

# NOT TWINS AT ALL

## THE AGORA OINOCHOE

### REINTERPRETED

#### ABSTRACT

A unique double figure on a Late Geometric vessel known as the Agora oinochoe (P 4885) has been interpreted in a variety of ways. In this article the author explores problems with previous interpretations and offers new readings of the figure, the scene, and the frieze. The figure should not be interpreted as the conjoined Molione-Aktorione twins or, indeed, as conjoined at all, in which case there is little to connect the scene with Homeric epic. The scene can be viewed more convincingly as an experiment in narrative, simultaneously showing two moments in time. The frieze in its entirety might even be regarded as an ingenious optical trick.

#### INTRODUCTION

The most common interpretation of the famous double figure depicted on a well-known oinochoe (P 4885) found in 1935 in a grave near the Tholos in the Athenian Agora is that it represents Eurytos and Kteatos, the conjoined Molione-Aktorione twins.<sup>1</sup> There are several difficulties with this interpretation, which I explore below before presenting alternative readings for the figure, the scene in which it occurs, and the frieze and oinochoe as a whole.

The central scene on the “Agora oinochoe,” as it is most often represented, seems to depict a double figure attacked from the left by two figures armed with a spear and a sword (Fig. 1). The double figure’s square shield covers its body (or bodies), and the helmet crests of the figure appear to

1. For full bibliography and a summary of previous scholarship on P 4885, see Papadopoulos 1999. See also Coldstream 1968, p. 55, no. 9; 2003, pp. 353–354; Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 32. For a discussion of the excavation and findspot of the oinochoe, see Young 1939, pp. 6–20;

a detailed description of the vessel is given on pp. 67–71, figs. 43, 44.

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Figure 1. Detail of watercolor by Piet de Jong of the projected frieze on the Agora oinochoe P 4885. Photo courtesy Agora Excavations

be connected. The figure has one foot in the two-horse chariot to its right, although it is unclear if it is mounting or dismounting.<sup>2</sup> The figure carries a sword in its right hand and the reins and a whip in its left. This scene is shown flanked by two chariots. The approximate date of the vessel, 735–720 B.C., places it in Attic Late Geometric IIb.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the enigmatic double figure, another unusual feature of the frieze is the presence of four exit points for crossed ceramic tubes that would originally have been inside the vessel (Fig. 2). This design feature was the focus of much attention soon after the oinochoe was discovered.<sup>4</sup> While the ceramic tubes are integral to the design of the vessel, it is important to note that they were added *after* the pot was decorated: the painted design continues across the areas where the tubes intersect the frieze (the exit points).<sup>5</sup>

The scene has long been interpreted as representing the battle involving Nestor, his Pylains, and the twins described in book 11 of the *Iliad*.<sup>6</sup> In Homer's account, no mention is made of the twins being conjoined, although Hesiod, Pindar, and Apollodoros, among others, suggest that they were.<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Coldstream argues that the scene, portraying an *aristeia* performed by the hero Nestor, "looks like a family crest."<sup>8</sup> That one of the

2. King (1977, p. 34) argues that it "is a safe assumption that they are preparing to withdraw."

3. See Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 33; Papadopoulos 1999, p. 634. Coldstream (1991, p. 51) argues for a date around 730 B.C.

4. See Papadopoulos 1999, pp. 636–638. Payne's hypothesis (1935, p. 150) that the tubes were part of a cooling system and that the vessel represented a primitive psykter remains the most popular interpretation, but other possibilities have been proposed. Young (1939, p. 68) cautiously argued for a ritual purpose for the oinochoe, speculating that the tubes, being more porous

than the body, were for liquid libations that "trickled out gradually over an extended period of time." Fraser (1940, p. 462) proposed that the tubes had an apotropaic function associated with Siamese twins, since all the other exit points occur in neutral ground; while he is correct about the placement of the exit points, it would seem, as we will see below, that the design does not perfectly fit such an argument. Papadopoulos (1999, p. 638) argues that the oinochoe is a so-called trick vase, "a pouring vessel for wine, with *four* holes in its body, that still pours!"

5. *Contra* Fraser 1940, p. 457. See Figs. 1 and 2, where a figure's spear

extends just above an exit point. I thank one of the *Hesperia* reviewers for this observation. See below, pp. 726–727.

6. See *Il.* 11.670–761, esp. 709–710 and 750–752. Hampe (1936, pp. 87–88) was the first to identify the scene with the *Iliad* passage.

