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VELEIA'S BRONZES COLLECTION NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC DATA AND INTERPRETATIONS

« Les procédés des arts sont intimement liés avec leur théorie » Caylus, *Recueil* I, p. II, XI

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MINISTERO
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Three bronze statuettes belonging to the collection of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale* at Parma, have recently been re-examined. They all come from the old excavations of *Veleia*, a small Roman town in the Apennines, South of Piacenza, Northern Italy. The archaeological researches on the site were promoted in 1760 by the Duke of Parma, Philip of Bourbon, in the area next to the church of *Sant'Antonino di Macinesso*, after the discovery - in 1746 - of the bronze fragments of the well-known *Tabula alimentaria*. This find brought eventually to the identification of the area as the long lost *municipium Veleiatum*. Remarkable artifacts, such as the statuette of the so-called "drunken Hercules", came to light already during the first excavation campaign. After the discovery, the three items - Hercules, Dionysos and Alexander - underwent several restorations and were exhibited to the public in different ways. The three statuettes are well known to scholars. This poster allows now to reconstruct the context of the finds through a thorough documentary study of the old excavation, to discuss the historical and artistic peculiarities, and to present the compositional data, the production stages and the ancient restorations, as determined by XRF analyses and microscopy.

Fig. 2: Drunken Hercules
(Soprintendenza per i beni archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna; photo R. Macri).

Data from Historical Archive

The journal of the excavations carried out at *Veleia* in the 18th century AD consists of loose, handwritten pages - now collated and chronologically ordered - in the Historical Archive of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale* at Parma. The journal was written at the end of the excavation day. It reports information on one or more days of excavation, depending on the complexity of the work carried out, and on the importance of the finds. When a noteworthy item was discovered at the end of the day, its description was reported in the journal in the following days - this was also the case with the Hercules. A still unpublished document now allows to exactly define the finding context. In the past, the circumstances of the discovery have been the reason for the scientific discussion on the authenticity of the statuette. On the leaf with the entries of the 11th and 12th July 1760 the excavator and compiler of the excavation journal for the Director A. Costa refers to the discovery, on the 10th July, of an "idolo di bronzo", a bronze figurine, already sent to the court of the Duke of Parma together with a letter and a map indicating the exact spot of its discovery. A second report, dated 11th of July (*Veleia* 1760 Manoscritto 44, p. 445) describes the discovery made the previous day, of a bronze "idoletto" with silver eyes found nearby and representing an old man, i.e. the Hercules. The statuette was apparently carrying a round, vessel-shaped "hat" in the hand. The report states that the statuette was found in the western part of the forum, behind the marble basis of a large table. This was a *mensa*, situated in front of the *tabernae*.

In the unpublished excavation report of *Veleia*, written by A. Costa (Manoscritto 49, I), the exact spot of the discovery is indicated on the finds map of the year 1760. In the drawings attached to the manuscript the Hercules is already represented on the bronze basis found next to the statuette (in the photo). All archive documents are therefore coherent with the up to now unpublished excavation journal. This allows to assert that the Hercules statuette had been with certainty found on the excavation of *Veleia* on the 10th of July 1760. The mention of a vessel-shaped, round hat suggests that he was holding a *skyphos* in the right hand. Its fragmentary foot is still recognizable in the right hand of the statuette.



Fig. 2



Fig. 1: Veleia. Forum from the air.

Drunken Hercules, i.n. B.105 (418); total H.: cm 26,1

The statuette was found near the western *porticus* of the forum and belongs to the type *Hercules bibax*, a late Hellenistic variation of Lysippos' *Herakles Epitrapezios*. The body of the naked and drunken god is represented with a marked spatial disequilibrium. The unbalanced bust leans back and the belly is protruding and swollen. The head is bent to the right, while the right arm, held high, grasps a now lost *scyphos*. In the left hand he might have held a club. The face, with its large silver inlaid eyes and incised iris, seems to express a vague drunkenness, as does the posture of the head, framed by a thick curly beard. The small mouth, with open lips, is delimited by a long mustache. The flowing hair is characterized by plastic curls, carefully finished with a chisel. The nose is straight and broad at the basis, while the brow is characterized by over-orbital bumps.

The theme of Hercules defeated by wine seems to appear in the figural repertoire of the 2nd century AD, and had a wide success in the imperial period, especially in the glyptic, in statuettes and in the small ornamental sculpture. This statuette, with its plasticity and the emphasized muscular tension, can therefore be considered a work of the late Hellenistic period that appealed to the middle-class clients and the copyists of the 2nd half of the 1st century AD.

Fig. 3: *Aichmephóros* Alexander,
(Soprintendenza per i beni
archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna;
photo Roberto Macri).

