# Humour as a tool of social cohesion: images of foreigners in ancient Athens

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## Introduction

According to Diogenes Laertius (1.33), Thales often used to say that he thanked the gods for making him Greek and not a foreigner.

A fundamental aspect of mankind that seems commonplace among most cultures and where humour plays a vital role is its need for social cohesion. In a small group, individuals are often mocked so that they revert to the group's socially acceptable behaviour (See Bergson's thesis on the social function of laughter and humour).

This produces the desired group cohesion. At a national level, one nation might ridicule another nation – the foreigners – so as to reassert or reinforce its own cohesion. People come together to struggle against adversity. The need for cohesion is rooted in the fear of exclusion – of being alone and defenceless – and the dread of the resultant breakdown of society.

## Athenian images of foreigners

Ethnic jokes are rooted in the fear of the 'other' and his (or her) perceived difference. They lobbed at other nations or populations to comfort a majority (or a minority) race.

Greek colonists came into contact with the native peoples of the African continent. Ethiopia held a special fascination for the Greeks as a fabled land, favoured by the gods. Africans enter Greek art as figures in myth or as studies in human physical type and caricature. African residents in fifth-century Athens were mostly slaves.

Athens was a metropolis inhabited by a community that was socially and ethnically diverse. But, it was dominated by men, who regarded the male, free-born citizen and his values as the norm: *Kalos k'agathos*. Those who did not share in the status of the ruling class included women, children, the old, slaves and resident foreigners.

**1. Two outsiders -** This small vessel combines the head of an African with that of a woman. 5th Century Athens was dominated by citizen males. Foreigners and women were both therefore political outsiders.

*Attic aryballos, London, British Museum, GR 1847.8-6.35. 470-450 BC. Photograph © Alexandre G. Mitchell*

**2. African shoe-shine boy -** Probably a slave, the boy holds the boot in one hand and cleans it with a sponge held in the other

*Greek bronze statuette, London British Museum, GR 1859.3-1.17 (Bronze 1676). 460-440 BC, Photograph © Alexandre G. Mitchell*

## Mocking the foreigner

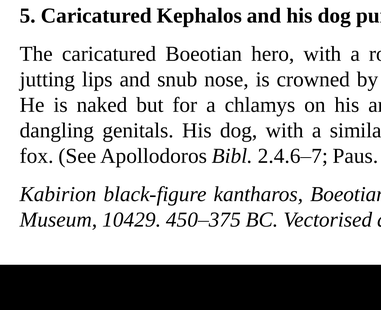
Most Greeks seemed to fear or at least have contempt for the 'other'. No need to seek for fantastical monsters or mythical Amazons, African slaves and foreigners amply sufficed. Africans were mocked in scenes with Herakles and the Egyptian king Busiris **[fig. 3]**, where his servants usually have African features.

**3. Herakles and Busiris -** Herakles massacres the mythical king of Egypt, Busiris and his priests because he sacrificed foreign travellers.

*Caeretan hydria, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. No. ANSA IV 3576 . 530-510 BC. Photograph after* Furtwängler, A. and Reichhold, K. (eds.) (1904). *Griechische Vasenmalerei: Auswahl Hervorragender Vasenbilder*. Munchen: F. Bruckmann, pl. 51

## The foreigner as a caricature of the Greek

In Greek caricature, African facial traits were often used in conjunction with dwarfism to emphasise the contrast with normally proportioned Greek men and women with Caucasian facial traits. This cruel mockery, which is prevalent in many scenes at the Kabirion sanctuary, really is laughter out of ignorance. If beauty is represented by tall men, with strong limbs, prominent noses, and straight hair, then small men, with bandy legs, snub noses, jutting jaws and frizzy hair are ridiculous and ugly in comparison.




**4. Eos pursuing Kephalos**

Tondo of a cup showing the beautiful hunter Kephalos pursued by Dawn (Eos). This depiction of Kephalos is strikingly different from his caricature in fig. 5.

*Attic red-figure cup, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 95.28; Painter of Acropolis 356. 450–430 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell*


**5. Caricatured Kephalos and his dog pursuing the Teumessian fox**

The caricatured Boeotian hero, with a round head and a protruding jaw with jutting lips and snub nose, is crowned by a ridiculously small and bent petasos. He is naked but for a chlamys on his arm, which reveals his huge belly and dangling genitals. His dog, with a similar grotesque appearance, is pursuing a fox. (See Apollodoros *Bibl.* 2.4.6–7; Paus. 9.19.1).

*Kabirion black-figure kantharos, Boeotian BF, Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 10429. 450–375 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell*

## The Persian

The *Philogelos* (a 4th Century AD book of jokes) made fun of Abderites, Kymeans, and Sidonians but the 'foreigner' par excellence was of course the Persian. The cup in Basel **[fig. 6]** and the Eurymedon jug **[fig. 7]** reveal painters' enjoyment in mocking Persian fighters by portraying them as incompetent drunks or effeminate men (*i.e.* cowards). The reason for mocking Persians is based on the fact that Athens constructed its sense of self through its opposition to the 'despotic' East.

**6. The stupor-drunk Scythian -** A Scythian (often interchangeable in iconography with Persians) is sleeping with his eyes closed. The scene is divided by a thick line. Below is a large wine horn. It is almost like a rebus puzzle: a sleeping Scythian added to a drinking horn means 'he drank too much and fell asleep' (*skuthizein* 'to drink like a Scythian', *i.e.* too much. Hieron. Rhod. *ap. Ath.* 499)

*Attic red-figure cup, Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, BS1423; Chaire Painter; 490–470 BC. Photograph © Claire Niggli.*

**7.** ΕΥΡΥΜΕΔΟΝΕΙ Μ ΚΥΒΑΣΕΗΕΣΤΕΚΑ.

A Persian warrior bends over, offering himself to the sexual assault of an Athenian soldier. The inscription (above) may refer to the Persian defeat of Eurymedon in the first quarter of the fifth century or could be a general joke about Persian effeminacy: 'the wide (arse) Persian' (See the use of *euruprōktos* in Aristophanes, *e.g.* in *Clouds* 1084–99).

*Attic red-figure oinochoe, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 1981.173. Manner of the Triptolemos Painter; 480–470 BC. Vectorised drawing © Alexandre G. Mitchell*

When Athenians used ethnic stereotyping, it was both a reflection of this state of affairs, a sign of their eugenistic tendencies, and, to a lesser degree, a way of maintaining social cohesion. In many ways, foreigners are handy scapegoats for a society's ill fortunes. We are also here in the realm of the 'laughter of the enemies' and the laughter of superiority. To laugh at enemies by poking fun at their laziness or effeminacy may seem a little childish, but within a shame-culture, to lose face was to lose everything that held meaning in one's life.

## Further reading

Mitchell, A. (2009). *Greek Vase Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour*. Cambridge: C.U.P.

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