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MEDEA AND THE CAULDRON IN THE IMAGE OF THE BELDAM PAINTER¹

Abstract. – The Beldam Painter was at the center of a workshop that produced numerous unattributed vases for decades after the painter himself ceased any identifiable activity. The nature of his work must therefore be clarified. He may have been a potter-painter who eventually turned full-time to throwing vases for later anonymous painters. Alternatively, he may have been a specialist painter within the workshop. His activity is dated to the second quarter of the 5th century BC, between 470 and 450 BC.

Key words. – Medea, Beldam, Pelias, lekythos, Athens.

The Beldam Painter was an Athenian black-figure painter active in the second quarter of the 5th century BC, who also used added white and white-ground lekythos. His activity is dated in the second quarter of the 5th century BC, between 470–450 BC. His workshop, which was active enough, continued its function until 440/430 BC. The main shape is the lekythos of different types, including the “chimney lekythos” and pattern funerary lekythos. Findspots² are Athens/Kerameikos, Agora and Attica, Corinth, Eretria, Perachora, Boeotia, Argos, Olympia, sites in Italy and Sicily, Ampurias (Spain), the Black Sea, and Pitane.

The term “funerary lekythos” evokes the image of a tall cylindrical vase. The usual lekythos was a small terracotta vessel used to hold oil for funerary rituals, but the form was monumentalized and translated into marble for use as a grave marker. Greek tomb monuments sometimes took the form of a large lekythos.³ Ertekin M. Doksanalti reports that lekythos was a popular form used as a cosmetic and

¹ I thank Prof. Wander Stayner Barbosa Martins for reviewing and correcting the text in the English language.

² Donna Carol Kurtz. *Athenian White Lekythoi: Patterns and Painters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975, p. 136

³ Kristine Gex, 2014, p. 321

ointment container in the Greek world until it gave way to unguentaria, which were used for the same purposes. Lekythos was also used as an important burial gift. It was produced in large quantities in Attica, especially during the Archaic and Classical periods in the last quarter of the 6th century B.C. The black figure technique gave way to the red figure technique, which was technically more functional. However, until the middle of the 5th century B.C., the Edinburgh Painter, the Haimon Painter, and the Beldam Painter had produced lekythoi in the black figure technique in their workshops, who remained popular for some time.⁴

About the Beldam Painter, Philip Sapirstein reports that he specialised in the BEL class, which was probably the work of a potter.⁵ The distinctive chimney lekythos was another specialty of the painter, but the Emporion and Haimon painters also decorated this type.⁶ The Beldam Painter was at the center of a workshop that produced numerous unattributed vases for decades after the painter himself ceased any identifiable activity. The nature of his work must therefore be clarified. He may have been a potter-painter who eventually turned full-time to throwing vases for later, anonymous painters. He may also have been a specialist painter within the workshop.

Most researchers need more information about the workshop of the Beldam painter for the analysis of the lekythoi data. One of the experts on his style was Emilie C. H. Haspel with *Attic Black Figured Lekythoi* (1936). Years later, D. C. Kurtz appeared with *White Lekythoi* (1975). Interest in pottery and some Beldam data continued with Sourvinou-Inwood's publication *Reading Greek Death* (1995) and with Diez de Velasco, *Los Caminos de la muerte* (1995). In 2017, Panariti Panagliota, a Greek researcher, successfully defended her doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Beldam Painter". The research presents the most recent information about the painter. The author asserts that the craftsman's activities were notably prolific towards the conclusion of the fifth century. The period between 470 and 450 BC, during which the artist remained active until 430, marks the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. In Panagliota's view, the painter's style can be classified chronologically into three phases: early (470-460 BC), middle (460-450 BC), and late (about 450 BC).

⁴ Philip Sapirstein, 2013, p. 13; Doksanalti 2011, p. 82.

⁵ See ABL, 170–71, 176–79, 186; Kurtz 1975, 18, 84–7, 153–54.

