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A PIECE OF DIONYSIAN HILARITY

LEENA PIETILÄ-CASTRÉN

In Graeco-Roman art Dionysos' followers, his *thiasos*, are always easily recognized through their ebullient characterization and stylistic features. Although popular in earlier Greek art across all media, depictions of Dionysos' companions became one of the most successful branches of Hellenistic and later sculpture.¹ A marble head of one such young satyr has ended up even in Finland, although it arrived only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is, of course, no longer in its original context but rather a result of smart collecting by a sophisticated traveller.

It was a member of the Thesleff family, who according to the family's oral tradition acquired the marble head, nicknamed "the Boy". Unfortunately, any further knowledge of its acquisition, in the form of e.g. a note in a diary, was lost during the wars of the first half of the 20th century, and thus, the exact purchaser remains unidentified. At least three members of the Thesleff family had an opportunity to purchase the marble head during their travels. The estate owner, Councillor of State Fredrik Wilhelm Thesleff (1824-1893) travelled extensively in Europe in the 1850s and the 1860s. One of his five sons, the city medical officer of Vyborg, Theodor Thesleff (1854-1899) honeymooned in Italy in 1890. Finally, another son, the engineer Wilhelm Thesleff (1852-1912), spent significant periods in Germany and might have bought it there as an import.²

Description

The marble head is 14.2 cm in height. It is carved from a fine-grained white

¹ R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, London 1991, 127.

² Personal communication from the present owner Prof. Holger Thesleff in May 2002.

marble, now covered with yellowish-grey patina. Delicate brown vein-like remnants on the left cheek and back of the head probably result from roots in the soil where it had lain. The surface is quite worn and weathered: the proper right side even more so than the left. The head is deliberately cut off immediately below the heavy chin. The ears and nose are broken. The front of the head is rounded, yet the sides and back are quite angular. The result is a certain blockiness, as if the trapezoidal form of the marble block is still present and the head has not fully freed itself (Fig. 1).

The crown of the head is slightly flattened with the hair rendered as long, simplified strands in lower relief. The hair is short and held back from the face by a wreath of ivy leaves (στέφανος κίσσινος) and bound with a fillet tied in a stylized Herculean knot at the base of the skull.³ Due to the worn condition of the surface, it is difficult to discern the number of leaves on the wreath at the right temple, but we can assume it was symmetrical to the reflected pairs of leaves at the left temple. Above the forehead the wreath ends with two ivy fruits, of which only the right one is preserved. The right berry cluster, however, has worn into one large mass with a drilled center. The face is broadly oval and fleshy. The eyes are softly modelled but framed by distinctly carved upper and lower eyelids. The nose did not project far from the surface of the face as only the very tip is broken. The narrow lips are parted revealing teeth behind. It is possible that portions of the lips have worn reducing their appearance. The chin is also modelled and fleshy (Figs. 2–3).

This is the face of a young satyr expressing his ecstatic state with a half-opened mouth and wide-open eyes staring straight ahead. The expression is emphasized by both the glimpse of the teeth and the heavily outlined eyes.⁴ His Dionysian identity is further supported by the wreath.⁵ The ivy-leaf wreath worn here belongs most often to members of Dionysos' sacred band. It appears in sculpture, for instance, on many of the copies of

³ The use of the Herculean knot, a double knot, dates back to the archaic *kouroi*.

⁴ The same basic facial features are to be seen e.g. in E. Simon, "Silenoi", *LIMC* 8 (1997) Pls 197b and 1999 (with beard), both dated to the first century AD.

⁵ Wreaths of pine, ivy and vine-leaves are mentioned e.g. in the description of a Dionysiac procession in Alexandria in the first half of the third century BC, in the times of Ptolemaeus Philadelphus by Callixeinus of Rhodes and transmitted by Athenaeus (5, 197–198).

the Lysippean old Silen with baby Dionysus.⁶ The ivy-leaves may be arranged upwards or downwards, and closely or widely set. This identification along with technical features and general character of the head allow for a reconstruction of its chronology and may elucidate its original setting.

Chronology and Setting

To our modern eyes, it may look like the head is grimacing, but it is the face of a laughing satyr. The motif of a laughing satyr, often with the upper teeth showing, is quite common in Hellenistic and Roman art.⁷ The laughing yet brutish countenance is a sign of Dionysian *hilaritas*, the happy laugh of the carefree, yet ignoble.⁸ We may assume that the smile reflects the activity in which the satyr was once involved. The head is broken from a body, but satyr sculptures are seldom presented alone as they are by nature sociable creatures. The marble head may well have belonged to a *nobile symplegma* composed of two separate statues in the round and, according to Pliny, originating in the third century Pergamum.⁹ A young satyr with a mischievous smile was a production of the second century BC, and has been associated with a female figure to form an open group, known as "The Invitation to the Dance".¹⁰

The grinning faces of young satyrs are also known from other group

⁶ See P. Moreno, "Sileno e Dioniso infante ad Atene", in *Lisippo – l'arte e la fortuna*, exhibition catalogue, Milano 1995, 252–255, and *ibid.* M. Bonanno Aravantinos, "Sileno con Dioniso infante", 380–381.

