

## **Changed Appearances: The Use of Masks on the Ceramics from the Theban Kabeirion in Greece**

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Kabeiric ware is a unique ceramic type from the sanctuary of the Kabeiroi, near Thebes in Boeotia, central Greece. The Kabeiroi were a group of pre-Hellenic deities, of probable Anatolian origin (Beekes, 2004, p.473), whose cult was founded at Thebes in the late sixth century BC (Heyder and Mallwitz, 1978, pp.59-60). The focus of this paper is to identify and catalogue those Kabeiric vases that have masks within their scenes. This clarifies the motivations and reasoning of the society and artists who created and used these vessels. This study will take into account the Kabeiric vases as well as evidence from other Greek ceramics. Upon Kabeiric ware the human figure was depicted in different, or *unworldly*, ways to that of a normal, or *worldly*, human body. Although early representations of humans were stylised and simplistic (Cook, 1997, p.20), the *orientalising* period saw more realistic depictions (Boardman, 2001, p.31). The vases of the Kabeirion, however, are renowned for their grotesque and caricatured appearance. It has been argued that, across Greece, the peculiar vase scenes with deliberately grotesque figures may represent theatrical and mythological scenes which were performed before an audience (Taplin, 1993, p.6).

### **Kabeiric ware and the sanctuary of the Kabeiroi**

Kabeiric ware appeared in the sanctuary in the mid-fifth century BC (Schachter, 1986, p.99), although there are a few examples of pottery with Kabeiric characteristics before this period. The ceramics, which were produced locally in Thebes, remained in use at the site until the first half of the third century BC (Cook, 1997, p.97). Despite its popularity at the sanctuary of Thebes, Kabeiric ware is not commonly found elsewhere in

Greece. Given its highly localised nature and its rather unique iconography, Kabeiric ware is something of an oddity in the world of Greek ceramics. It has been hailed as the only type of Boeotian pottery worth mentioning in any detail, and even then, such attention is not always flattering (Sparkes, 1967, p.116).

In fact, the ceramics of the Kabeirion are of great importance due to the lack of both archaeological and historical documentation of ritual activity at the site. This ranges from problematic excavations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Miller, 1979, p.357; Coulton, 1980, p.305; Parke, 1981, p.208), to a refusal by ancient authors to provide any detail on the cult.

The initiated are permitted to enter it. The sanctuary of the Kabeiroi is some seven stades distant from this grove. I must ask the curious to forgive me if I keep silence as to who the Kabeiroi are, and what is the nature of the ritual performed in honour of them and of the Mother. But there is nothing to prevent my declaring to all what the Thebans say was the origin of the ritual. They say that once there was in this place a city, with inhabitants called Kabeiroi; and that Demeter came to know Prometheus, one of the Kabeiroi, and Aetnaelis his son, and entrusted something to their keeping. What was entrusted to them, and what happened to it, seemed to me a sin to put into writing, but at any rate the rites are a gift of Demeter to the Kabeiroi. (Pausanias, 9.25.5-26.1)

The Kabeiric cult is one of the largest mystery cults in ancient Greece after the Eleusinian mysteries of Athens. Since details of the cult were not to be revealed to outsiders, participants had to be initiated in a private ceremony (Schachter, 1986, p.96). The secrecy explains the lack of historical texts. Therefore, the ceramics and other artefacts represent our best resource in understanding the sanctuary.

### **The iconography of Kabeiric ware**

Previous research has shown that the iconography of the vases can be divided into three distinct categories relating to ritual events (Schachter, 1986, p.100). Firstly, the arrival of the initiates at the sanctuary and the events prior to the ceremonies; secondly, the preparation for the initiation; and thirdly, the celebrations, or *panegyris*, following initiation (Schachter, 1986, p.100). These categories can be further sub-divided into specific events associated with each stage of the process. It must also be established as to why secret rituals would be depicted on vases, given that they may have been seen by the uninitiated.

