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**David Walsh, *Distorted Ideals in Greek Vase Painting, The World of Mythological Burlesque*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xxx & 420. 108 figs. £55.00. ISBN 978-0-521-89641-2 (Hbk).**

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Walsh's study offers an insight into an area of Greek vase painting which is often overlooked by more mainstream surveys. Whereas most books on the subject tend to cover the same issues of development of technique, subject matter and iconography, here Walsh presents a study of one of the lesser known aspects of the topic, bringing some of the (sometimes literally) sidelined features of the subject to the forefront of discussion. He explains that the vases studied here are often overlooked since they 'stand in sharp contrast to the "grand and the sublime"' of Greek art, as described by Gombrich and Kris (p. 4; Gombrich & Kris 1940: 5).

Instead of following the usual convention of discussing only Attic, or at most, Attic and Corinthian vases, Walsh selects his material from vases from a wide range of centres including Boeotia and Southern Italy. While authors often draw on vases from these centres to compliment their discussion of mainstream vases from Athens or Corinth, Walsh does the opposite, focusing mainly on these lesser known vases and complimenting the study with Attic vases.

Part One of this volume (Introduction and Chapter two) focuses on explaining the way the vases have been categorised and the context surrounding Greek humour in general. Walsh discusses the way the vases are divided into different groups and gives background details on each, briefly discussing the find spots and dating issues relating to each category of vase (p.11-18). Part Two (Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6) looks in depth at different aspects of the burlesque imagery shown on the vases. Here Walsh divides his analysis by characters and/or types of scene. His well-argued consideration of the 'extras' in the scenes, such as the "'stone-throwers" and monkeys', suggests that

these figures are used to direct the viewers attention towards the main action rather than as 'decorative additions to fill the space' (p. 45). His section on scenes at sanctuaries (Chapter 4), demonstrates how even burlesque vase painting sticks to the same limits as theatrical displays when determining what can and cannot be depicted in good taste. The chapter on depictions of the gods (Chapter 4) raises questions about what these images tell us about how the "ordinary" Greek citizen' felt about their gods (p. 156). Chapter 6 on the depiction of heroes suggests that 'burlesque and irreverent images appear to amplify, even celebrate, the all too human frailty of the Greek hero' (p. 240).

Part Three (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) forms an overall discussion which looks back over the images previously discussed and draws together conclusions from Parts One and Two. Walsh focuses heavily on the link between burlesque vase painting and Greek theatre. He notes that while the majority of burlesque material from Southern Italy seems to draw its inspiration from comic theatre, Attic material focuses more on scenes from satyr plays and *geranomachiae* (p. 260). Its comments on the link between Greek theatre and vase painting make this volume a useful (if slightly more expensive) companion to Taplin's *Pots and Plays* (2007) offering an insight into the comedic side of both vase painting and theatre, to balance Taplin's focus on tragedy.

Throughout this work Walsh tries to highlight the worth of the vases as scenes in their own right, rather than as the lesser neighbours of mainstream vase painting or as illustrations of Greek theatre. He notes that these vases, with their caricatures and distorted depictions, offer further insight into Greek humour and religion. He suggests that the images decorating these vases would not be considered impious or blasphemous as they do not deny the existence of the gods, but merely find amusement in their antics and exploits (p. 29). He later notes that the burlesque images illustrate the strength of society's belief as 'a citizen who is confident in his beliefs not only can withstand the challenge posed by burlesque images of his gods and heroes but also may enjoy them and learn from them' (p. 278).

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The division of the study into three parts works well in allowing the vases to be studied in detail, while presenting the context in which they are to be seen and then allowing conclusions to be drawn. Although the volume includes over 100 figures illustrating the vases in question, which justifies the cost of the book, a number of those featured in the catalogue remain unrepresented. This tends to lead to some confusion when Walsh moves from describing a vase which is accompanied by an illustration to one which is not, or vice versa. Overall the book is definitely a worthwhile read to those interested in Greek humour and theatre. As a volume on vase painting it is suited more to the experienced reader than those looking for a general overview of the main trends in Greek vases.

### **Bibliography**

- Gombrich, E. H. & Kris, E. 1940. *Caricature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Taplin, O. 2007. *Pots and Plays*. Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum.