

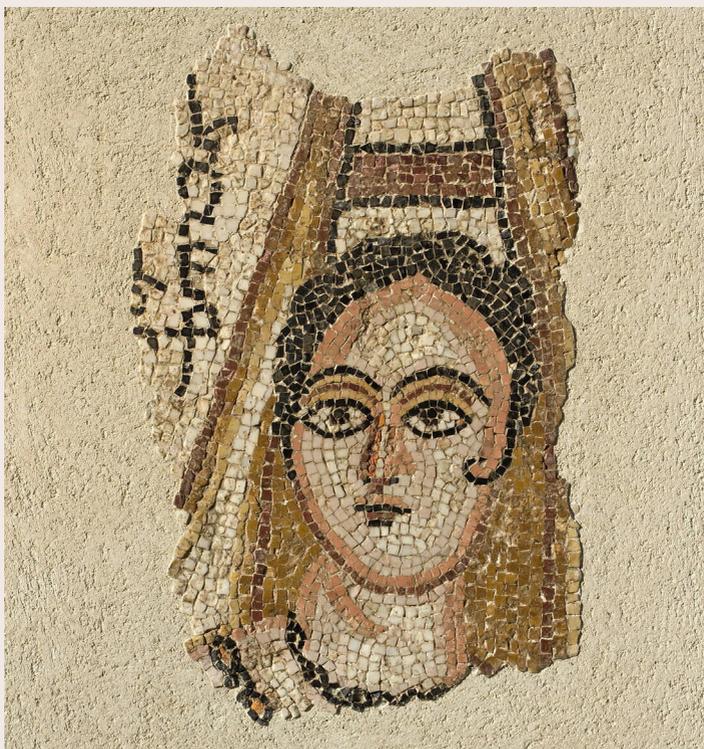
Local portrait habits in West Asia and Egypt (100 BCE – 500 CE)

(A bottom-up LoCiS approach)

1-2 December 2025

Organized by Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters
Copenhagen



CARLSBERG FOUNDATION



Bust of a female figure, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object 1986.453,
gift of Deborah and Jack Rosenberg, 1986.

Front cover

Fragment of mosaic from Edessa, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. AO 22917. © 2012 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Paul Veyseyre

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Outline

The recently initiated Locally Crafted Empires (LoCiS) project situates its point of departure in the region of the ancient world that provides undoubtedly *the richest material for this purpose: the portrait cultures of Western Asia* (defined here as the region from Anatolia to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, and from the river Tigris to the Mediterranean Sea) and will survey and chart those portrait cultures across six hundred years, from 100 BCE to 500 CE. Within the project research is undertaken on intersecting identities under changing imperial regimes through analysing locally produced representations of individuals in all materials (stone, mosaics, paintings, wood).

This first conference organised within the framework of the Locally Crafted Empires project will focus on the project's core questions: *how do local and regional entanglements with, and responses to, different and shifting imperial hegemonies express themselves in the several thousand extant portraits of individuals crafted in local materials by local communities? And what do these portraits tell us, when studied in a longue durée perspective, about intersecting identities on individual, local and regional levels?*

Presentations are invited to take their point of departure in locally produced representations of individuals (portraits) in Western Asia and Egypt between 100 BCE – 500 CE and to consider the questions above critically taking their point of departure in local and regional case studies of groups of material/clusters or single contexts (i.e. materials: stone, painting, mosaics, metal; i.e. case studies: graves, domestic contexts, public spaces). The intention is to contribute to a contextualised discussion of these issues in a cross-regional perspective bringing overlooked and underutilized evidence to the forefront and to engage with how this changes our perspectives and understanding of local portrait cultures.

Portraits, defined here as representations of the individual, are the art historical category par excellence that expresses the complexity of the individual human being, while at the same time being an expression of broader local, regional and even global trends.

Therefore, portraits form the ideal group to be studied as responses to changing regimes and as material that ordered knowledge, shaped and expressed identities. Ancient portraits created in Western Asia and Egypt in the period between 100 BCE and 500 CE, have usually been studied as direct responses to core-imperial traditions and developments, and they have often been seen as merely passive absorbers of these. This conference will turn the tables on this traditional approach. Local portrait-images will be investigated not merely as pale reflections of imperial values generated at the distant centre but rather analysed as *the primary evidential basis through which imperial systems and their societal impacts can be studied.*

Programme: Monday 1 December

8:30–9:00 Coffee and tea (3rd floor)

9:00–9:30 *Locally Crafted Empires and local portrait habits*
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

9:30–10:20 *Faces of Empire: Local Responses to Roman Portraiture in Provincial Egypt*
Barbara Borg (Scuola Normale Superiore)

10:20–11:10 *Fragile Faces: Plaster Heads from Roman Egypt*
Asja Müller (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel)

11:10–12:00 *Portraits from Berenike/Red Sea*
Marianne Bergmann (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen)

12:00–13:00 Lunch (3rd floor)

Chair: Jane Fejfer (University of Copenhagen)

13:00–13:50 *Honouring gods and men in ancient Arabia: Lihyānite anthropomorphic statuary at Dadan (4th c. – 1st c. BCE)*
Bilal Annan (University of Groningen)

13:50–14:40 *Female Bodies and Cultural Norms in Palmyra*
Maura Heyn (UNC Greensboro)

14:40–15:10 Coffee (3rd floor)

15:10–16:00 *A needle in haystack: Palmyrene portraits and their contexts*
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

16:00–16:50 *From 'sub-Seleucid' to 'sub-Parthian'? The character and role of portraiture in Elymais*
Rachel Wood (Cardiff University)

18:00 **Speakers' Dinner** (Delphine, Vesterbrogade 40)

Programme: Tuesday 2 December

8:30–9:00 Coffee and tea (3rd floor)

Chair: Barbara Borg (Scuola Normale Superiore)

9:00–9:50 *Edessene mosaic portraits: artistic production at the borders of empire*
Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University)

9:50–10:40 *The family tomb of Areisteos in the South Western Necropolis of Zeugma*
Kutalmış Görkay (Ankara Üniversitesi)

10:40–11:30 *Local Faces, Imperial Frames: Funerary Portraiture in Roman Cilicia*
Michael Blömer (Universität Münster)

11:30–12:30 Lunch (3rd floor)

Chair: Will Wootton (King's College London)

12:30–13:20 *Reused Portraiture and Rewritten Narratives in Roman Asia Minor*
Lindsey Anne Mazurek (Indiana University, Bloomington)

13:20–14:10 *Immortal Fame: Panegyric Portrait Display in Western Asia during Late Antiquity*
Joshua Thomas (Royal Holloway, University of London)

14:10–14:40 Coffee (3rd floor)

14:40–15:30 *West to east, east to west: the movement of portrait styles under the Tetrarchs*
Michael Koortbojian (Princeton University)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

15:30–16:00 Closing discussion

16:00–17:00 **Reception at the Academy**

Faces of Empire: Local Responses to Roman Portraiture in Provincial Egypt

Barbara Borg
Scuola Normale Superiore

Following the Roman conquest and annexation, Egypt began to participate in the wider Mediterranean practice of portraiture characterized by individualized physiognomies and fashionable hairstyles. While portrait traditions existed in Egypt prior to Roman rule, the Roman period saw these practices expand to new social groups and contexts, accompanied by a growing interest in lifelike representations of faces, dress, and hair. However, the speed and extent of this adoption—and its later decline—varied significantly across regions. So too did the degree to which local artists engaged with styles associated with the imperial centre, often modelled on members of the imperial family. This paper maps these regional variations by examining painted portraits, mummy masks, and stone-carved likenesses from across Egypt, and explores potential reasons for these local divergences in form, style, and visual language.

Fragile Faces: Plaster Heads from Roman Egypt

Asja Müller
Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

Unlike stone portraits, plaster heads from Roman Egypt have received little scholarly attention. The few known examples—found in museum collections or on the art market—are rarely studied in depth. This neglect stems from two main factors: their poor preservation—most plaster portraits survive only as fragmentary head pieces—and their frequent misidentification as other plaster artefacts from the same era, such as mummy masks or coffin headpieces.

However, closer examination suggests that these plaster heads constitute a distinct category. They differ significantly from funerary objects in terms of size, weight, and iconographic and stylistic features, indicating a different function and cultural significance. These characteristics raise broader questions about evolving concepts of the body and the representation of individuals in Roman Egypt.

