**[title]The Paramythia Bronzes: Expressions of Cultural Identity in Roman Epirus**

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[A-head]Abstract

[abstract]

In the British Museum is a collection of statuettes known as the Paramythia bronzes, named after the place of their discovery near Paramythia, Epirus, Greece, ca. 1792. The statuettes depict various deities including a Roman *lar* figure, and therefore they presumably once belonged to a *lararium* (a Roman household shrine). It is likely that the bronze statuettes originated in a Roman villa situated in or near the ancient Roman colony of Photike, which is located a short distance from Paramythia. The bronze hoard provides valuable evidence for the presence of Roman settlers in Epirus, and more importantly informs us about Roman domestic cult activities in the Roman province of Achaea. Additionally, the bronzes may be interpreted as symbols, which served to project and reinforce the cultural and ethnic identity of the Roman householder.

[A-head]Introduction

[main text]

This paper will focus on a hoard of bronze statuettes found near Paramythia (Epirus) at the end of the eighteenth century (**figs. 16.1–14**).[[1]](#endnote-1) It is appropriate to review these bronzes in light of recent scholarship on Roman Greece and current discussions regarding aspects of Roman identity.[[2]](#endnote-2) A reappraisal of the Paramythia material can contribute to recent deliberations concerning how material culture, in particular personal items, might reflect and reinforce the patron’s social and cultural identity. With this focus in mind, I will discuss some of the recent scholarly and archaeological investigations of Roman Epirus, specifically the Roman colony of Photike, which is where the Paramythia bronzes were said to have originated. Although the specific findspot of the bronzes has been lost, the statuettes most likely came from a Roman house or villa judging from the predominantly Roman character of the finds from Photike. This paper will conclude with a brief discussion of the subject matter of the bronzes (i.e., the deities represented), and with consideration of how the villa owner might have utilized these bronzes as a means to project and reinforce his or her Roman identity.

[A-head]Discovery of the Bronze Statuettes

At the end of the eighteenth century, local inhabitants living around the modern Greek town of Paramythia discovered approximately twenty bronze statuettes in a “dry sandbank”; they were subsequently taken to Ioannina purportedly to be sold as scrap metal.[[3]](#endnote-3) Fortunately, a Greek merchant noticed them and, recalling that he had seen similar works of art in Moscow, sent some of the statuettes to St. Petersburg to be sold.[[4]](#endnote-4) The bronzes were purchased by various collectors, but by 1904 the majority had been donated to the British Museum (see Appendix).

Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824), who had acquired twelve of the statuettes, dated the bronzes to the second century BC, believing that they had been buried for safekeeping prior to the Roman invasion of Epirus in 167 BC.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, the presence of a Roman household deity—a *lar* (see **fig. 16.12**)—clearly indicates that the hoard must be Roman in date. Later scholars, including Karl Anton Neugebauer and Luigi Beschi, proposed that they should be dated to the Hadrianic or Antonine period, respectively.[[6]](#endnote-6) N. G. L. Hammond and Judith Swaddling provided further information on the origin of the bronzes, demonstrating that they originated from ancient Photike (a Roman site) and were once part of a *lararium*.[[7]](#endnote-7)

