

AKTI VIII. MEĐUNARODNOG KOLOKVIJA O PROBLEMIMA RIMSKOG PROVINCIJALNOG UMJETNIČKOG STVARALAŠTVA

AKTEN DES VIII. INTERNATIONALEN KOLLOQUIUMS ÜBER PROBLEME DES PROVINZIALRÖMISCHEN KUNSTSCHAFFENS

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE 8TH INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON PROBLEMS OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL ART

LES ACTES DU VIII^{ÈME} COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR LES PROBLÈMES DE L'ART PROVINCIAL ROMAIN

ZAGREB 5.-8. V. 2003.

RELIGIJA I MIT KAO POTICAJ RIMSKOJ PROVINCIJALNOJ PLASTICI

RELIGION UND MYTHOS ALS ANREGUNG FÜR DIE PROVINZIALRÖMISCHE PLASTIK

RELIGION AND MYTH AS AN IMPETUS FOR THE ROMAN PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE

LA RELIGION ET LE MYTHE COMME INSPIRATION POUR LA SCULPTURE ROMAINE PROVINCIALE

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PROVINCIALE

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FLEXIBLE INTENT: SHIFTING VALUES & DISCREPANT MEANINGS IN ROMANO-BRITISH RELIGIOUS SCULPTURE

BY MIRANDA ALDHOUSE-GREEN

INTRODUCTION: FLEXIBLE INTENT

The focus of this paper is the notion of figural depictions as articulate artefacts that, as such, contained within them opportunities for flexible symbolic meaning, on the one hand, and physical biographies, on the other (the term 'flexible intent' has been used in discussions of ritual deposition of Bronze Age metalwork)¹. Both are important for the understanding of sculpture and other imagery as dynamic, active and interactive mechanisms for discourse between individuals and between people and their supernatural worlds. We need to rid ourselves of rigid, prescriptive and unilinear models of image-consumption and, instead, to recognise that, on a par with image-use in many traditional societies, Roman provincial images could say different things to different interest-groups: thus, a single depiction may be polyvalent and may even present deliberate tensions and contradictions, in terms of appropriation, manipulation, rejection and resistance². We also need to acknowledge that their function may have changed over time: the excavation of an image from a tomb or a shrine may represent one episode (and not necessarily even the final chapter) in its life-story. A further issue to be borne in mind is the multi-faceted nature of cultural interaction, or religious syncretism, which may be 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'³: in other words it may be driven by the dominators or, more covertly, by the dominated, and the distinction may be determined by the form of iconography presented. But we must also

be aware that synthesis involves more than the sum of its parts and that 'syncretistic' iconographies, while inspired by the traditions of native and imported cults, are not just mixtures of the old but the result of new ideological structures and new systems of ritual and belief.

RECUSANCY & REVISIONISM: RETRO-IDEOLOGIES IN ROMAN BRITAIN

One of the problems of Romano-British imagery is that it appears to erupt, fully-fledged, into the material culture of Britannia with little, if any, Iron Age ancestry, yet – like Gallo-Roman cult-iconography – it contains symbols and motifs that are alien to the mainstream repertoire of Rome⁴. It is a commonplace that the introduction of *romanitas* brought with it the 'disruptive technologies' of epigraphy and iconography. But it is occasionally possible to glimpse what may be the result of conscious revisionism or retrospection, concerned with the reaffirmation of British identity and a desire to incorporate ancestral memory in the new modes of visual expression.

It is possible to illustrate such a model with reference to a recurrent motif in south-west British sculpture, namely that of the vat or bucket, an item frequently present as tomb-furniture in high-status cremation graves of the late Iron Age in southern Britain (and elsewhere) and sometimes ritually-deposited in watery con-

¹ S. Needham, *When expediency broaches ritual intention. The flow of metal between systemic and buried domains*. Journal Royal Anthr. Inst. n.s. 7, 2001, 275–298.

² M.J. Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images* (London 2004). – M.J. Aldhouse-Green, *Alternative iconographies. Metaphors of resistance in Romano-British cult-imagery*. In: P. Noelke mit F. Naumann-Steckner und B. Schneider (Hrsg.), *Romanisation und Resistenz in Plastik, Architektur und Inschriften der Provinzen des Imperium Romanum*. Neue Funde und Forschungen. Akten des VII. Internationalen Colloquiums über Probleme des provinziäl-römischen Kunstschaffens. Köln 2. bis 6. Mai 2001 (Mainz am Rhein 2003) 39–48.

