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Theatrical and Grotesque Figurines amongst the Terracottas from Stobi

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Amongst the rich collection of terracottas that have been found at the site of Stobi is a small group of figurines inspired by the theatre and the world of entertainment—figurines that belong to the category of artworks whose subject was everyday life. These creations have not been discussed in detail in domestic literature to date.

When I first addressed this topic in 2006, there were a total of six figurines, including two grotesques. During excavations in 2009, another 115 terracotta figurines were discovered in Tomb No. 2226 near the Heraclea Gate, of which five represent actors and two represent grotesques. These more recent finds shall not be discussed in this article.¹

The figurines date from the time before the construction of the theatre at Stobi at a time when the theatre repertoire consisted mainly of Atellan fables, mime, pantomime, tragedy, and comedy. These shows would soon be replaced with grandiose spectacles more fitting to the taste and mind-set of the Romans, of which the main attractions were chariot races and other shows with horses, gladiator fights and fights with wild animals. The earlier theatrical shows would then be used to fill in the gaps between the major events. The belligerent Romans preferred rough shows over the finer works which had stimulated the intellect of the ancient Greeks with their wise and philosophical elements.

All of the figurines, except for the grotesque, were found as grave goods in the cremation pits that formed part of the necropolis in the south-west of Stobi. Depending on the identification of the characters, three types can be distinguished.

There is only one specimen of a sitting comedian in our collection—a figurine with a short *himation* over the left shoulder and a face-mask. This character has been identified as that of a slave and originated from the New Comedy that treated subjects from the everyday life.

Figurines directly inspired by comedy—and sometimes, though more rarely, by

¹ These figurines have not previously been discussed in publications and the papers in which they are mentioned describe them as five representations of comedians and two of grotesques. Of the three figurines to which I have had access, I can say these are of a type that depict an actor wearing a mask and a short *chiton*, standing with his arms crossed at his chest. This is a type of actor figurine not discovered during previous excavations in Stobi.



Fig. 1 Type One—An actor who represents a slave

satirical drama—were extremely popular in Attica during the second and third quarters of the fourth century BC and are amongst the most attractive group of Attic terracottas found to date. They must have been highly prized in Antiquity as they were widely copied and exported. Such figurines were provocative depictions of actors wearing grotesque face masks and short *himations*, typically with exaggeratedly large bellies and backsides and with phalluses attached. (Feminine clothes were worn over grotesque costumes for female roles.) Several types are known to us and several characters have been identified.

Ancient Greek comedy went through several stages of development. Old Comedy, of which the comedies of Aristophanes defined the genre, flourished in the period of Athenian democracy and consisted of satires of Athenian political

life, morality and philosophy. Middle and New Comedy forms emerged with the demise of democracy in Greece and the domination of Macedonia. These forms abandoned political themes in favour of comical situations from everyday life. Two later works of Aristophanes, *The Assemblywomen* and *Plutus*, are also considered works of Middle Comedy.

An abundance of figurines and masks depicting actors from the Middle Comedy, Satiric Drama and Tragedy of the second half of the 4th century BC have been found in Sicily.² Menander (343–292), the greatest playwright of New Comedy, introduced slaves, crones, burly old men, and mute persons as favourite characters in his plays.³ New Comedy treated the customs and habits of everyday life through uncomplicated intrigues and played an important role in the expression of emotions. A popular character in Boeotia during the fourth century BC, for example, was that of the ‘Old Nanny’ appropriated from New Comedy.⁴

In the Roman era the tendency to standardize characters would reduce these comical characters to only a few types, the main one being the wily ‘Leading Slave’ (*servus callidus*)—an ancient, long-surviving character.⁵ Representations of this comical actor-slave can be found standing or, as with our figurine, sitting on an altar

² Higgins, R.A., 1967, 87.

³ Јанакиевски Т., 1998, 26-27.

⁴ Higgins, R.A., 1967, 103, pl. 44 B.

