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Stylization of the body and embodied values in Classical Antiquity

The paper investigates the ways in which ancient Greek political philosophy from the IVth century BCE analyzed the role and function of bodily figures and, more generally, the mimetic technai. *The cross-media dimension of the codified language of bodily* schemata – *as well as the latter's alleged capacity to imitate invisible entities – emerge as the most relevant traits from a political perspective.*

1. Reflections on the techniques of the body, the *technai* in general and the mimetic arts in particular, seem to have been particularly urgent in Athens between the end of the Vth and during the IVth centuries BCE. It is worth analyzing the ways in which the problem of the status and power of the "bodily figures" was inflected against this backdrop. A couple of general contextual premises, first:

1) In classical times, contrary to today, *technai* such as poetry, theatre, music, myth telling, gymnastics, dance, painting, sculpture, drawing, knitting, as well as public etiquette, were all considered mimetic arts. Each one of them was thought to be able to produce a *mimesis* of not only visible and concrete objects but also of abstract entities and values, like courage, cowardice, temperance, etc. Precisely this capacity granted a great political relevance to the mimetic arts, putting them at the very center of political philosophical reflection, particularly during the IVth century BCE.

2) The main tool employed both to describe the properties of visible and invisible entities and to realize imitations was the *schema*, a term built on the root "segh*" (the same of the verb *echein* "to have", which also has the intransitive meaning of "to be in a certain state, condition, position"). Words built on the same root, such as for example *schesis* and *hexis*, share with *schema* their oppositional relationship to movement[1]. The term *schema* literally means figure. To be more precise, it indicates a figure seen in outline, as a pattern. The plural form *schemata* may also mean gesture or attitude. Even in these latter instances, though, the gestures described or mentioned are treated synthetically, i.e. they are considered in terms of an outline[2].

Before continuing with the rest of this analysis, two important traits of the *schema* should also be mentioned in our context: a) the *schema* is intrinsically

static, even when used within a dynamic *techne* (such as dance, recitation, public etiquette, etc.) and b) it cuts across many different *media* like dance, music, sculpture, painting, gymnastics, public etiquette, etc.

To illustrate the first trait, one only need recall a passage by Plutarch[3], which mentions a theory of dance that can be traced back to, at least, the beginning of the Vth century BCE, in terms of explicit literary enunciation.

Dance consists of movements and positions as melody consists of notes and intervals. In the case of dance, the rests are the limits of the movements. Now, the movements are called "phrases", while "*schemata*" is the name of the positions and attitudes to which the movements lead and in which they end, as when dancers compose their bodies in the *schema* of Apollo or Pan or a Bacchant, and then retain that aspect as if they were figures in a painting.

Apart from the detailed parallel between music and dance, which cannot be discussed here, Plutarch's closing remark is particularly relevant in our context: in a dance, the *schema* would consist in a phase of rest, in which a dancer, having stopped moving, keeps still in a clearly identified position *like a figure in a painting* (*graphikôs*). In the context of the *technai* implying and/or representing movement, the *schema* is thus intrinsically static. Yet, at the same time, it always implies the possibility of movement[4], the latter being what leads to – and ends in – it. Such a relationship between movement and *schema* implies that the former remains inscribed, so to speak, on the latter and, under certain conditions, it remains recognizable.

The second crucial trait of the *schema* is its cross-mediality. The extraordinary power the mimetic *technai* were credited with, by IVth century political philosophers, was mainly founded on its cross-mediality, which is documented by abundant figurative and literary evidence. A passage from Xenophon's *Symposium*, among others, clarifies the point as well as the underlying premises of many similar cases. Among the latter, we also include the theatrical use-or description of-, as well as allusion to, the *schemata* appearing, e.g., in painting[5].

During the drinking-party narrated by Xenophon, then, Socrates asks that the company of professional dancers hired by Callias change their entertainment program, remarking that[6]:

If these dancers danced the *schemat*a in which the Graces, the *Hora*i and the Nymphs are painted, it would be much better for them and the *symposion* would be much more enjoyable.

