

## **Reply to 'Excavating Women Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece – The evidence from Attic Vase Painting'**

The study of vase paintings has long held a prominent position in classical archaeology, as vase paintings depict scenes that give us an insight into various aspects of everyday life, economy, festivals and mythical beliefs. Yet, this study is not without limitations. As Mary Beard rightly notes, these images that we interpret as those of everyday day life may not be so, and they are modified to the artist's selection and perception of the world around him<sup>1</sup>. Thus, every image has to be analysed with a sense of scepticism with what it represents. Vases by themselves help us form an idea regarding its function and who could have been the intended viewers of the images drawn on them.

The study of female homoeroticism in ancient Greece seems to be one of considerable difficulty. Unlike male homosexuality, there remains very little visible evidence of homosexuality in women. Notable references are the poems of Sappho and Alcman that show signs of lesbianism. Plato too validates the notion of 'lesbianism' in the Symposium:

"Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half. Men who are a section of that double nature which was once called Androgynous are lovers of women; adulterers are generally of this breed, and also adulterous women who lust after men: the women who are a section of the woman do not care for men, but have female attachments; the female companions are of this sort. But they who are a section of the male follow the male, and while they are young, being slices of the original man, they hang about men and embrace them, and they are themselves the best of boys and youths, because they have the most manly nature." (Jowett, 2015)

The lack of evidence, literary or otherwise, makes us consider the fact that though female homosexuality was present, it may not have been widely accepted by the society. By the general perception that women played the submissive role and required a penetrator in sexual activity, the concept of lesbianism was lost. So, it is with these barriers that Rabinowitz attempts to study female homoeroticism through the medium of Greek vase paintings.

Rabinowitz's work aims to understand homoeroticism, not in the modern form of lesbianism but, to find women escaping the confines of male domination. Therefore, she looks for

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<sup>1</sup> Beard 1991: 20

opportunities where the homosocial can be read as the homoerotic. Thus, she concentrates on touches that may be interpreted as intimate and the degree of women's gaze.

This method is not devoid of its challenges. As red figure paintings increased the characteristics that defined both male and female merge into one. Therefore, both sexes grow rounder and voluptuous and become difficult to identify without visible genitalia. While the author notices the absence of women potters in antiquity, I wonder about the lack of women patrons who could have commissioned vases to their liking. Ridgeway discusses various works commissioned by women patrons<sup>2</sup>, this brings me to the lack of more visible signs of female homosexuality in Greek vases. Therefore, the fact that most potters were males gives rise to further challenges, not only did they depict women in a way appropriate for ancient society but, I question their awareness of the concept of desire between two women.

### Discussing Evidence

There are some examples that Rabinowitz provides that show evidence for homosexuality which shall be discussed. The giving of gifts to entice a sexual partner was a common practice in antiquity. In the cup from Douris which depicts two women exchanging gifts<sup>3</sup>, could be homoerotic as flowers were used as gifts in courting between heterosexual couples as well<sup>4</sup>.

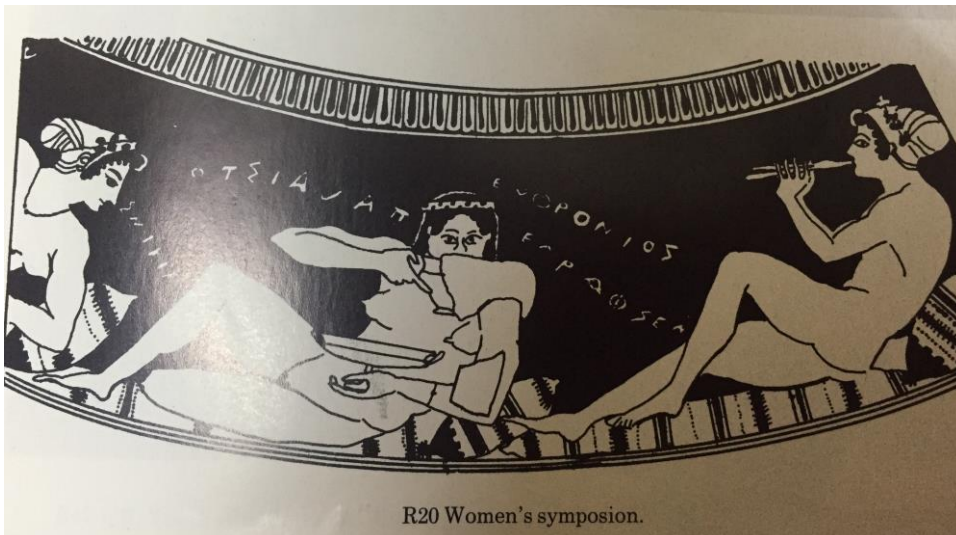
In the below painting by the Danae painter, two women listen to the music, and one fondly leans over the other. Rabinowitz claims that the women share a direct and intense gaze and thus coins it as a possibly homosexual painting. A possible debate could be made by Toscano whose study on female gaze and desire directs us to the importance of a triangular shape formed between the two participants (in this case a man and a woman) by overlapping limbs that brings out the sexual desire onto the viewer. In the study of touch too she points out to a more intimate contact than the one shown below. Therefore, these women may just as easily have been friends in the eyes of the artist.

