

Imaginings of the Other: A New Interpretation of Oedipus and the Sphinx in Greek Vase Painting

In Greek archaeology, scholars have conducted decades worth of research involving the classification of painted vases, studies of potters and their patrons, uses of these vases, and finally, the vase trade as an element of economic history. Yet scholars such as Lowell Edmunds have pointed out that “although scholars of Greek vase painting have never overlooked this subject matter [of mythological scenes], their agenda, until recently did not include the interpretation or study from a strictly mythological standpoint” (Edmunds 1990). One way to reimagine material culture is to view artifacts with mythological motifs as myths being told through a medium that is visual instead of oral. As a result, we can think of visual representations of mythological scenes as another sort of ‘telling’ of the myth. Using this new lens, we can look at these images and try to understand the social structures and historical events that may have shaped their creation in the same way anthropologists have done with transcribed myths.

A methodology developed by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood in her article *Myths in Images: Theseus and Medea as a Case Study* addresses the importance of context in order to fully understand and interpret mythological images found in Greek art. She highlights the fact that the variability of versions of myth and mythological images in Greek archaeology should not be credited solely to the whims of individuals, but to the ways in which social and historical influences shaped that image within a specific moment in time. The methodology Sourvinou-Inwood proposes is a combined iconographic and semantic analysis of the ‘Theseus with a sword’ theme (Sourvinou-Inwood 1990). This iconographic theme commonly found on fifth century Greek pottery depicts Theseus, with a drawn sword in his right hand, pursuing a woman,

who the author reads as Medea. By applying these two analyses to the 'Theseus with sword' theme, Sourvinou-Inwood interprets the image as a mythological paradigm for the Greek, and especially Athenian, victories over the Persians.

The intention of this paper is to perform a similar analysis to Sourvinou- Inwood's of an 'Oedipus and Sphinx' motif that becomes popular in Attic Greece during the fifth century BC. Unlike her work, which focuses on a motif suggestive of 'Greeks versus Persians', I attempt to understand how the Greeks, and more specifically the Athenians, would have perceived another neighboring cultural group: the Egyptians. This is achieved not only through an analysis of images of Oedipus and the sphinx found on Greek pottery, but also through an exploration of the history of interactions between the ancient Greeks and Egyptians. My findings suggest that unlike depictions of Greeks versus the Persians, which often portray Greeks in pitched battle against some kind of 'Other', the 'Oedipus and Sphinx' motif is much less violent in nature. Yet the antagonism between the monster and hero hints at an uneasy relationship between the Greeks and Egyptians, which is reflected in the historical events taking place in the Mediterranean during the fifth century BC.

Bibliography

Edmunds, Lowell. "Iconography." In *Approaches to Greek Myth*, edited by Lowell Edmunds, 393-394. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990.

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