

Rethinking the Hetaira-only Drinking Party in Attic Vase Painting

There are a total of eight complete vases in the shape of kylikes, a hydria, a psyktēr and a plate, dating between 520 and 450/425 BCE, that depict the hetaira-only drinking party. These scenes show female figures enjoying a symposium, but without any male participants. They show one, two, four, and five hetairai, who recline on pillows, hold wine cups, and wear wreaths. They are either nude or draped in the fashion of a male symposiast. The women play drinking games, like kottabos. The women further adopt masculine roles by conversing with each other. An aulos player frequently accompanies them as well. The scenes recall sympotic scenes of just men, or of men and hetairai, either clothed or fully undressed. In the case of single female symposiasts, the fact that the hetaira is shown acting alone without a male partner makes it more reminiscent of the scenes of hetaira-only drinking parties than other symposia scenes. The women, in all these examples, are no longer simply “part of the ‘furniture’ of a symposium” (Lewis 2002: 114).

Ingeborg Peschel was the first to focus on these scenes, referring to them as “reine Hetärensymposia” (hetaira-only drinking parties) (1987: 70-74). Scholars offer various interpretations. Since all but one of these vases were found in tombs in Etruria, Lewis concludes the vessels were manufactured specifically for the Etruscan market and thus reflect Etruscan values rather than Athenian (2002: 13-14). Unlike Athens, literary sources and tomb paintings attest that Etruscan women participated in banquets as equals alongside their husbands. Peschel and also Carola Reinsberg argue in contrast that the scenes represent real women on real occasions, suggesting an active hetaira subculture in classical Athens (1987: 73-73 and 1989: 112-14). Leslie Kurke argues in contrast that the “vessels represent fantasies painted for the gaze of the male symposiasts, who enjoyed seeing their own activities mirrored in those of sexually available female ‘companions’...male symposiasts can savor the fantasy of a gathering of sexually active women sharing their longing for the beautiful Euthymides. And through their shared desire, the represented hetairai can stand metonymically for the eroticized sphere of the elite symposium generally” (1997: 136). Anne Steiner reads these scenes as reversals of “the ordinary male version”, and focusing on the game of kottabos, “as parodies of ‘correct’ behaviour” meant to invoke laughter (2007: 208, 244). Richard Neer interprets the vases as the reaction of potters to social hierarchy and citizenship inline with the message of their “potter portraits,” both underscore elitism and challenge it at the same time (2002: 87-32, esp. 131-32).

In the majority of the above interpretations, there is a tendency to ignore the visual context of an individual vase and focus on its similarities with scenes on other vessels instead. As Anne Steiner has shown, however, a reading of a scene on a vase must include any inscriptions and other images on the vessel (2007). In this paper I examine five of the eight vases, excluding vessels that simply depict the image of the hetaira-only drinking party alone. These five scenes are paired with scenes that include youths. In three cases the youths are modestly wrapped in cloaks. On a fourth vase the drinking party is paired with a nude heroic figure. And on a fifth vase the youth is loosely draped. Nudity, similar poses, drapery and/or activity encourage the viewer to make comparisons between hetairai and youths, but rather than elevating the status of the hetaira, they denigrate the behavior of the youth or contrast the two as exact opposites. These scenes of hetairai function as negative paradigms for the youths actually present at symposia and demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate behavior for such youths. They further remind adult male symposiasts that youths and hetairai are not to be confused as erotic objects. In this reading, the vases are a site of paideia, suggesting generalizations about gender and codes of behaviour at the male symposium.

- Kurke, Leslie. 1997. Inventing the Hetaira: sex, politics, and discursive conflict in archaic Greece. *Classical Antiquity* 16.1: 106-50.
- Lewis, Sian. 2002. *The Athenian Women: An Iconographic Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Neer, Richard T. 2002. *Style and Politics in Athenian Vase Painting: The Craft of Democracy, ca. 530-460 B.C.E.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peschel, Ingeborg. 1987. *Die Hetäre bei Symposion und Komos in der attisch-rotfigurigen Vasenmalerei des 6.-4. Jahrhunderts v. Christus*. Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang.
- Reinsberg, Carola. 1989. *Ehe, Hetärentum und Knabenliebe im antiken Griechenland*. Beck's Archäologische Bibliothek. München: C.H. Beck.
- Steiner, Ann. 2007. *Reading Greek Vases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.