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Review of the doctoral dissertation “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”, submitted by Lukasz Sokołowski, M.A.

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The seminal doctoral dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw by Lukasz SOKOŁOWSKI, M.A., and bearing the title “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” is bound in three volumes. The first volume contains the text properly and counts 601 pages; in volume 2 one finds a catalogue of 369 funerary reliefs from Palmyra on 347 pages, while volume 3 offers a catalogue of close to 150 funerary reliefs from North and South Syria on 128 pages, followed by a list of illustrations, 70 plates and the bibliography. All together, the dissertation counts for 1220 pages.

When one hears the words "funerary reliefs" and "Syria", probably everyone automatically thinks of the beautiful Palmyrene reliefs, well known and to be admired in many museums in- and outside Syria. Lukasz Sokołowski's (in the following LS) work does, of course, deal with them as well. However, his approach is a much broader one. Not only he – successfully – tries to dress a complete picture of funerary reliefs in all parts of Roman Syria, he also aims at putting them in the wider context of the Roman Empire and its "zones of contact", including the manifest Hellenistic heritage in these areas. This needs a lot of introductory work, starting with defining the geographical and chronological frame of the work, but also putting down the principal evolution in Roman (funerary) art.

By doing this, LS presents some highly valuable results, impossible to discuss all in length here. Given the wide range of observations, it almost becomes a "quantité négligeable" that he presents a much improved chronology for the evolution of Syrian funerary reliefs, clearly showing – within others – that a) they played no role before the Roman presence and b) they remained popular for a very long period when in Rome they more or less went out of use. Hence, this type of funerary representation must have hit an important trigger within local Syrian communities. Contrary to an often repeated stereotype in archaeological research, according to which there is almost no evolution in Syrian (mainly Palmyran) funerary reliefs, LS can show that traceable developments and changes take place more or less every 20 to 30 years. Also, there is a mostly clear geographical section in style and typology of reliefs, LS being able to identify even specific workshops.

The backbone of LS's work is the carefully compiled and edited catalogue of nearly 500 Syrian reliefs, bringing together for the first time such an important number from various sites and, therefore, allowing to base all further interpretation on a valuable material and statistical ground, covering a wide chronological and geographical range. Even without the analyses based on this material, the catalogue alone is an important achievement.

The most valuable contribution of the dissertation, at least in the eyes of this reviewer and without wanting to neglect the many other results, is the in-depth analysis of the different identity systems to which the people using these reliefs belonged. LS's careful observations clearly show how the Syrians, at least the ones that were in a position to buy such funerary monuments and the decorative reliefs, did represent themselves with elements of multiple identity systems. One could belong to a specific family and/or tribe, but in the same time present characteristics of a Roman citizen and a specific profession etc. Therefore, much more

than representing actual likeness of the portrayed¹, the reliefs depict elements and codes of people belonging to various social groups. One particularity of the Syrian reliefs is the important number of female representations. Therefore, the corpus allows for a detailed observation of the aforementioned elements within women and within men, illustrating differences as well as similarities.

These identity systems were displayed on several levels during the live and after the death of people, the funerary relief being one important element. What is interesting here and well observed by LS, is the fact that the funerary reliefs originally were situated inside funerary monuments and not in the public sphere. Some of these monuments clearly had doors that could be locked. Hence, access to the monuments and, therefore, to the reliefs, was restricted to specific groups, they became *heterotopiai*. This means, the codes and information depicted on the reliefs had specific groups as a public, probably family and tribal members in the first place. Hence, the group (family, tribe) did define itself by identity systems not only of the living members but also of the deceased members of the group. Gatherings at or – pending on the architecture – inside the funeral monuments offered perfect occasions to practice again and again this kind of (re-)defining and (re-)negotiating of identity systems. This is not so far away from what we know of Roman funerary rites, when at the *pompa funebris* of wealthy Romans the portraits of the deceased family members were shown and apparently worn by actors and all their merits and offices etc. were publicly read. But it is also not so far away from specific forms of tribal ancestor cults in the Arab world (but not only there).