The possibility that the very same *schemata* could migrate from one *medium* to another guarantees their functioning as the basic units of a pervasive, virtually un-ambiguous and stable vocabulary of figures, as it can easily be observed in the visual representations until the beginning of the IVth century BCE. Such a visual vocabulary – on which many different arts and literary genres would heavily rely in different ways[7] – came to be perceived and analyzed, in the context of the rising field of political philosophy in particular, as a powerful and dangerous political tool.

2. In addition to being a tool for the description and classification of numbers, first elements, animals, plants, planets, constellations and so on, the *schema* was also one of the tools imitators used. Color and *schema* were, for example, the two main tools of the *techne* of painters and sculptors, so much so that, starting with Plato, painters could be referred to as «the imitators with *schema* and *chroma*»[8]. In conjunction with notes and words, the *schemata* of the body were the tools used by theatrical poets, actors and dancers. In the words of Aristotle, dancers «through figural rhythms, imitate characters, emotions and actions»[9]. In the realm of public appearing and etiquette, the *schemata* of the body were held able to imitate specific *ethe* in a virtually un-ambiguous way.

A good example of how the *schemata* were considered capable of imitating invisible entities is offered by the Pythagorean method of visualizing numbers, a method that provided the starting point for establishing meaningful relationships between numbers and musical intervals, as well as between the former and abstract values. The *schema* of a number, according to the Pythagorean School, visualized its identity, that is to say its properties. This type of visualization was strictly dependent on the system of number notation in use within the Pythagorean School, in which pebbles were used as indivisible units. Thanks to it, important rules were discovered, as for example regarding the sum of consecutive natural numbers and consecutive even and odd numbers (Figs. 1-3).

Without entering now into the specific mathematical issues raised by such an approach[10], it is relevant to underline its most obvious premise, which seems to have been quite a common idea during the Vth-IVth centuries BCE, documented not only by many and diverse literary sources but, most importantly, by the social practice itself of relying on the *schemata* to communicate and diffuse behaviors and values. This premise is that the *schemata* can attain *mimeseis* of abstract entities, including values like loyalty, courage, civic virtue and so on. We can actually say more. The *schemata* could be considered not as simple imitations of these values but as concrete embodiments of them. It was precisely this alleged ca-

pacity, in particular, that drew the attention of political philosophers, who came to consider the *schemata* to be powerful political tools to determine the citizens' character.

3. Just to provide one example among many, we can observe the level of codification of the appropriate *schema* of a good, well-mannered and self-constrained citizen standing, as they are represented on vases since the last quarter of the sixth century BCE. The *psykter* attributed to Smikros (Fig. 4) represents a series of courting scenes in a *gymnasium* and offers just one example, among many, of the high level of codification of the *schema*, which is actually the result of specific bodily techniques. The free leg of the courting figure (both within pederastic and heterosexual courting) is brought behind (more rarely in front of) the supporting leg, in such a way as to have the upper body prominently lean forward. As a result of this bodily *schema* or, more precisely, as a substantial part of it, the walking stick is turned into a real tool. The degree of unbalance of the body – and the supporting role of the walking stick – can vary significantly from one representation to another. It should also be reminded that the same *schema* also occurs in many different contexts and it is not limited or specific to courting scenes. These latter, though, make particularly evident the tension between movement and stillness in the same body, i.e. between the performance of an action (involving, moreover, the risk of loss of control) and the strict control over the stance. Values such as self-constraint, elegance and appropriateness are embodied by this particular *schema*. What matters the most for us here is the high degree of codification of the *schema* within a specific scene (courting, in this case), a codification that results in the subtraction of the represented pose from the natural sphere of everyday life to enter the sphere of "ritualized" behaviors.

This type of codification is actually linked to the role of the s*chemata* as tools of the *mimesis* of abstract values[11]. Slightly different variants of the appropriate *schema* for a man standing are employed in frameworks beyond explicit courting. They all show, nonetheless, the attention paid by the painter or sculptor to the representation of the relationship between the position of the legs and the forward leaning of the rest of the body (Figs. 5-7) on the one hand, and the mastery in using the walking stick as a technical tool on the other.

