NABATAEAN FACES FROM PETRA

by Philip C. Hammond and Teresa Mellott - Khan

During the seasons from 1975 to 1977 of the American Expedition to Petra, the excavations at the "Temple of the Winged Lions" produced a series of unique architectural affixes. A few of them were rendered unrecognizable as a result of the earthquake tumble (AD 363), but some twenty-four were relatively well-preserved. They consisted of naturalistic mold-cast human faces, with the exception of AEP 1975, R.I. No.12, which may have been only a "Tragic Mask". The sizes and find locations of these affixes suggest that they were displayed on the lower frieze of the altar plat-form of the Temple.

The apparent visibility of the affixes, their naturalism, the fact of molding (i.e. with prior individual sculpting), and (onetime?) casting, indicates their individual importance within the Temple cella. All seem to have certain physical characteristics in common: rounded cheeks, bulbous eyes, and pouting lips, which suggests local Nabataean manufacture (Glueck 1965: 225-26; Hammond 1973: 87). At the same time, the individuality of the faces indicates that actual persons were being portrayed. The placing of individual portraits within the Temple cella likewise indicates the importance of the personages portrayed. When these factors are examined, four possibilities for such representations seem obvious: deities, local royalty, allied royalty, or distinguished local citizens.

In the first instance, with the sole exception of AEP 1976, R.I. No. 35 (possibly Helios?), none of the recovered examples display any of the usual attributes, nor other recognizable symbols usually exhibited in the Nabataean (and other Near Eastern) re-

ligious iconography. Hence, the affixes do not depict Nabataean deities, nor those from any other associated cultural group. Patrich's arguments (190: 50, 104 ff., 152, 153ff., 189) against anthropomorphic depiction of Nabataean deities may, perhaps, support this conclusion.

In the case of the possible Nabataean royal portraiture being represented, the only source for comparative examples is to be found on the extant Nabataean coins, where a relatively limited repertoire of the royal portraits is available. The official coinage of the Nabataeans began with Aretas III (87 -62 BC), although non-portraiture types of previous rulers appear earlier. Meshorer (1975: 11) notes that it was only at a very advanced stage in the minting of Nabataean coins that "...the Nabataean kings ventured to strike coins with a definitely Nabataean character and without any attempt to imitate foreign issues". It is, therefore, with the mints of Aretas III that a search for any identification of portraits with those of the recovered affixes can begin.

Meshorer comments in detail concerning the characteristics of individual royal portraits on Nabataean coins. He notes that the coins of Aretas III bear the profile of the King, "...with the copious locks of the Arab race and a formidably curved nose, quite as hawk-like as those of his Seleucid predecessors, Grypus and Antiochus XII" (13).

The coins of Obodas II (62-60 BC) are seen to "...reflect the transition from the coins of the Seleucids (particularly as regards the form of the hairdress) to the later Nabataean types with their distinctively 'oriental' faces" (80). Likewise, the coins of Malichus I (52-30 BC) distinguish him

quite distinctly from other Nabataean kings, in that "...his face is depicted as that of a young man and his hair hangs down in long, distinct ringlets, a style not found among none [sic] of the other Nabataean kings. Another notable feature is that the ringlets fall down in more or less straight lines, unlike the hair of his successors, which fall in oblique, wavy lines" (24).

During the reign of Obodas II (30 - 9 BC), the majority of Nabataean coins bear the jugate portraits of both the king and the queen, therefore providing the possibility of the identification of the female affixes recovered from the Temple.

The king appears with his hair "...tied on top with a fillet which is wider than that on the coins of his predecessors and which terminates in a knot, whose ends hang down at the back...", while the queen's head is obscured and "...it is difficult to distinguish her hairdress, the shape of her ornaments, or the details of the object binding her hair, which may be a diadem or a wreath" (33).

With the reign of Aretas IV (9 BC - AD 40) the Nabataean kingdom reached its highest political, economic and artistic peak. With the length of his reign, also came a proliferation of mintages at various points in time, which likewise vary in the portrayal of the king and his queens. Meshorer sees the portraiture of the earliest mints of Aretas as archaic, in that "...the hair is diademed, falls straight down onto the nape of the neck and covers the ears: a robe [himation?] is wrapped around the shoulders" (43).

With the advent of the queen's (Huldu) jugate bust on the coins the portraiture improves. Huldu is "...invariably portrayed with a veil which leaves the front of her head and the laurel wreath on it exposed to view, but covers her hair and the nape of her neck and hangs down onto the robe around her shoulders... At times the queen also wears jewelry, a necklace of beads as well as earrings; the latter are spiral-shaped ... or shaped like a pendulum.." (43).

Around AD 18, Huldu was replaced by queen Shaqilat and Meshorer again sees a lesser level of both artistic style and execution (957-58). Conservatism, which also apparently appears in the redecoration of the temple interior, seems evident in the two main mintages of Malichus II (AD 40 - 70). Both of those mintages, in silver, or bronze, follow the pattern of his predecessor.

Rab'el II (AD 70 - 106) shared the early part of his reign with his mother, Shaqilat, but the conservatism of his father, Malichus, was not shared in terms of his coin portraiture after her death. Meshorer points out that the king appears with "... thick ringlets falling luxuriantly onto his shoulder and the nape of his neck: his chin is heavy and protrudes ..." (77). On the other hand, the portrait of Gamilat, Rab'el's queen, did not fare so well, as Meshorer again points out, and she appears less well portrayed than did Shaqilat. However, it must be noted that the features which Meshorer decries (i.e. thick lips, protruding chin, and even the "thick" veil) may well represent a naturalistic trend in royal portraiture, not a degeneration of either artistry, nor technical skill. From ca. AD 102 onward (Meshorer — between AD 103-106), Rab'el's final mintages display the portrait of his new queen, Hagiru. When comparison is made between the royal portraits on the coins (especially those of Aretas IV and later) and the architectural affixes recovered from the Temple, certain specific similarities are evident: for example the "oriental" faces, curly hair, beardlessness, large eyes, and heavy lips. However, there is an obvious absence of other details, such as the laurel wreath, diadems, the veil, distinctive jewelry, or parallel hair treatments. Only one of the facial affixes appears as filleted (R.I. No. 167) and only two appear to have any sort of other headdress treatment: R.I. No. 3 has a double head band and R.I. No. 190 has an indistinct addition on the right side of the face. Still further, no close parallel appears to exist between any of the faces, s.s., depicted on the affixes and any member, male or female, of the repertoire of the regnal portraits available on the coins.

Hence we must conclude that the persons being depicted on the architectural affixes are not meant to represent the kings, nor the queens, of Nabatene. However, they do, as noted above, have the physical characteristics and hair styles which are more distinctly Nabataean than the more Hellenistic features of Roman portrait styles, either in statuary or painting.

There remains only the fourth possibility, initially proposed, for identification of the affixes: namely that these affixes depict distinguished local citizens.

Given that possibility, therefore, the question arises as to who would be so prominent, or so honored, to merit public display of their faces in the temple to the supreme goddess of the Nabataeans.

Again, a series of possibilities arise in answer to this question, along with a broad range of comparative parallels in both the Graeco - Roman world and the Near East, to note only the most proximate regions.

It is obviously unnecessary to cite the multitude of examples of personalized statuary, busts, and masks, which stemmed from public honors accorded the Imperial families, senators, victors in games, friends, and various other private citizens during both Republican and Imperial Roman times (Suetonius, 1930: I. vii, lxxv, lxxvi; II. xxxi, lii, xcvii; III. xxiii, xxvi, lvii; IV. vii, xiv, xxii; V. ix, xi; VI, xii, xxv, xxxi, xlv, lvii; VII. i (Galba), (Otho) xxiii, vii; VIII. v (Vespasian), xxiii (Titus), iv, (Domitian), vi, xiii, xv, xxiii; II. iv ("imaginibus"); VI. xxxvii; VIII. i (Vespasian); VII. iii (Vitellius), ix; VIII. ii (Titus); II. xcvil; III. lxv, lxx (poets); 1935: IV. xxxiv; (On Gammarians) XVIII).

In addition, private persons accorded themselves, or family members, the same

"privilege" for personal display. There is the report, for example, that one Libo Drusus had a "...house crowded with ancestral busts" (Tacitus II. 27, 32; Orentzel 1979: 145).

