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SMILING SLAVES:
FIGURAL DEPICTIONS OF CLASSICAL COMEDY'S 'CLEVER SLAVE' IN A ROMAN SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

A paucity of identifiable archaeological material makes it difficult to locate slavery in the archaeological record, but the figurines of slave characters in Roman comedy represent a rich, untapped resource. One character in particular, the 'clever slave' (servus callidus), with his devious schemes and sharp wit, captured the imagination of Roman society. This clever slave's popularity is attested archaeologically, with thousands of charming figurines spanning different time periods and geographical areas of the Classical world. Much discussed in the field of classics, no previous work has been undertaken to examine this character from an archaeological perspective in terms of its societal significance. Slave statuettes have been unearthed in homes, sanctuaries and tombs- diverse contexts that hint at their multitudinous purposes. By examining a representative sample of the material evidence alongside comedic texts I provide an in-depth look at servus callidus figurines: their form and iconography, their archaeological contexts and their potential agency for the society that produced and purchased them.

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Only in recent years has archaeology's potential to contribute to ancient slavery studies been recognised, though many researchers remain reluctant to tackle slavery from an archaeological standpoint thinking it unglamorous in respect of artefacts, unrewarding in terms of information and ill-fitting with the current trend for agency theory in archaeological research (Webster 2008, 110-111). Ascertaining the agency of slaves in the ancient world proves challenging given that slave culture was embedded in the fabric of everyday life, making the remains indistinguishable from other material (George 2013, 15; Mullins 2008, 124-125). We must turn to other evidence to enhance our knowledge of slave culture, and it is in this vacuum that I conduct this examination of slave figurines, specifically an artefact type representing the most popular character in Roman comedy: the 'clever slave'.

The character of the clever slave in Roman drama is particularly fascinating as a wickedly heroic figure, beloved despite his lowly position within Roman society. His Latin epithet, *servus callidus*, translates as skilful or cunning slave and the surviving comedies frequently portray him as the gossipy narrator, facilitating interaction with the audience. He is blatantly shown to be cleverer than his master (e.g. Plautus *Ps*. 1-130), which is intriguing considering the staunchly hierarchical society of ancient Rome. The examination of the clever slave has been polarised between the academic spheres of classics and archaeology, with each field making little reference to the other, and there is much potential for new insights to be gained by employing a tandem approach.

Research Methodology
The referenced material is by no means intended

to constitute all archaeological evidence for the clever slave of which there are thousands of figurines found across all regions of ancient Greece and Rome as well as Cyprus, Asia Minor, Egypt and the Levant. Establishing their context would help attest to the purpose and meaning of these artefacts, but is complicated by the lack of a solid archaeological context for many objects. Another obstacle is the debatable classification of clever slave iconography as styles naturally change and evolve over time and large geographical areas. An iconographical analysis has been conducted by looking in depth at 39 statuettes that, in my estimation, depict the clever slave through very distinct use of an iconographical motif.[1] To distinguish works from different periods one must differentiate between the more rigid conception or motif and the style of the piece, which is changeable (Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1984, 9). Fig. 1 shows how the iconographical motif of the clever slave is heavily indebted to its Greek comedy origins, with the main characteristics recognisable in each style. Greek comedy of the third century BCE saw slave roles become individualised- from these distinctions the clever slave emerged with his striking iconographical markers (Webster *et al.* 1995a, 1). The first statuette could be termed a proto-clever slave, produced before this character was noted for these physical attributes particularly; the slave is seated on an altar after claiming sanctuary with a hand raised to his face, looking forlorn. Comparing this figure with a Roman clever slave also seated on an altar one can see they share the grinning upturned mouth, framed by the outer-edges of a beard, with the furrowed brow a manifestation of their conniving temperament (Bieber 1961, 189; Webster *et al.* 1995a, 27-28). These attributes constituted my main criteria for identifying the clever slave assemblage; the trademark "trumpet-mouth", a distorted face and short tunic that became the quintessential indicators of this character.

