

Roman Portraits in Context

Jane Fejfer

Walter de Gruyter

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Image & Context

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Preface



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Some practical notes: Firstly, the illustrations: every museum object is provided with at least one measurement, its material and its inventory number; w.i. (without inventory) is only used when I have been unable to find one. Secondly, ancient authors have not been listed in Works cited. However a reference to the edition (mainly Loeb) which I have consulted is given in the notes. Finally, abbreviations for journals and series follow those of *Archäologische Bibliographie*.

Copenhagen, May 2007

Jane Fejfer



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Introduction





In second-century A.D. Ostia, the senate honoured Fabius Hermogenes upon his death with a public funeral and an equestrian statue to be placed in the city's forum. Hermogenes had been public equester, priest in the cult of the deified emperor Hadrian, and benefactor to the city. His father, probably a freedman but with considerable monetary resources, and proud of the public commemoration of his deceased son, made the generous gift of 50,000 sesterces in return. Part of the interest of these 50,000 sesterces was to be distributed among the citizens every year on Hermogenes' birthday and, as it was decided, in front of his statue. The incident, recorded on the statue base which once bore Hermogenes' equestrian bronze statue, is not an isolated one. Numerous similar records demonstrate that the award of a portrait statue was considered perhaps the highest public honour a person could wish for in Roman society. Hermogenes' commemoration highlights the essence of what is at issue in Roman honorific portraiture: the desire for public honour and glorification; perpetuation of the memory of the patron through the portrait image itself and through the events taking place in front of it; reciprocity between a city and its citizen(s); concern for the mode of representation, the material and the location of the statue. The publicly displayed honorific statue was the normative format of a Roman portrait image. It played a prime role in the public life of a Roman citizen. Honour defined a citizen's position in society – the greater his honour the greater his power. To the Romans the zealously sought after honorific portrait was the best means of demonstrating status and power and of perpetuating one's existence. The honorific statue represented values and ideals that were universal in time and space. The award of an honorific statue turned an ordinary citizen into the ideal citizen. It therefore played a significant part in the creation of common identity, in constructing memories and a sense of ancestry within a communal system of values across the Empire.

My primary interest is to discover how and why portraiture became, not just the most widely disseminated but possibly also the most important monumental art form with a pivotal role in expressing political ideology, social and intellectual identity. I will also explore the way in which such statues facilitated exchange between the emperor and those over whom he ruled, and between a citizen and his fellow citizens in the Roman Empire. Therefore I focus less on style, typology and chronology, than on reconstructing the socio-historical and physical context of portraiture. The study is not confined to the portraits themselves, but also relies on epigraphical sources, as the discussion of the inscription

honouring Hermogenes above has already indicated. The essential reason for this is that although we can deduce important information about the interaction between images and viewers from an analysis of the portrait images themselves, there are certain types of information which they cannot yield. There are limits to how far we can progress in relating portrait images to the surrounding socio-historical environment for which they were created by analysing artistic expressions and details of facial physiognomy, styling of hair and costume alone, even when the point of departure is historical.¹ Inscriptions often offer further insights, however.² The aim of an inscription is to present information about the patron. It has long been recognized that not all portrait inscriptions were composed according to a standard formula. In the language of praise and in the composition of details about the life of the patron the text contributes to the rhetorical power of the portrait and epitomizes what the viewer should read in the image. Inscriptions provide information about the patron that would be impossible to glean from the image alone. Without the accompanying inscription we would hardly ever have guessed that the life-size statue of a proud Roman in toga with a capula of book rolls at his feet, in excellent eastern marble and of the highest quality carving, represents the actor and freedman Gaius Fundilius with the cognomen Doctus, 'one who has learned something'³ (see plate 26). On the other hand, inscriptions may introduce different aspects of the character or career of the patron, as when an aristocrat is portrayed in the standard civic costume of the toga but with the details of his long and distinguished career listed in the inscription. Information that has no direct relevance to the visual representation of the image, for example what the patron contributed to the upkeep and welfare of the city in order to earn his statue, shall also be considered because it adds to the overall understanding of the role portrait images played in Roman society. Inscriptions may give supplementary and even contradictory information to the messages that are communicated in the portrait image but portrait and inscription serve the same overall purpose of communication with the viewer. In modern research, portraits and inscriptions are often treated as two separate sources and even studied by different academic disciplines. It is a fundamental point – hardly original but often neglected – that portrait images and inscribed statue bases, which were in antiquity usually united in a single monument and as part of the same concept, with the same function and expressing a similar ideology, should best be studied together. This is what will be argued in the following study.