Private citizens displayed statues of reigning emperors in their homes and on their estates, exchanging heads, often in gold or ivory, as a new emperor came upon the scene (Tacitus I.73-74).

The Senate and the public vied with each other in awarding statues, especially to the Imperial family, but also to worthy citizens, as well (Tacitus II. 41,64,183; II. 18, 56, 64, 72; IV. 64, 67).

Art historians of the Classical periods (e.g. Bieber, 1977; Thompson, 1988, et al.), supply us with detailed analyses of hair styles, beards, and ornamentation appropriate for comparison with the Roman corpus. When comparisons are sought just prior to the Augustan age and extending to the terminal date of the temple, no actual identifications can be made. Neither the beardless faces from Julian, Flavian and early post-Flavian Periods, nor the bearded examples from the later periods (Hadrian and following) fit those of the Temple examples of male faces. The beardless faces during the earlier period (Augustan and Claudian) depicted the men's hairstyles in "...elegant and always repeated arrangement of the hair over the forehead" (Bieber 1977: 188-89). Augustus, himself, is depicted with the cheekbones standing out of a "meager face", hollow-cheeked, yet still with an expression "dignified and serene" (192). In the Flavian period (Bieber's "monumental realism" style - 203) royal male portraiture shows many tight curls, with a "bowlshaped" cutting style (for example Fig. 836, Pl. 143 - Domitian). Trajan shows rows of vertical curls, with a "bowl-shaped" cutting style (Fig. 842, Pl. 144). With Hadrian, who instituted the practice, as with later portrait sculpture, there is reversion to the beards and full hairstyles typical of Greek philosophers and gods (208, 218, 255). Likewise, female hair styles from the same periods are not those to be seen on the Temple examples. As Bieber again points out (150, 197; and for example of commoners' styles, Thompson 1988: 99-115), the earliest hairstyles of the Hellenistic period appear as the "melon coiffure" of the early Ptolemaic princesses. By the Julian period, the most common was center-parted, "laid in fine wavy lines to the sides". Livia, however, illustrates the varieties in vogue during her long imperial history. Her early style was "similar to the melon coiffure", with the continuation of the previous chignon. Flavian women adopted two styles, the most prominent being the "...honey comb headdress, with small curls attached to a wire frame." The second style (cf. the early statue of Agrippina the Younger / Poppaea Sabina ?), came into favor, with a coiffure built with a diadem decorated with ringlets and ribbons. Bieber suggests the latter may have been actually the transitional forerunner of the former. The above "honeycomb" headdress along with other complicated styles, such as high toupees, wire frames, intricate braid patterns, and a kind of tongue pattern at the front part of the hair, continued into the third century (for example Matidia, Sabina, Plotina, the Younger and Older Faustina, Alcestis, and Plotina -165, 150, 151, 166, 218).

Not until the rule of Septimius Severus did the hairstyles become simpler, with the hair merely being drawn over the ears and with deep waves being parted in the middle (e.g. Julia Domna, Julia Mamaea, Otacilia, Julia Paula, Salonina, 151,152, 254, 251).

Other characteristic facial treatments, for both male and female Roman statuary: for example, forehead treatment, eye modeling, and so on (150, 192, 205, 218, 255) are also absent on the temple specimens. All of these comparative characteristics prove negative for possible identifications when the nonroyal portrait sculptures are compared.

The Egyptians had long been addicted to the same habit of honorific portraiture. With the advent of Ptolemaic political control of the land, the practice continued with an Hellenistic emphasis. Athenaeus (XIII. 576) cities Callixeinus in regard to the "many images" of Cleino, cup-bearer and mistress of Ptolemy Philadephius, and notes that Ptolemy honored Philadelphius with two gold portrait statues, along with three for Bernice (V. 203) at one public festival. He also notes statues to Arisinoe (XI. 497) and, quoting Masurius, on the basis of a record left by Callixeinus of Rhodes, describes a procession staged by Ptolemy, in which were carried statues of Alexander and Ptolemy, along with those of "kings and gods". Even this display was more subdued than the "parade" of the neighboring Seleucid monarch, Antiochus Polybius, in which were carried "statues of all beings who are said or held to be gods, demigods, or even heroes among mankind" (X.195; V. 196 ff.)!

Since the Nabataeans copied the coin types of their Hellenistic neighbors, in the earliest mintages, comparison of the coin portraiture of the Ptolemies provides another possible identification source. However, when coins from the period of Ptolemy I onward, including representations of the queens, are considered, no parallels with the Petra faces can be found (Poole, 1982: Pl. 1 - 30; Bieber 1955: 90 and Figs. 403, 340, 93). Still further, Ptolemaic statuary up to the time of Augustus provides no identifications. In terms of the females, for example, the "melon" hairstyle, not found at Petra, regularly appears (Bieber 1997: 86, 92, 94, 149), and even the center-parted hairstyle of Arsinoe III (Bieber 1977: 92, and Fig. 356) seems different from the center-parted style at Petra. Although Ptolemaic queens appear with protruding lips and rounded cheeks, female nose types appear generally thinner and more "Greek" than the Petra examples. The presence of diadems / fillets, worn by both males and females (Bieber 1977: 92 - 94 and Figs. 344, 356; 94 and Fig. 364; and cf. on Cleopatra, 94 and Fig. 360), is likewise a feature lacking on the Nabataean representations.

The neighboring Palmyrenes found it necessary to add projecting brackets to the columns along their main street for the purpose of displaying honorific busts accorded by the "Council / Assembly / Senate and People" to merchants and other citizens of note, as well as to Roman emperors, who had contributed to the prosperity of the city (Robinson 1946: 65, 102, 104; Starcky and Munajjed 1948: 29; Starcky and Gawlikowski 1985: 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 55, 58, 74, 75, 78, 70, 124-127).

In the temples of Palmyra, we also find that individual donors had spaces allocated to them by the priests for bas-reliefs of their choice (Rostovtzeff 1938: 76; Robinson 1946: 185). The Palmyrenes provide us with a lavish number of funerary busts, paintings and reliefs depicting honored members of their families (Colledge 1967:155, 66; Robinson 1946: 93, 122, 123; Starcky and Munajjed 1948: 19, 22, 27; Starcky and Gawlikowski 1985:128-132). In addition, the Tariff even notes a tax on bronze statues, so common was the practice.

Dura Europus likewise furnishes examples of pictorial recognition of individuals. The commander of the XXth cohort (Palmyrenian), the tribune Julius Terentius, along with his officers and men, appear on a fresco in the temple of Yarhibol, 'Aglibol, and Arsu, in the dress of sacrificers (Starcky and Gawlikowski, 1985: 53 - 54). Other similar donors so represented include one Konon, son of Nikostratos, in the Temple of Bel. In the Temple of Zeus Theos, the same piecemeal decoration by donors appears to have been prevalent, as at Palmyra (Perkins1973: 38, 40 - 41, 50, 72). At the Synagogue, the paintings, though apparently not involving pictorial depiction of actual donors, were at least commissioned by individuals (Perkins 1973: 56; Rostovtzeff 1978:116; Wischnitzer 1948: v).

Parthians, too, were infected with portrait decoration as an architectural feature. Perkins (1973: 106) notes the use of busts adorning the walls and voussoirs of Parthian buildings at Hatra, with the suggestion that such decoration was confined to the Temple architecture. The nature of these is, however, uncertain as to attribution.

Only the religious iconoclasm of the Jews, Nabatene's nearest neighbors, precluded the practice of individual donor portraiture developing there, but the synagogue decorations at Dura Europus and elsewhere, including Palestine, suggest a latent desire to emulate the pictorial practices of their neighbors (Rostovtzeff 1978: 102; Perkins 1973: 55-56'; Patrich 1990:153 ff.).

In short, the practice of public display of private persons' portraiture, of every variety, was widespread and needs no profound verification. But, the question of which persons merited such display among the Nabataeans remains to be determined. Since the affixes do not bear any of the usual indications as to whether the person represented was living or dead, no definitive answer can be offered in that respect. However. the open eyes of our few semicomplete examples suggests the former state, in spite of the same open-eyed treatment seen on Palmyrene funerary busts and plaques, to cite the nearest parallel body of sculpted portraiture.

