

STYLE AND POLITICS IN
ATHENIAN VASE-PAINTING

The Craft of Democracy, ca. 530–460 B.C.E.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset Electra 10.5/13.5 pt., with Weiss and Linotype Decoration Pi 1
System Quark XPress™ [HISBNT]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Neer, Richard T.

Style and politics in Athenian vase-painting / Richard T. Neer.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in classical art and iconography)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 79111 1

1. Vases, Greek. 2. Vase-painting, Greek. 3. Politics in art. I. Title. II. Series.

NK4645 .N44 2001

738.3'82'09385-dc21

2001035049

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from MMe
Millard Meiss Fund of the College Art Association.

ISBN 0 521 79111 1 hardback

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ONE



THE GREEK SYMPOSIUM AND THE POLITICS OF ADORNMENT

Attic vases were exported throughout the Mediterranean world, from the Sudan to Southern Russia, from Persia to Spain.¹ Yet their iconography remained resolutely Athenian, their written inscriptions exclusively Greek: indeed, their exotic Hellenism seems to have been part of their value to Etruscan and other “barbarian” consumers.² In these varied contexts, Attic pottery served a wide array of purposes: the vases could be dedications, grave-goods, or tableware. Presumably, a single vase could play first one role, then another. But the chief function of Attic pottery was to serve at drinking-parties, *symposia*.³ As noted in the Introduction, these gatherings were central to Greek society from the age of Homer to the coming of Rome. Literally a “drinking-together,” the symposium was in essence a highly ritualized drinking bout for upper-class men.⁴ The symposiasts, as participants were called, would come together after a meal in the “men’s room,” or *andrōn*, of a house. There they would measure out wine into a large bowl or *kratēr* placed at the center of the chamber. The wine would be mixed with water according to a more or less fixed formula (only barbarians drank their wine neat). Prayers would be said; libations would be poured to the gods. The men drank reclining in pairs on long couches. Entertainment was provided by hired musicians, both male and female, who often doubled as prostitutes. The men themselves would sing – the genres known today as elegy and lyric monody are essentially symposium verse – sometimes taking turns doing so. They would tell jokes, one after another. Sometimes they would dress up in elaborate costumes. The ideal symposium involved sexual gratification of one kind or another – between the prostitutes and the other guests the possible combinations were almost limitless – and would culminate in a public dance (*kōmos*) through the city streets: a public proclamation of the drinking-group’s solidarity. The small social groups that resulted from these practices were known as *hetaireiai*, literally “companionships.”⁵ They were often

overtly political; or rather, in the early years of the Greek city-states, politics was often thought in terms borrowed from these groups. Thus, by the fifth century, *hetaireia* came to signify “political faction.”

Such a brief characterization cannot do justice to an immensely complex network of social practices. This chapter will attempt to provide more detail: it owes a great debt to recent work by Oswyn Murray, Wolfgang Rösler, Luigi Rossi, Pauline Schmitt-Pantel, Massimo Vetta, and others. Throughout this book, I shall argue that the literature of the Greek symposium – that is, certain forms of lyric and elegy, plus drinking-songs, riddles, jokes, and anecdotes – can provide us with a set of terms with which to approach the artifacts.⁶ The vast majority of Attic vases is connected to these parties in one way or another: they are drinking-cups, bowls for mixing wine and water, pitchers, ladles, wine-coolers, water-carriers, wine-carriers, and so on. Attic pottery is symposium furniture. One of the central premises of this study is that the *poetry* of the symposium may be used to illuminate the *pottery*, for the simple reason that both participate in the same social rituals. More generally, the varied and elaborate customs of the Greek drinking-party – games; sexual activities; ways of holding cups, or singing, or relating to one’s comrades – will be crucial points of reference throughout this discussion.

Three aspects of the symposium will be especially germane. First, sympotic literature is particularly open to reflexive or self-referential language: puns, riddles, elaborate metaphors, ornate poetic conceits. Chapter Two will argue that Attic pottery employs similar rhetorical strategies: that it is, in this respect, a pictorial counterpart to poetry. Second, the symposium was a prime site for the socialization of upper-class males: it was a place in which personalities were formed, consolidated, and reinforced. This aspect will be particularly relevant to Chapter Three. Third, the symposium was fundamentally an elite event: and as such, it was intimately bound up with politics. The politics of the drinking-party will figure prominently in Chapters Three and Four. The present chapter will examine each of these aspects in detail; it will then conclude with a discussion of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to read an artifact in “contextual” terms.

MASTERS OF TRUTH

In order to discuss the literature of the symposium, it is necessary first to step back and examine some of the general themes of Archaic poetry. An early, programmatic statement of the nature of poetic speech appears in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, when the poet is accosted by the Muses as he walks on Helikon. “Shepherds of the wilderness,” they say, “wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many falsehoods like the truth, but when we will, we know how to utter true things.”⁷ Like the familiar Liar’s Paradox (“I always lie”), this disconcerting remark defies easy reading. It has spawned reams of scholarly text: no one can decide just what it means.⁸ One thing at least seems clear: if even the Muses can lie, then

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poetry is not a comfortable zone of true utterance, and deception is an ever-present possibility. This quality defines the literature of the Archaic age: it declares itself to be neither true nor false, but ambiguous to the core.

