

Discovered for You

Theatrum – Setting the Scene for Spectacle and Representation

Insights into Roman Theatre

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Fig. 1: Detail of a stage set with pantomime mask, east wall of the Room of the Masks House of Augustus, Rome, Palatine, in situ. Roman, ca. 30 B.C. Photo: Carole Raddato

The so-called Phylak vases of the 4th century B.C. reflect the impact of Greek theatre that we became acquainted with in CQ 3/2019: actors in bizarre costumes and wearing comic masks perform on wooden stages in front of backdrops with windows and doors. The Phylak farces influenced the emergent Roman theatre, as did other farces and mimes performed by the Italic peoples. Their improvised and extemporary character prevented their textualisation. The accounts of the genesis of Roman theatre provided by historiographers such as T. Livius and C. Rufus and the writer V. Maximus are at such variance with each other that it is difficult to create an accurate reconstruction of the world of Roman theatre today.

First so-called *ludi scaenici* (scenic performances) on makeshift stages were performed in Rome in the context of the propitiatory ceremonies held during a plague epidemic (364 B.C., Livius, *Ab urbe condita* 7, 2). Etruscan influences are reflected in words such as the one for actor, *histrion* (Etruscan: *ister*). In the 3rd

century B.C. mimes and Oscan Atellane drama (masques) took the stage. Increasingly popular among the common people were above all the rude, mocking, obscene mimes about intrigue, fraud, adultery, murder, politics and early Christian rites. Their disrespectfulness was harshly criticised by Roman intellectuals and later also by the Church Fathers.

On the occasion of the *ludi romani* (240 B.C., after the end of the First Punic War) Livius Andronicus initiated the production of Latin versions of Greek dramas; it was a decision of cultural-political significance for in this way, the *curule aedile* (officials for the games) referred back to the traditions of the Hellenistic East. Later, Plautus and Terence studied and reworked the comedies of Menander. Seneca likewise used Greek models in the 1st century A.D. It remains unclear whether he wrote his tragedies for performance; it was only in the Renaissance that they were actually staged.

The *fabula saltica* (dancing plays) emerged in Rome in ca. 40 B.C.; at the same time, Cicero and Horace complained about the continuing tendency towards the spectacular. Emperor Augustus' promotion gave the genre of pantomime additional impetus. The pantomimus wore a mask with closed mouth. He acted out a "libretto" based on celebrated scenes from tragedies by means of expressive gestures and actions, and was supported by instrumental music and a chorus that sang the text behind the scenes. The mural shown in fig. 1 exemplifies the effect of such a stage. Personal charisma, great versatility supported by mask changes, and perfect body control were demanded of a pantomimus. Lucian's work on pantomime names Pylades of Cilicia and Bathyllus of Alexandria as the celebrity artists of their time (Lucian, *De saltatione* 34). The pantomimus replaced tragedy and, together with the *mimus*, now dominated the programme.

The full, curved lips of the mask of Attis offered for sale by the Cahn Gallery are closed (fig. 2). The pantomimus played the role of Attis wearing a Phrygian cap, long sleeves and legwear typical of oriental costume. It was truly a tragic



Fig. 2: A PANTOMIME MASKE REPRESENTING ATTIS. H. 23 cm. Terracotta, traces of light blue paint. Roman, 1st cent. A.D. CHF 12,000

role as Attis was driven into a mad frenzy by the jealous goddess Cybele and even emasculated himself. With the revival of the mystical Cybele-Attis cult (mid-1st century A.D.) theatres and private living spaces repeatedly participated in Attis's fate: Nero publicly sang a poem called *Attis*, accompanying himself on the lyre (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62, 20, 1 ff.). Reliefs with pantomime masks of Attis adorned suspended marble *oscilla* in villas; monumental masks of Attis graced many a theatre. The eastern wall of the cubiculum of the Casa di Pinario Ceriale (Pompeii, Regio III, Ins. 4.4, ca. 40-50 A.D.) is decorated by a "stage" in the center of which Attis, with herdsman's staff and sickle, leans against a pine tree.

The magnificent lamp fragment with a comic mask offered here also reflects the influence of the theatre (fig. 3). The high-quality relief emphasises the features typical of comic masks: hair standing on end, wide-open eyes, curved brows, funnel-shaped mouth. The lamp has monumental dimensions and may have decorated a sacred space or, as comparable candelabra and chandeliers on wall frescoes show, a private home.



Fig. 3: A MONUMENTAL ARM OF A RING LAMP OF CA. 1 M DIAMETER WITH COMIC MASK. L. 21 cm. Bronze. Roman, 1st-2nd cent. A.D. CHF 16,000

Towards the end of the Republic, politicians sought to win voters' favour by putting the construction of permanent theatres, for which there had long been a demand, on their agenda. The first Roman theatre to be made of stone was built in Pompeii under Sulla in 80 B.C. Rome owed the construction of its first permanent theatre on the Field of Mars (61 B.C.) to Pompeius; Caesar initiated another one which was dedicated under Augustus as the Marcellus Theatre. These buildings were trend-setting. Designed as a solitary edifice with an exterior façade that shut out the outside world, a Roman theatre consisted of a semi-circular *cavea* (auditorium) supported by substructures, in the interior of which were passages directing spectators to their places according to their social rank. On the opposite side the roofed *scaena* (stage building) closed off the complex. Its front section (*scaenae frons*), which became increasingly sophisticated architecturally, had main and side doors through which the performers made their entries. Depending on the theatre's size, other parts of the *cavea* were also roofed over, often with a *velum* (tent roof). The imperial era marked a construction boom throughout the empire. Theatres in the provinces varied and many earlier constructions were rebuilt.

In Roman times, the theatre changed with regard to content, intent and structure. The common people were entertained, thrilled to ecstasy even, but also controlled by rules and social order. By investing in buildings and games, emperors and wealthy citizens cleverly used the theatre as a place of political and pecuniary representation: Pompeius's portrait statue in the theatre on the Field of Mars already symbolized the cult of personality; numerous imperial statues throughout the empire made the theatre the site of the cult of the emperor. With the decline of the Roman Empire, the demise of the old Roman gods, and the reduction of public funding, the ancient theatre tradition also came to an end. Since the revival of the dramas of Antiquity in the Renaissance, however, ancient theatre has continued to exert a complex influence to this day.