The theatrical performances within the *panegyris* are especially interesting. It is an accepted practice that theatrical performance requires costume and make-up to change an individual's appearance. It is this use of costume, specifically masks, which is most relevant to this paper. Theatrical performances at sanctuaries are not uncommon; one only has to think of the important sanctuaries of Epidaurus, Delphi and Messene which all include theatres within their cult boundaries (Mee and Spawforth, 2001, under *Epidaurus, Delphi and Messene*). Therefore, the Kabeirion is not unusual in having a theatre, although the central position of the theatre suggests that it was the focus of the cult, rather than, as might be expected, a temple or altar.

### **Theatre, performance and the Kabeirion**

Costumes and masks are known to have been used in theatrical performances in ancient Greece (Marshall, 1999, p.188). One interesting study, which has now run to several editions (Webster, 1960, 1969, 1978), catalogued the masks preserved on vases, bronzes, terracottas and other media. The mask catalogue was comprised of characters recognisable from ancient Greek drama, tragedy and comedy. The appearance of these mask types on Greek painted vases suggests that the scenes depicted were of a theatrical nature. The idea that Greek vases may represent actors depicting

scenes from well-known myths and plays cannot be dismissed (Taplin, 1993, p.6). Webster's study of theatrical masks (1960, pp.19-20; 1969, pp.19-20; 1978, pp.61-64) included ten examples of Kabeiric ware. This catalogue was later expanded by Braun and Haevernick (1981, p.10).

However, this information can be expanded further. What is presented here is a revised catalogue of vases with scenes of ritual performance. This increases the total number of vases with mask-like representations from fourteen to twenty-nine. Those vases which have masks from the first and second initiation stages and which have been identified by previous writers (Webster, 1960, 1969, 1978; Braun and Haevernick, 1981) are also included.

Given the nature of theatrical productions, sets and props are likely to have been included in an accurate representation of a performance. Taplin notes that many of the vases included within his study on theatrical representation have evidence of stage design – stage doors, props in some of the vases, such as the south Italian krater with images of Goose Plays – which clearly demonstrate that we are indeed faced with a scene from the theatre (Taplin, 1993, p.30). Therefore, the table which details the mask types found upon each vase, also records the presence of alternative theatrical evidence. From this information, it is increasingly apparent that the Kabeiric artists included little representation of stage design. Only two vases (Nos. 8 and 13 below) have clear iconographic elements: one has a chorus, a staple ingredient of ancient Greek performance; the other has doors behind the characters, on this occasion representing the gates of Troy.

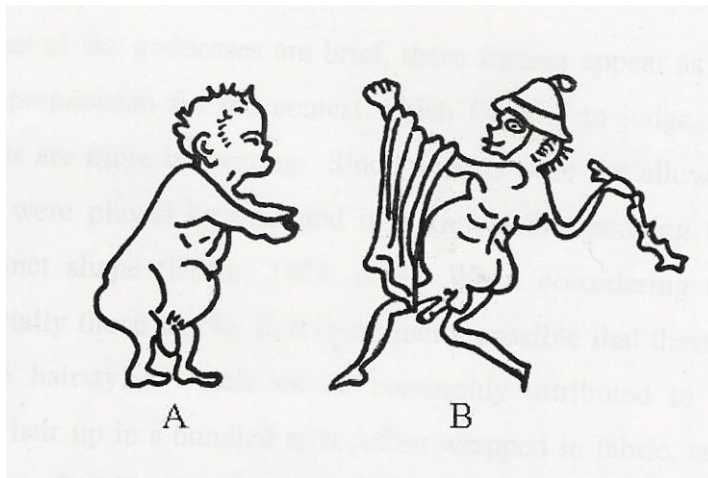
### **Theatrical (and non-theatrical) scenes: the iconographic types**

The definition of 'theatrical' used within this paper incorporates all the scenes from well-known plays and myths that would have been recognisable to an ancient audience. It is important to note that, while many vase scenes have theatrical links, only twenty-nine are suitable for discussion here. The

numerous unsuitable examples have been rejected on the basis that they are either too fragmentary or that the scenes on them are badly defaced.

### A. The Battle of the Pygmies and the Cranes (Catalogue nos. 1-4)

This particular scene type relates to the myth of the Pygmies and the Cranes, where the two fight each other in battle as a result of jealousy (Swindler, 1932, p.516). The story ends with the destruction of the pygmies (Hoffmann, 1997, p.38). Despite the lack of literature, the genre was popular. The Pygmies are comic figures, ludicrous in their inept attempts to defend themselves, belonging to the outskirts of society because they are not the ideal Greek hero-figure (Hoffmann, 1997, p.28). The Greeks retained an enduring fascination for those ‘outside’ their world. Pygmies were comic characters, and existed purely for the purpose of entertainment.



**Figure 1. Pygmies from Kabeiric vases. A. the short-limbed, traditional pygmy (from No. 4), B. the long-limbed, theatrical pygmy (from No. 2). (author’s own work)**

In terms of costume, pygmies seem to have had a standard format. They featured limited or no clothing, held a weapon in hand, and possessed a stylised head with gaping mouth, and they were either bald or wild-haired. The sense of movement for the pygmy on the vases is also interesting. Some of the depictions have longish torsos, shortened limbs and large crania that

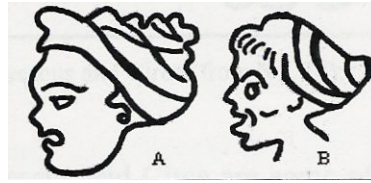
we would associate with achondroplasia (dwarfism). There are also other examples of pygmies which are peculiar – some seem to creep along the ground with a hunched posture, although their limbs and heads are in proportion. This would suggest that, rather than the figures being actual pygmies, they are actors trying to present an imagined construct of a pygmy.

### **B. The Iliad and Related Myths (Catalogue nos. 5-9)**

Those scenes classified within this group comprise those taken directly from the Iliad or from those stories relating to it. Many have no place within the epic but are closely connected to it. The heroic ideal explains the popularity of this genre, and others like it in Greek art (Renehan, 1987, p.106).

(i) *Judgement of Paris*: Paris judges the goddesses Athena, Hera and Aphrodite in a competition of beauty. Since Aphrodite bribes him with the promise of Helen, Paris is sometimes shown presenting her with a victor's wreath. The alternative version is the arrival of the goddesses, who are presented to Paris by Hermes. The Judgement of Paris is identified as the origin of the war, with the abduction of Helen leading the Greeks to wage the ten-year war on Troy (Gantz, 1993, pp.567-71).

The costumes of the goddesses are brief, and these figures appear as though they are finishing their preparation for the contest which Paris is to judge. The actual figures and the faces are more interesting. Since women were not allowed upon the stage, all the roles were played by men and it is known that padding was used to create a feminine shape (Beare, 1954, p.74). When considering the females depicted here, especially those on No. 6, it is distinctly possible that these are indeed men in drag. The hairstyles, which are commonly attributed to *hetairae*, or prostitutes, are not what we would expect of goddesses (Lewis, 2002, p.21).



**Figure 2. Hairstyles. A. a *hetaira* mask type (from Webster, 1978, p.24, XB *Hetaira*), B. Athena or Hera on a Kabeiric vase (from No. 6). (author's own work)**

(ii) *Achilles and Cheiron*: The introduction of the young Achilles to the learned centaur Cheiron is a well-known myth. Cheiron was known to have taught heroes and semi-divine individuals alike (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Centaurs*).

The simple inclusion of a centaur within this scene suggests that it is not a representation of a theatrical production due to complexities of costume. This, however, begs the question as to why these figures are then depicted with theatrical masks instead of ordinary facial features. The use of the mask to depict something not of this world has been used before; one only has to look at the representations of actual figures of pygmy-type discussed earlier. This suggests that a certain level of scepticism needs to be maintained when considering the vase scenes. Artists used mask-like features on vases regardless of whether the scene required such iconography or not.

(iii) *Achilles and Hector*: One of the climatic scenes from Homer's *Iliad* (Gantz, 1993, p.616). The battle of Achilles and Hector heralds the beginning of the end for Troy.

