

Going to the Dogs with the Amasis Painter

After centuries of neglect, the domestic dog has recently become an active area of scholarly research in the sciences and the classical world (Franco, 2014; Pevnik, 2014). As a biologist with research experience studying dogs and dog behavior, I became interested in dog images in Ancient Greek black figure vase painting and how they might influence the interpretation of the scenes in which they occur. Knowing the physical state of an animal allows the observer to reasonably determine its mental and/or emotional state (Fox & Bekoff, 1975; Horowitz, 2009), which in turn, I suggest, bears on the interpretation of the human actors in the scene.

While scenes on the painted vases are not simple windows on life in ancient Athens, some details of those scenes do reflect the observed realities of everyday life (Osborne, 2011) – including dogs. Moore (1968) has made that case in her study of horses in respect to the animal's fitness and type. In the work of the Amasis Painter, it is not horses but dogs that are most frequently observed (Karouzou, 1956). Approximately 20% of works attributed to the Amasis Painter contain at least one domestic dog, and I argue that in every case his dogs are realistic in structure and pose. None of the Amasis Painter's dogs are the famous dogs of myth (e.g. Kerberos or Argos). The Amasis Painter seems more interested in the dogs he observed rather than their mythic cousins. For these reasons, the works of the Amasis Painter seem an ideal starting point to examine the ability of canine behavior to inform vase interpretation.

As a test case, I focus here on the Amasis Painter's amphora in Bloomington (71.82; Beazley Para 65, 151; von Bothmer 74-75), where I believe that previous scholars have mischaracterized the postures and behavior of the dogs. Commentators on the Bloomington amphora (Moon, 1979; Von Bothmer, 1985; Carpenter, 1986) have assumed that the dogs are

depicted naturally, but they have misinterpreted the postures of the dogs. This misinterpretation of the physical postures leads to a misattribution. Students of animal behavior recognize the poses of the dogs on this vase as alert, attentive, and playful and not, as earlier commentators have characterized them as antagonistic or aggressive.

On the Bloomington amphora both sides show two male figures on either side of Dionysos who stands at the center of the composition, and on both sides two dogs face one another at the feet of the men closest to the god. The dogs on side A are shown in play-postures. While the four men give little sense of their emotional state, the play behavior seen in the dogs represents cooperative, social behavior and excitement. Side A stands in contrast to side B where the dogs are alert rather than playful and attentive to one another, but not, as von Bothmer has suggested, aggressive. The male figures surrounding Dionysos on side A differ from those surrounding the god on side B in a variety of ways. One of the four figures on side A, e.g., is a bearded male, while all four figures on side B are unbearded youths; only one figure on Side A raises his arm in greeting, while three of the four on side B raise their arms in greeting. In Karouzou's words "The gestures of the Amasis Painter's figures express a relation between persons or narrate a state of affairs" (Karouzou, 1956). However these differences are to be interpreted, I suggest that the playfulness of the dogs on Side A in contrast to more cautious pose of the dogs on Side B must be taken into account.

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