



# CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND SOCIAL STRATEGIES ON THE PONTIC SHORES

BURIAL CUSTOMS IN THE NORTHERN BLACK SEA AREA C. 550-270 BC

*Jane Hjarl Petersen*





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STRATEGIES ON THE PONTIC SHORES

BLACK SEA STUDIES

12

THE DANISH NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION'S  
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# CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND SOCIAL STRATEGIES ON THE PONTIC SHORES

Burial Customs in the Northern Black Sea Area  
c. 550-270 BC

*By Jane Hjarl Petersen*

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# Preface

The present volume springs from my PhD dissertation defended at the University of Aarhus in 2007. In recent years I have travelled from Denmark to the Black Sea region on several occasions. Mostly, my trips to the area have been concerned with material studies of burial data on display in museums or topographical 'micro-surveys' of cemetery areas, firstly in connection with my Masters thesis and subsequently in relation to my PhD dissertation, and thus the present project. On other occasions my time has been spent in the dusty storerooms of Olbia looking through endless boxes of pottery for the collaborative project between the Black Sea Centre at Aarhus University and the Academy of Sciences in Kiev. On these trips I have encountered a small fraction of life in the Black Sea region, both in the form which it takes today and as I imagine it to have been in Antiquity. The practical experiences and the mental challenges which I have been faced with during this period have, in various ways, influenced the manner in which I approach and perceive new cultural areas and the people who inhabit them. In these encounters with 'new lands' I have been confronted with many important questions central to the subject of the 'meeting of cultures' and the formation of identities – mainly from an ancient perspective, but also in relation to my own modern-day life. It has been a true privilege to become immersed in these matters and to work with them under such advantageous conditions and in such a rewarding working environment as that provided by the Black Sea Centre.

There are many people to thank for their support, endless patience, comments, critique and encouragements – amongst them my supervisors, Annette Rathje, Jens Krasilnikoff and Catherine Morgan, and all my colleagues at the Black Sea Centre, who have always been willing to share information and ideas as well as to lend a helping hand and a listening ear. Helle Horsnæs at the National Museum, Copenhagen has provided valuable and to-the-point comments and critique of the chapter on southern Italy; George Hinge, University of Aarhus, has given his detailed, expert opinions on the epigraphic material; and Patric Kreuz, University of Bochum, has been very kind and helpful in answering my many questions concerning Black Sea funerary architecture and sculpture. Many more people have been involved in discussions of the work and they are mentioned and thanked in the text accordingly. Elena Stolba and Line Bjerg have done a fantastic job with the bibliography, for which I own them my deepest thanks. Gina Coulthard has expertly and patiently edited, corrected, and commented the final version of the manuscript.

Last but not least, I owe immense thanks to my friends and family who have been a never-failing support to me during this long process – thank you all for listening, supporting me and still being there after all I have put you through. Finally, my husband Tom deserves a special mention as he is always there beside me with inexhaustible resources of unconditional support, care and encouragement – carissimo mio!

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Presentation of the study

The study *Cultural Interactions and Social Strategies on the Pontic Shores. Burial Customs in the Northern Black Sea Area c. 550-270 BC* was initiated immediately after my Masters graduation in Greek archaeology. Prior to my employment at the Danish National Research Foundation's Centre for Black Sea Studies, I had worked on similar themes in my Masters thesis, specifically Archaic burial customs from Olbia and Taranto (Petersen 2003). The conclusions of this work led me to seek further understanding of the mortuary evidence from the Black Sea region and to elaborate on – as well as to rethink – some of the main questions and problems.

The present volume has as its point of departure the burial data from four coastal localities in the northern region of the Black Sea. Through detailed analyses, the mortuary practices are sought, decoded and interpreted within a framework which is mainly based on concepts of cultural interaction rather than cultural polarization. This means that the dogma of 'The Greeks and the Others' is challenged, and alternative perceptions of the interactions between the peoples of Black Sea region form the basis of the study. The burials are primarily analysed within the tradition of Western burial archaeology with an emphasis on the social strategies which can be reflected in burials.

Furthermore, the Black Sea region is set into a comparative perspective through an assessment of the burial customs and mortuary practices in the colonial milieu of contemporary southern Italy.

