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Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Apotropaic masks

Two masks representing Silenus were found in the necropolis of Sulky; both were found in the same year and in the same place where the female protome was discovered.

The first (fig. 1) was discovered in 1979, in the northern sector of the Sulky necropolis; it is made from hazelnut-coloured, porous, impure clay with traces of creamy-white engobe (18 x 15.2 x 7.3 cm). The mask is made from a mould then hand-finished and with a stick. It has a crack on the back right edge, and has three suspension holes, one in the centre of the head on the front and two at the sides. The mask has several different characteristics than the ones found in Tharros and in Carthage. Compared with the ones from Tharros (fig. 2) the silenus mask from Sulci is more autonomous: the ears stick out less, the eyes are full holes, the moustache is strongly highlighted, the painted beard has vertical and diagonal lines, the mouth is closed with a fleshy lower lip.

The Sulcis specimen was found together with other Punic material dating back to the fifth century B.C., a dating which is believed valid for the masks of Carthage as well. Which were however produced until the 3rd-2nd centuries B.C.; the Tharros specimens instead may be framed between the end of V and the end of the fourth century B.C.





Fig. 1 - Silenus mask from Sant'Antioco. Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca"
(from http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sulci#mediaviewer/File:Sileno_%28Sulcis%29.jpg).

The second Sulci mask found in the same year and same place. It is hazelnut-coloured clay with cream englobe and has the same technical indications as the previous mask. It has been restored in the upper left part and has a diagonal crack across it; it has the usual three suspension holes in the centre of the head, on the front and sides under the ears and is about the same size as the other (17.6 x 15.4 x 0.9 cm).



Fig. 2 - Silenus mask from Tharros. National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari (from Ciasca 1988, p. 365)

There is a considerable difference with the other Sulky item (fig. 3): the silhouette of the second is oval, while that of the other mask tends to be squared and flares upwards in a sort of cap headgear which also includes its ears. The face is more human than Silenic, the eyes are holes as is the mouth, unlike the other. The moustache, a distinctive characteristic of the Silenus prototype, is missing.

The nearest comparison is with an example in Carthage, that always has a hole for eyes and mouth, and is characterised overall for its more human traits. This type may be dated to the third century B.C.



Fig. 3 - Silenus mask found in Sulky. Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca"
(from <http2.bp.blogspot.com-0iijUChNelwUKkWeCtMAeIAAAAAAAAAAAAEcv43cPqlsvjUs1600image004.gif>).

The Silenus masks had an apotropaic function: They had the task of frightening the bad spirits during the deceased's stay in the tomb and during the soul's journey to the other side. The grinning masks are very common in various towns of the Punic world, but currently there are no known items from Sant'Antioco.





Fig. 4 - Grinning mask from San Sperate (CA)
(from http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Sperate#mediaviewer/File:Maschera_punica.jpg).



■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

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