

## Two Red Figure Vases and the Stories They Tell



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A History of the Ancient World in a Half Dozen Objects  
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*Preface*

August is the month I look forward to the most in the year, as it is marked by my family's yearly vacation to Greece. During the time spent there, my mom makes sure that I visit the archaeological dig sites, and museums deemed a necessity by any classical scholar. So, when Professor Nevett led my class into the Kelsey for the first time to study objects from ancient Karanis, I felt very comfortable walking through the brightly lit and peaceful gallery. Among the valuable artifacts I saw in The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, and from the Jackier Collection, in this essay I want the spotlight to fall upon two specific objects that open up windows into everyday life in Ancient Greece. The first is an Apulian krater (Figure1) from the second half of the 4th century BCE decorated with funerary images. The second is an Attic lekythos (Figure2) from the Golden age of Athens, which depicts a scene mythic in nature. The krater (Figure1) and the lekythos (Figure2) are compared in order to shed light on the history of ancient Greece, the way in which ancient pottery was created, who created them, the meanings of the icons on the vases, and their functionality.

*Introduction*

To the naked eye she is a busy city, streets lined with tall white apartment buildings, bustling with people, each following their own internal rhythm to get through the chaos that is daily life. What cannot be seen at a first glance is what lies beneath the streets, and in the past of all those people moving about; something that ties them all together, and that is History. The history of Athens is incomparable to that of any other place, layer upon layer of centuries filled with the lives and deaths of heroes, philosophers, politicians, artists but also, most of all, ordinary people. This history is preserved and deciphered by the vast number of objects that these men, women and children used in their everyday life and now ornate the shelves of

museums all over the world. Among the artifacts, pottery is a surprisingly-for its fragile nature-common find. During her classical period, Athens is the birthplace of the Attic lekythos (Figure2), which depicts a mythic encounter of Dionysus and his satyr. A few thousand meters away and a few centuries later, in Magna Graecia, at the heel of the Apennine peninsula, another soil gives life to the Apulian krater (Figure1). A descendant of the vase that was made in Attica now finds itself in the same proximity as its distant relative. These two variations of red figure vases, very common type of ancient Greek pottery, are chosen to be compared, not only to point out the similarities and differences between the two objects, but, with the comparison, to also open the door to the multi-level culture of Ancient Greece, put the two obstinate objects in proper context, and further explore their creation and usage.

### *History*

The triumphant victory of the Greeks over the Persians in 479 BCE marks the beginning of what would later be known as the Golden Age of Athens. With the war at a favorable end, the ancient Athenians have more time -and hands- to move their city forward, in all aspects of life. Economic prosperity, aesthetic achievements, and a strong political presence all are characteristics of the Golden Age, also known as the Age of Pericles (ancient.eu3). During that period the Greeks continue to branch out further on the coasts of the Mediterranean, and to form colonies in Sicily and Southern Italy, an area known as Magna Graecia (ancient.eu2). These colonies are independent but have strong religious and trade ties with their mother city-state (metmuseum.org1). The first half of the sixth century BCE the Corinthians dominate the trade of the Mediterranean. However, a few decades later, the Athenians become a predominant naval force and a shift in the tides occurs, as Athens uses her influence to ultimately dominate trade as well (ancient.eu1). Her pottery is a large export; this can be seen by the countless pots and shards

found all over the coasts of the Mediterranean. Numerous intact pieces found are similar to the ones being studied in this project. Many are originals, from Athens, and some are copies made by the colonists (metmuseum.org1). These pots and fragments offer an insight into the daily lives of the ancient people, and the way their goods are produced and traded. There are approximately 65,000 samples of red figure pottery that has been found to date, which, if taken into context, is only a small fraction of what actually was used (ancient.eu1).

