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Hidden Treasures – Four White Ground *Lekythoi* of the Collection of Count Anton Prokesch Von Osten in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien

Count Anton Prokesch von Osten – Biographical Data

Anton Prokesch (* 1795 Graz; † 1876 Vienna)¹, a lawyer by training, prepared himself for a career in the military service of the Austrian Empire before being assigned to a diplomatic-military mission in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1824. He travelled to Egypt, Levant, Turkey, as well as Greece. He completed his missions successfully and was ennobled. From 1834 to 1849 Count Prokesch von Osten was ambassador of the Austrian Empire in Athens. Later his diplomatic career took him to Berlin (1849), Frankfurt (1855), and Constantinople (1855-1871). Right from the beginning he was fascinated by the local population, the culture, and history in the countries which he travelled. Apart from political reports, commentaries, and autobiographical articles he also published numerous essays focusing on these topics. von Osten was also attracted by the ancient cultures and engaged in collecting and excavating ancient artefacts, particularly while living in Athens. During this time he was mentored by Georg Christian Gropius (1776-1850)². Von Osten communicated with prominent archaeologists of his time - being close friends with many - and personally wrote scientific and popular articles on archaeological artefacts.

The Collection of Antiquities of Count Anton Prokesch von Osten

During his private and official travels and particularly during his long presence in Athens von Osten acquired a variety of ancient artefacts. He had a particular interest in ancient coins and numismatics. He was in close contact with coin dealers and specialists in the history and art of the Eastern Mediterranean area. He also published numerous articles himself, not only focusing on his own collection of coins but also on various numismatic topics³. However, he also collected and transcribed inscriptions, and bought statues, vases, and smaller objects of daily use. His personal diary is full of sketches and drawings⁴.

¹ The recent book by D. Bertsch collects archive records and earlier publications dealing with Count Prokesch von Osten comprehensively; Bertsch 2005. It was most valuable for this article. For his political ideas see MOUTAFIDOU 2001.

² CALLMER 1982: Von Osten and Gropius held close contact and discussed political and archaeological matters intensively.

³ His political publications are not subject of this paper. BERTSCH 2005, 465–492.

⁴ The personal diaries are unpublished; they are stored in the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv.

Von Osten had contact and cultivated friendship with scholars of antiquities residing in Athens, e.g. L. Ross⁵, or passed through and corresponded with those residing outside of Greece, e.g. with E. Gerhard⁶. Together with his wife he organised popular cultural events in their villa in Athens⁷. Accompanied by friends and scholars the couple visited numerous archaeological sites and ongoing excavations⁸.

For a variety of reasons the former collection of antiques of von Osten today is scattered over numerous museums. The artefacts collected by von Osten were given as presents or were sold to a number of museums. The better part of his collection of coins⁹ was sold to the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, many coins were given as presents to the Münzkabinett in Winterthur¹⁰, the Joanneum in Graz, the Academy of Sciences in Pest, the Albertinum in Freiburg, the Historical Society in Carinthia, and the Glyptothek in Munich. The most famous piece out of the collection of Prokesch von Osten is likely to be the Apollo statue, found in Tenea. Today, it is exhibited at the Glyptothek in Munich¹¹. In Austria, the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst/Gegenwartskunst (MAK)¹², the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (KHM)¹³, and the Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz¹⁴ store(d) artefacts originally part of Prokesch von Osten's collection.

Four white ground lekythoi collected by Prokesch von Osten

Among other objects, originally collected by Prokesch von Osten, which are owned by the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna today, are four white ground lekythoi (KHM IV 3743-3746)¹⁵. Two vases, IV 3745 and IV 3746, are known in the scientific community and on display in the showroom of the museum, the others, IV 3743 and IV 3744, are in the storeroom of the museum. The four vases will exhaustively be discussed in the upcoming CVA volume¹⁶ whereas the present paper will focus on the little that is known about the excavation and the finding situation.

