

# Vanished Players: Two Classical Reliefs and Theatre History

*Niall W. Slater*

IT IS UNFORTUNATE that for the fifth century, the most fertile period of Greek drama, we have scarcely any reliable information about actors and acting conditions. According to traditional accounts it was in this period that poets ceased to act in their own plays.<sup>1</sup> The men who replaced them, though little more than a handful of names to us, represent the first step towards the great guilds of the Artists of Dionysus in the Hellenistic period. I propose here to use two pieces of Attic relief sculpture, both from the end of the fifth century, as a window into the social history of the theatre in this formative era. Only one of these pieces has received full publication and discussion. I shall therefore deal in some detail with questions of style, date, and iconography to provide the basis for further observations on the changing rôle of theatre and the people of the theatre in fifth-century Athens.

The first is the well-known actors' relief from the Piraeus (PLATE 1).<sup>2</sup> The relief is usually interpreted as a dedication by three actors to Dionysus, represented on the couch, after a successful performance. More specifically, in view of such Bacchic features as the tympana held by two of the actors, it has been suggested that this is a dedication for the successful first Athenian performance of Euripides' *Bacchae*.<sup>3</sup> There are, as we shall see, difficulties with these interpretations.

The relief, 55 cm. by 93 cm., lacks upper and side molding.<sup>4</sup> Proceeding from the left we encounter the first of five figures, a standing actor holding an upraised tympanum and presumably wearing his

<sup>1</sup> Plut. *Sol.* 29; Arist. *Rh.* 3.1. A familiar anecdote in the *Life of Sophocles* relates that the poet gave up performing because of his weak voice, but the authenticity of the biographical tradition is vigorously questioned by M. R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (London 1981) 78. For a survey of actors in this period see P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la grèce antique* (Paris 1976) 135–54.

<sup>2</sup> Athens, NM 1500; see S. Karouzou, *National Archaeological Museum: Collection of Sculpture* (Athens 1968) 55.

<sup>3</sup> See, most recently, H. Froning, *Dithyrambos und Vasenmalerei in Athen* (Würzburg 1971) 8f; cf. T. B. L. Webster, *Greek Theatre Production*<sup>2</sup> (London 1970 [hereafter *GTP*<sup>2</sup>]) 41.

<sup>4</sup> Karouzou (*supra* n.2) 55.

mask. The head is now missing, but a dowel hole remains.<sup>5</sup> The figure is clothed in the long-sleeved floor-length chiton that had by the end of the fifth century become the standard actor's costume.<sup>6</sup> The treatment of the fold on the breast may indicate that the actor played a female part,<sup>7</sup> but certainty is not possible.

The second actor holds a tympanum in his left hand, a mask in the right. The mask, presumably held by a strap,<sup>8</sup> is tragic, depicting quite naturalistically a bearded older man. Unique among the three actors, this one wears over his long chiton a shorter garment falling to his knees, with short notched sleeves and a round neckline. Some differentiation of his rôle is doubtless intended, but just what it is difficult to say.<sup>9</sup>

The third actor turns his back to the group of the first two and faces the couch, making a gesture usually interpreted as worshipful or prayerful.<sup>10</sup> He carries an inverted mask by means of a thumb hooked through the mouth opening. Though badly damaged, this mask also seems to have been rendered quite naturalistically, depicting a male, younger than the first mask and probably beardless. A depression in the hair indicates a headband.

The fourth figure is a young woman seated at the foot of the couch, turning slightly to her right to acknowledge the presence of the actors. She wears a peplos with a *nebris* (the fawnskin worn by

<sup>5</sup> Normally even high relief sculpture does not have separate pieces dowelled in: most scholars therefore assume that the dowel hole indicates a repair or deliberate replacement. In carving the mask worn over the actor's face, was the sculptor tempted to such high relief that this area was more susceptible to damage? If so, this in turn raises the question who chose to repair such a small piece and on what occasion. While it is conceivable that whoever added the later inscription may simply have wished to repair obvious damage, the possibility remains—as Professor E. G. Pemberton has suggested to me—that mask and head were deliberately replaced as part of the later re-dedication of the piece to Dionysus for which I argue below.

<sup>6</sup> *GTP*<sup>2</sup> 39–41.

<sup>7</sup> *GTP*<sup>2</sup> 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Cf.* the mask shown in a vase fragment published by L. Talcott, *Hesperia* 8 (1939) 267–73, esp. 269.

<sup>9</sup> A parallel for this short over-garment appears in an Athenian column-crater of ca 430 (Beazley, *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 1104.6, conveniently illustrated in A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*<sup>2</sup> [Oxford 1968, hereafter *DFA*<sup>2</sup>] fig. 47; for the date *cf.* Beazley, *AJA* 43 [1939] 636.) Pickard-Cambridge (186 and n.1), on grounds independent of costume, suggests that the scene may represent a dramatic performance with Prometheus and satyrs (for the use of tragic costume by actors in satyr-plays see *DFA*<sup>2</sup> 180). Prometheus' costume here is also knee-length, with a rounded neckline and short sleeves. At least his right sleeve seems to be notched, though the notch is much smaller than that on the sleeves of the second actor's over-garment. It remains unclear just what significance the garment may have within a given play.

<sup>10</sup> See Froning (*supra* n.3) 8. For more general discussion of such gestures *cf.* G. Neumann, *Gesten und Gebärden in der griechischen Kunst* (Berlin 1965) 78–85.

Dionysus and his followers) girt around her waist. One end of the *nebris* is thrown over her left shoulder; the other disappears in the folds of her lap.

The reclining male figure at the right is bare to the waist. His short hair shows the line of a fillet or headband. In his left hand he holds a phiale, in the other a rhyton ending in the forepart of a griffin (the head seems too small for a Pegasus, and the forelimbs are paws, not hooves).<sup>11</sup>

Remains of a rather poorly and hastily carved inscription appear beneath the two figures on the couch. The letter-forms date it to the end of the fourth or early third century B.C.: while the cross-bar of the *alpha* shows no sign of sagging, the *nu* and *upsilon* have acquired small apices or serifs, and the upper and lower strokes of the sigmas are nearly horizontal.<sup>12</sup> Only the final two letters of the inscription labelling the female figure are preserved: ]IA: the name has been variously restored as Paideia, Lydia, or Tragoidia.<sup>13</sup> The reclining figure is clearly identified as Dionysus. It will be sufficient to note for the moment that, however they have dated the figures stylistically, scholars have agreed that the inscription is a later addition to the relief.

Attempts to identify the three actors as characters from Euripides' *Bacchae* involve difficulties. Webster (*GTP*<sup>2</sup> 41) lists the figures from right to left as Pentheus, Cadmus, and Agave; he believes that the mask held by the central actor is an old man's (hence Cadmus) and that the treatment of the breast of the left-most figure indicates a female character (hence Agave). This is an impossible distribution of parts: Dionysus must double with Teiresias and may double with the second messenger but cannot take any other rôle, yet the actor playing these parts is unrepresented in Webster's scheme; Pentheus must double with Agave, so this actor would be represented twice. M. Bieber<sup>14</sup> encounters a similar problem in suggesting Teiresias for the old man's mask and Dionysus for the mask held by the actor nearest the couch. The three figures in fact require little interpretation; their number reflects the three-actor rule in tragedy: they are protagonist, deuteragonist, and tritagonist, perhaps in that order from left to right. The left-hand actor is emphasized by his height and by the deference

<sup>11</sup> After determining this by autopsy, I was pleased to note that C. Robert, *AthMitt* 7 (1882) 389, who may have seen the relief in a better state of preservation, confirms that it is a griffin.

<sup>12</sup> See A. G. Woodhead, *The Study of Greek Inscriptions* (Cambridge 1959) 64.

<sup>13</sup> Robert (*supra* n.11) 388–96; cf. E. Simon, *Gnomon* 41 (1969) 792.

<sup>14</sup> *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*<sup>2</sup> (Princeton 1961) 32.

shown him by the central figure. The actor at the right is the smallest, perhaps a youth still in training.

The male figure on the couch with his female companion poses more of a problem: is this indeed Dionysus? The youthful beardless Dionysus is a type well known from the later fifth century, but we miss his attributes: the thyrsus, the panther skin, and, above all, the long hair so prominent in his portrayal in the *Bacchae* itself (e.g. 453–59). The only possible sculptural parallel would seem to be figure D of the east pediment of the Parthenon—if indeed one accepts Brommer's identification of this figure as Dionysus.<sup>15</sup> Since the figure has neither long hair nor thyrsus, Brommer's identification rests heavily on his claim that the figure reclines on a panther skin. Without entering into all the questions concerning the identity of D, we may note that Brommer's suggestion has not won a wide following.<sup>16</sup> The parallels that Brommer adduces from vase painting to strengthen his argument resemble the figure on the Piraeus relief even less. The Dionysus of the Pronomos vase (*ARV*<sup>2</sup> 1336.7) has long locks spilling across his shoulders and a thyrsus, as does the figure on the Berlin dinos (*ARV*<sup>2</sup> 1152.3). The Dionysus on a South Italian volute krater<sup>17</sup> is seated rather than reclining and holds a thyrsus as identifying attribute.

None of these parallels is sufficient to persuade us that the recumbent figure on the Piraeus relief is Dionysus. But if he is not Dionysus, as the person who carved the later inscription wished him to be, who is he? The anonymity of the figure, the only two unmistakable attributes he possesses (the rhyton and phiale), the couch on which he reclines, and the female figure seated at his feet all suggest, not the usual fifth-century portrayals of Dionysus, but the well-known series of banqueting hero reliefs that enjoyed a resurgence in Attica at the end of the fifth century.<sup>18</sup> In the fully developed middle period of the

<sup>15</sup> F. Brommer, *Die Sculpturen der Parthenon-Giebel* (Mainz 1963) 148f.

<sup>16</sup> E. Harrison, "Athena and Athens in the East Pediment of the Parthenon," *AJA* 71 (1967) 43f, who interprets the figure as Heracles, provides a cogent summary of objections to the identification of figure D as Dionysus, concluding that "If we had the figure alone outside the context of the pediment no one would think first of calling him Dionysus" (44). Cf. H. Lloyd-Jones, *AJA* 74 (1970) 181, for further evidence in support of the identification as Heracles. I suggest that we have had two unsatisfactory pieces of evidence used, in isolation from other Dionysus portraits, to support each other for nearly a century.

<sup>17</sup> A. D. Trendall, *Early South Italian Vase Painting*<sup>2</sup> (Mainz 1974) plates 24 and 25.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R. N. Thönges-Stringaris, "Das griechische Totenmahl," *AthMitt* 80 (1965) 1–99, esp. 15–21 and 78–85. I am not, of course, the first to suggest the parallel: Robert (*supra* n.11) 389–95 thought at first that the reclining figure was a hero, though not of the usual banqueting type; he later changed his mind (*Hermes* 22 [1887] 336), presumably in connection with his re-identification of the seated female as Phyle, and relabelled him Dionysus without stating why he had ceased to believe that "Der robuste Jungling

series (late fifth through fourth centuries) the same iconographic elements appear in the same disposition from left to right: worshippers, the female figure seated at the foot of the dining couch, and a reclining male figure bare to the waist. The actors' relief lacks only a serving boy, who is often but not universally present in these reliefs.<sup>19</sup>

Our reclining male figure is far more satisfactory taken as a banqueting hero than as Dionysus: as the latter he has none of his expected attributes, but for a banqueting hero the presence of the phiale and rhyton make excellent sense.<sup>20</sup> While bearded heroes are the rule in the early and mid-fifth century, a youthful, beardless banqueting hero can be paralleled at the very end of the fifth and beginning of the fourth centuries.<sup>21</sup>

The female figure remains somewhat puzzling because of the *nebris* she wears. This may be sufficient to identify her as a maenad—though this interpretation, if accepted, is insufficient to establish the male figure as Dionysus. We can only speculate that the hero to whom these actors dedicated this votive had, not surprisingly, strong theatrical associations. A maenad might then be a reasonable, even a natural, serving-companion for such a hero. Such an acknowledgement of the bacchic origins and ambience of the theatre might also account for the tympana in the actors' hands.

Having placed our relief in its appropriate context, we now have the comparative material of the developing series, as well as the individual details of carving style, by which to date it. The earliest member of the series of developed banqueting hero reliefs (*i.e.*, those with the woman seated on the foot of the couch, rather than on a separate chair) is that found at the Piraeus in 1961 and pub-

---

auf der Kline hat so gar Nichts von Dionysos, weder in der Körperbildung noch in den Attributen" (*supra* n.11: 392). The lively early discussion of the actors' relief is recapitulated in Svoronos-Barth, *Das Athener Nationalmuseum* III (Athens 1937) 512–28. Svoronos' own conclusion, that the three standing figures are personifications of tragedy, comedy, and satyr play, is unconvincing and easily answered: the mask the right-hand standing figure carries is not comic. Nor can the left-hand figure have represented satyr play: as we have already noted (*supra* n.9), actors in satyr drama wore tragic costume. A representative figure for satyr drama, therefore, would have to be a chorus member, wearing both the mask and the hairy trunks of a satyr (*cf.* the chorus figures on the Pronomos vase, *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 1336.1). These are all tragic actors, not *daimones*.

<sup>19</sup> *Cf.* Thönges-Stringaris (*supra* n.18) nos. 91–92a.

<sup>20</sup> *Cf.* Thönges-Stringaris (*supra* n.18) no. 85, pl. 9 [=Athens, NM 1505, ca 400 B.C.], where both the rhyton and phiale are shown. She also notes (50) that the rhyton in the raised right hand seems to be a gesture characteristic of reliefs depicting heroes (as opposed to a small class of reliefs that functioned as grave stelae), and adduces Ath. 11.461B, who attributes the rhyton specifically to heroes.

<sup>21</sup> *Cf.* Thönges-Stringaris (*supra* n.18) nos. 31 [=Paris, Louvre CA415], 62 [Piraeus Museum], 73 [=Berlin K95], and 74 [=Berlin K97].

lished by J.-M. Dentzer, who assigns a date of *ca* 420 B.C.<sup>22</sup> The relief is broken at the left; the possibility cannot be ruled out that a worshipper (the only element of the developed iconography lacking) occupied the missing portion. The similarities between it and the actors' relief are considerable. The female figure of the new relief is badly damaged but shows the same relaxed pose, with legs crossed at the ankle, right over left. The head of the male figure is also poorly preserved; Dentzer believes that there was a short beard originally.<sup>23</sup> I am less sure; if there were not, this would be our earliest representation of the youthful beardless hero. In his upraised right hand he has a cup with which he plays kottabos. Particularly noteworthy is the 'keyhole' pattern in the drapery under his left forearm, characteristic of the late fifth century. Two similar passages are visible in the drapery of the actors' relief: one in the hanging end of the reclining figure's own drapery below the left hip, the other in the folds of the couch coverlet between the two pillows.

Other stylistic considerations tend to move the date of the actors' relief somewhat nearer the end of the century. The proportions of the actors are rather elongated (head to body 1:7). Note also the fold hanging from the knee of the free leg of the third actor from left: it falls straight down in the proper naturalistic rendering rather than clinging to the shin. This is hard to parallel in decree reliefs before 400 B.C.<sup>24</sup> It is, however, already present in sculpture in the round: the Athena Parthenos apparently displayed such a fold falling from the left knee.<sup>25</sup> It is also visible in post-Parthenon fifth-century relief sculpture, as in a female figure (number 21) from the east frieze of the temple of Athena Nike.<sup>26</sup>

The tendency to associate the actors' relief with the *Bacchae* has doubtless exerted some upward pressure on its dating. The strength of the parallel with the new Piraeus relief, however, suggests a date in the last decade of the fifth century. At the same time, the naturalistic rendering of the masks remains a strong argument against lowering the date beyond this.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *BCH* 94 (1970) 67–90.

<sup>23</sup> Dentzer (*supra* n.22) 72.

<sup>24</sup> I owe this observation to Ms. Carol Lawton.

<sup>25</sup> See N. Leipen, *Athena Parthenos: A Reconstruction* (Toronto 1971) 28. The fold is quite visible in the Varvakeion statuette (*cf.* Leipen, fig. 2) and several other copies.

<sup>26</sup> *Cf.* C. Blumel, *Der Fries des Tempels der Athena Nike* (Berlin 1923) pl. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Cf.* the small choregic relief with four masks (NM 4531) found in Dioniso in 1955: Karouzou (*supra* n.2) 60, illustrated in E. Mitropoulou, *Corpus I: Attic Votive Reliefs of the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.* (Athens 1977) 75 no. 159. Of the masks, two are comic, one tragic, and one a satyr's (I owe this observation to Mr. Brady Kiesling). Though

How are we to account for the initial dedication of this votive to an unknown hero and its subsequent relabeling and attribution to Dionysus? First, one erroneous interpretation must be discarded: it is highly unlikely that the actors' relief is a votive dedicated for *any* successful single performance by the three actors shown, let alone Euripides' *Bacchae*. When a play won the prize, the honor belonged to the *choregos*, who might celebrate his success with a monument such as the relief from Dioniso. The contest of actors, introduced at the City Dionysia in 449 B.C. and at the Lenaea soon thereafter, concerned only the protagonists of the various plays.<sup>28</sup> It was a contest of the stars, and we can scarcely imagine a victorious protagonist (who might, incidentally, have played in a losing play) sharing the votive he paid for with his supporting players.

