

A Plastic and Iconographic Study of the Lion Foot Reliefs on the Seats of the Early Roman Imperial Bouleuterion of Smyrna

Smyrna Erken Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi Bouleuterion'u Pençe Kabartmalı Aslan Ayakları Üzerine Plastik ve İkonografik Bir İnceleme

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Abstract: The Early Roman Imperial Bouleuterion of Smyrna had been used from the late 1st century BCE until the Smyrna earthquake of 177 CE. The building collapsed after the earthquake, its constructional components were repurposed to rubble stones and used in a new bouleuterion. The subject of this article, the lion feet reliefs were found in the new bouleuterion, were reused as spolia in cavea. They were found during 2009-2014 excavation seasons. This article analyzes a total of 12 reliefs whose stylistic features could be clearly identified. The findings were categorized into two groups based on an evaluation of their plastic details. The aim of this article is to identify fragments of these architectural plastic building elements and compare their stylistic characteristics with similar examples from Hellenistic and Roman buildings in Western Anatolia. In addition, the study included iconographic evaluations regarding the presence of lion foot reliefs in communal structures such as theaters and bouleuterions. Finally, opinions and suggestions on which predatory animal or mythological creature these may belong to and for what purpose they may have been made are discussed.

Keywords: Lion Foot/Claw • Marble Relief • Seating Bench Decoration • Architectural Plastic

Öz: Smyrna Erken Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi Bouleuterion'u MÖ 1. yüzyıl sonlarından MS 177 yılı Smyrna depremine kadar kullanılmıştır. Deprem sonrası yıkılan yapının mermer yapı elemanları, moloz taşlar haline getirilerek yeni bir bouleuterionun inşasında kullanılmıştır. Makalenin konusunu oluşturan aslan ayağı kabartmaları yeni bouleuterion'un cavea alt yapısında, şipolyen malzeme olarak kullanılmışlardır. Bunlar 2009-2014 kazı sezonlarında bulunmuştur. Makalede bu parçalardan stil özellikleri tespit edilebilen toplam 12 adeti incelenmiştir. Söz konusu buluntular kendi içlerinde plastik detayları değerlendirilerek, iki grupta toplanmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı, bu mimari plastik yapı elemanı parçalarını, kendi içinde tanımlamak ve stil özelliklerini belirlemek olmuştur. Ardından bu kabartmalar stilistik özellikleri de göz önüne alınarak, Batı Anadolu'daki benzer Helenistik ve Roma Dönemi yapılarındaki örneklerle karşılaştırılmıştır. Çalışmada ayrıca, ikonografik bir bakış açısıyla aslan ayağı kabartmalarının, tiyatro ve bouleuterion gibi toplanma yapılarında görülme süreci hakkında değerlendirmeler yapılmıştır. Son olarak pençe kabartmalarının hangi yırtıcı hayvana veya mitolojik yaratığa ait olabileceği ve hangi amaçla yapılmış olabilecekları konusunda görüşler ve öneriler tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aslan Ayağı/Pençesi • Mermer Kabartma • Oturma Basamağı Dekorasyonu • Mimari Plastik

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Introduction

In ancient Greek and Roman architecture, it is seen that the edges of the seats in gathering places such as theatres, stadiums, bouleuterions and, odeions were decorated with feet reliefs with a specific design. In many buildings constructed in the above-mentioned plan types during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, these decorations were generally applied on the seating benches located on the sides of stairs. It is also observed that in some ancient theatres, the seats of honour called *prohedria* were also decorated with feet reliefs.

Two types of plastic profiles can be seen, when the design of the feet reliefs is analysed. The first one consists of the feet reliefs with realistic details extending vertically on the edges of the seats. In these reliefs, it is seen that the feet of predatory animals such as lions and panthers or mythological creatures such as griffons were preferred. However, in the archaeological literature, these plastic elements are generally referred to as lion's foot or claw because they are only detached feet without heads or bodies. In the other profile group used for the decoration of the seating benches, there are examples where claw-like profiles were left stylised without any plastic details. Except for a few early examples, these were mostly applied in the assembly buildings after the 2nd century CE (Fig. 1).

Feet reliefs in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamia were used as decorative elements on the edges of various furniture, thrones, and armchairs¹. Similarly, in Greek and Roman art, feet were used on the edges of individual seating elements and *exedra* benches. In addition, sculptural table legs *trapezophoros* at times designed in the form of feet and sometimes included head and body details with feet. Apart from these, there are feet reliefs on the legs of various furniture as seen on mosaics, frescoes, and coins that have survived to the present day from different periods. This shows that feet in a variety of forms were a frequently used ornamental element in the daily life of the ancient period.

The feet, used in a wide range of areas from furniture in daily life to plastic decorations in public architecture in Antiquity, suggest that they may have different meanings. The fact that they were used particularly on items such as thrones is also interpreted as magical symbols of power, strength, nobility, and protection². Foot reliefs were also used on theater seats that might be related to the cult of Dionysos. In ancient Greek mythology, Dionysos is depicted in many portrayals as a panther or a lion. The god, who is known to take the form of these predatory animals in myths, is sometimes shown riding on a panther or a lion or with their pelts in ancient sculptures, vase paintings, frescoes, and mosaics³ (Fig. 2).

