

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRAGMENTS

AND OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

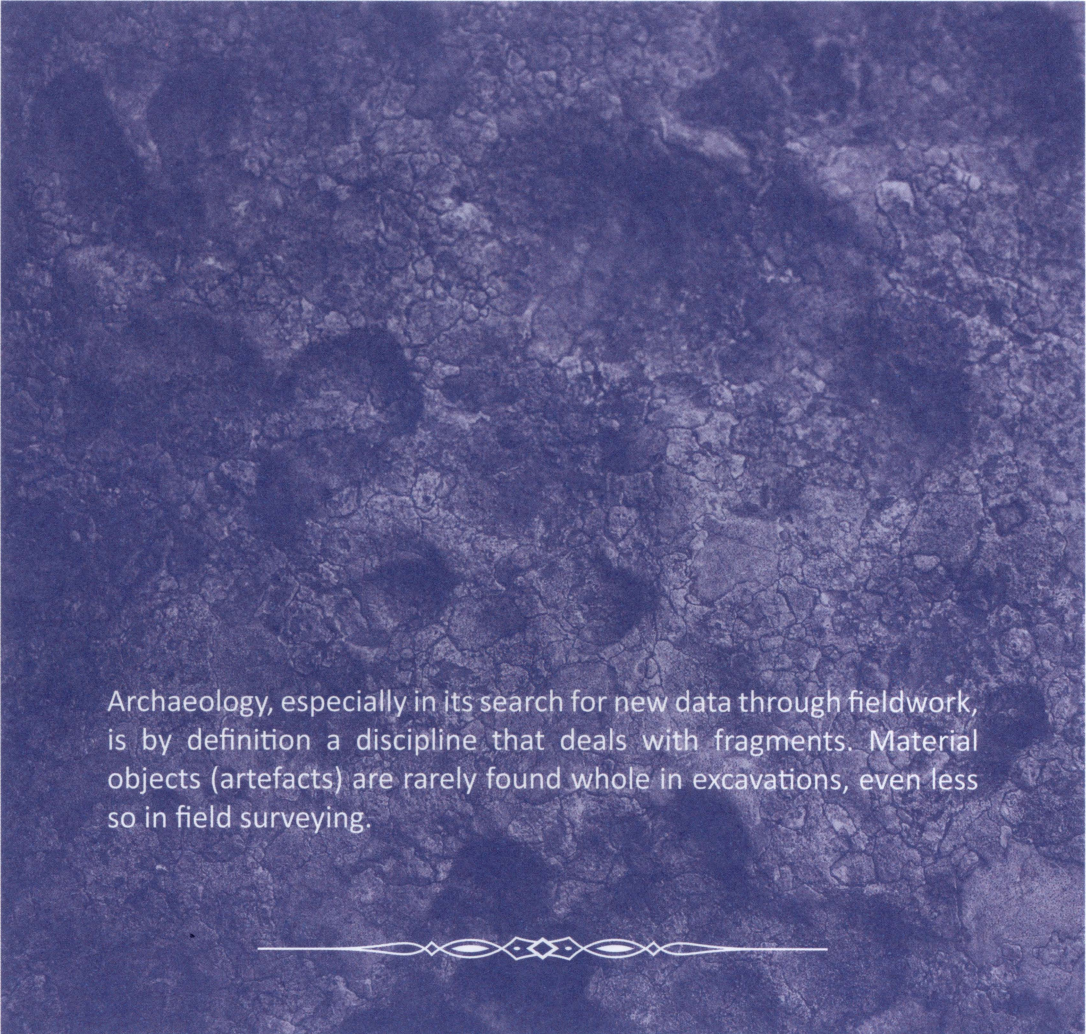
 Heritage Malta



FROM PIECE TO WHOLE

RECONSTRUCTING GRECO-ROMAN SCULPTURE

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Archaeology, especially in its search for new data through fieldwork, is by definition a discipline that deals with fragments. Material objects (artefacts) are rarely found whole in excavations, even less so in field surveying.

Although the medium I have chosen to discuss, sculpture, is an artistic one and involves by its own nature strong elements of aesthetics and iconography, I shall deal with it also from the archaeological perspective. This distinction between these two disciplines was brought to the fore in my mind by a recent article in an Italian archaeological magazine which commemorated a man who rightly deserves to be considered the founder of ancient Classical art history, namely, Johann Joachim Winkelmann (1717-1767). Winkelmann set down and published the first history of Greco-Roman art in 1764. The authors of the article declared him to be the first archaeologist and to have introduced the archaeological method in the study of ancient art. At first I found this attribution questionable since it is nowhere recorded that he was ever involved in archaeological field work, but then I realized that this attitude is, or was, quite standard in continental academic circles, as opposed to Anglo-Saxon ones. I should have known better since I had my professional training in both of them, having studied in the *Istituto di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte Antica* of the University of Palermo and at the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London.

Archaeology, especially in its search for new data through fieldwork, is by definition a discipline that deals with fragments. Material objects (artefacts) are rarely found whole in excavations, even less so in field surveying. The exceptions are cities buried suddenly by climactic disasters, like Pompeii and Herculaneum, and undisturbed roofed tombs. This applies not only to sculpture, but also to objects of daily use such as glass and pottery containers. So much so, that whereas we use the term 'sherds' for broken glass and pottery, we tend to use the term 'pieces' for sculpture even if they, or some of them, are still intact.

