

The Riace Bronze Warriors: Understanding Their Exceptional Form, Problematic Discovery, and Indistinct Provenience

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Abstract

In August of 1972, two life-like ancient bronze statues were pulled from the seafloor off the coast of the southern Italian region of Calabria. Since the discovery of the Riace Bronzes, as they are now known, there has been much scholarly debate surrounding their manufacture, provenience, form, and, above all, the circumstances of their deposition at sea. Through exploration of the statues' characteristics in comparison to other known sculptures of the ancient world, scholars place the creation of these pieces in the early Classical Greek context (480-450 BCE). This paper reviews the scholarly debate and argues for an association with the workshop of the famous 5th century sculptor Phidias. It also suggests that the military presentation of the statues strongly indicates their original inclusion within a larger group of sculptures formerly situated in a commemorative monument at Delphi. This paper's approach to resolving their unknown past involves an examination of what little physical evidence exists in their discovery, as well as the lack of evidence with respect to their transport and former physical situation. Further research offers a premise for the reason for their oversea transport, which is Roman imperialism and conquest. By connecting and synthesizing historical texts and modern scholarship, this paper uses archaeological methodology as a means to resolve many of the problematic aspects surrounding the bronzes, from creation and original context to their ancient loss and subsequent discovery.

1. Introduction

The Riace Bronze Warriors exemplify Classical Greek sculpture in its quest to depict idealized human anatomy, but subtle attributes of their physique cause the statues to appear more perfect than humanly possible. These statues were pulled from the floor of the Mediterranean Sea with no associated objects or context to explain how they arrived, and their origin and creator remain a mystery that generates scholarly debate. Their exceptionally idealized physical presentation belies human anatomical possibility while causing an almost magnetic visual appeal. Through close examination of the portrayal of their bone structure, musculature, and casting technique, scholars generally attribute their form to the Classical Greek period of art, providing a date range for their creation from approximately 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Examination of details of their casting in comparison with other known contemporary sculpture provides feasible evidence for their placement at a memorial in several potential locations in ancient Greece, and by extension to the speculative identity of the workshop or artist who created them.

2. Describing the Statues and Their Idealized Features

Technically supreme in physical form, this pair of bronzes undoubtedly belongs together, and may possibly exist as components of a larger grouping.¹ The difficulty in placing them in a known context of representations of gods or heroes leads to debate about their role in a larger grouping, and also speaks to their anonymity as no signature or other narrative elements exist to identify them. Unremarkably named "Statue A" and "Statue B" (Fig. 1), each

bronze stands over six feet tall, adopting a life-like presence for the viewer. Statue A has the height of six feet eight inches, and Statue B stands at six feet five inches. A strong similarity in appearance supports their pairing while inviting the viewer to seek distinguishing differences between them. Both bronzes represent the male form at the height of its muscular development, with Statue B (Fig. 2) generally considered more mature in appearance. The highly developed musculature of each statue and the remnants of weaponry they held conflate the evidence of their warrior portrayal. Their muscles and their weapons both represent a form of protective armor while furthering the impression of masculine strength. It is through the presentation of idealized -- though nearly feasible -- development of the musculature portrayed throughout their entire bodies that a sense of aggressiveness is felt. These anatomical attributes of the statues are recognizable to the viewer as realistic yet rarely seen in the general male population, and are idealized because of the difficulty in attaining this physique. Idealization of any object causes that object to exceed the ordinary and place it above the reach of the commonplace. Their well-proportioned muscles suggest an advantage of power beyond other men in the same way armature provides greater strength and protection against an adversary. When coupled with spears, swords, and shields the notion of the military persona springs forward.



Figure 1. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warriors, Statue A and Statue B. Circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" tall (Statue A) and 6' 5" tall (Statue B). Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <http://eu.greekreporter.com/2013/07/09/riace-bronzes-await-to-be-housed-in-magna-graecia/>.



Figure 2. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, bust of Statue B. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 5" tall. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/RiaceWarrior.htm>.

While the precise identity of the figures remains unknown, the heroic impact realized upon the viewer through their idealization seems undeniable. The superlative structuring of each statue's body places them at the zenith of anatomical accomplishment, thereby making them appear heroic within their gender. Lacking the evidence to name each bronze as an individual shifts the focus to the context to which they belong. Gods and heroes were immortalized in monuments throughout ancient Greece, and the immortalization of heroes usually carried with it the

historical reality of the hero's death, often in battle. This lens of exaltation provides the meaning for these deceased and ennobled men for their placement within a commemorative program. Their membership in a military unit on the battlefield extends to their grouping in a memorial; military figures were frequently placed as part of a larger contingent of warriors in monuments throughout ancient Greece as was seen in Olympia at a monument commemorating the Greek heroes at Troy.² The pendant view of these two bronze figures makes more sense when considered as part of a larger arrangement.

