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Chytra rituals in Athens

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Abstract: This essay examines the use of an ordinary household item – a chytra (stewpot) – to ritual effect. It focuses on Classical and Early Hellenistic deposits under the floors of a single room of the Classical Commercial Building, just north of the Athenian Agora. The plan of the building and workshop debris found in its floors identify it as a workplace, and the repeated appearance of the chytra and its orientation and relationship to the stratigraphy and other objects constitutes evidence of the ritual practices of those who worked there. Ancient texts and other chytra deposits, both in this building and elsewhere in the excavation, throw more light on these practices, constituting evidence for "religion-as-lived" in the Athenian workplace.

Keywords: industrial religion, Athenian agora, ceramics, Classical period, ritual, apotropaia

Established religion leaves obvious traces in the archaeological record, in the form of dedicated structures, uniquely designed objects, and consecrated gifts. But not all engagements with the divine took place in a special venue or expressed themselves with those specialized artifacts. This paper builds a picture of religious practice outside that ambit, based on the ambiguous traces sandwiched between the floors of a single room in an Athenian workshop: ordinary objects in slightly unusual places; combinations of ordinary things that don't quite seem to belong together.

The recovery of such evidence is dependent upon a fine-grained excavation technique that records a high degree of detail and retains as much of the material record as possible, even if its significance may not be clear at the time of excavation. To tease out its meaning requires a search for patterns, examining finds and their arrangement with the expectation that they may mean more than immediately meets the eye, and remembering other patterns and seeking to match them. In my own case, a years-long study of Athenian saucer pyres – the buried and often dispersed leavings of small rituals enacted in private, secular spaces – helped to sharpen my vision. One needs to accept as axiomatic that such practices were an integral part of day-to-day life and that their remains may at any moment lie before our eyes. Present-day rituals like knocking on wood or dropping a penny in a well serve to illustrate the omnipresence of small religious gestures even today and their contribution to strengthening the protective barrier between human beings and the invisible forces arrayed against them, or to reaching across that divide to summon assistance from more beneficent powers.

Can we have confidence in our readings of such evanescent traces? There is always the danger that one is seeing more than is truly present – a cigar is sometimes just a cigar. But you rarely find something if you aren't looking for it, and an increased sensitivity to this level of evidence of religious practice may bear fruit in the study of industrial venues in the wider Mediterranean world.

The Classical Commercial Building

The area to the north of the agora of ancient Athens was occupied by a dense neighborhood of dwellings and workplaces, with architectural remains preserved from at least the Archaic period onward. This paper concentrates on a single room in a Classical

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workshop building there, located on the street running north from the west end of the Stoa Poikile, the colonnaded porch that formed part of the public square's northern limit. Excavation has uncovered evidence of a row of approximately same-sized rooms, constituting one or perhaps two buildings facing westward onto the street (Fig. 1). A similar plan – stoa-like but without the beautifying columned porch – repeats itself in buildings all around the borders of the agora, structures built to house the workplaces of artisans and modest commercial establishments. The orator Aischines (4th c. BCE) makes a passing reference to such "shops on the street," painting a vivid if brief portrait of their constantly changing tenants: "if a physician moves into one of these shops on the street, it is called a clinic. But if he moves out and a smith moves into this same shop, it is called a smithy; if a fuller moves in, a laundry; if a carpenter, a carpentry-shop; and if a pimp and his whores move in, we call it a brothel" (Aeschin. *In Tim*. 124; transl. Adams 1919, 101, adapted). It is the purpose of this paper to add to this portrait by revealing something of the religious or ritual practices of this tenantry. It will focus on the recurrent presence of a commonplace item of cooking ware, the chytra, and its miniature form, the chytridion, under the room's floors, and on the ways in which an ordinary utilitarian object might have been manipulated for ritual purposes.

The fragmentary state of the excavated remains, be they walls, strata, or objects, as well as their modest nature, presents a methodological challenge. The plan of the structure, along with craft debris found within it, makes it clear that the inhabitants were workers. It is more difficult, however, to identify the purpose of the objects they left behind. There is no single guideline for distinguishing between an object of daily use that is playing its usual workaday role and the same object pressed into ritual service. In what follows, I present three situations where something other than daily use is suggested by the placement or orientation of the objects, their relationships to other objects and stratigraphical features, and the physical state of the objects themselves.

