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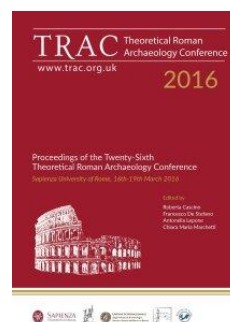
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Portrait as a Medium? Interpreting Funerary Portrait Reliefs from Palmyra as a Means of Communication

Łukasz Sokółowski

Roman Funerary Portraiture and its Regional Variance

The purpose of this paper is to introduce Roman funerary portrait reliefs as a definite set of archaeological objects designed to convey the indicators of social position and to spread ideas over time and space, thus placing the images in a broader cultural network. The set of concepts I am presenting here is a part of a broader research project aiming at understanding the genesis and development of funerary portraiture deriving from the former Roman province of Syria in its broader artistic and cultural context of interconnected provincial centres where the sculptures were actually commissioned.

In the canon of Roman studies, portraiture has always been perceived as the most distinctive product of the Roman culture (Kleiner 1977: 5; Stewart 2008: 77). Funerary portrait reliefs constitute a highly specific group in this set (Zanker 1975; Kleiner 1977: 1992; Kockel 1993; Petersen 2011; Borg 2012). It proliferated in Republican and Augustan cities of Italy and the last singular commissions date back to the early second century. Bianchi Bandinelli (1970) observed that a small but prominent group of imperial and aristocratic patrons from the capital favored a highly artificial style dependent on classical and Hellenistic Greek art, while Italian minor magistrates and freedmen were patrons to a style that betrayed its indigenous Italic origins. The practice described by Bianchi Bandinelli can be observed in several hundreds of Italian funerary portrait reliefs – including those preserved in their original context, like the Tomb of the *Rabirii* erected on the side of Via Appia in the direct vicinity of Rome (Fig. 1).

Apparently, Roman funerary relief portraiture emerges in regional provincial contexts one hundred years after its appearance in Italy. Once again, it addresses non–elite, yet wealthy members of the Roman society – the prosperous freedmen, less important members of the city councils, small landowners, and entrepreneurs (Veyne 2005: 117–162). Contrary to the elitist imperial art, it provides the best clues about local and regional identities (Fig. 2) resulting in the high variability of images derived from different regions of the Roman World, despite the presence of some commonly shared patterns (Balty 1993; Balty 2004).

The examples supporting the above observations originate from a time span of four centuries. They come from distant and remote areas of Britannia, Gallia, both Germanias, Italy, Spain, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Cyrenaica (Balty 1993; Balty 2004; Hauser

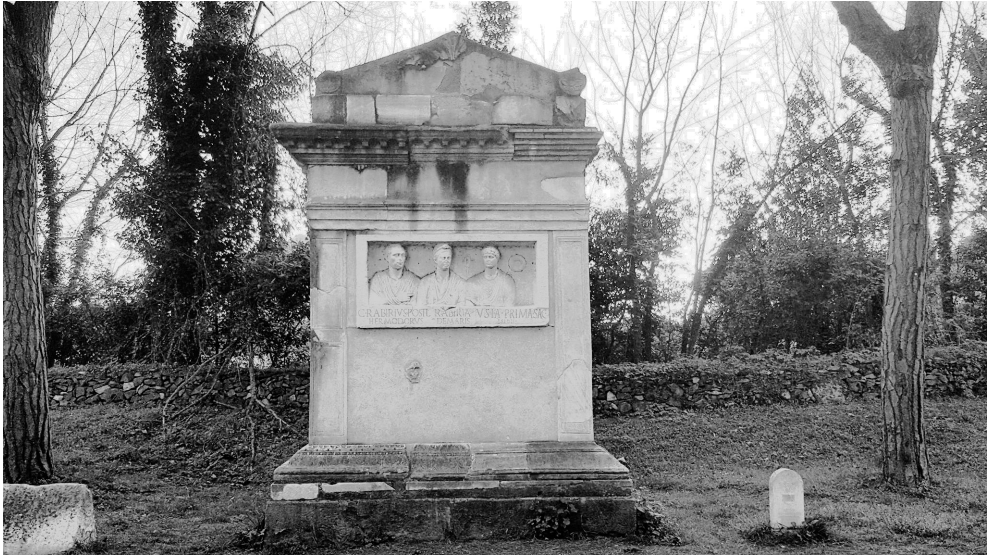


Figure 1: The Tomb of Rabirii on Via Appia. (author's photo).

2014: 139–140). Most of these territories were populated by a regional substratum of ‘native’ (non–Roman/Italic) origin – a group that defies a clear definition due to the lack of literary sources, but is evidently tangible in material culture record, as shown in collective work edited by Andreas Schmidt–Collinet (2004). The observations on Roman portraiture signify the fact that the Roman Empire was a formation of extraordinary geographical extent with a number of populations encompassed within its borders. Consequently, Roman art was always eclectic and characterized by varying styles attributable to different regional tastes and diverse preferences (Kleiner 1992: 10).

