Hour 08: A psychology of signs in ancient Greek visual arts

Key word: psukhē, as used in the context of the key word for the last time, sēma. This word psukhē refers to the life of someone who is alive and to the disembodied conveyor of someone’s identity after that someone dies.

This key word is actually the only piece of text for this time. As we saw from the previous time, psukhē is written out as ph-s-kh-e on an art object that I have been calling the Münster Hydria. The meaning of the word “hydria” is relevant to the meaning of the word psukhē. (Note the spelling: hydria, not “hydra,” which comes from a Greek word for a venomous dragon.) The word “hydria” comes from a Greek word for a vessel used for libations (= ritual pourings), on occasions that include the worship of ancestors and the worship of heroes. Libations poured from hydrias, as we will see, are relevant to the meaning of psukhē. I will concentrate on two hydrias.

One of these two hydrias was previewed the last time. It was the Münster Hydria (dated around 520 BCE). It showed a picture of Patroklos hovering over the sēma or ‘tomb’ that was destined to be shared by the bodies of Patroklos and Achilles. And the picture is identified by the lettering that spells out psukhē. We will now concentrate on the meaning of psukhē in the context of the picture of Patroklos. Such a picture would be called in Greek a sēma, just as the tomb of a hero is called in Greek a sēma. And the same word sēma can refer not only to the tomb of a hero or to a picture of the hero but also to any sign of the hero, such as the lettering that identifies the picture in the painting on the Münster Hydria. That is what I mean when I say “a psychology of signs.” The word psukhē is a marker of such psychology.

The other one of the two hydrias on which I will concentrate is housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is the Boston Hydria (also dated around 520 BCE). Both the Münster Hydria and the Boston Hydria depict the athletic event that I described the last time, which is the contest of the apobatai (plural of apobatēs).

Both depictions mix the ritual of an athlete’s ordeal with the myth of a hero’s ordeal.

So what do we see in the picture painted on the Münster Hydria? We see an athlete / warrior engaging in a chariot contest and we see Achilles honoring Patroklos by way of participating in that chariot contest. Achilles himself is participating in a ritual by way of driving round and round the sēma of Patroklos.

The picture shows ritual and myth together, just as poetry shows ritual and myth together in the chariot race described at Iliad XXIII.

Emily Vermeule speaks of a “window effect” created by the picture frame of the Boston Hydria, but her comment can apply to the picture frame of the Münster Hydria.
as well: “The technique gives the impression that the myth is circling around in another world, outside the window frame through which the spectator views it, in endless motion which is somehow always arrested at the same place whenever we return to the window.”

I have a question about this window: as you are looking through the window, are you looking in from the outside or are you looking out from the inside? The figure runs around a turning point (termas), a point of concentration. (Note what Nestor tells Antilokhos in Iliad XXIII: concentrate on the sêma. The medium of the tomb (sêma) of the hero (or ancestor) is the message of the hero (or ancestor).

Things to look for as you compare the picture of the Münster Hydria (=M) with that of the Boston Hydria (=B):

a. The axis of vision centers on the sêma in M, while the sêma is off-center in B.
b. The chariot is also off-center in B. Study question: what is centered in B, and why?
c. The homunculus (= smaller-than-life-size body-double) has no wings in M; it does have wings in B.
d. The homunculus is labeled as psukhê in M and as Patroklos in B. Question: whose psukhê is the homunculus in M? Of Achilles? Of Patroklos? Of both?
e. Note the picture on the shield of the homunculus in both M and B.
f. The Greek word for ‘picture on a shield’ is sêma.
g. The sêma on the shield of a hero is supposed to symbolize his identity.
h. A running leg (or foot: the Greek language does not make the same distinctions between ‘leg’ and ‘foot’ that the English language does) is symbolic of which hero in the Iliad?
i. When there are three running legs spinning around a center (the technical Greek word for this visual device is triskeles = ‘three-legs’), the idea of superhuman running speed is implied.
j. The “winged lady” is still in the process of landing in B; on the other hand, she has already landed in M.
k. In B, The “winged lady” makes a gesture toward the portico situated on your far left. The old couple in the portico repeat the gesture. Achilles is making eye-contact with the gesture. Notice that he is not making eye-contact with the sêma, nor with the psukhê of Patroklos. Is he getting on the chariot or getting off?
l. Consider the painting of the council of the gods on the upper part or “shoulder” of the Münster Hydria. We see here Zeus and Hermes (with his caduceus = his magic wand) at center left and center right, while Athena is at the right. Dionysus is
at the extreme left. Note the goddess, making a gesture, between Dionysus and Zeus. Study question: how does this council of the gods compare with the council of the gods at the beginning of *Iliad* XXIV?

m. How does the action of “the winged lady” in B (and, probably, in M) compare with the action of a certain character in *Iliad* XXIV?

Things to look for as you compare the pictures of M and B with other pictures.

1. Note each image (sēma) on each hero’s shield. Compare with the pictures of animals guarding the tomb (sēma) of the hero.

2. Note the details that convey an epic event (by “epic” we mean the kind of macro-narrative represented by the *Iliad*) and details that convey an athletic event. Where are epic / athletic details distinct and where are they not? Compare the epic / athletic events of the Funeral Games of Patroklos in *Iliad* XXIII.

   The rage of the hero translates into the killer instinct of the athlete. Compare the dragging of Hector’s corpse, presented as an athletic event. This detail about the “dragging” is an aetiology (myth) for the athletic event (ritual) of the chariot race featuring apobatai at the Panathenaia in Athens.