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A Roman Portrait-Head from Medinet Madi

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A Roman Portrait-Head from Medinet Madi

SOBHI ASHOUR, SAYED SHUEIB*

The life-size limestone head presented here was found in Medinet Madi, the ancient *Narmouthis*.[1] The portrait-head is in the collection of the Kom Oushim Archaeological Museum (inv. no. 188). It has a maximum height of 27.9 cm. A portion of the cranium is broken off, but the surface is levelled, whilst the nose and the left eyebrow are damaged, and the surface is chipped in many spots (fig. 1).

The head shows an aged man crowned with an ivy wreath. The face is softly lined and the cheeks are fleshy. The forehead is furrowed, with knotted eyebrows. The damaged nose is long, with noticeable nasal folds. The winged eyebrows are located higher than the brow line, with diagonal incisions for individual hairs. The eyes are heavily lidded, with circular upper eyelids, while the lower lids are linear and merge gradually into the cheeks. The eyes are almond shaped with round pupils and irises.

The mouth is closed with full lips. The right ear is unfinished, appearing in sketchy outline, whilst the ear lobe is clearer on the left side and more finished (fig. 2). The hair is treated on the front side only, partially worked on the sides, but entirely untreated on the nape (fig. 3). The hairstyle shows drill-like curls on the front and sides, more finished on the left. The beard

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1 According to the registers in the Kom Oushim Museum, the head comes from Kiman Faris (ancient *Ptolemais Euergetis*), the capital of the Arsinoite nome; Bailey 1996, p. 213, n. 33, also cites this provenance. In following this information and seeking a more precise find spot for the object, no mention of the head at all was found in the Kiman Faris registers. Widening the search to other Fayum registers revealed that the head comes instead from Medinet Madi, *Narmouthis*, found during *sebakhin* work in 1954, and was registered by Naguib Farag. Thanks are due to Mr Mustafa Faisal in the Kom Oushim Museum Magazine, who led me to this information. The image in the register, the serial number 51, which is also inked in black on the neck of the sculpture fig. 5, and an additional note concerning its transfer to Kom Oushim Museum, do not leave any doubt about the correct provenance of the object.

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is relatively short, parted in the middle, with a tuft immediately beneath the lower lip, but not merging into the beard strands, which are thick and patterned into three rows, with neatly cut edge on the checks (fig. 4). There is a symmetrically rendered moustache in two parts, patterned in linear thick diagonal strands with hairless *philtrum*. The hair is crowned in ivy wreath partly carved in the stone: three leaves appear on the right side, while one leaf only appears behind the left ear (fig. 2,4). The leaves have the typical heart-shaped form of ivy. The head still retains a portion of the flat roll of the mantle, which is tightly wrapped around the neck (fig. 5),[2] with the hem of an under tunic.

SUBJECT

It was suggested that the head is a Marcus Aurelius portrait of medium quality,[3] but the ivy wreath does not appear on a single imperial portrait.[4] Literary[5] and iconographic material connect the ivy to poets, such a wreath is attested on the Old Singer portrait type, with its replicas in the Louvre,[6] London,[7] Rome[8] and Lyon.[9] Another *ancient*[10] portrait type is attested in about forty replicas, known as Pseudo-Seneca or Hesiod.[11] A replica in Rome shows an ivy wreath,[12] a double herm combining the head with Menander.[13] The poetic subject of this head finds iconographic support in the well-known relief in the Louvre,[14] depicting a visit of Dionysus to a victorious poet whose head is wreathed in ivy.

Closer in date and cultural context are the Pompeian wall paintings, where a fresco from the Menander house, shows the Athenian poet wreathed in ivy and the name *Menandros* is written on an open scroll.[15] A *togatus* figure from Exedra 18, in the House with the Library, shows Catullus with ivy wreath on his head,[16] whilst a standing victorious poet wreathed in ivy and holding a scroll in his left hand comes from another house in Pompeii.[17] Therefore it

2 Bailey suggested that the head could "come from a statue dressed in civilian clothes, possibly Greek" (1996, p. 213, n. 33, wich seems reasonable).

