

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING RELIEF PITHOI IN GREECE BETWEEN THE END OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> AND THE 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES BC

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*Pithoi, large vessels for storing supplies, were a valuable tool of the household economy. Despite the high practicality of these containers, they are also known in a richly relief-decorated version produced in Greece from the 8th century BC. This paper offers some reflections on this phenomenon based on literary sources and proposes a comparison with some Late Bronze Age vases. The hypothetical derivation from a particular type of bronze kraters, whose existence was already echoed in Homeric poems, will reveal some interesting details. These concern primarily the origin of the vascular profiles from the eighth to seventh centuries BC. Secondly, the comparison with vases from earlier periods highlights and can explain some differences in the decorations, which were preserved until the 7th century BC.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Jars of varying sizes, suitable for storing both liquid and solid edibles, have always been a fundamental element in the furnishing of residential or public contexts<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1). The purpose for which they were made was practical, yet some examples were richly decorated, according to a practice that had already spread throughout most of the Aegean by the end of the 7th century BC.

Large *pithoi* with engraved, punched, painted or relief motifs are often found in Bronze Age dwellings and palaces, as evidenced by numerous finds in Crete<sup>2</sup> and Central Greece<sup>3</sup>. The simplest decorations probably simulated the ropes used to secure them to each other, to fasten the lid or to prevent them from breaking while drying<sup>4</sup>. The use of more complex decorative motifs soon followed. It was therefore a purely decorative taste, linked to an elite whose first source of ennoblement came from the production and conservation of surplus<sup>5</sup>.

Figurative representations, on the other hand, were widespread in the Mycenaean environment, particularly on kraters, often painted with battle scenes to praise the warlike exploits of an individual, a family, or a circle<sup>6</sup> (fig. 2). The echoes of this world, which had slipped into oblivion during the centuries of the Dark Age, came to light again in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. with the Homeric poems, celebrating a heroic past often translated in a contemporary style<sup>7</sup>.