This vase is one of only two which has iconography relating to stage design. The gates of Troy featured behind the characters could easily be interpreted as stage doors, supporting the idea that this is indeed a performance. In Homer's tale, Priam is not mentioned as being present at the fight (*The Iliad*, Ch. 22). This suggests a certain level of artistic interpretation, either on the part of the stage production or the vase painter.

There are no images of (iv) and (v) available. However, both were exceedingly popular iconographic types, and the reunion of Menelaus and Helen was a feature of the ancient Greek stage (see Euripides, *Helen*).

(iv) *Ajax and Cassandra*: According to Taplin (1993, p.81), the scene of Ajax and Cassandra was a popular image in ancient Greek vase painting. Cassandra was said to have taken refuge in the temple of Athena during the sack of Troy, only to be discovered clinging to the statue of Athena, and was dragged away to be raped by Ajax (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Cassandra*).

(v) *Menelaos and Helen*: The reuniting of Menelaos and Helen was supposed to be a murderous meeting on the part of Menelaos. He plotted to kill his wife for her treachery but failed to achieve his goal upon meeting and seeing her again (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Helen*).

### **C. The Odyssey and Related Myths (Catalogue nos. 6, 10-14)**

Odysseus is a naturally popular figure in Greek art, doubtlessly because his place in the epic poems and his manifold adventures provide much variation for a vase painter. As with those scenes connected with the Iliad, not all of these depictions are based on passages within the epic. The Ogress is a new character which has no place within the Odyssey.

(i) *Odysseus and Circe*: This relates to the fateful meeting of Odysseus and Circe, shortly after she has enchanted all his men into swine (Gantz, 1993, p.704). He triumphs over her, though only with the aid of Hermes. This scene is often accompanied by some of Odysseus' men, either in human or swine form.

(ii) *Odysseus on a raft*: Odysseus is shipwrecked more than once in the Odyssey, so it is unsurprising that a scene like this would appear (Gantz, 1993, p.705).

(iii) *Odysseus and an Ogress*: Truly a comic scene, and one which has no basis on any of the known adventures of Odysseus in ancient



literature. It could be argued that this figure is not Odysseus, but the conical hat upon his head is a well-known feature of Odysseus in Greek art (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Odysseus*).

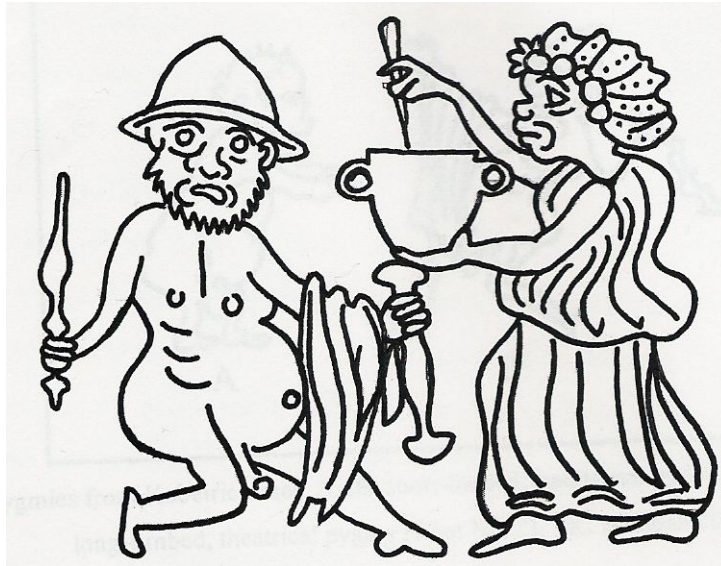


Figure 3. Odysseus and Circe (from No. 14). (author's own work)

The figures of Odysseus and Circe are some of the most interesting amongst the Kabeiric vases. Odysseus is bandy-legged, pot-bellied and pygmy-like; Circe is plump and unattractive, neither is what would be expected of a hero and a goddess. The representation of these figures is pure parody, which would support the possible idea of a stage production, albeit one with tongue firmly in cheek. Like the representations of the goddesses in the judgement of Paris scenes, Circe could very well be a man in drag, with heavy padding providing a feminine, if overweight, figure.

