
III. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

The Riddle of Life and Death: An Interpretation of the Relationship between Presocratic Fragments and Vase Paintings of the Dark Ages

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Abstract:

This paper explores the relation between Presocratic fragments and vase paintings in the Greek Dark Ages. In some texts of Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, there is a theme that can be read as philosophical reflection on the riddle of life and death. This theme can be traced back earlier to vase paintings in the Dark Ages instead of the written records of Hesiod and Homer. The geometric pattern and funeral scene on the amphora A 00804 symbolize the potters' and vase painters' cosmological views of the same theme. The first section of this paper will analyze the Presocratic fragments and the following section will explore how these themes were depicted in the vase paintings of the Dark Ages. On the one hand, there is the relation between the art of writing and pottery in cultural inheritance, which relies on revealing the superiority of pottery as a medium of cultural inheritance during the Dark Ages. On the other hand, the artistic value of decorated pottery in this period should be affirmed adequately, especially in a context where people usually consider the black and red figure periods to be the summit of ancient Greek vase paintings, and the Proto-Geometric and Geometric periods to be relatively inferior. Furthermore, there is an important argument that should be made that life and death are central themes in Pre-Geometric and Geometric pottery.

Key Words: Ancient Greece; pottery; cosmology; Anaximander; Heraclitus; Parmenides;

1. Introduction

Presocratic thought is comprehensively concerned with the cosmos, one theme of which is the riddle of life and death. It is worthwhile to investigate from where this cosmologically-informed came. This paper argues that it is the decorated pottery in the Greek Dark Ages that conceives and preserves ancient Greek's cultural inheritance and breeds Presocratic cosmological thought whilst the previous art of writings of Linear A and B was lost during that era. The written records on papyrus scrolls before the Presocratics also benefited from the plastic arts. Namely, before Hesiod and Homer, the histories and genealogies have not only already been manifested in oral recitals and dances of bards and priests/priestesses, but also in the plastic arts, of which decorated pottery was the most remarkable medium.¹

Either in the geometric patterns or in funeral images, vase paintings show us that cosmological scenes originated from the souls of anonymous primitive potters and painters in the Dark Ages.² That is the real face of the starry night—a black glaze and reddish brown, rather than the blue and white under the sun of the Parthenon temple that the philosophers in classical period can see. Those patterns and images in the Proto-Geometric and Geometric vase paintings symbolize the reflections on the riddle of life and death in the Dark Ages.

2. The Philosophical Reflection on the Riddle of Life and Death in Some Presocratic Fragments

Anaximander showcases early explorations of the original sin of life in the second part of his fragment as follows,

the limitless is principle and element of the things which exist...it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements but some

¹ The attention to the ancient Greek oral recitals can be traced back to the relevant ideas in Plato's *Phaedrus* (274a-278d), where Plato emphasizes the difference of significance in cultural inheritance between oral recital and written record.

² From the 7th century BC onwards, Greek artists became more familiar with their own personality and artistic merit and began to sign their name on their works of art. During the Dark Ages, artists' signature was quite rare.

different limitless nature, from which all the heavens and the worlds in them come into being. The things from which existing things come into being are also the things into which they are destroyed, in accordance with what must be. For they give justice and reparation to one another for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time. (B1)³

From the very beginning, Presocratic thinkers have already probed the issue of justice or injustice through the fact that all living things come into being and are destroyed, namely, the phenomena of life and death.⁴ Anaximander brings the Milesian school into ethics from the philosophy of nature, and grapples with the issue of goodness. Thales' focus is merely upon where cosmos and life come from, while Anaximander mainly questions why cosmos and life decay. What stimulates Thales to explore is childlike curiosity, but, what triggers Anaximander to contemplate is adult solemnity. Unsurprisingly in Nietzsche's imagination, Anaximander wears black clothes.

Obviously, such a thought on this 'original sin' is not an odd conclusion caused by Anaximander's individual brainstorm, rather, it is a collective conception of the ancient Greeks'. Hesiod and Homer depict the genealogy from Uranus through Zeus in chaotic pictures. According to the ancient Greek texts, not only for mortals, but also for the heroes

³ Jonathan Barnes (trans. & intro.), 2nd revised ed, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London, 2001), 21.

