

## A SCENE FROM COMEDY IN BRINDISI\*

In the course of a series of excavations in the foundations of the Palazzo Nervegna in Brindisi during 2000-2001, a team led by Assunta Cocchiario discovered a series of pavements of the Roman period<sup>1</sup>. The palazzo lies on the via Duomo in the central area of the old town; the work has been left exposed, in the basement, and access has been created so that it is easily visited. Given the later activity on the site, both excavation and interpretation have been difficult. It is not yet clear if the remains represent a public or a rather fine private building, but there are strong hints that the date of the pavements should lie in the second century AD, perhaps the Trajanic period, and that there may be a relationship with activity surrounding the completion of the Via Traiana<sup>2</sup>.

Among the mosaics is one of a comic scene (Fig. 1) that was unfortunately rather badly damaged. The later wall that lies along the top of the panel does not rest over it but its construction seems, so far as one can see on a visit, to have actually removed the mosaic's surface. And then, although it is not immediately obvious, the right part of the scene must have been damaged at some intermediate point in its history and then repaired – as one can make out from the larger size of the replacement tesserae and their different and much more haphazard alignment. We are therefore missing a third figure from the scene. It is interesting that for this purpose they still had access to the same type of stone for the tesserae; but since the figure was not replaced, they presumably no longer had access to an image of the original scene.

\* I am deeply grateful to Francesca Silvestrelli not only for taking me to Brindisi to see the mosaic but for much other help besides; also to Sophie Morton for all her help in Sydney. For photographs and permission to use them I am indebted to Jutta Schubert (Bonn), Jacklyn Burns (Malibu), Alessandra Villone (Naples), Tiphaine Leroux and Anne-Catherine Biedermann (Paris). I have also enjoyed a number of useful observations from Alan Sommerstein and Angela Heap; they should not, however, be taken as necessarily agreeing with everything here.

ABBREVIATION: *MNC*<sup>3</sup> = J.R. Green and A. Seeberg, revised and enlarged ed. of T.B.L. Webster's *Monuments Illustrating New Comedy*, i-ii ("BICS" Suppl. 50), London 1995.

<sup>1</sup> A. Cocchiario, *Brindisi*, "Taras" 22, 2002, 72-79; A. Cocchiario, L. Masiello, M.T. Giannotta and G. Quarta, *Brundisium. Recenti rinvenimenti di sectilia e tessellati pavimentali*, in *Atti dell'VIII Colloquio AISCOS* (Ravenna 2001) 669-689. See also the articles by F. Lacinio, A. Cocchiario and P. Palazzo in *Arqueología, patrimonio y desarrollo urbano. Problemática y soluciones. Actas del seminario de Girona, 3 de julio de 2009* (Girona 2010). I commented briefly in "Lustrum" 50, 2008, 231.

<sup>2</sup> For the urban centre in antiquity, see for example E. Lippolis and I. Baldini Lippolis, *La formazione e lo sviluppo del centro urbano di Brundisium: aspetti e problemi della ricerca*, "Taras" 17:2, 1997, 305-341.

It is also worth noting the neatness of the tesserae in the scene as compared with the surrounding area, and then the way in which those of the figures are finer than those for the background of the scene. The decoration is done in a largely monochrome system, abolishing almost all colour, and this itself is a further confirmation of the likely date. From our point of view, this is something of a pity since scenes of the comic theatre, as this piece demonstrably is, have a lot to convey through the use of colour, as was also true on stage.

Preserved are parts of two figures, from the level of the chest down, and there is a pale brown groundline or shadow running along beneath their feet, certainly from under the left figure where it seems to have gone up to the left of his feet in a single line of tesserae. Both figures should be taken as male. The one on the left is shown frontal, his feet very close together and his legs apparently fairly rigid. I do not think the legs were crossed but it is difficult to be quite sure. He wears sandals. His left arm comes straight down at his side but the hand is extended, palm down, and one can readily make out the sleeve, typical of a comic actor. The belly is prominent and rounded. He wears his chiton and himation wrapped tightly around him. To either side, in a brown-black, are pairs of hanging cords used to tie his chiton<sup>3</sup>. That he is a slave seems clear also from the treatment of his belly, a feature typical since Hellenistic; from his body-language, taking up restricted space, he is perhaps to be read as exhibiting fear or tension in the context of the event depicted, or at least wishing he were elsewhere having failed to persuade his master of a different course of action. The hand-gesture reinforces the point.

