
Hiding in Plain Sight, Yet Again: An Unseen Attribute, An Unseen Plan, A New Analysis of the Portland Vase Frieze

RANDALL SKALSKY

THE PORTLAND VASE has always drawn a crowd, and in the seventeen-plus years since my interpretation of its celebrated frieze appeared here in *Arion*,¹ the bibliography has grown considerably. Offerings of differing readings have appeared; others have averred the primacy of older ones; none has gained any currency. Remarkably, though, all interpretations to date have failed to see, much less explain, a crucial figural attribute in the frieze, one that proves to be both explicit and explicatory, and whose location and appearance secures the identification of not one but, indeed, three figures. Furthermore, the attribute lies at the heart of a distinct schema of figural grouping and arrangement that has also gone unheeded in previous treatments of the Portland Vase frieze.

Hiding in plain sight, this overlooked attribute can be seen almost dead center on the cover of the Winter 1992 *Arion* in which my interpretation was published.² How is it that in the forty-six or so published interpretations spanning some four hundred years, an attribute that will soon seem immediately apparent could be so consistently overlooked by so many for so long? Yet such was the case with the architectural cryptograms revealed here almost two decades ago, and so it is again with these new findings.

It is therefore a pleasure to amend the opening sentence of paragraph two in my 1992 article: “The obstacle to interpreting the frieze is that all but one of the figures lack iden-

112 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

tifying attributes,” a statement prefacing the notion that the frieze could not be interpreted via the standard method of attributes.³ That contention is somewhat off the mark. By dint of this previously unknown attribute, I will show that one can, in fact, straightforwardly read the opening scene of the frieze using the attributes therein provided, but the opening scene only. To complete the task, a second methodology—that which I laid out in 1992—is a categorical sine qua non. One can, as I have already shown, successfully navigate the entire frieze using that second methodology alone but, as so many others have shown, not contrariwise. These new findings—the attribute and figural plan—convince me that the artistic vision of the Portland Vase was purposefully executed in a two-part program.

In this two-part scheme, one of the most strategically challenging programs in art history, the Portland artist first draws the viewer into his unique visual narrative by starting out with the old and familiar method of attributes, but then quickly changes all the rules. The use of attributes to identify figures and thereby tell a tale is a passive exercise requiring little effort on the part of the viewer; it is a common, shopworn, unexceptional methodology in ancient art. But the Portland Vase—technically, artistically, and conceptually exceptional by any standard—demanded more.

Thus, rather than simply laying down an entire narrative in a labeled, linear sequence as was the norm, the artist changed gears halfway through, shifting into a second stratagem whereby a complex narrative involving changes in time, space, and players could be delivered, a unique format compelling the viewer to not just observe, but to participate; to not just read a series of attributes, but to actualize a program of multi-dimensional, abstract thought.

These new findings validate and verify the salient points I made in 1992; they further demonstrate that it is wise to heed Aesop in treating with the Portland Vase, for appearances are indeed very often deceiving on this unique artwork—architecture is not architecture, limbs are not limbs,

serpents are not serpents, attributes are not attributes, and divisions do not divide.

Coming to these new findings—(a) the figural arrangement and grouping; (b) the new attribute; and (c) the two-part methodology of decoding the frieze—began, in part, when revisiting a 1995 essay by Denys Haynes wherein, among other issues, he definitively argues that the creature nuzzled up to figure C is a sea-snake or *ketos*, and not, as some would have it, a land serpent.⁴ It is a crucial point, superbly settled, and one that prompted a fresh look at the Portland Vase frieze.

First, though, a summary of the main points of my 1992 interpretation will prove helpful: (1) a program of visual and literary tropes, some in the form of hidden Greek letters, i.e., cryptograms, encodes the frieze. These include the sea serpent or *ketos* in the shape of the letter *omega*, the architecture opening scene A as the letter *pi*, and the opening architectural element of scene B as the letter *iota*; (2) scene A of the frieze illustrates specifically lines 26–30 of Catullus 64, most notably in its exact visual translation of “Peleus, the pillar of Thessaly” (figure A); (3) the theme and basic structure of Catullus 64 is the template of the entire frieze; (4) there is a multi-dimensional, unfinished interaction between scenes A and B which the viewer must internalize and complete by animating, manipulating, and reassembling the three fragmented pieces of architecture in his own mind, a process by no means unknown in the ancient world.⁵

THE PLAN OF THE FIGURES

HOW PREPOSTEROUS it would be to approach the Portland Vase frieze without the awareness and conviction that an intellectual and spatial plan taking both technical and conceptual challenges into account was thoroughly and thoughtfully worked out by the artist long before its actual execution ever began.

