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A Greek Source for Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* and *Hercules and the Twelve Giants**

Michael Vickers

Recent discussions of Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* have assumed that its origins lie in Roman relief sculpture.¹ They have tended to overlook, or dismiss, an extremely perspicacious article in *The Art Bulletin* for 1919–1920 in which Fern Rush Shapley suggested that the paintings on Greek vases inspired several of Pollaiuolo's works, including the *Battle*.² She did not know of the engraving of *Hercules and the Twelve Giants* (generally regarded as a copy after an original by Pollaiuolo), mistaking a drawing of a detail now in the Fogg Art Museum as part of a study for the *Battle*, but had she known of it she would undoubtedly have included it among her list of works that seem to depend on Greek models. The object of this article is to indicate that it may be possible to go further than Shapley did and to establish that Pollaiuolo relied principally on a work by a specific Greek artist, known to us as the Niobid Painter, who flourished in the decade immediately before the mid-fifth century B.C.

Prints exist in the British Museum of both the first and the second states of *Hercules and the Twelve Giants*.³ The first state lacks any of the inscriptions that occur in the second state (Fig. 1) and the latter has rather more foliage in the background. Despite the title added to the second state: *QUOMODO HERCULES PERCUSSIT ET VICIT DUODECIM GIGANTES*, the scene clearly shows not one man against the rest, but two parties in combat. It may be that the figure wielding an axe, and whose scabbard is inscribed *HERCULES*, was formerly in the center of a composition that has six figures to the left of him, and six to the right instead of the present three, but the extant later versions after the complete composition only serve to cloud the issue. A spear thrust in from the top right corner indicates that one of the missing figures was a spearsman. A print by Alaart Claas (Fig. 2) in the British Museum⁴ in which the scene is reversed does supply three extra figures, but not ones that could easily be joined to the right edge of the earlier print, for they do not account for the spear. A fragment of a cartoon in the Fogg Art Museum,⁵ usually attributed to Pollaiuolo himself, the right side of which terminates in the same place as does the engraving, suggests that the drawing was already cut at the point when the engraving was made. A rough drawing in the Biblioteca Reale in Turin,⁶ which includes two extra figures on the right, may have been copied from the original drawing

when it was still complete, but the other figures in the Turin drawing are of no help in recreating the original battle scene.

But whether the scene we have is complete or not, it is possible to make certain generalizations about the figures in it. Most of the heads are shown in profile, although there are some three-quarter views and some bodies are seen from behind. The figures are drawn at different levels and do not diminish in size as they recede towards the background. Four carry round shields, the blazons of two of which are clearly visible, one with five spots and the other with an acanthus scroll. The third round shield appears to be black with a narrow light border. All four round shields are shown elliptically. The figures are remarkable for their lively poses, and the details of their musculature. "Hercules" stands near the center and wields an axe above his head. In front of him, two figures are on the ground attempting to protect themselves, while four still fight on foot with bow, spear, or sword. Behind him stand another bowman and two swordsmen. Legs seen in profile generally have a pair of lines running from knee to heel; calf and thigh muscles are emphatically rendered. In nearly every figure the chest muscles are shown in the greatest detail, especially about the ribcage, and between the armpit and the stomach.

The figures in the *Battle of the Nudes* (Fig. 3) are almost evenly disposed on either side of the picture. In the middle, two swordsmen fight over a chain, while struggles occur to each side between standing or fallen figures who have between them a bow, two axes, and several swords or daggers. The swords resemble scimitars in shape (though less so than those in the *Hercules* engraving), with details indicated of the surface of the blade. Again, the figures are arranged at different levels with very little, if any, diminution of size. Nearly all their heads are in a three-quarter view, and two have their backs to us. Much is again made of the anatomical details of the figures, especially their rib cages, where row upon row of small muscles are often visible. Two shields lie on the ground, one upside down with its interior showing, and the other with a large boss decorated with tongues.

In discussing the *Battle*, Shapley observed that one of the figures runs with upraised club (in fact an ax) as do repeated examples on Greek vases, and the striding movement throughout the whole composition suggests Greek pro-

* I am grateful to Professor George Bauer, Dr. Dietrich von Bothmer, and Professor Martin Robertson for their help and advice in connection with this article.

N.B.: A bibliography of selected sources follows the footnotes.

