

Cult vases of the Eleusinian Mysteries (*plemochoai*) from Alexandria in Egypt

English Abstract

Plemochoai, the cult vases of the Eleusinian Mysteries, present a very restricted, precise geographical diaspora. In their majority, they have been found in the immediate surroundings of the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, in the area of the Eleusinion and the wider area of the Athenian Agora and the Kerameikos, as also in specific locations within Attica. These findspots, either identified as production centers (ceramic kilns), deposits along road sides (as the Sacred Road or the Acharnanean road in Attica), or as domestic shrines or mineral workspaces in demes of South-Eastern Attica, may all be directly –or indirectly– correlated with the relationship that the inhabitants of Attica developed towards the Attic Eleusinian sanctuary.

The only findplace outside of Attica which has up to our day brought to light the simple shape of the Eleusinian *plemochoe* vase, is Alexandria in Egypt. The two known examples are finds of the early 20th century and are both published. The findplace of the first is the Sciabbi necropolis, while the second remains of unknown provenience. As the vase is nearly completely preserved, it is likely that it also was a grave offering.

These cult vases from Alexandria have often been quoted in scholarship, had however never been systematically investigated, nor reexamined with modern methods. More specific interpretations were not easy to be uttered upon such a slim number of specimen. As a consequence, no correlations between these vases and the religious politics of Ptolemy I Soter have ever been proposed.

A recent examination of the *Plemochoe* from the collection of Ernst von Sieglin, kept in the Albertinum Museum in Dresden, does however project the topic to a new dimension: the observation that this vase an original example of the Attic-Eleusinian shape, but not equally of the Attic fabric, leads to the need of reevaluation of all the parameters. The faithful reproduction of the shape of the Eleusinian cult vessel *par excellence* in Alexandrian workshops, can be interpreted as strong evidence that the vase was intended for local cultic use. Ancient texts report that Ptolemy I Soter introduced new cults to Alexandria under the influence of the Eumolpid Timotheos, an interpreter (*exegetes*) of the Attic Eleusinian sanctuary.

It will be examined at which point the Alexandrian copies of the Eleusinian *plemochoe* may be interpreted as material evidence towards this historical information. The identification and publication of more examples of the category from Alexandria remains a *desideratum*. An eventual location of areas presenting density of similar finds, might in the future be a way of identifying zones of Demetrian cult activity within the ancient city of Alexandria.

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