

## **Gilded Roman portraits from the Odeon at Carthage**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines two portraits found in the cisterns of the Odeon of Carthage, on which the remains of polychromy and gilding have recently been documented through an analysis with video-microscopy. Taking into consideration the contexts of discovery and reception, the form and the colour of the statues, we will show how the analysis of polychromy can bring new light on the interpretation of the message that the statues were intended to convey.

### **Keywords**

Portraits, gold, gilding, Carthage, Odeon, Musée du Bardo (Tunis)

Gilded statues have received considerable attention for their political-social significance, because gold is considered a mark of the divine or of heroic status<sup>1</sup>. In the Roman empire it was generally granted *post-mortem*, not only to members of the *domus Augusta*, but also to civic heroes, important magistrates, consuls or prefects of the city<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the gilding of statues is regulated by a specific legal process, validated by the Senate and applied to the province by a religious authority, the *flamines*<sup>3</sup>. Until now the phenomenon has been studied mainly through the literary sources, inscriptions and bronze statues, because the number of marble portraits in

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<sup>1</sup> Bourgeois – Jockey 2005; Pékary 1968; Fishwick 1994, 2.1, 544.

<sup>2</sup> Lahusen 1979; Lahusen – Formigli 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Letta 1978, 15-17.

which the traces of gold leaf are documented is still extremely restricted<sup>4</sup>. This paper documents two new cases of gilded marble portraits, found in the Odeon at Carthage during the 1900 excavations, and on which a recent video-microscopic analysis (Dino-Lite Premier: white and UV light and Dino-lite, polarizer) has revealed traces of the polychromy and gilding. The ~~global~~ comprehensive analysis of an artwork, which also considers form and colour, shows how the analysis of polychromy can bring new light on the interpretation of the context and on the message that the statues were intended to convey.

### **1. The context of the discovery: the cisterns of the Odeon of Carthage**

During the excavations in 1900-1901, P.Gauckler brought to light the foundations of a building from the Roman period and identified as an Odeon because of its shape, its proximity to the theatre, and a debated fragmentary inscription (Fig. 1a)<sup>5</sup>.

The date of this building is not based on the excavations, but only on a brief reference in the literary sources. Tertullian mentions (in *De resurrectione carnis*, § 42, 8, a treatise dated around 210) the “very recent” construction of an Odeon in Carthage, suggesting that its construction dates to just before the beginning of third century. Victor de Vita, in 439, mentions a fire in the neighbourhood of the Odeon, which was caused by the Vandal invasion and probably marked the end of the building.

Many decorative elements had been discovered in two cisterns located under the *scenae frons*, including about twenty broken sculptures (Fig. 1 b-d). At first, Gauckler had attributed these statues to the decoration of the building, supposing a partial collapse that would have caused the statues to fall into the cisterns. However, the dimensions and heterogeneity of the statues make their attribution to the same set unlikely; moreover, their chronology is earlier than the beginning of the third century, when the Odeon was probably constructed. More recently, some scholars have suggested that the statues were deposited in the cisterns for protection<sup>6</sup>. This scenario, very suggestively associated with the controversy of Christian texts against statues, is

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<sup>4</sup> Powers et al. 2017; Skovmøller – Therkildsen 2014.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to the excavations and the statues, see Gauckler 1902; Wells 1996; Ghardaddou 2008; Letellier-Taillefer 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Leone 2013, ch. 4.

posited because many other places in Carthage and Africa confirm this practice, for example the recently documented mausoleum of Lalla Messaouda<sup>7</sup>. However, this proposition remains very hypothetical for the specific context of the Odeon, mainly for the lack of details in P. Gauckler's notebooks. In any case, on two portrait heads from this set of statues<sup>8</sup> we documented gilding: the Colossal Livia (C933) and the pseudo-Hadrian as Mars (C932), both exhibited at the Bardo museum in Tunis.

## 2. The colossal statue of Livia

The colossal Livia, which was first identified as Faustina the Younger, is actually a colossal female statue, standing, draped, with her head slightly turned to the right and hair with a middle parting (Fig. 2). She wears a long-sleeved tunic and a long coat while her head is crowned with a crescent diadem, which is restoration based on two small original parts that are still visible at the edge of the headbands. In 1998, Bartman and Alexandridis interpreted the statue as a divinised Livia from the late-Tiberian or early Claudian period because of the dimensions, the dress code, the hairstyle with a middle parting, and the diadem<sup>9</sup>. In fact, after the death of Augustus in 14 BC, Livia became a priestess of the cult of the *Divus Augustus* and after her own death Claudius declared her *diva*. The statue has sparked several debates due to its state of conservation and restorations. At the time of its discovery, it was broken into many pieces by diagonal cuts and a photograph of the head taken before restoration shows that the pieces of the diadem had no connecting surfaces that would prove that they belonged together junction point. The head has been reattached to the neck. A fundamental analytical restoration of this statue seems necessary in order to understand the attribution of the head to the body and the diadems to the head<sup>10</sup>.

Supposed by P. Gauckler to be “entirely gilded” at the time of discovery, the statue presents to the naked eye significant traces of strong red paint, still clearly visible only in the original parts on the hair, eyes and the drape. The coloured effect is provided by the plaster used for the restoration, made with a pink mortar in which the colour is obtained by the mixture and not

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<sup>7</sup> Baratte – Béjaoui 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Ghardaddou 2013 had already analysed the formal aspect of the statues.

<sup>9</sup> Bartman 1998, 176, n° 67; Alexandridis 2004, 132, n° 39, pl. 4, 3. For the formal analysis see Baratte – Béjaoui – Chaisemartin forthcoming, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Another problem, the disproportion between head and body, was first underlined by Kreikenbom, but also recognized in other statues of Livia by Alexandridis 2004; Kreikenbom 1992, 180.

with paint. The Dino-lite video-microscopy analysis allows one to be specific with regard to the shades of the original colours, observed on 200 points on the sculpture.

With regard to the head, traces of light-yellow paint on its skin areas. It was applied directly on the marble and the paint layer is better preserved and thicker towards the edges of the face, especially on its right side, between the face and the neck (fig. 2c). The skin, the temples, as well as the facial features (eyebrows, inner edge of the eyelids, iris, outer nostrils and lips) are rendered with an orange-red paint, which was also directly applied to the marble. The pupils are outlined in a darker colour, which is particularly visible under UV light on the left eyeball (fig. 2g); the eyes are marked in orange in the corner of the eye and on the eyelid (fig. 2, macrography on the left). The two original fragments of the diadems show no trace of paint. The lips display significant layers of dark red colour of different shades, and here gold leaf is superimposed on the uppermost layer (fig. 2d). On the hair, we found different shades of brown-red, applied onto an orange layer with some preserved traces of gold leaf (fig. 2 b).

A similar treatment seems to have been applied to the tunic and its drapes, but it is differentiated from the hair by a slight variation in tone: large flat areas of deep red colour, which are applied to a thin orange-red layer. The lack of a finishing on the statue's back suggests a setup against a wall or in a niche; the colossal size and the highlighting of facial features with color underscore the readability of the sculpture from afar.

The analysis of the polychromy confirms a uniform treatment of the head and the drape, which is not visible on the diadem. This observation supports the attribution of body and head to the same statue while suggesting that the diadem, as it currently stands, may not belong to the original statue. Rather, a veil, a laurel wreath, or ears of wheat, all features associated with the middle-parted headdress (*Mittelscheitelfrisur*) and exclusively worn by women of the imperial family who were priestesses of a deified emperor (Livia, Antonia the Younger and Agrippina the Younger), could have completed the statue as in other copies of the deified Livia<sup>11</sup>.

Due to the state of conservation the original colour scheme of this sculpture remains hypothetical (fig. 3). The palette plays on the tones of yellow, orange and red, which supported partial or total gilding. Moreover, the hair and the lips, on which traces of gold leaf are

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<sup>11</sup> Taiuti forthcoming.

preserved, could have been entirely or only partially gilded to attract attention on some semantic part or just to give a special light to them.

The gilding traces offer a supplementary element to convey the divinity of this image, which is undeniably also expressed by the colossal size and the ideal treatment of the facial features.

### **3. A soldier represented as Diomedes: the pseudo-Hadrian**

The second statue that was examined is a slightly larger-than-life male (fig. 4). He is standing frontally and leans on his right leg while his helmeted head turns to the left. The body is naked, except for a *pallium* over his left shoulder, which falls to his calf. A harness is across the torso. The workmanship is very meticulous, with a very discreet application of the drill and a thorough polishing, even at the back. A Diomedes attributed to the sculptor Kresilas served as model, with some variations in the torsion of the head, the gesture of the left arm, as well as the placement of the cloak and the harness.

P. Gauckler, H. P. L'Orange and H. G. Niemeyer dated the figure to the late Hadrianic period and also identified him as Hadrian because of the physiognomy and the use of the Diomedes model, which finds parallels in Vaison, Pergamon, and Perge<sup>12</sup>. However, the Carthage statue deviates from the Diomedes type as it is helmeted, which assimilates it to a Mars figure. Moreover, helmeted portraits are few, and helmeted standing statues are even fewer<sup>13</sup>. Except for the one in the Bardo, they tend to use the type of the Borghese Mars, whether they are emperors, such as the Hadrian of the Capitoline museums, or unknown persons. Already M. Wegner<sup>14</sup> rejected the identification of the statue as Hadrian and later C. Evers completely abandoned it in arguing that it did not show any features of the official portrait types documented for this emperor<sup>15</sup>. More recently we have newly dismissed the attribution to Hadrian. Rather, we see in it a fine example of *Angleichung* to the portraits of this emperor and the representation of an unknown but important citizen, who emphasized his military and heroic character<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> L'Orange 1967, 57; Niemeyer 1968, 62, 108-109, n° 101, pl. 37, 1

<sup>13</sup> Fittschen 1977, 43, n. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Wegner – Unger 1984, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Evers 1994, 286.

<sup>16</sup> Baratte – Béjaoui – Neri forthcoming.

The visual examination of the statue revealed the presence of painting traces, which are neither mentioned in the scholarly literature nor noted at the time of the Odeon's excavation. Traces of different shades of yellow, visible to the naked eye, survive on large surfaces: the flesh (right ear, lacrimal wattles, eyelids, mouth between the lips, neck, left shoulder, navel, pubis), the hair and the beard, as well as the military attributes (helmet - on the left and from behind -, harness, pallium in folds and the fibula).

Microscopic observation with a Dino-lite at 300 spots allowed us to specify the nature and application. A very fine, almost translucent pale-yellow layer was found on the flesh (fig. 4, macrography on the left); a darker and thicker layer was observed in the shadowy areas such as the hollow of the ear, between the lips and the navel. Black dots, which mark the eye rims, may result from a degraded line. Both the helmet and the pallium show a thick orange-yellow layer (fig. 4a). The shoulder strap is darker, with a rusty tone, and the fibula is black-brown on the edges and pale yellow in the middle (fig. 4e). The beard and hair alternate between warm yellow and bronze yellow strands (fig. 4b). In the hollows of the beard on the left there are remains of gilding with gold leaf, not visible to the naked eye (Fig. 4d).

The back of the statue has the same fine treatment as the front. Therefore, it was visible from behind and was probably placed on a base.

Overall, the application of a very fine and translucent polychrome treatment underlines the high quality of the statue's execution. The added painting respects the marble, and it is very different from the statue of Livia with its covering and opaque colour coating. The fact that the gold leaf is only preserved on the beard, which is certainly a significant area, does not allow us to know whether the statue was partially or completely gilded. The edge of the *pallium*, however, must have been gilded, because the traces of erasure of the gold leaf are clearly visible on the lower edge (fig. 4g). In a famous episode from fifth-century Carthage St. Augustine documents the erasure of the gilding from the beard of a statue of Hercules, which had recently been restored (*Sermo* 24 of Augustine delivered in 401). The act testifies on the one hand to the practice of erasing the gold leaf of statues, on the other that the golden beard was a semantic attribute. According to St. Augustine, the statue lost its power once it was deprived of the gilding.

If we assume a partial gilding, the statue could have been presented in two ways. In the first case, the gold leaf was applied sparingly on the beard to create light effects, as is proposed for

the hair of the portrait of a young Roman (inv. 821) in the Glyptotek in Copenhagen<sup>17</sup>. This aesthetic rendering could be related to the cosmetic practice of sprinkling gold dust in the hair and beard to make them shinier (e.g. *Historia Augusta*, 10.7 for Lucius Verus)<sup>18</sup>. In the second case, the beard and the edge of the pallium were entirely gilded and contrasted with the other painted parts. In the hypothesis of partial gilding, it cannot be excluded that other parts were also enhanced with gold, such as the scalp hair, the pubic hair, the helmet, and the harness, with a different treatment for the flesh. This type of treatment can be seen on Greek stone statues that imitate chryselephantine ones and it seems to be the most frequent in the Roman period, as it allows the semantic attributes of the divinity or the portrait to be emphasised with gold. Examples are the Venus in a bikini from the house of Iulia Felix in Pompeii (1st century, inv. 152798), the Venus from Hadrian's baths in Nysa-Scythopolis in the Israel Museum (inv. IAA 2001-2987)<sup>19</sup>, as well as the portraits of Antinous in the San Antonio Museum of Art<sup>20</sup>, the Minerva in the Uffizi<sup>21</sup> and the Hygeia from Antioch<sup>22</sup>. This practice was long-living, and it is even documented on late sarcophagi where only certain details are gilded<sup>23</sup>.

It is also possible that the painted layers of the statue are a preparation layer for the gold leaf and that what remains is only a small part of a gilding leaf that would have covered the entire statue. However, although the total gilding on marble statues is attested in Greece, this is not yet the case for Roman sculptures of the imperial period. The only evidence might be the leg of a heroic figure found in the *bouleuterion* of Aphrodisias<sup>24</sup>. Probably, it can be associated with a set of imperial statues that are attested through their bases which carry inscriptions in honour of Titus and Caracalla. In the case of a comprehensive gilding, the light effects of the sculpture would have depended not only on its form but also on the colour of the preparation layer. This is related to the fineness of the leaf, which is less than one micron, as suggested by Pliny (*Naturalis Historia*, 32, 11).

Whatever way the gilding is used, it reinforces the ideal and the heroic character of the statue, in addition to the iconography of the statuary type and its attributes. This brings us back to the

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<sup>17</sup> Skovmøller – Therkildsen 2014.

<sup>18</sup> As assumed by Skovmøller 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Østergaard 2010, p. 98-99

<sup>20</sup> Powers et al. 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Paolucci 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Artal-Isbrand et al. 2002.

<sup>23</sup> For instance “Roman Garland sarcophagus”, inv. 2468 at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen (Sargent 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Abbe 2010, 277.

problem of identifying the represented person and his social level. For Proconsular Africa, the only reference to gilded statues of a non-imperial figure come from the Late Imperial period. Two gilded statues (*sub auro*, not the more common *deauratae*) were erected in honour of *Julius Festus Hymetius*, proconsul between 365 and 368: one in Carthage and the other in Rome (CIL, VI, 1736). The province of Africa dedicated the statues to honour Hymatius' achievements as an administrator (Ammianus Marcellinus, XXVIII, 1, 17-23). During a famine, the proconsul made the population sell wheat from the *annona* of Rome, before having had the new harvest available. The profit was paid into the imperial treasury; but Hymatius was sued, risked being sentenced to death and was exiled to Dalmatia, where he died. When he was rehabilitated after the death of Valentinian I, the provincial council erected the two golden statues in Carthage and Rome in his memory.

#### 4. Hypothesis on the original context of the statues

The original context in which these two statues were observed remains unknown. However, both the sculpting and the polychromy allow us to suppose that the Livia was placed in a niche or against a wall while the soldier-Diomedes stood on a base and was visible from all sides. Both statues have a chronology prior to the construction of the Odeon and therefore their first context was probably in another monument. Regarding the Livia, P. Gros affirms that the statue “certainly adorned a building from the Julio-Claudian period before becoming a part of the decoration of the *theatrum tectum*”<sup>25</sup>. This hypothesis, plausible but impossible to prove, is based on a honorary inscription for *Sextus Appuleius, flamen Julialis*, which was found on the hills of the Byrsa. According to Gros, this was a Julio-Claudian place of veneration for the *domus Augusta*. Two other colossal statues of the divinized Livia are documented in Africa. One was in the theatre of Leptis Magna, more precisely the sanctuary at the top of the *cavea*, and it featured Livia as seated Ceres<sup>26</sup>. The other can be assumed from an inscription that comes from Cirta, which mentions a building dedicated to the deified empress (CIL VIII 6987 et 19492). These two parallels offer a possible primary context for the statue, considering that the theatre of Carthage is dated to the Antonine period.

