Footwork in Ancient Greek Swordsmanship

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IN HONOR OF MY OLD friend and colleague Helmut Nickel, I should like to offer some speculations in an area where his interest in arms and armor overlaps mine in Greek and Roman art, in particular to explore the possibility that evidence for one aspect of ancient Greek swordsmanship can be found in Greek sculpture and vase-painting. Such an exploration can only be tentative in the absence of supporting evidence from ancient literary sources, especially in the period around 500 B.C. Such literary evidence as does exist comes from later periods and deals mainly with tactics and the movement of troops in formation, of concern to the ancient equivalent of Clausewitz rather than the drill-sergeant.[1] Detailed evidence for basic drill-movements is totally absent from the literary record at all periods.[2]

The evidence in Xenophon for spear-drill in the fourth century B.C. has been treated in detail by J. K. Anderson, who warns that in trying to reconstruct ancient arms drill, it is safer "to use works of art mainly to provide illustrations of the ancient texts, while admitting that there must have been several movements for which no literary evidence has survived."[3] Anderson follows his own principle by using illustrations in ancient art to flesh out Xenophon's description of spear-drill with commands given by trumpet-calls.[4] Although Anderson concludes that training in ancient drill was restricted to a few simple movements, he concedes that they were not necessarily limited to those for which literary evidence survives. He even accepts that "the repetition of certain poses in works of art raises the interesting possibility that the artists, or their models, had been regularly taught the movements represented."[5]

The specific example cited by Anderson of sword-movements represented so often in works of art that it seems reasonable to accept them as representations of a standard action from real swordsmanship is the so-called "Harmodios blow" studied by Shefton, who coined the useful term by which it is now fairly generally known.[6] This is a slashing movement named for the action of Harmodios in the marble statuary group of the Tyrant-slayers best known from a Roman copy in Naples.[7] The moment most frequently represented is the point of stillness when the sword-hand has been raised head-high with the sword pointing backward over the shoulder in readiness for a downward slash. The blow may be delivered either forehand (Figure 1) or backhand (Figure 2).[8] Philip Lancaster, of the Department of Edged Weapons at the Tower of London, who kindly gave advice on some practical aspects of swordsmanship, pointed out that this movement would be hazardous under normal combat conditions: not only is there some danger that it would put a swordsman off balance, but the action would also leave the sword-arm unprotected and vulnerable. B. B. Shefton had already noted that the sword when raised could not be used for parrying, and that in close combat the blow therefore required careful timing.[9] It would have been particularly dangerous for a Greek hoplite in leaving the armpit exposed above the edge of the cuirass.[10] A further disadvantage of the Harmodios blow is that it was less effective than a thrust against a well-equipped opponent: it would probably have been resisted even by a padded linen corselet, which would have been vulnerable to a thrust, and would certainly have been ineffective against a metal cuirass.[11]

In combat, then, the Harmodios blow can only have been a desperate measure, employed when the vulnerability it imposed was outweighed by a greater danger. There is evidence for this in both literature and art. The problem arises when a swordsman faces

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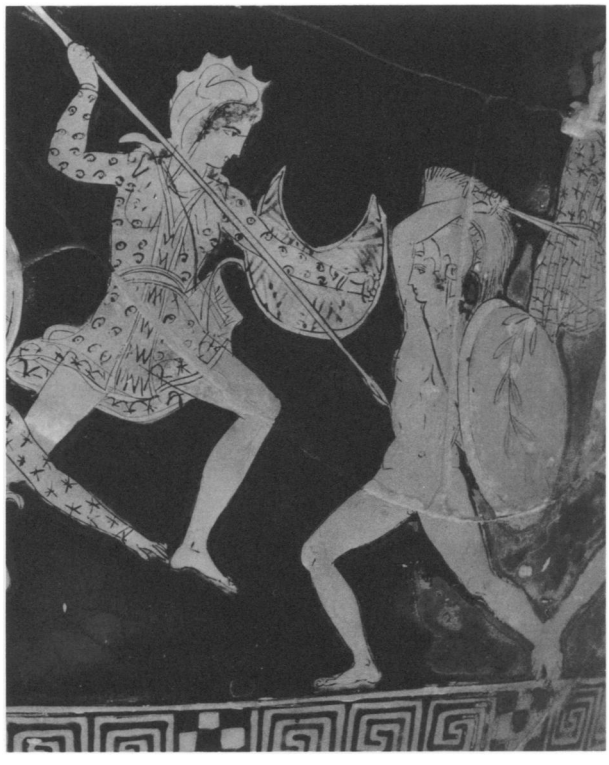
1. The forehand "Harmodios blow." Drawing of an Attic red-figured hydria, 460–450 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1925, 25.28 (drawing: Lindsley F. Hall)



