A Tale of Two Combats: A Reading of the Tsyzkiewicz Painter’s Name-Vase

Boston 97.368, a calyx krater which serves as the name-vase of the Tsyzkiewicz painter, depicts two legendary combats: Achilles and Memnon on side A, and Diomedes and Aeneas on side B. No other vase juxtaposes these two combat scenes. The Tsyzkiewicz painter deliberately parallels the scenes—all four combatants are supported by a goddess, and Athena encourages both victors with similar gestures, while the defeated warriors fall back into the arms of their divine mothers. The painter enhances this parallelism by replacing Thetis, who usually stands behind Achilles, with Athena.

The most striking difference between the two sides is the presence of a corpse between Achilles and Memnon, labeled Melanippos. This is the only occasion where the corpse between Achilles and Memnon is identified as Melanippos. Homer, Pindar, and Proclus’ summary of the *Aithiopis* agree that the death of Antilochos, son of Nestor, precipitates this duel. In other instances of this scene in art, if the corpse is labeled, it agrees with the literary sources. According to the literary sources, Aeneas’ duel with Diomedes is also precipitated by a death, that of Aeneas’ companion Pandaros.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet only one of the seven known depictions of this combat includes the body of Pandaros, and the Tsyzkiewicz painter omits it.

While it is possible that the Tsyzkiewicz painter’s deviations from the literary tradition represent otherwise unknown variants of these two duels, the choice to follow that alternate account must still be explained. The fact that the corpse between Achilles and Memnon is mislabeled perhaps suggests that the presence of the corpse mattered more than its identity. The importance of the corpse is highlighted by several artistic choices. The shield of the fallen warrior projects into the space between the two combatants, and is further emphasized by a kalos-inscription. Melanippos’ right leg is foreshortened and depicted frontally, and the way his helmet has fallen from his head, revealing his eyes closed in death, is very uncommon.

I will argue that Melanippos’ corpse may be read in two ways: as an integral element of the emotion of the scene, and as a symbolic foreshadowing of the fate which awaits both Memnon and, a little later, Achilles himself. The depiction of Melanippos’ body—limbs lying awkwardly in death, without a corselet, his helmet falling off to reveal his closed eyes—evokes pity and sadness in the viewer, a counterpart to the glorious and heroic duels which take place on each side of the krater. Viewers familiar with the tale of Achilles’ death, however, would also remember that his combat with Memnon is his last heroic action before he breaches the walls of Troy and meets his own death. This foreshadowing role of the corpse is similar to the meaning behind the *psychostasia* which is sometimes depicted in conjuction with Achilles and Memnon, where Hermes weighs the souls of the two warriors. Although the scales appear to foretell Memnon’s death, the device itself symbolizes fate and reminds the viewer also of Achilles’ imminent demise. The corpse of Melanippos on the Boston 97.368 krater fulfills a similar role, evoking sadness and pity in the viewer and foreshadowing Achilles’ death.

The parallelism of the two sides of this vase thus highlights the differences between the two combats. Side B, portraying the combat of Diomedes and Aeneas, is wholly heroic. Though Aphrodite reaches for her injured son, the viewer knows that the wound is not fatal; both heroes are destined to fight another day. On side A, the composition of the duel between Achilles and Memnon has an additional element—Melanippos, whose vulnerable and piteous corpse heightens the emotion of the scene and symbolically emphasizes that Achilles will soon be occupying a similar position between warriors dueling over his body.

**Selected Bibliography**

Caskey, L.D. and J.D. Beazley. *Attic Vase Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*. London: Oxford University Press, 1931.

Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Holliday, Peter J. (ed.) *Narrative and Event in Ancient Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* Vols. 1 & 2. Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1981.

Lowenstam, Steven. “Talking Vases: The Relationship between the Homeric Poems and Archaic Representations of Epic Myth." *TAPhA* 127 (1997), 21-76.

Snodgrass, Anthony. *Homer and the Artists: Text and Picture in Early Greek Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

1. *Il.* 5.290-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)