The IVth century BCE political-philosophical reflexive approach to the problem of *mimesis* rested on the idea that through the knowledge of the *good* bodily *schemata* a citizen would acquire the ethical qualities that those *schemata* imitated, embodied and, ultimately, produced.

«Knowledge of the good bodily *schemata*» means, in this context, both a pas-

sive understanding – i.e. the capacity of a citizen to read images, for example (but also the gestures and bodily figures performed by actors, dancers, citizens in the public space) – and an active understanding – namely the capacity to perform them. We have to keep in mind that in Athens, until the IV century BCE at least, a free citizen was required to participate in the active performance of the many religious and civic rituals, which punctuated the city's life.

Within the discussions and reflections on the mechanisms, tools and limits of the mimetic arts, various types of the latter were often compared to each other. Not all of them were considered equally important and powerful as tools of communication and diffusion of values (the only criterion by which they were evaluated): *mousike*, in particular - that relied on the three pillars of words, music and dance - had the highest status. Through the notion of *schema*, in particular, the analyses carried out in the field of *mousike* and the rules based thereupon could (and were) easily transferred to other mimetic arts, like for example, etiquette, sculpture and painting. A passage from Plato's *Laws* can best illustrate the point and the substantial political consequences it could entail[12]:

It appears that long ago they (the Egyptians) determined on the rule of which we are now speaking, that the youth of a State should practice in their rehearsals postures (*schemata*) and tunes (*mele*) that are good: these they prescribed in detail and posted up in the temples, and outside this official list it was, and still is, forbidden to painters and all other producers of *schemata* and representations to introduce any innovation or invention, whether in such productions or in any other branch of music, over and above the traditional forms. And if you look there, you will find that the things depicted or graven there 10,000 years ago (I mean what I say, not loosely but literally 10,000) are no whit better or worse than the productions of to-day, but wrought with the same *techne*.

In this passage (extracted from a political treatise) we see some of the issues we have already mentioned come to the surface once again. Plato stresses the link between *mousike*, on the one side, and painting and sculpture, on the other, a link that is grounded on the common use such different mimetic arts make of the *schemata*. Plato, in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, and Aristotle, in the *Politics*, consider the capacity of the *schemata* to migrate from one *medium* to another as one of the main tools the State can use to educate its citizens. Given that the *schemata* embody ethical values, a citizen, simply exposed to these embodiments, would involuntarily imitate them thereby absorbing the corresponding value into his soul. The prohibition of introducing any innovation beyond a set of established *schemata* is the specific Platonic response to the immense power the philosopher attributes to the mimetic arts, in particular to generate behaviors and thus determine the character of the citizens. In a passage from the *Republic*, the need

of such a strict control over the mimetic arts is explicitly justified in the following terms[13]:

Haven't you noticed that imitations, if they go on from childhood to adulthood, stabilize (*kathistantai*) as nature and character (*ethe kai physis*), in regard to the body, the voice and mental attitudes (*dianoia*)?

In the *Laws*, Plato insists on the need for the State to exert the strictest control over the *schemata* the young citizens perform and are exposed to, starting from the games and sports they practice as small children. The prohibition of any innovation in the vocabulary of *schemata* approved by the State is directly related, for Plato, to the very survival of the State itself; the stability of that vocabulary would be, for him, the necessary condition for keeping the same set of shared values (and laws) in place within the community. A passage from the *Law* makes the catastrophic political consequences of the introduction of innovations particularly clear[14]:

They (the legislators) fail to reflect that those children who innovate in their games (*paidiais*) grow up into men different from their fathers; and being thus different themselves, they seek a different mode of life, and having sought this, they come to desire other institutions and laws; and none of them dreads the consequences of all this, which we described just now as the greatest of all banes (*megiston kakon*) to a State.

Both Plato and Aristotle based the vast political power they attribute to the mimetic arts on the notion that a citizen, performing or exposed to the embodiment of a given value, would involuntarily imitate it and, as a consequence, would introject the value corresponding to its imitation.

