
THE ORIGINALITY OF ROMAN SCULPTURE*

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ORIGINALITY in itself is an absolute quality; it is either there or not there. It can be present in some aspect, or aspects, and not in others. But its presence or absence can be determined only by relating the artifact which is supposed to contain it (be it a poem, a work of figurative art, a patented idea, or even a philosophical thought) with others preceding it in time.

An industrial design presented for patent registration has to be original, otherwise it does not qualify as a new device, a new contribution to science or technology; it is worthless because it is only a repetition of something else that was created before it. So, even here, originality is judged by comparison with what precedes it. But it is rarely or never the case that the entire design, or designed object, is entirely new. Originality generally resides only in a part of the whole, but that partial novelty is conventionally accepted as constituting a new design, a new device.

Apart from the common place and far from poetical analogy, I believe that more or less the same thread of thought can be applied to the task of establishing whether Roman art is an original art, and thus qualifying it as something distinctly Roman, or whether it is merely an extension of another art. And to establish one or the other, the comparison has to be made with the art that precedes it in time.

The prehistoric cave art of the Franco-Cantabrian region with which we are all familiar has no predecessor, at least according to the present state of our knowledge of Palaeolithic man and his art; therefore, it stands to reason that this art could not be other than original. There is nothing before it to compare it with. It is not so in the case of Roman art. Beside the art of the different prehistoric cultures, which it probably ignored, Roman art could benefit from the various artistic experiences of the pioneering civilizations of the Near East, most of all the Egyptian one, and to a much greater extent (because of its much closer contact with it, both in time and in space) from Greek art. So it is with the latter that the comparison has to be made to decide where, if anywhere, Roman art can lay a valid claim for originality.

We would probably have taken it for granted that the art of the Romans could

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not be anything but Roman, were it not that claims to the opposite effect have been made in the past. The seeds for such a contention were perhaps sown already by Johan Joachim Winckelmann, the father of the history of ancient art, at the very birth of this young discipline. Winckelmann introduced a view of a Greek art that is born, grows up to reach the apogée of its development in the works of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, after which it declines in accordance with a rigid biological cycle. Roman art was to find itself at the wrong end of this life cycle. Following Winckelmann there have been several attempts by various art historians to relegate Roman art to a secondary role, an appendix to Greek art, and a decadent one at that. It is possible that this view was rendered more plausible by the repeated re-emergence of the Greek Classical ideal in Roman sculpture, and the adoption of the Greek architectural orders as an external veneer by Roman architecture, even though the latter had created for itself new structural problems and solved them by different structural and aesthetic solutions.

In reaction to this view, on the other hand, there have been efforts, with varying degrees of success, to vindicate the primary role of Roman art by identifying those elements in it that constitute definitive, undeniable innovations.

Limiting myself to the field of sculpture, I intend to discuss two areas of Roman art for one of which a strong claim for originality has been made, and for the other of which, in my view, a much stronger case can be made.

Realistic Portraiture

When I first embarked on the study of Roman art at the University of Palermo in the late sixties, I was faced by an overwhelming series of Alinari large format plates of realistic Republican portraits and by an equally overwhelming literature that appeared to suggest that realistic (or better, veristic) portraiture was one of the major, if not the only trademark of Roman sculpture. I was greatly disillusioned, soon after, to learn that, barring one or two exceptions, all these portraits, including the numerous funerary ones, were datable to the late-Republican period, namely, the first century BC, that is, at the very end of that process of Hellenization which, from the third century BC onwards, had accompanied the process of political expansion of Rome from a Latin state to an uncontested Mediterranean power. As a result of some archaeological freak, beside the bronze head of 'Brutus' of the *Museo Capitolino* and the bronze statue of Avle Metle in Florence (better known as the *Arringatore*), we do not know of any Roman portraits that are datable to the second century BC or earlier, even though there is plenty of historical evidence of the existence of honorary portrait statues in several public places in Rome at the time.

A further disillusion that the overenthusiastic fan of Roman art is bound to encounter is when he directs his attention to Greek Hellenistic portraiture and

Fig. 1 finds that the latter produced a fair number of realistic portraits as well as a couple of others that would even qualify as 'veristic', for example, the one of Eumenes II of Bactria. Thus Roman art cannot really claim absolute originality for the creation of this sculptural type, but it certainly contributed in making it a standard feature and diffusing it throughout the Roman empire to the exclusion, perhaps, of some pockets of resistance here and there.

Moreover, it should be kept in mind that Roman realistic portraiture did not derive its inspiration solely, not even mainly, from this Hellenistic source; there were, in fact, several sources of influence and factors that brought about this popular artistic genre among the Romans. I am overlooking here the possibility, or perhaps probability, of Egyptian influence, about which Gisela Richter produced an interesting and eye-opening study; I do so because I believe that any influence coming from that direction would have reached Roman art indirectly via Hellenistic art.

Fig. 3 It is true that many honorific portraits of Roman dignitaries in our possession, mostly political figures of the late Republican period, like Sulla, Cicero, Antony, and some of Caesar's images, derive their inspiration directly from the heroized images of Hellenistic princes and monarchs which seemed somehow to fit in their ideological aspirations and personal ambitions. But the overwhelming majority of Roman portraits of this period, which belong to members of the upper layers of Roman society, is characterized by an exaggerated realism, by an unbridled search and merciless reproduction of the true features of the sitter, warts and all (I would say, warts and wrinkles and skin folds above all). The origin of this verism can be traced in a typically Roman tradition which had its roots in the Roman social structure. I am referring to the death mask tradition, or the *ius imaginum*. The *ius imaginum* was the prerogative of the patrician families who had the right to keep in a special cupboard in the *tablinum* faithful reproductions of the faces of several generations of ancestors which had been reproduced by the application of wax masks on their faces at the point of death. These *imagines maiorum* were removed from their places only to be carried by younger members of the family on the occasion of the funeral of the head of the house. Vivid accounts of this custom are given us by Polybius and later by Pliny the Elder.

Another source of inspiration for the late Republican portrait is the funerary sculptural tradition of the peoples of central Italy (Etruscans, Samnites, Latins, and others) of which the Romans themselves were a tiny minority which, however, by dint of sheer military acumen and cumulative expansionistic experience, managed to dominate not only its neighbouring peoples but also powerful empires beyond. This central Italian component in Roman art has been identified already in 1948 by Bernard Schweitzer in his masterly work *Die Bildkunst der Römischen Republik* but has been further developed in the last few decades, mostly by the

Fig. 1 Naples, Museo Nazionale. Roman copy in bronze of a Hellenistic portrait. Usually called 'Pseudo-Seneca'. The likeliest identification is with the Greek poet Hesiod. Late II century BC. Another copy, in marble, is preserved in a private collection in Malta.



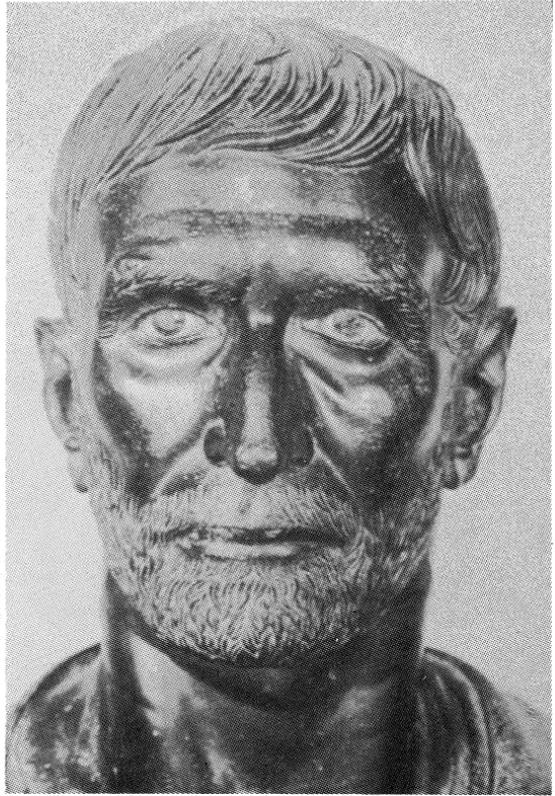


Fig. 2 Rome, Capitoline Museum. Bronze head of 'Brutus'. Variously attributed to the third, second, and first centuries BC.

Italian art historian Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli and his school. Its main characteristic feature is expressiveness, often coupled with impressionistic treatment of the hair.

It should be remarked that these indigenous artistic tendencies of the peoples of central Italy would probably have produced only abstract or primitive works of sculpture, like the *Warrior* from Capecetrano and the attempts at portraiture on the lids of the Etruscan canopic vases, had they not succumbed to the naturalistic influence of Greek art. Of these peoples the one that embraced most wholeheartedly the ideals of Greek classical art was the Etruscan one. This it did in practically all the artistic media: sculpture, painting, terracotta modelling. The Etruscans were to exert an enormous and deep influence on the development of Roman civilization and art, first as a dominating power and later as a subordinated people under its sway.

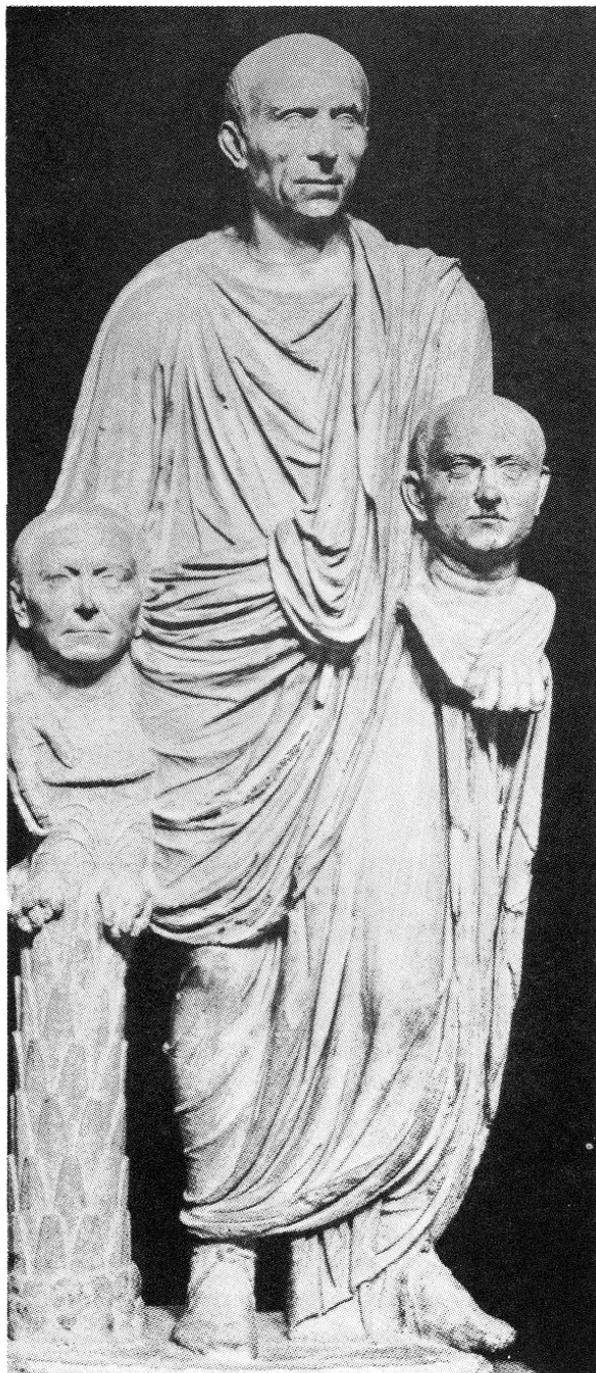


Fig. 3 Rome, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Statue of a Roman holding busts of two ancestors. The head is ancient but not the original one.



Fig. 4 Munich, Glyptothek. Marble bust of Augustus. c. 20 BC. An example of Neo-Attic sculpture.

Thus, these three components, the Greek idealizing naturalism, the Roman predilection for exaggerated realism, and the central Italian expressionism were destined to combine together to produce a new type of portrait, the Roman one.

The same components, in particular the antithetical ones (idealization and realism) continued to vie with each other to prevail over each other so that throughout the history of Roman portraiture there is a continued alternation of one tendency dominating the other. In late Republican times it was obviously the realistic tendency which had the upper hand. With Augustus and the Julio-Claudians the Neo-Attic movement marks a return to the classical ideals of the fifth and fourth centuries BC not only in the imperial court art but also in private portraiture. Claudius' heads re-introduce the colour, warmth, and plasticism of

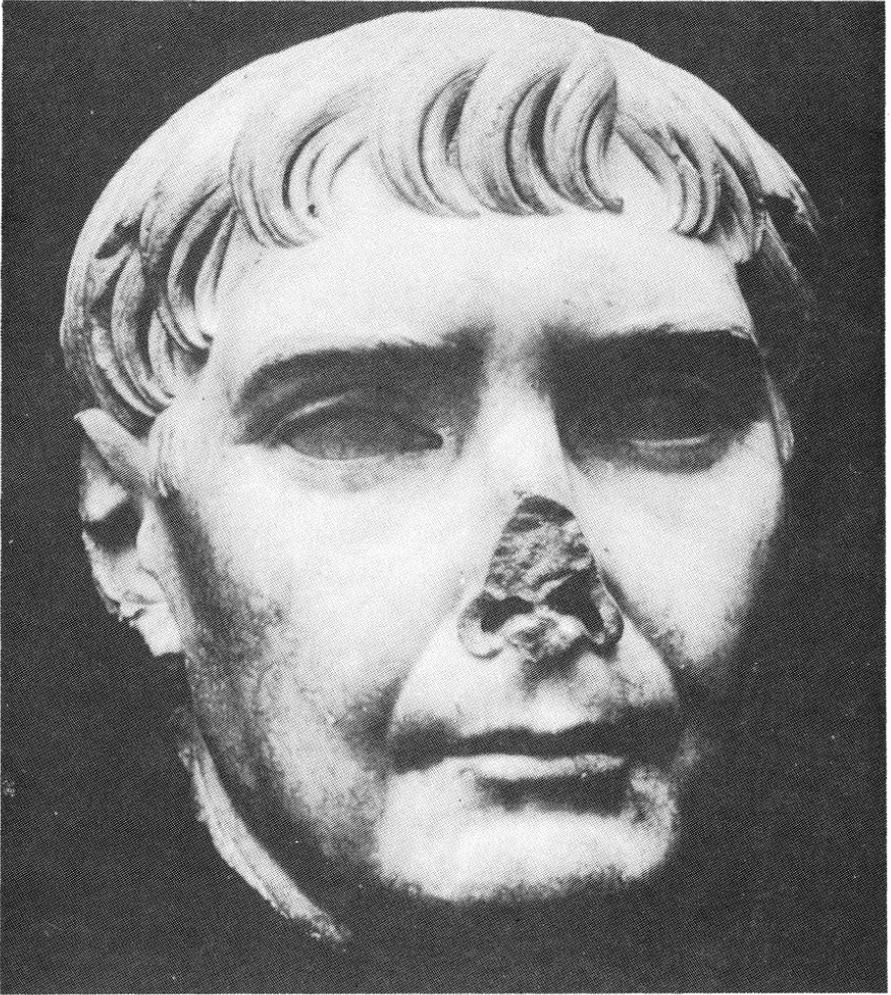


Fig. 5 Ostia Museum. Larger-than-lifesize marble head of Trajan. c. AD 120.

the Hellenistic taste which became even more pronounced in a section of the portraiture of the Flavians, the successive dynasty. In some of the latter portraits, however, the Republican dry treatment of the facial surfaces reasserts itself. Vespasian's portraits, for example, are known in two versions: one in which Hellenistic colour and plasticism predominates, the other harks back to late Republican tastes.



fig. 6 Cairo. Porphyry bust of Emperor Calerius (or Maximinus Daza). Early fourth century AD.

Fig. 5 It is with the Emperor Trajan that Roman portraiture reaches the climax of artistic achievement and its pure Roman character. The three stylistic trends are so well fused together that it is almost impossible to distinguish one from the other.

After a Greek revival introduced by the Graecophile emperor Hadrian, the Antonine portraiture starts off on a path that was to lead it to the Baroque masterpiece of Commodus as Hercules in the *Conservatori*. Antonine portraiture is characterized by a marked contrast between highly polished, porcelain-like,

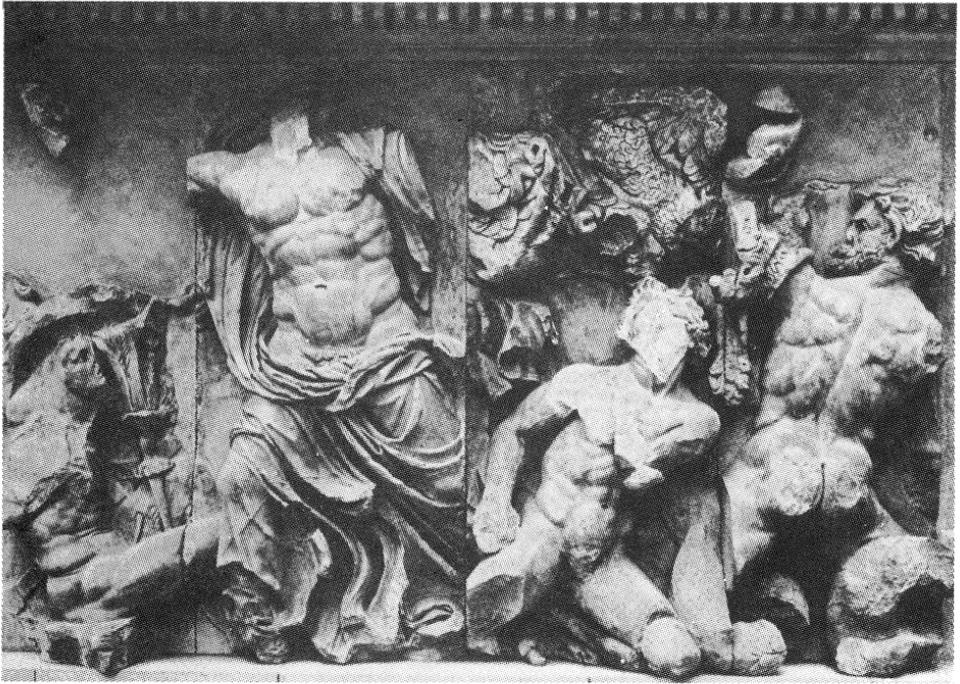


Fig. 7 Berlin, Staatliche Museen. Large frieze from the Altar of Zeus at Pergamon. Zeus fighting Giants. 182–165 BC.

fleshy surfaces and heavily undercut, thick and curly hair with a strong colourful light-and-shade effect. A reaction to the latter is found in the portraits of the third century with their emphasis on close-clipped hair and beard and a return to late Fig. 6 Republican realism. Mild attempts at classical revivals under Gallienus and Constantine do not succeed in arresting the inevitable spiritualization of the human form. The head loses its organic structure and assumes stereometric forms. The eyes become exaggeratedly large. The way to the transcendental ideals of Byzantine art and the gradual breakup of the human organic form of early Medieval art in Western Europe is inexorable.

In view of the above, if portraiture cannot be said to be an original creation of Roman art, nor can its realistic content be considered an unprecedented quality, there is no doubt that Roman portraiture as a whole, as well as its development, have all the pre-requisites of originality and cannot in all fairness be counted as a continuation of a branch of some other art.

Historical Relief

To my mind the most important genre of Roman art which had no forerunner in Greek art is the historical relief, the factual representation of a historical event in three-dimensional relief. Real events from contemporary, or near-contemporary, history had, as a matter of fact, suggested the subject-matter of several Classical



Fig. 8 Rome, Villa Albani. Section of a painting from the 'François Tomb' at Vulci. Third century BC.

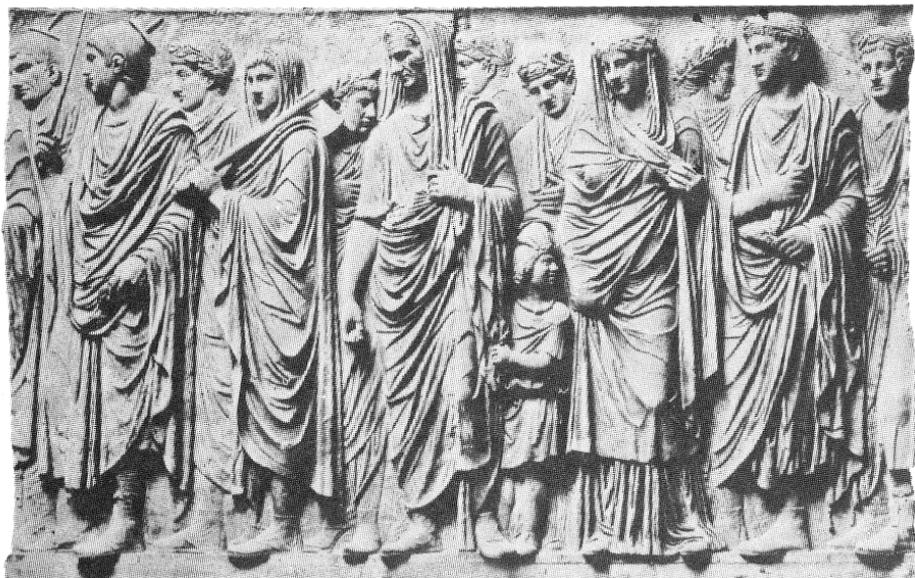


Fig. 9 Rome. *Ara Pacis Augustae*. Procession of the Imperial family. 13–9 BC.

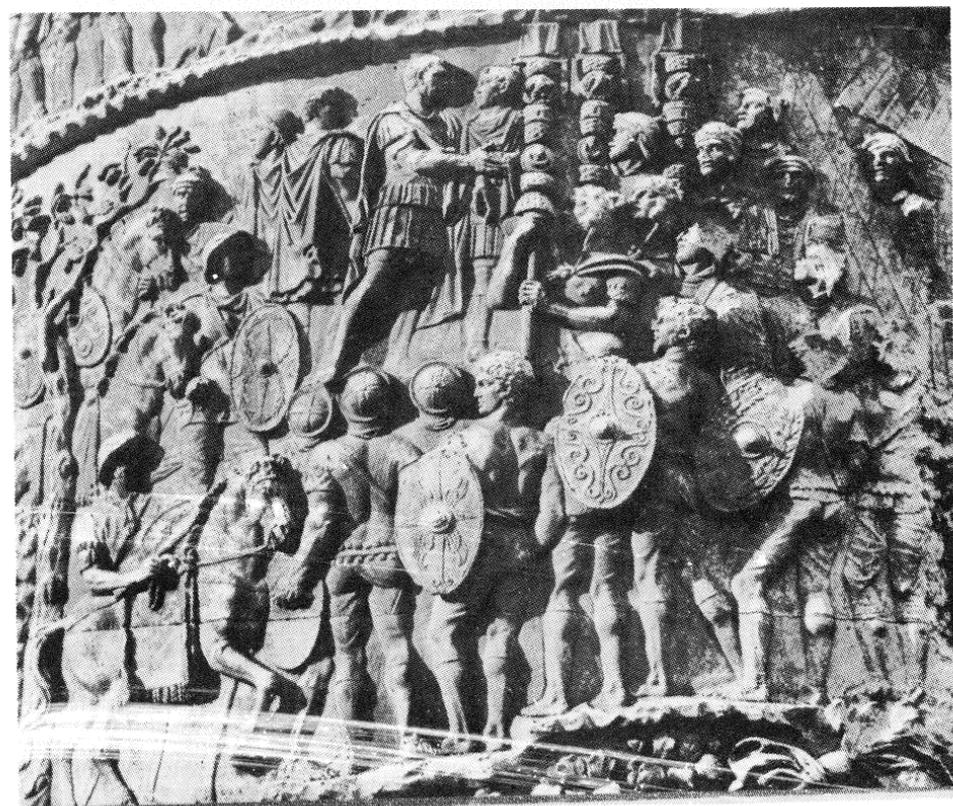
and Hellenistic reliefs, but both Greek artists and patrons preferred to hide the commemoration of events of this kind behind the veil of myth or allegory. To celebrate the victory of the Greeks over the Persians in the fifth century traditional mythological and legendary themes were chosen; battles between Greeks and Amazons, between Lapiths and Centaurs, Gods and Giants. All of them stood for the struggle and final victory of civilization over barbarism, of West over East. Even in the second century BC the struggle between Gods and Giants on Fig. 7 the great altar of Pergamon is a clear allusion to the Attalid dynasty's victories over the invading Galatians.

The closest the Greeks came to celebrating a historical event by the representation of real human figures, and not allegorical ones, is when they set up the group of two statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in 514 BC. Of course the various extant copies of the group are replicas not of the original versions which were carried away by the Persians but of their replacements made by the Athenians soon after 480 BC.

A similar instance is the commemoration of the wars and victories over the Galatians by the Attalids who set up two groups of warriors, sculptured also in the round, one placed on the Acropolis of Athens, the other in that of Pergamon. Here, however, one cannot identify any attempts at representation of recognizable



Figs. 10 and 11 Rome, Column of Trajan. Scenes from the war campaigns of Trajan against the Dacians. AD 110.



historical personalities.

