

An Early Greek Bronze Sphinx Support

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CLARE LE CORBEILLER HAS OCCUPIED A SPECIAL place in the curatorial ranks of The Metropolitan Museum of Art by virtue of her expertise and the gracious generosity with which she has imparted it. Her specialization in European porcelains and metalwork inspires me to publish an extraordinary recent acquisition¹ that features two of the most long-lived Greek contributions to Western iconography, the sphinx and the foot in the form of a lion's paw.

The adornment and animation of utilitarian objects by means of figural motifs are hallmarks of Greek art. The object of our attention is a bronze support datable to about 600 B.C. and consisting of a lion's paw that develops into the forepart of a sphinx. While a sphinx, by definition, has the body of a lion, the head of a woman, and the wings of an eagle, the paw-shaped foot is considerably more common than the sphinx as an adjunct in related bronze utensils (Figures 1–3). The paw shows five toes that are separated and articulated but nonetheless maintain a rather strong, blocky appearance from both the front and side views; this is a chronologically early feature. The paw swells into the chest and wings, surmounted by a large, carefully detailed head. The torso is rendered with a pair of breasts and two symmetrical, bolero-like areas of chased feathers that extend, in low relief, onto the wing feathers.² These are executed with radiating chased lines. On the proper left wing appear three short, straight strokes that may indicate guidelines. The small holes at the top of each wing and the surviving rivet in the center of the creature's forehead helped to fasten the sphinx to a utensil. While the articulation of the torso is generalized, the throat and collarbones are attentively described.

The powerful face shows a very large mouth set asymmetrically to the left. The ridge of the nose continues into the heavy eyebrows. The equally prominent eyes are rhomboidal, each with a small hole for the pupil. Light, regular hatching ornaments both eyebrows and eyelids. The hairdo consists of curls over

the forehead, strands that frame the temples and then fall behind the ears, and four distinct waves that widen toward the bottom. A short channel behind each ear may have served in the attachment of the figure to the vessel it carried. On the top of the head rests a thick fillet that may have had a central ornament. While the details of the physiognomy are not organically interrelated, the prominent eyes and mouth convey sharp focus and ferocity.

The base, sides, and back of the object reveal little articulation but provide some more information about the larger whole to which it belonged. The cutting at the top of the back of the head, the continuation of the rivet noted on the forehead, and extensive remains of lead indicate the use of several means of joining and attachment. The underside of the foot has a roughly elliptical opening, also filled with lead, indicating that the metal was poured through the hollow interior. The long, triangular tongue projecting from the back and reinforced by a strut ending in a volute helped bear the utilitarian part of the piece. The very wide arc of the cutting on the sphinx's head and the relation between this cutting and the rivet holes on the wings suggest that the missing element was an extremely large basin with a profiled lip, a short neck, and a bottom that deepened from its circumference to the center. The diameter of the basin measured a meter or more.³ The sturdy construction of the foot and its considerable weight testify further to the size and mass of the original object. The lead visible on the underside not only provided stability but may also have served to affix the foot to a base. The utensil must have had at least three figural supports.

Contributing further to the complexity of the work are two irregularly square openings under each wing. The surrounding surfaces indicate abrasion. The proper right hole contains miscellaneous material as well as a small rivet, the head of which appears at the bottom of the proper right wing. The proper left hole shows some lead. The function of the holes under the wings is particularly puzzling; these are not viable points at which to attach the straight rods or struts of a tripod or stand.⁴ The holes may be the points of attachment for a second set of wings that arched

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Figure 1. Support with sphinx, Greek, ca. 600 B.C. Bronze, H.10 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (27.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift from the family of Howard J. Barnet, in his memory, 2000 (2000.660)

downward in ancient Near Eastern fashion, as Dr. Mary B. Moore has suggested. During the late seventh and the sixth century B.C. Greek artists eschewed the double set of wings at least in part because it complicated an organic rendering of the human body. Nonetheless, it appears occasionally⁵ and is even favored by the Amasis Painter, for example.⁶ The alternative is that a pair of arms was worked and fastened separately. The shortcoming of this proposal is that in the pertinent comparative material the arms seem to be cast as part of the figure.

