

## INTRODUCTION

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This volume seeks to accomplish something rarely attempted: an investigation of Roman sculpture from multiple perspectives, encompassing the manifold disciplines and fields of research involved in its study, from art history to archaeology, classics to history, and folklore to religion. We are all familiar with Greek and Roman statues as priceless *objets d'art* from museum exhibitions and the colorful art books devoted to them; many of us appreciate their beauty and admire their artistic achievements. Less widely understood, however, are the enormous significance that these statues had in their original contexts and the myriad meanings they held for the men and women of the ancient world. In part because our modern, Western encounters with statuary are so different, we do not realize that in the ancient world these inanimate objects virtually burst with life; on Roman streets, in people's houses, and everywhere else, statues were ubiquitous, charged items, "loaded" with meanings. As such they offer an exceptional opportunity to study a class of "material culture" used throughout the Roman world and to investigate the complex matrix that emerges from the encounter between people and the physical reality in which they lived.<sup>1</sup>

In cities of the Roman era, statues were everywhere. They surrounded people wherever they went and formed a vivid backdrop to the empire's polyglot blend of nationalities, cultures, and religions. Most prominent were the three-dimensional sculptures, some life-sized, others colossal, that represented mythological figures and real people. They were carved from marble or other stone, cast in bronze, and fashioned out of wood. They were displayed on tall pedestals, atop arches, and in special niches and *aediculae* (openings framed by columns or pilasters, supporting entablatures and pediments). Alongside these were a profusion of relief sculptures that enlivened both the exteriors and interiors of public buildings and temples, animated

<sup>1</sup> For a recent overview on the field of material culture studies, see Chris Tilley et al., eds., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage, 2006).

column capitals, and decorated the facades of architectural structures such as *nymphaea* (water fountains) or *tetrapyla* (four-sided, arched structures that monumentalized the intersection of streets).

Statues were found outside the city walls as well: they appeared as directional signs at crossroads, as decorations for *sarcophagi* (coffins) in cemeteries, and on triumphal arches that greeted visitors at the city limits. They also inhabited the private realm. Miniature statues were sold in markets or in sculptors' shops, and sculpted portraits, masks, household utensils, and other sculpted ornaments were common household décor.

Like the billboards that are ubiquitous along the main streets of our cities, each communicating a fragment of the politics and culture of the era,<sup>2</sup> public sculptures functioned as the "mass media" of the Roman world. Populating city centers and enhancing local landscapes both topographically and intellectually, they served as a "plastic language" that communicated political, religious, and social messages. Sculptural displays evoked a complex spectrum of emotions and ideas, ranging from fear and loathing to aesthetic admiration, and from reflections on the nature of the divine to the implications of social hierarchy, patronage, and power. The editors of this book label this phenomenon the "sculptural environment," by which we mean to embrace not only the outward appearance (the subject matter and style) and physical reality (the materials and display) of the statues but also the political, religious, and social implications, interactions, and tensions associated with them. The goal of the current book is to unpack these cultural textures and to present a comprehensive picture of the Roman sculptural environment.

Geographically, the book focuses on the Roman Near East. We have decided to shift the attention from the traditional core of the Roman Empire — the lands of Italy, Greece, and to a certain extent Asia Minor (modern Turkey) — to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean — to Syria, Arabia, and Palaestina, with glimpses at Egypt, Asia Minor, and Persia. This focus enables us both to widen and complicate the discussion about statuary by adding to the story voices and views

<sup>2</sup> For this analogy, see Yaron Z. Eliav, "Viewing the Sculptural Environment; Shaping the Second Commandment," in: Peter Schäfer, ed., *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III* (TSAJ 93; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 414.

other than the traditional Greco-Roman perspective. The facets of culture embedded in sculpture were particularly charged in this diverse milieu; these lands formed intersections between east and west, north and south, and were home to an assortment of civilizations and an impressive ethnic diversity — Phoenicians, Syrians, Jews, Nabateans, Arabians, Persians, Egyptians, and others. Bustling harbor cities dotted the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, connecting the districts of the east with the core of the empire in the west. Farther inland, two major “highways” traversed the area and linked the south (Africa and Egypt) with both the north (Asia Minor) and the east (the Persian frontier). The Near East, then, was a major crossroads in Roman life.

