

# Norm and function : children in Attic vase imagery

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NORM AND FUNCTION. CHILDREN ON ATTIC VASE IMAGERY

In iconographic studies on Greek vases,<sup>1</sup> the question of the age of the depicted persons plays a central role. The discussion is heavily influenced either by the diverging opinions on the classification of the respective age groups and their nomenclature or by the social values and norms underlying the imagery.<sup>2</sup> In the following, using the example of images of children from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, a structural solution for the problem of differentiating young adolescents by age in Attic pictorial art will be proposed — detached from any detailed analysis and without considering the connection between form and function.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN IN 6<sup>TH</sup> AND 5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES BC

In Attic pictorial art, non-adult persons, children and adolescents, do not appear as acting figures in scenic contexts until the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In all genres, depictions of children are relatively rare. They feature for example on vessels showing images of the cult of the dead, processions or warrior farewell scenes. In said period, their iconography is strongly influenced by that of the adults belonging to same gender and is also defined by these adults within the scenic context. Young age is expressed by a small physique and the according habitus, based on the status of non-adulthood.

Small children are principally depicted in a carrying motive. Their bodily traits stay more or less constant in black and red-figure vases until the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, a black-figure chariot scene from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (**fig. 1**) shows two female figures, each carrying a naked child on an arm.<sup>4</sup> The baby's muscles are modelled strongly and are similar to those of an adult. The detail of somewhat younger red-figure lekythos from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC also shows a naked child being carried by a woman (**fig. 2**).<sup>5</sup> The same principle also applies here:

The child is depicted as a miniature adult. These observations led Leslie A. Beaumont to presume that in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, children were handled with disrespect because of their lower social standing.<sup>6</sup> It is thus difficult to discern the different stages of childhood in early pictorial art. According to Beaumont, a more differentiated depiction resulting from a changed understanding of childhood started around the time of Pericles and during the Peloponnese war.<sup>7</sup> From this period onwards depictions of non-adults with child-like traits occur — figures with a small build, soft incarnate and disproportionate limbs.<sup>8</sup>

1 This paper was presented at Heidelberg in September 2008 and I would like to thank Jörg Gengnagel for his invitation to take part in the seminars on ritual dynamics. For the translation of my paper into the English language I wish to thank Andrew Lawrence. Many thanks also to Ralph Chr. Rosenbauer and all the participants in the conference for their comments and responses to my original presentation. A first draft of my contribution in German language was given at Munich in spring 2008 (CVA Beiheft 2009, forthcoming).

2 I will only mention a small selection of important studies on children in Greek art: Beaumont 2003: 59–83; Beaumont 1994: 81–96; Sourvinou-Inwood 1988. Most recently see Cohen & Rutter 2007.

3 In my first step of argumentation, there is no formal difference made between figures depicted in «mythological» and «non mythological» contexts.

4 Black-figured amphora, Rome, Musei Vaticani 1770; ABV 138,2: Close to the Group E. Cf. Spieß 1992: 305 fig. 38; Wrede 1916: pl. 17.

5 Red-figured lekythos, Ashmolean Museum 320; restored; ARV<sup>2</sup> 864, 13: Attributed to the Manner of the Pistoxenos Painter. Published: CVA Oxford (1) 29 pl. 38. See also Rühfel 1984a: 29 fig. 15.

6 According to Beaumont 2003: 62, the children depicted on prothesis scenes are meant as «secondary or supporting figures».

7 Beaumont 2003: 75.

8 The depiction on a red-figured kylix of the Sotades Painter shows a well-dressed woman seated on a diphros facing a child, who sits on a stool: Brussels, Musée Royaux d'Arts et d'Histoire A 890; ARV<sup>2</sup> 771,1. Published: CVA Brüssel (1) pl. 1,1. Cf. Neils & Oakley 2003: 240 no. 42.

## AGE DIFFERENTIATION BY SOCIAL STRATA

The existing picture material however, implies that already in the black-figure pottery (i.e. 6<sup>th</sup> century BC) a differentiation of non-adults started to take place, referring to build, physique, clothing, habitus and positioning within the scene.

The artistic interest did not concentrate on the portrayal of childhood or even «childhoods».<sup>9</sup> This is clearly underlined by black-figure scenes dealing with the cult of the dead. This differentiation results more from the social strata specified by the *oikos* and the phratries. The following remarks will provide the evidence for this hypothesis.

