

Curator's Choice

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“Smoke Like a Turk”: An Example of the Orientalist Movement in 19th-century Baltimore

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Most tobacco pipes imported from Europe up until the mid-19th century were made from white ball clay. This clay was high in titanium with a smooth texture that was highly malleable and could be used to make molded tobacco pipes without requiring further treatment (Vince and Peacey 2006: 14). These pipes had a fine white color and have been found in abundance on archaeological sites from the 17th through the 19th centuries.

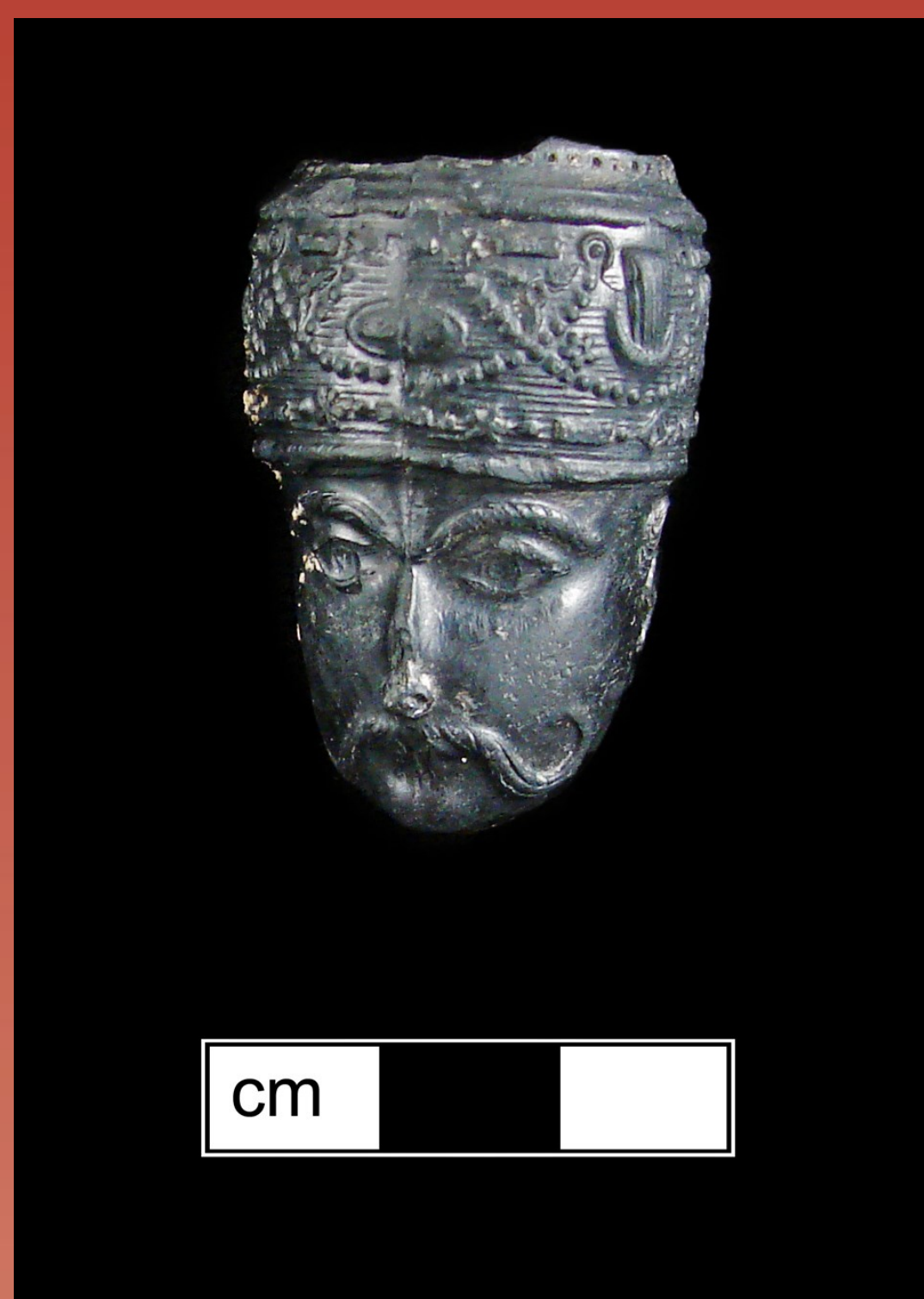


Figure 1. Polished black tobacco pipe from a privy at the Federal Reserve site in Baltimore City.

Illustrations found in the 1846 catalog from the Fiolet factory in Saint Omar in northern France show designs very similar to the pipe from the Federal Reserve site (Figure 2) (Dr. David Higgins 2011: personal communication). Like most tobacco pipes of this time period, this pipe is made of white clay but was put through

One of the most interesting white clay tobacco pipes in the MAC Lab's collections is actually black (Figure 1). This black tobacco pipe was recovered from a privy at the Federal Reserve site in Baltimore City and likely dates to the early to mid-19th century. Dr. David Higgins, a British tobacco pipe expert associated with the Society for Clay Pipe Research in the United Kingdom, said that the pattern and style of the pipe indicate it was likely produced in one of the many large pipe-making factories in northern Europe, perhaps France or Belgium (2011: personal communication).



Figure 2. Illustration from the 1846 Fiolet Factory catalog (Higgins 2011: personal communication).

an additional process to obtain its black appearance. For protection during firing, clay tobacco pipes were placed in cylindrical ceramic vessels called “saggars” before being placed in a kiln (Figure 3). Once fired, the saggars were then filled with oak sawdust and fired a second time. This process produced a black matte finish on the pipe. The surface was then coated in graphite or coal dust and rubbed with a cloth to produce a polished surface (Walker 1977: 44).



Figure 3. Ceramic saggars protect tobacco pipes during firing (Rack and Tisdale 2024).

The molded face of the pipe is referred to as a “Turk’s Head” and is a representation of Europe’s fascination with “the Orient” during the early 19th century. In the late 18th century, after Napoleon Bonaparte led the French Army’s invasion of Egypt, European travelers flocked to the Near and Middle East. Many of these travelers captured their impressions of these foreign lands in Africa and Asia through art and literature, sparking the Orientalist movement of the 19th century. As this Turk’s Head pipe illustrates, this artistic expression can also be found in the molded pipes made throughout continental Europe during this time period. The Turk’s Head design was also associated with tobacco imported from the Near East and was a symbol, along with the Saracen, the Indian Prince, and the Moor, used on coffee house and tobacconist’s signs, as well as trade figures, since the 17th century (Colin 1994: 36) (Figure 4). The term Orientalist and its cultural depictions are now, rightly so, criticized as demeaning and simplistic. However, to this day, the Italian phrase “Fuma come un turco,” which means “To Smoke like a Turk”, is still used to describe a person who smokes excessively.



Figure 4. Turkish tobacco trade figure from 19th-century England (David Levi Antiques N.D.)

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