⁴ The meaning of life and death, especially the latter is an important part in many ancient rituals and sites, including the ancient Irish burial site at Newgrange and the UK Stonehenge site. Research on Stonehenge shows that, "Stonehenge marked the special days in the cosmic calendar. Spring and Autumn, as well as the well-known alignment of the midsummer sunrise. The midsummer sun rise exactly matches another event, the setting sun at mid-winter." It suggests that, "our most famous prehistoric monument of all might not have been a celebration of summer and life, but a commemoration of winter and death." See the BBC documentary *A History of Ancient Britain*, section 3, "Age of Cosmology". Further evidence is obtained, according to the Daily Mail (9 October 2012): "the latest 3D laser technology revealed new evidence of the importance of the midwinter sunset to the ancient creators of Stonehenge, along with 71 new images invisible to the naked eye due to weathering of the stone."

and immortals, life is not self-evidently good. 'To be or not to be' has been a question since the ancient Greeks rather than Shakespeare.

The discussion of death in Heraclitus' fragments occurs frequently. That can explain why Heraclitus was called "the tearful philosopher." "Man, like a light in the night, is kindled and put out." "One alone is the wise, unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus."⁵ In the first sentence, the tension between brightness and darkness makes the expression very charming. Light to be kindled means the brightness; night and to be put out indicates the darkness. Darkness here is a background, and a theatre, and brightness is an actor. Darkness is static and eternal, and brightness is temporal and dynamic. One more thing that needs to be noticed is the passive voice here. Human beings are determined by external forces. Lack of autonomy is not merely the situation of human beings, but also of the gods. In the second sentence, the only wise entity is the one rather than Zeus. The one could be called by the name of Zeus, but Zeus here is merely a name of the one, which can be called by any name, similar to what we see in Plato's dialogues. When Socrates swears an oath, he could easily and cheerfully do it in the name of anything that happens to be nearby, a tree, a dog and so on.⁶ According to ancient Greek mythology, why was Prometheus tortured by Zeus? Not only did he tease Zeus by distributing sacrificial offerings and stealing fire for human beings, but he was the god of prophecy and knew the ultimate fate of Zeus. This manifests the unavoidable lack of autonomy of even the lord of Olympia.

Here Heraclitus' reflection on life and death is conveyed in a few words. The mortality of the mortals and so-called wisdom of Olympian gods imply a wiser and higher entity, no matter whose name is called 'night,' 'one,' 'divine law,' and 'child' by Heraclitus, because of which, both gods and human beings are merely draughts and dice played by the other. By being aware of such a tragic fate of the immortals and mortals, Heraclitus as a tearful philosopher could take the attitude of deep pity toward all existing things and inspire Hellenistic Stoics several hundred years later, whose thought, in turn, basically became the ethical

⁵ (B32); Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 66)

⁶ It also reminds me of Crane's poems, like *The Bridge*. He asked the bridge to lend a myth to God, and suggested that is something every age must do because our names for God are always metaphors, poems or, acts of speech.

and religious foundation for the Romans and the Middle Ages.⁷

The obscure entity in Heraclitus' poetic writings is developed in Parmenides' *On Nature*, and becomes logically clear: that is, 'being.' The only road to this truth is to abandon life and death. Or, as he puts, to abandon life, therefore, to abandon death. Being is ultimately symbolized as a perfectly well-rounded ball, a self-identified rational formula $A=A$. A continuously becoming world of sensations can not accord with this formula, therefore it must be unrealistic.

As for an individual, when death means the biggest limitation, there is no meaning to distinguishing life from death. Are they not identical? Further, are 'being' and 'non-being' not identical? Are A and $\neg A$ not identical? Innate reason logically denies this, or perhaps, this kind of polyphony of existential experiences of life and death impinges tremendously upon the authority of Hellenistic ideals of truth as monistic terms. Only that which contains no contradiction is true and only that which is true is authoritative. Hence some approaches are constructed to solve the problem. Anaximander denies A in a perspective of value judgment, therefore $\neg A=\neg A$. Heraclitus affirms the $A=\neg A$ formula from an aesthetic perspective rather than a logical one, therefore A is still equal to $\neg A$. Parmenides denies A in a perspective of fact judgment, therefore, $\neg A=\neg A$ again. In other words, as for Anaximander, the contradictory and chaotic world of sensations $A=\neg A$ becomes an ethically unjust world $\neg A=\neg A$. For Heraclitus, this world of sensations $A=\neg A$ transforms into an aesthetic world $A=\neg A$. According to Parmenides, the sensational world $A=\neg A$ again converts into the ontological world $\neg A=\neg A$.

