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The Panathenaic amphorae: an instrument for the propagation of Athens' discourse and a subject of symbolic conflict

Ioana-Teodora STAN

University of Bucharest

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Abstract: Visual arts represent one way of transmitting different ideas and messages, from personal preferences of subjects to political identities. The Antiquity is not an exception from this practice. An excellent example of illustrating a political discourse, through a type of visual art, is found in the iconography of the Panathenaic amphorae, the prize vases from the Great Panathenaea.

The focus of this paper is the Panathenaics from the Great Panathenaea of 402 BC, represented by four pieces discovered in Libya. These four vases stand out by having the statuary group of the Tyrannicides decorating Athena's shield on the obverse side. This element of iconography will be analysed from the perspective of the symbolic conflict theory of Simon Harrison.

Keywords: Panathenaic amphorae, tyrannicides, symbolic conflict, circulation of ceramics, Athens.

Introduction and Methodology

The context created by Athens, through the reorganization of the Panathenaea into a quadrennial festival, offered a great opportunity for the city to rise to the same level as the other Panhellenic sanctuaries that held contests. At the same time, the Great Panathenaea was an important factor in *creating an exclusive (and superior) Athenian identity*.¹

The Panathenaic amphorae were a good instrument for Athens to use in transmitting a certain discourse to the Greek community and beyond, as the archaeological evidence shows. Given the fact that the Athenian identity, after 510 BC, was built upon an anti-tyrannical and anti-Persian stance,² is not surprising that the iconography of the Panathenaic was involved in the symbolic conflict that took place between the democratic and tyrannical regimes which ruled over Athens.

Simon Harrison proposed that a symbol can be manipulated in four ways in the context of a *competition for power, wealth, prestige, legitimacy or other political resources*. The types of the symbolic conflict depend on the actions that affect the political symbols. They can be manipulated through their value, their production, their ownership, *or their*

¹ Popkin 2012, 224-225.

² Petre 2000, 114.

survival as emblems of political affiliations.³ As these four types of symbolic manipulation can be separated only in theory, actions can be analysed from the perspective of multiple aspects.⁴ I will try to show that in the case of the Panathenaic amphorae the theory can be applied from the perspective of the proprietary contests and of the innovation contests.

For a better understanding of how Harrison's theory can be applied on the subject of the Panathenaic, a presentation of the changes that occurred in the iconography of these vases is necessary and will be covered in the next section of this article, alongside some aspects of the circulation of the Panathenaic outside of Attica. The following section will focus on the analysis of the iconography of four vases that were discovered in Libya and which have the statuary group of the Tyrannicides decorating Athena's shield on the obverse side, from the perspective of the symbolic conflict theory.

In the study of the circulation of Panathenaic amphorae, I used the sample of the Beazley Archive Pottery Database, provided online by the Classical Art Research Centre of the University of Oxford. The data provided by this platform was used to determine: the state in which the Panathenaic are discovered the most (whole vases or fragmentary state), and what is the occurrence of the fragments that have inscriptions.

The map for this paper were created through the map function of the online Beazley Archive Pottery Database, by applying exclusion filters so that only findings of Panathenaic amphorae, pseudo-Panathenaic amphorae and miniature Panathenaic (whole vases or in fragmentary state) are marked on the map.

The life cycle of a Panathenaic amphora and of its variations⁵

The annual festival, held in honour of Athena's victory against the Giants, was reorganized into a quadrennial event around 566 BC.⁶ In time, the Great Panathenaea held up over 55 of athletic, hippic and musical competitions during each edition,⁷ but some of these contests were reserved to the Athenians, who distinguished the Great Panathenaea from the other Panhellenic festivals.⁸ The Great Panathenaea is well attested in sources until 390 AD.⁹

The quadrennial festival was held from 20 to 30 of Hekatombaion, the last days being dedicated for the Great Procession to the Acropolis, where sacrifices and offerings were

³ Harrison 1995, 255.

⁴ Harrison 1995, 266.

⁵ By "variations" I refer to the pseudo-Panathenaic amphora and the miniature Panathenaic amphora.

⁶ Popkin 2012, 209-210.

⁷ Neils and Tracy 2003, 5-17.

⁸ Popkin 2012, 224-225.

