

The Trade in Small-Size Statues in the Roman Mediterranean: a Case Study from Alexandria

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Source / Izvornik: **ASMOSIA XI, Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone, Proceedings of the XI International Conference of ASMOSIA, 2018, 101 - 108**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.31534/XI.asmosia.2015/01.08>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:123:814732>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-23**



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ASMOSIA XI

Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone

PROCEEDINGS

of the XI ASMOSIA Conference, Split 2015

Edited by Daniela Matetić Poljak and Katja Marasović



Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone
Proceedings of the XI ASMOSIA Conference (Split 2015)

Publishers:

ARTS ACADEMY IN SPLIT
UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

and

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT
FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING,
ARCHITECTURE AND GEODESY

Technical editor:
Kate Bošković

English language editor:
Graham McMaster

Computer pre-press:
Nikola Križanac

Cover design:
Mladen Čulić

Cover page:

Sigma shaped mensa of pavonazzetto marble from Diocletian's palace in Split

ISBN 978-953-6617-49-4 (Arts Academy in Split)

ISBN 978-953-6116-75-1 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

e-ISBN 978-953-6617-51-7 (Arts Academy in Split)

e-ISBN 978-953-6116-79-9 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

CIP available at the digital catalogue of the University Library in Split, no 170529005

Association for the Study of Marble & Other Stones in Antiquity

ASMOSIA XI

Interdisciplinary Studies of Ancient Stone

Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of ASMOSIA,
Split, 18–22 May 2015

Edited by
Daniela Matetić Poljak
Katja Marasović



Split, 2018

Nota bene

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THE TRADE IN SMALL-SIZE STATUES IN THE ROMAN MEDITERRANEAN: A CASE STUDY FROM ALEXANDRIA

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Abstract

A group of sculptures found in the eastern suburbs of Alexandria, Egypt, allows us to analyse the production, trade and display of statuary in domestic contexts.

This collection is composed of 13 statues and statuettes. Eight of these are reduced in size, belonging to the well-attested types of mythological statuettes which decorated Late Antique domus and villas. Two female portrait sculptures can be associated with the owner's family and, finally, three objects – which are the only ones not made of white marble – consist of a table stand, a sphinx, and a small statuette of Isis.

The analysis of marbles in relation to sculptural technique allows the identification of two groups and two different production processes and trade patterns. Nevertheless, their archaeological context reveals that these artefacts were part of a single assemblage and decorative programme.

Keywords

small-size sculpture, trade, Alexandria

1. Methodology

The identification of the stones was based on examination of their macroscopic features, since archaeometric analyses were not permitted. This is also based on parallels with known marbles commonly employed at Alexandria. The identification of Proconnesian marble was possible through parallels with numerous groups of artefacts found at this city (statues, sarcophagi, and architectural elements). Recognition of other marble types is more hypothetical, being fundamentally based on historical patterns and parallels with sculptures kept in museums in Athens, Afyon and Aphrodisias. A significant parallel is represented by a small statuary group of Aphrodite and Pan in the museum at Afyon, showing similar features to the Aphrodite and Eros of Mehamara.



Fig. 1. Alexandria city map with an indication of the Mehamara area (Google Maps)

2. Previous research on the sculptures

During the 1973 excavations in the Mehamara area at Alexandria, near Sidi Bishr (Fig. 1), a group of sculptures was found approximately 1 m below the present ground level hidden in a hoard¹. The group consists of 13 sculptures made of white marble, except for one object made of basanite, a limestone sphinx, and a pavonazetto table stand. The height of most objects is between 30 and 140 cm².

The area of Sidi Bishr is known for the discovery of private houses of the Roman period³. Due to their small sizes, it has been hypothesized that these sculptures were part of the decoration of a private building in Alexandria. The poorly preserved structures that formed the original Mehamara complex may have been destroyed after its abandonment, perhaps around the late fourth or fifth century AD. At that time the statues may have been hidden to prevent their destruction by Christians⁴.