Between the late eighth and the late sixth century B.C., elaborately wrought and decorated bronze vases with figural adjuncts were luxury items exchanged as gifts by individuals of rank and dedicated at sanctuaries. The Museum's newly acquired sphinx support was such an object⁷ and can be assigned a place within the distinguished lineage of bronze tripod stands and vessels with lions' paws. The site of Olympia has yielded the largest number of examples, and Werner Gauer has reconstructed an evolutionary sequence.⁸ Three-legged stands were introduced to Greece from the East, with Cyprus as a significant intermediary.⁹ Among the earliest Greek supports with a lion's paw and human face is a piece from Olympia dated to the late first quarter of the seventh century B.C. (Figures 4, 5).¹⁰ While it lacks an organic connection between the paw below and the head above, it is directly pertinent to our sphinx in two respects. At the back it has a projecting support that preserves remains of solder, thus indicating the existence of some kind of bowl. Furthermore, it can be related stylistically to bronze vessel adjuncts from Lakonia, the most innovative and prolific center of bronze vessel production from the late seventh until the mid-sixth century B.C.¹¹

A Laconian work dated about 590–580 B.C. demonstrates an appreciable advance in both the development of the feline support and the integration of figural mythological elements (Figure 6).¹² The lower part resembles the Metropolitan's sphinx in the paw that gives rise to a capacious torso with a pair of wings; in somewhat different form, the breast feathers are rendered in low relief above the flight feathers. Upon this base stands a goddess wearing a long, close-fitting garment and a low, cylindrical headdress; two tresses fall behind her ears and then forward onto her shoulders. She has not been associated with any of the Olympian deities but may represent a manifestation of Artemis, who was important in contemporary iconography, particularly as a *potnia theron*, or mistress of animals.¹³ The figure was attached to a cylindrical vessel as tall as she by rivets visible on her chest and at the lower edge of her chiton. While the surface has suffered



Figure 2. Side view of Figure 1



Figure 3. Back view of Figure 1

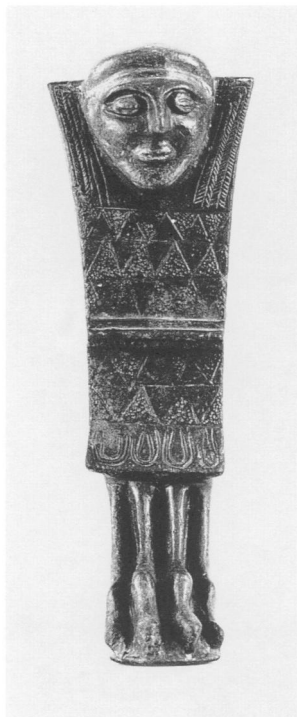


Figure 4. Support with face, Greek, late 1st quarter of 7th century B.C. Bronze, H. 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (10.6 cm). National Museum, Athens, 6201; Olympia Br 10881 (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. NM 6180)

Figure 5. Side view of Figure 4 (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. NM 6181)

considerably, the facial features—particularly the eyes—show a softer, fuller rendering than those on the Museum's piece.

A slightly later variant of the Olympia *potnia* is an impressive support in the form of a Gorgon; found off the island of Rhodes and dated to about 550 B.C., it is now in the Louvre (Figures 7, 8).¹⁴ Here, the kneeling Gorgon bears the lion's paw, from which issue attachments for the rods of a tripod. The mythological figure is readily identifiable, but she is rendered without her usual wings and snakes. The position of her arms, slightly bent at her sides, however, evokes mythological beings with two pairs of wings, perhaps quite deliberately. In any case, at this relatively early time in the development of bronze vessels, shape and iconography vary considerably.

The next major typological stage is represented by two supports of the last quarter of the sixth century B.C. The first, attributed to a Laconian workshop and found in Olympia, consists of a feline foot surmounted by the upper body of a Gorgon (Figure 9).¹⁵ Of the pieces that we have considered so far, it most resembles the Museum's. The later date is, however, indicated by the fuller articulation of the feline toes,



Figure 6. Support with goddess, Greek, ca. 590–580 B.C. Bronze, H. ca. 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (14.5 cm). Olympia Museum, B 1202, B 6050 (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. Ol.6886)



Figure 7. Support with kneeling Gorgon, Greek, ca. 550 B.C. Bronze, H. 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (55 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris, Br. 2570 (photo: M. & P. Chuzeville, courtesy of Musée du Louvre)