The best other example of the hand-gesture known to me is that of a beautifully-drawn comic actor on a Gnathia situla in the collection of the Getty Museum (Fig. 2)<sup>4</sup>. The figure is isolated against the black ground of the vase and so we have no context, but he is an adult free citizen and, to judge by his elaborate wreath, a reveller. His chiton is white, his himation a pale yellow with well-judged highlights to indicate volume. His left arm is wrapped in his himation, as is proper for a gentleman, but he makes the gesture with his right. He does so as he moves away, looking back, and so one has the impression that he is saying "enough of that". The date of the vase should be about 340 BC, almost at the transition from Middle to New Comedy, just a generation or so before the archetype of our scene<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> For similar cords, see several of the Mytilene mosaics, e.g. *Messenia*, *Misoumenos*, *Theophoroumene*.

<sup>4</sup> Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 96.AE.118, *Passion for Antiquities* 142-4 no. 63 (colour ill.). Perhaps to be attributed to the Konnakis Painter.

<sup>5</sup> The gesture is not a common one on comic vases. Compare the mug in Boston on which a figure runs away as if leaving something behind or escaping, making a similar gesture with

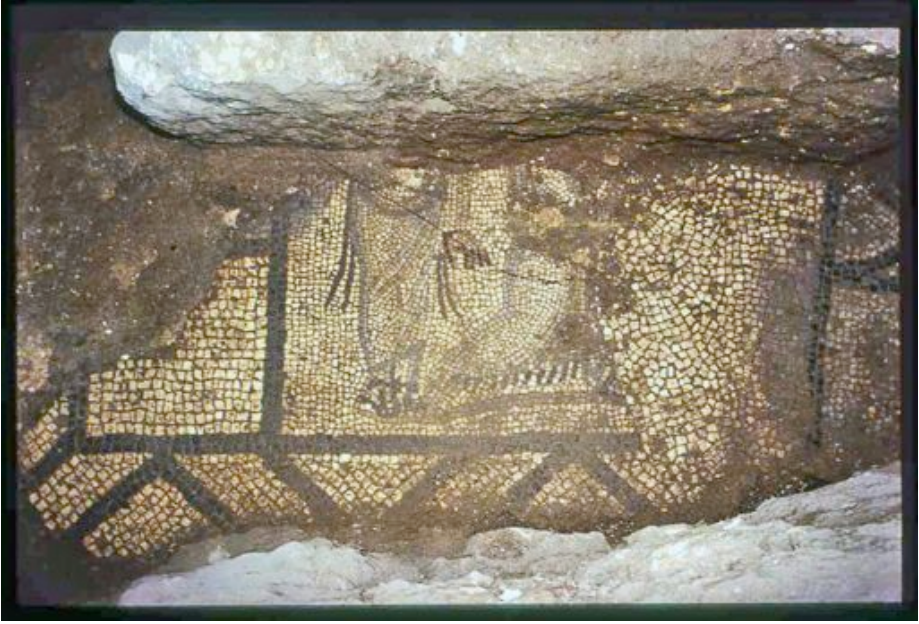


Fig. 1. Mosaic in the Palazzo Nervegna, Brindisi. Courtesy Assunta Cocchiario and the Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici della Puglia.

The other figure, what would have been the central figure, is moving to the right (Fig. 1). It is a strong and forceful movement as one can see from the distance between his feet. In terms of the conventions of theatre-scenes, he is a gentleman or upper-class citizen: even though there is no hour-glass motif on his skirt of the kind typically shown from this period onwards, the fringe on the hem of his himation makes it clear enough<sup>6</sup>. It is a pity that one cannot make out much of his upper body, but there is perhaps a hint in what remains that his right arm came forward at a little higher than waist level, and that we see it as far as the elbow.

