Sebasteion from Aphrodisias (20-60 CE)

The Sebasteion

Augustus crowned by Nike

Claudius and Britannia

Claudius ruling the Oikoumenè

Agrippina and Nero
Name of the artist: Unknown
Patron/Sponsor: Attalos and Diogenes; Menandros and Eusebes
Original Location/Place:
Aphrodisias

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):
In loco; Aphrodisias Museum (Geyre, Turkey) - (reliefs)

Description:
The Sebasteion is an architectural complex located at Aphrodisias in Caria. The Sebasteion, erected between 20 to 60 CE, is a temple dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite and to the ruling imperial family. The Greek word...
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Sebasteion, which corresponds to the Latin Augusteum, emphasizes the prominence given to the imperial family. The purpose of the huge complex was to commemorate the close association between the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the city of Aphrodisias. The complex is organized around a long processional road, which follows an east-west axis. The road started from an eastern monumental gate, and at its west edge stood a temple dedicated to Aphrodit. Two huge stoas, located on its northern and southern sides, flank and embellish the processional avenue. Each stoa is 90 m long, the same length as the processional avenue, and 12 m high. Each stoa includes three storeys; the first lower storey is built in the Doric order, the second, middle storey, in the ionic order, and the third, the upper storey, in the Corinthian order. The stoas are decorated with marble reliefs, which were once painted, on all the three storeys. As the reliefs are framed by a pair of columns in each storey, the result is the creation of a “picture wall” (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 18). These reliefs were set all along the stoa in groups consisting of three reliefs, with an emphasis on the central relief, which was located on a doorway. All in all, there were 200 reliefs, of which 80 have been recovered. The reliefs were arranged thematically. Thus, reliefs depicting members of the imperial family decorated the upper storey of the southern Stoa. According to an inscription (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 12), the emperors bear the title theoi sebastei olympioi, or Olympic imperial gods. The most important members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, such as the emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero, some imperial women, most notably Livia and Agrippina Minor, together with less prominent members such as Gaius and Lucius Caesar were depicted (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 30). This group of reliefs emphasizes the successful campaigns waged by the emperors, such as Claudius’s conquest of Britain (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 50-51), and Nero’s submission of Armenia (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 48-49). Thus a relief depicts Augustus together with Nik?-Victoria, the goddess of victory (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 38-39); another shows Claudius as the lord of the oikoumen? (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 76-77). Together with the emperors, various members of the imperial family are depicted, such as Livia offering a sacrifice to Aphrodite (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 34-35), Gaius and Lucius Caesar presented as the two Dioscuri (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 36-37), and Agrippina crowning her son Nero (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 20-21). Moreover, various reliefs depict personifications and goddesses stemming from Roman mythology and iconography. For example the goddess Rome is depicted standing alone (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 68-69), and together with G?, the goddess of the earth (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 46-47). A relief depicts an unidentified Roman emperor crowned by the Genius of the Roman people (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 56-57).

The second storey supports reliefs, which, for the most part, depict gods and heroes from Greek mythology. Moreover, three reliefs are dedicated to the myth of Aeneas, namely scenes depicting Anchises and Aphrodite (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 86-87), Aeneas’s departure from Troy (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 88-89), and Aeneas’s arrival in Italy (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 90-91). The northern stoa is less ornamented. However, the second storey is decorated with various reliefs depicting foreign peoples, which were brought under the domination of Rome by Augustus, such as the Egyptians, the Ethiopians, the Arabs, the Bessi (a people living in Thracia), the Bosphorans; the Dacians, the Dardani, the lapodes (a people living in Illyria), the Andizeti (also Illyrians), the Judeans, the Callaeci (a people living in Spain), the Pirousti (a people living in Illyria), the Rhaetii (a people living in the Alps), the Trupilini, and the provinces of Crete, Cyprus, and Sicily (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 26-27).

Date: 20 CE to 60 CE
Material: Marble
Measurements: 12 x 90 m (stoa)

