

A RESPONSE: Oakley on Schmidt on Oakley

Stefan Schmidt's recent review of my book, *Picturing Death in Classical Athens: The Evidence of the White Lekythoi*, raises a number of basic questions concerning the methodologies used to interpret vase-paintings. Because of this, the editors of the *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* have kindly allowed me to address these issues here, and they provided me the opportunity to correct factual errors in Schmidt's review and to expose what I consider the faulty reasoning that he employs in places to question the validity of my observations and conclusions.

In Schmidt's assessment of my first chapter (p. 1002), which is an introduction to white lekythoi, he first implies that the only reason I give as to why a white background was used on the lekythoi was because the color went well with marble grave monuments and bones. I clearly state that the traditional explanation was because of the traditional use of white in the background for contemporary wall- and panel-painting (p. 9), after which I add that the color went well with marble grave monuments and bones. Schmidt follows this with the blanket statement that no Greek ever saw a white-ground lekythos next to an unpainted grave stele or decomposed corpse (i.e. bones). This is untrue. First, we know from both the depictions on vases, including the lekythoi themselves, and archaeological evidence, that these vessels were placed on the graves at a time (ca. 470-430 BC) when partially unpainted stelai without figural decoration as well as other types of stone monuments were placed on Athenian graves. Second, cremations were not an uncommon form of burial in fifth-century Athens, so many an Athenian saw bones placed in graves, since unlike modern cremations where the bones are ground into powder after firing, in ancient cremations sections of bones remained with the ashes. I cite here two examples of cremations with white-ground lekythoi from the Kerameikos: graves H 19 and H 22 (*Kerameikos* VII,2 pp. 86-88, no. 300 and p. 89, no. 311). Also, Schmidt seems to forget that, as I pointed out, Thucydides informs us that the bones of Athens' fallen soldiers were set out yearly for three days in a tent so that loved ones could place gifts by them before the funeral oration (Thuc. 2.34). White-ground lekythoi have been found in these state burials. Thus seeing white-lekythoi next to marble monuments and – at least during the burial process – bones was not unusual, as Schmidt would have us think.

Next, in his comment to my section "The Archaeological Evidence", he implies that one can identify different types of groups of people among the graves

with white lekythoi, which in turn would allow us to determine if the white lekythoi really were valuable items. This type of analysis is clearly statistically (so methodologically) impossible at present, because, as I clearly state, very few white lekythoi have been excavated and fully published with their finds, and even in the rare cases when they have been, no analysis of the bones has been made as to gender and age. Not only that, but grave goods alone are not always a reliable indicator of the sex of a grave's inhabitant. For example, strigils are often thought to be items for male burials, but in fact are found in both male and female burials (B. Kratzmüller, R. Lindner, and N. Sojc, "Die Strigilis im antiken Athen. Ein Gerät der Reinigung als geschlechtsspezifisches Symbol und als ein Zeichen im religiösen Symbolsystem," in B. Heininger (ed.), *Geschlechterdifferenz in religiösen Symbolsystemen* [2003] 93-134). If only ca. 12 percent of the graves had white lekythoi, this would "suggest", as I said (p. 10), that they were worth more than the average vessel, which is also indicated by the imported materials used in making them (p. 217).

Before addressing the next five chapters (pp. 1003-4), Schmidt attempts to define the iconographical and iconological methodologies that I use. He says that I primarily interpret the pictures on lekythoi as one of two types. Concerning the later type, he understands correctly that I perceive them to be constructed out of elements from different times and places, but about the earlier ones he errs, for he says I interpret them as showing a real event, implying that I understand them to be like a photograph. Scholars have known for a long time that the vase paintings are not pictures of one real moment in time, but are constructions of elements which can represent an idealized moment at one time and place, or consist of elements which may refer to different times and/or different places. The former are my first group, the latter my second.