3 The Appearance of Contemplation on the Riddle of Life and Death in the Vase Paintings of the Dark Ages

As mentioned in the introduction, from where Presocratic cosmological thought derives is a question that deserves to be examined. In approaching this question, people usually tend to seek a relationship among similar cultural media, for example, between writing and writing. Therefore, it is considered quite reasonable to view the poems of Hesiod

⁷ Here what should be pointed out is that the lack of autonomy as a feature of the mortals in Heraclitus becomes a more complicated question in the Bible. From biblical texts, human beings are either with or without autonomy.

and Homer as origins of Presocratic thought. Their texts are indeed the earliest written texts after the Dark Ages. It is reasonable to observe that the reborn Greek art of writing is totally and completely different from the Linear A and B of the Bronze Age, since during several hundred years in the Dark Ages the old art of writing gets lost. The cultures are transformed too, however. People have ignored the possibility that the extraordinarily thriving pottery in the Dark Ages could remedy the cultural wounds that the fracture of the art of writing caused.

Some arguments along the following lines should be made to support this possibility. On one hand, is the relationship between the art of writing and pottery in cultural inheritance. This relationship relies on revealing the superiority of pottery as a medium of cultural inheritance in the Dark Ages. On the other hand, artistic value of decorated pottery in this period should be affirmed adequately, especially in such a context that people usually consider black and red figure periods are the summit of the ancient Greek vase paintings, and Proto-Geometric and Geometric periods are relatively inferior. Furthermore, there is an important argument to be made that life and death are a main theme in Pre-Geometric and Geometric pottery. This is certainly not an easy feat to achieve within this article, nevertheless I would like to attempt the task.⁸

During the Dark Ages, written records vanished, and oral recitations could not be preserved. Remote antiquity has not faded away completely, however, thanks to the plastic arts, which included pottery, gold and silver wares, bronze or pot sculptures and so on. However, art archaeology shows that, during this time, decorated pottery is uniquely brilliant, compared with other plastic arts. The reason deserves to be examined.

⁸ The 7th century BC is widely viewed as the most important period for the ‘Renaissance’ of Greek art, such as the emergence of monumental sculpture, the birth of the first large stone temples, and the start of depiction of Greek myths on vases, all of which symbolize a sort of artistic ‘prosperity,’ and seeing that this point has already been prevailing, “The darkness of this Dark Age is not just due to our own comparative ignorance about what was happening, but represents a real and traumatic transformation” (Michael Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks* (London, 1987), 2), the objective of this paper is to inspire more research into the relationship of Presocratic fragments and vase paintings of the Dark Ages.

Vase paintings in the Dark Ages originated in the Sub-Mycenaean period during 1100-1050 BC. In their beginnings, vase paintings were relatively inferior: “at this juncture, as pollen-analysis reveals, populations sharply declined, reverting to pastoralism. The art of writing was lost for several centuries to come, the use of stone for construction purposes vanished, and Greece became a country of villages, making an impoverished pottery (Sub-Mycenaean, c.1100-1050) which displayed stolid, insensitive shapes and hand-drawn designs of circles and half-circles.”⁹ However, things soon changed. The widely distributed pottery known as “Proto-Geometric (c. 1025-900), initiated by Athens and then developed in the Argolid and over a wide area extending from Thessaly to the northern Cyclades, displayed circular designs drawn no longer by hand, like those of the preceding Sub-Mycenaean wares, but by the compass, and painted by multiple brushes with patterns that neatly define the clear-cut shape of the vessel.”¹⁰

Grant argues the reason why pottery developed rapidly in this period was that Greek pottery was much more important than its counterpart today, fulfilling the combined modern roles of porcelain, glass, wood, leather and basketry, and in consequence, it attracted the services of outstanding painters. Furthermore, since during that period Greece was no longer a wealthy country, those painters were called upon to provide the decoration which no gold or silver vessels were available to supply.¹¹

Benefiting from the participation of outstanding painters, pottery patterns became quite varied, geometric patterns primarily, accompanied by animals, plants and figure patterns. Geometric patterns include rhythms of thick and thin lines, triple lines, wavy lines, zigzags, cross-hatch triangles, and concentric circles and semi-circles.