The building in question, christened the Classical Commercial Building by its excavators, was discovered in 1982 and excavated piecemeal over the next 40 years, as property became available and the removal of later remains over it made further exploration possible.[1] In the 4th c. BCE, its best-preserved phase, six rooms can be distinguished, their configuration changing in repeated rebuilding over time (Fig. 1). Abundant evidence of the activities of its tenants survives in the items beaten into its earthen floors: marble dust and chips, bits of pumice, pieces of limestone used as burnishers, fragments of pigment and metal waste, informal paint pots, molds, and an impression of a metal vessel, as well as pits containing iron and bronze slag.[2] The building also contained a large number of saucer pyres, a type of ritual deposit frequently found in private buildings around the agora square and elsewhere in Attica. Some years ago I published a monograph on the pyres found by the Agora Excavations, exploring their association with industrial activities and arguing that they made up part of the religious practices of workers, possibly bearing witness to ceremonies conducted to protect the workplace, its workers, and its processes.[3] They were not building deposits, in the sense of

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1 Shear 1984, 43–48; Camp 1996, 236–39; Camp 1999, 274–80; Camp 2003, 247–49; Camp 2015, 467–70; Camp and Martens 2020, 622–24.

2 Some are mentioned in print: Shear 1984, 45; Camp 1999, 277–78, no. 50, fig. 27; Camp 2003, 249; Rotroff 2013a, 104.

3 Rotroff 2013a.



Fig. 1. *Plan of the Classical Commercial Building, with locations of votive deposits marked. 1a: chytra and pyre in trench. 1b: deposit on Floor 3. 2: 4th-c. chytra. 3: chytridion and one-handler. (Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

founding dedications made at the time a building was constructed, but their burial often coincided with renovations that took place later on, during the life of a building. In my monograph I described the remains of 13 pyres found within the rooms of the Classical Commercial Building and five more just outside its walls,[4] the heaviest concentration of saucer pyres within the agora excavation zone. The building's form, its content, and the pyres all combine to stress its essentially industrial or commercial character.

Room 4

Excavation of the building continued until 2022, during which time a further pyre was uncovered, located on the north side of room 4, the fourth room from the south, and raising the total within the building to 14.[5] This has refocused attention on this space, encouraging a review of its evidence for religious or ritual practices. Room 4 preserves the longest sequence of floors excavated in the building: 11 surfaces, with the best-preserved stretching from the last quarter of the 5th to the middle of the 3rd c. BCE. They make it possible to trace craft activities and to recover modest ritual events through nearly two centuries of the building's existence.

The north and east limits of room 4 are defined by walls 4 and 7, respectively, and its western limit is suggested by a later, Roman wall bordering the long-lived north–south street. Its southern wall was rebuilt along different orientations at various times but at about the same location (wall 10, wall 11). These boundaries define a room about 6.80 m deep and at least 2.70 m wide, and the conventions of the architectural form suggest a single door opening to the street at the west. Later walls built over its eastern half and a Byzantine pithos at the center of its western half have disturbed the plan and the stratigraphy of room 4, but a continuous sequence of floor surfaces survived in its northwestern part, along with patches of floor elsewhere.

From the earliest to the latest, these floors preserved frequent evidence of craft activity within the room. Most common were bits of pigment – red, blue, yellow, white, pink, and orange (in floors 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 11, numbered from the top) – as well as fragments of shell and pottery that had been used as paint pots. There were also occasional pieces of worked bone, horn, and shell, a piece of rock crystal, a few loomweights and a spindle whorl, and slag is mentioned in the latest floor.

Ritual deposits

This single room also preserves a wide array of objects and juxtapositions that may have ritual significance. They include the two saucer pyres mentioned above, as well as single buried vessels, a scattering of knucklebones and an eye bead, pottery with peculiar

4 Rotroff 2013a, 102–22.

5 Exploration of the building proceeded from south to north and the rooms have been numbered accordingly. For the new pyre, deposit J 2:30, which dates in the first quarter of the 4th c. and, intriguingly, lay directly below the later one, though much deeper, see Camp and Martens 2020, 622–24, figs. 29, 30.



Fig. 2. *Chytra P 35583. (Photograph: Angelique Sideris. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

breakage patterns, and some intriguing holes in the floors. A full treatment of this material goes beyond the limits of this article, so I will concentrate on a single form of ritual deposit – the chytra, or stewpot – working in reverse chronological order, from the 3rd c. BCE back to the 5th.

