**[title]Looking at the Bronze of Lost Sculptures: The Reception of the Delphic Monument of the Admirals in the Imperial Age**

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**[A-head]Abstract**

[abstract]

The paper focuses on Plutarch’s interpretation of the Monument of the Admirals in Delphi and attempts to explain if and how the material (in particular the blue patina of bronze), the state of preservation of the statues, and their style influenced Plutarch’s perception and led him to attribute peculiar meanings and values to the group. It investigates also how these issues intertwined with the philosophical, religious, and historical reflections that are part of his discussion of the monument.

[main text]

At the beginning of his writing *On the Pythian Responses* (*De Pythiae oraculis*), Plutarch dedicates several chapters (395b–396c ) to the blue patina that characterized bronze Delphian votive offerings. Several studies have tried to give a scientific explanation for this patina and to identify it in artworks brought to light during excavations.[[1]](#endnote-1) This contribution focuses on a different aspect, strictly linked to the reception and perception of art in the Imperial age. Its aim is not to explain what the blue patina is but rather the values and meanings that Plutarch attributed to it, and also how it influenced his interpretation of the Monument of the Admirals.

*On the Pythian Responses* describes a group of intellectuals walking along the Sacred Way in Delphi. The walk begins at the entrance of the sanctuary and ends in front of the Temple of Apollo. Along the way, various discussions on Delphic philosophy and religion take place, each of them linked to a votive offering that the group looks at.

The first stop along the way is the Monument of the Admirals*,* as Plutarch points out (*De Pythiae oraculis* 395b, ἀπ’ ἐκείνων γὰρ ἦρκται τῆς θέας).[[2]](#endnote-2) It was dedicated by the Spartans after the victory at Aigospotamoi in 405 BC. According to Pausanias (10.9.7–11), it included thirty-eight statues, but at least one more should be added on the basis of preserved inscriptions. Lysander was represented among a number of gods, being crowned by Poseidon; there were also statues of the Spartan navarch Arakos and of the Greek trierarchs who were Spartan allies.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Plutarch (395b) tells us that, in front of this offering, one of the visitors, Diogenianos of Pergamon, is struck by the patina (τοῦ χαλκοῦ τὸ ἀνθηρὸν) that covered the monument, because it is neither like dirt (πίνῳ) nor like verdigris (ἰῷ), but shines with a dark blue dye (βαφῇ δὲ κυάνου στίλβοντος). This observation provokes a discussion of the origin of that patina, which is considered an alteration, a deterioration of the bronze. According to Theon, it is subject (πεπονθὼς) to the action of air (395d).

At first it does not seem that Plutarch intends to refer to the patina of the Monument of the Admirals in particular. In fact, he describes (395a–b) with a bit of irony the guides who bore the visiting intellectuals with tedious explanations of all the sanctuary’s inscriptions; he reports that Diogenianos was not interested in the appearance and artistic merit of the statues (ἡ μὲν ἰδέα καὶ τὸ τεχνικὸν), because he had already seen beautiful artworks elsewhere. He does, however, admire the blue patina of the statues (ἐθαύμαζε δὲ τοῦ χαλκοῦ τὸ ἀνθηρὸν), in particular that of the group of the Admirals. This means that, according to Plutarch, the blue patina was not a feature just of the Monuments of the Admirals but also characterized at least some of the bronze statues nearby.[[4]](#endnote-4) Therefore, it is first of all necessary to understand why he chose this specific monument for developing his reflections.

The visual impact of the Monument of the Admirals certainly played an important role in Plutarch’s choice. Comprising at least thirty-nine bronze statues, it was a very impressive monument, and the peculiarity of Delphic bronze would have been extremely evident there. Even before entering the gate of the sanctuary, one could see the monument looming over the walls of the sacred precinct.

