THE REPRESENTATION OF MUSICIANS ON GREEK GEOMETRIC POTTERY FROM ATTICA: MUSICIANS AS DECORATIVE SYMBOLS

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The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the intent in representations of musicians painted on Greek pottery during the Middle and Late Geometric periods in Attica. This evaluation is preliminary in that it does not pretend to find ultimate answers, but it does address the fundamental questions about the conceptual methodology of the ancient artist: How did painters of the period perceive musicians? Under what conceptual category did they find them worthy of pictorial representation? Under which representational formats could they understand and then apply them? What degree of accuracy did the painter intend, and was the painter even capable of accurately representing a musician at his practice? Can we establish the vase painter's purpose and method in representing the musician?

During the Middle (*c*.800–750 BC) and Late (*c*.750–700 BC) Geometric periods in Attica, vase painters began to incorporate human, animal, and man-made figured objects into the ubiquitous geometric decoration that covered their vases.[1] Most common, of course, were representations of waterfowl, grazing deer, horses, warriors, ships, and the like. Positioned in a curvilinear, serial arrangement, they made up most of the Geometric vase painter's representational repertoire. Among such series of representations, there appear a number of musical contexts, primarily with dancers and lyre players. It is possible that the former belonged to the celebration of rituals, perhaps the same for which the vessel was originally created. In any event, ancient Greek choral dancers regularly formed a line, and painted geometric dancers are commonly observed to be in linear formations, formations which were easily transferred to the curvilinear field of a painted pot.

As for the latter, however, there is no tradition or general assumption that lyre players stood or sat in a line. While the appearance of lyre players on vases of the period certainly verifies their existence during the pre- and early literate era, a generation or so before Hesiod and Homer,[2] it may also testify as well to their importance and to the regularization of lyric music.[3] After all, with the exception of warriors and sailors, no other human profession is recognized regularly on Geometric vases. But their appearance in serial representations is curious and brings up another group of problems similar to those produced by painted pottery of even the classical period, namely, the function and formation of the musical ensemble. That is to say, if more than one musician is depicted in a panel, can or does that mean that those depictions represent actual musicians playing music together? In the classical period, vases depict, for example, a lyre player sitting or standing next to an aulete or an barbitos player. They may well be playing the same music at the same time and constitute an ensemble. With serial representations of lyre-players in the Geometric Period, however, the possibility exists that the serialization

1. For a general introduction to vase painting of the period, see Snodgrass 1980, 65–76 and Hurwit 1985, 53–70.

2. On the relative chronology, see Snodgrass 1980, 72–8 and Hurwit 1985, 117–24.

3. From the period just after 700 a number of individual lyric poets begin to appear, e.gg., Terpander, Archilochus, Arion, and Tyrtaeus.

of the musician figures exists merely as a decorative serialization and not as a representation of actual musical practice.

We begin our examination with Athens NM #15439 (fig. 1), a plastic vase in the shape of a duck. We begin here since it is necessary in light of our stated concerns to consider first the ability of the eighth-century Greek potters and painters to create with their art the representation they had intended. The chest, back, tail, neck, and belly of the fowl are indeed rendered here quite realistically and with proper proportions. The head has been carefully surrendered to the wide spout. Equally well formed, the stocky legs and webbed feet are rearranged only so that their aligned position allows the duck to stand without additional or external support. The potter who created this vase—and others like him during the same period—were clearly capable of perceiving and reproducing lifelike, natural shapes in plastic form.

The charm of even this plastic vase and the skill of the potter in creating a standing ceramic vessel in the shape of a duck, only slightly modified, remind us that the goal of the Middle and Late Geometric potter was not really to reproduce natural objects literally. In fact, the Geometric potter only rarely rendered a plastic vase as an exercise in natural representation. Much more frequently the goal was to subject that limited repertoire of natural forms to linear design. The typical Geometric potter allowed himself great latitude within a fairly wide range of patterns and designs in order either to elaborate a natural form or to reduce it to linear simplicity.

A fine example of the ability to elaborate a form can be seen in Athens NM #15314 (fig. 2), a pitcher finely formed but with its bulged base elaborately repeated four additional times, more than doubling the original height of the pitcher itself. The additional base segments are not merely added one after another without care for their arrangement or size. The middle base, the third from the bottom and the third from the top, has the smallest diameter, which gives the entire structure a cleverly sculpted, concave vertical appearance, and the black horizontal bands above each bulge reemphasize the horizontal aspects of the repetitive bases.

This pitcher illustrates how Geometric artists could take a natural or formal shape and elaborate it through repetition, but Athens NM #16351 demonstrates how an artist of the Geometric Period could subject a natural object to linear variation, even in a plastic molding. In rendering this bronze horse, the artist has left the lower legs, shoulders and thighs relatively intact but drawn the belly which connects them into a thin tube. The neck is given a gentle curve to complete the line begun at the bottom of the shoulder, and the tail has been given a counterbalancing extension all the way to the ground. In essentially eliminating the back, elongating the tail, and unifying the shoulder and neck, the artist clearly hoped to emphasize the vertical lines of the animal.