⁶ In April 1936, the accidental discovery of antiquities in the building lot of A. G. Christodoulos, at 28 Lenormant Street, Athens, led to the clearing of several ancient graves with lekythoi by the Beldam Painter workshop. By permission of the Greek Archaeological Service, the operation was carried out by workmen from the Agora Excavations, under the supervision of Miss Virginia Grace; see *Hesperia*, VI, 1937, pp. 360–363.

We are interested in analysing the black-figure lekythos from the Beldam Painter's Workshop, considered to be the oldest, whose well-preserved vases were intended for the world of funerary rituals. The identification of the lekythos produced by the Beldam Painter's Workshop is based firstly on the small volume cylindrical interior (false interior) and then on the specificity of the design of fifteen palm leaves, the simple swastika and the striped lines under the neck. The workshop of the Beldam Painter was active in the second quarter of the 5th century BC and is considered to be the last group of high-quality black-figure vessels produced in Athens.⁷

Our research and interest in the subject is based on the many vases produced in Attica with the theme “Rams in Cauldron”, also identified as “Peliades or Medea and the Rams”. We selected a set of Greek vases (27 vases) identified as Peliades. When we applied Claude Berard’s methodology to the Greek vases produced by the Beldam Painter, certain pictorial units were repeated: the cauldron, the women near the cauldron, and sometimes the makhaira/dagger and the ram; in other images, the woman carries a box in her hand identified as a phoriamos/urn of magical herbs. The figurative units confirm the theme of the Peliades, which circulated among the Greeks from the sixth to the fifth century BC, see below:

LOCATION: Erlangen, Friedrich-Alexander-Universitat
SUBJECT: Peliades Daughters of Pelias, Ram in Cauldron
STYLE: Black-figured Lekythos
INVENTORY: n° 1429; Beazley n° 5012
DATA: -500 - 475 Painter Beldam by Haspels
INSCRIPTION -
DIMENSION: 22,5 cm
ORIGIN: Attica

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum: Erlangen, Antikensammlung der Friedrich-Alexander-Universitat 2, 57, BEILAGE 6.7, PL.(4406) 21.4, 21.6-8 View Whole CVA Plates; Haspels, C., *Attic Black-figured Lekythoi* (Paris, 1936): 267.19; *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*: VII, PL.211, PELIADES 6D; Meyer, H., *Medeia und die Peliaden* (Rome, 1980): PL.7.1 (DRAWING); Vojatzki, M., *Fruhe Argonautenbilder* (Würzburg, 1982): PL.13.B77 (PART); *The Image of Jason in Early Greek Myth* by Simon Spence, 2010, n° 075.

⁷ Beth Cohen, 2006, p. 190.

REPERTORY

I. Anatomical Elements

Two young women, one standing to the right, in profile, looking to the left. She has her hair up, wears a long chiton under a himation, and holds a container in her right hand and a stick in her left. The other woman stands in profile to the left, looking to the right, her hair up, wearing a chiton with a himation, and also holding a stick in her right hand. In the centre is a right-facing ram in a rustic cauldron on a tripod with a brazier underneath.

II. Utensils

Vase: Lekythos – oil vase for funerary ritual, the two women are holding a stick in their right hand, raised, and the other hand lowered; both are standing before a ram, facing right, inside a rustic cauldron, with a blazing fire on a tripod under the cauldron's lid. They are wearing a chiton and a himation.

III. Syntagmatic Units

Iconographic repertoire	King Pelias' Rejuvenation
Support	Black-figure lekythos, Painter of Beldam workshop
Woman standing on the left	One of the daughters of King Pelias, wearing an embroidered himation, looks towards the cauldron in the centre of the picture, holding a stick in her right hand and a kylix in her left.
Woman standing on the right	Medea, giving the magical instructions with her right hand raised, appears to be holding a staff in her right hand and a kylix in her left.
Man sitting/standing	Absent
Cauldron	Rustic model of the type in <i>empyribete</i> tripod with ram inside
Phoriamos	The magical box was absent
Ram	Ram facing to the right inside the rustic cauldron
Fire	blazing fire on a tripod under the cauldron's lid
Side B	----
Dagger	Absent
Minimal Formal Units	Woman, Cauldron, Ram

