Hugo Meyer: Prunkkameen und Staatsdenkmäler römischer Kaiser. Neue Perspektiven zur Kunst der frühen Prinzipatszeit, München: Biering und Brinkmann 2000, 144 S., ISBN 3-930609-21-5, EUR 98,00

Rezensiert von:
Emanuel Mayer
Oxford

This is a book on the development of artistic styles in the first century AD. Hugo Meyer attempts to give "new perspectives" on early imperial "art" by offering a novel chronology for the well-known "imperial" Sardonyx cameos and state monuments of the early principate. Issues of reception, as well as of social and political significance play only a peripheral role. It must therefore be the first aim of this review to discuss whether Meyers datings are convincing before turning to a more general evaluation.

Meyers book is difficult to read, as the author acknowledges himself in the preface (7: "Der rote Faden mag […] nicht jederzeit sichtbar sein"). Instead of discussing his material in a series of individual and accessible studies all objects are more or less randomly woven into a long, continuous argument which is in fact quite a loose chain of associations. One is forced to follow it completely in order to appreciate Meyers suggestions who actually feels compelled to apologise to his readers in the conclusion for having taken them on a "bumpy ride" (141: "Die Fahrt ist holprig verlaufen"). At the end of the journey the reader has basically been told that the Grand Camée de France, the Portland Vase, the San Vitale Relief at Ravenna and the Cancelleria Reliefs in Rome are all of Neronian date. If this was true, Meyers findings would cry out for a new assessment of early imperial material culture and political iconography, but that does not seem necessary.

It is beyond the limited scope of this review to reconsider Meyers long and twisted argument in full, but since all conclusions are built upon each other it should suffice to discuss his first chapter on the Grand Camée de France in order to demonstrate how fragile most of his conjectures are. Meyer needs to be credited for having re-assessed this famous object by the means of a plastercast-based photographic survey which shows in hitherto unknown clarity that almost all the heads in the central register were completely recut in late antiquity. While Meyers discussion of the reworking of the cameo - which heavily draws on H. Jucker [1] - is the best and most straightforward account of the matter, his conclusions are hardly convincing.

Meyer argues that the gem was recut in AD 325 and nowadays represents Constantine, his son Crispus and other members of the imperial family.

The imperial portraits are identified by comparison with the facial features of contemporary coins. Ignoring imperial hairstyles would already be quite bold when dealing with early and middle Imperial coinage but in the fourth century it is methodologically flawed. Ever since Diocletian's reform of the mints, imperial coins ceased to faithfully reproduce the facial features as well as the coiffure of the emperor. Anyway, it is absurd to identify the full haired and clean shaven Constantine with the emperor of the cameo who wears short cropped hair and the soldier's stubble. In fact it seems that the recut portraits did not refer to any established portrait type but were rather identified by the context in which they were used. If this was the case the Grand Camée de France would provide us with another striking example of the general vagueness of imperial portraiture in the later third and fourth centuries - this time possibly among the highest echelons of Roman society.

When it comes to the first century context of the cameo Meyer again feels confident to attach a precise date to the piece: He argues that it was carved in AD 58. This interpretation is based on the identification of the persons originally represented. The most surprising conclusion may be that the divus hovering in the upper register represents the *divus Claudius* and not the *divus Augustus*, but again Meyer uses a methodologically flawed numismatic argument to make this claim. He points out that the facial features of the *divus* on the cameo match those of the *divus Claudius* on a provincial coin series from Antioch that show the emperor in a way which is obviously reminiscent of hellenistic ruler portraiture. This time not only the hair but also the entire imperial coinage of the period is brushed aside. Given the obvious weakness of this identification one wonders why it is used as the cornerstone of most later arguments. When it comes to the original identity of the recut figures in the central register Meyer makes important observations on the emperor's head. Above the forehead, on the temples and especially on the neck, traces of the original hair arrangement have survived. The long wavy locks on the neck have prompted Meyer to conclude that the emperor originally represented must have been Nero, but Tiberius - who is traditionally and possibly correctly considered to have been depicted in the first place - also had long neck hair. Furthermore, the few original locks which survive beneath the partly remodelled laurel wreath are too short and too tousled for the Neronian *coma in gradus formata* coiffure which Meyer wants to recognise.

While Meyer tries to offer "new perspectives on early imperial art" he does so in a highly conservative way. This is intentional. By reconsidering the style of well known monuments Meyer wants to demonstrate that the old motto *primum monumenta deinde philosophia* should still be the leitmotif of all archaeological research (8). Even though his careless and often apodeictic way of reasoning does more to discredit rather than to advocate the long established method of stylistic analysis, hardly anyone would question the need to date politically charged monuments as precisely as possible before formulating an interpretation. For Meyer, style is the central hermeneutical tool to assess the meaning of the objects he is dealing with. As already noted in another review of his book, Meyer believes that "art reflects absolutely the written records of emperors'

reigns and characters (so 'bad' emperors will be known by extravagant art)". [2] He uses historical context to determine when an object was produced. As soon as the date is established and all figures have been named, Meyer considers that everything essential has been said. The attempt to distinguish between different groups of patrons and recipients is outwardly rejected in his - justifiable - criticism of the term "Hofkunst" (12-13). This is the main reason why Meyer does not ask questions about context.

All this comes as a calculated provocation against an influential school of thought which is represented by scholars like Paul Zanker, to whom Meyer refers explicitly (13 n. 10, 141). It seems unlikely, however, that this book will "revive" what Meyer claims to be "object oriented research" (142: "objektorientiertes Forschen"). Classical Archaeology has finally evolved into a historical discipline which acknowledges and deals with the semantic qualities of style but is mainly concerned with the social and historical context of material culture. This reflects not a fashionable zeitgeist as Meyer seems to suggest but rather a shift in paradigms.

In conclusion Meyer needs to be credited for having published a superbly illustrated book on a central topic in early Roman archaeology that includes several important observations, even though they are pressed into a somewhat confusing and overall unconvincing argument.

Notes:

[1] H. Jucker: Der große Pariser Kameo, in: Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts 91 (1976), 211- 250.

[2] S. Hales, in: Journal of Roman Studies 92 (2002), 238.

Redaktionelle Betreuung: Christian Witschel