CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Typically, as connoisseurs, John Boardman and Michael Vickers have preoccupied themselves with the smallest details of form, shape, material, color and design. They fail to give adequate attention to changes over time caused by taste, politics, economics, or philosophy. Vickers has claimed that the elite always used fine metals for their symposia, but Boardman, specializing in ceramics, has insisted \textit{au contraire} that the clay, whether black or red-figure, continued to serve the elite from their origins about 650 until 338 BCE, the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Even he has admitted that silver replaced pottery on their tables. Sir Kenneth Dover was no connoisseur himself; as a philologist, he felt his own central achievement was as an historian of the Greek language; and he specialized in Attic comedy and oratory. Coming to ceramics, he focused on homoerotic pottery, overemphasizing its importance beyond reason. He also failed to distinguish between true symposia, confined to the very rich, and drinking bouts involving the common people.

Quite how Vickers has managed to keep publishers interested in printing his babbling for three decades about how the colors of Greek ceramics supposedly imitated metals is beyond me. His theory is that the lower orders aped the style of the elite as best they could, by making their
cheap ceramics look as much as possible like “the real thing”, namely the expensive metalware that would always have been available (in his mistaken view) to the top echelons. True, at one time, briefly, in early Egypt, gold was relatively plentiful, to the extent that it was worth less than silver; and in the Bronze Age, long before the classical era, the Mycenaean, did indeed have some gold cups, such as the Vaphio cups found at the town of that name near Sparta. These are thought to date from c.1500–1400 BCE. But it is an unjustified leap to suppose, without evidence, that precious metals were always readily available for symposia, even for the most wealthy. Nor can a connection be assumed between the Bronze Age decorative tableware of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations and the dining culture of Greeks a thousand years later, after the passage of long dark ages. The art of the symposium in the latter classical period of Ancient Greece is steeped in pederastic themes, but Dorian pederasty was first institutionalized only after c.650 BCE. The famed Minoan Chieftain’s Cup (c.1650-1500 BCE), carved from soapstone in Crete by people not even speaking Greek, is definitely not related to Dorian pederasty despite some strained interpretation along those lines. The only connection between the two, a whole millennium apart, was their location on Crete.

The rhapsodes, professional reciters of epic poetry, were licenced by their trade to make their performances, well, epic, telling of ancient heroes who might be superhumanly strong, and

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3 The chronology of Minoan civilization is a complicated business. Its origins go back to 3000 BCE and beyond, with a flowering from around 1900 BCE to 1500 BCE, ending with its assimilation into Mycenaean culture, usually dated from around 1600 BCE to 1100 BCE.
equally of tableware that was fabulously grand. The rhapsodes of the Dark Age (1200-800 BCE) and Early Archaic Age (800-650 BCE), whether Homeric or otherwise, could cover their imaginary tables as easily with golden and silver vases as with ceramic pots, which in fact had geometric designs from about 1100 to 750 BCE. Surely Vickers doesn’t believe that the geometric pots and the orientalizing ones that followed them from 750 to 730 were copies of metallic vases? He does seem to believe, however, that the early black-figure ceramic cups (late 7th century and early 6th century BCE) were modeled on gold ones. He has maintained that red clay signified gold, while black indicated silver inlay. In fact, because most of the early black-figure cups were Corinthian, a lighter-color clay than the Athenian red would have had to imitate electrum (a natural amalgam of four-fifths gold and one-fifth silver sometimes used at the time).

Likewise, the earliest red figures could hardly have imitated metal, though silver pots by 550 were much less unlikely to have existed than gold (red) ones. Copper, bronze, and brass, being cheaper, were far more likely, but the color purple (which Vickers mistook for imitating copper) was, in fact, very rare, and white (modeled, according to him, on ivory) absurd.
After 470, some clay pots did indeed imitate silver vases in shape and probably in scenes, but the red did not imitate gold any more than black imitated silver. In sum, Vickers’ thesis of colors on pottery imitating metals is utterly without merit.

On the other hand, Boardman, a far more learned and balanced antiquarian than Vickers, has also exaggerated. He has claimed that the painters of the ceramic cups (or vases, as he dubs them) were equal in talent to Michelangelo, Raphael, and other geniuses who painted during the Italian Renaissance, though no ancient author whose works have survived ever mentioned a single one of them. Pliny the Elder praised the greats masters of gem cutting, Dioskourides and Tryphon, along with the leading sculptors, Phidias and Polykleitos, as well as master painters Zeuxis and Apelles. But neither Pliny nor any other Greek or Latin writers stooped to mention even a single pot painter or maker, apparently regarding them as little more elevated than carpenters or masons. Surprising as it may seem to us, however, Athenasius and other epicures did spend a great deal of time extolling the finest chefs by name.

