

## VARIA

DOROTA GORZELANY

Muzeum Narodowe  
ul. Pijarska 6, 31-015 Kraków  
Polska – Poland

### AN UNWELCOME ASPECT OF LIFE: THE DEPICTION OF OLD AGE IN GREEK VASE PAINTING

ABSTRACT. Gorzelany Dorota, An Unwelcome Aspect of Life: the Depiction of Old Age in Greek Vase Painting.

The article contains an analysis of selected depictions of the elderly in vase painting in terms of their iconography and the types of scenes in which they appear, including references to the written sources.

Keywords: Greek vase painting, red figure style, black figure style, iconography, Greek society, old man, old woman, mythology, Greek literature, classical Greece.

The clock ticks  
the time licks  
weighing moments  
a man's going.  
Moczulski 2012: 143

The iconography of Greek vase painting is dominated by images of young people: young athletes, young warriors, young symposiasts, young women. This picture, while seemingly selective, corresponded to the structure and activity of the society of the Athenian polis. Given the high mortality rate of children (it is believed that approximately a third of children aged 3–5 years died<sup>1</sup>) and the threat of diseases and wars, it should be assumed that people over sixty constituted a mere 5–10% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the division of tasks in Greek society relied principally on young and middle-aged men (cf. Arist. *Rhet.* II 14). Women spent their lives as modest wives in the home, where they were to take

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schmitz 2009: 20.

<sup>2</sup> Herzig 1994: 173f.

care of the family to ensure its continuation – their situation would change after menopause, generally when they turned sixty years of age and obtained the right to participate in religious ceremonies as priestesses and to move more freely about the city, but it also meant that they were perceived by men as less attractive than before.<sup>3</sup>

The life of older men was subject to change as well: because of their age and worse state of health they were marginalised as less useful, in other words less capable of work or public service – this process occurred in farming families, where fathers essentially became a burden upon transferring the farm to their sons (e.g. Hom. *Od.* 24.367–374), as well as in the cities; social exclusion of old people also became one of the elements of comedy (cf. Ar. *Vesp.*) and the illustrations of comic scenes in vase painting depict the elderly characters in an exaggerated manner.<sup>4</sup> The possession of wealth made it easier to cope with the inconveniences of old age (Pl. *Resp.* 329e–330a), but the seniors did not acquire any additional privileges, apart from lifelong membership of the Areopagus, whose powers and significance were substantially reduced by Ephialtes' reform in 462/1 B.C., however – the situation was different in Sparta, for instance, where the elderly were valued, and the *gerousia* included men over the age of sixty.<sup>5</sup> For many of older men in Athens participation in paid court sessions was the only source of income. The absolute domination of youth meant that older people were removed from social and political life; they could still be active in the religious sphere, but it was also subject to the requirements of the rational policy favouring the young (Arist. *Pol.* 7.1329a). Were the elderly completely useless then? The problem was addressed by Euripides, who in 438 B.C. presented a dispute about death in his tragedy *Alcestis*:<sup>6</sup> Pheres praises Alcestis' noble decision to give up her life for her husband and his son, Admetus, but the latter angrily rejects his father's compassion and blames the old man for allowing his young wife to die. The father's selfish desire to live out the few remaining years of his life was supposed to inspire aversion for him. Although Euripides used the story of a mythical royal family from the Thessalian town of Pherae, this conflict reflected a hierarchy of values suitable for the rapidly developing, powerful Greek polis: first came the politically active man, then the mother who raised children, i.e. future citizens, whereas the aged father no longer performed any political or social role, had no power over his family and often no property, because it had been given to the son.<sup>7</sup> But the same tragedian also wrote the following lines:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Bremmer 1987: 191ff.; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 6ff., 69f., 78ff.; Lewis 2002: 57f.

<sup>4</sup>Green, Handley 1995: 49–57; Krumeich 2009: 39–50.

<sup>5</sup>Baltrusch 2009: 70, 84f.; Schmitz 2009: 87–112.

<sup>6</sup>Baltrusch 2009: 62–72.

<sup>7</sup>Martin 1984: 84–109.

<sup>8</sup>Eur. Fr. 852[N]; Mikalson 1991: 171.

A man who reverence his parents in life  
 is, while both alive and dead, dear to the gods.  
 but may the man who does not wish to honor his parents  
 not be a fellow sacrificer with me to the gods  
 nor set sail on the sea on the same boat with me.

The passage of life limited the role of elderly persons in society, but did not result in irreverence for one's parents. Such attitude would run contrary to divine law – honouring one's parents is one of the three cardinal virtues (*aretai*), apart from respect for the gods and the law (Eur. *Fr.* 853[N]; Aesch. *Supp.* 707–709; *Eum.* 545; Pl. *Leg.* 11.917a).

These standards do not seem to be fully consistent with the realities of life in democratic Athens, but draw on higher values, espoused by Homeric heroes, and refer to the security for old persons introduced by Solon.<sup>9</sup> This issue was the subject of debate, however: according to Plato (*Resp.* 409b, 412c, 425a/b, 465a), for example, old age, as a natural part of life, should be accepted in society; the philosopher claimed that the intellectual capacities of old citizens are an asset that should be used rather than deliberately discarded and their activities should be combined with the duties of young people, as in the organization of the Spartan state.<sup>10</sup> This utopian vision included an important condition: the elderly person had to have the right character, be able to see the positive aspects of life and be active regardless of his age (Pl. *Resp.* 1.329d).

The Athenians' conflicting attitudes towards death are also evident in vase painting, both in terms of its themes and iconography of figures.

#### THE ICONOGRAPHY OF OLD PEOPLE

The appearance of an old man in vase painting was subject to a certain idealization due to the specifics of the painterly technique and the current social standards. In the black-figure style, in which the details were incised, depiction was limited to the outline and basic anatomical parts of the figure. It was only the use of a brush in the red-figure style that made it much easier to paint with soft strokes which allowed more precision in rendering wrinkles, for example. That is why the principal method of indicating a figure's age was to accentuate men's hair with white paint, both in black-figure;<sup>11</sup> here fig. 1 and red-figure vase painting: the old Phoinix is shown with ample white hair held up by a fillet on the front of a stamnos by the Triptolemos Painter of ca. 480 B.C.;<sup>12</sup> here fig. 2

<sup>9</sup> Baltrusch 2009: 81f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pl. *Leg.* 12.965a; Baltrusch 2009: 74.

<sup>11</sup> Latacz 2008: 355–356 cat. 91; Hatzivassiliou 2010: 29, pl. 12.4.

<sup>12</sup> Slehoferova 1988: pl. 23.1; Latacz et al. 2008: 369 cat. 104.

