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## 'READING' GREEK VASES?

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*Summary. The suggestion that the inscriptions on Attic decorated vases were intended especially for symposia, to be read aloud and as a commentary on the scenes, is examined and found wanting in the face of the primary evidence about the vases, their inscriptions, and their possible purposes. Intentions and practices seem far more varied and often arbitrary.*

Archaeology is Fact not Truth; for Truth, go to  
the Philosophy Department along the hall.  
(Indiana Jones in *The Last Crusade*)

But we would like to have the Truth. The problem is that it can only be reached through the Fact. This essay explores a recent topic for discussion which may seem through a number of theory-based Hypotheses to have achieved Truths that are not altogether supported by Facts.

The Hypothesis that Greeks read aloud has been much debated and seems for some to have reached the point at which it must be believed that, faced with a written word or document, a Greek could normally deal with it and understand it only by reading it aloud. There is nothing very remarkable about the general proposition since, in a society where full literacy was extremely rare, and partial literacy perhaps not much more common, the audible mouthing, letter by letter, of what was being read, was a prerequisite to understanding. So it is for those children who are still taught to read in the traditional way, and for whom a written word can be comprehended only after its components have been said aloud, enabling them to be conflated into an intelligible word. Like many modern children, most, though probably still a minority of, ancient Greeks got no further than the D-O-G stage of being able to read the word DOG.

The evidence is mainly textual and has been carefully explored by more than one scholar in recent years; but they are able also to adduce several texts from which it is quite clear that silent reading was just as possible for the adept (Gavrilov 1997; Burnyeat 1997). We are not told whether there was a THANK YOU FOR NOT TALKING notice in the Library of Alexandria.

However the 'Greeks read aloud' motto has the appeal of a Hypothesis which might then be applied especially in a non-literary context to the words written on figure-decorated Greek vases, mainly of the seventh to fourth centuries BC, to the point that they may be deemed to have been written with the very intention of their being read aloud. And since many of them appear on vases intended for the symposium, a further Hypothesis can be formulated that this was the setting for which such inscribing and declamation was designed, for common consumption along with the wine, this being an ideal occasion for the delivery of the writer's

message to an audience; though it must be likely that inscribed vases were bought more often by the illiterate than the few literate. This 'reading' of vases is expounded in Snodgrass 2000, which poses several interesting questions and answers about the subject, and has inspired this essay.<sup>1</sup>

Inscriptions on Attic vases designate one of the figures in a scene, or they issue from a mouth as a true 'legend', or they are artists' signatures, or they are loose remarks praising the beauty of boys in general (*ho pais kalos*) or of a particular boy (*Leagros kalos*, etc.), or they are nonsense, or they allow the vase to speak for itself, or they are bespoke dedications, and there are one or two scene titles. There appears to be a concentration of them in the later Archaic period (about 550–475 BC).

The inscriptions identifying figures, tag-names, present something of a problem since they are applied very irregularly. An early example that is examined is the Protoattic (seventh-century) procession of heroic kings, only one of whom is named – the non-Attic Menela[o]s.<sup>2</sup> Very often the names identify the most obvious figure, an Athena or Herakles who really requires no identification, and not the other figures who may remain puzzlingly anonymous to us, as well, perhaps, as to some ancient viewer. An example I have used elsewhere, showing the Seven Heroes setting out against Thebes, labels almost the only figure whom anyone, now or then, might have recognized anyway for his physique and action, not the others whose individual identities remain problematic (Boardman 2001, 174–5). Many of the uncommon, even (so far) unique, scenes have no such aids whatever. There was clearly no programme of use here to aid viewer or reader, and individual artists can be very erratic in the matter though some are ostentatiously literate and tell us much about both their subjects and themselves.

