A Children's Hermeneutics

Giorgio Buccellati

The site of ancient Urkesh has been sealed off by the war in Syria for seven years now. But Marilyn and I have never been away from the site. Through a unique program that has seen us work as one with the people of the region, the site has become a firm point of reference for the local communities. And we have made a major effort to include children in this program: we have put in touch a middle school in a city near the site with a counterpart in Italy, and the children have reflected on what the history of their territory means to them, in particular (for those near Urkesh) what *archaeology* means to them. The deliberate attacks on the Syrian cultural heritage have heightened sensitivity to this question, and we wanted the children to articulate their feelings to each other, through email and Skype conference calls. I will describe briefly the impressive results of this unique program.

I use this as a case study to illustrate a more general principle: approaching children poses a special challenge within the broader issue that characterizes "community" or "public archaeology." How can we help children in their effort to appropriate values when it comes to broken traditions; traditions from a remote past that have no immediate resonance with recent concerns, especially in time of war? It is a unique form of hermeneutics, one that has wide-ranging implications about some of the central issues we are considering in archaeology today, such as cultural heritage and the notion of loyalty to a territory. It opens, in other words, an unexpected window onto some central theoretical considerations that, it turns out, have a much wider application.

We made a monthlong trip, among tents, sheep, and donkeys.

CHILDREN IN THE STEPPE

This is a topic that Lloyd Cotsen would hold close to his heart. His many projects and initiatives addressing children had, as a common thread, not only a pedagogical intent but also the desire to understand more closely the basics that underlie the process through which meaning can be appropriated. I would like here to share, as an introduction to my main argument, some memories of a momentous trip that Lloyd and I took together through the Syrian steppe in 1995.

In the late 1960s, Lloyd was president of the local chapter of the American Institute of Archaeology (AIA). Marilyn and I had just arrived at UCLA, and the first lecture we gave for the AIA was on a reconnaissance trip she and I had taken, in the summer of 1966, in the Palmyrene and the Jebel Bishri in central Syria. The title was "In the Footsteps of the Amorites." For the lecture, I prepared a map on a large canvas using oil paint. (This was well before digital imaging, but the goals were the same.) Lloyd was particularly impressed by that feat, and I used it as a starting point when, some 30 years later (in 1995), I invited him to join me on a winter trip through the Syrian steppe. A trip that aimed to study the lifestyle of the mod-

Figure 1. Children in the Syrian steppe near Jebel Bishri in 1995. (Photograph by Lloyd Cotsen.)

ern "pastoralists" outside the warmer season, when we would normally encounter them in the region of Terqa first and then, to a lesser extent, in the region of Mozan. I told him it was an offer he could not refuse. We would retrace the trails I had first followed with Marilyn in 1966, but this time in the winter, and Lloyd would be in charge of color photography. (My son Federico was in charge of black-and-white photography; again, this was before digital cameras.) And so we made a monthlong trip, among tents, sheep, and donkeys. Personal memories blend inextricably with the goals of a scholarly enterprise that, still today, contributes meaningfully to ongoing research about the Amorites.

In his photography, Lloyd had a special eye for children. I reproduce here three of the many images that he carefully composed with his camera. Instead of a picture *of* Lloyd, we can see the world here *through* Lloyd, the way he looked at it. Of course, we had innumerable chats with the people we encountered, including the children, and an important element that surfaced in these encounters has a direct bearing on my topic. Early in the morning, the children would leave the tents and walk to school. Where in the steppe would they find a school? That was our obvious question. It turned out that a camper/trailer followed the groups of tents, and this trailer served as a grammar school, so that the children would not lag behind in the winter months, before returning in spring to the settled areas where they hailed from and where they could finish their schooling. It was a recent program, they told us, and it was remarkable to see how the children could in fact read and write Arabic when their seniors often could not. That experience made a strong impression on us: education in the steppe, imagine! Think of it. What is the frame of reference for a child living in a tent, in a barren landscape? How would schooling in a trailer contribute to the formation of this frame of reference?

