

## BEYOND THE PENTHESILEA PANTER: STATUS OF ISSUES AT LIMITS OF THE ATTRIBUTION

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**Abstract:** An attribution is, first and foremost, an interpretative category. With the anonymous pottery painter identified as the *Penthesilea Painter* would not be different, but this “creative personality” was implicated in unexpected workshop practices, stylistic transitional peculiarities and crossover involving parietal painting. Throughout the second half of the last century, the Penthesilea workshop generated less and less interest among the specialists in the field of Greek vase painting. The dominant interpretation that the “ethical” aspect of its contemporarie parietal paintings could be seen in the Penthesilea Painter’s works has given way to doubts and academic disinterest. This paper compiles main understandings on the subject.

**Keywords:** The Penthesilea Painter; the Workshop of the Penthesilea Painter; Red-figure vase painting; Connoisseurship of figurative art; Archeological methods and theory; Archeology of image production.

The identity of the painters is still an aspect to be observed in greek and magno-greek pottery studies. Despite the belittling of the results of connoisseurship inquiry (Etienne, Prost, Müller 2000; Robertson, Beard 1990), and important methodical revisionism (Osborne 2018, 42–49; Denoyelle 2018; 2014), the attributions remain suitable in many research projects, including new interpretative trends and alternative investigations approaches.

In his synthesis of 15 years of development of the field, John Oakley states that “interpretation of subject, collecting, typology, cataloguing, chronology and attribution” are aspects to be considered (Oakley 2009, p. 599), but also recognizes that the emphasis was being turned to more contextual – or social, one might say-, subjects involving trade, production context, among others, or the interpretation of “gender” and “everyday life” images.

This essay aims to be a first author’s monothematic presentation<sup>1</sup> about the origins, developments, vinculations and potential problems of a singular attribution: the “Master of Penthesilea”, the “Munch’s Cup Painter”, more known as the Penthesilea Painter after the John Beazley’s lists of Athenian pottery painters

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<sup>1</sup> This paper provides a compilation of observations, cross-checking, hypothesis and some research results from the author master thesis (Sanches 2004), till then disponsible only in portuguese language.

stylistically identified. In the tradition of ancient Greek art studies, this painter is considered a prominent figurative artist of the *early classical*<sup>2</sup> period.

In Beazley's connoisseurship, periods are not merely chronological points of reference. Each stylistic-chronological subclassification is determined by the most recurrent vessel shape, and is also dominated by some 'masters', or central painters. Among the *Early Classic Cup-Painters* (Beazley 1963, chapters 43 to 48), the Penthesilea Painter is highlighted, widely recognized as a valued and influential image maker (Richter 1958, 97–101; Dugas 1960, 51–53).

Being contemporary of mural painters celebrated in dozens of ancient texts (Reinach 1985; Pollitt 1990; Pereira 1998), the Penthesilea Painter would have shared with artists like Polygnotus of Thasos the *ethographia*, often translated as "character painting" (Arias 1962; Pollitt 1976; Rouveret 1989).

When considering the relationship between the ancient texts about mural paintings and ancient pottery, Paolo Arias recognized that vascular artists like Penthesilea Painter, Chicago Painter and Kleophon Painter would be "followers of Polygnotus of Thasos as "ēthographos". They share the same "interest in psychological interpretation of individual figures" that arose at the time (Arias, 1962, 17). According to Arias, among the vases attributed to the Penthesilea Painter, the greater interest is especially expressed in the "passionate encounter" of the "Cup of Penthesilea" (inventory 2688 at *Museum Antiker Kleinkunst*, Munich, Germany<sup>3</sup>), the vase that served as a reference to name the anonymous artist, and also in the "passionate" fury of the "Cup of Tityus" (inventory 2689 at *Museum Antiker Kleinkunst*). In both cases, the central figures would be examples of ethos figuration, the character's nobility.

A relatively large quantity of vases was attributed to the Penthesilea Painter or to his workshop (Beazley 1963, 877–971), but no other vase in this series received as much attention as the "Cup of Penthesilea", the vase-name of the painter (*Museum Antiker Kleinkunst* n° 2688). It is a frequent example either of unusual figures composition or disposition (Prost 1997, 34–36; Robertson 1959, 123; 1992, 160–161; Villard, 1969, 244).

### **The vase-name and the interpretative tradition**

Before the publication of Beazley's lists of Athenian Red-Figure Painters (Beazley 1925; 1942; 1963), the two great cups by the Penthesilea painter in Munich were often quoted from "*Furtwängler-Reichhold, pll. 6 and 55*"<sup>4</sup> (Furtwängler;

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<sup>2</sup> As the period is named by Beazley 1963, pp. 483–984; Pfuhl 1955, p. 54; Pollitt 1976, pp. 49–54; Boardman 1989, pp. 11–59; Oakley 2009, p. 609, among many others.