[A-head]The Findspot: Contextualizing the Bronzes

Today, this group of bronzes is commonly referred to as the Paramythia Hoard due to the misconception that they were discovered at Paramythia. In 1809, William Martin Leake, a British military man and antiquarian, visited Paramythia and clarified that the bronzes in fact had been discovered just outside of that town.[[8]](#endnote-8) He described a valley located to the north of Paramythia, “watered by one of the tributaries of the Vuvó” (i.e. Kokytos River), where a village named Lábovo once stood (**figs. 16.15–16**). There he observed some architectural fragments as well as broken pottery in neighboring fields. Hammond, who extensively explored Epirus from 1929 to 1939, clarifies the findspot of the bronzes further by connecting Lábovo with the modern site of Liboni (also spelled Limboni).[[9]](#endnote-9) Liboni has not been excavated, but a number of inscriptions have been found in the vicinity that identify the site as the ancient city of Photike.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Photike was a Roman colony founded in the first century BC by either Julius Caesar or Augustus.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is situated at an important crossroads with access to the Kalamas River to the north, the Acheron River to the south, and a mountain pass leading east to Dodona and Ioannina (see **fig. 16.15**).[[12]](#endnote-12) In addition to having an advantageous geographic location, the area has long been considered to be especially fertile. The climate and landscape are well suited to pastoralism, and in antiquity Epirus was famed for the quality of its livestock (**figs. 16.17–18**).[[13]](#endnote-13) The varied terrain could support a broad array of foodstuffs and goods; in addition to livestock, the region is suitable for the cultivation of apple, pear, olive, and almond trees; wheat, barley, and pulses; and is abundant in a variety of timber species: holm oak, poplar, willow, and pine.[[14]](#endnote-14) It is therefore not surprising that after the sack and devastation of the area by Romans under Aemilius Paullus in 167 BC (including the enslavement of 150,000 inhabitants),[[15]](#endnote-15) the territory experienced an influx of Roman settlers who took advantage of the economically stricken region.[[16]](#endnote-16) Roman immigration to northern Epirus took place as early as the third century BC,[[17]](#endnote-17) and Roman colonies were established at Butrint, Nikopolis, and Photike in the second half of the first century BC.[[18]](#endnote-18) Archaeological excavations and surveys, most recently the Thesprotia Expedition conducted by the Finnish Institute at Athens,[[19]](#endnote-19) have uncovered evidence of Roman settlers in the Kokytos Valley to the south of Paramythia, including inscriptions,[[20]](#endnote-20) farmsteads, and a villa.[[21]](#endnote-21) The Roman villa, located at Agios Donatos of Zervochori, is situated approximately 9 kilometers (5 miles) south of Paramythia and therefore is unlikely to have been the origin of the Paramythia bronzes.[[22]](#endnote-22) In his discussion of Thesprotia during the Roman and Late Antique periods, William Bowden has suggested that, as at Roman Butrint, rich suburban villas were likely situated in and around Photike; he further proposes that the Paramythia bronzes once belonged to such a villa.[[23]](#endnote-23)

We are further informed of Roman settlers in Epirus through literary sources, specifically Cicero in his letters to his friend Titus Pomponius Atticus, and Varro, who wrote an agricultural treatise in which he often referenced large estate holders in Epirus.[[24]](#endnote-24) We learn from Cicero and Cornelius Nepos that Atticus had acquired property in Epirus, notably a villa at Buthrotum (Butrint) and property on Corcyra.[[25]](#endnote-25) Varro speaks more generally of Roman settlers in the region, referring to them as *Synepirotae* (fellow citizens of Epirus), and he playfully refers to two Romans—Atticus and Cossinius—as *semi-graeci pastores* (half-Greek shepherds).[[26]](#endnote-26) The *Synepirotae*, however, were not simple farmers; they were *Epirotici pecuariae athletae* (cattle-raising champions of Epirus),[[27]](#endnote-27) noted for their wealth, the size of their estates, and their focus on animal husbandry, considered to be a rich man’s hobby.[[28]](#endnote-28) We should imagine that the Paramythia bronzes, which must have cost a considerable sum of money, once decorated the villa of one of these wealthy Roman settlers.

The region of Epirus recovered economically under the Pax Romana with growth and expansion visible in and around Butrint and perhaps also at Nikopolis and Photike.[[29]](#endnote-29) Survey results from the Thesprotia Expedition indicate that settlements in the Kokytos Valley continued to increase in number into the fifth century AD;[[30]](#endnote-30) however, there are signs of growing unrest in the region beginning in the middle of the third century AD.[[31]](#endnote-31) Sometime around AD 250, the Roman villa at Agios Donatos (Zervochori) and a farmstead located on the hill of Mastilitsa next to delta of the Kalamas River were abandoned.[[32]](#endnote-32) Furthermore, a number of inhabitants in Epirus took pains to safeguard some of their wealth by hoarding coins; four hoards have been found in the region ranging in date from AD 193–268 and were likely buried over fears of the Herulian invasion of Greece in AD 267.[[33]](#endnote-33) It is likely for this reason that the Paramythia bronzes were buried.

