

# Reading the Vase:

## Exploring responses to Greek art through an examination of d'Hancarville's interpretation of the Hunt Krater and Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

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*This article examines the cultural significance of eighteenth-century collections of Greek vases through an exploration of two different responses to these artefacts. D'Hancarville's explanation of the Hunt Krater attempts an empirical, objective analysis of the vase, assigning identities to unnamed figures and determinedly linking the scene to a famous legendary episode. D'Hancarville likens his reading of the vase to solving an 'algebraic problem' as he seeks to definitively establish the vase's meaning. His approach can be seen as a consequence of the need to create the market, the science and the value of Greek vases at a time when they had not been widely classified, assessed or organised. It also reflects the ideals of the Enlightenment and d'Hancarville's somewhat calculating personality. The mere existence of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' perhaps demonstrates the success of eighteenth-century collectors and publishers in establishing the Greek vase as a significant subject of scholarly and artistic contemplation. The poem, however, is an openly speculative, Romantic response to a generic Grecian Urn that embraces and enjoys its mystery rather than attempting to solve it. D'Hancarville and Keats's responses both idealise Greek art and Greek virtues but the forms and styles of their interpretations display the varying contexts in which they were written and their differing artistic philosophies.*

When John Keats wrote 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in 1819 he chose as the material focus of the poem an object widely recognised as a symbol of classical beauty. The British Museum had acquired Sir William Hamilton's collection of Greek vases in 1772 and Hamilton's collections and, perhaps even more significantly, his publications had quickly established the Greek vase as an object of aesthetic and scientific value. The publication of Hamilton's first vase collection, *Antiquités Étrusques, Grecques et Romaines (AEGR)*, managed by the self-styled Baron d'Hancarville, was central to the proliferation of the neo-classical aesthetic. As Milo Keynes comments, in publishing his collection Hamilton, he was 'aiming to influence taste besides increasing its market

worth'.<sup>1</sup> Keats' poem may be seen as a reflection of the success of Hamilton and d'Hancarville in embedding the neo-classical aesthetic in the popular creative consciousness.

There are, however, striking differences between d'Hancarville's approach to the Greek vases he studied and wrote about in the four volumes of *AEGR* published between 1767 and 1776 and Keats' attitude to the generic, imagined Grecian Urn he addressed five decades later. D'Hancarville and Keats's responses both idealise Greek art and Greek virtues, but the forms and styles of their interpretations display the varying contexts in which they were written and their differing artistic philosophies.

*AEGR* is an enormous, sprawling and frequently chaotic publication. As Thora Brylowe comments, 'the text largely consists of d'Hancarville's long and tangled disquisitions on the ancient aesthetic, which swell the length of the volumes but do little to illuminate the engravings of vases and vase painting.'<sup>2</sup> In order to examine d'Hancarville's method of interpreting specific examples of Greek art, it is therefore necessary to select from the voluminous pages of *AEGR* an extract in which he focuses on a particular vase and its decoration. This article will concentrate on d'Hancarville's interpretation of the Hunt Krater, a vase he analysed in volume one of *AEGR* and returned to in volume three. D'Hancarville's tone and methodology in his commentary on the Hunt Krater reflect his broader approach, the context in which he was writing and his somewhat calculating personality.

D'Hancarville was a precocious and talented mathematician and this aptitude is clearly evident in his analysis of the Hunt Krater. As Ian Jenkins states, 'in the publication of Sir William's vases there is copious evidence of d'Hancarville's love of numbers in his exceptional willingness to use hard dates in working out the chronological development of the arts in antiquity.'<sup>3</sup> In his commentary on the Hunt Krater in volume one of *AEGR* d'Hancarville asserts that 'it is probable that this Vase was made at the latest towards the year 4056'.<sup>4</sup> The statement is followed by a lengthy discussion on the writing on the Hunt Krater as compared with the writing on other antiquities, which are chronologically ordered in d'Hancarville's confident tone of logical deduction to establish the date of creation and the subject of the vase. He concludes that 'these philological remarks added to those which the Reader has already met with [...] authorise us to look upon this Vase as one of the most ancient monuments