Figure 8. Side view of Figure 7 (photo: M. & P. Chuzeville, courtesy of Musée du Louvre)

the channeling of the leg above, the more organic treatment of the body, the tighter curve of the wings, and the greater number of feathers. The second example, of smaller size and lesser quality but probably contemporary date, is a foot found at Dodona and now in Iannina.¹⁶ The paw rests on a circular base. Gauer attributes the work to one of the Corinthian workshops of the middle and later sixth century B.C. that adopted—and adapted—earlier Laconian inventions.¹⁷

The five works just mentioned provide the main lines of the typological development to which the Museum's support belongs. Additional evidence includes, most notably, the leg of a tripod *kothon* (vase for perfumed oil) with a projection to support the bowl and a lion's paw but no additional adjunct. Found at Dodona, it is dated by Gauer to the first half of the sixth century B.C. (Figures 10, 11).¹⁸ Noteworthy among the pieces with figural elements is the

primacy of female forms, whether or not they are evidently mythological and whether or not they have wings. Expensive dedications, particularly in bronze, seem to have called for protection by demonic forces.¹⁹ The phenomenon recurs, with greater restraint, in the largest preserved class of bronze vessels, the bronze hydriai, or water jars, made from about 630 B.C. onward (Figure 12).²⁰ The special interest of the Museum's sphinx support is that it is earlier than most of the pieces we have reviewed and distinctive indeed in the articulation of the head. Moreover, the lion's paw belongs with the creature above it; the other early examples often combine the paw with a Gorgon.

In Greek art of the seventh century B.C. a style known as Daedalic has been distinguished and characterized by scholars according to several criteria.²¹ Among the more generally accepted features are



Figure 9. Support with Gorgon, last quarter of 6th century B.C. Bronze, H. $3\frac{3}{8}$ in. (9.85 cm). Olympia Museum, Br 12947. (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. 81/145)

heads rendered with a U-shaped face framed on either side by tiers of hair that widen from top to bottom producing a regular triangular shape. Although our sphinx displays certain similarities, she is quite distinct, for instance, in the irregular stepping of her tresses. The latter detail leads us to an earlier category of dedicatory bronze vessels, the cauldrons with figural attachments that were introduced from the Near East to the Greek world and Etruria during the eighth century B.C.²² Intensive study of these impressive objects has indicated that some are Eastern imports, others are Greek adaptations.²³ Several examples are particularly pertinent to our inquiry.

The sites of Olympia, in Greece, and Praeneste, in Etruria, have yielded fewer than a dozen conical supports of hammered bronze that originally held cauldrons. One from Olympia is decorated with a series of frontal female creatures with clawlike or pawlike feet, two pairs of wings, and stepped coiffures (Figure 13).²⁴ They stand on indeterminate, elevated bases. The support is attributed to a neo-Hittite workshop active in North Syria during the second half of the eighth century B.C. It is significant



Figure 10. Support, Greek, first half of 6th century B.C. Bronze, H. $6\frac{1}{4}$ in. (16 cm). National Museum, Athens, KAP 414 (photo: National Museum, Athens)



Figure 11. Back view of Figure 10 (photo: National Museum, Athens)



Figure 12. Hydria, Greek, ca. 630–610 B.C. Bronze, H. 17¼ in. (43.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, David L. Klein Jr. Memorial Foundation Inc., The Joseph Rosen Foundation Inc., and Nicholas S. Zoullas Gifts, 1995 (1995.92)



Figure 13. Cauldron support, Greek, 2nd half of 8th century B.C. Bronze, H. 19¼ in. (49.5 cm). Olympia Museum, B 5005 (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. Ol.6124)

in documenting the kind of source underlying the iconography of the Museum's sphinx support as well as the variants noted above.

The figural adjuncts embellishing the cauldrons themselves consisted of the heads and foreparts of animals and mythological creatures, notably sirens, bulls, and griffins, as well as human busts attached to the vessels by arm-shaped or wing-shaped extensions or both. An attachment from the Athenian Akropolis (Figures 14, 15)²⁵ of Greek workmanship, dated to early in the first quarter of the seventh century B.C., shows the U-shaped head with pronounced eyes, nose, mouth, and chin; from the front, the hairdo is jagged, but in back view it falls in harmonious, stylized waves. Over time, the artificial angularity could well have softened into the forms of the Museum's sphinx. A Greek attachment from Olympia,²⁶ dated to the late eighth century B.C., differs in the coiffure but has the fuller features and large mouth of our work. Moreover, it illustrates the combination of arms and wings for fastening the heavy, usually cast, elements to the vessel; the heads looked over the cauldron lip. Finally, an attachment probably from Mesopotamia and now in The British Museum is enlightening as a rather late Near Eastern relative (Figures 16, 17).²⁷ In the round face, the strong eyes and mouth, the slightly bell-like conformation of the hair, as well as the prominent and

