

A NOTE ON THE BERBER HEAD IN LONDON

Abstract: The well-known ‘Berber Head’ in the British Museum, found at Kyrene in 1861, has long defied exact stylistic analysis. Its findspot provides no precise date, and ever since the excavators suggested that it was a piece from the fourth century BC, this dating has been sustained, generally through inertia. Yet recent scholars have become increasingly aware of the weakness of this date without offering specific alternatives other than a gradual down-dating. Its North African features indicate that it is a portrait of an indigenous ruler, and thus attribution must be based on the likelihood of such a person being honoured in Kyrene. It is herein suggested that it is a portrait of the Numidian prince Mastanabal, son of Massinissa, and that it dates to the time that Massinissa was a close associate of the king of Kyrene, the future Ptolemaios VIII of Egypt, or 163–148 BC. Mastanabal was a noted athlete and thus the piece may be a commemoration of one of his victories. Its commissioning would fit into his father’s vigorous hellenization policy. Although the style remains difficult of analysis, certain features, especially the beard under the chin, support a second-century BC date.

ONE of the best known pieces of ancient art is a bronze head from Kyrene, now in the British Museum, familiarly known as the ‘Berber’ Head.¹ It was discovered in 1861 in the Temple of Apollo, sealed about 3 m below the surface in the ruined lower levels of the temple after its destruction during the Jewish Revolt of AD 115 and the subsequent rebuilding that began under Hadrian. The head is 35 cm high and was part of a life-sized torso, probably forged by the indirect lost wax method from a live subject. Since the excavators found (but abandoned) fragments of bronze horses and pieces of gold leaf, it may have been part of an honorific equestrian group. It is individualized with a furrowed brow, a slightly irregular nose, heavy eyebrows and North African features, but overall is classicized in form. There are no definite stylistic dating criteria, although the beard under the chin is reminiscent of later Ptolemaic portraits. An analysis of the bronze by Paul Craddock of the British Museum also resulted in no dating evidence. Thus the only secure date for the piece is before AD 115, based on its location when found, and indeed it shows some effects of the fire that destroyed the temple.

The excavators, Robert Murdoch Smith and Edwin Porcher, originally proposed a date in the fourth century BC.² This has generally been upheld, within the limits of 400–280 BC. They also suggested the indigenous North African context that has consistently been a standard interpretation of the piece.³ Yet, especially in recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the weakness of the dating criteria, largely because there are no definite comparanda: in 1999, Claude Rolley wrote, ‘On a hésité sur la date’, but then fell back on the traditional mid fourth-century BC attribution.⁴ But the British Museum label now has ‘about 300 BC, and the most recent suggestion is that its placement was perhaps connected with the renovation of the Temple of Apollo around 350–325 BC, when the temple may have become a location for the display of honorific sculpture.’⁵ These fluctuations of date indicate the difficulties of stylistic analysis.

So far all critiques of the head have been based on style, placing it within the Late Classical school of the brothers Lysippos and Lysistratos. This theory was first advanced by the excavators⁶ and has influenced all subsequent discussions, to some extent through inertia. Although this

¹ PLATE 2 (a). The British Museum label is ‘Bronze Head of a North African’. BM Bronze 268; Reinhard Lullies and Max Hirmer, *Greek Sculpture* (revised and enlarged edn, New York 1960) no. 210; most recently, Claude Rolley, *La sculpture grecque 2: La période classique* (Paris 1999) 306. The author would like to thank Andrew Stewart of the University of California at Berkeley, Judith Swaddling and Neil Adams of the British Museum, and especially Sally-Ann Ashton of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, for their advice and assistance.

² Robert Murdoch Smith and Edwin Porcher, *History of the Recent Discoveries at Cyrene* (London 1864) 42–3.

³ Smith and Porcher (n.2) 94; see also Lucy M. Mitchell, *A History of Ancient Sculpture* (London 1883) 628, an indication of how quickly the traditional interpretation became standard.

⁴ Rolley (n.1) 306.

⁵ Neil Adams of the British Museum is currently engaged in a doctoral thesis which includes an examination of the head and its role at the Temple of Apollo, and communicated this conclusion to the present author (April 2001).

