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The Collection of Bucchero in the British Museum

Phil Perkins

The Open University, UK

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This paper presents some of the preliminary findings of a research project to catalogue the collection of bucchero in the British Museum. It provides an outline of the bucchero in the collection and discusses a few of the vessels in detail. A focus of the study is the observation of manufacturing techniques and some initial observations will be reported. The bucchero and the impasto in the British Museum was the subject of one of the first systematic studies of bucchero that was published as a volume of the Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum (CVA) in 1932 by Pryce. The collection had previously been catalogued as ‘Class H’ by Walters in the 1912 “Catalogue of the Vases” in the British Museum, and this replaced the earlier catalogue of 1851 which also included some of the bucchero. The CVA volume briefly describes and illustrates 207 pieces of bucchero. This current study has identified 328 separate pieces in the Museum, an increase of 58% over the quantity published in 1932. Some of this growth is due to new acquisitions or transfers from other Museums (16 vessels) but many of the unpublished pieces were in the Museum long before 1932. It is not known what, if any, selection criteria were used by either Walters or Pryce in their choice of vessels to publish. Previously it was assumed that the CVA volume represented the complete collection of bucchero in the Museum at the time of its compilation. This study has therefore dramatically increased the number of bucchero artefacts known from the Museum, and will provide a complete record of all the bucchero in the British Museum.

“Any colour – so long as it’s black”4

Before the study commenced the bucchero was cleaned and consolidated as necessary. The conservation work included the reconstruction of several vessels and the identification of restoration work that had been undertaken on some of the vessels prior to their accession in the 19th century. This has provided an insight into an obscure chapter of 19th century antiquarian activity. The programme of cleaning identified that the vast majority of the vessels had
been treated with a blackening compound to improve the traditional black colour and sheen of the bucchero. There is no record of this “improvement” in the Museum records and it seems likely that most were blackened and polished in the 18th and 19th centuries before their arrival in the Museum. It is entirely likely that this was a part of their preparation for sale by dealers such as Campanari. It is also possible that we are observing unrecorded conservation treatment of the vessels as it was practised in museums in the 19th century. Whatever the history of the blackening of the bucchero, it is clear that not all bucchero is as black as it might at first appear to be. Many vases show signs of complete or partial painting to provide a good uniform black colour, for example the vases purchased from Campanari in 1839. A dramatic illustration is provided by an oinochoe (Fig. 1) that was dismantled, cleaned and reconstructed during this project: prior to the cleaning it was uniformly black.

There is no surviving record of these vases being treated: the paint may have been applied before or after arrival in the British Museum. The practice was widespread and some of the earliest arrivals in the collections (eg., Fig. 2) – some coming from the collection of Sir William Hamilton – have been treated with black paint. The motivation for the painting black was presumably to make the vessel have a uniform, glossy, black surface, the ‘typical’ finish for bucchero, but the intention may also have been to make the vases resemble plain Attic black-gloss ware. However, in reality the vessels are a range of colours from brown through black to grey. This suggests that great care is required in using the colour of bucchero as a defining or descriptive characteristic. Colour is a useful guide to bucchero classification, but care needs to be taken to ensure that it is the original colouring that is being observed and not black paint from recent centuries.

“... the ingredients of our poisoned chalice ...”

Numerous other examples of restoration work were observed, but some few fall into the category of pastiche. A caryatid chalice, GR1838.6-8.146, also acquired from Campanari, reached the Museum in its current form, as a caryatid chalice (Fig. 3). The vessel fits with the Rasmussen 1b type of chalice and the caryatids with Capecchi - Gunella Type IV Δ, a winged goddess with a polos on her head and clutching tresses to her breasts, and the
relief panels are similar to other published examples. However, the vessel is a pastiche. Originally, it was a Rasmussen type 3 chalice, to which the caryatids and panels (all ancient) have been added, along with a plaster annular base. Examination of the underside of the bowl reveals a circular area, ground smooth, marking the previous attachment of a stemmed foot. This ‘improvement’ was followed by the addition of the supports, which upon examination were found not to have ancient joins with the body: all of the junctions are restored. This vase is therefore a sophisticated creation of an annular footed chalice from a more common chalice, made before it was purchased from Campanari in 1838. A considerable effort has been made to make a credible chalice from fragments of other vessels.

In the British Museum collection there are other examples of items which have been improved or perhaps over enthusiastically restored during the 19th century. A pair of chalices, one with four and the other with seven caryatids supporting the bowl, were acquired from the Durand Collection in 1836 (Fig. 4-5). The caryatids were recognised as additions, and removed before 1932. Another chalice in Tarquinia with the same type of caryatids has been identified as a pastiche and it would seem that the caryatid type Cappechi and Gunella IV A’ may date from nearer to the 19th century AD than the 7th century BC.

In 1756 the first bucchero artefacts entered the British Museum from the collection of Sir Hans Sloane. These were two bowls, a chalice, four kantharoi, an oinochoe and a ‘bust,’ four of these were published by Pryce in 1932, but the others are unpublished. Of these, the ‘bust’ is interesting in that it further illuminates collecting 250 years ago.

