

THE FORCE OF TRADITION IN EARLY GREEK POETRY AND PAINTING

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TRADITION IS A UNIVERSAL socio-cultural and historical phenomenon. It exerts a force in society that is both normative and formative; it affirms values and imposes constraints against changing them; and yet all the while it responds to the needs and expectations of the society within which it is established. Tradition is deeply embedded in human life, and determines the human world-view, yet because it is so pervasive, it generally works below the horizon of our perceptions. It is only when we study a culture other than our own, and especially one far removed in time as well as divergent in other aspects, that we have the distance to recognise the traditional patterns of activity for what they are. In a highly literate culture, the effects of tradition are complex and subtle: even in a society that treasures innovation and originality there *are* traditions, but they are interwoven into the societal fabric below the surface. By contrast, in a pre-literate society, the traces of the traditions that governed the oral and the pictorial transmission of culture, history and beliefs tend to be much more evident, and comparative analysis of the two traditions allows insight into the workings of both production and reception within a traditional context. This paper presents some of the major parallels in narrative strategies and techniques between the oral poetic and the painted pictorial traditions of early Greece, and their effects.

▲ Detail, fig. 13b, p. 49.

In recent years, Homeric studies have explored in great depth the finer points of the narrative techniques peculiar to traditions of oral and oral-derived poetry, including the more recent explorations of how meaning is constructed in an oral-traditional context. A useful starting-point, therefore, is a brief overview of some of the characteristic features of the ancient Greek oral-derived tradition. The Homeric epics are for us fixed texts, but as the cumulative research of Milman Parry in the first third of the twentieth century made clear, the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* manifest the hallmarks of an *oral* epic tradition, and so are to be regarded as oral-derived: they are the best evidence we have for traditional epic in early Greece, which, as Parry came to recognise, was not a memorised recital, but a recreation in performance, fresh every time.¹

The most important determining characteristic of Homeric epic is its strict metre of dactylic hexameter, which is best appreciated when the ancient Greek text is heard, rather than read visually. The bards composed their epic in this rolling rhythmic pattern as they went along in performance, but it would have been difficult for them to come up with impromptu phrases that would properly fit the metrical demands, and so traditional poetry is composed of recurrent traditional phrases that were already pre-

existing within the tradition: the bards needed to have a vast repertoire of descriptive phrases and even whole lines for reference under any grammatical circumstances to characters, objects and events. Each of the following examples of these ‘formulae’ has the same metrical value and so can slot into the same position in a Greek hexameter line (stressed syllables are underlined).

ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων
(Agamemnon, lord of men)

ὑφ’ Ἐκτορος ἀνδροφόνου
(by Hektor the man-slayer)

θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη·
(the goddess, shining-eyed Athena)

Those examples apply to people but formulae for objects work in a similar way and tend to stress the most significant quality of the item: mule-carts are usually well-wheeled or well-polished, houses are well-constructed, ships are swift or well-benched.

There are also situational formulae: recurrent situations, such as someone responding to another character’s speech, can utilise a full-line formula where only the names are variable. The name phrase may be placed in the middle of the line but most often will occur at the end of the line, as in these two examples:

τὴν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη νεφεληγερέτα Ζεὺς· (Od. 1.63)
(To her in answer spoke cloud-gathering Zeus).

τὴν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη ξανθὸς Μενέλαος· (Od. 4.147)
(To her in answer spoke fair-haired Menelaos).

τὸν δ’ αὖ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἀντίον ἠΰδα· (Od. 4.593)
(To him then perceptive Telemachos answering spoke).

τὸν δ’ αὖ Νεστορίδης Πεισίστρατος ἀντίον ἠΰδα· (Od. 4.155)
(To him then Nestor’s son Peisistratos answering spoke).

The name-phrase changes but the line remains otherwise the same. These situational formulae serve in a small way to signal what is to follow: obviously here they introduce an answering response; additional, less self-evident signals would further be picked up by a listener steeped in the tradition, as an important means of marking the narrative structuring.

There is a lot more complexity to how these metrical formulae are fitted together in the narrative, but this overview should serve to provide a general idea of how a traditional bard is able to compose his epic in performance drawing on his repertoire of pre-existing phrases. The significance of these phenomena for *production* was recognised in the landmark studies of the early to mid twentieth century,² but it is only more recently that scholars have started to try to recreate the *audience’s reception process* in an oral traditional societal context. In particular consequence of the signal work of the late John Miles Foley, it is now widely recognised that these formulaic phrases are much more integral to the *reception* of epic narrative than was initially perceived.³ They are not ornamental epithets, as used to be assumed: a name-phrase such as πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς (Achilleus swift of foot) goes beyond mere ornament and encodes a cumulative reference to Achilleus’ essential *persona*, which is thus additionally affirmed every time a listener hears the phrase in a context. Over time, given a hearer’s increasing experience of the numerous contexts in which the phrase has been heard, it acquires for the individual hearer’s reception process a resonance that draws into each specific context a fleeting echoic awareness of all the other contexts in which it has been encountered, so that

the figure’s entire *persona* is immanent in the reference.⁴ It is important to recognise that these formulae are used extra-contextually – Achilleus can be described as swift of foot even when he has been sitting down for a while (for instance at *Iliad* 9.193–96, and on through Book 9).

