

9: MYTH AND GREEK ART: CREATING A VISUAL LANGUAGE

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In perusing any book devoted to Greek art, one is struck by the ancient Greeks' obsession with their gods, heroes, and mythological creatures. From the earliest extant work of figurative art produced in the so-called Dark Ages, the terracotta centaur from Lefkandi (ca. 950–900 BC), to that icon of late Hellenistic group sculpture, the marble Laocoon (ca. 30–20 BC), Greek artists and their patrons were drawn to mythological subjects not only for their intrinsic interest but also for the important roles they played in explaining the cosmos and shedding light on human nature. Although Greek artists shared this interest in mythological narrative with poets, they did not illustrate written texts; rather, they were guided by that oral culture or *Volksvorstellung* that was an essential part of every Greek's upbringing.¹ They, like all artists, were heavily influenced by the work of their predecessors, the demands of the marketplace, and the restrictions imposed by their medium. That said, Greek narrative art displays an amazing degree of imagination, ingenuity, and originality that continues to fascinate today, as it must have engaged viewers in antiquity.

Numerous books, not to mention multivolume lexica, have been devoted to the subject of myth in Greek art.² It would be foolhardy to attempt to encompass the entirety of this intriguing and vast topic in a single essay. Therefore, this chapter will examine two specific concerns of Greek painters and sculptors when faced with the challenge of narrating in visual, as opposed to literary, terms a specific story involving gods, heroes, or fantastic creatures. First, what devices did the artist employ for depicting a myth and how did this visual language come about? Second, how did the artist make his chosen theme relevant to a particular audience at a specific point in time? In order for a work of art

to succeed in narrating a myth, it must employ a grammar understood by its viewers and relate in some fashion to the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary society. As much as possible, I will let the art speak for itself and examine it independent of any literary tradition.³ This essay will also concentrate on the art of ancient Athens not only because of the quantity of extant material, especially painted vases, but also because we know more about the cultural and political history of this city than that of any other Greek *polis*. Before analyzing the origins of the visual language devised in the Greek pictorial tradition, we will begin with a highly developed example of mythical narration.

AN EXEMPLUM

At about the time that the Parthenon was nearing completion, an Athenian vase painter (whom we call the Codrus Painter) decorated a wine cup, inside and out, with seven deeds of the local hero Theseus (Figure 3). In the central tondo the hero is shown in his most readily recognizable exploit, the slaying of the Minotaur. Encircling the tondo (beginning at 12 o'clock and moving clockwise) and repeated on the exterior of the cup are six additional deeds of Theseus: he contends with the wrestler Cercyon, fells Procrustes with an axe, topples Sciron off his cliff, drives the Marathonian bull to Athens, binds Sinis to his pine tree, and slays the sow in spite of the protests of its aged mistress Crommyo. This painted vase is the result of a long tradition of heroic imagery in Greek art, and as such represents a fully evolved, sophisticated visual language – imagery that cannot be taken literally, but must be carefully “read” to be understood. So, for instance, the male figures are all “heroically” nude, although as a traveler Theseus might be expected to wear a tunic, cloak, and traveling cap. His human opponents are portrayed as distinctly “other” or unheroic: heavily bearded, balding, older. They are shown in compromised poses (falling, legs splayed) and gesturing frantically for a reprieve.⁴ Theseus’ sword accompanies him in every episode, although it is distinctly out of place in the wrestling match; however, as one of the *gnorismata* (tokens) of the hero it is his most significant identifying attribute. There are few elements of setting, only those necessitated by the scene: Sciron’s rock, the pine tree of Sinis, and perhaps the old woman as a local personification of Crommyon.

But there is more here than meets the eye. Ancient viewers would have noticed that some of Theseus’ deeds resembled those of the great Panhellenic hero Heracles who captured a boar and a bull and wrestled

an ogre named Antaeus, but that other deeds demonstrated greater mental than physical prowess by turning the tables, so to speak, on his human opponents. Theseus also bears a club, the traditional weapon of Heracles, as he drives the bull to Athens. (Later texts claim he obtained it in defeating the club-man Periphetes, but this episode is not represented on cups such as these.) A more subtle reference to Heracles can be found in the tondo where, instead of slaying the Minotaur as in earlier images, Theseus is shown dragging the monster from a Doric porch-like structure; the meander pattern to the right alerts the viewer to the concept of the labyrinth. This rare composition deliberately recalls earlier vase paintings of Heracles leading Cerberus from the entrance to Hades and so may represent an attempt on the part of the Athenian mythmakers to suggest that their hero too overcame death itself and so attained immortality.⁵

There was nothing radically new in the depiction of these deeds, which had been part of the vase painters' repertoire since ca. 510 BC, nor in the vehicle for their display, the so-called cycle cup – although both were quite novel at the end of the previous century.⁶ What would have impressed viewers of this vase is the startling visual device where the figures appear in exactly the same location inside and out, as if one were seeing through the walls of the cup. Only in the Sciron and sow episodes is Theseus' pose reversed from back (interior) to front (exterior) so that he can maintain the weapon in his right hand. Why would the artist go to such pains to echo the pose, placement, and action of the hero inside and out? Is it simply an artistic conceit or does it convey a specific message to the viewer? It has long been recognized by scholars that Theseus here takes on the poses of the famous sculptural group set up in the Agora in 477–6 BC, namely the Tyrannicides by the sculptors Kritios and Nesiotes (Figure 4). With his cloak draped over his extended left arm Theseus not only is defending himself from the tusks of the sow, but also is mimicking the older tyrant-slayer Aristogeiton; and with Sciron's foot basin raised overhead he takes on the undefended pose of the younger Harmodios. Ironically (to us) the future king of Athens is portrayed as a freedom fighter, a hero of the early democracy.

