

Perspectives

The study of the stone surface of Palmyrene reliefs has shown how the documented tool traces can be connected to a larger picture of production economics. This can also be applied to other groups of portraits and intense studies of their making will help to understand their production and the organization of the economy.

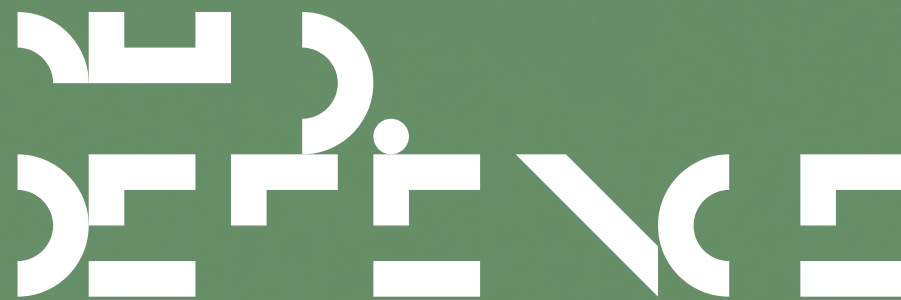
Facts about the field of study

The Palmyra Portrait Project

- Funded by the Carlsberg Foundation since 2012 under the leadership of Prof. R. Raja
- The project's database currently contains around 4.000 portraits
- The database allows a systemized study of portraits
- The main aim of the project is to publish all known Palmyrene portraits
- Over 100 publications have been published so far

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CARVERS AND CUSTOMERS THE PRODUCTION ECONOMY OF LIMESTONE LOCULUS RELIEFS, 1ST TO 3RD CENTURY AD

PhD dissertation by Julia Steding



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CARVERS AND CUSTOMERS – THE PRODUCTION ECONOMY OF LIMESTONE LOCULUS RELIEFS, 1ST TO 3RD CENTURY AD

The dissertation focuses on the production of limestone loculus reliefs from Roman Palmyra from the 1st to the 3rd AD. The large corpus of funerary portraiture from Palmyra allows venturing into questions on carving techniques and economical structures. The study of single reliefs as well as larger groups of reliefs helps us to understand what tools were used, how the tool use developed, who was involved in the production and which mode of production is most likely. By studying the tool traces on a single relief in detail on the one hand and a larger group of reliefs on the other hand, it is not only possible to explain the making of individual objects but to discuss the organization of the production of grave reliefs in the city.

Limestone carving in Palmyra

All the reliefs from the funerary sphere were produced in local limestone. On most of them, tool traces are visible, documenting the way they were made. The most common tools were the pick, the point, the tooth chisel, the flat chisel, the drill and the rasp. All of these tools can be put in a sequence of carving but depending on the period they were made in, the chosen block of stone, and the choices made by the carver, some tools were skipped or replaced.

Chronological development of tool use

The study of the stone surface of 79 reliefs has proven that the tooth chisel was used less and less over time. The drill, in contrast, was used more and more often. This means that not only the style changed, but also the way the portraits were carved. The study also shows that the rasp was used more commonly than previously assumed in research and it was not uncommon to smooth the skin and sometimes other parts of the relief.

More Palmyrenes – more space?

Calculating the size of 200 loculus reliefs has proven that there was no standardized size. Also, the addition of children to a relief did not have any influence on the size of reliefs. The children were thus treated as other attributes that could or could not be added to the depiction of one or multiple adults. The study also showed that there are some reliefs that were produced for a specific space in a tomb and therefore the dimension of this space had to be communicated to the workshop before the carver could start to carve the relief.

Individualization and workshop organization

A study of 799 reliefs has proven the diversity of the corpus. Even though carvers worked within certain stylistic and iconographic standards, every object is unique and only in rare cases, busts are really similar. This proves that the production was individualized and the reliefs were not produced to stock. The carvers carved the busts on customers' demand and the number and combination of details varied. Master carvers, students and helpers as well as specialists for e.g. the colouring must have worked in or for the workshop to meet the customers' requests.

Conclusion

The production of Palmyrene portraits was well organized and the Palmyrene carvers adapted their carving to the material that was available to them. They made use of the full range of carving tools that was common elsewhere and, over a period of time, the techniques changed alongside the style. The workshops reacted to the growing interest in this form of representation and they were able to create reliefs with great diversity.