

ATHENA PARTHENOS IN LIVERPOOL

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Abstract: A terracotta figurine depicting Athena Parthenos, which is in the collections of the University of Liverpool and previously dated to the Roman period, is argued to have been made in the 19th century. The premise is based on the object's close stylistic similarities to 19th-century terracotta figurines in collections in Manchester and Geneva, leading to the conclusion that all three were made from the same mould, and accordingly are of the same date. The note also considers possible reasons for the manufacture of this series of terracotta figurines depicting Athena Parthenos.

Keywords: Athena Parthenos, Garstang Museum, figurine, terracotta

The collections of the Garstang Museum at the University of Liverpool include a terracotta figurine with the attributes of the renowned statue of Athena Parthenos, which has the accession number C519 (fig. 1). The Garstang Museum's records do not include any acquisition details for C519, and there are no other sources of information as to its provenance. It can be supposed, however, that, along with many of the objects in the classical collection, approximately 1,000 in number,¹ it was acquired either as a purchase or as a donation to supplement the museum's teaching collection of items from the prehistoric Aegean, Greek and Roman worlds. The assembly of the teaching collection of classical objects began in 1906, when Robert Carr Bosanquet was appointed to the chair in Classical Archaeology at Liverpool. Bosanquet presented mainly prehistoric Aegean material acquired either through his own excavations or through his travels in Greece and via dealers in Athens.² The figurine has been catalogued as dating to the Roman period. I shall argue here that it should be re-dated to the 19th century.

The figurine is mould-made from coarse orange-brown clay, with a vent hole in the base. It is 192mm high, with a maximum width of 85mm. The figurine is not complete, as the head of Nike, standing on Athena's right hand, is no longer present. The detail of Athena's aegis is well preserved on both front and back (fig. 2). A snake is depicted on the inside of her shield, with a protrusion, presumably intended to depict the shield's arm-band, shown between the first and second coil of the snake (fig. 3). The outer shield design shows a large Gorgon's head, surrounded by rays, presumably indicating hair (fig. 4).

In terms of artistic style and material, the object bears a marked resemblance to figurines in the collections of Manchester Museum³ and the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva.⁴ It has been concluded that both these figurines were made in the 19th century rather than in the Roman period.⁵

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¹ Winker (2000) 15.

² Mee and Doole (1993) x.

³ Manchester Museum 20,001. This figurine was initially published in Prag (1972), with references to previous scholarship on the Athena Parthenos and copies of the original, with a further note in 1983 co-authored with S.G.E. Bowman: Prag and Bowman (1983).

⁴ Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire 7464; Prag (1972) pl. XXI; Leipen (1981) fig. 45. Unfortunately, I was not able to travel to Geneva to study this figurine.

⁵ Prag and Bowman (1983).



Fig. 1. Figurine depicting Athena Parthenos, Garstang Museum C519, University of Liverpool (courtesy of the Garstang Museum, University of Liverpool).

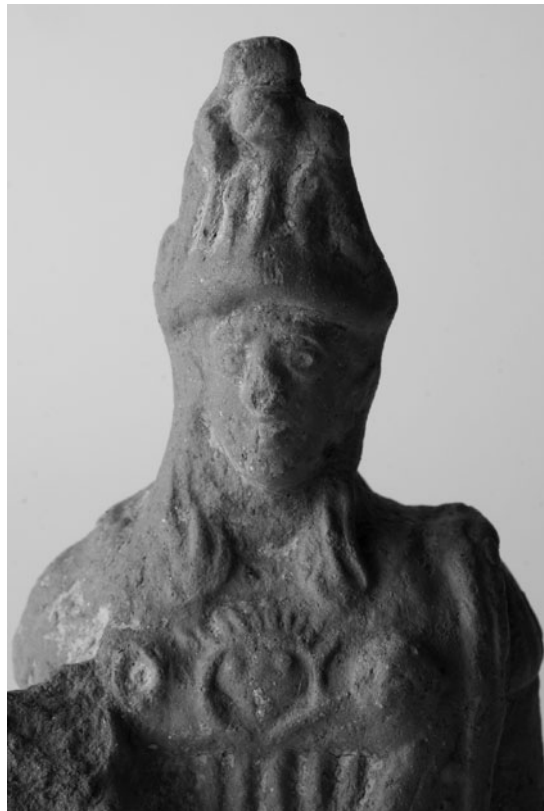


Fig.2. Detail of aegis, Garstang Museum C519, University of Liverpool (courtesy of the Garstang Museum, University of Liverpool).