What is of pivotal importance is that geographical-ly embedded portrait commissions were definitely not treated by their producers or purchasers as works of art (Stewart 2008: 18–21; Hallett 2015; Squire 2015). Quite to the contrary, it appears that their value was profoundly utilitarian. The sculptural monuments produced in the Graeco–Roman world had been meant to fit the communicative context they were placed in. In the case of funerary portraiture, its ultimate purpose was to fully reproduce the social position of the deceased and their identity within a broader cultural network rather than to bear physical resemblance. Thus, one may say that communicating a social position to the spectators is an act of interaction in which a funerary portrait relief becomes a medium. The



Figure 2: The Stele of Blusus and Menimane, Mainz, Landesmuseum (after Selzer 1988: 165, No. 110).

message is encoded in the form, style, iconography and, often, the inscription attached to the sculpture. In the Roman West, the name and information about the occupation is usually inscribed. In the East, however, its content might be partly, though not entirely, different. Nonetheless the visual and textual messages from different areas were regionally interconnected. The issue of spatial setting of these communicative processes mediated by Roman funerary portraiture draws attention to the phenomenon of extraordinary geographical connectivity within the borders of the Empire. That dynamic process of exchange between different geographical settings with diverse local cultures had a tremendous effect on funerary portraiture.

Connectivity of the Roman Empire and its Communicative Aspects

It is John B. Thompson (1995: 82) who noted in his fundamental work on media formation that the history of culture is, in fact, the history of communication. With the technological progress, the intensity of contacts simply increases. This phenomenon has laid the foundation for the globalization processes. As regards the emergence of Roman Imperial administration, the expansion of power has undeniably provided the local native groups with new opportunities (Hingley 2005: 106). Mobility and migration within the borders of the newly created realm was the key to benefit from this new situation. Circulation and mass consumption of goods was one of the most important aspects of emerging mobility (Morley 2015; Laurence and Trifilò 2015). The process was related to the phenomenon of long distance transport that developed on an unprecedented scale in this period. From the very beginning one can clearly observe the growing demand for sculptural production as one of the most striking dimensions of this phenomenon.

The growing demand for sculptural production, which had significantly increased since the reign of Augustus, was reflected in a rapid increase of stone shipments (Russell 2013) and extraordinary artisan mobility. The profession of Graeco–Roman artists was collective and migratory in nature – the manuals with designs were transported and copied across long distances (Stewart 2008: 28–32). Undeniably, the communicative act contains the process of mediating – the transportation of books and reproduction of transmitted visual design resulting in sculptural commission.

In his magisterial study on *Empire and Communications* (1972) Canadian economist Harold Innis signified two opposite aspects of media used in antiquity that varied primarily in their weight and durability. Media durable in character, like for example stone, parchment and wood, accentuated control over time rather than space (Innis 1972: 7). The less durable and lighter materials like papyrus emphasized space and enabled efficient administration and trade over wide distances. In Roman times, owing to the prevalent knowledge of the alphabet and intensive spread of cheap papyrus, it became possible to loosen the relationship between the centre and periphery which resulted in the emergence of new ideas or techniques in the peripheral areas (Innis 1972: 85–115).

Roman funerary sculpture produced in localized, provincial contexts appears to be a product of the specific communicative processes observed by Innis. At the same time the funerary portrait reliefs were made using a paradoxically heavy medium–stone, which in Innis' opinion should accentuate control over time rather than space. A perfect example of

dominance, one would argue convincingly. It appears, however, that this medium documents the meeting of several messages transmitted by lighter means of communication and their syncretic interpretation in localized settings. In the process of communication between the centre and the periphery, the local reinterpretation of the global message is inevitable and symbolical meanings shared by the specific audience receiving the message are attached to it (Thompson 1995; Herzfeld 2001: 294–315). It is yet commonly confirmed observation in the media theory, though it contradicts the older theories of Innis and his most acclaimed continuator, Marshall McLuhan (2005).

The processes of local reception may lead to the discursive elaboration of the information received in distant contexts (Thompson 1995: 109–112). That observations shed a new light on the processes of ‘mobility of images’ that took place on the Roman territory in the first four centuries and has been just commented on by Versluys (2014) in his very recent, yet quite pertinent paper. The material remains of the ‘mobility of images’ process have been partially preserved in the particular archaeological contexts where they seem to document that period of ‘remarkable connectivity’ (Versluys 2014: 19). It seems that Palmyrene funerary portraiture, due to extraordinary richness of preserved contexts and analogies, constitutes the perfect example of the communicative processes described in this section. Therefore, it is only fitting to focus on this particular group of monuments.

The Medium and its Context

Within the group of regional portraits included in my research project mentioned at the beginning of this article, portraiture from Palmyra deserves special attention for two reasons. Firstly, Palmyra portraiture is noteworthy due to an extraordinary amount of preserved monuments, well above 2000 items (Kropp and Raja 2014: 396). Secondly, it is notable owing to its unique artistic value which is manifested in a rare style and original iconography (Parlasca 1967; Parlasca 1976; Parlasca 1985; Sadurska and Bounni 1994; Wielgosz–Rondolino 2016). The outstanding iconographic design of Palmyrene portraiture has been mentioned in literature several times with particular emphasis on long duration (almost three hundred years) and at least three distinct phases in which they occurred. They were documented by shifts and transformations in the iconographic code (Ingholt 1928; Colledge 1976; Makowski 1985; Sadurska and Bounni 1994; Ploug 1995). To date, the oldest attested dated example derives from 65/66 A.D. (Ploug 1995: cat. 1, 35–36). The chronologically youngest dated monument originates from 241/242 A.D. (Ingholt 1928: PS 54, 87–89). Currently, no examples dating after Palmyra’s fall in 273 A.D. are known, although the local population continued to exist regardless of the political calamity.

