BRONZE HYDRIAII

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The water jar, or hydria, to call it by its Greek name, is of a characteristic shape that is easily recognized and can be followed in one material or another from prehistoric times to the Hellenistic age and beyond. In the course of the centuries the proportions of the shape underwent certain changes which no form can escape in a long stylistic development, but the very function of the vessel—to draw water, to carry it, and to pour it—appears to have favored conservatism. The changes are subtle and gradual, for the most part more evident in the accessories, such as handles, mouth, and foot, than in the body of the vase itself.

As the name implies, the primary use of the hydria centered around water, though it also served other purposes. We know of hydriai which were awarded as prizes in Greek games; they were kept in the temple treasuries in large numbers; they were employed as ballot boxes or to hoard money. Several of them were ultimately used as cinerary urns, a custom alluded to in Sir Thomas Browne's Hydriotaphia.

While hydriai of terracotta have been preserved in great numbers, examples in metal are considerably rarer and must have been as precious in antiquity as they are today. Of gold, none have been found, and of silver only a very few and only of the latest period. In bronze the shape is known from the late seventh to the late fourth century B.C. The body of the vase was hammered out of sheet bronze, which, being fairly thin, has often perished completely or been sadly damaged, whereas the foot, the three handles, and at times the lip of the mouth were cast and therefore stood a better chance of survival. The Museum has today eight complete vases and handles or reliefs from five others, which makes its series the largest and most representative that can be studied and admired in a single collection. Three of the complete vases are recent accessions.

Bronze hydriai fall into four groups, which correspond to successive phases in the development of the shape and the sculptural accessories. The earliest group is represented in the Museum by a large handle with particularly rich sculptural adjuncts, illustrated on the next page. On the horizontal flange, which was originally attached by rivets to the mouth of the hydria, are two recumbent sphinxes who wear the special headgear known as a polos. A similar polos appears on the woman’s head below at the base of the handle, flanked by two reclining banqueters. A sturdy palmette forms the finial of the handle. Comparison with sculpture in the round and with the conventions of vase-painting suggests a date in the beginning of the sixth century B.C. In the course of the century this type of hydria handle changed considerably. The head at the base became smaller, and the horizontal figures above and below less obtrusive. In place of the sphinxes and banqueters of the Museum's handle we usually find small lions and rams. In the latest examples of this group the head of a woman is omitted, and toward the very end even the flanking figures below are suppressed. By way of contrast, the palmette finial increases in size, and stress is laid on the vertical lines of the handle proper.

In the earliest group this vertical handle always ends flush with the rim, and the top of the mouth is fairly flat. Toward the end of the sixth century, however, a new type emerged, illustrated on the next pages by a complete bronze hydria which the Museum acquired in 1954. Here the vertical handle rises high above the rim and turns back to meet it. The mouth is flaring and the neck is narrow. The sculptural accessories are used with much restraint. Gone are the recumbent figures in high relief, and even the palmettes which serve as finials of the three handles are no longer modeled but are engraved. This austerity helps to focus all the attention on
ABOVE: Handle from a bronze hydria, an example of the earliest style. Early 8th century B.C. Rogers Fund, 1906. BELOW: Details of the vertical handle of the hydria illustrated above on the facing page.
Front and side views of two bronze hydriai. Above, from the Chalcidice, late VI century, and below, from the Peloponnesus, about 460 B.C., early and late examples of a class of hydriai. Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1954, 1926
the relief that appears on the return of the vertical handle, the bust of a woman, facing toward the mouth of the vase. The features of the face are somewhat worn, as this part of the hydria was most exposed to handling. The woman wears a diadem on her head. Her hair, which is parted in the center, comes down in soft waves over the forehead, with two long tresses behind the ears on either side of the long neck. These tresses are modeled in the same convention as the upper edge of the dress. The breasts are indicated but lightly, and the shoulders merge with the lateral projections of the handle, two upright disks, which are decorated with beading along the edges and engraved rosettes on the outer faces. There is also an engraved palmette directly above the head on the highest part of the carinated handle. The three rivets with which the handle is attached to the mouth of the vase are still in place, as is a fourth which fastens the base of the handle to the wall of the shoulder. The side handles are soldered on. They are no longer straight and horizontal but curve upward in the center, with a ring at the highest point. The foot, which in earlier hydriai is big and flaring, has become small and convex. This hydria is said to have been found in Northern Greece, in the Chalcidice. It can be dated in the last quarter of the sixth century.

