

TWO HELLENISTIC HEADS FROM PETRA

by
Eve French

In the Hellenistic period the tendency in modelling towards realism of the subject in movement, expression, representation of human character and emotion, and the reproduction of these characteristic in a naturalistic manner became a great ambition of artists. Old age, childhood, deformity, drunkenness, and racial differences were studied with new interest. This tendency spread over the whole of the Hellenistic world, and well into Arabia (Richter 1977: 166). It started in Petra about the fourth century B.C., probably about the time when the army of the Seleucid Antigonos attacked Petra in 312, a campaign brought about by his envy of the Nabataeans' renown as successful caravan traders (Bowersock 1983: 12, *passim*).

The collection of Nabataean figurines from the excavations conducted by P. J. Parr under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem in 1958 to 1964 included two heads that are of particular interest in that they reflect the Hellenistic or Greco-Roman influence in Petra. Both are surface finds discovered in the course of excavations.

The small limestone head (Figs. 1 and 2) was probably carved with a flat chisel and a point, while a flat chisel held at an angle would have been used on the hair and on the face (Colledge 1976: 110). It is 5 cm high and 3.6 cm wide; the hair, eyebrows, eyes, moustache, and beard were painted black, the face red, and the lips crimson, but the paint is flaking, and the hair and beard are somewhat damaged. Paint must have been applied to cover some imperfections of the sculpture. The pose of the head tilts slightly to the right, and corkscrew curls cover the front of the head and fall around the face onto the neck. The hair

styles resemble those on the coins of Obodas II (68-60 B.C.), Malichus (60-30 B.C.), and Obodas III (30-9 B.C.) (Meshorer 1967: 23, 24, pl. 14). Some similarity to the front curls can be seen on a bronze head from Yemen in the British Museum that is considered Nabataean (Hicks 1937: 49; Murray and Ellis 1940: 31). Similar curls were also commonly depicted in the Hellenistic period in Syria (Dussaud 1938: 99). The hair style is probably a Western Asiatic variant of a Hellenistic fashion. Around the head is a fillet; such fillets are shown as an adornment of kings on a number of Greek and Nabataean coins. Depictions of kings on Nabataean coins are without moustache or beard. From the time of Mithridates I (c. 171-137 B.C.) Parthian men were often bearded and their hair was usually long and elaborately dressed in wavy or tiered curls (Colledge 1967: 91), as was that of the god Sadrafa depicted on a statue dated A.D. 55. (Colledge 1976: 127) and of the god Zeus from Gerasa (Glueck 1965: pl. 43). The facial features are worn, as already mentioned, and due to flaking are somewhat indistinct; the face is oblong, the eyes are deeply set, and eyebrows can be distinguished. The nose, which follows the slope of the forehead, is straight and has a broad ridge, but, being chipped, is shapeless. The slightly smiling mouth is reminiscent of the Greek archaic style, which is perhaps of Oriental origin (Bothmer 1961:38). A moustache partly covers the mouth and droops over a short beard that covers the cheeks and chin. Gods like Dushares (Dunand 1937: 29), Sadrafa (Colledge 1976: 27), dated A.D. 55, and Zeus Sarapis from Gerasa (Glueck 1965: pl. 43) have similar moustaches. Whether this head represents a king is difficult to decide, because the



1. Limestone head from Petra. Scale 1:1 (courtesy of P.J. Parr).

boundary between the sacred and secular in the art of the region is not clear. However, the head probably represents the deified king Obodas.

The second head (Fig. 3) is of an old man and conveys the interest of the period in realism. It is a bivalve clay figurine, 5 cm high and 2.7 cm wide. It is well preserved and traces of red paint are noticeable. The joining of the two valves has obscured the ears. The headgear appears to be a variation of a polos, cylindrical but slightly curved on the sides as if it were too small for the head, or had been stretched. The short hair in reticulate or multiple flat curls partly covers the forehead; the face is oblong, the brow is smooth with deeply furrowed cheeks, and there are double lines, the first outlining the mouth, the second in the middle of the cheeks. The nose is bulbous at the end with flaring nostrils and has a central vertical furrow. The eyes are almond-shaped, deep sunk, and outlined; the pupils are slightly hollowed. The mouth gapes wide below a very deep upper lip and shows regular bared teeth, both upper and lower, with spaces between them. The overall expression is tragic, an impression



2. Limestone head from Petra. Scale 1:1 (courtesy of P.J. Parr).



3. Terracotta head from Petra. Scale 1:1 (Courtesy of P.J. Parr).

of deep emotion, or of an attempt to conceal sorrowful feelings with an outward display of laughter.

The Nabataean artists have shown that they conveyed the spirit of the age. Figurines have been considered a minor art, but the Nabataean sculptors and coroplasts elevated them above that level.

E. French
51 Queens Gate Gardens
London SW7 5NF
U.K.

Bibliography

- Bothmer, B. V.
1961 *Brooklyn Museum Catalogue*. New York: Brooklyn Museum.
- Bowersock, G.
1983 *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Colledge, M. A. R.
1967 *The Parthians*. London: Paul Elek.
1976 *The Art of Palmyra*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Dunand M.
1937 *Fouilles de Byblos. Tome I: 1926-1932. Atlas*. Paris: Geuthner.
- Dussaud, R.
1938 Tête de bronze provenant d'Arabie. *Syria* 19: 98-99.
- Glueck, N.
1965 *Deities and Dolphins*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Hicks, P. R.
1937 Bronze Head from Yemen. *British Museum Quarterly* 4.9: 153-154.
- Meshorer, G.
1967 *Nabataean Coins. Qedem* 3. Jerusalem: Hebrew University.
- Murray, M. A. and Ellis, J. C.
1940 *A Street in Petra*. London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt.
- Richter, G.
1977 *Greek Art*. Oxford : Phaidon Press.

