

A Portrait of a Roman Emperor

1. *Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet*. Alabaster. Height 0,13 m. Formerly in the Paus Collection in Rome. S. Eitrem, *Antiksamlingen* (1927) No. 58; *Kunst og Kultur* 13, 1926, page 209 ("Galba"). Brendel in *Einzelaufnahmen XII* (1931) 3334 ("a tetrarch"). H.P.L'Orange in *Symbolae Osloenses VIII* (1929) page 100 and in *Studien zur Geschichte des spätantiken Porträts* page 102 ("Diocletian"). *Nasjonalgalleriet Kat. Skulptur* (1952) No. 17. (Fig. 3).
2. *Autun, Musée Municipal*. Alabaster. Height 0,16 m. "From Lyon". Espérandieu, *Recueil Général des Bas-reliefs ecc. de la Gaule Romaine IX* (1925) No. 7058. L'Orange, *Studien* page 102. *Journal of Roman Studies* 43 (1953), page 100, plate 18,3.
3. *In a French private collection*. Alabaster. Height 0,14 m. "Found at Riez". Espérandieu, *Recueil X* (1928) no. 7435 (According to this author together with no. 2 above of the Italian Renaissance period). *Journal of Roman Studies* 43 (1953) page 101.
4. *Arles, Musée*. Yellowish marble. Height 0,13 m. "Undoubtedly" derives from the excavation of the Theatre. Espérandieu, *Recueil XII* (1938, by Raymond Lantier) No. 7942, plate 35 ("possibly Vespasian").
5. *London, British Museum*. Alabaster. Height 0,165 m. Rosemarie Miescher in *Journal of Roman Studies* 43 (1953) page 100, plates 17-18 ("Constantius Chlorus"). (Fig. 4 and 5).
6. *London, British Museum*. I.N. 1953. 11-22. 1. Alabaster. Height 0,139 m. (Fig. 6 and 7).
7. *Leipzig, in a private collection*. Alabaster. Height 0,15 m. Purchased in Venice in 1872. Heidenreich in *Festschrift Schweitzer* (1954) page 367, plates 83-84 ("a tetrarch, probably Constantius Chlorus").
8. *Madrid, Museo Cerralbo*. I.N. 4663.

9. *Berlin, Altes Museum.* Alabaster or yellowish marble. Height 0,11 m. Gerda Bruns in *Berliner Museen Berichte* 63 (1942) page 6, plates 2 and 4 ("Renaissance"). Eberhard Paul, *Die falsche Göttin* page 56, plate 19. In an extremely concise form Gerda Bruns gives the hitherto most useful contribution to the true understanding of these small heads, "which are to be found among the fakes in many old collections", by attributing them to the Renaissance period. She furthermore draws attention to the existence of another and smaller group of similar small imperial heads of comparatively recent date and in this connection she refers to four other items in the Berlin collection: *Beschreibung der antiken Skulptur* (1891) No. 394-396 and I. N. 1857, which is presumably identical with Eberhard Paul, *Die falsche Göttin* page 46, plate 20.
10. *Amherst College.* Alabaster. Height $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Purchased in Rome. M. Milkovich, *Roman Portraits Loan Exhibition*, Worcester Art Museum (1961) Cat. No. 35 ("Constantine the Great or one of this successors").

The ten small heads of alabaster listed above are evidently meant to portray ancient Roman rulers wearing the Imperial laurels. Four of them have in our time been included in Roman iconography as contemporary portraits of members of the "tetrarchy"; thus, the head in Oslo (No. 1) has been declared to be a likeness of Diocletian, while it has also been suggested that this head, and Nos. 2, 5, and 7 as well, portrayed Constantius Chlorus. Nos. 2 and 3, however, have been ascribed to the Renaissance, and incidentally, in 1942, Gerda Bruns declared the whole class – and other related heads – to be fakes of the modern period (*Berliner Museen Berichte* 63, 1942, page 6).

