
A missing work of art: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Asklepios, Serapis, or Herakles?

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This is an edition of a small marble head of a male bearded divinity found in 1924 in an underground space in the area behind the Domvs Romana Museum, Rabat (Malta). It was stolen from its showcase in the 1980s. Its physiognomy qualifies it as a representation of any of the abovementioned divinities. A closer examination of its head cover based on available photographs, however, identifies it as part of a statuette of Herakles.

Certainly one of the finest pieces of Roman religious sculpture ever retrieved from Maltese soil is this smaller than life-size head of fine-grained white marble. It measures 0.12 m high and 0.11 m wide, and represents a partially 'veiled' bearded divinity (Figs 1-2). The quotation marks are justified for reasons that will be given in due course.

It was discovered by Themistocles Zammit in 1924 inside 'a small cave 9' x 8', under the floor of a room', during his excavations in the area north of the present Domvs Romana Museum, in Rabat (Zammit 1924, entry for 24 June). In the Museum Report for the same year Zammit gives more details of his find, including its dimensions and a tentative identification with the god of the underworld Hades, in his own words:

'A remarkably fine head of a marble statuette 12 cms in height and 11 cms at the base of the neck. It, probably, represents Pluto as it is fully bearded and has his head covered by the toga. It is a good work of the Hellenistic period of art.' (Zammit 1925, 4)

In his 1930 guidebook of the same Museum where it was displayed, he extended the possibility of its representation to other divinities:

'of the Hellenistic period [...] is a beautifully carved marble head representing Pluto or another beared [*sic*] divinity with the head covered by a fold of the toga.' (Zammit 1930, 24).

Description

Many today would be unfamiliar with this sculpture because it has been missing from the scene for over thirty years and certain details presented hereunder, as well as the accompanying photographs, were taken in the 1970s. I had, in fact, included it in my dissertation on Greek and Roman sculpture in Malta for my '*laurea in lettere*' conferred by the university of Palermo in March 1971 (Bonanno 1971, 157-60).

The head is broken off the statuette to which it belonged at the level of the lower neck, where the latter starts expanding towards the shoulders. The break also involves the head cover which was detached from the statuette more or less at the same level. Some breakages and abrasions are also visible on the rest of the head cover and in some parts of the beard. The back surface is somewhat coarsely finished with rasp marks covering most areas (Fig. 2d). It is not certain whether the two irregularly-shaped holes at the back were intentional, to enhance the unusual texture of the head cover.

There is no doubt that the statuette represented a bearded divinity with its head and hair partly concealed by a cover of a sort that gives the impression of being a veil. The voluminous beard, consisting of rather thick wavy strands separated by deep channels produced by the running drill, emphasizes the triangular



Figure 1. Marble head of a male bearded divinity. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta [NMA 3641]).

shape of the face. The modelling of the latter verges on the *sfumato* and its surfaces produce a contained chiaroscuro effect. The eyes are almond-shaped and dreamy, separated by a broad nose and surmounted by lightly accentuated orbital ridges. Above them a horizontal wrinkle separates the forehead in two. The visible parts of the hair display the same treatment as that of the beard. The mouth is small, with slightly parted fleshy lips.

Iconography

The identification of the divinity here represented is not an easy one. It has to be based on the physiognomic features (shape of head, face, hair style and pattern of beard) as well as the ‘veil’ or rather, head cover.

The physiognomic typology corresponds to that of a number of Greco-Roman divinities.¹ Foremost among them is Zeus/Jupiter, of whom the Maltese collections include a miniature statuette and, possibly, another head in a private museum, both

unpublished. But the same physiognomy is also found in numerous statues of other bearded divinities, like Poseidon/Neptune, Hades/Pluto, Asklepios/Aesculapius, and Serapis.² The right identification is normally established by means of the other attributes accompanying the rest of the statue, which in this case are missing. The problem lies with the second element in the iconography of the Rabat sculpture, the head cover which, in the finder's description, implied drapery (see above) even though the word 'toga' might not have been intended to be taken literally. The fact is, however, that these five divinities are hardly ever portrayed with a covered head.

