



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE
CURATOR - MARIANNA DÁGI
OPEN - 04. 03. 2008 - 25. 05. 2008
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PRINTING - A-Z BUDA COPYCAT KFT.



HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2008 **SPRING** SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS - COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

A BOAR HUNT

Vases modelled wholly or partially on human or animal figures have been produced for use in cult, or more rarely as ornaments, since the invention of pottery. Vases with groups of figures appear in Greek art from the fifth century BC, beginning in Athenian workshops. From the end of the fifth century, when the quality and popularity of painted pottery began to decline, until its final disappearance in Attica in the late fourth, they were made in large numbers, mostly in Athens and (in smaller quantity) at Olynthus in north-east Greece. Locally produced examples are found sporadically from Pergamum in Asia Minor to Palestrina in Italy.

This vase, from the Antiquities Collection of the Museum, is one of these pieces. Nothing is known about its provenance, but the colour of the clay proves it was not made in Athens, Olynthus being even less likely. Its style dates it between the last quarter of the fourth century BC and the middle of the third. The front,

in low relief, was moulded, with a separate mould used to make the wild boar underneath the mounted figure. As is usual on pieces of this type, the back is unworked: the neck of the vase, now lost but similar in shape to the one on the vase immediately behind it in the case, which ended in a mouth and lip, once jutted out from the surface of the back side, which had been smoothed down by hand prior to firing. The missing parts (the rider's head and right arm, the spout, the front legs, tail, and mouth of the horse, the boar's head and the foot of the vase) were all made separately and attached to the body of the vase: they were easily broken off and lost. The figural portions of the vase, as is usual on objects of this kind, were polychrome: painted in delicate tempera, little of which remains. Traces of the original white coating can still be seen, along with little spots of yellow on the horse's mane and pink near the left hand of the rider. The smooth back and the lost mouth were covered with black glaze.

The lost parts are easily reconstructed. Already in the fifth century BC the iconographic type of the mounted hunter obeyed certain rules: a pictorial canon so strict and so long-lasting that the description of a rider in the *Cynegetica* ("On Hunting With Dogs"), an anonymous didactic poem of the third century AD attributed falsely to Oppian, fits the composition of the Budapest vase point by point: "...with his left hand the mounted hunter should guide the bridle that steers his



horse. Let him wear a tunic well-girt and fastened above the knee and held tight by crossing straps. Again on either side

of his neck let his mantle be flung back over his strong shoulders to hang away from his hands for easy toil" (Ps. Oppian), *Cynegetica* 1, 95ff, translation by A. W. Mair, *Oppian Colluthus Tryphiodorus*, Loeb Classical Library, p. 13). The only details missing in the poem are the brooch that holds the cloak together at the rider's throat, and the leather corselet and hunting-boots he wears. As a great series of surviving images, most of them stone reliefs, attests, he had the face of a youth: he looked toward the viewer, and held a hunting spear in his raised right arm.

The figure of the mounted hunter is found most often in the territory of modern Bulgaria, on stone relief stelai of votive or funerary type, some small, some larger, which are identified with the culture of the ancient Thracians, and known conventionally as images of the "Thracian rider god". Thousands of these have been found, most of them made in the second and third centuries AD. One example, a funerary stele, can be seen in the case. Beneath the figure of the "rider-god", the names of the deceased, a young man, and his father, who erected the stele, can be read. On the majority of the votive stelai, the names of various Thracian gods and goddesses can be read, or simply the Greek word "HEROS" ("hero"): an inscription modelled clearly on a familiar motif of Greek funerary art which heroised the deceased into a mounted hunter. Parallels aside, however, it has proved impossible to find the exact place of the "rider hero" in the religious life of ancient Thrace.

The iconographic type of the mounted boar-hunter is open to several different interpretations. It may represent a figure from the world of gods and heroes, or else a version of the aristocratic ideal appropriate to the particular social context from which it came. However, in the case of the figure vase and the relief displayed here, one should probably look elsewhere. In a classic work of anthropological theory published almost a century ago, Arnold van Gennep wrote the first systematic discussion of "rites of passage": the rituals and customs which accompany transitional moments in human life. These include birth, the border between childhood and adulthood, marriage, death, and the sundry initiation rituals of the mystery

cults and their profane successors. These transitional rites all tend to distinguish a state of departure from the old, and a second state of entry into the new; their characteristic feature is a process of marginalisation or liminality in which the individual is first excluded from the community to which he belongs, and then allowed to return. His return is followed by his reintegration, on a new level, into that same community. The liminal state is often accompanied by various trials. (The ordeals Tamino undergoes in *Die Zauberflöte* are a familiar example). According to the ancient literary sources, hunting was a frequent initiation ordeal for youths on the cusp of manhood. In northern Greece and Thrace, boar-hunting seems to have played a special role. Ortega once wrote that hunting "frees us from our familiar personality". As one collection of ancient Greek anecdotes tells it, at aristocratic banquets in Macedonia only those could recline to drink in the Eastern way who had already slain a boar without nets: that is to say, in single combat. Here success in the boar-hunt is clearly a symbol of, and condition for a young man's entry into full manhood and the community of warriors. The exhibited figure vase was a *lekythos*: in their more usual form (see the example on display) these were deposited in graves. This must have been the function of the Budapest vase as well, which again represents the boar hunt as a rite of passage. It is the only known example of its kind, and, though five hundred years older, it clearly precedes and parallels the stone reliefs in its iconography. Note the difference between the representation of the galloping horse on the two images.

On the vase, its back legs are bent inwards, in the so-called "short gallop" pose familiar in Greek art from the Parthenon frieze onwards. The Thracian relief, where the horse's legs extend behind its body, illustrates the so-called "flying gallop" seen in the art of the Near East and China. This supports the assumption (in any case quite probable) that the Budapest lekythos came from a Greek workshop; most likely, considering the nature of the subject, from a workshop in the northern part of the Greek world. The difference in the horse's pose does not, however, affect the meaning. The image retains its symbolism on the Thracian grave-stele five hundred years later. It marks the passage of the young man whom the image commemorated from one state of being into another, and from the community of the living to the more populous society of the dead.

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