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## Bucchero in context

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## ***Bucchero in context***

6,000 to 7,000 words

Fig. 1. line drawing illustrating cultural influences on bucchero wares.

Fig. 2. A map of bucchero finds after Parlavecchia, P. (ed.) (1992), *Les Etrusques et l'Europe* (Paris). pp.64-5.

Bucchero is the modern name that archaeologists give to a class of ceramics that was produced in central Italy between the seventh and the fourth centuries BCE. Bucchero vessels take a wide variety of forms and have a black or dark gray color and a smooth reflective surface (Martelli 1994; Camporeale 2000; Naso 2004; Perkins 2007; De Puma 2013). Bucchero was a distinctive part of Etruscan material culture and the story of this type of ceramic reflects the cultural and historical development of the Etruscan people in many ways. To explore the story of bucchero this chapter will use the concept of a 'life cycle' to construct a form of biography for bucchero as a class of ceramic which will place bucchero in its wider cultural and historical context (Kopytoff 1986, 66-7; Hoskins 1998). Starting with its production, moving on to its use and then considering how bucchero became a part of the archaeological record, this study will end by considering how bucchero fits into the contemporary world.

### *Context of Production*

Just like any other ceramic, the raw material for making bucchero is clay. Etruria is well endowed with clay deposits and the production of bucchero did not require clay with precise chemical properties. A more important quality was the purity of the clay, and this could be achieved by washing freshly dug raw clay and then settling out the clay from the water to remove the larger impurities and obtain a relatively pure raw material. Other Etruscan ceramics that were in use at the time when bucchero first appeared (the second quarter of the seventh century BCE) used a raw material that was either less purified or was modified by the addition of minerals (grits, lime or organic material) to manipulate the characteristics of the clay when it was fired (fluxes) or its strength and malleability while the pots were being formed from the raw clay (fillers). These ceramics are known by the Italian term '*impasto*' which encompasses a wide range of ceramic styles from quite rough and thick everyday vessels to fine highly polished vases that are virtually indistinguishable from bucchero vases (Badoni 2000). Indeed *impasto* and bucchero productions are very closely linked, and the earliest bucchero may be considered as a refined version of *impasto*. Some scholars use the term 'buccheroid *impasto*' to describe vases that share characteristics of *impasto* and bucchero, however, there is no clear cut boundary between the two and there is a continuum rather than a division between the two categories.

*Impasto* and bucchero also share techniques that were used to form and decorate the vessels. The earliest bucchero was made by hand, probably using a slow potter's wheel to shape the vessel. When leather hard, the dried clay body was polished with smooth tools to burnish the surface. This created a compact and resistant surface that also had a characteristic reflective surface. On many vessels it is possible to see individual burnishing strokes on the surfaces of the vase, but on some very carefully polished

examples it is impossible to see such tool-marks on the uniformly smooth, polished surfaces of the vases. This smooth surface was then often used as the background for decoration that was either incised into the surface or stamped using specifically prepared dies. In the southern part of Etruria stamped decoration becomes rare in the last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century but remains in use through the sixth century in more northerly parts and the Po Valley. A distinctive form of stamping, shared with some impasto, is a pattern of dotted lines radiating from a single point and forming a semi-circular or wedge-like fan shape (Regter 2003, 21-53). The pattern, made with a toothed comb, was common in the central decades around the mid-seventh century. It is conventionally described as a fan, due to it resembling modern hand held folding fans, but it does not resemble any ancient Etruscan fan shapes and it has been suggested that the motif might possibly derive from Egyptian representations of a papyrus flower (Gran-Aymerich, 1995, 49-50). This form of decoration was often accompanied by various incised lines and horizontal grooves, or impressions apparently made with twisted wire or cord, following a tradition found in earlier Italic ceramics. A more elaborate decoration is incision of freehand motifs such as friezes of animals, or rarely humans or animals molded in low relief. Some of the earlier hand made vessels are very elaborate and take on more sculptural forms with the use of ribbing, undulating surfaces or plant and animal forms (Sciacca 2003).

