Time in Space: Narrative in Classical Art

Classical artists often portrayed events in a narrative out of sequential order. From an examination of well-known classical pictorial narratives, I have found two patterns of organization: hierarchical and spatial time. In the former, figures and events are arranged according to their importance and role in the narrative. In the latter, the placement of figures and events is determined by the physical location in which the event occurred, because time in classical antiquity was mistakenly thought to be movement through space and not duration. Hence, to show that time has elapsed, the setting or location of a scene must change.
Debates about how to tell a story go back, no doubt, to the time when some mythical humans sat around some mythical fire in some mythical cave.¹ Most of us today grew up under the premises so aptly described by Lewis Carroll in Alice in Wonderland. There the King of Hearts advises, “Begin at the beginning . . . and go on till you come to the end; then stop.” The King of Hearts implies that stories work in a single linear sequence. In contrast, many representations of stories in classical art juxtapose episodes that did not occur next to each other. While we can follow the classical stories, their parts often seem to be oddly ordered.

Consider what Anthony Snodgrass says about a Corinthian krater depicting the departure of Amphipolos (Fig. 1): “Allusions to past and future episodes (the necklace of Eriphyle, the hero’s drawn sword, the seer’s despair) are piled onto a central episode which itself turns out to be split into temporally incompatible phases (the charioteer’s drink and the horses already at the trox). . . . The painter . . . has defied time.”² Jocelyn Toynbee, writing about the Great Trajanic Frieze (Figs. 4, 5) notes that “whereas on the Column [of Trajan] the main stream of the story flows consecutively from left to right, here, at least in the portions we have, it ebbs and flows alternately to left and right and the scenes are grouped together with a total disregard of spatial and temporal logic.”³ Both scholars began with the same assumption as the King of Hearts: all narrative is sequential and should be represented visually in a sequential manner, from left to right or even right to left, but certainly not by constantly switching directions or by interspersing parts that do not “belong” sequentially next to each other.

To understand narrative in classical art one has to understand how time was viewed in classical antiquity, for no narrative in any period exists independently of time. Like numerous scholars before me, I avoid any definition of time by referring to Saint Augustine for support. He said, “What therefore is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I were to explain it to a questioner, I do not know.”⁴ I can say, however, that the concepts of time I am interested in are easier to examine in literary and artistic narratives than in scientific tracts. Furthermore, ideas about time vary from culture to culture, from period to period. Here I concentrate on only those classical views that affect classical pictorial narrative. The most important fact to grasp is that strict sequencing of events in the order that they actually happened was not of paramount interest in antiquity. Classical historians in their writings often relate events out of chronological order; Dio- sisyus of Halicarnassus, for example, prefers Herodotus to Thucydides because Herodotus follows a geographical order when relating the history of the Persian Wars, while Thucydides arranges his history broadly by the seasons of the year.⁵ Individual genealogies in Homer make sense, at least within Homer, but they are nigh impossible to correlate. When, according to Homer, did Theseus live compared with Jason compared with Heracles compared with Odysseus?⁶ Even the order of events within a brief span of time was resolved differently from the way it is today. Consider the adventures of the young Theseus.⁷ In classical antiquity, there was no single agreed-upon order for the episodes whether the sources were pictorial or textual, even though arranging seven events chronologically should have been simple. Today, most scholars assume that these events occurred in geographical order, as they were related by Bacchylides (Dibydrads 18) in the late sixth century B.C.E. The first event must logically be the one that occurs in the most southerly location, so that Theseus can proceed north up the coast of Greece to Athens. Such a simple sequence of episodes is not portrayed on any of the extant twenty-two Attic red-figure cycle vases from the fifth century B.C.E. Each of these vases depicts a differing selection of the seven episodes that comprise the early adventures of Theseus, as recorded in various literary sources. Most of these vases are kylikes (cups) that have three surfaces that can carry decoration: the exterior of the vase with its two sides and the interior (tondo). Hence, this group of vases actually has a total of thirty-one decorated surfaces or scenes. Moreover, each area (side A, side B, and the interior) can display one or more of the events in Theseus’s life.

Since a number of these thirty-one scenes include only two events, they must be eliminated from our consideration. Two episodes present problematic sequences, because it is possible to claim that the two events should be viewed in the reverse order. With all the units showing two events eliminated, only one vase remains that portrays three or more events in the logical geographical order, and even then the order only works backward.⁸ On both sides of this Kylix the appearance of Theseus, as the victor, on the left in each of the duels means the action moves to the right, with the reader that the encounter with Sinis, as the earliest of the group, according to scholars, appears on the far right, not the far left, of side A. Furthermore, not one of the eleven vases with three or more episodes repeats the arrangement of the episodes of any other.

The fifth-century Hephasteion in the Agora in Athens exhibits the same muddle to modern eyes.⁹ Four metopes on the north side and four on the south depict Theseus. The majority of scholars arrange each set in the approved scholarly chronological order, based on the geographical order just discussed, but the viewer has to run back and forth between the north and the south sides of the temple to get the series in sequence, because Periphetes and Sinis appear on the south; the Sow, Skiron, Kerkyon, and Procrustes on the north; and the Bull and the Minotaur back on the south.¹⁰ Clearly, because the Greeks often did not care about the niceties of sequential order, scholars should think twice
before trying to arrange classical stories in strict chronological order.

Around the time of Thucydides, in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E., the Greeks begin to make a distinction between those things capable of precision and exactitude and those for which only the gist, or spirit, can be known. Furthermore, they believed that the gist could be more telling than accuracy. For example, Herakles must perform certain deeds in a certain order; for other deeds, however, that form and demonstrate his character, it only matters that they occur, not when. Thus, he always kills the Nemean lion first, so that he will be properly equipped for his other deeds. Similarly, his apotheosis is going to happen last. In between much could be and was in flux.

The emphasis on gist rather than accuracy helps to explain, for instance, the wide divergences in the three fifth-century plays about Electra. It is a matter of common knowledge, that is, of accuracy in Thucydides' terms, that Clytemnestra and Agamemnon are murdered. Because no one really knows how precisely they met their deaths, each of the three dramatists felt free to use their imagination. Hence, the manner of their deaths has nothing to do with exactitude, but with general truths—how particular characters should perform in particular situations. Some explanations will be better than others. While we would consider mimetic fidelity better—either it happened this way or it did not—Aristotle in the Poetics (1460b 8-11) reverses our judgment by putting “as they ought to be” at the top of his three levels of imitation with “as they were or are” at the bottom. He also says (Poetics 1451b), “The real difference [between history and poetry] is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.” In other words, when Aristotle rates the poet higher than the historian and puts “as they ought to be” as the poet’s highest achievement, he is saying that, when all is said and done, how something actually happened matters significantly less to the Greeks than how it should have happened. With such an attitude, chronological considerations are inevitably subordinated.

One of the bases for the nonchronological view of the Greeks, I believe, lies in the differences between oral and literate cultures, in which Thucydides plays a transitional role. In an oral society an excellent memory is required just to recall a set of deeds. Remembering an unchanging order is more difficult. Since modern studies of memory have shown that we can hold at the most only six to eight items in short-term memory, who is likely to remember that three weeks ago someone gave events in a different sequence or changed the canonical deeds of Herakles or membership in the twelve Olympians? In fact, I wonder whether Aristotle’s strictures on unity of time reflects the limitations of our ability to keep track of complex sequences.

Writing is necessary to compare variations, and not until variations can be compared and aligned will a full awareness of chronology develop. The establishment of the first libraries in the fourth century B.C.E. resulted in third-century Roman historians showing intimations of a true chronological sense. As they began to codify early Roman history, they saw contradictions. In their attempts to produce plausible accounts, they imaginatively filled in gaps, just like modern historians. These fillers in their turn could be embellished, in part because they needed to meet the criterion of general truth rather than accuracy, with the result that a plethora of variations coexisted. Nor is it coincidental that the first depictions of deities of time also occur during the fourth century B.C.E. and that they sometimes hold scrolls—an indication of the intimate connection between time and writing.

Now that it is clear that neither classical art nor classical culture privileged strict sequential time, it is appropriate to examine what kinds of representation of time they did favor. The François vase, an Attic black-figure volute krater made about 570-560 B.C.E., reflects certain practices of an oral society, whether it is the paratactic tradition of Homer or one of the later excursions of Herodotus (Fig. 2). One subject simply leads to another, but with certain emphases that can be made more easily in art than in literature. As often remarked, speech and writing are linear and hence, in a sense, sequential. The listener or reader starts with the first word, each strictly following one after the other to the end, at which point he has an idea of the whole. Something visual, like the vase, generally works in the opposite manner. The whole is taken in at the start and only later are the individual parts examined, as certain pictorial devices move the viewer’s eye from part to part. On an object with a number of scenes like the François vase the scene that takes up the most room is likely to be the most eye-catching and therefore the most important. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis not only appears in the widest band on the
shoulder but also is the only narrative theme to appear continuously on both sides of the vase, except for the scene of the Pygmies and Grapes on the foot, which tends to be overlooked because of its small size and position.

When the scenes are numbered in their putative chronological order, the results are noteworthy for their lack of pattern. The earliest scene should be the Return of Hephaistos below the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis on side B (the "back" of the vase). The second scene would be the Victory Dance of the Athenians after their rescue by Theseus from the Minotaur in the first band on the neck. The next scene is the Cabydonian Boar Hunt, which includes Peleus, before his marriage, fighting alongside Meleager on the "front" (side A) of the vase; then back to the back and the second register on the neck with the fight between the Lapiths and Centaurs at the wedding of Peirithoos. The procession of four chariots for the Wedding of Peleus and Thetis is on the main band, which takes us around to the front for the Ambush of Troilus below it and the Funeral Games of Patroclus above it. Finally, Ajax appears on each handle carrying the body of Achilles.

Clearly, sequential time was not intended. I think the only conclusion possible is that the events are arranged spatially in their order of importance to the artist. This organization is analogous to that of newspapers; the position of an item on the front page defines its significance, not when it occurred in relation to the other news items.

Let us explore some more examples of "hierarchical time," as I call this phenomenon. The slightly later Attic black-figure cup with Circe, now in Boston, is a thorn in the classical art historian's side, for every discussion of narrative in the archaic period stresses its inconsistencies (Fig. 3). In the center Circe, at the left, has just taken back her metamorphosing potion from her latest victim, half changed into a boar. They are flanked by previous victims and then two intact men. The one on the right is identified as Eurylochus, who rushes off to get Odysseus, on the left, to rescue his men. A final victim, half lion, runs away on the far left. Scholars find the positions of Eurylochus and Odysseus particularly vexing, because they are separated from each other. For the jumping back and forth in temporal sequence, they have given various
labels, of which synoptic is the most popular.\textsuperscript{27} Except possibly for the man on the far left, the ordering of figures is totally hierarchical, with Circe and what she is doing taking center stage because she is the protagonist. She is surrounded, first, by her previous victims, and then, also in rough parallel, by those about to help the victims, with the victor, Odysseus, as is common, coming in from the left.

A similar kind of composition occurs on the Great Tragic Frieze (Figs. 4, 5),\textsuperscript{28} which Jocelyn Toyabee accused of "a total disregard of spatial and temporal logic" because "it ebbs and flows alternately to left and right."\textsuperscript{29} Four panels, each composed of two slabs, were inserted in the Arch of Constantine. From their moldings, the order of slabs has been incontrovertibly reconstructed, to the dismay of archaeologists. If the frieze is viewed as moving predominantly from right to left, then the end points of the action, the beginning of the charge to battle, and the final adventus mark the limits of the frieze in much the same way as Herakles must fight the Nemean lion first and be apotheosized last. Then, like the Circe cup, the eye is drawn to the center; the emperor on the fifth slab leads his troops into battle. This segment is flanked, on the left, with further fighting and, on the right, with the defeat and taking of prisoners.