1 GASSOWSKA 1977, 99-118.

2 SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 148-161.

3 DASZEWSKI, EL SHEIKH, MEDESKZA, 1990, 100.

4 KISS 2007, 187-206; KRISTENSEN 2009, 158-175; POLLINI 2013, 1-29.



Fig. 2.
Alexandria
National Museum,
standing female
figure (photo:
P. Pensabene)

It has been recently observed that this ensemble of statues was part of a collection composed of pieces with different chronologies, following a Late Antique fashion⁵. This phenomenon can be recognized inside villas, where it could be significantly widespread, as in the case of Chiragan in Aquitania⁶, but also in urban or suburban contexts, as in the Villa of Theseus at Nea Paphos in Cyprus⁷, and in a residence in the outskirts of Antiochia⁸. Some examples from Late Antique mid- and small-sized urban

houses can be identified at Ostia too⁹. Since this group was found as part of a hoard, it closely recalls other Late Antique contexts of the same kind and poses the same challenges to an attempt at a correct interpretation.

Despite the significant number of sculptures belonging to this group, the attention of scholars has been mainly focused on two or three specific sculptures only, while most of them have been almost entirely neglected. Moreover, these pieces have not been considered as part of a collection that reflects the cultural and religious trends of the building's owners. Even if other interpretations are possible, one cannot discard the possibility that these statues were all stored together at the same time. For this reason, the hypothesis that they came from the same context remains the most probable one.

3. Analysis of the group: various workshops and marbles

Among the Mehamara sculptures there is only one life-sized statue (1.76 m high), which portrayed one member of the family owning the residence¹⁰ (Fig. 2). In contrast, the other statues consist of small-size depictions of deities (Aphrodite¹¹, Dionysus¹², Harpocrates¹³, Asclepius¹⁴, and Hygeia¹⁵), a pastiche reproducing the god Mars or the portrait of a Hellenistic king in a retrospective style¹⁶, and personifications (Nilus¹⁷ and Euthenia¹⁸).

5 BONFANTE, CARTER 1987, 247-257; BERGMANN 1999; KRISTENSEN 2010, 265-288; GAZDA 2015, 386.

6 HANNESTAD 1994, 117-123, 128-141, 144-149, 152; *ead.* 2007, 273-305; STIRLING 2007, 304-321. *ead.* 2008, 89-161.

7 MAIER, KARAGEORGHIS 1984, 234-236; GRIMM 1989, 168-181.

8 BRINKERHOFF 1970; HANNESTAD 1994, 117-123.

9 BOIN 2013, 247-277.

10 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 7; HANNESTAD 2007, 292.

11 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 6; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 1994, 125-126; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 156-159.

12 GASSOWSKA 1977, 100, n. 2; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; MARCADE' 2009, 135-155; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 152-153.

13 GASSOWSKA 1977, 100, n. 1 and fig. 1; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 152.

14 GASSOWSKA 1977, 101, n. 3; GRIMM 1989, 168-181; DASZEWSKI 1991, 62; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 154-155.

15 GASSOWSKA 1977, 101-102, n. 4; GRIMM 1989, 176 fig. 3; DASZEWSKI 1991, 62; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 154-155.

16 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 5; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 156-157.

17 GASSOWSKA 1977, 103-104, fig. 3; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 150-151, n. 47a.

18 In 1936, before the excavations at Sidi Bishr, the statue of Euthenia was acquired by the Graeco-Roman



Fig. 3. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Mars; B Aphrodite and Eros (photo: P. Pensabene)



Fig. 4. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Harpocrates; B Infant Dionysus (photo: P. Pensabene)

On the basis of both the subjects portrayed and their size, these eight sculptures can be divided into four groups: Aphrodite and Mars (Fig. 3); Dionysus and Harpocrates (Fig. 4); Asclepius and Hygeia (Fig. 5); Nilus and Euthenia (Fig. 6). This division was probably intended to reproduce a symmetrical setting, perhaps inside niches in an open space, in connection with fountains.

