

A NOTE ON A ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS
NOW IN THE MUSEO DELLE TERME.¹

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Few more remarkable monuments of later Roman art are preserved in the Roman museums than the great sarcophagus, once in the Villa Ludovisi and now in the Museo delle Terme.²

The sarcophagus, on which is represented a battle between Romans and barbarians (plate 1.³), was discovered in 1621 near the Porta San Lorenzo, and at that time still showed traces of the original gilding on some of the figures. Probably the effect had been further heightened by polychrome decoration. It measures 1.53 metres in height and 2.73 metres in length, dimensions surpassed by few monuments of the same class. There are no restorations, but the faces of some of the Roman soldiers seem to have been worked over in modern times.

On the face of the sarcophagus the scene of battle is framed by two Roman soldiers at the corners, each carrying a trophy.⁴ Within these limits the struggle is raging, but is evidently about to end in a victory for the Roman troops. Many of the barbarians have fallen, wounded or dying. One has his hands bound and is seized by the mouth by a legionary. Some few still keep up an unequal combat. To the left of the Roman commander, who occupies the centre of the picture, a barbarian chief turns back on his horse to strike a blow with his sword; to the right, a beardless youth, with masses of disordered hair,

¹ The substance of this paper was read at a meeting of the British School at Rome, January 30th, 1908.

² Schreiber, *Villa Ludovisi*, No. 186; Helbig, *Führer*, 2nd ed, No. 935; Mrs. Strong, *Roman Sculpture*, 321 *et seqq.* pl. c.

³ The Institute is indebted to Messrs.

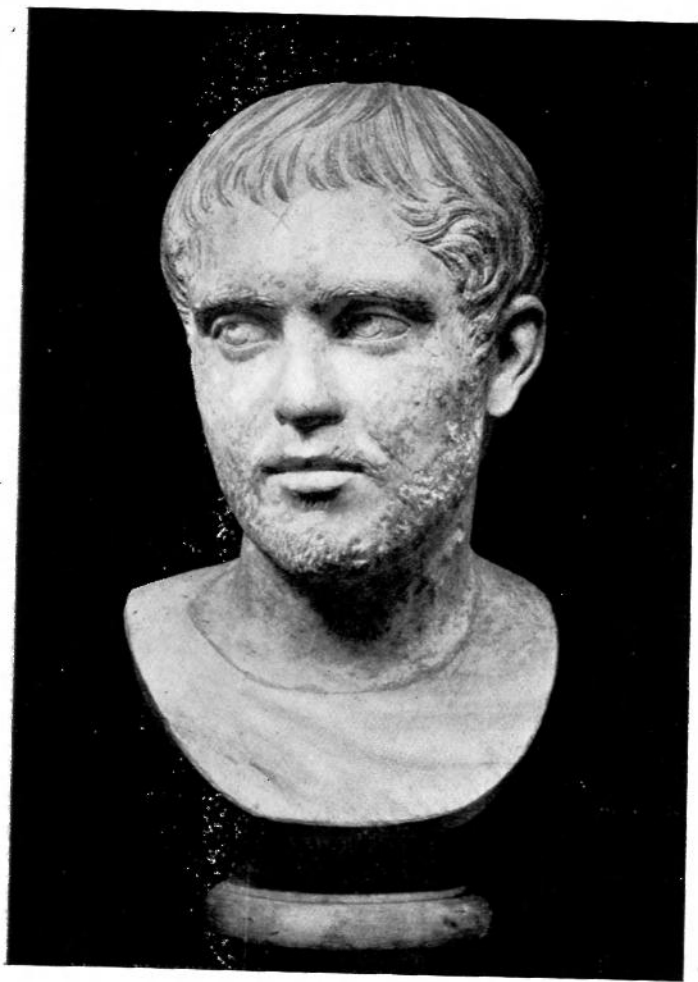
Duckworth and Co. for the loan of the block of this illustration, and to Messrs. Alinari, of Florence for permission to reproduce it.

⁴ Scenes from the same battle are carved on the sides. They are carelessly and superficially worked.



[Alinari, phot.]

ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS, NOW IN THE MUSEO DELLE TERME.



PORTRAIT HEAD IN THE CAPITOLINE MUSEUM.

is blowing a blast on a great horn which encircles his head. Immediately to the right of the central figure, and somewhat in the background, appears a dragon-standard, which, from its place and direction, seems to be an ensign of the Roman army. It may be noted that this standard, long in use among the barbarian enemies of the Empire—it occurs, for instance, on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius—is not recorded in literature as in use among the Romans at an earlier date than the reign of Gallienus.¹ No great weight, however, need be laid on this point, as the biographer of that emperor does not record the adoption of the standard, but merely mentions it in an account of a triumphal procession.

The composition of the relief is extraordinarily confused. The entire surface of the marble is covered by a mass of struggling figures, which completely conceal the background. The artist has that horror of a vacant space, which is often characteristic of early art. Its appearance here is a sign of that return to the archaic which is notable in Roman works of the decadence, and in portraiture is particularly striking in the gradual retrogression to a rigid "frontality." In this sarcophagus, however, there is no want of dramatic vigour and even of invention. The figure of the trumpeter with his swollen cheeks and the great horn used as a frame to his head has been justly noted as a powerful conception.²

We may now turn to the figure of the Roman general in the centre.³ He is represented on horseback with bare head, as is usual in scenes of this description. His hair is short and smooth and ends in curls over the forehead. He has a short beard, rendered with small incised lines. a snub nose, and plain undistinguished features. On his forehead is cut a small St. Andrew's cross, which is certainly antique, although it is not mentioned by Schreiber in his careful description of the monument.