The drapery of both figures in the mosaic exhibits some fairly sophisticated handling of light and shade. It is perhaps somewhat less well

his hand: inv. 13.93, Bieber, *Theater*<sup>1</sup> fig. 397, <sup>2</sup>143 fig. 526; *Vase-Painting in Italy* (MFA Boston, 1993) 79 no. 20 (ill.). One suspects that it is more literal in this case. Another example is that of the slave in the scene on the red-figure bell-krater, Matera 164507, CVA (1) pl. 36, 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> On fringes, see C. Roscino, *L'attore di Würzburg*, in: A. Martina and A.-T. Cozzoli (eds.), *La tragedia greca. Testimonianze archeologiche e iconografiche. Atti del Convegno, Roma, 14-16 ottobre 2004* (Rome 2009) 183-205. In the fourth century and the Hellenistic period, their use is fairly restricted but they come to be used more widely in the Imperial period.

done around the legs of the man, but it is quite subtle around the belly and skirt of the slave. It seems appropriate for the suggested date in the second century.



Fig. 2. Detail of Gnathia situla in Malibu, 96.AE.118. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California, Gift of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman.



Fig. 3. Fragment of sarcophagus lid with relief decoration. Paris, musée du Louvre, MA 3192. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Christian Larrieu.

Scenes from comic theatre at this period are most likely, one might reasonably say invariably, drawn from the repertoire of scenes commemorating the plays of Menander in a tradition that goes back to the Early Hellenistic period<sup>7</sup>. This restricts our search for parallels and identification, but there were in fact a lot of them. (He is said to have produced about a hundred plays.) We are searching for a scene combining a man in such an

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the listings in *MNC*<sup>3</sup>, there is now an excellent overview in S. Nervegna, *Menander in Antiquity. The Contexts of Reception* (Cambridge 2013) 136-169 and 264-267.

active pose with a slave who stands fairly rigid. If we had had the third figure, the process would have been simpler. At least three known depictions contain such a man. The first is on a fragment of the lid of a sarcophagus in the Louvre (Fig. 3)<sup>8</sup>. The man there does not kneel as it may seem at first sight, but he lunges across and, to judge by the gesture of his right hand, palm up, to implore the third figure whose dress appears to be that of a female. The figure to the left of the scene is a slave. There are difficulties, not least the fact that we might have expected to see both the man's hands on the Brindisi mosaic, and of course his staff. The slave on the Louvre fragment turns away, but that is perhaps not an insuperable problem since the implication may well be the same as we have suggested on the mosaic. He may even be disappearing behind the curtain.



Fig. 4. Wall-painting from Pompeii, Bonn B 279.

Courtesy the Institut für Kunstgeschichte und Archäologie, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn.

Another piece to take into account is the wall-painting in Bonn that is normally thought to be from Pompeii (Fig. 4)<sup>9</sup>. Here the old man in the

<sup>8</sup> Paris, Louvre Ma 3192, pres. ht 0.62m; *MNC*<sup>3</sup> 6RS 2; Bieber, *Theater*<sup>2</sup> fig. 832a; *Musée du Louvre. Catalogue des sarcophages en pierre* (1985) 39 no. 9; *El Teatro Romano. La puesta en escena. La Lonja, Zaragoza, abril-junio 2003* (Zaragoza-Barcelona 2004) 95 left; "JRA" 19, 2006, 201 fig. 7 (Dunbabin); "AnTard" 15, 2007, 115 fig. 2 (Malineau).