Further political references could be seen in the episodes placed directly above (Cercyon) and below (bull) the Minotaur-slaying. The former took place at Eleusis, the latter at Marathon. In Herodotus' account of the Persian Wars (8.64), an omen in the form of a dust cloud arose at Eleusis and drifted to Salamis, foretelling the naval victory over the Persians. At the earlier battle of Marathon Theseus was said to have arisen from the ground to aid his fellow Athenians. The deeds are not

depicted in chronological order, since Theseus captured the bull after his arrival in Athens. So it seems the artist has given these two deeds special prominence in the axis perpendicular to the handles because they reference locations in Attica closely associated with the defeat of the Persians. With its emphasis on the poses of Harmodios and Aristogeiton and its subtle references to Salamis and Marathon, this cycle cup does much more than recount some of the deeds of the hero Theseus; it rewrites history by associating Athens' glorious Bronze-Age hero with its glorious present. For the Athenians their myths were their history, and they saw no problem in embellishing them for the greater glory of the *polis*.

If we think of this wine cup in its original context of the Greek symposium, it could have served as an exemplum to young Athenian males. They too should perform heroic deeds for the good of their city as well-trained athletes, skilled hunters, and brave warriors. The calculated poses of Theseus may have recalled to the symposiasts the general Miltiades' exhortation before the great encounter at Marathon to the polemarch Callimachus to fight to make Athens free, as the Tyrannicides had done before him (Herodotus 6.109). Given the date of this vase, its depiction of the hero Theseus served as a role model for Athenian youth at the beginning of a new military challenge to the democratic polis, that of the recently begun Peloponnesian Wars. Thus the Codrus Painter not only invented a new referential form of imagery for the myth of Theseus, but also devised a compositional format that placed the hero in a position to serve as an example for contemporary viewers in late fifth-century Athens.

When did this sophisticated visual language of myth begin and how did it evolve? When did artists incorporate allusions to recent events in mythological narratives to reinforce their message? What roles did the depictions of Greek myth in media ranging from minutely carved gems to vast temple pediments play in society? Because of the great losses from antiquity, such as most monumental paintings, these questions are not easy to answer. But by starting at the beginning we can perhaps trace a likely scenario for how a work of art as multivalent as the Theseus cup came about.

HORSE, BIRD, AND MAN: THE ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

In the first two centuries of Greek art (900–700 BC), the figurative repertoire of artists consisted of simple geometricized forms: humans,

quadrupeds, and birds. With this basic toolkit the artist could create super- or subhuman creatures of myth by devising imaginative combinations. Thus, for instance, attaching a horse's hindquarters to a human resulted in a creature that combined the powers of human intelligence and equine strength – making it an equal opponent (Nessus) as well as a tutor and friend (Chiron, Pholus) of gods and heroes. In precanonical Greek art this hybrid, commonly known as the centaur, was also used to depict other monsters such as Medusa (by the addition of a skirt) or the Minotaur. A male figure with only an equine tail and ears became the subhuman satyr, while a horse protome (forequarters) attached to a rooster's body produced the somewhat ridiculous *Mischwesen* known as the hippalektryon. To create a daemon of subhuman intelligence the artist would surmount a human body with an animal's head, as in the case of the canonical Minotaur (see Figure 3). Wings were added to horses, enabling them to fly (Pegasus) and power the chariots of heavenly divinities. A female with wings could be either a goddess (*potnia theron*, Iris, Nike) or a monster, if given an ugly or leering frontal face (Harpy, Fury, Medusa). Fish tails added to human torsos resulted in fantastic marine creatures such as Triton or Skylla. Finally, perhaps only the Greeks would invent a semidivine being that was both male and female, Hermaphroditus.

Another method available to the creative artist for fabricating a mythological daemon was simply to multiply its form. Dual- and triple-bodied humans, such as the Molione/Actorione and Geryon, are formidable opponents of heroes, as are multiheaded dogs (Cerberus, Orthus), snakes (Hydra), and hybrids (Chimera). Many mythological figures take the form of male twins (Dioscuri, Cercopes, Boreads) or female triads (Gorgons, Fates, Graiae). Hecate could be depicted either as a normal woman or as a triple-bodied divinity. Most of the canonical hybrids were either invented or adapted from Near Eastern or Egyptian prototypes (e.g., sphinx, siren) by the mid-seventh century and continued relatively unchanged throughout classical art and well beyond.⁷

Other conventions that generally operate in Greek figurative art are *horror vacui*, the horizontal ground line, isocephalism, avoidance of the frontal face, and size as an indicator of status. Until specific attributes or inscribed names are included in narrative scenes, we cannot always be sure that myths are intended, as for example in late-eighth century BC scenes of a man hunting a deer (Heracles and the hind?), two males confronting a tripod (boxers or Apollo and Heracles?), or a man and woman boarding a ship (Figure 5: Theseus and Ariadne? Paris and Helen? Jason and Medea?).⁸ Items of dress, such as belts or special headgear, in

archaic Greek sculpture and painting may indicate heroic or divine status, but are too generic to be decisive for identification. Old-fashioned conveyances such as the chariot or types of armor such as the Dipylon shield (as in the hold of the ship in Figure 5) presumably were not used in battle in historic times, but whether they allude to the Homeric past is an issue that has not been satisfactorily resolved.⁹ In later Greek art, the figure moving to the right or auspicious side is usually the victor, although when this principle was adopted is not easy to determine. It is clear enough in two similar Trojan War compositions that are popular on Attic black-figure vases of the mid-sixth century: Ajax carrying the corpse of Achilles usually moves to the left, while Aeneas rescuing his father Anchises moves to the right.¹⁰

In painting and relief sculpture, elements of setting such as landscape are minimal,¹¹ and temporal indicators are almost nonexistent. Archaic and earlier works of art tend to illustrate the high point of the action, for example, the slaying of the monster or the heat of battle, rather than episodes taking place before or after the main event. In order to represent two events in any particular narrative, an artist might conflate two scenes such as King Priam being killed at the altar and his grandson Astyanax being hurled from the walls of Troy (Figure 6). In the powerful and shocking formula adopted by Attic vase painters, the slayer Neoptolemos uses the child as a weapon to cudgel the old man to death. Thus, in one blow, two generations and the future of Troy are extinguished. This same schema was adapted to a more comic context in which Heracles likewise slays a king (Busiris) at an altar, holding another Egyptian upside down by the ankle.¹²