The fact that these affixes were first sculpted (life size and then reduced?), molds made, and finally, the miniature casts produced, may also suggest that the individuals depicted were still alive.

If these portraits had been placed on architectural features of a more secular nature (e.g. full-size on pedestals along the "Paved-Street", through Petra's city center), it might be assumed that they represented

had made some public contribution, monetary, military, or political. Yet, no indication of such a practice can be docu-mented at Petra, nor elsewhere in Nabatene. Still further, the actual loci of the recovered affixes points to a specific relation with the Temple itself. This opens the issue of purpose, once again. Such portraits may be a parallel practice seen elsewhere for honoring citizens in a public fashion, with the temple selected as the appropriate "public" location for such display; or, they may have been a ritual means to call the attention of the goddess to the individual involved (a sort of insurance); or may have been dedicated as votives in response to some specific benefit achieved by the dedicant and attributed to the assistance of the goddess; or, finally, they may have simply been the (time-honored) response on the part of the religious institution to exceptional donations for the construction of the temple, itself. Any of these possibilities remain viable. However, the paucity of the affixes, in the mass of the recovered remains, their relative seclusion in the Temple, rather than in some more "public" location, and the obvious cost involved to produce them, may well suggest private production, rather than civic dedication. The cost factor (both in posing for the original sculpted version and the expense involved in production) suggests that the persons so represented were at least of the wealthier leisure class of Nabataean society. This supposition is further heightened by the well-nourished appearance of the persons represented on the recovered temple affixes. Neither of these aspects rules out possible prophylatic, or thanksgiving, motives for the production and placing of the affixes in the temple, but the relatively small number of them re-

public dedication in honor of citizens who

covered suggests that, even for wealthy members of the Nabataean community, the practice was not widespread. Assuredly, if the purpose had been purely cultic, many more citizens who could afford both the time and the expense involved would have been similarly represented. Thus the answer to their presence may be the possibility that they represent Temple response to donations from the individuals so "blessed" by the privilege of being displayed within the Temple. In any event, certain contributions to our further understanding of Nabataean culture arise from the recovery of these affixes:

- The first evidence that such a practice even existed among the Nabataeans has now been recovered in a defined archaeological context. The mold recovered by Murray and Ellis (1940: 30 31 and Pls.) was identified with the period of Obodas and no attribution of use suggested.
- Once again, the eclectic nature of Nabataean culture is illustrated by their appropriation of a concept, which is adapted, not simply adopted, to their own cultural purposes.
- 3) Perhaps for the first time, aside from numismatic and possibly glyptic art, we have the opportunity to see, even if in fragmentary form, the actual faces of some of the Nabataean residents of Petra.¹

Philip C. Hammond 15810 East Fountain Hills, AZ 85268 USA

Teresa Mellott–Khan University of Utah Salt Lake City, Utah USA

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Catalogue

The illustrated "faces" are described below by year of excavation, by the usual Register notations: Object Number, Date (found), Find Location (Area Site and Stratigraphic Unit), Form, Material, Description, Condition, and Dimensions). All examples remain with the Department of Antiquities.

AEP 1975

No. 3 II.3(101)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; right side, lower face missing; double head band; heavy eyebrows; iris raised; high cheek-bone; angular nose; finger marks on interior. Poor, fragmentary. L.-9.5 cm x W.-7.0 cm.

No. 12 II.3(101)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human face. Mouth gaping; other features unrecognizable (shown as a "Tragic Mask"?); plug hole at rear. Poor. H.-11.0 cm x W.-8.0 cm.

No. 85 II.3(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human face affix; right side and half of left side only; iris shown by dot; lips pursed; straight nose; female. Good, fragmentary. L.- 5.6 cm x W.- 5.0 cm.

AEP 1976

No. 32 II.2(101)

AFFIX

Plaster, white. Human face, molded; inclined to left; broken and missing above eye level and below chin; female. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 35 II.5(201)

AFFIX

Plaster, white. Human face; naturalistic style; male; short cropped curly hair framing face to above ear level; round face; pouting lips; flattened nose; heavy brow; possible neck torque; head slightly inclined to left; radiating rays of plaster added; Helios (?); possible gilding over red paint base; plugged to masonry, dressing









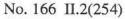


of stone visible on back. Excellent. H.- 4.3 cm x W.-3.1 cm.

