

Two portraits from Aphrodisias: late-antique re-visualizations of traditional culture-heroes?

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The “Last Statues of Antiquity”, the collaborative project directed by R. R. R. Smith and B. Ward-Perkins, gathers into a single database all extant late-antique portraits.¹ As a member of the research team, I was given the opportunity to study all the portraits that are either known or conjectured to represent traditional culture-heroes. This exercise gave me “new” eyes for viewing two “old” portraits from Aphrodisias, until now not identifiable.² One, excavated in 1982, is a clean-shaven portrait, once fancifully identified as Julius Caesar (fig. 2); the other, first published in 1958, is a bearded portrait broken off a bust (fig. 13).

Neither of these two heads is immediately recognizable as a representation of any known individual by the scholarly method which works so well with portraits of Early and High Imperial Roman emperors: that is, neither is identifiable as following any known “portrait type” by the application of the rules of “Kopienkritik”, whereby a scholar establishes the indisputable dependence of two sculptures on a model by finding precisely shared details between two heads — details of hair locks, face, pose, or attributes. In late antiquity, however, fidelity to inherited models was more fluid, and a bold re-interpretation — in terms of contemporary portrait-style — was perhaps even to be desired. This is particularly true in the case of the portraits of traditional culture-heroes: the many highly variable portraits of Menander (here fig. 6) or of Socrates may serve to demonstrate this point.

I would like to suggest that this recognition of a changed attitude in late antiquity toward the portrayal of the great culture-heroes of the past now allows for a possible identification of these two portraits from Aphrodisias. The first is likely to be a Menander, probably from a shield-portrait; the second a version of the so-called “Apollonios of Tyana”, a type today thought to represent Homer.

1. A PORTRAIT HEAD FROM THE ATRIUM HOUSE

Find context

In 1982, the head of a clean-shaven man was excavated in the “Atrium House” (fig. 1)³ immediately north of the Sebasteion complex.⁴ Although domestic structures existed on the site already in the Early Imperial period, the house reached its greatest extent in the 4th c. A.D., its importance proven by the fact that the N wall of the Sebasteion’s North Building was modified so as to accommodate the curve of a broad apse off the S end of the house’s largest peristyle (fig. 1).⁵ In its late-antique phase, the house was elaborately decorated and contained much white marble sculpture. Of relevance here are the 14 busts

1 The database is available at <http://laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk>. For a comprehensive analysis of the data, see R. R. R. Smith and B. Ward-Perkins, *The last statues of antiquity* (Oxford 2016). The project was funded by the AHRC.

2 See Lenaghan, chapt. 21 in Smith and Ward-Perkins, *ibid.*

3 Inv. 82-97. Nbk 218. *WN ROT 82* (1982) 113, find 39.

4 I. Lockey, “The Atrium House: the archaeology of a late-antique residence,” in R. R. R. Smith *et al.* (edd.), *Aphrodisias papers 5: excavation and research at Aphrodisias, 2006-2012* (JRA Suppl. 103, 2016) 243-54.

5 P. D. De Staebler, “Excavations in the Atrium House, North Agora, and Northeast Sector (2006-7),” in Smith *et al.* *ibid.* 140.