Objects in Focus
Classical Archaeology

Ancient Greek pottery sherds: Shapes and Styles

The Museum of Classical Archaeology houses a collection of over 10,000 pottery sherds – broken pieces of pottery. These are rarely displayed and mostly used for teaching. Ancient pottery has its own complexity of types, styles and shapes.

Attic pottery from between 900 – 300 BCE

- **BCE** is the same as BC (Before Christ) and stands for Before Current Era.

In this handout we will explore:

- What knowledge do these fragments hold?
- Why do we collect them?
- What are the ethics of collecting pottery in the 21st century?
What knowledge do these fragments hold?

**Decoration and Dating**

Attic Greek pottery is usually dated through an analysis of the decoration and style. The styles are called **Geometric, Black Figure and Red Figure**

**Shapes and Use**

Different shapes were used for different purposes. Sometimes we can tell from a sherd what the shape of the pot was, and therefore what it was used for.

This sherd is a fragment of a lekythos.

A lekythos is the name of a small, long vase usually used for storing oil. The curve of the sherd shows this very well.

Diagram of a lekythos vase, showing a sherd that could have been part of it.
What are the ethics of collecting pottery in the 21st century?

The Museum of Classical Archaeology continues to acquire objects, but there are international agreements in place to protect a country’s cultural heritage and the trafficking (illegal sale of) of cultural objects. The most important of these being the 1970 UNESCO Convention.

Generally speaking, at the Museum, any newly acquired object, must have records of official excavations, and permissions for it to leave its country of origin.

However, we (and many other museums) collect objects which have been recorded to have exited their country of origin before 1970 UNESCO Convention. Our most recent acquisition, this Cypriot aryballos (small jug) is an example of this.
Behind the Scenes at the Museum

Meet Justyna Ladosz

Justyna was the Education and Outreach Lead at the Museum of Classical Archaeology, where she has worked for the last two years. She also works at the Cambridge University Library on a Greek Manuscripts Project. She likes ancient pots and books.

Museum of Classical Archaeology

Location
Faculty of Classics, Sidgwick Avenue
Cambridge, CB3 9DA

Opening Hours
Tuesday-Friday:10am-5pm, Saturday: 2-5pm, Sunday- Monday & Public holidays: Closed