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Composition in Athenian black-figure vase-painting: The 'Chariot in profile' *type scene*

Geralda Jurriaans-Helle

text

Composition in Athenian black-figure vase-painting: The 'Chariot in profile' *type scene*

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ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

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Preface

During my studies in the Department of Classical Languages and Classical Archaeology at the University of Amsterdam in the 1980s, I became fascinated by the question of how much the contemporary people in Syracuse or Agrigento hearing an Ode of Pindar would have understood the coherence and structure of the poem. In the 21st–century we can understand the poems only with difficulty and the help of learned commentaries, and even then only partially, because in many cases it is not obvious why the poet refers to a given myth. At the same time I began to wonder why there are so many Athenian vase-paintings in which we can recognise the depicted figures – and even their actions to a certain point – although we cannot be certain what event or story is depicted. I asked myself whether Athenian vase-painters and their customers perceived more in these images than endlessly repeated, rather meaningless representations of gods and heroes apparently placed together at random. Because Athenian pottery was popular for a long time over a large area and because Pindar was invited to write victory odes over and over again for patrons throughout the Mediterranean world, I became convinced that ancient Greeks did indeed comprehend more in both images and poems and that the fact that we do not is due to a deficiency of knowledge on our part.

This fascination resulted in two master *theseis* in which I tried to reconstruct the knowledge and associations of the contemporary public. For Ancient Greek Literature I wrote a master thesis about the literary court of Hieron of Syracuse, reviewed by Professor Jan-Maarten Bremer, who was open to my 'excursion' outside pure literary texts. I collected historical and archaeological information about the lives and times of Hieron and his family, friends, and enemies. Then I studied the literary texts written for Hieron, looking for references to facts and details that could clarify the meaning of the poems – and found that on certain points it could.

In my thesis for Classical Archaeology, judged by Professor Jaap Hemelrijk, who taught me how to look at vase-paintings, I studied the iconography of black-figure pursuit-scenes, analysing which compositions were used for different stories. After my studies I continued on this path and studied various groups of depictions, developing a method to identify some of the rules of the *pictorial language* of Attic black-figure vase-painting. I concluded that a consistent pictorial language was used and that even on mass-produced vases painters respected its rules, using fixed compositions and combinations of persons and

objects or attributes, comparable with the use of *type scenes*, *formulaic verses*, and *epitheta ornantia* in the Homeric epics. I argued that the resulting images could be recognised and associated with specific mythological episodes or daily life events by contemporary viewers. Variation was possible, but within boundaries: the vase-painters did not randomly replace one person with another, nor insert figures who did not belong to a scene into empty spaces.

A few years ago I realised that the method I was applying in my archaeological research was closely related to literary studies of Homer's oral poetic art and that I had brought my literary experience into my archaeological research, just as I had brought my archaeological experience into my literary research. This shows the interconnectedness of the various branches of *Altertumswissenschaft*.

I am deeply grateful to my *promotor* Professor Irene de Jong because she not only showed me the way and gave my research the methodological and theoretical background it needed but was also willing to guide me on this path, when I took up my research again seriously after 30 years of work as curator at the Allard Pierson Museum. I thank Professor Vladimir Stissi, my *co-promotor*, for his pointed but encouraging comments on the archaeological aspects of this study. Both colleagues gave me complete freedom in how I organised and executed the research.

I want to thank the staff of the Beazley Archive Pottery Database. The availability of so much data and so many images on so many vases is a great help for people interested in the topic. The BAPD made my lists much longer and underpinned my research. During the past 30 years I have visited many museums to study their collections. I want to thank all the colleague-curators who received me hospitably and facilitated my research, who answered my letters and emails, and who were willing to walk to the galleries to check *in persona* a detail on the vase. Especially I want to thank Dr. Sandra E. Knudsen, former curator of the Toledo Museum of Art, who not only improved my English but also saved me from many errors and ameliorated the text as a whole with her learned and kind comments and questions. Remaining errors are entirely my responsibility.

I started this dissertation in 1986 with a scholarship of *The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO,* then *ZWO)*, which I relinquished in 1988 to become curator of the Allard Pierson Museum, the archaeological museum of the University of Amsterdam. Although I did not have the time then to finish the dissertation, I never lost interest in the subject and kept studying it on my own time. In 2011, I decided to return to my research. In 2013–14 I took a sabbatical leave from work at the museum, thanks to having saved holidays for several years for this purpose and to funding by the *Employability Fund* of the University

of Amsterdam, for which I would like to thank the Board of the University. The Allard Pierson Museum is part of the Library of the University of Amsterdam, and I thank Maria Heijne, the Librarian of the University, for giving me permission in 2016 to finish the revision of the text partly in working time.

The love of antiquity was first given to me by my parents, Gerard Helle and Corrie Helle-Filarski, who told me many myths as bedtime stories and later brought me to museums and excavations. That love was further nourished by my teachers in Greek, Latin, and History at the Barlaeus Gymnasium in Amsterdam: Wim van Lakwijk, Arnold van Akkeren, and Gerard Portielje. When I started my studies of Classical Languages at the University I came into contact with many new aspects of antiquity including Archaeology, where my teachers were Professor Herman Brijder, who was later my director at the Allard Pierson Museum for 20 years and from whose specialist knowledge I also benefitted greatly during my research, Professor Joost Crouwel, and Dr. Kees Neeft. Their enthusiastic lectures made it inevitable that I decided to pursue not only a Master's degree in Classical Languages but also a Master's degree in Classical Archaeology, both of which I finished *cum laude*.

From the first day of my study at the University, Clara Klein was my best friend. I want to thank her for so much love and friendship and for the many conversations on all kinds of topics in Greek and Latin of all times.

Finally I want to thank my family, my children Boudewijn, Robrecht, and Machteld, and last but not least my husband Ruud Jurriaans for filling my life with so much more than this research and keeping me outside the ivory tower. The last sentence of this Preface is devoted to my red-figure friends, Lien, Tommie, James, and Sammy, without whom many late nights at the computer would have been much lonelier.