

THE ABDUCTION AND RECOVERY OF HELEN

ICONOGRAPHY AND EMOTIONAL
VOCABULARY IN ATTIC VASE-PAINTING C. 550-350 BCE

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'We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways
in which it shows what cannot be seen.'

Mitchell 1987: 39

'I have gazed so much on beauty
That my eyes overflow with it.'

Cavafy (trans. A. Sharon)

ABSTRACT

The antics of Helen of Sparta, famous both for her beauty and her adultery, have fascinated ancient and modern audiences alike. The subjects of her abduction from Sparta and recovery from Troy are explored in various ancient discourses. This study investigates the iconography of Attic vase-paintings, c. 550-350 BCE, that show (or have been identified as depicting) these two events in the life of Helen. My approach seeks to investigate their subtexts or metanarratives of emotion through a rigorous methodology. This process first involves engaging in a close reading of the vase scenes in order to identify their visual language, especially their emotional vocabulary. The second process contextualises the vases in the society that produced and used them. By reading them in their original context of production and reception, one can extrapolate a range of meanings these scenes could have had for their original audience. In doing this, there are two main goals: to establish which emotions are pertinent to the ancient audience in these two episodes (emotional content), and how emotions – in essence invisible – are communicated in the vase images (emotional language).

Applying this methodology to the scenes yields significant results. The identification of the most typically emotional indicators includes the following: gesture; stance; gaze; clothing, physical attributes and icons; divinities and personifications; and contextual icons or information. The emotional content that emerges includes, in particular, the emotion of *eros* – its potentially destabilising and emasculating consequences – and the appropriateness of *orgē* and revenge. Another significant result is in relation to the traditional identification of the scenes. While most of the traditional identifications of Helen's recovery stand firm, the opposite is true for the abduction. My rejection of the majority of images identified as Helen's abduction by traditional scholarship is necessary due to a lack of evidence – inscriptional or iconographic – and the marked incongruity of these depictions with their context. These results demonstrate the merits of a solid methodology that takes the language of images seriously, as well as the social, political and ideological context in which the vases were produced and viewed.

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