This same kind of vertical emphasis in the rendering of a horse is more commonly found in pottery painting although, as we have just seen, it is not at all unique to pottery painting. The Hirschfield Painter's name vase, Athens NM #990 (fig. 3), though Late Geometric Ib, demonstrates the typical display of horizontally repetitive horses each with a clearly vertical linear emphasis. The human figures in the band above have a similar linear emphasis highlighted by the elongated legs and the reduction of the torso to a triangle.

Athens NM #894 (fig. 4) provides one last example of the tendency towards linear emphasis. In the detail illustrated here, each of the four horses' four legs, sixteen in all, is carefully painted in two parallel sequences of eight legs each. The torsoes of the horses, on the other hand, are thin and unemphasized, totally overshadowed by the decorative lozenge design placed between the groups of legs.

Common in Geometric vase painting is the assemblage of humans and animals. Humans and horses, for instance, appear frequently in groupings of funerary and military processions, with and without carts and chariots. Another common and profound grouping of human and animal is the 'Master/Mistress of the Animals'. Typically, as on Athens NM #220 (fig. 5), a seventh-century Boiotian amphora, a human is placed central to two symmetrically surrounding animals. More often than not, the human figure holds two animals in a posture of domination, but Boiotian and more eastern examples often display a winged humanoid or divinity.

This pattern is not at all an invention of the Geometric Period, of course, for it can easily be traced back to a number of Bronze Age exemplars.[4] Mycenaean seals reveal the use of combinations of animals and columns (as in the sculpted triangular stone set atop the 'Lion Gate' at Mycenae), human and columns, and human and lions. Such symmetrical arrangements have their origins centuries before the Geometric Period,[5] but the same type of arrangement is still used in a number of Geometric vase paintings.[6]

This particular arrangement can be found in numerous Geometric vases where the formula has been reduced to two horses symmetrically framing a man. Painted on the central panel decoration of Athens NM #190 (fig. 6), a vessel with a spout and ceramic lid, for example, is a fine example of a Geometric 'Master of the Animals' arrangement. The artist has carefully positioned this painting centrally, and he has filled the panel with several waterfowl and common geometric patterns. Again the emphasized axis is vertical, and again the horse's shoulder and neck are perceived as one structural unit.

A second example, Athens NM #877 (fig. 7, left), also depicts a thin and elongated man bounded symmetrically by two tubular-bellied horses. Much of the central panel's space is filled with patterns regularly found in the Geometric artist's pattern vocabulary. The space between each horse's legs, however, is filled with large fish, not as common a part of the Geometric artist's regular pattern vocabulary as it is germane to the traditional depiction of the Master/Mistress of the Animals.

Interestingly, in the Athens National Museum, just next to this vase is another vase with a telling variation of the symmetrical horse-man-horse pattern. Here, in Athens NM #231 (fig. 7, right), the artist has substituted one common geometric figure for another, in this instance a meander pattern for the central human figure. The obverse of this particular vase has a different variation of the symmetrical pattern. Here, although there is still the traditional central figure and the symmetrical fish between the legs of each horse, there is a waterfowl standing where the human or meander pattern had stood before, and the forelegs of the horses are crossed to fill the central space (fig. 8).

Lastly, a Geometric bowl, Athens NM 13038 (fig. 9), contains two riderless horses symmetrically enclosing a human figure, but it also contains two horses with riders, an isolated standing human, and a bull. Clearly the human standing between two symmetrically positioned horses is not the Master of the Animals. The symmetrical pattern of horse-human-horse is something learned from tradition but not honored as a ritualistic icon except as a pattern of composition. All the animals in this bowl are facing in the same, clockwise direction except the horse which is intentionally turned counterclockwise to create the symmetrical pattern.

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4. For instance, Athens NM ##2875, 2852, and 2977.

5. On symmetry in neolithic ceramics, for instance, see Washburn 1983, 138–64.

6. See Hurwitt 1985, 71–124, Snodgrass 1980, 49–84, for survivals of Bronze Age in Geometric Period.

In sum, an artist of the Geometric Period had at his disposal a number of traditional patterns, most of them decorative and purely geometric. Over the years a number of once natural figures—horses, humans, waterfowl, fish—had also developed into designs; at least, that is how they are to be interpreted in most cases. The Geometric artistic repertoire included a number of figures which can be interpreted either as simply the reproduction and repetition of certain figures available from that repertoire or as representations of actual, even specific rituals, ceremonies, or gatherings. Under the former interpretation, vase paintings are worth not nearly so much for the study of the history of music, except to say that musicians were, as in a large formal gathering today, ignored and thought of as part of the scenery rather than as fascinations in themselves. Under the latter interpretation, however, we could employ vase paintings quite successfully to reach a better understanding of musical performance practices in pre-classical Greece.

