A SIGNATURE HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT AT NEAPLES ON A BORGIA PLAQUE FROM VELLETRI

Daniele F. Maras*

A new examination of one of the Archaic terracotta plaques from Velletri on display in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli at the time of the exhibition "Gli Etruschi e il MANN" in 2020 brought about the unexpected discovery of a craftsman's signature hidden in plain sight among the figural reliefs.

The plaque belongs to the series found in 1784, during the renovation of the church of S. Maria della Neve at Velletri (aka 'delle SS. Stimmate'). They date from around 530 BCE and depict chariot races, galloping horsemen, official processions, banquets and an assembly of sitting gods.

The plaques entered the collection of the Borgia family and were later acquired by the Royal Museum of Neaples (1814) and subjected to many scholarly studies: e.g. Andrèn 1940, Fortunati 1986, Cristofani 1987, Torelli 1988, Winter 2009, Carlucci 2011.

In 2020 Gary Enea pointed out to me the presence of some graffiti on the best-preserved example of the series, depicting an assembly of gods: from the left a woman and a youth holding a bow gesture towards a series of five deities sitting on foldable stools: the first holding a spear; the second turned backwards and holding a lituus; the third wearing a hat and braids; the fourth holding a spear; the fifth almost entirely lost (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Terracotta relief plaque from Velletri, site of the SS. Stimmate, depicting an assembly of gods, ca. 530 BCE (© Neaples, National Archaeological Museum).

*Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze (danielefederico.maras@cultura.gov.it)



Fig. 2. Graffito on the upper thigh of the first sitting deity on the left (photo D.F. Maras).

A close inspection of the graffiti (September 2020) proved that they were incised before firing with a thin stylus: a W-shaped siglum is incised on the thigh of the first seated deity on the left; a less eye-catching sequence of letters is incised horizontally on the thigh of the deity holding a lituus (figs. 2-4).

The thin graffiti are visible only with a strong raking light from top-left, which helps to explain why they had never been noticed before. However, their authenticity is confirmed by the presence of the main strokes in a photo published in Andrèn 1940 (fig. 5).

The letters of the second sequence are Latin and correspond to forms attested in the sixth century BCE. Most probably the scribe wrote originally a sequence MAPTI; then, reconsidered and decided to add a further A in ligature with the first letter: M^A APTI. Finally, a small superscript A was added before P: MA {A}PTI (fig. 6).



Fig. 3. Inscription incised along the thigh of the divine figure holding a lituus
(photo D.F. Maras, with raking light from the left).

It seems likely that the first two letters are the abbreviation of the name *Ma*(*rco*) or *Ma*(*merco*): *Marcus* in Classical Latin. The following word is probably part of a name formula, to be interpreted as either an unparalleled gentilicium *Apti*(*os*), or a surname in genitive *Apti*, from the adjective *aptus*, that is to say "suitable, ready" (often attested in Cassical Latin as a *cognomen* and a name for slaves as well as for craftsmen).

Most probably, the inscription on the plaque is the only known signature on a Latin architectural terracotta, to be integrated as (*opus*) *Ma*(*rci*) *Apti*, "(work) of Marcus Aptus", and the associated W-shaped mark might be interpreted as a monogram of Marcus himself. Apparently, the craftsman signed one of the serial plaques, incising his name with almost invisible strokes on the thigh of a deity, presumably to gain divine protection against the evil eye.

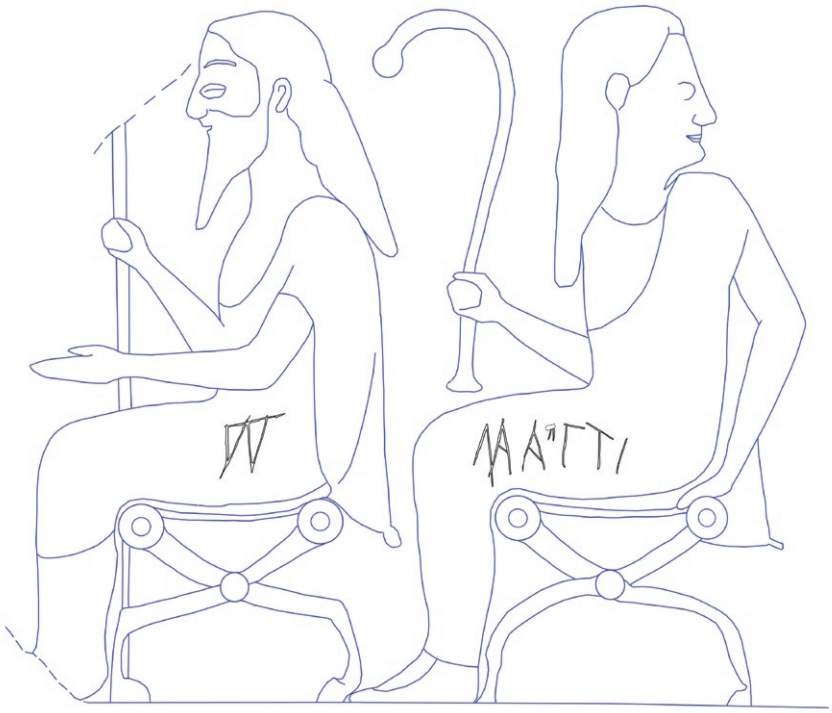


Fig. 4. Drawing of the graffito monogram and the inscription with their respective positions on the outline of the relief figures.

