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Bochum/Köln

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In Attic vase-painting, the possibilities and occasions for visual humor are almost boundless. Satyrs are often funny, whether sneaking up on a sleeping maenad, dressing in a citizen’s himation, or balancing a drinking cup on the tip of the penis. Then there are Pygmies fighting Cranes in comical scenes and, in the human sphere, caricatures of fat prostitutes and flabby athletes. Two books published simultaneously in 2009 (and by the same publisher!) explore the visual humor of Greek vases of the sixth to fourth centuries and have filled a big lacuna in the scholarship.

1 Hertel 2003, 127–133 Abb. 5, Planquadrate ZA 6–8; Abb. 47–54 (s. W. Dörpfeld, ‘Bericht über die im Jahre 1893 in Troja veranstalteten Ausgrabungen’ [Leipzig 1894], 38f Abb. 8); Dörpfeld 1902, 204f Abb. 36 (S. 114 [angeblich griechische Reparatur der Burgmauer von Troia VI/VII]).
2 S. auch Hertel 2003, 14–16; 302–309.
4 A. G. Mitchell, ‘Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour’, Cambridge University Press; D. Walsh, ‘Distorted Ideals in Greek Vase-Painting. The World of Mythological Burlesque’, Cambridge University Press. The first focuses mainly on Attic vases, the second on a combination of Attic and South Italian, with some discussion of Caeretan hydriai and Boeotian Kabeiric skyphoi. The latter also come into W.’s discussions (Figs. 16.19.20.254–255), even though they fall well outside his chronological parameters.
But, as Detlev Wannagat argues, Corinthian painters of the 7th century did not have such a broad range of options. What they had were komasts, variously known in the scholarship as padded dancers or ‘Dickbauchtänzer’, and all the humor derives from the comical situations in which these exuberant and ubiquitous figures find themselves. Since Proto-Attic is wildly imaginative but fairly serious in its myth scenes, the Proto-Corinthian and Early Corinthian painters can justly lay claim to the earliest visual humor in the Western tradition. W.’s goal is to review the corpus of padded dancers previously studied by Humphry Payne, Axel Seeberg, D. A. Amyx, and others in order to define exactly how the painters achieved their comic effects.

The book grew out of the author’s Habilitationsschrift at the University of Freiburg, completed in 2001. In several earlier works, W. has shown himself to be an unusually perceptive interpreter of vase imagery, especially when issues of humor and transgressive behavior come into play. His interpretation of the well-known Eurymedon Oinochoe in Hamburg remains for this reviewer the best reading of this much-discussed vase. And his brilliant analysis of the Boston Polyphemos Cup added a radically new perspective on one of the most famous Attic black-figure vases. Neither of these familiar vases falls within the scope of this book, but the same originality of thinking and careful observation of images that hover somewhere between the serious and the comic, the ideal and the grotesque, that inform those earlier studies are in evidence throughout this book.

An introductory chapter deals with modern and ancient theories of the comic and with various examples of visual humor in the fifth and fourth centuries (and sometimes later). This section could be titled ‘Klassisches Lachen’ and seems intended to sketch some of the types of humor that post-date the subject of the book. Thus, for example, the genre of parody of myth that we find in abundance in South Italian and on Kabeiric vases does not exist in the Archaic period. In a kind of ring composition, the last two objects illustrated in the book, a fragmentary bowl from the Kabeirion and a black-figure South Italian fragment (Figs. 254–56), return us to late fifth and fourth century with scenes that parody the myths of Bellerophon and Nessos and Deineira.

W. divides the Corinthian material into five broad categories and analyzes each in turn: dancers with physical deformities and others displaying the effects of too much food and drink; sexually charged but largely playful behavior; mock fighting; unexpected encounters between men and animals in the traditional Corinthian animal frieze; and travesties of hunting scenes with distinctly unheroic protagonists.