¹ E.g., L. S. Richards, "Antonio Pollaiuolo, Battle of Naked Men," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, IV, 1968, 63; L. S. Fusco, in J. A. Levenson, K. Oberhuber, and J. L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Engravings from the National Gallery of Art*, Washington, D.C., 1973, 78.

² F. R. Shapley, "A Student of Ancient Ceramics, Antonio Pollaiuolo," *Art*

Bulletin, II, 1919–20, 78–86 (kindly brought to my attention by Dr. von Bothmer). Cf. A. Chastel, 168–69.

³ See L. A. Anderson, "Copies of Pollaiuolo's Battling Nudes," *Art Quarterly*, XXXI, 1968, 155–67.

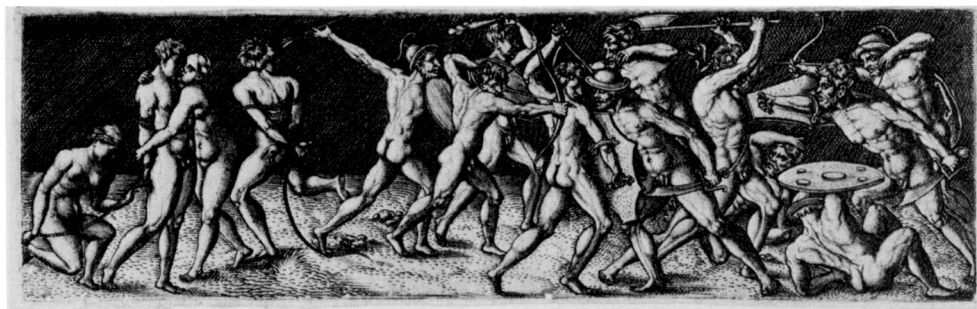
⁴ A. Mongan and P. Sachs, *Drawings in the Fogg Museum of Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1940, I, No. 30; S. Ortolani, *Il Pollaiuolo*, Milan, 1948, pl. 84.

⁵ Anderson, "Copies," fig. 7.

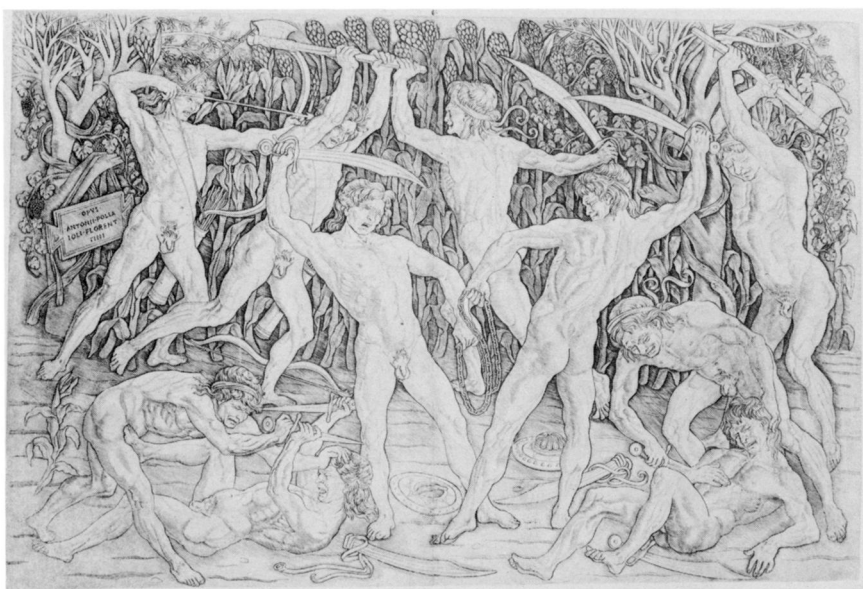
⁶ *Ibid.*, fig. 10.



