


27

Statuette of a Seated Comic Actor

FOURTH-THIRD CENTURIES BC

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Object Details

Catalogue Number	27
Inventory Number	96.AD.164 
Typology	Statuette
Location	Taranto region
Dimensions	H: 10.3 cm; W: 4.1 cm

Fabric

Light beige in color (Munsell 10 yr 8/3), with a very fine and friable consistency, and small blackish inclusions; a layer of white slip. The statuette was made from a bivalve mold; it is open in the back, and there is a circular hole underneath the figure, probably for attachment to a base.

Condition

The statuette is missing its original base and its surface presents diffuse calcareous incrustations.

Provenance

– 1992, unknown [sold, Fine Antiquities, Christie's, London, July 8, 1992, lot 121, to Charles Ede.]; 1992, Charles Ede, Ltd. (London, England); 1992–96, Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman (New York, New York), donated to the J. Paul Getty Museum, 1996.

Bibliography

Fine Antiquities, Christie's London, sale cat., July 8, 1992, lot 121; *PASSION FOR ANTIQUITIES* 1994, pp. 233–34, no. 117; *ACQUISITIONS* 1996–1998, p. 67.

Description

This character is depicted with his legs crossed; his right arm is folded beneath his chest, and his left hand is propped beneath his chin in a pose of reflection. The original seat is missing, but in accordance with numerous comparisons to the type, it may be conjectured that it was a parallelepiped-shaped altar. The figure wears a short tunic with sleeves and belt and, over it, a short cloak of which a section hangs below the left shoulder; on his feet are sandals with T-straps. The face is broad and the hair is brushed in a *speira* hairstyle, which forms a compact mass with radial striations around the face; the mouth is open wide and is surrounded by a large trumpet shape formed by the mustache and the short beard, which still leaves the lips and gums visible. The figure has a snub nose that is quite broad at the base; the eyebrows are prominent and asymmetrical and join at the middle of the forehead, which is creased by deep wrinkles. This figure is a depiction of the leading slave (*hegemòn therapon*), a key character of New Comedy: a protagonist in amorous intrigues, often described and portrayed in lively or mocking stances. Whereas in Old Comedy and Middle Comedy the slave appeared in grotesque costume, the New Comedy figure wears only the short chiton and cloak; these distinctive characteristics make him easily recognizable in the context of New Comedy masks.¹ In particular, the snub nose, the *speira* hairstyle (often painted red to emphasize the character's negative nature), and especially the singular “trumpet” that frames and deforms the mouth—previously found in Old Comedy and Middle Comedy as permanent attributes of the character—appear more stylized in this period.

The character of the seated leading slave, who has escaped from some dangerous situation and takes refuge in a sanctuary, is derived from Athenian typological models. It is found in a number of variants and interpretations in numerous centers of Greece and the Mediterranean basin between the end of the fourth century and the third century BC.²

In Magna Graecia and in Sicily, the extensive presence in funerary deposits of terracottas with theatrical subjects and powerful symbolic and religious values has generally been linked to the spread of the cult of Dionysos, and can be interpreted in eschatological terms.³

In the Hellenistic period, as is known from funerary deposits—especially from non-adult tombs—Taras seems to have become the most active center in Magna Graecia for the

coroplastic production of material with a theatrical subject, a context to which this type may be tentatively linked. It is prevalent in such deposits dated between the last quarter of the third century and the first quarter of the second century BC.⁴ It has been proposed that the statuettes of theatrical subjects, including this Getty statuette, could be linked not only to the Dionysian cult but also to burial sites of children who died at an age when they were preparing to participate with adults in the life of the theater; such statuettes could therefore be intended to emphasize the transition from childhood to maturity.⁵

At Lipari, where a prolific production of comic statuettes extends over a period from the first half of the fourth century to the first half of the third century BC, the type of the seated leading slave is represented by a group of Middle Comedy statuettes, while the standing slave is the type that is chiefly documented for New Comedy. The mask of chief servant is, in any case, the type most frequently depicted in New Comedy terracottas of Lipari.⁶