⁷ A. Costantini, "Satiro e ninfa", in *La collezione Boncompagni Ludovisi. Algardi, Bernini e la fortuna dell'antico*, Venezia 1992, 168–172.

⁸ Smith (above n. 1) 129.

⁹ According to Plin. *nat.* 36,24 by the Younger Cephisodotus, a son of Praxiteles.

¹⁰ W. Klein, *Vom antiken Rokoko*, Wien 1921, 45–47, fig. 14, p. 58. J. Charbonneau – R. Martin – F. Villard, *La Grecia ellenistica (330–50 a.C.)*, Milano 1971 (orig. fr. 1970), 315–316. Costantini (above n. 7), 168, 172. The dancing satyr, known since the fifth century BC and in a recent example from the bronze statue discovered in 1998 in Canale di Sicilia, does not smile. See P. Moreno, "Satiro di Prassitele", in *Il satiro danzante*, exhibition catalogue, Roma 2003, 104–107. This kind of ecstatic dancing seems to be connected most often to a backwards thrown head and a serious countenance.

compositions, such as the "Satyr and Hermaphrodite",¹¹ as well as from individual sculptures that have lost their partners and thus, narrative contexts. Well-known examples include the famous "Fauno Rosso", now in Rome but originally from Hadrian's villa,¹² a head of a satyr, the so-called "Fauno con Macchia" in Munich,¹³ and a third in Princeton.¹⁴ These are, however, not easy to date.¹⁵

Throughout the Hellenistic age, the bestial features of satyrs diminished to discreet. What was left of the animal in them was usually limited to a certain hairiness and prominent goat ears.¹⁶ In our case, nothing much can be said about the ears, as they are fragmentary and partly hidden beneath the wreath. The hair does not follow the Hellenistic convention of curly coiffures. Rather, the low-relief wavy hair most resembles the gently undulating short locks of the Julio-Claudian portrait style.

Dionysian sculptures usually represented the beneficent side of the god's power. They reflected the joy and happiness that the god could disperse with the simple pleasures of song and dance.¹⁷ As early as the second century BC, such subjects were much appreciated in luxurious Roman villa gardens to create an ideal Hellenistic countryside, often reflected in the villas's wall-paintings.¹⁸ The demand for copies of Dionysian statuary in Italy and throughout the Mediterranean must have been great, and there was often no intention or even need to make

¹¹ As a parody of the Laocoon-group satyrs were presented also fighting snakes, or else, anguiped giants. See, C. Vorster, "Die satyriskoi im Konservatorenpalast an der Porta San Lorenzo", in *Hellenistische Gruppen, Gedenkschrift für Andreas Linfert*, Mainz 1999, 267–294. Also S. Settis, *Laocoonte: Fama e stile*, Roma 1999, 20–21.

¹² Capitoline Museum nr. 657 in Rome. W. Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom II*, Tübingen 1963, 4th ed., 1420.

¹³ Glyptothek nr. 222.

¹⁴ B.S. Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture I: The Styles of ca. 331–200 B.C.*, Bristol 1990, 321–324, Pls 160 a–b, without the wreath. A list of the known satyr heads in A. Balil, *Zephyrus* 32–33 (1981) 230–231.

¹⁵ Ridgway I (above n.14) 312.

¹⁶ Smith (above n. 1) 129.

¹⁷ Smith (above n. 1) 127. To the light-hearted satyr may also refer the Herculean knot, see A. Nicgorski, *The Iconography of the Herakles Knot and the Herakles-Knot Hairstyle of Apollo and Aphrodite*, Chapel Hill 1995, 278.

¹⁸ Charbonneaux (above n. 10) 315–316. P. Grimal, *I giardini di Roma antica*, Milano 1990 (orig. fr. 1984), 322–326.

recognizable replicas. Subjects and motifs could be copied, adapted and recast in endless decorative variations, especially among the small-scale figures,¹⁹ such as our satyr head.

The surface of our marble head is quite worn, and since the root scars appear over the wear, then this must be an indication that a great deal occurred in its original location. It must have been located outdoors and have been exposed to the elements, especially water. Satyrs had a connection with springs and were used as fountain sculpture as early as the early Hellenistic period.²⁰ Since our head is well-finished on the back, it is unlikely that it appeared in a fountain niche which would result in a frontal view.²¹ Instead, it is more likely that our satyr stood with a companion in a free-standing, unprotected place in the garden.

Technical aspects also help define the head's chronological limits. The hair is carved primarily with the chisel, and the drill is used only for the ivy-berry and ear canals. The limited use of the drill points to a date no later than the first century AD,²² after which the drill becomes the carving device of choice. There is also no visible²³ plastic rendering of the iris and pupil of the eye. This custom was introduced into portraiture and other types of marble sculpture in the reign of Hadrian replacing the flat eye defined with paint.²⁴

As there are no ancient literary descriptions of Dionysian sculptures, and so many are without archaeological provenance, we depend on the statues themselves to reveal their meaning and context. The motif persisted throughout a wide chronological period, but the sum of stylistic, technical and ideological characteristics give our satyr a voice. If our reading of the satyr head is correct in chronology and context, then he was likely a

¹⁹ Smith (above n. 1) 128–129. J. Boardman, *Greek Sculpture. The Late Classical Period*, London 1995, 75.

²⁰ One example of a smiling small-scale satyr from a fountain is, e.g., a bronze statuette from the Casa del Centenario in Pompei from the first century AD, in *Storie da un'eruzione. Pompei Ercolano Oplontis*, Milano 2003, 118, fig. 2.

²¹ Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture III: The Styles of ca. 100–31 B.C.*, Madison 2002, 91. A single view point would date it to the years 100–70 BC, see Ridgway II, *The Styles of ca. 200–100 B.C.*, Madison 2000, 288.

²² S. Ensoli, "Testa di Sileno", in *Lisippo. L'arte e la fortuna*, (above n. 5) 382, 6.13.1, the satyr head from the Capitoline, inv. 271.

²³ Taking for granted that it has not worn out with other details.

²⁴ D.E.E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, Yale 1992, 238.

protagonist of a group composition for a villa garden and may date to the early Imperial period.

Finnish Antiquarianism

Three events may have affected Finnish private antiquarianism and an interest in ancient statues in the latter half of the 19th century: In 1843 university students, probably on the initiative of the Associate Professor of Greek and Roman Literature, N. A. Gyldén, began a public fundraising to acquire a collection of plaster casts of ancient sculpture for the University of Helsinki, thus following the fashion of other European universities. During the next forty years a collection of more than seventy copies was acquired from Paris, Florence, Munich and Berlin and opened to the general public in 1880s.²⁵ At the University the founding of the Classical Philological Society in 1879 enlivened the philological curriculum²⁶ and may have interested culturally-minded people outside university circles in classical culture. Similarly, 1893 saw the foundation of the National Museum in Helsinki, and the discussion of its holdings and mission certainly encompassed the importance of the classical tradition in the visual arts.

The Roman tradition of enhancing one's home with ancient sculptures to express one's intellectual interest and knowledge in antiquity was revived during the Renaissance and re-invigorated during the neo-classical period. The satyr head in Helsinki is evidence of the same enthusiasm. "The Boy", however, also has emotional value as an heirloom. It is, furthermore, one of the very few known examples of ancient statuary in Finland.²⁷ For practical

²⁵ R. Nikula, The history and background of the cast collection at the University of Helsinki (in Finnish), *Helsingin yliopiston taidehistorian laitoksen julkaisuja* 1 (1974) 65–114. P. Aalto, *Classical Studies in Finland 1828–1918*, Helsinki 1980, 147. L. Pietilä-Castrén, "Classical Reflections and Collecting in Finland", *Rivista di archeologia* 24 (2000) 132–133.

²⁶ Aalto (above n. 27) 186.

²⁷ Not more than five – excluding the statuettes – heads are known to exist in Finland, the satyr head under discussion being the only one so far published. By chance the only complete full-size statue in Finland is a copy of another satyr. See, L. Pietilä-Castrén, "A Copy of the Praxitelian *Anapauomenos* in Finland", *Arctos* 26 (1992) 97–104, and L. Pietilä-Castrén, "Upplyst samlande", in *Antiquitas Borea* (Acta Universitatis Ouluensis B 48), Oulu 2002, 108–115.

reasons it was, of course, much easier to bring from abroad just the head rather than the entire statue. To acquire a half-grinning satyr head was quite a courageous choice.*

Finnish Institute at Athens



Figure 1.

* I am indebted to Prof. Holger Thesleff for his generous cooperation, to Ms Tiina Tuukkanen for the photographs, to Ms Hanna Maukonen for technical help and to Dr. Kathleen M. Lynch for constructive comments and language revision.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.