Chapter 3

The Iconography of War Violence in Archaic Greece: Vase Painting and Other Media

CON3

Introduction

"*Polemos* is the father and ruler of all things; he defines some as gods and others as men, making some slaves and others free."[1] These words of Heraclitus are illuminating and capture the *ethos* of Archaic Greek culture, where war was a central element of the value system that was so deeply ingrained that it constituted a true way of life. War--and the violence associated with it--was thus a pervasive aspect of daily experience, thereby sharply distinguishing the ancient Greek world from the modern Western world.

In line with the methodological premises of this volume,[2] the present contribution explores the cultural significance of violence associated with war in the Archaic Greek world by examining how this violence was conceived, experienced, processed, and presented to the public. A particularly rich area of study that offers the opportunity to analyze a wide range of evidence across a broad chronological span lies in the representation of war-related violence in Greek pottery painting. This study focuses on the period from the early 7th century BCE to the early 5th century BCE--a time when depictions of warfare were especially prevalent, thereby providing valuable insights into the violence that inevitably accompanied it.

From a methodological perspective, the greatest mistake a scholar can make is to approach Archaic Greek imagery using parameters derived from our own cultural and social contexts. This approach can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the meaning and values that these

[1] Heraclitus Fr. 53 Burnet. See Reale (2006) 352-53.
[2] See the introduction to the present volume by CON1.

images conveyed to their original audience. Thus, it is crucial to shift from an ethical to an emic approach[3]--in other words, as Jean-Pierre Vernant put it, to look at "the moon with the eyes of a Greek."[4]

Another key methodological consideration is intermediality, or the need to analyze how different types of media interact and how the same themes are represented across various forms of expression. While the primary focus of the present study is on images found on Greek Archaic ceramics, other forms of evidence--such as statues and architectural friezes--are also considered. These items require a distinct approach given their unique contexts and purposes and the unique ways in which they were experienced by the public.

A final important caveat concerns the value attributed to the images of violence produced in the Archaic Greek world: To what extent do they reflect reality, and how should we interpret them? Scholars have oscillated between viewing these images as direct representations of historical reality--sometimes even attempting to infer combat techniques and tactics[5]--and adopting a contrasting view that considers them to be fictional constructs based on idealized concepts with no concrete connection to actual events.[6]

However, there is a third approach, in which these two opposing positions do not negate each other. According to this view, images of war and violence can indeed reference reality, but this reality should be understood to be a cultural construct. In other words, the images represent a concept that is not objective, but that is rather perceived and portrayed through specific mental frameworks. Essentially, these are conceptual realities, and they should be analyzed as such in order to be decoded correctly. In this context, we should recall the words of François Lissarrague, who cautions that proper iconographic analysis does not imply that each image is a near "photographic" repetition of reality; instead, every representation is a construction created from a surprisingly limited set of

[3] For a recent overview, see Lissarrague (2022) 13-14.
[4] Vernant (1997a) 4.
[5] Van Wees (2009) 273-86.
[6] Hölscher (2019) 5-7. On the debate, see Schwartz (2009) 20-22; Kagan and Viggiano (2013b); and Lloyd *et al.* (2021); for similar considerations concerning Roman Imperial reliefs, see the contribution by CON4 in the present volume.

elements and serves as an interpretation of reality by the artist--the product of this artist's own reading of the world around them.[7]

The *Mise en Scène* of War and War Violence

As stated in the introduction, war was a central element in the value system of the Greek world, thereby making it unsurprising that depictions of combat appear on ceramics as early as in the beginning of the 7th century BCE. Noteworthy examples include two Proto-Corinthian aryballoi--one from Lechaion (ca. 690 BCE)[8] and one from Perachora (ca. 675 BCE)[9]--both featuring groups engaged in combat. The former is particularly significant as it marks the first depiction of the hoplitic shield, which is round and has a double-grip system (*porpax* and *antilabe*).