2. The backhand Harmodios blow used against a spear. Detail of an Attic red-figured squat lekythos, ca. 420 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1931, 31.11.13

the longer weapon of a spearman: the classic solution was that of Hector, who cut off the end of Ajax's spear with his sword.[12] This is precisely the aim of the Greek in Figure 2: so great is his danger from the Amazon's spear that he must attempt to cut its wooden shaft, even at the risk of exposing his whole body to attack, since he must swing back his shield to maintain his balance.[13]

A safer use of the Harmodios blow, as pointed out by Shefton, was to deliver a "butcher's blow" to a fallen opponent.[14] Indeed, the blow could only be used safely when the opponent was not in a position, or not suitably armed, to strike back. The unfortunate centaur in Figure 3 has no weapon for a counterstroke and only a cushion to ward off an overhead blow, here from a battle-ax rather than from a sword.[15] The principle of the Harmodios blow still applies: an overhead blow by sword or ax normally leaves the striker vulnerable. Amphytrion may also safely use the Harmodios blow (Figure 1), since it is aimed not at an armed warrior but at the snakes that have attacked the infant Herakles. Here too, no doubt, there was an element of desperation.

Finding no examples of the use of the Harmodios blow before the closing years of the sixth century B.C.,[16] Shefton connected it with the introduction of the spatulate sword, a more versatile weapon than the straight-edged sword, which is most effective in an underhand stabbing or thrusting movement.[17] It is around the same time that warriors began to be represented in Attic red-figure in a stance that, although it soon became conventional, may reflect the kind of simple drill-movement for which no literary evidence survives. The movement is in fact so simple that no specific comment was made by ancient authors: like so many minor details of life, it was too familiar at the time to call for explanation.

The stance is simple enough and may be observed in conjunction with the Harmodios blow in the representations already discussed: one foot is simply placed in advance of the other. This is not merely a walking posture, for, as Borthwick has pointed out,[18]

right-handed swordsmen commonly advance the left leg and left arm simultaneously, as in Figure 4, which shows a swordsman using a straight-sided sword for a conventional upward thrust against an Amazon.[19] In what may be called the "attack" posture, the forward leg is bent at the knee while the other leg is straight.[20] Should the need arise to evade an opponent's counterblow, it is possible to move the body back into the "defense" posture without even moving the feet, simply by straightening the forward leg and, if necessary, bending the other. The Amazon in Figure 4 has straightened her forward right leg and has bent her left. The painter has even shown her left foot turning away to produce a posture that is scarcely possible physically. It was presumably intended to convey a continuous action, beginning with a backward movement into the defense posture and freeing herself from her opponent's grip, to be followed (at least in intent) with flight. The frequency with which these postures appear in scenes of combat in Greek vase-painting suggests that they represent a standard drill-movement, so familiar as not to require comment in the literary sources.

Familiar though it was, it must at some stage have been learned. The Athenians did not provide "training in the art of war at public expense," at least not for adults;[21] indeed they seem to have taken an amateurish pride in being unlike the Spartans in this respect, although they were expected to keep themselves physically fit for warfare by regular exercise.[22] It is generally assumed that basic drill was taught to *ephebes* during their two-year period of military training, undertaken at the age of eighteen.[23] In Plato's ideal state, the military training of youths was to include fighting in armor—*hoplomachia* (translated by Anderson as "fencing with hoplite weapons")[24]—and it seems reasonable that this would have included elementary drill as a basis for concerted action in the field, at least if modern military experience can be accepted as a substitute for the nonexistent ancient literary sources.[25]

Private training in *hoplomachia* seems to have been available in Athens, at least from the later fifth century, for the discussion of courage in Plato's *Laches* begins with a demonstration of the art by a professional instructor.[26] The Greek term for such an instructor, *hoplomachos* (or, as we would say, drill-sergeant), does not appear in surviving literature before Theophrastus (fourth–third century B.C.), but it may well have been in use earlier.[27] The comment

