

SAPPHO AND OTHER WOMEN MUSICIANS IN ATTIC VASE PAINTING

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We know a great deal about the musical activities of women in Classical Greece, partly from the occasional literary references to them and especially from the hundreds of surviving sixth- and fifth-century Attic vase paintings that depict their daily lives.² Athenian potters and painters produced these wares—some elegantly decorated and some less so—for a thriving local market as well as for export all over the Mediterranean, with the result that over 30,000 examples of their durable products survive today as invaluable sources of information about the activities, musical and otherwise, of the upper classes of Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries BC (Webster 1972, xiii). Although caution must be exercised in analyzing the scenes on the vases, since the paintings are in fact artists' representations and not videotapes of live performances, we can learn much about the musical life of Athenian women by comparing the information from iconographic and literary sources of the period.

If we had to rely solely on Greek literature for an assessment of the musical experience of Greek women, we would probably conclude that female musical activities followed one of two models: either a woman was like Sappho of Lesbos, composing love songs and wedding songs for her aristocratic circle, or she was a hired musician of low social status who performed as a wind-player or harpist for the pleasure of Athenian men at drinking parties. The vase paintings, however, fill out this rather narrow picture considerably, and, as I hope to demonstrate here, suggest a degree of musical literacy among upper-class Athenian women that we might not otherwise suspect. As Keuls has noted, the 'female educational underground' was the only means for women to escape the ignorance encouraged by the Athenian system, which provided no formal schooling for girls and which severely restricted female participation in public life (Keuls 1985, 104). In a society in which men could write things like 'Let a woman not practice reason (*logos*), for that would be a terrible thing' (Democritus, fr. 110 D–K), it is little wonder that song was an important medium for the transmission of female ideas and culture.

Before we examine some characteristic examples of Attic vases that depict female musicians, a few comments about the nature of our iconographical sources will be helpful. By and large, the Attic vase-painters seem to have produced a standard repertoire of scene types, often matching the general nature of the scene portrayed to the vase type on which it appeared; a water-jug (*hydria*), for example, might show a scene of Athenian women going to a public fountain; a cosmetic jar (*pyxis*) might depict the story of the Judgement of Paris and the beauty contest among Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite; the interior of a wine cup (*kylinx*) might typically portray a drinking party or an erotic liaison. As I indicate below, this same principle tends to hold true for the scenes depicting women musicians. In general, there seems to be little evidence for specially commissioned vases, although a customer would of course feel free to ask for a type of vase appropriate for a particular

1. The author wishes to thank the College of Humanities at Ohio State University for a research grant to assist in obtaining the illustrations for this article.

2. For a comprehensive survey of the stringed instruments of the Greeks, see Maas and Snyder 1989; cf. also Paquette 1984. For a very general, introductory survey of women as presented in Athenian vase painting, see Swerdlow 1978; a more thorough study is available in Webster 1972, 226–43. See also Bérard 1984. A standard general study of the position of women in Greece and Rome is Pomeroy 1975.

occasion: a *kalos*-vase ('handsome', an inscription on a vase understood to be descriptive of the recipient) that a man might give to his male lover, a domestic scene of some sort on a vase for his wife, or a wedding scene on a ritual vase to be given as a gift to a bride and groom. Inscriptions on the vases sometime identify mythological or legendary figures portrayed, and frequently supply the name of the potter or the painter; rarely do they give any other actual names of contemporary people of Athens. Despite the repetitive characteristics of Greek vase-painting, the sheer volume of evidence from so many surviving examples provides us with abundant visual information. As Boardman has observed, 'The vase scenes give us a richer view of the visual imagery of Greece than is vouchsafed for any other ancient society...' (Boardman 1991, 102).³ Finally, in looking at representations of women musicians (or women in general), we must remember that as far as we know, all Athenian vase-painters were men; we must allow for a potential gender bias and acknowledge that we are seeing women as men chose to depict them, not as they might have depicted themselves.

I shall begin with the four known vase-painting representations of the poet Sappho, showing how one of them in particular seems to be modeled on the scenes of musical activities in the women's quarters of an Athenian house. After considering several such scenes that appear to portray women musicians in their homes, next I will focus on the scenes that depict female professional players. Finally I will turn to vase paintings that show mythological female musicians such as the Muses and maenads, which also tend to reflect the musical activities of 'real' Athenian women—at least insofar as they were perceived and portrayed by the vase-painters.