¹ Richter 1966, 15-18.

² Meyer 1920, 63; Ulanowski 2015, 260.

³ Miziur 2016, 362.

Region	Ancient City	Building Type	Period	Feet Relief	Number of Toes
Ionian	Smyrna	Bouleuterion	Early Roman (late 1st century BC)	Lion	Four
Ionian	Smyrna	Bouleuterion	Roman (late 2nd century AD)	Stylised	-
Ionian	Ephesos	Bouleuterion	Roman	Lion	Four
Ionian	Ephesos	Theatre	Roman	Lion	Four
Ionian	Priene	Theatre (Prohedria)	Hellenistic	Lion	Four
Ionian	Metropolis	Bouleuterion	Hellenistic	Lion	Four
Ionian	Metropolis	Theatre	Hellenistic	Lion/Gryphon	Four
Ionian	Magnesia	Theatre	Roman	Lion	Four
Ionian	Notion	Bouleuterion	Hellenistic	Stylised	-
Ionian	Miletos	Theatre	Roman	Lion	Four/Five
Karia	Iasos	Bouleuterion	Roman	Lion	Four
Karia	Iasos	Theatre	Hellenistic	Lion	Four
Karia	Nysa	Gerontikon	Roman	Stylised	-
Karia	Stratonikeia	Theatre	Roman	Lion	Four
Karia	Aphrodisias	Bouleuterion	Roman	Lion	Four
Karia	Aphrodisias	Stadion	Roman	Stylised	-
Troas	Parion	Odeion	Roman	Lion	Four
Troas	Troia/Illion	Odeion/Small Theatre	Roman	Lion	Four
Lykia	Rhodiapolis	Theatre	Roman	Lion	Five
Kabalia	Kibyra	Odeion	Roman	Stylised	-
Aiolis	Aigai	Bouleuterion	Hellenistic	Stylised	-

Fig. 1 Table showing the types of feet reliefs used in some Hellenistic and Roman buildings in Western Anatolia



Fig. 2 Dionysos riding a panther (left), floor tiling, 120-80 BC, Delos, House of the Masks (Welch, 2005, Fig. 1). / Bronze statuette of a child Dionysos or Eros riding a lion (right). Early 1st century BCE, mid-1st century CE (Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. <https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/S2013.2.77.2/>)

The griffon also closely related to the cult of Dionysos. In mythology, the griffon has a protective role as the guardian of Dionysos's wine cup⁴. For this reason, the tradition of feet relief, which may have started in the theatre seating rows, must have continued to be used in the odeion and bouleuterion structures, which are similar in form but smaller in size. In addition, it is known that theatres were also used for political meetings in some Classical Greek Period cities and in some small cities during the Hellenistic Period⁵.

Description

The Early Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna⁶ was built in the middle of the 1st century BCE on a terrace to the northwest corner of the State Agora of Smyrna⁷ (Fig. 3, App. Fig. 1-2). It is understood that it was mostly used for political meetings of the Smyrna City Council, but it was put out of use by a great earthquake in 177 CE. Afterwards, almost all marble structural elements of the building, including the feet relief seats became rubble and were used in

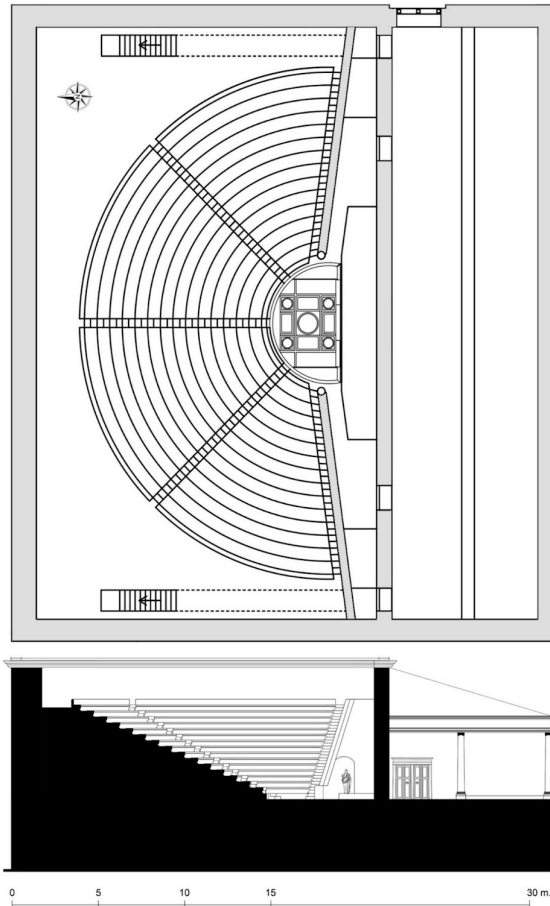


Fig. 3 Smyrna Early Roman Bouleuterion restitution plan and section. (Göncü 2019, fig. 13-14)

the construction of a new bouleuterion. The Early Roman Bouleuterion to which the reliefs belong is a rectangular building measuring 36.25 x 22.5 m. In the northern part of the building, there is a cavea with a semicircular plan and a diameter of 31 m. The

