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ABSTRACT

A Portrait Head of Severus Alexander in Delft

Sam Heijnen – Eric M. Moormann

An as yet unpublished ancient marble head from the Paul Tétar collection in Delft (NL) can be interpreted as a portrait of Emperor Severus Alexander (222–235 A.D.). The provenance of the piece is unknown. On the basis of the bearded cheeks and moustache as well as other criteria the portrait must be classified in ›Group C‹ of the official portrait type of the emperor and dated to c. 225 A.D. Thus 31 portraits of the emperor are known in total.

KEYWORDS

Roman emperor, Severus Alexander, Roman portraiture, Delft, Paul Tétar

A Portrait Head of Severus Alexander in Delft

Introduction

¹ Thanks to a kind communication of Dr. Dé Steures from Leiden, we were informed that the small Museum Paul Tétar in Delft (The Netherlands) is in possession of a marble head dating to the third century A.D. and hitherto unnoticed in any archaeological publication¹. Rather than being famous for antiquities and Roman history, the town of Delft is much more known as the city of Johannes Vermeer, the place where the first Dutch stadtholder, William of Orange, called the Taciturn, was murdered in 1584, and where the Orange stadtholders and royals have held their mausoleum in the Grote Kerk.

² Paul Tétar van Elven (1823–1896) was a wealthy painter and collector of art who bequeathed his house cum collection to the municipality of Delft and stood at the origins of this very nice museum at Koornmarkt, in the centre of the old town, finalized in 1926, after the death of his second wife, and opened to the public in 1927. The house can be seen as an excellent example of a traditional elite mansion of the seventeenth and later centuries². Its collection mainly consists of Tétar's own work (both originals and copies of well-known masterpieces from Italy and Holland), paintings by old masters and Tétar's colleagues furniture, and *objets d'art*, mostly Dutch and, as to ceramics, Chinese import ware³. This collection was partly enriched by the board of the foundation in the late 1920s. The Roman head, presented here for the first time, is an exception as is one more Roman antique object within the collection, a small soldier's head belonging to a Roman relief.

¹ We thank Dr. D. Steures for his observation made at the end of November 2019 and his generosity to transfer his discovery to the present authors. We also are very grateful to the director of the museum, Dr. Alexandra Oostdijk, for her permission to publish the head and her help in exploring the documentation in the museum. Prof. Marianne Bergmann was so kind to discuss the head with us on the basis of photos and provided some important references.

² On this museum, see its official website <<https://tetar.nl/>> (accessed January 20, 2020) and Hoftijzer 2004.

³ Hoftijzer 2004, 34–43.



Fig. 1. 2: Delft, Museum Paul Tétar van Elven, inv. 0482

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Formal Analysis

3 Delft, Museum Paul Tétar van Elven, inv. 0482 (Fig. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6).

Dimensions: Slightly over life-size; height 31 cm (neck-head), chin-crown 27 cm, chin-hairline 19 cm; width 20 cm; depth 22.5 cm.

Material: White compact marble with bluish and blackish veins and barely showing crystals. Probably marble from Dokimeion.

Condition: Surface covered with crust of lime and dirt. Damages: blemish in hair at front left; chin, nose, eyebrows, ears chipped; philtrum and eyes damaged. Lips and cheeks complete. Obliquely broken off under neck. Bottom covered with whitish mortar and original surface invisible. Set into a mortar slab hollowed out and covered with a brass sheet.

Provenance: The provenance of the head is unknown. It might have been purchased by Tétar or by the board that gestured the house after 1926, but according to the director, the piece forms part of the collection since long. No archive material is at disposal to confirm one of these suggestions. Tétar and his second wife made a one-year trip in the 1880s to Egypt, Greece, and Italy during which the head and the relief could have been acquired⁴.

Description: The piece represents the head of a young man turned slightly to his right, with roundish and protruding cheeks. No traces of movement or original dress have been preserved. Eyebrows are likewise protruding and running in one line over the bridge above the nose. The mouth is well carved, with slightly protruding, closed lips. The chin is round and has no indent. The moustache is thin and curly, typical of first beard growing, and executed with tiny chisel strokes. The man's eyes are set deep in their sockets, with the lower lids going over in the cheeks. The upper lids are heavily accentuated and arched, which could indicate that the head was meant to be seen from a low standing position. Iris and pupil are drilled and set against upper lid. Drill holes indicate the inner corners of the eyes. A horizontal indent marks the high front. The hair is rendered in low relief and cropped short *a penna*. It has been combed to the front



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Fig. 3-6: Delft, Museum Paul Tétar van Elven, inv. 0482

from the crown. A partition of hair is visible above the left eye. It has been combed to the sides above the ears. Crown and back are roughly worked, so that barely no hair details result visible, which corresponds to our theory that the portrait was meant to be seen from below. In the nape, the hair cap ends in a V-shaped point, sharply set off from the nape. The well-proportioned ears are cut out moderately, and show an indent at the upper side of their outline. Inside, the ears appear to have been worked out naturally. Whiskers, rendered in soft and shallow relief, run down in wavy strands until the lower side of chin, where they finish in harsh chisel strokes.

