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Recent approaches to the study of Roman portraits

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Recent Approaches to the Study of Roman Portraits

Barbara E. Borg

– Jane FEJFER, *Roman Portraits in Context*, (*Image & Context*, 2), Berlin, Walter De Gruyter, 2008. 592 p., 336 fig. in b/w, 40 pl. in color. ISBN: 978-3-11018-664-2; 114.95 €.

– Klaus FITTSCHEN, Paul ZANKER, Petra CAIN, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom*, II, *Die männlichen Privatporträts*, 2 vols., Berlin, Walter De Gruyter, 2010. 488 p., 232 fig. ISBN: 978-11-022886-1; 149 €.

– Massimiliano PAPINI, *Antichi volti della Repubblica: la ritrattistica in Italia centrale tra IV e II secolo AC*, (*Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma*, Supplementi, 13), 2 vols., Rome, “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 2004. 558 p., 202 fig. in b/w, 194 fig. in color. ISBN: 978-8-88265-282-1; 450 €.

– *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere*, Eugenio La Rocca, Claudio Parisi Presicce, Annalisa Lo Monaco eds., (exh. cat., Rome, Musei Capitolini, 2011), Rome, Musei Capitolini, 2011. 431 p., 350 fig. in b/w and color. ISBN: 978-8-89058-535-7; 59.95 €.

– Roland R. R. SMITH, *Roman Portrait Statuary from Aphrodisias*, (*Aphrodisias*, 2), Mainz, Philipp von Zabern, 2006. 338 p., 27 fig. and 163 pl. in b/w. ISBN: 978-3-80533-527-0; 76.80 €.

Roman portraiture is among the most exciting art that Roman culture has to offer, and not only because of the staggering artistic skills and beauty that characterize the best examples (fig. 1). While its study originated in an interest in the “real” personality of the subject, it has long been noted that the physical appearance and character of a person were just two of the possible elements that determined a portrait¹. Indeed, the commemorative and eulogistic intent of Roman portraiture demanded that the person always be depicted in what the ancients considered a positive way, and much artistic license was accorded to accomplish this goal. As Pliny the Younger suggested (*Letters* 3.10), these “improvements,” which were not limited to – and sometimes even contradicted – physical beautification, were aimed at (positive) moral or ethical characterization.

This aspect has intrigued scholars for the last forty years or so. Recently, in a brilliant

contribution by Eugenio La Rocca to the 2011 exhibition catalogue *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere*, the author discussed the major implications of these insights for our understanding of what a portrait can and cannot be or do, and rightly questions the existence of any “objective,” non-manipulative representation of an individual (p. 21-29). What has dominated research on Roman portraiture in recent years, however, are enquiries into the actual messages that specific portraits or elements of portraiture convey, and into the social practices that surround them². While the study of portraiture has often been regarded as the realm of a small group of specialists with little relevance to historical studies at large, recent research has made it clear beyond a doubt that portraits are an important source of information on the value systems and social norms of a given time and place, and thus contribute substantially to Roman social history. Communicating this insight to a wider audience is the aim of the exhibition catalogue that accompanied the second of a series of five



1. Portrait of a lady whose hair and facial features demonstrate an impressive level of artistic skills, late Trajanic or early Hadrianic Rome, Rome, Musei Capitolini, Palazzo Nuovo [Ritratti..., 2011, p. 394].

yearly exhibitions called “I Giorni di Roma”, which singled out portraiture to demonstrate the development, distinct nature, high standard, and cultural relevance of Roman art.

The five volumes chosen for review here are in many ways representative of the direction recent research has taken, as well as being, in my view, superb contributions to the field, whatever their flaws might be³. As such, even the older ones among them remain on the cutting edge of their field and offer compelling reflections that have yet to be fully explored.

Traditional approaches and questions: filling the gaps

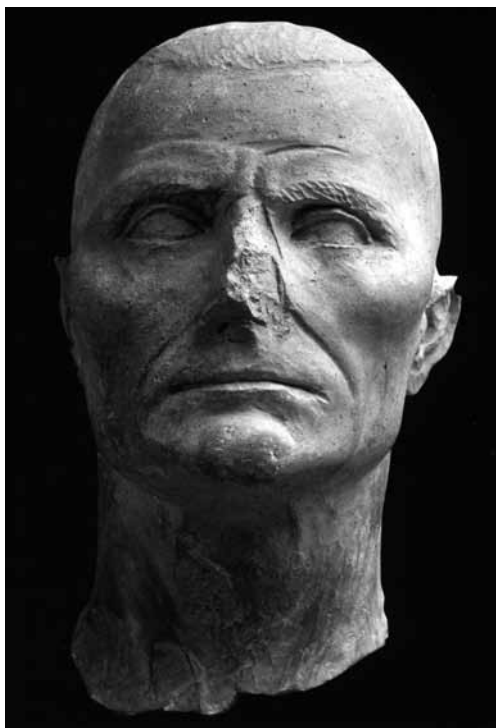
The recent shift in interest reflects a general trend in classical archaeology to increasingly regard itself as an intrinsically historical discipline. It must not be forgotten, however, that such an approach only became possible, and methodologically sound, after other questions had been resolved, most notably the identification of members of the imperial family and the dating of portraits, two aspects that are prerequisites for any historical interpretation. Significantly, three of the volumes discussed here address dating issues at some length, although the 2010 volume by Klaus Fittschen, Paul Zanker, and Petra Cain, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitulinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom: Die männlichen Privatporträts*, may prove to be the last large-scale contribution to this field of study focusing almost exclusively on dating issues. Fittschen and Zanker have led the way in establishing a sound methodology for these enquiries, and they have used their series of catalogues on portraiture in the municipal collections of Rome, published intermittently since 1983, to summarize the state of the art and promote cutting-edge research. The size and diversity of the museums’ holdings, often discussed in comparison with numerous sculptures in other collections, have thus rendered the catalogues proper methodological handbooks. The long-awaited final volume of the series is devoted to the collections’ 188 portraits of adult male privates from the Republic to the sixth century CE. The particular challenge in their dating, especially in those cases when they are

anonymous and out of context, is the limited range of different hairstyles achievable with short hair and the degree to which these hairstyles tend to deviate from that of the emperor⁴. Given this frequent lack iconographic dating criteria, comparisons of technical and stylistic details across a wide collection of examples is therefore essential to achieving plausible results.

In his 2004 book *Antichi volti della Repubblica: la ritrattistica in Italia centrale tra IV e II secolo AC* – a work that is clearly indebted to the German tradition of scholarship in that it draws heavily on stylistic analysis⁵ – Massimiliano Papini offers a study of republican portraiture from the fourth to the second century BCE. Though his assumption of a linear development of style might invite doubts in some instances⁶, his explicit discussion of methodologies, both previous ones and his own, and his efforts to refer to as much context as there is available to support his argument leaves the reader grateful that he has taken the risk. The result is by far the most comprehensive and best-supported approach to this important body of material so far.

There are still desiderata when it comes to provincial portraiture. As Roland R. R. Smith and his co-authors demonstrate throughout their 2006 publication *Roman Portrait Statuary from Aphrodisias*, stylistic and iconographical choices in the provinces can differ markedly from those in Rome. As in the volume by Fittschen, Zanker, and Cain, some catalogue entrances read almost like manuals of how to analyze and interpret portraits of non-Roman origin. The outstanding level of sophistication and methodological rigor applied by the authors of all three publications (FITTSCHEN, ZANKER, CAIN, 2010; PAPINI, 2004; SMITH, 2006) render their results more than plausible; those who engage with their arguments in more detail will see that stylistic analysis is based not on vague subjective impressions of similarity, as is sometimes insinuated, but on the meticulous study of changing aesthetic and technical preferences, and that such analysis does not necessarily need to assume linear developments, which clearly did not exist in the imperial period.

Another long-standing issue has also resurfaced recently, namely the highly controversial debate about the origins of Roman verism⁷.