3. Use of battle-ax in the attack posture. Detail of an Attic red-figured volute-krater, ca. 450 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.286.84

4. A Greek in the attack posture using a sword in an underhand thrust. Detail of an Attic red-figured volute-krater, ca. 450 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.286.84

5. Satyrs in defense and attack postures confronting maenads. Detail of an Attic red-figured volute-krater, ca. 430 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1924, 24.97.25

by Nicias, that such skill would be most useful in single combat after the ranks had broken, is not inconsistent with a supposition that *hoplomachia* may have included the attack and defense postures seen in depictions of single combat on vases.[28]

The appearance of the attack and defense postures in Greek art is not restricted to vases and begins long before Plato's time, toward the end of the sixth century B.C. Although this is about the same time as the first appearance of the Harmodios blow, there is not necessarily a connection with either the Harmodios blow or the introduction of the new type of sword. Indeed, as we have already seen, the attack posture lends itself to the use of other weapons, including the battle-ax and thrusting spear. Its appearance in Late Archaic red-figure seems more likely to be connected with the improved opportunities for representing movement in a lifelike way that were offered by the red-figure technique and gradually developed by its early practitioners. In the black-figure technique, by contrast, as well as in sculpture of the sixth century, warriors in action were commonly represented with both legs straight. Indeed, the convention of representing the torso in frontal view and the legs in profile, which went back as far as the Geometric Period (eighth century B.C), seriously inhibited a more realistic representation of bodies in motion.[29]

6. The Deeds of Theseus: variations on the attack posture. Interior of an Attic red-figured kylix, 440–430 B.C. London, British Museum, Vase E 84 (photo: British Museum)

Among the earliest appearances of the new attack posture in red-figure are a warrior delivering a backhand Harmodios blow and Herakles (wielding a club) on the volute-krater by Euphronios in Arezzo, dated about 510–500 B.C.[30] Almost as early is a cup in Boston, dating to about 500 B.C. and attributed to Douris in an early phase of his career. This cup shows two swordsmen converging on a fallen opponent, both in the attack posture, one seen from the front and the other from the rear.[31]

In sculpture, the posture was already used in the pediment of the temple of Aphaia (about 490 B.C.) and in the Tyrannicide Group (477/6 B.C.), and it appears almost as a matter of course in the pediments of the temple of Zeus at Olympia (about 465 B.C.).[32] It soon became popular—as Anderson reminds us, Greek artists were inclined to copy one another[33]—and examples in red-figure become too numerous to mention. It appears, too, in scenes of unconventional warfare: for example, in an engagement between satyrs and maenads on a volute-krater of about 430

B.C. (Figure 5).[34] On the right, a satyr adopts the canonical attack posture, with left leg and arm advanced simultaneously, against a retiring maenad. His companion on the left, however, is forced back into the defense posture as a more aggressive maenad threatens to deliver a particularly painful blow with the butt end of her *thyrsos*.

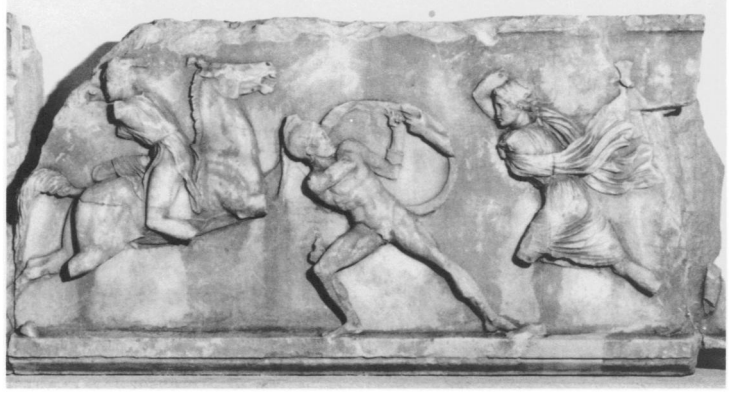
As the stance proved not merely useful but versatile, it was adopted by Greek artists for use in a variety of circumstances. A selection is conveniently illustrated on a single cup in the British Museum showing the Deeds of Theseus (Figure 6).[35] Against the sow of Crommyon, Theseus uses the attack posture with a conventional underhand sword thrust (upper left). Procrustes is attacked with his own ax (upper right), wielded overhead as in the Centauromachy discussed earlier: again there is no danger of a counterattack. Sciron's footbath, also conveniently at hand, provides an unconventional weapon to be used in the same fashion. In the central tondo, Theseus is no longer in actual combat, but the artist shows him using the same stance as he pulls the Minotaur's corpse out of the Labyrinth.

