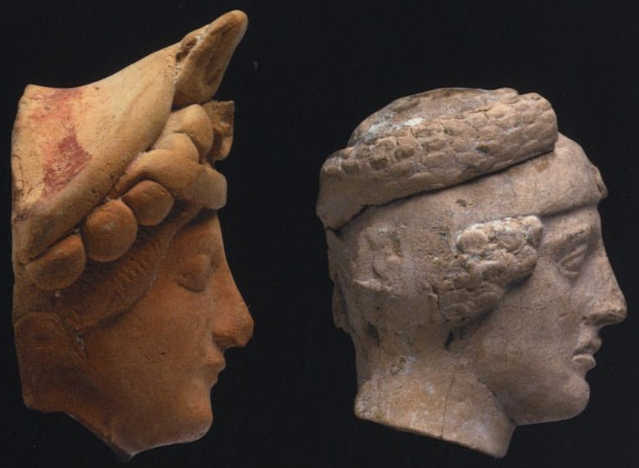

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BUDAPEST, HEROES' SQUARE

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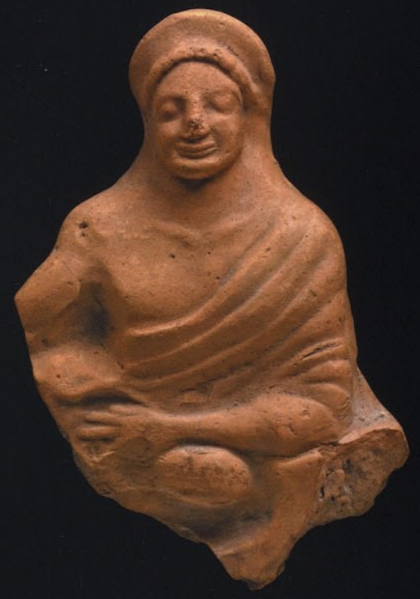
HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

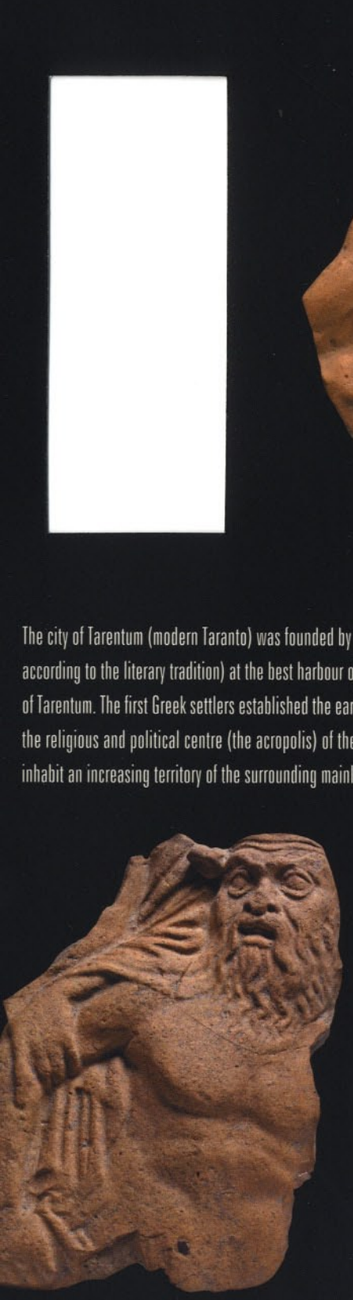
2006 SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

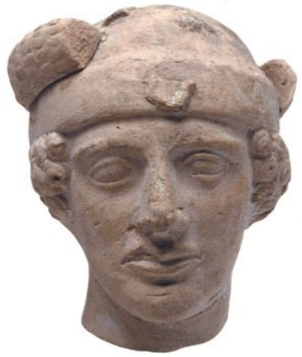
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

BANQUETER FIGURINES OF TARENTUM



The city of Tarentum (modern Taranto) was founded by Spartan colonists at the end of the 8th century BC (in 706, according to the literary tradition) at the best harbour of the South Italian coastline, at the Eastern edge of the Bay of Tarentum. The first Greek settlers established the earliest urban nucleus on a narrow headland, which remained the religious and political centre (the acropolis) of the town later on, when the following generations started to inhabit an increasing territory of the surrounding mainland. The extension of the classical town area, enclosed by the 5th century BC walls, was almost as large as that of the modern town developed mainly during the 20th century. Judging from the huge amount of ancient finds which have come to light since the end of the 19th century, this part of the city also housed a number of sanctuaries alongside the habitations, as well as the cemetery quarter, the necropolis. The fact that the necropolis was situated inside the wall circuit constitutes an almost unique phenomenon in the Greek world, where the town of the dead was always separated from that of the living. The only analogy that we find to this Tarentine practice is the organization of Sparta, its mother town. Among the innumerable ancient finds from Tarentum, the votive terracotta figurines and reliefs make up a group of particular interest well known all over the world. Within this group, compositions representing a banquet scene constitute





