

When is a Chinese god not a Chinese god? When he's Hercules, of course!

This may sound like a cryptic riddle with an answer so obscure that it's meaningless, but it isn't. It's a tale of misidentification from 1926. On 29 July in that year, Walter Whiting, the manager of Barclays Bank in Hitchin High Street, loaned a collection of 67 antiquities to Letchworth Museum (accession numbers 1926.3656 to 1926.3708) on behalf of a client. Walter and his wife Marion lived above the bank, with their children and household servants.

Most of the objects loaned to Letchworth Museum came from a Roman burial ground discovered at Foxholes, on the Pirton Road in Hitchin, about 1880. The items consisted of pottery vessels, copper alloy brooches and other metal items. There were also a Saxon pin from St Andrews Hill, a pilgrim flask, a key found in the wall of a house in Bucklersbury during demolition ('many years ago'), a belt slide, a lead cloth seal, 15 jetons (all from Hitchin) and two bone spoons from Arlesey as well as '1 Chinese Bronze God, Royston Heath'. In January 1940, Mr Whiting removed them from Letchworth and deposited them in the newly-established (and still unopened) Hitchin Museum. When the objects were accessioned to Hitchin Museum (accession number 220 to 232), the 'figurine of a god' had become '?Chinese or Indian'.



In 1976, the object was transferred back to Letchworth Museum, along with most of the archaeological material accessioned to Hitchin. Some time between 1940 and 1976, the loan had become a donation from the heirs of the Lucas family. The '?Chinese or Indian' god had also been downgraded to Hercules, who was a demigod; it had also acquired a label that had fallen off one of the pots from Foxholes giving the original Letchworth Accession number. Perhaps all the objects from the Lucas collection were kept in the same box, allowing the labels to become muddled.

How do we know that the statuette shows the classical demigod Hercules rather than an Indian or Chinese god? There are several pieces of evidence. Firstly, the figurine is naked. Hercules is always naked, as in so much classical art (except in the terrible Disney™ animated cartoon from 2008). Secondly, he is brandishing a club in his right hand. A knobbed wooden club was his favourite weapon, which became a common design for talismans from the second century onwards. Thirdly, he has a cloak draped over his left arm. This is actually a lion skin, taken from the Nemean lion, which Hercules killed as the first of twelve labours he had to perform for King Eurystheus. Its fur was its protection: no arrow or missile could pierce it. After stunning it with his club and then strangling it, Hercules used one of the lion's claws to remove the pelt. The skin protected him not just from arrows but also from the elements (very useful if one has no other clothing!).

The Roman Emperor Commodus (AD 161-192, emperor from 176) liked to present himself as a second Hercules. He was left-handed and proud of the fact. He was also unusually handsome and strong, and even trained as a gladiator to perform in arenas, to the disgust of the Roman upper classes. Like Hercules, he was able to kill lions (the historian Cassius Dio, a younger contemporary, claimed that on one occasion, he killed a hundred in a single show) and he was a skilled archer. Although popular with ordinary people and the army, he was disliked by the Senate. His rule became increasingly dictatorial during his 20s, after his father Marcus Aurelius's death. Cassius Dio thought that he was not naturally evil but was too easily led astray by friends. Eventually, his mistress Marcia arranged his murder. Although the Senate declared him a public enemy, the Emperor Septimius Severus (145-211, emperor from 193) reinstated his memory and had him deified in 195.

Might this statuette be a depiction of Commodus, then? Similar claims have been made for the notorious Cerne Abbas Giant, an unashamedly male chalk hill figure in Dorset. Our figurine seems to be wearing a radiate crown, an attribute of the god Helios. An intaglio in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg shows Commodus with one; Hercules never wears a crown. Perhaps this is not so much a statuette of Hercules than one of Commodus-as-Hercules-and-Helios. Merging humans, demigods and gods was something that Roman religion was more than capable of doing, especially if the statuette dates from after 195 and shows Divus Commodus ('divine Commodus').

Unfortunately, we know nothing about the circumstances of its discovery. The Letchworth Museum accessions register states that it was from 'Royston Heath', meaning Therfield Heath. Although the heath is a place with many important archaeological remains, almost nothings found there dates from the Roman period. A low mound excavated during improvements to the cricket pitch in 1855 covered a pit containing a Roman pot, but its precise location is unknown. Roman finds have been made by metal detectorists in Therfield (although not on the Heath, where detecting is not allowed). There are some in the northwest corner of the parish, at the end of what was formerly counted as part of the heath but is no longer. A barrow that once stood in this area, at The Thrift, was opened about 1830 and found to contain 'pottery and other objects reputed to be Roman'. Might this statuette of Commodus-Hercules-Helios have been one of those objects? We will never

know.

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