

The Delian “Slipper Slapper” Group (c. 100 B.C.E.) and Feminine Power

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: The Delian “Slipper Slapper” Group (c. 100 B. C.E.) and Feminine Power

This thesis examines one of the most famous sculptures of the Hellenistic period of Greek art—the "Slipper Slapper" group of Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan, set up in the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Berytus on Delos around 100 B.C.E. The sculpture captures a suspenseful moment: Aphrodite raises her sandal as Pan makes sexual advances. This thesis argues that Aphrodite’s naked form, far from being merely erotic, is an assertion of feminine agency. It also suggests that Aphrodite’s raised sandal may be understood not as a means of defense but rather as a way to discipline Pan. By examining the sculpture’s composition and archaeological context, Aphrodite’s nakedness, and the significance of her raised sandal, this thesis concludes that the “Slipper Slapper” is a powerful expression of female agency and resistance.

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Chapter I. Introduction

What does it mean for a goddess to raise her sandal in defense? And how might this gesture, combined with her nakedness, reshape our understanding of female agency in Hellenistic visual culture? The sculptural group of Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan—commonly referred to as the “Slipper Slapper”—was created around 100 B.C.E. The sculpture was discovered in 1904 by French archaeologist Marcel Bulard on the island of Delos, in the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut, a building owned by merchants from the Phoenician city of Beirut.¹ This dynamic composition captures a dramatic moment: Aphrodite lifts her sandal to strike Pan, who reaches lewdly toward her genitalia, while her son Eros hovers above, restraining Pan by the horns.

The “Slipper Slapper” has been a standard inclusion in major handbooks of Greek and art history,² yet discussion of the Delian group has largely been limited to its date, findspot, and comedic tone. Scholars have often dismissed the work as technically “crude” or artistically “disliked,”³ yet these assessments overlook the deeper cultural and symbolic meaning embedded in Aphrodite’s nakedness and her raised sandal. My thesis aims to challenge previous interpretations that limit the reception of Aphrodite’s nakedness and to reveal the significance of the sandal that the goddess wields against Pan’s unwanted advances. Specifically, I seek to reframe Aphrodite’s nakedness and to question whether the sandal she raises is merely a humorous prop.

¹ Abbreviations and formatting in this thesis follow the *American Journal of Archaeology*’s Author Guide: www.ajaonline.org. For the Slipper Slapper group (Athens, NM 3335) and previous bibliography, see especially Kaltsas 2002, no. 617; Martin 2017a; Martin 2017b, 156-68.

² E.g., Pollitt 1986, 130-31; Stewart 1990, 226-27; Ridgway 2000, 147-49; Stewart 2014, 170-71.

³ Smith 1991, 242; Pollitt 1986, 130.

The thesis is structured to guide the reader through a layered examination of the “Slipper Slapper” group; its artistic, religious, and cultural contexts; and its scholarly reception. After this introduction in Chapter I, Chapter II provides a detailed archeological and contextual analysis of the sculpture itself, including the significance of its placement within the Poseidoniasts’ Clubhouse on the island of Delos. Chapter III surveys the major strands of previous scholarship, tracing how interpretations of the group have evolved and highlighting the neglected areas that this thesis aims to address. In Chapter IV, I investigate the meaning of Aphrodite’s nakedness, particularly how her bodily display operates within both public and religious settings in Hellenistic art. Chapter V focuses on the interpretation of Aphrodite’s raised sandal as an expression of female agency. Finally, Chapter VI concludes the thesis by synthesizing the findings of the previous chapters, reaffirming the sculpture’s cultural complexity, the significance of Aphrodite’s nakedness within a religious and social setting, and the importance of examining both her nakedness and the significance behind the goddess’s raised sandal.

Chapter II. Description of Artwork and Historical Context

Discovered in 1904 by French archeologist Marcel Bulard and his team, the sculptural group of *Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan* was excavated in the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut on the island of Delos.⁴ This merchant complex is located in an area that is north of the Sacred Lake and the Apollo Sanctuary, near the famous “Terrace of Lions” and “Agora of the Italians,” which are adjunct to the house of the Diadoumenos.⁵ The plan of the Clubhouse was designed in a large, spacious layout to function both as a luxury private house and as a civic space that accommodated large groups of people – evident by the architectural inclusion of large courtyards, various-sized rooms, and peristyles. The functionality of the Clubhouse seems to be integral to the merchants’ financial and social stability, as this was a space for meetings and gatherings in which public and private favor was gained. The building went through three stages of construction in antiquity, and the “Slipper Slapper” was found in the last version of the complex. It was excavated below room “Z.”⁶

Formal Analysis

The sculptural group of *Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan*, often referred to as the “Slipper Slapper,” depicts the goddess of love Aphrodite, her son, Eros, and the satyr (half-goat half-man) Pan in the midst of a tense confrontation. Aphrodite is sculpted in a seemingly defensive pose, with her right arm raised above her head, clutching her sandal in her right hand, in an attempt to ward off the sexual advances of Pan. This Aphrodite is a quotation of the now-lost, late-Classical Aphrodite of Knidos (fig. 4) which was created by the prominent Greek

⁴ Bulard 1906. For the excavation history, see Martin 2017a, 253.

⁵ Martin 2017a, 273.

⁶ Martin 2017a, 273.

sculptor Praxiteles in the fourth century B.C.E.⁷ The artist of the “Slipper Slapper” sculptural group remains unknown to art historians. Being unique both in stylistic content and in figural arrangement, this work has no known copies that exist. It is one of the few artworks from antiquity that can be accurately dated owing to the inscription on the base, making it one of the Hellenistic period’s most significant works.⁸

As I observed when examining the sculptural group in person at the National Museum in Athens, Greece, Pan is seated on a stump-like support that has an animal skin draped over the top of it to act as a cushion. His left leg extends outwards in front of Aphrodite and his right leg lingers close by, almost straddling the goddess between his legs. His left arm is outstretched and takes hold of the goddess’s left hand, which is covering her pubic area in an effort to shield herself from his unwanted advance. Pan looks up at Aphrodite with an intense grimace on his face that is strikingly realistic. The depth in which Pan’s features and curly hair are carved add an extra sense of dynamism to the group that is amplified by the intense musculature of his body and outstretched hand. The artist’s attention to fine detail can be identified specifically in the protruding veins in Pan’s hand which is grasping Aphrodite’s. Further adding to the sense of movement is the figural composition. Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan are positioned close in proximity to each other at the base and arch out into a “Y” shape, which creates a sense of visual movement that is actively taking place. All of the figures are sculpted in a highly stylized and realistic manner, inviting the viewer to engage directly with the work.

When examining the sculptural group, I also noted that, while Aphrodite and Pan are caught in a tense moment of struggle, Aphrodite’s son, Eros, flies above and grips the horns of

⁷ Martin 2017a, 253.

⁸ Pollitt 1986, 131; Ridgway 2000, 147.