We are now ready to turn to several Geometric vases which illustrate practicing dancers and musicians. Barely visible on a large Geometric pitcher, Athens NM #16022 (fig. 10), is a painting portraying a chorus of eighteen dancers arranged in a curvilinear band around the neck. In general, modern scholarship relies on secondary sources to be satisfied that the standard late sixth- and early fifth-century chorus contained some twelve members and then, perhaps, grew in size. Advocates of a twelve-member tragic chorus will be disappointed to find not only that the total number of dancers in this painting is eighteen, but that the chorus is divided into two opposite facing groups not of twelve and six dancers but of eleven and seven. On the other hand, our literary sources (Pollux 4.110 in Bekker 1846) suggest that early choruses consisted of fifty members, in which case this particular painting might be displaying a non-specific number of them, or, at best, as large a number of dancers as would fit on the neck of the vase. To what extent this artist is depicting accurately what he presumably saw at the dance, is unknown.

Of course, we need to keep open the possibility that the artist was not depicting a particular dance or festival, in which case there would have been nothing to portray 'accurately'. Although the artist has rendered the dancers in two groups facing in the opposite direction, he has certainly rendered all eighteen dancers in the same posture. They stand with both of their hands resting upon their heads, and one leg is extended slightly in front of the other. They are dressed in long garments, neither very tight nor excessively loose fitting, which fall to their ankles. They stand at intervals of a half meter or so. They neither hold hands in a line, nor do they dance to any music which is visibly produced in this drawing. It is possible that this is what the artist in fact intended to portray, but is it not also possible, especially in light of what we have just observed about the repetitive and organizational decorative techniques of the Geometric artist, that this vase illustrates merely a series of dancers in the same way that it contains a series of meander, checker, and other geometric patterns in its other registers? Of course, some primacy and *ergo* special treatment might be associated with the neck location of the band on which the dancing figures appear, but then again, one could argue, perhaps the artist thought this was his best 'design' and therefore displayed it quite prominently on the neck of the pitcher as a design, not a panel illustrating an actual scene.

In sum, what this vase tells us is that to the mind's eye of the Geometric artist there was at least a conception or memory of at least one dancer holding hands above the head and wearing the sort of garment depicted here. But then again, the triangular shape of the torso and/or the bent arms, which together form a diamond pattern, might belong to the geometrically decorative abilities of the artist as much as they do to actual dance practice he personally observed. On the other hand, perhaps there was an actual dance

for which a chorus of eighteen dressed as depicted here, and which was performed with a gesture and posture similar to that depicted serially here as well. In brief, the credibility of the Geometric artist as an accurate portrayer of actual people and events is almost always in question, and the music historian is not at liberty to use the visual information possibly given in such a vase without ample caveats, disclaimers, and parallels.

Similar is a Geometric bowl, Athens NM #874 (fig. 11), which is decorated with twenty dancers. Again, it is a number which does not help us understand our literary sources. The line of participants includes thirteen women and seven men, some of whom are armed, some unarmed. Men and women are all arranged serially in a circle. Each dancer faces frontally. The women wear dresses decorated with hatch marks, the men are fully painted in black silhouette. They stand in the following arrangement: five men, eight women, one man, two women, one man, three women. Of the men, the two single men quite clearly bear arms, and two of the group of five bear arms as well. The three other men apparently do not. Four of the five grouped men hold hands with each other, as do the first four of the eight women and the groups of two and three women. The last of the three women holds the hand of the first of the five warriors.

In juxtaposition to the rest of the regularized, consistent geometrical designs on the vase, the human figures are irregularly arranged. It would seem, then, that the artist intended to paint actual characters or an actual ritual, but unfortunately his geometric style allowed him to depict only minor variations or movement. He clearly portrays hand holding, variegated group arrangements, differentiation of gender, and differentiation of dress, but we learn nothing else here about the type of dance, its movement or purpose, let alone anything about the music to which they danced, if indeed this vase illustrates a dance in the first place. It could after all be simply a depiction of men and women dressed for a procession and holding hands during that procession.[7]

Similarly, a damaged pot, Athens NM #234 (fig. 12), contains a few men serially depicted at reasonably regular intervals, and at least two of them have a lyre between them. The condition of the vase does not allow the viewer to determine positively if this pattern was repeated and/or varied serially around the pot, but the position of this one clearly depicted and well preserved musical instrument is certainly not in playing position. No one holds it in his hands, since the two men surrounding it hold each other's hand. This fragment then illustrates either a lyre used merely as a decorative object to punctuate a series of male human figures, or it illustrates a lyre played by a musician but held in such an inaccurate position that it again is of no use in discovering anything important about performance practices from the Geometric musician.