⁹ Shear 2021, 8.

brought for the goddess, the feast that followed the sacrifice, rest and cleanup.¹⁰ Until about 229 BC invitations to the Great Panathenaea were sent only to the colonies and the allies of the city. Athens decides to extend the invitations to cities with no Athenian connections until that time.¹¹

The winners of the Great Panathenaea competitions were awarded depending on the nature of the contests. The victors of the musical's competitions received golden or silver crowns, while the winners from the athletic and hippic contests were given the Panathenaic amphorae with the sacred olive oil. The city had to commission around 1400 vases for the occasion of the quadrennial festival.¹²

The features of the Panathenaic amphora were standardized since the beginning, but the iconography had been through more changes than the other characteristics of the vase. A vase of this type had around 60-70 cm in height and the volume of some piece went from 29,7 liters to 40,7 liters,¹³ but the average volume of the Panathenaic was 39 liters.¹⁴

The iconography of the obverse side maintained a standardized version from around 540 BC. This version included the goddess Athena, armed, in profile, positioned between two Doric columns surmounted by roosters,¹⁵ and the prize inscription on the left side of the panel (*TON AΘENEΘEN AΘAION*). The clothes of the goddess and her shield device differ from vase to vase. On the reverse of the vase was illustrated the competition for which it was awarded.¹⁶ The elements of the obverse were meant to show the intimate relationship that existed between the goddess and Athens, the role of Athena as protectress of the city *and her preparedness to compete and fight for the Athenians*.¹⁷ As Athens became dominant in the export of painted vase, during the sixth century BC, and *it was asserting its commercial dominance across the Mediterranean*, the iconography of the Panathenaic presented the *emerging Athenian identity as leader of the Greek World*.¹⁸ The earliest versions of the Panathenaic lack the columns and the roosters,¹⁹ and the birds were replaced once Athens started to lose its dominance.²⁰

¹⁰ Neils and Tracy 2003, 16-17.

¹¹ Shear 2021, 292.

¹² Neils and Tracy 2003, 29.

¹³ Anastasiou et al. 2017, 252.

¹⁴ Fisher 2009, 229.

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of each iconographic element see Popkin 2012, 212-224.

¹⁶ Popkin 2012, 208-210.

¹⁷ Popkin 2012, 224.

¹⁸ Popkin 2012, 225-227.

¹⁹ Popkin 2012, 210.

²⁰ Popkin 2012, 232.

Even though the period in which the columns and the roosters were added to the iconography may coincide with the third tyranny of Peisistratus, we can't say with certainty that he was personally involved in these iconographical changes, but it's not unreasonable to consider that these actions were associated with the period of the tyrannical regime of Peisistratus.²¹

The Panathenaic amphorae given to the victors of the Great Panathenaea competitions were not the only vases produced in this context, pseudo-Panathenaic amphorae and miniature Panathenaic were also produced for the occasion. The smaller versions of the Panathenaic amphorae were produced in the first part of the fourth century BC, to serve probably as souvenirs.²² For the pseudo-Panathenaic, which lacks the official prize inscription,²³ there are more suggestions regarding the reason of their productions: to serve as souvenirs, to serve as containers for wine at symposiums,²⁴ or they were *supplements to meet the demand for the prize amphorae*.²⁵

The several discoveries of these vases in burials and sanctuaries across the Mediterranean show how the types of amphorae were an important trade commodity,²⁶ as it can be seen in Figure 1.²⁷ The main factor of the circulation of the Panathenaic amphorae is the victors themselves. The Panathenaic were subjects to second-hand trade because of them.²⁸ The winners could have sold the olive oil, and the vases in which it was stored, dedicated some of the vases at sanctuaries, or bring the prize home.²⁹ Another way in which these vases were distributed was through the practice of gift-exchange.³⁰ Through these channels of distributions, the Panathenaic amphorae and their variations were showing to non-Attic viewers how Athens was unmistakably under the patronage of Athena, and at home they reinforce the pride of being Athenian.³¹

It is difficult to determine the profit made by resealing the Panathenaic olive oil. An Athenian inscription from the fourth century BC, in which the tariffs of fees for sacrifice are listed, gives us the cost for 3 *kotylai* of sacred oil: one-half obols, meaning that a metretes (39

²¹ Popkin 2012, 230-231.

²² Boardman 1974, 179.

²³ Popkin 2012, 228.

²⁴ Mannack 2022, 6.

²⁵ Bundrick 2019, 218.

²⁶ Popkin 2012, 228.

²⁷ Unfortunately the link doesn't save the version of the map which has exclusion filters applied for the shape type.

²⁸ Boardman 2001, 155.

