

A Kimonian Hephaistos: The Lame God Refashioned in Fifth Century Athens

The god Hephaistos is perhaps known best for two things: his lameness, which separates him from the rest of his Olympian cohort, and his ability to craft beautiful objects. Yet his position in the “divine pecking order,” as Bremmer refers to it, places Hephaistos in a decidedly low and often risible state. I argue that this literary premise, found primarily in Homer, stands in contrast to Hephaistos’ depiction in fifth century B.C. vase painting. My study concentrates on the iconography of Hephaistos in scenes of the birth of Erichthonios, in which the god is presented as a virile, nude male figure. I begin by examining an amphora in Bologna that represents Hephaistos’ pursuit of Athena, which ultimately resulted in Erichthonios’ birth. This is the only known image of the infamous pursuit scene between two Olympian deities, and accords well with a literary passage attributed to Euripides in which Hephaistos’ strength is emphasized, in opposition to other texts that highlight his lameness. Despite the obvious mishap in Hephaistos’ pursuit of Athena, the child Erichthonios is born, and I subsequently turn towards a group of vases that depict this scene. Of these nine vases, eight of which are red-figure, Hephaistos is clearly present in six scenes of the birth of Erichthonios.

Two of these red-figure vases stand out in particular, a stamnos attributed to the Painter of Munich 2413 and a kylix by the Codrus Painter. Both vases depict Hephaistos as nearly nude, save for a mantle draped over his shoulders. While some may maintain that this emphasizes the status of a lower-class craftsman, I instead argue for Hephaistos’ nudity as a type of costume. Utilizing Hurwit’s recent study of the different forms of nudity in Classical art as a model, I read Hephaistos’ nudity on these two vases, as well as the Bologna amphora, as representative of the idealized Athenian citizen, statue-like and nearly heroic in pose. To support this, I draw parallels with contemporary sculpture and vase paintings that employ nudity and posture to illustrate the

consummate democratic citizen reputed for *sophrosyne*. Though at once erotic and sensual, perhaps a throwback to Erichthonios' conception, Hephaistos' nudity also aligns him with the other gods of the Greek pantheon, virtually eliminating any references to his deformity.

I suggest, too, that the driving force behind this "refashioning" of the image of Hephaistos in the second quarter of the fifth century potentially came from Kimon, whose floruit of statesmanship occurred at roughly the same time as our collection of vases. After all, it was Miltiades, Kimon's father, who was involved in the conquest of Lemnos, and it has been suggested that Hephaistos' cult was brought from there to Athens. To support this notion of Hephaistos' importance for Kimon, I draw parallels between the god and a prominent Athenian hero, Theseus, who was also popular with Kimon. With an interest in royal genealogy at this time, the scenes of Erichthonios' birth, at once divine and chthonic, are read as prescient for a future line of kings and citizens. In addition, I establish further comparisons with the iconography of the Athens' Temple of Hephaistos, begun during the time of Kimon. The temple was resplendent with imagery related to the heroes Theseus and Herakles, while it was also central to Hephaistos, whose cult statue stood next to Athena Hephaisteia and who was possibly depicted in the cult statue base's scene of the birth of Erichthonios. On equal footing with Athena in the creation of Athens' eponymous hero, the iconography of Hephaistos helped to connect Erichthonios to both the land of Attica and to a divine parentage, helping to solidify the ascending notions of Athenian citizenship and ancestry that took shape in the mid-fifth century B.C.

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