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<sup>1</sup> Milo Keynes, 'The Portland Vase, Josiah Wedgwood and the Darwins' in *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (July 1998), p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> Thora Brylowe, 'Two Kinds of Collections: Sir William Hamilton's Vases, Real and Represented' in *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter 2008), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Jenkins, 'Contemporary Minds: Sir William Hamilton's Affair with Antiquity' in Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and his Collection* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre d'Hancarville, William Hamilton et al., *Antiquités Étrusques, Grecques et Romaines. : Tirées du cabinet du M. William Hamilton, envoyé extraordinaire de. S.M. Britannique en cour de Naples* (Naples: W. Hamilton: François Morelli, 1766), p. 162.

of the Painting and the writing of the Greeks'.<sup>5</sup> It is apparent to the modern reader, as indeed it was to many of d'Hancarville's contemporaries, that while d'Hancarville was a mathematician and a purported empiricist, he did not really succeed in applying a logical, scientific approach to his analysis. The tone of d'Hancarville's writing suggests that he supports his hypothesis with a series of logical deductions to reach his conclusion, but his assertions are frequently speculative and, as James Moore comments, 'Francis Haskell viewed him almost as a figure of the counter-enlightenment combining a Romantic attachment to the exotic and a love of the irrational with fanciful and unproven theories'.<sup>6</sup>

D'Hancarville's character offered little to soften his critics. As Jenkins writes, he can be viewed as 'at best, an adventurer, and at worst a swindler'.<sup>7</sup> Hamilton is frequently perceived as an unwitting victim of d'Hancarville's duplicity and it is certainly true that d'Hancarville had little regard for the integrity of Hamilton's collection when he wrote *AEGR*, a project that he regarded, according to Jenkins, as 'a vehicle for his own apotheosis into the pantheon of celebrated antiquaries'.<sup>8</sup> For d'Hancarville, *AEGR* presented an irresistible opportunity for self-promotion. His desire to establish himself as an authority on his subject is evident in the assertive, didactic tone with which he delivers what is often merely conjectural opinion. He also embellishes and perfects the collection, preferring an idealised catalogue that supports his theories and ideas to a truthful representation of the vases. As Brylowe notes, 'idealisation in *AEGR* is so powerful that d'Hancarville included vases that were not in Hamilton's collection and that his engravers therefore had no 'real' versions to consult'.<sup>9</sup> Even where the engravings are taken from 'real' versions, they present an artificially complete version of the artefact. As Vicky Coltman comments, 'far from being faithful to the ruined or fragmentary condition of the actual pots in Hamilton's collection, the engravings present the vases as reconstructed and "improved"'.<sup>10</sup> While d'Hancarville positions himself as a methodical, logical cataloguer of the vases, Brylowe and Coltman remind us here that in fact he shared Keats's willingness to imagine and idealise. These speculative processes are a key feature of the neo-classical ideal and perhaps an inescapable necessity for d'Hancarville given the incomplete nature of the very old objects with which he was dealing.

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<sup>5</sup> D'Hancarville, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> James Moore 'Baron D'Hancarville and the Exploration of Ancient Mythology' in James Moore, Ian Macgregor Morris and Andrew J. Bayliss, *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History* (London: University of London, 2008), p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Brylowe, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Vicky Coltman, 'Sir William Hamilton's Vase Publications (1766 – 1776): A Case Study in the Reproduction and Dissemination of Antiquity' in *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2001), p. 2.



Figure 1. Flattened, 'improved' image of the painting on one side of the Hunt Krater from *AEGR Vol. 1*



Figure 2. Flattened, 'improved' image of the painting on the reverse side of the Hunt Krater from *AEGR Vol. 2*

It is important to remember that d'Hancarville was engaged in a discipline that was very much in its infancy. Emmanouil Kalkanis observes that 'the large number of painted vases found and collected in southern Italy in the 1750s had an immediate effect on the diffusion, perception and study of these objects'.<sup>11</sup> Kalkanis is right to note the immediacy of effect of these collections, but James Moore and Ian Macgregor Morris add the important note that while 'popular taste for these classical forms was widely shared [...] its impact on historical research was limited until the nineteenth century'.<sup>12</sup> Like many eighteenth century thinkers, d'Hancarville was contemplating objects and ideas for which no strict, methodical approach had yet been established. Moore comes to d'Hancarville's defence, opining that 'there can be little doubt that d'Hancarville was a pioneer at the forefront of the science of mythology. By the early twentieth century advances in empirical archaeology inevitably highlighted the somewhat conjectural nature of d'Hancarville's work. However, even critical publications were forced to

<sup>11</sup> Emmanouil Kalkanis, 'The Visual Dissemination of Sir William Hamilton's Vases and their Reception by Early 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Scholarship (c. 1800s – 1820s) in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 75. Bd., H. 4 (2012), p. 487.

