

Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya) Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos

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THASIAN CONNECTIONS OVERSEAS: SCULPTURE IN THE CYRENE MUSEUM (LIBYA) MADE OF DOLOMITIC MARBLE FROM THASOS

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Abstract

Multi-method analysis has previously established that four out of 200 statues in Cyrene are dolomitic marble from the northern Aegean island of Thasos. Art historical analysis shows that three of the four are careful replicas of famous Greek prototypes, made by copying plaster casts of the originals. The fourth is a free interpretation of a now-obscure prototype. In two cases it seems likely that a workshop connected to Athens and Crete carved the Thasian marble, probably in Cyrene. Sculptors with a connection to Thasos may have been involved in finishing some or all of the sculptures, but the evidence is fragile.

Keywords

copies, regional workshops, stylistic adaptation

Points of departure and methodology

Donato Attanasio has made a provenance study of over 200 sculptures in the Cyrene Museum, Libya, and he has been kind enough to inform me that four female statues proved to be carved in dolomitic marble from Cape Vathy on Thasos.¹ In his study Dr. Attanasio made use of isotopic analysis, paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (EPR), maximum grain size (MGS), and color assessment.

Coarse-grained dolomitic marble from Thasos tends to be rare everywhere outside of its own northern Aegean neighborhood, and in distant markets was rarely used for reliefs or architectural ornament. It was used for about 4% of the statues, statuettes, and sarcophagi in Rome,² and less than 2% of those in Cyrene, according to Attanasio's study. In a sense, this rarity is surprising, since Thasian dolomitic marble was the whitest of ancient marbles.³ Dolomite



Fig. 1. Head of Athena of the Velletri type, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, first century CE, Cyrene Museum

and dolomitic marble, however, are harder than calcite and calcitic marble: 3.5-4 as compared to 3 on the Mohs scale. This made Thasian sculptural marble more difficult to work than the usual calcitic marble. This difficulty may have given experienced sculptors from Thasos an advantage, and the question arises whether Thasian sculptors had a role beyond that of extracting the blocks from the quarries.

Statues and a statuette in Cyrene

Three of the Thasian statues in Cyrene are exact replicas of types known elsewhere. One, a dolomitic marble head of Athena wearing a Corinthian helmet (Fig. 1), is a full-size replica of the head of the colossal Athena in the Louvre from Velletri near Rome (Figs. 2-3). The Louvre colossus (height 3.05 m) is also dolomitic marble from

1 ATTANASIO *et al.* 2006; ATTANASIO *et al.* 2009.

2 HERRMANN *et al.* 2014.

3 ATTANASIO 2003.



Fig. 2-3. Athena from Velletri, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, Augustan, Louvre (photo: A. van den Hoek)



Fig. 4. Head of a woman, probably marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, late first century BCE? Thasos Museum (photo: A. van den Hoek)

Thasos.⁴ Two more colossal replicas of the Velletri Athena are also made of Thasian marble; one is in Rome and another in New Haven, Connecticut.⁵ Evelyn Harrison lists 16 colossal examples of the Velletri type,⁶ and the new Cyrene piece makes a total of 17. The four proven Thasian pieces make up 23.5% of the total, which is far above the usual Thasian percentage of 4% of a given group of statues. Christa Landwehr has dated the *colossi* as a group to Augustan times.⁷ There clearly was an unusually strong inclination to use Thasian marble for this subject. Its pure white color was probably one of the attractions, but the question remains why Thasian dolomite was especially popular in the particular case of the Velletri Athenas.

Most scholars have thought that the prototype for the Velletri Athenas would have been a statue in Athens and that Athens was probably the center from which these