Even from this specific point of view, *mousike* would be considered, throughout and well beyond Classical Antiquity, as the most powerful and relevant mimetic art. *Mousike* only would produce exact representations (*homoiomata*) of *ethe*[15]:

Rhythms and melodies contain exact representations (*homoiomata*) of anger and mildness, and also of courage and temperance and all their opposites and the other ethical qualities; these exact representations (*homoiomata*) most closely represent the true nature of these *ethe*. And habituation in feeling pain and delight at representations of reality (*en tois homoiois*) is close to feeling them towards actual reality […]. The objects of sight contain representations of *ethe* to a smaller degree: the *schemata* and the colors that are produced are not exact representations (*homoiomata*) of *ethe* but just indications (*semeia*) of them, indications which concern the body in a state of *pathos*. Insofar as even the observation of these *semeia* produces different [ethical] results, the young must not look at the

paintings of Pauson but at those of Polygnotos and of any other painter or sculptor who is *ethikos* (i.e. who depicts *ethe*).

In the closing remark, Aristotle clarifies that the figurative works are analyzed, as in Plato's *Laws*, from the political perspective and for this very reason the only valid criterion for their evaluation is the ethical results they produce. It can thus easily be understood why Plato was so obsessed with the possibility that the *demiourgoi* or, better, any *mimetes,* could freely introduce innovations in his works: as he makes clear in the Laws[16], the *mimetai* lack any knowledge of the ethical results (good or bad) their imitations produce in the viewers.

The recognition of the strong link binding *dianoia* and *schemata* – both performed in real life and represented in paintings and sculptures – is not confined to the theoretical reflection of philosophers.

The bitter exchange between Aeschines and Demosthenes[17], in the *Against Timarchus* and *The false Embassy* (345 and 343 BCE respectively), focuses at a certain point on the *schema* in which Solon, the great legislator of archaic Athens, was represented in a statue in Salamis. According to Aeschines, who chose that same *schema* for his honorary statue, the *schema* of the statue is the indisputable proof of the great legislator's *sophrosyne*. Demosthenes, on the other hand, would contest precisely this easy and transparent link between *schema* and reality, evoking the possibility that *schemata* could lie. The *schema* of a statue, or even of a real person, could not be used, according to Demosthenes, as evidence of the ethical value of the person.

The relationship between art and life, representations and (ethical) reality had always been problematic and even played with, for example in Old Comedy. During the IVth century BCE, though, the issue was given special and serious attention, in particular with regard to public appearing: the pact of confidence between viewers and *schemata* entered a period of profound crisis and the same happened to the codified vocabulary of *schemata* of the classical age.

1   Philo, *De sobrietate*, 34 stresses the analogy between *schesis* and *hexi*s, both terms sharing the absence of movement. «The state of rest (*schesis*) and the state of motion (*kinesis*) differ

from each other. While the former is static (*eremia*), the latter is dynamic (*phora*) and is of two kinds, one passing from point to point, the other revolving round a fixed place. Habit (*hexis*) is akin to rest (*schesis*), as activity (*enérgeia*) is to motion (*kinesis*)».

2   On the literary uses of the term and the *technai* relying on the *schemata* as tools, see M. L. Catoni, *La comunicazione non verbale nella Grecia antica*, Torino, 2008.

3   Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales*, IX.l5, 747c ff. (transl. by F.H. Sandbach [Plutarch, *Moralia IX, Table Talk (Quaestiones Convivales)*, Volume IX, transl. by E. L. Minar, F.H. Sandbach, W.C. Helmbold, London-Cambridge, Mass., 1969], slightly modified).

4   On this passage and its relationship to movement and *schemata* see M.L. Catoni, *Mimesis and motion in classical antiquity,* in *Bilder animierter Bewegung / Images of Animate Movement*, ed. by S. Leyssen, P. Rathgeber, Basel, 2011, pp. 199-220, with relevant literature.

5   As the examples drawn from Vth century tragedy examined by G. Ieranò, «*Bella come in un dipinto». La pittura nella tragedia greca*, in *Le immagini nel testo, il testo nelle immagini: rapporti fra parole e visualità nella tradizione greco-latina*, ed. by L. Belloni, A. Bonandini, G. Ieranò, G. Moretti, Trento, 2011, pp. 241-265 and, in part, by F. De Martino, *Ekphrasis e teatro tragico*, in M. Quijada Sagredo, M.C. Encinas Reguero, *Retorica y discurso en el teatro griego*, Madrid, 2013, pp. 193-224.

