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Athenian Use of Black-figure Lekythoi in Fifth-century Burials

Fifth-century burials in Athens are generally not especially ostentatious. Funerary sculpture – the kouroi and carved stelae often associated with Archaic burials – disappears after 480 and production of carved grave markers begins again in Athens only in the 430s¹. From the late sixth century through most of the fifth century, Athenian grave goods are also less elaborate and presumably less expensive than in the preceding and subsequent periods. Metal objects are rare and jewellery is almost completely absent from burials in Athens. Most grave goods are pottery, and the most common type of vase found in Athenian burials until the 430s – even wealthy or otherwise elaborate burials – is the black-figure lekythos. Furthermore, nearly all lekythoi found in Athenian burials of first half of fifth century are of the same hastily-painted type.

The vase shown in figures 1 and 2 is a prime example. This lekythos of the Haimon Group very sketchily depicts Athena in the Gigantomachy. Many features of the figures are not well articulated. The painter did not incise any details of the giant's face, and his limbs and the legs of the flanking horses fade away into thin twigs at their ends. The painter has liberally used added white for the women's skin, as is typical in black-figure. However, he did not paint the white slip over a layer of black, as was the usual technique. The result is that Athena's extended left hand fades away into the background, as does much of the body of the mounted Amazon at left. This vase is characteristic of black-figure lekythoi produced through the fifth century. Images on black-figure lekythoi become more generic and repetitive, to the point that specific myths can rarely be recognized, and individual figures are often not clearly identifiable.

Though vases like this one have been assumed to be cheap, second-rate products², they are found in historically and culturally significant burials like the Marathon tumulus (where this vase was found) and other well-furnished burials, as well as more humble graves where the only grave good may be a single black-figure lekythos. Lekythoi were also made by the 'better' painters of later black-figure, like the Sappho Painter and the Athena Painter, but their lekythoi are very rarely found in Attic burials.

Tall lekythoi with skillfully-painted funerary scenes in coloured slips on white-ground are often imagined as the funerary offering par excellence of Classical Athens. There is an increase in production of white-ground polychrome lekythoi after 480 B.C., and funerary iconography appears on these vases around the same time, so it is often assumed they became popular funerary offerings in Athens after the Persian wars. A common narrative, for lekythoi and all other Attic vase-painting, is that black-figure is phased out after 480 and replaced by other techniques – most often red-figure but in the case of lekythoi white-ground with outline and polychrome painting. These vases

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I wish to thank Dr. Jutta Stroszeck for allowing me to examine numerous objects from the Kerameikos, Professors Alan Shapiro and Kathleen Lynch for their valuable suggestions and support, and the reviewers of *Archäologischer Anzeiger*.

¹ Stears 2000, 26 f. 39–41.

² e. g., by Kurtz (1975, 79) and Boardman (1974, 146), among others.

are thus used as evidence for Athenian funerary practices and to understand conceptions of death and the afterlife in Classical Athens³.

In 1976, Florens Felten noted the scarcity of white-ground lekythoi from burials in the Athenian Kerameikos of the first half of the fifth century, and Kristine Gex has recently shown that it still holds true today that large, standard lekythoi with outline and polychrome decoration on white-ground are all but absent from Athenian burials before the 430s⁴. Gex goes on to point out that most Attic white-ground lekythoi dated to the first half of the fifth century do not have a provenance connecting them to Athens or Attica, but come predominantly from Eretria and Sicily, especially Gela. Before they find greater use in Athens in the second half of the century, white-ground lekythoi are clearly products made for export⁵.

An examination of published burials shows that black-figure lekythoi, usually with hastily-painted decoration, are by far the most common type of vase in Athenian burials throughout the fifth century. This is especially the case in the first half of the century, but even after use of polychrome white-ground lekythoi increases in Athens in the 430s, they are never as common or popular as black-figure examples had been and never see as widespread use in Attic burials. Black-figure lekythoi, in particular ones painted with non-figural designs, continue to be placed in Athenian graves into the last quarter of the fifth century, often alongside supposedly finer white-ground lekythoi. Late black-figure lekythoi play a significant role in Athenian burial customs of the fifth century and deserve greater attention.

This article seeks to re-evaluate the use and significance of funerary lekythoi in fifth-century Athens by considering in the first instance vases found in Athenian burial contexts – rather than beginning with the iconography of vases assumed to have come from Athenian burials – with the hope of gaining a new understanding of how Athenians of the Classical period viewed and valued vases of varied painting techniques and style. From this evidence, there is no indication that hastily-painted late black-figure vases were considered inferior to more finely-painted red-figure or polychrome vases. It is then posited that the black-figure technique itself carried particular meaning for the users of these vases, connecting the objects, the rituals in which they were used, and the individuals using them to long-standing Athenian traditions. The black-figure technique was a symbol of the Athenian origin of the vases and the history they embodied.

As noted above, Athenian lekythoi were decorated in a variety of techniques in the fifth century. The terms ›white-ground lekythoi‹ and ›funerary lekythoi‹ are often used to refer specifically to large, standard lekythoi with outline and polychrome decoration on white-ground, but the labels ›white-ground‹ and ›funerary‹ cannot be applied exclusively to this type of lekythos. Black-figure decoration is often painted on lekythoi with white-ground, and lekythoi of various techniques are found Attic burials. Felten talks about ›weißgrundige Lekythen‹ but given his examples, he clearly means white-ground lekythoi with polychrome decoration and not black-figure. Gex focuses on ›funerary lekythoi‹, but again is concerned primarily with white-ground polychrome lekythoi, specifically in funerary contexts. Below, I will refer to vases with outline and polychrome decoration on white-ground as simply ›white-ground‹, and vases with black-figure decoration on red- or white-ground as ›black-figure‹.

