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Article abstract

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Who Was that Masked Man? An Alexandrian Bronze

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Résumé

Le présent essai examine la signification d'une statuette hellénistique en bronze faisant partie de la collection du regretté docteur Elie Borowski. Le sujet en est unique : un homme émacié porte un masque représentant un babouin. Le masque exprime de la tristesse et de la dignité, et le porteur est difforme et souffre de malnutrition. Sa condition semble le relier à d'autres figures anciennes représentant des gens anormaux, à la suite d'une maladie ou par infirmité. Par ailleurs, par le travail de représentation, le masque suggère un lien avec le théâtre. L'essai propose des parallèles avec les masques thériomorphiques dans la comédie antique grecque et dans divers contextes théâtraux durant la période hellénistique. Le babouin est une espèce commune en Égypte et était identifié au dieu Thoth dans l'Antiquité. L'essai avance que l'homme masqué était acteur dans une version égyptienne d'un conte folklorique grecque, racontant l'histoire de dieux qui se déguisent pour rendre visite aux pauvres humains.

In 1984 the Royal Ontario Museum presented a special exhibition of Greek art from the private collection of the late Dr Elie Borowski.[1] Almost buried amongst larger and more spectacular exhibits was a bronze statuette only 15.2 cm high (fig. 1). The subject is a unique combination of apparently incongruous elements: a baboon-headed man, emaciated and deformed, dressed in Greek costume. Ancient art of several varieties presents deformity and suffering with some frequency and familiarity. The baboon, and sometimes a male figure baboon-headed, were common cult themes in Egypt. Both types must be briefly examined before we can begin to decode this figure. It is the combination that is unique; and the conundrum is more intriguing still, because the artist has clearly indicated that the animal head is a mask. Like masks worn in all types of ancient theatre, it covers the whole head, rather than the face alone. The bronze is skillfully crafted and certainly Greek, although its provenance is not recorded. Neda Leipen, R.O.M. curator (Greek and Roman) and an authority on bronzes, dates the piece to the Hellenistic period – the second or first centuries BCE.[2]

The uniqueness of the subject should not distract us from the beauty of the unknown craftsperson's work. The statuette is cast in one piece, and probably never had a separate stand. The right foot is missing and the left is bent, but the latter is large and flat enough to have permitted the figure to stand fairly securely upon two such feet. The emaciated legs are slightly bowed, and the arms are drawn in close to the thin body. The left hand has been broken off, but the modelling of the right is simplified. The sinews of the forearm are lightly indicated rather than anatomically detailed, and the loosely curled fingers are not separated, except for the thumb, which crosses the palm in an uncomfortable attitude suggesting pain. The right shoulder is higher than the left, a phenomenon induced by the twisting of the spine that can be clearly seen from the rear: the back of this piece is as carefully made as the front.

None of this is inconsistent with creative fantasy. Is the man in the mask a fictional construct by a skilled and imaginative artist, or is the figure based upon observation from life? We must not expect photographic accuracy; the impressionism of the musculature is appropriate to a small figurine. However, three points can be measured against known reality: the man's physical condition, his costume, and the mask's fidelity to nature.

Symptoms are displayed with such accuracy that a practising paleopathologist who studied a set of photographs of the figure, taken from the front, back and both sides, readily diagnosed the man as suffering from right hemiplegia, with malnutrition. "The hemiplegia is caused by right-sided paralysis of the central motor centre in the brain. The attitude of the right arm [wrist drop]... and the hunchback [kyphosis with minimal scoliosis, i.e., deformity of the upper spine with some lateral curvature], and adduction [drawing in] of the right arm... [and] the distortion of the hips and position of the legs are in keeping with this diagnosis. Generalized malnutrition, as still seen in elderly patients, is entirely compatible with the limb appearance. The fullness of the abdomen implies a diet of primarily carbohydrate rather than protein."[3]

From his costume, it is apparent that the man is Greek. His outer garment is a rather meagre version of the *himation* worn throughout the Greek world, both by citizens and by such slaves as were lucky enough to own one. A simple rectangle of fabric, it was draped and folded about the body. A prosperous citizen often wore a *himation* of fine wool known as a *chlaina*. It was ample enough to reach almost to the ground, but the masked man wears the poor man's short *tribon* of homespun fabric. Its folds are gracefully rendered and slightly stylized, but his right leg shows through its thin fabric. Because the *chiton* beneath his *tribon* is visible at the right shoulder, it is evidently not the *exomis*, pinned only at the left, which slaves and working men wore in order to keep the right arm free for manual work. There could not have been much hard physical work a man with wrist drop could do.[4]

The doglike features of the mask correspond closely to those of *papio hamadryas*, the smallest of the five species of baboon. Today it is native to Ethiopia, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen; in antiquity its range extended to northern Egypt.[5] The male of this species has luxuriant sidewhiskers, which, in the mask, have been carefully trimmed and curled, while the mane has been braided into a pigtail. The mask confers distinc-

Figure 1 (two views). Unknown Greek artist, bronze statuette [actor with baboon mask], second to first century BCE, 15.2 cm. Jerusalem, Elie Borowski collection (Photo: David Harris, Jerusalem).

tion upon the man who wears it. In spite of the animal features, the face has an expression of sad gravity that unifies the composition, matching the deformity and illness of the body, as though the mask were in sympathy with the man who wore it.

The evidence of pathology, costume, and animal species all implies that the figure is based on observation of life, rather than fancy; but that raises more questions. Why did an artist commemorate this person, malformed and unhealthy as he is? What was the significance of an animal mask, and particularly of a baboon? And why was the man wearing such a mask at all?

Many cultures are fascinated by people with physical peculiarities and deformities: in relatively recent times the press made celebrities of Britain's Elephant Man (Joseph Merrick), America's General Tom Thumb (Charles Stratton, 63 cm tall), and St Petersburg's Jo-Jo the Dog-faced Boy (Fedor Jeftichew). In antiquity, achondroplastic dwarfs were a frequent theme in Apulian red-figure; terracotta figurines with grotesque heads were commonplace in Hellenistic Ionia; and one terracotta group suggests that a hermaphrodite performed in mime.[6] Three miniature bronzes of dancing dwarfs have been found in a shipwreck off the coast of Tunisia. Two of them are thought to be from Alexandria, and are dated to the middle of the second century BCE; the third is probably Athenian, and slightly later. Their graceful modelling and fine dark finish suggest that the artists found more in their subjects than mere grotesquerie. A similar aesthetic appreciation must have directed the artist who embellished with silver inlay a bronze statuette of a terribly hunched and emaciated beggar.[7] None of these figures is masked, however.

Figurines of masked actors in Greek comedy are very common. Masks are frequently grotesque, and, like the man in the baboon mask, many of the actors wore the *tribon* with an ordinary *chiton*. In Old and Middle Comedy, the actors' bodies were grossly padded at stomach and buttocks, but the viewer was never permitted to glimpse the actor beneath the costume. The deformity was part of his characterization; it is artificial and is presented as merely funny, like the mask. As Aristotle says, the comic mask is "ugly and twisted, but not painful to look at."[8] A few bronze figures of comic actors are extant, but I know of only one other bronze figurine of an ill-formed masked person: a thin, hunchbacked man with oversized feet, wearing a hideous mask with silver fangs.[9] Its provenance is said to be southern Italy, but neither the costume nor the mask are characteristic of the Greek comedies that were popular there. Nor can the man be a performer in Greco-Roman mime, which is a broad term referring to many sorts of public and private shows. Mime performers were sometimes dwarfs or deformed people, but they never wore masks of any sort, and certainly not animal masks.