<sup>9</sup> Bonn B 279 (formerly E 108), from Pompeii VI.ix.6, Casa dei Dioscuri? 0.573 x 0.518m. *MNC*<sup>3</sup> 5NP 9 (with earlier refs); "Pallas" 47, 1997, 182ff. fig. 59 (colour) (Csapo); *El Teatro Romano. La puesta en escena. La Lonja, Zaragoza, abril-junio 2003* (Zaragoza-Barcelona 2004) 147 (colour ill.); N. Savarese (ed.), *In scaena. Il teatro di Roma antica/The Theater in Ancient Rome* (Milan 2007) 84-85 (colour ill.); Landschaftsverband Rheinland (ed.), *Alter in der Antike. Die Blüte des Alters aber ist die Weisheit* (Katalog zur Ausstellung Bonn 2009) 45 fig. 11 (colour).

centre moves away from a woman, coming in front of a slave, and he too has his staff in front of him. Mirror-imaging occurs not infrequently among ancient reproductions of scenes from drama, but this selective mirroring seems to change the sense radically.



Fig. 5. Fragment of sarcophagus lid with relief decoration. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 6730. Courtesy the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.

Our third comparison is with another fragment of sarcophagus lid (Fig. 5)<sup>10</sup>. It is not well carved and the surface is worn, making any interpretation difficult. At a basic level there is, from the left, a doorway, a young man (perhaps, rather than a female, but the hair and the pose are like those of a woman), then another frontal standing figure, surely female even though without a himation. She is placed in an ambiguous spatial relationship with a mature male who seems to stand behind her but who may own the drapery billowing out to her left (as we see her) and whose staff runs from his left arm down in front of her knee. At the same time her left hand reaches out to the man who moves away to the right in the pose with which we are now familiar. He in turn seems to take something away from her, possibly her

<sup>10</sup> Naples 6730, from the Vesuvian area. Ht 0.33m; pres. width 0.71m. *MNC*<sup>3</sup> 6RS 6; “MEFRA” 88, 1976, 763, 799 fig. 2 (Schefold); *El Teatro Romano. La puesta en escena. La Lonja, Zaragoza, abril-junio 2003* (Zaragoza-Barcelona 2004) 148. Wrongly claimed in the Zaragoza catalogue to have been unpublished.



himation. All this is too complicated to share an original with our scene and what one can make of the intent seems quite different.

