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Figure of a boar

Solid cast bronze

7.3 x 3.8 x 11.5 cm

Greek world, late 6th – early 5th century BC

FGA-ARCH-GR-0053

Provenance

Collection Robin Symes, before 1979

Mathias Komor, New York, 17.03.1979, lot no. 1. 692

Collection Clarence Day, Memphis, Tennessee

Acquired at Sotheby's, New York, 07.12.2010, lot no. 2.

Previous publication

Tassignon, Isabelle (dir.), *Fondation Gandur pour l'art. Les antiquités classiques*, I. Déesses et dieux, Milan, 5 Continents Editions, 2022, no. 103.



Boars from Greece and other regions

Within the Greek world, the boar held a specific position in the collective imagination. Although the figure of the animal considered here is a rare object, it pertains to a series produced in Greece and on the Aegean coast, from the late 6th century BC to the Hellenistic period. This beast enables us to rediscover the achievements of Greek heroes, such as Ulysses and Heracles, Meleager and Atalanta.

A boar with a brother

This solid cast bronze figure shows a boar standing on its legs, on the defensive: with the ears pointing backward, upper lip drawn back, large crested mane and curled tail, this animal is at bay (*fig. 1*). A few details were carved after casting, such as the hair of the ruff and spine, the eyelids and the wrinkles around the snout and above the shoulders. Since boars of a herd communicate by the position and motion of their ears and tail¹, these details must be meaningful. The acute sense of observation of the Ancients always impresses me.

This boar also has a close-looking brother – not a twin brother, as their dimensions are slightly different, as well as their finish – preserved at the museum of Harvard (*fig. 2*)². Both pieces show the same defensive attitude, dorsal crest interrupted in the middle of the spine, and ring-shaped tail drawn upward, although its final tuft of hair is placed on the right thigh in one case, and on the left in the other. There is not an ounce of fat in the body of these two stocky mountains of muscles. And contrary to the Italic or Gallo-Roman statuettes of boars, their fur is not detailed. Both pieces were produced by the same technique: a lost-wax casting, with some cold-work finishing for some details.

¹ Mosler-Berger, "Portrait du sanglier", *pass.*

² Harvard Art Museums, inv. 2012.211, late 6th century BC; dimensions: 8.7 x 14.1 x 3.5 cm.



However, the boar kept at Harvard is a little less detailed: both pieces were inspired by the same model. The prominent Karl Schefold proposed that the Harvard piece had been made in Asian Greece, and dated it to the years 530-520 BC³. Less refined, the one in the Fondation could be a somewhat later production.

A white-tusked loner

For the ancient Greeks, the boar is a solitary, bad-tempered male that doesn't like being disturbed. The animal's taste for isolation was immediately suspicious to the Greeks, and the Romans stressed this trait of personality by calling it a (*porcus*) *singularis* or "solitary (pig)", as opposed to the domesticated and more social pig. Via Vulgar Latin, the adjective *singularis* gave rise to the French word "sanglier" (boar). A solitude enjoyed by the beast in the Greek mountains and *eschatiai*, the far reaches of the civilized world... but to the Greeks, civilization meant life organized in society⁴: a lonely individual, living hidden and wandering at the edges of the world, had to be a villain.

This "tank on legs", as described on the website of a well-known firearms company, is a tough adversary, with a very thick flank skin, which makes it hard to injure; the boar also has impressive tusks, which he sharpens by shutting his jaws⁵. This grim "nutcracker" noise is typical of a raging boar⁶. The animal can also whet his tusks against a tree, like the careful boar of Aesop, so as to be ready when he might need them⁷. Much later, Ovid also mentioned the neck, "rough and stiff, with bristles sticking out like rigid spears" and the huge tusks, "like on an elephant", of the gigantic Calydonian boar⁸.

³ Schefold, *Meisterwerke*, p. 180, iii 185, and p. 183, fig. 185. In 1960, it was still part of the collection of Marion Schuster (Lausanne).

⁴ Debidour, "Les Grecs anciens", p. 100-103.

⁵ Homer, *Iliad*, xi, 414-418: "whetting his white tusks in his curving jaws".

⁶ A behaviour also referred to as "breaking hazelnuts", see Etienne, *Le sanglier*, p. 199.

