In recounting the tale of Apollo’s love for the nymph Cyrene, Pindar puts a prophecy into the mouth of the wise centaur Cheiron: the nymph shall become patroness of the north African city of Cyrene and

There she shall bring forth a son, whom renowned Hermes shall receive from his dear mother and shall bear away To the enthroned Seasons and to Earth. They, gazing with bright eyes at the child on their knees, shall drip nectar and ambrosia on his lips, and shall make him immortal, a bringer of joy to his friends among men, an ever-close follower of the flocks, For some men to call Zeus and holy Apollo, Agreus and Nomios, and for others Aristaios.

Aristaios was one of the minor members of the Greek pantheon; he seldom found a place in Attic art or in the writings of the classical Athenian authors, and so he is little known to us, who see Greek culture predominantly through Athenian eyes. To the Boeotians, however, Aristaios was more familiar. Hesiod, whose family settled in Boeotia in the ninth century B.C., is said to have called him “the pastoral Apollo,” while in the Theogony, an eighth century Boeotian poem traditionally ascribed to Hesiod, Aristaios marries Autonoë, the daughter of Cadmos, legendary founder of Boeotia’s principal city, Thebes. Pindar, born near Thebes in the late sixth century B.C., has left us the earliest detailed account of Aristaios’ birth, upbringing, and accomplishments. Aristaios was much traveled, but almost

1. Aristaios. Detail of the Museum’s tripod-kothon shown in Figure 4

all the ancient authors are agreed that his first home was in Boeotia, and it is appropriate to find him represented on a Boeotian vase (Figure 1) that was recently acquired by the Museum and is now on view for the first time in the Greek vase galleries.

The vase is of an unusual shape not previously represented in the collection: a tripod-kothon. The Greek word kothon properly means a Spartan type of drinking cup, characterized by Kritias as "most useful on military expeditions, and very easily carried in a knapsack." However, it was mistakenly applied by nineteenth century archaeologists to a perfume bowl with an overhanging rim like an unspillable inkwell, and the name has been retained for vases that include a bowl of this shape. They may also have feet and handles of various kinds. Our kothon (Figure 4) has this sort of bowl with three handles that are clearly copied from bronze handles like the one from Cyprus shown in Figure 3. This consists of a swinging loop suspended from an attachment in the shape of a double reel, which was fastened to a bronze bowl. The handle would be lifted upward in use. When the metal form is imitated in terracotta, the loop is permanently fixed in the lower position to the shoulder of the vase and ceases to be strictly functional.

The tripod support must also have had a metal prototype. The legs consist of convex panels, curved to conform with the shape of the bowl. When made of clay, these panels are quite fragile, and in fact two of them have been cracked and repaired; but a metalworker would have no difficulty in bending sheets of bronze to a similar shape, and these would not be so liable to fracture. He would, however, need to provide struts between the three legs to prevent them from splaying outward; these too have been imitated by our potter. Below the center of the bowl is a short spike from which three rods curve downward and outward to join the backs of the legs. At their lowest point these rods are connected by a ring of clay some three inches in diameter, which is itself attached to the bowl by three vertical struts. The struts have been left unglazed; the other rods and the ring are black. The potter's finishing touch was to add a slight projection on the outside of each leg; the projections were glazed and can be seen as black disks in

Figures 1, 5, and 8. They are not part of the figure decoration: they are the last traces of the studs which, in the bronze prototype, were formed by hammering back the ends of the rods that projected through the legs.

The black-figure decoration comes in panels on the shoulder between the handles and on the three legs. The lion, sphinx, and siren on the shoulder (Figures 6, 9, 10) are descended from the animals and monsters on Corinthian vases of the seventh and early sixth centuries; the human figures on the legs (Figures 1, 5, 8) are also Corinthian in origin, but the style of the drawing is more closely related to that of an Athenian, the so-called KX Painter, who was much influenced by Corinthian artists and was in turn imitated by the Boeotians. The K in his nickname stands for komasts, the grotesquely padded dancers seen frequently on his vases and imitated on one of the legs of our kothon (Figure 8).

