

## VII.—A PALMYRENE SCULPTOR AT SOUTH SHIELDS?

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When Haverfield and H. Stuart Jones selected "Some representative examples of Romano-British sculpture",<sup>1</sup> they chose two pieces from South Shields: the tombstones of Regina, wife of Barates of Palmyra,<sup>2</sup> and of Victor, freedman of Numerianus.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the former, but concentrating on its architectural features, they suggested that these revealed influences from Asia Minor or Syria. It is the purpose of the following notes to draw attention to other features of Regina's monument which, to the present writer, not only confirm the observations of Haverfield and Stuart Jones, but make it possible to believe that this tombstone is actually the work of a Palmyrene sculptor; and, as will be seen, the argument derives additional plausibility from a consideration of Victor's tombstone, which may well be attributable to the same hand.

Regina's monument deserves closer analysis than it has yet received, or can receive in these paragraphs. To recall it in brief terms, the deceased woman is represented seated in an arched niche beneath a pediment, the arch being supported on two pilasters, the pediment on two "secondary" capitals above those of the pilasters. These were the features which interested Haverfield and Stuart Jones. At the foot of the stone is the well-known bilingual epitaph, so far unique in Britain, in three lines of Latin characters and one of Palmyrene script (pl. XXXI, 1).

<sup>1</sup> *J.R.S.* II (1912), pp. 144-147, pls. VI, VII. Both stones are now in the Roman Fort Museum at South Shields.

<sup>2</sup> *A.A.*, 2nd Ser., X (1885), pp. 239-243.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 311ff.

The epitaph demands a preliminary note. The Latin, inscribed in bold but somewhat ungainly capitals, here and there influenced by cursive forms, contains errors of declension and betrays uncertainty as to the spelling of the name of Regina's tribe, the *Catuvellauni*.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Palmyrene has been carved with assurance by one evidently familiar with both the language and its script, and reproduces the standard form of epitaph, reduced to bare essentials, used on the tombstones of Palmyrenes in their homeland and in their settlements in different parts of the Empire.

It is, however, on details of Regina's portrait that the argument really depends. As a portrait it achieves, despite the unfortunate damage to the face, a feeling of life and naturalness completely subordinating the stiffly frontal pose, and reveals a skill in execution above the average for Roman Britain. Regina is seated on a cushion, facing the spectator, in a high-backed wicker chair, the weaving of which is lightly but carefully indicated. Her head is nimbed; of her hair only a few waves can be seen on the surviving part of the head, and the tresses which fall, one on either side of her neck, to rest on the shoulders.<sup>5</sup> Her costume consists of a loose-fitting gown with full sleeves ending just below the elbow, worn over an ankle-length dress; the feet were perhaps sandalled, but damage renders the point uncertain. Her personal adornment is simple: a necklet and two bracelets, one on either arm, which the sculptor has copied perhaps from originals woven from silver wire in a herringbone pattern. By her right foot stands a small chest, supported on strong legs, metal-bound and equipped with a

<sup>4</sup> The "official" form of the name is preserved in the inscription found at Howgill, Cumberland: (e) *civitate Catuvellaunorum*, *C.I.L.* VII, 863. On Regina's tombstone uncertainty is evident in the spelling, particularly in the alteration of the fourth letter of the tribal name from "o" to "u" while the stone was still under the hammer; the original "o" is quite visible.

<sup>5</sup> For a probably contemporary portrait in the fashion followed by Regina, cf. R. P. Hinks, *Greek and Roman Portrait Sculpture* (Brit. Mus., 1935), p. 33, pl. 45=A. H. Smith, *Catalogue of Sculpture in the Dept. of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Brit. Mus., 1892-1904), No. 2009.

lock; her right hand is in the act of raising the lid, which is fitted with a drop-handle. Her left hand, holding a distaff and a spindle, rests on her lap, while a basket containing what appear to be balls of wool and pieces of material lies by her left foot.