900-700 BC was the Geometric period. Pottery reached its highest peak. During this period, Athens still displayed brilliant creativity. The geometric patterns were gradually extended, until they covered the entire pottery surface, in the place of a large area of black glaze in Proto-Geometric period. Decorations became more and more elaborate and exquisite with quite complicated rhythm. “Some scholars have likened

⁹ Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks*, 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 332.

this complicated new rhythm to that of an epic hexameter, as Homer's."¹² John Boardman thinks this analogy is not absurd because, "this is the first intimation of the Greek artist's interest in the almost mathematical disposition of complex patterns and images, but the effect is more like that of a carpet, or patchwork."¹³ Besides the geometric patterns, figurative elements are also highly stylized. In the beginning, single or repeated bands appeared, then they encircled the whole surface with a high degree of schematization.

Compared with pottery, how did other plastic arts fare in the Dark Ages? David Piper holds that, "in sculpture, during the Geometric period, small schematic figurines in bronze and terracotta were produced."¹⁴ Even the famous, enigmatic archaic smile did not occur until the middle of the seventh century. Similarly, stone temples developed their essential forms during the archaic period, providing scope for both painted and sculptural decoration. Their paintings have disappeared by now. The figures with sharp but exquisite precision would have responded dramatically in the bright Aegean sun; their original effect, further enriched by colour, was far removed from their usual bland, monochrome appearance in museums.¹⁵

It is thus clear that in the Dark Ages, pottery and vase paintings are exclusively brilliant in comparison with other plastic arts. They reached maturity during the Geometric period and various patterns were extraordinary elaborate. While at the same time, bronze and terracotta sculptures were relatively coarse and crude, and no stone temples were made. Although iron, gold and silver vessels have already been used, their decoration and popularity cannot catch up with pottery. In a large part, it is because pottery is uniquely adapted to the requirements of artistic development in the Dark Ages.

For some reasons which are yet to be affirmed, the glorious Bronze Age finally falls into economic exhaustion, with the loss of the art of writing and a sharp drop in population. Contemporary archaeologists even found evidence of human sacrifice during this age, as some cooking containers and human skeletons with axe markings were excavated

¹² John Boardman, *Early Greek Vase Painting* (London, 1998), 23.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Piper, *The Illustrated History of Art* (London, 2005), 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35,

together. From these excavations, historians infer that during this period ancient Greeks likely encountered horrible threats, and the panic or sense of insecurity caused by this kind of tragedy may have been directed by priests.

Since there are no concrete or precise records, it is hard to analyze the extent to which economic exhaustion impacted the ancient Greek's choice of artistic materials. Pottery undoubtedly began to show its importance as cultural media. Archaeologists discovered pottery was exclusively used by various people in various situation regularly, from ordinary people to elites, from daily life, funeral to religious and sacred situation. Gold and silver wares were too expensive to be owned by the common Greek peoples. For the same reason, their sizes cannot be compared with pottery. Therefore, during the Geometric period there are many monumental pots as grave markers. On the other hand, from the perspective of preservation, pottery can endure thousand of years with painting and glaze as good as new if they are not broken. By contrast metal works cannot withstand oxidization over time, and stone temples also cannot withstand the effect of erosion over time.

With regards to the significance of pottery as a historiographical method, Boardman also comments,

The production and use of decorated pottery is the only universal (for Greeks), prolific and relatively sophisticated source which might enable us to draw comparisons about the visual and social experiences of ordinary people in different parts of the Greek world and in their colonies, over centuries. They are sufficiently differentiated to invite explanations, sometimes of broader historical relevance. This may seem a bold claim, but it is what archaeology is about, and we are less likely to be misled by evidence that is full and articulate than by accidental survival from later periods of 'historical' accounts, or by the very partial survival of other artefacts of whatever quality or value. The only comparable medium, for later periods, is coinage.¹⁶

It is not a bold claim, rather, a sensible analysis. Archaeologists have certainly considered other media, such as metal work. "Metals

¹⁶ Boardman, *Early Greek Vase Painting*, 263.

were available in Greece too but are less informative, less well preserved, and gold and silver were largely in the possession of the fat cats.”¹⁷ And with regarding to size, “in Geometric Athens the vessel can be enlarged to monumental proportions, on which the figure decoration can be explicit about rites. There is no question here of pottery substituting for metal or stone.”¹⁸ How about comparison with sculpture? “Ubiquitous objects like profusely and significantly decorated pots, might have even more to offer than formal sculpture when it comes to understanding antiquity and ancient Greek taste.”¹⁹

Here it would not be appropriate to argue that, from the perspective of artistic style, earthen wares come from earth, giving us the sense of homeliness and simplicity, is a pastoralist art itself, and the entirety of Greece is a big village composed of many small villages in the Dark Ages, so pottery matches that era quite perfectly. A female Chinese writer San Mao in *‘Huatao Kiln’* says, “although we can also fight for and talk about political issues, let’s make pottery and enjoy wild flowers.” It appears that pottery symbolizes a peaceful and idyllic life. However, the truth is, behind the beautiful silhouette of pottery in the Dark Ages, archeologists found a turbulent world. In the Bible, we could perceive the very detailed picture of the similar great suffering and grief in a destroyed city and nation, such as Lamentations over Jerusalem and David’s lamentations over Saul, ‘How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!’ ‘How the precious sons of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter’s hands!’²⁰

In regard to the above topic of woman and pottery, there is a relevant question: who are the painters and potters of that exquisitely decorated pottery? Boardman argues that, these types of figurative patterns probably originated from weaving art, such as basket, carpet weaving and patchwork and in many early societies, they were typically female’s crafts. Therefore, the development of pottery in the Geometric period probably attributes to female endeavor, although women can hardly cope with huge-sized pots, their roles as vase painters can not be ignored

¹⁷ Ibid., 264.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 270.

²⁰ Lamentations 1:1, 4:2. Holy Bible (NIV).

absolutely.

This sort of attention to female's unique status in pottery can also be seen in some other papers. Blundell et al examines the ideological implications of a female focus. Although the article focuses on the pottery scene rather than their potters, it also concerns the issue of female potters or painters, such as here, "the question of who made and commissioned Attic pots is obviously relevant. All the named potters and painters are male, but there is at least one representation of a woman painting a pot, and female painters may well have existed." As Blundell et al notes, although scholars point out that the evidence for female painters is small, it is there nonetheless.²¹

The question of who the potters and painters of the decorated pottery are is not irrelevant to the main argument here. I also have a bold claim to make: since the Dark Ages experienced a sharp population drop, the ratio of the adult male drop is probably exceedingly higher than the adult female drop, since adult males were often massacred after defeat in ancient times. If so, the proportion of female potters and painters in the Dark Ages was probably much higher than it was in the archaic and classical periods. I have noticed that in the Proto-Geometric and Geometric figurative patterns, female bodies were not as prominent as those in the archaic and classical period, whereas male bodies are more prominent. Such a phenomenon indicates the existence of the female artists' perspective. Those elaborate and exquisite patterns and designs seem to show us as well, their styles are quite feminized, lingering, complicated and delicate, which are likely the evidence that female potters and painters exist widely.

In addition, I argue that radical social change in this period gave the ancient Greeks unique life experiences, especially death experiences, and as responsible for giving birth, women's perception of those experiences must surely be equal to those of a man. A transformation between external life-death and its internal projection certainly exists. Internal contemplation on life and death triggers art creation. Indeed, life and death are almost always core themes of literature and art. Needless to say, Paul Klee's *Death and Fire*, and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in

²¹ See Sue Blundell and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, "Women's Bonds, Women's Pots: Adornment Scenes in Attic Vase-Painting," *Phoenix* 62 (2008): 115.

the Dooryard Bloom'd," just as Bloom says in *The Western Canon*, are attendants of death. Looking back to the Dark Ages and the period after it, it is not difficult to infer that Greece was being reborn and pottery provided the little wombs. I agree with Robin Osborne's ideas as follows, it is a mistake to think a concrete feature of the ancient Greek city-states produced 'philosophers'. Only in whole cultural environment of the ancient Greece can we understand the development of philosophical utterance properly.

