

# The Aphrodite of Emesa: miniature marble sculpture and religious life in Roman Syria

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The sculpture of Roman Syria is a mighty tree with roots so deep and branches so far-flung that they have defied all attempts at systematic and comprehensive study. This article deals with one of these branches of artistic traditions, a series of unusual marble Aphrodite statuettes found in Roman Syria, and in particular at Emesa (Homs). In what little attention these statuettes have received, scholars have listed up to 10 extant specimens,<sup>1</sup> but a closer look has uncovered dozens, many of which have surfaced on the art market in recent years. In all likelihood, they reproduce a cult statue of Aphrodite at Emesa. They merit attention on a number of levels. Unlike much of the marble statuary of the Roman Near East, they do not reproduce an *opus nobile* from the Graeco-Roman canon; the Emesa Aphrodites, although based on Graeco-Roman divine iconography, draw on a Roman Venus type, while their style has much in common with local sculpture made of basalt, sandstone and limestone. This study examines, first, the character, origins and development of this statuary type and its links to well-established Graeco-Roman Aphrodite types. Many years ago, M. Bieber identified these statuettes as miniature versions of the statue of Venus Genetrix created by Arkesilaos for the Temple of Venus in the Forum of Julius Caesar.<sup>2</sup> As there is still no consensus on the exact appearance of that famous statue, I will also comment on this question. Second, I look at the statuettes in context. Through their unusual style, format and iconography, they portray an Aphrodite of a distinct and unique character that raises questions about the significance of marble sculpture in the religious life of Roman Syria.

A first step towards systematisation of the large corpus of sculpture in Roman Syria was made by E. Will in a seminal paper that has received little consideration in the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup> He proposed a distinction, based on iconography and, to a lesser extent, on style, between three different kinds of Roman Near Eastern sculpture:

a) Classical types in marble and bronze, often imports, mostly found in Phoenicia and the Orontes valley. For a region with no marble quarries of its own, marble was an expensive and prestigious resource that had to be imported by sea. If it had to be transported farther inland, away from the Levantine coast, its cost rose to such heights that only the richest cities, such as Palmyra, could afford it;

<sup>1</sup> E Künzl, "Römerzeitliche Skulpturen aus Kleinasien und Syrien im Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseum," *JbRGZM* 48 (2001) 512, list of replicas. This type does not feature in reference works on Greek and Roman sculpture. The first and so far only study is M. Bieber, "Die Venus Genetrix des Arkesilaos," *RömMitt* 48 (1933) 261-76.

<sup>2</sup> Bieber *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> E. Will, "La Syrie entre l'Occident gréco-romain et l'Orient parthe," in P. Demargne (ed.), *Le rayonnement des civilisations grecque et romaine sur les cultures périphériques* (Paris 1965) 511-26 = id., *De l'Euphrate au Rhin* (Paris 1995) 763-81; also id., "La Syrie à l'époque hellénistique et romaine. Mille ans de vie intellectuelle et artistique," in J.-M. Dentzer (ed.), *Archéologie de la Syrie* vol. 2 (Saarbrücken 1989) 573-79; J.-M. Dentzer, "L'impact des modèles 'classiques' sur le cadre de la vie urbaine en Syrie du Sud, entre la fin de l'époque hellénistique et le début de l'époque byzantine," in A. Laronde and J. Léclant (edd.), *La Méditerranée d'une rive à l'autre: culture classique et cultures périphériques* (Paris 2007) 37-38; K. Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East* (London 2003) 307-8.