

Representations of conflict in Greek pottery

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Abstract

Greek pottery is among the oldest arts and crafts known to humankind, initially linked to daily and functional needs, and later becoming enduring, imbued with aesthetic and symbolic values. Greek pottery was distinguished by its diverse styles and renowned techniques that emerged throughout different eras. Artists excelled in shaping the clay, employing firing and coloring techniques to produce high-quality pottery pieces. The graphic designs and patterns on pottery vessels reflected various aspects of Greek life, including economic, commercial, social, and political ideas. Initially simple designs based on clustered elements, they later incorporated human and animal motifs with symbolic and functional significance. This has contributed to the study of conflict patterns in the decorative designs of Greek pottery, revealing the details and artistic techniques used by Greek artists in producing these works, and their role in uncovering aspects of ancient civilization.

1. Introduction

Greek pottery is an art form with deep historical roots and a distinguished position among other forms of ancient art. It represents a continuation of artistic and cultural traditions that developed from the earliest civilizations and reflects the aesthetic experience of pottery and ceramics throughout history. Its expressive characteristics contain symbolic meanings related to the philosophy of life, human existence, religious belief, heroism, and social experience. Greek civilization demonstrated the intellectual and technical ability of its people to overcome material limitations and transform functional objects into works of beauty and cultural significance.

Ceramic art is one of the oldest art forms and has maintained its continuity throughout different historical periods. This continuity has supported archaeological discoveries and contributed to the reconstruction of ancient Greek civilization. Pottery provides important evidence for understanding myths, conflicts, rituals, wars, and daily life, particularly because many visual scenes appeared before complete literary records. Greek potters used vessel surfaces as visual fields for depicting religious beliefs, military campaigns, mythological narratives, social activities, and everyday experiences. These objects consequently functioned as historical records of Greek civilization in its social, economic, political, religious, and aesthetic dimensions.

Pottery is considered one of the earliest and most enduring artistic products created by humans. Herbert Read described pottery as simultaneously the simplest and the most difficult art because it emerged from basic utilitarian needs but later developed into a highly abstract artistic form. Early vessels were manually shaped from natural clay, dried in the sun, and later fired after the discovery of fire. The invention of the potter's wheel enabled artists to create more balanced forms, rhythms, and upward movements. By the fifth century BC, Greek pottery had reached a high level of formal harmony and became one of the defining achievements of classical art (Read, 1968).

The historical value of Greek pottery is closely related to the painted scenes found on black-figure and red-figure vessels. These scenes frequently illustrate myths, religious ceremonies, heroic actions, wars, and social encounters. They also allow researchers to identify characters and reconstruct fragmented or lost narratives through visual attributes, inscriptions, gestures, and symbolic objects. Therefore, Greek pottery should not be understood merely as a collection of utilitarian vessels but as a visual archive that records the intellectual, cultural, and political life of ancient Greek society.

Among the various themes represented on Greek pottery, conflict occupies an important position. Conflict appears in scenes of warfare, heroic combat, competition, punishment, confrontation between humans and gods, and struggles between opposing individuals or groups. These images communicate not only physical violence but also broader concepts such as authority, resistance, honor, destiny, domination, sacrifice, and victory. The arrangement of bodies, facial expressions, weapons, spatial positions, and movement contributes to the construction of dramatic tension and visual meaning.

Conflict is generally understood as a clash between characters or forces that produces action within a dramatic or imaginative narrative. It may occur internally within an individual or externally between individuals, groups, environments, or supernatural forces (Wahba & Al-Muhandis, 1984). Linguistically, conflict refers to opposition between characters and forces, particularly when such opposition influences the development of events or a plot (Al-Attiyah, 2020). Operationally, conflict can be understood as a dispute between two or more parties that differ in ideas, interests, principles, or objectives.

Conflict is a complex and enduring concept whose roots can be traced to the earliest periods of human history. Differences in values, interests, needs, and objectives often lead individuals or groups into cycles of action and reaction. Each party attempts to protect its position, gain advantage, or impose its will on the other. From a psychological perspective, conflict may refer to discomfort or pressure resulting from incompatible desires or needs within an individual (Al-Samadi, 2012). From a political perspective, conflict reflects competition among parties that recognize the incompatibility of their present or future interests. From a social perspective, it may involve struggles over values, power, status, conditions, or limited resources (Khalifa, n.d.).

