

LITERACY AND SOCIAL STATUS OF ARCHAIC ATTIC VASE-PAINTERS*

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RESUMO: Recentemente, novas evidências levaram alguns estudiosos a questionar a visão tradicional que considera os ceramistas e pintores atenienses *banausoi* de baixo estatuto social cujas vidas raramente ou nunca cruzaram com as da aristocracia (Keuls, 1989: 149-67). A evidência diz respeito principalmente à geração dos pioneiros das figuras vermelhas, que são excepcionais em seu forte senso de identidade e deliberada referência seja de um a outro deles, ou a seus padrões. O campo de encontro era o simpósio.

Este trabalho enfoca um período anterior, os meados de séc. VI, e certas inscrições em vasos que sugerem não somente um elevado grau de instrução de parte do pintor, mas também uma familiaridade com vários gêneros de poesia de simpósio ou de outro tipo.

Essas incrições métricas, algumas em vasos modestos, sob outros aspectos, e não coletadas previamente, atestam o poder de difusão da “cultura da canção” da Grécia arcaica descrita por J. Herington (1985). Estes e outros exemplos implicam em que a estrutura social da Atenas do arcaico inicial, na esteira das reformas de Sólon, não era rigidamente estratificada; antes, artesãos conviviam livremente com os aristocratas, frequentemente unidos pelo gosto que compartilhavam pela poesia e pela canção.

UNITERMOS: Vasos gregos – Atenas – Pintores de vasos áticos arcaicos – Escrita.

The traditional view of Athenian potters and vase-painters is of *banausoi*, artisans of low social status, sometimes slaves, whose lives seldom if ever intersected with those of the aristocrats who purchased some of their finest wares (Scheibler, 1983: 120-33; Sarian, 1993). Many workers in the Kerameikos, it is often pointed out, have names that betray a foreign origin – Lydos, the Lydian

(Tiverios, 1976: 15-17) or Amasis, whose name suggests an Egyptian origin (Boardman, 1987; Isler, 1994), to cite just two prominent examples – placing them outside the bounds of the Athenian citizenry altogether. Yet there are at least as many with good Athenian names, even occasionally names that occur in well-known families, though it is usually not possible to determine if there is an actual family connection. Thus, for example, the Andokides who was a well-known potter in the years around 530 (Beazley, 1986: 69-72) could well be related to the Andokides who was *tamias* of Athena about 550 and ancestor of the great orator of the late fifth century (cf. Shapiro, 1989: 72). It

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was in Andokides' workshop that the red-figure technique was probably invented (Cohen, 1978: 105-239), so we may suppose that it was one of the largest and most successful of its time.

It has often been suggested that the signature on vases with *epoiesen* refers not to the potter but to the workshop owner (Robertson, 1972; Eisman, 1974). If this is correct, then in a few instances, as with Andokides, Nikosthenes, and Pamphaios (Immerwahr, 1984), we might imagine that, in the social climate of post-Solonian Athens, owning a successful potter's shop that exported extensively overseas had become a respectable occupation for a man of good family. John Boardman has recently intimated that the black-figure master painter/potter Exekias could even have belonged to the family of Solon, whose father's name was Exekestides (Boardman, 1978: 24).

The very fact that aristocrats must from time to time have bought or commissioned vases directly from the potters' shops is a strong *a priori* argument that there was at least some interaction, as is the existence of a large number of kalos-inscriptions praising the beauty of the *jeunesse dorée*, many of them identifiable from other sources (Robinson and Fluck, 1932). In recent years, the basic assumption that the finest vases were made for aristocratic patrons has been challenged, particularly by Michael Vickers and David Gill (Vickers and Gill, 1994). They argue that the Athenian aristocracy only dined off gold and silver plate, the black-and red-figure vases being cheap imitations. There is much evidence that makes this thesis untenable (Robertson, 1992: 4-5), including, I believe, the longer vase inscriptions that I shall be discussing later in this paper. These were surely not copied from another medium, but were added directly by the painter. But in any case, such evidence as the existence of kalos names does not allow us to specify the nature of the interaction between patron and painter. Was it strictly a business transaction, or might there have been other forms of social intercourse between the potters and painters and their clientèle? Do the kalos-inscriptions imply that these handsome upper-class youths paraded themselves through the potters' quarter and caught the eye of the artisans there, or were these names simply dictated by the patron to an obliging painter (cf. Webster, 1972: 21)?

