

Echeverría, F., (2015) 'Heroic Fiction, Combat Scenes, and the Scholarly Reconstruction of Archaic Greek Warfare', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 58(1), pp. 33-60 – A Scholarly Reply

Heroic Fiction, Combat Scenes, and the Scholarly Reconstruction of Archaic Greek Warfare approaches the way in which scholars have typically analysed the battle scenes featured on vases and other archaic pottery. Echeverría uses heroic fiction and combat scenes to argue that the Phalanx is an over-assumed aspect of ancient Greek warfare, and that the scholarly assumption that all contemporary warfare would have included the use of phalanx has led to the ignoring of valuable evidence, and a tendency to write off any aspect with fiction or scenes that does not fit within the style of fighting allowed by a phalanx as 'fictional' and 'heroizing'. Echeverría's approach is to analyse individual scenes and their components on individual merit, and to attempt to step back from preconceptions on warfare, and address a scene as if both 'fictional' and 'real' elements have value for academic analysis. He also argues that 'heroizing' does not interfere with historical analysis, and that elements of 'heroizing' hold valuable insight into cultural ideals.

Whilst Echeverría's approach seems sound when applied to scenes on vases, does it hold up in other contexts? The North Frieze of the Siphnian Treasury of Delphi depicts the gigantomachy, and whilst the topic lends itself to 'heroizing' elements; Echeverría suggests that fictional elements do not prevent the inclusion of 'real' elements of contemporary warfare. As such, if Echeverría's perspective within *heroic fiction* is to hold up, his approach discussed should be applicable to scenes such as the North Frieze (figure 1).

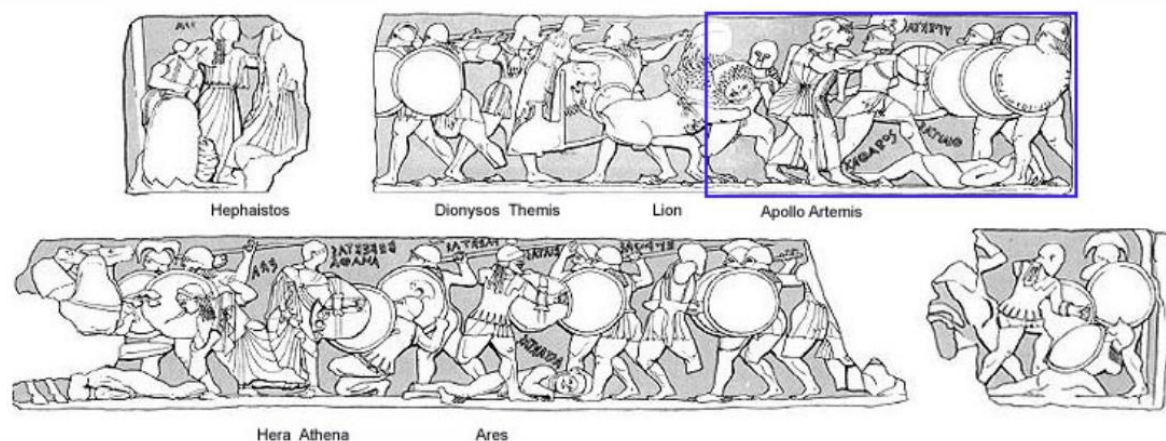


Figure 1: Siphnian Treasury at Delphi, North Frieze (Boardman, 1978)

Echeverría suggests that, in order for a scene to be understandable to a large group of people, there should be an "agreed system of symbols, references and iconographic elements to make the message understandable to everyone"¹. Watrous argues that the giants are deliberately identified with certain Greek states, through the use of emblems typically found on coinage from said states². As such, the use of Kantharos on a helmet would identify the giant with Naxos, and another wearing a helmet with cow horns would identify this one with Eretria³. These would be commonly

¹ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 44

² Watrous, 1982, pp. 163

³ Watrous, 1982, pp. 165

recognisable symbols, coming as they do from the coinage of each state, and would therefore serve to support Echeverría's view that scenes would have such easily identifiable markers. The presence of such attributes, therefore, associates the giants with known enemies, and emphasises their place as a barbaric enemy of the gods.

Whilst name tags are uncommon in archaic vases⁴, the north frieze does name many characters. Whilst some gods are named, the giants are most notable, since these are not the usual characters associated with known Gigantomachies⁵. Echeverría argues that name tags usually do not identify poorly recognisable characters, usually tending towards popular figures from well-known surviving myth⁶. Clearly, this may not apply here. Any myth that would have referenced the giants named within the frieze has not survived, so the name tags do help to identify them to a modern audience, although how easily identifiable they would have been to a contemporary audience is hard to say. It is possible that the helmet designs, linking the giants with other states, would have served as enough of an identifier for an illiterate audience. As such, Echeverría's suggestion that "name-tags do not in practice help to identify poorly known characters"⁷ is in this case inaccurate in regards to a modern audience, but we cannot claim that the same would necessarily have been true for a contemporary one.

