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UNPUBLISHED PORTRAIT HEAD OF A YOUNG MAN FROM ALEXANDRIA

ABSTRACT

This article presents an unknown portrait head from the Flavian period, preserved in a storeroom in Alexandria (Egypt).

Keywords: Graeco-Roman Egypt, Alexandria, portrait head, Flavian period

The paper discusses a portrait head depicting a young man, currently housed in the Maria Storeroom, west of Alexandria (inv. no. 218). Unfortunately, nothing is known about its provenance.

The head is made of white marble; its height amounts to 0.2 metre. Apparently, it once belonged to a small or commemorative statue. The head depicts a beardless young man. The face is slender, highly polished and softly treated. The forehead is small, lightly protruded in the middle, but does not show any wrinkles. The eyebrows are protruding and sharply carved in a straight line, without any indication of hair. The eyes are wide, open, almond-shaped and lidded slightly, with deeply inserted inner corners. The upper and lower eyelids are similar but lack any indication of the iris or pupil (Fig. 1).

The nose is well-carved, thin and straight, with a small bridge. The nostrils are realistically engraved with a drill. The mouth is small, closed and carved in two separated rows, with two fleshy lips. The mouth is marked by small holes ending the lips and two light lines emerging towards the chin.

The chin is small, well carved, protruding and bounded by the two lines mentioned above. The cheekbones are clearly executed and carved with light lines which depict the skinny face.

The ears are big, carefully sculpted, symmetrically rendered with their inner details realistically patterned (Fig. 2). The neck is softly carved and shows veins, with

a small hole engraved at its bottom for fastening a metal prop. In other words, the head appears to have been broken off from a statue (Fig. 3).

The hairstyle is a characteristic feature of this head, as it is arranged in twelve rows of individual, spiralling corkscrew curls with drilled holes. The curls frame the forehead and both sides around the ears (Fig. 4).

Since the provenance of this beautiful head is unknown, a stylistic study had to be used for dating it. Furthermore, we can depend on the face treatment in this regard. The face shows portrait features and its treatment is comparable to that of many of the portrait heads kept in museums around the world. For example, the portrait of Domitia, from the Capitoline Museum in Rome (Fig. 5), shows similar features: a well-carved face, slightly protruding forehead with lightly protruding eyebrows, eyes with deeply inserted inner corners, without any indication of the iris or pupil, a small mouth with fleshy lips and small holes ending it, a straight nose and the most characteristic feature – the hairstyle arranged in many rows of drilled curls. This portrait head dates to the Flavian period.¹

Another portrait of a young woman, probably depicting Domitia, with a similar hairstyle and facial features, is in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (Fig. 6).² The portrait head of Domitia from the National Roman Museum in Rome (Fig. 7) with drilled curls³ and the two portraits mentioned above are dated to the Flavian

¹ Hekler 1912, 323, pl. 239 b.

² Savvopoulos, Bianchi 2012, 62, fig. 14 (inv. no. 3516); Breccia 1922, 191–192, no. 3.

³ Kleiner 1992, 179, fig. 148.



Fig. 1. Portrait head of a young man, the Maria Storeroom, inv. no. 218, front view.



Fig. 2. Portrait head of a young man, the Maria Storeroom, inv. no. 218, side view.



Fig. 3. Portrait head of a young man with a small hole at the bottom, the Maria Storeroom, inv. no. 218.



Fig. 4. Portrait head of a young man, the Maria Storeroom, inv. no. 218, back view.



Fig. 5. Portrait head of Domitia, the Capitoline Museum, inv. no. 25 (after Hekler 1912, 323, pl. 239 b).



Fig. 6. Head of a young woman, probably Domitia, the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, inv. no. 3516 (after Savvopoulos, Bianchi 2012, 62, fig. 14).



Fig. 7. Portrait head of Domitia, the National Roman Museum in Rome, inv. no. 57.261 (after Kleiner 1992, 179, fig. 148).



Fig. 8. Portrait head of a Roman lady, Copenhagen, inv. no. 747 (after Borg 2019, 139, fig. 3.7).



Fig. 9. Portrait of Marcia Furnilla, Copenhagen, inv. no. 711 (after Kleiner 1992, 178, fig. 146).

period. Another head of a Roman lady from Copenhagen (Fig. 8) with analogous drilled curls is dated to the early Flavian period.⁴ The portrait of Marcia Furnilla from Copenhagen with a similar hairstyle (Fig. 9) is dated to the Flavian period.⁵

The statue of a young man from the Vatican Museums in Rome (Fig. 10) with a similar hairstyle and facial features is dated to between the late 1st and the early 2nd cen-

