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Man Overboard: A Re-Evaluation of the Underrepresentation of the Navy in Classical Athenian Art

The strength of the Athenian empire during the Classical period was thanks largely to the dominance of the Athenian fleet, with which the city-state was able to control her allies, punish her enemies, and feed her swelling population. However, ships, naval warfare, and clearly distinguished sailors are conspicuously absent from fifth-century Athenian art, despite the fact that the ship enjoyed some popularity in vase-painting of the Geometric and Archaic periods. The purpose of this paper is to argue that a thorough review of the evidence and the proper interpretive approach reveal that Athenian naval activity was reflected in Athenian public and private art, in a surprisingly rich and diverse range of ways.

The prevailing scholarly consensus, best represented in recent work by Barry Strauss, Paul Cartledge, and Victor Hanson, is that Athenians had an ambivalent attitude toward ships and sailors and thus did not choose to include them in their art. Although sophisticated and persuasive, this scholarship is potentially vitiated by the fact that it is based on a relatively cursory examination of the wide range of pertinent evidence. This paper breaks new ground by summarizing the results of an in-depth, two-year long study of all the extant literary and physical evidence for ships and sailors in Archaic and Classical Athenian art. The results of this study suggest that current views require thoroughgoing revision.

The paper begins with a demonstration that there is very little in Athenian political and social history which supports the notion that there was meaningful distaste for the navy among the general Athenian populace. It then proves, through a thorough examination of ships in Athenian art, that the absence of ships from red-figure vase-painting has almost nothing to do with attitudes about naval warfare but is rather the result of the antithetic advantages and disadvantages of black- and red-figure vase-painting. This undercuts the idea that there were insuperable ideological barriers that prevented the depiction of ships and sailors in Athenian art, since this idea has been based, in large part, specifically on the lack of ships in Classical vase-paintings.

This is followed by an examination of the evidence for ships and sailors in Athenian public and private art of the Classical period. The Athenian state erected public naval monuments at both intra- and inter-state sanctuaries as well as at the sites of individual naval battles. In private art, overt depictions of warfare at sea are almost nonexistent, but this should not be taken to mean that the Athenian navy was entirely ignored by artists of the Classical period. Athenian art was shaped by very specific ideas as to what form artistic representations of warfare should take. Rather than illustrate historical events explicitly, Athenian artists frequently 'coded' them in terms of mythical or legendary analogues. For example, in order to commemorate the Greek victory at the battle of Marathon, Athenian artists portrayed Greeks fighting Amazons; obviously, these fictional 'unmanned' barbarians from the east represented the Persians.

An exploration of the possible ways in which Athenian artists may have 'coded' naval warfare in Classical art reveals two mythical/allegorical scenes: so-called *aphlaston* vases which feature a deity holding the stern ornament of a captured enemy ship and illustrations of Theseus, hero of the democracy, with Poseidon, god of the sea, both of which appeared during the second quarter of the fifth century and clearly reflected pride in the prowess of the Athenian navy. In addition, Athenian artists suggested the presence of sailors by juxtaposing regularly armed hoplites or athletes with sea gods or sea creatures. These iconographical devices compose an imposing body of implicit, coded naval iconography from Classical Athens, in light of which modern ideas about the role of the navy in Athenian art should be re-evaluated.