That these basic principles persisted throughout Greek art can be illustrated by a large red-figure skyphos painted about the same time as the Theseus cup, ca. 430 BC (Figure 7).¹³ The subject is the Return of Hephaestus at the point at which the smith god rides his mule into the presence of his mother Hera, trapped on a magic throne. The figures move to the right on a horizontal ground line and fill the space from top to bottom, a principle that results in making Hephaestus much shorter than Dionysus. The music-making satyr is also smaller, either because he is an attendant, like the girl fanning Hera, or on account of his younger age (which, however, is not consistent with his balding head). Each figure lugs along his distinctive attributes (tongs and hammer for Hephaestus, kantharos [high-handled cup] and thyrsus [ivy-bedecked wand] for Dionysus), although they are hardly necessary for the action at hand; in lieu of inscriptions they serve to identify the protagonists. There is no reference to the past (Hephaestus does not appear to be

drunk – although he wears an ivy wreath – or even lame) or the future (no sign of the prize-bride Aphrodite), nor is there any indication of setting. Dionysus is the key player here and he is appropriately placed in the center of the composition on a large wine vessel.

A depiction of this same myth on a vase painted a mere ten years later demonstrates how radically these basic conventions could be altered under the influence of monumental wall painting. The body of a volute-crater by Polion (Figure 8) depicts the same scene, but with the figures scattered over the surface, and with hints of landscape in the form of rocks and trees.¹⁴ The action moves to the left as a satyr helps the drunken Hephaestus up from the couch of Dionysus. Hera is relegated to the upper left corner, seated frontally to indicate her helplessness, and her fan-waving attendant is now a siren with arms. Much of the surface is taken up with extraneous satyrs and maenads conversing in pairs. Reflecting the composition and style of major painting, this vase shows how artists could combine the temporal and spatial aspects of a specific episode within a larger format. It also demonstrates how a vase-painter could transpose the setting of an age-old myth: instead of an equestrian procession it has become a symposium with cushions, music, and Dionysus featured in the role of the symposiarch. Such a scene is particularly appropriate to the shape of the vase, a wine crater, which served as the centerpiece of the symposium. The running figure of a satyr who holds the smith god's tongs and lights his way with a torch may have suggested to the painter the ritual torch-race held at the Hephaisteia in Athens, for he has represented this event on the neck of the vase. Hence this mythological narrative on a symposium vessel (like Theseus on the cycle cup, Figure 3) can reference aspects of the real life of its users, their drinking parties and their festivals.¹⁵

Naturally, format and medium play major roles in determining how mythological scenes are depicted. So, for instance, a vase painter portrays the birth of Athena as a tiny doll-like goddess emerging from the head of a large enthroned god flanked by as many standing attendants as fill the available space. For a sculptor decorating a temple pediment, the small goddess would be invisible from below. Thus, on the Parthenon's east pediment, Athena is depicted full-sized standing beside her father, flanked by Olympians in various poses to fit the raking angles of the pediment. In the small corners are Helios rising and Selene descending, who together symbolize both the setting (the heavens) and the time (dawn). Round fields such as those of gems, coins, and cup interiors usually restrict the protagonists to one or two figures, while square fields, such as painted or carved metopes (square plaques in the Doric

frieze), admit two or three. Long friezes are the most suitable formats for multified narratives such as the divine procession to the wedding reception of Peleus and Thetis painted on several early sixth-century Attic vases, or the gigantomachy that is carved in low relief on the Treasury of the Siphnians at Delphi (ca. 525 BC) and in high relief on the altar of Zeus at Pergamon (mid-second century BC). In both of these multified reliefs, the gods and giants are labeled for the sake of the viewer, who might otherwise have trouble distinguishing individual combatants.

By examining what myths Greek artists avoided or clearly had difficulty depicting, we can come closer to understanding the relationship of myth to art and life. Although a favorite *topos* of Greek myth, the act of metamorphosis is especially challenging for any artist.¹⁶ Dionysus' transformation of the Tyrrhenian pirates into dolphins is not essayed in Greek art until the later fourth century on the sculpted frieze of the Lysicrates monument in Athens, and Actaeon's conversion into a stag is simply a matter of attaching horns to his head, enough to impel his hunting dogs to attack him. Artists succeed better at the metamorphosis of Odysseus' companions into swine by the magician Circe, for they can revert to the time-honored tradition of tacking animal heads onto human bodies to create figures of subhuman intelligence.¹⁷ The multiple transformations of Thetis in her wrestling match with her suitor Peleus can be symbolized by a lion atop her shoulder, a simple but legible solution to the problem of representing corporeal change. Differentiating between different states of consciousness such as sleep and death was also a challenge, and so winged male personifications could represent these altered states. Hypnos is much more common and is often depicted in miniature, like the lion of Thetis, crouching on the body of the sleeping giant Alcyoneus.¹⁸ This marked tendency in Greek art to personify abstract concepts even carries over into inanimate objects that could easily be represented concretely. A case in point is the elixir of immortality that is offered by Athena to one of the Seven who marched against Thebes, Tydeus. While in Etruscan art it is depicted as a jug held by Athena, the Attic vase painter invents a personification labeled Athanasia, a young girl whom the goddess leads by the hand to the mortally wounded warrior.¹⁹

