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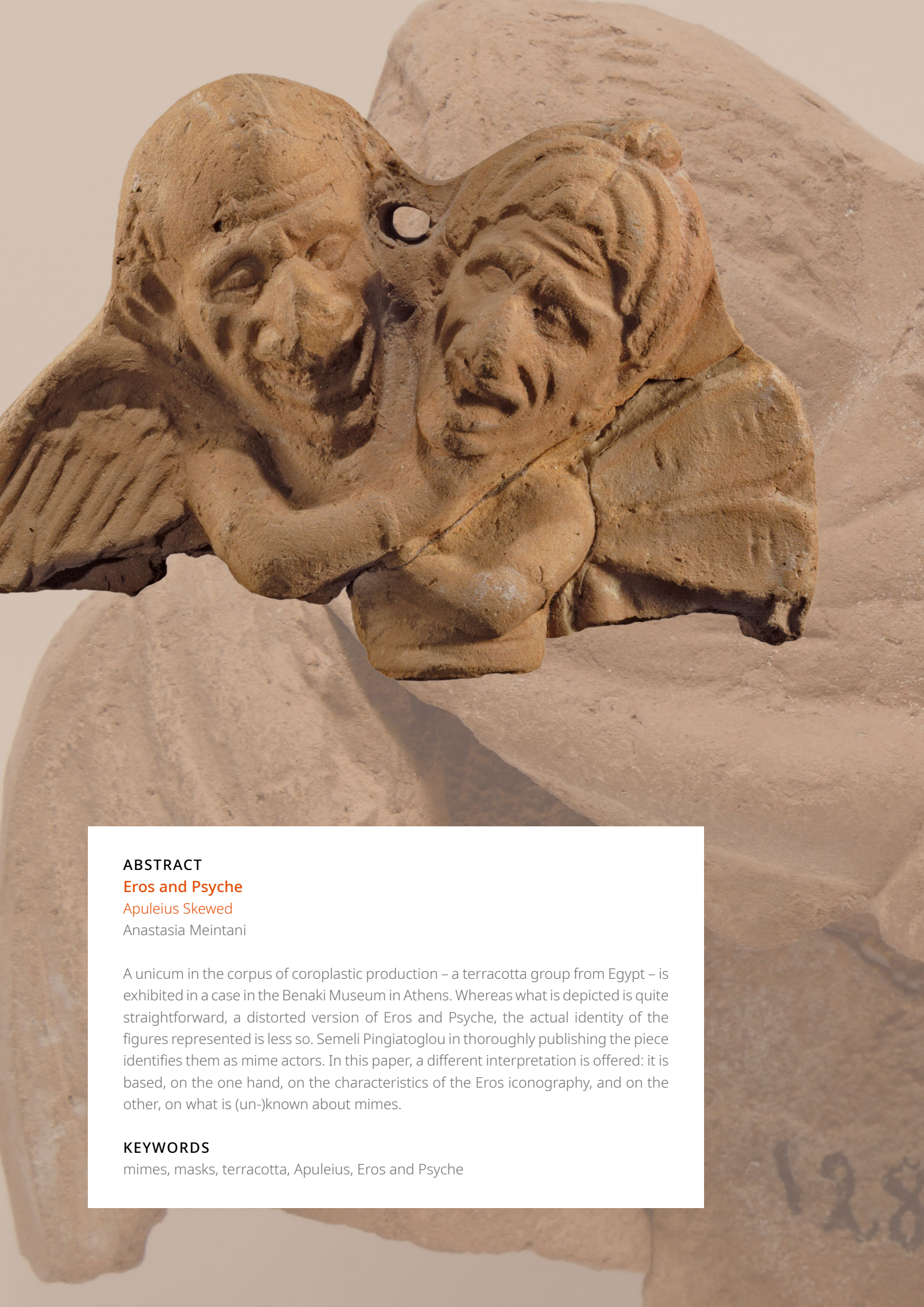

ABSTRACT

Eros and Psyche

Apuleius Skewed

Anastasia Meintani

A unicum in the corpus of coroplastic production – a terracotta group from Egypt – is exhibited in a case in the Benaki Museum in Athens. Whereas what is depicted is quite straightforward, a distorted version of Eros and Psyche, the actual identity of the figures represented is less so. Semeli Pingiatoglou in thoroughly publishing the piece identifies them as mime actors. In this paper, a different interpretation is offered: it is based, on the one hand, on the characteristics of the Eros iconography, and on the other, on what is (un-)known about mimes.

