

The Fountainhouse of Archaic Athens

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During the Archaic period of Greek art (c. 600–480 BCE) vase painting garnered much attention. It was during this period that Exekias painted the famed *Ajax and Achilles playing a game*¹ (c. 540 – 530 BCE), and Euthymides painted *revelers*² (c. 510 BCE). Both of these paintings depict male figures. Given the “canon” of Archaic vase paintings, it appears as though women were seldom subject to depiction. In 1901, Professor of Greek John Homer Huddilston wrote that:

The life of women in ancient Hellas in historic times was decidedly an indoor existence; only on a few occasions were they supposed to appear in public places. This condition of affairs is distinctly noticeable in the vase-paintings, for, barring the mythological scenes and the Bacchic revels, pictures in which women appear are for the most part confined to the domestic circle.³

Indeed, over a hundred years of new evidence and scholarly inquiry have not shed much light on women’s public roles. However, my research suggests that although women’s lives and their roles in the public sphere may have been limited relative to that of men, they were by no means inconsequential to society. A scene depicted on an Archaic hydria dating to about 510 BCE shows one task that moved married women into the public sphere: that of fetching water from the fountainhouse (Figure 1). When examined within a broader context, I suggest that this hydria shows more about the life of women than might be garnered on preliminary inspection. Indeed, I propose that this work is nuanced and may reveal more than the simple task of collecting water.

To understand women’s relationship to the fountainhouse it is first imperative to survey the function of the fountainhouse itself. During the Archaic period, “Greek tyrants,” including Athenians, “seem to have favored large public construction programs, among which temples and hydraulic systems were prominent.”⁴ The fountainhouses were secure alternatives to wells, which ran the risk of drying up, and cisterns, which gathered rainwater from the roof. Neither the well or the cistern was as reliable a source of water as the fountainhouse, which provided “good, clean water for public consumption [which] was piped from springs.”⁵ The fountainhouses were not solely an Archaic phenomenon, either, as the Athenian Agora saw construction of two new fountainhouses between 350 and 325 BCE.⁶ It was in these publically secure markers of state prosperity that women met, engaged, and even shared stories about their inner domestic lives.

The Archaic (c. 510 BCE) *Fountainhouse Scene* on an Attic black-figure hydria (Figure 1) depicts five women who have gone to the fountainhouse to fetch water.

While there is a chariot scene above the fountainhouse scene, this essay will principally concentrate on the latter. The hydria has traces of Geometric design motifs across the very top of the fountainhouse scene, and incorporates the element of animals' mouths as sources of wine and water. The spouts from which water pours feature both lion and donkey designs. A mixing of architectural elements is also seen: the columns at each end are more elaborate, decorative, and intricate, suggesting Ionic inspiration, while the two center columns are more austere, borrowing from Doric ideals.

The women depicted on the vase appear to be in a celebratory mood, although from a contemporary view they have merely stepped beyond the home to collect water. However, despite the seemingly mundane experience of collecting water for the household, fountainhouses "offered the rare opportunity of social intercourse for women and slaves."⁷ This is because while most women's chores were confined to the home, women were responsible for the necessary trip to the fountainhouse, but only if her family was not rich enough to afford a slave to do so.⁸ The fountainhouses, then, allowed the intermingling of women, whether free, slave, upper- or lower-class, for women, "...whatever their station in life, had [no] political rights."⁹ It is noteworthy that all of the women have long hair, which flows freely, is tied in a bun, or is wrapped in various length of cloths. Throughout Greek history, slaves consistently wore short hair, while free, and particularly wealthy, women wore kept long hair and experimented with a range of elaborate hairstyles.¹⁰ It seems likely, then, that the jovial scene on the hydria showing women performing a slave-like task might actually be women basking in their ability to leave the home.

Examining the *Fountainhouse Scene* closely reveals that the women depicted are all barefoot. This suggests that collecting water may have had ritualistic connotations or implications. After all, "[t]he most important role played by women in the public sphere was in religion."¹¹ Married women attended the Thesmophoria, a festival in honor of Demeter, "goddess of the fertility of the earth."¹² Perhaps there was an association between Demeter and the earth's bearing of spring water. Perhaps the "ritual" of gathering spring water from the fountainhouses symbolized a woman receiving fertility from the earth; the connection between spring water and fertility may even be at the root of the reason why women were permitted into the public to perform the task of gathering water. Ritual was one of the most important aspects of Greek life, and women played an important, even critical, role. That women played such a crucial role in ritual is indicative of their social presence.

Additionally, as aforementioned, the women depicted in the *Fountainhouse Scene* carry amphorae. This was not an arbitrary choice on behalf of the painter. Amphorae were, like hydria, reserved for women's use. They also served a ritualistic function: amphorae depicted women's funerary scenes and contained women's mortuary remains. The amphorae may allude to how rituals are evident throughout the human lifecycle: the fountainhouse may be a giver of fertility, while the amphorae, despite being used during life, would also mark the end of life.

Given what is known about women's public roles, it seems plausible that a woman would have had no part in the hydria's creation. However, Marjorie Susan Venit offers evidence in favor of the existence of female artisans. Additionally, she suggests that although "[t]extual sources are slight" what exists "are to be dated to the

fifth century.¹³ This timeframe coincides with the approximate time the *Fountainhouse Scene* may have been created. Venit also references a votive depicting a scene which “has been interpreted as a woman kneading clay.”¹⁴ Another vase, a hydria, that Venit cites shows “the picture [of] a single female figure who also works on the vase.”¹⁵ Although Venit provides evidence that women may have been allowed some role in vase production, she addresses a “curious element” concerning that aforementioned female figure, which is that “the platform on which the female worker sits [has] raise[d] her above the other craftsmen, setting her off from her colleagues.”¹⁶ This only leads to more confusion about women’s working lives. It is not known whether this was done merely to segregate the sexes, or if this woman, being a female, was regarded as “different” or “foreign.” Perhaps she simply did not belong here but she had the influence to dabble in craftsmanship; her status may have allowed such influence, and she was raised above her colleagues accordingly. Indeed, the female worker “gives us the only extant example of a woman at work in a vase studio in Attic art” and other “epigraphic material...give[s] no names of women among Attic vase painters and potters.”¹⁷ So, was the painter of this vase influenced by a rebellious, influential woman who chose to work in a studio? Was this a possible political statement on behalf of women? Or does the image represent a social situation that was more common than the extant male-authored literature suggests? Since this example is one-of-a-kind in the current corpus of Greek art, answers to these questions remain speculative until further evidence is brought to light.

Contrary to Venit’s example of a female studio worker are several depictions of women performing “women’s work.”¹⁸ Women performed work as spinners, weavers, woolworkers, washers, midwives, nurses, vendors, bakers, and cooks.¹⁹ Perhaps, as opposed to the fountainhouse women, these women had an economic purpose in working. The fountainhouse would only be visited by women whose families could not afford slaves, but the fact that the fountainhouse was the only public outlet for the less wealthy women suggests that they were wealthy *enough* to not have to work. Their work remained in the realm of domestic chores, not maintaining a livelihood. The existence of these relatively well-off women would have been documented on stelae and amphorae, for example, because their families, despite not being able to afford a slave, would have been able to afford such luxuries.

Depictions of working women did not coincidentally appear, however. The *Fountainhouse Scene*, like scenes of weavers and bakers, would have been part of “[t]he ripe archaic period” which was “most inventive.”²⁰ During the Archaic period, which has already been discussed, “[t]he...art is above all descriptive, [and] *genre* scenes abound.”²¹ Such *genre* scenes would have been extended to include depictions of women working. That the *Fountainhouse Scene* is painted on a hydria is important not only because hydriai were water-carrying vessels, but because they afforded an outlet for “storytelling.”²² Since these vessels would have been used by women, perhaps it was artistically more appropriate to paint stories and women instead of warfare.

Not only did these stylistic choices emerge during the Archaic period, but the *Fountainhouse Scene* also represents Archaic trends. Despite the fact that the women appear much livelier than their sculptural counterparts, their clothing offers Archaic clues. In particular, the woman second from the viewer’s left is dressed very similarly to *Kore, No. 682*, (Figure 2) dating to 520 BCE. While the *Kore* wears her mantle over

one shoulder, the folds of the drapery and the appearance of the garment itself is very similar to that of the fountainhouse woman.

Contemporary to these Archaic trends in clothing and occupations were women who defied the stereotypical notion of the oppressed housewife. One woman, Elpinice, was born in 510 BCE and "remained very much a visible woman after her marriage" to Callias and lobbied Pericles twice.³³ Having remained politically and intellectually visible signifies that a large enough sector of society would have accepted Elpinice's visibility for her to continue in her actions. Aspasia, Pericles' wife, was another woman who remained politically and intellectually involved and even freely visited with Socrates. Lastheneia studied philosophy not with a private tutor in her home but with Plato at the Academy in Athens. Not only were these women, just a few examples of their kind, allowed to receive an education, but were permitted to do so publicly. Telesilla was a renowned intellectual and poet in her own right, but she "also organized and led a successful defense of her native city, Argos, against an invading army of Spartans. She was honored for both service to the muses and military victory."³⁴ Plangon, born in 404 BCE, also independently sought victory, but of a different kind. Plangon's father had been a general and was dismissed on charges of embezzlement. Upon hearing this, her husband, Mantias, divorced her while she was still pregnant and later refused to acknowledge the child as his own. He remarried, but remained sexually attracted to her. Another son was born, and again, Mantias would not recognize the child. With her two sons denied citizenship because of Mantias' actions, Plangon sought justice. She presented Mantias with a settlement and enlisted an arbiter. After Plangon's pressure, Mantias folded and acknowledged his sons, who became rightful citizens. Independently ensuring her sons' citizenship was possible not only because of Plangon's perseverance, but also because society was not so stringent as to disallow this from happening. These examples of women's mobility may also apply to the fountainhouse scene. The women may not be the oppressed housewives scholars would have us believe, but are perhaps more free than first thought.

Each woman depicted on the hydria (with the exception of two that share a vessel) carries an amphora, a vessel that would have been reserved for women's use. Although the women in this scene carry amphorae, the vessel itself is a hydria, which would have been used for "water transport and storage"³⁵ and therefore would have been carried by women. Notice also the vessel's lack of inscription. While many vessels used by men by this time featured an inscription, this one very clearly is without one. Many wealthier Athenian women would have been literate, so this vessel may not suggest female illiteracy, but female literacy may have been superfluous in the public sphere.³⁶ Even the women whose families could not afford for them not to work would not have *needed* to be able to read and write to perform the tasks which were assigned to them, such as baking and midwifery.

Despite inferred reasons as to *why* women were responsible for visiting the fountainhouses, it is clear that the *Fountainhouse Scene* on the Archaic hydria offers a rare glimpse into the lives, duties, and publicality of women.

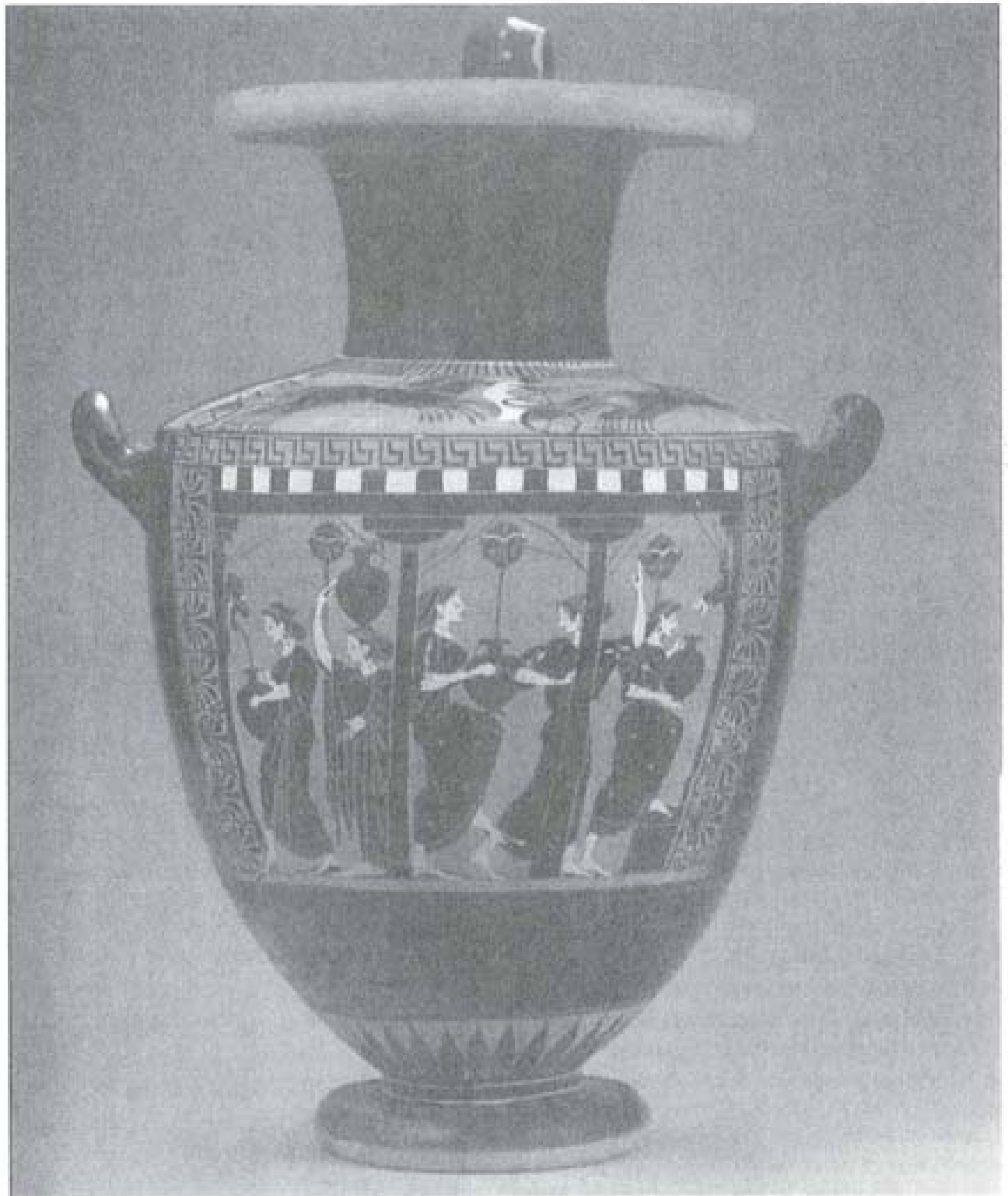


Figure 1: Hydria depicting Fountainhouse Scene. c. 510 BCE²⁷



Figure 2: Kore, No. 682. c. 520 BCE²⁸

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Endnotes

- ¹ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 198.
- ² *Ibid.*, 205.
- ³ John Homer Huddilston, *Lessons From Greek Pottery* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 46.
- ⁴ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 174.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 298.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.
- ¹⁰ David J. Symons, *Costume of Ancient Greece*. (New York: Chelsea House, 1987).
- ¹¹ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 214.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Marjorie Susan Venit, "The Caputi Hydria and Working Women in Classical Athens," *The Classical World* 81.3 (March-April 1988): 265.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁶ Ibid., 267.

¹⁷ Ibid., 267.

¹⁸ Ibid., 269.

¹⁹ Ibid., 265.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ T. B. L. Webster, "Attic Vase Painting during the Persian Wars," *Greece & Rome* 1.3 (May 1932): 138.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 139.

²⁴ Marjorie Lightman and Benjamin Lightman, *Ancient Greek and Roman Women* (New York, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2000), 92.

²⁵ Ibid., 219.

²⁶ Anthony Snodgrass, "From *The uses of writing on early Greek painted pottery*" in *Word and Image in Ancient Greece*, eds. N. Keith Rutter and Brian A. Sparkes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000), 29.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 175.

²⁹ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 183.