

Oral Session II: History and Theory of Art

Visualization of Myth: The Mythical Representation of the Birth Pithos

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ABSTRACT

The so-called “Birth pithos,”¹⁾ thought to have been produced on the island of Tenos during the first quarter of the 7th century BC, approximately 1 m high, is regarded as one of the most important examples of this group. In previous studies, several scholars focused on the interpretation of the subject matter of the neck panel (*Figure. 1*), specifically, whether or not it portrays the Birth of Athena, because the depiction of the main figure is extraordinary in comparison with the visual language of ancient Greek art.

This paper examines not the main figure—Zeus—but the figure of Athena, which has been given less attention in previous research. In contrast to the curious representation of Zeus, Athena of this pithos shows quite a canonical form: fully armored figures are common in representations of the archaic period. I will clarify the figure’s innovative quality by observing other examples of 7th and 6th centuries BC that represent the Birth of Athena. I will point out the necessity to reconsider the Birth pithos in the extremely new movement of visualization of epic and myth.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Aegean islands, notably northern Cyclades, many huge storage vessels—pithoi—with elaborate relief decoration were produced from the 8th to the 7th century BC. The relief pithoi of the Tenian-Boeotian group are known to include some of the earliest representations of mythological scenes in ancient Greek art. The so-called “Birth pithos,” thought to have been produced on the island of Tenos during the first quarter of the 7th century BC, approximately 1 m high, is known for having one of the earliest representations of mythological scenes in ancient Greek art. It has a neck panel on its main side depicting the Birth of Athena (*Figure. 1*).

The Birth of Athena, patron goddess of Athens, was a popular artistic subject, especially in the archaic period. According to Hesiod (*Theogonia*, 924—926), Athena was born from the head of Zeus. Zeus swallowed Metis, the goddess of “cleverness” whom he had made pregnant. He was afraid she would invent a stronger child than him. After this fierce event, Athena was born out of Zeus’s head. The so-called “Homeric Hymn (XXVIII)” to Athena tells us that Athena suddenly emerged from Zeus’s head, stood

before him and shook her spear. The myth is a part of what it told about the destiny of the gods in general. The original father of the gods is displaced by his son, who is subsequently overthrown by his own son. This myth—with Athena’s extraordinary birth preventing the Olympian gods from being overthrown—was so popular in the archaic period because it assured the stability of the universe. According to some later authors, the lyric poet Stesichorus (c. 630—555BC) was the first to mention that the goddess was born in full armor²). Strabo mentions a painting of the Birth of Athena by Kleantes of Corinth in the Sanctuary of Artemis at Olympia. Kleantes must have lived in the 7th century BC. The aim of this paper is to reconsider the importance of the representation of Athena on the Birth pithos.

2. DESCRIPTION

The chief character on the neck panel of the Birth pithos is a winged figure seated on a chair with bird head decoration. The lower body is in profile, and the chest, head, and arms are frontal. The hair is half-length and the dress reaches down to a little above the knees. The figure has thin wings bent upwards, and the arms are bent and raised. From the main character’s head, a small, winged, fully armored figure protrudes, visible from the waist up, holding a spear in the right hand and a short, sticklike object in the left hand (*Figure. 2*). This object has been interpreted as a distaff, branch, javelin, thunderbolt, or shield. The attendant winged figure with a sickle or a surgical knife to the left is interpreted as Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. In the lower-right part of the field, a naked, winged figure sits with his legs under him, and holds a short staff-like-object close to a tripod. In the upper-right zone of the field, there is a fragmentary winged and naked figure who turns his head toward the incredible birth scene, holding one hand on his chest, as if he is astonished.



Fig. 1 Drawing of neck panel of the Birth pithos



Fig. 2 Athena of the Birth pithos

3. ICONOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Due to the non-canonical and extraordinary representation of the seated figure, several

scholars have proposed many possible interpretations of the subject matter of the pithos. Is this the Birth of Athena or is it a different mythic event? The point of their discussions is whether the seated central figure is male or female. Simantoni-Bournia summarizes the former research and points out that the knee-length dress and half-length hair indicate a male in this period and dismisses the idea that the traces of a beard of the seated figure resulted from an incorrect repair in comparison with examples from the same period. Then, she concludes that the seated figure represents Zeus³).

The depiction of Athena of this pithos, however, has been given less attention in previous research. The position and portrayal of the small figure of the goddess protruding from Zeus's head has a lot in common with later archaic examples of this subject matter. The bronze relief in Olympia (a. 600BC) shows the archaic canonical type of the Birth of Athena. Zeus is seated on a chair, Eileithyia is standing close to him, and Hephaistos is shown to the right moving off the scene, looking round toward Zeus. Athena—equipped with a helmet, spear, and shield—is above the head of Zeus. The Tyrrhenian amphora by Kyllenios Painter (570—560BC) shows Athena visible from the hips upwards above Zeus's head, fully armored with an Attic helmet, shield on her left arm, and spear in her right hand. A little later than the Kyllenios Painter, the C Painter adapted the same theme to decorate the pyxis in the Louvre (a. 560BC). Here- Athena has almost completely emerged. Examples of the Birth of Athena became less frequent in the later 6th century. The myth would have appeared grotesque to the anatomical understanding of Classical times. The Antimenes Painter attempted to resolve the problem by standing Athena before Zeus in fully grown splendor, like lines of the Homeric Hymn.

4. VISUALIZATION OF MYTH

Among the Tenian-Boeotian pithoi, we find some exceptionally brutal scenes: the slaughter of women and children, birds picking at bodies, lions attacking men, and so on. The Birth pithos also shows a hopeless combat between a man and a beast on the shoulder relief. The Mykonos Pithos (a. 670BC) shows scenes of the slaughter of Trojan women and children by Greeks on the belly. Birds in the battlefield pick at soldiers' bodies on some fragments of relief pithoi from Tenos and Eletria (a. 680BC). Why did the 7th century Cycladic artists choose these brutal motifs? According to Vermeule, these brutal representations might single-mindedly reflect and echo literary expressions, in particular Homer⁴). In the *Iliad*, Odysseus insults the Trojan warrior Sokos by saying the following passage to him:

It is not your mother and father who will clean your eyes when you are dead, but the birds who eat flesh raw will pluck them out as they strike you all over with their wings (XI.454)

Some images of the birds in the battlefield act as similes of the soldiers' tragic end in the *Iliad*. Additionally the combat between the Greeks and Trojans is likened to an animal fight between a carnivorous animal and an herbivorous animal. The image of lion aggression is used more than 25 times to describe the heroic onslaught in Homer's works. This motif might have been considered appropriate as a literary device to represent the heroic triumph. On the shoulder frieze of the Birth pithos, there is a scene depicting two lions attacking a deer. This motif is represented on countless works in early Greek art.

5. CONCLUSION

In contrast to the curious representation of Zeus, the depiction of the goddess protruding from Zeus's head in full armor is considered as an advanced and canonical representation ahead of later archaic examples. In the late 7th or early 6th century, Stesichorus mentions Athena's Birth in full armor. It would be reasonable that 7th-century artists understood the details of this mythological episode. Considering the Birth pithos in the contemporary movement of visualization of myth, the depiction of Athena, springing out from the head of her father in full armor matches the trend: 7th-century artists attempted to precisely visualize myth.

NOTES

- 1) Relief pithos. Tenos Museum. Cycladic c. 680BC. From Tenos.
- 2) Robbins, 2013, 9.
- 3) Simantoni-Bournia, 2004, 83-85.
- 4) Vermeule, 1979, 83-116.

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