

## The Daily Dig – Albert Fried-Cassorla

### The Mythology of the Pyxis of the Wedding of Hebe and Herakles

#### Introduction

- I am a Senior Auditor with a strong interest in ancient Greek pottery. I have taken several Penn courses in history, including ancient Greece and Rome. I have also brought classes from Edison H.S. to the Museum. Currently, I serve as Adjunct Assistant Professor of English at Gwynedd Mercy University.
- This gallery includes dozens of examples of pottery from all over the ancient Greek world, which included some of modern day Turkey and Italy. The Penn Museum has been excavating in Greece since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- The following outline and my Daily Dig talk benefited substantially from contributions and edits by Dr. Thomas J. Tartaron and Dr. Susan Linn, both of the University of Pennsylvania. This summary served as an organizing document for the Daily Dig talk I gave at the University of Pennsylvania's Greece Gallery on May 8, 2019.

#### Narrative

- This gallery is made up mainly of pots of different kinds. Some contained wine, oil, perfume or other liquids. We will be focusing today on a pyxis, a cylindrical container used for cosmetics, jewelry and the like.
- Some pots here are of the red figure style, including the pyxis to which I am pointing. This means that people and other foreground items are mainly red. And other pots in this gallery are black figure, dating from an earlier period.
- We will be looking closely at a pyxis, which is a container often used for cosmetics and jewelry. It gives us picture of an important but rarely depicted mythological event – the wedding of Hebe and Herakles.

#### The Wedding of Herakles and Hebe (MS5462) – by the Meleager Painter. 400-390 BCE, in the Classical Greek period.

- How many of you have heard of the Greek hero Herakles? He is better known by his Roman name Hercules. Now how many of you have heard of Hebe, goddess of youth? Very few. One purpose of our visit is to get you better acquainted with her important story.
- Hebe was the direct descendant of Zeus and Hera. She was also a cup-bearer for Zeus and other Olympian gods. the goddess of eternal youth. She brought divine food and drink to the gods. Homer wrote about her in *The Iliad*. Hebe was also the patron of new brides, so it is likely that this pyxis was given to a young bride in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Another way of saying this is that the shape, function and figural scene all come together to suggest that this pyxis was given to a young bride on the occasion of her wedding in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- Herakles was one of the great heroes of Greek mythology. Here, on the pyxis lid, he is leading his wife, Hebe, on a procession. Herakles is famous for many deeds, including completing his famous Twelve Labors. Here, he holds a club, the same one he used to kill a monster called the Hydra. The club and lion skin are visual attributes that are repeatedly associated with Herakles; the ancient Greek viewer would instantly recognize this figure as Herakles and would know many stories associated with him.
- We are looking at the lid of the pyxis. Shown on the lid of this pyxis are, left to right: Eros, god of love, who holds Hebe's veil; Hebe, goddess of youth and cupbearer to the gods; Herakles, who carries a club; and Hemenaios, god of marriage, who carries a bridal torch.
- I will briefly tell you the stories of Hebe and Herakles. Hebe was the child of Hera and either Zeus or Apollo. She helped Hera with her chariot. Hebe soon became the cupbearer of the Olympian gods, meaning she served them a special drink, called nectar, and godly food, called ambrosia. She met Herakles, who was granted immortality. Soon after his becoming a god, they got married. Hera was not happy about

this, since Hebe could no longer help her. Herakles received Eternal Youth at this time. Hebe and Herakles had a happy marriage. Also shown here are a torch, bird, and chest, and the brass knob of the pyxis. Herakles was a demigod by birth, but how did he achieve immortality and when? In Homer he seems to have died. Was it after the labors? Was it by marriage to Hebe? What can you say? Perhaps only that there are different mythological streams involving gods and heroes, and that often they don't square with one another.

## **Conclusion**

- In summary, this object tells of an important but relatively unknown goddess named Hebe, and her marriage. This mythological wedding scene helped build a sense of cohesion among the Greeks who beheld it. They knew these myths and legends and heard them re-told. And they too had weddings featuring mythological objects and rituals.