3. Nude Representation in Ancient Greece

Their execution as nudes further supports the identification of the heroic warrior. Nudity and nakedness represent two distinct methods of presenting the unclothed human body in that to be naked is to be seen as one truly exists, while the presentation of a nude suggests objectification. Nakedness in Greece was more commonplace than in other parts of the known world, as we understand from the writings of Thucydides.³ *Gymnos*, meaning "naked," was an expected and widely seen characteristic of male life, as experienced with nude exercise, and in various forms of dance and rituals. "To be naked is to be oneself," declares scholar John Berger as he distinguishes between the concepts of nakedness and nudity by expanding on nudity:

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude. (The sight of an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.⁴

The intentional nudaity of the Riace Bronzes emphasizes their objectification as masculine heroes while combining the attributes of weaponry and hyper-defined muscles to create a visual configuration meant to be idolized. Although their battlefield shields are now missing, as is the weaponry they were believed to carry, the remains of metal shield strapping on their left arms (Fig. 3) reinforces their identification as military men.⁵



Figure 3. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, left arm of Statue B. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 5" tall. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. http://www.italy-travel.net/sicily_archeo_15_days.htm.

4. Physical Analysis and Military Presentation

Each statue manifests a *contrapposto* pose, which places a majority of the body's weight onto one leg, bringing the rest of the form off-axis; the *contrapposto* pose provides a visual dynamic alternating between tensed and relaxed musculature. Andrew Stewart, Professor of Ancient Mediterranean Art and Archaeology at UC Berkeley, furthers this postural description as a contrast between rest and movement by saying, "[The] pose was rigorously worked out so that each weight-bearing limb or muscle was placed in diagonal opposition to a relaxed one."⁶ With one arm

raised and the other arm lowered, the statues impart a sense of motion, and this sensation is furthered through the turning of each model's head (Fig. 4). The sculptural features of *contrapposto* pose and turned head provide the life-like perception for each statue, while conveying the movement and activity associated with the military persona.

The accoutrements they once bore can be detected through markings on their castings which show either attachment points for headdresses and shields, or holes formed within their grasping hands for now missing weapons. Each statue originally wore a headdress (Fig. 5), carried a shield on the left arm, and held what is believed to be a spear or sword in the right hand. The unfinished condition of the top Statue B's head provides evidence that he would have worn a helmet pushed back on his head, in contrast to Statue A which may have been arrayed with a garland over his existing headband. No trace of either headdress has been found. The statues' now empty right hands were cast in such a way as to have held an object, and the left arms still show the strapping for massive shields they would have borne, supporting their military presentation.⁷

Constructed almost entirely out of bronze, each figure displays no bodily hair, except for the hair atop their heads, their beards, and their pubic regions. This lack of body hair heightens the viewer's awareness of skeletal structure and musculature. Their lips and areolae are copper, giving contrast to their faces and chests. Slightly parted, the lips of Statue A display his upper row of teeth, which are cast in silver, providing greater variance with the dark bronze of his face (Fig. 6). The only remaining non-bronze features of these warrior statues are their eyes, the material composition of which is debated by scholars. They could be formed from calcite or ivory, with their pupils (now missing) possibly made of glass.⁸



Figure 4. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, turned head of Statue A. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" tall. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <https://www.studyblue.com/notes/n/arh-252-test-two/deck/5685431>.



Figure 5. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warriors, Heads of Statue B and Statue A respectively, revealing missing headdresses. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" tall (Statue A) and 6' 5" tall (Statue B). Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <http://www.italia.it/en/news/detail/celebrating-the-riace-bronzes.html?cHash=2ef8802655655b60943ca7c6a0e141ff>.



Figure 6. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, Statue A's silver teeth and copper lips. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" tall. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/RiaceWarrirorA.html>.

5. Moment of Discovery Supports Their Realist Appearance

Discovered in the sea just off the coast of Riace, Italy in August of 1972 by a scuba diver on vacation, the sculptures were immediately thought to be corpses, so realistic was the hand of Statue A that reached up from the sand on the sea bed.⁹ The diver's first impression extends to modern viewers when beholding the statues; their life-like stature and naturalistic appearance often lead to a sensation of awe. A feeling of attentiveness develops upon inspecting their physiques causing what scholar Nigel Spivey calls their "aesthetic paradox."¹⁰ Though cast in solid and unmoving metal, the statues appear life-like and impart movement through their *contrapposto* pose. Spivey further explains this paradox by saying, "Within seconds of stepping into their presence, you realize why Mariottini [the scuba diver] immediately thought he glimpsed a human body."¹¹ The mystery of their apparent realism unravels through examination of their impossible anatomy. Several features of each statue can not be duplicated in nature, and some features were enhanced for aesthetic purposes, revealing the skill of the unknown sculptor.

