

A Ptolemaic Portrait in Sarasota

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The legacy left by Alexander at his death at Babylon in 323 BC gave the world its first far-reaching cultural unity. This legacy, known as Hellenism, sprouted in newly created cultural and artistic centers built by Alexander and his successors. Cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Priene and Pergamom became famous almost immediately as centers of learning. Alexandria, the seat of the Ptolemaic dynasty, was renowned in antiquity for its Museion, a forerunner of our own modern museum and library. For several centuries the Library at Alexandria attracted learned men from all over the Hellenistic world, poets such as Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes, and scholars like Eratosthenes. Art, architecture and artists also flourished in Alexandria under the patronage of the Ptolemies, as exemplified by the celebrated Lighthouse on the island of Pharos built by Sostratos, which became one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Communication between Hellenistic centers was made much easier as a result of common language, religion and custom. Consequently, artists were frequently itinerant, travelling wherever commissions would take them. It is not surprising therefore to see how homogeneous Hellenistic art is, particularly in comparison with the more isolated art of the Classical period. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate stylistic characteristics of the great Hellenistic schools. However, discernible styles emerged within these schools, setting each one apart from the other. These styles, or rather trends, were often dictated by taste, either official or public. One such case is the art of Alexandria, a product of which is the focus of this paper.

At the outset, Alexandrian sculpture is probably derived from Attic tradition,¹ or, more specifically, from the style of the great fourth century sculptor Praxiteles.² The softened, languid Praxitelean rendering of the human form and the characteristic "melting gaze" as seen on the famous Hermes from Olympia become the predominant features of Alexandrian sculpture. This dream-like quality in sculpture lent itself well to the use of portraiture. Many examples of royal Ptolemaic portraits exist throughout the world, exhibiting various degrees of quality. One particularly fine female head is now on indefinite loan from the collection of Dr. and Mrs. Freddie Homburger to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida (Figure 1a, b, and c).³

This lifesize marble head is in a fine state, marred only by slight damage to the nose and upper back of the head.⁴ The entire back of the head is missing, purposely made in that condition to be covered over in stucco as was the usual practice in Alexandrian sculpture.⁵ Set on a long neck, the head is tilted upwards and slightly to the left. The face is finely polished while the neck and hair are rough. The hair is centrally parted, carried over the temples and ears in long, wavy strands and gathered together in a small bun at the nape of the neck. A ribbon or fillet binds the hair. On the

neck, below the left ear, are two small drill holes which may have been used for fastening a separate band or diadem.

The Praxitelean qualities of this beautiful head are readily apparent: the shadowy, trance-like eyes, the slightly flaring nostrils and parted lips.⁶ The soft, transparent quality of the face is paired with a rough impressionistic blocking-out of the hair, a contrast frequently found in Praxitelean expression. Heightening this effect is the Alexandrian tendency to contrast a smooth polished face with rough crinkly hair. The added stucco would have emphasized the sharp contrast. Uncharacteristic of the style of the fourth-century master is the attenuated, almost manneristic neck demonstrating the eclecticism and originality of the head's anonymous sculptor.

One of the closest parallels to the Homburger head can be found in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Figure 2).⁷ The features are strikingly similar. Besides the stylistic qualities already mentioned, the Alexandria portrait exhibits similar facial features: rounded face, fleshy lips and close-set, deeply-recessed eyes. Picard, who published this piece in 1925, drew immediate attention to its Praxitelean quality as compared with the Knidian Aphrodite.⁸ He also pointed out the close resemblance in appearance between the head and certain issues of Ptolemaic coinage.⁹ The use of a divine Aphrodite type for royal portraiture was justified by Picard on the basis that the Macedonian Ptolemies considered themselves divine as did the ancient pharaohs before them. Thus, a sculptural portrait resembling an Aphrodite type would not be heretical. The coin portrait Picard associated with the Alexandria head was that of Berenice I, the second wife of Ptolemy I, dating the head to the late fourth/early third century.¹⁰

