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Youthful Boiotian protomes: technique and ideology.¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses Boiotian terracotta bust-protomes of the Classical period. It focuses on the youthful male type, represented by three surviving examples belonging to two mould series. These protomes are technically intriguing because they were constructed by combining female and bearded male types to create secondary prototypes. This intricate process was driven not only by technical considerations but possibly also by religious and ideological reasons: to convey the androgynous quality of a young initiate of Dionysos, whose identity was intentionally blurred with that of the god during the time of transition from adolescence to adulthood. Depositing a youthful protome in the grave of a prematurely deceased could have helped place him under the protection of the god of transitions, who would guide him from life to death and hopefully to a blessed afterlife.

Keywords: Boiotia; protomes; terracottas; Dionysos; *kantharos*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Terracotta bust-protomes were a common and characteristic votive and grave offering in Boiotia and areas influenced by it, like neighbouring Lokris and Phokis, from the middle of the fifth through to the fourth century BC². These are frontal representations of the upper parts of figures, often reaching the waist. Boiotian protomes, made in moulds, have hollow backs and were originally painted in bright colours, which are occasionally well preserved. Most represent female figures with arms either by their sides or, more often, bent under the breasts, with one hand usually holding a flower bud rendered in relief or simply painted on. They wear a polos-like headdress or low *stephane* and generally sport an archaising wig-like hairdo with centrally parted hair that falls onto the shoulders in horizontal ridges.

Male Boiotian protomes are much rarer and date from the late fifth to mid-fourth century BC. These generally lack specific archaeological context. Most were likely associated with graves, many plundered during the late 19th century, with their finds sold on the antiquities market. Today, these protomes are scattered across various Greek and other European museums³. They range in height from 24.5 to 50 cm. Some are clearly made

² SABETAI 2015, pp. 151–154 with references.

³ For the protomes see most recently SZABÓ 1981; HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015.

in the same mould series, with a few distributed over at least three generations of moulds.

Coroplastic production meant that from a single prototype hundreds of terracotta objects could be produced, constituting a mould series⁴. All moulds taken directly from the prototype are considered first-generation moulds in which identically sized first-generation casts are produced. These casts could then be used as prototypes to produce second-generation moulds; the casts from those were slightly smaller because of the shrinkage of clay during drying and firing⁵. Using terracottas of earlier generations as new prototypes could be repeated, resulting in a family of mechanically related products that could extend to several generations. Moulds taken from the original or a derivative prototype could be reworked before firing, producing casts that differed to a greater or lesser extent from the original.

2. BEARDED AND BEARDLESS PROTOMES

Most Boiotian male protomes represent a bearded, thus mature, individual with both arms bent. He holds various attributes, most commonly a *kantharos* in his left hand and an egg in the right⁶. He wears a *himation* that falls from his left shoulder and an elaborate headdress consisting of a thin wreath and a low *stephane*, both of which are also found on female protomes⁷. Wide flaps hanging down to the shoulders, occasionally found

⁴ On the mould technique see MULLER 1996, pp. 27–47.

⁵ The degree of shrinkage between terracottas of two successive generations can range from about 10 to 20 per cent.

⁶ E.g., MOLLARD-BESQUES 1954, p. 97, no. C 87 pl. 70. In a future article, I will present a systematic and comprehensive discussion of all surviving bearded examples according to iconographic types.

⁷ HIGGINS 1954, p. 224, no. 842, pl. 116.

on female protomes⁸, probably represent a short veil supported by the *stephane*.

A youthful, beardless type, which is the focus of this paper, is represented by only three surviving protomes⁹: one in Prague (Appendix no. 1 and fig. 1)¹⁰, a second in Amsterdam (Appendix no. 2 and fig. 2)¹¹, and a third in the British Museum (Appendix no. 3 and fig. 3)¹². In all three, the youth faces forward and wears a *himation* that covers his left shoulder and upper arm. The *himation* then goes around his back, under his right forearm, and finally gathers over his left forearm. With both arms bent, he balances an egg on the fingertips of his right hand, which he holds in the middle of his chest, and holds another attribute in his left hand: in the Prague and Amsterdam protomes, he holds a *kantharos* from the base, while in the British Museum example he carries a cockerel. All three figures wear an elaborate headdress with flaps, like the one on the bearded protomes.

The three youthful protomes belong to two distinct mould series, which also feature a bearded version. It is unclear whether the bearded and beardless versions of each series were created simultaneously or if one was a later transformation of the other. If the latter, we need to delve into the technical process used to produce the second version¹³.

⁸ GOLDMAN, JONES 1942, pl. XVII.

⁹ There is at least one more found in a cemetery near Elateia in 1979 (see Appendix no. 4); as it is unpublished, this protome cannot be taken into consideration here.

¹⁰ Prague, Kinsky Palace NM-HM10 7670.

¹¹ Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum 1815.

¹² London, British Museum 1874,0305.71.

¹³ I thank Arthur Muller for his expert advice on these complicated technical issues.

Mould series A: Prague protome

The Prague protome differs from the other two youthful protomes, which belong to a different series, in the thick set of hair framing the youth's oval face and covering the ears, and a wreath with symmetrically arranged leaves under the *stephane*. The setting of the rounded face on the fleshy neck and the rendering of the swollen complexion are hallmarks of the post-Pheidian art in the late fifth-early fourth century BC¹⁴. This example is mechanically related to a bearded protome in Toronto (Fig. 4)¹⁵, whose face reflects some influence of the art of Pheidias, so the series probably dates from the later fifth century BC¹⁶.