⁵ Grandjouan, C., 1961, 21.

that represents a sanctuary from his master's punishments and a place to pray or rest after the show.⁶

The figure of the Hellenistic actor sitting on an altar had an extremely long life. Its origins were from Old Comedy and it became standardized during the early third century BC, most probably during the time of Menander. This applies to all the masks and costumes of New Comedy, as corroborated by the Hellenistic figurines, masks and pottery discovered in the Agora. Among the earliest specimens to have been found are four fragments from the Athenian Agora dated to c. 330 BC. The costumes and masks on these figurines were an interesting mixture of Old and New Comedy, indicating a period of transition.⁷ From that time to the late second century AD, however, only minor changes can be seen developing in these figurines.⁸ Even a century later the changes were not yet drastic, as can be observed if we compare the actor-slave seated on an altar from Myrina dated to the end of the 3rd century BC⁹ with the sitting actor-slave from the Athenian Agora from the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century AD.¹⁰

The typical iconographic model is a slave either sitting on an altar with his legs crossed at the ankles or—more rarely—a slave sitting on a stool (*diphros*), as in the specimen found in the Eastern Necropolis in Thessalonica dated to the late second century BC. Most commonly, they are clad in a short *himation* and a *chiton*, the latter sometimes slung over the left shoulder and sometimes wrapped around the stomach. The figurines are sometimes clad only in a short *himation*, leaving the rest of the upper body uncovered, as is the case with the figurine from Thessalonica. Sometimes they wore *cothurni* (buskins) on their feet, to look taller.

The wearing of face masks by actors was a tradition reflecting the original association of the theatre with the cult of Dionysus. These masks were made of wood or linen cloth, covered with plaster and then painted. Different masks were worn by the actors in tragedies and comedies, but mime actors performed without masks.

Masks had a wide slit on the front for the mouth and two smaller slits for eyes. The features of the face-mask were adjusted to the nature of the actor's role, enabling them to capture the heroes in tragedies or the comical characters in comedies. In the theatre at Stobi, one tragic mask was found on a pilaster capital, thereby introducing the possibility that theatrical plays were once performed in this theatre, at least in its early years.¹¹ However, terracotta figurines of tragic actors never achieved the popularity of comical statuettes, though the findings of tragic masks attest to the continuity of the

6 KOPTH-KONTH, Σ., 1994, 58.

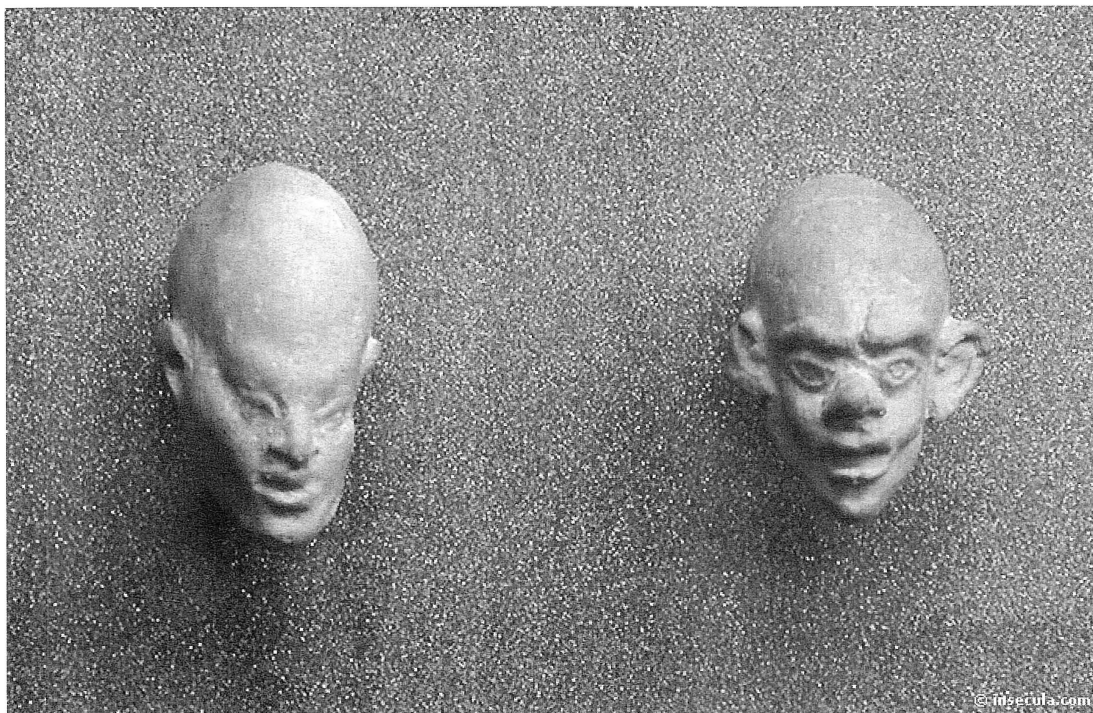
7 Burr Thompson, D., 1952, 142-143, pl. 38, catalogue N° 45 a-d. Sitting on a family altar that serves as a refuge, two or three of these slave-actor figurines are depicted nursing their ears after having been struck by their master. The legs of the actors are not shown crossed in this first stage of their appearance.