This second group of bronze hydriai can be traced down to the transitional or sub-archaic period, to the middle of the fifth century or a little later. Best known among the Museum’s hydriai is a particularly splendid bronze vase, dated about 460 B.C., one of the prizes of the contests at the Argive Heraeum, as an inscription on the mouth tells us. This hydria is illustrated here together with the earlier one, to show the contrast between them. On the Argive hydria the bust of a woman is no mere adjunct to the handle but rises powerfully from it, the head completely worked in the round. The garment is clearly indicated, with folds on the sides and between the breasts. While the arms of the woman merge, as before, with the lateral projections (here terminating in elaborate blossoms), her shoulders are set off from her neck and from the handle. The neck of the vase is narrower and hammered separately, as became the custom in
the fifth century. The shoulders of the hydria are decorated with tongues all the way round, framed below by four engraved lines.

Side by side with these hydriai goes a variant in which the place of the bust of a woman is taken by a lion’s head, its mouth wide open, as if it had been transplanted from the waterspout of the fountain house to the water jar itself. With this subject, illustrated here by a set of handles in the collection, came an innovation: the lower finial is in the shape of a siren in front view with her wings spread out, standing on a palmette volute. This motive furnishes the transition to the third group or phase of bronze hydriai, which spans most of the fifth century B.C.

In this group the sculptural decoration is confined to a siren at the base of the vertical handle. The handle itself is not flush with the rim, nor does it sweep above it as in the earlier groups; instead it is attached to the neck of the vase by means of an oval disk and is either round in cross section, like the siren handle in the Museum shown on this page, or fluted. The side handles not only curve upward but also inward and have round finials. The foot is convex and rather small. Mouth, foot, and handle finials are usually decorated with floral patterns. Sometimes silver inlays enliven the ornament. The type remained fairly uniform until the very end of the fifth century, when Greek artists (who could never for very long remain contented with a tradition) abandoned the siren at the base of the handle and began to experiment with other subjects, such as satyrs’ masks or heraldic animals in a fight. But the relief did not really rise above the level of the subordinate decoration until the subject became narrative, with single figures or groups of gods and goddesses in action.

A complete hydria in the Museum, illustrated at the upper left on the next page, bridges the transition from the siren hydriai of the third group to those of the fourth and last, in which the relief seems to take on a life of its own. On this hydria the artist has cast the relief at the base of the vertical handle separately. While the shape and the proportions of the vase itself still conform to the standards of the siren group, the choice of subject in the relief goes far beyond anything previously attempted. A winged Artemis is fighting with a stag. Her wings present some difficulty of interpretation, but it may be argued that they have a twofold function: to conceal the join of the relief and to serve as an ornament in a place where the wings of sirens had heretofore been firmly rooted. The Artemis hydria dates from the last decades of the fifth century, and, while there is a gap between it and the earliest vases of the fourth group, the direction of the development is demonstrably clear.