It has sometimes been held that the study of Roman portraiture is a somewhat fossilized branch of classical archaeology.⁴ Critics have argued that hardly any new ideas have entered this mainly German dom-

inated research area during the whole post-war era and that it was not until the 1980s that new approaches appeared.⁵ Given the fact that archaeology was strongly dominated by new theoretical approaches such as those appearing in Cambridge in the 1960s, this 'fossilization' requires further explanation. Archaeology is a discipline which does not have its own theory. But during the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the so-called New Archaeology which borrowed scientific models and approaches from anthropology and social history, archaeology moved away from what has been named 'the old art history': New Archaeology had serious scientific ambitions whereas traditional art history grounded its knowledge in connoisseurship. This created a dichotomy in classical archaeology between archaeology that was studied in relation to society, and art history understood in aesthetic terms. The latter school's prime concern was with style and aesthetics, setting art objects apart from the social system. Studies on portraiture entered the discussion relatively late and the preoccupation with identification, typology, style and dating, continued for much longer than in other areas of classical archaeology, probably because it was considered to be the most 'scientific' and objective approach. Studies that tried to write the social history of the ancient portrait were exception. However, during the last twenty years or so, new approaches have appeared in which social explanation and aesthetic understanding meet. The idea that Roman portraits are the product of and are embedded in a specific historical context has come to be taken seriously. Important finds in Asia Minor and other parts of the Empire have been well documented; and approaches in which the wider context of these portraits is considered a key issue, are crucial for the development of future approaches to Roman portraiture.⁶ That such approaches took so long to come to the fore and have only reluctantly been accepted in portrait studies does not imply that the study of Roman portraiture during the post-war period was not a product of its time – quite the contrary. Without discussing in detail the history of the study of Roman portraiture (this has been done fairly recently by other scholars)⁷ it may be useful to explore this and a few other aspects further because it is of importance for understanding why the study of Roman portraiture has taken the direction that it has.

Firstly, going back to the German 'Strukturforschung' of the first half of the 20th century in which the notion of Greekness as opposed to Romaness played a crucial role, many studies on portraiture have been rooted in discussions about the origin of the Roman so-called veristic portrait. Scholars have been concerned with explaining why and how the transition from the Greek so-called idealised portrait into the Roman so-called veristic portrait took place. Two examples from different eras are Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg's study from the 1920s and Jeremy

Tanner's study from 2000,⁸ both of which are concerned with explaining the origin of the Roman veristic portrait. Kaschnitz-Weinberg argues that verism developed from the tradition of taking death masks while Tanner suggests that it originated in the Greek East as an expression of the relationship between Roman patrons and Greek clients. Although Kaschnitz-Weinberg was not the first to propose the death masks theory his works became very influential and were discussed as late as the 1980s.⁹ He argued that the early Roman portrait was a fully realistic representation of an individual with all physiognomic characteristics based on the tradition of casting the face in death. He supported his theory with literary evidence, in particular Polybius' description of *imagines maiorum*, albeit not death masks but ancestral masks.¹⁰ It was not until ca. 100 B.C., so he claims, that the non-artistic (of course, Roman) portrait style was fused with the artistic expressionist (Greek) portrait style. But, according to Kaschnitz-Weinberg, the death mask continued to play a key role in Roman portraiture, which was therefore considered a non-manipulative art form. This theory has had a great impact on many of the studies of Roman portraiture in the first half of the 20th century and well beyond. Even though it was gradually accepted that the Roman portrait became, or even originated in, a manipulating art form there were no attempts at historically-based interpretations. Studies continued to concentrate on portraiture as the expression of personality and as part of a linear, autonomous chronological development.¹¹

