

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[BMCR 2025.09.53](#)

Nathalie de Chaisemartin, *Les frises à guirlandes d'Aphrodisias de Carie*. L'Atelier du sculpteur, 4. Bordeaux: Ausonius Éditions, 2024. Pp. 605. ISBN 9782356135858.

Review by Marcello Spanu, Università degli Studi Roma Tre
marcello.spanu@uniroma3.it

This volume deals with the garland friezes found at Aphrodisias in Caria (ancient province of Asia, present-day Turkey) dated to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This book has long been in the making. Nathalie de Chaisemartin started to work on architectural friezes decorated with garlands in 1981. The particularly long genesis of this book easily can be explained in terms of the impressive amount of evidence analysed, with its complexity and iconographic diversity. The book is published in collaboration with the architects Dinu Theodorescu, Anca Lemaire, and Yann Goubin.

The richly illustrated book consists of a brief introduction, followed by twelve chapters organized in three parts. A detailed catalogue of all architectural elements constitutes the fourth part (pp. 315–535). In addition, the volume is closed by a thorough bibliography, appendices, and thematic indexes. The first part consists of two chapters, after the preface and forward: Chapter I situates the book in the current scholarly debate, while Chapter II discusses the few preserved architectural members decorated with garlands from the Hellenistic period (i.e. the second half of the 1st century BC) found at Aphrodisias.

The second part examines the Roman garland friezes of Aphrodisias in five chapters. The first four focus on a specific monument and its urban context: Chapter III deals with the South Agora, Chapter IV with the Civic Basilica, Chapter V with the Agora Gate, Chapter VII with the Temple of Aphrodite, and Chapter VIII with the Civic Agora. Chapter VI presents friezes with garlands, heads, and masks which served as spolia for the construction of later monuments in Aphrodisias and cannot be recontextualized. Each monument under discussion is analysed with reference to its architecture, as well as its archaeology and topography with a different level of depth depending on the cases and state of knowledge; some analyses are more detailed and nuanced than others due to the varying degrees of available information. The monuments cover the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period—the polyad Temple of Aphrodite dates back to the mid-1st century AD, the Civic Basilica to the last third of the 1st century AD, the Civic Agora to the first quarter of the 2nd century AD, and the Agora Gate to the mid-2nd century AD. Thus, this part provides not only a useful overview of the stylistic and artistic development of garland friezes in Asia Minor, but also a reliable contextual analysis of these decorated architectural members. The author considers for all contextualised monuments in the second part the technical processes that started in the city’s quarries and ended with the final touches on site. Recording, among other things, letters engraved on the blocks and working traces, it was possible to recognise the extremely careful organisation of the work, which involved several groups of stonemasons, each of which had its own working habits and stylistic standards.

Special attention was given to the city’s South Agora (Chapter III); this is reflected in the length of this chapter and the central role it plays in the second part. The South Agora consisted of an impressive square measuring 70 m x 318 m with an extraordinary central water basin (30 m x 70 m) surrounded on three sides by a portico (the short, west end of the square was defined by a colonnade built in the early 2nd century AD to ensure the transition to the adjacent Hadrianic Baths, while the eastern end was closed off at the end of 1st century AD by a monumental facade known as the Propylon of Diogenes). For various reasons, including the exceptional size of the South Agora, the investigations lasted for the most part of the 20th century and still only managed to cover a little more than half of its total area. De Chaisemartin deals with these challenges by dividing the South Agora into different sectors and reviewing the respective state of knowledge. The more than 200 metres long frieze decorating the north portico, which is also known as the “Portico of Tiberius”, is treated in much detail. Despite many difficulties, the author was able to propose a precise reconstruction, recognising the location of individual blocks in their original position within the portico.

The long frieze of the north portico features garlands alternating with 226 theatre masks and human heads, constituting a unique iconographic program in the Graeco-Roman world. The ensemble includes models of heads from statues made over a wide chronological range from Polycleitus to Lysippus, masks related to the three types of Greek theatre and 42 portrait heads of Alexander and Hellenistic rulers and dynasts. Every single motif is analysed with great competence and in a precise and detailed manner, offering many comparanda and an exhaustive bibliography. This applies both to the best-known cases that can be attributed to the *opera nobilia*, but also to more problematic depictions, such as masks and heads that have been associated with the theatrical world and appear in limited numbers in the north portico, but more frequently in the other sectors of the monument. Equal attention was also given to the group consisting of portraits of Hellenistic dynasts (starting with that of Alexander the Great as an adolescent), as well as heads that have been associated with historical figures of the Hellenistic age. The importance of this unique repertoire is therefore abundantly clear. It illustrates the extensive knowledge of the sculptors at Aphrodisias of Greek and Roman art history. It also provides glimpses into what the (mainly Roman) clientele of the Tiberian period might have demanded and the motifs that were en vogue in the years around 20 AD.

Thanks to the systematic study of the preserved frieze blocks of the South Agora, the author was able to identify and underline the differences between the north portico and the other colonnades surrounding the square. De Chaisemartin not only suggested multiple construction phases, but also highlighted the different decorative choices across monuments. While the north portico displays a great variability in the selection of decorative motifs, others are limited to the sphere of the theatre and the Dionysiac *thiasos*.

Chapter III ends with a discussion on the function of this extraordinary monument, meticulously reviewing previous hypotheses. On the basis of the available data and on all the conjectures expressed thus far, it must be said that no single, absolute interpretation can be reached at the present state of the research, since the monument existed for about seven centuries, undoubtedly experiencing various transformations and uses during this time span.

Concerning the other monuments of Aphrodisia which were decorated with garland friezes, they offer, for a variety of reasons, a much smaller amount of preserved material. However, they are treated by the author with the same methodological rigour and competence.

The third part of the volume presents a very important overall assessment of the garland friezes of Aphrodisias, considering chronological aspects (Chapter IX), workshop attributions (Chapter X), and Aphrodisias’ role and significance in the development of architectural friezes with garlands in Asia Minor during the imperial age (Chapter XI). A discussion of the semantic and symbolic value of garlands in Aphrodisias concludes this part (Chapter XII).

The last part of the volume is dedicated to the extensive and analytical catalogue of all the blocks decorated with garlands, organised by monument (or area) of origin, taking into account also out-of-context and fragmentary ones. Editing this catalogue was, definitely, an enormous amount of work.

On the whole, the volume is well researched and well edited, even though some concerns can be raised about certain details. In terms of formatting, the orientation of some captions are incorrect (see, for instance those of fig. 4 and fig. 5). More importantly, the images of the iconographic material is of uneven quality.

The long-awaited volume by De Chaisemartin is undoubtedly a very important work and should be regarded as an essential point of reference for the specific sphere of the city of Aphrodisias and also (and above all) for its many contributions toward the study of architectural decoration in the Graeco-Roman world. The study ranges from decoration to architecture, from sculpture to the diffusion of motifs from the Classical and Hellenistic ages until the Roman period. Even though future research may bring new insights, this volume will serve students and researchers well in the years to come.