

Review

THOMAS SCHÄFER, *DER RELIEFZYKLUS MEDINACELI: VON ACTIUM BIS NERO. ZEITGESCHICHTE UND SELBSTVERSTÄNDNIS IM PRINCIPAT DES KAISERS CLAUDIUS* (Tübinger Archäologische Forschungen 37). Rahden/Westf.: Verlag Marie Leidorf GmbH, 2022. Pp. xvi + 390, illus., plates. ISBN 9783896468680. €69.80.

Ever since the 2013/14 exhibitions in Rome and Paris at the 2000th anniversary of Augustus' death displayed together a relief cycle showing a sea battle, a triumph and a circus procession, scholars have awaited Thomas Schäfer's final publication of the sculptures. S. has been working on the reliefs since the 1980s. It is thanks to his dedicated research that the twelve sculptured slabs, stemming from collections in Seville, Córdoba and Budapest, are today perceived as belonging to the same Julio-Claudian monument.

The much-expected publication is massive. Weighing 2.5 kg, it covers almost 400 pages of double-columned text, followed by 120 pages of plates. The first chapter tells the intriguing history of the reliefs from sometime between 1558 and 1571, when the Spanish Viceroy of Naples purchased the slabs and shipped them to Seville, via their later disunion and through modern research. S. also discusses possible sites of ancient origin (in Campania and Rome), suggesting either Avellino, Nola (site of the death of Augustus), Puteoli or Misenum, preferring one of the latter two.

Ch. 2 consists of a technical catalogue, in which S. helpfully provides measures, state of preservation and former restorations of each slab. Hereafter follow three chapters which analyse the friezes that, according to S.'s reconstruction, once adorned three walls of a Roman monument, presumably a temple or an altar. Ch. 6 forms rather a digression; here, S. sets the sea battle scene in a (to me) not fully convincing context of the rowing games that Aeneas held for his father Anchises in book five of the *Aeneid*. Ch. 7 presents an important analysis of the two types of wagons preserved on the frieze, a triumphal chariot and a *tensa*, intended for circus processions. Finally, ch. 8 discusses the dating of the frieze. After a summary follow an extensive bibliography, various indices and finally a very valuable, rich catalogue of plates, of the slabs and of visual comparanda.

The order of the slabs, as already set up by S. for the exhibitions, has generally been met with acceptance by scholars. As he shows (ch. 3), the presence on the so-called Frieze A of Apollo seated with a cithara watching a sea battle makes the identification with Actium highly likely. Further, a figurehead on one of the prows shows a centaur (restored, but known from eighteenth-century drawings), which Propertius attributes to Antony's fleet. Also, the soldiers on both fleets carry identical armour, revealing a civil war battle, indeed an exceptional motif in Roman art.

The remains of Frieze B (ch. 4) shows a triumphator in his *currus* and, on other slabs, various processional participants such as musicians and lictors. The original face of the triumphator is lost, but as his chariot follows the sea battle at Actium, most scholars, including S. himself in an earlier publication, have interpreted this frieze as depicting Octavian's triumph(s) in 29 B.C. Here, however, S. prefers Claudius, and reads the depicted event as the Emperor's British triumph performed in A.D. 44. S.'s idea is that the Actium slabs rehabilitate Claudius' grandfather Antony by showing him as an equal to Octavian, while simultaneously celebrating both Octavian/Augustus' victory and Claudius' own crossing of the sea in the invasion of Britain.

Finally, Frieze C (ch. 5) also depicts a ritual movement, and a *tensa* suggests a circus procession. This wagon is decorated with images of Aeneas carrying Anchises, the young Ascanius and a sow on one side and Romulus carrying the *spolia opima* on another, all Augustan images indicating that — as rightly argued by S. — the *tensa* belonged to *Divus Augustus*. Less convincing is his identification of a figure with naval emblems as Pompey (Neptune, Agrippa or Octavian, all referring to Actium, seem more likely to me). More figures precede the *tensa*, and S. further discusses possible reconstructions of the missing slabs, tentatively inserting Caesar, Augustus, Livia, Nero, Britannicus (all conceivable) and Antony (doubtful).

Based on style and contents, S. concludes that the monument is Claudian, linking it specifically to the circus procession performed at the Emperor's *decennalia* in A.D. 51. He suggests that it celebrated Augustus, the Julio-Claudian family (including Antony and adding Pompey), Claudius' own military

success and his future successors. Restorations of the Spanish slabs pose challenges for a stylistic dating, but a Claudian date is perfectly reasonable, if not conclusive. Among other possibilities, the monument might have been built early in the reign of Caligula, before he halted the celebrations of Actium (Suet., *Cal.* 23.1).

Most problematic in S.'s book is the interpretation of Frieze B as Claudius' triumph, even more so because this reading is presented as a categorically expressed premise (e.g. 'Auf Fries B ist mit Sicherheit der Triumph des Claudius über Britannien 44 n. Chr. zu erkennen') (62). In my view (and others'), it is more reasonable to view the friezes as referring to the life cycle of Augustus: Actium followed by Octavian's triumph and finally the deified Emperor. After all, Roman monuments often picture the death/apotheosis of an Emperor in triumphal terms, thus binding the friezes thematically together.

Many scholars will disagree with S.'s reading of the triumphal scene and continue to debate the date, origins, contents and meaning of this extraordinary frieze. This fact, and my own noted objections, do not, however, in any way diminish the high value of S.'s book. With this monumental publication, scholarly analyses of art, culture and politics of the Julio-Claudian era can move forward.

University of Gothenburg
ida.ostenberg@class.gu.se
doi:10.1017/S0075435824000637

IDA ÖSTENBERG

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.