In addition, the Homeric bard has a further repertoire of set piece situations—type-scenes—that can be utilised in many different contexts: for instance, a warrior naturally puts on his armour before battle, and he follows a logical order: first the greaves, then the breastplate and sword belt, followed by the shield, helmet and spear. This can be narrated in a minimalist way in the basic model, as

for the arming of Paris in *Iliad* 3, 330–38 (the italicised portions are the recurrent standard features, repeated more or less exactly in other arming passages in which, however, descriptive elaborations of the various items are likely to be interspersed):

*The greaves first he set around his shins,
fine ones, fitted with silver at the ankles.
Next he put on the corselet around his chest,
the one of his brother Lykaon: it fitted him too.
Over his shoulders he slung his sword, studded with silver,
a bronze one, and then his shield, both broad and strong.
On his sturdy head he set his well-made helm,
crested with horsehair; and formidably the crest tossed from aloft.
He took up his stout spear, which fitted the grip of his hand.*

This basic account can be elaborated to a considerable length by describing each item and telling its history.⁵ The basic pattern is a more or less fixed narrative sequence: any divergence is likely to be highly significant, and to be picked up as such by the hearers experienced in the tradition. It is noteworthy in a battle-poem such as the *Iliad* that there are in fact only four occurrences of these extended arming sequences throughout all twenty-four books of the poem. In each case, they signify that an important warrior is about to enter a battle in which he will experience something momentous: in Book 3, Paris will duel with Menelaos; in Book 11 it will be the first major battle-engagement of great Agamemnon in the *Iliad*; in Book 16 Patroklos is preparing to go to his death in battle; and in Book 19 Achilleus is setting aside his quarrel with Agamemnon in order to re-enter the fight and avenge Patroklos' death, whereupon he will encounter and kill Hektor.

It is clear, then, that any traditionally formulated and recurrent situation has the capacity, strengthened over time, to signal something about the on-going shaping of the story as it continues to unfold. This can be quite a complex effect: Foley analysed the occurrences of the feast sequence in the *Odyssey*, for instance, finding it to be a particularly resonant signal. As he describes the phenomenon, the Homeric feast 'betokens a ritualistic event leading from an obvious and pre-existing problem to an effort at mediation of

that problem.'⁶ As soon as people are described as taking their seats for a feast, the expectation is created of an incipient and important change of direction in the story-line, such as the resolution of a point of conflict.

My own work over the past few decades has followed my initial recognition that Attic black-figure vase-painting of the sixth century BC exhibits many of the features that characterise the Homeric epics as oral-traditional in nature, given, of course, that they work not verbally but visually. In traditional oral epic the story relentlessly unfolds in real time in performance with no opportunity for individual differences in speed of response. A painted scene by contrast lacks the linear narrative story-line of epic poetry: instead it presents a visual object that can be studied and interpreted at length and at will. Nevertheless, as will be explained, the overall approach of the painter to expressing narrative meaning in his scene is indisputably part of the same tradition-determined culture as the Homeric poems. It is important, though, at this point to stress that this is *not* in any way to suggest that the vase-painters were setting out to *illustrate* Homeric narrative passages, text in hand as it were. Seldom in fact can we positively identify a vase scene as corresponding indubitably to a given passage from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Painters and their contemporaries knew the stories as part of their folk tradition, and drew upon them primarily from that source, although doubtless an occasional bardic performance might have caught their attention with a particularly vividly recounted episode.

My interest here lies not in discussing the subject-matter of the paintings *per se*, but rather in analysing the means by which the painters evoked their narrative contexts. As will be shown, their techniques are strikingly similar to those of the epic bard: one can recognise systems that *mutatis mutandis* were parallel in their visual expression to the verbal structures and strategies of oral-traditional epic. Painters used visual formulae of various kinds as a natural way of representing common figures and narrative situations, and in the visual reception just as in the verbal, the use of recurrent patterns has a profound effect

that is difficult to appreciate from outside the tradition. While the standard meaning of a recurrent visual pattern is not hard to recognise, added signification often results from the elaboration of an element to draw attention to its importance, or from the omission of an element that the tradition has led one to expect.

Many of the vase scenes at the height of the Athenian black-figure painting tradition (from around 570 BC on) are constructed in a manner that demands a certain level of analytical engagement on the part of the viewer. The most compelling evidence is that in vase depictions time is often treated in a non-linear fashion that to us can seem disjointed. Scenes may incorporate elements or even events from different points in the narrative that will evoke the whole story, pointing, for instance, to a cause-and-effect relationship between episodes.⁷

By way of example, in a scene on an amphora by Lydos (figs 1a and b),⁸ the painter has combined several different episodes from the story of the sack of Troy. On the left is the Recovery of Helen as she works her wiles on Menelaos so that he will not kill her with the sword he holds. In the centre, Priam sits as a suppliant on Zeus' altar, but will be killed regardless by Neoptolemos, and where one would expect a sword in the latter's hand, he holds the young son of long-dead Hektor by the ankle, little Astyanax, whom Neoptolemos hurled to his death from the walls of Troy: these two separate episodes are conjoined into a single image that evokes both. The scene is closed on the right by a couple of Trojan women pleading for mercy, while a dead Trojan sprawls in the background behind Priam's altar. It is a complex composition, and one that is nonsensical if interpreted as a 'snapshot'—would Neoptolemos be about to batter Priam to death with his grandson's corpse? A scene of this kind cannot be taken in at a glance: its juxtaposition of selected parts of the story into a single scene needs to be considered analytically. Why are these events brought together? The conflated death of a king and his grandson: is this to capture the widespread slaughter of young and old alike in the Greeks'



root-and-branch destruction of Troy once the city fell? What of the inclusion of the King of Sparta and his bride? Helen's triumphant re-instatement as Menelaos' wife and queen is in stark contrast to the futile pathos of the pleading women of Troy on the right. Scenes such as this can be seen to comprise a collection of narrative elements from different temporal points in the story, each with its own cluster of associations, brought together and artfully arranged into the *semblance* of a tableau that would seem to reflect a particular moment in the story of the fall of Troy, but often one finds that contemplative analysis of such an assemblage of images leads to much deeper perceptions about the event to which they refer. Here for instance, one might respond to the contrast between victor and vanquished, and within that to the differentiated fates of the women of conquered and conqueror, as well as the contrastive parallels between diverse killings. Thus each element evokes its own narrative episode, and all interact to

▲ Fig 1a. (top) Attic black-figure amphora Type B, attributed to Lydos, c. 550–540 BC, Berlin Antikensammlung F1685 (BAPD 310170).

