

PICTURING DEATH  
IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

 THE EVIDENCE OF THE WHITE LEKYTHOI

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## THE HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

The first scholar to devote any significant attention to white lekythoi was O. M. Baron von Stackelberg, who in his *Die Graeber der Hellenen* of 1837 published drawings of several and recognized that they were Athenian vessels connected with funerary ritual.<sup>1</sup> Previously, most known Greek vases with figural decoration had been discovered in Italy, where Athenian white lekythoi with polychrome decoration are rarely found. Although these white lekythoi first became known late compared to other types of figured Greek vases, unlike their black-figure and red-figure counterparts, which were first thought to be Etruscan and later Western Greek, the Athenian manufacture of the polychrome lekythoi was never in doubt.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, aside from an occasional mention,<sup>3</sup> virtually no further attention was paid to them, despite the commencement of many new excavations in a now independent Greece, until O. Benndorf devoted one of the fascicules of his *Griechische und sicilische Vasenbilder* (1868–83) to white lekythoi.<sup>4</sup> His discussion presented the first detailed consideration of their function, their subject matters, and the technical aspects of drawing upon them.

Publications of individual finds of new lekythoi followed, as well as descriptions of them in museum catalogues; this led to separate studies of some of the individual subjects found on them, such as C. Robert's *Thanatos* (1879) and O. Waser's *Charon, Charun, Charos* (1898).<sup>5</sup> The next major attempt at an overview was E. Pottier's *Étude sur les lécythes blancs attiques* (1883).<sup>6</sup> This small monograph included a catalogue of many unpublished lekythoi, individual chapters on different scenes, and a section on the fabrication and artistic character of the vessels. He, however, like several other French scholars, mistakenly termed the earlier Attic lekythoi with white-yellow slip, outline or black-figured drawing, and nonfunerary iconography as "Locrian," believing that their place of manufacture was Southern Italy.<sup>7</sup> The end of the century saw A. S. Murray and A. H. Smith's

excellent folio-size publication of white-ground vases in the British Museum, many of which were lekythoi.<sup>8</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century German scholars, such as P. Hartwig and A. Furtwängler, focused their attention on attributing unsigned vases to groups of those which had been signed by a single artist. It is not surprising, therefore, that several scholars turned their attention to grouping together white lekythoi whose drawing and shape appeared to be stylistically related. R. C. Bosanquet wrote two particularly fine articles of this type in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* for 1896 and 1899;<sup>9</sup> one group in the second article formed the core of the work of an artist later to be named after him, the Bosanquet Painter. The culmination and end of this methodology is the magnificent two-volume work of A. Fairbanks, *Athenian White Lekythoi* (1907 and 1914). Besides its still very useful catalogue listing some 829 white lekythoi – mainly, but not only polychrome – it also included many photographs of them.<sup>10</sup> His complicated system of Groups and Classes, however, was quickly eclipsed by the pioneering work of Sir John D. Beazley, who spent his scholarly life attributing vases on the basis of their systems of drawing to various artists, most of them anonymous. Already in 1914 Beazley presented his “Master of the Achilles Amphora in the Vatican,” an anonymous painter to whom he attributed both red-figure vases and white-ground lekythoi.<sup>11</sup> This was the first painter of white lekythoi to be given a name; it was later shortened to the “Achilles Painter.”

The year 1914 was a very good one for the study of white lekythoi, not only because of Beazley’s and Fairbanks’s publications, but also because of the appearance of W. Riezler’s *Weissgrundige attische Lekythen*.<sup>12</sup> Its ninety-six large folio-size plates illustrate many of the finest white lekythoi known. His overview of these vessels is still the most comprehensive and useful to date.

During the following decades Beazley continued to find new artists and add new painters to the lists he was generating, culminating in the 1963 second edition of *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, which also included the painters of white lekythoi.<sup>13</sup> His final additions were published in *Paralipomena* (1971).<sup>14</sup> New references to the vases he cited were assembled by the Beazley Archive at Oxford University and published as the *Beazley Addenda*, the second edition of which appeared in 1989.<sup>15</sup> Updates are maintained on the computer at Oxford, which are available to researchers on the Internet, as are digitized images of many attributed vases.<sup>16</sup>

