

A ROMAN BRONZE RELIEF OF THE PERSONIFIED CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

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There is no doubt that personification of the city of Alexandria was always a very curious subject. The relatively well-known examples constitute a valuable source for many new studies of personification of that great city. I shall deal with a bronze relief displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum⁽¹⁾ in Alexandria representing a head of a woman whose headdress is a prow of a ship (Plate I). The provenance of that bronze relief is indicated by its place in the museum. It has not ever been either published or studied before. It may throw a new light on such personification of the city as a mistress of sea, since it has never stimulated greater interest. Only very few examples show Alexandria's maritime associations⁽²⁾ expressing its naval power. Moreover, all personifications of the city express different ideas emphasizing Alexandria's economic or religious aspects. Hence, the bronze relief, here, in my paper has a particular importance. We must bear in mind that lack of published examples make it difficult to depend on comparative studies.

Considering the representation of the woman's head in our bronze relief; her face is shown in front, it is round, broad and full-face. It has a very heavy appearance. The cheeks are both full and heavy. The nose is sharp and well-defined. It is rather big ended with wide open nostrils. The mouth is big its lips are thick, parted and the corners are pointing slightly downwards. The forehead

(1) Graeco-Roman Museum, *Alexandria*, Inv. No. 24388, 0.195 × 0.245cm. A Bronze head of the personified city of Alexandria dedicated to the Museum from King Foad I in 1936.

(2) - Toynbee, J. Mc., *The Hadrianic School*, 1934, p. 50.
- Jentel, M. O., LIMC, *Alexandria*, I, Paris, 1981, Nos. 80, 82.

is narrow and rather low. The hair is combed with very short heavy curls over the forehead. The short hair is indicated by coarse incised lines. The eyes are unnaturally large, wide with a rather superhuman power in its glance. The pupils of the eye are big and the eyebrows are long and sharp. It is noticeable that the artist, here, succeeded in reflecting a kind of terrifying power in the big eyes. The headdress is in the form of a prow of a ship. The woman has earrings.

I may suggest that the bronze relief, here, is displaying an unusual version of Tyche of Alexandria; the Tyche of maritime city for the following reasons:

Firstly, the woman has earrings; it is accepted that the use of earrings had a real meaning connected with the reference to the concept of Agathe Tyche⁽³⁾ ἀγαθῆς Τύχης (good fortune). In addition, in Roman Imperial times Tyche of Alexandria is a frequent feature on Alexandrian coins⁽⁴⁾. In contrary, the ptolemies use the skin of the elephant's head in personification of Alexandria as a symbol of their power inherited from Alexander⁽⁵⁾. So, Tyche of Alexandria is a pure Roman future.

Secondly, Tyche of Alexandria in Roman times almost wears turreted headdress as it is shown on certain examples on imperial coins. Alexandria is depicted with turreted headdress and holding a small figure of Isis Pharia⁽⁶⁾.

(3) Fraser, P.M., *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, London, 1971, pp. 245 - 246.

(4) - Grueber, A.H., *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, London, 1910, PL. Viq, III nos. 3648, 3649.

- Pool, R.S., *Catalogue of the coins of Alexandria and the Nomes*, London, 1892, PL. XXIV nos. 1173, 1000.

(5) - Edgar, C.C., *Two Bronze Portraits from Egypt*, in, J.H.S. 26, 1906, p.281, pl. XVIII.

- Idem, *Greek Moulds*, 1903, PL. VII, No. 320.47.

(6) Pool, *op. cit.*, PL. 24, nos. 1684, 1989.

Also, Alexandria represented in a fresco in Naples on relief in Torlonia dated on the second century A.D with the same headdress.⁽⁷⁾ The turreted headdress always to symbolize victory as well as prosperity. It is believed that the helmets of Athena especially those with three crests were an inspiration for the uncommon attribution later in imperial Roman era⁽⁸⁾. The most striking parallel is afforded by a Hellenistic plaster cast from Mit-Rahina⁽⁹⁾ representing Athena wearing the Corinthian helmet with three crests. In this way, it would not be too much to suggest that the representations of Athena especially these with earrings and necklaces that characterize Athena Parthenos⁽¹⁰⁾ were the direct influence on Tyche of Alexandria which always wears earrings and turreted headdress⁽¹¹⁾. While to say prows of ships as headdress seem to be a unique hint to maritime associations, victory, good-luck and prosperity. The famous mosaic of the queen Berenike II displayed in the Graeco-Roman⁽¹²⁾ museum in Alexandria is the proof. A connection between prows of ships and maritime victory or maritime importance is always there.

