This lecture on The François Vase was written and presented

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(Images were presented with the lecture that are not available here.)

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"A magnificent vase, the like of which has never been seen," is how Alessandro François described this ancient Greek pot in 1844 at the moment of its discovery. The vase was found inside an Etruscan tomb in central Italy, smashed in antiquity by tomb robbers who deemed it unimportant. The archaeologist François obviously felt differently: he systematically dug up an area the size of a football field searching for lost fragments of the vase. The vase was pieced together and immediately attracted the attention of Leopold II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who purchased it for the collection of art in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The history of the vase since then is checkered, but this is how the vase appears today in the National Archaeological Museum in Florence.

The reason for the nineteenth-century enthusiasm is this. The François Vase, as it is now known, is a Rosetta-Stone of ancient Greek mythological art. Encircling the vase are five bands of figure scenes. More figures decorate the handles. Ten different mythological narratives are depicted on the vase. Over two hundred figures in total are represented, and virtually everyone one of them is identified in writing on the pot. The François Vase is like the film archive of Archaic Greece.

The vase must have been painted sometime around 570 B. C. at Athens, 125 years before the creation of the Parthenon and the Elgin marbles. We know the names of the artists who made the

vase, because they signed the work--twice. The unusual shape is the creation of a potter named Ergotimos. The painted decoration is the work of Kleitias.

The painted decoration is a wonder of miniature detail. The pestilent Kalydonian boar is trampling on men and dogs: You can see the disemboweled entrails of its victims. The centaurs who pound the hero Kaineus into the ground with boulders have brushed up forelocks and little moustaches. You can make out the pine needles on the branches they carry. Clothing exhibits the variety within type characteristic of a Bill Cunningham spread in the New York Times [show Moirai, or Horai]. The temple-like structure that is the house of the hero Peleus, with two columns and a porch, includes a little door for a dog or cat. There are memorable portraits on the vase as well. A humiliated god of war. A quizzical messenger god with high-topped sneakers. An aging king worried about his children. Artemis, the Mistress of Animals. The hero Ajax bending under the weight of his friend Achilles as he carries the body off of the battlefield at Troy.

Above and beyond the expressive and informative style of the painting, however, is its pictorial narrative technique. The François Vase is a laboratory of visual narrative experimentation. One story unfolds around the entire circumference of the vase. The eldest daughter of the Old Man of the Sea, Thetis, was married to the hero Peleus. The gods and goddesses were invited to attend this unusual union of goddess and mortal. In the picture running around the vase, you can see the gods and goddesses waiting in the receiving line to greet the groom, who stands before his house.

Peleus was the recipient of the greatest honor any mortal can hope to experience (according to the poet Pindar): to host the gods and goddesses at his wedding, to see them with his own eyes, and to receive their gifts. The bride and groom were indeed blessed. The product of their union, conceived on this night, would grow up to become the greatest hero of his generation. That child was Achilles.

Virtually every picture on the François Vase concerns one or the other of two themes, both of which are announced by the principal picture of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. One theme is Achilles, and the other is marriage. All four of the picture-bands on the main face of the vase, plus the handle-plates, present key stories about Achilles or (in one case) his father.

The back of the vase gives us three more pictorial narratives, all three pertaining in some way to theme of marriage. Let us look at one picture in particular, which addresses the theme of the musical composition and video:

The image is dominated by a procession of seven boys and seven girls holding hands, boy-girl-boy-girl. The line proceeds from a beached ship toward a pair of girls who greet them. It is not just a procession but also a dance: the hero Theseus supplies rhythm and melody on a lyre. The image includes a point of departure and a destination for the processional dance, which is stretched out between like a necklace.

Everybody knows that the 14 Athenian children were sent to Minoan Crete as sacrificial offerings to an elusive and freaky creature. This is the Minotaur, part-man, part-bull, and raw-flesh-eating. This creature was confined within an eery enclosure at Knossos, a prison with an endless series of passageways. It was called the Labyrinth. Theseus not only slayed the Minotaur, but also successfully led the young people out of the Labyrinth. He succeeded thanks to a ball of thread. He tied the end of the thread to the entrance of the maze before he entered. This trick he learned from the sister of the Minotaur and daughter of King Minos, Ariadne. She sailed away with the victorious Athenian hero, and never looked back. You can see Ariadne in

the picture, holding out a ball of thread, as Theseus approaches her.

