

A Portrait of an Imperial Priest



Roman portrait head found in Section EA.

A Roman portrait head in Pentelic marble was found June 20, 2002, lying in late fill on the north slopes of the Acropolis, just south of and uphill from the Eleusinion, about 12 meters east of the post-Herulian wall (U 22). There seems to

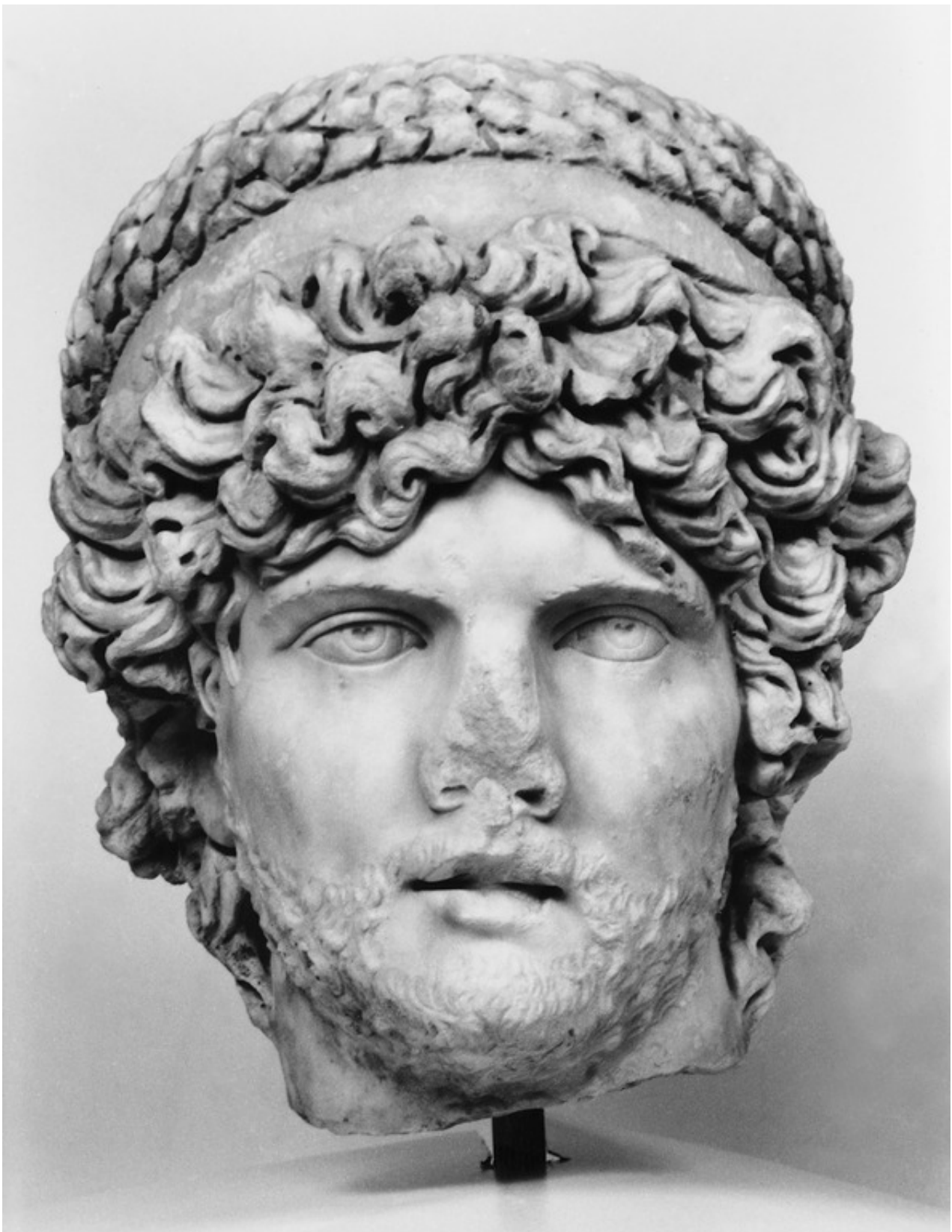
be no useful archaeological context in its find-spot. The figure is broken off at the neck, while most of the chin, mouth and nose are missing. There is damage to the eyes, but it is clear that the pupils were rendered with two shallow holes drilled adjacent to one another and overlapping slightly. From the eyebrows up, the figure is in good condition.