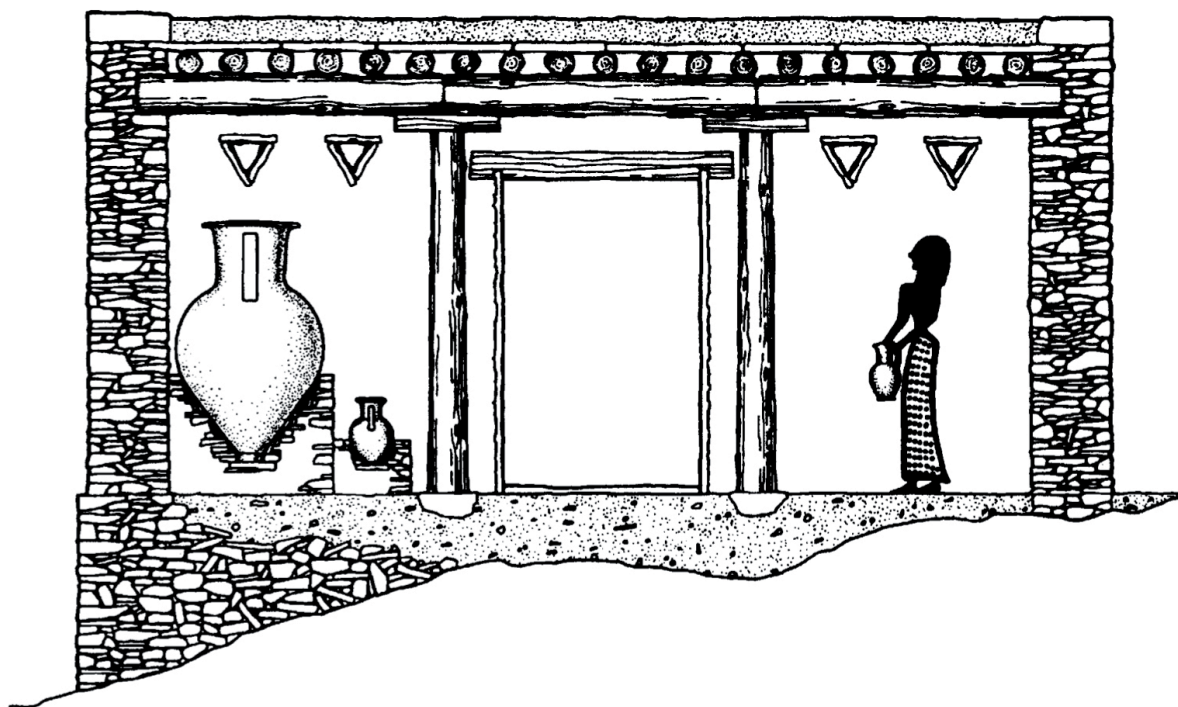


Fig. 1. Zagora, Andros. Reconstruction of a house with a bench housing a *pithos* (after CAMBITOGLOU *et alii* 1981, fig. 8).

1. On this subject, in general, see the valuable analysis proposed by EBBINGHAUS 2005.

2. CHRISTAKIS 1999, p. 5, fig. 2; CHRISTAKIS 2005; CHRISTAKIS 2011, p. 201, fig. 1.

3. BLEGEN - RAWSON 1966, pp. 394-396, figs. 381-384; WIENCKE 1970.

4. COURBY 1922, p. 11, note 2.

5. HALSTEAD - O'SHEA 1982.

6. On this issue, see D'AGATA 2012.

7. MORRIS 2001, pp. 89-91; CRIELAARD 1993; RAAFLAUB 1998, pp. 172 ff.; CRIELAARD 2016, pp. 44-45.



Fig. 2. Tiryns, the so-called “Krater of Shield Bearers” (after DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, fig. 341).

### RELIEF PITHOI FROM 8TH TO 6TH CENTURY BC

The first study dedicated to large containers decorated in relief was an article by Edmund Pottier in the *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* (1888), a short 18-page excursus that laid the foundations for subsequent research<sup>8</sup>.

Fernand Courby's monograph covers, diachronically, a broader time span. Even though it includes Hellenistic ceramics, it dedicates eight chapters to the birth and development of geometric and archaic production<sup>9</sup>. The cornerstone for studies in this field remains the work by Jörg Schäfer *Studien zu den griechischen Reliefpithoi des achten bis sechtes Jahrhunderts v. Chr. Aus Kreta, Rhodos, Tenos und Boioten* (1957), which provided, in fact, the first identification of macro-groups and advanced the first hypothesis for relative chronologies<sup>10</sup>.

Although never published, it is worth mentioning Linda Hillman Anderson's doctoral thesis from the University of Michigan in 1975<sup>11</sup>. Based on the chronologies proposed by Schäfer, Anderson analyses the iconographic aspects of the representations on the vases and tries to recognize some recurrent features.

The most recent study is Eva Simantoni Bournia's monograph, published in 2004, which lowers the dates of Schäfer's chronology by about twenty years<sup>12</sup>. Although the literature on chronologically more recent productions adopts a specific nomenclature, that on large, decorated

8. POTTIER 1888.

9. COURBY 1922, pp. 3-122.

10. SCHÄFER 1957.

11. ANDERSON 1975, PhD dissertation.

12. SIMANTONI BOURNIA 2004.

containers encounters some difficulties. The most common form, often classified as *pithos*, was also defined as ‘amphora’ or, in more recent times, as ‘*pithamphora*’<sup>13</sup>.

During this discussion, we will prefer the term “*pithos*”, which better represents the function of these vessels. Their characteristics, especially the size – 2 meters high, in some cases – are quite unique. Their considerable weight, even before being filled, makes them almost irremovable. In addition, unlike earlier Minoan and Helladic production, the handles have ceased to be functional, becoming purely decorative elements. Relief *pithoi* were used in numerous contexts, both domestic and funerary, with a conceivable use also in sacred contexts. Their high economic value meant that they were often recycled, sometimes until the Hellenistic period.

