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THE IMPERIAL PORTRAITS FROM MALTA: THEIR CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE¹⁾

(with pls. 19-20)

The discovery in 1881 of the remains of an ancient *domus* in Rabat, Malta, just outside the fortified city of Mdina is of great importance not only for the archaeological and artistic heritage of the Maltese islands but also for the history of ancient art in general, and of portraiture and mosaic in particular.

This paper is concerned with two imperial portraits, one of Claudius and another of a female member of his house (hitherto identified with his mother Antonia the Younger) found together in the context of that house which, for its architectural quality, refined mosaic repertory and other furnishings, has unfortunately not been paralleled by similar discoveries on the archipelago since then. My purpose here is to discuss very briefly the two portraits and to share with you a few reflections on their contextual significance.

The Portraits

The central piece within the cycle of portrait statuary that seems to have adorned the Rabat *domus* towards the end of the first half of the first century A.D. must have been, without doubt, the *imago* of Emperor Claudius (Pl. 19: 1).

The construction of the head, which is broken at the neck just below the chin, is monumental and vigorous suggesting the bone frame underneath the plastic modelling and *chiaroscuro* effects of the mobile surfaces of the flesh. The face is permeated by an expression of fortitude and strong will, emphasised by the shape and position of the eyes which are rather small and deep-set. The bags beneath the eyes suggest that the portrait, though idealised, represents the emperor at an advanced age.

After Ugolini's erroneous identification of this larger-than-life-size head with Emperor Tiberius, its first correct identification with Claudius is due to Ludvig Curtius. Such an identification is confirmed by the iconography in the coins and by the most reliably attributed portraits of the Emperor.

A second portrait that must have served as an appendage to that of Claudius was discovered along with it in 1881. It survives as a broken bust (Pl. 19: 2). This and other circumstantial evidence suggest that it was originally part of a whole statue, most probably together with the lower half of a draped statue coming from the same excavation of 1881.

The triangular shape of the face, wide at the top and tapering down to the chin, and the protruding ears are two very characteristic physiognomic features of the members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The hair-style, then, is one of the most characteristic of Roman female portraiture. The bust portrays a young woman who has generally been identified with Antonia the Younger, mother of Claudius, although there now seem to be very strong arguments in favour of an identification with a much younger member of the Julio-Claudian family, either Livia Iulia (known as Livilla, daughter of the same Antonia Minor and Nero Claudius Drusus)²⁾ or, more probably, Claudia Antonia (daughter of Claudius and Aelia Paetina).³⁾

The beautiful portrait attributed to Antonia in Berlin is very close to the Maltese head but seems to represent the princess in her younger years. Her face is sweeter, the facial bone structure much less strongly pronounced. The Maltese portrait has, however, much closer analogies in the fragmented head of "Antonia" in Palermo and in the colossal one from Leptis, and is almost perfectly identical, typologically and stylistically, with the head of the portrait-statue from Cherchel and with that of a similar statue from Rusellae.

¹⁾ The text of the paper read in the Conference is here being published in a greatly reduced form, and without notes and references, in order to comply with the limited space allowed for each paper. The author intends to publish a fuller and annotated edition of these portraits elsewhere.

²⁾ I owe this identification to Prof. L. Sensi.

³⁾ I am greatly indebted to Dr. R. Amedick for this newly-proposed identification.

The Portrait-Statues

Although both foregoing portraits have been included in several publications – from those on Maltese antiquities to others concerned with studies of iconography of either Claudius or his mother – none of these writings have, to my knowledge, ever tried to connect the two portraits with the other pieces of Roman statuary found on the same site. In this section of my paper I would like to propose the integration of the two heads with two fragmentary draped marble torsos found in the same context.

In my view the head of Claudius must have once fitted into the colossal *togate statue* which was discovered during the 1922 excavations that were carried out by Themistokles Zammit (Pl. 20: 3). The details of the find indicate that the statue was buried close to where the rest of the sculpture had been unearthed in 1881. Although the lower part of the neck is missing in the portrait-head of Claudius, there is little doubt that it fitted perfectly into the cavity between the shoulders of this togate statue. The proportions of the head to the fully integrated statue are correct (between 1 : 7 and 1 : 8) and the width of the neck at the level of the chin (18 cms) would have expanded out to fit exactly in the width of the cavity in the statue (20 cms). This and the chronological concordance in the style of the two sculptures are very convincing that they belonged together.

I am also equally convinced that Antonia's bust must have been one with the lower half of a draped female torso found with it in 1881 (Pl. 20: 4) even though in this case the intervening missing section is larger. The surviving drapery on the bust integrates perfectly with that of the draped torso and the design of the drapery of the combined fragments finds a very close iconographic parallel in the standing female figure in the Ravenna Julio-Claudian relief, which is portrayed in a very similar pose. This figure has been variously identified as Livia, Julia and Antonia Minor, in the semblance of Venus Genitrix. Moreover, the lower half of the statue from Cherchel, representing Antonia, already mentioned in connection with our portrait, is perfectly identical to the Rabat torso, and as it is preserved in its entirety, it goes a long way to confirm our hypothesis that the Maltese portrait bust of "Antonia" must have originally formed part of the same statue as the torso in question. It would seem that the bust was carved in one piece with the upper trunk of the body which would have fitted into the deep cavity on top of the lower torso.

Context

The four pieces of sculpture we have just examined were recovered from the ruins of a palatial house which must have belonged to an important resident of the ancient town of Melita. It should be noted that together with these another beautiful togate statue was found, this time representing a boy. Judging from its fine quality, it was probably intended to receive the portrait-head of a Julio-Claudian prince, which has never been recovered. I would venture to say that given the iconographic context, it probably represented the young Nero, son of Agrippina the Younger and Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, adopted by Claudius in 49, at the age of 12, when Claudius married Agrippina. Claudius made him assume the *toga virilis* in 51, when he appointed him *princeps iuventutis*, consul designate and member of several priestly colleges. The size of the statue fits well with that of a boy of 12 to 14.

Furthermore, among the various other pieces of sculpture he discovered in 1881 Caruana mentions "the feet and pedestals (*sic*) of three other minor statues". It seems to me that he could only be referring to three fragments of male togate statues preserved in the Museum of Roman Antiquities in Rabat, which seem to be datable to the age of Tiberius. If I am correct, it would appear that at least six portrait-statues of the Julio-Claudian period were paraded, possibly as a sort of statuary cycle, in this *domus* of ancient Melita.

The presence of such a group of statues provokes a number of legitimate questions, the most crucial ones being: what were these imperial statues doing in a private house? And, what is their significance? Here, I believe, there are a number of economic, political and ideological (perhaps even social) considerations at play.

Unfortunately, we cannot tell who the owner of the house was during the reign of Claudius when the sculpture group was presumably installed in the house. The stately house – which, judging from our present scanty knowledge of the rest of the town's topography, must have been a prestigious one in the context of ancient Melita – was then already more than a century old. We do not know whether the occupier was a visiting Roman (or Italian) magistrate, or a local Maltese dignitary. The social and perhaps even the political background of the story would change from one case to the other. What is certain is that the two portraits and the rest of the portrait-sculpture must have been commissioned and shipped to Malta – probably from Rome – at considerable expense, an expense that could only be sustained by a wealthy individual and for a deeply motivated cause.

The occupier of the house certainly meant to manifest in a concrete way his allegiance and devotion to the reigning emperor; not only to him but also to his family. This manifestation of piety to the image of the emperor could be out of gratitude for a bestowed honour, or for an important assignment; or it could be purely out of ideological zeal. Recorded cases of discoveries of imperial portrait statues on a grand scale in private houses or villas are very rare. These include 1) the veiled statue of Augustus from Via Labicana, 2) the togate statue of Titus in the Vatican, recovered together with a female portrait-statue (Julia Titi) in the Villa of Plautius Lateranus and 3) a seated statue of Tiberius together with one of a Julio-Claudian woman (Livia) from a villa near Paestum, now in Madrid.

There must also be an ideological meaning in the choice of the attire of the emperor. He is not portrayed in military garb, in a *lorica*. At that time Malta was no longer a frontier land where such an attire would have made the desired impact; as it would have made in the Capital, only for different reasons. Nor is he represented in heroic nudity, half-clad and seated like a Jupiter. Such an image would have been more suitable in a public place or building, a religious one even. But for a private house the most suitable gear for the emperor to be portrayed in was that of his civic status of the first citizen of the empire, of the *Princeps* – namely, the toga; this, in order not to invade too aggressively the quiet tranquillity of the home.

