

**Steven LOWENSTAM**  
**Images of Achilles in Italiote Painting**

This paper explores two instances of the reception of Trojan War myth in fourth-century Magna Graeca and attempts to show that even at this “late” date painters depict unique interpretations of the heroic tradition, often with unexpected emphases.

A bell-krater by the Sarpedon Painter (ca. 390 BCE), portrays the embassy to Achilles. One iconographical detail is startling: Patroklos is depicted sitting apart, his hands wrapped around his knee, facing right. This pose is the very one painters in the fifth century used repeatedly to portray Odysseus in embassy scenes. This transference of an embassy pose from Odysseus to Patroklos suggests a muted theme in the *Iliad*. As becomes clear from several passages in Books 11-16, Patroklos feels great sympathy for the Achaean cause and dissatisfaction with Achilles’ intransigence. The painter appears to be indicating Patroklos’ identification with the ambassadors by positioning Patroklos in the iconographic position traditionally assigned to Odysseus. It is also because of Patroklos’ mental detachment that he is shown sitting outside of Achilles’ tent instead of inside it. The fact that Achilles is separated from his peers and has no visual contact with them highlights his isolation. He is so ensnared in anger and self-absorption that he does not notice that he is entirely alone; even his closest companion is moving out of his orbit.

Hence, the Sarpedon Painter has detected and emphasized an epic motif that he knows from some traditional source, perhaps an *Iliad* or the *Iliad*, and demonstrates that an Apulian painter can impart a unique commentary on the Iliadic tradition. A related Achillean typology appears on a krater by the Darius Painter (ca. 340 BCE). Inscripting his image PATROKL[OU] TAPHOS, the painter chooses as his central scene the sacrifice of the Trojan youths, a subject that, as far as is known, no Greek artist had previously depicted. So, unlike earlier artists, he does not select a heroic theme but instead portrays Achilles as a butcher of bound youths and as one who mutilates corpses, as he is shown on the lower register. Despite the title of his work, the Darius painter does not show the body of Patroklos but only his funeral pyre, highlighting not the tragedy of Patroklos but Achilles’ savagery and wrath. Ultimately the Darius Painter’s commentary is much like that of Simone Weil, who speaks of a world that turns people into things.

Neither the Sarpedon nor the Darius Painter is depicting anything foreign to our *Iliad*, but earlier Greek painters (like modern critics), emphasized how Achilles heroically overcame adversity, and acquired immortality. Although some Apulian painters show heroic images (Achilles’ arming), many stress his savagery. This feature is partly explained by the context: Italiote vases were often painted as tomb gifts through which mourners could come to terms with death. Families mourning the loss of kin might contemplate the cruelty of fate in many of the Achillean images. The story of Achilles had become a tale of inexorable violence. In sum, interpretations of heroic myth by ancient painters of any period can contribute much to our understanding of the Homeric tradition.