Sculptors were also quick to share the enthusiasm of vase-painters for this posture, which lends itself so freely to a variety of situations and, especially in battle-scenes, both serves (or so it seems) as a reminiscence of a movement used by actual swordsmen and provides the artist with figures in a whole range of poses for incorporation in his composition. Throughout the Greek world, the posture appears constantly in sculptured scenes of battle. By the time of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (mid-fourth century B.C.) it had become a cliché, employed particularly blatantly on a slab formerly attributed to Scopas (Figure 7).[36] Here, separated only by an Amazon in the defense posture, desperately wielding her battle-ax in a manner that leaves her totally exposed to a sword-thrust, are two Greeks shown facing to the right in the attack posture. Each leans forward on a bent left leg, his body continuing the line of his right leg stretched out in a straight line behind. The only significant difference is that one leans farther forward, at a sharper angle to the ground. From the sculptor's point of view, both contribute conveniently to the system of interlocking diagonal lines that binds together the whole composition of the Amazon frieze of the Mausoleum. On the adjacent slab (Figure 8) a Greek provides a corresponding set of diagonals pointing in the opposite direction as he adopts an extreme form of the defense posture under the onslaught of an Amazon, who herself uses the attack posture, wielding her battle-ax overhead with one hand as she pushes the Greek's shield aside with the other.[37]

The posture was to have a long history in ancient art, lasting well into the Roman period. Its nadir is perhaps to be found in Macedonia, on the celebrated lion-hunt mosaic from Pella.[38] Hunting lions and other dangerous game with spears had been an artis-

7. Greeks in the attack posture against Amazons. Detail of a frieze from the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, ca. 350 B.C. London, British Museum, Sculpture 1014 (photo: British Museum)

8. A Greek in the defense position yielding to an Amazon. Detail of a frieze from the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, ca. 350 B.C. London, British Museum, Sculpture 1015 (photo: British Museum)



tic convention in Greece for several centuries.[39] In the Macedonian mosaic, the lion is attacked from both sides, by a swordsman on the spectator's right and by a spearman on the left. The swordsman adopts the attack posture, with his weapon held overhead for a Harmodios blow. Neither his weapon nor the way he uses it is really suitable for engaging a lion. A spear is certainly a more sensible weapon for the task, but only when properly used. The spearman's legs are in the attack position, but turned in the wrong direction. In fact, the legs of both men are represented in similar fashion, although both their actions and their positions relative to the lion are different. The stance, therefore, is used merely as an artistic convention, without regard for its original form and function. Unfortunately, the sort of comment on such inept footwork that might have been made by one of the *hoplomachoi* who drilled the *ephebes* remains among the many things not recorded by ancient authors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

Anderson—J. K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1970)

*ARV*²—J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters* (2d ed. Oxford, 1963)

Pritchett—W. Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War* II (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1974), IV (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1985)

Shefton—B. B. Shefton, "Some Iconographic Remarks on the Tyrannicides," *American Journal of Archaeology* 64 (1960) pp. 173–179

NOTES

1. Anderson, p. 84; Pritchett, II, pp. 208ff., esp. 219–221 for training during campaigns.

2. Anderson (p. 87 with n. 7) points out that there is no Greek account of sword exercise like that recommended for the training of Roman legionaries in Vegetius, *De re militari* I, 12.

3. Anderson, pp. 87–89.

4. Xenophon, *Anabasis* I, 2.17; VI, 5.25–37. For company-drill, see Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* II, 3.21–22; drill for larger units, see ibid. 4.2–5.

5. Anderson, p. 87.

6. Shefton, pp. 173–179.

7. Naples, G 103, 104: G. Lippold, *Die griechische Plastik* (Munich, 1950) p. 107 n.1 (bibl.), pl. 34, nos. 3–4; Martin Robertson, *History of Greek Art* (Cambridge, 1975) pp. 185, 647 n.49 (bibl.).

