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# The Greeks, the Near East, and Art during the Orientalizing Period

Kathryn Tanner

*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence of the Near East, specifically the Phoenicians, during the Orientalizing Period in ancient Greece that began in the 7th century BCE. The influence of the Near East was one of the greatest catalysts in changing the Greek world. During this time, the Greeks experienced changes in art, the development of a writing system, changes in the systems of trade, the founding of settlements far away from the Greek mainland, changes in architecture, and works of Homer were written down, (from which we have learned much about the daily life and history of this period). Our knowledge of the Orientalizing Period is constantly developing through new archaeological finds and these finds and the surrounding history is described thoroughly in a plethora of documents. Although the information can be overwhelming due to this mass amount of research, this paper will specifically be presenting the change in designs, motifs, subject matter, and depictions of the gods in Greek art as evident on pottery, metalworking, sculpture, and ivory carving.*

The dark ages of ancient Greece (c.1125 -700 BCE) was characterized by warfare and instability (Desborough 1972: 339). Life was difficult and contact with the outside world was inconsistent (Pedley 2012:105). However, by the eighth century, poleis or independent city states, were developed, warfare receded, and stability was established (Pedley 2012:105). The population of Greece began to grow and soon the needs of the people could not be met. Although political stability had begun, population growth and a shortage of land, combined with drought, famine, oligarchical systems of land tenure, and the need for sources of metal, caused many Greeks to look elsewhere to fulfill their needs and many started to settle across the Mediterranean and beyond (Pedley 2012:119). Toward the end of the eighth century BCE and continuing in to the seventh century BCE, the Greeks were moving and creating settlements outside of the Greek mainland in the search for a better life and raw resources including

metal (Pedley 2012:119). During this period of settlement, the Greek developed contacts with the East.

By the middle of the seventh century BCE, tyrants had taken control of power in many Greek states (Biers 1996:106, 132). The rise of tyrants in itself reflects the rise of Eastern influence, for the word “tyrant” is an oriental word and these courts more or less copied Eastern models (Biers 1996: 132). Tyrannical power in Greece lasted through the sixth century BCE and was plagued by corruption and became another factor that led many people to look overseas for their fortunes and livelihood (Biers 1996: 132). However, the tyrants’ courts provided some stimulation for the arts, particularly in the sixth century BCE. Foreign contacts and trade raised the standard of living in the seventh century BCE which probably provided for the economic ability to purchase art, thus increasing the demand for art (Biers 1996: 132).

Just as the Greeks were searching for metal, the Phoenicians were on the search for metal as well (Cook 2004: 45). And just as Greece experienced a rise of tyrannical powers, Assyrian power and tyranny in the Near East had been expanding since the ninth century BCE (Burkert 1992: 11). Since the ninth century BCE, the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon were forced to pay tribute beginning in 841 BCE (Burkert 1992: 11). It was the Assyrian demand for raw materials and metals that was the driving force for the Phoenician commercial networking and colonization (Cook 2004:45). The Phoenicians increasingly turned to the West searching for metal, particularly gold, silver, and tin (Cook 2004:45) By the late eighth century BCE, the Phoenicians formed a commercial network extending to and beyond the Greek world (Cook 2004:45,46). The Greeks knew of this Near Eastern power because the Phoenicians were settling in areas near Greece and in areas that Greeks were in contact with. For example, Phoenicians from Tyre were settling in Cyprus, Kition became a Phoenician city, and by 814 BCE, the Phoenicians had founded Carthage (Burkert 1992:11). These Greek and Phoenician worlds had much in common; they were well developed, sea-faring people who searching for new settlements under the control of tyrants. Soon enough, their art would become similar as well, particularly the Greek art mimicking Near Eastern art which was influenced by the Phoenicians settling in and around the Greek world.