Papini, in *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere* (*Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 33-43), and Jane Fejfer in her 2008 book *Portraits in Context* (FEJFER, 2008, p. 262-270) both return to the idea, abandoned for some time, that the choice of hyper-realistic old faces for much of late Republican portraiture depended on highly regarded ancestral wax masks and portraits. While simultaneously eschewing those aspects of the traditional argument that have rightly been refuted by Heinrich Drerup⁸, both authors bring fresh ideas about contexts to bear on their subject. According to Fejfer, these wax portraits were elaborated from casts made from the living face, while Papini maintains that they derived from death masks; both, however, draw on Polybius and others who described them as extraordinarily realistic. While Fejfer believes that the verism of Roman marble portraits is a result of the fierce competitive climate present at the very end of the republic, Papini's monograph supports his view that verism has a much longer Italian tradition (fig. 2).

Current approaches and new trends

What all five volumes (though FITTSCHEN, ZANKER, CAIN, 2010 to a rather limited extent⁹)

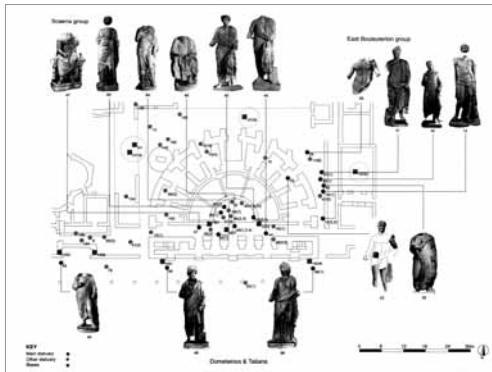
have in common that marks them out as products of recent scholarship is their contextual approach and socio-historical impetus. Papini studies Republican portraiture in all media, including not only the predominant terracotta but also bronze sculpture, painted portraits, Etruscan sarcophagi, gemstones, and coins. Moreover, through a detailed analysis of literary texts as well as archaeological contexts, he attempts to restore them to their original historical, political, social, and cultural frameworks. One of his guiding questions, on the impact of Greek portraiture on Italian and Roman images, goes back to the nineteenth century, but Papini's interest is utterly modern. Building on the insight that identity is a matter of self-perception and self-fashioning, he argues that the Italians drew upon Greek ideas and skills in such a way, and to the extent, that they helped to express *local* identities and ideologies. While the patrons of Etruscan cinerary urns preferred a lifestyle of Dionysiac *tryphe* and adopted styles similar to that of the Ptolemies, so he argues, most central Italian portraiture was closely affiliated to the more austere Seleucid royal portraits, and to philosopher portraits.

The other volumes under review all deal (predominantly) with material from the imperial period. Fejfer's *Roman Portraits in Context* is the first attempt at a comprehensive treatment of the questions raised by Roman portraiture as an historical source, taking "context" to cover an extraordinary breadth of issues, from the statues, busts, herms, and *clipei* to which the portrait heads were attached, the materials used and techniques applied, the inscriptions that often accompanied the likenesses, and the locations chosen for their display, to the motivations and social practices surrounding their commissioning and choice of style, their dedication, and their subsequent treatment. To cover all these issues, she draws on an enormously wide range of primary evidence, including inscriptions, literary sources, and portraits in different media and from all parts of the Roman Empire.

As noted, *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere* follows in the wake of Fejfer's book, and a similar approach also characterizes Bert Smith's *Roman Portrait Statuary from Aphrodisias*. In contrast to the majority of existing excavation catalogues, roughly half of Smith's volume – one in a series

2. Terracotta portrait of a man, probably a votive portrait from Cerveteri, 3rd century-early 1st century BCE (?), and thus earlier than the Roman veristic marble portraits, Vatican City, Vatican Museum, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco [*Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 182].

3. Aphrodisias, main portrait statuary from different periods with their find-locations in and around the Bouleuterion [SMITH, 2006, fig. 17].



of ongoing publications on excavations in the ancient city – is devoted to general insights gained from the material, and their wider implications. All of his portraits come from a single city, and many of them can be named and/or recontextualised in their original display environment. The author makes the most of an ideal situation. His observations on the identity and social background of those depicted, the use of different styles and costumes, and the choice of display locations not only shed light on the social practices at Aphrodisias, but also inform the use of portraiture in provincial cities more generally and thus substantially enrich a number of methodological and historical reflections¹⁰.