It all begins in ancient Corinth where the black figure pottery is created, and becomes a prominent export (metmuseum.org1). That style is very common; it has black figures painted on the clay's orange backdrop. Over the years, competition sparks the neighboring city, Athens, to try, and ultimately perfect, making their own pottery with a similar technique. Circa 530 BCE, the first red figure vases emerge in the workshop of Andokides. The creation of the vases is perfected by the Athenians because of their iron-rich clay and more elaborate designs. They discover that by switching to an orange figure with a black background, the pots look nicer and the details are more refined. These vessels are rich in iconography and illuminate numerous aspects of Greek life and culture. That results in a dramatic increase in demand for Athenian pottery (metmuseum.org2). For many centuries the vases made in Attica are popular all over the Mediterranean. It is very common for cities along the coasts of Southern Italy and Sicily to import the Athenian vessels. Athens dominates the region economically, socially, and politically, so her thriving in the pottery trade only echoes her authority of the region.

However, the trade in the Mediterranean comes to a sudden halt for the Athenians, when, in 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian war, between Athens and Sparta, breaks out. Athenians can no longer spare the time or the resources to create art; they are consumed by a long and gruesome war. The Spartan victory tarnishes the Golden Age and ultimately (404 BCE) puts an end to

Athens' dominance (ancient.eu3). The wounded Athenians no longer have a drive to create, since their population takes a heavy hit. This limits the creation of pottery in Attica, but the demand for it in Magna Graecia remains the same. The high demand and low supply motivates the people of the colonies to create their own red figure pottery.

The Greeks of the eastern coast of modern-day Italy are motivated to find the means create their own red-figure pottery, due to the decreased imports from Greece. Each region forms their own school: Apulian, Campanian, Lucanian, Paestumian, and Sicilian (metmuseum3). Of these schools, the Apulian is where the krater (Figure1) comes from. These schools follow the Greek traditions, as they are just trying to replicate the original vases. Through the following years, the schools of Magna Graecia adjust the red figure pottery to their own aesthetics, but still keep close ties which are reflected in the cultural integration between the Attic lekythos (Figure2) and the Apulian krater (Figure1). The two together parallel in iconic appearance, and thus show the Greek influence on Apulian iconography, the ideas behind it, and the method of its creation.

### *Creation of Red Figure Pottery*

The two vases may come from different geographical locations, but they are held together, not only by their shared history, but by another mutual idea: the way they are made. As the contemporary artist throws clay on a wheel and creates a masterpiece, so does the ancient potter. In ancient Greece, the clay for red figure pottery, or *keramos*, as it is called, is readily available. The best clay for this task is in the soil of Athens (ancient.eu1). The clay of this region has a high iron content that added sheen to the orange red color when it is fired. Before use, it is stored and refined in settling tanks until the potters throw it. The pots sculpted on the wheel are usually made in different sections; the base, handles, and body are all made separately from each

other (metmuseum.org<sup>2</sup>). Each piece of pottery is created for a different use, and with each use comes a specific shape: from transporting food and liquids, pouring libations (lekythos, Figure<sup>2</sup>) drawing water, to mixing wine with water and special rituals (krater, Figure<sup>1</sup>). Other than the lekythos and the krater, some of the most common vessels and vases are: the amphora, a tall, storage jar for liquid or dry goods and grain; the hydria: large, three-handled jar for carrying and pouring water; the kylix: a shallow, round, two-handled drinking cup on a stem; and the oinochoe: a small pitcher used for pouring wine into the cups (luna.edu).

Once the sections are air-dried to a leathery feel, the artist joins them together with slip, clay in a liquid form. After putting the pieces together, the pot is decorated by painting the whole or parts of the vase with a thin black paint: a combination of alkali soda, clay with silicon, and black iron oxide. Once it is fired the paint is bound to the pot (ancient.eu<sup>1</sup>). In the case of the white ground vessels, which are mostly used for funerary purposes, the vessel is covered with white clay paint, and the details were added with a thicker black paint (ancient.eu<sup>1</sup>). The final step is to fire the pots. There are three stages to solidify the form. The first firing, which is known as the oxidizing stage because of the large amount of oxygen allowed in the kiln, turns the entire vessel into the color of the clay. During the second firing, green wood is added, the oxygen is limited, and, as a result, the vases turn black. At the third and final firing, the oxygen is reintroduced into the kiln and the unglazed portions of the pots turn back to orange, while the glazed portions stay black (metmuseum.org<sup>2</sup>). The men behind the wheel and the paintbrush are free from political influence restricting their work. They are driven by their artistic inspiration and, of course, by the demand of the market for specific styles, icons, images, and ornamentations (metmuseum.org<sup>3</sup>).