Marcel Detienne and others have argued that this ambiguity derives from poetry's central role in the social life of preliterate Greece.⁹ An oral culture relies on poets for knowledge of the past: the singers perform the all-important function of meting out "fame," *kleos*. They preserve the memories of the heroes, and through their memory they provide the only link with the past and its traditions. The absence of any independent record means that their stories have no external guarantee. They are, in effect, "true" by virtue of being told. Early Greek poetry is in this sense performative: truth is a discursive effect, its power guaranteed by the fact that it has been pronounced by a divinely selected poet.¹⁰ The poet is, in Detienne's phrase, a "master of truth," someone who fills the social role of commemorating the past – and, by necessity, of "creating" the past as well.¹¹

This system is neither as simple nor as stable as it may first appear. The Greeks themselves realized very early on that, in practice, truth of this sort cannot be distinguished from mere invention. Even Hesiod's Muses can lie, and "the master of truth is also a master of deception."¹² Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea who possesses the gift of prophecy and never lies, is a shape-shifter, metamorphosing into water, fire, and other forms when captured and pinned down.¹³ There is always at least a potential danger that the poet's truth will likewise dissolve, that it too is no more than a "falsehood *like* the truth." This double valence only elevates the prestige of those gifted persons – seers, poets, and kings – who can work with speech and master it. Yet it also suggests that poetry is, at the core, as shifty and unstable as "the Sea's Ancient."

Of course, not just anyone can seize such authority. The high status of an oral poet derives from the fact that he, and only he, has been selected by the Muses to reveal such truths to the community. In more concrete terms, the power of performatives is always political by definition. No pronouncement carries weight on its own: it depends on the existence of a social network to support it. Performatives can even signal fundamental changes in political structures, as for instance when a new constitution replaces an old one.¹⁴ The authority to exercise such speech is at once a source and an effect of power. Detienne argues that, in early Greece, performative truth was inseparable from a particular social system based on kingship and the ideology of the warrior-prince. The decline of that system, which coincided with the rise of the city-state, entailed the decline of the prestige of poetic speech. The inherent truthfulness of a poetic utterance could no longer be taken for granted: its mystical authority had begun to slip away. This situation, visible already in the *Odyssey*, reached crisis proportions in the sixth and fifth centuries with the spread of literacy and the development of competing modes of speech such as rhetoric and sophism. The latter were essentially public and civic: different

in kind from the fireside songs of the Homeric bards, or the elegiac poems of Archaic drinking-parties.

The late Archaic and early Classical periods mark the crucial moment in this gradual “secularization” of poetic speech. It is, we might say, an epistemic shift, away from the sacred and quasi-magical utterances of the bard and toward the publicly debated speech of the historian, the sophist, and the orator.¹⁵ Poets of the later sixth century, working on commission for aristocratic patrons, stress the artificial aspect of poetry: its status as a material product, made by an artisan and purchased by a customer.¹⁶ They downplay the sacred or “truthful” aspect in favor of a rhetoric of craft, skill, and pleasure. Even in Homer, Odysseus praises a song about the Trojan War, not for its veracity, but for its formal qualities: it is, he says, “orderly,” *kata kosmon*. By contrast, the speech of the upstart Thersites in *Iliad* 2 is *ou kata kosmon*, “disorderly.”¹⁷ From earliest times, the Greeks describe their literature in terms of the pleasure it gives rather than its historical accuracy: poetry is “sweet,” “delightful,” “honey-like,” and so on.¹⁸ Rhapsodes “adorn” (*kosmein*) the lines they recite in order to make them all the more pleasing to the audience – as though a poem were something to be decorated, dressed up, not distilled into an essence of truthfulness.¹⁹ The standard of value is more hedonistic than historical. Plato condemns poetry for just this reason: it is, he says, a “screen” for hiding the truth, an obstacle to true vision, not transparent at all.²⁰ As one sophist put it near the end of the fifth century, “Poets create with pleasure, not truth, as their goal.”²¹

This hedonism must be situated within the broader context of the *agōn*, or “competition,” which was a poem’s normal venue.²² In Archaic Greece, poems were not read in solitude but were performed in public. Often the occasion was a contest of some sort: all of the major Panhellenic games, save the Olympics, included musical events. Like modern-day rappers in dance clubs, Greek poets would often cast aspersions on the competition, declaring rival works to be inferior. Typical in this respect is the priamel form of composition, in which the poet begins by opposing his or her version of a tale to the competing accounts.²³ Thus the first *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos* opens:

For some say [that it was] at Dracanum; and some, on windy Icarus; and some, in Naxos; ... and others, by the deep-eddying river Alpheus, that pregnant Semele bore you to Zeus the thunder-lover. And others yet, lord, say you were born at Thebes; but all these lie. The Father of men and gods gave you birth far from men and secretly from white-armed Hera. There is a certain Nysa, a most lofty mountain...²⁴

Although the poet does make a claim to truth in these lines, the net effect is to undermine the factual value of traditional narratives as such. For if (other) poets can lie, then the mere fact that a tale has been set down in verse does not guarantee its validity. Faced with such battling truth-claims, the audience can judge only

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on the basis of subjective criteria: which version is more pleasing?²⁵ Such agonistic speech, free from obligation to the truth, appears even in Homer: the heroes of the *Iliad* engage in formal boast-and-insult contests – for which Richard Martin has used the term “flyting” – which are decided on the basis of rhetorical skill, not veracity.²⁶ The point is to give a good performance, to crush one’s opponent with verbal prowess: skill, not truth, determines the winner.