For all the books under review, the physical (re-)contextualisation of portraits is of primary concern, and it has contributed substantially to our understanding of how portraits worked as vehicles for communication. If there is an insight worth singling out, it is the fact that, very often, we are actually looking at late antique display contexts when we study archaeological evidence (fig. 3), an aspect explicitly addressed in Smith, but which merits much more attention in future research. Of course, it is impossible in the present review to do justice to the full range of issues brought to light by the current publications. The remainder of the review will therefore focus on one aspect that has attracted much recent attention and controversy.

Bodies and costumes

One such element is the body on which a portrait was mounted, and its role in contributing to the overall message of a monument. Fejfer, of all

the authors, addresses the widest range of different materials and formats, as well as the factors that determined these choices (FEJFER, 2008, p. 152-261 and 439-445). Of special interest is her discussion of abbreviated formats (p. 228-261) and her observations on the use of herm shafts (p. 228-233). Based on her analysis of the Nemi herms during their recent restoration (see pl. 34-35), she identifies criteria that allow a distinction to be made between herm portraits and busts even when the herm itself is not preserved, and demonstrates that herms were far more common than is usually acknowledged¹¹. While they were popular in the West during the late Republic and first century CE, they were used in the Greek East into the later second century and maintained strong connotations of Greekness.

Likewise, costumes, often neglected in earlier studies due to their repetitive nature, have attracted much attention in recent scholarship. Smith and his co-authors rightly insist that this repetition in fact reflects the limited number of roles in society and indicates a public consent about norms and values. Patrons carefully selected *topoi* from this repertoire in order to express “individual combinations of shared values” (SMITH, 2006, p. 25, emphasis in the original). In *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere*, Matteo Cadario



provides an excellent overview of the repertoire, conveniently illustrated with photographs of statues, on which the different parts of dress are labeled (*Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 209-221). The following catalogue entries (3.1-18) contain a wealth of important observations and intriguing interpretations, for instance

4. Statue of a young man from the Claudian period, Formia, Archaeological Museum. Ample remains of red paint on the toga suggest that he is wearing the *toga purpurea*, and thus may have received *ornamenta triumphalia* [Ritratti..., 2011, p. 233].

Cadario's discussion of several statues with red togas (cf. the color illustration of cat. 3.9; fig. 4), most likely referring to the *ornamenta triumphalia* bestowed on their patrons.

Smith even organizes his catalogue according to costume, a choice that is not entirely convincing or helpful, but which allows him and his co-authors to discuss in detail the meaning of different types of dress. Especially when read in conjunction with Fejfer's extensive analysis of the same material (FEJFER, 2008, p. 181-227; 331-351; 440-445), it becomes clear how much the choice of dress (or the lack of it) also depends on a local context and ideology. The toga statue, for instance, which is so widespread in the West and embodies the ideal of the Roman citizen actively involved in business, administration, and cult, is largely absent in the East, where the Greek himation is worn as a token of local pride even by eastern Roman citizens who held offices in Rome (FEJFER, 2008, p. 196-197; Smith, 2006, *passim*).

The meaning of dress in female statues, as well as the significance of nude statues and representations of humans in the guise of gods, is still very contentious. It has long been observed that women are typically depicted according to body types modeled on Greek statues from the classical to the early Hellenistic period, mostly created for goddesses (FEJFER, 2008, p. 335-348)¹². The reasons for such representational choices are not always clear, but Fejfer makes some intriguing observations and suggestions (p. 335-348). For instance, she observes a preference – in the West only – for closely wrapped bodies in the early period, while a more open body language revealing more of the woman's form becomes prevalent from the second century onwards. Pointing to the fact that women were often praised for their *pietas* and that their main public role was related to cult practices, she further proposes that the way in which they were portrayed may often have been a reflection of their affinity to a specific (local) deity, with whom the original statue type may have been associated.

Nude male statues have also long been an object of controversy. In *Roman Portrait Statuary from Aphrodisias* and in an earlier monograph from 2005¹³, Chris Hallett has treated them at length and proposes to distinguish two different

kinds of nudity: athletic, which is very rare, and "heroic." The latter was primarily used in the early imperial period for members of the imperial family, who were often also depicted according to divine statue types. To explain heroic nudity in privates, he points to the funerary realm, where the deceased were sometimes addressed as heroes in inscriptions.