7. Hes. fr. 17b (Merkelbach–West); Pind. *Ol.* 10.22–39; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.7.2.

8. Coldstream (1991, p. 51) also notes that Neleus, Nestor's father, moved to Athens after leaving Pylos, thus explaining the scene's appearance on a vessel found in the Athenian Agora. Neleus was the progenitor of three prominent Athenian families—



Figure 2. Two views of the Agora oinochoe, showing the location of the exit points for the crossed tubes.  
Photos courtesy Agora Excavations

attacking figures is Nestor himself is problematic, since he should then be represented as “heroic” with the typical dipylon-shaped body, and T. B. L. Webster’s argument that Nestor’s shield was omitted because he was fighting offensively is hardly convincing.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Webster goes so far as to argue that the whole scene is an interpolation into the series of three chariots celebrating the funeral of Amarynkeus, king of Bousprasion, and that the scene also alludes to another episode, Nestor being bested by the brothers in a chariot race at *Iliad* 23.638–642. Evidence for an allusion to this chariot race, the argument continues, is provided by the explicit connection of one of the twin’s legs to the chariot.

While most interpretations connect the scene in some way with the *Iliad*, alternatives have been suggested. According to Bernhard Schweitzer, the origins of the story behind the scene lie in a Peloponnesian poem that described the war of Neleus against the Elians.<sup>10</sup> Anthony Snodgrass suggested that the scene may be related to the twins’ other adversary in

the Alkmoneonides, the Paionides, and the Medontides—and so, the argument assumes (p. 56), the piece represents Neleid-clan family pride and comes from a grave of one of these families. A family crest of what amounted to a defeat, however, seems more than a little odd; see below, n. 43.

9. Webster 1958, p. 203. There is also the second attacking figure to explain. No combatant in the *Iliad* is armed with a spear and a sword simultaneously. Webster attempts to explain this anomaly by suggesting that the spear is a reference to the spear battle that preceded the sword battle. This

complication is usually ignored, and the combatants with the twins in later depictions are also armed with both spear and sword. It is worth remembering that in the *Iliad* account, by the time Nestor joins combat with the twins, he is in fact mounted in a chariot.

10. Schweitzer 1969, p. 56.

mythology, Herakles.<sup>11</sup> But the “Nestor-twins” interpretation has remained popular; in part that may be because the scene, if it does represent the story narrated in the *Iliad*, would rank among the earliest representations in Greek art of a specific incident from Greek myth.<sup>12</sup>

However one interprets the scene, its unusualness seems to encourage the belief that it refers to a specific incident. Nevertheless, there are several problems with the interpretation that this scene depicts the Moliones. John Boardman has warned against the readiness with which Homer has been used to identify scenes on Late Geometric vessels,<sup>13</sup> and it is useful to remind ourselves that we know of only a fraction of the cultural references or sources on which artists could draw. Nonetheless, as the scene involves chariot combat, references to Homer can be used to give an idea or sense of the *kind* of material an artist might use, without its source being specifically Homeric.

## PROBLEMS WITH PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

The depiction of the double figure on the Agora oinochoe differs from all other extant examples of conjoined twins in Late Geometric art. There are as many as 17 full or fragmentary depictions known of twins.<sup>14</sup> In all of these (where it is possible to determine), the twins are depicted either as having four legs generating from a single set of hips with a single waist, or as having two arms on each side of the torso (e.g., Figs. 3, 4). None of the other examples carry shields. One of the four examples depicted on a krater in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 4) may have two lower bodies, while a Phrygian statuette in the British Museum has two bodies joined at the lower back.<sup>15</sup>

What these examples show is that, despite some similarities, no consistent iconography exists for depicting conjoined bodies in Late Geometric art. This should not come as a surprise, since Classical-period artists had

11. Snodgrass (1998, pp. 31–32) argues that the presence of a quiver on a Boiotian fibula (p. 32, fig. 12) suggests Herakles as the twins’ opponent, but Coldstream (2003, p. 353) counters that the twins’ encounter with Herakles was better known outside of Attica than the Nestor episode, and hence their appearance on the Boiotian fibula. Herakles encountered the twins when he waged war on King Augeias of Elis. The twins defeated Herakles’ army and wounded his brother Iphikles. Later, Herakles ambushed and killed the twins on their way to the Isthmian festival.

12. *Agora Guide*, pp. 230–231, and fig. 121. Schweitzer (1969, p. 56) is more categorical: it “is the earliest

mythological theme in Geometric art.” See also Coldstream 1991, p. 56.

13. Boardman 1998, p. 54. Against this, see Snodgrass (1980, p. 52): “such legendary interests as early Greek artists possess must be derived from epic in general, and Homer in particular.” On p. 53, however, Snodgrass himself argues that “we should no longer be confined, in our identification of possible subjects, by the limits imposed by Homeric epic. . . . We can entertain the possibility of the artists seeking to portray stories which have a very obscure status in epic, and perhaps even the occasional story which has not survived in any written source of whatever date.” This cautious statement seems to me a much better position than that of



Figure 3. Krater fragment from the Argive Heraion, 720–700 B.C. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 29983. Photo courtesy Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Receipts Fund

Ahlberg-Cornell (1992, p. 34), who maintains that the artist of Metropolitan Museum krater 14.130.15 (Fig. 4), which shows conjoined figures, “misunderstood” his own epic tradition.