The similar dimensions of the bearded and beardless protomes indicate they are likely products of the same generation. The slight difference in height between the two (37.5 cm for the Prague protome versus 39 cm for the Toronto one) is because the bottom of the Toronto protome has been restored (Fig. 4b shows the protome before restoration). Due to the approximate nature of restoration work, there is also a slight difference in the shape of the right forearm. The mediocre quality of the moulding suggests the two protomes were not cast in a first-generation mould taken directly from the prototype but are likely products of the second generation.

If the original version depicted a youthful figure, it could have been transformed into a mature individual with curly hair and a beard through intaglio work on a first-generation mould. This would result in a second-

¹⁴ Cf. some Tarantine works: a terracotta head (Taranto, Museo Nazionale Archeologico 4006; ROLLEY 1999, p. 387, fig. 408) and an acrolithic head (Taranto, Museo Nazionale Archeologico 3885; BELLI PASQUA 1995, pp. 54–57, III.4).

¹⁵ Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum 959.17.60.

¹⁶ Not mid-fourth century, as stated in SVOBODOVÁ 2020, p. 205. On the influence of Pheidias in Athenian art of the late fifth century, see more recently GHISELLINI 2023.

generation piece with similar dimensions to the second-generation youthful protome. However, the major differences in hairstyle and headdress cannot be attributed to intaglio work modifications, and several other versions of bearded figures holding an egg and *kantharos* suggest the original version was the bearded one. Therefore, the most likely scenario is that the youthful type was created through a 'secondary prototype'¹⁷. In this process, a newly cast example of the first generation representing a bearded figure was modified before firing in one of two ways: either by altering the hairstyle and wreath and removing the beard through modelling work, or, more likely, by replacing the bearded head with that of a female protome. After firing, this modified youthful protome became a secondary prototype from which the second-generation Prague protome was manufactured, differing from the second-generation Toronto example only in the upper part.

Mould series B: Amsterdam and British Museum protomes

The protomes in Amsterdam (Fig. 2) and in the British Museum (Fig. 3) depict a similar youthful figure to the one in Prague. However, they belong to a different mould series of a popular bearded type. This type is attested in three generations and includes at least 13 examples dating to the first half of the fourth century BC. A well-preserved protome of the first generation (38 cm high) is in the Louvre (Fig. 5)¹⁸.

The Amsterdam youth holds the same attributes as the Prague example. There are minor differences, such as the positioning of the right arm, which is less upright here, and the *kantharos*, which is placed vertically. The

¹⁷ See MULLER 1996, pp. 45-46, p. 95 and *passim*; MULLER 1997, p. 452, *s.v.*

¹⁸ Paris, The Louvre MNC 752; MOLLARD-BESQUES 1954, p. 97, no. C 87 pl. 70.

coiffure is noticeably different: the hair is parted in the middle with flame-like patterned locks combed up from the forehead and wrapped around a thin tubular headband, visible at the centre¹⁹. Called *ampyx*, this was part of the Classical female hairstyle. The headdress consists of a thin, stippled wreath and a *stephane* with flaps slightly shorter than those of the Prague example. Unlike the Prague and Toronto examples, the hair does not totally cover the ears.

The dimensions of the Amsterdam protome (33 cm high) suggest it belongs to the second generation, like a bearded example in Copenhagen (Fig. 6)²⁰. However, the facial features and hairstyle differ slightly. Unlike the furrowed forehead of the bearded type, the face of the Amsterdam protome is smooth, the eyes more horizontal, the lips thinner and straighter, and the locks of hair dissimilar²¹. These differences and the absence of a beard indicate that the Amsterdam protome was not cast in a similar mould as the Copenhagen example. Therefore, it appears that, as with the Toronto and Prague case, one of these protomes, again most likely the youthful one, was created through a secondary prototype that used the head of a female protome. In this case, the feminine face dates from the second half of the fifth century, thus predating the bearded type. The sex change of the female face to a male would have been clearly signalled by the pink skin colouring,

¹⁹ The flame-like coiffure is of the first half of the fourth century (though the model goes back to the Erechtheion Caryatids): cf. a female protome from an Akraifian grave in SABETAI 2022a, p. 355, fig. 16.8; see also JEAMMET 2003, p. 116, no. 75.

²⁰ Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark 6355 (H: 30.8 cm): BREITENSTEIN 1941, 14, no. 304, pl. 36; GASPARRI 1986, p. 428, no. 56 (who dates it to the end of the fifth or the beginning of the fourth century BC).

²¹ Amsterdam example: on either side of the parting, at least five locks of hair are divided into two or three strands. Copenhagen (and Louvre) example: only three locks of hair are divided into three strands. The hair is also slightly different near the parting.

traces of which are preserved. The transformation of female into male types is not surprising. Adapting existing types to create new ones was an expedient production method for introducing greater variety in coroplasty.

From both a technical and iconographic perspective, the third youthful protome in the British Museum (Fig. 3) is even more interesting than the one in Amsterdam. It belongs to the same fourth-century bearded-type series, and although slightly smaller than the Amsterdam example²², its dimensions suggest it, too, is a derivative product of the second generation²³.

