


26

Plaque with a Woman

LATE FOURTH-THIRD CENTURY BC

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Object Details

Catalogue Number	26
Inventory Number	78.AD.294.1 
Typology	Plaque
Location	Taranto region
Dimensions	H: 16.4 cm; W: 5.9 cm

Fabric

Light orange in color (Munsell 7.5 yr 8/6), purified, with reflective inclusions, white slip over the entire surface of the front. Polychromy: red (base), traces of black (hair, chiton, *phiale*). Suspension hole.

Condition

Reassembled from two fragments; polychromy and slip are worn away.

Provenance

– by 1978, Bruce McNall (Encino, California), donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1978.

Bibliography

Unpublished.

Description

The female figure is shown frontally, standing on a curving base marked at the upper and lower edges by a fillet in relief and decorated by a pair of horizontal red lines. She places her weight on the left leg, while the right leg is bent. The right arm hangs straight down the figure's side and is gathering folds of drapery in her hand; the left arm, by contrast, is raised, and the left hand, beneath which a broad hem of himation hangs vertically, holds up a patera. She wears a chiton gathered by a belt beneath the breasts, and a himation drapes down in broad transverse folds on the left side. The face is oval and elongated and the facial features are expressed sketchily; the hair is parted over the forehead and gathered up. The statuette, made from a worn mold, must originally have been painted with bright colors.¹

The relief could depict Polyboia, sister of Hyakinthos. She is a character of uncertain origin, generally portrayed with attributes such as a cornucopia, lyre, flabellum, pyxis, grape cluster, swan, rooster, or phiale mesomphalos, a bowl used in rituals.²

Such reliefs with a female figure or an ephebic figure are widespread in Tarentine coroplastic production, especially between the end of the fourth century and the third century BC.³

A number of myths, like that of Polyboia, entail couples involved in death and apotheosis; the story of her death as a virgin and ascension to heaven links her to the host of mythological figures whose existential condition is closely connected with the cycle of the seasons. Certain sources associate Polyboia to chthonic deities like Kore, with whom she shares the state of virginity and the specific attributes of the Underworld.⁴

The cult of Hyakinthos, an ancient pre-Dorian deity closely affiliated with Apollo, had its chief center at Amykles in Laconia. Pausanias described the renowned funerary monument there in Hyakinthos's honor, and it was where the *hyakinthia*—among the most important festivals of the region—were held. The cult of Hyakinthos, which inherited a number of iconographic attributes from that of Apollo, enjoyed great popularity in the Laconian colony of Taras where, according to Polybius's account of Hannibal's taking of the city, a *taphos extra moenia* (a funerary monument placed outside the city walls) allegedly stood, though its location remains in doubt.⁵ Likewise, we must assume, despite the absence of written evidence, that the *hyakinthia* must have taken place in Taras with methods and rituals similar to those in Sparta. These rites probably also included elements typical of the Dionysian cult, such as the ivy wreath present in the ephebic and female examples referring to the divine couple. The extensive presence in Taras of this type of relief after the second half of the fourth century BC is documented by the material found in the excavations of Castelsaraceno, of the Via Peluso, and of Masseria del Carmine, and in the votive deposits of the Via Leonida.⁶

It seems likely that unforeseen political developments, such as a request of military aid from Sparta, made it necessary to reinforce diplomatic relations between the two regions, in order to reaffirm their common origins through the revival of specific cults.⁷

A Tarentine findspot is nearly certain, though in the absence of objective data, it is not possible to assign the relief to a more specific cult context.⁸

Notes

1. The bright coloration is documented by better-preserved examples of the same typology. For the use of polychromy, see ABRUZZESE CALABRESE 1996, p. 194, no. 115.
2. On the mythological figure of Hyakinthos, see L. Villard and F. Villard, s.v. "Hyakinthos," *LIMC* 5 (1990), pp. 546–50; for Polyboia, see A. Kossatz Deissmann, s.v. "Polyboia," *LIMC* 7 (1992), pp. 425–26; also PICCIRILLI 1967. On the relationship between Hyakinthos and Polyboia, see also ABRUZZESE CALABRESE 1987, pp. 25–26.
3. On the Tarentine finds, see below, n. 6. These reliefs are also found in Heraclea, for which see G. Pianu, *La necropoli meridionale di Eraclea: Le tombe di IV e III secolo a.C.* (Rome, 1990), pl. XLIV, no. 3, p. 98, from the late fourth century BC; in Lucania, for which see M. C. D'Anisi, "Nuovi dati sui culti lucani: Un deposito votivo inedito da Accettura," in NAVA AND OSANNA 2005, pp. 167–78, fig. 10; and at Capua, for which see BESQUES 1986, pl. 35d, from the end of the third century BC.
4. On relations among Polyboia, Kore-Persephone, and Artemis, see PICCIRILLI 1967, pp. 99–116, n. 100. The chthonic relevance of the deity appears to be confirmed as well by the attestation of nocturnal rituals in the context of the *hyakinthia*: see A. Stazio, "La documentazione archeologica in Puglia," in *Santuari di Magna Grecia, Atti Taranto 4, 1964* (Naples, 1965), pp. 153–79, pl. XI; WUILLEUMIER 1939, p. 404.
5. Pausanias (3.19.1–5) relates that on the pedestal of the statue of Amyklean Apollo, there was a depiction of the apotheosis of Hyakinthos and Polyboia before an assembly of deities. On the Amyklean and Tarentine *hyakinthia* and the problem of identifying the funerary monument in Taranto, see ABRUZZESE CALABRESE 1987, pp. 11–12, 23–32. See also Polybius 8.2. Lippolis's study of this type of relief refuted the identification of the Polybian *taphos* with the votive deposits of the Contrada Carmine, based on topographical considerations, further calling into question whether these reliefs depict Polyboia and Hyakinthos: see *TARANTO* 1995, pp. 56–58.
6. On the Tarentine finds, see E. Lippolis, "Pratica rituale e coroplastica votiva a Taranto," in NAVA AND OSANNA 2005, pp. 91–201; ABRUZZESE CALABRESE 1987, pp. 9–11. See also Contrada Vaccarella, in IACOBONE 1988, p. 160, pl. 1. The chronology was proposed on the basis of a partial typological analysis, considering that many examples come from old excavations that are inadequately documented. For comparisons in terms of general composition and the iconographic characteristics of the relief, see the examples in TARANTO* 1995, pp. 61–62, pl. XX, fig. 4; D. Rossi, "Sei terrecotte tarantine e il culto di Hyakinthos," in *APARCHAI* 1982, pp. 563–67, pl. 161, no. 2 (reliefs probably from the Masseria del Carmine); G. Zampieri, *La collezione Casuccio del Museo civico archeologico di Padova (Padua, 1996), pp. 405–9, nos. 139–40; WINTER 1903, p. 76, no. 5; LEVI 1926, p. 36, no. 139, BREITENSTEIN 1941, no. 404, pl. 49.
7. In this connection, see ABRUZZESE CALABRESE 1996, pp. 193–95.
8. It should be pointed out that the votive deposit of Masseria del Carmine suffered a massive dispersal of the material in the years following its discovery.