THE STEPPE AS A METAPHOR

But then, what is the frame of reference of a child anywhere? In a sense, each child has a steppe of his or her own. Children seek to go beyond this steppe and construct the world as they discover it. Some of these "steppes" are emptier than others. There is now, in Syria, the steppe of war, that empty moral space that war creates, an emptiness all the more devastating for the little ones. Yet it is precisely here that we

Figure 2. Children in the Syrian steppe near Jebel Bishri in 1995. (Photograph by Lloyd Cotsen.)

see the immense resilience and creativity with which children in general, and Syrian children in particular, face this other empty steppe in their lives. I will use this metaphor to explain, before coming to our Urkesh case study, my title. "A children's hermeneutics" refers to their ability to invent the world around them, their coming out of the various "steppes" in which they live. Therefore this is not hermeneutics for children (how we should explain things to them) but *from* children (how can they explain things to us). In other words: What do they teach us?

The core of the answer, when it comes to archaeology, is the profound impact of the territory. No matter how barren, how "steppe-like," a territory might be, there develops in children a profound sense of psychological dependence upon it. They do not need to be able to describe it in its subtle richness. They *know* it in all its faces: the landscape, the climate, the animals, the human presence. Fragile as it is, there is here a built environment as well, from the tents to the stone desert kites, from rock markings and graffiti to caves used for storage. There are also reminders of the past: tells and cemeteries. What do all these evoke? In a way, the very contrast with the wide-open spaces of the surroundings makes these fragments of human presence all the more imbued with meaning, all the more effective in their impact on the construction of the children's human world. It is thus that they shape their own bearings.

What comes from this dependence is, in turn, an abiding sense of loyalty. It is a loyalty that manifests itself in the consonance with details that are absorbed "natively," precisely, by individuals who are born in the territory and grow up in it. I use the term *loyalty* to refer to the symmetry in the relationship: if the territory leaves an imprint on the children, the children turn to it for their part with a sense of belonging. They create their own worldview, their own vision of the environment that conditions their lives. We can draw two lessons from this with regard to the notion

This is not hermeneutics for children but from children.

of "community archaeology." In the first place, the relationship of the inhabitants to their own territory is what justifies new concerns that the discipline is developing. The self-understanding of the local community is conditioned by the territory in ways that are analogous to those of the ancients. It is especially the native dimension of this belonging to the territory that needs stressing. We can certainly introduce an extrinsic standard of measure by categorizing all possible variables. But the response to the substance that brings together all these variables cannot be measured or categorized. It is rather appropriated through the very fact of being born in it and growing up in it.

The second point to be made relates more directly to our metaphor. We speak of "heritage." But what does the "heritage" of a Hurrian city, no matter how important for being one of the very first cities in history, mean to these children? What do they really inherit? Or, for that matter, what do the villagers—young and adult as well, living around ancient Urkesh—inherit from it? The heritage of the Hurrians

is a broken tradition, and a broken tradition is like a steppe of time. Their culture has no direct connection with anything the local people experience today. Nothing except the territory; which takes us to the case study I now wish to illustrate briefly.

A CASE STUDY: THE URKESH SCHOOL PROGRAM

Marilyn and I were in Beirut in November 2017 for the opening of an exhibit we organized about our site during six and a half years of war. On that occasion, we organized a roundtable in which seven of our Syrian colleagues participated; four of them were from the region of our site. One of the concerns we addressed was the need to develop the underpinning of an eco-archaeological park that we had been planning before the war. It being impossible, under the present conditions, to attend to the formal realization of the park, we sought, with our Syrian colleagues, to identify other ways to create a sensitivity among the local people to the substance of our goals, even if we could not set in place any proper structure to administer them. Among other things, we came up with the idea of a project that would involve the children of the area. In the first half of 2018, we set this in motion. The results were little short of extraordinary.

The program paired middle school children (11 to 13 years of age) in Qamishli, the Syrian city closest to our site, with their counterparts in Domodossola, a small city in northern Italy, aiming to develop a dialogue in which they would become more and more the protagonists. The program was articulated in three components: the writing of essays that would make them reflect on the past of the area in which they lived, a live dialogue via Skype, and musical exchanges. The program was only possible because of the commitment of Amer Ahmad in Qamishli, Yasmine Mahmoud in Damascus, and Enzo Sartori in Domodossola, to whom goes my heartfelt gratitude. All three components of the program proved to be extremely successful and were the centerpiece of an exhibit held in Rimini in August 2018, which then went to Damascus for the reopening of the National Museum in October 2018. Here I can only report briefly on the first component, the writing of essays. To break the ice, Enzo Sartori suggested a first question: What makes you feel at home? The answers came in by the dozens (in Arabic and Italian at first, and then progressively in English), and they were extremely enlightening.

