

Men Without Clothes: Heroic Nakedness and Greek Art

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Clothes are the cause of nudity. (Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society)¹

Classical Greece has become the cultural reference point by which the public display of the naked male body is justified: the German magazine editor who in 1994 published photographs of Prince Charles only partially concealed behind a bath towel, attempted to claim the purloined private image as suitable for the public stage with reference to his appearing 'like a Greek statue'. For us, appeal to the Greeks can indeed be the bath towel which alone preserves our academic respectability, but if we wish to understand the role of the exposed male body in Greek art, no such defence is possible. The issue is pointedly highlighted by Denis Diderot in his imaginary dialogue with a sculptor on the topic of female beauty:

'Well, to answer without torturing my mind too much, when I want to make a statue of a beautiful woman, I have a great number of them undress; all offer both beautiful parts and badly shaped parts; I take from each what is beautiful.' 'And how do you recognize what is beautiful?' 'Obviously, from its conformity with the antique, which I have thoroughly studied.' 'And if the antique did not exist, how would you go about it? You are not answering my question ...'²

For Kenneth Clark the ideal early Greek male nude was 'calm, pitiless and supremely confident in the power of physical beauty'.³ Modern discussion of male nudes focuses on their structure and their musculature, while discussion of female nudes focuses on their sexuality (hence the dismay at the boundary crossing of Robert Mapplethorpe's *Lady: Lisa Lyon*).⁴ But what were the connotations of nudity in antiquity, and just how asexual was the naked male body? This paper reviews what scholars in the past have made of the nakedness of men in Greek art and then surveys chronologically the naked male body in archaic and classical Greek art, probing the protocols of fleshly display and the changing boundaries of what was acceptable.

Scholarship on classical Greek art is divided in its interpretation of the exposed male body. For one tradition the exposure of male flesh is an act of heroization.⁵ Among contemporary scholars, this tradition can be seen behind Brunhilde Ridgway's comment that in the scenes of fighting on the sculpted frieze of the late fifth-century temple of Athene Nike at Athens 'the unrealistic attire of the fighters may have been meant to support a generic identification, *whereas complete nudity might have entirely removed the action from the human sphere*'.⁶ Most recently Nigel Spivey has written: 'Greek men did not normally walk around with no clothes on, so if figures are glimpsed naked (or nude) in the context of what appears to be a "realistic" scene, then the chances are that the scene has been elevated from the realistic to the supernatural.'⁷ Those who deny heroization may nevertheless stress idealization: so Andrew Stewart, who writes that 'so-called heroic nudity is nothing of the sort', explains the dominance of the male nude in Greek sculpture by exclaiming that 'if the artist's wish was to portray man in an "ideal" or rather archetypal and generalizing way, then what better device was there to reveal both beauty and arete [excellence, virtue], while affirming the superiority of men over women, and soon, of Greeks over barbarians?'⁸

But a second tradition regards the element of idealization in the exposed male body as minimal. Although Sir John Boardman admits that 'The idealizing tendency in Classical sculpture ... is abetted by the male nude', he claims:

In Classical Greece the nude (men only) was acceptable in life. Athletes at exercise or competition went naked and it was possible to fight near-naked. Youths and even the more mature took no pains to conceal their private parts on any festive, and no doubt many more ordinary, public occasions ... In Greek art, therefore, the nude could carry no special 'artistic' connotation, nor could it exclusively designate a special class, such as hero or god.⁹

Christoph Clairmont wants to go even further, and has asserted that the naked male of Greek sculpture 'is not likened to a hero. The fact that the heroes of Greek mythology are mostly, but not exclusively, depicted naked is sheer coincidence.'¹⁰

At issue here is the role of undress in Greek life. Insistence that Greek sculpture looks as it does because Greeks themselves looked like that goes back to the founding father of classical art history, the eighteenth-century German scholar J. J. Winckelmann, in whom, at least, there is an element of wishful thinking:

The forms of the Greeks, prepared to beauty, by the influence of the mildest and purest sky, became perfectly elegant by their early exercises ... By these exercises the bodies of the Greeks got the great and manly contour observed in their statues, without any bloated corpulency. The young Spartans were bound to appear every tenth day naked before the ephors, who, when they perceived any inclinable to fatness, ordered them a scantier diet ... The

gymnasia, where, sheltered by public modesty, the youths exercised themselves naked, were the schools of art ... Here beautiful nakedness appeared with such a liveliness of expression, such truth and variety of situations, such a noble air of the body, as it would be ridiculous to look for in any hired model of our academies ... The fairest youths danced undressed in the theatre; and Sophocles, the great Sophocles, when young, was the first who dared entertain his fellow-citizens in this manner ... Then every solemnity, every festival, afforded the artist opportunity to familiarize himself with all the beauties of Nature ... The probability still increases, that the bodies of the Greeks, as well as the works of their artists, were framed with more unity of system, a nobler harmony of parts, and a completeness of the whole, above our lean tensions and hollow wrinkles.¹¹

Against such a view, those who stress idealization deny that Greek men can normally have worked or fought unclothed. So Martin Robertson says of the sixth-century dedicatory figure of a man carrying a sacrificial calf that 'A Greek of this time would not have gone about in a single little garment exposing the whole front of his body', and supports his claim that the Parthenon frieze does not represent the Panathenaic procession as it ever took place by observing that 'young men for instance did not ride naked in classical Athens'.¹² Andrew Stewart points out that statues of unclothed men were produced before it became conventional for men to compete unclothed in athletics, and he sees the latter as the adoption of 'a kind of absolute and archetypal state' which served to 'certify athletes as a class apart'.¹³

Little external evidence is available to settle the arguments about the relationship between exposed bodies in Greek art and exposed bodies in Greek life. The main body of evidence for life comes from art itself, both Greek sculpture and the scenes on Greek pots, but the relationship between either sculpture or the scenes on pots and life is itself open to discussion.¹⁴ Texts support the view that at least some gymnastic and athletic activities were practised with bodies unclothed,¹⁵ but textual evidence for bodily exposure in other circumstances is limited and not always easy to interpret. Nevertheless it is important to stress that the textual evidence clearly indicates that at Athens, at least, opportunities to observe male genitalia were limited and that viewing young men's penises was sexually provocative. In Aristophanes' play *Clouds* insouciant youthful nakedness is a feature of the golden Marathonian past,¹⁶ vanished from the present, and when in his *Wasps* the character Bdelykleon asks his father Philokleon 'Give me an example of what good ruling Greece does you?', Aristophanes has Philokleon reply: 'When boys are inspected [to see that they are eighteen] we get a good view of their genitals.'¹⁷ This latter exchange draws attention to the way the unclothed male body went on display in controlled contexts: the Athenian Council which inspected these young men was made up of men aged over thirty; at the Olympic games too, women were prohibited from being spectators. It is common to note that Winckelmann's

claims about the Greeks were not unrelated to changes in attitudes to sexuality and the body that he desired to promote in his own day, and a similar motivation can be found behind parallel recent claims that what you see on pots is what you got in life,¹⁸ but the ancient texts give us good reason to believe that male nudity in life was sexually charged in classical antiquity as well for modern scholars.

To understand why any particular sculpted or drawn body is clothed or unclothed, we need to be able to establish what the options were. No artistic image is produced in a vacuum, and in the case of any particular image we can and must establish the alternative traditions against which, at any given moment in time, the choice of an artist or of his client to have a particular image is to be understood.

Male figures in the various regional styles of Greek art in the eighth century, known as 'Geometric' art because of the dominance of geometric ornament in pottery decoration, are not clothed. Breasts are indicated or separate legs are replaced by a solid or decorated panel from which two feet project to gender a figure as female. Maleness is positively indicated not by clothing but by arms and armour and by such occupations as driving a chariot. In statuettes maleness may be positively indicated by making male genitalia manifest. Some males are prominently belted but this apparently does not imply clothing.

In geometric drawing and sculpture, therefore, to be a man is to be unclothed. Several arguments suggest that this was not also true of geometric life. Practicality suggests that those who donned more or less elaborate armour would not neglect more elementary protection for parts vulnerable in war or to accidents liable to occur when animals are handled or metal worked. The Homeric poems, which draw on an oral tradition certainly alive and well in the eighth century, clothe their male characters and associate stripping of the body and exposure of genitals with dishonour and shame. More generally, clothing plays an important part in exchange and in the making of symbolic statements in epic poetry, and in the one instance where a hero displays his body along with his heroic prowess, when Odysseus casts off his clothes to tackle the suitors at the very beginning of *Odyssey* 22, that it is rags that he casts off may be as important symbolically as the nakedness he reveals.¹⁹ Already in the *Odyssey*, however, the encounter between the newly cast up Odysseus and Nausikaa does suggest the latent possibility, and sexuality, of the naked male body beautiful.²⁰

Given that the clothed man is unknown to eighth-century artists, and that they had the option of showing a woman instead of a man but not of showing a man clothed, it is inappropriate to ascribe any particular value to the unclothing of any particular male in geometric art. Historians sometimes worry about the lack of correspondence between art and what they believe to have been the case in life, and so talk of the 'ceremonial nudity' of a youth with a ram and deduce from this 'ceremonial nudity' that the activity in question is sacrificial rather than workaday, or suggest that the

contrast between the largely negative associations of the removal of clothing for the Homeric warrior and the uniformly unclothed bronze warrior figures demonstrates 'the early existence of different kinds of nudity in Greek culture. The nudity of a heroic warrior is apotropaic and must symbolize his valor and perhaps even divine favor'.²¹ The contrast between the generally negative value of being without clothes in the Homeric poems and the absence of clothes from all men in drawing and sculpture does indeed demand explanation, but the very consistency with which men are unclothed argues for the exposed body as being essential to being a man, not as a feature of a particular sort of man.²² The unclothed body marks gender difference, and suggests that marking gender difference was important, but there seems no reason to read anything more into it.²³

The 'conventional' exposure of the male body in geometric art suggests that it is clothing, as much as the unclothed body, which needs to be explained in early Greek art. In geometric art clothing marks out a character as 'not a man'. Later, in seventh-century Greek art, men are not infrequently clothed, but it is arguable that clothing marks out figures who are in some way deserving of special attention. Where getting a story over is what is important men frequently remain unclothed—so Odysseus and his men are unclothed as they blind the Cyclops.²⁴ But elsewhere, when an artist wishes to confront viewers with the recognition of everyday experience, men are often clothed and their clothing treated in considerable detail. This can be illustrated nicely from the mid-seventh-century pot of Corinthian manufacture known as the Chigi Vase (Figure 1): here the top frieze, which shows, perhaps for the first time in art, heavily armed troops about to clash in battle, clothes both the warriors and the boy playing the flute; the middle frieze seems to have clothed all participants in the tableau of the judgement of Paris and clothes most of those involved in the chariot procession and lion hunt, but leaves at least one huntsman naked but for a belt; the lowest frieze showing boys ambushing small animals leaves most of the human participants naked. Armour is clearly itself part of the subject of the top frieze (two men are shown behind the main lines still arming themselves); the conjunction of the familiar and the exotic (whether mythical beauty-contests or foreign lion hunts) seems essential to the central frieze; only the bottom frieze is essentially an adventure story. The naked huntsman in the centre frieze embodies the tension there between on the one hand emphasizing the similarity between exotic hunts or Paris' judgement of goddesses and the everyday activities of hunting and girl-spotting, and on the other hand the uncluttered telling of a story.

It is, I suggest, clothing that is the marked signifier in seventh-century art, not the unclothed body, and there is no reason to think that the significance of the unclothed male in art changed immediately there was a possibility of men being clothed. To leave a man without clothes in seventh-century painting or sculpture is to offer the viewer no context in which to place him other than the context of the figure's own actions. This is particularly



Figure 1: Protocorinthian *olpe* known as the Chigi Vase; mid-seventh-century BCE. Rome, Villa Giulia. Photo: Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Munich.

important for understanding the development and popularity of the *kouros* type in sculpture (Figure 2).

