



“Conservation of Architectural Heritage, CAH” 23-27 November 2015, Luxor

History and Conservation of Sphinxes in Diocletian's Palace in Split (Croatia)

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Abstract

In the beginning of the 20th century thirteen Egyptian sculptures have been found in Diocletian's Palace (Split, Croatia) but none of them was intact. In the paper will be discussed the origin and the meaning of the Sphinx, their discovery during the conservation works in 1930-ties and 1960-ties. A special part is going to be given to the conservation work of the Sphinx at the peristyle in the last few years conducted by the Croatian Conservation Institute in Split (Croatia).

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Peer-review under responsibility of IEREK, International experts for Research Enrichment and Knowledge Exchange

Keywords: Split; Conservation; Diocletian; Sphinx

Introduction

Approximately 5000 Egyptian artefacts (dated until the Arab conquest in 642 AD) are housed in Croatia. Most of these can be found in museums but various objects are housed in private collections. Here we include thirteen completely of fragmentary preserved sphinxes from the Diocletian's palace in Split.

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The Egyptian antiquities in the Croatian collections have found their way to Croatia in two ways:

- Material acquired from abroad through intermediaries or donations,
- Material associated with the Egyptian cult in Croatia or more to the east. It has been acquired through archaeological excavations, and brought to the Croatian territory mostly in Roman antiquity.

The material from this second category posed often problems, especially in the second half of the 19th century. The antiquities were often said to be fakes. Fortunately, recently it has been established that the material originates from the Roman era and these antiquities are considered genuine.

In Croatia there are more than 4.030 Egyptian artefacts in 20 museums and unknown number in private collections (presumably around 1.000).

1. The symbolism of the Egyptian monuments

Diocletian's Palace in Split (built between the late 3rd and the early 4th centuries A.D.) is imbued with eastern symbolism as with Egyptian sphinxes and columns of reddish granite from Aswan.

Some of the pillars are still in the western colonnade of the peristyle, and some were transferred to a small church Sustipan on the Western part of the city.

In the Diocletian Palace eight sphinxes have been discovered and dated with four other monuments in connection with them.

Throughout the palace we are acquainted with only two names of the builders – Filot (his name was found at the end of one of columns of the mausoleum) and Zotikos (on the console of the same column. Since both names have oriental origin it defines enough the oriental influence in the palace. That influence is mostly found in the central part of the imperial palace, mausoleum and Peristyle. The tendency of the Emperor Diocletian to decorate those spaces with Egyptian material was associated with the ideas of the divine nature of imperial person.

The thesis that the emperor himself chose Sphinx as the symbol of illegitimate ruler in order to prove the legitimacy of their government and their divine origin is unfounded.[†]

Yet one cannot deny the fact that the presence of the sphinx in the Palace is not based only on the decorative intentions.

Egyptian sphinx is primarily a lion with the Pharaoh's head, a symbol of the sovereign power. Pharaoh with divine person - he is "living Horus" - connects the world of earthly people with the world of the Gods and the Sphinx kept the ways of the afterlife expressing both earthly power of rulers.

Under the influence of political and spiritual circumstances of the Empire more prominent oriental features is present during the Diocletian's era. Although the very first emperors wore the epithet *divi*, it is more a means of paying excellence of their personality, their human qualities, rather than to the direct bond with the world of the gods - divine filiation, such as those in eastern monarchies.

Diocletian was already a direct son of Jupiter (*Iovius*) how is documented in his official title. He was using a more visible expression of the divine nature of his personality and the divine origin of power, used symbols of royal power of Egyptian civilization, where he was not only the divine messenger or governor but the "only God". This function is associated with the new status of the royal personality which was expressed in the new ceremony, which determinate the later architectural solutions.

According to the theses of E. Dyggve (architect and archaeologist), P. Selem (Egyptologists and historian) and B. Gabričević (archaeologist) sphinx could form a kind of *dromos* to the mausoleum and be placed in niches of *temenos*. Their function in Egypt was to guard the entrance of Pharaohs tombs which explains the connection to the mausoleum. Due to the space requirements of the official cult of the emperor's palace architecture they had to be adapted to the new ceremony. According to E. Dyggve's opinion the peristyle is a transition between the northern public part and the southern part of the private chambers of the Emperor with containing eastern elements.

The entire palace has the function of the temple of Diocletian, and sphinxes were certainly decent guards the emperor's ceremonial appearance. But the question remains: were the sphinx ordered by the architects of the palace or sent by Diocletian during his campaign in Egypt? Diocletian spent eighteen months in Egypt to calm the revolt

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