The Phoenicians were the first of these Near Eastern people to trade by sea in the Greek world, and Phoenician craftsmen were some of the earliest Near Easterners to settle in the Greek world (Woolley 1964:179). Homer speaks of the Phoenicians in a well-regarded manner (Woolley 1964:179). The Greek historian Herodotus also describes trade from the Near East beginning before the Persian wars

before 490 BCE stating that Phoenician vessels visited the coasts of Greece (Markoe 1996:55; Herodotus). Archaeological evidence from Corinth and the neighboring sanctuary site of Perachora points to the probability of direct and active trade between Argos and the Near East in the Orientalizing Period (Markoe 1996:55). By the late eighth century BCE, Phoenician colonies had been established in Cyprus, Carthage, Sardinia, Sicilia, Malta, North Africa, and Spain (Winter 1976:18). It was during this time that Greece and the Near East became increasingly familiar with one another. The Greeks interest in the Near East is especially apparent when, by the ninth century BCE, eastern craftsmen migrated to Greek cities and began to pass on their skills to the Greeks (Burkert 1992:21). Thus, archaeological and written evidence describes this movement of Phoenicians and their goods to the Greek world.

Archaeological evidence points to contact with the Near East beginning in the seventh century BCE. By the eighth century BCE, commercial and personal trading had become regularized, colonization continued, and Eastern goods flooded the Greek world, causing a revolution in arts (Biers 1996:132). Metal ware, ivory carvings, trinkets of one sort or another, and probably textiles made up most of the imports into Greece and this new form of art drastically stimulated and changed the arts (Biers 1996:132). The focus on this paper is to discuss the tangible objects of art imported in Greece from Near East and how Greek art was changed, but it cannot be overstated that one of the most important influences of the Phoenicians is the adoption of the Phoenician script by the Greeks (Burkert 1992:25).

However, ancient Greek text do not provide much information on the history of Near Eastern influences in Greece but from archaeological finds that offer solid evidence for tracing Oriental influences (Burkert 1992:25). As mentioned, the Phoenicians had settled in areas of the Greek world and much evidence of their presence was left behind in the archaeological record. Discovered objects provide us with information on the beginning of changes in Greek art as influenced by easterners. Objects particularly appear at Greek sanctuaries (Burkert 1992:14). The Greeks practiced votive offerings to a deity, with the hope of obtaining divine protection or giving thanks. This overlap and discovery of Near Eastern goods at Greek sanctuaries provides evidence of acceptance of Near Eastern art and the Greeks drawing toward these new forms of art and motifs.

The developing relationship between the Greek and the Near Eastern worlds was a stimulating period that led to changes in art. Metal work from the Near East was the first visible influence to Greek art, and it is on metal work from Greece that we find the first examples

of the emergence of changing and new motifs in Greek art (Markoe 1996:47). Markoe (1996:47) discusses the priority of metalwork in the receipt and transmission of oriental motifs to Greece. Tradesmen from the Near East not only passed on goods and products to the Greek World, but many Near Eastern craftsmen, such as goldsmiths and gem cutters, also settled in Greece and taught new technical skills to Greek artisans (Burkert 1992:22). They also taught ivory carving, and in particular, the various forms of bronze working, be it hammering (*sphyrelaton*) or casting with the “lost core” method (Burkert 1992:22). The significance of the influence from metal from the Near East can even be attested to in Homer where he discusses kraters that have long been identified as Phoenician metal work (Burkert 1992:16).

Phoenician bronze and silver bowls were costly objects that have been found in Cyprus, Athens, Olympia, Delphi, southern Italy, Praeneste, and Etruria (Burkert 1992:16). Many of these bowls provide archaeological evidence of trade with the Phoenicians because at least three of these bowls are in fact of Phoenician origin because the ones found in Olympia, Italy, and Praeneste carry Aramaic-Phoenician inscriptions (Burkert 1992:16). Near Eastern friezes have also been found across Greece and its colonies. And it has been argued that the greatest influence of Near Eastern art on Greek art was from imported oriental goods on Greek soil (Markoe 1996: 50).