The most common place for arranging figures and actions in evenly flanking, parallel units occurs naturally in pediments. ("Naturally," that is, since sequential compositions are high impossible to arrange within an isosceles triangle.) In the east pediment from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, Zeus stands largest and in the center, flanked by the two protagonists, Pelops, on the left, and Oenomaus, on the right.\textsuperscript{30} They in turn are flanked by two women, Sterope, the mother of Hippodameia on the left, and Hippodameia by Oenomaus, her father, on the right. Next are the two chariots, each with figures at the heads of the horses. Myrritus, on the left, who is "fixing" the chariot wheel, is complemented by the seer, on the right, who knows what is about to happen. Behind each of them is an unidentified youth or onlooker. The whole composition is set between two onlookers.\textsuperscript{31}

My last example of this type is the Parthenon frieze, with its depiction of the Panathenaea, for the arrangement of participants is similarly in parallel and balanced.\textsuperscript{32} The riders are concentrated around the west end of the building and preceded by chariots, elders, carriers, and cattle, with musicians and sheep added on the north frieze. The east frieze has proved the most troublesome because of its mixture of worlds—human, heroic, and divine. Yet it exhibits the same symmetry, with women on the ends, followed by heroes, then gods, and, of course, the reason for the whole procession in the center, the peplos itself.

Thus, the center is the most important position compositionally on a variety of monuments. Because of the triangular shape of pediments, however, the flanking figures proceed in order of diminishing importance to the ends. Friezes, whether architectural or ceramic, have more flexibility. They can follow the pattern of either the east frieze of the Parthenon, with an order similar to the pediments, or the Circe cup and the Great Tragic Frieze, where the ends are next in importance to the center, with lesser figures and lesser events filling in the gaps.

My analysis of these examples resembles the basic ring composition, so well known to Homeric scholars.\textsuperscript{33} This organization also has a counterpart in written language. In Latin the "Golden Line," as it is called, may be best explained visually as overlapping rather than nested horseshoes. For example, Horace (\textit{Epodes} 13.11) says: "nobilis ut grandi cecinit Centaurus alumno" (as the famous Centaur sang to his great pupil). The verb (\textit{cecein}) stands in the center between the two adjectives (famous and great) and the two nouns (Centaur and pupil) they modify. L. P. Wilkinson names a variation on the Golden Line the Silver Line, which has a pattern of words that matches the arrangement of figures on the Circe cup and the Great Tragic Frieze.\textsuperscript{34} The verb, again, takes the center, with adjective and noun on the ends and a similar pair in between, as in "impositis duris crepitare incubiis ensis" (the clash of the sword on the hard anvil).\textsuperscript{35} It is important to keep in mind that both the classical literary and visual examples can order their words and figures in a number of different ways to achieve particular effects, some of which are not discussed here. Today, instead, we order visual scenes sequentially from left to right far more than any one method was used in antiquity.

I further suggest that those speaking an inflected language would find this kind of arrangement of figures quite congenial, because in inflected languages, as has been seen, the order of words reflects the importance of each word, unlike in English, where the sequence determines the meaning. "Man bites dog" does not have the same sense as "Dog bites man." According to Charles Beye, "\[a\]n ancient Greek would not
understand . . . [the English] system of construction," and therefore, I would add, might find our penchant for strict sequencing of events strange. In particular, the Greek or Roman would wonder how one could know which deeds and which figures were most important if all were given equal weight in their placement. Time marching evenly in one direction obviously does not tell the whole story.

The idea of inflection is translated in one other way into visual terms in another popular example in the scholarly literature: the blinding of Polyphemus on a Laconian black-figure cup contemporary with the Boston Circe cup (Fig. 6). The enormous stake hefted onto the shoulders of the four men on the left is already plunged into the eye of Polyphemus, seated on the right. At the same time Polyphemus holds two legs from a victim otherwise digested. Meanwhile, the first man is offering yet another drink to Polyphemus, who is in the act of sipping. The simultaneity of the actions has "defied time," according to Snodgrass, because the whole point of the story is that Polyphemus has to be in a drunken sleep before he can be blinded. Yet if the representation is considered from the point of view of inflection, its portrayal makes sense. Each participant is "inflected" with the actions or attributes that explain his role. Delete the cup of wine, for example, and how will you know how the Greeks were able to blind Polyphemus? Why they needed to blind him is explained by the two legs he grips. To put it another way, since this is a visual, not a literary, representation, the only way to tell the whole story is to use space, not written or oral sequence, to portray all the elements.

All pictorial representations are of necessity spatial, whether
about Greek landscape, they always end up speaking of "elements."40 (Exceptions exist, such as the Attic black-figure rendering of women bathing.41) In most cases, all action takes place against a solid, undifferentiated background. The effect is one of timelessness, with only the style in which the object was made, the dress, and the accoutrements giving any indication of date, as the late archaic ballplayer base and almost any segment from the Parthenon frieze demonstrate.42 The Greek artist’s lack of interest in portraying physical setting is paralleled in the literary sources. As in the artistic tradition, exceptions exist, such as Herodotus’s rudimentary geographic organization or Socrates’s description of the resting place beneath a plane tree in Plato’s dialogue the *Phaedrus.*43

In other words, it would seem that there was some place for the rendering of landscape in Greek thought, but that place was not particularly in art, which never lost its focus on the figure. For example, the family sacrifice on a votive relief from the late second century B.C.E. portrays a wonderful gnarled plane tree with tiny figures at its base, slightly larger ones by the altar, and rather large ones on the right (Fig. 7).43 At first glance it might seem as if the figures are placed within a landscape, but a second glance shows that each figure is accorded his or her size according to importance: the divinities on the right are largest, the family is next in size, and the servants smallest. The plane tree, the only landscape element, is merely an outsize version of earlier solitary trees that often appear in Greek renditions of Herakles wrestling the Nemean lion.44 Furthermore, it is important to understand that one cannot use Roman wall painting as evidence for Greek landscape. Major developments and changes in technique, style, and subject separate Greek and Roman painting.
The painting of the hunt on the facade of the Tomb of Philip at Vergina, dated to 340–330 B.C.E., presents the best evidence for Greek landscape. In and around garnished trees and hills, deer, a boar, a lion, and a bear are all about to die from the spears of the hunters. Close examination reveals that the landscape works more like a backdrop for the action of the figures than as a real landscape, as a comparison with Roman landscape painting shows. In the Greek hunt the figures define the landscape and are the focus of our attention. In contrast, consider the later and very Roman Odyssean landscapes from the Esquiline in Rome from the first century B.C.E. Here the figures work within the landscape, which determines their size. Two more Roman examples will make the difference clear.