Moreover, the collection includes a reclining female portrait¹⁹, interpreted as part of a sarcophagus lid,

Museum of Alexandria as a private donation from Baron Charles de Menasce. ADRIANI 1961, II, n. 204; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 150-151.

19 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102-103, nn. 8-9, fig. 2; SAID MAHMOUD 1995, 412-414. Several mistakes were made in the past studies, which resulted in an incorrect list of pieces of the Mehamara Collection. In particular, confusion reigned with regard to the reclining female portrait. This was primarily due to the fact that the head and body were published separately on different occasions in GASSOWSKA 1977, p. 102, cat. 8, fig. 2 and cat. 9, and also in DASZEWSKI 1990, 100, where the author follows the list of 13 objects by Gassowska adding the word “standing” to the mention of the headless female statue, which, in reality, corresponds to the reclining figure described in Gassowska. In SAVVOPOULOS BIANCHI 2012, 148 the reclining woman is missing, while two additional pieces - in fact corresponding to this single statue - are mentioned: “a headless statue of a female figure” and “a head of a young woman”. Moreover, in HANNESTAD 2007, 292-293 a list of 13 objects is indicated, but only nine of them

showing facial features similar to those of the standing woman (Fig. 7). It can be attributed to a mausoleum that was included in the property, as testified by a passage of Strabo (17, 1, 16-17) mentioning that gardens of rich Alexandrians, often including family tombs, were present in this area.

The Mehamara group would primarily testify to the presence at Alexandria of blocks coming from Proconnesos and used by local workshops, as demonstrated by the statues of Asclepius, Hygeia, Nilus, Euthenia, the female portrait, and the sarcophagus lid. However, this collection also attests to the importation of small-size, half-polished statues (Fig. 10b). These are represented by the statue of Harpocrates, made of a white, translucent marble with a blackish-blue surface and medium and small crystals, perhaps to be identified as a white marble from Docimium (Fig. 4a); Dionysus, also made of a white, translucent marble with fine grains (probably Pentelic, even if Göktepe marble cannot be excluded) (Fig. 4b); Aphrodite taking off her sandal, part of a group with two erotes and

correspond to Gassowska’s description (the female portrait, Asclepius Hygeia, Harpocrates, Dionysus, Mars, a female personification lying down on a sphinx (Euthenia), Nilus, and Aphrodite with Eros), while the other four sculptures do not belong to the Mehamara group. These later are: “a headless, swaying female, her right arm attached, a broken and restored torso of an old fisherman, two reclining statuettes apparently from a nymphaeum”. On the other hand, in the same paper the reclining female portrait, the table stand, the sphinx and Isis are not mentioned.

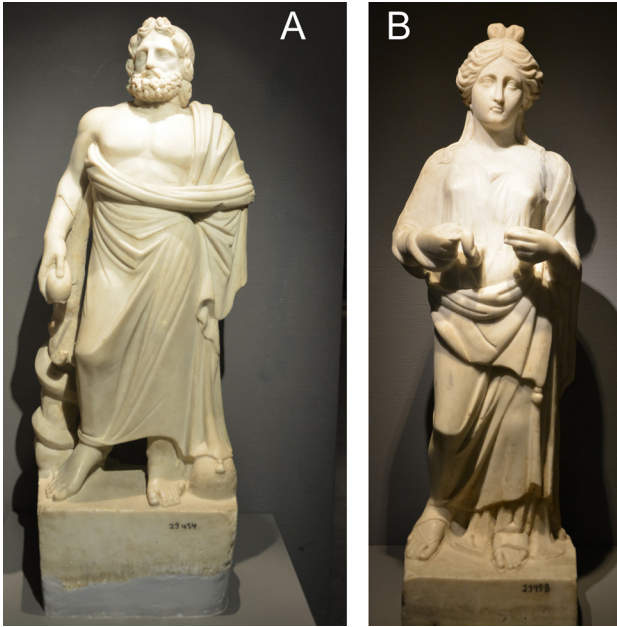


Fig. 5. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Asclepius; B Hygeia (photo: P. Pensabene)