A startling new piece of evidence, first published a dozen years ago, seems to cast the relation-

ship of painter and patron in a very different light. A red-figure psykter of the late sixth century, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Figs. 1-2), depicts a gathering of young athletes and other youths, mostly grouped into pairs with more or less explicitly erotic overtones (Frel, 1983:).¹ Most are labelled, and many of the names are familiar from kalos-inscriptions on other vases of the period: Ambrosios and Euthydikos; Hegerthos and Andriskos; Melas and Antias. There is one great surprise: Leagros, the reigning beauty of the day (to judge from his enormous popularity in vase-inscriptions) is wooed by none other than the vase-painter Euphronios (Fig. 2). Is this to be taken at face value, or could it be some kind of elaborate joke? The less than beautiful Leagros (cf. Keuls, 1989: 162, who describes him as a "chinless wonder") verges on a caricature, and Martin Robertson has recently suggested that the drawing on the vase is itself a kind of caricature, "a rude parody ... of the Pioneers" (Robertson 1992: 26). Previously the vase had been attributed to Smikros (Frel 1983: 150), a close, slightly younger colleague of Euphronios, who gave the name Smikros to a participant in the symposium on one of his most ambitious vases (Fig. 3; Beazley, 1963: 1619; Vermeule, 1965; Beazley, 1971: 322; Carpenter, 1989: 152).² Smikros in turn produced a self-portrait of sorts in an elaborate symposium scene that comes close to the spirit of Euphronios' krater.³ Even if such elements are meant in jest – the very notion that a Smikros would be invited to the poshest party in town, or that Euphronios would court the most sought-after prize in the palestra – they cannot be strictly in-jokes among the painters. The very fact that their patrons could also share in the joke presupposes a certain degree of social intimacy, even comradeship.⁴

(1) Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 82.AE.53; Figs. 1-2 here reproduced from Frel 1983: 149, figs. 10.2 and 10.6.

(2) Munich, Antikensammlungen 8935; Fig. 3 here from a photo courtesy of the Staatliche Antikensammlungen.

(3) Stannos, Brussels A 717; Beazley 1963: 20, 1; Beazley 1971: 322; Carpenter 1989: 154; CVA (Brussels 2) pl. 12-13.

(4) The tendency of painters of the Pioneer Group to refer to one another on their vases, usually in a lighthearted fashion, is well attested. Cf. the amphora by Euthymides with the challenge *ὡς οὐδέποτε Εὐφρόνιος*: Munich 2307; Beazley 1963: 26,1; Linfert (1977); Engelmann (1987) and the hydria by Phintias with a hetaira toasting Euthymides: Munich 2421; Beazley (1963): 23-34,1.