Pan, potentially in an effort to free the satyr from exposing the goddess's nakedness. When viewing the sculpture in person, the viewer must look up to the sculpture and catch the gaze of all three figures, adding to the immersive quality of the sculptural group. The lighting in the National Museum is positioned carefully so that the three dimensionality of the sculpture is emphasized and seemingly stands out further in an optical illusion created between light and shadow, which works to highlight the artist's mastery of the marble. The gradients of shadow change in effect when the viewer moves around the sculptural group, as it is carved in the round. The "Slipper Slapper's" immersive aspects include these dynamic qualities and this command of space and the viewer's attention.

Generally, the sculptural group's pigment stands out in dark contrast to the cream color of its Parian marble. The back of the sandal that Aphrodite holds (fig. 9) has pigment that is still a light shade of dark red, as I observed during the close autopsy of the sculptural group that I conducted in person. When viewing the sculpture in the round, I found that traces of the same red pigment can also be seen on the front of the sandal, more so at the bottom in the space between where the goddess's middle finger and thumb grip around the edges. After viewing the work from all angles and using a flashlight to illuminate the sculpture further, I identified pigment traces on various parts of the entire sculpture. Aphrodite's legs preserve pigment mostly on the front of the right leg, trailing down her hip and thigh, all the way down the outer portion of her right shin, stopping just above the ankle. A similar pattern of surviving pigment is mirrored on the inner right leg of the goddess, extending down into the arch of the left foot, and can be seen by viewing the sculpture from the front at an off-center angle. The left side of Pan also contains trace pigment (fig. 10) that is concentrated on his upper thigh, trailing off at his shin area, and on the base of the trunk on which he rests. The locks of his hair and facial hair also

hold faint amounts of pigment, which is illuminated by the gallery lighting in the museum. When viewing the back of the statue, I noticed visible pigment traces on the right outstretched leg of Pan which is concentrated on the inner thigh.

The sculptural group's base also holds pigment in the carved inscription in ancient Greek that is on the front of the base. The inscription states: "Dionysios son of Zenon son of Theodoros of Berytos, benefactor, on behalf of himself and his children to his ancestral gods."⁹ The inscription mentions the patron, Dionysios, in addition to his lineage, and says that the Delian group was created on behalf of the children of Dionysios and dedicated to his ancestral gods, the "*theoi patrioi*."¹⁰ By viewing the inscription from a side angle, I could see the depth of the inscription's carving, along with the precision and uniformity of the letters themselves, which show the careful, steady hand of the letter-carver. The dedicatory inscription on the statue's base is rendered in a style that is characteristic of Delian dedications, further supporting the sculpture's accuracy with dating.¹¹

Though mostly intact, the sculptural group sustained damages that resulted in the loss of various pieces of the sculpture. Most of these damages have been restored through conservation efforts. The right arm (fig. 11) and upper part of the head of Aphrodite are restored along with an oval piece on the center of her right buttocks (fig. 12). Although restored, the cracks of the original points of breakage are still visible. Three fingers of Aphrodite's left hand and the index finger of her right (fig. 13) are restored with plaster, as noted in Bulard's primary findings after the sculptural group's excavation.¹² I observed other missing parts as well. The straps from

⁹ Martin 2017a, 258. Translated by S.R. Martin.

¹⁰ Martin 2017a, 258-59.

¹¹ Martin 2017a, 258-59.

¹² Bulard 1906.

Aphrodite's left sandal are missing, with holes on the sole left exposed where the straps would have connected to it. Pan's left horn has been chipped off at the top (fig. 14), with the right horn suffering two breakages at the base and at tip, though they have been reattached. His right leg, semi-concealed from the front of the statue, has also been damaged where his knee would bend, and it has been placed back onto the statue. Eros, the smallest figure of the group, seemingly suffered the least amount of damage. His left leg and left wing were broken off but were later reattached. Additionally, the right arm of Eros is missing at the elbow (fig. 15).

Delos

The island of Delos (fig. 2) is located in the heart of the Aegean Sea and is seen as one of antiquity's most culturally rich and diverse places in the Mediterranean. It offers key insights to understanding the development of Hellenistic trends in art history.¹³ Delos is most significant as an archeological site due in part to the abundance of sculptural evidence preserved on the island and the early dated evidence it provides for two central phenomena of the late Hellenistic period: the new more realistic style in portraiture and the copying of older works in a neo-Classical style.¹⁴ The island as a geographical location and the findspot of the "Slipper Slapper" are important to the field of art history and archeology as the sculptural group provides the first externally dated example which survives from antiquity.¹⁵ R.R.R. Smith asserts that the Delian artworks are the first of their kind predominantly commissioned by Greeks, placing Delos as the birthplace of the new hybrid style of art occurring in the late Hellenistic period from Phoenician and Greek contact. From the middle of the fourth century B.C.E. until the middle first century B.C.E, the island of Delos saw a growth in population and prosperity in addition to significant

¹³ Smith 1991, 255.

¹⁴ Smith 1991, 242.

¹⁵ Smith 1991, 256.

cultural interactions.¹⁶ Known as the only Cycladic Island with sustained evidence of Phoenician religious activity,¹⁷ Delos fostered hybridity that is evident both in chosen artistic style and in ways of social living in the ancient Mediterranean. Phoenician presence on the island quickly became an integral part of shaping the social fabric of Delian social life after Delos was declared a free port by the Romans in 166 B.C.E.¹⁸ The island functioned as a hub for cultural exchange and Greek influence,¹⁹ which is seen in the hybrid style of Greek-Phoenician art, particularly in the sculptural group of *Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan*.

The Poseidoniasts of Beirut on Delos

The Poseidoniasts of Beirut were a distinct merchant and religious association that was active on the island of Delos during the second century B.C.E.²⁰ They are only known to the region of Delos.²¹ Their name reflects a dual identity: "Poseidoniasts" refers to their devotion to the god, Poseidon, likely as a protector of seafarers and merchants, while "of Beirut" signals their ethnic and geographic origin from the Phoenician city of Berytus (modern Beirut).²² This affiliation places them within Phoenician culture, and their presence on the island of Delos is well documented.²³

Following 166 B.C.E., Phoenicians became increasingly prominent in Delian social and economic life, benefiting from its free trade policies and vibrant religious culture. Two Phoenician merchant groups—the Herakleists of Tyre and the Poseidoniasts of Beirut—are

¹⁶ Smith 1991, 256.

¹⁷ *OCD*, s.v. "Delos" (Catling).

¹⁸ Martin 2017a.

¹⁹ Martin 2017a.

²⁰ Martin 2017a, 258-59.

²¹ Martin 2017a, 270.

²² Martin 2017a.