The illustration on another Geometric bowl, Athens NM #14477 (fig. 13), contains a scene which clearly represents a musical event. A musician on the right plays a five-string instrument to the sounds of which, presumably, the four depicted dancers leap and dance in somewhat individual patterns. That the musician's right hand is at his right hip indicates either that the artist has not portrayed him correctly (since the right hand should be strumming or plucking the strings) or that the musician has completed playing for the moment and is resting. The five strings on the instrument are, of course, suspect.[8]

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7. In either case, of course, music would have been played.

8. Terpander is credited with expanding the number of strings on the lyre from four to seven perhaps a generation or so after this vase was painted. A pentatonic five-stringed lyre is not out of the question musicologically, however. Aristides Quintilianus 1.21 includes scales traditionally dated to at least the fourth century BC and no doubt earlier, and the scale of the 'Intense Lydian' (*Syntonolydisti*) contains only five pitches. Other such scales, e.gg. the Lydian and Phrygian, have more than seven pitches, so the correlation between these early scales and lyre performance is still problematic.

Of interest, if the painting accurately represents actual performance practice, would be the standing position of the *lyristes*. Some Geometric *lyristai* are portrayed in a seated position.

Interestingly, it is largely because these dancers and the instrumentalist are depicted in individualized positions and postures that I tend to think they portray actual musical practice to the extent allowed for in the previous paragraph. In the previous painting with the eighteen humans strung decoratively in a lengthy choral chain (Athens NM #16022; fig. 10), it was the regularity and the pattern of the human choral chain that made one suspect that the artist cared only to decorate his pitcher with dancing human figures and that any performance information derived from such a painting would be subject to dismissal. In this painting, though, it is the randomness, the individuality, the non-geometric, non-symmetrical decorative nature of the painting that allows us to treat the depiction as based on actual performance.

This methodology, when stated as such, obviously must preclude any painting that looks too decorative and regularized, but there must have been instances in which the chorus arrangement and postures, as well as the arrangement and perhaps the postures of the musicians, actually looked decorative and regularized, particularly to the Geometric artist. Care must be used in evaluating all these paintings, therefore—with respect both to the decorative pattern style and those that are individualized.

A tempting example which seems to fall between these two poles of perception is Athens NM #18542 (fig. 14). Painted on this vase there are two seated lyre players and two other seated men apparently playing gourds or some sistrum-like instruments. The lyres are drawn quite inaccurately in not having a sound-box of any sort, but the lyre players are nonetheless depicted correctly in their seated posture. Their left and right arms are in roughly the correct position for playing their instruments. What is particularly intriguing in this juxtapositioning of plausible accuracy and impossible inaccuracy is the symmetry of the painting. The two lyre players sit back to back while the two gourd players sit opposite at the far borders of the panel. The left side is merely a mirror version of the right, or vice versa. Does this painting have implications for our knowledge about performance practice and musical ensembles in the Geometric Period?

One of the more enduring questions plaguing the subdiscipline of ancient Greek music is the question of harmony in musical ensembles. Did ancient Greek musicians regularly play in ensembles, and if they did, did they all play the same melody simultaneously? It used to be quite fashionable for scholars to make dogmatic pronouncements to the negative side of the question. They concluded from the thousands of archaic and classical representations of single, solo musicians, as well as from the apparently solely monophonic extant fragments of ancient Greek (Hellenistic and Roman) music and the absence of discussions of harmony or polyphony in the ancient Greek musicological treatises, that all ancient Greek music was monophonic (e.g. Winnington-Ingram 1970, 707, 5.3). Of course, most of it no doubt was monophonic. Our abundant prose literary sources describe—and the remaining poetic lyrics are certainly best understood in—musical settings consisting of solo performances of poetic lyrics sung to the accompaniment of solo aulos or lyre/cithara music.

The picture is not so clear that ancient Greek music can be described as so exclusively monophonic, however. There are a number of examples of musical ensembles painted in the classical period (cf. Maas and Snyder 1989, esp. 167–74); Pindar refers to auloi and lyres or citharas played simultaneously,[9] and the music theorists talk quite extensively about harmonic intervals. The entire question must be left to another discussion, but this

9. E.g. Pindar, *Isthm.* 5.27–9.

Geometric painting illustrates either two lyre players playing to the accompaniment of two rhythm players, or it illustrates simply one lyre player and one gourd player mirror imaged for the sake of decorative symmetry, always a potential desideratum in Geometric painting.