Fragmentation in sculpture depends also on the size of the objects: smaller objects, like statuettes, have a much better chance of surviving whole in destruction layers than larger ones, like life-size, or colossal, statues. It also depends on the material. Bronze sculptures are less prone to break than stone and marble ones, but they tend to get melted down for their metal or squashed if they end up under heavy collapse and, in this case, their restoration consists of reshaping rather than adding missing elements. Within individual sculptures there are parts that are more vulnerable than others, such as protruding hands and feet in human bodies and noses (slightly less so, ears) in faces. It also stands to reason that, due to normal taphonomic processes and human pillaging, larger sculptures are harder to come by in excavations. A case in point is the Maltese archaeological context where the archaeological strata are so shallow that, in most areas, a span of thousands of years is contained in a metre or so of deposits. A classical case is the sanctuary of Tas-Silġ.

With regard to Roman marble and hard stone sculpture it is advisable to keep in mind that, in Malta, many such sculptural pieces probably ended up in the lime kilns over the centuries. This might, at least in part, explain the paucity of such finds in archaeological contexts.

There has always been an understandable desire to fill existing gaps in ancient works of sculpture in order to enjoy them in their entirety. In the past, this desire led consummate artists, like the neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, to integrate Greco-Roman sculptural masterpieces like the pedimental sculptures from the temple of Aphaia at Aegina, now in the Glyptothek of Munich. This same desire made these sculptors do their utmost to hide their interventions and the inexperienced spectator often has a hard task to identify the extent of the surviving original work from the restored parts.

This tendency has been almost universally abandoned, and Greco-Roman sculpture is generally displayed in the state of preservation in which it was brought to light from the ground. Good examples are the Elgin marbles in the British Museum, which were spared from being 'restored' only by Elgin's lack of financial resources.

For purposes of study and cataloguing freshly discovered sculptural pieces, especially if fragmentary, it is necessary to undergo a whole process of research and professional training even to identify the subject of the representation, whether it is a human figure, for example, or a mythological one. A high degree of familiarity with ancient portrait physiognomy is required for the former, while familiarity with Greek and Roman mythology and religious iconography is required for the latter. The speaker has been involved in such an exercise since his early postgraduate studies, namely, the compilation of the *catalogue raisonné* of the Greco-Roman sculpture in the Maltese national and private collections. This catalogue is now being published by instalments online on the website of Heritage Malta.

The speaker will, therefore, illustrate the methodology of this discipline from his experience in the study and publication of two different classes of fragmentary Roman sculptures: a small head which was originally part of a statuette of a male bearded divinity; and a whole cycle of portrait sculptures representing members of a particular Roman imperial family, that were recovered from the excavations of the Rabat Domvs Romana.

The small marble head was found by Temi Zammit during his excavations, a few metres beyond the remains of the Domvs Romana, in the early 1920s. The head presented some difficulty because the general physiognomic features occur in a number of Greco-Roman divinities. A crucial factor for the determination of which god was represented was the head cover. This was hampered by the fact that the head went missing in the 1980s and the unusual headdress was only discernible from old photographs.

The identification of at least four of a group of fragmentary portrait statues from the Domvs Romana took several decades to mature, and did so, only, as a result of research into hundreds of publications (monographs of single imperial personalities and of the whole Julio-Claudian dynasty, catalogues of sculptures housed in different museums, specialised papers on patterns of drapery and shoe types). Mainly from circumstantial evidence, in one

case, the speaker proposed the identification of the togate statue of a young boy as the future emperor (Nero), and in another case, a more tentative identification of a draped female figure with a portrait statue of Emperor Claudius' fourth wife and Nero's mother (Agrippina the Younger).

The speaker, as consultant to Heritage Malta, was also responsible for the eventual physical combination of a portrait head with the body of a togate male torso (Emperor Claudius) and of a female bust with the lower part of a draped torso (Antonia the Younger or Claudia Antonia, respectively mother or daughter of Claudius).

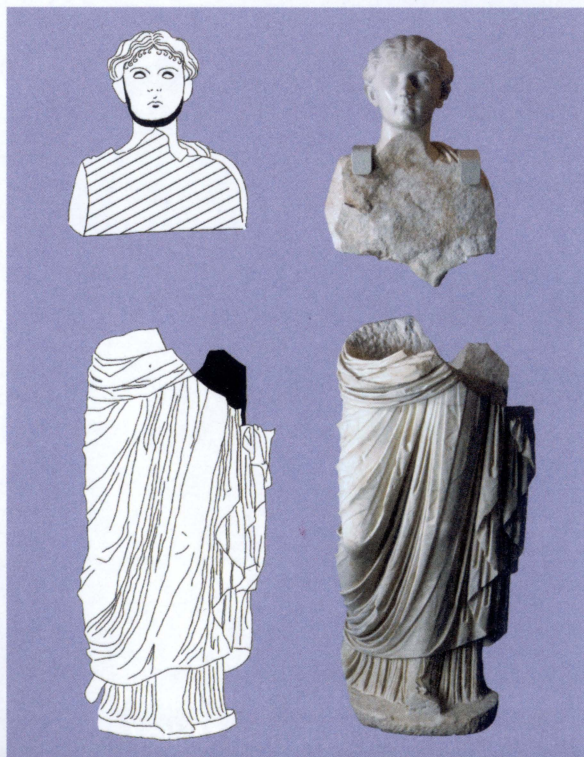
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Left: A sketch of a hypothetical combination of the two pieces commissioned from a student of Archaeology (Ramon Micallef) prior to their present mounting.

Right: A portrait statue of a female member of the family of Emperor Claudius – the two separate pieces of sculpture were retrieved during the discovery of the remains of the Domus Romana in 1881.