Ever since Johann Winckelmann made the appreciation of Greek art central to European culture in the 18th century, artifacts have increasingly rivaled texts as the major tool to
document classical civilization; and recently archeologists have sought primacy for them over the written word.

"In the eighteenth century a new humanism competed with the traditional one. It was organized in learned societies instead of being centered in the universities; it was fostered by gentlemen rather than schoolmasters. They preferred travel to the emendation of texts and altogether subordinated literary texts to coins, statues, vases and inscriptions." (Arnaldo Momigliano, Ancient History and the Antiquarian, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 12, pages 285-315, 1950)

Winckelmann himself had, in fact, argued that cameos and intaglios⁴, better preserved the visual culture than any Greek paintings, mosaics or statues, "because the stages of art are found to a much greater extent in a collection of engraved gems than can be discerned in the larger monuments that are left to us." Thus, he deemed jewels the most accurate guides to Greek art although even they were few and far between.

⁴ A cameo is a relief image raised higher than its background. In contrast, if the artist carves down into the stone to hollow out a recessed image, the resulting work is an intaglio.
Even before Winkelmann wrote, archeologists began uncovering masses of clay vessels and the volume of such artifacts has exploded exponentially ever since. This huge quantity is easily explained: although pots may be broken, their shards are virtually indestructible. Most of the discoveries have in fact been broken fragments except for those recovered from Etruscan tombs, and long presumed to have been made by Etruscans as in Wedgwood’s Etruscan ware.

The scientific documentation of the finds has also been made more precise, with the result that artifacts have become the main dating tool in reconstructing history. Carefully documented and dated ceramics, without doubt or rival, now constitute the principal artifactual source for classical culture. On that strong foundation, archeologists are now challenging the previous dominance of classical texts, themselves subject to ever better recensions and supplemented by new finds from papyrologists and epigraphers. Dover, by contrast, although he paid attention to painted ceramics, was far too narrow in his interpretation of Greek pederasty. His *Greek Homosexuality* (1980) was outrageously over-reliant on a single oration about a sex scandal, plus the depiction of pederasty in jokes and comedies.

*The astute and prolific curator Gisela Richter pioneered the 20th century study of ancient engraved gems at the Metropolitan Museum in a monograph published by that institution (Ancient Gems, 1942).* After her retirement, she added two volumes (*Engraved Gems I*, 1969,

Boardman has also exaggerated the price of ceramic sympotic ware in ancient times and otherwise enthused wildly over their excellence on both black and red-figure vases. True, such vases were indeed made for upper-class Greeks from about 650 BCE until they were replaced by silver ones in 470. But the ceramics, however charming, were never really considered great works of art in antiquity, nor were they very costly when made. Not even the richest Greeks, however, except for kings and tyrants, were wealthy enough to afford silver sympotic ware before 470. After that time, the Athenian elite, newly enriched, set the tone for elites of other Greek metropolises by converting to silver sympotic ware.

This whole effort of mine sprang from my need to account for the virtual disappearance of explicitly homoerotic ceramic ware after about 470 BCE, as discussed in a somewhat crude footnote in my *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (1996), to which I would now make minor changes. I can hardly call it a work of my youth because in 1996 I was already 63; having trained as a medievalist, though, I was a novice as regards classical scholarship. I wrote:
It is a puzzle why the erotic vases decreased noticeably c. 470, whereas pederasty continued unabated (see my epilogue). In their 1994 study Michael Vickers and David Gill contend that the upper class always dined on plate of precious metal. For the symposia given by hoplites, they believe, ceramic pots were used and constituted cheap copies of the elegant silver vessels owned by the Athenian elite. This highly original notion requires that we accept as well that large numbers of hoplites possessed sufficient wealth to afford the cost of giving symposia, including the luxury of the special men’s dining room where these gatherings took place. I say “large numbers” because judging by the considerable remnants of Greek vases that have survived to the present day, the original output by potters for the hoplite symposia must have been considerable indeed. However, despite the unorthodox nature of their theory, Vickers provides no evidence that such wealth existed among the hoplite population. They do insist that the pottery was inexpensive, but ceramic tableware represented only a small portion of the cost of a proper symposium. Even more important is the absence in their text of any explanation as to why after 470 production of erotic ceramic pots became significantly rarer.
I believe that when the Athenians' wealth grew as a result of their new predominance in trade, the discovery of silver at Laurium⁵, and the booty taken from the Persians, aristocrats substituted silverware for the pottery that had previously appeared on their tables. (In so doing, they may also have been influenced by the Persians, who used metal tableware.) This reading of the known facts raises no difficult questions about the financial resources of the hoplite class and its purported interest in giving symposia. It also explains why ceramic pots disappeared after 470: they were simply no longer the tableware of choice among the upper-class, the only group rich enough to give symposia.

