

Veleia's Bronzes Collection: New Archaeological and Scientific Data and Interpretation

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Three bronze statuettes in the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale* of Parma, found in Veleia, a Roman town South of Piacenza, were recently re-examined. The statuettes, portraying Hercules, Dionysus and Alexander (all ca. 25 cm high), underwent several restorations and are well known to scholars. The collaboration between the *Centre d'Étude des Mondes Antiques* of the *Université catholique de Louvain*, the *Soprintendenza per i Beni archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna* and *AGM Archeoanalisi* allows the reconstruction of the context and production technology, as well as a discussion of the historical and artistic peculiarities of these pieces.

Key words: statuettes, bronze, composition, XRF, copies

1.1. Drunken Hercules, Inv. N. B.105 (418)

This statuette was found near the western *porticus* of the forum and belongs to the type *Hercules bibax*, a late Hellenistic variation of Lysippus' *Herakles Epitrapezios* (fig. 1). The bust leans back, the head is bent to the right, and the right arm grasps a now-lost *scyphus*. In the left hand he might have held a club. The face has silver inlaid eyes, and the open mouth is delimited by a mustache. The hair is characterized by curls. The theme of Hercules defeated by wine appears in the repertoire of the 2nd century A. D., and enjoyed wide success in the imperial period, especially in statuette form. This statuette can be considered a work of the late Hellenistic period that appealed to middle-class clients and copyists of the 2nd half of the 1st century A. D. (Cavalieri 2004).

1.2. «Aichmephóros Alexander», Inv. N. B.5 (423)

This figure stands on his right leg, while the left is bent forward. The right arm is laterally extended and the hand, higher than the head, originally held a spear. The left hand is lowered and perhaps carried a sword. The head is characterized by torsion in the neck; the "inspired" eyes look upwards (fig. 2). A mass of hair forms the characteristic *anastolé* over the forehead. He may have originally worn a helmet, as the groove around the top of the head is too deep for a simple *taenia*. The anatomical modeling of the torso and the muscles of the limbs is rather rigid. This type belongs to the group of replicas of Lysippos' celebrated statue, widely mentioned in the literary tradition, which depicts Alexander with a spear. Iconographic characteristics, such



Fig. 1. Drunken Hercules, Inv. N. B.105 (418).



Fig. 2. *Aichmephóros Alexander*, Inv. N. B.5 (423).

as the neck torsion, the large eyes looking upwards, and the wavy hair over the forehead, seem to identify the statuette as the Macedonian king (Moreno 1995; Rolley 1999). The small Roman copy (1st century A.D.) whose archetype traces back to Alexander's conquests in Asia, despite its inferior quality, can be appreciated for the ideological meaning of its subject (Cavaliere 2006).

1.3. *Dionysus*, Inv. N. B.3 (416)

The bronze statuette represents a young standing Dionysus (fig. 3), naked except for the boots (*embades*) and the *nebris*, with a *thyrsus* in the right hand, and the left hand leaning on a pillar (Pochmarsky 1974). The head, turned to the right, is framed by curly hair and ivy; long locks hang over the shoulders. The type seems to derive from eclectic, re-elaborated praxitellic elements, such as the soft modeling of the shoulders, the movement of the hips, and the crossed legs and, as already noted, only few similar examples can be found among the small bronzes productions. The massive chest and thighs muscles contrast with these elements. The head can be compared with marble copies and ascribed to classicistic experiences of the first imperial age.

