New Tetrarchic Reliefs from Nikomedia: Uncovering the Colorful Life of Diocletian’s Lost Capital

Periodic Reporting for period 1 - NIKOMEDIA (New Tetrarchic Reliefs from Nikomedia: Uncovering the Colorful Life of Diocletian’s Lost Capital)

Reporting period: 2019-09-01 to 2021-08-31

Summary of the context and overall objectives of the project

The main purpose of this project is to research and produce the first scholarly publication of a major new body of Late Roman painted reliefs which were recently discovered in an imperial complex at the
ancient city of Nikomedia (Izmit) in Turkey. Three essential aspects of this discovery have a great importance for the world’s cultural heritage in general, and for archaeology and art history more specifically. First, the complex is the most extensive archaeological discovery ever found in Nikomedia, a city which became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire during the reign of emperor Diocletian in the late 3rd century and it provides welcome material collateral to ancient literary sources about Nikomedia. Second, these reliefs are the only surviving examples of Roman relief sculpture with extensively preserved colour. Third, the style and subjects of the Nikomedia reliefs are precious new examples of art from the Tetrarchic period, in which symbolic and abstracted forms came to provide a new visual system for a distinctive Late Antique art. Thus, this project deals with the technical, stylistic, and iconographic analysis of these reliefs and the Diocletianic complex to which they once belonged, and their contextualisation within Roman art and history. Main objectives are to shed light on the art and history of Late Roman Nikomedia, especially the aspects of the new state art and architecture under Diocletian’s imperial administration; to investigate polychrome relief sculpture, a little-known medium in Roman art; and to understand the origins of Late Antique art.

Work performed from the beginning of the project to the end of the period covered by the report and main results achieved so far

The research and academic activities performed during this project led to the publication of an exceptional monograph on the Nikomedia reliefs, an edited book on the ancient cities of Nikomedia and Nikaea, and several other articles on the scientific analysis of the preserved colour on the reliefs, mythological representations on the reliefs, history of Nikomedia, and the repatriation of one of the stolen reliefs from an art gallery in Germany back to the Kocaeli Museum in Turkey. The list of publications produced during the fellowship is:

Şare Ağtürk, T. 2021, The Painted Tetrarchic Reliefs of Nicomedia: Uncovering the Colourful Life of Diocletian’s Forgotten Capital. Brepols: Turnhout
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2020, Imperial Residence and Site of Councils—The Metropolitan Region of Nicaea / Nikomedia. Bonn: Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt, 2020 (edited with A. Lichtenberger, E. Winter, and K. Zimmermann)
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2022, (forthcoming), Kayıp Roma Başkenti Nikomedia’nın Renkli Rölyefleri. Koç University Press
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2021, “Antik Nikomedia’nın Görkемli İmparatorluk Kompleksi” Aktüel Arkeoloji 82: 6-15
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2020, “Myth and Eponymy on the Tetrarchic Frieze from Nicomedia” Journal of Roman Archaeology 33: 417-431
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2020, “Return of the Emperor: Technical and Iconographic Analysis of the Stolen Emperor Relief from the Nicomedia Frieze” TÜBAKED 22: 10-19
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2020, “A New Statue of a Weary Herakles from Nicomedia.” Arkeoloji ve Sanat 165: 63-70
Şare Ağtürk, T. 2019, “The New Corpus of Painted Imperial Roman Marble Reliefs from Nicomedia: A Preliminary Report” Technè 48, 101-110 (co-authored with M. Abbe)

For the dissemination of the project, the scholarly evaluation of its results in the academic community
and for the transfer of knowledge, I attended seminars and organised an international symposium at
the Faculty of Classics and the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Oxford (my host
institution). I also gave presentations at several institutions both as part of a conference and as an
invited speaker. % 50 of these events held online due to the restrictions of the pandemic:

Conference Presentations:
April 2021, “Colours of Imperial Power in Nicomedia” What a Colourful World: Pigments and Colours
in Antiquity, online symposium of the Bilkent University Archaeology Day, Ankara,
May 2021, “Kimliğini Giyinmek, Kimliğini Soymak: Antik Görsel Tasvirlerde Kıyafetin Söyledikleri,
Söylemedikleri/ Dressing and Undressing One’s Identity: What Clothing Says in Ancient Imagery” III.
Meeting of the Theoretical Archaeology Group-Turkey, Istanbul

Invited Lectures:
November 2019, “Painted Reliefs of Nicomedia” Talk for Zentrum für Altertumswissenschaften,
Institut für Klassische Archäologie, Byzantinische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte, Universität
Heidelberg, Heidelberg
December 2019, “New Tetrarchic Reliefs from Nicomedia” Winckelmann-Festvortrag at Philipps
Universität, Marburg
October 2019, “Innovation and Material Entanglements: Theoretical Considerations” (co-presented
with N. Papalexandrou and L. Peri) Presented in Material Entanglements in the Ancient
Mediterranean and Beyond, Getty Foundation, Connecting Art Histories, Johns Hopkins University
and National Hellenic Research Foundation, Chania, Crete
February 2020, “Tetrarchic Reliefs from Nicomedia: Uncovering the Colorful Life Diocletian’s Capital”
Vortrag für Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke, Munich
November 2020, “Imperial Reliefs of Nicomedia” Seminar for the School of Classics at the University
of St. Andrews, St. Andrews

Symposium Organization:
16-17 Dec. 2021, Symposium ‘Tetrarchs, Constantine, and Imperial Art, AD 284-337’ organized with
R.R.R. Smith and held at the Ioannou Centre for Classical & Byzantine Studies, Faculty of Classics,
University of Oxford (10 speakers from 6 different countries including myself, average of 70 people
attended)

Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact
(including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal
implications of the project so far)

The project increased the international visibility of the ancient city of Nikomedia and its recognition as
an important European Heritage site. The impact of the project outcomes were so influential that it led
to the start of new excavations in Nikomedia ( Izmit) in Turkey, which will be supported by the Turkish
General Directorate of Cultural Heritage and Museums and Izmit Municipality between 2021-2025.
The scientific analysis of the well-preserved colour on the painted reliefs, the first ever done and
published for this period, also set a methodological example for future multidisciplinary studies on
sculptural polychromy. Project NIKOMEDIA also helped the creation of a new large-scale research
project proposal on the planning and decoration of imperial palace complexes of the 4th century across Europe: as it revealed that the reliefs once decorated the part of emperor Diocletian’s palatial complex in his new capital of the Roman Empire, Nikomedia. Designed for an ERC Consolidator Grant, this new project proposal aims to investigate imperial palaces in Milan, Trier, Thessaloniki, Split, Gamzigrad, and Sirmium in relation to the complex in Nikomedia.
THE TETRARCHS, CONSTANTINE, AND IMPERIAL ART
A Symposium: Thursday – Friday, 16 – 17 December 2021
Online from the Faculty of Classics, Oxford University
Organisers: Bert Smith & Tuna Şare Ağtürk
Registration: Please register at tuna.sareagturk@classics.ox.ac.uk for the Zoom link

DAY 1 - DECEMBER 16
12.00 - 12.20  1. Bert Smith: Introduction
12.20 - 13.00  2. Marianne Bergmann: Diocletian's porphyry workshop
13.00 - 13.15  Discussion
13.15 - 14.00  Lunch break

DIOCLETIAN AT PERINTHOS & NIKOMEDEIA
14.00 - 14.30  3. Mustafa Sayar: The first capital of Europe: Perinthos/Herakleia, the alternative residence of Diocletian in southeastern Thrace
14.30 - 14.45  Discussion
14.45 - 15.15  4. Tuna Şare Ağtürk: The new Diocletianic complex at Nikomedia and its painted reliefs
15.15 - 15.45  Discussion
15.45 - 16.00  Break

GALERIUS IN THE BALKANS
16.00 - 16.30  5. Christoph Rummel: Felix Romuliana/Gamzigrad: How much of a Tetrarch makes a palace?
16.30 - 16.45  Discussion
16.45 - 17.15  6. Filipe Pina: Double Cerimonial Hall in乙

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