Although only a limited number of examples come with indications of provenance, this paper aims to contextualise the group by comparing them with better-known Egyptian objects, such as plaster masks, as well as stone statues and busts from the same period. Additionally, the use of plaster connects them to workshop traditions in regions such as Tuna el-Gebel in Middle Egypt, where artisans produced many objects using plaster instead of more traditional materials like cartonnage, terracotta, or faience for masks, figures, or amulets.

Through these comparative approaches, the paper seeks to establish a clearer understanding of plaster portraits as a unique category of portraiture within the Roman Empire. By situating them between funerary and non-funerary traditions and examining their material and stylistic attributes, the study places these long-overlooked objects within the broader socio-historical framework of Roman Egypt.

Portraits from Berenike/Red Sea

Marianne Bergmann
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Berenike, a harbour on the arid western coast of the Red Sea, 800 km south of present day Kairo was for centuries one of the main ports of transshipment for the maritime trade between Rome, the Mediterranean, Egypt, East Africa and India via the Nile and the Red Sea. It was probably very different from most places considered in this colloquium. For one it had no civic institutions. The part of its population, that possessed a status allowing them to make substantial dedications in the local sanctuaries seems to have consisted of military, government - especially tax-officials - businessmen or their representatives, ships' captains and crews, from Italy, Alexandria, Egypt as well as Palmyra, Meroe, Aethiopia (Axum) and India; such persons may have stayed at Berenike for longer periods, many of them however seasonally in sync with the monsoons. This situation seems, on the one hand, to have prevented the establishment of permanent sculptors' workshops with specific traditions, although much work was done in local stone by sculptors, who also may have worked seasonally at Berenike. Even the usually rather uniform depictions of Sarapis are all different from one another! On the other hand, various commissions from foreign patrons exhibit some tendency toward idiosyncratic adaptations to Greco-Roman-Egyptian habits, such as the execution of Buddhist images in marble and in the Greco-Roman style.

The five portraits from Berenike known until now reflect the situation between the coexistence of different normative systems and tendencies to adapt to the local Greco-Roman-Egyptian culture.

Honouring gods and men in ancient Arabia: Liḥyānite anthropomorphic statuary at Dadan (4th c. – 1st c. BCE)

Bilal Annan
University of Groningen

Recent excavations by the *Dadan Archaeological Project* (2019–2023) at the ancient oasis of Dadān, in north-western Arabia, have uncovered a remarkable assemblage of anthropomorphic statues and statuettes. Dadān was the capital of an eponymous kingdom in the first half of the first millennium BCE, before becoming the centre of the Liḥyānite kingdom, which also included nearby Taymā'.

In Dadān's main sanctuary – likely consecrated to Dhū-Ghābat, chief deity of the local pantheon – worshippers dedicated both colossal and small-scale statues carved from local pink or red sandstone. The sanctuary also originally housed bronze statuary, as evidenced by a statue base and inscriptions referring to bronze sculptors and effigies. A nearby funerary shrine, dedicated to the deified ancestor 'Ab 'Alef, has likewise yielded a rich collection of statuary, offering tables, incense burners and altars.

Liḥyānite statues, typically mounted on inscribed Dadanitic bases, represent bare-chested male figures standing upright, with arms at their sides and loins wrapped in a cloth garment. Though stylistically consistent, subtle differences in facial features and bodily traits suggest efforts to individualise the representations.

This paper examines the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Cypriot, and Phoenician influences discernible in this statuary, alongside its local iconographic traits, to shed light on the artistic interactions and visual culture of the Dadanitic population within their broader regional context.

Female Bodies and Cultural Norms in Palmyra

Maura Heyn
UNC Greensboro

When does a gesture or body position displayed in a funerary portrait have greater significance, and when does it not? In a society as face to face (at least for men) as Palmyra was in antiquity, bodily interactions were crucial, and thus the way in which the body was held in the funerary portraits may have had some connection to the lived experience in the city. But was the same true for women? In this paper, I analyze funerary representations of women in Palmyra to understand better the role of female portraits in the negotiation of Palmyrene identities vis-a-vis its regional and imperial neighbors. I am particularly interested in the significance of the animating arm poses and the extent to which these poses acted as signifiers for something else, whether that be behavioral norms, cultural affinities, or local self-definition. The so-called pudicitia gesture stands out and will be discussed, but the armless busts are equally intriguing. Were armless busts merely shorthand for the extended torso-length representations, or were they a choice that also had greater significance? Expanding the study set to include comparable visual material from Palmyra itself as well as the Palmyrene hinterland, city states in Asia Minor, and Parthian sites to the east, and eschewing any assumption of Roman cultural norms, enables us to nuance the interpretation of female body positions vis-a-vis questions of familial and community identity.

