



Pots and Tetrobols

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POTS AND TETROBOLS

In the Museo Civico Sutermeister di Legnano (Milan) – sezione Collezione Sala – there is a black-figure Attic column-krater of a date perhaps just after than before 500 B.C. which has an underfoot graffito of peculiar interest (Figs. 1–2). The vase itself, 33 cm. high, is to be published by Daniele Selmi in *Antenor*, with a full discussion of its interesting iconography and attribution, by Anna-Maria Volonté, to the Painter of Brunswick 218 (Beazley, *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters* 339). I am grateful to Dr. Selmi for the opportunity of discussing the graffito here. Suffice to say that the pot is a competent piece, both as a piece of potting and an art-work, and that it has no known provenance, though it must be presumed it comes from a cemetery in Italy.

There is a graffito which precisely fills all the underside of the foot. It gives every appearance of being ancient,¹ and from the lettering there need be little or no chronological difference between the manufacture of the pot and the inscription.



Fig. 1. Underside of foot of black-figure Attic column-krater c. 500 B.C., Museo Civico Sutermeister di Legnano (Milan) – sezione Collezione Sala



Fig. 2. Graffito under foot of black-figure column-krater

Reading

There is little doubt about the reading of the text; only two letters could be disputed, even if the “style” of the cutter is idiosyncratic:

λακυθοιτριακοντετροβε

This diplomatic reading of course disguises the circular nature of the text, which in a very particular sense can be said to be cyclic since it most clearly, and deliberately, employs what might be termed, *faute de mieux*, “syllabic crasis”:

τριακον(τα) τετροβε(λα) λακυθοι

¹ I have not had autopsy of the piece, but as there is only one point where the reading could just plausibly be questioned, and even here all points to one solution, I do not regard this as important. The digital photograph, reproduced as Fig. 1, shows that the graffito may have been “enhanced” with chalk or the like, but the original lines are almost all visible “beneath” and beyond. TM = Johnston, *Trademarks on Greek Vases* (Warminster, 1979).

Where graffito texts start to reach the end of a circle, they normally tend to veer to one side,² but here the solution is clearly different; but as Beazley said, true, with respect to such commercial texts in verse, “I suppose there is no act of Parliament forbidding that”.³

Epigraphic notes. The full extent of the omicron and second epsilon in τετροβε(λα) is not wholly apparent in the photograph. With respect to the former, what is clearly visible could only with great reluctance be read as omega, which is a lexical possibility, while in the latter I see some support for epsilon in the photograph when enlarged; certainly it is extremely difficult indeed to find a viable text unless epsilon is read. A horizontal crack, possibly the result of firing, appears to coincide with the upper diagonal of the kappa in τριακον(τα).

The form of rho is intriguing; the inscriber has cut the straight vertical and upper stroke, and then added not very expertly a “C” to form the lower half of the loop and a tail.

In translation – “30 lakythoi 4-obols”, without prejudicing any further interpretation.

Commentary

The graffito poses a number of problems; it would have been useful to know the provenance, and the type of vase helps little in reducing the number of possibilities since BF kraters are to be found in many early fifth century cemeteries.

Some implausible interpretations⁴

1) reading with no overlapping of words. I feel this is unlikely on formal grounds: a) one overlap is more or less assured, τριακοντ(α τ)ετρ., and b) the precise filling of the circle, without punctuation, suggests that the writer is playing a game.

2) reading with one overlap only, making κυθοί a free-standing word. This is not lexically impossible, since by metathesis it could represent χυτοί in full Ionic dialect, and χυτοί could possibly qualify objects, though it is very far from clear how an understood “κρατήρες” could be so termed. With this reading, the Doric form λάκυθοι would disappear, and the absence of qoppa would become a minor issue. There would remain the problem of the use of the form τριόβελον, with epsilon but without omega, in non-Attic Ionic, as well as the use of this numismatic term in the first place by the user of such a dialect (see below). The combined difficulties surely make this interpretation highly dubious.

If one could also assume a misspelling, and here we turn from the “could possibly” to the “barely imaginable”, the Ionic form of χύτροι or perhaps Panhellenic κύσθοι would be possibilities. While the latter would constitute a “witticism”, it would be based surely on serious texts of the same nature;⁵ as to the former we may note a similar form found in graffiti of a little later, but with κύθρις not κύθρος; apart from the dialectal problem that would arise also with “κύθροι”, noted above, I argue that “κύθρις”

² I cite the lid from Histria which I published in *Il Mar Nero* 2 (1995–6) [1997] 99–101 as an example, largely because it is still to receive a convincing overall interpretation.

³ *AJA* 31 (1927) 350.