While animal-headed divinities are ubiquitous in Egyptian iconography, theriomorphic images are comparatively rare in Greek art. Monsters like centaurs or harpies are too fanciful to be relevant here, their forms too inhuman. Satyrs, however, were conceived in human form, except for ears and tails like those of a horse, and the white wooly hide of their leader, old Papposilenos. They were familiar figures in art, and actors in the satyr plays that followed tragic trilogies at the Dionysiac festivals in Athens needed only a mask and simple costume elements to represent them in the theatre. Their images in classical art might come either from the theatre or an artist's imagination, and it is not always easy to tell the difference. Nevertheless, art links these mythical beast-men to theatrical masks. There is a similar connection with the scene in the *Odyssey*, in which Circe transforms Odysseus's companions into swine: a mythological narrative that appears on a number of Attic vases. A scene from Boeotia, however, seems to show real humans as a masked swine chorus from a play.[10]

Humans wearing true animal masks are almost always associated with comedy. Six Attic scenes, dating between ca. 540 and 414 BCE, show men with animal masks, all in comic choruses.[11] We know the titles of more than four hundred comedies, extant and lost, performed in Athens during the fifth century. Before the actor began to dominate comedy towards the end of the century, titles commonly referred to the composition of the chorus, which gave a play its character, often a fanciful one. Many suggest choruses masked as creatures as diverse as birds, frogs, wasps, bees, goats, and ants; none, however, are apes.[12] A few later figurines with animal masks seem to be linked to comedy. Two men in bird costumes, one of them wearing a removable bird mask, may be *choreutai* in late revivals of Aristophanes. A figure dressed as a woman in a Doric tunic wears a horse mask, and a lost bronze figurine depicted a Roman senator masked as a rat.[13] Satire of that kind is familiar today, but three terracottas recently listed by a London dealer are less transparent: robed figures wear the masks of a sheep, a monkey, and an ass. They are said to be Alexandrian, from the same period as the Borowski bronze. If that is correct, their masks may refer to a comic Greek satire of Egyptian religious practices.[14]

None of these wearers of animal masks is deformed, but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, like them, the man wearing the baboon mask is an actor. In is not easy to identify the genre of the performance. Tragedy seems unlikely, as does satyr play. The mask sets the figure apart from the mimes, to the same extent that real deformity distinguishes the mimes from the artificial grotesquerie of actors in Greek comedy. New Comedy was the prevailing type at the time of the figurine's manufacture, and while some character types were no longer padded, actors wore tights, and there is no sign of those here. Artists normally showed the cuffs of the tights at wrists and ankles, but

of course the sculptor was under no obligation to do so. Comedy seems therefore to be the most likely point of origin for our figurine, unless he was an actor in a form we know little about. (A number of red-figured vase scenes show masked actors in at least three distinct styles of humorous performance that are not formal Greek comedy.[15])

Leipen believes that the statuette was made in one of the Greek centres of Asia Minor or in Alexandria. Stylistic grounds alone are insufficient to assign an Alexandrian origin, and Stewart has argued that a distinctive Alexandrian school in sculpture is a mirage.[16] Deformed subjects appear to have been as common in Magna Graecia and Ionia as in Egypt. An artist in any of those places might easily have seen a baboon. However, as we have seen, the mask accurately identifies *papio hamadryas*, which was native to Egypt. Moreover, a man with the head of a baboon might have been regarded as a prodigy in Smyrna or Taras (Taranto), but such a figure would convey a clear and predictable meaning only to Greeks of Alexandria, who knew something of the beliefs and customs of their Egyptian neighbours. There was simply no reason for an actor to wear a baboon mask, or a sculptor to depict him, anywhere else in the Greek world.

The hamadryad is known also as the "sacred baboon" because, as both the Alexandrian sculptor and his audience knew very well, the god Thoth was frequently represented with the head of the baboon, which was sacred to him. His other sacred animal was the ibis. Near modern Tuna el-Gebel, and also at Sakkara, archaeologists have found underground galleries containing thousands of mummified baboons and ibises.[17] To an audience of Alexandrian Greeks, the baboon mask would certainly have suggested Thoth. He was the scribe of the gods, the "master of law," and had "knowledge of divine speech." He invented all arts and sciences. In his baboon manifestation he stood for equilibrium, serving as arbiter in the battles between Horus and Set, light and darkness, and ensuring that neither gained a decisive victory.[18]

An Egyptian god as a character in a Greek play may seem anomalous, but in fact, even outside Egypt, Greeks were in the habit of identifying some Egyptian gods with their own. Thoth corresponded to Hermes; hence, Tuna el-Gebel was known to the Greeks as Hermopolis. In his baboon mask, the audience would recognize that the actor was playing the part of Thoth/Hermes. But why was the god played by a pitifully deformed actor?

