Dining with Death:

An Analysis of Attic White-ground Lekythoi and Athenian Notions of the Afterlife in Classical Greece

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Some of the most valuable and unusual visual records of Athenian concepts of the afterlife, the soul, and death in Classical Greece are Attic white-ground, funerary lekythoi from the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Despite the fact that these polychromatic, ceramic, oil vessels were a short-lived phenomenon that emerged out of Classical red-figure pottery (*ca.* 450 – 425 BCE) (Cook, 1960: 172), and were predominant grave offerings in Athens only from *c.* 560 BCE until the end of the 5th century (Oakley, 2004: 9), to archaeologists and art historians alike, they are remarkable not only for the wealth of information they offer as tomb artifacts used for ritual libations and as burial gifts, but also for their uncommon iconography. Their imagery documents both the Athenian burial rites involving food and drink and the Attic notion of the deceased's journey to the afterworld during the Classical period (Garland, 1985: 107 – 108). Indeed, the white-ground, funerary lekythoi are especially notable for their depictions of tomb visits, unprecedented among pottery vessels of this type, and for their portrayals of the Greek soul bearers such as the ferryman Charon and the god Hermes (Beazley, 1938: 8). Although these faded relics leave many questions unanswered, a few scholars have been able to surmise what social and religious factors, and what new Athenian attitudes toward death and the afterlife may have led to this deviation from the popular mythological subjects depicted on black- and red-figure funerary pots. By exploring issues of food and drink in relation to 6th and 5th century BCE

white-ground, funerary lekythoi, this essay aims to demonstrate that the elite Athenians during the Classical period conceived of their afterlife as a material reality.

Examination of 6th and 5th century BCE Attic white-ground, sepulchral lekythoi reveals that there was a deliberate attempt to link the world of the living with the world of the dead at a basic level. Their form and function are obviously utilitarian, even though they mainly served a funerary purpose, as is evidenced by the fact that their coat of delicate white slip proved unsuitable for everyday handling (Beazley, 1938: 6). Contemporary Attic black- and red-figure types, which were more resilient than the white ground (Beazley, 1938: 6), were popularly used for toiletry and household purposes, holding perfumes of scented oils and olive oil for cooking (Clark, et al., 2002: 112). From the abundance of pottery excavated at Attic gravesites, some dating as early as the middle of the 11th century BCE, archaeologists can further infer that the ancient Athenians had a longstanding tradition of burying their deceased with lekythoi as well as other kinds of pottery such as ceramic storage vessels called neck-amphorae, and certain types of wine jugs called trefoil-mouthed oinochoai (Cook, 1960: 7 – 9). Even if it is impossible to prove definitively as to why the ancient Greeks preferred to inter their dead with utilitarian objects, it is worth noting that the presence of these practical items unearthed in or near tombs, at the very least, suggests that there was a desire to transmit aspects of the living world to that of the dead.

While it was common among many ancient civilizations to bury the dead with everyday objects, what is most notable and exceptional about the white-ground, funerary lekythoi is that they *visibly* tie these two antithetical states of existence. In a sense, these vessels are the medium that joins the realm of the living and the world of the dead; in some cases, they literally juxtapose living persons with the deceased. On one Athenian polychromatic, white-ground lekythos attributed to 'Group R,' a group of artists associated with the so-called Reed Painter (last quarter

of the 5th century BCE), the young man who sits on the base of the grave stele holding a spear is most likely an image of the deceased, what is known as an *eidolon* (Garland, 1985: 128), while the young woman holding his helmet and another young man situated on each side are probably mourners (Osborne, 1998: 192 – 195). The warrior's disconnected gaze and the fact that he and the two other figures do not seem to be aware of each other implies that, although all the individuals graphically share the same setting and picture plane, the central figure is in a state of remove, perhaps even in another dimension (Osborne, 1998: 195). The tomb, which itself provides the central axis of the composition, is the connecting piece between the two levels of existence. As the renowned art historian Sir John D. Beazley succinctly remarks on a similar scene of a young woman visiting the grave of a soldier, "the tomb is the link in the picture" (Beazley, 1938: 10). Nevertheless, the figures' impression of detachment expresses both the sense of loss and the reality of the deceased's departure from the living – two sentiments that pervade the imagery of Classical white-ground lekythoi.

