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Athenian eyecups of the Late Archaic Period

This article interprets two eyecups created in Athens at the end of the Late Archaic Period. Both would have been purchased by Athenian aristocrats and used at what were essentially exclusive drinking parties. Eyecups are a specific type of drinking cup used by aristocrats at these social gatherings. The cups are therefore an important source of information about how the Athenian elite expressed their self-identity during the period in which the cups were created and used. I will argue that eyecups indicate that aristocrats could only be equal among themselves if they stripped away what made them civilised and embraced ‘the Other’.

Athenian aristocrats would have shared the concept of the Other. The ideal Athenian was *kalos kagathos*, beautiful and good, and displayed *sophrosyne*, self-control, at all times.¹ Three Others are depicted on the two eyecups that will be studied in this article; the gorgon, the satyr, and Dionysus. The gorgon was a semi-human and semi-animal powerful female.² The satyr was identified as an Other because he was also ‘semi-animal’ and was depicted as ithyphallic, ugly, and incapable of controlling his sexual urges.³ Dionysus was associated with wine and therefore with the loss of control that can accompany it.⁴ Athenians used the concept of the Other as a form of self definition; they conceived the self and the Other as being binary opposites that could not have existed in reality.⁵

However, I will argue that depictions on eyecups were not depictions of reality, rather, they would have been the expression of ideas and concepts such as Otherness. Ugly and deformed beings such as the satyr and the gorgon were depicted as Others whereas depictions of the self portrayed the ideal. Two youths are shown reclining on a bench in a vineyard on an eyecup in the Museum Antike Kleinkunst, Munich; they are smooth skinned, beardless, and are engaged in conversation rather than allowing their passions to run wild.⁶ A Panathenaic amphora in the Rijksmuseum, Leiden, depicts two youths wrestling under the watchful eye of an older tutor.⁷ The youths are naked, muscular, and each has a small penis. The youths depicted on the eyecup and the amphora are examples of the ideal Athenian represented in art. This article examines representations of the Other on two eyecups and interpret the concept of the Other within the context of *symposia*, social gatherings of Athenian aristocrats.

The kylix.

The eyecup is a type of *kylix*, a drinking bowl or wine cup. The diameter of a *kylix*'s bowl is about 30cm and it is about 5cm deep; usually the bowl stands on a short,

¹ Cohen, 2000, p. 4.

² Boardman, 1997, p. 226.

³ Boardman, 1997, p. 232.

⁴ Boardman, 1997, p. 218.

⁵ Cohen, 2000, p. 4. McNiven, 2000, p. 83.

⁶ Museum Antike Kleinkunst 2082.

⁷ Rijksmuseum xv.i.79.

circular stem that flares out into a wide flat foot.⁸ *Kylikes* stand approximately 13cm high. Short u-shaped handles protrude about 5cm from the outside of either side of the bowl; they rise slightly above the rim of the bowl.

The eyecup's defining feature is the pair of eyes painted on the outside of each side of the bowl. As a result, a continuous frieze around the outside of the bowl was not possible; instead, the area between the eyes was decorated, as was the area under the handles and to each side of the eyes.⁹ The area at the bottom of the inside of the bowl is called the tondo; it is virtually flat and was often decorated with a gorgoneion (the decapitated head of Medusa). The remainder of the area inside the bowl was usually, though not always, undecorated.¹⁰

The Ashmolean Cup

An eyecup in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Ashmolean 1974.344) differs from most other eyecups in that it rests on a tripod produced in the form of the male genitals, rather than on a short stem.¹¹ Only three other eyecups share this feature, and two of these were created by potters in the Andocides circle.¹² Vickers attributes the Ashmolean Cup to the manner of the Andocides painter and dates it to c. 500 B.C.¹³ Boardman, on the other hand, notes several similarities between the satyr depicted on the Ashmolean Cup and the satyr depicted on an eyecup in the Louvre.¹⁴ Beazley had attributed the cup in the Louvre to 'the manner of the Lysippides painter' and therefore Boardman has attributed the Ashmolean Cup as being in the manner of the Lysippides painter and dated it to shortly after 520 B.C.¹⁵