Another scholar, E. Buschor, already in 1925 had made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the white-ground painters of lekythoi by isolating a number of hands for the first time.<sup>17</sup> Beazley later accepted many of Buschor’s attributions in his own work. Buschor’s scholarship, particularly his small monograph, *Grab eines attischen Mädchen*, with its metaphysical, spiritual view of the dual nature of the scenes on the white lekythoi – part real, part imaginary – had a major impact on their interpretation, which is only now slowly being tempered.<sup>18</sup> Equally influential was Beazley’s Charlton lecture of 1937, *Attic White Lekythoi*, still the finest short overview.<sup>19</sup>

Interest in the painters of white lekythoi, however, has not been limited to these two scholars, as several artists have received considerable attention from other authors, including the Reed Painter, Thanatos Painter, Bosanquet Painter, Sabouroff Painter, Phiale Painter, Achilles Painter, and the Group of the Huge Lekythoi.<sup>20</sup> Other important ones, such as the Painter of Athens 1826, Quadrate Painter, Woman Painter, and Triglyph Painter, still await more detailed scrutiny.<sup>21</sup>

Over the years scholars have published the white-ground holdings of various museums and excavations. Publications with large numbers of white-ground lekythoi include several volumes of the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, most notably the first two from Athens and the eighth from Berlin;<sup>22</sup> Ricardo Olmos's catalogue of the collection of white-ground lekythoi in Madrid;<sup>23</sup> and articles, such as those by V. H. Poulsen, R. Herbig, K. S. Gorbunova, and F. Felten's on white lekythoi from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Heidelberg University, the Hermitage, and the Kerameikos excavations respectively.<sup>24</sup>

Another milestone was reached with the publication of D. C. Kurtz's *Athenian White Lekythoi* in 1975.<sup>25</sup> Although its central focus is the subsidiary, nonfigurative ornament, the book is a mine of information for shape, artists, and subject matter. It was soon complemented by two important studies on the white-ground technique, those of J. R. Mertens (1977) and I. Wehgartner (1983). Although both focus on shapes other than lekythoi, they contain much information relevant to the lekythoi.<sup>26</sup> F. Felten's attempt to combine the oeuvre of a red-figure artist, the Kleophon Painter, with that of a white-ground one, the Thanatos Painter, although unsuccessful, still provides important insight into these artists.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1980s, due to the great interest in iconography created by the ongoing publication of the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, a number of important iconographical studies were published. These include N. Nakayama's (1982) careful analysis of the types of gravestones depicted on lekythoi, C. Sourvinou-Inwood's article on Charon (1986), and Kurtz's (1988) and J. Reilly's (1989) analyses of the so-called mistress and maid scenes.<sup>28</sup> Concurrently, important new lekythoi continued to be published, including a masterpiece by the Achilles Painter in Berlin (1985) and an interesting one in the Piraeus by the Painter of the New York Hypnos with a picture of the *prothesis* (1989).<sup>29</sup> In addition, articles by H. A. Shapiro (1987) and F. Lissarrague (1988) investigate some of the *kalos* inscriptions found on the lekythoi.<sup>30</sup>

Interest in white-ground lekythoi has continued during the last decade of the twentieth century and the start of the new millennium. They have received considerable attention in Sourvinou-Inwood's *'Reading' Greek Death* (1995) and Díez de Velasco's *Los cominos de la muerte* (1995),<sup>31</sup> and articles by Kurtz (1990), E. Mintsi (1997), and O. Tzachou-Alexandri (1987), among others, have dealt with specific vases, themes, or groups of lekythoi.<sup>32</sup> U. Koch-Brinkmann's lavishly illustrated book, *Polychrome Bilder auf weissgrundigen Lekythen* (1999), demonstrates that the drawing on the lekythoi is technically closer to that of wall-painting than previously thought,<sup>33</sup> while scientific studies by E. Aloupi and her colleagues (forthcoming) will increase our knowledge of the material used for the white slip and colors painted upon it, once the results have been fully published.<sup>34</sup> A

comprehensive monograph on the Achilles Painter, the most important painter of white-ground lekythoi, appeared in 1997, and shortly thereafter, in 1998, Tzachou-Alexandri's magnificent color catalogue of this artist's white lekythoi in Athens' National Museum.<sup>35</sup> This was followed in 2000 by G. Kavvadias' important monograph on the Sabouroff Painter, another major painter of red-figure vases and white lekythoi.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, despite the great scholarly interest in white lekythoi, there is no comprehensive, detailed analysis of the images on these vessels to date, a situation this study attempts to rectify.