But what does this "heroism" actually mean? The question is obviously related to that concerning humans assimilated to gods or heroes in statues, busts, and reliefs. While one group of scholars interprets such images as an indication of heroization, divinization, or apotheosis, the majority, including those in the present volumes, now consider them a poetic device used to suggest that the subject possessed the same positive character traits as the hero or divinity to whom they were assimilated. Fejfer points out the lack of a clear divide between portraits *in formam deorum* and female statues depicted using classical body types, and also notes a considerable number of examples from semi-public and public contexts (FEJFER, 2008, p. 124-128). The latter are discussed in an excellent and highly effective contribution by Annalisa Lo Monaco in *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere* (*Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 335-349), which draws on both archaeological and written evidence. She stresses that the privates portrayed *in formam deorum* in fact emulated the imperial family and their imagery, and that imperial freedmen, who were sometimes not only enormously powerful but also very close to the emperor, may have had a leading role in this. In the previous essay, Stefano Tortorella discusses visual representations of imperial *divi* and *divae* and their apotheosis, linking them to actual practices as known from written sources and archaeological contexts (*Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 303-313), while the following fifteen catalogue entries again provide detailed analyses of interesting examples.

All books under review here, including the exhibition catalogue, are full of original research and fresh ideas on key questions and controversies. They are also lavishly illustrated, mostly with images of outstanding quality. While all are

key publications in their field, it is with Fejfer's monograph and *Ritratti: le tante facce del potere* in particular that the subject of Roman portraiture has come to occupy a central place in a narrative of Roman cultural history that is relevant and accessible to a wide audience, ranging from students and scholars of the ancient world to the interested public.

1. For a history of scholarship see Jan Bažant, *Roman Portraiture: A History of Its History*, Prague, 1995; Barbara E. Borg, "Jenseits des mos maiorum: Eine Archäologie römischer Werte?" in Andreas Haltenhoff, Andreas Heil, Fritz-Heiner Mutschler eds., *Römische Werte als Gegenstand der Altertumswissenschaft*, Munich, 2005, p. 47-75.

2. Most notably, portraits of women have received much attention, with interesting and important results that deserve to be reviewed on their own, including Kathrin Schade, *Frauen in der Spätantike – Status und Repräsentation: Eine Untersuchung zur römischen und frühbyzantinischen Bildniskunst*, Mainz, 2003; Annetta Alexandridis, *Die Frauen des römischen Kaiserhauses: Eine Untersuchung ihrer bildlichen Darstellung von Livia bis Julia Domna*, Mainz, 2004; Jennifer Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication in Roman Imperial Art and Culture*, Cambridge, 2011.

3. For this reason, and bearing in mind the constraints of word count, I have considered it legitimate to skip over such flaws, and to focus on aspects that render these publications important contributions to the field. I shall also refrain from referring to other publications than the books under consideration here when these provide extensive bibliographies on the issues at stake.

4. Roland R. R. Smith, « Cultural choice and political identity in honorific portrait statues in the Greek East in the second century A.D. », in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 88, 1998, p. 56-93.

5. It is surely no coincidence that his PhD thesis, on which the book is based, was written at Tübingen.

6. See Sheila Dillon's review of the book, in *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 20, 2007, p. 428-431.

7. For a vast bibliography on the subject, see *Ritratti...*, 2011, p. 42-43.

8. Heinrich Drerup, « Totenmaske und Ahnenbild bei den Römern », in *Römische Mitteilungen*, 87, 1980, p. 81-129.

9. That the one volume stands out is surely partly due to the nature of the evidence, but also to the fact that the volume was conceptualized and largely finished in the late 1980s (FITTSCHEN, ZANKER, CAIN, 2010, p. vii).

10. For an extended review of this book, see Barbara E. Borg, « Aphrodisians on display: the public image of a local élite », in *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 20, 2007, p. 583-588.

11. In doing so, she provides valid criticism of Timothy A. Motz's *The Roman Freestanding Portrait Bust: Origins,*

Context, and Early History, dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1993, in which the author proposes that almost all early busts would have belonged to herms.

12. The few examples of statues dressed in the matronly *stola* cease during the first century CE (FEJFER, 2008, p. 331-335).

13. Christopher H. Hallett, *The Roman Nude: Heroic Portrait Statuary 200 BC-AD 300*, Oxford, 2005.

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