Epicurean Symbolism in Herculaneum Art - Something To Track Down

Post by “Godfrey” of May 14, 2023 at 9:39 PM

Today I was in an out-of-town bookstore with my family and ran across this book, which is the catalog from the exhibit at the Getty in Malibu a few years ago:

Buried by Vesuvius: The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum - Google Books

It may be of interest in itself, but what I noticed while quickly browsing through it was a few images in particular. Pardon my poor photo quality; the store was one of those great rabbit-warrens of books and lighting wasn't a prime concern in the design....

8 9 10 11

Four Portrait Busts of Greek Intellectuals

8 Epicurus
Roman, first century BC/AD
Bronze, H: 28.5 cm
Found in the tablinum, December 11, 1752
MANN 11017

9 Epicurus
Roman, first century BC/AD
Bronze, H: 20 cm (with ancient base)
Inscribed: ΕΠΙΚΟΥΡΟC
Found in room 8 on Weber's plan, November 3, 1753
MANN 5465

10 Hermarchus
Roman, first century BC/AD
Bronze, H: 13.2 cm
Found south of the tablinum, in room XVI on Weber's plan, June 15, 1753
MANN 5471

11 Demosthenes
Roman, first century BC/AD
Bronze, H: 28.5 cm
Found in the tablinum, September 18, 1752
MANN 5469

These four bronze busts, each depicting a famous Greek intellectual, were found along with four others in or near the so-called tablinum of the Villa dei Papiri. Given their small size, it is likely that they were displayed as table ornaments, perhaps intended to conjure an atmosphere of sophisticated erudition: the chamber in which they were discovered may have functioned as a reading room. The first-century AD encyclopedist Pliny the Elder wrote that Rome's elites decorated their libraries with exactly these

11.16)—were produced in the same, plausibly local, workshop. Each head was cast in a single piece with its bust, each has cast eyes, and each was fitted into its base with a similar tang. Two share the same metal alloy (cat. 9 and fig. 11.5c), and three were seemingly inscribed by the same hand (cat. 9; figs. 11.5c and 11.5d). We cannot know if they were bought as a set, or even if they were all bought by the owner of the Villa. Given that some are duplicates, it has been suggested that they instead represent gifts from guests, intended to flatter the owner's interests and taste.

Of those included here, two (cat. 8, 9) depict the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC). Both replicate the same portrait type, with wavy comma-shaped locks brushed across the forehead, thick, curly beard, stern brow, and long, aquiline nose. Each wears a himation (cloak) draped over the left shoulder. The second (cat. 9), which has a leaner face and less luxuriant hair, also retains its original base inscribed in Greek with the name of the philosopher. A third bust of a different but clearly related type (MANN 5470) was found nearby in the Villa's "library," making Epicurus the most popular subject of the whole group. This is not surprising. Epicurean philosophy and its emphasis on the pursuit of ataraxia (freedom from care) through the enjoyment of simple, physical pleasures was of

(L-R, top to bottom: Epicurus, Epicurus, Hermarchus and Demosthenes)

around with them (Natural History 35.5), presumably referencing the popularity of Epicurus's image on engraved gemstones (see Cicero, *On the Ends of Good and Evil* 5.1.3). At the Villa dei Papiri, the three busts clearly speak to the Epicurean texts contained within the library and complement the underlying Epicurean tone of the sculpture collection as a whole.

Another of the four busts shown here (cat. 10) represents Hermarchus (ca. 325–250 BC), a disciple of Epicurus and his successor as head of the Epicurean school. Now mounted on a modern base, this is one of two busts depicting the philosopher that have been recovered from the Villa (see fig. 11.5c, which also preserves its ancient inscribed base). In this example, he is shown with a *himation*, neat hair and beard, and a contemplative, perhaps concerned, expression. The fourth (cat. 11) depicts the Athenian statesman Demosthenes (ca. 384–322 BC), who wears a *himation* across his left shoulder, and turns his head slightly to the right, with pensive gaze, haggard face, and furrowed brow. Also on a post-antique base, this is one of two busts from the Villa depicting the orator (the bust in fig. 11.5a is inscribed across the chest with Demosthenes's

