Serial Production or Individual Orders?
Palmyrene Sculpture
from the 1st to the 3rd Century AD

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Serial production is the fabrication of significant quantities of standardized items, which impacts also the assembly process, and sometimes results in cheap goods. This facilitates their widespread distribution. Two criteria determine mass production: the availability of material, and the increasing demand for goods. In Palmyra, sculpture production or, broadly speaking, the production of all kinds of stone artefacts, fulfilled both criteria. The city was very rich in architectural and sculptural material, namely limestone of various types and qualities.

Already in 1990 Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, who published the results of a survey of hard-limestone outcrops, pointed at the prefabrication of various artefacts in the quarries.[1] Thus, the first step in the long chain of serial-production consisted in dressing the artefacts in the quarry.

As is well known, the most peculiar form of local artistic expression was figurative sculpture, which, until the end of the Palmyrene civilization, preserved its unique character. In funerary sculpture, old models were preserved since they were fixed by tradition and transmitted from generation to generation. On the other hand, sculpture was subject to the influences of oriental cultures and trends coming from the west. From the Palmyrene perspective, these could be interpreted as an imprint of the Greek and Hellenized cultures of the Roman east, and also that of the Romans. Funerary sculpture includes a variety of sculptural categories: bas-reliefs on slabs, sarcophagi, and statues.

The largest group of sculptures consists of funerary busts, or rather half-figures, which became emblematic representations of Palmyrene art. They were carved on rectangular slabs usually of standardized dimensions, approximately 55 to 50 cm. As already demonstrated over thirty years ago,[2] the use of funerary monuments of a specific type (busts or sarcophagi, etc.) was strictly connected to the development of multiple burials. In the case of funerary busts, serial/mass production concerns not only the huge number of these monuments, which were highly demanded by the demographically and economically developing Palmyrene society, but also by the standardization of poses, gestures, clothes, and attributes. Obvious differences between the busts concern their style (often expressed in drapery rendering), technical handling, and iconographic details; these depended on the skills of the sculptors and on the financial means of the purchasers. We may imagine a workshop providing a variety of the busts for sale, some of higher and some of lower quality, among which the customers could choose the ones they liked and could afford. This was possible because Palmyrene portraits did not reproduce the physiognomy of the deceased. In fact, the "portraits" of the Palmyrene middle and upper class represent men and women in their characteristic social con-

texts through their attributes. Garments were standardized as well: men were usually dressed in a chiton and himation, and priests sometimes wore a mantle. Women were represented in local, traditional garments: a chiton, a cloak, and a turban. Long veils supposedly covered the heads of married women. The images were accompanied by Aramaic inscriptions, sometimes bilingual (in Aramaic and Greek), but rarely in Latin. Without the engraved and/or painted text it would be impossible to identify the person represented.

Until the last decades of the second century AD, Palmyrene portraits were produced in series and not made to order. Subsequently, the situation seems to change slightly, but still it is rather difficult, if not impossible, to find any physical resemblance to the deceased. We can even suppose that some portraits might have been individually produced, especially if they were part of bigger projects connected with the most opulent tombs. Wealthy commissioners did not require accuracy in rendering the physiognomic features of the person portrayed; instead, they expected the highest quality of sculptural work. Thus, the Palmyrenes desired to differ one from another, but not necessarily by their physical features and physiognomy. The physiognomy of a person did not play a role, but attention was paid to the attributes and ornamental details added to the portrait. The diffusion of the underground tombs and funerary temples caused increasing demand for another category of funerary sculpture: the slab showing a banquet scene. Often arranged in sets of three, the slabs were intended to imitate banquet halls (triclinia). These very characteristic reliefs were mass-produced, but the familiar character of the representation stimulated a certain level of personalization. As in the case of funerary busts from the last decades of the second century AD, the banquet scenes reflected changes in the way of life of the Palmyrenes and the improvement of the economic situation. This resulted in the appearance of rich embellishments in funerary representations. A similar thing happened for sarcophagi: a specific order was made for a specific setting in the funerary temples or underground tombs.

Notes

[1] Schmidt-Colinet 1990; Schmidt-Colinet 2017.

[2] Makowski 1985.

References

Makowski 1985

    K. Makowski, La sculpture funéraire palmyrénienne et sa fonction dans l'architecture sépulcrale, Studia Palmyreńskie 8 (Warsaw 1985) 69–117.

Schmidt-Colinet 1990

A. Schmidt-Colinet, Considérations sur les carrières de Palmyre en Syrie, in: M. Waelkens (ed.), Pierre éternelle. Du Nil au Rhin, carrières et préfabrication (Brussels 1990) 87–92.

Schmit-Colinet 2017

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