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MYRRHINE'S BALL REVISITED

ELINA M. SALMINEN – MIKA KAJAVA

The present note on a late archaic clay ball emerges from our work on "Greek Inscribed Discs" (the results of which are forthcoming elsewhere). This is because the unique expression ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίων scratched on this artefact has been taken to further contribute to the understanding of the function and meaning of the late 6th-century BCE discuses inscribed ἐκ τῶν ἐρίων (or sim.) that have been found in Athens. Conversely, a common interpretation of the discus phrase has been employed to give support to that of the text appearing on the sphere. Before dealing with this object and its inscriptions, a few words on the ἐκ τῶν ἐρίων discuses are called for.¹ The relevant evidence is as follows:

1. *IG I³ 1394*: Τελεσάρχο ἐκ τῶ ἐρί[ο]. – Marble discus (diam. 28.4 cm, th. 5.9 cm [centre]); late 6th century BCE; Athens (precise provenance unknown), now Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY (MMA.G.1985.11.4). Auctioned together with no. 2 at Sotheby's London in 1929. – Photograph: Jacobstahl 1933, 18 no. 2 (fig. 9).
2. *IG I³ 1395*: ἐκ τῶν ἐ[ρί]ων (rather than ἄ[θλ]ων; "utrumque legi potest" *IG*, but the crucial letter seems to be E). – Marble discus (diam. 28.4 cm, th. 6.1 cm [centre]) with remains of painted decoration in the centre, "fortasse equitis" (*IG*); late 6th century BCE; Athens (precise provenance unknown), now Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (accession no. 1987.621). – Photograph: Jacobstahl 1933, 18 no. 1 (fig. 8).

* Our thanks go to the anonymous reader who offered helpful suggestions and to Simo Örmä for sending us a copy of a not readily available article.

¹ A more detailed survey will be provided by Kajava – Salminen 2014.

3. *IG I³ 1397*: ἐχ τῶν ἐρίων εἰρμῖ (EINI stone). – Marble discus (diam. 28 cm, "crassior medio quam in marginibus" *IG*, letter ht. 4.5 cm); late 6th century BCE; Athens ("angeblich aus einem Grab bei Anavyssos": Jacobsthal 1933, 19 no. 4), now Sammlung Werner Peek, Archäologisches Museum der Universität Münster (no. 2071). – Photograph: Stupperich 1990, Pl. 16, 6.7.

Since the term ἡρίον, occurring in Homer in reference to the monument planned by Achilles for Patroklos and himself,² is traditionally translated as 'mound, barrow, tomb', it has been a popular interpretation since Jacobsthal's work that "from the grave-mound(s)" is a reference to funeral games commemorating individuals and that the preserved discuses inscribed in this way were those awarded as prizes to winners at such games.³ Various objections may be raised against this view. Firstly, the term ἡρία (or ἡρίον) is not otherwise known to have been used for funeral games. Secondly, ἐκ τῶν ἐρίων is not what one would expect for prize inscriptions, which were normally construed with partitive genitive (e.g. τῶν Ἀθηνᾶθεν ἄθλων, "[one] of the prizes from Athens", which is often mistranslated as "from the games at Athens"). Thirdly, and most importantly, as Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood demonstrated, ἡρίον actually does not mean 'mound', but denotes 'grave monument' independently of its precise appearance.⁴ Later on, the term came to cover the wide concept of 'tomb', but in the archaic period it must have meant 'grave monument'. In our material, this should be evident from **1**, which has a singular form (Τελεσάρχο ἐκ τῶ ἐρί[ο]) and thus obviously marks the grave monument of Telesarchos, while reference to various games and contests was typically made by using the plural. Finally, it is noteworthy that all these discuses, as well as some others of the same date from Athens, are almost identical in diameter (c. 27–28 cm), as if designed for similar use.⁵

² Hom. *Il.* 23,126.