a characteristic local class, found mostly in a sacred area near the coast of the interior bay of Taranto (a site called Fondo Giovinazzi) and in some votive deposits spread all over the necropolis. The core of the composition is the figure of a man taking part in a banquet (symposion), reclining in a characteristic pose, resting on one elbow, holding the accessories of the symposion in one or both hands (drinking vessels, sometimes a lyre, less often an egg). The banqueter's head is nearly always adorned with a sophisticated headgear, which raises the scene out of the realm of everyday life. Alongside the banqueters, the votive complexes also contained a series of seated female figurines, which recall the reclining males in many respects; in some later compositions the two kinds of figures were combined, as well. A variant composition of these banqueter reliefs shows the triad of a reclining man, a woman seated at his feet and a child between the two. Other compositions are complemented with horse heads in the background or with a table near or in front of the kline (couch) and with a small cup-bearer. In a special group of Tarentine banqueter compositions the man is not reclining on a kline but carried by some creature — animals like a ram, a cock, a horse or a fantastic creature — leaning on one elbow in the usual way; a particularly successful Late Classical type of this group is presented here by a fragmentary exemplar of a composition originally showing a banqueter on the back of a centaur carrying a lyre and characterized by satyr-like traits.

As shown by the archaeological finds, Tarentine coroplasts produced this class of votive terracottas for more than two centuries (from the second half of the 6th to the end of the 4th century BC), without making any substantial changes to their composition, determined evidently by the cult of which these objects formed a part, except for the variations mentioned above. Nevertheless, within the frame of this essentially unchangeable scheme, artisans succeeded in giving a new form to their figurines and their accessories again and again with remarkable creativity, which is particularly noticeable in the modelling of the faces. The stylistic variations that can be observed amongst the thousands of complete and fragmentary banqueter terracottas, show clearly how the subsequent generations of clay modellers renewed from time to time the style of their compositions, following the contemporary inventions of mainland Greek art without any considerable delay. However, the stylistic variations of Tarentine banqueters do not merely reflect changes of time: the observation of the hundreds of known types proves that there were several parallel stylistic solutions within the same period, which permits us to recognize the hand of artisans skilled within different traditions or influenced by different personal tastes. It seems to be highly probable now that the iconography of the banqueter type developed in Tarentum towards the middle of the 6th century BC or not much later, inspired by the representations of Laconian black figure vase painting, and not by East Greek ('Ionian') sculptural models, as it has been supposed until recently. A few decades later, following the universal tendencies characteristic of the Late Archaic period, Tarentine workshops started to produce coroplastic types reflecting the influence of Ionian and Attic models. In the Classical period the influence of several major Greek artists can be seen in the style of these products of 'overseas' handicraft, while the rapid changes of artistic taste also transformed the headgears, draperies and other accessories, framing the figurines. The 4th century BC repertory of Tarentine banqueters shows an extraordinary variability, often with sophisticated compositions; some of the physiognomies of this period clearly reflect the sculptural taste of their time, while others are conceived in a wholly original way (as for example our no. T.185), justifying the term of "portrait-like" quality, sometimes referred to Late Classical Tarentine banqueter figurines.

The iconography of the banquet scene, of ultimately Near Eastern origin, was adopted in Greek art from the Archaic period onwards in different contexts and with a varying content. The interpretation of the Tarentine banquet compositions has been a largely controversial issue for more than a century, since the discovery of this group of terracottas. The only reliable fact in this case is the function of the figurines: as it was recently shown, banqueter terracottas were produced to be offered as votives in a cult practised first of all in the sacred area of the site Fondo Giovinazzi and repeated — at least partially — also in the area of the necropolis. The content and the meaning of this cult might have undergone some modifications in time, but it seems wholly justified to suppose that it continued without any substantial change until the end of the 4th century BC. Among the numerous interpretations proposed, the connection of the banqueter figurines with the necropolis confirms those, which try to establish a relation between these representations and the idea of transition to afterlife. It remains a divisive question, if the reclining man wearing a celebratory headgear is to be identified with one or more hero(es) venerated by the local community, with a mortal man elevated to the status of a hero by his transition to afterlife, or with the Lord of the Underworld, Dionysus identified with Hades. This question might be cleared by a better understanding of the origin and the content of the cult concerned, but it should also be noted that these three categories were not strictly separated in the period concerned and that the essence of the still unknown Tarentine cult might have been exactly the idea of transition from human to super-human life. One of the interpretations proposed in the 1970s connected the cult of the Tarentine banqueters with the Orphic movement, but it was successively rejected by most scholars. Some recent observations suggest, however, that we should again take this hypothesis into consideration.

The thousands of exemplars making part of this group of antiquities, coming to light continuously since 1879, reached most of the European and North American collections of ancient art during the 19th and the early 20th century. The Collection of Classical Antiquities of the Museum of Fine Arts conserves ca. 70 fragments of such objects (acquired mainly in 1914 with Paul Arndt's collection), out of which we now put on view some selected pieces, never displayed in exhibition before.

ÁGNES BENCZE