A similar procedure has been recently recognized in the signature of an Etruscan artist on a painted plaque from Caere, about one generation more recent than the plaque from Velletri. In this case, the inscription was incised with a thin stylus before firing and is made visible only with a strong raking light (Maras 2020). The comparison between these two terracottas provides evidence for a recurring pattern among Archaic pre-Roman craftsmen, who left the inconspicuous trace of their pride hidden in plain sight on their works.

Since the new inscribed plaque belongs in the Roma-Veii-Velletri series, whose moulds were originally created in Veii or possibly Rome (Carlucci, Winter 2019), it seems unlikely that the signature referred to the original artist. At the same time, such a rare event as an Archaic signature can hardly depend on the initiative of a low-grade workman. Thus, the best hypothesis is that Marcus Aptus (or Marcus, slave of Aptus) was the skilled craftsman responsible for the production of the whole terracotta decoration, who possibly was one and the same as the 'architect' of the roof.

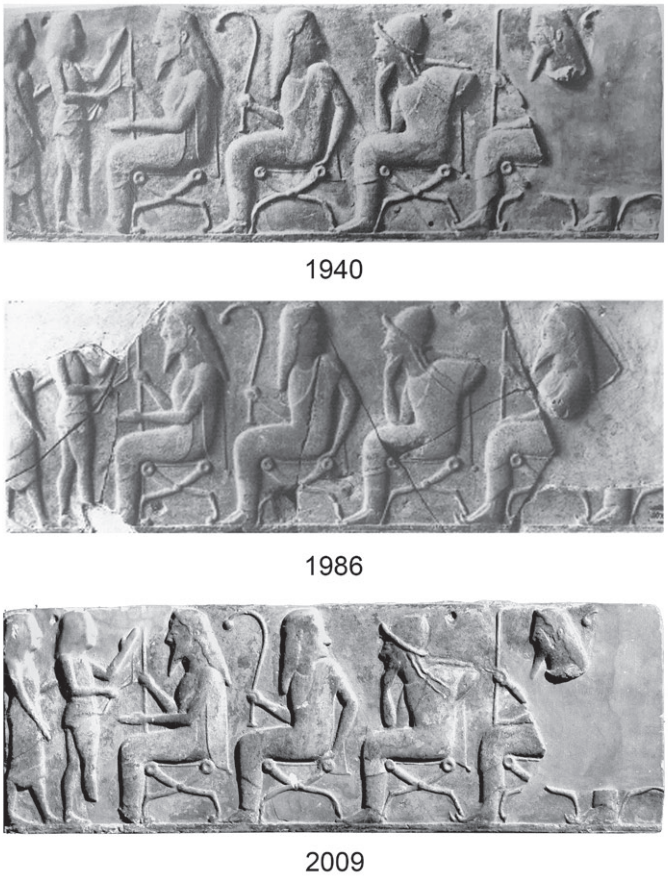


Fig. 5. Three different stages of conservation of the plaque after restorations published respectively in 1940, 1986 and 2009.



Fig. 6. Three subsequent versions of the inscription with the progressive insertion of the missing A and the relevant epigraphic transcriptions.

References

Andrèn 1940 = A. Andrèn, *Architectural Terracottas from Etrusco-Italic Temples*, Lund 1940.

Fortunati 1986 = F.R. *Fortunati, Ipotesi ricostruttive della decorazione del tempio di. Velletri*, in *Prospettiva* 47, *1986*: 3-11.

Torelli 1988 = M. Torelli, *Aspetto ideologico della colonizzazione romana più antica*, in *DArch*, s. III, VI.1, 1988: 65-72.

Winter 2009 = N. Winter, *Symbols of Wealth and Power: Architectural Terracotta Decoration in Etruria & Central Italy, 640-510 B.C.* (*MAAR*, Suppl., 9), Ann Arbor 2009: 311-393.

Carlucci 2011 = C. Carlucci, *Il sistema decorativo del tempio delle Stimmate di Velletri tra Veio Portonaccio e Roma-Palatino*, in *Tetti di terracotta: la decorazione architettonica fittile tra Etruria e Lazio in età arcaica*, Atti delle giornate di studio (Roma, 25 marzo e 25 ottobre 2010), a cura di G. Bartoloni, Roma 2011: 220-236.

Cristofani 1987 = M. Cristofani, *I santuari: tradizioni decorative*, in *Etruria e Lazio arcaico*, Atti dell'incontro di studio, Roma 1986 (*QAEI*, XV), a cura di M. Cristofani, Roma 1987, 95-120.

Drago 2012 = L. Drago, *Velletri*, in *Biblioteca Topografica della Colonizzazione Greca in Italia e nelle Isole Tirreniche*, Pisa-Rome-Neaples 2012: 719-799.

Winter 2019 = N.A. Winter, C. Carlucci, *Architectural terracottas*, in *Veii*, edited by J. Tabolli, Austin 2019: 207-215.

Barbera 2020 = D. Barbera, in *Gli Etruschi e il MANN*, Catalogo della mostra (Napoli, 16 marzo - 31 ottobre 2020), a cura di V. Nizzo, Milan 2020: 279-281, cat. n. II.2.7.

Maras 2020 = D.F. Maras, *La firma 'invisibile' di un artista ceretano*, in *Scritture nascoste, scritture invisibili*, a cura di A. Campus, S. Marchesini, P. Poccetti, Rome 2020: 49-74.

Maras 2021 = D.F. Maras, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, in *Etruscan News* 23, 2021: 1 and 6-7.