

ΑΘΕΝΑΙΑ / ΑΙΑΣ*

Georg Simon GERLEIGNER

Universität Basel and Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften

That the placement of name inscriptions (letter-chains naming figures or, in rare instances, other pictorial elements) in Greek vase-painting followed certain conventions was noticed early by scholars. In his seminal *Non-Attic Greek Vase Inscriptions*, Rudolf Wachter succinctly described two main “principles of labelling”: the “starting-point principle” and the “direction principle”.¹ While these conventions allow for some variation which is mainly determined by the availability of space, the basic rule of the starting-point principle is that a name is placed close (but preferably not too close) to the figure it refers to – often as close to the head as possible –, with the first letter of the inscription always being closest to a figure’s head (the only exception to that are cases where the name is in its whole width placed horizontally above the head). This also determines the direction of the writing: if the name is placed to the right of (the head of) a figure, the writing runs from left to right, and vice versa; as a consequence of this direction principle, the “feet” of the letters face the figures they belong to. The rationale behind these long-running and overwhelmingly consistently observed conventions followed by vase-painters presumably was to make clear to the viewer in an unambiguous way which inscription referred to which figure – otherwise (and sometimes still, despite adherence to the conventions) something not easily achieved in many images teeming with figures and letters. In this contribution, I would like to present a – to my knowledge singular – case of a name inscription that plays with these conventions in a spectacular way which epitomises the ingenuity of some craftsmen in exploiting the specific potential of the combination of writing and imagery which inscriptions in Greek vase-paintings represent.

The inscription in question is found on an Attic black-figure neck amphora from the last quarter of the sixth century (like all further dates B.C.E.) which was first published more than thirty years ago in an auction catalogue.² On its

uninscribed side, it shows Peleus and Thetis delivering their little son Achilles to the centaur Cheiron, while the side with the inscription (fig. 1) shows an image whose iconography is well-established at this time:³ Aias (Lokros) is striding menacingly towards Cassandra who flees to Athena, a picture based on a story that was part of the *Ἰλίου πέρσις*, subject of a fifth-century tragedy and already mentioned in the “Cologne Alcaeus”:⁴ during the sack of Troy, Cassandra seeks refuge at the Palladion, from which Aias drags her away – an act of *θεοσυλία* which angered the goddess greatly against the Greeks.⁵

In our image, Cassandra – here depicted naked, apart from a chlamys around her shoulders – is running towards Athena but has not quite reached the goddess yet, only one of her toes seeming to touch her foot. Aias, his sword pulled out of the scabbard he holds, strides towards her. Athena is shown as Promachos, like on Panathenaic amphorae.⁶ Although Cassandra has a more prominent position within the composition – Aias aims his attention at her –, the iconography nevertheless rather belongs to the earlier phase of the pictorial tradition which tends to marginalise the figure of Cassandra.⁷ Thus, as in the early textual sources, the image gives room to the confrontation between Aias and the goddess while the new focus of the iconography evolving at the end of the sixth century is the suffering of the Trojan princess at the hands of the Lokrian.⁸

The letter-chain, which is of our particular interest, runs in a roughly horizontal line between the nose-guard of Aias’ tipped-back helmet and Athena’s frontal locks. Read from right to left, the inscription straightforwardly reads AΘENAIA, naming the goddess⁹ in accordance with the aforementioned two “principles of labelling”. This understanding is found in the first published description of the painting,¹⁰ but already the (to my knowledge) second one, in the pot’s first academic publication by Heather Jackson, complicates matters because irritatingly, read from *left to right*, the first four letters give the name AΙΑΣ, this *also* in accordance with the placement conventions of name inscriptions; Jackson thus reads one-and-a-half names here: “In the field, between the heads of Athena and Aias are the letters AΘE (retrograde) and AΙΑΣ, the two names almost meeting in confrontation”.¹¹

This may at first sound surprising because of the shape of the fourth letter which looks like a ny, but vase-painters in this period sometimes actually used a so-called “sideways sigma”, a sigma turned by ninety degrees and thus looking like a (reverse) ny.¹² A roughly contemporaneous black-figure neck amphora attributed to the Long-Nose Painter in Munich, for instance,

features ny, sigma *and* sideways sigma in different inscriptions on the same side;¹³ the same is (very probably) true for another comparable Munich pot, a hydria attributed to the Antimenes Painter to whose circle our amphora may belong.¹⁴ Two circumstances suggested to the reader-viewer that the inscription can or should be read from left to right (as well): first, the fact that the space between the fourth and fifth letter from the left is slightly bigger than the space between the others – the signs thus forming two visual clusters –, and second, the near-axial symmetry of the first three letters, AIA. Going one step further than Jackson, I would therefore suggest that contemporaneous viewer-readers, occasionally confronted with sideways sigma on other pots, could easily have read both AΘENAIA *and* AIAS, a single letter-chain yielding two names without breaking the conventions of placement!

