

Anaglyptica Variana: Column capitals with sculptural relief, and associated fragments, related to the cult of Elagabal

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Fascicle 4: The Idyll of Elagabal: A considered as a work of art

The Idyll of Elagabal: A considered as a work of art

It remains to this study to consider a category of questions that has hardly been touched in the discussion so far: that involved in seeking to understand these artefacts from an aesthetic point of view. Because of their lamentable state of preservation, it is difficult to make out enough of **B** or **C** to consider them thus in any detail. **A**, however, although damaged, preserves sufficient sculpture to warrant a fuller analytical investigation of its nature and significance, as a work of art, than has been attempted in the literature so far.

Lest it be objected that the concept of a work of art is anachronistic, as applied to any of these artefacts, the article in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* on “art, ancient attitudes to,”¹ makes clear that, “until the late Hellenistic period, there is no evidence that sculpture and painting were viewed as fundamentally different from shoemaking or any other profession which produced a product” but goes on to show how this situation changed from that period onward, and particularly how the Romans elevated art to the status of an object worthy of contemplation in itself, collecting it, building musea and galleries, etc. Indeed the article itself uses the phrase “work of art” more than once, as in the sentence: “Throughout antiquity there was a tradition of informal criticism” (as opposed to purely technical criticism in the form of training manuals for artists, described earlier in the article) “which praised works of art for imitating nature so closely that the viewer was deceived into thinking that the work of art was ‘real’.” Even more importantly, in the next sentence, it uses the phrase to refer to such artefacts, produced outside the period in which they may have been considered as such by their contemporaries: “In the Archaic period this may have involved attributing magical qualities to works of art...” I see, therefore, no valid objection to use of this phrase in the context of these artefacts.

¹ *OCD*, 1996, p. 178.

Those who have discussed **A** in terms of the history of art, Altmann, Strong, Rumpf, Gothert, L'Orange, and Picard, have done so fairly briefly, and have concentrated more on placing it in an historical context, whether chronological or thematic, on the basis of a given characterisation of its style, than on attempting, by close examination of its iconography, to reveal all it shows, and how it shows it. Nobody so far has sought to understand, and explain, its full significance, in terms of categories such as, say, representation or abstraction, naturalism or symbolism, reality, virtual reality, and imagination.

Of course a number of scholars, in particular the first three to write about **A**, Jordan, Wissowa, and Studniczka, have undertaken more or less close examination of its iconography, and have sought to reveal what it represents. But their interest has been directed more towards establishing the individual and collective identification of the figures on **A**, and explaining the religious and political significance thereof, than towards understanding **A** from an aesthetic point of view.

The three figures elevated on a platform and two plinths have been identified, by previous scholarship, as, from left to right (from the observer's point of view): Minerva, Elagabal, and either Juno or Venus.² Depending on how this last equivocation is resolved, they have been considered as representing either the Capitoline, or some other triad, with differing religious and political implications.³ The possible relationship of the two female figures who are not thus elevated, unanimously identified as Victoria and Tellus, to those who are so, has also been considered, but only on an individual basis, in terms of its religious and political, rather than of its artistic significance. It has been remarked that Victoria seems to perform her sacrifice of a bull *veluti deorum maiorum famula*, as if she were the slave or servant of greater gods, and it has been wondered to which of the elevated deities that sacrifice is dedicated, or whether to all three.⁴ It has been suggested that Tellus' attitude constitutes propaganda, seeking to promote not only the cult of Elagabal, but the world domination of the emperor who may have commissioned this relief.⁵

Now it is time to stand back, as it were, from consideration of these and other religious or political themes, which **A** may be thought to contain, and contemplate this sculpture as a work of art, investigating it in terms of

² Studniczka, reviewed above.

³ Studniczka, Seyrig, reviewed above.

⁴ Wissowa, Studniczka, reviewed above.

⁵ Studniczka, reviewed above.

those aesthetic and technical concepts that its leisurely contemplation and analytical investigation may suggest to the viewer. As it turns out, such consideration, in addition to its interest in itself, does, in fact, offer clues towards understanding the cosmology and theology of the religion of which **A** is an icon. It also provides plausible answers to some of the other questions raised.

But first, before embarking on this endeavour, it is apposite to recall a few remarks, made, interestingly enough, not by art historians, but by those archaeologists who first brought **A** to the attention of the world. They are germane to such a contemplation, and indeed implicitly suggest the need for such an investigation.

The first is Jordan's, made in the text containing the first published mention of **A**:

- Referring to a figure of a winged and clothed Victoria, on a piece of relief sculpture, perhaps from a frieze, he remarks that she is set among plant ornamentation, as if growing out of it. A footnote leads to a text discussing the juxtaposition of human images and plant ornamentation: Benndorf und Schoene, *Die Antiken Bildwerke des Lateranensischen Museums*, p. 40.

An observation of Wissowa's (who may have had Jordan's in mind, but does not mention it) is also relevant to this investigation:

- In most Corinthian column capitals, the individual figures are subordinate to the architectonic ornament, to such an extent that they seem to grow out of the foliage, and never seem to be anything other than a part of the whole. But the figures in this relief lack any connection to their background ornament. They seem, rather, to be stuck onto the surface of the capital. Wissowa therefore fears that they may be attributable to a late and decadent period, one whose style is degenerate.

Two comments of Studniczka's are also relevant:

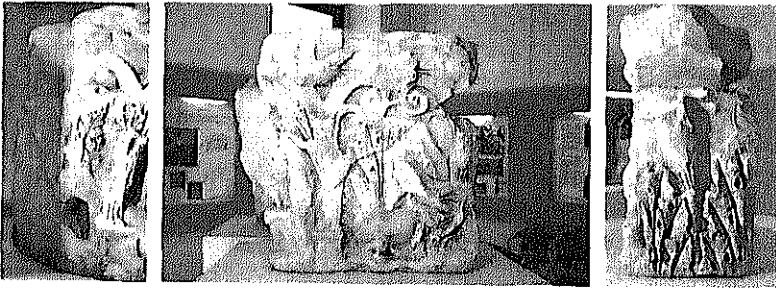
- In discussing the composite icon of Elagabal, consisting of an eagle and a conical stone, Studniczka cites coins of Antoninus Pius, and remarks that this eagle may there be shown as live, perched above the stone, not at all as a flat representation.

- This composite icon of Elagabal, as depicted on **A**, is set upon a tasselfringed platform, and is flanked by two idols standing on plinths, who nevertheless (despite, that is, their depiction as idols, hence, presumably, as inert pieces of statuary) seem, like live women, their outstretched hands poised over the crown of the stone, to be caressing it: *wie liebkosend*.

Finally, there is a point arising in the course of this monograph's critical review of Studniczka's text:

- The three figures elevated on a platform and on plinths, by virtue of that elevation, constitute a triad, irrespective of their individual or collective identities. This distinguishes them from the other figures in the relief, who are not thus elevated.

Neither Wissowa nor Studniczka develops further any of these observations; nor does any of the subsequent scholars, who have contributed to the discussion of these artefacts. Their relevance to an investigation of **A**, in particular, in terms of aesthetic and technical considerations, will, however, presently become apparent.



Circumambulation of the sculpted sides of **A**, placed on a stand in the exhibition *Il Giardino dei Cesari*

There are, practically speaking, two ways of contemplating **A**: holding still, or moving around it. An initial circumambulation of **A**, when it is placed on a stand at eye level, reveals that side δ is left unsculpted. This side can therefore be omitted from iconographic, though not from structural analysis of **A**, (such as that undertaken above, in discussing the question of this capital's original shape and location). Of the remaining three vertical sides, γ depicts only foliage, whereas β and α show anthropomorphic figures. In addition to these, there are griffins on both α and β , an eagle and a stone

on the corner of α and β , and a bull on β .

Thus, if one wishes to hold still, and contemplate at once the two potentially most interesting sides that one can see simultaneously, one must choose a point of view allowing one to look at α and β . The angle that immediately presents itself as granting a single view of these two sides is that of the obtuse diagonal to the intersection of their planes. Somewhere along the plane of this diagonal, at 135 degrees to either α or β , the observer can choose a point, at a convenient elevation and distance, from which to view all the anthropomorphic relief sculpture on this capital.



Angular view of A

As it happens, any viewpoint chosen, along the plane of this diagonal, at whatever distance or elevation, will lead one to focus first on the composite icon of Elagabal, the eagle and stone on the corner, which is set at approximately the perpendicular to that same obtuse angle to the planes of α and β , and is therefore the only figure seen face on from such a point of view: the only one, give or take a certain latitude, from which both α and β can be seen at once. Thus contemplated, the relief can be seen to depict, within a single visual field, a sole unitary scene, one that includes all the remaining figures in the sculpture. From what is left of the anthropomorphic figures, on the basis of their postures, one can see that they all (save one, an infant) face the eagle and stone. This composite icon of Elagabal, the focal point of their attention, is thus the key to the scene's interpretation.

The scene is the sculptural equivalent of an idyll or *ειδύλλιον*, "a short, highly wrought descriptive poem, mostly on pastoral subjects," a concept de-

riving originally from *εἶδολον*, the Greek word for an image.⁶ The idyll depicted on A is not exactly pastoral, inasmuch as it lacks shepherds and shepherdesses, not to mention sheep.

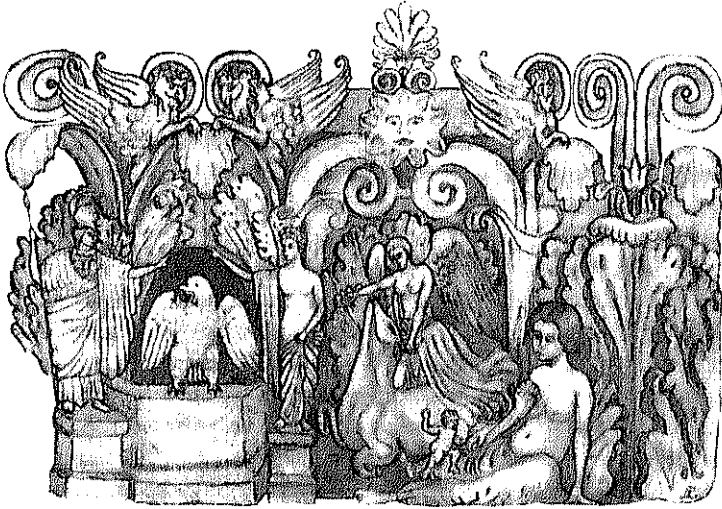


Photocomposition triptych of the Idyll of Elagabal⁷

But it follows the conventions of pastoral poetry and painting, as well as those of theatre, in its use of a highly stylised nature as a backdrop, one that is nevertheless considered, in this context, as real. It depicts an outdoor occasion, one on which four goddesses relate to Elagabal in diverse ways, performing towards him an act of worship or homage in a sacred grove. It can be seen that A depicts such an act, by virtue of the actions and attitudes of the anthropomorphic figures represented, all directed towards the figure of Elagabal on his platform. Only one action among those depicted, Victoria's sacrifice of a bull, is specifically religious in itself, but the adoring attitudes of the two goddesses to either side of Elagabal, extending their hands as if caressing him, and his serene contemplation from afar by the reclining Tellus, that is, by the earth herself, imply a universe, spiritual as well as physical, of which Elagabal, the sun god, is the focal point. It will, moreover, emerge from this analysis, that both the gestures of the goddesses on plinths, and the attitude of Tellus at the capital's base, have more specific religious meaning than may at first appear.

⁶ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1897, p.414, *εἶδύλλιον*.

⁷ For an explanation of how this photocomposition was made, see the concluding section of this monograph: *The reconstruction of the Idyll of Elagabal*.



The Idyll of Elagabal⁸

It is clear that the occasion takes place out of doors, not only because it depicts, among other things, the sacrifice of a bull, a ceremony that would normally be performed in the forecourt of a temple.⁹ In order to accommodate this sacrifice, and the other acts or attitudes of homage depicted, an appropriate outdoors setting is provided for this idyll. A framework of volutes and helices, thrusting upward and curving outward and sideways, like the trunks and branches of trees, defines the basic outlines of the capital, at the same time as creating a locus for the scene, that of a sacred grove.

There is more to this arboreal simile than may at first appear. It implies a subtle and complex interplay of concepts in the iconography of A. Each element in its foliage plays a role in two distinct realms: one architectural; the other sculptural. Accordingly, the distinction between decorative and structural elements, raised above, in discussing the status and location of the columns on which A, and its companion pieces, B and C (if indeed they are its companions), may have rested, is, if understood in the context of A itself, correspondingly subtle and complex. The volutes and helices of A

⁸ For an explanation of the method and rationale used in reconstructing this image, see the concluding section of this monograph: *The reconstruction of the Idyll of Elagabal*.

⁹ Scheid, John, *La religion des Romains*, 1998, p. 72: "Un sacrifice est un rite complexe qui se déroule dans un espace ouvert et devant la communauté concernée. Dans le cadre du culte public, il est célébré devant le temple, auprès de l'autel dressé sur l'aire cultuelle..."

are not only the (not altogether) conventional decoration of a Roman Corinthian column capital (which happens also to define its shape) but are simultaneously the trunks and branches of trees in a sacred grove. The griffins crouching above the two goddesses on plinths are perched, not only on the capital's protruding corner volutes, which support the abacus, and hence the entablature, but at the same time in the clefts of the branches of highly stylised trees. Thus the foliage is at once architectural and sculptural, decorative and structural.

That being the case, all the elements in the scene's iconography, foliage as well as figures, are relevant to its description and characterisation. Because it sets the scene, the foliage may be considered first. In order to do so, the viewer should, as it were, stand back from close contemplation of the capital, and imagine what it would be like to view it in its original emplacement, on top of a column in a building of some sort, most likely religious. (The questions of what sort of a building this may have been; of whether the columns, atop which the capitals **A**, **B**, and **C** once rested, were wholes or halves, structural or decorative, have been discussed at length above, in the section of this monograph devoted to the state of the question in 2002, and need not be reconsidered here.)

Whatever the nature of the building, its use of columns with capitals, whether as a structural or decorative element, invokes a metaphor: the commonplace arboreal metaphor implied by all construction with columns and capitals, whereby the column stands for the trunk of a tree, and the capital for the cup or pod, from which its foliage spreads out, whether horizontally, supported by the figured trellis of a frieze, or curving upward and outward like branches, joining with its counterparts, sprouting from another column, to form an arch, or combining with yet others, diagonally, to form a vault.

Thus the viewer of the capital in its original emplacement, doubtless a structure consisting of numerous columns with capitals, would already, merely by virtue of looking at this sculptural relief, be standing inside a metaphorical grove, most likely a sacred one, if, as is likely, the building in question were religious in nature.

Focusing closely on **A**, the viewer might realise that this circumambient metaphor has been transferred, in miniature scale, to **A** itself, with its volutes and helices standing for the trunks and branches of a sacred grove. Beneath its overarching branches, an acanthus - leaf design indicates the presence of figured shrubbery, serving as a backdrop for the interaction of the

figures in the scene depicted in the foreground. The existence of such a backdrop implies a three-dimensional space. These figures are, therefore, within the virtual three-dimensional space thus provided for their interaction, miniature counterparts of the viewer, who also stands most probably within a real three-dimensional space, perhaps not alone, but with companions, possibly engaging in a religious ceremony of some sort, just as are the figures in the scene depicted in the sculptural relief.

It has been remarked, by Wissowa, possibly referring to an earlier observation of Jordan's, both quoted above, that the figures on **A** are depicted, not, as in other reliefs, growing out of the foliage, but rather stuck onto it: standing (or, in the case of Tellus, reclining) before it. Whether or not this indicates a decadent, degenerate style, as Wissowa surmises, it is in perfect conformity with a pictorial convention whereby the foliage merely provides the background for a scene, one whose main interest lies in the interaction of its anthropomorphic figures with each other, and, in this case, with certain figures that are not anthropomorphic.

In considering Wissowa's remark, and, if it is relevant, Jordan's previous observation, and attempting to make sense of them, one should keep in mind the difference between two different modes of representation: symbolic and naturalistic.

Naturalistic representation aims at creating an illusion of reality, however transparent or fleeting, in the mind of the viewer, so that the object or character depicted is thought to be seen. This occurs by means of the viewer's tacit consent to a set of conventions, governing this mode of representation, involving the willing suspension of disbelief. Having thus gained the viewer's acquiescence to its specific conventions, a given representation can then proceed, through its depiction of imaginary interactions among its figured characters and objects, treated as real, to describe a situation, tell a story, or enact a scene, and even, perhaps, on that basis, to propose a particular vision or interpretation of reality. This last, as shall presently be seen, is accomplished by the scene depicted on **A**.

Symbolic representation foreshortens and concentrates this process, greatly reducing the amount of detail required of an image to produce, not an illusion, which requires of the viewer detailed contemplation, in order fully to explore its contents and absorb its meaning, but rather a sign, to be read as a symbol, granting the viewer instant understanding, at a glance, of its content and meaning. A symbol stands for the presence of the object or

character in question, in such a way that the viewer, presumably familiar with the conventions of the type of symbolism operating in a given case, reads, rather than sees, that object or character into the picture. Having thus quickly and effortlessly done so, the viewer can take that object's or character's presence in the picture for granted, as well as its or his or her conventional meaning, and still has attention left to focus on something else.

On **A**, the transformation of a naturalistic representation into a symbol, can be observed occurring in the background. The process of foreshortening and concentration, with concomitant reduction of detail, takes place in tandem with the process of scaling down the arboreal metaphor, implied by the presence of a column with a capital, in order to transfer it from the realm of architecture, comprising both these elements, to that of sculpture, comprising the capital alone. In undergoing this transference from one realm to another, the metaphor also shifts from one set of relevant dimensions to another.

This is not just a question of scale, for while the architectural and sculptural realms are usually conceived on different scales, they also normally imply different spatial dispositions and relationships, that is, different sets of relevant dimensions. Architecture is not only usually realised on a much larger scale than that of sculpture, but it is fully three dimensional, and is so in reality; whereas relief sculpture, at least, is only very slightly three dimensional in reality, though it can appear more fully so, albeit only in a specific mode of virtual reality, that of naturalistic representation, when it chooses to do so. It can achieve an illusion of much greater depth than it actually possesses, by means of techniques borrowed and adapted from painting, such as the use of perspective. Thus, when the arboreal metaphor is transferred from the realm of architecture to that of relief sculpture, it undergoes not only a diminution in scale, but also a transformation in nature, or in *modus operandi*.

This can best be grasped visually, in relation to **A**, by indulging in a further leap of the imagination. The background of foliage on **A**, if considered from within the scene, as if one were a figure inside it, is vastly out of scale. Individual acanthus leaves reach the size of large shrubs, in relation to the figures. Stems or tendrils, expressed as volutes and helices, attain the size of tree trunks. Yet if one steps back, as it were, and recovers one's original focus, that of an observer from without the scene, this disproportion does not bother one at all. It is readily accepted as an instance of a symbological convention of pictorial art, a visual metonymy, whereby the part, stems and

leaves, stands for the whole: trees and shrubs.

The size of the stems and leaves on **A** corresponds, within the dimension of naturalistic representation, to that of the arboreal metaphor immanent in the architectural realm, whence they derive; whereas their role in the dimension of symbolic representation relates to the deployment of that metaphor inside the sculptural realm, where the anthropomorphic and other figures interact before them. In other words, if one considers the stems and leaves on **A** as belonging to the branches of a metaphorical tree, whose trunk is identical with the column on which **A** once rested, then they are of approximately the right size to be considered as naturalistic representations of the stems and leaves of that tree. Whereas if one considers them in relation to the figures in the foreground, they are far too big to belong to the same dimension as those figures, if considered as naturalistic representations of stems and leaves. Instead, to make sense, they must be read as standing symbolically for tree trunks and shrubs, in which case their scale fits the dimension of the figures.

The leaves' and stems' transformation from naturalistic to symbolic representation has thus been effected by a bold juxtaposition of scales, simultaneously producing a visual metonymy. The introduction of a new scale for the figures in the foreground, whilst keeping the original scale for the foliage in the background, deploys a part of the foliage to stand for the whole (stems and leaves for trees and shrubs) when seen in relation to the figures. This is relatively easy, once conceived, to do, at least in the case of foliage, because of the tendency of plants to reproduce the same principles of structure at different levels of growth.

Thus the relationship of the background to the scene depicted in the foreground is symbolic, though it serves a larger naturalistic purpose: the acanthus leaves and stems are to be read, rather than seen, as shrubbery and tree-trunks, in order to allow one to focus one's close attention on the figures in the foreground. These, in contrast, are clearly naturalistic representations, serving as touchstones to spark one's imagination and cause it to re-enact the scene they represent. For not only are they shown in detail, but in action, and in interaction with each other. They are the "something else" on which the artist here clearly intends the viewer to concentrate attention spared by merely reading, as opposed to looking at and making out the details of the background.

Considered in terms of this distinction between naturalistic and sym-

bolic representation, it can be seen that the representation implied by Wissowa's reference to figures growing out of foliage is most likely symbolic. Most likely, because in the absence of specific references or illustrations, and at this distance in time from Wissowa, one must rely on his text alone, to try to imagine the visual effect such figures may have produced, and compare it to the visual effect produced by **A**.

A clue to Wissowa's meaning may be afforded by the possibility that, in this remark, Wissowa is referring, without citing him, to Jordan, who has earlier, in a passage that goes on to discuss **A**, drawn attention to another relief with figures growing out of foliage. Jordan refers, in turn, to Benndorf and Schoene's text on the sculptures in the Lateran Museum.¹⁰ The relevant passage there lacks, alas, drawings, or photographic illustrations.

A passage shortly before that cited by Jordan describes its subject: "an Eros, whose body ... sinks into plant ornament from the hips downward, pouring (liquid) for a griffin ... into a patera, on which its right paw rests." The passage cited by Jordan, incomprehensible without this previous description, follows a plethora of references to comparable pieces. It says of the motif they have in common: "The question of the origin of this ornamental motif, as in [the piece described above, and another like it], that is, the transformation from human into ornamental form, is not easy to decide with certainty." It then goes on to list a series of earlier works, which may prefigure this motif. Clearly, the implied dynamic involved in this motif, "*das Auslaufen menschlicher in ornamentale Formen*," the transformation from human into ornamental form, seen by Benndorf and Schoene, is precisely the opposite of that cited by Jordan and Wissowa, who both speak of human figures growing out of plant ornamentation. That being as it may, it is in no way certain that the figures and motives referred to by Benndorf and Schoene are those referred to by Wissowa.

Unless one is to assume that those referred to in this context by Wissowa belong to some hypothetical sculptural genre, devoted to the depiction of mythological episodes, such as those described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, or in other myths and folktales, where individuals are transformed into plants, or, conversely, grow out of them, and hence are literally rooted to the spot, one must suppose that by figures growing out of foliage Wissowa means figures set more deeply inside the foliage than they are on **A**. So whichever way round one chooses to see its implied dynamic, this would, involve, in sculptural terms, an uninterrupted continuity of the human with the plant figure, whereby part of the human – presumably the lower part

¹⁰ Benndorf & Schoene, *op. cit.* p.40

– is not sculpturally represented, its vacant place being taken by plant ornamentation.

In Wissowa's presumably preferred, supposedly undegenerate alternative to **A**, the foliage, rather than constituting the backdrop to a scene, would be part of the foreground, on the same plane as the figures, or at least on that of their feet, legs, or lower bodies. In other words, the sculptural depiction, albeit in relief, would not be that of a three-dimensional space, with any considerable figured depth, but at the most, that of a single fairly thin slice of virtual reality, including figures separated from each other by foliage. If that were so, then it is unlikely that such figures could be depicted as taking part in a complex unitary scene, such as that depicted on **A**. Their interaction would be impeded by the presence of the intervening foliage – unless one is to suppose the existence of yet another hypothetical genre, this time devoted to the depiction of figures lost in a forest or thicket, perhaps looking for one another, or rooted to the spot, yearning for interactive mobility.

More likely than this, is the supposition that the figures, described by Jordan and Wissowa as growing out of foliage, are depicted symbolically, not as actors in a figured scene, but as discrete individuals, such as a reigning emperor, or as members of a set, like, say, the Capitoline triad, or the four winds, or the nine muses, or the twelve Olympian deities. Hence the presence of each individual figure, or group of figures, on a given capital, would be determined, not by having any particular role to play in a given scene, but merely by virtue of being a member of the given set there represented. This does not mean that such figures need be depicted as inert or unaware. Each figure could perform his or her individual action: each muse interacting with the instrument of her respective art; each deity wielding or wearing his or her specific attributes, whilst assuming a characteristic pose. But they would not be interacting with each other in a figured scene, implying an imaginary unity of place and time, and some narrative or dramatic content.

In such a case, the process of simplification involved in the transformation of a naturalistic representation into a symbol may take the form, not necessarily of reducing detail, in the depiction of individual figures, but rather of not having to provide for elements intended to create an illusion of scenographic realism. One need not provide any backdrop implying depth, and may refrain from locating or posing the figures with respect to each other, or to the contours of a figured space. If there is no interaction among the figures, then their arrangement on the capital can be quite simple: geo-

metrically, rather than narratively or dramatically determined. They may be evenly spaced, centred, say, along a given horizontal section of its vertical planes, looking straight out towards the viewer.

It should be noted, by the way, that the example cited by Benndorf and Schoene (leaving aside the question of whether it is relevant at all to this discussion) does depict an interaction: Eros pours liquid for a griffin. But that single interaction of a pair of figures, constituting a single motif, is quite different from the many interrelated interactions in the complex scene depicted on **A**, involving no less than eleven surviving or vestigial figures. They are, from left to right: Athena, a griffin, the sacred stone of Elagabal, the eagle of Elagabal, another griffin, the other goddess on a plinth, the bull, Victoria, the infant, Tellus, and a third griffin.

The figures on **A**, corresponding to this cast of characters, rather than being depicted as discrete and isolated individuals, or merely as members of a set, are depicted as members of a group, several of whom, depicted naturalistically, interact directly with each other, in a scene taking place in an imaginary space: the sacred grove provided and defined by the foliage of the capital. Even those who do not seem to be directly interacting with the others, and appear to be depicted symbolically, are, as shall be seen, participants in an imaginary or mystical interaction, involving them all.

The question of whether their representation is naturalistic or symbolic is a subtle one, depending on one's characterisation of what is taking place in this scene, and on the point of view from which one looks at it. Some of the characters are obviously naturalistic. Among these are Victoria and Tellus, both on side β , as well as the bull beneath Victoria, and the child with whom Tellus plays. So are the griffins, in the trees above, on both side α and β , although they are fantastic beings, or chimeras, a status somewhat different from that of gods and goddesses. Thus it becomes clear that naturalistic depiction of a given figure does not depend on the status in objective reality of the figure depicted. Whether the figure exists in objective reality or not does not matter. All that counts is that it exist in the virtual reality depicted.

The goddesses on plinths flanking Elagabal, however, if imagined as seen from within the virtual reality corresponding to that scene, seem to be examples of the type of symbolic representation just described. They owe their presence on those plinths merely to the fact of belonging to the class of deities included in a particular set: that of the two female *paredroi* of Ela-

gabal. That god himself, inasmuch as he is represented by a composite icon, is both naturalistic and symbolic. The eagle is naturalistic, insofar as it is depicted as live, hence capable of autonomous movement, and can be imagined as having landed on the platform on which it stands; whereas the stone, though its model was, in reality, according to Herodian,¹¹ unsculpted, at least not by the hand of man, has, like the sculptures of its *paredroi*, been set upon a platform as an object of worship.

Yet if the scene is looked at from outside its own virtual reality, then the whole of the scene is naturalistic. It depicts, naturalistically, an occasion in which figures on the ground, represented as live, interact with figures represented as statues or stones, raised on a platform and two plinths. (It will presently emerge that this is not the only respect in which the goddesses on plinths may be said to be depicted naturalistically.) Thus, the distinction between naturalistic and symbolic representation in this context is not absolute, but relative, depending on one's point of view.

The scene in the foreground of **A** is independent of its setting, though fully integrated into it. It is independent, because the interactions of the figures depicted in the scene do not depend directly on the background of symbolic foliage before which they are set, being neither rooted in it, nor separated from each other by it, nor yet interacting directly with it, at least not at the level of representation, whether symbolic or naturalistic. It is, however, integrated with that background, at the interface between the symbolic and the naturalistic modes of representation, in a way that contributes to the successful achievement of the illusion sought by naturalistic representation. That symbolic background, like the painted backdrop in a theatre, provides a setting for those figures' interaction with each other, just convincing enough, so that one imagines the scene they represent as taking place within a garden or a grove.

Rather than decadence, this treatment of the figures on **A** would seem to indicate a gain in sophistication over its alternative, so far as that alternative is deducible from its description by Jordan and Wissowa. Indeed it may be said that **A**'s creation of an imaginary space within which it is possible naturalistically to represent a complex scene, involving several figures, whilst yet remaining within the broad conventions of Corinthian capital structure and decoration, shows that it is a masterpiece of imagination and representation, incorporating a deep understanding of the subtle and fluid relationship between symbolism and naturalism, as well as a consummate command of visual metaphor, using, among other techniques, bold juxtaposi-

¹¹ Herodian 5.3.5

tions of scale.

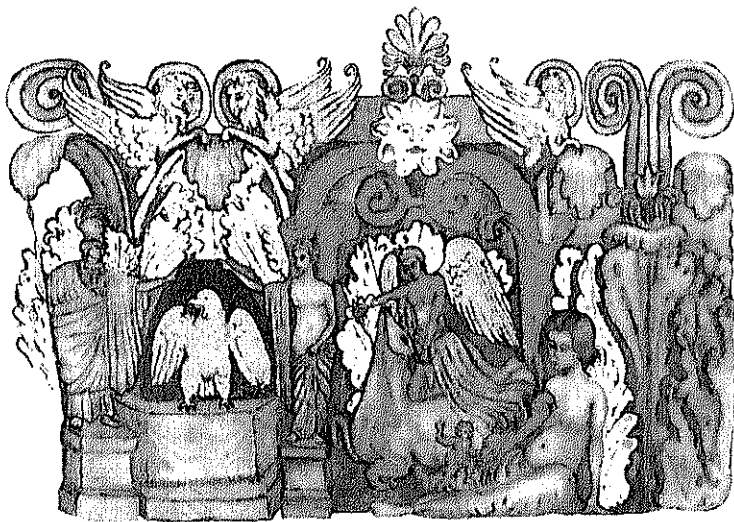
Let us sum up the results of this analysis so far. It has been seen that the foliage on **A** is structural, as well as decorative and representational. It is structural, inasmuch as it defines the basic structure of the capital; decorative, in that it conforms to and exemplifies the decorative conventions of the Corinthian order; representational, in that it provides, through the subtle and complex deployment of metaphor described above, a symbolic background for a naturalistic representation. In so doing, it spans the architectural and sculptural realms, operating simultaneously, but independently, within the relevant dimensions corresponding to each of two distinct modes of representation: the symbolic and the naturalistic. Its perception in either of these modes depends on the perceiver's point of view.

That understood, one may now turn one's attention to yet another aspect of **A**, visible in the relationship between its figures and its foliage: that of the composition of the whole. There is a way of looking at **A**, through abstraction, whereby the figures in its foreground seem fully integrated with the foliage of the background, and interact directly with it, as well as with each other. Abstraction involves yet another adjustment of focus, or point of view, making it possible to detect presences that are merely suggested to the imagination, rather than represented to the eye, whether naturalistically or symbolically. The dimensions perceptible through an abstract focus are those that constitute the composition of the whole.

To see that composition, one must, yet again, make an effort of imagination, so as to achieve the requisite adjustment of focus. One must, for a moment, desist from looking at the shapes in the sculpture as representations of foliage or of figures. Thus, paradoxically, one's effort of imagination involves a certain relaxation of attention. It eliminates the need to consider, for the moment, the strict correspondence of the shape of a given sculptural figure to that of the entity depicted by it, of sign to referent, and allows one instead to perceive a much simpler object: the shape itself, abstracted from its context. That shape, inevitably, tends to suggest other figures, but these are imaginary, as opposed to representational. This does not, however, mean that they are not intended to be seen, or rather, intuited. Their presence, usually unnoticed, since one's attention is normally directed towards the representational aspect, registers nevertheless in one's mind, at a level of perception that only comes into view with an abstract focus.

When one looks thus at side β of **A**, one notices a series of visual puns,

formed by the correspondence, whether disposed in the same or in opposite directions, of various shapes. There are the spiralling terminal scrolls of the helices, mirroring each other to right and left, nearly meeting in the middle. There are the wings of Victoria, the griffin, and the eagle, set at different angles, but indicating potential flight. The pose of the infant on Tellus' right shank is the miniaturised inversion of that of Victoria. The trumpet shape of the cornucopia towards which the infant strains is repeated, larger and, as it were, louder, by that of the caulis above it. The curve thereby traced seems directional, conveying one's attention from Tellus, stretched out at the base, defining the capital's lower perimeter, up, through the caulis and helix, towards a rounded stump with nine convexities, set above the point of near conjunction, or symphysis, of the helices. This looks to Mercklin like a large acanthus flower, which may have formed part of a wreath around a bust.



Some abstract shapes and patterns visible in A

I find Mercklin's characterisation of this stump unconvincing. A single large acanthus flower, in order to conform to its shape, would have to be depicted, not, as is usual, vertically, seen from the side, but rather turned, its stalk bent down ninety degrees, so that the viewer peers into its calyx. I do not see how a single large flower, thus depicted, could form part of a garland or wreath surrounding a bust, which would, in that case, in order to be seen frontally, have to be placed inside the calyx, at a right angle to the flower's natural line of growth. To me, because this stump has nine convexities, it

looks more like the base of a radial or starburst depiction of Helios/Sol, who is often depicted with nine rays emanating from his head. It is surmounted by the stump of what may be a further two, smaller helices, perhaps emerging from behind it, curling upward and outward, from whose symphysis may indeed grow a large flower, depicted vertically, thrusting up over the abacus, as in certain column capitals belonging to the Greek Corinthian Order.¹²

Returning to the larger helices on **A**, if, as their shape suggests, one imagines each of these helices as conductors of energy or force, rising like sap in a stem, one can see how some of that force might flow down through the gap between them, generating whirlpools, in the form of their terminal scrolls, as it gushes through the gap. That force flows down into the body of the bull, not only by following the line of Victoria's torso and leg, pressing down upon the sacrificial victim, but also down an imaginary funnel, suggested by deep grooves in the acanthus leaf backdrop, converging, together with the line of Victoria's body, on the bull. Probably Victoria's missing head once formed part of the same line of force now only suggested by her torso and leg, while the missing sword, held in her absent hand, would also, perhaps from a different angle, have directed its potential force, about to be realised, towards the neck of the bull.

Thus, at the level of focus proper to abstraction, the bull is the recipient of all the imaginary energy conveyed by the convergence of these lines of force upon his body. At the level of representation, to which one's focus now returns, he is the recipient of very real energy, naturalistically depicted in Victoria's pose, for she is pressing him down to the ground, with her knee on his spine, in order to slay him. Thus his sacrifice is clearly a central episode depicted in this scene, though it may not be the only or the main one. It is so, not only in the obvious spatial sense, that it occupies the middle of side β , but in terms of the composition of the whole, and of the flow of energy it seems to suggest. What the nature of that energy may be, and why and how it flows as it does, are questions immediately arising out of this contemplation, through an abstract focus, of the composition of the whole. In searching for an answer to these questions, it is necessary to examine more closely some of the shapes detected in the course of that exercise.

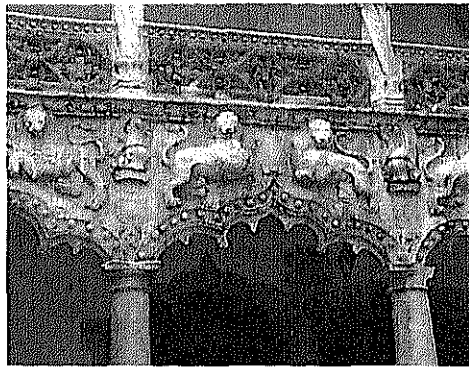
¹² For an illustration of this phenomenon, see the concluding section of this monograph.



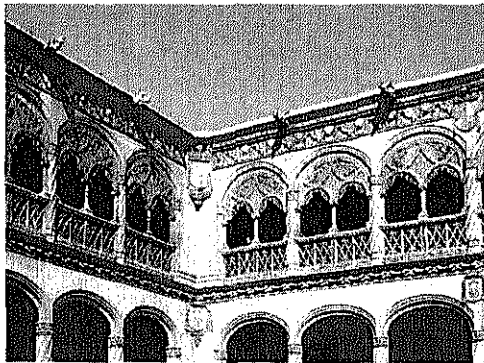
Victoria sacrificing a bull¹³

¹³ Goethert, *Trajanische Friese*.

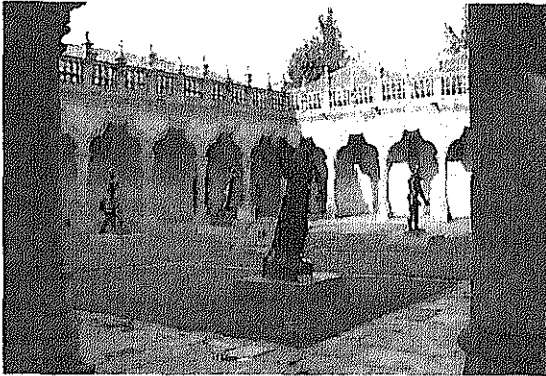
One of these is an imaginary or virtual arch, formed in the middle of side β , by the symphysis, through a crossbeam joining them, of the two helices' terminal scrolls. It reminds one of a Spanish Renaissance style called Plateresque, because likened to the ornate work of silversmiths. This recalls Studniczka's remark, cited above, that the sculpture of *A* reminds him of the work of goldsmiths. Plateresque is a fusion of Arab and Gothic styles. Studniczka also considers, and rejects without explanation, the possibility that the sculptor of *A* was Syrian. Could there nevertheless be some connection, perhaps a common source, between these two styles? This is probably unknowable. What is certain, however, is that once seen, this arch cannot be unseen: it remains in the viewer's imagination.



Palacio del Infantado, Guadalajara



Colegio de San Gregorio, Valladolid



Patio de las Escuelas Menores, Salamanca

One is almost tempted to call it a proscenium arch, given the use of theatrical conventions in the depiction of the background as a backdrop; but that would not be quite true to the spatial relationships actually depicted. The roots of the helices that constitute this arch are located behind the plane on which the action in the centre of side β takes place: behind the missing head of Tellus, on the one hand, and behind the plinth on the left of side β , on the other. The point, somewhere in midair, where the keystone of the arch would be, were these helices to develop along a single plane, is covered by the stump just discussed, providing a metaphorical keystone. But since the helices are rendered three dimensionally, curving slightly forwards towards the viewer, thus protruding outwards from the plane of the background of β , their terminal scrolls may well be thought, within the perspectival conventions of relief sculpture, to overhang, rather like a canopy, the missing head of Victoria, and hence the action taking place immediately beneath: the sacrifice of a bull. By virtue of those same perspectival conventions, it appears that Tellus, and the infant with her, are depicted on a plane considerably nearer to the viewer than that of the sacrifice, one that would correspond, if one continues to think in theatrical terms, to the apron of the stage. This impression is strengthened by the angle at which her right leg sprawls out towards the bull, suggesting depth.

If, however, one changes, not so much one's visual focus, as one's mental frame of reference, and thinks in terms of cosmology, it also seems fitting that Tellus, the earth, should occupy and define the capital's base. And, if this is so, then might not the virtual arch formed by the helices, in terms of cosmology, stand for the sky, or the vault of the heavens? And if so, where is

the sun? The first, and obvious, answer to this question, is that the sun is present in the sacred stone and eagle, forming the composite icon of Elagabal, the sun god of Emesa, depicted on the corner of sides α and β . But if this is the sun, it gives off no light. The black stone of Emesa, on the contrary, absorbs light. As such, it is, rather, an inversion of the sun, perhaps thus, mystically or metaphysically, the dark counterpart of the sun in the sky. The eagle, on the other hand, relates more directly to the sky, than to the sun, although, of course, the one complements the other.

The composite icon of Elagabal, if considered from an external point of view, is depicted naturalistically on **A**. Yet when considered in itself, it may be said to represent the sun symbolically, rather than naturalistically, if by "the sun" one means the principal light-giving star, visible in the daytime sky. In its symbolic role, the sacred stone is placed upon a platform and adored. But the black stone of Emesa is no mere artefact, made by the hand of man. It is a meteorite, fallen, white, then red hot, from the sky, turning black as it cools into an obsidian ovoid, known in religious parlance as a *baetyl*. If considered as such, it does not *represent* the sun; it *is* the sun, albeit in its dark, rather than its light-giving aspect.

The second, less obvious answer to the question of where the sun is to be found on **A** emerges from looking at **A** with an abstract focus, and searching for the sun where one would expect to find it: high in the sky. The stump identified by Mercklin as a missing flower, part of a garland or wreath, which may have framed a missing bust, suspended above the head of Victoria, occupies the very spot where one would expect the sun to be, assuming the scene represented on **A** to be susceptible to cosmological interpretation, and the imaginary arch formed by the helices thus to stand for the sky, or the vault of the heavens. This, together with the stump's nine convexities, argues for its having borne some figure of Helios/Sol.

If one chooses to test the proposition that side β of **A**, at some level of abstraction, may embody or conform to the pattern of a given cosmology, the result of such a test is that the earth, naturalistically represented as a goddess, and two different shapes which, by virtue of their position, may in some way stand for the sky and the sun, are all to be found in the places and relations one would expect. To see or intuit the cosmology suggested by this combination of representational and abstract shapes is not to unsee the naturalistic depiction of a scene taking place inside a sacred grove. Rather, it is to see both at once.

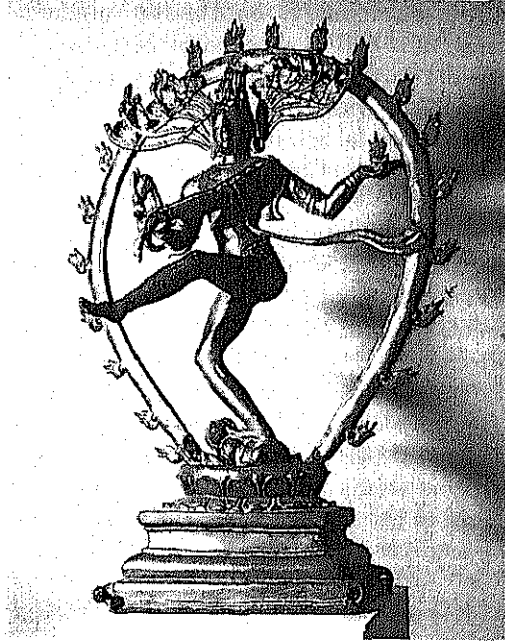
Apart from the question, which cannot be answered with certainty, but only with likelihood, of what image this stump bore, it seems to constitute a vital element of the design, and perhaps provides a key towards further understanding the structure and meaning of A. Located at the point where the close approximation of the terminal scrolls of the helices on β suggests an arch, it joins these scrolls together, thus providing, metaphorically, a keystone for that imaginary arch. Above it, some further ornament, possibly an acanthus flower, joins it to the capital's abacus. This establishes a direct link between the imaginary architecture of the sacred grove, and the real architecture of the structure to which A belongs.

There may be, on A, yet another link between the realm of architecture and that of figural representation. For immediately above the terminal scrolls of the helices lies what looks like a horizontal crossbeam or lintel, perhaps pertaining to a figured structure. What, precisely, that structure might be, is difficult to determine. It could be the lintel of a temple in whose forecourt the sacrifice of a bull is about to be performed. Or it could be an outdoor structure in the garden of the gods, perhaps a trellis, supporting the growth of foliage overhead. Whatever it is, this structure may be continuous with another, possibly visible behind the sacred stone, in the form of a sharply defined vertical corner at the juncture of sides α and β .

Together with the ornament, perhaps a flower, that rises vertically from it, the stump on β , linking this structure, whatever it may be, to the abacus above it, as well as to the arch formed by helices below it, thus links together three different levels of structure. These correspond to two different realms, the architectural and the sculptural, and, within the sculptural realm, to two different aspects or focuses, the representational and the abstract, each with its own relevant dimensions. Given its ability thus to span different levels, realms, aspects, and dimensions, one feels that whatever was represented on this stump must have been an embodiment of supreme force or power: if force in the natural world, the sun; if power in the political realm, the reigning emperor.

The foregoing observations, concerning the shapes suggested by the helices, however much else they may leave uncertain, at least confirm the existence of that three dimensional space, first detected in discussing the role of the foliage in the background, in relation to the figures in the foreground. If one redirects one's attention to that foliage, whose acanthus-leaf design, through a juxtaposition of scale, symbolically provides a backdrop for the scene, and one looks now with an abstract focus at its individual leaves,

springing up like sprays of shrubbery behind each principal figure, one may notice that their outer fringes form an outline, suggesting a flameburst or an aura surrounding at least two of the deities: Minerva and Victoria. Auras or flamebursts are often seen in painting and sculpture of gods and goddesses from well beyond the eastern confines of the Roman Empire, in Indian, Chinese, and even Japanese art. Again, as in the case of the Plateresque arch, this may or may not be significant, especially since the other goddesses on *A* do not enjoy such a background. It could simply be coincidence. Or it might indicate some common source for the iconography of *A*, and for such flamebursts. If it did the latter, it would tend to support the aforementioned theory, raised only to reject it, by Studniczka, that the artist who created *A* might have come from Syria. Studniczka thinks that *A*'s style does not tend to support this surmise. He offers no reason for this opinion.



Siva surrounded by a ring of fire.¹⁴

¹⁴ India, 12th century, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Having thus construed the relationship between the figures and the foliage on **A**, it is time to train one's attention on the scene played in the foreground. In so doing, one must be prepared to switch one's focus back and forth between a representational and an abstract aspect, or even to try to hold both in one's mind's eye simultaneously. And, while, on the one hand, it is my intention to contemplate and analyse the scene depicted on **A** from an aesthetic point of view, since, on the other, that scene is clearly and thoroughly religious in content, it is essential, for the sake of its accurate description, that any such contemplation and interpretation be informed by an understanding of the religion of the sun god Elagabal.

This requirement poses a very considerable difficulty. No texts have survived, if indeed any ever existed, giving an objective and accurate account of the cosmology and theology of the religion of Elagabal. The direct references to it in the ancient historiography are implacably hostile and denigratory, as in Dio's text, or concerned mainly with spectacular effects, as in Herodian's, or largely unrelated to that religion itself, as in the *Historia Augusta*, which deploys an ostensible depiction of Varius, and a caricature of his religion, as a veiled attack against the early Christian emperors.

Thus, the viewer of **A** gets little or no direct help in understanding its content: a sacrifice performed according to the rite of Elagabal. Any search for indirect enlightenment, by analogy, is complicated by the fact that ancient religion is a vast and variegated field, full of contradictory examples. Yet all that one has for guidance, in this case, is what can be gleaned from studies of other cults. A few scholars have sought, by comparing ancient evidence and allegation concerning other cults, which are assumed, on account of geographic, ethnic, or iconographic coincidence, somehow to relate to that of Elagabal, to offer some clue to this cult's cosmology, theology, and ritual, and, in particular, to its form of sacrifice.¹⁵

¹⁵ Recent, and foremost among these, is Martin Frey's *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, a single passage of which, relevant to **A**, is reviewed above. Its focus is, however, trained on using this comparison to verify specific allegations regarding Varius' religious policy. Its bibliography provides a lead to earlier, relevant works. A more general approach to the subject of sacrifice, in relation to the cosmology and theology of two well-documented religious contexts within which it occurs, the Hebrew and the Hindu, is provided by Henri Hubert & Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur la Nature et la Fonction du Sacrifice*, *L'Année Sociologique*, 2, 1897-1898, Paris, 1899. Other relevant works include: Dussaud, René, *Le Sacrifice en Israël et chez les Phéniciens*, Paris, 1914; Eissfeldt, Otto, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Panischen und Hebräischen und das Ende des Gottes Moloch*, *Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums*, Heft 3, Halle, 1935; Halsberghe, Gaston H., *De eeredienst van Sol Invictus Elagabal*, *Philologische Studiën*, 10, 1938-1939, Leuven, 1939, p. 46-55. Scheid's *La Religion des Romains*, 1998, cited above and below, while very useful for understanding Roman religion, does not cover Oriental cults in Rome.

It is my belief that **A** itself, if only its mysteries can be unlocked, and its messages revealed, constitutes a valuable clue towards understanding the religion of Emesa. For it is, so far as is known, together with its companion pieces (if indeed they are such), the only piece of actual material evidence, as opposed to allegation, fashioned from within the universe of ideological assumptions proper to that cult, depicting the performance of one of its rituals.

With this in mind, it seems that a useful way of attempting to penetrate some, at least, of its mysteries, is to try to reconstruct, in one's imagination, informed by what is known of ancient Roman and Near Eastern religions, in terms of the scene depicted on **A**, the ritual therein performed. Some scholars may feel that there is insufficient evidence for such a reconstruction, and that this is the point at which to fall silent. I think this a counsel of despair, and that sufficient evidence exists for informed imagination to attempt to understand this scene, so long as it is realised that the attempt is provisional and hypothetical. What follows is therefore such an imaginative reconstruction.

Entering the scene, a sacred grove, from one's initial viewpoint, that of the angular view facing Elagabal, one immediately finds before one, on a platform, Elagabal himself: an eagle standing with open wings before a black ovoid meteorite. He holds with his beak what looks like a ribbon or garland. He is flanked by two statues of goddesses on plinths: his *paredroi*. One, to his right (one's own left), holds a spear in her right hand, as if barring the way, while stretching out her left hand towards Elagabal. She wears the helmet and aegis of Athene or Minerva. The other, to his left (one's own right), seems rather less forbidding. With her left hand, she gathers her drapery before her lower body: a gesture proper to Venus Pudica, also known as Caelestis or Urania; while her right hand mirrors her counterpart's gesture.

Turning to the right, one comes upon an animate goddess: a buxom lady, lounging on the ground, her legs sprawled apart, her back propped against foliage, holding a cornucopia, and playing with a naked infant. One recognises her, in this typical pose, as Gaia or Tellus, the Earth goddess. Beyond this placid pair, there is another goddess, with wings, not only animate, but animated. Young and athletic, her upper drapery removed and hanging from the waist, she presses down a squirming bull with her knee, holding back his head by a horn, raising a sword to his throat. She is, unmistakably, Nike or Victoria.

Because they are not on plinths, it is not surprising, to a viewer familiar with the religious notions of antiquity, that Victoria and Tellus, albeit goddesses, are animate. For they are beings who, in every respect other than possessing immortality, and varying degrees of superhuman powers, look and behave as do humans. Thus, although they may belong to quite a different order of reality, and operate according to a different set of rules, one that allows them (among other privileges) to fly through the air, to appear and disappear at will, and to transform their shape into that of an animal, they are thought, in most respects, to act and feel as humans, with whose shape, in one case slightly modified by wings, they are presently endowed.

Thus, like a human, reclining on the ground, during a long religious ceremony, Tellus rests against foliage, and plays with an infant boy, crawling towards the cornucopia she cradles in her right arm. Thus, like a human, Victoria, in order to slit the throat of the bull she is about to sacrifice, anchors herself to the ground with one leg, and, with the knee of her other on its spine, presses the recalcitrant beast down to the ground, pulling, with one hand, its head back by the horns, whilst raising her sword in the other. Her wings do not get in the way. Indeed one may imagine that, outspread, they help her keep her balance, poised as she is over the squirming bull. They are in any case no more fantastic, to the acquiescent viewer, than those of the griffins, perched in the treetops above.

It is dawn, the usual time for sacrifice, specifically cited as such with regard to Varius' performance at Rome of the rites of Elagabal.¹⁶ The sun, a large red globe, appears above the lintel of a structure in the background, glowing through the branches of the trees that arch over the sacred grove. (Just so might it have appeared, emerging from the mist over the Apennines, in the eastern sky, seen from the platform on the Palatine now called the Vigna Barberini, the probable site of the urban temple of Elagabal.) The smell of incense, whose use in the ritual of that god is likewise attested,¹⁷ mingles, perhaps, with the smoke of psychotropic herbs, often found in the context of Near Eastern and North African religion. Its inhalation produces an effect as pleasant as, but different from, that of wine, whose pungent aroma, poured as it is in copious libations, also floats through the air.¹⁸ The wail of flutes, the clash of cymbals, and the roll of drums, attested both by relief sculpture and by ancient historiography, in connection with ecstatic

¹⁶ Herodian 5.5.8.

¹⁷ Herodian 5.5.7.

¹⁸ Herodian 5.5.8.

Oriental cults, and in particular with that of Elagabal,¹⁹ announces the beginning of the sacrifice.

The contrast between the serene relaxation of Tellus, indulging in playful dalliance with an infant, whilst gazing from afar at Elagabal, and the concentrated energy and power of Victoria, about to engage in an act of awful, albeit sacred violence, creates an atmosphere charged with tension. That tension is reflected in the pose of the bull, tracing a line from the point where Victoria's sword is about to sever his jugular vein, down the curve of his neck, merging with that of his shoulder blade, and terminating at the joint of his torso and foreleg. Then, springing, as it were, back from that point of involution, a new curve, somewhat more angular in shape, is formed by the joints of the bull's thigh, calf, and hoof, curling, then unfurling in the opposite direction.

These two curves, or rather coils, placed one above another, correspond, in terms of naturalistic representation, to the crouching position of a bull, naturalistically depicted. But looked at abstractly, they also contain the suggestion of a taut, compressed force; one potentially capable, if suddenly sprung, of raising the bull from the ground. It is precisely that force against which Victoria must prevail, pressing down with her knee, hard on the bull's spine, compressing its energy back into those coils. They remind one, albeit in a vertical, rather than a horizontal disposition, of the near conjunction of the terminal scrolls of the helices on β , almost directly above them, and above Victoria's head, forming an imaginary canopy over the proceedings.

If, as is expected, Victoria succeeds in keeping the bull down, with the pressure of her knee upon his spine, and in plunging her sword into his throat, the sacrifice will be accomplished, and – assuming no disease or deformity is found inside the victim's body – all will be well. If, however, Victoria should fail in the execution of her duty, and the bull should rise up, unslaughtered, overthrowing her, then his compressed energy would flow in the opposite direction, with unforeseeable, and possibly disastrous consequences.

This depiction of a moment of anticipation, suspended for eternity in marble, and thereby prevented from reaching its climax, invites one to complete the sacrifice in one's imagination, and thereby in some sense to perform it. In so doing, one's imagination, informed as it should be by what is known about this sort of sacrifice, as well as by what one sees on **A**, must

¹⁹ Herodian 5.5.9, cymbals and drums.

take into account a possible anomaly.

The relationship between Victoria and the bull, as interpreted above, would seem to be agonistic, one of struggle, in which all expectation is that Victoria, as is proper to her nature and her name, will emerge victorious. If this interpretation of the specific iconography of these two figures, Victoria and the bull, is correct, then it appears that the sacrifice depicted on **A** does not conform to the known Roman protocol for that rite, at least not in one important respect: "In principle, the victim should show its consent, notably, by lowering its head. Thus it was generally attached to a rope threaded through a ring set at the base of the altar, so that the head could, with the help of the sacrificer, make the gesture of acquiescence. Any manifestation of fear or panic by a victim ... amounted to an unfavourable omen for the sacrificer."²⁰

Here, perhaps because the ritual is not Roman, but Syrian, or because it is performed by the goddess of victory herself, there is neither rope nor ring nor altar, and the victim's missing head, far from being lowered, is pulled back and up (if the present reconstruction of this scene, conforming as it does to the known iconography of Victoria sacrificing a bull, is correct). Rather than the stately Roman rite, with its emphasis on acquiescence and decorum, this sacrifice seems to suggest a more instinctive, savage form of ritual, one in which at least a potential opposition of forces plays some role.

Those forces can, fairly obviously, be identified as those of life and death. Both were conceived of in antiquity as active principles or forces, unlike the modern conception of death as merely the end or absence of life, and were personified as such in mythology. The precise way, however, in which they relate to one another in this scene, and in which that relationship may offer clues to understanding the religion of Elagabal, is somewhat less obvious. In order to begin to understand it, it is necessary to follow through with one's imaginary reconstruction of the sacrifice, and to consider, in terms of the iconography of **A**, where and how those forces may be present in this scene, and how they may interact with one another.

On the basis of the elements of information provided by the capital itself, combined with one's own experience or witness of bovine slaughter, whether on a ranch, in the arena, or in an industrial context, it is possible to reconstruct the next step in the scene. One can hear the bull's impending execution announced by a fanfare of terrified bellowing. One glimpses a

²⁰ Scheid, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

flash, as Victoria's swift, unhesitating swordthrust momentarily glints in the rising sun, plunging into the bull's throat, severing its jugular vein. Then the life springs out of the bull, in sudden, fast waning spurts of iron-scented crimson.

From this point on, with regard to the proceedings, the scene sculpted on **A** ceases to instruct one's imagination. Nevertheless, possibilities propose themselves:

Perhaps the bull's blood will be collected in a basin, by an undepicted attendant, one watching and waiting, alongside the viewer, for this climax, ready to move in with his receptacle, as soon as the sword has done its work. Then, perhaps, this basin full of steaming blood will be placed before Elagabal, to offer to that god, and to his *paredroi*, through the inhalation of its ferrous vapour, the life force it contains.²¹

Or, perhaps, it will be poured over the god, bathing the black stone in red,²² just as, so we are told (admittedly by a very unreliable source)²³ Varius himself was bathed in the blood of a bull, whilst undergoing the ceremony of the taurobolium. (Whether Varius was or not, there is better regarded attestation that other emperors, before and after him, did undergo this rite, so it would not be all that surprising if he did so.)

Alternatively, perhaps there is no basin involved, and instead, if the angle at which Victoria plunges in her sword is right, the blood will spurt straight upwards, like a fountain, then flow back down the bull's body, onto the right foot of Tellus, which seems to be thrust into the space between the bull's flank and the ground. This would, in fact, more closely resemble the relative positions of victim and beneficiary in the taurobolium, a Mithraic rite, where the beneficiary, draped in white, entered a pit covered by a metal grill, on top of which the sacrifice was performed, so that the blood flowed down onto the beneficiary, drenching him, and his white drapery, in red.

If this were so, and if a part of Tellus, her foot (the part which treads the earth), were allowed metonymically to stand for her whole, would the

²¹ Dussaud, op. cit. p 13, with reference to the offering of blood in the Hebrew sacrifice: "*L'importance considérable de ce rite tenait à ce que le sang mis en liberté véhiculait l'âme même du sacrifiant. Cette âme atteignait ainsi la divinité et la liait... 'Car le principe vital de toute créature c'est son sang' [Levitiques XXVII, 14]...Parce que l'âme s'échappe avec le sang, il est indispensable d'en faire l'offrande au moment où on immole.*"

²² Dussaud, op. cit. p 13: "*On versait du sang tout autour de l'autel, contre la paroi, probablement avec des patères...*"

²³ HA/AH 7.1.

vertical flow of energy implicit in this depiction propose that the earth is thereby fertilised by the blood of the bull? Perhaps, but against this supposition it must be observed that this sacrifice takes place before Elagabal and his *paredroi*: greater gods and goddesses. If all the bull's blood, the most spectacular element of his life, is given to Tellus, then what is left for the elevated triad? The smoke from the burnt offering of some of his viscera and flesh, as in the Graeco - Roman ritual? Perhaps.

But if, on the contrary, the blood is, in one way or another, offered to Elagabal, and to his *paredroi*, then the question is reversed: what is given to Tellus? Does she, like the attendant, the viewer, and everyone else taking part in the rite, even if only as spectators, partake of the flesh, roasted, and perhaps cut according to a geometrical, rather than an anatomical pattern, as in the Greek rite? Since she is goddess of the earth, perhaps her portion, rather than being burnt, as are offerings to the celestial gods, and given them as smoke, is buried instead in her ample bosom: the ground. Again, perhaps.

Or is there something else, some product or result of the sacrifice, as yet unaccounted for, other than the bull's flesh or blood, which goes to Tellus? Before attempting to answer this question, there is a prior one that requires attention: Why does anything at all have to go to Tellus?

The reason is that she, both literally and metaphorically, is the base of everything that happens here. She provides the context within which life exists: without the earth, there is no life, although she does need other entities, or deities - notably sunlight and rain, both of which come from the sky - in order to be fruitful. Without life, specifically human life, there is nobody here to worship Elagabal. If they are not worshipped, the gods wither and die. And if the gods disappear, so does the universe. Thus Tellus has an integral role to play in the scene enacted here. The sacrifice concerns her just as intimately as, if not more than, it does any of the others present, whether actors or spectators.

That being the case, there is a way in which she can be said to be an ultimate beneficiary of the sacrifice, even if all its first fruits, whether blood or flesh, are offered to the greater gods, elevated on their plinths and platform. If Elagabal, the black sun god, who, in combination with Tellus, is himself a source of life, renews his powers, whether through the inhalation of vapour or of smoke, or by being bathed in blood, both conceived as forms of energy, or by some other means, then, his good will thus secured, he will redirect

this energy, greatly magnified by its passage through him, towards the earth, whose body, that of Tellus, lies curved around the base of the scene, waiting to be filled by his bounty.

But, in addition to this, an abstract focus on the iconography of **A** suggests another way in which Tellus may receive the life force, directly from the dying bull, and transmit it to her progeny, including humankind.

It has been noticed that her right foot is inserted beneath the bull's chest. Its sole is turned towards the base of the bull's hoof. There is a gap between them. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, this gap between two opposing, somewhat similar forms (here more similar in function than in shape) lies directly below the gap between the terminal scrolls of the helices, and nearly below the coils formed by the bull's shoulder and foreleg. The general orientation of her body is that of a curve, which closely resembles, follows, and amplifies another curve already detected, above, in considering the shapes of the body of the infant, the cornucopia, and the caulis on the right side of β . The point of inception, both of this, and of the lower curve traced by Tellus' body, is the bull's knee, calf, and hoof.

Now when Victoria's sword plunges into the bull's throat, that is not immediately the end of his life. There is energy left in his body, even as his blood is draining. It is visible, in the form of the continuing spasms of his muscles, passing like waves through his body, and exiting by way of the flailing, then twitching of his hooves. The shape and disposition of his foreleg and hoof, and those of Tellus, the infant, the cornucopia, the caulis, and the helix, in combination with the lines leading down through Victoria and the grooves in the acanthus, back into his body, seem to suggest a cyclical transmission of force, such that the cycle of life and death, and then of life again, can be endlessly repeated, by virtue of the sacrifice captured in marble.

It is appropriate now to address another allegation about Varius, in relation with the scene depicted on **A**: the charge that he practiced infant sacrifice.²⁴ Frey has shown, in his examination of Near Eastern and North African cults, in some respects affine or similar to that of Elagabal, that infant sacrifice cannot be ruled out as a conceivable rite in the religion of Emesa. There is nevertheless no positive evidence for it. There are only Dio's allegations, second-hand, and possibly a form of political propaganda, to the effect that Varius indulged in it at Rome; these and the testimony of the *Historia Augusta*, for what it is worth. Now if it were to be established that **A** does indeed issue from this emperor's patronage, it seems to tell a rather different story. Here the victim is a bull, whereas the infant gambols untouched towards Tellus, whether to play with her cornucopia, or to suckle at

²⁴ Dio 80.11; HA/AH 8.1.

her breast.

Not only that, but the infant appears to be a major beneficiary of the sacrifice. For together with Tellus' right foot, he is one of the first recipients of the force flowing through the curve described above. Indeed, it may be observed that the curve defining the direction of this force, that which leads from the hoof of the bull to the cornucopia, passes directly through his budding genitalia, surely a meaningful coincidence. It may or may not also be significant that the infant's form is placed directly over the spot where the bull's own genitalia might otherwise be visible, given its hindquarters' slight elevation from the ground. His potential for life, not only for his own, but also for its future generation, seems to form part of what is affirmed by this composition.

As one contemplates this infant, noticing, by the way, that he is the only figure in the composition with his back turned to Elagabal, one also becomes again aware, as noted above, that his shape, in particular the pose of his legs, is the miniaturised mirror image of Victoria's. This, in turn, leads one to consider that his relationship to Tellus may somehow be comparable to Victoria's relationship to the bull: comparable, but in reverse, for while Victoria is about to slay the bull, Tellus is the source of life, or at least of nurture, for the infant. There may also be a sense in which the infant is the child, not of Victoria herself (for she is hardly maternal), but of her act, that of killing the bull.

The precise metaphysics whereby the death of the bull leads to the life of the infant may be unknowable, or unsusceptible of rational analysis. But the scene depicted on A seems to indicate some connection between the bull's death and the infant's life. Victoria and Tellus appear to act, respectively, as artificer and enabler of that connection. The bull dies as a result of Victoria's act of sacrifice, and his energy is transmitted through the infant and onward, into the curve described by the cornucopia, caulis and helix. This transmission somehow involves the reversal and miniaturisation of Victoria's shape into that of the infant, who is depicted as the child, or at least the ward, of Tellus. This goddess also serves to transmit the pulse of energy generated by the bull's death, and, by virtue of her underlying curvature, to provide a containing foundation for the scene. That foundation's corresponding counterpart is formed by the curves of the helices, tracing the vault of the sky.

This interpretation of the sacrifice, and of its consequences, seems to provide a possible answer to one important question regarding its intention and effect. Not so much to that first asked by Wissowa: To whom is the sac-

rifice directed? For it is fairly obvious that it is directed towards Elagabal, perhaps together with his *paredroi*. But rather: For whose benefit is it performed?

The iconography of A, if interpreted as here, suggests that it is performed for the benefit of the entire world in which it is enacted: the cosmos depicted, abstractly as well as representationally, on side β of A. It should be remembered that this cosmos has, as well as an earth, in the form of Tellus, and something like the vault of the sky, in the form of an arch suggested by the near conjunction of helices, an object, whose remains are a rounded stump, located in the place where the sun would be, in a figural representation of nature.

If this is so, how exactly does this sacrifice, taking place within that cosmos, relate to Elagabal, the dark aspect of the sun, and to his two *paredroi*, set to the (viewer's) left of the locus of the sacrifice? The first step, or rather leap, towards understanding this relationship, is to consider, in terms of the discussion so far, how energy, the life force, or however it may be conceived, might flow from the locus of the sacrifice to that of Elagabal. In the earthly cosmos, depicted on the right part of side β , it flows in a cycle from the bull through Tellus and the infant, the cornucopia, the caulis, and the right helix, down through Victoria and the grooves in the acanthus, back into the bull. But how exactly does it flow from the sacrifice to Elagabal, and to his *paredroi*?

An abstract focus on side β provides the answer. One can see how the point of convergence of the lines of force formed by Victoria and the grooves in the acanthus, just like the point of involution of the coils formed by the bull's shoulder and his foreleg, is a point where energy can spring back and curve off in a new direction. And, just as, in the earthly sphere, that energy uses various forms - Tellus, infant, cornucopia, caulis, helix - as its conductors, passing easily from one to another, leaping across gaps, so in the celestial sphere, it uses wings. It traces an arc from Victoria, whose wings are half open, to the griffins, whose wings are raised, as in flight, to the eagle of Elagabal, whose wings are again half open, suggesting a completed flight, or perhaps merely a pause, before taking off again.

Studniczka's remark, concerning the depiction of the composite icon of Elagabal, consisting of an eagle and a stone, on coins of Antoninus Pius, is relevant here. This eagle may there be shown as live, perched on the baetyl, and not at all as a flat representation.

The eagle on A is clearly depicted, not as an emblem, a flat representa-

tion, but with relief, as a real live eagle, holding a ribbon or garland in its beak, standing before, rather than above, a large conical stone. The eagle wraps round the corner of α and β in such a way that it can be seen from the sides, as one moves around the capital. The stone itself, in contrast, although it has a certain thickness, when viewed from either side, looks, from that angle, more like the sort of tablet on which one may expect to find an inscription, than like the cone described by Herodian.

Now when one looks at side α , in search of symmetry, one finds it only partially. There is a griffin, corresponding to that on side β , but there are no figures corresponding to Victoria, Tellus, the infant or the bull. Rather than suggesting movement, Minerva's stance, holding a spear, appears to set a limit. This is the far end of the scene, over whose boundary she stands guard.

That understood, it becomes clear that the scene on **A**, taken as a whole, reads from right to left, as do most Semitic scripts.²⁵ If this is so, then the sacrifice taking place on side β is both logically and chronologically prior to an event taking place on the corner of α and β .

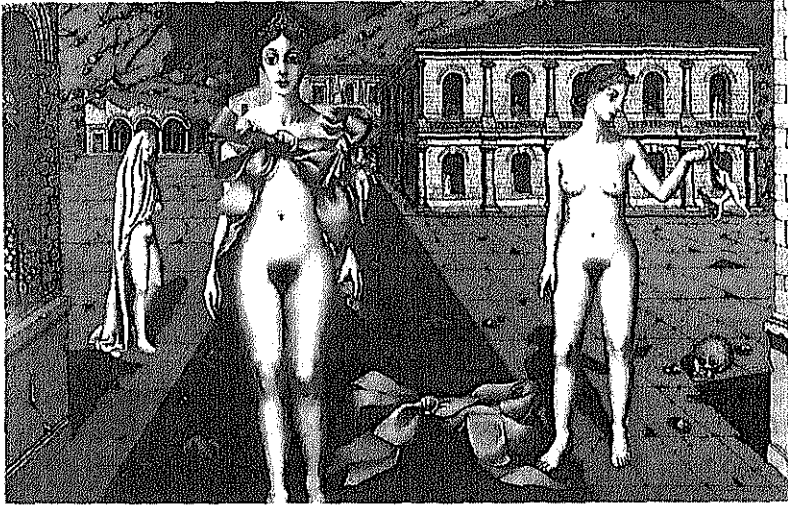
Focusing again on the representational aspect of **A**, one may contemplate the mirroring gesture of the two goddesses standing on plinths, to either side of Elagabal. Their naturalism has been remarked upon by Studniczka. Despite their depiction as idols, hence, presumably, as inert pieces of statuary, they seem, like live women, their outstretched hands poised over the crown of the stone, to be caressing it: *wie liebkosend*, in Studniczka's memorable phrase.

When first contemplated by the modern critical eye, this gesture seems not so much naturalistic, as surreal. There are, indeed, surrealist paintings depicting marble goddesses come to life. But such a notion is, of course, anachronistic. The reason such paintings seem surreal to the modern critical eye is that the modern sceptical mind, to which that eye corresponds, does not believe in goddesses, much less in the ability of their statues to come to life. Thus any artistic depiction of such an event is dismissed, or, conversely, admired, as a (mere) product of imagination, rather than of observation.

The ancient mind, or rather, a significant number of ancient people, did, however, believe, both in goddesses, and in the ability of their statues to come to life. Their belief, whether enthusiastic, or merely habitual and uncritical, was sufficiently deep-rooted and widespread in classical culture to constitute the basis for a commonplace topic of Graeco-Roman religion, as well as that of Egypt and the Near East, known as epiphany. The statue of

²⁵ Vogüé, Comte Melchior de, *Inscriptions Sémitiques*, 1868, passim.

a god or goddess could, in certain circumstances, such as those of its receiving proper worship and sacrifice, in some sense come to life. So it was important that a cult statue be well sculpted, and truly resemble the canonically established features of its respective god or goddess, because the spirit of that deity must be able to recognise its own likeness, and, when appropriately enticed by adequate sacrifice and worship, deign for a time to come and inhabit it. Such deliberately induced infestations of the statue by the spirit of the god or goddess in question are special instances of a wider form of epiphany, whereby the deity might even manifest itself spontaneously, taking animal or human form, or appearing in a dream.²⁶



Paul Delvaux, *Les Noeuds Roses*, 1937

The presence on A of Tellus and Victoria in human form could be interpreted as just such a spontaneous epiphany, if there were any real humans in the scene. Here the status of the infant is relevant. Is he a human child, merely being played with by Tellus, or is he also divine? I do not presume to guess. But an infant hardly constitutes a full-fledged consciousness for the purpose of making a determination based on cognition; for the goddesses' presence is only an epiphany if there is someone there to witness it, and to know what it means. If there is no such human present, then the depiction of Tellus and Victoria on A is not so much the representation of an epiphany, as that of a scene involving gods and goddesses, taking place in a

²⁶ *OCD*, *epiphany*, p. 546.

human-free zone, such as the gods are reputed to favour.

Against this interpretation, however, stands the fact that the goddesses on plinths seem to be undergoing an induced epiphany. They are springing to life, or at least their hands are. Among the alleged signs that the deity had thus deigned, in response to offerings and supplication, to visit a temple or a shrine, and inhabit for a time its own cult statue there, were the statue's giving off a certain glow, or appearing to sweat, or being heard to speak. Just how the priests arranged for these epiphanies, using an illusionistic bag of tricks worthy of a conjurer or a ventriloquist, forms the object of satire by pagan sceptics, as well as of ridicule by early Christian writers. Despite which, presumably during or shortly after the Second Sophistic, replete as it was with sceptics, a sculptor could depict an epiphany, and count on his message being understood.

It is noteworthy that, in certain cults, such as that of the Minoans in Crete, long before the classical period, an epiphany – not involving a statue – could be induced by ecstatic dancing.²⁷ The same, with the aid of wine, or herbs such as *cannabis sativa*, could be said of the cults of Bacchus and Dionysus, both of which lasted, often conflated with each other, throughout classical times. Part of the cult of Elagabal consisted of ecstatic dancing, performed by his high priest, who was, at one moment of history, the emperor here known as Varius: one whose boyish beauty, when performing the sacred dances of his cult, Herodian compares to that of the young Dionysus.²⁸ Another point worth noting is that epiphany, as opposed to omens and portents, was not a feature of Roman state religion,²⁹ of which that emperor was, in his role as *pontifex maximus*, officially the head. We are told (admittedly by Dio, who hated him) that Varius as emperor not only danced for his god himself, but that he forced Roman nobles to do so also, thus exposing them to ridicule.

A particular consequence flows from this, if Dio's allegation is true. Not only may Varius have sought to introduce a foreign god, a pretender claiming equivalence with Jupiter, into the Roman pantheon, and even have attempted to extend his dominion over other, long established deities. He may also have attempted to introduce a foreign form of ritual, that of ecstatic dancing, alien to the Roman notion of the *gravitas* proper to a man, let alone an emperor. This ritual involved a theological doctrine, that of induced epiphany, which, though widespread in the religious practice and experience of many of the peoples of the Roman empire, had, for whatever reason, not been considered worthy, till then, of adoption into the official Roman state

²⁷ Burkert, Walter, *Greek Religion*, 1985, p. 40.

²⁸ Herodian 5.3.7

²⁹ *OCD*, *epiphany*, p. 546.

religion.

Whatever may be the case regarding Varius and his religious policy, it seems, at least, returning to **A**, that the gesture of the two goddesses standing on plinths to either side of Elagabal constitutes an epiphany; one that goes much further than mere glowing or sweating or speaking, all of which the priests could easily arrange. For these marble goddesses seem to have been set in motion. This is a much more difficult trick, perhaps achievable only in a quasi-narrative scenic representation, such as that of this relief, with the aid of some imagination.

Consequently, there must be humans somewhere, to act as witnesses of this induced epiphany. For there would be no point in these goddesses coming to inhabit their statues, and causing them to move, merely to be seen by Victoria and Tellus, who, being goddesses themselves, albeit of somewhat lesser status, can presumably see their betters anyway, from time to time. The infant must, as noted above, be left out of the reckoning, since he is unlikely to be able to distinguish between a human and a goddess, and is in any case facing away from them. Since there are no fully cognisant humans represented in the relief sculpture of **A**, the task of acting as witnesses to this induced epiphany, and to the spontaneous one of Tellus and Victoria, falls to the viewer of the statue. The requisite act of witness must be performed in the viewer's imagination.

Now against this supposition it could be argued that the sculptures depicted on **A** are representations of real idols that were sculpted in that pose, and set upon plinths opposite each other, perhaps in a sacred grove somewhere in Rome. But it can be countered that the clear direction of their mirroring gestures to Elagabal, and the unanimous consensus of ancient historiography that his sacred stone resided, during its sojourn at Rome, not out of doors, but inside one temple or another, passing between them, at the change of seasons, in processions on a horse-drawn cart, means that for most of the time such statues would have been caressing a void, waiting for it to be filled. This would occur at the most twice a year, perhaps at a halt, during the vernal or autumnal procession. Had such a remarkable pair of statues existed in Rome, surely they would have been mentioned by one or another of the ancient historians, such as Herodian, who writes in such detail about the procession of Elagabal.

It makes far more sense to suppose that the idols depicted on **A** exist only on **A**, and in the imagination of its sculptor. If so, the meaning of their gesture should be interpreted as the depiction of an event taking place in the context of the fictional scene of which it is a part: the Idyll of Elagabal.

Something occurring in that scene induces an infestation of the statues by the spirits of their respective goddesses.

It is the sacrifice, completed in the viewer's imagination, by a goddess who is herself the protagonist of a spontaneous epiphany, which induces the gesture of Elagabal's *paredroi*. Again the role of the human viewer, here as more than just witness, but as imaginative realiser, is essential. If the sacrifice were not thus completed in imagination, the effect would precede the cause. But since, as noted above, the scene reads from right to left, the time frame of the event taking place on the corner of α and β – the epiphany of the two goddesses – may be assumed to be later than that of the event taking place on β – the sacrifice – and thus the proper order of cause and effect is preserved, so long as one cooperates, by completing the sacrifice in one's imagination.

But given that the sacrifice precedes and somehow causes the epiphany undergone by the statues of Elagabal's *paredroi*, how precisely does this causation work? How does it induce them to spring to life and stretch out their hands towards Elagabal? Studniczka thinks they are caressing him, doubtless a pleasant thought. But what makes them want to do so, if indeed that is what they are doing? Rather than the altruistic, loving emotion implicit in Studniczka's caress, one could detect in this gesture a more self-interested, practical, and, above all, more ritually efficacious motive.

It has been seen how the upward flow of the energy released by the sacrifice reaches Elagabal: via the wings of Victoria, the griffin, and his own. But how exactly does it reach his *paredroi*? For just as Tellus and the rest of the figures in the cycle depicted on side β both receive and transmit the energy flowing downwards and out from the sacrifice, so must the energy sent into Elagabal also somehow be transmitted. It has, however, been noted that the wings of the eagle are somewhat more closed than those of Victoria, perhaps indicating a completed flight, or a pause before taking off again. The tips of their feathers point downward and slightly outward, towards his *paredroi*'s feet. Perhaps that is enough.

But since the stone is also Elagabal, just as much as, if not more so than the eagle, that energy is also present in the stone. Perhaps it has made it begin to warm up, perhaps even to glow. That would be true to its nature, since it was once red, even white hot. So, if Elagabal, whether as eagle or as stone, is thus the first, and so far only recipient of all the flow of the energy released by the sacrifice, then may his *paredroi*'s gesture, rather than to bestow affection, not be intended to seize energy? The two goddesses stretch out their hands to the stone in order to draw out its force. And if this is so,

once that energy has entered the goddesses on plinths, where does it go?

In the case of Venus, it goes down into the plinth, hits the ground, and springs back up, into the curve of the left helix, and into that of the volute. In the case of Minerva, it performs a similar manoeuvre, rising up through the volute, and out through a helix that may or may not have had a counterpart beyond it, perhaps in a frieze on the wall to which **A** may have been engaged.

This appears to explain how the various epiphanies depicted on **A** might work in terms of religion, specifically in terms of some theory of cause and effect, involving the transmission of some sort of imaginary energy. The naturalistic depiction of the spontaneous epiphanies of Tellus and Victoria has also been discussed, and, it is hoped, adequately explained. But how exactly does the induced epiphany of the *paredroi* of Elagabal work in terms of the aesthetic categories discussed above?

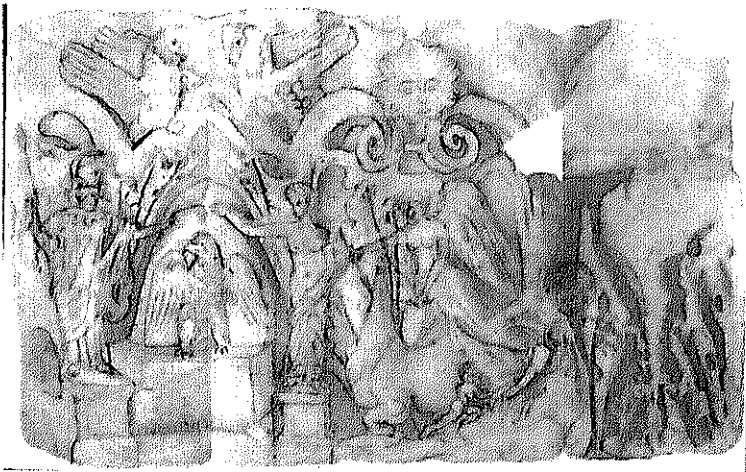
What happens here, in terms of such categories, is that the symbolic becomes naturalistic. It has been noted that, if seen, as it were, from within the scene, the goddesses depicted as standing on plinths, placed in an imaginary sacred grove, are represented symbolically, rather than naturalistically, in the sense that the difference between these terms is defined above, in discussing Wissowa's remark about figures growing out of foliage. They are symbolic, inasmuch as, being depicted as statues on plinths, flanking the composite icon of Elagabal, they are situated where they are, because they are the *paredroi* of Elagabal, and together with him constitute a triad.

They are not, until the moment of their epiphany, signalled by extending their hands towards the stone's pate, and, one may surmise, by looking each other in the eye, depicted as interacting with Elagabal, or with each other. By virtue of that gesture, however, they are transformed, from inert, symbolic representations of statues, into naturalistic depictions of interacting beings, members of a group composing a scene with one another.

And is that all that happens on **A**? Not quite. The energy it contains and transmits has at least one further leap to perform: the eagle has yet to take off and fly, in the direction suggested by the griffin above it, over the viewer's head, and up into the sky.

The reconstruction of the Idyll of Elagabal.

The drawing of the Idyll of Elagabal, reproduced above, represents in visual form my conclusions regarding the interpretation of **A** from an aesthetic point of view. In particular, it embodies my opinion concerning the identity of the second goddess on a plinth, and that of the figure in the stump above the helices, the nature and precise moment of the sacrifice, and the poses and relationships of the figures, whether anthropomorphic, animal, vegetable, or mineral. It was the process of drawing the figures that led to my most fully considered interpretation of this scene, as set out above, since only through the process of attempted reconstitution did certain facts about the sculpture reveal themselves.

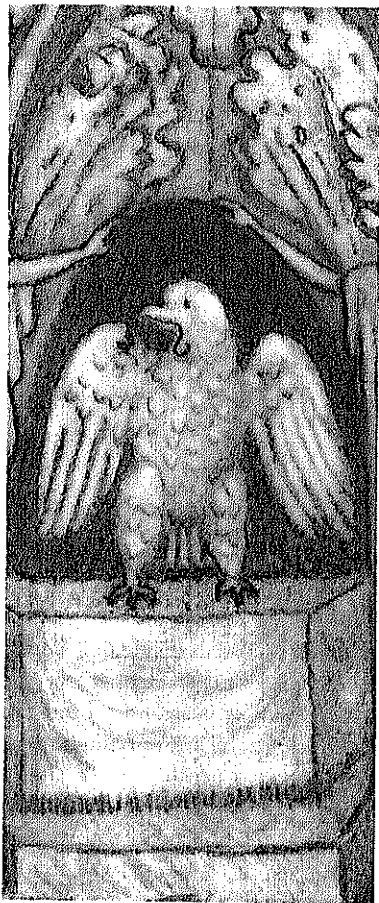


In order to reconstitute the scene depicted on three sides of **A** into a single, continuous image, the following techniques and criteria were employed: A photograph of each of the three sculpted sides was subjected to editing for contrast, cropped, and joined with the others, resulting in the photocomposition triptych reproduced in the text above. Over a printout of this triptych, a sheet of architect's transparent paper was placed, and a pencil drawing of the extant outlines and shadings was traced on it. Then, with reference to images and information from various sources, an attempt was made to fill out the missing parts of the anthropomorphic figures and the foliage, as in this illustration of an early stage of the process. In so doing, the likely shape of its original figure had constantly to be deduced from the shape of the stump or damaged shape on **A**.

The specific arguments and sources employed in this reconstitution are

as follows:

The corner of sides α and β : the composite icon of Elagabal, on a platform draped with a tassel-fringed cloth; the terminal scroll of a helix, and a protruding acanthus leaf.



Elagabal

Here, the sculpture on **A** was sufficient to provide the image of the composite icon of Elagabal. The only major adjustment that had to be made was that of providing for the terminal scrolls of a volute above that icon, and for a protruding acanthus leaf beneath this, both developing simultaneously out of sides α and β . Given the origins of this drawing in a composition combining photographs taken at right angles to each other, the right and left edges, respectively, of these two figures originate wide apart, as much so in the photocomposition, as in the drawing traced from it. It was thought best to retain this feature, although the acanthus leaf thus takes on the appearance of a canopy, and the volutes look like haloes around the heads of the griffins, rather than to try to alter the proportions of the rest of the drawing to eliminate it. Similar considerations apply to the leaf and volutes on the corner of β and γ .



Griffin³⁰

The griffin on side α , and his counterparts on β , are derived from representations in Goethert's *Trajanische Friese*, reviewed above, in the discussion of the literature concerning these capitals. The raised paw is frequently found in these.

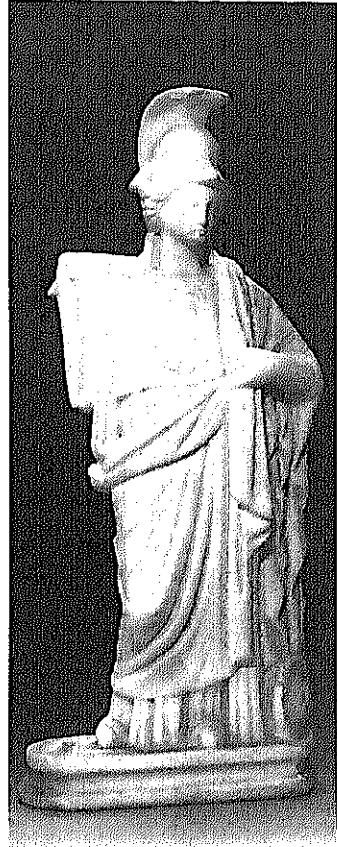
³⁰ Goethert, *Trajanische Friese*.

Side α : Athena/Minerva/Allath, and a griffin; acanthus foliage and helices.



Athena on A

The likelihood that Athena/Minerva/Allath is here represented with a helmet, as is often the case, was deduced from the elongated shape of the stump above her torso, and that she holds a spear, from the remains of her right arm. The angle of the spear was determined by the narrowness of the plinth on which she stands, and upon which it also must rest.



Athena³¹

The main example used in the reconstitution of her drapery was provided by a picture of a statue of Athena in the collection of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, Turkey.

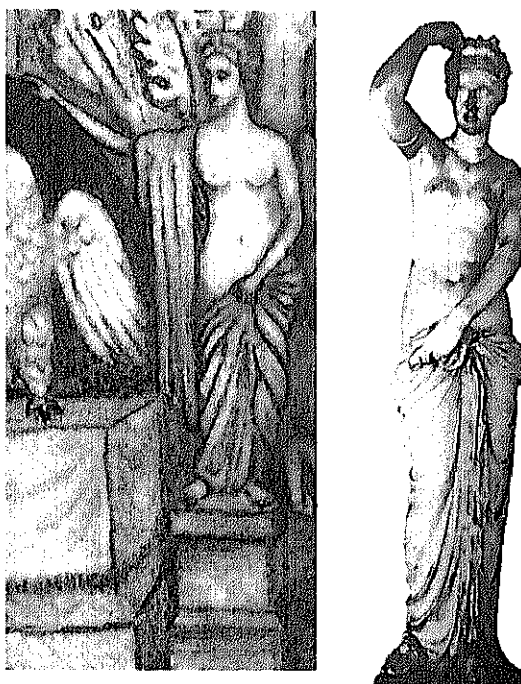
³¹ *Gods and Goddesses*, Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, 1992.

Side β: The second goddess on a plinth (=Aphrodite/Venus Caelestis or Urania/Astarte), Nike/Victoria, Tellus, an infant, a bull, two griffins; helices and acanthus foliage.



Venus Caelestis or Urania on A

The most important conclusion resulting from the present reconstruction of the Idyll of Elagabal is the almost certain identification of the second goddess on a plinth as Aphrodite/Venus Caelestis or Urania/Astarte, rather than as Juno. This emerges from close examination of grooves and shadows in her remaining drapery. These tend to converge towards a point where her missing hand would gather them together. This suggests that she is here depicted as a Venus Pudica, a form of that goddess identified with Venus Caelestis or Urania, the goddess of Carthage (further identified with Syro-Phoenician Astarte): the very same goddess whom Varius allegedly wedded to his god, Elagabal. If correct, this identification renders otiose Studniczka's argument, based on this goddess's identification as Juno, that **A** represents an attempted usurpation by Elagabal of Jupiter's place in the Capitoline triad.



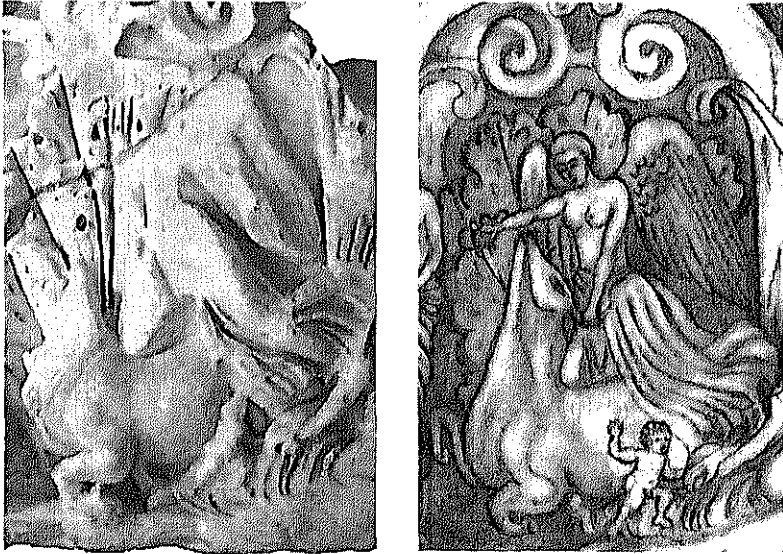
Venus Caelestis or Urania³²

Another detail of Venus' drapery is also interesting: the diagonal grooves below her extended right arm may, at first sight, seem to belong to the acanthus leaf or caulis behind her, but, if more closely examined, their respective lines do not correspond to each other. In conjunction with a slight trace of undulation over her extended arm, these grooves seem more likely to be drapery, coming up from behind her body, surmounting her arm, and falling vertically in front.

The image of Venus Pudica which guided this reconstruction, though not that of the drapery over her arm, is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and is reproduced here, in an edited version, from a book on the reception and conservation of classical sculpture in modern times.

³² Haskell, F., & Penny, N., *Taste and the Antique, The Lure of Classical Sculpture*, 1981, p. 320.