The eyes on each side of the Ashmolean Cup are large and the pupils are intense; they are almost solid black whereas the irises are colourless, wide, and are outlined with thick black sweeping brush strokes. Between the eyes the disembodied face of a satyr is depicted. It has a thick beard, black parted hair, pointy ears, and beady eyes. The contrast between the large pair of eyes on the cup and the satyr's small, mischievous eyes seem to focus one's attention on the satyr's face. A gorgoneion is depicted on the tondo. The hair is tightly curled, like that of Medusa's snakes; the hair and a black beard encircle the monster's white face. A bulbous nose and arched eyebrows are depicted using fine lines. The gorgoneion is shown grinning; its lolling tongue is incised and it would originally have had white teeth and tusks when it was first painted.¹⁶

Unusually, the bowl of this cup is fully decorated. The frieze surrounding the gorgoneion depicts a *symposium*, which is taking place in a vineyard to judge from the grapes and the lyre that hangs from the vines. Six *symposiasts* are shown; one is about to spank a serving boy with a slipper while another looks on with interest. A *symposiast* holding a cup seems to be offering it to the man behind him. The

⁸ Boardman, 1997, p. 107.

⁹ Boardman, 1997, p. 107.

¹⁰ Boardman, 1997, p. 107.

¹¹ Boardman, 1976, p. 287.

¹² Boardman, 1976, p. 287.

¹³ Vickers, 1981, p. 544.

¹⁴ Boardman, 1976, p. 289.

¹⁵ Beazley, 1956, p. 262. Boardman, 1976, p. 281.

¹⁶ Boardman, 1976, p. 283.

gathering is shown being entertained by one of the company singing and by the sixth member playing the flutes.

The Boston Cup

The eyecup in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (MFA, Boston, 01.8057) was discovered in Vulci and was attributed to the Group of Walters, a group of painters responsible for several eyecups.¹⁷ The Boston Cup has been dated to the last decade of the sixth century B.C.¹⁸

Although the eyes on each side of the Boston Cup are smaller than those on the Ashmolean Cup they are just as intense. The pupils are thick black concentric circles and it is likely that the irises would have been painted white. A mass of twisted vines fills the areas around the handles and beside the eyes. A few tendrils reach between each pair of eyes, where they frame a mask of Dionysus. The latter is shown wearing an ivy crown, and what hair one can see is tightly curled in the manner of a gorgon's. His beard is long and black, its central mass is solid black and it is incised only on the edges; his moustache droops down on either side, thereby framing his expressionless mouth. The face is pale, a single line providing the detail; it creates a pair of straight eyebrows and skinny nose. Although Dionysus' eyes are small they are intense and seem to attract and hold the viewers attention.

The interior of the bowl is black save for the tondo which, like that of the Ashmolean Cup, is decorated with a gorgoneion. Unlike the detailed and lively gorgoneion on the Ashmolean Cup, that on the Boston Cup is simple and stark. Only a few meagre traces of colour remain; incisions and details are minimal. The sparingly detailed hair and beard form a ring around the pale face. The ears are mere outlines, the eyebrows are suggested by two flat lines, and the nose can best be described as a simple blob. The hideous toothless grin and tongue are one solid black mass. The gorgoneion's eyes are large and powerful.

Symposia.

A *symposium* was a small gathering of men, like the one depicted on the inside of the Ashmolean Cup; although six symposiasts are depicted on the Ashmolean Cup seven was a common number of participants in a *symposium* during the late archaic period.¹⁹ A *symposium* might have taken place in secluded spot such as a vineyard, as depicted on the bowl of the Ashmolean Cup. A scene from a *symposium* is also depicted on an eyecup in Munich; between each pair of eyes two youths are reclining on a bench in a vineyard, the vines weave around them.²⁰ However, many *symposia* took place indoors, either in the *andron* of a private house or in a banqueting chamber elsewhere.²¹ In the South Stoa on the Athenian Agora up to fifteen such banqueting chambers were available for use.²² The depiction of a *symposium* on the Ashmolean

¹⁷ Beazley, 1956, p. 206, no. 5.

¹⁸ True, 1978, p. 44.

¹⁹ Bergquist, 1990, p. 37.

²⁰ Museum Antike Kleinkunst 2082.

²¹ Murray, 1990, p. 6.

²² Bergquist, 1990, p. 37.