Polyclitus, a Greek sculptor who lived during the approximate time period the Riace Bronzes were cast, created a canon or standard of bodily perfection marveled at today. His acute attention to detail transcended representation and ventured into the realm of exaggeration through his use of geometric symmetry as applied to the human anatomy. His most well-known sculptural creation, Doryphoros (today existing only in marble copies), exhibits the elements of *contrapposto* pose and detailed accuracy with profound similarity to the Riace Bronzes. This visual correspondence extends to speculation about Polyclitus's possible participation in the making of the Riace statues while confirming the life-like appearance of all three sculptures. Enrico Paribeni, archaeologist and scholar of Greco-Roman sculpture, describes the perception of these statues through his statement that, "In a certain sense these works are still part of a legend, for the inexplicable enthusiasm that they have excited has done nothing so much as to produce a swirling cloud of uncertainty around them."¹² The realism experienced by the viewer was contrived by the hyper-realistic methodology executed by the sculptor, and this involvement of perception generates the academic quest to reveal their maker.

In the Riace bronzes, muscular details on the torso are carried around the sides of the body to the back, creating visual symmetry not mimicked in real life as the quest of perfect symmetry belies human possibility. Beyond the musculature, some of the statues' bone structure also borders on implausibility. The legs of each display an elongation to match the length of their upper body, which creates another unlikelihood in humankind, yet imparts a sense of balance in statuary.¹³ Likewise, the deep groove above the spine on each figure runs straight through the divide of their buttocks, again creating the non-human scenario of an absent coccyx. The coccyx was left out (Fig. 7) for the aesthetic purpose of intensifying the appeal of uninterrupted musculature.¹⁴ Each specific element of structure, posture, musculature, and finish combine to represent an un-sensed distortion of perfection in the mature male anatomy.



Figure 7. Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, Statue A showing missing coccyx. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" tall. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/539446861589765306/>.

6. The Issue of the Non-evidence of a Shipwreck

Previous evidence of the Riace Bronzes' existence has not yet come to light. The body of historical texts from classical Greece makes no mention of the statues in an oblique or definitive manner that could resolve their identity and origin. So far as is known, when the statues slipped below the surface of the sea, they also soon slipped from living memory. No precise information has been found to explain why they journeyed from Greece, or how they came to lie on the sea floor. The reason for their transport across the Mediterranean must lie within the context of Roman imperialism. Rome looked to Greece for its inspiration in art and architecture, and that adoring gaze also translated into the gathering of the spoils of conquest. Later in time, monuments like the Arch of Titus in Rome trumpeted victory while pillaged sculpture and statuary served as further evidence of Rome's victory and dominance over its adversaries. The vessel in which the bronzes travelled was almost certainly lost during an oversea voyage, yet no dates or record of the voyage and loss have been ventured. Their discovery at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, close to the coast of Riace, Italy, adds to their intrigue as no associated shipwreck has been found. The reason for their transport across the sea can be reasonably conjectured, yet their intended destination remains elusive, though Rome stands as the most likely candidate. Because the warriors were found intact, coupled with the amount of encrustation enveloping them, scholars widely accept their loss occurred in antiquity.

One of the most confounding aspects of the location of the Riace statues' recovery is the absence of information explaining why they were there. Scholar Piero Gianfrotta sums up this mystery lucidly in the following quotation:

In the case of the Riace Bronzes there is no clear evidence for the existence of a wreck, so we find that in addition to the usual problems regarding the identification, provenience and dating of the statues, (now put at around the middle of the Fifth Century B.C.), we must also confront the question of their context. The problem, in short, is the non-existence of a wreck, or rather, of any evidence for one, and it has given rise to a range of varied and often fantastic hypotheses that seek to explain the presence of the statues.¹⁵

This lack of archaeological evidence – the absence of facts – obscures their past and makes it difficult to trace the bronzes to their point of origin. Scholarly opinion tilts in the direction of “no wreck happened.” Gianfrotta offers the explanation that if no wreck can be found, then *possibly* no wreck occurred.¹⁶ One hypothesis is the loss of the statues could be an amalgam of several shipwreck or maritime distress theories. Perhaps as the result of a storm at sea, the mast of the vessel broke off, thereby causing loss of control and subsequent foundering due to inability to properly negotiate the heavy storm waves. The ship's crew began to jettison the heavy cargo – the bronze statues – in order to bring about greater buoyancy. The spear and the sword the statues may have held were readily removed before the statues went overboard, as was Statue B's helmet, possibly made of precious metals. The shields they carried, also valuable, were less readily removed, accounting for the broken shield bracket on the arm of Statue A, later found in the salvage area. Consequently, the ship was indeed able to make land, where it was either repaired or salvaged. All this would explain the missing accoutrements the statues bore and the lack of any other ship-related wreckage. All that survived for modern discovery was the hastily stripped and jettisoned cargo of a distressed ship.