1. White ground *lekythos* with false bottom (fig. 1a-b)

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3745

⁵ BERTSCH 2005, 517–522. MINNER 2005.

⁶ WREDE 1997. – Due to political and cultural interests many *philhellenes* visited Greece in the starting decades of the 19th cent. The official archaeological exploration and the conservation of the archaeological heir was no primary question of the newly founded state of Greece. A serious official interest in archaeology started late in the Ottonian era; FITTSCHEN 1999. SCHÖLL 1843, gives an overview of the excavations and monuments stored in Athens till 1840.

⁷ BERTSCH 2005, 244–262. His house, still standing in Fidiou Street, has an illustrious story itself which is merely forgotten because of its ruinous state today; MOUTAFIDOU 1999.

⁸ BERTSCH 2005, 507.

⁹ BERTSCH 2005, 482–492.

¹⁰ BERTSCH 2005, 509–510.

¹¹ BERTSCH 2005, 513–517. A Hellenistic statuette which was found in a grave near Athens is stored also in Munich; during its excavation in spring 1829 Gropius was present; BERTSCH 2005, 506 f.

¹² Due to an exchange in 1940 the antique objects of the MAK are also stored in the KHM today. Originally the objects in the KHM were predominately donated or sold to the Oesterreichisches Museum in the 90s by the son, few were given as a present by von Osten himself.

¹³ BERTSCH 2005, 508: An inscription from Erythrai, a statue of a sphinx of Roman time, weights of bronze and lead, Cypriot terracotta figurines, a black figured spindle whorl, needles of the geometric period found in the Heraion of Argos, a ring of gold with gem. There are also seven clay vessels: a Corinthian pyxis, an Attic cup by Onesimos (CVA KHM 1 Taf. 3, 5; 5, 1; CVA-Online 203383), an Attic rhyton in the shape of the head of a boar (CVA KHM 1 Taf. 47, 5, CVA-Online 12095), and four white ground *lekythoi* on which the focus of this paper lies. – Some of the artefacts were stored in private collections before they came to the KHM.

¹⁴ Von Osten had a close relationship to Archduke Johann, the founder of the Joanneum; BERTSCH 2005, 468. The Joanneum holds few Greek vessels and few other objects from Greece and Egypt which were presented to the museum by von Osten himself in 1836–1839 (pers. communication St. Karl).

¹⁵ These vessels were originally given to the Oesterreichisches Museum (today MAK) and were exchanged together with a bigger sample of vessels with the Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1940 where they are kept still. Cf. Footnote 12.

¹⁶ CVA KHM 5 (in print).



Fig. 1a-b - White ground *lekythos* with false bottom: A woman delivers a bundle of textiles (*himation*) to her maid. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3745 (© KHM).

A woman hands a bundle of textiles (*himation*) to her maid. A *diphros* behind the woman and a suspended *oinochoe* indicate that the scene most probable takes place in the woman's part of the house.

Achilleus Painter; 445-440 BC. BEAZLEY 1963, 998.163; CVA-Online 213985; OAKLEY 1997, Nr. 221 Taf. 116B.

2. White ground *lekythos* with false bottom (fig. 2a-b)

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3746

A woman and a man stand beside a wide pillar which is nicely decorated by *taeniae*. It is crowned by a *kalathos* and a *diphros*; a *plemochoe* is placed in front of the stepped base. Achilleus Painter; 445-440 BC. BEAZLEY 1963, 998.164; BURN and GLYNN 1982, 152; CARPENTER ET ALII 1989, 313; CVA-Online 213987; OAKLEY 1997, 75 Nr. 222 Taf. 116A. 117.

3. White ground *lekythos* (fig. 3)

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3743

A young man stands in the middle of a three-figured scene, his head, the upper part of the body, and possibly an attribute are poorly visible.

He is accompanied by a boy carrying a *lyra*. Charon stands in his boat on the right of the picture.

Third quarter 5th cent. BC. MASNER 1893, Nr. 1034.