Cup indicates a variety of activities that *symposiasts* might have engaged in: singing, conversation, drinking and also some playful eroticism.²³

The Ashmolean Cup demonstrates the interaction between an eyecup's iconography and its form. The depiction of a *symposiast* about to spank the serving boy is complimented by the cup's unusual base. The cup might have been held by the genitals rather than by the handles as the *symposiasts* drank from it. The Ashmolean Cup would therefore have been more suitable for a *symposium* of the more casual, erotic variety than a serious philosophical gathering.

Eyecups would not have been random purchases. An aristocrat who was organising a *symposium* would have either commissioned a set of vessels or chosen specific items.²⁴ The cup or cups would have been used once and then traded away on the second-hand market.²⁵ Cups were not functional storage vessels, unlike *amphorae* that would have held such products as wine or olive oil or *pelikae* that would have held perfume; instead, they were traded for their aesthetic value. This suggests that their initial purchase price would have been high and that they would have been sold to the trader in perfect or near perfect condition.

The communal nature of eyecups is demonstrated on the Ashmolean Cup. There is only one cup in use and one *symposiast* is depicted passing the cup onto another. Each *symposiast* would have interacted with the eyecup's iconography in turn. Drinking from an eyecup should therefore be considered both a personal and a communal experience.

As a *symposiast* drank from an eyecup it would have become a mask. The cup's foot would have replaced the *symposiast's* mouth, its handles would have replaced his ears, and its eyes would have replaced those of the *symposiast*. To the *symposiasts* watching another member of their group drink from the Ashmolean cup, his face would have disappeared behind the cup and the satyr's face would have become visible, the *symposiast's* mouth would have been replaced by a large penis and two testicles. Frontisi-Ducroux suggested that a cup's persona would have replaced that of the *symposiast*.²⁶ The *symposiast* who drank from the Ashmolean Cup would have been an ideal Athenian, *kalos kagathos*; however, he would have become deformed, base, and ugly; to his fellow *symposiasts* he would have become an Other. The cup's form, function, and the iconography and decoration all created a 'system of visual meaning' that defined the cup's own persona.²⁷ The Ashmolean cup's persona was that of a satyr.

Dionysus

Although Dionysus was considered a god, to the Athenians he would also have been a manifestation of the Other. For example, Dionysus was the god of wine, it was his gift to mankind, and, although he had taught men how to use wine in a civilised manner, the temptation would have always existed for it to be abused. To abuse wine

²³ Pellizer, 1990, pp. 178-193.

²⁴ Webster, 1972, p. 42.

²⁵ Webster, 1972, p. 298.

²⁶ Frontisi-Ducroux, 1995, p. 40. Cited in Csapo, 1997, p. 256.

²⁷ Beard, 1991, p. 17.

would have been to act like an uncivilised person, ‘an Other’.²⁸ When wine was used properly it would have acted as a liberating agent and in the context of *symposia* a nominated member of the group would have controlled the proportion of water to wine.²⁹

Dionysus was often associated with the satyr.³⁰ An eyecup in the Cabinet des Medailles, Paris, is fully decorated inside the bowl.³¹ The scene is set in a vineyard. Dionysus is depicted sitting on a donkey overseeing a group of satyrs picking grapes and making wine. Dionysus is often shown riding a donkey, regarded by Athenians to be an Other in relation to the horse, a noble animal.³² Donkeys were thought to be demi-horses; in this respect they were similar to satyrs, part human and part horse.³³ Donkeys, like satyrs, were depicted in art as having long pointed ears, a bushy tail, and as ithyphallic.³⁴ An *amphora* in Munich depicts a satyr holding an ithyphallic donkey by its tail and about to penetrate it.³⁵ Dionysus’ association with the donkey and the satyrs further define him as an Other.

Dionysus was also the god of masks and he was often represented as a mask rather than as an entire figure. The Boston Cup is decorated with a mask of Dionysus between each pair of eyes. It functioned as a wine cup, and when lifted to the mouth would have acted like a mask. The cup’s iconography, function, and form were Dionysian. Dionysus was believed to have the power to drive a man out of his mind,³⁶ and the Dionysian eyecup would have had exactly that effect; the drinker’s persona would have been replaced by that of Dionysus.

