

1 | Achilles and Patroclus in the Trojan War: An introductory case study

From early times, the use of the bow and arrow formed a part of Greek military practice, as a dangerous long-range weapon. If the arrow had not struck an immediately fatal blow, it could still be the cause of insidious wounds. If the arrowhead had become completely embedded in the body and perhaps, in the heat of the battle, broken off from the shaft, then the removal of the metal would cause acute pain and, in certain circumstances, cause further damage to the tissues surrounding the wound. In the detailed battle descriptions of the *Iliad*, wounds caused by arrows are mentioned on various occasions. When the Greek Menelaus has just been struck by an arrow, his initial fear gives way to relief that the binding, which attaches the arrowhead to the shaft, is still visible (4, 150–1): the wound cannot be deep and the damage is therefore slight. So too in the picture that will now be used as a test case for interpretation (Fig. 1), the warrior has been lucky in his misfortune. The arrow portrayed in beautiful detail in the left foreground, so as to put the cause of the wound in his arm beyond all doubt, is still complete and, at the most, slightly bent at the tip, unless the small irregularity in the drawing is unintentional. Yet the abrupt turn away of the head and the open mouth, with the teeth visible and coated in added white, convey something of the pain that the man feels, as his comrade-in-arms applies the bandage to his arm. But the fact that neither man has taken off his armour – the helper still wears his helmet and his companion’s cuirass is only partially unfastened – gives an obvious impression that the wound can be treated there and then, and that the two warriors will probably return immediately to the fray. Thus an unpleasant incident, admittedly, but not a catastrophe: a passing event on the edge of the battlefield, where nothing in the image would lead a viewer to think that the arrow-shot would have fatal consequences for the wounded man. So why, then, was an event of such obviously transient significance seen as a theme deserving of representation?

If one were to confine oneself exclusively to what is shown in the image itself, then the question could only be answered speculatively. So-called ‘iconography’, the verbal recording of all the visual elements in an image, cannot on its own supply any indication of the significance of the content. A symbol of friendship and solidarity, of the dangers of war or, conversely,



Figure 1 Achilles tends the wounded Patroclus. Attic red-figure cup, signed by the potter Sosias, interior, c. 500 BC

of the obligation to defend one's country? Each of these is equally justified as an off-the-cuff idea, with an equally free choice between them, since in the end it is only the spontaneous reaction of a present-day viewer that is being put into words. The path to be followed in a careful interpretation, by contrast, has a clear, yet never wholly attainable, intermediate goal: to recover the cognitive horizons of the people for whom this image was made. 'Context' is the term used for the sum of those aspects which could have been fundamental to the contemporary understanding of an image or an object. Often the context of an image can be deduced only very incompletely, but in the present case the circumstances are relatively favourable. Enough clues are available, whether provided by the picture itself or taken from external sources, to form the basis for an interpretation. Some of the circumstantial evidence, derived from various fields of context, will be

examined presently. The fundamentals of contextual research will be dealt with in the methodological chapter.

In antiquity, no one ever saw the image in the isolated form in which it appears in our illustration. The scene with the two male figures decorates the interior of a large terracotta drinking-cup. The image has a diameter of 17.5 cm.; the bowl of the cup, one of 32 cm. Since the broad outer ring is coated in a lustrous, deep black, the effect is one of looking at the image through an opening. This artistic trick – that is, the decision not to extend the figured scene over the entire surface available – emphasises the somewhat miniaturist character of the execution, but also has the effect of focusing attention on the events depicted.

The high level of artistic craftsmanship represented by the cup can be directly grasped by anyone who goes to see the original in the Department of Antiquities of the Berlin Museums. The vessel dates from the years around 500 BC: in historical terms, to the period of transition from the Archaic to the Classical period in Greece. The piece is one of the undisputed masterpieces among the painted vases produced in Athens. The term ‘vase’, introduced here, should be understood not as an indication of function, but as a purely conventional expression to convey the sense of a luxury vessel. The contribution of the potter is the first feature to display high quality. The wide-splaying bowl of the cup, very thin-walled in proportion to its extent, sits perched on a slender foot in such a way that the contour of the vessel runs in an elegant, unbroken curve all the way from the round foot to the outer rim of the bowl. Two handles provided the means of holding, at the same time enlivening the shape of the cup. The potter has added his name, Sosias, on the edge of the foot. The painter (assuming that he was not the same person as the potter) has not signed his work. Since no name is found, either, on other vessels which on the basis of style could be identified as works by the same hand, the painter is known by the alias or substitute name of the ‘Sosias Painter’. Even though his *oeuvre* and his artistic development are no longer accessible to us, it is beyond question that he was not just a master of the technique of vase painting, but also an innovator within it. For the first time in the history, already centuries long, of Greek vase painting and two-dimensional art in general, we have on the Sosias cup (as it is called in the technical jargon) profile figures whose eyes are also shown in profile. By comparison with the pictorial convention followed hitherto, with the eyes shown in frontal view, an exceptional gain was achieved in the accuracy and vividness of the portrayal of the human figure. One can also see just how innovatory this type of rendering was, from the fact that the same vase painter did not employ it for the scenes on the outside of the same



Figure 2 Heracles takes his place among the gods on Mount Olympus. Exterior of the cup shown in Fig. 1

cup (Fig. 2). In connection with the issue of meaning and interpretation, this stylistic detail deserves attention for showing that, with an artist who shows himself an innovator in terms of formal technique, innovation in the thematic field may also be expected.