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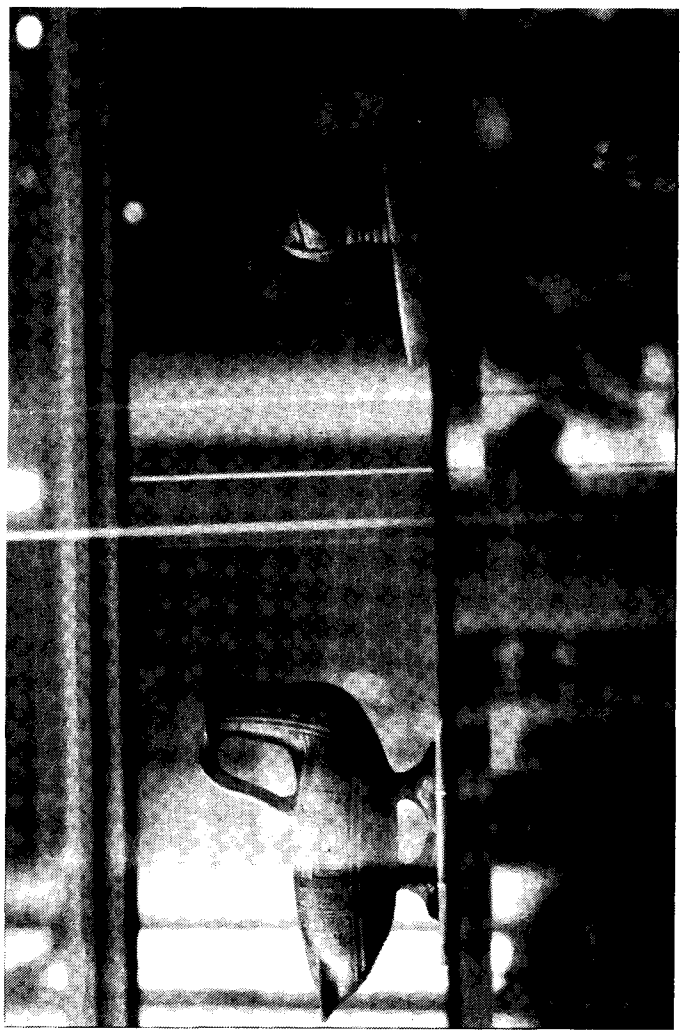