Literature identifies the following classification:

- Tenian-Boeotian Group;
- Rhodian Group;
- Cretan Group;
- Spartan Group;
- Corinthian Group;
- Attic Group.

Of these, we prefer to analyze only the first three, as they are the more representative ones. Jörg Schäfer’s classification into groups and subgroups has stood the test of time, but recent studies are more in line with the classification proposed by Simantoni Bournia<sup>14</sup>.

The Tenian-Boeotian Group is the largest in terms of number and bears the name of the two areas that have yielded the largest number of records<sup>15</sup>. It is also the oldest group, with a rich geometric phase characterized by a wide iconographic repertoire, which surpasses that of the coeval painted pottery. This phenomenon can only be explained in the context of trade with the Near East, whose routes reached Greece via the natural bridge of the Cyclades islands. This connection led to the development of a common figurative language, which is well exemplified – between the end of the 8th and the end of the 7th century – by the production of relief pottery.

The earliest group (740-700 BC) seems to belong only to the island environment, more precisely to the islands of Andros, Tinos, Naxos and Amorgos. These are pyriform vessels, mostly with geometric decoration, in which begin to appear figurative elements such as theories of animals and mythological creatures (centaurs), battle scenes and parades of dancers or warriors.

The second group (700-675 BC) sees an exploit in the decorative registers, perhaps because of its spread to Attica, Boeotia, and Euboea. The only whole vase from this phase is the so-called ‘*amphore de la Naissance*’ from the Thesmophorion of Xobourgo on Tinos.

The third group (675-650 BC) represents the apogee of production. Although the decorative techniques did not change, the bodies of the vessels underwent a transformation by switching to more rounded profiles. The well known pithos from Mykonos, decorated with scenes from the Iliad, is the final stage of this trend<sup>16</sup> (fig. 3).

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13. SIMANTONI BOURNIA 2004, p. 11.

14. GIGLI PATANÈ 2015.

15. CASKEY 1976, pp. 20-21, 38.

16. ERVIN 1963; EBBINGHAUS 2005, pp. 59-60.



Fig. 3. The Mikonos *Pithos* (after EBBINGHAUS 2005, pl. 1a).

The fourth group (650-600 BC) is stylistically very close to the previous one, differing in a more slender and proportionate form. The decorations follow very similar registers to the previous production but show greater care in the rendering of the hair and clothing. An emblematic example of the group is the *pithos* in the Museum of Fira on Santorini, in which is depicted a chariot pulled by two winged horses within a metopal decoration.

The fifth group (6th-early 5th century BC) is mostly characterized by fragments, from which we can still deduce a radical change in the decorations. The simple double or triple cords and braided motifs, that divided the vessel into sectors, are replaced by much more complex motifs. These are characterized by a crowding of fillers, which partly take up motifs from earlier repertoires, and introduce new elements such as the anthemion.

The Rhodian Group has a much smaller spread than the Tenian-Boeotian<sup>17</sup>, being geographically limited to the island of Rhodes and the mainland in front of it. Characteristic of the production is a marked conservatism in the decorations, which are mostly limited to geometric motifs, with just a few hints of figurate scenes.

The three cities of Rhodes seem to be characterized by the same chronological scansion, with a distinction between three phases. In fact, the sub-geometric phase seems to be attested only in Lindos, Vroulià and Elea in Asia Minor, leading to the hypothesis of the existence of a workshop known as the “atelier of Lindos I”. The characteristics are a very narrow base, an oval body, a low neck with a rather wide mouth, a flared rim and a decoration that is limited to the upper portion of the vessel.