⁷ Aesop, *Fables*: "The Wild Boar and the Fox".

⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 267-525. <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph8.htm#482327663>



Was it a poetic exaggeration, for which the Greeks always had a knack? What the poet tells us, is that the boar was a most formidable creature: strong, agile and swift, with an excellent hearing and sense of smell. All these features are conveyed by our two figures, and by other bronze depictions of boars from Asia Minor or Greece.

A protégé of Artemis

Admired and feared at the same time, the boar was naturally associated to the goddess Artemis, who sometimes protected it, sometimes hunted it with her arrows, on the slopes of Erymanthos or Taygetus⁹. The hero Teuthras paid a hard price for his unawareness: by killing a boar of Artemis, he sparked the wrath of the goddess, who punished him with leprosy and madness¹⁰. Several sanctuaries in Greece or Asia Minor yielded offerings in the form of boars made of terracotta or bronze, or depictions of Artemis as *Potnia Theron* (mistress of beasts) escorted by boars¹¹. Among offerings of the archaic period are also many boar tusks¹². A few votive boars were found in Etruria, such as the one from Fonte Veneziana in Arezzo (*fig. 3*)¹³ or the one searched by the Italian police in 1972 (*fig. 4*)¹⁴, but these are pacific animals, very different from the two pieces discussed here, and do not pertain to the Greek iconographic tradition: these are probably votive offerings meant to give thanks for a choice piece of game, which was an appreciated source of food.

But the Greek boar is way more than just a “tank on legs”, an embittered loner or a delightful piece of meat: the “bête noire” of the Greeks is a digest of myths.

⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, vi, 101-109.

¹⁰ Pseudo-Plutarch, *About the Names of Rivers and Mountains*, xxi, 4.

¹¹ Bevan, *Representations of animals*, p. 372-374.

¹² Bevan, *Representations of animals*, p. 376-377.

¹³ Uncovered in 1869: Bocci Pacini, “La stipe”, p. 88, no. 20, pl. xxxii, a. Their size also differs from the Greek pieces: the Arezzo boar is 4.5 cm long and 3 cm high. MacIntosh Turfa, “Votive offerings”, p. 98-99, fig. vi.7.

¹⁴ Dimensions: 8 x 5 cm; *Boletino Arte in Ostaggio*, 1, 1972, p. 13.

Online: <https://tpcweb.carabinieri.it/SitoPubblico/home/contenuti/bollettini>



The legendary boar

Indeed, if the fables of the Greeks are full of wild animals making a deal among themselves or with humans, their myths consider the lonely boar as a diehard savage devastating crops when wandering in the countryside. This beast dwells in dark forests, which are the lairs of monsters of all kinds, including centaurs. This is where he must be sought. By whom? Young men, who must prove their bravery by forcing the animal to leave its den and fighting it. So did Heracles, who was to catch the Erymanthian boar (Arcadia), Meleager, Theseus and Atalanta (a heroine who pretended to be a boy), or even young Ulysses, who realized his first masterstroke by killing a boar during a hunt in the land of his grandfather Autolycus, but was severely injured at the thigh by the beast, which left him with a lasting scar: these heroes always had to face extraordinary animals¹⁵. These were in fact real monsters.

A mix of teambuilding and leadership

If one wanted to catch the boar alive, like Heracles did, one had to wear it out by forcing it to run and play hide-and-seek in the snow¹⁶. Many scenes painted on vessels of the archaic period show the Erymanthian beast exhausted and kneeling in front of Heracles, who can simply pick it up and bring it to Eurystheus (*fig. 5*).

Killing a boar is a real achievement, which can be carried out only as a group: teambuilding before the term was coined. Because what better way is there to strengthen ties than to fight a tough beast together? As a team and stealthily, one must take the animal by surprise, flush it out of its wallow, flank and strike it with a pike, which is where a hero can reveal himself¹⁷. The mountain monster thus enables to reveal a civilized hero. It is a violent and dangerous task, where many hunters are trampled upon, their limbs torn by the white tusks¹⁸. In the

¹⁵ Barringer, *The Hunt*, p. 125-126.

¹⁶ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II, 4.

¹⁷ Xenophon, *Cynegeticus*, x, gave all the boar hunting techniques, which corroborate these mythological episodes.