Satyr

The satyr did not feature in any myth and seems to have been an Athenian artistic development that emerged c. 580 B.C.³⁷ In Attic representations, satyrs were more human than horse; however, they almost always had a tail, short flat nose, beard, bald patch, equine ears, and were ithyphallic.³⁸ In contrast, the ideal Athenian youth would have had a straight nose and a small penis; he would have been expected to demonstrate self-control and moderation at all times.³⁹ Satyrs displayed little or no self-control and possessed an insatiable sexual appetite; they were almost always excited and in motion.⁴⁰ A cup in the Louvre has a depiction on its tondo of a satyr chasing a maenad.⁴¹ The satyr is grotesquely ithyphallic and appears to be intent on raping the fleeing maenad.

²⁸ Lissarrague, 1990b, p. 202. Detienne, 1989, p. 35, 38.

²⁹ Lissarrague, 1990a, p. 8.

³⁰ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988, p. 203.

³¹ Cabinet des Medailles 320.

³² Padgett, 2000, p. 43. Padgett, 2000, p. 54.

³³ Padgett, 2000, p. 49.

³⁴ Padgett, 2000, p. 51. Padgett, 2000, p. 55.

³⁵ Museum Antiker Kleinkunst 2335A.

³⁶ Steiner, 2001, p. 171.

³⁷ Boardman, 1997, p. 233.

³⁸ Lissarrague, 1990a, p. 54.

³⁹ Padgett, 2000, pp. 46, 47.

⁴⁰ Padgett, 2000, p. 49.

⁴¹ Louvre F 130.

The satyr was able to give expression to the base side of its nature. On each side of a cup in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a satyr is depicted squatting amongst a tangle of vines.⁴² The squatting position represented degradation and baseness; not only did slaves assume the squatting position in relation to their master, but it was also associated with defecation.⁴³ The image juxtaposes the vineyard, a symbol of civilisation and place where symposia took place, and the symbol of degradation; therefore the image would have been an expression of baseness and would have represented defiance against civilised society.⁴⁴ As Lissarrague notes:

The world of satyrs ... is close enough that the Athenian looking at these vases can project himself into the world of satyrs, but it is also far enough away that he is in no danger of confusing it with the world he inhabits.⁴⁵

Satyrs were able to go to extremes that Athenian aristocrats could not, even during *symposia*. It has been suggested that satyrs represented man in his most natural and uninhibited state⁴⁶ and also that they were expressions of man's 'libidinous fantasies'.⁴⁷ The satyr would have represented an Other to the Athenian, and therefore to imitate its behaviour, especially in public, would have been a serious crime that would have resulted in the loss of honour and the withdrawal of the right to congregate in public spaces.⁴⁸

Gorgon

The gorgoneion depicted on the tondos of the Ashmolean Cup and the Boston Cup represents the decapitated head of Medusa. The gorgon had both male and female features, and both human and animal features.⁴⁹ Although the gorgoneion is the face of Medusa, a female, it is depicted with a beard. As well as the beard, the gorgon's eyes, ears, and nose resemble those of a human; however, gorgoneions are often depicted with the tusks of a wild boar.

In myth the gorgon's eyes had the power to turn a person to stone.⁵⁰ Even Perseus could not look directly at the gorgon: he decapitated her by aiming his blow using her reflection on Athena's shield. Once she was dead, he put her head in a sack and used it to kill his enemies. The pipes, as played by a *symposiast* on the Ashmolean Cup, were thought to imitate the cries of the gorgon and would have been an expression of female power.⁵¹ Depictions of the gorgoneion had the power to protect the owner against evil and against his enemies; they were used on soldier's shields, in workshops, temples, and wherever else evil might strike.⁵² Mack described the face

⁴² Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 03.784

⁴³ Lissarrague, 1990c, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Detienne, 1989, p. 34.

⁴⁵ Lissarrague, 1990c, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Beazley, 1928, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Padgett, 2000, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Cohen, 1991, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988, p. 194.

⁵⁰ Boardman, 1996, p. 102.

⁵¹ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988, p. 192.