The geographical area of the northern Black Sea has been chosen as a primary focal point for the research mainly due to the large bodies of material which derive from the localities here. The intensive and extensive research history of this particular region has also resulted in a great number of specialist studies offering excellent potential for debate and discussion.

The four case-study localities, Olbia, Kerkinitis, Panskoe I and Nymphaion (Fig. 1.1), have been selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, all these localities offer published or otherwise available burial data. Secondly, the localities are situated within a well-defined geographical area of the Black Sea which strengthens the basis for internal comparisons between them. Additionally, each locality represents an individual socio-political aspect which together provide a broad introduction to the practice of burial customs at different

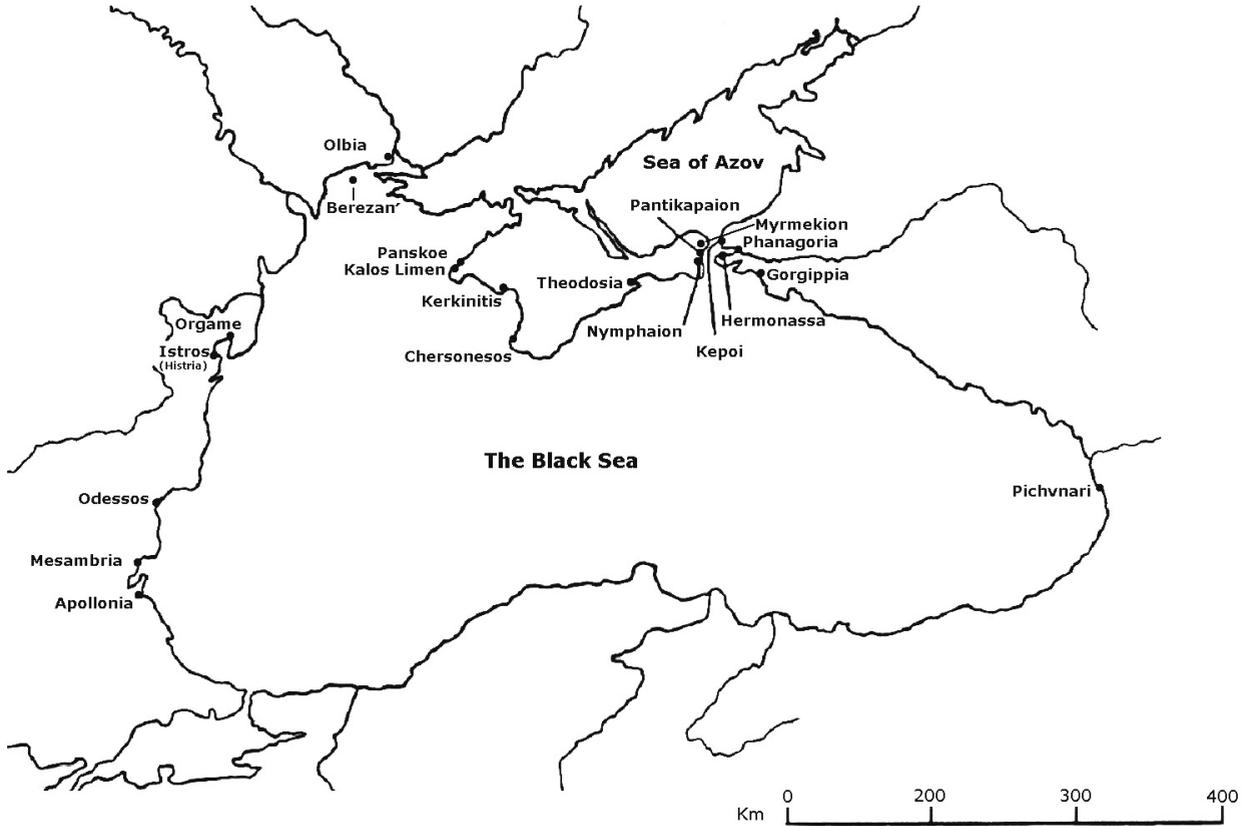


Fig. 1.1. Map of the Black Sea region with selected localities (map by author)

levels of social development within the Black Sea settlements. Thus, Olbia can be seen as the first major power of the Black Sea region and one of the leading cities throughout Antiquity; Kerkititis was a small settlement under the political and social influences of larger cities in the region; Panskoe I was a remote rural settlement; and Nymphaion a well-established city which faced the new dominance of an upcoming regional power, the Bosporan Kingdom. Hence, the aim with regards to this aspect of the selection of sites is to examine if and how the burial data reflect the different socio-political circumstances of the localities.