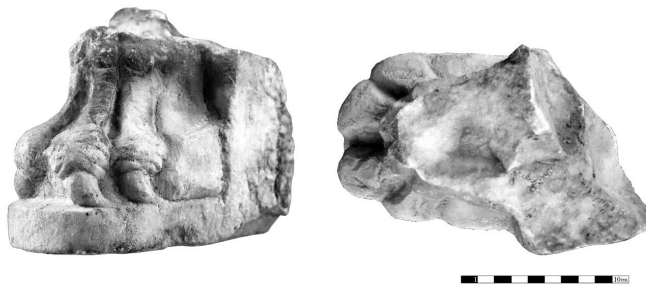


Fig. 4 Detail of the feet with find number Bou.12.102

people with 14 rows of seating steps. Partial remains of the cavea substructure and opus

substructure for the cavea was formed as a terrace about 3 m high in the absence of a natural slope in the area. On this terrace, opus incertum walls extending radially to the orchestra section were built, and the cavea was placed on an artificial fill. It is estimated that the bouleuterion could host approximately 580

⁴ Çakır & Yağızağa 2012, 58.

⁵ McDonald 1943, 39.

⁶ For details on the dating and construction phases of the Smyrna Bouleuterions, see Göncü 2019b.

⁷ Ersoy 2015, 108.

sectile pavement from the orchestra have survived from the building⁸ (Fig. 3).

The lion feet reliefs of the seating benches of the Early Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna, are carved from white marble with few pores. Each foot consists of four toes (Fig. 4). When viewed from the front, the two toes in the centre with their pointed claws are carved in such a way that they spread prominently to both sides. They also have an oval anatomical detail (Metacarpal Pad) at the end of the digits on their sides. In addition, each digit has a detailed claw and linearly depicted feather details. The feet are placed on an oval base with an average width of 9 to 10 cm and a height of about 2 cm (Fig. 5).

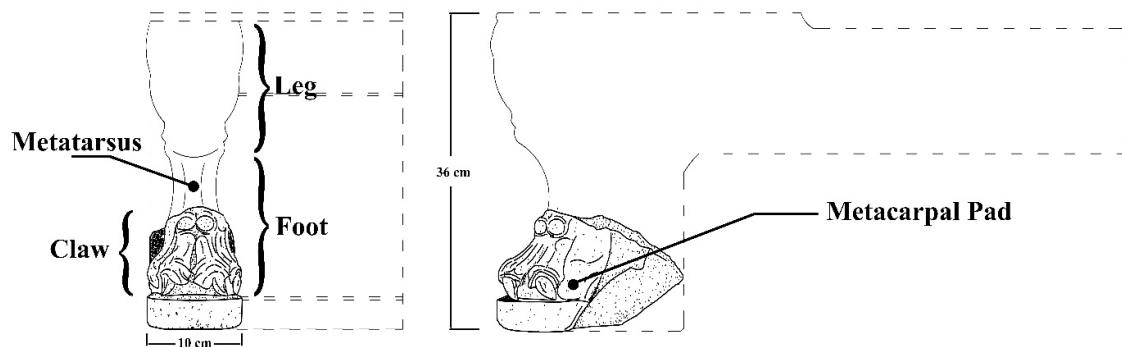


Fig. 5 Speculative reconstruction of the lion feet block with find number Boucad.14.02 and anatomical sections of the reliefs

Some differences in the details on the feet can be seen. These differences, especially in anatomical features such as the proximity of the toes in the centre and the length of the individual toes, are not big enough to change the general appearance of the feet. Considering the differences in detail, lion feet reliefs can be categorised into two groups. The first group includes feet with long toe bones (Fig. 6/7). The claws in this group are also raised and worked in higher relief. The toes on the sides were designed to be parallel to the metacarpal pad and to wrap around it together with the claws. There are five lion feet reliefs in the first group. The artefacts with complete claw sections are Bou.12.102 and Boucad.14.02. These two artefacts were also used to determine the groups of partially identified lion feet reliefs as Type 1 (Fig. 6/7. Bou.09.16, Bou.14.09, Bou.09.113 B). The basic relief details, width, and height of both artefacts are identical. In addition, the kyma recta and kyma reversa transitions in the toe details in profiles have the same design. Another common feature is that the metacarpal pad detail is more oval on the right while it has a more stylised appearance on the left side. Again, in this group, the oval metacarpal pad of Bou.14.09, whose left side is better preserved (Fig. 6/7), has a detailed and oval appearance on the left side, while the right side is not preserved. The biggest difference between these two artefacts is the lines on the toe knuckles and the linear / incised feather-like details applied on the nail transitions. This difference is also observed in the other pieces in the group.