Roman works of art impart a magical sense of place. The harbor scene from Stabiae has been described by Amedeo Maiuri: “A light breeze is playing on the blue expanse of landlocked water, making it glitter in the sun, while the darker masses of jetties, wharves and the lighthouse are faceted with golden glints, that gradually lose their brilliance in aerial perspective.” The need for place was part of the Roman ethos. Lucretius states, “if there had been no substance of things nor place [localis] and space [spatium], in which all things are carried on, never would the flame have been fired by love through the beauty of Tyndarid [Helen]. . . .”

A late first-century B.C.E. painting of Perseus freeing Andromeda from the villa at Boscoreale, for example, exudes atmosphere (Fig. 8). Here, the setting or space determines the way the story is told, while working within a hierarchical mode. Our attention is drawn first to the center with Andromeda, the heroine, draped more than manacled against a bleak cliff. The rough triangular shape of the rocks leads the eye next to the large and lighter-colored Ketos, the sea monster, rearing up on the lower left, and then to the smaller figure of Cassiopeia, Andromeda’s mother, on the lower right. Only later do we notice Perseus flying in from the left with the harpe raised in his right hand and the Gorgon’s head, not visible today, in his left, but clearly depicted in another Pompeian painting with the same subject. The line of sight in the Boscoreale example follows along the arms of Andromeda to the right, to the small scene of Perseus being received by Cepheus, Andromeda’s father, standing outside his palace with another building farther off. That both figures represent Perseus is clear from their identical accoutrement, but just when the meeting with the king occurs is ambiguous. Medusa’s head should be held by Perseus in a meeting before the freeing, but Andromeda should be present if the meeting occurs afterward. Moreover, if Perseus is being greeted by Cepheus before the freeing of Andromeda, then the viewer has to jump around Andromeda to Perseus flying in. If he meets Cepheus after the freeing, then the scene moves simply from left to right. The ambiguity is conscious, for the artist is interested in telling what happened where. Since Cepheus did not move his palace, he would see Perseus in the same place both before and after the liberation of his daughters, and one representation would suffice for both actions. Thus, one unified setting is used to portray different parts of one tale. The story is told not through time but across space. Again, as in the Odyssey landscapes, the landscape in the Boscoreale painting subsumes the figures, because it is the primary organizing principle for them and that which claims our focus.

The repetition of Perseus raises another very important issue of sequential time, that of continuous narrative. The term was proposed by Franz Wickhoff in 1895. In Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli’s phrasing, it means “presenting the various episodes of a single narrative against the same background and, in effect, uniting them in the same composition, the same figures always being repeated for each episode.” “The same background” refers not just to the one setting used in the Boscoreale painting but also to the fact that almost all classical representations, in the broadest sense, have no physical breaks between episodes. The locus classicus is the Column of Trajan, where the setting flows from one scene to another without any obtrusive physical markers, such as the vertical dividers in the Odyssey landscapes. Even in these paintings, however, the landscape continues unbroken behind the pillars.

Today the idea of continuous narrative seems to have lost its spatial limitation and is often applied to any set of events with repeating figures, such as the cycle vases with Theseus. My use of “set” rather than “sequence” or “series of events” is crucial for an understanding of continuous narrative in antiquity. For example, the representations of Theseus on Attic vases, already discussed, show various episodes or events in Theseus’s life without regard to the order in which they occur. Thus, they are neither a series nor a sequence, terms that imply a particular order, but a set of related events. Analogously, the Great Trajanic Frieze also depicts a set rather than a sequence of episodes from one particular event. Events, in turn, can be subdivided into episodes, although where one begins and the other ends frequently depends on one’s point of view. For example, the entire Column of Trajan can be viewed as depicting one event, the Dacian Wars, with numerous episodes, or it can be broken up into a series of events, such as various campaigns, which can in turn be divided into episodes. Simpler is the Boscoreale painting, which shows two episodes, the impending freeing of Andromeda and the reception of Perseus, within one event, the coreship of Perseus and Andromeda.

Late Etruscan funerary urns, the so-called Homeric bowls, and illustrations of ancient texts together form the battleground over which scholars have fought about continuous narrative. Kurt Weitzmann has been the leading proponent of the theory of extensively illustrated texts with episodes, the smallest unit mentioned so far, in turn subdivided into their component actions or moments. The classic example is the duel between the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices. Carl Robert said succinctly, “if two warriors simultaneously thrust swords into the body, then we have Eteocles and Polynices,” as on an Etruscan sarcophagus in the Vatican. It by no means follows, however, that two warriors preparing to fight or two warriors after the battle must also represent Eteocles and Polynices when appearing on different objects. The evidence is threefold. First, whenever two warriors are fighting in an Attic vase painting, they are typically called Achilles and Memnon on as much basis, unfortunately, as they are called Eteocles and Polynices on the Etruscan urns. Second, despite the wonderful variety in the moments chosen for Theseus killing the Minotaur on Attic vases, no one has
8 Perseus and Andromeda, Roman, Boscoreale, wall painting, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
ever suggested that they are drawn from one series of models, in which each and every stage of the death was drawn like a full set of movie stills.65

Third, most often cited in support of such a full and conscious set of sequential illustrations are the Homeric relief bowls, despite the fact that none of them ever depicts more than one moment within the one episode of the duel. I do not dispute that a continuous narrative in a broad sense appears on them. A bowl in London, for example, portrays scenes from Euripides' *Phoenician Women* with Antigone and Creon each repeated twice in different episodes and with a doorway, on the right, indicating the entrance to the palace (Fig. 9).66

The duelers, however, appear only once, at the point of joining battle. Similarly, on a cup in Halle and Athens they are again depicted only once, but this time after they have killed each other (Fig. 10).67 Thus, the dividing of an episode into its components, like a series of movie stills, within one set of continuous, even sequentially ordered episodes did not occur.

