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PART I

APPROACHES TO GREEK ARCHAEOLOGY

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CHAPTER I

**INTRODUCTION: CLASSICAL
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS OBJECTS**
1.1 Two objects

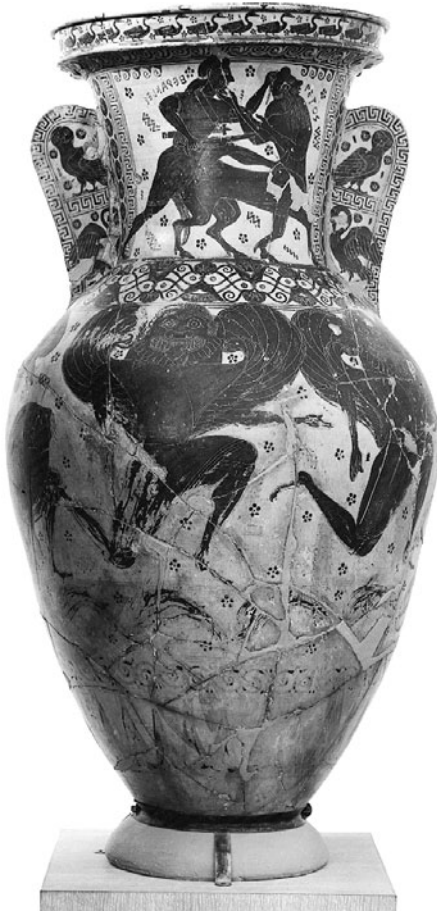
Classical Archaeology is pre-eminently an archaeology of objects. Much of what Classical archaeologists write has been concerned with the description and interpretation of certain classes of artefacts, artefacts of a very particular kind. Such objects are often striking and sometimes beautiful. They may even be considered art. Let us take a look at two of them, taken from two quite different periods in the Greek archaeological sequence.

Figure 1.1 shows a pot (Athens NM 1002) now on display in the National Museum of Athens. It is a large vessel, about 1.22 m (or 4 feet) high, known as the Nessos amphora, after the scene on the neck of the pot, which shows the hero Herakles slaying the Centaur Nessos. It was found in 1890 in the course of rescue excavations while building work was taking place in the Piraeus street area of modern Athens. In Antiquity this area was known to be a part of the Outer Kerameikos, a region which lay outside the city walls to the west of the ancient city.¹ It is conventionally dated to the end of the seventh century, and the general style of the pot can be called 'Late Protoattic' or 'Early Black-Figure'.² The painting on the surface of this pot, like a painting you might see hanging in one of the great galleries of Western Europe, has been 'attributed' to a particular craftsman or artist, named after the pot (or vase) itself, the 'Nessos painter'.³

To describe something in a certain way is also to begin to interpret it. I have listed above a number of facts or circumstances pertinent to our understanding of this pot. But before we describe or interpret something we have to have some idea of what we wish to learn from it; that is, we have to have some notion of what kind of evidence it is, and what it is evidence for. This is what archaeologists mean by the problem of approach, and it raises the question of how Classical archaeologists have traditionally looked at such objects. Which of these facts (some of which, to be truthful, are inferences) have been thought most important? And what role does this object play in the various stories scholars have wanted to tell us, stories about the art and archaeology of early Greece? Do we, for example, know the function of this pot? What it was actually used for is

¹ Kavvadias 1890: 4–5; Stais and Wolters 1891: 46.

² Early Black-Figure according to Beazley 1951: 14–15 (1986: 13–14); 1956: 4–5. Protoattic according to J.M. Cook 1935. ³ Beazley 1944; 1956: 4–5.



1.1 Nessos amphora

unclear; it was found, like its near contemporary the Kynosarges amphora,⁴ broken in many parts and associated with bones and ash. It has often been said that this vase, like its Geometric predecessors, served as a grave marker.⁵ Indeed its findspot, close to a known cemetery area of Late Geometric graves referred to at the time as the 'Dipylon', is consistent with this view. The excavator, Kavvadias, thought that it served as a container for a cremation.⁶ Kavvadias' description is, however, equally consistent with another interpretation; it could have come from what German excavators in the Kerameikos were later to call an 'Opferrinne' or offering trench, since the bones and ash of animals have been found associated with broken fineware pottery of similar date in offering

⁴ For the Kynosarges amphora, see Smith 1902; for its context see Droop 1906.