IMAGE: © BPK/ANTIKENSAMMLUNG, SMB/PHOTOGRAPHER INGRID GESKE, IMAGE NUMBER 00041616

▲ Fig 1b. (bottom) Attic black-figure amphora Type B, attributed to Lydos, c. 550–540 BC, Berlin Antikensammlung F1685 (BAPD 310170).

IMAGE: DRAWING AFTER EDUARD GERHARD, ETRUSKISCHE UND KAMPANISCHE VASENBILDER DES KÖNIGLICHEN MUSEUMS ZU BERLIN (BERLIN: G. REIMER, 1843), PL. XXI.



▲ Fig 2. Attic black-figure Panathenaic prize-amphora attributed to the Euphiletos Painter, c. 530 BC, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 14.130.12 (BAPD 301692).

IMAGE: PHOTO COURTESY THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; ROGERS FUND 1914, IMAGE NUMBER DT5492.

propose to the viewer a variety of cognitive responses that encompass the entirety of the extended narrative. It is significant that whereas in an oral or written textual narrative episodes must be encountered one at a time in linear presentation, visually they can be presented simultaneously, with the logic of their juxtaposition left indeterminate, unexpressed, for viewers to construct their own meaning.

While the constraints of metre—the fixed hexameter of Homeric epic—can be seen as the determining factor in the epic formulae, in the black-figure vase tradition it is the painting technique itself that imposes formative constraints on the painter. This involves the representation of figures as solid black silhouettes on the orange clay ground, within which details such as facial features, musculature and drapery folds can be incised with a sharp point, and over which a very limited palette of additional colouring—white, and a purplish red colour—can be added as highlights. These are the only two applied colours to withstand the firing process, and at this time, all painted decoration was applied before firing, relying on chemical reactions in the kiln to produce the characteristic red and black of Attic painted pottery. A further technical constraint is that in black-figure depictions the head and legs of a figure were generally rendered in profile, while the chest is regularly frontal: there is quite often even

a blurring of the distinction between back and front, as can be seen in a depiction on a Panathenaic prize-amphora of the goddess Athena (shield on her left arm, spear wielded in her right hand, and snake-fringed aegis worn like a poncho) (fig. 2).⁹ Although in Homeric epic, the aegis belongs to Zeus (*Iliad* 17.593), vase-painters present it as a regular iconographic marker unique to Athena: this is just one example showing that the vase-painters were not simply imitating the specifically Homeric figures and situations, but rather responding to their own traditional patterns of narrative representation.

So, wherein lie these parallels between the painted and the poetic traditions? The most obvious instance is iconography, which in its use and effect corresponds closely to the formulaic phrases of traditional epic. Like the verbal Homeric nominal-epithet formulae, iconographic elements constitute a system of visual attributes that serve at their most fundamental level to identify important figures. So, for instance, Athena in fig. 2 is marked as female by the white over-painting of her flesh (the standard gender distinction in black-figure), and she wears a long garment unsuitable for battle (contrast Amazons who wear short tunics), but she is equipped with a warrior's shield and spear, and a helmet, albeit of a special shape that reveals her face.

A scene on a hydria of Herakles tussling with Apollo over who should own the Delphic tripod exemplifies a range of traditional iconographic attributes (fig. 3).¹⁰ In the middle are Apollo, with a quiver hanging at his hip, and Herakles, immediately identifiable by his lion skin and his knotty club held aloft. On the far left, gesticulating in support of her brother, is Artemis, identifiable by her *polos* hat and bow, while Athena stands on the far right supporting Herakles: she wears her snake-fringed aegis and open-face helmet.¹¹ Thus, it is relatively easy for a vase-painter to construct a figure of Herakles, Athena or others by including these traditionally sanctioned attributes, and even though in this case the painter has inscribed the names of all the figures in his scene, it is not essential, as the identities are unmistakable from their attributes.

As with the formulaic phrases of epic, these visual attributes do much more than merely identifying a figure in a scene: for one thing, figures are commonly over-determined (that is, there are frequently more iconographic elements than would be needed for mere recognition, not to mention inscribed names). It can be argued that each of the attributes has its own additional associations that reinforce the essentials of the character's identity. In fig. 3, in the case of Herakles' lion-skin, there is direct reference to the Nemean Lion and Herakles' feat of first strangling it and then adopting as his armour its impenetrable hide, and so his heroic stature is visually affirmed and enhanced. It is noteworthy that like Homeric formulae, iconography is extra-contextual, in that it is depicted even in situations where it would be inappropriate in real terms. For instance, a number of depictions of Herakles by different vase-painters represent him in a peaceful context, performing before other deities on the kithara as if in a concert. One such example is on a neck-amphora in London (fig. 4),¹² where he plays the instrument (wearing lion skin and with bow, quiver and sword-scabbard slung about his person) framed by a three-strong audience of deities: Poseidon (trident) sits facing Herakles, while Athena (helmet, aegis, shield and spear) and Ares (helmet and two spears) stand to either side. The various arms and armour are indubitably extra-contextual in such a scene. The continual repetition of Herakles' attribute-clusters in his innumerable depictions acquires a resonance that, as with the Homeric formulaic descriptions, will evoke in the viewer an awareness of the many other vase-scenes, the many other heroic situations, in which similarly marked renderings of the hero have already been encountered: this awareness transcends any particular context to encapsulate the entirety of Herakles' heroic persona.

Figure-stance is also an important signifier, although more generalised than iconography. The most obvious is Panathenaic Athena (for instance in fig. 2). On the large amphorae of special shape that were filled with olive oil and given as prizes in the annual Panathenaic



▲ Fig 3. Attic black-figure hydria attributed to the Lykomedes Painter, c. 520–510 BC, Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 86.AE.114 (BAPD 7813).

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE GETTY'S OPEN CONTENT PROGRAM. THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, IMAGE NUMBER 01389701.



◀ Fig 4. Attic black-figure neck-amphora, name vase of the Painter of London B228 (within the Leagros Group), c. 510–500 BC, London, The British Museum 1843,1103.23 (B228; BAPD 302117).

IMAGE: © COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IMAGE NUMBER AN517548001.

Games in honour of Athena, the goddess was always represented on one side as Athena Promachos ('in the forefront of battle') in a characteristic striding stance in aegis and helmet, brandishing her spear aloft and holding her shield before her: it is a warrior pose, signifying her protective function before the battle-line. She is depicted thus on the example in fig. 2 from around 530 BC (in contrast to her quieter stance on the hydria in fig. 3), and this warlike representation persisted on the prize amphorae from the earliest (c. 565 BC) through to the fourth century BC.¹³

► **Fig 5.** (top left) Attic black-figure amphora Type B in the Manner of the Lysippides Painter, c. 520 BC, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.14 (BAPD 302234).

IMAGE: COURTESY THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART: FLETCHER FUND 1956, IMAGE NUMBER DP102378.



► **Fig 6.** (top right) Attic black-figure amphora Type B (reverse) attributed to Group E, c. 540 BC, 'The Johnson Vase,' Canberra, Classics Museum, Australian National University 84.02 (BAPD 8244). For the obverse, see fig. 11.

IMAGE: COURTESY THE CLASSICS MUSEUM, ANU, CANBERRA; PHOTO BOB MILLER (2009-0374).



► **Fig 7.** (lower left) Attic black-figure amphora Type B (obverse) attributed to Group E, c. 540 BC, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.11 (BAPD 301036). For the reverse, see fig. 12.

IMAGE: COURTESY THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART: FLETCHER FUND 1956, IMAGE NUMBER DP297585.



► **Fig 8.** (lower right) Attic black-figure amphora attributed to the Painter of Berlin 1686, c. 540 BC, London, The British Museum 1861,0425,50 (B197; BAPD 320380).

IMAGE: © COURTESY THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IMAGE NUMBER AN256423001.



On a larger scale, corresponding to the Homeric type-scenes such as the arming sequence or the feast, vase-painters utilised recurrent compositional patterns in the arrangement and combination of figures. In the painters' production processes, these are a natural development from painting repetitive subjects within a traditionally normative context. In the reception process, through the recurrence, the patterns accumulate additional associations that can resonate and interact at quite a deep level of consciousness.

One of the most immediately recognisable scene-types is the fight between two warriors. We can easily trace how a very simple formulation of a commonplace narrative event was variously developed and adapted, and adapted again, within the continuing tradition, even while the simple form continued. This is *not* a chronological development from simple to complex, but a choice made by the painter: the simple form continued in use throughout, alongside the more complex versions.

As with the arming sequence in Homer, there is a very basic form of fight scene, as for example on an amphora of around 520 BC (fig. 5):¹⁴ its characteristics are the

warriors' striding stance of attack (compare Athena Promachos in fig. 2), the spears aimed reciprocally in visual symmetry, and the shields in the middle, one showing its inner surface with arm grip, the other its bicoloured outer face. This schema can be elaborated in various ways, with more detail for the two participants, more figures included, or even with a specifically identified conflict being superimposed, but the primary impact is still two figures engaged in an evenly balanced encounter. Sometimes framing figures are added, as in a scene from an amphora in Canberra (fig. 6), which also includes the common optional addition of a corpse as the objective of the fight: the slayer wants his victim's panoply as a trophy, which the friends of the deceased want to deny him.¹⁵

Moving beyond the mere formulation of a scene-type, we can examine the application of this same pattern to specific (and uniquely identifiable) stories: for instance, on an amphora of around 540 BC by a painter within Group E (fig. 7) the opponents are Herakles and the triple-bodied Geryon, and in this context the elaboration of the scene-type gains additional signification from Herakles'

iconographic presentation—the shaggy-looking, club-bearing hero against the formally armed, hoplite-type warriors—and Herakles on his own faces a tripled opponent, having already defeated the herdsman Eurytion, collapsing at his feet, as the giant’s first line of defence.¹⁶ Then again, on an amphora in London (fig. 8), the central figure of Zeus is added, intervening in the fight between Herakles and Kyknos (respectively supported by Athena and Ares).¹⁷

And now we come to examine how the adoption or adaptation of an established traditional scene-type could contribute significantly to the meaning in the depiction of a specific narrative episode. The effect becomes evident when an earlier depiction of a mythological event is compared with a later one in the black-figure tradition: around 570 BC, the C Painter painted a scene in the interior medallion of a cup, depicting the Rape of Cassandra, when Lokrian Aias dragged Cassandra away from the statue of Athena where she had tried to seek sanctuary in the

Sack of Troy (fig. 9).¹⁸ In ancient Greek belief, someone sitting on an altar (like Priam in fig. 1), or clasping a deity’s statue as Cassandra does, was sacrosanct, under the protection of the god appealed to. For an assailant to continue his assault regardless was to show contempt for the god’s power and potentially to arouse that deity’s anger—a dangerous venture.

The C Painter’s version of the Rape is from relatively early in the tradition (c. 570 BC), and emphasises Athena as a stiff statue with rigid vertical stance, while Aias grasps the arm of the crouching Cassandra. This representation illustrates the central action of the event, incorporating no interpretative signals other than the vulnerability of Cassandra, who is depicted as small and naked: the absence of clothing is made clear by the expanse of her white-overlaid flesh. A commentary of sorts is however offered by the two lotus-flowers, likely indicators of sexually attractive beauty, and the siren behind Athena, a common motif of potential death.



◀ Fig 9. Attic black-figure ‘Siana’ cup attributed to the C Painter, c. 570 BC. London, The British Museum 1885,1213.11 (B379; BAPD 300525).

IMAGE: © COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IMAGE NUMBER AN148164001.



▲ Fig 10. Attic black-figure amphora Type A, Berlin Antikensammlung F1698 (BAPD 310314).

IMAGE: DRAWING AFTER EDUARD GERHARD, *ETRUSKISCHE UND KAMPANISCHE VASENBILDER DES KÖNIGLICHEN MUSEUMS ZU BERLIN* (BERLIN: G. REIMER, 1843), PL. XXII.

► Fig 11. Attic black-figure amphora Type B (obverse) attributed to Group E, c. 540 BC, 'The Johnson Vase,' Canberra, Classics Museum, Australian National University 84.02 (BAPD 8244). For the reverse, see fig. 6.



IMAGE: COURTESY THE CLASSICS MUSEUM, ANU, CANBERRA; PHOTO BOB MILLER (2009-0374)

► Fig 12. Attic black-figure amphora Type B (reverse) attributed to Group E, c. 540 BC, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.11 (BAPD 301036). For the obverse, see fig. 7.



IMAGE: COURTESY THE NEW YORK METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; FLETCHER FUND 1956, IMAGE NUMBER DP297583.

After the mid-century, painters changed the scene-formulation, regularly recasting the Rape in the form of the fight pattern, as is exemplified in a scene from an amphora by a painter within Group E (fig. 10).¹⁹ Aias is presented as a fighter engaging directly with Athena as though with an opponent on the battlefield. The fixed traditional components of the fight scene-type are clear: mirror-image stances of warrior and goddess as

each seems to be attacking the other, so that Cassandra, no longer Aias' direct objective, is positioned between the two 'combatants' like the corpse between confronted warriors, as the motivation for conflict (see fig. 6). The impious contempt with which Aias disregards Cassandra's appeal for protection at Athena's statue is now formulated in terms of a mortal warrior challenging an Olympian deity, an act of supreme *hubris* that will result in retribution. This cause-and-effect connection had in fact been established much earlier in the narrative of the now-lost cyclical epic, the *Ilioupersis*, as Proclus' summary of the plot makes clear.²⁰ It seems that the effectiveness of reformulating the Rape as a battle-confrontation was soon recognised, for the new composition became accepted and assimilated into the tradition as the regular pattern for depicting the narrative.

This kind of application of a standard formulation to a new context leads inevitably to the issue of innovation, and the question first of *whether* an inventive and original-minded painter could readily introduce innovations that would be accessible to his contemporaries, and then, if so, *how* this might be accomplished. In answer, examples can be sought from among the works of the best and most skilful of black-figure painters, Exekias, to see how he manipulated the traditional response patterns to enrich his scenes with extra layers of signification: in many of his scenes he encoded a depth of interpretative potential that is in its own way the equivalent of the exploitation of traditional mechanisms in the Homeric poems.

First one must appreciate just how repetitive the pictorial tradition could be. This can be illustrated by comparison of two vases by different hands within Group E, produced around 540 BC (figs 11 and 12).²¹ These two scenes are markedly similar in depicting Herakles stabbing the Nemean Lion with his sword (in contradiction of the version in which its invulnerable hide obliged him to strangle it!), and there are many more renditions of this narrative by Group E and other painters that follow the same compositional pattern, with few minor alterations of details. The overall impact of all the scenes is the same:

the similarities are obvious, the divergences incidental. The identities of the two framing figures are not explicit, and a suggestion that they may have been intended for Athena and Iolaos is possible only because of a scene by Exekias where his framing figures are both named by inscription, and Athena is iconographically marked.

The master-craftsman Exekias produced an innovative response to this recurrent scene-pattern on a neck-amphora in Berlin (fig. 13a),²² where he reverses the frame arrangement: Athena, resplendent in her armour, now dominates the right, with a tense Iolaos on the left, both identified by inscription. The lion has been turned to face Herakles, its hind leg in the same raking stance but flipped horizontally, which has the effect of presenting hero and monster as opponents (like a pair of confronted warriors in the fight pattern), rather than just evoking Herakles' despatch of the creature. It is noteworthy that Herakles here holds no weapon: he is indeed striving to strangle the beast. This is still *essentially* the old composition, but these changes present a lot more impact and potential for interpretative response to the additional layers of interpretation.