No doubt some myths were too repellant to the ancient Greeks to be depicted in art. While fairly common in Greek myth, portrayals of human sacrifice are a rarity. As in depictions of animal sacrifice, the few images of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia show her being led to the altar, not the cutting of her throat. The one rather bloody Attic vase painting of

the sacrifice of Polyxena was almost certainly intended for an Etruscan audience, since most amphorae of this type (Tyrrhenian) have been found in central Italy. Likewise, the dismemberment of Pentheus by his mother and her bacchic companions was not a common subject. When it came to depicting physical deformities, the Greek artist was clearly at a loss or unwilling to render the human body in a less than ideal form. The one-eyed giant Polyphemus is often larger than Odysseus and his men, but given the predilection for profile views, his single eye is not evident in the numerous seventh- and sixth-century painted depictions of his blinding. The multieyed monster Argos who guarded the cow Io was endowed either with two Janus-like faces, or more often multiple eyes covering his body. The lame Hephaestus is seldom depicted with a deformed foot; only his riding of the mule alludes to his disability (see Figure 7). One of the only mythological figures represented as severely deformed is Geras, the personification of old age; his pathetic emaciated body sometimes bears the brunt of Heracles' club.²⁰ Clearly the preferred figure of Greek artists was the perfect male specimen, namely, the hero.

HERACLES: FROM HERO TO GOD

As the Panhellenic hero *par excellence*, Heracles is represented in all periods of Greek art and in nearly all regions of Greece. He appears struggling with Apollo for the tripod in the earliest narrative art of the Late Geometric period (ca. 750–700 BC) and can be found in a Roman copy of a late Hellenistic painting transformed into a weary family man with Arcadia and his son Telephos. The iconography of Heracles changes over time, as does his meaning for a Greek audience, but his popularity never seems to wane. He is especially prevalent in Attic vase painting from the sixth to the fourth centuries, and it is in this medium that one can best plot the changes that occur in his imagery.

Not surprisingly, in sixth-century Athenian vase painting, myths highlighting military, athletic, and hunting prowess predominate, as these represent the primary values of elite male society at that time. Scenes of the Trojan War, funeral games in honor of kings (Pelias) and heroes (Patroclus), and group expeditions in search of major prey (Calydonian boar hunt) are popular themes. Because he exemplifies all of these talents, Heracles is the sixth-century hero *par excellence*: he fights formidable opponents (Kyknos, Amazons, Geryon), competes in athletic contests (wrestling Antaeus, archery competition with Eurytos'

sons), and single-handedly conquers wild beasts (Nemean lion, Cerynitan hind, Erymanthian boar, Stympalian birds). By contrast, other heroes such as Theseus, Perseus, and Bellerophon have only one claim to fame in the art of this period – the conquest of a monster (Minotaur, Medusa, Chimera). The labors, deeds, and *parerga* of the hero fit a variety of formats (vases, pediments, metopes, gems) and had a universal appeal throughout Greek lands.

It is enlightening to compare the number of Attic vases with representations of Heracles with those of other heroes. According to the Beazley Database there are 3,751 vase paintings of Heracles, compared to 786 of Theseus, 114 of Perseus, 27 of Bellerophon, and only 10 of Jason. Predictably, Heracles is also the most popular mythical hero in Laconian vase-painting, which is limited to the sixth century, and it is interesting to note that he is sometimes dressed as a warrior, a feature calculated to appeal to the Spartans.²¹ On Corinthian vases, Heracles is also a common motif, but the choice of deeds is rather different from that in the Attic corpus. While the Nemean lion is by far the most popular deed on Athenian black-figure vases, that of the Lernaean hydra predominates on Corinthian vases, perhaps because the labor was performed not far from Corinth.²² Naturally, Theseus is more popular in Athens than elsewhere, but his sixth-century repertoire is limited almost exclusively to the Cretan adventure. On the archaic Acropolis, Heracles is far more prevalent, being featured on at least four pediments. This sampling of regional variations demonstrates how local taste affected not only the choice of myths but also their manner of representation.

Looking at Attic vase representations of Heracles diachronically is also revelatory. While the Nemean lion constitutes twenty-five percent of all black-figure scenes of Heracles, in red-figure before 450 BC the percentage drops to a mere four. After 450 a significant shift occurs from depictions of his Labors and other adventures to the hero's apotheosis and his appearance in the company of the Olympian gods. In the fourth century, the favorite themes are the apples of the Hesperides and his initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries. These more metaphysical scenes can be related to the humanizing process that takes place in literary and philosophical circles. Likewise, his appearance as an infant strangling the snakes sent by the jealous Hera on early fourth-century silver coins from Byzantion to Croton demonstrates a more human side to the brawny hero.²³ The fact that Alexander the Great minted coins with the head of Heracles in his own likeness attests to the universality of the hero as an emblem of "Greekness" in the early Hellenistic period. This

ubiquitous and long-lived hero even survived pagan antiquity, emerging as the figure of Fortitude in Christian art.

ICONOGRAPHIC INNOVATORS

Some especially gifted artists could rise above the restrictions of their particular medium and artistic conventions to produce new perspectives on traditional themes. Within the standard repertoire of sixth-century mythological vase paintings, one Attic painter, Exekias, stands out for his individual treatment of traditional themes and his invention of new motifs. In contrast with the work of his contemporaries, Trojan War scenes predominate in his repertoire. He takes the suicide of Ajax, normally crudely shown as a nude, bleeding warrior on hands and knees impaled on his sword, and makes it a psychological drama in which Ajax is methodically planting his sword into the ground (see Figure 18). Even the palm tree behind the hero is said to be “weeping” in sympathy with the hero, an unusual instance of the pathetic fallacy.²⁴ Exekias can also be credited with the new motif of Achilles and Ajax gaming, first seen on the amphora now in the Vatican, but not attested in any extant literary account of the Trojan War. Again, this scene succeeds in portraying the personalities of the heroes with a detail as small as the heel of Ajax lifted slightly off the ground, which suggests his impetuous nature.²⁵ Even the artist’s portrayal of Achilles slaying the Amazon Penthesilea (the menacing face of the hero encapsulated in his black helmet contrasting with the unprotected white face of his victim) projects in its simplicity more of the drama of the encounter than other depictions of this duel. By limiting his mythological scenes to one or two figures where lesser artists jammed them with subsidiary figures to fill the space, Exekias achieved a dramatic intensity not found elsewhere in archaic Greek art.²⁶

