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J. D. Beazley and Bernard Ashmole

Excerpt

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I. EARLY GREEK ART: INTRODUCTION

THE early story of Greek art is concerned with three phenomena: the reign of a primitive geometric art from the tenth century to the eighth; the assimilation of Oriental influences towards and after the close of that period; and the formation, assisted at first by these Oriental models, of a new national style, the Greek archaic, in the seventh and sixth centuries. The culmination of this style, at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the fifth, is attended by the collapse, for the first time in the world's history, of certain age-long conventions, and the way is thus prepared for an art of unprecedented freedom, the classical Greek art of the fifth and fourth centuries.

The literary sources for the history of sixth-century art are extremely scanty, and for the art of the preceding centuries there is hardly any direct literary testimony. Inscriptional evidence begins in the seventh century. But most of our knowledge is derived from the stylistic and other peculiarities of the objects themselves, and from the circumstances of their discovery. Sometimes an object can be connected closely or loosely with a datable person or event; and other objects can be dated relatively to the first.

Of the vast number of objects produced in antiquity, some had a better chance of surviving to our times than others. Some substances are perishable (wood, plaster, textiles), others comparatively durable but convertible (marble, bronze), others comparatively durable and comparatively inconvertible (well-baked clay, gem-stones). Thus painted clay vessels must take the place, for us, of paintings on wood or wall; small bronzes, lost or discarded, for the most part, in antiquity, of the large bronze statues which remained in place to be melted down; and only a small proportion of marble statues has escaped utter defacement or the lime-kiln. For these reasons, and for others, such as

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

GREEK SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

the lack of exploration in many areas, there are great gaps in our monumental evidence. In the early period, however, our sources, though scanty, are untroubled: the objects to be dealt with are almost exclusively originals, and not, as in subsequent periods, largely later copies or imitations: unearthed but lately, they have suffered little at the restorer's hands: lastly, we may feel confident that, on the whole, the best of them, whether sculptures or paintings, are equal in quality to the best of their time: for the archaic sculptures of the Acropolis were buried in an age which paid little respect to the work of the past, and were not disinterred until our own days; and it was not till well after the Persian Wars that painting took such a leap as to leave the decoration of vases far behind: 'the vases of the classical period are but a reflection of classical beauty; the vases of the archaic period are archaic beauty itself.'

II. GEOMETRIC ART

Between the flourishing of the Creto-Mycenaean civilization, and the geometric period proper, there lies a long period which has been named, not very happily, the proto-geometric: a period of cultural decay, doubtless of invasions and incessant conflict. The remains are chiefly ceramic. The shapes and decoration of the vessels are commonplace. The material which the painter uses is still that lustrous black glaze which was invented by Middle Minoan potters, but his repertory is limited to groups of semi-circles and circles, triangles, straight and wavy lines.

Somewhere about the end of the tenth century, a new style arose, the geometric style proper, which in the course of the ninth and eighth centuries conquered the Greek world. Its triumph was more complete in some districts than in others: in Crete and eastwards, proto-geometric and even late Aegean elements lingered; old shapes, and old ornaments, such as the concentric circle, persisted; and old principles of decoration.

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GEOMETRIC ART

3

The analogies between Greek geometric work and the products of the Northern Balkans and Central Europe point to the rudiments of the style having been brought to Greece by Northern invaders. When life in Greece became a little more settled, the seed ripened: and the rudiments were formed into a distinctive Greek style. That this Greek style originated in a single centre seems likely from the uniform character of early geometric decoration in places so far apart as Crete and Thessaly, Athens and Rhodes. Where the centre was is doubtful, but seeing that the development of the style is more consistent in Old Greece, especially in Attica, than elsewhere, its home probably lay in that quarter.

Geometric pottery reached its highest point in Attica, and the progress of the style can be traced better there than anywhere else. The earliest Attic geometric vases are decorated with horizontal bands, row over row, of simple rectilinear patterns—meander, lozenge, chain, zigzag; a broader band being set between narrower, and the narrower symmetrically disposed. New shapes of vase came in with the new style of decoration, and others were added later. These shapes differ widely from the harmonious forms of sixth- or fifth-century vases; but they please by their strength, clarity, and sedateness. The early geometric system of decoration was elaborated in two ways: first by a structural alteration in the ornamental scheme—the division of the main zone by means of verticals into rectangular fields; and secondly by the introduction of animal and human figures. A row of animals in single file is substituted for a pattern zone; the antithetic group, two animals facing, with or without a central object, is used to adorn a rectangular field; freer compositions appear, scenes of a general character from everyday life. The chief animals are birds, horses, deer: the scenes are mostly battles, often at sea or on the seashore, and funerals. The figures are schematized silhouettes. The men, for example, are very tall and thin, the trunk a triangle tapering to the waist, the head a knob with a mere excrescence for the face: towards the end of the style the head is lit up—the head-knob is drawn in outline, and a dot signifies the eye.