Fig. 2a-b - White ground *lekythos* with false bottom: A woman and a man stand beside a pillar crowned by a *kalathos* and a *diphros*. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3746 (© KHM).



Fig. 3 - White ground *lekythos*: A young man stands in the middle of a three-figured scene, accompanied by a boy carrying a *lyra*. Charon stands in his boat on the right the side. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3743 (© KHM).

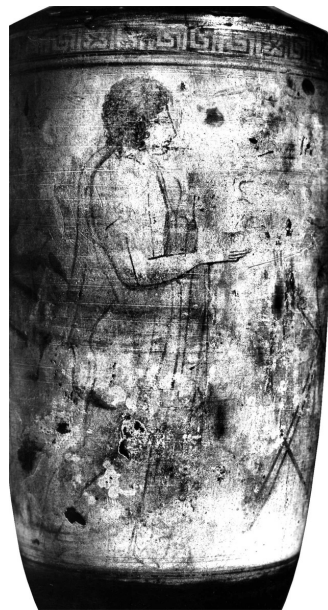


Fig. 4a-d - White ground *lekythos*: A young man stands accompanied by an old man in front of Charon in his boat. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3744 (© KHM).

4. White ground *lekythos* (fig. 4a-d)

Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien IV 3744

A man dressed in himation stands on the left side of a three-figured scene; he holds a big, neatly drawn rabbit and a birdcage. Another man stands in the middle and Charon in his boat on the right side. The picture has faded considerably.

Third quarter 5th cent. BC. MASNER 1893, Nr. 1033; OAKLEY 2004, 112 Nr. 84.

The white ground technique used on lekythoi characterise sepulchral vessels. The depicted illustrations often correlate with the function of the vases as funerary gifts¹⁷.

In our case particularly No3 and No4 with the depiction Charon's boat are linked to death and afterlife. The comparison of various similarly arranged paintings demonstrates that the person depicted in front of the boat is likely to be the deceased person, in both cases a young man. He is accompanied by an elderly man who seems to be partly bald on No4, maybe a (slave) teacher, and by a boy on No3. Both carry attributes which should indicate the life and character of the dead young man: pets and *lyra*¹⁸.

The painting on No2 also seems to have a direct relation to Greek sepulchral rites. Pillars depicted on white ground lekythoi are usually described as grave stelai. However, grave stelai are usually depicted as being taller, frequently crowned by palmettes or gabled¹⁹. Also *kalathos* and *diphros* on top of the pillar do not match exactly with the depiction of grave stelai on various other lekythoi²⁰. But without doubt they point to a female context, similarly the *plemochoe* in front of the stepped base. The pillar on No2 is more likely to represent the entire grave and not just the stele itself; *kalathos*, *diphros* and *plemochoe* are deposited during a sepulchral ritual nearby to memorize the dead person, obviously a woman.

The painting on No1 is also taken from the female environment. In this particular case only the technique of the vase painting points to the grave context – comparable scenes are also depicted on vessels of various shapes in red-figured painting.

The Owner and the Location of the Grave

Particularly the technique and some of the illustrations on the four lekythoi clearly refer to the function of these vessels as funerary gifts. Also the fine state of preservation of these four vessels makes it likely that they were found in a sepulchral context²¹. All these facts support the interpretation of vases No1 and No2 as being part of a woman's funeral, whereas No3 and No4 more conceivably point to male burials.