The earliest of the four inscribed Sappho portraits, Goluchow Inv. 32 (fig. 1) in Six's *Technique by the Sappho Painter*, shows a single figure standing and playing a long-armed type of lyre called *barbitos*; the player is identified by the incised label just above her right hand, which holds the plectron.⁴ Similarly, the poet is shown as a single figure holding the barbitos and doing a dance-step on a red-figured calyx *krater* (mixing bowl), Wuppertal 49 (fig. 2), attributed to the Tithonos Painter and dated to about 480–470 BC. We see her playing the same instrument, together with her fellow-poet Alcaeus, on the more familiar red-figured *kalathoid krater*, Munich 2416 (fig. 3), by the Brygos Painter, also about 480 BC. Sappho is shown in almost frontal view, her head turned towards Alcaeus. In these three paintings, all showing the instrument especially associated with some of the Eastern Greek poets such as Anacreon, Alcaeus, and Sappho, the artists seem to emphasize the non-Athenian qualities of the poet as a solitary female performer or as a woman playing a duet, as it were, with a man. But when we turn to Athens 1260 (fig. 4), a red-figured *hydria* assigned to the Group of Polygnotos and dated to about 440 BC, we find an altogether different scene: a seated Sappho (identified by inscription) looking at a book-roll, along with three other women, of whom the figure just to the right of Sappho appears to be handing her an ordinary tortoise-shell lyre.⁵

In this, the latest of the four known representations, we find a scene that is quite similar in many ways to those that show a music ensemble in the women's quarters. The chair on which Sappho sits makes clear that this is an indoor setting. The scroll in the poet's hands, rather than the instrument itself (though it is nearby), perhaps suggests an emphasis on literacy rather than orality; the poet is about to sing, we assume, but

3. A standard study of the history and characteristics of Greek vases may be found in Cook 1960.

4. See the Appendix for a list of all vases referred to, together with Beazley numbers.

5. For a detailed description of the vase, see Immerwahr 1964, 26.

evidently her words (a few of which are intelligible on the scroll) do not depend entirely on the memorization of song for their transmission.⁶ Even the type of lyre here represented implies a domestic or educational setting—it is a simple *chelys* played by schoolboys and by women, rather than a *barbitos*, which is sometimes played by women but is more characteristically the instrument of symposia and of singers of drinking songs like Anacreon. Athens 1260, then, seems to portray a literally more sedate version of Sappho than the other three vases—a matronly seated figure in the company of three other women. Perhaps it is no wonder that Beazley once described this scene as ‘an anaemic specimen of its class’; he found wanting in all three of the Sappho portraits known to him the grace (or, in Greek, *charis*) that he felt characterized Sappho’s poetry (Beazley 1928, 10).

Let me turn now to some analogous scenes that clearly show women players entertaining each other in the women’s quarters. An as yet unpublished hydria, Athens 12883, portrays four women, of whom the one seated on the left plays an *aulos* while the woman on the far right approaches carrying a lyre.⁷ The domestic nature of the scene is suggested by the small chest carried by the woman between them. There are no inscriptions on the vase to indicate that these are meant to be any particular women. The composition of the scene, however, is quite similar to that of the inscribed Sappho-and-her-circle portrait which we just examined, on a vase of the same shape (a water-jug, a type frequently used by women) and from the same period, roughly 440 BC. It appears likely that the Athens 1260 version of Sappho’s musical circle was in fact based on actual groups of Athenian women entertaining themselves by singing and playing for each other.

Despite the presence of the mythological figure of the winged Eros here, the chest and the objects hanging on the wall similarly suggest a domestic context for the scene of Würzburg 521 (fig. 5). This time, however, the instruments include not only an *aulos* held by the woman on the right but also a *barbitos* being played by the seated woman and the small round-based instrument on the far right that is probably a descendant of the *phorminx* mentioned in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This instrument, which had earlier been the lyre of Apollo and the Muses and the Homeric bards, came in the sixth century to be identified with male performers in Dionysiac celebrations, but by the fifth century it is connected exclusively with women players—either with maenads or Muses, or occasionally with an ordinary mortal woman such as this one. The winged Eros hovering towards the seated player presumably suggests that the women will sing of love.

Another winged Eros, this time himself playing an *aulos*, appears in a domestic scene, Athens, Kerameikos HS 89, in which the seated woman on the far left plays a *barbitos*. This vase, like the seated Sappho and the similarly composed scene with the seated *aulos*-player, is a hydria, a type of vase that would have been frequently used by women in the household chores of cooking and washing; consequently, it is not surprising that a large percentage of the domestic music ensembles such as this one are found on the very sort of pot that would have been purchased for or by Athenian wives.⁸

6. On the scroll, see Edmonds 1922.

7. I have examined the scene in person, but no photograph is available due to the as yet unpublished status of the vase. On the *aulos*, see Schlesinger [1939].

