

ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENT UNDER THE FLAVIAN DYNASTY IN ASIA MINOR: THE CASE OF THE ALTAR OF THE TEMPLE OF DOMITIAN IN EPHESUS



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Parole Chiave: Efeso, decoración arquitectónica, altare, fontana; decorazione architettonica, dinastia Flavia, Neokoria

Abstract: *The altar of the Temple of Domitian in Ephesus has been dated to the 2nd century A.D. by several scholars. New research on the altar and the decoration as well as comparative studies on other monuments in Ephesus and Asia Minor prove the origin of the altar in the late Flavian period. Both the construction of the temple complex and the erection of the altar can be linked to the first Neokoros to Ephesus in the years 83-86 A.D.*

L'altare del tempio di Domiziano a Efeso è stato datato da diversi studiosi al II sec. d.C. Nuove ricerche, che prendono in esame struttura e decorazione dell'altare, come anche studi comparativi con monumenti ad Efeso e in Asia Minore, riconducono l'altare all'epoca flavia. Sia la costruzione del complesso templare, che l'erezione dell'altare possono essere collegate alla prima neocoria di Efeso (83-86 d.C.).

In 1930 the Austrian excavation team discovered the altar of the Temple of Domitian in Ephesus after having excavated the temple². Josef Keil and his team found one part of the altar *in situ*, so as a consequence they thought the other part had been removed in late antiquity (fig. 1). Since they found walls from a later period set in the area of the altar, no further remains of the missing part were preserved. The part of the altar found in 1930 is on display in the Efes Müzesi Selçuk (fig. 2)³.

At that time Josef Keil did not know that the other part of the altar had been reused in late antiquity as a basin of a fountain on the so-called Theatre-street (fig. 3), the street which leads from the Theatre to the Stadium⁴. This area and the fountain were excavated by a Turkish team in the 1970s. Parts of the fountain basin and a fragment featuring weapons are preserved. An inscription, which was reused as a floor plate on the bottom of the basin, provides a *terminus post quem* for the fountain in the late 4th/5th century A.D.⁵. The temple itself was dated to the Flavian period, due to the discovery of a colossal head of a Flavian emperor within the substructure of the terrace⁶.

The reliefs of the altar have been dated to the later, Antonine, period by several

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² KEIL 1932, 57-58 fig. 38.

³ The photograph was taken in 2008 and shows the exhibition prior to the new construction of the Museum in Selçuk.

⁴ On fountains see DÖRL-KLINGENSCHMIDT 2001; SCHMÖLDER-VEIT 2009.

⁵ On the inscription see H. Taeuber in: LANDSKRON ET AL.

⁶ KEIL 1932, 59-60 fig. 40.



Fig. 1. Altar of the Temple of Domitian *in situ*, excavation in 1930



Fig. 2. Part of the Altar in Efes Müzesi, Selçuk in 2008 (© Oesterreichisches Archäologisches Institut [ÖAI], Vienna, photo: Niki Gail)

scholars, especially due to the bearded barbarian with an oriental dress and a Phrygian cap⁷. The figure sits on a cuirass leaning against a trophy which is part of the frieze featuring armours and weapons on the long side of the monumental altar (fig. 2). The narrow sides are decorated with a sacrifice (A, fig. 1. 5) and weapons (B)⁸.

In my paper I will show that the altar was erected at approximately the same time as the Temple of Domitian in the Flavian period, and I will focus on the socle moulding, the cornice and the reliefs⁹.

Obviously the ornaments of the two parts of the altar differ concerning motifs and stylistic features. The motif on the basis which was reused on the “Theatre-street”, in contrast, is more: the anthemion on the base - which is about 22 cm high - alternates with standing closed palmettes and pendent open palmettes (fig. 4). The intermediate leaf is missing on all upright closed palmettes, which is unique in Ephesus at that period of time. The ornament on the narrow sides differs from the anthemion on the frontal long side: acanthus-shaped leaves on one side and lotus flowers on the other side mark the parts which protrude minimally at the end of the narrow sides, left and right of the slab (fig. 5). The ornament as a whole seems to be overlain on the background or even cut out of the stone like a pattern. This method of carving ornamentation seems to be characteristic of the Flavian period. The ornament on the pedestal of the pillar figures which belong to the architecture of the temple-terrace has a similar pattern-like decoration¹⁰.

The ornaments of the base found *in situ* on the terrace are much more heterogeneous: there is no rhythm in the decoration of the anthemion: palmettes and acanthus leaves vary in form and style. On the left side for example, three open palmettes are set in a row, one pendent is flanked by two upright ones (fig. 1. 2. 5). This part protrudes minimally. The anthemion continues with three open palmettes, two pendent and one upright in the middle. The open palmettes have a short dart-shaped intermediate leaf and a plain surface. An S-shaped, spiral-ended tendril links the palmettes.