14. Ahlberg-Cornell (1992, p. 32) argues for a maximum of 11 such figures or fragments, and rejects one. Snodgrass (1998, p. 30) counts 14 depictions, all early: “six from Athens, four from Boiotia (Hesiod’s homeland), and one each from Argos, Corinth, Arkadia and Lakonia.” King (1977, p. 30) identifies 17 depictions or fragments.

15. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 14.130.15; London, British Museum 1905.10-24.5. For the Phrygian statuette, see Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 286, fig. 43.



Figure 4. Detail of frieze on an Attic dipylon krater, ca. 725 B.C. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914 (14.130.15).

Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

no consistent iconography for portraying the conjoined Geryon of Herakles' 10th labor either. The three-bodied Geryon is depicted variously as having one body with two legs, three heads, and six arms; three bodies with three heads and six legs and arms; one body with six legs and arms and three heads; and one body with two legs and arms and three heads.<sup>16</sup> These inconsistencies would seem to provide no barrier to regarding the Agora scene as depicting a conjoined twin, although for the Late Geometric period we should not assume that any arguably conjoined body must be conjoined, or that such a figure must represent the Moliones.

Another argument that has been made is that the double figure on the Agora piece represents two figures hiding behind one shield.<sup>17</sup> Those who favor the Moliones interpretation reject this suggestion, arguing that it is clear that the shoulders and lower bodies are joined.<sup>18</sup> I am unconvinced, however, and do not think it is at all certain that the two figures are joined. The placement of the exit points of the crossed tubes in the vessel complicates matters; in particular, one of the holes obscures the area of the hips (see Fig. 1), making it impossible to determine if the double figure has only one set of hips. Given the angles of the legs, however, it would seem that there must be some separation not depicted in other examples.<sup>19</sup>

Another argument that this scene depicts conjoined bodies is derived from the iconography of the joined helmet crests, but this feature is hardly conclusive either. In most depictions of the twins for which the heads survive, the figures face the same direction, and thus their helmet crests

16. See Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Art Museums 1972.42; Munich, Antikensammlungen 1379, 2620, and J81; Paris, Musée du Louvre F 53 and F 55; London, British Museum B155 ("Chalkidian" amphora) and 1865.7-20.17 (Middle Protocorinthian pyxis); Paris, Cabinet des Médailles de la Bibliothèque nationale de France 202; Alanya, Archaeological Museum,

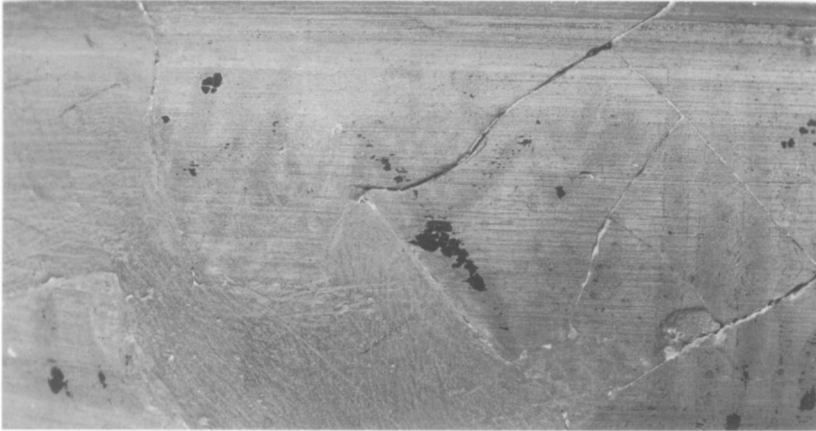
the "Perge sarcophagus"; and an unpublished Athenian black-figure vase: L3.6 at [www.theoi.com/Gallery/L3.6.html](http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/L3.6.html) (accessed September 22, 2007).

17. See Fraser 1940, p. 460; Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 33.

18. Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 33. Snodgrass (1998, p. 31) points out that "to be fair, this vital detail is not quite so clearly visible on the original jug;

but it does look like a remarkably neat way of conveying the fact that the two are, quite literally, inseparable." See below, pp. 724-725.

19. The projected frieze presented by Nefedkin (2001, p. 200) cleans up the image and omits all geometric decoration as well as the exit points. The twins are depicted with two sets of hips uninterrupted by the exit point.