The Near Eastern friezes found at Olympia are the “remains of the largest related set of imported Near Eastern bronzes excavated in Greece, where more Near Eastern bronzes have been excavated than in the Near East itself (Guralnick 2004:188).” These friezes begin the start of the discussion of the influence and change of motifs in Greek art as influenced by the Near East. Metal work from the Near East was the main oriental prototypes that influenced these emerging motifs on Greek pottery (Markoe 1996:47). One of the new motifs that the Near East introduced was the use of motifs based on nature. *Repoussé*, a technique that hammered metal onto a mold of wood or stone to create a design, was used by the Phoenicians to create the basic figure, animal, and floral decorations (Guralnick 2004:204). The Near Eastern *repoussé* friezes at Olympia are a prime example of the introduction of themes based on the natural world. On these friezes there are several compositions arranged in relation to a central tree, the motif of nature being the focus of the metalwork (Guralnick 2004: 191-192). This tree has also been found on Near Eastern cylinder seals and on the sculptural decoration of Assurnasirpal’s palace at Nimrud (Guralnick 2004:195-196). These trees were considered to be the sacred tree of life in the Near East, hence their importance and presence on many mediums of art (Guralnick 2004:195-196). The Greeks picked up on

this theme of nature and when looking at art from the Orientalizing Period we see the emergence of floral designs including the lotus and palmette (Burkert 1992: 19). Thus, metal works from the east provided the first stimulus for changes in the Greek world that mimicked Near Eastern works. The first known change, based on evidence of metalwork, is a movement toward motifs based on nature.

Continuing with this theme of nature, depictions of animals were also common in Near Eastern art. Goats, bulls, lions, and antelopes are found on the Near Eastern friezes found in Olympia. These animals start to make their appearance in Greek art and became a central motif (Guralnick 2004:191). Not only do depictions of animals become central to Greek art, but the Greeks were also influenced by their poses and presentations (Markoe 1996:47). Few Greeks would have ever seen a lion, but it soon emerged as a common motif in Greek art, even if lions and panthers were occasionally confused in images (Burkert 1992:19). Depictions of lions and sphinxes have been found at the North Palace at Nineveh (as well as to the New Kingdom Egyptian lion from Deir-el-Bahri), Neo-Hittite sculptures, and on Assyrian cylinder seals (Guralnick 2004:200-201). With this new depiction of the lion in Greek art, there also emerges the popular theme of a lion attacking that is found throughout Greece (Guralnick 2004:200-201). The Greeks were incredibly interested in these foreign depictions and depictions of animals became prominent on Greek art, particularly on pottery.

Artistic influence from the Near East is most evident in the animal files that decorate the vases of the Dipylon Painter and his workshop of pottery vessels (Markoe 1996:47). Near Eastern influence is not only evident in the animals themselves because many depicted animals were not present in ancient Greece, but their poses and representations are different as well and based on Near Eastern works of art (Markoe 1996:47). One of the areas where these Near Eastern influenced depictions are evidence is in Corinth. Corinth was a well-situated city for commerce and communication and a growing amount of archaeological evidence points to the probability of direct trade between Corinth and the Near East (Markoe 1996:55; Pedley 2012:122). The location of the city linked the Peloponnese to the rest of Greece with harbors on both sides of the isthmus, connecting east and west (Markoe 1996:55; Pedley 2012:122). Vase painters in Corinth were the first to be influenced by Near Eastern motifs and art that passed through Corinth from the Near East, suggesting that Corinthian vase painters were more open to change and innovation (Markoe 1996:55; Pedley 2012:122). Orientalizing motifs appear in Corinth around 725 BCE (Markoe 1996:55). Proto-Corinthian vessels

exemplify innovative decorations originating from the Near East and changed by the Greeks (Markoe 1996:50). The most prominent innovation, as shown on the Proto-Corinthian vessels, is the introduction of new motifs such as floral patterns and animals that appear at the end of the eighth century BCE (Markoe 1996:47, 50, 52).