⁶ Smith and Porcher (n.2) 94.

is a possible context for the piece, the matter is complicated by the lack of any comparanda from North Africa, and it does not seem to be in the tradition of Lysippan athletic sculpture such as the Apoxyomenos. Other known pieces from the fourth century BC provide little in the way of comparison. The famous so-called Mausolos portrait in the British Museum,⁷ securely dated to the middle of the fourth century BC, is significantly different, especially in the treatment of the hair, mouth and beard. The boxer from Olympia,⁸ also in a tradition of honorific sculpture at a major sanctuary, shows a slight similarity in the details of the hair and the heaviness of the forehead, but is different in its almost brutal character and the overall irregularity of the hair. The Antikythera philosopher,⁹ perhaps from the third century BC, is different in all respects except the treatment of the mouth. Even portraits of Alexander the Great offer little comparison: the Dresden Alexander¹⁰ is perhaps the closest but again lacks similar detail.

Furthermore, there is no fourth-century comparandum from Kyrene itself. The only other bronze head found at the Temple of Apollo is a portrait discovered in 1926 that has long been thought to be of Arkesilas IV, the last Battiad king of Kyrene,¹¹ perhaps commemorating his victory at the Pythia in 462 BC that was recorded by Pindar.¹² This identification has been questioned as much as it has been sustained, and is of no real assistance in understanding the Berber head.¹³ Attribution of the Berber head is further complicated by the scant knowledge of Kyrene between the assassination of Arkesilas IV in 440 BC and the time of Alexander the Great, a period that is almost blank.¹⁴ Although this does not affect any stylistic dating of the head, it makes it difficult to determine any contemporary historical context when a North African chieftain might have been honoured at the Temple of Apollo, and perhaps gives the fourth-century BC date more authority than it deserves.

There is one period, however, when there were especially close relations between Kyrene and North African royalty. This was the mid second century BC, during the tenure of Ptolemaios VIII of Egypt as king of Kyrene, when he became an associate of Massinissa of Numidia.¹⁵ Massinissa was the most famous of the long line of Numidian royalty. Numidia, the territory south and west of Carthage, was ruled by independent hellenized kings until the defeat of Juba I by Julius Caesar and the provincialization of the territory in 46 BC.¹⁶ Massinissa, the great-great-grandfather of Juba I, was the first to consolidate a strong Numidia: during his long reign from 205 to 148 BC he moved steadily into the Roman sphere and became a paradigm for vigorous old age, living to 90.¹⁷ His court was one of the most notable of the early second century BC, attracting Greeks and Romans, including Polybios and Scipio Africanus: his relationship with the Carthaginian Sophonisba became one of the great romantic love stories of antiquity. He cultivated the leading states of the period and sent his sons to Athens to be educated. When Ptolemaios VIII became king of Kyrene, he and Massinissa became close friends. The date of this contact can be determined with precision: between Ptolemaios' accession at Kyrene (163 BC)

⁷ British Museum 1000; Lullies and Hirmer (n.1) nos. 212, 213. The controversy over the identification of this portrait (for which see G.B. Waywell, *The Free-Standing Sculptures of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus in the British Museum* (London 1978) 21-5) is not relevant here.

⁸ Athens, National Museum 6439; Lullies and Hirmer (n.1) nos. 238, 239.

⁹ R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture* (London 1991) 239.

¹⁰ R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Royal Portraits* (Oxford 1988) no. 3A.

¹¹ Luigi Pernier, 'Doni votivi ad Apollo in Cirene', *AfrIt* 2 (1929) 70-5.

¹² Pind. *Pyth.* 4, 5.

¹³ G.M.A. Richter, *The Portraits of the Greeks* (New York 1965) 104-5.

¹⁴ Typical of recent scholarship is Werner Huss, 'Kyrene. I. Geschichte', *Der Neue Pauly* 6 (1999) 1003: 'endete um 440 die Herrschaft der Könige. In nachalexandrischer Zeit...'

¹⁵ *FGrHist* 234 F 7, 8.

¹⁶ The major source is the treatise *De Bello Africo*; see also Livy, *Epit.* 110-14; Suet. *Jul.* 39, 56, 66; Plut. *Cat. M.*, *Caes.* 52-5; App. *BCiv.* 2.44-110; Dio 43.2.13; Elizabeth Rawson, 'Caesar, civil war and dictatorship', in *CAH* 9² (1994) 434-6.

