

SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

A COPPER-ALLOY *LAR* FRAGMENT LOST IN A MEDIEVAL PIT AT PRESTON ST MARY

by *Judith Plouviez*

In early 2001 part of the left leg from a heavy leaded bronze figurine was found while excavating a pit on a medieval site at Priory Farm, Preston St Mary (Suffolk SMR PSM 007, excavation trench 6B, feature 103). The leg was found at a depth of 1.35m within the pit which is about 2m in diameter and 1.8m deep overall. Other finds from the pit include a large amount of 13th–14th-century pottery, occasional earlier medieval sherds and very occasional probably Roman grey ware sherds.

Despite the undoubted medieval context the excavators recognised the piece as likely to be Roman and the director and landowner, Adrian Thorpe, reported it to the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service.¹ The following details are based on a report by Martin Henig with comments on the footwear by Quita Mould.

The well-modelled leg is bent at the knee, and broken just above this, the surviving length is 72mm. It is wearing an open-toed half boot, a type which first appears on sculptures in the 2nd century B.C. This boot was worn with leg bindings (*pilio*), part of which extended over the shaft of the boot and hung down over the leg. Hellenistic *pilio* are often shown as animal skins and indeed the Preston side hangings look like animal legs with paws and the front could be a stylised head (Dohan Morrow 1985, 141–49). On the foot there are two pairs of relief roundels flanking a central rib. The figure was originally mounted on a stand. It must have been a fair size for a Roman figurine, perhaps some 180mm. Up to the base of the knee, at the level of the break point at the back, the leg is a



FIG. 89 – Preston St Mary: *lar* fragment, front and back

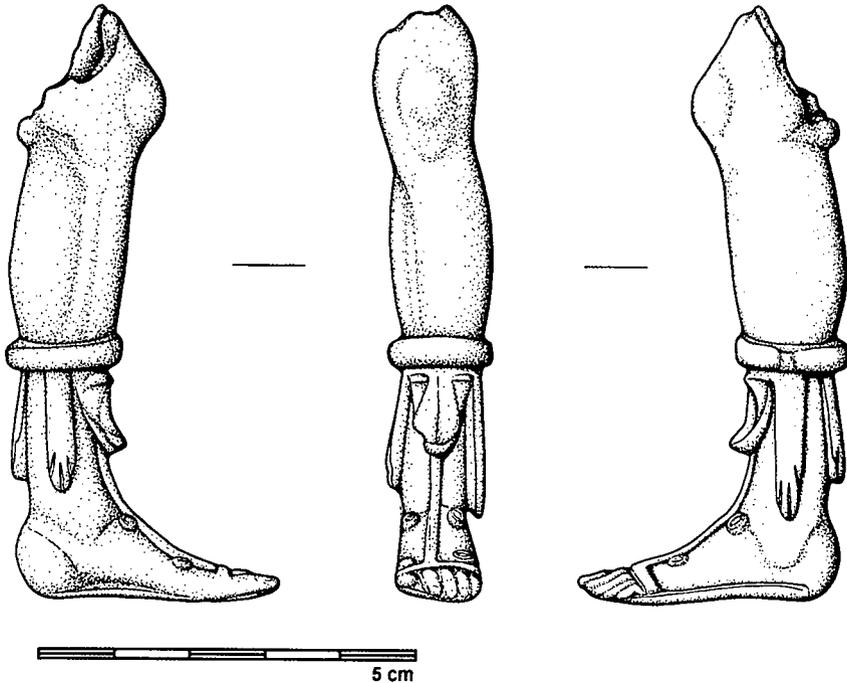


FIG. 90 – Preston St Mary: *lar* fragment, front, right and left.

solid casting. Above this however it appears to have been hollow; the broken edge is between 1.5 and 2.2mm thick (this construction is comparable to a much larger statuette leg described in Webster 2002, 161–68). The break is rough, with no sign of sawing or hammering to indicate deliberate breakage for scrap.

Comparison with other bronzes in Britain and north-west Europe suggest that the figure was a *Lar familiaris*, a household god. These divine servants were commonly shown as youths wearing short tunics and holding wine vessels or *cornucopiae* (horns of plenty). Of similar size from Britain, a *Lar* in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Henig 1983, 96, ill. 82) is 216mm in height but is dancing. Standing *Lares* of comparable size are known from Switzerland (Leibundgut 1976, 30–32, no 15, Taf. 14,15) and Germany (Menzel 1986, 22–23, no. 48).

Within East Anglia there are examples of *Lares* from Felmingham Hall, Norfolk (Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 230–31, no. GF5, Abb.179), from Lakenheath and from 'near Brandon' (Green 1976, 283, pl. XIb²). These are only 90mm, 100mm and 110mm high respectively but illustrate that the Roman practice of having a household shrine (a *lararium*) for the god of the place was not restricted to the urban centres, such as London, Silchester and Cirencester.

It is not clear how part of such a high quality Roman household bronze ended up in a rubbish pit in medieval times. Several possible routes can be imagined. The *Lar* might originally have graced a shrine in an affluent town house in Colchester and been found when flint and brick rubble was carted away for re-use in building medieval churches – Preston is only 26km from Colchester. Alternatively there is a substantial Roman site just 500m from the findspot in Preston (Suffolk SMR PSM 003/008, see 'Archaeology in Suffolk 1995', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXXVIII, 482³) and other possible but minor Roman sites even nearer (although the few sherds found in the pit were almost certainly only from a

manuring scatter). The large site does not have the typical features of a Roman villa (such as tessellated floors and painted walls) which one might expect of the residence of this figurine's original owner. But perhaps the piece had been broken up for scrap and moved here within the later Roman period. The quantity and quality of the pottery and metalwork finds does suggest reasonable affluence. There could also have been a pile of debris which might have attracted later residents of Preston to investigate and recover exotic objects. If this was the case history has repeated itself.

Notes

- 1 The object remains in private possession, records held by Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service.
- 2 My thanks to Ralph Jackson for confirming that the Lakenheath and near Brandon examples, each holding a double cornucopia, are separate finds and in the British Museum, ref 1895.1–16.1 and 1931.11–18.3.
- 3 The site has been investigated by systematic fieldwalking and metal detecting over many years and was the subject of a Channel 4 'Time Team' programme.

References

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