³ C. Stewart/ R. Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London 1994).

⁴ M. J. Green, *God in man's image. Thoughts on the genesis and affiliations of some Romano-British cult-imagery*. Britannia 29, 1998, 17–30.

texts. Several scholars⁵ have pointed to the importance of 'power-drinking' during this period, and the significance of vessels for the containment and consumption of liquor, not just for conviviality but for both political and religious ceremonies. The appearance of large vessels, accompanying female images on Romano-British sculptures, such as those from Bath⁶, Gloucester (fig. 1)⁷ and Lemington⁸, may indicate that the symbolism of the container and/or its contents may have retained its archaic meaning, albeit within a different context and that its depiction may even have acted as a referent for the maintenance of ancestral power by local people and local gods.

The Lemington image raises other issues suggesting its use in discourses associated with gender and 'otherness' in relation to *romanitas*. It is generally assumed that the icon is female, partly because of its clothing but mainly, perhaps, on account of a crudely-scratched basal inscription 'Dea Riigina', which may not even be contemporary with the sculpture. If the figure is female, then its possession of a spear is interesting; what is more, 'she' carries it in her left hand (and we can assume the proportion of right- to left-handed people to be broadly similar to that of the present: roughly 10%). So the Lemington image runs doubly counter to the 'norm', particularly in terms of Roman values, and its symbolism is reminiscent of the motif of warrior-horsewomen on late Iron Age Breton coins, some of whom brandish weapons in their left hands⁹. Finally, we should look at the style of the piece: it was made according to a schematic, reductionist paradigm, in contrast to the mimetic realism of Classical iconography, yet it probably came originally from the great and sophisticated rural Roman estate of Chedworth: was it perhaps the possession of a servant, who had his or her own agenda for ritual expression?

MANY-SIDED CONVERSATIONS: THE EMBERTON MERCURY

The stone relief-carving from Emberton¹⁰ in south-east England shares with the Lemington figure an es-



FIG. 1 TRIANGULAR STONE PLAQUE DEPICTING A GODDESS WITH A STAVE-BUCKET, ACCOMPANIED BY MERCURY; FROM GLOUCESTER (SHAKESPEARE INN SITE). © GLOUCESTER CITY MUSEUM.

chewance of somatic naturalism and minimal attention to bodily detail (fig. 2). Its possession of a caduceus and *petasos* identifies the image as that of Mercury but the winged hat of the Graeco-Roman deity demands closer inspection, for the excrescences resemble horns as much as wings. In my view it is unnecessary to interpret the motif as 'either or' but rather as 'both and', with intentional introduction of ambiguity into its meaning; the very schematism of the piece renders its dubiety all the more successfully. This oscillation between wings and horns is not unique to the Emberton figure but is presented unequivocally at the great temple-precinct of Uley¹¹, a shrine dedicated to Mercury: on at least one

⁵ B. Arnold, *Drinking the Feast. Alcohol and the Legitimation of Power in Celtic Europe*. Cambridge Archaeological Journal 9:1, 1999, 71–93. – B. Arnold, *Power Drinking in Iron Age Europe*. British Archaeology 57, February 2001, 14–19. – B. Fischer, *Coinage and wine in Gaul*. In: P. de Jersey (ed.), *Celtic Coinage 2001*. Proceedings of a Conference held at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, December 2001 (Oxford 2005) in press.

⁶ B.W. Cunliffe/M.G. Fulford, *CSIR Great Britain I 2. Bath and the Rest of Wessex* (Oxford, London 1982) no. 39 pl. 11.

⁷ M. Henig, *Roman Sculpture from the Cotswold Region*. CSIR I 7 (Oxford, London 1993) fig. 78.

⁸ M.J. Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins and Mothers* (London, 1995) 75. – Henig (note 7) fig. 94.

⁹ M.J. Green, *Some Gallo-British Goddesses. Iconography and Meaning*. In: L. Goodison/C. Morris (eds.), *Ancient Goddesses, the myths and the evidence* (London 1998) 180–195 fig. 1 – M.J. Aldhouse-Green, *Poles Apart? Perceptions of Gender in Gallo-British Cult-Iconography*. In: S. Scott/J. Webster (eds.), *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art* (Cambridge 2003) 95–118.

¹⁰ M.J. Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester 1986) 98 fig. 47. – Henig (note 7) pl. 22 no. 78.

¹¹ A. Woodward/ P. Leach, *The Uley Shrines. Excavation of a ritual complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire* (London 1993) 98 fig. 83.



FIG. 2 SCHEMATIC STONE RELIEF OF MERCURY, FROM A WELL AT EMBERTON, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE. © BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY MUSEUM, AYLESBURY.

of the many images of the god, the *petasos* has been replaced by a pair of horns. Wings and horns reflect a small visual discrepancy but a chasmic conceptual gulf: the first works within a syntax of trans-species iconogra-

phy that is at home within a British cosmological context; the second belongs to the Hermes-Mercury grammar of Classical mythic art. I suggest that what is going on at Uley and Emberton is intentional appropriation of a Roman form by a British artist and patron. Finally, we should think of the Emberton stone's biography: it was found down a Roman well, but it must once have stood in a shrine, and it is interesting to speculate as to whether it came by its ultimate fate as an act of worship by devotees or as a consequence of desecration by the followers of a contrary religious tradition.

RESISTANCE AND ALTERNATIVE IN ROMAN BATH

The thermal sanctuary dedicated to Sulis Minerva at Bath¹² appears to have been heavily dependent upon Rome for its structural and religious development and, indeed, the evidence for its pre-Roman presence is sparse. Much of its iconography betrays overt *romanitas* and it is clear that Roman soldiers as well as civilians enjoyed the healing experience here. Despite the presiding goddess's eponymous status as a 'dual-national', the gilded bronze head of her cult-statue¹³ displays unequivocal Classicism. But what of a small schist plaque¹⁴ depicting three female figures standing in a row? They may represent a version of the *Deae Matres*, perhaps the *Suleviae* who are mentioned in epigraphy at the site. But they might also exhibit a desire to present a British alternative to Sulis Minerva, a resistant image that spoke to local people, using the paradigms of threeness, schematism and exaggeration of the head, all of which belong to habitual modes of expression that had meaning within Gallo-British religious traditions¹⁵.

GODS OR SHAMANS: ASYMMETRIES & THERIANTHROPE

The sandstone carving of a severed human head from the garden of a late Roman house at Caerwent is well documented. It was found on a platform within a building interpreted by the excavators as a shrine, and George Boon¹⁶ has suggested the owners of the house

¹² B. Cunliffe, *Roman Bath* (London 1995). – B.W. Cunliffe/ P. Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath*. Volume I: The Site (Oxford 1985).

¹³ Cunliffe/ Fulford (note 6) pl. 7 no. 26.

¹⁴ Cunliffe/ Fulford (note 6) pl. 11 no. 38.

¹⁵ M.J. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London 1989) 169–203. – Aldhouse-Green (note 2).

¹⁶ G.C. Boon, *The Shrine of the Head, Caerwent*. In: G.C. Boon/ J.M. Lewis (eds.), *Welsh Antiquity* (Cardiff 1976) 193–175; 173.

itself may well have been Christian, arguing from the presence of a 'Seasons' mosaic, probably once with an Orpheus motif at its centre, together with more tangible evidence of Christianity in the town. Close scrutiny of this stone head reveals a mismatch in treatment between the two sides of the face, particularly the eyes, the left being much more shallowly carved than the right, as if in deliberate attempt at achieving asymmetry. In her study of prehistoric wooden figurines from British and European sites, Bryony Coles¹⁷ has drawn attention to a persistent pattern of physiognomic representation, involving the 'slighting' of one side, usually the left, and focused on discrepant display of the eyes.

It is possible to discern recurrent intentional asymmetry in other Romano-British carved faces. A new find from Doncaster in northern England (fig. 3)¹⁸ shows this very clearly: it is remarkable, too, in its depiction of an apparently cat-eared human head, with long moustaches and lopsided facial features. The combination of asymmetry and therianthropic presentation is highly reminiscent of ritual practice involving shamans in many traditional societies, past and present, particularly in hunter-gatherer communities, where holy men and women experience trance-induced visions and thereby liaise with the spirit-world. During ecstatic engagement with the supernatural world, the shaman may be exposed to considerable pain, anguish and risk; his or her eyes may bulge and the face may become distorted in the agony of transference and conflict with maleficent spirit-beings, as he or she endeavours to heal the living by rescuing their stolen souls¹⁹. Very often, the shaman exhibits the persona of a 'two-spirit', transference being by cross-dressing or by adopting the guise of particular animal-helpers and 'becoming' that animal, thus enabling encounters with the supernatural. I suggest that this is one way of 'reading' the Doncaster head: its cat-ears may represent a headdress and its asymmetrical face lends validity to its interpretation as a trance-experiencing ritualist.

Therianthropes are common images in Romano-British (and other western European) iconography in the Roman period, and manifest themselves above all in the depiction of humans with antlers or horns. The little plaque from Cirencester²⁰, shows an anthropomorphic figure, its head adorned with antlers and its legs merged with the

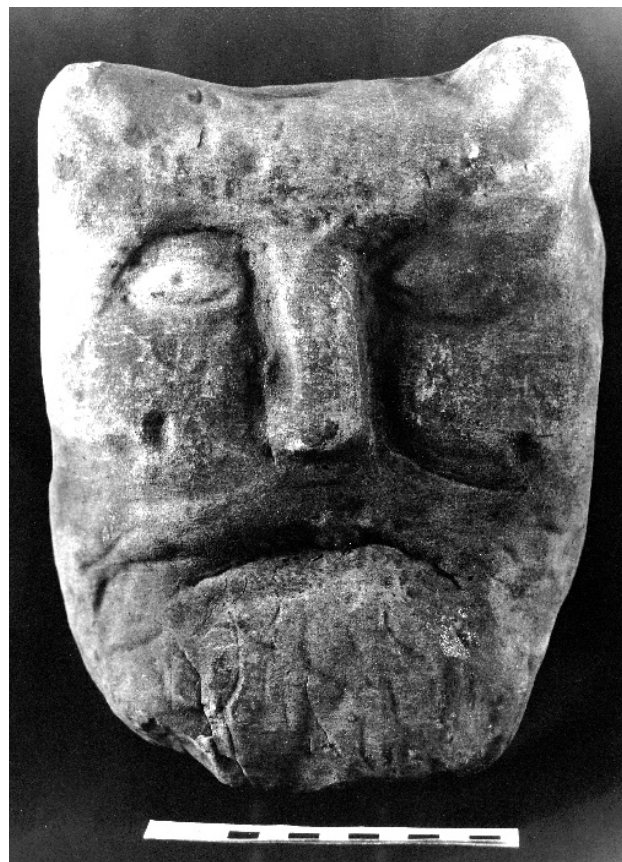


FIG. 3 STONE HEAD FROM BARNBY DUN CHURCHYARD, DONCASTER, WITH BEARD AND CAT-EARS. © DONCASTER MUSEUM SERVICE (BY KIND PERMISSION OF MR PETER ROBINSON).

bodies of ram-horned snakes, the two motifs forming a persistent grammar of depiction in Roman Gaul. The Cirencester image displays double transference, in the antlers and in the hybrid form of the serpent: each pairing (the human/stag and the snake/ram) exhibits tension between order and wilderness, culture and nature, the domestic and the wild. The stag itself seems to have been perceived as a liminal creature in later prehistoric Europe, perhaps because of its ambivalent relationship with people, being both hunted and herded and on account of its complex and variable social behaviour (solitary in woodland and communal in open country). It may be

¹⁷ B. Coles, *Anthropomorphic Wooden Figures from Britain and Ireland*. Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society 56, 1990, 315–333. – B. Coles, *Wood Species for Wooden Figures. A Glimpse of a Pattern*. In: A. Gibson/D.D.A Simpson (eds.), *Prehistoric Ritual and Religion* (Stroud 1998) 163–173.

¹⁸ Doncaster Museum; information from Mr Peter Robinson (unpublished at time of writing but see Aldhouse-Green (note 2)).

¹⁹ P. Vitesbsky, *The Shaman* (London 1995). – N. Price (ed.), *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (London 2001). – D.J. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing. Symbolic Meanings in southern San rock painting* (London 1981). – D.J. Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* (London 2002). – M.J. Aldhouse-Green/S. Aldhouse-Green, *The Quest for the Shaman in European Antiquity* (London 2005).

²⁰ Henig (note 7) no. 93. – Green (note 15) 93 fig. 39.