The same kind of innovative iconography can be found in the Early Classical sculptural program of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (ca. 465–457 BC), which also displays an interest in the temporal progression of a narrative and the psychologically potent moment. The labors of Heracles, son of Zeus, were appropriately chosen for the twelve metope slots of the porches; this hero was credited with establishing the sanctuary of Zeus as well as its games. The fact that Heracles is shown without one of his distinctive attributes, his bow, has been interpreted as a calculated response to the Persian War, which was viewed as a contest of spearmen (Greeks) versus archers (Persians).²⁷ The pediments display

a quiet, localized scene on the east, with Zeus in the center, and a turbulent battle in the west, presided over by Apollo.

Because these metopes represent the first known *dodecathlon* of the hero in Greek art, the format may have dictated the number twelve, which subsequently became the canonical number of Heracles' labors. The anonymous master designer at Olympia not only varied the temporal aspects of these labors by showing some already completed (Nemean lion, Figure 9, Stymphalian birds), but also portrayed the hero physically aging as he progressed from his first labor (lion), where he is beardless, to his attainment of immortality. In a prescient way, the Nemean lion metope with its exhausted hero heralds the famous image of the "Weary Heracles" devised by the sculptor Lysippus at the end of the fourth century. The last and least represented of Heracles' labors, cleaning the stable of Augias, is one that took place near Olympia and so perhaps was invented for this locale.

Locale is almost certainly responsible for the subject of the temple's east pediment, the chariot race of Pelops and King Oinomaus – a scene that clearly references the most prestigious contest of the ancient Games. What the viewer beheld was not the race itself, which resulted in the death of the king, but a group of figures flanking the central deity Zeus, rather like a Renaissance *sacra conversazione*. As in the suicide of Ajax by Exekias, the viewer is presented with the psychologically tense moment before the inevitable bloodshed; only the face of the seer registers the tragic events to come. The artist has managed to convey the personalities of the protagonists with the subtle language of stance (haughty Oinomaus with arm akimbo), gesture (his brooding wife with her hand to her chin), and facial expression (furrowed brow of the seer) so that it is easy to identify them even if the story is not well known. While the east pediment represents the prelude to a wedding, the west shows the outcome of a wedding where chaos has erupted because of the drunkenness of the centaurs. In many ways, the west pediment is more traditional, with its big on-going battle (centauromachy), a subject readily adaptable to the challenging triangular spaces of temple facades and one much favored by Archaic and Classical artists.²⁸

THE BIG BATTLES

Although battle imagery had been part of the Athenian painted repertoire since at least the end of the Middle Geometric period (ca. 770 BC) and had remained a popular theme, it came into its own in the wake

of the Persian Wars. The most commonly depicted multifigured battles were the centauromachy and the Amazonomachy, which became ubiquitous in architectural sculpture and wall painting during the Classical period, especially in Athens, where the themes were reprised on large red-figure vases. Perhaps this is not surprising, since the beloved heroes Theseus and Heracles took part in both. These battles make their appearance in monumental wall painting in the Theseum in Athens, in friezes within the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, and not once, but twice on the Parthenon (west and south metopes, and statue of Athena Parthenos). We have already noted the centauromachy of Theseus in the west pediment at Olympia, and it was engraved on the shield of the colossal Bronze Athena by the Athenian sculptor Phidias on the Acropolis. The battle of Theseus and the Amazons was depicted in the Stoa Poikile by the mural painter Mikon and by Phidias on the footstool of the chryselephantine statue of Zeus at Olympia, while that of Heracles was carved on the bar of the throne. The trend continues in the fourth century outside Athens, with the Amazonomachy and centauromachy on the metopes of the Tholos at Delphi and the battle with the Amazons in the west pediment of the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus and on one of the friezes of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. And even in the Hellenistic period these themes are reprised in the architectural sculpture of numerous monuments, particularly heroa (mausoleum at Belevi, Ptolemaion at Limyra).²⁹

Scholars have detected a slight but important change in these popular battles in the early fifth century BC. The battle with the centaurs moves indoors to the wedding feast, so that women are present, including the important bride Hippodameia. The Amazonomachy, at least in Attic depictions, is the female warriors' expedition to Athens to rescue their queen Antiope and takes place on the slopes of the Acropolis itself, recalling the Persians' violation of Athena's sanctuary in 480 BC. Tellingly, Mikon's painting of Theseus fighting the Amazons was juxtaposed with the famous painting of the Battle of Marathon in the Stoa Poikile in Athens, and it is generally believed that these "big battle" scenes allude to the Greeks' victories over the Persians. These instances demonstrate the malleability of myth in art, which can be adapted to new political circumstances as needed. However, the appearance of the Amazonomachy on the tomb of a Persian satrap in Caria would indicate that they had become stock themes by the mid-fourth century BC, and the political allusions were either different or irrelevant. The Amazon theme was revived ca. 200 BC, when Attalus I dedicated the

two-thirds life-size bronze figures of dead barbarians (giant, Amazon, Persian, Galatian) on the Athenian Acropolis, in commemoration of his own victories over the Gauls.³⁰

MYTH AND POLITICS

This symbiosis between mythical representations and contemporary politics is most evident in Athens because of the large number of extant vases and sculptures, as well as texts describing lost works of art. It has been documented that the cycle cups devoted to the youthful deeds of Theseus began to appear just as Cleisthenes was reforming the political system from tyranny to democracy, ca. 510–500 BC. Needing something grander than a mere Minotaur-slayer to reflect their new status, the Athenians embellished the life of their local hero by giving him a series of youthful deeds akin to those of the renowned hero Heracles. The cycle cup (and later the metopes of the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi and those of the Hephaesteum) was the vehicle invented to publicize these new exploits, which by combination with the Minotaur made clear to the viewer that Theseus was being depicted. While many scholars have posited an epic poem of the life of Theseus as the source for these representations, the cycle cups almost never show the deeds in chronological order; rather, we have here a scenario where Athenian artists faced the challenge of grafting new exploits onto the persona of a well-known local hero, and so devised an until-now novel, cyclical mode of narration for the dissemination of the hero's early life.

