

FIGURAL RELIEF SCULPTURE FROM JARASH

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Abstract

This paper offers the first publication of four figural relief excavated at the Roman odeum of Gerasa (Jarash) between 1984 and 1991. In their subject matter, the relief relate to the function of the odeum. In their iconography and style, they are part of an enduring and widespread artistic tradition. They present new evidence for local sculptors in the Decapolis working in a Hellenistic mode.

Introduction

Two architectural blocks, each sculpted on two faces with figural relief, were recovered from the orchestra of the odeum (also called the "North Theater") at Gerasa (Jarash) during excavations conducted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan between 1984 and 1991¹. The distinctive form of the blocks elucidated their original position at the ends of *analemmata*, that is, the lateral support walls of the *cavea*. They were restored to their original position in 1996.

The building is dated by an inscription dedicated to the joint emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in the year 228 of the Gerasene era, or 165/166AD (Clark *et al.* 1986: 229). A later architectural phase, associated with an inscription honoring Alexander Severs and Julia Mamaea (222-235AD), may have included an expansion of the *cavea* and a remodelling of the *scaena* (Clark *et al.* 1986: 228-9). The identification of two distinct building phases makes it difficult to date the relief with precision, though it is tempting to associate them with the first architectural phase since they belong to the *ima cavea*.

The building is specifically designated as an odeum (music hall) in the 165/166AD dedicatory

inscription, although there is no evidence for a permanent roofing system, which would have been desirable for acoustic purposes in a structure of this kind². A series of postholes and brackets in the support wall encircling the back of the *ima cavea* may relate to an awning system in the first period³. Evidence for winch devices at the top of the *summa cavea* also suggests that an awning system was used in the second period (Clark *et al.* 1986: 215, fig. 5).

Relief Sculpture

The four reliefs are thematically united by their musical iconography, which would have been especially suitable for an odeum. Each relief depicts a single figure. The two figures on the west block are male, and the two on the east block are female.

West Block

Upper cornice: height 21cm.

East panel: height 47cm, width 47.3cm.

North panel: height 47cm, width 47.2cm.

Lower cornice: height 20cm.

Condition: The block has been reconstructed from three fragments. The upper and lower cornices are damaged, most severely on the north side.

W1. (East Panel) (Fig. 1)

Figure height: 34.5cm.

Description: A male is seated on a rock, nude except for a cloak draped across the neck, winding over the left thigh, and falling between the legs. The torso is frontal and the lower body is turned in profile towards the left. The figure is identified as the god Apollo by the attribute of the *kithara* (lyre) that rests on the right knee. The *kithara* is held by a

1. We wish to thank Dr. Fawwaz al-Kraysheh for granting permission for this collaborative effort, and Dr. Pierre Bikai (ACOR) for his support and assistance. The odeum was published in preliminary form following excavations conducted by a joint British, American, and Australian team in 1982 and 1983 (see Clark *et al.* 1986). For an overview of

Roman theaters in this region, see Segal (1995) and Retzleff (2001).

2. For the problem of odea as an architectural type, see Gros (1996: 308) and Thompson (1950).

3. For various possible awning systems in theaters, see Graefe (1979).



1. Gerasa odeum, relief W1: Apollo.

strap that crosses the chest and passes over the right shoulder. Landscape is indicated by a large boulder, upon which the figure sits. The weight rests on the left hand. The lower legs hang over blank space.

Missing or broken: The left toes are missing. The lower portion of the drapery is slightly damaged. A join between two fragments runs from the lower left corner to the center of the right side. The figure was defaced in an act of vandalism in 1989.

W2. (North Panel) (Fig. 2)

Figure height: 39cm.

Description: A male is depicted in left profile, nude except for a cloak draped across the neck. The figure strides toward the left, with the cloak fluttering behind to indicate movement. Both hands are raised to hold an *aulos* (double pipe)⁴. No landscape or ground line is depicted.

Missing or broken: A join between two fragments runs vertically through the left sector of the panel. The left fragment is subdivided horizontally by a second join. The facial area is badly weathered. The left thigh, both lower arms, and right foot are damaged.

East Block

Upper cornice: height 23cm.

East panel: height 44cm, width 49cm.

North panel: height 44cm, width 47.5cm.

Lower cornice: height 21cm.

Condition: The core of the block is intact, but the upper and lower cornices are damaged, most severely on the west side. Damage extends to the upper right sector of the west panel, but does not affect the figure.

E1. (West Panel) (Fig. 3)

Figure height: 38cm

Description: A female wears a tunic, which has slipped off the left shoulder and opens to expose the back of the nude lower body. The face is turned upwards, and the hair is gathered in a bun at the back of the head. The drapery is full of movement, reflecting the torsion of an ecstatic dance. The figure is identified as a *maenad* (bacchante) by the attributes of the *thyrsus*, held with in the right hand, and the *tympanon* (drum), depicted as a plain circular disk in the raised left hand. No landscape or ground line is shown.

Missing or broken: n/a

E2. (North Panel) (Fig. 4)

Figure height: 33cm

Description: A female shown in right profile is wearing a tunic, closed at the right shoulder with a round clasp. The hair is worn in a style similar to the *maenad* in E1, but the bun is more rounded than angular. An *aulos* is held to the mouth with both hands. No landscape or ground line is depicted. This panel forms a compositional pendant to W2 (male piper).