The chronological time frame of c. 550-270 BC takes as its beginning the date at which most settlements were established and burial data is available in larger quantities, at least from some of the localities. The lower limit of c. 270 is determined by the dramatic social and economic changes which left the northern part of the Black Sea region in a significant crisis, a situation that was possibly enhanced by drastic climate changes and instability amongst the nomads of the steppe regions.

The study starts with the present introductory chapter (Chapter 1) which touches briefly on the project and the practicalities, followed by an introduction to the research history of Russian archaeology, which mainly serves to highlight the historical developments and political influences under which the primary data was created and initially presented. This is followed by a summary of the research history of theoretical burial archaeology in the West, with a presentation of the specific theoretical considerations which lie behind this project. Finally, the introductory chapter touches upon some aspects of the problems connected with the issue of the 'Greeks and the Others'. The main part of the book is made up of four analytical chapters (Chapters 2-5) concerned with the four case-study localities from the Black Sea region. They aim to describe and analyse the burial data of each locality as well as to present and discuss previous approaches and interpretations. The case-study chapters are concluded with assessments of the burial landscapes of nearby regions as well as comparisons with other relevant material. Chapter 6 presents a short summing up of the results of the analyses of the Black Sea localities, and offers some suggestions regarding the implications of the understanding of cultural interactions in the region. A chapter on the mortuary practices of selected localities in southern Italy (Chapter 7) is then presented in order to provide a comparative basis for the Black Sea material. Finally, the book offers a conclusion and a summary in Russian.

The material body of the study has been collected and structured in a database which is presented in detail below. The database is available as a download from Aarhus University Press [[www.unipress.dk](http://www.unipress.dk)].

The general terminology of the study primarily follows the guidelines suggested by Sprague (2005), although there may be instances where the research tradition has led me to use a more commonly accepted term for the sake of consistency with the remaining literature on a specific topic.

If not otherwise stated, all chronological references and dates refer to the era before Christ.

Each chapter has its own set of figures and illustrations; they are numbered according to chapter and figure, thus the first number refers to the number of the chapter, the second to the individual number of the figure or illustration, for example 'Fig. 2.1' is the first figure in Chapter 2. Further, there are a smaller number of tables that run consecutively through the text.

## 1.2 A few practicalities

### *Preservation*

An important aspect in the selection of graves for this study was their state of preservation. As this study deals with large-scale investigations and overall interpretations primarily based on statistics, it was an important criterion that the graves were as intact as possible. This means that robbed, reused or

otherwise disturbed burials have generally not been included in the study. In the rare instances where disturbed graves have been included, this has been done due to the invaluable or unique information they provide. These are mentioned as specific examples and clearly noted as being disturbed.<sup>1</sup> In determining whether a specific grave is disturbed or intact, this study has relied solely on the information provided by previous publications.

It must be stressed that, due to the vast amounts of material included in the study, the time frame of the project, as well as the often poorly preserved material, no 'hands on' examination of the material or the original excavation diaries has been possible. It is therefore more than likely that misinterpretations and mistakes from these initial publications have now become 'my' misinterpretations and mistakes, but this is a fundamental danger of this type of general overview study and must be kept in mind accordingly.

#### *After the excavation*

Another aspect of preservation is the treatment of the burial material after excavation and its fate in the store rooms of museums and other institutions. Often, the material was kept for many years before the actual publication work was started, and, even more often, this was undertaken by scholars other than the excavator (an example is Skudnova 1988 and the majority of the graves in Kutajsov & Lancov 1989a; 1989b). The tradition of archaeological investigations and excavations both in the Black Sea area and in southern Italy goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a period when the documentation and understanding of archaeological context was not yet necessarily part of the daily agenda. This leaves the material with a long and often uncertain history, and exposed to various damaging factors: storerooms may have been reorganized several times, new numbering systems may have been introduced and material may have been lost, stolen, damaged or misplaced. Times of war, changing administrations and governments may likewise have added problems and complications to the matter (see, for example, Graepler 1997, 23-30 on Taranto; Tsetskhladze 2001, IX-XX on the Black Sea region in general; Fless 2002, 78-81 on Pantikapaion).

