

ART ANCIENT



AN ATTIC RED-FIGURED KYLIX FRAGMENT WITH AN ATHLETE

Attributed to the Pistoxenos Painter, Circa 470 B.C.
Width 8.26 cm

PROVENANCE

Early 20th century collection, based on collection sticker on reverse reading, 'From Greek Vase c. 480 B.C. Vulci (tomb)'

Subsequently in the collection of Myra Karp (b. 1939), Seattle, Washington, acquired 1980s.

An exquisite example of the artistic heights achieved by the most talented Greek painters of the Classical Period. A precious fragment from the centre of a wine cup, detailing a finely painted nude athlete, in the process of tying a *kynodesmē* around his penis before a competition. The clearly visible brushstrokes and raised details, all delicately and confidently applied, reveal the hand of the painter, Pistoxenos.

A young male athlete, shown in profile, with his companion's raised arm preserved to his right. The athlete's muscular body is rendered in thin, delicate lines of black-slip, his right arm is held across his body, and terminates in a slender hand, the thumb and forefinger of which pluck at a ribbon, detailed in red. The curls of the hair, also encircled by a thin band of red, are detailed in small dabs of paint.





Red-Figure Pottery and Artistic Innovation

A revolutionary new artistic technique, red-figure painting emerged in Athens around 520 B.C., and within just a few decades had come to completely replace the black-figure method. The older technique, where the composition was rendered in black slip and the details incised, resulted in flat, silhouette style figures with little or clumsy detailing. By contrast, the red-figure technique - painting in the negative space with black slip, and leaving major areas in the natural red-orange colour of the clay before adding details in paint on top - allowed artists greater detail, realism, and flexibility to depict dynamic scenes.

By the turn of the fifth century B.C., the new artistic possibilities afforded by the red-figure technique were being used to paint figures in three-quarter view rather than profile, creating dynamic and naturalistic scenes. Artists began experimenting with foreshortening, shading and various poses previously unattainable. Greek mythology, scenes of day-to-day life, and athletic events were now delicately rendered, with expressive faces and body language.

The present fragment was from a wide-bowled drinking cup known as a *kylix* - one of the most popular forms of pottery from the Mycenaean times (1600-1100 B.C.) through to the classical period (c.510-323 B.C.). Kylix vases usually had a painted frieze around the outside of the bowl, as well as another scene on the tondo of the inside (see Fig. 1). The present fragment would have been from the inside tondo, which would have been gradually revealed as the user drank from it. Such pottery was so popular among contemporaries that it was exported all throughout Greece, even to Magna Graecia and Etruria, and dominated the ancient market for ceramics.

The present fragment would have been from the inside tondo, which would have been gradually revealed as the user drank from it.

1 Terracotta kylix, attributed to the Amasis painter, c.540 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1989.281.62.



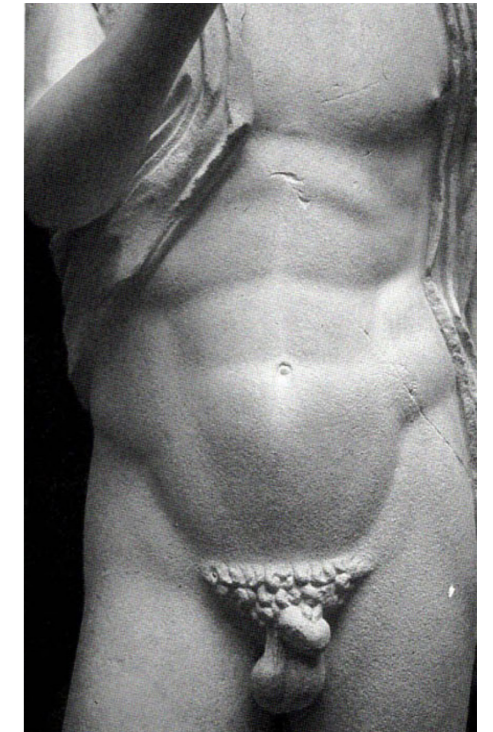
This particular fragment is attributed to the Pistoxenos painter, an important Greek vase painter of the classical period, active between c.480-460 B.C. British archaeologist John Beazley (1885-1970) named him from a *skyphos* now in the Staatliches Museum in Scherwin, which displays his signature. By tracing idiosyncrasies in style, it appears he probably began his apprenticeship under the Antiphon Painter in the workshop of Euphronios, who was active in Athens in the late 6th, early 5th centuries B.C. While Pistoxenos worked mainly in red-figure, he also skilfully executed the white-ground technique, in which the first step is the application of a white slip to the vase. His delicate brush marks can be seen in the background on the present fragment where he traced the outline of the athlete, as well as in the raised lines delineating carefully the body and chest. A kylix with similar tondo scene to the present piece, also by the Pistoxenos Painter, is preserved today in the Antikensammlung, Berlin (see Fig. 2).

