The Image of Sphinx in Roman Sculpture from Lower Danube Fortresses

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Abstract: The motif of the sphinx, originating from the Ancient Orient and Egypt, was later taken up by Hellenistic art and eventually, around the year 30 BC, emerged in Roman imagery as the symbol of hope. At the time of Caesar, it appeared on coins together with Sibyl. In sepulchral art, it is obviously decorative, of an apotropaic nature. Furthermore, images of sphinxes on sarcophaguses, tombstones and individual statues were used to guard graves or necropolises. In the region of the Lower Danube, two fragments of sphinxes have been found. One of them was uncovered during the conservation work in the central part of Novae. Another fragment was discovered within the structure of the defensive wall in the Roman castle of Dimum. The sphinx of Novae may be dated to the 2nd century AD, and possibly to the first half of the century. The sphinx of Dimum is dated to the time between the late 2nd and the early 3rd century AD.

Key words: Roman sculpture, sphinx, Lower Danube, Novae, Dimum.

Each season of the long-lasting Polish-Bulgarian exploration of the Roman legionary camp and the later Roman and Early Byzantine city of Novae (fig. 1) yields an abundant and diversified collection of archaeological artefacts, among them ancient sculptures. In the course of conservation works in the south-western section of the complex of the legionary bath in 2013, a fragment of a limestone statue which obviously portrays a sphinx was discovered. It is 0.52 m high, the maximum width is 0.33 m, the minimum is 0.19 m, and it is 0.21 m thick (fig. 2). In its present condition, it is a headless torso with a partly preserved single wing, made of local crumbly limestone (bi-opellsparite). On the extant portion of the underbelly, four pairs of animal nipples are visible. Also the lower portion of the neck is extant. The wing, growing out of the torso, features eleven small down feathers and six primary remiges. Some feathers have been badly broken off. Extinct parts of the statue are the other wing, the head, the fore legs and the rear section of the body of the portrayed animal, including the hind legs. The entire preserved fragment of the sculpture has been much damaged and many pieces have been broken off, which increases the difficulty of identifying its exact purpose. On the back of the statue there is a rectangular flat area, as in sculptures which were used as bases or supports of Roman tables and candelabra; sculptures on Roman tombstones also had this feature.

In 1928, within the structure of the defensive wall in the Roman castle of Dimum (now Belene) (fig. 1), a fragment of a sculpture
made of organogenous detrital limestone was discovered, representing the torso of a sphinx (Вълов 1968, 51, 52, fig. 7). The extant piece is 0.48 m long, 0.34 m tall and 0.24 m wide. It shows the front part of a woman’s trunk including a section of the neck (fig. 3). It features two female breasts with the nipples visible. In its lower part, the torso becomes an animal’s underbelly with extant four pairs of small nip-
ples. On both sides, wings grow out of the torso. The better preserved one consists of three arcuated strips of small down feathers. The first strip, at the shoulder, consists of six down feathers, the second of five, and the third one of as few as four, from under which five secondary remiges protrude. Of the other wing, only the section directly at the torso is extant, consisting of three straight strips of small down feathers. The first and the second strip feature five down feathers each, and the third one, only four. Only an impression is preserved of the secondary remiges. On either side of the torso, under the wings, the outline of ribs is distinguishable. The head, the hind part of the trunk and the fore and hind legs are extinct.

Upon a comparative study, both sculptures may be tenably identified as sphinxes. The motif of the sphinx, originating from the Ancient Orient and Egypt, was later taken up by the Hellenistic art and eventually, around the year 30 BC, emerged in Roman imagery as the symbol of hope. At the time of Caesar, it appeared on coins together with Sibyl (Zanker 1999, 270). Octavian sealed his documents with an effigy of the sphinx. Cistophorus coins minted in Pergamum

![The sphinx of Dimum](photo: A. B. Biernacki)
in the year 27/26 BC bore an image of a sphinx, which augured the beginning of a new era and was also associated with the prophecy and secret of Octavian (Zanker 1999, 56, fig. 36b). Likewise, an image of this mythical creature appears on the pauldrons of the armor of Augustus’ statue in Prima Porta (Zanker 1999, 194, 270, fig. 148b). The same motif occurs on candelabra, bronze tables, murals, altars, tombstones and marble urns (Zanker 1999, 270-271, fig. 213; S. Landi in Durante 2001, 54-55). In sepulchral art, sphinxes are obviously decorative, of an apotropaic nature. They may also be related to the myth of Oedipus (Herrmann / von den Hoek 2005, 279; Cesarik / Štrmelj 2015, 89). Furthermore, images of sphinxes on sarcophagi, tombstones and individual statues were used to guard graves or necropolises; an instance of this practice is the sphinx of Colchester, dated to AD 43-75, a statue of a sitting lion with a woman’s head, shoulders and breasts, holding the deceased’s head in the claws of its fore paws (fig. 4/1). This is a representation of the triumph of death over life (Lodge 1870, 89-91; Katakis 1997, 1173, pl. 322; Cesarik / Štrmelj 2015, 89-90). Of a higher artistic quality is the sphinx tomb
guardian from the Roman mausoleum of Orange (France) – a naked female bust decorated with a plastron, with a phalera in its center (fig. 5/3). The woman’s face is preserved; it has a very refined expression, while the model’s carefully combed hair reaches halfway down her neck. This statue probably dates from the 1st century BC – mid-1st century AD. A sphinx of a similar design is kept at the archaeological museum of Zadar; found at the ancient necropolis of Aenona, it is tentatively dated to the late Antonine or the Severan dynasty (late 2nd – 3rd century) (fig. 5/5) (Cesarik / Štrmelj 2015, 80, figs. 1-3). Another sphinx found in Aenona has strongly emphasized feminine features, but wears no jewelry (fig. 4/2) (Cesarik / Štrmelj 2015, 82-83, figs. 13-15). In the Ancient city of Luna (Etruria) was discovered a fragment of a sphinx which constituted the base of a marble table, dated to
the time between the late 1st century BC and the mid-1st century AD (S. Landi in Durante 2001, 54-55, figs. 81-84). One statue of a seated sphinx is kept at the Archaeological museum of Piraeus in Greece. On the head she wears a polos adorned with anthemia (palmette flowers) (fig. 5/4). It served as a leg of a marble table, dated to ca. AD 150. Further instances of this design of sphinxes are two sculptures found in Side and dated to the 3rd century AD (figs. 4/3, 4/4).

In our opinion, all of the abovementioned artifacts belong to Type I sphinx statues, which may be further divided into Subtypes A and B, the latter distinguished by decorative jewelry girdling the breasts of the woman’s torso. Type II, of a slightly different design, is represented by a sculpture found on Monte Cognolo at Lanuvium (near Rome), dated to the years AD 120–140 (fig. 5/1). Its characteristic is a more masculine torso, with the chest covered by peculiar scale-like down feathers. The breast is less pronounced and deprived of nipples. There are also down feathers on the upper sections of the sphinx’s fore legs. The item was apparently used as the support of a stone table. An earlier example of this Type II sphinx sculpture was made from tufa and was found in a Roman villa in the Prisco property at Boscoreale, dated to AD 79 (fig. 5/2).

The statue found in Novae must be classified as a Type II sphinx image. It is emphasized that it clearly came from a provincial workshop where the workers had only mediocre skills, both the stonecutters and the sculptors. Since it is made of second-rate crumbly limestone (biopellsparite), a material available locally in Novae and its environs, it may have been produced in this city (Skoczylas 1995, 91-99; Skoczylas 2013, 121-126). The sphinx of Novae may be dated to the 2nd century AD, and possibly the first half of the century.

Conversely, the statue discovered in Dimum must be classified as Type IA. In comparison with the artifact from Novae, it plainly shows a better quality of the sculptor’s skills, a more careful representation of anatomical details and superior visual decoration. It is made of highly crystalline organogenous detrital limestone quarried in Hotnica (near Nicopolis ad Istrum) (Skoczylas 2013, 125-126). This is yet another piece of evidence proving that the workshop at the latter location employed better skilled stonecutters and sculptors. The sphinx of Dimum is dated to the period between the late 2nd and the early 3rd century AD (Вълов 1968, 53-54).

Bibliography


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