

# ◆ The Falmer ‘Cupid’

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*The so-called Falmer Cupid is a competently-executed, copper alloy figurine which was apparently found by a ploughman on the downs around Falmer, East Sussex. The figurine came into the possession of George Fleming Richardson, curator of the Mantellian Museum attached to the Royal Sussex Scientific Institution. Richardson presented the figurine to Dr Gideon Algernon Mantell in 1836. The Cupid remained with Mantell until his death in 1852, after which it was acquired by the British Museum. Although the figurine has some Cupid-like attributes (it is naked and has a quiver of arrows), it lacks wings. It is proposed that this figurine represents Apollo, who is also depicted divinely naked, with a bow, but without wings.*

## INTRODUCTION

Born in Lewes, East Sussex, Dr Gideon Algernon Mantell (1790–1852) is perhaps best known for his contributions to geology and palaeontology (e.g. Mantell 1822; 1844). Most famously he identified fossil vertebrates, such as *Iguanodon* and *Hylaeosaurus*, which would be instrumental in Richard Owen’s designation of *Dinosauria* in 1842 (cf. Curwen 1940; Cooper 2009; Dean 2009).

However, Mantell was also a keen antiquarian. He had been a vice-president of the Sussex Archaeological Society since its formation in 1846 and had amassed a large collection of antiquities from Sussex and further afield.

In 1833, Mantell relocated both his medical practice and his collection of geological specimens and antiquities from (166) High Street, Lewes, to 20 The (Old) Steine, Brighton. Despite initial financial worries, the timely assistance of the town council ensured that Mantell’s house was transformed into the Mantellian Museum, attached to the Royal Sussex Scientific Institution. The collection was so extensive that by 1838 the curator, George Fleming Richardson (c. 1796–1848), estimated that the museum held between 20,000 and 30,000 specimens.

It was among this collection that the Falmer Cupid was first exhibited and described. The earliest record of the statuette can be found in Mantell’s catalogue of the museum (Mantell 1836, 40). He records that among the antiquities in Case S, in the upper back room, was ‘a bronze statue of Cupid (without wings), from near Falmer, presented by G. F. Richardson, Esq., curator of the museum’. Richardson was the museum’s curator between

1836 and 1838 (Torrens and Cooper 1986), so it seems probable that the Cupid was given to Mantell in 1836. How long it had previously been in Richardson’s possession remains unclear.

Two years later Richardson added more details about the discovery of the Cupid in his *Sketches in prose and verse*. In this detailed snapshot of the Mantellian Museum, Richardson described one cabinet with ‘a little Roman bronze figure of Cupid, found by a ploughman at Falmer, and presented by the writer to Dr. Mantell’ (Richardson 1838, 219). He even went as far as to provide a fictitious backstory for the statuette in what can only be described as a Roman romance (Richardson 1838, 222–240).

Richardson’s ‘The Bronze Cupid’ is the story of an ill-fated romance between Apronius, a Roman officer, and Voana, a native girl, which took place during Caesar’s second invasion of Britain in 54 BC. In Richardson’s story, the Cupid is given by Apronius to Voana as a token of love (Richardson 1838, 231). It is subsequently lost when Voana commits suicide upon hearing that Apronius had killed her brother in single combat.

Unfortunately for Mantell, despite Brighton’s growing population and increasing prominence as a tourist destination in the 1830s, the museum was not a financial success. The death of his patron, Lord Egremont (1751–1837), and his habit of waiving the entrance fee contributed to the demise of the enterprise (Spokes 1927, 59). This financial decline was further compounded by the low numbers of patients attending his medical practice (Critchley 2010, 141–143). His dire financial situation required Mantell to seek a buyer for his collection.

Initial attempts to raise £3,000 by public subscription were ineffective, despite a campaign

in the local press. Negotiations with the British Museum were more successful (Cleevely and Chapman 1992, 321–4). In his journal for July 30, 1838, Mantell records that he 'accepted the offer of the Trustees of the British Museum, of four thousand pounds for my Collection of Fossils and Antiquities; the trustees engaging to remove the specimens'.

