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Report on the doctoral thesis of Ł. Sokołowski, *The Origin and Development of Funerary Portrait Relief in Roman Syria. Study of Cultural Interactions in the Roman East between 64/63 BCE and 273 CE*, Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw

This is an exceptional effort at a doctoral thesis, far beyond the usual scope of such things in Britain or America, and more in the way of a combined doctoral and Habilitation dissertation. So far as I know, no one has written with this depth or comprehensive command about Palmyrene or indeed Syrian funerary portraiture, nor placed it so broadly within patterns of Roman image making and visual culture. The existence of a number of dated inscriptions enables a detailed chronology, which allows ŁS to present a remarkable catalogue arranged by types (reliefs of couples, males, females etc) in a convincing chronological order. All this makes his project an unusual combination of the imaginative and wide-ranging on the one hand, as well as the immensely detailed and rigorously sound on the other. It is a superb achievement – obviously passable for the degree of doctorate – and one hopes to be published or otherwise made widely available by some means on the internet (with its very helpful photographs) since it is way ahead of anything else it its field.

ŁS's work is grounded in acute, detailed description and visual analysis founded on expert knowledge of the materials. He constantly refers to this and develops it within a chronological

and larger-scale cultural framework, moving Syrian art away from the parochialist territory of a provincial backwater of relative unnaturalism within the Roman empire to a significant position of intercultural dialogue with the bigger frame. The typical chapter pattern is to analyse each chronological section (chapter by chapter) by location – looking at Palmyra, South Syria, Zeugma and the north.

In my comments below I summarize what he is doing chapter by chapter including some critiques or potential alternative nuances as I go along. Overall, I should say that this work is not only superb but also ready for publication – and it is very important that it does get published (preferably with the illustrated catalogue). When that happens, I think there is a little more scope for an introductory (or concluding) chapter in relation to the bigger picture. Personally, I think some discussion of the Silk Road (Chinese materials have been discovered in Palmyra, e.g. in A. Schmidt-Colinet, A. Stauffer, and K. As'ad, *Die Textilien aus Palmyra: neue und alte Funde*, 2000) and of the potential for interchange and artistic influence from the east, would be welcome. On Syria itself, while ŁS has taken account of Paul Veyne's *L'empire gréco-romaine* (2005), his more recent 2015 book on *Palmyre* (translated into English in 2017) does need some discussion, even if in the end the positions on Syria of this great ancient historian, writing in late retirement, are probably rather conservative. In general, ŁS's various chapters contain much intelligent critique and assessment of the cultural-historical works on Syria (Millar, Sommer, Andrade etc) but some of this could be synthesized in more comprehensive cultural picture that puts the visual culture (beyond only the funerary) in the centre of the discussion.

Chapter 1: Approaching Roman Syria: Geographical Frames, Historical Outline, Sites

This sets up the cultural geography of the region within which S will mainly concentrate, including its political administration, history, and centres of visual production with focused discussion of Palmyra, the rural south, Zeugma and the north. The discussion is well annotated.

Chapter 2: Approaching Funerary Portrait Reliefs: Definition, Social Function, Contexts and Research Frames.

This is an important defining discussion of the particular material under consideration in the thesis. ŁS makes very important constitutive contrasts and comparisons for his half figure portrait reliefs – against Syrian honorific sculpture (life size statuary) and against the Roman bust but in parallel with the half-figure freedmen funerary reliefs of Italy. He deals with a series of key formal issues including frames, depth of relief and shape as well as the problem of the largely lost painting and its palette. He summarizes questions of social function, production and communication (without exploring the theoretical issues, which arise from Hölscher's *Blidsprache* book of 1987), as well as sketching the chronological questions (which principally depend on epigraphy, principally Palmyrene, in relation to stylistic analysis). The brief but stimulating sketch of the 'broader context' touches on very interesting and important questions of globalization and connectivity, looking west to the Western empire, but also south to Egypt and east into Parthia in relation to trade exchange etc. This is terrific stuff deserving of broader and deeper study, and notably of a critical historiographic of earlier approaches (and their limitations), for instance in the works of Mikhail Rostovtzeff. Likewise, the short section on identity and sculpture is very important and well annotated. The discussion of previous studies is excellent in its command and depth, but not presented as a critical historiography that reveals

the ideological assumptions underlying the approaches of the relevant scholars in their historical moment.

Chapter 3: Between the city of Rome and Syria: Designing the Chronological Framework of Portraiture based on Style, Social Realism and Semiotics

This is an important theoretical consideration of the issues involved in dating and assessing one of the most characteristic of Roman genres of art, with a significant historiographic angle going back to Strukturforschung and its problems (but no discussion of L'Orange). This is the basis for a very significant discussion – I do hope it will be published – although it needs some expansion. In particular, despite mention of Smith's 1981 article on verism, it underplays the work of Smith and his students (e.g. Dillon and Raja) in the arena of what Smith calls 'self-styling' in his various accounts of (admittedly honorific rather than funerary) portraits in the east and especially at Aphrodisias. I miss also mention of the book by Brilliant, but like the willingness to extend to (for instance) portraits within other (funerary) media than the simple portrait (such as sarcophagi. The discussion of Zanker's key work is good, but more space might be made for his teacher and collaborator Fittschen. The inclusion of the semiotic strand (Giuliani, Nodelman, Tanner) is excellent and, with some revisions, this chapter will stand as one of the major reflections on the study of Roman portraiture of our time. The chapter ends with a narrowing of its focus down to the issues at hand (in Syria) and the applications of its theoretical survey to that more specific range of materials. Some expansion and more depth of scholarly reference are needed in the published version, which might as an article exclude the last part on Syria and simply review the methods but is necessary in the book as the theoretical basis of ŁS's own approach.

Chapter 4: From Full-Length Figure to Funerary Portrait: The Fusion of Local and External Traditions in the Funerary Space (Nero-Trajan)

This chapter opens the part of ŁS work that is more directly focused on close analysis of the Syrian materials. The opening section about challenges might perhaps include something on the destruction of so much of what ŁS is writing about in the Isis nightmare of the last decade. It is a lengthy and detailed account focussing especially on evidence in Palmyra and Zeugma that established what we can know about the foundations of half-body portraiture as a Syrian funerary practice in the second half of the first century CE, and about its accommodations between the Hellenistic visual heritage and that of local traditions (such as frontalism).

Chapter 5: Austerity of Local Style and Iconography: Between Classicizing Trends, Rough Schematism and Naïve Idealism

A detailed stylistic discussion of the early second century materials that opens with an account of the relative paucity of evidence outside Palmyra but offers a detailed approach to all areas of Roman Syria. Useful tables of characteristic types (both male and female) with iconography and attributes. The total is necessarily descriptive.

Chapter 6: Restrained Expression of Identities: Diversifying Styles and Broadening Iconographies

This chapter takes on the development of variations and shifts in handling following external impacts in the second century. Again much use of tables. The work is detailed and impressive in its handling and command of large amounts of rather specific information. There is recourse to comparative discussion, e.g. of contemporary mummy portraits for hairstyles, and to a larger placement of conclusions in relation to the works of historians like Andrade and Sommer. ŁS

here concludes that a great deal of creative originality in treatments was characteristic of all three of his centres (South, North and Palmyra).

Chapter 7: Hellenizing Transformation and Funerary Boom: Towards Softer Modelling and Idealized Expression

This chapter does important work in grounding the 'stylistic and semantic transformation of the funerary portrait reliefs' of the later C2 in Antonine Classicism, the Second Sophistic, the ideals and practices of paideia; the fusion of Greek and Syrian models exhibited above all by Lucian as well as Iamblichus' lost *Babyloniaca*, is well addressed; one might attest also the Roman and Latin command of some such as the great lawyer Ulpian of Tyre.

Chapter 8: Syrian Romanness in its Full Bloom: Three-Dimensionalism and Severan Naturalism: Variety of Codes and Meanings.

ŁS sees the culmination of the Hellenizing process in the Severan period into the third century, despite the administrative reorganization of the province of Syria into two: Syria Coele and Syria Phoenice. But it is also a matter of macro-regional identity with certain patterns shared with Anatolia and Egypt. As usual ŁS combines the macro perspective with extremely detailed stylistic and formal observations about the styling and execution of the archaeological materials. This is particularly complex in this chapter (and this period), mingling naturalism and schematism, geometric renderings with idealisation, with different balances between these kinds of handling across different parts of Syria, yet overall a greater general consistency and maturity of Syrian sculptural art that observable before. ŁS locates his formalist observations in the recent historical analysis of the mixing of Syrian, Greek and Roman cultural idioms to create a syncretic identity, advanced by N. Andrade. This historical perspective is westward looking and

one might ask – for instance by comparison with the contemporary sculpture of Hatra – whether there were some elements of material-cultural identity-formation shared with the Parthians…

Chapter 9: Globalizing Self-Identifications: New Variants of Naturalism, Classicizing Temperance, Abstractionism, and Relgionalisms

As with so much other Roman archaeological evidence, there is a much smaller amount of material from after the Severans, even – in the context of Palmyra – during the period of its independence in the later third century. The empire constructed by Odainath and Zenobia is seen as a 'regionalized variant of the fracturing Roman empire', and the chapter is extremely interesting in its attempt to sketch the ways visual culture attempts to formulate identity in the context of autonomy; but at the same time ŁS largely concludes that the visual culture hardly changes as a result of independence, although it involves re-blending with local Palmyrene traditions which allows an extension of earlier trends. Some mention is made of the end of Syria funerary portraiture after the fall of Palmyra but there is not enough discussion of how strong a cultural institution should have ended so fast. It is of course tragic that so much third-century relief sculpture placed in the Archaeological Museum on the site of Palmyra was unpublished in 2015 when Daesh rolled in: its fate remains unknown.

Chapter 10: Discussion, Concluding remarks, future perspectives

This is an outstanding general summary of the large-scale issues – questions of portraiture and identity, shared and interactive visual traditions, the emergence of a Syrian *koine*, different zones of workmanship within Syria.

Volumes II and III of the thesis consist of a remarkable illustrated catalogue of the materials discussed – vol. II of 369 funerary busts from Palmyra, vol. III of the smaller quantities of material from elsewhere in Syria, as well as a range of pictorial comparanda and bibliography. The catalogue entries are superb: as full as possible with full and up to date bibliography. As a work of synthesis for this material and as a data-base underpinning the whole enterprise of ŁS's thesis, this is exceptional work.

I should conclude with a reiteration of my final view. Despite some small critiques, many arising from the normal professional disagreements in emphasis between scholars, which in no way diminish the value of a highly original piece of work, I think this a remarkable and outstanding piece of work. It is rigorous, comprehensive and scholarly but at the same time imaginative, creatively thoughtful and intellectually ambitious. It extends the field and our understanding not only of Roman art in Syria but – through its comparative discussions – Roman art *tout court* in ways whose influence will last for several generations. It fully deserves the award of the degree of PhD, and indeed outstrips any normal expectations for such work. It richly and urgently deserves publication.

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