

# Ancient Greece: Pots



Black-figured lip cup  
Greek, around 540 BC

Visit resource for teachers  
Key stage 2

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# Before your visit

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## Background information

As with most ancient civilisations, large amounts of pottery have survived from ancient Greece. Pottery is one of the most durable materials and even when broken, the pieces of a pot can usually be put together again. This means that pottery is one of the most important sources of evidence for ancient Greece, whether for contacts within the Greek world, artistic influences from other cultures or for dating archaeological sites. An added bonus of much Greek pottery is that it carries figure scenes which provide information about many aspects of Greek life.

Different city states produced different styles and types of pottery. In the seventh century BC, Corinth was the leading producer and exporter of pottery, but was overtaken by Athens in the sixth century BC. Athenian pottery is the most famous type of ancient Greek pottery and was much sought after by collectors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the Athenian pots in the Museum come from tombs in southern Italy and modern Tuscany - Athenian pots were extremely popular with the Etruscans.

The three most common techniques of decoration on Athenian pots are the black-figure technique (black figures on an orangey-red background - mainly sixth century BC), red-figure (orangey-red figures on a black background - from the late sixth century until the end of the fourth century BC) and white-ground (coloured figures on a white background - some sixth century examples, but mostly fifth). All three techniques used slips (refined clay) for their paint and pots were not glazed in our sense of the word - the shine comes from the nature of the clay slip..

Almost all Greek pots were made in functional shapes for particular purposes even if they were not actually used for that purpose - some pots were also made specifically to be buried in tombs and graves. There is some debate among archaeologists as to the ancient value of pots. It is certain that wealth was best demonstrated through the use of metal vessels, but there were larger and smaller and higher and lower quality pots which must have differed in price.

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the Museum's collections. To investigate objects from ancient Egypt use the Explore option on the homepage of the British Museum website: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

#### Ancient Greece website [www.ancientgreece.co.uk](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk)

This is an interactive website with text, images and maps relating to a range of key themes. It includes a wide variety of online activities for pupils and an area for teachers providing guidance and ideas for the classroom.

### Books

#### For Adults

Williams, D, *Greek Vases*, British Museum Press, 1999.

#### For Children

McAllister, Emma, *Pocket Timeline Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2006.

Sheehan, Sean, *The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2002.

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## Gallery information

Room 13 is a large room with material from the Archaic Period in Greek history (about 1050 – 520 BC) from mainland Greek city-states like Athens, Sparta and Corinth, the Greek islands, the coastal Greek cities of Asia Minor (East Greece), and Greek territory in Egypt (Naucratis). The large sculptures are from Apollo's oracle at Didyma. There are very early pots with geometric patterns on them. Corinthian pottery with its rows of animals has a case to itself. There is a very large case with black-figure pots from Athens. Room 14 is a tiny room showing different techniques of decorating pots. Room 15 contains pottery and other material from the classical period of the fifth century BC (500-400). Most of the pots are decorated in the red-figure technique with a few using white ground. These are some of the finest examples of Greek pots in the world.

## What is it like to visit these galleries?

A lot of people walk through these rooms and they can get quite noisy, but there are spaces away from the main through-route where you can gather students together to brief them and discuss what they've seen. All the pots are behind glass, but most of them are at a good height for children - there are a few pots a bit high up in Room 13, but many of these are reasonably visible to Years 5 and 6. Few people go on the narrow side of the long cases in Room 15 so this is also a good place for students to do observational drawing.

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## Preliminary activities

### General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by the ancient Greek world in an atlas and look at the modern countries which currently exist in this region of the world.
- Explore life in ancient Greece. Use images to illustrate discussion.
- Look at objects from ancient Greece using the Explore function from the home page of the British Museum website.

### Activities to support gallery activities

- Look at examples of ancient Greek pots. If possible project images of the pots onto a whiteboard or distribute printed copies. Point out the features of the pots: shape, handles, decoration and use.
- Discuss the decoration of pots. Explain that pots were decorated to make them look nice but also, to remind the user of an event or activity or communicate a message. Look at examples of pot decoration with your group - be sure to include simple pattern decoration and complex painted scenes.
- Talk about life in ancient Greece. When would pots be used? What would they be used for? Discuss the types of things ancient Greeks ate and drank. Is this reflected in the types of pots?

## **During your visit**

## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Rooms 13 and 15. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: Pot shapes, names and uses**

- Ancient Greek pots had very specific shapes for their functions. Students may need help identifying the use with the Greek name for the shape; you need to help them use the labels to work out which is which.
- This activity encourages the students to use observational skills and to think about how the use of a pot may relate to its design.

### **Gallery activity: Animals**

- Decoration on pots reveals activities and scenes from ancient Greek life. The animals shown on pots reveal the animals the ancient Greeks knew of even if they had never seen them.
- This activity asks students to look at a wide range of pots and to concentrate on the images shown in decoration.