**Figure 5.** Detail of worn frieze on a skyphos from Corinth, 720–700 B.C. Corinth Archaeological Museum C-1966-216. Photo I. Ioannidou and L. Bartzioti, courtesy Corinth Excavations, neg. 2007-5-3

do not touch; in examples where the twins face opposite directions, as they do in P 4885, they may not be wearing helmets at all (see Fig. 5).<sup>20</sup> There are several incidents in extant literature where helmet crests do indeed touch, but these are in instances where it is obvious that we are dealing with separate individuals very close to one another in combat.<sup>21</sup> Touching helmet crests should therefore not be regarded as an iconographic indicator of conjoined bodies.

## ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Alternatives to the event-specific interpretation involving the Moliones can be proposed. First, it is possible that the scene simultaneously represents two moments in time involving two figures, rather than a single moment involving four (or, indeed, three). An alternative reading for the frieze as a whole is also possible. Before exploring these options, however, we must consider several other factors. If the scene does represent a specific incident (whether we can confidently identify it or not), we might consider, since it involves chariot combat, that it depicts an event akin to that described in *Iliad* 11.423–425<sup>22</sup> or 13.131–133 and 16.215–217.<sup>23</sup> The particular incident shown cannot come from the *Iliad*, however, since the details of the image do not match any of the epic's descriptions of chariot combat.

### ALTERNATIVE 1: TWO MOMENTS IN TIME

It is a commonplace that Geometric vase painting lacks any specific indication of time, and that instead it depicts typical or timeless episodes.<sup>24</sup> This position is unassailable in many cases, but in some examples one may argue that the vase painter experimented in narrative. One such example is an Attic krater now in Paris (Fig. 6)<sup>25</sup> that depicts many figures, including

20. See also Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 285, fig. 40.

21. See Tyrtaios fr. 11.32. See also *Il.* 13.131–133 (= 16.215–217) where the same formula is used: “buckler pressed on buckler, helm upon helm, and man on man. The horse-hair crests

on the bright helmet-ridges touched each other, as the men moved their heads, in such close array stood they by one another” (trans. A. T. Murray, Cambridge, Mass., 1925).

22. In this passage, Odysseus kills Chersidamas just as Chersidamas leaps

down from his chariot.

23. See n. 21, above.

24. See, e.g., Snodgrass 1980, p. 51, and n. 4.

25. Musée du Louvre A 519; see also Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 282, fig. 35.

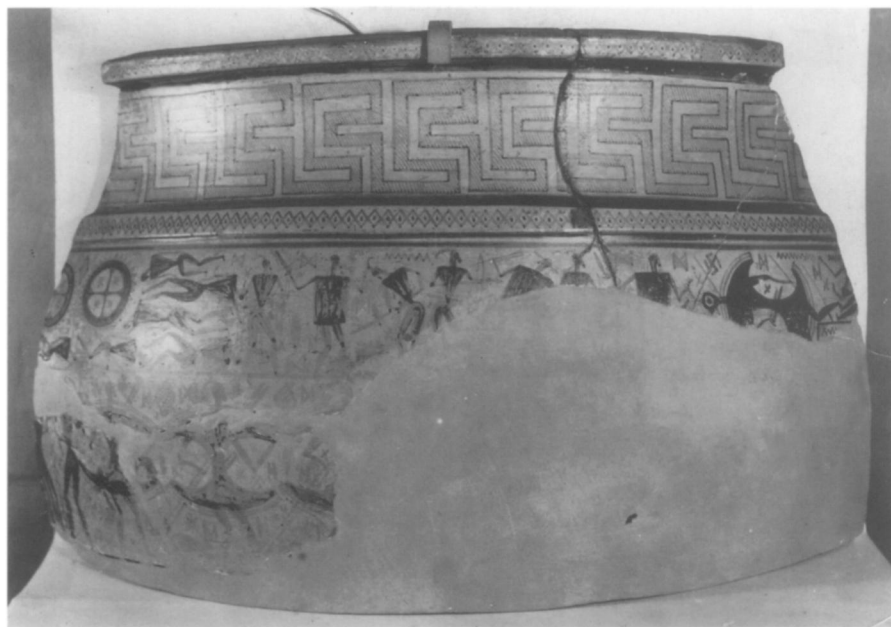


Figure 6. Attic krater, 750 B.C. Paris, Musée du Louvre A 519. The twins' legs and torso can be seen at the extreme bottom left. Photo courtesy Musée du Louvre

conjoined twins, and it can hardly be considered typical or timeless.<sup>26</sup> Another vessel that shows multiple narratives and creates interesting parallels for the Agora oinochoe is the *Iliupersis* pithos from Mykonos,<sup>27</sup> which is dated to the first half of the 7th century B.C. and simultaneously shows several moments in time, such as the Achaians inside the Trojan horse at the same time as Greek warriors are on the march (identified by Karsten Friis Johansen as the Greeks setting out from Tenedos).<sup>28</sup>

Another scene that has been argued to depict several moments in time in the same image is the blinding of Polyphemos on a well-known Protoattic amphora from Eleusis (ca. 670–650 B.C.).<sup>29</sup> The combination of Polyphemos holding a skyphos, having his eye open (and thus not being unconscious), and being blinded argue for the representation of what Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell describes as “different moments into the composition.”<sup>30</sup> The existence of early-7th-century scenes showing multiple moments in time means that it is not improbable that similar visual experiments took place in the late 8th century. The Agora oinochoe can be seen as such an experiment.