The wily slave was present in the Greek comedy of Menander (from 320 BCE), though simply as a comedic turn and plot exposition. It was the second century BCE Latin playwright Plautus who adopted and adapted the cunning slave character and placed him at the forefront of his plays, which coincides with the increased popularity of the character in the material record (tab. 1). The description that Plautus provides echoes the unflattering figural portrayal:

"Bright red hair, protruding belly,
Rather swarthy, chubby calves,
With large head, ruddy face, sharp eyes…"
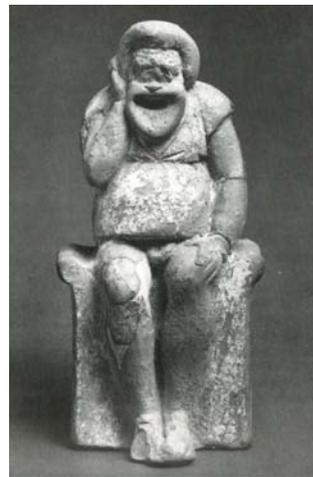*(Pseudolus 1218-20) (tr. Smith 1991)*

Figure 1. Above: Terracotta figurine of drunken slave: second century BCE, Cyprus, Height: 11.1cm, Australian National University, Canberra (Green et al. 2003, 54);
Below Left: Terracotta figurine of slave sitting on an altar, 330-310 BCE, Piraeus, Height: 13cm, British Museum;
Below Right: Bronze clever slave seated on an altar: early first century CE, Roman, Height: 11.2cm, British Museum (Green and Handley 1995, 66 fig. 41; 82 fig. 54)

Figurines from across the Greek and Roman world, ranging from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE were examined in terms of their clever slave iconography to explore the form and development of these pieces, to chart their popularity and to illuminate their varied archaeological contexts. Conscious of bringing together such eclectic material, the study of the cultural interpretation of this character employs Plautus and Roman society as an anchor in this timeline.

Comic Archaeology

The trickster slave's origins can be found as far back as the fourth century BCE, though slave statuettes were not uncovered in notable quantities till after the time of Menander (c. 290 BCE) (Webster *et al*. 1995a, 78 fig. 16) The first costumed comic actor figurines were immortalised in terracotta at the start of the fourth century BCE in Athens, where they were produced and exported. Terracottas were manufactured cheaply and are therefore excellent indicators of the impact of theatre on a wide social spectrum. Depictions of theatrical characters reveal a much broader social enjoyment of theatre than is suggested by the written sources (Easterling and Hall 2002, xviii). The production of these figures continued into late antiquity, with the objects copied by local centres of production in Italy and throughout the Greek world for a mass market (Csapo and Slater 1995, 55). From 320 BCE, slaves begin to dominate the comic theatral material with their growing popularity peaking in the period 150-50 CE (tab. 1) (Webster *et al*. 1995a, 82 fig. 27). At this time Plautus provided the fullest, most entertaining interpretation of this character to the point where the clever slave became the most recognisable symbol of Roman comedy.

At this time, bronze was increasing as a popular media for theatral art which may indicate that these motifs entered a high level of Roman society originally, inspired by Greek and Hellenistic designs, though there is still plenty of cheaper material as well (Webster *et al*. 1995a, 61 fig. 6).[2] From 50 BCE-50 CE slaves would remain the most well-liked image of comedy and likely expressed an active passion for the theatre (Webster et al. 1995a, 58 fig. 5; 66-67). From 50-180 CE, there is a striking dwindling in the finds of comic material, possibly the result of changing interests and fashions. The close of the second century CE saw the clever slave's era of popularity come to an end with the continued lessening of comic objects across the board (Webster *et al*. 1995a, 74).

Staging the Figurines

There is a plausible presumption that many of the surviving statuettes were used decoratively in domestic settings, though for most pieces their archaeological context is unknown. There is also a current tendency to excavate other types of sites (e.g. burial) which affects this kind of context analysis. Comic figurines have been uncovered in the houses of Olynthos, which was destroyed in 348 BCE and remains one of the few urban sites in Greece to have been completely excavated (Green 1994, 38). Despite these constrains, comparable comic depictions strengthen the argument for the placement of these statuettes in domestic contexts.
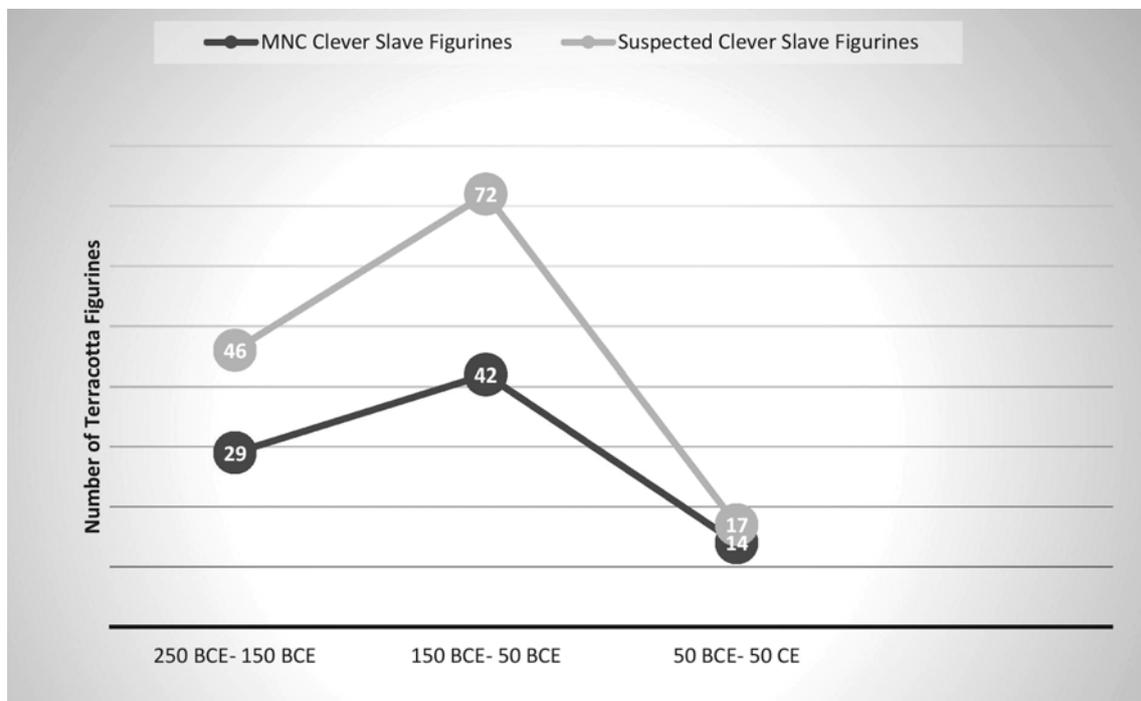
From the second century BCE, the villas