Where the inscribed words issue from a mouth, speaking, reciting or singing, they indeed add much to the scene by identifying the performance or conversation, and a viewer might well be tempted to join in audibly. Often they are lines of recited verse or a song, even a conversation: 'Look, a swallow' . . . 'Spring already'. Here, however, another Fact might be observed, though the evidence may seem too slight to be conclusive. Where such explicit recitation or conversation is shown, with a legend or verse, the speaker normally has his mouth open, as do singers-without-words in many other scenes which are identified by the occasion, usually a drinking party with musical accompaniment. I know of no scene, on a vase or relief, in which a *reader* appears, with a scroll in his hand or before what may be an inscribed pillar, with an open mouth. In other scenes where a conversation might reasonably be inferred, mouths are closed probably because this is the default mode, and the main message of the figures is not the content of what they may or may not be talking about, or even the fact that they are uttering, as it is with the reciters and singers, while there is often a 'speaking' gesture to make the point. This iconographic evidence, a Fact, seems not to have been taken into consideration in discussions of the text evidence or the Hypothesis about reading aloud as applied to vases.<sup>3</sup>

1 See also Slater 1999, who tends towards the same idea, as 'occasions for performance'; and Stoddart and Whitley 1988, 765.

2 Snodgrass 2000, 24. They are surely not dancing, as Ferrari suggested, and there is no hint at the occasion except that it is formal, if indeed there was one in mind rather than a display of heroic royalty – each spear is a sceptre (*doru*), and they need not be at or going to war: Boardman 2002, 95–6.

3 See Beck 1975 for illustrations of folk reading (pls. 6–15, 69–75) and singing (pls. 18–25). Some other pictures of readers in *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 (1948), pls. 34–8; *Athenische Mitteilungen* 71 (1956), pl. 2. Virtually all rhapsodes or figures with legends emerging from their mouths have their mouths open.

Then there are painter or potter signatures, which clearly do not relate to any figure on the vase, are extremely erratically used, often never by the ‘best’ artists, and could only have had advertisement value if ever declaimed – and normally not by the painter or potter himself. *epoiesen* ‘made’, appearing without a name as it sometimes does, could have helped no one.

Then there are the mottoes about pretty boys. It should be noted that tag-names applied to figures are carefully placed on the vases with the beginning of the name as close as possible to the figure’s head.<sup>4</sup> This is not true of the mottoes which are in free field. Yet, ‘. . . there is not much point in writing, for example, *ho pais kalos* (“the boy is beautiful”) unless there is a picture of a boy to go with the message’ (Snodgrass 2000, 24). Unfortunately it seems that probably a majority of scenes in which the motto appears on Greek vases have no *pais* (a young teenager) whatever depicted on them (see also Boardman 1992), and where they do the motto is not significantly placed. Indeed, it might be argued that since the inscriptions need have no boy to show for them, it proves that they were not written to be read out and audibly shared at all. So they are simply an expression addressed to the viewer by the painter about their shared erotic interests, and this might or might not be further shared by the viewer with his companions. It is the same with the named boys, where the inscriptions are not placed as tags to a figure, and where commonly no boys at all are shown.<sup>5</sup> On the very many vases with formulaic scenes of a man fondling or importuning a young boy (a *pais* up to fifteen years old) it seems that no *pais kalos* inscriptions are found at all.<sup>6</sup> The same relative lack of possible illustration in the scene applies to named *kaloi*, and to the *kalos* motto on its own. Some artists are repeatedly loyal to one *kalos* name regardless of the figure subject beside which it is written.

We should take an example rather than make allegations. Douris was an artist who has left us some 250 vases, loaded with many representations of men (bearded males), youths (unbearded men) and boys (*paides*, of shorter stature, under-fifteens), as well as much else from Greek mythology and life.<sup>7</sup> Looking only at the *pais kalos* inscriptions (in Buitron-Oliver 1995) we find:

- 6 in scenes with a true *pais* (one a Ganymede)
  - 8 in scenes with men or youths
  - 5 in scenes with men only
  - 6 in scenes with athletes
  - 4 in scenes with arming/fighting/a warrior
  - 4 in scenes with women only
  - 1 in a scene with a man and woman
  - 4 in purely mythological scenes involving no *paides*
- where there are groups the motto *paides kaloi* (plural) never appears here (or in the work of others).