(7) Jantel, LIMC, *op. cit.*, nos. 80, 82.

(8) Hill, D.K., *Catalogue of Classical Bronze Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery*, 1949, nos. 190 - 191, pl. 49.

(9) Robensohn, O., *Hellenistisches Silbergerät in Antiken Gipsabgüssen*, 1911, 13 - 15 in pl. I.

(10) Higgins, R.A., *Greek and Roman Jewellery*, 1961, p. 128, Fig. 29.

(11) Pool, *op. cit.*, pl. 24, nos. 1684, 1989.

(12) Daszki, A., *Corpus of Mosaico from Egypt*, I, pp. 152 - 153.

Thirdly, the terrifying power in the women's eyes has a particularly strong effect with the wide staring eyes giving expression of power⁽¹³⁾. One of the closest parallels was a personification of Tyche Alexandria on a Roman silver patera dated to the first century A.D.⁽¹⁴⁾. That terrifying power in the woman's large eyes in both examples to represent superhuman power. But in the bronze relief, here in question, had a real meaning in imperial Roman time. It has long been realized, however, that expressing deep feeling of terrifying power is a must.

In comparing the woman's head in our bronze relief with the few examples of personifications of Alexandria either on coins or frescos, and metalwork, we are stuck by fundamental likeness between the artistic style of the bronze relief and the dated examples to the second century A.D especially those dated to Hadrian's era.

It thus appears that the bronze relief of the personified city of Alexandria here, most probably dates to Hadrian's reign for the following reasons:

1 - With Hadrian (117 - 138 A.D) began an era of peace and widespread prosperity in the whole empire, and it is well known that Alexandria shares with Italy the honour of appearing as a city among Roman provinces⁽¹⁵⁾.

2 - Naturally, the combination of maritime and Tyche of Alexandria in the bronze relief had a certain meaning closely connected with the official

(13) Orange, H.P., *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture*, 1947, p. 22.

(14) Perdrizet, P., *Bronze Gecque d'Egypt de la Collection Fouquet*, Paris, 1911, p. 39.

(15) Mattingly, H., *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*. Vol. III, London, 1936, pp. CLXXVII, CLXXXI.

propaganda in Hadrian's region. It is not forgotten Hadrian's activities in flourishing the economical state of the Empire including Egypt⁽¹⁶⁾. Therefore, the sculptor who carved this head successfully tried to personify Alexandria by reflecting its naval and economical importance with a stress on the state of prosperity in Hadrian's era.

3 - From the artistic point of view, the bronze relief, here, reflect the classical realism adopted by artists in Hadrian's era. Evidently, the artists adopted not only a kind of classical realism but also a re-classicism. Hadrian, himself was a philhellene emperor⁽¹⁷⁾. In his region, Roman art experienced a nostalgic return to Greek classical ideals not merely in style but also in content⁽¹⁸⁾. So, it is not surprising that the artist inherited the Hellenistic tradition in expressing power, victory and prosperity as it appeared before in the representation of the Ptolemaic queen Berenike II. So, personification of Alexandria here in the bronze relief assume a provincial taste of Roman Alexandria, and the prow of a ship as a headdress is a direct symbol of power that Hadrian brought to the whole empire. It was Hadrian who adopted the policy of defending the weak against the strong⁽¹⁹⁾. In addition the sculpture on the grand scale was always expensive and there was a continuing demand for smaller

(16) Rostovtzeff, M., *The Social and Economic History of Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1957, p. 362.

(17) - Strong, A., *Roman Sculpture*, London, 1907, p. 267.

- Henig, A.; *Roman Art*, Oxford, 1983, p. 88.

- Hinkes, R., *Greek and Roman Portraits Sculpture*, London, 1976, p. 70

(18) Strong, *op. cit.*, loc. cit.

(19) Rostozeff, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

works of arts, being both cheaper and more portable. Hence, the bronze relief, here, reflect local needs of artistic school in Roman Alexandria.

4 - In comparing the bronze head with two significant examples dated to the second century A.D, we are inclined to think that the bronze relief dated to the same era. The first was the silver patera published by perdrizet⁽²⁰⁾ and the second example is a large mosaic recently excavated in Alexandria by Empereur⁽²¹⁾ representing a big face of Medusa dated on the first half of the 2nd century A.D⁽²²⁾. The point is, the great artistic likeness between the famous mosaic of Medusa and the woman in the bronze relief; both have the same artistic touch in representing the terrifying power in the big eye's glance. In addition, both characterized by the classical realism most probable in Hadrian's region. So, it is not surprising that the same artistic school in the first half of the second century A.D that produced both the mosaic and the woman's head in the bronze relief displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum. It is obvious that the Alexandrian artists in Hadrian's region not only adopted the classical realism tendency in art but also adopted the policy of power preferred by the emperor himself in many spheres⁽²³⁾. This policy is reflected in many measures

(20) Perdrizet, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

It is a silver patera with an emblema, Louvre, Paris. The emblema represents the bust of a woman in her right hand she holds an uraeus, in her left a cornucopiae. Under the right hand a personification of the sea (waves and dolphin) there is no doubt that the figure personifies Alexandria. This fact has been proved by Perdrizet.

(21) Empereur, J.Y, *Alexandria*, I, Paris, 1998.

(22) *Idem*, p. 130.

(23) Rostozeff, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

of the second and third centuries⁽²⁴⁾. It has, as a rule, been designated as a style of the time comprising a reaction, in conjunction with the personal taste of Hadrian himself, against the art of the generations immediately preceding⁽²⁵⁾. Hadrianic classicism is a phenomenon that both conceptually and formally is collateral with the main line of imperial art⁽²⁶⁾.

In conclusion, the bronze relief with the woman's head whose headdress is a prow of a ship may give a good idea of personifying Alexandria as Tyche and emphasizing its role in flourishing maritime commerce. Moreover, the relief reflects a mixture of realism and glorification, which such works required especially in imperial Roman Alexandria. It is formally influenced by wave of classicism adopted by Hadrian to develop into a true Roman form.

(24) *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

(25) Hamberg, G., *Studies in Roman Imperial Art*, Sweden, 1945, p. 75.

(26) *Ibid.*, 77.

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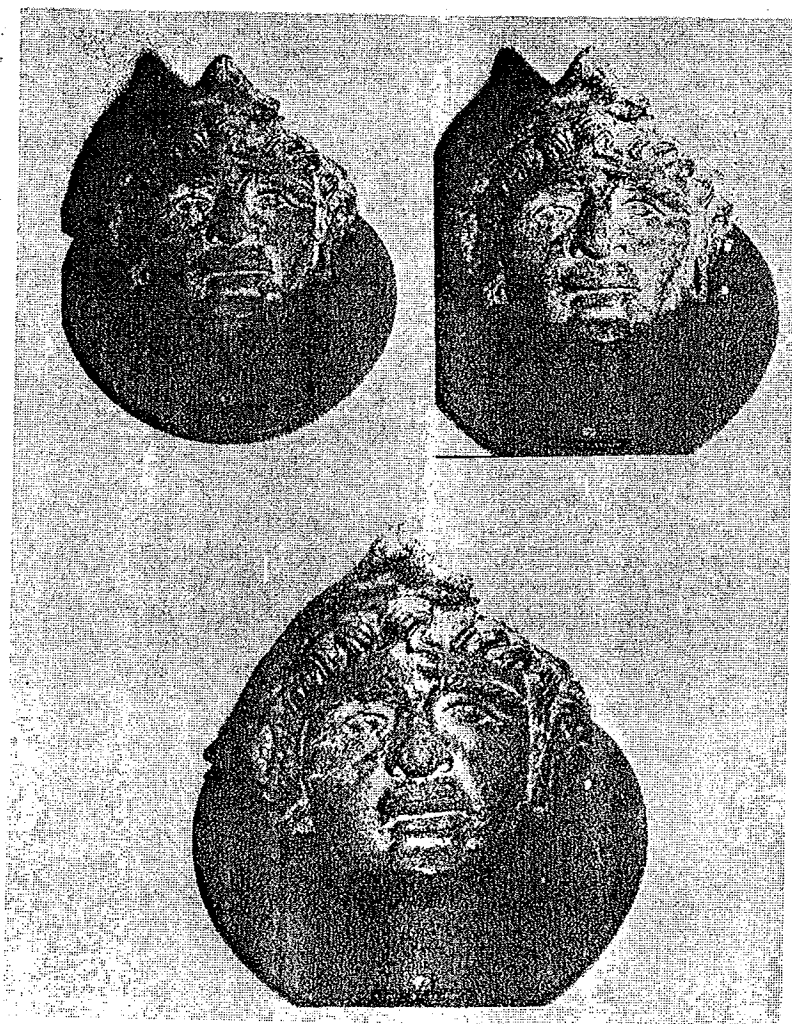


PLATE 1