

This paper presents the sculpted images of three women and two men that have been found in the Athenian Agora excavations. None of these heads have yet been published, so this session will serve as an opportunity to present these images prior to their appearance in print.

The female heads, while all different and found in different contexts, none the less exhibit some basic similarities that allow them to be discussed together. While each has its own initial history, their later, secondary use in medieval times reveals interesting aspects about the reception of pagan statuary in Christian times. Their hairstyles allow the dates of their initial creations to be determined with some certainty. One is Trajanic, one late Antonine or early Severan, and one mid-third century. All were portraits of aristocratic women, probably benefactors or the relatives of benefactors to the city of Athens, and their original display in the public space of the Agora would most likely have been in recognition of some generous donation to Athens. But all three of the portraits were found in medieval levels of the Agora excavations, and two of them were clearly utilized as building material in a medieval construction. The use of Roman portraits as building material, was a highly charged activity in Christian times. Heads were not just any old block, but, as many literary sources attest, they were considered to be infused with pagan associations, and to have a certain dark religious power. The Agora heads were placed in medieval constructions in the way that would be most likely to neutralize this religious energy, that is, with the eyes scratched out, and the heads inserted upside down and facing down or inwards. Mutilating and concealing a pagan image is a relatively common Christian response in various places in the Roman empire, and attacks were most commonly directed at the heads of statues before they were thrown into a well or a river or otherwise buried. There are several comparable examples of this behavior toward sculptures from the Agora, including material from the well-appointed sixth century villa on the northern slopes of the Acropolis.

The male heads were both found in the summer of 2002. The earlier and more elaborate of them comes from the vicinity of the City Eleusinion. It is a slightly over-life size early third-century head of a man wearing a crown bearing eight small busts. This type of crown is known from ancient literature, inscriptions, coins, mosaics, and sculptures. About 20 examples of sculpted portraits wearing these crowns are known, only one other from Greece, a portrait from the villa of Herodes Atticus in Loukou. This portrait from the Agora probably represents a delegate to the Panhellenion, the organization created under Hadrian and active in Athens for about 150 years. The Panhellenion was closely associated with the rites at Eleusis, and a recently published inscription from Aezani suggests that some of its representatives wore bust-crowns decorated with imperial images. The Agora portrait therefore probably represents one of the delegates, someone who was probably an important benefactor to Athens or Eleusis and was honored with a portrait statue in the precinct of the Eleusinion. The busts on the crown represent members of the Antonine and Severan dynasties, and their arrangement and the details of their appearance suggest that Caracalla was the reigning emperor at the time it was carved.

The other male head probably dates to the 4th or 5th century AD and may be a representation of a hero or a river god, perhaps used to adorn the bathing complex not far from where the head was found.