

## REPRESENTATION OF HOMERIC MYTHS IN ATTIC BLACK AND RED FIGURE VASE PAINTINGS

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### Introduction

Pottery is a primary source of evidence throughout the history of ancient Greece. Pervasive and almost indestructible, its generally predictable development means that it provides a framework to which other arts can be related.

Of all ancient Greek vases, those produced in Attica receive significant attention, for several reasons. Firstly, they outnumber the other Greek vases so far unearthed. Secondly, the Black Figure (decorations painted in black and the background of the vase left in brownish red colour of the clay) and Red Figure (decorations left in brownish red colour of the clay and the background of the vase painted in black) vase types show some sophistication in the art, technique and style that had been used to create them, and thus they represent the climax in the development of Greek vase paintings. Moreover, the decorations in these vases contain imagery that depicts diverse themes ranging from scenes from ancient Greek Myths to those from daily life.

### Objective

The objective of this study is to examine how the Homeric myths are depicted in Athenian Black and Red figure vase paintings in order to identify whether these depictions show any peculiar characteristics in terms of techniques of painting, and to what extent the artists have been true to the Homeric account in representing these scenes.

### Methodology

The study will be carried out through library research. Observation of vases is limited to the vases displayed in literary and electronic

sources since the museums and archives in Sri Lanka do not possess any Greek vase types, let alone any Attic Black and Red figure vases.

### Discussion

Greek literature is dominated by Homer, a crucial, if nebulous, figure in the transmission of Greek myths. Homer was regarded as the author of the *Iliad*, a poem in over 16000 hexameter verses about the wrath of Achilles and the fighting in Troy in the tenth year of the Trojan War. The second great early epic, the *Odyssey*, also attributed to Homer, is about the adventures of Odysseus on his return from the same war to his island home in Ithaca and about how he eliminated suitors who were expecting to marry his wife and take over his palace.

Representing scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has captured the attention of many Greek artists and most importantly those who decorated the surfaces of many Attic vase types and techniques.

### Results and conclusions

Out of the 360 vases that represented scenes from Greek myths, only 65 depict scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* on Attic black and red figure vase surfaces. Of these, 27 were Attic black figure vases while 38 are Attic red-figure vases. Artists who have decorated Black figure ware seemed to have preferred broad surfaced bigger vase types such as amphorai (13), hydria (5) and krater (2). The rest of the vases include one lekythos, one dinos, one kantharos, one cup and a plate. Artists of red-figure vases seemed to have preferred smaller vase shapes such as cups (17), skyphos (5), kylix (2) and pyxis (1)

although they have also decorated bigger vases such as amphorai (3), hydria (2), krater (5), stamnos (2) and one pellike.

Scenes from the *Iliad* are predominant in both black and red figure vases. Of these, the representation of Achilles seems to be the most sought after theme. Moreover, scenes from the *Odyssey* do not seem to be as popular as those from the *Iliad*. In both black and red figure vases while many artists were loyal to the Homeric account in their representation of myth, some have either used their imagination or have used a different version of the same myth.

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