

The paraphernalia of an actor from Kerameikos

The Director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Athens, Eleni Sp. Banou and the curator of the archaeological site and the museum of Kerameikos Leonidas K. Bournias, write about the archaeological find from the tomb of the actor Makareus.



Lidded Pyxis containing pellets with pink pigment. Photo: S. Mavrommatis

In the archaeological site of Kerameikos, at the beginning of the conventionally named “Street of Tombs”, which is flanked by some of the most magnificent funerary sculptures, at the junction with the “South Road” and only at a small distance from the grave monument of Dexileos, lies a plateau with five burial precincts known as the “Edge Terrace”. In this appealing venue -in about a century (from the middle of the 4th to just before the middle of the 3rd century BC)- at least three actors and a comedian were laid to rest.

One of them was Makareus from the deme *Lakiadae* [in the area of the modern Botanikos, along the Sacred Way (*Hiera Odos*)]. Makareus was a talented tragedian ‘who would have grown into a great artist of the theatrical tragic plays, if luck had only favoured him and allowed him to mature...’, according to the epigram at the base of his funerary *naiskos*. The marble *naiskos* of Makareus was erected on the “Edge Terrace” after 338 BC., but before the ban on sumptuous burials came into force

in Athens (in 317/307 BC). The now-lost back wall of the *naiskos* originally bore some painting related to the deceased, as did the funerary *stèle* for Aristion, an actor from Troizen, who ‘served comedy’ and also had his monument decorated with a painted comedian’s mask. Aristion had as well perished *ἔμπροσθεν ὥρας... οὐκ εἰς γῆρας ἐλθών*¹, just before the middle of the 3rd century BC. [The phrase in ancient Greek meaning «before his time had come, before getting old»]. He died only forty years of age and with no descendants, according to the inscription just below the painted mask.

Some finds related to Makareus’ burial are quite interesting. In particular, inside the limestone sarcophagus, among other important grave goods, two miniature lidded *lekane* (n. 10538, 10539) and a miniature lidded *Pyxis* were found (n. 10537), all exhibited in a group in showcase 13 of the Kerameikos museum. The vases belong to a pottery type quite common in Corinth and Boeotia. They were frequently employed as jewel or cosmetics cases, containing makeup powder in the form of pellets and are usually found in female burials. The two *lekanidae* in question contained white coloured pellets and the *Pyxis* pink coloured ones, consisting primarily of neutral lead carbonate, according to the physicochemical analysis² (also known as *cerussite* or *psimythion* or white lead or *stoupetsi*). The pink colour is due to the presence of a small quantity of cinnabar (mercury sulfide). The uniform size of the pellets is explained by the use of a mould, which indicates a standardized production and sales procedure, as recorded by similar finds inside and outside of Athens.



The “Edge Terrace” in Kerameikos, from the northwest. At the center lies the base and the capping of the funerary naiskos of the actor Makareus, crowning a burial enclosure with a facade of polygonal masonry. Phot.: Ch. Louisides.

¹ Λουκιανός, Περὶ πένθους, 13

² Analysis by Éléonore Welcomm, Philippe Walter and Georges Tsoucaris in the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France

The method of production of these pigments in antiquity, their medicinal and cosmetic use is mentioned by various ancient Greek and Latin writers, often in a manner derogatory of female complacency and (in rare occurrences) of male effeminacy. However, the number of vessels that have been found to contain *psimythion* remains relatively small, in Attica as well as in the Peloponnese, Euboea, Thessaly and Macedonia, which conflicts with the number of references in the ancient literature and calls for further investigation. Finally, the toxicity of these pigments to the human body –and especially of the lead– despite being familiar to Hippocrates, does not seem to have been of particular concern before the Roman period, since the symptoms of acute lead poisoning are first described in the middle of the 2nd c. BC, while those of chronic lead poisoning, in the 7th c. AD.



Corinthian lidded *lekanis* containing pellets of white pigment (cerussite – psimythion). Inv. n. 10539. Photo: S. Mavrommatis.

In conclusion, the find from the tomb of the actor Makareus from Kerameikos is unique because, unlike its parallels, it is related to a male burial; in its particular archaeological context it can convincingly be explained as a means of impersonating female theatrical roles rather than as part of female toiletry. Considering that the followers of Thespis performed both male and female roles in the ancient tragic theatre

wearing masks, sleeved clothes and high-heeled shoes (in the Kerameikos replicas of masks as well as Terracotta figurines of masked actors have been excavated), only their hands would have been exposed and visible to spectators, requiring a change in colour [alas by implementing a toxic dye] in order to represent women. It is well known that the Homeric epics praise the white complexion of mortal and immortal women, while bare female skin is conventionally rendered in added white, both on pottery and on terracotta statuettes of women and of actors representing women, until Late Antiquity.

Maybe for Makareus and probably for other actors of his time, love for acting eventually proved fatal...

Eleni Sp. Banou
Archaeologist, PhD

Director of the Ephorate
of Antiquities of Athens

Leonidas K. Bournias
Archaeologist, MPhil.

Curator of the Kerameikos
museum

Bibliography

T. Katsaros, I. Liritzis, N. Laskaris, «Identification of Theophrastus' pigments *egyptios yanos* and a *psimythion* from archaeological excavations». *ArcheoSciences* 34 (2010), 69-80. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/archeosciences.2632/>

W. Kovacsovics, *Kerameikos XIV: Die Eckterrasse an der Gräberstraße des Kerameikos*. Berlin, New York, 1990.

E. Banou, L. Bournias, *Kerameikos*. John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, Athens 2014, 240.

Photos-Jones, E., Bots, P., Oikonomou, E. *et al.* Correction to: *On metal and 'spoiled' wine: analysing psimythion (synthetic cerussite) pellets (5th–third centuries BCE) and hypothesising gas-metal reactions over a fermenting liquid within a Greek pot.*

Archaeol Anthropol Sci 12, 264 (2020). Online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs12520-020-01184-1>

F.P. Retief και L. Cilliers, «Lead poisoning in ancient Rome». *Acta Theologica* 7 (2015), 147-164. Online: <http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2086>.

J. Stroszeck, *Der Kerameikos in Athen, Geschichte, Bauten und Denkmäler im archäologischen Park*. Bibliopolis, Athens 2014.