Figure 3. Children in the Syrian steppe near Jebel Bishri in 1995. (Photograph by Lloyd Cotsen.)

Here is a selection of recurrent themes from the essays written by the Syrian youngsters:

TRADITIONS AND GRANDPARENTS

- My grandpa always talks about the old traditions so we learn about it and preserve it.
- It is through my family that I learned about our history and our traditions which we hold onto, despite gaining new habits and traditions. In the old days, people used to visit each other, but now no one cares anymore.
- My grandmother always tells us about life in the old days. Whenever I wanted to know more about our history, I would ask my father and grandfather. And even though this was helpful, it was not enough. I needed to read history books to learn about the archaeological sites in my country.
- My family kept only the traditions that are positive and that strengthen the social bonds and respect. We also hold onto our traditional outfits on special occasions. As for the negative ones, we forgot them.

VILLAGES

- I go to the village on the weekend to get away from the polluted city and to see the sun that is always blocked by buildings.
- In the village, people still make traditional food like cooking the wheat (Danouk) and bourghul and semolina, and make dried meat. And my grandmother tells us about the traditional handmade items that she used to make like carpets, and making

I love being from a place so rich in archaeological sites.

food in the traditional way like making yogurt, ghee, and cheese. I like going back to making these foods and help my grandmother in making them.
- I prefer to live in the village because life there is quiet and beautiful. There we can detach ourselves from the chaos of the city and enjoy the splendid views and landscapes.
- Although I live in the city, I like living in the village, where it is clean and quiet. It is the perfect atmosphere to innovate and to write.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

- In my area, there are many archaeological sites like the Roman bridge, Ain Diwar, and Tell Arbid, which I visited because my mom is from there.
- My father said that there are archaeological tells in almost every village, which is a sign of a great civilization that thrived in the area thousands of years ago.
- Some of the most important sites in al Jazirah are in my region, like Tell Mozan and Tell Arbid.
- I love being from a place so rich in archaeological sites, but I never visited these sites.
- In our area, there are many archaeological sites like Tell Beidar, Tell Mozan, and Tell Arbid, which makes me very proud. I would love to visit these sites because I never did before.
- There are many archaeological sites in my area, like Tell Halaf, Tell Mozan, and Tell Beydar, and I have always wanted to visit because I love archaeology. I went to Jaabar citadel.
- I consider my area a beautiful one, full of archaeological monuments. And my village is very close to these sites.
- Every archaeological site in my country has a special place in my heart.

IDENTITY

- I think it is very important to preserve the traditions that express our authenticity and our identity.
- In my town, Qamishli, Kurds, Arab, Assyrians, and Armenians all live together. I get along with everyone, and I feel proud of being friends with everyone, and I can't imagine being away from my friends or my country.
- My country does not mean just a geographical space. It is a place where people live in equality.
- I was excited to see these monuments: the people who lived there were Syrians!

Here is a similar selection from their Italian counterparts:

VILLAGES

- Something very dear to me is my little mountain village: Sasseglio. I was not born there, but when I am there I feel at home.
- What makes me feel at home . . . are the mountain villages. The particularity of these villages is that, since there are many valleys, each one is different from the other because of the different building styles.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

- A special place which I adore is the old mill near my home, where I was going to play as a little child because inside there was my special little space.
- A small eating place where my dad would bring me to drink a soda—now it is closed, unfortunately, but there is still a water fountain, hidden away.
- The villages are structured as follows: a central square, usually with a fountain, one or more churches, houses built of stone, all connected by stone paved paths.
- I miss a lot my mountain lodge when I am not able to go there—for instance in the winter, because there is too much snow.
- I also love the structure of the mountain lodge, all wood on the inside and stone on the outside.