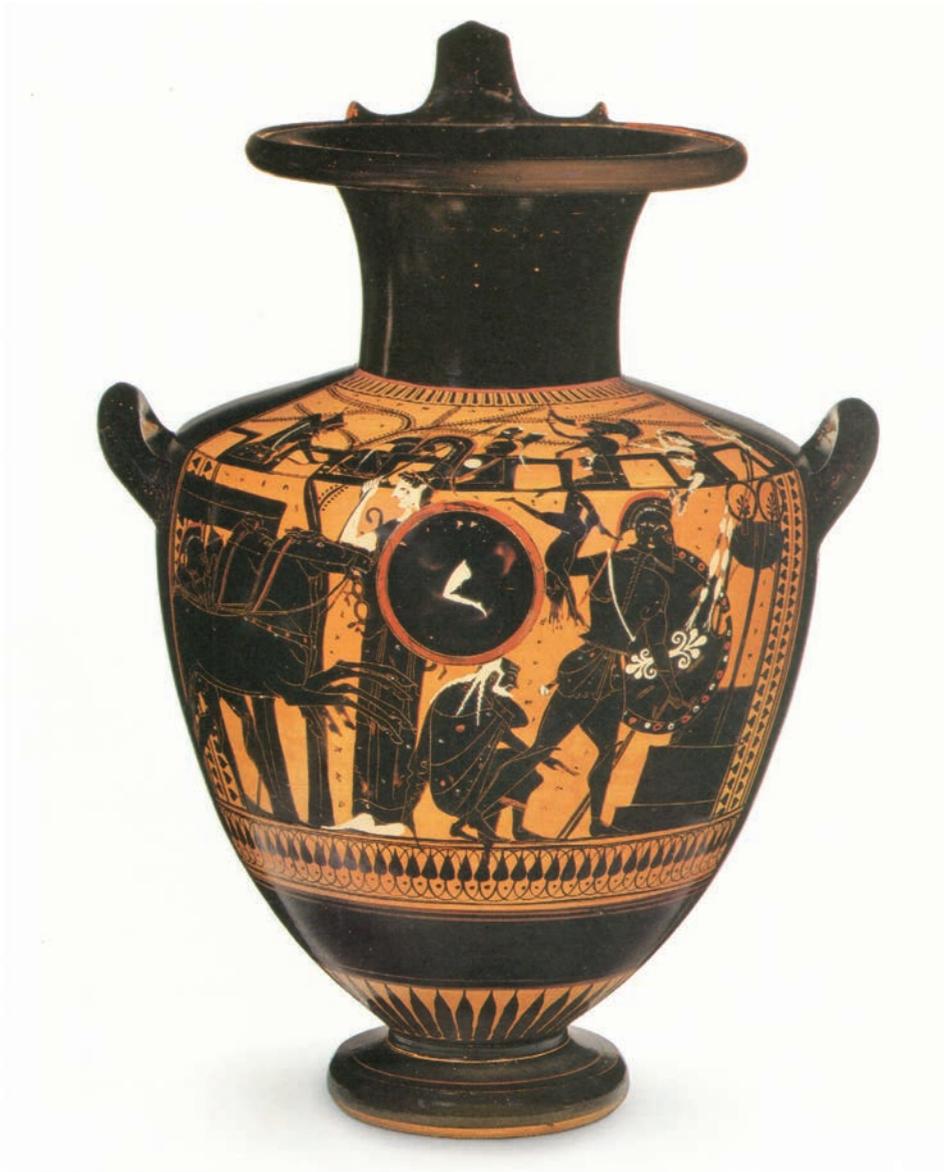


Fig. 1. Black-figure hydria, Leagros Group, ca. 510 B.C., München, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek (after Latacz et al. 2008: fig. 91)

and with a bald patch covered by loose wavy strands on a cup of ca. 490 B.C. attributed to the Brygos Painter;<sup>13</sup> here fig. 3. The age of Priam and Anchises was indicated differently on an early fifth-century hydria by the Kleophrades

<sup>13</sup>Knittlmayer 1997: pl. 6.2.



Fig. 2. Red-figure stamnos by the Triptolemos Painter, ca. 480 B.C., Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig (after Latacz et al. 2008: fig. 104)



Fig. 3. Tondo of a red-figure cup by Brygos Painter, ca. 490 B.C., Paris, Louvre  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Briseis\\_Phoinix\\_Louvre\\_G152.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Briseis_Phoinix_Louvre_G152.jpg)

Painter;<sup>14</sup> here fig. 4: their hair is severely thinned out, marked with dots of slip, and gone from the top of their heads; in addition, Priam has other senile features, such as a small double chin and a thick fold at the nape of his neck. White hair is less frequent in the images of women;<sup>15</sup> here fig. 5, especially in black-figure vase painting in which it adversely affected the colour scheme as white paint was used to emphasize the flesh areas. Older men were often depicted in a sitting position, e.g. in the scenes of the departing warrior;<sup>16</sup> Greifenhagen 1953: pl. 27.4,

<sup>14</sup> Beazley 1933: pl. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 21f., II 9.

<sup>16</sup> Kuntze-Götte 1973: pl. 417.2–4.



Fig. 4. Red-figure hydria by Kleophrades Painter, early 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/tools/pottery/painters/keypieces/redfigure/kleophrades.htm>



Fig. 5. Red-figure cup by Kodros Painter, ca. 440–430 B.C., British Museum, London

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theseus\\_deeds\\_BM\\_E\\_84.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theseus_deeds_BM_E_84.JPG)

28.7); sometimes they lean their stooped, tired bodies on a walking stick and the chest visible under a himation thrown loosely over the shoulders is emaciated. Older women are distinguished from other people by their small height and frail frame, as exemplified by Aithra rescued by her grandsons Demophon and Akamas from Troy on the Niobid Painter's volute-krater of ca. 470–460 B.C.,<sup>17</sup> fig. 6, appearing in this scene as the Theseus' mother but also as Helen's servant. A different method was used in the Late Archaic period to represent the age of older hetairai: they are corpulent beyond the accepted norm, with double chins and flabby breasts.<sup>18</sup> However, they seldom appear in the numerous depictions of young and attractive hetairai.<sup>19</sup> Vase painters took care to portray women without the signs of age, because of the negative connotations of old age and the ideal of beautiful appearance, or *kalokagathia*, adopted in iconography. Therefore, wrinkles at the corners of the eyes and on the forehead, more pronounced lines along the nose and sunken cheeks (fig. 6) appear more often on the faces of older men and slaves, but only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. in South Italian painting. It was also determined by the greater possibilities for drawing technical details offered by red-figure painting and the white-ground style. Traditional iconography was used in depictions of mythological figures from outside the Greek world and complemented with typical ethnic features; for example, Oriental clothes, full lips and a fleshy upturned nose indicate the Ethiopian origin of King Kepheus on a red-figure pelike related to the Kensington Class and the Workshop of the Niobid Painter of ca. 460 B.C.<sup>20</sup>

