Les céramiques d’usage quotidien à Thasos au IVe siècle avant J.-C.


The latest entry in the venerable Études Thasiennes series tackles several important questions related to ancient pottery, ranging from older concerns, such as the dating of contexts, to more recent problems, including the evidence for trade over long distances, industrial activity, and behaviors such as cooking, dining, and drinking. It does so with varying degrees of success. The book consists of two volumes—one of text, the other of plates illustrating the typology of vases—and a DVD-ROM containing a self-running FileMaker database containing all the entries in the typology, plus several other examples of many types (707 total entries). None of the data on the DVD-ROM is exportable to other software, so secondary analysis will be somewhat complicated for interested scholars.

In essence, this work (carried out over a 15-year period) compiles several different kinds of studies conducted on a carefully chosen set of material: household pottery dating to the fourth century B.C.E. Most of it was excavated by scholars other than the author over many decades. From the beginning, Blondé focuses her investigation on the daily use of the vases, as well as on understanding the presence of Athenian imports, although, given the significance of previous research on Thasian amphoras, she also concentrates on the local pottery industry. To this end, Blondé (in collaboration, for this part of the study, with Picon) sampled a number of sherds for X-ray fluorescence (XRF) testing. The results identified six groups, including Athenian black-gloss, and a few groups of mixed wares—local black-gloss and undecorated tablewares, and undecorated tablewares and cookwares. These results show clearly that potters could and did use the same raw materials to produce visually and even functionally different fabrics. Without performing XRF testing on local clay beds, however, any conclusions about a Thasian provenance must remain preliminary. Blondé and Picon were also able to test some Athenian black-gloss sherds from the Athenian Agora, discovering that Athenian black-gloss found at Thasos has a slightly different signature (28). It would be useful to know whether this scientifically derived evidence shows that what might be called the “Nikosthenes phenomenon”—the concentration of certain potteries on the export market while other workshops focused on domestic sales—continued to hold true into the fourth century.

The author’s long experience with the archaeology of Thasos is evident in the two chapters in which she skillfully outlines the nine contexts (mostly containing fill deposits) that serve as the source for her data, discusses the chronological implications of the pottery in each context, and constructs a thoughtful typology of each of the forms represented in the deposits. The typology is categorized first by shape, then by ware, demonstrating effectively the similarity of forms in contemporaneous fabrics from different production centers.

Blondé’s analysis is less successful in her discussion of the distribution of types, which necessitates the adoption of a method for quantifying the pottery. Blondé admits that counting came late in the research process (114). She notes that there are difficulties associated with quantifying broken pottery but does
not discuss them or why she chose the methods that she did (sherd counts and minimum number of vessels represented [MNV], derived from diagnostic sherd counts). Instead, she directs readers to Py’s discussion of his methods at Lattes (M. Py et al., Lattara. Vol. 4, Système d’enregistrement, de gestion et d’exploitation de la documentation issue de Lattes [Lattes 1991] 91–4). There is, however, a substantial bibliography associated with the problem of “how much pottery is there?” While MNV counts might have been considered appropriate in older or preliminary publications, it has been clear for some time that the counts generated by that method have little relevance for illustrating the real numbers or proportions of vessels in antiquity, especially compared with weight or estimated vessel equivalents (C. Orton et al., Pottery in Archaeology [Cambridge 1993] 166–73; see also P. Rice, Pottery Analysis [Chicago 1987] 288–93).

Blondé counts sherds from two contexts—one with 7,000 sherds, the other with 770—dating to slightly different periods. She identifies a significant discrepancy in the MNV counts between the proportions of unslipped tablewares in the two contexts (70% to 40%). She argues, without explanation, that the ratio of unslipped to slipped pottery in the larger context is more accurate (rather than simply different, for reasons that might be meaningful), and she “corrects” the proportions in the smaller context by applying the ratio from the larger count to it (118). Finally, she averages the new overall proportion of wares in the two contexts to produce a picture of the general distribution of wares at Thasos in the fourth century. Such a picture is ultimately meaningless, however, given the methods used to arrive at it. Further, even the use of correct methods would have required deeper statistical analysis to show the significance of the results. Instead, Blondé ultimately makes little comment about the distribution of wares, apart from claiming that her results show that the proportion of cooking ware vases went from a very small percentage of the assemblages (6% in her averaged result) to 50% in the Late Roman empire (a datum for which there is no citation).

Given the long gestation of this work—the author remarks that Rotroff’s 1997 volume on Hellenistic pottery from the Athenian Agora came to her attention during the late stages of editing (110), and the preface was signed in May 2004 (2)—it is perhaps unfair to expect the latest techniques to be used here. But the book also does not follow through fully on its stated interest in pottery use in daily life. Having discussed the deposits, fabrics, and shapes (each in detailed chapters), Blondé goes on to state that the material is insufficient for giving detailed answers to this problem; a cautious tone is evident throughout (see esp. 188). She does not analyze the relationship between pottery in different contexts on the basis of their types (e.g., refuse pit, floor fill, use-level) or locations. The absence of a testable hypothesis denies her the opportunity to comment on possible relationships between pottery and other variables, such as status, wealth, or gender.

The strengths of this work include the rigorous scientific testing of clay signatures (though not clay sources) using current methodologies, an expertly constructed typology of forms, and a clear and thorough discussion of the utility of pottery for dating deposits, relative to other methods such as amphora stamps and coins. More problematic is its attempt at quantification, where the approach is at first traditional (with regard to counting) and in the end confusing in its efforts to normalize certain results.

Justin St. P. Walsh
SCHOOL OF ART
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA 70803
JWALSH@LSU.EDU