Gianfrotta continues with his own analysis of evidence, which he believes points directly to the existence of a wreck. When the statues were originally pulled from the sea floor, one had amphora fragments among its encrustations. Additionally, twenty-eight lead rings were found in the salvage area within a year after the statues were recovered. Gianfrotta and others believe these lead rings are similar to those used in antiquity to secure a ship's rigging to its mast. These items, he believes, while small in number provide some evidence for a wreck. Further, he draws attention to the position the statues were in when they were discovered. They lay side-by-side as they would have if they were stored as cargo in a vessel's hull. They did not lie in a position one would expect had they been thrown overboard. Indeed, the statues were discovered next to each other, with their heads facing in the same direction; one statue was lying face up, and the other on its side.¹⁷

The lack of any associated trove of evidence from a shipwreck confounds researchers and scholars in their efforts to date the bronzes' maritime misadventure or even speculate on a range of possible dates. The Riace Bronze statues themselves, the lead rings, and a handful of pottery shards that may not have any association with the statues comprise the full body of evidence salvaged from the discovery site. Vessels sailing from Greece to Italy would have almost certainly carried additional cargo for mercantile transport, though even if the bronze statues were the only cargo, there would have been amphorae and other supplies needed to feed and otherwise support the sailors during their journey. It is through the information gathered from detritus resulting from a shipwreck that researchers are able to propose dates for any mishap. Amphorae are frequently used as a guideline for dating because their known stylistic features vary from place of creation, as well as the changes in their styling that occur over time. Their ubiquitous use and presence throughout the ancient world provides modern archaeologists with sound evidence for dating an excavation and understanding an excavation site's commerce by examining the amphorae found.

In the ancient world, amphorae were used to contain and transport nearly every liquid and foodstuff available to the population. They can be likened to the trailer-size metal containers of today that are used for oversea transport of goods and materials traded between countries. Varying in size and sometimes shape depending on what they contained, amphorae are found at land-based and maritime excavation sites because they do not deteriorate as quickly as wood or other organic materials. They are also frequently found intact, with some still holding remnants of their original contents or the residue from their contents, such as red wine. Through laboratory analysis scientists are often able to understand exactly what they held in antiquity, and then narrow down the date range for when they were in use. Archaeologists David Gibbins and Jonathan Adams review the importance of amphorae and detritus by saying, "Wreck data thus provide evidence not only for transport but also for production and consumption, and form an integral part of research programs involving the investigation of sites reflecting all three types of activity."¹⁸ Scholars of the Riace Bronzes lack this important evidence and the information it could provide when attempting to formulate a date for the statues' journey across the Mediterranean and for understanding more about their origin through associated cargo remains. This rather complete lack of evidence of a shipwreck develops the theory that no shipwreck occurred. Without an actual wreck, the discussion about how the statues came to lie on the seafloor moves toward maritime distress or accident, but not sinking.

The final point made in the analysis of the salvage area revolves around further exploration of the recovery site. It was only in the subsequent year following the statues' discovery that any effort was made to search for additional artifacts. Modern issues in the Italian economy forced the redeployment of funds to other projects deemed more critical, thereby creating a lack of funding for continuing investigation of the area. Although the site in which the Riace Bronzes were found did not undergo a thorough search and excavation as scholars and historians may have hoped, the possibility of one day mounting a new archaeological expedition yet exists. A wider and more thorough exploration of the statues' recovery site might yet yield additional artifacts associated with the vessel that transported them.

7. Realistic Appearance and Casting Techniques

Scholars agree with respect to the date of their general creation in the mid-fifth century BCE, with little debate concerning the span of time between the creation of the first and second statue. The most widely held date for the interval between their individual creations is thirty years, and this span of time is derived through slight differences in style. Statue A, believed to be the first one created, displays the strictly applied canons of the Severe Style, while Statue B represents a development reaching further. The Severe Style succeeded the Archaic Style of sculpture, and preceded the Early Classical Style which reached more strongly toward realism through the development of articulated features such as musculature and proper proportioning. Given the presumed thirty year difference in creation, it is therefore possible for an improvement or subtle change in approach to take place in the interim.

Through careful analysis of differences in form and execution between the two pieces, scholars are able to detect a progression in naturalistic representation, thereby delineating the time period between the earlier statue and the later one. Scholar Piera Bocci Pacini recognizes stylistic differences yet places them in the same studio, saying, "There are also similarities of style which would favor the theory that they were produced in the same workshop. The stylistic character and the naturalistic treatment of the nude appear to fit in with the Attic tradition."¹⁹ It is through the lost-wax casting technique that the overall date of the pair is made.

The thickness of their casting aids in their dating as they were made near the end of one method of casting which gave way to a new, more economical approach that used less bronze. The contemporary method of producing statues like the Riace Bronzes employed the technique of using one model to create a grouping of similar statues.²⁰ Their bodies would appear similar, as do the Riace Bronzes, yet the heads could be heavily worked separately to provide the appearance of individuality; their stylistic features and casting technique place them firmly in the context of other statues created circa 450 BCE.