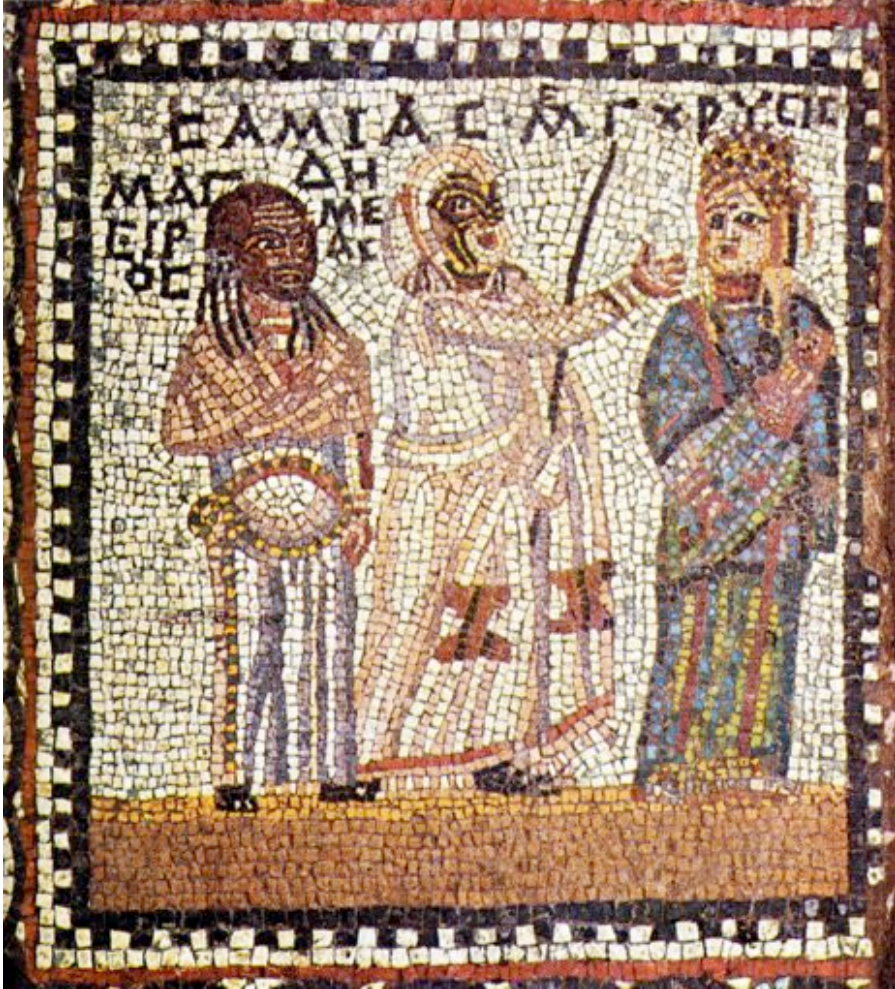


Fig. 6. Mosaic panel from the House of the Menander, Mytilene. After S. Charitonides - L. Kahil - R. Ginouvès, *Les mosaïques de la Maison du Ménandre* (Berne 1970) (with permission).

There is, however, another piece of evidence that seems to me relevant, a mosaic from the series at Mytilene (Fig. 6)<sup>11</sup>. Before going into detail, it is

<sup>11</sup> S. Charitonides, L. Kahil, R. Ginouvès, *Les mosaïques de la Maison du Ménandre à Mytilène* ("AntK" Beiheft 6, Basle 1970) pl. 4, 1 (colour), pl. 19, 1; *MNC*<sup>3</sup> 6DM 2.2 (with refs); "Pallas" 47, 1997, 182ff fig. 57 (Csapo). Further references below.

worth bearing in mind how much this Mytilene series as a whole, with its emphasis on the literary tradition as much as the artistic, stands apart from the general run of Menandrian scenes. The images themselves are square rather than the rectangular of the sequence we see in other mosaics or other media. As a result many of the artistic values and subtleties of composition are rejected and/or simplified<sup>12</sup>. Most of the Mytilene scenes comprise three upright, fairly static figures. One could claim that their identities are more important in the context than their action. It has been shown, too, that the order of figures in the scenes has at times been altered to suit the sequence of speakers in the scene depicted<sup>13</sup>. Their function was a different one from the scenes we have elsewhere.

If we accept that this was so, we can compare the Mytilene mosaic with that in Brindisi on a modified basis, from a different perspective. We have the same sequence of characters: the slave (whom we now see to be the cook), the gentleman, and then the figure missing in Brindisi, that is the woman Mytilene tells us is Chrysis. The pose of the slave/cook is much the same: he stands frontal, but note how the Mytilene version has his feet somewhat further apart and therefore spoiling some of the impact. We can now see how his right arm, lost in the Brindisi, came up to rest in his cloak, across his chest; his left arm comes down at his side rather stiffly in both cases, but the Mytilene has lost the gesture of the horizontal hand. One can only speculate at what point in the transmission this element was left out and whether it was through a defective copy or through loss of knowledge of the finer points of the drama and therefore of the gesture's significance. The elaborate cord tying his chiton (and emphasising his belly) hangs down on one side only in the Mytilene. It is clear, however, that this cook was no minor figure: not only was he a (doubtless expensive) cook from North Africa but he wore what is evidently quite up-market clothing<sup>14</sup>.

From our perspective what is important about the Old Man, Demeas, is that he has been shown more upright in the Mytilene version (Fig. 6). He

<sup>12</sup> Most of the painterly qualities of the archetypes were doubtless long lost: this is what makes Dioskourides' versions of *Theophoroumene* and *Synaristosai* so valuable. On the formulaic nature of the Mytilene series, see the excellent remarks by E. Csapo, *Actors and Icons of the Ancient Theater* (Chichester 2010) 157-158, and then Nervegna (*supra* n. 7) 158-169 ("Archetypes and Iconographic Corruption").

<sup>13</sup> See Handley in B. Le Guen (ed.), *De la scène aux gradins* ("Pallas" 47, Toulouse 1997) 197. Also E. Csapo, *Performance and Iconographic Tradition in the Illustrations of Menander*, "SyllClass" 10, 1999, 154-188.

<sup>14</sup> Ethiopians were something of a status symbol in the later part of the fourth and early third century BC, and one recalls how, in Theophrastus *Char.* 21, the Man of Petty Ambition goes to some length to acquire one as an attendant. On the mask of this cook and whether it is Maison or Tettix, see *MNC*<sup>3</sup> i, 31-32.



nevertheless moves quite strongly to the right and his lower drapery continues to take up quite a lot of space. We may note that his staff was in his left hand and its lower part largely hidden, and so it is not surprising that we do not see it in the Brindisi version. We can also observe how the mosaicist in Mytilene conveyed the cross-hatched finish of his sleeve, typical of comic costume in the Imperial period. For the sake of our sense of the staging, it looks as if Chrysis also wore expensive clothing with a blue and red himation over what may have been a saffron-dyed (sexy) chiton, and she had an elaborate hair-do, probably bejewelled in this version<sup>15</sup>. Her golden hair falls in long curls over her shoulders; it points up the interaction with her name. She holds the baby against her.

There is potentially a very important further point here about the construction of the *Samia*. In his introduction to the Loeb edition, Arnott took the Mytilene version as portraying “the moment when Demeas expels Chrysis and the baby from his house before the apparently puzzled gaze of the cook”. We have already seen that this was probably an over-simplification of the cook’s role, but the critical issue concerns Demeas. For so long as the Mytilene mosaic was the only evidence, Arnott’s interpretation was probably acceptable. If we now introduce the Brindisi version (Fig. 1) into the equation, it becomes difficult to see Demeas as merely suddenly turning and shouting at Chrysis. For one thing there is too much bend in the knee. At this point in the discussion it is very tempting, and I believe legitimate, to introduce the relief fragment in the Louvre (Fig. 3). This is of course a looser version and one that has come through a somewhat different tradition. The cook/slave, for example, has been employed to tie up or move behind some sort of curtain at the left of the scene, in a not-untypical Roman adaptation of the simpler Greek composition, and there are elements introduced in the background that are difficult for us to explain in this fragmentary state, even apart from the act-counter shown between the figures of what I take as Demeas and Chrysis<sup>16</sup>. What is important to our interpretation in this version is first that he rests his left wrist on his knee, and then, as we noted above, that he holds out his right hand palm-up. This is not a dominant, aggressive pose but a supplicatory one, and the gesture with the hand is also one of subservient begging (τὴν χεῖρα ὑπέχειν), as I have noted elsewhere<sup>17</sup>. In

<sup>15</sup> For a useful summary of the perceived significance of saffron-coloured clothing, see Ll. Llewellyn-Jones in: Louis Rawlings and Hugh Bowden, *Herakles and Hercules. Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity* (Swansea 2005) 57-58.

<sup>16</sup> It could in fact be a doorway, as would be quite reasonable to expect in the circumstances. On the act-counter, see the references, above n. 8, to the articles by Dunbabin and Malineau. This is not the place to open discussion on its prominence and its function on stage.

<sup>17</sup> *Comic Cuts*, “BICS” 45, 2001, 37-64.

seeing this as the key scene of *Samia*, it gives it more point, and a lot more Menandrian subtlety. If we go back to lines 80ff. (Arnott), we have Chrysis saying to Moschion in reference to Demeas:

... πεπαύσεται πάλιν.  
 ἐρᾷ γάρ, ὧ βέλτιστε, κακείνος κακῶς,  
 οὐχ ἦττον ἢ σύ. τοῦτο δ' εἰς διαλλαγὰς  
 ἄγει τάχιστα καὶ τὸν ὀργιλώτατον.

"He'll calm down again. You see, my boy, he too is as badly in love as you are! That persuades the most hot-tempered man to make an early peace!" [transl. Arnott]

This sounds like a prediction of what in fact will happen, alerting the audience to watch out for it – in addition, of course, to demonstrating her maturity, her knowledge of the world, and her insight into her man. To have Demeas, who has behaved in aggressive fashion throughout the earlier part of the play, come to realise that he has to make amends with Chrysis, to beg her forgiveness for his behaviour when he had thought she was the one who had behaved so appallingly, *this* would be a memorable moment with which to bring the play to mind, not a more banal (and in the end pointless) reiteration of his earlier attitude.

If we now come back to the Mytilene mosaic (Fig. 6), we can see that Demeas' hand-gesture is not well done and that it in fact could well be intended as showing the palm up. And the mosaicist has managed to put his head and shoulders back slightly, not aggressively forward. Chrysis turns away (note the direction of her feet) but looks back. From what little remains of her on the Louvre fragment (Fig. 3), she was probably doing the same there: one can see something of the lean of the body. Indeed one might speculate that the original painting had something of a W arrangement and that the figure of the slave/cook leaned away slightly to the left (as the man in Fig. 2 leans away to the right) emphasising his gesture and dissociating himself from the action, at the same time balancing the figure of Chrysis on the right. Such an arrangement would have put still more emphasis on the figure of Demeas in the centre, and for those who knew the play, on the critical moment he is facing.

Although we have a good amount of the text of the *Samia*, no fragments of quite such a scene have been recognised. The picture in Mytilene tells us that it happened in Act III, and there will have to be some re-thinking of the structure of the dramatic action. It is a topic I shall leave to others, but it will be difficult to find a solution that does not have Chrysis and a highly emotional Demeas meeting again just before the end of Act III, or better perhaps, extending the encounter that has been preserved.

To sum up, the iconographic linkages between the Brindisi mosaic (Fig. 1), the Louvre relief (Fig. 3) and the Mytilene mosaic (Fig. 6) seem to me

secure. There are enough shared but unique elements to clinch it. The labelling of play, scene and actors on the Mytilene mosaic demonstrate that the play has to be the *Samia*, unless for some far-fetched reason one impugns its authority, which it would be difficult to do given the demonstrable reliability of the other mosaics in this respect. The body-language and gesture of the figure of Demeas are not dominant or aggressive but supplicatory. We are therefore lacking that part of the play, and from the development of the story-line as well as the very choice of this scene as the key identifier in the illustrative tradition, it was the most memorable part of the play to the ancient audience.

Before closing, we should note another aspect of the Brindisi mosaic that is remarkable within the larger context of the second century. It is the only theatre mosaic to be found in southern Italy outside the region of Pompeii, from any period, and the absence of parallels prompts one to think about the questions of the survival of Hellenic culture in the south under the Empire. The most economical view, to my mind, lies in remembering that Brindisi was a principal link in the Mediterranean transport network, and that the next stop could quite likely be Patras where there is another mosaic drawn from comedy, even if it is not of the quality of this<sup>18</sup>. And on from Patras there are many more such mosaics, whether one thinks of recent finds from Sparta or from Chania, even leaving aside examples we have known for many years<sup>19</sup>. In other words, its discovery underlines the city's links with the Greek-speaking world at a time of economic prosperity and a time (in the second century AD) when the cultural links with that world were being renewed.

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#### ABSTRACT.

A recently-discovered mosaic in Brindisi contains what is undoubtedly a comic scene. Although badly damaged, it can be shown to have presented what was understood in antiquity as the key moment of Menander's *Samia*, and it demands our reconsideration of the plot of that fragmentary play.

#### KEY-WORDS

Mosaic, Comic scene, Menander, *Samia*.

<sup>18</sup> *MNC*<sup>3</sup> 6CM 1.

<sup>19</sup> References will be found in my notes in *Theatre Production: 1996-2006*, "Lustrum" 50, 2008, 7-302 and 367-391.