## TYPES OF SCENES

### HOMERIC MOTIFS

The positive features of old age included experience, wisdom, and ability to act diplomatically. In vase painting, they are connoted by kings and sages. Representations of scenes from Homer's *Iliad* allowed the portrayal of such figures on both the Greek and the Trojan side.<sup>21</sup> One of them is Priam, whose age ranges from mature to advanced on Athenian vases. In the scene of preparation to depart for the battle on an amphora by Euthymides of ca. 510 B.C.<sup>22</sup> the king – his bald spot is clearly visible – stands slightly bent, wrapped in a warm himation,

<sup>17</sup> Montanari 1960: pl. 97.1, 99.1; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 23ff.; Mangold 2000: 108 fig. 60; Matheson 2009: 194.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sutton 1981; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 47–55, fig. 68–73; Sutton 2000: 196f.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Peschel 1987.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen 2006: 183f.

<sup>21</sup> Matheson 2009: 195–196; Shapiro 2009: 91–102.

<sup>22</sup> Lullies 1956: pl. 165.1, 166.1; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 7f.; Pfisterer-Haas 2009A: 34.



Fig. 6. Red-figure neck-amphora by the Ixion Painter, ca. 450–425 B.C., London, British Museum (after R. Green, E. Handley, *Images of Greek Theatre*, London 1995, fig. 23)

gesturing with his hand as he gives fatherly advice to Hector. To the right, Hector is accompanied by his mother Hecuba who, in line with the vase painting tradition, is portrayed without the signs of age. The scene illustrates a mythical subject, but exemplifies also a popular motif in the decoration of Greek vases,



Fig. 7. Red-figure cup by Briseis Painter, ca. 485–480 B.C., British Museum, London  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hektor\\_ransom\\_BM\\_E75.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hektor_ransom_BM_E75.jpg)

known as the “departing warrior” motif.<sup>23</sup> This type of representation focuses on every man’s duty to defend the polis, placed above family life; in mythology, the standard was set by Achilles, who chose the fame of battle and death over a long quiet life (Hom. *Il.* 9.413, 18.95–101). This duty aroused contradictory feelings in the family which knew that their loved one might die, but was also aware of the necessity for him to perform important social tasks – the fame of the departed was to be the compensation for their loss (Thuc. 2.42–44). A bell-krater in the manner of the Villa Giulia Painter of ca. 450. B.C.<sup>24</sup> shows a young

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wrede 1916: 221–374; Spieß 1992; Matheson 2005: 23–35.

<sup>24</sup> Eichler 1974: pl. 114.4–5.

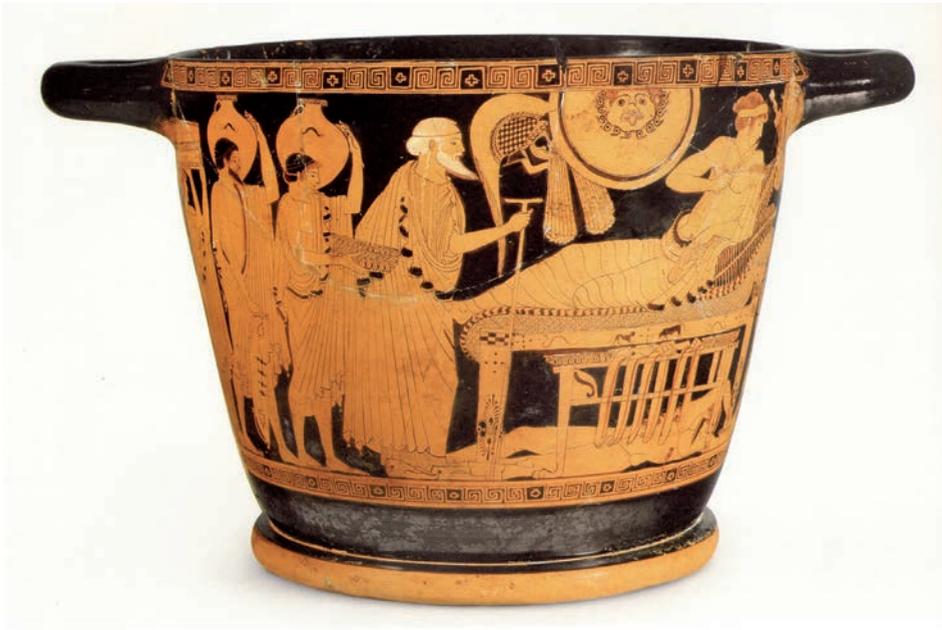


Fig. 8a i b. Red-figure skyphos by the Brygos Painter, ca. 485 B.C., Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum (after Latacz et al. 2008: fig. 126)

man taking leave of his elderly father, depicted with expressive portrait features and a nearly bald head, who sits in a comfortable position, with his legs crossed.

Another group of scenes in vase painting shows Priam trying to recover Hector's body from Achilles in order to fulfil his parental duty and bury it in accordance with religious rites. In the tondo of a cup by the Briseis Painter of ca. 485–480 B.C.,<sup>25</sup> here fig. 7, Priam stands before a guard at the door to Achilles' tent. He is not so much a king as a father, worn out by pain and unkempt, with a thinned beard and the remainder of his hair falling in streaks on the back of his neck. He gestures with his right hand, requesting permission to enter. Priam's confrontation with Achilles, which is announced by this image, became a popular motif in vase painting: it is with similar sadness and resignation that Priam leans over his son's body on a black-figure amphora attributed to a painter of Group E of ca. 540 B.C.,<sup>26</sup> while in the scene of begging for Hector's body on a hydria by the Pioneer Group, ca. 510–500 B.C.,<sup>27</sup> fig. 5, he is shown as an older man in his prime, with a shock of dark hair, briskly approaching Achilles, who reclines on a kline. A different interpretation can be seen on a skyphos by the Brygos Painter of ca. 485 B.C.,<sup>28</sup> here fig. 8a, where the king has a long white beard and a headband in his white hair and stands calmly in a dignified posture, leaning on a stick. This portrayal is the closest to Homer's text: Priam's diplomatic speech (*Il.* 24.486–506) demonstrated the advantage of his wisdom, while Achilles was impressed by the king's courage and moved by the memory of his own father, whom he did not support in his old age (*Il.* 24.540–1). His concern for Peleus, an expression of filial duty towards the father, can be heard again in the conversation of Achilles' soul and Odysseus (*Od.* 11.494–504).