Scholars Nigel Konstam and Herbert Hoffmann hold a belief about the molding techniques used to create the bronze pair that varies from accepted ideas about what methods were used in their formation. The additive process of working in bronze allows for changes to be made throughout the process; details can be added or subtracted while creating the original model, from which the bronze will then be cast. Konstam and Hoffmann believe that molds were taken from plaster casts derived from one living model, as opposed to a working model made of wax or terracotta.²¹ Their primary evidence has its basis in the visible weight bearing stance of each statue's feet, which also carries through to the underside of each foot, an unlikely feat for a sculptor working on a wax or terracotta model. Konstam and Hoffmann assert that a living model would have had to stand in a tray of plaster in order to capture the weight-bearing features seen on the soles of the feet of the Riace statues.

The realism employed in casting the Riace Bronzes helps affirm the dating of their creation, and surprisingly may hint at a pathological condition known as varicocoele, which is the presence of varicose veins in the testis.²² Classical Greek sculptors depicted their work with such detail that they included features of the anatomy, in this instance the scrotum, that today tell scientists of their pathology. Varicocoele causes one testicle to appear larger and hang lower than the other, though ancient Greeks may not have known this as a variant from normal testicular formation. Either the sculptor erred in his casting, or he depicted what he saw in his model. I.C. McManus researches scrotal asymmetry in men and in ancient sculpture and dates sculpture on the basis of his findings. Referencing his research, B. Bonafini and Paolo Pozzilli state, "[B]ased on the position and size of their testis, we can comfortably say that they were not antecedent to 480 BC and correctly located to 460-440 BC."²³ Their examination supports the generally accepted dating of the Riace Bronzes to circa 450 BCE.

The Classical Greek canon of portraying the human figure differs from the ancient Egyptian canon in significant ways. The Egyptian canon places body parts in a grid (Fig. 8), and forces those parts to conform to that grid, whereas Greeks began with their interpretation of a perfect human model, and then conformed their work to that model.²⁴ Thus the Greek canon was more organic and therefore more life-like. Carol Mattusch references the dialog between Greek and Egyptian methods, saying "The Greeks saw large-scale bronzes in Egypt, and they learned how to cast statues like them by means of the lost-wax process, the same method they used to produce small-scale bronzes."²⁵ Greek classical sculptors took what they learned from the Egyptians and expanded that knowledge to create their own canon. Mattusch believes bronze naturally lends itself to recreating the human form because of its color and workability. Comparing the Riace Bronzes to the Artemision God (Fig. 9), also called "The God of the Sea," she conjectures no other bronze medium could be more appropriate for the portrayal of motion and overall naturalism.²⁶

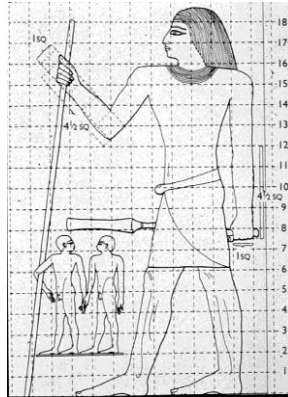


Figure 8. Diagram of the Egyptian canon demonstrating the conforming of body to grid.
<http://www.oberlin.edu/images/artime27.html>.



Figure 9. Artist Unknown. The Artemision God. Mid-Fifth Century BCE. Bronze with silver and copper inlays. 6' 10" tall. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemision_Bronze.

8. Comparison of a Contemporary Idealized Anatomy

The Artemision God, created during the same time period as the Riace statues in 460 BCE and whose sculptor is also unknown, offers a comparison in style. As with the Riace Bronzes, the Artemision statue possesses overstated features which offer a hyper-reality of the human form. Here we see longer than normal arms, created to add symmetry with the height of the sculpture, yet the viewer readily overlooks the length of these arms as they are outstretched and conveying motion. The Artemision God confers a sense of motion through his stance, with weight pushed forward on his extended left leg, and his right foot and leg positioned behind him, raised on to the ball of his foot for balance. In his outstretched right arm, he would have held a spear or lightning bolt, either of which would have seemed poised to leave his hand in the next moment. His left arm, outstretched as well, provides symmetry to the composition while displaying the thrower's need for aim and balance in his physical effort. Like the Riace Bronzes, the Artemision God was cast using the lost wax method, and the heads of all three castings were heavily worked before casting.²⁷ The similarity in casting technique echoes the corresponding perception of motion each of these statues convey.