The ornament on the long side of the base shows more varied motives (fig. 2): animated scrolls, S-shaped linking scrolls with additional acanthus or acacia leaves and pendent acanthus leaves, with both plain and structured surfaces. One fragment features two birds surrounded by a linking tendril¹¹.

Is this style unique in Ephesus? Comparative studies on other monuments of the Flavian period demonstrate that the decoration of the altar differs from architectural decoration on well-known Flavian monuments in Ephesus, as the following cited samples illustrate¹².

⁷ POLITO 1998, 214-214 fig. 162; KARWIESE, 108 fig. 85.

⁸ KEIL 1932, fig. 38. The Western part of the altar is decorated with a bull, a Zebu which is tied to a ring beside an altar, ready for sacrifice. The victim indicates a context to an imperial cult.

⁹ The contribution is a brief presentation of the topic. An entire and detailed publication of the Altar of the Temple of Domitian in Ephesus is in preparation for print (LANDSKRON ET AL.).

¹⁰ BAMMER 1978-80, fig. 13., LANDSKRON 2005, 188-192 fig. 1.

¹¹ On animated scrolls see SCHÖRNER 1995, 105-117.

¹² On Flavian architectural decoration in Ephesus see BAMMER 1978-80, 67-90; THÜR 1985, 181-187; KÖSTER 2004, 193.



Fig. 3. Fountain *in situ* on the “Theater-street”, basin and rear wall (© ÖAI, Vienna, photo: Niki Gail)

The basis of the pilaster from the temple terrace construction, for example, is decorated with an oblong anthemion¹³: closed upright palmettes with an intermediate leaf alternate with open palmettes. The S-shaped inner leaves are modelled in the shape of a heart, and the leaf points do not adjoin. The cut-out-effect of the ornament is striking.

The inner leaves of the palmettes are fleshy and curved, compared to the architectural decoration on buildings in Miletus. The ornament on an entablature frieze from the Capito-Baths in Miletus consists of two half-palmettes which grow out of a caulis and S-shaped scroll¹⁴. The decoration of an architrave from the Ionic Hall in Miletus consists of half-palmettes which are linked to a scroll and alternate with four-petaled rosettes with a leaf-shaped or serrated contour, deeply drilled and heavy¹⁵. The decoration varies in style due to different phases of construction¹⁶. R. Köster underscores the visible tradition of style regarding the elaboration of the décor on the friezes of both construction phases of the Ionic Hall¹⁷.

The bead-moulding of the base of the altar in Ephesus is decorated with leaf bands (fig. 4): overlapping laurel leaves have a plain surface, some have a central valley, while very few have a central ridge. The elaboration of the leaf bands is as heterogenic as the anthemia. For the most part the leaf band is carved in a rhombic and not in a leaf-shaped pattern. The leaf band is intermitted by a rosette or a ribbon. The variations are probably the result of different sculptors at work.

The closest parallel for the leaf band can be found on architraves from the Nymphaeum in Miletus; especially the rhombic pattern on some soffits is very similar¹⁸. Since both monuments date to the late Flavian period a connection between the workshops or even the carvers is likely.

The ornament on the cornice of the altar in Ephesus consists of a simple scroll with plain S-shaped stems, side-shoots and flowers linked with two half-palmettes¹⁹. There is no similar pattern on architectural ornaments in Ephesus²⁰. Different buildings in Miletus show more varied and detailed scrolls: the scroll of a soffit dated to the late Flavian period can be compared to the cornice in Ephesus due to the simple and less carefully elaborated rinceau and scroll pattern²¹. Furthermore a few scrolls on architraves from the fountain in Miletus have similar shapes: single flowers are surrounded by a simple stem

¹³ BAMMER 1978-80, 84-85 fig. 16. On Flavian decoration in Aphrodisias see STINSON 2008; YILDIRIM 2008.

¹⁴ KÖSTER 2004, 41-42, fig. 8 pl. 20,1. The Capito-Baths are dated to the Claudian period: Köster 2004, 33-37.

¹⁵ KÖSTER 2004, 42-44 pl. 24.

¹⁶ Concerning the decoration of the friezes, KÖSTER 2004, 42-46 discusses the heterogeneous elaboration of the anthemion and the rosettes of both construction phases. On decoration in Asia Minor see also VANDEPUT 1997.

¹⁷ KÖSTER 2004, 46.

¹⁸ KÖSTER 2004, 71-72.

¹⁹ KEIL 1932, 56-58 fig. 39; OUTSCHAR 1989, 35-37. 114. 115 pl. 36-38.

²⁰ BAMMER 1978-80; VANDEPUT 1997, passim; KÖSTER 2004, 193; on soffits see also WEGNER 1978-80.

²¹ KÖSTER 2004, 112-114 pl. 72,1.



