Reviews


This volume is the magnum opus of Anne Mackay both in size (and weight!) and in substance. It is dedicated to Exekias, long recognised as an accomplished and pioneering potter and vase painter, who developed the black-figure technique to its limits and exerted considerable influence over his contemporaries. His works are distinguished by precise draughtsmanship, carefully thought out compositions and exceptional representation of emotional states. All this comes ‘very close to the “unGreek” notion of art, rather than techne’ (326).

Mackay sets herself two main goals: to discuss in detail each surviving vase attributed to Exekias; and to establish a chronological framework for his extant corpus of 32 vases (excluded are his funerary plaques). The book therefore takes on a catalogue format. After the introduction, separate chapters discuss individual vases and one chapter briefly discusses four ‘disattributed’ vases. Each chapter comprises a detailed description of the vase, an analysis of its iconography and a discussion of its relative date based on stylistic criteria. The book ends with an overview of the chronology, the conclusions and three appendices (Appendix C, indicating the depth of field in his most complex scenes through planar maps, is especially illuminating).

To achieve her goals the author first meticulously describes both the shape and decoration of each vase. Then she analyses the decoration in relation both to the rest of Exekias’ vases and also to other contemporary works, while at the same time paying particular attention to the influence of oral tradition and ritual. During this process she fine tunes previous interpretations but also daringly explores alternative identifications and interpretations of the scenes in order to generate discussion.

Many of her suggestions are ingenious and persuasive but some not so. It is unlikely, for example, that the warrior falling off his horse...
on no. 7 has just been killed by a spear passing through his body.
Rather, it is the wounded and falling horse that is unbalancing the
rider; and he does not seem to be clutching at his wound, but to hold
his spear, now lowered and thus with spearhead pointing backwards.
The puzzling scene of a woman driving the male passenger on both
sides of no. 8 is interpreted as a ritual re-enactment at a Dionysiac
festival, with the woman driver representing the wife of the archon
king. However, the lack of Dionysiac attributes in the scene makes
this highly unlikely. The riding couple is more likely a mythical
goddess-mortal pairing (e.g. Thetis and Peleus). Still, Mackay's
suggestion that some scenes may have related more to cult activity
than abstract myth is well taken. In fact, it makes great sense when
it is applied to the unique scene of Dionysos on his boat (no. 20): in
addition to the mythical encounter of Dionysos with the pirates, the
scene would have evoked the parade of Dionysos' statue in a ship-
cart during the Anthesteria festival.

Exekias, who worked for about 20 years, emerges as an influential
creator of new scenes and compositional patterns, with over half
of his extant scenes highly innovative. As Mackay shows, however,
his scenes are grounded in tradition, with elements from the
traditional repertoire adapted to create innovative compositions
and narrative contexts. By incorporating familiar elements in his
scenes, he facilitated acceptance of his creative changes by his
clients. Moreover, Exekias explored myth not only for depicting
specific points of the story but also to express profound messages
and elicit responses from the viewer at a time when tragedy had not
yet been born.

Mackay distinguishes four main periods of Exekias' production,
within which she arranges clusters of vases. Her detailed arguments
for dating are based on both shape and decoration and are very
persuasive. In tracing changes in his art, the author shows that his
later works are particularly well designed and precisely executed,
with an increasing amount of anatomical detail and an unusual
raised contour around the figures. These works are also more
evocative and complex in meaning, often with moments loaded
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with emotion and suspense, like the preparation for Ajax’ suicide (no. 21) or the group of Achilles and Penthesilea (no. 31).

A major contribution of this study is the attempt to analyse the process of reception by Exekias’ contemporaries, which occurred on different levels as well-known myths were seen through personally experienced performances. She argues that in some scenes Exekias blurs the line between myth and ritual, while in others he employs mythical prototypes to express contemporary experiences (e.g. scenes related to the sea reflect Athenian mastery of the sea and celebration of seafaring).

Mackay also focuses on how vases were viewed. Some of the scenes were supposed to be read in sequence, from obverse to reverse, most obviously no. 1 where the horses in a chariot harnessing scene are distributed over both sides. This holistic approach is extended to more examples, with scenes designed to be considered in association because of causal connection, thematic pairing or contrast, or narrative sequence. On the other hand, the repetition of the same scene on both sides of a vase (e.g. Herakles and Triton in no. 12) remains puzzling.

The volume is very well produced and the plates are abundant, usefully offering several views of each vase. There are occasional typos of which only one may create confusion: ‘Fighting-cocks were understandably popular as love-gifts from erotes to eromenos’ (23); surely erastes is meant here instead of erotes.

In sum, this thorough and thoughtful study, meticulously researched and a treasure-house of stimulating observations and suggestions, paints a complete portrait of the artistic personality of Exekias. Written in an accessible and engaging style, this major monograph will be cherished for years by vase painting specialists and anyone interested in Archaic Greek art.

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