<sup>12</sup> James Moore and Ian Macgregor Morris, 'History in Revolution? Approaches to the Ancient World in the Long Eighteenth Century' in James Moore, Ian Macgregor Morris and Andrew J. Baylis, *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History* (London: University of London, 2008), p. 4.

acknowledge the importance of the scholarship.’<sup>13</sup> In fact, d’Hancarville himself recognised the difficulties and limitations of his work. Although he seeks to create the impression of a discourse dominated by logical, empirical deduction and evaluation, he does permit suggestions of tentative analysis, with the occasional ‘perhaps’, ‘seems’, ‘imagine’ or ‘may’ implicitly acknowledging the speculative nature of his reflections.

This creeping tentativeness is particularly apparent at the beginning of some of his paragraphs on the Hunt Krater in volume one of *AEGR*: ‘we imagine that the Horsemen upon the back part of our Vase shew that they began to pursue the Boar in the plain [...]’, and ‘let the truth of this Explanation be as it may[...]’.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, his revision of his views in volume three that is the clearest indicator of the conjectural nature of his study. In volume one he asserts that the significance of the birds on the Krater cannot be explained (in itself an acknowledgement of the limitations of his approach), writing that ‘as to the Swans or Geese and the sort of Eagle in Plate IV we know not what to say of them, unless we follow the remark of the Count of Caylus, who says that these sort of birds are frequently met with upon the monuments attributed to the Etruscans without assigning any reason to it’.<sup>15</sup> It strikes the modern reader as curious that d’Hancarville finds himself unable to account for the birds on the basis of this remark, given that he relies on evidence that seems equally flimsy in making some of his other assertions about the origins of the krater and the identities of the figures it depicts. Equally intriguing is that in volume three he extrapolates considerable symbolic meaning from the birds and regards them as integral to the scene.<sup>16</sup> Moore regards this as a reflection of d’Hancarville’s development as a reader of classical artefacts, commenting that ‘this change in emphasis in the interpretations offered is illustrative both of d’Hancarville’s intellectual growth and his increasing interest in decoding the visual language of antiquity’.<sup>17</sup> It is true that d’Hancarville moves away from an attempt to identify an actual hunt as the subject of the vase painting towards a more symbolic reading, his ‘theory of signs’ becoming increasingly evident and developed as the work progresses. As Moore acknowledges, however, he is still seeking to decode the vase, viewing it as a puzzle to be cracked rather than a mystery that must endure and should therefore be embraced. Jenkins and Sloane consider that d’Hancarville ‘was clearly frustrated by the lack of any name among those of the hunters that could be associated definitively with the Calydonian hunt. He was, however, determined to link this vase with that legendary episode’.<sup>18</sup> Even in volume three d’Hancarville refers to the name of the man on foot in the principal scene being ‘dégagé as in the solution to an algebraic problem [...]’.<sup>19</sup> The mathematically minded D’Hancarville, mired in the rapidly

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<sup>13</sup> James Moore, ‘History as Theoretical Reconstruction? Baron d’Hancarville and the Exploration of Ancient Mythology in the Eighteenth Century’ in Moore, Macgregor Morris and Baylis, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> D’Hancarville, p. 156.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> For further reading on the meaning of the birds see Jenkins and Sloan, p. 157.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins and Sloan, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> D’Hancarville vol. 3. pp. 204–9.

developing sciences of the eighteenth century, attempts to ascribe identities to the figures depicted and to endow the vase with a specific history. Ultimately, however, he is defeated by the silence Keats subsequently celebrates in his 'Ode'.

