1st INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Ancient Greece and Ancient Iran
Cross-Cultural Encounters

ATHENS, 11-13 NOVEMBER 2006

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Athens 2008
OLGA PALAGIA

The Marble of the Penelope from Persepolis and Its Historical Implications

A LIFE-SIZE Greek lady in the Severe Style was excavated in Persepolis by the Oriental Institute of Chicago in 1945 and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Tehran (inv. no. 1538) (Figs. 1-2). It lay scattered in three fragments in the ruins of the Persepolis Treasury, headless torso lying in Corridor 31, shattered right hand in Hall 38. The circumstances of discovery recall the destruction of Persepolis by Alexander the Great in spring 330 BC (Arr., Anab. 3.18.11-12). Before torching the palace, Alexander removed the gold stored in the Treasury and allowed his army to plunder the rest of its contents. According to Curtius' graphic description (5.6.5), '[the soldiers] hacked to pieces with axes vases that were precious works of art... Statues were dismembered and individuals dragged away the limbs they had broken off'. This explains why the rest of the statue was never found: it was probably carried away as a souvenir. It is interesting that the obvious Greek provenance of the statue did not save it from destruction. Its placement in the Treasury is no less intriguing. Gift or loot? This question has always haunted scholarship on the statue. But new evidence has come to light that may help resolve the problem.

Arrian (Anab. 6.30.1) reports that when Alexander returned to Persepolis in 324 he regretted his action. And when the ambassadors of the Greek cities came to see him at Babylon shortly thereafter, he went so far as to promise repatriation for a number of statues looted by Darius I and Xerxes from Ionia and Greece in the 490s and 480s (7.19.2). These included the bronze Apollo Philesios by Kanachos, taken from Miletus in 493 in retaliation for the Ionian revolt, the bronze Tyrannicides by Antenor, a statue of...
Artemis Kelkaia, and a bronze statuette of a female water-carrier dedicated by Themistokles, all plundered from Athens in 479, and a cult statue of Artemis removed from Brauron at the same time. Those statues were distributed to various centres of the Great King’s domain, Sardis, Ecbatana, Susa, Pasargadae, Babylon and Persepolis. We do not know if they were placed on public display, with the exception of Themistokles’ Water-Carrier, which ended up in the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods at Sardis. The exiled Themistokles tried to persuade the satrap of Lydia to return it to Athens, but his request was turned down. The Tyrannicides were probably repatriated after Alexander’s death, either by Seleucus I or his son Antiochos I; Seleucus was also responsible for the return of the Apollo Philesios to Miletus.²

The Penelope of Persepolis sits on a stool, legs crossed, head bent (Figs. 1-2). She wears a chiton and a himation covering her head, back and lower body. The head with the neck, both forearms, left hand, lower legs and feet, along with most of the seat, are missing. The fragmentary right hand has a groove running along the palm, indicating that it held a rod-like metallic object, now lost.³ The stool was placed on top of a wool basket: the round outline of its shaft is now visible underneath the seat.⁴ The stool was pieced, its underside carrying anathyrosis and circular holes for attachment on either side. Three holes remain at the rear, two in front, but their original number is unknown. The figure is composed as a relief, with only one good view, showing her torso frontal while the legs and right arm are in profile. The pose is awkward but the drapery in front appears sophisticated, especially the loose ends of the chiton folds over her midriff and the himation draped over the thighs. This transition from the old to the new is a characteristic of the Severe Style. The drapery over her torso anticipates the gods on the east frieze of the Parthenon, especially Artemis (Fig. 3); but her stiff pose and flat composition indicate an earlier phase closer to the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia.⁵