Nonetheless, it seems that no other interpretation of the Portland includes a comprehensive, holistic plan, analysis, or

114 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

study of the figures prior to and independent of their identifications. Most commentators do make the readily apparent observation that scenes A and B are compositionally similar, but none seems to credit the artist and patron with the foresight of a strategic, unifying plan nor, for that matter, with sufficient creative talent to forge an unorthodox method of artistic expression. It seems to be widely assumed that the artist was somehow not only enslaved to an attributional method of figure identification, but also creatively restricted by the shape of the medium. Such a notion seems egregiously hidebound on many levels, but especially so given the Augustan dating of the vase by most experts, a period teeming with creativity in the three fields so exquisitely epitomized on the Portland: art, literature, and architecture.

The treatment, arrangement and grouping of the figures as a whole needs to be thoroughly examined.

It has long been the practice *in modern times* to label the figures A through G and thereby construe them as seven in number. Because access to the Portland itself is not an option for most, scholars and commentators rely almost exclusively on photographs and a full-length line drawing of the frieze, exactly like the two-page fold-out accompanying this essay (q.v.). While certainly helpful, the drawing nonetheless subliminally pre-disposes and conditions those who use it to work within its arbitrary seven-figure construct.

Unfortunately, this plan makes a subjective and inferential leap in assuming that the *ketos* is, at best, auxiliary to figure C, and thus labels the two figures as one. Such an action categorically, albeit subtly, dictates that the *ketos* not be understood as a separate figure. This psychological relegation of a clearly distinct figure to a bit-playing, second-class status has led to a great deal of long term obfuscation. It is a modern prejudice, I submit, perhaps even an arrogance, that is responsible for the problem, for were the *ketos* another *human* figure, it no doubt would have received a separate identifying letter.

Looking at the frieze without the superimposed letter designations makes it clear that there are eight individual fig-



Fig. 1.

116 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN



Fig. 2.

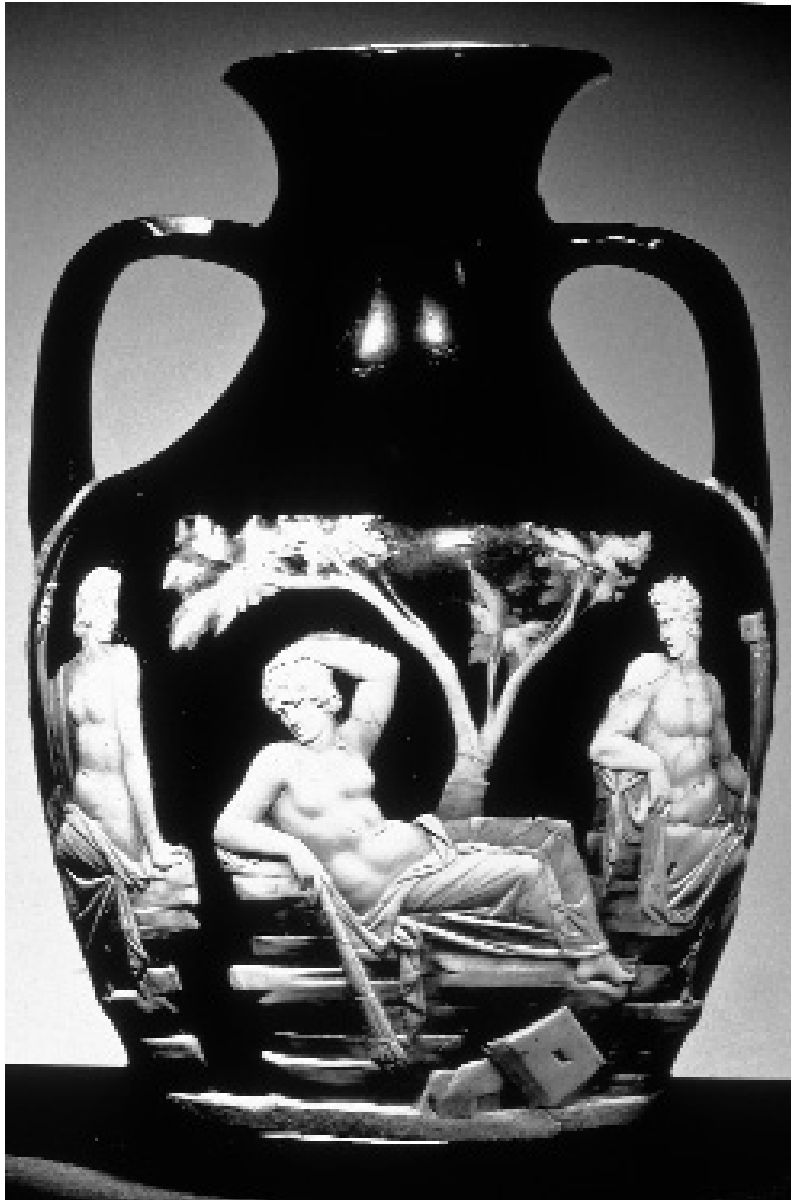


Fig. 3.