The last phase opens sometime in the second quarter of the fourth century and continues until the thirties or a little later. This is the period in which Greek metalwork reached its greatest height. The freedom achieved by the sculptors of the fourth century finds its immediate reflection in the smaller, though no less interesting, reliefs in bronze. Hydriai of this period were collected and thoroughly studied by Miss Richter not so long ago, 1946 (see the reference to her article in the note at the end). Since then the Museum has acquired two more complete examples. One of them, perhaps among the earliest of the group, dates from the second quarter of the fourth century. The subject of the relief shows the wind god Boreas as he abducts the Attic princess Oreithyia. Boreas has seized his bride by the waist. His wings are spread, but his feet are still on the hilly ground (perhaps the Areopagos at Athens), while Oreithyia looks in vain for her playmates. The relief is not cast but in this case worked in repoussé and reinforced with lead.
Details of hydriai shown opposite and a bronze mirror cover in the Princeton Museum. Left, above, Boreas abducting Oreithyia, on the hydria from Chalke, and below, Eros, on the hydria from Eretria. Right, above, Dionysos and Ariadne, on the mid 4th century hydria, as restored on the analogy of the relief below.
The relief of the other new accession also shows a group, but the tone is quieter. Dionysos and Ariadne are side by side as they revel through the night. Dionysos carries a wine cup; Ariadne (or is she a mere maenad?) holds a torch. This relief is also in repoussé, but it has been much damaged. Thanks to its similarity to the cover of a mirror in Princeton it has been possible not only to restore the missing portions of the Museum’s relief but also to clear the Princeton relief of all suspicions of forgery, of which it had undeservedly been accused. They are illustrated together here for comparison. The style is somewhat soft and the figures are languid. The date must be after the middle of the fourth century. Later still is a hydria from Eretria. The relief, which is cast, shows Eros in a thoroughly feminized pose, as he leans on a small statue and arranges his hair. Classic art, one feels, cannot go much beyond this. We have traveled a long way from the compact symmetry of the sculptures on the earliest hydriai.

On hydriai see Elvira Fölzer, Die Hydria (Leipzig, 1906); G.M.A. Richter and M.J. Milne, Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases (New York, 1935), pp. 11-12; and articles by L. Politis (Ephemeris Archaiologike, 1936, pp. 147 ff.), D.M. Robinson (American Journal of Archaeology, vol. 46, 1942, pp. 172 ff.), and G.M.A. Richter (American Journal of Archaeology, vol. 50, 1946, pp. 361 ff.). The archaic handle, the lion handle, the Argive hydria, the siren handle, the Artemis hydria, and the Eros hydria are published, with bibliography and measurements, in Handbook of the Greek Collection (1953), pls. 22 g, 64 e-f, 64 a and h, 63 c, 76 a and d, 90 a and c. The archaic hydria from the Chalcidice has not been published before (acc. no. 54.11.2; total h. 18½ in.). The Boreas hydria (acc. no. 53.11.3; h. 19 in.) was formerly in the collections of John Edward Taylor (Christie's, July 1-4, 9-10, 1912, p. 93, no. 368, ill.) and William Randolph Hearst (Sotheby's, July 11-12, 1939, no. 271, pl. 10, and February 16, 1953, no. 12). It is listed under nos. 18 and 21 in American Journal of Archaeology, vol. 50, 1946, p. 365. The damaged and missing portions of the vase have been restored and the foot and the handle reattached. The hydria with Dionysos and Ariadne (acc. no. 51.11.8; h., as restored, 20¼ in.) was formerly in the City Art Museum at St. Louis and was published in their Bulletin (1924, p. 11). On May 10-12, 1945, it was sold at auction at the Kende Galleries in New York (p. 70, no. 235, ill.) and was republished the following year in the American Journal of Archaeology (vol. 50, 1946, p. 364, no. 14, pls. 16-17). After its purchase by the Museum, the alien foot was removed and replaced by a wooden one, the missing portions of the wall restored in lucite, the handles reattached, and the missing parts of the relief restored in wax on the analogy of the relief in Princeton. The Princeton relief is published in Collection M.E.G. 19-20 mai 1904, pl. 5, no. 129, and by K. Elderkin in Art and Archaeology (vol. 20, 1925, p. 124, ill.). Its authenticity was attacked by W. Züchner in Griechische Klappspiegel (Berlin, 1942), p. 112.

A paper on the subject of this article was read at the Seventy-fifth Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America at Boston on December 30, 1954. A somewhat fuller study of bronze hydriai will appear in the American Journal of Archaeology.