2.1. Documentation

The journal of the excavations carried out at Veleia in the 18th century A.D. consists of loose, handwritten pages – now collated and chronologically ordered – in the Historical Archive of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale* of Parma. The journal reports information on one or more days of excavation, depending on the complexity of the work, and the importance of the finds. When a noteworthy item was discovered, its description was reported in the following days. This was also the case with the Hercules statuette. A still unpublished document now allows the exact identification of the context in which it was found. In the past, the circumstances of this discovery have sparked scientific discussion on the authenticity of the statuette. On the page with the entries from July 11 and 12, 1760, the excavator and compiler of the excavation journal for the Director, Antonio Costa, refers to the discovery of an “*idolo di bronzo*”, on July 10th, already sent to the court of the Duke of Parma with a letter and a map indicating the exact spot of its discovery. A second report, dated July 11 (Veleia, 1760 MS 44, 445) describes the discovery on the previous day of an “*idoletto*” with silver eyes representing an old man, i. e. Hercules, with a round, vessel-shaped “hat” in his hand. The report states that the statuette was found in the west of the forum, behind a *mensa* and in front of the *tabernae*. In the unpublished excavation report of Veleia by Costa (MS 49), the location of the discovery is indicated on the map of the year 1760. In the drawings, Hercules is represented on the round molded pedestal found next to the statuette. All documents are therefore coherent with the unpublished excavation journal and demonstrate that the Hercules was found in Veleia on July 10, 1760. The mention of a round hat suggests that he was holding a *skyphos*; a fragment of its rim is still recognizable in the right hand of the statuette.

2.2.

On September 6, 1776, both Alexander and Dionysus were found in the structure of a *domus*. The first is described as a naked Phoebus with wreath-like hair and missing the left arm and right foot, and with a bent left foot (MS 47, 34). The second is described as Bacchus, leaning on a tree-stump, with a partly covered chest and vines clinging on the right arm. The right foot and some fingers of the left hand were broken (MS 47, 34).

3. Methods

The statuettes were first examined under a microscope. As they could not be sampled or removed from the museum, a non-destructive transportable X-ray fluorescence analyser was employed using special software for the analysis of ancient metals. This method allows a large number of elements to be quantified simultaneously with a high

degree of precision, assuming proper standards are used (Lutz et al. 1996).

4. Discussions

Previously, the authenticity of the Drunken Hercules was challenged and some analyses were carried out (D'Andria 1970, 34–36; 134–135; Kenfield 1976; Nicholls 1982). The low lead content was taken as proof of a late date, but, as shown by research on Roman statuettes (Beck et al. 1985; Condamin & Boucher 1973; Giumlia-Mair 2002; Picon et al. 1966–1968; Rabeisen & Menu 1985; Riederer 2002; Thomas 2002), ca. 6% lead is perfectly compatible with Roman production. The alloy is well refined, with a high tin content to achieve a golden colour. High lead contents render the alloy dark and prone to tarnishing. The surface is well polished. The analyses determined traces of silver in the eyes and the nipples are also inlaid. The object shows only tiny casting faults, and looks like the work of a skilled artisan. The only larger casting fault, between the beard and neck, was carefully repaired. The statuette comes from old excavations, but the club was found in recent years. Its composition does not exactly match that of the statuette, but as it is a separate casting this is not unusual. The shape of the club fits perfectly in the left hand of the statuette, and its composition, with high tin and low lead, is similar to that of Hercules. Technically there is no reason to suppose that the piece is not Roman; the doubts were therefore exclusively of stylistic nature.

The Alexander leaning on a spear contains over 30% lead and ca. 5% tin. Such alloys were used for statuettes in imperial times (Riederer 2002, 296, 10). The quality is not the best, as the metal is dark and lustreless. The structure is weakened by the lead, which is not soluble in copper and forms globules in the metal, rendering it fragile. The left arm and the right foot of the statuette are a modern repair with ca 38% zinc, ca. 5% lead and 2.5% tin, also recognisable because of the incorrect proportion of the left shoulder, much thicker than the other. The lost left arm was probably a separate casting. Both feet were broken off, but the original left foot was soldered onto the leg stump after discovery. The modern parts were covered with dark paint. The face features are indistinct and blurred, with undisguised casting faults. Alexander's *anastolé* is cursorily represented, without any details. The head is too small on the thick neck, and seems to have been adapted by taking a cast from a smaller statuette. The right hand shows the attachment of the crudely cut casting channel. The quality of the statuette is in general rather poor.

The alloy of the Dionysus statuette contains ca. 10% tin and ca. 20% lead, a common Roman composition for statuettes. The high lead content facilitates the casting and lowers the melting point. The alloy is dark, but also cheap and easy to file and drill. The analysis identified traces of



silver on the right eye. The casting faults were repaired with almost invisible patches, and the finishing was careful. The statuette was produced by a skilled artisan in a well-organised workshop.

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