Recently, however, the Alexandrian head has been re-attributed to Arsinoe III, the sister/wife of Ptolemy IV Soter, who lived in the last decades of the third century BC.¹¹

A few definite portraits of this Hellenistic queen exist, particularly coin portraits.¹² On a gold octodrachm in the Hunterian Collection in Glasgow we find the rather idealized portrait in profile of Arsinoe (Figure 3).¹³ She holds a scepter and is adorned with a necklace, earrings and diadem, all trappings fitting for a regal portrait. From London another octodrachm containing the same elements perhaps better reveals the likeness of her portrait (Figure 4).¹⁴ The neck appears long, and the cheeks fleshy, while her eyes are wide with some modelling to the brow; but the more prominent and significant features are the chin which juts out perpendicular to the lips and the long nose. A portrait head in Boston, identified as Arsinoe III by Caskey,¹⁵ contains the very same features found on the coins, including pierced earlobes for the insertion of earrings (Figure 5).

Stylistically similar to the Boston head is a fine example in Cairo, identified as Arsinoe Philopator by Adriani (Figure 6).¹⁶ The diadem crowning the head certainly suggests

a royal portrait and appears to parallel the features found on the coinage: the fleshy cheeks, sharply modelled eyes, jutting chin, and long nose.

Other portrait heads identified as Arsinoe III display these same identifying characteristics.¹⁷ Two examples in particular, from Mantua¹⁸ and Dresden,¹⁹ besides the stylistic similarities, reveal a subtle quality of pathos in the modelling of the face (Figures 7 and 8). Generally, those portraits mentioned previously appear to display no emotion but rather are stark and stately. The Mantua and Dresden heads, however, betray hints of sadness in the eyes and, more importantly, the pursed lips. Indeed, the Dresden piece, with the slightest tilting of the head and the mournful upward gaze of the eyes, accentuates this emotion.

This same pathos is found in the Alexandria head, the closest parallel to the Homburger portrait. Again, we note the saddened visage, seeming almost doleful in appearance. Yet the characteristic portrait features of Arsinoe III remain relatively unaltered, both in the Alexandria and Homburger portraits.

Apart from coins and sculpture portraits of Arsinoe, representations exist in other media. Numerous examples can be found on gems which generally seem to follow the numismatic renderings very closely.²⁰ Arsinoe may also appear on the Archelaos Relief in the guise of Oikoumene with Ptolemy behind her as Chronos crowning Homer (Figure 9).²¹ Also, many small faïence heads exist representing the Ptolemaic queen, often articulated with the same precision, skill and characteristics found on the larger-scale stone portraits.²²

Thus because of stylistic parallels to already identified portraits of Arsinoe III Philopator, I suggest that the Homburger Hellenistic head of a young woman also can be identified as this Ptolemaic queen.

Though much time and effort and scholarly writing have been devoted to identifying her physical features and portraiture, little is known concerning her life.²³ Born sometime between 230 and 225 BC, Arsinoe III was the daughter of Ptolemy II Euergetes and Berenice II. Unfortunately for Arsinoe, she was also the sister to the heir apparent, Ptolemy IV, who was accounted one of the worst Ptolemaic kings by Strabo.²⁴ She first appears in history in 217 on a battlefield in Syria where her brother (and future mate) met and defeated the armies of another Hellenistic monarch, Antiochus. In an account preserved in the third Maccabees, the girl, who was still little more than a child, ran back and forth to the front encouraging the soldiers on

to victory.²⁵ Polybius, generally a dry historian, gives no such descriptive details but only confirms the fact that she was present at the fighting.²⁶

After this episode, her life as a Ptolemaic queen is cloudy at best. Bits and pieces are preserved only in inscriptions and official decrees. Probably soon after the defeat of Antiochus, Ptolemy married his sister, an act not unheard of among Macedonian royalty. Their son, the future Ptolemy V Epiphanes, was born in 209 and it was probably the youth of the queen which accounts for the long interval between marriage and the birth of Ptolemy V.²⁷

The death of Arsinoe came in 203, shortly after the mysterious death of Ptolemy IV. Ministers, who may or may not have had a hand in his death, certainly did in hers. It is known that Ptolemy's death was concealed for some time for political reasons²⁸ and there is some evidence that Arsinoe may have been secretly divorced from Ptolemy, an event which would account for the absence of her name on official decrees in the last years of Ptolemy's reign.²⁹ It is possible that, although well-loved by the Egyptian people, Arsinoe may have been assassinated because her indomitable spirit, which she exhibited as a child on the Syrian battlefield, proved an obstacle to the designs of the regents for the new young king.

Upon her death it was announced that she and Ptolemy were accidentally killed in a palace fire. Polybius describes an emotional scene where the regents crowned the little king before the Macedonian soldiers and displayed the urns holding the ashes of Ptolemy and Arsinoe to be given over for burial.³⁰ Rumors that she had died were now publicly admitted yet the official reasons were disbelieved by the populace. The love the people had for Arsinoe turned to hate against her murderers who were ultimately killed.

Arsinoe, then, was beloved by the people of Egypt. Indeed, Eratosthenes wrote a book about her which, except for one small fragment recorded in Athenaeus,³¹ has not survived. Through her popularity a cult was established by her son in her honor, as suggested by a passage on the Rosetta Stone which names a priestess to Arsinoe Philopator.³² Perhaps here we find the origin and the purpose behind the numerous portraits of Arsinoe and possibly the Homburger head. Polybius said that "Arsinoe endured insult all her life."³³ The face of the Homburger portrait expresses the brooding sadness of one who has known the bitterness of life and yet reflects a gentle love which the people of Alexandria and Egypt felt for their queen.

Ringling Museum of Art
Sarasota, Florida

1 M. Bieber, *Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*, 2nd ed., New York, 1961, 89.

2 *Ibid.*

3 The portrait head is one of several antiquities presently on indefinite loan to the Ringling Museum of Art. I would like to thank Dr. and Mrs. Freddie Homburger for their kind permission to publish this piece. Also, I would like to thank Mrs. Elizabeth Telford and Dr. William Wilson of the RMA for their support during my stay in Sarasota.

4 PH 0.368 m. The surface of the marble contains several blotches of discoloration as well as numerous scratches and small nicks.

5 Bieber, 90.

6 Walter Amelung first used the Italian words *sfumato* and *morbidezza* in connection with the Praxitelean style of Alexandrian sculpture; cf. *Bollettino Comunale*, XXV, 1897, 110ff. Also, see Bieber, 89.

7 E. Breccia, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, Bergamo, 1922, 177f and 115, fig. 48; C. Picard, "Tête féminine du Musée d'Alexandrie," *Monuments et Mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Fondation Piot)*, XXVIII, 1925, 113-130.

8 Picard, 117f.

- 9 Picard, 121ff.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 H. Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, Berlin, 1975, 106f.
- 12 Cf. J. Svornos, *Ta Nomismata tou Kratous tōn Ptolemaion*, Athens, 1904-8, cat. nos. 1159-1174; 1269; 1272.
- 13 G. Macdonald, *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection*, Glasgow, 1905, "Ptolemy IV," no. 22.
- 14 R.S. Poole, *Catalogue of Greek Coins. The Ptolemies*, London, 1883, 67, no. 1.
- 15 L.D. Caskey, *Catalogue of Greek and Roman Sculpture*, Boston, 1925, 120ff; also, cf. Kyrieleis, 104.
- 16 A. Adriani, "Nuovi ritratti di Arsinoe III," *Arti Figurative. Rivista d'Arte. Antica e Moderna*, III, 1947, 51-60, pls. 25 and 26; also, cf. Kyrieleis, 104.
- 17 Kyrieleis, 105ff; other probable portraits of Arsinoe III can be found in Paris, Alexandria and Copenhagen. For a catalogue of all portraits identified as Arsinoe, see Kyrieleis, 181f, LI-L9. One other possible portrait exists in Toronto although it is not mentioned by Kyrieleis; cf. B. von Bothmer, *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period*, Brooklyn Museum, 1960, no. 105, 134f, pl. 98.
- 18 A. Levi in *Bollettino d'Arte*, Series II, no. 6, I, 1926-27, 548ff; E. Pfuhl, "Ikonographische Beiträge zur Stilgeschichte der Hellenistischen Kunst," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, XLV, 1930, 38ff; Adriani, 51ff; Bieber, 92f; Kyrieleis, 105 and 182.
- 19 Kyrieleis, 105 and 182.
- 20 For portraits on engraved gems, cf. Svornos, IV, pl. 3 no. 20; Kyrieleis, 44, note 165; F.H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings in the British Museum*, London, 1907, 383, pl. XII; H.B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems and Cameos in the British Museum*, London, 1926, 1186, pl. XVII; J. Charbonneau, "Sur la signification et la date de la tasse Farnèse," *MonPiot*, L, 1958, 95, fig. 7; J. Boardman and M.-L. Vollenweider, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems and Finger Rings in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, 289.
- 21 A.H. Smith, *Catalogue of Sculpture in the British Museum*, III, London, 1904, 244ff, no. 2191; Bieber, 127f and 90, figs. 404 and 497. D. Pinkwort, however, in her thorough study of the Archelaos Relief dismisses the possibility of the pair as representing Ptolemy and Arsinoe; cf. *Das Relief des Archelaos von Priene und die 'Musen des Philiskos.'* Kallmunn, 1965. D.B. Thompson, however, in light of evidence given by faience portrait heads, believes that the two figures crowning Homer are indeed Ptolemy and Arsinoe; cf. *Ptolemaic Oinochoai and Portraits in Faience*, Oxford, 1973, 90.
- 22 For a complete listing of portraits in faience, see Thompson, 88ff. Also, for a small glass portrait head of Arsinoe (?) in the W.C. Baker Collection which follows the same characteristic patterns found on the faience heads, see Thompson, 89f and no. 132.
- 23 For a history of Arsinoe III, see Wilcken, "Arsinoe," in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopedie*, II, A1, 1287; G.H. Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens*, Baltimore, 1932, 136ff.
- 24 Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, 1, 11.
- 25 Maccabees, III, 1-4.
- 26 Polybius, V, 83.
- 27 Macurdy, 138.
- 28 See F.W. Walbank, "The Accession of Ptolemy Epiphanes," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, XXII, 1936, 28ff.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 30 Polybius, XV, 25.
- 31 Athenaeus, VII, 276a.
- 32 Cf. Macurdy, 141.
- 33 Polybius, XV, 25, 9.

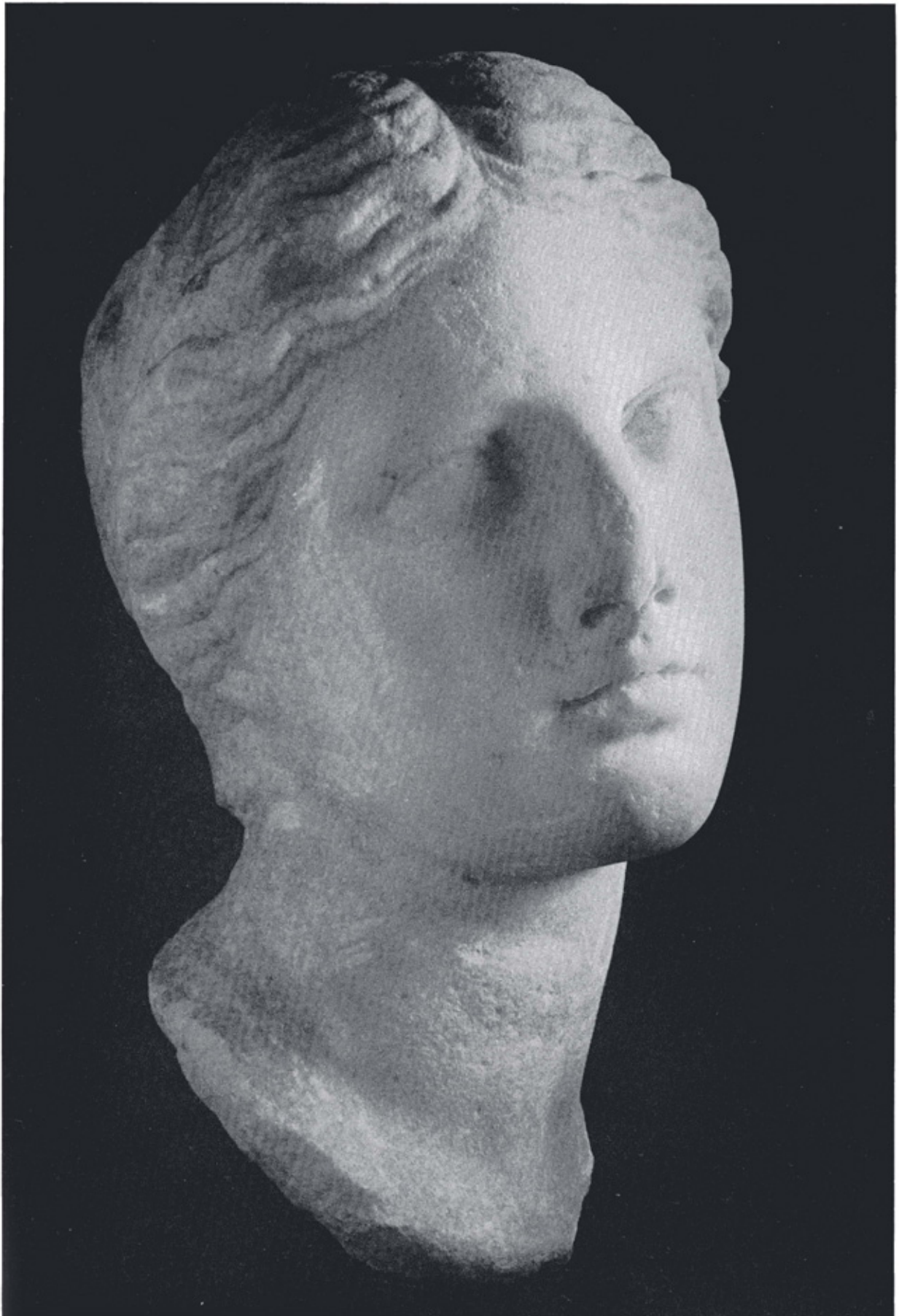


Fig. 1a, b, c, Female head, collection of Dr. and Mrs. Freddie Homburger, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota.

