

For the Groom Alone: Bridal Sexuality in Athenian Vase-Painting

In Athenian vase-painting, especially the earlier Archaic depictions, scenes of marriage rarely display intimate actions between the bride and groom. The extent of such intimacy can be found on a red-figure vase in Berlin (F2372), where the groom grasps the bride by the waist and lifts her into a chariot. Or, as can be seen on a red-figure fragmentary vessel in the Agora Museum in Athens (P5220), a bride hooks her arm around the groom's neck, perhaps using him as an aid whilst stepping down from their heroic conveyance. When the chariot begins to disappear from marital imagery in the fifth century, one often finds the couple "going on foot" in what is known as the *chamaipous* wedding procession (for *chamaipous*, see: Poll. 2.195, 3.40). With the advent of the *chamaipous* scene, sexual connections materialize more fully, especially when one considers the prevalence of the so-called "hand on wrist" gesture (*cheir' epi karpo*). Although some of these sexual facets have been explored in previous scholarship (e.g., Sutton 1981, 189; Oakley and Sinos 1993, 45; Sutton 1997/98), two distinct but subtle features have not been recognized: the mimicking of the groom's physical appearance in that of *Eros*, the god of sexual love, and the portrayal of the bride as a figure completely enveloped by her veil.

In *chamaipous* representations, *Eros* often appears diminutive in size and nude. Hovering between the bride and groom, he can be shown carrying items like wreaths, cradling nuptial vessels like *loutrophoroi*, or playing instruments like *auloi*. Curiously, within some of these marital representations, *Eros*' coiffure changes, and frequently it copies that of the groom's. The present paper argues that painters deliberately twin or mimic the appearance of the groom in order to make a visual connection between the god of sexual love and the husband. Accordingly, these nuptial *Erotes* reference the specific and, preferably, only erotic experience of an Athenian bride: the physical union between her and her husband.

Contrary to these slightly sexualized representations, some vase-painters choose not to include *Eros* in their *chamaipous* processions. Rather, in quite a conservative manner, they illustrate the bride completely covered by her veil, revealing only her silhouette. Indeed, unlike a majority of marital depictions, here the emphasis is not on the ritual unveiling of the bride (*anakalypteria*), which symbolically relayed her public transformation from a *nymphē* into a wife (Cairns 2002, 81-82), but, rather, a type of meaningful concealment. The garment acts as a barrier that denies the viewer visual access to the bride's body, heightening the mystery of its form and increasing its erotic appeal. This barrier, however, is only temporary for the depicted groom: he alone will have the ability to behold her form.

The following paper investigates the development of intimate encounters in wedding processions on later Archaic and early Classical Athenian vases and it identifies seemingly contradictory sexual significations. While some illustrations highlight the potential sexuality of the wedded couple with the inclusion *and* specific portrayal of *Eros*, others display the bride fully draped in her veil. Though these images, at first glance, seem paradoxical, they reveal a similar message: the carnal experiences of the bride are limited to her interactions with the groom. Not only did vase-painters specify (and idealize) who the bride would encounter sexually, but also they presented her as a package, to be unwrapped only by her future husband. Indoctrinating women and mitigating the fears of men, these images, then, function as idealized accounts of bridal desire and sexuality.

Bibliography

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