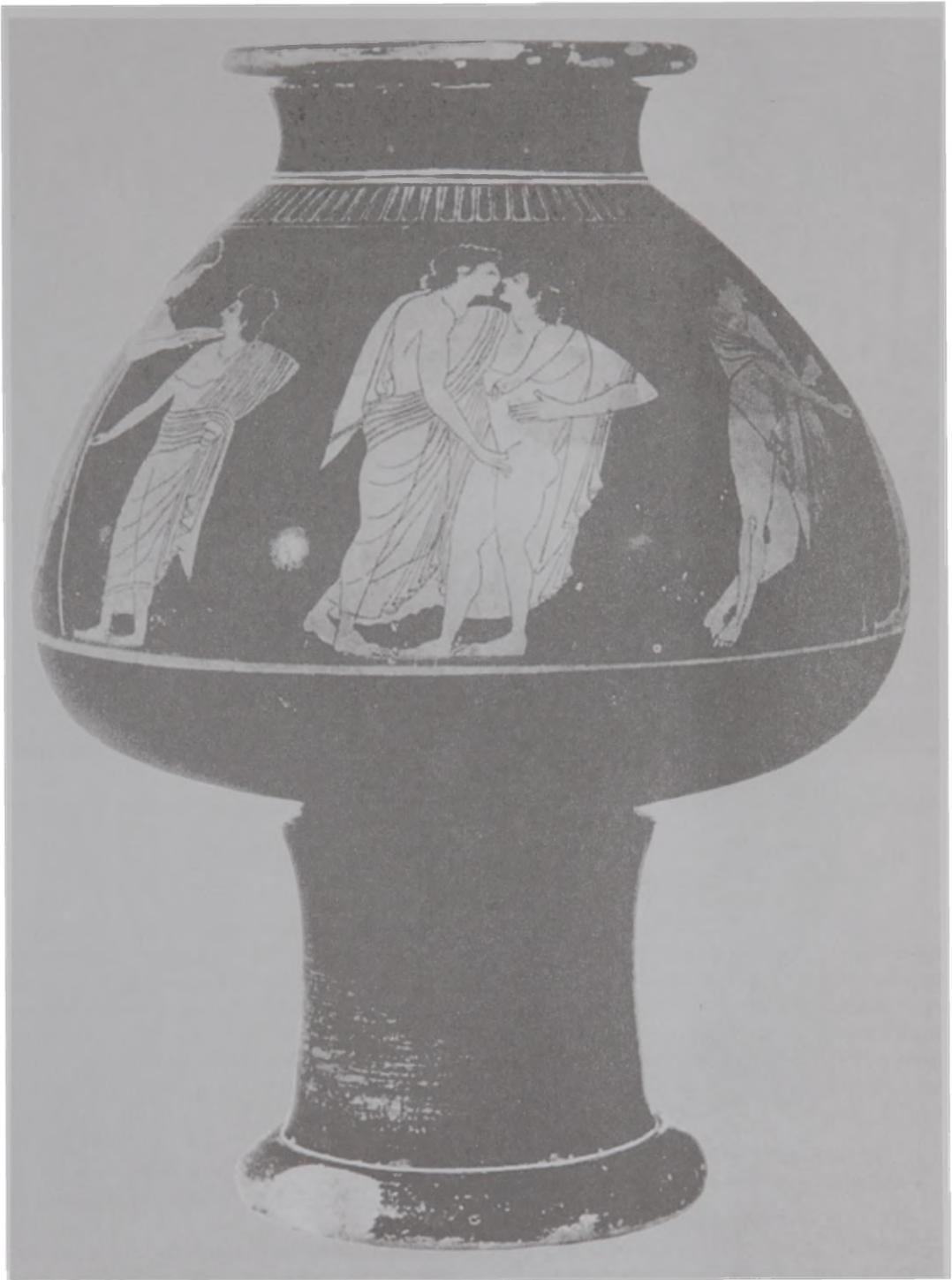


Fig.1 – Red-figure psykter J.Paul Getty Museum, Malibu.



Fig.2 – Detail of Fig.1: Euphronios and Leagros.

But the Euphronios krater in Munich (Fig. 3) has another unusual feature that may suggest a different approach to the question, what knowledge or experience did the vase-painters have of the world of the Athenian aristocracy. One of the symposiasts, Ekphantides, spontaneously throws back his head and bursts into song, the words issuing from his mouth:

”Ὅπῳλλον, σέ τε καὶ μάκαι<ραν>
O Apollo, you and blessed (Artemis)

The verse is in Hipponactean metre, one of several Aeolic metres commonly used in the Attic skolia, or drinking songs. Vermeule identified the metre as glyconic (Vermeule, 1965: 38), while Beazley had suggested completing the line with a Phalaecian (Beazley, 1963: 1619). Athenaeus re-

cords a good selection of the skolia (15.694C-696A), and ours follows a typical pattern for the opening line, the invocation of a divinity, or a group of related divinities. One, for example, calls on Demeter, mother of Ploutos, and Persephone (15.694C). Ours probably named Artemis in the second line and may well have referred to their mother Leto and their birth on Delos. One of the skolia quoted by Athenaeus was on this very subject (Vermeule, 1965: 39). Invocations to Apollo as son of Leto also occur twice at the beginning of the *Theognidea*.

