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# Proceed to Olympus: The Iconography of the Return of Hephaestus

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### Catherine Hensly - Essay

Originally tasked with analyzing visual representations of a mythological story for Professor Salowey's Myth and Ancient Art class, I barely knew where to begin. I felt completely lost despite having completed several papers for the course. Returning to the paper description, I noticed that one recommendation was to expand on a previous paper, one in which I had described a singular depiction. Using my work with a krater depicting the return of Hephaestus as a springboard, I began pouring through journal articles about the mythological topic. Little did I know then that this assignment would teach me more about the research process than any had before it. I would have to rely on my own thought processes and analytical skills to develop my argument instead of merely rehashing old ideas. This paper would challenge me, but in doing so, cause me to grow as a researcher.

Yet my preliminary research seemed fruitless; I found little literature detailing the imagery and nothing that piqued my interest enough to develop a thesis. I went to Professor Salowey with my concerns, and she guided me back to the original depictions and away from secondary literature. Upon her recommendation, I carefully analyzed and grouped images of the return that are catalogued in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC). But the images did not fall into neat categories, and a sense of uncertainty crept back over me. I did not know what argument I could make or how I could use all of the information collected from the sixty-three depictions.

I found myself in Professor Salowey's office once more, this time with pages of notes and half-baked topic ideas. She looked at what I had and listened as I voiced my trepidation, replying simply that I should continue. Based on the limited research existing about the images, I was treading on new territory and should pursue the analysis. "It doesn't have to be earth-shattering," she told me, "you are researching something relatively unprecedented, and that makes it worthwhile." Inspired by her words, I delved back into my research with renewed zeal.

After many revisions, I drilled down my thesis into the argument presented in my paper. Relying primarily on the LIMC images, I also pulled depictions from museum websites to illustrate my points. Utilizing ancient primary sources, I related the myth's narrative prior to expounding on its depictions in ancient art. By the end of the process, I had used a combination of library books, online journals, and websites, later returning with another book borrowed from Roanoke College to solidify one of my points. Having completed this research process, I feel much more confident going forward. These skills have emboldened me to pursue topics for assignments I otherwise would have been afraid to choose. I continue to refine these skills, carrying them with me into my many endeavors and strengthening my work. Most importantly, this paper taught me the value of exploring information to synthesize existing works into a new discovery.

### **Proceed to Olympus: The Iconography of the Return of Hephaestus**

The ancient Greek god Hephaestus frequently appears as a processional figure accompanied by Dionysus and his *thiasos* on vases dating to the Archaic and Classical periods, depicted in such a manner on no fewer than sixty-three vases attributed to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>1</sup> The earliest surviving appearance of this procession occurs on the iconic François Vase<sup>2</sup> and most likely represents Hephaestus's return to Mount Olympus. Although examination of the sixty-three vases published in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)* fails to yield individual schemas dominating specific time periods, it does reveal certain styles cycling through over the two hundred year period. As the theme rises in popularity, artists choose to incorporate or omit specific elements originally presented on the François vase, setting it as the prototype of the myth's appearance in art. Contemporary trends then influence the nuances of the depiction, resulting in differences in the manners of procession, attitudes toward satyrs, and emphases on deformity.

Hephaestus was the “Greek god of fire, of blacksmiths, and of artisans,”<sup>3</sup> even serving as a master blacksmith forging armor for Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* (18, 468-482). As such, he was closely associated with fire and the forge. Born to Hera (Hes. *Theog.* 929), Hephaestus was unique among the Olympian gods as he was not physically idealized. His legs were crippled, and he would sweat as he worked (Hom. *Il.* 18, 136ff).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These images are found catalogued in the *LIMC*. Similar figures are reported by the *American Journal of Archaeology*, where “Waentig enumerates forty-two vases with this subject” and “Loeschke speaks of ‘about fifty’” (Eldridge 1917, 42).