118 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN



Fig. 4.

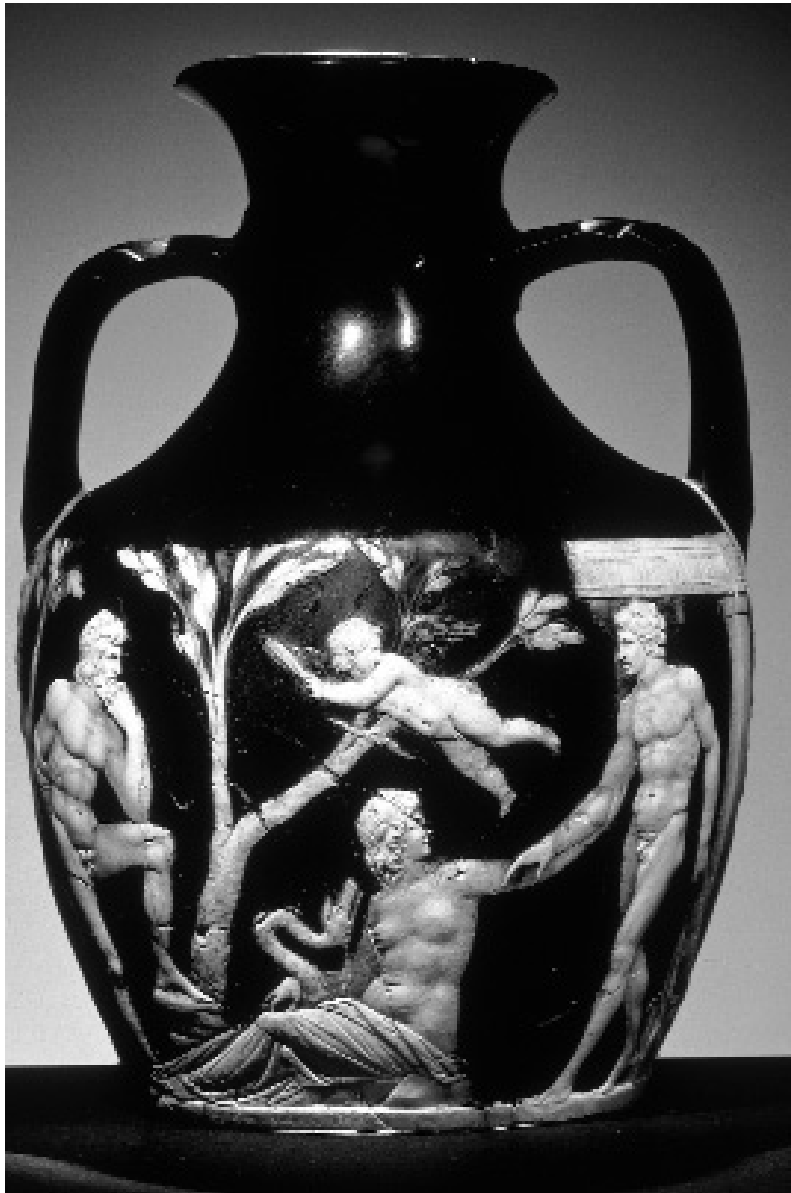
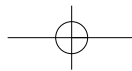
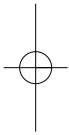


Fig. 5.

120 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN



ures, not seven. Placed aside and interacting with figure C, the *ketos*, literally, stands on his own. The very fact that over time it has been singled out to receive at least as much, and likely more, scholarly consideration than any other figure in the frieze strongly argues in favor of such a viewpoint. Indeed, a great many interpretations of the frieze hinge entirely on the author's understanding of the *ketos* and some, it may be argued, have gone far astray in not considering the *ketos* a unique, identifiable figure, but casting it, rather, as merely supplemental or incidental to figure C.⁶

Although it is unmistakably the artist's intention to portray the two figures now collectively labeled C as somehow intimately connected, it does not follow that the *ketos* is merely attributive or anonymous nor, most importantly, that two figures be arbitrarily labeled a single figure some 1,700 years after the creation of the vase. Let us at long last give the *ketos* his due as a distinct, unique figure and, for ease of discussion and identification, label him C' (C prime). The total figure count, then, is eight: five in scene A (three singles, one double), three in scene B.