The five vases from the Beldam workshop have the same subject: the figure of Medea, Queen of Corinth, on the right of the picture. She

wears an embroidered peplos and a himation with many folds. She puts a pinch of her magic herbs into the cauldron and in her left hand she holds a small box called phoriamos (box of potions and magic herbs). There are other depictions of her holding a knife in her right hand. On the other side of the picture is a lady who is one of Pelias' daughters. She is wearing the same Greek clothes as Medea, and these clothes are fashionable in Greece. This means that the Beldam Painter followed Greek mythology, probably from the oldest epic cycle, the one telling the story of Iolcus.⁸

Among the body of Attic vases with black and red figures related to the presence of Medea, we highlight the set of ceramic artefacts related to the mythical narrative that refers to the rejuvenation of King Pelias.⁹ The theme of the death of the king through rejuvenation became famous among the Greeks of Attica, Etruria and Magna Graecia. This statement is due to the significant number of vases of different models and styles found in these regions, but produced in the workshops of the Kerameikos.¹⁰

In terms of textual documentation, Homer quotes Pelias (*Iliad*, II.715; *Odyssey*, XI.254), who mentions the arrival of the Argonauts. From the epic circle, Eumelus of Corinth, author of the poem “*Korinthiaca*” or “*Corinthian History*”, narrates the ordeal of Medea and Jason in Corinth, fragments of which are quoted by Pausanias in his “*Description of Greece*” (II.2-3). Another member of the epic circle was Creophylus of Samos, who wrote “*The Capture of Oechalia*”, the location of which is found in Strabo's *Geography* (IX.5.17), which identifies the region of Corinth with the name Ephyra. In conclusion, Homer, Eumelus of Corinth and Creophylus of Samos were contemporary poets of the Archaic period who quoted the myth of Medea in the maritime adventures of the Argonauts, a fact that confirms the antiquity of the myth in circulation, which was probably a theme recited in poetry at banquets, by the aoidoi and the rhapsodes at the symposia and festivals of the VIII century BC.

There are two mythical versions of the story of Pelias' death. The earliest is from the 8th century BC, quoted by Homer and Eumelus of Corinth, who tell of the participation of Jason and the Argonauts

⁸ See Candido, 2020, p. 05.

⁹ There are numerous articles concerning the subject: P. J. Sijpesteijn. The Rejuvenation Cure of Pelias. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Bd. 9 (1972), pp. 104-110; candido, Maria Regina. Medea and the Rejuvenation of Pelias: One Alternative Version. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: History, Archaeology & Anthropology*, Vol. 20 Issue 3 Version 1. 0, 2020, p. 01 a 6 and Ildikó Csepregi. Medea Rejuvenates Herself: Female Roles and the Use of the Body in Seneca's *Medea*. *Clotho* 5 (2): 2024, p. 5-31.

¹⁰ See Kristine Gex, Athens and the Funerary Lekythos, *Essays on Greek Pottery and Iconography in honor of Prof. Michalis Tiverios*, 2014, p. 321-331.

in the funeral games held in honour of the death of King Pelias. In this episode we see Jason and Medea returning to Corinth, but before that they pass through the region of Iolcus to celebrate the homage and take part in the funeral games in memory of Pelias.

Acastus, son and heir of Pelias, organises the games and coordinates the prize-giving ritual in honour of his father after taking over the kingdom of Iolcus.¹¹ The participation of Jason's companions in the funeral ritual remained in the social imagination of the Greeks through mythical poetry and narrative, as the poet Hyginus shows when, in the second century BC, he recounts the details of the winners of the games: Acastus, one of the competitors, wins the chariot race; Asterion, Admetus, Euphemos and Amphiaraios win the jumping contest; Meleager wins the javelin contest; Admetus and Mopsos win the pankration contest; and Jason and Peleus fight each other. Iphicles wins the race, and in the end Acastus, son of King Pelias, crowns the winners of the contests. All participants are part of the expedition and the adventures of the ship Argos together with Jason.¹²