Interpretation

4 The portrait is that of a young man in his teenage years with short-cropped hair. The style of the portrait reminds of the emperors of the first half of the third



Fig. 7: Toulouse, Musée St. Raymond, inv. 30.128/RA 73h (Philip II)



Fig. 8: Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, Museo delle Terme, inv. 326 (Gordian III)

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8

century A.D. Possible candidates that come to mind are Elagabalus (r. 218–222), Severus Alexander (r. 222–235), Gordian III (r. 238–244), and Philip II (r. 247–249), son of Philip the Arab (r. 244–249), in particular. The coiffure of our portrait consists of short locks of hair combed to the right side until they are met by strands of hair arranged in opposite direction above the right eye. This arrangement thereby creates the impression of an almost horizontal line of hair across the forehead, a characteristic feature of the imperial portraits of the third century and the Tetrarchy. The arrangement of locks of hair on the forehead comes closest to that of Severus Alexander and Philip II. Of the four emperors mentioned above, all but Philip II, who died aged twelve, are known to have presented themselves with a thin moustache and sideburns.

5 Even though the shape and hairstyle of the Delft head correspond to known replicas of Philip II's portrait type (Fig. 7)⁵, we believe that the presence of facial hair rules out an identification with the son of Philip the Arab, as it would have required the sculptor to add these features without clear incentive from the imperial center⁶. This leaves us with three possible imperial candidates, of which we may dismiss Gordian III for the lack of the emperor's characteristic double vertical indent above the nose and his receding hairline around the temples (Fig. 8)⁷. With regard to Elagabalus, the preserved evidence shows that the moustache and sideburns only appear in his second portrait type⁸. Since the Delft head lacks the elaborate hairstyle and middle parting of this second type, we may exclude Elagabalus as a possible candidate. Since we have also been

5 e. g. Toulouse, Musée St. Raymond, inv. 30.128/RA 73h, see Bergmann 1977, 36 no. 3; Borg et al. 2005, 123 f. cat. 60; Spranger 2014, no. 04-05; Berressem 2018, 377 f. no. 26.

6 Philip II is portrayed clean-shaven in all coins minted on behalf of the imperial center.

7 As in Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, inv. 326, see Fittschen 1969, 200 no. 16; Wegner 1979, 27; Wood 1986, 130 no. 3; Prusac 2011, no. 204; Spranger 2014, no. 03-008; Berressem 2018, 367 f. no. 28.

8 e. g. Rome, Musei Capitolini, Stanza degli Imperatori, inv. 470, see Wiggers – Wegner 1971, 151 f.; Bergmann 1977, 22 no. 1; Fittschen – Zanker 1985, no. 98; Wood 1986, 123 no. 1.

unable to locate clear traces of re-carving, it is improbable that the Delft head represented Elagabalus in a first configuration⁹.

6 This reasoning leaves us with the following conclusion. The portrait corresponds closest to the main portrait type of emperor Severus Alexander, particularly with regard to the arrangement of hair. Surviving portraits of Severus Alexander adhere to one main portrait type, although it should be acknowledged that replicas of this type show a large variety in execution as they portray the young emperor transitioning from a boy into a young adult. The replica that comes closest to our portrait from Delft is a portrait head that is now preserved in the Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo, which is listed under »Gruppe C« in Fittschen and Zanker's seminal catalogue of Roman portraits (Fig. 9)¹⁰. Similarities between the portraits include their shape and execution on the level of the facial hair, ears, and lips in particular. Another characteristic trait that both portraits share is the V-shaped hair cap in the nape, which is a recurrent feature in the portraits of Severus Alexander¹¹. Characteristic features of portraits of Group C also include the whiskers and thin moustache, which are both present in our portrait from Delft. The portraits of the different subgroups can be dated by their first appearance on coins¹². Portraits of Severus Alexander that adhere to the iconography of Group C appear for the first time on coins from the year 225 A.D.¹³, thereby providing us with an approximate date for the production of the portraits from Oslo and Delft.

7 The style of Severus Alexander's portrait can be seen as following some of the trends set out under Caracalla (r. 198–217 A.D., as sole ruler: 211–217 A.D.). Whereas Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 A.D.) still presented himself with a curly hairdo and a long beard in order to align himself with his Antonine predecessors¹⁴, his son and successor Caracalla preferred a shorter haircut and beard. Less attention was paid to the hairstyle of the emperor, resulting in a simple *a penna* execution of the hairdo¹⁵. Severus Alexander took this representational strategy one step further by only introducing some facial hair in his otherwise consistent portrait type during the course of his almost thirteen years of rule. Alexander apparently stuck to the accepted novel norm of representation, possibly to avoid a connection to his cousin and predecessor Elagabalus, who experimented with a longer hairdo in his second portrait type. To retain a shorter hairdo also meant to uphold an aesthetic link to the portraiture of Caracalla, to whom Alexander traced back his lineage¹⁶.



