

The “lost” Nollekens Relief of an imperial sacrifice from Domitian’s Palace on the Palatine: its history, iconography, and date

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Mainstream classical scholarship has long considered as lost a Roman “historical” relief, excavated in the earlier part of the 18th c. in the Palace of Domitian on the Palatine hill.¹ Showing an emperor sacrificing, it is known as the Nollekens Relief after Joseph Nollekens, an accomplished British sculptor who came to possess it in the 18th c. Besides being a sculptor and painter, he was a sculptural restorer and dealer active between 1761 and 1770 in Rome,² where he worked in the workshop of the sculptural restorer Bartholomeo Cavaceppi and in his own studio.³ The relief has been known chiefly from two engravings and a pen-and-watercolor drawing, all produced in the 18th c., but, rather than being lost, the relief has been hiding in plain sight in the Gatchina Palace near St. Petersburg. Its dimensions are 88 cm high x 139 cm wide.⁴ A recent visit to St. Petersburg established that the relief has been continuously in the Gatchina Palace since the late 1770s and that it had been damaged not only in antiquity but also during and after World War II. I also discovered that a cast of it existed by 1870 and that a photograph of the relief itself had appeared in an obscure Russian publication of 1914.

The present essay examines the history of this relief, its discovery and restoration in the 18th c., its purchase by the Russian noble Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov, and its vicissitudes during World War II and afterwards. Also presented and discussed is the evidence for the condition of the relief in 1914 and subsequently. The 1914 photograph (fig. 1, with my numbering of figures) allows us to compare it with the three earlier non-photographic illustrations (figs. 2-4) in order to address questions about restorations and other details of

1 See, e.g., É. Michon, “Les bas-reliefs historiques romains du Musée du Louvre,” *Mon. Piot* 17 (1909) 215-16; G. Lugli, *Roman antica. Il centro monumentale* (Rome 1946) 418, fig. 126; I. S. Ryberg, *Rites of the state religion in Roman art* (MAAR 22, 1955) 96 n.48 (with reference to Winckelmann); G. Lugli, *Forum Romanum. Palatin* (Rome 1964) 111-12, fig. 25; id., *Itinerario di Roma antica* (Rome 1970) 186 fig. 125; G. M. Koepfel, “Official state reliefs of the City of Rome in the Imperial age: a bibliography,” in *ANRW II.12.1* (1982) 491; id., “Die historischen Reliefs der römischen Kaiserzeit II,” *BjB* 184 (1984) 12-13 and 46-49 (no. 19), figs. 26-27, but note also the “Nachtrag” on 65; id., “Die historischen Reliefs der römischen Kaiserzeit III,” *BjB* 185 (1985) 146 n.20; J. Ronke, *Magistratische Repräsentation im römischen Relief* (BAR S370; Oxford 1987) 173-74, 706 (no. 120) fig. 135*; D. E. E. Kleiner, *Roman sculpture* (New York 1992) 183 and 203, fig. 153; F. Fless, *Opferdiener und Kultmusiker auf stadtrömischen historischen Reliefs* (Mainz 1995) 17 n.29, 42 n.253, 79 n.5 (cat. no. 25), 107 (cat. no. 25), pl. 24.1 F.

2 For the personal life (with much gossip) of Nollekens, see J. T. Smith, *Nollekens and his times: comprehending a life of that celebrated sculptor ...* vol. I (London 1828) especially 1-22 (years in Rome), 250 (selling antiquities from Rome), 262-65 (his antiquities collection, including restorations, in England); *ibid.* vol. II (1828) 61-70 (his collection and some comments on his method of restoring antiquities), 70-85 (inventory of his own works). In neither of the two volumes is there any mention of the Nollekens Relief. For his work as a restorer in the workshop of Cavaceppi, see S. Howard, “Boy on a dolphin: Nollekens and Cavaceppi,” *ArtB* 46 (1964) especially 181-83; for his being a painter, 177-89.

3 Howard *ibid.* 181-83.

4 Not previously reported in cm or inches, only in palms (see n.42 below). I thank I. Belyaeva for providing me with these dimensions.