The essays gathered in this collection span the hubs of the ancient Middle East: from the caravan cities of the Syrian desert — Palmyra and Dura Europos — to the harbor cities on the shores of the Mediterranean — Tyre, Caesarea Maritima, and Ascalon — and from the southern reaches of the city of Dandarah on the west bank of the Nile River in central Egypt, through the Nabatean capital of Petra in southern Jordan, to the celebrated metropolis of Antioch on the Orontes in northern Syria. They feature the amalgamation of ancient cultures and languages of the Roman Near East, where Greek and to a lesser degree Latin rub shoulders with Aramaic and other diverse dialects that permeated the region — Demotic, Nabatean, Hebrew, and Coptic (to mention the most prevalent).

During the historical period we chose for the project, spanning (with some deviations) the 550 years from the turn of the second century to 640 CE, the Near East witnessed great changes that revolutionized the Roman realm. The shifting social, cultural, and religious interactions of the population — Greeks, Romans, Semites, Indo-Aryans, Egyptians, and others — reshaped the classical world, ultimately contributing to the rise of Christianity, late antique Judaism with all its variations, and later (but beyond the scope of this project) Islam. Study of the innumerable sculptural displays in this region, when considered in context with the rich textual sources from local traditions, have the potential to bring about more nuanced understandings of imperialism, cultural and social developments, as well as religious developments in this area of the Roman world.

The twenty-eight articles collected in this book emerged from an international conference that convened at the University of Michigan

in Ann Arbor and the Toledo Museum of Art between November 7 and 10, 2004. We defined three goals for the discussions: (1) to examine the role of statuary in the diverse social, cultural, and religious spheres of the Roman Near East; (2) to unveil, define, and clarify how the different audiences throughout the Roman Near East perceived statuary, and to investigate the possible interaction, cross-fertilization, and reciprocal influences of those “views”; and (3) to study the cultural roots of these “views” as well as their social and religious contexts. We also challenged the participants to set aside the technical jargon of their numerous disciplines and to speak in a language that would both make sense to and engage scholars from other fields. To make the material accessible to students and the interested among the general public, we have added to these discussions dates and short definitions of terms and names.

The papers are grouped in six parts: from the broad cultural context (Part I – Encompassing Hellenism: The Dynamics of Extended Cultures), we move to the more technical aspects of the production of statues, their dissemination, and eventual disuse or destruction (Part II – Origin, Production, and Fate) as well as to their depiction in other visual and written media (Part III – Two-Dimensional Landscapes: Re-Presenting Statues in Other Media); this leads to a series of discussions about the various perceptions and meanings associated with these statues, in relation to the divine world (Part IV – Engaging the Realm of the Gods), in the urban sphere (Part V – Urban Landscapes and Perceptions), and finally in the rhetoric and imagery of politics, society, and religion (Part VI – Social, Political, and Religious Discourses).

To elucidate the complexities of the cultural stage, the book opens with an introductory chapter on Hellenism in its Near Eastern setting. Glen Bowersock’s essay, “Reconsidering Hellenism in the Roman Near East: Introductory Remarks,” launches the discussion with comments building on his Jerome Lectures, which were first delivered in Ann Arbor more than fifteen years ago. Unlike the relatively uniform cultural landscape of the Byzantine and late antique periods, which were the focus of his earlier presentation, Bowersock identifies the opposing trajectories that shaped the Roman period. In his words, “Hellenism in the Roman Near East was... by no means what it was to become later in the Byzantine Near East. It was more conspicuous in the architecture of theaters and temples, in sculpture, and in urban

design than it was in unofficial epigraphy or the themes of representational art. This dominance of Greek form and design in a unified world of Aramaic culture seems to me a quite different kind of Hellenism from what comes later." In the following essay, "The Nature of Syrian Hellenism in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Periods," Maurice Sartre illustrates and analyzes the cultural ambiguity of the region. Instead of the customary paradigms that depict diametrically opposed cultural entities (such as Hellenic vs. Eastern-Levantine), Sartre draws an intricate picture, which fluctuates from one location to the other. Surveying disparate elements such as language, attire, housing, and religion, he portrays a world infused with ambivalence, in which Greek and local phenomena simultaneously interlock, conflict with, and supplement each other. Closing Part I is Aharon Oppenheimer's paper, "The Jews in the Roman World." Espousing the more traditional line in scholarship, Oppenheimer surveys the development of the relationships between Jews and Greco-Roman culture in the generations after the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 C.E., mainly focusing on the rabbis and the institute of the Patriarchate (the Jewish governing authority appointed by the Romans). His major claim is that early hostile attitudes of Jews toward the Greek way of life softened in the early centuries of the Common Era, due to a decline in the attractiveness, and thus threat, of pagan worship.<sup>3</sup>

Moving from the broader cultural background to the practical and physical realms of statues, Part II discusses the origin, production, and later fate of sculpture in the Roman Near East. It begins with Gideon Foerster's piece, "Marble Sculpture of the Roman Period in the Near East and Its Hellenistic Origins," which "presents a summary of the current state of knowledge regarding marble statuary in the region." Foerster shows that unlike the common view among scholars, who have traditionally taken Roman Palestine to be a peripheral backwater in terms of sculpture production, "it is in Palestine that we encounter what are possibly the richest discoveries of marble sculpture of the Roman period in the Near East." He goes on to survey the various types and genres that have been found in the region. In the second contribution of this part, "The Sculptor's Studio at Aphrodisias:

<sup>3</sup> On traditional versus new approaches in the study of the relationship between Jews and Greco-Roman culture, see Eliav, "Viewing the Sculptural Environment," 411-4.

The Working Methods and Varieties of Sculpture Produced,” Peter Rockwell draws on primary research as well as his own experience as a trained sculptor to recreate the manufacturing process of statuary. He touches on issues of space arrangement and location within the urban fabric, and reconstructs the tools and techniques of the artists, as well as the perceptions of the buyers. Closing this part are three articles about how people in late antiquity used, reused, damaged, or destroyed the statuary that had been so integral to the earlier landscapes, which they now inhabited. Yoram Tsafir’s “The Classical Heritage in Late Antique Palestine: The Fate of Freestanding Sculptures” undermines our often one-dimensional perspective by exposing the ambivalence that characterized people’s attitude toward their classical heritage. As he writes, “on one hand, the pagan cults were forbidden and in most places also forgotten; on the other hand, the classical tradition (which cannot be differentiated from its polytheist origin) remained alive.” Evoking literary and legal sources as well as archaeological data from his own excavations at Scythopolis (in northern Israel), Tsafir maps the transition from Roman to Byzantine and shows the new life that some statues received in the Christian realm. Frank Trombley’s piece, “The Destruction of Pagan Statuary and Christianization (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.),” analyzes the Byzantine-Christian practical response toward cult statues. Focusing mainly on reactions such as eradication of sculpture or the neutralization of their divine powers, Trombley sheds light on the diversity of the process and its lack of uniformity. John Pollini’s contribution, “The Imperial Cult in the East: Images of Power and the Power of Intolerance,” continues the examination of the destruction of statues by Christian authorities in the early Byzantine period. He focuses on one example — small busts representing divinities or members of the imperial family that decorated the crowns of priests of the imperial cult — which are usually found damaged or, more commonly, broken off. Questioning common interpretations that tie the injured crowns to natural causes or ordinary, unintentional acts of violence, Pollini sees here deliberate and systematic mutilation by Christian hands. Unlike some of the articles in this volume, Pollini argues for opposition and hostility between Jews and pagans and later Christians and pagans, although he admits that those entities were not monolithic and thus allow for a variety of attitudes.

The volume’s third part looks at the representation of statues in other media. Eric Moorman’s contribution, “Statues on the Wall:

The Representation of Statuary in Roman Wall Painting,” deals with the depiction of statues in paintings. He explains the vital function of wall painting in the Roman world, exploring the process and the changes that occurred in transforming a three-dimensional statue into a two-dimensional representation of one. Fergus Millar discusses the medium of mosaics. In his “Narrative and Identity in Mosaics from the Late Roman Near East: Pagan, Jewish and Christian,” he examines how the creators of mosaics communicated matters of identity through the multiple, conjoining, yet separate narratives of the images and the inscriptions that accompanied them. Moving to another form of visual media, Sharon Herbert’s paper, “The Missing Pieces: Reflections in Miniature of the Visual Landscapes of the Hellenistic East,” explores the earlier roots of visual culture by studying the images of Greek goddesses engraved on the seals of a second-century B.C.E. archive found at Tel Kedesh (northern Israel). She shows that the images reflect diverging modes of interaction between Greek and Near Eastern belief systems, or, as she puts it, “three very different faces of the process called Hellenization.” Concluding this section, Werner Eck’s study, “Statues and Inscriptions in Iudaea/Syria Palaestina,” considers the relation between statues and inscriptions. Eck surveys inscriptions that were originally attached to free-standing statues (although in most cases the latter are now lost) and shows how they provide additional information and insight about the sculptural environment, especially by preserving data about numerous statues (mainly those erected as honorific monuments) that would otherwise have been unknown. Focusing on inscriptions unearthed at Caesarea Maritima, Eck’s article joins the later discussions by Kenneth Holum and Rivka Gersht that also concentrate on this harbor city in central Palestine; together they offer a spectacular picture of the numerous statues and busts honoring government officials, locals, and gods that populated its urban space.

Part IV is devoted to godly matters. Peter Stewart’s essay, “Baetyls as Statues? Cult Images in the Roman Near East,” deals with the phenomenon of shapeless cult statues. Stewart examines the presentation of these divine, non-anthropomorphic, and thus “aniconic” objects, particularly on coins, and then situates them in contrast to their “humanly shaped” partners. By doing so he shows the different approaches to the representation of deities that operated side by side in the Greco-Roman world. The contribution of Elise Friedland, “Visualizing Deities in the Roman Near East: Aspects of Athena and Athena-Allat,” provides a

specific, sculptural example in the religious sphere of the culturally intricate and ambiguous landscape of the Roman Near East (as evoked in Sartre's essay). By documenting and analyzing the disparate depictions of Athena and Athena-Allat found throughout the regions of the eastern Mediterranean, Friedland demonstrates "how patrons in the Near East conceived of the same goddess differently," conflating the broad universal characteristics of Athena's images with local visual traditions. Friedland's piece also makes the point that the sculptural environment was far more varied — in material, style, iconography, and scale — than most scholarly or popular reconstructions have envisioned.

The following four papers in this section dwell on specific cult sites in the Roman Near East, from its southern tip to its northeastern most edge. Fawzi Zayadine's "Roman Sculpture from the Exedra in the *Temenos* of the Qasr al-Bint at Petra" begins this tour by focusing on one aspect of the sculptural environment at Petra. Zayadine sees the Nabatean tribal tradition as fertile ground from which divine reverence for leaders emerged. He also highlights the combination of local, Semitic elements with broader Roman attributes in the configuration of imperial sculpture at Petra. Moving north, Thomas Weber's contribution, "Sculptures from Southern Syrian Sanctuaries of the Roman Period," documents four rural sanctuaries in central and southern Syria. His article not only reveals "different iconographic and stylistic treatment of sculptures" but also "provides illuminating new evidence of Oriental worship in the Roman period." Farther north and on the edge of the Syrian desert, Michal Gawlikowski's piece, "The Statues of the Sanctuary of Allat in Palmyra," deals with another local temple, this time in the caravan city of Palmyra. The author establishes the historical developments in the sanctuary based on inscriptions, architecture, and art and shows how locals — in this case herdsman tribes and caravan merchants — simultaneously adopt popular iconographical elements and preserve indigenous motifs. We reach the northeastern edge of the Roman Empire with Susan Downey's article, "The Role of Sculpture in Worship at the Temples of Dura-Europos." She too explores the cult statuary of this site through epigraphic and archaeological material, and with insight gained from the depictions of worship in the wall paintings for which the site is famous. Downey's discussion also emphasizes the local aspect of religious practices and perceptions as well as their multiple associations with Greek and Hellenistic norms.



Concluding the discussion of people's interactions with the gods through statuary, Ellen Perry's essay, "Divine Statues in the Works of Libanius of Antioch: The Actual and Rhetorical Desacralization of Pagan Cult Furniture in the Late Fourth Century C.E.," takes us back to the center of the Roman Near East, to the Syrian metropolis of Antioch on the Orontes. Perry examines the encounter of Libanius — the famous orator whose life spans the pagan revival under Emperor Julian (361-364 C.E.) and the subsequent Byzantine rule — with statues of deities. Through Libanius's writings to Christian rulers about the nonreligious qualities of divine images, and through the descriptions of his own experiences with such objects, Perry traces the developing relationships of pagan residents in the Christian world with the realm of the gods.

Part V considers the function of sculptures, as well as their associated imagery and concepts, within the urban realities of the Near East; each essay focuses on a different city in the region. The opening piece, Raymond Van Dam's "Imagining an Eastern Roman Empire: A Riot at Antioch in 387 C.E.," reconstructs the cultural discourses behind the shattering of the imperial statues during Antioch's tumultuous riots. Van Dam explicates the multiple, and at times conflicting, views regarding the statues of Antioch in the newly shaped Roman/Byzantine Empire and shows how these, each in their own way, stimulated the attack on statues representing the imperial family. Moshe Fischer's paper, "Sculpture in Roman Palestine and Its Architectural and Social Milieu: Adaptability, Imitation, Originality? The Ascalon Basilica as an Example," deals with the cultural dynamics of the marble trade that sustained the production of statues across the Mediterranean. Focusing on one example from the port city of Ascalon on the southern shore of Palestine, Fischer illustrates how this city becomes "the instrument of Roman imperialism" and how sculptures made of marble serve as "expressions of the imperialist tendencies of Rome." The next two contributions move the focus northward along the Mediterranean coast to the city of Caesarea Maritima. In "Caesarean Sculpture in Context," Rivka Gersht collates much disparate data to reconstruct the sculptural displays of many of the city's public monuments. She surveys the distribution of sculptural programs in the spatial layout of the city and analyzes the iconography associated with these installations. Her central argument claims that architectural context sheds light on the meanings that people bestowed upon particular pieces and