KEYWORDS

mimes, masks, terracotta, Apuleius, Eros and Psyche

ANASTASIA MEINTANI

Eros and Psyche
Apuleius Skewed

1 An outlandishly grotesque – in terms of its iconography – terracotta group from Egypt readily catches the viewer's attention in one of the display cases of the Benaki Museum on the ground floor (Fig. 1. 2)[1]. Unfortunately, it is preserved only fragmentarily, with the lower part missing; what remains measures 8.8 cm × 12.2 cm. The clay is brown and derives from the Nile mud[2]. The group, probably the upper part of a lamp, shows a sorry-looking elderly man embracing an equally repellent old woman, long past her prime. From the man's right shoulder grows a bird wing, while from the woman's left shoulder sprout butterfly wings. It is this last feature that saves the day and reveals the identity of the figures, that is Eros and Psyche. The group dates to around the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D., based on Psyche's hairdo: the hair is parted in the middle and arranged in a series of layers or waves. At the back, it is pulled up from the neck to the top of the head. This hairstyle can be paralleled in the portraits of the mid-3rd cent. A.D.[3]. The otherwise balding man has in the middle of his head a plastic braid, a cheeky reference to that hair-do typically seen on Eros in the Hellenistic period[4] (I save a description of the lower parts of the figures for later).

2 One can only gauge the visual shock (and consequently laughter) such an object would have produced, if one is familiar with the story of Eros and Psyche. The only written version is in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* from the second half of the 2nd cent. A.D.[5]. However, variants of the story were probably circulating much earlier as the legion

1 Athens, Benaki Museum Inv. 12822; Ht. 8.8 cm, first half of the 3rd cent. A.D., from Alexandria. Richter 1951, 31 fig. 56; Binsfeld 1956, 36 n. 6; Schlam 1976, 12 f. fig. V2; Pingiatoglou 1987, 681–693 pl. 134; Pingiatoglou 1993, 193 no. 459 (first half of the 3rd cent. A.D.).

2 Pingiatoglou 1987, 682.

3 Fittschen – Zanker 1983, 33 f. no. 36 pl. 44; 34 f. no. 37 pls. 45. 46; Pingiatoglou 1987, 683.

4 Raftopoulou 2000, 51 f. no. 29 pls. 56. 57.

5 Apul. met. 4, 28–6, 24; Schlam 1976, 1 f.; Pingiatoglou 1987, 683 f. n. 7.

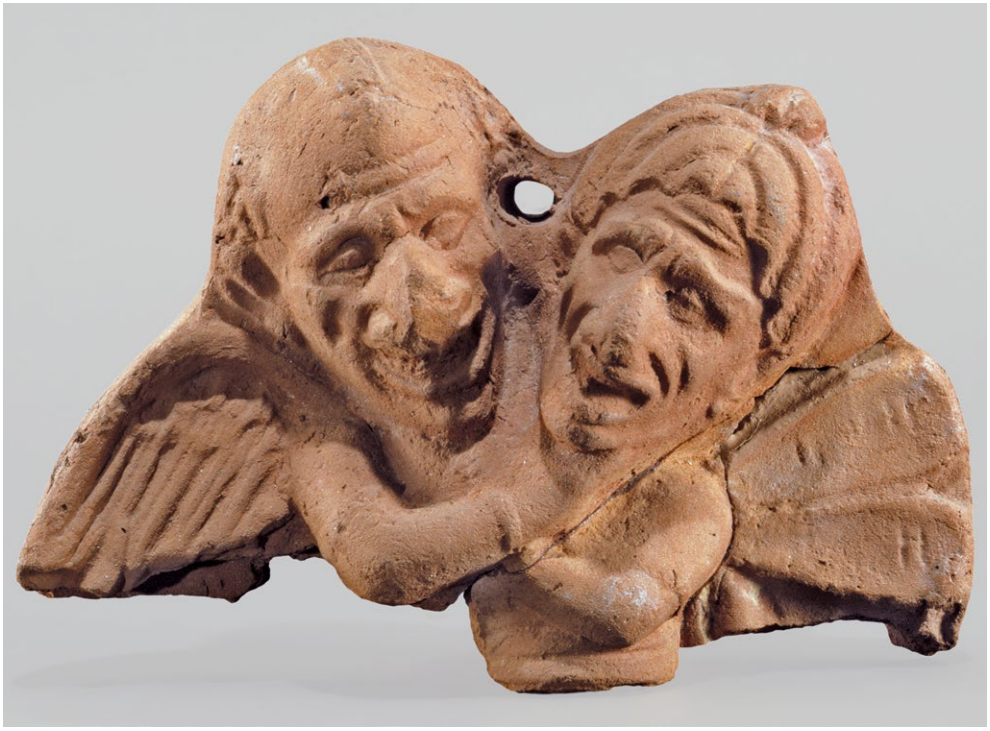

Fig. 1: Athens, Benaki Museum Inv. 12822. Caricature of Eros and Psyche (front view)

