

Explore an ancient Athenian picture

Aims

To help students interpret paintings on pots
To help students think about relationships between figures in a picture
To introduce students to some aspects of life in ancient Athens

Description

- A sequence of 11 slides to explore in detail a painting on an Athenian pot
- Slides 1-7 ask students to interpret a painting by gradually revealing it part by part.
- Slides 8-11 ask students to compare the painting they have explored with other similar paintings.

Teaching ideas

- After viewing and discussing the presentation, students could create a living tableau of the scene in the painting. They could then create a tableau for the moments before and after and move through the sequence.
- Students could imagine what the participants are saying to each other and then think about what they may be feeling but not saying.
- The scene decorates a wine jar which would have been used at a drinking party or symposium. Ask the students to find out more about the symposium and then to consider why this scene might have been chosen for such a vessel.
- Download the presentation on hoplites from the British Museum website and explore the warrior's armour and weapons.
- Explore the *War* chapter of the British Museum's Ancient Greece website: www.ancientgreece.co.uk and encourage the students to build up a picture of what sort of experience war would be for the warrior in the painting.
- Explore the *Daily Life* chapter of the British Museum's Ancient Greece website: www.ancientgreece.co.uk especially the Story section which compares male and female roles in Athens.

Notes on the pictures

Main picture: painting from a red-figure stamnos (wine jar) of a departure scene involving a hoplite warrior and his family; made in Athens about 450-440 BC. The current expert explanation of the painting is given on slide 7. The following additional points may be useful:

- the woman could be either the warrior's wife or mother; wives could be as young as 13 or 14 in Athens, though that is clearly not the case here
- the bowl she is carrying is specially associated with poured offerings (libations), usually of wine, sometimes of other liquids such as milk; libations were a common form of everyday sacrifice to the gods

- the warrior's equipment is that of the hoplite - the presentation on hoplites in this series provides much more information about it
- the dog is a hunting hound; it serves to show that the warrior belongs to a social class that could afford to hunt, but may also refer to his life in peacetime; hoplite warriors had to supply their own equipment so needed to be well-off

Slide 9: made in Athens about 450-40BC. This soldier is alone, but holds the libation bowl; he is equipped in a very similar way to the warrior in the main picture

Slide 10: black-figure pot made in Athens about 530-510 BC. The white hair of the man on the left gives an indication of his age. The woman raises her hand to her face - a standard gesture of worry.

Slide 16: inside of a red-figure drinking cup made in Athens about 480 BC. The woman holds a ladle with which to fill the libation bowl. This is not quite the same sort of scene as the others. The man is already dressed for battle and sits on a stool. The woman holds his shield. Some experts think this may be a mythological scene, but even though the characters are named (Chrysippos and Zeuxo), the story cannot be identified.

Background information

- Warfare was a fact of life in ancient Greece and there was scarcely a year in the fifth century BC when Athens and other city states were not involved in fighting. This means that seeing the men off to war was a common experience for older men and for women.
- Ancient Greek literature contains many references to the grief felt by fathers when their sons die before them. As well as the human sadness of this, sons were the continuation of the family in social terms. A widow would come under the guardianship of a male relative (her father, uncle or even son). If she had no children, she would return to her own family after her husband's death and be remarried as soon as possible.
- Dying in battle on behalf of one's city-state was regarded as the finest kind of death for a man. The bodies of Athenians who died in battle were brought back to Athens and buried together in an official grave.
- Paintings on vessels used at the all-male symposium or drinking party will often have generated conversation and carried messages about how people were expected to behave.
- Scenes showing family grouped around an individual and involving a hand shake are often shown on Greek tombstones and this pot was found in a tomb so may have been intended as a grave offering.
- For further reading, we can recommend the following:
Cartledge, Paul, The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece, Cambridge University Press, 2002: an up to date, well-illustrated overview of ancient Greece.