In Attica, a workshop of painters is usually led by a master potter. Some masters of the craft are in great demand and their products are sold in Greece and traded overseas. The name of the head potter and the esteem of their workshop also play a role in the prices. There is often a signature of a potter, with the words ἐποίησεν (epoiesen, has made), the first known is of Sophilos. Ergotimos and Euphronios are also among the 100 or so names of known potters. Achilles, Aristophanes and Polygnotos are some of the 40 names of painters that survived oblivion, inscribed on Attic vessels along with the words ἐγράψεν (égrapsen, has painted). Overall, signatures are rather rare. Mostly found on especially good pieces, the signature expresses the pride of the artist and creator, either potter or painter.

The relationship of potters and painters is somewhat unclear. Some of them, especially from black figured period, like Exekias and Amasis, are both potters and painters. The fact that the division of labor appears mainly in the red figured pottery leads to the conclusion that there is a structure of roles within the workshop. Someone who starts as an apprentice painter, later on advances to the position of potter (ancient.eu1). The fact that some of the names are rather common indicates the desire to profit by copying the signatures of famous and popular painters, like Polygnotos. Usually, pots by the same potter are painted by various painters-apprentices at the workshop. Pots made by Euphronios, for example, are painted by Antiphon and Triptolemos, among others (wikipedia2). Although not considered the most valuable tableware, like the vessels that are made from precious metals, painted vases, especially the larger and more elaborate are rather expensive. A stone mason has to work one full day to be able to afford to spend one drachma, the price of a large painted vase (ancient.eu1).

In Apulia, since the first workshops are founded by Attic potters (around the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the local potters and painters are trained to run their workshop in the same

manner. The only difference is that their goods are sold mainly in the local markets, only a few pieces are found outside southern Italy and Sicily. Eventually, they adopt a more elaborate style on both the construction and the decoration of the vessels; the Apulian krater (Figure1) with its grand stature and elaborate designs is a true representative. Some of the most famous painters of the Apulian school, which is considered the most grandiose of the five schools of Magna Graecia mentioned above, are Darius, Baltimore and Ilioupeisis. These are not their actual names, but rather the names to the workshops to which they belong (wikipedia2).

Unlike modern day perception, the potters and the painters are not considered artists in antiquity; they are skilled craftsmen, and they produce goods for sale and use. These craftsmen nonetheless, become more than potters and painters, they become historians and story tellers; they become indeed artists that can freeze time and capture life's moments on a vessel.

### *Iconography*

Memories of walking in various museums, amongst the ruins of the ancient world all have one thing in common- the red figure pottery on display. The icons are all different, depending on the theme, but they are always there; images of gods and demi-gods, pictures of noble heroes and their conquests, ordinary people engaged in everyday activities, all figures frozen in time; images that trigger the imagination of the viewers and transport them to a mythical past. If they do so, then the ancient potter and artist have successfully done their job. The iconography found on the ancient red-figure vases affirms or disproves common conceptions of the ancient world, and portrays common myths known and written about today.

Although icons with mythological themes are more common on the black figure vases of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, along with the soldiers putting on their armor or in formation, the



tradition continues through to the 5<sup>th</sup> century red figure pottery. The painter becomes the story teller, illuminating a scene from the Odyssey or the Iliad, beloved poems of the Athenians. The death of Achilles, the fall of Troy, the long and difficult voyage home of Odysseus, all are source of inspiration for both painters and consumers. So are popular myths and legends: Persephone's descent to Hades and Herakles' labors are a few examples. It is especially popular to draw Herakles while battling and performing tasks, and while he is relaxing, or playing a game (ivc.edu). The depictions of his tasks verify or disprove what is commonly known about him today. Scenes with gods and semi-gods, Dionysus with satyr or Aphrodite and Artemis and the rest of the gods are among the common themes. In addition, depictions of specific actions of deities also give hints as to what the vessel is used for. For example, a vase showing Dionysus or a symposium would be used as a wine vase or cup. Another example is a depiction of a funerary procession on a vase that would be used to carry libations and be buried with the deceased (ivc.edu).