Interpretation problems arise when vases from the so-called ‘ateliers of Lindos II, Kamiros II and Ialysos II’, dated between 675 and 600 BC, are attributed to the second phase. This presumes the existence of two earlier workshops, called Kamiros I and Ialysos I respectively, to which the literature often seems to make no reference.

Group II sees an extension of the repertoire. The profile of the body undergoes a clear lowering of the center of gravity, with a neck that now rises to almost half the overall height of the vessel. The handles take the form of curtain walls, the rim is more everted, and the decoration extends to cover three quarters of the total surface. This period saw the first roller reliefs. They consist exclusively of monomachies, the most common type being the centaumachy.

The third group extends to the end of the 6th century B.C., with the introduction of more massive vases with more proportionate masses. The production of Ialysos III is emblematic, whose geometric decoration can sometimes give way, in the band above the triple cord that delimits the area in contact with the support, to continuous reliefs with scenes of monomachy.

Finally, Cretan production is the most conspicuous in the Aegean<sup>18</sup>. Certain characteristics distinguish these vases from contemporary Aegean production, elements that are sometimes traced back to the late Minoan tradition<sup>19</sup>. A *pithos* found on the terrace of the temple of Apollo at Dreros, seems to demonstrate a derivation from earlier industries<sup>20</sup>.

Among the earliest examples (690-660 BC) are a few fragments from Knossos and one of unknown origin now in the Ashmolean Museum. These bear a decoration of stylized human figures, expressed either in relief, as in the case of the Ashmolean fragment, or in negative, as

17. STROKES 1906; ANDERSON 1975, pp. 29-40; SIMANTONI BOURNIA 2004, pp. 49-62.

18. ANDERSON 1975, pp. 41-77; SIMANTONI BOURNIA 2004, pp. 21-47.

19. SALVAGGIO 2021.

20. MARINATOS 1936, p. 261, fig. 24; LEVI 1969, p. 165; D’ACUNTO 2002-2003, p. 17.

in the case of the Knossos *pithoi*.

The development of metopal decoration originated with the second group of Schäfer's classification (660-640 BC), in agreement with the beginning of the Arkades workshop. Roller decoration, which is not predominant in Crete, is used only modestly during this phase. The last thirty years of the 7th century B.C. saw the exploit of the Arkades workshop<sup>21</sup>. Some initial difficulties in dating this production are due to the varied iconographic repertoire that characterizes it. Alongside new themes, such as the depictions of the divine couple, the *potnia theròn* and Bellerophon being unseated by Pegasus, there is the repetition of some depictions from the previous phase, such as griffins<sup>22</sup>, sphinxes, and bulls in metopal panels.

Four *pithoi* from Phaistos with clay cord decoration on the body and the depiction of an animal on the neck belong to a separate group datable between 610 and 590 BC.<sup>23</sup>. The strong decorative conformity of the vessels led Schäfer to assume the existence of a single workshop, that of the so-called 'Master of Phaistos'.

The most recent group is also the most varied, as it includes types that are difficult to place in the previous production panorama. This is a series of productions spread throughout the island, in which stamped decorations are used throughout the body of the vessel as well as scenes that became typical of the central Cretan repertoire.

The Kassel *pithos* is characterized by a pyriform profile and a neck with a larger diameter than the previous groups. The vertical handles are roller-decorated and have gorgon protomes at the connection below the rim. The figurative decoration takes place exclusively above the shoulder, while the belly is often decorated with a variant of the wave motif typical of the previous phases, now ending in protomes of animals or mythical creatures. On the neck, a metopal space framed by Ionic columns accommodates the depiction of a sphinx.

Depictions of divine triads, a central element, for example, in the clay pinakes of Gortina<sup>24</sup>, became widespread during the same period. One of the most representative fragments comes from Lyttos and depicts a man dressed in himation advancing towards the left holding a plant crown in his hand.