Sir Kenneth Dover maintained in a personal letter that by symposium could be understood any gathering of men for drink and song and that dividing a house into quarters for men and women was a normal practice, not one signifying particular wealth. I reject both observations. The passages used by Dover to illustrate these points—Theocritus 14, 12 and Lysias I, 9 respectively—belong to periods much later than the Archaic age, and Lysias's comment about his two-floor dwelling refers to a time when Athens was far richer and more populous than it had been during the Archaic period. I use symposium to refer to the kind

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⁵ Otherwise known as Laurion or Lavrio.
of elegant gathering described by Plato and Xenophon, that is, dinners on a scale mentioned in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (vv.1086-80) where a herald speaks of the "couches, tables, cushions, chaplets, perfumes, dainties, ... biscuits, cakes, sesame bread, tarts, lovely dancing women" that have been readied for the feast. At such events, where skolia were sung\(^6\) and boys courted, ceramic ware with pederastic scenes was hardly out of place, as it most assuredly would have been in just any gathering of men. Similarly, it is worth noting a passage from Aristophanes' *Wasps* (vv.1122ff.), where we are treated to the portrait of a common man who does not understand how to behave at the kind of symposium I am concerned with. No doubt he attended many dinners in his life, but that was not sufficient to prepare him to know the ways of a proper, elegant symposium. He may even have been prosperous enough to possess his own cup, as apparently was sometimes the custom. (Aristophanes' herald also says, "Come quickly to the feast and bring your basket and your cup.") Still, this is no assurance that he could afford to host an event at which only metal tableware was used. (I might add that in our correspondence Jasper Griffin has expressed doubt as to whether the ability to give such symposia was widespread. Griffin has further written me of his agreement with my position that prior to 480

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\(^6\) The singular is skolion. Skolia were songs sung by invited guests at banquets, often in praise of gods or heroes. Improvised to suit the occasion, they were accompanied by a lyre, handed around from one singer another as the time for each scolion came around.
ceramic tableware prevailed. Before that time, he adds, “it is hard to imagine so much plate on Athenian tables as Vickers and Gill believe in.”

The aristocrats’ preference after 470 for metal plate at symposia is pertinent to this study in that some have previously hypothesized that ceramic vases rapidly declined because Greek aristocrats did not dare flaunt their pederastic tradition in an increasingly democratic Athens. Since, as I argue here, the arrival of democracy in Athens did not spell the end of institutionalized pederasty, it is interesting to realize that the fate of ceramic pots can be understood in terms quite unrelated to the later history of Greek pederasty.

(Pederasty and Pedagogy, Ch. 8, “Gymnasia, Symposia and Pederastic Art, “ footnote 32, pages 208-209)

When I wrote Dover about the problem, he said that a symposium was wherever men drank together and not just a fancy occasion, exclusively for gentlemen, of the type Plato and Xenophon described. At first he also declined to review my book, claiming he had lost interest in the subject. A couple of years later, however, only after Paul Cartledge had written in a review that I was “the first to try to go beyond Dover,” he changed his mind and savagely reviewed it in the German classical journal Gnomon. Boardman, on the other hand, always a
gentleman, wrote a polite letter, mildly opining that silver did not predominate in symposia until the Hellenistic era\textsuperscript{7}.

Alan Shapiro, now fast becoming the leading candidate to succeed Boardman as the doyen of the Greek vase, and Thomas Hubbard, another eminent authority, have tried to grapple with the dilemma. It has been a puzzle for some time now why the explicit erotic vases virtually disappeared c. 470.

Some, including Hubbard at a colloquium in Quebec City in April, 2010, where we both spoke, maintained that the aristocrats, fearful of the social disapproval of the envious but all powerful democrats, jealous that they could not afford trophy boys, gave up pederastic scenes after 470. But I claim in contrast that they switched to silver after that date.  

\textsuperscript{7} This refers to the period after the conquests of Alexander the Great during which Greek cultural influence and power was at its zenith in Europe and Asia, until Rome came to dominate the entire Mediterranean world. The Hellenistic era is often taken to date from the death of Alexander 323 BCE to the Roman conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt in 30 BCE.