

The mock face of battle

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One of the more exotic parts of the Roman cavalryman's panoply was the face helmet, a metal mask that completely encased the head. Some 130 examples of this highly-wrought, specialized type of armor have come to light in contexts of the 1st through 3rd c. A.D. that span Rome's vast empire. Although these helmets have long been admired by military specialists, they remain little-known in archaeological and art-historical circles. I hope to demonstrate that the face-mask helmet was used in a public spectacle whose aims and visual language had close ties to other genres of Roman triumphal art. And while some aspects of face-helmets remain enigmatic, their embodiment of themes of violence, identity and gender speak to powerful cultural concerns of both the Romans and their modern interpreters.*

Face-mask helmets: definitions and history

The face-mask helmet was constructed in two parts: a metal mask and bowl or skull-piece. Colour pl. 1.1, a specimen found in a tomb at Emesa, shows how the mask was hinged to the bowl, essentially functioning as a kind of visor;¹ rivets for attachment at the temples are also present in other examples. Slits for the eyes, nostrils, and mouth were cut into the mask, but the ears were left covered. From pure iron or bronze to combinations (e.g., silver-plated bronze), the materials used for face-mask helmets run the gamut of available metals. A few rare examples (including the Emesa piece) were silver-plated iron with gilt decorations.

Because they were made primarily of metal, many face-mask helmets survive in remarkably good condition. What have disappeared are the various accoutrements fashioned from organic materials: the leather straps that ran from bowl to mask (ending at the base of the neck) to provide a snug fit; the tall plumes that sprouted from the bowl; the streamers that gyrated in the breeze; and fur or cloth glued to the bowl in decorative patterns or to simulate hair. Although such accoutrements did not decorate every helmet, each kind can be documented in at least one surviving example and, occasionally, in secondary sources.² These fluttering attachments and tactile materials further animated what was already, by virtue of its metallic sheen and reductive forms, a visually arresting piece of armor.³

* Frequently cited abbreviations include:

Bishop & Coulston M. Bishop and J. Coulston, *Roman military equipment from the Punic Wars to the fall of Rome* (London 1993);

Garbsch J. Garbsch, *Römische Paraderüstungen* (Munich 1978);

Hyland A. Hyland, *Training the Roman cavalry. From Arrian's Ars Tactica* (London 1993);

Junkelmann M. Junkelmann, *Reiter wie Statuen aus Erz* (Mainz 1996);

Robinson H. Robinson, *The armour of Imperial Rome* (London 1975).

1 Damascus, National Museum 7084; M. Fortin (ed.), *Syria: land of civilizations* (Montréal 1999) 113 no. 62; Robinson 122 pls. 349-51; Garbsch 63 O4; H. Seyrig, "Antiquités syriennes. 53. Antiquités de la nécropole d'Émèse," *Syria* 29 (1952) 204-50.

2 Small hooks for leather straps can be seen on helmets from Vize (Istanbul Archaeological Museum 5730; Robinson 118-19 pls. 341-34; Garbsch 62 O3; A. Mansel, *AA* 56 [1941] 170) and from Emesa (supra n.1). One of the Newstead helmets has a tube-like attachment on the left side that would have held a feathered plume of the type mentioned by Arrian and depicted on funerary reliefs such as that of Flavinus, now in Hexham Abbey (Junkelman fig. 30); the same helmet has a small hook at the apex of the crown that might have anchored a streamer. For Newstead, see J. Curle, *A Roman frontier fort and its people* (Glasgow 1911) 170; J. Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (2nd rev. ed., London 1963) 167 no. 99 pl. 104; Garbsch 57 H1. Patterned fur and embroidery appear on helmets from Nijmegen (H. van Enckevort and W. Willems, "Roman cavalry helmets in ritual hoards from the Kops Plateau at Nijmegen, The Netherlands," *JRMES* 5 [1994] 127 and a reconstruction in A. Goldsworthy, *The complete Roman army* [London 2003] fig. p. 137). One feature that does not seem able to be corroborated is the horsehair crest; see a reconstruction by P. Connolly in *Tiberius Claudius Maximus: the cavalryman* (Oxford 1988) 22-23.

3 On gleaming armor in general, see Veg., *Mil.* 2.14 and Amm. Marc. 31.10.10.