

BOOK REVIEWS

Vases from the Sotades workshop

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Herbert Hoffmann's new book on Attic vases is as exceptional and remarkable as the objects with which it deals – some hundred pots (easily accessible for the first time through the illustrated catalogue at the end) attributed to the potter Sotades on epigraphical grounds and to the so-called Sotades Painter for reasons of style, the two collaborating around 450 BC. Produced at the peak of Classical Athens by one of the city's most famous and extraordinary workshops, Sotadean vases proved to be an attraction to people throughout the Mediterranean; they have been found not only in and on the edges of the Greek world, but also beyond, in Persia, Egypt and the Sudan, mainly in tombs and sanctuaries, thus providing a precise provenance. The speciality of the Sotades workshop was an unusual vessel, the sculptured *rhyton*, a funnel affixed to a sculptural form, usually an animal head but occasionally also a human or mythical figure.

Hoffmann's approach to the subject of Sotadean vases is basically holistic, defining culture as a coherent system of 'inner unity beneath complex outer multiformity' (p. xviii). From this structural background, he probes 'the level of meaning that unites the imagery on vases with the vase forms themselves, establishing the function and the significance of these objects within the matrix of Greek society' (p. 3).

The author's iconology of Sotadean vases is founded on four principal assumptions, debated by classical scholars (pp. 1-17). The first is that the use of Attic vases was generally limited to deposits in tombs and offerings in temples, as cheap substitutes for expensive metal models in silver and gold, the actual materials used to make vessels for the aristocratic élite. Secondly, the imagery, form and meaning of Attic vases were essentially linked to their ritual function as gifts to the gods and the dead. Furthermore, as ritual objects, Attic vases opened an essential line of communication with the world of the gods and that of the dead, and became a crucial symbol of the Greek concept of immortality. Finally, the imagery of Sotadean vases, dominated by Dionysian figures, was consequently related to male and female initiation rites (whether from boy to man, virgin to matron, or novice to

mystery initiate) which are rooted in Greek beliefs relating to ritual death and rebirth.

The key vessel of Sotadean vases, the *rhyton*, is analysed in eight of the thirteen discourses which run through Hoffmann's book. Sotadean clay *rhyta*, imitating (often Persian) vessels of precious metal, and mainly painted with figures of a Dionysian connotation, were virtually all restricted to ritual drinking and seemed to be Dionysus' exclusive property. Historically, the rapid spread of pottery *rhyta* in Athens in the aftermath of the Persian Wars was connected both with the new spoils of Persian banqueting paraphernalia (which included gold and silver *rhyta*) and with a new political interest in the Athenian forefathers, the Bronze Age heroes of the mythical past in which the *rhyton* was first used.

Sotadean *rhyta* are attached to sculptural bases of the most exotic appearance: besides the ordinary animal heads are a fantastic split head (half ram, half donkey), a seated sphinx, a mounted Amazon, a demon mask, a camel driver, a dwarfish pygmy carrying a slaughtered crane and a crocodile clasping a black boy and biting his right arm. According to Hoffmann, the structural unity of this iconographical diversity is rooted in initiation rituals and (Dionysian) mystery religions of ritual death and rebirth, and of actual death and heroic immortality.

Hoffmann's macroscopic approach involves some methodological and iconological problems. It lacks a systematic study of the known archaeological context of each vase, a principal discussion of the 'contextual' model of the 'Ideologia funeraria' advanced by Italian scholars from the circle of Bruno d'Agostino, and a more context-orientated investigation of the assumed belief in immortality. For a cultural-historical understanding of Greek vases, however (a field as yet accessible, for the most part, only in the narrow confines of iconography),

Hoffmann's anthropological approach is a fundamental advance, both for Classical scholars and for traditional connoisseurs. This challenging and unconventional study – published by the Oxford University Press, as were the standard volumes on Attic vase painters by Sir John Beazley – will substantially provoke and stimulate discussion of Greek, and especially Sotadean, vases, which are some of Classical Athens' most fascinating and unclassical remains.

SOTADES: SYMBOLS OF IMMORTALITY ON GREEK VASES

Herbert Hoffmann

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