⁸ Göncü 2019a, 180-203.

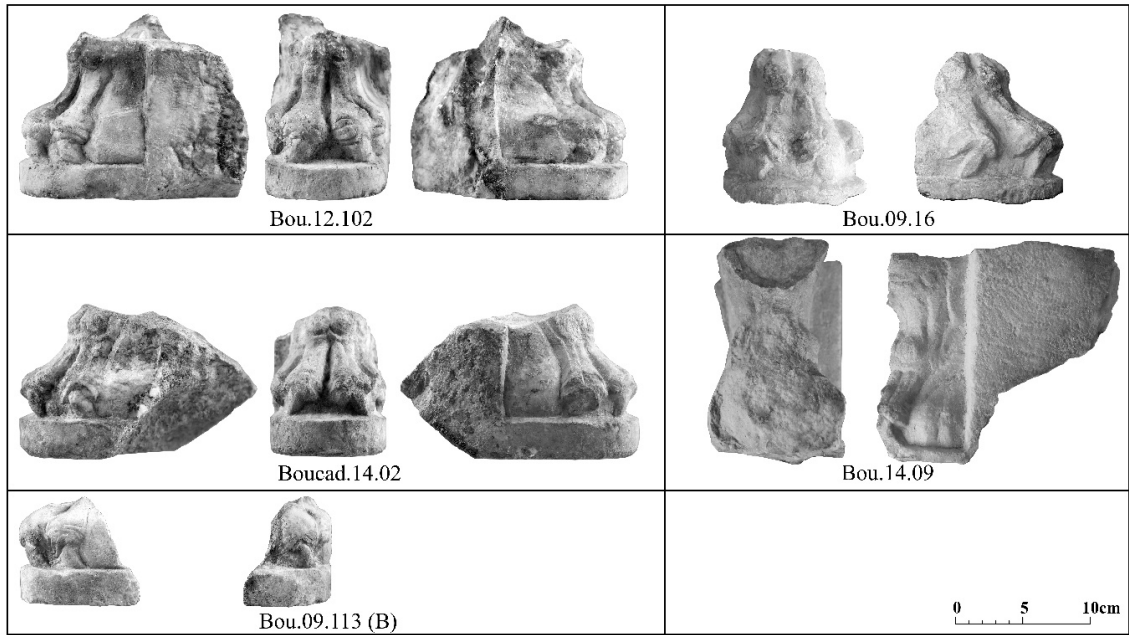


Fig. 6 Table showing the type 1 reliefs from different facades

Type 1

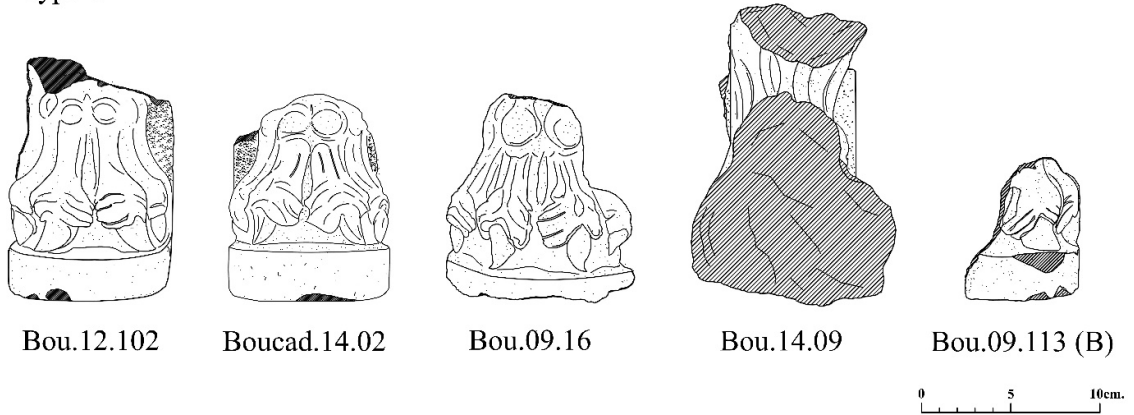


Fig. 7 Table showing the drawings of the Type 1 reliefs

The second group consists of 7 pieces. The most anatomical difference between the reliefs of these lion feet is that the toes are much shorter than those of the first group (Fig.8-9). In addition, the reliefs are designed at a lower level than the first group. The nail details of the reliefs are less distinct, but they extend horizontally, almost parallel to the ground. The best-preserved artefact in this group is Bou.10.42 (Fig. 8/9). The anatomical relief details of this artefact were used to categorise the partially preserved ones under Type 2. Toe details are preserved on the front and left side, while the right side is broken. When the artefact is viewed from the front, the detail consisting of shorter toes used in the determination of Type 2 draws attention. This feature and the deeper carving of the upper toe knuckle give this section a circular appearance. In the preserved left side, the metacarpal pad detail and toe tip and nail transition are similar to Type 1. The most striking difference in this group is that the knuckle above the nail almost covers the entire metacarpal pad.