<sup>2</sup> Depicted in Figure 1, the François Vase is a black-figure volute krater dating to c. 570 BCE and is currently on display at the Museo Archeologico in Florence, Italy. Covered in mythological depictions, it represents one of the greatest examples of archaic artwork.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Graf, “Hephaestus,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron J. Atsma, “Hephaistos,” [Web article], The Theoi Project: 2000-2011, *Theoi Greek Mythology*; available from <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Hephaistos.html>; Internet; accessed 6 December 2011.

Few literary accounts remain describing the return of Hephaestus to Mount Olympus, and those that exist are fragmentary. Homer writes that Hera, seeing her son's malformation, threw him from Mount Olympus (*Il.* 18, 393-400). He was then taken in by Eurynome and Thetis (*Hom. Il.* 18, 400-409 and *Paus.* 8.41.5). Because he had discovered the many applications of fire for working metal, Hephaestus was incredibly skilled in the craft (*Diod.* 5.74.2), and he used this knowledge to exact revenge on his indifferent mother. Tradition holds that Hephaestus created a trap for Hera, building her a throne that ensnared her when she sat upon it. Unable to free her from the clever device, the Olympian gods resolved to retrieve Hephaestus from his exile (*Paus.* 1.20.3). Ares was the first tasked to fetch the deviant god, but was thwarted.<sup>5</sup> The job then fell to Dionysus, a close friend of Hephaestus, who utilized his knowledge of wine to inebriate the god before leading him to release Hera (*Paus.* 1.20.3).

The pictorial record augments the written record, adding details to the myth's fragmentary literary record. Its protagonist and theme lends itself to depiction on vases, whose spherical shapes are ideal canvases for extensive narratives. As a procession, the return serves well to fill the space, providing continuous ornamentation and opportunity for artistic innovation. The patron god of craftsmen (*Diod.* 5.74.3), Hephaestus would have held particular appeal to professional vase painters. The god's imperfect, working nature but ultimate acceptance amongst the gods would have resonated with the lower classes who were able to achieve slight social mobility by capitalizing on the "Greek love of art," producing vases and crafts that rendered them "superior to traders" in the eyes of the upper class.<sup>6</sup> With other members of the

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Hedreen, "The Return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac Processional Ritual and the Creation of a Visual Narrative," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol 124 (2004): 38, JSTOR.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Grant, *A Social History of Greece and Rome* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 66-67.

middle class as patrons, this may account for the myth's surge in appearances in black figure pottery during the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest and most complete Attic representation of the myth appears on the François Vase,<sup>8</sup> as shown in Figure 1. The figures process to the left and are accompanied by inscriptions; Hephaestus rides sidesaddle on an ithyphallic mule<sup>9</sup> led by Dionysus who negotiates with

Aphrodite.<sup>10</sup> An ithyphallic satyr follows behind, carrying a wineskin.

Although not shown in this image,

Hera also appears on the vase still restrained by the bonds of the chair

Hephaestus had sent her.<sup>11</sup> The vase

therefore serves as one of the most



Fig. 1: François Vase, c. 570 BCE

synoptic views of the myth as it includes the moment of the return in addition to the procession leading to it. It also employs a number of design elements that remain unusual and noteworthy: Hephaestus typically is not depicted riding sidesaddle or processing to the left. However, even these motifs become quotable and are later applied to other works of art, becoming strong antecedents to later compositions of the story.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Black figure pottery came into being during the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, denoting the creation and rise in popularity of such work; red figure pottery was developed later c. 530 BCE (Grant 1952, 157).

<sup>8</sup> Guy Michael Hedreen, *Silens in Attic Black-figure Vase-painting: Myth and Performance*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Hephaestus is depicted riding both donkeys and mules. For the sake of clarity, the term “mule” will be maintained throughout the paper as no particular attention is being paid to the species.