4 Boardman 1992, 45, for Attic examples; elsewhere the practice is much the same: Wachter 2001, 228, ‘starting-up principle’.

5 Boardman 1992, 47–9 for Leagros. There are probably no real ‘tag-*kalos*’ inscriptions for mortal males at all, or they are exceptionally rare; they are found for a few mythological figures and ‘tag-*kale*’ for women; Douris (see below) has *pais kale* twice, in love-making scenes.

6 As listed in Beazley 1989, 4–25; one hundred black figure, one with *kalos* alone written twice; there are three with named *kaloi* on the fewer red figure examples.

7 Even if we admit some ‘youths’ as *paides* (as we should not, to judge by the Late Archaic courting scenes) the figures remain telling.

The Hypothesis that the symposium was the prime stage for this alleged reading of Greek vases is supported, as often in such arguments, by Statistics, and as in much use of Statistics, their validity may be inadequately questioned and the Facts on which they are based misjudged. The corpus of material which Snodgrass has used is the catalogue in Henry Immerwahr's 1990 book on Attic inscriptions. Immerwahr's lists were designed to demonstrate for discussion the palaeography of Attic inscriptions; only 62 per cent of his list are vases. Of these inscribed vases it is observed that 66 per cent are shapes which are reasonably regarded as for the symposium. But Immerwahr's list was not designed to be representative of the use of inscriptions on or off vases, but of their palaeography. Thus, the painter Exekias and the red figure Pioneers have inscriptions on most of their vases (the majority not cups) and Immerwahr lists virtually all of them; Epiktetos has inscriptions on some 75 (mainly cups), of which Immerwahr lists only 11. The lists are clearly unreliable in terms of close analysis by shape and date, which is how they have been used.

However, we might judge that 544 inscribed vases are a 'valid sample', even if not a sample of what is required. At this point another Fact needs consideration. The 66 per cent of the inscribed Immerwahr vases which are judged for the symposium need to be measured against the other Fact that far more than 50 per cent of *all* figure-decorated vases are what are generally designated symposium vases; and even many more if the quality of the vases and their suitability for inscribing are considered, as they should be.<sup>8</sup> The Statistics used are appropriate to the palaeographic interests of Immerwahr's book, but not to what is being investigated. This substantially modifies the apparent preponderance of inscribing/reading especially for the feast. That symposium vases are likely to be inscribed may be due to the fact that so many have no less than three scenes on them, not just one or two, and for a context in which inscribed scenes, especially many related to the activity in hand and its erotic associations, might be best appreciated, whether declaimed or not. It seems likely, however, that any Attic figure-decorated vase of the Late Archaic period and of a type suitable for inscribing had about the same chance as any other of being inscribed, whatever its shape and purpose. Much of the decorated pottery made in Athens, especially in the Late Archaic period, was symposium ware, and it was not exceptionally more often inscribed than the few other finely decorated shapes made. This does not, of course, mean that no inscriptions and mottoes were suggested by the scenes; but most, except the descriptive tags, were not.

As for the many nonsense inscriptions on vases; were these simply an invitation to improvisation on the part of the owner displaying them, a form of Hellenic *karaoke*? All seem to be either decorative or making a false pretence to literacy.<sup>9</sup> They are part of the look of the vase, nothing to do with reading. A final small class is of remarks made by the vase itself – 'buy me!', 'cheers, and drink up!': humble relatives of the archaic statues who speak to the viewer from their inscribed bases.

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8 The percentages are much distorted by the big production of small oil vases (lekythoi) of a quality not inviting inscription. If we consider only vases of an inscribable quality the percentage of symposium vases made is more like 90 per cent of the whole. I am indebted to Thomas Mannack for some statistics from the Beazley Archive database ([www.beazley.ox.ac.uk](http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk)) which show that for the range about 525–475 BC the lekythoi outnumber cups! See also Boardman 1979, 38, for a chart of shape frequency in Athens and elsewhere.

9 Snodgrass 2000, 30, admits that they require a 'slight further dilution' of his assumptions about literacy of producers and customers.