Conflict also possesses anthropological and historical dimensions. It may emerge between individuals, families, lineages, social groups, political organizations, tribes, religions, or entire societies. Such conflict is often connected to incompatible desires and objectives that persist over time and become embedded in social life (Abdullah, 1989). Laura Nader similarly explains that conflict results from competition between at least two parties, which may include individuals, families, communities, social classes, political organizations, tribes, religions, or ideological systems (Nader, 1968). Conflict is therefore not an exceptional condition but one of the recurring features of human interaction.

The concept of conflict has also been discussed through philosophical and sociological theories. Hegel associated conflict with contradiction, movement, and the process of becoming, suggesting that development emerges through the interaction of opposing forces (Imam, 2007). Marx emphasized class struggle as a central force in human history, particularly the conflict between groups that control the means of production and those that depend on their labor for survival (Raslan, 1968). Dahrendorf later connected conflict with authority, social organization, and structural change, arguing that class conflict plays an important role in transforming social systems (Al-Hawari, 2008). These perspectives show that conflict is not limited to destruction but may also stimulate change, creativity, adaptation, and the emergence of new social arrangements (Guth & Haman, 1996).

Conflict can also be understood as a struggle between wills. In ancient narratives such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, conflict appears in the relationship between humanity and the gods, particularly in the tension between human ambition and divine authority. This conflict reflects the desire of humans to transcend limitations, achieve extraordinary goals, and challenge established power (Baqir, 2002). The balance of power therefore becomes central in determining whether conflict leads to victory, defeat, coexistence, or mutual destruction. Conflicts may occur between kings, heroes, ordinary people, gods, human beings and gods, or groups and states at different levels (Al-Mashat & Khalifa, 1995).

From a broader social perspective, conflict may be defined as the presentation of arguments, reasons, or facts in support of or opposition to a position. It may also refer to prolonged disagreement, debate, or quarrel between individuals, groups, or organizations. A conflict crisis can disrupt normal patterns of life and require rapid adjustment to restore balance and create new forms of social order (Aliwah, 1987). Because conflict exists at multiple levels of human life, it has been

studied in psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, geography, and international relations (Coser, 1968).

Greek pottery provides an appropriate medium for studying conflict because its visual structure combines form, function, and narrative. The surface of the vessel serves as a space in which figures, ornaments, gestures, and symbols are organized to create visual meaning. Potters and painters adapted their compositions to curved forms and arranged figures according to balance, hierarchy, rhythm, and movement. The resulting scenes often present moments of confrontation in which the positions of the bodies, weapons, facial expressions, and surrounding decorative elements contribute to the intensity of the represented event.

Greek pottery was produced from high-quality clay found in various regions, especially Athens. Athenian clay contained iron oxide and calcium oxide, which produced the distinctive reddish-orange color commonly associated with Greek vessels. Other specialized clays, including kaolin, were used for decorative purposes. Greek potters generally used the potter's wheel, while handles and additional elements were added manually. Decorative techniques included black-figure and red-figure painting, which enabled artists to represent anatomy, clothing, weapons, gestures, and facial features with increasing precision (Richter, n.d.).

The amphora was one of the most common Greek pottery forms. It usually had two handles, a long neck, and an oval body and was used to store or transport olive oil, wine, fish sauce, grains, and other materials. The development of amphora studies also created a specialized field known as amphorology because of the vessel's economic, commercial, and archaeological importance (Amphorology, 2021). Amphora decoration frequently presented heroic and mythological conflicts, and its broad surface enabled artists to create detailed narrative scenes.

The hydria was another important vessel used for carrying water. It commonly had three handles, two horizontal handles for lifting and one vertical handle for pouring. Hydriae were produced in black-figure and red-figure forms and often depicted mythological scenes connected to moral, social, and religious obligations. They were also sometimes used in funerary contexts to hold ashes. Their forms changed during the fifth and fourth centuries BC as their proportions became smaller and their handles more compact (Cunliffe, 1999).

