

The Foreigner in the Attic Head Vase: A Greeks View on Negroid

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ABSTRACT

In ancient Attica a series of ceramic vessels modeled in a figure of human head was produced. The so-called head vase, used as drinking-vessel, jug and perfume pot, began to be made in the middle of the 6th century BC. It was figured as a sculptural head of a woman, satyr, Hercules, Dionysos and human Negroid. In the 6th century BC. many other foreign tribes were generally represented in the Attic arts, so the Negroid head vase belonged to the typical examples of such trends. However, the head vase represented in its earlier period almost always the Negroid, reproduced rarely other foreign tribes, such as Skythians, Thracian or Persians. Why only the Negroid was preferred as subject of the head vase in the period from the middle of the 6th to the 5th century BC? In this presentation, the various examples both in classical literature and art are reflected so that the view of the ancient Greeks to the Negroid, a typical existence of “other”, is clarified. The Negroid appeared already in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod in the 8th century BC. In this period the Greeks seem to have recognized them rather as mythical than real existence. It is presumed that the Greeks began to see them as real foreign tribe in the mid-sixth to the end of the 5th century. Herodotos referred to the Ethiopian mercenaries participating in the Persian army with detailed description, but mentioned them on the other hand as a mysterious ethnic group, too. Even in the 5th century BC, it was often perceived as a legendary tribe. In the 4th century BC. Theophrastus mentioned the Negroid as a nobility's follower, and this reference is often cited by scholars. The possession of Negroid slave seems namely to have been associated to the wealthy classes in the eye of the contemporary Athenians. It seems to have functioned as a kind of status symbol of the upper classes, because the Negroid slave was simply rare and precious. The Negroid was represented also in the Attic vase-paintings from the mid-6th to the end of the 5th century BC. It appeared both in the mythological and genre scenes. The representations of their body varied often, but were not very far from the depictions of the modeling of the head vase. The potters and the painters seem to have shared the same accurate insight and formative interest to the exotic representation of the Negroid. In the beginning of the production of the head vase in Attica the Negroid seems to have been represented as a semi-mythical existence, but to have functioned in real life as a status-symbol of the upper classes of Athens. The artist's formative interest stimulated also the earlier representations of the Negroid.

1. PREFACE

The head vase (Figure 1) is a container in the shape of a human head and neck and sometimes part of a shoulder. The head vases of ancient Greek art are made of ceramic (clay) or metal. The production of Attic head vases began in the mid-sixth century BC, at about the same time as representations of foreigners began to appear in Greek art¹⁾. Until the end of the 5th century BC the only foreigner represented in the Attic head vase was the Negroid, distributed today in the Sahara desert and sub-Egypt African continent. This study

focusses on the Greek Negroid in ancient literature and the depiction of the foreigner in Greek art, and considers the intention of motif selection in the attic Negroid head vase from the end of the sixth century to the mid-fifth century BC.



Figure 1: Mug in the shape of a man's head

Greek, Attica, Archaic period, ca.510 BC, Height: 17.7cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 00.332. Photo: *The Image of the Black in Western Art* 1, 143, Pl. 154.

2. ABOUT THE HEAD VASE

The production of the head vase in Greece began in about the 7th century BC, in regions where ceramics were more highly developed, such as Corinth, Rhodes and areas of Eastern Greece influenced by the Orient and Egypt. From there it spread to Attica. The head vases made in Attica were used as perfume pots, drinking vessels, and jugs²⁾. There were also vases with two joined heads called janiform (Janus-like) head vases. In an area preceding Attica in the production of the head vase, motifs chosen included an animal, a woman, a man with a helmet, a horn goddess, Hercules wearing a lion's skin, an Oriental, and a Negroid, but by Attica were female, satyr, Hercules, Dionysus, and Negroid. In Beasley's *ARV₂*³⁾ there are 26 pieces that can be confirmed as Negroid head vases. *ARV₂* gathered and classified the Attic head vase from the latter half of the sixth century BC when the production started in Attica, until the early fourth century BC. The Attic Negroid head vase has black skin, small spherical head hair, thick lips, prognathism, and a long wide nose. In previous studies, the Negroid style head vase is usually interpreted as a symbol of slavery, and is understood in the context of an Ethiopian slave associated with Greek luxury.

2. THE ANCIENT WORLD AND THE NEGROID

The modelling of the Attic Negroid head vase is an almost perfect depiction of the physical features of the Negroid from the Sahara desert and sub-Egyptian Africa, and it can therefore be understood that the potters had enough insight to express their subjects exactly. In addition, a head vase with personal body features such as a wrinkle on the forehead or crow's feet suggests that the potter must have directly encountered the model. The Negroid has equal distribution areas with Ethiopian peoples in ancient times, and

similar physical characteristics are described in literature. They were recognized as mythical characters for the Greeks around the 8th century BC before Homer's and Hesiod's epic⁴⁾ was established, and from the mid-sixth century BC to the end of the 5th century BC they became recognized as the "real" foreigners. Regarding this, in the 5th century BC Herodotus refers to Ethiopians who appear in both the Persian Wars and legend⁵⁾. According to Theophrastos's work⁶⁾, they were also regarded as symbols of upper class or wealth in Greek society, at least in the 4th century BC.

3. THE NEGROID AND GREEK ART

Pottery painting around 530 BC is considered the earliest Greek expression of foreigners; those depicted at this time are Skythai, Thracian, Persian and Ethiopian, Negroid. The start of the depiction of the Negroid is said to be at about the same time in pottery paintings as in the head vase. Expression of the Negroid in Greek art appears in pottery paintings, head vases, statues, precious metals and jewellery works. Although they might be the motif alone, many of them are expressed as followers (including slaves) in both a mythological and non-mythological context. They are arranged as a symbol of regionality, and in the case of a follower as an indicator of the master's status. From the 5th century, the Negroid physical features depicted in pottery scenes became more subtle, but because the head vases were produced using molds, there was little such a tendency there. In fact, the format and motif of the head vase did not change for over 100 years from the start of production, similar to sculpture with less undulating change, unlike pottery or pottery painting which is rich in variations and subject matter.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The beginning of head vase production in Attica and the expression of the foreigner in Greek art occurred at the same period in the mid-sixth century, but then the foreigner who was chosen as the motif of the head vase was the Ethiopian - Negroid. The depiction of the Ethiopian's figure in literature is confirmed from the 5th century. The Attic Negroid head vase with accurate physical features shows that there must have been direct contact between the peoples of Attica and Ethiopia in the sixth century. From the 5th century, there was a change in the depiction of the Negroid in pottery painting, but in the head vase, both form and body depiction remained almost unchanged. The Negroid was one of the newest art motifs at the time of the start of the production of the head vase, and it was considered a symbol of luxury by Greeks in the Hellenistic period. Furthermore, at this time, it is understood that although the Negroid was in contact with the Greeks as a real foreigner in the campaigns of Psamtik II and the Persian War, it was recognized as a mid-mythical existence. And from the accuracy of modelling of the Negroid in the head vase, we can confirm the potter's strong creative interest in the Negroid. Based on the above factors, it seems that the Negroid was chosen as the motif at the beginning of the production of the Attic head vase in the mid-sixth century.

NOTES

- 1) *The Image of the Black in Western Art I*
- 2) Beazley, 1929

- 3) *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painter*, Second Edition, 15 29-1552
- 4) Hom. *Od.* 1.22-24, 19.246-247, *Il.* 1.423-425, Hes. *Op.* 527
- 5) Hdt. 2.32-33, 2.104-105, 7.69-71
- 6) Theophr. *Char.* 21.4

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