Unlike the mythological and domestic scenes that dominate the decoration of black- and red-figure types, the white-ground lekythoi, which appear to have drawn away from the dramatic narratives of mythical figures and creatures around 470 BCE (Garland, 1985: 125), tend to concentrate on funerary iconography. They depict intimate and "more contemplative scenes" (Osborne, 1998: 190) from life of departing warriors, souls of the deceased at their tombs, visits to the tomb, and, in rare instances, the preparation of the dead (Garland, 1985: 28), and the deposition of the body (Garland, 1985: 35) (Osborne, 1998: 190; Garland, 1985: 107 – 108). Though the white lekythoi provide little visual evidence concerning the elaborate Greek burial rituals, that is, the "laying out of the body (*prothesis*), its conveyance to the place of internment (*ekphora*), and finally the deposition of its cremated or inhumed remains" (Garland, 1985: 21),

scholars can infer from other kinds of Attic pottery and literary sources what role these vessels played in the funeral proper. During *prothesis* lekythoi filled with oil were placed around the bier that held the corpse, perhaps to purify the deceased and the living (Garland, 1985: 26, 43; Oakley, 2004: 11). While there are few explicit descriptions of the significance of olive oil in the funerary context, the extensive usage of this substance in all sorts of religious rites, competitions, etc., as well as in major literary works indicates that the Greeks thought it possessed auspicious qualities. In the *Odyssey*, the "olive is the plant of civilization, whose shade covers Odysseus on his return to Ithaca. A stake of wild olive is used to blind the man-eating Cyclops." Furthermore, in the great Panathenaic games, a jar of olive oil was awarded to the victors (Wilkins and Hill, 2006: 135). When the body or ashes were interred, white-ground lekythoi were also used for libations of oil (Burkert, 1985: 194; Oakley, 2004: 206, 208) that were sometimes mixed with wine and honey (Burkert, 1985: 72). In the 5th century BCE Greek play *The Persians* by Aeschylus, "the queen brings milk, honey, water, wine, and oil and also flowers to the grave of the dead king" (Burkert, 1985: 71). According to one late 5th century BCE law from Iulis in Keos which prescribed that "up to three measures of wine and one of oil may be brought to the tomb" (Kurtz, 1971: 200), there were also restrictions on the amount of oil given.

Furthermore, white-ground lekythoi were burial offerings for the deceased, sometimes discovered piled inside the grave with other gifts around the body or broken and burnt with food offerings (*holokautomata*) (Garland, 1985: 113; Oakley, 2004: 11) in special ditches called *opferinnen* (Kurtz, 1971: 204; Garland, 1985: 36). Indeed, a few Athenian white-ground lekythoi which portray broken vases by the stele suggest that some of the pots and food may have been purposefully destroyed so that they might symbolically "die." Consequently, perhaps, they could then be accessible to the dead (Kurtz, 1971: 215 – 216; Oakley, 2004: 205) or could aid the

deceased souls on their journey to the afterlife (Garland, 1985: 113). Thus, archaeological excavations of Attic white-ground, sepulchral lekythoi together with ancient written sources further confirm that the Athenians of Classical Greece incorporated material substances from life into the world of the dead, the *ekei*, literally meaning the place "there" (Garland, 1985: 128).

Moreover, white-ground lekythoi are particularly valuable for the details they disclose about Athenian burial offerings, including those of food and drink. Many of the tomb visit scenes portray one, two or three persons, mostly women, coming towards the stele bearing gifts (Garland, 1985: 108). The most common funerary offering is a long, shallow basket, possibly crafted out of reed or cane, called a *kaneon* or *kaniskion* (Oakley, 2004: 203; Garland, 1985: 108). On one Attic piece by the Timokrates Painter, two women each carry one of these baskets, containing lekythoi and ribbons for decorating the stele or its base (Garland, 1985: xvi, 111). The *kaena* contain vases (usually lekythoi), wreaths, fruits, and sometimes eggs and cakes (Oakley, 2004: 203). Unfortunately, it is difficult for the most part to identify indisputably what foods were given to the dead. Speculation is primarily based on other archaeological findings, such as terracotta shaped fruits and eggs, and literary sources like Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* which refers to honey-cakes called *mellitouttata* (Oakley, 2004: 208; Garland, 1985: 113). However, in a few instances pomegranates, bunches of grapes and eggs are distinguishable (Garland, 1985: 113; Oakley, 2004: 206). Although the reasoning behind the offering of certain foods is also hard to validate, there are a few credible hypotheses. In the ancient Greek myth of the rape of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter (the goddess of grain and agriculture) must reside in the netherworld for half of every year after eating seeds of a pomegranate, a fruit of the dead. As a result, Demeter's grief over her daughter's absence from earth causes the cycle between winter and spring, the metaphorical death and rebirth of the seasons. (Grimal, 1996: 359). From this