THE RIDDLE-NET

The qualities outlined above – a complex attitude toward truth and language, an emphasis on hedonism, and a competitive motivation – pervade the symposium.²⁷ Riddles, for example, were a favorite sympotic pastime. The Greek word for riddle, *griphos*, literally means “net,” and a Greek riddle is more than just a tricky question. The point, says the fourth-century comedian Antiphanes, is “Never [to speak of] a thing itself, but to twist it together in a thick mass with other things.”²⁸ This twisting could take the form of hyper-elaborate speech, as, for example, speaking of “the hollowbodied vessel formed by the whirl of the wheel, fashioned of clay, baked in another house of mother earth,” instead of just saying, “pot.”²⁹ In the *Deipnosophistai*, a virtual encyclopedia of the symposium compiled in the second century C.E. from much earlier sources, Athenaeus gives an extensive catalogue of different types of sympotic riddles.³⁰ The “most ancient” kind, and the one “closest to the true nature of riddling,” is the word-riddle, the *logikos griphos*.³¹ Its guiding principle is double-meaning, *homōnymia*: “What is the same everywhere and nowhere?” the answer being, Time.³² Likewise, a drinker would have to decode the sentence, “A man that was not a man saw and did not see a bird that was not a bird perched on wood that was not wood, which he hit with a stone that was not stone,” the answer being that a near-sighted eunuch hit a bat perched on a fennel-stalk with a lump of pumice.³³ Plato also knew this joke, and not surprisingly he frowned upon it.³⁴ The “ambiguities of the banquet,” *epamphoterizontes en tais hestiasisin*, are no fit pastime for philosophers: men who played such games are like *philodoxoi*, people captivated by the world of seeming (*doxa*) and deceptive appearances. The principle of *homōnymia* involved a splitting of meaning, a twisting of language, that Plato found intolerable. But at the drinking-party, such behavior was encouraged.

The *griphos* also reveals the agonistic quality of the symposium: those who failed to guess the answer had to drain a cup of wine mixed with salt-water.³⁵ Likewise, iambic poetry – a distinctive sympotic form – is among other things a way for drinking-groups to declare their supremacy over rivals.³⁶ For present purposes, however, the most significant form of sympotic competition may be the *skolion*, a special class of drinking-song.³⁷ One man would begin, and his neighbor would then take up the tune and try to cap or outdo him in a convivial competition.³⁸ Marking the progress of the song was a branch of myrtle or laurel, which

each singer would hold in turn.³⁹ Thus passing from one drinker to the next, the song would wind its way around the party: and the name *skolion*, or “crooked,” seems to evoke this meandering path.⁴⁰ In this respect, the *skolion* is a bit like a drinking-cup or *kylix*, which was passed around the room over the course of an evening. Cups could even be used in competitions like *kottabos*, a drinking-game that involved flicking wine-lees at a target: the fifth-century poet Dionysios Khalkos called this pastime “the strife of cups.”⁴¹ On certain, admittedly rare, occasions, we even find snatches of these songs inscribed on the vases.⁴² Here again, in other words, there exists a manifest link between the decoration of the vases and their function as sympotic paraphernalia. As will become clear in Chapter Three, the analogy between pot and *skolion* may be taken quite far. For now, however, the chief point is that both provide arenas for competitive displays of skill.

ASKĒSIS AND THE POIKILON ĒTHOS

Puns, wordplay, and sweet lying poetry are only one aspect of the symposium. The Greek drinking-party was a place in which poets, singers, and audiences could all craft identities for themselves, a place in which people could transform themselves, if only for a little while. Obviously, getting drunk is one such change: and it is worth recalling that Dionysos, god of wine, is also the god of theater, masks, and alterity (Figure 1).⁴³ Nowadays we might call such transformations *self-fashioning*, but the Greek equivalent is perfect: *askēsis*, a word that connotes physical exercise, ethical training, and artisanal embellishment all at the same time.⁴⁴ In Greek, to work on one’s body – to train it, to make it fit for war – is homologous to making oneself into a good citizen, and also to craftsmanship.