Here comparative iconography and the history of Greek theatre both fail us, and we must grapple with the uniqueness of this bronze statuette, and the dramatic genre it illustrates, using hypothesis alone. Conceivably this was a dramatized myth of the acts of the gods, like a medieval "miracle play." In myth, Zeus and Hermes frequently go slumming on earth, usually in disguise. Once, concealing their divine radiance, they knocked on the door of a poor old childless farmer named Hyrieus, who entertained them hospitably. In Ovid's version of the story, the gods are disguised only as mortals, not as beggars; however, they begged for accommodation at many houses. Their apparent poverty served to emphasize the charity of Philemon and his wife Baucis. In a dramatized analog, the more beggarly they were, the stronger the situation would become. In the morning, the gods revealed their identities and fulfilled the old man's greatest desire: a son would be born, and named Orion.[19]

The actor's deformity and malnutrition are entirely appropriate to a beggar, and his threadbare *tribon* suggests poverty. At his first appearance to the farmer he would have worn a beggar's mask. In the morning the noble baboon mask would reveal his true identity as Thoth/Hermes, visually and dramatically, but the actor's crippled body remained to link the god to his previous disguise. No other myth of Hermes fits the circumstances, and the details of the bronze support the story reasonably well. Perhaps the hypothesis is faulty, but this unique work of art challenges explanation, and the mask shows conclusively that the man is an actor in a play, despite his deformities and ill health.

Notes

1 N. Leipen, P. Denis, J.R. Guy, A.D. Trendall, *Glimpses of Excellence: A Selection of Greek Vases and Bronzes from the Elie Borowski Collection*, exh. cat., Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto, 1984), 43, cat. no. 40. I am grateful to Dr Borowski for permission to publish photographs.

2 N. Leipen, "Dionysos et le théâtre grec dans la collection du Musée Royal de l'Ontario," *Réalia: cahiers du GITA*, 6 (1990–91), 3–20, section 6, figs. 20, 21.

3 Dr Michael McNeeley, Victoria, BC.

4. L.M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* (New York, 1981), 155, 171, 175–76.

5 For photographs and data on this baboon, see www.dierinbeeld.nl/animal_files/mammals/hamadryas_baboon/index.html.

6 Dwarfs: red-figure oenochoe, fourth century BCE, Melbourne, National Museum of Victoria 90/5, see A.D. Trendall, "The Felton Painter and a newly acquired Apulian comic vase by his hand," *Essays and Studies in Honour of Daryl Lindsay*, eds. F. Philipp and J. Stewart (Melbourne, 1964), 197, fig. 27; and V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Oxford, 1973), 170, 232. Performers with deformed heads: terracotta head, second century BCE to second century CE, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 01.7623, provenance, from Dardanelles; three terracotta figurines, first century BCE to first century CE, British Museum GR1907.5.18–1,8, GR1907.5.18–1,9, and GR1907.5.18–1,10; terracotta group, Hildesheim, Roemer und Pelizaeus Museum, see M. Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1961), 249, pl. 86.

7 The beggar: Hamburg, Museum für Künst und Gewerbe 1949.40;

see S. Pfisterer-Haas, "Die bronzenen Zwergentänzer," in G. Hellenkemper-Salies et al., *Das Wrack: Der antike Schiffsfund von Mahdia,* Bd. I–II (Cologne, 1994), 496, pl. 20; and for the dwarf dancers, 483–504, pls. 1–15. Like the male dwarf dancer, a hunchbacked and emaciated bronze dancer in the Munich Antikesammlung has enlarged genitalia: see Pfisterer-Haas, 497, pl. 21. Bronzes representing a hunchbacked man with enlarged genitalia and another with a deformed head have recently appeared on a dealer's website: see website, Sasson Ancient Art, Jerusalem, respectively Gr B009, Gr B017; both perhaps Alexandrian, second–first century BCE, http://www.sassonancientart.com/Classica/classica.html#Greek.

