

## Prompters on the Late Antique Stage?

The publication of the painted Tetrarchic reliefs from Nicomedia (Şare Ağtürk 2021) has added an important new item to the discussion of young figures, uncostumed and without masks, interacting with performers in full tragic costume in Late Antique art. The principal previous example appears in a mosaic from Noheda in Spain, while a somewhat similar figure of a boy with a scroll on a bronze disk now in the museum at the Villa Guilia (inv. 24844) has been drawn into the discussion as well. While previous interpretations have postulated these figures as prompters who could recall the stage performers to the text in case of memory lapses (Şare Ağtürk 2021, citing perhaps incompletely Dunbabin 2016 and 2017, also 2006), a re-examination of the evidence suggests a more participatory role for these young figures and a different performance style for tragedy in an age of excerpts and star performers.

The best starting point is the remarkable array of mosaics with both mythological scenes and depictions of athletic and agonistic public festivals from the villa at Noheda in Spain (Valero Tévar 2011 and 2013). Two panels clearly show elements of public theatrical performances. The scene at the far right end of panel E, unfortunately seriously damaged by plowing, nonetheless shows two tragic performers in full costume with a young boy to their left, holding an open scroll and looking at the actors. The boy cannot simply be a spectator (no representation of audience appears in the mosaics otherwise), and his clear orientation toward the actors suggests interaction. Models from the modern theater have suggested he may be a prompter, but why he is included in the depiction then remains very puzzling.

The new scene from the reliefs at Nicomedia (cat. no. 33) has a very similar structure, with two actors in full tragic costume and again an uncostumed figure to the left, holding an open

scroll, although this figure is at least an adolescent with long sideburns. Şare Ağtürk finds it improbable to imagine him appearing on the actual stage but suggests his inclusion may “upscale the actors physically ... [while] referring to a constituent element of a tragic play” (2021: 87 and n. 41).

While arguing persuasively that a large stage device with five knobs (lettered alpha to epsilon) appearing in multiple theatrical scenes in later Roman art was used to mark progress through five acts or sections for the audience, Dunbabin (2006) points out one example where a boy also holding an open scroll manipulates the device, while looking back at the tragic performers. He cannot be engaged in “prompting” at that moment but is still clearly a visible and apparently necessary part of the performance.

The notion that professional performers would so regularly need prompting that a company member supplying the occasional textual lapse would be visible to an audience and worth commemorating as such in art seems unlikely. More plausible may be a style of performance in which protagonist and deuteragonist interpret famous and beloved scenes for the audience while another voice from the side (probably someone in training) supplies any needed dialogue from a third character in a scene or even some choral transitions in performances staged without a full chorus. Such is not incompatible with performances including excerpts from most or all of the major portions of a play (and even designated by act for the audience by the knobbed stage device), though such displays would emphasize star vocal and gestural performance (perhaps of speeches and scenes familiar from elite education) over narrative coherence.

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