³ Jacobsthal 1933, 22; see, e.g., Immerwahr 1967, 263–64; Roller 1981, 3–5; Stupperich 1990, 73–5 no. 65 (= discus **3**). Kyle (1987, 19) was reasonably cautious.

⁴ Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 126–28, 152–58.

⁵ Cf. *IG I³ 1210* (diam. 27 cm); *1393* (diam. 27 cm); *1396* (diam. 28 cm). While *IG I³ 1210* and *1393* are funerary, *1396* (Ὀἴθεν ἄθλα) is usually regarded as having no funerary connotation to it. For this and the surprising form ἄθλα, see, however, Kajava – Salminen 2014.

What this use may have involved was explained tentatively by Lilian Jeffery.⁶ She argued that the discuses with the expression ἐκ τῶν ἐπίων formed part of the superstructure of funerary monuments, with the inscriptions' main purpose perhaps being to "ensure that such a useful and portable object was not snapped up by some passing Autolykus". The preposition ἐκ would be quite apposite here, as it could denote origin and belonging to a category or a group. Protection from theft seems, indeed, a plausible interpretation, and so ἐκ τῶν ἐπίων appearing on a discus probably reminded the passers-by that the object was part of the grave monument and that it should be left where it was fixed. The proper epitaph, of course, was engraved on the stele or whatever the monument's type was. This would have been the case also with 1, which names the deceased.

Now that it can be conjectured, with great probability, what the formula ἐκ τῶν ἐπίων meant when appearing on Athenian funerary discuses of the late 6th century BCE, we may turn to our main subject.

The artefact in question is a miniature clay rattle in the shape of a sphere (diam. 4.6 cm), presumably of Athenian origin and from about 500 BCE, which judging by its inscriptions belonged to someone called Myrrhine.⁷ The find context is unknown, but the good preservation makes it likely it was found in a burial. It has been commonly thought that this was a child's rattle imitating a playing ball that was given as a gift to a girl called Myrrhine, but the ball's decoration may rather point to ownership by a hetaira. The black-gloss scenes show two discus-throwers (Figs. 1, 5), two javelin-throwers with a stool between them (Figs. 2, 5), and a boy with a dog being approached by a cloaked man leaning on a staff, followed by donkey foal or a fawn (Figs. 3, 5).⁸ The young boy and the elderly man offering him a flower (or some other object) is reminiscent, of course, of peder-

⁶ Jeffery 1962, 147 no. 64, accepted by Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 157. Karouzos (1951, 98–9) has offered examples of reliefs showing discuses as part of funerary monuments, but the examples he cites are missing the discus due to an unfortunate break and showing a thick, more drum- than discus-like artefact, respectively.

⁷ Immerwahr 1967 (figs. 1–7) = *SEG XXIV 73*. A preliminary account appeared some years earlier, but it did not devote any attention to the inscription discussed here (Hoffmann 1963). The authenticity of the ball was strongly challenged by Frel 1970 (1994) (in his opinion, the object itself would be ancient, but its decoration and inscriptions are modern work). As far as we know, this view has not found favour (cf., however, Marcadé [1995, 100], who did not disagree). Purchased in Athens in 1929, the object has been in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston since 1963 (accession no. 63.119).

⁸ Fawn seems to be the most common interpretation for the figure, but to one of us (EMS) the large ears are more reminiscent of a donkey, albeit one with scrawny legs. See n. 26 below for donkeys as comic animals.



Fig. 1. Ball depicting palaestra scenes (central field): discus-throwers.

astic courtship scenes featuring gifts.⁹ While similar objects in clay imitating a toy ball have been found on Samothrace and Thasos in Hellenistic burials, the erotic scene, in particular, might have been considered more suitable for a hetaira than a young girl.¹⁰ Even so, it was deemed suitable to add an emphatic "ναίχι" (Fig. 1) after "Μυρρίνες εἰμί" (see below) – perhaps adding humour, or at least an acknowledgment that such artefacts with such decoration were not made for women on a regular basis.

