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Images et usages

Writing on Vases

Text and Image in Apulian Productions (5th-4th Centuries BCE)

Écrire sur le vases. Texte et image dans les productions apuliennes

(V^e-IV^e siècles av. n.è.)

Scrivere sui vasi. Testo e immagine nelle produzioni apule (V-IV secolo a.C.)

Luana Tesoro



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*Lire et voir
l'espace*

Writing on Vases

Text and Image in Apulian Productions (5th-4th Centuries BCE)

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Red-figure pottery is one of the most important and effective sources for understanding the communities that inhabited the region of Puglia in the vibrant cultural context of the late 5th and 4th centuries BCE. Greek culture is known for considering text and image as closely linked. Greek communities have always had a strong connection between text and image. The craft production that developed in southern Italy and Sicily, particularly in Apulia, originating from Taranto, appears to have been directly influenced by this Greek trend, albeit to a much lesser extent. Most painters in the region did not feel the need to complete the vase decorations with inscriptions. However, the decision to depict major certain mythological subjects – often complex and relatively unknown – necessitated the inclusion of

written elements. This is evident, for example, in the explanatory inscriptions found in the works of the Darius Painter's circle and the Underworld Painter. The aim of this paper is to trace the inscriptions on vase according to their different types: explanatory inscriptions, inscriptions borne by objects depicted in the scene, inscriptions on material supports, comic-style texts, signatures, decorative inscriptions, inscriptions indicating ownership, invective, signatures, and potters' marks. Additionally, it will be necessary to analyze the position of the inscription and the type of vase on which it is engraved, scribbled, or painted. Consequently, the method of execution must be identified from palaeographic and iconographic-technological perspectives.

Écrire sur le vases. Texte et image dans les productions apuliennes (V^e-IV^e siècles av. n.è.)

La céramique à figures rouges constitue l'une des sources les plus importantes pour comprendre les communautés qui peuplaient les Pouilles dans le contexte culturel dynamique de la fin du V^e et du IV^e siècle av. n.è. La culture grecque conçoit le texte et l'image comme étant étroitement liés. L'artisanat qui s'est développé dans le sud de l'Italie et en Sicile, notamment dans les Pouilles – diffusée depuis Tarente –, semble avoir été directement influencé par cette tendance grecque, bien que dans une moindre mesure. Si la plupart du temps, les peintres italiotes ne ressentaient pas le besoin de compléter les représentations par des inscriptions, on constate que dans certains cas, notamment pour des scènes mythologiques complexes et

relativement méconnues, ils ont recouru à des inscriptions explicatives – on identifie par exemple cette tendance dans les productions du cercle du Peintre de Darius ou du Peintre des Enfers. D'autres types d'inscriptions, gravées, peintes ou griffonnées, peuvent également être identifiés : inscriptions comiques et décoratives, inscriptions sur des supports représentés dans l'image, invectives, signatures, marques de potiers ou de propriété. À travers cet article, nous proposons d'analyser ces inscriptions dans la céramique apulienne à figures rouges, en portant notamment notre attention sur leur emplacement, le type de vase concerné et le mode d'exécution.

Scrivere sui vasi. Testo e immagine nelle produzioni apule (V-IV secolo a.C.)

La ceramica a figure rosse costituisce una delle fonti più significative per la comprensione delle comunità che popolavano la Puglia nel dinamico contesto culturale della fine del V e del IV secolo a.C. La cultura greca concepisce testo e immagine come elementi strettamente interconnessi. La produzione artigianale sviluppata nell'Italia meridionale e in Sicilia, e in particolare in Puglia – la cui diffusione ebbe come principale centro propulsore Taranto – sembra essere stata direttamente influenzata da tale concezione greca, sebbene in misura più limitata. Sebbene nella maggior parte dei casi i pittori italioti non avvertissero la necessità di integrare le raffigurazioni mediante iscrizioni, si osserva che, in alcune circostanze, soprattutto