The krater was a large vessel primarily used for mixing wine and water. It appeared in several forms, including column, volute, calyx, and bell kraters. Its large body provided an extensive surface for narrative decoration, making it particularly suitable for depictions of conflict, ritual, and heroic action. Archaeological studies indicate that krater production reached its peak between the first half of the sixth century and the third quarter of the fifth century BC (Hudson, n.d.). Other vessels, including the alabastron, were used for carrying oils or perfumes and contributed to the spread of Greek artistic influence through trade across the Mediterranean.

Greek pottery thus represents a unique combination of beauty, function, craftsmanship, and cultural expression. The relationship between vessel form and decorative scene is especially important because the meaning of a representation may be affected by the vessel's use, ritual context, and social function. A scene of battle on an amphora, for instance, may communicate associations different from a similar scene on a funerary vessel. Therefore, the visual image and the physical object must be examined as an integrated whole.

Although previous studies have discussed Greek pottery in terms of archaeological classification, production techniques, vessel types, mythological themes, and historical functions, the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of conflict represented on pottery require further attention. Conflict scenes are not merely illustrations of battles or mythological stories. They are carefully organized visual structures that communicate cultural attitudes toward power, heroism, struggle, fate, domination, and resistance.

This study therefore examines the representations of conflict in selected scenes depicted on Greek pottery. It focuses on pottery produced in Greece between the sixth and third centuries BC, particularly vessels that represent mythological, military, heroic, religious, or interpersonal confrontations. The analysis considers the parties involved in the conflict, the type of confrontation,

bodily movements, facial expressions, symbolic attributes, visual composition, decorative technique, and the relationship between the represented scene and the vessel's function.

The central research question is how the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of conflict are represented in Greek pottery. The study aims to identify how conflict was visually constructed and how these representations functioned as records of political events, wars, religious beliefs, heroic ideals, and social values. By examining Greek pottery as both a functional object and a visual narrative, the study seeks to deepen understanding of its role in documenting ancient Greek civilization and enriching the decorative and symbolic dimensions of ceramic art.

2. Method

2.1. Research Community

The current research community included (20) models of Greek pottery that the researcher was able to collect according to the following justification: The clarity of the images of the pottery, as they are found in international museums and their images are available in art, history and archaeology books.

2.2. Research Sample

The research sample was selected according to the purposive (purposeful) sampling method, and the selection was made with (3) samples from the research population consisting of (20) models.

2.3. Research Methodology

The researcher adopted the descriptive method (content analysis), as it is a method followed for such research.

2.4. Search Tool

The researcher relied on the indicators resulting from the theoretical framework of the research as analytical criteria upon which the analysis and observation were based.

3. Results and Discussion

Figure 1 depicted here represents three pictorial units of four human figures positioned at three points. At the edges, two figures stand observing the two individuals locked in a wrestling match in the center of the scene. The focus on the human figure as the central axis, opening up all aesthetic perceptions and imagined visions around it, has made it a popular aesthetic theme. This is further enhanced by the concept of conflict, which has long preoccupied Greek thought and the epistemological system. Here, we observe in the model the employment of the idea of conflict through this physical clash between the combatants, and within a focal point created by the presentation of the scene and its surrounding visual confines, a treatment distinct from that of other works.

However, this employment of the idea of conflict, through the wrestling scene between athletes or wrestlers, is an employment that takes its aesthetic dimension from that pictorial treatment of the scene that is transferred from the social reality that witnessed the playing of wrestling as an important and sacred sporting practice to the area of artistic and aesthetic thought and imagination to document it aesthetically. The artist was addressing man with his desires and aspirations to overcome through conflict with the other and embodying that by depicting those kinetic details that highlight feelings of challenge and conflict through the unity of the image and the idea of physical cohesion through the intertwining of the arms of the wrestlers. Accordingly, that aesthetic representation of the idea of conflict is achieved through that pictorial scene of the Greek vessel that gives the challenge social and intellectual popularity.