At first sight, this is just a conventional, albeit superior, example of the better class of Romano-British tombstones of women, in which the deceased is portrayed with things either symbolic of her wifely duties or closely associated with her during life; and so it has always been regarded. As, for instance, in a well-known tombstone at Carlisle we see a woman holding up her fan, while her child strokes a pet dove in her lap,<sup>6</sup> so here we have Regina with the implements for her weaving and the chest in which she kept her personal belongings. Individuality is the keynote of such portraits, and tombstones like these were evidently made to order and not bought ready-made with only the epitaph to add.

It has never been questioned whether, like the frame around it and the epitaph below it, this charming picture might also reveal exotic influences. Indeed, Regina's chair belongs to a class often represented in funerary and religious sculpture in Britain and neighbouring provinces.<sup>7</sup> Hairstyle, dress and ornaments, too, are characteristic of a woman of her class and times in the Western Empire; so that, when the sculptor introduces a chest, a basket of materials, a distaff and a spindle, it does seem that he is merely adding the individual touches required to bring an otherwise conventional portrait to life.

But a brief study of the tombstones of women of the native city of Regina's husband brings to light some illuminating parallels to the monument that he erected in her memory. In one, for example (pl. XXXII),<sup>8</sup> the *stela* of the woman Reoutah, a casket by the right foot and a basket by

<sup>6</sup> F. Haverfield, *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones in the Carlisle Museum, Tullie House* (1922), No. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Joan Liversidge, *Furniture in Roman Britain* (1955), pp. 15ff., pls. 25-32.

<sup>8</sup> J.-B. Chabot, *Choix d'Inscriptions de Palmyre* (1922), pl. XXVIII, 16.

the left immediately catch the eye of anyone familiar with the portrait of Regina. Admittedly, the contents of the basket are debatable, but it may be noted that a basket said to contain wool appears in the same position on another Palmyrene relief, depicting the goddess Latona, where it is interpreted as a symbol of the domestic duties of the Palmyrene woman, whose dress the goddess has assumed.<sup>9</sup>

Two details of Regina's portrait thus find highly interesting parallels in a Palmyrene relief. A third detail, and this is quite striking, is matched exactly on so many Palmyrene tombstones bearing representations of women that it was clearly a well-established convention: it is the distaff and spindle, normally held, it seems, in the left hand. Two illustrations, portraits of women, will suffice (pl. XXXIII);<sup>10</sup> they are quite typical and speak for themselves.

Casket, distaff and spindle, basket of wools: on no Romano-British tombstone other than Regina's is a woman portrayed with all these objects,<sup>11</sup> and it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that their appearance on her monument must be attributed, not to the sculptor's imagination, but to his knowledge of the conventions of Palmyrene funerary art.

"It would be fanciful to suppose," wrote the authors of "Some representative examples",<sup>12</sup> "that Barates had with him oriental workmen from his eastern home. It is less unlikely that he had himself some technical interest or training in stonecarving." It is known, however, from his own epitaph at Corstopitum, that Barates was a maker or purveyor of military standards;<sup>13</sup> and while this does not rule

<sup>9</sup> H. Seyrig, *Antiquités Syriennes, Syria XIV* (1933), p. 163, pl. XXI, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pl. XXX, 1, 2.

<sup>11</sup> A distaff is said to be represented on a tombstone at Chester, but there it is tucked into the woman's belt; v. R. P. Wright and I. A. Richmond, *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester* (1955), No. 37, pl. XIII.

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 145. To the examples of the "decorative combination of arch and pediment" in Asia Minor, illustrated in Lanckoronski, *Pisidien*, II, pl. 4 (cited by Haverfield and Stuart Jones) may be added one from the Upper Tembris Valley, *J.R.S.* XVIII (1928), pl. III, No. 247.

<sup>13</sup> *A.A.*, 3rd Ser., VIII (1912), p. 188, para 3, p. 189, fig. 12; cf. E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (1953), pp. 81-82.

out the possibility that he may also have been a skilled sculptor, it makes it difficult to believe that he could have engaged himself successfully in two so unrelated occupations. It is, in fact, not at all fanciful to suppose that there were other orientals, even Palmyrenes, in the settlement at the mouth of the Tyne, or that it is to one of them that we must attribute Regina's monument.