⁴ This note was prepared at the same time as I was reading G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *Athenian Democratic Origins*; hence the attempt, at least, to define the degrees of proof of each hypothesis, an attempt which has resulted in some phraseology reminiscent of de Ste Croix’s “model”, Felix Jacoby.

⁵ It is pure coincidence that the play on the word in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* occurs in the scene before the parcelling of the sycophant like a pot – however that was done. Two further possibilities that I relegate to footnote level, are an overlap involving tetrobela k (lak....) = 20 tetrobols, and the possibility that the “la” of tetrobela “overrides” a non-Doric “lekythoi”, with epsilon or eta.

refers to a stamnos,⁶ not a krater, and there is no parallel in graffiti on large pots for a batch of as many as 30 similar pieces accompanying the “master-vase”.

Dialect

Accepting the readings λάκυθοι and -οβελ-, we find two rather incompatible elements: λάκυθοι is clearly non-Ionic, while -οβελ- is not the fully Doric form, ὄδελος. It is probable that the form ὄβελος, not ὄβολος, could have been in use c. 500 in many parts of the Greek world to denote the “new” coins; Tod and Amyx have demonstrated its use at Athens, while evidence simply does not exist elsewhere before the fourth century.⁷ The crasis of τετρα-οβελ- to τετροβελ- presumably lengthened the vowel, although omega is not used; we note that omicron is a common usage here in later documentary texts (Tod l.c. 16).

Script

Very few letters are diagnostic, though epsilon and nu retain “high archaic” forms. Clearly we are not concerned here with Dorian areas using crooked iota and san, while the form of lambda, taken with the use of Doric λάκυθοι, excludes Attica, Euboea and Thessaly. There is no qoppa in τριάκον(τα). The form of tau with canted horizontal, perversely, is one most frequent in the Achaean colonies.

These considerations (together with the observation that the rendering of rho seem idiosyncratic rather than “epichoric”) help little in pinning down the origin(s) of the inscriber, and by extension where the text may have been inscribed. With the Doric dialect, if weak, evidenced, one could suggest much of Sicily, Taras, Lokri, south and west Peloponnese, Aegina and Rhodes; lack of qoppa would perhaps rule out the Peloponnese, the Dorian colonies in Sicily and Lokri.

Another unlikely interpretation

While accepting the reading with “syllabic crasis” we might attempt to “punctuate” in various ways; could the text simply denote lakythoi *and* thirty 4-obol coins (*or* 30 kraters and an unspecified number of coins)? Not impossible, but there is no obvious parallel, unless one re-works the later Vassallaggi text (see below, n. 15) in this way; and in that text the further words and numerals seem to point to a quotation of price. A more specific connection between pots and coins seems demanded, i.e. some form of price quotation.

Pots and prices

The Doric form λάκυθ(οι) is known from other “trademarks”, not least another column-krater whose inscriber I have placed in the Achaean area of South Italy, on the not too strong grounds that the numerals are closer to “Achaean” than Sicilian forms.⁸

If my reading is accepted, we have here a batch of 30 such vases; they are not called “lekythia”, which may be significant; I have argued that there may be a distinction in marks of the same period between larger ΛΗ- and smaller ΛΗΚΥ- (perhaps lekythia), as we find more clearly in one later fifth century text between lekythoi that are dik(aioi) and mik(roi).⁹ In such sets of material our batch of 30 is closer to that of the seemingly smaller vase; yet we should note that the first full diminutive form found among trademarks, a little later, is *lekythides*, which appear in batches of over one hundred.¹⁰ This scarcely helps us pin down the range of pot-size of our pieces. I note in passing that the vases on which these comparanda are cut are all of closed shape, such as could not have contained the relevant batches.

Also there is a price of four obols, presumably connected with some aspect of what is noted.

⁶ TM 225, type 7F.

⁷ M. N. Tod, *Num. Chr.* 1947 1–6; D. A. Amyx, *Hesperia* 27 (1958) 300.

⁸ *PdP* 30 (1975) 360–6.

⁹ TM 221, lower, and *AJA* 82 (1978) 223–4.

¹⁰ TM type 1F, 1–2.

Towards an interpretation

This is a text that involves virtually all aspects of so-called trademarks on Attic vases, and in itself reflects on them, yet has no close parallel. The major aspects – script, dialect, place of inscribing, close interpretation – are all debatable, and an overall picture can only be found by a combination of suppositions and the logical probability of a circular argument; in other words, an impossible simultaneous equation. I therefore start with the one of the simpler unknowns, and take forward the discussion from there – the place of inscribing.