At this point I would like to return to the original definition of continuous narrative by Wickhoff, for he has observed a very important phenomenon—the background changes as the figures repeat. In contrast today we expect both the background and the figures to repeat, as they do in strip cartoons like *Doomsday*. The difference in approaches lies in differing concepts of what time is and how it passes. In antiquity Aristophanes believed that time was not duration but motion through space.68 According to one scholar, it was not until the advent of polyphonic singing, when different singers had to hold notes for differing lengths of time, that it was realized that time means duration.69 Thus, for the ancients for time to elapse, movement needs to occur, and the only way to notice that movement has indeed occurred in a pictorial representation is to change the setting, even if that physical setting is only implied, as in most Greek representations. A physicist explains "that it is also part of our nervous makeup that we can only perceive motion relative to something fixed, be that a fixed point or object, a whole background, or anything else. We cannot perceive nor can we imagine motion without attaching it to a state of rest."70 These words strikingly echo Lucretius, who said, "It must not be claimed that anyone can sense time itself apart from the movement of things or their restful immobility."71 Next, the classical artist would need a sufficiently broad surface in order to have the room to show the changes in setting.

The Homeric bowls do show a varying setting with repeating figures, as just described. It seems unlikely, however, that
such scruffy objects were the origin of the concept. Instead, I would like to suggest that the classical idea of continuous narrative had its birth not in manuscript illustrations, the cycle vases with Theseus, or even in the metopes on temples, but in either monumental friezes or monumental wall painting, because a sufficient expanse is needed to portray a number of events. The earliest secure example I know dates from the fifth century B.C.E., in the now-lost painting of the Iliupersis by Polygnotos in the Lesche of the Kniadai at Delphi. Pausanias (10.25-27) starts his description with the ship of Menelaus just before its return to Greece, moves to the beach with its huts, Helen and various Trojans, and then separates the seacape from Troy itself by the city wall, following which are the events and places within Troy. The whole description on the surface resembles the Theseus cups, with a conglomeration of related events. Yet when the whole is physically drawn, it can easily be seen that Pausanias has told the story backward by starting on his right with the end point in time, the departure of the Greeks, and ending with the beginning, the last throw of the destruction of Troy. In other words, the painting shows not simultaneous events but rather a sequence of events determined by their location in the painting. In fact, the painting presages Lucretius: “So you may see that events cannot be said to be by themselves like matter or in the same sense as space. Rather, you should describe them as accidents of matter, or of the place [κοίλοις] in which things happen.” Lucretius has, in effect, described how the representation of Perseus and Andromeda from Boscorenceus works.

It might seem that I have contradicted myself in positing a Greek origin for continuous narrative in the fifth century B.C.E., for I have claimed that landscape is primarily a Roman phenomenon. The contradiction is easily resolved, because as I have stressed, landscape is not the same thing as “place” or “setting.” You can imagine the Trojan War taking place at Troy without having to depict the actual city of Troy. You can show Achilles dragging Hector’s body around the city of Troy without having to depict the walls of the city. Nonetheless, the idea that each action is limited to a specific place can still pertain, because the Trojan War did take place at Troy and Achilles did drag Hector’s body around the city. The Homeric bowls, for instance, have only the common “symbolic” setting of most Greek representations. In the two examples I have discussed, the bowl with Eteocles and Polyneices already dead has no indication of setting other than female personifications on either side, the left of Argos and the right of Thebes, while the other bowl with the two brothers still alive merely portrays doors, indicating the palace, on the right. Hence, I believe that the concept of continuous narrative with a changing background could only have been posited by someone like Wickhoff, who was working with Roman and not Greek art. It is only once you understand the phenomenon in Roman art that you can mentally strip the landscape away to see that the principle also operates in Greek art.

I believe that one’s expectations about how a visual narrative should be organized are affected by the nature of one’s literacy. I made brief allusions to the theme when I suggested that a true concept of chronology could not develop without writing. I am not claiming that artists were not literate, for I believe that they were among the first to be literate and, in fact, revered in that literacy. For example, one of the most striking characteristics of the François vase is the neat little inscriptions that label not just people but even things like the fountain house (Fig. 2). At the same time the labels allow the artist to tell his story more precisely, for they leave no doubt about the participants. Thus, we know that the funeral games of Patroclus rather than of Pelias are depicted on the François vase. That artists are literate should not be all that surprising, because writing, from a technical point of view, is an extension of drawing, which is reflected in the fact that the same Greek word, γράφω (grapho), is used for both writing and drawing.

Literacy has a number of effects on artists and their productions, and these effects vary over time and between cultures. Here I can only allude to one effect that involves the current topic of pictorial narrative. The more accustomed we are to reading narratives in sequence the more we expect to find such sequences. The modern inundation of print has forced us to develop not just the ability but also the desire to process sequentially to a far greater extent than in antiquity. While we are becoming more accustomed to the concept of hypertext, most of us were raised in a sequential world as far as narrative is concerned. As the King of Hearts said, stories should proceed from the beginning directly to the end.

In conclusion, I have stressed one particular aspect of time—sequence, or rather its absence in classical art. It is not that I claim that the Greeks and the Romans had no sense of sequence. They did. One can consider the begats of Homer or Hesiod, which work well within single families but do not march together through time. I have examined what seem like anomalies and inconsistencies to us to show that they fit certain patterns, which I have called “hierarchical” and “spatial” time. I have also suggested that one of the major reasons for their existence lies in the fact that literacy was still comparatively rare and certainly comparatively new, with the result that it had, for the most part, less effect on the basic thought patterns of the Greeks and Romans than it does on ours. Hence, classical artists tended to render narratives differently from the way we often do today. At the same time the nature of both Greek and Latin, as inflected languages, makes them much more attuned to dissecting visual scenes that unfold their action in a nonsequential order.