3 Kiss 1995, p. 62 (who incorrectly gave the inventory number as18); followed by Bailey 1996, p. 213, n. 33.

4 Bergmann 2010, p. 333 ff.

5 Blech 1982, p. 312 ff, Athenaeus VI, 40, recorded an inscription on the tomb of the poet Machon, who lived and was buried in Alexandria, mentioning the ivy wreath as a prize for comic poet, see as well Fraser 1972, p. 595. An epigram of the Locrian Poetess Nossis confirms ivy as insignia of the tragic poet, Greene 2005, p. 123 f. Vergil, in *Eclogue* 8, mentions ivy as the crown of the poet. Propertius 4,6,3 describes the Coan poet Philiteas statue crowned in ivy: *Serta Philiteis certet Romana corymbis*. Ovid *Ars Amatoria*, III 411, again mentions ivy as the poet's crown. Scholars agree that ivy and bay were the standard coronation of poets, Trapp 1958, p. 232 f; Blech 1982, p. 312 ff; Zanker 1995, p. 143; Guillaume-Coirier 1999, p. 341.

6 MA. 62 , Richter 1965, p. 67, figs. 235–236; Zanker 1995, p. 146 ff, fig. 4; Tsantsanoglou 2012, p. 106, fig. 2.

7 BM. 1830: Richter 1965, p. 67, figs. 238–239; Tsantsanoglou 2012, p. 106, fig. 3. BM. 1851: Richter 1965, p. 67, figs. 240–242; Tsantsanoglou 2012, p. 106, fig. 4.

8 Villa Albani, no. 81, see Tsantsanoglou 2012, p. 106, fig. 5; Richter 1965, p. 67, questions its antiquity.

9 Tsantsanoglou 2012, p. 106, fig. 7: no ivy wreath.

10 Here we follow Zanker 1995, p. 198, referring to portraits of Greek intellectuals from ancient times, copied for Roman use.

11 Zanker 1995, p. 143.

12 Museo delle Terme, Inv.612: Felletti Maj 1953, p. 22, no. 23; Richter 1965, p. 58, no. 4, fig. 135.

13 Richter 1965, p. 59, no. 7, fig. 140–141.

14 Louvre MA. 741, Picard 1934, p. 144, fig. 5; Bieber 1955, p. 154, fig. 655; Bieber 1961, fig. 86; Moreno 1999, p. 87, fig. 107.

15 Bieber 1961, pp. 90–91, figs. 322 a–c; Ashby 1999, p. 150, fig. 58.

16 Moreno 2010, p. 144 ff, figs. 161–162.

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seems that the ivy wreath was used by Romans as the insignia of a poet, which conforms to the literary evidence.

A relief in Dresden depicts a seated figure, wreathed in ivy and berries, but in this case, the four-layered soles of his footwear indicates his profession as an actor.[18] The victorious actor is perhaps depicted inside a sacred precinct, since remains of curtains, an altar and a pillar are visible. The figure is wearing a *nebris* and another ivy garland on the chest, which are props of the Dionysac cult.[19] Other representations of actors confirm the peculiarity of the Dresden relief, since they do not show the ivy wreath as a constant iconographic feature, whether depicting actors in specific roles,[20] on wall paintings[21] or in private portraits coming from votive[22] and funerary contexts.[23] Literary and epigraphic evidence, however, shows that sometimes poets performed as actors and musicians.[24] It is difficult, therefore, to identify the subject of the Medinet Madi sculpture with certainty as either a poet or actor, but since the ivy wreath is more frequently associated with poets in both literature and representative arts, it seems probable that the figure represents a poet too.

17 Bieber 1961, p. 166, fig. 594.

18 Bieber 1907, passim; Bieber 1961, p. 84, fig. 307 describes the figure as a leader of actors' guild and actor-priest, see also Ewigleben, Kohne 2000, p. 118, no. 131.