9. Identifying the Statues

Many ancient works of sculpture represent known figures from history or mythology. Scholars identify individuals represented in sculpture, such as Poseidon, Hercules, or Dionysus, either from nominal inscriptions on the work itself or from depicted iconographical clues and known attributes. Hercules, for example, is consistently portrayed throughout history as being well-muscled, often wearing or holding a lion skin, and frequently carrying a gnarled

club (Fig. 10). When researchers encounter these characteristics in a work of sculpture or painting, they can contextualize the artwork and identify who it represents with relative assurance. Without definitive portraiture or photography, scholars and researchers must rely on attributes and characteristics when forming a categorization. Riace Statue A could be compared to Dionysus when viewing facial features alone (Fig. 11), yet the military attributes of Statue A do not comport with the familiar characteristics of the mythical figure of Dionysus, who was known for pleasure pursuits. Statue A must conform to a warrior construct of identity as a result of the weaponry he carries, and his military identity could lead to speculation about his positioning in a larger grouping, as military figures often belong to a wider contingent when represented in sculpture.

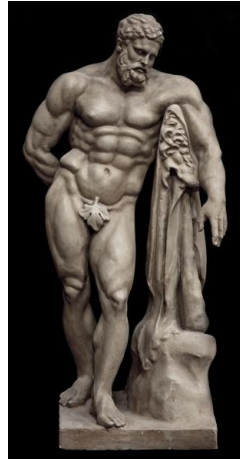


Figure 10. Farnese Hercules, displaying his well-known attributes. Glykon, reproduced from the original by Lysippos. circa 216 CE. Marble. 6' 5" tall. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. <http://albertis-window.com/2012/07/the-farnese-hercules-and-renaissance-substitutions/>.



Figure 11. Comparison of Dionysus and Statue A.

Left: Unknown artist. Bust of Dionysus. Second Century CE. Marble. 1' 6" tall. British Museum. http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/gr/h/head_from_a_statue_of_dionysus.aspx.

Right: Artist Unknown. Riace Bronze Warrior, bust of Statue A. circa 450 BCE to 430 BCE. Bronze casting, with copper, silver, calcite, and glass inlays. 6' 8" high. Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy. <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/RiaceWarrirorA.html>.

Several Italian scholars have chosen names for the Riace bronze statues, seemingly in an effort to leave behind the non-descriptive designations of "Statue A" and "Statue B."²⁸ Italian scholarly texts frequently refer to Statue A as "Hero" and Statue B as "Stratego," the naming conventions of which derive from their research and examination into minute details of each statue's pose and facial expressions. The "heroic" Statue A — held to be the more youthful appearing of the two — expresses an outward gaze which coupled with his parted lips and turned head suggests a more arrogant and extroverted persona. His youth and the motion he projects could place him in a

battlefield or heroic context. In contrast, the more mature appearing “strategic” bronze does not project an external focus, but appears more inwardly drawn. Stratego’s identity can be more readily imagined as one of a battlefield commander or strategist, which would further suggest a more seasoned warrior, since the Greek word for general is *stratego*.

Reaching beyond the visages portrayed by each statue, Paribeni employs words such as “stress” and “inner tension” or “quiet” and “simple” to draw attention to the pose and posture of Hero and Stratego, respectively. Acknowledging those differences, he nonetheless believes their broader context does not venture beyond their pairing: “The possibility that both works belonged to a single, more extensive series that included other statues seems to me to be excluded by the very similarity between the two.”²⁹ Hero’s musculature and stance are more tensed and restrained, which coupled with his extroverted stare yields a sensation of upcoming activity. Stratego evinces thoughtfulness and greater solemnity through eyes focused not on an object, but on the abstract. The subtle differences of visual focus and physical attitude separate them individually, while their *contrapposto* stance and military accoutrements join them communally. Again, Paribeni concludes, “The two Riace bronzes may be pendants, but I would deny any possibility of one or more additional statues in the same pose as the two that have survived.”³⁰ With that statement, this scholar connects Hero and Stratego with each other through their similar pose, yet he ventures no further by extending their pose to a broader grouping.

In his own analysis, Italian historian Alberto Busignani echoes Paribeni and delves deeply into the meaning behind Stratego’s facial expression and finds significance in his headdress. Busignani proposes a historical representation in the form of Stratego, while also contemplating the fate of his missing helmet. Describing the statue, he says, “This is Stratego, pondering a historical reality rather than a mythical one, not just living and breathing (like Hero), but thoughtful and pensive.”³¹ He ventures the fate of Stratego’s missing headdress in a shrewd and rational way, “The absence of the helmet, perhaps plated in precious metal, may have therefore been pulled off the statue before the statue was hurled into the sea.”³² The Riace Bronzes were found at the bottom of the sea without doubt due either to a shipwreck or some form of maritime distress. Because almost no other items have been discovered in association with the bronzes, scholars like Busignani conjecture the ship carrying the statues may not have been wrecked, but was otherwise caught in a storm and had to jettison its cargo (heavy bronze cargo in this case) in order to stay afloat and make shore.

