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## A ROMAN RELIEF WITH CHAIR, SCEPTRE AND WREATH IN COPENHAGEN

### I. INTRODUCTION

Present-day investigation of Roman history has at its disposal an extensive material consisting of data concerning the mental foundations upon which Roman society and organisation rested. This material has been constructed from the results of a scholarly study, both age-long and continuous, of the inscriptions and literary evidence of antiquity. The increasing knowledge of the monuments has enriched this material with illustrations, elucidating and confirming the texts.

In spite of the extreme care with which these investigations were carried out, it is without doubt that in literature a great many particulars of historical and cultural importance remain hidden from us. This is caused by our inability to grasp the meaning of these details by a direct study of the texts. They only become clearly apparent in the light of a given connection. Such a connection we may come on by surprise, whether by a happy association in reading a random passage, or in other ways. As a general rule the detailed examination to which the ancient texts have been submitted leaves little room for exclusively philological reconnaissances. Much more can be expected from a system reversing the formerly prevailing method. Instead of starting off with the texts and then illustrating them with monuments we can also put the study of monuments — historical documents of the highest order — first and foremost, and then, enlightened by the outcome of this procedure return to the written tradition. Working in this manner it will be possible in many cases to penetrate into particulars hidden till now among the texts.

The described form of investigation requires a close combination of archaeological and historical methods. This association is facilitated and furthered by the fact that classical archaeology and historical investigation, though different in their mode of working and in the material that forms the object of their study, are similar in their scientific objective. The task of an archaeologist is not fulfilled after having elaborated a dating-scheme and classified his material on the strength of meticulously defined characteristics. As an archaeologist he should endeavour to pursue the matter and ultimately aim at historical conclusions. As an art-historian of antiquity it is his business to work up style-characteristics into the construction of a style-history. As a historian of culture he should try to show how representations and motives of plastic arts — even where they manifest themselves in their most humble and common-

place form — are bound with indissoluble ties to the attitude towards life pertaining to a certain period. Particularly this branch of archaeological investigation offers the historian outstanding opportunities of gaining new insight into these matters.

It is a well-known fact that the existence of extensive gaps in ancient literature was one of the causes that led to the collection of every fragment of text that has come down to us — the state of preservation being quite immaterial. The editions of fragments thus compiled constitute a documentary archive that none of the classical sciences would be able to do without.

A similar situation as the one described for the remains of literature and inscriptions has come into existence with regard to the monuments of non-written tradition. As a matter of fact the archaeological musea form the archives, where a varied stock of finds — no matter whether they are well preserved or not — has been made accessible to study. This function of the archaeological museum explains why so many incomplete, queer-looking objects of little interest as works of art are exhibited in its rooms: if a monument is not interesting from the point of view of art it still may contain a valuable clue to a historical problem. Many studies starting from a careful examination of incomplete, seemingly insignificant objects, help to confirm this statement. The present investigation should be considered as an attempt to increase their number.

The conditions prevailing in archaeological museums often disappoint and bore the general public looking for the aesthetical enjoyment usually attending a visit to a museum of fine arts. The same conditions, however, inspire and attract the specialist to whom the incomplete and puzzling remains are like so many themes for an interesting story. He wants to discover what is concealed behind their present state and hopes that an intensive analysis of their characteristic features may open some unexpected historical prospect. Perhaps the excitement of the chase sometimes leads an investigator to overstate his case, inducing him to exaggerate the importance of a few ill-founded conclusions; but all the same it certainly keeps him awake. And, as Mr. Mattingly once most properly advised students of Ancient History: "In reading Ancient History one should expect surprises; if you read long without them, you should pinch yourself to make sure that you are awake"<sup>1</sup>.

What applies to reading also holds true for the study of monuments. Thus a surprise of the kind Mr. Mattingly was hinting at, was ours when examining a relief originating from a Roman monument forming part of the Ny Carlsberg collection in Copenhagen. The representation fi-

guring in this relief appeared to give an important clue to a problem attached to the interpretation of a group of similar monuments spread over various museums, mostly in Italy, or known from old descriptions and drawings. It seemed worth considering whether a systematical investigation after the method described in this introduction would prove successful as a means of tracing the historical associations and the exact significance of the group as a whole. The following study originated with this anticipation.

The argument falls into two main parts. It starts from a detailed comparative analysis of the relief in Copenhagen and the representations connected with it.<sup>2</sup> Several new and interesting facts emerge from this enquiry. The second part of our investigation then tries to assign to these facts their right place in a historical pattern, thus seeking to explain the elements of the reliefs we are concerned with as the results of a historical development.

## II. THE MONUMENT IN COPENHAGEN.

Among the numerous monuments of Roman origin in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, there is a curious marble relief, representing a so-called *Sellisternium* — an empty seat of honour bearing different attributes — belonging to the period of the Severi, which has as yet only once attracted more than incidental attention. (Fig. 1; 0,91 × 1,9 m.).

S. Eitrem and H. l'Orange made it the object of a close investigation,<sup>3</sup> considering the problem of its somewhat obscure meaning and offering many a valuable observation on its possible symbolism and historical associations. The short comment that F. Poulsen added to its description in the catalogue of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek published in 1951<sup>4</sup> is based on this treatise, which is called "Trône et Sceptre".

Both publications — the treatise and the catalogue — qualified the relief as the representation of "a chair or bench of curious form", not to be confused — as is emphatically pointed out — with a throne. As Eitrem writes, the relief shows a 'seat': ". . . un siège, — c'est à dire une chaise sans dossier ni bras, — donc pas un trône . . ."<sup>5</sup> This backless chair is decorated with a little frieze, upon which figures a series of seamonsters of a conventional type, and it seems to be supported by two human figures of a rather puzzling appearance as to their exact anatomical structure. Between them, under the seat of the chair, we see a footstool shaped like a rectangular block, showing no decoration. The chair itself is covered with a cushion, slightly squashed by the weight of a heavy laurel wreath apparently faced with an oblong precious stone. Above this is seen a