Table 1. Comparison between the numbers of figurines identified by clever slave iconography in MNC (Webster et al. *1995a) and the number I suspect can be classed as the clever slave (see footnote 1).*

of wealthy Greeks and Romans were decorated with theatre imagery: statues and busts of poets and characters, frescos, paintings and mosaics of dramatic scenes (e.g. House of the Comedian, Delos) (Csapo 2010, 147-149). We can picture the slave statuettes sitting in libraries and *triclinia*, acting as a reminder of the patronage of the house-owner, either as an avid theatre-goer or even one of the benefactors funding such spectacles (Csapo 2010, 140-141). It also suggests that private dinner theatre (in the style of Petronius' *Satyricon*) may have been performed in this setting. Public events were ephemeral, while domestic decorations offered a perpetual reminder, while serving as tangible expressions of upper-class status. One wonders if they were sold at the plays and are reminiscent of the merchandise peddled at modern music and sporting events. If collected in this way, clever slave statuettes would have both appealed to fans and encouraged buyers to be fans of any production the character was part of (Green 1994, 38). It would be easy to presume these figurines belonged to the master of the house, but this is contested by the beautiful women's jewelry found bearing the mask of the cunning slave (Green and Handley 1995, 75; 89-90). Domestic slaves, unable to purchase such things, may have enjoyed the ironic sight of the grinning slave around their master's home.

The terracotta figurines did not just sit in the homes of the rich but were produced for a relatively undiscerning mass market, with little originality or effort required in their production (Csapo and Slater 1995, 55). It may have been possible to buy a number of characters from a play and have a scene represented in a figural manner (Green 2010, 79; Green 2002, 118). In fact, full 'sets' including comic slaves have been excavated; the 'New York Group' was uncovered in a tomb on Lipari, a small island near Sicily which housed a permanent theatre (Brea and Cavalier 2001).

It is an archaeological site of crucial importance for the study of Classical theatre, with over a thousand Greek and Hellenistic terracotta masks and figurines found in graves, votive pits and waste pits, dating from 430-251 BCE (Battezatto 2003, 247). Their deposition in a tomb evokes a religious element which emerged from the Greek practice of actors suspending their masks in the temple of Dionysus after a performance (Lysias 21. 2) (Green 1982, 240 fig. 3). In Roman times the dramatic performances were similarly imbued with a religious connotation, having been performed at the *ludi* festivals which were usually dedicated to the gods. Goldberg (1998) convincingly argues that Plautine

performances were staged in front of the temple of the deity that festival was honouring, with the audience seated upon the temple steps. It is not difficult to see how the figurines of masked characters may have taken on the dedicatory tradition of the masks, which is almost certainly the case for a second century CE clever slave statuette found beneath the ruins of the Temple of Neptune in Sorrento (Mitten and Doeringer 1968, 281 fig. 275).