## CHILDREN IN SCENES OF THE CULT OF THE DEAD

Since the first quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and especially in the Attic art tradition the portrayal of ostentatious funerary rites play an increasingly large role. The apex of the production is reached at the transition to the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> On a black-figure phormiskos in Bologna from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> cent BC (fig 3)<sup>11</sup> the central scene shows the body of a deceased person on display, the *prothesis*, surrounded by various other people of different habitus, gender and size wailing and chanting. The bier takes up the majority of the middle scene of the vessel. Eight adult females are grouped around the bier all wearing inner tunics, over cloaks and veils along with four children in a standing motive and one in a carrying motive. The row of men is directed towards the head of the bier and consists of three adults and one adolescent at its helm; all clothed in inner tunics and over cloaks.

The age and status of the children is characterized by the differentiation in build, dress, gestures, placing in the scene and their interaction with other figures. The small child is depicted as being carried on the shoulders of a woman and is naked. Slightly older children appear in a standing position, wrapped motionless in their outer

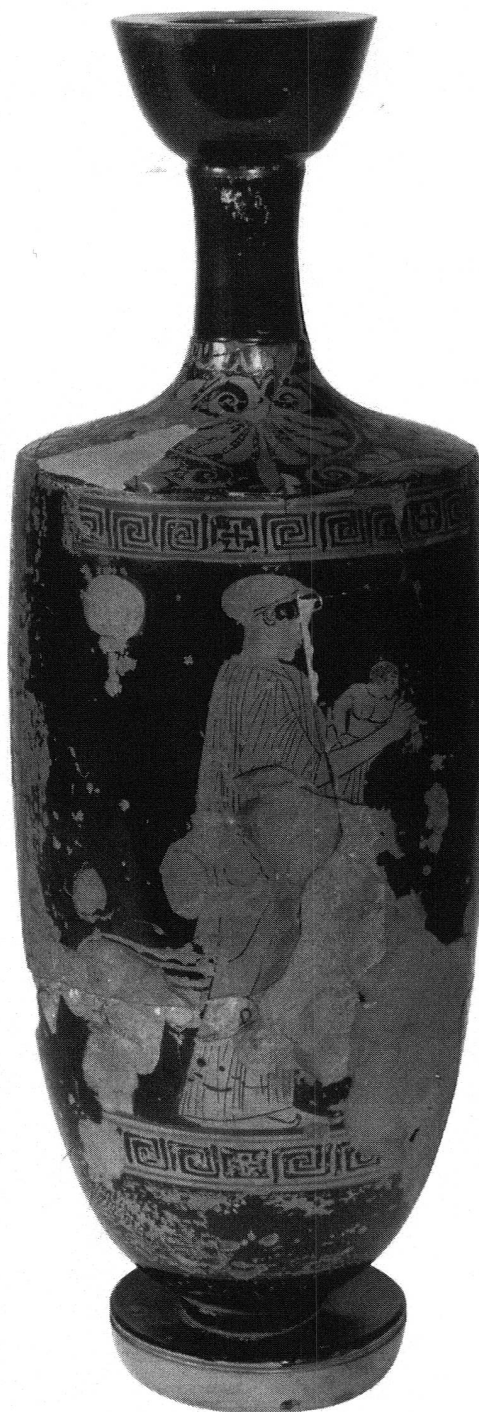


Fig. 2: White-ground lekythos, Ashmolean Museum 320: Woman and child.

9 Most recently Dickmann 2001: 181.

10 Oakley 2003: 163–194; Shapiro 1991: 629–656.

11 Black-figured phormiskos, Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico 1438. Published: CVA Bologna (2) pl. 24, 1–3. Cf. Seifert 2006: 72 fig. 2; Laxander 200: 93 PS 29 pl. 49, 1–3; Rühfel 1984b: 39 fig. 13; Zschietzmann 1928: 43 no. 87.

garments and near to the women. The adolescent, clearly taller than the still-standing children appears in the company of the men, mimicking them in terms of dress and gesture. The children's gender in the standing position is



*Fig. 3: Black-figure phormiskos, Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico 1438: Prothesis scene.*





Fig. 4: Black-figure pinax, Paris, Louvre MNB 905 (L4): Prothesis scene.

distinguished by their hairstyle, the neck-long uncovered hair and the dress, the under tunic and outer garment. They are unequivocally boys. Status, gender and age manifest themselves furthermore in their habitus, as well as in their pose, action and the spatial location within the scene. The element of the spatial location also includes the positioning, which the children assume in the composition of the image, as well as the space, which they occupy depending on build, movement and gesture.