This is extremely unlikely to be a coincidence but nevertheless, as an intentional device, possible only because of a very fortunate combination of conditions: the painter saw and exploited the circumstance that the (letters of the) two names – names of protagonists of a well-established iconography – are compatible in this way and thus not only had to place the inscription so that it fits both figures but also to employ “sideways sigma” at exactly the critical spot; here, perhaps to facilitate the recognition of this subtle play, he also left a slightly broader space between the letters. Fundamental to all this is of course the custom to read (and write) in both directions.

If we viewed the inscription only as a formal device playing with various conventions, it would already be quite artful, attesting to a high level of reflexivity in this regard. However, one could go further and attempt to interpret the letter-chain also in connection with the content of the image. Two aspects could be brought into play here. First, the impression that, in Jackson’s words, “the two names [are] almost meeting in confrontation” (see above), mirrors the emphasis placed on the confrontation between the goddess and the hero by early texts and images. Second, and mostly independent of this exceptional two-way legibility, the fact that only the names of Athena and Aias are given here, while that of Cassandra is omitted, is not only a further way to highlight the clashing protagonists of this conflict. It is also particularly meaningful because the fact that Athena is named *at all* and *just like* Aias reinforces the ambiguity, typical for both this time and narration, regarding the ontological status of the goddess here: while the story requires a cult statue, both early textual and pictorial sources leave open whether Athena is living or an effigy (there is no pictorial convention for “statue” in this period). The Promachos



Fig. 1. Attic black-figure neck amphora, once Melbourne, Graham Geddes collection GpA 1:3. Ca. 520/510. Drawing © Martina Hung.

pose could well belong to a sculpture but also suggests being alive; it is no coincidence that the iconography of Aias, Cassandra and Athena features frequently in discussions of the agency of ancient statues.¹⁵ Assigning a name to the figure of Athena in this context, not only in analogy to but in both confrontation and amalgamation with the name of a living and acting figure, further raises the stakes.

Finally, this τεχνοπαίγνιον, which one could perhaps term “asymmetrical palindrome”, is a very early example for a play with formal features of material language of this kind – Greek vase-painters explored the pictoriality of writing, particularly in combination with images, in many ways, but this appears to be a unique case in the extant record and must therefore have been rare. The earliest extant example for such a device in other Greek textual media collected by Christine Luz, the akrostichon of Chairemon, dates to the middle of the fourth century, the first surviving proper palindrome stems from the first century.¹⁶ Our inscription, devised by a nameless if talented craftsman in a period when (a culture of) literacy is still emerging, is thus a powerful reminder why the study of Greek vase-inscriptions, to whose promotion the honouree contributed so much, is a worthwhile endeavour.

NOTES

* First thoughts on the vase-inscription on which I elaborate below were presented in a talk I gave on 19 June 2016 in Heidelberg (see the reference and discussion by Nikolaus Dietrich in the context of his fascinating analysis of the layout of sculptural inscriptions [ch. 3 in: N. Dietrich – J. Fouquet – C. Reinhardt, Schreiben auf statuarischen Monumenten (forthcoming 2020)]). I would like to thank him, Harald Bichlmeier, Christine Luz and Robin Osborne for their interest and comments

on the draft. Last but not least, I am very grateful to Martina Hung for producing the fine drawing (fig. 1) which is based on the published photographs of the pot.

1 R. Wachter, *Non-Attic Greek Vase Inscriptions* (Oxford 2001) 228 §§ 104f.

2 Sotheby's, *Antiquities. Catalogue of the sale held in London on 13th and 14th July 1987* (London 1987) 128 no. 385 (with a colour photograph on p. 129), where it was attributed to the Circle of the Antimenes Painter (by Robert Guy:

see H. Jackson, *A Black-Figure Neck-Amphora in Melbourne. The Nudity of Cassandra, Mediterranean Archaeology* 9–10, 1996–1997, 71; for a detailed differing analysis of the style, see *ibid.*, 71–74). The pot's find-spot and provenance are unknown; it had been on loan to La Trobe University Melbourne from an Australian private collection (see Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 53) and was last recorded to be part of another Australian private collection when it was on loan to the University

of Canterbury, New Zealand (see R. Bell, *In the Museum*, Scholia 12, 2003, 168).

3 On the iconography (which first appears in the early sixth century) and its development, see J. B. Connelly, *Narrative and Image in Attic Vase Painting*. Ajax and Cassandra at the Trojan Palladion, in: P. J. Holliday (ed.), *Narrative and Event in Ancient Art* (Cambridge 1993) 88–129, LIMC VII (1994) 962 no. 82 s.v. Cassandra I (O. Paoletti), Jackson, *op. cit.* (n. 2) p. 53–75, and M. Mangold, *Cassandra in Athen*. Die Eroberung Trojas auf attischen Vasenbildern (Berlin 2000) 39–62.

