

ATTALOS, ATHENS, AND THE AKROPOLIS

THE PERGAMENE “LITTLE BARBARIANS” AND
THEIR ROMAN AND RENAISSANCE LEGACY



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with an Essay on the Pedestals and
the Akropolis South Wall by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in Hong Kong

Typefaces Sabon 9.5/12.5 pt. and Trajan System Quark XPress™ [MG]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stewart, Andrew, 1948–

Attalos, Athens, and the Akropolis: The Pergamene “Little Barbarians” and Their Roman
and Renaissance Legacy / Andrew Stewart.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-83163-6

1. Marble sculpture, Roman – Expertising.
2. Sculpture, Permanene – Reproduction.
3. Galatians in art.
4. Victory in art.
5. Bergama (Turkey) – Antiquities.
6. Acropolis (Athens, Greece). I. Title.

NB115.S74 2004

733'.5 – dc22

2003063509

ISBN 0 521 83163 6 hardback

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the
Millard Meiss Publication Fund of the College Art Association.



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Foldout: The Ten Little Barbarians ©© *back of book*

LITTLE BARBARIANS

An Encounter



THEY STARTED OUT TOGETHER but now are scattered among five European cities in three countries. Four of them – the best known – alternate between the aging galleries of the Naples Museum and a stygian basement, displaced by a series of far glitzier temporary exhibitions (Figure 1). Three more sprawl in a sunny room in Venice’s Museo Archeologico, overlooking Italy’s most glorious public space, the Piazza San Marco (Figure 2). An eighth cowers claustrophobically amid a crowd of marbles in the Vatican’s Galleria dei Candelabri (Figure 3). The ninth squats under a staircase in the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence, fearfully eyeing the descending visitor (Figure 4). And the tenth kneels defiantly in the middle of a huge room of Greco-Roman sculpture in the Louvre, shadowboxing the crowds of passing tourists (Figure 5).

Let’s put them together, and begin again.

Not one of them stands upright. They kneel, cower, sink, or sprawl in attitudes of corporeal abandon, pain, despair, and death. One or two grimace and gesture wildly in my direction as if trying to catch my eye. Several are naked or only half-clothed. And they’re small, only four feet tall (Figure 6). No opponents in sight, either: That’s odd. They look as though a thunderbolt hit them and another’s on the way.

Venturing closer, I notice their strange combination of knobby, aggressive muscles and contorted, often concave postures (Figure 7). But the marble’s high polish reflects my gaze. Bouncing back, it never quite returns to the same place (Figure 8). Flicking against the shiny, glancing

surface of the stone, it animates it. Flesh puckers, muscles ripple, bodies writhe, and cloth flutters (Figure 9) as I scan them. A primitive world of brute strength and savagery throbs, clashes, and collapses before my eyes. A giant among midgets, I’ve walked into a battlefield. The fighting is almost over, and the massacre has begun.

Towering over them and getting used to their glossy surface, I linger awhile. As I look closer, the crisp, dramatic, puckered modeling begins to thrust the individual parts into prominence. They begin to detach themselves from the whole, to float independently before my eyes, to jostle for my attention. I scrutinize the grimacing faces and recoil at the open, gaping wounds (Figures 10–11). One man screams dumbly; another snarls; a third gasps in pain; and several are frozen in death (Figure 12). Blood spurts out of the gashes, stickily coating the skin; it grabs my attention and makes me more than a bit uneasy.

Now almost myopically close, my glance is snared by the tactile: woven cloth, shiny swords, smooth skin, coarse hair. I notice textures, fissures, gouges, nicks, scratches, and holes: some rasping here, some drilling there (Figure 13). But on occasion the light still plays tricks, bringing the polished, semitranslucent stone to life and softening the men’s coarse features and rocklike muscles, and the cruel paraphernalia of war. Breaks and signs of weathering obtrude, along with a plethora of telltale seams, patches, and abrupt changes of stone color. A woman’s breast juts skyward, perfectly conical and startlingly white (Figure 13). Oho, the repairman at work! But decay’s sordid legacy snaps at his heels: Chipped



FIGURE 1. (clockwise from top right) Naples Giant, Amazon, Persian, and Dying Gaul (Roman copies). From Rome; originals, ca. 200 BC. Marble; length of each figure, ca. 1.16 m. Naples, Museo Nazionale FAR 6013, 6012, 6104, 6015. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource 5270.



FIGURE 2. Venice Falling Gaul (“Breakdancer”), Dead Gaul, and Kneeling Gaul (Roman copies). In the background, the Ulysses, Figure 103. Rome; originals, ca. 200 BC. Marble; height 69 cm; length 1.36 m; height 76 cm, respectively. Venice, Museo Archeologico 55, 56, 57. Photo: Osvaldo Böhm.

FIGURE 3. Vatican Persian (Roman copy). From Rome; original, ca. 200 BC. Marble; height 73 cm. Vatican, Galleria dei Candelabri 2794. Photo: Author.



FIGURE 4. Aix Persian (Roman copy). From Rome or Frascati; original, ca. 200 BC. Marble; height 64 cm. Aix-en-Provence, Musée Granet. Photo: Centre Camille Jullian.



FIGURE 5. Paris Gaul (Roman copy). From Rome; original, ca. 200 BC. Marble; height 87 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre Ma 324. Photo: Chuzeville.