famous myth, it is plausible to presume that the Greeks once associated the pomegranate with death and the afterworld, and likewise, it is appropriate to reason that they wished to bestow this fruit of the dead upon the deceased. In a series of 4th century BCE Totenmahl reliefs the pomegranate reappears in the funerary context; these death-feast reliefs commonly depict a man reclining with "a table beside him laden with various kinds of food, including cakes, fruit, pomegranates and eggs " (Garland, 1985: 70; 113). Yet, it is worth noting that these fruits do not exclusively denote death. According to the art historian John H. Oakley, the seeded nature of the pomegranate, and even that of the grapes, "makes them a sign of life and fertility, and like the wreaths and sprigs, their use in funerary cult signaled a hope for continuing life after death" (Oakley, 2004: 206). The gifts of eggs, obviously symbols of birth and regeneration, most likely served a similar purpose to that of the pomegranate. Although it can never be known for certain, perhaps these foods were emblematic of the deceased's soul entering a new state of existence. In this new state, the deceased were mere shadows of their former selves, but were, in some way, still conscious entities that needed material sustenance from the earthly realm (Kurtz, 1971: 204).

This notion of the soul's continuing existence after death is further implied in the portrayals of the offering of *choai* or libations for the grave (Kurtz, 1971: 150). One white-ground lekythoi depicts a liquid being poured from an alabastron, another type of oil and perfume container, at the grave (Oakley, 2004: 206). Among several other grave visit scenes on white-ground lekythoi, the steles are also anointed with oil and garlanded as if they are the deceased who, "like the living, are anointed and wreathed for the festival" (Burkert, 1985: 72). On a piece by the Woman Painter (*ca.* 420 BCE), one of the women to the left of the stele tips a hydria, a type of water vessel, and pours its contents into a phiale held by another female attendant (Oakley, 1004: 206; 209). Just as oil was thought to possess beneficial powers, water

was viewed as a "primary cathartic element, especially water from the sea since it was considered less susceptible to pollution" (Kurtz, 1971: 149). During *prothesis* it was used both to purify the corpse and the living, and, as the above example illustrates, as a common liquid offering in honor of the deceased (Kurtz, 1971: 149 – 150).

Although there is little mention about what purposes these libations served for the Athenians, the existence of a cult to the dead and the numerous gestures of piety by means of burial gifts and annual funerary rites (Kurtz, 1971: 145) suggest that the libations, not to mention food, somehow nourished and mollified the deceased person's soul (Burkert, 1985: 72-73). In the Classical Athenian cult of the dead, souls were believed to retain some level of consciousness, a shadowy likeness of themselves when alive, and possibly a few faculties of a living person. The Roman rhetorician and satirist Lucian wrote in a diatribe against burial practices: "the dead are thought to be sustained by our offerings, and that without them they starve" (Kurtz, 1971: 206). Of course the souls would not die if they were not fed; however, they could become angry and thereby retaliate against the living (Garland, 1985: 120). It appears that the core reasoning behind the offering of food and drink is rooted in the ancient Greek religious concept of *do ut des*, that is, "I give that you may give"; the relations of the deceased performed acts of piety to the dead so that in return the deceased would help fulfill the requests of the living (Garland, 1985: 120). Records of annual celebrations such as *Genesia, Nemesia, Nekysia* and *Epitaphia*, to name a few, also document how the Athenians continually sought to pay their respects to the dead. In short, the act of bestowing libations, food and other material gifts upon the dead was a display of familial piety, one of the most important virtues in Greek culture (Kurtz, 1971: 73).