6   Xenophon, *Symposium*, VII.5 ff.

7   On the relationship between the visual arts and Vth century theatre, I mention here only a very small selection of contributions, in which the reader can find earlier literature. The precious Ieranò, «*Bella come in un dipinto»*, cit., reverses the traditional approach, as it investigates how Attic tragedy resorts to the visual arts, painting in particular. Particularly useful also De Martino, *Ekphrasis*, cit. On the special relationship between images and words see S. Goldhill, *Placing Theatre in the History of Vision*, in *Word and Image in Ancient Greece*, ed. by N. K. Rutter, B. A. Sparkes, Edinburgh, 2000, pp. 161-181. For a picture of the recent debate see H. Golder, *Visual Meaning in Greek Drama: Sophocles' Ajax and the Art of Dying*, in F. Poyatos, *Advances in Nonverbal Communication*, Amsterdam, 1992, pp. 323-360; J. Elsner, *Philostratus Visualizes the Tragic: Some Ecphrastic and Pictorial Receptions of Greek Tragedy in the Roman Era*, in *Visualizing the Tragic. Drama, Myth, and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature. Essays in Honor of Froma Zeitlin*, ed. by C. Kraus, S. Goldhill, H. P. Foley, J. Elsner, Oxford, 2007, pp. 309-337; L. Giuliani, G. W. Most, *Medea in Eleusis, in Princeton*, in *Visualizing the Tragic*, cit., pp. 197-217; L. Slatkin, *Notes on Tragic Visualizing in the Iliad*, in *Visualizing the Tragic*, cit., pp. 19-34; O. Taplin, *Pots and Plays. Interactions between Tragedy and Greek Vase-painting of the Fourth Century B.C.*, Los Angeles, 2007; R. Osborne, *Putting Performance into Focus*, in M. Revermann, P. Wilson, *Performance, Iconography, Reception. Studies in Honor of Oliver Taplin*, Oxford, 2008, pp. 395-418. On non-verbal communication and gesture in the classical world and beyond, see J. C. Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval,* Paris, 1990; *A cultural History of Gesture*, ed. by J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, Cambridge, 1991; *Il Gesto nel rito e nel cerimoniale dal mondo antico ad oggi*, a cura di S. Bertelli e M. Centanni, Firenze, 1995; A. Boegehold, *When a Gesture Was Expected: A Selection of Examples from Archaic and Classical Greek Literature*, Princeton, 1999; M. Pedrina, *I gesti del dolore nella ceramica attica (VI-V secolo a.C.)*, Venezia, 2001; M. Baggio, *I gesti della seduzione. Tracce di comunicazione non–verbale nella ceramica attica tra VI e V sec. a.C.*, Roma, 2004; M.S. Celentano, P. Chiron, M.P. Noël, *Skhéma/Figura. Formes et figures chez les Anciens. Rhétorique, philosophie, littérature*, Paris, 2004; Catoni, *Comunicazione non verbale*, cit.

8   Catoni, *Comunicazione non verbale*, cit., pp. 251-261.

9   Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a 18ff.

10   Literature in Catoni, *Comunicazione non verbale*, cit., pp. 36-45.

11   G. Ferrari, *Figures of Speech: Men and Maidens in Ancient Greece*, Chicago-London, 2002, in part. pp. 11-60 and pp. 87-111 is very relevant in our context, both for the methodological problems it presents and the analyses of wool-working scenes in Attic vase painting. Particularly relevant also Baggio, *I gesti della seduzione*, cit.

12   Plato, *Laws*, 656d-e - 657a (transl. by R. G. Bury [Plato, *Laws*, Books 1-6, Volume I, ed. and transl. by R.G. Bury, London-Cambridge, Mass., 1926], slightly modified). On this passage, which has received much scholarly attention, see Catoni, *Comunicazione non verbale*, cit., pp. 262-267 with earlier literature.

13   Plato, *Republic*, 395d.

14   Plato, *Laws*, 798c (transl. by R. G. Bury).

15   Aristotle, *Politics*, 1340a33 (transl. by H. Rackham [Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. and transl by H. Rackham, London-Cambridge, Mass., 1932] modified).