Exit much of the Hypothesis about the special place of reading aloud in the symposium and the inscribing of vases – or perhaps not quite yet. We are invited to look at other shapes. ‘Amphorai’ (*sic*) are judged suitable for wine storage, but the figure-decorated versions which attract inscriptions are not – their wide mouths invite solid fare, not liquid, many are lidded, none are ever (I believe) shown in the hundreds of symposium scenes on vases, where the only amphorae shown are the true storage/carriage amphorae, unpainted and with pointed feet (Gericke 1970).

Hydriae, as water pots, are judged to be for women and are also non-apparent in symposium scenes (Gericke 1970). This promotes a digression on the literacy of women, which was surely somewhat less than that of men though certainly well attested. One might question whether a heavily decorated inscribed hydria was ever carried by a woman to the fountain house, there to promote a seminar on the iconography of the Sack of Troy. At the well women had plain or metal vases, and decorated hydria fragments are not conspicuous finds at the bottom of Athenian Agora wells.<sup>10</sup> They were domestic ‘best ware’; Greeks did not spend all their time at table in symposia. We may also begin to wonder about the ‘female-oriented’ hydriae carrying inscriptions praising pretty boys. And consider, for example, four pyxides (small cylindrical boxes) by the Thaliarchos Painter, each with a name-*kalos* inscription, showing a helmet-maker, a satyr, a komast, and a squatting satyr (Beazley 1963, 81), and reflect on the appropriateness of inscription to subject shown, and moreover on a shape commonly assumed to be for women.<sup>11</sup> This does not encourage attempts to relate figures to mottoes or to easy assumptions about shape use.

Finally, there is the alleged decline in the use of inscriptions on vases after the Archaic period (Snodgrass 2000, 30–3). Here again the chart (deriving from Immerwahr) of numbers of inscriptions by generations is seriously deceptive, since it does not take into account the Fact that the number of surviving inscribable vases made in Athens declines from the first quarter of the fifth century to the last quarter to about 20 per cent.<sup>12</sup> If there were any decline, it could be explained by the relative demotion of the medium, since the inscriptions are still common on consciously ‘display’ vases. It can have little to do with literacy, as Snodgrass observes, but neither has it to do with the style of narrative: the so-called ‘synoptic’ is neither peculiarly Greek nor confined to the Archaic, but persists even in Greece through the fourth century, and there might have been more reason, not less, for inscriptions, once the Archaic formulaic treatment of narrative, which offered an alternative means of identification, itself declined in the face of greater realism (Boardman 2001, 173–88), and an assumed greater literacy. The decline in the appearance of *kaloi* and signatures on vases over time is a social phenomenon.

Probably the most that can be said on the matter is that a figure-decorated vase’s shape (and thereby purpose) and date, did not significantly increase the likelihood of its being inscribed; that of the main categories of inscriptions only the tag-names certainly relate to figures

10 Mary Moore has kindly confirmed this assessment of Agora finds. There are plain and striped hydriae in some Agora well deposits. We do not know what was broken at the fountain houses, such as are seen on several black figure vases which seem to celebrate Athen’s new water supply.

11 Yet, some female literacy ‘makes it less surprising that the short messages painted on hydriai or pyxides should have been normally designed for female customers.’ – Snodgrass 2000, 29. Rotroff 1999 makes important points that need close consideration (and very careful statistics and judgement) to carry forward our understanding of the Greek use of pottery.

12 See the chart in Boardman 1979, 36.

drawn on the vase; that perhaps a majority of figure-decorated vases were for mealtimes where their decoration and any inscriptions might be admired in company (though surely not on every occasion, except in the hands of the party bore); that reading aloud was irrelevant to any decision to provide inscriptions on vases, and pointless for most; that painters' choices of inscriptions, even some tags, seem to have been carefully premeditated in only a minority of cases. The Truth, after appeal to the Fact, begins to prove rather more complicated than the Hypotheses proposed, as so often in real life as well as archaeology.

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