attributed to the sculptor Polyeuktos, that was dedicated in 280 BC in the

Selected Bibliography

cat. 8 Winckelmann 1762/1764 (2011), 93; Antichità di Ercolano, vol. 5 (1767), pls. 21, 22; Wojcik 1986, 143–44, no. E10, pl. 75; Neudecker 1988, 150, no. 14.25; Scatozza Höricht 1988, 134–35, no. 186, fig. a; Hoff 1994, 69, n. 72; Moreno 1994, I:787, n. 356; Adamo Muscettola 2000, 23; Mattusch 2002; Seilheimer 2003, 72–75, no. 2, figs. 67–69; La Sorsa 2005, 110 (A. Luppino); Mattusch 2005, 289–96, fig. 5.211; Gulizzi 2006, 128; Mattusch 2009; Moesch 2009, 122, no. 58.

cat. 9 Winckelmann 1762/1764 (2011), 93, fig. 59; Antichità di Ercolano, vol. 5 (1767), pls. 19, 20; Wojcik 1986, 163–64, no. F4, pl. 86; Fittschen 1988, 15, 159, 204, 211, 255, pl. 124:1–2; Neudecker 1988, 149, no. 14.20; Weber 1991, 215, no. I.1; Johansen 1992, 96; Hoff 1994, 69, n. 72, 70–71, n. 85, 88, n. 3, 93 and 104, figs. 39–42; Moreno 1994, I:183; Scholtz 1997, 230–31, figs. 121, 122; Seilheimer 2003, 70–73, no. 1, figs. 64–66; Mattusch 2005, 289–96, fig. 5.209; Mattusch 2006; Moesch 2009, 116, no. 62; Lang 2012.

cat. 10 Winckelmann 1762/1764 (2011), 93; Antichità di Ercolano, vol. 5 (1767), pls. 25, 26; Wojcik 1986, 157–59, no. F1, pl. 82; Neudecker 1988, 155, no. 14.74; Weber 1991, 215–17, no. I.6; Johansen 1992, 106; Hoff 1994, 75–76; Moreno 1994, I:Fig. 352; Seilheimer 2003, 96–97, no. 2, figs. 95, 96; Mattusch 2005, 289–96, fig. 5.213; Mühlenbrock and Richter 2005, 278, cat. 4.4 (T. Gilowi); Mattusch 2006; Moesch 2009, 112, no. 53.

cat. 11 Winckelmann 1762/1764 (2011), 93–94, fig. 62; Antichità di Ercolano, vol. 5 (1767), pl. 12; Wojcik 1986, 151–52, no. E2, pl. 6; Fittschen 1988, 83; Neudecker 1988, 151, no. 14.306; Scatozza Höricht 1988, 134–35, no. 187, fig. A; Moreno 1994, I:782, n. 3358; Zanker 1995, 331, n. 63; Adamo Muscettola 2000, 23; Mattusch 2002; Seilheimer 2003, 68–69, no. 5a, fig. 33; Mattusch 2005, 289–96, fig. 5.215; Mattusch 2006; Moesch 2009, 104, no. 50.

For depictions of philosophers on engraved gems,

Here's an image of the pig. In case it's not legible, the dimension given is the height, which is 40cm (15.75") including the base.

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Piglet

Roman, first century BCE/AD
Bronze, H (including base): 40 cm
Found near the northeastern corner of the rectangular peristyle, May 17, 1756
MANN 4883

Sometimes described erroneously by modern scholars as a boar (*cinghiale*) or a pig running at full speed (*porc en grande course*), this statue depicts a life-size female piglet, about one month old. She is leaping forward, with both front hooves raised, only the tips of her rear hooves touching the ground. Her short tail is coiled, while her mouth is closed and her large ears flattened back. Carol Mattusch notes that she "is at the midpoint of her early carefree days, not yet reined in by domestication," and cites Varro (*On Farming* 11.4.13): "As to the rearing of piglings, which is called *porculatio*, they are allowed to stay with their mother for two months." Although found at the east end of the Villa's large rectangular peristyle near the famous figures of deer (see fig. 11.13), this piglet must have evoked more than the pleasures of the countryside. For Epicureans, this dynamic figure of a leaping young pig might have summed up much of the philosophy of the founder of their school. The Roman poet Horace, who dedicated his *Ars Poetica* to the sons of Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus Pontifex, referred to himself in a letter to his friend and fellow poet Albius Tibullus as sleek, fat, and well cared for, "a pig from the sty of Epicurus" (*Epicuri de grege porcum*; 1.4.16). The Latin *grex* (herd or sty) was often used to denote philosophi-