The *prothesis* scene on a clay tablet by the Sappho painter from the Louvre displays a comparable conception in terms of figure setting and characterization (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> The pinax can be dated to time around 500 BC. The epigrams identify the persons present as relatives of the deceased.<sup>13</sup> Here too, women dominate the activity around the bier. And in this image as well, the scene is divided into a female and male activity zone.

Both the scenes (fig. 3 and fig. 4) show vividly that

gender, status and the respective age are hierarchizing criteria for the participation in rituals for the cult of the dead. The arrangement of the deceased was women's business, full of emotion and gesturing. The men's chanting is accompanied by more restrained gestures, somewhat more distanced from the deceased. The adults exclusively carried out important functions like leading the funeral procession or washing and perfuming the dead. Adolescents in younger years stayed merely observers. The fact that they are wrapped up in their garments shows that they did not actively participate in the events. Older children, in contrast, were included in the activities with clear functions.<sup>14</sup>

The portrayed adolescents thus align their actions according to their gender roles, which in turn represent their future status in adulthood. Their exact age however cannot be determined. The figures, classified by age, gender and social status, clearly refer to a female and male space within the image.

<sup>12</sup> Black-figured pinax, Paris, Louvre MNB 905 (L4). Attributed to the Sappho Painter. Cf. Seifert 2006: 71 fig.1; Laxander 2000: 198 PS77 pl. 51; Shapiro 1991: 639 fig. 1; Zschietzmann 1928: 40 no. 37 suppl. II.

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro 1991: 638–639.

<sup>14</sup> See also: Black-figured loutrophoros, Louvre 1325. Published: CVA Louvre (8) pl. 73, 1. Cf. Mommsen 1997: 70 no. 74. — Black-figured loutrophoros, Berlin, Antikensammlung F 1887. Published: CVA Berlin (7) pl. II,4.

#### THE STAGES OF SOCIALIZATION OF THE PHRATRIES.

Does age alone constitute the decisive distinguishing feature? Let us analyze the circumstances of the characterization of age, status and genders under the aspect of social norms and functions.

The characterization of physique should be assessed as a time-bound attribute in the period in question. According to the theory, the whole representation of a non-adult — poise, size attributes and location in the scene — refers to the stage of socialization of the depicted person. Stages of socialization were of greater representative interest as opposed to actual age.

The formal composition of the analyzed scenes and the stated thoughts on female respective male dominated image zones correspond with the findings on social organisation of the Attic society of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. BC: The *oikos* was the most important social space for small children. The *oikos* comprised of a household with all its human members and the whole possessions. A woman's existence, i.e. in the role of a mother, a nurse, maid or grandmother, was fundamentally defined through the *oikos*.

This is impressively depicted by the «Bildchiffren» on the black-figure scenes.

Aside from the affiliation to the *oikos*, the membership to a phratry played an important role in Attic society in the period in question. We are well informed on the functions of phratries and their stages of socialization. The main duty of the phratries was in the legitimate authentication of the parentage of their members.<sup>15</sup> Here, family-relevant status changes were shown; this occasionally includes the acquisition of citizenship. An acknowledged child was included in this phratry list and was initiated through the *kyrios*, the house lord, naming it in the *oikos* — the so called *dekate*. Furthermore each transition from child to ephebe status and to adulthood was indicated as well as the transition of the newly wed wife from her father's *oikos* to that of her husband.<sup>16</sup> The presentation and acceptance of the members into the phratry took place in a ceremonial act during the apaturia festival. The apaturies took place once a year each autumn in the month of Pyanopsion. It went on for three days and was the main phratry festival in honour of Zeus Phatrios and Athena Phratia.