The two youthful protomes of this type differ in several ways, indicating they were produced from two distinct secondary prototypes. The most obvious and iconographically significant difference is that the British Museum youth holds a cockerel in his left hand instead of the *kantharos* in the Amsterdam example. Additionally, the head is small in proportion to the neck and body, and the face has finer features, thus appearing even more feminine than in the Amsterdam protome. Finally, the wiry, flame-like hair is arranged slightly differently as the locks stand up straighter and do not extend as far on the sides.

Both protomes have prominent right pectorals that resemble a female breast, a feature also of the bearded type. In an older individual, this feature seems to represent saggy and flabby muscles, but in the youthful protomes,

²² British Museum protome: 31 x 25 cm; Amsterdam protome: 33 x 27.4 cm.

²³ Louvre protome (first generation): 38 x 30 cm; Copenhagen protome (second generation): 30.8 x 24; British Museum: 31 x 25.

it imparts a more effeminate appearance. This, and the absence of a beard, led some earlier scholars to mistake these two protomes for females²⁴.

One peculiar feature of the British Museum protome has remained unnoticed in scholarship: the presence of bulges on the neck, above the egg, which are more visible under raking light. These could well be remnants of a beard that were not completely erased in the transformation of a bearded protome to a youthful one²⁵.

This protome is often cited for its bright colours applied on a white slip: yellow on the wreath and cockerel; black on the eyes, brows, hair, and cockerel; red on the body, the *stephane*, and the cockerel's head; white on the egg, *himation*, and flaps (with black stippling along the edge); and blue on the *ampyx* and flaps²⁶. These well-preserved and vivid colours, along with the unusual features mentioned above and the reported location and date of discovery («Tanagra 1874»), might suggest it is a pastiche or even a fake. During the 1870s, Boiotian terracottas from illegal digs in the cemeteries of Tanagra became highly marketable and inundated the European antiquities markets. Inevitably, their popularity led to the creation of many forgeries. Ancient but unrelated fragments were pieced together and sold as complete objects or new terracottas were manufactured using moulds taken from ancient examples²⁷. However, there is no concrete evidence of modern forgery, though, of course, only scientific testing could

²⁴ E.g., WALTERS 1903, p. 216 (who identified the British Museum protome as a mask of Persephone); NILSSON 1957, pp. 118–120.

²⁵ Another, less likely, explanation could be that these are remains of a necklace from a female protome (cf. WINTER 1903, I p. 250, no. 7; DAFFA-NIKONANOU 1973, pp. 73, 105–108, pl. 5, fig. 3).

²⁶ HIGGINS 1954, pp. 233–234.

²⁷ HIGGINS 1986, pp. 162–178; UHLENBROCK 1993, pp. 11–12.

confirm the authenticity of the British Museum protome. Moreover, given other brightly painted authentic terracottas, the colours may be original but were likely enhanced in modern times²⁸.

Indeed, there is good evidence of enhancement of the polychromy and even the addition of further colours. In his 1903 catalogue of the terracottas in the British Museum, H.B. Walters reported that the colours were «much damaged, especially on the left side»²⁹. From the published black-and-white photograph (Fig. 7), it can be inferred that ‘left’ refers to the viewer’s point of view³⁰. Therefore, the protome was not entirely brightly coloured when it first surfaced. In fact, Walters’ description of colours does not mention those on the wreath, *himation*, egg, or cockerel. This suggests these colours were added in the first half of the 20th century, after Walters’ publication and before Higgins’ study. The other colours may also have been enhanced at the same time, following ancient traces.

Close inspection of the old photograph reveals another peculiar feature of the protome: a double curved edge at the bottom of the flaps. This area is concealed by the white slip, making it difficult to discern in the colour photograph³¹.

The differences in the upper part of the protome and the change in one of the attributes suggest that, like the Amsterdam protome, the British Museum protome was created by modifying an existing example of the bearded type. Thus, another secondary prototype was created by partially

²⁸ I thank Violaine Jeammet for this suggestion based on the photos.

²⁹ WALTERS 1903, p. 216 no. C 292, pl. VIII. See also FARNELL 1907, pl. X.

³⁰ Confusingly, Walters seems to refer to body parts from the figure’s point of view but to the sides of the protome from the viewer’s point of view.

³¹ Strangely, the bottom of the protome is slightly cut off in the old photo published in Farnell 1907, pl. X.

casting the original bearded version (up to the shoulders and the bottom of the flaps) and combining this bust with a beardless head obtained by partially casting a female protome. This head was not the same one used in the production of the Amsterdam example and was smaller. Consequently, the figure's proportions appear unnatural, with the smaller head placed on a longer neck, so it looks further from the chest. The double edge at the bottom of the flaps may have been created during the combining of the two partial casts.

The new prototype was reworked to replace the *kantharos* with a cockerel and remove the beard above the egg. However, the remnant bulges on the chest suggest the modification was not done diligently. Also, the flap on the left shoulder was slightly modified since it does not overlap the edge of the *himation* as on the bearded type.

3. THE NEW YOUTHFUL TYPE

The secondary prototype used to create a second-generation cast transformed the original mature individual holding a *kantharos* into a youthful, effeminate figure holding a cockerel. The flabby chest of the bearded version was left unmodified, now appearing more like a breast, perhaps reflecting the idea of gender ambiguity during adolescence.

Why did the coroplast go to great lengths to create the youthful protomes? One possibility is that the new type was an attempt to expand the coroplast's range of products. Alternatively, these protomes might have been isolated special commissions requiring the depiction of a young person with specific attributes. Since there were no existing models to base the protome on, the coroplast may have combined elements from the female

and bearded male types already in production to create a new type of protome. If these rare protomes were unique copies, the coroplast would have sold the modified secondary prototype itself, rather than using it to take new moulds for mass production of a new generation of youthful protomes.