Most contemporary researchers share the opinion that Palmyrene funerary portraiture was produced as ‘a distinct local variation of iconographies common within the Roman Empire’ (Hauser 2014: 143). The presented opinion on the matter includes both characteristic features of Roman funerary portraiture described above – localized heterogeneity and homogeneity deriving from geographically external influences. The definition can be applied in the same way to Italy and both the western and the eastern Empire alike. Indeed, the emergence of funerary portrait reliefs in Palmyra coincides with the incorporation of the city into the

Roman Empire and the unification processes that commenced during the reign of Claudius (Gawlikowski 1998: 145). Thus, the view of Klaus Parlasca (1976) that the characteristic half-figure form of Palmyra's funerary sculpture possibly derives from non-classical 'plebeian' or 'mid-Italic' sculptural patterns (Bianchi Bandinelli 1970) seems to be well-substantiated. In Palmyra, while the characteristic frontalism of these monuments may have no relation to 'Parthian' frontality, it can be considered one of 'the easternmost examples of a common way to represent dead persons throughout the Roman Empire' (Hauser 2014: 136). Nonetheless, the profound stylistic originality and rich variance of iconographic details of Palmyrene funerary portraiture cannot be denied.

It must be clearly stated that regardless of several relevant works of Klaus Parlasca (1967; 1976; 1985; 1990), the degree of distinctiveness of Palmyrene portraiture from the larger corpus of the 'common' Graeco-Roman art has not been appropriately determined to date. That observation raises the question of the role played by artistic interactions and exchanges in the development of Palmyrene funerary portrait reliefs. To address that issue, one must firstly know how to decode the messages that were once encoded in Palmyrene sculpture. To decode the messages, it is necessary to define the characteristic features of the medium from which the information derives:

- Form – the portrait is usually designed as a half-figure sculpted in high relief in a rectangular limestone slab of approximately 40 x 50 cm in size, originally used to seal burial niches (*loculi*) inside tombs.
- Style – profoundly original and can be characterized by a rigid frontal mode and particular attention paid to details, frequently resulting in ethnographic accuracy stressing the localized identity.
- Iconography – iconic style is bereft of any individual characteristics, instead it stresses the social background of the deceased with a set of iconographic details. Information about social standing and identity of the deceased is encoded in facial features (eyes, ears, hair), attire, jewellery, dress arrangement and adornment, hand gestures, as well as the attributes held in clenched palms.
- Inscription – in most cases the limestone slabs have a short funerary epitaph engraved above one of the shoulders of the person depicted. The inscriptions mention the name of the deceased and his genealogy, sometimes adding the date of death written according to the Seleucid era (312 B.C.). More often than not, they were inscribed in Palmyrene Aramaic script, sometimes in Greek, on several occasions in both languages and hardly ever in Latin, though Latin and Greek words adapted into the Palmyrene dialect appear several times, most specifically at dedication to certain Hairan, *beneficiarius* of Roman Auxiliary forces (Colledge 1976: 69 see also: 15–17, 20; Ingholt 1928: PS 19, 39–40; Parlasca 1988: Taf. 45,b; Sokołowski 2014: fig. 10). It seems that the specific language of the Palmyrene inscriptions communicates the particular cultural identification of the individual portrayed. Thus, Palmyrene funerary portraiture is not only a visual, but also a textual medium. The scripture creates a field and a system of communication that takes precedence in establishing relation-

ships (*cf.* de Certeau 1984). The shift from the official language or the use of multiple languages proves independence from any linguistic authority (Wallace–Hadrill 2008: 66).

Evidently, the processes of production and circulation of symbolical meanings always take place in a particular social context that has influence on the construction of messages (Thompson 1995; Herzfeld 2001). In Palmyra the appearance of funerary portrait reliefs coincides with the implementation of a new funerary form – the tower tomb (Gawlikowski 1970: 35–36; Gawlikowski 2005: 46–47; Hauser *in press*. The burial sites were marked by upright monuments and the *loculi* were decorated by reliefs engraved on slabs that were closing the burial niches. The idea of a tower tomb comes from Hellenistic Alexandria. In the late Hellenistic period it was successfully introduced in Roman Syria. There was an old Aramaic tradition there to mark a burial place by a stone or a small stele called ‘nephesh’ (Aramaic: NPS̄) which can be literally translated as soul (Colledge 1976: 62). In some cases the founding inscriptions on tower tombs inform that they were actually recognized as group ‘nepheshes’ of the founders accompanied by their families (Gawlikowski 2005: 46; Hauser *in press*). That observation makes Paul Veyne (2005: 350) believe that at the beginning of the second century A.D. the word ‘nephesh’ came to describe funerary portrait reliefs. The funerary portrait reliefs from Palmyra were commonly made in extremely high relief that gave the impression of half-figures almost flying out from the slab towards the potential spectator. The strict frontal mode and the famous, unnaturally large eyes were also supposed to serve exactly the ultimate purpose of making the visitors feel in touch with the soul of the deceased (Veyne 2005: 346–352). By A.D. 80 hypogeums, constructed under the tower had begun to evolve into a new, independent underground burial form, which (after A.D. 123) completely replaced the older one (Gawlikowski 1970; Gawlikowski 2005: 51). By A.D. 150 funerary portrait reliefs were occasionally called ‘salam’ (Aramaic: ŠLM), which means image, rather than ‘nephesh’, the word which regardless of M.A.R. Colledge’s (1976: 62) and P. Veyne’s (2005: 350) statements has never been used in Palmyra to designate the funerary portrait reliefs engraved on *loculi* slabs (for ‘salam’ see Sadurska and Bounni 1994: cat. 103, 111, 116). Still, that does not change the fact that their indispensable purpose was to mark the burial site and enable meetings of the surviving relatives with the ‘soul’ of the deceased kin. Consequently, it can be stated that the Roman invention of half-figure funerary portrait had been successfully adapted in Hellenistic architectural setting to embody the local Aramaic funerary beliefs.