8 Molard-Besques, S., II, 1963, 142, pl. 173 a. The left leg is crossed over the right ankle, while the figurine from Stobi has his legs crossed in the opposite manner. Both figurines are of equal height. The arms are crossed on the chest and the face is hidden behind a comedy mask. The figurine is dressed in a short *chiton*, with a *himation* over the left shoulder. Figurines of actors of New Comedy were common in Myrina during the second and first century BC, while grotesques were popular during the first century AD.

9 Grandjouan, C., 1961, 498, pl. 11. The figure is represented wearing a short tunic belted over a stitched, padded undergarment. It is possible that the figurine held a flute in one hand.

10 Thessalonika 1986, 122, Fig. 116; KOPTH-KONTH, Σ., 1994, 58 catalogue N° 33. The height is 0.185 m.

11 Јанакиевски, Т., 1998, 33, fig. 29.



Type Two-Mime Actors (Figs. 2-4)

tradition up to the 4th century AD.¹²

The emergence of New Comedy from around 330 BC introduced new masks and types. Changes in the masks might be connected with the growth of the audience for theatre during the time of Lycurgus of Athens. For an audience of 14,000 or more, a mask that served the function of an amplifier must have developed rapidly. The 'Leading Slave' was the prototype for comic masks; first established in Athens, this type spread throughout the world of Antiquity.¹³ Most of the comic masks that have been found are of this type. Specimens include life-size masks as well as miniatures. In the theatre at Lychnidos, an oval-shaped ivory amulet was found adorned with a comic mask on both sides.¹⁴

Alongside these typical character masks, there were individual masks representing old men, boys, females, servants, and masks of satyrs or Silenus, all with matching attire. The masks of pantomime actors had closed mouths as these actors expressed themselves with their bodies while the chorus delivered the words.

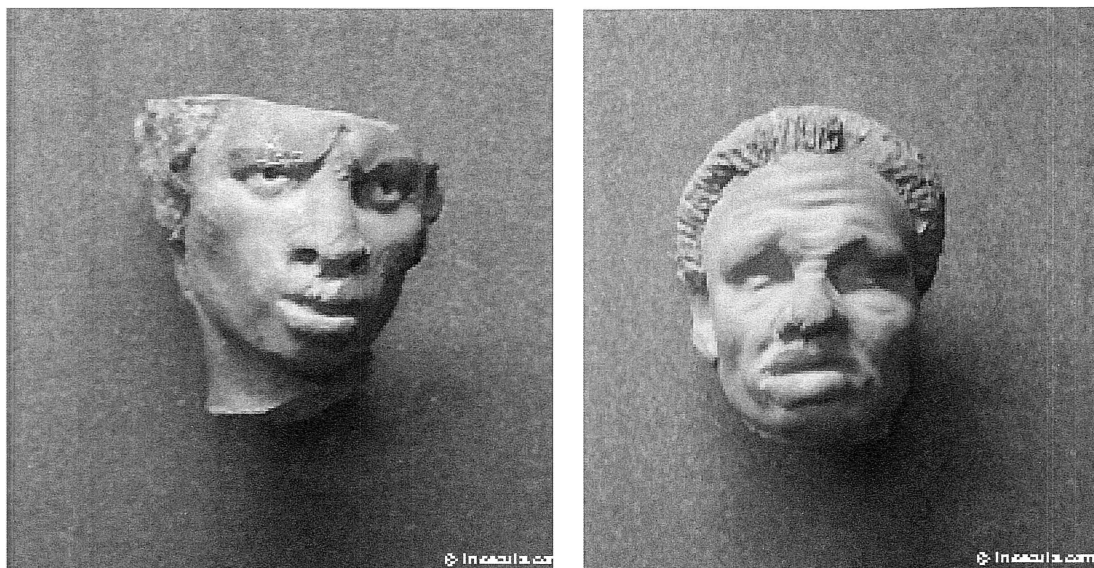
The figurine from Stobi of the actor playing a slave bears the typical comic mask of the 'Leading Slave'. It is unknown from which tomb the figurine came, though it is surely connected with the Augustan period as well as with other figurines from Stobi.