Very rarely, bucchero has been found further decorated with gold leaf or colored paint (Gran-Aymerich 1995, 47, 65, pl.3; Rastrelli 2000, 147 pl. 167), but these finishes are too rare to suggest that such elaboration was originally commonplace, and when seen in museums, it is often the result of 19<sup>th</sup> Century enhancement to make the decoration more visible. The polished surface of bucchero occasionally has a silvery surface sheen that is a byproduct of the firing process, but it is rare and unlikely to have been a consistent aim of the potters to produce vessels that had a silver metallic appearance (e.g. Perkins 2007, 87 no. 75).

During the third quarter of the seventh century the potting technology becomes more sophisticated and the fast potter's wheel becomes the standard means of shaping vases. This is supplemented by various techniques of turning partly dried vases on the wheel and using sharp tools to modify the profiles of the vases, often producing inflections and carinations in the walls with sharp, angular edges. The technique is similar to turning materials such as wood or ivory on a lathe. This technological transformation is matched by a scaling up in the quantity of bucchero that was produced and a shift from individually crafted pieces to mass-produced series of near-identical vases with only limited decoration.

The vessels, once dried and decorated were fired in relatively low temperature kilns. There has been much debate and experimental reproduction of bucchero firing techniques. Impasto ceramics are typically fired in oxidizing or mixed atmospheres that produce dark red, brown or brownish grey vessels. Bucchero however is characterized by its black, or very dark grey color that is produced in a reducing atmosphere where oxygen is kept out of the kiln, particularly when the vessels are cooling. It is possible that carbon, in the form of charcoal was deliberately added to the clay used for bucchero to enhance its black color but experimentation has shown that control of the firing atmosphere is the

key variable in producing the black effect (Acconcia, 2004; Cuomo Di Caprio 2007, 437-40; Deriu 2009).

Kilns for the production of bucchero have been reported in various places in northern Etruria and Campania (Acconcia 2004, 285), but unfortunately, none have yet been published, meaning that reconstruction of manufacturing processes depend upon observation of finished bucchero vases and experimental archaeology. Pottery kilns from the period that have been excavated are simply hollows cut into the ground, perhaps with a clay superstructure, or a simple bonfire above to fire the vases. Such kilns may have been used for producing bucchero that was closer to the impasto end of the scale, but it seems probable that more sophisticated up-draught kilns would have been necessary to provide the required control of the firing atmosphere to produce consistently black bucchero in large quantities (Acconcia, 2004; D'Asti and Vidale 2004; Di Gennaro 2004, Vallesi 2004a; b; Perkins 2007).

Moving beyond technological aspects, the context of the production of bucchero is also defined by comparison with a broader spectrum of ceramics. The relationship between earlier handmade impasto and bucchero has already been mentioned and bucchero also shares some basic shapes of bowls, plates and jars with coarser utilitarian wares. Bucchero is therefore firmly rooted in the ceramic traditions of the late Iron Age of Latium and Etruria, yet during the second half of the eighth century BCE cultural contacts across the Mediterranean began to intensify and Greek settlement at Pithekoussai and Carthaginian settlement on Sardinia made contacts with the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean more frequent. At the same time, trade and exchange began to bring novel artifacts, cultural practices and technologies into Etruria. These contacts had an impact on the development of material culture in Etruria and can be traced in both subtle and spectacular ways: bucchero provides a case study of how a cultural milieu may be reflected in the changes in material culture.