²³ Martin 2017a, 263.

documented as active participants in Delian religious festivals, including the Delian games, and other civic events.²⁴ Merchant clubs that began to form on the island banded together by common interests and the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut was established. The Poseidoniasts formed a structured and organized association, with their Clubhouse on Delos functioning as a “commercial hub” and a social space.²⁵ Against this backdrop, the presence of the “Slipper Slapper” group placed within the Poseidoniasts’ Clubhouse raises questions about the sculpture’s religious and cultural functions. Why would Aphrodite be depicted in a moment of struggle, fully naked? And what role does her nakedness serve in the “Slipper Slapper” group?

²⁴ Martin 2017a, 263.

²⁵ Martin 2017a, 263. For the Clubhouse, see especially Martin 2017a, 262-66.

Chapter III. Historiography

Marcel Bulard, a French archeologist, excavated the sculptural group in Delos in 1904 and published a meticulous reconstruction of the statue's missing components in 1906. He provided the first interpretation of the scene as one of bestial erotic pursuit and resistance, offering a thorough formal analysis of the figures.²⁶ Bulard argued that Aphrodite is defending herself against the assault of Pan with the help of her son, Eros.²⁷ While his study remains foundational for understanding the group's composition, it does not address the cultural significance or emerging stylistic trends evident in the sculpture's iconography and hybrid style within its Delian context. These unexplored aspects have given way to the modern scholarly debate surrounding the sculpture, particularly Aphrodite's nakedness.

Later surveys of Hellenistic art engaged with the "Slipper Slapper" group briefly and often critically. J.J. Pollitt (1986), in *Art in the Hellenistic Age*,²⁸ describes the group as "amusing,"²⁹ an "erotic parody,"³⁰ and "technically crude."³¹ While I think that these assertions are valid, the limitations placed on the sculpture by terms such as "crude" can be hard to break free of as they are featured in the major handbooks of Hellenistic art history that follow Pollitt's.³² His publication further offers a different lens which with to view the "Slipper Slapper" group by including it in his book's sixth chapter entitled "Rococo, Realism, and the Exotic." Pollitt's work also speculates how Hellenistic theater influenced artistic themes, notably in a "fondness for dramatic settings" and "tension-filled bodily forms."³³ His work describes how

²⁶ Bulard 1906.

²⁷ Bulard 1906.

²⁸ Pollitt 1986, 130-31.

²⁹ Pollitt 1986 130.

³⁰ Pollitt 1986 131.

³¹ Pollitt 1986, 130.

³² Pollitt 1986, 130-31. See, e.g., Stewart 1990, 226-27; Ridgway 2000, 147-49; Stewart 2014, 170.

³³ Pollitt 1986, 7.

the “theatrical mentality”³⁴ of the period accounts for the popularity and presence of theatrical imagery within Hellenistic visual arts³⁵ which often consisted of multi-figure compositions, or *symplegmata*, the intertwining of figures.³⁶ Pollitt does not classify the “Slipper Slapper” group as part of this dynamic trend, yet it can be visually identified in the “Slipper Slapper” group. With the newly popularized interest in thematic expression and dynamic scenes,³⁷ I think that the “Slipper Slapper” can be understood as part of a context that is rooted in themes of Hellenistic theater: Aphrodite is posed in a defensive gesture with her sandal raised aided by Eros’s supportive intervention, as Pan’s aggressive advance creates a dramatically intense scene.

Similarly, R.R.R. Smith (1991), in *Hellenistic Sculpture*, refers to the “Slipper Slapper” group as “famously disliked,”³⁸ echoing Pollitt’s sentiments. His analysis of the Delian group is centered in a discussion of the new styles of late Hellenistic art. The renewed popularity in the classical form that is seen in neo-classical art³⁹ can be identified in the “Slipper Slapper” group, as it too, looks to previous representations of the goddess, Aphrodite. He provides an analysis of changing stylistic trends in the late Hellenistic period, and credits the group’s significance to Delos, as the island contains the first examples of externally dated sculpture.⁴⁰

Andrew Stewart provides a more nuanced framework in which to reconsider the “Slipper Slapper” group in *Art in the Hellenistic World* (2014), situating it within broader shifts in religious, artistic, and theatrical culture. He refers to the “Slipper Slapper” group as a “somewhat clumsy burlesque”⁴¹ of the Knidian Aphrodite, calling attention to the Delian group’s deliberate

³⁴ Pollitt 1986, 7.

³⁵ Pollitt 1986, 7.

³⁶ Pollitt 1986, 131.

³⁷ Pollitt 1986, 7.

³⁸ Smith 1991, 242.

³⁹ Smith 1991, 255.

⁴⁰ Smith 1991, 242.

⁴¹ Stewart 2014, 170.

exaggeration of classical norms in Hellenistic art that reflects varying “standards of religious decorum” across the Hellenistic World.⁴² When discussing the “Slipper Slapper” group, Stewart mentions that it is as a “teasing strategy of simultaneous invitation and rejection”⁴³ as the “randy”⁴⁴ Pan replaces Ares in Stewart’s proposed love triangle among the Knidian Aphrodite, Ares, and the spectator.⁴⁵ Stewart asserts that the Knidia’s “nudity and alluring posture”⁴⁶ was once understood to imply “weakness and vulnerability”⁴⁷ but now can be understood as a display of “divine autonomy and power that is exercised through sexual choice.”⁴⁸ Stewart’s reading of the *pudica* pose emphasizes that Aphrodite’s bodily autonomy cannot be taken away and must be respected as a divine authority.⁴⁹ In such regard, the active gesture of the Delian Aphrodite’s weaponized sandal can be understood also as a representation of divine autonomy as she defends herself against the sexual advances of Pan.

Brunilde Ridgway’s treatment of Hellenistic sculpture, particularly in *Hellenistic Sculpture II: The Styles of ca. 200–100 B.C* (2000), similarly contributes to a deeper contextualization of the “Slipper Slapper” group but is centered within its archeological context and the themes of the late Hellenistic period. She notes that Delos is a site for sculptural production⁵⁰ and highlights that early excavations paid little attention to the relationship between statues and their bases.⁵¹ This oversight, she argues, makes the inscribed base of the Delian group especially valuable, as it provides secure evidence for dating the work and associating it

⁴² Stewart 2014, 170.

⁴³ Stewart 2014, 179.

⁴⁴ Stewart 2014, 179.

⁴⁵ Stewart 2014, 179.

⁴⁶ Stewart 2014, 180.

⁴⁷ Stewart 2014, 180.

⁴⁸ Stewart 2014, 180.

⁴⁹ Stewart 2014, 179-80.

⁵⁰ Ridgway 2000, 7.

⁵¹ Ridgway 2000, 7.

with a benefactor.⁵² In her extended discussion of the group, Ridgway emphasizes its “stage-like”⁵³ composition and its orientation toward a frontal viewing experience, noting how these features reflect the performative and theatrical qualities characteristic of late Hellenistic sculpture.