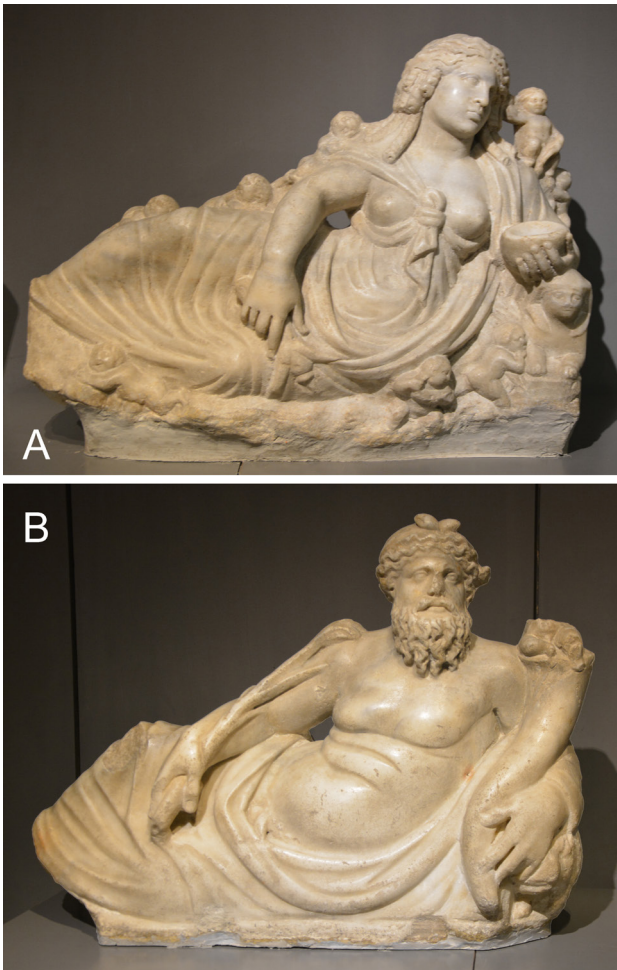


Fig. 6. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Euthenia; B Nilus (photo: P. Pensabene)



Fig. 7. Alexandria National Museum, reclining woman on a sarcophagus lid (photo: P. Pensabene)

Pan, made of a white transparent marble with medium and large crystals, either a white marble from Docimium or Parian marble (Fig. 3b); “Mars”, made of fine-grained marble, maybe Pentelic or white Docimium (Fig. 3a).

Finally, we would like to point out the difference in style and carving techniques between the group that can be assigned to local workshops and the group of imports. In the first group the carving of the bodies appears to be not naturalistic and only roughly worked. The rear is plain and simplified: drill grooves that could have better highlighted the folds of the drapery are not present here. The carving of the drapery shows only sporadic folds obtained with a chisel, simply by cutting the marble surface or incising triangular-shaped grooves on it.

In the second group, in contrast, one can notice a more naturalistic shape of the bodies, with an emphasis on their anatomic details, a smooth plasticity, and a careful attention to the shadows that softly fall on the bodies, according to the tradition of the Hellenistic “sfumato” style.

A particular case is represented by the Mars statue, which shows stylistic features typical of the locally-produced group. Unlike the other statues of the group, however, it is made of fine-grained marble and shows a moulded pedestal similar to the imported examples. We can thus assume this was a statue with a precise meaning. Given the subject portrayed and the identical height, it is possible that the statue was produced at Alexandria following the local style, with the purpose of being displayed together with the imported statue of Aphrodite. This would also explain the use of a similar marble.

Finally, the only objects which are not made of white marbles are a table stand with a lion head²⁰ (Fig. 8), a limestone sphinx²¹ and a rough basanite statuette of Isis

20 PPM I, Regio I parte prima, 367-371.

21 It was not possible to observe this object directly (length cm 26), since it is currently stored in the storehouse of the former Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria.



Fig. 8.
Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Antiquities Museum,
table support
(photo: P. Pensabene)



Fig. 9.
Former Graeco-
Roman Museum,
Isis (SAVVOPOULOS,
BIANCHI 2012, 161)

maybe belonging to the *lararium* of the *domus*²² (Fig. 9).