The figurines of mime actors also belong to the theatrical group and share some of the comic actors' comical features, though they do not wear masks. And while they resemble to some extent the grotesque group, they are not greatly caricatured.

¹² Grandjouan, C., 1961, 21

¹³ Burr Thompson, D., 1952, 144.

¹⁴ Јанакиевски Т., 1998, 34, figs. 32 and 32a.



Negroid heads from Smyrna, Museum of Louvre

A small group of three identical figurines of mime actors was found in the same tomb. Their subject is an adult man wearing a short *chiton* supported around his waist, with his head resting on his right hand. With his left arm over his chest, he supports the elbow of his right arm. In addition to this unusual posture, an interesting aspect is the strongly emphasized physiognomy of his face. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a *genre* theme with the representation of a common everyday person with individual facial features captured in a pensive moment. In comical contrast with his pensive posture, the figurine's large bald head, high forehead, protruding ears and thick eyebrows introduce a comic persona that originated in the theatre. It is known that mime actors performed without masks and it is almost certain that our 'pensive' character represents a mime actor. Mime was a short stage show that treated themes and types taken from everyday life in the spirit of parody and satire.

Even gods and heroes were represented as mortals with vices and flaws. Mime became popular in Greek theatre during the Late Hellenistic period. The Romans took mime from the Greeks and it became so popular in Roman theatres over time that during the Late Roman Period it almost completely surpassed tragedy and comedy.¹⁵ The earliest mimic shows were given in private houses and they became exceptionally popular in the rural areas of the empire.

Mime shows consisted of monologues, dialogues, scenes and choruses.¹⁶ The characters and costumes were inspired by everyday life and could be funny or serious. Interest in mime was great due to the visible facial expression of the actors who performed without masks.

Besides regular actors in mimes, these shows featured performances by

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23, 24.

¹⁶ KOPHTH-KONTH, Σ., 1994, 81-82.



A grotesque, Museum of Pella

naturally unattractive and deformed persons. Mime actors, unlike tragedy and comedy actors, did not wear masks and *cothurni* and were sometimes called *planipedes*.

That the figurine represents a comic persona from the world of mime is strongly supported by the fact that the actor wears a short *chiton* and has the disproportionally large head (*hydrocephalous*), thick lips, big nose and protruding ears of the ‘thinker’—an appearance consistent with the typical features of a mime stage character. These very features were almost obligatory for all mime actors and for some grotesques in coroplastic works.¹⁷

The nose of the figurine found in Stobi is more bulbous than crooked, as is the case with the majority of such representations. Thus the head and the nose of the figurines from Stobi of mime actors is more similar to the 2nd century AD representation of a mime actor found in the Eastern Necropolis in Thessalonika that is dressed in a *chiton* and a long *himation* over his left shoulder.¹⁸

The head is similar to the head of the walking slave-actor from Smyrna, most probably a representation of a mime character dressed in a short *chiton* with one of his arms raised.¹⁹ The high forehead and the elongated sunken face follow the standards of similar appearances in mimes. In its overall appearance, however, including the short *chiton* and the gesture of the hand raised to the chin, it bears the closest resemblance to the figurine of an elderly actor wearing a leather face-mask which has been found in Thessalonika and dated to the beginning of the 2nd century BC.²⁰

17 Almost all the grotesque and comic figurines from Myrina, most of them representing mime actors, are of bald men. See Molard-Besques, S., II, 1963, pl. 174-176. Even the most famous grotesque among entertainers (the one of the Punchinello type) has similar features, albeit more caricatured. See Grandjouan, C., 1961, 24, pl. 16, 643, 644; as well as the relief lamps on pl. 25, 933 and pl. 29, 1043. These are dated to the second and third century respectively.

18 KOPHTH-KONTH, Σ., 1994, catalogue N° 95. Height: 0, 19 m. The base on which this figurine stands is the same as the one found on the Stobi figurines: rectangular at the front and circular at the rear. The right arm is bent on the chest, while the left is lowered holding the *himation*. It bears the following inscription: Αλεξαν/δρου, meaning ‘Alexander’s’.