In addition to hastily-painted figural scenes, a large number of Attic lekythoi of the late sixth and fifth centuries are decorated in the black-figure technique with non-figural designs. Typical designs include large palmettes,

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Fig. 1 Marathon, Attic black-figure lekythos. Marathon, Archaeological Museum inv. 1024 (MMK750)

3 Oakley 2004, 6–8; Schmidt 2005, 32–38; Giudice 2015, 261–266; Walter-Karydi 2015, 139–163.

4 Felten 1976, 77; Gex 2014, 324 f. The ›standard‹ lekythos is one of Beazley's two main classes of lekythos, the other being the ›secondary‹ type. Standard lekythoi are generally ›larger and more careful‹, while secondary lekythoi are ›often rather nondescript in shape‹ (ABV 675). See also Kurtz 1975, 77–87.

5 Gex 2014, 325 f.

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Fig. 2 Detail of figure 1, Attic black-figure lekythos. Marathon, Archaeological Museum inv. 1024 (MMK750)

6 Haspels 1936, 170. 180–182; Kurtz 1975, 152–155. On ornament lekythoi, see Blegen et al. 1964, 164 f.; Knigge 1976, 37.

7 Kurtz 1975, 153. For late examples from Athenian burials see Willemsen et al. 1966, 37 no. 70, 1. 2 pl. 77, 2 (dated 440/30); Charitonides 1958, 75 no. 67, 10 fig. 131 (dated 420–400); 37 no. 36 a, 1. 2 fig. 65 pl. 17 β (425–410); 50 no. 47, 4 pl. 17 β (420–400); 108 no. 94, 1 pl. 17 α.

8 Kurtz 1975, 131.

9 These counts come from the burials with cataloged grave goods in Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964; Willemsen et al. 1966; Freytag 1976; Knigge 1975, 1976, 1980; and Kunze-Götte et al. 1999. For more on excavations of the Kerameikos cemetery, see Brückner – Pernice 1893; Vierneisel 1963, 1964a, 1964b; Kübler 1973 (especially pp. 2 f. for bibliography for more Kerameikos burials without their grave goods catalogued in detail). Many published burials cannot be dated by contents or stratigraphy, so there are certainly fifth-century burials that have not been included. These counts include only shoulder lekythoi and exclude squat lekythoi in all techniques. A sizeable number of black-gloss and red-figure squat lekythoi are found in fifth-century burials but represent a different branch of the ceramic and iconographic tradition (Schmidt 2005, 31 f.).

ivy, and cross-hatching, often on white-ground but sometimes on red-ground as well. These ornament lekythoi are not often included in discussions of black-figure pottery, whether in funerary contexts or elsewhere. They are likewise excluded from studies of plain black-gloss pottery. As a whole, ornament lekythoi are an understudied and under-appreciated corpus of material. Since the painting of late black-figure lekythoi is generally hasty and the iconography not directly related to the function of the vase, it seems fair to group these vases with abstract decoration along with vases with figural decoration.

Ornament lekythoi are contemporary with figured lekythoi and are produced in the same workshops⁶. The Haimon workshop produced ornament lekythoi into the final quarter of the fifth century⁷. There are also small, red-figure squat lekythoi decorated with simple palmettes, and these are sometimes found in Athenian graves in the second half of the fifth century. Though they served the same function of black-figure funerary lekythoi, they are not a direct evolution from them either in shape or decoration. Ornament lekythoi would certainly have a broader appeal and a less restricted market than lekythoi with specialized iconography, and this is clearly seen in their broad distribution⁸. The abstract patterns of ornament lekythoi could represent their Athenian origins and their place in pottery traditions just as well as generic mythological scenes could.

Six hundred and ninety-two fifth-century burials published from the Kerameikos cemetery contained 611 black-figure lekythoi, or 1,058 if ornament lekythoi are included. Other types of lekythoi are found in far fewer numbers in these burials. They contained 95 white-ground lekythoi, 34 red-figure lekythoi, and 118 black-gloss lekythoi. These vases are not evenly distributed among the burials. Of the 692 burials, 246 contained at least one black-figure lekythos (or 378 including ornament lekythoi), 49 contained a white-ground lekythos, 19 contained a red-figure lekythos, and 92 contained a black-gloss lekythos (see Table)⁹. Too much credence should not be given to these numbers, since many burials contained no objects and are not datable by stratigraphy, so the proportion of fifth-century burials containing lekythoi is actually smaller than these numbers suggest.

It is clear that black-figure lekythoi are most common in the first quarter of the fifth century and gradually decrease in numbers until they are all but

		500–475	475–450	450–425	425–400	Total
	# of burials	202	270	157	63	692
Black-figure (figured)	Total Lekythoi	349	256	6	0	611
	avg. / burial	1.73	0.95	0.04	0.00	0.88
	# burials w/ ≥ 1	122	118	6	0	246
	% burials w/ ≥ 1	60.40 %	43.70 %	3.82 %	0.00 %	35.55 %
Black-figure (all)	Total Lekythoi	464	481	110	3	1058
	avg. / burial	2.30	1.78	0.70	0.05	1.53
	# burials w/ ≥ 1	146	171	58	3	378
	% burials w/ ≥ 1	72.28 %	63.33 %	36.94 %	4.76 %	54.62 %
Black-gloss	Total Lekythoi	25	70	21	2	118
	avg. / burial	0.12	0.26	0.13	0.03	0.17
	# burials w/ ≥ 1	21	52	14	5	92
	% burials w/ ≥ 1	10.40 %	19.26 %	8.92 %	7.94 %	13.29 %
Red-figure	Total Lekythoi	2	15	11	6	34
	avg. / burial	0.01	0.06	0.07	0.10	0.05
	# burials w/ ≥ 1	2	6	9	2	19
	% burials w/ ≥ 1	0.99 %	2.22 %	5.73 %	3.17 %	2.75 %
White-ground	Total Lekythoi	0	16	53	26	95
	avg. / burial	0.00	0.06	0.34	0.41	0.14
	# burials w/ ≥ 1	0	15	21	13	49
	% burials w/ ≥ 1	0.00 %	5.56 %	13.38 %	20.63 %	7.08 %
	Total Lekythoi	491	582	195	37	1305
	avg. / burial	2.43	2.16	1.24	0.59	1.89

