

An Early Female Reader at Home: New Evidence from a Red-Figure Krater

A new fragmentary Attic red-figure krater in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2011.604.2.2399) recently published online shows a woman seated inside an architectural setting as she reads a scroll. Standing before her to the viewer's right is a male figure holding a staff with one leafy branch. Although this figure's head is missing, the ends of long locks of hair are visible on his back, just below the break of the fragment. The male figure seems to be approaching and probably observing the woman reading. General stylistic considerations suggest a date for the vase painting around the middle of the fifth century B.C. Thus, this new scene is among the earliest depictions of women reading scrolls in Greek vase painting (Immerwahr-1964; Immerwahr-1973). This female reader, uniquely shown concentrating on her text and not engaged with any others, adds to our understanding of vase painters' growing interests in women's literacy during this period, at least in elite Athenian society.

The female reader wears a hairband with pointed leafy decorations resembling that worn by the poet Sappho paired with the poet Alcaeus, depicted on the famous kalathoid vase in Munich by the Brygos Painter (with both names labeled). An identification of the seated woman as a poet is therefore tempting, though of course Sappho was not the only woman poet of renown in the fifth century, and a contemporary poet is by no means out of the question. The indoor setting, however, seems to point to one intimate moment in contemporary Athenian life.

The only substantial iconographic clue to the identity of the male figure may be the staff with its one offshoot bearing long thin leaves, most likely laurel leaves. This detail may mark the figure as the god Apollo who sometimes holds such a laurel-branch staff as his attribute in Attic red-figure vase painting. The scene might then show the god associated with literature and

culture. Immerwahr notes all identifiable texts on scrolls in Attic vase painting are literary (Immerwahr-1964; Immerwahr-1990). The woman is definitely reading, not writing herself: the papyrus scroll is the medium for finished writing, not work in progress.

The text partially revealed on the scroll allows multiple interpretations: it shows traces of at least 13 Greek letters arranged in *stoichedon* on four lines. The scroll text is correctly oriented for the reader, like most scrolls after the Douris cup schoolroom scene in Berlin. While the painter seems confident in his letter forms, the text could show beginnings of lines or possibly an imperfect abecedarium, suggesting the woman is learning to read. Recent studies in the so-called nonsense inscriptions (Chiarini-2018; Immerwahr-2006) also show that those inscriptions in vase painting that are not fully or immediately decipherable also serve manifold functions both within the imagery and between the viewers and the vase paintings.

The even more exiguous remains of the scene on the back of the krater point toward the contemporary Athenian world, rather than that of myth. We find the feet and lower edges of the garments of four figures, probably paired male and female figures in conversation or at least conjunction. Both male figures lean on a staff, but we cannot tell whether standard Athenian walking sticks of men or something like the staff on the vase front.

The krater fragments are unique in depicting a woman reading by herself. It thus enriches and enlarges our sense from later examples on vases of women reading with others, always in domestic settings. This woman, reading a literary hand on a scroll in a posture no different from contemporary depictions of male readers, suggests an audience quite willing to accept this as a depiction of contemporary reality, and this scene should be a part of future discussions of reading and literary culture for the women of classical Athens.

Bibliography

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