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**Just Horsing Around: Archaic Greek Inscriptions and the Iconography of Horses**

Representations of horses on archaic Greek pots comprise a narrowly defined corpus of images with wide chronological and geographical distribution against which one can measure changes and developments in decorative vase-painting techniques. In this paper, I argue that painters of alphabetic letters on archaic pots visually integrated the written word so that the words functioned aesthetically as well as semantically. As a study of painted inscriptions in the context of horses reveals, writing was able to fulfill the same aesthetic needs and visual expectations as filler ornament and abstract decoration, ultimately illustrating the aesthetic nature of these words.

Archaic Greek letters were etched (graffiti) and painted (dipinti) onto a variety of durable surfaces beginning in the second quarter of the 8th century BCE, continuing with increased frequency throughout the archaic period. Indeed, remains from both Attica and non-Attic regions, particularly Corinth, Boeotia, and Aegina, bear witness to the Greek preoccupation with inscribing artistically crafted objects with the written word (cf., Immerwahr 1990; Jeffery 1990; Wachter, 2001). In some cases, these objects are well enough preserved to allow an analysis of the relationship between the writing on them, other extant decoration if there is any, and the object itself. This approach, examining archaic writing in its material context, has been explored by only a handful of scholars to date (Lissarrague 1985, 1990; Henderson 1994), but serves as the methodology for this study of the relationship between abstract and alphabetic decoration on pots in the context of horses.

A survey of the earliest paintings of horses on both Attic and non-Attic vessels reveals the tendency of the Late Geometric vase-painter to adorn the field around and under horses with abstract filling ornament like hatching and chevrons, as, for example, on a well-known Attic Dipylon vase (Athens, NM 990), rarely leaving the space untreated. As painted inscriptions on vases begin to proliferate, however, particularly in the 7th and early 6th centuries, words begin to appear both next to the heads of horses and under their bellies. I argue that the writing now fills the field previously occupied by abstract decoration. This practice takes off, first in Corinth and subsequently in Athens, leaving us with examples on, e.g., a Protocorinthian *pyxis* from Aegina (Aegina 267), or the François Vase (Florence 4209) where the writing fulfills an aesthetic role, both as space-filler and as a visual reinforcement of the action in the scene.

A horse-and-rider scene on a Late Corinthian *pyxis*, c. 570-550, by the painter Chares (Louvre E 609), superbly exemplifies the interchange between word and image. On one end of the scene, a man and a horse, both advancing, have circular dot-cluster rosettes between their legs. On the other end, two horses have circular inscriptions under their legs, one identifying the horse with a name-label, *Aethon*, and the other, the painter's signature, *Chares m' egrapse*. Strikingly, the words function identically to the abstract pattern on the other end, both highlighting the forward motion of running or galloping legs, suggesting movement on a fixed, static surface. Thus the roles of abstract decoration

and painted words in the space around and under horses are analogous, reminding the viewer that archaic inscriptions were, in many instances, employed to an aesthetic end.

My final two examples of inscribed horses come from Exekias, and both play with the standard formula familiar from symposiastic vessels in which a beloved is labeled "*kalos*." In these two cases, however, the verbal praise is humorously undermined by the spatial position of the phrase. The best known of Exekias' *oeuvre*, featuring Achilles and Ajax playing dice (side A, Vatican 344), and Castor returning home on horseback (side B), preserves the phrase, *Onetorides kalos*, but the words originate at the horse's groin and stream down toward the ground. Another *amphora* by Exekias preserves the same formula (Berlin 1720), and here the source of the words is the horse's rear end. Both examples challenge the literal meaning of the phrase, and we may postulate a change for the worse in the relationship between Onetorides and his *erastes*. Notably, this change is verbalized not by the words themselves, but rather by their spatial arrangement. Thus the decorative nature of early archaic inscriptions has evolved to such a degree that now, vase-painters readily exploit the double function of words as both visually and semantically meaningful, affording a new depth of meaning for their compositions.