4 HERRMANN, NEWMAN 1995; HERRMANN *et al.* 2009, 539, fig. 10; CALLIGARO *et al.* 2013.

5 HARRISON 1977, 150-153, figs. 9-11.

6 HARRISON 1977; LANDWEHR, SCHUCHHARDT 1985, 76-88, pl. 44.

7 LANDWEHR, SCHUCHHARDT 1985, 86-87.



Fig. 5. Head of a youth, probably Pentelic marble, Corinth Museum, S-425 (photo: A. van den Hoek)

replicas were diffused. The great size of these sculptures raises the possibility that they were largely shaped in the quarries, as was the case with other colossal statues, such as the Dacian Prisoners from the Docimium quarries.⁸ The actual carving of the examples of the Athena Velletri from Italy, however, was evidently performed in Italy itself, the sculptors working from plaster casts; fragments of casts of the Velletri Athena and other famous types have been found at Baia on the Bay of Naples.⁹ As well as for its whiteness, Thasian marble may have been favored for these colossal statues because large blocks were relatively available on Thasos and because these statues were luxury productions. The colossal Velletri Athenas were high quality works of exceptional size, for which the added effort and (presumably) expense of carving the hard Thasian dolomite would have been a less significant obstacle than usual. The Athenian connection might also have played a role in the choice of marbles; many of the Velletri Athenas have been identified by eye as Pentelic, the marble most closely associated with Athens. Thasos could have been considered an associated or, at least, a similarly Greek marble source.

The Cyrene head has some distinctive features within the group of Velletri Athenas. Most of the examples from the area around Rome, including the Velletri

8 WAELEKENS 1985.

9 LANDWEHR, SCHUCHHARDT 1985, 88-93, pls. 44-53.

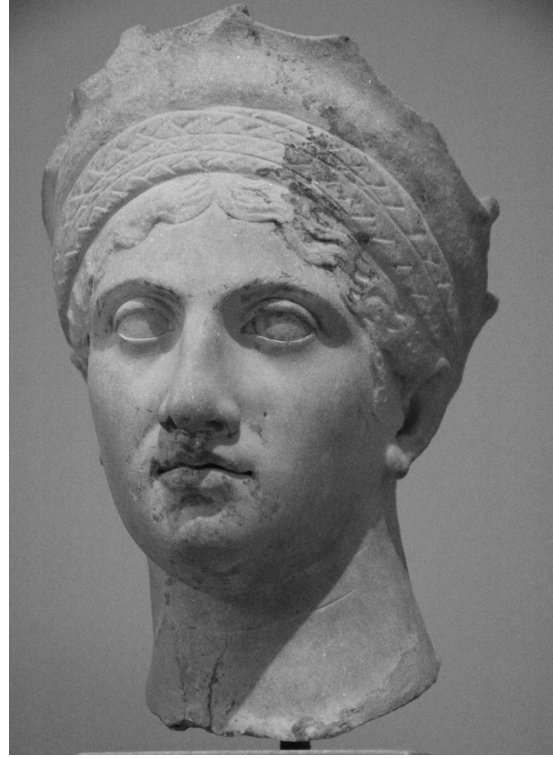


Fig. 6. Portrait of a woman as Venus, perhaps the Empress Sabina, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, ca. 120-130 CE, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. No. 357 (photo: A. van den Hoek)

Athena herself (Fig. 3), have more smoothly rounded strands of hair. The locks of the Cyrene Athena's hair are flatter, more sharply chiseled surfaces separated by drill channels. This treatment can be found on Thasos itself, as in a battered head of a veiled woman (Fig. 4, unpublished?), or in works of Thasians overseas, as in a dolomitic head of Aphrodite at Rome.¹⁰ The large eyes are hard to parallel on Thasos, but they can be found in sculptures near to or connected with Athens. Large eyes appear in a head of a youth in Corinth (Fig. 5) and in an idealized portrait from Crete (Fig. 6). The comparison with the Cyrene Athena is particularly strong in the case of the Cretan head since, like the Cyrene Athena, the lips are full, the surfaces are metallic, and the marble is also Thasian dolomite.¹¹ The two are similar enough to have been products of the same workshop. The Cretan portrait has a "turban" hairstyle common from about 120-140.¹² With its large eyes and more chiseled hair, it

10 HERRMANN, NEWMAN 2002, 222-223, figs. 17-18.

11 Inv. 357: HERRMANN, NEWMAN 2002, 216; RHOMIOPOULOU 1997, 71, cat. no. 70; KALTZAS 2002, 338 cat. no. 714. The face may have been polished in modern times.

12 DE KERSAUSON 1996, 174-188, cat. nos. 73-80.



Fig. 7. Head of Athena, Velletri type, marble unknown, Cyrene Museum, inv. 14.180 (photo: from PARIBENI 1959, cat. no. 127)

seems evident that the Athena in Cyrene represents a distinctive “Eastern” or Greek approach within the Velletri group, and it probably was carved by a workshop connected with Athens that was active not only in Cyrene but also in the nearby province of Crete. The emphatic, metallic, Classicising style of the Athena in Cyrene and the Cretan portrait also has a parallel on Thasos in the head of Alexander.¹³ It is even plausible that the Cyrene Athena and the Cretan portrait were carved by a sculptor from northern Greece who had a period of training in Athens.

Cyrene has another head of the Velletri Athena, which is again colossal (height 51 cm) but otherwise very different. Enrico Paribeni has characterized it as rough and provincial (Fig. 7).¹⁴ Cyrene generally has sophisticated sculpture and lacks rustic works directly comparable to this. The sharply chiseled locks, the complete lack of drill-work, and the symmetrical, pointed oval



Fig. 8. Kore of the Torlonia-Hierapytna type, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, early Antonine? Cyrene Museum, inv. 77-940, from the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore (photo: from KANE, REYNOLDS 1985, fig. 1)



Fig. 9. Kore of the Torlonia-Hierapytna type, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, early Antonine? Cyrene Museum, inv. 77-940, from the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore (photo: from KANE, REYNOLDS 1985, fig. 2)

13 Inv. I.3719: BLONDÉ, MULLER, MULLIEZ 1987, 34, fig. 6; KOUKOULI-CHRYSANTHAKI 1988; HERRMANN, NEWMAN 2002, 222, fig. 19.

14 Inv. 14.180: PARIBENI 1959, cat. no. 127.



Fig. 10. Nemesis of the Torlonia-Hierapytna type, probably Pentelic marble, 2nd century, from the west end of the Forum, Corinth, Corinth Museum, S-427 (photo: A. van den Hoek)

(lens-shaped) eyes are entirely compatible with many simple and rustic sculptures in the Thasos Museum. Although the marble type is unknown, it seems possible that this is a work by a sculptor from Thasos who lacked not only talent but also training in Athens.

A female statue of Thasian marble at Cyrene (Fig. 8-9) was formerly identified as Pentelic marble because of an overlap in the isotopic fields of Thasos and Mt. Pentelicon.¹⁵ Since it is dolomitic rather than calcitic marble, the Thasian option is clearly correct.¹⁶ The statue belongs to the Torlonia-Hierapytna type, which is known from four other copies, none of which seem to be Thasian marble.¹⁷ One in Corinth appears optically to be Pentelic marble (Fig. 10), and the three others are made of unknown marbles that do not appear to be Thasian. The figure was used to represent a variety of

goddesses. In Cyrene the inscription on the base tells us that she is Kore (Persephone). In Hierapytna, Crete, the figure represented Artemis the archeress; the strap for her quiver is visible in front view. In Corinth, she was Nemesis, the goddess of divine retribution, with the remains of her wheel of fortune beside her (Fig. 10). Two examples in Rome do not preserve any distinctive attributes or inscriptions. The iconographic changeability of the Torlonia-Hierapytna type indicates that it is a stock figure rather than a very famous masterpiece that could not be altered.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the prototype, which has been dated to about 460 BCE and probably stood in a temple in Greece, was repeated rather faithfully (except for the attributes) in the various versions, all of which probably belong to the second century CE.¹⁹ The Kore in Cyrene seems to be a slightly more luxurious version of the figure than the others. It is wider, and the others seem narrower and meager. The Corinthian piece has conspicuously simpler drapery (Fig. 10). The Cyrene piece is particularly notable for the undulating wrinkles of the *chiton* on the right side at the waist just above the himation (Fig. 9). This technique seems to go back to the lush, crinkly drapery often used in Classical Athenian sculpture, as in the Parthenon pediments. Like the more generous proportions and the richer finishing, the use of Thasian marble in the Kore may be an indicator that the statue was intended to be a work of special quality.

The carving of the Cyrene Kore was probably done by a workshop that specialized in carving Thasian marble and may once again have been connected with Crete. A statue of a woman wrapped in her himation in Rethymno on Crete appears macroscopically to be Thasian marble (Fig. 11-13).²⁰ The hem of the statue's *chiton* is exposed below the himation, and the ruffled effect where it passes over the right foot (Fig. 12) is distinctly similar to the wrinkles of the *chiton* of the Kore in Cyrene (Fig. 9). The Rethymno statue is of the Aspasia/Europa type, which, like the Kore, reflects a fifth-century original. This combination of similar workmanship, fifth-century prototypes,²¹ and Thasian dolomitic marble strongly suggests a connection between the two. The Rethymno statue's portrait head with its turban hairstyle is strikingly similar to an early portrait of Faustina the Younger found in Athens, which is also made of Thasian dolomitic

15 77-940: KANE, REYNOLDS 1985; HERRMANN, NEWMAN 2002, 218-219, fig. 7.

16 ATTANASIO *et al.* 2009, SK22.

17 KANE, REYNOLDS 1985; KARANASTASI 2012, 446-447, fig. 15.

18 Thereby qualifying the type as a "Konzeptfigur": LANDWEHR 1998.

19 KANE, REYNOLDS 1985.

20 Also the opinion of Olga Palagià (private communication).

21 GUERRINI 1973-4, 227, pl. 32; KARANASTASI 2012, 445.



Fig. 11-13. Portrait of a woman in the guise of Aspasia/ Europa, apparently Thasian marble, late Hadrianic or early Antonine, ca. 130-150 CE. Rethymno Museum, Λ150 (photo: A. van den Hoek)



Fig. 14. Portrait of Faustina the Younger, found in Athens, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, ca. 147-150 CE. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. 442 (photo: A. van den Hoek)

marble (Fig. 14).²² Pavlina Karanastasi has brought out the strong sculptural similarities between Cretan and North African sculpture in Roman times,²³ and this group of sculptures in Thasian marble from Crete and Cyrene establishes more specific points of connection. Members of these “Thasian-friendly” workshops could plausibly have passed from Athens to Crete to Cyrene, ordering blocks of Thasian marble for specific commissions.

Another Thasian marble copy of a lost Greek masterpiece at Cyrene represents a Bacchic figure, perhaps Ariadne, with a cluster of grapes caught up in the overfold of her *peplos* (Fig. 15).²⁴ The best-preserved replicas come from Rome, and none of them seem to be in Thasian marble. One is in the Uffizi²⁵ and the other in the

22 Inv. 442: RHOMIOPOULOU 1997, cat. no. 95; HERRMANN, NEWMAN 2002, 216; KALTZAS 2002, cat. no. 730.

23 KARANASTASI 2012, 446-449.

24 Inv. 14.245: PARIBENI 1959, cat. no. 357.

25 MANSUELLI 1958, cat. no. 66. For photographs cleaned, see <https://www.friendsoftheuffizigallery.org/ariadne/>



Fig. 15. Ariadne, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, first century, Cyrene

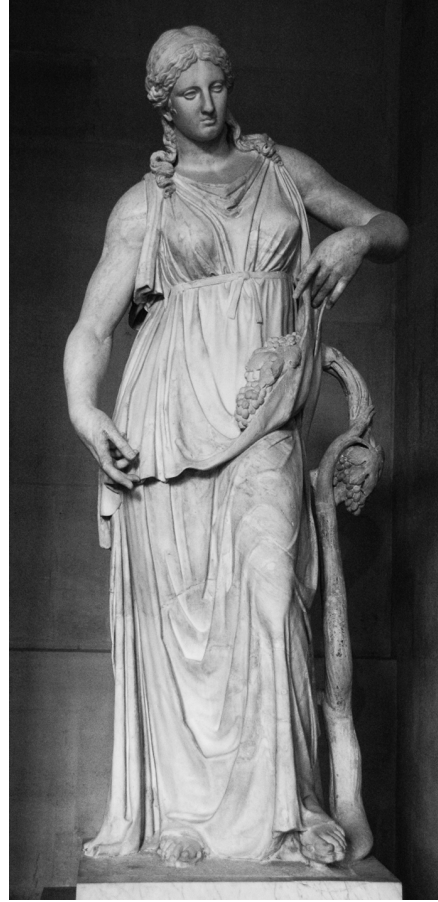


Fig. 16. Ariadne, unknown marble, first century, from the Borghese Collection, Rome, Louvre, Ma676