26. Snodgrass 1980, p. 52; Coldstream 2003, p. 113. It is interesting to note that the three types of warriors shown (unarmored, and with dipylon and rectangular shields) match those on the Agora oinochoe.

27. Mykonos, Archaeological Museum. See Friis Johansen 1967, pp. 26–31, and notes; Osborne 1998, p. 54, ill. 25.

28. Below this scene, metopes represent the meeting of Menelaus and Helen and the death of Astyanax. The whole seems to be a selected narrative of the sacking of Troy. These themes

were possibly at work earlier in Attica: a fragment from the Agora dated between 720 and 700 B.C. also depicts the death of Astyanax; see Brann 1962, p. 66, no. 311, pl. 18; Friis Johansen 1967, p. 31, fig. 2b, and discussion p. 30, n. 38. It is possible that these metopes are generic scenes of mayhem, although they could also represent multiple incidents from a lost epic.

29. Eleusis, Archaeological Museum. See Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, p. 2, fig. 1, and n. 4; also pp. 23–26, figs. 7, 8, on the narrative(s) presented on the Middle Protocorinthian

aryballos (Corinth Museum CP 2096). On narrative in Geometric art, see pp. 35–49, and on the twins, see pp. 46–47.

30. Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, p. 3. He argues that this would be the case only if this were an illustration of the account in *Od.* 9.382–397. Even if it is not, the scene can be argued to combine several moments in time from the story. Other examples, such as one from Argos (Athens, Archaeological Museum C 149), differ by depicting only one moment. See Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, pp. 2–3, fig. 2.

The Attic krater in New York illustrated above (Fig. 4) has also been argued to represent a continuing narrative.<sup>31</sup> Twins occur four times on this frieze, and it is more likely that they represent part of a narrative than that they occurred in four timeless or typical scenes—or, indeed, that there were four pairs of conjoined twins in the same scene. Two pairs are in adjacent chariots. J. M. Cook cautioned against a mythological interpretation of the twin figures because of the multiple occurrences in the same frieze. Instead, noting that they disappear after the Geometric period, he argued that they represent a figure used to fill a space too broad for a single figure and too narrow for two. Thus, twins are like the horses that are drawn according to the same convention.<sup>32</sup>

Such a scenario could be argued for the scene on the Agora oinochoe, although these twins seem flattened and are not as close together as other depictions of twins. If the figure was forced into the space, it would explain the interference of the exit point with the figure. The spacing between the double figure and the second attacking figure does seem cramped, with only three chevrons and not the four or five between the previous figures. It is possible that the scene became cramped as the painter planned it, or even as he painted it, forcing him to decrease the space between the figures.

It was suggested above that *Iliad* 11.423–425 might be helpful in interpreting the scene. Here Odysseus kills Chersidamas just as he dismounts from his chariot. There are other incidents in the *Iliad* in which a warrior is attacked as he mounts or dismounts his chariot, or in which he springs off his chariot into combat.<sup>33</sup> Such attacks, however, are always made with spears and never with swords. In the vast majority of examples of Homeric combat a charioteer is mentioned or named in addition to the warrior, but chariots in Late Geometric art overwhelmingly show single occupants. Late Geometric vase painters do not often depict charioteers (unless one considers the twin figures as an attempt to show warrior and charioteer).<sup>34</sup> This does not help efforts to match any scene to a specific incident from the *Iliad*, where, in most cases, the charioteer is named.

The artistic convention of one-occupant chariots may have come about because painters wanted to avoid the illusion that every chariot contained conjoined twins. It is possible that the Late Geometric depictions of “twins” in chariots are in fact depictions of several two-occupant chariots, especially when they appear in adjacent chariots as they do once on the Metropolitan Museum krater (Fig. 4).

Boardman suggests that the twin motif was an ingenious artistic convention used to show two men fighting together in proximity.<sup>35</sup> Boardman did not examine the Agora oinochoe, but it fits perfectly such an idea, and taking this suggestion as a starting point, we can read the scene in a new way.