Other, slightly more recent Proto-Corinthian vases play a key role in the discussion on the development of Greek warfare during the Archaic period. Examples include works by the Chigi Painter--specifically two aryballoi (both between 670 and 650 BCE) and the famous Olpe Chigi (650-640 BCE).[10] Additionally, we can include a wall painting with a frieze of warriors from the Temple of Kalapodi,[11] which some scholars suggest may have been executed by the same Chigi Painter, who appears to have been a craftsman with evident skill in various media.[12]

These objects--and especially the Olpe Chigi--are primarily discussed by researchers in terms of their significance to the development of combat techniques. While earlier evidence shows a diversity of types of equipment, the works of the Chigi Painter--particularly the friezes--depict warriors equipped with heavy gear (Corinthian-style helmets, Argive shields, and greaves) and clashing in what appear to be dense ranks. Regardless as to the debate about their interpretation--that

[7] Lissarrague (1990) 2-3: "La fidélité des détails […] n'implique pas que l'ensemble de chaque image soit comme la répétition quasi 'photographique' du réel. Chaque représentation est en fait une construction, à partir d'un nombre étonnamment restreint d'éléments, et comme une interprétation du réel par l'artiste, le produit de sa propre lecture dans le réel qui l'entoure."
[8] Snodgrass (1991) Fig. 26 and Viggiano and van Wees (2013) 63.
[9] Dunbabin (1962) Pl. 57 and Viggiano and van Wees (2013) 64.
[10] For a recent debate, see D'Acunto (2013) with previous bibliography and Giuliani (2022) 71-76.
[11] Niemeier *et al.* (2012).
[12] D'Acunto (2013) 37-41.

is, whether they depict scenes of battle between two hoplite phalanxes or alternatively a more fluid styles of combat--what is significant here is how violence becomes one of the central elements emphasized by the vase painter.[13] This is evident in the depiction of fallen soldiers interspersed among others engaged in action and is particularly apparent in the aryballoi of the Chigi Painter--one of which is preserved in the British Museum (known as the Macmillan Aryballos) (Fig. 3.1), and the other of which is now in Berlin--which bear a striking similarity to the almost-contemporaneous elegies of Tyrtaeus. [14] Additionally, the depiction of fallen and slain warriors is not confined to Proto-Corinthian productions; rather, it also appears frequently across major ceramic productions from the 7th to 6th centuries BCE, spanning Proto-Attic, Corinthian, Attic, Laconic, and Eastern Greek vases (Fig. 3.2).[15]

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.1 HERE]

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.2 HERE]

What becomes clear when analyzing the depictions of war-related violence in the Orientalizing and Archaic period productions--each of which has its own distinct characteristics--is a noticeable shift in tone compared with the imagery of the Geometric period. In the Geometric period, vivid and gruesome representations of extreme, often-excessive violence were common.[16] By the 7th century BCE, these excesses had gradually diminished, giving rise to a different, ethical perspective in which--even during mortal combat--opponents are shown to acknowledge one another's virtue.[17] The focus shifts from the violence itself to the moment of struggle and combat. As a result, violence

[13] Discussion in Kagan and Viggiano (2013b); Viggiano and van Wees (2013); and Pace (2017) with previous bibliography.
[14] See, e.g., Tyrtaeus Fr. 7.7-11 West.
[15] On the argument, see Boardman (1998) 83-176.
[16] Hölscher (2019) 8-31.
[17] Muth (2008) 139-238.

is suggested rather than explicitly depicted and is often represented through warriors lying on the ground rather than through direct, graphic portrayals.

There has been considerable debate about the causes of this change, with some attributing it to the competitive spirit of Archaic Greek society[18] and others linking it to the emergence of a new *ethos* connected to the development of political systems and structures.[19] Regardless of the cause, this long-term trend is clearly visible in 6th-century BCE Attic production, in which--despite some exceptions--battle scenes generally depict a sense of balance between the warriors. This applies both to those who are easily recognizable as heroes from the epic tradition and to "anonymous" combatants, all of whom share a common code of conduct that establishes norms to limit and prevent the escalation of violence against opponents. Notably, these norms of representation are often absent in depictions of combat with monstrous beings, such as Giants, Centaurs, or Amazons, or in battles involving Heracles against Geryon and Cycnus. In these instances, the combatants are depicted as warriors dressed in Greek fashion, yet they retain their monstrous and violent nature.[20]