8. Red-figured hydria attributed to the Nausikaa Painter, New York, MMA, 25.28; *ARV*², p. 1110, no. 41 (bibl.). Red-figured squat lekythos attributed to the Eretria Painter, New York, MMA, 31.11.13; *ARV*², p. 1248, no. 9 (bibl.).

9. Shefton, p. 173.

10. On a wound in the armpit, see J. Frel, "The *Volneratus Deficiens* by Cresilas," *MMAB* n.s. 29 (1970–71) pp. 170–177, esp. fig. 9; idem, "The Wounded Warrior in New York and London," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1973, pp. 120–121.

11. On linen corselets, see Anderson, p. 23 with nn.47–51.

12. Homer, *Iliad* XVI, 114–123. For a discussion, with other references to spears broken in combat, see Pritchett, IV, p. 56 with n.167; see also Shefton, p. 174. In Attic red-figure, representations of a sword-slash used against a spear-blow are particularly frequent in scenes of combat between a Greek hoplite armed with a spear and a Persian with a sword: see Anne Bovon, "La représentation des guerriers perses et la notion de barbare dans la 1re moitié du Ve siècle," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 87 (1963) esp. pp. 579–591.

13. Shefton, p. 173: The Harmodios blow is often represented with the shield moved back, perhaps for balance, but Shefton, p. 176, also sees the forward thrust of the left arm (without shield) as intended to maintain balance.

14. Ibid., p. 173, with n.6.

15. Red-figured volute-krater attributed to the Painter of the Woolly Satyrs, New York, MMA, 07.286.84; *ARV*², p. 613, no. 1 (bibl.).

16. Shefton, pp. 173 with n.3, 174.

17. Ibid., p. 175. On the use of straight swords (for thrusting) and curved swords (for slashing) in vase-painting, see Ander-

son, p. 37. The archaeological evidence for the two types is assembled by A. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks* (London, 1967) p. 97; see also Pritchett, IV, p. 61 n.183. On the "cut and thrust" sword, see also A. Snodgrass, *Early Greek Armour and Weapons* (Edinburgh, 1964) pp. 104 (use), 205 (origin). At this early period, at least in art, a blow with the edge of a sword was more common than a thrust: G. Ahlberg, *Fighting on Land and Sea in Greek Geometric Art* (Stockholm, 1971) pp. 47ff. The use of the edge and the point in vase-painting was also studied by H. Lorimer, "The Hoplite Phalanx," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 42 (1947) pp. 76–138, esp. 119, cited by Pritchett, IV, p. 60, where he quotes Vegetius, *De re militari* (I.12), to the effect that in practice a blow with the edge of a sword rarely kills, while a stab is generally fatal.

18. E. K. Borthwick, "Two Scenes of Combat in Euripides," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90 (1970) p. 18.

19. Detail from the same vase as Figure 3; see note 17.

20. The "underarm thrusting position" for the use of the spear, illustrated in Peter Connolly, *The Greek Armies* (London, 1977), is very similar, the rear leg being almost straight with the heel off the ground. On the overhead and underhand use of the spear, see Pritchett, IV, p. 60 with nn.177–179. Drill-movements with the spear and the words of command are discussed by Anderson, pp. 88–89, 91 n.22.

21. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III, 12.5, discussed by Pritchett, II, p. 211 and IV, pp. 63–64 with n.195.

22. Thucydides II, 38–39 (Pericles's Funeral Oration). Pritchett (II, p. 211) comments that the Athenians were nonetheless panic-stricken on confronting the Spartans at Sphacteria (Thucydides IV, 34.1). For a discussion of what was almost a literary commonplace (references in Galen, Lucian, Philostratus, Plato, Plutarch, and Xenophon), see Pritchett, II, pp. 213ff. Plato (*Laws*, 829ab) stressed that athletic training should be aimed at agility rather than mere strength. Agility was also fostered by the dance in armor (Pyrrhic), and Anderson (pp. 92–93) suggested that it may have been used to teach basic drill-movements, but representations in vase-painting do not include postures like those discussed here in connection with swordsmanship. The Pyrrhicist is often shown looking back over his shoulder: see J.-C. Poursat, "Les représentations de danse armée dans la céramique attique," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 92 (1968) pp. 550–615. For further references on the Pyrrhic with discussion of various controversies, see Pritchett, IV, pp. 61–63. For Etruscan parallels see G. Camporeale, "La Danza Armata in Etruria," *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome, Antiquité* 99 (1987) pp. 11–42.