Such verses were evidently composed and sung only within the symposium setting. How, then, did Euphronios know them, unless he also had first-hand experience of the kind of symposium he depicts?



Fig.3 – Red-figure calyx-krater by Euphronios. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.

Such examples of sympotic verse on Attic vases are, to be sure, rather rare, but sufficiently well-attested to be significant (Hurwit, 1990: 194-96). The most remarkable to come to light in recent years is on a small black-figure tripod-pyxis attributed to the Amasis Painter and found in the German excavations of the sanctuary of Aphaia on Aegina in the early 1970's (Figs. 4-5; M. Ohly-Dumm, *apud* Bothmer, 1985: 236-38).⁵ Once again the metre is an Aeolic one, the Major Asclepiadean, that could be used for drinking songs:

Ἥλιος οἶδεν καὶ ἐγὼ μόνος
αὐτως παῖδα καλόν

This is clearly a snippet of paederastic verse. "The sun and likewise I alone know a handsome boy" is the translation of Henry Immerwahr, taking αὐτως (with long o) adverbially (Immerwahr, 1990: 36). The lover wants to keep his beloved for himself, away from the gaze of others. Only Helios sees everything on earth, a conventional idea in Greek poetry, expressed, for example, as Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* 985, where Orestes calls upon Helios, ὁ πάντ' ἐποπτεύων to witness the cloak in which Agamemnon was ensnared and slain.

The erotic poem on our vase has no relevance to the scene alongside which it is painted (the combat of Herakles and Kyknos), but there *is* an appropriate scene elsewhere on the vase: three pairs of *erastes* and *eromenos* courting (Fig. 5). Part of one boy's name is preserved, Aprophasistos, translated by Martin Robertson as "nothing loth" (*apud* Bothmer, 1985: 237). The Amasis Painter is elsewhere quite sparing with inscriptions, and the one on this vase is most unusual for him (or any other painter, for that matter). That, as well as the unusual provenance, suggests a special commission, yet the inscription is, according to Immerwahr, compatible with the painter's handwriting and so could not, say, have been added by the purchaser (Immerwahr, 1990: 37). If the hand is smaller and more cramped than the Amasis Painter's usual, that is no doubt in order to squeeze it into the limited space – the same reason the inscription has been displaced from the more crowded scene in which it properly belongs.

In both examples considered thus far, Euphronios and the Amasis Painter demonstrate their familiarity with sympotic verse in settings that evoke the social milieu of the Athenian aristocrat: the

symposium itself and the courting of boys in the palestra. A third instance, again in black-figure but about contemporary with the Euphronios krater, is even more unexpected because the setting is definitely non-aristocratic. On a pelike in the Vatican, an oil seller fills a small jug from a large pelike that sits on the floor beside him (Fig. 6).⁶ A customer or co-worker sits opposite him and seems to be playing with the dog. Such scenes of *banausoi*, though not very numerous, do several times occur on pelikai, in part to illustrate the uses to which the shape was put (Shapiro forthcoming). Stretching from one figure to the other is the opening line of an impromptu hymn:

᾽ὦ Ζεῦ πάτερ αἶθε πλούσιος γεν<οίμαν>

"O Zeus, would that I might become rich!" The metre is again Aeolic and the invocation to Zeus reminiscent of skolia like the one on Euphronios' krater, only the sentiment somewhat less lofty. In fact the diction recalls even more closely another type of skolion of which Athenaeus records two examples. One reads:

εἶθε λύρα καλὰ γενοίμαν ἑλεφαντίνα,
καί με καλοὶ παῖδες φέροιεν Διονύσιον
ἐς χορόν

"Would that I might become a lovely ivory lyre, and that beautiful boys might take me to the chorus of Dionysos."