1. The Kerameikos in Athens, or the port of Athens in c. 500–490. If the former, we note the otherwise unusual length of a text, in non-Attic script and dialect; I have elsewhere argued the rarity of such texts, but perhaps it would be overhasty to discard the idea; for example, my “identification” of Sostratos rests largely on a probably Aeginetan script in the sequence ΛΑΣΟ, under the foot of another black-figure column-krater, and our prime archaic text in Megarian script was found in the Agora of Athens.¹¹ If the latter, I would assume that nobody would deny the likelihood that non-Athenian traders “worked out of” Athens’ ports, and so must retain the possibility. These two tentative conclusions immediately show the fragility of the standards of proof that can be applied. To consider: how and why such a batch mark was applied and the nature of the financial transaction noted in it.

2. Elsewhere – presumably in a Greek port in the central Mediterranean, if we make a reasonable assumption from the present location of the krater. If the text is cut in the local alphabet of that port we have a broad but not unlimited range of possibilities. The mark would then refer to a transaction in that port or an adjacent agora/emporion. To consider: the same matters as in 1.

Script and dialect *prima facie* may point to 2, despite the problems of pinpointing 2’s location. Can the financial transaction involved add any precision? The spelling of obel- can only be of minimal help, although in a perfect dialectal world one may be more positive – not Attic, not full Doric; while one feels that such commercial notes may readily cross dialectal boundaries, it is at least plausible that we are here in a “soft” Doric area, perhaps therefore not Taras, where the use of tailed rho is also rather rare. We might next ask, “where were transactions conducted in obols”? Here we step into *terra vix cognita*; many of the areas that would seem to be dialectally or alphabetically preferable present numismatic problems. Lokri has no apparent interest in coin at the time and the Sicilian Doric colonies later used the litra rather than the obol as their main small denomination. Taras and Aegina would not present any such difficulty, nor indeed should we too hastily discard Sicily; at Syracuse and Gela at least the obol denomination, though not a tetrobol, was minted around this date, a little before the litra seems largely to have replaced it.¹²

There is however a further numismatic point of some interest and relevance. It is not to be asked merely whether the term “tetrobelon” was in use at a given place; since it surely appears here, its first attested usage, in nominal form – τετρόβελα, “tetrobols”,¹³ it should reflect a place where either such coins or a unit of account, which virtually presupposes such a coin, was at least understood, if not minted. Where do find such material at the period in question, within the limits indicated by our other evidence?

An oversimple answer would be “very, very rarely”. But at heart we have here a question of nomenclature, not mint policy. Because of the relatively offhand manner of the reference here, suggesting familiarity of usage, we might assume that we should have preserved to this day some coins of the type referred to. What pieces that we know of could be so termed – within the broad geographical

¹¹ Sostratos: *PdP* 27 (1972) 416–23; the link with Athens here was strengthened by the association of the mark with others applied before firing in “glaze”. Megara, *LSAG* 137, 1.

¹² The change from obol to litra takes place between Boehringer’s Reihe XII and XIII, to be dated well after 480. See also G. K. Jenkins, *The Coinage of Gela* 49–50.

¹³ Tod l.c. 14–17 notes that the word is more often used adjectivally, but here there would be no noun to which to apply it, unless we posit an extremely, misleadingly elliptic text.

outlines denoted by the other factors already considered? They would lead me to rule out the possibility of reference to coinage of Ionia and North Greece, where indeed some coins that were highly probably called “thirds” (of a stater) *might* have got the name “tetrobols”. Rhodes too is overall an unlikely possibility. However, this particular line of thought would seem to me to be where the solution may be found, i.e. that the writer is describing *in his own terms coins that might otherwise have a different name* in the originating polis. Some “drachma” issues of the period could be described as “tetrobols” by those accustomed to a weight system using a heavier unit: the two most obvious possibilities here are the ratios of the Attic to Aeginetan drachma, and that of the Corinthian, or perhaps Achaean colonial drachma, to Attic.¹⁴ There is no such explanation available for the Dorian colonies in Sicily, where otherwise the dialect and alphabet fit.

It is necessary to lay these ground rules before looking at the interpretation of our graffito in detail. One crux is were these thirty lekythoi, however packaged with the “master” krater, available (or sold) for 4 obols each or at 4 obols for thirty? Or, with a nuance, does the price also include the marked krater? Here I think one solution can be ruled out on all available evidence: 30 for 4 obols would give a unit price of about a chalkous each for a lekythos; while we cannot judge what such a lekythos was, it would seem that there was no intention to refer to any small version in the “lekyth-” range. It therefore seems reasonable to reject this possibility and by elimination therefore to assume a price of 4 obols each for the pots. Indeed the very use of the plural form *tetrobela* requires that elimination, even if it does not elucidate any other. The “syntax” of the graffito, and indeed one of the precise words used, would then be similar to that of a presumed Sicilian text of the later fifth century from Vassallaggi (Fig. 4), though one using local lexical terms: “lakythia: coins”.¹⁵ The later text adds the “explanatory” word “έvo” indicating the existence of a batch including the marked vase and the lakythia; on the Milan krater there is no mention of kraters, and indeed no “trader’s” mark, such as is usually found in late archaic commercial marks mentioning pots.

