Retracing ancient Greek trading in utilitarian ceramics

Pottery from Aegina

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Five years of excavation at Mitrou in central Greece have toppled the existing view that only luxury pottery was traded in ancient Greece, demonstrating instead that much "ordinary" or everyday-use pottery moved from place to place as well

One of the charms of archaeology is that every new excavation turns up many surprises, frequently forcing well-established ideas to be reexamined. Even so, only rarely does a single project fill in many empty gaps in our knowledge of a given region and require certain chapters of Greek prehistory to be written anew. One such site is the excavation in Mitrou, a Greek-US project that has just finished its fifth and final season of excavation. The present author has been involved in this work since the outset (2004), and some of the material discovered there is now serving as the point of departure for my doctorate thesis.

One empty gap in our knowledge of the ancient world is about how ceramics produced on the island of Aegina were traded into central Greece, where Mitrou is located. All that was previously known was that such pottery did indeed reach this region, crossing the sizable distance of 240 km. But in what quantities, what periods, and why – that has remained unknown.

Gold-flecked pots

Aegina is an island conveniently located at the very center of the Sardonic Gulf (which Athens also faces, through its port in Piraeus). The main archaeological site on the island, named Kolonna after a single surviving column visible from a considerable distance seaward, was a significant settlement that played an important role especially before and during the formative stage of the Mycenaean period. That role is evidenced both by mighty fortifications and by the fact that the oldest shaft grave of a warrior-ruler was discovered there. Very similar graves, just ca. 150 years younger, have been found in Mycenae itself, where the famous mask of Agamemnon was unearthed. Archeological findings point to intensive contacts with the Cyclades and Crete, and it is not out of the question that a Minoan colony once functioned in Kolonna.

The pottery produced on Aegina serves as an important indicator of trade links in these early times, as it has been found to be widespread in areas of mainland Greece. Such Aeginetan pottery included decorative table ware (kraters, cups), but mostly pottery of a utilitarian nature – jars for transporting/storing water and cooking vessels. This is an extraordinary discovery because it had been thought that only beautifully decorated, luxury ceramics were exchanged through trade, along with pottery that merely served as "packaging" for traded goods like wine and olive oil. Such trade in utilitarian ceramics became traceable thanks to two observations: 1) vessels of similar form and decoration were found at various sites and 2) many of them were noticed to contain bits of mica (i.e. biotite) that shines gold in the sunlight. These same facts enabled Aegina to be pinpointed as the place of production: the most pottery in this style was found in Kolonna itself, and the island's volcanic origins excellently explained the presence of gold-colored mica and other admixtures.

Ancient masters

What can explain the popularity of this Aeginetan utilitarian pottery in regions of Greece where vessels of identical function were produced locally? One partial explanation undoubtedly lies in Aegina's dominant position at the start of the Late Bronze Age – possessing recognizable ceramics from an important hub entailed a certain prestige, as a status-symbol signaling one's connections. That is presumably why at a prominent burial at Lerna

Mitrou Archaeological Project

Both table ceramics and more utilitarian wares produced on Aegina were a commodity in demand in ancient Greece, and account for 10% of all pottery used at the distant site of Mitrou

Mitrou Archaeological Project

The Greek-US excavations at Mitrou in central Greece have shown that the island of Aegina in the Sardonic Gulf was a manufacturing center for cooking vessels in ancient Greece

in Argolis, more than half of the pottery had in fact been imported from Aegina! However, one of the main causes driving the spread of these utilitarian ceramics must have been their excellent suitability for day-to-day use. The volcanic admixture gave water jars a porosity that allowed some of the water to evaporate, thus keeping the water inside the vessel cool, and it probably made cooking vessels unusually resistant to high temperatures and sudden temperature changes. Aeginetan cooking pots were perhaps the only ones that could be placed directly into the fire, whereas the soot traces on others indicate that they were placed on the edge of the hearth.

It was presumably due to these advantages that such ceramics reached locations as far afield as Mitrou in such quantities. Intensive importing began around 1500 B.C., nearly simultaneously with the boom in the trading of such ceramics observed at sites closer to Aegina. Later years evidence a gradual waning of the trade in such ceramics, most likely due to the political and economic troubles of Kolonna itself. However, a few vessels were still reaching Mitrou even 150 years later.

Jars on distant voyages

Collected quantitative data indicate that during the peak, initial period of exchange, somewhat more than 10% of ceramics at Mitrou were imported from a single location, Aegina. This fraction is not much less than for settlements situated very close to Aegina. Some 4% of the Mitrou pottery consists of Aeginetan cooking vessels, which represent 25% of all kitchen vessels at Mitrou. A real turning point in both the production and distribution of Aeginetan ceramics occurred around 1350 B.C. and is excellently documented by the findings from Mitrou. From that period onward, for the next 200 years, Aegina only exported cooking vessels, whereas table ceramics and water jars completely ceased to be traded.

The 2008 excavation season brought an extraordinary discovery that exceeded our expectations. A rich deposit of pottery from Mitrou during the period immediately preceding the demise of the Mycenaean palaces (i.e. around 1200 B.C.) set a new record for the proportion of Aeginetan ceramics – nearly 50% of all cooking vessels turned out to be from the distant island. We can speculate that one out of every two meals in Mitrou was prepared using pots brought in from a distance of 240 km!

In closing we can cite two more interesting facts about Aeginetan ceramics. Throughout its nearly 1000-year history of production and trade, such pottery was only produced by hand, without the use of the potter's wheel – an astounding fact given the vast scale of production. Moreover, many of the vessels bear what are called potter's marks, combinations of incisions and indentations placed on various parts of the vessels with a specific purpose. These signs are presumed to have been used by specific workshops, probably operating within the framework of a single family, to mark their products. ■

Further reading:

Textbook on Prehistoric Archaeology of the Aegean by Prof. Jeremy B. Rutter: http://projectsx.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze_age

Lindblom M. (2001). *Marks and Makers. Appearance*, Distribution and Function of Middle and Late Helladic Manufacturer's Marks on Aeginetan Pottery, SIMA 128, Jonsered.

Van de Moortel A., Zahou E. (2004). Excavations at Mitrou, East Lokris. *Aegean Archaeology 7 (2003-2004)*, 39-48, http://www.mitrou.org/index.html; http://www.unc.edu/~dchaggis/Moortel%20Zachou%20AEA%207%20Excavations%20at%20Mitrou%202004.pdf