The Mantellian Museum closed to the public at the beginning of November 1838. By the end of the month the first objects were being shipped to the British Museum. Mantell received the money from the Trustees of the British Museum in August 1839.

Despite the purchase of the collection by the British Museum, some items appear to have been retained by Mantell, including the Falmer Cupid. Intriguingly, before the acquisition of the Mantellian collection by the museum, the findspot of the Cupid was described as Falmer, while subsequent references by Mantell refer to its being found in the adjacent parish of Stanmer.

For example, on 27 February 1840, Mantell exhibited a small collection of artefacts from the downs near Brighton and Lewes to the Society of Antiquaries. Among these was the 'small bronze figure of a Cupid, without wings, found at Stanmer near Brighton' (Anon 1842).

Similarly, at the second general meeting of the Sussex Archaeological Society, held in Brighton on September 25, 1846, some objects were exhibited, including the 'bronze statuette of Cupid, from the Downs near Stanmer' (Anon. 1848, viii). Mantell addressed the meeting on this occasion. Moreover, commentary in the journal *Archaeologia* refers to 'the figure of Cupid found at Stanmer' (Anon. 1842, 372). Numerous subsequent references to the statuette use the later findspot and refer to its origin as Stanmer (Winbolt 1935, 67; Aldhouse-Green 1976, 221, 285, Plate XIId).

There is a great deal of ambiguity as to whether the figure was found on the downs near Stanmer or near Falmer. Richardson's 1838 reference to the figurine being found by a ploughman in Falmer appears to be the most credible (Richardson 1838, 219). He was, after all, the owner of the figurine before Mantell, and so would have a clearer idea of the provenance. Quite why Mantell changed the provenance from Falmer to the adjacent parish of Stanmer remains unclear.

The later years of Mantell's life were difficult. Mary, his wife of 23 years, left him in 1839; his eighteen-year-old daughter, Hannah Matilda, died of tuberculosis in 1840 and a serious carriage accident on Clapham Common in 1841 left him crippled. The pain was such that in 1845 he started taking opium as a painkiller. It would be an overdose of opium that killed him on the evening of 11 November 1852, following a lecture at the Clapham Athenaeum.

The disbursement of Mantell's estate was overseen by his fourth son, Reginald Neville Mantell (1827–1857), who returned from the United States, where he had been working as a railway engineer in Kentucky since 1850, in order to carry it out. Although Reginald had inherited his father's keen interest in palaeontology, he had less interest in antiquities, which, coupled with the practicalities of keeping the collection, led him to dispose of it (Cooper 2010, 99, 240, 290, 369).

In April 1853 he sold more than 150 items from the Mantell collection to the British Museum, including numerous medieval floor tiles, spearheads, jet, beads, polished stone axes and brooches. One of the items in the collection was the little Romano-British, copper alloy statuette of 'Cupid', without wings, standing on a square pedestal (British Museum Accession Number 1853,0412.108; *see* Fig. 1).

## DESCRIPTION

The incomplete, cast copper alloy figurine is 72mm high (including the figure's pedestal but excluding the wooden block that was added when the figurine was acquired by the British Museum), 20mm wide and 17mm deep; it weighs 59.7g. The statuette is in relatively good condition except for the figure's left arm, which has been broken off above the elbow, and the left leg, which exhibits a crack below the knee (*see* Fig. 2). The break above the elbow is heavily patinated, indicating a long-standing fracture. The pedestal and figure were cast as a single, solid piece of copper alloy, probably using the lost-wax method.

The small, male figurine, with youthful, delicate features, has some attributes belonging to Cupid and is naked except for a capped quiver of arrows hung below his right shoulder. The head is oriented frontally, with a slight turn to the left. His hair is



Fig. 1. A frontal view of the Falmer Cupid (© Trustees of the British Museum).

short-cropped and wavy. The body is frontal, with the weight borne on the right leg, while the left leg steps forward and is slightly bent at the knee, with the foot slightly raised. The figure leans forward at an angle of about 10 degrees.

The figurine is set on a square, four-tiered pedestal. The torso is trim and gracile and does not have well-developed musculature. There is very little specific detail, apart from the nipples, which have been punched using a 0.7mm punch, the navel and the *linea alba*, which is the most prominent feature of the abdomen.

The quiver is positioned obliquely, midway up his back, with the top end at the level of his left elbow. The strap of his quiver passes over his right

shoulder and across his chest, a common quiver position in many Roman statues and figurines (see Fig. 3). The quiver is a flattened cigar shape with a groove above the base. The quiver is 23.2mm long, while the strap is 1.8mm wide.

The left arm has been broken above the elbow. Consequently, the left hand and anything that it might have held (such as a bow) are missing. The right arm is very slightly bent at the elbow and an unidentified object is held in the lowered right hand.

Apart from the breaks to the left arm and leg, the figurine is in very good condition, with a dark patina, although there is some surface roughness under the right arm and some sign of minor corrosion pitting, plus a slight, off-white incrustation. This is quite characteristic of interment in chalky soil, as would be expected on the downs around Falmer and Stanmer.

The square pedestal base comprises three parts: the base, or foot, next to the ground; the dado, or die, forming the centre, and the cornice, or surbase mouldings at the top, generating a tiered effect. The statuette was cast through the base of the pedestal. Afterwards it would have required fettling to remove casting debris and the surface design of the hair and hands would have been refined and defined by chiselling and chasing.

The most obvious remnant of the post-casting process is the angle between the figure's torso and left elbow, which has been drilled out with a 3.5mm, twist drill bit. The operation was performed with the drill entering from the front, as seen by the lip of material remaining at the rear of the elbow. The remnant toolmarks from the flutes of the drill are still evident inside the drill hole.

## IDENTIFICATION

The original identification of the figure as Cupid, made by Richardson, has generally been accepted in the literature (Winbolt 1935, 67; Aldhouse-Green 1976, 221, pl XIIId). In Roman mythology Cupid (from the Latin *Cupido*, meaning 'desire') is the god of love and the son of Venus, the goddess of love. The Roman Cupid derives from Eros in Greek mythology.

However, this identification needs to be viewed with caution. Richardson was not an antiquarian. Although he was the curator of the Mantellian Museum, his interest lay in geology and he would

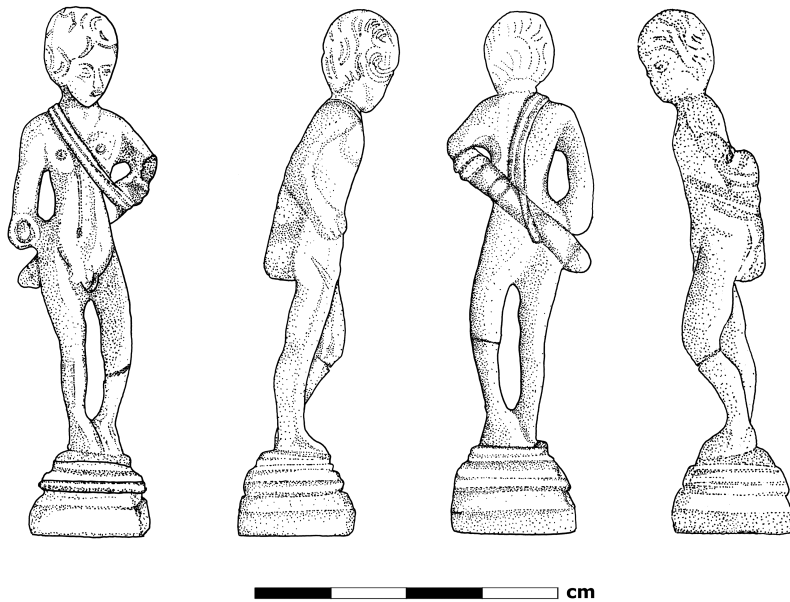


Fig. 2. The Falmer Cupid (frontal, side and rear views).

later become a geological curator in the British Museum. In the mid-1830s, when the identification was made, Richardson was new to the field of science, so much so that Mantell was at first reticent in hiring him for the post of curator (Torrens and Cooper 1986, 253). Mantell accepted Richardson's identification, although, just like Richardson, he was a geologist first and foremost. He certainly could make mistakes regarding antiquities, as seen in his journal entry of 8 July 1830 (Cooper 2010, 42), describing a 'brass celt found near the racecourse' as being Roman rather than prehistoric in date.