The Maltese Islands had lost their strategic and military significance with the conclusion of the second Punic War and the incorporation of Sicily first and of Africa later, within the Roman commonwealth. Although in the first century B.C. they were still used by pirates as a winter base, the latter's threat seems to have been eradicated from this part of the Mediterranean world by the first century A.D. and Malta appears to have gone through a period of quiet, peaceful prosperity, marked by the rise of several productive country estates and a quiet town life.

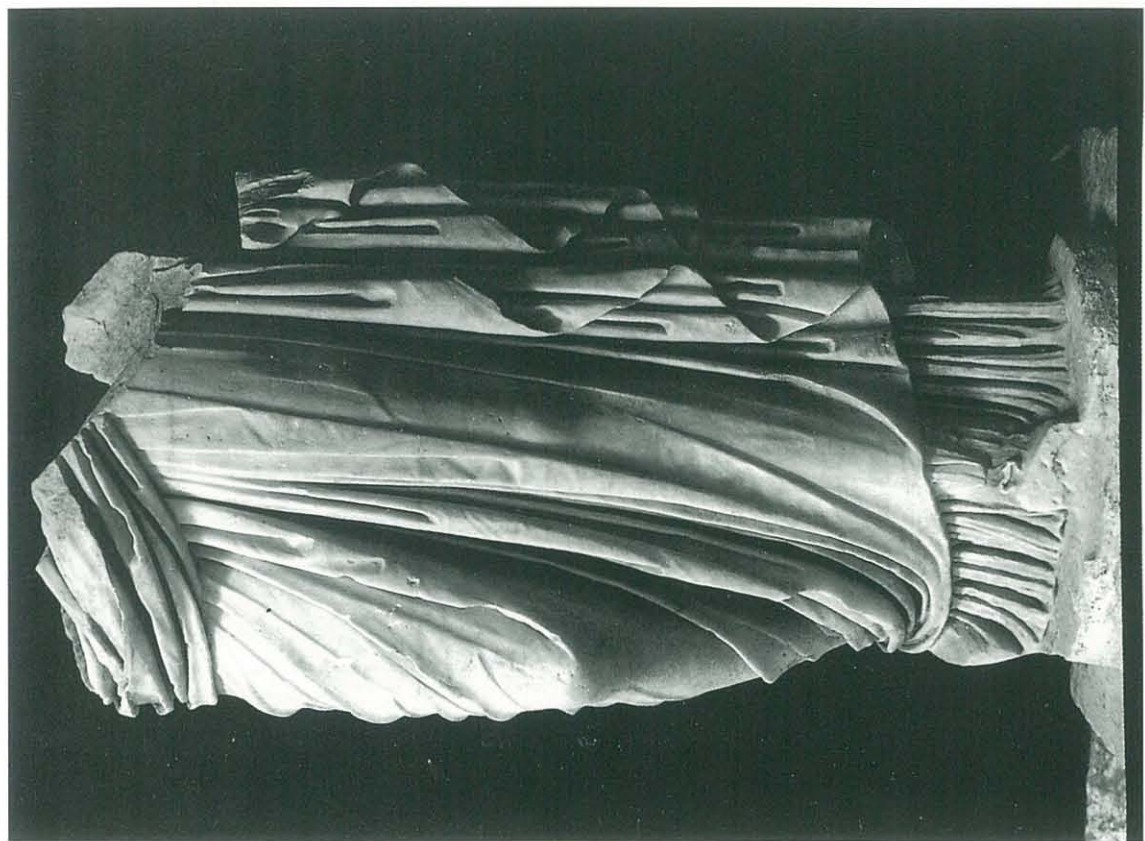
No imperial portrait-sculpture has been found in any of these country residences. It seems that in a political backwater like Malta imperial propaganda of this sort was a phenomenon restricted to the town environment, if at all. This is why we find it rather surprising to find imperial portraiture in a private residence in this small ancient town. Indeed the colossal dimensions of the statue of Claudius and of another statue of which only the foot was recovered in 1881, tempt us to suspect that the Rabat *domus* was not simply a private residence but could have been assigned some other role of a public nature, such as that of official residence for visiting magistrates from the capital, or one from which the residing official transacted business connected with the administration and day-to-day management of this small town.



2. Portrait of "Antonia"



1. Portrait of Claudius



4. Female torso



3. Male togate statue