## THE SHAPE

In ancient Greece the word *lekythos* (λήκυθος) and its diminutive form, *lekythion* (ληκύθιον), had a broader meaning than the modern, archaeological term "lekythos."<sup>37</sup> Not only in Athens, but also elsewhere in the Greek world, *lekythos* was a generic term for an oil or perfume jug that could take various forms.<sup>38</sup> The earliest use of the word occurs in Homer's *Odyssey*. There the young Phaeacian princess, Nausicaa, is given "soft olive oil in a golden lekythos" (VI. 79) by her mother, Arete, as part of the preparations for the young girl's departure to do the wash; the performance of this chore will lead to her encounter with the epic's hero, Odysseus. In this instance, there is no indication of the vessel's shape, only that a *lekythos* is an oil container and can be made of metal.

An Attic red-figure aryballos of 490–480 B.C. signed by Douris and found in Athens<sup>39</sup> provides further evidence. An inscription on it proclaims the vase to be the *lekythos* of Asopodoros (ΑΣΟΠΟΔΟΡΩ ΗΕ ΛΕΓΥΘΟΣ), giving us indisputable proof that the small, round-bodied oil bottle used by ancient athletes and referred to today by archaeologists as an aryballos, was called by fifth-century Athenians a *lekythos*.<sup>40</sup> This is in tune with what several literary passages indicate, namely that a *lekythos* was a commonly carried vessel that could be easily lost or stolen, for aryballoi are often depicted in Greek art hanging from the wrists of youths or in the background of athletic and bathing scenes.<sup>41</sup> The most famous passage to this effect is in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1198ff.), where in a contest between two playwrights, Aeschylus denies Euripides' claim that his prologues are well made and accuses him of formulaic compositions, proving the point by completing whatever prologue Euripides offers with "lekythion apolesen" (ληκύθιον ἀπώλεσεν) – he lost his little *lekythos*.<sup>42</sup>

Further information is provided by a scholiast to Plato's *Hippias Minor* (368c) who reports that Athenians call *lekythoi* the vessels in which they bring scented unguents (μύρον) to the dead. And a youth in Aristophanes' *Ekklesiazousai* (996) rebuffs an old hag trying to bed him by calling her lover the best of painters who paints *lekythoi* for the dead.<sup>43</sup> Later he mockingly tells her to prepare the bed for nuptials, when in reality he instructs her to arrange the bed as if for the *prothesis*, including the placing of *lekythoi* along side it (ll. 1030–33).<sup>44</sup> These passages clearly refer to the cylindrical vessels found in and on



1A. Deianeira-shaped black-figure lekythos. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 39.11.10, Fletcher Fund, 1939. 1B. Black-figure shoulder lekythos by the Amasis Painter. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.11.1, Purchase, Walter C. Baker Gift, 1956. 1C. Red-figure cylindrical lekythos by the Tithonos Painter. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 25.78.2, Fletcher Fund, 1925. 1D. Red-figure squat lekythos by the Kleophon Painter. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 22.139.31, Rogers Fund, 1922.

Athenian fifth-century graves and shown on Athenian vases as offerings to the dead at tombs and alongside the bed at the *prothesis*, vessels that archaeologists also call lekythoi. Thus, the same word was used for this shape in antiquity as today.<sup>45</sup>

Archaeologists use the term “lekythos” for a variety of other Attic forms as well. The earliest are Sub-Mycenaean (1100–1020 B.C.) and Protogeometric (1020–900 B.C.) vessels with bulbous body, thin neck, strap handle, and flaring foot.<sup>46</sup> They are replaced in the Early Geometric period (900–850 B.C.) by a squat, slow-pouring vessel with trefoil mouth, the so-called lekythos-oinochoe.<sup>47</sup> Lekythos is also the term used for Archaic and Classical single-handled jugs with narrow neck and deep mouth. There are three main Attic types (Fig. 1).

The earliest, the Deianeira lekythos, has a short concave mouth that is rounded on top, drip ring, ovoid or globular body, and echinus foot (Fig. 1A). It first appears in Attic black-figure circa 590–580 B.C. and apparently served as the model for Corinthian lekythoi. It continued to be used until the third

quarter of the century; the later versions often have a neck and are referred to as sub-Deianeira.

The second type, the shoulder lekythos, has a concave or calyx mouth, narrow neck, a sloping shoulder set off from the body, and a slightly swelling body, broad at the top and tapering down toward an echinus foot (Fig. 1B). Introduced around 570–560 B.C., and most likely derived from the so-called Samian lekythos,<sup>48</sup> it is by far the most common. Around 530 B.C. this type achieves the standard cylindrical form, with flaring or calyx-shaped mouth, neck and shoulder in one curve, often broken by an offset at the join, and cylindrical body that tapers only at the bottom to a torus foot (Fig. 1C). Smaller versions, often with different ornament and with some variation in form, are called secondary lekythoi. The cylindrical lekythos continued to be made until the end of the fifth century, and it is the form used for the polychrome images considered in this book.