No. 79 II.2(102/103)

AFFIX

Plaster, white. Molded male head; bulbous protruding eyes, originally painted, looking left; head originally wreathed (?); hair curled; trace of plug hole on back; broken and missing from upper lip down; substrate in rough plaster, finished in finer white plaster. Fragmentary. Face W.- 12.0 cm.



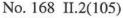
AFFIX

Plaster. Human head; face inclined to right; applied strips for hair detail; crude modeling; damaged in fall; broken and missing from midneck. Fragmentary.



AFFIX

Plaster. Female head; slightly turned to right; hair piled on head and filleted; slightly bulbous eyes; full face; back of head built up with plaster strips for reinforcement; damaged in fall. Worn and damaged. H.-11.7 cm x W.-8.2 cm.



AFFIX

Plaster. Female head; hair parted in middle; hair braided (?) around forehead, with rest piled on top of head; bulbous eyes; full face; plaster added in back of face at cheek line for support and attachment to surface; ancient break across face below eyes, too worn for repair. Broken and worn. H.- 7.4 cm x W.-4.6 cm.

AEP 1977

No. 112 III.8W(101)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded male head; hair slightly curly, reaching below ear; heavy brows; bulging eyes; bulbous nose affixed (?); heavy lips; finger marks on back; left side broken and missing; trace of red paint. Fair, fragmentary. H.-











4.9 cm. x Original W.-4.4 cm.

No. 113 III.8W(101)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human female (?) head slightly bulbous eyes; classical nose; heavy lips; cleft chin; fragment of plug and trace of copper oxide on back. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 114 III.8W(101)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human male (?) head; as RI No 113, but with trace of plug on back; finger marks on back. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 153 III.8S(6)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human male head; well formed; brows wrinkled; slightly flattened nose; bulbous eyes; heavy lips; deep cleft between lip and chin. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 154 III.8S(6)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded human male (?) head; left side of face damaged; traces of curly hair around head; slightly bulbous eyes; small mouth; finger marks on back; trace of blue paint on face. Poor, fragmentary. Original W.-4.40 cm.

No. 155 III.8S(6)

AFFIX(ES)

Plaster. As is RI No 23 A/B. Lower half of human head; gross features; finger marks on back; upper half missing. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 184 III.8(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; human male head; wavy hair; slightly bulbous eyes; flattened nose; pouty lips; trace of blue paint on eyes; trace of red paint on hair. Fair, fragmentary. W.-3.5 cm.













No. 185 III.8(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. As RI No 153, but flatter. Poor, fragmentary.

No. 186 III.8(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; human male (?) head; slightly inclined to right; curly hair; worried facial expression; nose broken and missing; pouty lips. Poor, fragmentary. W.-3.5 cm.

No: 187 III.8S(8)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; human male (?) head; hair in waves; head slightly inclined to right; bulbous nose; very pouty lips; badly worn. cf. AEP '77, RI No 114. Poor, fragmentary, worn. W.-3.9 cm.

No. 188 III.8S(8)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; female head; wavy hair with center part; classical hair style; almond-shaped eyes; nose worn; small mouth with edges turned slightly down; round face. Good, worn. H.-6.8 cm x W.-4.7 cm.

No. 189 III.8(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; human male head; hair in heavy curls; prominent nose; lips in extreme pout; lip corners turned down; bulging eyes; prominent chin; head inclined to left. Good, worn, part of nose missing. H.-5.75 cm x W.-4.45 cm.

No. 190 III.8S(8)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; human male head; flowing curly hair; fruit (?) and leaf on right side of face; neck torque (?); raised eyebrows; prominent nose; small mouth; firm chin; left side broken and missing. Fair, broken, fragmentary.













H.-6.45 cm.

No. 191 III.8(103)

AFFIX

Plaster. Molded; fragment of human head; thick cast with remains of plaster plug with imprint of wooden affixing plug; lower 2/3 of face; extremely well molded; classical nose; nostrils indicated; mouth slightly open; firm chin. Poor, fragmentary.

