The Three-Figured Reliefs: Copies or Neoattic Creations?

Peter E. Nulton, Ph.D., Rhode Island School of Design

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The well-known group of four three-figured reliefs, existing in several copies and once assigned to the Altar of Pity in the agora of Athens, has always eluded interpretation as a coherent iconographical program. The four scenes depicted are Orpheus and Eurydice, Herakles in the garden of the Hesperides, Herakles with Perithoos and Theseus, and Medea with the Peliads. Though some have questioned the association of the reliefs with the Altar, the conventional dating has not been challenged, in spite of the growing recognition that some of the pieces (most notably the Orpheus relief) are largely unparalleled in the Classical Greek idiom. Careful reexamination demonstrates that the prototypes for these reliefs are more readily defined as Neoattic decorative sculpture of the first century AD than as Roman copies of Classical Greek sculptural decoration.

The redating of the works also clarifies the unique position of the group in regard to the number of copies found and the preciseness of their similarity, which suggests the availability of the prototype. This study demonstrates that the copying skills that for so long caused scholars to underestimate the inventiveness of sculptors in the Roman period were not limited in their application to prior Greek works but systematically applied to producing copies of works designed to suit Roman needs and taste.

Best known of the group, the Orpheus relief depicts two males flanking a female figure (Fig. 4.1). On the left, a figure in traveling clothes holds her wrist, while on the right, a man in Thracian dress lifts her veil. Her left arm touches the shoulder of the Thracian, whom she faces, but their downcast gazes do not meet. In the Naples version, inscriptions carefully identify each of the figures, Orpheus’s name in retrograde. The retrograde inscription most likely corresponds to the direction Orpheus is facing. It should not be read as a chronological marker, as such inscriptions are no more out of place in the first century AD as they are in the late-fifth century BC.

The Hesperides relief of the series shows Herakles seated while two flanking Hesperides attend to him. The composition is less remarkable than that of the Orpheus relief, except

![Fig. 4.1 Hermes, Eurydice, and Orpheus. Museo Nazionale, Naples. DAI, Rome, Inst. Neg. 33.12 (Photo © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).](image)
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When it is seen juxtaposed with a third relief, which shows Herakles again, Perithoos seated, and Theseus (Fig. 4.2). This meeting most likely takes place on the Isle of the Blest (Harrison 1964, 76–84) or, perhaps, in a Virgilesque glimpse of Elysium.

In the last of the four, Medea stands aside with a container (presumably of magical ingredients) in her hand, as a daughter of Pelias prepares the cauldron that rests just left of the center of the stele. Another Peliad contemplatively holds the knife that will be used in their macabre ritual.

Homer Thompson (1952) noted the stylistic similarity of the four reliefs, each known from several copies and sometimes found together with one another. He ascribed all four of these reliefs to the Altar of Pity in the agora of Athens, mostly based on their scale. Since then, it is commonly believed that the reliefs replicate a lost Classical original, but all have been hard-pressed to find a convincing iconographical relationship between the reliefs, and most of the scholarship on them has focused toward that end.

Attempts at finding a unifying theme in the four scenes include: four examples of piteous reversal of fortune from the Altar of Pity (Thompson 1952), the quest for lasting good (Harrison 1964), threshold between life and death (Beschi et al. 1959), tragic love (Mobius 1965), and the contrast between the weakness of humanity and the triumph of good (Meyer 1980, 134). It is notable that none of these admirable attempts to unite the reliefs thematically result in any conclusions that are acceptable in the case of all four scenes, except in very general terms. Langlotz (1977) ascribes the reliefs to a four-sided sculpted funerary monument of an Attic tragedian. Although this hypothetical reconstruction is possible, it is difficult to cite contemporaneous comparanda for such a monument.

Perhaps the solution to the problem of iconographical relationships between the reliefs is simpler than previously assumed: a series of decorative reliefs in similar scale and unified more by the aesthetic appeal of their three-figured composition than by religious or political programs. A Neoattic workshop specializing in decorative sculpture for contexts such as homes, baths, and peristyles might have offered several pieces of similar scale and composition with no more unity of iconography and program than one would find in the catalogues of its modern equivalents. In reference to wall paintings depicting similar subjects, Ling (1991, 138) writes, “The chief factor which seems to have dictated the choice of pictures in a given room was the possibility of achieving a formal balance.” That the clearest correspondences between all four reliefs in the group is the similarity of scale, and the three-figured composition, suggests the importance of such considerations.

However, most of the subjects chosen for the reliefs were current in the literature of the Augustan period. Theseus and Perithoos’s descent into the underworld, for example, is mentioned twice in the Aeneid alone, once just a few lines away from Orpheus’s ill-fated return with Eurydice, which Virgil discusses in more detail in Georgics (4:453–522; Aen. 6.382–96, 6.122 on Theseus; 6.119 on Orpheus): Ovid deals with Medea and the Peliads in great detail, and makes some mention of Herakles and the apples of the Hesperides (Ov. Met. 7.297–349, on Medea; Met. 9.190, on Herakles). The iconographical taste of either the patron or designer of the reliefs, then, was very much in line with the literati of the day. Thompson (1952, 61–62) himself points out that the prototypes from which the reliefs were carved must have been quite accessible, considering the large number of copies preserved (five of the Orpheus scene and three each of the others), “a situation without parallel among works of this general order.” Götze (1938, 239) notes that the reliefs must have been designed as part of a project by one master and subsequently executed by two sculptors (he sees Alkamenes as the master behind the compositions). What better a solution to this set of circumstances than that where the original is produced in the same workshop as the copies? The prototypes, designed by one master as a series, either as stock scenes or with the subject matter chosen by the original patron, could have remained readily available for exact copying, and Thompson’s “situation without parallel” as to the number of copies could simply represent the mass production of a workshop specializing in producing such reliefs. The form of the preserved reliefs, which, according to Thompson (1952, 62), must have been freestanding stelai, perhaps with attached framing and crowning members,
instead lends itself easily to the decoration of a peristyle, courtyard, garden, or other such outdoor setting. Comparison with reliefs of similar size, shape, and subject matter, such as the second-century AD Palazzo Spada reliefs, masterfully discussed by Natalie Kampen, strongly suggests that such works would be displayed in shallow wall niches:

The framed mythological paintings of Pompeian and Roman houses, framed stuccoes, and large mythological reliefs would all have appeared to be set into walls, physically distinct from their setting, yet visually and intellectually part of it. The tastes and habits of thought and perception are, thus, inextricably connected in both art and literature of the educated Roman.

(Kampen 1979, 594)

Unlike the Palazzo Spada reliefs, which show too many tendencies of Hadriane and Antonine art to have been unanimously considered a “copy” of a Classical Greek monument, the four three-figured reliefs under discussion share no such traits. This is most likely because they are a product of a century earlier than the Spada reliefs, when Augustan classicism favored the elegant yet austere style of the late fifth century BC. Such similarity to Classical work, either in copies or new creations, is achieved mainly during the Julio-Claudian period (we see here none of the embellishment so characteristic of Hellenistic work, nor the fascination with light and shadow indicative of the Hadriane and Antonine periods; if not Classical in date, the reliefs probably belong to the early first century AD).

Of the Orpheus relief, Bowra (1952, 121) points out that “the relief displays too little distress for so tragic a catastrophe.” Such lack of facial response to trauma should be read as a stylistic trait of both Classical and Neoattic art more than as an iconographical barometer. M. Owen Lee (1962, 401), for example, quite rightly notes that, from a philological perspective, the version of the story in which Orpheus successfully recovers Eurydice from the underworld was both earlier and more popular than the “second death myth” most often cited today, which he traces to Virgil. If we should see the reliefs as original creations of a Neoattic workshop, roughly contemporaneous with Virgil, the author’s version might well have influenced the sculpture. The slight restraining touch of Hermes’s hand on Eurydice’s wrist signifies that he is taking possession of her, to lead her back to Hades, as a groom might lead a bride to his house, hence presenting the Virgilian version (Neumann 1965, 59–66; Boegehold 1999, 18). As for the gesture of Eurydice’s free hand, she reaches to Orpheus in vain, in a manner that recalls her words in Georgics:

“Fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus./Iamque vale: non tua, palmas!” (Verg. Aen. 496–98).

That such literary works may well have influenced the home decor of literate Romans is demonstrated in an impressive fashion. The Peliad relief shares its subject matter with the Casa di Giasone in Pompeii. Although different scenes in the myth of Medea and the Peliads have been chosen for the paintings, the date and extensiveness of the Peliad scenes roughly coincide with Ovid’s treatment of the subject. Ling (1991, 119) describes the scene of Jason and Pelias as “a typical example of Augustan classicism,” a stylistic trait that, like its date and subject matter, is shared by its Neoattic counterpart.

It is also notable that, if dated to the fifth century, as many would have it, the Orpheus relief would represent the earliest known evidence of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in art (Touchette 1990, 78). Parapets of altars may seem an odd place for Classical Athenians to experiment with unprecedented iconography; likewise, monumental relief sculpture in general. As Touchette (1990, 85) points out, the relief has little in common with funerary reliefs of the Classical period: “Although H. A. Thompson cites ‘numerous echoes’ of this relief on Attic grave stelai of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, an examination of A. Conze’s Die attischen Grabreliefs reveals that the echoes are of the most general sort. The iconography of the Orpheus relief is in fact unparalleled.” Instead, the group represented on the relief fits much more easily into the context of a later period:

The artistic evidence from the first century BC onwards, seemingly unaffected by the tragic version of the myth narrated by some of the Latin poets, continues to point to a successful ending to Orpheus’ mission. Orpheus and Eurydice are depicted amongst the inhabitants of Hades on a first-century BC fresco in the Louvre. A century later, on the stuccoes from the Basilica Sotterranea, Orpheus appears in a mirror-reverse rendering of his pose on the three-figure relief. (Touchette 1990, 84)

On the following page, Touchette (1990, 85) comes to terms with the near-absence of Hermes Psychopompos from Classical Attic red-figure, but fails to acknowledge that there are, perhaps, too many problems with dating the relief to the Classical period. Likewise, Touchette states that “[t]he gestures of Orpheus and Eurydice are echoed most closely on a relief from the Palatine. On examination, however, this piece is revealed as a Neoattic creation of the Roman period” (1990, 86–87). The evidence for the interpretation of the Orpheus relief as a Neoattic creation becomes, at this point, overwhelming.

Gadbury (1992, 483), in her reexamination of the Altar of the Twelve Gods (which Thompson considers to be synonymous with the Altar of Pity), disassociates the reliefs from the parapet by stratigraphically redating it to the third quarter of the fourth century. Moreover, Ridgway has shown that the Altar of Pity and the Altar of the Twelve Gods should be considered two separate monuments. Considering these factors, the argument for the association of the reliefs with the altar, based more on the scale of the panels than on iconographical unity, becomes very flimsy indeed.

In the reexamination of the four reliefs, especially the
Orpheus relief (upon which most of the attention has been lavished, partially due to the issues surrounding its iconography) several discrepancies between the scenes depicted herein and in the works that would be considered contemporaneous if we accept a Classical date for them become obvious. In addition, as has been noted, it is difficult to credibly unite the four scenes thematically, making it difficult to ascribe them to any one monumental program. Gadbury’s redating of the Altar of the Twelve Gods parapet makes Thompson’s connection between the reliefs and the monument dubious if not impossible. This conviction is strengthened by the number, exactness, and nature of the copies, which suggest that the prototype was very easily available, with copies of the reliefs being mass produced by a small number of copyists over a relatively short time, perhaps in a single workshop. Differences in copies may relate to the styles of different copyists of the same workshop, or perhaps a later series of copies, using the original Neoattic creations as its prototype. Gestures and poses of the figures in the Orpheus relief find their best comparanda in Neoattic art, and the iconography itself had no precedent in relief sculpture of the Classical period. With these factors in mind, it seems logical to interpret the reliefs as a Neoattic creation of Roman date, probably of the first century AD, mass produced as decorative elements for the gardens of wealthy houses and villas.

The marble of the reliefs and fragments are generally “said to be of Pentelic marble,” (Harrison 1964, 76) often without the benefit of isotopic analysis. In spite of the material, most of the pieces with known provenances have been discovered in Central Italy (Götze 1938, 200–202), and the workshop or workshops that produced them may have been located there. F. Van Keuren (this volume) argues that certain Neoattic motifs in sarcophagi gained currency in Rome, having been employed by Greek artists working in Central Italy. The case of three-figured reliefs may be quite similar.

By necessity, analysis from the perspective of ancient viewers requires a certain degree of hypothetical speculation. This issue is compounded when the question of the original context of a work is uncertain. Considering the form of the relief panels, the number and distribution of copies, iconography, and style, it seems reasonable to conclude that the three-figured reliefs decorated elaborate houses, baths, or peristyles of the first century AD.

The subjects of the reliefs are current in contemporary literature, and the buyers or patrons of such art might also be the consumers of such poetry, or those aspiring to demonstrate their familiarity with literature upon visitors to their home or garden. In a way, these monuments, seen by scholars for decades as later copies of famous fifth-century BC works, might have been read by their intended audience as demonstrating an interest in contemporary literature as much or more than an artistic tradition from the distant past.

That Roman viewers associated works of art with specific literary compositions is amply demonstrated both artistically, in works such as the Odyssey Landscapes, and in literature, such as the decoration of Trimalchio’s house in the Satyricon. The difference here is that subjects from literature contemporary with the artwork have been depicted, demonstrably specific in the case of Orpheus and Eurydice. Although the style of the reliefs is focused on the Classical past, the specifics of the iconography are united in their treatment in Augustan Latin literature. Would a viewer read the works as a panegyric to the accomplishments of contemporary literature? Mythological iconography is not static over the centuries but finds a different expression in the treatment of new authors, artists, readers, and viewers.

In any case, it seems that the three-figured reliefs are Neoattic creations, most likely chosen by a patron from specific literary iconography. Sculptors of the Roman period, like artists in other media, were free to copy from contemporary art or their own creations, instead of replicating the Classical Greek past. The stylistic preference for classicism was just one of many choices in the sculptor’s vocabulary. Whereas some sculptures that are known from many copies made in the Roman period clearly are reproductions of famous earlier works and some are elaborations or variations on a theme, some may, in fact, be new compositions, consciously influenced by centuries of artistic tradition, rather than replicas of a specific composition.

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Works Cited