The fusion of influences from different cultural traditions is connected to the second fundamental feature of Palmyrene culture that profoundly influenced the social context in which funerary portraiture was produced, namely its multilingualism. The bilingual, famous Palmyrene Tax Law in A.D. 137 erected in the vicinity of agora documents the use of both Greek and Palmyrene Aramaic in the local public context of administrative regulations (Mathews 1988). The other example comes from the Bel Temple, where a team of stonemasons employed during the building of the temple left a tri-lingual inscription hidden on the top surface of the drum of one of the columns (Fiema 1986). In this case, a far more



Figure 3: The Tower Tomb of Elahbel in Palmyra. (D. Wielgosz–Rondolino 2016).

Palmyrene Tombs (Gawlikowski 1970: 184–219). In one case, the trilingual inscription engraved on a lintel preserved from an otherwise unknown tomb informs the reader in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic that the tomb had been erected by certain Vibius Alcimus and Statilius Hermes ‘for themselves and their children’ (Gawlikowski 1998: 145). Further, the one of the two funerary portrait reliefs, a tombstone in fact, which was adorned with Latin inscriptions was dedicated to certain Annia Nice, a nurse to a prominent Hellenized family from the coast who seems to have passed away in Palmyra (Heinen 1982: 33–38; Parlasca 1982: Taf. 23.4). The form of the stele signifies that it was used as a grave marker rather than a slab closing the burial niche, following the Roman burial customs (Fig. 4). The style and the iconography of the image show, however, unquestionable connections with the Palmyrene artistic tradition. The melon hairstyle, the turban, the arrangements of folds, as well as the hand gesture are all well attested in Palmyrene art and enable dating to the Antonine period (Ploug 1995; Wielgosz–Rondolino 2016).

The use of more than one alphabet in the single funerary context just presented above reveals the exceptionally rich reception of communicative

private, almost secret context reveals the names of the ‘westernized’ Lucius Eras son of Zabu and his employees who, on the contrary, were bearing only the local, Aramaic names. Multilingual inscriptions also appear in private funerary contexts of Palmyrene tombs and relief sculptures that adorn their walls.

A bilingual Greek and Aramaic foundation inscription was engraved in a *tabula ansata*, which was placed over the entrance to the Tower Tomb of Elahbel (Al–Ass ‘ad and Yon 2001: 104; Henning 2013: Kat. Nr. 13: 152). The text informs the readers that it was erected in the month of Nissan in the year 415 of Seleucid Era (A.D. 103). Therefore, the Roman iconographic motive of the *tabula ansata* was used in a different context – to mark the tower tomb – as a medium for communicating multilingual information (Fig. 3). Such inscriptions are found over several entrances to specific



Figure 4: The Tombstone of Annia Nice, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra. (after Parlasca 1982: Taf.23,4).

exchanges that were taking place in the Graeco–Roman East epitomized in the locally produced stone media. Interestingly, the founding inscriptions in Latin appear exclusively in the first century, and are later replaced by bilingual Greek and Aramaic texts. The second century is also when most of the bilingual inscriptions appear on dedications inscribed on the slabs, adorned with funerary portrait reliefs (see Sadurska and Bounni 1994: cat. 202, fig. 57, cat. 204, fig. 90, cat. 205, fig. 91, cat. 223, fig. 39). Further, as time passed, the use of Aramaic in funerary inscriptions did not seem to decrease in number, in fact quite to the contrary.

Localisation, Distance, and the Dimensions of the Transmission of Information Encoded in Stone

The syncretic character of Palmyrene sepulchral codes encoded in funerary architecture and multilingual communications adorning its walls evidently demonstrates the extraordinary flow of people, ideas, goods, and documents (Schmidt–Colinet 1997). Definitely not an isolated oasis, as described in the past, Palmyra was in many ways interconnected with other, more or less distant sites of the region where funerary sculpture was a recognized local landmark as well (Hauser 2012; Hauser 2014; Hauser in press). It appears that at certain time intervals, the sculpture produced in these regional centres was decorated in a similar way. The interaction can be illustrated by the two examples: the female attribute of a spindle and a distaff and the iconographic element of masculine hairstyle, the extraordinary ‘snail-shaped’ locks. The spindle and the distaff are the most popular female attributes of the early second century (Cussini 2005). The first portraits with these particular tools appear in Palmyrene visual code at the beginning of the second century. The attribute stays popular until the reign of the Antonines, when the symbol, which by some is noted as an ancient Aramaic symbol of a good housewife (Bonatz 2000: 128–129), shall be replaced with the attributes of mourning Hellenized rich bourgeoisie who proudly holds the status of wife, relative, and mother (see below). The example can be fully illustrated by a funerary portrait of an unknown couple dating back to the early Antonine period that has been recently put on display in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (Ploug 1995: cat. 30: 105). The woman dressed in local dress and holding a spindle and a distaff, proudly accompanies her husband, dressed in a *chiton* and *himation* and holding a wax tablet in his hand (Fig. 5).