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1 This is, for example, is the case with the Tarantine chamber tombs which are almost all robbed, but still represent a unique, long-lived and prominent feature within the grave types, and thus are hard to ignore in the treatment of burial customs from Taras (Lo Porto 1967; Maruggi 1994; 1997; D'Amicis, Giboni & Lippolis 1997). The robbing of burials is not at all an exclusively modern phenomenon; ancient grave robbers operated also, evidently so commonly that literary evidence, in the form of lead curses aimed at disturbers of the peace of a grave, is found in quite large quantities in the ancient cemeteries. Furthermore, reburial and secondary use of existing graves also seems to have evoked curses (Faraone & Obbink 1991, Chapter 2; Flint, Luck & Ogden 1999, 19).

*Problems inherent in burials*

It is not only historical factors that play a role in the way the burial material has been preserved and published. The burials themselves represent a rather complicated situation. Most cemeteries have not only a horizontal, but also a vertical stratigraphy. This implies that burials have been placed on top of each other, sometimes *in* one another or very near each other. Unless the burial is in an enclosure clearly visible to the excavator, for example a chamber, a pit burial covered with a lid, a sarcophagus, a cist grave or the like, it can be very difficult indeed to determine if the burial is completely undisturbed. In particular, the most common type of burial, the simple pit grave dug into the soil, is in great danger of losing objects that were placed in or at the grave originally or of gaining objects from other burials in the vicinity.<sup>2</sup> Even when it comes to those burials placed in clearly identifiable enclosures, objects placed outside the grave may suffer the same uncertain fate as objects from pit graves. Naturally, this does not only affect the overall picture of the composition of the grave goods, but can also create severe chronological problems.

For the Black Sea region in particular, this problem is also evident for burials in kurgans (burial mounds). Furthermore, some caution must be exercised when dealing with the burials in this grave type, since it can be difficult to determine the main burial of a kurgan, especially with regard to the rather simple cremation burials often found in them. There are numerous examples of multiple burials within the same kurgan mound, and unless the main burial is very dominant and the mound has been thoroughly investigated, it can be difficult to identify which burial is the 'original' or dominant one, and which has been added later or has a subordinate status to the main burial. Moreover, the situation can be complicated further, since many kurgans were originally erected in the Bronze and early Iron Ages, and then reused and expanded in later periods.

As for identifications and ascriptions of grave goods and the dating of both grave complexes and individual grave goods, this study relies purely on the information given in the publications. The majority of the dating of the graves is based on data provided by the imported pottery, especially Corinthian and Attic imports. One could, of course, reasonably expect a certain delay in these products reaching the shores of the northern Black Sea. However, the most recent study of Attic pottery from the Archaic to Hellenistic periods in the Taman peninsula shows no major chronological discrepancies and no long delays in relation to the Attic sequence; and the picture seems to be confirmed when widening the study to the northern and northwestern Black Sea area (Morgan 2004, 154-155; Handberg & Petersen 2010).

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2 The same problematic situation concerns burials in containers where the grave goods are most commonly placed around the container rather than inside it (see, for example, Graepler 1997, 48-49 for comments on this in his treatment of the Tarantine graves).

Thus, there are no major concerns relating to the chronology and dates for this particular region. Another factor, however, which is more relevant in burial contexts, is the use and reuse of imported pieces, for example as heirlooms.<sup>3</sup> Again, this is a difficult topic to address when working solely from publications with sparse illustrative material and no possibility of ‘hands-on’ study.

