



Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2019.02.14. "Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/musings-about-a-scene-pictured-by-the-achilles-painter/>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42179310>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from *Classical Inquiries*

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author's name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

Nagy, G. 2019.01.31. "Homo Ludens at Play with the Songs of Sappho: Experiments in Comparative Reception Theory, Part Four." *Classical Inquiries*. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy](#) » Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter

Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter

February 14, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2019.02.14 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. On the cover of an earlier posting of mine for Classical Inquiries, [Nagy 2019.01.31](#), we see a facsimile of a picture painted on an Attic white-ground lekythos, dated somewhere around 440–430 BCE, by an artist who is known to art historians as the Achilles Painter. In that posting, which was all about Sappho, I never explained why I chose that picture for the cover. In the posting for today, 2019.02.14, I offer an explanation, which will require a broader view: that is why the facsimile for the cover here is in three parts: the part on our right is the same picture I showed in the earlier post, but the part in the middle “zooms out,” showing the whole scene that is being pictured—not just a part of the scene, as before—and then the part on our left shows a picturing that I have not shown before. Relevant to my explanation of the overall scene, as we will see, is the day on which this posting is being published, Valentine’s Day 2019.02.14. And, I should add on a personal note, the relevance extends further: whether or not I am right in trying to explain the meaning of the overall scene that is being pictured here by the Achilles Painter, I hope that the picture itself, in all its beauty, will be accepted as a loving Valentine’s Day “card” from Greg to Holly.



Share This



Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

Search for:

Subscribe Now!

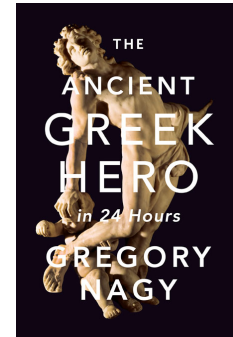
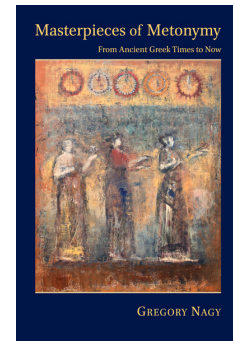
Subscribe to this site to receive email updates about the latest research—just one or two notices per week.

[EU/EEA Privacy Disclosures](#)

Now Online



Attic white-ground lekythos, 440–430 BCE, by the Achilles Painter. [Image](#) at left via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) license. [Image](#) at right via Wikimedia Commons.



Top Posts & Pages

[The Last Words of Socrates at the Place Where He Died](#)

[Helen of Troy: Unwomanly in Her Sexuality](#)

[Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part One](#)

Most Common Tags

[Achilles](#) [Aphrodite](#) [apobatēs](#) [Archilochus](#)
[Ariadne](#) [Aristotle](#) [Artemis](#) [Athena](#)
[Athens](#) [Catullus](#) [chariot fighting](#)

Commentary [Daphnis](#)

[and Chloe](#) [Demodokos](#) [Dionysus](#)
[etymology](#) [Euripides](#) [Gregory Nagy](#)
[H24H](#) [HAA](#) [travel-study](#) [Helen](#) [Hera](#)
[Herodotus](#) [Hippolytus](#) [Homer](#)

Homeric epic [Iliad](#)

[Jean Bollack](#) [lament](#) [Lelantine War](#) [Lesbia](#)
[mimesis](#) [Mycenae](#) [Odysseus](#)

Odyssey [Pausanias](#)

[Phaedra](#) [Pindar](#) [Plato](#) [Poetics](#) [Posidippus](#)

Sappho [Theseus](#) [weaving](#) [Zeus](#)

[Archives](#)



Attic white-ground lekythos, 440–430 BCE, by the Achilles Painter. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) license.

§1. The overall scene, as we can best view it by way of the “zoom-in,” shows a female figure, who is generally thought to be a Muse, in the act of playing a lyre. The rock on which the would-be Muse is seated bears the inscription ΗΛΙΚΩΝ, which would have been pronounced Helikōn. So, the would-be Muse on our right is seated on top of Mount Helicon, a sacred place that is frequented by the Muses—as every Classicist knows. And it is generally assumed that the other female figure, on our left, is another Muse.