It is at this point that we turn to the tombstone of the freedman Victor (pl. XXXI, 2).<sup>14</sup> This is a work of very different character from that which we have been discussing. It is a ready-made piece, an example of the well-known "funeral banquet" class of tombstone, much favoured by freedmen. Victor is shown lying at ease upon an elegant bed or couch, which is supported on moulded legs standing on blocks, and is spread with an embroidered mattress and pillow. The care with which the frill of the pillow and the creases of the mattress have been carved is matched in the representation of the light gown and heavier cloak with which Victor is clothed; the cut of the neckline, the form of the full, short sleeves and the folds of the gown may be noted. As with Regina's portrait, the head has most unfortunately suffered severe damage; from what remains it can be seen, however, that the hair was a mass of small curls in front, swept back behind and kept in place by a thin fillet. Only a part of the right cheek, with the outer corner of the eye and the end of the eyebrow, and part of the clean-shaven chin have survived, but the folds of fat round the throat suggest that the representation of the features was naturalistic and life-like. Even in its injured state the work is one of the most notable sculptures of Roman Britain, and it may be observed that the stone, a close-grained sandstone especially suitable for the rendering of detail, must have been carefully selected by a sculptor who knew his craft well: it is a very different stone from the gritty material usually employed for building and carving on Roman sites in the north.

Victor reclines, resting his left elbow on the pillow and

<sup>14</sup> *A.A.*, 2nd Ser., X (1885), pp. 311ff.

holding a small bowl in his left hand. His right hand, hanging over his raised right leg, holds a bunch of leaves. Behind him, the otherwise blank background is relieved by a lightly-incised scroll with spreading tendrils but with neither leaves nor fruit by which it might be identified. In the foreground a diminutive figure raised a decorated bowl which he has filled from the large fluted *cantharus* on the ground in front of him, and offers it to the deceased. The scene is framed at the sides by two moulded pilasters with simple, unconventional capitals. These support a pediment, in the centre of which is a lion-mask with a large ring in the mouth. Above the pediment, one on either side of the stone, are two busts springing from elliptical medallions, the faces of which were turned slightly towards each other. The four-line epitaph is inscribed in a panel at the base which was not designed for a text so long.

The commentary on Victor's monument in "Some representative examples" is very brief and contributes little to an appreciation of the stone, merely observing that the composition has been simplified by the omission of certain features, in particular the three-legged table with food which normally stands in front of the couch on Romano-British "funeral banquet" tombstones, and going on to say that "the medallion busts which occupy the upper corners apply (though here with little more than a decorative purpose) a type in which Roman art, especially in the eastern Alps, achieved great success".<sup>15</sup> It is possible to add something to these remarks. To begin with, "funeral banquet" tombstones are not uncommon in Britain; at Chester, particularly, there was at least one sculptor who turned out a number of closely similar examples.<sup>16</sup> But whether at Chester or elsewhere in Britain there is no tombstone of this class to compare for quality with Victor's, and there are two important points of contrast in detail. One of these, the

<sup>15</sup> Loc. cit., pp. 144-145. But cf. Chabot, *op. cit.*, pl. XXX, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Wright and Richmond, *op. cit.*, pls. XIV, No. 43, XIX, Nos. 65, 66, XXVIII, No. 108, XXIX, Nos. 111-113, XXX, No. 116.

omission of the usual three-legged table, has already been noted. The other is in the object placed in the deceased's right hand. At Chester this is nearly always a scroll, presumed to be the parchment containing the will; elsewhere the right hand is either empty or holds a cup; only at South Shields does it hold a bunch of leaves.