The situation is at its most complex and intriguing in a collection of poems grouped under the name of Theognis. Because these poems were meant to be performed at sympotic gatherings and because they deal explicitly with sympotic themes, they have a natural affinity with vase-painting. Indeed, snatches of Theognis’s poems were inscribed on at least four, and perhaps as many as six, vases – more than any other poet – and Theognis himself is praised as beautiful on a drinking-cup of the mid-sixth century.⁴⁵ Theognidean elegy is, for the most part, either didactic or erotic, or both.⁴⁶ The poet addresses his “beloved” or *erōmenos*, a boy by the name of Kyrnos, instructing him in how to comport himself, whom to befriend and whom to avoid, what his politics should be, chiding him for his faithlessness, praising his beauty, and so on. The result is what J. Hillis Miller would call a “version of Pygmalion”: a complex interplay of mutually ramified tropes, which expressly thematizes the process by which the personae of author and character – Theognis and Kyrnos – emerge into a notional vitality.⁴⁷ The *Theognidea* is an allegory of *askēsis*, acting out the “making” of Kyrnos and Theognis both. The guiding trope is *prosoipopoeia*, the making present of someone absent or dead.⁴⁸ It



1. Kantharos by the Foundry Painter, with plastic attachments in the form of a Dionysos-mask. First quarter of the fifth century. Photo: J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu.

is thus suggestive that, as Gregory Nagy has persuasively argued, Theognis himself may be no more than a generic name applied to verses of a certain type.⁴⁹ For Nagy, names like “Hesiod” and “Theognis” are best understood as “speaking positions,” roles, from which any number of poets could address their equally various audiences. Archaic singers, on this view, did not express their inner subjectivities so much as they constructed socially useful personae for themselves, rang changes on certain traditional formulae. Theognis and his Galatean beloved are not historical personages so much as discursive conceits, hallowed by tradition.⁵⁰

The result is an elaborate allegory of selfhood, self-making, and metaphor. A key passage in this respect comes at lines 213–18, where the poet addresses his own heart:

My heart, to all your friends [*philoî*] keep turning about your *poikilon êthos*, properly mixing your temperament to the like of each. Have the

temperament of a tangled cuttlefish, who always looks like whatever rock he has just clung to. Now be like this; then, at another time, become someone else in your coloring.⁵¹

Another passage, this time addressed to Kyrnos, employs similar language:

Kyrnos, to all friends turn a *poikilon ēthos*, properly mixing your temperament to the like of each; now follow this man, now like another raise up your temperament. Surely skill is even better than great virtue.⁵²

Left untranslated above is the phrase *poikilon ēthos*. Its literal meaning is “a painted character”; but *poikilos* is a particularly resonant term.⁵³ As Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant have demonstrated, it describes shimmering or dappled things – a bright weapon, the hide of a fawn, soft fabrics – but also thoughts and personalities. The trickster Odysseus is *poikilomētis*, a man of shifting and changeable wiles; in later literature, Fortune, *Tykhē*, is *poikilē*, because it always changes; as are foxes, because of their craft. For Plato, the *poikilos* is simply “that which is never the same as itself,” *oudepote tauton*.⁵⁴ Such is the *ēthos* that Theognis desires for himself and his friend: one that is transient, tangled, and self-divided.

Elsewhere, however, Theognis seems to express just the opposite view, as when he praises the “trustworthy companion (*pistos hetairos*) with no guile in him.”⁵⁵ This discrepancy has led some scholars to view the *poikilon ēthos* as a purely cynical gesture, an “extreme negative attitude [that] runs counter to the whole ethic of archaic friendship.”⁵⁶ But the contradiction is only apparent. Giovanni Ferrari and Bruno Gentili have separately shown that Theognis is not advocating deception so much as adaptability. One should read the lines in conjunction with passages like lines 313–14 (“Among the wild I am wild, among the just I am the most just of all men”) or lines 627–28 (“It is shameful to be drunk among the sober, and shameful to be sober among the drunk”).⁵⁷ The message in each case is that a good symposiast should collapse his identity into that of the group, adapting himself to its example as surely as the octopus adapts himself to a rock.⁵⁸ In this light, the *poikilon ēthos* seems less like bad faith and more like an extreme form of group solidarity. As Gentili writes of lines 213–18:

The nobleman’s ability – his *sophía* – lies precisely in his ability to adjust himself to the situation at hand and not to lose his inbred, intuitive sense for what is opportune to say or not say in the presence of a given audience. Without such vigilant attention to the social context in which he is moving, the nobleman falls into an obtuse inflexibility – a true condition of *atropía*, dulled perceptions, and inability to extricate himself adroitly from difficult situations.⁵⁹

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Giovanni Ferrari takes this argument a bit further, suggesting that the contradiction between a *poikilon ēthos* and a “trusty companion” evaporates as soon as one dispenses with an anachronistic notion of interiority:

To see this ethic as a Goffmanesque donning and doffing of social masks would be to appeal to the concept of an authentic ego “behind” the masks that seems to me simply not applicable here. The friend who can adapt to his fellow, who knows where he belongs, and who finds his values not within the closet of an authentic self but in the company of the noble – this is as good as it gets in Theognis’s world.⁶⁰

Although Ferrari’s vision of an Archaic man devoid of inner life may be too extreme, the basics of his reading seem valid.⁶¹ Indeed, it finds dramatic confirmation in a fragment of Pindar, which at once cites and clarifies the Theognidean imagery:

My son, let your mind resemble most the rock-clinging beast of the sea;
consort with men of all cities; with those around you agree freely; think
one thing, then another.⁶²

The *poikilon ēthos* is that of the symposiast who is at one with his comrades. In its ideal form, this adaptability is not quite the same as acting or role-playing. Quite the contrary: the cuttlefish’s transformation is, in theory at least, a complete identification with the environment. Thus the mask is the ideal drinking-partner, as is shown by a black-figure cup depicting a mask accompanied by the word *pistias*, “trusty”: to be a good companion is to play a role, to engage in a *mimēsis* strictly comparable to that of a theatrical actor.⁶³

In putting forward this conception of selfhood, the *Theognoidea* sets the terms for its own performance. Given that the anonymous “I” of much sympotic poetry – from Theognis to Arkhilokhos – is not so much a particular individual as a traditional speaking-position, the symposiast who performs one of these songs is effectively playing a role. In a poem like Theognis, lines 213–18, the linguistic shifters – “I,” “you,” “they” – do just that: they shift, so that the poem’s *egō* may apply equally to any of the assembled party who chooses to take up the song.⁶⁴ To sing these lines is to adopt the persona of Theognis or, more generally, of an aggrieved lover (*erastēs*). The result is a tension, probably considered pleasing, between the singer and his role.⁶⁵ At times, aided by drink, the role could win out and identification become complete. The historian Timaeus tells of some symposiasts at Akragas who – presumably after singing a song with a nautical theme, of which there were many in the sympotic repertoire – became convinced that they were actually on board a storm-tossed ship and began to throw their couches out the window in order to lighten the ballast.⁶⁶ This total collapse of self into song seems to have been con-

sidered exceptional (that is why the anecdote was worth telling), and the symposium was probably more frequently a site of negotiations between singer and song, between the *egō* of the poem and that of the performer.

Similar issues run through the whole gamut of sympotic poetry and permeate the symposium as a whole. Here again, the *skolia*, or drinking-songs, are instructive. One of the striking things about the *skolia* that have come down to us is their emphasis on the plasticity of selfhood. One distinct type, for instance, seems to have opened with the words *eithe genoiman*, “I wish I might become...,” as in the following:

I wish I might become a beautiful ivory lyre, and beautiful boys might
take me to the dance of Dionysos.⁶⁷

or

I wish I might become an unrefined, beautiful, big thing of gold, and a
beautiful woman might wear me with a mind pure of evil.⁶⁸

If Massimo Vetta is correct, these two couplets represent an example of competitive “flyting”: the second poem reprises and seeks to outdo the first.⁶⁹ At the same time, they both invoke the now familiar sympotic trope of alterity: to become *something else*, if only for a moment. The symposium is a place to fantasize about being different, or indeed to become different. Something of the sort is going on with the well-known “Harmodios *skolia*,” a set of four songs devoted to the assassins of the tyrannical Hipparkhos. Two of them read as follows:

I’ll carry my sword in a myrtle-branch, like Harmodios and Aristogeiton,
when they killed the tyrant and made Athens equal under the law.⁷⁰

and

I’ll carry my sword in a myrtle-branch, like Harmodios and Aristogeiton,
when at the festival of Athena they killed the man, the tyrant
Hipparkhos.⁷¹

These songs are noteworthy for many reasons and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. For now, the first two lines of each are of interest, in particular the phrase *en myrtou kladi*, “in a myrtle-branch.”⁷² The implication is that Harmodios and Aristogeiton hid their swords in branches of myrtle, presumably to disguise them in the Panathenaic procession where the killing took place: myrtle-branches were held by festival-goers. But as Martin Ostwald points out, given the importance of myrtle-branches in the performance of drinking-songs, the motif is by no means trivial. As noted earlier, myrtle branches were passed from one singer

to the next as the *skolia* followed their “crooked” course around a room. At any given moment, therefore, the person singing is already holding a myrtle-branch, already imitating the Tyrannicides. The songs do not just evoke a vague spirit of emulation; rather, they suggest a virtual reenactment of the heroic deed. Not that symposiasts were actually expected to leap from the couches and pretend to be Harmodios and Aristogeiton (though in light of the events at Akragas described above, such goings-on are not to be ruled out). Rather, the very act of singing the song and holding the branch is in itself a kind of performance. The singer takes on the role of Harmodios even as he promises to do so in the future; and so for that matter does each *hetairos* when it comes his turn to sing.

The preoccupation with role-playing pervades all aspects of the symposium. There is, in fact, a sense in which the very institution of the drinking-party is itself a mimicry of older, Asiatic practice. The couches, the ladles and strainers, even the recumbent pose of the drinkers, all derive substantially from the Near East; certain vase-shapes, such as the rhyton, likewise have Asiatic origins.⁷³ In this respect, the symposium is part of a broad orientalizing tendency characteristic of Greek aristocracies of the seventh, sixth, and even the fifth centuries.⁷⁴