In the context of the oil merchant's shop on the Vatican pelike, the verse turns the scene into a gentle parody of the symposium, in which two working stiff's daydream of being leisured aristocrats. The painter's sense of humor perhaps reflects a feeling of kinship or empathy with his fellows in the oil business, who must have had close ties to the pottery industry. The humor in fact extends to the reverse of the pot (Fig. 7). In a different vignette, which may be only loosely related to the first (the setting has moved outdoors), the oil merchant, who has perhaps been accused of shortchanging a customer, exclaims:

ἤδη μὲν ἤδη πλέο<ν>, παρβέβακεν

"It's already full. It's spilling over!" Although the wording probably captures a typical speech pattern of colloquial Attic Greek, at the same time it

(5) Figs. 4-5 reproduced from Bothmer 1985: 236-37.

(6) Vatican 413; Albizzati 1925-39: pl. 61. Figs. 6 and 7 here reproduced from photos courtesy of the Vatican Museums.

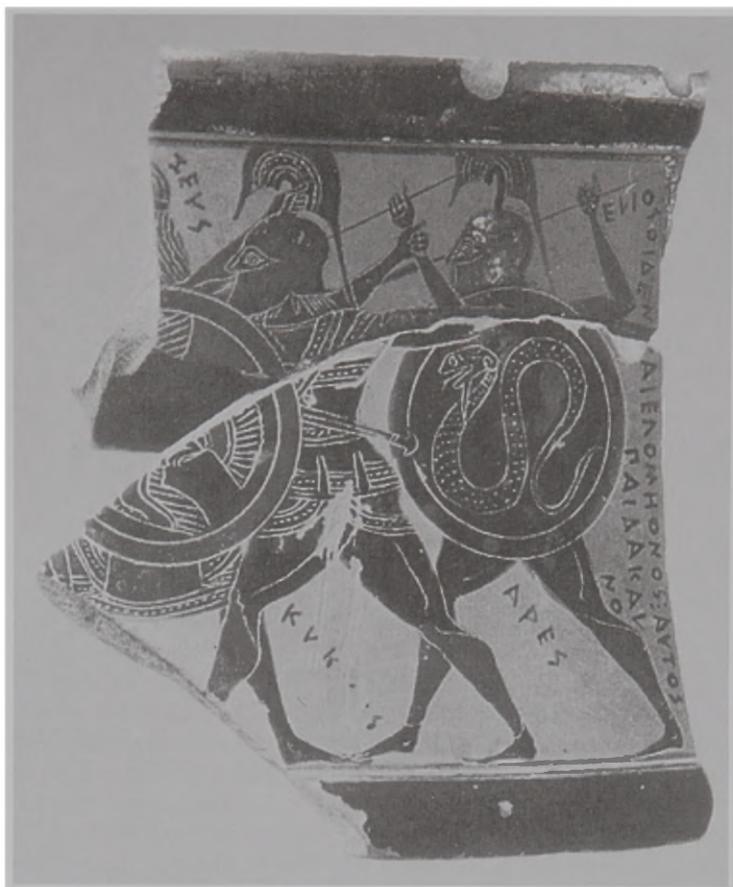


Fig.4 – Black-figure tripod-pyxis by the Amasis Painter, Aegina.

appears to be metrical, based on a succession of cretics, usually considered a Doric metre (West, 1982: 54-55). The use of a Doric form with long alpha in the final word would be consistent with this. Possibly the doricisms reflect the non-aristocratic status of the speakers.

If the preceding examples of what an Archaic vase-painter might write on his vases suggest anything about the place these men occupied in Athenian society, it is perhaps that they had no fixed place, contrary to our usual notion of the rigid social stratification of sixth-century Athens. Their profession brought them into contact with a broad cross-section of their fellow Athenians, and they moved easily between aristocrats and other *banausoi*. If they did not actually attend the symposia of the wealthy (and they might have, on occasion), they

still knew enough about what went on at them to render such scenes in sharply observed and sympathetic detail, complete with authentic fragments of the kind of verse spontaneously composed on these occasions. The notion that a “humble” painter could himself compose a snatch of verse, as on the Vatican pelike, is not so astonishing when we contemplate the nature of the “song culture” of Archaic Greece that John Herington has so compellingly described (Herington, 1985). Indeed, as the second speaker on the pelike illustrates, even conversational speech tends to slip easily into metre in this period. He may be the opposite of Molière’s *bourgeois gentilhomme*, who didn’t realize he was speaking prose.

The “song culture” encompasses many other aspects of life as well, some of them, unfortuna-



Fig.5 – Black-figure tripod-pyxis by the Amasis Painter, Aegina.

tely, not documented at all in the small corpus of surviving vase inscriptions. One instance that may seem unremarkable, almost predictable, but is no less unique for that, appears on an as yet unpublished black-figure loutrophoros of the mid-sixth century attributed to the painter Lydos.⁷ The vase itself is a nuptial vessel, used to carry water for the bridal bath. Amid the figures in the wedding procession is written a bit of the wedding song: HYMENAIE YMENAIE. This loutrophoros was found, along with hundreds more like it (cf. Travlos, 1971: 361, 363, fig. 466) in the sanctuary of Nympe at the foot of the Akropolis, probably all dedications of newly-wed couples. The inscription does not add anything new to the corpus of lyric poetry, as the others we have looked at could be said to do, but in adding the sounds of the wedding to the visual image (cf. Oakley and Sinos, 1994: 11), it uses the power of the written word to bring the scene to life.

By the early fifth century, the “song culture” was already on the wane. In vase-painting this is evident in the prevalence of book rolls in school scenes, some of them carrying identifiable passages of epic verse (Immerwahr, 1964). In the most famous example, by Douris, the opening lines of an epic poem are inscribed on the open book roll.⁸

(7) Akropolis; Beazley 1970: 45. I thank M. Tiverios for showing me a photo of this vase.

(8) Berlin 2285; Beazley 1963: 431,48.

How these painters of the period of the Persian Wars acquired their literary sophistication is another question. I have deliberately focussed on an earlier period in this paper, in order to consider the role of the vase-painters in a society of very limited literacy. And here I believe that their familiarity with several genres of occasional verse, their ability to transcribe it onto a vase and perhaps even to compose it spontaneously, must separate them from most of their fellow *banausoi*.

Archaic Athens was, in the end, a very small town, and the familiar model of segregation by social class would simply not have worked in practise. While mixing with men of a higher class does not, of course, imply moving up to a higher class – slaves, after all, probably spent a lot of time in the complany of their masters – in the case of free-born potters and painters I believe the frequent contact must have led to a greater degree of acceptance than was accorded most members of the urban proletariat. We know that professional musicians and poets, like Anakreon, were welcome guests at the Athenian symposium, because they provided the more refined entertainment (Pellizer, 1990; Kurtz and Boardman, 1986). Although vase-painters probably never enjoyed the same status as fine artists, might they not have been invited along as well, precisely in order that they might be better able to render the symposium scenes that their patrons favored?