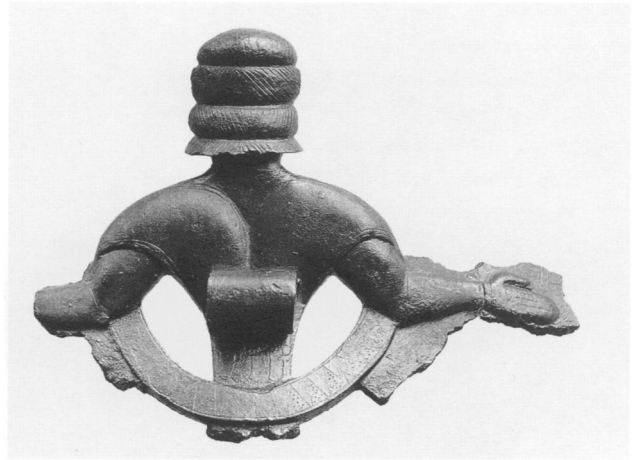
unnaturalistically high chest, it bears directly upon the pieces we have been discussing.

A primary aspect of Greek art—indeed, of all Greek culture²⁸—during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. is its exposure to and assimilation of influences from the East. The recently acquired sphinx support reflects a number of developments in the medium of bronze working. Compared with the earlier Eastern and Greek cauldron attachments, it illustrates an accomplished Greek bronze worker's effort to liberate the frontal bust from its two-dimensional captivity into a three-dimensional presence. The early vessel supports with lions' feet represent one of the forms in which Greek artists most actively and creatively reworked foreign imports into elements that were functionally and iconographically significant. The Museum's sphinx is of exceptional interest and importance because it so clearly presents where it has come from artistically and where it is going.

At the present time, the piece has no precise counterpart(s) and the localization of a workshop remains embroiled in scholarly controversy. However, the painstaking study of the Olympia finds as well as Conrad Stibbe's investigations has clarified stylistic and chronological aspects of Laconian bronze working. Subject to the appearance of other evidence, the sphinx support may be attributed to a Laconian workshop. A date



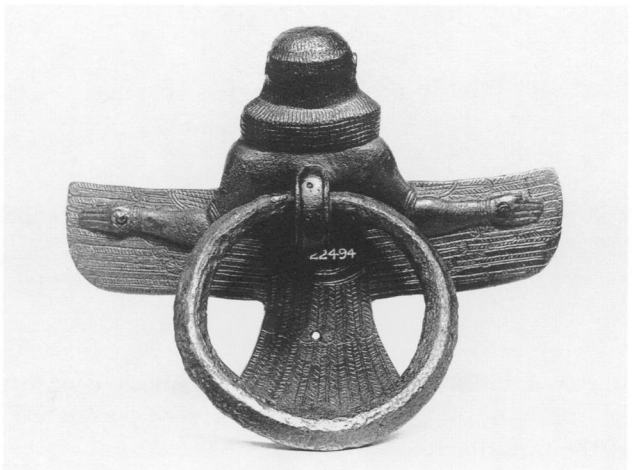
14.



15.



16.



17.

Figure 14. Cauldron attachment, Greek, 1st quarter of 7th century B.C. Bronze, W. 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (14.5 cm). National Museum, Athens, 6519. (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. 73/1072)

Figure 15. Back view of Figure 14 (photo: copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. 73/1073)

Figure 16. Cauldron attachment, Late Assyrian or Late Babylonian, 7th–6th century B.C. Bronze, W. 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (21.9 cm). The British Museum, London, 22.494 (photo: courtesy of The British Museum)

Figure 17. Back view of Figure 16 (photo: courtesy of The British Museum)

Figure 18. Cauldron attachment, Greek, 3rd quarter of 7th century B.C. Bronze, H. 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (25.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971 (1972.118.54)



18.