#### **D. Kadmos and the Snake (Catalogue no. 15)**

The character of Kadmos is somewhat peculiar; he is famous for founding Thebes (Gantz, 1993, p.468-9), but is not really spoken of in ancient literature. Kadmos is mentioned in Homer (*Odyssey*, 5.333) and indirectly in the tale of the Seven against Thebes (Price and Kearns, 2003, under

*Cadmus*). However, the site was already occupied by a dragon, which he had to defeat. The vase found at the Kabeirion is unusual in that it shows a snake rather than a dragon. If this is not the dragon that he slew, it may be a serpent that he met on his travels. Alternatively, it could be argued that having never seen a dragon, the vase painter imagined it rather as a large snake.

Kadmus is depicted as an unprepossessing character. Curiously, he bears a striking resemblance to the images of Odysseus and Herakles which appear on these vases. It is distinctly possible that the Kabeiric artists had a standard format for their male heroes and simply added minor signifiers, such as additional characters or characteristic outfits, to distinguish between them, as with Herakles' lion skin.

### **E. Herakles (Catalogue nos. 15-18)**

The many labours and adventures of Herakles are popular within Greek art, and the iconography of Herakles, with his lion-skin hood and cape, were firmly established by the archaic period (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Heracles*).

(i) *Herakles with the Stymphalion Birds*: These were man-eating birds which were found in Arcadia, which Herakles dispatched as his sixth labour (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Stymphalus*).

(ii) *Herakles with Omphale and King Jardanos*: As a result of an oracle announced by a priestess of Apollo, Herakles was sold into slavery for three years to Queen Omphale of Lydia, daughter of Jardanos (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Omphale*).

(iii) *Herakles with Acheloös*: From a fight between the river god Achelöos and Herakles (Gantz, 1993, pp.431-434).

(iv) *Herakles with Atlas*: During his eleventh labour in the garden of the Hesperides, where he was to steal the golden apples, Atlas got Herakles

to hold up the heavens, only for Herakles to trick him into taking them back (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Hesperides* and *Atlas*).

#### **F. Medusa (Catalogue no. 19)**

The story of Medusa is well-known: the hero Perseus obtains the head of the gorgon, Medusa, with some divine help from Athena and Hermes (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Gorgo/Medusa*). The concept of the grotesque and frightening female creature is common in Greek art up until the fourth century BC. However, after this period, the meaning of the motif radically changed and the gorgon was subsequently depicted as a beautiful woman. It is consequently unsurprising that the myth of the monstrous female is hardly found in art after this time (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Gorgo/Medusa*).

Again, this scene seems less like a theatrical production and more of a story-board with the characters moving through the different stages of Perseus meeting the gorgon, cutting off her head and then fleeing to Athena and safety.

#### **G. Kephalos and the Teumessian Fox (Catalogue no. 20)**

Kephalos was a mythical hunter who was presented with the hound, Laelaps, an animal forever destined to catch whatever creature he hunted (Price and Kearns, 2003, under *Cephalus*). When this hound chased the Teumessian Fox, who was fated never to be caught, it created a conundrum. Eventually Zeus settled the problem by turning both hound and fox into stone (Gantz, 1993, p.245). In terms of appearance, he fits into the category of a pygmy, albeit one of the long-limbed variety rather than a true pygmy.

#### **H. Other scenes from Kabeiric vases: non-theatrical (Catalogue nos. 21-29)**

Although these scenes bear little relation to those connected with theatrical performances, they are included within the catalogues of vases with

depictions of masks from Webster, and from Braun and Haevernick. Their inclusion is based upon the likelihood that the figures are wearing masks or have facial features derived from mask-types. The existence of these vases provides an interesting counterpoint to those images which definitely show theatrical scenes.

### Evidence of theatrical origins for Kabeiric vase scenes

The following catalogue details all the vases from the aforementioned categories. The table below summarises the catalogued vases, providing the information on the types of masks, according to Webster's types (1960, 1969, 1978), shown on the vases and whether they have any other theatrical elements such as set design.