For Adolf Michaelis, publications of Greek vase paintings were not far enough removed from the Romantic poetic response of Keats. Michaelis said of such publications that 'all scientific appreciation of Greek painting and its development became lost in a maze of fantastic and amateurish dreams only concerned with the subjects represented, and finding mysterious meanings therein, as these responded to the prevailing taste for a medley of religious and pseudo-scientific romanticism'.<sup>20</sup> Despite their flaws, this is perhaps an unduly harsh judgement of d'Hancarville and others who sought to disseminate and illuminate the collections of Greek vases that were amassed in the eighteenth century and which subsequently captured the public imagination when they were published, displayed and imitated by contemporary artists.

It is not known whether Keats read *AEGR*, but he certainly visited the British Museum and would have seen Hamilton's vases there. He saw the Elgin marbles too; as Susan Woodford observes, 'on part of the south frieze of the Parthenon, one heifer raises her head in protest, inspiring Keats' line "that heifer lowing at the skies"'.<sup>21</sup> These exhibits were integral to the artistic and philosophical culture of the age. As Joseph Mordaunt Crook asserts, it was such 'benefactions [...] which eventually transformed the character and appearance of the British Museum as it struggled out of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century'.<sup>22</sup> The museum's acquisitions of classical antiquities secured its significance in the English imagination of the Romantic period. Keats's ekphrastic approach was not unusual; as Ian Jack observes, 'one has only to turn over the pages of the *Annals [of Fine Arts]* to be reminded how common a practice it was to write a poem inspired by a particular work of art'.<sup>23</sup>

No specific artefacts have been definitely identified as the sources of Keats' poem but it is widely agreed that, as Jack states, 'the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is eclectic in its inspiration'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Woodford is right to link the line in the 'Ode' with the image of the heifer on the Parthenon, but it was the form of an urn, and not a statue or a frieze, that Keats chose as the focus for the poem. For Blackstone, this choice is a natural one for Keats because 'it gathers to itself the resonances of all the other urns, vases, pots and jars that stud Keats's poetry. Moreover, it would be a mistake to attempt an interpretation of the urn in isolation from other concavities [...] the urn is specifically the artefact of which the cave is the physical, and the dome of the sky the formal,

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<sup>20</sup> Adolf Michaelis, *A Century of Archaeological Discoveries* (London: John Murray, 1908), pp. 56–57.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Woodford, *An Introduction to Greek Art* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1996), p. 117

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Mordaunt Crook, *The British Museum: A Case-Study in Architectural Politics* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 214–215.

<sup>24</sup> Jack, p. 217.

analogy.<sup>25</sup> The ‘Attic shape!’<sup>26</sup> about which the narrator exclaims in the first line of the final stanza is a fitting subject for Keats’s poetic contemplation precisely because it will hold its mystery in the face of interrogation. This places the urn in close proximity to the heavens and temporal eternity. There are frequent reminders of this in the poem’s lexis and imagery: the ‘For ever’ (20, 24, 26, 26) that begins the final line of the second stanza and appears a further four times in the third; the events of the ‘pious morn’ (37); the awed comparison where ‘Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought | As doth eternity.’ (44–45). The gulf of ‘slow time’ (2) that separates the creator of the urn with the speaker of the poem ensures the preservation of its silence and its perpetual intrigue and mystery.

The ‘Ode’ poses numerous questions, but the identities of Keats’s imagined figures and the locations of his imagined scenes will remain the urn’s secret. The figures on Keats’s urn are anonymous, only ever to be described by type or occupation as in the ‘fair youth’ (15), ‘bold lover’ (17), ‘happy melodist’ (23) and ‘mysterious priest’ (32). The interrogative voice is maintained until the final stanza, but the pleasure is in the asking of the questions and no response is really desired. As Susan Wolfson observes, ‘the grammar that sustains negative capability amid positive pursuit is interrogative.’<sup>27</sup> The speaker does not really want to understand the urn, only to indulge in an interrogation of its intractable mystery. The shift to the exclamatory voice in the final stanza reflects the speaker’s admiration of the urn’s perpetual silence and the satisfaction its impenetrability provides. For Keats, the attraction of the urn lies principally in its ‘quietness’ (1), the ‘silence’ (2) acknowledged in the opening two lines and to which he returns in the final stanza. The urn is interrogated but the questions addressed to it are necessarily rhetorical and the urn will yield no definitive response. The very quality that frustrated d’Hancarville is, for Keats, the essence of the urn’s appeal.

