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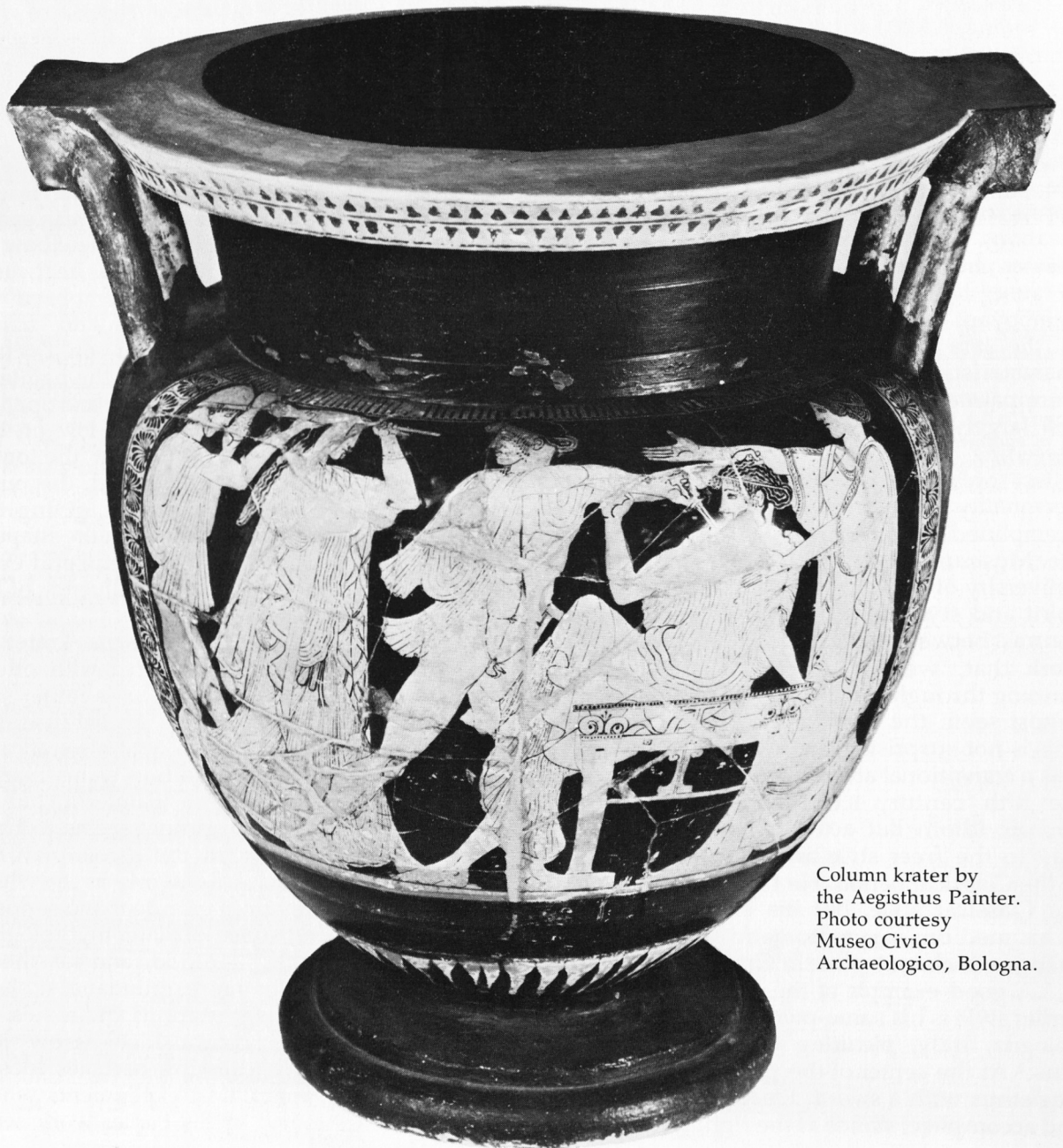
# The Aegisthus Painter—A Fragment

Fifth-century Greece produced artists and craftsmen of such extraordinary gifts that they sometimes overshadow, in our eyes, men of lesser but still considerable ability. For example, Attic red-figured vases decorated by the Aegisthus Painter, although they are often both original in concept and technically competent, are neither so well known nor so widely appreciated as the more numerous and elegant creations of the Pan Painter. The Aegisthus Painter has perhaps been neglected partly because he is best known for his more flamboyant pictures, mythological paintings in the late Archaic manner, which are not characteristic of his work at its best. Since they were painted early in his career, when he was still largely dependent upon the style of the preceding generation of vase painters, they reflect only a small part of his own artistic personality. His later and more typical work, exemplified by a fragment of a calyx krater in the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri,<sup>1</sup> is very different in both spirit and style. In fact, there is such a strong contrast between his earlier and his more mature work that, were it not for connecting links running through his whole production, it might almost seem the work of two different hands. This is not surprising, for the Aegisthus Painter was a transitional artist of the second quarter of the fifth century B.C., schooled in the late Archaic idiom but active when it was giving way to the freer style and more human spirit of the Classical period. He never fully embraced the Classical style, but his own development in his medium is symptomatic of the profound change which took place in Greek art in general.

A good example of the Aegisthus Painter's earlier style is his name-piece, a column krater in Bologna, Italy, picturing the death of Aegisthus.<sup>2</sup> At the center of the picture Orestes stabs Aegisthus with a sword. Electra, Orestes' sister and accomplice, stands at the right and seems to

warn of danger behind him. He turns to see Clytemnestra rushing at him with an axe and subdued by his friend Pylades. In keeping with late Archaic tendencies, a mythological event of strong emotional intensity is the chosen subject. The composition is grandly conceived, and the space is well filled with large figures shown in swift movement. Some interest in the three-dimensional representation of the figure in space is apparent in Orestes' right arm, the elbow of which is twisted toward the viewer as he thrusts the sword. The drapery is composed of numerous closely spaced folds and filling ornaments, in the late Archaic tradition. Even at this early stage, the eye is already the painter's characteristic one, a long oval, larger and opened more widely than is usual, placed low on the face and slanting down a little at the outer corner. In the manner of the period, the pupil is drawn high at the inner corner, giving the impression of a profile eye although the shape is a full oval. His painted line is careful and even rather labored, lacking as yet the fluency of his mature manner.

The painting on the Bologna krater is certainly attractive, yet compared with other, better creations of similar type, it is rather stiff and academic. Perhaps this is because the painter was still relatively new at his craft and followed closely in the tradition of his master (probably the Copenhagen Painter),<sup>3</sup> but in addition, his own temperament seems to have been inclined less toward the heroic than the lighthearted. In fact, his work as a whole tends to move away from grandeur and seriousness in subject and style. His later mythological paintings are lighter in mood, and he shows increasing interest in more mundane subjects such as conversations, flirtations and revels. At the same time his compositions grow less complicated and his drawing becomes looser. The spatial and anatomical experiments which are sometimes found in his earlier work seem



Column krater by  
the Aegisthus Painter.  
Photo courtesy  
Museo Civico  
Archaeologico, Bologna.

to have engaged his attention less as he matured. His scenes tend to become less crowded, and his figures to take simpler, less violent poses, thereby eliminating anatomical complexities. He even shows a marked preference for the old-fashioned way of drawing feet in profile, no matter what the pose of the torso. His evolution as a painter fits in well with the development of his craft in general, and he was probably influenced a good deal by the works of his colleagues and the tastes of his clients. But in addition, judging from the charm of his later work, his particular talents seem to have found a more comfortable vehicle in genre painting and less weighty mythological subjects.

Some aspects of his stylistic development become clear if the Bologna krater is compared with the krater fragment in Missouri. The latter shows some characteristics of his earlier manner, but in terms of technical facility and style, it clearly belongs to a later stage in his career. It pictures a woman, heavily draped in chiton and mantle, and preserved to about her hips, moving to the left behind a pair of Doric columns. Her hair is concealed in a *sakkos*, except for a thick fringe of wavy locks which escapes over her forehead. Her arms, each adorned with a spiral bracelet, are outstretched, as are the forearms of another figure (now lost) apparently following her. Compared to the Bologna krater, the drawing on the Missouri piece is more fluid, less hesitant, the work of a more experienced hand. The drapery rendering is more advanced; the folds are more widely spaced and flowing, less finicky and mannered. Broad outlines are stressed rather than details, and the folds emphasize the volume of the figure rather than the surface of the cloth. The eye is of the type described above, but is without lashes, and is more exaggerated in its low position on the face and downward slant. The long ear-lobe, slightly upturned nose, and clearly marked nostril are characteristic traits.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the painting is the woman's woebegone expression, which is typical of faces drawn by the Aegisthus Painter during the later part of his career. With time, his faces lost much of their earlier dignity and took on a piquant quality, although often retaining their emotional intensity. The successful portrayal of psychological relationships was indeed one of the accomplishments of Attic vase painting of this period, but there is often a particularly strong emotional link between the characters in the Aegisthus Painter's portrayals. This may be due in part to his tendency to exaggerate and distort facial features, as if in an attempt to connect his figures by means more subtle than the Archaic compositional conventions he had been taught.

We cannot be sure why the woman on the Missouri fragment looks so distressed, since we do not know the original narrative of the whole painting. Even a very small fragment of a vase painting can reveal the subject, provided that some key element has been preserved, but here the main clues are rather ambiguous. The woman's face seems to express fear; she seems to be fleeing toward the left, seeking aid or refuge, her arms raised in an imploring gesture. Her garments do not show any sign of particularly swift movement, but it would not have been unusual for a painter of this period to confine motion to the skirt and feet. The person following her (who does not wear bracelets and hence could be either male or female) seems to accompany her in flight rather than to be the cause of it, since the second pair of hands is behind her, not grasping or threatening her. The two people could be either running from the building or into it. Another question is the identification of this building; was it a house or palace, a temple, or perhaps even a fountain house?<sup>4</sup> Vase painters often relied upon secondary features such as household objects, altars or waterspouts to

define their settings more precisely, but unfortunately clues of this kind are lacking in this fragment.