Fig. 1. Athens NM #15439*
[all photographs are the author's own]*

Fig. 2. Athens NM #15314

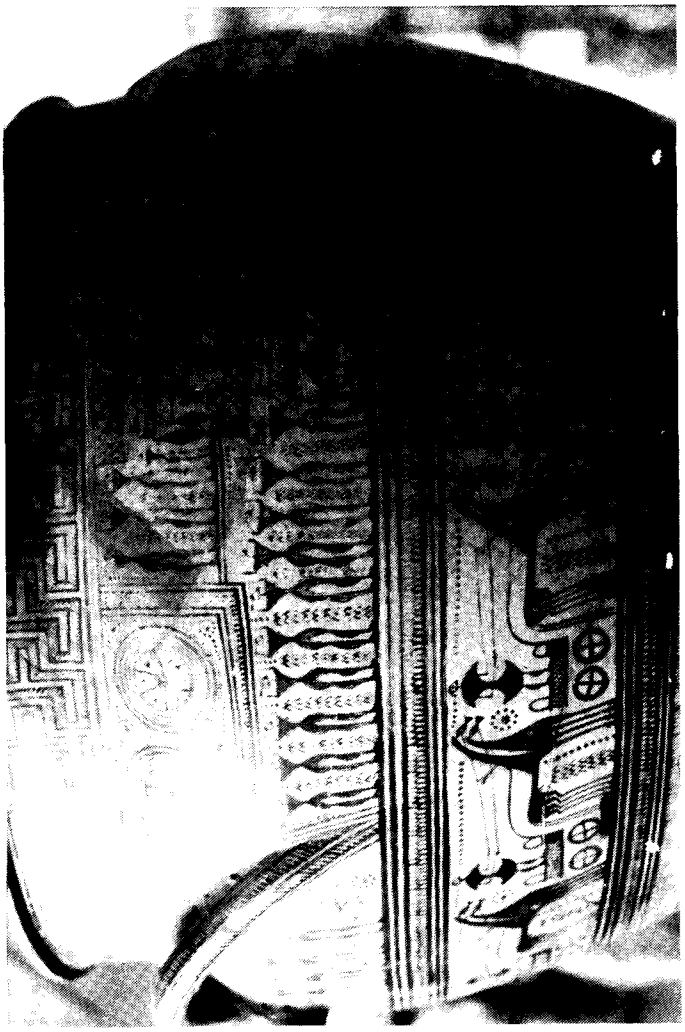

Fig. 3. Athens NM #990

Fig. 4. Athens NM #894

Fig. 5. Athens NM #220