From the late Bronze Age through the Iron age (10<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) the biconical urn with a horizontal handle at its widest point is a distinctive artifact used for domestic purposes and to contain cremated ashes in burial pits (Fig 1). The same distinctive body shape, with vertical handles from the widest point to the rim – the amphora – is found in impasto and bucchero (Rasmussen type 1). The same basic shape, but with only one handle becomes a bucchero dipper (*atingitoio*) or jug (Rasmussen type 1) which has an equally long prehistoric pedigree. This same shape was adapted by artisans who produced a bucchero wine jug shape that blends features of the biconical Etruscan shape with a Phonician narrow necked jug (Rasmussen Oinochoe type 2). The artisans must have seen the original jugs made in silver, bronze, ivory/ostrich egg and ceramic in Phonicia or Cyprus (Rasmussen 2006, 76; De Marinis 2008). This jug develops, in turn, into a wide mouthed wine flagon which become one of the most distinctive and characteristic bucchero shapes (Rasmussen Oinochoe type 3). Influences are also absorbed from Greek ceramics: horizontal bands and vertical rays around the lower body are taken from painted Protocorinthian wares and incised upon bucchero wine flagons, amphoras and cups. The shape of some wine flagons is further influenced by Protocorinthian ceramics and 'Rhodian' bronze flagons which have a more angular neck and a complex handle

with discs (*rotelles*) covering the point where it joins the rim (Rasmussen Oinochoe type 4). A further connection is provided by shallow, two handled, bucchero wine cups reproduce the shape of Corinthian and East Greek cups that were made with light colored clay and decorated with dark painted motifs (Rasmussen Cup types 1-3). This web of interconnections is illustrative of the complex cultural mix of influences that typifies the Orientalizing period in central Italy and reveals the openness of Etruria to the Mediterranean world.

These examples show how artisans producing bucchero drew from contemporary traditions in neighboring cultures, but bucchero also inspired artisans elsewhere. In Athens, for example, a later development of the amphora shape made by the potter Nikosthenes in black-figured ware, copied an Etruscan shape (Rasmussen amphora type 1g) as did some carinated one-handed cups (Rasmussen kyathos type 1h) (Rasmussen 1985; 2006, 113-4). Carinated cups, of various kinds were one of the most distinctive Etruscan shapes that had their origin in the Late bronze Age. The chalice shape, with a plain rim, sloping wall and carination, had many variants, with higher or lower base, one handle (*kyathos*), two handles (*kantharos*) and a multiplicity of different forms of relief decoration, some impressed and others raised up. This shape also inspired Athenian potters to reproduce the Etruscan vessels. The distinctive Etruscan two-handed carinated wine cup, the *kantharos*, also became the attribute of the god Dionysos.

As well as being exposed to external influences, the artisans producing bucchero were working within a social and artistic tradition that had a profound influence on the development of the ceramics they produced. Some of the earliest bucchero made at Cerveteri is exceptionally complex and elaborately decorated (Sciacca 2003). Various aspects of its form and production are closely related to artifacts made in bronze, precious metals and ivory. The relationship is so close that it seems likely that artisans in these different materials were working alongside one another to produce prestige items for the very highest levels of Etruscan society in the early to mid-Orientalizing period (Gran-Aymerich 1995). Bucchero, bronze and silver vessels share some shapes of both Italic and Eastern Mediterranean derivation (e.g. East Greek cups, *kotylai*, chalices and *oinochoai*) and it is often assumed that the bucchero vessels are copying the original metal shapes. However, the priority of metal types has not been firmly established (Regter 2003, 108-9) and research is hindered by the differential survival of metals and ceramics: the metal examples are extremely rare and they can be easily recycled whereas the ceramic types are much more common but also more durable. There is an unmistakable skeuomorphic relationship between some metal and some bucchero vessels: clay rivets or repoussé decoration occur on some bucchero for example. But it is less certain whether common design features such as sharp carinations, which are simple to achieve in ceramic but difficult in sheet metalwork, originate in one medium or the other. What is more certain is that the material aesthetics, or style, of bucchero are shared across a range of media, and this implies that there were less rigid divisions between artisans working in different media than has been the case in more recent ceramic traditions.