Brushes are essential tools for the painter who, now, with the new red-figure technique, is able to depict not only the human body but expression and emotion, as well. He does not have to scrape out a figure anymore, as with the black figure method, he is able to draw the human body more detailed and realistically. He is also able to create a sense of depth, as he can paint the front, back and three quarters of the body (ancient.eu1)

Every day life scenes gradually become more common, male athletes, male soldiers and men in symposiums are some of the most favorite themes. Weddings, funerals and other every-day occurrences are also the subject for some vases, as these images are more familiar to the average person (Dartmouth.edu). The depiction of women engaged in domestic activities and wedding preparations comes a few years later, as well as scenes of music

performers with audience (metmuseum.org4). That provides the modern viewer with valuable information about the ways and the rituals, the fabrics, the furniture, the everyday and the celebratory objects and the way they are used by the red figures frozen in time on the body of a vessel.

The truth is that the painter of the vases has a set formula that he follows in order to achieve the desired effect for the paying consumer (ancient.eu1). The more images on the vase and the more intricate the design, the more expensive it would be. In the Apulian iconography, ideas of the afterlife are commonly expressed by details that can be easily overlooked on an ornate funerary vessel. The motif of the feminine head located on the neck of the vase, sprouting out of flowers and amongst the vines drawn belongs to the funerary context. This is sometimes replaced with the head of Pan, Hermes, or a stranger (metmuseum.org3); they are also usually done in white. Following suit, these heads can be found on the krater (Figure1). On vases that follow mythological context, like the lekythos (Figure2) gods are distinguishable by what they are surrounded, how they hold themselves, and their size. In the case of the lekythos (Figure2), the demeanor of the satyr, who is bent over in a servant manner, and the staff held by the divinity are clues which show that it is Dionysus (wikipedia1).

Apart from the elaborate images that immediately grab hold of the observer's attention, there are other little intricate designs, which add flare to the piece. **Ornaments**, as they are called, are the decorative patterns and floral designs added to the foot, rim, handles and borders of vessels. Lotus, palmettes, ivy, meander, rays, tongues and rosettes are the most popular (metmuseum.org4). A meander is a running motif, consisting of a design with many involved twists and turns. Greek meanders such as the Greek key, and the vitruvian wave represent

infinity, and the flow of things. Other images are commonly used in a continuous manner, flowers, and geometrical shapes (See figures 3 and 4). The iconography on the red figure vases consists mainly of a central scene with ornaments used to frame the event; this concept can be observed in both the lekythos and the krater, proving once more their cultural integration.

### *Description of the Vases*

With intricate imagery, the Apulian krater (Figure1) depicts a common funerary scene, mythic in nature. The larger (59.8cm tall) and more detailed vase of the two shows on the main body of the krater, a nude man and his dog painted in all white. He is somewhat leaned back with a spear in his left hand. He dons a cape which covers his back and a concealed sword, and his right leg is bent, his right heel slightly lifted, while his left leg is extended in front of him. He gestures with two of his fingers at the hound; this action creates an enigmatic dialogue between the pair, capturing a frozen command. The painting portrays more than just the man and his hound- it adds the location and the event it was made for, which are both clues to the details of the man's world. He is sitting underneath a small classical temple, or a naiskos, that is painted white with ionic pillars (wikipedia1). The handles of the vase contrast this detail since they are in the Corinthian style elaborately decorated with acanthus leaves. From the ceiling of the temple hang parts of a warrior's armor- taking that into account along with the fact that he is holding a spear it is possible to assume that the man was a soldier. Taking a closer look at the temple, the painter attempts to add a sense of depth to the naiskos by painting a set of receding wooden planks on the ceiling. The attention to the detail shows an important perception that sets the foundation that figural depiction is not just flat, but it has dimension. The artist also plays with colors-whites, shades of yellow, and maroons- to add depth, volume, and meaning, while accentuating important details on the krater. In burnt orange color, the artist depicts floating

entities offering gifts to the deceased. The people around the temple are most likely his relatives, preparing him for the afterlife. Both men and women are depicted, as each gender has a different role in that difficult task. Also, the area around the funerary scene is not left blank; the vase is far too ornate for that, palmettes, designs that appear similar to a detailed flower or leaf, in symmetrical groups take hold of the space.