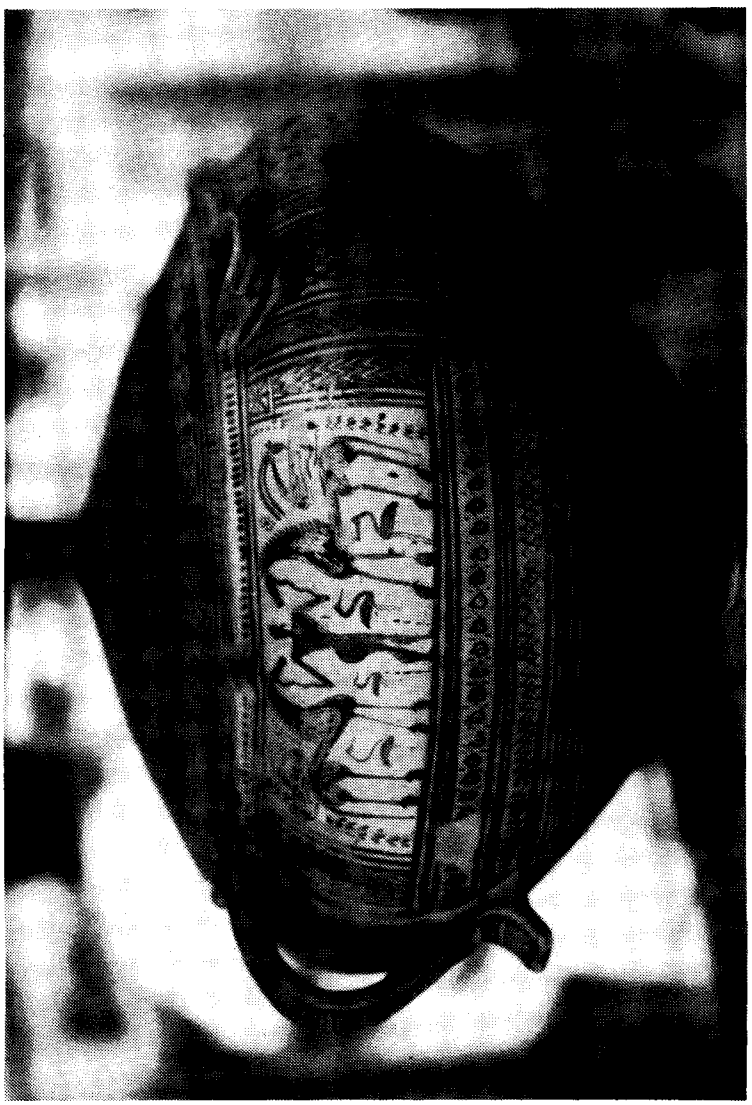

Fig. 6. Athens NM #190

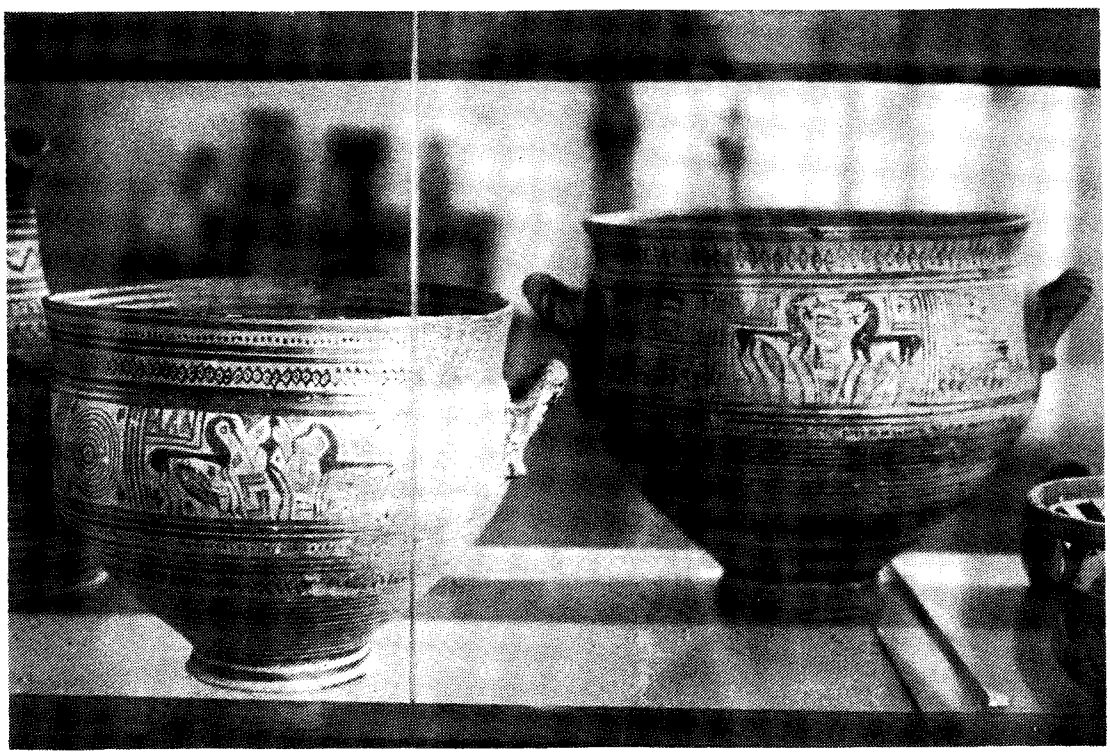

Fig. 7. (left) Athens NM #877; (right) Athens NM #231

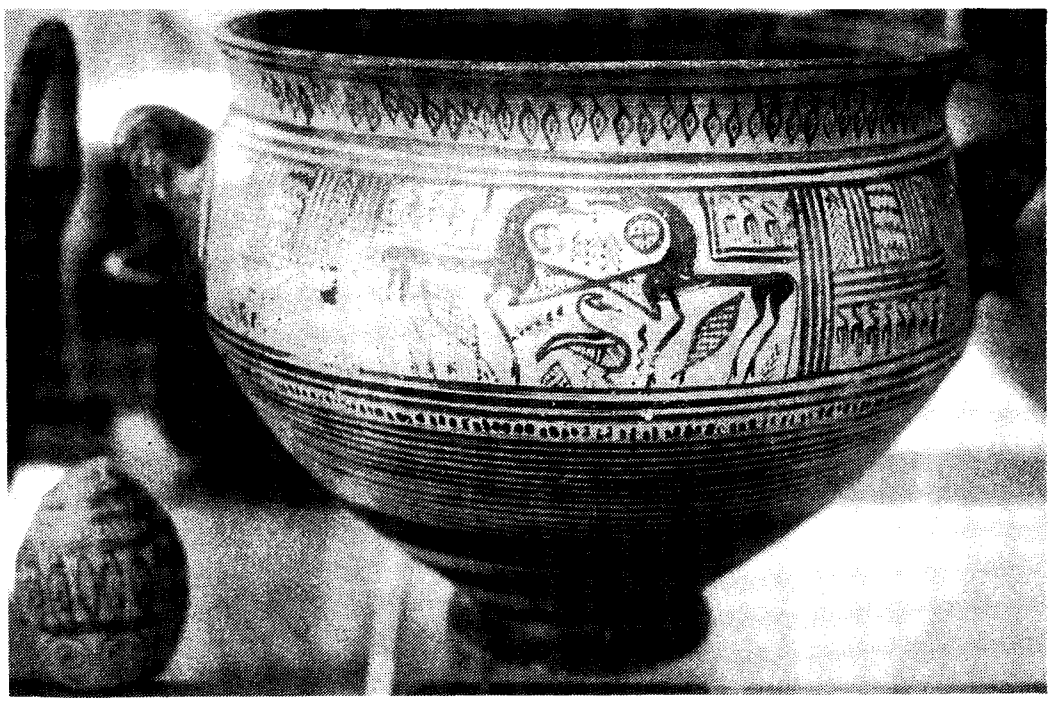

Fig. 8. Athens NM #231

Fig. 9. Athens NM #13038