⁵² Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1988, p. 191.

of the gorgon as being a ‘terror mask’;⁵³ the *symposiast* who glanced at it would have been trapped by its ability to invert the subject-object relationship.⁵⁴ Although the drinker held the cup and therefore controlled the gorgoneion, Barnes posited that in order to protect himself the drinker would have to wear the mask created by the cup.⁵⁵ Therefore the *symposiast* would have gone from being the holder of the cup and beholder of the gorgoneion to assuming the persona of the gorgon. It is possible that the persona of the gorgoneion and the drinker could have become one; however, in my opinion the gorgoneion’s power derived from its ability to ‘see’ the evil within the person who saw its image.

The eyes

It has been posited that the two pairs of eyes had an apotropaic function. Some scholars, notably Hildburgh, have suggested a range of evils that the cups could protect against. Hildburgh suggested that evil could have entered the body through the liquid being consumed, that the cups could have protected the drinker from jealousy or envy emanating from the other *symposiasts*, or that the *symposiast* could have been under threat from supernatural beings.⁵⁶ However, I believe that the eyes were more a feature of the cup’s role as a mask than they were an apotropaic symbol. The apotropaic aspect of the Ashmolean and Boston Cups’ iconography would have been the gorgoneion on the tondo of each cup. The *symposiast* who held either cup would have been able to identify with Perseus, who had held the head in his sack.⁵⁷ However, Perseus had held the sack with Medusa’s head inside for protection from another, whereas I believe that the gorgoneion on the tondo was intended to protect the *symposiast* from himself. As the *symposiast* drank from the cup he would have found that he and the gorgoneion on the tondo were staring at each other. The gorgoneion would have held the *symposiast*’s attention and its apotropaic power would have forced the *symposiast* to dwell on his own potential for evil and in doing so work to resolve his inner demons.

Conclusion

Although those Athenian aristocrats who attended *symposia* would have been privileged, educated to some extent, and relatively well-off, they would not all have been equals among themselves; some would have been very rich, and others only moderately so; some would have been powerful, and others not so. Even during the times when the tyrant Peisistratus ruled Athens the aristocrats formed power blocks; Peisistratus was at one point in a marriage alliance with Megacles.⁵⁸ Regionalism also united various aristocratic families into powerful groups; in the council of aristocrats in Late Archaic Athens power would have rested with those who could be present most often, giving those who resided in or near Athens an advantage over those who lived further away.⁵⁹ Peisistratus died in 528 B.C.⁶⁰ and then Athens was

⁵³ Mack, 2002, p. 572.

⁵⁴ Mack, 2002, pp. 575-576.

⁵⁵ Barnes, 1974, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Hildburgh, 1946, pp. 155, 157-8.

⁵⁷ Mack, 2002, p. 598.

⁵⁸ Sealey, 1965, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Sealey, 1965, p. 20

⁶⁰ Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, 2001, p. 414.

ruled by his son, Hippias, who was expelled from the city and lost power in 510 B.C.⁶¹ In 508 B.C. Cleisthenes instituted democratic reforms,⁶² wresting power from the aristocrats and placing it in the hands of the male citizens of Athens.⁶³ However, Cleisthenes was himself an aristocrat⁶⁴ and the entire exercise could be viewed as nothing more than a means to keep power out of the hands of a rival aristocratic group. It would not have been possible to create equality among the aristocrats by redistributing wealth, and power-sharing would not have been likely; however, a symbolic equality could have been achieved, if only fleetingly, in the *symptic* context.

That *symposia* were conducted outside public meeting places allowed the participants to explore the boundaries of socially-acceptable behaviour. They would have had the opportunity to embrace 'the Other' rather than to shun it. Eyecups facilitated the acceptance by an individual of an Other's persona and the presence of an Other within a small group. By drinking wine and putting on the mask, *symposiasts* would have participated in a liminal experience 'characterised by ... a breakdown of normal concepts of identity and behavioural norms'.⁶⁵ This liminal experience entailed the rejection of the defining feature of the ideal Athenian, his civilized nature. By rejecting civilisation and embracing, even becoming, the Other the *symposium* had become separate from Athens and emulated a small precivilised society. Real community-solidarity can only exist in the most elementary precivilised social formations, where all really are undifferentiated and equal.⁶⁶

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⁶¹ Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, 2001, p. 415.

⁶² Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, 2001, p. 415.

⁶³ Littman, 1974, p. 139-142.

⁶⁴ Littman, 1974, p. 139.

⁶⁵ Csapo, 1997, p. 254.

⁶⁶ Csapo, 1997, p. 254.

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