Fig. 1

Fig. 3

Fig. 2

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4

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The background of the picture is toned down by copious filling-ornaments.

The metalwork which has survived from the geometric period consists mainly of bronze bands, incised with patterns, which formed part of vessels; gold diadems with embossed designs; incised fibulae; further, of small bronze statuettes, some of them votive offerings each standing on its own base, others portions of larger objects (staves, pins, vessels, stands). The engraved and embossed decoration resembles that

Figs. 4, 5 of the vases. The statuettes are small figures of animals or of men, sometimes simple groups, mare and foal, rider, chariot. The best show artistic intention, decision, and some skill. The men are mainly arms and legs, but by the end of the period, the forms begin to round out a little and grow shapely: and in a small group of ivories found with
Fig. 6 geometric vases in an Attic grave, the greater corporeity, and the studied symmetry of the attitude, give a presage of Greek archaic sculpture.

This art of thin lines and sharp corners, this small, bleak, thrifty art, presents a strange contrast to the rich swell and swing of Mycenaean forms. But its achievement should not be underrated. Take one of those
Fig. 3 huge monumental vases which stood over Athenian graves: we cannot fail to admire the simple firm lines of the shape; the careful arrangement of the decorative elements to suit their places; and the clear, compact composition of the main picture—a dead man lying in state, with mourners to left and mourners to right of him, and mourners seated and kneeling beside the bier.

III. ORIENTAL INFLUENCES: AND THE EARLIEST ARCHAIC ART

Even in the geometric period, the Greek world shows occasional signs of contact with the more ancient and far more highly developed art of the East: if more were known about early Ionia these signs would no doubt be more frequent. Towards the end of the eighth century

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ORIENTAL INFLUENCES

5

foreign import and foreign influence increase greatly, and eventually contribute to the transformation of the aspect of Greek art. Products of Hittite and Syrian art, and of the mixed art created out of Syrian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian elements by the Phoenicians, reached the Greeks both overland and by sea. Few of these products were of fine quality; but they served to place the artistic experience of ages at the disposal of the untutored Greek craftsman. The Homeric poems bear witness to a general admiration for the works of art made or peddled by the Phoenician: and the old belief that the shield of Achilles is based upon Eastern metalwork, though often assailed, holds the field. Side by side with this Oriental influence, there are traces, but much fainter traces, of another: Cretan-Mycenaean traditions may have lingered in some districts after fading out elsewhere: and it is always possible that in various parts of Greece, Cretan or Mycenaean objects, remaining in view, or discovered from time to time, contributed at least the decayed nobleman's mite towards the formation not only of the Greek system of ornament but of the Greek figure style as well.

The phase of strong orientalization, which preceded the complete assimilation of the foreign elements and the formation of the new national style, the Greek archaic, may be illustrated on the one hand by the embossed bronze shields found in Crete, and on the other by the ivories found at Ephesus. The shields, with their cumbrous lions and sphinxes, deer and bulls, stand very close to the earlier and more Assyrian of a large class of metal bowls which have been found at Nimrud and in various parts of Greece; and are in fact Greek imitations of such Oriental work: their date is probably the later part of the eighth century, for similar orientalizing bronzework is found in Italian tombs which can be dated, on external grounds, about 700 B.C. The Ephesian ivories are somewhat later, and are closely related to a group of ivories found in the same room at Nimrud as the metal bowls.* Like the shields, the Ephesian ivories may be called mixhellenic: but the ivory-worker, unlike the shield-maker, surpasses his models: the characterization of the radiant priest who toys with his beads—a kind of small, Catholic

Fig. 7

Fig. 10

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6

GREEK SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

- Fig. 9 counterpart to the Orthodox figure from Sargon's palace—is hardly equalled either in early Greek art or in the art of Hither Asia: and the hawk-priestess is a masterpiece of delicate finish. Ruder ivories bearing the same relation to Nimrud as the Ephesian have been found at Camirus in Rhodes; and Sparta has yielded a long series of small ivory reliefs, mostly parts of fibulae, and ivory figurines¹. The earliest of the Spartan ivories are older than the Ephesian: for the pottery of the stratum in which they were found is exclusively geometric. The earlier Spartan figurines recall the ivories from Camirus. Favourite subjects in the reliefs are Artemis, with a wild beast or bird in each hand; and her male counterpart. Another collocation of man and animal is the old Asiatic type of a man grappling with two monsters. Lions appear, sometimes winged; sphinxes; griffins.

Oriental motives find their way into Attica, as into Sparta, before the end of the geometric period. Lion and griffin appear on diadems found with geometric vases: a man fights with a rampant lion; two lions devour a hunter: and from time to time an Oriental creature strays into pottery, like a prospector before the rush.

- Fig. 8 The geometric tripod bowls, with their engraved legs and accessory statuettes, give place, towards the end of the eighth century, to other types, in which the bowl is decorated with winged human figures and heads of animals, all in the round. The earlier examples, which are found not only in Greece, but as far east as Armenia and as far west as Etruria, are not Greek work: but many of the later, in which the animal heads are cast hollow, are certainly Greek.

The pottery of the late eighth and the seventh century, from its plentifulness and variety, throws more light upon the history of Greek art during the period than any other class of object. The technique of vase-painting changes towards the end of the eighth century. The face, or parts of it, are now drawn in black outline, with black lines for inner details. The 'reserved' spaces (those enclosed by the black outline) are often uncoloured; but female flesh is sometimes filled in with white,

¹ *Artemis Orthia*, pls. 91–178.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLIEST ARCHAIC ART

7

male with white or brown. White and red are used for details as well as black. An alternative process was to retain the old silhouette of the geometric period, but transformed by the use of incised lines for inner markings: the black is usually enlivened by touches of red. Both processes, 'outline' and 'black-figure,' may occur on the same vase, even in the same picture; further, in the black-figured pictures, the female flesh is regularly 'reserved,' and the male sometimes brown.

Figs. 18–
19

Geometric painting was monochrome: the new art contrasts light with dark, and one colour with another. The geometric painter divided his field into many small areas, and decorated each with small oft-repeated units: the new art enlarges the areas by reducing their number; decorates them with bigger and bolder elements, connected by an ampler rhythm; lays more stress on the chief area; achieves unity of design by subordination not by diffusion.

In patterns and in figures the straight line gives place to the curved. Lotus-flower, lotus-bud, and other motives floral and spiral were borrowed from the East, and out of these borrowed elements new and complex patterns were constituted, the ancestors of classical Greek ornament. For a long time animals are no less, even more, popular than before; but the choice changes; the favourites are now the ferocious or fantastic creatures of the East, lion, griffin, sphinx, and new monsters invented to keep these company. Turning to the human figure, we find the meagre schematic forms swelling out and acquiring volume. The arms are no longer match-like; thighs, buttocks and calves are big and strong: the joints are defined, breast, knee and ankle indicated, the facial features emphasized. In the geometric period legs and head were always in profile, breast always frontal: now the breast may be either frontal or in profile: frontal if the arms are extended to left and right of the body, in profile if the arms are close to the body or both stretched forward. The head can now look back. The movement of the legs is freer and truer: geometric figures are unsteady, especially when they would run: but seventh-century figures, standing, running or striding, have the steadiness of later Greek art. An interlocked group is

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hardly representable in the simple silhouette style: if two geometric figures were in contact, they touched but gingerly: the seventh century, by its inner delineation and its colour contrasts, can demarcate one figure from another in an intertwined group: animal can close with animal, man with monster or man. 'Congruent' groups can also be formed, two figures side by side, one overlapping the other. The subjects alter: the battle pictures become more disciplined; hoplite faces hoplite in the prescribed attitude; in good order, a detachment advances at the double, or the victors follow up their success; the fallen are no longer ranged, one higher than the other, like specimens on a board, but lie grovelling or supine each on his own piece of groundline. The chariot-race supplants the slow funeral procession. Lastly, the Greek artist now sets himself to represent, on clay, metal or other material, the stories of the gods and the great men of old: and by the sixth century these 'myths' will have become his favourite theme. Old types are enriched and defined by a mythical content, new figures created to embody a particular story. The scenes are still confined to the barest necessities: and the passions represented are the simplest: the desire to kill or to escape death, the delight at the sight of a friend.