### **Gallery activity: Pot patterns**

- Ancient Greek pots could be highly decorated. This decoration varied from simple patterns to elaborate scenes.
- This activity promotes observational and drawing skills.

### **Gallery activity: A kylix**

- A kylix is a type of drinking cup. This example is decorated with a scene showing a woman pouring a drink for a warrior.
- This activity uses observational skills.

# Pots: shapes, names and uses

- Look in the cases and find a pot that matches each of the drawings below.
- Fill in the information about each pot using the names and uses below.

**names:** stamnos • hydria • volute krater • lekythos • kylix • oinochoe

**uses:** carrying and pouring water • pouring wine • drinking wine  
storing wine • to mix wine and water in • to hold oil



found one?

name:.....

used for:.....



found one?

name: .....

used for:.....



found one?

name: .....

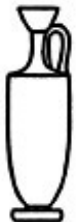
used for:.....



found one?

name: .....

used for:.....



found one?

name: .....

used for:.....



found one?

name: .....

used for:.....

- Now look in the cases for other pot shapes.

## Animals

- Look in the two large glass cases in the middle of this room. Look at a few of the pots near to where you are standing and record in the space below what colours have been used to decorate them.

- Animals can be found in many pictures on ancient Greek pots. See how many of the animals named below you can find. Tick the boxes when you find them.

lion

horse

dog

bird

deer

boar

- Now carefully draw one of the animals you saw on the pots.

- See if you can spot any other types of animals not listed above

## Pot Patterns

Ancient Greek pots were sometimes decorated with patterns.

- Find the large human sized pot near the entrance to Room 13. This is a pithos storage jar used to hold olive oil, wine or grain.
- Look at the patterns on the pot and choose four to copy into the boxes below.

Pattern 1	Pattern 2
Pattern 3	Pattern 4

- The handles on pots could also be chosen for their decorative shape. Look at some of the other pots in the cases. Choose two handle shapes and draw them in the boxes below.

Handle 1	Handle 2
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- Decide on your favourite decorative feature. Discuss it with your group.

## A kylix

- Pots could be decorated with scenes from myths and legends or with scenes from everyday life.
- Find this pot in case 6. It shows a woman pouring wine for a warrior. Look closely at the pot in the case. Draw lines from the labels to where they are in the picture.

his helmet

his spear

her name

his name



ladle for wine

his cup

his shield

her hair band

- This pot is a kylix or shallow cup. In the boxes below draw the pot as if you were looking at it from above and then as if you were looking at it from the side.

view from above	view from the side

- Now see if you can find any more drinking cups in the gallery.

## **After your visit**

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## Follow-up activities introduction

Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the pupils to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.

- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the ancient Greece learning website ([www.ancientgreece.co.uk](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk)) which relate to your visit.

### Follow-up activity: Pot shapes, names and uses

Curriculum links: history, literacy, drama

Skills: observation, discussion, analysis

- Review the shapes, names and uses of the pots seen during the visit. Students can use their activity sheets as prompts.
- Discuss the shapes and styles of pots. Are these features always functional? Why might they have been decorated?
- Ask the children to write down examples of containers that are used today. What do they drink out of? How is oil/juice/milk stored today? What materials do we use that were not available to the ancient Greeks?

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## Follow-up activity: Animals

Curriculum links: history, geography, literacy

Skills: investigation, analysis, group work

- As a class discuss the animals seen on the pots during the visit. Did they manage to spot all the animals listed in the activity sheet?
- Ask students to research the animal they chose to draw. Use books and, if possible, the internet to widen the research capabilities. Ask students to produce sketches of their animal and a fact sheet about the animal today, where it lives, what it eats, and any other information they choose.
- Produce research books on each animal with collaborative work amongst students.

## Follow-up activity: Pot patterns

Curriculum links: history, literacy, citizenship

Skills: investigation, analysis, practical design

- Discuss the decoration of pots as seen on the visit.
- Using their worksheets ask the students to design their own decorated pot. Drawings from the visit can be supplemented with images of other Greek pots displayed on the whiteboard or printed and distributed to groups. Students should think of overall shape, whether they will choose one pattern, what colours will be used and the handle design.
- Once a pot has been designed ask the students to look at it as a functional item. What could their pot be used for? Would it suit this purpose? Is the shape and handles appropriate?

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## Follow-up activity: A kylix

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art & design

Skills: investigation, group work, analysis

- Discuss the kylix seen during the visit. Review the scene shown within it and its outline shape.
- Explain that there were many different pot types in ancient Greece and they each had a name and a function. Individually or in groups ask the students to research the different types of pots and record their shape, function and name.
- Create a book or wall chart detailing each pot type. Groups or individuals could be responsible for one type each. The shapes could be cut out of coloured paper, decorated and any features labelled.

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