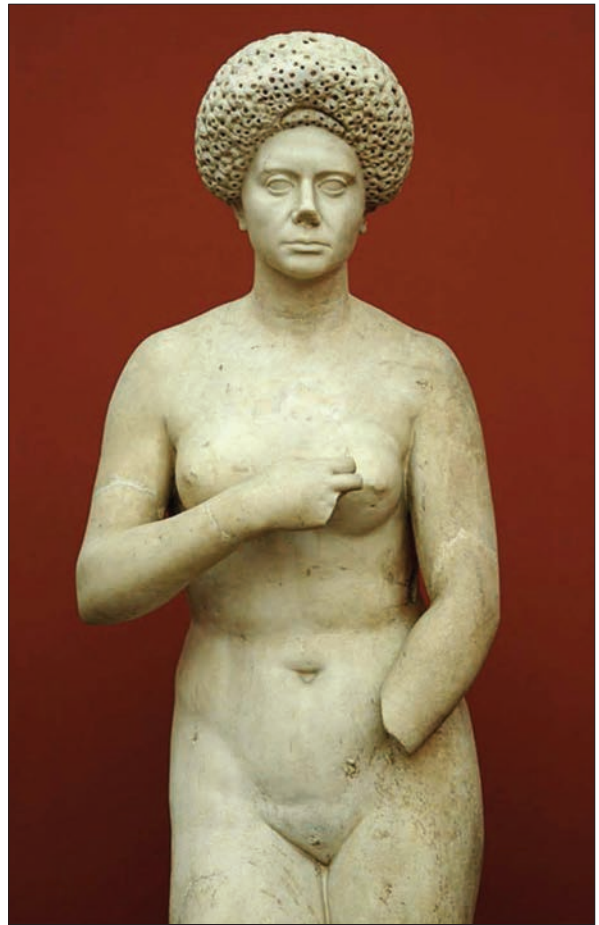


Fig. 10. Statue of a young man, the Vatican Museums, cat. no. 65 (after Hallett 1993, 195, fig. 5.46).

tury AD.⁶ The bust of a Flavian woman from the Getty Museum with drilled curls (Fig. 11) is dated to 90 AD.⁷

Another portrait head of a Roman lady from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 12) is dated to the early 2nd century AD.⁸ In the case of the head of a Roman lady from the Museum of Apollonia (Fig. 13), the hairstyle and face treatment of this beautiful head also reflect the fashion of Flavian women.⁹ The grave relief depicting a Roman woman in the Louvre (Fig. 14) is dated to the Flavian period.¹⁰ In the case of a group of a mother and daughter in the collection at Chatsworth (Fig. 15), the woman was represented with a coiffure popular among women in the Flavian period.¹¹ The funerary altar of Cominia Tyche at the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 16),

⁴ Borg 2019, 139, fig. 3.7, no. i; Bentz 1997/1998, 67, fig. 16.

⁵ Kleiner 1992, 178, fig. 146.

⁶ Hallett 1993, 195, fig. 5.46.

⁷ Frel 1981, 56, fig. 39.

⁸ Howard 1926, 9, fig. 2.

⁹ Ceka 2017, 424–425, fig. 2.

¹⁰ Poyiadji-Richter 2009, 185, fig. 4.

¹¹ Strong 1907, 366, pl. CXV; Furtwängler 1901, 221.



Fig. 11. Bust of a Flavian woman, the Getty Museum, inv. no. 73.AA.13 (after Frel 1981, 56, fig. 39).



Fig. 12. Portrait head of a Roman lady (Octavia, wife of Nero), the Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. no. 103 (after Howard 1926, 9, fig. 2).



Fig. 13. Head of a Roman lady, the Museum of Apollonia (after Ceka 2017, 424–425, fig. 2).



Fig. 14. Grave relief depicting a Roman woman, the Louvre, inv. no. MNB 2029 (after Poyiadji-Richter 2009, 185, fig. 4).



Fig. 15. Group of a mother with her daughter, the Chatsworth collection (after Strong 1907, 366, pl. CXV).

depicting a Roman lady with a hairstyle, is also dated to the Flavian period.¹²

The herm depicting Staia Quinta from Copenhagen (Fig. 17), with a beautiful hairstyle distinguished by drilled curls surrounding both sides of the head is dated to the second half of the 1st century AD.¹³ Another head of a Roman lady (Fig. 18) with a similar face treatment and drilled curls on both sides of the head beneath the hairdo is dated to the 1st century AD.

As for the distinguished individual with drilled curls, the present study conducted on many examples of Roman portraits indicates, with no doubt, that a reasonable date for the discussed head is the Flavian period.¹⁴ As we mentioned above, and due to the lack of information

about the provenance of this beautiful head, we depended on the stylistic analysis and face treatment to date it.

It is worth noting that Imperial portraits, as well as those of individuals, adopted the same fashion, not only for the hairstyle, but also for the face treatment.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Flavian period was a new and distinct artistic age. It differs from the Julio-Claudian period especially by the use of realism instead of idealism which prevailed in the earlier period.¹⁶ In the Flavian period, a sculptor would use the drill more often than before and show great attention for highly polished and softly treated faces.¹⁷

¹² Thompson 2007, 119, fig. 24; McCann 1978, 19, fig. 8.

¹³ Feijfer 2008, 287, pl. 25.

¹⁴ Romano 2006, 235–236, cat. no. 115.

¹⁵ Evans 2005, 441.

¹⁶ Henig 1983, 86; Tuck 2015, 181.

¹⁷ Strong 1976, 37.



Fig. 16. Funerary altar of Cominia Tyche, the Metropolitan Museum (after Thompson 2007, 119, fig. 24).



Fig. 17. Herm depicting Statia Quinta, Copenhagen (after Feijfer 2008, 287, pl. 25).



Fig. 18. Head of a Roman lady (after Romano 2006, 235–236, cat. no. 115).

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