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The Rhone Caesar

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On 10 January 49 BC, leading the Legion XIII Gemina, general Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy proper. This Caesar's military action, forbidden to any army-leading general, began the civil war. During the first period of this war, Caesar and Pompey, the commander of Senatorial forces, are engaged in some indirect tactics that included emersion and organization of their supporters. Both Caesar and Pompey (their profiles in Fig.1) have interest in getting the support of Massilia (Marseille), one of the most important cities of the western Mediterranean basin. Approaching Massilia in April 49, Caesar, who was marching to Spain, finds its gates closed: the town, although claiming its neutrality, is allied with Domitius Ahenobarbus, a Pompeian. Caesar, as he is writing in his *Commentarii* on the civil war, feels deeply insulted; after this hostile action, he leaves the newly raised XVII, XVIII, and XIX legions, under the command of Gaius Trebonius, to conduct a siege against Massilia. At the same time, he orders the neighboring Arelate (Arles) to prepare twelve warships. Differently from Massilia, people of Arles had already joined Caesar's leadership. Quickly prepared in thirty days, the warships, under the command of Decimus Brutus, move to Massilia to participate its siege. In the beginning of June 49 BC, Caesar reaches Spain, where the Pompeian legates surrendre. He comes back to Massilia at the end of October: the town gives up, exhausted by the long lasting siege.



Fig. 1: Caesar and Pompey.

The warships built by the yards of Arles had certainly a helpful role during the siege; the Caesar's ships, although less skillfully built than those of the Massiliots and outnumbered, were victorious in two naval battles (on June 27 and July 31). How the civil war between Caesar and Pompey continued is well-known, having its final showdown at the battle of Pharsalus (August 48 BC) with the victory of Caesar, followed by the flight of Pompey and his murder on the shore of Egypt. These events however, do not conclude the fratricide war, the bloodsheds continued until the battle of Munda (45 BC), after which Caesar became the unopposed leader of Rome, although just for a short period of time.

Before the end of the civil war, in 46 BC, something rather important occurred to Arelate. Full of gratitude for the support received against Pompey, Caesar decided to return the favor, entrusting the funding of some Colonies in the Gaul to Tiberius Claudius Nero (the father of Emperor Tiberius). So, as mentioned by Suetonius in his *Life of Tiberius*, Arelate became a colony of veterans of the Legion VI Ferrata named *Colonia Iulia Paterna Arelate Sextanorum*, which included the Rhone territory up to Hyères and replaced Massalia in the coasting trade.

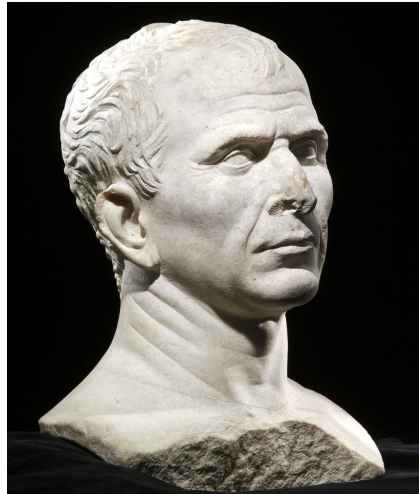


Fig. 2: The bust of Arelate.

It was probably between 49 and 46 BC, when Caesar had close relationships with Arles that, according to the French archaeologist Luc Long, who found it in 2007 after struggling with poor visibility, strong currents and the catfishes of Rhone [1], the famous marble bust of Arles had been carved. This beautiful portrait, (Fig.2), discovered in the depths of the right bank of the river near Arles, has been undoubtedly attributed by Long to Julius Caesar. This piece of work, made of Dokimeion marble (Frigia), has been brought up during one of the campaigns promoted in more than 20 years, by the DRASSM, French Department of Underwater Archaeology, directed by Long himself. The discovery was made in September 2007, however the news was breaking in May 2008. From then on, the Rhone portrait has been the starring protagonist of three exhibitions, one held at the Louvre Museum in Paris from March 9 to June 25, 2012. In this last occasion, the Arles bust has been exhibited together with the Tusculum bust (Archeological Museum of Turin), which is considered the most ancient portrait of Caesar (Fig. 3). The other two exhibitions, were held in Arles (2009-2011) and Marseille (beginning 2013). In addition to Caesar portrait, an invaluable archaeological treasure has been exhibited, composed by several masterpieces, such as a Neptune statue, discovered close to the bust, a Bacchus statue, a golden Victory, and a kneeling and tied bronze prisoner. All these treasures give strong evidence of the Roman Arles as a highly dynamic town, thanks to an intense trade activities favored by the Rhone River.

However, the identification of the bust proposed by Long as the oldest and more realistic portraiture of Caesar, had not gained unanimous agreement from scholars: indeed, several archaeologists who have expertise in ancient portraiture, questioned the identity of the portrayed person. The first disagreeing with Long's interpretation was Paul Zanker [2]: the bust could represent a private man portrayed with Caesar's features, according to the fashion of that age (*Zeitgesicht*), fashion which is well-attested in the portraiture of the late Republican period. Since 2008 then, several debates,

meetings and articles stimulated the discussion and increased the bibliography on this subject: during 2012 and the beginning of 2013, we can find the round table of June 2012 at Louvre [3], the *Rencontres* of Arles on the Roman sculpture in France in October 2012, a conference organized in Marseille by Daniel Roger, curator of the Greek, Roman, and Etruscan antiquities of Louvre, and finally, on April 9 2013, a speech by Lorenz Baumer, Genève University, who had already shown his skepticism during the Arles seminar.

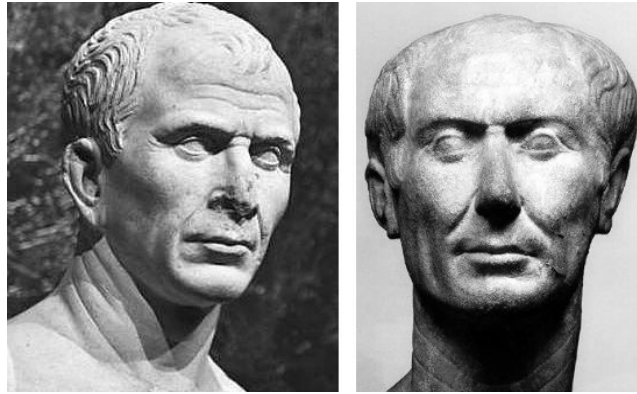


Fig. 3: Arles and the Tusculum bust (Museo Archeologico di Torino).

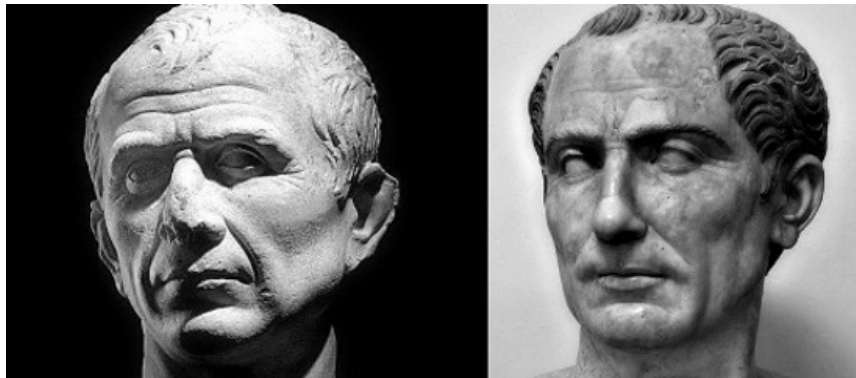


Fig. 4: Arles and the head from the Trajan's Forum (Museo Archeologico di Napoli).