The portrait is life-size, showing a male with abundant curly hair and a light beard. On his head he wears an elaborate diadem or crown, decorated with eight small busts, either cuirassed or togate. Such crowns, adorned with busts, are usually interpreted as an indication that the individual was a priest, most often of the imperial cult. A fair number of examples are known from Asia Minor, but few if any from Greece. Just below the busts - tied around the crown or actually part of it - is a wreath made up of numerous small, pointed leaves.

The ornate, deeply drilled curls on the head suggest a date in the latter part of the 2nd century AD. The treatment of the beard, however, is somewhat puzzling. It is rendered by means of a series of small, shallow, curved incisions, with no relief at all, in marked contrast to the hair on the head. This combination of a flamboyantly full head of hair and a scraggly incised beard is also a feature of other portraits dated to late 2nd or the early 3rd century AD.

It is probable that the beard represents a reworking. The edge of the figure's left jaw where it recedes to join the neck is surprisingly angular in comparison to the rounded modeling seen elsewhere. In addition, the entire area of the beard has been finished smooth, with a flat-faced chisel, and then incised; everywhere else the surfaces of the face have been finished with a rasp. In most other examples of a thin beard, however, the hair is still shown in slight relief; that is not the case with our figure. A restyling of the beard, of course, would have considerable ramifications for the identification of the figure and the subsequent history of the piece. The line of least resistance is to assume that the reworking was done during or soon after the original commission and carving of the portrait, but it is perhaps more likely that the piece was in fact recut to represent a second individual, presumably in the 3rd century AD.

At the break there are slight traces of a change in the angle, where the neck meets the chest, but not enough to determine if the head is from a bust or a full statue; both types are known from Asia Minor.



Portrait head of a priest found in the theater of Dionysos.

Assuming that we have here a portrait of a distinguished Athenian, it is reasonable to suppose that the work was carved in a local workshop. A close parallel for the piece is another portrait of a priest, found at the theater of Dionysos in 1878 and dated to the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD: National Museum no. 356 = Datsouli-Stavridi pp. 69/70, pl. 85, found with no. 350, a portrait of Lucius Verus). The beard is scraggly, though still in low relief, and the surfaces of the face have been smoothed, leaving no trace of the rasp. Otherwise

the similarities are striking; the eyes and eyebrows are very similar, while the treatment of the hair is virtually identical. Both faces are also rounded and full, and somewhat idealized. Given the range of similarities, it is not unreasonable to suggest the possibility that the two are the product of the same atelier.

Portraits of Imperial Priests: Crowns with Busts

The association of crowns with busts and the imperial priesthood is based on a passage in Suetonius' *Life of Domitian* (4.4):

He also established a quinquennial contest in honor of Capitoline Jupiter of the threefold character, comprising music, riding, and gymnastics, and with considerably more prizes than are awarded nowadays. For there were competitions in prose declamation both in Greek and Latin; and in addition to those of the lyre players, between choruses of such players and in the lyre alone, without singing; while in the stadium there were races even between maidens. He presided at the competitions in half-boots, clad in a purple toga in the Greek fashion, and wearing upon his head a golden crown with figures of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, while by his side sat the priest of Jupiter and the college of the Flaviales, similarly dressed, except that their crowns bore his image as well. (Loeb)

Other high officials could also wear such crowns. A long inscription from Oenoanda in Lycia records the foundation of a festival and games by one C. Julius Demosthenes in AD 124 (*SEG* 38, 1988, no. 1462, esp. ll. 46-65). In addition to his other benefactions, Demosthenes dedicated to the *demos* a gold crown decorated with relief figures of Hadrian and Apollo Patroos (στέφανον χρυσοῦν ἔχοντα ἔκτυμα πρόσωπα, l. 52), to be worn by the *agonothete* of the new games.

As noted, representations of this type of crown or diadem have hitherto been confined largely to Asia Minor. In all, some 21 examples are known, dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD, with more than one example reported from Ephesos, Aphrodisias, and Perge. They are worn by both priests and priestesses, on both busts and full statues; at least some are adorned with deities and may not be for imperial cult. The number of busts varies considerably, from as few as one to as many as fifteen. In addition to the 21 examples of portraits wearing such crowns, they appear in another 55 instances on coins, sculpted reliefs, and the like, again almost exclusively in Asia Minor. The appearance of such a rare, substantial, and well-preserved example from Athens is therefore noteworthy.



Detail from the Roman portrait head.