As M.C. Miller and others have argued, Archaic elites looked to their counterparts in the East for models of behavior.⁷⁵ Sappho, Alkaios, Mimnermos, and Anakreon – to name only the most obvious examples – repeatedly celebrate a life of luxury and ostentation. They suggest, moreover, that the East is where the truest aristocrats live, where the privileges of birth are most successfully exerted over the lower orders, where the elite lifestyle achieves its fullest realization and its most emphatic justification. A keyword for this orientalizing ideal was *habrosynē*, which Leslie Kurke glosses as a “luxurious lifestyle consciously adopted by Greek aristocrats (first in the East, then spreading to mainland Greece) as a form of differentiation and self-definition.”⁷⁶ To be *habros* was to emulate Easterners in general and Lydians in particular; thus Anakreon, a prime exponent of this ideal, declares himself to be *Lydopatheis*, or Lydia-mad.⁷⁷ This lifestyle had fairly distinct attributes, consisting, according to Kurke, of rich, flowing robes; long and elaborate hairstyles; gold jewelry; perfume; wine; song; and a general emphasis on things sensual.⁷⁸ To the extent that the symposium sought to re-create this environment through its appropriation of Eastern customs, it was a site of imitation and emulation: in short, of *mimēsis*. Indeed, the reactionary Athenian Kritias, writing at the end of the fifth century, suggests that the whole of the symposium – pottery included – is an exercise in *lydopatheia*: “A Lydian hand, born in Asia, invented [wine] vessels, extending of toasts to the right, and challenging by name the person to whom one wishes to drink a toast.”⁷⁹

The iconography of Archaic vase-painting registers the cult of *habrosynē* most clearly in the so-called Anakreontic vases.⁸⁰ Produced from circa 530 to circa 470, these sympotic vessels show men dressed in long, unbelted gowns, with earrings and a turban-like headdress known as a *mitra*; sometimes they wear boots, some-



2. Stamnos showing sympotic revelers in Lydian attire. First quarter of the fifth century. Photo: Archivo Fotográfico, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid.

times sandals; they often carry parasols and *barbita*, or Lydian lyres (Figure 2).⁸¹ Beazley saw these images as depicting the effeminate Anakreon and his boon companions, since three examples bear the poet's name and the garments are superficially feminine. More recently, however, Keith de Vries has shown that the costume is not feminine but Lydian, while Donna Kurtz and John Boardman have connected the iconography to the Anakreontic discourse of *lydopatheia*.⁸² As Kurke observes, the attributes of the "Anakreontics" conform exactly to those of the luxurious man, the *habros*.⁸³ It is this ideal that the vases depict: Anakreon appears on them because he was a prime exponent of that broader discourse.⁸⁴

These vases suggest that the imitation of the East took place at the level of material practice: dressing up, going to parties, presenting oneself in a certain way in public. It was a kind of performance. Xenophanes, who frowned on this brand of elitism, conveys as much in his account of the oligarchs in his native Kolophon:

Having learned useless luxuries [*habrosynai*] from the Lydians, as long as they were free from hateful tyranny, they went to the agora wearing



3. Neck of a rhyton by the Brygos Painter, showing a symposiast in Eastern attire. Ca. 480. Photo © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1988.8.

purple cloaks, no less than a thousand in general, boastful, glorying in their beautiful hair, drenched in unguents curiously wrought in scent.⁸⁵

The Kolophonian aristocrats, when in power, display and justify their status by assimilating themselves to the older and more established aristocracies of their Eastern neighbors; that is, by making what amounts to an intensely political fashion statement. It seems from the evidence of the vase-paintings as though a similar dressing-up took place in late Archaic Athens, even under the Peisistratids. Not only did Attic symposiasts imitate the East in the generalized terms of the symposium, but they actually seem on occasion to have put on a sort of quasi-Lylian costume.⁸⁶ At the drinking-party, one could stop being Greek and become a nobleman from the land of Gyges and Croesus. One could even become a Mede: Miller has suggested that the appearance of symposiasts wearing an Asiatic hat called a *kidaris* represents a corresponding appropriation of Persian attributes (Figure 3).⁸⁷ The identification with the East is, in short, very literal and very deliberate.⁸⁸ The *habros*, the “lydopath,” and the *kidaris*-wearer are all versions of the *poikilon ēthos*, men who use the symposium to define themselves recursively through mimicry.

These images are important reminders of the political and social stance of the symposium. As Mazzarino, Kurke, and Morris have argued, *habrosynē* and its attendant values represent but one site within a broader “contest of paradigms” in

poetry, politics, and the visual arts – a contest that pitted adherents of traditional, “Panhellenic” virtues against those who took the collectivity of the polis as the standard.⁸⁹ We see traces of this latter position in Xenophanes, for whom the elite lifestyle is “useless,” *anōphelea*; or again in Arkhilokhos and Hipponax, both of whom disparage things Lydian.⁹⁰ This division is only part of a larger bifurcation within the corpus of Archaic poetry.⁹¹ In an important discussion, Ian Morris has classed Sappho, Alkaios, Anakreon, Ibykos, Alkman, and Mimnermos with the “elitists,” and Semonides, Arkhilokhos, Xenophanes, and Hipponax with the civic or “middling” group.