For example, our head shares most of the iconographic features with those of a nude statue of a standing Zeus, with his recognizable attributes, from Cyrene (Todisco 1993, 104, pl. 218). The statue is signed by Zenio, son of Zenio and dated to AD 138. It is thought to be derived from the Zeus Brontaios of the fourth-century BC sculptor Leochares, dated to circa 375 BC. The statue, however, is bare-headed.

A similar nude statue of a bearded divinity with the same head typology from Caesarea Mauretaniae (present day Cherchel, Algeria) is identified as Poseidon from its attached attributes, such as the dolphin by its right leg (Landwehr 2000, 84-6, no. 111, pls 46-50). The head, however, is not covered.

The same physiognomy and the same hair, moustache and beard patterns are portrayed in the head of a statue of Asklepios in the Museo Gregoriano Profano (AM3) of the Vatican, though the face is more rounded (Meyer 1994, 7-55, especially pls 25a, 26a, 27a). Again, the deity is bare-headed.

On the other hand, the iconographic features characteristic of the Maltese head – the triangular shape of the face, the hairstyle (including the two partitioned wavy tresses on the forehead), the format and treatment of the beard, the division of the forehead by a prominent horizontal wrinkle, and the soft graciousness of the expression – are all reproduced in the head of a statue of Serapis from the Isaeum of Gortyn in Crete (Karetsou and Andreadaki-Blasaki 2000, 439-440, no. 508B). This is shown with all the unmistakable attributes of Serapis, a bearded god whose association with Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the underworld, makes him identifiable also as Hades/Pluto. But, again, he is unveiled, while his counterpart, Isis, is veiled. Both statues have been dated to the 'late Antonine age (180-190 AD)'.³

On a closer look at the Maltese head, however, which can only be based on the available photographs since the marble itself is missing, the head cover appears to be of a different material than just drapery. It is far thicker than expected, and the side views, especially the left side of the head, point to some very different type of cover, a cover of different shape and consistency, such as an animal skin. This detail brings to mind the lion's skin, the attribute par excellence of Herakles/Hercules, another divinity who had all the prerogatives of religious worship in antiquity, including temples and sanctuaries.

Herakles was perhaps the most renowned and popular hero of Greek mythology and in time he became one of the most widely worshipped divinities in the ancient world and, as a result, the most represented in ancient art (Boardman *et al.* 1988). Born of the union of the great Olympian god Zeus and the mortal Alkmene, wife of king Amphitryon of Thebes, he incurred the persecuting enmity of the goddess Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus. For this he had to endure the famous 'labours' at the service of Eurystheus, king of Tiryns and Mycenae, and most of his representations in art gravitate around these labours. His most distinguishing attributes are the invulnerable lion skin and the club. Most agree that the lion skin was that of the Nemean lion which he killed as one of his labours. He is sometimes shown wearing it with its head serving as a helmet and its front paws knotted in front on his chest. The club was carved from the trunk of an olive tree also from Nemea, or from another source. He is sometimes represented with a clean-shaven face but much more often with a full beard.

Except for the hair over the forehead and the absence of the head cover, the rest of the Malta head resembles very closely the colossal head of Herakles from Pergamon, now in Berlin (Damaskos 1998: 129-36). Another telling comparison is with the head of a marble statue of a seated Hercules from Alba Fucens (Latini 1994, 475-77). It has the same structure of the face and beard and a very close similarity in the shape of the eyes, the nose and forehead and in the modelling of the mouth. The hair, however, is quite different, based on very small curls which leave the ears visible, and instead of the head cover it wears a laurel crown of *Hercules Invictus*.