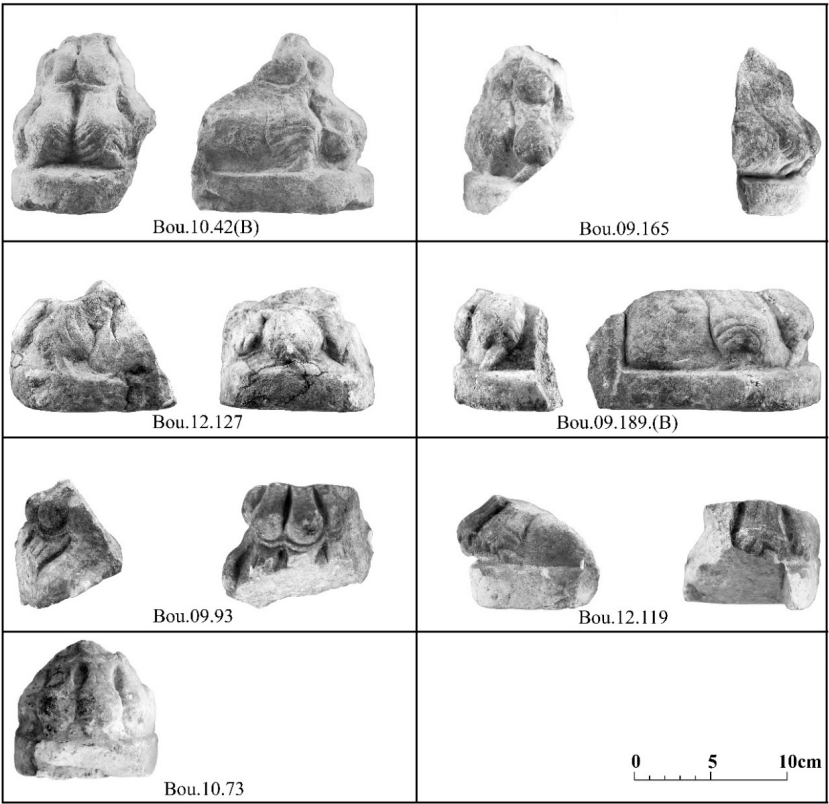


Fig. 8 Table showing the type 2 reliefs from different facades

Type 2

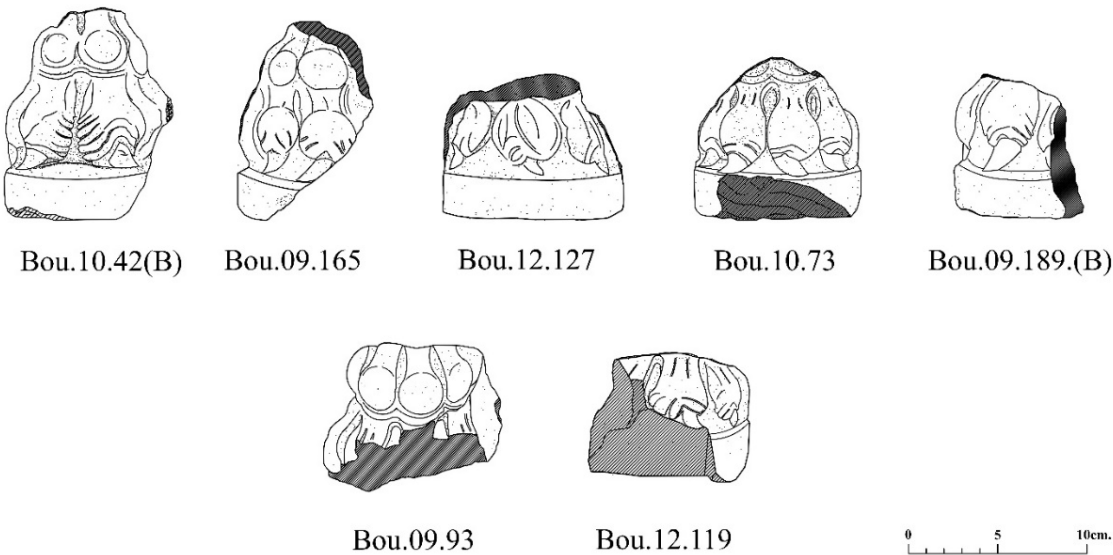


Fig. 9 Table showing the drawings of the Type 2 reliefs

Comparison

There is no precise data on when or for what purpose the claw reliefs used on the sitting steps were introduced into monumental architecture. The earliest known examples date back to the 4th century BCE. They are present in the 4th century BCE buildings of the theatres of Erythrai in Western Anatolia, Mantinea in Continental Greece, and Iaitas in Sicily⁹. In addition, the Hellenistic bouleuterions of Notion¹⁰ and Aigai¹¹ in Western Anatolia are the earliest examples of political assembly buildings. These early examples are more stylised than realistically carved feet reliefs.

