

## Two Heroes, One Polis: Athenian Treatment of Herakles and Theseus during the Archaic and Early Classical Periods

In the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, after the introduction of the black figure technique, Athenian vase painting production increased dramatically and flourished throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Developing a characteristic local iconography that favored mythological and figural scenes, Athens began an intense export market in Italy, as revealed by distribution patterns and find spots of vessels, with pots appealing to foreign demand and rivaling Corinthian trade. Among the wide range of Greek myths depicted on vessels, the life and exploits of Herakles and, to a lesser extent, of Theseus are especially prevalent. The popularity of these two heroes in Athenian art has often led scholars to provide a political interpretation of their iconography, connecting myths to specific historical figures or events (Boardman 1972). In the case of Herakles and Theseus, I argue that the incorporation of and reliance on these heroic figures aimed at projecting a distinct Athenian social and cultural identity onto an international stage during the Archaic and Early Classical periods. Using empirical data rather than iconographical arguments, I attempt to dismantle the traditional interpretations and propose an apolitical understanding of Herakles and Theseus.

I propose that the political interpretation of Heraklean imagery is particularly problematic in the connection drawn between the imagery of Herakles' introduction to Olympus with Athena, and Peisistratus' grandiose entrance into Athens as narrated in Herodotus (Hdt. I.60). Several objections to a political reading of the image, such as the lack of literary sources explicitly equating Peisistratus with Herakles, the impiety that the personification of Herakles and Athena entails, and the question of the contact between painters and patrons, have already been identified in the scholarship. Zatta further suggested that the use of myth served to legitimize

Peisistratus' rule (Zatta 2010); yet, it remains difficult to see when and how this ideology was transferred to vase painting iconography. Moreover, it should be questioned how foreign populations like the Etruscans would have read the images and whether they would have made the connection with the current Athenian political situation, since a large quantity of Attic pottery was exported to the Italian market (Spivey 2006). Lastly, there are chronological problems that defy the traditional interpretation; in fact the longevity of both Herakles' and Theseus' imagery casts doubt on the connection between iconography and specific political events.

The popularity of these two heroes from 600-460 BC, then, is best explained not as political propaganda, but as emerging from Athenian socio-cultural contexts and an evolving sense of self-consciousness. Relying on quantitative data and, where known, provenience information for vessels, I aim to elucidate patterns of production and distribution that corroborate a more global, apolitical interpretation of Herakles and Theseus. In the Archaic period, Athenian identity was tied to a broader Greek identity: the use of a Panhellenic hero such as Herakles assisted in propelling Athens onto the international stage. Furthermore, quantified data on black and early red figure production highlights that Heraklean imagery experienced a gradual decline, thus excluding a sudden shift in iconography between the tyranny and democratic government. Similarly, the data illustrate that Theseus' role and importance in art increased slowly. Accompanied by the intensification of his cult in the city, this long process of Theseus' ascendancy in the Archaic and Early Classical periods culminated with a heightened national self-consciousness and need for a national hero. Reaching the forefront of the Panhellenic scene, Athens needed to distinguish itself among the Greek poleis by favoring Attic hero and myths that could strengthen its position and identity.

Images and iconography could be used to communicate and strengthen Athenian power, identity, and social and cultural concerns through myths, heroes, and figural scenes; and while public monuments explicitly focused on political identity, vases could emphasize a wealth of themes beyond the realm of politics (Holscher 1998). In this view, the popularity of Herakles and Theseus in vase painting represents not so much a specific political change, but an evolving sense of Attic identity and self-confidence. Supported by quantitative data, this argument weakens the political interpretation and establishes the iconography of the two heroes within a larger Athenian socio-cultural context.

#### Bibliography

- Boardman, J. 1972. "Herakles, Peisistratos and Sons." *Revue Archéologique* 1: 57–72.
- Holscher, T. 1998. "Images and Political Identity: The Case of Athens." In *Democracy, Empire and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, eds. D. Boedeker and K.A. Raaflaub, 153-83. Harvard University Press.
- Spivey, N. 2006. "Review Article: Greek Vases in Etruria." *American Journal of Archaeology* 110:4, 659-661.
- Zatta, C. 2010. "Making History Mythical: The Golden Age of Peisistratus." *Arethusa* 43:1, 21-62.