In Attic pottery, the experience of war is encapsulated in three main themes with numerous variations: departure, combat, and the transportation of the fallen.[21] The departure--which can sometimes be replaced by the warrior's dressing (Fig. 3.3)--is a moment filled with tension, often accompanied by menacing omens suggesting that departing warriors may not return on their own feet and must instead be carried home by their comrades. Combat--the central theme in which violence unfolds--can be depicted as duels or battles involving larger groups. This combat may represent the moment just before battle begins or may capture the final instant when one or more combatants lie struck on the ground, or when the fatal blow is dealt (Fig. 3.4). What characterizes all these scenes in Attic pottery from the first three-quarters of the 6th century BCE is a restrained approach to depicting

[18] Angeli Bernardini (2016).
[19] On the debate, see Kagan and Viggiano (2013b).
[20] Muth (2008) 25-137.
[21] Hölscher (2019) 31-46.

the aftermath of violence that typically involves avoiding an emphasis on the wounds inflicted by weapons or on the grimaces of pain of the fallen or dying.[22]

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.3 HERE]

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.4 HERE]

This trend underwent a reversal in the last thirty years of the 6th century BCE that continued into the first two decades of the 5th century BCE, when scenes filled with pathos became increasingly common. In these depictions, there is a focus on emotionally charged details, such as blood pouring from the wounds of dying or already-dead warriors (consider, e.g., the scene of the transport of Sarpedon's body on the famous Euphronios Krater), with their faces revealing the physical suffering caused by the consequences of violence (Fig. 3.5).[23] However, this situation certainly does not imply any criticism of violence; rather, the focus shifts from depicting the battle itself to emphasizing the victor while still preserving the dignity of the defeated. The equality of the combatants is maintained, thereby underscoring the honorable nature of the fight.

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.5 HERE]

Turning to other media, such as architectural sculpture, it is evident that the Greek world often avoids depicting episodes of warfare and violence in relation to contemporary reality, instead placing these depictions in a mythical context. This can be seen, for example, in the North frieze of the Siphnian treasury at Delphi, in the pediment decorations of the temple of Athena Polias on the Acropolis in Athens, and in the decorations of the temple of Athena Aphaia at Aegina. [24] A

[22] Muth (2008) 139-59.
[23] Muth (2008) 160-82.
[24] On the Northen frieze of the Siphnian Treasure at Delphi (c. 530-20 BCE), see Schultz (2019) 106 and Sturgeon (2019) 285. On the Eastern Pediment of the Athena Polias Temple (c. 510 BCE) on the Athenian Acropolis, see Fullerton (2016)

particularly significant example of this cultural taboo is the well-known kouros from Anavyssos (Attica, 530 BCE), which seemingly has no connection to war, violence, or death and instead presents itself in the full psychophysical vigor associated with youth.[25] However, we know that this dedication is linked to a mournful event: The statue is accompanied by an inscription that reveals the funerary aspect of the dedication: "Stop and weep at the monument of the deceased Kroisos, whom rabid Ares one day killed while fighting in the front ranks."

A slightly more recent example (520-10 BCE) is the funerary stele created by Aristocles for a certain Aristion, found at Velanideza near Marathon (Attica). In this case, the deceased is depicted not as a *kouros*, but as a warrior--a role hinted at by the presence of armor elements such as a corselet, greaves, and a spear held in the left hand.[26] Here, the association with the sphere of war is more direct, although the warrior's abilities are not shown in action.

