

There's More to Me Than My Bum: Interpreting Both Sides of the Boston Skyphos

The Red Figure Boston skyphos painted by Makron was discovered beside a tomb in the Cemetery of Suessula in southern Italy (Caskey and Beazley 1931). Two scenes are depicted on this skyphos: The Abduction of Helen by Paris from Sparta and The Recovery of Helen by Menelaus from Troy. While these scenes are clearly related in subject matter, most scholarship concerning the interpretation of the iconography on this skyphos focuses on one scene or the other. The iconography is rarely interpreted as a whole. For example, in his article "Image, Text, and Story in the Recovery of Helen," Guy Hedreen goes into great detail about the iconography of the recovery scene, but never mentions that the obverse is the scene of Paris and Helen (Hedreen 1996). While considering just one side of the Boston skyphos may yield valuable results, particularly in comparative studies, it is crucial that one considers the iconography of the skyphos as a whole to gain a full understanding of Makron's intentions. His very choice to portray these two scenes side by side, which is an unusual pairing in the archaeological record, is the crux of his overall portrayal of Helen as one to be pitied, not to be blamed.

Makron carefully chose every aspect of this figural scene in order to emphasize the innocence of Helen in the Trojan War. This can be seen first in his selection of characters. By analyzing the presence of the characters individually, I will show that Makron included each figure for the purpose of reflecting Helen in a sympathetic light.

The specific moment in each story that Makron elected to portray was also an intentional and effective choice. By discussing the context of the moment chosen within the overall stories of the abduction and the recovery, I will demonstrate that Makron selected these particular moments in order to elicit an emotional reaction from the viewer that would lead them to feel pity for Helen.

The importance of interpreting the iconography of the skyphos as a whole is most evident when viewing the two scenes side by side. It is clear that the configuration of each scene mirrors the other. In both scenes there is a central figure taking up significantly more space than the rest of the figures. This figure is flanked on one side by a man bearing a shield and on the other by three fairly static figures facing the central character. Below each handle is a figure facing their respective scene. Through this mirroring, it is clear that Makron intended not only that the scenes be interpreted together, but also that the viewer draw connections between the corresponding figures on each side.

Each compositional choice that Makron made in the figural scenes on the Red Figure Boston skyphos was intended to emphasize Helen's innocence in the Trojan War and to evoke sympathy for her, not the least of which was his choice to couple the abduction of Helen by Paris with the recovery of Helen by Menelaus. In order to glean the full understanding of this figural narrative it is critical to take all of these choices into consideration and to interpret the iconography on the Boston skyphos as a whole. This will allow for a more complete understanding of the perception of Helen held by the aristocrats of southern Italy who deemed this skyphos a worthy grave good.

Bibliography

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