Perhaps the richest body of material and some of the most ingenious analysis are to be found in the first group (‘Körper’). W. estimates that no fewer than 10% of padded dancers have some physical handicap, usually a club foot, lameness, or other deformity of leg or foot. He argues that these are not fantasies, but rather closely observed depictions of real conditions, even down to the depic-

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tions of an ancient version of orthopedic shoes (p. 67). Interestingly, this motif, which is so common in Corinth, is not one borrowed by Attic black-figure (apart from the singular depiction of the lame Hephaistos on the François Vase) and appears elsewhere only in Boeotian. If all komastic humor is predicated upon some form of transgressive behavior, then the cripple is «die fleischliche Demonstration der Transgression». The deformity is not hidden or minimized but rather prominently displayed, heightening the effect of wild and disorderly dancing. This interpretation obviates the uncomfortable question that is often asked: Did the Greeks make fun of handicapped people, something we would now consider unacceptable? The locus classicus, well discussed by W., is the figure of Thersites in Iliad Book Two, who is not only ugly and deformed but insolent, earning himself a well-deserved (in the eyes of the troops) blow from the scepter of Odysseus. In W.’s reading, a deformity in itself does not arouse either laughter or pity, but is part of a larger nexus of behaviors and bodies that cross the boundary of convention.

Those behaviors include, most notably, crude sexual jokes like grabbing the rear end or genitals of a fellow dancer or spontaneously doing things in public, presumably while inebriated, that are commonly done privately: vomiting, masturbating, urinating, and defecating. The sexual humor is generally rather tame, and even when an ithyphallic dancer approaches his partner from the rear, the latter is not nude, but clothed in the tight ‘padded’ costume, thus eliminating the possibility of penetration. Mutatis mutandis, the sexual charge seems no more overt than our naked athletes in the locker room snapping towels at each other. W. contrasts the oft-discussed Tyrrenian amphora in Orvieto (Fig. 101) with a youth forcefully penetrating a bearded man sprawled on the floor while others seem to observe and comment on the spectacle. W. sides with those, such as G. Koch-Harnack, who see the scene as one of real sexual violation, likening the pose of the ‘victim’ to that of dead and dying figures. But when we consider the other figures in the group – three with erect phalloi, one of which appears to be almost a meter long (!), a man with a comically large flaccid penis, and even a naked woman watching from the corner – it is hard to take the whole picture seriously. Robert Sutton has observed that the scene «is surely intended as a humorously lascivious depiction of depraved social Others».

The scene on the Orvieto amphora falls so far outside the norms of what Beazley termed «courtship scenes» of erastes and eromenos that we must wonder whether the Tyrrenian painter belonged to a different world from his contemporaries in the Athenian Kerameikos. Not only is anal intercourse virtually never shown in Attic black-figure, but even if it were, we would expect the penetrated partner to be the youth, who usually stands motionless and without an erection as the aroused older man takes the initiative.

In a welcome move, for both the scenes of sexual innuendo and those of komasts evacuating their bodies, W. widens the lens to look at all the fabrics of Archaic black-figure in order to places the Corinthian iconography in a broader

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2 See T. H. Carpenter, Oxford Journal of Archaeology 3 (1984) 45–56 for the suggestion that the Tyrrenian workshops were located in another part of Attika.

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context. In particular, W.’s chapter on defecating komasts across four Greek artistic landscapes of the sixth century is a tour-de-force of detailed and subtle analysis of an initially off-putting topic, and it reveals remarkable insights. He finds a few examples in Attic, but lest we think these are limited to the eccentric Tyrrhenians (Figs. 107–109) and a crudely executed hydria (Figs. 110–111; not in ABV), we should recall the exquisitely drawn oinochoe in Athens signed by Xenokles as potter and Kleisophos as painter (not mentioned by W.) with a wild revel of burly komasts. One pair is engaged in what looks like a demented version of ephedrismos as the man being hoisted up lets loose from his bowels. Yet even this scene is fairly demure compared to the excessive behavior on some Boeotian black-figure drinking vessels, including one on which an elderly man in great distress simultaneously vomits and defecates as a companion reaches out to hold his throbbing head (Figs. 113; 115).

