

Sellers LAWRENCE

Miltopareoi: Miltos and the Painting of Greek Ships

Miltos, or red ochre, is a natural mixture of red ferric oxide with clay or other impurities, which when ground into powder served as the primary red pigment for the ancient Greeks. It had a variety of applications: in paint, in makeup, and as a glaze in vase painting, as well as medicinal uses. However, some modern writers suggest that the Greeks also used miltos extensively in painting their ships, in particular the Athenian triremes, thus making it an essential material for the maintenance of Athenian naval power. This notion grew from attempts to rationalize a series of agreements between Athens and the cities of Keos in the mid fourth century B.C. that required all miltos from the island be sent to Athens (*IG II2 1128*=*Tod GHI 162*, on handout). There is, in fact, very little ancient evidence that the Greeks applied miltos-based pigment to their ships. A full examination of the evidence, particularly the few literary references, is necessary before this unsupported conjecture becomes orthodoxy.

Some early scholars took the agreements between Athens and the Kean cities as examples of state involvement in the economy by assuming that the miltos was for use in the Athenian pottery "industry." Johannes Hasebroek (1928) denied these were commercial matters, stating instead that miltos was "indispensable in the painting of triremes, and for that reason alone were the Athenians interested in it." Later writers accepted this conjecture that gave miltos a military importance, along with the further assumption that it helped in waterproofing ships' hulls (Michell 1957, Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977, Hopper 1979, Vélissaropoulos 1980, Casson 1991, Meijer and van Nijf 1992, Gabrielsen 1994, Photos-Jones et al. *ABSA* 1997).

There is scant literary evidence connecting miltos with the painting of ships. Homer most often describes ships as black, but he twice uses the term *miltopareoi*, red-bowed (*Il.* 2.637; *Od.* 9.125). Herodotus (3.58) describes Samian ships of the 6th century B.C. as *miltoliphees*, red-cheeked. No ancient source describes any Athenian ships, or any ship after Herodotus, as red. Further, no evidence suggests miltos played a role in waterproofing or preservation of ships' hulls. Hence, there is no case for calling miltos vital to the Athenian navy, or suggesting that it was used extensively to paint the hulls of Athenian or other Greek ships.