

Trade, Value, and Ritual: The Life and Times of a Krater by the Niobid Painter from Perugia

Our paper offers an object history of a bell-krater made by the Niobid painter, found in a tomb from the Frontone Necropolis in Perugia. (Nati and Nardelli 2008, 93 – 109) The obverse of the vase features a scene of Triptolemos, Persephone, Demeter, joined by Hermes and Celeus; the reverse depicts Zeus and Hera, seated to either side of a winged Iris. (Nati and Nardelli 2008, 102- 104). We offer a new interpretation of the meaning of these scenes, given the vessel's archeological context and use as a cinerary urn in an Etruscan tomb.

Many Athenian red and black figure vases like this one –especially the large, intact vessels favored for display by museums the world over– were found not in Greece, but in Etruria. The vast majority come from tombs, where their deliberate deposition as part of funerary assemblages led to their survival. Though such vases were commonly divorced from their archaeological contexts as scholars attributed them to workshops and considered their iconographic meaning in Greek culture, over the last two decades scholars have argued forcefully that attention to the Etruscan consumers of Athenian vases may reveal much about the movement of goods through the Mediterranean. (e.g, Osborne 2001) Other scholars have called for the close examination of the imagery on Attic vase imports in Etruria and other areas in the Etruscan sphere of influence as a means of elucidating religious beliefs, including those regarding the afterlife, and funerary practices (e.g., Small 1994; Bundrick 2014). Our case study speaks to both issues as it remarkably circulated for nearly a century before its deposition as the cinerary urn of its Italian owner.

As a Greek object, this krater had a specific function - mixing wine at a communal drinking party. It is one of 18 kraters found in an Etruscan site that is attributed to the Niobid Painter, who preferred to paint larger shapes and was active in Athens during the second quarter

of the sixth century BCE. The full assemblage of the tomb reveals that the vase's owner was a man of high status, suggested by fragments of a cranium included with the cremation and by the gendered nature of many of the grave goods including a bronze trefoil oinochoe, another shape associated with the consumption of wine, several figurines, and a full set of armor, including greaves, a spear, and a helmet of the 'Chalcidian type.' However, these finds are well over a century later in date than the krater, dating to roughly 350-325 B.C, indicating that this vase likely enjoyed a long life in an elite domestic context, and perhaps even was a family heirloom, before its funerary use. Its conversion from a banqueting vessel to a cinerary urn involved a physical and likely an iconographic transformation. A bronze cover of local manufacture was created to serve as a lid, seemingly outfitted with several figurines on top, including a dog and several female figures. The sepulchral use of the vase was likely motivated by the Etruscan interpretation of its decoration. For example, an Athenian viewer would likely view the two enthroned divinities in the act of offering a liquid libation on the obverse as Zeus and Hera with winged Iris, the messenger goddess, standing between them. Etruscans, however, could well have identified her as Vanth, the female demon connected with the Underworld, who began to increasingly appear in Etruscan visual culture during the fourth century B.C., and thus the figures flanking her would logically be Aita (Greek Hades) and his consort Phersipnei (Greek Persephone).

Bibliography

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