Some scholars proposed that the statues of Aphrodite, Dionysus and Harpocrates (both portrayed as infants) were Alexandrian products. This assumption was solely based on the fact that Alexandria was a metropolis in which many specialized workshops could have been based²³.

In contrast, we prefer to consider these statues as part of the activity of Late Antique workshops specialized in polishing small-size and good quality idealized statues. Their work was probably inspired by the presence of imported products coming from Aphrodisias and Docimium (Fig. 10 b). There is indeed a strong formal and stylistic connection between the Mehamara statues and a series of small statues of deities, heroes and other mythological figures that were inspired - rather than being mere copies - by Classical and Hellenistic models. All of them also feature a similar base moulding, with two thin tori and in some cases a shallow plinth underneath, as shown by the statues of Aphrodite, Dionysus, Harpocrates and Mars. The bases supporting the statues of Asclepius, Hygeia, Nilus and Euthenia present instead undecorated plinths of varying thickness, which were probably carved from the same marble blocks as the

figures above them (Fig. 10a). It has been ascertained that the moulded bases can be dated from the Hadrianic period, when close parallels can be identified in various Attic sarcophagi, then continuing to be documented throughout the third and fourth centuries²⁴.

4. Parallels elsewhere in the Mediterranean and the later Roman sculpture market

The purchase of small-size sculptures within the Roman market is a topic to which scholars have recently dedicated much attention²⁵. The discussion mainly focuses on two different models: according to the first model, one can hypothesize the existence of a standardized production in the quarries, which was independent of demand; in the other case, emphasis is put on the on-demand production of these objects. On a general scale, it must be stressed that production and sale mechanisms were also connected to the role played by the *mercatores marmorum* in distributing these artefacts.

Objects arrived in Egypt either as finished products or as roughed-out blocks. If one looks at the typical

GASSOWSKA 1977, 104, n. 13; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 148.

22 SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 160-161. The statue is currently under study by Mervet Seif el Din. We would like to thank her, as well as Mona Haggag, for providing helpful suggestions.

23 HANNESTAD 2007, 293.

24 MARCADE' 2009, 137-140.

25 PENSABENE 2013, 540-563, 580-585; for the exports from Aphrodisias: *Ibid.*, 348-358; RUSSELL 2013, 311-344; *idem*, 2015, 192-199. See also the case of Thasian exports of prefabricated statuettes in HERRMANN, ATTANASIO, VAN DEN HOEK 2015, 155-161, that includes also a sculpture from Alexandria (fig. 8).



Fig. 10. Mehamara Collection, A Locally carved products from imports of Proconnesian blocks;
B Locally finished products from imports of half-polished statues from several quarries

Aphrodisian sarcophagi found at several sites within the Egyptian metropolis, it is clear that these were roughed out at the quarry and finished once they reached their destination.

Being Egypt's main harbour, Alexandria was a crucial reception point for much of the imported marble and it easily supported a number of thriving sculptors' workshops. In smaller towns, sculptors may have produced objects made of a variety of stones, especially the abundant Egyptian limestone. The existence of itinerant sculptors is also possible, perhaps following requests in co-ordination with the supply of adequate marble²⁶.

Another point we wish to stress concerns the size of the blocks the statues were carved from. With

the exception of Aphrodite, Dionysus and Harpocrates, the sculptures seem to have been carved from very thin blocks, so that the figures appear more developed in width rather than in depth. This is particularly evident in the case of the female portrait, the sarcophagus lid, and the lying figures of Nilus and Euthenia (Fig. 10 a).

The same phenomenon has been observed at Cyrene, where it has been proposed that the Parian and Pentelic marble blocks²⁷, which were employed for small-size statues, were cut from larger imported blocks originally intended to be used for larger honorary statues²⁸.

26 RIGGS 2015, 564-565.

27 ATTANASIO, KANE, HERZ 2009, 352.

28 KANE, CARRIER 1988, 204.

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