<sup>3</sup> The most reproduced images of the Penthesilea Painter's vase-name is available online, on the Heidelberg University's digital library: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/furtwaengler1904bd1/0008/image>. Proper images of the vases mentioned in this paper are also available online, on the Beazley Archive pottery database (<https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/pottery/default.htm>) or on the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* website ([www.cvaonline.org](http://www.cvaonline.org)).

<sup>4</sup> Images of the last one also available online, on the Heidelberg University's digital library: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/furtwaengler1904bd1/0053/image>.

Reichhold 1904). After the lists, studies that address the Penthesilea Painter's "masterpieces" have multiplied as an important stylistic reference (Arias, 1962, fig. 168–169, 351–352; Beazley, 1944, 29; 1967, 129–132; Devambez, 1962, 25; Richter, 1958, 97–100; Robertson 1959, 123; 1975, 263–264; Ufford, 1950, 188–189; Villard, 1969, 244, fig. 275). Almost always, only the scenes painted inside the cups – over the large flat horizontal area – are considered by generations of scholars. Neither attention was paid to the cavalry scenes on the exterior, nor to the necessary vinculation between inside-outside compositions.

Throughout the twenty century, a dominant interpretation stipulated that the "ethical" aspect of the Polignoto de Tasos' parietal paintings (Pollitt 1976, 49–54; Rouveret 1989, 129–135) can be seen in the "Cup of Penthesilea" and in the "Cup of Tityus". To justify the association, details of the painted faces of Achilles and, mainly, of Penthesilea are pointed out. Their tragic exchange of glances is the main focus of the scene (Robertson 1975, 263).

The personal style of the Penthesilea Painter is recognized in the eyes, eyelids and mouths of this cup interior, which would be marked by "psychological expressions" (Villard, 1969, 244), accompanied by changes in wall painting style which would be occurring in the same period<sup>5</sup>.

The Achilles and Penthesilea intense exchange of glances does not constitute the only figurative element considered. There are who attach greater importance to the ensemble than to the details, recognizing the expressiveness of the "ambience of the whole" (Ufford, 1950, 188), among other aspects that motivated the hypothesis of a close relationship with mural painting from the same period.

First, because the large size (Arias, 1962, 351). The diameter of the cup is larger than other Athenian cups. It is 43 cm while, for example, the diameter of the celebrated Cup of Brygos (Louvre G152) is around 32.5 cm. It should be noted that "the largest of red-figure cups", found in the necropolis of Spina (Archaeological Museum of Ferrara, inventory T 18 CVP), is also attributed to the Penthesilea Painter (Beazley 1963, 882, n° 35).

The figures of the Penthesilea Cup are extended over the entire interior surface of the piece, and the painter carries out his work on an exceptionally large scale. The Achilles figure, armed and in heroic nudity, extends over the central portion. Even curved, occupies the maximum extension of the medallion's surface. At one point, touches the curved edge with the tip of the right foot, at the opposite end, the curves of the mane of his helmet and his shield are not seen, they go beyond the limits of the

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<sup>5</sup> An example of what was called "exchange of glances" in texts about the paintings of Polygnotus of Thasos is the Pausanian description of the figures of Phaedra and Ariadne on Hades in a small room at the Delphi sanctuary, paintings not preserved until our days: "Following for the adjoining side of the painting is Ariadne, very close to the man who is braiding the rope. She is sitting on a rock, looking at her sister Phaedra, whose body swings from a rope, to which she holds both hands, each on her side. The attitude, although designed with the utmost grace, suggests the story of Fedra's death"(Pausanias, GD, X, 29.3 in: Pereira 1998, pp. 496-497).

visible area. The same occurs with the mane of the helmet and the tip of the bearded warrior's spear, to the right of the hero.

Penthesilea is painted from the right to the center, touching the edge of the round with the tips of the feet, flexing the bare knees. Recognized by the crown, bracelet, anklet and earring, she is dressed like a Greek (Arias, 1962, 351), which is evident when looking at the fourth and last figure of the composition: a dead Amazon dressed in the oriental way.

The dead Amazon, wounded in the chest, is a fallen body over the limit of the round. The face is fronted in a similar way to the dead Niobid that extends below Artemis, in the famous Niobid krater at the Louvre Museum (Inventory G341) and also to a bearded warrior by the Bologna Painter 279, dated from the middle of the 5th century (at Basel Archeological Museum under the n° BS486), vases with approximate dating.

