South Italian “Phlyax” Plays

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The Phlyakes Plays:

- **hilarotragoedia:**
  - “exhibition of the subjects of tragedy, in the spirit and style of comedy”
  - tradition among the Greeks of Southern Italy
  - also known as φλυακογραφία, (Smith)

- 5th-3rd centuries, especially 425-325 B.C. (Taplin 1)

- φλύαξ, ακος, ο. = jester; tragic burlesque. “φλυακές τραγικοί” (φλυαρέω = to talk nonsense, play the fool) (LSJ)
Aspects and Themes

• comic effect, parody of tragedy, traditional myths, & daily life

• gods and heroes (e.g. Hercules), tragic characters (e.g. Aegisthus, Antigone) the Trojan cycle, thieves, boxers, lovers, stock characters: greedy old miser, mischievous slaves, etc.
Issues of Interpretation

- Were these simply improvisations containing themes and characters from history and mythology, or actual scenes from specific Attic comedies? Or a mixture of both?

- The Phlyakes Vases:
  - several hundred found in Southern Italy depicting memorable theatrical scenes with absurdly grotesque costumes on simple wooden stages

- A.D. Trendall, Margarete Bieber, and other scholars traditionally interpreted these as a totally native Italian tradition; recently, Oliver Taplin has connected them with Greek Old Comedy; in turn, H.A. Shapiro and Dwora Gilula have challenged Taplin’s analyses
Hercules angers Apollo, 400-325 B.C.
Hercules abducts a woman from a shrine
Zeus visits Alcmene
Servants helping Cheiron up steps
Rape of Cassandra (not a phlyax vase)
Rape by Cassandra
Old miser Charinus with thieves and slave
-theme of old father competing with young son for a woman—precursor to Plautus

Father and son fight over a woman
Dionysus and phlyakes watching a female tumbler.
Paestan vase attributed to Assteas
-Xanthias is the typical slave name

Slave Xanthias stealing pastries
Taras/Tarentum

Fig. 496.
Phlyax vase with farmer, clerk, and learned lady
Phlyax vase with farmer, clerk, and learned lady, c. 400-325 B.C.

“Sappho” fresco, Pompeii, c. 50 A.D.
Costumes

Caricature of two boxers
Masks

Cup in the shape of a comic mask

Terracotta representing an actor seated on an altar
Temporary stage buildings

Digital Visualization of Phlyax stage,
King’s Visualization Lab, Kings College, London
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Influence on the Development of Roman Drama:

- Rhinthon of Syracuse (c. 323-285 B.C.):
  - first to put phlyax plays/ hilarotragoedia into written form
  - followed by Sopater, Sciras, Blaesus (Smith)

- As the phlyakes died out in the late 4th century, the Oscans developed a form of satire and parody that came to be known as Atellan farce. This was brought to Rome, and played a part in the beginning of Roman comedy (i.e. Plautus)
According to Richard Beacham, the “early Roman entertainments were characterized by satirical abuse, expressed in uninhibited jesting and crude verse... The performances were essentially plotless, comic ‘turns,’ which probably took shape in response to a good deal of audience comment and encouragement.” (Beacham 13)

No evidence suggests that the phlyakes had a direct impact on the early Roman entertainments, but considering the shared themes and comic elements (slave beatings, shrewish old women, father and son fighting over a woman, greedy slaves, greedy old men, etc.) a connection is entirely plausible (Beacham 9)
Bibliography

Images

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