8. A further interesting example of a domestic musicale on a hydria is to be found in Bérard 1989, fig. 124 (Bâle, private collection). The interior of a house is indicated by a door shown on the far left. On the left a woman stands holding up an unrolled scroll, while in the center a woman sits in a chair on a podium and tunes her lyre (shown in side view) as she looks at the scroll. At her feet is an open chest from which the scroll has evidently been removed—a storehouse of songs to be sung. On the right, a third woman

Another kind of women's quarters scene is the wedding shower. On a *lebes gamikos*, New York Met. 07.286.35 (fig. 6), a type of vase used in connection with the marriage ceremony, we see the bride-to-be playing a closed, frame harp with a spindle-shaped soundbox as other women approach carrying various presents, including three chests and a *loutrophoros*, another type of marriage vase. Appropriately, the instrument the bride plays is yet another one shown exclusively in the hands of women players, including not only brides such as this one but also professional harpers (*psaltriai*) and the Muses.

The fact that the harp was a female's instrument in the fifth century is further confirmed by Aristophanes, whose description of Euripides in disguise as an old woman in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (l. 1217) includes mention of the type of harp known as the *pektis*, which the poet brings along as part of his costume. Not surprisingly, since the literary tradition emphasizes the association of the harp with female players, Hellenistic authors attributed the instrument's invention to the most famous of women composers, namely Sappho, who does in fact mention the *pektis* in one fragment (fr. 156, Lobel–Page).

Other vases that appear to portray amateur women musicians in less easily identifiable contexts include a scene on a *lekythos* (oil jar), Brussels A 1020 (fig. 7), in which the woman on the left plays the aulos while the woman on the right looks on—her lyre shown in a rare side-view enabling us to note the curvature in the construction of the tortoise-shell lyre. The scene on the interior of a cup, Louvre CA 482 (fig. 8), although badly damaged, again suggests the women's quarters (note the mirror on the upper right); here a single figure is shown playing the phorminx, represented by the artist with the apotropaic eyes often characteristic of this instrument. Presumably the eyes on the instrument were meant, like the eyes the Greeks painted on their ships, to ward off evil, much as evil-eye beads do in Greece of the present day.

I turn now from the portraits of Sappho and the domestic scenes of ensemble music-making to vase paintings that depict female hired musicians. A scene on a red-figured kylix in Rome, Villa Giulia, from about 460 BC, appropriately on a drinking cup, shows a professional aulos player (*auletris*) performing at a men's drinking party. Her puffed-up cheeks, resembling those of the modern oboe player, not to mention the evidence assembled by Schlesinger, indicate that this instrument was a reed-pipe, not a 'flute', as Greek dictionaries and translations of Greek texts would have us believe (Schlesinger [1939], n.9). Greek literature confirms the impression given by the vase paintings that such pipers (or, in some instances, harpers) were a customary feature of a symposium. In Plato's dialogue the *Symposium* (176e), the pompous doctor Eryximachus proposes to dismiss the *auletris* and let her go off to play for herself or for the women of the house instead so that the men can begin their speeches in praise of love. Similarly, in the *Protagoras* (347d), Socrates states that true gentlemen, who are capable of intelligent conversation over their wine-cups, have no need of extraneous distractions such as an *auletris*, a dancer, or a harpist. From the end of the fourth century we have some concrete information about the economic status of these women musicians, for a treatise on Athenian government reports that among the duties of a board of ten City Controllers was the supervision of the wages of female pipers, harpers, and lyre-players, which were restricted to two drachmas per performance. As Chester Starr (1970) observes, this seems to be our only evidence for wage-fixing in ancient Athens.⁹

Starr has convincingly argued that the *auletris*, as a highly trained musician who could command a good fee, should on the whole be distinguished from a professional of another

stands holding a lyre and a small chest.

9. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Athenaion politeia*, 50. See also Menander fr. 264.1–6.

sort—the usually less expensive *hetaira*, or courtesan. The woman on a drinking cup by the Triptolemus Painter, Berlin F 2286 (fig. 9), is probably not an expert musician, but only a *hetaira*, for she joins her male companion in the drinking and accompanies his aulos-playing with a pair of clappers, or *krotala*, an instrument presumably not requiring great expertise. On the other hand, some vase paintings do suggest that at least moderate musical skill might have been an asset to a *hetaira* in her trade as a courtesan. A *pelike* (storage jar) dated to about 420 BC, Rhodes 12887 (fig. 10), seems to be one of a number of vases showing a young man, purse in hand, who appears to be visiting the women's quarters of a house in order to negotiate for the services of a courtesan (see Rodenwaldt 1932). On one such vase the *hetaira* is tickling the potential customer with a branch, but here she seems to be enticing him to spend his money on her by means of a display of her lyre-playing abilities. The podium on which her feet rest—a feature characteristic of scenes of musical competition—perhaps suggests the implied contest: will she win this customer, or will he take his purse and go elsewhere?

I move now to the final category of female musicians as they are shown in Attic vase painting—those who belong to the mythological realm rather than to the 'real' world. The two most common types of mythological female musicians are Muses and maenads. In a scene on a vase by the Achilles Painter, Cureglia, private collection, we see a single female figure playing a *phorminx*. We are clearly in a mythological setting, for this woman sits not on a chair in the women's quarters but on a rock labelled Helicon, the mountainous home of the nine Muses. She is obviously one of the Muses, with whom the *phorminx* is, after 475 BC, almost exclusively identified in the vase paintings.

Muses can also be recognized in scenes in which there seems to be a superfluity of instruments, such as on a *pyxis*, Boston 98.887 (fig. 11). This scene represents several women musicians and a cowherd (on the other side of the vase) who is generally assumed to be the poet Hesiod. In scenes from real life, instruments are rarely shown being played in combinations of more than two at a time, whereas here we have a virtual chamber music ensemble including, from right to left, aulos, *syrinx*, lyre, and further on around the vase to the left of the seated lyre-player, two other *phorminx* players.

Inscribed vases showing the Muses leave no doubt, of course, as to the identity of the performers. On an *amphora* (storage jar) of about 440, British Museum E 271 (fig. 12), the legendary poet-musician Musaios stands holding his lyre in the presence of a seated Terpsichore who plays an open, angle harp, while behind her Melousa prepares to play an aulos. The *phorminx* which hangs in the field conveniently symbolizes the presence of the rest of the Muses with whom, as I have pointed out, this instrument becomes especially closely identified.

The outdoor setting of a scene on a calyx krater, also dated to about 440, Rome, Vatican 559 (fig. 13) by the Phiale Painter, in which the central figure plays a *barbitos* while sitting on a rock, suggests that these women also are Muses on Mount Helicon. Captions on illustrations of vase paintings all too frequently identify any women playing instruments as Muses. But in all of the mythological scenes that we have been looking at, either the setting, the inscriptions, or the superabundance of instruments makes clear that the musicians are intended as Muses. We should therefore be wary of accepting an overly wide application of the label 'Muses' to scenes of women musicians who, unless they are distinguished by one of the characteristics I have just mentioned, are probably intended as representations of 'real' women. It is worth noting that the types of instruments played by Muses and by 'real' women do not differ significantly; the aulos, the lyre, the *phorminx*, the harp, and the *barbitos*—all are shown being played in the domestic quarters as well as on Mount Helicon. This identification suggests that the vase

painters' model for their conception of the Muses as musicians was based on their knowledge of Athenian women's experience as instrumentalists.

Besides the Muses, the other type of female mythological musicians most frequently shown in the vase paintings are the maenads. On a pelike, Munich 2361 (fig. 14), by the Kleophon Painter, we see Dionysus on the left, holding a drinking cup and *thyrsos* (pine cone tipped wand), with a satyr in the center, and on the right a maenad playing a small drum, or *tympanon*. An *oinochoe*, or wine-pitcher, Oxford, Ashmolean 1879.147 (fig. 15), shows a maenad playing another instrument commonly found in Dionysiac contexts, the *barbitos*. The identification of the player as a maenad is certain, given the figure of Dionysus himself barely visible on the far right and the presence of vine leaves in the background.

More mysterious is a female phorminx player on an amphora dated to about 475, Urbana, Illinois 70-8-5. Although her instrument is one which can be played by mortal women, by Muses, or by maenads, her unrestrained pose and the abandon with which she plays suggest that the figure represents a maenad. With the possible exception of the *tympanon*, the instruments played by maenads are generally the same as those played by ordinary women, despite differing contexts and manner of performance.