The figures are not on a straight baseline as occurs, for example, in the cup of Brygos at Paris (Louvre Museum, inventory G152) or in a fight scene between Greek and Persian by the Triptolemus Painter (interior of the cup at Edinburgh Museum, inventory n° 1887.213). It should be remarked also that the figurative space had been extended, and the figures could be located in different planes. There are details that we do not see completely, and the bearded warrior would be placed in a second plan of figuration. This death of Penthesilea image was interpreted as being copied from a larger composition (a larger fresco, a great parietal Amazonomaquia) in which the present figures would have been selected (Villard, 1969, 244).

Thus, the Cup of Penthesilea became a “testimony to the influence of great painting” (Prost, 1997, 35; Ufford, 1950, 188), although the curved base line that limits the interior of the cup serving as a common base for all the figures have been interpreted as a painter's hesitation between the traditional figurative space and the new way of composing, or between “the tradition of his workshop and his desire for innovation” (Prost, 1997, 36).

Another characteristic pointed out by the specialists is the insertion of different colors in this composition (Arias 1962, 351; Richter 1958, 98; Robertson 1975, 263; Villard 1969, 244). The painter added yellow, blue-gray, brown and white to the black varnish on the red background with the probable objective of bringing his work closer to the polychromy of the mural paintings.

### **Technical innovations in other vases from the same hand**

Unlike the Niobid Painter, that remained loyal to the red-figure technique, the Penthesilea Painter had some forays into polychromy. The colors added to the Penthesilea's cup would have been tried on a white background at least in two pieces of the same attribution (Richter, 1958, 98): a double disc or “bobin” with *Zéphyros* and *Hyakínthos* (Richter, 1958, fig. 69; Beazley 1963, 890, n° 175; New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, inventory n° 28.167) and the New York Pyxis (NY Metropolitan Museum of Art, inventory n° 07.286.36 a;b<sup>6</sup>). The seven figures along

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<sup>6</sup> Further information and proper images available on the database of the Metropolitan Museum: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247916>.

the bulge of the small piece are preserved in excellent condition. When rotating the piece, we come across, at each moment, two or three of the seven figures, giving the narrow piece a narrative sense already identified in lekythoi of the previous period (Frontisi-Ducroux 1987).

According to Gisela Richter, the figures of this pyxis are well characterized (Richter, 1958, 98). The composition, a judgment of Paris, is described as “light” and “good-natured” (Beazley, 1967, 128; Richter, 1958, 98). However, the piece’s polychromy is not accompanied by formal aspects related to mural painting. The figures are painted rigorously on the a straight baseline and the “shape drawing” cannot be compared in parts, or as a whole, to the interior of the Penthesilea cup.

The New York pyxis would possibly be included among the works that Beazley considered “very disappointing” (Beazley, 1967, 130) and it’s characteristic that would bring the example of the mural painting closer would not be the polychromy, but the “straight lines indicating the course of folds [of the drapery]”, which, according to Ufford, give the image “a brighter and more lively air” (Ufford , 1950, 188).

The differences between the figures in this vase and those inside the Cup of Penthesilea are justified because the pyxis is a painter’s very first works (Ufford, 1950, 188), an additional difficulty in the process of attribution. In his *Attic red-figure vases in american museums*, originally published before the lists, Beazley still considered the possibility of including this pyxis among the vases of the Sotades Painter (Beazley, 1967 [1918], 128), who produced a considerable number of figures in white background (Beazley 1963, 763 and segs.).

### **Attributions difficulties and singular workshop practices**

The cups of the Penthesilea Painter, as well as skyphoi, kantharoi and other forms painted by the same artist, are difficult to attribute for several reasons.

Firstly, the stylistic proximity between the artist’s five important cups (Beazley 1963, 879 et seq., Nos. 1, 2, 20, 25 and 34), including the cup of Penthesilea itself (Beazley 1963, 879, n° 1 ), and three others cups attributed to the Pistoxenos Painter (Beazley 1963, 859 et seq., nos. 1, 2 and 9). Beazley considered grouping these vases in the same category: works by the Pistoxenos Painter (Beazley 1963, 859 and 879)<sup>7</sup>. It is also worth pointing out that the Pistoxenos Painter is not a member of the Penthesilea Painter workshop.

Second, among the vases and fragments attributed to the “Workshop of the Penthesilea Painter” ninety-one remained “indeterminate” (Beazley 1963, 965-970). Twenty-one painters were distinguished in the workshop, in a period of about 50 years of production, from which more than 800 vases, mostly cups, were preserved whole or in fragments (Beazley, 1944, 29).

Third, the attribution difficulties are also due to a particular practice adopted in this workshop: a considerable number of cups, among other forms, would be painted “in series”, that is, “passing from hand to hand to complete the composition” (Boardman , 2001, 94). The collective work in the same object constituted a small but significant portion of the production of the Penthesilea Painter’s workshop.