Obviously, there is less acknowledgment about artistic status of pottery in Proto-Geometric and Geometric period than Greek sculpture. When people mention the ancient Greek plastic arts, usually the first occurring form is sculpture. Even if people talk about decorated pottery, they always pay more attention to the black and red figure periods. People believe black and red figures represent ancient Greek pottery, and to some extent, that point is sensible. Geometric patterns and the primal motif of life and death in the Dark Ages are not exclusively unique stylistic characteristics that belong to the ancient Greek plastic arts. They are in fact primal motifs in many primitive arts. Which culture does not have myths regarding cosmos and life creation, and which plastic arts do not originate from geometric patterns? For example, consider the Japanese Jomon pot in the British museum, which was also quite old. It is worthwhile to question, with regards to the artistic level of Geometric patterns, whether there is any other decorated pottery that is comparable with that of the Dark Ages in ancient Greece?

It is a stereotype that only red and black figure pottery represents the typical Greek pottery style. This stereotype focuses excessively on the epic poems of Theogony and Homeric, and the stories of those gods and heroes within those poems, ignoring the more primitive appearances such as the Geometric patterns and theme of life and death. Such a stereotype can be traced back to Ancient Greece itself, whose mythology embodies the construction of genealogy and order, and whose philosophy manifests the start of rationality and logos.

Nietzsche's prescription for Western civilization should be hailed at least in one respect when it comes to the following question, which god among Ancient Greek gods experienced death and rebirth like Dio-

nysus? Jesus is certainly a great example.²² A god without death experience can not sense the fundamental fragility and loneliness of human life, and therefore cannot value profound grace, charity and goodness. Similarly, a work without touching life and death is merely playing games. From the Proto-Geometric period to the Geometric period, decorated pottery constructs and conserves the plastic arts of the Dark ages. The process is not only the process of Geometric pattern from the coarse to the delicate, but also one of portrayal from the simple to the complex, until specific scenes are finally set and stories are narrated.

A facile equation of some patterns and images with cosmological life and death is not convincing, such as those concentric circles and semi-concentric circles symbolizing the Sun, the Moon and stars; those triangles drawn by cross parallel and wave lines represent mountains and rivers; the black glaze of large space is the Earth, and hunting figures with long spears and animal patterns living secular lives. Art works are never the copy of copies.

Indeed, we can see star patterns directly in the Geometric vase paintings, such as the eight pointed star in Attic LGII dish (Ker. 800), the Sun in Attic LGIb kantharos (Athens 18422), the Sun in attic LGIb oinochoe of Dipylon workshop (Athens 152; H. 21), and the point star in Thera LG amphora (Copenhagen NM VIII. 324) etc. (John Boardman, 42, 40, 61) Those elements can be found almost everywhere, accompanied by plants, flowers, trees, hunters and animals, which do look like the images of cosmos. While if there is no reflection on essence beyond phenomena, all those scenes and portrayals are nothing more than copies.

Archaeologists found there are many large vases in the Geometric period, and the larger their sizes, the more exquisite are their patterns. Remarkably, those large vases are generally used in graves, such as grave markers or grave decorations. The essential distinction between humans and animals is that humans will be buried and animals will not.²³ Those

²² Perhaps this is why Nietzsche signed both of them on postcards in Christmas of 1888.

²³ Of course this point does not preclude the fact that some ancient people also buried their pets. For example, a Chinese emperor Jia Jing of the Ming dynasty is said to have cherished cats very much and when his pet cats died, he proceeded to bury them. Therefore they were no longer animals, they were in fact part of the family of human beings. Interestingly, in Isaiah 11: 6-9, the

large vases demonstrate to us the ancient Greeks' views on death.

The amphora (No. A 00804 in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens) of 155 cm in height is a typical case.²⁴ Besides its incomparably exquisite geometric decorations with delicate rhythms like music of the spheres, the portrayal shows directly the scene of death and burial. A human lies down horizontally and peacefully. Other people stand lined up solemnly and respectfully.