The differences between the two poetic traditions came down to a single point: the elitists legitimated their special role from sources outside the polis; the middling poets rejected such claims. The former blurred distinctions between male and female, present and past, mortal and divine, Greek and Lydian, to reinforce a distinction between aristocrat and commoner; the latter did the opposite. . . . Elitist poetry was the oppositional literature of an *immanent elite*, an imagined community evoked in the interstices of the polis world – at interstate games, in the arrival of a *xenos* [guest-friend] from a different city, or behind the closed doors of the symposium. . . . It was opposed on all counts by beliefs which made the polis the center of the world, but which we can only see through the poetry of the aristocrats who accepted it.⁹²

In this light, it is noteworthy that the “Anakreontic” vases were produced under the Peisistratids and the Kleisthenic democracy – precisely the time at which the luxury-loving elite was at its weakest politically. The pictures seem to be compensating for the failings of political reality.

By and large, vase-painting comes out squarely on the side of the Panhellenic aristocracy. It is probably no coincidence that Sappho, Alkaios, and Anakreon are all portrayed on pots, nor for that matter that an important black-figure painter should sign his name as *ho Lydos*, “the Lydian.”⁹³ This ideological slant is not surprising given that vases were luxury goods made for symposia. But it would be reductive to assume that pots must univocally express this party line. A black-figure oinochoe in Athens, signed by Xenokles as potter and Kleisophos as painter, shows a scene that could have been taken from Hipponax (Figure 4).⁹⁴ Just as the choliambic poet scathingly depicts a luxury-loving aristocrat evacuating his bowels while being spanked by a Lydian whore, so Kleisophos shows *mitra*-wearing lydopaths as incontinent louts rolling in their own filth.⁹⁵ Lest the class associations be missed, the krater at the center of the party bears the image of a horse: symbol of the *hippeis*, the horse-owning upper class.⁹⁶ The oinochoe employs the rhetoric of “middling” invective, suggesting that it was intended for a drinking-group with corresponding sympathies. The Kleisophos vase is unusual (interestingly, no other works have been attributed to his hand), but it cautions against simply assuming



4. Oinochoe signed by Xenokles as potter and Kleisophos as painter. Ca. 530. Drawing, after FR.

that all sympotic vessels have the same affinities as the “Anakreontics.” More broadly, it is entirely unjustified to assume that vase-painters would have shared the views of their clients. Rather, it is one of the chief dramas of vase-painting that it should be a site of negotiation between elites and artisans.

PARATACTIC HISTORY

Up until now, this chapter has argued four basic points. First, that sympotic poetry insists on its own materiality and is preoccupied with the complexities of language and reference; second, that this poetry is also a “version of Pygmalion,” insofar as it thematizes the construction of identity in and as prosopopoeia; third, that the symposium allegorized this process by fostering certain types of politically charged performance, such as the singing of *skolia* and the enactment of *habrosynē*; and fourth, that vase-painting addresses all of the above, either directly (in the inscription of *skolia* and the representation of “lydopaths”) or indirectly (in the broader repertoire of theatrical motifs), or in some combination of the two. Along the way, it has become clear that Ferrari’s historicizing account of the *poikilon ēthos* has much to recommend it, at least if it is taken to mean that the *hetairos* neither stood aloof from, nor melded wholly with, his *hetaireia*. Rather, we should look for a more dynamic and, indeed, problematic interplay between the two.

In trying to connect these literary representations with the vases, it is tempting to appeal to heuristic devices like “sympotic discourse,” “upper-class ideology,” or “Greek culture.” Such terms function more or less as *contexts*: they mediate between, and thereby explain, disparate phenomena. However, mediating figures of this sort can unjustifiably reify an assemblage of metaphors and practices into a

determinate historical entity. “Symptotic discourse,” for example, is itself no more than a tissue of rhetorical figures: a multiplicity of representations of selfhood, sexuality, class, and so on. As a result, it can provide no firm grounding for interpretation. Contexts require their own contextualizing, and the problem quickly becomes one of endless regress.

So it is worth pausing to reconsider contextualism. Behind every object, says the contextualist, there is a set of fixed terms that may act a guide to interpretation.⁹⁷ We are often told, for example, that “The Parthenon must be understood in the context of Periklean ideology.” “Periklean ideology” is here used to explain certain aspects of the building, such as its iconography or its lavish use of marble. But the underlying distinction is specious, for the simple reason that the Parthenon is at least partially constitutive of “Periklean ideology.” There is no good reason to privilege the latter over the former: they are inextricable. More generally, the antique past survives today only in the form of material traces: texts, buildings, artifacts of all kinds.⁹⁸ For all intents and purposes, these traces *are* the Greeks: they, and only they, are what we study. Everything we know about the ancient world derives from them: every available “context,” every available “discourse,” every available “ideology.” It is tempting to explain these traces in terms of one another, to say (for instance) that one trace “caused” another. To do so, however, is merest tautology. For the very ordering that such a statement presupposes – for example, privileging “Periklean ideology” over the Parthenon, or “symptotic discourse” over a particular red-figure pot – also derives from the material record. One can only justify it in terms of further information drawn from the same general fund. There is no end to this process, no stable ground outside archaeology from which to order our information about the past. Contexts and the like are effects and not causes, and therefore cannot be used to explain the material record without risking circularity.⁹⁹