He then goes on to state unequivocally that concrete rooms were never represented in Greek vase-painting and that elements which define rooms, such as stools, columns, and rocks, have nothing to do with the location of the scene as a whole, but rather, are used only to characterize the figures in the scene. The question of how such elements can be understood in terms of iconography, narrative and functions of the vases, needs further debate. I believe that Schmidt's rather formula ridden approach is an unsatisfactory methodology. I would dearly love to know what a column or stone says about a figure – are they hard-headed, rock solid, thin, lofty, etc.? Clearly objects hanging in the background of scenes are meant to make the viewer think of an interior wall, for this was one place that Greeks, who did not normally have closets, stored things. Second, to interpret every object in a scene as having to tell us something about the figures in it is to forget that every scene by a Greek vase-

painter was not a carefully thought-out composition. To see meaning in objects that often are randomly put together or chosen by the vase-painters is not a good methodology, for it does not take into consideration how the scenes were composed. The studies of the archaeological remains of pottery workshops as well as of their products have clearly shown that the painters did not invent every scene anew, but that the vase-painters and workshops had basic favorite types of scenes and compositions which they repeated, sometimes *ad nauseam*. Those who have examined in detail the work of many of the vase-painters have observed this implicitly and realize that not every element of every scene is a carefully thought out so that every object necessarily relates to one of the figures. To see a possible meaning – even for the modern viewer - in every object such as a stool, stone, or column is wrong and leads to mis- or over-interpreting the vase-paintings. In fact, Schmidt later contradicts himself and admits in his review that columns do indicate interior space (p. 1008).

Next, in his comments about my second chapter on domestic scenes (pp. 1005-6), Schmidt questions my suggestion that the domestic scenes on the lekythoi refer on one level of interpretation to the well-working oikos. He argues that there is hardly any scene on white lekythoi that emphasizes the community of the household as the fourth-century gravestones do because of the *dexiosis* common to many of their scenes. Rather, he argues that the scenes on the white lekythoi stress the individual's characteristics. Here he overlooks the fact that the size of the area on the body of a lekythos provides very limited space for figural decorations, which is why two figures were the most common arrangement, one to either side of the center, during the early years of the white lekythos (470-450 BC) when most of the domestic scenes were made. I fail to understand why two figures shown working or interacting together, as on many lekythoi, cannot imply the community of the household, just as gravestones with two figures do. Don't departure scenes with two figures do that, as on some of the white lekythoi, or women involved with children? The *dexiosis* is not needed for the viewer to perceive a household community in a simple picture. And when you have two figures, the most common arrangement, which of the two figures' characteristics is being stressed?

Also misleading is his statement that the women on the vases are always beautiful and sexually attractive, especially when they hold an exaleiptron, alabastron, wreath, girdle or fringed ribbon, and that this is even clearer when they girdle their chiton and receive a bundled-up mantle (pp. 1005-1006). Are we to actually believe that women shown holding wreaths, alabastra, and exaleiptron in preparation to visit a grave are pictured doing so because it makes them sexually attractive? I think not – or at least not primarily and/or

explicitly. And what about working women who, because of the conventions of classical art, do not dress or appear physically different than those not working? And does this include the servants as well? Such statements as his are clearly contradicted by the vase-paintings themselves and are another good example of problematic methodology. Besides, physical beauty is not a characteristic mentioned of the dead on classical grave epigrams, rather *sophrosyne*, *arete*, and other qualities referring to their character are, so why should we think that the pictures on classical white lekythoi highlight the women's beauty rather than these ideals? Schmidt's view of these women as beautiful and sexually attractive is a modern one, not ancient.

Among his comments on the fourth chapter (p. 1007), Schmidt questions whether Charon, Hermes Chthonios, Hypnos and Thanatos belong in a chapter named "Myth or Mythological Figures" because a dead human in its new existence is shown with these mythological ministers of death. He seems to forget that gods and mortals are pictured together on many vases, and on these vases the presence of a mortal does not preclude the god from being a mythological figure, so why does the presence of a dead mortal prohibit Charon, Hermes Chthonios, Hypnos and Thanatos from being mythological figures?

Also puzzling is his desire to call the fifth chapter, which I named "Scenes at the Grave", as "Scenes with Grave Monuments" (p. 1007). The latter would be inaccurate since a good number of the graves shown on the lekythoi I discuss are not decorated with monuments. A *tymbos*, for example, a mound of dirt, is not a grave monument.