[A-head]The Bronze Statuettes: Function and Iconography

Bronze statuettes from Roman Greece are relatively rare, and thus far there is little evidence of Greek inhabitants adopting Roman domestic cult practices.[[34]](#endnote-34) During the period of Roman rule, Greeks continued to venerate their traditional household gods, particularly Aphrodite, Dionysos, and Herakles, as well as new and foreign gods including Cybele, Asklepios, Isis, and Serapis. By contrast, the Paramythia bronzes are much more representative of Roman domestic cult practices.[[35]](#endnote-35) The inclusion of a *lar* statuette (see **fig. 16.12**) strongly suggests that the owner was Roman, and many of the Paramythia bronzes depict deities that were commonly venerated in Roman houses and villas (notably Jupiter and Neptune, see **figs. 16.1 and 16.9**). The presence of the Apollo, Hercules, and Pan may be due to the popularity of local cults, such as those at Nikopolis.[[36]](#endnote-36) More unusual is the Paramythia Isis-Aphrodite figure (see **fig. 16.5**), which belongs to a series of bronze statuettes more commonly found in the eastern Mediterranean.[[37]](#endnote-37) In Roman Egypt, written and archaeological evidence indicates that Aphrodite statuettes formed part of a woman’s dowry taken to the home of her new husband.[[38]](#endnote-38) In Syria, Isis-Aphrodite was associated with Astarte, and in the Roman period, there was a tradition of burying a woman with a statuette of Aphrodite or Astarte beneath her head.[[39]](#endnote-39) It is certainly possible that a member from the Photike household to which the Paramythia bronzes belonged was of Syrian or Egyptian heritage.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Earlier scholars have often referred to the gods represented in the Paramythia hoard by their Greek names and have attempted to associate the bronzes with local Greek cults at nearby Dodona. With the realization that the Paramythia bronzes are Roman, it is necessary to adjust our interpretation of the statuettes and the deities they represent. Depictions of gods and goddesses may convey very different meanings or ideas to individuals of diverse historical and cultural backgrounds. Rather than examine these statuettes solely within the framework of a Greek cultural context, we should explore how they might be interpreted as symbols of Roman identity. It should not be surprising that Romans living abroad would desire to maintain cultural ties to their homeland by surrounding themselves with references to *Romanitas*, which might range from the design of their villas, the inclusion of Roman style mosaics and wall-paintings, the utilization of Roman-made ceramics and glass, and the display and veneration of their household gods. From the time of the Republic, the retention of Roman customs and traditions was especially important for Romans living abroad, who were considered to be at risk from the corrupting influences of contemporary Greek society.[[41]](#endnote-41) With increased contact with the Greek world, a number of Roman writers developed xenophobic views of contemporary Greeks, condemning them for a number of perceived character flaws: excessive talkativeness, immoderation, arrogance, rashness, deceit, and a lack of manliness (from living a soft, luxurious lifestyle).[[42]](#endnote-42) Romans living or stationed abroad (especially in Greek lands) were deemed especially vulnerable, exposed as they were to the deleterious effects of the alleged luxurious lifestyle of indolent Greeks.[[43]](#endnote-43) We are reminded again of Varro’s comments regarding Romans living in Epirus, referring to them as “Greeks,” which implies a certain ambiguity regarding their cultural and political bonds with Rome.[[44]](#endnote-44) Certainly, the Roman owner of the Paramythia bronzes prized these objects because they represented his or her household gods, which ensured the prosperity and success of the family household, but they also must have projected and reinforced the owner’s Roman identity, to Greek and Roman visitors alike. They would have served as reminders of Roman ethnicity and emphasized the religious and cultural connections to the owner’s homeland, which might have been called into question if the family had resided in Greece for multiple generations.