What are we to make of such scenes, which are likely to elicit from the modern viewer an immediate response of disgust? Are they meant to be funny? In the United States, this would be called ‘gross-out humor’, and it has inspired an entire genre of Hollywood movies, typically involving drunken college boys and a lot of body fluids. The British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s hit movie ‘Borat’ (2006) is a somewhat more sophisticated example. Are we to think that the Archaic symposiast shared such a crude and puerile sense of humor? W. does not directly address the question of where the comic element in these scenes lies (perhaps it is too obvious). Rather, he makes the much more persuasive, if counter-intuitive argument that the demonstration of all kinds of excess is precisely the point, and even defecating should be understood as indicative of limitless abundance in the context of Dionysiac and other festivals. In all instances, D. argues for an ‘additive principle’, i.e. that the motif of defecation is added to other elements of festive excess to heighten the effect. A fine example of his approach (though not Corinthian) is a Euboean lekythos (Fig. 124) that includes a bizarre depiction of a small satyr defecating while perched on the head of an enormous dancing maenad, while another satyr treads the grapes and the god Dionysos calmly surveys the surreal scene. The satyr manages to play the aulos, have an erect phallus, and defecate all at once – for W. the perfect trifecta of Dionysian pleasure.

A remarkable instance of W.’s additive principle decorates a white-ground kantharos that entered the collections of the Louvre in 2009 and was not yet known to the author. One side of this possibly Laconian vase shows four nude komasts to the right of a big volute-krate in a stand. Of the four, only one is ‘normal’; the other three comprise a crippled dancer, a frontal-faced figure juggl-
ing three vessels, including one on his upturned heel, and a defecator. The other six komasts on the obverse of the vase and under the handles are all unremarkable, suggesting a temporal progression from one side of the vase to the other, as the evening wears on and the wine from the krater flows freely. A similar progression can be seen on a Boeotian kantharos discussed by W. (Figs. 66–71).

Needless to say, a delicate topic like defecation has to be handled with scholarly rigor and without smirking or cheap humor, and W.’s treatment is masterful. Who would have thought that it was possible to create a scientific typology of feces, based on size, texture, trajectory, even odor? W. also develops a highly refined vocabulary to describe rather coarse behavior – «Festfäkalie», «Ausscheidungskünstler», «exkrementelle Eskapaden» – thus achieving a subtle, understated humor of his own, based on the principle of ‘incongruity’ that, as he later argues (p. 291), underlies all definitions of the comic since the 18th century.

Following such images of extravagant excess and usually taboo subjects, scenes of playful fighting among the komasts, with or without ‘weapons’, seem tame by comparison, and the humor correspondingly lame. If the motif of one dancer grabbing the foot or leg of another in order to trip him up is meant to convey «Schadenfreude» (p. 154), it would seem that the level of humor has regressed from the adolescent to the pre-adolescent. Sometimes what looks like one dancer kicking another might be just a dance pose in which part of one figure overlaps another. A different accent is added when one dancer wields an object that, as W. shows in an interesting excursus, bears a striking resemblance to a kind of mace (‘Streitkolben’) employed by the king in Neo-Assyrian reliefs. W. seems to me to exaggerate a bit when he describes as a grotesque «Kampfgruppe» three dancers on a column-krater, with the man in the middle grabbed by the wrist by the one behind him and by the ankle by the one in front (Fig. 169). The only element of the grotesque is the enormous phallus swinging from the contorted body of the middle figure (an appropriate image for the book’s cover).