I end on two cautionary notes. First, I realize that all renderings, verbal and visual, then and now, are selective and involve portraying differing kinders and amounts of information, but that is another topic for another time. Second, because I think it is a grave error to fasten on one theme and maintain that it explains everything, I want to make it clear that I am very well aware that exceptions do exist. However, the overall trends I discuss are remarkably consistent throughout antiquity. I have also tried to stress the complexity, interrelationships, and pervasiveness of issues of time, space, and place in classical antiquity. If Edward T. Hall is right when he considers “time as culture,” then understanding time and its depictions will lead to a more thorough understanding of culture, especially when viewed not just in isolated segments but as a whole.
Frequently Cited Sources

ARB Beazley, J. D., Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).
Forni Beazley, J. D., Parallelen—Additions to Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters and to Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Notes

This essay has benefited from the comments of6 Dorothy Goodenough, Carolyn Kohler, David Konstan, Jennifer Nels, Gisela Ferrari Pinney, and Susan Woodward. I also thank Donald Bertram for his assistance. In its earlier form it was presented to the Columbia Seminar on Classical Civilization in April 1989, at Rutgers University in November 1989, and then, much revised, at Southern Methodist University in March 1990 and McMaster University in January 1991. I am grateful to the audiences at each presentation for their astute remarks and suggestions. I also would like to express my thanks to John Paulen, the editor of Art Bulletin, and to the two readers for their careful perusal of the manuscript.

1. Because the bibliography on the range of topics addressed here is extremely large, I have made no attempt at completeness. Since the pieces I discuss are well known, I have limited my references to their main basic information (e.g., museum, inventory number) and at least one publication with photographs (or) for each object mentioned. All translations are from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise noted.


5. Saint Augustine, Confessions 11.14: “quid est ergo tempus si nemo ex me quaerat, scio: si quernem expellas, mecum necesse est.”

6. See in particular the letter to Gnaeus Pompianus by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where Dionysius lays out his complaints against Thucydides. On the contemporaneity of events surrounding Smerdis, the brother of Cambyses, as recounted in Herodotus (3.57-77), which could not have occurred in that order, see Donald Wilcox, The Measure of Time Past (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 75-78. See also Wilcox, 88-89, for similar comments on Polybius, 88-89.

7. Compare Sicyopoles’ Antigone, where Sicyopoles does not care whether Antigone or Lamiae is the older sister, while modern actresses always want to know. The ancient authors are more or less evenly split. Peter D. Amoni gives the example in the note to the figures, 148.

8. Theseus has been chosen because no cycle vases exist for Herakles (compare Brunnemer, in no. 5), and all of the sculptural monuments are subject to a relocation somewhere or other. The Odysseus also were not the subjects of cephalic representations until much later, on which see Frank Brunnemer, Theseus (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982), 65. Also note that, while Theseus performs seven deeds, the encounter with Periphetes is not portrayed on the cycle cups and, strictly speaking, the duel with the Minotaur is not considered one of the deeds.

9. Museo Arqueologico Nacional, Madrid, 11265, by Anon. J. D. Beazley, Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1174, no. 1, Add1, 339. LIMC, vol. 7, Theseus, no. 52, pl. 632. Erika Simon, Sie griechischen Linden, 24 ed. (Munich: Hirmer, 1981), pl. 211-23. Only eleven of the ninety-two cycle vases meet the criteria described in the text. All the vases (nineteen cups, one skyphos, one calyx krater, and one volute krater) are genuine Brunnemer (see no. 5.21-23). I have not included the one Attic black-figure vase in this group (LIMC, vol. 7, Theseus, no. 32). Compare John Boardman, “Myth, Art, and Life in Archaic and Classical Greece,” Fenway Court, 1994: 27-40, esp. 31. Please note that I follow the convention in classical art of referring to the “front” and “back” of certain shapes of vases as side A and side B. I use the standard catalogues of J. D. Beazley, such as ARV, for deciding which is A and which is B, though, for the record, it should be noted that wearing a scholeades...real mental mess...dealing in formula—nothing thinking. But a good painter would not, and here the discussion is about general rules and patterns.

10. In between is “as they are laid out to be seen.”


13. Susan Woodward (personal communication) notes that “sometimes Herakles fights the lion already wearing a lion skin...a real mental mess—dealing in formula—not thinking. But a good painter would not, and here the discussion is about general rules and patterns.

14. In between is “as they are laid out to be seen.”

15. Compare also Pollitt’s discussion of arethusa (truth), 125-38, and diligentia (carefulness), 351-57, the Latin equivalent of arethusa (accuracy).


17. For a somewhat similar statement, see Gerdti and Cere in n. 122.

18. Literacy is now a very popular topic. See, among others, William V. Harris, Ancient Literacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Toby M. Lente, Orality and Literacy in Hellespont Greco-Carthaginian, III: Southern California University Press, 1988). Rosalind Thomas, Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Harris argues for a rather limited literate, which is in accord with the conclusions drawn here. Thomas’s book is more interesting for my purposes because of its close study of the interplay between literate and oral. Her basic premise that the divisions were very much blurrier than we generally maintain must be right. See also Small (as in n. 12).


20. Compare David Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). The 1918 writing of the feasibility of what they hear, oral audiences may comfortably embrace contradictory testimonies about the past, even conflicting accounts by the same informants.” Wilcox (in n. 7) (outside of America, 217-28). “The validity of wartime memorizing techniques for speech [e.g., mathematical tables] seems almost to require the prior reduction of language to a visual form, providing speech with a spatial dimension.” On the “spatial dimension in war films and today, see Woodman (as in n. 12), 11-25. Much fascinating work has been done by cognitive scientists on eyewitness testimony. See esp. the works of Richard Loftus, such as Elizabeth Loftus and K. Ketcham, Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness, and the Expert Who Put Memory on Trial (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).
18. "Of all the factors that have warped our understanding of Greek drama, the most pervasive has been the so-called 'Unity of Place.'" (Arnot, 132). Arnott attributes the misunderstanding to the Renaissance. Also compare Arnott, 138: "A number of plays contain actions which could not be temporally continuous, though at first they may appear so." He gives examples from Oedipus Rex of Sophocles, Agamemnon of Aeschylus, and Antigone of Sophocles (148–51). He further notes (151) that "even this striking departure from strict temporal congruence is hardly perceptible in performance. It becomes apparent from close reading only, and the solutions suggested for it tended to come from scholars, not from actors." This final comment is on the separation in time between Antigone's burial of her brother and her being caught in the act in the Antigone.

