Skills and Secrets: The Potter's Wheel in Ancient Greece

Most shapes of ancient Greek pottery were formed on the wheel by experienced potters. However, our evidence on ancient potters' wheels is very limited. Few philosophical works (especially Plato) use the gradual and incremental process of the potter's apprenticeship as a metaphor for a steady and patient learning of any other discipline, skill, or trade. About one hundred circular clay discs mainly found at Myrtos potters' quarter on Crete (3000–2000 BCE) could have functioned as rotating mats, removable bats placed on top of the wheel-head, or wheel-heads (Evely 1988; 2000). Potters' wheels are depicted on a handful of vase-painting scenes from ancient Corinth and Athens (600–400 BCE) which show potters at work. The wheel usually consists of two parts, a vertical axle and the horizontal wheel-head, where the potter throws and further refines his vessels. It is a low, hand-turned wheel, and potters throw while seated. Occasionally a male younger workman assists the potter with turning the wheel-head.

The entire apparatus of a potter's wheel has not yet been excavated, either in prehistoric or historical contexts. As a result, any technical questions regarding the original size of the wheel, its form, its material, its function, its rotation capacity, or even its durability, cannot be answered by the available evidence. Vidale (1998) has attempted to approximate the dimensions of the wheels depicted on Archaic and Classical vase-paintinhd, using the accompanying human figures as a reference scale, but since no two pottery scenes are identical, his suggested dimensions cannot be conclusive. I will address these technical considerations by constructing two replicas of an ancient potter's wheel, one entirely out of wood and one combining wooden and clay parts. I will compare the advantages and limitations of each replica, while assessing its rotating speed and other friction considerations. I will also examine whether potters adjusted the basic design of their wheels depending on the size and form of the vessel (e.g., a small kylix vs. a large amphora). Ultimately, ancient and experimental evidence combined may lead to a better understanding of how the wheels of the highly-skilled potters of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE would have functioned.

Works Cited:

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