

# A theatrical device on the Late Roman stage: the relief of Flavius Valerianus

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There has been much discussion of the question how long traditional drama, tragedy or comedy, continued to be presented in public under the Roman Empire, and very different answers have been given. Some writers have assumed that performance of full-length drama disappeared from the public stage early in the Empire, at least in Rome and the West, driven out by the greater popularity of mime and pantomime.<sup>1</sup> Others have preferred to see a wide range of options persisting, some undoubtedly more popular than others, but including at least occasional traditional performance of complete plays.<sup>2</sup> It can be shown, above all through epigraphic evidence, that classical tragedy and comedy were presented at agonistic festivals of the Greek world at least until the early 3rd c. A.D., while new plays were produced in the same setting for nearly as long.<sup>3</sup> In Rome, actors described as *tragoidoi* and *komoidoi* are attested in the later 2nd c. at the Capitolia (also an agonistic festival on the Greek pattern, though with many peculiar features), and there is every reason to think that these terms refer here to actors in traditional drama.<sup>4</sup> With the decline of the epigraphic habit in the 3rd c., and the disappearance of the inscriptions that give detailed records of the programmes of festivals, our evidence dries up. It remains controversial how long public dramatic performance of the traditional kind continued, and how widespread such performance may have been.<sup>5</sup>

Also controversial is the interpretation to be given to the archaeological material. Illustrations of actors, wearing stage costumes and masks, continued to be produced in the Later Empire, in a range of media that includes mosaic, painting, and sculpture; some certainly date from the 3rd and even the 4th c.<sup>6</sup> These show scenes that clearly relate to the traditional theatre, sometimes identified by inscriptions, notably a number of illustrations of the plays of Menander. But there has been no agreement over the extent to which these scenes reflect contemporary performance, and especially performance in the public theatre. While some have seen them as testimony to the continued vitality of the traditional theatre, at dates substantially later than any unambiguous references in the literary or epigraphic sources, for others they are no more than conventional repetitions of designs long-established in the repertory, intended to satisfy the tastes of educated patrons whose knowledge of the plays was derived from reading or, at best, from the presentation of them in the private setting of the house.<sup>7</sup>

1 See, for instance, Fantham 1996, 145-52: "But rather than straight tragedy and comedy, the theater would be most often filled for two less literary dramatic forms: the mime, which had largely displaced ancient comedy, and the performance of the pantomimes" (146); "it is likely, then, that literary tragedy had ceased to appear on the public stage well before the time of Nero" (151); Horsfall 2003, 59-60; Opelt 1978, 427-28, 435-36 and 454; Gianotti 1991.

2 For a more varied view, see Kelly 1979; Jory 1986, esp. 149-50 n.2; Easterling and Miles 1999.

3 Jones 1993; Heldmann 2000.

4 Caldelli 1993, 70-72; 137-39 nos. 29 and 32-33; 147 no. 48. Neither term necessarily refers to actors in traditional drama, and *tragoidos/tragoedus* especially is used frequently in the Later Empire to refer to performers who sang lyric excerpts from tragedies; but in sacred contests, such as the Capitolia, the traditional meaning is likely to have persisted. On the terms, see Ghiron-Bistagne 1976, 122-25.

5 See Barnes 1996, 170-71: "it is hard, perhaps impossible, to find similar evidence for real drama after the Severan period"; Easterling 1995, 157: "the archaeological and epigraphic evidence seems to suggest that a live theatrical tradition persisted late in the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean, and against this background performances of Menander are not unimaginable even into the fifth century"

6 Webster, Green and Seeberg 1995, 72-76; Green 1994, 142-71, with charts of the provenance of objects representing comedy after A.D. 180 and of their material.

7 For discussion of the value of the visual material as evidence for continued performance in later antiquity, see Green 1994, esp. 154-69; Seeberg 2002-3. A more sceptical view in Csapo 1997.