As mentioned earlier the four vases originate from the collection of Count Prokesch von Osten who acquired numerous artefacts

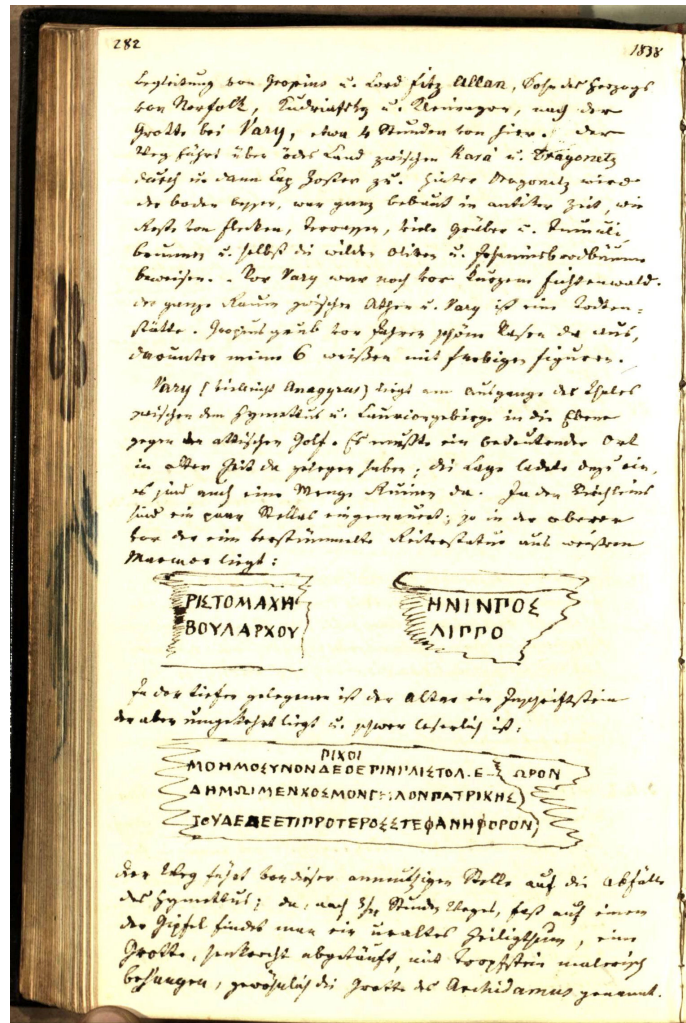


Fig. 5 - A page in the diary of Count Prokesch von Osten (© ÖStA Vienna).

¹⁷ OAKLEY 2004; SCHMIDT 2005: 29–85.

¹⁸ While the *lyra* is an attribute appropriate for both sexes, the rabbit is a traditional homosexual gift.

¹⁹ NAKAYAMA 1982.

²⁰ Only the Achilles Painter himself made comparable scenes: OAKLEY 1997, 67.

²¹ The fact that the vases are unbroken and merely intact (only the colours have faded) would indicate to a grave find anyway because ceramics in town contexts are usually broken, heavily worn, and badly damaged.

during his voyages and especially during his official stay in Athens. The inventory book of the museum refers to the site of the excavation as “*bei Kap Zoster*”, near Cape Zoster. In antiquity this promontory, the southernmost ridge of Mount Hymettos, is especially renowned its sanctuary of Apollo. However, a direct connection between the graves and Apollo’s sanctuary is not just unconvincing but virtually impossible²².

In his personal as yet unpublished diaries, he frequently refers to interesting sites which he and his entourage visited and to antiques he saw or acquired²³.

While describing a trip together with friends to the grotto of Vari in October on 3rd November 1838 he writes (fig. 5):

„[...] Der Weg führt über ödes Land zwischen Kara u. Dragonetz durch u. dann Cap Zoster zu. Hinter Dragonitz [!] wird der Boden besser, war ganz bebaut in antiker Zeit, wie Reste von Flecken, Terrassen, viele Gräber und Tumuli, Brunnen u. selbst die wilden Oliven und Johannisbrodbäume beweisen. Vor Vary war noch vor kurzem Fichtenwald. Der ganze Raum zwischen Athen und Vary ist eine Todtenstätte. Gropius grub vor Jahren schöne Vasen da aus, darunter meine 6 weißen mit farbigen Figuren. [...]“

This suggests that von Osten obviously owned six white ground vessels, most probable *lekythoi*, which were excavated by Georg Christian Gropius in a necropolis between Athens and Vari in Attica some years before. Gropius was a personal friend of von Osten and his predecessor as vice-consul of Austria in Athens. Although Gropius was on a diplomatic mission, just like von Osten he was very interested in archaeology. Together with the French vice-consul L. S. Fauvel (1753-1838) Gropius made excavations at a number of different archaeological sites in Greece, such as Phigaleia, in Aegina, and a number of necropoleis²⁴. He also organized the export of antiquities to other European countries²⁵.