19 Blech 1982, p. 216, n. 118.

20 This category of representations shows masked actors; e.g. the Villa Albani statuette, Bieber 1961, p. 161, fig. 583, and the Berlin statue of a masked actor in the role of Papposilenus, wearing an ivy wreath above the mask, Conze 1891, p. 118 f, no. 278. Many terracotta statuettes and paintings are citable, Bieber 1961, figs. 290–294 (tragedy), 295–299 (comedy), 324–328, 332, 338, 34 (new comedy). See also the Thalia statue in the Louvre, Bieber 1961, figs. 334, 342. From Egypt, see Himmelmann 1983, p. 97, and its marble replica in the Uffizi, Bieber 1955, fig. 333. Also a large statue from Pompeii, Bieber 1961, p. 548 a, and for scenes from Roman plays, see Bieber 1961, p. 161 ff, fig. 585 ff.

21 A Pompeian painting of seated man contemplating into a mask is labelled poet, Ling 1991, p. 160, or actor, Ashby 1999, p. 151, fig. 60. Another painting shows seated actor while a female painter is working on a mask, Bieber 1961, p. 82, fig. 302.

22 A relief from Piraeus in Athens shows three actors in an off-stage scene with masks in hands, but no wreaths are seen, Scholl 1995, p. 222, fig. 8; Csapo 2010, p. 17. fig. 1.7. A herm of Norbanus Sorex from the Isis temple in Pompeii shows the mime actor without a wreath, Bieber 1961, figs. 592 a–b; Fejfer 2008, pp. 301, 456, n. 185. From the Diana sanctuary in Nime comes a *togatus* statue of Gaius Fundilius Doctus, who is identified as an actor, Fejfer 2008, p. 285 ff, pl. 26. Another head from the same group shows a male portrait wearing a wreath of flowers, Fejfer 2008, p. 301, pls. 33d, p. 488, n. 53. Since most of the sculptures in this find-group represent actors, it was suggested that this figure does too.

23 A group of Attic funerary stelai, shows bare-headed male figures mediating at a mask held in the hand. It is much debated whether these are actors, choreuts or poets, but in any case the heads are not wreathed, Scholl 1995, p. 213 ff. See the Lyme Park relief, Himmelmann 1994, p. 142 ff, figs. 73–77. Another relief from Piraeus, dates to the late 5th century BC, Himmelmann 1994, p. 147, fig. 80 (actor); Scholl 1995, p. 230, fig. 14 (actor or choreuts); Csapo 2010, p. 22, n. 64, (choreuts). An east Greek funerary stele shows a man mediating to mask held up in his right hand, but no wreath is seen, 2nd century BC, Pfuhl, Mobius 1979, p. 293, no. 1193, pl. 179; Scholl 1995, p. 234, fig. 17. A nude male bust in the Capitoline Museums, found in a tomb near Porta Latina, shows an un-wreathed head, but a comic mask on the chest determines the profession of the subject as an actor or poet, dating to the mid-3rd century AD. Klaus Fittschen favors the identification of actor over poet: Fittschen, Zanker, Cain 2010, pp. 170–171, cat. 169, pl. 210–211.

24 Chaniotis 1990, pp. 103, 104; the evidence comes from Stephanēs' prosopographic study of *Dionysiakoi Technitai*, which we have as yet been unable to consult, but which may be applicable to Egyptian performers, even if it comes from other areas.