If, then, this is a dedication by more than one actor, what was the occasion? Two explanations immediately offer themselves. The three actors may have formed a troupe, regularly performing in plays together. We have evidence from the next century that Aeschines was part of such a troupe (Dem. 18.262). The votive would then be a dedication to their patron hero for past or future successes of the partnership. Alternatively, more than three actors may have been involved: worship of a hero probably implies more than three devotees. We might then have a dedication by a religious confraternity or guild of actors in Athens to the patron of their organization. Either explanation implies a much greater degree of coöperation between, and organization among, actors in the late fifth century in Athens than is attested in the literary sources;<sup>29</sup> but theatre is becoming a profession now: where before poets played in their own works or had favorite actors who habitually performed their plays, we now find independent actors making a living at acting and taking pride in their profession.<sup>30</sup>

---

both Karouzou and Mitropoulou date this relief to the late fifth century, the exaggerated facial expressions of both comic and tragic masks suggest rather a fourth-century date prior to 360, on the evidence of *omicron* for *omicron* *upsilon* in the fragmentary inscription. Cf. also the mask held by the figure on the grave stele to be considered next.

<sup>28</sup> *DFA*<sup>2</sup> 95.

<sup>29</sup> It was said (*FGrHist* 334F36) that Sophocles organized a *thiasos* in honor of the Muses; some have been willing to see a theatrical fraternity here. Lefkowitz (*supra* n.1) 78f argues that there is more likely a literary tradition (perhaps a representation of Sophocles in comedy) behind this story than historical fact. She does note (88f n.3; cf. 79) a fifth-century inscription (*IG* II<sup>2</sup> 2343) recording a "*thiasos* to which the poet Aristophanes belonged," though his fellow members were neither actors nor playwrights. (For a different view of Aristophanes' relation to this *thiasos*, cf. S. Dow, *AJA* 73 (1969) 235, and T. Gelzer, *RE* Suppl. 12 [1970] 1398.)

<sup>30</sup> We must at least consider the possibility that this is a dedication to a poet by his customary actors: one might then explain the female figure as the poet's muse or

The identity of the hero remains in doubt. More than a century after his death, Thespis may have attained heroic status among his successors, but this is no more than speculation. The heroes on other banquet reliefs are generally also anonymous.<sup>31</sup>

The subsequent history of the relief is equally intriguing. The approximate date of the added inscription, as we have observed, is probably early third century B.C. This is just the period at which the first two great guilds of the Artists of Dionysus, the Athenian and the Isthmian-Nemean, came into being, probably between 294 and 278.<sup>32</sup> I suggest that some continuity existed between the original dedicators of the relief and the actors in Athens of the third century. Descendants of the three original partners may have remained in the profession (a phenomenon attested then as now), or the original guild may have grown and flourished. In either case the relief was still visible and in a place frequented by actors when the Athenian actors were amalgamated into the new guild devoted to, and under the patronage of, Dionysus. At this time the hero cult of the descendants of the original dedicators (whether by blood or by calling) was absorbed into the new guild's worship of Dionysus, and the relief was rededicated to him. More than a century separates the first use of the relief from the second, but together these two dedications imply in that period, at least, a small fraternity of actors working and worshipping together.

The second piece we have to consider focuses attention on one life in the fifth-century theatre. It is a fragment of a grave stele, originally discovered in a re-used context on Salamis and now housed

---

inspiration. Cratinus, in his *Pytine* of 423, endowed himself with Comedy as his wife and *Methe* as his mistress (cf. Σ *ad Ar. Eq.* 400); for a thorough study of scenes of the poet and his female companions, see E. W. Handley, *JHS* 93 (1973) 104–08, esp. 108. There are, however, serious problems with such a notion for the fifth century: one could scarcely imagine such a dedication to a living poet, and the notion of heroizing a recently-deceased poet in the style of the banqueting hero reliefs seems nearly as improbable. Such scenes become essentially decorative in the Hellenistic examples discussed by Handley; the actors' relief is of a scale and quality to require a more specific aetiology.

<sup>31</sup> There are a few exceptions, for which see Thönges-Stringaris (*supra* n.18) 49. One of these (95 no. 177) bears the inscription, Ἡραεῖς Διονύσωι ἀνέ[θηκαν]. T. B. L. Webster, *Monuments Illustrating Tragedy and Satyr Play*<sup>2</sup> (London 1967 [hereafter *MTS*<sup>2</sup>]) 33 (AS6), suggests that the dedicators may be worshippers of Hera. In his original publication of this relief Maass, *Jdl* 11 (1896) 102–06, suggested that it was a dedication by a group of actors. The proliferation of such small cult/guild groups and their competition may have been a factor in the formation of the guilds of the Artists of Dionysus that absorbed them (see *infra*).

<sup>32</sup> *DFA*<sup>2</sup> 281f.



in the Piraeus museum (PLATE 2). It has recently been published by Elias Tsirivakos.<sup>33</sup> The preserved fragment comes from the upper part of the stele and is 70.2 cm. high by 73.2 cm. wide, crowned by a pediment molding but lacking architectural embellishment at the sides. The pediment has a central and two corner acroteria, the right one of which is partly broken away. The stele is broken on a diagonal line rising from left to right just below the two heads. The head at the right is that of a young man, beardless and with short curly hair. He is looking at a female tragic mask (the head at left), which he holds in his right hand. It is clear from the treatment of its eyes, the open, vacant mouth, the notch at the back of the neck indicating an opening at the rear under the hair, and, above all, the fact that the young man is apparently holding it by a strap, that this is indeed a theatre mask. We must imagine the young man to be seated.<sup>34</sup>

The lack of a complete architectural frame is one criterion for dating this piece to the period of the Peloponnesian War. While framed and unframed grave stelae may begin together in the latter part of the fifth century, it seems quite clear that the unframed stelae do not continue far into the fourth but are replaced by the standard naiskos form.<sup>35</sup> While the influence of the Parthenon frieze on our relief is undeniable, as on most fifth-century stelae, there has also been considerable movement beyond it here; a date in the last decade of the fifth century seems most satisfactory.<sup>36</sup> The female tragic mask supports such a date. The general naturalism of the style accords well with the masks shown on the actors' relief discussed above. Rather close parallels (of mask type, if not of sculptural style) may be found in two sculptural representations of masks from the fourth century, both originally from the Acropolis. One of these is a

<sup>33</sup> *Deltion, Mel.* 29 (1974) 88–94. My own conclusions on the stylistic date and restoration of the relief, reached independently, agree with those of Tsirivakos. I reproduce his measurements; points of disagreement otherwise I record below.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Tsirivakos' reconstruction (*supra* n.33: 89–91) of a seated rather than standing figure (his figures 1*a-b* and pl. 48). Tsirivakos shows a few longer locks of hair from the female mask as having been broken away and restores them extending below the present break. But his close-up photograph of the mask (pl. 50) confirms my own conclusion from autopsy that the front curls of hair end just below the jaw line. The bottom edge of the hair is rounded and finished, not broken.

<sup>35</sup> See T. Dohrn, *Attische Plastik* (Krefeld 1957) 92. The tendency is quite clear, as a glance at the examples in H. Diepolder, *Die attischen Grabreliefs* (Berlin 1931), will show.

<sup>36</sup> Tsirivakos (*supra* n.33) 92 sees in the relation of relief surface to plane surface a kinship with the Nike balustrade and decree reliefs of the period, and therefore dates it *ca* 410 B.C.

fragmentary relief containing six masks, four of which represent young women with smooth brows and chin-length hair.<sup>37</sup> Webster dates this piece to the second quarter of the fourth century.<sup>38</sup> The curly hair of these masks is quite similar to that of the mask on the grave stele, but already a defined roll of hair has developed, framing the face.<sup>39</sup>

What and who is the young man on our relief? There are two possibilities: he may be an actor or a playwright. The mask is an important clue: if he were an actor, the female mask might signify that his specialty was in acting female parts; it might indeed represent his greatest rôle.<sup>40</sup> The fourth-century parallels for the mask type, however, are presumably chorus members.<sup>41</sup> One can imagine a professional actor of the late fifth century but not a professional chorister; it is, in fact, doubtful whether such a profession ever existed in Greece. A much more likely explanation is that he is a tragic poet whose special skill lay in writing female parts, hence a female mask representative of his *arete* in life.

A poet's grave stele would also be a more likely source for the iconography of later fourth-century representations of dramatists, notably the grave stele said to be that of Aristophanes,<sup>42</sup> where the seated poet contemplates a comic mask, and the Menander reliefs, where the positions of poet and mask are mirror-reversed.<sup>43</sup>

Who is this poet? We need a late fifth-century poet whose particular *arete* lay in writing women's rôles, who died young or at any rate

<sup>37</sup> Athens, NM 1750, conveniently and well illustrated in P. Ghiron-Bistagne (*supra* n.1) 74 fig. 24. The other example (*MTS*<sup>2</sup> 37 no. AS24) is also from a frieze; here the hair is longer.

<sup>38</sup> *MTS*<sup>2</sup> 34 no. AS5. Webster's classification of masks into defined types cannot be assumed for this early period, but see his discussion (12–15) of the type of the half-shorn maiden. Note that both AS5 and AS24 are presumed to be chorus masks. Webster further believes (*GTP*<sup>2</sup> 53) that the shorn and half-shorn masks implied mourning or captivity.

<sup>39</sup> In this it resembles the tragic mask on the choregic monument from Dioniso mentioned above (*supra* n.27).

<sup>40</sup> Tsirivakos (*supra* n.33) suggests these same two possibilities, but favors identifying him as an actor on the grounds of his youth. This is a very dubious argument from probability: it doubtless took as long to establish oneself as an actor as it did for a playwright. The 'youth' of the deceased may also be as much a matter of conventional representation as of realism; males on grave stelae divide essentially into bearded and beardless.

<sup>41</sup> Webster, *MTS*<sup>2</sup> 12–15, 34, 37.

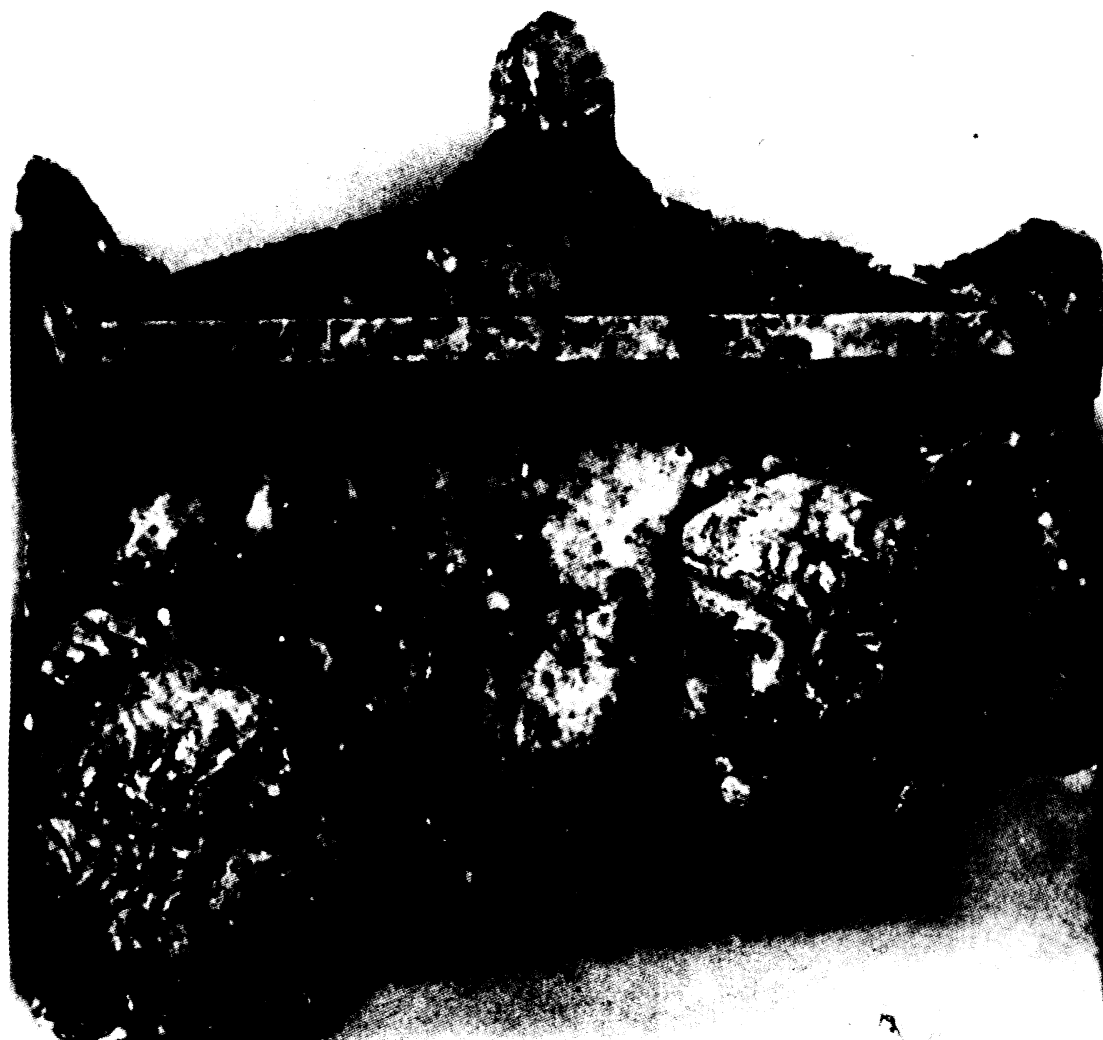
<sup>42</sup> The Lyme Park relief, originally published in *JHS* 23 (1903) 356–59; M. Bieber (*supra* n.14: 48 fig. 201) dates the relief to ca 380 B.C. T. B. L. Webster, *Monuments Illustrating Old and Middle Comedy*<sup>3</sup>, ed. J. R. Green (London 1978) 117, lowers this date; see also the remarks of Handley (*supra* n.30) 106.

<sup>43</sup> Bieber (*supra* n.14) 89f figs. 316 and 317.



ACTORS' RELIEF (ANM 1500)

PLATE 2 SLATER



ATTIC GRAVE STELE (PIRAEUS MUSEUM)

beardless, and whom we can regard as so committed to a life in the theatre that he could be shown as such even in death. I venture to suggest Agathon: so skilled at portraying women that he was ridiculed as effeminate by Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 130–52); an innovator in music, structure, and character, arguably the most important tragic poet after the standard three, who died in Macedonia in the last years of the fifth century.<sup>44</sup> From his first victory, celebrated in Plato's *Symposium*, to his death while a kept poet at the court of Macedon, his was a life in the theatre.

The significance of the Piraeus relief is considerable. Attic grave stelae fall into clearly-defined types such as warrior, athlete, or seated figure bidding farewell. Here we not only have an entirely new type, we have one that gives a professional designation to the deceased. Such grave stelae are very rare in Attica.<sup>45</sup> Stelae showing warriors or athletes are not truly professional designations: every able-bodied man is a soldier in defense of his city, and virtually every young man is an amateur athlete. Yet here we have a man of the theatre who wished himself so depicted on his grave monument.

In the end, it matters little whether this is the grave monument of Agathon (or, more likely, his cenotaph, since we have no record of his body being returned to Athens): what is important is that in the last years of the fifth century *someone* in Athens was so much a professional that he was so portrayed even in death. Both pieces discussed here testify to accelerating change in the theatre in Athens during and after the Peloponnesian War. The importance of drama increased markedly in the lives of many in this period. Country people trapped in the hated city during the years of war nevertheless took back with them to their farms a taste for plays, and dramatic performances were added to the festivals of the Rural Dionysia.<sup>46</sup> With more and steadier work, acting could become a livelihood, and long-term partnerships of actors, perhaps rudimentary actors' guilds, sprang up, as the early history of the Piraeus relief shows. Finally, some poets became theatre professionals. Though the judgment of history has been that the quality of theatre declined as professionalism increased, especially among actors, the lives and work of its

<sup>44</sup> For the poet and his work see P. Levèque, *Agathon* (Paris 1955), esp. 76 for a date of death between 405 and 399 B.C.

<sup>45</sup> I find at most four examples in A. Conze, *Die attischen Grabreliefs* II (Berlin 1900): 618, a coppersmith; 622, a youth with a scroll, apparently a scholar (not strictly a profession, but neither as obvious a choice of rôle as soldier or athlete); 696, a shoemaker; 920, a priest [?] with sacrificial knife.

<sup>46</sup> The early fourth-century choregic relief from Dioniso (*supra* n.27) may mark one of the first performances there.

earliest practitioners are an essential part of the history of the Attic theatre.<sup>47</sup>

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA  
*October, 1985*

<sup>47</sup> This article began in a sculpture seminar at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, led by Professor E. G. Pemberton, to whom I am grateful for many instructive criticisms. I also gratefully acknowledge the coöperation of Ephors Basileios Petrakos and Olga Tzachou-Alexandre, and of Ephor Elias Tsirivakos for kind permission to publish his photograph as PLATE 2.