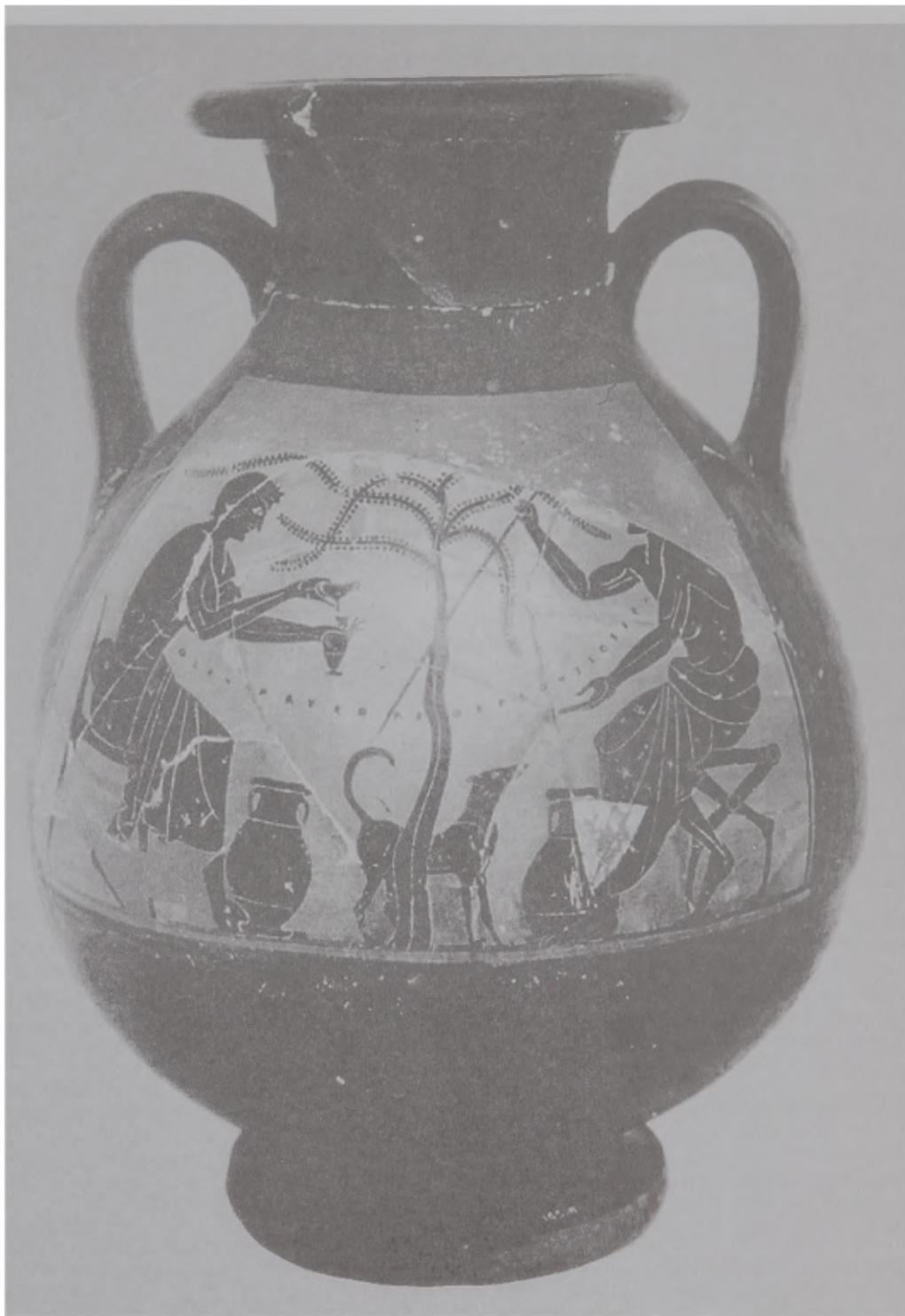


Fig.6 – Black-figure pelike, Vatican Museums.