Painted vessels like the cup by the Sosias Painter are luxury ware, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4. Here it will be enough to give a brief indication of the three main areas of use of pottery, particularly that from Athens. First, to furnish the symposium (*symposion*), the men's evening entertainment, accompanied by wine drinking; secondly, for use in association with the honouring of the dead, as props for the celebration of the funeral or for interment as grave goods; and thirdly, to function as votive offerings in sanctuaries, in gratitude to the gods. In principle, each of these three possible uses must be reckoned with in the case of every vessel. In particular cases, a find-spot, the traces of use or even the subject-matter of representations can help to restrict the range of purposes that the vase painter had in mind at the time of the vessel's making. But in every case we are dealing with prestige objects, whose use goes beyond the sphere of ordinary everyday business. In the case of vases like that by the Sosias

Painter, which can in all aspects lay claim to a special artistic status, such products will also have had a price, as luxury goods valued by those in 'high society' for their beauty, but also for the distinction which their ownership conferred.

This also speaks indirectly for the historical situation. In the decades at the transition from the sixth to the fifth centuries BC, Athens found herself in political upheaval. In the year 507, radical reforms were introduced which, by a very dynamic process, were to replace an aristocratic structure with the first democratic constitution in European history. In 490, the Persians first advanced as far as mainland Greece; in 480, the Persian Wars reached their dramatic climax with the triumph of the Greeks at the battle of Salamis. As far as the picture on the cup is concerned, a first point of interest is that the great political revolutions of these years did not immediately alter the status and self-perception of the ruling class. They kept in their hands, *de facto*, the power of decision in all important social questions; their lifestyle, too, in which the display of material wealth played a certain part, survived for a time. On the other hand, the principle that defence of the city's territory should be in the hands of 'citizen soldiers' remained unchanged. Instead of a professional army, or of mercenaries, it was precisely the better-off male inhabitants who, in the case of conflict, took on the task of the armed defence of their own land. Every citizen had a potential role in warfare, and was trained and equipped accordingly. To that extent, a picture showing two men in a war setting, however idealised the image might be, was always something that could get across a message about one's own existence.

A very inconspicuous detail of the picture, but one that is of exceptional importance for understanding it, has so far been left out of account: each man has his name inscribed beside him. The wounded man is identified as Patroclus, his helper as Achilles. The picture, then, is meant to reproduce not a typical scene of war, such as would repeatedly occur in this or much the same form, but a scene from the world of myth. Achilles and Patroclus are among the most outstanding Greek warriors and well-known figures in the saga of the Trojan War. Homer raised their literary monument in the *Iliad*, which exerted a powerful influence already in antiquity, certainly including the late Archaic period to which the Sosias cup belongs.

All the same, no ancient text that tells anything about an arrow-wound to Patroclus or his tending by Achilles has come down to us. Recognition of the names does not allow us to say, in consequence, whether the scene reproduced in the picture represents a specific moment in the life story of the two heroes or, if so, which. In the *Iliad*, Patroclus takes the field as a

warrior at one point only, in a longish passage of Book 16, but his powerful intervention there is immediately followed by his death. Yet the names which the vase painter has added are anything but valueless. Even if the written sources give no direct hint of the event depicted here, there is no shortage of indirect testimonies giving information about the special features of the two men and their mutual relations. We can with some certainty reconstruct the idea of the legendary warriors Achilles and Patroclus that an Athenian of the years around 500 BC would have.

Achilles was, by tradition, indisputably the mightiest warrior in the Greek army at Troy. To his legendary wrath, arising from a quarrel with his leader Agamemnon, he gave full expression by withdrawing from the war and thereby placing his comrades in dire straits. Only when he returns to the battlefield does the tide turn and the Trojans go on the retreat. Yet Achilles is not just the terrifying warrior, whose sword and spear bring destruction to countless enemies, but also a healer. He learned this skill from the centaur Chiron who, as Homer already recounts, took part in his upbringing. So there is no mystery about Achilles, in the vase painting, treating the wound and doing so with the same confidence and decisiveness that typifies his movements on the battlefield.