[A-head]Conclusions

Although discovered over two hundred years ago, the Paramythia bronzes still have much to reveal not only about the character of Roman domestic cult practices in Roman Epirus but also as evidence for how Romans strove have maintained a sense of Roman identity while living abroad. There are very few signs that Greeks living under Roman rule were interested in adopting Roman domestic cult practices, so the display of bronze statuettes in *lararia* must have been a remarkable sight in Roman Greece, one that immediately proclaimed the status and identity of the owner. While recent archaeological work has added to our knowledge of major Roman sites in Epirus (e.g., Butrint and Nikopolis) with some attention directed to determining the extent of the Roman cultural stamp placed on these cities, it is worth considering the personal experience of an expatriate Roman family and the measures it took to maintain and promote a Roman identity. During a period of unrest and insecurity—perhaps the Herulian invasion of Greece in AD 267—the owner of these bronze statuettes took great pains to safeguard them. They were not just objects of great monetary value but important symbols of status and identity. Today, they are worthy of reexamination as they add immensely to our understanding of the interrelationships between Romans and Greeks, both artistically and culturally, in Roman Epirus.

[A-head]Acknowledgments

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[A-head]Appendix: List of the Paramythia Bronzes

[main text]

In the collection of the British Museum, with current acquisition and catalogue numbers from Walters’s 1899 catalogue. With the exception of no. 5, the identifications are taken from Judith Swaddling’s 1979 paper.

Donated by Richard Payne Knight:

[numbered list]

1. Neptune (?) (inv. 1824,0453.4; Walters no. 274) (originally identified as a Jupiter[[45]](#endnote-45)) (fig. 16.1)

2. Apollo (inv. 1824,0405.2; Walters no. 272) (fig. 16.2)

3. Serapis (inv. 1824,0478.1; Walters no. 276) (fig. 16.3)

4. Castor (inv. 1824,0429.1; Walters no. 277) (fig. 16.4)

5. Isis-Aphrodite (inv. 1824,0428.1; Walters no. 279) (originally identified as a Dione) (fig. 16.5)

6. Venus (inv. 1824,0490.4; Walters no. 280) (fig. 16.6)

7. Ram with Odysseus (inv. 1824,0473.1; Walters no. 1446) (fig. 16.7)

8. Relief with face of Apollo as sun god (inv. 1824,0405.3; Walters no. 273) (fig. 16.8)

9. Jupiter (inv. 1824,0453.5; Walters no. 275)[[46]](#endnote-46) (fig. 16.9)

10. Arm from a statuette (inv. 1824,0453.6; Walters no. 281.1) (fig. 16.10)

11. Bull’s hoof and fetlock (inv. 1824,0415.11; Walters no. 281.2) (fig. 16.11)

12. *Lar* (inv. 1824,0437.2; Walters no. 278) (originally identified as a Ganymede) (fig. 16.12)

[end numbered list]

[break]

Donated by John Hawkins:

[numbered list]

13. Mirror-case relief depicting Aphrodite and Anchises (inv. 1904,702.1) (fig. 16.13)[[47]](#endnote-47)

14. Mercury (1904,1010.1) (fig. 16.14)

[end numbered list]

[break]

Belonging to the Czernicheff family[[48]](#endnote-48) (acquired in St. Petersburg; current locations unknown):

[numbered list]

15. Jupiter

16. Faun

17. Cupid

18. Hekataion

19. Draped female figure with diadem (Juno?)

[end numbered list]

[break]

Owner / location unknown:

[numbered list]

20. Hercules

[end numbered list]