1

of related artefacts testifies[6]. The story runs thus: once upon a time, Psyche, a king's daughter, was endowed with beauty so exquisite that it outshone even that of Aphrodite. While Psyche's two sisters were also extremely charming, we are told that her beauty was so divine that her admirers worshipped her instead of Aphrodite. Aphrodite, fuelled by envy and fury, dispatched her son Eros to punish her innocent rival. Eros, however, failed to accomplish his task as, enchanted by her beauty, he too became enamoured of her. Their union eventually took place after numerous ordeals. The terracotta dramatically upends traditional expectations, as the chubby, childish Eros is rendered as a repulsive, shrivelled man and the ravishing Psyche as an ugly, withered hag.

3 The iconographical type with the chin-chuck gesture, which harks back to a late Hellenistic original, was a most popular one, as demonstrated by numerous examples in various media. The most renowned copy is in the Capitoline Museum at Rome[7]. Strikingly, though, while in the marble life-size Capitoline group the virtually child-like Eros and Psyche appear blissfully oblivious of and isolated from the rest of the world while kissing, in the terracotta here the frontal faces blatantly stare straight out at the viewer as if challenging him or her to pause and make a connection. This element adds to the burlesque, and it also intensifies the unsettled feeling on the part of the beholder.

6 Reitzenstein, in examining depictions of Eros and Psyche on Egyptian lamps and plastic vases dating earlier than Apuleius's work, has argued for the existence, before Apuleius, of an eastern myth that evolved in Egypt. This story is represented in the beginning in some figurative expressions, but gradually absorbing and processing elements of fairy tales the final version emerged as recorded in Apuleius, Reitzenstein 1914. A comparable conclusion is reached also by Schlam through similar lines of argument. A folk tale lies at the core, but it was the artistic representations from the 5th cent. B.C. onwards with their symbolic meanings that were the sources of Apuleius's story, Schlam 1976, 31–40. The issue of whether Apuleius's version is a myth, fairytale or allegory does not need to distract us here. For this matter, see Pingiatoglou 1987, 683 n. 7. For earlier references to Eros and Psyche in Plato and in the epigrams of the Greek anthology of the 1st cent. B.C., see Pingiatoglou 1987, 684.

7 Rome, Capitoline Museum Inv. 408; Ht. 1.25 m. Bieber 1961a, 150; von Steuben 1966; Vorster 2007, 301 f. pl. 292; Zanker 1998, 64–67; Kunze 2002, 210. The sensual ›rococo‹ motif but mostly the paratactic arrangement of the figures, that offers a single view, justify the late Hellenistic date.