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TECHNICAL REMARKS

The carving of the portrait-head in local Fayum yellowish coarse limestone suggests a local sculptor rather than an Alexandrian one. Limestone is abundant in sculptures from the Fayum,[25] especially from Medinet Madi, in both Egyptian[26] and Greek style.[27] The levelling of the top of the head is a typical indicator of the Alexandrian marble-stucco technique, whereby the hairstyle was finished in the latter material, raising the possibility that the Fayumic sculptor was familiar with Alexandrian sculpting techniques (figs. 3–4) .The central cluster of the wreath is not carved, but rather there is a sunken socket on the right side of the head (fig. 2). It is possible that a metal fillet was inserted here, but more likely that the wreath was finished in plaster, a technique for which we have Alexandrian parallels.[28]

The marble-stucco sculptures are occasionally attested from the *chora*: two portraits of Vespasian come from the Delta[29] and Aphroditopolis,[30] whilst a head of Antoninus Pius is known from Hermopolis.[31] The last two portraits deviate from standard imperial types. Strocka and Laube debate the identity and date of Stuttgart I. 37.[32] but this head also comes from Upper Egypt. A Tentyrite sandstone sculpture bears a plaster coating[33], and the wooden Sarapis statue from Theadelphia shows a similar technique,[34] which indicates the spread of plastering techniques in the Fayum. Strocka observed that this technique is still attestable in Egypt into the 2nd century AD.[35]

For the current piece, therefore, the sculptor likely finished his work in plaster, adding the left side of the cranium with the central cluster of the wreath, which was entirely executed in plaster on the reverse of the head. Recent discoveries from *Narmouthis* include elaborately sculptured plaster elements, perhaps originating from a Sarapis statue,[36] some of them gilded.

The head was described in 1954 as having yellow paint on the face, remains of red on the lips and green on the ivy wreath. Some red paint is still seen on the upper right eye corner, and remains of yellow colour are visible on the face. This polychromic technique is also very noticeable among other *Narmouthis* sculptures: the recently discovered limestone portrait-head from the Roman Square shows remains of red paint on the right eye corner and black on the hairs of the eyebrow.[37] The Cairo Cuirassed[38] figure from *Narmouthis* shows a full polychromic scheme: blue *sagum*, brown *pteryges,* with

25 From Karanis, see Gazda 1978, nos. 22, 23, 25, 30, (31, 32, 34, 36 powdery limestone) no. 38 porous limestone, see Appendix, 71 ff, nos. 6, 10, 18, 20–23, 25. Also a limestone statue base in Warsaw from the Fayum and dated to the Ptolemaic period, mentioning the dedication of a statue to Artemis Sotereia, Bernand 1981, p. 142, no. 208.

26 Two Egyptian-style statues, see Lise 1979, no. 88, pl. 125; Ashour 2007, p. 189, cat. 143, and Ashour 2007, p. 190, cat. 144. Limestone is very common in the *Narmouthis* temples and public buildings, see Bresciani 2012.

27 The two cuirassed torsi discovered by Vogliano (1938, no. 42 fig., and Cairo. J.E. 66323), represent an emperor or military commander, see Ashour 2007, p. 398 ff, cat. 178–179; Bresciani, Radwan 2010, p. 13; Bresciani 2012. p. 183, For the portrait from the Roman Square, see Buongarzone 2015. Bresciani 2012, p. 181, reported that many private statues of *togatus* type were found near that square. Epigraphic data from Medinet Madi show many sculptural dedications and statue bases, Bernand 1981, p. 80, no. 160, 91, no. 170; Bresciani 2010, p. 133 f, nos. 148–149.

28 A head in Munich shows the hair and diadem executed in stucco, Strocka 1967, p. 125, no. 14, figs. 18–21. Alexandria GRM.3661, Breccia 1922, p. 193, no. 64, the levelled breakage indicates that a portion of the diadem would have been finished in the now-missing plaster addition.

29 Kiss 1983, p. 50, figs. 88–89.

30 Kiss 1983, p. 51, figs. 94–95.

31 Kiss 1983, p. 61, figs. 130–131.

32 Strocka 1967, p. 131, no. 102, Hadrianic private portrait; Laube 2012, p. 144, no. 51, Ptolemy Apion.

33 Edgar 1903, p. 5, no. 27433, pl. II; Strocka 1967, p. 123, n. 33, confirming the coating of limestone sculptures in stucco.