The clearest association between the figurine and Cupid is the quiver of arrows. This attribute of the deity was well-established in classical antiquity (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1, 463–473). Furthermore, the figure is naked. In the current corpus of thirty-two known Roman Cupid figurines identified in Britain, all but one are naked (Durham 2012). A single example of a cloaked Cupid figurine is known from Edinburgh (MacDonald 1937, 95; fig. 3). However, one of the key characteristics of Cupid is the possession of wings, and there is no evidence that the Falmer figurine ever had any.

Relatively few deities are known to use a bow and arrow. Diana (Artemis) can be discounted,

because she is female. Hercules (Heracles) has an association with the bow in classical mythology, but this is rarely seen in figurines. Moreover, the musculature on the Falmer figurine is not reminiscent of the hero.

Another male deity who has the attributes of the Falmer Cupid is Apollo (Durham 2012). Apollo is sometimes portrayed divinely naked, sometimes with a bow and arrow, but always without wings.

A similar example is known from the King Harry Lane Romano-British cemetery in St Albans (Niblett 2005, 94. Fig. 3). This standing copper alloy figure holds a patera in his right hand, with the arm held slightly out from the side of his body (Henig 2001, 17). Continental parallels can be seen in Switzerland (Kaufmann-Heinimann 1994, Table 8.11) and Bulgaria (Ognenova-Marinova 1975, 35, 7–12).

While clearly Roman, the absence of an archaeological context makes precise dating of the figurine problematic. There is very little in the figure itself that can be used. Conventions of increasing modesty in the later empire may indicate that this naked figure is a product of the first half of the Roman occupation of Britain.



Fig. 3. The Apollo figurine from the King Harry Lane Romano-British cemetery, St Albans (© Verulamium Museum).

### CONTEXT

The Falmer environs were rich in Romano-British activity. Numerous field systems of prehistoric/Romano-British date have been recorded by field and aerial survey on Falmer Hill (Holleyman 1935; Kaminski 2013). A small, rural, Romano-British settlement seems to have existed at Falmer (TQ 353092), where excavation has revealed two corn-drying ovens and domestic debris (Norris 1956). The dating evidence, based on ceramics and a coin of Constantine, is suggestive of occupation in the late 3rd–4th century.

Another Romano-British settlement or enclosure was situated on the northern slopes of Falmer Hill. However, some material undoubtedly ended up in antiquarian collections and escaped publication. For example, in his unpublished journal for 3 August 1821, Mantell records ‘a fine middle brass of Domitian [was] brought [to] me by a labourer, who dug it up on Falmer Hill; cost me 1/6’ (Cooper 2010, 18).

### CONCLUSION

The so-called Falmer Cupid is a competently-executed, copper alloy figurine. According to George Fleming Richardson the figurine was found by a ploughman on the downs around Falmer. Richardson acquired the figure from the ploughman and presented it to Gideon Mantell soon after becoming curator of the Mantellian Museum in 1836.

The figurine may have held some particular interest for Mantell because when he sold his collection to the British Museum, in 1839, he retained the Cupid. It was only with Mantell’s death in 1852 that his son Reginald sold the Cupid to the museum.

Although the figurine has some Cupid-like attributes (it is naked with a quiver of arrows), it lacks wings. On balance, it appears more likely to represent Apollo, who is also depicted divinely naked, with a bow, but without wings. The figurine may have been part of a household shrine (*lararium*) or a votive object used as an offering in a sanctuary.

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