On closer examination it appears to be practically impossible to uphold the claim of high antiquity for the small alabaster emperors. The material is very uncommon in Roman portraiture; Oriental alabaster seems occasionally to have been used for portraits in its Egyptian homeland (cp. Hans Jucker in *Jahrb. hist. Mus. Bern* 41-42, 1961-62, page 303), but rarely elsewhere. This is a relevant observation, for the style of the small heads, if accepted as late Roman, is particularly "Western" in its emphatic realism, in contrast to the stylization of Eastern portraits, of which the porphyry bust of a tetrarch, presumably Diocletian, from Athribis in Egypt is a well-known example (Delbrück, *Antike Porphywerke* plates 37-38). Just as alabaster is an unusual material for Roman Imperial portraits, so their size

is unusual. The very existence of ancient miniature busts of Roman emperors in stone has indeed been denied, but this seems to be an extravagant assertion (Wegner, *Herrscherbildnisse antoninischer Zeit* page 13 and page 277. Cp. *Gnomon* 16, 1940, page 207); none the less, they are extremely rare, and if our comparatively numerous group of these small portraits of a limited number of emperors were authentically antique they would indeed form a unique collection of Imperial busts.

The solution to the problem is to be found in the evidence presented by style, and those observers who claimed that the alabaster emperors were a product of the Renaissance were undoubtedly right. The numerous modern portraits of Roman emperors have not received much attention in art literature: archaeology only deals with them in order to exclude them as “fakes”, while art history seems inclined to regard them as a kind of antiquities. Yet, Titian did not consider it beneath him to paint the twelve Suetonian emperors for the Duke of Mantua, and busts of the same canonical number were much in demand during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The best known example is perhaps the splendid series on view in the Galleria Borghese (Italo Faldi: *Gal. Borghese, Le sculpture dal secolo XVI-XIX*, Cat. No. 11) which consists of 17 life-size porphyry heads, set in busts of alabaster. All the twelve Suetonian emperors are represented, though in the catalogue Julius Caesar is mistaken for Agrippa, and both Vitellius and Vespasian are duplicated, bringing the total number to fourteen; the remaining three are portraits of “Scipio Africanus”, Cicero, and Trajan (the latter being confused with Hadrian in the caption). The Borghesian emperors were first mentioned in 1683, and although they were then regarded as a find of ancient portraits, they were already exposed by Winckelmann; they can hardly be earlier than the seventeenth century. In the Danish National Museum there is a set of marble medallions of the twelve emperors, executed towards 1700 (cp. fig. 8).

Numismatical and other evidence confirms that most of the porphyry heads are authentic portraits in the sense that they are iconographically correct, as are the twelve marble emperors in the same collection by Giovan Battista della Porta, who died in 1597 (Italo Faldi, Cat. No. 48). It is evident that our small alabaster heads must antedate even this latter series by many years; they seem to belong to the fifteenth century or the very beginning of the sixteenth century, and, unless we are much mis-

taken, they were made in Northern Italy, probably in Lombardy, in a sculptural tradition which goes back to Donatello and the Tuscanian “quattrocento”. Most probably they belong to scattered series of the twelve canonical emperors – though portraits of later Roman rulers were also occasionally produced as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century (e.g. the bronzes executed for the tomb of Maximilian at Innsbruck: Hans R. Weihrauch in *Münchener Jahrbuch* 1952/53, page 203 seqq.) – but they are clearly not as faithful to the ancient prototypes as their successors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless No. 1 of the present list was once taken for Galba, and No. 4 clearly represents Vespasian. No. 3 might be Augustus or perhaps Claudius, No. 5 is most likely Julius Caesar, Nos. 6 and 9 resemble Titus, while No. 7 is probably Galba. There is a Tiberius in Berlin (Eberhard Paul, *Die falsche Göttin*, plate 20) – and finally, in Thorvaldsen’s collection there is a head of Otho (fig. 1, 2 and cp. the Roman coin shown below). This head, which was the actual starting point of the present article, is, by virtue of its size and the material of which it is made, closely related to our series of ten small alabaster heads, even though the crown of laurels is conspicuously absent.

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