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Leagros and Euphronios: the Vase-Painter as Erastes

Scenes of a mature bearded lover (erastes) wooing a younger lover (eromenos) are popular on Attic vases from ca. 560 B.C. to ca. 475, when they abruptly disappear. They reach a high point, in both quality and quantity, in black-figure of the third quarter of the sixth century. Between 500 and 475, the motif enjoys a brief popularity in red-figure, with some striking changes in iconography, e.g. the age difference may be only a couple of years, the erastes now a youth himself, with only the beginnings of a fluffy beard, and the formulaic gesture in black-figure of the erastes chucking the chin of his eromenos is in red-figure often replaced by the two partners preparing to kiss. The implications of this development are considered in the first part of the paper.

Martin Kilmer has recently argued that the standard chronology implies a certain gap, that is, that the courtship motif was not taken up by early red-figure painters before 500, including the outstanding artists who comprise Beazley's Pioneer Group (Euphronios, Euthymides, Phintias, and Smikros). I suggest that what we are dealing with is not so much a gap as a shifting of the homoerotic encounter from the palestra, where most black-figure courtship scenes take place, to the symposium. To explore this proposition, I consider a recently published vase in Malibu by Smikros that depicts Euphronios and Leagros as erastes and eromenos, along with a group of vases painted by Euphronios that name Leagros in various sympotic and erotic contexts.