The obvious importance of this figure would lead one to search for other portraits of him in the museums. Portraits in the round of persons represented on sarcophagi are not indeed known to me, but the Ludovisi sarcophagus

¹ Hist. Aug. Gallien, 8, 6,

² Mrs. Strong, *Roman Sculpture* 321.

³ This figure is absolutely intact and the face has not been worked over.

is of so remarkable a character that it would not be surprising to find an exception to the usual rule, and this expectation is not disappointed.

In the museum of the Capitol (Sala delle Colombe, no. 92), there is a head which is certainly a portrait of the same man (plate II.). The tip of the nose is unfortunately restored, but the form of the face, the rendering of hair and beard, especially of the curls over the forehead, and the style as a whole, correspond closely. On the forehead appears again the same incised cross, which here, too, bears all the marks of antiquity.¹

Who then is the person represented? The author of the *Beschreibung der Stadt Rom*² found in the head a close resemblance to Septimius Severus, but a glance at the coins or at the numerous authentic portraits of that emperor is sufficient to disprove the theory. At a somewhat later date Braun³ suggested the name of Severus Alexander, and proposed to interpret the scene as a battle between Romans and Persians. The latter part of Braun's explanation is, I believe, correct, but his identification cannot be accepted. The campaign of Severus Alexander on the Euphrates was far from successful, perhaps disastrous, and ended in an ignominious retreat to Antioch. Moreover, the appearance of the general on the sarcophagus is as unfavourable to Braun's view as the historical evidence. The short-cropped hair, fine features, and long, straight nose of the youthful emperor on his coins are wholly unlike the homely type of the unknown general. Recently Professor Helbig,⁴ adopting a very early view, has suggested the name of Volusianus, son of Trebonianus Gallus and a person of no importance, who never fought in the East. Mrs. Strong,⁵ on the other hand, is in favour of Claudius Gothicus, an active soldier, whose short reign was almost entirely taken up with wars in the Balkan peninsula. Both these suggestions, apart from other objections, are sufficiently disproved by a comparison with the coins. Neither the long face and straight nose of Volusianus, nor the

¹ I am unable to explain the curious feature in the two heads. One might suppose that it is some form of brand, but I know of no parallels.

² iii, 2, 591.

³ *Die Ruinen und Museen Roms*, 603, no. 28.

⁴ *Führer*, No. 935, cf. Bernoulli, *Rom. Ikonographie*, ii, 3, 162.

⁵ *Roman Sculpture*, 321.

thin, careworn features of Claudius Gothicus can be reconciled with the head on the sarcophagus.¹

None of the theories so far put forward can therefore be accepted, nor is there any other emperor who could be suggested with any greater probability. I have no certain identification to set in their place, but I should like to make a suggestion, which does not claim more than a certain degree of probability.

The Roman represented on the sarcophagus and in the Capitoline head is clearly a person of considerable importance, who commanded in wars between the empire and the barbarians. These barbarians are probably Persians. This is shown by the Phrygian caps worn by their commander on the front and sides of the sarcophagus, and by their close resemblance in details of costume to the Parthians on the arch of Septimius Severus in the Forum, and on the fragmentary reliefs found not long ago by the Austrian excavators in the Library at Ephesus.² On these monuments the Phrygian cap is clearly indicated and cannot be confused with the Dacian cap, which is of a different form. Nor do the physical type and arrangement of hair and beard agree with that so well-known from the Column of Trajan.

The style of the sarcophagus points to the third century and, more accurately, to the second quarter of it, since the crowded composition and the rendering of the hair and beard of the Roman general forbid us to place it as early as the reign of Septimius Severus, while the general merit of the execution would scarcely be found after 250.

The battle is, then, in all probability an event in some war in the East after the time of Septimius Severus and before the memorable capture of Valerian in 260. Within those limits there were three expeditions, those of Caracalla, Severus Alexander and Gordian III. The first was concluded by a disgraceful peace, after the murder of the emperor; the second was unsuccessful if not disastrous;

¹ For the coins of the emperor discussed above, cf. Bernoulli *op. cit.* ii, 3. Münztafeln i, iii, v, vi.

² Heberdey, *Oesterr. Jahreshefte*, vii. (1904), *Beiblatt*, p. 50 *et seq.* fig. 10, 11, p. 158 *et seq.* The reliefs commemorate the Parthian war of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius

Verus, who celebrated their triumph in 166. A fragment from some Roman monument raised in honour of that event is, in my opinion, preserved in a relief from the Ludovisi collection (Schreiber, No. 80, Cultrera, *Bollettino d'Arte*, 1908, p. 6 *et seqq.* fig. 4).

the third was a brilliant success, until the young Gordian was murdered in 244 by his successor, Philip the Arab.¹ The good fortune of this last campaign, during which the whole of Mesopotamia was recovered, was largely due to the excellent strategy of C. Furius Timesitheus, father-in-law of the emperor and praetorian prefect.² His stern discipline was combined with great care for the soldiers under his command, by whom he was both loved and feared. His death during the campaign was variously ascribed to natural causes and to the treachery of Philip.

Even in the lifetime of Timesitheus honours had been decreed to him by the senate as well as to his imperial son-in-law. By his will he left his fortune to the Roman people, which probably had as much respect for his memory as for that of the popular Gordian, whose statues Philip did not venture to remove.

I would suggest then that Timesitheus is the person whose portrait the sarcophagus in the Museo delle Terme and the Capitoline head have preserved. The style of both monuments agrees excellently with the date of his career. He alone fulfils the historical conditions as a man, who at this period achieved great distinction in a Persian war and whose memory was held in honour after his death.

¹ Hist. Aug. Gordian, 26, 3 *et seqq*; Zosimus, i, 18.

² Cf. Dessau, *Prosopographia Imp. Rom.* ii, 100, no. 405.