



# **Sprachen – Schriftkulturen – Identitäten der Antike**

## **Beiträge des XV. Internationalen Kongresses für Griechische und Lateinische Epigraphik**

Wien, 28. August bis 1. September 2017

### **Einzelvorträge**

Wiener Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte online (WBAGon) 1  
([wbagon.univie.ac.at](http://wbagon.univie.ac.at))

Herausgegeben von TYCHE – Verein zur Förderung der Alten Geschichte in Österreich

vertreten durch

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Wien 2019

This article should be cited as:

Sara Kaczko, *Greek Myths, South Italian Pottery and Vase-Inscriptions: Hellenic Culture and Local Identities in 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Magna Graecia*, in: F. Beutler, Th. Pantzer (ed.), *Sprachen – Schriftkulturen – Identitäten der Antike. Beiträge des XV. Internationalen Kongresses für Griechische und Lateinische Epigraphik*, Wien 28. August bis 1. September 2017: Einzelvorträge, Wiener Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte online (WBAGon) 1, Wien 2019 (DOI: 10.25365/wbagon-2019-1-13)



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SARA KACZKO

GREEK MYTHS, SOUTH ITALIAN POTTERY  
AND VASE-INSCRIPTIONS: HELLENIC CULTURE AND LOCAL  
IDENTITIES IN 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BCE MAGNA GRAECIA\*

The impressive number of red-figure vases (between 20.000 and 25.000)<sup>1</sup> is undoubtedly a very significant legacy of the extraordinary richness, cultural sophistication and diversity that characterized late-classical and 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE Magna Graecia (southern Italy and Sicily). This world was shaped by two main factors: the presence of affluent, dynamic, cultured (e.g. circulation of poets, philosophers, actors; theatrical representations; production of local plays etc.) Greek colonies (e.g. Tarentum, Metapontion, Syracuse, Thurii) and the contact with local populations (Messapians, Daunians, Peucetians, Oscans etc.), which often resulted in conflicts, but more often in reciprocal influence.<sup>2</sup> This *milieu* is well represented by red-figure vases: they reflect the tastes, conceptual world, habits, interests of the Greeks and, chiefly, of the Hellenized indigenous peoples. The red-figure vases were initially acquired from the mainland (Attica), but promptly became a wholly southern Italian product, being produced locally (Trendall 1967; 1978; 1982; 1987 identified five main fabrics: Apulian, Lucanian — the division between these two, however, is not always straightforward and there are often overlaps in distribution and provenance<sup>3</sup> — Paestan, Campanian, Sicilian); workshops yielding also finely crafted vessels depicting Greek myths / (perhaps tragedy-related subject) have been found in / producing for both Greek colonies such as Metapontion, Tarentum, and in internal areas, e.g. Pisticci, Gravina, Ruvo, Canosa, coherently with the fact that ca. 99% of the red-figure pottery was crafted for local consumption, i.e. for both Greeks and Hellenized Italic peoples (thousands of red-figure vessels have been found in burials of indigenous individuals); the shapes of the vases were mainly taken over from Attica (volute- and bell- krater, amphora; see however the indigenous *nestoris*), but then developed according to the local taste, as can be seen in e.g. in the increasing (often monumental) size and elaborate decoration. Red-figure pottery is a southern Italian product especially with regard to imagery and function: vases have been found mainly in *necropoleis*; they mostly feature funerary / burial scenes, scenes of ordinary life and, strikingly, of Greek myths, often possibly mediated through drama. Such Greek-influenced depictions were also adapted to the local context, as is evident from the selection of myths significant for a given area or situation (e.g. those of Herakles in Tarentum's colony Herakleia, of Dionysos in burials, of Theseus and of Orestes, in the latter case chiefly the scene portraying Orestes and Elektra at Agamemnon's tomb) and the iconography of the characters (e.g. young warriors wearing indigenous armor, clothing).<sup>4</sup> There has been much debate on the nature of the interplay among drama,<sup>5</sup> mythology and vase-painting, but it is universally agreed that it is evidence of a certain level of Hellenization of the local élites and that it is also relevant with regard to the level of reception and elaboration of the Greek models and elements by the

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\* This contribution was completed as part of the Hera JRP - Uses of the Past, 'Multilingualism and Minority Languages in Ancient Europe' (HERA 15.029 Cassio).

<sup>1</sup> See respectively, Trendall 1989, 7 and Todisco 2003, 100ff. (cf. Taplin 2007, w. n. 61).

<sup>2</sup> Poccetti 1989; La Rosa 1996; D'Agostino 1996; de Juliis 1996; Bottini 1996; Lombardo 1993; Id. 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Ciancio 1996, 395-396; Taplin 2007, 18 w. n. 71, and already Trendall himself in Id. 2003, 17-18; on Trendall's work and the different scholarly approaches to the subject see Lippolis 1996.