Nikolaos Kaltsas’s 2002 catalogue of sculpture in the National Museum at Athens provides a detailed formal analysis of the “Slipper Slapper” sculptural group and emphasizes the compositional dynamics among the figures. He particularly highlights the “dynamically modelled muscles and the distended veins in Pan’s left arm, and above all, his contracted face”⁵⁴ as well as the position of Aphrodite’s hand, which attempts to cover her exposed pubic areas as the satyr, Pan, “assaults”⁵⁵ the goddess. Despite this insightful attention to gesture and bodily expression, Kaltsas’s study does not engage with the significance of Aphrodite’s nakedness itself and the group’s archeological context.

A major reorientation of the scholarly conversation occurs with Rebecca Martin’s 2017 article, “Revisiting the Slipper Slapper and Other Sculpture Dedications in the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut.”⁵⁶ Martin’s work stands as a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse surrounding the sculptural group. By framing her arguments around the group’s archeological significance that is deeply intertwined with cultic worship and maritime exchange, Martin emphasizes how the cultural exchange occurring on the island of Delos sparked the formulation of a multiethnic culture and a newly shaped social identity. Martin offers the most comprehensive modern analysis of the group, integrating archeological, historical, and

⁵² Ridgway 2000, 148.

⁵³ Ridgway 2000, 148-49.

⁵⁴ Kaltsas, 2002, no. 617. Translated by D. Hardy.

⁵⁵ Kaltsas, 2002, no. 617. Translated by D. Hardy.

⁵⁶ Martin 2017a. See also Martin 2017b, 156-68.

theoretical perspectives. She situates the sculpture within its specific findspot — the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts, a merchant guild active on Delos — and emphasizes the significance of maritime trade, cultic devotion, and multiethnic interactions that influenced the island’s artistic culture.⁵⁷ The multiethnic interactions were occurring among the Greeks, Italians, Phoenicians, and others who became attracted to the island for its commercial activity in maritime trade. The hybrid social fabric that was created on the island greatly “enhances our understanding of the role religious imagery played in complicated ‘contact zones’ such as the Delos clubs.”⁵⁸ She argues that when situating the group within the context of the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts, one can infer a number of possible parallels between the figures chosen for the sculpture and “Greek, Phoenician, and Egyptian gods, as Aphrodite can be related to Beiruti Aštar and to the Egyptian Isis.”⁵⁹

Martin’s analysis carefully unpacks the sculptural group and considers how it would have been viewed on ancient Delos. Martin explains how the statue’s location in room “Z” of the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts “enhances this narrative choice, as the romantic encounter unfolds in a verdant setting reminiscent of the abduction/ seduction locales of maidens in literature,”⁶⁰ adding a richer sense of understanding to the thematic content of the sculptural group. Furthermore, she challenges the long-standing, deeply ingrained assumptions in classical scholarship that reinforce the limited interpretations of the female form by using outdated narratives of Aphrodite’s nakedness and positions the previously standardized interpretations of

⁵⁷ Martin 2017a, 250.

⁵⁸ Martin 2017a, 257.

⁵⁹ Martin 2017a, 273.

⁶⁰ Martin 2017a, 273.

the work⁶¹ within the context of the statue's archeological findspot to bring forth fresh understandings of the group in a modern context which considers ancient perception.

⁶¹ E.g., Pollitt 1986, 130-31; Stewart 1990, 226-27; Ridgway 2000, 147-49; Stewart 2014, 170.

Chapter IV. Aphrodite's Nakedness

The “Slipper Slapper” group presents a striking image: Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is depicted fully naked as she raises her sandal to strike the satyr, Pan as he lunges toward her. Her son Eros hovers above, tugging at Pan’s horn in a scene of tension, motion, and confrontation. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the composition’s humor,⁶² the implications of Aphrodite’s frontal nakedness and active gesture has received far less critical examination. Most importantly, the representation of her nakedness as a show of active bodily agency has been largely unexamined. This chapter addresses that gap in scholarship by arguing that Aphrodite’s nakedness in the Delian group does not function erotically or passively, but rather signifies her divine strength, control, and sacred authority. Drawing on the works of Andrew Stewart,⁶³ Christine Havelock,⁶⁴ Kristen Seaman,⁶⁵ and Rebecca Martin,⁶⁶ I explore how Aphrodite, when positioned within the religious context of the Poseidoniasts’ clubhouse, asserts agency through her active pose and her naked frontal composition, and how she transforms the *pudica* pose—originally seen in the Aphrodite of Knidos (fig. 16)—into an expression of bodily command and visual authority. Rather than implying weakness or vulnerability,⁶⁷ the gesture, inherited from the Aphrodite of Knidos,⁶⁸ becomes a gesture of bodily command and divine assertion.

The composition of the “Slipper Slapper” group draws heavily on the stylistic precedents set by the Knidian Aphrodite that the Greek sculptor Praxiteles created c. 360 B.C.E. and is widely acknowledged as the first major instance of the female nude in Greek sculpture.⁶⁹

⁶² E.g., Pollitt 1986, 130-31.

⁶³ Stewart 2014, 177-80.

⁶⁴ Havelock 1995.

⁶⁵ Seaman 2004.

⁶⁶ Martin 2017a.

⁶⁷ Stewart 2014, 180.

⁶⁸ Stewart 2014, 177-80.

⁶⁹ Havelock 1995, 9.

Although the original Praxitelean Aphrodite sculpture has not survived, the discovery of numerous variations across the Mediterranean in different media and literary descriptions of it attest to the statue's general appearance; there are no exact casts or direct copies of it from antiquity.⁷⁰ The original Aphrodite of Knidos was carved from Parian marble. She was in a contrapposto pose, standing on her right leg as her left leg was slightly bent with her left foot trailing off, visually implying movement. Her arms were loosely bent, and her right hand was positioned inward, covering or pointing to her genital area. Her left hand delicately held a piece of drapery that rested on the top of a pot. Although the relationship among the drapery, her left hand, and the pot are still of great debate to scholars, the *pudica* gesture Aphrodite makes with her right hand has been heavily examined.⁷¹

In the "Slipper Slapper," Aphrodite's nakedness clearly echoes the Knidian model in form but departs from it in function. The Delian Aphrodite confronts Pan directly, raises her sandal, and actively defends herself. The Knidian Aphrodite established the now-canonical *pudica* pose, in which the goddess places one hand in front of her pubic area. Foundational scholar in the field of Greek art and archeology Andrew Stewart argues that this pose has a dual function: it is a protective gesture, yet shields her from the spectator's view, casually drawing attention to the very area she wishes to conceal⁷² and allows for a different interpretation of Aphrodite's pose to be concluded. The *pudica* pose creates a dual effect: it both veils and draws attention to the nakedness it supposedly conceals. Stewart asserts that over time the Knidia's *pudica* pose can be understood as an interpretation of divine strength that is exercised through sexual choice, offering Aphrodite back her bodily autonomy that is fiercely protected in the

⁷⁰ Seaman 2004, 532-33.

⁷¹ Seaman 2004, 551-57.

⁷² Stewart 1997, 103.