The iconography of Herakles includes several depictions of him with his head covered by the lion skin (the *leonté*), especially on coins (Boardman *et al.* 1988, nos 117-163, 243, 377, 465, 468, 576, 639,



Figure 2. Marble head of a male bearded divinity. (Photographs reproduced courtesy of National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta [a. NMA 3644, b. NMA 3643, c. NMA3645, d. NMA 3646]).

650, 735). The following examples are limited to a few sculptural ones.

A statuette of Herakles with his head covered by a lion's skin, dated to the third quarter of the fourth century BC, comes from Athens but it

depicts a young, clean-shaven version of the divine hero (Kaltsas 2002, 264-65, no. 553). Another such statuette head in the Glyptotek of Munich belongs to the more diffused type of Herakles' iconography, i.e. with short curly hair, rather than wavy as in the

Maltese head (Fuchs 1992, 157-162, no. 22, figs 159-63). Another head of the same bearded type and with head partly covered by the lion's skin, but with small curls in the hair, is paired with the head of Omphalos on a double-herm in the Museo Civico of Treviso (Galliazzo 1982, 104-106, no. 31). Finally, another head of the same size depicting a bearded Herakles with head framed by the lion's skin comes from Fano, Italy (De Marinis *et al.* 2002, 78-79). The incisions of the pupils and irises place this head a few decades later than the Maltese one.

The beard typology of the Maltese head, with its several layers of curls thickening down under the chin, follows that of the Weary Herakles by Lysippos, several versions of which are housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Comstock and Vermeule 1976, 66, 106-107, 138, nos 104A, 163-64, 216; Vermeule and Comstock 1988, 34-36, no. 22). But, again, in the Rabat head the hair is significantly different, being parted in the centre over the forehead and rising in two conspicuous waves on each side. These are, on the other hand, reproduced almost identically on a much larger head, datable to the second half of the second century AD, in Geneva which, however, has been identified as an Asklepios, not clear on what grounds (Chamay and Maier 1990, 27, no. 27, pl. 33). While its heavy use of the running drill justifies an Antonine date, this head seems to have been veiled but lacks the whole head cover which was attached separately. The pattern of both the hair and beard are repeated on a life-sized head, identified as 'Zeus (?)' and dated as 'Late Hellenistic, perhaps ca. 50 BC', in the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (Vermeule 1981, 157, no. 124).

The turn of the head, the horizontal division of the forehead, the soft treatment of the eyes and flesh surfaces, as well as the general calm expression of the Maltese head are found in a head of Herakles, albeit without the headgear, in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen (No. 621: Moltesen 2000, 116-17, pls 86-88). It too recalls the Lysippean Weary Herakles.

So, really and truly, there is no perfect parallel for the Rabat head among the standard sculptural portrayals of Herakles, or else, if such a parallel exists, I have not managed to find it. For this reason I cannot really connect its iconography to any of the types of Herakles' plastic representations, even less so to any prototypes mentioned by the ancient authors.

In spite of this I am convinced of my identification, based mainly on the facial physiognomy and the pattern and style of the hair and beard – even though these, on their own, could fit well, as we have seen, with the iconography of at least five other Greco-Roman divinities. The determining feature that connects the head with Herakles is, however, the head cover which could not be other than a lion skin. This is confirmed by rasp marks finish of its surface, the bulges behind the left temple – one of which looks like an animal ear – and the thick-set folds below it (see, in particular, Figs 1, 2b and 2c).

The size of the head could fit either on a free-standing statuette or on a figure in high relief, for which I would cite as parallels two marble sculptures in the Vatican Museum, both of which show Herakles wearing the lion skin over his head: a square-shaped relief panel (Amelung 1908, 79, pl. 21), and a free-standing statuette (Amelung 1908, 213, pl. 34).

As for other sculptural representations of Herakles in a Maltese context one should also mention two small marble heads, one of which was a small herm, probably intended to be affixed to a table support, and the other might have been sawn off from a relief decorating a sarcophagus (Bonanno 1977; *LIMC* IV, 1-2, nos 1198-99). They are held in the reserve collection of the National Museum of Archaeology. Unfortunately, their provenance is still unknown.