19 Higgins, R. A. 1967, 112, pl. 52 D, E. Figurines of mime actors were quite popular in Smyrna during the first century BC and the first century AD.

20 Thessalonika, 1986, 113, fig. 102.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

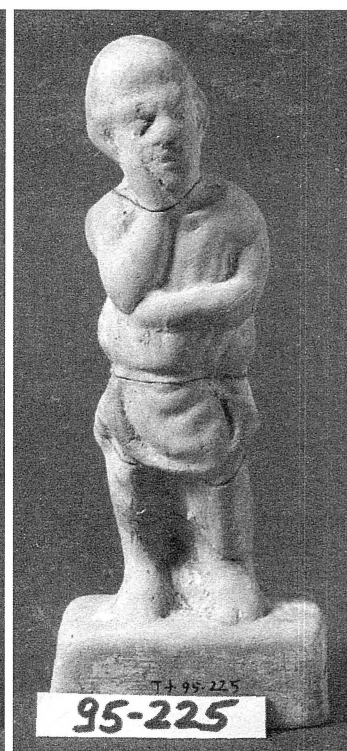


Fig. 3

Let us also give some credit to an alternative hypothesis, though in my opinion it is less plausible than the first. Thus it is possible that these figurines are representations of the Atellan fables (*Attelanae fabulae*) from which originated four types of characters with comic appearance and unattractiveness. Our character could be that of Dossennus, a caricature of the conceited philosopher, as shown by his pensive posture. Yet this is a rather bold statement because of the lack of material analogies for such an identification, since the other two artefacts discovered on the site of the theatre in Heraclea in the Republic of Macedonia, depict only the head of this actor-jester. The first was applied to a clay pot; while the other was made of bone with its backside serving as a vessel for salve or perfume.²¹ Moreover, there are no sufficient analogies that could help us determine what this character of Dossennus might have looked like in his entire physiognomy.

As for the interpretation of the theatrical figurines in general and their connection with the deceased and the sites where they were found, the first and most natural guess would be that the tombs in which such figurines were found belonged to actors.²² The association of the theatre with Dionysius is direct, and it is known that Dionysius was quite respected in Stobi. There is a possibility that the deceased was a priest of Dionysius or some other person of significance in the city whose intent was to gain enhanced protection from Dionysius. Yet there is always a possibility that this

21 Јанакиевски, Т., 1988, 24, 25, figs 21 and 22.

22 КОРН-КОНТ, Σ., 1994, 82



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

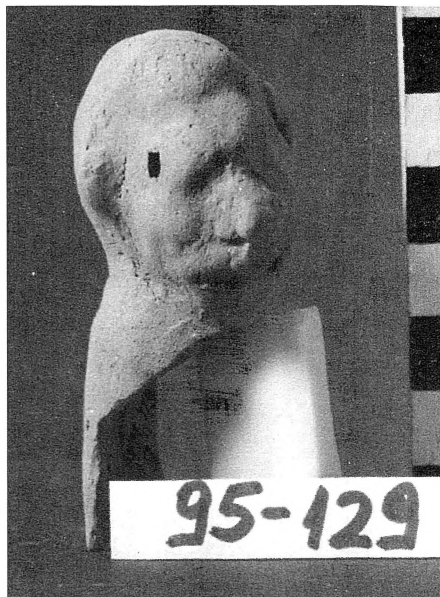


Fig. 6

representation simply belonged to somebody of either sex and of any age and that the figurine was placed in the grave for no particular reason except for the fact that it was a possession of the deceased.

Theatrical plays are proof of the culture of theatre in a city. It is certain that such plays predated the building of the theatre in Stobi, as earlier mime plays were given at private residences. Corti-Codi concurs with Beiber that the figurines from Stobi are contemporary with the epoch when mime was dominant at the Greek theatres. It must also be allowed that these figurines might have been imported.

The three figurines from Grave No. 1913, as well as the *lagynos*, *unguentaria* and the ritual vessel, have all been dated to the first century BC. The same dating applies to the other *lagynos* found in Grave No. 278.

