It is now some time since the griffin protome, of Samian production and previously attributed to the votive deposit of Brolio in the Val di Chiana, was recognised as belonging in reality (since at least 1777) to the Medici and Lorraine collections. The opportunity to pay tribute to my friend and maestra Sybille Haynes offers me the occasion to present a small bronze in the Museo Archeologico, Florence; and to discuss, with particular reference to Chiusi (Romualdi 1992, 95), a number of issues concerning bronze imports from Greece and the products of the bronze workshops in Etruria in the Late Orientalising period.

From the lists preserved in the Filze Archive in the Uffizi, it is clear that three griffin protomes were found in 1863 in the Brolio deposit and subsequently sent to the Reale Galleria. The other two unprovenanced griffin protomes in the Florence Museum collection, however, both already appeared in Luigi Lanzi’s 1763 manuscript inventory of the bronzes in the Reale Galleria, so it was proposed that a different small bronze be attributed to the Brolio Deposit. The piece in question, which has so far escaped the attention of scholars, seems to appear for the first time in the 1871 ‘Register of ancient artefacts added to the Etruscan Museum’. It is a solid-cast bronze protome, 10.0cm high, and bears the inventory number 808 (Fig. 1). The following fanciful statement appears in the museum inventory: ‘badge in the shape of a small dog’s head with open mouth’. There are traces of oxidised iron at the lower attachment, where a nail, round in section, is preserved. The protome has a perfunctorily modelled head and a short, slightly curved, hooked beak.

The eyes, triangular in shape, are bulbous and outlined by incision. The swelling brows are characterised by a long wavy line which continues to the ears. The conical protuberance on the forehead, on a moulded base, appears almost outsize in relation to the head. The jaws are emphasised externally by short irregular strokes; the internal details are incised. The fur on the neck is rendered, not very naturalistically, by a kind of incised triangular kerchief with long oblique hatching. The neck, lacking both the usual thickening towards the base and the scales, is decorated on the back by three inverted Vs, one above the other, the upper two with ends curling inwards, while the lowest set is only very lightly incised. The lower end of the protome is extended into a vertical and a horizontal element, fitted with a rivet that forms the ‘back’ of the griffin.

This particular form so far has only one parallel on the art market and, like ours, is small (Art of the Ancient World, Royal Athena Galleries, New York 1985, 52, no. 173). The original function must have been to decorate a terminal on a piece of furniture or similar wooden item. For a very general comparison regarding the decorative function we can cite, among other examples, the small wooden table from tomb B/1971 Lippi in the Verucchio cemetery (von Eles 2007, 149–56, figs 5–6). The nature of the fitting in fact seems to exclude the possibility that the piece was re-used already in antiquity, or that it belonged to a lebes or other vessel. Jantzen’s hypothesis that no griffin protomes made in Etruria can be associated with vessels was refuted by Herrmann’s attribution of three examples found at Olympia to Etruscan manufacture; to these were added the two protomes from the Brolio votive deposit in the Val di Chiana (Jantzen 1955, 80; Herrmann 1981, 83–90). The re-discovery of the little bronze in the Florence Museum increases the currently exiguous number of extant Etruscan protomes that can be associated with furniture, chariot fittings.

Figure 1 Bronze griffin-head protome, Florence, Museo Archeologico, inv.808. Ht.10cm
or fire-dogs (Haynes 1985, 254–5). What is especially striking about the group is the variety in the physiognomical detail, which distinguishes it iconographically and stylistically — and thus (as already noted by Jantzen) impedes the attribution to one or more workshops. The type with a forepart and very stylized muzzle is represented by an example with a quadrangular socket, now in the British Museum, and said to be from Vulci; it is attributed by Haynes to a south Etruscan workshop (Haynes 1985, 25, no. 25). Although they differ in the more naturalistic treatment of the muzzle, two protomes in the Louvre can also be assigned to this type (Jantzen 1955, pl. 59).

The recent discovery of the context of the griffin protomes from Chiusi in the British Museum (Paolucci 2005, 102–3, fig. 8; Paolucci 2007, 26–7), in a sense confirms the attribution to a workshop in Chiusi proposed by Sybille Haynes (Haynes 1985, 102–3). Together with a horse-head protome, which also found its way to London, the griffin protome was in fact discovered in 1846 by Mauro and Claudio Paolozzi during the excavation of a tomb at Dolciano, which also yielded ‘pieces of tubing’ (now interpreted as parts of tripods). The presence on both the protomes of a socket, quadrangular in section, excludes the possibility that they could originally have belonged to a tripod, as proposed by some (Minetti 2000, 85; Paolucci 2005, 102–3; contra Bruni 2002, 38), or – even less probably – to a lebes. Although finials of this type are sometimes taken to indicate fire-dogs in the scientific literature, the presence of nails with round heads (for example in the British Museum examples), clearly intended for attachment, suggests that they may rather have been used as to decorate a wooden element in funerary ritual — perhaps actually connected with the transportation and deposition of the deceased. However, the lack of contextual data, combined with the practical problems of inspecting all the pieces, makes interpretation difficult: suffice it to note that the complete absence of nails in the griffin protome acquired in 1941 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York led to the suggestion that in this case the wooden element was simply inserted into the bronze terminal (cf. Jantzen 1955, 80, note 110; Haynes 1985, 255, no. 26).

The little protome in the Museo Archeologico, Florence, now reunited (if our research into the inventories has led to the right conclusion) with the votive deposit from Brolio in the Val di Chiana, thus adds a new functional type to enrich the picture of decorative finials for wooden furniture produced in Etruscan bronze workshops.

For some time now, it has generally been thought that between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th century the majority of the griffin protomes emerged from bronze workshops operating at Chiusi. This hypothesis is strengthened by the considerable number of ceramic imitations securely attested at Chiusi (suggesting the circulation of Greek models), and by the imports from east Greece at Trestina in the upper Tiber valley (where the rôle of Chiusi does not seem to be secure) (cf. Martelli Cristofani 1978, 170–1; Cristofani 1996, 127ff; Camporeale 2000, 101–24; Hayes 2000, 129; Romualdi in press, 53; for Trestina, see Macnamara in press, 85–106). It remains to consider and further define the relationship which must have existed between the output of bronze workshops in southern and northern Etruria. For example, in another typological sphere, the decoration of the Dutilt chariot has recently been attributed to a Chiusine workshop: but it has also been proposed to recognize it in fact as the work of south Etruscan (especially Veientine) craftsmen who had transferred their operations to Chiusi (Maggiani 2007, 94–5; cf. also Minetti 2004, 449). The question, still open, of models and transmission constitutes one of the still partly-unresolved riddles arising out of the intricate story of Etruscan bronze craftsmanship between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th century BC.

Note

1 For the lists of the material from the votive deposit at Brolio, see Romualdi 1981, pp. 56(D3), 58(DB8), 59(D11); the two other griffin protomes are now numbered 815 and 816 in the collections of the Museo Archeologico, Florence. Luigi Lanz’s inventory of the bronzes is in the process of being published by Cristiana Zaccagnino, with a preface by Luigi Beschi (Naples: La Stanza delle Scritture, forthcoming).

Bibliography


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