Number	Object	Scene Type	Masks	Scenery & Other Theatrical Elements
1	Skyphos	Pygmy & crane	Z	None
2	Skyphos	Pygmies & cranes	Z	Ground visible
3	Skyphos	Pygmies & cranes	Z	None
4	Skyphos	Wrestling pygmies	Z	None
5	Skyphos	Judgement of Paris	B, T or TT, W, XD, Z	Rocks
6	Skyphos	Judgement of Paris	XB, Z	Couch & table
7	Skyphos	Achilles, Peleus & Cheiron	B, E	None
8	Skyphos	Achilles, Hector & Priam	Z	Gates of Troy
9	Kantharos	Ajax, Cassandra, Menelaos & Helen	Masks	None
10	Skyphos	Odysseus & Circe	XB, Z	Loom
11	Skyphos	Odysseus & Circe	Masks	Loom & swineman
12	Skyphos	Odysseus & Circe	T, Z	Loom
13	Skyphos	Odysseus & Circe	J, S or SS	On side B, chorus of swinemen
14	Skyphos	Odysseus & Circe	J, T	Loom, raft, mask of Boreas
15	Skyphos	Kadmos	B	None
16	Skyphos	Herakles & Stymphalion birds	J	None
17	Skyphos	Herakles & Omphale	C, QQ	None
18	Skyphos	Herakles & Atlas	J, but with short beard	Globe
19	Bowl	Medusa	H, XC	None
20	Skyphos	Kephalos	Z	None
21	Skyphos	Man & woman	XB, Z	None
22	Skyphos	Initiate, officials & dancer	AA, B, V, XC	None
23	Skyphos	Boar hunt	A	Rocks
24	Skyphos	Three men	D, QQ, Z	None
25	Bowl	Three men & a runner	Masks	Trees
26	Skyphos	Man	Masks	None
27	Skyphos	Man	Masks	Tree
28	Skyphos	Woman	T	None
29	Skyphos	Man	Masks	None

**Figure 4. Masks and other theatrical elements on Kabeiric vases. Images of all the masks catalogued in the table can be found in Webster, 1978, pp.14-26 (author's own work).**

### Catalogue of vases

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. 12880, National Archaeological Museum, Athens<br/>Skyphos, Complete<br/>A. Cranes and pygmy.<br/>B. Vines.</p>   | <p>Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter<br/>Wolter and Bruns, 1940, p.111, M29; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.324</p>                       |
| <p>Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter<br/>Wolter and Bruns, 1940, p.111, M8; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.299</p>   | <p>4. 3179, Staatliche Museum zu Berlin<br/>Skyphos, Condition unknown<br/>A. Wrestling groups.<br/>B. Pygmy and cranes.</p>  |
| <p>2. 3159, Staatliche Museum zu Berlin<br/>Skyphos, Complete<br/>A. Pygmies and cranes.<br/>B. Pygmies (one on a horse) and cranes.</p>                                 | <p>Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Kabir Painter<br/>Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.99, K16; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.355</p>  |
| <p>Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter<br/>Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.108, M7; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No. 354</p> | <p>5. 99533, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston<br/>Skyphos, Condition unknown<br/>Judgement of Paris.<br/>Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter</p> |
| <p>3. 10530, National Archaeological Museum, Athens<br/>Skyphos, Condition unknown<br/>L-R: Pygmies and cranes.</p>  | <p>Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109, M18; Webster, 1978, p.63, BV6; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.366</p>  |

6. No Inventory Number, British Museum, London

Skyphos

A. Ogress and Odysseus.

B. Judgement of Paris.

Undated

Levi, 1968, pp.155-6, Pl.5-6;

Webster, 1978, p.64, BV10;

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,

No.401

7. B77, British Museum, London

Skyphos, Complete

A. Peleus, Achilles and Cheiron.

B. Man and bird.

Boeotian

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109,

M17; Webster, 1978, p.62, BV2;