<sup>10</sup> As Andrew Stewart points out in his article, “Stesichoros and the François Vase”, it is generally accepted that one of the stipulations for Hephaestus to free Hera involved his acquisition of Aphrodite as his wife.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron J. Atsma, “Aphrodite Loves 1” [Web article], The Theoi Project: 2000-2011, *Theoi Greek Mythology*; available from <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/AphroditeLoves.html>; Internet; accessed 7 December 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Apart from the François Vase, Hephaestus appears sidesaddle only four times in the images catalogued in the *LIMC*, and only five Attic vases and one Caeretan hydria show the characters processing to the left.

An exception does exist when considering the François Vase as the forerunner for future depictions of the return: it does nothing to accentuate Hephaestus's deformity. No consensus has been reached as to why he appears riding, and so it cannot be used as compelling evidence of his handicap. While some argue that it is because of his inability to walk, others assert that it is representative of the god's status relative to the other Olympic deities, triumphal return, or level of inebriation.<sup>13</sup> But the god's lameness was frequently referenced in his iconography, especially during the Archaic period when painters would depict his feet backward.<sup>14</sup> The deformation is included in subsequent depictions of the return as it was such a specific trait of the god. While some utilize the "backward feet" approach, other painters more subtly allude to the malformation by showing his legs hanging limply instead of actively gripping the sides of the mule. The image shown in Figure 2 takes this style a step further, portraying his feet as though they melted down from his ankles. Although later depictions of Hephaestus tend to show his legs swinging and his feet fully and properly formed, this is in accordance with the Classical ideal.



Fig. 2: Black-figure amphora neck, 520-510 BCE

As the myth gains popularity and artists begin depicting the processional return of Hephaestus during the early to mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, many condense the images shown on the François Vase. Whereas this vase conflates the procession with the moment of return to Mount

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Hedreen enumerates on how it defines his status relative to other Olympian gods, wherein he must ride a mule rather than use his own specialized mode of travel, but states that it may also be indicative of a "slow-moving terrestrial religious procession" ("The Return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac Processional Ritual and the Creation of a Visual Narrative", 41). However, he reconciles that whereas J. Wiesner supports this theory, H. A. Shapiro maintains reservations which he elaborates in *Art and Cult under the Tyrants in Athens* (9, 12).

<sup>14</sup> Fritz Graf, "Hephaestus," in *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, 142.

Olympus, blending the two moments into a singular artistic rendering, many artists instead depict the procession as a stand-alone event. This trend appears throughout both centuries but is especially prevalent during the Archaic period: twenty-nine of the thirty-seven Archaic vases appearing in the *LIMC* show Hephaestus with Dionysus, satyrs, and in some instances, maenads or nymphs, but without other divinities like Hera or Aphrodite.<sup>15</sup> With heavier focus placed on the aspects of the procession, where “more space [is devoted] to the depiction of the wine-god’s entourage...than to the representation of the story’s protagonists,”<sup>16</sup> the function of the image as a part of the myth becomes lost. In such instances, “Hephaestus and Dionysus, each in his own Bacchic element, may be regarded as simply represented together without reference to the return to Olympus”<sup>17</sup> as no additional evidence exists on the individual vase to argue its depiction of the return. Recovery of the theme of the return, then, comes in comparing the depictions against other more synoptic views, such as that of the original procession appearing on the François Vase.



Fig. 3: Terracotta kylix: “band-cup,” c. 550 BCE

The terracotta kylix shown in Figure 3 is representative of the condensed style popularized during the Archaic period: Dionysus leads the mule that carries Hephaestus, and the

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<sup>15</sup> This figure may be slightly skewed as only one face is shown in the catalogue and several images are fragmentary. The François Vase is not included in this count.

<sup>16</sup> Hedreen, “The Return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac Processional Ritual and the Creation of a Visual Narrative,” 40.