The third festival day, called *koureotis*, has a special significance in regards to the question at hand. On this day the sacrifices were carried out for the newly accepted members of the phratries on the occasion of birth, ephebe status or marriage; the sacrifices were called *meion*, *koureion* and *gamelia*.<sup>17</sup>

Through the *meion* fathers displayed their legitimate sons to the phratries. The *koureion* was obviously seen

as confirmation of those who had reached the age of *hebe*, maturity. An age between 12 and 14 seems probable here. The *gamelia* finally was aimed at newly wedded couples. Thus the three sacrificial ceremonies of the festival were linked to the status change of the adolescents within the community of the phratry. The official act of inscription received a solemn confirmation in a ceremony for the participants in front of the community and the gods. The stages of socialization of the adolescents were presented before the community.

The status changes that were displayed within the phratry and celebrated during the apaturia festival clearly mirror the socialisation steps, which male adolescents went through in order to obtain their citizenship — respectively that female adolescents passed through up until matrimony.

These stages of socialisation were strongly connected to the age and the associated skills (physical, intellectual and social) of the adolescents. Thus adolescents of different ages could belong to the same stage of socialization.

The following conclusions can be deduced for the interpretation of the presented Attic depictions: Children standing on their own two feet would have passed the naming ceremony of *dekate*, could be accepted as members in the *oikos* and would go on to be enregistered by their father in the citizen list of the phratry in one of the following years; the last ritual was enforced by the *meion*. In the depictions, the *oikos* thus acts as an abstract image space, where small boys — whose age could vary by some years — were depicted in the company of women together with girls of different ages and babies.

It wasn't until the older boys had reached the age of *hebe*, when they were depicted in the company of men. Only once *hebe* had been reached, was the dichotomy of the genders visualized in a spatial manner.

Thus, the imagery deployed for adolescents visualized norms, which were on one hand specified by *oikos* and phratry and performed in the rituals and cults on the other.

15 For recent overviews of the current state of debates see Jones 1999; Lambert 1993; Welwei 1988: 12–23.

16 For literary sources see the contributions of: Golden 1986: 245–269; Golden 1990: 26.

17 Poll. 8,107; Harpokr. s.v. *gamelia*.





Fig. 5: Black-figure exaleiptron, Paris, Louvre CA 616: Birth of Athena.

The functions of the depicted persons, i.e. their role within the scene, were based on their status in two respects: The current status, dependent on age and gender was expressed, as was their future function in the role of an adult.<sup>18</sup>

#### MYTHICAL CHILDREN

These thoughts can now be complemented and exemplified with a comparison between the children already shown from the scenes of the cult of dead and mythical children figures. Depictions of Athena, Achilles and Erichthonios will serve as examples.

Even as a newborn, the child-goddess Athena already possesses all the attributes for her later duties (fig 5<sup>19</sup> and fig 6<sup>20</sup>). A miniature Athena bursts out of Zeus's head, fully armed and ready for battle. Her qualities as a goddess lift her up above the spheres of mere mortals. Her size and her specific attributes set her apart from the other depicted deities. Up until the middle of the 5th cent. BC, her iconography follows the same principle in black as in red-figure pottery. Interestingly, her myths tell us nothing of a socialization phase. This is

<sup>18</sup> For the fully argumentation see my habilitation thesis given at Hamburg University in 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Black-figured exaleiptron, Paris, Louvre CA 616; ABV 58, 122: Attributed to the C Painter. Cf. Beaumont 1995: 339–361; Simon 1981: 77 pl. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Red-figured pelike, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum 728; ARV<sup>2</sup> 286,11: Attributed to the Geras Painter. Published: CVA Wien (2) pl. 73, 2. Cf. Arafat 1990: 187 no. 2.3 pl. 7.



Fig. 6: Red-figure pelike, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum 728: Birth of Athena.



Fig. 7: Red-figure stamnos, Paris, Louvre G 186: Achilles.



Fig. 8: Red-figure kylix, Berlin, Antikensammlungen F 2537: Erichthonios.

different as opposed to Dionysos or Hermes. Heroes and mythical figures adapt a different characterization in their child years when assuming the role of the protagonist.

The physiques of the young hero Achilles and little Erichthonios both adhere to the contemporary iconographic tradition of non-mythical children. In a scene from the beginning of the 5th century Achilles appears as an adolescent from the aristocratic upper class in the kouros motive (fig 7).<sup>21</sup> Erichthonios appears as a symbol of the first Attic citizen in the motive of a child being carried<sup>22</sup> and wearing an amulet band (fig 8).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, both are connected by socialization phase in a «stranger's house» as parentless children.