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,

No.399

8. 99532, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Skyphos

Complete

A. Achilles Hector and Priam.

B. Three men, palmette and bird.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.112,

although it is given the inventory number 563; Webster, 1978, p.62,

BV5; Braun and Haevernick,

1981, No.365

9. No Excavation Reference

Kantharos, Condition unknown

A. Ajax Cassandra, Menelaos and Helen.

B. Female flute-player, two chained men and man with torch.

Undated

Purchased at a market in Lucerne, 1962; Webster, 1978, p.63, BV9

10. No Number, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

Skyphos, Complete

A. Loom, Circe and two men.

B. Vines.

Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC

Hoppin and Gallatin, 1926, Pl.5;

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.100,

K21

11. 93.3-3.1, British Museum, London

Skyphos, Complete

A. Odysseus and Circe.

B. Vines.

Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Kabir

Painter

Walters, 1892, pp.77-87, Pl.4;

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.398

12. P116, University of  
Mississippi, Mississippi

Skyphos, Complete

A. Loom, Circe and Odysseus.

B. Vines.

Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Kabir

Painter

Robinson, 1934, Pl.18.2a-b;

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.100,  
K20; Braun and Haevernick,  
1981, No.402

13. 144, Archaeological Museum,  
Nauplion

Skyphos, Complete

A. Chorus of Swinemen.

B. Odysseus and Circe.

Late 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Pupil of, or  
influenced by, the Kabir Painter

Wolters, 1930, pp.209ff, Pl.14-15;

Webster, 1978, p.62, BV3; Braun  
and Haevernick, 1981, No. 405

14. 262, Ashmolean Museum,  
Oxford

Skyphos, Complete

A. Odysseus, Circe and Loom.

B. Odysseus on raft and Boreas.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup>  
Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109,  
M16; Webster, 1978, p.61, BV1

15. 3284, Antiquarium, Berlin

Skyphos, Complete

A. Kadmos and snake.

B. Herakles, Acheloös, and two  
men.

Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Kabir  
Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.100,  
K22; Webster, 1978, p.63, BV7

16. 582, Allard Pierson Stichting  
Museum, Amsterdam

Skyphos, Complete

A. & B. Herakles and bird.

Lunsingh Scheurleer, 1927, Pl.3.2;  
Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.114,

S8; Webster, 1978, p.62, BV4;  
Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.286

17. 3057, Staatliche  
Antikensammlung, München  
Skyphos, Complete

A. Herakles, Omphale and King  
Jardanos.

B. Vines.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the  
4th Century BC

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.112,  
M30; Braun and Haevernick,  
1981, No.403

18. No Number, Bosnia-  
Herzegovina Museum, Sarajevo  
Skyphos, Fragment

Atlas and Herakles

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup>  
Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109,  
M12; Braun and Haevernick,  
1981, No.410

19. Vase has no excavation or  
museum inventory numbers.

Bowl, Condition unknown

Two men, Gorgon, Medusa's  
body, Pegasus, two men, Athena.

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, Pl.37.1

20. 10429, National  
Archaeological Museum, Athens

Skyphos, Complete

A. Kephalos, hound and fox.

B. Horse-drawn cart carrying  
amphora led by a male figure,  
towards a female figure and an  
amphora on a stand.

Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Kabir  
Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.98

21. K1751, Archaeological  
Museum, Thebes

Skyphos, Fragment

Man and woman making a votive  
gesture.

Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century  
BC, Mystes Painter

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.8

22. 427, National Archaeological  
Museum, Athens

Skyphos, Complete



A. Initiate, two men, dancer and two women.

B. Vines.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter  
Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.106, M2; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.292; Webster, 1978, p.63, BV8. Webster (1978) has the inventory number for this vase as National Museum 5987.

23. 190, Universität, Heidelberg  
Skyphos, Complete

A. Man and boar.

B. Vines.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter  
Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109, M15; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.387

24. 540, Archäologisches Institut der Universität Göttingen  
Skyphos, Complete

A. Three men carrying sticks.

B. Vines.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.108, M5; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.380

25. 10467, National Archaeological Museum, Athens

Bowl, Fragments

Fragment 1: Three men standing and one man running.

Fragment 2: Two figures standing.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.105, M1; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, p.10

26. No Inventory Number, Bosnia-Herzegovina Museum, Sarajevo

Skyphos, Fragment

Bearded man.