⁵ For example Robertson 1975: 54; R.M. Cook 1972: 71. Both here seem to be following Beazley 1951: 14–15.

⁶ Kavvadias 1890: 4–5; Stais and Wolters 1891: 46. See now comments by Osborne 1998b: 18–20.

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trenches. These 'Opferrinnen' were often filled with the bones and ash of animals used in sacrificial meals.⁷

Soon after its discovery, however, the function of this pot swiftly became a matter of secondary importance. Once restored, its context became the National Museum of Athens, where it can be seen today alongside other vases of late seventh-century date. Here its style and iconography can be closely scrutinised. It stands with its decorated face open to view, its rear being covered with a few large strokes of the brush. On the lip is a frieze of ducks; below this, on the neck, a scene familiar to students of Greek literature: the hero Herakles slaying the Centaur Nessos (or Netos). Indeed there can be little ambiguity about the subject, as these images are accompanied by dipinti (painted labels) telling us exactly who is who.⁸ Beside the neck, on the handles, are some owls, and below them runs a frieze of palmettes. On the main body of the vase, Gorgons with wings, their tongues sticking out, stare out at the modern museum visitor. Below this a frieze of dolphins, and below that a cable pattern, can still faintly be discerned.

The careful reader may well ask, what is the point of this detailed description? Can we not see all this for ourselves? Descriptions not unlike this one, of objects not unlike this one, form a large part of many books on Greek archaeology and art. Such descriptions may form a prelude to an interpretation, as if interpretation flows naturally from description. And the careful reader (and viewer) may well be asking, what can this combination of images mean? Here we have to remember that the ancient viewer would have been familiar with the relevant myth or myths. One of the earliest versions of the story of Herakles and Nessos is to be found in Sophocles' play, *The Women of Trachis* (lines 555–81). Here Herakles' wife, Deianeira, recalls how Herakles killed Nessos (in this version, with an arrow) because the Centaur had tried to rape her. On the point of death, however, Nessos tells Deianeira to keep safe his blood. He tells her that if she ever finds that Herakles has fallen in love with another woman, she can, by making him wear a shirt dipped in the blood of Nessos' wound, return Herakles to her affections. Naively, Deianeira believes him, and the 'shirt of Nessos' proves the means by which Nessos, through Deianeira, contrives the death of Herakles. In the scene that we see here, Herakles kills Nessos. But an ancient viewer might also know that Nessos was to have his posthumous revenge.

The myth of Perseus slaying one of the Gorgons, Medusa, is in a sense the inverse of this.⁹ In the Gorgon's case, her ability to turn anyone who looks at her to stone is used by Perseus himself to good (or bad) effect, when he shows the severed head of the Medusa to Polydektes, a man who had attempted to force

⁷ For seventh-century Opferrinnen in the Kerameikos cemetery with deposits of ash and bones (probably the bones of animals from some kind of ritual meal) see Kübler 1959: 25, 29, 31 and 42.

⁸ For the painted labels, see Boeghold 1962; Immerwahr 1990: 20; Jeffery 1990: 76 no. 6a. The names are written retrograde (right to left), and 'Nessos' is spelt 'Netos'.

⁹ There are many versions of the Perseus myth. But we do know that one version at least was in circulation in neighbouring Boeotia in the years around 700 BC. The poet Hesiod mentions Perseus 'the Gorgon-slayer' several times (Hesiod, *Shield* 216–48; *Theogony* 280).

Perseus' mother, Danae, to marry him against her will. A viewer familiar with both myths might see the common theme that connects these two images as one of the inevitability of vengeance.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that we have to imagine an ancient viewer who can, as it were, read between the lines – that is, can supply the end of the story which the images leave out. Another possible answer to the question 'what do these images mean?' is that they are simply two scenes of violence: Herakles slays Nessos; whilst Perseus (who cannot be seen, but whose presence somehow has to be inferred) slays the Gorgons. The friezes of ducks and dolphins are there to provide some kind of narrative context. These images may then be plausibly related to others on Protoattic pots with funerary associations, such as the Polyphemos amphora from Eleusis (fig. 9.4). On this vase the neck shows another violent scene, one well known from book IX of the *Odyssey* (*Odyssey* IX.322–86): Odysseus and his companions blind Polyphemos. On the shoulder, one animal attacks another; and on the lower body, Gorgons stare out to 'freeze' the viewer. Both context and image suggest a common theme: death as deprivation of the senses. This linking theme has in turn been used as evidence to indicate that a certain kind of 'funerary ideology' existed in seventh-century Athens.¹⁰

There are many versions of Greek myths however. None of the images shown above conforms precisely to those known from literary sources, which are often much later than the myths to be seen on the surfaces of Greek pots. It is always possible to put forward other interpretations, and it is perhaps for this reason that most commentators have avoided detailed interpretation of the 'meaning' of the image or of the pot. Most attention has been given to the *style* of the Nessos amphora. Style was one of the principal interests of Stais and Wolters, the first to describe the pot in detail and, in so doing, admit it to the canon of Greek Art.¹¹ This status was confirmed, and its role in the history of Greek art carefully defined, by a number of later scholars, principally J.D. Beazley. By style is meant two things: the overall manner and technique of drawing and painting; and the individual style of the painter, that which distinguishes his hand from that of others. For Beazley, 'black-figure' is a technique where figures in black are drawn on a clay ground, their features being outlined by incision. It was Beazley who grouped this pot with others he believed to be by the same painter, a painter called (by other scholars) after this vase, the 'Nessos painter'.¹² In Beazley's eyes its significance is twofold: it exemplifies the style of a particular individual; and it comes to play a pivotal role in the development of Greek art and narrative composition. For this pot is pregnant with as yet unrealised possibilities. As Beazley put it:

¹⁰ For this interpretation, see Osborne 1988: 1–6; for criticisms see Whitley 1994a: 63–5. For the publication of the pot, see Mylonas 1957. For the latest discussion of this image, see Snodgrass 1998: 90–100. ¹¹ Stais and Wolters 1891.

¹² Beazley 1944, 1956: 4–5. Beazley actually attributes this pot to the 'Nettos [sic] and Chimaera painter'. Most other scholars, while agreeing with Beazley's attributions, have preferred to use the term the 'Nessos painter'; see Boardman 1974: 15.

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At the end of the seventh century, the black-figure takes the place of the outline technique in Attica: the exuberant ornament is reduced, the animals are powerfully stylized; the eccentricity disappears. The change is partly due to influence from proto-corinthian art. The chief example of this stage is the Nessos amphora in Athens, where the group of Herakles and the Centaur yields to fine proto-corinthian work in deftness, surpasses it in force. Other works by the same painter have been preserved: he is perhaps the earliest Greek artist whose *personality* we can grasp [emphasis mine].¹³

After Beazley, unanimity descends upon British Classical archaeologists. For Robert Cook, the style of fig. 1.1 is 'carefully chosen and admirably executed' and 'Attic art has gained in compactness and unity, and in subtlety too';¹⁴ for Martin Robertson, the vase shows that 'patterns of form and meaning are beginning to crystallise, which keep their character through the archaic age and beyond'.¹⁵ American commentators too have tended to follow Beazley's lead; for Hurwit, this pot shows that 'after a period of idiosyncrasy, experiment and whim, Athenian image making is once more subjected to the rigors of schema and type'.¹⁶

There seem to be a number of features common to all of these accounts, chief amongst which is a tendency to round off an empirical description with a kind of abstract, almost metaphysical claim. My argument in this chapter is that Greek archaeology, at least as it has traditionally been practised up until the early 1970s, is characterised by certain commonalities in the description of its preferred objects. If so, similar features may also be evident in the commentary on another example of Greek art I want to examine, the Delphi Charioteer (fig. 1.2). This can be seen today in the museum of Delphi, close to where it was found by French excavators in 1896. It is one of the few original bronze statues we possess, cast in several pieces by a version of the lost wax method.¹⁷ It was discovered just to the north-west of the temple of Apollo itself, where it had been buried in rockfall.¹⁸ The statue was almost immediately recognised as being part of a bronze chariot group of a kind described by the Greek travel writer Pausanias, who wrote a sort of 'Guide to Greece' in the second century BC.¹⁹ Two inscriptions were found in close association. One, found much closer than the other to the statue itself, reads in part '*P]olyzalos m'anethk[e]*', Polyzalos dedicated me; the other, less clearly

¹³ Beazley and Ashmole 1932: 11. I have presumed here that the style of writing indicates Beazley's rather than Ashmole's 'scholarly personality'. ¹⁴ Cook 1972: 71. ¹⁵ Robertson 1975: 54–5.

¹⁶ Hurwit 1985: 178.

¹⁷ For its technique, see Mattusch 1988: 4, 126–35. The lost wax method is the one most widely used by Greek craftsmen when making large, hollow statues in bronze. It requires first a clay model to be made, over which the features of the statue are modelled in wax. A clay covering is placed over the whole, and, when the molten bronze is poured in, the wax melts away, and, as the molten bronze cools, it takes on the wax's shape.

¹⁸ For the circumstances of its discovery, see Chamoux 1955: 7.

¹⁹ See for example Pausanias X.13.5, X.10.3. Neither of the chariots so described is a dedication after a victory in the chariot race. They are rather dedications of bronze chariot groups erected after military victories, and the subjects are legendary heroes rather than contemporary figures. Pausanias, in his description of Delphi, for the most part disdains to list all the athletic victors' statues, as he had done for Olympia.



1.2 Delphi Charioteer

associated, gives the name of a sculptor, Sotades.²⁰ The historical record of the time tells us of a certain Polyzalos who may plausibly be associated with this statue (Diodoros [Diodorus Siculus] XI.48.3–6, 8). He was one of the sons of Deinomenes who was, for a time, tyrant of Gela in Sicily. The inscriptions and the context allow us to say with some certainty what the sculpture was for: it was a monument intended both to commemorate Polyzalos' victory in the chariot race in the Pythian games and, simultaneously, to stand as a thank offering to the god Apollo. Since we know when Polyzalos and the sons of Deinomenes held power in Sicily, and since we know that the Pythian games were held every four

²⁰ For the inscriptions, see Chamoux 1955: 26–31 and 19 fig. 1. The inscription is, in fact, a bit more complicated than this. There seems to have been an erasure, and it is only the second inscription that mentions Polyzalos. An earlier inscription seems to mention Gela. See discussion by Jeffery 1990: 266, 275 no. 9 and plate 51. Like most inscriptions, it is far from complete, and there is no interpretation without some degree of restoration.

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years, the statue can be dated, with some precision, to just after 478, 474 or 470 BC.²¹ Soon after its discovery it was proclaimed a masterpiece of Greek art, a supreme example of the early Classical or Severe style in Greek sculpture. French archaeologists were particularly proud of their find. J. Charbonneaux exclaims, 'Before the Charioteer, one cannot but feel the presence of genius, asserting itself both in the overall conception and in the inventive multiplicity of detail' and goes on to encapsulate the essence of the work: 'Everything in the figure of the Charioteer simultaneously suggests immobility and movement, rhythm and symmetry, life and design.'²² British scholars have often (though not always) agreed with this estimation. At the end of a long description, Martin Robertson boldly states that the Charioteer has 'architectural strength and simplicity, but infused with life'.²³

As with the Nessos amphora, there is a distinct tendency for scholars to describe works in terms of abstract qualities which transcend that object's original function or purpose; as too with the Nessos amphora, there is an urge to search for a personality, the painter behind the pot and the sculptor behind the bronze.²⁴ Some commentators, who have a wider interest in cultural history, have been more ambitious. At least one has tried to relate the abstract principles they discern in this work to ideas current at the time of its creation. Here J.J. Pollitt attempts to discern the ethos (the 'character') within the Delphi Charioteer: 'Not only does it celebrate, like the Pythian odes [of Pindar], a victory won at the festival games, but the ethos which it conveys is a manifestation of Pindaric *arete* . . . the "innate excellence" of noble natures which gives them proficiency and pride in their human endeavors before the gods.' Pollitt goes on to describe the abstract qualities which both inhere in the work, and which sum up for him the spirit of the age: 'In the Charioteer we are confronted with a definable ethos which is neither aloof, as the High Classical period will often be, nor remote and neutral like the Archaic, but rather, like the early Classical era, simultaneously proud and vulnerable.'²⁵