in relazione a scene mitologiche complesse e relativamente poco note, essi fecero ricorso a iscrizioni esplicative. Tale tendenza è riconoscibile, ad esempio, nelle produzioni riconducibili alla cerchia del Pittore di Dario e del Pittore dell'Oltretomba. È inoltre possibile individuare altre tipologie di iscrizioni, incise, dipinte o graffite: iscrizioni di carattere comico o decorativo, iscrizioni apposte su supporti rappresentati all'interno dell'immagine, invettive, firme, marchi di vasai o indicazioni di proprietà. Attraverso questo contributo, si propone di analizzare tali iscrizioni nella ceramica apula a figure rosse, prestando particolare attenzione alla loro collocazione, alle tipologie vascolari interessate e alle modalità di esecuzione.

Greece, and particularly Athens during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, has a long tradition of painted clay vases with inscriptions. Most of these inscriptions were engraved before the vases were fired and were later painted, mostly in white. Only a small proportion were engraved after firing. Writing on vases appears more fluid than writing on stone, and, for this reason, it seems to evolve more rapidly in the execution of graphic forms.¹

We thus have a complete and significant series of painted inscriptions on ceramics. However, these are limited to a narrow chronological period and are necessarily tied to the style of the representations. These inscriptions, mostly ornamental or accompanying the design, cannot be used to identify specific writing styles but only to compare them with those on papyrus or stone.² It is important to emphasize that, although there is a progressive evolution in letter execution, 'old' and 'new' forms tend to coexist on vases. Therefore, while writing on a vase may appear advanced for the period in which it was produced, an individual graphic form may not be. In fact, inscriptions often appear in different positions and orientations: horizontal, vertical, left-to-right or right-to-left, boustrophedon, or stoichedon. Sometimes, even the size of the letters varies within the same sequence depending on the available space on the vase.³ Unlike writing on other materials, letterforms alone do not constitute the only criterion for defining a specific chronological period. For this category of artefacts, chronology is determined by attribution to a painter or workshop, the stylistic approach, the archaeological context, or the chosen iconographic subject.

In the last quarter of the 6th century BCE, the red-figure technique emerged in Athens, alongside an increase in the number of pottery workshops. However, inscriptions engraved on the body of vases remained a rare phenomenon from the Archaic period to the late classical period. While there was a slowdown in the production of vases with inscriptions in Attica towards the end of the 5th century BCE,⁴ the same did not occur in southern Italy, where local red-figure pottery began to offer some of its most valuable examples from this period onwards. Engraved inscriptions on figured vases spread – albeit to a lesser extent than Attic production – in southern Italy and Sicily throughout the 4th century BCE: from simple name indications identifying the figures represented to the signature of the artist himself (as was particularly the case in Paestan production with Python and Assteas). These inscriptions should not be considered random graffiti, but rather elements that support the figures, in keeping with the Greek iconographic tradition of vases and the market for which this production was intended.

These vases in southern Italy were classified based on their place of production,⁵ with the following categories: Apulian, Lucanian, Sicilian, Paestan, and Campanian. The 4th century BCE witnessed Athens' clear political decline, and at the same time, the contraction of Etruscan hegemony in Italy coincided with a decline in Greek vase imports. Consequently, Athens was forced to seek new markets, which it found in southern Russia along the Black Sea coast, in Africa, and in Spain.⁶ This shift in trade routes inevitably led to changes in both style and iconographic choices. However, this transformation does not seem to have had a parallel in southern Italian production, where the political conditions were different and exports were not an issue.

Vase shapes that were popular in Athens at the end of the 5th century BCE began to undergo modifications. Vessels such as volute kraters and pseudo-Panathenaic amphorae continued to be produced in both Apulia and Lucania, after they ceased to be used after 380 BCE.⁷ The volute krater, which was characteristic of Apulian production, adopted elaborate decorative elements. For instance, placing small masks within the volutes of the handles became widespread, as did the rich floral decorations on the neck. These were often accompanied by a central figure or head, with rows of palmettes filling the spaces in between. Alongside the volute krater, other types of krater were also frequently produced, especially in Apulia. Amphorae, particularly those similar to the Panathenaic type, were produced in large quantities

1. Guarducci 1974, p. 456.

2. Immerwahr 1990, p. 1.

3. Immerwahr 1990, pp. 2-3.

4. Cohen 1991, p. 85.

5. Trendall 1989, p. 7.

6. Trendall 1989, p. 8.

7. Trendall 1989, p. 8.

and gradually increased in size and featured ever more elaborate decorations on the neck and shoulders. Loutrophoroi also evolved to feature accentuated spiral handles and an ovoid or cylindrical body. Common vase forms such as hydriae, lekanides, lekythoi (especially the squat type), oinochoai, skyphoi, and cups became larger and more ornamented, as did kantharoi, rhyta, and stamnoi. A particularly distinctive form is the fish plate, which features a characteristic decoration in Apulia with the fish's belly facing the central depression.⁸

Apulian artists are known for organizing the decoration of large vases into complex compositions in which figures are arranged across multiple levels. This practice began in the early stages of production and was certainly influenced by Attic traditions carried forward by painters such as Kadmos, Thalos, Pronomos, and Meleagros.⁹ Many of their works have been found in Ruvo di Puglia. This decorative system was evidently highly successful in the region, with artists experimenting with and adopting increasingly innovative solutions as production advanced.

The main Apulian production centre was undoubtedly Taranto, although later production in other locations, particularly in Daunia (Canosa di Puglia, Ordona, and Arpi) and in Peucezia (Ruvo di Puglia), has also been hypothesized. Vases from Apulia were certainly sold not only in the region itself, but also in Lucania and Campania, particularly in the northern area up to the Samnite border (today's Molise region), and to a lesser extent in the central and southern coastal areas of the region.¹⁰

Excavations carried out in southern Italy over the past century have revealed new and significant evidence regarding the presence and distribution of red-figure pottery produced in local ateliers from the late 5th to the 4th century BCE. Archaeological findings not only attest to the early presence of pottery workshops in Taranto in the decades following the Laconian colonization, but also to their active operation and technical suitability for red-figure production from its very inception.¹¹ Fortunately, in reconstructing the history of local craftsmanship, we have access to a vast quantity of locally produced materials that catered to everyday needs as well as those associated with funerary and religious rituals. However, due to urban development and the subsequent destruction of ancient layers, the organizational structure, as well as the technical and qualitative aspects of production within the various artisanal sectors of the ancient city, are only gradually becoming clearer. Although archaeological evidence related to potters' workshops remains scattered throughout the modern urban fabric, a comprehensive picture of the diachronic and synchronic organization of these workshops – almost certainly located in designated neighbourhoods – is only gradually emerging. Nevertheless, the identification of a large number of kilns through traces of burning and layers of red clay altered by fire has provided valuable insights into pottery production.

Moreover, physical and chemical analyses have allowed scholars to identify the type of clay used by these artisans. The region is particularly rich in Pleistocene marine clays,¹² which contain high levels of mineral salts and fossilized marine micro- and macro-organisms, rendering them unsuitable for producing high-quality ceramics. Additionally, this clay develops a high degree of porosity when fired, rendering it suitable only for common ceramic wares, as the application of varnishes and engobes causes swelling and detachment. It is therefore assumed that, in addition to using local clay, Taranto imported other types of clay with different qualities and mineralogical compositions.

It is important to remember that these vases were primarily intended for funerary purposes. They were placed in prestigious tombs as part of the grave-goods and sometimes served as *semata* (grave markers). This is attested by iconographic evidence and archaeological finds. However, this varies by site and only sometimes applies to Apulian vases. However, such occurrences remain rare and the interpretation of a strictly domestic use is debatable, particularly in the case of Apulian vases. Rather than reflecting household wealth per se, their presence in domestic contexts

8. Trendall 1989, p. 10.

9. Trendall 1989, p. 11.

10. Gadaleta and Todisco 2013-2014, p. 7.

11. Dell'Aglio 1996, p. 51.

12. Dell'Aglio 1996, p. 51.

may instead be linked to the ritualized character of certain domestic spaces, at least according to the current state of research.