Fig. 3. Detail of shield, Garstang Museum C519, University of Liverpool (courtesy of the Garstang Museum, University of Liverpool).



Fig. 4. Detail of shield, Garstang Museum C519, University of Liverpool (courtesy of the Garstang Museum, University of Liverpool).

Study of the Liverpool and Manchester figurines suggests that they are similar in terms of their material, their dimensions⁶ and the details of the aegis, dress and shield, including the ‘cross-bones’⁷ below the Gorgon’s chin, a somewhat schematic rendering of a pair of snakes. Perhaps the strongest evidence that both figurines came from the same mould is the presence of a column on the right in both cases, supporting the figure of Nike, each with concentric bands, representing mouldings, five at the base and three at the top of the column. Minor discrepancies, particularly a second step at the base of the Manchester figurine as opposed to the single step of the Liverpool example, are likely to be the result of gradual wear of the mould, caused by repeated use. Similar loss of detail caused by the over-use of moulds can also be seen, for example, in examples of terracotta female heads dating to the fifth century BC in the collection of the British School at Athens.⁸

The probability of the figurine in Liverpool being from the same mould as those in Manchester and Geneva is very high. There is a terracotta figurine of Athena Parthenos in Exeter that is almost exactly the same size and similar in style to those in Liverpool, Manchester and Geneva.⁹ However, despite the similarities, this figurine is not definitely from the same mould. It too was most likely made in the 19th century.

Scientific dating has not proved to be of assistance in providing a date range for the terracotta Athena Parthenos figurines. Thermoluminescence (TL) testing conducted at the British Museum on the figurines in Manchester and Exeter proved inconclusive,¹⁰ and, in view of this, it was decided not to request destructive sampling of the figurine in Liverpool to enable TL testing to be conducted.

A question that remains is the motivation for the manufacture of this series of figurines of Athena Parthenos. It is attested in literary sources that the Classical sites of Athens were visited during the Roman period, including by Pausanias, who travelled to Athens in the second century AD and described the Athena Parthenos statue.¹¹ This colossal statue was copied on a smaller scale in the Roman period. Indeed, it was initially assumed that the terracotta figurines in this series were made as souvenirs in the Roman period.

However, there is an equally plausible motivation for their manufacture in the 19th century. As well as a relief, now in Berlin, discovered in 1857,¹² which follows the general form of the terracotta figurines in Manchester, Geneva and Exeter, and now the example in Liverpool, the figurines show marked similarities with the statuette known as the Varvakeion Athena,¹³ dated to the early third century AD.

The impact of the discovery of the Varvakeion Athena in Athens in 1880 is apparent from the production of casts of the statuette made shortly after it was excavated.¹⁴ An example was purchased in 1881 by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge from Napoleone F. Martinelli of Athens, and transferred to the Museum of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge in 1884.¹⁵ An apparent discrepancy exists between the reputed discovery of the Athena Parthenos figurine in Geneva and the excavation of the Varvakeion statuette, although Prag has noted that it is by no means certain that the Geneva figurine was found in Switzerland in 1870,¹⁶ a decade

⁶ The slight height difference between the two figurines, 192mm for the Liverpool example compared to 190mm for the Manchester example, can be explained by the top of the helmet crest of the latter figurine no longer being present.

⁷ Prag (1972) 100.

⁸ Pisani (2006) 281 n. 84, 315–16 nos 52, 53, pl. 25e–f.

⁹ Exeter, Royal Albert Memorial Museum 5/1946/778; Prag (1972) pl. XXII; Leipen (1981) fig. 45

¹⁰ Prag and Bowman (1983) 153–54.

¹¹ Paus. 1.24.5–7.

¹² References in Prag (1972) 108 n. 73 and Prag and Bowman (1983) 153 n. 14.

¹³ Athens, National Archaeological Museum 129.

¹⁴ This date is from the records of the National Archeological Museum, Athens; the date of discovery of 1859, cited by two contributors, C. Mattusch and D.A. Traill, to de Grummond (1996) 102, 672, is incorrect and apparently a conflation with the ‘Lenormant Athens’ (Athens, National Archaeological Museum 128).