One of the most moving scenes with Priam is the moment of his death at the hands of Neoptolemos.<sup>29</sup> Its earliest example is found on a lekanis by the C Painter of ca. 580–570 B.C.:<sup>30</sup> Priam, grey-haired and balding, stands proudly before the altar, pleading for mercy with raised arms. In later depictions the king surrenders, sits on the altar of Zeus Herkeios before the Greek's final blow on a hydria by the Kleophrades Painter (fig. 4), or collapses onto it from a push by Neoptolemos, extending his arms in a gesture of supplication.<sup>31</sup> He hopes to be spared, but the Greek hero shows no respect for his age, social status or the sacredness of the altar. These scenes are marked by the pathos of the moment of the old man's death, who is also helpless to prevent his grandson's murder, which is movingly portrayed on a red-figure pelike attributed to an Early Man-

<sup>25</sup> Williams 1993: pl. 75a-b.

<sup>26</sup> Lullies 1972: pl. 21.2, 23.1; Latacz et al. 2008: 137 fig. 12, 383 cat. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Neils 2009: 214.

<sup>28</sup> Eichler 1951: pl. 35.1, 36.2; Latacz et al. 2008: 384–385 cat. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Mangold 2000: 14–33; Muth 2008: 570–582; Pfisterer-Haas 2009A: 29–38.

<sup>30</sup> Mele 1995: pl. 1.1–3, 2.1–4, 3.1–4; Mangold 2000: 29–30, fig. 15; Matheson 2009: 195.

<sup>31</sup> Walters 1928: pl. 43.2A.

nerist, ca. 475 B.C.:<sup>32</sup> holding Astyanax by one leg, Neoptolemos is about to smash him against the altar as the terrified Priam kneels at the altar shortly before his death. The Kleophrades Painter depicted a later moment in the story: the boy's bleeding body lies inert on the desperate king's lap as he tries to ward off the Greek's blow (fig. 4). Priam's sacrifice-like death is an extremely moving motif in vase painting.

The tragedy *Hecuba* by Euripides recounted the misfortunes that afflicted Priam's family after his death. One of the fragments (1046nn.) inspired the decoration of a red-figure loutrophoros by the Apulian Darius Painter (375–350 B.C.):<sup>33</sup> the queen, taking revenge on the king of the Thracian Chersonese for the murder of her son, appears here as an old woman, severely tried by life, her tired face covered with wrinkles; she leans on a walking stick and is supported by her companion. Hecuba is depicted realistically in this scene, she does not resemble the perfect stately young woman portrayed by Attic painters.

The hydria by the Kleophrades Painter includes another important iconographic motif, which was generally popular only in black-figure vase painting towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. It is the escape from Troy of Aeneas, who carries his father Anchises on his shoulders, the latter often depicted as a man of slight build. His old age is indicated by white hair of varying length or by partial or complete baldness;<sup>34</sup> here fig. 9.

The conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon resulted in the former's refusal to fight and occasioned many attempts at appeasing Achilles' anger. The mission of Odysseus, Diomedes – in *Iliad* (9.182–191) Ajax takes part in the mission – and Phoinix is among the popular motifs in vase decoration which show the old man in one of the principal roles. Phoinix, a tutor of Achilles, was portrayed in a long chiton and himation, supporting himself on a stick. He has a shock of white (fig. 2) or dark hair, with a marked bald spot above the forehead (fig. 3, 8b). Listening to the arguments of the diplomatic Odysseus, he always stands to one side, his task is to appeal to Achilles' emotions. Phoinix also appears in the scene of the sacrifice of Polyxena to the ghost of Achilles on a Tyrrhenian amphora by the Timiades Painter of ca. 570–550 B.C.,<sup>35</sup> the only representation of this event found on vases. On the left is Nestor, the oldest Greek general, esteemed for his wisdom (*Il.* 2.370), who, despite his fame, seldom appears in vase painting. He could spur the warriors on to battle with his tales, an ability admired by Agamemnon himself, who wished him: "Old Sir, I would that even as is the spirit in thy breast, so thy limbs might obey, and thy strength be firm" (*Hom. Il.* 4.313–316). The old man replied, "But in no

<sup>32</sup> Levi 1938: pl. 34.1.

<sup>33</sup> Trendall, Webster 1971: 75.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Villard 1951: pl. 99.1; Moore, von Bothmer 1974: pl. 51.3; Descœdres 1981: pl. 47.11; Latacz et al. 2008: 403–404 cat. 154.

<sup>35</sup> Latacz et al. 2008: 405 cat. 156.



Fig. 9. Black-figure amphora attributed to the Cabinet des Médailles 2180 Class, ca. 500 B.C., Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig (after Latacz et al. 2008: fig. 154)

wise do the gods grant to men all things at one time. As I was then a youth, so now doth old age attend me. Yet even so will I abide among the charioteers and urge them on by counsel and by words; for that is the office of elders” (Hom. *Il.* 4.320–323). On a kylix by Oltos, ca. 515–510 B.C.,<sup>36</sup> Achilles, unaware yet of Patroclus’ death, is extending his hand to Nestor, who is slightly bent forward and leans on a stick (Hom. *Il.* 17.400ff.). Behind him, on a chariot led by Iris, stand the bearded Phoinix and Antilochus, who was to tell Achilles the tragic news. However, the sage’s old age is more evident in the depiction illustrating a fragment of *Odyssey* on an Apulian column-krater by the Dijon Painter, ca. 370 B.C.,<sup>37</sup> here fig. 10: here Telemachus visits Nestor in his palace at Pylos to learn about his father’s fate. The sage is wearing sumptuous robes, but his stooped figure, left hand placed on the back of his hip, thinning grey hair, furrowed forehead, and tired gaze indicate that he is no longer the same man who raised the spirit of the Greeks at Troy. Nestor gives emphasis to his account by extending two fingers of his right hand, which rests on a stick. His posture seems to illustrate the timeless words of the Krakow poet Leszek Aleksander Moczulski:<sup>38</sup>

I have aged.  
In the end.

or

At an age  
a man’s dead.

## SUPERVISORS

The most typical image of an elderly woman is the nurse, who looked after both girls and boys; in black-figure vase painting she is sometimes smaller than other figures and accompanied by the inscription *τρόφος*,<sup>39</sup> while on red-figure vases she stands slightly stooped, has white or thinning hair, sometimes a wrinkled face, sunken cheeks or a double chin, and a short hairstyle denoting the status of a slave. The reddish shade of hair of the nurse in the scene of *prothesis* on a fragmentarily preserved loutrophoros by the Bologna 228 Painter of ca. 460 B.C.<sup>40</sup> indicates

<sup>36</sup> Rohde 1990: pl. 2.1; Latacz et al. 2008: 132, fig. 8, 374, cat. 111.