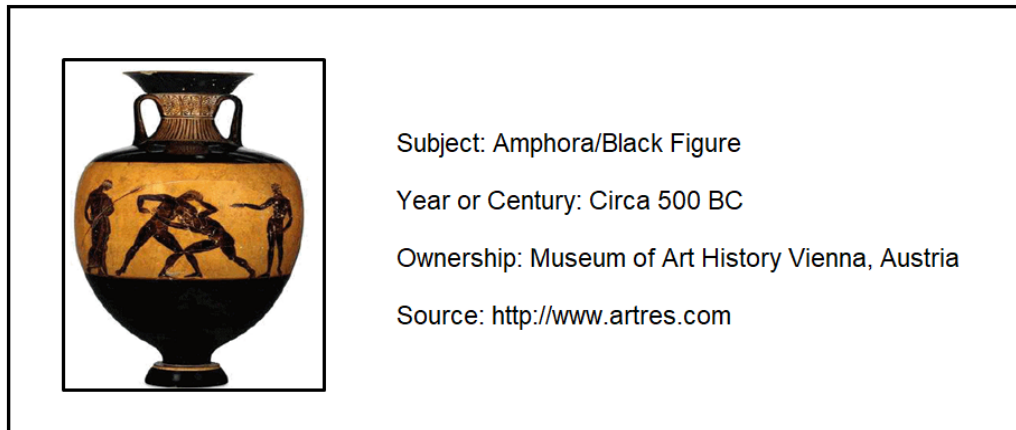


Figure 1. Amphora (Black Figure)

Figure 2 depicts a dramatic scene of a protracted conflict between human forces, supported by the goddess, culminating in the death of Achilles, a legendary hero of Greek mythology. Achilles, son of Ptolemy, king of Phthia, played a pivotal role in the Trojan War and is the central figure in Homer's Iliad.

The portrayal of Achilles' death is a clear and significant representation of the concept of conflict. While Achilles experienced numerous struggles throughout his life and achieved victories during nine years of fierce warfare, the conflicts recounted in Greek mythology are not only present but also active and fundamental to the very existence of these myths. This led the artist to represent a crucial moment in the history of mythical conflict within Greek theology: the death of Achilles, who was killed by Paris, who shot an arrow into his Achilles tendon and then finished him off. This scene, with its intense confrontation and dramatic action, is a visually and aesthetically pleasing depiction of a highly tense moment, imbued with the essence of the conflict between two mythical figures. The event itself held significant weight in Greek mythology, serving as a crucial juncture in the conflict and its resolution, marked by moments of murder and the struggle for revenge.

It is worth noting that the scene's documentation here is not overly bloody or brutal. Rather, it is more akin to a visually designed unit, yet one laden with the intellectual content of the conflict. The scene's structural study and the contrast in colors and costumes create a dynamic contrast, not merely on the level of intellectual opposition or thematic conflict, but rather through the unique character of each element in terms of color, attire, and movement. This visual representation complements the thematic content of the conflict.



Figure 2. The Painting of Achilles Amphora Killing

In Figure 3, the pictorial scene on the ceramic surface depicts a battle scene from Greek mythology: the struggle between Theseus and the creature Mentor. Here, Theseus, with his strong physique, is shown wielding a sword and engaging in combat with Mentor, who is depicted as having the body of a man and the upper body of a bull, a description found in Greek mythology.

The reflection of the idea of conflict in the works of Greek art, including scenes on ceramic surfaces, confirms the expressive harmony and objective primacy of the concept of conflict, given its presence in all Greek myths, narratives, and literature. The representations of this concept (conflict) found easy application within the fabric of imagination that depicts narrative and myth, transforming them into a visual text, as seen in this example. The Mentor, a mythical, monstrous figure, was the reason for Athens' destruction as a city, due to the sacrifices imposed upon its inhabitants each year—young men and women offered as sacrifices to the Mentor. Here, the idea of psychological conflict began, first with this monstrous figure, and then transformed into physical conflict after Theseus decided to fight and defeat the Mentor. Theseus felt the humiliation of his people and hoped to vanquish the Mentor. Indeed, after a plan, he succeeded in defeating and killing him forever.

