DISPARATE BODIES IN ANCIENT ARTEFACTS:  
THE FUNCTION OF CARICATURE AND PATHOLOGICAL  
GROTESQUES AMONG ROMAN TERRACOTTA FIGURINES*

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In archaeology the term “grotesques” covers an important class of objects (several thousand), generally small in size (height 10–20 cm) and ranging in artistic quality. They show caricatured faces and bodies, physical deformities and human diseases. They were found in various sites throughout the Mediterranean, but especially in Asia Minor and Egypt. The meaning of ancient grotesque terracotta has been debated since the time of Charcot and Régnault from the famous Parisian medical school La Salpêtrière, at the turn of the 20th century. They were the first to “diagnose” a pathological inspiration in the grotesquely deformed bodies of these terracotta statuettes.1 But not all grotesque figurines are pathological, and both their typology and function as objects are difficult issues to tackle. There are three main types of grotesque figurines: stage actors, humorous caricatures and “portraits” of known pathologies. These categories are not air-tight, as the last two types often merge. I hope to present some standard ways of differentiating these various grotesque figurines and in the absence of proper context for most of these objects, some solutions regarding their various potential functions.

1. Preliminary Remarks

Coroplasts from archaic Greece down to the late Roman Empire period made a living from mass-producing clay figurines. Grotesque figurines were also small and cheap to produce and purchase, but are very difficult to date precisely as they were mostly found in the 19th century by collectors who were not concerned with their exact provenance. Thus, except when we have an archaeological context or the female figures are given typical 1st or 2nd

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1 See Régnault (1900).
century CE Roman hairstyles or drilled pupils, we tend to give a very wide dating range (3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE). Although many were found in Egypt and in Alexandria, in particular, this paper focuses on finds from Asia Minor, and especially from Smyrna (among many others found in Tarsus, Ephesus, Priene, Pergamon and Myrina). A large number of figurines are missing their torso and legs. This is an added problem to the lack of context. Many such heads were found by peasants in Smyrna’s surrounding countryside, and it would seem they believed that only the heads interested collectors so they probably discarded the torso and members. Even in Smyrna, where so many grotesques were brought to light in the 1890s we are unsure of their exact finding place. The objects are said to come from somewhere on Mount Pagos or other neighbouring hills, probably from tombs and in domestic contexts. Indeed, Rumscheid (2006) has recently shown at Priene that numerous grotesque figurines were found in domestic contexts.

Even though the iconography of terracotta figurines over time and throughout the Mediterranean is vast and varied, most of the artists’ stock consisted in idealized types, reproducing famous marble or bronze sculpture. For example, a statuette found in Smyrna (Fig. 1), measuring 0.29 m and dating to the first century BC, is a small-scaled clay imitation of the famous Diadoumenos of Polykleitos, a youth tying a fillet around his head after a victory in an athletic context, in ca. 430 BCE. The life-size Diadoumenos (Fig. 2), is 1.86 m in height. The Diadoumenos, was evidently still favoured by customers as it was being reproduced in terracotta series, i.e. in large numbers, four hundred years later. Numerous terracotta copies of famous sculptures by Polykleitos, Lysippos, etc. were found throughout the Mediterranean.

The obvious function of this smaller reproduction was decorative, probably for indoor domestic use. It was sold to clients who could not afford to purchase life-size expensive stone, marble or metal copies of famous sculptures. Not only was clay cheap but most of these figurines were not sculpted

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3 On Myrina, see Burr (1934); Kassab (1982); (1987); 1988.
4 See however the interesting point made by Fjeldhagen 1995: 24 concerning the context of Greco-Roman figurines in Egypt: “… there is no difference between the types of figurines found in tombs, houses or places of worship … it was up to the owner to use this figurine as he thought fit”. See also Stevenson (1975) 156–171 on context and chronology.
5 Paris, Musée du Louvre, on loan from New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 32.11.2. Photograph © Alexandre G. Mitchell.