While many of the known examples combine both members of the imperial family and deities, the new portrait seems to portray all mortals, increasing the probability that he is in fact a priest of the imperial cult. It is unclear whether the busts represent a single generation of the imperial family or the lineal descent through eight generations, or a combination of the two. The absence of any female figures perhaps suggests the busts are arranged dynastically rather than as a family group. The figures are small but relatively well cut and detailed. All the heads seem to be bearded; the fourth figure from the left has a round object decorating the center of his cuirass, apparently a gorgoneion. The appearance of the gorgoneion should help further to date the piece. The device appears on the cuirass of the large *imago clipeata* in the pediment of the outer propylon at Eleusis (often identified as Marcus Aurelius: Deubner), on several marble portraits of Marcus Aurelius, and on a gold bust of Septimius Severus found at Plotinoupolis

(see below).

Busts of the Imperial Family

Imperial busts (προτομαί) of bronze were specified as a desirable form of dedication in a letter to the Athenians from Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in AD 179 (J. Oliver, *Hesp. Suppl. VI*, pp. 108-120, esp. 116). The text of lines 32-39 is translated by Oliver as follows:

Then in regard to the images which you have wanted to make of ourselves and of our consorts in gold or silver, or best of all, if understanding from our own proposal, you are willing to content yourselves with images of bronze, it is clear that you will make statues such as the many more commonly call προτομαί (busts), and you will execute them on a moderate scale, the four of equal size, so that it will be easy on your holidays at every gathering to transport them wherever you may wish on every occasion, as for example to the popular assemblies. And as for the bases, we permit the placing of our names upon these because of your good will toward us, for we gladly accept such honors but on all occasions we avoid the divine and those which seem to provoke envy. Therefore, also we now gratefully instruct you to make only bronze images, for this would be most pleasing to us.



Imperial bust of Septimius Severus.

For a series of silver images of earlier emperors at Ephesos in 162/3 AD, see also Oliver 1941, pp. 93-95, and, from 103/4 AD, dedicated by Gaius Vibius Salutaris: Oliver 1941, pp. 55-85 and Rogers 1990. A gold example of an imperial bust, identified as Septimius Severus, was found in 1965 at ancient Plotinoupolis in Thrace, and is now in the Komotini museum; it weighs about a kilo and stands some 0.25 m. high (Babritsas and Pentazos; see Babritsas for a gold bust of Marcus Aurelius from Avenches, also wearing cuirass and gorgoneion). As suggested by various testimonia in addition to the one quoted above, busts of this type were carried in processions and were brought to specific locations to attend specific events. The individuals who carried these images, known as 'Sebastophoroi', are attested both at Athens and in the Oenoanda inscription (I. 61).

The Imperial Cult in Athens

The picture of the imperial cult as it was practiced in Athens is a complicated one. Imperial worship is attested as early as the beginnings of the empire, with the

dedication of at least thirteen altars of Augustus. Cult activity, altars, or officials are attested also in the 1st century AD for Tiberius, Nero, Vespasian, and Titus, and perhaps for Drusus and Claudius. As in many cities, worship of the imperial family at Athens seems often to have been practiced in association with well-established cults of older, Olympian gods (A. D. Nock, *HSCP* 41, 1930, pp. 1-62). It has also been suggested that several old Classical temples were transplanted from Attica to the Agora to serve the needs of the imperial cult in the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD. The reign of Hadrian, who was worshipped with Zeus in the Olympieion, is marked by the dedication of no fewer than 94 altars in Athens. At all times there seems to have been some ambivalence on the part of many of the emperors themselves; if asked, they would often decline divine honors, but they seem not always to have been asked. For the most part, divine honors at Athens seem to have been politely rejected by the Roman emperors in the later 2nd century AD, until the reign of Commodus (180-192 AD). Commodus himself seems to have fond of Athens, and he actually held the title of eponymous archon in 188/9 AD.

If small altars, statue bases, and epigraphical evidence suggest an active imperial cult in the city, thus far there has been little sculptural expression of it until the discovery of our portrait. Its find-spot, unfortunately, does little to resolve the question of the possible center of the Imperial cult within the city. There was, of course, the monopteros east of the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis, presumably some sort of focal point for the worship of Augustus. Most of the many altars of Hadrian were found north of the Acropolis and especially around the Agora, suggesting a cult-center there, separate from the Olympieion. It is also worth noting that the emperors of the later 2nd century had very strong ties with the cult of Demeter at Eleusis. Lucius Verus was initiated into the Mysteries in 162 AD, and Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in 176. The head was found some 10 meters south of the City Eleusinion, which would also be an appropriate place for setting up a portrait of an imperial priest.

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