The Greek world exhibited a strong tendency to avoid direct references to contemporary episodes of war and violence, with only a few exceptions being known. Depictions of Persians on Attic ceramics from the early 5th century BCE, for example, never allude to specific historical battles.[27] Unfortunately, the large-scale paintings of the Stoa Poikile--which portrayed the Battle of Oenoe (506 BCE) and the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) and appear to have depicted actual battles--are known only through literary sources.[28]

In general, contemporary events were filtered through myth, which explains the popularity of specific iconographic themes--such as the Gigantomachy, Amazonomachy, and Centauromachy--in the decoration of large architectural programs after the Persian Wars.[29] Departures from this convention were rare and often controversial. A prime example is Aeschylus' tragedy "The Persians," which directly confronted the traumatic events of the Second Persian War, or the case of Phrynichus,

85-87. On the pedimental sculptures of the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina (Western pediment ca. 510-500 BCE; Eastern pediment ca. 490-80 BCE), see Brinkmann and Scholl (2010) 117-44.
[25] Martini (2008) 270-74.
[26] Sturgeon (2019) 288-89.
[27] Pace (2018) 98 with previous bibliography.
[28] Paus. 1.15.1. De Angelis (1996) 130-36; Papini (2011) 64; and Palagia (2018).
[29] Hall (1989); Miller (1997); and Pace (2018) 98.

one of the earliest tragedians, who was fined for depicting the destruction of Miletus by the Persians in 494 BCE with excessive realism.[30]

Greek depictions of war and violence evolved from the detailed and often-brutal scenes of the Geometric period to more stylized and restrained representations in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. Mythological battles--such as the Gigantomachy--increasingly came to replace depictions of real-world conflicts. A shift occurred at the end of the 6th century BCE, with a growing emphasis on pathos and emotional elements. However, direct representations of contemporary warfare remained rare, which reflected a cultural preference for conveying war through mythological or idealized imagery rather than for depicting its brutal reality.

Exceptions to the Rule and Collateral Damage: Uncontrolled Violence and Violence Against Non-Combatants

As we have seen, the analysis of various types of evidence (i.e., ceramic, sculptural, and pictorial) revealed that the violence of war is present and--in some cases--can be depicted very starkly, but at the same time, this violence is contained within certain boundaries. However, there are exceptions: Indeed, there are instances in which the respect between opponents is broken by acts of extreme cruelty. A prototypical example is Hector's fate following his mortal confrontation with Achilles. In most depictions of the Trojan War, Achilles and Hector are often shown as equals--both models of virtue--prepared to face each other decisively but within the established rules of combat.[31] What changes is what happens afterward, when Achilles succumbs to an extreme and brutal desire for revenge, pushing him to exceed the limits of the norms. This behavior--for which he will later face consequences--goes beyond mere victory and the avenging of Patroclus' death: Achilles desecrates the body of his opponent by tying it to his chariot and dragging it around the walls of Troy

[30] Lohmann (2021) 52.
[31] Hölscher (2019) 68-73.

three times.[32] Another violation of the norms that is depicted several times is Achilles' refusal to return Hector's body, keeping it as a macabre war trophy and denying it the rites of burial. In Attic pottery, this scene is depicted with an emphasis on the stark contrast between the feasting Achilles and the lifeless body of his opponent lying on the ground, all while Priam pleads for the return of his son's body (Fig. 3.6).[33]

Another area in which uncontrolled violence can be observed is in the brutal killing of defenseless non-combatants by soldiers. The most famous example is, of course, the sack of Troy by the Greeks--a theme that gained early popularity, as seen in the famous amphora from Mykonos (second quarter of the 7th century BCE), in which the atrocities suffered by the population are vividly depicted.[34] This theme highlights what awaited the non-combatant population in times of war: destruction, indiscriminate massacres (including of the elderly and children), rape, and exile for those who managed to survive.[35]

In Attic imagery, depictions of the *Ilioupersis* (i.e., the fall of Troy) are well known from as early as the 6th century BCE, but these images took on a different significance as the inhabitants of Attica began to face the real threat posed by the Persian Empire. It therefore does not seem coincidental that one of the most complete and evocative representations of the mythical episode was created by an Attic artist--the Kleophrades Painter--at the very beginning of the 5th century BCE on a hydria found in Nola (Fig. 3.7).[36]

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.6 HERE]

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[32] *BAPD* 351200-302338.
[33] *BAPD* 352403-350427.
[34] Hölscher (2019) 23 Fig. 8a-b.
[35] Fachard and Harris (2021a) 29 with previous bibliography.
[36] Naples, National Archaeological Museum, 81669; *BAPD* 201724. *ARV*^{2} 189.74, 1632; *Para* 341.

Indeed, on the shoulder of the vase are several episodes related to the last night of Troy, when the Achaean warriors--having breached the city--indulged in the most heinous acts, all woven together with remarkable narrative skill. These acts include the murder of the defenseless, as exemplified by the slaying of Priam and Astyanax by Neoptolemus; violence against women, as seen in the episode of Cassandra and Ajax the Lesser; and a complete disregard for civil and religious norms. The murder of Priam and Astyanax occurs at the altar of Zeus Erkeios, while the violence against Cassandra takes place in full view of the statue of Athena Parthenos.[37] The few who managed to survive--following Aeneas with his father Anchises and son Ascanius (Fig. 3.8)--were left to endure the harsh condition of exile, destined to wander far from their homeland in search of a new place to call home.

[PLEASE INSERT FIG. 3.8 HERE]

In this regard, several archaeological findings from various parts of the ancient Greek world--particularly Athens--are of great significance and offer firsthand evidence of the destruction that the city endured during the Persian occupation of 480 BCE. For instance, in the Agora, numerous wells filled with rubble and debris are documented, all of which seem to be remnants of the area's clearing following the Persian invasion. These wells provide a tangible trace of the devastation not only economically, but also in terms of the destruction caused by the war.[38]

It is well known that on the Acropolis, the Persians spared no religious buildings or votive offerings, as is vividly illustrated by the destruction of the Kallimachos monument, which celebrated the victory at Marathon, or by the mutilations suffered by the korai statues, which were torn apart in complete disregard of religious norms.[39] This same violence is also documented in other sanctuaries in Attica (e.g., Sounion, Eleusis, Ramnous, and Brauron) and beyond, such as at Kalapodi. Unfortunately, these

[37] Cerchiai (2006).
[38] Shear (1993); Lynch (2011) 20-28; and McKesson Camp (2021) 72.
[39] Fachard and Harris (2021a) 17.

episodes have more than one modern parallel, as we are reminded by the recent devastating destruction of cultural heritage during wars.[40] It is clear that the fury directed at monuments and sacred places was not aimed at achieving military objectives, but rather at spreading terror among the population, thereby leaving indelible marks both physically and in the collective memory.[41]

Finally, the case of Himera can give historical depth to the images evoked by the hydria painted by the Kleophrades Painter. In 409 BCE, the city of Himera was besieged and successfully captured by the Carthaginian army. In this case, the raw brutality of war and the violence inflicted upon both people and property are revealed in mass graves--where many bodies of the defeated were carelessly thrown--as well as in individual graves that had been hastily set up throughout the city[42] and in the widespread devastation visible across the site. [43] The massacre had a profound impact on Himera, which--like Troy as depicted by the Kleophrades Painter--remained depopulated and abandoned in the aftermath of the Carthaginian invasion.[44]

Conclusions

As we have seen, images of violence related to war were deeply embedded in the lives of the Archaic Greeks, thereby making it essential to understand the cultural significance that these images held for their audience and their connection to reality. From a methodological standpoint, it is crucial to avoid a purely aesthetic approach to these depictions and to consider the substantial difference between modern sensibilities and those of the ancients, for whom violence was an omnipresent aspect of daily life. Thus, it is legitimate to question the relationship between these depictions of violence and their historical reality.

On the one hand, these images undoubtedly depict elements drawn from reality, as suggested by the gradual modification of details in the armament (e.g., the appearance of new elements, or the

[40] McKesson Camp (2021) 71-79.
[41] Fachard and Harris (2021a) 17-18.
[42] Vassallo (2016).
[43] Vassallo (2020) 16-17 and Allegro (2021).
[44] Vassallo (2005) 41.

typological evolution of items, e.g., the cuirass or helmet)[45] and the portrayal of physical injuries sustained by warriors, which appear to be inspired by direct experience observed on the battlefield. Indeed, it is not uncommon to encounter scenes of warriors on the ground, either dead or dying, with extensive wounds to their legs or lower abdomen, almost as if they were the materialization of the dramatic scenes described by Tyrtaeus in his elegies.[46] The legs--being rich in blood vessels and unprotected by armor or shield--were often targeted in battle. In many vase images, hoplites are depicted charging their opponents by thrusting the spear beneath the shield to strike the less-protected lower body.[47] Another vulnerable area was the collarbones and neck, which could be targeted by holding the spear above the shield--a posture that was common outside of Attic 6th-century BCE ceramics.[48] One notable example is the famous duel between Achilles and Penthesilea portrayed by the skilled hand of Exekias on the neck amphora from Vulci, which is now in the British Museum.[49] The dramatic nature of this fighting technique is corroborated by exceptional anthropological data, such as findings from the mass graves linked to the Battle of Himera in 480 BCE. Some of the fallen soldiers from the Sicilian contingent--pitifully buried--still had spearheads lodged in the upper part of their chests, penetrating from top to bottom, which is concrete evidence of the violence experienced on the battlefield.[50]

On the other hand, it is important to reiterate that representations of violence related to war are cultural productions that are constructed from concepts that held meaning for the society that created them. The question therefore is not how closely these scenes resemble reality, but rather why and in what way reality was depicted and perceived. We must move away from the modern concept of verisimilitude and focus on the fact that these images offer conceptual portrayals of reality--not objective depictions, but ones that must be interpreted through cultural and ideological filters.

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[45] Graells i Fabregat (2021).
[46] Tyrtaeus Fr. 7.7-11 West.
[47] Hanson (1989) 209-10.
[48] Vassallo (2011) 29.
[49] London, British Museum B210; *BAPD* 310389; *ABV* 144.7, 672.2, 686; *Para* 60; and Iozzo (2018) 35 Fig. 6-7.
[50] Vassallo (2020) 11.

How should we then interpret the growing interest of Attic painters in more pathos-driven scenes in the latter part of the 6th century BCE in which the physical consequences of violence are emphasized? Is this phenomenon connected to an increased public awareness of such themes that aimed at provoking reflection and a critical examination of war and its consequences, or do these motivations stem from specific representation strategies whose ultimate goal was to accentuate the value of the victorious warrior, contrasting it with the fate of the defeated?[51]

Similarly, how can we explain the gradual disappearance of combat scenes from Attic pottery around 480 BCE? Is this phenomenon connected to internal production dynamics within the Athenian Kerameikos, or can it be attributed to a sort of taboo on the theme of violence related to war that developed within Athenian society after the Persian Wars?[52] Finding shared answers to these questions is not easy, but this is the challenge that future research must address while always bearing in mind the need to "look at the moon with the eyes of a Greek."

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Fig. 1. Frieze from the MacMillan aryballos, Middle Protocorinthian (c. 650 B.C.). London, British Museum 1889.4-18.1. From Smith 1890, pl. II.

Fig. 2. Rhodian plate of the Middle Wild Goat Style, with duel scene between two hoplites from the British Museum (GR 1860.4-4.1). Drawing J. Quesada.

Fig. 3. Scene of a warrior arming himself. Group of Arming Lekythoi (525-500 BCE). Syracuse (24676). From Pace 2019, fig. 56.

Fig. 4. Combat scene over the body of a fallen warrior. Decoration on the shoulder of an Attic black-figured hydria (540-530 BCE). Milan, Museo Civico Archeologico (A.0.9.1870). Da Pace 2021, tav. 8, 2.