programs. Kenneth Holum's study, "Caesarea's Fortune: Ancient Statuary and the Beholder in a Late Antique City," deals with the reception and function of early Roman sculpture in the urban setting of late antiquity. He analyzes two examples from sixth- and seventh-century Caesarea Maritima in which the authorities integrated old, partially broken statues into newly built (or renewed) architectural structures. He asserts that these pieces, by now disassociated from their original artistic programs and thus deprived of their initial, overwhelmingly pagan meanings, were perceived as fostering the shared pride of the citizens in their ancient tradition and contributing to the city's beauty. Closing this section, Ze'ev Weiss's contribution, "Sculptures and Sculptural Images in Urban Galilee," adds a view from the inland territories of Jewish Palestine. He presents an inventory of sculptural fragments that were unearthed in the excavations of Sepphoris, adding references to statues in rabbinic literature as well as what he calls "sculptural imagery" embedded in mosaic floors, in order to substantiate his thesis that three-dimensional figures did indeed exist in the Jewish realm of Roman Palestine.

The sixth and final part of the book discusses the social, political, and religious nuances associated with sculpture. In the first essay, "Roman Victory Displayed: Symbols, Allegories, Personifications," Benjamin Isaac weaves together a wide range of literary sources and visual representations to argue against recent scholarship that imbues ancient images with allegorical meaning. He claims that it is anachronistic to see these images as abstractions and personifications of ideas that circulated at the time. Instead Isaac argues for a mythological framework of ancient visualization; as he puts it, "the Greeks and Romans tried to make abstract ideas understandable by thinking of them as magic and divine powers." If Isaac's piece explores the visual vocabulary that emanates from Greco-Roman culture and literature, Yaron Eliav's paper, "The Desolating Sacrilege: A Jewish-Christian Discourse on Statuary, Space, and Sanctity," moves in similar directions but with regard to Christians and Jews. By focusing on one set of articulations — those that evolved around the Roman statues that presumably stood in the space of the ruined Jewish temple in Jerusalem — Eliav shows that Christian and Jewish authors developed similar notions and employed identical phraseology to instill statues with their own meanings. Eliav argues as well against the widely held opinion that Jewish and Christian reactions to Roman statuary were purely

hostile. He sees these groups as part and parcel of the cultural landscape of the Roman Mediterranean and their interaction with statues as modeled on the common perceptions of their time. Richard Kalmin's contribution, "Idolatry in Late Antique Babylonia: The Evidence of the Babylonian Talmud," extends the discussion beyond the Roman world into the lands of Persia. By utilizing the vast Jewish literary material that survived from this region (collected in the Babylonian Talmud), comparing it to its parallel rabbinic sources from Roman Palestine, and contextualizing it within the changing Parthian and Sasanian realms, Kalmin is able to reconstruct a wide array of Jewish notions about statues. He asserts that unlike "the conventional scholarly view that the rabbis of late antiquity were single-mindedly opposed to idol worship... at least some rabbis, both Palestinian and Babylonian, found idol worship far more attractive than scholars heretofore imagined." Closing this volume is David Frankfurter's study of Egypt. His article, "The Vitality of Egyptian Images in Late Antiquity: Christian Memory and Response," dissects the ambivalent, at times contradictory notions that permeated the world of Egyptians in the early Byzantine period. Like others in this volume, mainly Yoram Tsafrir and Kenneth Holum, Frankfurter illustrates the ways in which statues continued to affect people — and to shape space and culture — in the newly rising Christian domain. He uses the expression "hot" to describe the cultural substance of statues in the eyes of the people who engaged them; this brings to mind the term "loaded," which the volume's editors have used at the beginning of this introduction and which brings full circle our description of the remarkable roles and myriad values of Roman statuary.

All in all, this collection does not aim to be an exhaustive treatment of statues in the Roman world. These essays are meant to be a multivocal and crisscrossing exploration of the various methods that can assist our scholarly inquiry, and a demonstration of the possibilities and challenges embedded in our efforts to unearth the past. Our hope is that these contributions may pave the way for further research in the future, and in the process shed light on some neglected and fascinating facets of the sculptural environment of the Roman Near East.