In the same way as the shapes of bucchero display a wide range of connections with the wider Mediterranean context, decorative details can also reflect the broader cultural

milieu of the Etruscans. Amphoras from the mid-seventh century with incised decoration of connected spirals, geometric designs and stylized animals are recapitulating motifs familiar from the Iron Age. Later, in the last decades of the 7<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century vases with an incised frieze of animals form a distinct group of bucchero vases (Bonamici 1974 ; e.g. Perkins 2007 nos. 12 & 130). The animals share distinctive characteristics of Phoenician and Assyrian representations, and may be framed with Greek geometric motifs in a scheme that is reminiscent of Corinthian painted wares. As such they provide an example of how Etruscan artisans were fully engaged with the Orientalizing phenomenon and producing items for use by sections of society that were receptive and presumably appreciative of such external figurative styles. A further example is provided by the chalices supported by caryatids and strap-work that combine the Etruscan chalice shape with Near Eastern motifs and perhaps representations of Near Eastern deities (Brocato and Regoli 2009). In the sixth century too, bucchero vases with relief decoration continue to reflect Corinthian motifs but also include figures with more Archaic traits, illustrating how the bucchero artisans were continually exposed to broader cultural currents that modified forms of visual representation in this period.

#### *Geographical and economic context*

Although no production facilities have yet been identified it is possible to identify different bucchero produced at different places using formal characteristics (color, surface finish, chemical or mineral composition), the shape of vessels, style of decoration and geographical find spot. However, it is not possible to assign all bucchero to specific production sites, or even regions of Etruria: it is only the presence of distinctive features that have been clearly associated with specific sites that make an attribution possible. Even with chemical analysis, such as neutron activation analysis, it is not always possible to reliably differentiate production centers given the fundamental similarities between different clay sources in Etruria. Nevertheless this is an area where future work will refine and increase our knowledge (Naso 1994).

The earliest Bucchero production sites appear to be Cerveteri and Veii (Marchetti 2004), and it is at Cerveteri that the most elaborate and technologically advanced vessels first appear (Capecci and Gunella 1975; Regter 2003; Sciacca 2003). Many of these early vessels are characterized by exceedingly thin walls (<3mm) which has led to the general use of the term *bucchero sottile* to describe earlier wares. It is not yet possible to trace the full details of the spread of bucchero production but by the end of the seventh century production was underway at most of the main Etruscan cities with significant productions developing at Tarquinia (Locatelli 2004; Palmieri 2010), Vulci (Celuzza 2000; 2004), Orvieto (Tamburini 2004) and Chiusi (Del Verme 2000; Minetti 2000; Cappuccini 2011). Much of bucchero production appears to have taken place in urban contexts and most cities have an identifiable production of their own: Vetulonia (Camporeale 1967; Gregori 1991), Roselle (Donati 1991; 1994), Populonia (Acconcia 2010; Grassini 2010), Pisa (Bruni 1998), Rome (Rossi 2004; Van Kampen 2004) and those where a bucchero production has not been securely identified are places that have not yet yielded extensive Orientalizing and Archaic Period deposits (Volterra, Cortona, Arezzo, Perugia and Fiesole). There are also limited indications of production at smaller sites in Etruria such as Blera (Di Silvio et al. 2004) and Poggio Colla and the important finds from Poggio

Civitave (Murlo) (Berkin 2003) are distinctive enough to suggest that they may have been made at the site rather than having been imported from elsewhere. Our understanding of the details of these more local productions is still emerging and there are known productions, such as the winged cups in northern Etruria, for which a production center has not yet been proposed and localities, such as the Faliscan area where it seems highly likely that the bucchero was locally produced.

Although the earliest bucchero was a rare product of high quality workmanship, possibly made in workshops alongside precious metals and ivory, attached to elite households, during the later decades of the seventh century the economic context of production changes as does the volume and quality of production. Before the end of the century bucchero was being mass-produced in most Etruscan cities, probably in specialized workshops, using technology shared. This technological and organizational revolution is distinctive of late Orientalizing Etruria in other media as well (Nijboer 1998) and is perhaps matched by similar developments in ceramic production in Corinth.