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<sup>7</sup> Further information available in the author’s doctoral thesis (Sanches 2010).

Beazley recognizes the Penthesilea Painter's prominent position among the other artists of the workshop, but does not draw conclusions about social status from that. There is no guarantee that the Penthesilea Painter was "necessarily the owner" (Beazley, 1944, 29).

Before Beazley, Ernst Pfuhl still considered the possibility of Euphronios and the Penthesilea Painter being the same person, since the last pieces signed by Euphronios coincide with the flowering of the Penthesilea Painter. This unsigned production would be a mature phase of the "old Euphronios" in the hypothesis that Pfuhl himself presented as something "improbable, but not impossible", an "insoluble enigma (...)" (Pfuhl, 1955, 60-61).

Among the works of the Penthesilea Painter, the one that most often coincident with the innovative style of the "Penthesilea cup" is the cup where murder is also the central theme, the "cup of Tityus" (Munich, inventory n° 2689). This piece also comes from Vulci and was also interpreted as being a good adaptation of monumental figures to the available space on pottery (Ufford, 1950, 189; Villard, 1969, 246).

This composition would still be compromised with elements of traditional figuration (Villard, 1969, 246; Pfuhl, 1955, 60), although the elder figurative versions of the same myth often had the presence of Artemis (Pfuhl, 1955, 60), and did not count on the "greatness and ethical posture" that Ernst Pfuhl saw in the Penthesilea Painter's Tityus figure.

The cup of Penthesilea was interpreted as a "selection of a larger composition", which is not said of this "cup of Tityus" without the proviso that "archaizing" elements persist, as preferred by Ernst Pfuhl, or "mannerists" motifs as François Villard prefers.

One possible interpretation is to recognize in the new elements that are occasionally seen in both scenes a slow learning of the new way of figuring. In this process, the "Cup of Tityus" would reveal a stage where the relation with a possible large scale example would be being operating, despite commitments to tradition, or, according to Ufford, this relation would be limited by technical difficulties:

"(...) In the center, the figure of Tityus shows itself in a painful way, once again giving us the impression that the decorator was not always able to reproduce his example" (Ufford, 1955, 189).

In vases of less controversial attribution, the Penthesilea Painter seemed to use another positioning of the figures, more close to the previous vase-painting tradition. An Athenian red figure skyphos at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Inventory n° 018031) has this characteristic. On one side, the painter figured Menades and Satyrs on the horizontal base line, but on the other side (face A in Beazley 1963, 889), a woman can be seen in the center, who emerges from this same line, at knee height (Aphrodite?), between two figures identified by Beazley (1967) as "goat-men". The female figure in the center seems to emerge from the ground, surprising the goat-men. This scene would take place in a forest, as suggested by the vegetal motifs above and on the skyphos' wings.

The central figure, in fact seen only above the knees and, necessarily, in a lower figuration plane than the satyrs, has a cap on his head and is dressed in cloths with a

light appearance, full of parallel folds. Her head is in profile to the right and the ends of the garment are supported with the fingertips of both hands.

Beazley suggests that the wild aspect of the composition would oppose the gracefulness of the “birth of Aphrodite” from the throne of Ludovisi (Beazley, 1967, 131), a sculptural work dating from the second quarter of the 5th century that, according to Robertson, performs “a perfect fusion of late archaic grace with the gravity of the new age” (Robertson, 1982, 64, fig. 83).

## Conclusion

The academic attention to the Penthesilea workshop has decreased over the last decades. After the thesis of Efthymia Mintsi, defended in Paris-Nanterre under direction of François Villard (Mintsi 1998), the Painter of the Penthesilea’s Cup and his entourage became subject only of specific studies like the interesting article of Maria Pipili (Pampili 2002), or isolated comparisons like the promising gender focused review of two other painters by Marisa Anne Infante (Infante 2017, 6, fig. 5).

Under current conditions, areas such as chronology and attributions “remains static” in the field of Athenian vase painting, if compared to areas such “inscriptions on vase, trade, economy, shape and the use of context” (Oakley 2009, 620). Another important factor for the lack of interest in the Penthesilea Painter’s *milieu* might be the fall of athenocentrism in the studies of the Ancient World: “*l’étude du monde grec n’est plus centrée uniquement sur la Grèce propre mais se s’est étendue à l’ensemble des peuples situés à la périphérie de celle-ci*” (Gleyse 2007, 85).

In both instances, there must not be left of side the analysis of a case of collective production of images that can be able to provide more documented information about social status, shared techniques and iconographical preferences, a *paideia* of ancient vase painters exceptionally preserved in their common oeuvre that became influential by the dispersal of hundreds of vases over Greek related cities in very different cultural regions.

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