

Crafting Portraits

Local and Regional Perspectives in West Asia and Egypt (100 BCE – 500 CE) (A bottom-up LoCiS approach)

within the framework of the
Locally Crafted Empires Semper Ardens Advance Project

5-6 March 2026

Organized by Michael Blömer (University of Münster),
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University), and Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)

The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen





Plaster mask from Roman Egypt, early 2nd century AD, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 00.2.32 (Public Domain).

Front cover

From the Two Athletes Mosaic, Antakya Archaeology Museum (Wikimedia Commons).

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Outline

This conference organised within the framework of the *Locally Crafted Empires* project focusses on the questions: how do local and regional entanglements with, and responses to, different imperial hegemonies express themselves in the several thousand extant portraits of individuals crafted by local communities in Western Asia and Egypt between the late Hellenistic period and Late Antiquity? And what do these portraits tell us about intersecting identities on individual, local and regional levels when studied in a longue durée perspective?

Portraits, defined here as representations of the individual, are a crucial art historical category that expresses the complexity of the individual human being, while at the same time reflecting 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 what often have been treated in scholarship as “peripheral” areas of ancient empires 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. But this conference will turn the tables on this traditional approach.

This conference takes its point of departure in the processes that underpinned the creation of these representations of individuals: the techniques, processes, approaches, tools and materials used in the making of these portraits; the training of local craftspeople, their places of work, and their interactions with their customers; the ways in which craftspeople engaged with broader fashions and material supply networks to produce images that functioned primarily in local contexts and responded to local concerns. Another question arises from the fact that in many regions of West Asia and Egypt portraits were rarely, if ever, created. What motivated some communities to develop a portrait habit, and what causes others to refrain from doing so?

We seek to include research presentations covering the wide range of media in which portraits were crafted (mosaics, paintings (on walls, wood and fabric), and sculptures in stone, terracotta and metal) and we ask speakers to engage with case studies that move beyond the narratives of centre versus periphery, and consider the evidence from the region in its proper local and regional context.

Local portrait-images will in this conference be investigated not merely as pale reflections of imperial values generated at the distant centres, but rather analysed as *the primary evidential basis through which imperial systems and their societal impacts can be studied – including their oppressive aspects*. We include material from a broad time span to take into consideration shifting imperial influences (Greek, Roman, Parthian, Sasanian) and reactions to these in the regions under consideration.

Programme: Thursday 5 March

9:00–9:30 *Introduction*
Michael Blömer (University of Münster), Rubina Raja (Aarhus University), and Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

9:30–10:20 *Material Matters: Local Agency and Empire Wide Fashions in Plaster Busts from Roman Egypt*
Lucy Audley-Miller (King's College London)

10:20–11:10 *Blending Cultures for Power and Identity: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Elements in Ptolemaic and Roman Portraiture from Egypt*
Clarissa Blume-Jung (Ruhr University Bochum)

11:10–12:00 *Portraiture from Roman-period Egypt: New Avenues*
Julia Steding (Aarhus University)

12:00–13:00 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Chair: Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)

13:00–13:50 *Carving Identities: Commemoration and portraiture on the sarcophagi of Roman Hierapolis (Phrygia)*
Anna Anguissola (University of Pisa)

13:50–14:40 *Absent Faces. Contextualizing the limits of Doliche's intra-urban portraitscape*
Lennart Kruijer (University of Exeter)

14:40–15:10 Coffee (1st floor)

Chair: Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)

15:10–16:00 *Stone, Skill, and Status: Material Economies of Funerary Sculpture in North Syria*
Michael Blömer (University of Münster)

16:00–16:50 *Portraits in Ḥaurān seen from within – locally crafted identities and means of distinction in the first centuries CE*
Anna-Katharina Rieger (Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingoldstadt)

17:00–20:00 **Visit to Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek**

20:30 **Speakers' Dinner** (Restaurant Cofoco, Abel Cathrines Gade 7)

Programme: Friday 6 March**Chair: Michael Blömer (University of Münster)**

- 9:00–9:50 *Local Portrait-Making in the Syrian Tetrapolis. Crafting Identities between Local Traditions and Imperial Contexts*
Giulia Vannucci (Aarhus University)
- 9:50–10:40 *Limestone Portrait Busts from Roman Syria-Palaestina: Considerations on Material, Technique and Style*
Giovanni Colzani (Aarhus University)
- 10:40–11:30 *Portraits at Petra: (De-)Facing the Nabataeans*
Lucy Wadeson (University of St Andrews)
- 11:30–12:30 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Chair: Michael Blömer (University of Münster)