A quite similar example of a spindle and a distaff appears likewise as a female attribute of funerary relief preserved at Epiphaneia at a tomb that dates back to the reign of Trajan (Fig. 6). The reliefs of women dressed in local attire displaying the same attributes, alone or together with their husbands, were commissioned in Zeugma from the Hadrianic period through all Antonine until the Severan



Figure 5: *The Unknown Couple from Palmyra, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (after Ploug 1995: cat. 30: 105)*



Figure 6: Unknown Woman from the Tomb in Epiphaneia, Hama (after Parlasca 2006: Taf. 23b).



Figure 7: Unknown Couple from Zeugma, Gaziantep Museum (after Wagner 1976: Taf. 49, Nr. 122).

era (Fig. 7) (see: Wagner 1976: Taf. 34, Nr. 42b, Taf. 49, Nr. 122–124; Parlasca 1982: Taf. 7,4, Taf. 12,1; Balty 2004: fig. 11). Moreover the funerary portrait reliefs from Zeugma and Epiphaneia, as well as Palmyra, reveal similar iconographic and stylistic traits at the same time. Interestingly, in the late second and third centuries the spindle and the distaff became the female attributes depicted on funerary monuments in Phrygia (Lochman 2003: II 207, II 220, II 221, II 225, II 226). The men were portrayed in civilian, Graeco–Roman dress, just like in Syria, and the writing attributes hold in hand (Lochman 2003: II 192) or depicted on the steles as a male attribute together with wool baskets symbolizing womanhood (Lochman 2003: II 39, II 110). Additionally, one stele with a boy holding a bird is attested (Lochman 2003: II 219); a popular child attribute in Palmyrene portraiture as well (Colledge 1976: 158). Those observations can support the suggestion of cultural interactions, made by Parlasca in the context of decoration of acroterions adorning steles produced in second century Zeugma (Parlasca 1976: 42; cf. Colledge 1976: 156).

The extraordinary, masculine ‘snail-shaped’ locks appear in Palmyra slightly later than the female attribute of spindle and distaff, apparently in the Hadrianic period (Fig. 8). Produced a few decades after the peak of spindle and distaff occurrence they remained fashionable at least until the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Variations also appeared in Zeugma (Wagner 1976: Taf. 51, Nr. 129), as well as in the southern rural areas of the Syrian province, Auranitis, Trachonitis, and Batanea (Fig. 9). Like in Palmyra and Zeugma, in this latter area, at the same time, family representations became as popular as single funerary portraits. Aramaic was not used there, but Latin



Figure 8: Zabdibol son of Bolha, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra (after Sadurska and Bounni 1994: fig. 26).

and Greek appeared in inscriptions, though always separately. Nonetheless, the names reveal the local, Greek, or Roman identification. The ‘snail-shaped’ locks are also represented on the second bank of Euphrates Rivers, in the areas populated by nomadic tribes. In the famous city of Hatra these extraordinary locks appeared as element of hairstyle represented on statues in the mid-second century and was produced almost until the fall of this city in A.D. 240/241 (Homés–Fredericq 1963: Pl. V, 1–4, Pl. VI, 1–2; Mathiesen 1992: cat. 205, fig. 75; cat. 207, fig. 77; Dirven 2008: Pl. LXXI, Pl. LXXII, Pl. LXXIV, Pl. LXXV; Hauser 2014: fig. 11).

Naturally, the fact that information of local origin was added to the visual and epigraphic message of Palmyrene funerary portraiture does not imply that there was no transfer of messages from Italy and other provinces of the vast Roman Empire. In fact, even the commissions that evidently reflected the local iconographic variants were produced in certain periods defined by political changes taking place in the Roman Empire, like the integration of the East under Trajan, or the travels of Hadrian. Two funerary reliefs that portray a man and a woman, respectively, can provide the example of the communicative impact from Rome. The funerary relief of Ateaquab, son of Jedibel (Fig. 10), now on display in Istanbul Museum, shows a bearded man with a cap of rich, messy, wavy locks falling from the crown of the head onto the forehead and ears. The inscription in Palmyrene script informs that Ateaquab passed away on March 13, 468, according to Seleucid Era, which is equivalent to A.D. 157. The portrait of a certain woman, now on display in Damascus Museum (Fig. 12), shows her with a particular hair ar-



Figure 9: Schamalos, Obbe and Ebbe, *The Archaeological Museum of Damascus* (after Parlasca 1982: Taf. 21,1; Sartre–Fauriat 2001: No. 16, fig. 346).