The figure of the bull on A is sufficiently well preserved, except for its head, to permit the discussion, above, of the possible significance of the coil shape formed by its left foreleg, without recourse to reconstruction. So also are the grooves in the acanthus flowers forming a backdrop to its sacrifice at the hands of Victoria. Her own figure is, however, less well preserved, though the remains of her torso, right shank, and left wing, allow one to determine the angle at which she should be depicted in the reconstruction.



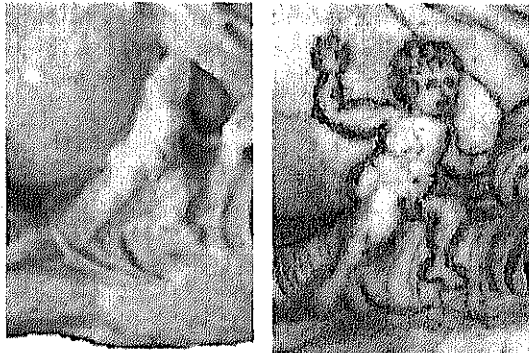
Victoria and the bull, with Tellus and infant

This is based on a series of images in Goethert's *Trajanische Friese*, though the precise pose has been adapted to that determined by the shape of the remains of Victoria on A. In particular, given her elevation over the bull, it is likely that its head would be pulled back much further than on any of the images reproduced by Goethert. This in turn determines the angle at which Victoria holds her sword.



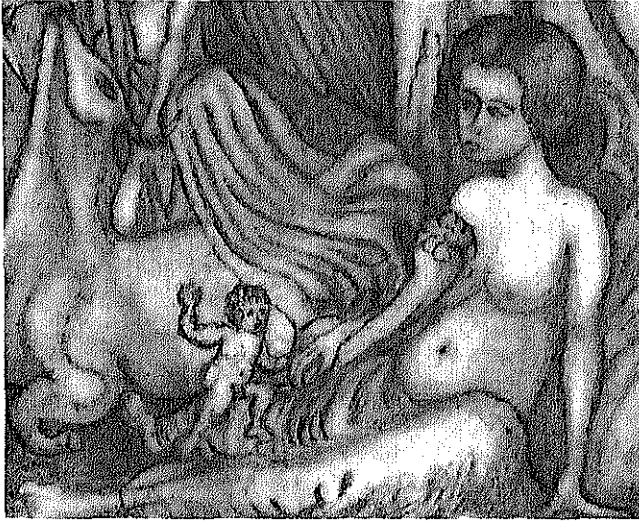
Victoria sacrificing a bull³³

It has been remarked, above, that the infant's pose almost constitutes a miniaturised mirror image of Victoria's. It was possible to reconstruct him from the capital itself, deducing the angle of his right arm from the need for balance suggested by the thrust of the rest of his body.



Infant

³³ Goethert, *Trajanische Friese*.



Tellus

The figure of Tellus presents certain difficulties in reconstruction, not only because its upper part is largely missing, but because of the nature of her pose, sitting on the ground with her legs opened wide: a posture difficult to render without awkwardness. The remains of drapery on her legs, and the well defined groove at the base of her abdomen, whose shape might be construed as showing signs of pregnancy, suggest that she was nude above the waist, as is often the case in depictions of this goddess. The requirement of a comfortably sustainable disposition of corporal weight, applied to what remains of her pose, leads to the realisation that her left hand most likely propped her up. Her head and face must, of course, be supplied, like those of the other goddesses on **A**, and in her case, the logic of the scene demands that she, too, turn to face in the direction of Elagabal. In the absence of any concrete indication of her upper features, it seems opportune to portray her with a hairstyle typical of the Severan period. Enough survives of the infant crawling onto her right shank to allow one to realise that he is straining to seize the cornucopia which she nestles against her bosom.

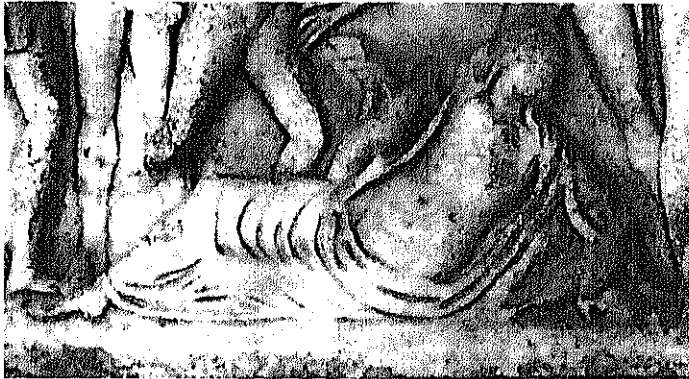
Of several images of Tellus in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, two seemed most relevant to the reconstruction of her figure in this scene. One, interestingly, is that discussed before in this monograph, in

its review of Studniczka's contribution to the discussion of these artefacts: the figure of Tellus on the armour of Augustus in the Primaporta statue, kept in the Vatican.

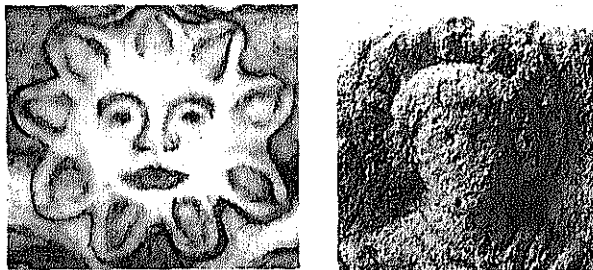


Tellus 68

The other comes from a sarcophagus housed in the Cathedral of Amalfi, showing Tellus in a complex scene with other deities.



The argument for Helios, rather than a bust, in the rounded stump above the symphysis of the helices, has already been made above. My choice of the specific figure of Helios depicted here, was determined by the stump's nine convexities. Helios is often shown with a radial crown of nine, as well as with crowns of seven, eight, or eleven points. Most of these points are fairly long and narrow, radiating far out from his head. I preferred a more restrained version, based on one example provided by the *LIMC*, because the scene seems to me already quite busy enough.



Helios

Side γ : Acanthus foliage, volutes, and flower.

A itself provides the lower foliage. The models for the details of acanthus foliage on this, and on the other sides, and the English terminology with which to discuss them, were provided by drawings in the article *Order*, in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The acanthus flower thrusting up over the abacus, may be found in the Greek Corinthian Order.

Acanthus flower³⁵

³⁴ *LIMC*, *Helios* 325

The caulis, flower and volutes are modelled on those of the Roman Corinthian order.

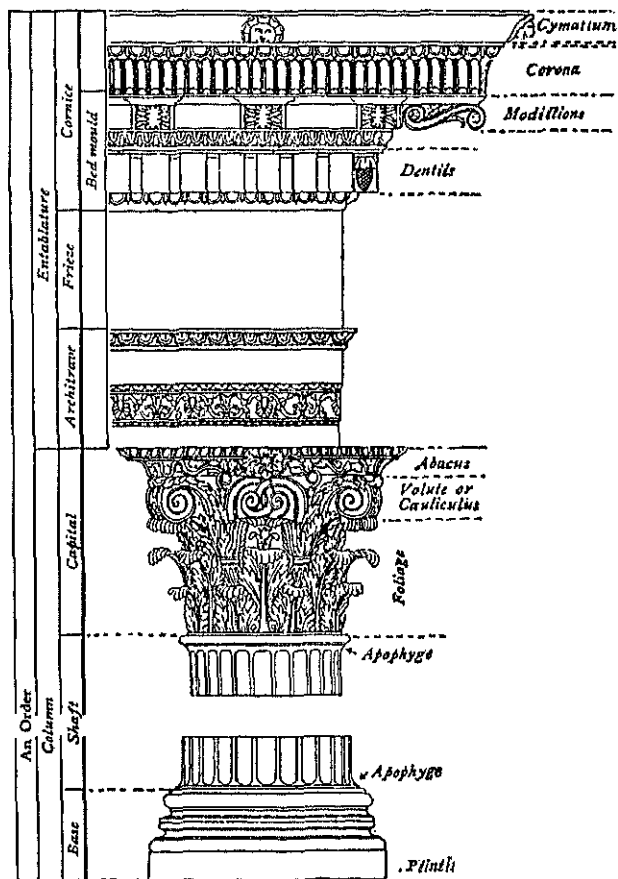


FIG. II.—The Roman Corinthian Order; Temple of Castor.

Roman Corinthian Order³⁶

³⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, 1910-1911, *Order*.

³⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, 1910-1911, *Order*.

Much of the acanthus foliage was traceable from the photograph of **A** itself. That which was not is rendered according to the likelihood that it would correspond to that on sides β and γ . In particular, It was thought likely that there would be a helix leading to the upper left hand corner (from the viewer's point of view) of side α , just as there is on the opposite corner of α , and on the corresponding corners of β .

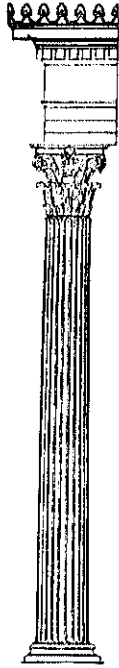


FIG. 5.—Greek Corinthian Order Choragic monument of Lysicrates.

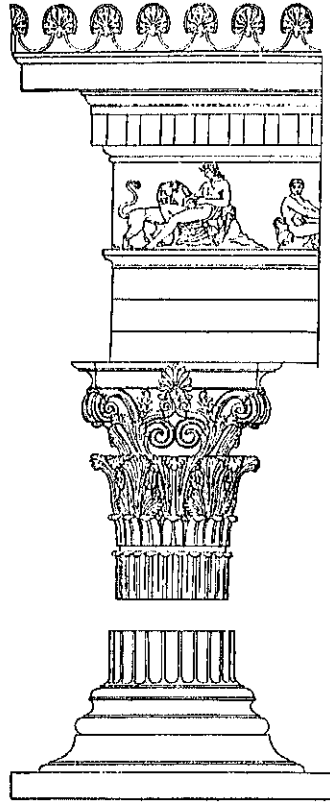
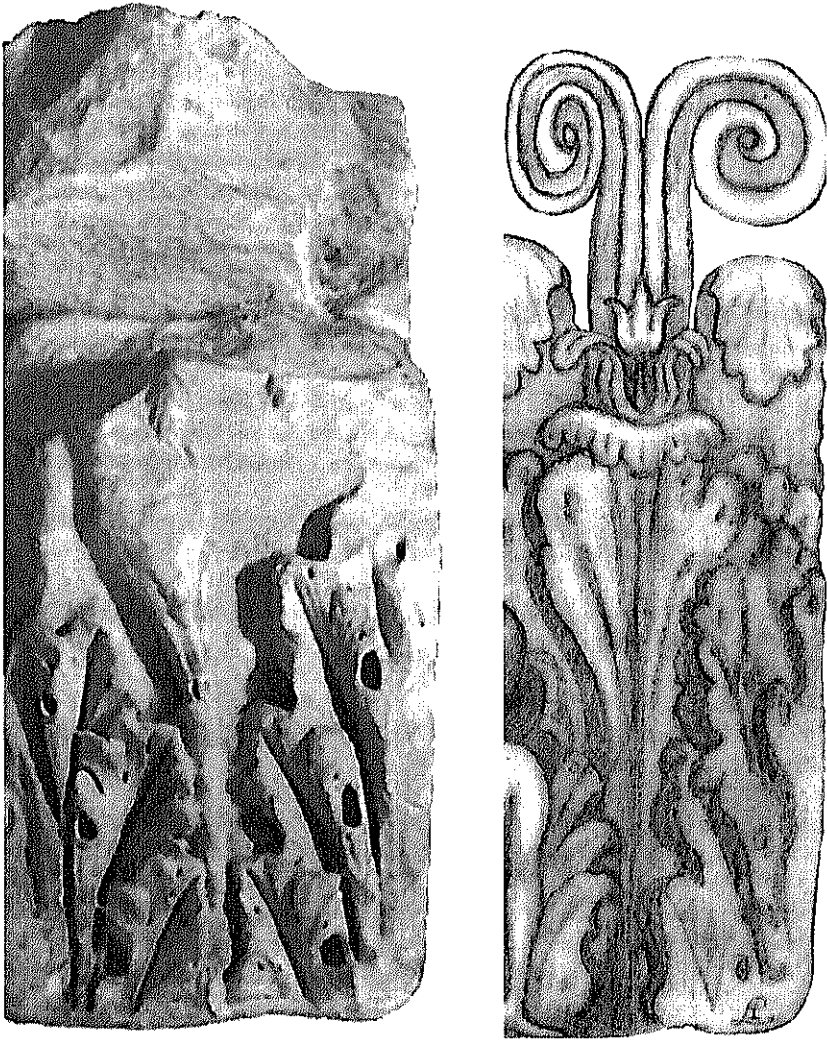


FIG. 6.

Greek Corinthian Order³⁷

³⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, 1910-1911, *Order*.



Acanthus leaves, flower, and volutes

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Abbreviations used in text and footnotes:

APARAR = *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti*

ARW = *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*

BAGB = *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé*

BAMBCA = *Bollettino di Archeologia del Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali*

BCAR = *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*

BHAC = *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium*

BICA = *Bullettino dell' Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica*

HA/AH = *Historia Augusta, Antoninus Heliogabalus*

JDAI = Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts

LIMC = Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae

MAIBL = Mémoires présentées par divers savants à l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres

MKDAIRA = Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung

OCD = Oxford Classical Dictionary

RE = Pauly's Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft

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