Late 5<sup>th</sup> – Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Mystes Painter

Wolters and Bruns, 1940, p.109, M13; Braun and Haevernick, 1981, No.411

27. K3000, K3055, current location unknown

Skyphos, Fragment

Man and tree.

Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century  
BC, Mystes Painter

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.6

28. K316. K335, K1504, current  
location unknown

Skyphos, Fragment

Woman.

Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century  
BC, Mystes Painter

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.9

29. K2415, current location  
unknown

Skyphos, Fragment

Nude man, possibly Pais (literally  
translates as ‘the child’, the  
younger of the two deities  
worshipped at Thebes).

Second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century  
BC

Braun and Haevernick, 1981,  
No.40

## **Conclusions**

It is clear that a significant number of the figures upon Kabeiric vases are depicted wearing masks. However, the motivations behind this artistic decision are unclear. A possible explanation for their appearance is the contrast between figures in masks and those without. The non-mask vases from the sanctuary have a more naturalistic bent, with these figures being based directly upon human forms. The figures from the mask scenes are more stylised. Their mouths gape and facial features are exaggerated. Presumably, these larger than life features are directly connected to theatrical performance; it is far easier to see a stylised expression than a real one. While we can convincingly argue that a large proportion of the vases are showing scenes from theatre productions, there is an equal, if not greater, number (when all the vases from the sanctuary are considered) that have no connection whatsoever. Rather than rely on the evidence of masks alone, we must appreciate the other information that the vase scenes provide.

When considering the wider aim of addressing the issue of identifying those vases whose origins were theatrical, much can be made of aspects such as the chorus of swinemen (No. 13) or set design, like the gates of Troy (No. 8). Other scenes, including that of Odysseus on a raft (No. 14), could be argued to be stages. The stylised water and mask of Boreas to one side would have been easy to construct for a stage. However, other examples of ‘scenery’ may indicate that the activity is not taking place on stage. The cult appears to have held some ceremonies out of doors, so trees, rocks and other natural features may simply be representations of the real world. Admittedly, these features could be examples of set design but the context of the scenes argues against this opinion. The scenes of hunting and initiation at the ceremony would not have been put on stage and yet the characters depicted clearly wear masks.

Given the strong outside influences on Boeotian pottery as a whole, from the major vase centres of Athens and Corinth, as well as further afield, the Boeotian artists may be copying the forms of other vase styles which definitely displayed theatrical forms. The clear features and strong lines of theatrical masks would have undoubtedly appeal to the Kabeiric vase painters due to their caricatured expressions which are so commonly found on this pottery type. As a distinct type of pottery used by a social group with a vested interest in the theatrical reproduction of mythical tropes, the imitation of actual theatre is essentially unsurprising.

If, however, these masks are not an instance of imitation of other cities’ artistic styles, it is possible that members of the cult wore masks while participating in the activities at the sanctuary. The frequent appearance of masks on vases with non-theatrical images only serves to support this concept. This argument is not significantly hindered by the lack of research carried out upon Boeotian ceramics as a whole. The fact that the field is largely unstudied means that we cannot definitely state whether the Kabeiric vases are the only Boeotian type which depicts human activity in this

manner. Nevertheless, the lack of detailed modern studies does not mean that conclusions cannot be reached here. These vases represent a window into the ritual activities of a hitherto obscure cult, which cannot be gained from consideration of the other archaeological material. The other material from the sanctuary predates the vases and relates to earlier incarnations of the sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> While other excavated evidence may provide telling insights into the physical layout and general topography of the sanctuary, it is only the naturalistic style of the Kabeiric pottery painters that reveal the people behind the cult, and the manner in which they changed their appearances in order to emulate gods and heroes.

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest artefacts date from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and clearly indicate a herdsman or livestock-associated cult; the dedications consisting of bulls and other animals cast in bronze and lead (Schachter, 1986, p.97). The later offerings, from the early to mid fifth century BC, are mainly figurines of youths and children, suggesting a change in focus for the sanctuary to one aimed at human fertility (Schachter, 1986, p.98).

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