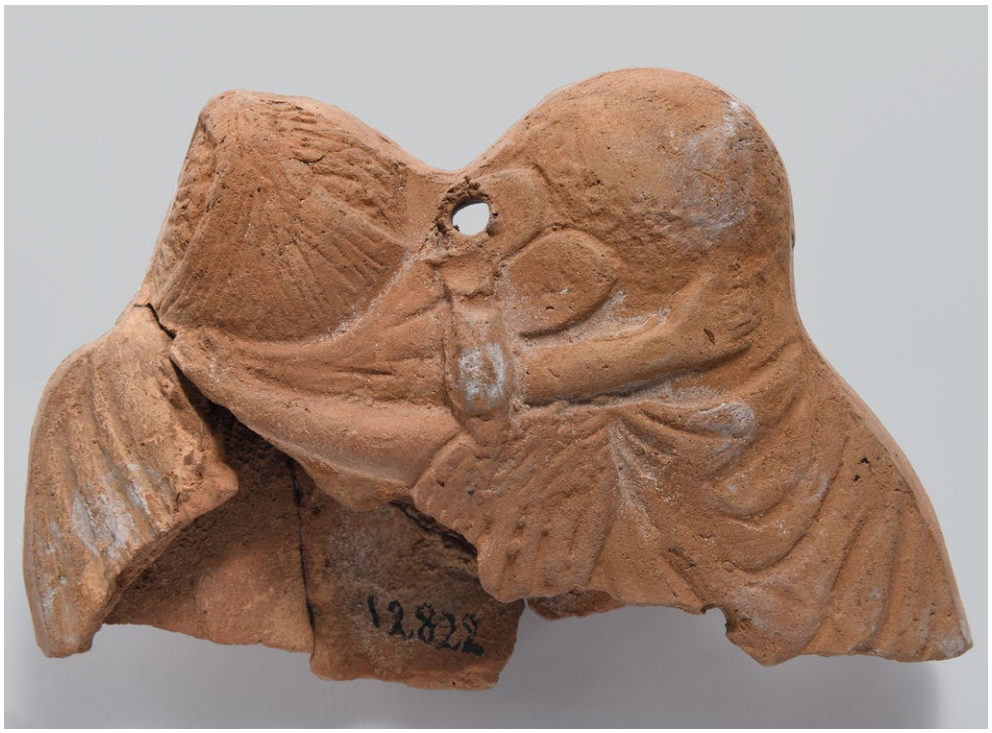

Fig. 2: Athens, Benaki Museum Inv. 12822. Caricature of Eros and Psyche (back view)

2

4 In earlier scholarship, the terracotta group was *en passant* characterized as a caricature and the matter was left there without further consideration[8]. It was Semeli Pingiatoglou who first came seriously to grips with it. She asserted that the images are masked actors on two grounds: the heads are oversized in relation to the body and the wide-open mouths are excessively large. Furthermore, Eros is wearing a kind of tricot, the tight-fitting garment typical of actors, the edge of which is, in Pingiatoglou's opinion, visible in his right hand. What is more, searching for a suitable category of actors, she identifies them specifically as mime actors: mythological burlesques were most likely to occur in mime plays and some mime characters may have worn masks. She borrows the point from Georges Theocharidis, who argues for the use of masks by at least some late mimes of the 4th and 5th cent. A.D.[9].

5 Although her proposition is attractive, it also breeds fallacies. What do we actually know about the mime actors and their performances? Regrettably, we are hindered by there being only shreds of evidence. Our view is mostly forged from second-hand information – quotes and references – which we find scattered in the works of various authors[10]. The mimes were allegedly performed without masks, theatrical costumes, and buskins unlike their comic and tragic counterparts, because the appearance of the participating actors was allegedly naturally distorted – their ugliness needed no artificial props. Their dress was that of everyday life. As far as the masks are concerned, the evidence is far from solid. A short passage from Athenaeus mentions that a certain Cleon, nicknamed Mime-Actor, »καὶ τῶν Ἰταλικῶν μίμων ἄριστος γέγονεν αὐτοπρόσωπος ὑποκριτής«[11]. Whereas for almost every scholar this passage attests to the non-use of masks, Pingiatoglou turns the inference on its head and considers it

8 Richter 1951, 31 fig. 56; Binsfeld 1956, 36; Adriani 1972, pl. 40, 1; Schlam 1976, 12 f. pl. 5, 2.

9 Theocharidis 1940, 65. 68. 74. 87–93.

10 Reich was the first to piece together all the kinds of sources, Reich 1903. For the history and development of the mimes, see Wüst 1932; Beare 1964, 149–151; Weismann 1972, 49–54; Wiemken 1972, 31–44; Beacham 1991, 129–140.

11 Ath. 10, 452 f. »who was the best Italian mime-actor to perform without a mask«; Douglas-Olson 2009, 167. 169.

an indication that before Cleon mime actors may have occasionally worn masks[12]. However, for the proponents of the non-mask view, what is meant by ›natural distortion‹ is also not clear. For example, Gisela Richter sought to tease out facts regarding the physical appearance of mimic actors based on ancient writers like Cicero[13]. Cicero, in his description of the ideal orator, makes allusions to the mimes[14]. His remarks, though, are too generic[15]. What is more, he does not make any reference to deformity, as Richter claims[16]. We can only say that, on the whole, laughable grimaces, foolish behaviour, and a rather sordid appearance were part and parcel of these actors' performance.

6 We actually possess only one secure piece of archaeological evidence regarding the mimes. A terracotta lamp found on the west slope of the Athenian Acropolis, dating to the 3rd cent. B.C. and depicting a small troupe of mimes[17]. The three mimologoi are staging a piece titled »The Mother-in-Law«; the inscription reads »ΜΙΜΟΛΩΓΟΙ/ΗΥΠΟΘΗΣΙΣ/ΕΙΚΥΡΑ«. Their clothes are those of everyday life: the man in the middle is clad in a short, knee-length and belted tunic, and the two flanking him are dressed in himatia. The grumpy old man in the middle but also the one in his left have an unfortunate appearance as scholars have pointed out, with their exaggeratedly ugly faces and huge fanlike ears, which are understood to be actual features and not masks.

