

ATHENA, GODDESS OF COMMUNICATION

Images on Greek vases are a rich source of information about the relationship between gods and mortals, but in most cases the mortals are heroes and heroines, not everyday people. While votive reliefs regularly depict mortal worshippers in the presence of a divinity, their different status indicated by a striking difference in size, this is generally not part of the visual language of vase-painting. But Athena is an exception. This paper posits that Athena is the only divinity on Attic vases who is shown in direct communication with her worshippers, and in particular with her female worshippers.

A group of red-figure vases of the Early Classical period depicts a woman (or two) joining Athena, usually in the act of libation. No attribute or garment indicates that the woman is a priestess, much less a heroine or another goddess. She is a nameless Athenian, and the lack of size differentiation typical of the votive reliefs creates an unusually intimate encounter with the divine. The paper explores the implications of this iconography for our understanding of Athena's role in the city that bore her name.

A consideration of black-figure vases, especially so-called pseudo-Panathenaic amphorae and vases dedicated on the Akropolis, suggests that the Early Classical vases are not an entirely new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a special relationship between Athena and her people that goes back at least to the reorganization of her festival in 566. Since many Archaic vases show mortal women and men interacting with what is usually taken to be a statue of Athena (again, the only divinity shown so often as a statue), the paper also reconsiders the much debated question of when a figure is intended as a statue and when the goddess herself, or whether this is a distinction that would not have been meaningful to the ancient viewer.

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