## Dealing with the material

### *The database*

The database is the cornerstone of this study. Here, all information relevant to the research has been collected and registered.<sup>4</sup> The database is of a rather simple construction with two corresponding layers of information. The first layer deals with the grave itself. Here, details about location, grave type,<sup>5</sup> orientation, measurements, treatment of body, sex, age, date, total number of grave goods, NOT-value,<sup>6</sup> literature and comments on outside deposits or other features, for example grave *stelai*, are given. The date registered in the database is always the lowest possible date; for example, if a burial is dated ‘5<sup>th</sup> century BC’, the date stated in the database will be 400. This is due to the technical construction of the database and does not necessarily reflect the exact date of the burial context. Further, the graves are divided into chronological phases, introduced in order to break down the long time-span of the study

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3 See, for example, Lillios 1999 on heirlooms in archaeological contexts.

4 The data set which forms the basis of this study has been selected according to the following criteria: firstly according to state of preservation; and secondly according to the level of detail provided in the publications. It was important that the publications gave details on the specific individual characteristics of the burials in question; meaning a catalogue text or similar chapter which described each individual grave and the possible grave goods in as much detail as possible. Information should include: grave type, measurements, the skeletal remains and treatments of the body, orientation, age and gender, the types of grave goods, the state of preservation, place of origin, position in the grave, date, etc. To provide a unique identification in the database, the individual publications are marked with a capital letter in front of every grave number: **A:** Moreschini 1988; **B:** D’Amicis, Giboni & Lippolis 1997; **C:** Lo Porto 1959-1960; **D:** Neeft 1994; **E:** Lo Porto 1962; **F:** Skudnova 1988; **I:** Grač 1999; **J:** Maruggi 1982; **K:** Silent’eva 1959; **L:** Kutajsov & Lancov 1989b; **M:** Knipovič 1940a; **N:** Rogov & Stolba forthcoming. Thus, grave I23 refers to Grač 1999, grave 23. (The letters G and H were initially allocated to Kozub 1974 and Parovič-Pešikan 1974, which were excluded from this study, see Chapter 2 below).

5 The individual grave types and their characteristics are described in the relevant chapters of the book. The terminology of grave types can differ from publication to publication which can, at times, create some confusion. I have, however, strived to maintain a coherent terminology throughout this study.

6 The NOT-value (Number of Object Types value) has been introduced in order to describe the variation of object types within a grave. This means that a grave with, for example, three drinking cups, two jugs and a knife will score a NOT-value of 3.

into more manageable periods. The phases are thus artificially created and follow the general chronological periods used in traditional Classical archaeology and ancient history:

- 1: c. 550-520 (Archaic)
- 2: c. 519-480 (late Archaic – early Classical)
- 3: c. 479-400 (Classical)
- 4: c. 399-270 (late Classical – early Hellenistic)

Needless to say, avoidance of furthering any biases in the conclusions of the data analysis by the phase divisions has been a matter of constant attention. This means that an open mind has been kept throughout the study regarding potential chronological overlaps as well as long-term developments and patterns exceeding the limitations of the phases.

#### *The definition of gender and age groups*

Concerning the determination of both gender and age groups, the quality of the data and the level of detail vary greatly from publication to publication. Therefore, it has been necessary to work from simple ground rules on this matter; gender is only registered in the database if physical anthropological studies have been applied.<sup>7</sup> Gender determinations which rely solely on the basis of grave goods have not been accepted, since such methods have long been proven too problematic and treacherous (see Sørensen 2000, 74-95; Sofaer 2006; Spencer-Wood 2006).

For the same reasons, the definitions of age groups are also rather problematic and have been approached in a comparably simplistic manner as the gender determinations. Firstly, the study operates with three broad age groups: infants/small children; sub-adults/teenagers; and adults. Whilst it would have been preferable to have had a more detailed and varied approach to the treatment of age groups,<sup>8</sup> the general quality of the data has not allowed for this (the data from Panskoe I and Nymphaion (Grač 1999) is an exception to this). When no age definitions have been given in the publications, the standard approach has simply been to register all graves with a length of more than 1.5m as adults and all below this as sub-adults/teenagers and children. The demarcation line of 1.5m is based on the average height for adult men and women from skeletal material from Hellenistic Athens, which was 1.564m

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7 On the reliability of physical anthropological studies, see Mays 1998, 38; further, Stone & Walrath 2006; Walker 2008.