Now to pose a standard question in any analysis of figural art: Is the figure static or dynamic? Clearly, the first four figures (A, B, C, C') are all highly dynamic and fully in motion, while the remaining four (D, E, F, G) are all completely static. Not only are the last four figures simply not in motion, they are in almost exaggerated attitudes of *non*-motion: D is shown leaning and bent forward, chin resting on hand, arm resting on leg, and leg leaning on a rock-pile; E has slouched back in his chair with relaxed, outstretched limbs, one arm on an armrest, legs casually crossed, one foot on a rock-ledge; F reclines, a torch is slipping from her limp hand, and seemingly lost in daydreams; G, much as the analogous E, is likewise shown seated in an obvious pose of relaxation. The contrast between the dynamic players and the static ones could not be any more pronounced.

There is, furthermore, a sudden, precise, equal division of dynamic and static figures—two sets of four girdling the

122 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

vase with action figures to the left, and static figures to the right—a scheme that could hardly be serendipitous. To look ahead slightly, it is important to mark carefully where and how the dynamic/static division occurs. Some scholars argue that the frieze is two separate scenes, but if a single one, it will fall to the artist to effectively knit together as one what, at first blush, may appear to be two, an intrinsic situation imposed on the work by the shape of the vessel and placement of its handles.

It must not be assumed (although many do) that merely because the handles of the vase *appear* to create two sides that the artist was programmatically restricted by such a division. As D. Haynes pointed out many years ago, “That the whole of a single scene must be simultaneously visible is a rule unknown to ancient art, as is evident from the many Greek vases on which figures directly connected with each other by the action are depicted on opposite sides.”⁷

THE DYNAMIC FIGURES

BEGINNING WITH the four dynamic figures (A, B, C, C’), observe that not only are they clustered in a physically interactive group, but that they are psychologically enjoined as well, and that the group is compacted into the first half of the first scene, or about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total length of the frieze. As the action in scene A is depicted, the dynamic figures, in toto, are participating in an unfolding group behavior with all eyes focused exclusively on A, whose own gaze is fixed on some distant point outside his present field of vision. figure A is striding forward, guided by B in flight and jointly urged on by both C and C’ via the arm-hold of C. It is especially significant that the three ground line figures—A, C, and C’—are all physically joined by the arms of C to form a triad, with the fourth figure, Eros, hovering above the two and leading the one. It is apparent that B, C and C’ are urging A onward, and it is thus the totality of action and interaction within this four-figure group that sets the narrative in motion.

THE STATIC FIGURES

ALL MOTION, however, abruptly terminates at figure D, the first of the four static figures and the last of the scene, a detached observer who, eyes trained on the unfolding drama, contemplates what is coming to pass—a strong visual cue that we ought to do the same. figure G delivers the same directive at the end of scene B, as will soon be shown.

In clear-cut contrast to the cluster of dynamic figures, the static ones are spread out singly, one by one, throughout the remaining 3/4 of the frieze, in a simple, methodical arrangement that can be spatially represented as follows: D E — F G

Study of Figs. D and G shows, first of all, that the two are fully analogous in placement, position, attitude, and function. Not only are they each the last, bookend figure in their respective scenes, they are also both rendered as phlegmatic, detached observers of a set of figures, each spatially and psychologically distanced from the others. Fully relaxed, comfortably slouched forward, D stands between trees located both back and behind the figures he observes, none of whom show any interest in or awareness of his presence. G, likewise comfortably ensconced, observes from a discreet distance the two figures in her scene. Note how G's rocky pile is distinctly separate from the other two, which overlap to appear almost as one (hence, the linking dash in the diagram). Figures E–F each further relate to the other in that both their spaces contain a curious, incomplete piece of architecture; G's allotted space does not. E's gaze, furthermore, is tightly fixed on F (he appears not to see G at all), and F seems lost in thought as she dreamily gazes downward. Just as in scene A, the figures in scene B take no notice of their detached observer, figure G.

D and G are exquisitely rendered figures, no doubt, but it is easy to be misled by their charms and make more of them than what they are. They are, as I have begun to show, functionaries in the figural plan, but non-players in the narrative.

124 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

Naming these figures is helpful at this stage of analysis, but ultimately of little import. For all the reasons enumerated in 1992, and others included here, D and G are identified as Zeus and Aphrodite, respectively. They perform several key roles in the plan and configuration of the frieze but, again, are merely incidental to the narrative.

One of their more important and immediately recognizable functions is to serve notice that we, the viewers, should do as they do, i.e., focus our attention on two groups of figures: the four dynamic ones in scene A, and the remaining two static ones in scene B. Compositionally, it is a straightforward visual prompt: your eyes sweep the scene from left to right, and the end figure cues you to go back and focus your attention on the same area it itself beholds.

There is more. As first in the set of the four static figures, figure D not only marks the end of the dynamic set, but simultaneously serves as both stop point of the entire scene and as transition to the next phase of the reading in scene B, where the remaining three static figures are located. It is important to recognize there is no dynamic action whatsoever in scene B—it is a static scene with static players. D's role in scene A is both physical and intellectual: while the figure physically terminates the action of scene A, it also serves as the intellectual harbinger of what is to come in scene B. In other words, it knits together in stark contrast the *action drama* that is scene A to the *static tableau* that is scene B. Using D for a dynamic figure and S for a static one, the full plan can be rendered in spatial terms thus: D^DDD S S—S S.

As noted above, precisely where this division of dynamic and static figures occurs is most significant. The sudden cessation of movement in scene A, the rapid change of mood and attitude in both the narrative and the figures takes place *before the end of the first scene, not at the beginning of the second*, and it is at that midpoint in the figural scheme that the two sides of the vase are therewith and thereby joined, physically as well as intellectually. Notice further that the entire body of figure E is positioned facing

into scene A, and that he has been made to twist his neck around to gaze back upon figure F. It is compositionally clear that figure E is participating in a continuing, single scene curving around from Side A to Side B and has only momentarily turned his head. Were that not the case, the artist would simply position him facing inwards and gazing upon figure F. Such deliberate posing makes it clear that figure E is physically cued to and aware of the impending actions of the dynamic figures. It falls to the viewer to heed the visual and cognitive clues provided by the artist, and to avoid being misled by what may seem to be visual constraints inherent in the shape of the vase—surely the manner in which the artist approached his task.

The information imparted in the figural plan is conveyed yet again, in a different format, in the architectural elements of the frieze which likewise conjoin the scenes and the narrative, again, both physically and intellectually. All three instances of architecture in the frieze are in a fragmentary state: the structure at the beginning of scene A lacks a second supporting column, while the lone column and detached capital in scene B both display clamp holes that demand attention in demonstrably illustrating their incomplete condition. Once aware of these architectural anomalies, it is no leap to deduce that the three disassembled bits of architecture strategically located at critical points throughout the length of the entire frieze are meaningful, visual connectors that somehow bind the whole together. The architecture, in fact, thereby functions as a fail-safe that confirms the role of the figural plan, and vice-versa.

Finally, figure D's analog, figure G, likewise has both a physical and intellectual role that knits the scenes together. She, as well, visually terminates her respective scene, and her intellectual role as Aphrodite repeats, reinforces, and further bridges the narrative with the theme of love initiated by her son, Eros, in scene A.

Recognition of the figural plan is pivotal in understanding the various programmatic points in the frieze. Were one to

126 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

attempt a continuous reading beginning with scene B, or a reading of two independent scenes in either A–B or B–A order, the arrangement and posing of the figures becomes helter-skelter and loses all coherence. No less important is recognizing the degree of participation by the various players in the frieze, an effort also highly dependent on recognizing and heeding the figural plan and visual prompts.

To summarize: the action, the driving force of the narrative is launched in the first quarter of the frieze by the set of four dynamic figures. D, the first of the set of four static figures, terminates the action of the dynamic ones and thus the opening sequence in the narrative. G, the last of the static figures, terminates the second phase of the story and the scheme as a whole. Rendered as passive observers by the artist, that is precisely the role of D and G *in the narrative*, nothing more, nothing less, although, as noted, the role they play in the figural plan is critical.

As we recall now the disproportionate amount of space purposefully allotted to the static figures, and bear in mind that as non-players in the story-line, D and G can, in a sense, become penitents in our mind's eye, we visualize the narrative in a different light, spatially represented as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c} B \\ A-(C+C') \quad E-F \end{array}$$

Thus, the artist has crafted a tableau that communicates an unfolding narrative where the action begun with the dynamic figures seeks its denouement among the static ones. It is also significant that not only has he focused our attention on two *sets* of figures rather than on individual ones, but also special scrutiny has been brought to bear on the E–F figures by essentially isolating and spotlighting them within the framework of the frieze. It bears repeating that with continued study, it could hardly escape notice that the two scenes are further conjoined by those three, oddly-fragmented pieces of architecture.