In the sixth century, the thinnest bucchero (*sottile*) was no longer produced and fabrics in intermediate thickness give way to thicker, less carefully finished wares called *bucchero pesante* (heavy) in Italian. These were produced at Tarquinia (Camporeale 1972b; Locatelli 2004), Vulci (Celuzza 2000; Celuzza *et al.* 2004; Belevi Marchesini 2004), Ovieto (Camporeale 1970; 1972a) and Chiusi (Barbagli and Iozzo 2007, 130-9) in particular, and were often elaborately ornamented with relief decoration with figurative, floral or geometric motifs and notably frontal human heads (Donati 1967; 1968; 1969). Also during the sixth century, bucchero production spread beyond Etruria proper and large scale production began in Sabina (Cantù 2010), Campania at Capua (Locatelli 1993; Minoja 2000) and probably at other centers because bucchero has been found on many sites in the region, for example in the lower levels of Pompeii (Fulford and Wallace Hadrill 1999, 64-6). Similarly, to the North, bucchero is found in Etruscan settlements in the Po Valley with distinctive stamped productions found at Marzabotto and other sites in western Emilia Romagna which are like those in northern Etruria at Vetulonia, Pisa and Poggio Colla (Santocchini Gerg 2012), while plainer bucchero is found at many sites such as Forcello where it may well have been made (Casini 2005; Deriu 2009). Productions have also been hypothesized in other neighboring areas in the Apennines and Adriatic coast (Benelli 2004), the Faliscan area (Ambrosini 2004; Biella 2010) and in Rome and southern Lazio (Rossi 2004).

Later bucchero productions, in the fifth and perhaps into the fourth centuries have been less well studied, but there is a trend towards grey, rather than black wares and the term 'grey bucchero' is often used to describe these later wares. The range of forms also reduces and most vessels are bowls, chalices, plates or flagons. At the same time fine wares with cream surfaces (with or without brown or red painted decoration), some with the same shapes as bucchero, grow in popularity.

#### *Context of use*

There are two potential approaches to establishing how bucchero was used: investigating the function of the vessels and investigating the contexts in which they were found.

Function can be inferred from the shape of bucchero vases. Most are shapes that were used as table ware: various types of bowls, plates, cups, jugs and lids for serving or consuming food and drink. The amphoras, and rarely jars, are usually small and more likely to have been used as table ware than as vessels for the longer term storage of liquids or grains. Bucchero was also used as a material to make aryballoi – small flasks for perfumed oils (Poupé 1970), a use that is distinct from table wares. In the seventh century bucchero was occasionally used to produce small female figurines, often parts of more complex objects, that may represent deities or mourners (Perkins 2007, 22-5). At Chiusi, in the second half of the sixth century, bucchero was also used for producing large trays that are usually described as ‘braziers’ and are found with miniature vessels and serving implements (Perkins 2007, 22).

Recent emphasis upon settlement archaeology in Etruria has made it clear that bucchero was a regular part of domestic assemblages and used on a regular basis for serving and consuming food and drink, as at Castellina del Marangone, Cetamura, Gravisca, Lago dell’Accesa, Poggio Civitate (Murlo), Podere Tartuchino, Populonia, and Roselle) for example (Gran-Aymerich and Dominguez 2011; Layton 2009; Pianu 2000; Camporeale 1997; Berkin 2003; Perkins and Attolini 1992; Acconcia 2010; Grassini 2010; Donati 1994). Bucchero is also found at public or cult buildings for example at Tarquina (Bonghi Jovino et al. 2001). Nevertheless, an important use of bucchero was as a tomb-good, accompanying the dead to the afterlife. In some cases it seems likely that bucchero may have been purposefully made for funerary use, particularly when shapes are not functionally practical or constructed with walls or handles that are apparently too fragile for regular handling. The characteristic Etruscan use of banqueting symbolism and iconography in funerary contexts, makes bucchero vessels appropriate in both settlements and tombs.