## ECHOES OF THE HOMERIC EPIC

The practice of attributing a higher value to an object that has been handed down for decades, whether given as a demonstration of friendship, dedicated in shrines, or placed in burial places, is a widespread costume in the society depicted in the Homeric poems<sup>25</sup>. The words pronounced by Achilles on occasion of Patroclus' funeral, «τῆ νῦν, καὶ σοὶ τοῦτο γέρον κειμήλιον ἔστω/Πατρόκλοιο τάφου μνημ' ἔμμεναι» (HOM., *Il.* 23, 618-619), are perhaps the first literary attestation of this term among the warrior aristocracy, for which there is no lack of archaeological evidence.

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21. On this subject, see LEVI 1931, pp. 58-77; RIZZO 1984; BIONDI 1994; BRISART 2009.

22. On the depiction of griffins in post-Minoan Cretan art, see REED 1976.

23. PALERMO 1992.

24. RIZZA - SCRINARI 1968, pp. 204 ff.

25. Regarding the topic of 'biographical/entangled objects'/keimelia between the Homeric world and Early Iron Age archaeology in Greece, see WHITLEY 2013; WHITLEY 2018. Updated bibliography in D'ACUNTO 2020, pp. 356, 818, 820.

Another object described during the funeral of Patroclus is recalled here: «ἀργύρεον κρητῆρα τετυγμένον- ἔξ δ' ἄρα μέτρα/χάνδανεν, αὐτὰρ κάλλει ἐνίκα πᾶσαν ἐπ' αἴαν/πολλόν, ἐπεὶ Σιδόνες πολυδαίδαλοι εὔ ἤσκησαν» (HOM., *Il.* 23, 741-743). In addition to its enormous premonitory value, the silver krater «of beautiful workmanship» had its own history. Of the nine verses devoted to the description of this artefact (HOM., *Il.* 23, 741-749), seven are dedicated to the sequence of events that, from the forging onwards, placed it among Patroclus' possessions. It is instead curious to note that just a single word is referred to the precious material of which it was composed.

We are, in fact, aware of a few metal kraters decorated in cast relief<sup>26</sup>, one of which comes from the Toumba at Lefkandi<sup>27</sup> (fig. 4). These are not silver but bronze vessels, of which only seven examples are known archaeologically, all dated to before their context of discovery. The oldest specimens of these relics can be stylistically attributed to the Late Minoan period and, as in the case of the Lefkandi example, may date back to the 10th century BC.