SCENE A: THE NEW ATTRIBUTE

THUS, HAVING approached the Portland with a holistic analysis of the figural plan, it is time to begin a reading, and we return to the group of four dynamic figures. Starting with the most obvious, figure B is Eros. Instantly recognizable, he becomes thus the prime notion, the theme implanted in the viewer's consciousness—an unfolding love story. The next most readily recognizable figure is the *ketos* or sea serpent. These two up-front clues quickly deliver a theme: this is a love-story that involves the sea.

Several elements of the composition must now be realized and kept in mind at this critical stage, namely that the three action figures beneath Eros form a group, joined both physically and psychologically, and that they are players in a maritime love-story. That gods and heroes are involved is self-evident from the god-like, perfect forms of all the figures, but especially the heroic lead, figure A, who towers over the figures of C and C', the two of whom form a couple as they cozy up seated together on the ground line (their placement on the ground line, soon explained, is also a strong visual clue). C embraces the *ketos* with her left arm, and with her right, she grasps the arm of figure A.

That a three-figure group consisting of a double figure and a single figure is created by the conjoining of the dual figure C with the heroic figure A is the visual key to the identification of all three. The schema, in symbolic terms, is not

$$A-C+C'$$

but rather

$$A-(C+C')$$

and it is at that crucial, and meaningful join between the single figure A and the couple C and C' that the artist has ingeniously provided the necessary clue for identification.

The careful composition aids in highlighting the attribute: note first the symmetry in the opposing-arms arrangement of C and A as well as the contrast of the white arms against the elongated field of blue-black glass. As our gaze lingers on

128 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

these symmetrically reversed arms, we follow A's arm from his beautifully carved downturned hand up along the diagonal to C's upturned . . . NON-HAND.

Look yet again.

A's downturned hand clearly shows a well rendered thumb and index finger complete with nails; a further look at other hands and feet in the frieze shows them all nicely executed, including, most importantly, C's left hand. With comparanda inches away, it is obvious that the right hand of C is unquestionably not a hand at all.

In fact, it looks exactly like a crab claw. And that is what it is. And it is the ideal and identifying attribute.

In the eyes of the contemporaneous, affluent Augustan Roman to whom the Portland no doubt belonged, recognition of this triad as Peleus, Tethys and Oceanus, would be easily triggered after seeing the crab claw, for it is a common attribute of the sea deity Oceanus and thereby associated with his wife, Tethys, the two of whom are frequently shown as a couple. In human form, Oceanus is regularly depicted with crab claws projecting from his forehead (much in the manner of the horns of Moses), and that Tethys would assume a crab-claw hand as the wife of Oceanus, now nuzzled against her, is a natural—husband and wife sharing a dual attribute. Like Tethys and Oceanus themselves at the very moment shown on the vase, the crab is both a seashore and a sea creature; thus the crab claw attribute is doubly ideal for the seaside location of this scene, for it has been long noted that the low ground line which the two C figures occupy strongly suggests a “watery domain.”⁸

Tethys and Oceanus, moreover, are often pictured with a *ketos*, and that the *ketos* itself is Oceanus is perfectly straightforward, especially given the clear intimacy and display of affection between the two, not to mention the propensity of Greek gods to assume the shapes of their animal familiars.⁹ Thus, with Tethys and the *ketos* Oceanus gazing upon and urging along a heroic male on a love quest, the story is perfectly clear: Peleus, guided by Eros, is off to

Randall Skalsky 129

woo Thetis, and he goes urged on by his future in-laws, Tethys and Oceanus, the grandparents of Thetis. The pensive and detached Zeus, figure D, is likely recalling that he, too, once had a love interest in Thetis, a bit of mythological minutia that both justifies his presence and enhances the story line, but has no affect on the action. The scene is exactly as it occurs in lines 26–30 of Catullus 64. Finally, it is noted that the general theme of “love” has been honed to one of “love and marriage.”

In my 1992 essay, the above identification of the dynamic group of figures is identical, but here requires neither recognition of the cryptograms there embedded, nor any immediate invocation of Catullus 64, although it stands to reason that our educated Roman would be familiar with that most vogue and current version of the famous Peleus and Thetis myth. The artist, in any event, has deployed a traditional, familiar methodology, and a superbly crafted attribute, to guide the viewer through the first set of identifications.

There is still more to the role of Oceanus the *ketos*. Although it has to this point been assumed that the omega cryptogram has not been recognized by the ancient viewer prior to seeing the crab claw (which is likely the case inasmuch as it remained unidentified for centuries in modern times), once the identity of Oceanus is established by the familiar attribute, the door was wide open to usher in the second methodology used in the frieze, namely, the cryptograms. From personal experience, I can report that internally vocalizing the name “Oceanus” during the reading is what triggered recognition of the omega-as-monogram, and that such an exciting experience primes a viewer to anticipate, indeed, to hunt, for further instances of the phenomenon.

SCENE B

AT THIS POINT, there are at least three possible avenues by which one might attempt to complete an interpretation of the frieze: (1) spurred on by recognizing the Oceanus cryp-

togram, a quest for further instances of the phenomenon leads to independently realizing the various architectural cryptograms and tropes; (2) sufficient familiarity with Catullus 64 to recognize Peleus as “the pillar of Thessaly” in scene A’s architecture, and thus realize that the architecture itself both furnishes an identification and creates a cryptogram; or (3) cleave to the familiar, and continue to search for attributes that will identify the remaining figures.

Avenues 1 and 2, separately or combined, lead to a manner and method of successfully decoding the entirety of the frieze and, among other things, wholly account for the architectural anomalies that other readings simply ignore. Interpretations of the Portland Vase, however, show a marked affinity for the well worn ruts of Avenue 3. For the moment, then, let us do the same.

Continuing the search for identifications via attributes, one enters scene B where visual attention is immediately drawn to Fig F. who, it would seem, must be the goal of Peleus’ quest, namely Thetis, elegantly showcased, center stage. Thus, a number of attempts to use the pose of figure F, or the torch falling from her hand, or the detached capital at her feet as some type of attribute to make such an identification have been made. Not a one is even remotely convincing.

Simply put, there is no traditional attribute present to make anything other than a stretched and speculative identification of figure F as Thetis, or anyone else for that matter, a situation which nonetheless has not prevented her identification over the years as, for example, Hecuba, Atia, Julia, Ariadne, Iphigenia, Media, Polyxena, and more.¹⁰ Nor is figure F the only victim of centuries of unsuccessful efforts; none of the static figures has identifying attributes, yet all have been assigned manifold conjectural identifications.

At this stage in the history of interpretations of the Portland, it is obvious that the artist *intentionally* discarded the attributional method of identification at some point; the figural plan now makes it clear that this occurs with the static figures. The dynamic figures, as demonstrated, can indeed

all be identified via attributes but, as the history of the Portland so plainly shows, attributional identification of the static figures is a futile exercise.

Had there previously existed knowledge of the new attribute and the figural plan, i.e., a recognition that there are two precisely divided sets of four figures each, one dynamic and one static, it would have greatly benefitted those attempting a reading of the frieze, for it would perhaps have been realized that just as each set of figures differs fundamentally, one from the other, so too might the method of their identification. In any event, it is now evident that halfway through the reading, the nature of the players and the rules of the game both radically change, and it is woe to the viewer who fails to realize that critical shift.

In a situation markedly similar to that of the *ketos* and the lady in scene A, the torch and the lady in scene B have been the subject of some truly wild speculation. There has appeared, though, an ingenious and thoroughly convincing decoding of the torch, and identification thereby, of figure F. In 1995, John G. Hind recognized that the torch is *not* an attribute, but rather “a visual pun (rebus), since the Greek for such a torch was *elane* or *elene* . . . and there is no doubt that the artist intended the lady to be Helen (Helene);” furthermore, he continues, the torch is strongly associated with marriage.¹¹

Hind’s discovery is directly comparable and analogous to the *ketos/omega* brainteaser in that vocalizing the Greek word (“torch,” in this instance) would trigger the identification of the figure. This visual homonym is a trope perfectly consonant with other examples of the same phenomenon in the frieze that I discussed in 1992.

Yet what an apple cart of problems such an identification brings with it! Naming figure F as Helen quickly advances that of E as Paris and yields a logical, balanced reading of the two as Paris and Helen, and, of course, Aphrodite to the right is perfectly at home as well. It also confirms and continues the love/marriage theme. Apart from Helen, though, such further identifications have always lacked proof and

132 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

become speculative forays leading nowhere but to a multitude of confounding questions. To consider just a few of these: Why is the torch falling out of Helen's fingers? Why does she appear almost asleep? Why is Paris seated above and behind her, facing scene A with his head twisted back? Why is there a loose capital with clamp hole lying at her feet? Why is there a single column behind Paris displaying clamp holes like the one in the capital? And perhaps most disconcerting, if this is Helen, what happened to Thetis, and how does all this relate to Peleus?