- 12:30–13:20 *The anatomy of appearance: portraiture and mosaic production in Edessa*
Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University)
& Will Wootton (King's College London)
- 13:20–14:10 *Faces on the floor – Portrait habits on mosaic pavements*
Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail (Austrian Academy of Sciences)
- 14:10–14:40 Coffee (1st floor)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

- 14:40–15:30 *Emperor or Local Notable: Looking carefully at pseudo Hadrians*
Julia Lenaghan (University of Verona)
- 15:30–16:20 *Umayyad Portrait Habit: Wall Painting and Stucco Revisited*
Katharina Meinecke (Saarland University)

Chair: Michael Blömer (University of Münster), Rubina Raja (Aarhus University), and Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)

- 16:20–16:45 Closing discussion
- 16:45–18:00 **Reception at the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters**

Material Matters: Local Agency and Empire Wide Fashions in Plaster Busts from Roman Egypt

Lucy Audley-Miller
King's College London

This paper explores a selection of free-standing portrait busts from Roman Egypt that are manufactured from plaster. These include images that not only make use of the Roman bust form, but show subjects that embrace personal styles shared with the imperial family. The images are manufactured with details that reference contemporary sculptural techniques. Such features include 'sculpturesque' drilling of pupils or careful incisions of eyebrows in a manner that recalls high-quality second century sculpture. The images appear to quote personal styles and technologies of marble manufacture that would not be out of place in specialised centres of stone production. However, they do so in a very different medium, requiring different techniques, to commemorate local people in their tombs.

The use of plaster as a material shaped to commemorate the dead is seen in various parts of the Roman Empire, deployed particularly in the creation of death masks. It was not unique to Egypt, but it did have a particularly long history in this region, and was used with significant frequency and variety here in the Roman period for the manufacture of painted plaster masks on mummies. This paper aims to examine how that local craft history informed these portraits. It seeks to examine local uses and knowledge of Empire-wide styles, and situates these within local specialisms in production.

Blending Cultures for Power and Identity: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Elements in Ptolemaic and Roman Portraiture from Egypt

Clarissa Blume-Jung
Ruhr University Bochum

When Ptolemy I, a Macedonian general, assumed power in Egypt, the local population along the Nile Valley was still shaped by their collective memory of the relatively recent and oppressive Persian domination. To support the consolidation of his legitimacy as Egypt's new ruler – despite his foreign origin – Ptolemy, and subsequently his successors, were frequently depicted in a hybrid artistic style rooted in the Greek (Macedonian) portrait tradition yet characterised by distinctively Egyptian elements.

For instance, such portraits were often executed in imported white marble, a material rarely used in Egyptian sculpture. The modelling of the face, its detailed features, and the treatment of the hair followed Hellenistic Greek (Macedonian) conventions, while the colouration was adapted to the visual habits of Egyptian viewers, reflecting local portrait traditions and, in particular, the representations of the pharaohs. This is particularly evident in the rendering of the eyes, which feature black and red outlines and extended black horizontal lines emphasising the outer corners.

Notably, key aspects of Egyptian visual tradition persisted well into the Roman period, as evidenced by the painted funerary portraits (the so-called Fayum portraits), which display varying degrees of Roman and Egyptian influence.

This paper presents selected examples of portraits produced during the periods of Greek and Roman rule in Egypt. In line with the conference's thematic focus, these works illustrate the fluid blending of diverse cultural influences in portraiture of the time. The analysis explores the contexts in which these portraits were created and displayed. It sheds light on the materials selected, the choice of specific details reflecting Greek, Roman, or Egyptian traditions, and the cultural backgrounds of the artisans. In the case of the sarcophagus portraits, attention is also given to the background of the customers and their interaction with the artists.

Portraiture from Roman-period Egypt: New Avenues

Julia Steding
Aarhus University

Mummy portraits painted on wood, plaster masks, and painted linen cloths are well-studied types of portraiture from Roman-period Egypt. Scholarly discussions have long focused on questions of identity, both of the individuals depicted and of the broader cultural influences that shaped their creation under Roman rule. This paper revisits these questions by moving beyond iconographic analysis to consider the multiple layers of influence that impacted the making and the final appearance of these portraits.

I attempt to bring together evidence for artistic traditions, workshop practices, and the transmission of technical knowledge among craftspeople familiar with distinct “styles.” Furthermore, the question is raised how the production of the portraits was shaped by networks of material supply and exchange, tracing how e.g. pigments, woods and textiles moved across regions and contributed to the final appearance of the finished portrait. By integrating these strands, the paper seeks to illustrate how intersecting identities (personal, communal, and imperial) were negotiated through the very processes of making, rather than only through the finished image. While this will only present the very beginning of my research, I hope to present some new ways of thinking about portraiture from Roman-period Egypt. By acknowledging the complexity of the portraits and the influence the craftspeople and materials had on the final portraits, we gain a better understanding of portrait-making as a practice in which identity was not simply depicted but constituted through material, crafts, artistic expressions, and cultural influences.

Carving Identities: Commemoration and portraiture on the sarcophagi of Roman Hierapolis (Phrygia)

Anna Anguissola
University of Pisa

The city of Hierapolis, founded during the Hellenistic period on the western edge of the Anatolian plateau, reached its greatest splendor between the late first and the mid-third century CE. During this period, hundreds of funerary monuments clustered along the roads leading north toward the Maeander River and the city of Tripolis, south toward the Lycus Valley and the sites of Laodikeia and Colossae, as well as on the surrounding slopes. Scattered among these monuments are thousands of sarcophagi carved from local travertine and marble. The burial grounds of Hierapolis thus offer a unique vantage point from which to observe the competitive dynamics of urban societies in the imperial Greek East and to understand how private identities were projected into the public sphere. This paper draws on an ongoing cataloguing project of Roman marble and travertine sarcophagi from the site to examine the role of portraiture within the funerary landscape. It focuses on three main aspects: first, the specific characteristics of each production, relating variations in portrait types to patterns of patronage and to the function of the coffin within the tomb; second, the relationship between portraits on sarcophagi and the principal mode of communication in the funerary space—inscriptions; and finally, imagery associated with the professions of the deceased, considered within the broader context of commemorative practices. The study of funerary portraiture illuminates how the vertical structures of social competition within the imperial network intersected with local networks of emulation, distinction, and identity negotiation.

Absent Faces. Contextualizing the limits of Doliche's intra-urban portraitscape

Lennart Kruijer
University of Exeter

This contribution offers a first overview and analysis of the sculptural finds from the urban excavations in Doliche (Keber Tepe) from the Roman period. It presents the very few pieces of sculpture and centers on the relative scarcity of finds in the city as compared to the sculptural evidence from Dülük Baba Tepesi, where the nearby extra-urban sanctuary belonging to the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus was located (cf. Blömer & Facella 2022). Apart from far outnumbering the evidence from Keber Tepe, the finds from the sanctuary are characterized by a high level of heterogeneity in terms of materials, styles and iconographies. A third 'socio-sculptural domain' is offered by Doliche's necropolis, where only one tomb contains portraiture. The contribution will first consider what may explain the contrasting quantitative and qualitative character of these three 'portraitscapes' (Riedel 2018), taking into consideration the methodological hurdles of uneven preservation and the general lack of proper archaeological find contexts. The paper then moves on to place the case of Doliche in a wider regional context, considering the great diversity of north-Syrian urban portraitscapes (e.g. Zeugma, Samosata) as well as the seemingly isolated cases of highly monumental mausolea in the countryside (cf. Blömer 2019). From this, the paper ultimately considers how highly localized sculptural habits - including the near absence of sculpture on Keber Tepe - may be understood as not merely representing locally rooted traditions, but rather revealing emergent strategies of urban identity formation in an interconnected region, a form of cultural glocalization (Versluys 2025).

Stone, Skill, and Status: Material Economies of Funerary Sculpture in North Syria

Michael Blömer
University of Münster

This paper examines the regional dynamics of funerary sculpture in ancient North Syria, focusing on the relationship between the urban centres of Zeugma and Hierapolis and the rural communities of the Sajur/Sacir Su plain between Türkiye and modern Syria. Across this landscape, differences in material, technique, and scale reveal not a uniform sculptural tradition but a set of interconnected local practices that reflect varying access to resources and networks of production.

In the urban necropoleis, funerary monuments in limestone exhibit stylistic refinement and adherence to broader imperial fashions. By contrast, the basalt sculptures of the Sajur/Sacir Su plain, produced in villages and in a markedly different geological and social environment, adapted urban models to local conditions. The hardness and visual properties of basalt demanded different carving strategies and encouraged a more schematic aesthetic, while simultaneously grounding these monuments in a distinctly regional visual tradition.

Through a analysis of material choices, carving techniques, and iconographic adaptations, this paper argues that the funerary sculpture of the Sajur/Sacir Su plain should be understood not as a derivative provincial phenomenon but as an expression of local agency within the material and economic constraints of the rural hinterland. These monuments illuminate how regional elites in northern Syria engaged with metropolitan artistic norms while consciously asserting their own cultural and social identities through the medium of stone.

Portraits in Ḥaurān seen from within – locally crafted identities and means of distinction in the first centuries CE

Anna-Katharina Rieger
Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingoldstadt

The Ḥaurān in the Roman period represents a prime example for the attitude in archaeology to interpret its material culture, especially its sculptural production, primarily as a response to influences emanating from distant ‘centres’ of the Roman empire.

The paper examines stone portraiture from the Ḥaurān to shift the perspective from assessments of craftsmen producing works inferior in style and iconography, and commissioners lacking sophistication. Instead, it draws on the relatively small corpus of busts on funerary reliefs, honorific statues and other representations of individuals to explore the ‘pathways’ of artistic production – from the material basalt and its technical and stylistic implications to the selection of types and the societal implications of the motifs. The hypothesis is that both craftsmen and commissioners made deliberate choices, highlighting the local style, developed by Ḥaurānite craftsmen, further supported by inscriptions attesting to their social self-awareness and presence in local communities.

By adopting this approach, the paper aims to present a nuanced view of sculptors and commissioners in the Ḥaurān who selectively adapted, or refrained from artistic influences and fashions circulating within the Roman empire, negotiating their self-image and identity through certain sculptural styles and motifs. A focus on contexts or features where craftsmen and commissioners either followed homogenising visual trajectories in portrait sculpture of imperial scope, or consciously did not engage with them, allows for the identification of social situations in which the wish for distinction and resonance within the local peer-groups and communities outweighed any aspiration to conform to imperially defined visual languages.

Local Portrait-Making in the Syrian Tetrapolis. Crafting Identities between Local Traditions and Imperial Contexts

Giulia Vannucci
Aarhus University

This paper investigates portrait-making in the Syrian Tetrapolis between 100 BCE and 300 CE, examining how crafted images of individuals negotiated the relationship between local artistic traditions and Graeco-Roman visual languages. The study approaches these portraits as outcomes of creative and context-dependent processes of exchange between local cultures and broader imperial frameworks. Particular attention is devoted to the processes of making – techniques, materials, and workshops – in order to reconstruct the environments in which portraits were conceived, commissioned, and circulated. Through this lens, Tetrapolis emerges as a dynamic arena of artistic experimentation, where craftspeople and patrons actively engaged in shaping visual expressions of civic, social, and personal identity. By situating this corpus within its local and regional context, this study highlights the agency of local actors in crafting distinctive visual languages that both responded to and reinterpreted imperial artistic traditions. This approach serves to reposition Tetrapolis as a significant centre of artistic interaction within the broader context of West Asia.

Limestone Portrait Busts from Roman Syria-Palaestina: Considerations on Material, Technique and Style

Giovanni Colzani
Aarhus University

Over forty years after the publication of Ilona Skupinska-Løvset's seminal study (1983), this paper offers some preliminary thoughts for a reassessment of the portrait busts from Roman Syria-Palaestina, starting from a set of technical and production-related considerations.

Dated to the second and third centuries AD and concentrated mainly in the necropoleis of Scythopolis and Samaria-Sebaste – though with significant parallels in some centres of the neighbouring Decapolis, such as Abila and Gadara – these works represent a distinct manifestation of regional artistic culture, produced by local workshops for a local market. Their schematic appearance and rough style can hardly be dismissed as the result of limited technical skills. Rather, they reflect deliberate choices rooted in clear expressive intentions and sustained by coherent craft and working practices. Carved from the soft local limestone, the busts were shaped through a work in plane approach that relied extensively on the use of tooth and flat chisels, producing a pronounced frontality clearly related to their display within the funerary space. The same material also allowed for the use of incision techniques – likely enhanced by the application of colour – to reproduce facial and drapery details. These methods resulted in exaggerated and stylized features, such as the wide frontal eyes, which should be understood as intentional devices rather than as signs of inexperience. Addressing the “reasons of technique” underlying these distinctive formal outcomes, this paper seeks to clarify how material, working methods, and stylistic choices were closely interdependent in shaping the local sculptural language.

Portraits at Petra: (De)-Facing the Nabataeans

Lucy Wadeson
University of St Andrews

Representing the individual through a figural portrait was not a common practice among the Nabataeans. At their principal city of Petra, which is dominated by hundreds of monumental rock-cut tombs, less than half a dozen funerary portraits have survived, carved in stone during the 1st century CE. Despite the lack of texts accompanying these portraits, and the fact their faces have been considerably destroyed by iconoclasts and weathering, we know that they belonged to the elite given the size, location and façade type of the tombs with which they are associated. Similarly, the only other corpus of Nabataean portraits belongs to the rulers and their consorts, depicted on coins. More commonly, the inhabitants of Petra expressed their identity through inscriptions or non-figurative nefesh carvings, according with the tendency towards aniconism in Nabataean visual culture.

This paper will explore what motivated the owners of the few tombs with portraits at Petra to include them, and what messages they intended to convey, taking into account their location within the urban setting, the local cultural context, and regional developments in the mid-1st century CE. While we know little about who sculpted these portraits, the techniques used in crafting them and incorporating them into the design of the tombs will be considered, and what this might reveal about their meaning and the social and cultural identities of their owners. Finally, it will be questioned why the portrait habit did not become more widely adopted by the Nabataeans.

The anatomy of appearance: portraiture and mosaic production in Edessa

Olympia Bobou
Aarhus University

Will Wootton
King's College London

This paper focuses on the mosaic portraits from the cave-tombs in Edessa. It reviews the previous scholarship to understand their chronology and context. Building on recent efforts to catalogue the mosaics and interpret their art-historical significance, we focus on quantifying the overall output and analysing the individual mosaics in terms of their technical features. The talk outlines the many challenges involved in studying this material but also demonstrates some of the gains for our understanding of the craft and its organisation. We are particularly interested in exploring the question of individuals, workshops and groups, the relationship between the funerary and domestic commissions, and the development and operation of the craft within both Edessa and the wider region.

Faces on the floor – Portrait habits on mosaic pavements

Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail
Austrian Academy of Sciences

Unlike the bust and full-body images that gaze back at us from wall-paintings of elegant European residences from the late Middle Ages onwards, traces of this genre are not often found in ancient dwellings. However, mosaics, which have generally been preserved more frequently than paintings, also depict faces and busts. This article focuses on this genre of human representations on floors, especially in the domestic context during the Imperial period and late antiquity. They are contrasted with the so-called donor portraits in public, especially sacred, buildings. The contribution outlines the emergence and spread of portraits on mosaic floors in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Emperor or Local Notable: Looking carefully at pseudo Hadrians

Julia Lenaghan
University of Verona

Since the Renaissance scholars, using small but labelled images on coins and medallions, have sought to identify portraits in the round as Emperors. This method permitted twentieth-century scholars, with access to more data, to develop a convincing typology for imperial portraits. The extant material culture suggests that the political centre of the Empire controlled a prototype which was reproduced on coins and in portraits in the round. The reproduction of the prototype varied according to the capacity of the artist, the size of the object, and the material used. While scholars concur about the general process, they acknowledge two problems. First, at times portraits made to honour the Emperor or his family did not look like the Emperor or his family. These portraits either do not follow the model created in Rome or do not incorporate enough of the characteristics to evince the model. Second, local men and women might emulate the emperor or his family, and commissioners and artists might give divinities characteristics of the emperor or his family. This phenomenon, *Zeitgesicht*, a repetition of a period look, presents the modern archaeologist with difficulties. This paper, using 3D scans, assesses portraits of Hadrianic men from Ephesus, Cyrene, Alexandria, and Syria to reflect on pros and cons of the established method and to show how it can be applied to greatest advantage to distinguish between non-typological production of imperial subjects and local production of fashionable contemporaries.