¹⁸ Thelamon, "Le sanglier et le bœuf", p. 270.



archaic period, boar hunting even was a rite of passage for young aristocrats. Because when the day came to take up arms and go to war, they had to display the same skills: sense of teamwork and individual boldness, which would cover them with glory.

Vases and statues

The moment favoured by artists, and notably vase painters, is when the boar is cornered by the young heroes, or when he receives a deadly strike¹⁹. Many Greek vases of the archaic period show the most famous of these boar huntings, that of Meleager and his companions from Attica. The huge Calydonian boar was sent by Artemis to avenge an offence perpetrated against her by Meleager's father²⁰. Always on alert, snout sniffing the wind and tusks ready to get to the heart of the matter, ears and tail pointing upwards, as on a black-figure Siana cup kept at the J. Paul Getty Museum (*fig. 6*).

Our two bronze figures are three-dimensional depictions of this boar at bay, and are typical of the Greek world of the archaic period. But what was their function? Did they belong to a more complex group of figures depicting a mythical hunt, as suggested by the Harvard museum note²¹? Or was it rather meant as a *pars pro toto* (a part for the whole), where only one element is enough to remind the beholder of the complete scene?

As mentioned above, Karl Schefold had hypothesized that the figure kept at Harvard came from Asian Greece. Indeed, several other artefacts depicting this kind of boar, either in relief or in the round, come from the Ionian world, like the archaic funerary stela from the island of Symi²² (*fig. 7*) or a slightly later statuette from Smyrna (*fig. 8*).

I shall conclude by mentioning another bronze statue, which remains enigmatic in many ways, but still bears witness to the importance of boar hunting in the Greek world, i.e. the boar from Mezek (Thrace, nowadays southern Bulgaria, *fig. 9*). A large figure pertaining to the decoration

¹⁹ Barringer, *The Hunt*, p. 16-18.

²⁰ Thelamon, "Le sanglier et le bœuf", p. 266-267.

²¹ <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/342292?position=0>

²² Joubin, "Stèle funéraire", p. 223, who also stresses that the boar was a popular theme among dynasts of Lycia, and on Klazomenian sarcophagi.



of an aristocratic tomb, this boar is iconographically close to our two bronze figures, and bears a large scar on its left shoulder. This shows that even in the northern margins of the Greek world, the Calydonian boar hunt undertaken by the young Meleager was still referred to as an educational model.

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Figures



Fig. 1 : Bronze boar, Asian Greece, late 6th – early 5th century BC
FGA-ARCH-GR-0053, photographic credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art
Geneva.



Fig. 2: Bronze boar, Asian Greece, late 6th – early 5th century BC, inv.
Harvard Art Museums inv. 2012.211 © President and Fellows of
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Fig. 3: Bronze boar, Italy (Arezzo), late 6th century BC
Florence, Museo archeologico Nazionale
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Fig. 4: Bronze boar (stolen), Italy, late 6th century BC, after *Boletino
Arte in Ostaggio*, 1, 1972, p. 13.



Fig. 5: Hydria, painter A, 525-500 BC, Louvre, inv. p 129, F 299 © 2024 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn/Hervé Lewandowski



Fig. 6: Black-figure Siana cup, 560 BC. Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 86.AE.154 © J. Paul Getty Museum



Fig. 7: Funerary stela from Symi, marble, late 6th century BC, Istanbul, Archaeological Museum, inv. 507 T, after Joubin, "Stèle", pl. VIII.



Fig. 8: Boar from Smyrna, bronze, 490-460 BC, British Museum inv. 1909, 0523.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum

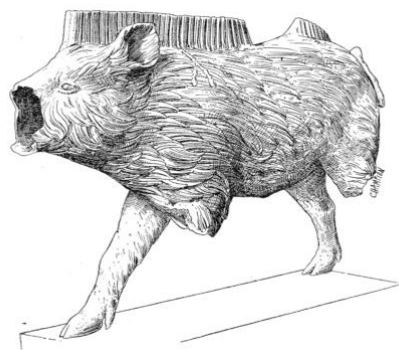


Fig. 9: Boar from Mezek (Bulgaria), bronze, 2nd half of the 4th century BC, Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. After De Ridder, "Bulletin", p. 303.