

Foliage and Fillets: A Flavian-Trajanic Priestess and her Connections to Greece

Dynamic and graceful, lively and elegant, the portrait bust of a Roman priestess in the Michael C. Carlos Museum dates to the turn of the 2nd Century CE, during the late Flavian or early Trajanic period (Fig. 1). Said to have been bought in Rome, she was in the collection of Ernst Lelong in 1902. After his death, Hercule Canessa bought the portrait bust and included it in his show of antiquities at San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in 1915 (Canessa 1915). Still, much of her ancient origins are unknown. Such provenance could suggest a connection to the city of Rome, and the high quality of carving is worthy of the center of the Empire; however, stylistic and iconographic aspects of the priestess suggest not the city of Rome, but Roman Greece.

I will explore in this paper the stylistic and iconographic connections between the Carlos priestess and late 1st and 2nd Century CE portraits from both Rome itself and the provinces. Carved from Parian marble, the sculpture almost glows. While the artist has taken time to create individual curls falling down her forehead, the hair on the top of her head has been rather impressionistically incised. Her features are classicizing, including, in particular, her smooth brow. Interestingly, the reverse of the bust remains unfinished, only roughly carved in a convex shape, whereas most Roman busts have a finished convex back. These aspects, and additionally, the acanthus-leaf pedestal, the careful rendering of the curls and the fillet that crowns them, can be found on other portrait busts across the Roman Empire; yet, taken together, these attributes all suggest her identity and origin within the Greek East.

In particular, both the fillet and acanthus base frame the sculpture with particular associations and meanings. The manner in which the priestess' fillet is rolled and tied at the back

of her head is similar to that of clergy of Demeter and Kore associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. This is depicted on a number of portraits from the same period or a little later at Eleusis, the Athenian Agora, and Corinth and has been identified as a *strophion* by both Margherita Bonanno Aravantinos and Evelyn Harrison (Aravantinos 1996, Harrison 1953). As Hans Jucker has studied, the acanthus base, too, is not uncommon on private portrait busts, especially those from the Eastern Empire: while appropriate in a funerary context, as acanthus suggests growth and rebirth, these themes are equally appropriate within the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated in Attica. Moreover, the three unfurling, vertical leaves of this acanthus seem most closely similar to acanthus bust portraits found in Greece. Likewise, the use of marble from the island of Paros, though not unused in Rome, adds another connection to Greece itself. Collectively, these features indicate a private roman portrait from Greece, quite possibly a priestess of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Works Cited

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