2 Attic Red-Figured Kylix, 5th century B.C. Attributed to the Pistoxenos Painter. 32.5 cm. Found in Vulci, Italy. Antikensammlung, Berlin, no. 1960.2.



3 (left) Attic red-figure Panathenaic Amphora showing an athlete wearing a *kynodesmē*. c.480 B.C. Attributed to the Tripolemos Painter. From Vulci, Italy. Munich, 2314.

4 (right) Detail of the Borghese Anacreon, showing a *kynodesmē*. 1.90m. Glyptotek, Carlsberg, I.N.491.



Athletes, Heroes, Warriors

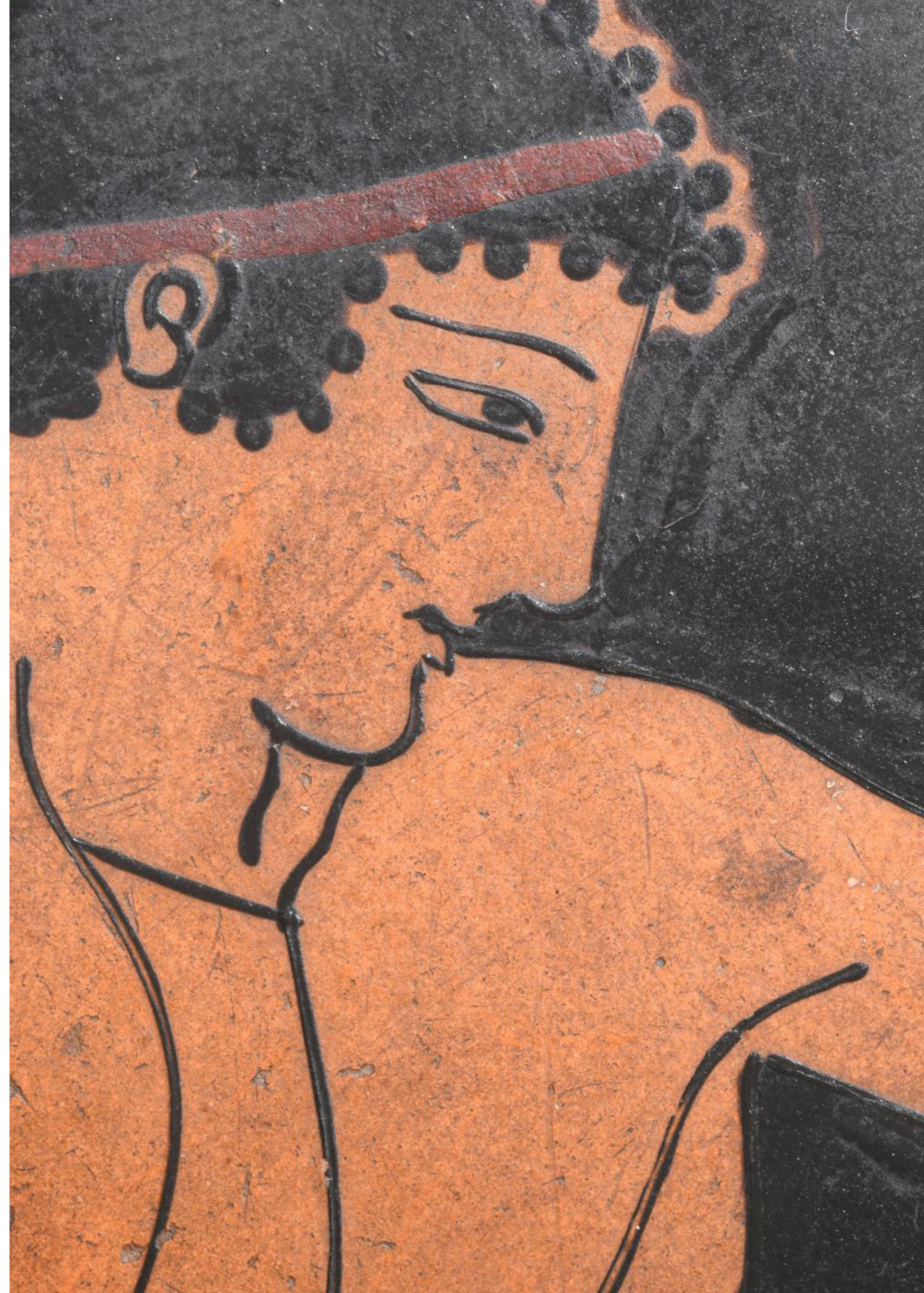
The youth depicted here is likely in the process of tying up his genitalia with a *kynodesmē* before taking part in an athletic competition. Translated literally as a 'dog tie', athletes would wear a cord or string around their genitals to prevent indecent exposure and to restrict movement during a sporting event. Worn for practical as well as aesthetic purposes, the use of a *kynodesmē* also had strong connotations for freed Greek citizens participating in the games. Exposure of the penis head was regarded by the Greeks as dishonourable and shameful, and something only associated with slaves and barbarians. A *kynodesmē*, therefore, became tied to the ideology of *kalokagathia*, in which aesthetic appearance was inherently an expression of moral worth. The use of the technique is seen in pottery from as early as the fifth century, and was also adopted by Etruscans and Romans.

