

A SHORT NOTE ABOUT A RECENT STATEMENT ON PRAXITELES

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Abstract

Objections are raised against recent hypercritical statements made by K. Arafat and C. Morgan on Praxiteles. Their opinion that this sculptor is a shadowy figure is rejected.

In fact, this sculptor is known thanks to 120 sources, which allow us to reconstruct his life and works in a detailed way. Their opinion that the Hermes of Olympia was by a younger Praxiteles is also rejected, for several reasons. The indented sole of the sandal of this Hermes does not support the down-dating of this group, because analogous indentations appear from 360 BC.

The opinion that Pliny, Pausanias and Callistratus wrongly attributed to great masters of the Fifth and Fourth centuries works made by later name-sakes seems very unlikely.

K. Arafat and C. Morgan have recently published an article on "Architecture and other Visual Arts", in "The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece" (Cambridge University Press, 1998), edited by P. Cartledge.

On p. 281, in the context of a quick presentation of late-classical art, the following statements are made:

"Perhaps the most famous of all Greek sculptors was Praxiteles, but he remains a shadowy figure. Even his origin is uncertain. There is reason to think there was a younger Praxiteles - perhaps a grandson - and it is possible that some of his works (for example, the Hermes and baby Dionysus at Olympia) were erroneously attributed to the most famous one, etc."

Books printed by the Cambridge University Press are usually considered to be of high scientific standard, so it is likely that several readers take this 'information' as fact.

This probability obliges me to write some considerations about it.

First of all, I think that the word "shadowy" cannot be referred to Praxiteles, a sculptor very well known thanks to 120 sources, many of them very long and giving a lot of information, which allow us to reconstruct his life and works in a detailed way¹.

The statement that "his origin is uncertain" is surprising, to say the least. In fact, several inscriptions declare him an Athenian². His master, who was probably also his father, is known too: Kephisodotus the Elder³. The social and economical conditions of this family are well-known, thanks to the studies of Davies, Lauter and Müller⁴: Phokion's

marriage with the sister of Kephisodotus the Elder permits the inference that this family was socially acceptable already when Praxiteles begun his activity, in the 370s.⁵

So, whichever meaning may be given to the word "origin", geographical, prosopographical, social or economical, Praxiteles' origin is certain and not therefore uncertain.

The opinion that the Hermes of Olympia was by a younger Praxiteles seems very weak: Pausanias, 5, 17, 3, attributes this work to the great Praxiteles and was certainly able to distinguish late-classical sculptures from hellenistic ones: he saw many original masterpieces made by the greatest masters, which are now lost, so we have no title to attribute to him such serious mistakes. The style and iconography of this group are entirely in keeping with everything we know about Praxiteles and late-classical sculpture, as I hope to have demonstrated in a recent article. Moreover, its outstanding quality may be explained only by its attribution to the best marble sculptor of all classical antiquity. Historical reasons and especially the stratigraphy of offerings in the temple of Hera at Olympia suggest also a late-classical date. Finally, a fragment of a group derived from the Olympian Hermes was found in the Northern Italian city of Verona and bears the signature "Praxiteles epoiei"⁶. The sole of the sandal of this Hermes, having an indentation between the big toe and the second toe, does not support the down-dating of this group, because analogous indentations appear in vase-painting and sculpture from 360 BC⁷.

The opinion that great experts of ancient art such

as Pliny, Pausanias and Callistratus wrongly attributed to great masters of the Fifth and Fourth centuries BC works made in fact by later name-sakes does not convince me. Whoever saw the Zeus of Olympia, the Athena Parthenos, the Doriphorus of Polyklet, the Discus-thrower of Myron, the Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles and hundreds of other

works made by the great masters could not make such serious mistakes, as well as nobody now could attribute wrongly a baroque painting to the early renaissance, because the most important masterpieces of these periods still survive.

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¹ See CORSO 1996a, 456-62.

² See CORSO 1988, inscriptions nos. 1, 4, 6, 10 and 11.

³ On this family of sculptors, see LAUTER 1980, 525-31, and MÜLLER 1988, 346-61.

⁴ See n. 3 and moreover DAVIES 1971, 286-90, no. 8334.

⁵ On the marriage of Phokion with the sister of Kephisodotus the Elder, see PLUTARCH, Phokion, 19, 1.

⁶ Evidence supporting all these statements may be found in CORSO 1996b, 131-153.

⁷ See the indented sole of Orestes in TRENDALL and CAMBITOGLU 1978, 97, no. 229 (by the Eumenides Painter, 360 BC); see also a left foot on sandal from the free-standing sculpture of the north side of the Mausoleion of Halikarnassus, to be attributed to Bryaxis according to Pliny, 36, 30 and dated to before 350 BC, in WAYWELL 1978, 155, no. 228, pl. 33.

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