The interpretation of the British Museum protome relies heavily on the replacement of the typical *kantharos* with a cockerel. The inspiration for this attribute may have come from a protome like the one originally in Berlin (Fig. 8)³². This very interesting protome was unfortunately lost during World War II, with only an old drawing ever published; it is usually referred to as another example of the youth with a cockerel type. However, an old photograph kindly provided by the Berlin Museum clearly shows a female³³ wearing typical female attire: a chiton worn under a peplos forms sling-shaped sleeves, similar to examples from the mid-fifth century BC³⁴.

The woman depicted on this Berlin protome has wavy hair parted in the centre and adorned with a low *stephane*. She wears a veil, or the back of the overfold of her peplos drawn over the head³⁵, which frames her triangular face like the flaps on the male protomes. Her hands are brought up to the breasts in a commonly depicted feminine gesture, with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand pinched, possibly indicating she was originally holding a painted flower bud.

³² Staatliche Museen-Antikensammlung TC 8163,65: FURTWÄNGLER 1888, 253, no. 4.; WINTER 1903, I, p. 248, no. 1; BIANCHI 1976, p. 32 no. 67. H: 23 cm. Traces of red colour.

³³ Correctly identified by BIANCHI 1976, p. 32 no. 67.

³⁴ Cf. HIGGINS 1954, p. 224, no. 842; BREITENSTEIN 1941, no. 333, pl. XL; SABETAI 2015, pp. 151–153, figs. 2–3).

See also <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/antiquities-n08500/lot.52.html>.

³⁵ Cf. Sabetai 2022a, p. 355.

Interestingly, a cockerel has been added to the crook of her left arm, an attribute not typically found on other female protomes. Perhaps adding this bird to a generalised type aimed to specify her as a goddess, such as Persephone. On one type of the Lokrian plaques, the underworld goddess, similarly veiled and wearing a *stephane*, holds a rooster while enthroned next to her spouse³⁶. Alternatively, this could have been an early attempt to depict a youth using a female protome, with the only modification being the addition of the cockerel. This was an attribute frequently held by adolescent boys in Attic vase paintings and Boiotian terracottas, as will be discussed later. The hanging veil, which replaces the more typical ribbed hair mass of female protomes, reduces the overall feminine appearance of the figure.

4. FUNCTION OF THE YOUTHFUL PROTOMES

All three youthful protomes, as well as most of the bearded ones, have a semi-circular horizontal flange at the back, just below the upper edge. This is often pierced once or twice for suspension or attachment³⁷, suggesting they may have been displayed before being deposited in graves³⁸. This feature, along with the usual downward gaze of the protomes, implies they were designed to be seen from below³⁹—hung on a wall above eye level or

³⁶ Type 8/31 (490-480 BC): LISSI CARONNA 1996–2007, III-2, pp. 413–452; III-5, pl. CXXXIV. However, it is important to note that the rooster is not the exclusive attribute of Persephone: SPIGO 2000a, p. 30; SPIGO 2000b, pp. 51–55.

³⁷ This flange is also found on several female protomes: SABETAI 2015, p. 151.

³⁸ Cf. KLINGER 2019, p. 139.

³⁹ JEAMMET 2003, 106: The position of the pupils on the upper part of the eyes of the British Museum protome, indicates the same.

perhaps from a tree. The projecting flanges, especially where unpierced, could also have provided a grip when carrying the protomes for dedication or deposition⁴⁰. Therefore, it seems likely that the protomes originally had a ritual function, probably in a domestic context where several female protomes have been found. They could have been used in a household shrine or as memorials of transition rituals and only later put to secondary use as grave offerings⁴¹.

5. INTERPRETATION OF THE YOUTHFUL PROTOMES

In addition to technical issues, the youthful protomes also raise questions about the identity of the individuals they represent. As noted, the interpretation of these youthful protomes is closely linked to the bearded ones, in terms of their shared features and attributes, as well as their technical connections.

The bearded individuals are usually identified as a divinity, more commonly Dionysos⁴². This is mainly based on his imposing appearance, elaborate headgear, and the *kantharos*, the characteristic, though not exclusive, cup of the god⁴³. The *kantharos* is a vessel closely associated with Boiotia, but its association with Dionysos is more evident in Athens.

⁴⁰ Cf. KLINGER 2019, p. 140.

⁴¹ Cf. SABETAI 2015, pp. 157–158.

⁴² HEUZEY 1878, p. 15; BREITENSTEIN 1941, p. 34; HIGGINS 1954, p. 233; MOLLARD-BESQUES 1954, p. 97; HIGGINS 1967, p. 80; BECQ, JEAMMET, MATHIEUX 2010, p. 150.

⁴³ For the *kantharos* in Boiotia and its associations beyond Dionysos, see TOMEI 2008, pp. 113, 151–155; SABETAI 2012, 129; SABETAI 2022b, 156. Cf. SALAPATA 2014, 135–136; HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015, 75.