Missing or broken: n/a

Discussion

The two pipers (E2 and W2) alone do not inform on a specific iconographic context, as *auloi* were used in many religious ceremonies, in drama, and at various festive occasions in antiquity. The positioning of the *maenad* (E1) opposite Apollo (W1), however, sets up a juxtaposition between the well-ordered music of Apollo's *kithara* and the ecstatic rhythms of a Bacchic celebration. Both the god of music and, indirectly, the god of theater are thus referenced. A draped female piper is often included in *maenadic* processions in Greek art⁵; E2 (female piper) can thus be understood as a companion to E1 (*maenad*). The nude depiction of the male piper (W2) is, however, surprising. Musicians are normally draped unless they are satyrs, which this figure clearly is not, being un-bearded and without a tail.

It has been noted previously that the work of local sculptural ateliers in the Decapolis is most clearly represented in architectural ornamentation and private sepulchral monuments carved out of local stones (Bitti 1986: 208; Weber 1990: 352-353). These reliefs from the odeum, hewn from the same type of local yellow limestone used throughout the building, can be counted among the works of local sculptors. The subject matter and the style nonetheless reflect the impact of Greek culture on the cities of the Decapolis. The seated Apollo holding the *kithara* (W1) is a standard type reproduced in various media, with the closest parallels found in Roman works which look back to Hellenistic models⁶. E1 (*maenad*) is perhaps best understood in the context of so-called "Neo-Attic" sculpture, which initially flourished in the late Hellenistic period and enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the Antonine

4. The double pipe, called *tibia* in Latin and *aulos* in Greek, was common throughout the Mediterranean. It was not a flute but rather a reed instrument, like the modern oboe.

5. See for example Bieber (1961: fig. 25 a-b, a Lenaeon vase

in Naples).

6. See W. Lambrinudakis *et al.*, "Apollon," in Ackermann and Gisler (eds.), vol.II.1, 1984, esp. Pp. 206-207 (#156-167).



2. Gerasa odeum, relief W2: male piper.



3. Gerasa odeum, relief E1: maenad.



4. Gerasa odeum, relief E2: female piper.

period⁷. Decorative and calligraphic qualities, particularly evident in the *maenad's* "flying drapery," are exploited at the expense of coherence.

There is a sense that the sculptural heritage from which these figures were derived was not deeply understood. The reliefs contain "flaws" which suggest that the motifs were passed down through a succession of copies. The *maenad* was a popular Neo-Attic motif, of which eight basic types have been identified⁸. E1 seems, however, to combine more than one type; the two attributes of *tympanon* and *thyrsus* are not normally held by a single *maenad*, since no hand is thereby left free for striking the *tympanon*. The animated drapery of the open tunic is illogical, fluttering both behind the right buttock and in front of the right leg. The tilted head is shown wider than the shoulders, and thus disproportionately large in relation to the rest of the body. There is awkwardness in the treatment of human anatomy in the other reliefs as well. The seated figure of Apollo (W1) is short-waisted, and the torso, depicted frontally, is small in proportion to the heavy lower body, which is depicted in profile. The male piper (W2) is plump and heavy; the left hand is exceptionally large where it wraps around the end of the pipe. The female piper (E2) is perhaps the most successful of the four figures, although all are executed in a rather formulaic style.

Figural relief decoration on the ends of the *analemmata* is attested elsewhere in the Roman world, for example at the odeum at Pompeii (ca.75BC), where kneeling *atlantes* overlook the staircases accessing the *cavea* (Bieber 1961: 33). Two *atlantes* found in the excavation of the theater at Caesarea in Palestine might have originated from the *analemmata* or from the stage (Frova 1966: Figs. 260, 261). The reliefs from Gerasa are, however, the only certain examples of sculpture occupying this location at an odeum or theater in the Near East. Their subject matter also distinguishes them from those support figures. Comparable reliefs depicting single figures against plain backgrounds are found outside the region, however, such as at the theater at Sabratha in North Africa⁹. Although the theater at Sabratha was built in the last quarter of the second century, some of the relief sculpture is firmly dated to the Severan period (ca. 203AD). Particular interest for comparison with Gerasa is the reliefs on the screen walls facing the lateral staircases leading from the orchestra to the stage. Each of the two screen walls is ornamented with two female dancers on separate pro-

jecting ground lines. Although lacking the attributes of *maenads*, these female dancers are comparable to E1 from Gerasa, with flying drapery and ecstatic poses. Likewise, the linearity of the Sabratha reliefs might be explained by local sculptors copying popular motifs. These roughly contemporary works from Sabratha suggest that the Gerasa reliefs belong to a category of architectural sculpture that was diversely applicable.

Conclusion

The odeum was an imported cultural institution, which was brought to Gerasa with an established architectural form. In fact, the erection of theaters throughout the Decapolis may be taken as an indicator of the spread of Greek civic life in the Roman period (Graf 1994). It is not surprising to find that the decoration of these theaters also relates to Hellenistic artistic traditions. The decoration of the Gerasa odeum, which also includes Greek dedicatory inscriptions and freestanding sculpture in limestone and imported marble, shows the cultural fusion of local sculptors working in a widespread Hellenistic mode. The figural reliefs from the odeum are the product of a polis partaking in the worldwide culture of the *oikoumene*.

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7. On Neo-Attic art, see Pollitt (1986: 169-170).

8. For a typology of Neo-Attic maenads, see Hauser (1889).

9. For the relief sculpture from the theater at Sabratha, see Caputo (1959: 15).

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