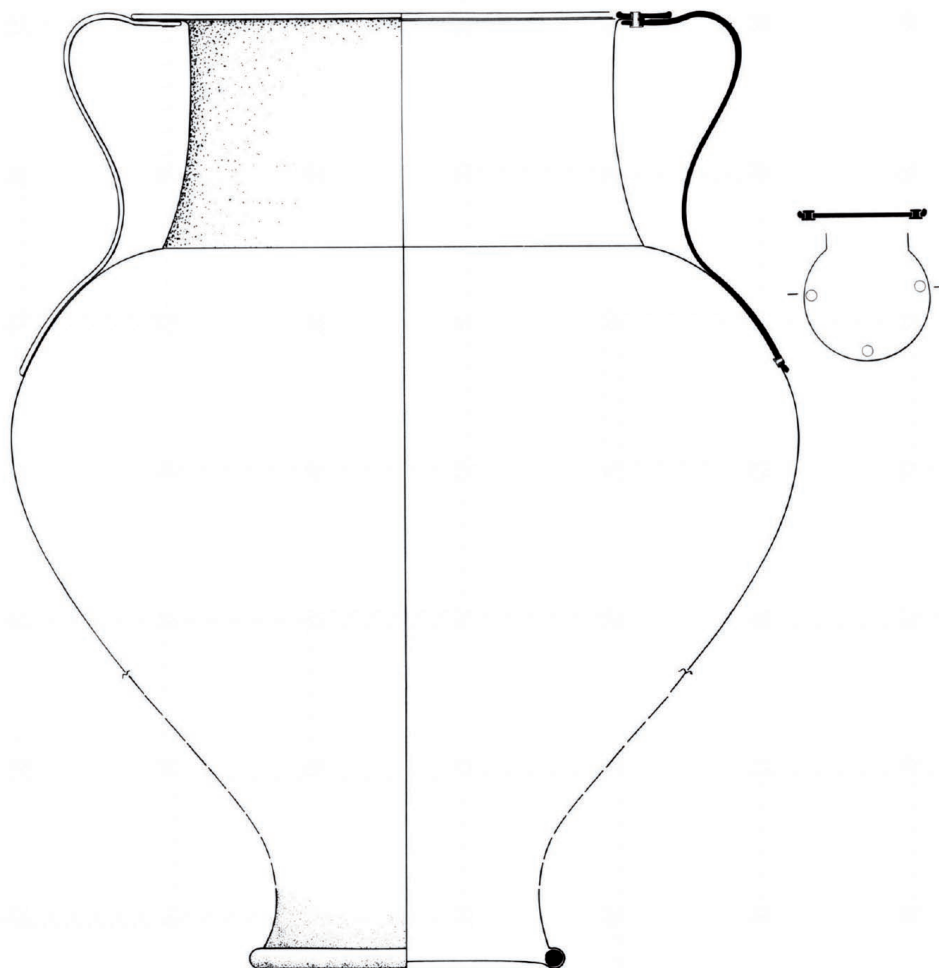


Fig. 4. Lefkandi, 'Heroon'. Bronze krater (after CATLING 1993, pl. 18D).

26. When this is known, i.e., in five out of seven cases. See CROUWEL - MORRIS 2015, pp. 153-155.

27. CATLING 1993, pp. 81-96, tavv. 16, 18D, 19-21; KANTA 1998, p. 58; KARAGEORGHIS - RAPTOU 2016, pp. 117-124, pl. IX-X.



## AN OUTLINE OF THE SOCIAL ROLE OF PITHOI

The parallels with protohistoric bronze vessels, imitated by some 8th century relief *pithoi*, do not stop at the external appearance alone. A *pithos* was certainly not an inexpensive object, since its production required a large quantity of raw material and a great deal of skill on the part of the potter, hence the ancient proverbs «Ἐν πίθῳ τὴν κεραμείαν μανθάνειν» (POLL., *Onom.* VII, 163; see also PL., *Grg.* 514e) and «ἐν πίθῳ ἡ κεραμεία γυγνομένη» (PL., *Lach.* 187, b.4). A richly decorated *pithos* of a size close to two meters in height, like some of the ones from Tenos, was a luxury object, a kind of casket in which a family stored its food reserves for the winter.

Each *pithos* of this type was therefore a strong social marker, which could accompany an individual into the afterlife, often being chosen as a container for *enchytrismoï*<sup>28</sup>.

The robustness of the thick walls also gave the artefacts considerable longevity, and not a few of them have survived to the present day almost intact. To give a few examples, a *pithos* with considerable influences from late Minoan production, found in the storerooms of the Temple of Apollo at Dreros<sup>29</sup>, may date from well before the construction of the building, while examples from the Hellenistic settlements of Arkalochori<sup>30</sup> and Haghia Pelaghia date from the 7th-6th centuries B.C. and were probably reused in productive contexts<sup>31</sup>.

The fact that they were valuable artefacts can be deduced not only from the epigraphic evidence<sup>32</sup>, but also from the practice of suturing up the fractures or reusing the fragments if they could not be restored.

The references to the past of these vessels are therefore not always explicit, but are reflected in the decorative, dimensional, and practical choices. The subdivision into three macro-groups made by the major collections reflects, in addition to geographical location, a different preference for figurative repertoires. The Cycladic group, which also includes Boeotia, makes extensive use of human representations linked to mythical cycles, with detailed scenes of battle<sup>33</sup>. The Rhodian and Cretan groups, on the other hand, hardly ever include such figures, favoring an almost complete covering of the vase with geometric motifs, or depictions of gods in hieratic poses, animals, and mythological creatures.