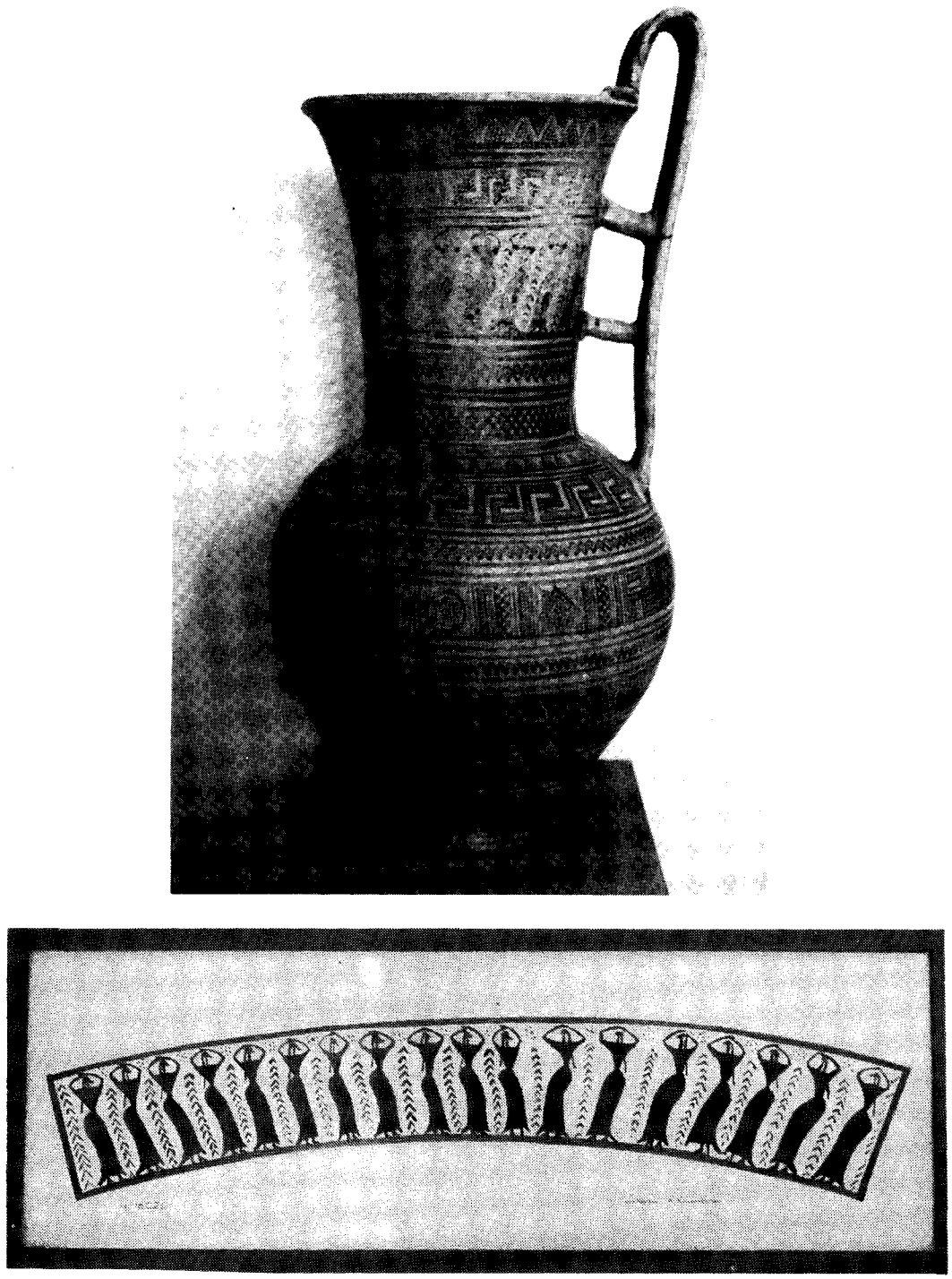

Fig. 10. Athens NM #16022

Fig. 11. Athens NM #874

Fig. 12. Athens NM #234

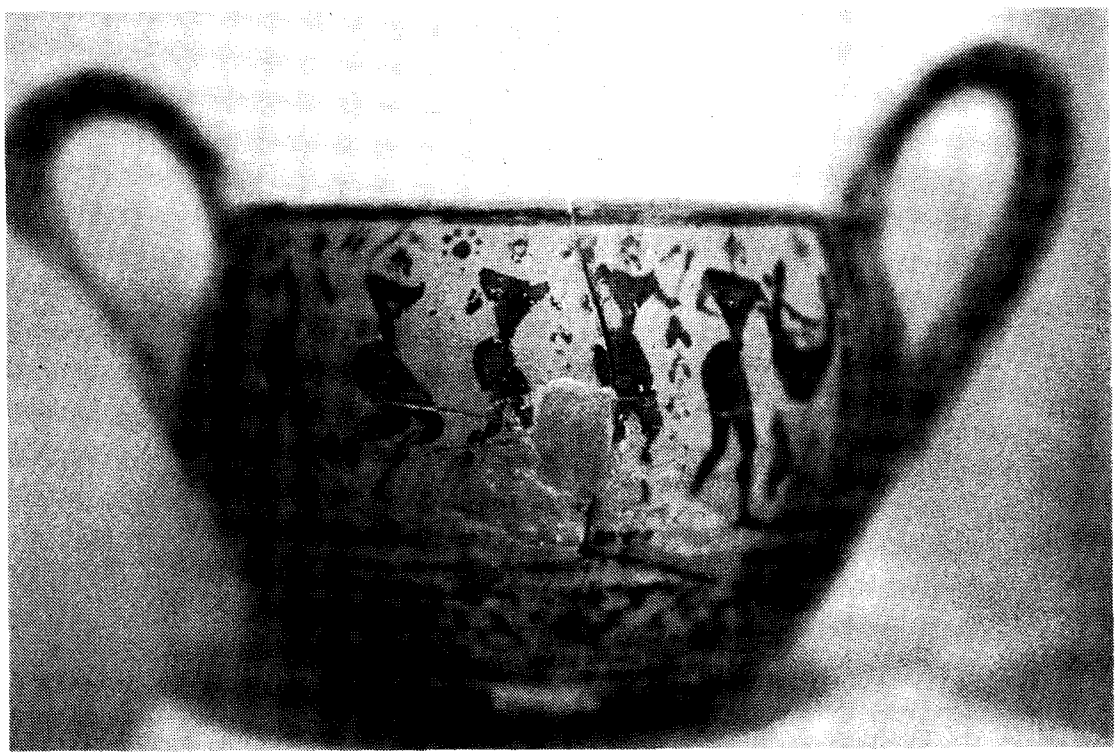

Fig. 13. Athens NM #14477

Fig. 14. Athens NM #18542