The statuary type had long been known from two headless marble sculptures of the Roman imperial period. Both were found in Rome and are now in the Vatican Museum. In the Galleria delle Statue, a statue of a figure sitting on a rock has been restored with a non-pertinent head (Fig. 4), while a fragmentary relief in the Museo Gregoriano Profano (formerly in
the Museo Chiaramonti) (Fig. 5) preserves the wool basket and the left hand resting on it.⁵ In 1891 Studniczka associated the ex Chiaramonti relief with a Severe Style head in Berlin (Figs. 6-7), also from Rome, showing a woman leaning her head on what appear to be the remnants of her right hand.⁶ The Berlin head wears a broad headband, probably a sakkos, underneath a himation drawn up over her head. The bangs over her forehead recall the hairstyle of the Severe Style Artemision God.⁷ There are two other copies of the head, both with a Roman provenance, one in Copenhagen and the other, heavily battered, in the Museo Nazionale in Rome.⁸ The head in the Museo Nazionale has a flat surface on the right side of the head for the attachment of a separately carved hand. Sadly, all three copies of the head lack their noses.

Studniczka’s reconstruction shows her leaning her head on her right hand in an attitude of dejection, left hand resting on the stool (Fig. 8). Variants of this reconstruction combining different elements of the various copies were produced by Treu (1882-1916), Langlotz (1961) and Gauer.
The motif of the head leaning on the hand was challenged by Stähler, who was the first scholar to take account of the groove in the right palm of the Persepolis statue. He reached the conclusion that her right hand held out a wreath by comparison with a later variant represented on a stater from Thebes from c. 446-426 BC, showing a seated woman holding out a helmet in her left hand, right hand placed on hip. But the metallic, rod-like object in Penelope’s right hand need not rule out its traditional placement on the right cheek. A new reconstruction in plaster created for the Museum für Abgüsse klassischer Bildwerke in Munich adds a spindle in the right hand supporting the head, thus identifying the figure with Penelope (Fig. 9).

The prototype most probably did represent grieving Penelope waiting for Odysseus, judging by the numerous reproductions in other media that circulated in the fifth century. It was obviously both popular and accessible, inspiring a spate of reproductions in a wide range of regions, the earliest dating from 460 BC. Only a few examples need be cited here. A number of clay ‘Melian’ reliefs combine her with Odysseus and other figures at the moment of recognition. A gold ring in New York naming her in the Dorian dialect (ΠΑΝΕΑΟΙΑ) includes Odysseus’ bow thus evoking the slaying of the suitors. An Attic red-figure skyphos of c. 440 in Chiusi represents her in front of her loom, attended by her son Telemachos, while the other side shows Odysseus being recognized by the old servant washing his feet. This vase has prompted the suggestion that the seated Penelope was invented by a famous Severe Style painter and was subsequently adapted into other media.

In the second quarter of the fifth century Polyclitus of Thasos painted a series of works inspired by the life of Odysseus, a Nekyia or Descent into the Underworld for the Lesche of the Cnidians at Delphi (Paus. 10.28-31), Odysseus stealing the bow of Philoktetes on Lemnos for Athens (Paus. 1.22.6), and Odysseus slaying the suitors for the temple of Athena Areia at Plataea (Paus. 9.4.1). He may have painted further Odysseus themes, for
example at Thespiai, where we are told that a work of his of unknown sub-
ject was restored by Pausias in the fourth century BC (Plin. HN 35.123). A
seated Penelope contemplating her fate could easily have formed part of
any number of Odysseus compositions. It has been suggested that the pic-
torial prototype of the seated Penelope was invented by Polygnotos in his
painting at Thespiai.\textsuperscript{20} But other possibilities present themselves, not least
a picture of the massacre of the suitors, with which indeed she seems to be
associated on the New York ring on account of the addition of Odysseus’
bow. The attribution of the Penelope prototype to Polygnotos is an attrac-
tive suggestion that goes back a long way and has met with wide accep-
tance. In addition, Pliny (HN 34.85) reports the little-known fact that Polyg-
notos was not only a famous painter but also a bronze sculptor. It is not un-
likely that he may have turned his own design into a statue. But this re-
mains in the realm of speculation.

The appearance of an ‘original’ Greek marble version at Persepolis has
generated endless discussion as to its provenance, date, and relation to the
Roman copies and adaptations, which were obviously based on another
original that survived into the Roman imperial period.\textsuperscript{21} A case of two
identical originals is attested before this time by the bronze Apollo Mile-
sios by Kanachos, carried away by Darius I in 493 BC, and its wooden con-
temporary replica by the same artist in Thebes.\textsuperscript{22} One assumes a duplicate
dedication, especially as later replicas of earlier types are unheard of in the
archaic and classical periods.\textsuperscript{23} Such retrospective tendencies are only com-
mon from the first century BC onwards.

The Persepolis statue (Fig. 1) has been considered a marble copy of a
bronze original or a second marble original. There is no consensus over its
date. Most scholars place her in the decade 460-450 BC but she is probably
closer to the mid-fifth century on account of her affinity to the Parthenon
frieze. A minority view considers her either a High Classical or a Rich
Style imitation of a Severe Style prototype despite the fact that we have
no evidence of reproductions of Severe Style originals in the second half
of the fifth century.\textsuperscript{24} The more ‘archaic’ appearance of the Roman copies
has prompted the suggestion that the Persepolis statue was created one,
two or more decades after the putative prototype which is reflected in the
Vatican copies. It is not safe, however, to make stylistic arguments based
on Roman copies, as these may be contaminated by retrospection or oth-
er tendencies. The stylistic differences detected between the Persepolis
torso and the Roman copies need not reflect two originals created at dif-
ferent times but may be attributed to the whims of the copyists. On pre-
sent evidence, it is safer to assume that two versions of the Penelope were
created at the same time, that is, around the middle of the fifth century, in
order to be set up at different locations.\textsuperscript{25} Because the Persepolis statue
was created long after the Persian raids of the first quarter of the fifth cen-
tury, it was probably not loot but a gift from a Greek city to the Great
King.\textsuperscript{26} The historical context may well be mounting opposition against
Athenian oppression in the middle years of the century, when the Delian
League was gradually transformed into an Athenian empire. After the dis-
aster of the Athenian fleet in Egypt in the mid-450s there were movements
of rapprochement between Ionian cities and the Persians, e.g., Erythrai
and Miletus.\textsuperscript{27} In 440/39 Samos solicited Persian support in its attempt to
secede from the Athenian alliance\textsuperscript{28} and there may have been other, un-
recorded cases of allies looking eastward.
The origin of the Persepolis statue has been tentatively placed on an unspecified Greek island or on Samos, in Cyzicus, Colophon, Phocaea, Thessaly, Sparta, even Athens. Despite the fact that there was no Severe Style in East Greece, her style is often described as Ionian. Because the motif of the woman seated in dejection was later adapted to represent a variety of figures, like Electra on ‘Melian’ plaques or Demeter on the Parthenon frieze and possibly other local deities and personifications, the identification of the Persepolis statue with Penelope has been questioned. She has been interpreted instead as Aphrodite mourning for Adonis, perhaps dedicated at Phocaea by Aspasia; as a city personification like Larissa, created by the Phocaean artist Telephanes for the Thessalians; as Hellas waiting to be liberated from the Persians by the Athenians and their allies or to be rid of Athenian domination with the assistance of Persia or as Eleutheria (‘Freedom’) on the evidence of a fourth-century coin type from Cyzicus. In sum, its findspot in the Persepolis Treasury has affected the interpretation of its iconography, which has been invested with a political significance.

There is, however, one factor that has not been taken into consideration in the discussion of the Persepolis statue, and that is the provenance of its marble. Olmstead, who first published the torso, identified it as Greek island marble. This was contested by Langlotz, who remarked that the marble is similar to that of many sculptures from Ephesus and therefore must come from that area. Discussion of the marble soon stopped as other scholars only knew the statue from plaster casts in European collections or from photographs. The present writer had the opportunity to view the statue while it was on display on the loan exhibition ‘Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia’ in the British Museum in autumn 2005. The coarse-grained white marble (Fig. 10) with its sugary, sparkling texture can be readily distinguished as the dolomitic marble quarried at Cape Vathy on the island of Thasos in northern Greece. In the absence of scientific tests determining its provenance, one can only compare its appearance to other
sculptures in Thasian marble in Greek museums, for example a grave relief from Dikaia in Thrace in the Athens National Museum (inv. no. 40) (Fig. 11). Thasian marble was widely exported in the Roman empire and extensively employed for the Roman sculptures at Ephesus (for example, in the Parthian Monument), which explains why Langlotz believed it was local. It was not, however, much exported in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, except to the Greek cities on the Thracian coast, for example, Neapolis (modern Kavala), Abdera, Dikaia and Maroneia. The sculptural production of these cities was very limited at that time and is usually credited to Thasian workshops. A probable Thasian work carved in Thasian marble is a Severe Style grave relief from Komotini in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki (inv. no. 1251). It has been suggested that Thasian marble also found a market in Magna Graecia in the fifth century, but the few Thasian marble sculptures assigned to South Italy are in fact pieces of doubtful provenance in American museums. Until further evidence becomes available, the South Italian connection remains sub judice.

In sum, if the Persepolis statue is in Thasian marble, it must come from a Thasian workshop which operated either on the island or in the cities on the opposite coast. What do we know of Thasian sculpture in the Severe Style? Not much. Apart from a fine banquet relief in a style related to that of Paros, now in the Istanbul Museum (inv. no. 1947), we hear from Pausanias (5.25.12-13; 6.11.2) of bronze statues of Herakles and the Olympic victor Theagenes dedicated by the Thasians at Olympia, probably in the second quarter of the fifth century. Bronze sculptural production indicates prosperity. Thasian history in the fifth century is marked by the struggle to stave off the encroachment of Athens, in an effort to maintain control of the gold mines on Mount Pangaion in Thrace. Thasos' revolt from the Delian League in 465 ended in disaster. After a three-year siege and a vain appeal to Sparta for help, Thasos surrendered to Kimon in 463 and gave up its dependencies on Thrace. Financial recovery seems to have returned sometime between 446 and 444, when Thasos' annual tribute to the Al-
liance rose steeply from 3 to 30 talents. It was precisely at that time that the most famous Thasian artist of all time, the painter Polygnotos, returned to settle on the island, as is indicated by the lists of theoroi from the 440s.

If the statue of Penelope was created by a Thasian workshop, then it cannot have been plundered by the Persians, who did not raid either Thasos or the opposite coast in the mid-fifth century. Xerxes and his army were lavishly entertained on the island when making their way to Greece in 480 BC. The memory of good relations presumably remained, and the Persepolis statue could conceivably have been offered as a gift to his successor, Artaxerxes I. This would have constituted an act of defiance against Thasos' Athenian allies, perhaps a secret attempt to curry favour with the Persians, an attempt that has eluded our literary sources. The Thasians had, after all, secretly solicited the aid of Sparta in the 460s (Thuc. 1.101.1). Regardless of whether the Persepolis statue represents Penelope or not, it is likely that its true significance lies not in its iconography but in its putative association with Polygnotos, which makes it into a hallmark of Thasian art. The prototype of the Roman copies was a second original, which must have been taken to Rome because all copies were found in Rome. If this second original stood on the island, it may well have been removed by Mark Antony after the battle of Philippi in retaliation for Thasian support of Brutus and Cassius.

As luck would have it, the closest stylistic parallel to the Penelope can be found in another Severe Style sculpture in Thasian marble found in Rome: the Boston Throne (Figs. 12-15). This appeared in the antiquities market in Rome in 1894, having reportedly come to light in the area of the Gardens of Sallust, not far from the findspot of its ‘twin’, the Ludovisi Throne, which was excavated in 1887. The Ludovisi Throne ended up in the Museo Nazionale in Rome, whereas the Boston Throne was acquired by E. P. Warren, who took it to his property, Lewes House in Sussex in 1896, and eventually sold it to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1908. The surface of the marble was covered by accretions, so-called root marks, but was cleaned with a razor prior to shipment to America. If we compare photos of the present state of the relief (Figs. 14-15) with those taken before the sculpture was over-cleaned (Figs. 12-13), we can appreciate how the almost lifeless appearance of the Boston Throne is due to the removal of its original surface.
Both the Boston and the Ludovisi Thrones have long been considered of South Italian origin. They were first associated with Lokroi Epizephyrioi by Amelung in 1913, and the connection was reinforced by Ashmole in 1922 on the basis of the so-called Ionian style of the Locrian pinakes. An alternative interpretation has associated them with the temple of Venus at Eryx in Sicily on account of the proximity of their findspots to the alleged whereabouts of the temple of Venus Ericyna in Rome. The fact, however, that no Thasian marble sculptures are securely attested in Magna Graecia in the fifth century, combined with the feeble surface and the uncertainty over the findspot of the Boston Throne, has raised doubts over its authenticity. Despite brave attempts to defend it on technical grounds, mainly on the part of Ashmole and Young in the 1960s, Herrmann and Newman, and Ohnesorg in the 1990s, a shadow of a doubt has lingered.

We have already seen, however, that fifth-century sculptures in Thasian marble are more likely to have been produced in northern Greece. A northern Greek connection for the Boston Throne had already been suggested by Bakalakis in 1955. He pointed out the similarity of the volutes of the Boston Throne to a corner akroterion in Thasian marble from an altar found in Maroneia and now in the Komotini Museum (inv. no. 936). The connection was taken up by Herrmann in 1995, but he only went so far as to postulate a sculptor from the northern Aegean active in Italy. An association of the Throne with the workshop of the Penelope, however, may help resolve the problem.

It is not my intention to discuss the complex problems issuing from the unusual iconography of the Boston Throne, only to demonstrate its stylistic affinities to the Penelope. The front of the Throne represents what appears to be a weighing of souls (Figs. 12-13). The side panels show an old woman, possibly one of the Fates (Fig. 14), spinning the fate of one of the souls, while a naked youth plays his lyre on the other side (Fig. 15). A Thracian connection can be detected in the features of the so-called Fate, who
is portrayed like a Thracian slave woman as we know them from Attic red-
figure vase-painting. An Attic red-figure skyphos in Schwerin showing
Herakles going to a music lesson includes his old slave woman, Geropso,
whose features recall those of the Boston 'Fate'.59

The eyes, lips and chin of the Penelope head in Berlin (Fig. 7) are very
close to those of the lyre player on the side panel of the Boston Throne (Fig.
15). Penelope's gesture is repeated in the grieving woman on the right of
the front face of the Throne, while her pose with frontal torso in chiton and
profile legs in himation finds a close parallel in the woman on the left (Figs.
12-13). As for the Thasian connection, we need only compare the physique
of the lyre player to the banqueting hero on the Thasian relief in Istanbul60
and observe the thick cushions in two layers represented both on this relief
and on the Throne. In sum, the close similarities between the Penelope and
the Boston Throne point to a common workshop, operating in the northern
Aegean. This would easily explain the use of Thasian marble and
would remove some of the strongest objections to the Throne's authentici-
ty. The Boston Throne and its counterpart, the Ludovisi Throne, may well
have stood on Thasos and have been removed to Rome along with the sec-
ond original of the Penelope.