Louvre (Fig. 16). The arms and the head of the Louvre piece are modern restorations. This type of figure seems to be a Rhodian creation of the second century BC. The Uffizi Ariadne is more elaborate and deeply cut, and the Cyrene and Louvre examples are crisper, simpler, and more direct. The Cyrene piece has its own distinct personality: it seems more slender and lively than the Louvre example; the undulating hem of the overfold is particularly animated. Presumably a plaster cast of the figure was sent to Cyrene to be reproduced in marble. While there are fine marble *peplos*-wearing statues in Cyrene,²⁶ it is not impossible that a sculptor from Thasos could have been commissioned to execute the marble replica.

The final Thasian marble sculpture in Cyrene²⁷ can be identified as a statuette of Thalia, the muse of comedy (Fig. 17). The broken remains of connectors suggest that she originally held a mask at her left shoulder and a shepherd's staff at her right side. A simplified version of this figure appears on a Roman sarcophagus in the

Louvre.²⁸ Like the Ariadne, the Thalia seems to be based on a prototype from the eastern side of the Aegean. The hip-swinging stance, the dragging drapery, the overlapping layers of drapery, and the contrasting fold lines are common in Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic sculptures of Asia Minor. A "Pudicitia" from Magnesia on the Maeander is a good example,²⁹ but the Cyrene statuette presents a simplified and schematic version of such contrast-rich compositions. It is hard to closely parallel these simplifications in Cyrene or elsewhere. Statuettes of Aphrodite and of a man wearing a *chlamys* on Thasos, however, provide a comparable kind of bold, sweeping, repetitive stylization of drapery folds (Fig. 18-19). A Thasian sculptor freely interpreting an Asiatic prototype might well have been responsible for the figure in Cyrene.

26 PARIBENI 1959, cat. nos. 130, 154, 156,

27 Inv. 78-700: ATTANASIO *et al.* 2009, SK14.

28 FAEDO 1994, cat. no. 172 (Louvre). The Louvre version does not have a bare shoulder and lacks the overfold of the himation.

29 MENDEL 1914, cat. no. 823; LINFERT 1976, 40, fig. 59.



Fig. 17. Statuette of Thalia, muse of comedy, marble from Cape Vathy, Thasos, first century? Cyrene Museum, inv. 78-700, from the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore

Conclusions

These Roman Imperial sculptures in Cyrene provide an insight into the spread of Thasian dolomitic marble to the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The quantity was limited at Cyrene; only 2% of the statues were Thasian, only half the percentage seen in central Italy. In three cases, at least, there are indications that Thasian marble was used partly as a sign of quality and luxury. In special cases the marble's whiteness was evidently considered worth the trouble entailed by its hardness. Three of the Cyrene statues were exact copies of distinguished Greek masterpieces made by copying plaster casts of the originals. The actual carving was probably done in Cyrene. The statuette of Thalia is more puzzling, since no other replicas are known.

In all cases there is some chance that a workshop with a special link to Thasos was involved in finishing the statue. In the case of the Athena and the Kore, a workshop travelling from Athens to Crete to Cyrene could have carved the



Fig. 18. Statuette of Aphrodite with Eros (?) on her shoulder, marble probably from Thasos, late Hellenistic or Early Imperial (?). Thasos Museum (photo: A. van den Hoek)



Fig. 19. Statuette of a youth (ephebe) wrapped in his chlamys, marble probably from Thasos, Late Hellenistic or Early Imperial (?). Thasos Museum (photo: A. van den Hoek)

statues. If sculptors originally from Thasos were involved, they usually suppressed distinctive stylistic traits of their home island; when carefully copying famous prototypes for prestigious commissions in a distant, cosmopolitan city, they stayed true to their Athenian training. The Thalia, however, seems to represent a distinctive and uninhibited kind of Thasian stylization of Early Imperial times. In any case, each piece in Cyrene represents an individual interaction between prototype, sculptor, training, and the Thasian material.

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