Identification of the busts as Dionysos is supported by a group of terracotta male masks from Boiotia and elsewhere. These have been produced since the sixth century BC and may have inspired the creation of bust-protomes. The masks represent a similar bearded figure with a *stephane* or *polos*⁴⁴, which, in some later examples, is decorated with vegetation, ivy leaves, or grapes, thus presumably representing Dionysos. None were indisputably found in a funerary context, so they likely had a votive or cultic function. In contrast, the bearded bust-protomes were almost certainly associated with graves, as suggested by those discovered at the excavations of Halai⁴⁵.

The egg has also been significant for identifying the bearded figures. As a symbol of fertility, new life, and rebirth, the egg was offered to underworld divinities, heroes, and the dead⁴⁶. Those identifying the bearded figure as Dionysos generally interpret it as an attribute of his chthonic aspect. However, the egg can also be interpreted as a heroic symbol. On a Boiotian krater from ca. 400 BC, a banqueter is depicted holding a *kantharos* and an egg, like the contemporary protomes⁴⁷. This figure could well represent a hero⁴⁸. A few scholars prefer to identify the bearded protomes as the Boiotian Kabiros, who is often assimilated with Dionysos due to the similar iconography⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ Jerusalem, Israel Museum 91.71.334 (formerly Norbert Schimmel Collection, NY).

⁴⁵ GOLDMAN, JONES 1942.

⁴⁶ BÖHR 2009, esp. pp. 46–48.

⁴⁷ Athens, National Museum 1393; LULLIES 1940, pp. 21–23, pl. 26.

⁴⁸ SALAPATA 2006, 555.

⁴⁹ SCHALTZ 1974; DAUMAS 1998, p. 105. On the Kabirion sanctuary, see most recently SCHACHTER 2003.

More recently, Stephanie Huysecom-Haxhi proposed a different interpretation of the bearded protomes. She argued that, although their Dionysiac character is evident, they should be seen as abridged versions of mortal banqueters, representing men in their status as citizens and heads of *oikoi*. The *kantharos* would symbolise the identity and role of those who had the right to participate in the symposion. Additionally, she argued that the wine contained in the *kantharos* and transformed from grapes would represent transformation and the passage to adult life that included access to the symposion⁵⁰.

However, although the *kantharos* sometimes does appear in the hands of mortals, it seems to be a special type of cup more appropriate for gods and heroes.⁵¹ Therefore, it might characterise Dionysos, or even a heroic or ancestral figure, rather than ordinary adult citizens. Since the *kantharos* is mainly associated with the god of transformation, it could also function as a symbol of transformation in various contexts: for example, in the hand of Herakles it could represent his elevation into a god, and in the hand of a special mortal his elevation into a hero. If the bearded protomes do represent ordinary citizens, these could be initiates in the cult of Dionysos depicted in an elevated state after death, assimilated to the god. The egg, which does not fit easily into the image of an adult citizen, would have conferred an eschatological meaning, symbolising life after death for the god's followers. Such representations of Dionysos, or of mortals assimilated to the god, might have been placed in graves to indicate initiation into his

⁵⁰ HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015.

⁵¹ TOMEI 2008, pp. 113, 151.

cult. Alternatively, these offerings could have expressed the desire to place the deceased under the god's protection⁵².

The rarer youthful protome type is also usually identified as Dionysos⁵³, based on the formal similarities with the bearded one and the god's alternative depiction as an adolescent⁵⁴. This type fits the fluid and androgynous identity of Dionysos, who blends gender lines and mediates between male and female⁵⁵. Alternatively, scholars identifying the bearded protomes as Kabiros see Pais, his adolescent companion, represented in the youthful ones⁵⁶.

However, identifying the youthful figure as Dionysos raises the question of why he is depicted as both youthful and mature at different times. A more likely interpretation, suggested mainly by Huysecom-Haxhi⁵⁷, is that the figure is a young mortal. As his appearance and attributes use similar artistic language to the bearded protomes, it is possible he was a follower of Dionysos. The intentional blurring of identity between deity and worshipper would assimilate the latter with the god during vulnerable and dangerous life stages, such as the passage to adulthood, thus enabling a smooth transition under the guidance and protection of the god of transitions⁵⁸.

⁵² SABETAI 2015, p. 160. In a future article, I plan to delve deeper into the interpretation of the bearded protomes.

⁵³ E.g., LUNSINGH SCHEURLEE 1986; HIGGINS 1967, p. 80; BECQ *et al.* 2010, p. 150.

⁵⁴ On the youthful Dionysos, a type that emerged in Athenian art of the second half of the fifth century BC, see ISLER-KERÉNYI 2011; TODISCO 2019. His appearance as an adolescent in the eponymous *Homeric Hymn* (7.3-4) well predates his visual appearance as a youth.

⁵⁵ According to a Boiotian myth, Zeus gave Dionysos to Ino to raise as a girl. On the effeminate Dionysos, see BREMMER 1999, 184–188; CAIN 1997.

⁵⁶ DAUMAS 1998, p. 105; cf. JEAMMET 2003, p. 104.

⁵⁷ HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015.

⁵⁸ SABETAI 2015, pp. 155–158.

The special headdress of the youth, modelled on that worn by bearded protomes, may indicate initiation or a rite of passage. The attributes he is holding have symbolic meaning and may mark his current social identity. The egg may signify that the youth is in a transitional phase with the potential of a whole life before him. In a funerary context, the egg could also signify hope for a new life after death⁵⁹. The *kantharos* in the Prague and Amsterdam examples assimilates the youth with Dionysos but may also denote that the youth has matured and now has access to the symposium, representing his future life as a citizen⁶⁰. On the other hand, the cockerel held by the British Museum (and the Berlin) protome suggests an earlier stage in life. This bird was a common erotic gift given by an older man (*erastēs*) to his younger lover (*erōmenos*) and symbolised virility and the spirit of competition. Its presence in the hand of the youth indicated that he had attained adolescence and was ready to engage in a pederastic relationship⁶¹. In this relationship, the youth was expected to gratify his *erastēs* in exchange for guidance and support towards adulthood and citizenship⁶².