<sup>4</sup> The bibliography is extensive, see e.g. *RVSIS*; Pouzadoux 1999; Schmidt 1996; Mugione 1998; Ead. 2000; Carpenter 2003; Roscino 2006; Todisco 2009; Isler-Kerényi 2016; cf. also many important contributions in the volumes published by Denoyelle – Lippolis – Mazzei – Pouzadoux 2005; Todisco 2012; Carpenter 2014.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Séchan 1926; Trendall – Webster 1971; Kossatz Deissmann 1978; Aellen 1994; Giuliani 1995 and 1996 (on theatrical subjects see also Taplin 2003; Green 1991); Catucci 2003; Gadaleta 2003 and generally the volume edited by Todisco 2003; a useful survey in Taplin 2007, 22ff.

(local) patron, the potter, and the local audience and, on a more general level that is relevant to the kind the relationship between Greek and indigenous culture: it seems that at least the local élites were open to Greek elements and culture (and eager to show their “Greekness”) but at the same time keen to preserve their identity.

Notably, among the few hundred vases that depict Greek myths and are also deemed related to drama, a good number of those reads one or more Greek inscriptions. Generally speaking, inscriptions on red-figured southern Italian vases (on 236 of them, according to Roscino 2012) are usually brief; the majority are name labels of heroes or gods represented in mythological (dramatic) scenes, mostly inscribed close to the hero or god they identify with the label, though some occur on small pillars; there are also a few *kalos*- (and, in an interesting innovation, *kale*-inscriptions); potters’ signatures, unlike the situation with black-figure and red-figure Attic vases, are very rare (basically those from Assteas’ workshop)<sup>6</sup>.

These inscriptions are usually mentioned only with regard to the information they offer in identifying the characters, hence the myth and / or play depicted / alluded to on the vases, aside from some interesting observations found in Moret 1979, Schmidt 2003; Ead. 2005, in the abovementioned Roscino 2012, and in Taplin 2007 (see below). They have neither been discussed extensively nor collected in a *corpus* and have received little scholarly attention on a general level and especially with regard to their palaeographical and linguistic shape: a telling exception is a chapter in Kretschmer’s monograph, *Griechischen Vasenschriften*, dating to 1894, when a large number of red-figure vases was still to be unearthed. Only recently, Taplin 2007, 42-43 and *passim* (cf. some observations by Green, in passing) put forward the hypothesis that the (Ionic-)Attic linguistic / dialectal shape of the name label inscriptions on several vases (on a quarter of those he deems related to tragedy) depended rather than on the local dialects of the Greek colonies in Magna Graecia, mainly Doric (see Tarentum) or Achaean, on the source, i.e. tragedy, and that, as a consequence, the Attic dialect may have steered the viewers toward an association with tragedy while, on the contrary, Doric may have steered them away from relating the vase to drama.

It must be noted, however, that inscriptions on red-figure southern Italian vases are interesting in various respects: they were an exceptional feature, occurring on a very small percentage of vases of each fabric (and notably those from a few workshops, e.g., those of the Darius Painter, the Assteas Painter, the Brooklyn Budapest painter)<sup>7</sup> and, more significantly, on elaborated vases, the majority of them with mythological (perhaps drama-related) subjects, often also with funerary connotations; they “add” something to the scene depicted on the vase, for example in terms of decoration and visual image; they perhaps add value, i.e. another Greek element or “signal”, and a supplementary message, to the vase, since writing was neither a necessary nor an easy task, especially considering that the majority of vessels were crafted for local consumption, which means for Greek or Hellenized patrons, but often in an indigenous context; they provide information about the relation of the patron and artisan in the selection of subjects / inscriptions, about the literacy of the areas involved and therefore the complex relation between Greeks and non-Greeks etc.

Therefore, in my opinion, these inscriptions should be collected in a *corpus*, commented upon, and analyzed as for their layout, *mise en page*, palaeographical and linguistic shape<sup>8</sup>. This kind of study would enable us to address many relevant questions, such as, e.g., the role of inscriptions as part of the visual image / as a visual signal of the painted scene (as partially done by Moret 1979), which would be also useful for the understanding of every single piece; Taplin’s hypothesis that (Ionic-)Attic and Doric inscription are respectively a factor pro and against considering a mythological-subject vase related to tragedy and more generally the reason for the selection of a certain linguistic shape for the inscription: to my mind, the situation is complex and it should be addressed by considering various factors, including fabric, workshop, provenance, potential audience (starting with the patron) for the red-figure vases, “linguistic” / ethnic connotation of a hero or of a myth, reason for selecting a myth or a “literary” variant

<sup>6</sup> Taplin 2007; Roscino 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Roscino 2012; Schmidt 1960 (on the Darius Painter see also Aellen – Cambitoglou – Chamay 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Such as the monographs by Immerwahr 1990 and Wachter 2001.

in a certain area etc.; finally, the palaeographical analysis of the vases could add relevant information to the variants of the Greek alphabets used in southern Italy, which, so far, have been discussed and analyzed mainly (or often only) regarding inscriptions on stone (the comparison between letters inscribed on stone and on vases will be important, as well).

In sum, these questions deserve to be dealt with in-depth in the future and I hope that such a *corpus* and project – which I intend to carry out – will yield a better understanding of the complex relations between Greeks and non-Greeks in multilingual and multicultural Magna Graecia.

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