A bust, such as this, is not a typical bucchero artefact (Fig. 6). Close examination revealed that breaks at the waist
and arms had been polished smooth suggesting that the bust had originally been a caryatid. It was probably from a chalice\(^{11}\) which had been broken and then improved by re-cutting the breasts, the hair on the shoulders and the waist to form a plinth, and then polishing the breaks to complete the bust. The artefact is therefore a product of antiquarian imagination rather than an authentic Etruscan statuette and provides evidence for the manufacture – or at least the improvement – of antiquities at some time before the middle of the eighteenth century. Its similarity to the caryatids of type Cappechi and Gunella IV A’ discussed above may push the date of the fabrication of these caryatids back into the first half of the 18th century. The origins of the caryatids from the Durand collection (Edme-Antoine Durand, 1768-1835) in the British Museum might also date back to the 18th century, but details of when and where Durand collected the pieces are not known although most are said to be from Chiusi or Volterra.\(^{12}\)

**The collection**

The British Museum collection of bucchero has grown over the last 250 years from its origins in the Sloane collection. The collection was augmented by the acquisition of the collections of Townley and Hamilton and significantly in 1838 and 1839 with purchases from Campanari. These origins are reflected in the collection with some Campanian bucchero originating from Hamilton and some Vulcentine bucchero from Campanari. Piecemeal collection continued through the 19th century but the collection has only grown slowly through the 20th. The development of the collection can be illustrated graphically (Fig. 7), and it can be seen that by far the greater part was acquired before the mid 19th century (the peak in acquisitions apparent in 1977 reflects a programme of registration of vases acquired before 1851 rather than new arrivals in the Museum, and the spike in 2006 was created by this study, when any remaining pieces without registration numbers were registered).

A wide variety of forms are represented in the collection, summarised in Fig. 8. The most common form is the oinochoe (61 examples), although the total is elevated by a number of body sherds from Naukratis which have been counted individually, though some may have

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\(^{12}\) T. W. Gomme, Greek and Roman Antiquities, London, 1928, p. 82.
belonged to the same vessels. The next most common are the kantharoi and chalices (31 of each) then various cups (28) and bowls (26). There are fewer amphorae (18), jugs (17), kotylai (13) and kyathoi (13). Minor classes are listed in Fig. 8.

Manufacturing techniques

One of the aims of the project has been to focus upon the macroscopic identification and interpretation of manufacturing and finishing techniques. The British Museum’s collection of bucchero is particularly suited to this approach because it contains multiple and complete examples of similar vessels which allow detailed and systematic comparisons to be made between vessels. The approach taken has been to reconstruct a chaîne opératoire – a working sequence – detailing the steps in the manufacture of each vase. This has enabled a reconstruction of the ‘standard’ sequence of manufacture for some vessel types. In the case of the Rasmussen 3b cup:

- the bowl of the cup was potted first
- then the base was potted and attached
- then the handles were formed and attached
- the vessel was then dried
- the interior the bowl and the rim were burnished horizontally while the vessel was turning on a wheel
- the vessel was inverted on the wheel and the foot was burnished only around the edge and the extremity of the underside
- the bowl was burnished on the wheel on the exterior except the handles themselves which were burnished horizontally freehand
- finally the grooving was added as a single spiral groove rather than a series of

figure 7 – Bucchero acquisitions through time.
The sequence of operations is remarkably consistent within the cups, chalices, kantharoi and oinochoai suggesting that for each there was a standardised production process, which itself must be related to regularised workshop practices as large scale production of bucchero developed.

Turning and Burnishing Techniques

As part of the study of the manufacturing techniques a variety of methods of burnishing the vessels has been identified. The earliest technique, is “freehand haphazard burnishing” which is the finishing of the surface of the leather hard vessel with a burnishing tool using strokes made without any apparent directionality. In the finest examples the individual strokes of the burnishing tool are not discernible. In the next stage the burnishing is still freehand but has a distinct directionality, it is commonly horizontal on the bowl of vessels, radial on the interior of open forms, and vertical on the neck of closed forms. In the following stage burnishing is accurately horizontal and was executed while the vessel was turning on a slow wheel, as in the case of the cup above. This developmental sequence appears to be a chronological development through the second half of the 7th century. The technique of “wheel burnishing” also seems to be associated with the turning of vessels during their forming, either to shape the body and foot or to add carinations or grooving with a sharp tool. The technique of producing “spiral grooves” was also executed when the vessel was turning on the wheel, and presumably developed in order to produce a set of grooves more rapidly. These two techniques, “wheel burnishing” and ‘spiral grooving,” have not previously been noted in studies of bucchero. It seems as if turning –analogous to working wood on a lathe – became a part of the bucchero manufacturing process during the latter half of the 7th century. This turning – shaping the soft clay while it is rotating on a potting wheel – is a technique suited to clay working and also wood working, but is less suited to metalwork in pre-industrial times, and does not appear to have been used in producing metal vessels until the Roman period.

Phil Perkins
The Open University, UK
NOTES

1. The project combined a Research Exchange funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and study leave from the Open University that enabled the author to work at the British Museum between January and June 2002. I am most grateful to Judith Swaddling and Dyfri Williams of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities of the British Museum, Lucilla Burn and Tom Rasmussen for their support of the project. A catalogue of the bucchero in the British Museum is now in preparation by the author.


3. Walters 1912; Birch and Newton 1851.


6. Macbeth in Shakespeare 1606, act 1, sc. 7, l. 11.


   It is illustrated in Bonamici 1974, 65-6 No.92 Tav. XIv Ia. Gualtiero also notes that some of these caryatids are in the Louvre, perhaps from the Durand Collection. A chalice in the Louvre C659 has two of these caryatids and the base of the vase is restored, Pottier 1928, pl.27.


11. The face is very similar to the caryatid of type IV A and IV A’ of Caepecci, and Gunella 1975.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