In addition, *choai* may have also served as a means to contact and perhaps summon the deceased (Garland, 1985:114). Instead of the dead being totally cloistered in their afterworld,

oblivious to the happenings on earth, it appears that in the Classical Athenian cult of the dead the deceased could attain access to the world of living through their tombs (Garland, 1985: 118). Many Attic white-ground lekythoi depict pots besides lekythoi, such as cups, aryballoi, kantharoi, oinochoai and pyxides being transported in the funerary baskets, standing at the base or on top of the stele, or being held by some of the people (Oakley, 2004: 205, 208). Some of these vessels probably contained *choai* (Garland, 1985: 115). As the art historian Walter Burkert wrote, "as the libations seep into the earth, so it is believed, contact with the dead is established and prayers can reach them" (Garland, 1984: 115). In general, *choai,* mostly composed of honey, milk, water, wine and oil, were typically poured at the tomb on the steps of its base or over the shaft (Garland, 1985: 115). Unlike *spondai*, which usually refer to small libations of unmixed or mixed wine that were also drunk by the offerers (such as during the symposium), from pottery analysis and descriptions of libations in Classical Greek tragedy *choai* seem to have been solely meant for the dead and for chthonic deities (Burkert, 1985: 70 – 71; Garland, 1985: 115). Moreover, with *spondai* the liquid was poured in a controlled manner, whereas with *choai* the vessel's contents were emptied entirely onto the ground (Burkert, 1985: 70). To put it simply, this semantic difference between *spondai* and *choai* suggests that the ancient Greeks tried to separate the living from the dead by performing different libation customs. In a way, the offering of *choai*, and even other foods given to the dead (Garland, 1985: 110), helped remove the deceased from the living world by distinguishing the dead souls as "other" beings that drank special libations forbidden to living humans.

This effort to distinguish the dead individual as an "other" being is further emphasized by depictions of the soul's journey to the afterworld on Attic white-ground lekythoi (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1995: 327). Unlike the iconography of other white-ground lekythoi that portray the soul

in real life settings, the representations of the soul guided by divine beings called *psychopompoi* (leaders of souls) (Garland, 1985: 52) portray the deceased entering into a new, alien state of existence, a mythical reality (Souvinou-Inwood, 1995: 327). Yet, unlike the representations of sphinxes and winged demons on preceding archaic monuments that convey a threatened response toward death, these Classical representations of the soul's journey to the afterlife possess a remarkably empathetic sensibility (Osborne, 1998: 192; Oakley, 2004: 144). Many of these crossings over to death scenes, the most common of which portrays the soul waiting on a bank alone and facing Charon as he guides his boat across the river Styx, which separates the worlds of the dead and living, (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1995: 322 – 323) capture the pain of loosing a loved one, the natural unwillingness to die, and the acceptance of human mortality (Oakley, 2004: 144). Moreover, the *psychopompoi* are often depicted in a sympathetic light; in contrast to an early representation of Charon, which one scholar called "repulsive" (Garland, 1985: 56), most often the ferryman is portrayed as a benevolent guide, caringly leading women, children and youths toward their final resting place (Garland, 1985: 56). In some instances, a second bearer to the land of the dead, such as the god Hermes, is shown escorting the soul to the bank of the Styx where Charon awaits (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1995: 305 – 306; Garland, 1985: 54). On another Attic white-ground lekythos (*c.* 440 – 430 BCE), Hermes sits on a rock while he waits for the woman to finish adjusting her hair before she finally departs to the netherworld (Garland, 1985: 55; 57). More rarely, there are illustrations of the two divinities Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death), who usually lead the souls of soldiers (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1995: 326). Thus, although the number of portrayals of the soul's journey to the afterworld on Classical white-ground lekythoi is small, probably approximately five percent (Oakley, 2004: 144), these vessels are key visual documents of the change in Athenian attitudes toward death, the chthonic gods, and the afterlife

during the Classical period. Through these lekythoi we can trace the movement from a conception of the deceased and the afterlife as forbidding and frightening to a still apprehensive view toward mortality, but a more compassionate sentiment toward death and departure from the living world (Garland, 1985: 122 – 123).

While these Attic polychromatic, white-ground, funerary lekythoi from the 6th and 5th centuries BCE never illustrate a scene set in the netherworld, their archaeological context and unusual iconography of tomb visits and of journeys to the world of the dead offer many clues that permit scholars to at least catch a glimpse of the Classical Athenian notions of the afterlife as a material reality. In both their form and function they acted as medians between the living and deceased. They not only link the worlds of the living and the dead by portraying offerings of utilitarian objects and the nourishment of food and drink to the deceased, but they also visually join the two in their imagery of tomb visits and metaphorical crossings over to death. Even though these vessels did not outlast the end of the 5th century BCE (they were replaced by another oil container, the fusiform unguentariaum), their intimate and moving scenes of departure strike an emotional chord that resonates even to this day.

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