Similarly, in the mid to late fifth century, when the Athenians wished to highlight their myth of autochthony, they commissioned artists to depict the birth of Erichthonius, the offspring of Hephaestus' unsuccessful attempt on Athena that resulted in the impregnation of the earth. The baby is usually shown in the arms of Ge, who rises out of the ground to hand him over to his surrogate mother Athena, while male figures such as Cecrops, Zeus, or Hephaestus look on with approval.³¹ However, on one of the latest versions (Figure 10) produced during the Peloponnesian Wars, the earth goddess is shown seated on the ground in a luxurious garden filled with lovely women; Athena dashes forward with a receiving blanket while baby Erichthonius reaches toward her. Because the three girls looking down from above must be the daughters of Cecrops on the Acropolis, Ge is here identified as Attica, both earth in general and a place personification. This vase by the Meidias Painter

is a squat *lekythos*, or perfume flask used by women, and its function may account for the unique feminization of this founding myth of Athens.³²

In the past, scholars argued for a close correlation of myth depictions and contemporary political events. The classic example is Boardman's argument that the mid-sixth-century black-figure hydriae (water jugs) with scenes of Athena driving Heracles to Olympus in a chariot were prompted by the tyrant Peisistratus' stratagem for retaking the Acropolis, namely driving into Athens with a tall girl dressed up as Athena (Herodotus 1.60). Peisistratus' personal identification with Heracles would then be the impetus for all the Archaic pediments on the Acropolis that depict the hero, and much else in sixth-century Athenian art.³³ More recently doubts have been cast on this approach, especially, as we have seen above, because Heracles was such a universal hero and one of great popularity at all times in Greek art. In his apotheosis, he represents the aspirations of Everyman to become immortal.

GODS

Immortal, ageless, and omnipotent, the Olympian gods were objects of intense veneration; consequently their most significant form of representation in Greek art was the cult statue, few of which survive. Although these statues per se had little or no narrative content, they often bore subsidiary decoration of a mythological nature, as we have already noted in the case of the *Athena Parthenos* (centauromachy on sandals, Amazonomachy and gigantomachy on shield). Likewise, the throne of Zeus at Olympia and the painted fence surrounding it carried a number of disparate themes, but some clearly related to his role as the god of justice (the slaughter of the Niobids, the rape of Cassandra, Prometheus). Cult statue bases, in particular, seem to have been loci for myths relating to the famous progeny of the gods in the Classical period; so, for instance, the bedecking of Pandora in the Parthenon, the birth of Erichthonius in the Hephaesteum, the *anados* (rising from the ground) of Aphrodite at Olympia, and the presentation of Helen on the Nemesis base at Rhamnus. These contexts, like the east pediment of the Parthenon with the birth of Athena, allowed for the inclusion of all or most of the Olympian gods, as well as other lesser deities such as Helios and Selene.³⁴ While the collectivity of the canonical twelve gods is represented for the first time on the Parthenon frieze in the mid-fifth

century, they were certainly referenced in earlier imagery where groups of them are shown seated together (e.g., east frieze of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, ca. 530–525 BC).

The one narrative episode in which a large number of gods participate is the gigantomachy, a theme that first occurs in the early sixth century on large Attic vases dedicated on the Acropolis and continues until the Hellenistic period in relief sculpture. Its most famous manifestation may have been in textiles, for the subject was woven into the *peplos* or woolen robe presented to Athena Polias at her major Athenian festival, the Panathenaia. The central figures in most of the fuller versions of this battle are Zeus, Athena, Heracles, and Ge, but even deities from an earlier generation, such as Themis, can take part, as on the north frieze of the Siphnian Treasury. Thereafter, and on smaller fields such as amphorae and metopes, individual duels are depicted, the most popular being Athena versus Enceladus. That this theme could also allude to the Persian Wars is perhaps indicated by the red-figure lekythos in Cleveland of ca. 480 BC (Figure 11), where the giant's shield device is a centaur brandishing a tree.

Another popular theme involving the gods is amorous pursuit, particularly of mortals. Young Trojan princes appear to be the most attractive victims; Zeus pursues Ganymede, who is given a hoop to indicate his youth, while Eos carries off Tithonus with his usual attribute, a lyre. She also snatches up the young hunter Cephalus, son of the Athenian princess Herse by Hermes. Taking after their mother Eos, the winged wind gods are also notorious pursuers in Attic art; Zephyrus was attracted to the beautiful boy Hyacinthus, while his brother Boreas chased the Athenian princess Oreithyia.³⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, given its consequences for mankind, the myth of Hades' rape of Persephone is largely ignored in Greek art, except in ritual (terracotta plaques from Locri) or funerary contexts (Vergina tomb).³⁶

One of the most common manifestations of the individual gods in Greek art is what one might call their epiphanies. Whether descending from the sky, as in the case of Nikes alighting on the roofs of temples in the form of marble acroteria (roof sculptures), or emerging from the earth, as in the various *anadoi* of goddesses like Persephone and Aphrodite, divinities who magically appear in human or heroic contexts are especially favored. Athena, for instance, is regularly depicted at the side of heroes (Heracles, Theseus, Perseus, Jason), not actively involved (see Figure 9), but simply standing in a bouletic capacity as their patron deity. Apollo and Artemis are often depicted

as a pair at weddings, providing music as the bridal couple depart in their chariot. Most common of all is Eros, who flutters around mortal brides on wedding vases, ensuring the appropriate romantic ambience. On a somewhat darker note, divine mothers (Thetis, Eos) look on as their sons (Achilles, Memnon) fight duels in the Trojan War. Often, on Classical vases and votive reliefs, deities are shown pouring libations onto altars, either singly or in groups, such as the Delian triad (Apollo, Artemis, and their mother Leto). As Himmelmann has shown, the pouring of a libation by the gods is not a rite performed for the benefit of someone else, but is an act in which the gods reveal their own sanctity.³⁷