4 A poem from around 600 which seems to presuppose knowledge of the plot; see Mangold, *op. cit.* (n. 3) p. 37f. (with further literature). Hom. *Od.* 4.502 already alludes to the story.

5 Only late sources explicitly mention Aias' subsequent rape of Cassandra (see Jackson, *op. cit.* [n. 2] 58–60).

6 On Athena's status in this image, see below.

7 See, for instance, the belly amphora Geneva H 84 (Beazley Archive Pottery Database [BAPD] no. 7475): Mangold, *op. cit.* (n. 3) p. 167 no. II 7 and p. 42 fig. 19.

8 A prominent example for this, now often showing Aias pulling Cassandra from a statue of Athena which is on a base and often below life-size, is found on the frieze surrounding the tondo of Onesimos' cup now restituted to the Museo Nazionale Archeologico Cerite di Cerveteri (BAPD 13363, Attic Vase Inscriptions [AVI] database no. 4972).

9 Ἀθηναία is the Attic form of her name (see P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Histoire des mots. Nouvelle édition (Paris 2009) 26 s.v. Ἀθήνη) and thus commonly used in Attic vase-inscriptions.

10 Sotheby's, *op. cit.* (n. 2) p. 128: "the Goddess's name inscribed in retrograde between the figures".

11 Jackson, *op. cit.* (n. 2) p. 54. The latent interpretive uneasiness which is expressed productively in the phrase "the two names almost meeting in confrontation" (see also below) is also mirrored in the description in both other publications known to me which, following Jackson, (briefly) mention the inscription: Mangold, *op. cit.* (n. 3) p. 170 no. II 32: "Beischriften: ΑΘΕ (rückläufig), ΑΙΑΣ"; A. Skilton apud Bell, *op.*

cit. (n. 3), p. 168: "The letters ΑΘΕ (retrograde) and ΑΙΑΣ appear in the field between the heads of the two eponymous figures". Similarly, that there is something unusual is possibly already indicated in the respective entry in the BAPD (no. 24969) where the description of the pot's decoration says "AJAX WITH SWORD AND SCABBARD (NAMED, AIAS), ATHENA (NAMED)" (<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/record/F87DAD38-CC2A-43B9-BA22-8684DCB38A45>, last checked on 10 December 2018), tellingly *not* giving, as would be usual, "ATHENA (NAMED, ATHENAIA)".

12 According to Henry Immerwahr, comparing the letter-forms of Euphronios and Euthymides, "the sideways sigma is common in this period (it is sometimes misread as a nu, which in one form it resembles)" (H. R. Immerwahr, *The Lettering of Euphronios*, in: I. Wehgartner [ed.], *Euphronios und seine Zeit* [Berlin 1992] p. 52).

13 ΗΕΡΜΕΣ, ΑΠΟΛΟΝΟΣ and ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΟΣ (the latter ending in sideways sigma) on Munich 1560 (ABV 327.5, BAPD 301751, AVI 5180).

14 The final letter of the name inscription

]ΣΧΙΔΕΜΟ[Σ] on Munich 1694 (ABV 266.5, BAPD 320015, AVI 5190) is a curious case: B. Kreuzer who examined the letter together with A. Buhl, J. Gebauer and L. Rintelen (who took excellent photographs which confirm their findings) from the Antikensammlungen München (to all of whom I am very grateful) kindly informed me that the right-hand *half* of the ny/sideways sigma (minuscule traces of which remain) was, for whatever reasons, erased *before* firing, leaving the (Attic) gamma-shaped

sign now visible. However the name is to be restored (see CVA Munich 19, 44 ad pl. 13.1–2 with further literature), it ought to end in sigma, not ny.

15 On the “fluidity between image and living goddess”, see recently J. N. Bremmer, *The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues. From Homer to Constantine*, *Opuscula* 6, 2013, 7–21 (with further literature and particular discussion of this iconography on p. 4); see now also, e.g., F. Hölscher, *Gottheit und Bild – Gottheit im Bild*, in: R. Bielfeldt (ed.),

Ding und Mensch in der Antike. Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung, Akademie-Konferenzen 16 (Heidelberg 2014) 239–256 (esp. 245. 252–255); on the phenomenon, see already R. L. Gordon, *The Real and the Imaginary. Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World*, *Art History* 2, 1979, 5–34.

16 See Ch. Luz, *Technopaignia. Formspiele in der griechischen Dichtung* (Leiden 2010) in general, 7–15 on the akrostichon of Chairemon, and 179–211 on palindromes.