about 600 B.C. seems appropriate in view of not only the bronze comparanda²⁹ but also works in other media. As in virtually every case where no external evidence exists, the function of a date is to situate the object chronologically and, especially, to suggest its place in relation to other material.³⁰

The sphinx support joins the bronze griffin from the Baker Collection³¹ (Figure 18) as an eloquent representative of one of the most innovative and influential

periods of Greek art. The magnificence of metal vases of the Archaic period was evident already in antiquity; the historian Herodotos, for example, mentions a colossal bronze krater embellished with a frieze of animals that the Spartans had made as a gift for Croesus, king of Lydia.³² The tradition whose beginnings the Museum's sphinx documents enjoyed a long and fruitful life that was still flourishing in the epochs of Clare Le Corbeiller's special competence (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier. Cruet frame, French, ca. 1817. Silver, W. 12 in. (30.5 cm), D. 15½ in. (39.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Audrey Love, in memory of C. Ruxton Love Jr., 1978(1978.524.1)

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Descamps, Musée du Louvre, Paris; Dr. Nikolaos Kaltsas, Dr. Rosa Proskynetopoulou, and Dr. Katerina Rhomiopoulou, National Archaeological Museum, Athens. Special thanks are due to a friend whose interest in the Greek and Roman collection extends as much to the whole as to the individual objects.

NOTES

1. The piece has been noted briefly in Carlos A. Picón, "Recent Acquisitions by the Greek and Roman Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Apollo*, July 2001, pp. 12–13, and in *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin: Recent Acquisitions. A Selection, 2000–2001*, entry by Joan Mertens, p. 9.
2. The treatment of the "bolero" shows many variants in winged creatures of the late seventh and sixth centuries B.C. A useful indication of the possibilities is provided by the decorated bronze shield straps from Olympia cited in Emil Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder* (Berlin, 1950). The sphinx is particularly well represented; especially pertinent to the Museum's support is Ia (pl. 5 and p. 242). Note also the ankle guard (B 153) in Alfred Mallwitz and Hans-Volkmar Herrmann, *Die Funde aus Olympia* (Athens, 1980), p. 103, no. 64. For a rather awkward three-dimensional "bolero," see Marlene Herfort-Koch, *Archaische Bronzeplastik Lakoniens* (Münster, 1986), p. 122, no. K161. A late, very dry variant occurs on a foot in the Metropolitan Museum, x.21.101, more likely from a bowl than a cista. See Gisela M. A. Richter, *Greek Etruscan and Roman Bronzes* (New York, 1915), p. 293, no. 849.
3. Richard E. Stone, conservator at the Metropolitan Museum, suggests that the lip of the basin was reinforced by an underlying iron band. The height of the lip measures about $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (1 cm), the height of the neck about $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. (4 cm).
4. The only possibility of this kind would be a curved rod joining the Museum's support to those on its left and right, assuming that the original object had three supports in all. Although three is the canonical number, it could theoretically have had more.
5. To my knowledge, the subject of wings in ancient Near Eastern and early Greek art has not received particular attention. It was touched upon by Paul Wolters, *Der geflügelte Seher* (Munich, 1928). Recently, Sarah Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton, 1992), esp. pp. 191–96, and Erika Simon, "Early Images of Daidalos in Flight," *The Ages of Homer* (Austin, 1995), pp. 409–11, have addressed this significant attribute of the mythological craftsman. In Near Eastern iconography, some information can be gleaned from F.A.M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits* (Groningen, 1992), and Dieter Kolbe, *Die Reliefprogramme religiös-mythologischen Charakters in neuassyrischen Palästen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981). In Greek art, the derivation and significance of double as against single wings remain unexplored.
6. Dietrich von Bothmer, *The Amasis Painter and His World* (Malibu, 1985).
7. For a survey of the iconographical history of the sphinx, see Heinz Demisch, *Die Sphinx* (Stuttgart, 1977).
8. Werner Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse mit Löwenpranken und figürlichem Schmuck aus Olympia," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 99 (1984), pp. 35–53.
9. Ibid., pp. 35–37. See also Hartmut Matthäus, *Metallgefäße und Gefäßuntersätze der Bronzezeit, der geometrischen und archaischen Periode auf Cypern* (Munich, 1985), pp. 312–13.
10. Olympia Br 10881 (Athens, National Museum, 6201). Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," pp. 38–40.
11. For the most recent assessment of the role and achievements of Laconian bronze workers, see Conrad M. Stibbe, *The Sons of Hephaistos* (Rome, 2000).
12. Olympia B 1202 + B 6050. Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," pp. 43–44; see also Werner Gauer, *Die Bronzegefäße von Olympia I* (Berlin, 1991), p. 287, no. E229.
13. For a general survey, with further bibliography, see Lilly Kahil, "Artemis," *Lexikon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 2 (Zurich, 1984), esp. pp. 624–29.
14. Paris, Musée du Louvre Br.2570 (MNC 482) Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," p. 45. See also *Greek Art of the Aegean Islands* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979–80), p. 164, no. 121.
15. Olympia Br 12947. Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," p. 46; see also idem, *Bronzegefäße*, p. 286, no. E228.
16. Iannina Museum, 4909. Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," pp. 46–48.
17. Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," p. 48.
18. Athens, National Museum, KAP 414. Gauer, "Gerät- und Gefäßfüsse," p. 39. Worth mentioning because it belongs to the Metropolitan Museum is the Etruscan cauldron, 03.23.3, found with the Monteleone chariot. Datable to the mid-sixth century B.C., the cauldron has three feet ending in lions' paws surmounted by very stylized sphinxes; the source of inspiration was clearly a model such as ours. Gisela M. A. Richter, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Greek, Etruscan and Roman Bronzes* (New York, 1915), p. 226, no. 624; Sarah Leach in Francesco Roncalli, *Antichità dall'Umbria a New York* (Perugia, 1991), p. 400, no. 3.
19. With the development of monumental marble sculpture, at least in Attica, the Archaic sphinx becomes the guardian, par excellence, of funerary stelai. See Pierre Müller, *Löwen und Mischwesen in der archaischen griechischen Kunst* (Zurich, 1978), pp. 158–65.
20. See Conrad M. Stibbe, "Archaic Bronze Hydriai," *Babesch: Bulletin Antieke Beschaving* 67 (1992), pp. 1–62; idem, *Sons of Hephaistos*. For 1995.92, see idem, "Between Babyka and Knakion," *Babesch* 69 (1994), pp. 63–113.
21. Romilly J. H. Jenkins, *Dedolica: A Study of Dorian Plastic Art in the Seventh Century B.C.* (Cambridge, 1936); more recently, Georg

- Kaulen, *Daidalika* (Munich, 1967) and *Dädalische Kunst auf Kreta*, exh. cat. (Hamburg, 1970).
22. Hans-Volkmar Herrmann, *Die Kessel der orientalisierenden Zeit I: Kesselattaschen und Reliefuntersätze* (Berlin, 1966); idem, *Die Kessel der orientalisierenden Zeit II: Kesselprotomen und Stabdreifüsse* (Berlin, 1979); see also Mallwitz and Herrmann, *Die Funde aus Olympia*.
 23. For a review of the literature, see Oscar White Muscarella, "Greek and Oriental Cauldron Attachments," in Günter Kopcke and Isabelle Tokumaru, *Greece between East and West* (Mainz, 1992), pp. 16–45.
 24. Olympia, B 5005. Herrmann, *Kesselattaschen und Reliefuntersätze*, pp. 163, 170–74; Mallwitz and Herrmann, *Die Funde aus Olympia*, p. 72, no. 39.
 25. Athens, National Museum, 6519. Herrmann, *Kesselattaschen und Reliefuntersätze*, p. 102.
 26. Athens, National Museum, 6123. Herrmann, *Kesselattaschen und Reliefuntersätze*, p. 102, A 19.
 27. Herrmann, *Kesselattaschen und Reliefuntersätze*, p. 56. John Curtis, "Mesopotamian Bronzes from Greek Sites: The Workshops of Origin," *Iraq* 56 (1994), pp. 11–14. I am indebted to Dr. Curtis for his help with this object.
 28. For one survey, see Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, 1992).
 29. See Herfort-Koch, *Archaische Bronzeplastik Lakoniens*.
 30. Gisela M. A. Richter's *Korai* (London, 1968) and *Kouroi*, 3rd ed. (London, 1970), remain useful surveys of the range of stylistic development in the decades immediately before and after 600 B.C.
 31. Carol C. Mattusch, "A Trio of Griffins from Olympia," *Hesperia* 59 (1990), pp. 549–60.
 32. Herodotus I, 69–70.