The third type is the squat lekythos, which is characterized by a flaring or calyx mouth, round or ovoid body, and ring foot (Fig. 1D).<sup>49</sup> The earliest squat lekythos dates circa 500 B.C., but it does not become a popular shape until the second half of the century, at the end of which it replaces the cylindrical lekythos in Athenian graves as the most popular grave good. It, in turn, is replaced a decade later by simple, undecorated tube-like oil-containers with a central swelling known as *unguentaria*.

## THE WHITE-GROUND TECHNIQUE

**B**y convention, the term white or white-ground lekythos normally means one with polychrome painting on a background of white slip. Technically, however, the term can also refer to earlier lekythoi whose drawing was done on a white slip in black-figure, outline, or both. Because these earlier white lekythoi played a role in the development of the iconography of those with polychrome decoration, and later changes in the methods of polychrome painting also affected the iconography, it is important to understand the development of the white-ground technique.

The use of an added light slip as a surface for decoration on terracotta vases is known already in various parts of Greece from the Geometric period, but it does not appear in Athens until the seventh century on some Proto-Attic vases.<sup>50</sup> There, only around 530/525 B.C. does a white slip made from a local calcareous clay start to serve regularly as the background for black-figure drawing on vases of various shapes.<sup>51</sup> This was a time of experimentation in Athenian vase-painting, when various techniques were tried and invented, red-figure being the most important and longest lasting. Which painter was responsible for the introduction of the white-ground technique is uncertain: Nikosthenes, the Andokides Painter, Psiax, and the Antimenes Painter have all been suggested.<sup>52</sup> It is Psiax, nevertheless, who around 510 B.C. painted the earliest white-ground lekythos preserved,<sup>53</sup> a black-figure shoulder lekythos with thin, disc foot. Slightly later, circa 510–500 B.C., the black-figure artist the Edinburgh Painter was the first to start consistently



2. X-ray of an Attic white lekythos by the Sabouroff Painter showing the interior container. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 21.88.17, Rogers Fund, 1921.

applying a white slip as a background for figural decoration to the cylindrical lekythos.<sup>54</sup>

The start of the next century saw changes in the drawing technique used on white lekythoi, as black-figure started to give way to drawing in outline or semi-outline; the latter is a mixture of black-figure and outline, and was used primarily in the workshops of the Diosphos Painter, Athena Painter, and Bowdoin Painter.<sup>55</sup> The rapid raise in popularity of the red-figure technique – essentially outline drawing on a fired red clay background – undoubtedly accounts for the corresponding change on white-ground vases.<sup>56</sup> At this time the lekythos was only one of a variety of shapes decorated in white-ground. In fact, there are relatively few pre-480 B.C. lekythoi with outline drawing, and those often have unusual subject matter, suggesting that they were special pieces (e.g., Plate IVA).<sup>57</sup>

Immediately after the Persian Wars (480–479 B.C.) white lekythoi with black-figure died out, and those with outline drawing began to proliferate. The subjects found on both types are the same as on contemporary red-figure. Not long after that, circa 470 B.C., another change occurred, for various washes started to be used to color the garments and objects composing a scene, and a second, brighter white than the background slip was used to color the flesh of females, as well as some objects (e.g., Plate III).<sup>58</sup> At first, with the primary exception of reds made from hematite (iron oxide) and cinnabar (mercuric sulfide), nearly all

the material for the colors were those used on contemporary red-figure vases: black gloss, added purple, and added white. Later, after the middle of the century, others, such as yellow ochre, expanded the painter's palette, as the technique moved more closely to wall- and panel-painting than to pot-painting. Indeed, we know that basically the same materials were used for the colors on both wall- and panel-painting and the white lekythoi.<sup>59</sup> Some of these colors, such as yellow ochre and Egyptian blue, were added after firing and are no longer visible on many lekythoi, since they are fugitive.<sup>60</sup> This accounts for the many figures who seem to be wearing transparent garments, when in reality the color for the garment has disappeared and only the outlines for it remain (e.g., see Figs. 4 and 22). Only a few well-preserved lekythoi today give one an accurate idea of what these vases looked like originally (e.g., Plates IA, IIIA and VIA).<sup>61</sup>