Fig. 9: Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet, inv. 1233 (Severus Alexander)

9 Re-carved portraits of Elagabalus are normally recognized by remnants of his full and more curly hair or by a straight line of hair in the back of the neck, on which, see Varner 2004, 279–281. Both traces are lacking in the portrait from Delft.

10 Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet, inv. 1233, see Wiggers – Wegner 1971, 189; Bergmann 1977, 26 no. 8; Fittschen – Zanker 1985, 119 no. 11; Spranger 2014, no. 01-054. On the typology of Severus Alexander's portraits, see Fittschen – Zanker 1985, 117–121.

11 Varner 2004, 279.

12 On which, see Fittschen – Zanker 1985, 120.

13 As argued by Wiggers – Wegner 1971, 181; Bergmann 1977, 28. Coins: e. g. *RIC* IV Severus Alexander 48. 50.

14 Hekster 2017.

15 On the change between Antonine and Severan portraiture, see Leitmeir 2011 and Leitmeir 2013; Bergmann 2015, 76–78.

16 On Alexander presenting himself and being presented as the son of Caracalla, see Hekster 2015, 218–221.

8 The identification of the portrait head from Delft as Severus Alexander means that there are now 31 preserved portraits of Alexander known to us¹⁷. This number corresponds to 2.4 portraits per annum of his reign, which is overall quite low considering the average of 4.3 under the Severans in general¹⁸. A possible reason for this lower number may be the destruction of Alexander's images under the rule of his successor Maximinus Thrax (r. 235–238 A.D.). Though we have no evidence of any official sanctions directed towards Alexander's images, our evidence suggests some spontaneous acts of violence occurred nevertheless¹⁹. The relative low number of preserved portraits of Alexander also stands at the brink of a general decline in the number of imperial portraits, which has been seen as a reflection of the political turmoil and economic decline of the third century A.D.²⁰. When looking at the number of statue bases per annum, however, there is little evidence of a significant drop in statue dedications in the third century²¹. The relatively low number of preserved portraits of Severus Alexander, therefore, does not necessarily reflect a change in statue habit; rather, they seem to be more indicative of the overall chances of survival of portraiture as opposed to statue bases in this era.

Conclusion

9 Although the provenance of the head remains unknown, we may assume that this portrait represents Severus Alexander and forms a replica of his official portrait type. The sideburns and moustache of the portrait have furthermore allowed us to date the portrait post 225 A.D. It constitutes a fine addition to the rather small number of portraits known of this emperor.

17 In addition to the 26 portraits listed in Fittschen – Zanker 1985, 119 f., the following portraits can be identified as Severus Alexander:

– Constanța, Archaeological Museum, see Wegner 1979, 21 (as Gordian III); Bergmann 1998, 122. 281 pl. 55, 2; Spranger 2014, no. 01-037.

– Delft, Museum Paul Tétar van Elven, inv. 0482 = this portrait.

– Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, inv. 45-66, see Varner 2004, 279 no. 7.16; Prusac 2011, 142 no. 203.

– New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 2011.87, see Spranger 2014, no. 01-059; Zanker 2016, no. 29.

– Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Museo delle Terme, inv. 124492, see Varner 2004, 281, no. 7.23.

– Furthermore, Francesco Paolo Arata identifies a portrait of Severus Alexander (Group D) in a relief fragment from Rome, see Arata 2010.

18 Numbers are derived from Sam Heijnen's forthcoming PhD thesis on this subject, which will include a numerical overview of Roman imperial portraiture produced between 27 B.C. and 565 A.D. Although we are aware of the potential problems involved with the statistical analyses of portraits, we believe that they can be insightful in determining general patterns, as demonstrated by the »Last Statues of Antiquity« project, on which, see Smith – Ward-Perkins 2016.

19 Varner 2004, 156. 196 f.; Calomino 2016, 167–171.

20 Fittschen 1975, 134.

21 Spranger 2014 and Spranger 2016.

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SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Title Page: S. Heijnen

Fig. 1: S. Heijnen

Fig. 2: S. Heijnen

Fig. 3: S. Heijnen

Fig. 4: S. Heijnen

Fig. 5: S. Heijnen

Fig. 6: S. Heijnen

Fig. 7: Toulouse, Musée Saint-Raymond, Musée d'Archéologie de Toulouse (Photo: D. Martin)

Fig. 8: Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, Museo delle Terme

Fig. 9: Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet, The Fine Art Collections

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