Over time clever slave imagery came to be found in all areas of Roman art with little connection to specific performances, often simply referencing an enjoyable memory or cultivated lifestyle (Jory 2002, 239; Wiles 1991, 80-81). There is a strong association between the leisurely worlds of the theatre and the symposia, epitomised in the happily drunk slave in fig. 1, which were both domains of the fun-loving god Dionysus/Bacchus. The double affiliation of Dionysus with the theatre and the cult of the dead seems to explain why comic masks are so often found in cemeteries as tomb decorations. Commonplace by the second century BCE, comic images in Roman graveyards appear to represent the carefree life that the decedent might wish to hang on to (Csapo 2010, 148-149; Wiles 1991, 129).

The Slaves and Their Audience
It is still puzzling why Plautus decided to adopt a fictive slave as his trademark and why this lowly character was so well received, especially by the high-ranking magistrates who funded such plays. It would be anachronistic to say that Plautus used onstage slaves to criticise the institution of slavery and he is far more likely highlighting the instability of fortune as a plot device. The fact that all of his plays were set in Greece would also have discouraged any mapping onto Roman society. The most credible theory points towards the psychological impact of the clever slave for slave-owners. A rogue slave can be entertaining when serving as a medium for the fantasies and anxieties of the members of the audience (McCarthy 2000, 3, 6). In a hierarchical society people constantly strive to navigate power-relationships- to assert their position while serving those above them- and the clever slave may have appealed to people as an archetypal rebellious subordinate. Decorating their homes with these pieces might reflect people's need for bold fantasies. This obviously glosses over the harsh realities of servile life, with slaves shown content in their servitude and much too infantile to look after themselves (e.g. the drunken slave of fig. 1 and Plautus *Ps*. 1287). The objectification of a person in slavery melds well with the use of a fictional slave (especially in object-form) onto which to project subversive fan-

Figure 2. The 'New York Group' of terracotta Greek Comedy figurines: late fifth-early fourth century BCE, Attica, Metropolitan Museum, New York (http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/gr/original/DP116961a.jpg).

tasies (McCarthy 2000, 19-21). In this light comedy becomes another form of catharsis resembling the Roman festival of *Saturnalia*, where society's rules were broken momentarily as the slaves acted as masters and the masters as slaves (Segal 1987, 8-9). The clever slave could never be considered threatening as the play's dénouement leaves the characters back where they started; the master's authority is affirmed and the clever slave lives to scheme another day as a slave still.

There is no doubt that slaves were present at these plays, whether spectators themselves, attending to their masters or working within the production, and would have been exposed to the antics of the sly slave (Richlin 2014, 204). The character probably provided an outlet through which to vent their emotions vicariously and silently reassert their independence. Trickster tales usually embody a story of the weaker besting the stronger, understandably enjoyed by dominated people and incorporated into their folk tales. Insider gossip can be seen as a powerful tool of the slave, and the fast-talking comic slave is the ultimate expression of this. Even inadvertently, Plautus' plays humanised slaves by showing them interacting with other slaves (*Capt*. 198-205), lamenting their relentless beatings (*Poen*. 129-139) and resenting their master (*Ps*. 471-473). It is unlikely that the Plautine comedies were composed with the reception of slaves in the audience in mind, but theatre is experienced uniquely by every individual and it is perfectly credible that oppressed slaves in the audience held this rebellious slave in admiration.

Conclusion

The power of comedy in society is often overlooked, with ancient comedy paling next to its "nobler sister" of tragedy, in the same way that archaeology is sometimes seen as the "handmaiden" of history next to historical texts. In turn, archaeologists can operate on the assumption that the material record will reveal the truth of oppressed groups or "those without history", ignoring the embedded nature of slavery in every aspect of society, including its preserved writings. Though approaching from an archaeological standpoint, I strived to utilise both the material and written evidence in order to formulate valid social theories. Archaeology should not be framed in a text-free zone and vice versa, and this mode of study is especially effective when dealing with a subject that suffers from a dearth of evidence like slavery (Moreland 2001, 11, 94-95).

Arising from a Dionysian milieu, clever slave imagery was considered appropriate in domestic, religious and funerary contexts, which may be surprising for such an irreverent comic creation. Their archaeological contexts, though hampered by a lack of findspot records, have shed light on their purpose and reception in Roman society. While the exposition for the agency of these figurines is tentative, it does lay down groundwork for a more comprehensive study of these fascinating artefacts.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Webster et al.'s Monuments Illustrating New Comedy (MNC) (1995a) catalogues slave statuettes with clever slave iconography (called Mask 22) but it is my belief that the wavy-haired slave (like the third figurine in fig. 1) (Mask 27) also represents the clever slave. The resulting increase in the number of clever slave figurines in the catalogue is conveyed in tab. 1.

[2] Such small objects were easily transportable, making provenance difficult to establish (Webster *et al*. 1995b, 257).

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