

GREEK VASE-PAINTING AND THE ORIGINS OF VISUAL HUMOUR

This book is a comprehensive study of visual humour in ancient Greece, with special emphasis on works created in Athens and Boeotia. Alexandre G. Mitchell brings an interdisciplinary approach to this topic, combining theories and methods of art history, archaeology, and classics with the anthropology of humour, and thereby establishing new ways of looking at art and visual humour in particular. Understanding what visual humour was to the ancients and how it functioned as a tool of social cohesion is only one facet of this study. Mitchell also focuses on the social truths that his study of humour unveils: democracy and freedom of expression; politics and religion; Greek vases and trends in fashion; market-driven production; proper and improper behaviour; popular versus elite culture; carnival in situ; and the place of women, foreigners, workers, and labourers within the Greek city. Richly illustrated with more than 140 drawings and photographs, as well as with analytical tables of comic representations according to different themes, painters, and techniques, this study amply documents the comic representations that formed an important part of ancient Greek visual language from the sixth through the fourth centuries BC.

A scholar of Greek art and archaeology, Dr. Alexandre G. Mitchell is an Honorary Research Associate at the Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford.

Greek Vase-painting and the Origins of Visual Humour



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À Lila, ma fille au doux sourire

Amis lecteurs, qui ce livre lisez,
Despouillez-vous de toute affection,
Et, le lisant, ne vous scandalisez:
Il ne contient mal ne infection.
Vray est qu'icy peu de perfection
Vous apprendrez, sinon en cas de rire,
Aultre argument ne peut mon cueur élire,
Voyant le dueil qui vous mine et consomme,
Mieux est de ris que de larmes escripre,
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

(Rabelais, frontispice to *Gargantua* 1534)

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Preface

What is a study of ancient visual humour? It is an archaeology of humour, a study of humorous artefacts, rather than verbal humour. My intention is to attempt to recover ancient Greek visual humour, and as far as possible, its social context. It is also an archaeology of knowledge: taken as a metaphor, it is the logical unlayering of strata of meaning and rubbish, of twists and turns in order to recover some social truths deformed by humour. In Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1982), a Benedictine monk is terrified by Aristotle's apology of humour in the second book of his *Poetics*. The book is now lost, and this is probably a good riddance. A few sentences on humour by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian have somehow formalised the way ancient humour is studied, and their influence is still palpable within each new theory on humour. Luckily, we have always had Aristophanes and many humorous passages in Greek literature to counter-balance these theoreticians. Visual humour offers yet another way to study ancient Greek humour and, by extension, ancient Greek society. By further extension, it may help us retrace some of our own categories of thought. The concluding chapter on humour as a means of social cohesion also deals with the issue of freedom of expression and with the special relationship between humour and democracy.

I first had the idea of studying visual humour in ancient Greece in 1995 for my master's degree at the University of Strasbourg under the supervision of Prof. Gérard Siebert.¹ I chose this subject because as a student of classics and archaeology I could not believe that, in the world populated by Aristophanes and his many followers, the visual arts did not express similar forms of humour. I could not believe that all was serious, well-balanced, aesthetically pleasing, and stony white in ancient Greek art. Hopefully, the reader will feel the same way after reading this book.

Apart from the methodological problems inherent to any study of humour – how to categorise humour when it plays with the very fabric of categories – a major challenge has been the difficulty in writing for a number of different readers. It is intended to be

¹ Mitchell, A. G. (1996) *L'Expression du Comique dans la Peinture de Vases Attique à Figures Rouges, de l'Époque des Pionniers à la Fin du Ve Siècle*, Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université des Sciences Humaines, Strasbourg. This was followed in 1997 by a longer version of the same work, *L'Expression du Comique dans la Peinture de Vases Attique du Vie Siècle à la Fin du Ve Siècle*, Mémoire de D.E.A. d'archéologie, Université des Sciences Humaines, Strasbourg.

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read by classical archaeologists and classicists in the first instance, but hopefully parts of this book will appeal to scholars from other disciplines, such as humour scholars, anthropologists, psychologists, and philologists. They will find a short glossary of technical words and Greek terms at the end of the book. All Greek is transcribed into Roman lettering. Similarly, mini-biographies of mythological heroes at various stages of the book are written with a mixed audience in mind. I have tried to keep them as short as possible, but may I remind my colleagues that not every scholar knows what Peleus was doing up a tree on Mount Pelion.²

Humour specialists must forgive me for the absence of a general theory of ancient visual humour. My focus was first on putting the corpus together among thousands of ‘serious’ pieces, second on analysing how the transgressions of visual codes functioned, and third on using visual humour, just like the tricked mirror of ancient stage comedy, to penetrate one step further into the ancient Greek psyche. For the sake of scholarship, one cannot afford to crack jokes in a study on humour: it would be an ontological mistake, but I have tried as far as possible to avoid writing a dour, heavy-handed book.