⁹ Such scenes were already described by Beazley (1947, 195–244), although they typically feature a cock or a hare as the gift.

¹⁰ Immerwahr 1967 discusses the associations between toy balls and eroticism, starting with Odysseus and Nausicaa. For some further evidence (mainly literary) of the erotic associations of girls or women and ball-playing, see O'Sullivan 2012, 20–21 (Myrrhine is mentioned on p. 21). See Dusenbery (1998, 199–208) for the Samothrace burial, dated to 275–250 BCE. The osteological material seems to have been so poorly preserved that sexing it was impossible, but the deceased were two adolescents. For the Thasian burial, only a brief note by Ghali-Kahil (1954, 242–44, referenced in Immerwahr 1967) exists, dating the burial to the 2nd century BCE but not giving any information on the human remains. The clay ball itself is undecorated save for incisions imitating the joins of the leather patches.

In any case, the object shows four texts, one of which is probably a later addition:

1. Μυρρίνες εἰμί· ναίχι (on central frieze; painted before firing)
2. Μυρρίνες εἰμί (bottom cap; incised after firing)
3. *ho paîs kalós* (top cap; incised after firing)
4. : *hos êoiken apò tòn êríon ênai{ai}* (top cap, incised on the outside of **3**)

2 and **3** were scratched by the same hand, perhaps the painter himself.¹¹ **4** seems a later addition, possibly coinciding with a change in the use of the artefact. The conventional *ho paîs kalós* may refer to one of the youths represented in the athletic scenes of the central field. Subsequently, either already in the workshop or some time later, a comment on, allegedly, the "beautiful boy" was added by someone seemingly also having one of the depicted figures in mind (Fig. 4). Whether the two remarks matched in referring to one and the same boy remains uncertain – perhaps they did. Various readings of **4** have been proposed. The one given above was suggested by Henry Immerwahr (n. 7), who examined the inscription on the original (the last two letters would have been written by mistake or in an attempt to rewrite them after a first and slightly unsuccessful trial).¹² Taking *hos* as *ôs*-relative and *êríon* as indicating 'funeral games' (*êríōn*) rather than 'wool' (*êríōn*, which, if for no other reason, would sound odd with the article), he translated the inscription as follows: "(The boy is handsome), who seems to be from the mounds", that is, from the funeral games.¹³ In other words, "that is how

¹¹ Note the repetition of Μυρρίνες εἰμί. See below for more discussion: was the duplication the result of someone practicing their writing, or perhaps something to mark the artefact moving into a new phase in its "life" as it left the potter's kiln?

¹² The appearance of *ênai* (**4**) alongside *εἰμί* (**1–2**) in about 500 BCE is noteworthy, see Threatte 1980, 176, who cites this case. That **4** is an addition should not be significant, as it is hardly much later than **1–3**.

¹³ Note that Immerwahr (1967, 264 n. 12) objected to Jeffery's idea about the funerary function of the discuses with *ἐκ τῶν ἐρίων*: "Her explanation seems unlikely, since two of Jacobstahl's discuses are anonymous and since the statement 'from the tombs' would make sense only after the object had been removed from the tomb". But the anonymous discuses would naturally have been accompanied by epitaphs. The second objection remains partly opaque. Roller (1981, 4) also missed the point when referring to anonymity, which would have made the use of the discuses "as burial markers or votives improbable".



Fig. 2. Ball depicting palaistra scenes (central field): javelin-throwers.

he looks as he comes from the [games at the] funeral".¹⁴ That a winning athlete returning from festivals may appear handsome makes perfect sense, but as we saw, ἐρία should mean 'grave monuments' or tombs in general, and not contests of any kind. A further problem is that the text may end with ΕΝ, the first Α (in ἐνοι{αι}) looking less like a letter and the second one being considerably dislocated, and it is difficult, moreover, to discern any traces of the two iotas (Fig. 4).

Provided that the word division is correct and that the text really includes the expression ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίων,¹⁵ we would then be dealing with the expression "from the tombs" in possible reference to the παῖς καλός.¹⁶ What does this mean? Could it be that instead of reinforcing the praise of the boy, the remark actually

¹⁴ This is the translation given at the Museum of Fine Arts web site: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/ball-depicting-palaistra-scenes-153578>. A different version (by Gregory Nagy) appears in the MFA entry of one of the discuses listed above (no. 2): "... as he comes from the funeral games at the Eria" (cf. below n. 18): <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/discus-130164>.

¹⁵ Various early readings, many of them related to ἔριον 'wool', were reported by Immerwahr 1967, 261. As for other word combinations, none seems workable (ὡς ἔοι κεν, ἄποτον, ἄπωτον, ἀπ' ὄτων, Ἐριοῦνην, etc.).

¹⁶ See below for alternative interpretations.



Fig. 3. Ball depicting palaestra scenes (central field): boy and elderly man.

served a slightly derisive purpose, as if the figure in question resembled someone "from the tombs", or indeed was like a corpse "from the graves". The youthful figures are all customarily beautiful and athletic (see below), but a jeering comment like this might have been made with some sense of malicious humour in mind. We observe that Margherita Guarducci arrived at a similar conclusion when reconsidering her earlier adhesion to Immerwahr's hypothesis.¹⁷ She did not discuss the ἐκ τῶν ἐπίων evidence at all, but had intuitive doubts about any connection with funeral games ("debbo ammettere che il passaggio dal significato di "tombe" a quello di "ludi sepolcrali" è decisamente troppo audace", p. 13). Even if the address of the anonymous comment can hardly be established with certainty, our impression is that Guarducci was basically right in her explanation of the text, which was accompanied by a translation with fitting comment: "(il fanciullo bello), che sembra venuto dal cimitero"; quasi a dire: "Altro che bello! Egli è un mezzo morto, il fantasma di un morto" (p. 15). As far as may be gathered from the entry *CAVI* no. 2809, although referring to Guarducci's hypothesis ("differently Guarducci"), Immerwahr continued to prefer his original interpretation.

¹⁷ Guarducci 1980, 13–5 (earlier, Guarducci 1970), with due critique of the interpretations of Gallavotti (1971, 349–53) and Cataudella (1978).



Fig. 4. Ball depicting palaistra scenes (top cap): graffiti.

One may add that both Immerwahr and Guarducci referred to an interesting topographical detail preserved in Etym. Magn. s. v. Ἡρία: Αἱ πύλαι Ἀθήνησι· διὰ τὸ τοὺς νεκροὺς ἐκφέρεσθαι ἐκεῖ ἐπὶ τὰ ἡρία, ὅ ἐστι τάφους.¹⁸ It has been assumed long since that this "Gate of the Graves" led to an archaic cemetery northeast of the Dipylon, and thus close to the Kerameikos with a concentration of pottery production. If so, one may wonder if the clay ball was manufactured in a workshop situated in this district, the commentator *also* playfully alluding with the phrase ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίων to a local toponym.

There is something more, however. Considering that the text may end with EN (see above), one wonders whether the latter character could be read as A rather than N (based on photographic evidence, this might be just possible¹⁹). In that case one could think of the imperative ἔα, the whole phrase then correspond-

¹⁸ Immerwahr 1967, 263 n. 19; Guarducci 1980, 15–6 n. 28. In the latter's view, the entry should be emended to Ἡρία<ι>αι πύλαι. Rather Ἡρία{α}ι πύλαι (unless Ἡρία{α}ι). Matthaiou (1983) less convincingly opted for Ἡρία, a general descriptive term for all the gates, through which the dead were carried. See Ruggeri 2013, 64 (D 7).

¹⁹ Not only would one expect the second hasta of N be more oblique, but its middle stroke also differs from those of the other *nus*. Such minor differences are admissible, however. Unfortunately, final judgement is complicated by an abrasion straight in the crucial part of the letter.

ing to something like "(The boy is handsome), who seems (to be/come) from the graves; let it be". However, to avoid undesirable ellipsis with ἔοικεν, one might opt for a version like this: "As it seems, (he is like one) from the tombs; so let it be". Taking *hoc* as a relative adverb of the common parenthesis ὡς ἔοικε(ν), as this translation does, might even allow for regarding the phrase as metric.²⁰ With ἔα, one could also get rid of ἐναί (alongside εἰμί), though this is an interesting feature rather than a real problem (see above n. 12). Alternatively, one might read ἔα as the (not very common) interjection of displeasure or surprise, which, however, usually occurs before a question (that it is also preponderantly poetic would not be an obstacle). Speculating even further, if the inscription really shows AI{AI} at the end, as Immerwahr claimed (and others have agreed), could this be the exclamation αἰαῖ, perhaps a final comment by still another hand? By this reading, the "problem" of dittography would be eliminated.²¹

An entirely different explanation would be that ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίων simply states that the παῖς καλός is "far from the tombs", i.e., that he has avoided premature death. However, this sounds somewhat colourless and too moderate for a comment, and one would rather expect an explicit wish to the same effect.

Let it be noted, finally, that in the opinion of Quintino Cataudella, ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίων would refer to the custom of scratching acclamatory graffiti (like *kalos*) on grave monuments, and thus inscription 4 would mean "(The boy is beautiful), who, from the graves (i.e., judging by *kalos*-graffiti), appears to be so (= *kalos*)".²² However, even if *kalos*-acclamations are well known to have been scratched on walls, natural rocks or in the bark of trees, for those on small-scale standing monuments the evidence is meagre.²³ The phenomenon of scratching one's admiration even on tombs evidently existed,²⁴ but the problem in our case is that the boy who is *kalos* is not recorded by name, nor is he otherwise identified

²⁰ The iambo-trochaic sequence, whether acephalous iambic or catalectic trochaic, would not be quite faultless, though. Note that Cataudella (1978, 172–73) thought that he could recognize here, not without difficulties, an acatalectic anapaestic dimeter.

²¹ "Ahi, ahiii" was also considered by Gallavotti 1970, 353, but his reconstruction was otherwise completely untenable.

²² Cataudella 1978, 174.

²³ Cf. Miller 2001, 86–8, and the epigram of Aratos, which is cited by Cataudella (1978, 174), *A.P.* 12,29: Ἀργεῖος Φιλοκλῆς Ἄργει καλός, αἴ τε Κορίνθου / στῆλαι καὶ Μεγαρέων ταῦτ' ὀβωῶσι τάφοι / γέγραπται καὶ μέχρι λοετρῶν Ἀμφιαράου / ὡς καλός.

²⁴ Cf., however, Guarducci 1980, 14: "uso non dimostrato (ch'io sappia) da documenti epigrafici".

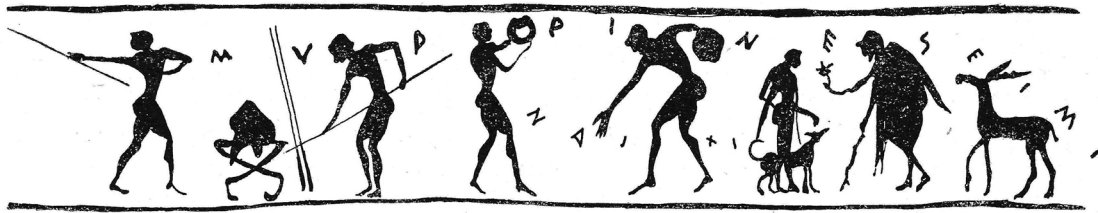


Fig. 5. Panorama of central field.

for that matter. Therefore, reference to graffiti on tomb stones or anywhere would seem pointless.