Finally, an amphora by the Nikoxenos Painter, Berlin 2161, shows an unusual sight: the large concert *kithara* in the hands of a female player. The only females who even touch the *kithara*—the large and ornate instrument of the professional male virtuosi—are Athena, as here, and occasionally Nike, the goddess of victory, who is sometimes shown in flight as she wings her way with the instrument towards a victor in a contest. This particular vase is of a shape and design which identify it as one of the prize pots which were filled with valuable olive oil and awarded to victors in the athletic and musical contests held yearly in Athens during the festival called the *Panathenaia* and open only to male competitors.

The *Panathenaia* was a state-sponsored religious festival held in honor of the city's protector, the goddess Athena.¹⁰ The prize pots such as this one show the goddess on one side wearing her traditional armor, and on the other, a representation of the type of contest for which the vase was awarded. In this instance, the reverse side of the vase depicts a male *kithara*-player representing the man to whom the prize was given. So, although we apparently see here a mythological version of a woman musician, she has nothing to do with real women musicians in Athens, unlike the Muses and maenads, who seem on the whole to reflect the musical life of actual Athenian women. In fact, although Athena is playing the *kithara* here, she does so only as patron saint of the male performers who had exclusive access to this most prestigious of Greek stringed instruments.

Let me conclude by returning for a moment to the women of Athens—not the mythological projections of the male imagination but the real women of the Athenian upper classes who, when they were not weaving or supervising other labors of the household, must have sometimes sat in the women's quarters playing music and singing songs. Although we have no way of knowing such things, it is interesting to speculate what music these women played and what sort of songs they sang. Did they sing about the old legends of the Trojan War, perhaps of Helen and Penelope? Did they sing of legends from their own families? Did they sing of the bittersweetness of love?—the sort of folk motif preserved for us in a fragment of Sappho's poetry which runs:

10. For a full description of the festival (and of its apparent representation in the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon), see Robertson and Frantz 1975; Boardman 1985.

Sweet mother, I cannot weave at my loom
Overwhelmed as I am with desire for a boy
—all because of tender Aphrodite.

(fr. 102, Lobel–Page)

The voices of these women must remain silent for us, but at least we can see that women in Classical Athens, despite the many restrictions on their lives, could become musicians. A few were professional players, probably mostly from the lower classes, whose performance opportunities were limited chiefly to the male institution of *symposia*.

Upper-class women played primarily for their own pleasure and for the pleasure of other women in their household whose living quarters in the typical Greek house were separate from the men's quarters. All of the Greek women musicians, including the mythological ones, played certain instruments considered appropriate for women, particularly the harp, the simple tortoise-shell lyre and its long-armed cousin the *barbitos*, and the small round-based *phorminx*. Although girls and women lacked access to the official, formal instruction available to their male counterparts in music schools and to the stimulation provided by the state-sponsored musical competitions, some of them still learned to play music. More importantly, we may speculate, they achieved the means for preserving their own musical culture and for passing down their musical traditions from one generation to the next.

APPENDIX

NOTE: The list below gives all the vase-paintings referred to in the text in the order in which they are mentioned. Items 1–15 are reproduced below. Further information (numbered below according to the figure numbers in the text and captions) may be found by consulting the appropriate pages in the following publications of John D. Beazley: *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), abbreviated here as ABV; *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), abbreviated here as ARV²; and in *Paralipomena* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), abbreviated here as 'Para'.

1. Goluchow Inv. 32	Six's technique hydria	Para 246
2. Wuppertal 49	red-figured calyx-krater	
3. Munich 2416	red-figured kalathoid vase	ARV ² 385 and 1649, Para 367
4. Athens 1260	red-figured hydria	ARV ² 1060, Para 445
[Athens 12883	red-figured hydria	ARV ² 1040]
5. Würzburg 521	red-figured calyx krater	ARV ² 1046
[Athens, Kerameikos HS 89	red-figured hydria]	

6.	New York Metropolitan 07.286.35	red-figured lebes gamikos	ARV ² 1126
7.	Brussels, Musées Royaux 1020	white-ground lekythos	
8.	Louvre CA 482 [Rome, Villa Giulia	white-ground kylix red-figured kylix]	ARV ² 774,1669
9.	Berlin F 2286	red-figured kylix	ARV ² 365
10.	Rhodes 12887 [Cureglia, private	red-figured pelike white-ground lekythos]	ARV ² 1116
11.	Boston 98.887	white-ground pyxis	ARV ² 774, Para 416
12.	British Museum E271	red-figured amphora	ARV ² 1039
13.	Rome, Vatican 559	white-ground calyx krater	ARV ² 1017, 1678
14.	Munich 2361	red-figured pelike	ARV ² 1145
15.	Oxford Ashmolean 1879.147 [Urbana, Illinois 70-8-5	black-figured oinochoe red-figured amphora]	ABV 525
	[Berlin 2161	red-figured amphora	ARV ² 221.7]