I studied for several years in London and I must have visited the British Museum numerous times and inspected the monument of the Nereids from Xanthos equally often. But I must admit that it was in the few hours in between flights on my way to Harare that I noticed for the first time that its reliefs illustrate what appear to be a number of episodes from the life of a Lycian chieftain to whom it was dedicated. They include the siege of a city and a scene in which the chieftain himself appears in consultation with the elders of the city prior to its capitulation. These reliefs, belonging to the beginning of the fourth century BC are, in my view, the nearest to the concept of the historical relief the Hellenized East managed to arrive; but, although the artists that carved the reliefs might well have been Greek, even here they were operating for non-Greek, Lycian, patrons.

On the other hand, battle episodes from the history of central Italy, sometimes involving Etruscans and Romans, are found in Etruscan art, in particular the François Tomb at Vulci, but these are on paintings and not on sculptural reliefs. An episode from a war is also represented in the well-known mosaic from Pompeii with the battle of Alexander and Darius.

From the third century BC onwards there is evidence also in Rome of paintings illustrating episodes from war campaigns being displayed in triumphal processions and exhibited in public places, the so-called 'triumphal paintings'. Such paintings depicting the campaigns against the Carthaginians and the Syracusans were exhibited by Valerius Messalla in 263 BC on the walls of the *Curia*. In 201 BC, P. Scipio Africanus held an exhibition of triumphal paintings and in 188 BC L. Scipio showed pictures on the Capitol of his exploits in Asia. It is generally thought that the work of a modest painter in a tomb on the Esquiline, of which only a tiny fragment survives, was probably inspired from such paintings, none of which has actually survived. Whether the 'triumphal paintings' gave rise to, or somehow influenced the origin of, Roman commemorative relief cannot be ascertained. What is certain, however, is that they were the product of the same sense of history and deep-rooted passion of the Roman mind for factual representation which brought about the creation of historical relief. It is, perhaps, not co-incidental that the earliest known Roman historical relief, the frieze on the monument of Aemilius Paulus in Delphi, illustrates a similar war episode (the battle of Pydna in 168 BC) and that it was commissioned by L. Aemilius Paulus, the same man who asked the Athenians for a painter to commemorate his victories against the Macedonian king, Perseus.

Portraiture on Historical Relief

That the Roman realistic, or veristic, portrait had its roots in Hellenistic sculpture as well as in Etruscan and central Italian art is today widely accepted. It is still

too early for me to exclude the possibility that the representations of the Lycian chieftain on the Xanthos funerary monuments depict his real individual features, in which case I might have to modify my position slightly. Otherwise, I will continue to uphold the view that the fusion of portraiture and commemorative relief is a purely Roman contribution. Greek funerary reliefs of the fourth century BC and later, besides being a different branch of sculpture altogether, never seem to have represented the true likeness of the dead person as happens in Roman funerary sculpture. The only two other Greek monuments I know of, where portraits appear in relief, are the 'Alexander sarcophagus' and the relief of Archelaus with the *Apotheosis of Homer* in the British Museum: the purpose of the first is evidently funerary and the scenes depicted are symbolic rather than historical in character; the second is a votive relief and Ptolemy IV and Arsinoe III are shown as Chronos and Oecumene deifying Homer in an equally symbolic composition.

It is, therefore, in Roman relief sculpture that true portraits appear for the first time in the representation of real episodes from contemporary history. This combination of portrait and narrative relief is again the offspring of that sense of history and factualism which was rooted in the Roman character which demanded a real, immediately recognizable, likeness of a historical figure to be inserted in the figurative representation of the achievements of the Roman people. For a Roman the relief is not a historical record unless the real people involved in that particular event are present. It is to my mind precisely the combination of these two realities in one single art form that constitutes one of the greatest achievements and most significant revolutions of Roman art with respect to Greek art. Without its portraits the *Ara Pacis* would have been only a second class imitation of the Panathenaic procession of the Parthenon. Without its portraits Trajan's Column would have remained a simple narration of the struggle between the Roman army and the Dacians, between civilization and barbarism, and would have lacked that experienced reality which is infused into it by the likenesses of people the Romans knew so well and with whom they identified themselves.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11