In this new ceramic style, known as Early Proto-Corinthian, the artist moves away from the *horror vacui* of the Geometric Period where small motifs are repeated in a register to fill space, to where instead now small motifs, such as the rosette, are enlarged and monumental and space is left open (Markoe 1996:52). The importance of decoration is still important, but motifs are investigated individually for their decorative potential (Markoe 1996:47, 50, 52). Rather than focusing on the importance of decoration, the Phoenicians skilled metal ware stimulated an interest in new motifs, that of nature and animals, and focusing on the artist's ability to depict detailed representations of these new motifs. Rather than focusing on the overall scene that was entirely filled and focused on decoration, artisans honed in on specific motifs and their representations.

The depictions of animals and humans change as they begin to appear more natural and realistic than geometric. Archaeological evidence of this movement toward naturalism is seen on the contemporary engraved Phoenician silver bowls found in Etruria, thus providing support that the Phoenicians were the main influence in the movement toward realistic depictions (Markoe 1996:53). The Phoenicians, as compared to other Near Eastern areas, focused on attempting to create realistic depictions more than their contemporaries (Winter 1976:7). Markoe even argues that the more naturalistic dappled hide of the deer on Protocorinthian vessels, rendered in small incisions, imitates the Phoenician metal bowls and is the first step in the evolution from the outline technique to the full black-figure (Markoe 1996:53). Thus, this Phoenician influence was a basis for later movements in art aiming toward more realistic figures.

With this increased focus on specific motifs, entirely new motifs appear and artists experiment even more with their depictions and move further toward realistically drawing these subjects and motifs. Markoe gives the example of the Attic Late Geometric twin-handled bowls (now housed in the Worcester Art Museum and in the Erlenmeyer Collection) as the most apparent influence of Near Eastern motifs in the Geometric Period (Markoe 1996:47). Markoe argues that the large figural repertoire, with its files of standing horses, grazing deer, water birds, and warriors are found in the Dipylon workshop, but the rosette medallion and cableband of these bowls are different from

Geometric designs and show the influence of the Orient (Markoe 1996:47-48).

One of the major indicators of Oriental influence, specifically Phoenician influence, can be seen in the change in depictions of bulls on pottery (Markoe 1996:48). Examples of Phoenician bronze bull-file bowls have been found on Greek soil (Markoe 1996:48). The broad, stocky torsos of the bulls on a bowl of Phoenicians and Greece during the Orientalizing Period are very different than the thin, stick-like rendering of horses and bulls of earlier Geometric art (Markoe 1996:48).

Markoe discusses one of the major influences of Near Eastern Art, even more important than style or iconography, which is the influence of the oriental model on the syntax and formal structure of Greek artistic composition (Markoe 1996:49). The composition is that of a central motif within an antithetical grouping of confronted figures (Markoe 1996:49). "Even the prosthesis scenes and representations of the symposium with figures reclining on couches interacting also originate from the Near East (Burkert 1992:19).

This change in formal structure in art is most evident in the Late Geometric Terracotta shield from Tiryns from the end of the eighth century (Markoe 1996:49). The subject is the battle between Herakles with an Amazon (Markoe 1996:50). In this scene Herakles grasps the crest of the Amazon's helmet. This gesture of gripping the hair or horned cap of one's opponent has a long history in the Near East, dating back to the third millennium (Markoe 1996:50). This gesture is also a venerable pose of the smiting pharaoh in Egyptian art (Markoe 1996:50). When we compare the shield from Tiryns with the famous and enormous Geometric amphora from the Dipylon cemetery in Athens (c. 750 BCE) from the Geometric Period we can observe the great changes that took place in interactions between figures. In this amphora, which dates to earlier than the Greek shield at Tiryns, other than the seated child in the adults lap, the figures do not directly interact with each other. Later, we continue to see the influence of this gesture in the Late Protoattic/early black-figure amphora, the Nessos amphora (c. 625-600 BCE) where Herakles is grabbing the head of his opponent, the centaur, Nessos. I find it highly significant that this Near Eastern gesture of grabbing the enemy's head as a sign of confrontation is still prevalent even through the Hellenistic age, as seen on the relief of the Great Altar of Zeus and Athena at Pergamon (c.175 – 150) where one example is Athena, the victor, is grabbing the head of her opponent, a giant.

