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CURATOR · MARIANNA DÁGI
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RESPONSIBLE EDITOR · DR. LÁSZLÓ BAÁN
GRAPHIC DESIGN · JOHANNA BÁRD
PHOTOGRAPHS · LÁSZLÓ MÁTYUS
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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS – COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

STATUE OF A BOY WITH ASTRAGALS

The life-size statue measuring 1.02 m represents a boy of about three or four years. With his left hand the child is pressing several astragals against his chest. He is standing on his right leg, the left leg is put slightly sidewards, while his gaze is directed to the right. On closer inspection it becomes obvious that the statue consists of different ancient and modern parts: an ancient torso, an ancient head as well as modern restorations, such as a tree trunk and the plinth, all of them put together to form a complete figure.

The statue is first mentioned as part of the collection of the French Cardinal Melchior de Polignac. From 1724 to 1731, the cardinal resided as ambassador of Louis XV at Rome. During this period he established a comprehensive collection of antiquities. He even conducted excavations himself in order to obtain sculptures, although many of the objects were purchased at the antiquities market in Rome. Therefore it is very likely that the statue was excavated in Rome or its surroundings and subsequently restored in a Roman sculptor's workshop. The cardinal transferred his collection to Paris, where it was exhibited in his residence since 1734. A collection inventory dated 1738 lists the statue as "enfant, tenant des osselets". After Polignac's death, Frederick II of Prussia acquired the entire collection of sculptures. The boy with astragals was displayed in the castle Charlottenburg until 1830, when it was moved to the newly inaugurated Royal Museum in Berlin, the present Altes Museum. At that time the porcelain label was attached to the plinth, — its number 120 corresponds to the numbering system of the Berlin Museum's first catalogue published in 1832. In 1922, the Berlin Museums sold the sculpture on the art market, from where it was bequeathed by Béla Fogarasi to the Szépművészeti Múzeum.

Around 1800 the first archaeologists began to study the statue. In an essay published in 1820 in Berlin, the scholar Konrad Levezow suggested that the statue did not represent a mortal child but instead the god Amor as infant. On the basis of literary sources, he assumed that the statue had originally been part of a group showing Ganymed and Amor playing with astragals. The game of the divine boys is narrated by several ancient authors (in particular, The Argonautica of Apollonius of Rhodes). However, the interpretation of the boy with astragals as naughty little Amor who cheated his playing partner Ganymed was abandoned in the later 19th century as there are neither traces of wings nor other attributes that support the theory that the

figure represents Amor. Similarly, there is no evidence for the assumption of a group consisting of two statues. According to the Roman author Plinius, the famous Greek sculptor Polyclet is believed to have created a group of *astragalizontes*, i.e. boys with astragals, but they are likely to have been mortal boys. Apart from that, Polyclet's group has not been preserved.

For the interpretation of the statue it is necessary to study it more closely and to determine which parts originally belonged to it. The torso with the left upper leg and part of the knee are ancient, while the right leg up to the hip as well as the adjoining large tree trunk are modern additions. The right arm has also been added later, while the left one is antique. As preliminary archaeometric analysis of the marble show, the marble used to build the torso comes from Asia Minor (Turkey), while the modern additions are made from Italian marble. The plump and soft body, the unsteady stance and the impetuous move of the hand holding the astragals against the chest underline the boy's childlikeness. A comparison with the better preserved statue of a boy in the Vatican (Museo Chiaramonti, 338/XXXVIII 19) representing the same statuary type illustrates that the sculpture from the Polignac collection might also have stood with his legs wider apart and with the weight on both feet, showing the unsteady stance of a young child. It was only the 18th century restoration that created the relaxed pose with the shifted balance of weight between engaged and free leg. The slightly hoisted right shoulder indicates that the right arm was tightened with the hand propped up or that the arm was bent in the elbow. The head attached now is also antique but it did not originally belong to the torso as the breaks do not join but are instead joined together by a connecting element. However, with regard to size and material, both parts fit together well — the 18th century sculptor has joined them together in a sensitive way and not at random. What can be said about the head? Do we look at the portrait of a mortal boy or the representation of an infant god? The head is rather unusual, and there are no direct comparisons. In case it is a portrait, there are only few individual features. Besides the general proportions of the face, the narrow and asymmetrical eyes with the heavy eyelids and the soft area of the mouth appear portrait-like. Similarly unusual is the hairstyle with the rich curls falling on the neck. Normally Greek and Roman children wore their hair in strands, and this is also featured by most childrens' portraits. However, there are a few portraits of children preserved showing curls that cover forehead, temples, ears and neck. Another uncommon feature is the headband wrapped around the head whose ends are hanging down in the neck. Such headbands are worn for instance by victorious athletes, while heads of Greek children usually only wear a simple woolen band in the hair. Furthermore, there are childrens' portraits with wreaths, circlets or diadems to evoke a divine or royal character. However, if all aspects are considered, the pretty small head is most likely the strongly idealized portrait of a child and not the head of an ideal infant god such as Heracles, Hermes or Amor. Portraits of children were frequently idealized by adapting the iconography of divine childrens' representations in order to evoke the divine qualities in the portrait of the mortal child.

On the basis of the narrow eyes with the heavy eyelids and the style of the hair, which features only few drill holes, the portrait can be dated to the Flavian period, i.e. the last quarter of the 1st century AD.

The astragals in the boy's hand were a popular toy for Greek and Roman children. They were either used in games of skill or for gambling. The so-called astragals were small ankle bones (that is, the tarsal bones supporting the tibia and fibula), which were cast in the air and came down like dices whose sides had different values, or they had to be caught with the back of the hand. Literary sources show that the astragal game can also symbolize the game of dice played with or for Eros, and that astragals could also serve as love gifts or grave goods. For this purpose, astragals were also imitated in various materials such as metal, marble, ivory, and terracotta.

To conclude, our statue is a work of the Roman imperial period and goes back to Greek models in the shape of genre figures. It probably served as funerary statue of a deceased boy. In this case, the lost original head must also have been the portrait of a child. The ancient head that was added in the 18th century might likewise have originally belonged to such a funerary statue. Numerous grave reliefs illustrate that children were frequently represented with their toys and with small animals. Astragals which were used for gambling could at the same time allude to the unpredictable fate.

What was this sculpture's purpose in antiquity? The tomb figure served as memorial statue for the deceased child, emphasizing its childlikeness and at the same time evoking its virtues through idealization and perhaps the successes the child had not been granted due to its early death.

ASTRID DOSTERT

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