This mythology, which illustrates the idea of conflict between humans and some composite creatures like the Mentor, is a story of conflict that ends with the victory of the liberated human will, as happened with Theseus. The scene executed here is a scene with a smart structural design, employing the circular form to surround the elements. The scene was filmed according to a creative imagination that took into account the idea of conflict. It shows the fusion and clash between Theseus and the Mentor, and a dynamic movement that makes us feel the moments of conflict, where Theseus appears about to kill the monster with an improvisational and impulsive movement, while the Mentor appears lying dead on the ground in a moment of conflict with death.

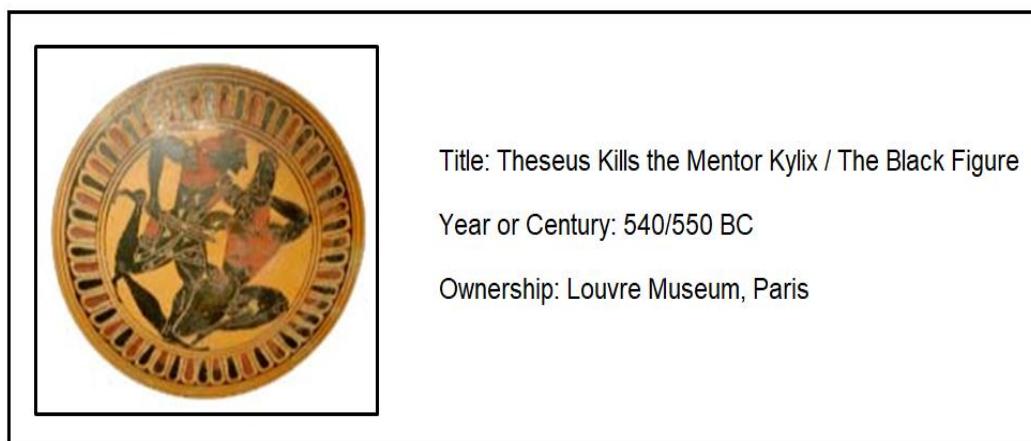


Figure 3. The Painting Theseus Kills Mentor Kylix

The representation of conflict in Greek ceramic vessels is reinforced by the chromatic contrast between the figures and their backgrounds. This contrast, achieved through specific ceramic rendering techniques, deepens the expressive and aesthetic meaning of the depicted conflict. The relationship between color, form, and technique therefore becomes an essential element in communicating the emotional intensity of the scene.

The theme of conflict is also closely connected to the spatial and temporal context of the represented event. The visual manifestation of conflict may depict the moment preceding the confrontation, the event itself, or the situation following the conflict. Each temporal stage creates a different dramatic effect and influences how the viewer interprets the actions, emotions, and consequences presented in the scene.

The forms of conflict represented in Greek pottery are diverse. They include conflicts between humans, confrontations between heroes and composite or mythical beings, and struggles between humans and animals. This diversity demonstrates that conflict was understood not only as a social or military event but also as a mythological and symbolic experience.

Through these pictorial scenes, the idea of conflict is constructed by combining an imaginative vision of events with the realistic execution of figures. This construction is further supported by decorative treatment and the aesthetic organization of the composition. The interaction between imagination, realism, ornamentation, and visual structure strengthens the narrative and symbolic dimensions of the conflict represented on the ceramic surface.

4. Conclusion

The representation of conflict in Greek ceramic vessels is reinforced by the chromatic contrast between the figures and their backgrounds, achieved through specific rendering techniques that deepen the expressive and aesthetic meaning of the depicted scenes. These representations are closely connected to the spatiotemporal context of the event, as the formal manifestation of conflict may portray the moment preceding the confrontation, the conflict itself, or its aftermath. The forms of conflict represented are also diverse, including struggles between humans, confrontations between heroes and composite or mythical beings, and conflicts between humans and animals. Through these pictorial scenes, the idea of conflict is constructed by combining an imaginative vision of events with the realistic execution of figures, the decorative treatment of the scene, and the aesthetic organization of the overall composition.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

Declaration on AI Use

The author declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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