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<sup>2</sup> Ridgeway 1987: 405

<sup>3</sup> Rabinowitz 2009: 114

<sup>4</sup> Buitron-Oliver, 1995: 37



The above painting by Euphronios is a better example of the 'lesbian gaze.' The three naked women seem to be enjoying their female gathering. While the woman on the right plays the flute, the woman on the extreme left intensely stares at the pubic hair of the lady in the centre showing desire and tension amongst the three.

Rabinowitz refers to a red-figure kylix, where on the interior of the cup a woman leads the other who has a paper or book in her hand. The author infers from the holding of the wrists, which is a symbol of a heterosexual marriage that there may be a sexual relationship between the two. She also sees a reluctance in the one on the left. Richter classifies this as a writing lesson or receiving a letter<sup>5</sup>. Outside, the author sees an echo of male homoeroticism as she interprets pairs of women, one of whom is fully dressed and the other

<sup>5</sup> Richter and Hall, 1936: 107-108

less covered. Altman further explains the actions of these women as vocabulary for male pederastic courtship<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in each pair, there is one that urges while the other is reluctant.

In studying the marriages of heterosexual couples, Rabinowitz looks deeper to search for the homoerotic aspect of the scene. She notices the change of focus between the man-woman depictions of a wedding in black figure paintings to a focus of the preparation of the marriage in the red, which leads to the homosocial environment in which the bride is being dressed by the 'attendants.'<sup>7</sup>In the figure where a woman places a necklace on the bride, the attendant may have been anyone, Rabinowitz drives the notion of homoeroticism by claiming that they could be more than friends.

## Music and Dance

Rabinowitz notes the influence of music and dance on ladies by stating that they were mostly a women's institution that brought women together for weddings and other functions. She cites the fragments of Alcman to validate her point as women praise others dances whereby creating a sexually charged atmosphere. A suggestion remains as the homosocial leading to the homosexual in the worshipping of gods such as Dionysus. In the vase painting of Dionysus and the maenads, the maenads offer a hare to him. The relationship between the two maenads is questionable, as they seem to be merging with their arms intertwined with each other.

## Who are these women?

Rabinowitz goes on to analyse who are these women that are depicted on the Greek vases, as there is no way to make out to what class they belonged to. Scholars debate that they are the hetaireia, an explanation to the naked images of the women on the vases as elite Athenian women did not attend symposiums and would not pose as such. The notion that no respectable woman would be shown naked is countered by the author with the depiction of bathing scenes. She notes that the lack of male presence in such scenes allows a sense of respectability to the image. And that it have an 'only female' viewership if such scenes are depicted on vases such as the hydria. In the red-figure cup by Oltos, the two women sitting in a symposium seemed relaxed as they hold a double pipe, and kylix and a tall cup respectively. Their legs intertwine to cast a picture of intimacy and sexual desire between the two.

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<sup>6</sup> Altman 2009: 4

<sup>7</sup> Robinowitz 2002: 120

## The Need for Dildos

The author discusses the two different types of images of male genitalia that is found in Greek vases. While the larger ones called phalluses symbolize fertility and rituals, the smaller ones called olisboi or dildos signify a more erotic aspect. Though not many there are various images of dildos present in a female setting. In the red-figure pelike where a woman waters penis plants, Rabinowitz avoids the erotic and interprets this as the Haloa festival where the women encourage the growth of wheat which turns into an all-night feast. The women hold the feast to honour Dionysus and Demeter. Another red-figure cup shows two women dancing at an erect phallus. Rabinowitz reads this as homoerotic as the foot of the clothed female directly points to the genitalia of the other, as if trying to seduce her dance partner with her beautiful feet. I interpret both vases differently from the author; both the vases indicate the want for a male presence on the scene. The woman planting the dildos may be doing for the need of a man, and the two women dancing could be doing so for the joy of seeing an erect penis. Following on Kilmer's path, I too would infer that i was created to attract and excite male gaze.

By reading into the need for dildos as homoeroticism, the author diverts from her objective as that denotes understanding an image in the confines of the current concept of lesbianism. Kilmer uses the term companionable masturbation when women use dildos, though this may be characterized as lesbianism for a modern viewer, the need for sexual satisfaction in a homosocial environment may have given rise to the concept of dildos.

While the author could be absolutely right that the dildos were used by women who had no need for a man, and though I believe that may have been the case in reality for the presence of the dildo; the male-dominated field of pottery and a strongly patriarchal society may have used these images for their male fantasy rather than depicting societal truths.

## Conclusion

While Rabinowitz makes a good case for the presence of 'female homoeroticism' on Greek vases, I belong to the school of thought with Kilmer that these homosocial paintings were created to attract male gaze. Yet, the message of empowerment for the people by digging deeper into the pits of history is not unappreciated. There is a need to learn about the presence of female homosexuality in our past and for our future. To quote Altman<sup>8</sup>:

" On the other hand, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, in "Excavating Women's Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece" (2002), does provide a sensitive and compelling reading, but she writes from a model of female eroticism that sees it as more diffuse, less hierarchical, less frankly sexual than the male pederastic paradigm."

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<sup>8</sup> Altman 2009: 14

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