A Kylix by Onesimos:
Visual and Linguistic Humour in the Athenian Classroom

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Abstract

This chapter assesses a fragmentary kylix by Onesimos (ca. 480-470 BCE) housed at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, that is decorated on both sides and in the tondo with school scenes. This discussion seeks to reconstruct the vase, and assess the significance of the highly unusual boustrophedon inscription added to the scroll held by one of the figures. When the inscription is considered alongside the imagery, it appears that the painter included humorous elements to the scene designed for both literate and illiterate audiences. Moreover, these jokes centre on the idea of literacy, and the dissatisfaction of both the student and teacher in the classroom. When the text and image of this vase are analysed together, they give an insight into the potential wittiness of vase-painters, and the latent significances held by Athenian vases.

The vase in question was found in the Hellenion of Naukratis. A piece of the first fragment (preserving the scroll) was found in 1898 (Hogarth et al. 1899), and further fragments were retrieved in 1903 from the threshold of building 64, interpreted by the excavators as a shrine (Hogarth et al. 1905: 114). The five fragments come from a type C kylix, approximately 24-26cms in diameter at the rim. Fragment A (fig. 1) preserves parts of three figures. To the left, the face, hands and shoulders of a bearded male figure playing pipes are preserved before the break-line, the bottom of his staff resting on the ground. In the centre, a draped male youth (of whom only his torso, arms and

thighs are preserved) sits on a stool. He leans forward, with the edge of his chin and nose preserved before the break-line–his head therefore stooped over his lap.[1] He holds an unfurled scroll, on which is inscribed an intricate verse (see below). To the right are the fingers of another figure, facing the scroll-holder and inscribing an open tablet with a stylus. It is possible the scroll holder is dictating to the writer, who dutifully transcribes the verse, though this would perhaps make the action of flute-player difficult to explain (Beazley 1927: 13). Fragment B (fig. 2) comes from the tondo of the cup, and preserves the base of the stem on the exterior. To the right is the top of a male youth's head, garlanded with a red-slip fillet. To the left, you find the frontal face of an older, bearded man, his arm raised, probably in the act of dictating to the youth (Beazley 1927: 13). The interior of fragment A preserves part of the meander border around the tondo, but also a scrap of red-slip at the break-line which is probably from the fillet of a further youth, potentially suggesting that at least three figures adorned the tondo.

Fragment C (fig. 3) preserves the far left of a scene, and the very base of the handle. To the right are the torso and forearm of a seated male figure. The edge of his forehead and nose are preserved before the break-line, indicating his head was tilted upwards, perhaps in the act of singing. Beazley (1927: 14) suggested the lines in front of the figure's torso to be the strings of a lyre, but one line terminates before the edge of the fragment. In all other examples of Onesimos' lyres, strings are painted onto the black-glazed background, while here the background is reserved. Perhaps it is better to interpret this object as drapery rather than a lyre, and that another figure played the music to which he sang. In the centre, a naked male youth leans against an Ionic column, his frontal face resting in his right hand, a wash-bag, strigil and aryballos dangling from his left. Beazley (1927: 13) interpreted this figure as a servant and the frontal face may indicate he is tired from his work (Himmelmann 1971: 33). However, when other examples of school scenes are examined, perhaps this youth may be better interpreted in another way. A different education scene

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1 Compare the position of a similar scroll-holder on a cup by the Ancona Painter (Ferrara 19108, BAPD 203657).

depicts a nude youth with a washbag - side A of a kylix by the Cage Painter (fig. 4). The similarity between this figure and the youth on fragment C is highlighted not just by the wash bags they both carry, but also by the fact that both stand by a column on the far left of the scene. It would seem the naked youth and column are somehow related. It is possible that the columns indicate the edge of the school space, and these youths have returned for class after exercise, caught in the moments before dressing. In short, they need not be servants, but could instead be students.