Each pictorial element makes a contribution, and all interact. Athena's warrior attributes of helmet and shield contrast with the raw strength of the unarmed Herakles' strangle-

“ The tension of the moment is palpable: the stance of Iolaos on the left imitates that of Herakles, as though he is empathetically copying Herakles' battle.

hold on the monster lion. Her stance is not that of Athena Promachos, striding forth into battle; here, with her shield held before her, she fends off the lion, as it backs away from its assailant, and she thus forms a kind of back-stop. Her stance makes her look immovable, and so the lion is bailed up between the hero and the 'hard place': Gerhard's rendition in fig. 13b of the original added white for Athena's flesh



restores the original emphasis on her figure at the right margin of the scene, which gives point to the perception of movement across the picture-field to the right. The tension of the moment is palpable: the stance of Iolaos on the left imitates that of Herakles, as though he is empathetically copying Herakles' battle. While innovative within the tradition, however, Exekias' Herakles scene in Berlin achieves its effect primarily by reversing the figure arrangement, both creating and capitalising on the sense of direction from the viewer's left to right.

A far more complex manipulation of traditional elements to convey new content is exemplified by Exekias' splendid amphora in the Vatican with its obverse scene of Achilles and Aias gaming (figs 14a and b).²³ It is a visually impressive composition with its huge

▲ Fig 13a. (top) Attic black-figure neck-amphora signed by Exekias, c. 540 BC, Berlin Antikensammlung F1720 (BAPD 310383).

IMAGE: © BPK / ANTIKENSAMMLUNG, SMB; PHOTOGRAPHER GERHARD MURZA (IMAGE NUMBER 0002362).

▲ Fig 13b. (bottom) Attic black-figure neck-amphora signed by Exekias, c. 540 BC, Berlin Antikensammlung F1720 (BAPD 310383).

IMAGE: DRAWING AFTER EDUARD GERHARD, ETRUSKISCHE UND KAMPANISCHE VASENBILDER DES KÖNIGLICHEN MUSEUMS ZU BERLIN (BERLIN: G. REIMER, 1843), PL. XII.



▲ **Fig 14a.** (left) Attic black-figure amphora Type A signed by Exekias, c. 530 BC, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco Vaticano 16757 (A344; BAPD 310395).

IMAGE: PHOTO AFTER C. ALBIZZATI, *VASI ANTICHI DIPINTI DEL VATICANO* (ROME: SANSAINI, 1922–42), FASC. 5, PL. 41.

▲ **Fig 14b.** (right) Attic black-figure amphora Type A signed by Exekias, c. 530 BC, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco Vaticano 16757 (A344; BAPD 310395).

IMAGE: DRAWING AFTER ADOLF FURTWÄNGLER AND KARL REICHHOLD, *GRIECHISCHE VASENMALEREI* (MUNICH: BRUCKMANN, 1932), VOL. 3, PL. 131.

seated figures, and it has provoked arguably more scholarly interpretations than any other single black-figure scene. It is instructive, therefore, to examine the range of traditional elements and their associations that combine to create the masterpiece.

Many have sought to analyse how the visual impact of this most famous scene is achieved.²⁴ First of all, on a vase that is already very large (61cm in height) there is the sheer size of the figures, which, seated, occupy the full height of the scene—as is often noted, if they stood up, their heads would break through the ceiling of the frieze above (like Pheidias’ seated Zeus in the temple at Olympia). The unity of form between painting and vase shape is also frequently discussed, but here there is need for caution, because at least some of the unifying alignments can be appreciated from only one viewpoint, directly in front of the middle of the scene, and while they are immediately apparent in most photographs, viewers’ actual visual relationships with a real object in space are complex and constantly changing as the viewers move. Much of the impact of the scene, from whatever angle it may be viewed, derives from the clarity of the silhouette-forms, combined with the intricacy of the incised details, which catch and engage the eye of the beholder. There is the marked symmetry of forms, and the breaks in that symmetry that signal winner and loser: the differentiation is affirmed by the numbers inscribed between Achilles and Aias, τέσσαρα and τρία (‘four’ and ‘three’), taken to be the respective heroes’ scores. Surely, one feels, there must have been a

powerful story being evoked here, but we know of none from any of the extant literary sources, and although many scholars have sought to hypothesise one, the proposals have tended to be unpersuasive, albeit inventive and engaging.

It was only when I began seriously to explore the potential in the visual tradition of black-figure for the creative use of the basic schemata that I realised there is indeed more to be understood about how the scene achieves its effect within its traditional reception context. The basic form of the scene is the pattern of the fight between equally matched opponents (compare fig. 5). The clear articulation of the opponents makes the scene’s traditional underpinnings unmistakable, while their intricate, elaborative detail entices the viewer to study the scene more closely, and to consider its implications. Although the figures are seated, their legs are separated and this stance is evocative of the attacking stride of a duel. The box supporting the gaming board is positioned on the ground between them, in the place occupied by the corpse in so many fight scenes (compare fig. 6): just as the body of the fallen warrior is the focus of the conflict, so, in parallel, the box with its game is assuredly the centre-point of this mock engagement.