FIG. 4 COPPER-ALLOY FEMALE FIGURINE FROM A LATE IRON AGE SACRED SITE AT HENLEY WOOD, SOMERSET. © NORTH SOMERSET MUSEUM SERVICE.

possible to read such contra-normative images as indicative of a resistant repertoire of imagery, that presented an intentionally archaic theme, harking back to the Iron Age, when antlered human imagery is first identified.

PERSISTENCE OR PARODY: THE MARYPORT WARRIOR

The little carving of a warrior from the Roman fort of Maryport²¹ in Cumbria exhibits a gloriously unroman package of symbols: he is naked, unashamedly ithyphallic and horned. His body is carved according to a thoroughly schematic template, yet there is harmony in the repeated phallicism of genitals, horns, nose and spear. What is such a figure doing in a Roman fort? It hardly represents a Roman soldier – legionary or auxiliary, so does it depict a local god or a British warrior? The somatic treatment belongs to a recurrent pattern of imagery in

Britain, particularly in the north, where horned beings form a persistent element in the repertoire of sculptors. But, given the strong Roman presence in the region, and the wide availability of Roman-trained craftsmen, it might be worth exploring the use of iconography to act in a parody of ‘British barbarism’. We should remember the comments of Classical writers, such as Herodian, who painted a wonderful picture of the Britons, wallowing naked in the mud and covered with tattoos²². Even if this were not the explanation for the appearance of the Maryport warrior and his fellows, it may well be that a British warrior-god, carved by a Briton might, even so, have been a focus for Roman mockery and was simultaneously a sacred object and a source of satire depending on the cultural context of the viewer.

MATERIALITY & MEANING

The final theme I should like to explore is the association between materiality, function and meaning. Studies in other areas of archaeology, notably the British Neolithic, have pointed to the need to examine the relationship between the properties of materials (including durability, colour and change through time) and the objects from which they are made²³. It is right to apply such a model to imagery, and to examine how this might work. It may be possible to establish a link between the material used for an image and its life-experience and between the image and its source – whether tree, rock-face or metal ore. Three Romano-British images serve to exemplify how such studies might progress: the bronze figure from Henley Wood in Somerset, a chalk image from Deal in Kent and a wooden statuette from Winchester in Hampshire, all in southern Britain.

The Henley Wood figurine (fig. 4)²⁴ depicts a woman, naked but for a torc round her neck and a plaited *sprang* (headband) round her head. Her pendulous breasts imply maturity, perhaps childbearing, and her once inlaid glass eyes must have drawn the attention. The socket between her feet suggests she was once mounted on a

²¹ Green (note 10) 114 fig. 55.

²² Herodian History III, 14, 67.

²³ M. Parker Pearson/ Ramilisonina, *Stonehenge for the Ancestors. The Stones Pass on the Message*. *Antiquity* 72, no. 276, 1998, 308–326. – J. Pollard/ M. Gillings, *Romancing the Stones. Towards a Virtual and Elemental Avebury*. *Archaeological Dialogues* 5, no. 2, 143–164. – C. Evans/J. Pollard/M. Knight, *Life in Woods. Tree-Throws, “Settlement” and Forest Cognition*. *Oxford Journal Arch.* 18, no. 3, 1999, 241–253. – A. Jones/G. MacGregor (eds.), *Colouring the Past. The Significance of Colour in Archaeological Research* (Oxford 1998). – M. Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees. The Symbolism of Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain* (Aberystwyth 2000). – M. Aldhouse-Green, *Devotion and Transcendence. Discrepant Function in Sacred Space*. In: A.T. Smith/A. Brookes (eds.), *Holy Ground: Theoretical Issues Relating to the Landscape and Material Culture of Ritual Space* (Oxford 2001) 61–71.

²⁴ M. Henig, *The Bronze figurine*. In: L. Watts/P. Leach, *Henley Wood, Temples and Cemetery Excavations 1962–69*. By the Late Ernest Greenfield and Others (York 1996) 131–133.

stand and carried through streets or countryside in processions. Most interestingly, the body shows signs of repeated handling, particularly evident in the wear-polish on the face. The find-spot of the figurine is interesting, for she was deposited under the floor of a Romano-British temple and, in the opinion of the excavators, she may have been deliberately hidden, probably because she was the object of sincere veneration and respect, perhaps over centuries. Her headgear is highly reminiscent of later Iron Age images in Gaul, like the torc-wearing stone statue from Alesia²⁵, and her neckring and nakedness proclaim her Britishness. The wear on her body indicates her use as a working artefact, habitually fondled and probably kissed during ritual practice. It may have been important that such polish was visible, as a means of recharging her energy and, in turn endowing her celebrants with some of her power²⁶. As the image was used and handled, so her colour and form would change and her face would increasingly reflect the light.