Fig. 4. Base ornament, long side, "Theater-street" (© ÖAI, Vienna, photo: Niki Gail)



Fig. 5. Base ornament, narrow side, Efes Müzesi Selçuk 2008 (© ÖAI, Vienna, photo: Niki Gail)

and some secondary stems terminate in leaf shapes or half-palmettes. To summarize so far: style and decoration of the altar in Ephesus refer to the late Flavian period.

The frieze of the altar features accumulated arms and armour in disorder, manifold weapons of different peoples and even Roman armour: various kinds of shields, helmets, quivers, bows, leg armour (cuisses), cuirasses etc., as well as non-historic weapons such as pelts are accumulated²². The frieze has close parallels in many other friezes featuring accumulated weapons in Asia Minor and in the Western part of the Roman Empire, for example in Italy²³.

The relief is not deeply carved²⁴, and the drill has hardly been used²⁵. It has a soft modelled surface. The figure of a seated barbarian also shows a soft modelled surface. His wide face and strands of hair, cut in a horizontal way, are characteristic for the Flavian period as well as for the reign of Trajan but are not consistent with the 2nd century A.D., as some scholars have proposed²⁶.

Barbarian figures on friezes featuring weapons are well known, for example on a frieze in Ephesus dated to the Augustan period²⁷, on a small number of monuments dating to Julio-Claudian times, and on some reliefs dated to the 1st/2nd century A.D. in Bologna and Berlin²⁸. Usually, captured barbarians are crouched next to a trophy or seated on weapons. Monuments featuring weapons of Germanic, Dacian and Oriental captives refer to a tradition in the 1st century A.D. - especially in the Flavian period as well in the reign of Trajan - and in the 2nd century A.D.²⁹.

How do the altar and the decoration fit into the imperial cult in the Flavian period? Ephesus became first Neokoros between 83 and 86 A.D. under the reign of Domitian³⁰. The erection of a temple and a temple complex for practicing the imperial cult in the years after 83 A.D. is likely, as M. Dräger points out by referring to an Ephesian inscription³¹. This event implies a busy building activity in Ephesus under the Flavians³². Concerning the historical context we know that Domitian celebrated a triumph in 84 A.D. After having defeated the Chatti he received the title GERMANICUS. The emperor celebrated another triumph over the Dacians in 86 A.D.³³.

The relief featuring a sacrifice (fig. 1. 5) can be interpreted as a reference to Zeus

²² KEIL 1932, 55-58 fig. 38; POLITO 1998, 214-215 fig. 161. On friezes and monuments featuring weapons see POLITO 1998 with numerous bibliographical notes.

²³ For further samples see POLITO 1998. Examples are discussed in the monograph (LANDSKRON ET AL.).

²⁴ The relief is about 3-4 (maximum 5) centimeters high.

²⁵ Figures and shapes are outlined by drilling.

²⁶ The authors proposed a date in the Antonine period: POLITO 1998, 214-215: "...una datazione flavia appare in ogni caso esclusa"; KARWIESE 1995, 108 fig. 85. On the contrary see BAMMER 1978-80.

²⁷ The frieze is still unpublished; see POLITO 1998, 62. 213 note 136. 137.

²⁸ POLITO 1998, 155; 209-213.

²⁹ In general see POLITO 1998.

³⁰ DRÄGER 1993, 122-136.

³¹ DRÄGER 1993, 123, note 2 (IvEphesos 2034, 85/86 A.D.).

³² See Bammer 1978-80; Thür 1987; FRIESEN 1993, 53-54. 56-75; WINTER 1996, 170 -171. 346; HALFMANN 2001, 39-44; KÖSTER 2004, 193.

³³ DRÄGER 1993, 122-136.



Fig. 6. Cornice of the altar (Depot, Ephesus) (© ÖAI, Vienna, photo: Niki Gail)

who probably shared the temple and was worshipped together with Domitian³⁴. Captured weapons were often dedicated to temples and sanctuaries. Friezes featuring weapons are common in the Flavian period and under Trajan. Weapons demonstrate the successful emperor and in this context celebrate the triumph over the Chatti and the Dacians. The decoration of the altar represents the importance of martial supremacy for the fame and legitimation of a dynasty, in this case, the Flavian dynasty³⁵.

³⁴ DRÄGER 1993, 125-130. Compare also SCHÖRNER 2003, 185-191.

³⁵ The reconstructed ground-plan of the temple complex on the Ephesian terrace by Max Theuer and the reconstruction of the so-called Ara Augusti in Miletus, already suggested by Klaus Tuchelt, can be cited as samples of reconstruction of a monumental altar in Asia Minor. As a result of these achievements, including the findings on the so-called Theater-street, a reconstruction of the altar can be suggested, based on the preserved parts and the fragments. A new reconstruction of the altar and a detailed discussion will be published in the monograph of the altar of the Temple of Domitian (LANDSKRON ET AL.).



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