The vases of this period divide themselves into two groups, an eastern, comprising the vases of Greek Asia Minor, of the adjacent islands, especially Rhodes, and of Naukratis; and a less homogeneous western. The contrast between the two groups is instructive. The east uses the outline technique, and long avoids incision: the black-figure technique arises in the west. The east is conservative, the west experimental. The east is content with the ancient monsters of the Orient, the west devises new: the east likes uniform rows of animals, a whole row of goats, another of deer, the west mixes its animals: the western patterns are now wilder, now more complex than the eastern: the west is narrative, the east decorative: the east, having no tale to tell, retains the filling-ornaments, and needs no inscriptions: the west ends by clearing the ground for action and for word.

Geometric pottery, though exported, was not exported widely, and

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[More information](#)

EARLIEST ARCHAIC ART

9

beyond the Greek world hardly at all: the potter worked mainly for local demand: but by the seventh century pottery was one of the principal articles of Greek export trade. Eastern Greek pottery was sent north to the Black Sea colonies, south to Egypt, west to Sicily and Etruria. The circulation of Corinthian pottery was even wider.

More eastern Greek vases of this period have been found at Rhodes than anywhere else: but the pottery found in other parts of eastern Greece shows that the same style prevailed throughout the area with local differences. The animals—predominantly wild goats and fallow-deer—and the pattern-bands, are inspired by oriental models, but the freshness and tartness of the drawing, and the contrast of white ground and black glaze, give the vases a peculiar brightness and charm. The human figure, rare at first, becomes commoner in the later examples. The black-figure style of Corinth invades the east late in the seventh century: the outline style survives, but its range is restricted, and the eastern Greek vases of the sixth century are chiefly black-figured.

It seems likely that Crete was one of the chief places in which Oriental and geometric elements were blended to form the style of the west. The Cretan figure style is known both from metalwork and from vases: bronze openwork plaques show figures of hunters, thin and angular, but full of a true feeling for line and for momentary action. One of the best examples of Cretan figure-work in painting is a dish from Praisos, with a horseman on one side, and a hero, perhaps Herakles, grappling with a sea-monster, on the other. The dish sums up the technical devices of the new age—outline, added colour, incision on black. Cretan vases were exported: for example, a jug found in Aegina, with a picture of Ulysses and his mates escaping from Polyphemos, is Cretan.

The chief Peloponnesian fabric of the period is Corinthian. In its early, so-called proto-corinthian, phase, tiny, fine perfume-vases were a specialty. The decoration is always clear and well arranged: the filling-ornament is discreet, and in some of the later vases the background is left quite plain. The pattern-work is often of great complexity and beauty;

Figs. 15–
16

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 18

Fig. 17

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

GREEK SCULPTURE AND PAINTING

and the more elaborate of the pictures rank among the masterpieces of the later seventh century. It will be long before we re-encounter the lightness of movement, the varied and expressive attitudes, which we

Fig. 18 find in the Berlin Centauromachy. In the Chigi jug, now in the Villa Giulia at Rome, the exquisite drawing is enhanced by an unusually rich polychromy, which uses white, two shades of red, two of brown.

In the later products of the Corinthian fabric, shapes are usually heavier, and drawing at least a little more conventional than in proto-corinthian: the cheaper vases crowd the background with blot-like rosettes. We are not wholly dependent upon vases for our knowledge of Corinthian painting: the painted clay metopes of the temple of Apollo at Thermon in Aetolia are probably Corinthian work¹; and a deposit of small votive plaques in clay has been found near Corinth itself. The metopes are painted in the outline technique, with details in black, white, and three shades of red: the drawing is inferior to that of the best seventh-century vases. Most of the plaques belong to the end of the seventh and the early sixth century, and one of them is signed by the vase-painter Timonidas: a few show a later stage of Corinthian painting than any of the Corinthian vases. The technique is now the black-figure, now the outline. Some of the representations are of a novel kind: scenes from the industrial life of the city: the clay-pit, the potter's oven, the potter's wheel.

Fig. 20

Proto-corinthian restraint finds a surprising contrast in the licence of the big Attic vases of the so-called Phaleron class. The Attic artist is at first intoxicated by the new wine. In the latest geometric vases, a strong wind seems to be blowing against the neat fabric and making it bend, totter and reel. Then comes the Analatos hydria², in which the men are still silhouettes, but the birds and the ornament are done in bold brush-outlines, and the vegetation is of tropical luxuriance. The next stage is represented by the remarkable amphora in New York, with the crude vigour of its combatants, with its incredible animals, with its uncouth

¹ *Ant. Denk.* II, pls. 49–52a.

² *Jahrbuch* 2, pl. 3.