The twin figures on the Agora oinochoe are so close together that their crests touch (see above, Fig. 1), recalling passages in *Tyrtaios* and the *Iliad* in which individuals in close proximity are similarly described.<sup>36</sup> The painter has gone further and depicted the figures as fighting from behind the same shield; to adopt this convention, however, he has had to sacrifice one arm of each. One figure may therefore be dismounting a chariot in very close proximity to another who is attacked by two armed figures. The traditional interpretation holds that the double figure is mounting the chariot to escape the combat.<sup>37</sup> The figure to the left, however, faces his

31. Ahlberg-Cornell 1992, p. 33, n. 8. Coldstream (2003, p. 354), in contrast, maintains that MMA 14.130.15 is timeless, and that the twin motif represented repeatedly occurs in the context of the funeral of Amarynkeus.

32. Cook 1938, p. 206.

33. See also *Il.* 3.28–29; 4.419–421; 5.45–46, 297, 494–497; 6.103–106; 7.13–16; 11.94–96, 211–214; 13.748–750; 16.342–343, 426–427, 733–734, 755; 17.483; 20.401–402.

34. Subgeometric artists were able to depict warrior and charioteer separated on the same chariot, as on a Boiotian vase from the early 7th century (Munich, Antikensammlungen 2234) reproduced by Greenhalgh (1973, p. 13, fig. 4). Rare examples of Attic Late Geometric vessels depicting both charioteer and warrior include the Borowski amphora (Greenhalgh 1973, p. 35, fig. 27) and Sydney, Nicholson Museum 46.41 (Coldstream and Reade 1997).

35. Boardman 1983, pp. 25–26. See also Powell 1997, p. 192. Boardman (1998, p. 54), however, argues that the twins, at best, “might reflect on the common pairing of heroes in life and the battlefield, or of hero and charioteer, which is clearly the case where two such pairs appear on adjacent chariots in a frieze.”

36. See n. 21, above.

37. See above, and, e.g., Snodgrass 1998, p. 31: the twins are “evidently making a fighting retreat to their chariot.”



attacker and is arguably defending himself. Alternatively, this figure may represent a nearby warrior who is covering the retreat of his companion to the chariot.

Another possible reading is that this scene involves only two figures (rather than four), and should be read from the outside in as two moments in time. First, as a figure dismounts from his chariot he is attacked by an assailant armed with a spear and a sword from the left. Then, just as he has dismounted he is reached by his assailant, who strikes him on his body or his shield.

Let us begin with the two figures on the left (Fig. 1). They are identically armed, the only difference between them being the number of their helmet crests: three on the left and four on the right. If we read the figure in this way, as part of a continuing narrative, then the change in position of his sword can be read as a slashing motion toward the double figure.<sup>38</sup>

In this “outside-in” interpretation, the two figures on the right present more difficulties: their crests join and their shield is one surface.<sup>39</sup> There is also the problem that the figure is shown swapping his shield from his right arm to his left as he dismounts.<sup>40</sup> This may have been necessary in order to make the double figure’s movements fit with those of the attacking figure(s). As the attacking figure moves from left to right, the double figure must be read from right to left so that the figures match up in the middle of the scene. Thus, the double figure can be read as dismounting from the chariot and then turning to meet his attacker.

The scene may be looked at as a depiction of rapid movement, although this reading assumes the use of a technique that is well known from 20th-century cartoons, but unattested in Greek art. It seems plausible to suggest, however, that iconographically the change from a dismounting figure to a defending figure would be achievable if certain sacrifices were made. Similar sacrifices and discrepancies in perspective are common in Late Geometric art, and are seen elsewhere on the Agora oinochoe, as for example when the hooves of horses that are clearly behind one another are nevertheless depicted on the same plane (Fig. 1). If we ignore for the moment the fact that the two parts of the double figure swap their shield arm and their rein-and-sword arm (which can be attributed to a similar sacrifice), the only difference between the double figures appears to be in their helmet crests.<sup>41</sup>

38. This is consistent with sword wounds described in the *Iliad* (see, e.g., *Il.* 13.605–619, 16.339–341, 20.463–472, 478–483); they are always slashing wounds, never piercing ones (Saunders 2003, p. 135).

39. The double shield itself can be considered the most problematic item in this scenario, for it clearly was painted as a single entity. It is also the boldest design on the whole vessel, and perhaps the Geometric patterning proved too attractive to the artist to break. The exit point does not pierce

this design, which might have been expected if the tube had an apotropaic association with the deformation of a twin, piercing it in the center rather than merely “winging it” through the hips. See Fraser 1940, p. 462.

40. The member of the double figure on the left holds his shield on the correct arm for combat; it is unlikely that a warrior would ever be depicted carrying his shield on his right arm.