In place of a causal or genetic model, we must insist that the material record of antiquity is no more (or less) than an assemblage of artifacts in juxtaposition. To pull a given artifact (say, a red-figured pot) out of this assemblage and view it in terms of other artifacts from the same assemblage is clearly not *explanation* so much as *metonymy*. It makes the image signify through its proximity with something else: a lyric poem, a story about Kleisthenes, a way of holding a cup, or what have you. Such a view will not provide a diachronic statement of cause-and-effect so much as a synchronic juxtaposition of artifacts. Or, to vary the terms, it will be paratactic instead of hierarchical. The danger, of course, is that of producing a mere concatenation of details instead of the desired, mosaic-like effect.¹⁰⁰ In the absence of mediating terms like “culture,” “power,” or “ideology,” it is difficult to relate the assembled bits of information in a meaningful way. Even metonymy requires a system – a grammar – in which to work. The problem is one of formalization: of legislating the formal relations between material traces.¹⁰¹ We have to find something to replace mystifying idealisms like Politics or Culture.

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One response to this dilemma is simply to accept freewheeling rhetoric as a liberation from the constraints of fact. Such maneuvers are hallmarks of the debased post-structuralism of the late 1980s. It cannot be said too often that rigorous post-structuralist criticism never denied the workaday referentiality of language. Rather, it insisted on the *potential* aberrance of reference, and on the ethical importance of acknowledging that potential.¹⁰² The whole point of that critique was to find a way out of idealist aesthetics. But the denial of reference, the elevation of a definitively groundless rhetoric – in a word, freeplay – is nothing more than the recuperation of that aesthetic. It is formalism at its worst, debilitating and apolitical.

A better alternative is to reconsider “the political” (or “the cultural,” or what have you). Is it something artworks (and their makers) can engage, interact with, play themselves out in relation to? Or is it, on the contrary, the very stuff out of which artworks (and their makers) are made? I favor the latter view, and suggest that we cannot explain representations in terms of politics because *the two are indistinguishable*. As far as any historical project is concerned, “politics” is a name for the interface between two categories of representation: those we call artworks (images, literary texts, buildings, statues) and those we call “history” (images, non-literary texts, buildings, deposit-layers, all construed as evidence for particular events in the past).¹⁰³ In the case of archaeology, this situation is especially pressing: as noted earlier, the sheer paucity of information about the ancient world makes the mediation of our knowledge in, through, and as representations all the more apparent. What I think we have to do, and what I try to do in the pages that follow, is find a way to look at images that takes their constitutive role in social life as a starting point. Instead of describing artworks in terms of other representations and claiming to have thereby “explained” them, I will try to see how an object might in itself be a political act – not the hypostasis or the signifier of a political act, but the very thing itself. Greek vases, for instance, are not representations of ideas (*Vorstellungen*), nor even manifestations or presentations of them (*Darstellungen*), but the physical traces of actions.

In place of the foreground/background vocabulary of contextualism, therefore, we might speak instead of *fields*, *sites*, or *scenes* in which vases can act. In contrast to an institutional, social, or political context, such a field would consist of a set of ideas and material practices linked together by contiguity. Returning to the subject at hand, the symposium is at once a way of thinking about masculinity and food; a theme of elegy and monody; a political trope; a set of protocols for arranging one’s body relative to furniture and people; a mode of intersubjective address ... the list goes on, and it is not quite endless. Neither pure discourse nor spontaneous, unmediated practice, but somewhere in between, the symposium is among other things a place where Greeks used painted ceramic vessels, lifting them to their lips, pouring from them, dropping them on the floor. These vessels – which often as not depict the very symposia at which they were used – cannot be understood as the hypostaseis of some Ur-Symposium, for they helped to define the symposium in

the first place: not just for us, but for the Greeks as well. Instead, they may be seen, provisionally at least, as *participants in a sympotic field*. In essence, the notion of field differs from context in a small but crucial respect: the field is concrete and material. The “glue” linking the various representations is not an immanent *Zeitgeist* but a set of specific, repeated practices: real activities performed or fantasized by real agents.¹⁰⁴

Such fields, sites, or scenes are by their very nature contingent, improvisational, and fuzzy around the edges. Attic vases were manufactured and used within a broad, shifting and often contested network of discourses and institutions.¹⁰⁵ Each “point” in this network has its own appropriate reading strategies, no one of which can exhaust the imagery of even a single pot. Indeed, it is precisely because Attic pots may appear at so many points that their meaning is irreducibly impure. Signals are constantly criss-crossing from point to point, so that at any given node the vase attracts a certain amount of background “noise.”¹⁰⁶ Thus a pot in the symposium is not wholly free of “foreign” associations: it may allude tacitly or overtly to sacrifice, the export market or local politics, all of which are technically alien to the introverted camaraderie of the drinking-party. While in such a situation it may seem futile to speak of distinct “sites” at all, there are certain identifiable focal points in which practice and pot come together with unusual force. Characterized by an interplay between opposing reading strategies, a give-and-take between iconography, style, and function, such points (or fields, or scenes) account for much of the interest these vases hold. The remainder of this study will be devoted to isolating some of them and studying their interconnections.