²⁹ Mannack 2022, 6.

³⁰ Bundrick 2019, 26.

³¹ Popkin 2012, 229.

litters) would cost 12 drachmas.³² It is tempting to assume that the winners would sell a Panathenaic for 12 drachmas,³³ but the prices offered by the list with the tariffs of fees for sacrifice should not be used as evidence for the price for which these vases were resold by the victors.³⁴ We know that an empty Panathenaic amphora was in Athens for 2,7 to 3,4 obols, in the late fifth century.³⁵

The vases meet the same fate, as they were found in the same types of archaeological contexts: burials and sanctuaries.³⁶ The practice of using the vases as cinerary vases, outside the Athenian community, shows the integrations of the pieces into the local material culture,³⁷ as Bundrick presented the case of the Etruscan material culture. The presence of these vases in funerary contexts doesn't mean that the graves were the ones of the victors from the Great Panathenaea competitions. Only if the funerary inventory suggests the lifestyle of an athlete, we may assume that the deceased might have won a competition at the Great Panathenaea in his life, as in the case of the grave near Barca, Libya.³⁸ In most cases, the ceramic material from the Panathenaic amphorae is discovered in a fragmentary state (Figure 2), and it is difficult to determine if the fragments came from a prize vase or from a pseudo-Panathenaic, as the majority of the fragments don't have parts of the official prize inscription, or the name of the archon (Figure 3). The most recent published discovery of Panathenaic ceramic material comes from Olbia Pontica. During the 2015 campaign, two fragments were found mixed with material from the first century AD, near the defensive wall, and they were dated for the last part of the sixth century BC. These fragments don't have inscriptions.³⁹

The Panathenaic amphorae of 403/2 BC

The Great Panathenaea of 403/2 represents the first known instance of using the shield's device to express a political discourse.⁴⁰ The festival was the first one held after the short period of the Thirty Tyrants⁴¹ and was a great opportunity to reinforce the image

³² Pritchett and Pippin 1956, 184.

³³ Thomas and Sneed 2018, <https://www.colorado.edu/classics/2018/06/15/social-and-economic-value-oil-ancient-greece> on 14.04.2025.

³⁴ Pritchett and Pippin 1956, 199.

³⁵ Bundrick 2019, 217.

³⁶ Mannack 2022, 6.

³⁷ Bundrick 2019, 163.

³⁸ Elhaddar 1999, 28.

³⁹ Buisikh and Khmelevskiy 2022, 311-320.

⁴⁰ Shear 2012a, 110.

⁴¹ Azoulay 2017, 77.

adopted by Athens since 507 BC, through the cult dedicated to the Tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton.⁴²

There are four known Panathenaic amphorae which have the statuary group of the Tyrannicides decorating Athena's shield. One piece is kept at the British Museum (London B 605), two vases at the Roemer-und Pelizaeus-Museum (Hildesheim, 1253, 1254), and one vase is kept at The Archaeological Museum in Cyrene (no inventory number).⁴³ This iconographic element symbolized and celebrated the victory of the Athenians over tyranny, while the vase celebrated the victory of the athletes in their competitions.⁴⁴ The Panathenaic amphora in the British Museum comes from a grave in Tocra, it was bought by George Dennis around 1865, from a group of Arabs that found tombs with fine Greek pottery, and donated to the museum alongside his own discoveries at the site.⁴⁵ The Hildesheim amphorae were discovered at Ptolemais.⁴⁶

The image adopted by the city, through the cult of the Tyrannicides, positioned tyranny as opposed to democracy and emphasized that the polis was ruled by the demos. However, the version promulgated by the polis ignored the four years of tyranny after the murder of Hipparchus and the period of *stasis* that followed Hippias' exile. The events were reconstructed to appear as purely Athenian deeds.⁴⁷ The presence of the Tyrannicides on Athena's shield was reinforcing this discourse to the Athenians and spread it in the Greek World.

In this case, is it clear that the Panathenaic amphorae are the subject of symbolic conflicts between the democratic and tyrannical regimes. Considering that the vases were maintained as a symbol of the city, with the iconography elaborated during the period of the tyranny of Peisistratus, the Panathenaic amphora held the same value as a symbol for the democratic leaders of Athens as it had before 510. This aspect would be a characteristic of the proprietary contests, as the symbols has the same value to the groups which are competing over their ownership.⁴⁸ The marking of Athena's shield with the statuary group, a schematic representation of the Tyrannicides and their actions, represents typical actions for the

⁴² Shear 2012b, 30-35.