This notion of outstanding military ability is not equally closely associated with Patroclus. The prime role which the mythological tradition assigns to him is as the friend of Achilles. They were brought up together and set out for Troy together, Achilles as leader of his contingent, Patroclus as his first comrade in arms; together, too – so says Achilles according to Homer (*Iliad* 18, 80–2; 24, 574–5) – they would one day be buried. Patroclus is the elder of the two: in the picture, he is shown bearded and in this way contrasted with the more strikingly youthful Achilles. That one of them should look after the other, therefore, when an injury necessitates skilled first aid, fully conforms to the established understanding of the contemporary viewer. But yet another aspect of the biography of Achilles and Patroclus was certainly also present to that viewer, though it is one to which the picture makes no direct reference: both men are doomed to fall, in the tragic linkage of their destinies, even before the Greeks capture Troy in the tenth year of the war. When Achilles, out of anger at the conduct of Agamemnon, stayed away from the fighting, Patroclus begged him to provide at least some indirect support by putting at his own disposal his exceptionally fine armour and weapons. Reluctantly, Achilles agreed and let Patroclus go off into battle, where he fought with outstanding success and might have brought lasting ascendancy to the Greeks, had not a god invisibly joined in the fray. Apollo leaps to the aid of the Trojans and sees

to it that Patroclus loses his armour, making it easy for his enemies to destroy him. Patroclus himself takes note of what is happening to him: he would, he says in his dying words, have left the battlefield in triumph, had he had only mortal opponents to contend with.

The notion of such direct forms of divine intervention in the affairs of mortals was deeply embedded in the religious feelings of early Greeks. Achilles, likewise, does not meet his end entirely through the power of his human opponents. The arrow-shot by Paris, one of the sons of King Priam of Troy, that strikes Achilles in the heel, has won proverbial fame. According to a later refashioning of the myth, this was the only part of his body where he could be wounded; originally, and still at the time when the Sosias cup was created, Achilles was thought of as fully mortal, and the wound in the heel represents no more than an assumption that Achilles could no longer defend himself and was thus doomed. Independently of this detail, however, it is part of the earliest form of the legend that it was an intervention by Apollo, once again, that sealed Achilles' fate. He could be mightier than any one of his enemies on the battlefield, but even he could do nothing against the power of a god who directed a hostile arrow into his heel.

The contemporaries of the Sosias Painter certainly needed no such reconstruction of the biographical background to the two participants in the vase painting since they were familiar with the context. On such a basis as this, the first, very generally worded question of the interpretation of the scene can be formulated in a more complex form. One thesis (it has long been the prevailing interpretation in research) runs like this: it is friendship and humanity that are at issue here, qualities that showed themselves precisely in a situation of crisis, but which are also linked with the ideal of unconditional commitment to war service: even a wound can only briefly keep men from the battlefield. The alternative view can be developed out of the aspect handled just now. Notwithstanding the exceptional military prowess of both men, reflected in the picture by their imposing physique and the presence of the weapons, Achilles and Patroclus will not return in triumph from the war, but will meet early deaths. Only in the knowledge of this does the motif – in itself unspectacular – of the treatment of an arrow-wound acquire its full force of drama: in the wound, there is indicated the possibility of total failure. What is depicted is the positive situation, in which one man helps the other and restores his body for a return to battle. But this very scene calls up their later fate for the viewer to recollect, and to realise that, if gods intervene, there can be no rescue. On this initial explanation, confrontation with the inescapability

of death, and perhaps with the brutality of war, become the central cues to interpretation.

From what has been said so far, this second, more complex interpretation of the scene gains preference over the other explanation. It takes into account a much wider range, both of the features inherent in the picture (that is, the indications given by the representation itself) and of the background knowledge that the vase painter's contemporaries possessed. If, then, a basis has been given for saying that one of the two lines of interpretation can lay claim, at least provisionally, to far greater probability, then from this a clear proposition has crystallised which can now be tested. How far will a closer examination of the context in which the image was produced provide a confirmation? Or will it rather result in serious counter-arguments?

So far, we have considered the vase painting more or less in isolation, as if it stood entirely alone in the ancient iconographic tradition and there were no other representations offering similar motifs and thus parallel interpretations. Unlike many other new iconographic devices of this period, the tondo of the Sosias cup is not in fact linked to a long tradition of motifs. Its specific peculiarities are uncommon. Scenes from the edge of the battlefield are exceptionally rare, apart from the theme of the rescue of the body of a fallen comrade. Yet there is one representation which can be called closely related in its motif. It is found on a so-called Chalcidian amphora, produced some forty years earlier than the cup by Sosias (Fig. 3). The term 'Chalcidian' is used for a class of vases which is in many respects close to Athenian vessels. The inscriptions on many of these vases point, by their letter-forms, to a dialect that was spoken in the Euboean city of Chalcis, but in other places too; in reality, the Chalcidian vases were probably produced in southern Italy, and specifically in the Greek city of Rhegion (today, Reggio Calabria). The amphora is decorated with a long frieze of figures, a battle-scene which once again includes, among others, Achilles; but this time he lies dead on the ground, pierced by two arrows. The fierce battle over his corpse means that his comrades and enemies are fighting over his body, with the aim of dragging it from the battlefield on to their own side. The Goddess Athena, only symbolically present, stands towards the left-hand edge of the scene, acting as a protecting authority for the Greek warriors.