<sup>17</sup> L.G. Eldridge, “An Unpublished Calpis,” *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1917): 44, JSTOR.

gods are joined by an entourage of satyrs and maenads, but no additional deities are present.<sup>18</sup> Dionysus is easily identified as he is shown holding his iconic *kantharos* in his left hand and a section of grapevine in his right. Although Hephaestus typically appears carrying a double axe or tongs to symbolize his role as the god of the forge with some sort of emphasis placed on his lameness,<sup>19</sup> he appears on this vase without any of these identifying traits and without a label. In this instance, the identification of Hephaestus is assumed based on his role in the scene, riding the mule with the presence of the accompanying figures. The procession on the kylix, therefore, follows a simplified version of formula proposed by the François Vase, where Hephaestus also appears riding a mule led by Dionysus and followed by a satyr.

The satyrs appear here in their Dionysiac element, displaying erect phalluses and chasing the female figures. They fail to contribute to the goal of the procession, reveling in their sexuality and doing nothing to speed the travel. If anything, they seem to hinder the progress toward Olympus with their tawdriness, such as where the satyr directly behind Hephaestus attempts to rape the mule. While the satyr appearing on the François Vase is also ithyphallic, he appears carrying a wineskin, a symbolic element that may serve as a gift upon arrival Mount Olympus, and does not act in opposition to the progress. As the satyrs on the kylix primarily appear to be in pursuit of the females shown, the motivation of their procession can be questioned. They serve to inspire laughter in the viewer through their antics, a common function

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<sup>18</sup> Identification of the figures is provided by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art website. While Ariadne can also be identified, her presence does not contribute to identification of the myth as she exists here only in conjunction with Dionysus.

<sup>19</sup> David Soren, "The Fogg Kleophrades Vase Under the Ultraviolet Light," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 228 (Dec. 1977): 33, JSTOR.



of satyrs;<sup>20</sup> such a deviation from the role proposed by the François vase may be attributed to the rise of satyr plays also representing the myth.<sup>21</sup>

The attitudes of the satyr participants change in later depictions. Eventually, they transition from focusing primarily on their sexual enthusiasm to joining in jubilant revelry of the return. During the Classical period, they frequently appear playing various musical instruments as they walk in a festive manner more appropriate for ritualized procession. These Classical satyrs typically do not display the enhanced, erect phalluses of their predecessors, which would have corresponded to the ritual of inversion present in Dionysiac procession,<sup>22</sup> but instead are portrayed more modestly. While this shift is indeed representative of the Classical style, it also

serves to focus the scene back on Hephaestus and his return rather than Dionysus and his iconography.



The calyx krater shown in Figure 4 serves as a transition piece, dating to the cusp of the Classical era. In this instance, the satyr immediately following Hephaestus plays a flute, creating music typical for a procession. On the obverse side, another satyr carries the god's tools. Sexual undertones certainly persist, clearly manifesting with Dionysus as he tickles the satyr in front of him on the back of the thigh with a grape vine, but they are joyous and do not detract from the

**Fig. 4: Attic Red-Figure Calyx Krater, c. 480 BCE**

<sup>20</sup> Aaron J. Atsma, "Satyroi." The Theoi Project: 2000-2011, *Theoi Greek Mythology*; available from <http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Satyroi.html>; Internet; accessed 5 November 2011.

<sup>21</sup> The existence of such plays is referenced in notes on Aeschylus Papyri Fragments (I. 66 f.) as provided by Hugh Lloyd-Jones. A satyr play predominantly features satyrs, animalized male companions to Dionysus, which invert the typical tragedy, utilizing sexual innuendo and other such low-level comedic tools to add levity. A satyr play would follow a tragic trilogy to alleviate the emotional drama.

<sup>22</sup> Hedreen, "The Return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac Processional Ritual and the Creation of a Visual Narrative," 41-42.

progress of the procession. The satyrs here contribute to the effort of returning Hephaestus to free Hera, who appears on the vessel seated.