34 Bakhoum 1971, p. 66 ff.

35 Strocka 1967, p. 123 , presents an extensive list of known sculptures up to 1967.

36 Bresciani 2012, pp. 175, 181; Buongarzone 2015, p. 224, pl. 4.

37 Buongarzone 2015.

38 Ashour 2007, p. 398ff, cat. 178–179; Bresciani-Radwan 2010, p. 13; Bresciani 2012, p. 183.

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red colour on the base and the back support. Newly found sculptures from *Narmouthis* also confirm this technique in 2nd and 3rd century statues,[39] which characterizes the production of the *Narmouthis* sculpture workshop.[40]

DATING

To date the Fayum sculpture, one can begin comfortably from the plastic treatment of the eyes and beard to pinpoint the second half of the 2nd century AD. The pupils are round and set inside full incised irises, a shape that suggests a date in the late Antonine to early Severan periods.[41] Typologically the Fayum head conforms to Marcus Aurelius portrait types III–IV and to the latest portrait types IV–V of Commodus, suggesting a date in the late Antonine period.

Hairstyles are usually credited as providing more accurate dates of Roman sculptures,[42] and here it can be noted that the coiling hair locks of the Fayum piece appear on sculptures from Egypt dating from 140 AD to the Severan period.[43] This hairstyle occurs as well on painted mummy portraits from the Fayum, which show elaborate styles with detailed locks falling on the forehead.[44] The painted portraits from the Commodus age show tighter and narrower locks,[45] and a similar hairstyle with three coiling locks on the forehead[46] is found on a mummy portrait in Cairo, dating to the late Antonine period. Barbara Borg compared this hairstyle to Commodus portrait type III–IV,[47] which may support the stylistic paralleling of the current piece to the sculptured Commodus head from the Delta.[48] Therefore it seems reasonable to date the Kom Oushim Museum head between the last years of Marcus Aurelius and the Commodus age, between 175–193 AD.

39 See: http://egittologia.cfs.unipi.it/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/mm2011.pdf

40 Anonymous sculptor *technites* is known from *Narmouthis* via an inscription of late Hellenistic date that mentions his dedication and carving of a monument to Isis and Isermouthis, Bernand 1981, p. 81, no. 161. Another inscription from Temple A in *Narmouthis,* dated by Vogliano to the late Ptolemaic period, attests the sculpture workshop of Isidoros *gluptēs*, who carved and dedicated a "monument" to the goddess Isermouthis; see Bernand 1981, p. 83, no. 163, who remarks on the later attestation of the word *gluptēs* in an inscription from Philae of the late 3rd century AD, but did not re-date the *Narmouthis* inscription.

41 The Antonine sculptured portraits show many forms of pupil drilling, amongst which is the circular form, Albertson 1981, p. vii. A round pupil appears on a portrait of Faustina the younger from the Athenian Agora 150–175 AD, see Harrison 1953, p. 45, no. 34, pl. 2. A pupil of circular shape with upper triangular incision appeared on Antonine portraits, like that of Lucius Verus in the Bardo Museum, Albertson 1981, p. 4. The semicircular pupil perhaps does not go later than 160 AD, when round form begin to appear, Jucker 2006, p. 69 with bibliography.

42 Fittschen 2001.

43 Borg 1996, p. 80.

44 An example from Hawara dates between 140–160 AD, Walker, Bierbrier 1997, p. 68, no. 45. Another portrait in Baltimore shows a more elaborate but similar hairstyle, the locks hanging on the forehead being very detailed, curly and spiral. The treatment of the facial hair shows low-cut beard and more Antonine moustache, Borg 1996, p. 79 f, pl. 27.2. Antonine = Parlasca 1969, p. 201, pl. 49,3. Late Hadrianic.

45 Cairo, CG.33242, shows the same hairstyle, Borg 1996, p. 79, pl. 77.1, belonging to the time of Marcus Aurelius, while Parlasca 1977, no. 377, pl. 91,3 dates to the beginning of the 3rd century AD.

46 Cairo CG.33252 comes from the Fayum, Parlasca 2003. no. 867, pl. 186.2, and is of late 2nd century AD date; also Borg 1996. 210, Cat. no. 5, of late Antonine to early Severan date.

47 Another portrait in Cambridge showing similar locks, dates as well to the Commodus age, see Parlasca 1977, no. 332; Borg 1996, p. 80. Antiken Sammlungen Wien. 1983, with a very similar hairstyle, but with less distinct and coiling spiral locks, Parlasca 1977, p. 329, pl. 79,2 dates a little after the middle of the 2nd century AD; Borg 1996, p. 82.1, a transitional piece into Severan period.

48 Künzl 1977, p. 320, fig. 27.

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CONCLUSION

This portrait-head is of particular importance, its subject: a poet or an actor is the first assured representative testimony of the Egyptian *dionysiakoi technitai*. The guild activities are well documented in Egypt through written data from the capital, Ptolemais Hermiou,[49] the Arsinoite nome[50] and Oxyrhynchos[51]. The *Narmouthis* poet jointly offers iconographic evidence of the theatrical performances and literary contests that are narrated vividly in Greek papyri.[52] The portrait owner was one of the successors of the Alexandrian *Pleiades,* in the *chora*, who kept the traditions of Greek theatre and theatrical culture in order to stress the Hellenic identity of the Greek community in Egypt. Interestingly in Narmouthis where this portrait was presumably dedicated, there is little evidence about intellectual activities in general,[53] and artistic entertainment in particular.[54] The high artistic value of the portrait-head gives an interesting insight into the sculptural activities and perhaps workshops in the Arsinoite nome, which gave the epithet Fayum to the painted mummy portraits. The public space in Medinet Madi is not yet explored, but this portrait-head and other few portraits known from the site give a glimpse into sculptural dedications and *ornamenta* in such a town in the Fayum. Edda Bresciani noticed that the honorary sculptures known from *Narmouthis,*[55] concentrating near the Piazza Porticata, and argued that they represent the important persons of the town.[56]

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49 Fraser 1972. II, p. 870, n. 1

50 Claysse-Thompson 2006, p. 135 ff.

51 P.Oxy. 2476.

52 Tedeschi 2011.

53 Literary Greek papyri from Medinet Madi show Homer's Iliad, Vergilius' Bucolia, and Isocratess Ad Nicolem and Archidamus, Van Minnen 1998, p. 137 ff, and at least one Mime text is known, Vogliano 1936, pp. 71–73, and one ostrakon shows Iambic Trimeters, attributed to a lost comedy or tragedy, Pintaudi- Sijpesteijn 1989, p. 91 f, no. 7; Van Minnen 1998, p. 137.

54 OMM. 73, Messeri-Pintaudi 2002, pp. 215–216 no. 3; Tedeschi 2011, p. 119, no. 56, where Mimes, dancers, a company of *Heterai*, and a singer accompanied by *Kithara* player, performed in a private feast. Another *ostrakon* shows a flute player paid in beer, Bresciani 2010, p. 117f, no. 131.

55 Brescaiani 2012, p. 175; Buongarzone 2015, p. 223 ff. A cuirassed figure once kept in Castello Sforzesco in Milan came from debris, according to Vogliano 1938, no. 42. I was not able to find this statue in Milan in 2005 and the Museum authorities said that it was lost during World War II. This debris could be some place near the Piazza Porticata according to Bresciani 2012, p. 181, and most likely its counterpart in Cairo comes from the same dedication, Ashour 2007, p. 398 ff, Cat. 178.

