

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of Libation in Classical Athens. By MILETTE GAIFMAN. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. Pp. 196. Hardback, \$65.00. ISBN 97-0-300-19227-8.

One of the most iconic vistas on the Athenian Acropolis is a view towards the Caryatids, the maidens supporting the south porch of the Erechtheion. Their naturalistic contrapposto stance, idealized proportions and Classical visages capture our attention. Less obvious to most visitors, however, may be the object held along their sides, a phiale or libation offering bowl. Opening the book with a discussion of these sculptures and weaving them into her discussion throughout the volume, Milette Gaifman's *The Art of Libation in Classical Athens* offers an introspective survey of libation imagery.

Gaifman lays out the premise of her study in the Introduction. In addition to an examination of libation iconography in Athenian vase-painting and sculpture (i.e., scenes, figures, actions and occasions), the author also contemplates the viewership of the objects in question. Divided into four chapters, the book is organized by the types of figures and scenes displayed, and throughout the volume, Gaifman incorporates pertinent literary sources.

In the first chapter, "Chapter 1: Around the Altar," the author examines representations of figures making a liquid offering alongside an animal sacrifice. In several of these scenes, divinities appear (or witness) the sacrificial acts, and Gaifman questions how Greeks "understood the relationship between making a sacrifice and establishing a connection with the gods" (21). It seems that sacrifices can afford mortals the opportunity to reach the divine. Yet, depictions of these encounters seem to indicate that the humans are not aware of the god(s), and the god(s) can either acknowledge or ignore the sacrifice taking place. Though only a few examples are considered, Gaifman is skillful in her visual analysis, and she is attentive to the nature of the artifact and the context of its display.

"Chapter 2: Among Us" examines representations of ritual libations between two or more individuals. Lacking the presence of divinities, this category of imagery allows the viewer to focus on the private context of the rite and the significance of the depicted relationships. While the identities of these figures are

unclear, a majority of the scenes display a libation between a woman and an armed man, and their juxtaposition seems to suggest a familial bond. Augmenting this allusion of a family unit is the frequent appearance of an aged man observing the rite. For Gaifman, this figure's passive role as a spectator recalls the external viewers of the vase. She notes that "such vessels invited ancient viewers to engage not only with the depicted moment but also with their own familial ties and commitment to warring sons" (85).

Gaifman explores libation imagery at tombs or grave markers in "Chapter 3: Lamentations." Pouring some type of liquid to the dead was an essential funerary rite, occurring at burial and likely during subsequent visitations to the grave. Examples discussed by the author showcase the requisite involvement of women for the rite, and some of these scenes include a bystander who may or may not be the deceased (and the recipient of the liquid offering). In addition to the numerous representations of funerary libations on Greek vases, the author makes frequent references to its practice both in literary sources, like Homer, and on stage during the performance of certain tragic plays.

The final chapter of the volume discusses the appearance of divinities offering libations ("Chapter 4: Gods' Libations"). As there exists a "substantial corpus of depictions" (117), the meaning of these scenes has been analyzed by a large number of scholars, and Gaifman reviews the many theories as to why a Greek god would be involved in this religious act. Yet, for the author, the goal of the chapter is not to settle on one interpretation or present a new one altogether. Indeed, theories of this nature are unprovable. Rather, Gaifman continues her analysis in the same vein as the previous chapters and "examines the visual force this imagery might have had in its ancient context" (121).

The terse conclusion summarizes the types of scenes discussed with regards to the question posed by Gaifman in the introduction: how are libations depicted in Attic visual culture? Naturally, as the author admits, imagery cannot reveal the cultic meaning behind the act nor can it describe how the recipient(s) would have received the offering. Rather, Gaifman focuses on the physicality of liquid offerings: the participants illustrated, the instruments necessary and the liquid itself, whatever that substance may be.

In general, the book is beautifully produced, with large color figures throughout. While the author's discussion of the imagery is quite detailed and thorough, some may find parts of the analysis problematic. For example, while it is useful to consider the action of using the oinochoe found on page 61 (figure 2.4), Gaifman

pushes the reader both to think about the viewership of the object and to embody the depicted figures with emotion. Additionally, despite having a large corpus of vases for her study, each chapter only considers a small handful. While several end notes mention the use of the Beazley Archive Pottery Database, it is unclear how the author selected the vessels under consideration. Did she examine all the vases? Are the vase-paintings in the book representative of certain types or are they unique? Overall, however, *The Art of Libation in Classical Athens* is a thought-provoking read, and Gaifman is commended for her nuanced assessment of the visual evidence.

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