7 And what about their subject matters? Because of the (improvisational) nature of the mimes, we are regrettably only left with some scraps. Apart from these, Choricius, writing around the beginning of the 6th cent. A.D., furnishes us with glimpses of some mime characters: the master, the slave, the innkeeper, the sausage seller, the cook, the lover and the enraged rival – to name but a few[18]. Extant titles, such as the *Courtesan*, the *Fisherman*, the *Fuller*, and the *Salt Seller*, also allude to the base subject matters of the mimes. It seems that adultery, buffoonery, trivial scenes from everyday life, slapstick farce, and the burlesquing of philosophical concepts were stock-in-trade[19]. Nor could political leaders (even of the stripe of Caesar!) avoid being stung by Roman mimic satire[20]. It seems that mime actors enjoyed a kind of impunity. In the same vein, Cicero expresses the anxiety of potentially being exposed to ridicule on stage[21]. Mime writers were also probably not above making mythological subjects the butt of their jokes. Mythology and religion were, like politics, fair game for comedy. In terms of the earliest examples, we have a few lines from Laberius's works *Necyomantia*, *Lacus Avernus*, and *Anna Perenna*, dating to the 1st cent. B.C., which could indicate the burlesquing of pagan religious themes[22]. By the 2nd cent. A.D., Tertullian gives us explicit references

12 Grysar, Reich, Richter, and Bieber, among others, contended that the mimic actors did not wear masks, Grysar 1854, 270; Reich 1903, 527 f.; Richter 1913, 153; Bieber 1961b, 165; Pingiatoglou 1987, 687. Nicoll also contends that the use of masks should not be entirely dismissed, Nicoll 1931, 91. The no-mask argument has been contested by Stevenson as well, Stevenson 1975, 70 f.

13 Richter 1913, 154.

14 Cic. de orat. 2, 251; Richter 1913, 154; Meintani 2022, 31.

15 Giuliani 1987, 712 n. 39.

16 Richter 1913, 154; Giuliani 1987, 712 n. 39.

17 Athens, National Archaeological Museum Inv. 12424; Ht. 9.7 cm, 3rd cent. B.C, from a cistern on the west slope of the Acropolis. Watzinger 1901, fig. 1; Winter 1903, 429 no. 8; Richter 1913, 155; Theocharidis 1940, 67; Bieber 1961a, 107 fig. 415. Graindor suggests that the lamp is an import from Alexandria. It is a non-utilitarian type of lamp very common in Egypt. Moreover, the composition of the clay; the inscription, which is comparable to those on hydriai of the late 3rd cent. B.C. from the Hadra Cemetery; and the three spelling mistakes, more likely to be made by a Greek living in Egypt rather than by an Athenian, speak to an origin from Alexandria, according to Graindor. Finally, he points to the widespread popularity of the mimes in that city, Graindor 1939, 25 n. 1; Himmelmann 1983, 76 n. 274.

18 Chor. Apol. Mim. 110; Theocharidis 1940, 79; Csapo – Slater 1995, 377.

19 Theocharidis 1940, 78–87. 92 f.; Duckworth 1952, 15; Beare 1964, 155–157; Weismann 1972, 49; Horsfall 1982, 293; Pingiatoglou 1987, 686; Beacham 1991, 130 f.; Panayotakis 2005, 141 f.; Clarke 2007, 26–28.

20 Macr. Sat. 2, 7, 2–8; Csapo – Slater 1995, 374.

21 Cic. epist. 34 (VII.11), 3; Shackleton-Bailey 2001, 207.

22 Beare 1964, 155; Panayotakis 1997, 304 f. also n. 6; Panayotakis 2010, 118 f. 278. 302.

for the mocking of the pagan gods onstage: »Is it your actors[23] or your gods that make you laugh with their jokes and tricks? Think of ›Anubis the Adulterer‹, ›The Gentleman Moon‹, ›Diana Lashed‹, …and the mockery of ›Three Hungry Herculeses‹«[24].

Returning to Pingiatoglou's arguments, as noted above she refers to the sources that Theocharidis cites regarding the use of masks in mythological mimes of the 4th and 5th cent. A.D. However, these sources could well have been referring to different comic performances, ones other than mimes; a point interestingly made also by Pingiatoglou herself[25]. All in all, the use of masks is a highly problematic matter. Though it is true that the rendering of the mouth in our terracotta may fit better with that on a mask, upon close inspection of the Eros and Psyche group on-site, I had difficulties discerning any signs of masks. These figures are most probably just gross caricatures. I use the term »caricature« for a derisory imitation of a type, of a specific artwork, or for an exaggerated representation of a person.

