



Athenian White-ground *Lekythoi* Intro Guide

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Introduction

White-ground *lekythoi* (sing. *lekythos*) are special oil containers bearing painted polychrome decoration on a white background. Their function was purely funerary: they were placed in the graves as burial goods, as well as brought to the tomb as funerary offerings during the customary visits of family members to the graves of their loved ones. Their time span of use was limited, since they appeared in Athens around 470 BCE and ceased being produced at the end of the fifth century BCE. Their painted surface was delicate, and their colors have often faded with time. The scenes adorning the white-ground *lekythoi* provide us with valuable information about the funerary rituals and customs of fifth-century Athens. They also give us an idea of what the non-surviving large-scale paintings of the time might have looked like.

Decoration Types

Their decoration was largely (but not exclusively) funerary, consisting of:

1. Domestic scenes: These were the most popular subjects on white-ground *lekythoi* during 470-450 BCE. They usually depicted one or two female figures in a domestic setting, involved in various everyday life activities. These include images of warriors bidding farewell to their family upon leaving for war and scenes showing the preparation of women to visit the family tombs.

2. Warriors: Outdoor scenes depicting a single hoplite or horseman; scenes of fighting. Such scenes are rare. They refer to war casualties.

3. Mythological scenes: depicting various subjects.

4. *Prothesis* scenes: depicting the *prothesis* (laying out of the dead). The deceased is shown lying on a *kline* (bier), surrounded by lamenting women and male relatives paying their respects to the dead.

5. *Psychopompoi* scenes: they portray death as a journey which takes place under the guidance and protection of the mythical *psychopompoi* (guides of souls): Hypnos and Thanatos (Sleep and Death) who carry the dead to their tomb; Hermes who leads them to the banks of the river Acheron; and the ferryman Charon in whose boat they will cross the river to reach the underworld. Each white-ground *lekythos* scene only depicts one stage of the journey.

5. Tomb visit scenes: These scenes were the most popular subject on white-ground *lekythoi* during the second half of the fifth century BCE. They are valuable in providing information for the funerary customs of the Athenians during the fifth century BCE. Although male visitors are also shown, tomb visit scenes frequently depict women visiting the tombs of their deceased family members, bringing the customary offerings to their dead. Caring for the family tombs was one of the most important obligations of women in ancient Athens. The deceased is often shown appearing near her/his tomb, invisible to the living visitors.

Bibliography

Oakley, J. 2004. *Picturing Death in Classical Athens: The Evidence of the White Lekythoi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix



Domestic scene. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 08.258.17



Mythological scene: Nike bearing a fillet. New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, 06.1021.129

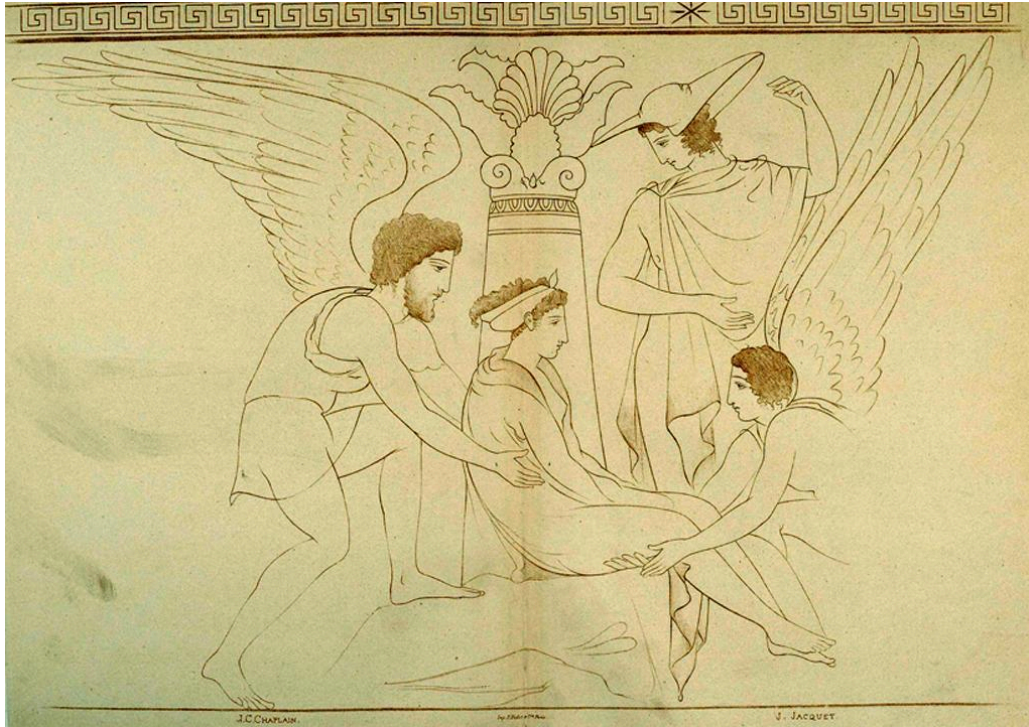


Prothesis scene: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 07.286.40



Hermes bringing a dead youth to Acheron where Charon awaits

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21.88.17



Hypnos and Thanatos carry a dead female to her tomb where Hermes awaits. Sketch from a white-ground *lekythos*. After Dumont, *Les céramiques de la Grèce propre*, Didot, 1888–1890.



Tomb visit scene. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 07.286.45