Only a very small proportion of Italiote and Siceliote ceramic production features inscriptions on the body of the vase. These inscriptions appear most frequently on Lucanian and Apulian pottery, whereas they are less common on Campanian, Paestan, and Siceliote productions. According to the latest survey conducted in 2012, there were a total of 150 red-figure Apulian vases bearing inscriptions.¹³ Most of these inscriptions consist of engraved graphic signs placed on figurative elements or used to identify specific characters depicted in the scene. Furthermore, an analysis of these specimens suggests that the practice of inscribing vases was characteristic of well-defined productions and specific workshops – perhaps even the work of individual ceramographers.

This leads us to a fundamental question: was writing a widespread practice within these workshops, or was it the prerogative of only certain individuals? Furthermore, were these inscriptions commissioned by clients to facilitate the understanding and recognition of the depicted scenes, or were they simply added for decorative and/or prestigious purposes?

Explanatory Inscriptions

From the general framework of the collected testimonies, it emerges that the inscription can be evaluated as a distinctive sign of a representation. Its function may vary depending on the type of epigraph itself and the relationship it establishes with the other elements of the composition. However, most of the inscriptions on Italiote and Siceliote vases belong to the much larger category of proper names, placed within the field of representation. From the outset of Apulian production, there is a tendency to use nominal inscriptions referring to famous characters from myth and epic, but above all to gods. For this reason, this type of epigraph can be described as ‘explanatory’, to use a term coined by Guarducci,¹⁴ as they aim to identify not only people, but also sometimes objects and even entire scenes depicted by the artist.

The earliest examples of this type of inscription in the Greek world are found on a specific type of vase: the Panathenaic amphora. From the first half of the 6th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE, alongside the figure of Athena armed in the traditional archaic figurative scheme, the inscription τῶν Ἀθηνηθῆν ἄθλων (‘of the Athenian athletes’) appeared.¹⁵ Of similar function, we can recall the inscription ἡδύποτος¹⁶ (‘sweet to drink’), dating to the Hellenistic period and found on some small vases: rather than defining the shape of the vase, it indicated its content and intended use.

A primary function of these epigraphs can be seen in the general practice of identifying each individual character represented in a scene. For example, the pelike by the Painter of the Berlin Dancing Girl (430-410 BCE), now housed in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (inv. no. 1391-D5), depicts an Amazonomachy, with the nude Telamon (on the left) attacking Andromache on horseback (fig. 1). Both characters are identified by inscriptions above their heads: ΤΕΛΑΜΩΝ and ΑΝΔΡΟΜΑΧΗ (fig. 1).

The nominal inscription may also refer only to the main characters of the scene, almost as if to emphasize their primary importance. This can be seen, for instance, on the volute krater from Ceglie del Campo, attributed to the Painter of the Birth of Dionysus (400-380 BCE), which is now housed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale (MAN) di Taranto (inv. no. 8264). This krater depicts the birth of the god Dionysus and only the names of the two gods represented are inscribed: ΙΕΥΣ and ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΣ (fig. 2).

13. Todisco 2012. Inscriptions on red-figured vases of southern Italy and Sicily is the theme of my PhD thesis: the inscriptions on Apulian vases are actually 208 more or less.

14. Guarducci 1974, p. 456.

15. Guarducci 1974 p. 457.

16. Guarducci 1974, p. 457.

Figure 1. Pelike attributed to the Painter of the Berlin Dancing Girl, 430-410 BCE

Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, inv. no. 1391-D5

Image courtesy National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne





Figure 2. Volute krater attributed to the Painter of the Birth of Dionysus, 400-380 BCE. Detail of the inscription
Taranto, Museo archeologico nazionale, no inv. 8264
Courtesy of the Museo Archeologico di Taranto