Regarding the batches, it is not easy to envisage their unity. I argued in *TM 222* that they rarely form recognisable “sets” and that the numbers are often irregular, as if the batch was what was available at the time. Perhaps I understressed the role that available space may have played as a constraint on size, but we have few parameters for assessing whether “available space” was in any sense a constant over time and space, and are therefore little nearer a solution to the matter. What should be said is that the batch system remains difficult to envisage or explain at any stage of the export process, and so can do little to help resolve our major crux here which is to explain the conditions in which this text was cut.

By way of conclusion

No absolutely clear preferences emerge, but overall we should perhaps consider most seriously the probability of an Aeginetan, using a currency term adapted for use from another system, somewhere offering or noting a batch of “normal” sized lekythoi at a price of one Attic drachma each. As regards the “somewhere” I cannot offer even a preferred location. The price, with respect with what we *surely* know, would be high, and one would be tempted to suggest it applied to a transaction at the end of the

¹⁴ Another couple which are mathematically less satisfactory are Attic: “Euboean” and Attic: “Phocæan”. In this context mention can be made of another “nearly unique” graffito under the foot of a black-figure krater of c. 480 this time using a seemingly non-Attic reference to “stater”, in a text again with no assured epichoric home, even if Aegina is a strong possibility, Johnston, *Directed trade: two epigraphical problems*, *Céramique et peinture grecques. Modes d’emploi*, Colloque, Paris 1995 (Paris, 1999) 398–400; the form of tau and the “excessive” rho are noticeably similar to those on our graffito (Fig. 3). If both “stater” and “tetrobol” were being used by Aeginetans to describe Athenian coins, didrachm and drachma respectively, the resulting reference “system” is clearly not “accurate” in our terms, but merely conventional. For arguments in favour of widespread issues of fractional coinage (but not specifically such “heavy” tetrobols) in the period, see H. Kim, *Archaic coinage as evidence for the use of money*, in A. Meadows and K. Shipton (eds.), *Money and its uses in the Ancient Greek World*, 7–21, esp. 11–13, and *Small change and the moneyed economy*, in P. Cartledge, E. Cohen and L. Foxhall (eds.), *Money, Labour and Land*, 44–50.

¹⁵ Johnston, *ZPE* 12 (1973) 339–506.

journey of the vase, but that would be to base conclusion on hypothesis, and until more material appears – and it does in very small quantities – we should keep an open mind. The text is unusual in the corpus of trademarks, with only one tolerably close parallel in the “stater” graffito, but the matter-of-factness of the inscription does not suggest that the procedure to which it refers was particularly rare. It would be speculative to suggest that similar transactions were noted on perishable material, or retained in the memory; the commitment to writing was probably not merely an aide-memoire, but had a further transactional purpose. But if for nothing else, this text is significance for its “literary” aspect and the lexicographically and numismatically significant *tetrobelon*.



Fig. 3. Graffito under foot of calyx-krater by Syriskos, c. 480 B.C., J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, 92.AE.6 (re-edited version of *Céramique et peinture grecques. Modes d'emploi*, Colloque (Paris, 1999) 402)

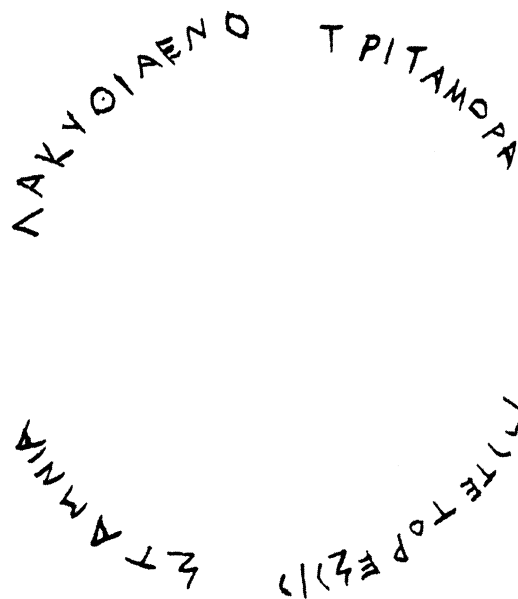


Fig. 4. Graffito under foot of red-figured pelike from Vassallaggi, c. 420 B.C., Agrigento Museo Nazionale (after *ZPE* 12 (1973) 269).