In the grand scheme of things, bucchero ware was a flash in the pan—a trend that developed, peaked, and then went out of fashion. The shiny, black Etruscan pottery later known as “bucchero sottile” was popular in the seventh century BC. Between 650 and 600, the potters of Caere (modern Cervetiri) “discovered” a method to make unglazed terracotta look like metal. The technique appears to have spread quickly throughout southern Etruria, with potters exporting their wares as far as Egypt and southern France.

“Most of the types on which bucchero shapes are modelled come ultimately from metal prototypes. Early bucchero pots tend to be particularly metallic in that they frequently have sharp curves, which are more natural to metal than to pottery, projecting ridges and points, and thin walls. Even the shiny black surface was probably an imitation of metal types, and on occasion the pot was covered with a thin layer of silver to complete the metallic effect.”

2 https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/etruscan/a/bucchero
By the sixth century BC, Etruria had switched to the sale and export of a heavier form of bucchero pottery. What these wares had in common with thinner-walled pots was a dark-gray to jet-black color that extended through the fabric of the pot. This effect was achieved by cutting off the air supply during the firing process, a technique now known as reduced-atmosphere (or reduction) firing. The polished surface was the result of burnishing the unfired clay vessels when they were in a leather-hard state.

“Earlier vessels were usually burnished with a small tool using freehand short vertical strokes. On some parts of the vessel, typically the neck, burnishing was achieved with short freehand horizontal strokes. On the inside of open vessels the bottom was often burnished with radial strokes.... Between 625 and 600 BC a new style of burnishing appears alongside freehand techniques: vessels were burnished whilst revolving on the wheel, creating even, long lines of burnishing around the body.

Many sources have noted in the development of bucchero a curious “reverse trend of refinement.” The earliest bucchero pottery was “exquisitely thin-walled,” and skillfully formed, apparently the work of master ceramicists. It is possible that Greeks "in the last decades of the eighth century BC” brought technological advances to the Etruscans. These

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would have included the use of purified clay, the introduction of the fast potter’s wheel, and the use of closed kilns for firing at higher temperatures. These technical upgrades make the emergence of *bucchero sottile* possible, but fail to explain why this level of craftsmanship was so short-lived. As early as 625 BC, Etruscans were producing transitional bucchero of arguably lesser quality.

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**TRACING HISTORIC TRENDS IN POTTERY**

*Bucchero sottile* was the thin, wealthy father of *bucchero pesante* and a possible descendant of *buccheroid impasto*. The latter ceramic, which preceded both types of bucchero, employed a less refined raw clay body. Etruscan pottery in use before bucchero’s appearance contained fillers, in addition to grit, lime or organic material. Also, a *buccheroid impasto* ceramic had the characteristic dark surface, but a broken pot would reveal a lighter colored core:

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“Buccheroid is a dark brown or dark grey fabric with a fine shiny polished surface.... The shiny surface and dark colour are somewhat similar to bucchero; hence the name. However, the basic requirement for calling a fabric ‘bucchero’ is lacking, i.e. a completely reduced core. Buccheroid begins earlier than bucchero, when the potters had not yet learned or tried to make a reduced fabric. The shapes, while similar to those found in bucchero, tend to be at a slightly earlier stage of development.”  

According to Ramage, *buccheroid impasto* could be more a deviation from *buccheroid impasto* than a natural progression. The leap in thin-walled ceramic technology, followed by a return to thicker, less refined wares, may point to a limited period of direct outside influence. Many sources are willing to concede that the Orientalizing period of Greece must have extended to trade outposts in Etruria. Others theorize that such a radical change in pottery production must have come from further east than Greece.

"Between 670 and 600 BCE, many pottery vessels were imported from Corinth especially, Attica, Ionia, and the Near East. Popular imports from Phoenicia were the beak-spouted jug and the 'pilgrim flask,' a round flat bottle with geometric decoration. These imported goods, and *sometimes the immigration of the artists themselves,* inspired Etruscan artists to produce their own versions and to copy the new style of decoration in their own work.” [Emphasis added]

The advanced artists and sophisticated artistry of the seventh century did not prevail in Etruria for long. The popularity of *buccheroid impasto* seemed to wane after a single generation.

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14 Ibid., 4-8.
Transitional forms appear in the archaeological record only 50 years after bucchero’s introduction. By 575 BC, a mere 100 years after the advent of sottile, most bucchero wares are described as pesante or heavy (575-480 BC).  

“Sometime around the turn of the century, bucchero fabrics imperceptibly turn into the more ordinary ware of the sixth century. The colour of the clay is sometimes black, although there is an increasing tendency toward greyer fabrics. The walls are thick almost without exception; the decoration is crude, and applied in a mechanical and sometimes even haphazard manner. Pride in the bucchero technique, which is a hallmark of the seventh century, was much less evident in the sixth.”  

EXPLORING IL MUSEO CLAUDIO FAINA

Along with bucchero sottile, the collection at Museo Claudio Faina displays thick-walled pottery with stamped and appliquéd decoration. Such bucchero pesante was “especially common in workshops at Vulci, Tarquinia, Chiusi and Orvieto.” Potters making this “heavy” type of bucchero also used molds to create relief designs.

ABOVE LEFT, Bucchero pesante Foculo (Brazier) decorated with appliqued faces, VI c. BC, Inv. n. 784, ABOVE RIGHT, Amphora with lid decoration in the shape of a bird, VI c. BC, Inv. n. 827. Both Orvieto, Museo Claudio Faina.

16 Ibid.
18 DePuma, Richard Daniel, "The Meanings of Bucchero," 975
19 https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/etruscan/a/bucchero
These sturdy vessels were created and traded for everyday Etruscan use, and exported throughout the Western Mediterranean. Bucchero amphorae, *kantharoi* (for drinking wine), and *oinochoai* (for pouring wine) are found in coastal settlements and shipwrecks.²⁰ By the early fifth century BC, Etruscan black- and red-figure wares had “replaced” bucchero in popularity.²¹ Yet before that time, many an Archaic-period body, both rich and poor, were entombed with precious and practical bucchero ware.²²

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²¹ [https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/etruscan/a/bucchero](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/etruscan/a/bucchero)