The umbrella term 'grotesques' usually includes figurines related to phallic cults and representations of professional entertainers (such as dwarfs) and ordinary caricatures. The difference between the two genres of figurines—the theatrical representations and the grotesques—diminished greatly in the Imperial age, most probably because persons with deformities were involved in mime and other entertainment shows.²³

The first of our grotesque figurines represents a dwarf with an enormous head (*hydrocephalous*) and remarkable facial features on top of a clumsy body (Fig. 5). The figure is dressed in a loose *himation* that falls from his left shoulder to the right underarm. A common feature of this type of figurine is that they have large noses and lips. The eyes of the figurine are particularly striking and protruding. We may conclude that the coroplast successfully captured a truly deformed face (Fig. 5).

²³ Grandjouan, C., 1961, 23.

Many identical representations have been found during excavations undertaken at the Eastern Necropolis of Thessalonica. Unlike the figurine from Stobi, these were found intact. It is still evident that the figure stood on a low rectangular base. Its left leg is slightly inclined to the right, its feet protrude from underneath the himation which is held by its left hand and thrown over its left shoulder. The base is hollow underneath, with no air vent at the back. Their average height is 0.105 m. Two of the Thessalonica figurines, unlike the figurine from Stobi, do not have easily distinguishable facial features. They are dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.²⁴ The Museum of Pella has a very similar figurine of a short male with an enormous head and identical positioning of the arms; yet the base is round and high. The figurine from Stobi was found in Grave No. 1304 and dates to the beginning of the first century AD.

Of the second grotesque figurine, only the head was found intact. It is a unique find in Stobi and it is one of the oddest depictions in terracotta ever found on the site (Fig. 6). This head with protruding ears, a large, bulbous and fleshy nose, a wide incised mouth and a protruding brow bears a striking resemblance to a prehistoric man. The intent of the artist to exaggerate certain facial features to achieve comical appearance is evident.

We are aware of the popularity of Negroid types, as well as faces with Semitic features or satyr-like features; all of these have marginal appearances as grotesques. Our figure seems to belong to this group. Yet the most striking and oddest feature of this specimen, under closer inspection, is that the body (what is left of it) has a cylindrical shape. There are no hints of any representation of limbs or clothes and it was not given a stylistic rendering. In the course of my research into plastic lamps from the Agora in Athens, I have seen similar terracotta figurine-lamps depicting genre scenes, mime actors and grotesques with similar cylindrical bodies which served to connect the modelled head to the oval lamp base with an opening.²⁵ However, most of these 3rd century plastic lamps have handles and an opening on the head for refilling. Though the specimen from Stobi does not have these elements, it introduces a possible identification of the usage of this interesting terracotta finding. On the other hand, this head might have served as a *protome*. This figurine was found in the Southwest Necropolis of Stobi, though it does not originate from a tomb.

A multitude of male and female figurines with fat faces and deformed bodies were created in Smyrna and other Eastern Greek cities, as well as Alexandria, in the first century BC and the first century AD. Though it is commonly believed that many of these figurines represent mime actors or were adapted to represent them by the addition of a *falus*, some of them might just have served as pathological studies of a disease.²⁶

Alongside the grotesques like the ones from Smyrna and Alexandria, which were common in Eastern Greece, a local creation emerged in Priene. These figurines of peculiar-looking and indecent women probably represent Baubo and were offered

24 KOPHTH-KONTH, Σ., 1994, catalogue N° 38, 39. Traces of paint can be noted.

25 Grandjouan, C., 1961, 39, pl. 29, 1036. It has been identified as the head of mime actor figurine.

26 Higgins, R. A. 1967, 112.

in the temples of Demeter and Persephone in the third century BC.²⁷

However, it would be prudent to view a great number of these grotesques as having an apotropaic character, regardless of their origin. Many of them survived intact up to modern times and are still used as lucky charms, preserving their ancient forms.²⁸

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120

²⁸ Grandjouan, C., 1961, 23, 24.

Резиме:**ТЕРАКОТНИ ФИГУРИНИ ОД СТОБИ ОД ТИПОТ НА ТЕАТАРСКИ
ПРЕТСТАВИ И ФРЕСКИ**

Теракотните фигурини од жанрот на театарски претстави и гротески сочинуваат мал сегмент од богатиот теракотен фонд на локалитетот Стоби. За овие впечатливи креации инспирирани од театарската програма, досега не е пишувано кај нас. Тие датираат пред изградбата на стобскиот театар, поточно од крајот на 1 век п.н.е. и почеток на 1 век н.е., време кога мимот, пантомимот, ателанските лакрдии, трагедијата и комедијата биле главните шоуа на театарската програма, која наскоро ќе биде заменета со нови поголеми спектакли и шоуа, кои повеќе биле блиски до вкусот и интелектот на Римјаните.

Во зависност од идентификацијата на карактерот на ликот, издвоени се три типа.

Првиот е “ Актер кој претставува роб “, од типот седнат комичен, облечен во краток химатион префрлен преку левото рамо и со маска на лицето. Овој карактер потекнува од Новата Комедија, која обработува теми од секојдневниот живот. Фигурите кои биле инспирирани од комедијата, станале екстремно популарни во 4 век п.н.е. во Атика и биле нашироко извезувани и имитирани. Хеленистичкиот тип на актер седнат на олтар екстремно долго живеел, а во римско време кога комичните актери биле редуцирани во неколку типа, “Робот Предводник” бил омилениот комичен карактер. За сето тоа време, почнувајќи од 4 век п.н.е. па се до крајот на 3 или ран 4 век н.е. промените во иконографијата се многу мали. Што се однесува до носењето маски на нивните лица, тоа е традиција која што останала уште од првата врска меѓу театарот и Дионисовиот култ.

Мимичарите се друга категорија на театарски фигури, исто така од жанрот на комичните личности, но тие играле без маска на лицето. Тие се блиску до категоријата гротески, но не се толку карикирани. Трите идентични фигурини потекнуваат од ист гроб, а претставата е возрасен човек облечен во краток хитон, кој ја потпира својата глава на дланката од десната рака. Интересна е и силно нагласената физиономија на неговото лице. Мимот како мала сценска претстава обработувал теми и типови од секојдневниот живот и имал пародично-сатиричен карактер. Тој станал популарен во грчкиот театар во доцнохеленистичкиот период, а со тек на време ќе стане се попопуларен и во римските театри. Освен регуларните типови, во мимот учествувале и природно грди и деформирани личности.

Што се однесува до интерпретацијата на театарските фигури нивната поврзаност со покојникот и местото на наоѓање, првичното објаснување би било дека грбовите во кои се ископани ваквите претстави припаѓале на актери. Исто така и врската на Дионис со театарот е директна, а знаеме дека Дионис бил доста

почитуван во Стоби, за што меѓу другото говорат и многуте теракотни фигурини поврзани со него или неговиот култ, пронајдени во Стоби. Тука е и можноста покојникот да бил свештеник на Дионис или да имал некаква врска со него, или едноставно претставата да припаѓа на која и да било персона, сместена со неа во гробот.

Театарските претстави се доказ и за театарскиот живот во еден град.

Третата категорија “Гротески” ги вклучува фигурите од фаличните култови, професионалните забавувачи (вклучувајќи ги и кепеците) и обичните карикатури. Разликата помеѓу жанрот театарски фигури и фигури гротески се смалува за време на царството, поради употребата на деформирани личности за мимот и другите класи на забавувачи.

Првата гротеска од Стоби е кепец со голема глава (хидрокефалос), а сосема идентични претстави, како и многупати досега, се ископани во И. некропола на градот Солун. Втората гротеска од која е сочувана само главата со клемпави уши и голем бабурест нос, многу наликува на праистори-ски човек. Претставата не е гробен наод и на неа нема траги од раце или облека, па можеби намената на оваа глинена изработка е некоја друга, а не фигурина.

Фигури на мажи и жени со дебели лица и деформирани тела на големо се правеле во Смирна и другите источно грчки градови, како и во Александрија во 1 век п.н.е. и 1 век н.е. Иако за многу од овие фигури се верува дека претставуваат актери во мимот, другите можеби се само патолошки студии на болеста. Александриското влијание и наклоноста кон жанр теми, карикирани форми, пародии и сатира, во Стоби не се огледува само во фигурите на гротески. Тука влегуваат и неколкуте црнечки глави, а може-би и онаа со семитски карактеристики. Овие мотиви не чудат затоа што во Стоби претходно се откриени наоди кои упатуваат на врските со Александрија, како стаклото и сатирот танчар од бронза. И почитувањето на Изиде е потврдено преку еден натпис и монетите, а постоел и храм посветен на оваа божица. И од Серапис е пронајдена мермерна глава, а неговата претстава исто така ја среќаваме на стобските монети. За голем дел од овие гротески е предложено да се разгледуваат како апотропејски во карактерот.

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(English Translation by Jelena Jarić)