In conclusion, we suggest that the Penelope from Persepolis was made
around the middle of the fifth century and offered by the city of Thasos to
the Great King. It was probably chosen not for its subject matter but for its
connection with the famous Thasian artist Polygnotos and must document
otherwise unattested diplomatic relations of the island with Persia despite
its membership of the Delian League. The situation in the northern
Aegean in the mid-fifth century was perhaps more fluid than our sources
seem to suggest.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Brian Bosworth for help with the question of Macedonian destruction in
Persepolis, as well as with the issue of repatriation of statues stolen by the Persians. The
British Museum provided the photo Fig. 10 with the permission of the Tehran Museum:
thanks are due to Dyfr Williams and John Curtis for their assistance in the matter. Hans R.
Goette kindly took new photos of the plaster casts of the Persepolis Penelope in Berlin
(Figs. 1-2) and of the Vatican Penelope statue in Basel (Fig. 4), and helped with obtaining
photos of the marble head in Berlin (Figs. 6-7). I am much indebted to G. B. Waywell for
providing photos of the Boston Throne from the Ashmole Archive in King's College, Lon-
don. Last but not least Ingeborg Kader sent me a copy of Penelope Rekonstruiert and pro-
vided the photos Figs. 5 and 9.
The dates suggested for the Persepolis torso are:

460-440 BC: Kader 2006: 48, 63. (She considers the Persepolis statue a variant of a prototype dating from 470-460. This alleged early figure is reflected in the two sculptures in the Vatican and the heads in Berlin and Rome.)


C. 400 BC after a prototype of c. 460-450: Gauer 1990: 51; Kader 2006: 69-74, figs. 2.32a-f.

435; Eckstein 1959: 148; Fuchs 1983: 482.
460-440 BC: Kader 2006: 48, 63. (She considers the Persepolis statue a variant of a prototype dating from 470-460. This alleged early figure is reflected in the two sculptures in the Vatican and the heads in Berlin and Rome.)


20 Gauer 1990: 49.
21 For a summary of the various arguments, see Ridgway 1970: 101-3; Gauer 1990: 50-1.
22 Note 2, above.
23 On contemporary duplicate originals, see Ridgway 1984: 8.

1 Kraay and Hirmer 1966: no. 451; Gauer 1990: 37, no. 27, fig. 8. The legend ΘΕΒΑΙ both identifies the statue as the Thessalian or stands for ΘΕΒΑΙΩΝ.
13 Kader 2006: 69-74, figs. 2.32a-h.
15 Copies and adaptations in marble and the minor arts are listed in Gauer 1990: 32-6; variants: ibid. 36-7.
16 Gauer 1990: 34; Hausmann 1994: 294, no. 33; Andreae and Presicce 1996: 386, fig. 6, 439, cat. no. 6.11; Kader 2006: 29-30, figs. 2.3a-d; Stilp 2006: 100-1, 200-5, cat. nos. 65-72, pls. 29-31.
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25 As was suggested by Ridgway 1984: 8, pl. 16.
26 Contra, Olmstead 1950: 11 (looted from Colophon c. 430); Robertson, note 34, below. On gift-giving to the Great King, and his expectation to receive the best and most valuable products of a region, see Briant 2002: 394-7.


Elektra on 'Melian' clay reliefs: Gauer 1990: 34, no. 13; Andreae and Presicce 1996: 388, fig. 9; Kader 2006: fig. 2.2b; Stilp 2006: 102-4, 208-12, cat. nos. 78-81, pls. 34-6. Demeter on Parthenon frieze: Langlotz 1951: fig. 11. Local personifications and minor deities on coin types: Langlotz 1951: 162-3, figs. 7-10.

Langlotz 1961.

Robertson (1975: 210) suggested that copies of the statue were distributed by Athens to cities of the Delian League as a reminder of Greek areas still under Persian rule, and that the Persepolis statue was looted from one of these cities.

Gauer 1990.


Olmstead 1950: 10.


Herrmann and Newman 1995: 78, fig. 9. On the export of Thasian marble, see Herrmann 1999.


Despinis et al. 1997: no. 8, fig. 22.

E.g., head of a youth in the Cleveland Museum of Art 28.195: Herrmann 1990: 77-8, figs. 5a-b. It appears that Parian marble was the dominant medium in the marble sculptural production of Magna Graecia: Barletta 2006: 94-100.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