§2. I suggest, however, that the would-be Muse on our right is Sappho. As we see from a variety of ancient sources, including two epigrams attributed to Plato, Greek Anthology 9.506.1–2 and 9.571.6–7, Sappho was conventionally described as ‘the tenth Muse’; the same description applies in two epigrams by Antipater of Sidon (second half of the second century BCE), in Greek Anthology 7.14.1–2 and 9.66.1–2; another epigrammatist, Dioscorides (second half of the third century BCE), in Greek Anthology 7.407.1–4, not only equates Sappho with the Muses but also connects her with two sacred places frequented by the goddesses—both Mount Helicon and the heights of Pieria, a mountain range dominated by Mount Olympus. Yet another epigrammatist, Antipater of Thessalonike (late first century BCE and early first century CE), makes the same connection in Greek Anthology 9.26.1–4. Finally, Himerius (fourth century CE) in Oration 46.44–46 says that Sappho in her songs—as well as Pindar—pictured Mount Helicon as a sacred place frequented by the Muses together with Apollo.

§3. If the female figure to our right is Sappho, then who would be the corresponding female figure to our left? I suggest that she is the goddess of love and sexuality, Aphrodite. For this suggestion to be successful, however, there are at least two preconditions that would have to be met. First, the small bird that we see positioned between the would-be Sappho to our right and the would-be Aphrodite to our left would have to be a sparrow. And, second, such a sparrow would have existed in one or more songs of Sappho, playing the role of her beloved pet.

§4. I address the second precondition first. In another essay for *Classical Inquiries*, [Nagy 2018.12.13](#), I have argued for the existence of such a pet sparrow in the songs of Sappho. In terms of my argument, this

little bird later became the model for the pet sparrow of Lesbia, who is a poetic stand-in for Sappho in Poems 2 and 3 of the Roman poet Catullus.

§5. And now I address the first precondition. The question is, can we say that the little bird that we find pictured between the would-be Sappho on our right and the would-be Aphrodite on our left is really a sparrow? I asked a number of colleagues and friends, and I did not get a unanimous answer. For now, however, I am persuaded by the expert opinion I was given by my friend Carole Slatkin, who writes, 2019.02.10:

“I believe that the bird is a female House Sparrow. They’ve been around for at least 15,000 years, and are native to the Mediterranean Basin. From what I have been reading, the House Sparrow was sacred to Aphrodite.”

§6. As we look to the surviving songs of Sappho, we can see clearly in her Song 1 the connectedness of the goddess Aphrodite with sparrows. These sexually hyperactive little birds are pictured in that song as drawing the chariot of the goddess and transporting her from the heavens all the way down to earth, where they touch ground at the very spot where Sappho pictures herself as performing her song.

§7. Elsewhere in the songs of Sappho, in terms of my argument, there existed a singular sparrow who became her beloved pet. And such a pet is pictured, I suggest, in the scene painted by the Achilles Painter.

§8. Granted, the little bird we see in the painting may seem not little enough for a sparrow if we view it in proportion to the delicate little bare feet of the two ladies on either side. But I contend that if you painted the bird any smaller, it would be much too small to be viewed effectively within the visual composition of the overall scene.

§9. Epilogue... Today, Valentine’s Day 2019.02.14, is the fourth anniversary for my weekly postings in Classical Inquiries, which started on Valentine’s Day [2015.02.14](#). I hope that my posting for today can be seen as a fitting recognition of Aphrodite, whose erotic identity can be so playfully linked with randy little sparrows. That said, I now end this posting just as I began it, on a personal note: I hope that Holly will be amused by this offering from her loving Greg. She may like to think of my words here as a supplement to what I wrote for an earlier Valentine Day, as recorded at §30 in [Nagy 2016.02.18](#).



Attic white-ground lekythos, 440–430 BCE, by the Achilles Painter. [Image via Flickr](#), under a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) license.

Bibliography

Greene, E., ed. 1996a. *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Berkeley and Los Angeles. (The illustration on the cover of this volume corresponds to the facsimile I show at <https://flic.kr/p/dnVb6g>.)

Greene, E., ed. 1996b. *Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*. Berkeley and Los Angeles. (The illustration on the cover of this second volume corresponds to the facsimile I show at <https://flic.kr/p/bL4cra>.)

Nagy, G. 2015.10.22. "Diachronic Sappho: Some Prolegomena." *Classical Inquiries*. <http://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/diachronic-sappho-some-prolegomena-2/>.

Nagy, G. 2018.12.13. "Two small comments on Catullus Two: an iconic effect and an expression of delight in what is beautiful." *Classical Inquiries*. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/two-small-comments-on-catullus/>.

Tags: [Achilles Painter](#), [Antipater of Sidon](#), [Antipater of Thessalonike](#), [Aphrodite](#), [Catullus](#), [Dioscorides](#), [Himerius](#), [Plato](#), [Sappho](#)

Comments are closed.

« [Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Six](#)

[Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Five](#) »



Classical Inquiries, edited by Keith Stone, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