The ideas found painted in this amphora show what is really behind Ancient Greek culture, even the whole of Western culture. The funeral image gives us explicit, deep insight into the reasons for some original questions. It does not appear to have been an improvisation. The creations of ancient anonymous painters and potters were portrayal creations that were committed to memory. They could then be dictated and written and composed again. I should point out that one of the most exciting and significant finds in Western archaeological history is this amphora.²⁵ Why does Theogony tell us the beginning of gods is so unjust—father and son killing each other; why does the Bible say the first ancestor of human beings committed an original sin; why in the beginning of the Presocratic aesthetics, does Anaximander tell us in a fragment that all existing things must be punished for their injustice according to the order of time; and why does Socrates ask Crito to offer a rooster to Asclepius for him? The expected answer is here: the attention and reflection on death and the attempt to seek the significance of death. It is the extraordinarily unique death experience in the Dark Ages that led the ancient Greeks to contemplate this philosophical theme.

The culture about the 'original sin of life' within the Western world is quite unique. At least in China, especially before the Song dynasty when Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism influenced each other, there was no such concept. Chinese traditional ideas suggest, "the biggest virtue of the heaven and the earth is vitality" and "Producing and reproducing can be named change." Thus, the meaning of death is nega-

prophet also depicts a world of equality for humans and animals.

²⁴ As I stepped into the Museum in September of 2013 I already felt so familiar with it.

²⁵ I think this can be an additional interpretation toward the reason why the amphora is placed at the entrance of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, besides its obvious artistic achievement.

tive, which should be avoided as much as possible. Some Taoist practices, such as seeking a longevity drug, try to seek immortality for our bodies. “Long live the emperor” manifests the ultimate dreams. In a few words, the meaning of life in Chinese traditional thoughts is self-evident and prevailing.

Why would the ancient Greeks rather paint the solemnity of death and burial on vases? Perhaps the Greeks in the Dark Ages experienced quite unique death experiences. What horrifying situation could lead to the loss of the art of writing? Archeologists could make a lot of assumptions about the reason and it is indeed a matter of much dispute,²⁶ but there is an obvious fact that cannot be ignored, namely, horrifying death experience. Besides this, when and where else in the world did the loss of the art of writing occur during human history? Pollen-analysis indicates that the population sharply decreased at that time. There is no precise evidence that reveals what led to this and to what extent the decrease in population caused the loss of the art of writing. Imagination cannot be much assistance. Nevertheless, is it not possible that with their unique collective experience, the ancient Greeks reflect like this: if death is just, life is unjust?

To sum up, after the Dark Ages, the reborn Greek texts with their new art of writing begin to recollect their collective memory. The epic poems of Theogony and the Homeric are some records of those collective memories, and Anaximander's fragment reveals the collective sub-

²⁶ There are various assumptions among academics, such as internal corruption, alien attacks, natural disasters, severe plagues, and wars. I consider natural disasters to be more reasonable historically, especially the floods, such as those that were recorded in the Genesis of the Bible even though there are some problems with viewing the Bible as history. It's hard to determine dates for many events within the Bible. When was Genesis written and when did the events in Genesis such as the flood take place? There are certainly problems with chronology. Even still, archaeology supported the basic historic biblical tradition, such as, we agree the Old Testament was written between 1000 BC and 164 BC, and the history and stories in the Old Testament ended before 500 BC. Considering the history, to assume a flood happened during the twelfth century to mid eighth century in ancient Greece sounds reasonable. In an era without modern large-scaled military weapons like we have now, I cannot imagine any other horrifying death experience that could be comparable with a biblical flood when it comes to the scale of death.

conscious. Prometheus and Oedipus Rex narrate life tragedies of mortals, heroes and gods. Except for ancient Greece, which other culture produced such great tragic dramas? The code of Ancient Greece is found here, the unique history in the Dark Ages gives the ancient Greeks unique experience, which is condensed on the vase paintings with death and burial patterns. As Robert Browning says, “time’s wheel runs back or stops, potter and clay endure.” The typical pot mentioned above is of similar size and scene which we can see in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens and other museums.²⁷ Through these vases, exploration of the significance of life and death, and the affirmation of tragedy, as the Greeks’ cultural and genetic heritage, has been rooted deeply in the ancient Greeks, and manifested broadly later. Therefore, we have encountered them again and again, in the Pre-Socratic fragments, in the tragedy of Dionysus’ death and rebirth, even after 2,500 years in Nietzsche’s writings.