Third century: chytra, pyre, and floor scatter

A broken but largely complete chytra (Fig. 2) was found just south of wall 4, the northern wall of the room.[6] It had been buried in an irregular trench, about 0.25 m deep, that ran along the wall from its western end for a length of ca. 2.80 m, at which point it had been obliterated by an intrusive Late Roman pier (Fig. 3). At the bottom of the trench and about 0.25 m east of the chytra lay the remains of the later of the two saucer pyres found in this room, which had been burnt elsewhere, then discarded here, probably at the same time as the chytra.[7] Not much of the original votive assemblage survives: one miniature lekanis and its lid and fragments of four saucers. A complete pyre, by contrast, would usually include a larger number and variety of vessels; miniature cooking pots and saucers, full-sized ritual plates (ribbon-handled and rilled-rim varieties), one or more drinking cups, and a lamp were standard. These would normally be laid on a fire in a shallow pit and then buried, along with the burnt remains of parts of a sacrificed animal, leaving a lens of charcoal and potsherds covered over by a new floor. But deviations from this practice were not unusual,

6 P 35583: h. 0.155, diam. of body 0.17, est. diam. of rim 0.10 m. Three quarters of upper body missing. Throughout this article, numbers in this format (capital Latin letter(s) followed by a number) refer to the inventory of the Agora excavations.

7 Pyre J 2:28. Rotroff 2013a, 115, no. 13, figs. 22, 39.



Fig. 3. *Chytra P 35583 in situ, looking north, with Wall 4 and location of Pyre J 2:28 (not yet excavated) marked. (Photograph: Marcie Handler. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

and there are many instances of incomplete or disturbed pyres in buildings around the agora.[8] Excavation of the trench beside wall 4 began on June 28, 2007, and the chytra was discovered on the next working day, July 2, after which it was block-lifted and removed to the conservation lab. The pyre fragments lay at the bottom of the trench and were excavated two days later. The excavation account makes no comment on a possible connection between the two features. With the advantage of hindsight, however, it seems likely that the deposit of the two was part of the same activity: the trench was dug, perhaps in connection with work on the wall, and both the chytra and the fragments of the pyre were discarded there before it was filled in. The slender remnants of the pyre can be dated only within the rather wide limits of 325–275 BCE. The chytra, however, was probably produced in the latter part of that span. Its slender proportions and wide mouth contrast with the typical echinus-shaped chytrai of the 4th c., and its gritty fabric represents a departure from the smoother, finer ware of 4th-c. stewpots. Two finds pinpoint the change before the early years of the 3rd c.: a chytra of similar shape and fabric found at Thorikos, containing a coin hoard buried around 295 BCE, and another discarded in a well near the Tholos, which may have been filled after disturbances during the tyranny of Laches, in 294 BCE.[9] The chytra in the trench is unlikely to have dated much earlier, though it could be considerably later.

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8 For the types of offerings usually present, see Rotroff 2013a, 17–41. For the various modes of deposition, see Rotroff 2013a, 11–17.

