

## NOTES & COMMENTS

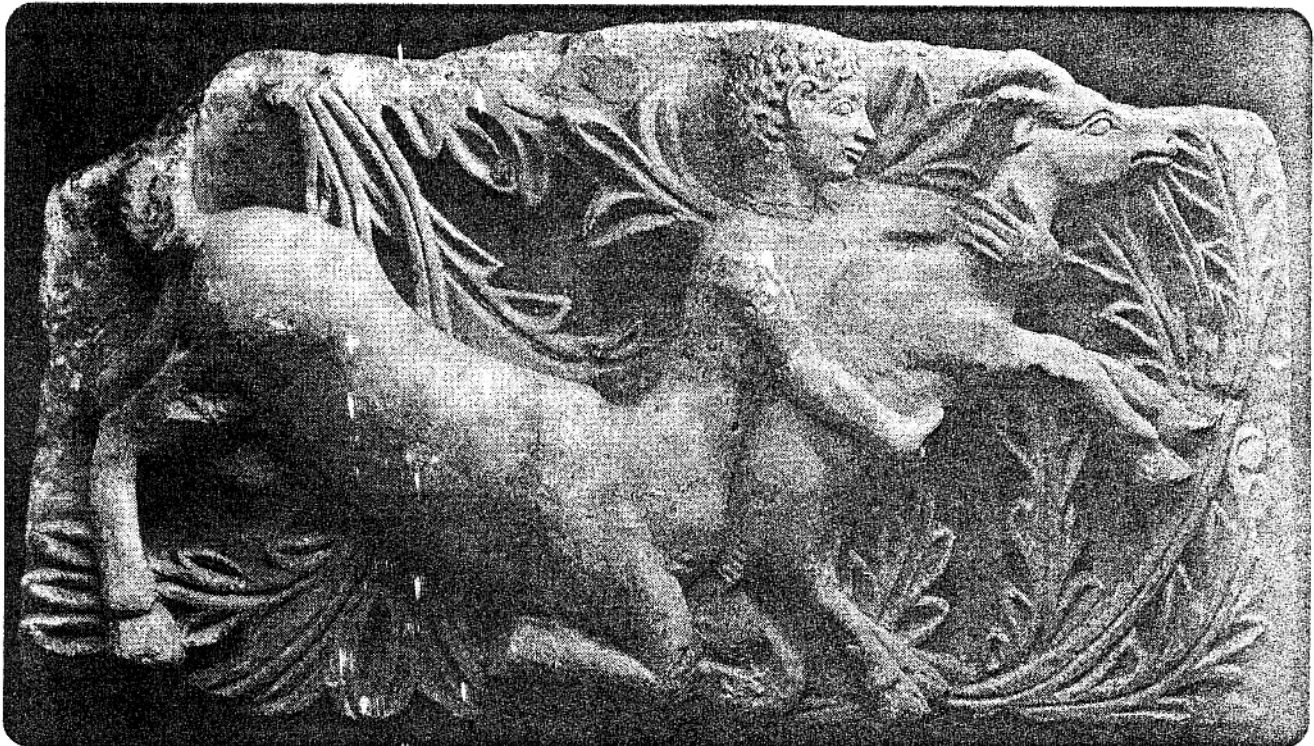
### The Hunting Centaur

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There were two exciting events in September 1998 for those interested in the art of Late Antiquity and in the complex historical questions pertaining to this period. The exhibition of a Late Antique Egyptian relief block depicting a Centaur opened in the Museum of Fine Arts simultaneously with the appearance of a lavishly illustrated book-length study by László Török introducing the relief.\* The marble relief block was

votives in temples by women praying for fortunate delivery or placed in tombs of women or men in order to promote their resurrection in the hereafter. The

majority of the figurines exhibited were, however, manufactured at the Christian pilgrimage center of Abu Mena, attesting to the Christian reinterpretation of a pagan image which united traditional Egyptian and Hellenic features.



recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts and now enriches its collection of Egyptian art from the Graeco-Roman period.

The relief was exhibited together with previously acquired material in an exhibition organized under the auspices of the Department of Classical Antiquities and the Department of Egyptian Art: Coptic textiles with figural ornamentation and terracotta sculptures, relics of private piety of the final period of paganism in Egypt. They come from different social and intellectual milieus but visualize uniformly the final result of the fusion of traditional Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religious conceptions and images. At the same time, they are also relics of the integration of Graeco-Egyptian religious imagery into early Christian art. Figurines representing Aphrodite in an Egyptianized form were offered as

On the front of *The Hunting Centaur* relief block, measuring 34.8 cm (height) x 65.1 cm (length) x 17.8 cm (depth), two figures of a dynamically arranged group of figures facing right can be seen in front of the background of a medallion-scroll: a young Centaur throwing himself onto a gazelle standing on its hind legs and holding it to his breast with both arms. László Török's research has dated this relief to the middle decades of the fourth century AD, sometime between 330 and 350. It was in all probability meant to decorate the façade of a tomb edifice in Oxyrhynchos, one of the significant urban centers in the Egypt of Late Antiquity. The Budapest relief must have been part of a sculptural decoration showing scenes of the myth of Dionysos. The goat, the traditional prey of Dionysos and the Centaurs in Greek and Roman representations, is replaced in the Budapest relief with the gazelle, the traditional Egyptian sacrificial animal. The Centaur belonged to the cortège of the redeeming God.