16   Plato, *Laws*, 667b-669b.

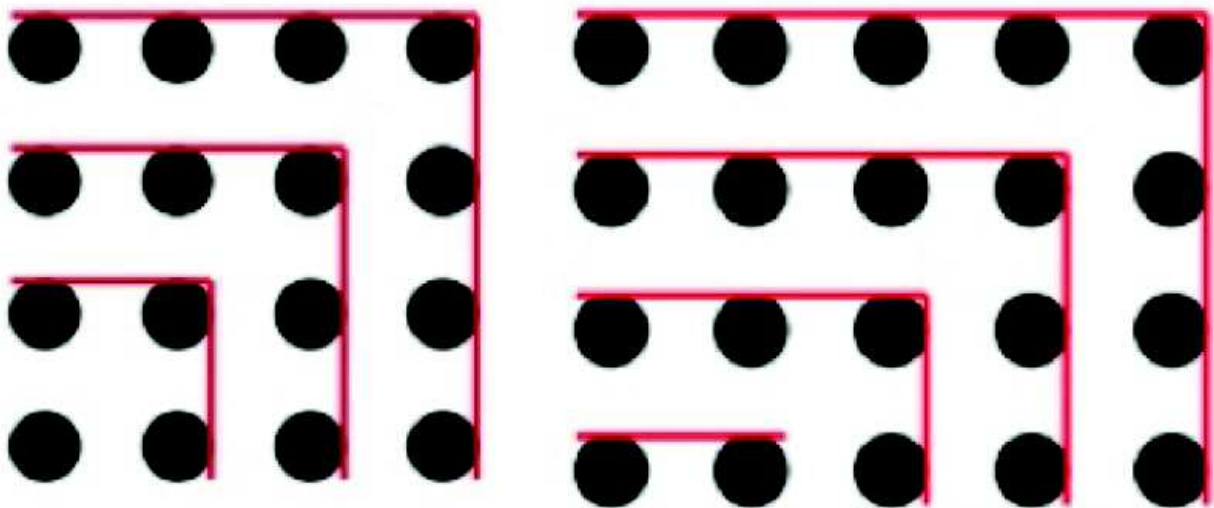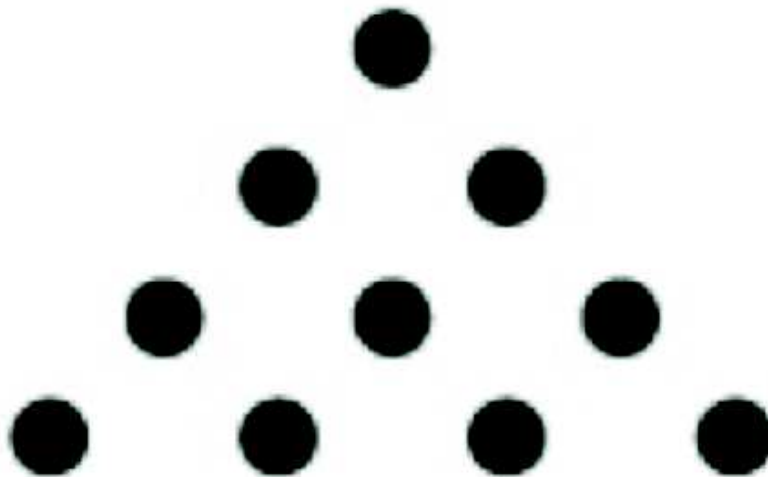17   Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, 25.1 ff.; Demosthenes, *The false Embassy*, 251-252.