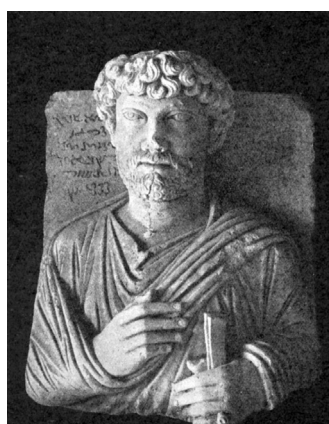


Figure 10: Ateaquab son of Jedibel, *The Archaeological Museum of Istanbul* (after Ingholt 1928: PS11).

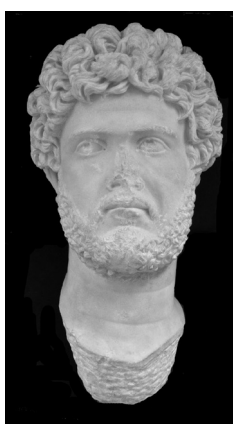


Figure 11: Lucius Verus, *The British Museum* (after Walker and Bierbrier 1997: fig. 265).



Figure 12: Palmyrene Woman with Antonine hairstyle, *The Archaeological Museum at Damascus* (after Tanabe 1986: Pl. 351).



Figure 13: *Lady from Temple of Aphrodite at Cyrene, The British Museum (after Walker and Bierbrier 1997: fig. 264).*

rangement that evokes the hairstyles popular among the imperial women from the Antonine dynasty (*cf.* Wrede 1990).

What is noteworthy is that the hairstyle of Ateaquab also resembles the imperial fashion, being quite similar to that shown on imperial portraits of Lucius Verus, like the example displayed in Metropolitan Museum of Art (Kleiner 1992: fig. 239). Lucius Verus was actually the first Roman emperor who resided in the Eastern provinces on a regular basis for several years, mostly in Antioch, the imperial capital of the province of Syria. The sculptural evidence from Roman Egypt and Cyrenaica suggests that the reception of Antonine male hairstyle was popular in these eastern provinces, likewise in Palmyra. The evidence supporting that observation includes, for example, regional copies of the portrait of Verus (Fig. 11) and the masculine hair arrangements depicted on the famous Mummy portraits (Walker and Bierbrier 1997: cat. 83–84, 87–88). Private female busts with hairstyles characteristic to the early Antonine period are also found in Egypt and Cyrenaica, many of them now on display in the British Museum, e.g. a bust of a middle-aged matron (Fig. 13). The hairstyle of the matron is quite similar to the hair arrangement known from a Palmyrene female portrait kept on display in Damascus. Last, but not least, the interactions between Egypt and Palmyra can also be confirmed through the examination of a few examples of Palmyrene sculpture and inscriptions confirmed in the Nile region (Walker and Bierbrier 1997: cat. 266) and, simultaneously, the Egyptian hairstyles, such as the Isis lock copied in funerary representations commissioned in Roman Syria on the Euphrates (Parlasca 1982: Taf. 6,1).

This connection between the geographical localization and the spread of Graeco–Roman imagery was recently observed by Stewart (2010) in his study of tombstones deriving from the northern border of the Roman Empire. Thus, it can be stated that an undeniably strong link existed between the geography of the Roman provinces and the distribution of Roman funerary sculpture, as well as with the mastery of craftsmen, the expectations of the viewers, and geological factors. It seems that in Roman times it was possible to transmit symbolic forms vertically, both in the social and geographical meaning. These observations then embrace the question concerning the spatial settings of the provincial Roman commissions and the scale of interconnections between particular places. Addressing this issue will allow to determine the spatial dimensions in which the communication processes mediated with varying intensity by the means of funerary portraiture took place in the region of Roman Syria and beyond.

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As already mentioned, the visual code known from Palmyra has plentiful analogies to the circle of Zeugma and Hierapolis in the north, the Valley of Orontes in the west and the villages in Auranitis in the south. It seems that other centres of sculptural production in the region were linked with one another, as with the centres located in other Roman provinces and even further. As a supporting example, the sculptural design of Zeugma can be taken for comparison. It appears that it shares some stylistic features not only with Palmyra and Italy,

but also with Anatolia, most notably the Phrygia and Dokimeion area (*cf.* Pfuhl and Möbius 1977; Waelkens 1986; Lochman 2003; Hauser 2014: 139). The art of Auranitis, in turn, reveals strong stylistic connections not primarily with the North, but rather with the area of the former Nabatean Kingdom (Weber and Al-Mohammed 2006). Naturally, the main technical means of transmitting messages, namely the half-figure image made in relief on a stone slab, which originated in Italy was a late republican invention. So was the idea of distant physical resemblance replaced by providing information on social status and identity communicated by iconography and funerary inscriptions. The case of the Roman province of Syria illustrates how the sculptural productions of the Roman Empire simultaneously belonged to the three separate sets. Each set uses its own specific visual code that can be defined by spatial setting:

- Imperial provincial *koine* which on an inter-regional level was superficially homogeneous and at the same time regionally highly mutable and complex (*cf.* Stewart 2010).
- Regional set of monuments that reflected the imperial *koine*, but also the sculptural solutions, iconographies and communicative codes present in the particular area (which in the case of Roman Syria means the intermingling of Hellenistic and local patterns of the Greeks and Arameans dwelling in the territory).
- Productions of specific workshops placed in particular geographical settings that transmitted the imperial and regional influences while adding elements of artistic traditions present in their specific geographic location.