As for interpreting these scenes, Schmidt says I employ no uniform criteria for interpreting the individual scenes. This is odd, since I clearly state in the Foreword (p. xxiii) that my primary approach in chapters 2-5 is "a traditional, iconographical one that looks at the images chronologically, observing how compositions continue or change over time and their relationship to each other...". I further state that "the final chapter is iconological and seeks to place the images in their precise contexts" and that "a variety of methodologies is incorporated, including anthropological theory and semiotics." In other words, my approach is traditional, but when I saw that another methodology was useful for answering a specific question about the white lekythoi, I used it. This, to my way of thinking, is a better and more successful way to look at any set of images, rather than to employ only one methodology, which sheds light only on some of the questions. Schmidt clearly wants to employ simple formulae, global rules for interpreting these pictures. For example, he pro-

poses once again to use the simple formula that this object equals this quality of a person when interpreting the objects shown being brought to the grave. Thus, alabastra, exaleiptra and pets are not necessarily being brought to the grave as grave gifts, but can be used, in his opinion, to characterize the individual figures and thereby indicate who the deceased is, yet he provides no specific example. He seems to forget that all these objects have been found in excavated graves, so that there is no doubt these are gifts that were brought to the grave in antiquity. Actual grave gifts could of course reflect the deceased's personality, but many were generic vases, such as simple pattern lekythoi, alabastra, and black-gloss vessels. As a methodological rule, in my view, simple formulae don't work in interpreting Greek vase-painting. The entire picture and all its elements need to be considered when interpreting them.

In his comments to the section entitled "Social Context" in my final chapter, this same incorrect, in my opinion, way of interpreting the scenes and objects within as praising the individual, particularly women, appears again (p. 1009). In fact, he contradicts himself, first saying that discontinuity between Archaic/aristocratic and Classical/democratic grave scenes is questionable, then he notes the increased intention to women in the classical gravestones and how this reflects the changed values of democratic Athens, so obviously there was discontinuity. You cannot have it both ways. What is particularly methodologically unsound is Schmidt's statement that "for the buyer and user of the lekythoi, the remembrance of the deceased was more important than their correct political consciousness". Now, I ask, how does he know what the buyer and user of the lekythoi considered more important? What about the makers of the vases? Does he know what they considered most important? For an archaeologist to state emphatically that they know how the ancients thought about a particular object with absolutely no written or contextual evidence to support it is speculation and not sound archaeological methodology.

Another similar perplexing statement occurs in his comments to my section on cultural context in the final chapter (p. 1010). He claims that the picture on the Berlin lekythos of the Achilles Painter with a grieving old man and warrior is not to be understood as symbolic of the normal honoring of the dead. Why is an old man visiting the grave of a dead warrior, probably his son, not symbolic of normal honoring of the dead? What, in fact, could be more symbolic of the normal honoring of the dead? He then goes on to say that my connecting the various groups of scenes with Van Gennep's *rites de passage* are of little help in understanding the scenes on the lekythoi, when in reality they provide the crucial concept for understanding why Charon scenes become popular,

why prothesis scenes continue to be made, and finally why scenes of visits to the grave combine elements from different times into one picture.

There are finally several criticisms that he makes of a trivial nature which are either a question of taste, such as whether the lists of vases are better in the text or at the back (p. 1011), or of minimal substance, such as his statement that I could have done more when comparing the scenes on the gravestones and white lekythoi, although he fails to cite any example of what more could have been done (p. 1009). Similarly, he claims that there is no spirit of synthesis, and that I should have expressed stronger opinions (p. 1011), despite the fact that the entire final chapter is a synthesis in which numerous conclusions are reached. Once again he provides no concrete examples. If he thinks that a scholar should have a definite opinion one way or the other when the evidence is contradictory or unclear, I disagree, and I consider it poor methodology to simply state an opinion only for the sake of having one. Admitting that one does not know or is uncertain is the mark of a mature scholar, in my opinion.

To conclude, I hope to have shown that Schmidt's review has numerous flaws, particularly in respect to the methodologies that he employs to interpret the pictures on the white lekythoi, for there are deep differences in our ways of thinking as to what methodologies are best used to interpret Greek vase-paintings. Clearly, there is a great need for scholars to continue to discuss the best ways of interpreting these images, and as each book has its "Schwache Stelle", so too does each review.

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