Echeverría suggests that some typical iconographic conventions have meanings known to the contemporary audience but likely lost to us, and others with clear meanings. In addition, the use of an artistic convention that is consistent with a more flexible fighting style does not automatically mean that there are no 'real' elements of contemporary warfare within the scene, and neither does the absence of a phalanx⁸. Within the North Frieze, there would have been a total of three chariots, one of which was drawn by lions. Echeverría argues that the chariots, whilst largely incompatible with a phalanx, would have been an option on a more open battlefield⁹. The scene however is one of close quarters fighting, this is not a series of individual vignettes showing two or three people in combat, but one single scene. As such, chariots, and the space that they would require, would not be suitable to this hypothetical battlefield. Therefore, they exist within this scene as a 'heroizing' element, rather than a reflection of the contemporary reality of warfare. Of course, this is most true for the chariot drawn by lions, combining several 'heroizing' elements in one entirely fictional symbol. That this scene is a Gigantomachy suggests that the presence of the chariots (particularly the one drawn by lions) is, as Echeverría suggests they often are, an iconographic convention, which in this case highlights the heroic aspects of the gods¹⁰. Whilst it is theoretically possible for a chariot to exist both as a reflection of 'real' warfare, and as a narrative convention, in this case they appear to be used solely as a 'heroizing' element, and do not impart a sense of realistic warfare.

Ridgway suggests that the helmets are "so fanciful that they can hardly have corresponded to real armour"¹¹, and whilst this would normally eliminate them from analysis of any basis in contemporary warfare, Echeverría would suggest that 'fictional' elements should be taken as a part of the entire scene¹². In the case of the North Frieze, a 'fictional' style of helmet relates not to

⁴ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 42

⁵ Watrous, 1982, pp. 162

⁶ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 43

⁷ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 43

⁸ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 59

⁹ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 59

¹⁰ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 58

¹¹ Ridgway, 1977, pp. 270

¹² Echeverría, 2015, pp. 59

physical warfare, but, as discussed above with the giants, to the political field at the time. Watrous argues that the gigantomachy acts as an allusion to contemporary conflicts, with giants identified as allies of Athens, and the gods as allies of Sparta, with the inclusion of the Spartan god Karneios¹³. As such, while the inclusion of ‘fictional’ elements of armour are not a direct reflection of actual contemporary warfare, they are a reflection of the contemporary political scene.

Echeverría notes the Boeotian Shield as a typical symbol taken as mythical or ‘heroizing’ iconographical element¹⁴. This style of shield, with its distinctive cut-out sides, is not present at all in the North Frieze. The shields carried are simple and round, and there is no distinction – in terms of shields carried – between the gods and the giants. It is unclear if there is a specific form to the shields that are used, other than that they are round, a form which is in line with what would have been used by hoplite forces¹⁵. This element of the frieze is likely a result of real influences on the creator, a common shield type that is both a familiar and simple shape. The lack of a Boeotian shield as a ‘heroizing’ element is consistent with Echeverría’s suggestion that a Boeotian shield, despite its modern treatment as a symbol of a heroic character, does not effectively identify mythical figures within a scene¹⁶.

Echeverría argues that nudity within a scene should be “examined independently on their own merits”¹⁷, and that whilst nudity in a scene often has heroic connotations, this meaning cannot be taken for granted¹⁸. In the North Frieze, the dead giants lying on the ground appear to be naked. In this context, such nakedness cannot possibly have heroic connotations, the giants are an enemy (identified with political enemies of Delphi and Sparta), and have been defeated, they lie dead beneath the feet of the gods. Echeverría’s argument that nakedness symbolises “an individual quality” cannot truly apply here, these figures are not carefully separated and emphasised at all. Hilloowala states that the Greek adopted many Egyptian styles¹⁹, and this treatment of nakedness can be seen in Egyptian art as well. In this context, as is often the case in Egyptian art, the nakedness is an iconographical convention that implies failure, defeat, and humiliation, and the choice of displaying slain enemies as naked reflects this²⁰. When discussing nudity as an iconographical device, it appears that Echeverría is correct only in stating that “individual cases should be examined independently on their own merits”²¹.