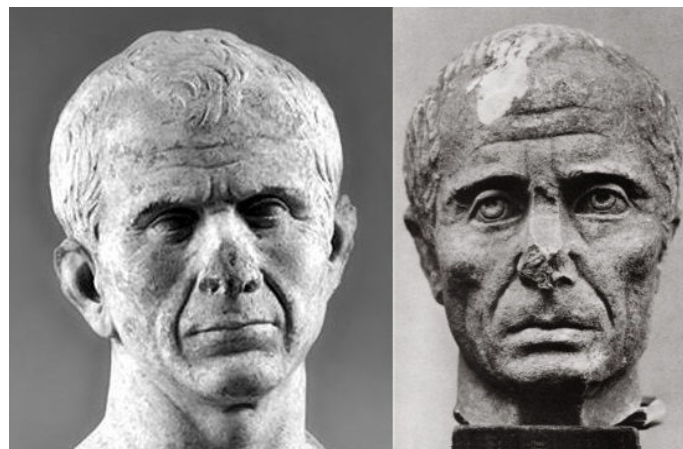


Fig. 5: Arles and the head from a private collection, proposed by F. Johansen as a replica of the Arles bust. The man on the right seems the old Arles one.

The conference at Louvre was rather interesting because, there, the “pro-César” and “anti-César” parties challenged each other. In the latter party, besides Paul Zanker, there were Jean Charles Balty, of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres in Paris, and Emmanuelle Rosso of the Université de Provence in Aix-en-Provence, who proposed and further developed the Zeitgesicht thesis [5,6]. The hypothesis of a portrait of Caesar was supported by Luc Long, Claude Sintès, Director of Arles Museum, Paolo Moreno of the Università degli Studi Roma Tre [7-10], and the Danish expert of Caesar portraiture Flemming Johansen. In particular, Paolo Moreno compared, in an evocative family reunification, the Arles portrait with the statue he attributed to Caesarion [11]; Flemming Johansen showed a replica of a head from a private collection, where he recognized the features of the Arles bust [12,13]. In addition, the numismatist Nicolas Tasset, in a conference on November 2012 held in Bruxelles, supported the Long’s thesis, by comparing the Rhone bust with coinages representing Caesar portraits [14].

If we look at Figure 3, where the Arles and Tusculum heads are compared, we can appreciate that there are several iconographic common features: the wrinkles on forehead, and those above the nose between eyebrows, and the prominent nasal labial folds, and the same vague smile. Let us remark that, until the discovery of the head of Arles, the portrait of Tusculum was considered the oldest and most faithful portrait of Caesar, perhaps the model of many following portraiture. Even if we compare the head of Arles with the portrait of the Trajan’s Forum (Fig. 4), which is held in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, we find some common features. Then, the Figure 5 shows us the bust of Arles compared with the head of a private collection, which Johansen proposed as a head of Caesar: it seems the elder version of the Arles man.

In these three images (Fig.3-5), we are looking at marble busts sculpted by artists who, in the case of that of Trajan’s Forum and that of the private collection, had not Caesar as a living model for sure. What is then, between the portraits of Arles and Tusculum, the most likely portrait of Caesar? Perhaps, this is a question that will be answered by a systematic comparison with other busts [15], and from the discovery of other artifacts, such as the one recently found in an ancient cistern of Pantelleria (Fig. 6). The use of biometric software for face detection and morphing can also help us rendering these marble portraits in more realistic faces, turning them out in some sorts of pictures of real people; an example of the results that we can obtain is shown in Figure 7, where it is used a software freely available at the site In20Years.com. The faces of Arles and the portrait of the private collection, proposed by F. Johansen, appear greatly resembling.



Fig. 6: Pantelleria’s Caesar.



Fig. 7: Caesars from Arles, Tusculum, Pantelleria and from the private collection, processed with a morphing from site In20Years.com, which makes a face looking older of about twenty years. Note the similarity between the Arles portrait and that of the private collection, disclosed by F. Johansen.

In conclusion, the discovery of the Caesar of Arles, by itself a remarkable evidence of art and history, is even more significant from a scientific point of view: the debate on its identification, with related methodological implications, will be an important chance for advancing the multidisciplinary of archaeological researches.

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