3

Fig. 3: Athens, Kerameikos Inv. T 235 B. Male head with distorted features

8 Strikingly, a great swathe of heads from Asia Minor and Egypt with equally distorted features – wrinkled faces, sticking-out jug-ears, sausage-like lips, gaping mouths, and enormous noses – have come down to us (Fig. 3)[26]. It is worth noting that these are characterized by most scholars as heads of mimes *precisely* because of their profound ugliness, which (*contra* Pingiatoglou) was not due to masks[27]. However, in my view, labelling all similar specimens *tout court* as mimic actors is a big no-no. Mimes is a highly elusive category in the visual record, as we lack any secure identification criteria, as has been noted above[28]. The matter of the misshapen appearance remains difficult to comprehend and as Jane Masséglia has noted the lack of a theatrical costume cannot be regarded as a distinctive trait, since this would make the separation of mimes from ›real‹ persons impossible[29]. Not for nothing does she title the concise chapter that summarizes the main issues »The Mime Problem«[30]. So as Wolfgang Binsfeld rightly puts it »muß man sich hüten, all die seltsamen Gestalten grundsätzlich auf den Mimus zu beziehen, wie es bisweilen geschieht«[31].

9 Therefore, I find no compelling reason for interpreting our group as mime actors. In any case, the aforementioned heads do arguably show an influence from the theatre. One needs only to look at the mask of the Parasite, a character of the New Comedy[32]. This holds true for the female figures too[33]. These figurines may be stage-in-

23 In the Latin text »*mimos*«.

24 Tert. apol. 15; Glover 1931, 77.

25 Theocharidis 1940, 88–93; Pingiatoglou 1987, 687 n. 33.

26 Kerameikos Inv. T 235 B; Ht. 6.2 cm, from Smyrna, found in the Kerameikos. Vierneisel-Schlörb 1997, 86. 89 no. 269 pl. 53, 9. 10 (Late Hellenistic – Early Imperial period). Some more specimens: Uhlenbrock 1990, 149 no. 36; Zimmer 1994; Laugieur 2009, 180 no. 98.

27 Besques 1971/1972, 229 f. pl. 309; Uhlenbrock 1990, 149; Vierneisel-Schlörb 1997, 86; Laugieur 2009, 180 no. 98 to name but a few. For this matter, see also the two bald-headed, hideous figures on the lamp found on the Acropolis mentioned above, who are mimes indeed.

28 For the difficulties regarding the identification of mimes in the visual record, see Meintani 2022, 30–33. 328–334. Numerous delightful spoofs have come down to us especially from the two coroplastic powerhouses of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, that is Egypt and Asia Minor, e.g., Himmelmann 1983, 33. 36–39 pls. 3 a. b; 4 c. d (3rd cent. B.C.; actor); Dikaios 1947, 142 no. 103; Bruneau 1962, 201–210 fig. 4; Meintani 2022, 130 f. (Ganymede); Besques 1971/1972, 169 D 1174 pl. 234 e; Laugieur 2009, 182 no. 99 (1st cent. B.C. – 1st cent. A.D.; boxer); Winter 1903, 409 no. 3; Rumscheid 2006, 51–56. 294–297. 497 f. 351–354 no. 278 pls. 119, 2. 3; 120 (with the entirety of the vast bibliography); Masséglia 2015, 232–236 fig. 4, 43; von den Hoff 2019, 149–163 (Thorn-puller); Winter 1903, 411 no. 7; Binsfeld 1956, 51; Drühl 2008, 174–176 fig. 45; Voegtle 2013, 148 f. A.1.4 fig. 41 (classroom); see also the caricature of a poet mentioned right below.