Not only is the interaction between figures changed by the influence of the near East, but the figures themselves are changed by



the influence of the Orient. The Greeks had moved from the focus on overall decoration, to focusing more on the decorative features of a specific motif, adding more motifs, exploring natural depictions of these motifs, and depicting figures in a certain way. The change on vessels as influenced by Phoenician metal ware and has already been discussed, but the change in the depiction of the human and god form is greatly influenced by ivory carvings from the Phoenicians. Ivory carving originated in the Near East and this skill was soon adopted by the Greeks (Burkert 1992:15). Ivory had a unique appeal because of its shine and color which was highly regarded and considered to be a luxury (Winter 1976:1). The Phoenicians in particular excelled in this art (Winter 1976:1). After the extinction of the Syrian elephant in the eighth century BCE, the Phoenicians dominated the distribution of ivory throughout the Mediterranean, thus they were the main influences of both ivory carving and the representation of figures carved out of ivory in Greece (Winter 1976:17).

Ivory carvings of human figures from the Near East are characterized by their oval faces, high receding foreheads, large eyes and noses, little or no chins, and small pinched mouths (Winter 1976:3). As previously discussed, new designs and motifs came from the Near East and soon became the norm of Greek art. The Daedalic style of figurines in the Orientalizing period has Near Eastern origins (Akurgal 1966:173, 176). Syrian prototypes stand with their arms closely pressed against their body, and they wear the *polos*, which are characteristics of what developed into the Daedalic style that was popular in Greece until the middle of the seventh century BCE (Akurgal 1966:173). Ivory carvings from the Near East display locks of hair that are closely packed together which becomes another defining characteristic of the Daedalic style (Akurgal 1966:173). The Greeks adopted this Near Eastern style as their own and the shape of the hair becomes more triangular (Akurgal 1966:173), the face becomes more triangular, the forehead lower and flatter, and the eyes larger (Jenkins 1923/33: 69). Not only did the Near East influence the depiction of the human form, but their influence is also seen in the move from an abundance of male figurines made in the Geometric Period to an abundance of female figurines in the Orientalizing Period, due to the influence of Syrian depictions and how Syrian figurines were dominantly female (Cook 2004:29). The most numerous figurines that show these adaptations by the Greeks are primarily made of terracotta (Pedley 2012:141).

Small images of female figurines flooded the Greek world, suggesting they were mass produced (Pedley 2012:140). One of the technological exchanges between the Greeks and oriental craftsmen

was the technique of using molds to make terracottas (Ammerman 1991:208). Knowledge of mold technology arrived in Greece between the last quarter of the eighth century BCE and the first quarter of the seventh century BCE (Ammerman 1991:208). These molds probably came from the Syro-Phoenician coast (Ammerman 1991:208). The technology and molds for creating these nude females arrived in Crete by the eighth century BCE (Ammerman 1991:208). Standing goddesses were first depicted as nude by the Phoenicians and originally by Greeks who adopted these figurines (Ammerman 1991:226). Nude female figure terracottas have been found on Crete by the eighth century BCE and in Gortyn, Rhodes, and Corinth by the seventh century BCE; whether all of them are Greek or Phoenician originals are up for debate, but regardless they attest to the Phoenician influence as these were originally, as discussed, from the Syro-Phoenician coast (Ammerman 1991:226). This nude standing female was known as Astarte to the Phoenicians (Ammerman 1991:226). She was soon dressed and became the also known as the Greek goddess, Aphrodite (Ammerman 1991:226).