D’Hancarville and Keats not only have starkly different attitudes to the inscrutability of Greek vases but also to their readers. Brylowe comments that d’Hancarville ‘positions the reader as a pupil studying models while referring to theories that explain why the works he is viewing are aesthetically significant’.<sup>28</sup> For Wolfson, ‘Keats writes the odes less as designs for certain interpretation than as calls for readerly participation.’<sup>29</sup> D’Hancarville’s didacticism and Keats’s desire to evoke and share with the reader an object that is entirely satisfying in its mystery mirror the very different dispositions of the two men and also reflect the shift from the eighteenth century preoccupation with empiricism to the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. Kelley opines that ‘Keats is one instance of what McGann later identified as the Romantic ideology – a transcendent poetic vision that works assiduously to exclude

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<sup>25</sup> Bernard Blackstone, *The Consecrated Urn* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959), p. 330.

<sup>26</sup> John Keats, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ in John Keats, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 191, l. 41. All further references to this work are incorporated in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Brylowe, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfson, p. 91.

historical reality as injurious to the autonomy of Romantic selfhood'.<sup>30</sup> Certainly in the 'Ode' Keats suggests that historical reality is inaccessible, perhaps irrelevant. It is the process of interrogation and not the yielding of answers that is important. This makes the interrogator integral to the reading of the urn, which derives its continued relevance from the questions it stimulates but cannot answer. For Nicola Trott, 'the poet of progress conceives an art form whose age and stillness are a final apotheosis [...] such inviolability is the condition of an art that is purely historical. It is the living poet whose desire endows the urn with a future in the image of 'breathing human passion, "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd" (28, 26)'.<sup>31</sup> Keats, then, places the viewer of the imagined urn at the centre of his 'Ode' and evokes an individual, distinctly emotive tone through the interrogation of the eternally still object.

There has been much critical debate over the meaning and effect of the final lines of the poem, "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' (49–50). In the context of this article, however, they neatly represent the limits on the viewer of the urn in understanding precisely what it portrays. For Keats, the empirical analysis pursued by d'Hancarville is entirely unnecessary; an aesthetic, emotive response is not merely a sufficient but a consciously superior approach to this 'friend to man' (48).

## CONCLUSION

D'Hancarville was writing at a time when Greek vases had not been widely classified, assessed or organised. His approach may be seen as a consequence of the need to create the market, the science and the value of these artefacts. While his frequently conjectural assertions often undermine his empirical tone, he played an important part in making Greek vases objects of popular cultural significance. Keats's poem is openly speculative and embraces his imagined urn's mystery, entirely different in tone and form from d'Hancarville's cataloguing in *AEGR*. Keats is nevertheless indebted to d'Hancarville for bringing into the Romantic consciousness the real urns that inspired his 'Ode'. Twentieth-century scientific techniques have enabled a more technical, empirical analysis of the Greek vases that fascinated and inspired d'Hancarville and Keats. Despite these advances, the gulf of time that separates the original artisans and artists from modern collectors, writers and readers ensures that any form of interrogation of these vases leaves many questions unanswered. The mystery of the Greek vase, inescapable for d'Hancarville and openly embraced by Keats, continues to challenge and fascinate viewers of these classical antiquities.

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<sup>30</sup> Theresa M. Kelley, 'Keats, ekphrasis and history' in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> Nicola Trott, 'Keats and the Prison House of History' in Roe, p. 274.



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Flattened, 'improved' image of the painting on one side of the Hunt Krater from Hugues, Pierre-François, called Baron d'Hancarville, *Antiquités Étrusques, Grecques et Romaines, tirées du cabinet de M. William Hamilton Pierre-François Hugues, called Baron d'Hancarville* (Naples: François Morelli, 1766-1767 [correct date c. 1776])

Figure 2: Flattened, 'improved' image of the painting on the reverse side of the Hunt Krater from Hugues, Pierre-François, called Baron d'Hancarville, *Antiquités Étrusques, Grecques et Romaines, tirées du cabinet de M. William Hamilton Pierre-François Hugues, called Baron d'Hancarville* (Naples: François Morelli, 1766-1767 [correct date c. 1776])

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