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Anne Mackay (The University of Auckland): “What Painted Ladies Do: Representations of Female Agency in Attic Black-figure Vase-Painting”

Abstract:

While there have been quite a few specialised studies of depictions of women on Attic vases in the past quarter-century (from Harvey 1988 to gender-studies publications by scholars such as Rabinowitz and Blundell in the last decade) these have focused in large part on Attic red-figure vases of the 5th century, where the depictions can seem comparatively accessible to modern interpretation. The women represented on archaic black-figure vases, by contrast, are difficult to interpret, not least because few of them are iconographically identified. Furthermore, black-figure vase-painting is strongly traditional in its nature, so that it tends to use what may be termed a ‘restricted code’ (in contrast to the much more flexible ‘elaborated code’ of classical red-figure painting) that can limit interpretative response. In this paper, a selection of black-figure scenes featuring women in active roles will be discussed, with due attention to how their meaning should be (re-)constructed in the context of the black-figure tradition. This will lead to the recognition that in the vase-painting of archaic Athens as preserved, images of women on the whole represent polarised extremes: either they directly affirm (male) societal expectations of women’s roles, or they reinforce those expectations through alterity expressed in mythological contexts.