Based on this recognition the effect can be more deeply explored: it is indeed a conflict-scene, but between warriors on the same side—this is why their identities are important, and why, therefore, Exekias inscribed their names. They are friends, not enemies, but perhaps rivals, the best and the second-best of the Achaian warriors at Troy. Playing a board

game should be a peaceful occupation—why do they need to be armed? The answer (from the tradition) is that their weaponry and armour encodes their iconographic personae; unarmed, they would be just another couple of civilians. The inclusion of their *full* panoplies (including such rare elaborations as the thigh-guards and the rerebrace on Achilles' upper arm) heightens their magnificence as warrior heroes; it expresses their mythic biography, and simultaneously evokes the viewer's own experience of them from other scene representations within the black-figure tradition. This brings to the depicted context that aura of extra-contextual reference to the tradition in its entirety that Foley identified as one of the most important effects of Homeric formulations.

Furthermore, the heroes are alone, with no framing figures: why? The scene seems devoid of any temporal context, a kind of indicatory, almost existential, moment. In contrast to so many black-figure scenes that conflate several different episodes into a single inclusive take on a story,²⁵ Exekias here has narrowed his narrative scope to one precise moment in the game. Onlookers on the sidelines would have broadened the canvas and created a more defined sense of a particular event with the players as its focus. Here, the shields leaning against the sidewalls fill the positions normally occupied by onlookers, which draws attention to the absence of the usual bystanders, emphasising the intensity of the two central figures; indeed the players can themselves be seen as forming a frame, leading *us* to focus on what *they* are focusing upon.

Why, then, are they so intense? It is just a game, surely, a matter of chance and luck, with perhaps an admixture of skill as well (more likely than dice, they would have been playing a board game like checkers or backgammon). The miniature mock-conflict of the game can stand for the real-life (or real-myth) battle experience, where for all a warrior's skill he also needs luck, which is often in epic reported in the form of the support of the gods. In terms of luck, Achilles is winning with his 'four' to Aias' 'three'. He is biographically the greater warrior, and visually too he dominates the scene with

his towering helmet (the main break in the symmetry). For all that, he will die sooner than Aias, but he will die in glory, having won *kleos* (reputation) for himself. Aias too will perish soon after, but in ignominy: as a heroic figure, he will lose in the game of life.

But for the here and now of the scene, although it is evocative of what is impending, although one is even now winning, the pair are in symmetry, hanging, one might say, in the balance in a moment out of time. They are imposing figures, majestic, immense: their identities past, present, and future, are immanent in their images. Here, supremely, we can appreciate how awareness of the tradition can add immensely to our response to the depiction.



Playing a board game should be a peaceful occupation—why do they need to be armed?

The tradition of course continues after this. That Exekias' scene had contemporary impact is evidenced by the numbers of subsequent versions of the gamesters, first in black-figure and then also in red-figure. Although the scene pattern of the seated figures facing each other over a gaming board remains a constant basis, there are many contextualising variations as the tradition continues to be creatively used by subsequent generations of vase-painters. A single example must suffice here, a scene on a neck-amphora attributed to the Medea Group in which Athena stands in the middle behind the box, hand held up for attention like a policeman controlling traffic (fig. 15).²⁶ Probably not by coincidence, her placement echoes that of Zeus breaking up the fight between Herakles and Kyknos (see fig. 8),²⁷ a visual connotation that adds further underlying meaning to the scene, emphasising the competitive element of the gaming, and intimating that it is inappropriate and should be interrupted. The inclusion of Athena recurs in many versions of the gamesters from the last two decades of the sixth century on. In such treatments,



▲ Fig 15. Attic black-figure neck-amphora attributed to the Medea Group (within the Leagros Group), c.510 BC, Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 71.AE.441 (BAPD 9029664).

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE GETTY'S OPEN CONTENT PROGRAM. THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, IMAGE NUMBER 00798101.

new applications of existing formulations are invented, which are then absorbed into the tradition in turn as formulations in their own right, increasingly emptied of their new meaning as they become more and more familiar through repetition.

It is my hope that this presentation will have offered a measure of insight into what can be gained by undertaking this kind of analysis. Looking at archaic vase-paintings in light of the advancing understanding of traditional meaning-production in early Greek oral-traditional epic (as reflected in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) can open our eyes to new categories of interpretation within the visual tradition of vase-painting. Conversely, I believe that returning to Homer with ears informed by visual analysis can provide additional insights into the subtleties of oral traditional epic, but that is another story, for another occasion. ¶

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Abbreviations

1. BAPD: Beazley Archive Pottery Database: <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/pottery/default.htm>
2. LIMC: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* and Supplement (Zürich and Düsseldorf: Artemis Verlag, 1981-1999, and 2009).



ANNE MACKAY developed a special passion for Athenian vase-painting studying Classics at the University of Canterbury, nurtured by the James Logie Memorial Collection curated by Marion K. Steven. Her PhD (Victoria University of Wellington) explored the

chronological development of the 6th century BC Athenian potter and painter Exekias, and this, after some 20 years of further work culminated in a monograph entitled *Tradition and Originality. A Study of Exekias* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010). Her comparative analysis of the separate but largely parallel narrative traditions of archaic Greek vase-painting and early Greek oral epic (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), resulted in a number of articles over the past decades, and having organised two orality conferences in Durban 1996 and Auckland 2006 she edited both sets of proceedings (Leiden: Brill, 1999 and 2008).

First employed as a Junior Lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, she subsequently moved to the (then) University of Natal in Durban, South Africa as Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer and finally Professor of Classics. From 2001 she was Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Auckland (retired 2018). She has served as Chairperson of the Classical Association of South Africa and as President of the Australasian Society for Classical Studies.