9 Bingen 1973, 7, 18–21, fig. 1; Rotroff 2006, 168, 303, no. 560, fig. 71, pl. 61.

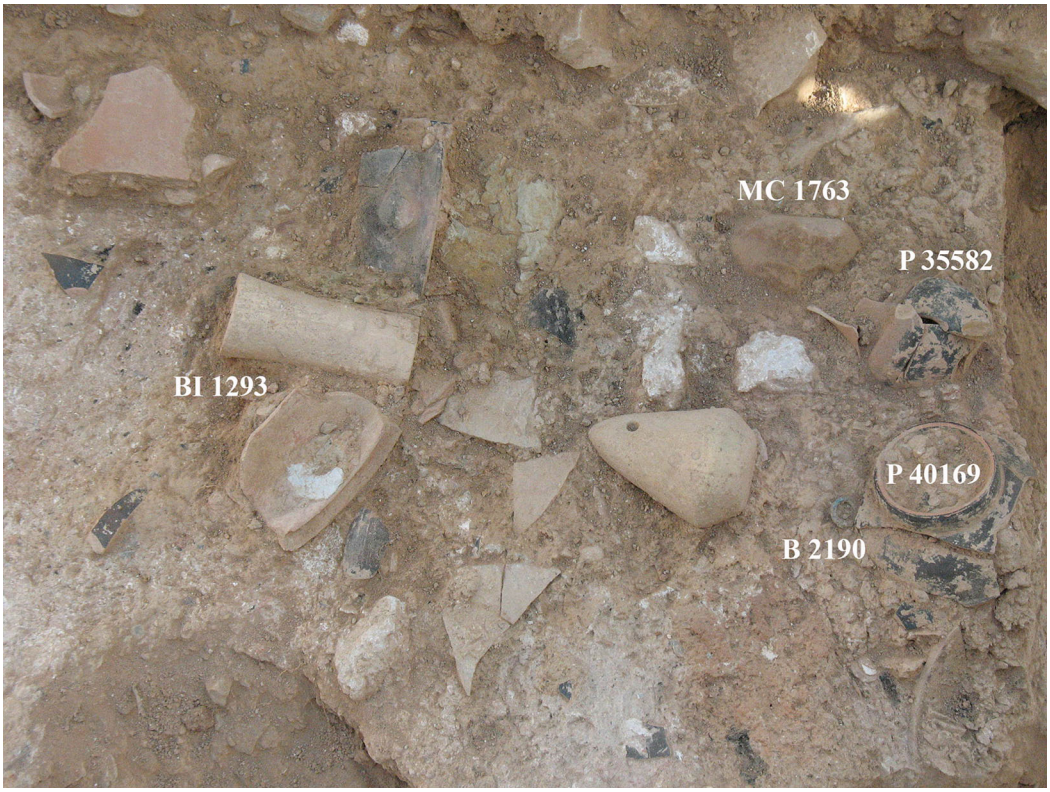


Fig. 4. *Deposit on Floor 3, with some of the items labeled with their Agora inventory numbers. (Photograph: Marcie Handler. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

The trench beside wall 4 had been dug from the level of floor 3, which was preserved about halfway across the northern part of the room. At the easternmost extent of floor 3, just south of the Late Roman pier mentioned above, the following collection of disparate items lay on the floor's surface, irregularly scattered over a rectangular area measuring ca. 0.45 × 0.25 m (lot BZ 1754; Fig. 4).

A stone cobble used as a grinder, stained on one surface with red pigment and worn to a shine on the other (ST 1191; l. 0.095 m, dark gray stone; Fig. 5).

Over it, positioned upside down, most of a black-glaze bowl with an outturned rim, a hole deliberately broken through its floor (P 40169; est. diam. of rim 0.12 m; dated ca. 300–290 BCE; Fig. 5).[10]

A black-glaze cup-kantharos (drinking cup), its handles and foot missing, with red and yellow pigment adhering to the inner walls (P 35582; preserved h. 0.085, est. diam. of rim 0.075 m; dated ca. 300 BCE).[11] Two more small cup fragments with painted West Slope decoration have the remains of yellow pigment inside.

10 Cf. Rotroff 1997, 330, nos. 869, 871, fig. 59, pl. 72.

11 Cf. Rotroff 1997, 247, no. 58, fig. 7, pl. 6.



Fig. 5. *Stone grinder (ST 1191) and black-glaze bowl (P 40169). (Photographs: Kristen Boutwell and Susan I. Rotroff. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).*

An iron knife with a wide, slightly curved blade (IL 2013; preserved l. 0.15 m).

A plain bronze ring (B 2190; diam. 0.016 m) with a textile pseudomorph (identified by conservator Amandina Anastassiades).

Two terracotta disks, gilded and with illegible relief on one side, and with traces of blue and red pigment (T 4888, T 4889; diam. 0.016 m).

Two loomweights, one stamped but damaged (MC 1753; h. 0.095 m), the other complete (not inventoried).

A sawed and worn segment of a bovine metatarsal (BI 1293; preserved l. 0.099 m).

An illegible bronze coin (BZ-1975 = N 74619).

Other, smaller fragments in the assemblage help to support an early Hellenistic date of deposit: the rim of a bolster cup (ca. 300–280 BCE) or a cup with moldmade feet (ca. 285–275 BCE),[12] and seven tiny fragments of early drinking cups with painted West Slope decoration, probably dating late in the first quarter of the 3rd c. Excavation notes also record a lead pot-mending clamp and a bronze tack.

[12] Cf. Rotroff 1997, 259, no. 165, fig. 13, pl. 15 (bolster cup) or 275, no. 311, fig. 20, pl. 32 (cup with moldmade feet).