56 Bresciani 2012, p. 175, fig on p. 182.

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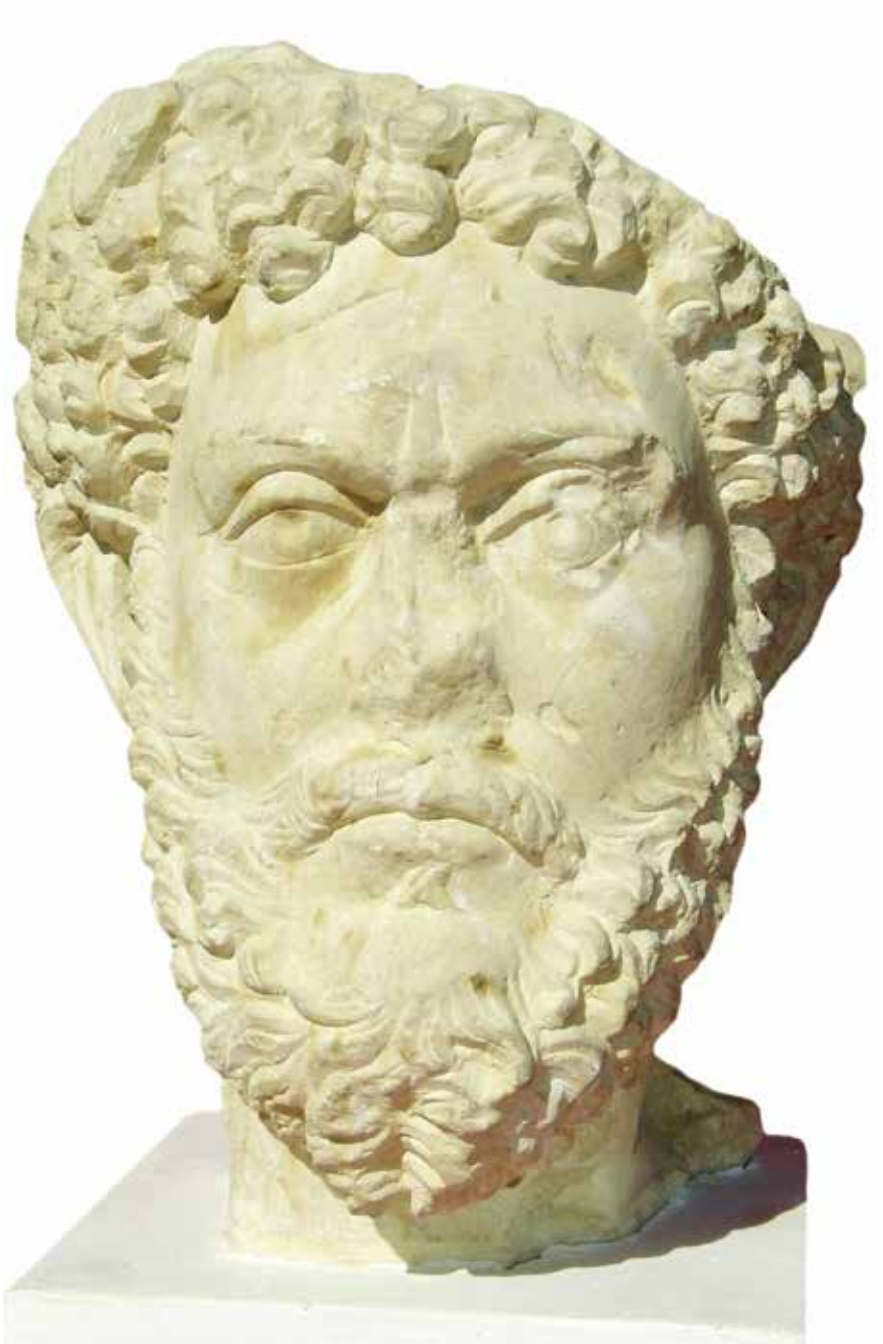


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Fig. 1. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv.188, frontal view.

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Fig. 2. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv.188, right side view.



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Fig. 3. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv.188, back view.



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Fig. 4. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv.188, left side view.



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Fig. 5. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv.188, frontal 3/4 view.

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