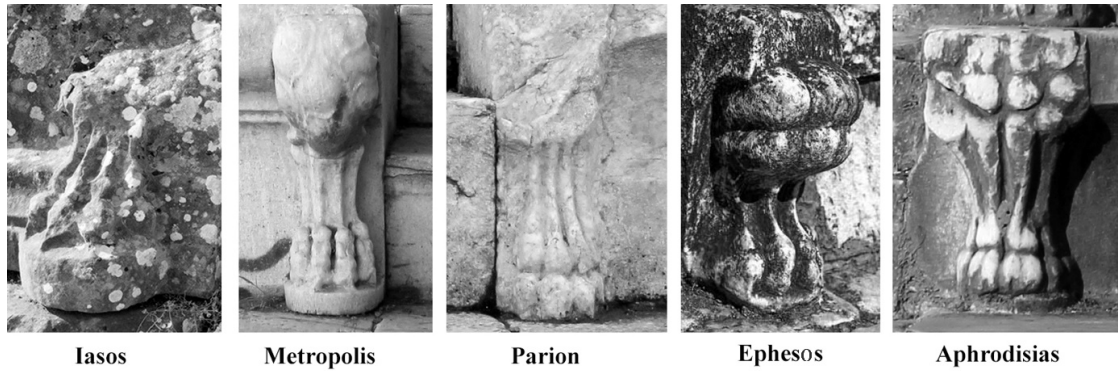


Fig. 10 Some examples of bouleuterion seats with lion feet relief

Better more realistic carved lion feet reliefs in both political and public gathering buildings were first seen in the Late Hellenistic Period¹². When the lion feet from this period and later are analysed, there is a certain typological diversity¹³. The Hellenistic Theatre in Metropolis¹⁴ in Western Anatolia houses one of the earliest and most well-preserved examples with detailed lion feet ornaments. The prohedria seats of the theatre and the seats facing the steps of the cavea are decorated with lion feet reliefs. In addition, both sides of one of the seats of honour of this building were made in the shape of a griffon, feet and head complete¹⁵. Examples of other theatre buildings with lion feet reliefs in Western Anatolia include the prohedria seats of the Hellenistic Theatre in Priene¹⁶, the Roman theatres of Miletos¹⁷, Ephesos¹⁸, Iasos¹⁹, Stratonikeia²⁰ and Rhodiapolis²¹ and the Theatron at Magnesia ad Maeandrum²². In addition, the Late

⁹ Isler 2017, 115.

¹⁰ Büyükkolancı 1996, 373-374.

¹¹ Gürbüzer 2015, 34.

¹² Isler 2017, 115.

¹³ Isler 2017, 114.

¹⁴ Arslan 2021, 128.

¹⁵ Meriç 2004, 95; Arslan 2021, Fig. 4- 5.

¹⁶ Wiegand & Schrader 1904, 242.

¹⁷ Krauss 1973, 89.

¹⁸ Isler 2017, 115.

¹⁹ De Bernardi 1996, Tafel 11.

²⁰ Isler 2017, 734.

²¹ Özdilek 2016, 67.

²² Bingöl 1998, 82.

Hellenistic bouleuterion at Metropolis²³, the Roman bouleuterion at Ephesos²⁴, Iasos²⁵, and Aphrodisias,²⁶ and the odeion at Parion²⁷ are examples of political assembly buildings with lion's feet reliefs on the sides of the stairs (Fig.10).

This practice is frequently seen in the gathering buildings built until the middle of the Roman Period in Anatolia, was continued in the 2nd century CE, but from the end of the same century onwards, it became a stylised form for an unknown reason. In the newly built or renovated Theatre of Hierapolis²⁸, Stadions of Aphrodisias²⁹ and Magnesia³⁰, Odeion of Kibyra³¹, Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna,³² and Gerontikon of Nysa³³ the lion feet reliefs were carved in a stylised form.

When examples above are compared with the findings from the Early Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna, it is noteworthy that there are some differences and similarities between them. Except for the Odeion of Parion, the feet in the other buildings have an oval base as in the example from Smyrna (Fig. 3). However, in Parion, the feet reliefs extend to the floor without a pedestal. In Ephesos, Iasos, Aphrodisias, and Parion examples, the feet have the appearance of two bumps on top of each other, with the knuckles close to each other and almost adjacent. This detail is also seen in the Smyrna Type 2 examples. However, this feature is not observed in the Smyrna Type 1.

The detailed metacarpal pad design on the lion feet from Smyrna is found only in the Metropolis and Ephesos examples. In addition to these, the Metropolis and Ephesos are partially similar to Smyrna in that they have realistic details and the toes and claws in the centre, slightly spreading towards the edges. If the metatarsus sections of the reliefs are compared, the metatarsus lines continue to rise parallel to or narrower than the claw section at Iasos, Ephesos, Metropolis, and Parion examples. Only at Aphrodisias, does the metatarsus section of the lion feet appear to expand from bottom to top. At the transition to the muscular arm/leg section, the metatarsus line is much shorter in the lion feet at Ephesos compared to the others. This detail is only partially preserved on one relief from Smyrna (Fig.6-7, Bou.14.09). This example it does not have the muscular leg section, but the metatarsus part of the claw is quite short and resembles the Ephesos example.