Discussing the sculptural modelling of the work, Török calls attention to two contradictory tendencies

■ László Török, *The Hunting Centaur: A Monument of Egyptian Hellenism from the Fourth Century AD in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest*. Budapest: Atlantisz—Szépművészeti Múzeum, 1998. 145 pp. Bilingual in English and Hungarian, with Plates and Illustrations.

which appear alongside one another. From the background of strongly stylized, ornamental acanthus scrolls there emerge with dynamic movement and with an almost statue-like plasticity the deeply undercut naturalistic figures of the Centaur and the gazelle. There is an additional contradiction between the extremely precise and detailed rendering of the heads on the one hand and the summary treatment of the bodies on the other. Finally, in the complex iconographic canon (manifest in the anatomy of the Centaurs as they first emerged in the Greek archaic period or in the "Satyr" features of the young Centaur's head) is present alongside "hieroglyphic" elements from the most ancient Egyptian tradition (such as the characteristic physiognomy of the human head and the iconographic role of the gazelle).

The rendering of the scene is vivid and animated, while its theme is mythological and symbolic. Most likely the relief was not only meant to elicit pleasure at a visible reality but was also intended to evoke in the viewer abstract conceptions which operate on a number of different levels and derive from the symbolic system of various traditions. Thus the figure of the Centaur capturing an animal with his bare hands originates in the tradition of Classical Greek mythology. Yet the spiritual meaning conveyed by the relief is only accessible to someone who can situate this scene within the web of connections obtaining in Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean region. The interpreter must take into account the temporal and spatial distance that separates this image made in the fourth century AD from its earlier Greek models. He must consider all those processes of transmission and transformation which have influenced the meaning of the original representation throughout the centuries, as well as the excess of meaning with which the religion and culture of ancient Egypt—equally admired by the Greeks and the Romans—have invested it.

Török frequently writes of "poliphony"—while he usually applies this term in aesthetic and stylistic contexts, he clearly has the idea of a multiplicity of voices in mind as he develops his symbolic interpretation of "the hunting Centaur". For instance, while the Centaur capturing animals with his bare hands can be clearly linked to the triumphal feast of Dionysos (*thiasos*), the question still remains: what does it mean to evoke Dionysos and his ecstatic cortège in this particular place at the twilight of antiquity? In his answer to this question, the researcher, who is thoroughly versed in the tradition of Graeco-Roman antiquity as well as that of Egypt, underscores the entwinement of conceptions of various provenance, all contributing to the belief in transfiguration after death and happiness in the beyond. At the very end of antiquity, as Christianity was about to become ubiquitous, belief in a happy afterlife once more expressed itself in this relief in an artistic form peculiar to the great pagan religions of antiquity.

Based on its symbolic theme as well as its artistic qualities, the Budapest Centaur most likely decorated the façade of one of those monumental funerary edifices which are known to us from other Egyptian cities, too. This sort of monument was typical of a particular class of Egyptian society, namely, the pagan aristocracy, which owned large estates in the countryside but lived in the urban centers of Hellenistic origin. The diverse traditions of the past centuries mingled with the erudition of these "descendants of the gymnasial class" (p. 55—to use Török's words). Yet their links to the capitals were becoming increasingly tenuous. This sort of partial isolation was the last precondition for the emergence of a unique formal idiom peculiar to the location.

László Török's book introduces the Budapest Centaur with the scholarly aptitude of someone who is both an archaeologist and a historian of art. He locates his object in time and space, as well as identifying its function and deciphering its message, through meticulous stylistic analyses. But the questions considered in his monograph go beyond the individual object. Not only does he determine its place within the social context already mentioned (chapter 7); he also uses the example of the object in the limelight of his study to illustrate a crucial turning point in the history of Egyptian art in the last chapter (titled "Egyptian sculpture in the fourth century AD. The hunting Centaur relief and the birth of Coptic art").

The consistently high quality of László Török's monograph will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the author, who has been a research team leader at the Institute for Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences since 1985 as well as lecturer in Egyptology at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest; affiliated with numerous research institutes abroad, he has been member of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences since 1995.

The appearance of *The Hunting Centaur* is, moreover, an unusual and welcome event considering the current conditions in Hungarian and international publishing. Books about the art of antiquity still appear much too infrequently in Hungary. Moreover, of publishable at all, monographs in archaeology and art history with detailed analyses of works of art and generous photographic illustration usually appear in unwieldy large format and in a price range beyond the budget of the ordinary reader. By publishing Török's thought-provoking monograph in an affordable and reader-friendly bilingual edition, the Atlantis publishing house has once again proven its place at the cutting edge of scholarly publishing in Hungary. □