

THE REVIVAL OF MYTHOLOGICAL SCULPTURE

The presumed disappearance of mythological sarcophagi following the reign of Constantine has a parallel in the idea that mythological sculpture – or ‘Idealskulptur’, a more apt term – disappeared at the same time.

The chaos created by the military anarchy of the mid and later 3rd century left a physical and mental vacuum in aristocratic life. But the reign of Constantine inaugurated a time of peace and prosperity, which also initiated a flurry of upper-class building activity, termed the ‘villa boom’. It peaked from about 320 to the end of the century; in most of the empire, upper-class mansions, domus in the cities, suburban villas and countryside villas were restored, and new were built. The floors were covered with marble slabs or mosaics, often presenting mythological motifs matching the sculpture and silver on view in the same rooms. As an innovative architectural concept, these wealthy mansions were embellished with niches suitable for displaying sculpture.

Much sculpture, in particular small-scale pieces, has indeed been found in these houses. An explosive growth of such material has been recovered since the Second World War by excavation activity – some scientific, other more random due to construction work, not to mention clandestine digs to satisfy a booming art market. The ever-rising number of well-preserved marble sculptures found in Late Antique upper-class houses makes it increasingly difficult to accept the conventional chronology, which would also leave us with a very simple question: where were all these well-preserved sculptures stored during the troubled years of the third century? Additionally it should be noted that the limited number of sculptures found in Late Antique contexts and unquestionably dated to the early and high empire are mostly worn and often heavily restored using techniques only attested in Late Antiquity.



Fig. 1. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek: The Esquiline Group.

Mythological marble statuary found in late Antique private contexts has been explained as reuse from earlier periods. On the assumption that such sculpture was not produced in Late Antiquity, such pieces were – and to a large extent still are – dated to the Antonine-Severan period based simply on the highly polished surface treatment. However, this conventional dating has increasingly been questioned since the early 1980s.

A new understanding of Late Antique mythological sculpture came with the appearance of two unrelated articles. In 1981 Elaine Gazda published a marble statuette of Ganymede and the eagle excavated in Carthage, which she dated to the “Age of Augustine”, thereby demonstrating that production of small-scale sculpture continued into Late Antiquity⁸. In her large comprehensive article, she broadened the art circle to involve various groups of artefacts such as small-scale mythological sculpture as well as full scale reliefs and Christian sarcophagi. Her most epoch-making contribution to the understanding of the period was to draw on a very different material: Late Antique silver plates in the classical tradition regardless of the unknown faith of the then owners.

A year later Charlotte Roueché re-dated the so-called Esquiline Group [**Fig. 1**] now in Copenhagen from the mid-second century to late Constantinian times based on epigraphic evidence⁹. The statues of this large ensemble all have inscribed plinths giving the names of two Aphrodisian sculptors. Five sculptures – Jupiter, Neptune, Sol, Satyr with the infant Dionysos on his shoulder and the upper part of Hercules – out of what could have been more than ten statues altogether making the group the largest one known from Late Antiquity. Based on these two articles a new field of research emerged focusing on Late Antique mythological sculpture¹⁰.

8 Gazda 1981, 125-178.

9 Roueché – Erim 1982.

10 The main contributions are: Hannestad 1994 and 2012, 75-112; Bergmann 1999; Kranz 2006; Vorster 2012/2013. On the Esquiline group Moltesen 2000, 111-131.

The traditional view that production of mythological sculpture came to a halt with the military anarchy of the third century has, however, some truth. A rare example from Rome is a poor quality Dionysos statue (H: 94 cm.) dated by an inscription to the end of the 3rd century, but more unrecorded pieces may exist¹¹. Otherwise, the very few pieces securely dated to the period of upheaval were mostly produced in remote, but protected areas, such as central Spain and Cyprus¹². The scanty material makes it difficult to establish a line of continuation, but it appears that production was slowly resumed at the end of the century. The absence of mythological sculpture during the troubled period is a puzzling fact considering that production, however modest, of monumental sarcophagi continued. In many respects, most of the 3rd century is a black hole in which villa life too is poorly understood.

When mythological sculpture reappeared, starting with small-scale sculpture, it is obvious that much had changed. Large-scale sculpture of Late Antiquity is rooted in the tradition of the early and high empire. The amount of such sculpture in Late Antiquity is modest, in contrast to the multitude of sculptures on a smaller scale. As opposed to larger sculpture of the period, small-scale sculpture is an offshoot of the production of sarcophagi for the nobility that were carved in very high relief.

11 Giuliano 1981, I 2 Ala IV 13, 292 f. inv. 74025 (M. A. Rizzo).

12 Hannestad 2014, 230-231, 244 with references.