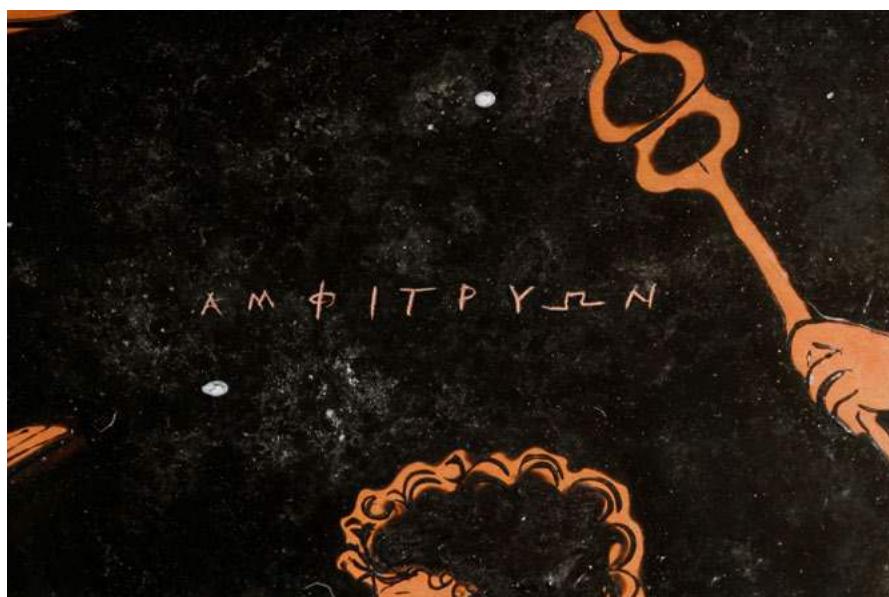


Figure 3. Krater attributed to the Painter of the Birth of Dionysus, 400-380 BCE. Detail of the inscription
Taranto, Museo archeologico nazionale, no inv. 4600
Courtesy of the Museo Archeologico di Taranto

17. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/154078/> [accessed in June 2026].



Figure 4. Krater of the Wolves,
attributed to the Corego Painter, 400-380 BCE
 Milan, Civico museo archeologico, inv. no AO.9.283
 © Comune di Milano – all rights reserved

18. Roscino 2012, p. 287.

19. Todisco 2012, vol. 1, p. 189.

Another distinction within this category can be observed when only a single character is identified in the scene. For instance, on another krater attributed once again to the Painter of the Birth of Dionysus and now housed in the MAN in Taranto (inv. no. 4600), only the inscription ΑΜΦΙΤΡΙΩΝ appears (fig. 3), designating the main character of the scene while simultaneously facilitating immediate identification – almost as if it were the title of the representation.

A similar function can be seen in inscriptions that serve to indicate generic or even collective figures. For instance, the volute krater from Ceglie del Campo by the Painter of the Thersites of Boston (350–330 BCE), currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston (inv. no. 03.804)¹⁷, features the inscription ΔΜΩΣ, referring to an unnamed servant within the broader depiction of the myth of the death of Thersites, where all the other characters are identified by their names. It is therefore preferable to attribute generic or ‘social status’ labels to figures of lesser significance.

Comic Scenes

In Italiote and Siceliote red-figure production, vases depicting comic scenes and actors are not uncommon. These scenes are easily recognizable in terms of iconography, as the characters always wear masks, tights – indicated by folds at the arms and legs –, padding around the belly and buttocks, and a false phallus – pendulous or twisted, almost never erect. Regarding Apulian production, there are approximately 78 known examples¹⁸ featuring comic iconography.

One particularly illustrative krater is the piece attributed to the Corego Painter, now housed in the Civic Museum of Milan (inv. no. AO.9.284), dating to 400-380 BCE (fig. 4). The protagonist of a comic scene depicting the theft of sweets is a servant, ΞΑΝΘΙΑΣ. In the scene, the elderly master, ΦΙΛΟΤΙΜΙΔΕΣ, offers a tray of delicacies to his wife, ΧΑΡΙΣ. The woman’s name itself has a comedic effect, as it contrasts with the traditional association of the term ‘charis’ with feminine grace. The servant, who sneaks away after stealing a *plakous*¹⁹ – a typical sweet focaccia – wears the ‘P’ mask of the cook type, characterized by a broad receding hairline on the forehead and tufts of hair at the temples.