In Morgantina, statuettes of comic actors derived from the Attic repertory and elaborated on a local basis have been found in both sanctuaries and dwellings, and they seem to date primarily between 330 and 280 BC. According to Bell, they should be related to the cult of Demeter.⁷ From Centuripe in Sicily comes a statuette of a slave seated on an altar, with legs crossed, the trumpet-shaped mouth, and the short cape tossed over the left shoulder; another piece representing a slave seated on an altar comes from the votive deposit of Butera dating from the second half of the fourth century BC.⁸

The slave taking refuge on an altar is also depicted on Sicilian red-figured vases, as for example on a skyphos from Manfria that interprets Attic typologies in a peculiar local vein.⁹

Notes

1. The mask of the leading slave is documented in the catalogue of Julius Pollux, *Onomastikon* 4.148. For a discussion of the character of the leading slave, see WEBSTER 1995, vol. 1, pp. 26–29, 229–32; the character is presented in the pose corresponding to the Webster's iconographic scheme a2. See also BERNABÒ BREA 1981, pp. 201–3, and PORTALE 2008, pp. 33–35. On the origin and development of the mask, see T. B. L. Webster, "Leading Slaves in New Comedy, 300 BC–300 AD," *Jdl* 76 (1961), pp. 100–10; for the evolution of the type in Attica, see also D. Burr Thompson, "Three Centuries of Hellenistic Terracottas," *Hesperia* 21 (1952), pp. 142–43, nos. 45a–d, pl. 38.
2. For comparisons, see HIGGINS 1954, no. 743, pl. 98 (from Athens, dating from the third quarter of the fourth century BC); BIEBER 1961a, figs. 231–32, 271; BREITENSTEIN 1941, pl. 39, no. 330 (statuette probably from Tanagra, with its hands on its knees); BESQUES 1963, pl. 173e (from Myrina and dating to the end of the third century BC); WINTER 1903, p. 419, nos. 2–8 (examples from Athens, Cyrenaica, and Boeotia). The figure of the seated slave continued to be depicted in the Roman period as well: see F. Dunand, *Catalogue des terres cuites gréco-romaines d'Égypte: Musée du Louvre, Département des antiquités égyptiennes* (Paris, 1990), no. 600, p. 219. See also the seated slave in the same position in a Graeco-Egyptian two-wick oil lamp, datable between the first century BC and the first century AD, in *PASSION FOR ANTIQUITIES* 1994, no. 118, p. 234.
3. On the significance of the terracottas of theatrical subjects in the funerary deposits of Lipari and Taranto, see BERNABÒ BREA 1981, pp. 21–27; GRAEPLER 1997, pp. 180–90, 231–34.

4. GRAEPLER 1997, pp. 128–29, 229–34, 237, pl. 111–12, statuettes from 225–175 BC, and a statuette of a slave with a wreath sitting on a rectangular altar from a male tomb dating from 175–25 BC; also see pl. 276. There is also, from Puglia, a statuette of an actor sitting on a cubic base, datable to the end of the fourth century BC, in BESQUES 1986, pl. 68b.
5. For this hypothesis, see GRAEPLER 1997, pp. 231–32; L. Todisco, “Bambini, fanciulli e dediche votive in Italia meridionale,” in *Depositi votivi e culti dell’Italia antica dall’età arcaica a quella tardo-repubblicana: Atti del Convegno di Studi Perugia, 1–4 giugno 2000*, ed. A. Comella and S. Mele (Bari, 2005); and PORTALE 2008, pp. 33–35.
6. On the presence of this character in the repertory of theater masks from Lipari linked to New Comedy, see BERNABÒ BREA 1981, pp. 79–81, 200–3; BERNABÒ BREA 1971–74, p. 172, fig. 7.
7. BELL 1981, pp. 67–69; for the seated slave, p. 212, no. 724, pl. 115.
8. For the statuette from Centuripe, see BERNABÒ BREA 2002, pp. 141–53, fig. 139; for the piece from Butera, see PORTALE 2008, pp. 33–35, fig. 33, with previous bibliography and more comparisons from Sicily.
9. For the subject of Sicilian red-figured vases, see PORTALE 2008, p. 35, n. 2.