There is no expressive *koinè*, but a differentiation that in some ways takes up the tradition of historical Mycenaean painting, and in others the more decorative protohistoric tradition. The choice of a particular decorative motif thus relates to the cultural substratum of a given society.

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28. EBBINGHAUS 2005, pp. 56-57.

29. MARINATOS 1936, pp. 261-262, fig. 24; LEVI 1969, p. 165; D'ACUNTO 2002-2003, p. 17.

30. GALANAKI *et alii* 2015, pp. 326-328.

31. On the possible meanings of representations and contexts in the practice and rituals of wine consumption, regarding Cretan decorated *pithoi*, see D'ACUNTO 2012, pp. 253-254.

32. There are, for example, five *pithoi* from room J of the Villa of Good Fortune in Olympus, with a total value of about 210-215 drachmas. See ROBINSON - GRAHAM 1938, pp. 214-216; CAHILL 2000, pp. 505-507, note 25; AULT 2007, p. 265.

33. On the possible values of the depictions in the practice and rituals of wine consumption, D'AGOSTINO 2002-2003, p. 337.

## CONCLUSION

The considerations regarding the derivation of the shape and decoration of 8th-7th century *pithoi* deserve a few comments.

*Pithoi* from the Late Bronze Age present a narrow repertoire of forms that have little in common with the Early Iron Age production. These vessels were not used exclusively for food storage. Some of these *pithoi* were elaborately decorated in the Palace Style and had pyriform profiles, almost imitating the amphoroid kraters produced in Crete and mostly used in burials<sup>34</sup>.

Although this latter form was considerably smaller than some colossal *pithoi* of the 7th century BC, it anticipated many characteristics of future production, which in many cases fulfilled the same funerary function.

The decorative registers of amphoroid kraters depend mainly on their use and the place where they were produced. In the case of Cretan production, the use of these kraters for convivial purposes should be ruled out, as was the case with the Mycenaean component. The Mycenaeans, through their specialized workshops in Argos, exported many amphoroid kraters decorated in the Pictorial Style, and probably also the practice of community drinking. The Minoan civilization never fully embraced the celebratory warlike depictions of Helladic society, unlike Cyprus and the Levant. In the post-palatial period, the function of disseminating a new practice – that of burial in amphoroid bronze cinerary urns – was fulfilled by Cyprus, as evidenced by the imported cinerary urn found in the Heroon of Lefkandi.

Through the mediation of Cyprus, the form of the amphoroid cinerary urn was preserved, becoming more monumental and spreading to Crete. The tholos cinerary vessel from Pantanassa Amariou (Crete) testifies to the reception of the typically Helladic heroic model, whose echo is preserved in the Homeric poems. The tales of the era of the heroes and their rich burials in metal cinerary urns remained alive in the common imagination thanks to the Homeric tradition and were revived from the end of the 8th century BC.

Simple and composite ornamental motifs on the relief *pithoi* appear to derive with certainty from Minoan and Mycenaean vase painting and glyptic art, with influences from the Near East, Rhodes, and Corinth mediating through the Archaic period. As for the figurative motifs, the iconographies present a different language from that which characterized the late Minoan art of the last phases, but with a preference for the same themes

This is a major difference between the production of Cretan relief *pithoi* and those produced in the Cyclades and Greece (the so-called Tenian-Boeotian Group), characterized by complex figurative scenes of a didactic nature, and often concerning the sphere of myth.

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34. On this subject, see VAVOURANAKIS 2014.

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SOME CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING RELIEF PITHOI IN GREECE  
BETWEEN THE END OF THE 8TH AND THE 7TH CENTURIES BC

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