Somewhat withdrawn from the crowded tumult of battle, one can see two warriors, one of whom is binding the other's wounded index finger. These two figures, named as Diomedes and Sthenelos, again represent a pair of friends. The *Iliad* relates how Diomedes is at one point wounded in the



Figure 3 Fighting before Troy: Sthenelos tends the wounded Diomedes. 'Chalcidian' amphora (drawing), c. 540 BC

shoulder, and how Sthenelos assists him by pulling the arrow out of the wound (5, 111–13). But the vase painter, if he took his inspiration from the epic at all, has given himself the freedom to exploit not the letter, but the spirit of the legendary tradition. The rendering of the treatment of the wound emphasises the momentary, enforced suspension of the fight and the considerate aid given by one warrior to the other. As on the Sosias cup, both men are armed, fully in Diomedes' case, while Sthenelos has put down his helmet and shield. Even if it represents an isolated work within the tradition, the testimony of the scene on the amphora is still of no little value. It shows that the introduction of the motif of the treatment of the wound, and its use to express something extending far beyond the incident immediately shown, was no new invention of Sosias' time. In one case as in the other, the iconography makes it clear beyond all doubt that the men's injury will not prevent them from returning to the battle. And in each case, the temporary disablement hints at the fundamental vulnerability and mortality of even the greatest heroes. On the amphora, this is directly expressed through the dead Achilles; on the Sosias Painter's cup, it is done by the indirect means already mentioned. Thus the later work contributes no real innovation. But by expressing visually the two elements, 'military prowess' and 'mortality', in one and the same image, instead of doing so cumulatively in two separate scenes, as on the amphora, it displays both greater conceptual elegance and a more discriminating creativity. In any case, the consideration of both representations together has produced added circumstantial evidence for the soundness of the thesis advanced earlier.

An important component of this thesis is that the Sosias Painter's picture has a prophetic quality. It is created by the tension between what is actually depicted, and the knowledge of the further destiny of the two men, of their approaching death. This interpretation cannot be, in the strictest sense,

demonstrated, yet there are further iconographic elements that support the legitimacy of the thesis. Patroclus, while he is being attended to, sits not on the ground but on a shield. The device on the shield is just recognisable. It is an (only partly visible) tripod, the attribute of Apollo. So: the very god who will set in train the killing of Patroclus is brought, if only symbolically, into the picture. But, as already explained, it is not only Patroclus, but Achilles too who will perish before Troy through the intervention of Apollo. One should not, however, judge the device, without reservation, as an unambiguous 'speaking sign', for the tripod occurs very widely as a shield-device in late Archaic vase painting, and does so in a variety of types of mythical scene. Yet analogies nevertheless exist for the referential function suggested here, as for instance when giants, in their struggle against the Olympian gods, carry on their shield a device which relates to the divinity who is their opponent.

In the *Iliad*, the headlong downfall of Patroclus is described in a dramatic sequence (16, 698–867). Apollo first knocks the helmet from his head, then breaks his spear; his shield falls to the ground and finally his cuirass is undone, so that the warrior stands unprotected on the battlefield, to be struck first by the rather unimportant Euphorbus, then by Hector, the greatest warrior in the Trojan ranks. The question arises: is it possible that certain details of the picture, not directly connected with the theme of the treatment of the wound, might establish an associative link with the concrete circumstances of Patroclus' death? In contrast to Achilles, he is not wearing a helmet, but has only the cap-shaped lining on his head; the cuirass is untied not only on the side of the wounded arm, the left, but on the right too – its lacing cord is clearly visible. Both features fit in with the initial stages of his destruction, as the Homeric epic describes them. His posture, too, seated with splayed legs, should not be put down to his circumstances, as has often been supposed: it was seen as a momentary loss of composure, a way of bringing the hero down to a human level. Patroclus' body-armour, and the block-like unity of Achilles' pose, stand in marked contrast to the bare, widely spread legs and unprotected genitals. The exact words of the *Iliad*, to describe where the fatal spear-thrust of Hector struck him, are 'Low down, in the flank' (16, 820–1).

At first, it may perhaps appear too risky to assume such a close correspondence as this, between the verbal version of a myth and the visual representation of Patroclus. But the doubts disperse when one takes account of the fact that regular, festive public recitations of the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were taking place in Athens at the period when the cup was made. In an age when there was nothing to compare with the present-day