On Supports

In a significant proportion of Apulian red-figure productions, inscriptions are placed on representations of stone or clay supports, architectural elements, or in their vicinity. These primarily include pinakes (votive tablets), *naiskoi* (or similarly structured small temples), small pillars, and altars. These inscriptions do not appear to correspond specifically to objects that might have existed in the urban environments of their original contexts. However, the epigraphs that ceramists placed on or near these structures seem to convey a different, almost transcendental or allegorical

Figure 5. Amphora of the Painter of Ruvo 423. Detail

Ruvo di Puglia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale Jatta, inv. no. 36734, J 423
 Courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura –
 Direzione regionale Musei nazionali
 Puglia

meaning – that would undoubtedly have been understood by those who used the vases, primarily in funerary contexts.

An example of an inscription placed on the architrave of a small temple can be found on the eponym amphora of the Painter of Ruvo 423 (360-350 BCE), now housed in the MAN Jatta in Ruvo di Puglia (inv. no. 36734, J 423). Inside the *naiskos*, what appears to be a statue of the hero Heracles is depicted, as indicated by the inscription on the architrave: ΗΡΑΚΛΕ (fig. 5). In this case, the small temple is stylized, with an attempt to create a perspective effect. The figure inside can be easily identified by his attributes: the *leontè* (lion skin) and the club. However, the inscription may function more as a 'label' indicating the owner and/or dedicatee of the structure rather than merely aiding the identification of the figure itself.



Decoration

Another category of inscriptions found on Apulian red-figure vases is the ornamental motifs. Only one example has been identified: an oinochoe of form 3 from the Ragusa Collection in the MAN in Taranto (inv. no. 73650). It depicts a single female head in profile, occupying the entire iconographic space. The head is adorned with a necklace and a radiate diadem painted in white. The *kekryphalos* is also decorated with two lines of painted letters arranged in a herringbone pattern. The vase is attributed to the Monopoli Painter and dates to 330-310 BCE. The painted letters are ΧΨΩ ΕΗΙΟΥΩ (fig. 6). This is undoubtedly an ornamental motif, as the sequence of letters does not appear to have any intended meaning.



Figure 6. Oinochoe attributed to the Monopoli Painter, 330-310 BCE. Detail

Taranto, Museo archeologico nazionale,
 inv. no. 73650
 Courtesy of the Museo Archeologico di
 Taranto

Indication of the Owner

A Panathenaic-type amphora, attributed to the Hearst Painter (420-400 BCE), now housed in the Museum of Art and History in Geneva (HR 194), features numerous inscriptions in the Doric dialect, all of which are incised in ‘hidden’ locations. On the left handle, the engraving reads ΚΛΗΝΙΑΣ ΔΑΜΕΑ, ‘Clinias, son of Damea’ (fig. 7). On the upper part of the foot, another inscription states ΑΡΙΣΣΤΟΔΑΑΜΟΣ ΑΝΕΘΕΤΟ ΔΙΧΑ ΚΑΕΑΣ (fig. 8), meaning ‘Aristodemus [the alpha corresponds to the attic eta] has consecrated [it], having had it cooked separately’. On the attachment of the other handle, the right one, the inscription ΚΛΗ appears, though it may be incomplete.

These inscriptions suggest that the vase was intended as a votive offering at a sanctuary, though its exact provenance remains unknown, making this only a hypothesis. It is possible that a certain Aristodemus commissioned this vase – apparently an exclusive piece: ‘having had it cooked separately’ – for Clinias, son of Damea. Notably, only Clinias is identified with a patronymic, while Aristodemus is not.

Turning to the iconography of the figurative scene,²⁰ the main side of the vase depicts three male figures. The central figure holds a *pilos* in one hand and a spear in the other, while to his left, another man offers him a crown. To his right is a seated figure with a bandage around his head. The precise context of this scene is difficult to determine, as it could simply depict the presentation of an athletic competition.