Light and colour may have influenced the choice of chalk for making images, such as the figurine from Deal in Kent, which was found deep in an underground shrine²⁷. It may be that the whiteness of the chalk was relevant to its placement in the dark, and that deliberate contrast between whiteness and blackness was intended: the Deal image is by no means the only chalk figure to have been deliberately deposited in a dark place. Such association between colour and meaning is increasingly recognised as a significant factor in the way symbolism worked within ancient societies²⁸. In the European Iron Age, we may point to the gleaming granite statues of the 'gallaicos guerreros' guarding Celtiberian hillforts²⁹, or the Deskford carnyx³⁰ deposited in a remote Scottish peat-bog, which had been carefully manufactured with different copper alloys to produce a variegated effect.

Finally, we should mention the importance of wooden imagery in Roman Britain and elsewhere in the provinces. Though, of course little has survived, the oc-

casional preservation in watery contexts of such objects as the little female figure from Winchester, preserved because of its deliberate aquatic deposition,³¹ reminds us that, as in Gaul, wooden iconography must once have been common. It is my belief that wooden carvings had a particular set of meanings that were contingent upon their organic nature and their properties of transformation and decay, perhaps perceived as analogous to flesh. The notion that such connections were made is supported by the 'sacrifice' of the early Iron Age alder figurine from Ballachulish in Scotland³². Lucan draws attention to the horror of the sacred grove outside Marseille, where rotting, leprous wooden images struck terror into Caesar's soldiers³³. The instability and mutability of wooden images may have been central to their meaning and purpose, and lends credence to the idea that images had biographies and that their production from living trees, perhaps ancient and enmeshed within landscape and memory, served to ensoul them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to address the issue of Romano-British images as dynamic, active and interactive objects, as articulate voices whose meaning was embedded in the societies that produced them and the cosmologies perceived by the communities that consumed them. I have tried to present a model of figural iconography as flexible, transformative and polyvalent, both in the way they were physically used and in the meanings enshrined within them. Ancestral memory, revisionism and resistance, the ability to convey discrepant and sometimes contradictory messages, the questioning of theocentric interpretation, the idea that images may be used as satire, and the linkage between material and meaning all have a role to play in the search for how iconography worked in the multi-cultural and post-colonial context that was Roman Britain.

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²⁵ S. Deyts, *Statue au torques d'Alesia*. In: S. Deyts, *À la rencontre des dieux gaulois un défi à César* (Dijon 1999) no. 36.

²⁶ On analogy with wood-symbolism in traditional societies, for instance among the Caribbean Taíno: N.J. Saunders/D. Gray, *Zemís, Trees and Symbolic Landscape. Three Taíno Carvings from Jamaica*. *Antiquity* 70, no. 270, 1996, 801–812.

²⁷ K. Parfitt/M. Green, *A Chalk Figurine from Upper Deal, Kent*. *Britannia* 18, 1987, 295–298.

²⁸ Jones/ MacGregor (note 23).

²⁹ A. Tranoy, *Du Heros Au Chef. L'Image du guerrier dans les sociétés indigènes du nord-ouest de la péninsule ibérique* (Ier siècle avant J.-C.-Ier siècle après J.-C., in Université de Tours Actes du Colloque 16–17 mai 1987. *Le Monde des Images en Gaule et dans les Provinces Voisines* (Paris 1988) 219–228.

³⁰ F. Hunter, *The Carnyx in Iron Age Europe*, *Antiquaries Journal* 81, 2001, 77–108. – M. Green, *Celtic Art. Reading the Messages* (London 1996) 94, fig. 64.

³¹ M. Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (London 1984) 147.

³² M.J. Aldhouse-Green, *Dying for the Gods* (Stroud 2001) 121, fig. 51, colour plates 19–20.

³³ *Pharsalia* III, lines 399–453.