41. Two of the heads in the frieze are shown with four-crested helmets

(see Fig. 1), which may be significant. To my knowledge, this is the only extant depiction of four-crested (*tetraphalos* or *tetraphaleros*) helmets in Greek art. This description is used by Homer four times (*Il.* 5.743, 11.41, 12.384, 22.315) and twice by Apollonios Rhodios (*Argon.* 2.919, 3.1228). Even if there is little significance in the use of the term, the rare depiction of these four-crested helmets in art is noteworthy. The number of helmet crests may have been a deliberate way of differentiating figures.

As noted above, later Greek painters did show two or more moments in time simultaneously in the same image and, if read in the same way, the Agora oinochoe can be seen as an early experiment in such a technique. An incident from the *Iliad* can easily be fitted into this way of reading the image: at *Iliad* 16.733–734 Sarpedon springs from his chariot and advances toward Patroklos, who, seeing Sarpedon advancing, also leaps to the ground and into combat with him. Although not all details of this particular incident fit the image on the Agora oinochoe, it is suggestive of a similar scene.

## ALTERNATIVE 2: AN OPTICAL TRICK

Perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves, however, and need to return to the basics of how the Agora oinochoe might have been used. When we look at the vessel as a whole and consider how it may have functioned, we can see that the double figure is located immediately below the handle (Fig. 7).<sup>42</sup> Below the spout of the vessel, and therefore visible to the recipient of the poured wine, are the two chariots (Fig. 2, above). In published depictions of the frieze, the chariots are usually presented at the extreme left and right. Only if the vessel were turned handle first to the viewer would the double figure be seen as complete. This action seems unlikely in the course of the vessel's use, although we must take into account its possible function as a painted item and a grave good as well as a pouring vessel.<sup>43</sup>

Robin Osborne has taken a similar perspective, arguing that the position of the "Odysseus" shipwreck scene directly below the spout of an oinochoe in Munich is significant.<sup>44</sup> Another spout-centered figure can be seen on the "horse tamer" oinochoe in Copenhagen, where the tamer is flanked by a horse on either side.<sup>45</sup> We would certainly expect this position to be the most important if the viewer is assumed to be the recipient of the poured wine—that is, if the vessel was intended to be viewed primarily from the front. Even if other viewers saw the vessel from the side, they would only see (at most) half of the double figure. While the wine jug was being carried, the double figure would be at least partially obscured from any viewing angle.

In this respect, we return to the issue of the tubes in the Agora oinochoe as an integral part of the vessel's design. The painter must have known where these would be located and where they would exit, and it is highly unlikely that he would place the most important figure where it would

42. King (1977, p. 34) also makes this observation, but does not comment further.

43. If the figure is a family crest, as argued by Coldstream (1991, p. 51), it certainly is given a strange location. Surely such an emblem would be positioned far more prominently—under the spout rather than under the handle. Coldstream does recognize,

however, that the image is separated from the "main scene" of the action. Fraser's argument (1940, p. 462) that attention is purposely drawn to the double figure has certainly influenced how the figure has been approached and how the projected frieze has been reproduced.

44. Munich, Antikensammlungen 8696; Osborne 1998, pp. 35–37, ill. 14.

45. Copenhagen, National Museum 1628; Osborne 1998, p. 39, ill. 17. See also Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum GR-1-1935 (Coldstream 1968, pl. 13:e, f); Berlin, Staatliche Museen VI 3374 (Schweitzer 1969, pl. 56); and Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 25.43 (Schweitzer 1969, pl. 57).



Figure 7. The Agora oinochoe, showing the location of the double figure under the handle. Photo courtesy Agora Excavations

be partially obscured by an exit point, even if it were meant to be below the handle. This placement of the double figure argues against its being compared to the other extant examples of double figures, since no other double figure is similarly placed.

The painter of the Agora oinochoe may have been experimenting with his medium, since what one would see if the oinochoe were presented spout first or with one side showing would be, at most, half of the double figure. The only person to see the double figure complete and unobscured would be the carrier or pourer before they first picked up the vessel.<sup>46</sup> Apart from that instance, we can assume that half of the double figure would be obscured from view.

Revising the way in which the frieze on the Agora oinochoe is usually projected creates a different narrative (Fig. 8). What we see, then, if we read the image from left to right beginning with the right-hand half of the double figure as the starting point of the frieze, is a procession of three different chariots. The first, a two-horse chariot depicted in profile with only one wheel showing, is being mounted by a figure carrying a rectangular shield; the second, a “flattened” two-horse chariot with two wheels showing, is driven by a dipylon warrior with two spears; and the third, a single-horse chariot again shown in profile, is driven by a figure with no armor aside from the sword he wears. The vase painter is deploying his whole repertoire of chariots, different perspectives, and types of figures in a compact space.<sup>47</sup> The third chariot is depicted with a pole, an unnecessary inclusion

46. This point might be particularly relevant if the tubes functioned as part of a cooling system.

47. A figure with a round shield is not shown, although these are relatively rare in Geometric art. See, however, Greenhalgh 1973, p. 35, fig. 27 (Borowski amphora), and p. 65, fig. 38.



