

Working at Democracy in Classical Athens

In this paper I analyze a small group (selected out of a larger corpus) of Athenian figural vases dating from the late 6th to the middle of the 5th centuries that bear scenes of “daily-life” - specifically men and women at work. So-called genre-scenes have historically been seen as simple, descriptive portrayals of a despised class of Athenian residents. I argue here that they ought instead to be read as complex, prescriptive texts that challenged their viewers and subverted the traditional Athenian social order. They are early material and visual counterpoints to later normative literary depictions of workers as slavish, dependent and marginal by writers such as Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle.

These lively pictures, focused as they are upon technical aspects of different types of skilled labor such as shoemaking, blacksmithing, and vase-painting, can be used to better understand the social and political status of citizen workers in the democratic *polis*. Such scenes stress individual skills, emphasize the linkage of technical processes and time, and highlight the cooperative nature of “banausic” work by forging connections between external viewers and artistically represented internal viewers. Finally, I show how the physicality and shape of the vessels upon which such scenes were painted ideologically linked users with producers.

In order to fully appreciate the place of the Athenian democracy within history, and as an object of inquiry in its own right, it is crucial to develop a clearer picture of common Athenian citizens. Athenian democracy was, after all, partially defined by the political enfranchisement of workers. These depictions offer glimpses of how working Athenians imagined themselves as individuals and as groups. By seriously examining these portrayals of working Athenians by their fellow working Athenians I hope to begin to redress what E.P. Thompson once famously called “the enormous condescension of posterity towards ordinary people”.

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