Crucial support for this interpretation is provided by Boiotian figurines of youths with softly modelled musculature holding various markers of their social identity at that stage of life, such as a strigil, hare, or lyre, and

⁵⁹ Both actual eggs and reproductions in different materials are occasionally found in graves: LECHNER 1953; BOTTINI 1988, pp. 11–12; PERUZZI 2016. Cf. the late fifth-century BC limestone figurine of Helen hatching from the egg found in a female grave in the *chora* of Metapontum and related to Orphic beliefs: BOTTINI 1988, figs. 6–8; pl. IIb.

⁶⁰ Cf. HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015, p. 80.

⁶¹ Cf. the inscribed funerary stele of Mnasiatheos from Akraiphia erected by his lover “in place of long-ago affection”: ESTRIN 2016.

⁶² HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015, pp. 82–85; SABETAI 2022b, pp. 156, 158.

most commonly a cockerel placed in the crook of their left arm⁶³. This characteristically Boiotian coroplastic figural type appeared around the mid-fifth century and lasted until the third century BC. Such figurines represent idealised male adolescence and have been found in large numbers in Boiotia, both in tombs and in sanctuaries of divinities associated with maturation rites for boys, like that of Apollo Ptoios and the Kabirion.

During the fifth century BC, the hairstyle of the youths was simple and short, but by the mid-fourth century it became elaborate, with voluminous curls topped by an ornate headdress⁶⁴, an arrangement that may characterise the youth as an initiate or as undergoing a rite of passage. A figurine found in a grave at Tanagra and dated to the first half of the fourth century (Fig. 9) resembles the British Museum protome. The youth is wearing a himation falling on both shoulders and holding a cockerel; the face, added separately, is missing, but the flame-like hair, the *ampyx*, and the *stephane* (here pointed at the centre and decorated with flowers) are similar. It is probably such an androgynous type that the coroplast of the British Museum protome tried to reproduce by modifying a bearded example. This exceptional protome can thus be considered an equivalent, abridged version of the popular youth figurines⁶⁵.

If these protomes were originally intended for display in a domestic context, they might later have accompanied a deceased youth to his grave. Such a funerary gift would be appropriate for his age and social status and would also serve as a reminder of his initiation or rite of passage. Just as

⁶³ On these figurines, see most recently HUYSECOM-HAXHI 2015; ROSENBERG-DIMITRACOPOULOU 2019.

⁶⁴ ROSENBERG-DIMITRACOPOULOU 2019, 238.

⁶⁵ Thebes Museum 35430. JEAMMET 2003, pp. 112-113, no. 71. On the concept of protomes as abridged versions of full figures, see MULLER 2009.

Dionysos had protected the youth during the transformational phase of adolescence, the god would now safely guide him into the afterlife. As symbols of fertility and regeneration, the cockerel and egg evoke Dionysos as the god of renewal of nature and as an underworld divinity who offered his followers eternal life⁶⁶. The *kantharos* would symbolise the pleasures that await the deceased initiate, much like Dionysiac banquets⁶⁷.

6. CONCLUSION

The few surviving youthful protomes reveal an interesting interplay of technical, iconographic, and symbolic dimensions. The adaptability of Boiotian coroplastic workshops is demonstrated in their ability to create new types within a mould series by introducing secondary prototypes. The formal characteristics of the youthful protomes strongly suggest their origin in a combination of female and male types that transformed bearded protomes into youthful ones.

This intricate construction, driven by technical considerations and possibly influenced by religious and ideological motivations, conveys the androgynous essence of an adolescent under the guidance of Dionysos. Attributes held by the youthful figures, such as the egg, *kantharos*, and cockerel, contribute to the symbolic significance of the protomes, providing insights into rituals and social identities. Modelled after the god, these

⁶⁶ JEAMMET 2003, p. 106. Egg and rooster figurines in late-fourth-century pyres near the West Gate at Eretria have been associated by the excavators with Dionysiac festivities which would include the cult of the dead: DESCOEUDRES *et al.* 1978, pp. 81–87.

⁶⁷ Cf. MORAW 2011, pp. 243–244. Egg and *kantharos* are also associated with a youthful banqueter on a vase: SCHMALTZ 1974, pl. 20, no. 247.

protomes could represent young initiates of Dionysos, their identity intentionally blurred with that of the god during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The later repurposing of these artefacts as grave offerings adds an intriguing layer to their life cycle. Placing a youthful protome in the grave of an individual who met premature death possibly aimed to ensure his protection by the god of transitions in the journey from life to death and a wished-for blessed afterlife.

APPENDIX: *Catalogue of Boiotian youthful male protomes*

1. Prague, Kinsky Palace NM-HM10 7670

Provenance: Boiotia.

Preservation: Pieced from fragments; small restorations in the fingers of the right hand, the hairline on the right-hand side, and the left flap of the headdress.

Height: 37.5 cm

Width: 29 cm

Fabric: Light brown clay.

Polychromy: Traces of white slip on the surface and pink colour on the face, lips, and arms.