¹⁷ Polyb. 14; Livy 25.42; App. *Pun.*; Gabriel Camps, *Massinissa, Libyka-Archéologie-Epigraphie* 8.1 (1990); P. G. Walsh, 'Masinissa', *JRS* 55 (1965) 149-60.

and Massinissa's death 15 years later. Ptolemaios visited the court of Massinissa, and it is highly probable that Massinissa was in Kyrene.

Yet it is doubtful that the Berber head is of Massinissa. He would have been between 75 and 90 years old during the years in question, and the head, seemingly done from life, is of a far younger man. It is possible that a youthful portrait of the king was commissioned, but given his almost mythic reputation as the aged and wise leader and the ultimate survivor – the only role in which Ptolemaios would have known him – this seems unlikely.¹⁸

It has long been argued that the head represents a victorious athlete, and this suggests another possibility. Massinissa's son Mastanabal, father of the famous Jugurtha, was victorious in the Panathenaia in 158 BC,¹⁹ exactly the time when his father and Ptolemaios were closely associated. Mastanabal was probably an athletic competitor elsewhere, and it is compellingly reasonable that Ptolemaios would have honoured the son of his colleague by allowing his portrait to be placed in the Temple of Apollo, a milieu long used for athletic commemoration. Such an assumption, needless to say, goes against the vague stylistic criteria that have long been used to date the piece to the fourth century BC. Yet there are stylistic reasons for assuming a date in the first half of the second century BC. A crucial, yet often ignored, feature of the Berber head is the beard beneath the chin. This is a distinctive element of late Ptolemaic art, appearing first at the time of Ptolemaios VI. Examples include two gold sealing rings in the Louvre,²⁰ whose attribution ranges from Ptolemaios VI to XII, or, in other words, the mid second to mid first century BC. The beard under the chin and the curling hair of the Berber head also appear on a coin of Ptolemaios VI,²¹ and in a bronze of Ptolemaios IX or X in Stuttgart.²² One is also reminded of the Getty Late Ptolemy and similar pieces in Boston and Alexandria.²³ Sealings from Edfu provide an additional comparandum.²⁴

Massinissa was noted for being the first Numidian to hellenize his kingdom. It is compellingly reasonable that Greek-style sculpture would have been part of this effort, and it is expected that his son Mastanabal, a noted athletic victor in Greece, would be artistically commemorated in Greek fashion at a Greek sanctuary. Moreover, given the close contacts between Numidia and the Ptolemies in the second century BC, it is probable that Ptolemaic influences would be paramount in many aspects of Numidian culture, including art. Thus some time between 163 and 148 BC Massinissa, in one of several ways he sought to demonstrate his legitimacy in the Greek world, commissioned a victor portrait of his athletic son at the Temple of Apollo in Kyrene, the most important Greek sanctuary near his kingdom and a place with which he was personally connected. As to be expected in the tradition of athletic victor portraits, the bronze of Mastanabal was in a classical tradition, but at the same time showed definite Ptolemaic influence.

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¹⁸ Other than coin portraits, there are no certain contemporary portraits of Massinissa. The coins (Jean Mazard, *Corpus Nummorum Numidiae Mauretaniaeque* (Paris 1955) nos. 17-36) all show the same portrait, a left-facing bust of a mature bearded man with a laurel wreath, bearing no resemblance to the Berber head. The Pompeian wall painting depicting Massinissa and Sophonisba is probably from tragedy and has no continuity with the time of the king himself. No other portrait has been identified without question (German Hafner, 'Das Bildnis des Massinissa', *AA* (1970) 412-21).

¹⁹ *IG* ii² 2316.41-4.

²⁰ Louvre Bj 1092, 1093. See Susan Walker and Peter Higgs (eds), *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth* (London 2001) nos. 44, 45.

²¹ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Fonds Gen. 368; Walker and Higgs (n.20) no. 90.

²² Württembergisches Landesmuseum SS.176; Walker and Higgs (n.20) no. 29; see also no. 28.

²³ PLATE 2 (b) (Getty 88.AA.330). Smith (n.10) nos. 57, 59, 60.

²⁴ PLATE 2 (c) (Royal Ontario Museum 96.12.125); see also no. 140; J.H. Milne, 'Ptolemaic seal impressions', *JHS* 36 (1916) 87-101.



(a) The 'Berber' Head, London, British Museum.
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)



(b) The Getty Late Ptolemy.
(Courtesy of the Getty Museum)



(c) Seal from Edfu.
(Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum)