



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Remember Me: Levitha

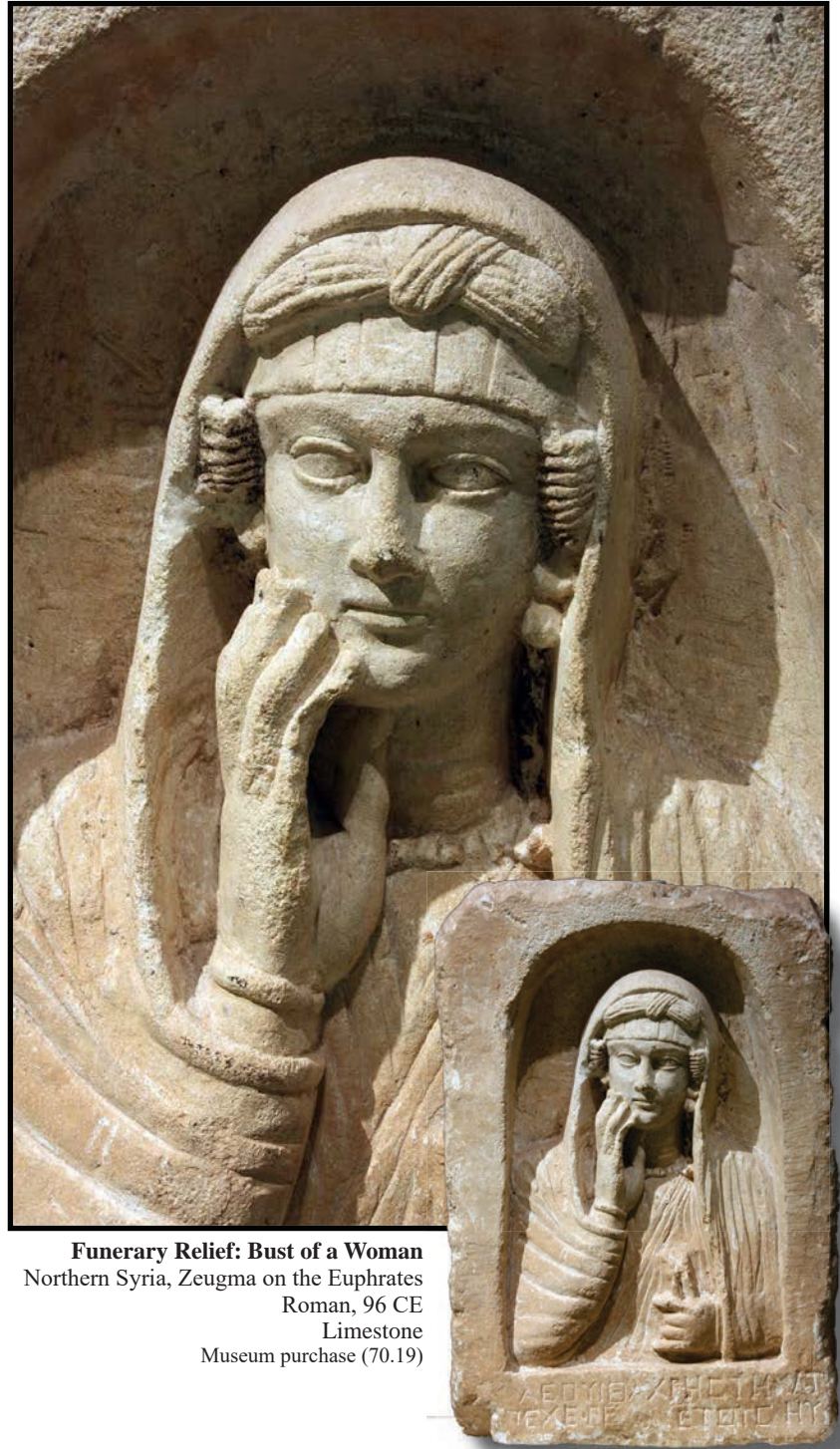
by Cathy Callaway, Museum Educator

The Museum of Art and Archaeology has a particularly interesting funerary monument commemorating a woman named Levitha, who lived in the later part of the first century CE. The Museum relief is identified as being from ancient Zeugma (modern Belkis, located in southeastern Turkey) in the Roman province of Syria. These types of relief plaques sealed loculi (or “compartments”), which were set into the walls of tombs.

The funerary relief, or stele, is of yellow limestone and shows a frontal bust of a woman set in an arched niche and carved in high relief. The two-line inscription carved in ancient Greek at the bottom of the monument gives her name: Levitha. The inscription reads:

Λέουιθα χρηστή ἄλυπε χερε ἔτους ΗΥ
(*Levitha, noble, free from pain, farewell.*
Year 408).

The greatest number of these types of monuments come from the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra and have inscriptions in Aramaic. No inscriptions from the East have a similar name, and it may be that “Levitha” is a transliteration from a different language (the root Levi- is likely to be Semitic in origin). A dated inscription is also uncommon. The year is calculated according to the conventions of the Seleucid era, which began on October 1 in 312 BCE, when the Greek Seleucid dynasty began its rule. The letter H is the equivalent of the number 8, and the letter Y the equivalent of 400; 312 subtracted from 408 gives a date of 96 CE.



Funerary Relief: Bust of a Woman
Northern Syria, Zeugma on the Euphrates
Roman, 96 CE
Limestone
Museum purchase (70.19)

(Continued on page two)



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Levitha's raised right hand and the himation-palla draped over her head and arms reflect the well-known Roman sculptural type, the *Pudicitia*. This type appeared in numerous statues from the Late Republic on and referred to the highly prized female virtues of chastity and modesty, as well as alluding to the veiling of the bride in the Roman marriage ceremony. The spindle and distaff in her left hand underscore the role she wishes to impart to the viewers of her monument: she has fulfilled her duties as a woman of the house. A woman's standing was conveyed by wealth (jewelry; here a ring, earrings, necklace, and a bracelet on each wrist) and by their role in the household (spindle and distaff).

This stele presents an example of a cultural negotiation: how different cultures in the Roman province of Syria accepted and rejected practices, traditions, and attributes, as suited each individual. The East is represented by oriental attire (the turban, diadem, and veil), frontality, linearity, and reduction of natural forms to simple systems and patterns of line, but we can also discern Greek and Roman influence on clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, and inscription. Perhaps there is no better indication of this sort of negotiation than the choice of clothing, gestures, and other attributes to illustrate those cultural preferences accepted and rejected by any given individual in his or her final portrait. Ultimately the monument, with its balance of convention and choice, affords an individual the opportunity to convey a final expression of cultural identity by which to be remembered in perpetuity. ■



Funerary Statue of a Woman
Northern Syria, Ca. 165–200 CE
Limestone
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. A.M. Adler (76.164)

A more in-depth article on Levitha can be found in the Museum's annual publication: [MUSE, Vol. 43, 2009](#) pp. 31–45, "A Matter of Life and Death: 'Reading' A Funerary Relief."

[MUSE](#) articles highlighting artwork in the Museum's collections are available online and can be downloaded for FREE.



[Istanbul Archaeological Museum](#) - A columbarium, from Palmyra. Artwork of the Roman imperial era. - Picture by: Giovanni Dall'Orto, May 28 2006.