A needle in haystack: Palmyrene portraits and their contexts

Rubina Raja
Aarhus University

The funerary sculpted and painted representations of individuals from Palmyra make up the largest group of portraits from one location in the ancient world. With more than 4,000 surviving and now in depth cataloged examples these universally recognisable images can now be studied in their local, regional and imperial contexts. They can be studied in context where the evidence allows and stylistic phenomena can now also be studied in an entirely different light through statistical analysis and tracking of developments in a much more nuanced light than possible ever before. This presentation will focus on the results of the Palmyra Portrait Project and bring to the forefront new considerations - also on the legacy of Greek art in the portrait tradition of Palmyra between the first and late third centuries CE. The presentation also considers whether the robust corpus can be used to investigate traditions, innovations and intersecting identities in Palmyra across three hundred years and what the existence of the corpus now might mean for the study of portrait habits in other regions of the ancient world.

From 'sub-Seleucid' to 'sub-Parthian'? The character and role of portraiture in Elymais

Rachel Wood
Cardiff University

In light of recent reappraisals of key examples, new excavations, and continuing developments in numismatics, this paper will consider portraits from Elymais (Khuzestan, southwest Iran) from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD, especially those from Shami (Kal-e Chendar), Hung-e Azhdar, and Tang-e Sarvak, created during the rule of the Kamniskirids and later the Orodids, which contributed to formulating the position and identities of local client kings within the Arsacid empire. At the centre of the discussion is the aim to move beyond the identity of the local rulers depicted by sculpture and coins to consider the role of portraits in Elymaean society and their function at sacred sites, as well as the relationship between portrayals of individuals and those who interacted with those depictions. These portraits convey very deliberate messages about connections with the hegemonic Parthian dynasty through their form and placement, as much as the physical attributes of the individual depicted. Given the distinctive nature both of the evidence and historiographical traditions, this paper questions how to consider Elymaean portraiture on its own terms while treating it in relation to and as part of broader transregional networks.

Edessene mosaic portraits: artistic production at the borders of empire

Olympia Bobou
Aarhus University

According to political history, the kingdom of Osroene was an independent state, closely allied to the Parthians, until it became a vassal kingdom to the Romans and a part of the Roman empire in AD 214. Edessa, its capital city, was the centre of its artistic production, and probably the location from which the artistic tradition of decorating tombs with mosaics originated. These mosaics, placed in the burial chambers of rock-cut tombs, depicted the deceased with other members of their family, and they told a different story than the political one, one about local traditions and continuities despite changes in government. In this paper, I will explore the different iconographic strands that are visible in the funerary mosaics of Edessa, and locate their production within the context of the shifting political powers of the second and third centuries AD.

The family tomb of Areisteos in the South Western Necropolis of Zeugma

Kutalmış Görkay
Ankara Üniversitesi

Recent excavations of several tombs in the necropoleis of Zeugma have significantly enhanced our understanding of the funerary portraiture of elite and multicultural families and their family tombs. Notably, a rescue excavation conducted in 2019 at a rock-cut hypogeum tomb in the south-western necropolis of Zeugma has shed new light on the self-representation of an elite family.

The tomb is located along the ancient road from Doliche, connecting to the south-western expansion of Zeugma. The tomb comprises a vestibule and a rock-cut burial chamber with arcosolia. The vestibule contains more than twenty in situ rock-carved and freestanding portrait relief stelai, along with two freestanding portrait statues of deceased family members, some of which bear inscriptions. These sculptural elements not only reflect significant transformations in portrait styles, headgear, clothing, and personal accessories over the course of a century—offering a visual narrative of the family's evolving identity and social representation—but also reveal how local and regional traditions were integrated into funerary self-representations shaped by western artistic models.

Based on portrait styles, Areisteos—likely the *kyrios* (head) of the family—appears to have established the tomb in the late 1st or early 2nd century CE. The latest datable portrait stele, from the early 3rd century CE, indicates that visual self-representation by Areisteos's descendants came to an end around that time, possibly following the Parthian campaign led by Septimius Severus in 217 CE.

With its architectural design, statuary program, rich archaeological and epigraphic context, the tomb provides valuable insight into the funerary self-representation of a local elite family on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire during the 2nd century CE.

Local Faces, Imperial Frames: Funerary Portraiture in Roman Cilicia

Michael Blömer
Universität Münster

Roman-period Cilicia, located at the intersection of the eastern Mediterranean and northern Syrian cultural zones, produced a varied repertoire of funerary portraits. These works reveal a complex interplay between enduring local traditions and the expanding cultural horizons of the Roman world.

This paper explores how Cilician communities navigated and negotiated these influences in their commemorative practices. Drawing on case studies from both urban centres and rural necropoleis, it examines the persistence of local traditions and their connections to northern Syrian. At the same time, it considers the adoption of Hellenistic and “global” Roman traits.

By situating these monuments within broader patterns of artistic and cultural exchange, the paper argues that Cilician funerary portraiture was neither a simple reflection of metropolitan models nor a static continuation of local tradition. Instead, it emerged as a dynamic medium in which communities articulated regional identities while engaging with imperial aesthetics and values.

In this way, the funerary monuments of Cilicia provide an important case study for understanding the local crafting of empire. They demonstrate how provincial societies could integrate diverse cultural strands into localised expressions, offering insight into the processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation in a globalised Roman world.

Reused Portraiture and Rewritten Narratives in Roman Asia Minor

Lindsey Anne Mazurek
Indiana University, Bloomington

In his 1st century CE Rhodian Oration, the orator Dio Chrysostom complained that the people of Rhodes were committing an unbearable outrage: taking down old portrait statues, giving them new inscriptions, and re-erecting them to honor new individuals. For many years, his complaints were not read alongside the archaeological evidence. Reuse and recarving are often treated as a later phenomenon, associated with the *spolia* culture of the 4th century and beyond. But a growing body of evidence across the Greek east demonstrates that private portraits were often reused in earlier periods. The full range of motivations behind these instances of reuse remain underexamined.

I survey three examples of reused portraiture from Asia Minor and its islands to think about why communities reused private portraits and what functions they expected these new sculptural assemblages to perform. I focus on the three 2nd century BCE female portrait statues reused in a mid 1st century BCE monument in the Agora of Magnesia am Meander; the reuse of a 2nd century-1st century BCE nude male statue in a 2nd century CE *exedra* identified as the “Heroon of Symmachus” at Knidos; and the programmatic reuse of earlier priest portraits in the 2nd century CE *Sebasteion* at Thera. At all three sites, local elites reused earlier portraits to manipulate narratives of time, bringing past, present, and future into a close and dynamic dialogue. But each example demonstrates a different method and motivation, opening up new avenues of inquiry for the study of imperial-period portraiture in Asia Minor.

Immortal Fame: Panegyric Portrait Display in Western Asia during Late Antiquity

Joshua Thomas
Royal Holloway, University of London

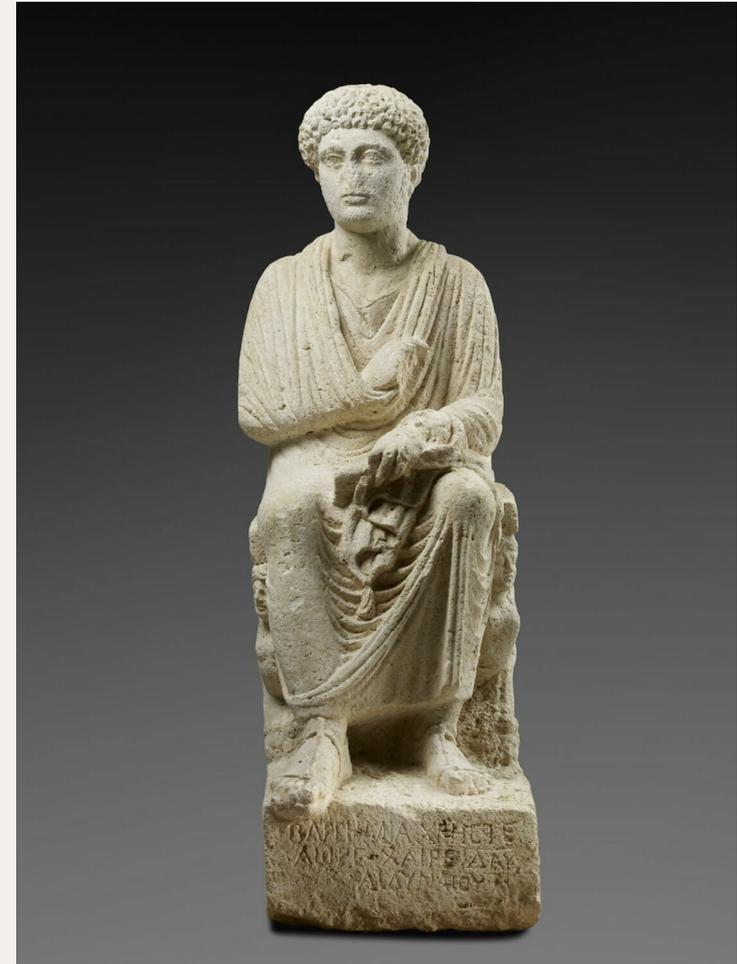
Building on recent advances in our understanding of late antique portrait statuary in Western Asia and elsewhere, this paper will seek to highlight and analyse an aspect of late antique portrait display that has not yet received sufficient attention: the juxtaposition of portrait monuments with re-used mythological statuary of the Early and High Imperial periods. Juxtapositions of this kind especially well-attested in the public bathhouses of the late Roman East, including cases at Aphrodisias, Miletos, Gerasa, Palmyra, and Tyre. Perhaps the most remarkable example is supplied by a display of ca. AD 500 from the Hadrianic Baths at Aphrodisias, where an extraordinary *chlamydatus* portrait was displayed alongside an Achilles and Penthesilea group, a Pasquino group, and a colossal nude hero.

While the mythological groups redisplayed in such settings have often been dismissed as ‘mere’ ornamenta, this paper will instead argue that they retained a vigorous semantic charge, providing panegyric points of comparison for the portrait statues displayed nearby. This reading is founded partially on the ‘heroic’ language deployed in verse epigrams inscribed on late antique statue bases, and partially on a category of evidence that has not yet been brought to bear on the study of late antique portraiture: contemporary panegyric poetry. It is argued that comparable strategies were deployed by the authors of these poems and the designers of the statue displays, utilising heroic and/or Homeric *comparanda* to highlight the immortal fame and achievements of the individual(s) being honoured.

