

NOTES ON MR. KING'S MEMOIR ON "THE ANNECY
ATHLETE."¹

By C. D. E. FORTNUM, F.S.A.

DEAR MR. BURTT,—In the printed notice of the Proceedings of our Institute on May 1, 1874, which appears at page 287 of this volume of the Journal, I am reported to have said, in reference to the Annecy Athlete, a learned paper upon which figure, by the Rev. C. W. King, M.A. had just been read, that I ventured to differ in opinion from that gentleman, and considered it "rather a Gallo-Roman work than of earlier date."

This hardly conveys correctly the purport of my few observations on that occasion, by which I wished to express the opinion that that fine bronze was not a work of high Greek art, "probably not much later than Lysippus," but, as it seemed to me, of the period of restoration under Hadrian. I noticed, moreover, the similarity in certain technical details and in the general workmanship of the figure, corresponding with the treatment of the Payne Knight Mercury in the British Museum, and some other bronzes found in France, which almost suggested a local origin, a Gallo-Roman School of the Hadrianic Period, perhaps directed by a Greek master. I find that Mr. King, in his valuable dissertation, has alluded to the opinion expressed that the Athlete was of "Gallo-Roman manufacture," and he correctly instances the rudeness of works in sculpture known generally as "Gallo-Roman," in answer to that observation, which would seem to have been conveyed to him only in part, and probably as printed in the Journal.

It is but fair to myself, therefore, that I should make this explanation, and in doing so I will, with your permission, offer some further remarks on the opinion expressed in Mr. King's valuable paper and in justification of my venturing to differ from so learned an authority.

I am, my dear Mr. Burtt,

Yours most truly,

C. D. E. FORTNUM.

STANMORE HILL, *Jan.* 6, 1875.

THE article in vol. xxxi of the Journal of the Archæological Institute (No. 122), by the Rev. C. W. King, M.A., on the subject of this fine figure—rich in classical quotation, referring to antique works of bronze sculpture and to the varieties of that alloy in use among the Greeks and Romans—gives also to the world that learned writer's opinion as to the artistic excellence of this statuette, and the probable period of its production. Agreeing with him in opinion, Mr. King quotes from "an accomplished critic," the author of an article upon the subject in the

¹ Arch. Journ. vol. xxxi. p. 108.

Pall Mall Gazette, and with an eminent sculptor, both of whose names he refrains from communicating. With equal courtesy, he also keeps anonymous those who differ from him in the judgment he has formed, among whom are some "who, from their more favourable opportunities, ought to have known better." With those dissentients, among whose ranks are M. L. Revon, the Director of the Museum at Annecy, seemingly agreeing with other French critics and with several of high authority in England, I would humbly venture to join, believing, as I do, that the attribution of this statuette as stated by M. Revon to "some Greek artist of Hadrian's time" is nearer to the truth than that it is of "a Greek School, probably not much later than Lysippus," as supposed by Mr. King.

On what grounds that gentleman arrives at so favourable an opinion I am at a loss to discover, for I can deduce nothing from the argument in his highly interesting and discursive paper, which amounts to even presumptive evidence.

The enthusiastic remark of the writer in the *Revue Archæologique* (Jan., 1868), that *La statuette, que nous avons vue, dépasse en beauté tout ce que l'on peut imaginer*" is hardly extreme when one takes into account its state of preservation; but this opinion is vague, and proves no more than that of those other gentlemen who, like myself, were struck with the beautiful condition and high finish of this bronze. I would humbly suggest that eminent sculptors are not always necessarily infallible judges of the characteristics as to the period or school under which antique figures in bronze may have been produced; nor are all eminent painters the most perfect connoisseurs of the works of the old masters. Neither does the practical ignorance of those arts debar the possessor of a faculty for discriminative appreciation, well exercised by observation from being a connoisseur.

I confine myself to Mr. King's arguments and to the consideration of the bronze itself, which we may perhaps accept, on his dictum, as representing an Athlete, although some other opinions have been offered on that head.

Mr. King finds that the details of this figure correspond with the recorded improvements in sculpture introduced by Lysippus, and notices that the head is small and the finish of the details scrupulously careful. I cannot, for my own part, see that the body of this figure is less fleshy than the models of Phidias, as seen in the Parthenon frieze. The length of legs, perhaps somewhat disproportionate, is also deemed Lysippian, as compared with the "square or squat proportions" of the earlier masters (Phidias, of course, included). Of the arms, the perfect proportion of which with the rest of the figure I have heard doubted (also by a very eminent artist) no remark is made, nor of a certain feebleness throughout and want of that original vigour—that semblance of arrested movement and imparted life, which assuredly marked the works of the great sculptors of Greece in her palmy days. No proof these of the work of the school of Lysippus, but pointing to the production of a clever copyist of later date, reducing perhaps from an earlier original. Why not, as already suggested, rather the work of an able Greek bronzist of Hadrianic days working from a grand original, copied, perhaps varied, or reduced in size? The Payne Knight Mercury in the British Museum, and the Apollo (?) lately in M. Feuarden's possession, and some other figures found in the neighbourhood of Nismes or Arles, are of very similar

general character, and quite as finely finished—but we should hardly class those charming bronzes with the works of the grand old Greek School. Compare the Athlete, or either of those just mentioned, with the small recumbent figure lately acquired from the Castellani Collection; what largeness of style, what repose and dignity in that small bronze!

Fine as it is, if the immediate followers of Lysippus produced nothing finer than this Athlete, the dream that we have indulged in, aided by small fragments² which remain, of the mighty power and entrancing charms of old Grecian sculpture, must have been dreams indeed.

Mr. King's quotations from Martial and from Pliny, to prove the extent of the "manufacture" of inferior complimentary bronze statues at Rome, does in no way disprove that bronze statuettes, the handiwork of individual sculptors of great excellence were not produced at the same period. The marble masons of the Euston Road, London, and Foley were chiselling at the same time; so were those workers for the market at Carrara contemporary with Gibson and with Tenerani—but their productions were not quite equivalent.

Possibly the bronze heads found at Annecy were of that Roman manufacture, and are of that inferior Roman metal referred to by Mr. King, but the Athlete is a work of higher art, not however beyond the genius of him who sculptured the Antinous, or they who chiselled out the Centaurs. It would be indeed a bold assertion, that among the many artists encouraged and patronised by Hadrian, one among whom produced that glorious impersonation, none could be found capable of modelling and casting such a bronze. The incapacity of the Roman founders of Nero's day proves nothing as against the ability of the many Greek and Roman artists flourishing in Hadrianic and even later times, to execute such a figure as this Athlete, of 2 ft. high.

Mr. King instances only two as remaining of the "innumerable array" of Imperial Statues; viz., the colossal head of Nero at the Capitol, which, he says, "has all the character of Etruscan art" (!), and the Marcus Aurelius. Surely the latter, a work of about a century later than that time when, as Pliny tells us, Roman founders were incapable of casting the huge colossal statue of Nero, is no mean production, though probably of some half-century nearer the final decline than the period at which M. Revon, as I think reasonably, considers that this Athlete may have been made. The Marcus Aurelius and his horse have a somewhat higher claim from us than to be classed among those "merely religious or monumental—not 'objects of high art'" which, our learned author tells us, were the only "bronze figures continued to be manufactured both in Pliny's age and for two centuries later, with which the men of taste did not concern themselves."

We must moreover bear in mind that smaller objects in metal-work of the highest excellence were produced even in Nero's day—witness the copies by Zenodorus of the cups by Calamis, referred to by Mr. King, whose own instances I would cite as disproving his argument.

Nor must we forget the numerous copies produced in Greece and Rome of works by earlier and abler sculptors—copies, many of which are our only means of forming a faint idea of the wondrous beauty of the original conceptions as rendered by their creators' own hands.

² Of such are the Hypnos and the head of Aphrodite, and in less degree the mask of Mercury in the British Museum.

Many of these were more or less modified in size or detail, doubtless to suit the whim of the patron. There would seem to have been, in fact, a large class of artists whose whole labour was devoted to these repetitions, and who, having no small amount of manipulative skill, applied it to that end, rarely or never rising to original productions, except perhaps of minor character.

They were, in fact, the prototypes, in various grades, of that large class of copyists who now at Rome, Florence, Naples, and elsewhere, repeat, *ad nauseam*, the Violinista, the Cenci, or the Sybil, or the less numerous copyists in sculpture who work the "Young Augustus," or bronzists whose reductions from the antique supply the shopkeepers of the Condotti. Of such were they of old, in Rome, working no doubt on larger objects, whose hammers and chisels made a constant din.

Mr. King shows (foot-note to page 123) that in Greece, at earlier time there was a sort of manufacture of bronze statuary, probably for general demand.

In Italy, of the "renaissance" a parallel artistic handicraft was extensively practised, as also referred to by Mr. King. He is, however, hardly just in his illustrative statement, though right in the main, that "the Florence of the sixteenth century is the source of *all* similar productions that display superior merit and originality, whether in the design or the actual manipulation of the metal," ignoring the numerous contemporary works of the Paduan, Venetian, and other Northern Italian Schools.

Nor can we agree with him in his remark (page 125) that we are "accustomed to see all bronzes with one uniform dark-green coating;" intimate acquaintance with the many shades of artificial colouring upon the surface of bronzes by the great artists of the "*bel cinque cento*" and other times refuting such a generalization.

The revival of art under Hadrian's encouragement extended more or less throughout its various branches, and the series of bronze medallions of the Antonines were the work of men of artistic power, quite equal, in another walk, to model, cast, and chase a bronze statuette of equal merit with the Annecy Athlete.

In conclusion, I would again repeat my agreement with M. Revon's rather than with Mr. King's opinion, that the Annecy Athlete may be ascribed approximately with greater probability to Hadrianic than to Lysippian times. I fully coincide, however, with the latter gentleman as to its being a work of high excellence and rarity, and in admirable preservation; I also join him in regretting that it has not been secured by the trustees for our national collection.

With the highest respect for Mr. King's accomplishments as a scholar, and fully appreciating the loving labours of his ready pen, I have been constrained more than once, however humbly, to differ from him in judgment upon certain works of art and antiquity; taking for my standard their special distinctive characteristics, which I hold to be more reliable, as evidence of the school and period of their production, than can be inferred from classic learning or historic narrative—however valuable as auxiliaries these last may be. It is the object itself that must be first consulted, and its oracular reply is seldom fallible to the initiated, although sometimes given indistinctly at the first appeal; circumstantial evidence or proof of title are for the most part more open to doubt.