Moreover, the monument stood at the entrance of the sanctuary and this corresponds well with Plutarch’s need to deal with the issue of the patina at the beginning of the walk. *On the Pythian Responses* is first of all a theological and philosophical text and this aspect obviously influences how Plutarch looks at artworks.[[5]](#endnote-5) The walk along the Sacred Way is an ascent to the Temple of Apollo and to the heart of the discussion, which is the responses of the Pythian oracles and how they changed through time. All the issues discussed along the way are a preparation for that main discussion. In this perspective, the debate on the patina is suited to be the first one, because it is linked to substance and physics. In other words, it is a perfect bridge between art and its materiality on one side and philosophy and its physical theories on the other.[[6]](#endnote-6) Plutarch’s explanation of the patina is deeply linked with the sanctuary and Delphic religion.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Nonetheless, the Monument of the Admirals was not the only significant bronze monument at the entrance of the sanctuary. While the group of Admirals was certainly impressive for the number of its statues, there was nearby at least one other equally impressive bronze offering, the bull dedicated by the Korkyreans (Corcyraeans), which was over life-size. Because it stood on a high base, the bull also appeared in the visitor’s field of vision before entering the gate, above the wall.[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, we can assume that the Admirals’ group was renowned in part because it celebrated an important victory, the one at Aigospotamoi, but just near it there was also a base by Pheidias celebrating Marathon.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In conclusion, location, visual impact, and fame are not in and of themselves sufficient reasons to justify Plutarch’s choice. The mention of the group is rather connected to its interpretation: in the case of the Admirals, the blue patina made the statues look, to Diogenianos’s eyes, very like sea creatures in their surface color and deeper than the ocean (οἷον ἀτεχνῶς θαλαττίους τῇ χρόᾳ καὶ βυθίους).[[10]](#endnote-10) It seems that Plutarch is playing with history here. In fact, the reference to the color of the sea seems, primarily, an allusion to the naval battle the monument celebrated. Except for the gods, the figures were mainly those of the men who commanded the victorious ships at Aigospotamoi, so that a sea-blue patina made them look like real “men of the sea.” But θαλάττιος also means something that is “*in* or *of* or *on* or *from* the sea.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Thus another interpretation suggests itself. Perhaps Plutarch, in writing this passage, also had in mind bronze statues that were actually found in the sea. This phenomenon was not unknown to the ancients, as we know from a famous relief from Ostia representing statues in a fishermen’s net.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Plutarch refers twice to the Spartan Monument as the monument “of the Admirals” (*De Pythiae oraculis* 395b, πρὸς τοὺς ναυάρχους; *Lysander* 18.1, τῶν ναυάρχων[[13]](#endnote-13)), and this is the name commonly used today, although from a historical point of view it is erroneous. In fact, only Arakos was navarch at Aigospotamoi. He was elected because Lysander, who was navarch the year before, could not assume that role again. Instead, Lysander was vice-navarch, while all the other men represented in the Delphian monument were trierarchs. Historical mistake or not, from Plutarch’s perspective all the commanders are put on the same level, so that the impression of *concordia* and unity among Greek cities is stressed. Since this is a very important theme in Plutarch’s reading of the past and present history of Greece and also in his interpretation of the votive offerings in Delphi,[[14]](#endnote-14) we can conclude that the philosopher attributed to the Monument of the Admirals a peculiar political, historical, and social meaning and considered it an apt symbol of *concordia*.

Lysander was undoubtedly the main character of the monument; nonetheless, when Plutarch wants to mention a portrait of him (*Lysander* 1.1), he refers to a marble statue in the Treasury of Brasidas and the Akanthians.[[15]](#endnote-15) The indication of the material (λίθινον) serves, together with information on the statue’s exact position inside the treasury (τὸν ἐντὸς ἐστῶτα τοῦ οἴκου παρὰ ταῖς θύραις λίθινον ἀνδριάντα), first of all to identify the statue. In describing it, Plutarch is interested in just a few features: the long beard and hair, according to the ancient Spartan tradition. He interprets this tradition as a rule established by Lykourgos: according to the Spartan ruler, long hair made beautiful men more fascinating and ugly men more fearsome. We can conclude that in Plutarch’s opinion Lysander belonged to one of these two categories, though it is not clear which one, and his marble portrait mirrored this feature very well, probably better than his portrait in the Monument of the Admirals. Plutarch’s preference could also be due to a different way of representing the Spartan commander and/or an inferior state of preservation of the bronze statue. In fact, we should also take into consideration that, unlike the Admirals’ group, Lysander’s marble statue was set inside a building, so that it was not subjected to atmospheric agents.

As a priest in Delphi, Plutarch knew very well the histories and myths connected to the sanctuary, and, above all, he had access to its archives. For this reason, his interpretation of the marble statue of Lysander is particularly interesting. According to him, the statue was usually identified with Brasidas because of the name of the treasury itself. But it seems he had further information confirming that, indeed, it represented Lysander.

The doubtful identification of the statue seems to suggest, first of all, that at least in Plutarch’s time the statue in the treasury did not have an inscription.[[16]](#endnote-16) Although the philosopher does not state where he learned that the statue was Lysander, it is possible to propose a hypothesis about his source. In the *Life of Lysander* (18.2), he reports that according to Anaxandrides of Delphi (Ἀναξανδρίδης δ’ ὁ Δελφὸς ἱστορεῖ), Lysander had left a gold and ivory trireme in the Treasury of Brasidas and the Akanthians. Consequently, we can conclude that Anaxandrides was certainly one of his sources on the connections between Lysander and the Treasury of Brasidas and the Akanthians. Therefore, it is possible that the identification of the marble statue as Lysander—and not Brasidas, as usual—also came from Anaxandrides.