Although small bronzes of naked standing figures are known from the end of the eighth century onwards, the large stone type of naked male figure with feet slightly apart and arms by sides, known as the *kouros*, appears only in the late seventh century. Although analysis of proportions leaves no doubt that sculptors were inspired by large Egyptian sculptures, the Egyptian parallels have been rid of their loin-cloths, their determined expressions, and their associations with particular (ruling) figures, before they appear in Greek sanctuaries and as markers on Greek graves. The *kouros* type dominated free-standing sculptural representation of individual men from the end of the seventh to the beginning of the fifth century. That long popularity seems closely linked to the difficulties involved in pinpointing exactly what the *kouros* represents: it is clear that it cannot in every case represent the god to whom it is dedicated, since some are dedicated to the goddesses Athena and Hera, or the dedicant (since men dedicate *korai*, the clothed female equivalent). Some have argued that the nakedness of the figure *does* make it specifically an athlete, but the absence of the *aryballos* (a flask to hold perfumed oil) that identifies the athlete in archaic grave reliefs, or the strigil that serves the same purpose in classical sculpture counts against this.²⁵ Rather this figure would seem to offer a template in which any man can fit himself, whether to feel sympathy for the dead in whose place he might have been or to place himself as a model of humanity before the gods. Either specific action or a specific age for the figure require clothing: once a figure is shown carrying a calf (as with the Moskhophoros from the Athenian Acropolis mentioned by Martin Robertson in the quotation above), or is shown distinctly immature (as with the figure of Dionysermos from Ionia), at least minimal clothing is provided.²⁶

But if the *kouros* carries on the tradition of unmarked nakedness, other sculptures and painted pottery of the sixth century reveal that the unclothed male was becoming an increasingly complex figure. Athenian tombstones, for example, regularly carry reliefs of individuals seen in profile.²⁷ Some are clothed, notably with armour, but the great majority are naked. Of these some carry a staff or other object which does little to specify their role in life, but a large proportion identify themselves, by discus, bound hand, or oil flask, as men who engage in athletics. These unclothed bodies have become contextualized, and the viewer is encouraged to see in the absence of clothing the realities—or at least the idealization—of the gymnasium. Real-life contexts of nakedness have for the first time been invoked in sculpture. More or less contemporaneously, as sculpture begins to invoke the one public context in which males might be viewed unclothed, pots begin in the middle of the sixth century to invoke both private and public contexts in which men might be unclothed, first with lewd dancers and sexual activity—where the erect phallus might best be seen as an accoutrement which sexualizes as it contextualizes—and then with athletes.²⁸



Figure 2: Sixth-century *kouros* probably from Boiotia. British Museum B474. Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Neither in sculpture nor in the painting of pottery is there a clean break between the unmarked unclothed male and the marked naked man, but in the course of the sixth century the male body lost its semiotic innocence. We can understand what is happening equally in social and in artistic terms. An elite which expresses its superiority over the run of men by the ability to make lasting memorials of its dead will also create a demand for ways by which some of its members can demonstrate their superiority over others. One area of possible competition is size of monument, but another is its specificity, the invoking of the dead person as a particular type of individual by making reference to their achievements in life. To make such reference demands the display of the range of public achievements of which members of the elite were proud, demands that features of the sculpted monument be seen to invoke particular features of the life lived and not just its bare male humanity. Similarly, the demand for figurative pottery seems to have moved from semi-public pots such as amphorae which may have stood about storing wine or oil, or the mixing-bowls for wine which seem to have been popular as wedding gifts around 600 BCE, to smaller private vessels seen only when in use at the, perhaps increasingly fashionable, formalized male drinking parties known as symposia. Such vessels could display the owner's wit and culture in many ways, but that they should do so by offering reflections of acceptable, and in due course unacceptable, behaviour on the very occasions on which they were used, was surely inevitable.²⁹

In artistic terms, the challenge to both sculptors and painters in the sixth century can be seen as the challenge to allude to the known world in an ever richer way, to absorb the viewer's interest and attention by encouraging a continuous and varied flow of associations—something some artists sought to achieve by combining texts with their painting or carving. There is an inevitable tension, however, between this aim and the aim, most apparent in the *kouros*, of offering an image with which any man can associate himself, for the richer the skein of allusions the greater the specificity which must result (Figure 3). The final destruction of the *kouros* type by this specificity is to be seen in such early fifth-century figures as the Anaphe *kouros*, illustrated here, or the Kritian boy; in these figures the traditional static *kouros* pose is transformed into a specific movement, and the traditional agelessness of the *kouros* transformed into a specific adolescence; the power of the *kouros* to stand in for men in general is utterly lost. The unclothed male can no longer stand to the viewer in a relationship of identity: a new relationship is formed. This new relationship, which is the basis of what E. Gombrich famously called 'the Greek revolution', is one in which voyeurism becomes for the first time one of the options for the viewer.³⁰ The varied sexual attraction exercised by the remarkable Riace Bronzes, which perhaps date to around 460 BCE, on different modern viewers shows very clearly that their unclothed mature male bodies can no longer make a pretence at sexual innocence: the viewer stands to the statue in a relationship of desire.³¹



Figure 3: Early fifth-century *kouros* from Anaphe. British Museum B475. Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

The most remarkable monument to the sexualizing of the unclothed body may well be one now lost. The Athenians had erected, perhaps in the last decade of the sixth century, what Pliny (*Natural History* 34.70) believed to be the first official portrait statues to commemorate the killing of the tyrant Hipparkhos by Harmodios and Aristogeiton. This original 'tyrannicide' group was taken away by Xerxes in the sack of Athens in 480 BCE, and the Athenians had Kritios and Nesiotes produce a new group. That group, although now lost, inspired both direct copies and imitation in other contexts, including on painted pottery, and we have a good idea of the appearance of the balanced pair in striding active poses. It is likely that the tyrannicide pair were markedly distinguished as to their maturity by means other than merely the beard of the older man. By the time that Thucydides wrote, Harmodios and Aristogeiton were held to have been lovers, and the murder of Hipparkhos the indirect result of Hipparkhos' lack of success in seducing Harmodios.³² Antenor's original group seems unlikely to have conveyed much of that relationship, but in the later group the aggressive display of the unclothed male bodies may well have acquired a sexual edge.

