Swans and Circles: An Object Biography of an Unprovenanced Geometric Pyxis

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Introduction

The early Iron Age (1075-700 B.C.E.) on mainland Greece was a time of strong regionalism and loss of the cultural advancements gained during the Mycenaean period (1400-1200 B.C.E.).[1] There was a massive population decline at the end of the Bronze Age as well as a loss of the elaborate administrative structure that utilized palatial structures and the written language.[2] Figural pottery styles such as marine style and zoomorphic rhyton stopped being produced. Instead, geometric shapes and lines became the style.[3] There was a lot of interest in creating crisp lines concentric rings as well as emphasizing the transitions and main areas of the pot.[4] Concentric rings were often used to mark the swelling bellies of a pot and a wide band was often placed between the handles.[5] By the Late Geometric Period (760-735 B.C.E.), every available surface was decorated and anthropomorphic figures began to be painted on the pots.[6]

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[1] Richard T. Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology: A New History, c. 2500-c. 150 BCE* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 60-5.
[2] A. Bernard Knapp and Sturt W. Manning, "Crisis in Context: The End of the Late Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean," *American Journal of Antiquity* 120, no. 1 (2016): 99-149.
[3] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 73-8.
[4] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 73-8.
[5] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 73-8.
[6] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 76-8.

Many aspects of burial also changed during the Late Geometric Period. People began to be inhumed in cist graves at the margins of the city instead of being cremated.[7] In Late Geometric I, 760-735 B.C.E., there is a greater investment in grave markers due to a desire to impress the wealth of the deceased's family on the public.[8] This practice falls away in Late Geometric II, 735-690 B.C.E., when grave markers disappear and grave goods become smaller, simpler, and homogeneous as people begin to display their wealth through religious dedications instead of graves.[9] Also in the eighth century B.C.E., children began to be interned in communal cemeteries instead of inside houses suggesting that they had a new symbolic status and a distinct role in their communities.[10] The role of young girls in this society was to marry and reproduce and the grave goods in the burials of girls aged ten to eighteen usually contained dolls, boots, and chests that communicate a loss of their potential role as a married woman.[11] These maiden burials were the richest burials of the Late Geometric Period.[12] These young women were being singled out in burial with expensive and specific grave goods lamenting their loss to society.

The focal object for this paper is a pyxis from the Late Geometric Period.[13] The decoration and shape suggest that the object was made in Attica or Boeotia between 750 and 700

[7] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 78-80.
[8] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 78-80.
[9] Neer, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 80.
[10] Susan Langdon, "The Awkward Age: Art and Maturation in Early Greece," *Hesperia Supplements* 41 (2007): 173.
[11] Langdon, "The Awkward Age," 187.
[12] Susan Langdon, *Art and Identity in Dark Age Greece, 1100 – 700 BCE* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 140.
[13] KM 2569: Geometric pyxis with swans, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan.

B.C.E. The quality of the object suggests it was a very expensive piece. Although the object is unprovenanced, it is likely to have come out of the burial of a young woman because of its design and the provenience of other pyxides excavated from Geometric period contexts.

Historic Provenience

This object belongs to a large collection of pottery known as the Marburg Vases. It came to the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1923 when F.W. Kelsey bought it and 129 other vases from Paul Gottschalk, a German antiquities dealer.[14] At the time of purchase the objects were on loan to the University of Marburg.[15] Upon purchase, no other paperwork was collected so it is unknown how the vases were originally acquired or excavated.[16] Currently, the object, seen in Figure 1, is on display on the first floor of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology alongside five other objects showing the change in pottery style from the Late Helladic to the Late Geometric periods (3000 to 750 B.C.E.).

Figure 1: KM 2569 Geometric pyxis with swans, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan

Manufacture and Fabric

The object appears to have been thrown on a wheel because it widest point is more than halfway up the

[14] Ivan Cangemi, "The Marburg Vases," in *A Man of Many Parts: The Life and Legacy of Francis Willey Kelsey*, accessed September 27, 2017, http://exhibitions.kelsey.lsa.umich.edu/fwk/marburg.html.
[15] Cangemi, "The Marburg Vases."
[16] Cangemi, "The Marburg Vases."

vessel, it has a very regular and symmetrical shape, and there are no vertical sealing lines that would suggest the use of a mold. The object is made from a fine white clay with few inclusions. The lid's unglazed clay appears slightly darker than the cream color seen on the bottom of the pot. The difference in coloration could be due to different fabric, the way the object was fired, or how the object was preserved. However, on the lid there are two pairs of holes that correspond to two other holes on the horizontal rim of the box suggesting that the lid and the box are part of the same object.[17] The symmetry and thin walls of the object as well as the expansive decoration suggest it was made by an expert craftsperson for an upper-class buyer. Artisans dedicated many years to practicing and perfecting the painting and throwing skills to create such a vessel. Therefore, it was probably made in a specialized economy that needs not only people who focus their energy in artistic pursuits, but also people with enough surplus income to buy the artist's creations.