Description: Youthful figure wearing a *himation* covering his left side; his thick hair is crowned by a wreath and a low *stephane* with wide flaps hanging down to the shoulders. Holds an egg in his right and a *kantharos* in his left hand.

Reverse: Behind the *stephane* is a semicircular flange, pierced once slightly off-centre, for suspension.

Date: Late fifth century BC.

Bibliography: SVOBODOVÁ 2020, 205, no. 145.

2. Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum 1815

Provenance: Boiotia. Acquired in 1934, formerly collection of Joly de Bammerville (Paris, auction catalogue 1893, no. 180).

Preservation: Complete; edges of *stephane* are slightly damaged.

Height: 33 cm

Width: 27.4 cm

Fabric: Reddish-yellow (5YR 7/6).

Polychromy: Traces of white slip; red on hair and cup, pink on arm and chest, brown on egg. The colour on the hair and the *kantharos* may be modern enhancements.

Description: Youthful figure wearing a *himation* covering his left side; his wiry, flame-like locks are crowned by a thin wreath and a *stephane* with flaps hanging down to the shoulders. Holds an egg in his right and a *kantharos* in his left hand.

Reverse: Behind the *stephane* is a semicircular flange, pierced twice for suspension.

Date: First half of the fourth century BC⁶⁸.

Bibliography: *ALGEMEENE GIDS* 1937, no. 278, pl. XVII; HIGGINS 1967, 80, pl. C; LUNSINGH SCHEURLEE 1986, 42–43 no. 27; BREMER 2003, 36 fig. 47.

3. London, British Museum 1874,0305.71.

Provenance: Reportedly from Tanagra and acquired in 1874 from Charles Merlin⁶⁹.

Preservation: Pieced from several fragments.

Height: 31 cm

Width: 25 cm

Fabric: Pale orange clay with some inclusions; dark at the back, brown on the front.

⁶⁸ Amsterdam: ca. 400 BC.

⁶⁹ Merlin had served as British Consul at Piraeus and as manager of the Ionian Bank in Athens; he collected and sold hundreds of antiquities to the British Museum, including forgeries: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG59456>. For Merlin see most recently GALANAKIS 2012.

Polychromy: Remarkably well-preserved colours (but peeling): red, yellow, black, blue.

Description: Youthful figure wearing a *himation* covering his left side; his wiry, flame-like locks are crowned by a thin wreath and a *stephane* with flaps hanging down to the shoulders. Holds an egg in his right and a cockerel in his left hand.

Reverse: Behind the *stephane* is a semicircular flange, pierced once for suspension.

Date: First half of the fourth century BC.

Bibliography: WINTER 1903, I, p. 248, no. 2; WALTERS 1903, 216, no. C 292, pl. VIII; HIGGINS 1954, 233–234, no. 874, pl. 126; HIGGINS 1986, 113–115, fig. 134, pl. VII; JEAMMET 2003, 105–106, no. 61.

4. At least one youthful protome holding *kantharos* and egg was found in a cemetery near Elateia in 1979.

Bibliography: Unpublished; but see PANTOS 1979, 193.

ADDENDUM:

While this article was in press, I became aware of two other examples of youthful protomes, which could not be considered here. They both belong to mould series B.

The first is part of the P. Zoumboulaki collection which was gifted to the Greek state in May 2024⁷⁰. It is from the same mould as the Amsterdam

⁷⁰ <https://www.lifo.gr/now/entertainment/yppo-apodohi-doreas-zoym-poylaki-kinton-mnimeion-pros-elliniko-dimosio> (I am grateful to Vicky Sabetai who alerted me to this article.)

example, and thus, it belongs to the second generation. Approximate dimensions: H: 37.8 cm; W: 29.5 cm. The second protome is held in a private collection and belongs to a later generation, most likely the third⁷¹. Approximate dimensions: H: 24 cm; W: 23 cm.

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⁷¹ I thank Anna Lekka for this information and for showing me a photograph.

