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A FEW PRELIMINARY REMARKS  
ON THE CYPRIOT SCULPTURES  
KNOWN AS TEMPLE-BOYS

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**Abstract:** Although scholars have pored over them for many years, there are still more questions than answers concerning the temple-boy figurines. Aside from canonical presentations, many figurines are considered as belonging to the temple-boy category, even though they do not possess features compatible with it. Symbolic analysis of the manner of their presentation, as well as animals, fruits and other objects held by the boys, shifts the direction of influence from Phoenicia to Egypt, also raising the age of the presented boys to two to three years old. Finally, they might be interpreted as votive gifts to ensure protection and well-being for Cypriot heirs to the throne.

**Keywords:** Temple-boy figurine; Hellenistic Cyprus Art; Symbols of death and life; Egyptian influence; Jagiellonian University Antiquity Collection

Children of ancient times have been an object of study since the very beginning of the human and social sciences. However, this research has become more intense in the last few decades, in the period of social change that has brought awareness that children are human beings with the same natural rights as adults. Throughout the history of art some of the most popular themes have been studies of the methods of presentation of children in particular times. Research into the Cypriot sculptures known as temple-boys fits perfectly with this branch of studies.

These sculptures are made of clay and limestone – materials very popular on Cyprus in figural art, especially because of their local availability.

They are schematically presenting small boys, sitting in an erect frontal pose, with the left leg bent flat on the ground close to the front of the body and the right leg drawn-up to the body. The centre of mass is shifted onto the right hand. The depicted persons are usually wearing a tunic with sleeves, rolled up to expose the genitals and wearing a necklace with pendants in the shape of a bearded head or the letter T, mostly interpreted as a phallus (Daszewski and Sztetyło 1989, 107). On the wrists and ankles they have very massive bracelets. One very important element of their iconography is the objects held in the left hand: birds, small animals, fruits, flowers, and objects that are unidentifiable due to the state of preservation. They are sometimes presented holding a combination of these, e.g. fruit in one hand and a bird in the other. Their backs are flat and unmodeled which might suggest that they were made to be seen from the front. This might indicate their original location to be close to a wall or in a niche.

Studies on the temple-boys were taken up by A. Westholm (1955), T. Hadzisteliou-Price (1969), W. A. Daszewski and Z. Sztetyło (1989), and A. Marczevska (1998), who considered their provenances and dating, and interpretations of their function. The most important studies on this subject were done by C. Beer, who also published a catalogue of 301 temple-boy figurines and 13 similar objects (1994). In recent decades it was also taken up by T. Petit (2007), C. Baurain (2008; 2011), and S. G. Caneva and A. Delli Pizzi (2014), who are drawing more attention to the sociological and cultural aspects of the sculptures.

Studying the temple-boys phenomenon hits upon a lack of logic and research consequences. Despite the specific canon defining their belonging to the category or not, there is an exception to each of the features presented above, which in consequence undermines the canon itself. As temple-boys are classified as sitting, standing, or walking figurines, there are girls next to the boys as well. Only around 30% of them have exposed genitals (Beer 1987, 21; Caneva and Delli Pizzi 2014, 499). In fact, as is in the case of objects from the collection of the Jagiellonian University Institute of Archaeology (see below), fragments of sculptures that have any distinctive features of that group were also classified as belonging to it.

Some theories, like those relating temple-boys to the child forms of gods like Adonis, Eros or Eshmun, have been debated and rejected because of a lack of distinctive, divine features (e.g. Marczevska 1998, 112). The age of the depicted children is also problematic. Marczevska (1998, 112) suggests that they should be around the age of one year, and other researchers (de Ridder 1908, 57; Daszewski and Sztetyło 1989, 110)

set the age limit a little higher, as less than two years old. Both of these hypotheses seem to be incorrect because of the inability of such a young child to take the described position of the body. It is physically impossible due to the development of human beings at this stage to have such erect posture or a drawn-up leg or to shift the centre of mass onto one hand. Similarly, such massive jewellery as the schematically presented necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings or a wreath on the head of such a young child could only cause injuries and deformities of the cervical spine. Taking into account the biological condition of child development, it should be assumed that the portrayed boys were no younger than two to three years old.<sup>1</sup> Raising this age limit allows us to reject Marczevska's (1998, 110) theory that the shape of the skulls is flattened because they are still not fully formed.