Earlier on I mentioned the many sanctuaries and temples dedicated to Herakles in antiquity. One such sanctuary was placed in Malta by the second-century AD geographer Ptolemy (*Geogr.* IV, 3, 13), and his cult is documented by two bilingual inscriptions, in Punic and Greek, of the second century BC (*Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* III, 5753; *Inscriptiones Graecae* XIV, 600; *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* I, 122 and 122bis), although some doubts have recently been raised on their original provenance from Malta (Amadasi Guzzo and Rossignani 2002). In those inscriptions Herakles appears as the Greek counterpart of the Punic god Melqart in the Punic versions. Melqart is also said to be represented by an orientalising bearded head on Maltese coins of the last two centuries BC (Perassi and Novarese 2006, 2391, n. 62). Various attempts have been made to determine the physical location of this ancient temple, some dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Jean Quintin (1536, f. A4), basing himself on the co-ordinates given by Ptolemy, placed it near

the Marsaxlokk harbour. His location was supported by Abela (1647, 108) and Niderstedt (1660, 17). Tancred C. Gouder (1991, 17) suggested that the Punic square tower in Żurrieq might be part of the remains of such a building. The most recent attempts have sought to identify the shrine with the remains of a building hurriedly and incompletely 'excavated' by personnel from the British Navy in 1960 at Ras ir-Raħeb on the west coast of Malta (Buhagiar 1988; Vella 2002). So far the evidence brought forward is very tenuous and the identification remains largely hypothetical.

Archaeological Context

The circumstances of the discovery of this marble head suggest that the structure above the surface under which it was found belonged to the residential quarter of the ancient town of Melite, in very close proximity to the stately Roman house which produced a group of imperial portrait statues. Zammit (1925, 3) is quite explicit about this when he states that 'It is clear that the rooms to the north of the Roman house were of a later date, and quite independent of the Villa'. In view of this archaeological context, I do not think that the head can be used to argue for the existence of a temple in the area. Its size, on the contrary, suggests a domestic context. If correct, moreover, such a context would confirm that the cult of Heracles was not limited to the state religion, but extended also to the household, as in the rest of the ancient world.

Date

Although Zammit was right in seeing a strong Hellenistic content, the head should be assigned to the Roman period. The iconographical and stylistic similarities to other sculptures cited above, as well as the carving technique, involving considerable use of the running drill in the rendering of the hair and beard, in 1971 made me assign the head to the second century AD (Bonanno 1971, 160). But because of the absence of the incision of the pupil and iris in the eyes it would be preferable to assign to it a pre-Antonine date and place it in the Flavian or Trajanic period when the running drill started to be used more freely and the plastic rendering of the eyes had still not been introduced.

Missing

This art piece was exhibited in the lower storey of the small museum that was built over the remains of the Roman *domus* of Rabat soon after its discovery (Zammit 1930, 24). This is where I saw it for the last time, in one of the two central old showcases – showcases G and F according to Zammit (1930, 22-24) – on the east side of the *domus* peristyle. And it was from here that it was stolen sometime around 1981. A strong appeal is here made for its return to the common national, and international heritage, to which it rightly belongs. It certainly cannot be properly 'enjoyed' by its present possessor. That person will also be able to enjoy it freely together with the rest of the community once it is back in the showcases of the *Domus Romana* Museum.

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Notes

- 1 I shall be giving both the Greek and the Roman names of these divinities the first time, but I shall shift to only the Greek name thereafter, since the iconography of all these divinities was of a Greek origin in the first place.
- 2 For a discussion of the attribution of types to different divinities see the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (hereafter *LIMC* 1981-1999) under the respective entries and Agnoli (2002, 138-40, no. I. 40). Agnoli traces these types back to a model created at the end of the fifth century BC within the circle of Agorakritos, which was then readapted in the following centuries.