The same sexualizing process can be traced on pots too. Black-figure pottery shows an increasing interest in scenes which are not identifiably mythological and which make more or less direct reference to real life. Such reference is in part pioneered by the scenes of athletics which were painted on the oil amphorae awarded as prizes at the games associated with the great festival of the Panathenaia from the 560s onwards. It is in athletic scenes that sensitivity to male nakedness is first apparent, when on vases destined for an Etruscan market painters of the so-called Perizoma group add loin-cloths to running figures.³³ The development of the red-figure technique at the end of the sixth century enabled bodies to occupy space and not simply be flat silhouettes, as they had been in the earlier black-figure technique, and the shadow-play which kept painted scenes at a distance from the viewer's experience gave way to possibilities of intimacy which necessarily made real-life experiences part of the painter's agenda. The painter's desire to emulate real-life experiences is inseparable from the painting of desire.

From around 500 BCE onwards, therefore, the decision to show an unclothed male was a decision in which a number of different factors played a part. Artists who chose to show men unclothed might do so because they wished to signal that they belonged to a long artistic tradition, because they were imitating life, or because the display of male sexuality was relevant to their artistic aims. The way in which the sexuality of the unclothed male was newly subject to negotiation on painted pottery from the end of the sixth century onwards is well illustrated by one particular iconographic development: the representation of the ligaturing of the penis, often known as 'male infibulation', and by the way in which some habitually clothed male figures are treated.

Ligaturing, the restraint of the penis usually by tying it up in some fashion, is represented on vases and, very occasionally, in sculpture.³⁴ In early red-figure vases, between about 510 and about 460 BCE, youths are represented in athletic contexts tying up their penises, or with penises tied up, and mature men are represented with ligatured penises in the context of the post-sympotic revel known as the *komos*. During the same period some satyrs are also shown with ligatured penises.³⁵ What unites all these activities? Although the activities of the *komos* could indeed be athletic, and are particularly so portrayed when satyrs are involved, the factor common to all these scenes would seem to be not violent physical activity but discourse about sex. Athletes were both peculiarly in the public eye and in danger of immodest display, and were held to perform better if they refrained from sexual activity;³⁶ the symposium was the place where control over bodily appetites was displayed in the face of opportunities to lose control; satyrs' bodies were used to parade humanly improper degrees of indulgence and transgression. By taking the ligaturing of the penis out of the athletic context in which it may have been at least occasionally employed, and out of the context of use by sexually immature youths, and by redeploying it in mature human or fantasy situations in which it had no role in genital protection but was rather a signifier of discourse about sexual control, early red-figure artists make it abundantly clear that the display of the naked male body is no longer insouciant: men's bodies are actively sexual.

The place of ligaturing in discourse about sex is well illustrated by comparing its use by the painter Douris on a wine-cooling vase (*psykter*) in the British Museum and on a cup in Berlin.³⁷ The *psykter* (Figure 4a and b) shows a group of satyrs performing various more or less athletic feats in order to drink wine out of a range of vessels. Of the eleven satyrs shown, eight have their penises ligatured. One satyr has a penis which is unligatured but not erect, and it is he alone who is not entirely naked, but wears, as if in theatrical costume, a highly decorated cloak round his shoulders, Thracian boots and a travelling hat, and carries a herald's staff: he is dressed up as the god Hermes, his boots and cloak deliberately made to be mortal equivalents of Hermes' own accustomed dress, rather than identical with that dress. Two other satyrs have erect penises: one is performing the feat of balancing on the tip of an erect penis a vase which is being filled from a jug by one of his companions; the other overlooks and approaches with a great stride from the rear a satyr who is attempting to drink from a cup while doing a hand-stand. The presence of these sexually excited satyrs in the two most extraordinary stunt performances makes it clear that sex, as well as drink, is a focus of attention here. These satyrs are shown both as the most 'cool' and urbane of men, and as the most transgressive: to represent satyrs is always to raise the question of sexual activity.

The exterior of the Berlin cup by Douris shows mortal men in a post-sympotic revel (Figure 5). Like the satyrs on the *psykter*, these men put on display a range of drinking vessels. Two play the double pipes of the *aulos*,



Figure 4a and 4b: Attic red-figure *psykter* by Douris of c. 490 BCE. British Museum E768. Photos: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 5: Attic red-figure cup by Douris of early fifth-century date. Staatliche Museen Berlin Antikensammlung 2289.

two dance, another throws his head back as singers regularly are shown to do. In this *komos*, all the participants whose genitals are visible have their penises ligatured. All these mature, bearded men, who exhibit the acceptable degree of wine-induced excitement, are thus visibly shown to retain their urbanity, even in the heat of the wine. The ligaturing draws attention to what is absent, draws attention to the gap between the behaviour exhibited in this civilized revelry and the behaviour familiar among satyrs.

The importance of the ligatured penis for our understanding of the display of the unclothed male body lies precisely in the way in which it comes to be used to draw attention to an absence. To show scenes of men engaged in sexual activity, such as appear on certain shapes of pot particularly during this period from about 510 to about 460 BCE, carries no necessary implications for the unclothed male body as sexual. To show the penis ligatured, however, is to display the penis as an essentially sexual organ, and not merely a marker of the male gender. By taking over a practice which may have been employed by athletes for purposes of comfort or modesty and applying it in fantasy contexts, where it can have no practical place, artists turn the ligaturing of the penis into a way of denying that the naked male body can ever fail to be sexually engaged.

While men and other gods regularly appear naked, whether in myth or real-life contexts, in sixth- and early fifth-century art, one divine figure stands out: the god Dionysos is always clothed.³⁸ Young or old, beardless or bearded, gods regularly appear naked or in a sufficiently unclothed state to reveal their genitals during this period. Not Dionysos, who is rarely even bare-chested. Though regularly surrounded by satyrs who are not only not clothed but who display their sexual excitement, Dionysos remains clothed, just as, in the midst of drunken display, he remains sober.³⁹ Although Dionysos' dress can be paralleled by that worn by other male figures, there is no doubt that his robes, usually including a long garment, became inseparable from his image. This is particularly nicely seen when Dionysos is shown taking part in battles against the Giants: not only is his spear often also a *thyrsos* (a giant fennel stalk crowned with ivy), but when he is shown arming his costume is incongruous, and while his opponents may be shown as naked hoplites, the god himself never is (Figure 6).⁴⁰

Dionysos' clothing is closely related to the peculiar character of the god. Not only is his dress an object of attention in literary texts, particularly but not at all exclusively, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, but the cult image of Dionysos, which was a head on a draped pole, points to the peculiar unimportance of the body for this god. That stands out particularly clearly when the mask-idols of Dionysos are compared with the other divine image which lacks an anthropomorphic body: the Herm. Herms have square pillars for bodies, with short stubs for arms, but they also have an erect phallus. Dionysos' bodilessness emerges, by contrast with the Herm, as in particular a denial of sexuality.

Making sense of Dionysos' clothing is revealing both about how Dionysos differs from other gods and about the changing meaning of the unclothed



Figure 6: Attic red-figure cup by Oltos of c. 500 BCE. British Museum E8. Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

male body. Dionysos is exceptional among gods in the extent to which he attracts images which cannot be related to myths. The Dionysiac entourage of satyrs and/or maenads attracts the attention of sixth-century vase painters in its own right, and from the early fifth century there are also scenes of activity around a mask-idol of Dionysos on a series of vases which scholars have associated with the festival of the Lenaea.⁴¹ Whatever the relationship of these scenes to ritual activities familiar to Athenians, there is little doubt that maenads in some sense reflect the activities of Dionysiac devotees. Sexual relationships between gods and mortals in myth were one thing, sexual relationships between gods and mortals as part of the normal encounter with the god of any (female) worshipper were another. By the end of the sixth century at least, when there has been a change in iconography such that maenads have become an object of interest in their own right and the *thyrsos* has appeared as their regular attribute, the bodilessness of Dionysos has to be read as a strong denial of the god's sexuality and an affirmation that, for all that phalloi were paraded as part of Dionysiac cult activity, enjoying sex was not itself part of what it was to worship this god.⁴² The emphasis on the clothing of Dionysos, which in the earliest representation of the god may simply mark him out from ordinary men, has to be seen by 500 BCE as a powerful symbol of his undoubted sexual power being kept under check, the visual equivalent of the marked lack of any mythological tradition of Dionysos as rapist. The universal concern to keep the

unclothed body of Dionysos off the scene argues very strongly for the strong sexual overtones of the naked body of at least the mature bearded male.

Until the middle of the fifth century, therefore, the story of the unclothed male body is arguably the story of a conventional way of showing men becoming increasingly problematized because of the changing priorities of representational art. The unclothed male body, which in geometric art could find a place in scenes of all sorts, comes to carry with it a sexual charge which makes it good, sometimes scandalous, to think with in certain contexts, but which makes it impossible to employ in others. The long tradition of representative practice in which the unclothed male body dominated sculptural and graphic imagery can be seen to be threatened by the additional burden which the richness of reference to the particular achieved in early fifth-century art. This richness of reference forced a confrontation between artistic traditions and real-life practice. As we have seen in examining the representation of ligaturing, early fifth-century vase painters, painting largely for consenting adult males in private, exploited this confrontation to encourage critical thought about behavioural conventions. In public sculpture, however, that confrontation was arguably distinctly more problematic, for outside the contrived and controlled circumstances of the symposium it was harder to maintain the playful fantasy that displayed the unclothed body in carefully captured real-life contexts to which it was alien. What the fifth-century sculptor needed was a way of escaping from real life and its associations, a way of preventing the very richness of his allusions to the world from giving his creations an all too specific fantasy life.⁴³

Around the middle of the fifth century there is a subtle but dramatic change in sculptural style which has been much discussed. The Riace Bronzes inhabit a different world from the classic male nude, Polykleitos' Doryphoros; the particularism and sensual bodily presence of the former is replaced in the latter by a focus on the shared and the typical. The sculptural convention of showing men without clothes has been rescued, and its sexual charge dissipated.

What is at issue in mid-fifth-century art is very well shown by continuing the story of the representation of Dionysos. From the third quarter of the fifth century, perhaps from the time of the Parthenon pediments (Figure 7), Dionysos is regularly shown without clothes in Athenian art in particular and in Greek art in general. But the removal of the clothes is not an isolated event, it goes together with the removal of the beard. The mature Dionysos, whose body is kept under wraps, is joined by a youthful Dionysos whose body is displayed (Figure 8).⁴⁴ Exhibiting the body of Dionysos, and exhibiting it in public sculpture, has become acceptable provided that that body is sexually immature.

What is true of Dionysos is also more generally true of males in sculpture. In the Parthenon sculptures all the bodies which are on display, whether on the pediments, in the metopes, or on the frieze, are the bodies

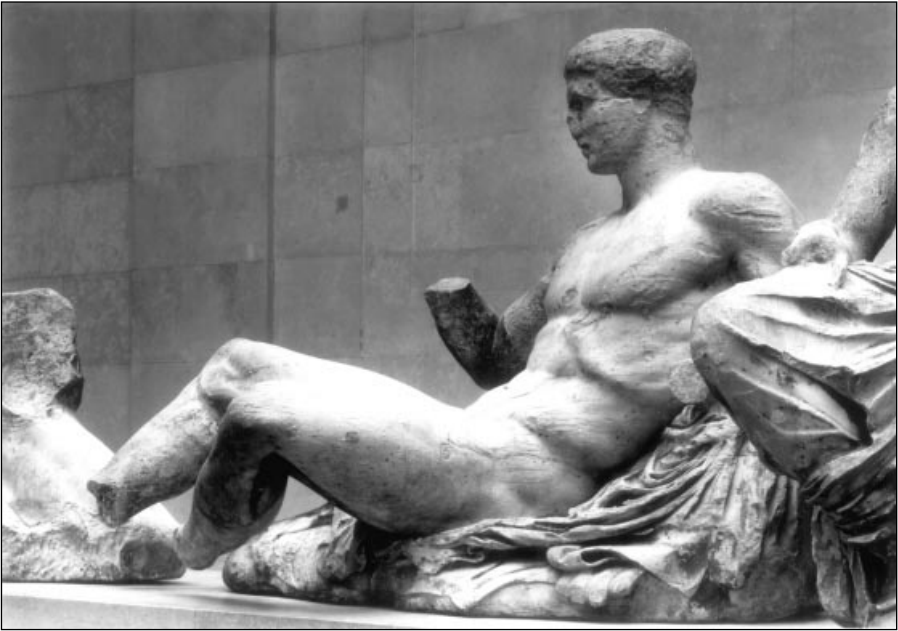


Figure 7: Figure of Dionysos from the East Pediment of the Parthenon, c. 435 BCE. British Museum 303. Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

of the beardless. Bearded men appear on the frieze, both as occasional features of the cavalcade and among the officials and other personages at the east end, but they are all clothed or otherwise have their genitals obscured. The famous free-standing sculptures of male nudes of this period, such as Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* and *Diadoumenos*, are similarly always beardless. The men who appear in Attic grave reliefs obey the same rule: beardless men may be naked, the bearded are clothed.⁴⁵ So, when *Lykeas* and *Khairedemos* are shown as two hoplites on a grave stele of c. 400 BCE, the latter is beardless and naked, the former bearded and clothed (Figure 9).⁴⁶ This convention that bearded men are not shown naked in normal circumstances endures throughout the fourth century, and has its effect even on the imagery of so quintessentially mature a figure as *Herakles*. Although *Herakles* is still shown bearded and without clothes, a youthful *Herakles* type is developed, perhaps stimulated by a sculpture by Polykleitos, in which the hero is shown beardless. It is this type that prevails, for example, in Athenian decree reliefs where, once more, all naked male figures are beardless.⁴⁷ Though the convention of not showing bearded men naked was perhaps stronger at Athens than elsewhere, exceptions are rather thin on the ground.⁴⁸

In vases the picture is more complicated, but something of the same pattern can be discerned. Bearded males without clothes continue to appear, but few such figures are of ordinary mortals. Satyrs remain bearded and naked, as do other 'monstrous' figures,⁴⁹ but gods (other than *Dionysos*)



Figure 8: Squat lekythos by the Makaria Painter, c. 400 BCE. British Museum E 703. Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 9: Grave relief of Lykeas and Khairedemos, c. 400 BCE. Peiraieus Museum 385. Photo: Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Munich.

may also be shown bearded and without clothes, as in the scene of their combat against Giants on a cup by the painter Aristophanes.⁵⁰ There is certainly no hard and fast rule that bearded men are not represented naked on vases, but such representation is infrequent, and when it occurs it seems to be specially motivated—as, for example, in the bell krater by the Nicias painter showing the end of a torch race, where it seems to be important to indicate that the leader of the running team was not a youth.⁵¹

What has happened to the unclothed male body seems best explained by returning to early fifth-century *kouroi* and the Riace Bronzes. The same richness of sculptural reference which gives the Riace bronzes their unavoidable sexual charge also renders the Anaphe *kouros* (Figure 2) or Kritian Boy definitely boys, and it is in the genitals, above all, that that boyishness is signalled. Beardlessness is now not a denial of age, as it was in archaic *kouros*, but an affirmation of youth, a sign of not having entered into the man's world and in particular of not having become sexually active. The distinction visible in the way vase-painters employ the ligaturing of the penis, where the athletes who use it are all beardless and tend to have a ligature which realistically shows the ends of the string, while the revellers (and satyrs) who use it are all bearded and no string is actually shown, foreshadows this differentiation between the sexuality of the beardless and of the bearded.

The emasculation of the beardless figure, which even allows a naked Dionysos to enjoy the company of women, should be seen as heavily conventional, not unrelated perhaps to literary claims that boys take no pleasure in being the passive partners in a homosexual relationship (as in Xenophon, *Symposion* 8.21). Although beardless figures include some who are in all respects shown as youthful, the beardless body is very often a sculptural construct, an idealization, distanced from the male body of life by its combination of beardless immaturity with distinctly mature musculature. The naked beardless men in fourth-century Athenian grave reliefs include men who in other respects are clearly physically in their prime. But the development of the convention helps to indicate the significance of the naked male body. Only in circumstances where there was a strong desire to maintain the central position of the naked male body in the representation of the human figure is the development of this artificial convention comprehensible. The convention enables the naked male body to be enjoyed in sculpture as it was enjoyed in life, on such occasions as the competition for manly beauty (*euandria*) at the Panathenaia.⁵² The convention recovers the archaic artistic tradition that men need no clothes and makes it possible to continue it in a new world in which art's enriched reference to the situations of ordinary life had put it under threat.

Tracing the history of the unclothed male body in Greek art has shown how changing artistic practices meant that the representation of the naked male was no unchanging sign. An unclothed body in geometric and archaic art was a body gendered as male; once sexually explicit scenes, and figures and scenes with rich reference to the circumstances of daily life, developed,

nakedness could no longer be a symbol simply of gender. After what may, in retrospect, be seen as something of a crisis of representation during the early years of the fifth century, when traditions of representing men naked were exploited as ways of exploring male sexuality, classical art developed a new convention which rescued the unclothed male body as an artistic standard by limiting its representation to youthful and 'sexually immature' males (or figures which belong outside the purely human world).

This history shows that there is justification neither for claims that in respect to nakedness art merely imitated life nor for claims that nakedness heroizes. To show a male figure without clothes was certainly to invoke the beautiful body of the young athlete and to claim the athletic body as the model of all it was to be a man. The artificiality of the claim that the beardless body could be asexual was soon exposed by vase painters who from time to time put young men's sexual activity defiantly on display.⁵³ And sculptors who adhered to the convention came themselves to make clear that the conventional asexuality of the unclothed beardless youth offered the male body for display only at the price of questioning his masculinity.⁵⁴ That such awareness of the fragility of the convention did not destroy that convention is evidence of the fundamental role which it played in establishing and maintaining a distance between art and life such as to ensure that the discourse about life which art maintained was kept distant from the sordid particulars of specific lives.

Any means of establishing a distance from the grubby reality of daily life will have its political uses. The transformation of Athenian imagery and iconography in the middle of the fifth century was a political as well as an artistic act; the Roman emperor Augustus and later autocratic rulers have known what they were doing when they have encouraged the re-adoption of classical imagery and its conventions. The activities of snooping photographers attract little praise from the royals whose images they capture, but the distancing from the sordid particulars of daily life which the image of the naked beardless male still has the power to effect is one that royalty should surely welcome.