It is possible to assume that this method of presentation is the result of low skill levels of the Cypriot artists, who could not present children in a proper way, as this took place later in Medieval art, when children were depicted as miniaturised adults. On the other hand, skull deformations were very popular as an artistic form in Egypt during the Amarna Period. However, it is not very relevant to relate such fairly chronologically distant manners to each other.

Estimating the child's age as around three years old allows to agree with Daszewski and Sztetyło (1989, 113), in that it is not justified to interpret them as servants of the temple or as sacrificers, which will be discussed below. Similarly, their role as sacred prostitutes suggested by E. Sjöqvist (1955, 46) or having been dedicated by their parents to serve in this purpose (Beer 1987, 23; Marczevska 1998, 112), would, because of their young age, be very cruel and inhumane, as Beer (1987, 23) has also emphasized.

Another of Beer's theories (1987, 23; 1991), that the exposed genitals are somehow related to circumcision, should be revised. It is based on the assumption, having no evidence in the material, that the temple-boys figurines present young Phoenicians. Caneva and Delli Pizzi's (2014, 501) most recent theory actually indicates the opposite direction of influence, from Cyprus to the Phoenician coast. As well, the analysis of photos published by Beer (1994) allows us to state that there is no evidence of this practice visible on the sculpture. Similarly, the hypothesis about inclusion into the social community following circumcision should be rejected. More reasonable would be the southern roots of the gesture of uncovering the genitals, especially when looking closer at details like the eyes, which

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indicate an Egyptian influence. The eyes are in many cases almond-shaped, as they are in many Egyptian presentations. However, sometimes it is in the shape of the Eye of Horus (e.g. Beer 1994, 44, cat. no. 138), a very important and powerful Egyptian protective amulet, similar to the phallic pendant hanging from a necklace on the chest. The corpus of limestone amulets, very similar in shape to those presented on the temple-boys figurines, excavated on Geronisos confirmed Eastern influences with Egypt playing a particular role (Connelly 2007; Caneva and Delli Pizzi 2014, 502).

Also from Egypt is known the celebration related to Apis, when women uncovered their genitals to ensure their own fertility (Manniche 1988, 38). The uncovering of the genitals is also known from Egyptian myth. Hathor, probably to exhilarate the *heart of Ra* or to take control over him, showed him her vulva (Manniche 2001, 274). It seems that boy figurines with uncovered genitals were sacrificed in the sanctuaries to ensure happiness, prosperity and fertility in the upcoming years to those on whose behalf they were dedicated. Important is also the dedication of the sanctuary. It was the cult places of Aphrodite (or another Great Goddess), Apollo – solar god, divine healer and perpetrator of sudden death, mentioned in an inscription preserved on a few of the figurines (e.g. Beer 1994, 57, cat. no. 190), as well as Melqart – Heracles (Daszewski and Sztetyło 1989, 111). Also very interesting is the temple-boy from the Louvre (Beer 1994, 64, cat. no. 212) when the relation with Apollo is considered. Above the right ankle there is the head of a reptile, probably a fragment of a bracelet in the shape of a snake – an ancient chthonic symbol of fertility, disease and sudden death (Cirlot 1971, 285), Apollo's antagonist at the foot of Mount Parnassus (Schmidt 2006, 279).

A similar, sexual interpretation can be assumed based on analysis of the objects held by the boys. It seems that they should not be interpreted as sacrifices, as Daszewski and Sztetyło (1989, 113) suggested. The proper dynamic gesture for sacrifice is missing. Instead of presenting gifts to the deity, or passing it on their way, the boys cling it to themselves, as if they are trying to emphasize the unity between 'sacrificer' and his 'sacrifice'. The goose was for the ancients a symbol of death and descent into the abyss (Cirlot 1971, 120), while the dove symbolised fertility (Forstner OSB 1990, 228). Both birds were related to the cult of the Great Goddess. Another bird held by the boys is a rooster, which, similarly to the hare, a bunch of grapes, and pomegranates, is a symbol of fertility (Cirlot 1971, 51, 122, 139, 260; Forstner OSB 1990, 164, 180, 233, 310). Another interesting fact is that the boys held birds' wings (like e.g. Beer 1994, 47, cat. no. 152).

This symbolic gesture of the right hand – an ancient symbol of power and ability to act – might express the desire to strengthen the sexual potency of the donors and, consequently, the life force of those in whose names they were offered. Especially important in this case is the rooster – a symbol of reproductive power and belligerence as well as the guardian of the dawn, related to solar deities and indirectly also with the Great Goddess, who as a celestial body was linked to the planet Venus – the Morning star, *stellae maris*, which safely led sailors to their destination (Kowalski 1987, 84). In Egyptian culture those two aspects – reproductive power and belligerence – were particularly related to the ideology of the pharaoh (Manniche 1988, 30). Thus, one possible interpretation is that the temple-boys figurines probably represent Cypriot monarchical heirs to the throne as children. The dating of the figurines, from the Cypro-Classical Period to the first half of the Hellenistic Period (Marczewska 1998, 110), as well as the amount of jewellery depicted on the boys, seem to confirm this hypothesis. Interestingly, a similar possibility was proposed in the case of the ‘temple-boys’ from Eshmun sanctuary from Bostan esh-Sheik near Sidon, which are interpreted as an expression of the elite and the royal family (Caneva and Delli Pizzi 2014, 499-500).

If the hypothesis of circumcision is not rejected, it is possible to agree with Marczewska (1998, 112) that the sculptures represent boys who did not live just to be subjected to that ritual and, consequently, to the inclusion of the local community. That might be why sculptures were found in separated areas like sanctuaries or tombs. This theory can be confirmed by the fruits and animals held by the boys. Along with the sexual and fertile aspects, they are also eschatological, related to death and the Underworld. Against Marczewska’s theory are the amulets in the shape of the head of Bes, being a part of the boys’ necklaces (Petit 2007). This Egyptian god was a protector of women in childbirth and children from birth up to the age of majority (Wilkinson 2003, 102). Therefore, it seems pointless to present it as the sculpture of a dead child. The amulets in the shape of the head of Bes, similar to the Eye of Horus, were used to protect the living rather than the dead. In this case Harpocrates – the child form of Horus, very popular among Greeks and Romans – is very important. The above-mentioned fact that bird sacrifices are held by the wings might be a symbol of capture, breaking the power of the animal and overcoming it. In consequence, it could symbolise the defeat of death. Because of this, the sculptures might be interpreted as an offering to the gods imploring for the child’s health or as a votive after receiving it (Caneva and Delli Pizzi 2014, 515).

The first of these possibilities seems to be more compatible with other symbols presented on the figurines. Daszewski and Sztetyło's (1989, 115) interpretation, relating the mentioned symbols and phallic pendants with the cult of a particular deity – probably Aphrodite or the 'Paphian Goddess' – seems to be unconvincing because of their common and universal use.

The above-mentioned sculptures from the collection of the Jagiellonian University Institute of Archaeology (inv. no. 10.507 and 10.517) are far too fragmented to agree with Z. Kapera (1976, 76; 1985), Marczevska's (1988, 114-116) and Śliwa (2007) assertion that they should be classified as of the temple-boy type, especially when their provenance is uncertain. Figurine 10.507 (Pl. 1: 1) is a triangular head of a young person with a wide nose and short curly hair. The surface is quite worn so that some details like the shapes of the mouth and nostrils cannot be precisely defined. Figurine 10.517 (Pl. 1: 2) is the head and a fragment of the left shoulder of a young boy. The face is a little bit flattened, with almond-shaped eyes and wide nose, but in this case it more looks like the effect of sculpture's skills than his intention. The hair is short and adheres to the head, like a bonnet. They actually could be fragments of any other figurine styles representing children. What is interesting is that Kapera interpreted only the second sculpture as a temple-boy (inv. no. 10.517). The other he described as a male head with Negroid features. In both cases the preserved fragments of the heads have features like wide nostrils and hairstyles that allow them to be excluded from the group of temple-boys and classified in a different category.

To summarise, it can be stated that the temple-boys might present heirs of Cypriot thrones dedicated to the Great Goddess as a sacrifice, asking for care, health and wellness, or as a votive for salvation from disease. Earlier hypotheses relating them with circumcision or sacred prostitution seem to have no evidence in the historical or archaeological sources. Nevertheless, this issue still needs further research, which might help in our understanding of most of the problems raised above.

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Pl. 1: 1 – The so-called ‘Temple-boy’ figurine with Negroid features from the collections of the Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University (inv. no. 10.507, photo by author)

Pl. 1: 2 – The so-called ‘Temple-boy’ figurine from the collections of the Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University (inv. no. 10.517, photo by author)