1 After Pollaiuolo, *Hercules and the Twelve Giants*, engraving, second state. London, British Museum



2 Alart Claas, *Hercules and the Twelve Giants*, engraving. London, British Museum



3 Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Nudes*, engraving. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

totypes.⁷ This is true as far as it goes, but between the *Battle* and the *Hercules* we have enough diagnostic features to be able to say with a fair degree of certainty which Greek artist Pollaiuolo was imitating. The Niobid Painter, who flourished in the middle years of the fifth century B.C., was an artist who applied to vase-painting some of the techniques and mannerisms of contemporary monumental painters such as Polygnotus or Mikon. Indeed, it has been plausibly suggested that in some of his works his sources are more evident than his own style.⁸ Such a piece is his name-vase, the calyx-crater from Orvieto, which shows on one side (A) the slaying of the children of Niobe (Fig. 4), and on the other (B) various persons in the presence of Heracles and Athena (Fig. 5).⁹ In this case the sources on which the Niobid Painter relied were wall paintings in which the artist (or artists) indicated receding planes by painting the figures progressively higher up in the field. This was by no means the Niobid Painter's usual style, though three other instances of it are known on fragments.¹⁰

If, as will be argued below, Pollaiuolo depended on a missing work of the Niobid Painter, that work would have been a fourth instance of his use of a varied ground-line in light of the way the figures are disposed in the two Pollaiuolos under discussion. Other features of the Louvre calyx-crater that are thought to be derived from the Niobid Painter's sources are the faces seen in three-quarter view, which occur but seldom in Greek art of this time. They occur twice on the A side and three times on the B, and recur in only two other examples by the Niobid Painter. The two heads shown in three-quarter view in the *Heracles* engraving are no more than we should expect in a work by the Niobid Painter,¹¹ but the eight such heads in the *Battle* imply either that the hypothetical prototype was quite exceptional, or that Pollaiuolo used the motif rather freely. Other characteristics of mid-fifth-century mural painting preserved for us on the Niobid Painter's name-vase are foreshortened figures with overlapping limbs, and figures with a great deal of anatomical detail, especially over the rib cage. This detail takes the form of a compact series of intercostal muscles drawn beneath the armpit in a manner very similar to Pollaiuolo's figures. Shins are frequently indicated by means of vertical lines, either singly or in pairs, another feature that recurs in Pollaiuolo. Another curious practice of the Niobid Painter's source for side A of the Louvre crater is the representation of the underside of a foot in three-quarter view: there is one example in the fleeing Niobid

on the right (Fig. 4). Pollaiuolo employs the same feature three times: on the left foot of the archer on the left of the *Hercules* engraving (Fig. 1) and on the two feet immediately to the right of the center of the *Battle* (Fig. 3). The variety of pose and activity that occurs in Pollaiuolo's engravings can be paralleled either on the Louvre crater or on other works by the Niobid Painter and his circle, and in many cases their models were to be found in contemporary wall-painting. The Apollo aiming at an already wounded Niobid on the Louvre crater (Fig. 4) is the obvious counterpart of Pollaiuolo's archers. Heracles draws a bow like the Apollo on the Niobid Painter's calyx-crater Ferrara T.313.¹² The wounded, fleeing Niobid (Fig. 4, right) provides a close parallel for Pollaiuolo's figures seen in back view. He possesses nearly all the elements of the swordsman to the right of center of the *Battle*: the sinewy back, the tight buttocks, and even, as we have already seen, a glimpse of the underside of the foot. We do not have an axe-wielder on the Louvre crater, but a fragment of a volute-crater by the Niobid Painter (Fig. 6)¹³ supplies a close parallel for Pollaiuolo's "Hercules" (Fig. 1) both in stance and musculature. "Hercules'" intended victim, who crouches in fear, resembles in more than a general way some of the Niobid Painter's figures in a similar situation. Compare, for example, the giant being attacked by Hecate on the back of his calyx-crater (Fig. 7).¹⁴

The weapons and armor that we see in the engravings can nearly all be paralleled in the Niobid Painter's works. He frequently employs or copies from models that have elliptical views of shields seen from both inside and out. In Pollaiuolo's *Battle* there are two shields lying on the ground, both shown elliptically, the nearer one lying face-down. The *porpax* (handle) of the latter can be clearly seen as well as a star-like pattern that probably derives from the way that leather thongs are arranged inside Greek shields (e.g., those on Fig. 5). The other shield in the *Battle* is convex. The convexity is admittedly smaller than regularly occurs on Greek shields but the tongue decoration on it is recognizable as derived from one of the Niobid Painter's favorite shield blazons: the eight-spoked wheel,¹⁵ the painted areas of which appear rather like tongues (e.g. Fig. 5). Circular shields seen elliptically appear in the *Hercules* engraving too, one decorated with five dots and another with an acanthus scroll. Neither of them can be clearly paralleled in the Niobid Painter's work, although the latter recalls both the snake blazon, which regularly occurs,¹⁶ and the decoration of the Ara Pacis, parts of which had probably only recently come to light in Rome when Pollaiuolo

⁷ Shapley, 84.

⁸ T. B. L. Webster, *Der Niobidenmaler*, Leipzig, 1935, 9; J. P. Barron, "New Light on Old Walls: The Murals of the Theseion," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xcii, 1972, 25.

⁹ J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, Oxford, 1963, 2nd ed., 601, 22 (henceforth cited as ARV²); *idem.*, *Paralipomena*, Oxford, 1971, 395. See also Barron, "New Light," 20–45; E. B. Harrison, "Preparations for Marathon, the Niobid Painter and Herodotus," *Art Bulletin*, liv, 1972, 390–402; M. Robertson, *A History of Greek Art*, Cambridge, 1975, 253–58.

¹⁰ See Barron, 24, n. 42.

¹¹ They occur on Louvre G. 341 (ARV², 601, 22); Palermo G. 1283 (ARV², 599, 2); and Ferrara T. 313 (ARV², 602, 24).

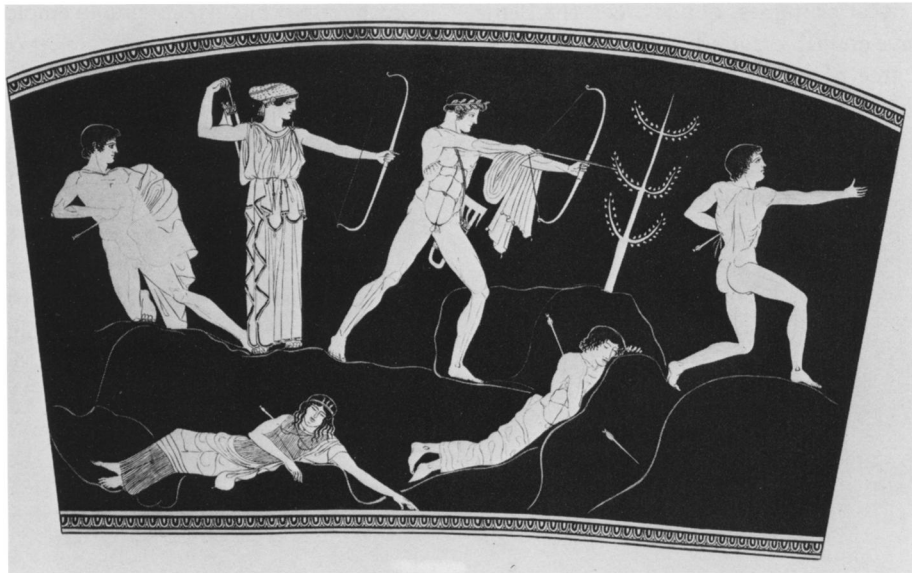
¹² *Ibid.*, 602, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 599, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 602, 24. The motif was to be copied in other 15th-century works, e.g., Dürer's *Death of Orpheus* (E. Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, 1948, 3rd ed., 95, No. 928, fig. 49), and Zoppo's *Death of Pentheus* (E. Ruhmer, *Marco Zoppo*, Vicenza, 1966, fig. 98). The "persistent use" of the motif "on Greek vases . . . and sarcophagi" is noted by E. H. Gombrich in A. Warburg, *An Intellectual Biography*, London, 1970, 181 and pl. 29 (a red-figure stamnos by Hermonax from Nola, Louvre G 416). Cf. F. Saxl, "Rinascimento dell'Antichità," *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, XLIII, 1922, 225–26.

¹⁵ E.g., Louvre G. 341 (ARV², 601, 22); Bologna 269 (ARV², 599, 8); Munich 2324 (ARV², 604, 55); fragments formerly in Rome (ARV², 608, 6; Manner of the Niobid Painter). Four-spoked wheels occur on, e.g., Boston 33.56 (ARV², 600, 12); Palermo G 1283 (ARV², 599, 2).

¹⁶ E.g., on the shield of the warrior second from the left on Louvre G. 341 (B) (Fig. 5. left).



4-5 Niobid Painter, calyx-crater from Orvieto, Sides A and B. Paris, Louvre, G 341



6 Niobid Painter, volute-crater fragment. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, 2403



7 Niobid Painter, volute-crater from Spina (detail). Ferrara, T. 313.



8 Painter of Bologna 279, volute-crater from Spina. Ferrara, T. 579



9 Pollaiuolo, dancing figures, fresco. Arcetri, near Florence, Villa della Gallina

engraved the original of the *Hercules*.¹⁷ A third round shield in the *Hercules* engraving, which is black with a light border, is very close in its scheme to a shield device on the Niobid Painter's volute-crater, Ferrara T. 740.¹⁸ In general scheme and proportions, the swords approximate the single-edged curved sword that suddenly becomes common in Greek battle scenes of the late sixth and earlier fifth centuries B.C., probably derived from the curved weapons for which the Persians and other Orientals were famous.¹⁹ The falling giants on the calyx-crater (e.g., Fig. 7) have swords of this type.

Both Pollaiuolo's swords and those common in Greek art have a pair of grooves along their blades, but they differ in certain other respects. Pollaiuolo has made his swords resemble contemporary scimitars²⁰ and has fitted the handles of most of his weapons—both swords and daggers—with a round finial in the 15th-century Italian manner.²¹ And there are other details that show that Pollaiuolo did not slavishly imitate his Greek model. The way in which some of the short pointed swords or daggers on both engravings are being wielded is un-Greek. The

two figures struggling on the ground in the lower left corner of the *Battle* are holding their weapons as though for a downward stab, which is very rare in Greek art. Short dagger-like swords do occur, but nearly always for a cut and thrust.²² The two figures wielding daggers in the *Hercules*, the figure on the far right on the engraving and the figure in front of "Hercules," are derived from spearmen (compare the one second from the left in Fig. 1). This suggests that Pollaiuolo did not copy his Greek models in exact detail, but changed them about and altered them somewhat. When he came to the bowmen in both engravings, he seems to have applied knowledge derived from personal observation of archers for instead of keeping their elbows level he lifts them up in a distinctive and more realistic manner. We have already noticed one intrusive element derived from Roman sculpture: the acanthus scroll on a shield in the *Hercules* engraving; the "barbaric" shields carried by two of the combatants in the same scene are another. These shields regularly occur on *tropaia* in Roman reliefs and on coins as booty won by the Romans from their

¹⁷ M. Vickers, "Mantegna and the Ara Pacis," *Journal of the J. Paul Getty Museum*, II, 1975, 109–120.

¹⁸ ARV², 559, 5.

¹⁹ Cf. A. M. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks*, London, 1967, 97–98, pl. 50.

²⁰ Cf. the ornate 16th-century scimitar in the Bargello Museum, Florence, presented by Henry II of France to his court jester: G. F. Laking, *A Record of*

European Armour and Arms Through Seven Centuries, London, 1920, IV, 279, fig. 1346; L. G. Boccia, "Le armi," in *La caccia e le arti*, exh. cat., Florence, 1961, 10, pl. 5.

²¹ Compare, e.g., the finial on the handle of the Ferrarese sword of ca. 1500 in the Museo Civico Marzoli in Brescia: F. Rossi and N. di Carpegna, *Armi antiche*, Milan, 1969, 61, No. 136.

²² E.g., on Ferrara T. 936 (ARV², 601, 18).

barbarian adversaries, but they are frequently employed in Renaissance art as though they were in fact Roman. But these intrusive, un-Greek elements are merely details. They do not detract from the overall impression that Pollaiuolo relied closely on a work of the Niobid Painter, but they do show that neither engraving was copied directly from a vase. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that it was not just any Greek vase that Pollaiuolo employed, but one that incorporated so many of the characteristics of the greatest Greek mural painters of the fifth century B.C.

We can only speculate as to the precise nature of the model that Pollaiuolo used, whether it was a complete vase or one in fragments. But whichever it may have been, it was certainly a big vessel: probably a volute- or a calyx-crater. Volute-craters are occasionally decorated with figures standing on different groundlines after the fashion of Louvre G.341 (Figs. 4–5); and they have an additional feature that may be relevant to Pollaiuolo. They always have an extra zone of decoration around the neck, the subject-matter of which is often apparently quite unrelated to the action on the main field of the vase. Thus, for example, on the volute-craters Bologna 268²³ and Palermo G.1283,²⁴ above scenes taken from the Trojan cycle and an Amazonomachy, are Heracles and Pholos on one side of the neck, and a centauromachy on the other. Shapley observed that the dancing figures on the frescoes in the Villa della Gallina at Arcetri near Florence derived from satyrs on Greek vases.²⁵ Although she did not adduce any satyrs by the Niobid Painter, his would fit this case as well, if not better, than those of any other artist. For example, we might compare the jerky pose of one of the satyrs by a follower of the Niobid Painter, the Painter of Bologna 279 (Fig. 8)²⁶ with one of the dancers in the Villa della Gallina in Arcetri (Fig. 9). To connect the Arcetri fresco (of the middle 1460's)²⁷ and the engravings would contradict the recently expressed and cogently argued view that at least the *Battle* was a product of the first half of the 1470's.²⁸ Nevertheless the argument would be economical if a single vase by the Niobid Painter inspired the *Hercules*, the *Battle of the Nudes*, and the Arcetri fresco, even if these works were done at different times.

The fact that Greek vases were appreciated in Renaissance Italy has been largely overlooked by both Classical archaeologists and, with the exception of Shapley, by art historians. It has even been argued recently that “writers and

collectors, at least until the middle of the 17th century, had generally no interest in ancient painted pottery” and that this was due to “some stylistic repugnance.”²⁹ But as early as 1491 we hear of Lorenzo de' Medici being offered three pottery vases, one “3 spans high and 4 wide” (i.e., a large column-crater) recently imported to Venice from Greece. The writer adds that he is sure that Lorenzo does not possess a vase as fine, implying that there was already a collection of vases in existence.³⁰ It is unlikely, though, that the vases from Greece included our lost vase by the Niobid Painter. First, any vase entering the Medici Collection would probably have been preserved long enough to have been known to modern scholarship, and secondly, nearly all the known findspots of the Niobid Painter's volute- and calyx-craters are Italian,³¹ implying that they were made for, or ended up on, the export market—for “Italian grandees” of a much earlier generation than Lorenzo's.³² Moreover, Pollaiuolo seems to have used Greek vases in other contexts, as Shapley has argued in general terms. I hope to show elsewhere that Piero della Francesca used black- and red-figure sherds as models for parts of the *Legend of the True Cross* in Arezzo; and doubtless more examples could be found.

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

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²³ *Ibid.*, 598, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 599, 2.

²⁵ Shapley, 81–83. Chastel, 167ff., thinks that these figures may have been derived from Etruscan frescoes, and Saxl, 222, fig. 2, compares one of the Arcetri dancers with a Hellenistic bronze in the Cabinet des Médailles.

²⁶ ARV², 612, 1.6

²⁷ Ortolani, 203.

²⁸ Fusco, 73–75.

²⁹ R. M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery*, London, 1972, 2nd ed., 287. And see now E. H. Gombrich, “Bonaventura Berlinghieri's Palmettes,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxix, 1976, 234–36, where it is suggested that a 13th-century painter derived a palmette motif from a Greek vase.

³⁰ The information is contained in a letter to Lorenzo written from Venice by Poliziano, dated 20 June 1491: “Un bellissimo vaso di terra antiquissimo mi mostrò [sic] stamattina detto messer Zaccheria [Barbero], el quale nuovamente di Grecia gli è stato mandato: et mi disse che sel credessi vi piacessi, volentieri ve lo manderebbe con due altri vasetti pur di terra. Io dissi che mi pareva proprio cosa da V. M. et tandem sarà vostro. Domattina farò fare la cassetta, et manderollo con diligentia. Credo non ne habbiate uno sì bello in eo genere. È presso che 3 spanne alto e 4 largo” (E. Müntz, *Les Collections des Medicis au XV^e siècle*, Paris-London, 1888, 57, a reference first observed by Shapley, 79, n. 5). Cf. R. Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity*, Oxford, 1969, 189, n. 7.

³¹ Twenty-eight out of thirty-three with known findspots came from Italy or Sicily.

³² The expression is that of Barron, 25.