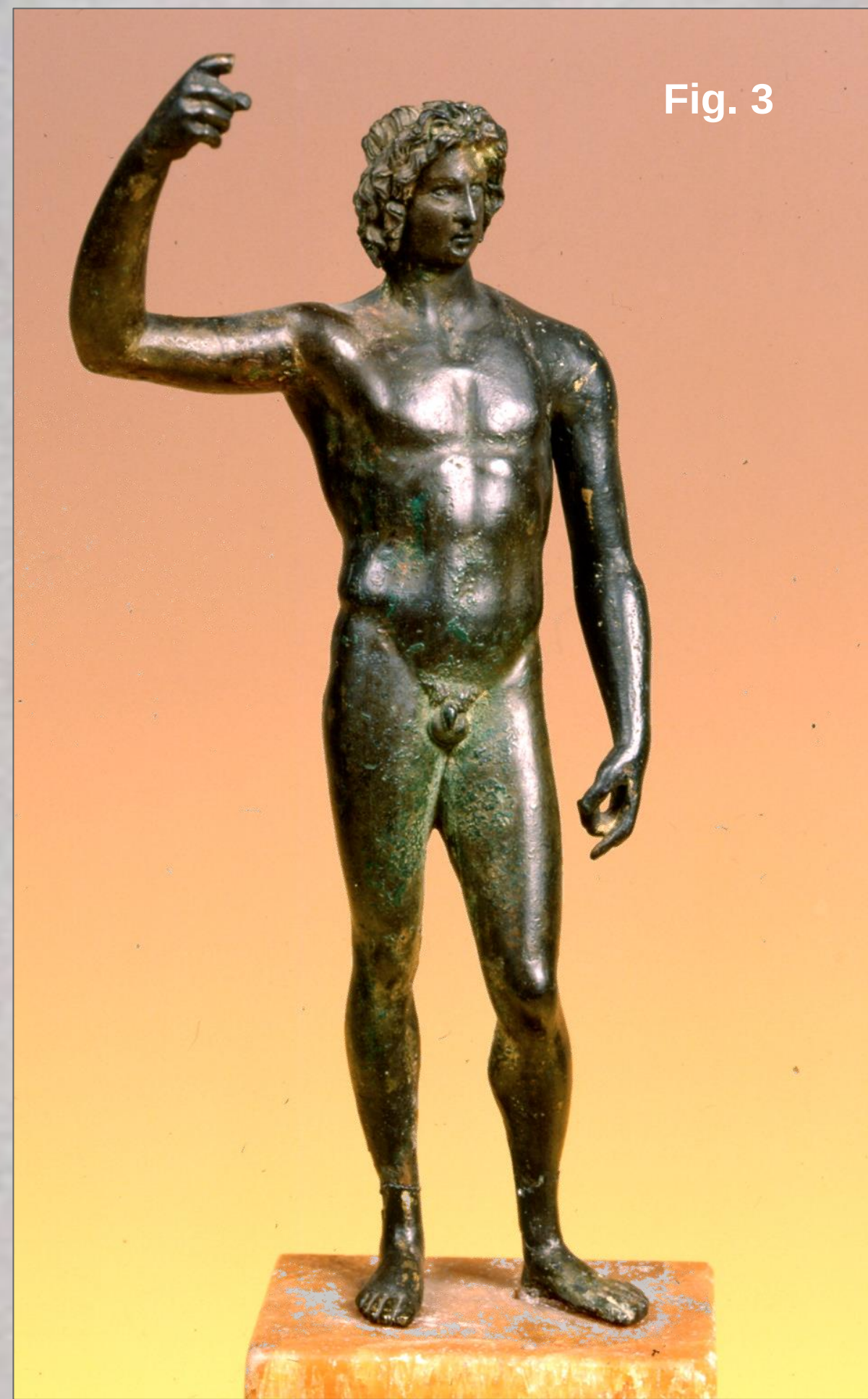


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Fig. 4: Dionysos, (Soprintendenza per i beni archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna; photo Roberto Macri).

Dionysos, i.n. B.3 (416); H cm 28

The bronze statuette represents a young standing Dionysos: he is naked except for the boots (*embades*) and the *nebris* and holds a thyrsus in the right hand, while the left seems to be leaning on a pillar (or trunk). The head, turned to the right, is framed by a lush mass of hair, held by ivy and grapes; elongated locks hang over the shoulders.

As already noted in the published bibliography of the piece, only a few parallels can be found in the small bronze production. As it is the case with many representations of the young Dionysos, the type seems to derive from the eclectic re-elaborated version of praxiteles elements. These can be recognized in the soft modelling of the shoulders, in the movement of the inferior part of the body and in the crossed pose of the legs. However, the massive aspect of the muscles of breast and thighs contrasts with these elements. The head can be compared with marble copies and ascribed to classicistic experiences of the first imperial age.

Aichmephóros Alexander, i.n. B.5 (423); total H.: cm 24

Alexander is represented standing on his proper right leg, while the left is bent forward. The right arm is laterally extended and the hand, placed higher than the head, originally held a spear. The left hand is lowered and perhaps carried a sword. The head is characterized by an evident torsion of the neck. The "inspired" eyes look upwards. The thick mass of hair forms the characteristic *anastolé* over the forehead. It is possible that the head was originally wearing a helmet as the groove around the top of the head is too deep for a simple *taenia*. The anatomical modelling of the torso and the muscles of upper and lower limbs is rather rigid. This type belongs to large group of replicas of the so-called Alexander with the spear, the much celebrated work of Lysippus, widely mentioned in the literary tradition. Iconographic characteristics, described in the literary sources - such as the neck torsion (a stratagem devised to hide his physical imperfection), the large eyes, looking upwards and the wavy hair mop over the forehead - seem to identify the statuette as depicting the Macedonian King. The small Roman copy (1st century AD) whose archetype traces back to the time of Alexander's conquests in Asia, despite its not excellent quality, can be appreciated for the ideological meaning of the subject.