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<sup>25</sup> Gros 1990, 567-8.

<sup>26</sup> Caputo – Traversari 1976, 58-60; 76-81.



Although their original context remains uncertain, the portraits found in the cisterns of the Odeon in Carthage add two new examples of gilded Roman statues of actual humans to those previously known, the Antinous from the San Antonio Museum of Art, and the young character from the Copenhagen Glyptothek. The first was a member of the *domus* Augusta and the second an unknown young private citizen.

The gilding, probably partial, which was applied to two statues studied here was an important part of their semantic meaning. In the case of Livia, it reinforced the ideal and divine representation and in the case of the soldier-Diomedes, it underscored a heroic representation which was already evoked through the iconography of the type and the attributes.

Gilded marble or stone portraits could further expand the attestations of gilding, which so far have only considered epigraphs mentioning gilding and gilded bronze statues. By observing which rank of citizens the gilding is intended for, we can understand which honours allowed this public recognition.

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## Figures

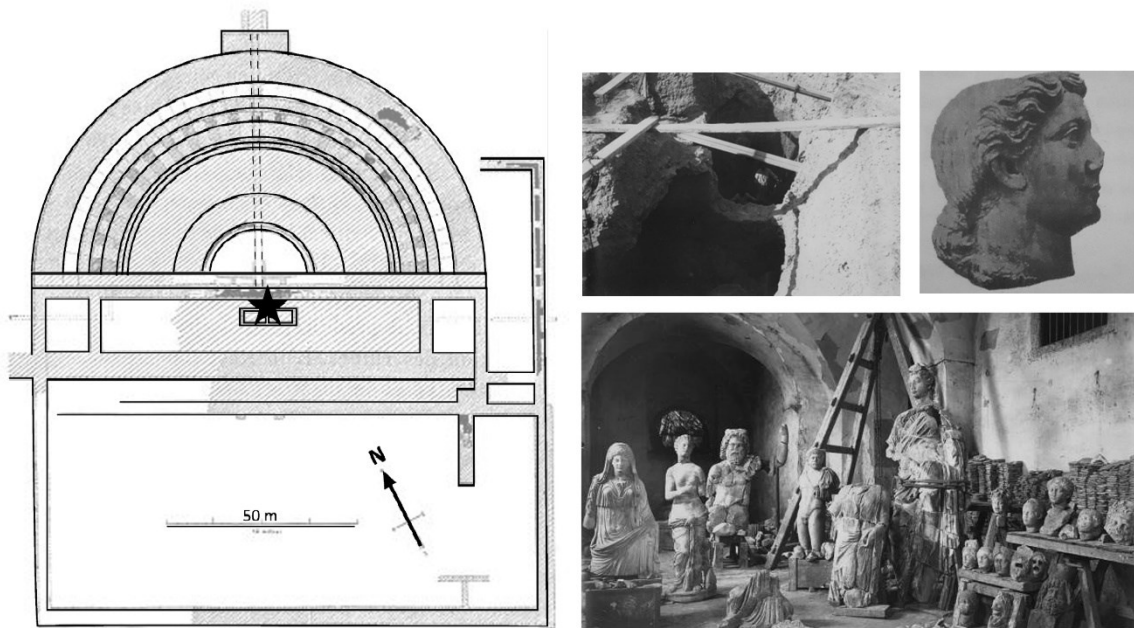


Fig. 1 Carthage, plan of the Odeon with localisation of the cisterns (marked with a star) and photographs of the statues found inside (fonds Poinssot, INHA).



Fig. 2 Colossal Livia (C933) - H 2.60 m. Musée du Bardo (Tunis): traces of painting layers on the lips, hair, eyes and micro-photographs obtained with Dino-lite (250x).



Fig. 3 Virtual reconstruction of the polychromy of Colossal Livia: left, with lips and hair entirely gilded; right, with gold leaf applied sparsely on lips and hair.



Fig. 4 A soldier represented as Diomedes (C932); H max. 1.41 m. Musée du Bardo (Tunis): traces of painting and micro-photographs obtained with Dino-lite (250x).



Fig. 5 Virtual reconstruction of the polychromy of a soldier represented as Diomedes