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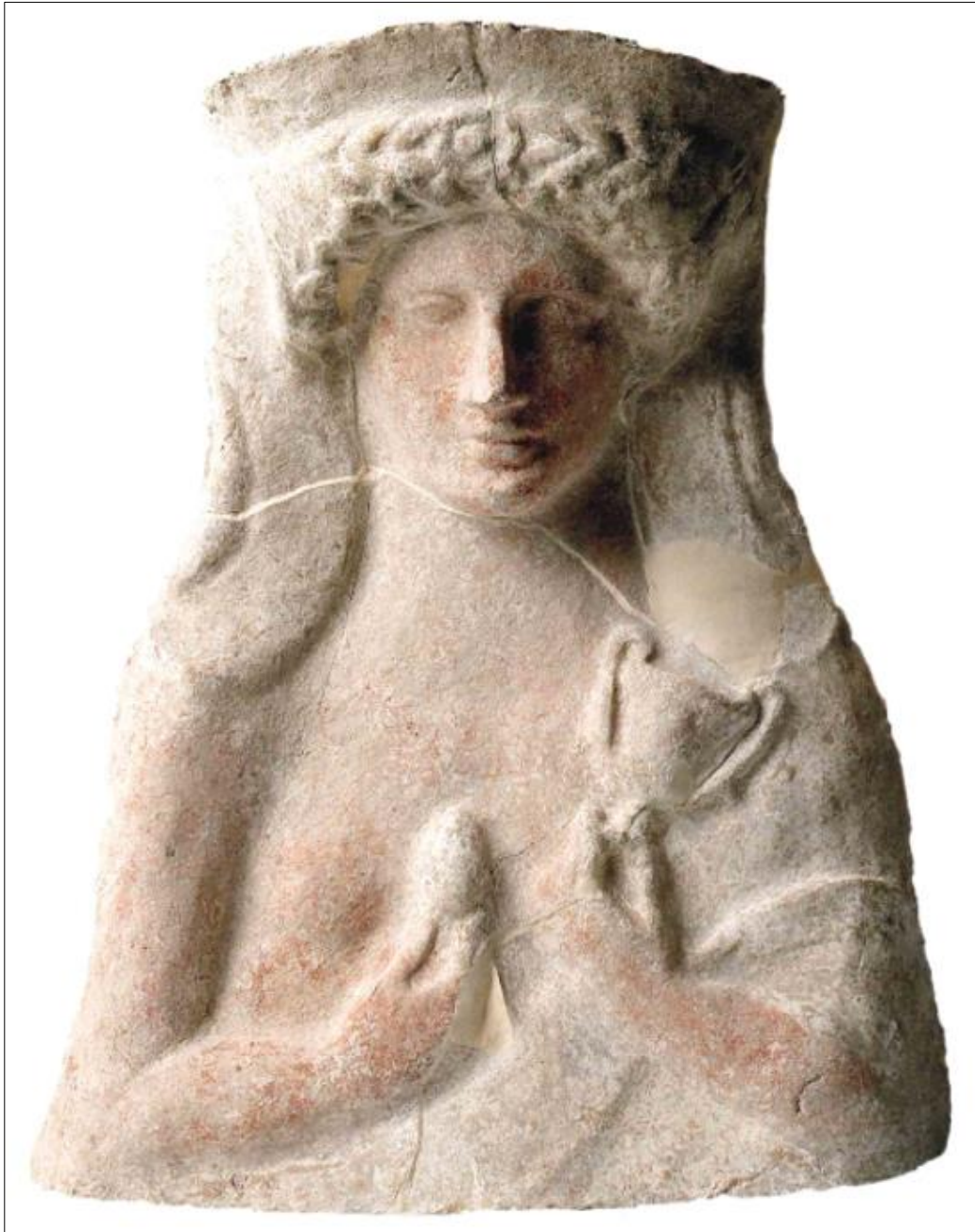


Fig. 1. Terracotta protome of youth. Prague, Kinsky Palace NM-HM10 7670 (after: SVOBODOVÁ 2020, 205, no. 145).

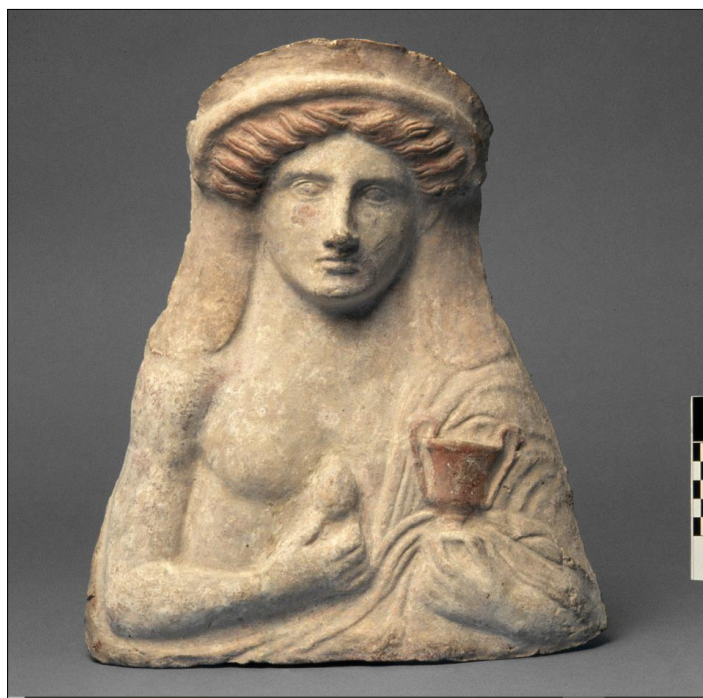


Fig. 2. Terracotta protome of youth. Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum 1815 (Photo: courtesy of the Museum).



Fig. 3. Terracotta protome of youth. London, British Museum 1874,0305.71 (after: HIGGINS 1986, pl. VII; © The Trustees of the British Museum, published with permission))



Fig. 4. Terracotta protome of bearded figure. Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum 959.17.60. a: after restoration; b: before restoration (Photos: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/356812>).



Fig. 5. Terracotta protome of bearded figure, first generation. Paris, The Louvre MNC 752 (Photo: Courtesy of the Museum).



Fig. 6. Terracotta protome of bearded figure, second generation. Copenhagen, National Museum of Denmark 6355 (Photo: Courtesy of Frederik Vingaard Rasmussen).



Fig. 7. Old photo of the British Museum youthful protome (after: WALTERS 1903, pl. VIII).



Fig. 8. Terracotta protome of female figure holding cockerel (lost). Berlin, Staatliche Museen-Antikensammlung TC 8163,65 (a: drawing after WINTER 1903, I, p. 248, no. 1; b: photo courtesy of the Museum).



Fig. 9. Terracotta figurine of youth holding cockerel. Thebes Museum 35430 (after: JEAMMET 2003, p. 112).