Fragments D and E (figs. 5 & 6) preserve a standing figure leaning against a staff. While not certain, it is likely they belong to the same figure (Beazley 1927: 14). Behind the figure, a scrap of a linear object is preserved before the break-line, which Beazley (1927: 14) hypothesised could be a column. The very edge of fragment D preserves a line, spaced 0.15cms from the edge of the object, the same width as the flutes of the column on fragment C (0.15-0.2cms), thus making this interpretation highly likely. For the purposes of understanding the images on this vase, and their relation to the text, it is important to reconstruct how these fragments fit together. Firstly, it is vital to determine whether the four body fragments came from two sides of the vase or one. On many kylikes, the scene depicting education only occupies one side of the vase,[2] however, some also have school scenes on both sides of the vase, such as the example by Douris in Berlin (fig. 7). Therefore, both possibilities are plausible. However, the four body sherds depict six figures in total, exceeding the maximum of five figures depicted in school scenes on either side of intact vases.[3] Therefore, I suggest that these fragments come from two sides of the vase. The overall appearance of the vase was probably similar to the slightly earlier kylix by Douris (Buitron-Oliver 1995: 23).

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2 See Munich 2607, BAPD 200906; Amherst 1962.74, BAPD 275229; Berlin F 2549, BAPD 3407.

3 Sides of kylikes depicting school scenes either depict three figures (eg. London 1901.5-14.1, BAPD 203642) or five figures (eg. Berlin F 2285, BAPD 205092).

The figure holding the scroll on fragment A, judging by the composition of the cup by Douris, was the central figure; the inscribed scroll would have undoubtedly been the focus of the scene. This side will henceforth be referred to as side A. This fragment therefore depicts three of the five figures on side A, the man playing the pipes, the man holding the scroll, and the figure with the writing tablet. If the sides had five figures, and the scroll-holder was the central figure, fragment C cannot belong to the same side, as the flute-player of fragment A and seated figure of fragment C must both be the second figure from the right on either side. Considering this, fragment C therefore must belong to side B. It has been suggested that a column exists on the right of fragment D. In other examples of school scenes with a column,[4] only one column exists in the scene, and always on one edge. Therefore, I suggest fragments D and C cannot belong to the same side, placing fragment D on side A. Overall, four figures of side A are surviving, with the figure on the far left now lost. Further, only two of the five figures survive from side B. This reconstruction (fig. 8) would therefore imply education scenes decorated the tondo and both sides of the kylix.

The inscription: boustrophedon on Athenian pottery

The scroll is inscribed 'στεσιχο|ρον ημνον | αγοισαι', written both stoichedon and boustrophedon (on the translation, see below). Boustrophedon, meaning 'as the ox plows', is a form of script chiefly associated with inscriptions, in which alternate lines are written in opposite directions (Hays 2017). On each retrograde line, the letters are also typically reversed (Immerwahr 1990: 16). Boustrophedon is most commonly used in the sixth century BCE, with a particular prevalence around the middle of the century and almost total abandonment by the beginning of the fifth century. A series of sacral inscriptions from the Eleusinion in the Athenian Agora (ca. 510-480 BCE) present

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4 Louvre G 318, BAPD 203643; Amherst 1962.74, BAPD 275229.

a uniquely late epigraphic example (Jeffery 1948: 103).[5] Only 20 examples of boustrophedon writing on vases are recorded in Immerwahr's *Corpus of Attic Vase Inscriptions,* searchable in the Beazley Archive's pottery database. Eight of these are so-called end-boustrophedon, where a word has its end written retrograde in order to fit a tight space between figures.[6] Nine are found as post-firing graffiti on ostraka (Lang 1990: 9), probably facilitated by the lack of space on the sherd.[7] This evidence shows that most of the boustrophedon on Greek pottery is used because of spatial constraint.

Apart from our kylix, two other examples of boustrophedon are used without these same spatial limitations. One is found on a plate fragment from the Agora (fig. 9), between the legs of a striding figure, probably best interpreted as Athena (Athens AP 1859A-B). The inscription reads → ΣΟΤΕΣ ΜΕΠ [Ο] | ← ΙΣΕΝ ΠΑΙΔΕΡΟΣ | → ΕΛΡΦΣΕ[Ν], 'Sotes made me, Paideros painted me'. This painter/potter inscription is exceptional not only because of it being written boustrophedon, but also because these ceramicists' names are only attested on this one fragment. It has been noted the plate's shape makes it appropriate for dedication, as, like the plaque, it could be easily hung in the sanctuary (see Callipolitis-Feytmans 1974; Wagner 1997: 40), and may have been specifically produced for this purpose. Perhaps this use

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5 Boustrophedon appears on a number of types of Attic inscription: dedications from the Acropolis (IG i3 589bis; IG i3 590; IG i3 594; IG i3 597; IG i3 599; IG i3 600; IG i3 601; IG i3 1009), boundary markers to sacred precincts (IG i3 1055; IG i3 1068), and lyrical tomb epigrams (IG i3 1194bis; IG i3 1196; IG i3 1197).