However, the geographic distance was not always the only indicator of message transmission. In my view, it could be a particular language or alphabet commonly used in a particular area. The Empire was officially divided into two macro regions – the West and the East – each of which used a different administrative language – Latin and Greek, respectively. In Syria, there was a large Aramaic speaking population, differing in dialects, yet able to leave an artistic, epigraphic, and textual heritage (Millar 1993: 328–329, 507–510; Sartre 2005: 291–296).

The presented evidence suggests several connections and exchanges between Palmyra and other Syrian centres within local, regional, inter- and macro-regional dimensions. This observation implies that the visual and epigraphic messages provided by Palmyrene portraiture should still be interpreted in relation to these four geographic dimensions varying in the kind of language and alphabet used there in inscriptions. Thus, the territorially spread Graeco-Roman figurative art will finally enable an understanding of the phenomenon of its simultaneous homo- and heterogeneity which has fascinated researches for some time, and which can now provide the basis for further interpretation of the above processes in cultural and historical terms.

Preserving Regional Cultural Memory and Re-mediation

It must be noted that the portraiture of Palmyra, just defined as a medium, definitely successfully preserved, almost like the photograph, the cultural memory of transformations that took place in the regional frames of Roman Syria and the East during the first three centuries A.D. That phenomenon can be observed in the case of female portraiture that is usually considered as much more localized and ‘indigenous’ compared to male, ‘civilian’ images (Kropp

and Raja 2014: 400). In fact the three examples deriving respectively from the three main chronological and iconographical groups of Palmyrene art (Ingholt 1928; Colledge 1976: 245) can perfectly illustrate the three main turning points in the regional history which were encoded in local art:

- Akme, daughter of Taimamed – on this early second century sculpture one can observe the initial local interpretation regarding the form of Roman funerary portraiture transmitted from the West, in which the most important signs of the local female identity are maintained, i.e. the local head cover and hairstyle as well as the attributes of a good wife – the spindle and the distaff (Fig. 14).
- Aqmat – the portrait represents the second group (150-200 A.D.) (Fig. 15). Its design demonstrates how both attire and attributes undergo transformation in the mid-second century, related both to movements of the second sophistic, as well the political events like better integration with the rest of the Empire or long-term stay of Lucius Verus at the East. Regardless of the local decoration on the head, the sophisticated attire and *melon-frisur* hairstyle is Graeco-Roman, as is the gesture of *katakalyptis* (cf. Wielgosz-Rondolino 2016: 71). The status of rich bourgeoisie and member of the Hellenized family is undeniably communicated. This observation can also be supported by a note that among these groups of female portraits the bilingual and Greek inscriptions do occasionally appear (Parlasca 1985: Taf. 149, 1).
- Unknown woman with child and key with Greek inscription – opposite to the example from the mid-second century, an anonymous portrait dating back to the third century has much richer, local ornaments, like Parthian embroidery on the smaller figure, as well as jewelry, head cover, and the key with a Greek formula attributed to the portrayed woman (Fig. 16). The mixture of Graeco-Roman, local and Mesopotamian ornaments precisely preserves the memory of the cultural duality specific



Figure 14: Akme daughter of Taimamed, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra (after Sadurska and Bounni 1994: cat. 157, fig. 148).



Figure 15: Aqmat, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra (after Sadurska and Bounni 1994: cat. 207, fig. 176).

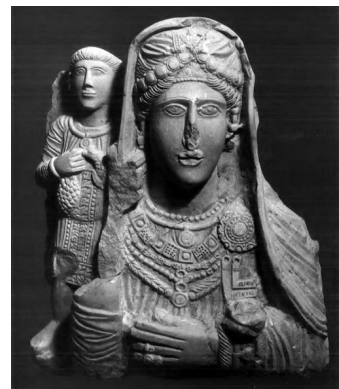


Figure 16: Unknown Woman with child and key with Greek Inscription, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra (after Tanabe 1986: Pl. 359; Sokolowski 2014: fig. 15).

to that time – Palmyra, located at the crossroads of two competing Empires, Roman and Persian, each of them transmitting over time and space its own visual message.

The simultaneous use of different codes in funerary relief portraiture has one more aspect which is related to the process of communication, namely re-mediation. Indeed, the iconography of Palmyrene portraiture clearly communicates the use of several technical means of communication by the urbanized and literate population (Sokołowski 2014). Further, it appears that different means of communication reproduced as attributes in a specific iconographic and epigraphic context of a particular funerary portrait relief might have expressed different identities (Sokołowski 2015).

The first example is set by an elaborate portrait of Zenobios–Zabdateh, son of Dionysius, whose name and genealogy are communicated by a bilingual Aramaic and Greek inscription placed above his left shoulder (Fig. 17). Behind his right shoulder one can see a Doric pilaster on which an upright roll tied with a ribbon and a remarkably big codex decorated with a large rhomboidal mark on the cover are posed. It seems that the given example manifests the Hellenistic aspirations, just like in the case of the portrait exhibited in the Louvre depicting a boy holding a stylus in his right palm. He is apparently using it to write on an open tablet the last letters of the Greek alphabet ‘ΩΨ/ΧΦ/Υ’ ranked from right to left, like in Aramaic (Dentzer–Feydy and Teixidor 1993: 228; Sokołowski 2014: 388).