[illegible] (1.4.9), moreover, for Quatus explains Epicurus's doctrine of pleasure:

"Every animal, as soon as it is born, seeks pleasure and delights in it as the highest good, while it avoids pain as the highest evil and so far as possible avoids it. This it does as long as it remains unperverted, its nature itself judging honestly and uncorrupted." The piglet from Herculaneum is both an infant and an animal and thus, in Epicurean terms, doubly in a natural state, incapable of holding mistaken opinions about what to aim for in life. For Epicureans, David Konstan argues, "the highest form and final end of human happiness arises when the body is free from pain and the soul is free from distress; these, moreover, are what Epicurus denotes as the static pleasures. The static pleasures may be accompanied by pleasant thoughts and sensations: these are what are called the kinetic pleasures. More particularly, the kinetic pleasures of the body are not those of replenishment (as is commonly supposed), but consist rather in unalloyed, but also unnecessary, pleasures such as sweet smells and delicious tastes; correspondingly, the kinetic pleasures of the mind are joy (*khara*) and good cheer (*euphrosunē*), which also are in the class of non-necessary pleasures." Such kinetic pleasures are immediately visible in this dynamic sculpture of a leaping piglet. In antiquity, moreover—as often since—comparing people to pigs was insulting, but Epicureans apparently reappropriated the animal whole-heartedly as a positive symbol. In fact, on a silver

the inscribed figure of Epicurus himself. It is unlikely coincidental that at the Villa dei Papiri, in addition to this happy little piglet, a portable bronze sundial fashioned in the shape of a prosciutto was found (cat. 13). It, too, is likely to have a deeper, yet playful meaning as it clocked the passage of time: piglet today, pork tomorrow. Carpe diem. KL

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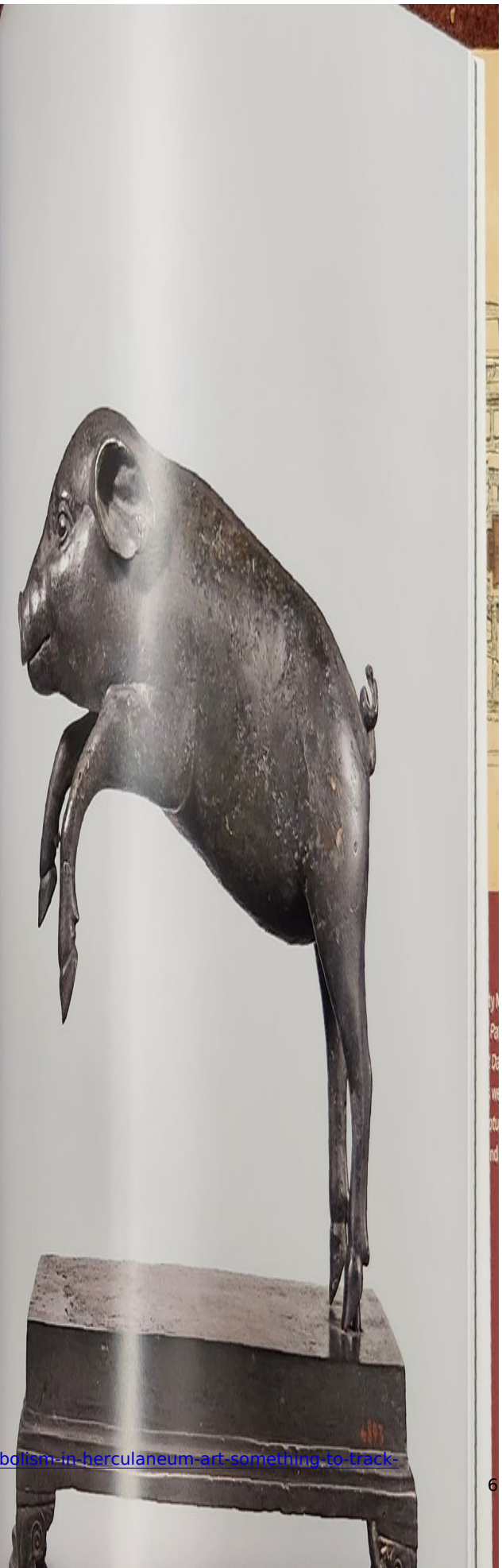
CDP 184, 185, 272, no. 85
Pandermalis 1971, 180, 202, no. 27
Wójcik 1986, 119, no. D10
Neudecker 1988, 153, no. 14.96
Gigante 1995
Warren 2002, esp. 131–34
Mattusch 2005, 327–31
Moesch 2009, 84, no. 37
Konstan 2012
For the beaker from Boscoreale, see Dunbabin 1986.



And the prosciutto. The height is 11.3cm to which the ring adds 2.5cm; the width is 7.8cm.

13

Orologio di Prosciutto (Portable Sundial in the Shape of a Ham)

Roman, first century BCE/AD
Bronze and silver; H. 11.3 cm, W. 7.8 cm, Th. 1.8 cm; ring adds 2.5 cm to height; ca. 285 grams
Found in the atrium area (aile e?), June 11, 1755
NAMA 25484

This silver-inlaid bronze sundial in the shape of a ham was discovered on June 11, 1755, in one of the rooms to the east of the atrium of the Villa dei Papiri. It is the earliest known portable sundial in the Roman world. That the calendrical notation identifies the eighth month as Augustus rather than Sextilius requires dating its creation between 8 BC, when the month was renamed in honor of that Roman emperor, and AD 79 when the Villa was buried by the eruption of Vesuvius. An eyelet and ring attached to the hock show that it was intended to hang inverted, like a curing ham, with only its now-broken tail defying gravity by extending up and away from the surface to serve as the gnomon. Whether the tail had the familiar curlicue shape is unknown since it was already broken off at the time of its discovery, but to function properly its top would have needed to align with the upper left-hand corner of the dial. The choice of this unique shape has been ascribed to some association between pigs and the Villa owner's name or occupation, but a more likely link may be that of the owner's evident Epicurean inclinations and pigs as symbols of both gluttony and the desired state of [illegible] (cat. 12).

The design is similar to later "altitude" or

dial is the grid of seven horizontal and vertical lines inscribed in the ham's surface. The vertical line on the left marks the summer solstice, when the sun is at its highest point in the sky and casts the sharpest shadow during the longest days of the year. The central vertical line represents the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, when the days and nights are of equal length, while the vertical line on the right is the winter solstice, when the sun would cast a long shadow across the full dial during days of shorter length. The upper horizontal line represents the horizon—the sun at its rising and setting—and the lowest undulating line constitutes high noon. The other horizontal lines mark the hours of the Roman day: six before midday and six after, with the larger squares on the left representing the longer hours of the summer months, and the smaller squares on the right capturing the shorter hours of winter. The names of the twelve months are abbreviated across the bottom in boustrophedon (i.e., moving first from right to left, then left to right) beginning with IA(nuarius) at the right, moving to IUN(ius) and IU(lius) on the left, and back to DE(cember) on the right. To take a reading, the prosciutto must be suspended from a cord and rotated so the left side faces the sun. The shadow's tip is then aligned along the vertical line corresponding with the current month. The shadow descends or rises across the dial over the course of the day, marking the hours.

As an archaeological object, this humble ham clock has been overshadowed by the Villa's spectacular statuary and papyri, but it has long been featured in histories of astronomical science and sundials. Its curious confluence of science, art, and daily life already had induced the Accademia Ercolanese to conduct empirical studies on it in 1762 and feature it in the preface to the third volume of *Le Antichità di Ercolano* (see below left). They concluded it was remarkably accurate, but more recently it has been proposed that the dial was imperfectly transferred onto the surface, preventing it from providing correct readings over the full course of the year. This would have rendered it more a sunny conversation piece than an accurate timepiece. CP

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Wójcik 1986, 256–57
Ferrari 2008
Moesch 2009, 160, no. 84
Jones 2016, 83, 186, fig. III.16
Pagliano 2018, 264–69