

ANCIENT GREEK ART & CULTURE

HOW TO READ AN ANCIENT GREEK POT

Ancient Greek pots and vases were most often made for everyday household and ritual purposes. But they were also very beautiful artworks. They tell us important stories about myths and legends.

Many mythical scenes are shown on pots, and it can sometimes be hard to work out what is being shown. To understand the picture better, try to work out who the figures represent. Are they holding any particular objects which might hint at who they are? For example, we might be able to identify Jason if he is holding the Golden Fleece, or Hercules if he is wearing the skin of the Nemean Lion, which he killed during one of his Labours. Once you have worked out who the characters are, try to remember key moments in the stories about them, to work out what is going on in the painted scene.

Below is an example of a vase with a mythical scene. You can see this beautiful vase at the Hellenic Museum.



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This vase, called a krater, shows the mythical wedding between Dionysos and Ariadne. As the myth goes the mortal Ariadne (daughter of King Minos) helped Theseus (the hero of Athens) in his quest to slay the Minotaur. This was a terrifying monster with a man's body and a bull's head, which lived in a labyrinth on the Island of Crete.

After helping Theseus put an end to this dreaded creature, Ariadne sailed away with Theseus on his ship. However when they anchored on the island of Naxos, Theseus abandoned Ariadne there while she was sleeping. The god Dionysos found her and made her his wife. The painting on this krater shows this mythical marriage between the mortal Ariadne and the immortal Dionysos, god of the grape harvest and winemaking. Eros, the ancient Greek god of love, hovers between them symbolising their union. It is believed that after marrying Dionysos, Ariadne became immortal.



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WHAT WAS DEPICTED ON POTTERY?

The adventures of the Argonauts were a very popular subject in Ancient Greek art. Many parts of the story are painted on Greek pots. These give us an idea of how the Greeks imagined different characters and moments in the legend.

This image shows a detail from a red-figure vase. It is painted with a scene from one version of the Argonauts story. According to this version of the myth, Jason was swallowed by the Colchian Dragon (the guardian of the Golden Fleece) and then coughed back up. This vase, called a *kylix* (a cup for drinking wine), shows the moment when the Colchian Dragon spits Jason out of its mouth. Athena, the goddess of military victory and Jason's patron goddess, looks on and the Golden Fleece hangs on a tree in the background. The vase-painting is very detailed, capturing the drama and intensity of the scene.

Interestingly, the idea that Jason was swallowed by the dragon is only told in this painting. This shows how vase-paintings were used as a form of storytelling in their own right. In other versions of the myth, Jason is able to snatch the Golden Fleece from the tree without being swallowed by the Dragon. He is aided by the sorceress Medea and the Argonaut Orpheus, who sings and plays the harp to put the dragon to sleep.



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HOW TO MAKE GREEK POTTERY

To make pots, the Ancient Greeks had a special method.

First, the pot was shaped on a pottery wheel. It was made in separate parts, which were joined together by a mixture of clay and water called slip. When the pot was in the right shape, it was ready to be painted, again using slip. The slip created the black colour that you see in Greek vase-paintings, since it turned black when the vase was placed in the clay oven or kiln.

The parts of the clay which were not painted with the slip stayed red, the colour of the clay. The first Greek painted pots were decorated mostly with patterns such as stripes and spirals, and a kind of square swirling pattern called 'meander'.

Eventually, vase-painters became even more skilled and started to paint more complicated pictures, including scenes with people, gods and heroes. The first scenes like this were black-figure paintings, with a red background and the people in black. Later, painters worked out that they could reverse this to create red-figure paintings with a black background and red figures. In both black and red-figure paintings, the painters sometimes used a white colour to add more details.

Example of the 'meander' pattern:

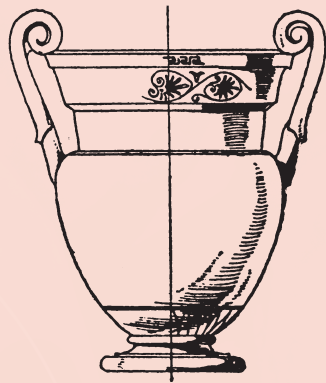


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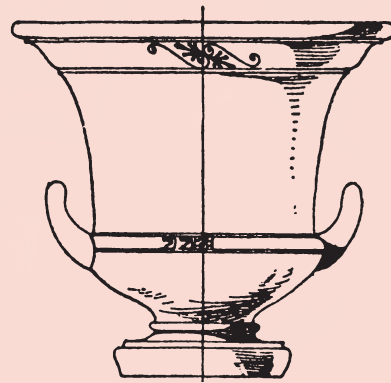
DIFFERENT TYPES OF POTTERY

The Krater

A krater is a kind of mixing vessel, made for everyday use. Wine was often mixed with water in these vessels, as watered down wine was a popular drink in Ancient Greek times. Kraters came in several different styles: volute kraters, calyx kraters, column kraters and bell kraters. They were all large, bell-shaped vessels which could hold a large amount of liquid. The different kinds of kraters are shown in the illustration below:



Volute krater



Calyx krater

The Amphora

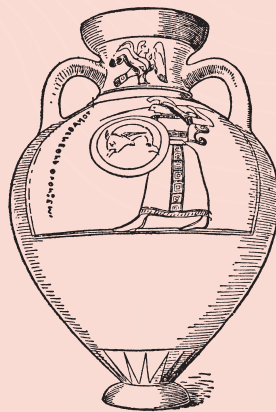
An amphora was a popular vase shape in antiquity. It is a tall jar with two vertical handles. Amphora were used for storing and transporting food and drink, such as wine and olive oil. The Panathenaic Amphorae, which can be seen in the example below, are large (60–70 cm high) vessels which held olive oil and were given as prizes at the Panathenaic Games. These games occurred every four years in Ancient Athens since 566 BC. Athletic competitions, cultural events and religious ceremonies (where the oil was given out) were all part of these games.

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DIFFERENT TYPES OF POTTERY



Amphora



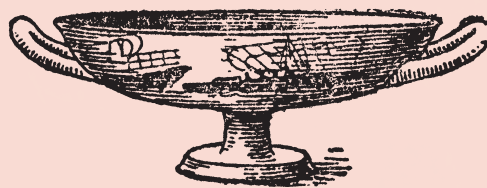
Panathenaic amphora



Neck amphora

The Kylix

The kylix was a kind of drinking cup with a very wide, shallow bowl and two handles. Kylikes (the plural of kylix) were often decorated with a painted scene around the outer surface, known as a 'frieze'. They often had a painting inside the bowl, in the centre, showing another scene. The idea was that when the drinker finished their wine, the scene inside would be revealed. For this reason, the painting inside was often funny or cheerful, in the spirit of a drinking-party (called a Symposium).



Kylix