29 Masséglia 2015, 317.

30 Masséglia 2015, 317 f.

31 Binsfeld 1956, 43.

32 Bieber 1961b, 100 figs. 373 a. b; 377; Uhlenbrock 1990, 149.

33 Besques 1971/1972, 214 E/D 1584. E/D 1583 pl. 295 d. e.

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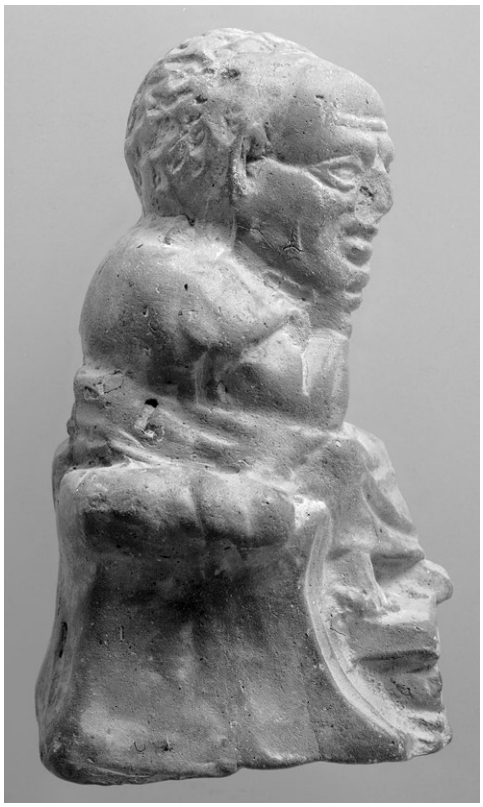

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Fig. 4: Olympia, Archaeological Museum Inv. T 350. Spoof of a contemplative poet (front view)

Fig. 5: Olympia, Archaeological Museum Inv. T 350. Spoof of a contemplative poet (side view)

spired, but it does not follow that all were portrayals of actors. The borders between caricature and theatre are quite fuzzy and porous.

10 Additionally, Pingiatoglou refers to the over-large size of Eros' and Psyche's heads as indicative of them wearing masks. Oversized heads atop ill-proportioned bodies are also typical of the caricature genre, as demonstrated by the caricature of a poet, found in Olympia, which had been produced in Alexandria (as the clay and the method of manufacture declare) (Fig. 4. 5)[34]. Or take for instance a terracotta in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston presenting a comic combo of a fourth-century head of Heracles with full hair and beard and a torso of a hunchback[35].

11 Moving to Pingiatoglou's next point that Eros is clad in a sleeved chiton, a tight-fitting garment characteristic of actors, the hem of which is visible a little above his right wrist; in fact, we are closer to the mark if we consider this a bracelet. Further inspection reveals that actually Eros wears a second bracelet around his right forearm. What is more, if it was truly the edge of a garment one would expect to see similar indications of a hem (or ›of clothing‹) in his left hand, which is not the case. Such bracelets are to be seen in depictions of Eros (Fig. 6)[36] and Aphrodite (with the band on the left upper arm being a trademark), but also on Egyptian statuettes of the child-god Harpocrates, as well as on female cult servants/celebrants[37]. We should keep in mind that Eros

34 Olympia, Archaeological Museum Inv. T 350; Ht. 10 cm, found in a Hellenistic well in the sanctuary in Olympia, from Alexandria. Bartels 1967, 251–264 (third quarter of the 3rd cent. B.C.); Himmelmann 1983, 44 f. (early 2nd cent. B.C.); Zanker 1995, 138 (late 3rd cent. B.C.).

35 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Inv. 01.7622; Ht. 8.4 cm, 2nd cent. B.C. – 2nd cent A.D. (Museum's online database), from Smyrna (?). Trentin 2015, 15. 109. 121 no. 52.

36 Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Inv. I 1896/1.27; Ht. 20 cm, from Smyrna. Leyenaar-Plaisier 1979, 139 f. no. 297 pl. 50 (Roman period).

37 For instance, Perdrizet 1921, pls. 33. 40. (Bes) 81; Leyenaar-Plaisier 1979, 139 f. no. 297 pl. 50; Hermary – Cassimatis 1986, 909 no. 685; 929 no. 959a; Menschner 2017; Mollard-Besques 1963, 61 MYR 123 pl. 77 e, wrongly in the volume with the plates as 77 d; Leyenaar-Plaisier 1979, 387 no. 1071 pl. 138 (Aphrodite). Regarding the meaning and the origins of Aphrodite's armband, see Kelperi 1997, 4–11.