Secondly, it is important to be aware that the study of Roman portraiture was and still is strongly dominated by the German school. Following E.Q. Visconti's early 19th century studies, J.J. Bernoulli undertook the first systematic treatment of Roman portraiture during the last decade of the 19th century.¹² Bernoulli based his identification of the sculpted portraits on comparisons with named likenesses on coins and introduced a system of making lists of portraits which he believed represented the same person. His studies inspired a long series of studies along similar lines. Before the outbreak of the Second World War scholars not only elaborated on Bernoulli's methodology but also broke new ground, in particular in their interpretation of portraits. Studies appeared which concentrated on the inner self and the psychology of the patron portrayed. Some such studies took a very unfortunate direction during the late 1930s when racial interpretations of Roman portraits became an issue in German research.¹³ No wonder then, that after the Second World War scholarship avoided such cognitive approaches, especially any that would be concerned with reading identity, ethnicity or personal character in a portrait. Instead scholars stayed on more neutral objective and 'scientific' ground by working in particular on typology by the refining of the systems already conceived by Bernoulli in the 1890s. Schol-

ars focussed on bringing order to the chaos of imperial portraits, portraits of private citizens and images of personifications, as well as collecting evidence for the different modes of representation. By means of a stringent typology it became possible to separate official imperial and widely disseminated portraits from portraits of private citizens. The identification of a portrait as imperial because 'it looks like' the emperor is no longer an issue.¹⁴ Good photographic documentation has enabled scholars to refine the so-called method of 'Lockenzählen'¹⁵, which is essentially a critical investigation of the individual locks of hair (and to a certain extent of physiognomic details) in a portrait. The method enables us to decide whether a portrait is unique when no copies of it are known or, when copies do survive, to establish what the relationship between them is. The method also solves further typological and stylistic questions: for example, whether a particular copy is close to the original or so-called prototype, repeating in detail all the characteristics of the type; whether it was a quickly-produced copy or one that took time to craft; whether it was made in a metropolitan Roman or a provincial workshop. The method of 'Lockenzählen' is therefore hugely important and provides the basis for any further investigations. If we cannot distinguish between imperial and non-imperial portraits, we can neither ask questions about the impact and meaning of the portraits nor about how the process of commissioning, production and dissemination functioned. Models and rules set up for identifying imperial portrait types and to some extent for understanding regional diversity and style, like that suggested by Klaus Fittschen in 1971,¹⁶ have proven very useful.

It is clear, however, that methodology cannot be the goal in itself. It only provides a means for formulating further questions about the socio-historical context and the impact and meaning of Roman portraiture, private or imperial. This book is therefore concerned with reconstructing the context for commissioning and setting up the portraits. Rather than being a comprehensive study, the book selects issues that are essential for understanding what the Roman portrait *was*; it is therefore not only concerned with the images themselves but also with inscriptions, as mentioned above. The study also refers to literary sources though less frequently. Ancient authors recording the events of their own time may have had a particular aim, which could best be obtained by extreme exaggeration. The important speech by Dio Chrysostom against the Rhodians, for example, which is a mine of information on second century A.D. Greek attitudes towards portrait statues, particularly those of Romans, has to be considered. However, to take the information at face value and interpret it as evidence of a general attitude towards the honorific statue would be a mistake. Dio wrote this speech in a specific historical situation and with the particular purpose of demonstrating