8 Such as the evidence from Athens which allows for the distinction of three age groups for children: infants (0-1 year old); small children (1-3 or 4 years old) and older children (3-4 to 8-10 years old) (Houby-Nielsen 2000, 152).

for women and 1.719m for men (*Kerameikos XIV*, 159, table 7).<sup>9</sup> Naturally, there are several problematic aspects connected with this methodological approach. Firstly the division line of 1.5m does not reveal children and sub-adults buried in longer graves or buried together with adults in adult-sized graves. Secondly, various crouched positions and other positions which are not supine could also influence the length of the grave. Moreover, there is a potential Athenocentric bias in the approach because the majority of the evidence used for studies of childhood and children in general, both epigraphic and archaeological, derives from Athens. Studies of childhood and children in, for example, Sparta, where the source material is equally available albeit on a smaller scale, suggest that children here had very different living conditions than in contemporary Athens (Golden 1990, 68; 2003, 19). This means that the perceptions of age groups could have varied significantly in the Black Sea region or southern Italy compared to Athens. Also, it is very important to note that the perception of children and childhood not only varied between geographical areas, but also took very different shapes and expressions over time and under the influence of both political and more private social relations. Finally, there is an additional potential social bias in the fact that the majority of the evidence, at least the literary and epigraphic sources, primarily relates to the upper classes of society and thus represents the perceptions of childhood of the wealthy rather than of a broad social section of the population.

One can only regret that the general state of the data does not allow for more detailed and complex analyses of these important and highly interesting aspects of social perceptions in more locations around the Black Sea, or southern Italy for that matter.

#### *Dealing with the grave goods – data reduction*

The second layer of information in the database deals with the grave goods. Here, the individual objects have an inventory number which corresponds to the grave number. The material has been divided into eight object groups:

Table 1:

Ceramics	Weapons	Jewellery	GFA <sup>10</sup>	Terracottas	Tools	Pers- o- nalia	Varia
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<sup>9</sup> For similar methodological approaches see, for example, Morris 1987, 58-59; Houby-Nielsen 1995, 177-178; Graepler 1997, 52. Gowland 2006 provides a very useful theoretical and methodological approach to age identifiers in funerary material in general.

<sup>10</sup> Glass, faience and alabaster.

This division has been chosen mainly as a way of coping with the very varied material while keeping a focus both on type and function, as well as a focus on obtaining the best search results from the database. A more simplistic division of the material focused only on material, for example ceramics, metal, bone, glass etc., would weaken the very important aspect of function, while, on the other hand, a focus on function alone would give far too many categories to handle effectively. It is, of course, clear that this division of the material causes some overlapping between the categories, for example between jewellery and GFA or tools and personalia (see Table 3 below for definitions of the various groups), and can be criticized for being too rigid. Moreover, it is necessary to be very clear and consistent about the placing of object types within the categories, for example is a knife a weapon or a tool? Another danger lies in the implications given to objects when placed in specific categories: is a comb a tool, does it belong under personalia or is the symbolic meaning in the mortuary context lost or completely misunderstood when placed in such schematic settings? The pitfalls are obvious and manifold, but, nevertheless, a fundamental condition when handling such a large and varied body of material as that which forms the basis of this study.

Out of context, the resulting system may seem confusing, but I hope to demonstrate that navigating through it can provide fruitful results as to the function and place of the grave goods in both their mortuary and social contexts.

Returning to the layout of the database, the objects are, furthermore, described according to object type (for example, lekythos or spearhead), material (for example, terracotta or bronze), origin (for example, Attic or local), technique (for example black-figured), state of preservation (for example, complete or fragments [restored]), ascription (for example, Haimon Painter), position (for example, at left hand or near feet), date upper and lower, literature and general comments. Where specific information is missing in the publication, fields have been completed as 'not stated'.

The following tables offer an overview of the object type groups and their contents. As for the function of the objects of the ceramic and GFA groups, the shapes are divided into subgroups in order to reflect their most commonly-assumed function. Here, I primarily follow Rotroff and Morgan (*Agora XXIX*, 5-7; Morgan 2004, 12-13).<sup>11</sup>

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11 See also, however, *Agora XII*; Amyx 1958; Richter & Milne 1935 for discussions of ceramic names and functions; more recently, see Clark, Elston & Hart 2002.