Commentary:
The purpose of the huge complex was to commemorate the close association between the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the city of Aphrodisias. In fact, the Hellenized city, thanks to the efforts of Zollius, an imperial libertus, was successful in establishing a close relationship with Rome, emphasizing the close bonds between the city goddess Aphrodite and the gens Iulia (see Reynolds, Aphrodisias and Rome). The primary result was that the city was given various fiscal privileges and, most significantly, the status of free city. Moreover, this bond between Rome, the centre of the empire, and Aphrodisias, in the periphery, is emphasized by the fact that several members of the local elite financed the project. Indeed, the names of the local benefactors (euergetai) who founded the two stoas are known through inscriptions. Thus, the erection of the southern stoa was founded by Attalos and Diogenes [1.Aph.2007.9.25], while the erection of the northern stoa had been financed by Menandros and Eusebes [1.Aph.2007.9.112]. Therefore, the Sebasteion mirrors the close connection between Aphrodisias and Rome. This can be seen and understood at various levels. However, the main characteristic of the whole complex is that Greek and Roman architectural and iconographic
elements are blended together, creating a unique monument. Thus, considering the architecture of the stoas, it is striking that these buildings reached the height of three storeys. This is in line with contemporary buildings erected in Augustan Rome, such as the Theatre of Marcellus. However, following the rules of Greek architecture, the building used is a stoa. Moreover, Roman technology, most notably the use of constructive arches, is lacking. Considering the iconography of the reliefs, it is necessary to emphasize that while some groups closely follow Greek iconography, notably the reliefs depicting Greek gods and heroes, as well as some reliefs depicting the emperors, other reliefs blend together Greek mythological iconography together with that of the Roman historical relief, or closely follow Roman iconography. A good example of a relief which closely follows Greek iconography but depicts a Roman topic is the one depicting Claudius as lord of the oikoumen? (Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 76-77; Smith, The Marble Reliefs, p. 134-138). Another good example of a relief blending Greek and Roman iconography is the one depicting the goddess Roma dressed as a warrior, holding a spear and a shield. A bearded prisoner on his knees, with his hands tied behind the back, stands on her right, and the iconography of the prisoner closely follows Roman precedents (see Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 68-69; Smith, The Marble Reliefs, p. 165-166). Other good examples of reliefs which closely follow Roman iconography, are the three reliefs dedicated to the myth of Aeneas, namely scenes depicting Anchises and Venus, Aeneas’s journey from Troy, and his arrival in Italy (see Gönül, Aphrodisias, p. 86-91; Smith, The Marble Reliefs, p. 202-208). Yet, these reliefs are set amongst the group of reliefs depicting gods and heroes from Greek mythology, which closely follow a Greek iconographic tradition. These scenes, put in the framework of Greek myths, serve to emphasize the primary importance of the Julio-Claudian family, as well as Aphrodisias’s close association with Rome. Similar depictions of Aeneas fleeing Troy can be found on wall paintings from Pompeii as well as on coins minted under the rule of Antoninus Pius by the mint of Rome.

Another interesting example of a relief which closely follows Roman iconography, is the depiction of the Genius of the Roman People crowning the emperor with the corona civica, or oak wreath (on the Genius of the Roman People, see Denarius minted by P. Cornelius Lentulus Marcellinus, representing Rome crowned by the Genius of the Roman People [16], and the bibliography there). Here, the Genius of the Roman People is depicted dressed in a tunic and draped in a toga. Besides, the cornucopia is lacking. Although this relief is clearly inspired by Roman art and depicts Roman figures, its iconography nevertheless shows local variance.

The best example of Roman iconography is the depiction of the ethn?. These personifications of various populations closely follow similar examples depicted on imperial monuments in Rome. Thus, the personification dressed with a long tunic is then draped in a mantle. The hair dress, or a cap, as well as some other attributes such as weapons, could enable us to identify the origin of the person. For example, the identification of the Pirousti is based on their weapons: a small shield and probably a spear. However, the most helpful indication is an inscription set on the basement, topped by a garland, which bears the name of the people depicted (“the ethn? of the” followed by the name) (Smith, “Simulacra gentium: the ethn? from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias,” p. 50-77). This series of reliefs served to emphasize the successful domination of the oikoumen? achieved by Augustus and his successors.

It seems that for the anonymous artist, Greek myths represented the past, while the Roman emperors stood for the present. The fact that amongst Greek myths special pre-eminence was given to the myth of Aeneas, the topic of the Aeneid, is probably to be understood in light of the deep relationship between Aphrodisias and the ruling Julio-Claudian dynasty in Rome. Moreover, it had the effect of putting Roman hegemony within the framework of a Greek chronology, echoing the idea that Rome’s rule was foreseen from the beginnings of the history of the oikoumen?. Roman hegemony is perceived as extending both in time and space. While the statues of the ethn? clearly express a spatial concept, an hegemony that extends and encloses the borders of the known world, the statues of the successive emperors convey the sense of a temporal continuity, suggesting that Roman hegemony shall continue forever.

Finally, it is important in this framework to emphasize the task of the local elites, who by financing this monument or similar monuments in other eastern cities, promoted the imperial “propaganda,” and served as intermediaries between the central power and the cities in the East. Thus, the Sebasteion is a good example of how Roman imperial ideology was perceived and received in an eastern province during the Augustan and Julio-Claudian period.

Thematic keywords:

- ally [17]
- benefaction [18]
- benefactor [19]
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- Greeks [20]
- Aeneas [21]
- Roma (goddess) [22]
- Augustus [23]
- Claudius [24]
- Nero [25]
- province [26]
- temple [27]
- Aphrodite [28]
- evergetism [29]
- Roman hegemony [30]
- Julio-Claudian dynasty [31]
- Roman power [32]
- Roman domination [33]
- Roman people [34]
- Genius of the Roman people [35]
- eternity of the Roman empire [36]
- oikoumenë [37]

Bibliographical references:  Göñül Hall, Sevgi, *Aphrodisias, Sebasteion Yap Kredi Yayinlari* [38] (Istambul: YKY, 2008)
Reynolds, Joyce, *Aphrodisias and Rome: Documents from the Excavation of the Theatre at Aphrodisias Conducted by Professor Kenan T. Erim, together with Some Related Texts* [40] (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1982)

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