4. Conclusion

This relationship between Presocratic fragments and vase paintings in the Dark Ages is difficult to characterize. I believe they must have both originated from the interpretation of the same theme; Life and Death. Interpreting the theme of Geometric vase paintings as the riddle of life and death through a few vases may seem subjective, however are there any ‘actual or objective historical records’ that are not an interpre-

²⁷ Even if the number of archaeological remains of the similar decorated pots in the Dark Ages was just a handful, the conclusions of this paper can still be made. Perhaps it is the sheer economy of archaeological evidence that inspires me to imagine the mystical possibility of this theme. Therefore, perhaps we could play out a drama entitled ‘The Flood in the Ancient Greek Dark Ages.’ The archaeological assumption has already been made that human sacrifice actually happened, through a few excavated human bones with cut traces and pots nearby. Rather than a literary narrative about Abraham and Isaac in biblical canon, or a mythological narrative about the Minotaur and its Labyrinth, why could we not draw a conclusion that ancient Greek potters and vase painters viewed the riddle of life and death as a creative theme on their creative works considering that there are already a handful archaeological vases with the scene out there? This imaginative theme not only demonstrates the sorrow of death but also the sublimity of life.

tation at the time when there is no video technology? We have no direct access to past events, except for mediated access in material, namely, archaeological remains which yield information to us only after the process of interpretation, or in texts that are themselves already an interpretation of events and must still be interpreted by us.

The claim that Presocratic cosmological thoughts originated from Hesiod and Homer relies too much on texts, the transformation from writing to writing,²⁸ thus it ignores the material of archaeological remains, ignores the possible bonds between plastic arts and writing. Maybe we should pay more attention to a simple archeological discovery, namely, before any art of writing appeared, plastic arts had already occurred.

To sum up, compared with magnificent temples, pottery is more like a little womb of ancient Greek thoughts. When traditional wooden temples became ashes due to countless wars and disasters, and all traces seem to be wiped away, it is the earthen pottery that preserves the ancient Greek culture. Indeed, when time's wheel runs, metal wares can not resist oxidation, and gold and silver wares cannot be popularly afforded and used, it is the earthen pottery that conceives the Presocratic thoughts.

The important thing is that, when we pay exclusive attention to the monumental Attic grave-amphora in the late Geometric period (760-750 BCE) whose scene shows the mourning for the dead, we must not ignore other images and patterns in Geometric vase paintings, which adds a level of complexity to the whole picture of this period's pottery. Alongside the hermeneutic portrayal of the life and death theme in this paper, what we find more often at that time are purely geometric patterns, and these images as follows also occur. The Sun, the Moon, stars, hunting

²⁸ Here is another example, "For Iamblichus and his successors...the origins of Hellenic philosophy were to be traced back to ancient revelations. As the Egyptian and Chaldeans were original revelatory sources for all mankind...For the late Neo-Platonists, the true Hellenic 'love of wisdom' could be supported and illustrated not only by the inspired poetry of Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod, but also by the Egyptian, Phoenician, and Assyrian myths and 'theological dogmas', including the so-called Chaldean Oracles." Please see Algis Uzdavinys, ed., *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy* (Bloomington, 2004), xxiv.

figures, long spears and animals pricked by spears, plants, flowers, trees and so on which appear secular-inclined. One image does not preclude others. It is going to be important that both the inclinations of secularity and eternity be held in a dialectic tension and that they can be reconciled with each other as one layer of the whole cosmological scenery to show what prompted primitive potters and painters to create in the Dark Ages and convey them to Presocratics later.

This does not exclude another possibility which is, all vase paintings in the Dark Ages do not have to be a uniform or unified image system with a single theme or doctrine of cosmology. Vase paintings in the Dark Ages are not an art book, rather, an art gallery that originates in vastly differently historical situations. It responds to a variety of shifting needs and events and reflects a range of perceptions about those specific centuries in the Greek world and its colonies.



(The picture of the amphora A 00804 is from the website of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, 5 August 2017.

<http://www.namuseum.gr/collections/vases/geom/geometrical03-en.html>)

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