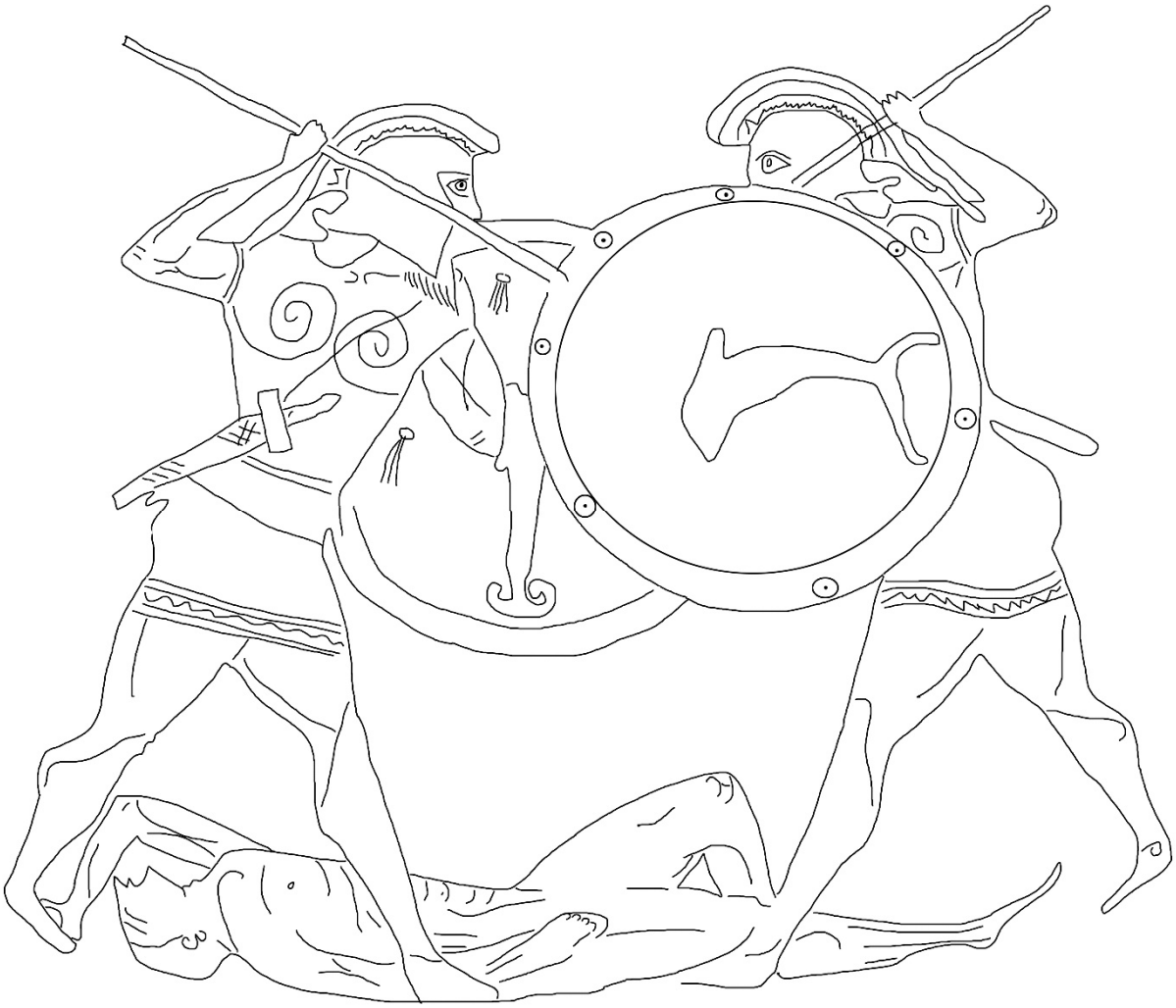

Fig. 5. Combat scene over the body of a fallen warrior. Attic black-figured amphora (520-510 BCE), Vaticano, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco (357). Author's drawing.

Fig. 6. Priam asks Achilles to return Hector's body. Attic red-figured hydria (520-500 BCE). Cambridge (MA), Harvard University (1972.40). Author's drawing.

Fig. 7. Frieze from the hydria Vivenzio of Kleophrades Painter (c. 500-490 B.C.) with the representation of Ilioupersis. Naples, National Archaeological Museum, 81669. From Furtwängler / Reichhold 1904, pl. 34.

Fig. 8. Frieze with Aeneas and Anchises fleeing from Troy. Black-figured lekythos of the Edinburgh Painter (500-475 B.C.) from Gela. Syracuse, Archaeological Museum, 19882. From Pace 2017, fig. 7.