The writing utensils appear as a part of a Palmyrene iconographic code on approximately 150 portraits. For example, Dionysus, father of Zenobios–Zabdateh, has been shown with a wide-open tablet (Sokołowski 2014: fig. 3). In the second half of the second century the male citizens of Zeugma were portrayed with tablets and scrolls of papyrus, as well (Parlasca 1980: 141–142). The popularity of the attribute is probably related to the social movement of the second sophistic and an eagerness to demonstrate the Hellenistic aspirations embodied by the iconic image of a citizen of a Greek polis (cf. Elsner 1998; see Sokołowski 2014: 388). In Palmyra, the writing attributes were used to communicate several separate, though coexisting, cultural identifications: a citizen of a polis; a Roman citizen; a mercantile entrepreneur; a priest; a student; a mourner; and a tomb owner (Sokołowski 2014; Sokołowski 2015).

The number of iconographic variations of writing tools combined with information provided by Greek and Palmyrene scripts is indeed impressive in the case of Palmyra. They seem to have been addressing several codes that were locally recognized. These codes were undeniably partly independent from the outside and partly connected with communications from the outer



Figure 17: Zenobios–Zabdateh, *The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra* (after Tanabe 1986: Pl. 290; Sadurska and Bounni 1994: fig. 91; Sokołowski 2014: fig. 2).

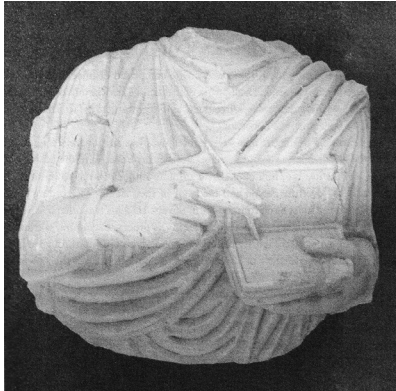


Figure 18: Youth with Writing Tablets and Stylus, The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra (after Smith 2013, fig. 33; Sokolowski 2014, fig. 27).

world. Regretfully, those codes and communications can only be reconstructed in a simplified way. Sometimes it is virtually impossible to recover them convincingly, just like in case of the issue of female participation in activities of everyday writing in Roman Syria.

Apparently, the headless funerary portrait preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Palmyra can be described as belonging to a girl – judging by the gentle execution of hands (Smith 2013: 213: fig. 33; Sokolowski 2014: 377, 379, 393: fig. 27) – but in fact most probably represents a boy – judging by Graeco-Roman male civilian dress. The person depicted is actually holding a stylus and an open book of tablets (Fig. 18). In this way the use of writing attributes in Palmyra is evidenced and demonstrated once again.

Nonetheless due to a lack of sculpture's head the sex of the individual portrayed cannot be ultimately determined. Unfortunately, there is no any parallel evidence in the region of the Roman Near East or the Roman East. The scarce examples of female literacy depicted in art come from Italy. In Pompeii, a few women were depicted with writing attributes used in their daily routines, just to mention the famous pictures of Paquius Proculus's (or Terentius Neo's) wife (Boriello 1986: cat. 236) and a young woman with a wax tablet and a stylus in the past sometimes described as 'Sapho' (Boriello 1986: cat. 231). However, it is naturally impossible to prove on the basis of this kind of information that women of Palmyra were literate and could participate in everyday mediated communication that took place in the contexts in which they were living.

Conclusion

It has already been mentioned that there was once a metaphor that Roman funerary portrait reliefs played the role of contemporary small pictures placed on tombs to show at least the schematic representation of the person to which the tomb was dedicated (Veyne 2005: 350). They were akin to ancient photographs, media produced to last in time and communicate the fact of somebody's existence that can provide a unique sort of information. It precisely happens so in Palmyra, which appears to be the largest source of those productions deriving from the former Roman territory. Situated on the fringes of the Empire, the funerary portrait reliefs commissioned in Palmyra were in fact an interactive tool that mediated several meanings communicated over the vast territories of the Roman Near East, the Roman Greek East and the Western Empire. The examples of visual and epigraphic messages composed in relief strongly suggest the processes of communication – introducing new experiences to the life of the oasis, as well as depicting the cultural memory of everyday routines that were once experienced in Palmyra. Like in the other regions of the Empire, funerary portraiture was commissioned not without reference to outside visual communications and far destinations.

Consequently, the communicated messages were mediated over vast geographic distances and interpreted according to the symbolical meanings and languages popular in particular, local settings. Of unique value is the set of monuments depicting the use of media in multi-lingual environments. The message certainly switches codes between at least three cultural linguistic groups which were simultaneously expressed in languages used in the desert oasis: Latin, Greek, and most broadly Aramaic. The perfect examples of cultural dialogue that they are, they also give a unique example of balance between visual and written media. The image plays here a role as crucial as the text – sanctioning the living experience of those depicted, as Innis would put it.

University of Warsaw, University of Konstanz

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