Notes

1. Quoted by Adam Phillips, *London Review of Books* (4 January 1996), p. 6. I am grateful to Simon Goldhill for drawing my attention to this passage and to him, John Boardman, Jas Elsner, Bert Smith, Nigel Spivey and Maria Wyke for comments on an earlier draft.

2. Denis Diderot, *Sur l'art et les artistes* (Paris, 1967), p. 37; tr. by Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (Reaktion, London, 1994), p. 21.

3. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (John Murray, London, 1956), p. 37.

4. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Lady: Lisa Lyon by Robert Mapplethorpe*, text by Bruce Chatwin (Viking, New York, 1983); see Susan Butler, 'Revising Femininity', in *Looking*

on: *Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (Pandora, London, 1987), pp. 120–6, and Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (Routledge, London, 1992), pp. 8–9.

5. The most subtle and sophisticated exposition of this position is N. Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit in der griechischen Kunst* (De Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1990). This work contains many pertinent observations but nevertheless seems to me to beg the question on the fundamental issue. See the review by T. Hölscher in *Gnomon*, 65 (1993), pp. 519–28. In particular Himmelmann's omission of the sexualized body, which Hölscher (p. 528) notes, is what I here try to make good.

6. B. S. Ridgway, *Fifth-century Styles in Greek Sculpture* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1981), pp. 90–1 (my emphasis).

7. N. Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1996), pp. 112–13.

8. Andrew Stewart, *Greek Sculpture: An Exploration* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1990), pp. 79, 106.

9. John Boardman, *Greek Sculpture, the Classical Period* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1985), pp. 239, 238 (original emphasis).

10. Christoph Clairmont, *Classical Attic Tombstones* (Akanthus, Kilchberg, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 145–6.

11. J. J. Winckelmann, 'On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks' (1755), tr. H. Fuseli, quoted from David Irwin, *Winckelmann: Writings on Art* (Phaidon, London, 1967), pp. 61–8. See Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit*, pp. 1–28 for a full history of the development of views on male nakedness in Greek art.

12. Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975), pp. 94, 311.

13. Stewart, *Greek Sculpture*, p. 106.

14. See Mary Beard, 'Adopting an Approach II', in *Looking at Greek Vases*, ed. Tom Rasmussen and Nigel Spivey (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), pp. 12–35 and Robin Osborne, 'Whose Image and Superscription Is This?', *Arion*, n.s. 1 (1991), pp. 255–75.

15. Thucydides 1.6.5 is the classic text, and M. McDonnell, 'The Introduction of Athletic Nudity: Thucydides, Plato, and the Vases', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 111 (1991), pp. 182–92 the most recent discussion.

16. *Clouds* 961–89; cf. also *Birds* 137–42.

17. *Wasps* 577–8.

18. On Winckelmann see Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1994). Recently note e.g. Catherine Johns's paean on Greek sexual liberation in *Sex or Symbol? Erotic Images of Greece and Rome* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1982), or K. J. Dover's unshockable Greeks in *Greek Homosexuality* (Duckworth, London, 1978).

19. This is a traditional crux since by *Odyssey* 22.488 Odysseus has his rags on again.

20. *Odyssey* 6.127–246.

21. Tamsey Andrews talks of 'ceremonial nudity' when discussing the youth with a ram in the Sackler Museum, Harvard (Catalogue no. 1970.26), and Susan Langdon talks of 'different kinds of nudity' and of the 'apotropaic' nudity of the heroic warrior when discussing a helmeted warrior figure in the Menil Collection, both in *From Pasture to Polis: Art in the Age of Homer*, ed. S. Langdon (University of Missouri Press, Columbia, MO, 1993), at pp. 149 and 196.

22. I am not persuaded by Himmelmann (*Ideale Nacktheit*, p. 32) that male nudity carries aristocratic connotations in geometric art.

23. Compare L. Bonfante, 'Nudity as Costume in Classical Art', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 93 (1989), pp. 543–70 (at p. 549).

24. This is so both on the Protoattic amphora from Eleusis (Eleusis Museum) and on the Aristonothos krater from Cervetri (Museo dei Conservatori, Rome), which was perhaps made in the Greek west.

25. C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *'Reading' Greek Death* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995), pp. 227–70.

26. Moskhophoros: Athens Akropolis Museum 624; Dionysermos: Louvre MA3600.

27. G. M. A. Richter, *The Archaic Gravestones of Attica* (Phaidon, London, 1962).

28. Both the pots and the grave reliefs show how untrue for the sixth century is the claim made by Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, p. 113 that nudity is heroized by association, for in both media many who are demonstrably not heroes are naked, just as in both pots and architectural sculpture many who are heroes are clothed.

29. On the self-reflexive world of the art of the symposium see F. Lissarrague, *The Aesthetics of the Greek Banquet* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1990).

30. E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Phaidon, London, 1960), ch. 4.

31. See O. Taplin, *Greek Fire* (Cape, London, 1989), pp. 87–9. I discuss this further in 'Sculpted Men of Athens: Masculinity and Power in the Field of Vision', in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self-representation in the Classical Tradition*, ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (Routledge, London, 1998).

32. Thucydides 6.54.

33. J. Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1974), pp. 112, 211.

34. W. Sweet, 'Protection of the Genitals in Greek Athletics', *Ancient World*, 11 (1985), pp. 43–52; E. J. Dingwall, *Male Infibulation* (John Bale, Sons and Davidson Ltd, London, 1925). Dingwall's fascinating book insists, mistakenly in my view, on refusing to identify the ligature with the *kunodesme* referred to in some ancient sources, and on distinguishing between those representations in which some form of tie is clearly shown and those in which the penis is curled up without a tie. He achieves this by not sufficiently acknowledging the overlap between the types of males shown in his two classes, and as a result denies a connection with male modesty for either of his classes, preferring views about ligaturing preventing powers leaking, which are based on a Japanese parallel, and the curled penis being a sign of pederasty, sexual excess and moral degradation. I hope to discuss Dingwall and ligaturing at greater length elsewhere.

35. See F. Lissarrague, 'The Sexual Life of Satyrs', in *Before Sexuality*, ed. D. Halperin, J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1990), pp. 53–82, at pp. 58–60, to which I am much indebted for what follows.

36. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 119–20, citing Plato, *Laws* 840a.

37. BM E768 (J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-Figure Vases*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963; [hereafter ARV²]), p. 446, no. 262); Berlin 2289 (ARV², p. 435, no. 95).

38. The relevance of Dionysos to discussions of male nudity is brought out by Himmelmann, *Ideale Nacktheit*, pp. 27, 46–7. I know of only one image of Dionysos dating from before the middle of the fifth century BCE in which the god appears naked: the Dionysos on the silver coinage of Serdaioi in southern Italy. My discussion of

Dionysos is heavily indebted to the article by C. Gasparri, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Artemis Verlag, Zurich and Munich, 1981–), vol. 3.1, pp. 414–514. The Serdaioi coin is no. 76 in Gasparri's catalogue. On Dionysos in sixth-century art see T. H. Carpenter, *Dionysian Imagery in Archaic Greek Art: Its Development in Black-Figure Vase Painting* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986).

39. See Michael Jameson, 'The Asexuality of Dionysus', in *Masks of Dionysus*, ed. Thomas Carpenter and Christopher Faraone (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1993), pp. 44–64, esp. pp. 47–53.

40. See Gasparri catalogue no. 620 (for thyrsos-spear and naked opponent) and no. 609. Dionysos himself appears naked in such combats only from the end of the fifth century (see Gasparri no. 630 by the Jena Painter).

41. I discuss these further in 'The Ecstasy and the Tragedy: Varieties of Religious Experience in Art, Drama and Society', in *Tragedy and the Historian*, ed. Christopher Pelling (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997), pp. 187–211. On the 'Lenaean' vases see also F. Frontisi-Ducroux, *Le dieu-masque: une figure du Dionysos d'Athènes*, (Flammarion, Paris, 1991).

42. Arguably an exactly parallel phenomenon with regard to wine is visible in the 'Lenaean' vases. There maenads ladle wine from large pots and carry it round in various forms of cup, but they are never seen to drink, and, given the taboos on women drinking wine, can reasonably be assumed not to drink. Just as only making Dionysos bodiless could remove assumptions of sexual activity from rituals involving manipulations of male genitalia, so only putting the vessels into the hands of women could remove assumptions of inebriation from rituals involving manipulations of wine.

43. The voyeurism of the kinds of sexual narratives which these naturalistic statues elicit is also, of course, on display in the art of those who from Michelangelo to Mapplethorpe have turned to the Greek model to justify a more or less explicitly homoerotic art.

44. For a very rare example, from this same period, of a bearded Dionysos whose genitals are not concealed see ARV², p. 632, no. 3, printed as Figure 4 in Jameson, 'The Asexuality of Dionysus'.

45. Of three exceptions to this rule that I know, one (Clairmont, *Classical Attic Tombstones*, vol. 1, no. 100 [Athens National Museum 2004]) involves one Agakles, a bearded man shown as an athlete—a pankratiast—who has occupational reasons for being unclothed; the second (Clairmont, vol. 2, no. 192 [New York Metropolitan Museum 40.11.23]) involves the naked victim of a warrior, where the nakedness seems to be a mark of the man's weakness and helplessness; and only the third (Clairmont, vol. 2, no. 957 [Budapest Museum of Fine Arts 6259]) seems clearly problematic. In this last relief a bearded naked man, with cloak over his shoulder, stands beside a clothed woman. It is possible that this man too was intended as an athlete, since signs that he wore a crown have been detected (Clairmont, vol. 2 p. 829). But it should also be noted that the piece may not be Attic: Clairmont regards the suggestion, on quite different grounds, that it is Boiotian as being 'not without its merits' (p. 828). Naked bearded men certainly appear on Boiotian monuments: cf. the stele of Rhyinkhon, W. Schild-Xenidou, *Boötische Grab- und Weihreliefs archaischer und klassischer Zeit* (Schön, Munich, 1972), no. 44.

46. Peiraieus 385, Clairmont, *Classical Attic Tombstones*, vol. 2, no. 156. Clairmont (vol. 2, p. 106) remarks: 'Hölscher has rightly pointed out that in the case of Chairedemos one should not speak in terms of heroic nakedness, Lykeas having as much reason as his companion to be depicted naked but he actually wears clothing.' In fact what

T. Hölscher says ('Ein Kelchkrater mit Perserkampf', *Antike Kunst*, 17 [1974], pp. 78–85 at p. 81, n. 32) is 'Take the grave relief of Khairedemos and Lykeas from Salamis, which has been explicitly cited as evidence of the heroizing meaning of nakedness ... both stand by one another with shield and spear, one is clothed and the other is naked. Obviously they are also of the same status: the naked man is not because of his nakedness raised to some fundamentally different world from the clothed man' (my translation). That Hölscher is correct does not entail that there is *no* reason why Lykeas is clothed.

47. For Herakles in Athenian decree reliefs see Carol Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995), nos. 72, 82, 85, 133, 157 and 158. The young Theseus appears naked in no. 187 (a rather later example) and some other hero in no. 148. See also O. Palagia in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 4.1, pp. 747–8, nos. 326–30 on the beardless Herakles of these reliefs, and p. 758 for the possible role of a Herakles by Polykleitos in popularizing the beardless type.

48. It is a peculiarity of the frieze from the Mausoleion that there bearded hoplites are shown naked.

49. So Theseus' opponents are all bearded on the cups by the Kodros painter and by Aison *ARV*², p. 1269, no. 4, p. 1174, no. 1.

50. *ARV*², p. 1318, no. 1.

51. *ARV*², p. 1333, no. 1.

52. See N. Crowther, 'Male Beauty Contests in Greece: the *euandria* and the *euexia*', *Antiquité Classique*, 54 (1985), pp. 285–91. N. Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, pp. 36–7 suggests that there was a pederastic element to the appreciation of the male body in the *euandria* competition, but it is clear that more was at stake in the competition than sexual attraction.

53. As on a wine jug by the Shuvalov Painter, Berlin 2412 (*ARV*², p. 1208, no. 41).

54. As in Praxiteles' Apollo Sauroktonos or Lysippos' 'Farnese' Herakles. I explore this theme at greater length in 'Sculpted Men of Athens'.