That the presence of such composition that could indicate the use of a phalanx has been left to last is deliberate; this follows Echeverría’s claim that the phalanx is over-assumed, and that scholars should “liberate ourselves from the phalanx question”²². As such, evidence concerning the phalanx has been considered only once the nature of other elements has been discussed. Whilst the scene as a whole typically puts one or two gods against two or three giants, where the giants’ approach towards a god in two or three, they do so in a manner that could be in resemblance of a phalanx. For example, the three giants that face Apollo and Artemis do so in a row, with shields raised, moving together. This could suggest that the creator was trying to mimic a phalanx, whilst working with limited number of figures and amount of space, since, as Hanson states, it is “nearly impossible to

¹³ Watrous, 1982, pp. 167

¹⁴ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 37

¹⁵ Sage, 1996, pp. 26

¹⁶ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 52

¹⁷ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 56

¹⁸ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 55

¹⁹ Hilloowala, 2000, pp. 51

²⁰ Asher-Greve, 2006, pp. 151

²¹ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 56

²² Echeverría, 2015, pp. 59

portray a phalanx in its proper three-dimensional perspective ... on temple frieze”²³. However, Echeverría suggests that it was typical of painters to group figures in such a way, in an effort to emphasis individuality in busy scenes, so it could instead be simply a reflection of this common style of creating a full but nonetheless understandable scene²⁴. In comparison to Echeverría’s dismissal of the phalanx, Hanson argues that that all textual evidence leans towards the phalanx as a basis of battle²⁵.

The nature of the North Frieze, as an illustration of Gigantomachy, means that it is a subject that will lend itself to a ‘heroizing’ and fictional style. Applying Echeverría’s approach that “individual cases must be decided on their individual merit”²⁶, and not assuming that a ‘heroizing’ element is wholly fictional is an effective way to approach analysis of scenes. The North Frieze is a stylised scene, which contains a combination of both ‘real’ and ‘heroizing’ elements, that results in a stylised and heavily politicised depiction of a gigantomachy. In this case, clear ‘fictional’ elements – notably the helmets worn by the giants – offer essential insight into the political nature of the frieze, and despite the limited military analysis within the helmets themselves, are incredibly useful to scholarly analysis. Other symbols, such as the chariot drawn by lions, have less immediately obvious value as a symbol relating to either warfare or politics, other than of course as a heroizing element.

Echeverría’s method does work when applied to sources other than the pottery that he originally worked with, and does allow for a more nuanced approach to individual elements of a scene. However, despite how useful it can be to put the question of the phalanx aside at first, the presence of iconography that could reflect the phalanx, and textual evidence to support its use, cannot wholly be ignored. As such, it is perhaps preferable to approach the question of the phalanx only after looking at the wider picture created by the rest of the iconography within a warfare scene. *Heroic Fiction, Combat Scenes, and the Scholarly Reconstruction of Archaic Greek Warfare* overall offers a fascinating approach to analysis of warfare scenes which emphasises how ‘real’ and ‘heroizing’ or ‘fictional’ elements work together to create a symbolic scene. This approach is a necessary one, and while there is value in leaving the question of the phalanx until last, it should not be discarded entirely. The abundance of evidence that supports the phalanx as a basis for archaic warfare means that there is some value to assuming that any truly realistic depiction will include an approximation of a phalanx, but Echeverría’s more nuanced approach, that includes talking in symbolic meanings and the value of interactions between real and heroizing elements is an important one to consider in analysis.

²³ Hanson, 2013, pp. 256

²⁴ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 50

²⁵ Hanson, 2013, pp. 265

²⁶ Echeverría, 2015, pp. 60

Bibliography

Asher-Greve, J., and Sweeney, D., (2006) 'On Nakedness, Nudity, and Gender in Egyptian and Mesopotamian Art', in Schroer, S., *Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co.KG#

Echeverría, F., (2015) 'Heroic Fiction, Combat Scenes, and the Scholarly Reconstruction of Archaic Greek Warfare', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 58(1), pp. 33-60, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26343165> (Accessed: 9th May 2021)

Hanson, V., (2013) 'The Hoplite Narrative' in Kagan, D., and Viggiano, G., *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 256-275

Hilloowala, R., (2000) 'Anatomy and the Art of Archaic Greece' *THE ANATOMICAL RECORD (NEW ANAT.)* 261 pp. 50 –56.

Ridgway, B.S., (1977) *The archaic style in Greek sculpture*, Princeton; Guildford: Princeton University Press

Sage, M., (1996) *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook*, London and New York: Routledge

Watrous, L., (1982) 'The Sculptural Program of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi', in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 86(2), pp. 159-172, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/504829> (Accessed: 22nd May 2021)

Image Bibliography

Figure 1 – Boardman, J., (1978) *Greek sculpture: the archaic period a handbook*, London: Thames & Hudson, fig. 212.1, illus