Busignani joins his Italian colleagues in his affirmation of the heroic personality represented by Statue A. He conjectures Hero may be understood as an Athenian king, mythical or only semi-historic at best. The inferred motion of his pose highlights the essence of a mythological ancient Greek monarch, and his physique is described as “large chested, with his head turned slightly, and his parted lips emphasize the importance of reality in the sublimation of the heroic . . . the profile view confirms the difference in expression – mythical versus historical – between the two statues and the different anatomical and stylistic settings.”³³ The placement of the two figures – one in a historical context and the other in a mythical context – has taken shape by way of painstaking analysis of the personalities they represent and not through their physical attributes.

10. Original Setting

Beyond identity, the origin of the Riace Bronzes remains a matter of mystery and conjecture. British historian and archaeologist John Boardman agrees the statues are of Greek origin, yet he strives for a more exact placement. Delphi, in Greece, was a vibrant hub of activity during the Classical period in which the bronzes were made, so placing them at Delphi as their literal point of departure would fit perfectly with their dates of creation. Inhabited as early as the fourteenth century BCE, Delphi grew slowly toward the development of the sanctuary in the eighth century BCE, and the establishment of the famed Oracle of Delphi at about the same time. The distinguishing sacred designation of the site led to the building of temples, altars, theatres, and stadia, most all of which became adorned with statuary. Eye-witness accounts from visitors in antiquity describe streets and stoai lined with statuary depicting religious and military themes, much of which stood for centuries until the Roman conquest in the early second century BCE. Equally intriguing is the relationship between Delphi and works by the great Classical sculptor Phidias. Celebrated for his bronze statuary during his lifetime, Phidias (circa 480-430 BCE) is believed to be the author of the frieze of the Parthenon, parts of which are known today as the “Elgin Marbles.” Because of Phidias’s genius at bronze casting, some scholars argue only he or his workshop could have produced the Riace Bronzes, and by tying the bronzes to Delphi an almost ready-made connection could be forged between Phidias and the statues as he was known to actively produce work in Olympia, Athens, and Delphi.

Boardman argues against viewing the bronzes as pendants and entertains the notion that they are part of a larger grouping. “At Delphi Pausanias saw a group by Phidias commemorating Marathon, including Athena, Apollo,

Miltiades and Athenian heroes. It is suggested that the Riace bronzes are from this group.”³⁴ He maintains an open mind and concedes the origin and author of the bronzes may never be known, though he believes research into these unresolved issues should continue. He also leaves room for other theories, such as their placement at Delphi, by saying, “An alternative explanation is that they are from a group at Troy, also described for us by Pausanias and ascribed to the Aeginetan sculptor Onatas.”³⁵

Scholar Brunilde Ridgway argues for a similar theory for placing the Riace Bronzes into a larger grouping by relating their casting technique to a possible large-scale production. The similarity in the statues’ appearance could be the result of using the same mold for the creation of each figure, while their differences could result from changes made during various stages of production. She argues,

The repetitive use of basic models explains also how complex groups of thirty or more life-sized bronze figures, as attested for Delphi and Olympia, could be produced within a relatively short time, some of them by collaborating sculptors coming from different geographic areas and workshops, who therefore could be presumed to have had distinctive individual styles and yet were capable of creating homogeneous compositions.³⁶

Her synthesis of casting method and possible production reiteration could easily fit the dual placement theories of grouping and site; the site of Delphi contained, by all accounts, hundreds if not thousands of life-size statues and many of these statues existed as groupings, most notably those representing military personae. She goes as far as to suggest the molds *harkened back* to Classical Greece, that the statues are classicizing as a result, and that they date to no earlier than the first century BCE.³⁷ No other scholar shares her opinion concerning this date of creation of the statues, yet her arguments for technique and placement form a compelling theory.

Researcher Peter Bol examines the statues’ origin through details of the excellent state of preservation in which they exist today. He believes the differences and the similarities between them help shed light on their origin, noting, “The two statues correspond not only in size, subject, pose of the head and arms, and the relationship between the flexed and bearing leg, but as we presently know from laboratory analyses, in the composition of the metal used.”³⁸ His analysis focuses on the evident techniques used to form the soles of the feet and the anchor dowels that would have held them to their original base, which was not recovered or found elsewhere. Muscular details of the thighs and knees, the sculpting of the pubic hair, and the torso, penis, and scrotum of each statue provide evidence for the differentiation between the time of their creation, with Statue A being the oldest and probably cast in the early part of the Fifth Century. Statue B possesses stylized pubic hair that developed in form around 460 BCE and afterward.³⁹ The backs and hair curls on the statues’ heads bear a relationship to Polycleitan motifs, Bol claims, the timing of which would again place them at approximately mid-fifth century BCE.