Construction and renovation generate a lot of rubbish, and some of the items listed above could be just that. The remnants of the pyre, however, were created by a known ritual, which must have taken place not far from where they were discarded – probably within room 4; there would be little reason to bring such leavings inside if they originated elsewhere. The chytra could also be nothing more than a common vessel that had been used for heating something, then broke and was discarded. Sooting on the lower body and the floor shows it had been used, and nothing distinguishes it as a ritual vessel. But, as we shall see, the burial of a chytra can be recognized elsewhere as a ritual gesture, so its association with the pyre here may be more than chance; possibly it played a role in the meal that was part of the pyre ritual. Although this is the clearest evidence of the burial of a chytra and a pyre at the same time, fragments of a large chytra have occasionally been noted in the vicinity of a pyre, and pyres occasionally include a chytra of medium size.[13] Finally, the small collection of objects that lay on floor 3 could represent ordinary workshop debris, shoved aside and forgotten as the room was refurbished. The diversity of the collection suggests, however, that it was assembled with some specific scenario in mind, however unrecoverable. The bowl with the hole in its floor is particularly suggestive, for such breakage occurs with some regularity on votive objects. Its purpose is unknown: perhaps to facilitate a libation, or to remove the item irrevocably from the world of the living.[14] The position of the bowl, upside down on top of a much-used tool (the grinder), also suggests a special purpose. The recurrence of used tools (paint pots, grinder, knife, bovine metatarsal) suggests that craft was central to the concerns of whoever assembled these objects. And the sacrifice of at least one favorite tool – the grinder, its smoothly polished surface testifying to frequent use – suggests a seriousness of purpose. It is possible that the grinder was a treasured antique. Work-worn cobbles like this are more common in Iron Age contexts than in Classical ones, and its Classical user would not be the first artisan who adapted an ancient tool to his own purposes.[15] Coins are commonly included in saucer pyres;[16] like those, the coin here may reflect the craftsman's concern with the economics of his craft and whether it would it bring in enough income to support him and his dependents.

Fourth century: chytra

The second instance dates two or three generations earlier. In the middle of the 2009 excavation season, the removal of an old wheelbarrow path enabled the exploration of the eastern side of room 4. Cleaning preparatory to excavation exposed another chytra (Fig. 6),[17]

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13 Chytra possibly buried with pyre: P 35505, found near pyre J 1:6 (Rotroff 2013a, 119, under no. 17); see also Lamont 2021, 105, 106, who discusses the possibility that a pyre found in room 6 of the Classical Commercial Building was buried at the same time as the curse chytra found in the same room (on which, see below). Larger chytrai found in pyres: Rotroff 2013a, 121, no. 19, fig. 48; Kovacsovics 1990, 19–20, no. 21.22, pl. 32.

14 Deliberately pierced vessels are a regular feature of the late 5th-c. votives in the Crossroads Enclosure on the north side of the Agora (Rotroff and Lynch 2021, 158, figs. 8, 9). For a brief review of other instances, see Pakkanen and Lentini 2022, 1274–75.

15 Early Bronze Age weight used as a grinder by a Hellenistic pharmacist in a house south of the Agora (Rotroff 2013b, 577, fig. 13, right); Neolithic celts used in the same manner in Hellenistic Eretria (Ducrey et al. 1989, 112, pl. 21: 3, 4; Reber 1998, 79). See also Davidson and Burr 1943, 96, 97, nos. 1–4, fig. 44.

16 Rotroff 2013a, 37.

17 P 39546. P.h. 0.106, est. diam. of rim 0.12 m.



Fig. 6. *Chytra P 39546. (Photograph: Craig Mauzy. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

sitting upright just to the east of the position of the early 3rd-c. floor-deposit described above, in an area where the upper floor stratigraphy had not survived. The top of the cooking pot had been sheared off, but fragments of its rim and upper body were recovered from the soil around it, suggesting that it had been buried whole. Although the lower body was broken into many fragments, they remained in place. The earth within it held nothing but a badly corroded bronze coin, probably datable after the middle of the 4th c.[18] The shape and fabric of the vessel also point to a 4th-c. date; the body is broad and echinus-shaped, the mouth narrow, and the fabric is a smooth, household ware painted with a thin wash. Although the outer surface is dark from its firing in a reducing atmosphere, the chytra is new and unused; the inside is red, and no sooting obscures the bright red stacking circle on its underside. A close parallel, down to the red stacking circle and the smearing of its thin glaze, was part of a ritual deposit excavated south of the agora, and datable in the third quarter of the 4th c. by an olpe and a rilled-rim plate buried with it (on which, see further below).[19] Sherds in the layers in which the chytra was buried date earlier, however – in the last quarter of the 5th c. – showing that it had been set into the ground from a higher level.[20] Comparison of the estimated elevation of its

18 Coin BZ-2042 (N 74857).

19 Miller 1974, 210, n. 80, pl. 35. Deposit F 16:7, containing a chytra (P 27913, Rotroff 2006, 303, no. 555, fig. 71, pl. 61), an olpe (P 27911, cf. Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 255, no. 275, pl. 13, dated 350–325; and P 28807 and P 29203, level VII of well J 5:1, ca. 350–325), and a rilled-rim plate (P 27912) with a glazed underside, a glazing practice that was not abandoned until ca. 300 (Rotroff 2013a, 46).