Bucchero was not only used in Etruria, it was also widely traded, often alongside wine amphorae. The most intense trade seems to have been between the southern cities of Vulci and Cerveteri and the shores of the Gulf of Lion, between modern Marseilles and Barcelona. Bucchero and amphorae are found on coastal settlements and also, notably in shipwrecks. Most of the bucchero vessels exported in this way are either *kantharoi* for drinking wine or *oinochoai* for pouring wine. Distribution of bucchero beyond this area was less intense, but none the less extends along the Mediterranean coast of Spain, to Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily, Carthage in Tunisia, but only rarely to the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean (Hase 1992; Gori and Bettini 2006; Gran-Aymerich and Turfa 2013, 383-5).

#### *Context of recovery*

Because of the past focus in Etruscan studies on excavations in cemeteries, and the more favorable conditions for preservation in chamber tombs, the vast majority of complete bucchero vessels has been found in Etruscan tombs. Uncontrolled, or largely unrecorded, excavation in the urban cemeteries of Etruria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century recovered large quantities of bucchero, but very often the focus was on the recovery of the figured Greek wares, which were highly praised for their artistic worth. The business of opening tombs in the 1840s is vividly described by George Dennis, ‘This is generally a process requiring

great care and tenderness, little of which, however, was here used, for it was seen by the first objects brought to light that nothing of value was to be expected - *hoc miserae plebi stabat sepulchrum* [‘here is the tomb of poor people’ (Horace Satires 1.8.10)]. Coarse pottery of unfigured, unvarnished ware, and a variety of small vases in black clay, were its only produce; and as they drew them forth, the labourers crushed them beneath their feet as things ‘cheaper than seaweed’. In vain we pleaded to save some from destruction; they were *roba di sciocchezza* – ‘foolish stuff’ - the *capo* was inexorable; his orders were to destroy immediately whatever was of no pecuniary value, and he could not allow us to carry away one of these relics which he so despised.’ (Dennis 1848, 450). The ‘small vases in black clay’ will have been bucchero, and an immense quantity of data about the ancient context of bucchero is now unrecoverable. The discovery of undisturbed tombs containing bucchero is now a rare event.

#### *Context of display*

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE small quantities of bucchero we collected along with other antiquities, particularly sculptures and Greek vases. Sir Hans Sloane owned eight that were part of the founding collection of the British Museum in 1756 and William Hamilton, the British Ambassador in Naples, who is better known for his collection of Greek vases, owned at least 11, and perhaps as many as 29 bucchero vases in 1772. The major collection of Charles Townley (1737-1805) contained 28 bucchero items when it was purchased by the British Museum in 1815 (Perkins 2007,3). By the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes were changing as the realization of the Etruscans role in the history of Italy became more widely appreciated. In 1837 the Gregorian Museum opened with an impressive collection of Etruscan antiquities from the Papal territories, and there was a block-buster Etruscan exhibition in Pall Mall, London in 1837 described by *The Times of London* as ‘very extraordinary and interesting’ (26 January 1837, 7 col. f) (Buranelli 1991, 33-56; Perkins 2007, 3-4). This increased presence of Etruscan material, including bucchero, in public collections and exhibitions was paralleled in other major 19<sup>th</sup> century CE European and North American museums. Bucchero was, and is, still collected by private individuals, although these are rarely published or seen by the public (Camporeale 1991).

#### *Context of study*

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century bucchero is a well-studied class of Etruscan artefact (Perkins 2007, 5-10; De Puma 2013). Some vases can be dated to within a few decades, although for many the uncertainty may be as much as a century, and the exact date of the start of bucchero production is still debated. It is now realized that bucchero was made at many different centers in modern day Tuscany, Lazio, Umbria, Campania and Emilia Romagna. Although it possible to differentiate some of these centers, there are still large areas of uncertainty. Perhaps the biggest challenge at present is to identify the precise places and facilities where bucchero was made. There must have been significant infrastructure at Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci, Orvieto and Chiusi, amongst other places, but to date none of the major production plants have been located and excavated. Exploring one of these centers will be the next big advance for the study of bucchero.

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