The hair on the heads of the bronzes provides the closest evidence to a link with where they once stood. Both statues have long hair, in contrast to Classical period statues of athletic victors. Statues of athletes were modeled and cast one at a time, depending on the athletic event and its outcome. Scholars know the Riace Bronzes are not athletic portrayals because of the weaponry they bear and because athletes did not sport long hair. The presumption now exists for the warrior statues to have been a part of a major monument, because of the value assigned to a military victory in contrast to an athletic victory.⁴⁰

The casting technique of using molds in the creation of the statues lends itself to supposed multiple iterations while allowing for distinct individual features. The heads of the Riace Bronzes were made separately, almost like the blank and hairless heads of department store mannequins. Because of the infeasibility of taking molds from hair, the curly locks of the hair atop the statues’ head and their beards would have been added in an entirely separate stage, thereby allowing for greater stylization and interpretation by the artist tasked with the carving. This method, widely used during the Classical time period, provides researchers today with some of the best clues for dating sculpture and determining the hand of the artist. Hair styles varied over time as they do today, though perhaps not at an accelerated rate, and hairstyle can provide strong support for the placement of a sculpture into a particular period on the basis of prevailing grooming manners. Likewise, a sculptor could become known for his method of portraying hair on a statue similar to a barber. Through careful examination of hairstyling techniques used across many sculptures, researchers are able to recognize the method and hand of an artist without naming him or knowing more about him.

11. Ancient Literary Observations

Several scholars who research the Classical Period of Greek art note the writings of Pausanias, a historian similar to Pliny the Younger who documented what he saw in antiquity. Pausanias is best known for his *Description of Greece*, which comprises his first-hand account of his experiences throughout his extensive travels within Greece at approximately 150 CE. Among the sites he visited was Olympia, and it is this location where the Riace Bronzes may have once stood. At Olympia, the monument to the *Dedication of the Achaeans* represented ten Achaean heroes armed with shield and lance, therefore standing as a tribute to warriors. Though Olympia was destroyed in the Late Antique period, Pausanias's description of his visit preceded the destruction of the monument, and it is this written historical link that can be formed with the Riace statues. Of the archaeological evidence from the site, one lock of hair from a warrior statue has been recovered at Olympia which bears resemblance to the hair of the Riace Bronzes. Bol cautions, "We should keep in mind, however, that this attribution is essentially based on a single lock of hair, which is, however, the one that most closely corresponds to the hair of Statue A of all those recovered at Olympia."⁴¹ This tenuous piece of evidence underscores the lack of corroboration that can firmly link the Riace Warriors to an undeniable point of origin, and represents only a razor-thin similarity between the hairstyling of the bronzes and a possible statue at Olympia.

Pausanias left one tantalizing clue in his writings about Delphi. In his account of a visit there he described a monument commemorating the victory at Marathon in 490 BCE. Within the monument stood thirteen statues, including the warrior Miltiades, as well as Athena and Apollo. If the Riace Bronzes were part of this grouping of thirteen, we would now know not only the location where they originally stood, but their maker as well; Pausanias noted this sculptural grouping was indeed created by Phidias.⁴² Delphi was the vortex of commemorative sculpture at the same moment in time the bronzes were cast. The dates of the statues which soon following the victory of the Battle of Marathon and the monument erected to honor that victory at Delphi offer strong physical evidence supporting artist and original location.

12. Conclusion

The exceptional life-like characteristics given to the Riace Bronze Warriors by their sculptor continues to arouse admiration in the viewer while stimulating the modern scholastic quest for insight into their unknown context. The lack of a sculptor's signature or narrative elements propels scholars and historians toward their careful and painstaking examinations of the statues' captivating visual features, revealing an homage paid to the artistic genius of their creator. The sculptor's intent for providing the observer with a stunning and extraordinary pair of heroic warrior figures continues to be realized two and a half millennia after their casting.

By connecting the bronzes' original situation to the commemorative monument of the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) at Delphi, a rational timeline for the memorial's installation would coincide with the production dates for the statues (circa 450-430 BCE). The dates of the lifespan of the sculptor Phidias (480-430 BCE) place his known productive years exactly within the range of dates for the production of the two bronze figures. Further support for naming Phidias as the sculptor springs from ancient historical accounts by Pausanias, who noted in his written records Phidias's participation in the several commemorative programs at Delphi.

Additional archaeological exploration of the discovery site off the coast of Riace, Italy is required to learn more about the circumstances of the statues' deposition at sea. Until scientists and archaeologist conduct a more thorough examination of that recovery area, no supplemental evidence can be offered to explain the problematic questions that continue to surround the bronzes' deposit on the seafloor. No one disputes the direction of their journey, from Greece to Italy (undoubtedly Rome), and there is no argument against a maritime mode of transport. Whether or not a shipwreck or other form of distress led to their situation at the bottom of the Mediterranean remains an unanswered question, and therefore the absence of wreckage indicates a maritime accident or another unoffered reason for their deposition.

The compelling association with the ancient workshop of Phidias offers a solution to the anonymity of the artist's hand while explaining the execution of the appealing anatomical presentation the Riace Bronze Warriors present, as well as their original placement at Delphi.

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