20 Lot BZ 1843. The latest fragments are a cup with a stamped ovolo band and free-stamped palmettes (cf. Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 272, 273, 277, nos. 522, 537, 590, pls. 52–54, dated 425–410) and a hydria rim (cf. 348, no. 1596, pl. 71, dated 425–400).

missing mouth with floor levels preserved just a meter to the west suggests the chytra was buried, upright and intact, from the level of the fifth floor in the 11-floor sequence, a level that dates no earlier than the middle of the 4th c.[21] The pristine condition of the chytra suggests that its burial was a ritual act. Its striking red stacking circle may have made it especially appropriate for a rite intended to ward off evil, for it bears a resemblance to the traditional eye bead, well known to ancient Athenians as a protective amulet.[22]

Fifth century: chytridion and one-handler

Removal of the wheelbarrow path allowed excavation at the eastern limit of the room to continue where it had left off at the Hellenistic level in 1995, revealing a third deposit another three generations earlier than the second. Just below the surface, and only a few centimeters from the east wall of the room (wall 7), excavators uncovered a black-glaze one-handler (a one-handled bowl), oriented upside down and covering a miniature chytra, or chytridion (Figs. 7, 8).[23] The chytridion was complete but had suffered a hairline crack. Its surface was partially darkened, but probably from firing rather than use; traces of red and white pigment are present on its mouth and upper body. It contained no surviving organic material, but the print of a microorganism was observed in the soil that had rested on its floor.[24] The one-handler had been broken and reused as a paint pot: it is missing its handle and a large fragment from its rim, and patches of blue paint cling to its inner surface.

The chytridion is a common votive in saucer pyres, often paired with a miniature lopas (lopadion); as replicas of the two most common cooking vessels of the Greek kitchen, they symbolized the preparation of the ritual meal. Although the chytra is a workaday stewpot, its miniature version, the chytridion, is almost exclusively a votive form. It first appeared at Athens around 500 BCE, initially as a grave gift for children, joining the saucer pyre assemblage in the late 5th c.[25] The fabric of this particular chytridion is very fine, with many flecks of golden mica, small dark inclusions, and a few linear white inclusions, probably sponge spicules, and the surface is very finely finished, almost polished, details that identify it as an import from the nearby island of Aigina. Aigina had supplied most of the cooking ware of Athens throughout the Archaic period and down to the third quarter of the 5th c., but the production of Aiginetan cookware was greatly diminished, or perhaps discontinued altogether, after the Athenian conquest of the island and the expulsion of its population in 431 BCE. The Aiginetan chytridion under consideration here must therefore have been produced before that date, though it may have been buried somewhat later.[26] The one-handler, a shallow, ring-footed vessel with a single horizontal handle, was a common piece

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21 Floor 5 was dug as lot BZ 1761. With only 36 sherds, it is not closely datable, but floor 7, below it, contained pottery of the mid-4th c. (lot BZ 1853).

22 A fragment of such a bead (G 854) was found under floor 11 in room 4 (lot BZ 2177), about three meters to the southwest and probably dating ca. 430–420 BCE.

23 One-handler: P 35940. H. 3.0, diam. of foot 5.7, of rim 8.7 cm. Chytridion: P 35941. H. to rim. 6.1, diam. 8.0, of rim 4.8 cm.

24 Report of conservation intern Vicki Kontogianni; image 2009.02.1044.

25 Rotroff 2013a, 20; Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 224–25.

26 For Aiginetan cooking ware of the Classical period, see Klebinder-Gauss 2012, 173–93. For the decline of the industry, see 174–75, 177–78. For the persistence of Aiginetan pottery up to the end of the 5th c. in deposits at the Agora, see Rotroff 2015, 184.



Fig. 7. *One-handler P 35940 and chytridion P 35941 in situ, looking south. Wall 7 at left. (Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*



Fig. 8. *One-handler P 35940 and chytridion P 35941. (Photographs: Angelique Sideris. Reproduced by permission of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens City, Ancient Agora, ASCSA: Agora Excavations. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development (HOCRED).)*

of Athenian tableware from the early 5th to the early 3rd c. BCE, playing a varying role as bowl or drinking cup. The one-handler that covered the chytridion is similar in both shape and size to another example that was found in a probable pyre of the last quarter of

the 5th c.[27] The evidence is, then, that the little deposit beside wall 7 was put together around 425 or not long after.

Pottery in the surrounding fill was about contemporary,[28] indicating that the chytridion and one-handler were placed on a surface and the fill poured around them. Pottery below the surface on which they rested was not closely datable, but it lay over a small pit (lot BZ 1838) that was filled in the first half of the 5th c., possibly in conjunction with clean-up after the Persian destruction. The chytridion deposit is too late for any connection with post-Persian rebuilding; it thus probably relates to private events in the lives of the occupants of the workshop.

