

**Anna Elin VON TÖRNE, *Stadtbelagerung in der Spätantike – das Berliner Holzrelief. Spätantike – Frühes Christentum – Byzanz 29*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag 2010, 288 S., 146 s/w-Abb.**

The subject of von Törne's book, a revised version of her 2008 Freie Universität Berlin dissertation, is a 45cm tall, 22cm wide, half-cylindrical block of wood carved with the scene of a battle in front of a fortified city. The object, currently in the Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin, was purchased on behalf of the museum by Joseph Strzygowski in 1900 from a London antiquities dealer. The dealer provided an alleged provenance of Egypt, and this entirely unsubstantiated assertion has taken a surprisingly strong hold on most scholars who have commented on the object.

The carving's iconography is remarkable and is not paralleled in its entirety by any other ancient artwork. The scene can be divided into three registers. The bottom register shows a scene of battle as a force of infantry drives off a group of cavalry. The infantry march in from the left and wear mail shirts and crested helmets while the cavalry, also wearing mail shirts but no helmets, flee to the right leaving one of their fallen comrades on the ground. The attacking infantry includes one soldier bearing a Christian standard (a *labarum*) and is led by a man in a cuirass (his head unfortunately missing) who stands rather improbably above the soldiers. In the middle register is a fortified city wall with a central gateway, before which the battle takes place. Very small soldiers stand in a row atop the wall, while from the open gate a force of soldiers issues out to join the battle. In front of the wall itself, to the right of the gateway, four figures are suspended by their necks in large wooden forks. In the upper register, rather heavily damaged, carvings of buildings (including one with an apse) and human figures presumably represent the city and its inhabitants; these include three large bearded figures on the left half of the relief. Especially noteworthy here are two figures framed by a central arch in the middle of the upper register: on the right a small male in a decorated *chlamys*, on the left a draped figure whose head is missing.

Given this remarkable iconography and the object's lack of provenance, one of the first questions that comes to mind is that of authenticity. Von Törne (p. 123) briefly reports the results of a carbon-dating test carried out at the University of Kiel in 2001 that dated the wood from which the relief is carved to between AD 318 and 424. While this does not in itself prove that the carving is antique, the scientific date is quite appropriate for the 5<sup>th</sup> century date also suggested by stylistic analysis of the relief and thus provides fairly strong support for the

authenticity of the whole (the investigation also showed that the relief had been treated with a „Konservierungsmittel“, and thereby darkened, sometime between 1661 and 1954 [!]; p. 10 n. 45).

Von Törne is particularly interested in the origin and subject matter of the relief, questions she approaches using an examination of iconography and style. Earlier scholarship has been dominated by agreement on an Egyptian provenance (and thus a place in the Coptic artistic tradition) and by disagreement on date and subject matter. Strzykowski noted parallels for the figures hung on forks in the Vienna Genesis and the Joshua Rotulus, but decided against a Biblical interpretation and instead read the relief as a symbolic scene representing a freeing of the „Feste des Glaubens“ from barbarian attack. Goldschmidt on the other hand suggested that the hung men represented the five kings of the Amorites who were „hung on five trees“ by Joshua after the fall of Gibeon (von Törne notes that the presence of only four hanged men in the relief make this doubtful). Effenberger was the first scholar to suggest (*Koptische Kunst*, 1975) a historical interpretation of the relief. He argued that the relief flowed in the tradition of Roman historical art and suggested that its theme was an attack by a Nubian tribe on an Egyptian city. This interpretation was followed by Brilliant and other later scholars.

Von Törne's major contribution is to look beyond the relief's alleged Egyptian provenance. She demonstrates convincingly (pp. 76-87) that the style of the relief does not follow in the Coptic tradition, but rather has its closest parallels in the 5<sup>th</sup> century ivory diptychs of the western empire, in sarcophagi produced at Ravenna, and on the pedestal of Theodosius' Obelisk at Constantinople. The dismissal of the assumed Egyptian origin then frees von Törne to suggest her own theory for the interpretation of the scene and its date. She chooses to follow the path of historical interpretation and, after narrowing the likely date range to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, focuses on the pair of figures in the archway in the top register, the *chlamys*-wearing boy and the headless female, as the key to the relief's interpretation. Interpreting the pair as mother and son members of the imperial family (though specific imperial attributes are absent), von Törne then seeks plausible candidates for these roles (pp. 88-89). von Törne concludes that the most likely candidates are Galla Placidia and her son Valentinian III, who were sent to Italy by Theodosius II in 424 as part of an attempt to recapture Ravenna from the usurper Johannes. Despite initial setbacks the attempt was successful in 425 and the mother-son pair ruled together in Ravenna until Galla Placidia's death in 433. The city on the relief, argues von Törne, is Ravenna, and the battle represented is the fight between the east-Roman army and the barbarian (Hun) supporters of Johannes. The crucified men are various bar-

barian leaders (Johannes is not shown), while the three large figures in the upper register may be Christian saints whose divine assistance helped Galla Placidia attain her goal.

This solution does not entirely convince. It is not clear that the larger figure in the archway is in fact a female; its dress is not significantly different from the three figures (clearly men) to the left. The action that is represented in the relief does not reflect the historical events that led to the capture of Ravenna by the eastern troops in 425. The relief shows a city garrisoned by the same type of soldiers (they all wear crested helmets) as those (interpreted as Romans by von Törne) who are attacking outside the walls from the left. The city garrison is shown in the act of making a sortie, presumably to aid the relieving force in repulsing the mounted barbarians. The inhabitants of the besieged city include the presumed imperial pair, who at the time of the recapture of Ravenna were in the Dalmatian city of Salona. The difficulty of identifying a known historical event with which the Berlin relief can be confidently associated perhaps suggests that its theme is not historical.

It is regrettable that there are not more images of the relief in the book, especially large-format detail images that would have been very helpful in evaluating von Törne's arguments made from autopsy. An index is also missed.

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