There remains only one unknown player at this point, figure E, and the entire reading now seems to hinge upon his substantive, provable identification—one that can bind together the many loose threads lying about. There is also one curious element in the frieze directly connected to E—the lone column half obscured by his legs at the bottom and displaying exposed clamp-holes at the top, the capital to which, also displaying a clamp-hole, lies nearby at Helen's feet. And there is only one other architectural feature in the frieze and that, most curiously, *lacks* a column and capital. The way out of this closing conundrum of identification is clearly marked.

Once properly analyzed, understood and deployed, the architecture itself not only supplies and substantiates the identification of figure E, but also fills out the elaborate narrative it simultaneously creates. By an internally visualized, rational manipulation of the three architectural elements, one comes to realize the full scope of the program, the complex role(s) of the cryptograms, Catullus 64, and the several sets of identifications, all of which is laid out in my 1992 essay. And, in reading that, you will discover that figure E is indeed Paris, and that figure F is indeed Helen; however—and a most emphatic “however” it is—you will learn further that she is but a dream figure, and is Helen only for the moment that she holds the eponymous torch.

The torch is depicted not only falling from her hands, but also so nearly spent as to be on the verge of extinction, for that singularly important reason: it is the visual cue and the

crucial clue that her identification is transitory, for as I demonstrated in 1992, she is also Thetis (and, in fact, is endowed with a third identity as well). scene B, in that frozen moment of time, shows Paris gazing upon his lover Helen. But in the very next instant, the torch—and with it, the identification—falls from the fingers, extinguishes, and the figure forthwith ceases to be Helen. Beginning at that selfsame moment, as detailed in my prior essay, the viewer must then visually conceptualize the completion of the tale by mentally reassembling the incomplete architectural elements. Paris, thereby, is removed from the scene and figure F becomes Thetis, awaiting her lover, Peleus, as he advances from scene A.

Let it be noted, too, that previous attempts to explain the torch slipping from Helen's fingers have been so stretched and futile as to be almost comical. Haynes, for example, on the heels of utterly destroying the Painter and Whitehouse interpretation of figure C' as a land serpent, goes on to have a little fun with their identification of figure F as Hecuba: "But anything less suggestive of the future pyromaniac [Hecuba] than the nearly spent torch hanging down almost forgotten from F's listless fingers, it would be hard to imagine."¹²

I was unaware those many years ago that the artist had created a comprehensive figural plan, a reading of scene A with attributes, and a two-part program—findings that speak with precision to how perfectly the artist knew his audience, knew to draw them in with the ordinary before challenging them with the extraordinary, and to do it all in rational, ordered form. The concinnity of such a singularly grand vision, particularly in the creation of the two-part methodology and figural plan that are conceptually one and the same, is an unparalleled artistic achievement.

NOTES

1. "Visual Trope and the Portland Vase Frieze", *Arion*, Third Series 2.1 (Winter 1992), 42–72 (hereafter VT).

2. A link to the cover: <http://www.bu.edu/arion/Volume2/2.1/arion2.1.htm>

3. VT (note 1), 42.

134 HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT, YET AGAIN

4. See Denys Haynes, "The Portland Vase: A Reply," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995) 146–52.

5. See VT (note 1), 64, notes 21 and 26 for Richard Brilliant on this process.

6. As I wrote in 1992 regarding many of the interpretations, they tend to be "founded almost exclusively on the authors' interpretation of the serpent in Figure C," (VT [note 1], 42). Haynes writes that "A crucial problem for any interpretation of the frieze is the nature of the sinuous creature beside C," (note 4), 146. But consider, for example, Susan Walker's recent, far-flung reading of the frieze as "the seduction of Mark Antony by Cleopatra," in *The Portland Vase* (British Museum Press, 2004), 47. Her summary treatment of the *ketos* minimizes it to a mere allusion or suggestion: "in . . . Greek narrative, Nereids ride sea-monsters to bring arms to Achilles: the scene on the vase may allude to Cleopatra's role as supplier of arms to Antony. As it appears on the vase, the serpent is also highly suggestive of ancient accounts of the queen's [Cleopatra's] subsequent suicide by asp-bite," 47–48. Lest it seem uncharitable to characterize Walker's reading as "far-flung," she closes her exegesis with a telling statement: "This story has not been recognized elsewhere in Roman art." (61).

7. Haynes (note 4), 150.

8. John G. Hind, "The Portland Vase: New Clues Towards Old Solutions," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995), 154.

9. Nibby (1848) construed C' as Jupiter in the form of a dragon; see "The Journal of Glass Studies" (*JGS*), 32 (Corning, NY, 1990), 174. The entire volume is devoted to the Portland Vase.

10. See *JGS*, 72–77 for a schematic of figural identifications through 1992.

11. Hind (note 8), 153.

12. Note 4, 149.