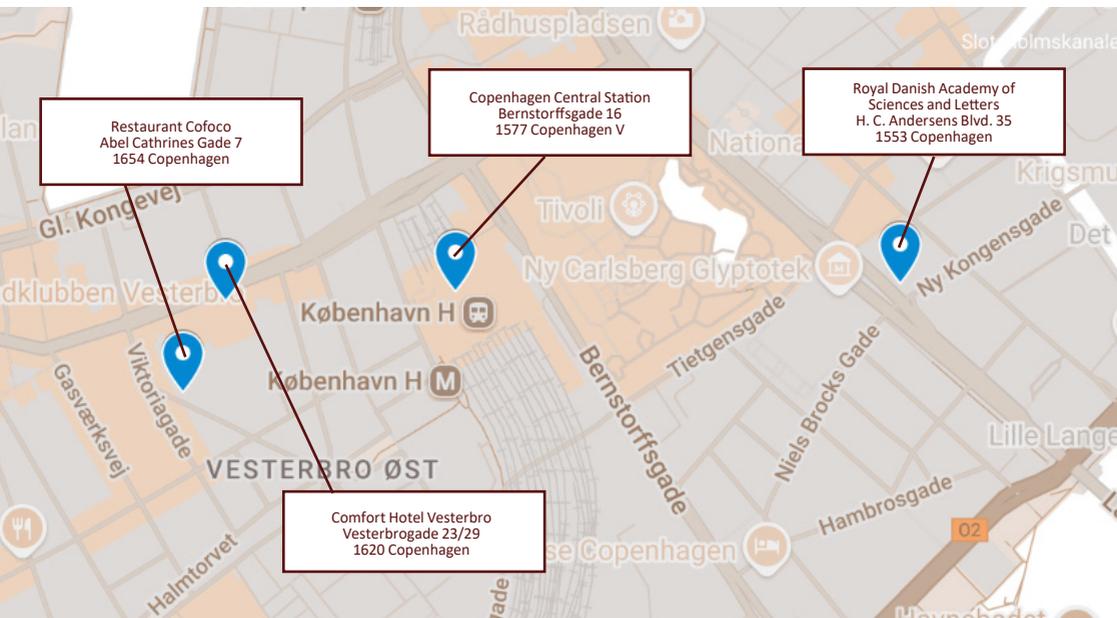
Umayyad Portrait Habit: Wall Painting and Stucco Revisited

Katharina Meinecke
Saarland University

The visual culture of the Umayyads, Islam's first dynasty (661-750 CE), is characterized by the appropriation of pre-Islamic, primarily Roman-Byzantine iconographies. Portraits are not found in the newly produced Umayyad images, though. An exception are the figures which have been interpreted as showing the caliphs, found in representative buildings erected by the caliphal family in what is now Syria, Palestine, and Jordan. As far as their heads are preserved, these assumed portraits do not depict individual likenesses, but they are typifying portraits with idealized faces and bodies relying strongly on their pre-Islamic models. These caliphal portraits are mostly stucco reliefs or wall paintings. Both stucco and wall paintings are attested in the ancient Middle East and the former Sasanian Empire, whose visual cultures served as models for the Umayyad images. However, even though it seems clear which kind of images could have served as models for the iconography, it is difficult to establish a direct dependence when it comes to the practical realization of the portraits.

This contribution asks about the tradition of stucco and wall painting in the ancient Middle East and Persia, focusing on possible continuities or changes in the Umayyad period. Where could workshops and craftsmen producing these stucco and painted portraits have come from, are there possible direct models regarding the technique in the region, and how could we imagine the transfer process in times of dynastic change?

Venues



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Conference Webpage

<https://projects.au.dk/locally-crafted-empires/events/show/artikel/crafting-portraits-local-and-regional-perspectives-in-west-asia-and-egypt-100-bce-500-ce>



Head of a priest from Hierapolis/Manbij, 2nd-3rd century AD, H. 54.61 cm, Dallas Museum of Art inv. 1994.51 (Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art).

Book of abstracts Crafting Portraits: Local and Regional Perspectives in West Asia and Egypt (100 BCE – 500 CE) (A bottom-up LoCIS approach)

Organizers: Michael Blömer (University of Münster), Rubina Raja (Aarhus University),
and Ben Russell (University of Edinburgh)