However, this interpretation is currently a matter of debate, as the idea of a separate firing is entirely unconvincing. A more plausible reading has been proposed as ΑΡΙΣΣΤΟΔΑΑΜΟΣ ΑΝΕΘΕ ΤΟΟΙ ΧΑΚΑΕΑΣ (‘Aristodemus has dedicated to Chakaeas’), where the gemination of sigma and the doubling of alpha and omicron to indicate long vowels reveal the writer’s limited knowledge of Greek. It seems that the scribe transcribed what he heard rather than what he read from a model. Furthermore, the inscription presents additional difficulties, such as the use of the verb ἀνατιθήμι, which is attested only in votive dedications and not in personal contexts, and the element ΧΑΚΑΕΑΣ, which may represent a non-Greek proper name, but appears in the nominative rather than the expected dative case. I am currently studying the inscription, with the hope of publishing a detailed analysis in the near future.

Invectives

Of the corpus examined in this study, only one example can be securely identified: a pelike attributed to the Painter of the Copenhagen Dancer (340-320 BCE), reportedly preserved in a private collection in Brusuglio (Cormano, Milan).²¹ The vessel bears an emblematic inscription painted in red beneath the foot: βουκολ[ι]ῶν μέλεος Λίβυσσα κατάπυγος (‘Boukolion [has become] miserable [because of] Libyssa, || [who is] a whore’). The text is structured as a brief invective and appears to belong to the sphere of sympotic verbal play, a communicative register well attested in the Greek West. Through the use of derogatory epithets and a repetitive grammatical structure, the inscription targets the individuals named – Boukolion and Libyssa – by alluding to their alleged sexual conduct. Rather than conveying a personal denunciation, the wording seems to exploit established erotic and humorous conventions, closely aligned with the language of Aristophanic comedy. As such, it may be understood as a performative utterance intended to provoke amusement within a sympotic setting.

20. Aellen et al. 1986, p. 37.

21. Trendall and Cambitoglou 1982, p. 510-511, no. 131.



Panathenaic amphora attributed to the Hearst Painter, 420-400 BCE.

Geneva, Museum of Art and History, inv. no. HR 194, loan from the association Hellas et Roma

© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève, photographer: André Longchamp

Figure 7. Detail of the left handle



Figure 8. Detail of the upper part of the foot



22. Johnston 1979 and 2006.



Figure 9. Krater of the Taranto Group 7013
Paris, Louvre, inv. no. MR 3
© 2010 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) /
Stéphane Maréchalle

23. Guarducci 1974, p. 471.

24. Guarducci 1974, p. 472.

25. This inscription on the volute krater, housed in Paris, Louvre (K 66), attributed to the Painter of Taranto 7013, is considered false: see Masci 1999, and 2013; Poccetti 2013; Bourgeois 2013; Denoyelle 2013; Ferrandini Troisi 2015; Di Franco and La Paglia 2020; Tesoro 2024, pp. 455–464.

Potters' Marks

Another group comprises inscriptions consisting of letters, often identified as potters' marks. The engraving of these letters has been interpreted as a trademark, the final price of the product, or a recognition mark – more specifically, as a means of ensuring correspondence, for instance between containers and their respective lids. This field of study is extensive, and moreover, the presence of such letters – whether incised before or after firing – is rarely mentioned in vase descriptions.

Johnston's studies²² further suggest that some of these letters may indicate the vessel's capacity or correspond to the initials of the artisans themselves. It is noteworthy that the most frequently documented letters on Apulian red-figure vases are alpha, delta, and lambda; this may be due to their similar linear structure, which facilitated their execution. Most letters were incised before firing, using tools of medium thickness that could produce relatively deep marks in the unfired clay. The letter chi is also widely attested, particularly when painted in red slip beneath the foot of small vessels, such as oinochoai.

Signatures

The practice of signing clay vases was widespread over a broad chronological span, from approximately the 8th century to the mid-4th century BCE.²³ However, signed vases were relatively rare in Athens and throughout the Greek world. Notably, vases bearing the signatures of 'great' artists represent only a small fraction of the total production. Furthermore, these vases



were not signed because they were considered of higher value, although some are certainly remarkable for their exquisite artistry. Ultimately, whether an artist chose to sign a vase does not appear to be linked to creative flair or any particular circumstances.

In Attica, however, artists' signatures appear almost exclusively on cups²⁴ rather than on other types of vessel forms. Typically, signatures were added once the painting was finished, but before the final firing of the vase, presumably by the painter himself. It was only rarely that a signature was applied – either incised or painted – after the firing process was finished like on the krater of the Taranto Group 7013, 325–300 BCE, housed in the Louvre under inv. no MR 3 (fig. 9).²⁵

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Although the transmission of epic and poetic texts in southern Italy and Sicily remains poorly understood, it is plausible that some vase painters were more cultured due to their access to written texts, and that the circulation of books was increasing by the late 4th century BCE. Depictions of writing supports on Apulian vases are rare. The tax collector on the Darius Painter krater is a notable example, and discussions of artisan literacy must therefore be cautious. Giuliani highlights the likely role of intermediaries during funerary rituals in explaining complex mythological imagery to largely illiterate indigenous audiences.

Linguistic exchange between Greeks and non-Greeks also warrants attention: trade facilitated cultural transmission but did not guarantee deeper cultural assimilation, which depends on broader cultural engagement. The integration of such sophisticated and culturally refined production into the indigenous landscape of Peucetia and Daunia remains a key question. These vases, primarily found in elite necropoleis, likely held symbolic and prestige value. Claude Pouzadoux and others²⁶ emphasize the cultural level of both the painters and their patrons, who belonged to educated social strata familiar with Greek literary traditions. The complexity of mythological narratives on the vases suggests some form of mediation between Greek-speaking intermediaries and indigenous audiences, either through funerary orators²⁷ or exposure to theatrical performances by itinerant Greek troupes.²⁸

However, Luigi Todisco and Ludovico Rebaudo²⁹ note that linguistic barriers and a lack of evidence of direct engagement with Greek theatre restrict these interpretations. Rather than direct transmission from texts or performances, iconography likely relied on internal workshop traditions – standard types, graphic conventions, compositional schemes, and ornamental repertoires – adapted to the expectations of a culturally literate clientele.

The study and the autoptic analysis of inscriptions on Apulian red-figure vases have also enabled hypotheses to be formed regarding their production techniques. Most inscriptions appear to have been incised onto the black gloss before firing, a technique rarely seen on Attic vases. This technique is highly refined, requiring a very fine-pointed instrument capable of producing almost calligraphic strokes, typically between 0.2 and 0.4 cm in height, with inter-letter spacing not exceeding 0.1/0.2 cm. Another technique involves painting with diluted black gloss on reserved areas, again using a fine brush applied with sufficient lightness that the starting points of the strokes remain visible due to the higher concentration of pigment. This method is typically employed for inscriptions on small pilasters or architectural supports. A third technique, post-firing graffito, raises questions regarding authenticity. These inscriptions are executed with a sharp, fine tool, producing strokes that maintain verticality and rigidity due to the hardness of the object and the consequent difficulty of execution. Studying these techniques provides insights into workshop practices, artisan roles, and authenticity verification.

Finally, studying these inscriptions has enabled us to examine the hands of ceramographers responsible for writing on the vases they produced. It is not uncommon to observe vases attributed to the same painter bearing inscriptions executed by different hands. This confirms the complex organization of ceramic workshops, the diversity of artisans involved, and their mobility, as well as a fairly widespread ability to write, or at least copy, alphabetic characters from a model.

26. Labellarte 1991, p. 163; Schimdt 2005, pp. 201-202; Pouzadoux 2008, p. 205.

27. Giuliani 1995.

28. Taplin 2007 and 2012.

29. Todisco 2003 and 2012; Rebaudo 2017, p. 1209.

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