There is a wonderful amount of detail painted on the neck and close to the base of the krater's body. The artist draws out some form of ornamentation on every inch of the surface. The Greek key can be seen circulating the base of the vase while the vitruvian waves wrap the top of its neck. Repeating chains of flowers, along with geometric lines and shapes also loop the vase. On the neck of the krater, plants and flowers swirl and thrive feverishly, but what stands out amongst that is the head sprouting from a stem. This female head is very appropriately placed, due to the vase's funerary context. This single head is the most common motif and can be found in most of funerary vases of Magna Graecia. Although its identity cannot be determined, it is strongly connected with the perception of afterlife of the people of this time and area (metmuseum.org<sup>3</sup>). The handles follow suit to the elaborately drawn body, as there are two faces painted white on each side of the top part of the large ornate handles. It is a **volute-krater**, which is a krater where the tops of the handles have a volute or scroll. Similar details can be found on the body of the Attic lekythos.

Standing at a height of 25.6cm, a smaller, simpler, and less ornate vase, the Attic lekythos (Figure2) depicts a mythical scene in which a man and a satyr, half man, half goat, are pictured. The man is reclining on a kline, or bench, above a basket filled with cadmium yellow flowers. He holds a staff in his left hand that is wrapped with ivy leaves topped with a pinecone, known as a thyrsus (De Waele 1927, 85). This wand is associated with the Olympian god Dionysus, and

is commonly used as a symbol for hedonism, and prosperity (Casadio, and Johnston 2009, 46). When depicted it is usually accompanied by a kantharos drinking cup. This vase is no exception as there is one in Dionysus's right hand. Adjacent to the reclining god is a satyr who is passing a large cantor to him. The satyr is bowed forward at the waist and his body language signifies that the two figures are not of the same social level. It can be inferred that the satyr is serving the reclining god. Both of the figures are muscular and enhanced by their contour lines -a common trait of masculinity. The lines create a sense of depth that makes the painting seem more of a screenshot into the tradition of Greek beauty and mythology. The lekythos also has ornamentation, such as vitruvian waves and some geometric lines that wrap themselves around its skinny neck for an additional decoration. The entire backside of the vase is covered in a large geometric palmette. Although the lekythos is a smaller vase and the surface area for iconography on it is considerably limited, its size does not limit the information that can be extracted from it. The central scene is strong, both in execution and in theme. The two figures are well defined with clear and precise lines and deep coloration. The secondary objects that surround them evoke the myth of Dionysus, god of wine and festivity and his faithful companion, the satyr. Although lekythoi are often used in funerary rituals, carrying oil for anointing the body of the deceased, it is not clear if this is the purpose of this particular one. Regardless of its somewhat festive depiction, the scene is sober enough to justify that use. What is clear however is that this little vessel is able to act as a window and transport the viewer in the everyday lives of both gods and mortals of ancient Greece.

### *Conclusion*

Both the Attic lekythos and the Apulian krater are true representatives of their era and school of thought. They both achieve their purpose, stylistically and in functionality. One is

smaller and simpler; the other has more elaborate design, dictated by the aesthetic of its time. They are both connected by the process of their creation, by a strong central scene and the ornamentation of their depiction. A few centuries separate them from each other, putting the krater in the lekythos' future. A few more centuries separate both of them from present day, putting both in the present's past. Memories of walking among the exhibits of the Kelsey Museum, studying and observing the vessels and vases of antiquity, and allowing them to be the vessels that transport the viewer to another era are expressed ideally with the words of T. S Eliot:

time present and time past

are both perhaps present in time future

and time future contained in time past

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The Apulian Krater (Figure1), and the Attic Lekythos (Figure2) the Kelsey Museum.  
Ann Arbor, MI



Figure 3: TM53 - Ceres Flat Greek Key



Figure 4: Vitruvian Wave: Picture Of