachiara Franceschini in this volume.
- ⁴ The signed pots are usually the more elaborate ones: Trendall 1987, 84–103. 139–143; Denoyelle 2011, 34–36.
- ⁵ Todisco 2012, 384.
- ⁶ Trendall 1987, 54. 84. 139–143; Todisco 2012, 386. A new signed vase was published in Simon 2002. The Paestan painters use the imperfect instead of the aorist, cf. Trendall 1987, 55.
- ⁷Trendall 1987, 84–172; Denoyelle Iozzo 2009, 184–195; Denoyelle 2011, 31–41; Todisco 2012, 381–392.
- ⁸Denoyelle Iozzo 2009, 184.
- ⁹ Beazley 1944, 363 f.; Trendall 1987, 55. The chronology of both painters is problematic. I follow Angela Pontrandolfo and Agnès Rouveret, who date Asteas between ca. 380 and 350 BC, and Python between ca. 360 and 340 BC (Pontrandolfo 1977; Pontrandolfo Rouveret 1992, 412; Denoyelle Iozzo 2009, 183; Denoyelle 2011, 16–18). A. D. Trendall dated them 20 years later, based on stylistic evidence (Trendall 1987, 56). Too speculative: Simon 2004.
- ¹⁰ Denoyelle 2011, 80. The reverses show draped youths, similar to Attic vases, cf. Franceschini in this volume. See also the newly published PhD thesis of Franceschini (M. Franceschini, Attische Mantelfiguren. Relevanz eines standardisierten Motivs der rotfigurigen Vasenmalerei (Rahden/Westf. 2018)) and the review of her book by Elisabeth Günther in Gymnasium 127, 2020, 198–201).
- 11 Beazley 1944, 363 f.
- 12 Trendall 1987, 55. 103.
- ¹³ The data derive from Trendall 1987 and Pontrandolfo Rouveret 1992.
- ¹⁴ New York, MET 1976.11.5, back (Python).
- ¹⁵New York, MET 62.11.3, back (Python).
- ¹⁶ New York, MET 1976.11.5, front (Python).
- ¹⁷ New York, MET 62.11.3 (Asteas). Cf. Paestum, Museo Archaeologico Nazionale 21390, Pontrandolfo 1996, 257 no. 195; Paestum, Museo Archaeologico Nazionale 26632, Pontrandolfo 1996, 260 no. 205. A systematic study and typology of the figures in Paestan vase-paintings is still missing, but currently conducted by Elisabeth Günther. This paper thus does not present a comprehensive statistic analysis, but is a first attempt to draw the reader's attention to the homogeneous design of Paestan vases, explaining it as an economical strategy of the workshop.
- 18 Cf. Louvre K 264, Denoyelle 2011, 69–98 no. 19; Paestum, Museo Archaeologico Nazionale no. 22449, Pontrandolfo 1996, 253 no. 183.
- ¹⁹ E.g. Salerno, Museo Publico 1813 from Pontecagnano, Trendall 1987, 73 no. 2/50 pl. 28e-f.
- ²⁰ Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional 14455, Trendall 1987, 128 no. 2/186 pl. 76.
- ²¹ Similarities in decoration result from repetition in iconographic and technical terms: Heilmeyer 2008, 244.
- ²² Paris, Louvre K 353 and 364, Denoyelle 2011, 116-119 no. 29-30.
- ²³ Todisco 2012, 305; Schwarzmaier 2011, 201–217. On the visualization of an *ideologia funeraria*, see Pontrandolfo 1982; Graepler 1997, 155–159.
- ²⁴ Schmidt Slehoferova 1991 Nr. 98; Söldner 2007, 2018. For women in windows, see Schauenburg 1972; Schauenburg 1973.

- ²⁵ For this contradiction, cf. Denoyelle Iozzo 2009, 184 f.; on the "hybrid culture" in Paestum, see Zuchtriegel 2017.
- ²⁶ Beazley 1947, 195.
- ²⁷ E.g. Ambrosini 2013, 956; Green 2001.
- ²⁸ Scarrone 2015, 100.
- ²⁹ Cf. Scarrone 2015, 61 f. for the reasons behind this adoption.
- ³⁰ Cf. Cohen 2006.
- ³¹Cf. Ferrandes 2006.
- ³² A large part of this work was done by J. Beazley in "Etruscan Vase Painting" (1947), who could resort to older studies. The most recent and comprehensive study on 5th century *sovraddipinta* is Scarrone 2015.
- ³³ Most recently Ambrosini Pellegrini 2015.
- ³⁴ Puritani 2009, 202 f.; Ferrandes 2006, 141–148; Knops 1987.
- ³⁵ Ferrandes 2006, 145; Bruni 1992, 64-67 and footnotes; Jolivet 1980, 713-716.
- ³⁶ Ferrandes 2006, 137.
- ³⁷ Most recently Ambrosini 2012/2013.
- ³⁸ Cf. Patzke 2016 for a more detailed description.
- ³⁹ Rome, Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, inv. 3676; Beazley Archive number 9002179; CVA Rom, Villa Giulia (3) IV B q pl. 2, 1. 2. 6. The group was assembled by Beazley 1947, 201–205.
- ⁴⁰ Pianu 1978, 162–168.
- ⁴¹ Ambrosini Pellegrini 2015, 77–91.
- ⁴²Cf. with similar dating Ambrosini Pellegrini, 91–99.
- ⁴³ Ambrosini Pellegrini, 94.
- ⁴⁴ E.g. the two *kylikes* showing Pegasus with a bearded head between its legs in the Antikenmuseum der Universität Leipzig (Bubenheimer-Erhart 2014, 120) and in the British Museum, London, inv. 1842,0407.19 (CVA London, British Museum (7) IV. E. b pl. 3, 5).
- ⁴⁵Beazley 1947, 205 f.
- ⁴⁶ Pianu 1978, 173–183.
- ⁴⁷ For 144 *oinochoai*, the main motif on the belly is not given.
- ⁴⁸ E.g. Stanco 2009, 164; Ferrandes 2006, 123. 161. Cf. Serra Ridgway 1996, 233.
- ⁴⁹Cf. Jolivet 1980; Pianu 1978.
- ⁵⁰ E.g. as indications for different workshops or for dating the vases. Pianu 1978, 173–183; Pianu 1982, 22–53 classifies by the execution of the draped figures.
- ⁵¹See Franceschini in this volume. This content is not necessarily the same for different audiences or even for the same viewer but different contexts. Cf. Knops 1987, 57 who collected examples of Phantom Group phantoms where he thought the sex of the draped figure could be determined. Apart from exceptions such as the ones in Ricci 1955, 923 fig. 214 that differ clearly from other Phantom-oinochoai and maybe 1012 no. 34 (without photograph), I do not consider this possible, though Knops' argument shows the ambiguity of the depictions.
- ⁵² Patzke 2016.

- 53 Ambrosini 2012/2013. See Green 2001, 68 f. for the theory that the (Roman?) workshop was led by the Gnathian Volcani painter.
- ⁵⁴Cf. Michetti 2016, 334; Pianu 1985, 81 f. Pianu 1989, 1096 believes commissioned vases existed but only for large orders.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. Franceschini in this volume.
- ⁵⁶ For the visual language in the Hellenistic period, cf. Hesberg 1988.

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