Shape

The object contains two movable parts, a lid and a bowl. The bowl has convex walls and the lid sits inside the rim of the bowl. Both pieces together are 11.5 cm high and 16.2 cm wide. The body of the vessel is not intact but has been reassembled from multiple sherds and a few modern pieces. The lid appears to be intact and is convex across the top of the bowl.

The object is most likely a pyxis - a small box-like container with a lid. These objects are most often found in the

[17] Wilhelmina Van Ingen Elarth and University of Michigan, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 29.

graves of young women.[18] Pyxides are usually round, like the vessel under consideration, but can have a variety of different vertical profiles. Pyxides have been categorized by two different classification systems. Richter and Milne separate pyxides into four basic classifications. This vessel fits type I best: bowl shaped body with three broad feet.[19] However, our object lacks three broad feet. Further, its decorations date it to the Geometric Period circa 900-700 B.C.E. while type I is confined to the sixth century B.C.E. Therefore, the Richter and Milne classification system does not aid this investigation. Beazley's classification system also divides pyxides into four divisions. Here type B fits this pyxis the best: flat cylindrical vessel with vertical sides and protruding rim at the bottom.[20] Type B is also not a perfect fit for this vessel because on this pot the bottom rim is even with the bottom of the pot not protruding over the foot. This lack of accurate identification suggests that the formal classification systems are not inclusive of all pyxides and need to be revised.

Looking at examples of published pyxides outside the formal classification systems, this pyxis resembles the Boeotian pyxides of the second half of the eighth century B.C.E. Boeotia is a region of Greece lying to the north of Attica. During the Geometric Period, Attic culture greatly influenced Boeotia.[21] The

[18] Eva T. Brann, "Late Geometric and Protoattic Pottery: Mid 8th to Late 7th Century B.C.," *The Athenian Agora* 8 (1962): 112; Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 130.
[19] Gisela Marie Augusta Richter and Marjorie Josephine Milne, *Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases* (New York: Plantin Press, 1935), 20.
[20] M. G. Kanowski, *Containers of Classical Greece: A Handbook of Shapes* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 128.
[21] Barbara Bohen, "The Boeotian Origin of an Unusual Geometric Vase," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 20 (1992): 41.

shape of the pyxis suggests that it was made in Boeotia during the latter half of the eighth century B.C.E.

Decoration

The pyxis is decorated with brown-black glaze and the unglazed surface has been buffed.[22] The pyxis' lid is decorated with concentric circles of varying widths that follow a pattern of one thick ring followed by two thinner rings three times and ends with radiating strokes at the lid's edge. The knob of the lid, cone shaped at the bottom but ending in a more circular shape, emerges out of the center of these concentric rings. The bowl is decorated from top to bottom starting with two lines, then a row of connected dots, followed by two more lines, then there is a wide band containing 18 panels separated by groups of three vertical lines, next there are three more stripes, a band of small dots, and a final line. The band of panels covers the majority of the wall of the pot. Each panel is separated from another with three vertical stripes and each panel contains one of five designs; five connecting dots circling a sixth, a vertical column of multiple zigzags, a swan-like bird with groups of dots in the background, a version of the dogtooth pattern, or a diamond with a checkerboard pattern inside with dots inside each diamond and more groups of dots in the background. On the bottom of the bowl there is a rosette of four hatched leaves surrounded by three concentric circles with swastikas filling out the empty space.

These decorations align with two different styles, Dipylon and Boeotian. Boeotian pyxides after 750 B.C.E. were unique in their use of attached vertical columns of multiple

[22] Elarth and University of Michigan, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, 29.

zigzags and files of birds.[23] This pyxis has the vertical columns of multiple zigzags as well as two depictions of a bird on its body. The Dipylon style is marked by its "elaborate system of linear decorations and purely decorative animals and human beings, often covering the entire surface."[24] The concentric lines as well as the dogtooth, chevron, and diamond patterns along the wide band show a use of linear decorations while the swan-like shape shows a decorative use of an animal figure. Objects made in the Dipylon style are attributed to one Athenian artisan called the Dipylon Master who was active from around 760-750 B.C.E. and mainly produced objects for burial in the Dipylon cemetery.[25] Thus, the decoration on this vessel suggests that the pyxis was made around 750 B.C.E. either in Attica or Boeotia and was used in a funerary context.

Use: Toilet Jar

There is evidence from pottery and grave reliefs suggesting that women used pyxides to hold cosmetics, trinkets, jewelry, medicine, and incense.[26] Some pyxides have been found in burials still containing cosmetics.[27] The idea that these jars were made to hold objects is supported by the remains of tie holes on the lids that allow for them to be held tight to the bowl with string. This pyxis, however, is impractical for daily use considering the skill necessary to create it. Its decoration and manufacture show it to be an expensive piece, unlikely to have been used in a daily context. This pyxis probably symbolized this

[23] Bohen, "The Boeotian Origin," 43.
[24] Gisela Marie Augusta Richter, "Early Attic Vase," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (April 1912): 68.
[25] Susan Woodford, *The Art of Greece and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 40.
[26] Kanowski, *Containers of Classical Greece*, 128.
[27] Kanowski, *Containers of Classical Greece*, 128.

daily use, but was created for a more exuberant or ritualistic use; perhaps an elite grave gift.

