Traditional Dionysiac Subjects

It is well known that for Athens the decades between the victory over the Persians and the beginning of the Peloponnesian war were a period of self-confidence and secured prestige in the Greek world. In Greek art the punctilious late archaic style is followed by the so-called severe style which is most markedly expressed by the figures of the metopes and pediments of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, completed in 456. The invention of counterpose for free-standing figures added spatiality and movement to the bodies; the faces were allowed to express feelings. These changes probably next made themselves felt in monumental painting, of which no examples remain, and only somewhat later—and less noticeably—in vase painting. In the more modest production of column kraters, pelikai and hydriai that Beazley attributes to the so-called early mannerists, archaic formulae continued in use, albeit in a more fluent manner.1 Nevertheless, the severe style may already be discerned in Hermonax’ oeuvre and also turns up in the work of other painters, in the softer and richer folds of the robes and in the perspectival traits of the lively bodies.

It is only from 460 BC onwards that the direct influence of monumental painting becomes manifest in vase painting: figures become bigger, their movements more spatial, the background becomes deeper creating the impression of a genuine landscape—even though this could, at the same time, spoil the aesthetic effect of the curved surface of the vase. As for the Italian exports of the Kerameikos, it may not be entirely contingent that in these years the Etruscan cities on the Tyrrenian coast are superseded by a new market north of the Apennines: Bologna, Spina and Adria. New consumers meant changes in the demand. The leading figures in these new developments are, for the large, closed vases and the kraters, the Niobid Painter, and for the cups, the Penthesilea Painter.

Next to this new direction, more conservative and academic painters, such as the Altamura Painter and the Villa Giulia Painter and his circle, hold their ground. For them, the total effect of the image carrier remains more important than bold perspectival and monumental experiments. As we will see, from

1 ARV Chapter 34.
around 430 BC the sculptures of the Parthenon will have a profound influence, both stylistically and iconographically.

In what follows we will first look at the most important vase painters of these decades against the background of Dionysiac imagery, and subsequently discuss Dionysiac mythology as it is presented in different variants by these as well as other artists. In the next chapter we will examine groups of vases by several painters referring to Dionysiac rituals which have so far been somewhat overlooked.

Dionysos was not a prominent theme for the Niobid Painter; he hardly features in that painter’s sculpturesque imagery. To be sure, however, the thiasos is depicted once on a volute krater and once on a calyx krater, but in both cases in one of the narrow friezes and therefore at a small size. The larger surfaces present other subjects: the main image of the volute krater, for instance, is an Amazonomachy. In the upper frieze of the calyx krater we see Dionysos among other gods, engaged in the Gigantomachy (Figure 43). The Greeks saw both battles as decisive events in the history of the world. It is therefore remarkable that in the lower frieze of this same calyx krater the Dionysiac thiasos is set against the sending out of Triptolemos on the reverse of the vase, as in the skyphos by Makron discussed earlier. Not much later it will be said in Euripides’ Bakchai that grain and grapes, from which bread and wine are made, enabled humanity to make the step from nature to culture. It seems clear that in these two Dionysiac images the Niobid Painter transcends the individual perspective and seeks to express the wider one of the polis. As in the work of Hermonax, here too, the ritual elements—altar, torch, and in the case of the volute krater sacrificial baskets—are striking. Moreover, the altar has a prominent place on one of the painter’s belly amphorae, one of his neck amphorae and three of his late hydriai. Instead of the thiasos, these vases present the motif of the encounter between Dionysos and a dignified standing woman (Figure 44). Apparently, the current trend towards ritualization also affected the Niobid Painter’s Dionysiac images. In addition, the use of a static, symmetrical motif

2 Volute krater Ferrara 9355: Addenda 266 (600.14); BA 206942 (no image); calyx krater Ferrara 2891: Addenda 266 (602.24); BA 206956; Raubitschek/Raubitschek 1982, 114.
3 See above Chapter 3, note 106. This juxtaposition may also be found on the volute krater in the manner of the Kleophon Painter, Stanford University 70.2: BA 8110 (no image); Clinton 1992, 124 and 166 f. fig. 11–14; Smith 2011, 154 VP 15.
5 Belly amphora London E 257: Addenda 267 (604.50); BA 206989; neck amphora New York 99.13.2: ARV 605.61; BA 207000 (no image); hydriai Ancona 4862: ARV 606.76; BA 207017 (no image); Ferrara 2683: Addenda 267 (606.77); BA 207018 (no image); Naples Stg 199: ARV 606.78; BA 207019 (no image).