This is not the place to dispute the interpretations, nor to question the judgement of these writers. Whether or not either of these objects is a work of art (and what we may understand by this term); whether they possess qualities which transcend the original purposes for which they were made and the contexts in which they were used; these are, strictly speaking, not archaeological questions at all, but questions of an art-historical or even philosophical kind. But Pollitt's remarks do raise other important issues, issues which archaeologists and

²¹ For a discussion of the sons of Deinomenes (the Deinomenidai) see Barrett 1973. For a recent attempt to place the Charioteer more firmly in its historical context (and a reconsideration of the date), see Rolley 1990. ²² Charbonneaux *et al.* 1972: 106.

²³ Robertson 1975: 189. Other English-speaking scholars have however been far less complimentary; see Stewart 1990: 149; Boardman 1985a: 52.

²⁴ For attempts to identify the sculptor of the Charioteer, see Chamoux 1955: 74–5; Robertson 1975: 189. Ridgway (1970: 34) however makes no real attempt at attribution, content to see the sculpture as a good example of the style (and spirit) of the age. ²⁵ Pollitt 1972: 48.

historians have to address. It has often been said that Classical Archaeology differs from prehistoric and other archaeologies because it is historical, and that the art and material culture of ancient Greece must be understood primarily in a literary context. In the case of the Nessos amphora, all that the literary context can provide is the means of recognising the myth depicted; it cannot, in and of itself, produce an interpretation of the images that are shown. With the Delphi Charioteer on the other hand, Pollitt's ambition to link the art with the literature of the period may seem more reasonable. For we can identify the dedicator, and so place the object in its historical context. Direct historical context is however not Pollitt's principal concern. His interest lies rather in the sense conveyed by two words – *ethos* and *arete*. *Ethos* is a term used in discussions of art in Greek literature from the fourth century onwards. There is no positive evidence that it was used in this way in the first quarter of the fifth. With *arete* Pollitt is on firmer ground. *Arete* is a word much used by the poets Pindar and Bacchylides, who were very much this sculpture's contemporaries. Pollitt's suggestion that chariot groups like the Delphi Charioteer were analogies, in bronze, to the epinician odes composed and sung to celebrate some famous athletic victory is an attractive one. Here art and literature do genuinely illuminate one another, and contribute to a broader cultural history. But this approach does have its limitations. Cultural history of this kind can be written from works such as this one which we can date with some precision, and whose context is of a kind described in our ancient sources (in this case Pausanias). But the vast majority of objects even from such a well-documented period as the fifth century do not have accompanying inscriptions that are quite so helpful; nor do they come from sites which are quite so well known; nor can their purpose be so easily compared to that of a literary genre. That species of cultural history that turns itself into an elevated conversation between high art and high literature is necessarily limited in scope. Cultural history of this kind must perforce restrict itself to a narrow range of well-known objects, a small canon of great works.

But it is exactly the description, discussion and reinterpretation of such objects which has, in the past, been the traditional subject of Classical Archaeology. Such an archaeology necessarily puts objects before contexts, and prefers personalities to technique. Such an archaeology has rarely, if ever, seen its task as being one of providing a worm's eye view of the 'banausic' (that is commonplace, or 'common') realities of Greek life. Historical or anthropological knowledge of a comparative kind has not been its primary objective. Rather the archaeology of ancient Greece, like Classical studies in general, has seen its role as one of celebration as much as of study. The numerous books cited above are, in a sense, so many epinician (victory) odes to the enduring appeal of Classical art, and to the values that art represents. The task of Classical Archaeology has been one of a custodian of traditional values, of what the European aristocratic societies of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries most prized in ancient Greece.