Fig. 1: Triangular numbers show the property of the sum of consecutive natural numbers: 1+2+3+n = 1/2n (n+1)

Fig. 2: The sum of consecutive odd numbers always equals square numbers: 1+3+5+n = [(n+1)/2]^2

Fig. 3: The sum of consecutive even numbers always equals rectangular numbers: 2+4+6+n = [n/2 (m/2+1)]
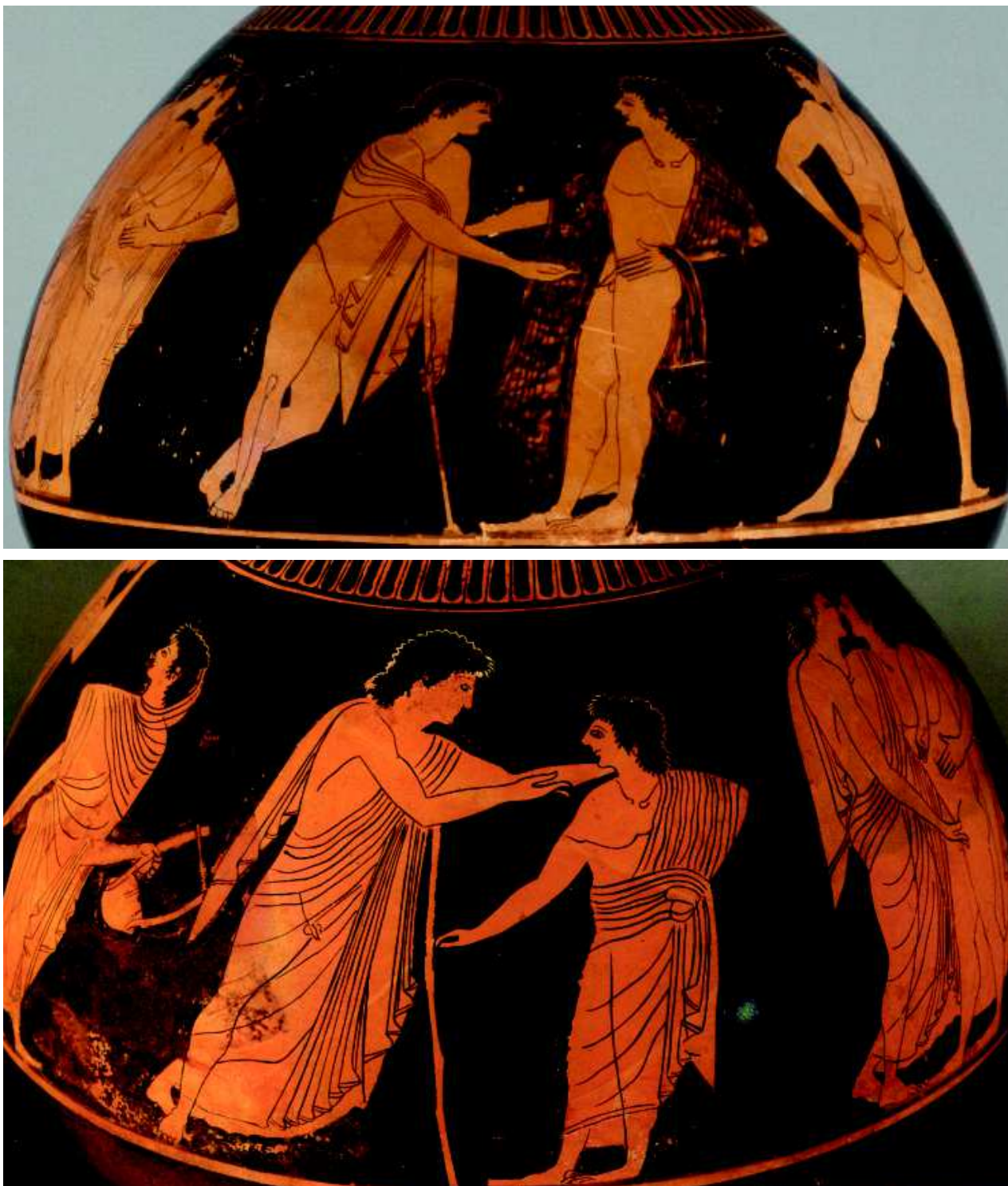
Fig. 4: Attic r.f. *psykter* attributed to Smikros. Ca. 510-500 BCE.
Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum. Homoerotic courting in the gymnasium.
Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.
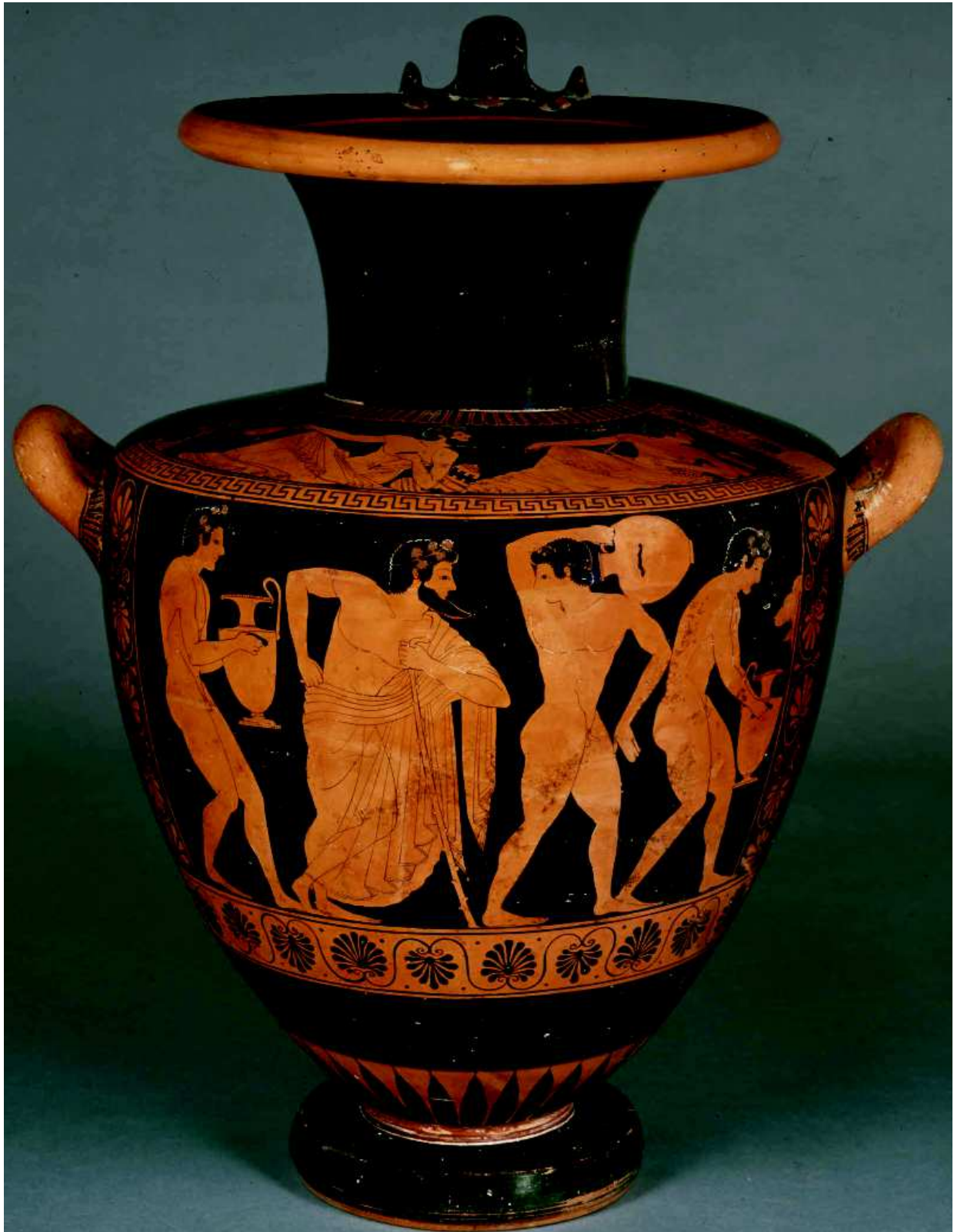
Fig. 5: Attic r.f. *hydria* signed by Phi[n]thias as painter. From Vulci. Ca. 510 BCE.
London, BM E 159. A wreathed adult man standing among boys at the fountain.
© Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 6: Parthenon relief. East frieze, detail of slab IV. 447-432 BCE. London, British Museum.
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Fig. 7: Attic funerary stele of Ktesilaos and Theano. Ca. 370 BCE. Athens, National Museum.
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