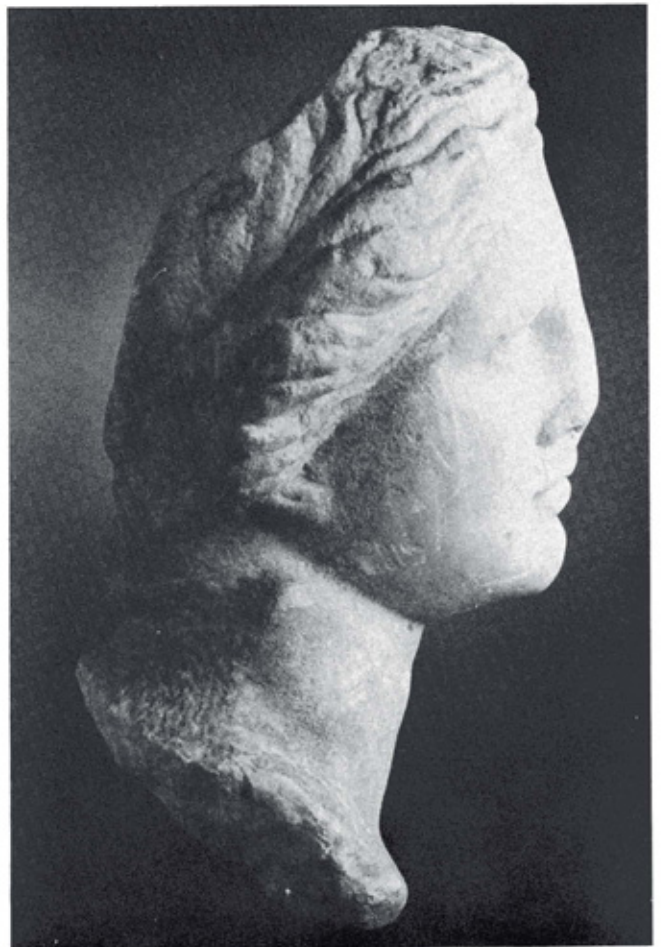




Fig. 2, Female head, Musée Greco-Romain, Alexandria.



Fig. 3, Octodrachm with portrait of Arsinoe III, Hunterian Collection, Glasgow.



Fig. 4, Octodrachm with portrait of Arsinoe III, British Museum, London.



Fig. 5, Portrait of Arsinoe III, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 6, Portrait of Arsinoe III, Cairo Museum.



Fig. 7, Female head, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua.

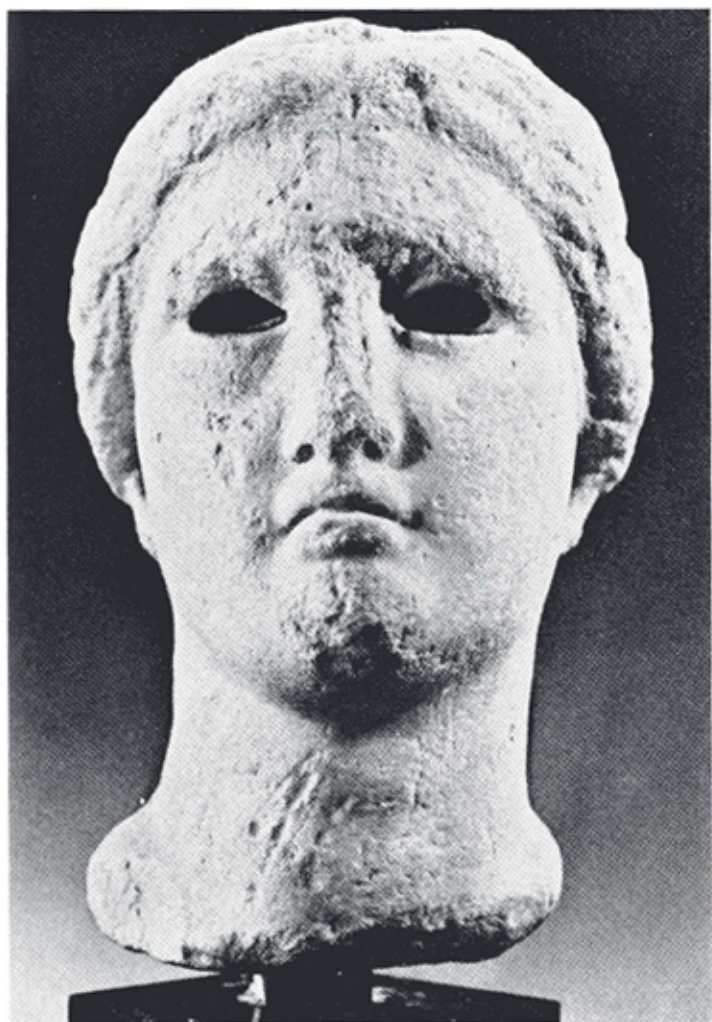


Fig. 8, Female head, Albertinum, Dresden.



Fig. 9, Detail of the Archelaos Relief, British Museum, London.