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1. Society of Dilettanti 1835, lxiv–lxvii; Walters 1899, xiv, 36–38; Swaddling 1979. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On Roman cultural identity and ethnicity, see in particular Laurence and Berry 1998; McInerney 2014; Woolf 1998; Swift 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dallaway 1816, 357; Society of Dilettanti1835, lxv; Edwards 1870, 407; Walters 1899, xiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Society of Dilettanti1835, lxv; Edwards 1870, 407. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Society of Dilettanti1835, lxvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Neugebauer 1921, 113; Beschi 1966–67, 49, n. 9; see Hill 1979, 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hammond 1967, 73–74 and 579–80; Swaddling 1979, 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Leake 1835, 62–63. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hammond 1967, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Samsaris 1994, 17–19; Sironen 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Dakaris 1972, 197; Rizakis 1996, 271–72; Samsaris 1994, 20–22, 113–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Forsén 2009b, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hammond 1967, 40–41; Nelsestuen 2015, 124–25. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Dakaris 1971, 12–15; Bowden 2003, 9–12. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Polybius 30.15; Strabo 7.7.3; Livy 45.34.5–6; Plutarch *Aemilius Paulus* 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Alcock 1993, 75; Cabanes 1997, 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Cabanes 1997, 124; Karatzeni 2001, 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hatzopoulos 1980, 100–101. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Forsén 2009b; Forsén and Tikkala 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Hatzopoulos 1980; Sironen 2009; Samsaris 1994, 113–40. According to Hatzopoulos 1980, 101, of the 27 inscriptions found in the vicinity, 74.1 percent are in Latin, 25.0 percent are in Greek. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Karatzeni 2001; Forsén et al. 2011; Forsén and Reynolds 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Forsén 2011, 17–19. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Bowden 2009, 169–71. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cicero *Epistulae ad Atticum* 1.5.7; 14.20.2; Varro *De re rustica* 2.1.2; 2.5.1. See also Dakaris 1972, 196; Karatzeni 2001, 171; Nelsestuen 2015, 127–29; [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cicero *Epistulae ad Atticum* 14.20.2; Cornelius Nepos *Atticus* 14.3; Hansen 2011, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Varro *De re rustica* 2.1.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Varro *De re rustica* 2.1.2; 2.5.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Alcock 1993, 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Bowden 2009, 169–70. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Forsén 2011, 21–27. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Karatzeni 2001, 164 and 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Forsén 2011, 17, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Karatzeni 2001, 164; Calomino 2011, 314–16. Epirus may have escaped the devastation caused by the invaders elsewhere, but the inhabitants apparently took precautions to safeguard their wealth: Wozniak 1987, 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Sharpe 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Orr 1978. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Tzouvara-Souli 1987. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hekler 1911, 117. Additionally, the copper, lead, and tin content of the statuette (65% Cu, 30% Pb, and 3% Sn) is markedly different from the other statuettes: Swaddling 1979, 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Burkhalter 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Piot 1878, 57; de Ridder 1905, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Mixed marriages might have been frowned upon but they were not uncommon: Treggiari 1991, 45–49; Phang 2001, 190, 332. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Braund 1998, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Petrochilos 1974, 35–53; Isaac 2004, 381–405. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Petrochilos 1974, 70–71; Livy 34.4.4; Diodorus Siculus 31.26.7; Dio Cassius 29.64. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Nelsestuen 2015, 124–30. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Society of Dilettanti 1835, lxv. Misattributed to the Townley Collection: Walters 1899, 36, no. 274. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Purchased in London from Thomas Amaxari, a Greek dragoman to the Turkish Ambassador; Society of Dilettanti 1835, lxv–lxvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. The mirror dates to the fourth century BC and therefore is unlikely to be part of the original Paramythia hoard. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Society of Dilettanti 1835, xlv–xlvi. In personal records, Richard Payne Knight (Knight MS n.d.) indicates that these five bronzes, in addition to an arm fragment (no. 10?) once belonged to Count Golovkin; Swaddling 1979, 103, identifies nos. 15–20 as belonging to Count Golowkin [sic]. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)