Figure 8. Revised projection of the Agora oinochoe frieze in Piet de Jong's watercolor, showing the two parts of the double figure at either end of the frieze. Photo courtesy Agora Excavations

for a single-horse chariot. If two horses were to be depicted, however, it is likely that the second horse would have been interrupted by the exit point immediately to the right.<sup>48</sup> The possible omission of a second horse for this reason, and the third chariot in particular, demonstrate that the painter's choices in decoration were deliberate. The four exit points divide the frieze into four separate panels that were filled in different ways.

We arrive finally, then, at the last three figures. Rather than another mounted chariot (were the painter's options exhausted, or had he run out of space?), we are shown a combat involving three figures: two men without shields, armed with swords and spears, attack a third figure armed with a sword and a rectangular shield. This last figure then melds seamlessly (albeit obscured by the pourer's arm) into the first figure of the scene, and the whole scene begins again.

The double figure, coming where it does and interrupted by an exit point (the feature that marks the end of each of the three chariot panels), can now be understood as being part of two panels rather than one. In the combat panel, the spear of the attacking figure on the left is also interrupted by an exit point, which suggests that the limitations of space did not fit the intended scheme. This possibility is supported by the fact that the figure at the extreme right of that panel (the left-hand half of the double figure) is cramped within the limited remaining space—so much so that the painter may have solved this spatial shortage by melding him into the first figure of the first panel.

Read in this way, the scene suggests an ingenious optical trick and an ingenious artistic solution—appropriate for a wine jug, and understandable as a favorite item to be included in a grave. This interpretation complements John Papadopoulos's idea that the Agora oinochoe is a "trick vase," although I am suggesting a different kind of trick. Indeed, trick vases most often seem to be connected with the potter's art rather than the decoration, although there is no reason to rule out a decorative trick.<sup>49</sup>

48. The potter seems to have solved this possible spatial problem far more successfully with the first two chariots.

49. For Papadopoulos's suggestion, see n. 4, above. For examples of trick vases, see Noble 1968; Vickers 1975, 1980; Turnure 1981. The triple skyphos described by Noble (1968, p. 371,

figs. 1, 2) dates to the 8th century B.C. and the decoration as well as the design is integral to its trick. Visual tricks can be seen to have continued in later Greek art as well; see Beard 1991, pp. 28–30, figs. 7, 8. The exterior of the Makron kylix (fig. 7) depicts *hetairai* being paid, while the interior (fig. 8) shows an Athenian wife in religious

worship. The exterior of the Byrgos Painter kylix (p. 30) shows a group carousing, and the interior shows a young man being sick (from over-indulging). These visual jokes on vessels presumably intended for symposia may have their antecedents in earlier works (probably for a similar purpose) such as the Agora oinochoe.

Other oinochoai arguably include similar artistic experiments, such as an oinochoe showing the execution of prisoners<sup>50</sup> or another with the earliest Athenian alphabetic inscription, translated as “whoever of all the dancers now plays most friskily.”<sup>51</sup> Perhaps potters wishing to try new techniques favored oinochoai over larger, more traditional vessels. Such experiments, one can argue, bore fruit in subsequent periods of Greek art.

It is possible that the two halves of the double figure were differentiated by the number of their helmet crests, although the scene, read in this way, loses its specificity and can be fitted into the “timeless” norm of Late Geometric art, albeit with an impressively inventive visual device. Read in this fashion, the double figure becomes an expression of wit and not the depiction of conjoined twins, and the problematic differences between this double figure and other known examples melt away.

## CONCLUSION

In the above pages I have suggested that the double figure depicted on the Agora oinochoe P 4885 does not represent the Moliones twins, as often previously believed, or indeed conjoined twins at all. It is thus difficult to maintain that the scene is Homeric, even though it appears to depict combat involving a chariot and there are passages in the *Iliad* that suggest related scenarios. I have proposed instead two new ideas to explain the presence of the problematic double figure on the Agora oinochoe. The frieze on the vessel may reflect an early experiment in simultaneously presenting two moments in time, a technique known to have been used from the early 7th century B.C. onward. But the most attractive and least problematic interpretation of the scene—indeed, of the frieze and pot as a whole—is that the double figure is part of a witty optical trick that accommodates both the vessel’s function as a wine jug and previous arguments regarding trickery in Greek art.

50. Paris, Musée du Louvre CA 2509; see Snodgrass 1998, pp. 20–22, and fig. 7.

51. Osborne 1998, p. 35. See also Papadopoulos 1999, p. 637, pl. CXXXVI:c, d. For the inscription, see *IG* I<sup>2</sup> 919.

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