⁴³ Shear 2012a, 110.

⁴⁴ Azoulay 2017, 79.

⁴⁵ Rasmussen 2018, 8-9.

⁴⁶ [https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={1F2DB5B5-55DE-48ED-9E37-EF3BDE054F6C}&noResults=4&recordCount=3&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20panathenaic%20amphora%20{AND}%20%20\[Decoration%20Termword\]%20TYRANNICIDES](https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?id={1F2DB5B5-55DE-48ED-9E37-EF3BDE054F6C}&noResults=4&recordCount=3&databaseID={12FC52A7-0E32-4A81-9FFA-C8C6CF430677}&search=%20{AND}%20panathenaic%20amphora%20{AND}%20%20[Decoration%20Termword]%20TYRANNICIDES) on 14.04.2025.

⁴⁷ Shear 2012b, 31-42.

⁴⁸ Harrison 1995, 258-259.

innovation contests. A pre-existent symbolic object was manipulated in a way that generated a more elaborate form of the symbol.⁴⁹

Conclusions

The iconography of the obverse side of Panathenaic amphorae went through different kinds of changes. The iconographic phases of these vases are linked to the political context in which Athens founds itself. By analysing these changes through the perspective of symbolic conflicts we could determine the way the city expresses its identity and image by comparing them to the ones from the previous period.

The Panathenaic amphorae and their variations represented key instruments for the propagation of Athens' discourse, by being distributed in the Greek World and beyond through so many and different ways, from the selling of the sacred olive oil to the practice of gift-exchange. Determining the channel of distribution for the discoveries, in Attica and outside of the region, it's almost impossible without other types of evidence. The subject is one of great complexity and difficulty.

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⁴⁹ Harrison 1995, 261.

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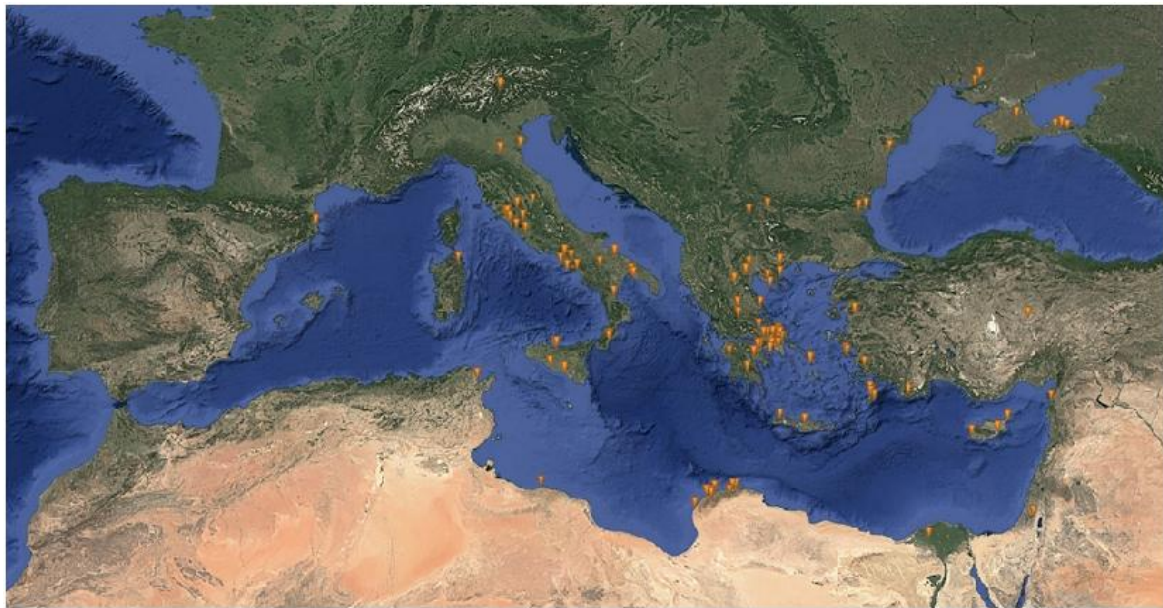