<sup>37</sup> Andreae 2000: 323.

<sup>38</sup> Moczulski 2012: 144.

<sup>39</sup> Beazley 1957: 233–244; Bremmer 1987: 200; Fellmann 1989: 4.2, 6.2; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 16–18, II.1–3; Torelli 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Karouzou 1954: pl. 22.3; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 27, fig. 27; Pfisterer-Haas 2009b: 72–74; Matheson 2009: 197, fig. 8.



Fig. 10. Apulian column-krater by the Dijon Painter, ca. 370 B.C., Berlin Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung (after B. Andreae, *Odysseus. Mythos und Erinnerung*, Mainz 2000, fig. 323)

that she is one of the numerous Thracian women<sup>41</sup> who looked after children in Athens at that time. Although they usually began work as young women, it was the convention in vase painting to depict them at an older age in order to convey their life experience and long relationship with the family. Nurses usually appear in a clear context, accompanying their charges: on a red-figure skyphos by the Pistoxenos Painter, ca. 470 B.C.;<sup>42</sup> here fig. 11, the white-haired Thracian Geropso, wrinkled and gap-toothed, supports herself on a stick as she follows the youthful and vigorous Heracles, carrying his lyre; the upper band of decoration on an Apulian calyx-krater by the Laodamia Painter of ca. 350–340 B.C.<sup>43</sup> depicts Phaedra's fatal attraction to her stepson Hippolytus. Beside the sad, seated Phaedra stands her nurse, an elderly woman with white hair pinned above the neck, in a long chiton and himation, supporting her chin with her hand in a gesture of concern. On the right, talking to a woman, is a *paidagogos*, a figure rarely portrayed in vase painting; he has longer white hair and beard, props

<sup>41</sup> Zimmermann 1980: 429–446; Tsiafakis 2000: 372–376.

<sup>42</sup> Lücken 1972: pl. 24.1, 25.1, 28.2; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 18, fig. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Taplin 2007: 131.



Fig. 11. Red-figure skyphos by the Pistozenos Painter, 480–470 B.C., Schwerin, Staatliches Museum (after P. E. Arias, M. Hirmer, *Tausend Jahre. Griechische Vasenkunst*, München 1960, fig. 166)

himself on a crook and wears a short girl chiton, himation and endromides. The pedagogue was usually an older slave with sufficient experience to introduce his pupil to the world at large. His duties included teaching music – in mythology, the model was Linus,<sup>44</sup> Heracles' teacher – and horse riding, which is depicted amusingly on a column-krater by the Naples Painter of ca. 440–420 B.C.<sup>45</sup> The figure of the pedagogue also appears on a Campanian red-figure amphora attributed to the Ixion Painter, 450–425 B.C.,<sup>46</sup> in an emotional scene illustrating a fragment of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (88–201), in which a *paidagogos* leads Antigone up to the roof of the palace at Thebes so that she could see the Argive army brought to the city by her brother Polyneices (fig. 6). The importance of tutors and nurses in the Greek family and the strong emotional ties that formed between them and the children over time are illustrated by the moment at which Odysseus is recognized by his nurse Euryycleia (an inscription inconsistent with *Iliad* refers to her as Antifata), shown on a skyfos by the Penelopa Painter, ca. 440 B.C.<sup>47</sup> The nurse's rounded back and short white hair indicate that she is advanced in years; washing the guest's feet as was customary (Hom.

<sup>44</sup> Lücken 1972: pl. 24.2, 26.1, 28.3.

<sup>45</sup> Neils, Oakley 2003: 256 cat. 56; Matheson 2009: 197.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, Pryce 1926: pl. 7,6; Green, Handley 1995: 46, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Rastrelli 1982: pl. 35.2; Pfisterer-Haas 1989: 19–20; Pfisterer-Haas 2009B: 69–71.

*Od.* 19.350–380; 466–471), she notices a scar on his leg and looks up at Odysseus in surprise. Behind her stands the swineherd Eumaeus. On a bell-krater by the Ixion Painter, ca. 330 B.C., Eumaeus supports his master in the violent fight with the suitors, which took place in the megaron of the palace (*Od.* 22). There are crow's feet and lines along the nose on his bearded face. Despite his age, he bravely attacks one of the suitors with his stick.

#### BURIAL SCENES

Burial scenes seem to offer a suitable context for depicting the elderly. In vase painting, usually the *prothesis* and the making of an offering at the grave were represented. *Prothesis* scenes were frequent in the Geometric period (ca. 770–700 B.C.) on the amphorae and kraters used as funeral monuments,<sup>48</sup> but the silhouetted style of the period makes it impossible to determine the age of the figures. Their number decreased in the Orientalizing period, but this subject matter became popular again in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. on clay pinakes decorating the walls of graves<sup>49</sup> and on black-figure loutrophoroi; the *prothesis* appears much less frequently in the later period on red-figure loutrophoroi and white-ground lekythoi, which were used as tomb furnishings. *Prothesis* scenes do not feature elderly dead people. The elderly only appear as mourners – on a lekythos by the Sabouroff Painter (ca. 450)<sup>50</sup> B.C., an old man with a bald spot on the top of his head stands by the bier. Although he wears a cloak, it is evident that he has placed his right hand on his left shoulder – this silent gesture of grief and longing for the deceased (probably his son) contrasts with the traditional expression of mourning by two female figures; the figure of an elderly man wrapped in a himation, hiding his face in one hand, conveys deep despair and the desire to escape the painful reality.<sup>51</sup> A different portrayal of mourning is found on a red-figure loutrophoros of ca. 420 B.C.:<sup>52</sup> a white-haired, bearded father leans on a stick at the head of the bed, making a gesture of mourning with his left hand held to his forehead; beside him, a nurse in a black mourning chiton tears at her white hair in grief. White-ground lekythoi typically depict young people, usually women, visiting the grave and making offerings to the departed. In this context, a lekythos by the Achilles Painter of ca. 450 B.C.,<sup>53</sup> is one of the exceptions: it shows an old white-haired man at a grave stele, leaning on a stick in a gesture of mourning. The

<sup>48</sup> Huber 2001: 61–86.

<sup>49</sup> Mommsen 1997: 26.

<sup>50</sup> Oakley 2004: 77, pl. II.

<sup>51</sup> Oakley 1997: pl. 140C.

<sup>52</sup> Pfisterer-Haas 1989: fig. 30–31; Huber 2001: 128f.