1. Although already in his 1928 writings on Homeric epic Parry had seen the significance of tradition in the texts, his recognition of the oral-traditional substructure underlying the texts was fully confirmed by his fieldwork in Yugoslavia (1933-1935) recording and analysing the living South Slavic oral epic tradition, in which he saw direct parallels to Homeric practice. These essential stages in the development of oral theory are described by J. M. Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), chs. I and II.
2. Most notably initially in the publications of Milman Parry from 1928 to 1937, later collected together in *The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. by Adam Parry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
3. See John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition* (1988); *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991); *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). The latter presents a useful overview of his contribution to oral theory in regard to the traditional reception process; see especially ch. 1.
4. The concept is drawn from Foley's work on oral-traditional epic and is explored at length in Foley, *Immanent Art*.

5. Compare, for instance, the arming of Agamemnon narrated in *Iliad* 11.17–44, which expands Paris's nine lines into twenty-eight.
6. Foley *Homer's Traditional Art*, p. 174 (Foley's italics).
7. This phenomenon is analysed by Anthony M. Snodgrass, *Narration and illusion in Archaic Greek art: a lecture delivered at New College, Oxford, on 29th May, 1981* (London: Leopard's Hill Press, 1982); reprinted in his *Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 381–406. See more recently Luca Giuliani, *Image and Myth: A History of Pictorial Narration in Greek Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), Ch. 5.
8. Attic black-figure amphora Type B, attributed to Lydos, c. 550–540 BC, Berlin F1685 (BAPD 310170): fig. 1b, drawing after Eduard Gerhard, *Etruskische und kampanische Vasenbilder des königlichen Museums zu Berlin* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1843), pl. XXI.
9. Attic black-figure Panathenaic prize-amphora attributed to the Euphiletos Painter, c. 530 BC, New York 14.130.12 (BAPD 301692).
10. Attic black-figure hydria by the Lykomedes Painter, c. 520–510 BC, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 86.AE.114 (BAPD 7813).
11. The flesh of Artemis and Athena appears dark because the added white has, as often, worn off.
12. Attic black-figure neck-amphora, the name vase of the Painter of London B228 (a painter within the Leagros Group), c. 510–500 BC, London B228 (=1843.1103.23; BAPD 302117).
13. Although over time some of the details changed (for instance, Athena was later turned to face the other way), her stance and attributes remained constant.
14. Attic black-figure amphora Type B in the Manner of the Lysippides Painter, c. 520 BC, New York 56.171.14 (BAPD 302234).
15. Attic black-figure amphora Type B (reverse) by a painter in Group E, c. 540 BC, 'The Johnson Vase', Canberra, Classics Museum, Australian National University 84.02 (BAPD 8244). The scene on the obverse is illustrated in fig. 11.
16. Attic black-figure amphora Type B by a painter in Group E, c. 540 BC, New York 56.171.11 (BAPD 301036).
17. Attic black-figure amphora attributed to the Painter of Berlin 1686, c. 540 BC, London B197 (= 1861.0425.50; BAPD 320380). Here Kyknos turns to flee, but in other versions, the opponents face each other symmetrically.
18. Attic black-figure 'Siana' cup attributed to the C Painter, c. 570 BC. London B379 (= 1885.1213.11; BAPD 300525).
19. Attic black-figure amphora Type A, Berlin F1698 (BAPD 310314). The drawing (after Gerhard, 1843: pl. XXII) makes clear some details that are not easy to discern in photographs as the vase in poor condition.
20. See *Greek Epic Fragments*, ed. by Martin L. West, Loeb Classical Library 497 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 146–47: *Ilioupersis* Arg. 3.
21. Fig. 11: Attic black-figure amphora Type B (obverse) by a painter in Group E, c. 540 BC, 'The Johnson Vase', Canberra, Classics Museum, Australian National University 84.02 (BAPD 8244). The scene on the reverse of the vase is illustrated in fig. 6. Fig. 12: Attic black-figure amphora Type B by a painter in Group E, c. 540 BC, New York 56.171.11 (BAPD 301036). The reverse is illustrated in fig. 7.
22. Fig. 13a: Attic black-figure neck-amphora signed by Exekias, c. 540 BC, Berlin F1720 (BAPD 310383). Fig. 13b: drawing of the scene, after Gerhard 1843 pl. XII.
23. Attic black-figure amphora Type A, Vatican 344 (=16757; BAPD 310395). Fig. 14a, Photo after Albizzati, C. (1922–1942). *Vasi antichi dipinti del Vaticano*, 7 fascicles (Rome: Sansoni, 1922–42), fasc. 5, pl. 41. Fig. 14b, drawing after Adolf Furtwängler and Karl Reichhold, *Griechische Vasenmalerei* Vol. 3. (Munich: Bruckmann, 1932), pl. 131.
24. Some of the major discussions are noted in E.A. Mackay, *Tradition and Originality: A Study of Exekias*, BAR International Series 2092 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010), ch. 32.
25. The phenomenon is commonly described as synoptic. For references see n. 7 above.
26. Attic black-figure neck-amphora attributed to the Medea Group (within the Leagros Group), c.510 BC, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 71.AE.441 (BAPD 9029664).
27. This in turn is a more specific version of the scene type of a figure intervening in a quarrel between unnamed warriors: for instance, on a cup by Lydos of around 550 BC, Taranto 20137 (BAPD 310211) <www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/7DC95838-F17C-4BB3-884E-oFoFoE911oEo>, or a later amphora by the Painter of Munich 1410: Munich 1411 (BAPD 301594) <www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/2E6EF19C-oC6C-4DA4-807A-36CE7784DE7D>.