

A Wedding Invitation: A Look at the *Lebes Gamikos*

This is just a quick glimpse into the world of 5th century Athens through a *lebes gamikos* that has travelled all the way to Mississippi from a cemetery in Vari, Attica. The vessel (Mississippi 1977.3.91) in the David A. Robinson Collection at the University of Mississippi, reveals some of the traditions of the ancient Athenian wedding both through the art on the vase and its possible function. The shape of the *lebes gamikos* is very unusual. It is two separate pieces, a stand and bowl. In this case the stand is connected to the vase. This unique piece was used in a young girl's wedding. It marks her last steps as a child and her first steps as an Athenian woman. This specific vessel had a purpose in the wedding ceremony but what it was is unknown. It is thought to have been used by the bride because it is often depicted on pottery in scenes with the bride and bridal party. Oakley states that it could have been used to hold food for the bride or water for the bride's bath.

There is much controversy over what the scenes on the Mississippi vessel represent. On the bowl, the bride sits and adorns herself. Robinson and others write that this scene must be the *epaulia*, the ceremony after the actual wedding when friends and family bring the couple gifts. On the other hand, Reeder believes that this is the representation of pre-nuptial adornment of the bride. By interpreting figures and other images on the bowl the scene is revealed, the idealized preparing of the bride. On the stand, however, a young man pursues a girl fleeing from him. This is recognized as the erotic pursuit scene, common on wedding vases. The identity of the protagonists, however, has been debated. Robinson proposed that these figures are Apollo and Daphne. This scene differs from generic erotic pursuits. The elderly man and a dolphin along with the youth and the young girl, suggest a particular narrative theme. More recent scholars, however, believe that they are Thetis and Peleus. These additions to the scene may be the painter hinting that this is indeed the story of Peleus and Thetis, the prototype of a married couple. Considering the adornment of the bride on the bowl of the *lebes* and the mythological bride and groom on the stand gives more meaning to the whole. The young girl who used this vessel at her wedding was momentarily equated with the shape changing sea goddess Thetis.