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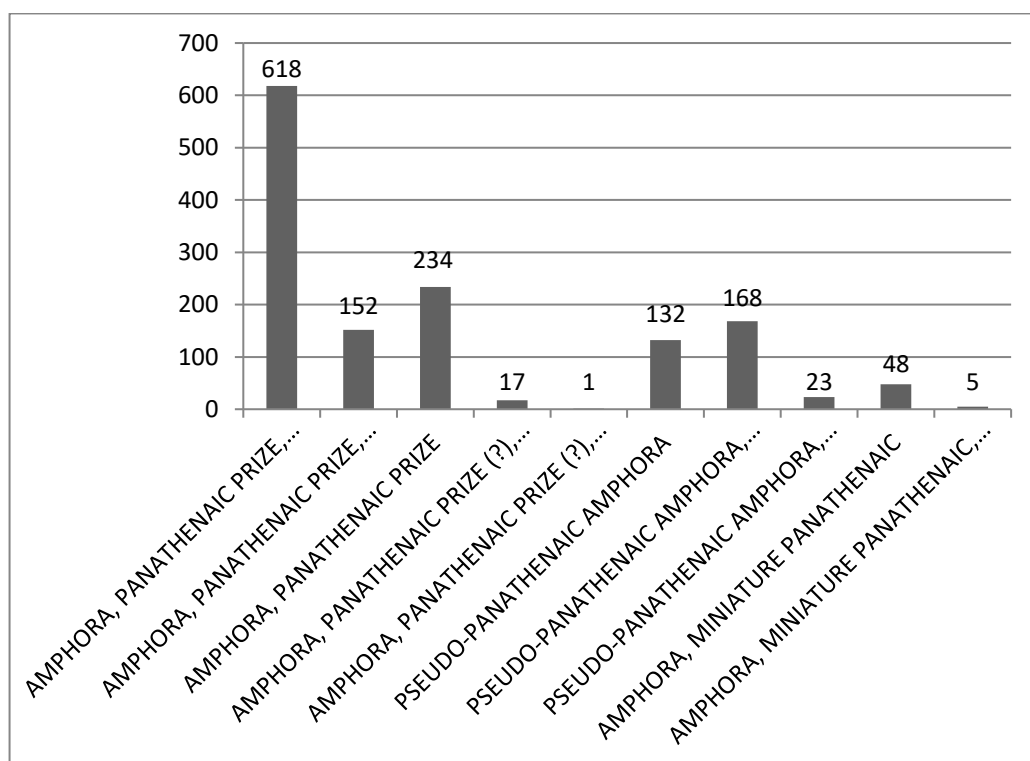


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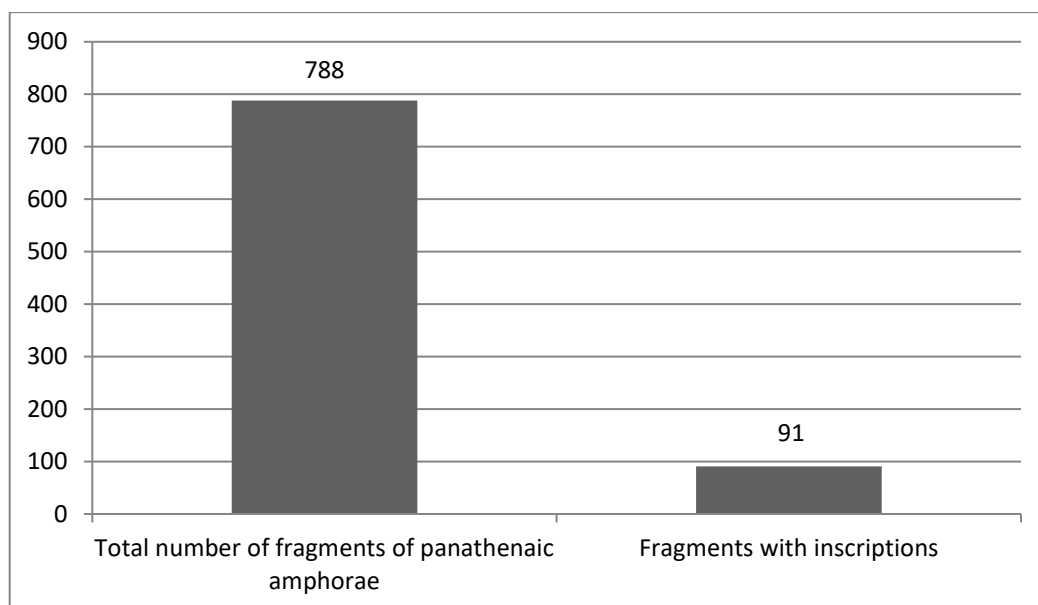


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