

Grotesque terracotta in the Greco-Roman world: the role of caricature in visual humour, of theatrical masks in the realm of Comedy and of portraits of deformity in ancient medical centres.

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The meaning and function of ancient grotesque terracotta has been debated since the time of Charcot and Regnault, who first “diagnosed” a pathological inspiration in the grotesquely deformed bodies of terracotta statuettes found in various archaeological excavations of the Mediterranean and dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Yet the iconography of these grotesque terracotta figurines is extremely complex to pinpoint with any certitude.

There are three main spheres of interpretation: visual humour and caricature, Comedy masks and theatrical figurines, and specific “portraits” of known pathologies. Their function may have been to amuse, to avert evil, as a memento of comic plays, or even for medical study.

These grotesque figurines often lack an archaeological context to be fully understood, which is a little like diagnosing a patient over the telephone. However, notwithstanding the fact

that the function of the objects is a tricky subject to tackle, I will try to offer some pointers to non-iconographic specialists to distinguish among these numerous, mass-produced objects, what can be differentiated between these three “types” of contexts of use.



*Caricatured head.* Roman terracotta figurine from Smyrna (Izmir). Paris, Musée du Louvre. 100 B.C. – 100 A.D.

### **Bibliography**

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