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CHECKLIST

Roman, Tunisian, stele with portrait of a boy, 3rd century CE, limestone
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William L. Eagleton Jr., B.A. 1948; 1984.121

Roman, Egyptian, Fayum portraits, 2nd century CE,
encaustic/tempera on wood
*Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of the Associates in Fine Arts
1939; 1939.263–264*

Near Eastern, Palmyrene, funeral stele of Herta, about 175 CE, limestone
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. Edgar Munroe; 1954.30.2

Egyptian, possibly from Kôm Abou Billou, sepulchral stele,
2nd–3rd century CE, limestone
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; S.978.41

Roman, *denarius* of Julia Domna, 196–211 CE, silver
Gift of Arthur Fairbanks, Class of 1886; 27.1.29392

Roman, *denarius* of Octavian, 28–27 BCE, silver
*Yale University Art Gallery: Transfer from Sterling Memorial Library,
Yale University; 2001.87.885*

Roman, *denarius* of Hadrian, 134–138 CE, silver
*Yale University Art Gallery: Transfer from Sterling Memorial Library,
Yale University; 2001.87.5967*

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Near Eastern, Palmyrene, funeral stele of Herta, about 175 CE, limestone.
Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. Edgar Munroe; 1954.30.2

CENTER AND PERIPHERY

Cultural Hybridity in the Funerary Arts of the Roman Provinces



Roman, Tunisian, stele with portrait of a boy, 3rd century CE, limestone. Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. William L. Eagleton Jr., B.A. 1948; 1984.121

Romanization—the process whereby Roman customs and values spread across disparate areas of the Roman Empire—is often thought of in terms of a unilateral movement toward a single, homogenous Roman culture. In truth, it was probably instead characterized by a dynamic exchange between imperial and provincial cultures. This installation presents examples of the kind of hybrid visual culture materialized in funeral art from certain key provinces—Syria, Africa Proconsularis (modern Tunisia), and Egypt—created during the era when the Roman Empire was at its greatest extent. The context of funerary art offers a special kind of insight into the formation and renegotiation of identity in the provinces, as this historically conservative genre might otherwise be expected to resist the intrusion of imperial culture.

In looking at the intersection of imperial and local customs and the construction of provincial identity, we must consider the various means through which one might express membership in a particular group. The selection of specific motifs and allusions in a given representation indicates cultural allegiances and

claims certain values, either consciously or unconsciously. In the Roman Empire the right to wear the toga was reserved for citizens and functioned as a physical marker of their *romanitas*, or Romanness. Citizenship conferred certain rights and advantages upon the individual, and while the indigenous inhabitants of the Roman provinces were initially excluded from this category, over time citizenship would be extended to those who served the empire or assimilated to “Roman ways” (Huskinson, 131). The North African stele with a portrait of a

boy, probably commissioned by the wealthy parents of a son who had predeceased them, commemorates and honors the child while proclaiming his Roman civic identity. This stele asserts the citizenship of its subject by presenting the boy in a *toga praetexta*, the traditional dress of Roman children who had not yet reached adulthood. The boy also wears typical Roman boots and a *bulla*, an apotropaic amulet given to freeborn citizens at birth to further distinguish their status (Dixon, 101). In his left hand the boy holds a *rotulus*, or scroll, a common attribute in representations of Roman emperors and officials that usually signified education and learning. In the funerary context, this motif may suggest the unfulfilled potential of the child who has died (Varner, 13). By displaying these specifically Roman items, the boy lays claim to his attachment to imperial culture and affirms his *romanitas*. While the main function of the stele is the remembrance of the deceased, the prominent presentation of these attributes perhaps also reflects the desire of a certain class of newly created Roman citizens to identify themselves as members of the dominant culture rather than provincial outsiders.

While the central figure of the boy utilizes particular attire to communicate a certain cultural identity, local beliefs and imagery are also displayed in the work. The seated female figure in the top register who nurses an infant is most likely a depiction of the local goddess of fecundity, Tanit. As a fertility goddess, she is often associated with childrearing and nurturing, which makes her appearance on the funerary stele of a child seem especially appropriate. The bottom register of the stele depicts a bull and a haystack, local imagery of sacrificial offerings often found in North African funerary and votive stelae (Varner, 12). The presence of such offerings and the fertility goddess demonstrates an enduring connection with pre-Roman religious practices. The combination of local North African motifs and specific Roman imperial attributes in this work also reflects the complexity and process of fusion involved in Romanization.

Like the stele of a boy from Africa Proconsularis, the funerary stele of Herta, daughter of Baida, from the city of Palmyra in the province of Roman Syria uses dress to communicate status and a shared Graeco-Roman heritage. In line with longstanding Near Eastern traditions regarding the afterlife, the stele, which would have sealed off a compartment for the body of the deceased in a funerary chamber, was believed to house the soul or personality of the individual who had died (Colledge, 58). While the burial and religious practices associated with this object show a continuation of Near Eastern customs, the female figure wears a traditional Greek *chiton* (tunic) and *himation* (cloak), indicating an association to her Hellenistic identity. Additionally, the affluence and social position of the woman are expressed via the abundance of jewelry presented; multiple necklaces, rings, earrings, and a diadem indicate great wealth. This conspicuous display of riches may be related to the economic changes that took place in Palmyra during the era of Roman rule. The city was located on the trade routes between the Roman west and the Parthian Empire to the east, and, due to this advantageous placement and the Roman Empire’s growing need for foreign goods, Palmyra became very prosperous during this time (Colledge, 14). The inferred wealth of the woman represented on the stele speaks to the economic growth that occurred under imperial rule.

Specific attributes or iconographic elements were not the only way in which mixed cultural identities could be expressed. Often the medium or style used to create a funerary representation communicates significant information about the identity of a patron or subject. The use of the encaustic technique (in which pigment is dissolved in beeswax and used to paint) in the mummy portrait of a youth, possibly from the Fayum Basin, for example, speaks to the diversity of cultures that were present in this area of Roman Egypt. Encaustic was a technique developed by the early Greeks, and its appearance in Roman Egypt suggests a diffusion of Graeco-Roman conventions through the empire. The naturalistic style of these portraits also derived from the Greek tradition. Classical texts indicate that naturalism and the ability to accurately capture the likeness of an individual were celebrated in Greek painting (Rubey, 136). In the portrait of a bearded man from the second century, particular attention is devoted to the rendering of bushy curls and facial hair as well as specific facial features. Though this kind of naturalism speaks of a connection with Graeco-Roman heritage, the function of such portraits was still tied to traditional Egyptian religious practices involving the mummification of the body. The placement of a representation of the deceased on or near the mummy of an individual was based on beliefs about the afterlife that spanned thousands of years of pharonic Egyptian culture (Walker, Bierbrier, Roberts, and Taylor, 9). The portraits, then, despite the heavy Hellenistic influence upon their style and technique, were essentially Egyptian in their purpose.

Cultural identity in the Roman Empire was not simple or unified. The diverse societies that became provinces under Roman rule experienced Romanization in varied ways. The intersection of imperial and provincial customs and the construction of cultural practices happened differently in each community, or even each household. The way in which a province, community, or individual negotiated this kind of cultural intersection and adaptation can provide modern viewers with insight into the concepts of identity and self-perception, then and now.

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Roman, Egyptian, portrait of a bearded man, 2nd century CE, tempera on wood. Yale University Art Gallery: Gift of the Associates in Fine Arts 1939; 1939.264

The majority of the objects in this installation are on loan from the Yale University Art Gallery as part of their innovative Collection-Sharing Initiative, which has been made possible by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.