

Who Does What and with Which and to Whom?
Dynamics of Identity and Sexuality on an Inscribed 5th Century South Italian Olpe

A small inscribed olpe, excavated in 1963 in the necropolis of Pratte in southern Italy, offers surprising evidence of ethnic, political, and erotic relations on the borders of Greek speaking territory with Italic and Etruscan settlements. The only major publication of the vase (Pontrandolfo 1987) has provided important cultural and political insights into possible relations of groups in this area as well as important observations on the lettering and form of the startling inscription, which along with the shape of the vessel allows a secure dating in the first decades of the fifth century BC. The curious form of the inscription, however, two lines written in retrograde but with each half of a line inverted with respect to the second, offers some potential for interrogating the meaning it would have made in use, probably in a symposium-like setting, and for the seven named participants, at least on the initial occasion of its use. It seems worth considering, even if highly speculatively, what that initial occasion might have been and why the vessel was preserved, long enough to become a significant item in a set of grave goods.

It is fortunate that the vessel comes from a securely excavated context, given one marked curiosity about its form. The inscription was incised into the surface of the drying vessel before firing, not typical for an exterior inscription but not unparalleled. A dark slip, however, was then placed over most of the body of the vessel so that the first line of the inscription is completely covered by the black, leaving the second line in the medium brown area of the lower part of the vessel. If this olpe turned up unprovenanced and on the art market, it might be suspected of being a forgery (perhaps for a particular kind of customer, given the nature of the inscription to be dealt with). Neither line of the inscription is very easily readable in these conditions, and it is quite possible that in low light at a symposium in interior space, it would not

be immediately obvious that the vessel (only 8.5 cm tall) was inscribed at all. On the other hand, the individual letters, approximately 5 mm in height, and written in a “practiced hand” (so Pontrandolfo) would be quite readable when examined close up.

Even though reading retrograde must have been quite common at the time and in principle no more difficult than orthograde for the more than minimally literate, the inversion of the first half of each line with respect to the second would certainly have presented more challenges. The individual letters are well oriented within the half-lines; we are therefore well past the period in which letters might differ significantly in orientation within single words. If we assume that the upper line is meant to be read first, this implies that it would be easiest begin reading after inverting the vessel, presumably emptying it, after which turning it upright again (to be refilled?) would facilitate reading the second half. The process could then be repeated.

In translation the inscription reads roughly as follows:

“Apollodorus loves [ἔραται] Xyla / Vulca sodomizes [ἀπυγίζει] Apollodorus

Onata loves Nixo / Hybricus has loved [ἦραται] Parmynis”

Apollodorus, one of only two with a clearly Greek name in this group, is the only one who appears twice, first as subject, then as object of a graphic verb (cf. Garlan and Masson 1982). At first glance, then, he would seem in some way to be the object of the joke, at least on the first occasion of this vessel’s use. Other jokes or at least critiques are possible as well, especially in light of the possible but otherwise unattested perfect form ἦραται describing the final relationship (problems of “H” being used both for the rough breathing sign in the name “Hybricus” and as the initial *eta* in ἦραται to be discussed).

The vessel’s clay tells us that it was originally made in Greek Posidonia, and the inscription in the Achaean alphabet must have been a special request. Which of the party guests

was the likeliest requester is indeterminable (though worth speculating about); even more intriguing is why and how this vessel, intrinsically quite modest in scale and value, ended up in a grave in a town of mixed Italic and Etruscan population.

Bibliography

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