23. Pritchett, II, p. 208 n.3; see also Anderson, p. 86, citing J. Delorme, *Gymnasion* (Paris, 1960) 27; contrast Humphreys, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 94 (1974) p. 90, who sees "little evidence of [Delorme's] association between the gymnasium and the hoplite."

24. Plato, *Laws*, 813e; Anderson, p. 86.

25. G. L. Cawkwell, "Epaminondas and Thebes," *Classical Quarterly* 66 (n.s. 22, 1972) p. 262 n.4. I remember introducing Helmut Nickel to Evelyn Waugh's trilogy, *Sword of Honour*—and his comment: "All armies are alike!"

26. Plato, *Laches* 181e–183d; Anderson, p. 86.

27. H. D. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (new ed., H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie, eds., Oxford, 1925–40) s.v.

28. Vase-painters generally chose to portray scenes consisting of a series of single hand-to-hand combats rather than fighting in formation. For the Chigi jug with its massed ranks, and other early examples, see Lorimer (n.17). Pritchett (IV, p. 91) comments that vase-painters' preference for open scenes also ruled out representations of concerted pushing (*othismos*).

29. Among rare examples in black-figure vase-painting of striding figures with a bent forward leg is a warrior on the hydria, Leyden P.C. 44 (J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black-figure Vase-painters* [Oxford, 1956] p. 106, no. 132; D. von Bothmer, *Amazons in Greek Art* [Oxford, 1957] p. 8, no. 24, pl. 13). A warrior near (and partly below) the handle of a neck-amphora attributed to the Polyphemos Group, at first sight in the classic attack posture (left knee bent, right leg stretched out behind, left arm bent, sword in hand for an underarm thrust) is actually being forced to his knees by an overarm spear-thrust from his opponent (E. Langlotz, *Martin von Wagner-Museum der Universität Würzburg, Griechische Vasen*, p. 87, no. 455, pl. 133). A similar posture occurs in Laconian black-figure as early as about 550 B.C. for a hunter pursuing a boar with a spear, perhaps an anomalously early version of the attack posture: Louvre E 670; P. E. Arias, B. B. Shefton, M. Hirmer, *A History of Greek Vase Painting* (London, 1962) p. 309 (bibl.), pl. 73 above.

30. Arezzo 1465; *ARV*², p. 15, no. 6 (bibl.).

31. Boston 00.338; *ARV*², p. 427, no. 4 (bibl.).

32. D. Ohly, *Die Aegineten* (Munich, 1976) I, esp. Beilage E and pls. 12, 55; note also on pl. 58 that the rear heel is off the ground: see also n.20. For the temple of Zeus at Olympia, see B. Ashmole and N. Yalouris, *Olympia, The Sculptures of the Temple of Zeus* (London, 1967) pl. 95.

33. Anderson, p. 87.

34. Red-figured volute-krater with stand, New York, MMA 24.97.25. G. M. A. Richter and L. F. Hall, *Red-figured Athenian Vases in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1936) pp. 161–162, pl. 127.

35. London, British Museum E 84 (GR 1850.3–2.3), kylix attributed to the Codrus Painter, *ARV*², p. 1269, no. 4 (bibl.). The scene of Theseus wrestling with Kerkyon is cited by Borthwick, "Two Scenes of Combat," p. 19, to illustrate the "Thessalian trick," a wrestling movement adapted to swordsmanship by Eteocles in Euripides, *Phoinissai* 1407–1413.

36. London, British Museum, Sculpture 1014 (GR 1857.12–20.269). The attribution to Scopas was first made by the exca-

vator of the Mausoleum, C. T. Newton, in 1857 and has been widely accepted. For reasons why the attribution is no longer tenable, see B. F. Cook, "The Sculptors of the Mausoleum Frieze" in *Architecture and Society in Hecatomnid Caria* (conference proceedings, Uppsala, 1987, forthcoming).

37. London, British Museum, Sculpture 1015 (GR 1857.12–20.268).

38. Ph. Petsas, "Mosaics from Pella" in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* (colloquium papers, Paris, 1963 [1965]) pp. 41–56, figs. 3, 4.

39. K. Friis Johansen, *Les vases sicyoniens* (Paris/Copenhagen, 1923) p. 149.