

Life and Death of the Cosmet Portraits

The Short Existence of a Group of Greek 3rd Century Philosopher Portraits

Portraits of the so-called cosmets, a group of public philosophy teachers in Athens, were used as building material in the Valerian walls by the Roman Agora. From the Hellenistic period, the cosmets had been teaching the philosophy of Aristotle, and the number of students had a peak of three hundred students a year in the 1st century AD, as the teaching became more varied. At the time when the portraits were buried in the wall, the number of students had decreased, much like in other pedagogic institutions. The activity of the cosmets ended about AD 280, when the Valerian wall was constructed; the dating of the wall is based on coins with the portrait of emperor Probus found among the building material. The dating of the wall, compared to what we know about the cosmets from the written sources, leads to several questions, such as why the cosmet portraits were used as building material, at a time when the identity of the sitters could still be remembered. Why were some of the portraits recut into those of other individuals briefly before they were put into the walls? The recutting of the cosmet portraits happened a short time before they were discarded, and as such, they form the group of portraits which was recut in the shortest span of time from the production. In other words, the cosmet portraits were produced, recut and deposited, all within a few decades. This paper discusses the portraits of the cosmets, their significance in Roman Athens, and explores questions related to the disposal of them. Previous research on the topic has been undertaken by Eva Lattanzi, who published the group in a catalogue from 1968. Some of the issues dealt with by Lattanzi will be considered in the light of new research on portraits and reuse.