“Slipper Slapper” group.⁷³ Using Stewart’s work on the Aphrodite of Knidos, I would like to argue that the Delian Aphrodite embodies the *pudica* gesture’s evolution, as Aphrodite’s assertive pose transforms the inherited Praxitelean gesture into a forceful act of divine autonomy and power. The Delian Aphrodite’s frontal stance and engagement with the viewer reframe the Knidia’s *pudica* gesture as one of divine command (fig. 17) rather than modesty, converting passive display into visual and bodily authority. Rather than diminishing her power, her nakedness enhances her divine presence in the “Slipper Slapper” group by asserting control over her body and space despite the resistance of Pan. In this regard, Stewart’s analysis of the *pudica* pose seen in the Aphrodite of Knidos is key to understanding the intentionality behind the similar gesture seen in the Delian Aphrodite, as it tracks how the idea of Praxitelean beauty evolves into a means of articulating affect, agency, and power.

Christine Havelock has provided an in-depth analysis of the Aphrodite of Knidos and examines how the Praxitelean representation of the goddess influenced subsequent ancient renderings of Aphrodite, most notably, the Aphrodite of the “Slipper Slapper” group.⁷⁴ Her work traces the origins of the Aphrodite of Knidos from its creation in the mid-4th century B.C.E. through the late Hellenistic period to study the significance of not only the *pudica* pose but also the evolving representations of Aphrodite in Greek art. Havelock’s insights into the evolution of Aphrodite’s portrayal in Greek art offer valuable context for understanding the relationship between the Knidia and the Delian Aphrodite. Havelock examines examples of the post-Knidian statues of Aphrodite and asserts that the Delian Aphrodite is the “earliest securely dated and original example of the gesture invented by Praxiteles.”⁷⁵ As the first quotation of the Knidian

⁷³ Stewart 2014, 180.

⁷⁴ Havelock 1995, especially 55-58.

⁷⁵ Havelock 1995, 56.

Aphrodite, the Delian Aphrodite's transformed pudica pose is of great intrigue as it departs from the Knidia's form. Havelock rejects the notion that the Knidian Aphrodite's *pudica* pose relates to the goddess being engaged in a bath, and she emphasizes the religious significance of water in ancient purification rituals. In ancient cultic worship practices, women would wash their hands in a basin with water to purify themselves⁷⁶ before performing religious practices, and with this understanding, we can speculate that the Delian Aphrodite's rendering of the *pudica* pose relates more closely to religious purification acts than a protection of her modesty, and therefore we can give her bodily agency back to her. Havelock's religious reading of the Knidian Aphrodite deepens our understanding of the Delian Aphrodite's gesture in the "Slipper Slapper" group. As Pan attempts to pry away the goddess's left hand, her physical resistance (fig. 18) reclaims control over her body. Rather than retreating, Aphrodite stands her ground, responds to the assault, and affirms her bodily authority. Her nakedness becomes not an invitation but a demand for reverence—a reaffirmation of divine power. More generally, Havelock reorients divine nudity in the Knidia away from aesthetic or erotic frameworks and toward sacred performativity and ritual authority.⁷⁷

Rebecca Martin further deepens the significance of the Delian Aphrodite's nakedness by contextualizing the sculpture in its architectural and dedicatory context. Martin also asserts that the "Slipper Slapper" group is the earliest example of the *pudica* gesture in Hellenistic sculpture and provides additional context for the ancient reception of the Delian group.⁷⁸ Installed in the semi-public setting of the Poseidoniasts' Clubhouse on Delos,⁷⁹ this group was embedded in a

⁷⁶ Havelock 1995, 23.

⁷⁷ Havelock 1995, 59–63.

⁷⁸ Martin 2017a, 261.

⁷⁹ Martin 2017a, 263.

space charged with both sacred and social meaning. She emphasizes that a reexamination of the “Slipper Slapper” group, particularly in relation to honorary dedications found within the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut, is necessary to understand the significance of Aphrodite’s nakedness in this setting. The Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut functioned as a venue for religious and social gatherings among people including but not limited to elite male merchants of Beiruti descent.⁸⁰

The sacred island of Delos has a deep relationship with Classical mythology as it known to be the birthplace of Apollo, as well as a religious sanctuary for the cult of Aphrodite. These defining characteristics highlight the inhabitants’ religious practices that were important to the island of Delos.⁸¹ As a goddess born from the sea, Aphrodite was heavily celebrated in the Hellenistic period as Aphrodite Euploia for her assistance in the safe passage of sailors and naval victories,⁸² and she played a dual role inside of the merchant’s Clubhouse, one of artistic appreciation and one of religious veneration. Martin interprets Aphrodite in the Delian group as a direct reference to the Knidian Aphrodite’s cultic following.⁸³ Martin emphasizes that the inclusion of Aphrodite in such a setting reflects more than aesthetic or erotic aims: it suggests an investment in Aphrodite’s divine authority as a “goddess of the sea and sex” whose assertiveness aligned with the Poseidoniasts’ values.⁸⁴ Her nakedness, therefore, functions as a symbolic affirmation of the goddess’s control over her body and domain.

⁸⁰ Martin 2017a, 265.

⁸¹ *OCD*, s.v. “Delos” (Catling).

⁸² Martin 2017a, 275.

⁸³ Martin 2017a, 275.

⁸⁴ Martin 2017a, 275.

Aphrodite's nakedness is further expanded upon by the work of Kristen Seaman. Seaman interprets the Knidian Aphrodite not as a passive erotic object but as an "authoritative sexual being," whose pose and gesture express control over both her body and its viewing.⁸⁵ We may use her reading of the Knidia and her discussion of its female viewers to foreground the Delian Aphrodite's capacity to address diverse audiences, including women, who may have come in contact with the "Slipper Slapper" group. Along these lines, we may argue that the Delian Aphrodite participates in an artistic tradition of empowered female nakedness, using her exposed body and raised sandal to enact, rather than merely depict, divine agency.

⁸⁵ Seaman 2004, 566-67.

Chapter V. The Significance of the Slipper

Following the argument in the previous chapter that Aphrodite's nakedness in the "Slipper Slapper" group is not simply an erotic display but also a display of feminine power and bodily agency, this chapter turns to the object she uses to reinforce that agency: the slipper, or sandal (fig. 19). This chapter explores the sandal as a deliberate communicative tool—one that signals not eroticism but resistance—through the scholarship of Elizabeth Dohan Morrow and Yael Young, both of whom have contributed significantly to the scholarship of Greek footwear in social and cultural contexts.

Elizabeth Dohan Morrow is a foundational scholar in the study of ancient Greek footwear and offers a comprehensive account of Hellenistic footwear's material, stylistic, and cultural functions in her work.⁸⁶ In her detailed study of ancient Greek footwear, she describes the Delian Aphrodite's sandal as a "thonged sandal with crossband,"⁸⁷ highlighting features such as the distinct profile of the sandal's sole, the indentations, and the refined shape of the heel.⁸⁸ The juxtaposition of this everyday object with Aphrodite's divine nakedness reorients the viewer's attention from eroticism to resistance. Rather than functioning solely as an object of fascination, Aphrodite's naked body—augmented by the slipper she wields—becomes a symbol of strength. Her nakedness here is not passive; it is defended with a domestic tool that invites both male and female viewers to understand its meaning.