One of the differences could be that the Roman variant is (also) displayed in public, as a matter of fact needs the public, while tribal ancestors are a more restricted phenomenon. Again, the Syrian examples show how flexible these communities were, since they adopted both, but with some differences: the same people could be depicted in statuary in a slightly different way – i.e. with other elements of identity systems – in the public sphere (agora, boulé etc.), and in the funerary sphere.

¹ Probably in Syria, as in most parts of the ancient world, the identification of a portrayed person with a specific individual was done by inscribing its name, father's name etc. This offers interesting tracks for discerning who was able to understand which part of the information such depictions offered (no matter whether we are dealing with Greek *kouroi*, Roman statues or Syrian reliefs): the ones who could read, learned who exactly the person was. All the others did not learn the name, but could see to which social group(s) the portrayed did belong. Since the later group (the ones that could not read) probably was

With his analyses LS touches at very important and vividly discussed elements in shaping group identities in the ancient world. In recent years different attempts to create a theoretical framework for such reflections were undertaken and terms like "bricolage" and "glocalisation" came up, borrowed from social and other sciences. The new terms and theoretical concepts aim to come away from a more helleno-centric or romano-centric point of view, when terms such as Hellenization and Romanization were frequently used. LK discusses some of these elements, especially aspects of glocalization. It would be worth, in this reviewer's view, to extend these parts a little bit for the publication of the work, maybe taking into consideration similar phenomena elsewhere within the Roman period but also in other periods and cultures².

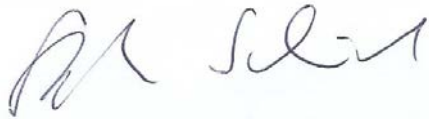
Talking about publication, it seems evident that the doctoral dissertation of LS should be published and made accessible to the scientific community as soon as possible, since it will become a very important book and set standards for many years to come. Maybe some parts could be shortened a little bit, such as the comparisons with proper Roman art, especially where one can refer to published evidence. The text would probably also profit from the introduction of some graphs and statistics, illustrating – for example – the different elements on reliefs within different time slices and/or regions etc. All this information is already in the text, but an optical presentation certainly would help the future readers. Finally, for comparisons with neighbouring cultures (such as the Nabataeans), more recent literature should be added³.

quite larger than the former, this means that belonging to specific identity systems and social groups was more important than being understood as a single individuum.

² Especially for aspects of glocalization, with an important discussion of other methodological approaches in archaeology, one could refer to S. Ardeleanu, *Numidia Romana. Die Auswirkungen der römischen Präsenz in Numidien (2. Jh. v. Chr - 1. Jh. n. Chr.)*. (Wiesbaden 2020); as one of many examples for similar thoughts dealing with other periods and cultures I refer to A. Killebrew, *From "global" to "glocal". Cultural connectivity and interactions between Cyprus and the southern Levant during the transitional late bronze and early iron age*, in: *Change, continuity, and connectivity. North-eastern Mediterranean at the turn of the bronze age and in the early iron age* (Wiesbaden 2018) 81-94. Ofcourse there is much more literature on these subjects, this is only to give a hint for further research directions.

³ For example I am not sure that Patrich 1990 should be prominently featured for aspects of Nabataean visual culture. Not only because there are more recent publications on the subject, but because the book displays a clear agenda that was quite criticised in the scientific community.

But these are definitely minor points. The doctoral dissertation of Lukasz Sokołowski, M.A., is an outstanding and excellent work, carefully written and edited. Throughout its over 1200 pages it brilliantly illustrates the intellectual and scientific capacities of its author and I recommend to the Faculty of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw to accept it and to award the highest grade.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S.G. Schmid', is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

(Prof. Dr. Stephan G. Schmid)