<sup>53</sup> Wehgartner 1991: pl. 12.2, 13.1; Oakley 1997: pl. 141A; Oakley 2004: 153, 158, fig. 120; Matheson 2009: 193, 195, 198.

well-preserved white paint highlights the colour of the man's hair and the wrinkles on his face are rendered with delicate brushstrokes. A similar representation adorns a fragmentarily preserved red-figure loutrophoros by Kleophon Painter (ca. 450–425 B.C.)<sup>54</sup>.

#### ACCEPTANCE OF OLD AGE

In vase painting, the joy of youth is expressed in the scenes of symposia. Old age did not limit men's possibilities for participating in banquets, although it may have lessened their enjoyment of the festivities. An amphora by the Acheloos Painter of ca. 500 B.C.<sup>55</sup> depicts a *komos* attended by two older aulos players, one of whom is characterised distinctly, not only by his white hair, but also by slight obesity, a stooped back and the robe covering his hips (young men were portrayed naked). The tondo of a cup by Onesimos of ca. 500–490 B.C.<sup>56</sup> depicts an emaciated, balding man enjoying himself at a symposion in the company of a hetaira. However, this image lacks the careless joy of youth. Perhaps the man's mind is occupied with nostalgic memories, as mentioned by Kephalos in a conversation with Socrates in Plato's *Republica* (Pl. *Resp.* 1.329a); similar sentiments are expressed by Euripides in the words of the chorus (*HF*, 638–650):

I love youth!

Old age is an interminable burden! Heavy. Heavier than the boulders on Mt Aetna!

It's a pall of gloom, all over my head, my eyes!

Give me youth and you can keep all the wealth of Asia's kings, houses full of gold!

Compare youth with wealth or poverty, and youth is the better by far.

Old age, though! I hate old age! Gloomy thing! Deadly thing! Let it sink and vanish beneath the ocean's waves!

How I wish old age never managed to find its way into the homes and cities of mortals!

It should have stayed up there! Drifting about through the winds of the upper air.

Even Heracles was afraid of old age, as illustrated by a grotesque scene – uncommon in the hero's iconography – on a pelike by the Geras Painter of ca. 480–470 B.C.<sup>57</sup> The powerfully built son of Zeus swings his club at the small, bent figure of an old man with a thin goatee. His body is shrunken, white-haired head deep between his shoulders, ears big, nose hooked, and his face is covered with wrinkles. His right hand raised with an open palm suggests a gesture of supplication and defence against Heracles' blow. This caricatural figure is Geras – the personification of old age, born, according to Hesiod (*Theog.* 211ff.), of

<sup>54</sup> Huber 2001: 130, fig. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Kunze-Götte 1982: pl. 64.2, 66.1–2; Gossel-Raek 1990: 294, fig. 48.3; Shapiro 2009: 97f.

<sup>56</sup> Williams 1993: pl. 9a-b.

<sup>57</sup> Pottier 1929: pl. 48.1–2; Schulze 2003: 234–237; Matheson 2009: 196; here fig. 12.



Fig. 12. Red-figure pelike by the Geras Painter, ca. 480–470 B.C., Paris, Louvre  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pelike\\_Geras\\_Louvre\\_G234\\_n2.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pelike_Geras_Louvre_G234_n2.jpg)

Nyx and Erebus. Possessed of all the characteristics that young people fear, especially in a society devoted to the idea of *kalokagathia*, he stands in both physical and symbolic contrast to Heracles.

These characters were also pictured together in the same period by the Mantsch Painter:<sup>58</sup> Geras props himself on a stick, but his posture is more relaxed, even

<sup>58</sup> Barbieri 1991: pl. 22.1; Schulze 2003: 235f.

though the position of his left leg suggests a handicap. He also wears a himation. Heracles has refrained from attacking the old man and leans on his club. The two figures appear to be engaged in discussion, as with the depictions of conversing Athenian citizens. The juxtaposition of the tiny Geras with the mighty Heracles creates a comic effect on this pelike too, which is enhanced by the former's stick, bent like its owner. The hero negotiates here with a frail, inconspicuous figure that personifies his future, something he fears more than the monsters he has defeated. But the inscription next to Heracles' mouth – *ΚΛΑΥΣΕΙ* – suggests his desire to fight the inevitable passage of time, and anticipates the apotheosis of Heracles for the viewer.

This option was not available to an ordinary human. The scene on a neck amphora by the same painter, ca. 480 B.C., shows a warrior's departure.<sup>59</sup> The older man and the young man facing each other look like a mirror reflection, shifted in time. Does the father reminisce about his youth or does the son recollect the father's battles from which he luckily returned home, where he has lived to a ripe old age? Death in defence of the polis was regarded as an honour, a cause for pride to the family, but there was always the tragic emotional aspect of abandoning one's elderly parents. The father's staff crossing with the son's spear is the only element of intimacy and possibly a gesture of encouragement, giving the son the prospect of a long life, which the father has enjoyed. Like Nestor, the latter figure connotes knowledge, experience and self-control, but an acceptance of one's age as well.

Although Medea was able to rejuvenate her father-in-law, Aison (*Ov. Met.* 7.163–291), who is depicted as a young man jumping out of a pot on a black-figure lekythos by the Haimon Painter of ca. 490–480 B.C. (VOS 1978: pl. 105.2, 3, 5), eternal youth was an exclusive privilege of the gods. In their beliefs, the Greeks did not introduce old age into Olympus; it existed only on earth – where even the goddesses assumed the form of an old woman to move freely, according to Greek customs (Aphrodite appeared to Helen as an old spinner in Troy, and Demeter went in search of her daughter disguised as an old woman; *Hom. Il.* 3.384–386; *Hom. Dem.* 2.100–104; c.f. Bremmer 1987: 192) – and in the underworld, where Hades is sometimes distinguished by his white hair.<sup>60</sup>

The biological cycle of human life determined the function of the elderly as the guarantors of the family's stability: stooped, leaning on stick, their hair white or thinned, they appear in vase painting as fathers and – much less frequently – mothers or nannies, but their knowledge and experience were valuable to society only in the context of the Homeric world. The rationalization of life in the democratic period radically changed that positive attitude towards the elderly, but the extant specimens of vase painting show that images of filial reverence,

<sup>59</sup> Bothmer 1957: 166, 177.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Walters 1929: pl. 64.2b; Schöne-Denkinger 2009: pl. 52.1, 53.

such as that of Aeneas saving his father or Demophon and Akamas rescuing his grandmother, continued to be used and the fate of Priam or Aithra still aroused compassion. In the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., older people can usually be seen only as mourners in burial scenes or in illustrations of scenes from dramas – these representations also include other iconographic features related to old age, such as realistically depicted wrinkles. Myths, which shaped historical and cultural consciousness as well as people’s attitudes (Pl. *Resp.* 377f.; Pl. *Euthphr.* VI E 5) for centuries, included negative patterns as well, some of them operating at the edges of social consciousness. Aversion to the elderly and their exclusion from active life are not surprising in view of the fate of Cronus, overthrown and imprisoned in Tartarus. Zeus took his place, just as on earth every son took over his father’s estate. Whether the successor provided a decent life for his parents afterwards depended probably on his empathy and the sense that the following words by Sappho (*Fr.* VII) would one day apply to everyone:

...