More interpretive ink has been spilled on this picture than on any other part of the decoration of the François Vase. The problem is this:

Ancient literature tells us that Theseus led a dance upon his triumph over the Minotaur and escape from the Labyrinth. There was in fact a special dance regularly performed in historical times on the island of Delos. The people of Athens sent their children to participate. The Delian dance was called the *geranos* or "crane" dance. The choreography was said to have been created by Theseus on the basis of his wanderings in the Labyrinth. The literary descriptions lead one to expect a dance that is labyrinthine, and one that was first performed *after* the slaying of the monster and escape from the maze. In the vase-painting, however, the dance is processional in format. And clearly it is occurring upon the arrival of the Athenians on Crete, before the encounter with the Minotaur has even happened.

Look at the ship and its crew: the mast is stowed, the sailors have risen from their seats and thrown their arms in the air. One sailor has even jumped into the sea and swims ashore. Everything suggests that the boat has just arrived at its destination after a long journey.

Look at the formation of the dance: the last of the 14 dancers, Phaidimos, is just now running from the direction of the ship toward the thirteenth dancer. He will take her hand and complete the chorus. The picture suggests that the dancers have just disembarked from the boat.

Look at how Theseus and Ariadne interact. Theseus approaches Ariadne and she stands facing him as if he is just arriving at her home. It is the moment when he wins Ariadne's affections.

The transfer of her allegiances, from her half-brother Minotaur to the young Athenian stranger, is signalled by her offer to the hero of a means of escape from the Labyrinth. He needs this ball of thread before he enters the maze.

This reading of the pictorial narrative of Theseus and Ariadne meets considerable resistance from many art historians. It seems inexplicable to them that Theseus would have performed a dance that imitates the path through the Labyrinth, *prior* to his experience and escape from the maze. They have devised ingenious interpretations, which allow the image to be read as occurring after the ordeal. But the interpretations fly in the face of the clear testimony of the picture.

For me, it is precisely the *illogical* temporality of this carefully crafted image that gives it its power. The picture does this in several ways:

The survival of the Athenian adolescents depends not only on defeating the Minotaur, but also on finding one's way home again. Theseus alone may have been capable of defeating the monster, but he requires the knowledge of an insider to escape the Labyrinth. In this story, the seduction of Ariadne is not an inessential optional pleasure, like a James Bond bedroom interlude. It is a do-or-die narrative necessity.

This dance explains why Theseus was attractive to Ariadne. The hero is leading a very special and unusual kind of dance. The mixed chorus of boys and girls was associated in antiquity primarily with marriageability. This form of dance, Lucian tells us, show-cased the masculine and feminine qualities of the dancers to each other. According to Plato, it afforded boys and girls an opportunity to take the measure of potential husbands and wives.

The picture supplies an answer to the crucial question: how did Theseus seduce Ariadne away from her family, given his unpromising status as a suitor, a boy tribute destined to die imminently? The vase-painting does this by visualizing the hero's mastery of the coed dance of marriageable boys and girls. This man, she can see, knows what it takes to be a husband.

Later writers in antiquity thought of the Labyrinth as a *place*. It is widely held that the idea of the Labyrinth was generated in the historical period by the visible remains of the prehistoric Palace of Minos at Knossos. As you can see, the remains are nothing if not labyrinthine. That understanding of the Labyrinth discounts dance as a secondary, later, and relatively unimportant narrative development.

But the earliest literary allusion to the Labyrinth is ambiguous. In the ékphrasis of the Shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, an important link is made. The image of a dance of youths and maidens, holding hands, dancing in lines and circles, decorating the shield, is compared to a dance created by Daidalos at Knossos for Ariadne (Hom. *Il*. 18.591–592). The most ambitious ancient literary image of a work of art, an all-encompassing picture of the human experience of war and peace, culminates in a vignette of just the kind of dancing unfolding on the François Vase. And it weds this form of teenage dance to the mythology of Ariadne.

Significantly, the word used in Homer for the thing created by Daidalos, *chorós*, is primarily used to describe the physical activity of dance. It describes a place only by extension. Yet the allusion to the creative work of Daidalos inevitably calls to mind the Labyrinth at Knossos. Many later writers tell us that the legendary artist was responsible for its infernal design. The

comparison in Homer suggests that the Labyrinth, and the dance choreographed by Daidalos for Ariadne, and the traditional historical mixed dance of marriageable maidens and youths--all are expressions of the same idea. That idea arguably is, What demonstrates, what constitutes, readiness to take up a new life, with a new acquaintance, from a new family, in marriage?

The François Vase gives concrete pictorial form to the nebulous constellation of ideas in Homer. Seeing the boy from Athens leading the tribute-victims in dance, Ariadne recognizes that he is capable of dancing the steps of the Labyrinth dance that Daidalos created for her. The temporality of the picture is crucial to make this point: Theseus demonstrates his intuitive grasp of what is at stake *before* he experiences the Labyrinth. In a sense, Theseus offers Ariadne the one thing she is missing to experience for herself the Labyrinth dance. That is, a man to dance with who does not have to be taught how to dance--someone who is her equal. She in turn provides Theseus with the one thing he lacks to master the Labyrinth and survive his ordeal. On a mechanical level, that is the ball of thread. In fact, the secret is blind faith, which she demonstrates by handing the ball of thread to the boy.

Visually, the processional dance of those who arrive by ship from overseas evokes a second form of ritual in antiquity. This is the arrival of the wine god Dionysos for a festival at Athens. In this slightly later vase-painting, you can see the god as he is imagined to arrive by sea. **29** Other pictures on vases demonstrate that the Athenians employed a ship on wheels in order to effect, in a commemorative ritual procession, the arrival of the god from the sea. This processional ritual was in fact a direct ancestor of the Roman triumphal procession.

The so-called ship-car procession is also associated with one of the most extraordinary and enigmatic events in all of Greek religion--a ceremony in which the wife of the Athenian

magistrate known as the Archon Basileus was joined in marriage with the god Dionysos himself.

To understand the complex allusions at work in this picture on the François vase, it is important to remember that Ariadne did not, in the end, marry Theseus. Although she eloped with him for Athens, he abandoned her on the island of Naxos. On this vase, you can see the hero quietly picking up his sandals, preparing to leave the girl as she sleeps under a large grape vine. The grape vine reminds us that the wine-god Dionysos will discover Ariadne in his vineyard and make her his wife. Abandoned by her mortal hero while she slept, Ariadne awoke to a better life. For the marriage of Dionysos and Ariadne was the epitome of happy and faithful marriage in antiquity. No other god was faithful to his wife forever. But Ariadne did not arrive at that blissful state before she had experienced the loss of her home, her family, and her mortal husband-to-be.

Anyone familiar with Athenian ritual will recognize that the arrival of Theseus in the picture on the François Vase has the appearance of a triumphal arrival of Dionysos at Athens for his festival. The god-like hero will take possession of the community's most important female figure. But the pictorial allusion is twofold: at the same time, we remember that Theseus, like his political counterpart in historical times, the Archon Basileus, will leave his partner to the god Dionysos in the end.

If you are familiar with the recent best-selling science-fiction novel and film series, the *Hunger Games*, you may know that Suzanne Collins based the story in part on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. The transformation of the ancient myth into a contemporary tale is fascinating, because the heroine of the modern story, Katniss Everdeen, is both insurgent tribute victim, like Theseus, and innocent girl on the verge of womanhood, like Ariadne. The *Hunger Games*

reveals an intuitive understanding that ordinary gendered hierarchies between boys and girls are temporarily leveled in this myth. Physical strength will only get you so far in the Labyrinth. Katness needs Peeta's winning ways with words. Theseus needs Ariadne's grace and cleverness.

Both the *Hunger Games* and the François Vase articulate this leveling of hierarchy of gender and power through the use of spectacle. But the two representations of the myth employ very different forms of spectacle. *Hunger Games* is predicated on the contemporary idea of the total surveillance society. Televised worldwide, the kiss is as powerful as a sword. The François Vase expresses the fundamental dynamic of the myth pictorially through the manipulation of the ancient spectacle of dance. In this depiction of the Cretan tale, dance is intricately intertwined with heroic action. Dance is not supplementary or secondary to masculine success. The image says, in effect, if you can't hold hands with a girl in a dance, you aren't ready to face a Minotaur.