The krater includes a total of four Olympic deities: Dionysus, Hephaestus, Hermes, and Hera. Hermes, rather than Dionysus or one of his attendants, leads Hephaestus to the seated Hera whose legs remain fettered by the bonds of Hephaestus's chair. While Hera is shown in a few Archaic vases,<sup>23</sup> she is generally absent from depictions until later vessels beginning c. 430 BCE when other myths involving Hephaestus and other Olympian deities begin to rise in popularity.<sup>24</sup> Hermes is not mentioned at all in existing literature detailing the return, though he does occasionally appear in its artistic depiction. His presence, then, further ties the image on the krater to the moment of arrival at Olympus. Hephaestus and Dionysus both appear, but this time they are on opposite sides of the vase. Their distance serves to return focus to Hephaestus, as "each god [appears] in his Bacchic character independently of the other."<sup>25</sup> The separation is a distinct departure from other instances where Dionysus appears leading the mule. This depiction, therefore, represents a return to the original themes of the myth as proposed by the François Vase as well as advancement in the visual commentary.

While convention has Hephaestus riding either a donkey or a mule, as per the appearance on the François Vase and other images thus far explored in this paper, another development in the depiction of the return occurs when the god appears on foot. This variation appears most frequently in later depictions dating to the Classical period.<sup>26</sup> The marked change in style could be attributed to the continued rise of satyr plays; it would not have been practical to use an

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<sup>23</sup> Hera only appears in five of the thirty-seven Archaic depictions catalogued in the *LIMC*; she also appears in her bonds on the François Vase.

<sup>24</sup> When chronologically considering the iconography of Hephaestus, the themes of the birth of Athena, the birth of Erechtheus, and the creation of Pandora seem to replace the theme of the return during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>25</sup> Eldridge, "An Unpublished Calpis," 42.

<sup>26</sup> Of the images appearing in the *LIMC*, five dating to the Archaic Period show Hephaestus walking in the processional return as compared to eleven dating to the Classical Period.

animal in such a manner on stage, and these images could be more reflective of the theatrical performances than the actual myth. Later depictions could also be explained by the rise in idealized form that followed the transition to Classical style. During the Classical period, any visual reference to Hephaestus's deformity has been removed, leaving him physically capable of walking.

By comparing the pedestrian images against the equestrian images, the similarities become more evident. Even in this deviation from the fundamental formula, enough common elements remain to identify the scene as the return to Olympus. The Attic red-figure kylix



Figure 5: Attic Red-Figure Kylix, c. 470 BCE

provided in Figure 5 shows a particularly striking instance in which Hephaestus, characterized by his double hammer and *pilos*, a type of hat, is shown walking. He is clearly a member of a procession, as the figures are depicted continuously along this face of the vase progressing toward the right. Dionysus leads him, grabbing him by the wrist,<sup>27</sup> and the pair is accompanied by satyrs and maenads like other images of the return. One of the satyrs is even shown carrying a bell krater in a manner reminiscent of the satyr carrying the wineskin on the François Vase. Given these parallels, the depiction can therefore still be identified as that of Hephaestus's return to Olympus, further developing it in the Classical style.

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<sup>27</sup> This movement may simply demonstrate more forcefulness by Dionysus but may also be evocative of the marriage gesture, wherein a groom would grab his bride's wrist as a display of power and possession. Robert F. Sutton, Jr. elaborates on this gesture in general and its representations in art in his article "Nuptial Eros: The Visual Discourse of Marriage in Classical Athens" (29).

The myth's popularity in response to the rising middle class and its limited number of formulas allows for a comparative study of its iconography. Doing so through different time periods reveals a changing delight in the Dionysiac element, times when there is a reluctance to portray Hephaestus as lame, and a reduced emphasis on Olympian matters in some moments but a return to portraying them in others. Working backward from Classical depictions, the François Vase manifests as the primary source of the depiction's overall style. Although it does not accentuate the god's lameness like some images, it incorporates all of the major elements and characters of the return. Later depictions merely expand or abbreviate its motifs as they serve simultaneously as representatives of their respective time periods.

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