Discussion

From the architecture of the Classical Commercial Building and the debris tramped into its floors, it is fair to conclude that its occupants were workers, and that it was workers who buried the three chytrai under discussion here. They thus constitute evidence for "religion-as-lived" in the workplace. But what was their purpose?

Literary sources describe a variety of ritual roles for the chytra. Probably best known is its use on the last day of the *Anthesteria*, a three-day Spring festival that was otherwise given over to the opening of the pithoi in which that year's wine had fermented and the sampling of their contents. But the third day was much more solemn. It was called "chytroi," probably after the chytra, though the masculine gender (*chytroi* instead of *chytrai*) is perplexing. On that day, householders cooked up a mixture of seeds and pulses as a meal for the dead, who visited the living world on that occasion. Sanctuaries were closed, offerings were made to Hermes Chthonios, and people took precautions to protect themselves and their homes from the wandering spirits.[29] The chytra here thus participates in chthonic activities, but that was not the only rite in which it played a role. A few passing comments in the plays of Aristophanes present the chytra in a joyful and positive light, invoking it as equipment essential for the establishment of a cult or a new settlement (*Av.* 42–45; *Pax* 922–24; *Plut.* 1197–99). The scholia on *Peace* and *Wealth* explain further that pulses, barley groats, and wheat flour were boiled in the chytra as an offering in this ceremony, which was also used in setting up a protective household image of Hermes (a herm), or an altar or a statue.

Neither of these roles fits the chytrai of the Classical Commercial Building very well. The sooted chytra buried with remains of a pyre could have been used to cook food eaten in the pyre meal, or offered to whomever the pyre celebrated, but the second chytra was fresh from the potter, never used to cook anything, and the third is too small for this purpose.

The archaeological evidence, however, paints quite a different picture of the ritual role of the chytra, in which it functions as a container rather than a cooking pot. The example that is probably most relevant to the present case is a chytra of medium size (h. 0.11 m) found two rooms further north in the Classical Commercial Building, where it had been buried beside

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27 Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 291, no. 773, pl. 31. Accompanied by a chytridion, two drinking cups, and a lamp (Rotroff 2013a, 161–62, no. 48, figs. 94, 95). For the shape, see Sparkes and Talcott 1970, 126–27; Rotroff 1997, 155–56.

28 Lot BZ 1835, second half of 5th c., possibly nothing later than ca. 425.

29 Parke 1977, 116–17.

the eastern wall of the room between ca. 315 and 285 BCE.[30] On its exterior were the scribbled names of over 50 men and women, written in the nominative, like the names on lead curse tablets. The chytra had been pierced by a long nail, also in the manner of curse tablets, and a small bronze coin had been placed on the nail's head. Finally, the vessel held the feet, lower legs, and head of a young chicken. It is a unique find, but Jessica Lamont, who published it, drew connections to several features of the rich body of information about ancient cursing practices. She speculated that the curse had its origin in disagreements within the workshop, possibly involving a lawsuit in which those listed were involved as plaintiffs, defendants, or witnesses, and their families, and provided an overview of what is known of curses involving craftspeople. Alternatively, though less likely in her view, the conflict may have had its origins in the political clubs that were active at the time.[31] She also pointed out the presence of a contemporary saucer pyre in the same room, and she explored the question of whether the chytra and the pyre might have been buried as part of one and the same ritual,[32] like the chytra and pyre in the trench on the north side of room 4.

A second instance is the chytra cited above as a formal parallel for the 4th-c. chytra of the Classical Commercial Building, with its eye-like stacking circle. It had been buried in a small pit in the line of the outer wall of the so-called House of Menon, outside the southwest corner of the agora, a building that had housed marble workers and coroplasts in the 5th and 4th c. BCE. The chytra contained the bones of a small puppy; a rilled-rim plate served as its lid, and a black-glaze olpe (small jug) had been tucked into the pit beside it.[33] The pit and its contents were located just outside the southeast wall of the house, but they encroached on its line, and it was the judgement of the excavator that they could not have been buried while the wall still stood. The deposit was at first taken to be the grave of a child; with the bones now identified as animal rather than human, it could be the grave of a beloved pet. At first glance it looks like an odd place for a burial or a ritual deposit of any sort: the roadside at the conjunction of several major thoroughfares and hence not at all private or out of the way. Viewed differently, however, this is a crossroads: the convergence of five roads, a numinous decision point, and a favorite haunt of the witch-goddess Hekate and her pack of hounds, all of which may have had a bearing on the burial of the chytra here.[34] In her discussion of the dismembered chicken, Lamont discusses the magical manipulation of animals, citing Gallo-Roman curses of the 2nd c. CE where the puppy serves as a paradigm of helplessness, a state that the curses aspire to inflict upon their objects.[35] The chytra's eye-like stacking circle, however, hints at a protective function. Puppies played a role in rituals of purification, such as *periskylakismos*, in which the animal was rubbed over the body of the

