COMMENTARY ON A BLACK FIGURE LEKYTHOS IN THE URE MUSEUM
(UNIVERSITY OF READING), INV. NO. 51.4.9

By Michael Atkins

The black-figured lekythos by the Painter of Vatican G31 Painter\(^1\), created during the late archaic period, around 520BC, is an interesting depiction of Amazons in battle. There were three popular heroes who battled the Amazons in myth – Herakles (the Greek Hercules), Theseus and Achilles. On this vase the Painter of Vatican G 31 has used varying styles and innovations in the scene that result in the creation of an individual, innovative variant of a scene that was a very popular subject for Greek vases. Yet which of the three heroes fights the Amazons on this vase remains a subject of debate.

The painting has been done on a small lekythos. Lekythoi were primarily used for storing oil, either in households, during festivals, or left at a tomb/grave in honour of the deceased. This function is indicated by the small, thin neck of the lekythos that only allows a small amount of oil out. The decorative form of the lekythos suggests the precious nature of the oil. The depiction of a battle scene depicted on the vase might indicate that this lekythos did not belong to a woman, but to a man who used it as a household ornament or a grave memorial. One unusual feature of this painting is the absence of any picture below the handle of the lekythos. Of course if someone was holding the vase and pouring oil, their hand would cover up the blank space of the vase, and not conceal any of the painted scene.

Little is known about the painter who created this scene, but sir John Beazley (1885 – 1970) attributed this vase and others to a painter who he named the Painter of Vatican G 31.\(^2\) Other paintings by this artist all decorate neck amphorae. These show such scenes as Achilles and Ajax playing dice, Theseus and the Minotaur, a gigantomachy, and Herakles. Beazley attributed these vases to the same painter on the basis of their similar styles. The Vatican G31 painter is not as accomplished as such painters as Exekias or Euphronios, as clothes on characters are not very well detailed, characters (such as the falling Greek) are not portrayed naturalistically and cannot be easily

\(^{1}\) Dietrich von Bothmer, *Amazons in Greek art* (Oxford 1957) 78, LIV.1, fig. 74.
\(^{2}\) John D. Beazley, *Attic Black-Figure Vase Painters* (Oxford 1956) 486.5; see also John D. Beazley, *Paralipomena* (Oxford 1971) 222.
identified easily. Also the use of perspective is not very well defined. The decoration on the vase is also not as sophisticated or detailed as on other pots bearing similar patterns. The painting is still interesting, however, and there is a sense of momentum and action that draws the viewer to look at the vase more closely.

The actual picture on the vase presents three Amazons and three Greeks fighting: an Amazon defeating a Greek, the main protagonist defeating an Amazon, and then an Amazon and a Greek advancing into battle. All the characters are in slightly different positions and dressed in different ways, helping to make each character an individual. We can tell that Amazons are presented on the vase mainly due to the style of their helmets. Amazons are presented on other vases with inscriptions identifying them and with similar helmets; for example, a black figure Amazons amphora by the Lysippides Painter (ca. 520 BC) shows the Amazons with tall helmets battling Herakles. The tall helmets appear to be Eastern in style, which reminds us where the Amazons came from. The three Amazons on the Reading lekythos have no inscriptions to indicate whether they are any particular characters, such as Penthesilea, or Antiope, but they are armed with spears and two of them have shields, which bear pictures on them. On one of the shields depicts the head of an animal, probably a tiger or panther, each of which indicates the eastern character of Amazons. With these slight details the artist presents the viewer with a good idea of the nature of the Amazons.

The other three characters on the vase are all male. They seem to be Greek, although there is a possibility that one of the characters may be a Trojan. The two males on either side of the main protagonist are dressed in typical hoplite armour. They hold spears and their shields are turned at an angle so the painter could portray them as different from the Amazons in the positioning of their shields. One of the characters has been wounded by an Amazon, and is falling to the ground, turning away as if to naturally stop himself from falling. This is quite well done, but the different styles of armour and use of colour are quite generic. The main character is shown boldly defeating an Amazon, who is also falling to the ground. Herakles is shown in this stance in many other vases depicting a similar scene. The figure is young looking.

1 Bothmer 1957, 53, XLI, 5, fig. 149.
dressed in a tunic and nebris (animal skin) and equipped with a sword and a quiver. As his appearance is significantly different to the other figures he will be the character that first draws the attention of the viewer. He is even more intriguing as it is difficult to distinguish which character from myth he actually represents.

Each of the characters is slightly differently decorated. Through the use of colouring techniques employing white and reds the artist has distinguished one character from another. The tunics of the Amazons and the armour of the Greeks vary in colour. In addition, the helmets and shields of all the characters are all individually detailed and decorated. The artist added a sense of perspective to the scene by presenting characters in front of the decorative borders; helmets, spears, bows protrude over the decorative frames, thus bringing more depth and life into the scene and making it more interesting for the viewer. The characters themselves also overlap each other, helping to increase the impression of perspective within the scene.

The decoration is quite simple. The decoration consists of lotus buds going around the shoulder of the lekythos. Underneath this is another decorative band, which is filled up with dots above the central scene but blank on the other side. This is probably done as part of ‘horror vacui’ to fill up space at the scene to make it more fascinating and detailed.

The main character depicted on the vase is very intriguing. As there are no inscriptions on the vase and the character has no defining features or conventions of any Greek heroes, so it is hard to suggest whom the painter is trying to depict. It is most likely that the character would be either Herakles, Theseus or Achilles as these three great Greek heroes each fought the Amazons in myth, and all were popular figures to present on Greek vases at this time.

Herakles was one of the greatest Greek heroes of all time, and also one of the most commonly depicted heroes on Greek vases. Herakles fought the Amazons as part of his twelve labours. His labour was to fetch for Eurystheus’ daughter, Admete, the Golden girdle of Ares that was worn by the Amazon queen, Hippolyta. She treats Herakles with hospitality, and is prepared to give up her girdle, except Hera, disguised as an Amazon, persuaded the other Amazons that Herakles was taking Hippolyta
against her will. This resulted in Herakles killing Hippolyta and defeating the Amazons. This was a popular myth on vases, which normally show Herakles in his lion skin and with a club, defeating the Amazons and taking the girdle of Hippolyta. An example of this is found on a red figure volute krater, painted by Euphronios (ca. 510 BC). He is wearing his lion skin and is armed with a club, battling three Amazons armed with sword and bows. While the figure on the Reading lekythos is in exactly the same position in which Herakles is shown in this scene on many other pots, he is advancing boldly with a falling Amazon in front of him. But the central Greek character on the Reading lekythos does not have any of Herakles’ standard attributes, such as his lion skin and club, and the character on the lekythos has no beard, whereas on vases depicting his battle with the Amazons Herakles is bearded. Therefore the figure might represent either Achilles or Theseus.

Theseus met the Amazons after Herakles had just battled them (some myths suggest that he was part of Herakles expedition) and kidnapped their queen Antiope and took her back to Athens. As a result of this the Amazons invaded Athens, fighting a great battle in the city itself, before they were defeated. This also became a popular myth on vases and sculpture, particularly in Athens. On the lekythos it can be seen that the main protagonist is wearing a small cap, which Theseus is sometimes seen to be wearing in other vases. Doubt arises, however, as Theseus is usually bearded. In the myth of the capture of Antiope, furthermore, Theseus does not kill her in the battle at Athens. And in the myth of Antiope, the battle between Theseus and the Amazons was located either in the city of Athens, where buildings would indicate the actual city (as on other vases). Alternatively the actual capture of Antiope would be shown, as on a black figure amphora painted attributed to the Leagros Group and the Antiope Painter, which depicts some Greeks waiting in a chariot (probably Pirithous, Theseus’ companion.) as Theseus carries a young, childlike Antiope towards them. Therefore the lekythos scene of the Amazon battle seems unconventional for the main protagonist to be Theseus

The third Greek hero that the Painter of Vatican G31 could have been trying to present to the viewer is Achilles. Achilles battled the Amazons during the Trojan

---

4 Depicted in Susan Woodford, An Introduction to Greek Art (Duckworth 1989) 67, fig. 89.
5 Bothmer 1957, 124, LXCVIII,1.
War, and defeated their queen – Penthesilea. After killing her, he fell in love with her and regretted his act. This moment is shown brilliantly by the painter Exekias on a black figure amphora around 530 BC, which shows the eye contact between the two characters at the moment before Penthesilea dies. Achilles is not always shown on vases as having beard, because he was younger than other heroes, such as Herakles and Theseus. Another factor that suggests the main character on the vase is Achilles is suggested by the characters who are not in battle. There is an Amazon entering into battle, not by running, and is going to aid the Amazon defeated by the main character. Behind that Amazon is another male figure, in the same stance as the Amazon, also advancing into battle, not running but also about to help his comrades. This figure could actually be a Trojan; about to help the Amazons and fight Achilles, All Amazons and Trojans on the pot are advancing left – against Achilles and the other, defeated Greek. This provides us with more contextual information to prove that it is Achilles, and not Herakles or Theseus. Other examples of this scene depicting Achilles in a similar battle scene are two ‘droop’ cups by the Wraith Painter (520–500 BC) which show a similar combination of Greeks (including Achilles) fighting Amazons and Trojans. These also have Heraklean connotations, which show the influence of Herakles battling the Amazons, and the stances and conventions used which were now also used for battles between Achilles and the Amazons.

Overall the vase is an intriguing depiction of Amazons and Greeks in battle. It is also interesting in the way that it is hard to specify who is the central hero. Although I have argued that it is Achilles, it could also be easily shown to be Herakles or Theseus. As there are no inscriptions on the vase, scholars will continue to argue over who the character is and what myth it originated from.

---

6 Illustrated on the cover of Dyfri Williams, Greek Vases (British Museum Publications 1985).
7 Bothmer 1957, 78, LIV, 3+4.
BIBLIOGRAPHY.


Amazons in Greek art: By Dietrich Von Bothmer, published by Oxford University press 1957.

Greek vases: By Dyfri Williams, published by British museum
Publications 1985

Attic red – figured vases, a survey: By Gisela Richter, published by Phaidon 1958