Unmasking the Helmsman: Painted Prows and Enigmatic Eyes at the Archaic Symposium

Philip Katz, New York University

The piercing gaze of the Attic eye-cup is one of the most familiar images from archaic Greece. It is also among the most theorized, and the vase form is most often thought to contribute to symptic role-playing through its masking properties. Although the eyes of these cups never appeared alone, this interpretation has long been argued in a way that denies agency to the surrounding figures. In this paper, I examine one understudied corpus of eye-cups for which the function was determined not by the eyes alone, but by their interplay with the prows of ships that framed them. The circulation of such a vessel, I argue, not only helped fashion the symposium as a sea voyage, but also allowed symposiasts to adopt the role of the helmsman on that voyage.

Among extant black-figure eye-cups, nearly 20 preserve evidence of prows on their exterior surfaces, all produced between 550–525 B.C.E. and displaying a consistent arrangement of iconographic elements, with each eye flanked by a truncated ship that begins under the handles. The compositional relationship between the painted prows and the eyes of the cup are highly significant, as these larger eyes find visual counterparts in those on the prows, a doubling that establishes a dialog between the two elements. This relationship is further reinforced by the way in which the convex curve of the larger eyes is nestled into the concave curve of the prows. Through this dialog and arrangement, I argue, the eyes of the cup become part of the prows, working together to transform the cup itself into a kind of ship.

This relationship between prows and eyes, moreover, also enabled the former to contribute to the masking functions of their cups. While ships on other sympotic vessels, as well as those in contemporary sympotic poetry, gave a prominent role to the helmsman, those on eye-cups uniformly omitted this figure. During a symposium, I argue, this vacancy was filled by the participant, who, in the act of handling the cup, temporarily inhabited the persona of a helmsman. Passing such a cup-as-ship around the room, moreover, allowed each symposiast to assume this role in turn. In so doing, these cups thus used their visual rhetoric to bring the user and viewers aboard the ship in a way that enabled the sympotic community to self-fashion as a microcosm of their poleis while still preserving for themselves a position of primacy.