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Fig. 1. Sappho playing barbitos. (Photo: Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw)



Fig. 2. Sappho dancing and playing barbitos. (Photo: Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal)



Fig. 3. Sappho and Alcaeus with barbitos. (Photo: Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, Munich)



Fig. 4. Sappho and three women. (Photo: Schwabe and Co., Bâle)



Fig. 5. Women musicians at home. (Photo: Martin v. Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg)



Fig. 6. Bride-to-be playing harp. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



Fig. 7. Women playing aulos and lyre (in side view). (Photo: Musées Royaux, Brussels)

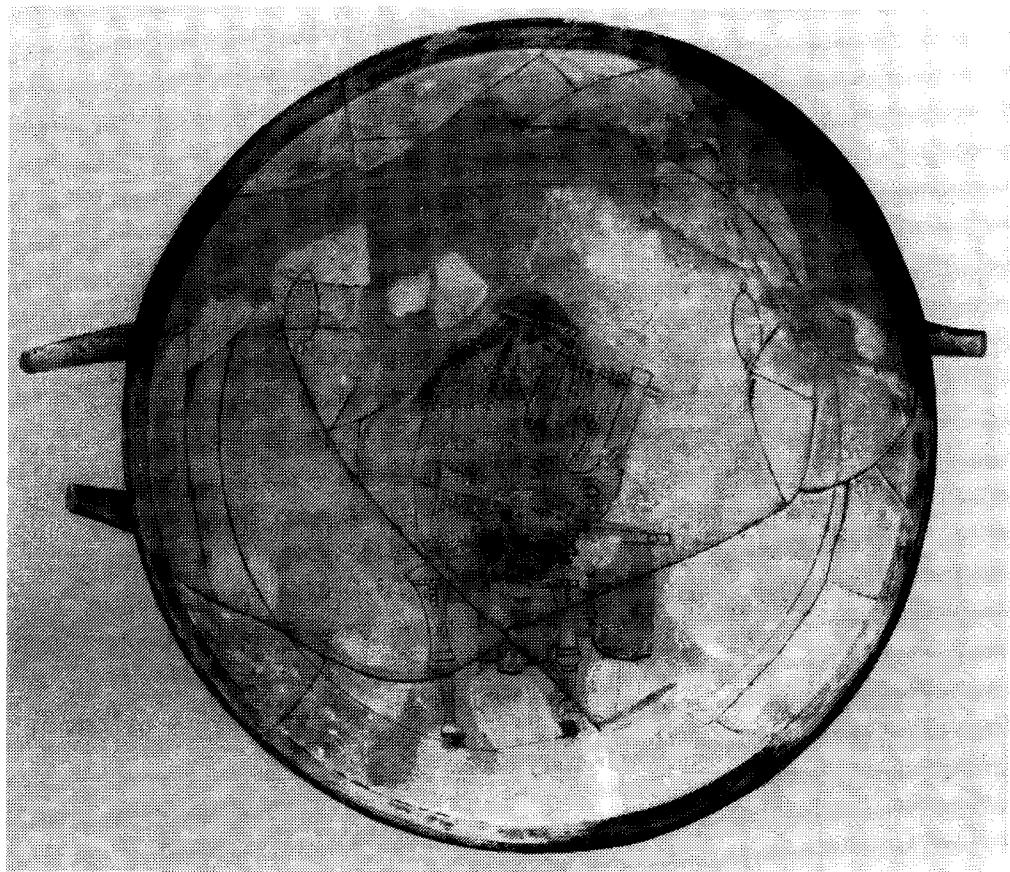


Fig. 8. Woman playing phorminx in women's quarters. (Photo: Musée du Louvre, Paris)



Fig. 9. Hetaira playing krotala. (Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)



Fig. 10. Hetaira playing lyre, man with purse. (Photo: Rhodes Museum)



Fig. 11. Three Muses. (Photo: H.L. Pierce Fund. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Fig. 12. Muses playing harp and aulos, Musaios with lyre. (Photo: British Museum, London)



Fig. 13. Muse playing barbitos. (Photo: Vatican Museums)



Fig. 14. Maenad playing tympanon in Dionysiac scene. (Photo: Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, Munich)



Fig. 15. Maenad playing barbitos. (Photo: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)