MOUNTAINS AND LANDSCAPE

- The cold and the snow are two things that make me feel at ease: "at home!"— even though in the end I don't like them that much.
- And then the mountains, which give me a sense of security.
- What makes me feel at home is the snow: I love to ski, and when it starts snowing I feel more free.
- To enjoy these imposing mountains gives me a sense of security.
- But the most beautiful thing is the silence. One can only hear the birds singing and the water running in the streams. I could not be away for very long.

Figure 4. Two essays from the Italian students.

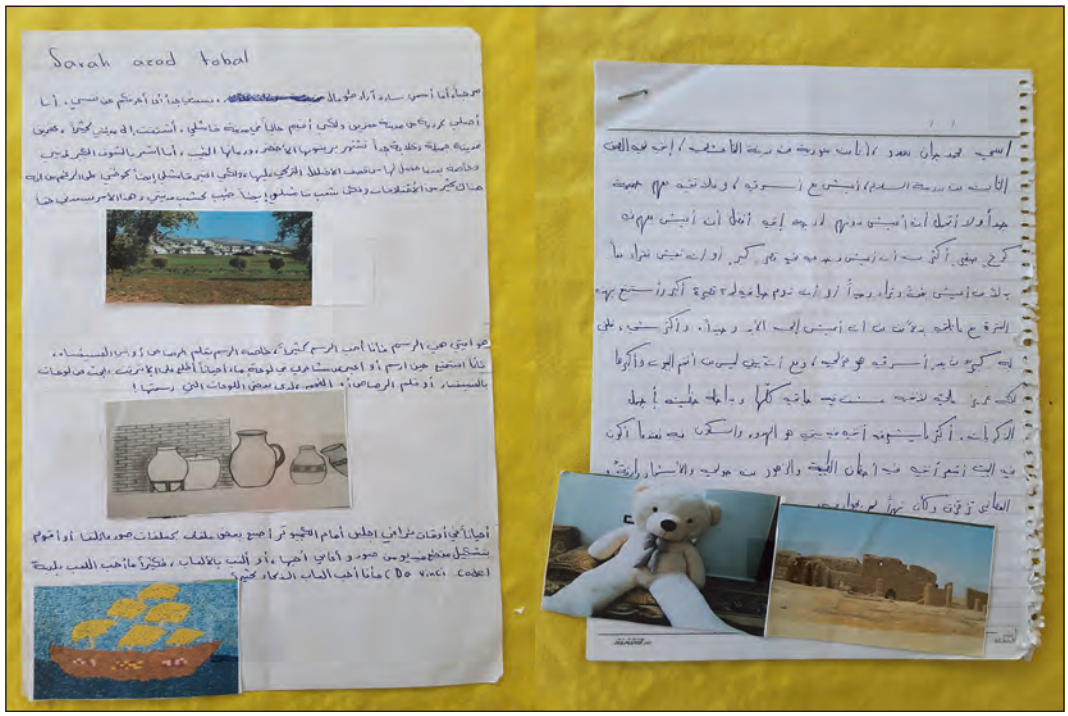

Figure 5. Two essays from the Syrian students.

It would be interesting to undertake a full exegesis of these essays, comparing them with each other and also studying the impact they had on the two respective groups; an impact that was indeed extremely remarkable, unexpected, and moving. But even this short selection is sufficient to help us see how the world vision of these youngsters is taking shape, and how the question of the past and of the territory is looming large in their imagination. It is by reaching out to this sensitivity that we can on the one hand learn from their responses and on the other help them discover those values that we, too, have discovered through archaeology and more deeply appropriated as our own.

It is, I think, a celebration that Lloyd would enjoy and of which he would be proud. A celebration of the future.

