

## ROMANO-BRITISH CULT OBJECTS FROM NORFOLK – SOME RECENT FINDS

by John Davies

Oh Help us, you household Gods! Oh Help us!  
*Hymn of the Arval Priests, AD 218.*

### Introduction

The importance of religion and the gods in everyday life during the Roman period is reflected in the records of the priestly college of the Arvals, as one of the oldest surviving documents concerning Roman religion. Surprisingly, despite the huge quantity of metalwork finds currently being recorded from Norfolk on a weekly basis, largely through the agency of metal detector users, objects recognised as having been certainly connected with Roman cults are very rarely encountered. Only some ninety finds described as Roman ritual artefacts have been recorded from the county. Several new metal-detected examples have now been reported to Norwich Castle Museum, in quick succession. All are representations of the heads of deities. They comprise an interesting, contrasting, group, particularly in the quality of their manufacture. Together with a sixth example from existing collections, they have an importance beyond that of artistic competence and are worthy of some fuller discussion in relation to Norfolk during the Roman period.

### A Pan head box mount from Elsing

A remarkable bronze mount was discovered in Elsing, central Norfolk, by Mr T. Hanratty. It is a representation of the head of Pan, measuring 5.5 cm x 3.2 cm (Fig. 1, 1). The facial expression is intense and fierce, which is emphasised by deeply incised lines beside the nose and diagonal frowning lines on the forehead. The nose is short, rounded and squat, and the eyes stare directly forward. He is portrayed as heavily bearded and moustached. Two rounded goat horns project from the centre of the forehead, each incised by a spiral groove running from base to tip. The hair, which flows upwards, forms leaf-shaped points, echoing the shapes of the horns. The ears are large and rounded, unlike the pointed goat ears often associated with this deity.

The back of the object is flat. It is slightly concave in shape with a flat rim, showing that it originally attached to a flat surface. It clearly functioned as an elaborately decorative mount. To this end, a silver sheen of solder still adheres to the flat rim. The overall style betrays extremely high quality workmanship. It is an expressive piece which reflects the lustful attributes of Pan as the giver of fertility. It is heavy and would have been fitted to a substantial casket or box. The object has been loaned to Norwich Castle Museum by Mr and Mrs P. Roy.

Representations of Pan are not commonly encountered in Britain, nor in the Roman west more generally. The Bibliothèque Nationale has two comparable Pan masks, which unfortunately lack any provenance (Babelon and Blanchet 1985, p 198 nos 447-8). Both show similarities of abundant wavy hair, arranged in pointed leaf-shapes, and staring expression. A third example has been recorded from the base of a jug-handle from Augst (Kaufmann-Heinimann 1977, pp 143-4 no. 247). That example is more highly-finished and facially life-like. In a similar vein, there are goat-like human heads beneath the handles of the Portland Vase (Haynes 1975), the horns of which embrace the union of the handles with the glass vessel. These heads are usually accepted to represent Pan. A mask of Pan is shown in profile on a red jasper intaglio from Eccles, Kent (Henig 1974, no. 144).





1



2



3



Fig. 1

1. Pan head box mount. 2. Pan head mask. 3. Mercury plaque. Scale 1:1



A second Pan head from Norfolk has now been recognised, originally having been described as a Satyr's head. This small bronze mask was found in the Thetford area and a replica is currently on display in Norwich Castle Museum. It is 8.0 cm high x 7.5 cm between the outer edges of the horns (Fig. 1, 2). This example has a well-rounded face, differing from the Elsing example by having a straight nose and thin eyebrows. The mouth is open and the eyes are silvered, with open holes for the pupils, which may originally have been set with stones. Although this example does have the more typical goat ears associated with Pan, it contrasts with the previous example, having down-turned rams' horns. The hair and beard are represented by tightly matted curls. The whole mask is almost circular in shape and convex in profile. The rarity of Pan in Britain makes more than one representation of this deity in Norfolk even more remarkable.

The association of Pan with central and south Norfolk goes further. Study of the Thetford Treasure of late Roman jewellery and spoons, discovered in 1979, revealed evidence for the cult of Faunus (Johns and Potter 1983). There is a known association between the deities Pan and Faunus and, indeed, any distinction between the two is far from clear. Specific references to Faunus are found on two rings, one carrying a Pan face with goat-like features and small horns (*op. cit.* p 95, no. 23) and the other being the woodpecker ring (*op. cit.* pp 84-5, no. 7). Picus (Latin for woodpecker) was the father of Faunus. Twelve of the spoons bear related inscriptions.

The Elsing box mount can perhaps most comfortably be given a 2nd-century date. The Thetford Treasure belongs to the later fourth. Faunus was an ancient earth deity of Latian origin, whose attributes would have found associations with native Celtic deities of the woods and fields. The affinity felt locally would appear to have been an enduring one, which persisted in the central and south Norfolk area through the Roman period.

#### **A Mercury plaque from Brampton**

A small decorative item was found at Brampton by Mr M. Bone. It is oval in shape, measuring 2.9 cm x 2.3 cm, and is made from lead alloy, weighing 13.93g (Fig. 1, 3). It depicts the bust of Mercury, in profile, facing left. The bust is draped and the deity has a winged head. He carries a *caduceus* over his left shoulder. The quality of the depiction is extremely crude. The facial features are sketchily portrayed and there is minimal detail. A lack of clarity is highlighted by a slight 'ghosting' of the face above the nose. There is a slight rim around the plaque, which is particularly pronounced at the bottom. This shows that the object was originally set into a rim, or a frame, of uncertain size. The reverse is flat. It may have been worn as a charm.

Brampton was the second town of Roman Norfolk (after Caistor St Edmund), situated in the north-east of the county. Previous finds of religious objects from the site include a bronze deer head and a bronze figurine of Hercules. Representations of Mercury are known from elsewhere in Norfolk. A bronze Mercury figurine was found at Caister-by-Yarmouth. Caistor St Edmund has produced a bronze plaque of Mercury wearing a neck torc and also a bronze saucepan handle carrying a figure of the deity, in high relief. In addition, three Mercury figurines have been found in north-west Norfolk, with two from Great Walsingham (Frere 1988, 456) and one from Stanhoe. Another came from Wicklewood in central Norfolk. The new example further attests the popularity of Mercury in the region, as elsewhere in Britain, and the Roman world.

#### **A plaque depicting the head of Neptune from Newton Flotman**

This artefact was found at Newton Flotman, south of Norwich, by Mr G. Linton. It is made of lead, from a sub-circular sheet, from which the edges have been folded back. It now forms a, somewhat battered, rounded shape, measuring 3.6 cm at its widest point (Fig. 2, 1). A circular





Fig. 2

1. Neptune plaque. 2-3. Busts of Venus. Scale 1:1

face is depicted centrally, employing minimal detail. A nose and simple eyes project forward and brief lateral lines form the mouth. Around the outside, square shapes form a border, which resembles hair. There is no moustache.

It is not possible to associate this crude piece with a particular deity with certainty. One possible identification may be the head of Medusa, although no snakes are shown in the hair. It



also resembles known representations of Neptune, for example the silver votive plaque from Great Chesterford in Essex (Henig 1984, 146), and this suggestion is strengthened by its provenance. This object was found at a location on the River Tas, just south of the Roman *civitas capital* of Caistor St Edmund. The River Tas was navigable up to this point during the Roman period and the water-borne trade link with the eastern seaboard of Britain would have been of vital importance to the prosperity of the town and its inhabitants. A lead curse-tablet from Caistor was addressed to Neptune (*op. cit.*, 143). The presence of the Neptune cult is therefore not surprising and seems to be a most likely association for this small lead votive.

### **Busts of Venus from Tharston and Burgh Castle**

Representations of Venus from Norfolk are scarce. Pipeclay figurines of the goddess have been found at Scole and at Hockwold-cum-Wilton. A small bronze bust of Venus was found at Tharston, by Mr R. Reynolds (Fig. 2, 2). This measures 6.8 cm in height and 4.0 cm at its maximum width, across the base. This bust, which is now very worn, was originally of very high quality and has been cut away from a larger complete figurine. It was separated across the neck and upper torso, in a clumsy fashion. The base comprises what had been the lower torso of the original figurine and the two pieces of the statuette have been joined by a square iron rod, soldered in place at each end.

A second, smaller, bronze bust of Venus was found at Burgh Castle in 1995 (Fig. 2, 3). This measures 2.7 cm in height and has a maximum width of 1.7 cm. This is a much simpler and cruder representation of the goddess than the example from Tharston. Again, this piece was originally from a larger bust or figurine. It has been cut away across the neck, but in a neater fashion than the previous example. The intention was to convert the head into a pendant, by way of a narrow hole which has been drilled through the hair.

### **Conclusion**

The rarity of recorded Romano-British cult objects in relation to the profusion of other Roman finds of similar date from Norfolk is remarkable. Some of the more ordinary examples, similar to the lead artefacts described here, may not have been recognised for what they are. It is also apparent that recorded examples show a bias towards classical deities. In the ancient world religion permeated daily life and it is likely that many more objects had religious significance. Such connotations may be detectable from the method of deposition or burial of what are apparently everyday items.

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