Another form of very tame humor results from inserting a komast into the conventional animal frieze that is so characteristic of Corinthian vases. The interaction of man and animal can be amusing, though not so clever, it seems to me, as the image of an aroused satyr propositioning a sphinx on Attic Tyrrenian amphorae.¹

In each of his last two chapters, on the comic hero and the anti-hero, W. offers a minutely detailed analysis of a single object in each category: a pinax from the large find at Penteskouphia, now divided between Athens and Berlin, with a little man behind a huge boar (Figs. 229–30, 234, in Berlin); and a Protocorinthian aryballos in a private collection in Basel with a man confronting a ferocious boar (Figs. 235, 238–39). Both objects seem at first like odd choices on which to expend 21 and 31 pages, respectively, since the pinax is a fragment, and it is hard to know what else may have been on it, while the aryballos is badly worn, especially in the crucial area of the man’s head. But by adducing many other scenes of boars and boar hunts, W. is able to show how both of them play upon the conventions of heroes such as Herakles grappling with a wild boar or the hunt of the Calydonian Boar. Among the more enlightening observations is that the man on the pinax holds his nose, as if the stench of the boar were more dangerous than

¹ E.g. Louvre E 862; ABV 102, 94; CVA (Louvre 1) pl. 6, 10.
his tusks, and that the man on the aryballos has a long beard entangled in the boar’s bristles as he leads the beast on a leash as if it were a pet.

The book is handsomely produced by De Gruyter, in the series ‘Image & Context’, which has since 2008 brought out works of innovative scholarship on (mainly) Greek iconography. One of the hallmarks of the series is a very generous selection of high-quality black-and-white images scattered throughout the text for ease of consultation. But while a number of entries in the series are somewhat bloated door-stoppers in the 600–800 page range, W.’s comes in at a sensible 350. Though Corinthian komast vases can hardly be said to have been overlooked in the scholarship, W.’s approach presents them in an entirely new light. Through a combination of fine-grained attention to detail with a bold method of ‘thinking outside the box’ about motifs, behaviors, and human nature that the Greeks surely understood differently from ourselves, W. has made a major contribution not only to the scholarship on Greek vases, but to cultural studies of the endlessly inventive world of Archaic Greece.

Baltimore

Alan Shapiro


La ricerca archeologica e le attività di restauro dei monumenti antichi in Turchia hanno conosciuto, in questi ultimi anni, uno straordinario sviluppo: circa 110 Missioni turche e 34 straniere operano nei principali siti anatolici, che presentano un ampio arco cronologico dall’Preistoria al Medioevo. Un grande impulso è stato impresso anche alle indagini multidisciplinari, nei settori più diversi, dalla bioarcheologia all’archeometria; infine le ricerche su argomenti più specifici e le prospezioni topografiche si sono sviluppate, oltre che ad opera di equipe interazionali, anche per iniziativa degli Istituti di archeologia nelle numerose università, sorte, in questo ultimo ventennio, in tutte le regioni della Turchia. A questa dinamica realtà tuttavia non sempre corrisponde un analogo impegno nella pubblicazione scientifica dei risultati di queste ricerche; si tratta tuttavia di un fenomeno più generale, riguardante anche altre importanti aree del Mediterraneo.

Tra i siti oggetto di indagini recenti si segnala Nysa, le cui rovine si dispongono in un pittoresco paesaggio, a 3 km a nord-ovest della moderna cittadina di Sultanhisar, ai piedi del monte Mesogis (oggi Cevizlideağ), lungo la media valle del Meandro. Grazie all’intervento dell’Università di Ankara, già nel 1990, erano riprese le attività di scavo, sotto la direzione di Vedat Idil, in un quadro di collaborazione con l’equipe tedesca guidata da V. M. Strocka; entrambi avevano promosso un ambizioso programma di pubblicazioni, nella serie ‘Forschungen in Nysa am Mäander’, giunta ora al terzo volume monografico, riguardante il cosiddetto Gerontikon, ad opera di Musa Kadioğlu. Le precedenti monografie avevano come oggetto due altri importanti monumenti della città, la scaenae frons del teatro (M. Kadioğlu) e la Biblioteca (V.M. Strocka).