The core of Chapters 2 to 4, which cover the Athenian material evidence, is based on my Oxford doctoral dissertation (Mitchell 2002). I have published some passages from this section in an article on ancient Greek humour (Mitchell 2004). The second part of Chapter 5, on the Kabirion, is loosely based on my doctoral dissertation as well as on three papers.³

Most vases referred to in this book were chosen among a greater number that I have been cataloguing in an *Access* database for almost a decade. I publish here and refer to either comical ‘one-offs’ or comical ‘heads of series’, not entire series. To get a rough idea of the numbers of comic vases that can make up a series, plates 12 and 13 display my database figures for two series.

More than one hundred figures in this book are drawings, and many of these are my own, accurate, painstaking vectorised drawings, often much clearer than photographs. The historiography of drawing antiquities is well known,⁴ and vectorised drawing – drawing directly in digital form using a tablet and vectorised drawing software, where each line in the drawing is an individual trait that can be transformed at a later date – is the latest development of this drawing tradition. A first drawing is made freehand at museums, and photographs are taken. I later draw each vase within two to three days on the computer in a vectorised format using the software Adobe Illustrator. A typically modern advantage of these layered drawings in comparison to the beautiful and highly accurate drawings published by Karl Reichhold at the turn of the century is that my

² Rome, Villa Giulia, 24247. See also oinochoe, Attic BF white-ground, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 46.11.7; (BA 320454), *ABV* 434.3, *Add²* 111, *Para* 187; *ABFH*, fig. 230. From Italy, Etruria, Vulci; Painter of London B620; 550–530 BC. See further, Chapter 3, Section 1.

³ 28/03/2003: ‘Les Canthares du Cabirion Thébain: Déformations Corporelles, Caricature et Problèmes de Style’, University of Fribourg, Switzerland: *Symposium sur le Corps et ses Différences*. 21/02/2006: University of Sheffield, Centre for Bakhtinian research: ‘A Reconstruction of Greek Carnival at the Kabirion Sanctuary in Ancient Boeotia’. 21/03/2006: ‘The Archaeology of Humour: A Case Study’, Institute of Archaeology, University College London. *Complex and Literature Societies Seminar Series*.

⁴ For an introduction to the history and challenges of drawing ancient Greek vases in the modern age, see von Bothmer, ‘Beazley’s Berlin Painter’ in Kurtz 1983: 6–8.

PREFACE

drawings can be reprinted without any loss of quality and crispness, from the size of a book to the side of a building.

Vase references are found only once in the footnotes. When a vase is referred to more than once in the text, it can be found through the index of vases listed by museum at the end of the volume (where alternative inventory numbers are given between brackets and Roman numerals ix–xiv refer to the list of illustrations). I give the figure number in between brackets (fig. 1).

Example:

Neck-Amphora, Attic RF, Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, R302 (BA 213557), ARV² 1044.7; CVA, Belgium 2, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire 2, pl. 7.3, pl. 8.5. Epimedes Painter; 460–440 BC. Photograph, courtesy of the museum.

Vase entries work in the following way: pot shape, regional fabric and technique (RF = Red Figure, BF = Black Figure), city, collection, collection no; Beazley Archive reference (BA #),⁵ Beazley reference if any,⁶ a choice of previous publications of the vase; provenance of the vase when it is known; attribution to a painter (by signature, by Beazley or other scholars); approximate dates (usually based on stylistic evidence). Copyright details (if it is a museum photograph, I thank it as required; there are eighty-eight vectorised drawings and ten line drawings of my own and a number of personal photographs; when a drawing or photograph is scanned from a publication that is out-of-copyright, I write *scanned after*).

I refer to the Boeotian vases from the Kabirion Sanctuary (see Chapter 5) in the following way: KH 4.67.413 = KH 1.99K14, pl. 51.1–2. KH stands for *Das Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben*; 1 or 4 to the volume number; 67, 99 as the page number; 413, K14 as the respective catalogue numbers in these volumes; and then the plate number(s) and figure(s). See the list of abbreviations below.