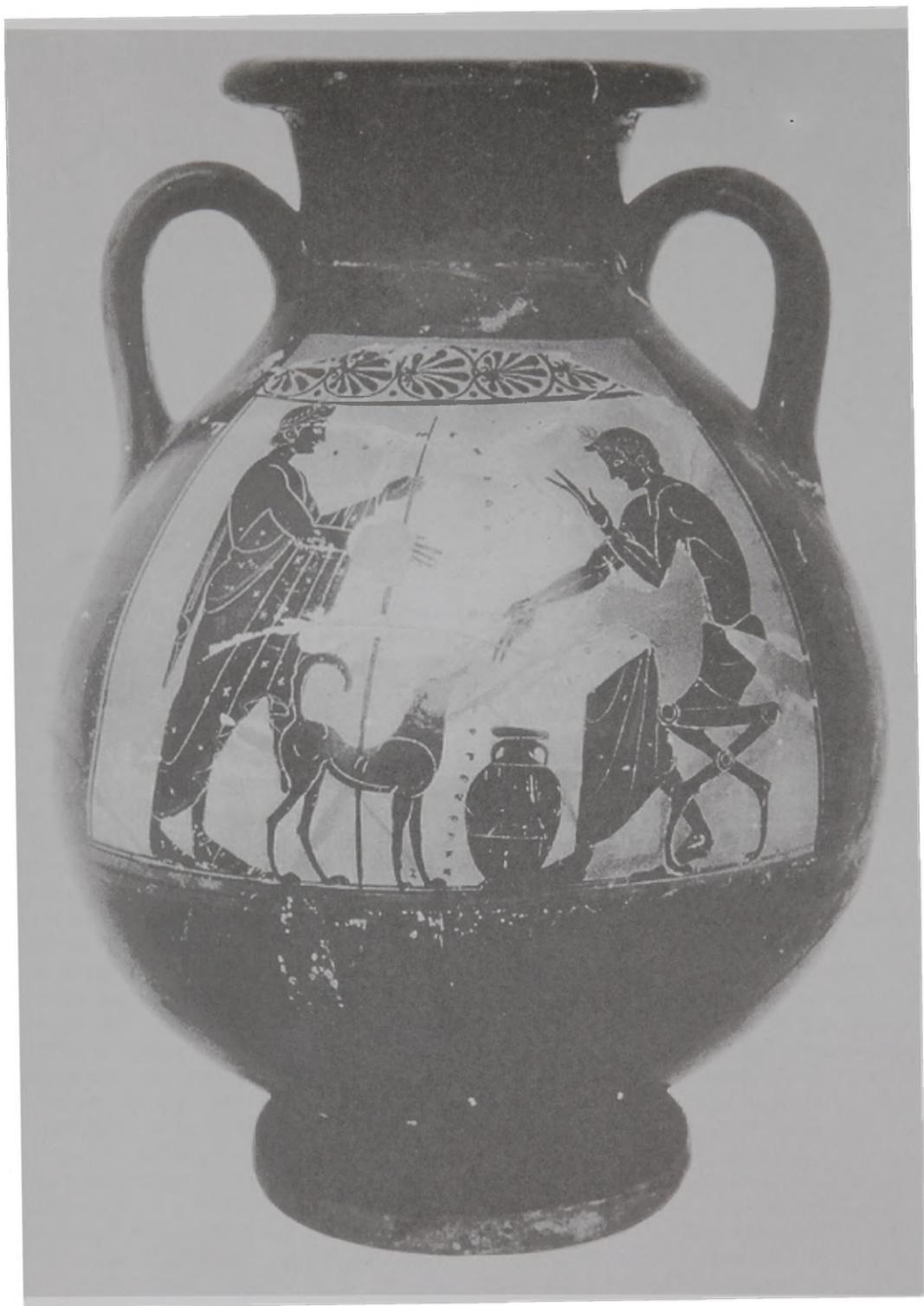


Fig.7 – Black-figure pelike, Vatican Museums.

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, new evidence has led some scholars to question the traditional view of Athenian potters and painters as *banausoi* of low social status whose lives seldom if ever intersected with those of the aristocracy (Keuls, 1989: 149-67). The evidence pertains mainly to the generation of the red-figure pioneers, who are exceptional in their strong sense of identity and self-conscious reference to each other and to their patrons. Their meeting ground was the symposium.

The presente paper focuses on an earlier period, the mid-sixth century, and on certain vase inscriptions that suggest not only a high degree of literacy on the part of the painter, but also a familiarity with several genres of sympotic and other poetry.

These metrical inscriptions, some on otherwise modest vases and not previously collected, attest to the pervasiveness of the "song culture" of Archaic Greece described by J. Herington (1985). These and other examples imply that the social structure of Early Archaic Athens, in the wake of Solon's reforms, was not a rigidly stratified one, but rather artisans mixed freely with aristocrats, often joined through their shared tastes for poetry and song.

UNITERMS: Greek vases – Athens – Archaic Attic vase-painters – Literacy – Social status.

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