

The Eleusis Amphora – the “Birth of the Individual” in Archaic Greece

According to Hurwit, diversity is certainly the emblem of individuality, and the seventh century Archaic Greek society was not deprived of it. This was indeed a period of fundamental social change, a spiritual revolution reflected in a multitude of fields of life such as literature, pottery, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, politics and socio-economic life. It was a heterogeneous culture, manifested through a lack of cultural uniformity, which could be the consequence of a certain ethnic division (Ionians and Dorians) and of the continual rise of the *polis*, seen nevertheless as a fragmenting force. Diversity of styles, techniques, spirit and preferences dethroned the schemata and archetypes of the Late Geometric period, and thus vase painting had become the “most convenient barometer of stylistic diversity of the period” (Hurwit, pp.151). As opposed to the Geometric style’s brevity, homogeneity and formula, Orientalizing pottery portrayed a free, “uncoordinated display of innovation, experiment” (Hurwit, pp.151), a projection of individuality and diversity. The Eleusis amphora, the most representative Protoattic vase, is thus the exponent of the “birth of the ‘individual’” through its monumentality, eccentricity and unpredictability, through its *dynamis*, energy and power. Moreover, through its mythological narratives and simultaneous narration technique, it offers an exuberant and

rather indelicate view, but however a vivid image and not a boring one - a mirror to the spiritual changes that took place within people, an individualistic perception of reality.

We can better understand the Greek perception of life through its perception and attitude towards death, which was displayed in burial rites and ceremonies. While the Dipylon Master's amphora only stood over the grave as a grave sign with commemorative function (*sema* and *mnema*), the Eleusis amphora was the actual grave: it was found with the skeleton of an approximately 10 year-old boy inside it. Both of them were huge (5 and 4.5 feet respectively), but they served different purposes. This transition from a strictly memorial to a practical purpose of the amphora suggests a change in the status of the individual. Indeed, during the eighth century, these vases were manufactured according to the preferences of the customer, who used to be part of the aristocracy and thus, their number was relatively small. Later, during the seventh century, the demand for Protoattic amphorae dropped. Thus, the painter could exercise his talent freely, without restrictions, he could find fountains of inspiration anywhere, he could experiment, play, but nevertheless, he could still imprint an individualistic, personal touch on his vase.

Consequently, we can infer that the Eleusis amphora is the exponent of individuality, whereas the Dipylon amphora is the exponent of a whole community. Although there is only a 75-year difference between the two amphorae, throughout this short period

the Greek society evolved a lot - from a community-based to an individual-based society. The two amphorae reflect this transition through their purposes and through their attempt to offer an explanation of the effect of death upon people in each period of time. Hence, the Dipylon amphora celebrated the death of a noble woman, emphasizing thus her status in society, whereas the Eleusis amphora was the grave of a 10 year-old boy. The latter had thus a more intrinsic value, paying more attention to the individual, even though the subject of death was a 10 year-old boy of a more modest social status than the noble woman. The Dipylon amphora emphasized the effect of death upon the community, a community in which it was honorable to be mourned by as many people as possible at one's death. By contrast, the Eleusis amphora presented an issue of death seen in its privacy, belonging to the individual. Therefore, not only did its effect overcome the superficial limits of "behavior within the community", but it also reached the depths of the human soul.

In creating the amphora, the Polyphemos Painter asserted the highest level of individuality and independence encountered in Ancient Greece until then. His work is the exact opposite of the formulaic, schematic, generic and superficial work of the Dipylon master. If we look at the amphora our vision is basically pierced by "*the largest vase painting we have*" (Hurwit, pp.165), which is located on its belly. In fact the amphora presents three images: Odysseus' blinding of Polyphemos, (on the neck), a lion's pawning of a boar (on the shoulder) and, the largest one, the

Perseus myth - more precisely, the beheading of the Medousa (on the belly). The first one, the blinding of Polyphemos, depicts the Homeric myth in "*all its violence and dynamis*" (Hurwit, pp.169): Odysseus blinds the Kyklops with the help of his men. The men and the Kyklops are combinations of black silhouette and outline, while Odysseus is the only one who is filled in with white paint, his forms being contoured in black and shading. The painting technique used for Odysseus practically breathes life into the character, creating a dynamic and vivid picture. This liveliness is amplified by the fact that the spear with which Odysseus blinds Polyphemos is the frame of the amphora. Above all, when Polyphemos is being stabbed, he actually opens his mouth to shout in pain, which provides "*the first archaic display of emotion*" (Hurwit, pp.169). As this suggests, the artist actually transgresses the previous apathetic depictions and, through his strong impulses, he succeeds in displaying something from within, something that cannot be visually perceived. Moving downwards, on the shoulder of the amphora there is a scene of a lion pawing a boar. The painting techniques used here are the same: the animals are delineated as black silhouettes, except for the lion's head, where the painter uses the same technique as for Odysseus. Below the previous scene from the amphora's shoulder we find the figure scene of the vase - the scene after Perseus killed the Medousa. The latter lies headless on one side of the vase, while on the other side there are her two sisters, the Gorgons and Perseus who tries to run away from them. In between,

there stands Athena who makes Perseus invisible, and near Perseus a great bird, which might be the symbol of divine favor. The painting technique is similar to the previous ones, but this time the hero is depicted using the black silhouette technique, while the Gorgons are depicted through the same technique as Odysseus was: a contrast of black contour and white body. Athena is illustrated in the same way, but the emphasis is definitely on the Gorgons. They are strange figures, they don't have anything human in them and their lion-like and serpent-like heads resemble the early bronze caudrons. It is the Polyphemos Painter who depicts them for the first time and he had to be inventive in painting because nobody who was alive had ever seen their faces before. He actually succeeds very well in this, since a single glance at the Gorgons' eyes makes one startle. Therefore, the painter brings a lot of innovations into vase painting, which should be seen as an attempt to overcome the boring and static image on the Dipylon amphora, as an attempt to assert his own personality and perception of death.

However, the question that arises is whether there was a perception of death associated with the purpose of the vase or was it just a simple representation of two myths? On one level, the juxtaposition of the two myths might represent the theme of heroes killing monsters, or humans overthrowing immortals. Did the painter just pick two myths at random or was it there something more personal? I believe there was. On the neck we see Odysseus painted in white in contrast to the others, on the

shoulder the lion's head is also white and on the belly, although Perseus is the hero, he is depicted in black this time. Thus, there is a black/white axis throughout the whole vase, creating a visual link between the two major scenes. This might mean that the painter did want to express something. When we look at the vase, the sense that tells us what it depicts is our vision. Similarly, the two scenes are related to the theme of loss of vision: Polyphemos loses his vision through Odysseus' piercing his eye and Perseus becomes paradoxically invisible in front of the Gorgons' huge eyes. In addition, seeing the Gorgons' eyes is equivalent to death. By extrapolation, we can thus infer that the loss of vision is closely related to death, and more precisely, that it is death. In other words, that death is loss of vision. These deep metaphors and symbols originate from the inner depths of the Polyphemos Painter, who puts a drop of his personality and independence into the vase. Therefore, the Eleusis amphora is a "*work of intemperate individuality*" (Hurwit, pp.169) especially through the painter's reinterpretation of the Homeric myths, which emphasizes the artist's assertion of independence.

This independence and individuality I am referring to finds itself in antithesis with the schematic and formulaic approach of the Dipylon Master. These two amphorae may also be approached as the projections of literature into pottery. Through its patterns, archetypes, *chiasmos*, *prothesis* and *parataxis*, the Dipylon amphora has all the characteristics of the epic poem, whereas, with its unpredictability, originality of interpretation,

innovation, experiment and *dynamis*, the Eleusis amphora has all the characteristics of the lyric poem. This deep lyric is obvious through the fact that the Polyphemos Painter is trying to display his perception of the world, a perception that is nevertheless arranged into a universal experience and feeling - death. This gives the vase a certain sense of order, but it is not the same order coming from the formulaic composition of the Dipylon amphora, it is that order which is attained by heroes' killing of monsters. Thus, the message of order derives from the multitude of suggestions the painting on the vase gives, suggestions that demonstrate its belonging to lyric, rather than epic poetry. However, even though between the two vases exists a strong antithesis, they are both depictions of Homeric values, fact that suggests the deep roots these myths occupy in people's souls, These values are represented by the supreme value of honor, but seen in two different ways: the Dipylon amphora is a representation of honor in the sense of community (the more people go to one's funeral, the more honored she is), whereas the Eleusis amphora in the heroic sense (the honor heroes gain by killing monsters).

In sum, this transition from the Late Geometric to the Protoattic period is marked by the constant changes that took place within people, by this spiritual revolution that is seen as the foundation of Western civilization. The creator of the Eleusis amphora manifested a high level of individuality breaking the patterns previously installed in archaic vase painting.

Through its monumentality, heterogeneity, independent interpretation and representation of Homeric myths, through its eccentricity, indelicacy, *dynamis* and power, the Eleusis amphora is the product of a new society - a society that saw the "birth and of the individual".