Along with the change in technique circa 470 B.C. came changes both in subject matter – from a wide range of mythological and everyday life scenes to those predominantly funerary in nature – and in form, as small interior oil containers now started to be made inside the vessel.<sup>62</sup> These small interior containers were first developed in the Beldam Painter's workshop, whose white lekythoi are the earliest with funerary subject matter.<sup>63</sup> X-ray photography reveals the shape of these interior containers, which vary according to workshop (Fig. 2).<sup>64</sup> The reason for these interior vessels has been variously explained. Many scholars consider them an intentional deception to make the lekythos appear to hold more oil than it does. Others consider the lekythos's use for libation as more important, believing that the interior container's function was to make pouring oil easier. Concurrently, less oil would be needed, and the delicate colored outer surface of the vessel would be protected from any oil seeping through the porous clay exterior wall. However, as the vases were used for only a relatively short period of time, not long enough for oil to have a chance to seep through the wall, the latter seems to be an unlikely reason. The disappearance of these interior containers around 430 B.C. may be due to a partial change in function of white lekythoi – that is, they were no longer used for libations.

By the middle of the century the classical polychrome lekythos with its funerary subject matter had become firmly established as a special type of funerary vase, as well as virtually the sole type of white-ground vessel now made in Athens. Changes in technique continued, however, as drawing with matt paint started gradually to replace the earlier glaze outlines around the middle of the century (e.g., Plate VIB). This freed the painters from worrying about the process of potting and firing. Second white disappeared, and the background slip became brighter in color and flakier in substance, a surface to which the colors could better adhere. This new white slip was made from a pseudomorph of metakaolinite clay, apparently imported into Athens from the Cycladic island of Melos.<sup>65</sup> The painters now tried to denote the plasticity of drapery, sometimes indicating three-dimensional space by rendering figures in three-quarter or frontal views. Outline became less important for defining the parts of the figures, the definition now being achieved by contrasting sets of color patches. Later, circa 430–425 B.C., an even wider range of colors started to be used, and by the end

of the century *skiagraphia* appears on select lekythoi, that is, light and shadow modeling. Sometimes this was achieved by using one color for hatching, while on other lekythoi various contrasting shades of color were employed instead.<sup>66</sup> These select lekythoi best reflect contemporary developments in wall- and panel-painting.

The reason why a white background was desired has traditionally been explained by its use in contemporary wall- and panel-paintings as a backdrop for polychrome drawing, and indeed the white lekythoi give us our best idea of how these fifth-century paintings appeared in respect to color and technique of drawing, because virtually nothing remains of the wall- and panel-paintings themselves, only literary descriptions.<sup>67</sup> In the case of the white-ground alabastron, the white clearly recalls the stone from which vessels of this shape were made, and it is important to consider this in respect to the lekythoi, for white goes well with the marble grave monuments and the bones, with which the white lekythoi were deposited. A recent attempt to see white lekythoi as imitations of vases made of ivory and silver has been roundly dismissed, the most obvious objection being that there is absolutely no evidence that such vessels ever existed in Athens at this time.<sup>68</sup>

## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

In Athens the lekythos was the most popular grave gift from about 560 B.C. until the end of the fifth century, having apparently replaced the function of the aryballos in earlier burials.<sup>69</sup> Polychrome white lekythoi come primarily from graves in Athens, Attica, and Eretria, and are found in those belonging to both males and females; their presence alone is not indicative of the gender of the grave's inhabitant.<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, very few derive from controlled and carefully recorded excavations, so that the exact location of their burial and the grave goods found with them are unknown. Nevertheless, in a few instances this is not the case, like, for example, the excavations in the Kerameikos and Charitonides' excavations in Syntagma Square. I. Morris's analysis of the finds from these two sites indicates that only about one-quarter of the Kerameikos graves and one-half of the Syntagma graves have white-ground lekythoi; he also notes that white lekythoi occur more frequently in burials with three or more vases.<sup>71</sup>

His percentages, however, appear to be too high for the Kerameikos, much of the material from which has only recently been published in full.<sup>72</sup> His figures are based on the earlier written descriptions of the graves, which do not distinguish between white-ground lekythoi with black-figure, outline, and polychrome drawing. I estimate that about 12 percent of the classical graves, those between 470 and 400 B.C., have polychrome lekythoi, and about 18 percent polychrome or outline. In reality the true percentage must be less, because I was not able to include graves without grave goods, as it is not possible to date them in most cases.<sup>73</sup> Because the material from Syntagma has never been published in full, it is difficult