Discussion of results

In the past the authenticity of the **Hercules** has been challenged and the low Pb had been taken as proof of a later date. 6% Pb is however perfectly compatible with Roman production. The alloy is well refined and with a high Sn content, the artisan clearly wished to obtain a golden colour. The XRF determined traces of Ag in the eyes, and also the nipples were inlaid. The only larger casting fault, between beard and neck, was filled with a bronze alloy and polished. The club was found recently on excavation. Its composition does not exactly match that of the statuette. This is not strange, because it was a separate casting, but it fits perfectly in the left hand, and the composition, with high Sn and low Pb, is very similar to that of the Hercules. Technically there is no reason to suppose that the piece is not Roman.

Analysis

The three statuettes were first autoptically examined, then under a microscope. As the pieces could not be sampled or removed from the museum, it was decided to employ a transportable X-ray fluorescence analyser, that allows to obtain satisfactory results in a totally non-destructive way. The measurements are carried out at a fixed angle and distance from the object. The measurement time for each spot is typically 15 minutes, but for explorative analyses it can be shorter and in case of problematic items it can be prolonged as necessary. The irradiated area has a diameter of approximately 1.5–2.0 mm, but the analysed spot can be smaller or larger as required by the size of the object and the surface texture. A wide range of elements is simultaneously quantified with a high degree of precision if proper standards and some caution are used. The comparison of previous analyses, carried out by AAS and XRF on the same samples, demonstrated that over 90% of the XRF results were well within $\pm 20\%$ of the corresponding AAS results. The calculated correlations for Sn and Pb, two of the most important alloying elements, range from 0.84 to 0.97. The standards employed have been expressly produced for the analysis of ancient metal alloys, and are as similar as possible to known alloys used in Antiquity.

VELEIA'S BRONZE COLLECTION												
Object	part	Cu	Sn	Zn	Pb	Sb	Mn	Ni	Fe	Co	As	Au
Hercules	shoulder	82,7	10,9	/	6,2	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
"	left hand	82,5	11,2	/	6,3	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
"	right hand	82,5	11,1	/	6,1	tr.	/	tr.	0,3	tr.	tr.	/
"	right leg	82,9	11,1	/	5,8	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
"	left leg	82,5	11,2	/	6,2	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
"	left eye	81,8	11,3	/	6,3	/	/	tr.	0,2	/	/	0,4
"	basis	82,7	11,3	/	5,9	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
club	top	78,7	10,6	/	10,7	tr.	/	tr.	tr.	/	tr.	/
Alexander	torso	63,9	5,4	/	29,9	tr.	tr.	tr.	0,4	/	tr.	/
"	left arm	53,8	2,8	37	4,2	/	/	/	2,2	/	/	/
"	right arm	60,5	5,5	/	32,4	tr.	/	tr.	0,5	/	tr.	/
"	left foot	60,5	5,3	/	34,1	tr.	/	tr.	0,1	/	tr.	/
"	right foot	52,6	2,3	38	5,6	/	/	/	1,8	/	/	/
"	head	63,8	5,3	/	30,5	tr.	/	/	0,4	/	tr.	/
Dyonisos	torso	65,6	9,8	/	24,3	/	tr.	tr.	0,3	tr.	tr.	/
"	right eye	65,9	9,9	/	23,6	tr.	/	/	0,2	/	/	0,3
"	left hand	69,1	10,1	/	20,5	tr.	/	tr.	0,3	tr.	/	/
"	right arm	69,5	9,9	/	20,3	tr.	tr.	tr.	0,3	tr.	tr.	/

The **Alexander** statuette is made of bronze with over 30% Pb and ca. 5% Sn, an alloy often used for Roman statuettes. The quality is not the best, the original colour was dark and lustreless, and the metal is weakened by the high Pb content. The left arm and the right foot of the statuette are a modern repair. They are made of a modern alloy, with ca.38% Zn, 5% Pb and 2.5% Sn. Because of the repair the left shoulder is much thicker than the right. The left arm was probably a separate casting, and went lost. Both feet were broken off, but the original left foot was soldered on the leg stump. The surface of the modern parts is covered by a dark paint. The face features are indistinct with several casting faults. The head is too small on the extremely thick neck, and seems to have been adapted by taking a cast from a slightly smaller statuette. The quality of the statuette is in general rather poor. The alloy of the **Dionysos** contains 10% Sn and 20% Pb, a common Roman composition for statuettes. The high Pb facilitates the casting by lowering the melting point. The alloy is dark, but also cheaper, and easier to work: the details are finely worked. The XRF identified silver on the eye. The few casting faults are repaired with almost invisible patches, and the finishing is careful in spite of the cheaper alloy. The statuette must have been produced by a skilled artisan in a well organised workshop.