West to east, east to west: the movement of portrait styles under the Tetrarchs

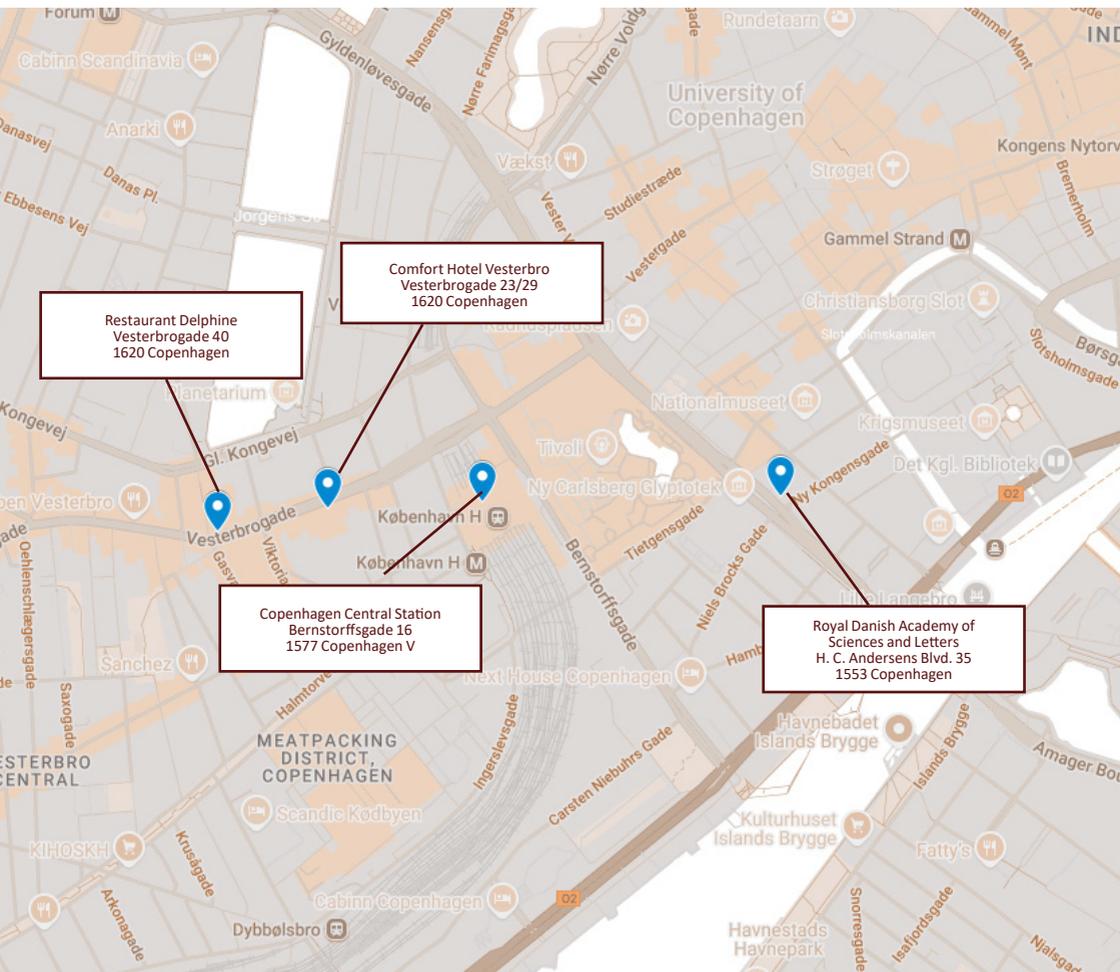
Michael Koortbojian
Princeton University

With the acclamation of Diocletian, a scarcely-known Illyrian member of the entourage of Carus, and later Numerian, was catapulted into the Roman world's most important role. The need for a portrait – for statues and for the coinage, as well as for other forms of any emperor's representation – was surely an immediately pressing concern. This was all the more so as there is no reason to believe that, given his background, a portrait of Diocletian already existed, and that there were few, if any, who knew the new emperor by his appearance. The coinage demonstrates that the model for Diocletian's portrait came, at the outset of his rule, from the west, and conformed to the style and general physiognomy exhibited by his immediate predecessors. Such conventionalized images had long served to declare any new emperor's suitability for his unaccustomed role. But within a decade, with Diocletian's having moved the primary capital of his empire to the east, portrait styles changed – and with them, the direction in which their artistic forms moved, as they spread from one end of the Roman world to the other. A discussion of these changes, their movements, and the repercussions that ensued shall form the subject of the presentation.



Seated male, from Hierapolis © 2011 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Thierry Ollivier

Venues



Locally Crafted Empires (LoCiS)

Intersecting identities under Imperial rule in Western Asia as expressed in local portrait cultures (1st c. BCE-5th c. CE)

LoCiS investigates the rich yet understudied local portrait cultures of ancient Western Asia to uncover how these visual traditions reflect local and regional interactions with various imperial powers. By examining thousands of surviving portraits across six centuries, the project aims to illuminate intersecting identities at individual, local, and regional levels from a long-term historical perspective with global relevance. Through comprehensive quantification and contextual analysis, LoCiS builds a robust, chronologically anchored corpus that captures the diversity of this visual heritage.

<https://projects.au.dk/locally-crafted-empires>

Organizer



Rubina Raja
Aarhus University
rubina.raja@cas.au.dk

Conference Webpage

<https://urbnet.au.dk/news/events/2025/local-portrait-habits>



Plaster masque, from Deir el-Bahari, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. E 20359. © 2007 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Georges Poncet

Book of abstracts
Organizer:

Local portrait habits in West Asia and Egypt (100 BCE – 500 CE)
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)