

Vidūṣaka's Cousins: Comic Theatre Characters on Both Sides of the Erythraean Sea

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L'articolo discute l'influenza del teatro classico mediterraneo sull'emergere del teatro in India: le somiglianze suggeriscono influenze sul teatro già esistente e più probabilmente provengono dal popolare *mimus* romano. Lo scambio di culture teatrali attraverso il Mare Eritreo sembra essere stato reciproco. Sui territori romani sono state rinvenute figurine comiche le cui fattezze ricordano i giullari nelle rappresentazioni narrative dell'Asia meridionale, soprattutto in Andhra, che corrispondono alla descrizione del giullare teatrale, il *vidūṣaka*, nel *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

This paper will touch on two vital points for the art and culture of ancient Andhra: knowledge of the Mediterranean theatre and the appearance of individual court jesters recognisable by means of the iconography of the *vidūṣaka* as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. There are good reasons to believe that the Western *mimus* was known on the subcontinent, but it can also be demonstrated that the physical characteristics of South Asian jesters had reminiscence in depictions of the comical characters on the territory of the Roman Empire. The exchange of two theatre cultures appears to exist across the Erythraean Sea and it appears to have been reciprocal.

Since the 19th century, Western scholarship has pointed to the similarities of Sanskrit drama with classical Greek and Roman theatre.¹ The most problematic issue about the polemic is that one is soon at the origins. Since the developed ancient theatre in Greece can be dated to 6th century BCE, it is declared to be the prototype of the Indian. Such assumptions cannot be proven. Theatre originated several times in the history of mankind; there is nothing to justify why Indian culture should need an external impulse for it. Nevertheless, just as we recognise motifs in art that have been assimilated from distant regions, in order to demonstrate cultural exchange—as for Andhra the exchange with the Greco-Roman world can be demonstrated in many instances²—it does not seem entirely wrong to search for impacts in theatre and drama, since some things are too similar to each other to assume independent roots. One such element

¹ Summary of the research in Bronkhorst 2003; see also Walker 2004. Comparisons of Mediterranean and Indian drama and theatre were also undertaken on several occasions, like e.g. comparisons of Plautus' *Cistelleria* (*The Casket*) with the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (*The Little Clay Cart*) carried out since the 19th century: in both plays the central role plays a container of jewels; cf. an interesting study by Berry (1982) examining the motif of prostitution in both theatre traditions.

² For numerous references among others to the research of Elizabeth R. Stone and Martina Stoye cf. Zin 2015a and 2020 <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/3/103/pdf>.