Use: A Grave Marker

Some Dipylon vases were used as grave markers. A viewer of a grave marker focuses his or her attention on the side of the object facing them when standing at the grave. The object reflects this assumed perspective by placing the focal point of the object on one side. The best example of this is the Dipylon belly-handled amphora c.760-c.735 B.C.E. This object is displayed in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.[28] This object is covered with repeating patterns except for a band between the handles that shows a prothesis. The prothesis was a part of the burial ritual where the body lies in repose.[29] Clearly the main focal point of the vessel, the prothesis stands out among the repeating patterns on the jar. The image is only visible on one side of the jar indicating that this object was used as a grave marker. This is corroborated by the fact that the amphora was excavated above a grave.[30] The pyxis under analysis here, though decorated in the Dipylon style, does not have a single focus point. Every pattern in the large decorated band around the middle of the box is found on every side of the object. This suggests that it was meant to be seen from many different sides and was not used as a grave marker. It also is lacking the monumental size that is commonly seen in grave

[28] "The Dipylon Amphora," National Archaeological Museum, accessed March 22, 2018, http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=5161.
[29] William Cavanagh and Christopher Mee, "Mourning Before and After the Dark Age," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement* 63 (1995): 58; Brann, "Late Geometric," 16.
[30] Barbara E. Bohen, "The Dipylon Amphora: Its Role in the Development of Greek Art," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 59.

markers. Further, this pyxis is a small object that would not be very noticeable on the horizon. This object was likely not used to mark a grave.

Use: A Grave Good in a Maiden Burial

During the Geometric period, ceramic wares were mostly used in burials and other special events while metal containers were used in daily life; pottery was integral in ceremonies of social reproduction such as death, birth, or marriage.[31] During the same time in Attica, the tombs of adolescent women began to be buried with distinct assemblages. From the Protogeometric through Middle Geometric periods the burial assemblage associated with women usually consisted of incised handmade attic dolls, terracotta models of boots and chests and spiral hair ornaments.[32] This collection of grave goods is referred to as a maiden kit.[33] Other objects found in these burials are pointed pyxides, kalathoi, and model granaries.[34] Langdon suggests that the model chests may symbolize the feminine goods and talents that her marriage would bring to a household or it may symbolize a dowry as chests are often represent in the classical era.[35] In the middle and late geometric period, a new form of the maiden kit emerges containing hair spirals, granaries, terracotta pomegranates, baskets with high arching handles, and horse pyxides.[36] The chests of the first maiden kits have been replaced with horse pyxides. Horse pyxides are seen in nine of the 20 burials of young women in Attica during the

[31] Susan Langdon, "Beyond the Grave: Biographies from Early Greece," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 4 (2001): 581.
[32] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 130.
[33] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 130.
[34] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 130.
[35] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 138-9.
[36] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 139.

Middle and Late Geometric period.[37] Horse pyxides fulfilled a purely ornamental role; "if the horse was meant to serve as a handle, practical considerations would have limited it to a single figure, thus creating a more manageable grip for the lid."[38] Therefore the horse must be an emblem or embellishment of some sort.[39] The use of pyxides to mark female graves is also seen in Young and Angel's report on Late Geometric graves in the Athenian Agora.[40] They report on the contents of ten adult inhumations: two of which the gender cannot be decided, three male, and five female.[41] The female graves were much richer deposits of artifacts than the male graves and four of the five female graves contain multiple pyxides.[42] Thus, while the pyxis under consideration here does not have horses on its lid, it is still likely to have come from the grave of a woman.

Conclusion

Women commonly used Pyxides to hold their bathroom necessities such as cosmetics, medicine, and jewelry, but in the Late Geometric period pyxides began to be put in female graves as a symbol of the potential of marriage and reproduction lost in the woman's death. This pyxis was part of the symbolic maiden kit placed in the burial of a woman. The pyxis' shape is similar to other pyxides of Boeotian origin however its decoration is more similar to the Dipylon style. The pyxis has vertical columns of multiple zigzags unique to Late Geometric period but the other patterns and use of a swan decoration

[37] Langdon, *Art and Identity*, 132-3.
[38] Bohen "The Boeotian Origin," 41.
[39] Bohen "The Boeotian Origin," 41.
[40] R.S. Young and J. Lawrence Angel, "Late Geometric Graves and a Seventh Century Well in the Agora," *Hesperia Supplements* 2 (1939).
[41] Young and Angel, "Late Geometric Graves," 67-98.
[42] Young and Angel, "Late Geometric Graves," 67-98.

resembles Dipylon style more just influenced by Boeotian styles. Dipylon style vases were made mostly for burials and during the Late Geometric period pyxides were commonly found in the burials of young women symbolizing the loss of marriage potential for the community. Thus, this pyxis was probably made in Attica close to 750 B.C.E. in the Dipylon style and was interred in the grave of a young woman.

Anne Sherfield
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
annesher@umich.edu

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