The avoidance of shame was particularly crucial as ancient Greek athletes were central figures in society. Considered role models and heroes, they were revered for their physical prowess, beauty and discipline. Ultimately, they embodied *arete*, the Greek concept of excellence and virtue, in both the mind and body. Taking part in renowned competitions, such as the Olympic and Pythian Games, they brought prestige to their city-state and honoured the Gods through their victories. Their successes were often seen as reflections of their polis, and were honoured in grand ceremonies and immortalised in sculpture and vase painting.

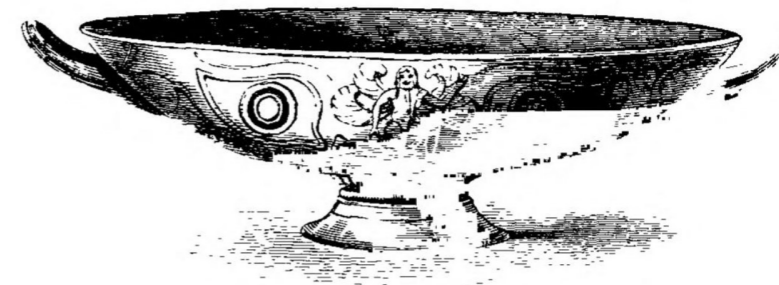


It is perhaps no surprise therefore that athletic competitions were closely tied to military training. Many sports, such as running, javelin throwing and wrestling, were also seen as essential preparation for warfare. Many famous warriors or military leaders were also athletes. Indeed, the renowned mythological figure of Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles was not only one of the greatest warriors of the Trojan War, but he also organised and competed in athletic competitions. And such literature certainly echoed real life. Notably, in 511 B.C., the wrestler and six-time Olympic champion, Milon of Kroton, originally from the Greek colony of Magna Graecia in Southern Italy, led the army of his home town into battle against the neighbouring Sybarites. According to first-century B.C. historian, Diodorus Siculus, Milo wore his 'Olympic wreaths' to battle, as well as 'a lion's skin and club', to emulate Hercules. His leadership gained 'an absolute victory, and he was thereupon was much admired by his countrymen.'

5 Terracotta Skyphos showing two wrestlers at the Pankration, c.500 B.C. Attributed to the Theseus Painter. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 06.1021.49.



From Greek Vase
c. 480 B.C.
Vulci (tomb)



KYLIX, OR DRINKING-BOWL, FROM VULCI.

The Vulci Tombs

The Vulci tombs, located in the ancient Etruscan city of Vulci in central Italy, are among some of the most richly furnished burial sites of the Etruscan civilization. Dating from the 8th to the 3rd centuries B.C., they reveal much about the wealth, art, and funerary customs of the Etruscans. On their discovery in the 19th century British archaeologist George Dennis (1814-1898) wrote in his *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, 'Vulci is a city whose very name... was scarcely remembered, but which now, for the enormous treasures of antiquity it has yielded, is exalted above every other city of the ancient world.' At the time of its discovery, more pottery had been found in the Vulci tombs than any other archaeological site. Their fame throughout Europe quickly made them a popular destination for those participating in the Grand Tour, and it is perhaps during such a tour when the present fragment was acquired.

6 Drawing of a kylix found at Vulci, published in George Dennis' *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, 1883, p.462.