An uninitiated reader will find sentences such as ‘on an Athenian cup in Berlin’ rather disconcerting. This is, however, the easiest way to refer to a cup that was produced in Athens but may have been found in a variety of archaeological contexts. The latter can be as disparate as Spain, the south of France, Italy, Sicily, Greece, Libya, Egypt, and further east than the region of the Black Sea. The vases are then bought and sold over and over from the seventeenth century until today. Nowadays, Greek vases are kept in collections as famous as the British Museum or the Louvre, or as exotic as Habana in Cuba or Christ Church in New Zealand. To sum up, the easiest way to refer to a vase is to refer to its last ‘resting place’.⁷

Thirteen tables found throughout the book display the body of comical scenes under various thematic arrangements: by painter, by technique, by hero, and so forth. The numbers and statistics found in the tables should be considered a rough estimate of the situation, not precise statistics.

⁵ BA stands for Beazley Archive Database, from the Beazley Archive in Oxford, which is the authority in terms of stylistic and other classification of Athenian vases.

⁶ See the abbreviation list for the Beazley references (*ABV*, *ARV²*, *Add*, *Para*, *Add²*) and other abbreviations such as *CVA* and *ABL*.

⁷ See index of vases cited in the text by museum. Further issues relating to the provenance and the chronology of the vases are discussed in Chapter 1.

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Abbreviations

I include a short list of abbreviations. The ancient sources are abbreviated in the text and follow the Liddel, Scott, Jones *Lexicon*, and the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Abbreviations of journals are those of the *Année Philologique*.

ABV	Beazley, J. D. (1956). <i>Attic Black-figure Vase-painters</i> . Oxford: OUP.
ABFH	Boardman, J. (1991). <i>Athenian Black Figure Vases Handbook</i> . London, Thames & Hudson.
ABL	Haspels, C. (1936). <i>Attic Black-figured Lekythoi</i> . Paris.
ARV ²	Beazley, J. D. (1963). <i>Attic Red-figure Vase-painters</i> , 2nd edn. Oxford: OUP.
Add	Burn, L. and Glynn, R. (1982). <i>Beazley Addenda</i> . Oxford: OUP.
Add ²	Carpenter, T. H., Mannack, T., and Mendonca, M. (1989). <i>Beazley Addenda</i> , 2nd edn. Oxford: OUP.
ARFH I	Boardman, J. (1987). <i>Athenian Red Figure Vases Handbook, The Archaic Period</i> . London: Thames & Hudson.
ARFH II	Boardman, J. (1989). <i>Athenian Red Figure Vases Handbook, The Classical Period</i> . London: Thames & Hudson.
(BA #)	Oxford, Beazley Archive (BA) Database number.
CVA	Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum
EGVP	Boardman, J. (1998). <i>Early Greek Vase Painting, 11th–6th Centuries B.C., A Handbook</i> . London: Thames & Hudson.
KH 1	Wolters, P. and Bruns, G. (1940). <i>Das Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben 1</i> . Berlin.
KH 2	Heyder, W. and Mallwitz, A. (1978). <i>Die Bauten im Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben</i> . Berlin.
KH 3	Heimberg, U. (1982). <i>Die Keramik des Kabirions</i> . Berlin.
KH 4	Braun, K. and Haevernick, T. E. (1981). <i>Bemalte Keramik und Glas aus den Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben</i> . Berlin.
KH 5	Schmaltz, B. (1980). <i>Terrakotten aus dem Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben</i> . Berlin.
KH 6	Schmaltz, B. (1980). <i>Metallfiguren aus dem Kabirenheiligtum bei Theben</i> . Berlin.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>LIMC</i>	Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, Munich, Zurich, Düsseldorf.
<i>OCD</i>	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i>
<i>Para</i>	Beazley, J. D. (1971). <i>Paralipomena; Additions to Attic Black-figure Vase-painters and to Attic Red-figure Vase-painters</i> . Oxford: OUP.
<i>RFVSI</i>	Trendall, A. D. (1989). <i>Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily. A Handbook</i> . London: Thames & Hudson.
<i>RVAp</i>	Cambitoglou, A. and Trendal, A. D. (1979, 1982). <i>The Red-figured Vases of Apulia</i> . Vols. 1–2. Oxford: OUP.
<i>RVP</i>	Trendall, A. D. (1987). <i>The Red-figured Vases of Paestum</i> . British School at Rome.