19. See also Goody (as in n. 17), 106 (on Aristotle), 132 (for an awareness of chronology). 21. In contrast, chronology is not an ancient word but first appears, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed. in the 16th century.


21. Compare Michael Young, "The beauty of the past is that it is so much more malleable than the present," Young, The Matteeonic Society (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), 237. Donald A. Norman, The Psychology of Everyday Things (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 68–72, 38–42, discusses the underlying psychological causes (38): "Modeling, our conceptual model of the way objects work, events take place, or people behave, result from our tendency to form explanations of things." We base our models on whatever knowledge we have, real or imaginary, naive or sophisticated. Mental models are too numerous to list, but they are a vital part of existence, with basic understanding of what is happening, and with a kind of naive psychology that postulates causes, mechanisms, and relationships even where there are none. The same mental model could be used to create portraits for long-dead persons who might have looked like Homer, for which see Pinto. Natural History 53:20. Similarly, on pagan and Christian biographers modeling somebody's biography on somebody else's, see R.打磨Incremento, Los Historianos de la Classical World and Their Audiences: Some Suggestions," Annals della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, 3d ser., 8, fasc. 1 (1978): 59–75, reprinted in Settoria Contributo (Rome: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 1980), 572–82.

22. Compare Emilio Gibba, "True History and False History in Classical Antiquity," Journal of Roman Studies 71 (1981): 50–62. It is only a modern concern as to who Shakespeare really was. Greeks and Romans would not have cared. "Shakespeare" were nought Shakespeare then it would have been someone else just like him; in Shakespearean terms, "What's a name? that which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo and Juliet, 5.3.1–2).

23. The earliest such representation is the Kairós of Lyssippos. While we tend to translate "ζῷος ἔκμοπος" as a chronological series of events (as in Plato, 533.5), both the word, καιρός, and the Lyssipan version emphasize the idea of the opportune moment (hence the forelock to be seized on the stage) rather than the more modern idea of a succession of equal and nigh indistinguishable moments. On the Kairós of Lyssippos, see Karin Moser von Fliebeck, De Aionyphousen des Lyssippos (Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 1968), 158–61. J. J. Pollitt, Art of the Helenistic Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 307, 18. 34. 47, for a photograph of the Tortoise-representation of Kairós. For the absence of Chronos until the Hellenistic period, see LDM, vol. 3, 278, n. "Chronos." 24. For example, Vico, Filosofia, Florence, 1698, from Chiosi, by Kleitias as painter. AVW, 76, nos. 3, 4, 47, 48, 81, 90, 91. 112, 137, 148, 171, 234, 274, 307. LDM, vol. 4, Kirke, no. 14, p. 25. The vase used to depict a figure from the Argo's voyage is a Cretochian black-figure vase, detail of Theodoros von Hohenthal's drawing (Jeffrey M. Hurwit, "Image and Frame in Greek Art," American Journal of Archaeology 101 [1997]: 1–33), and the art form has been generally not analyzed in this way. Most discussions instead focus on the "mind's eye" of the viewer, being engaged with the representation. Most historians agree that so elaborately decorated an object must have been specially commissioned, but trying to figure out the common theme or at least the intellectual underpinnings for its subjects has kept many art historians frustrated: I am not about to solve that problem, because I think it is solely a modern problem. The idea is that it is a pictorial encyclopedia of myth is anarchistic.

25. For example, Stewart (as in n. 24), 69. Also Jocelyn Penny Small, "Verism and the Vernacular: Late Roman Republican Portraiture and Catullus," La Poussière, 2 (1989), 75–103.

26. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 59:518, by the Painter of the Boston Polyphonies. AVB, 198, Pella, nos. 27, 32, 39. LDM, vol. 6, Kirke, no. 24, p. 17. The vase used to depict a scene from the story of Samson, Siano, as in n. 99, p. 51–57. The vase almost provokes admiration and frustration in art historians: Most people agree that so elaborately decorated an object must have been specially commissioned, but trying to figure out the common theme or at least the intellectual underpinnings for its subjects has kept many art historians frustrated: I am not about to solve that problem, because I think it is solely a modern problem. The idea is that it is a pictorial encyclopedia of myth is anarchistic.

38. Snodgrass (as in n. 3), 12, uses this phrase in the same paragraph in which he discusses the Lacanian concept, but without a different use. For the snake at the root of the fish in the exegesis, see Pijl (as in n. 38), 53.


40. The women bathing: Villa Giulia, Rome, 2609, from Cervetri, amphora by “Pittore Notabile.” Not in ABL but see AAB (nos. 51 and 52); Hattré, 1990, 51, fig. 5 (dated to 515–500 B.C.E.).

41. The pillbox base: National Museum, Athens, 5476, ca. 510 B.C. Charbonneaux et al. (as in n. 24), 261, fig. 302. Reindorp Lullies and Max Hirmer, *Greek Sculpture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pls. 62–65. From the Parthenon, for example, the festal offering and girl (Lullies and Hirmer, pls. 158–59) or even the seated divinities—Poseidon, Apollo, and Artemis—from both the east frieze (Lullies and Hirmer, pl. 156 bottom), Compare Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 2: “all experience takes place in time and space.”

