

DAVID AARON



Portrait Head of a Priest

Palmyra

2nd to 3rd Century A.D.

Limestone

H:31cm

A head of a man, carved from pale cream limestone. Clear, deeply incised lines delineate the thin, gently curved lips, straight aquiline nose, and large almond eyes under a knitted brow. He sports the flat-topped cylindrical headdress, or modius, worn by Palmyrene priests. A wreath runs around the base of the modius, flanking a central medallion enclosing a small figural bust, most likely representing one of the priest's predecessors or ancestors. The additional adornment of the modius suggests that this figure may have held an elevated rank within the priesthood. It has been speculated that the modius would have been made of a kind of felt ((like a tarbush or 'fez'). It covers the priest's hair, which would probably have been kept shaved. The laurel wreath is a feature not present in Palmyrene sculpture until c. 130-140 A.D., supporting the dating of this head to the late 2nd century A.D..

Palmyrene funerary portraiture is now recognised as the largest corpus of Roman portraiture outside of Rome. Prof. Rubina Raja, head of the Palmyrene Portrait Project, has stressed the importance of status over individual likeness within Palmyrene funerary sculpture. Of the more than 3,000 extant Palmyrene sculptures, around ten percent depict priests. The number of depictions suggests the prestige accorded to priests in Palmyrene society; suitable candidates for the position were chosen only from the city's leading families. The polytheistic religion of ancient Palmyra encompassed the gods of the northwestern Semitic pantheon, as well as others from Mesopotamian and Arab societies. The chief deity was known as Bol, or Bel after 217 B.C. – the god of fertility, weather, and war known as Baal in

northwestern Semitic practices. The pantheon comprised another sixty ancestral gods of the Palmyrene clans, including deities unique to Palmyra and to other regions in the Levantine.

Palmyra was established sometime in the third century B.C. and soon grew to be a city of major importance, due to its location on two of the most important trade routes in the ancient world: the Silk Road to China, and the route between the Far East and India and the head of the Persian Gulf. Although it began as a Mesopotamian settlement, Palmyra was run successively by the Arameans, the Arabs, and the Romans between the first centuries B.C. and A.D.. In the second century A.D., the Persians conquered the city, but the original site was destroyed in 273 A.D. by the Roman emperor Aurelian. The Romans and the Byzantines held the city for the next 400 years, rebuilding it and establishing it as a Christian city. The architectural and artistic style of the Palmyrenes reflects the shifting cultural landscape of the city, combining Greco-Roman, Persian, and Arabian influences. Situated as it was between the two great empires of Rome and Parthia, its languages, society and religion, its art and architecture speak of a rich and varied heritage, a unique synthesis of East and West that continues to fascinate and inspire scholarly research.

Literature:

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