6 New York 12.231.2, BAPD 203221; Louvre G 138, BAPD 203853; Louvre G 152, BAPD 203900; New York 07.286.85, BAPD 207338; Florence 4209, BAPD 300000; Athens 1.607, BAPD 310147; Reggio Calabria 12862, BAPD 310415; Athens AP 2293, BAPD 9017128.

7 Athens, Agora P 15555, BAPD 9016384; Athens, Agora P 13, BAPD 9016441; Athens, Agora P 4627, BAPD 9016462; Athens, Agora P 14687, BAPD 9016539; Athens, Agora P 14693, BAPD 9016540; Athens, Agora P 24745, BAPD 9016606; Athens, Agora P 6067, BAPD 9016624; Athens, Agora P 15379, BAPD 9016658; Athens, Agora P 13251, BAPD 9016777. For the explanations of early 'names-on-sherds' which predate the institution of ostracism, see Vanderpool 1949: 407 and Lang 1976: 16.

of boustrophedon, associated largely with dedications from the Acropolis, helped signify this vase as an offering. The placement of inscriptions on vases often conveys meaning (Gerleigner 2016) and it is possible this positioning at the feet of Athena imitates boustrophedon inscriptions that accompanied sculptural dedications, often placed on the sculptural base (for example *IG* i³ 590 and *IG* i³ 599). A similar use of boustrophedon is found on an olpe in Rome (Capitoline 6 A). The vase depicts Ajax and Achilles playing dice (fig. 10), an iconography common after Exekias, and believed by some to have been inspired by a sculptural dedication on the Acropolis (Mannack 2001: 87; Thompson 1976). The block between the players is inscribed with a pre-firing inscription: → ΝΕΟΚΛΕΙΔΕΣ Κ | ← ΑΛΟΣ, 'beautiful Neokleides'. Like the inscription on the plate fragment, the placement of this text between the figures at the base may reference dedicatory inscriptions found alongside sculptures, potentially adding further weight to the possibility of a sculptural prototype. It is however questionable whether a simple kalos inscription would have been associated by the viewer with dedicatory inscriptions. These examples date to the mid-sixth century BCE, when boustrophedon was most common in epigraphy, and it is possible these examples on vases reflect their epigraphic usage alongside sculpture. While Immerwahr suggests some bookrolls may have been written stoichedon in this period (Immerwahr 1964: 45), there is no evidence they were inscribed boustrophedon.[8] The inscription on our vase should therefore not imply contemporary forms of calligraphy, but could have been used by the inscriber to convey other, more representational meanings.

A separate scribe?

To ascertain the relationship between the text and image on this vase, it is important to determine whether the inscriber of the scroll was the same as the painter of the scene. It is possible it was not Onesimos, but instead a

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8 No scrolls from this period survive from Archaic Athens–the earliest example dates to ca. 430BCE (West 2013: 73), but one would perhaps expect a greater number of depictions of scrolls to be inscribed boustrophedon if it was a common form of calligraphy.

scribe associated with the workshop who was specifically hired to add inscrip-
tions to vases. However, this possibility seems implausible. The vast majority
of school scenes recorded in the Beazley Archive pottery database do not have
literately inscribed scrolls (62 of the 68), yet were still commercially viable. If
vase-painters did not require an inscription to sell their vases, it seems strange
that some painters would go to the expense of hiring a scribe. Another issue
with this possibility appears in the process of producing the vase. The slip
used to create the black glazed background was a refined form of the clay
used to pot the vase, and thus would have been the same colour before firing;
keep in mind it is the process of oxidisation in the kiln that causes the colour
change (Williams 1985: 8). The position of the scroll would therefore have
been very difficult to see before firing, which would have made a scribe's job
of adding an inscription to an already painted scene very difficult. Where we
know two painters worked on the same vase (such as a kylix by the Euergides
Painter and Epiktetos, Louvre G 16) the artists painted different areas, in this
case the outside and interior of the kylix, potentially to avoid this issue. Addi-
tionally, while Onesimos' alphabet is variable, certain idiosyncrasies remain in
his handwriting throughout his whole career, including high-kicking alphas,
omicrons with flat upper rights, and pis with shorter verticals (Immerwahr
1990: 84). It would be very unlikely Onesimos kept one scribe throughout his
entire career. It therefore seems more likely Onesimos was the inscriber of his
own vases.

Visual and literary humour

Our vase is exceptional not just for the use of a very rare script form, un-
common on Greek pottery, but for its seemingly archaising use at the date of
production (c. 480-470 BCE). Given Douris' scroll is not written boustrophe-
don, this seems to have been a deliberate adaptation by Onesimos. The expla-
nation for its use is perhaps to be found in the meaning of the inscription. The
inscription can be read in two different ways: στἐσιχό|ρō̄ν hύμνō̄ν | ἄγοισαι or
στἐσίχο|ρον hύμνον | ἄγοισαι. In the first, the inscription would be translated as
'I introduce the hymn of Stesichoros', thus referring to the late-seventh/mid-
sixth century poet, Stesichoros of Himera (Birt 1907: 143; Finglass and Kelly
2015: front-cover). However, the more likely second reading, which would

imply an address to the Muses, translates as 'Muses, who lead the chorus-leading hymn' (Beazley 1948: 338). While the meaning is unclear, the line scans and has rhythmic form. Taking the normal understanding of the verb as 'leading' perhaps suggests a visual joke in the boustrophedon. The backwards and forwards arrangement of the lines reflects the dancing of the chorus.[9] We have previously noted the flute-player behind the scroll-holder and the singer on side B of this kylix–the audial environment of the school has therefore been made clear by the painter. Perhaps here these depictions of music-making are designed to combine with this inscription, both in the physical and metrical way it is written, further enforcing the melodic beat of the classroom. Musical education is commonly depicted in school-scenes (eg. Vienna 3698; Beck 1975: 23-28), as is dancing (eg. Syracuse 20966; Beck 1975: 55). With this understanding of the inscription, it perhaps adds weight to the visual reading that the scroll holder on fragment A may not be dictating to the writer, but instead singing, justifying the involvement of the flute-player that Beazley struggled to explain (Beazley 1927: 13).

Intellectual humour drawn out by the inscriptions on book-rolls is found in another education scene: Douris' kylix in Berlin (fig. 7). Sider (2010: 543) has suggested the mistakes on the book-roll were intentionally included by Douris. The line reads 'Μοισα μοι α[ν]φι Σκαμανδρον ευρων αρχομαι αει{ν} δεν', which scans as hexameter, and seems to conflate two ideas of 'Muse to me', and 'I begin to sing of the wide-flowing Scamander' (Immerwahr 1964: 19). While the line is metrically sound, syntactically it merges two distinct constructions, certainly precluding it from being a line lifted from a now lost poem. While the literacy of vase-painters is still contested, and was probably varied in the Kerameikos, it is likely, given the range and competence of the painter's other inscriptions, that Douris was literate (Buitron-Oliver 1995: 41-5; Sider 2010: 550). It is unclear in that scene whether the boy is reading from the scroll presented by the teacher, or perhaps is being asked to recite

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9 It has been suggested that the chorus sang and danced (Kitto 1956). The 'vivid and energetic rhythms' of choral odes may indicate that the dancing of the chorus was equally lively (Kitto 1956: 6).

from memory. Douris' inclusion of these mistakes perhaps creates another, more credible visual interpretation: that the teacher is reading the student's unsound homework, perhaps pointing out corrections (Sider 2010: 550). In this example, the vase-painter includes an element of humour in an otherwise sombre scene of education. Given that Douris and Onesimos potentially worked very closely to one another (Beazley 1918: 97; Boardman 1975: 138), it is possible they may have shared each other's wit and sense of humour.

Whether we take the word 'στεσιχο|ρον' as meaning 'chorus-leading', the word will have still been associated with the poet Stesichorus. It is perhaps interesting that boustrophedon as a form of epigraphic writing and the floruit of Stesichorus are contemporary, even if this vase is later. Notably, funerary epigrams from the sixth century are sometimes inscribed boustrophedon. One such epigram commemorates Tettichos, who died in war, and dates to ca. 575-550 BCE (*IG* i^3 1194bis). While the forms of grave epigram poetry and the lyric poetry of Stesichorus are dissimilar, they are both contemporary. It is possible this was known by Onesimos, who chose to use this script to visually connect the form of writing to the period of the insinuated poet. It has been noted that grave epigrams are connected to the image of the dead (Day 1989: 21), and here we also see the same cognitive connection of the inscriber–in the same way these boustrophedon grave epigrams connected to the image on the tombstone, this boustrophedon scroll connects to the image of the school. Thus, boustrophedon acts in both cases as a form of script that links image and text.

The reference to Stesichorus may also have another usage. Diogenianus (early second century CE), in his list of proverbs, records the phrase 'οὐδὲ τὰ τρία Στησιχόρου γνῶναι' (Diogenian.7.14) as something said of the illiterate; not knowing your Stesichorus became, by this date, a marker of the ill-educated (Davies 1982; Pitotto 2015). It is impossible to know when this proverb became part of common parlance. However, if it was used in the late-Archaic period, perhaps this connection added further depths to the humour; poking fun at those that would be unable to read the inscription. This play on words implies both a literate producer and consumer able to understand the complexities of this witticism, and implies the proximity of an illiterate audience

at whom the joke is directed. Like the poorly written scroll on Douris' kylix, literacy (and illiteracy) becomes a source of humour. Here the joke links with the scenes adorning the vase–the inability to understand the joke probably reflected the inability to relate to the school scene.

If humour was conveyed by the text, it is possible it was also conveyed in the image. It has been noted that the kylix bares two unusual uses of frontal faces-one older man in the kylix (fig. 2), and one youth leaning against a column on side B (fig. 3). It has already been suggested, given the comparison to the Cage Painter's kylix, that rather than a servant, the naked youth may be a student returning to the school after exercising. If we interpret the older male in the tondo to be dictating to the youth seated in front of him (Beazley 1927: 13), it is likely this figure is a teacher. Korshak's analysis of frontal faces on Archaic vases illustrates their use to create pathos; in the dead/dying/endangered, in the physically burdened, and in the spiritually burdened or moved (Korshak 1987: 2). This interpretation of frontal faces seems correct in the rest of Onesimos' work. For instance, in one example, a frontal face is used on the figure of Kerkyon as he struggles in a fight with Theseus (Paris G 104), and in another, Troilos is given a frontal face in the final struggle before his death at the hands of Achilles (Perugia 89).

But how are we to read the frontal faces on our vase? If we take the teacher's face as indicative of 'spiritual burden', this rendering is designed to illustrate the teacher's exasperation at his students. The fragmentation makes this difficult to ascertain–perhaps the student was engaged in a particularly imprudent activity. A similar scene is found on side B of the Cage Painter's kylix (fig. 4), in which a draped bearded figure, probably best interpreted as a teacher, has a frontal face that is perhaps in the same posture of exasperation. Beazley noted that the Cage Painter was related to the Antiphon Painter (Beazley 1963: 348), who, like Onesimos, paints cups potted by Euphronios (Berlin F 2303), and whose style shows close parallels with our painter (Boardman 1975: 135). It is therefore likely the Cage Painter and Onesimos belonged to the same workshop and the exasperated teacher was probably an iconographic joke shared between the painters. As for the naked youth, it is possible his frontal face indicates his tiredness from exercise. Alternatively, his entry into the school

space may account for his 'spiritual burden'; perhaps his frontal face is intended to indicate his despair. With this interpretation, it is therefore possible that both these frontal faces, like the inscription, may have conveyed humour. If the scroll on side A was designed to amuse the literate, the frontal faces on side B and the tondo may have been used to amuse the illiterate, perhaps suggesting Onesimos was trying to cater to both possible audiences. Together, they augment the scene with humour, subverting an otherwise sombre vase.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to reimagine Onesimos' images on this kylix through its relation to text. When text and image are considered together, it becomes clear that the Onesimos used both as a vehicle of humour, perhaps aimed at two distinct audiences. Upon analysis, the visual implications of boustrophedon suggest possible connotations with sculpture on two vases, and the possible imitation of the dancing chorus on our kylix. These inscriptions help us understand the scenes, perhaps accessing the intended connotations of the images created by the vase-painter. These connotations help us understand the creative processes of the painter, and in this case, the wit introduced by painters into otherwise sober scenes.

Acknowledgements

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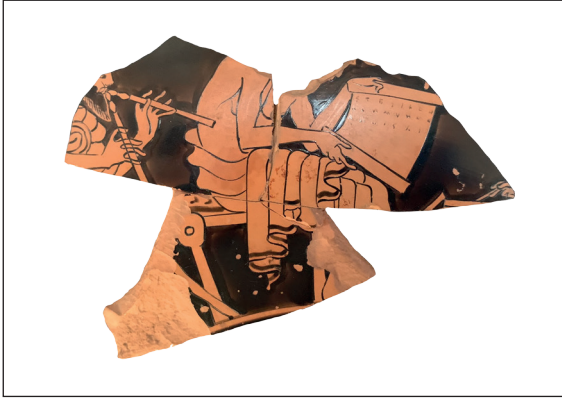
Fig. 1. Fragment A of Onesimos' kylix, with inscribed scroll (Oxford G.138.3.a). Image reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.

Fig. 2. Fragment B of Onesimos' kylix, from the tondo (Oxford G.138.3.b). Image reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.
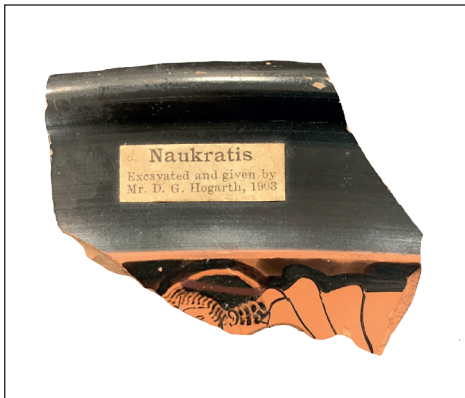

Fig. 3. Fragment C of Onesimos' kylix, with naked youth (Oxford G.138.3.c). Image reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.
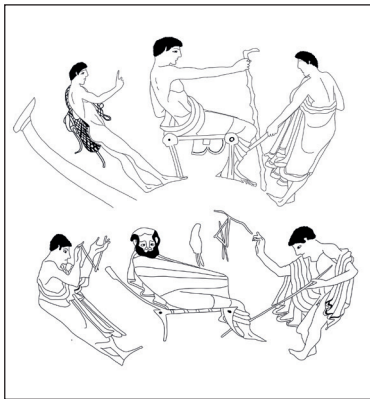
*Fig.4.* Drawing of sides A and B of a kylix by the Cage Painter (Louvre G 318). Author's own image.

Fig. 5. Fragment D of Onesimos' kylix, preserving drapery of figure (Oxford G.138.3.d). Image reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.


Fig. 6. Fragment E of Onesimos' kylix, preserving head of figure (Oxford G.138.3.e). Image reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.

Fig. 7. Drawing of sides A and B of a kylix by Douris (Berlin F 2285). Author's own image.
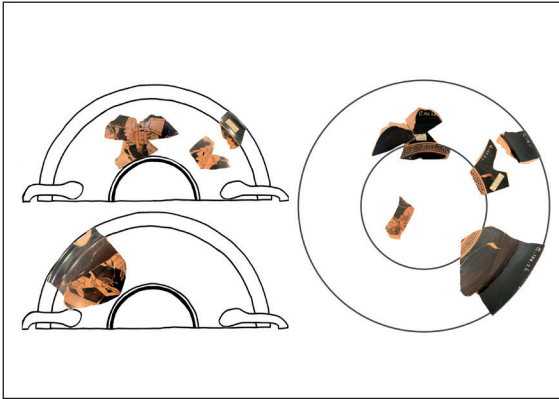
Fig. 8. Reconstruction of sides A and B, and tondo, of Onesimos's kylix (Oxford G.138.3.a-e). Images reproduced by kind permission of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Author's own image.
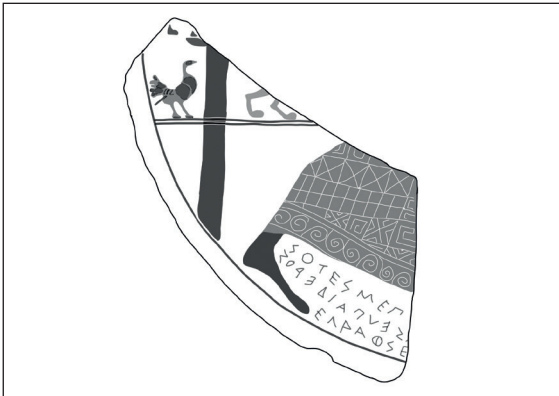
Fig. 9. Drawing of a plate fragment signed by the potter Sotes and the painter Paideros (Athens, Agora AP 1859A-B). Author's own image.

Fig. 10. Drawing of a fragmentary olpe (Rome 6 A). Author's own image.