Who, then, was the zombie-like *παῖς καλός*?²⁵ Immerwahr, who thought of someone coming from funerary athletic contests, preferred the boy, accompanied by a dog, who in what is clearly an erotic scene is being presented a flower by an older man (Fig. 3). The other two scenes represent two athletes each in the act of practising discus throwing in one case, and with javelins in the other (see Figs. 1, 2, 5). Now, if one wishes to say who among these youths is the one fresh from games, the choice would hardly be the boy approached by the elderly lover, for even if he may be considered beautiful, he is definitely a less athletic figure, being not only of smaller stature than the other youths but also without any sportive attributes. And this is precisely why Guarducci's guess hit the same boy, who, in her view, in comparison with the fearless athletes, appears as a lean, feeble-looking and awkward figure. This may not be objectively true, but in the words of the ancient commentator, he would have looked like a living dead "from the graves".

The inscription circling a seemingly straight-forward statement of beauty seems to stubbornly elude a singular interpretation, as there is yet another possible reading. For even though undercutting the clichéd phrase *παῖς καλός* with a reference to the undead would make for a sensible reading, it is possible to read the two utterances as separate. If the *παῖς καλός* is, indeed, a separate formula, it would appear conceivable that the one crawling out of the grave, perhaps re-

²⁵ One of the present authors (MK), while pondering on which of the figures might best qualify as the "zombie", cannot help confessing that what is painted between the two athletes practising with their javelins, at first sight, very much looked to him like a human creature squatting in a somewhat deformed position, as if in the act of winding the throwing thong of his companion's javelin, until he realized that it is a folding stool with clothes rolled up on it. This may simply result from a modern observer's limited or perverted spatial visualizing ability. The ancient Greeks must have immediately recognized such stools on vase paintings.

ferred to by the ὄς-demonstrative, is the elderly man leaning on his staff, looking unappetizing to the youthful athletes and the boy he is accosting, his humiliation possibly further emphasized by a donkey traipsing behind him.²⁶

As evidenced by the multiple possible interpretations offered above, Myrrhine's ball has a colourful biography and sits at an intersection of male and female, young and adult, athletic prowess and ridicule. When the ball was first painted and fired, the artisan or the commissioner found the combination of Myrrhine's name and the aristocratically male painted scenes amusing or confounding enough to add a confirmatory "indeed!" Either during the making of the ball or shortly after, someone added to this play on gender by repeating "I am Myrrhine's" while also adding a clichéd comment on (anonymous) male beauty. Whether this was idle scribbling, a reaffirmation of ownership on the object leaving the kiln and being further decorated, or even a bit of writing practice by copying what was already on the painted panel, the same person felt comfortable combining an almost stereotypically male motif of the beautiful *eromenos* with a female owner and viewer. Finally, one more comment was added, perhaps with an edge of ridicule, again flipping our (modern) expectations of a dignified courtship on their head: be the "zombie" the young boy or the elderly man, the inscription might give us an insight into the more tongue-in-cheek discussion coexisting with the lofty ideals of philosophers.²⁷ Whether there was an added morbid humour to the inscription coinciding with a repurposing of the rattle as a funerary object must remain an unanswered but tantalizing question. Either way, it seems likely the artefact had as many readings as it had readers in Antiquity as well as in the present day.

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Figures

Figs. 1–4. *Ball depicting palaistra scenes*. Ceramic, Black Figure. Late Archaic Period, about 500 BC. Athens. Diameter: 4.6 cm, height 4.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, 63.119. Photographs © 2014 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig. 5. *Panorama of central field*. From Guarducci 1980, 11.

²⁶ See Dover 1978 for mockery of both the *erastes* and the *eromenos*. See n. 8 on fawn vs. donkey. Mitchell (2009, 61–62) discusses donkeys as comic characters, although not in connection with an *erastes* or elderly men.

²⁷ Discussed, of course, by Dover at length. See preceding note.

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