A similar comparison with the examples from the theatres shows that they are more varied than previous examples. The first common detail in all the examples is that the feet all rest on a pedestal, similar to the Smyrna finds (Fig.11). Among these, the Magnesia Theatron example resembles the Smyrna examples both in terms of its detailed workmanship and that the two toes in the centre are more prominent when viewed from the front. Another similarity with Magnesia is that the metatarsus lines are

²³ Öz 2006, 229-231.

²⁴ Bier 2011, 33 plate 33-2.

²⁵ Baldoni *et al.* 2004, 76.

²⁶ Bier 2008, 147.

²⁷ Başaran & Kasapoğlu 2014, 195.

²⁸ Masino, 2012, 228.

²⁹ Uzunaslın 2010, 19 Fig. 10.

³⁰ Bingöl 2008, 17 Fig. 5.

³¹ Özüdoğru 2020, 234; Tarkan 2021, 366 Lev. LXI.

³² Göncü 2019b, 168.

³³ Kadioğlu 2014, 15.

kept quite short at the transition to the muscular leg section, as in Ephesos bouleuterion example. However, the design of the claws spreading to both sides in the centre of the Smyrna relief is not seen in Magnesia. In addition, the detail of the metacarpal pad, which is quite prominent in the Smyrna finds, is not prominent at all in Magnesia and other theatres except the Theatre of Metropolis. Regarding the design of the toes, the examples from Miletos, Stratonikeia, and Rhodiapolis differ from the finds from Smyrna, with their knuckles formed in the form of two bumps close by and on top of each other. In addition, some claws from the theatres of Miletos and Rhodiapolis differ from all other examples with a design consisting of 5 toes (Fig. 11).

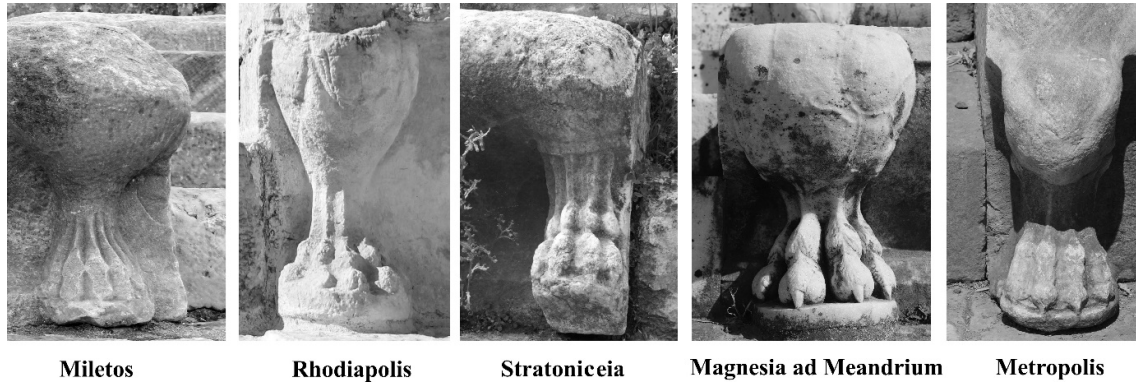


Fig. 11 Some examples of theatre seats with lion feet relief

Evaluation and Conclusion

In general, it is seen that the feet of the animals belonging to the family of big cats called pantherinae³⁴ were preferred in the seat edge decorations of ancient gathering structures. However, the typological comparisons above show that the feet have quite different designs in almost all examples. Of course, the realistic interpretation of some of the feet due to their detailed designs poses some problems in terms of which predator species they may belong to without anatomical examination. This also raises the question of whether the artists or craftsmen involved in the carving of these reliefs had the opportunity to examine these predators in detail. However, it has already been mentioned that the detailed designs in gathering structures can be seen starting from the Late Hellenistic Period. On the other hand, we also see that Greek plastic art began to portray predatory creatures such as lions and panthers in a less idealised and more realistic way from the beginning of the Hellenistic period³⁵. This also extended to other areas, such as mosaics and paintings. It is imperative to acknowledge that a significant proportion of the craftsmen engaged in construction projects during the late Hellenistic and Roman eras possessed a substantial degree of experience and expertise, thereby providing a substantial foundation from which they could draw inspiration. Lastly, it should also be pointed out that, appearance of detailed reliefs during the Late Hellenistic Period and further, might have been parallel with increasing marble usage.

Whether the examples with a fully stylised appearance were semi-worked in order to be finished at a later time or whether a stylised form was accepted as is and used in this period is another matter of debate. We believe that a detailed examination of the

³⁴ For the definition of Pantheriane see. Pocock 1917, 329-350.