The mythical narrative of Hyginus is based on the ancient version of Eumelus of Corinth from the “*Corinthiaca*”, in which he tells an alternative version of the return of the Argonauts. In this version, Medea, daughter of Aetes, is supposed to take the throne of Corinth with Jason. She arrives in Corinth on the Argos with the entire crew of the Argonauts. According to the version favoured by Eumelus of Corinth, the story takes place in Iolcus since Jason was married to Medea and stopped there after the expedition from Colchis. According to Tsagalis, Parmeniskos and the scholar of Pindar, Medea and Jason reigned for a time in Corinth and their relationship produced children, seven boys and seven girls.¹³

According to another mythological tale, Medea saved Corinth from famine by making offerings and sacrifices to the goddess Demeter and the nymphs. In another tale, based on Eumelus of Corinth, Medea considered the possibility that the goddess Hera had made her children immortal for not accepting the sexual harassment of Zeus. The ritual was performed in the temple of the goddess Hera Akraia in the hope of granting immortality to the children, but the purpose was not achieved, and Jason, having discovered the deed, left in indignation for Iolcus, leaving behind Sisyphus, who became the new king of Corinth. Another poet who mentions the funeral of Pelias is Stesichorus, around 580 BC.¹⁴

¹¹ Moreau, 1994, p. 46.

¹² Hyginus, Fab. 273

¹³ Tsagalis, 2017, p. 122.

¹⁴ Bowra, 1936, p. 98

The poems of Stesichorus, Eumelus of Corinth and Simonides claim that Medea and Jason came to Corinth from Colchis and stopped at Iolcus to take part in the funeral games of Pelias. The kingdom of Iolcus received Medea as queen of Corinth and Eumelus and Simonides confirm this story (frag. 20 West, *Korinthiaca*). They describe Medea's expertise with herbs and roots, yet there was a beneficial result in terms of curing and rejuvenating people. This ancient tale, in which Medea is seen as a healer, belongs to the Iolcus epic cycle. This story became famous and popular in the Greek world, as we can find many painted vases with this theme between 530 and 525 BC.¹⁵

There is another version in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (VII: 297-349) and Diodorus Siculus (IV: 50-53). They both claim that Medea performed the process of rejuvenation on Pelias and killed him with the help of his daughters. Pelias witnessed the transformation of the ram. There are several types of Greek vases depicting old men witnessing the rejuvenation of the ram, which may represent King Pelias.¹⁶

In both stories, Medea arrives at Pelias' palace and explains her expertise. She demonstrates her ability to convince Pelias of her magical powers by transforming an old ram in front of the king. Pelias agrees to the rejuvenation, but Medea and her daughter kill Pelias. As a result, his son Agastus asks the couple to leave Iolcus after his father's death (Sijpesteijn, 1972, 106). Dugas defends the episode of the Peliades as a narrative to justify Medea's actions, since she ceased to be the person who cured the diseases of old age and became a malevolent character herself.¹⁷

The images of the artisan raise questions about Medea and allow us to consider an alternative view of the epithet of a woman of cruel character, horrible nature and implacable spirit (Euripides, *Medea*, v.100), given her expertise in using herbs and roots for magical practices. Panagiota Panariti has identified The Beldam Painter as the “Ζωγράφος της Μέγαιρας”, Hexen Maler, Peintre de la Mégère, Pittore della Megeira (2017). The title is associated with the process of transformation of the mythical tale of Medea, which belongs to the Argonautic Cycle.

¹⁵ Dugas, 1944, p. 06.

¹⁶ Peliades: London, British Museum, Hydria, Inv n° B 328; ABV 363, 42; Museu do Louvre, Paris, pyxis, Inv. n° CA 636, ARV 1289. 25; London, British Museum, Neck Amphora, Inv. n° B 221; London, British Museum, Hydria, Inv n° E163, ARV 258, 26 (Pelias or Jason); Munich, Antikensammlungen, German, Stamnos, Inv. n° 2408; Vatican, Museum Gregorian, Kylix, Inv. n°16. 538; Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, Bell-krater, Inv. n° BS 1450; Greece, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, Krater Calyx, Inv. n° Beazley n°5046; Conservation Paris Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Oenochoé, Inv. n° 330832 (Jason?); Place/Museum: Switzerland, Basel, kylix, Inv. n° MID8309; Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museum zu Berlin, Stamnos, Inv. n° F218.