Though the narrative of the "Slipper Slapper" group is often read as humorous,⁸⁹ the gesture of the raised slipper also invokes warning signals that appear on numerous Attic vases of

⁸⁶ Dohan Morrow 1985, 92-143.

⁸⁷ Dohan Morrow 1985, 93.

⁸⁸ Dohan Morrow 1985, 93.

⁸⁹ E.g., Pollitt 1986, 130-31.

the Classical and Late Classical periods (5th-4th centuries B.C.E.).⁹⁰ Yael Young has asserted that men brandish sandals to admonish children in educational scenes on vases.⁹¹ In addition, it is clear in the sculptural group of Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan that the goddess intends to use her sandal as her favored method of punishment. The sandal is used as a form of discipline or a way to enact Aphrodite's power onto another more directly.

The slipper's significance is also magnified when considered alongside broader trends in Hellenistic sculpture that emphasized expressive gesture and viewer engagement. The "Slipper Slapper" group is not merely a humorous sculpture but also a narrative in which Aphrodite responds to the encroachment of her bodily space. Unwanted advances are deflected through her deliberate physical and symbolic action. The raised sandal serves as an invitation for interpretation—an image that would have resonated with ancient viewers, especially women, who recognized its associations with domestic discipline and resistance. Rather than occupying a passive role within a comedic mythological scene, Aphrodite commands respect and authority through both form and gesture, asserting control over her naked body and the space around her. This communicative act transforms the sculpture into an active site of negotiation among myth, gender, and cultural familiarity.

I propose that the everyday object of a sandal becomes a powerful symbol of agency that would have been understood by Hellenistic viewers—especially women. Not only can Aphrodite wield the sandal as a form of defense. She can use it as a physical reminder of her divine power and authority. By incorporating such a mundane item, the "Slipper Slapper" group works to engage the viewer through a common point of reference. This reading offers a departure from

⁹⁰ Young 2020.

⁹¹ Young 2020.

erotic interpretations and instead presents Aphrodite as a figure who actively controls desire and unwanted advances. Her active pose works in tandem with the sandal she holds to add a component of familiarity and a reminder of feminine power. In this moment, the naked female body is neither helpless nor physically available; it is defended and empowered through active gesturing, context, and social familiarity. Here, Aphrodite's raised sandal becomes not just a defensive tool but a symbol of authority and power that affirms her divine status.

By examining the sandal in a way that is detached from comical interpretations and as a culturally legible tool of resistance and control, this chapter repositions Aphrodite as a figure whose divinity is expressed through embodied, everyday symbols of feminine agency. This interpretive shift challenges assumptions about eroticism in Hellenistic sculpture and underscores how divine femininity was expressed through familiar objects and culturally specific gestural positions. Far from merely decorative, the slipper becomes a performative assertion of power. In reclaiming this gesture as authoritative, the "Slipper Slapper" group emerges not as a humorous work of art, but as a richly layered work in which nakedness, authoritative command and material detail function together to assert divine presence and resistance towards unwanted advances.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The sculptural group commonly referred to as the “Slipper Slapper” presents a remarkable visual narrative centered on Aphrodite’s nakedness and her wielding of a sandal in an act of defense. Since the sculptural group’s discovery in 1904, it has sparked scholarly debate pertaining to female nakedness in Hellenistic sculpture. Although the “Slipper Slapper” group is regularly included in major handbooks of Greek art,⁹² it is often dismissed as either “technically crude”⁹³ or “erotic”⁹⁴ and such characterizations have overshadowed a discussion of the goddess’s nakedness and its significance in the religious setting of the merchant Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut on Delos. By analyzing the group in terms of gesture, style, viewer engagement, and cultural context, I have argued that the “Slipper Slapper” group participates in a complex late Hellenistic visual conversation surrounding female agency, nakedness, and feminine power, and I asserted that the sandal can be understood as a visual motif of feminine strength and power when situated in the group’s archeological and religious context.

In Chapter I, I introduced the sculptural group and offered a breakdown of each chapter included in this thesis.

Chapter II offered a detailed formal analysis of the Delian group, a review of its missing and reconstructed parts, and an examination of its surviving pigment. This chapter additionally examined the dedicatory inscription that is found on the statue’s base which reveals the patron and his family lineage. The significance of the inscription was discussed in connection to the group’s archeological context, as it provides a date for both sculpture’s creation. The latter half of the chapter examined the “Slipper Slapper” group’s historical and archaeological context,

⁹² Pollitt 1986, 130-31; Stewart 1990, 226-27; Ridgway 2000, 147-49; Stewart 2014, 170.

⁹³ Pollitt 1986, 130.

⁹⁴ Pollitt 1986 131.

emphasizing its display in the Clubhouse of the Poseidoniasts of Beirut—a social space that invited collective viewing and interpretation. We saw that the centrality of Delos allowed it to serve as a zone of contact for many ethnicities who were interested in maritime trade and commerce, diversifying its social fabric.

Chapter III provided an overview of the dominant scholarly approaches to the “Slipper Slapper” group, many of which center on eroticism or humor. By reviewing the scholarship on the “Slipper Slapper” group, this chapter worked to illuminate the ways in which this sculptural group can be reimagined so that bodily agency, divine command, and power can be restored back to the naked figure of Aphrodite.

Chapter IV reconsidered the Delian Aphrodite’s nakedness and compared it with that of the Aphrodite of Knidos, arguing that it should not be understood as an invitation to erotic viewing but rather should be seen as a symbol of divine authority and female autonomy. Aphrodite’s frontal exposure, especially when displayed in a communal space, engaged the viewer not only with female nakedness but also with confidence and control. This reading draws on scholarship that understands Hellenistic nakedness—particularly female nakedness—as rhetorically charged and capable of expressing power, vulnerability, or even divinity, depending on context.

In Chapter V, I turned to the sandal Aphrodite wields in the “Slipper Slapper” group. Far from being a humorous accessory, the sandal was a symbol of agency—an everyday object transformed into an instrument of resistance. By raising it in a defensive gesture, Aphrodite disrupts traditional expectations of passive femininity. The sandal, as I have shown, evokes both domestic familiarity and symbolic authority, allowing the goddess to inhabit roles that are both culturally legible and subversively empowered. Together, Chapters IV and V argue that the

“Slipper Slapper” uses nakedness and gesture—two elements often framed as disempowering in traditional art historical narratives—to stage a bold assertion of female agency. The goddess’s unclothed body, rather than marking her as vulnerable or eroticized, becomes a site of divine assertion, while the sandal functions as a material extension of her autonomy.