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the discussion above, mythical representations are hardly static, and they changed considerably over the many centuries of Greek art. Some common trends are the “youthening” of gods and heroes, the decline in monstrosity, along with increasing naturalism, and the tendency for narrative subjects to become purely decorative. Thus Dionysus and Hermes lose their beards in the change from black- to red-figure vase painting, and Apollo can be portrayed as a young boy playfully killing a lizard (*Apollo Sauroktonos*) in the mid-fourth century. Medusa becomes a beautiful woman (albeit with snaky locks), and Athena no longer pops out of Zeus’ head as a doll-like creature, but stands regally beside him. Sirens become conventional mourners on late Classical grave stelae, battles with Amazons and centaurs are stock themes in post-Classical architectural sculpture, and Dionysus and his retinue are ubiquitous on painted pottery of the fourth century. Nike, who once bore tokens of victory to mortals, becomes a purely symbolic figure, as does Eros.

In this discussion, readers may have missed some of their favorite subjects, such as the Trojan Horse, faithful Penelope, the birth of Helen from the egg, or the voyage of the Argo, themes that are strangely nearly absent from Greek art. Why Greek artists or their patrons preferred certain subjects over others is still a matter of speculation since we have no testimonials to guide us. Future excavation, especially of areas beyond the Greek mainland, may bring to light new and different mythical representations to add to our vast store of images. This artistic legacy remains one of the richest sources for our understanding of Greek myth and its role in Greek life.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Rather than provide a footnote for every image mentioned in this essay, I recommend that readers pursue their own interests by consulting the appropriate entries in the comprehensive *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Zurich 1981–1997). Those without access to this resource can consult the handbook of Carpenter (1991), a compendium of over 300 images arranged typologically. Books devoted to Greek art and myth abound; some of the more recent include Shapiro (1994), Woodford (2003), and Small (2003). For textual sources on works of art no longer extant, see Pollitt (1990).

NOTES

- 1 For the argument that Greek artists do not illustrate texts, see Snodgrass (1998) and Small (2003).
- 2 See Steuben (1968); Gantz (1993); Carpenter (1991). The most useful source for illustrations of Greek myth is LIMC.
- 3 For this reason, I will not consider the vase-painting of South Italy, which directly references theatrical performances. For representations of Greek tragedy, see O. Taplin's essay in Easterling (1997): 69–90.
- 4 For behavior and gestures that characterize the Other in Athenian vase painting, see McNiven (2000).
- 5 On Heracles in the Underworld, see Wünsche (2003).
- 6 For these youthful deeds of Theseus, see Neils (1987) and LIMC 7 (1994) s.v. Theseus (J. Neils).
- 7 On the origins and development of Greek *Mischwesen* see Padgett (2003). Medusa is an exception to the rule, as she eventually loses her monstrous appearance and paralyzes men with her beauty. Mayor (2000) proposes that some mythological creatures owe their invention to the Greeks' discovery of fossils. For illustrations of some of these precanonical hybrids, see Schefold 1966.
- 8 For such problems of identification in early Greek myth scenes, see Fittschen (1969) and Ahlberg-Cornell (1992).
- 9 For the problems surrounding the Dipylon shield, see Hurwit (1985) and the convenient summary by M. Moore in CVA New York 5 (USA 37, 2004): 8.
- 10 See Woodford and Loudon (1980).
- 11 See Chapter 11 by Cohen in this volume.
- 12 I owe this observation to Ian McPhee. On Heracles and Busiris, see M. C. Miller (2000).
- 13 Toledo Museum of Art 1982.88. See CVA Toledo 2 (USA 20, 1984): pls. 84–7 (C. Boulter and K. Luckner).
- 14 Ferrara, Museo Archeologico 3033. See *Archeologica classica* 5: pls. 62–5.
- 15 For the relation of this vase to the Hephaisteia, see Froning (1971): 78–81.
- 16 See Davies (1986).
- 17 It should be noted that the men are given a variety of heads, not just swine as in the *Odyssey*. See Giuliani (2004).

- 18 For these and other personifications, see Shapiro (1993). On Hypnos *ibid.* 148–58.
- 19 See Neils (1994).
- 20 On mythical figures with physical deformities, see Garland (1995).
- 21 For Heracles in Laconian vase painting, see Pipili (1987): 1–13, 111–12.
- 22 For Heracles in Corinthian vase painting, see Amyx (1988) 2: 628–32.
- 23 On Heracles in the Classical period, see Vollkommer (1988).
- 24 On weeping palms see Hurwit (1982) and the responses in *CJ* 78 (1983): 199–201.
- 25 On this point, see Moore (1980).
- 26 Boardman (1978) demonstrates Exekias' special interest in Trojan War scenes and credits him with the invention of nine previously unrepresented scenes.
- 27 For the suppression of Heracles' bow, quiver, and arrows on the Olympia metopes, see Cohen (1994).
- 28 For the sculptures of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, see Ashmole (1972): 1–89.
- 29 For Amazons in Greek art until the end of the fifth century, see Bothmer 1957. For examples in Hellenistic architectural sculpture, see Webb (1996).
- 30 For the Attalid dedication, see Stewart (2004): 181–236.
- 31 On representations of the birth of Erichthonius and their relation to Athenian autochthony, see Shapiro (1998).
- 32 Cleveland Museum of Art 82.142. Attic red-figure lekythos attributed to the Meidias Painter, ca. 420–410 B.C. See Neils (1993).
- 33 See Boardman (1972).
- 34 On sculpted cult statue bases, see Kosmopoulou (2002): 111–44.
- 35 On these scenes in Attic art, see Kaempf-Dimitriadou (1979) and Lefkowitz (2002).
- 36 On the tomb painting at Vergina, see Andronikos (1994): esp. 100–114.
- 37 Himmelmann (1959).