But now old age has seized my tender body,  
Now my hair is white, and no longer dark.

My heart’s heavy, my legs won’t support me,  
That once were fleet as fawns, in the dance.

I grieve often for my state; what can I do?  
Being human, there’s no way not to grow old.

...

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andreae 2000: B. Andreae, *Odysseus. Mythos und Erinnerung*, Mainz 2000.
- Baltrusch 2009: E. Baltrusch, *An den Rand gedrängt – Alter im Klassischen Athen*, in: A. Gutsfeld, W. Schmitz (eds), *Altersbilder in der Antike. Am schlimmen Rand des Lebens?*, Bonn 2009, 57–86.
- Barbieri 1991: G. Barbieri, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Roma, Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia 4*, Milano 1991.
- Beazley 1933: J.D. Beazley, *Der Kleophrades Maler*, Berlin 1933.
- Beazley 1957: J.D. Beazley, *EAENHΣ AIIAITHΣIΣ*, “Proceedings of the British Academy” 43, (1957), 233–244.
- Bothmer 1957: D. von Bothmer, *Greek Vases from the Hearst Collection*, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin” 15 no. 7 (1957), 165–180.
- Bremmer 1987: J.N. Bremmer, *The Old Women of Ancient Greece*, in: J. Blok, P. Mason (eds), *Sexual Asymmetry. Studies in Ancient Society*, Amsterdam 1987, 191–215.
- Cohen 2006: B. Cohen (ed.), *The Colors of Clay. Special Techniques in Athenian Vases*, Los Angeles 2006.
- Descœdres 1981: J-P. Descœdres, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Basel, Antikenmuseum 1*, Bern 1981.
- Eichler 1951: F. Eichler, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum 1*, Wien 1951.

- Eichler 1974: F. Eichler, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum 3*, Wien 1974.
- Fellmann 1989: B. Fellmann, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: München, Antikensammlungen 11*, München 1989.
- Gossel-Raeck 1990: B. Gossel-Raeck, *Komos-Tanz der Zecher*, in: K. Vierneisel, B. Kaser (eds), *Kunst der Schale- Kultur des Trinkens*, München 1990.
- Green, Handley 1995: R. Green, E. Handley, *Images of Greek Theatre*, London 1995.
- Greifenhagen 1953: A. Greifenhagen, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Mannheim, Reiss-Museum 1*, München 1953.
- Herzig 1994: H.E. Herzig, *Der alte Mensch in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, in: K. Buraselis (ed.), *Unity and Units of Antiquity. Papers from a Colloquium at Delphi, 5–8.7.1992*, Athen 1994, 169–179.
- Hatzivassiliou 2010: E. Hatzivassiliou, *Athenian Black Figure Iconography between 510 and 475 B.C.*, Rahden, Westf. 2010.
- Huber 2001: I. Huber, *Die Ikonographie der Trauer in der griechischen Kunst*, Mannheim, Möhnese 2001.
- Karouzou 1954: S. Karouzou, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Athens, Musée National 2*, Paris 1954.
- Knittlmayer 1997: B. Knittlmayer, *Die attische Aristokratie und ihre Helden. Untersuchungen zu Darstellungen des Trojanischen Sagenkreises im 6. und frühen 5. Jahrhundert v.Chr.*, Heidelberg 1997.
- Krumeich 2009: R. Krumeich, *Würdevolle Greise und alte Geizkragen. Zur Bewertung des Alters im antiken Theater, in: Alter in der Antike. Die Blüte des Alters aber ist die Weisheit*, Mainz am Rhein 2009, 39–50.
- Kunze-Götte 1982: E. Kunze-Götte, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: München, Antikensammlungen ehemals Museum Antiker Kleinkunst 9*, München 1982.
- Latacz 2008: J. Latacz et al., *Homer: Der Mythos von Troia in Dichtung und Kunst*, München 2008.
- Levi 1928: D. Levi, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Firenze, Regio Museo Archeologico 2*, Roma 1938.
- Lewis 2002: S. Lewis, *The Athenian Woman. An iconographic handbook*, London–New York 2002.
- Lullies 1956: R. Lullies, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: München, Museum Antiker Kleinkunst 4*, München 1956.
- Lullies 1972: R. Lullies, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Kassel, Antikenabteilung der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen 1*, München 1972.
- Lücken 1972: G. von Lücken, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Schwerin, Staatliches Museum 1*, Berlin 1972.
- Mangold 2000: M. Mangold, *Kassandra in Athen. Die Eroberung Trojas auf attischen Vasenbildern*, Berlin 2000.
- Martin 1984: J. Martin, *Zur Stellung des Vaters in antiken Gesellschaften*, in: H. Süßmuth (ed.), *Historische Anthropologie. Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, Göttingen 1984, 84–109.
- Matheson 2005: S.B. Matheson, *A Farewell with Arm: Departing Warriors on Athenian Vases*, in: J.M. Barringer, J.M. Hurwit (eds), *Periklean Athens and its Legacy. Problems and Perspectives*, Austin 2005, 23–35.
- Matheson 2009: S.B. Matheson, *Old Age in Athenian Vase-Painting*, in: J.H. Oakley, O. Palagia (eds), *Athenian Potters and Painters II*, Oxford, Oakville 2009, 191–199.
- Mele 1995: N. V. Mele, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Napoli, Museo Nazionale 5*, Roma 1995.
- Mikalson 1991: J.D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*, Chapel Hill, NC 1991.
- Moczulski 2012: L.A. Moczulski, *Antologia*, Kraków 2012 [translated by P. Mierzwa].
- Mommsen 1997: H. Mommsen, *Exekias I. Die Grabtafeln*, Mainz am Rhein 1997.

- Montanari 1960: G.B. Montanari, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Bologna, Museo Civico 5*, Roma 1960.
- Moore, von Bothmer 1974: M.B. Moore, Dietrich von Bothmer, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 4*, New York 1974.
- Muth 2008: S. Muth, *Gewalt im Bild. Das Phänomen der medialen Gewalt im Athen des 6. und 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, Berlin–New York 2008.
- Neils 2009: J. Neils, *The 'Unheroic' Corpse: Re-reading the Sarpedon Krater*, in: J.H. Oakley, O. Palagia (eds), *Athenian Potters and Painters II*, Oxford, Oakville 2009, 212–219.
- Neils, Oakley 2003: J. Neils, J.H. Oakley (eds), *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece, Images of Childhood from the Classical Past*, New Haven 2003.
- Oakley 1997: J.H. Oakley, *The Achilles Painter*, Mainz 1997.
- Oakley 2004: J.H. Oakley, *Picturing Death in Classical Athens*, Cambridge University Press 2004.
- Peschel 1987: I. Peschel, *Die Hetäre bei Symposion und Komos in der attisch rotfigurigen Vasenmalerei des 6–4. Jhs. V. Chr.*, Frankfurt am Main, Bern–New York–Paris 1987.
- Pfisterer-Haas 1989: S. Pfisterer-Haas, *Darstellungen alter Frauen in der griechischen Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main 1989.
- Pfisterer-Haas 2009A: S. Pfisterer-Haas, *Alter im Mythos*, in: *Alter in der Antike. Die Blüte des Alters aber ist die Weisheit*, Mainz am Rhein 2009, 29–38.
- Pfisterer-Haas 2009B: S. Pfisterer-Haas, *Ammen und Pädagogen*, in: *Alter in der Antike. Die Blüte des Alters aber ist die Weisheit*, Mainz am Rhein 2009, 69–80.
- Pottier 1929: E. Pottier, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Paris, Louvre 6*, Paris 1929.
- Rastrelli 1982: A. Rastrelli, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Chiusi 2*, Roma 1982.
- Rohde 1990: E. Rohde, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Berlin, Antikensammlung-Pergamonmuseum 1*, Berlin 1990.
- Schmitz 2009: W. Schmitz, *Nicht >altes Eisen<, sondern Garant der Ordnung – Die Macht der Alten in Sparta*, in: A. Gutsfeld, W. Schmitz (eds), *Altersbilder in der Antike. Am schlimmen Rand des Lebens?*, Bonn 2009, 87–112.
- Schmitz, Prittwitz 2009: W. Schmitz, H.-H. von Prittwitz, *Einleitung*, in: A. Gutsfeld, Winfried Schmitz (eds), *Altersbilder in der Antike*, Bonn 2009, 9–27.
- Schöne-Denkinger 2009: A. Schöne-Denkinger, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Berlin, Antikensammlung II*, München 2009.
- Schulze 2003: H. Schulze, *Herakles bedroht das Alter, oder das Alter bedroht Herakles. Ein Bilde rätsel*, in: Raimund Wünsche, *Herakles-Herkules*, München 2003, 234–237.
- Shapiro 2009: A. H. Shapiro, *Geras lygron? Bilder des alten Bürgers auf Vasenbildern*, in: *Alter in der Antike. Die Blüte des Alters aber ist die Weisheit*, Mainz am Rhein 2009, 91–102.
- Slehoferova 1988: V. Slehoferova, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Basel, Antikensammlung und Sammlung Ludwig 3*, Bern 1988.
- Smith, Pryce 1926: A.H. Smith, F.N. Pryce, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: British Museum 2*, London 1926.
- Spieß 1992: A.B. Spieß, *Der Kriegerabschied auf attischen Vasen der archaischen Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main–New York 1992.
- Sutton 1981: R.F. Sutton, Jr., *The Interaction between Men and Women portrayed on Attic red-figure Pottery*, Chapel Hill 1981.
- Sutton 2000: R.F. Sutton, Jr., *The Good, the Base, and the Ugly: The Drunken Orgy in Attic Vase Painting and the Athenian Self*, in: Beth Cohen (ed.), *Not the Classical Ideal. Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art*, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2000, 180–202.
- Taplin 2007: O. Taplin, *Pots and Plays. Interactions between tragedy and Greek vase-painting in the fourth century B.C.*, Los Angeles 2007.
- Torelli 2007: M. Torelli, *Le strategie di Kleitias. Composizione e programma figurativo del vaso Francois*, Milano 2007.

- Trendall, Webster 1971: A. D. Trendall, Th. B. L. Webster, *Illustration of Greek Drama*, London 1971.
- Tsiafakis 2000: D. Tsiafakis, *The Allure and Repulsion of Thracian in the Art of Classical Athens*, in: B.h Cohen (ed.), *Not the Classical Ideal. Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art*, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2000, 364–389.
- Villard 1951: F. Villard, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Paris, Musée du Louvre 10*, Paris 1951.
- Vos 1978: M.F. Vos, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden 2*, Leiden 1978.
- Walters 1928: H.B. Walters, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: London, British Museum 3*, Oxford 1928.
- Walters 1929: H.B. Walters, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: London, British Museum 4*, London 1929.
- Wehgartner 1991: I. Wehgartner, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Berlin, Antikenmuseum 8*, München 1991.
- Williams 1993: D. Williams, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: London, British Museum 9*, London 1993.
- Wrede 1916: W. Wrede, *Kriegers Ausfahrt in der archaisch-griechischen Kunst*, MDAI(A) 41, 1916, 221–374.
- Zimmermann 1980: K. Zimmermann, *Thraker-Darstellungen auf griechischen Vasen*, in: R. Vulpe (ed.), *Actes du IIe Congrès International de Thracologie, Bukarest 4.-10. September 1976*, I, Bukarest 1980, 429–446.
- Eur. HF: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/EuripidesHerakles.htm> [17.07.2013]
- Hom. Il.: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0134%3A-book%3D4%3Acard%3D310> [20.07.2013]
- Sappho, Fr. VII: [http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Sappho.htm#\\_Toc76357052](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Sappho.htm#_Toc76357052) [21.08.2014]

#### AN UNWELCOME ASPECT OF LIFE: THE DEPICTION OF OLD AGE IN GREEK VASE PAINTING

##### Summary

The subject of old age is rarely addressed in Greek vase painting and usually appears in scenes from mythology or daily life. Older men in these representations are Homeric heroes, esteemed as kings, leaders and sages who have rendered great services to society; older people are also present in scenes of everyday life – usually as fathers or child supervisors. Depending on the technique of decoration, these figures were characterised mostly through hair colour (as well as thinning hair and baldness in the case of men), a stooped and frail frame or an obese one. Besides, on red-figure and white-ground vessels it was possible to render facial wrinkles. These features apply predominantly to the images of men, because due to the social ideal of *kalokagathia* Athenian women were usually depicted as timelessly young. The article contains an analysis of selected depictions of the elderly in vase painting in terms of their iconography and the types of scenes in which they appear, including references to the written sources.