¹⁵ Cambridge, University of Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology 145.

¹⁶ Prag and Bowman (1983) 153.

before the Varvakeion statuette was excavated in Athens. It is possible that this figurine, together with those in Liverpool, Manchester and Exeter, was made after 1880, a period when more overseas visitors were travelling to Athens. The company Thomas Cook and Son began conducting tours to Athens in 1868,¹⁷ although visitors were warned of dangers of violent robbery.¹⁸ However, the establishment of a branch office of Thomas Cook and Son in Athens in 1883 indicates that travel to Greece was perceived as becoming safer and the country more accessible.¹⁹ It is against this background of increased tourism to the renowned Classical sites in Greece that the small-scale terracotta figurines of Athena Parthenos previously discussed were apparently made, including the example in Liverpool. In particular, the discovery of the Varvakeion statuette in Athens in 1880 may have sparked an interest in the acquisition of smaller-scale versions of this impressive object.

The realization that the Liverpool figurine of Athena Parthenos is from the same mould as the Manchester and Geneva examples leads to the conclusion that the date of the Liverpool example must be the same, namely the 19th century, rather than the Roman period.

The late 19th century saw a revival of interest in the collection of objects from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, a prime example being terracotta figurines found in graves at Tanagra in Boeotia, central Greece, where excavations took place in the 1870s, not all officially sanctioned.²⁰ The demand from collectors was particularly high for figurines depicting females, dating to the third and second centuries BC, many of which still retained their pigment,²¹ and usually referred to by the term 'Tanagra figurines'. However, the relative scarcity of intact Tanagra figurines led to the practice of dealers putting together fragments of unrelated figurines, adding new material where necessary, with substantial over-painting, thus creating 'new' objects. Furthermore, as early as 1876, complete forgeries of figurines were to be found on the Athenian art market,²² a demand which increased following a well-received display of Tanagra figurines included in the Exposition Universelle, held at the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris in 1878.²³ The copying, albeit much less accurate and in a cheaper medium, of the Varvakeion statuette can be seen as a further manifestation of the interest on the part of late 19th-century collectors in acquiring classical antiquities. Moreover, an argument can be made that the purchasers of small objects such as forged Tanagra figurines and the related 'terracottas of Asia Minor', made in Athens in the 1880s,²⁴ thought they were genuine antiquities, whereas smaller versions of large-scale sculptures could only have been replicas, irrespective of the date of their manufacture. It is plausible that the terracotta figurines of Athena Parthenos were intended to be accepted by modern purchasers, whether private individuals or museums, as roughly contemporary with the Varvakeion Athena, namely, made in the Roman period as copies of the fifth-century BC statue of Athena Parthenos. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the Athena Parthenos figurine in Liverpool was initially catalogued as 'Roman'. The 19th-century replication of statuettes based on the Athena Parthenos statue was not confined to terracottas. Scientific analyses conducted in the 1980s on two bronze figurines with elements of the Athena Parthenos statues, one in the British Museum in London²⁵ and the other in the collections of what is now National Museums Liverpool (World Museum),²⁶ indicated that the London figurine was early Roman in date whereas that in Liverpool was likely to have been made in the late 19th century.²⁷

¹⁷ Harlan (2009) 423.

¹⁸ The 'Dilessi Murders', or 'Marathon Murders', the killing by 'brigands' of one Italian and three British subjects, which took place at Marathon in 1870, are discussed by Harlan (2009) 423.

¹⁹ Harlan (2009) 425.

²⁰ Higgins (1986) 64.

²¹ Jones (1990) 169.

²² Higgins (1986) 163–66.

²³ Higgins (1986) 163.

²⁴ Higgins (1986) 170.

²⁵ London, British Museum reg. no. 9. GR 1873.8-20.45.

²⁶ Liverpool, National Museums Liverpool (World Museum) 49.18.38.

²⁷ Prag and Swaddling (1988).

It is to be hoped that this note will revive interest in the small group of terracotta figurines depicting the Athena Parthenos statue. Moreover, it may encourage museums to look again at their collections to locate other small-scale figurines depicting the Athena Parthenos statue, created to satisfy the ongoing demand for souvenirs of the most renowned statues of the fifth century BC, whether in the Roman period or as late as the 19th century.

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