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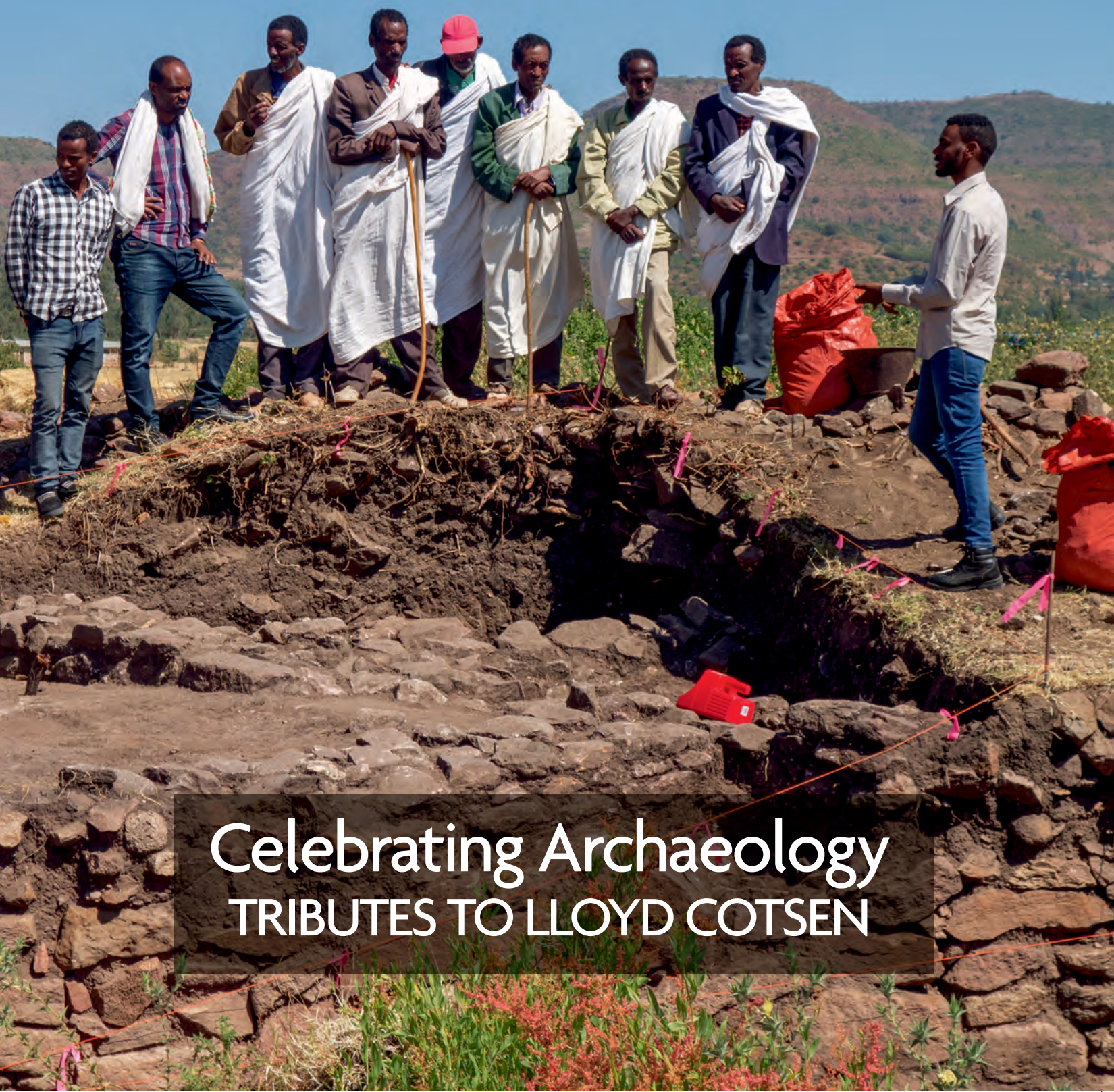

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FRONT COVER: Ethiopian archaeologist Goitom Weldehaweriat (right) explains the site of Mai Adrasha, near Indaselassie (Shire) in northern Ethiopia, to a group of mourners returning from a funeral.

BACK COVER: Northern Arizona University graduate student Whitney Yarbrough studies an ancient Egyptian wooden animal coffin in the collection of Museo Egizio, Turin, during the field school in museology and Egyptian material culture organized by the Cotsen Institute, the Institute for Field Research, and Museo Egizio.

ABOVE: Beverly Godwin, longtime member of the Friends of Archaeology, greets visitors during the open house on May 12, 2018.

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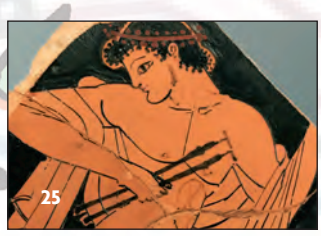

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