30 Lamont 2021.

31 Lamont 2021, 97–102.

32 Lamont 2021, 104–6.

33 Shear 1969, 393–94; Miller 1974, 210, n. 80, pl. 35; Rotroff 2006, 356. Note the significant redating of the deposit, back and forth from the late 4th–early 3rd c. (Shear), to the second quarter of the 3rd c. (Miller) and ca. 275 (Rotroff). The previous dating was based on the relationship of the pit to the wall and the presumed date of the destruction of the house. Recent intensive study of the olpe shape in the context of the Crossroads Well and of the rilled-rim plate in the context of the study of saucer pyres in which they are common dedications suggests the present date in the third quarter of the 4th c.

34 Ancient sources on Hekate and her association with dogs are collected in Liston and Rotroff 2018, 137, n. 172.

35 Lamont 2021, 107.

person seeking relief and absorbed the pollutant (Plut. *Quaest. Rom*. 68).[36] The deposit may witness the discard of the now-contaminated puppy at a crossroads, a place earmarked as appropriate for the discard of ὀξυθύμια, polluted material generated by household rituals.[37]

Finally, we can point to a chytridion that contained a curse tablet, buried sometime between 325 and 250 BCE in a building south of the agora.[38] Two rooms were discovered in its initial excavation in 1938, and there is no indication that there had ever been more. For what it is worth, the plan – two rooms of about the same size, side by side – looks more like a shop building than a house. The excavator could only guess at a date: "perhaps of late Greek date perhaps as early as the fourth c. B.C.," he wrote.[39] The chytridion came to light nearly 30 years later, in the course of cleaning the west wall of the building.[40] It lay in the corner of one room, close up against the cross-wall. The lower body of a larger chytra was found on the other side of the now-absent cross-wall but was not recovered, and whether these objects had been deposited at the same time, or before or after the wall was removed, is unknowable. The possible juxtaposition of a chytra and a chytridion-cum-curse is of some interest, however, especially in light of Lamont's inquiries. The curse is a simple list of names (eight men, one woman), repeated twice, and there is no clue as to what they did to invite such attention. Nothing survives of any contents of the chytridion in the Classical Commercial Building, but perhaps it once held a curse inscribed on some perishable material.

Conclusion

If these three instances are any indication, it is the contents that define the purpose of a buried chytra, and, without those contents, the chytrai of room 4 remain enigmatic. Were the workers setting up shrines in their shop, like that in the Foundry Painter's portrait of a bronze caster's workplace?[41] Or were they cursing their colleagues or their competitors or their bosses? Or seeking purification or protection? Whatever their goals and motives, this evidence of religious activity and work in the single small space of room 4 speaks for a close relationship between the two. Even in this small compass, that activity ranged from larger, communal rituals, like the pyre ceremony, sharing features with polis religion, to what were probably solitary and private rites.

The deposits in room 4 are not just the remnants of a series of "rituals" but evidence of repeated practice, something that was part and parcel of life as it was lived in this production space. Like sharpening a tool, repairing a basin, or putting the finishing touches on an artifact, these small acts punctuate a continuum that contributed to a successful outcome. The slow accumulation of the strata in room 4 provides the time depth to reveal not just the acts, but a repeated pattern, a way of getting on with the job that was typical of generations of this particular working team. They knew that the gods were always there, to be appealed to or propitiated as the occasion required.

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36 For this and other purificatory rites and ancient sources, see Liston and Rotroff 2018, 136.

37 Johnston 1991, 220–21, citing in particular Photius, the Suda, and the *Etym. Magn*., s.v. ὀξυθύμια.

38 P 27880. Jordan and Rotroff 1999.

39 Agora notebook Ψ IV, p. 636.

40 Agora notebook Ψ VII, p. 1381.

41 Berlin, Antiquarium F 2294. *CVA* Berlin Antiquarium 2 (Germany 21), pl. 73 (1002):1.

Beyond this modest result, the study can provide a model for the reading of workshop spaces elsewhere, stressing that quite ordinary objects may, in their state and their arrangement, have held messages for otherworldly powers, and may still hold them for us, if we will only be attentive. A large enough body of observations may throw light on the different, or similar, ways that work and worship were interwoven at other times and places of the ancient Mediterranean world.

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