The research conducted in this thesis supports a re-evaluation of the Delian group—one that critically examines how gesture, material culture, spatial placement, and visual tradition intersect to challenge normative readings of female representation in antiquity. In this thesis, we have seen how the nakedness of the Delian Aphrodite can be interpreted in a way that references the Knidian Aphrodite through frontal nakedness and the *pudica* gesture but departs from the Knidia as the Delian Aphrodite is actively defending herself against the unwanted advances of Pan with her raised sandal. The Delian Aphrodite’s active stance is significant owing to not only the group’s thematic originality but also the power and the agency the goddess asserts over her body that actively signals her divine authority.

Ultimately, the “Slipper Slapper” does more than entertain; it offers a complex and layered portrayal of Aphrodite as both playful and commanding, naked and authoritative. This rendering of a goddess who resists reductive categorization and rewards close, contextualized interpretation demands that we look again, more carefully and critically, at what the naked female body can signify in Hellenistic art.

Appendix



Figure 1: Sculptural group of Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan (the “Slipper Slapper Group”), c. 100 B.C.E. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. Photo: Author.

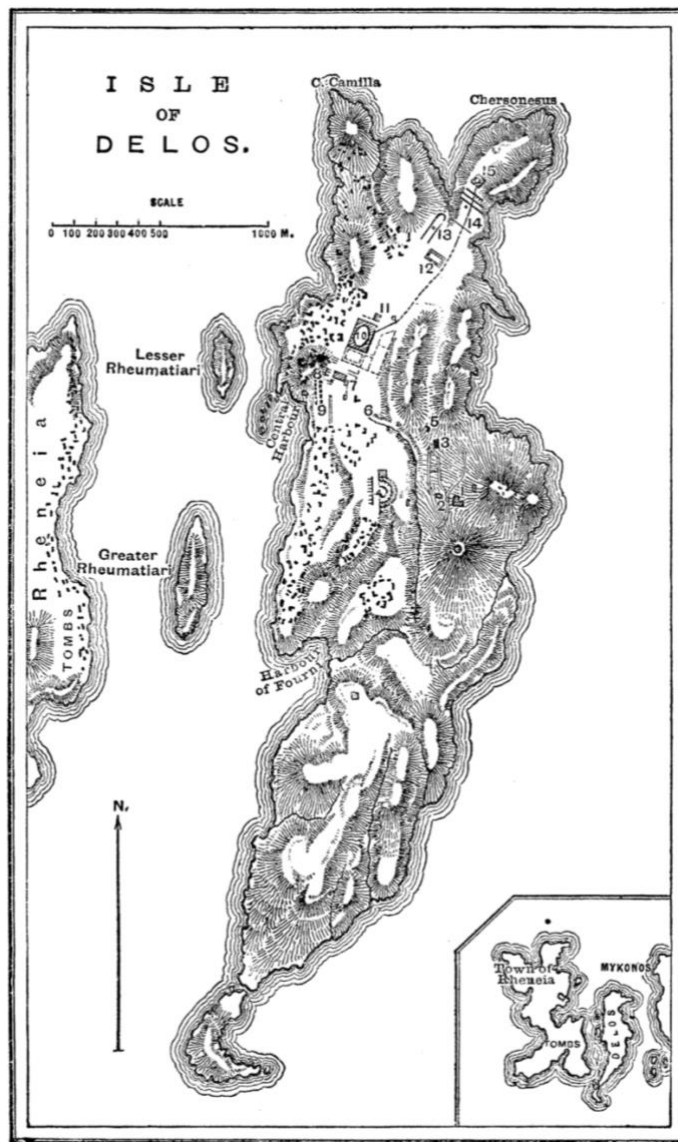


Figure 2: A Map of the island of Delos. Late Hellenistic Period. Photo: Jebb, R. C. 1889, Plate 40.



Figure 3: Detail of the base and inscription of dedication from the “Slipper Slapper” Group.

Photo: Author.



Figure 4: Copy of Aphrodite of Knidos, 400-300 B.C.E., Vatican Museum. Photo: University at Buffalo Libraries Digital Collections. Identifier VS439842.

Original: Praxiteles, 4th century B.C.E (c. 350-340 B.C.E)



Figure 5: Rear side of the sculpture. Photo: Author.



Figure 6 : Detail of sculpted Aphrodite with raised sandal. Photo: Author



Figure 7: Detail of Pan seated on a tree stump. Photo: Author



Figure 8: Detail of Pan's musculature and protruding hand veins. Photo: Author.

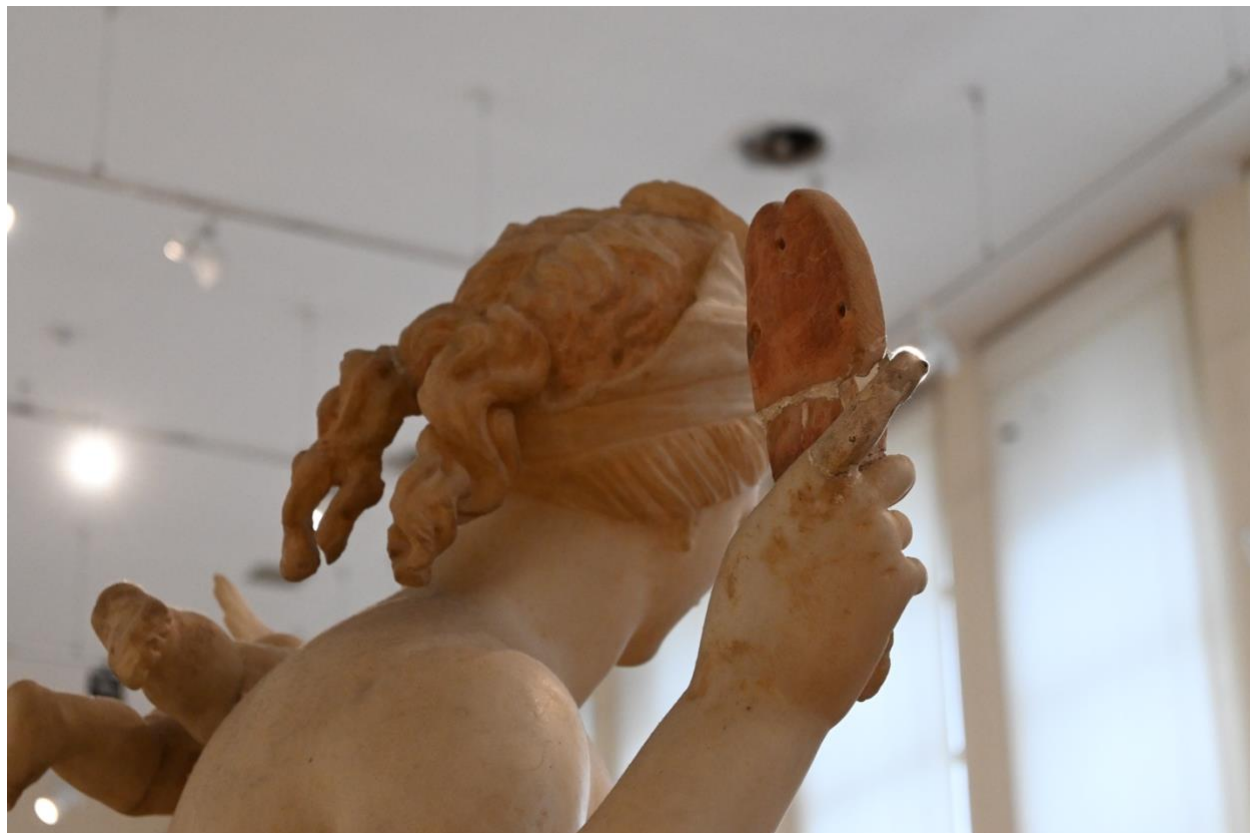


Figure 9: Detail of pigment on Aphrodite's sandal. Photo: Author



Figure 10: Detail of pigment on Pan's right leg. Photo: Author.



Figure 11: Detail of Aphrodite's reconstructed arm. Photo: Author.

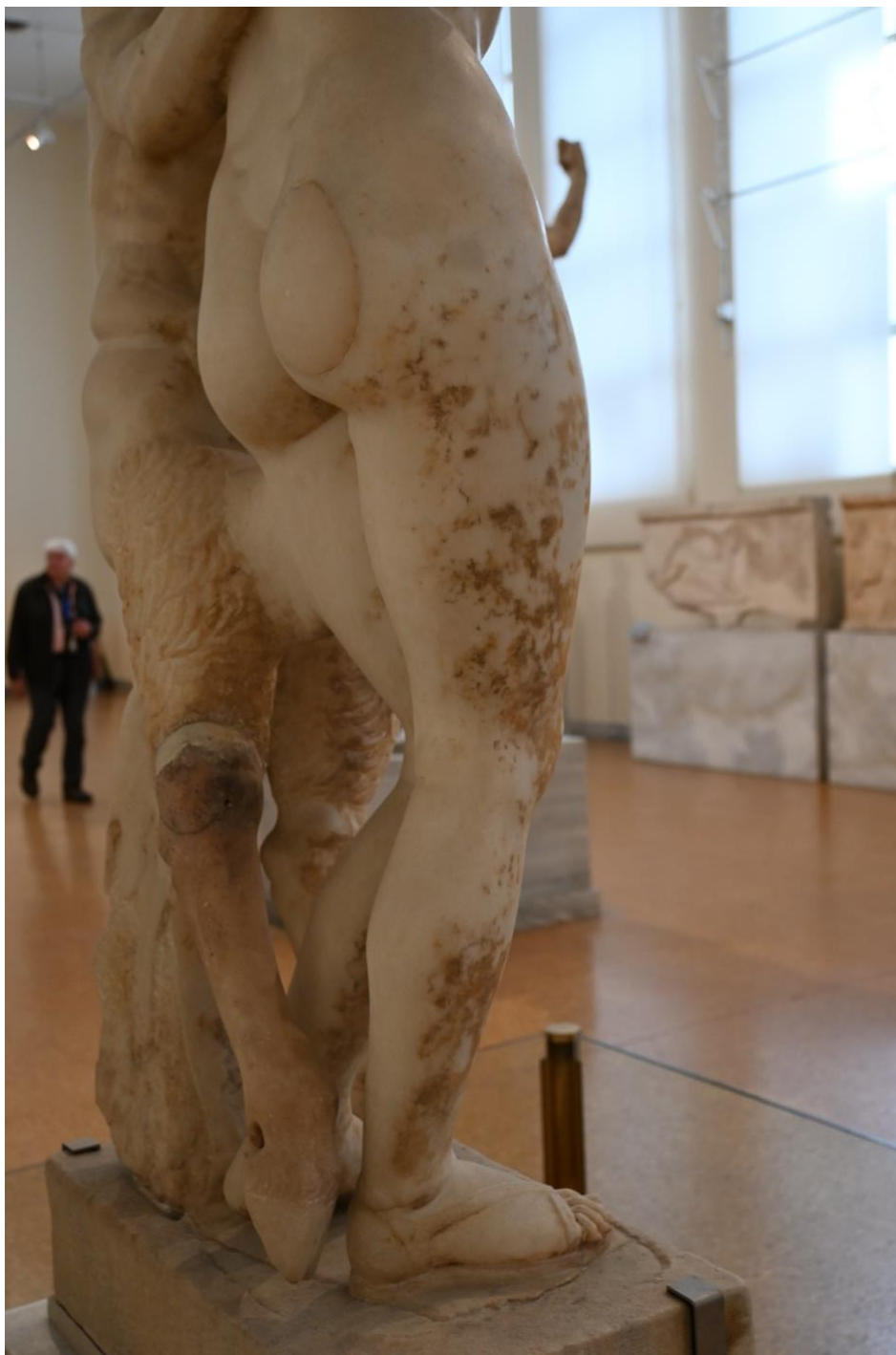


Figure 12: Detail of Aphrodite's reconstructed back. Photo: Author.



Figure 13 : Detail of Aphrodite's reconstructed left-hand fingers. Photo: Author.



Figure 14: Detail of Pan's chipped and reconstructed horns. Photo: Author.



Figure 15: Detail of the chipped left wing of Eros. Photograph: Author.

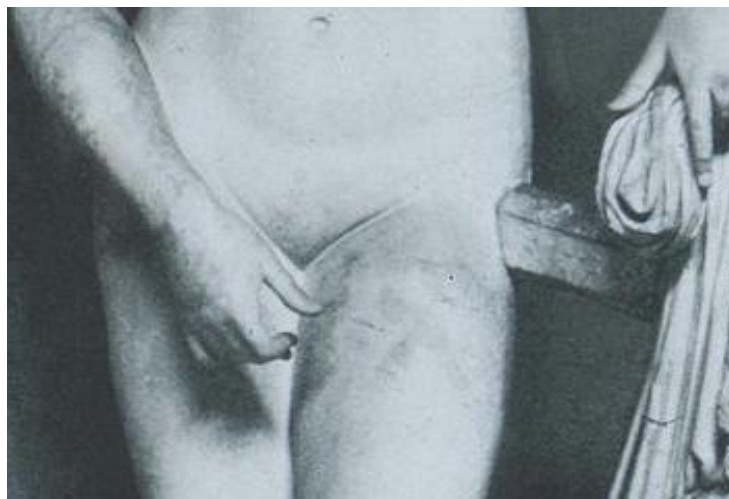


Figure 16: Detail of the Copy of Aphrodite of Knidos *pudica* pose.

Photo: University at Buffalo Libraries Digital Collections. Identifier VS439842.



Figure 17. Detail of Aphrodite's *pudica* pose in the Delian Group. Photo: Author.



Figure 18: Detail of Aphrodite actively resisting Pan. Photo: Author.



Figure 19: Detail of Aphrodite's raised sandal. Photograph: Author.

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