FIGURE 3. Deeds of Theseus. Attic red-figure cup attributed to the Codrus Painter from Vulci, ca. 430 BC. London, British Museum E 84. (Photo: Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)



FIGURE 4. Tyrannicides. Casts of Roman marble copies after bronze originals by Kritios and Nesiotes, ca. 477–476 BC. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art 94510.)

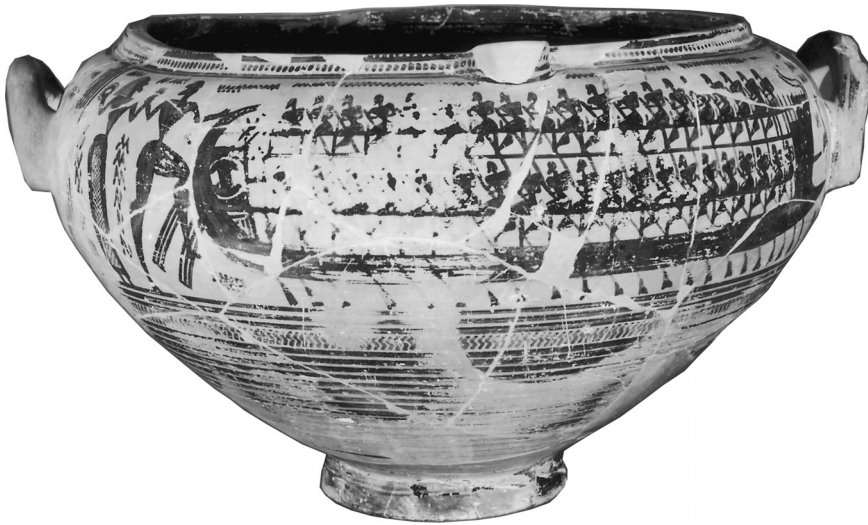


FIGURE 5. Departure of a Hero. Attic Late Geometric spouted crater from Thebes, ca. 730–720 BC. London, British Museum 1899.2–19.1. (Photo: Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)



FIGURE 6. Death of Priam. Attic black-figure amphora by Lydos from Vulci, ca. 550 BC. Berlin, Antikensammlungen 1685. (Drawing after Gerhard 1843.)



FIGURE 7. Return of Hephaestus. Attic red-figure skyphos attributed to the Curti Painter, ca. 420 BC. Toledo Museum of Art 1982.88. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1982. (Photo: Photo Inc., Toledo, Ohio.)

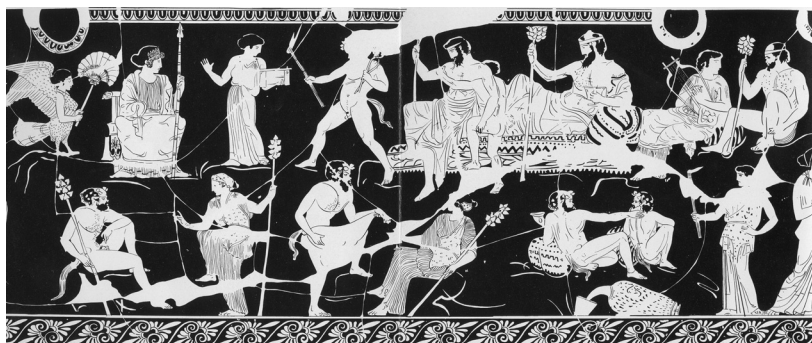


FIGURE 8. Return of Hephaestus. Attic red-figure volute-crater by Polion from Spina, ca. 420 BC. Ferrara, Museo Nazionale di Spina 3033. (Drawing after Aurigemma 1935.)



FIGURE 9. Heracles and the Nemean Lion. Metope from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, ca. 465–457 BC. (Photo: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Alison Frantz Photographic Collection, PE 199.)



FIGURE 10. Birth of Erichthonius. Attic red-figure squat lekythos attributed to the Meidias Painter, ca. 420–410 BC. Cleveland Museum of Art 1982.142. Purchase, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Bequest, 1982. (Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art.)



FIGURE 11. Battle of Athena and a Giant. Attic red-figure lekythos attributed to Douris, ca. 490 BC. Cleveland Museum of Art 1978.59. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1978. (Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art.)

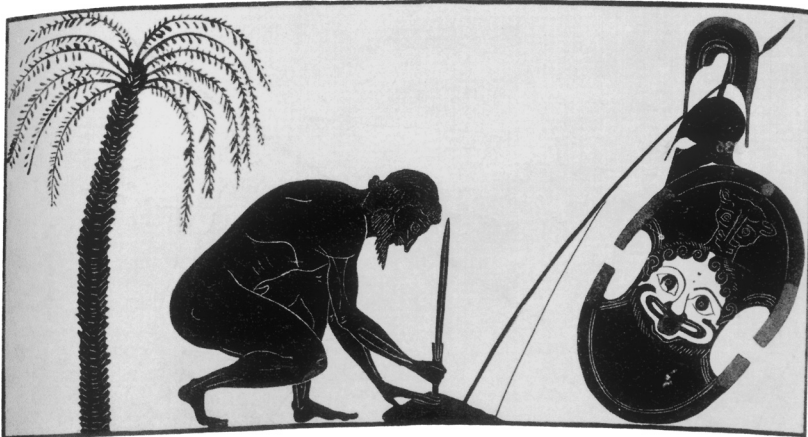


FIGURE 18. The Suicide of Ajax. Black-figure amphora by Exekias (drawing). Boulogne, Château-Musée, 558. Ca. 530 BCE. (Photograph after E. Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*. III. Band (Munich 1923) fig. 234.)