¹⁷ Dugas, 1944, p. 108.

The story of Medea's murder of King Pelias using the ritual of rejuvenation can be traced back to Creophylus of Samos, who, in his work "The Capture of Oechalia", describes how this scene spread throughout Greek territory through the Attic red figure pottery. The mythical story of Medea, quoted by Creophylus of Samos, is reproduced in Strabo's Geography (IX.5.17).

Our question is to reflect on the motivation for the user and consumer of Greek vases to order, as a gift to be offered to the deceased, a lekythos with a white background depicting a scene from the Peliades in which the pharmakides Medea exposes the daughters of Pelias to promote the death of the king. The presence of the story of Medea and the Cauldron brings an alternative view: the memory of the mythical aspect of the Argonautic Cycle. We believe that in the period from the eighth to the sixth century, the Argonautic Cycle, the image of Medea was that of the young wife of Jason from the region of Colchis on the Black Sea.¹⁸ The priestess of the goddess Hecate knew how to heal diseases, cure hunger, perform purification rituals with magical herbs and master the process of rejuvenation. The mythical tale of the funeral games for Pelias refers to the arrival of Medea and Jason in the region of Iolcus, by which time King Pelias had already died. This version suggests that the priestess of Hecate may have performed a magical ritual to bring Pelias back and make him young again.

The poet Aeschylus, in the drama *Nurses* (frag. 246), tells us that Medea used her magical gifts to rejuvenate the maenads and that the god Dionysus agreed to participate in the ritual process after witnessing the rejuvenation of Aeson, Jason's father. Hyginus adds in the *Fabulae* (v. 183) that the ritual took place on Mount Nysa. The experience of the practice of rejuvenation performed by Medea was recounted by Plautus in his *Pseudolus*, where he mentions how Medea cooked the old Pelias like a stew among the special and magical herbs, so that the old king became young again (Plautus, *Pseudolus*, v. 868-872). Sophocles, in the fragments of the plot of *Rhizotomoi*, showed the need for Medea to take care of the roots, perhaps to use them to rejuvenate Pelias.

In the remaining fragments, we can see that Medea had used her magical skills to remove the wrinkled and old skin from Pelias and replace it with young and healthy skin. The action consisted in boiling the body of the sick old king with various pharmaka/magical herbs in his golden cauldron (West, 2003, p.158.). We can confirm that the first mythical tales of Medea make it clear that she was known in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean as a young priestess of Hecate, who had expertise in the manipulation of herbs and magical drugs aimed at the

¹⁸ Candido, 2023 p. 194.

fertility of the soil, the fertility of women, the cure of diseases and the rejuvenation of the old and sick.

We conclude that the presence of the image of Medea and the cauldron in the Lekythos makes it clear that the relatives of the deceased express through the image the desire for the return of the deceased, younger and healthier, in other lives, in a way similar to the Pythagorean journey, which would replace the cause that led to his death. With the information presented, we can present an alternative view that the priestess of Hecate knew how to manipulate the magical herbs, which were aimed at the fertility of the soil, the fertility of women, healing and the rejuvenation process. In ancient times, Medea was known as a priestess who knew how to use different medicines to heal and rejuvenate the elderly and the sick. The information originates from the material culture and the distant mythological narrative of Medea was kept in the memory of specific users and consumers of funerary vases. We conclude that the consumer ordered the Lekythos from the Beldam Painter's workshop in recognition of the fact that the relatives of the deceased remembered the ancient mythical story of Medea. The image of the priestess of Hecate materialises the wish for the deceased to be cured of his illness and to overcome the cause of his death. The consumer invokes the help of the priestess of Hecate, meticulously depicted in the unique set of Lekythos by the painter of Beldam, and wishes the deceased to go on in peace and be healed through their new Pythagorean journey.

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