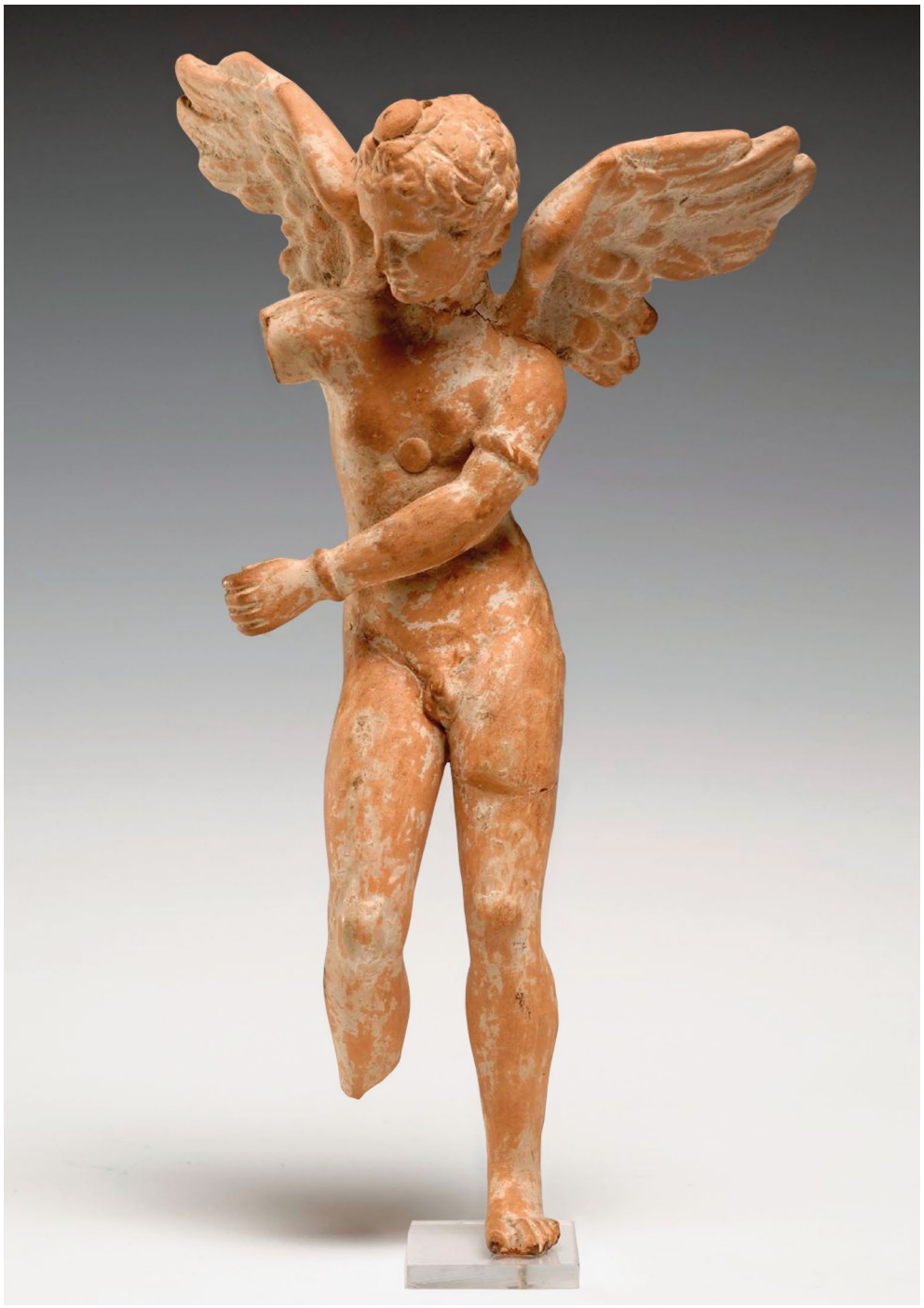

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Fig. 6: Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Inv. I 1896/1.27. Terracotta of an Eros holding once a bow

is invariably depicted either naked or semi-naked. Moreover, I take issue with what Pingiatoglou designates as »himatia« covering the backs of the figures[38]. This cannot be, since, if they did, they would not ›cover‹ the wings. No depiction of Eros is known to me, on which any garments are shown as lying over the wings. Either the reverse of such groups is left unworked or the wings are (clumsily in this case) indicated.

12 Where then, does this leave us? In short, though we cannot altogether exclude the possibility that some kind of masked actors are depicted (due more to the exaggerated features, not to any supposedly tight-fitting ›body-suit‹), close inspection has revealed that the figures most probably do not wear masks. This tallies nicely with

38 Pingiatoglou 1987, 682.

what is known about mimes. Mimic actors were notorious, as the *communis opinio* has it, for not having recourse to masks to distort their features. The lack, additionally, of the characteristic theatrical costume lends further support to this reading of the terracotta group. Nonetheless, seeing each misfortune statuette as a mimic actor is a big no-no since secure identifying criteria are missing to us. An interpretation then of them as caricatures is, to my mind, very plausible. A considerable number of Hellenistic and Roman caricatures with ›warts and all‹ blowing raspberries at various subjects have come down to us.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Univ. Ass. Dr. BA. MPhil. Anastasia Meintani
University of Vienna, Institute of Classical Archaeology
Franz-Klein-Gasse 1
1190 Wien
Austria
ROR ID: https://ror.org/03prydq77

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