absent by the last quarter of the century. White-ground outline and polychrome lekythoi are fairly uncommon until the third quarter of the century, but even then black-figure ornament lekythoi are still more numerous and are found in more burials. The number of burials dated to the fourth quarter of the century is rather low, but by then the use of white-ground lekythoi appears to increase while all other types decrease.

Other Athenian cemeteries provide a similar picture. The area of Syntagma Square in the centre of modern Athens was part of the larger Diocharian Gate cemetery in use around 750–300¹⁰. In the 117 burials excavated dating 425–390, one black-figure lekythos was found, along with 15 black-figure ornament lekythoi, 46 white-ground lekythoi, and 5 red-figure lekythoi. A cemetery at Lagonisi is not fully published but the excavators have described a selection they state to be representative of burials at the site in the fifth century B.C. No white-ground lekythoi were found in fifth-century burials at the site so far published¹¹.

Tab. Distribution of lekythoi in Kerameikos burials by date and technique

¹⁰ Charitonides 1958; Morris 1992, 111–118. Morris shows that the distribution of white-ground lekythoi between inhumations and cremations differs between the two cemeteries, but there does not seem to be a significant difference in the overall distribution across burial methods. Most of the grave goods published by Charitonides are only described and not illustrated. Unfortunately, the burials have never been more thoroughly published and the grave goods are not available for examination.

¹¹ Grigoropoulos – Lyrantzis 2006, 129.

A body of material so large seems to beg for some statistical analysis to make it digestible. Gex eschews any such analysis in her discussion of funerary lekythoi »[t]o avoid any false impression of precision«¹². The numbers offered here are meant to be neither comprehensive nor exact, but rather to give an idea of the size of the corpus of material and a brief overview of its distribution. The counts alone give a good impression of the popularity of the shape and technique, so it can be left at that and no further conclusions need be drawn from the numbers alone. A closer look at individual burials can give a more specific picture of the vases and how they were used.

The Marathon tumulus sits at the cusp of the shift away from ostentatious burials in the fifth century. The tumulus was conceived and constructed as a self-consciously monumental burial for the 192 Athenian dead from the Battle of Marathon in September 490¹³. Standing today about 9 meters high and 185 meters in circumference, the tumulus makes for an impressive monument. The mound was originally even taller, around 12 meters, and wider as well, the rising of the ground level around it since the late Archaic period slightly decreasing its impact¹⁴. The deposition of the warriors' cremated remains in a built mound recalls burials of epic heroes as well as aristocratic burials in Attica from the seventh century. According to Thucydides (2, 34, 5), the burial of the Athenian hoplites who died fighting the Persian invasion at Marathon was a singular and extraordinary honour¹⁵. By its monumental and heroic form, the tumulus is imbued with a great sense of importance that is not lost even today.

The dead were cremated on the battlefield, grave goods were deposited in an offering trench, and then the whole collection was covered over with a huge earthen mound. Among the offerings were a black-figure hydria attributed to the Nikoxenos Painter dating to around 500¹⁶, a fragmentary red-figure kylix attributed to Onesimos¹⁷, and an amphora attributed to Sophilos that was already nearly a century old when it was deposited in the burial¹⁸. While the Marathon tumulus is exceptional in nearly every respect, the grave goods selected to accompany the dead are not all so special and noteworthy. Among the cremated remains were found twenty-eight black-figure lekythoi contemporary with the burial¹⁹. Since the deposit is securely dated, these lekythoi are an important chronological marker for stylistic developments in Attic vase-painting²⁰. Of these lekythoi, those that are attributed to particular hands are all either by the Haimon Painter and his workshop or by the Marathon Painter, who takes his name from the site. These vases are hastily painted and

12 Gex 2014, 325.

13 See Herodotos 6, 117, 1 and Pausanias 1, 29, 4; 1, 32, 3–5. For modern studies of the Marathon Tumulus, see Staïs 1890, 1891, 1893; Haspels 1936, 92; Androutopoulos 1949; Pritchett 1960, 140–142; Hammond 1968, 15 f.; Clairmont 1983, 95–97; Shear 1993, 406–408; Petrakos 1996, 18–24; Goette – Weber 2004, 78–82; Valavanis 2010.

14 Hammond 1968, 15.

15 Whitley 1994, 215–217. The Marathon tumulus is not, in fact, the only or first time Athenian casualties were buried in a communal grave at the battle site. A polyandrion was built in 506 for

those Athenians who died in the victory over the Boeotians and Chalkidians near the Euripos River on Euboea, as well as for the Athenians who fought against the Pelasgians on Lemnos in the 490s (Shapiro 1991, 644).

16 Marathon, Archaeological Museum inv. K762a; ABV 393.18; CVA Greece 7, Marathon Museum pls. 1–3.

17 Marathon, Archaeological Museum inv. 848; BAPD 14270; CVA Athens, National Museum 1 pl. 13.

18 Athens, National Museum inv. 1036; ABV 38.2; Steinhauer 2009, 132 f. Mingazzini (1975, 101 f.) and Mersch (1995, 58 f.) suggest that the tumulus had

been used for burials long before 490 and the Sophilos vase belongs to an earlier grave in the plot. Pfuhl (1923, 28) and Haspels (1936, 92) believe the vase was the product of a conservative north Attic workshop. Beazley (ABV 38.2) and Bakır (1981, 25, 67.A12) attribute the vase to Sophilos without question. Bakır (1981, 25) places the vase in the painter's middle phase: 590–580.

19 Staïs 1893. For the vases from the tumulus, see Rhomaios – Pappaspyridi 1932, 6–8 pls. 10–14; Valavanis 2001, pls. 1–3. 17; and Steinhauer 2009, 124–138.

20 See especially Langlotz 1968, 38–48.

have been described as »generally flimsy and carelessly executed«²¹. Haspels asserts that »the Marathon painter does not care for anatomy«²². They are generally dismissed as mediocre²³.

Typical of the lot is the lekythos showing Athena in the Gigantomachy described above (figs. 1. 2). An early chimney lekythos also found in the tumulus (fig. 3), which Haspels calls »shockingly bad«²⁴, is painted so hastily that the scene is virtually unintelligible. It appears to show a woman kneeling and an animal at left. The presence of these vases in such a significant burial is explained away, suggesting that mourners must have bought up whatever was available and closest at hand on short notice²⁵.

Compared to finely-painted heirloom vases or a cup by a great painter like Onesimos, the lekythoi seem less exciting and less significant. They are, in fact, standard funerary offerings of the time and were the most common choice for fifth-century burials in Attica, no matter how significant or impressive the grave was meant to be. The place of black-figure lekythoi was so ingrained in Attic funerary practice that, even if they might be supplemented by more impressive or valuable objects when such items were available to those performing the funerary rites, they could not be replaced. The shape of the vases used as grave offerings may have been dictated by functionality – by what the ritual required – but decoration does not affect functionality. There were practical necessities for the funeral ritual which required the oil carried in lekythoi, but other forces – either traditions or trends – called for the use of a particular shape of vase decorated in a particular manner.

Monumental tumuli were also employed for several burials in the Athenian Kerameikos during the sixth century, and in the fifth century some Athenians clearly still wanted to associate themselves with these older, prominent burials. The Kerameikos was likely an exclusive cemetery in much of the sixth century, with use restricted to certain elite groups. The situation changes at the beginning of the fifth century, when the number of burials generally increases and the number of child burials especially surges²⁶. Compared to other fifth-century graves from Athens and Attica, burials in the Kerameikos are not out of the ordinary with respect to their grave goods²⁷.

Child burials tend to have the same sort of grave goods as adult burials of the period. One child burial dated to 490/80 (SW 69) included three black-figure lekythoi (fig. 4)²⁸. The iconography is typical of Attic vase-painting generally and does not highlight themes related to childhood or death. One vase shows a couple on a *klinē* flanked by standing figures with vines in the background. The painter has not incised facial features for either figure and has given only cursory treatment of their drapery. This minimal incision is a hallmark of the hastiest black-figure. The left figure is marked as female with added white slip, perhaps intended to represent Ariadne reclining next to Dionysos, placing the scene in the mythological sphere. Two likewise hastily-rendered, dancing figures flank the couple. This vase is attributed to the Class of Athens 581ii, Haimonian.

The other two lekythoi from this burial are of a similar shape, but smaller. The smallest vase, attributed to the Haimon Group, shows Herakles wrestling the Nemean lion flanked by seated figures, with the hero's gear hung among vines in the background. Herakles and the lion are neatly rendered, but the seated figures again lack any incised details to indicate their facial features. The third vase in the group shows a chariot race with the turning post in the background. The moment is just before the chariot clears the post and makes the turn, so there is none of the dynamism of the car and horses wheeling around as is often found on larger black-figure vases. Like the other vases from this

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Fig. 3 Marathon, Attic black-figure lekythos. Marathon, Archaeological Museum inv. 1033 (MMK758)

21 Boardman 1974, 148.

22 Haspels 1936, 90.

23 Rhomaios – Papaspyridi 1932, 6–8.

24 Haspels 1936, 166.

25 Haspels (1936, 77) imagines the Marathon Painter's »workshop was nearest at hand, or easiest to reach, when lekythoi were needed in a hurry for the funeral pile after the battle of Marathon.«

26 Morris 1987, 99–109.

27 Gex 2014, 323.

28 Kerameikos SW 69: Knigge 1976, 101 pls. 8, 2; 25, 5.



Fig. 4 Athens, Kerameikos. Vases from burial SW 69

burial, the scene has minimal incised detail. All three vases are of a similar shape and craftsmanship, with similarly hasty painting. These vases are remarkable with regard to neither their iconography nor their style and are representative of child burials (and really all burials) of the period.

Some fifth-century burials go against the general trend of austerity in form, but their grave goods include the same, hastily-painted lekythoi as other graves. Several fifth-century graves were cut into an earlier burial mound in the Kerameikos (Mound G) set up in the second quarter of the sixth century, and two smaller mounds (M and K) were later built up on its edge. Mound G has been interpreted as the grave of Solon²⁹ or a family plot belonging to the Alkmaionidai³⁰. The earliest figural funerary relief from Athens was found in this mound, probably associated with its initial burial³¹. Whomever the first grave in the mound belonged to, others sought to associate their burials with the mound and its prominence, either from its historical significance or purely by its physical size and location³².

Around 490 a shaft grave was cut into Mound K and Mound L was built on top of it. Slightly later a cremation burial was dug into Mound L. The grave goods of the two burials (35 HTR 49 II and 35 HTR 48 II) are comingled³³. The burials contained five nearly-complete black-figure lekythoi

²⁹ Kübler 1973. See Stupperich (1977, 85 n. 1) and Houby-Nielsen (1995, 156–158) for an argument against this identification.

³⁰ Knigge 1991, 109 f. See Houby-Nielsen (1995, 159) for argument against.

³¹ Kübler 1976, 11–15. Kerameikos Museum inv. P1132 (Knigge 1991, 27 fig. 24) is the earliest figural grave stele from Athens, but earlier funerary kouroi are known.

³² Morris 1992, 133–135.

³³ Kerameikos 35 HTR 49 II and 35 HTR 48 II: Kübler 1976, 73 f.; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 69 f. Since one burial was later dug into the other, it is unclear which objects goes with which burial, but all the grave goods are dated 500–490.



5 a



5 b



6

(fig. 5) contemporary with the deposit and comparable to those found in the Marathon tumulus. One lekythos from the grave of the Class of Athens 581 shows a scene of a maenad riding a bull (fig. 6). The vase is painted in a manner much like the vase from the Marathon tumulus described above (fig. 1). The details of the maenad's face are not incised, and her drapery is indicated with a few thick incised lines. In addition to the pottery, the graves contained an alabaster alabastron and fragments of a bronze mirror³⁴. Lekythoi were offered to both men and women in equal frequency, so while as grave goods they do not indicate the gender or status of the deceased, other objects like mirrors and strigils may

Athens, Kerameikos

Fig. 5 a. b Vases from burials 35 HTR 49 II and 35 HTR 48 II

Fig. 6 Attic black-figure lekythos from burial 35 HTR 49 II, detail

³⁴ Kübler (1976, 73 f.), in describing the graves, notes that 35 HTR 49 II contained one lekythos and one »Bronze-knopf,« and 35 HTR 48 II contained two lekythoi and a bronze mirror with case. Kunze-Götte et al. (1999, 69 f.), cataloging the grave goods for both graves, list five lekythoi, a fragment of

another black-figure vase (probably an olpe), a black-gloss mug, a black-gloss one-handler, an alabaster alabastron, a bronze lid, bronze disc, fragment of a bronze mirror, and another bronze fragment. It is unclear whether the grave goods were not fully reported in the initial publication or were later confused

with material from other burials. Three of the lekythoi, the mug, one-handler, alabastron, and possibly the mirror fragment are burnt, though Kübler (1976, 74) suggests that none of the grave goods belong to 35 HTR 48 II (the cremation).



Fig. 7 Athens, Kerameikos. Vases from burial 35 HTR 47 II

have been preferred for deceased of one gender and may have also served as an opportunity for display by offering objects beyond the ritual requirements³⁵.

A few other fifth-century burials went against the trend of restraint and included new and conspicuous mounds or structures³⁶. In the 460s, a shaft grave (35 HTR 47 II) was cut into an earlier mound (Mound M) and an earthen structure was built above it³⁷. The grave goods from this burial do not differ dramatically from the earlier burials associated with Mound L above. The grave contained seven lekythoi: four in black-figure, two in black-gloss, and one in red-figure (fig. 7), as well as a small iron box. These lekythoi are not among the hastiest of black-figure, but most of the figured

³⁵ Houby-Nielsen 1995, 166–172; Bodiou – Mehl 2008, 170 f.; Heinemann 2009, 162 f.

³⁶ Morris (1992, 132 f. n. 5) mentions in passing some other fifth-century burials that are especially monumental for the period. Peiraios St, tumulus A (Brückner – Pernice 1893, 86–100) was initiated at the beginning of the fifth century. Grave 3 contained six black-figure lekythoi. They are not illustrated,

but are described as »sehr flüchtiger ... auf einer war ein Gespann dargestellt, davor eine Frau sitzend, auf einer anderen sechs Männer, bis auf einen, der in ihrer Mitte saß, im Mantel bei einander stehend, nur eine Lekythos mit feinem gelben Überzug schien sorgfältiger Art zu sein« (Brückner – Pernice 1893, 88). Another is a burial mound initiated in the fifth century, though Boulter (1963, 115) says »[t]he graves are undistinguished

structurally, and, except for those of the fifth century, the contents are also modest. Even the fifth-century graves could not be described as rich, but they do reflect the character of an age when the simplest furnishings possess interest and taste.« See also Grace 1968, 44–48. ³⁷ Kerameikos 35 HTR 47 II (256): Kübler 1976, 77–79; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 71 f. The first burial in Mound M contained no grave goods, but the matrix

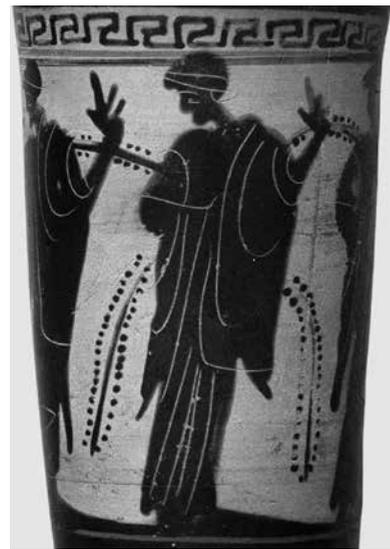
pottery in the burial is black-figure and the finely-painted red-figure vase is the exception.

One of the black-figure vases, attributed to the Beldam Painter (fig. 8), and the red-figure vase, attributed to the Aischines Painter (fig. 9), both show scenes of women in the household, and their differences in style are a telling contrast of late black-figure and contemporary red-figure. On the Beldam Painter's vase, three women move to the right while looking back to the left and gesturing with the left hands. The red-figure vase shows two women flanking a chest and one holding out a garland to the other. The Beldam Painter's women each hold up an awkward hand with fingers thick and out of proportion. Their clothing is rendered in a few loose incisions with limited relation to actual garments. The Aischines Painter's women, on the other hand, have more carefully and believably rendered limbs and drapery. If the purchasers of these vases selected them for their somewhat related iconography, the differences in painting styles were clearly not a problem.

The red-figure vase is an uncommon find in this period. Most often, any vessels other than black-figure lekythoi found in burials in the fifth century in Attica are decorated in plain black-gloss. An amphora burial dated 470/60 (SW 130) contained two black-figure lekythoi and an olpe, skyphos, and pyxis in black gloss (fig. 10)³⁸. The lekythoi are both chimney type and comparable in style to those discussed above and their iconography is likewise generic. One shows Herakles fighting an Amazon and the other a chariot scene. The other vase shapes are relatively common in burials around the Greek world. They were likely not offerings in themselves, but implements used in performance of funeral rites³⁹.

Though it is certainly ill-advised to regard grave goods as »a simple index of wealth«⁴⁰, it is difficult not to see some distinction between a grave containing one or two lekythoi and another containing ten or more. Sixteen Kerameikos burials from the fifth century contained ten or more black-figure lekythoi. This represents 4 % of Kerameikos graves dated to the fifth century that contain at least one black-figure lekythos (378 total) or 2.3 % of all Kerameikos graves dated to the fifth century (692 total). These totals do not include burials that cannot be dated by stratigraphy or grave goods, so the actual percentages should be lower⁴¹ (cf. table.)

One such burial with a large quantity of vases (S 12) dates to around 460 and contains one of the earliest white-ground polychrome lekythoi found in the Kerameikos, as well as twelve black-figure ornament lekythoi, a red-figure lekythos, two small alabaster alabastro, an iron strigil, and a bronze mirror (fig. 11)⁴². Though the burial is a simple shaft grave with no surviving marker, it is easily one of the best furnished burials of the period in Athens. Those performing the funerary rituals may have sought out a variety of materials for dedications, accounting for the choice of metal and stone objects as well as the red-figure and white-ground vases. The red-figure lekythos is attributed to the Aischines Painter and the white-ground vase recalls his style⁴³. The red-figure vase shows a woman standing before a kalathos, holding an alabastron. The white-ground vase shows a similar figure standing in front of a stool, holding



8



9

Athens, Kerameikos

Fig. 8 Attic black-figure lekythos, Kerameikos Museum inv. 1461. Detail

Fig. 9 Attic red-figure lekythos, Kerameikos Museum inv. 995. Detail

of the mound contained two sherds »einer strengrotfigurigen Lekythos«, now lost.

See Kübler 1976, 76 f.; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 71.

³⁸ Kerameikos SW 130: Knigge 1976, 126 f.

³⁹ Morris 1992, 13 f.

⁴⁰ Morris 1992, 106.

⁴¹ Houby-Nielsen (1995, 138, 148) notes that graves with five or more grave goods – especially lekythoi – are rarely child burials.

⁴² Kerameikos S 12: Kübler 1976, 98; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 82 f. pl. 55.

⁴³ Red-figure lekythos: Athens, Kerameikos Museum inv. 1427; BAPD 9022759; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, pl. 55, 5. White-ground lekythos: Athens, Kerameikos Museum inv. 1436; BAPD 9022760; Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, pl. 55, 4.



Fig. 10 Athens, Kerameikos. Vases from burial SW 130



Fig. 11 Athens, Kerameikos. Vases from burial S 12



Fig. 12 Athens, Kerameikos. Vases from burial H 82

a mirror in her outstretched hand. The ornament lekythoi are all from the Beldam workshop, and seven of the twelve are very similar in size and shape and have the same patterns of decoration. We can imagine that these seven at least were purchased as a lot for the funeral, with a clear desire to make a large offering. Given the generic imagery of the two figure-decorated vases, the number of vases present in the grave is clearly more significant in making statements about the dead than the imagery on the vases⁴⁴.

It is not the case, however, that white-ground lekythoi are only found in graves otherwise well-furnished. Another early example of a white-ground lekythos from Athens was found in a Kerameikos burial (H 82) dated to 460/50. The grave contained four lekythoi: one black-figure lekythos, two black-figure ornament lekythoi, and one white-ground lekythos (fig. 12)⁴⁵. All four vases are the same size and shape and come from the same workshop. The white-ground vase is attributed to the Tymbos Painter and the other vases are of the ATL type associated with his workshop⁴⁶. The image shows a woman wrapped in a mantle standing before a low grave monument on two steps (the monument is either a stele with a rounded top or a very narrow rendering of a tumulus). The scene lacks the polychrome decoration found on the example from the burial discussed above (fig. 11), save some added red on the tomb. The lone figure is rendered in black slip, with more detail than most of the black-figure examples heretofore discussed. The black-figure scene shows a chariot with winged horses, placing the scene in the realm of mythology, probably representing Helios. This assemblage shows the correlation between iconographic choices and painting technique. Tomb-side scenes were a new addition to the vernacular of Athenian painters in the fifth century. Black-figure vases rarely adopted newer iconographic trends in this period, instead opting for scenes that are often generically mythological.

White-ground lekythoi do begin to outnumber black-figure as grave offerings in the 430s. A noteworthy burial from the Kerameikos cemetery (from an area outside the modern archaeological park) has been linked to the plague that devastated Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War. A mass grave of at least 150 individuals was uncovered during excavations for the

⁴⁴ Jubier-Galimier 2014, 48 f.

⁴⁵ Kerameikos H 82: Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 100 pl. 65, 1–3, 7.

⁴⁶ Kunze-Götte et al. 1999, 100; ABV 675; Kurtz 1975, 77–87.

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Fig. 13 Athens, Kerameikos. Black-figure lekythoi from mass burial. Kerameikos Museum inv. A 15271, A 15277, A 15279

Kerameikos Metro station in 1993⁴⁷. The burial is dated by the excavators to the early 420s⁴⁸. Only about thirty vases were deposited with the dead as grave goods, suggesting the burials were carried out without elaborate funeral rites. Another mass grave in the area, securely dated to the 420s and certainly associated with the Peloponnesian War, contained the remains of 27 adults and no grave goods, further suggesting those performing these burials were unable to conform to funerary norms⁴⁹. About fifteen of the vases from the burial are white-ground lekythoi. The grave goods also include three black-figure ornament lekythoi (fig. 13)⁵⁰, one red-figure shoulder lekythos⁵¹, five red-figure squat lekythoi⁵², and six black-gloss squat lekythoi⁵³. The burial contained no grave goods other than pottery, and most of the vessels – other than two kothons⁵⁴ and a skyphos in black-gloss⁵⁵ and two red-figure choes⁵⁶ – are oil containers. Though this is obviously an unusual burial, it shows the trends in grave goods in Athens around the beginning of the last quarter of the century. At this time, white-ground lekythoi are gaining use in Athens, but are still

47 Baziotopoulou – Drakotou 1999; Parlama – Stampolidis 2000, 271–273; Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002.

48 Baziotopoulou-Valavani (2002, 198) dates the burial 430–426 in accordance with historical sources on the Peloponnesian War. She attributes three lekythoi from the burial to the Reed Painter (Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15293, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 43 b; A15301, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 44 a; A15302, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 44 b) whose work is usually dated 425–400. Other white-ground lekythoi in the burial are attributed to the Painter of Munich 2335 (A15300) and the circle of the Bird Painter (A15295, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 44 c), usually dated 440/35–425. She attributes

another lekythos to the late circle of the Tymbos Painter (A15296, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 44 d) and assigns it a date of ca. 440, though Oakley (2004, 15) notes that the painter's ›manner‹ or ›workshop‹ continues into the 420s. On the dating of white-ground lekythos painters, see Oakley 2004, 13–18. Baziotopoulou-Valavani (2002, 198) suggests raising the date of the beginning of the Reed Painter's career to rectify the discrepancy in dates.

49 Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, 190.

50 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15271, A15277, A15279.

51 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A14281; Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 43 a.

52 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15265, Parlama – Stampolidis 2000, 353 fig. 388;

A15270, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 42 b; A15283, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 42 c; A15269, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 42 d; A15268.

53 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15260, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 41 c; A15262; A15263; A15258, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, 41 d; A15268; A15276.

54 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15264; A15286, Parlama – Stampolidis 2000, 353 fig. 390.

55 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15285, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 41 a.

56 Athens, 3rd Ephoreia A15284, Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, pl. 43 c; A15272, Parlama – Stampolidis 2000, 356.

not the most common type of vessel chosen for funerary use. There are now a variety of options available, including white-ground lekythoi, but black-figure ornament lekythoi and squat lekythoi in red-figure or black-gloss are also in use. The differences in sizes of the vessels, with the largest lekythos 29 cm tall and the squat lekythoi around 11 cm, suggest either large differences in the amount of oil offered (which is not implausible) or that the larger vessels were deposited empty as tokens and not used as functional oil containers.

An apparent decrease in the number of burials in the Kerameikos during the time of the Peloponnesian War has been pointed out⁵⁷, but Baziotopoulou-Valavani says this is not the case in the area of the Kerameikos Metro excavations, located to the north-west of the area of the long-running German excavations⁵⁸. Additionally, the Syntagma Square cemetery was initiated in this period. While the locations of active cemeteries change, burial practice does not seem to be significantly altered. The nature of the grave goods found in the Metro excavations is consistent with those of previously published burials from the Kerameikos area⁵⁹.

As mentioned above, in the burials excavated at Syntagma Square, only one contained a black-figure lekythos with figural decoration, but at least eleven others contained a black-figure ornament lekythos⁶⁰. Charitonides believes the black-figure vase indicates the burial is older than the others in the excavation, placing it shortly after the middle of the fifth century⁶¹. At least four Syntagma burials contain both a black-figure ornament lekythos and a white-ground lekythos or fragment or a white-ground lekythos⁶². The simple function of these vases could easily have been carried out by a black-gloss squat lekythos, of which many were found in other burials in the cemetery, but the combination of black-figure decoration and shoulder lekythos shape seems to have remained attached to funerary uses, and the two aspects were apparently difficult to divorce. Black-gloss shoulder lekythoi are found in some burials, but they are much less common than the squat shape in that technique.

From the contextualized grave goods it is clear that black-figure lekythoi remain prominent in Athenian burial practice through the first half of the fifth century, after which their use declines but does not wholly cease until the end of the century. Though Attic vase-painters begin to produce white-ground lekythoi in increasing quantities after the Persian wars, they are primarily export products and their use in Athens is very limited until the 430s, and even then, they are never used as widely as black-figure lekythoi had been. Black-figure funerary lekythoi may seem less impressive than their white-ground counterparts both in terms of their size and the care with which they are painted, but these elements did not preclude their widespread use in Athenian burials.

It is difficult to say what finally provoked the decline in popularity of black-figure funerary lekythoi. Other types of oil containers continue to be found in Athenian burials into the fourth century, so it seems it was not a change in ritual that led to funerary lekythoi dropping out of use in Athens. As with the initial development of red-figure and the move away from black-figure toward the end of the Archaic period, there is not a precise moment of change from one decoration technique or vase type to another. Black-figure lekythoi are not suddenly abandoned and replaced by white-ground lekythoi (or any other type of vase for that matter) in similar quantities and with a similar distribution. In the second half of the fifth century, a variety of oil containers take over the function of black-figure lekythoi.

The fact remains that black-figure vases are preferred for funerary rituals in Athens for around forty years after the black-figure technique was largely

57 Kübler 1976, 199; Houby-Nielsen 1995, 146.

58 Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2002, 200.

59 Morris 1987, 99–109.

60 For the Syntagma Square cemetery, see Charitonides 1958; Morris 1992, 111–117. Excavations immediately to the east of Syntagma, undertaken as part of the Athens Metro construction, revealed burials dating back to the Submycenaean period and an extensive fourth century cemetery. The limited publications of these excavations (Parlama – Stampolidis 2000, 148–189) detail no fifth-century burials.

61 Charitonides 1958, 33 (burial 31 [CVIII], fig. 59 α – γ). The vase appears to be a Haimonian chimney lekythos of Knigge's type IV/2. This type is dated 460–450 (Knigge 1976, 36; Volioti 2014, 150).

62 Charitonides 1958, 36 f. (burial 35 [CVI]). 37 (burial 36 α [CV α]). 50 f. (burial 47 [LXXII]). 84–89 (burial 75 [II]). None of the white-ground lekythoi from burials also containing ornament lekythoi are illustrated, and most are described as fragments.

replaced by red-figure. This suggests a desire to maintain older forms in the context of a significant religious rite. In this respect, late black-figure vase-painting can be described as conservative or retrospective. It links itself to the past and traditional forms and practices. Black-figure was retained on these vases presumably because consumers demanded such objects out of a desire to carry on specific traditions and to link their ritual practices with those of their ancestors and with the history of the city of Athens. These vases function in a specific and separate context from red-figure vases of the same period. Red-figure painters ultimately came from the same artistic traditions as contemporary black-figure painters, but they made vases for different uses and to meet different demands from consumers. Black-figure has been judged in the same context and by the same standards as red-figure painting, contributing to its negative appraisal.

The decline in use of stone grave markers or monumental burial structures, the relatively homogeneous natures of grave offerings, and the continued use of a traditional art-form (black-figure) rather than a newer, innovative form (red-figure) may suggest a greater desire to assert membership in a group than individual wealth or elevated social status. A higher level of relative equality often leads to a dissociation of cultural products from class position. Markets for material culture are levelled and pluralized and producers do not need to or do not seek to differentiate themselves with a variety of material produced⁶³. This may seem appropriate for early fifth-century Athens, when the democracy had firmly taken hold and moved toward the radical Periklean democracy. The use of more ›traditional‹ and modest black-figure vases may reflect a relatively high level of social equality under the young democracy. Morris for one believes fifth-century Athens was broadly egalitarian until the last quarter of the century, when there was a shift that led to social attitudes that allowed the rich to pronounce themselves through symbols of wealth⁶⁴.

A new understanding of late black-figure vases has a bearing upon our understanding of Greek vase-painting and Greek art more broadly. Judgments of hastily-painted late black-figure vases as inferior to more finely-painted red-figure assume Classical Greeks judged the quality of art or images in much the same way as modern viewers. As Ernst Gombrich declared, »The test of the image is not its lifelikeness but its efficacy within a context of action.«⁶⁵ Since they were produced in different shapes for different uses, the contexts of action for black-figure and red-figure vessels were not the same and they cannot be tested or judged on the same standards. The qualities that make a good symposium vessel are not the same as those for a funerary vase or other ritual vessel.

Negative judgements of late black-figure lekythoi based on modern aesthetics ignore the fact that how we recognize and represent things is cultural and cultivated, and that past ways of seeing shaped what kind of images were produced⁶⁶. If we instead approach late black-figure funerary lekythoi through the visuality of their makers and users, we see them as distinct from other vases both in their appearance and the visual tradition they embody. Their distinctive appearance marks the vases not only as part of a separate and older visual tradition, but as part of a tradition of ritual practice. These vases were chosen by those preparing for funerary rites not because they were cheap or close at hand, but because their antiquated, out-of-the-ordinary appearance separated them from vases intended for everyday use. Their appearance echoes the qualities of the rites for which they were used. In this way, the black-figure technique itself carried an important meaning for the users of the vases, and that meaning outweighed any need or desire for mimetic or naturalistic imagery or even for legible iconography.

63 Gartman 2002, 261.

64 Morris 1992, 149–155; Morris 1994.

65 Gombrich 1969, 110.

66 Davis 2011, 32–36. 64–69.

Abstract

Ross Brendle, Athenian Use of Black-figure Lekythoi in Fifth-century Burials

This article re-evaluates the use and significance of funerary lekythoi in fifth-century Athens by considering in the first instance vases found in Athenian burial contexts. From the contextualized material it is clear that black-figure lekythoi remain prominent in Athenian burial practice through the first half of the fifth century. Their use then declines but does not wholly cease until the end of the century. Hastily-painted late black-figure lekythoi are by far the most common type of vase in Athenian burials throughout the fifth century and are found in simple burials and well-furnished tombs alike. The black-figure technique carried a meaning in itself, the importance of which outweighed other factors for the users of these vases.

Keywords

Classical period • Attic black-figure • lekythoi • Kerameikos • grave goods

Sources of illustrations

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