³⁵ Vermule 1972, 49-59; Bliquez 1975, 381.

profiles of the remains in question will help us to decide on this subject. A second question that can be answered by analysing the profile details and anatomical features is whether the feet are to the front or the hind feet of the predator. Particularly in some prohedria seats, it can be clearly seen that the shape of the hind feet of predators such as lions and panthers in the vertical sitting position is imitated. Thus, it can be assumed that the people sitting on these seats were integrated with these predators, symbols of nobility, power, and authority. In addition, predators belonging to this family have five toes on their front feet and four toes on their hind feet³⁶. Keeping this in mind, it can be suggested that the user sitting in the prohedria seats with four toes in the feet design completes the symbolic integration mentioned above with their own feet in the middle. In examples such as the Theatre of Priene, the deep concave metatarsus profile at the transition from the foot to the leg section supports the above design purpose of the people who will sit in these seats. Again, in the Priene example, each of the feet has four toes (Fig. 12).

Of course, the use of feet reliefs on the seats in buildings such as bouleuterions, where people who held power in the city administration gathered, can be interpreted in line with this purpose. Thus, based on the design, we believe that the question of whether the feet reliefs are a symbol of power for the people who will use the seats or a traditional reflection of an iconographic practice on these buildings can be answered.

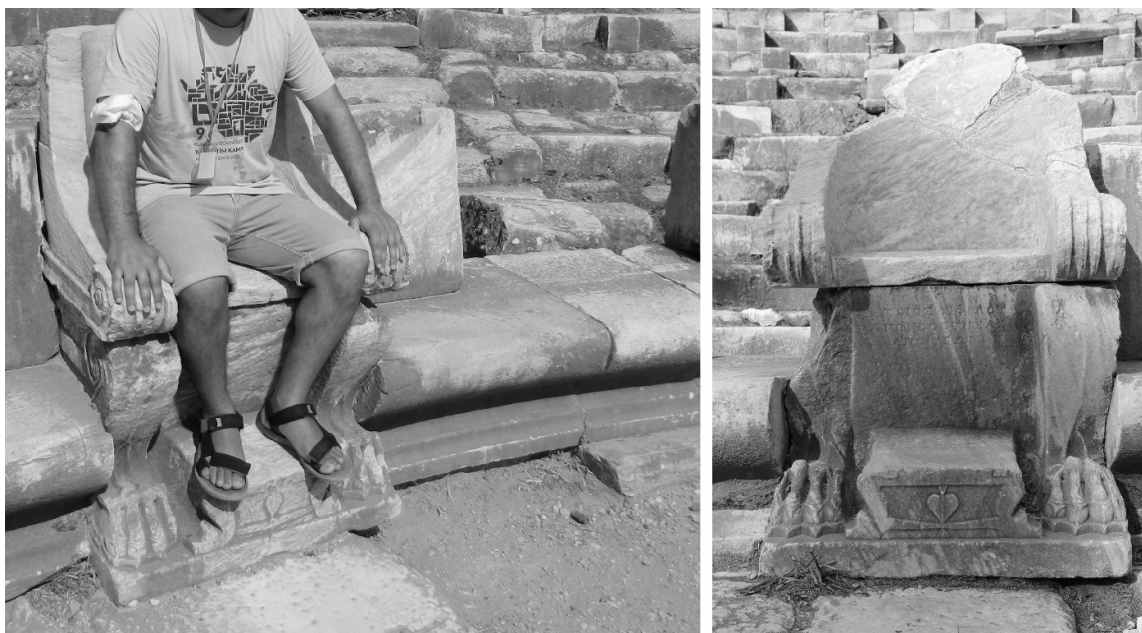


Fig. 12 An attempt to reconstruct the prohedria seats of the Priene Theatre

The first conclusion of this paper is that the feet reliefs used in theatrical planned assembly buildings may have a wide variety of typological and iconographical meanings. However, when the archaeological literature on the subject is examined, it is seen that there is no comprehensive study on either topic. The feet reliefs of the seating benches of the Early Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna show some plastic similarities and differences, as can be seen from the comparisons made with other ancient assembly buildings in the first part of this article. The upper parts of the Smyrna examples, which

³⁶ Jardine 1834, 265.

are defined as legs, are not preserved. For this reason, comparisons were made mainly on the feet parts of the other examples. Accordingly, the Smyrna examples, with their advanced workmanship and anatomical details, belong to the group of predators such as lions or panthers rather than mythological creatures. In addition, metacarpal pad detail on both sides of the feet, which is very clearly designed, is one of the remarkable features. The Smyrna examples can be categorised into two different types based on their anatomical features. Whether this difference is related to a possible construction or repair phase cannot be determined since no in situ remains were found. In addition, there is no evidence that the other preserved architectural parts of the building may have different construction phases.

The Early Roman Bouleuterion of Smyrna, with its architectural features, is dated to the late 1st century BCE. Therefore, the date that can be suggested for the feet reliefs is should also be dated the late 1st century BCE. When we look at the examples in ancient Greek art, especially in sculpture and mosaic art, including predatory animals such as lions and panthers dated to this period, the prominent metacarpal pad design of the feet, appears as a design detail specific to this period. For these reasons, the feet reliefs used on the seating steps of the Smyrna Bouleuterion also carry this characteristic feature of the period.

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