The geographical region described by von Osten as being situated between Kara and Cape Zoster is located in the ancient demos Halai Aixonides, today Glyphada/Voula/Vouliagmeni, south of the old Athens International Airport. In this area a number of excavations were conducted during the 19th and 20th century which uncovered ruins and artefacts from the 2nd millennium BC up to Byzantine times²⁶. L. Beschi located the sites, which were originally surveyed by Fauvel, Gropius, and subsequently also by the Dutch general B. E. Rottiers in the year 1819 in the region, and which, due to its rugged terrain, was called *Phelleis*²⁷. He labels the area “B” and called it “Area dello scavo Gropius” (fig. 6)²⁸.

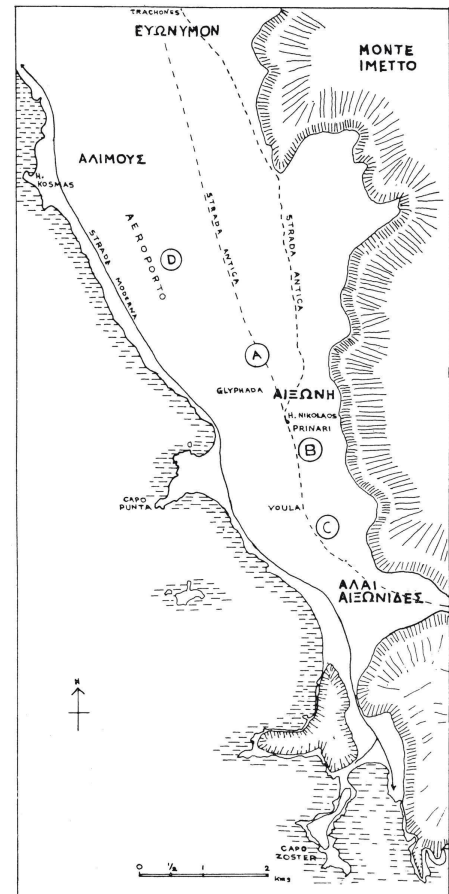


Fig. 6 - A sketch drawn by L. Beschi locating the excavations of the 19th century near Glyphada, Attica (after AD 30, 1975, 311).

²² Graves in the neighbourhood of Cape Zoster: MERSCH 1996, 218–220.

²³ SCHÖLL 1843, 28 mentions a female statue without head holding two torches (Artemis phosphoros), found in Rhamnus, in the possession of von Osten. Cf. Fn. 6.

²⁴ STACKELBERG 1837.

²⁵ CALLMER 1982.

²⁶ TRAVLOS 1988, 266–268. GÖTTE 2005. – The track used by von Osten and his friends was also well visited because of the popular Cave of Vari nearby. Also the path headed to the southern parts of Attica and to Sunion which was an all time favourite aim for excursions of persons interested in antiquity.

²⁷ ROSS 1837: “Aexonisches Todtenfeld”. ROSS 1848, 67–70. Ross mentions a village *Trachones*, one and a half hour travelling from Athens, which might be the badly understood *Dragonetz* by von Osten who sometimes cites terribly misspelled names and sites.

The evidence therefore suggests that the four white ground lekythoi today kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien were originally excavated in this area in 1819 by Gropius. Based on the iconographical evidence we are tempted to interpret the vases as burial gifts either from a single grave of a couple or from two individual graves. The diary of Prokesch von Osten mentions another two vases. These are unfortunately missing today.

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²⁸ BESCHI 1975.

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