Plutarch refers to a Delphic marble statue of Lysander again in *On the Pythian Responses* (397f), when he reports the extraordinary event that happened after the battle of Leuktra in 371 BC: the face of Lysander’s statue was covered in grass (ὁ δ’ αὐτοῦ [<](http://www.tlg.uci.edu/help/BetaManual/online/SB2.html)τοῦ[>](http://www.tlg.uci.edu/help/BetaManual/online/SB2.html) Λυσάνδρου λίθινος ἀνδριὰς ἐξήνθησεν ἀγρίαν λόχμην καὶ πόαν τοσαύτην τὸ πλῆθος, ὥστε κατακρύψαι τὸ πρόσωπον).

The event was very famous and is recorded also by Cicero, who gives a slightly different version: according to Cicero, the grass did not cover Lysander’s face but made a corona around his head (Cicero *De divinatione* 1.34.75: in Lysandri, qui Lacedaemoniorum clarissumus fuerat, statua, quae Delphis stabat, in capite corona subito exstitit ex asperis herbis et agrestibus).

Plutarch’s reference to marble and the use of the article *ὁ* encourages us to identify the statue with the one in the Treasury of Brasidas and the Akanthians,[[17]](#endnote-17) as if it was *the* marble statue of Lysander *par excellence*. Nonetheless, it seems a bit odd that such a famous event was connected to a statue whose identification was not clear and which was usually identified as Brasidas. It is, then, possible that another marble statue of Lysander was in the sanctuary. In either case, Plutarch intends the reference to marble as a way to distinguish this statue from another, probably from the most famous: that in the Monument of the Admirals, which was mentioned at the beginning of *On the Pythian Responses*.

[A-head]Conclusion

In conclusion, Plutarch’s description of Lysander’s monuments in Delphi reveals a use of the material—bronze or marble—first of all to distinguish between two different statues. In the case of the group of the Admirals, the deterioration of the bronze and the formation of the blue patina became a means of interpreting the monument in the light of the event it celebrated and of its connection with the sea. Moreover, the discussion of the origin of the patina, which is due to the Delphic air, introduces the philosophical nature of the writing and represents the first step in the theological reflection that Plutarch intends to develop. Therefore, the bronze and its patina also assume a philosophical and religious value: it is peculiar to the sanctuary of Delphi and strictly linked to Apollo. In Plutarch’s view, the bronze becomes more than bronze and a bronze statue more than just the sum of its technique and aesthetic appearance. The material assumes both a historical and a philosophical value and becomes the key of Plutarch’s interpretation of the Monument of the Admirals.

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1. Jouanna 1975; Pouilloux 1986; Craddock and Giumlia-Mair 1993a, 1993b; Giumlia-Mair and Craddock 1993, 15–17; Giumlia-Mair and Lehr 1998; Giumlia-Mair et al. 2000; Giumlia-Mair 2001a, 2001b; Giumlia-Mair 2008, 269–73; Franke and Mircea 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The text is cited from Schröder 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On the Monument of the Admirals, see Bommelaer 2015, 132–34 (with further bibliography). During a conference at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, in June 2016, Anne Jacquemin presented a new reconstruction of the monument by D. La Roche, which is going to be published. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jouanna 1975, 69–70. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Flacelière 1964, 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Falaschi 2015, 49–51. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pouilloux 1986; Zagdoun 1995, 589–90; Ildefonse 2006, 60–63, 259. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On the Corcyrean Bull, see Bommelaer 2015, 126–27 (with further bibliography). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On the Marathon Base, see Bommelaer 2015, 135 (with further bibliography). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the explanation of this expression, see Schröder 1990, 117; Ildefonse 2006, 259 n. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. LSJOnline, s.v. “θαλάσσιος”. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ostia, Museo Nazionale inv. 157 (from Ostia, first century BC). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The text is from Angeli Bertinelli et al. 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, Plutarch *Flamininus* 11.6; *Timoleon* 29.5–6; *Philopoemon* 8.3. On this issue, see Falaschi 2015, 53–55. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On the Treasury of Brasidas and the Akanthians, see Bommelaer 2015, 188–90 (with further bibliography). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Angeli Bertinelli et al. 1997, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Angeli Bertinelli et al. 1997, 124–25. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)