The child-like Athena thus differs from the human children through her status as an unwed goddess and in her specific function i.e. in her role as Athena. She is not subject to the norms of the human society; this is reflected in her depicted characterization. For male, mythical figures other, human norms generally apply. Thus, non-deities are distinguished by their status along the lines of the human stages of socialization.

#### THE FIGURE OF PAIS

To end with, the iconography of the (male) slave respectively servant figures shall be shortly discussed from the perspective of social classification. In many scenes, the iconography of slaves and servants corresponds to that of children respectively to that of adolescents: The differentiating feature is the habitus, often headdress or clothing.<sup>24</sup>

The chariot scene on black figure black-figure belly amphora in Karlsruhe from the middle of the 6th century shows two slaves or servants working on a warrior's ar-

21 Red-figured stamnos, Paris, Louvre G 186. Published: CVA Louvre (2) pl. 20, 1. Cf. Rühfel 1984b: Fig. 29.

22 Suggested by Castor 2006: 625–627. In contrast to Castor, see the argumentation of Beaumont: 344 footnote 26, who interprets the figure of Erichthonios as some kind of an «chthonic» archetype.

23 Red-figured kylix, Berlin, Antikensammlungen F 2537; ARV<sup>2</sup> 1268.2,1689: Attributed to the Kodros Painter. Published: CVA Berlin (3) 14 pl. 113.

24 Slaves are normally characterized by their daily work-actions. In general on the topic of Greek slavery see Himmelmann 1971: 23. Most recently and detailed: Oakley 2000: 227–247.



Fig. 9: Black-figure amphora, Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum 61.89: Departure scene.

mour, who is in turn covered by a horse (fig 9).<sup>25</sup> Their habitus and short hair is different to that of the boy on the belly amphora in Würzburg from 540/530 BC (fig 10).<sup>26</sup> The latter is characterized as a member of the upper class by his «kouros» iconography.

The iconography corresponds with the Greek language: In Greek, there is an assimilation of child and slave or servant. Both were called *pais*.<sup>27</sup> Here, against the background of the abstract category of *oikos*, a common figurative and linguistic definition is at hand. Both are linked by a lower social status and the *oikos* as a place of living and residing. Furthermore, the membership to the social and economic unit subjected small children and slaves to the same value measures and norms,

which were in some respect also valid for the other members of the *oikos*.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The developed structure above can also be observed on Attic votive-reliefs. The condition is however, that these images must also be conceived as a specific historical concept. The picture language can only be understood in cooperation with the individual picture elements. Iconography or iconology, semiotic analytical approaches, social, religious and of course historical studies must complement each other, in order to be able to outline the structures of ancient lives. The interpretation presented here on late black-figure depictions offers such a possible approach.

The explanations underline the importance of the collectives *oikos* and *phratriy*: The safeguarding of the continuity of one's own lineage and committing the next of kin to one's own tradition was an important issue in late archaic as well as in early classical times.

25 Black-figured amphora, Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum 61.89: The Painter of Munich 1410. Published: CVA Karlsruhe (3) pls. 12, I. 13, I. Cf. Spieß 1992: 239 B 295 figs. 33. 34.

26 Black-figured amphora, Würzburg, Martin-von-Wagner-Museum L 247; ABV 134,17(18). Cf. Rühfel 1984b: 17 fig. 6.

27 Golden 1985: 96.





*Fig. 10: Black-figure amphora, Würzburg, Martin-von Wagner Museum L 247: Departure scene.*

Thus it isn't astounding that in pictorial art, rank and function are portrayed in such a nuanced manner. However, picture elements do not occur randomly. Normative concepts constrict the number of meanings. These «Bildchiffren» are thus taken from the pool of culturally available images and pieced together. This is why there are no visualizations of childhood or child-hoods to be seen on the mentioned scenes. Rather, they show norms and functions, which reflect an appropriate behaviour of the depicted according the pictorial intention and situation. In the period in question, life stages and, closely related, social status of adolescents

are defined through the norms and value measures which apply to oikos and phratry. These were then illustrated in age iconography on Greek vases.

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