In fact, the origin of the goddess Aphrodite is unclear. Some argue that she is the Greek version of the Eastern goddess, while others assert that she was brought by the Phoenicians. Still others claim she originated before the Phoenician arrival on the island of Cyprus (Ammerman 1991:222). Regardless of Aphrodite's origin, by the eighth century BCE, both she and Astarte were worshiped on Cyprus, and their similar images provide further evidence for the overlap of Greek and Phoenicians worship of the gods and the influence of the depiction of Astarte had on depicting Aphrodite (Ammerman 1991:222). The Greeks and Near Easterners gods and goddesses overlapped, just as their art overlapped.

Not only is there a connection between the image of Aphrodite and the image of the Near Eastern deity Astarte, but early images associated with her, such as fish and the dog, arguably have a Near Eastern origin. Remains of a fish sacred to Aphrodite have been recovered from the altar of Aphrodite Ourania at Athens and in Crete. Fishponds were part of Astarte's temple complex at the Near Eastern city of Ascalan which provides a connection between the two cultures based on these major motifs (Ammerman 1991:229). The sacrifice of a dog is almost exclusively associated with the worship of Aphrodite (Ammerman 1991:229). The motif of a dog is also found in the Near East with the Akkadian or Babylonian (Burkert 1992:75) goddess of healing, patroness of dogs and dog leaders (Burkert 1992:78). The symbol of the dog continued to influence Greek art. A prime example of its influence is with the Greek god of healing, Asklepius, and his

association with dogs; a dog was placed next to the chryselephantine statue of Asklepius at his temple and great healing sanctuary at Epidaurus (Burkert 1992:77). Other symbols of dogs are found as statues at the Samian Hera sanctuary (Burkert 1992:77).

This exchange of motifs associated with mythical beings between the Near East and Greece can also be seen in the image of Medusa and the gorgons. Gallu is the most common Sumerian-Akkadian name for an evil spirit, and the ancient Greeks had a story of a demon named Gello or Gelan, a story of terror for children that describes a demon (Burkert 1992:82). Assyriologists have interpreted this similar name as a borrowing from Mesopotamia (Burkert 1992:77). Another demon of the Greeks is Lamia. Lamia resembles the demon, Lamashtu, of the Near East. Lamashtu is a horrifying picture, often represented with a lion's head, dangling breasts, holding a snake in each hand, with a snake belt, and represented with one bent knee to represent movement (Burkert 1992:77, 84). These features directly relate to the Greek gorgon (Burkert 1992:83). Evidence of Phoenicians presence and influence is evident with the depiction of Lamashtu on an Assyrian cylinder seal with a Phoenician inscription and an amulet from the seventh century in Italy (Burkert 1992:83). The Late Protoattic/early black figure Nessos amphora with the image of Medusa (c. 625-600 BCE) dates to about the same time and also represents this figure. Even the "typically Greek" depiction of Zeus or Poseidon brandishing a thunderbolt or trident is derived from bronze warrior god statues that originated in the Syro-Hittite region and appear in Greece in the Late Mycenaean period with more dating to the 8th century BCE (Burkert 1992:19).

An abundance of images, motifs, subject matter, and compositional representations came from the near East and was quickly adopted and stimulated Greek art. Even techniques of creating art from metal ware to ivory carving changed Greek mediums and art. The Orientalizing Period was an incredibly stimulating time in the Greek world and affected Greek life as shown by archaeological evidence of art. The Near East introduced the representation of nature, animals and art, it then influenced these representations to have more realistic depictions. The Near East then influenced the depiction of human form and even more so the depiction of the form and motifs of important Greek gods. The influence from the Near East, and particularly from the Phoenicians is vast and provided great change in the Greek World.

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