42. Compare Dionysios of Halicarnassus on Herodotus, on which see n. 6 above. Forzara (as in n. 14), 12–16, has a section on “chronotropes” like Hesiodus, whose work he describes (14) as “a geography containing subordinated topographies, most of them inevitably brief and formless...” On Plato, *Phaedrus*, 269c–270a, comp. Eva Keuls, “Rhetoric and Visual Aids in Greece and Rome,” in Havelock and Hershbell (as in n. 12), 129, on “Bidoexotism” and this particular reference. Even the Greek plays, according to Arnot, 1997, 136–37, identify their settings onverly narratively (parabasis).


44. See-Saw, 168–181, esp. 116.


46. For example, according to John Beazley, says, “We now turn to the unillustrated pictures. Many of the Astarte black-and-white pictures in which the two combatants are flanked by two female figures must represent Achilles and Memnon in the presence of THESE and EOS. ‘As if there is no distinguishing mark like the flower (i.e. an attribute to Aphrodite, indicating an Areias and Dionnoides duel), there is a strong probability that the subject is Achilles and Memnon.’ John D. Beazley and Lacie Davis Caskey, *Die Vorlagen Die Kunst der Miniatur* (Boston, 1925), vol. 1, 2: 31, pl. 36, no. 6. For the other see Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 58–59, 61, 71, 31, 75, 79, and 190; see also, Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 55, 60, 61, 71, 75, 79, and 190; see also, Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 55, 60, 61, 71, 75, 79, and 190.

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48. For example, according to John Beazley, says, “We now turn to the unillustrated pictures. Many of the Astarte black-and-white pictures in which the two combatants are flanked by two female figures must represent Achilles and Memnon in the presence of THESE and EOS. ‘As if there is no distinguishing mark like the flower (i.e. an attribute to Aphrodite, indicating an Areias and Dionnoides duel), there is a strong probability that the subject is Achilles and Memnon.’ John D. Beazley and Lacie Davis Caskey, *Die Vorlagen Die Kunst der Miniatur* (Boston, 1925), vol. 1, 2: 31, pl. 36, no. 6. For the other see Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 58–59, 61, 71, 31, 75, 79, and 190; see also, Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 55, 60, 61, 71, 75, 79, and 190; see also, Beazley, 1955, no. 57, 55, 60, 61, 71, 75, 79, and 190.


76. Stamosi (as in n. 88), 233.
77. *Lucretius, De rerum natura* I.462-63. See n. 74 below for the full passage.
78. It is possible that Ionic friezes also made their own contribution, but the evidence from the extant 5th-century examples is not good.
79. See, among others, M. D. Stambury-O’Donnell, "Polygnotus’s *Elpisides:* A New Reconstruction," *American Journal of Archaeology* 89 (1985): 205-15. Note that the specific details and the actual division on the walls do not matter for my argument. Only the general arrangement is important. I would also like to acknowledge the help of the students in my graduate seminars on narrative in classical art for their reconstructions of this painting.
80. Compare the full passage from *Lucretius* 1.450-82. "Similarly, time (tempus) by itself does not exist; but from things themselves there results a sense of what has already taken place, what is now going on and what is to ensue. It must not be claimed that anyone can sense time itself apart from the movement of things or their restful immobility. Again, when men say it is a fact that Helen was ravished or the Trojans were conquered, do not let anyone drive you to the admission that any such event (venit) is independently of any object, on the ground that the generations of men of whom these events were accidents have been swept away by the irrevocable lapse of time. For we could put it that whatever has taken place is an accident of a particular tract of earth or of the space it occupied. If there had been no matter of [materia] and no space (spatium) or place (locus) in which things could happen, no spark of love kindled by the beauty of Tyndareus’ daughter would ever have stolen into the breast of Phrygian Paris to light that dazzling blaze of pitless war; no Wooden Horse, unmarked by the sons of Troy, would have set the tower of Ilion aflame through the midnight issue of Greeks from its womb. So you may see that events cannot be said to be by themselves like matter or in the same sense as space. Rather, you should describe them as accidents of matter, or of the place [locus] in which things happen." The translation is by Ronald Latham, *Lucretius: On the Nature of the Universe* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1951), 40-41.
81. The Telephus frieze from the interior of the Altar of Zeus at Pergamon is generally considered in any discussion of continuous narrative. While it definitely contains repeating figures, especially its hero, Telephus, it is fraught with problems: when it comes to pinning down whether or not it obeys the constraints of shifting locales to show succeeding events. First and foremost is its current fragmentary nature. It is estimated, not known, that there were around thirty-five scenes, of which only five have survived pretty much intact. In turn, of these five scenes only two have precise locations. The situation becomes more complicated because the most recent reconstruction shifts, for example, panels 32 and 33, previously identified as the flight of the Argives to the ships to escape Telephus in Myia, to a position between panels 13 and 14, where it is identified as Telephus himself sailing to Myia. Not only are the identifications of individual panels open to question, but even the literary sources themselves are inconsistent. For these reasons I cannot consider the frieze either as proving or disproving my arguments. See Andrew Stewart, "A Hero’s Narrative: Narrative and the Telephos Frieze," in *Pegemos: The Telephos Frieze from the Great Altar*, vol. 1, ed. René Dreyfus and Ellen Schraderolph (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1990), 40, for the "statistical information." This volume and its companion, vol. 2, are excellent places to start for more information about the frieze and its vicissitudes. For the literary sources, see Timothy N. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 428-33, 578-80.
82. Simon (as in n. 9), pl. 57 (top). The Chigi vase by the Chigi Painter is the earliest with inscription, according to Harwit (as in n. 36), 159. See Pinty, *Natural History* 35.5.16, for an explanation for the invention of inscriptions. For the Chigi vase, a Protocorintshian oinochoe, ca. 540 B.C.E., in the Villa Giulia, Rome, 22679, from Fornello near Veii, see Amox (as in n. 31), 32. no. 3. Simon (as in n. 9), 48-50, pls. 25, 26, 27, with bibliography, *LIMC*, vol. 1, Alessandro, no. 5, pl. 376.
84. Edvard E. Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 11. Compare 5: "My [Hall’s] goal in this book is to use time as a means of gaining insight into culture, but not the reverse. In fact, I am not sure that the latter is possible."