The winged youth on another leg (Figure 1) is Aristaios, who also appears on a similar vase from the same workshop, now in the National Museum in Athens (Figure 2). Iconographically related to the many figures with wings in the repertory of Corinthian and Attic vase painters, he is distinguished from them by the objects he
carries. Many of the other winged figures are empty-handed and are not individually identified; they are conventionally termed “Boreads” (sons of Boreas, the North Wind), for when Boreas and his sons can be identified with certainty, either by inscribed names or by the mythological context, they are normally represented with wings, indicating the swift movement of the winds. Aristaios’s wings perhaps refer to his success in obtaining cooling winds for the Keans when their island was being parched during the “dog days” that follow the rising of the Dog Star, Sirius. Aristaios, summoned on the orders of Apollo, went to Keos and “built a great altar to Zeus Ikmaios (the rain-god) and duly offered sacrifices in the mountains to that star Sirius and to Zeus, the son of Kronos. Therefore the seasonal winds from Zeus cool the land for forty days; and even now in Keos the priests offer sacrifices before the rising of the Dog Star.”

However, Aristaios was better known for his many agricultural discoveries and gifts to mankind. In particular he was reputed to have taught men the care of bees and the use of honey, so that Ovid uses “honey to Aristaios” as the equivalent of the English proverb “coals to Newcastle.” Honey, described as “one tenth of immortality,” was extremely important to the

Greeks, since they did not make sugar from beet or cane. Aristaios was also credited with the discovery of the olive and was especially revered by the olive growers in Sicily, an island he was said to have visited. His titles Agreus and Nomios show that his patronage of hunting and herding was already well known to Pindar in the fifth century B.C. Nonnos, who wrote about a thousand years later, gave a long and detailed list of his many accomplishments, including such details as the invention of a linen mask for beekeepers and the technique of smoking out bees from the hive.

Nonnos also lists the wedding gifts Aristaios gave to his bride Autonoë: oxen, goats, sheep, olive oil, and honey. It has been suggested that the little pot carried by Aristaios might contain the oil or honey, and that he is here on his way to claim his bride, but this would hardly account for the implement he carries, which has a metal blade fastened with thongs to a wooden handle. To see such an implement in use we must look at a scene on an Attic black-figured cup in the Louvre (Figure 7), which shows a group of men working in the manner recommended by Hesiod, who advises prayers to Zeus and Demeter for a good crop “as you first begin ploughing, when you take the top of the ploughtail in your hand and apply a stick to the back of the oxen as they drag the oaken pin of the yoke-straps; and, just behind, have a slave with a mattock (μακέλατος) make trouble for the birds by covering up the seed.”
If Aristaios’s implement is a mattock, there seems to be no reason why he should be taking it to his bride; surely he is on his way to help at the ploughing. But then a pot of honey or oil would be equally out of place, and indeed I know of no vase from the sixth century of quite that shape: a sort of small pointed amphora with a conical lid and bail handle. Perhaps it is simply a reduced, one-handled version of the large amphoras in the mule cart shown on the other side of the Louvre cup (Figure 7), which Plaoutine has plausibly interpreted as storage jars in which the seed corn is being brought to the fields. On our vase, then, Aristaios is bringing not only a mattock to hide the seed from the birds, but also a token amount of the seed itself in a suitable small pot. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Aristaios is sometimes shown bringing the seed not in a pot but in a small sack of the kind used by the sower on the Louvre cup to carry the seed around the field.

The production of cereals was, of course, principally the concern of Demeter, whose importance was preserved, especially at Athens, by the influence of the Eleusinian mysteries. I know of no ancient author who names Aristaios specifically as a corn-god, but in the representations of him we do seem to find evidence that he was connected at least with ploughing and sowing. Perhaps this is the justification for the remark, ascribed to Aristotle, that Aristaios was reputed “the most concerned with agriculture (γιότεγνωσσικότατος) in the time of the ancients.”
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10. Bearded siren. Detail of the Museum’s tripod-kthon shown in Figure 4. The handle at the right is pierced for a cord to attach a lid (which no longer exists)