that the Rhodians were wrong in their attitude towards the honorific statue. In short, although archaeological and literary sources are products of the same culture, the literary sources often provide a very selective record. They may have a moralizing character, they may treat the peculiar rather than the general because they were written with a special purpose, under patronage or with obligations to an important individual, or they may take the form of flattery typically of the emperor. Archaeological sources including inscriptions may reveal overall trends better, simply by virtue of their sheer number and the factual nature of the information that they provide. The literary portrait is also of limited relevance for understanding the visual portrait. Suetonius' description of Tiberius as having over-sized eyes and a small mouth could match many public portraits,¹⁷ and imperial biographies or panegyrics like Pliny the Younger's characterization of Trajan were a product of the political ambition of the writers in question. Such descriptions are therefore highly selective in the characteristics that they mention.¹⁸ Indeed Pliny, who was a careful observer and describer of natural objects showed very limited interest in physical appearances, even that of Trajan.¹⁹ The writings of the physiognomists attempting to describe people's true character by their physiognomy, like Polemo's description of the physical defects of his favourite opponent, the sophist and rhetor Favorinus, are also of little relevance.²⁰ Although details of facial features are discussed and compared to the character of different types of animals, the descriptions are extremely stereotyped and aim at designating types of persons rather than individuals. In addition, physiognomic treatises are often used to ridicule, or to describe just the negative aspects of a person, as in the case of Favorinus, whereas visual portraits were normally intended to convey the positive in a person.²¹ On the other hand, these physiognomic treatises are evidence for a literary tradition and for the ancient viewer's familiarity with the basic deciphering of a face. Both the authors of the physiognomic treatises and the ancient biographers describe what resembles a person as we would today consider it. It is however clear that one of the most interesting developments in the study of Roman portraiture within the last decade has been the focus on the extent to which the imperial Greek literary trend known as the Second Sophistic and the interest in the *paideia* that accompanied it influenced contemporary portraiture, in particular the sculpted portraits of the first part of the second century A.D. in both the western and eastern part of the Empire. Yet, as the impact of the Second Sophistic was an element in Roman society for almost two centuries through the early and middle Empire, the influence which it has been thought to have on Roman visual portraiture may perhaps have been overestimated.²²

No book has previously been wholly devoted to Roman portraits and their context and the ambition with this study is therefore that for the non-specialist reader it may function as an introduction to the world of Roman portraiture. To the specialist that it will offer commentaries, discussions and some new models and ideas that are at the center of actual research. The structure of the book follows three equally important trajectories. Firstly, it gives an idea of the evidence that may be extracted from a consideration of the full mass of extant portraits, portrait inscriptions and portrait settings. Secondly, founded on a reassessment and combination of previous portrait and epigraphy studies new perspectives on the context of Roman portraits emerge. Thirdly, the study offers a number of new interpretations, readings and models.

Only a very broad chronological and geographical span will provide sufficient evidence to permit us to understand the wider socio-historical context of the portraits. I therefore include evidence from across the Empire from the Republican period into the early fourth century A.D., when the number of honorific statues and portraits of private citizens in general decreased significantly. Also, portrait styles became transformed into having exaggerated facial features, and are of relevance only for images of the emperor and his governing entourage. Although I shall refer to various significant differences between portraits in the East and the West as well as to significant chronological developments, my aim is to draw a general pattern.

Changes in the imperial portrait no doubt functioned to multiply the styles, ideologies and fashions that predominated, as they were imitated extensively in private portraiture. However, so-called private portraits are discussed first, in Part One, because portraiture and the practice of dedicating honorific statues commenced long before the dynastic monarchy prevailed in Rome. I will argue that a statue in the forum was the highest honour to which a Roman citizen could aspire. While the emperor and high senatorial officials were routinely awarded statues, fierce competition existed among local benefactors to obtain this honour, which distinguished and perpetuated the memory of the patron and his family for generations. There were many ways in which a portrait statue could be earned but locals often had to wait until they had passed away before the public finally fulfilled their expectations. From the day they were set up and inaugurated, the statues therefore became ancestors and part of the communal memory of the city, reminding fellow citizens of the high standards that would be required of them in order to gain such honours. It is further demonstrated that by combining a wide socio-historical perspective with a close reading of individual images, their inscribed texts, and their setting, even the portraits which have been irrevocably separated from their original context and now adorn muse-