Another calyx krater by the Aegisthus Painter<sup>5</sup> also pictures a running woman in an architectural setting; unfortunately it too is fragmentary, but the painting clearly included an old man. The theme of a woman running toward an old man, although without architecture, appears on other vases decorated by this painter.<sup>6</sup> It seems most likely that, if these pictures are mythological in content, we are to understand them, and the Missouri fragment as well, as excerpts from legends of abduction.

Stories such as the rape of Thetis or Oreithyia were extremely popular in red-figure vase painting. The Aegisthus Painter sometimes drew only the accessory part of the story in which the companions of the victim run in horror to her father in his palace. Very likely the painter did not always have a specific legend in mind, although myth was his ultimate inspiration. Although this interpretation of the Missouri fragment seems the most probable one in the light of his other works, various explanations of the scene are possible. The building could represent a temple rather than a palace, at which the woman and her companion are seeking



Fragment at Missouri, with the preliminary sketch indicated by dotted lines.

Fragment of a red-figured calyx krater in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.

refuge from an assailant.<sup>7</sup> But if the two are running from the building rather than into it, the woman could be Polyxena, followed by her brother Troilos, fleeing from the fountain house where Achilles has attacked them.<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that the fragment represents simply women fleeing during a revel, a more mundane theme which also interested our painter.<sup>9</sup> In this case, the architecture would indicate merely the setting of the party.

The style of the Missouri fragment is similar to other examples of the Aegisthus Painter's mature work. To mention a few, a stamnos in Florence,<sup>10</sup> picturing Nike at an altar with two youths, and women conversing, juxtaposes his earlier and later styles. The women and boys compare well with the Missouri piece in facial features and drapery, while the Nike copies the Electra of the earlier Bologna krater in dress, hairstyle and face. This is a good example of this painter's tendency to revert to his older, more elegant style for deities when he draws them in the company of mortals. His later work often carries much farther the lighter mood apparent in the Missouri fragment, and shows an irrepressible gaiety and an appreciation of human frailties. A pelike in Cambridge,<sup>11</sup> which depicts with great good humor a youth spurning an admirer's attentions, is a good example.

It is a little sad that a craftsman as talented as the Aegisthus Painter made so small a mark on the progress of red-figure vase painting. A few minor painters copied his style, but he was not an innovator and did not set the pace for further developments. The stylistic fluctuation and uncertainty of his time, which stimulated some of his contemporaries to great creativity, acted in his case as a means of freeing him from convention, allowing him to find a personal style of some merit. Had he been active twenty years earlier, he might have become a hack

painter of stilted heroes. As it was, he gave to Attic red-figure a small treasure of delightful paintings.

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<sup>1</sup> Acc. No. 57.12. Provenience unknown. Triangular sherd broken from the upper part of a large open vessel, probably a calyx krater. Surface of lower part of sherd chipped. Greatest preserved height, 11.4 cm.; greatest preserved width, 12.2 cm.; greatest thickness, 8 mm. Preliminary sketch visible outlining head, torso and mantle of first figure, and arms of second figure. Bracelets, hair and guttae in dilute glaze. J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1963) I, 504, no. 7. On the Aegisthus Painter, in addition to references listed by Beazley, see his *Paralipomena: Additions to Attic Black-figure Vase-painters and Attic Red-figure Vase-painters* (Oxford 1971) 381; *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica* II, 249, s.v., *Egisto, pittore di* (E. Paribeni); P. E. Arias, *Storia della ceramica di età arcaica, classica ed ellenistica* (Torino 1963) 282-283. Kyle M. Phillips, Jr. commented most helpfully on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Beazley, ARV<sup>2</sup> 504, no. 8. Photograph courtesy of the Director, Museo Civico, Bologna.

<sup>3</sup> Beazley, *Greek Vases in Poland* (Oxford 1928) 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of architecture on vase painting is problematic because the rendering of buildings was influenced by compositional considerations and the technical limitations of the medium. Here the proportions of the capitals and the spacing of the columns suggest a wooden building. The rendering seems to have stopped short of the triglyph frieze. A small part of one regula is preserved at the upper right corner of the sherd, with one of the guttae suspended from it, but the triglyph which would normally appear above the regula seems to have been omitted. The picture apparently was bordered above the regulae either by a plain red stripe or, perhaps, by a band of black floral ornament on the reserved ground.

<sup>5</sup> Beazley, ARV<sup>2</sup> 504, no. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, 504, no. 1; 505, No. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Compare for example an omphalos bowl in Berlin, *op. cit.*, 819, no. 50 (subject uncertain); a cup in Tarquinia, *op. cit.*, 405, no. 1 (Menelaus and Helen).

<sup>8</sup> Compare *op. cit.*, 109, London E13; BSA 36 (1935-36) 171, fig. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Beazley, ARV<sup>2</sup> 504, no. 2 bis; 506, no. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, 505, no. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, 506, no. 21.