This is the most significant feature, in the present context, of Victor's monument, for although it is unique so far as "funeral banquet" tombstones in Britain are concerned, it is repeatedly a feature of those found in the cemeteries at Palmyra. Again, two examples, representative of many, will suffice. The first (pl. XXXIV, 1)<sup>17</sup> offers a remarkable parallel to Victor's tombstone, not only in the bunch of leaves, perhaps an attribute of holiness,<sup>18</sup> but also in the style of the costume and the manner in which it is worn. The second example (pl. XXXIV, 2)<sup>19</sup> has also been chosen to illustrate something besides the bunch of leaves in the right hand: in this case it is the mask of a lion with a large ring in the mouth, absolutely identical with that in the centre of the pediment on the tombstone of Victor.

The bedding on most Palmyrene reliefs is much more decorative than that on Victor's couch, but some show mattresses much less ornate and very similar to Victor's, with bands of embroidery on a plain background,<sup>20</sup> while others have carved bedsteads with moulded legs, each standing on a block, which very closely match the bed or couch on which Victor lies.<sup>21</sup> Even the scroll which relieves the background on Victor's monument can be shown to have a parallel in Palmyrene art.<sup>22</sup> The evidence of Victor's stone thus com-

<sup>17</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pl. XXVII, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Seyrig, *loc. cit.*, p. 162. Cf. D. Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest* (1951), pl. XXXV, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pl. XXVII, 10. For a gargoyle in the form of a lion-mask in very similar style from the region of Palmyra, v. Schlumberger, *op. cit.*, pl. XLIV, 1-2. Cf. *Syria XVII* (1936), pl. XXVIII, "doorknockers".

<sup>20</sup> E.g., *ibid.*, pl. XXVII, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. Starcky, *Palmyre* (1952), pl. XIII, 2, Schlumberger, *op. cit.*, pl. XL, 4, and *Syria XVII* (1936), pl. XLVI, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Starcky, *op. cit.*, pl. XII, 10=H. Ingholt, H. Seyrig, J. Starcky, *Recueil des Tessères de Palmyre*, No. 33, a *tessera* of Bolha, priest and symposiarch.

plements and confirms that of Regina's, and what began as a suspicion becomes a conviction that both monuments can be attributed to a compatriot of Barates, Regina's Palmyrene husband. The differences between the two stones are undeniable, but can be explained without much difficulty as differences such as one expects to find between a special commission and a ready-made piece; there may well have been, moreover, some difference in time between the production of one stone and that of the other. And if particular links between them be demanded they may perhaps be discerned in the epitaphs, the uncertain Latin, the use of *natio*,<sup>23</sup> and the forms of some of the letters, especially the B's, the R's and the V's.

<sup>23</sup> The usual term for a British tribe was *civitas*, as in *C.I.L.* VII, 775, 776, 863; literary sources confirm the inscriptions here. Except at South Shields, *natio* is only once used in Romano-British inscriptions, *C.I.L.* VII, 1091, from Mumrills, where it refers to the Brigantes; generally it is a term reserved for whole peoples rather than tribes, and in that respect its use on Victor's stone raises no queries.





FIG. 1. TOMBSTONE OF REGINA, ROMAN MUSEUM, SOUTH SHIELDS.



FIG. 2. TOMBSTONE OF VICTOR, ROMAN MUSEUM, SOUTH SHIELDS.  
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TOMBSTONE OF A PALMYRENE WOMAN IN THE NY CARLSBERG MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN.

Reprod. from Chabot, *Choix d'Inscriptions de Palmyre*, pl. XXVIII, 16.



TOMBSTONES OF TWO PALMYRENE WOMEN IN THE NY CARLSBERG MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN.

Reprod. from Chabot, *Choix d'Inscriptions de Palmyre*, pl. XXX, 1, 2.





FIG. 1. FRAGMENT FROM A PALMYRENE SARCOPHAGUS.



FIG. 2. FRAGMENT FROM A PALMYRENE SARCOPHAGUS IN THE NY CARLSBERG MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN.

Reprod. from Chabot, *Choix d'Inscriptions de Palmyre*, pl. XXVII, 10, 11.