8 *Poetics* 1449a: trans. quoted from G.M.A. Grube (New York, 1985), 10. For an introductory account of masks and costumes in Comedy, see R. Green and E. Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre* (London, 1995), 49–56. C.W. Marshall, "Some Fifth-century Masking Conventions," *Greece and Rome*, 46 (1999), 188–202, supplies more detail on masks. See also J.R. Green, *The Theatre in Ancient Greek Society* (London, 1994), for more on masks; and Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy.*

9 Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, 247, fig. 817.

10 Narrative swine-men: e.g., red-figure lekythos, fifth century BCE, Athens, National Museum 9685, Beazley database 208271. Chorus: Boeotian kantharos with added colour, ca. 400–375 BCE, Nafplion, Archaeological Museum 730, see Hedwig Kenner, *Das Theater und Realismus der Griechischen Künst* (Vienna, 1960), 22, pl. 2.

11 Attic: black-figure amphora, "knights" riding men costumed and masked as horses, ca. 540–530 BCE, Berlin, Antikesammlung, Staatliche Museen F1697; black-figure hydria, men with bull-masks, ca. 520–510 BCE, British Museum B308; black-figure cup, men as bulls, ca. 501–500 BCE, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1971.903; black-figure oenochoe, men as birds, ca. 500–490 BCE, British Museum B509; black-figure amphora, men as chickens, ca. 480, Berlin Antikesammlung, Staatliche Museen F1830; red-figure kalyx krater, men as birds, ca. 414 BCE, Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 82.AE.83. For all these works, see J.R. Green, "A Representation of the *Birds* of Aristophanes," *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, 1985) II, 95–104, respectively figs. 6, 8, 7, 11, 14, 1.

12 On satyr play and comic choruses, see F. Brommer, *Satyrspiele: Bilder grieschischer Vasen,* 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1959); and G.M. Sifakis, *Parabasis and Animal Choruses: a Contribution to the History of Attic Comedy* (London, 1971).

13 Horse-woman, Italian, perhaps third century BCE: Richmond, VA, Museum of Fine Art 85.38.14, see M.E. Mayo, "Tradition and Imagination: Five Centuries of Greek Ceramic Art," *Apollo*, 122 (1985), 428–35, pl. 20. Bird men: Attic, second–first century BCE, Tampa Museum of Art 1988.34.9 c., see Charles Ede, *Antiquities*, VIII (London, 1985), cat. no. 18; whereabouts unknown, once New York, Schimmel Collection, Attic or Boeotian, perhaps fourth century, O. W. Muscarella, ed. *Ancient Art. The Norbert Schimmel Collection, New York* (Mainz, 1984), cat. no. 49. Rat: whereabouts unknown, see J. Babelon, *Choix de bronzes de la collection Caylus donnée au roi en 1762* (Paris, 1928), cat. no. 22, pl. XIII.

14 Once Alexandria, Mustaki Collection, first century BCE, see Charles Ede, *Ancient Terracotta Sculpture*, XVIII (London, 2002), cat. no. 26 a, b, c.

15 Campanian oenochoe, British Museum F 233, see Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, fig. 539; Attic pelike, Tarquinia RC 8261, see Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, 1st ed. (1939), fig. 119; Sicilian kalyx krater, Caltanissetta G 258, see A.D. Trendall, *The Red-Figured Vases of Lucania, Campania and Sicily* (Oxford, 1967), pl. 235.1. All fourth century BCE.

16 Leipen et al., *Glimpses of Excellence*, 43, cat. no. 40; A. Stewart, "The Alexandrian Style: A Mirage?" in J. Paul Getty Museum, *Alexandria and Alexandrianism* (Malibu, 1996), 231–46.

17 B. Watterson, *The Gods of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1984), 181.

18 E.A. Wallace Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians, or Studies in Egyptian Mythology* (London, 1904), I, 403–5.

19 R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1960), I, 152–53; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII.