

# Satyr sculpture from the site of Agios Georgios at Nopigia (municipality of Kissamos, western Crete)



**Abstract:** This paper analyses a marble head of a Satyr, currently housed in the Kissamos Archaeological Museum. The sculpture was discovered during a field survey conducted in the northeastern section of the churchyard of Agios Georgios at Nopigia – a structure dating to the 15th century AD, built atop a Roman bath complex. This study aims to identify the monument by drawing analogies from ancient art, supplemented by findings from field research conducted in the vicinity of the church. Its primary objective is to determine the most probable context and function of the object. The paper also reviews historical research related to the site, with particular emphasis on recent excavations around the church. Ultimately, it seeks to contextualize the sculpture within the broader historical and social framework of western Crete during the Roman period. Similar to other divine figures, the statue of the Satyr may have played a pivotal role in establishing visual associations with health and healing, in addition to demarcating ritual spaces such as baths and invoking erotic symbolism.

**Keywords:** western Crete, Satyr, Roman baths, Venetian churches, Roman provinces

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And when the water boiled in the bright bronze, she set me  
 in a bath, and bathed me with water from out the great cauldron,  
 mixing it to my liking, and pouring it over my head and shoulders,  
*till she took from my limbs soul-consuming weariness.*

Homer, *Od.* 10.360–10.364  
 trans. A.T. Murray, 1919

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of bathing and bath buildings during the Roman Imperial period has often been acknowledged in archaeological and historical studies. Scholars have primarily focused on baths as venues for social interaction and more official aspects of public life (DeLaine 1992; 1999; 2006; Zanker 1994: 270–273; Yegül 2010: 11–40). However, sculptural evidence from Roman bath buildings shows that statues representing deities significantly outnumber portrait statues of emperors and members of the local elite. Hubertus Manderscheid (1981: 36–37) suggests that *thermae* did not merely house collections of *opera nobilia*, but rather expressed the cultural (and religious) values of Roman society, with idealized imagery helping to emphasize the intrinsic qualities of the baths. More recently, even the so-called *Kaisersäle* of western Asia Minor are thought not only to have hosted the imperial cult but also to have involved certain religious practices (Steuernagel 2021: 226–236). The connections between Roman bathhouses and the earlier public baths of Classical Greece —along with their significance as

places of worship, exercise, and healing—are also very well documented (Smith 1922; Yegül 2010: 6, 9, 34–36, 51–55, 165; Voudouris et al. 2023).

Similar patterns regarding Roman baths emerged throughout the Mediterranean, following Roman expansion, including on Crete, which —after the Roman conquest of the island in 67 BC and its incorporation with Cyrene into a single province— witnessed the adoption of many Roman customs. While some notable sites with Roman bath complexes in western Crete were destroyed or buried by the AD 365 earthquake,<sup>1</sup> others were later incorporated into new architectural structures, often of a Christian and sacral character. One such example is the site of the 15th-century church of Agios Georgios, located southwest of the modern coastal village of Nopigia (Gr. *Νωπήγεια*). Here, a marble bearded head of a Satyr —preserved from the neck upward— was discovered in 2001, prior to the commencement of the excavation project, in the northeastern part of the yard in front of the church's main entrance. No photographs were taken at

1 The so-called eastern Roman baths at Kissamos, located just 5.6 km west of the site under study, provide a relevant example. Another case is Lissos, in southwestern Crete. For more information about the earthquake and the associated archaeological record, see Stiros 2001; 2010; Stiros and Papageorgiou 2001; Stiros et al. 2004.

the moment of discovery. The excavation project was undertaken by the Archaeological Service of Chania, prompted by conservation efforts at the church itself. The sculpture was subsequently transferred to the Archeological Museum of Kissamos in February 2001 (Inv. Λ411). The author was granted formal permission by the Ephorate of Antiquities of

Chania to publish the monument.<sup>2</sup> This article examines the sculptural piece in relation to its iconographic features and the context of its discovery. The former are analyzed in comparison with analogous examples from Late Antiquity, while the latter is informed by historical and archaeological research conducted at the site.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF AGIOS GEORGIOS, NOPIGIA

The Satyr head [Fig. 1] was found during a field survey in the northeastern part of the walled yard (Gr. *περίβολος*) of the church of Agios Georgios at Nopigia [Fig. 2]. The church is currently situated within an olive plantation, approximately 750 m south of the coastline between the

Gramvousa and Rodopos peninsulas, 1.2 km northeast of the modern village of Drapanias, and 570 m southwest of the village of Nopigia. The most accessible route to the church is via a 200-meter gravel side road that branches northward from the E65 highway. The building was constructed in the first half of the 15th century on the site of a Roman bath complex. Its walls, to a large extent, are those of the *Βαλανείον* (bathhouse). In other words, the church was built largely upon the well-preserved ancient walls. The preserved height of these Roman walls is impressive, ranging from 2 m to 3.20 m<sup>3</sup> [Fig. 3]. A particularly significant indication of the integration of a Christian church into a pre-existing Roman public building is the orientation of the sanctuary: rather than facing east, it faces south. To my knowledge, there is only one other example on Crete of a Christian church erected atop a Roman bath complex — the church of Agia Kyriaki in Argyroupoli, near Rethymnon. In both cases, the buildings are located adjacent to riverbeds: the Kolenis in the case of Nopigia, and the Musela in

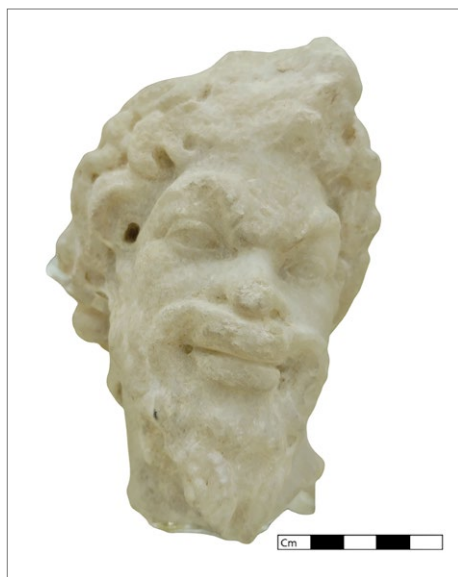


Fig. 1. Marble bearded head of the Satyr held in the Archeological Museum of Kissamos (Cat. No. Λ411) (Photo D. Borowka)

<sup>2</sup> Permit No. ΑΔΑ: ΩΔ0Δ4653Π4-Ι3Γ.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Chania Ephorate of Antiquities.

Argyroupoli. The large enclosure of the church (περίβολος) still contains many ruined walls of the former bathing complex. These structures are built in *opus mixtum* style, combining square bricks of fired clay and strong lime mortar set on a stone foundation. They are especially numerous in the southwestern part of the site, where they cover most of the surface [Fig. 4]. In this sector, one standing wall preserves part of the vaulted roof (Gr. *καμάρα*), serving as a powerful visual reminder to visitors (and/or pilgrims) of the site's multi-layered past.

Owing to its peculiar surroundings, the church of Agios Georgios has long attracted the attention of curious explorers and treasure hunters, with non-professional excavations occurring since at least the 19th century. Robert Pashley

(1837: 38–39), who visited the site during that period, mentions in his *Travels in Crete*:

... at the south-east corner of the chapel of *Hágios Gheórghios* is a fragment of circular walling. I learn from *Antónios* that the Greeks dug here, during the revolution, and “found a woman and child of marble, which they sent to *Anápli*.” there were twenty-five of them who excavated, and afterwards received nine dollars a-piece...

Pashley continues his description and claims that the excavations were conducted by a “Melian of the name of *Ioáannes*”, an antique dealer. He concludes with a remarkable story about a dark-skinned individual who, after the discovery of a certain entrance, deterred everyone from continuing the excavations (Pashley 1837: 39).

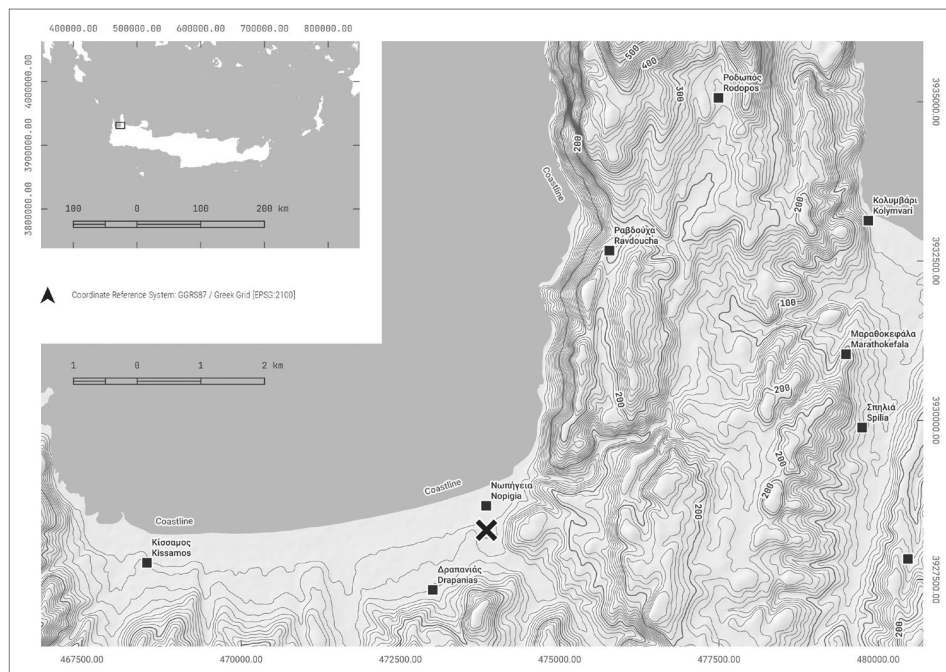


Fig. 2. Location of the site of Agios Georgios, Nopigia (marked with an “X”) (Map D. Borowka)

While describing the site, Pashley speculates that the bath complex may have belonged to the ancient settlement of Methymni (Gr. *Μηθύμνη*), known to us through the writings of Aelian.<sup>4</sup> The village was supposedly located close to the ancient city of Rhokka, itself known for the temple of Artemis Rhokkaea. This hypothesis was further confirmed in 1983, during the construction of the highway from Kissamos to Kolimvari. On Troulia hill, near Nopigia, an extensive settlement dating to both prehistoric and historic times was uncovered, prompting a change in the highway's planned route (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1994–1996: 14).

The most recent archaeological excavations around the church took place in 2001, coinciding with restoration efforts. These excavations were conducted by the Chania Ephorate of Antiquities under the supervision of Maria Skordou. According to the excavation report,<sup>5</sup> the work

was limited to the area immediately surrounding the church and extended into the fields to the south and west; however, the bath complex was not uncovered in its entirety. Six functional spaces were identified within the surveyed area, only two of which were fully excavated. The first evidence from the excavation dates the construction of the complex to the 2nd century AD (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012). Movable finds include fragments of marble plates decorated with relief, parts of a marble statue, and fragments of three statuettes, as well as various architectural elements such as parts of column shafts and capitals, a large quantity of pottery, and a few iron nails.<sup>6</sup> Along the eastern and northern walls, a built-in vault was identified. On the western side of Site I, below the level of the duct, an opening was found leading to a subterranean space — probably a *praefurnium* [Fig. 5] (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012).



Fig. 3. East wall of the Agios Georgios church. Remains of the Roman bath are still visible in the southeast corner of the church (likely originally part of the Βαλανεῖον) (Photo D. Borowka)



Fig. 4. Freestanding architectural features are still visible around the church. This photo shows the southwest part of the churchyard, where an ancient vaulted roof is located. In the background, the west wall of the church, constructed over the Roman wall, can be seen (Photo D. Borowka)

4 Aelian (Ael. N.A. 14.20) provides a curious account of a remedy for hydrophobia, reportedly discovered by a Cretan fisherman after his son was bitten by a mad dog.

5 Archives of the Chania Ephorate of Antiquities.

6 All of this material remains unpublished. For a brief overview, see Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012.

## THE SCULPTURE

The sculpture depicts a bearded Satyr, preserved from the neck upward. While the term “Satyr” is used here as a general descriptor for a follower of Dionysus, the iconographic traits —such as mature facial features, deeply modeled beard, and fleshy expression— may indicate that the figure belongs to the Silenus type. However, since only the head survives and key iconographic markers (such as body posture or symbolic attributes) are absent, a definitive classification cannot be made. The use of the broader term “Satyr” reflects both the fragmentary nature of the sculpture and its continuity with the satiric iconography commonly found in Roman bathhouse settings.

Based on macroscopic analysis, the sculpture is carved from a fine-grained material with subtle translucency and a sugary texture. Its plasticity and flexibility strongly suggest it is Parian marble. This material was widely exported across the Roman Empire and favored for smaller-scale statues with refined details (Herz 1988: 305–312). Parian examples are well attested on Crete, including sculptures housed in the Kissamos Archeological Museum (Cat. No. Λ419, Λ694), as well as sculptural works from Gortyn (Antonelli et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the possibility of local craftsmanship cannot be excluded, particularly in the absence of isotopic or petrographic analysis. As Karanastasi

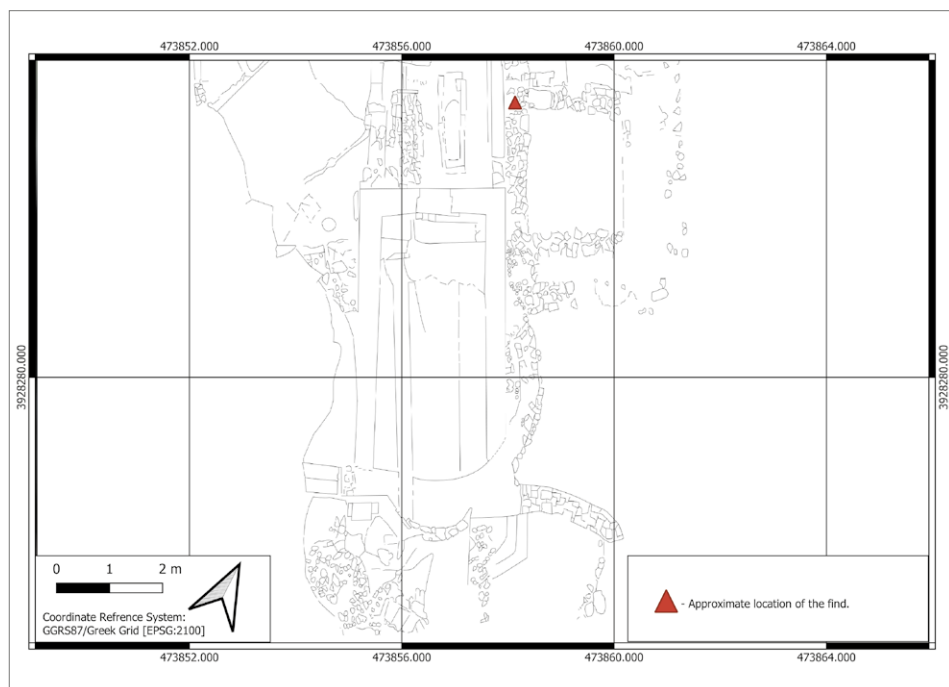


Fig. 5. Drawing of the site of Agios Georgios Nopigia (Drawing D. Borowka based on the plan in Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012: 418)



(2016) has noted, Roman-period sculpture on Crete was overwhelmingly produced using imported white marble, with local workshops carving these materials on-site to meet local demand.

The preserved head measures 15.1 cm in height and 11 cm in width, indicating that it originally belonged to a small-to medium-sized statue, likely around 100–120 cm in total height. This estimate is consistent with proportional systems used in classical statuary, particularly the

Polykleitos canon, in which the full figure is typically seven to eight times the height of the head — especially in smaller-scale statues intended for architectural settings (Manderscheid 1981; Stewart 2008: 144–148). Fragments of horns are missing from the hair at the front [Fig. 6:3], and the nose is slightly damaged. The hair and beard are intricately carved in deep relief, with pronounced, tangled curls. The head tilts slightly to the right. The eyelids are deeply engraved, with incised pupils



Fig. 6. Different views of the Satyr's head (Kissamos Archaeological Museum, Λ 411)



placed beneath heavily curved eyebrows, creating the ignoble or mocking expression characteristic of Satyr figures. The mouth is prominent and slightly open, its undulating lips conveying an expression of malicious glee. The upper lip is covered with thick whiskers, partially broken on the right side [see *Fig. 1*]. The beard is moderately thick and short, covering the cheeks and chin, and tapering into a triangular shape at the base of the neck. The back of the head [*Fig. 62*] is roughly finished, likely because it was intended for placement in a niche, where only the front would be visible. Protrusions of marble on the rear suggest the sculpture may have been left unfinished or was designed to be joined with an architectural surface or statuary group.

Such statues were a common decorative feature in Roman bathing complexes, especially around the 2nd century AD, when provincial bath architecture began to incorporate increasingly elaborate ornamental programs (Manderscheid 1981). Sculptures of Satyrs and related mythical creatures such as fauns and Sileni, drawn from the Dionysian mythological cycle, were used to evoke themes of sensuality, leisure, and nature, resonating with the hedonistic and rejuvenating functions of the bath. In the Stabian Baths at Pompeii, for instance, niches and fountain areas were adorned with mythological statuary, including Dionysian themes and nymphs, as documented in studies of Pompeian bath décor (Jashemski 1979: 163–164). Similar decorative ensembles are found throughout the Roman world, where Satyr or Silenus statues were installed within bath complexes (Gensheimer 2018:

165–172). Scholars have also noted that these figures may have held not only decorative but also symbolic or spiritual significance, reinforcing Dionysian themes of transformation, excess, and cyclical renewal within the bathing experience (Steuernagel 2021).

In Crete, a particularly important group of comparanda comes from the Roman bath complex at Kissamos, where several marble sculptures—including Pan-like figures and Satyr heads—were discovered during rescue excavations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These statues are now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Kissamos, though most remain unpublished and are catalogued only in excavation reports. The best-documented of these is a youthful figure (Cat. No. Λ419) with both Satyr and Pan-like features, namely short horns and a snub nose, carved in fine Parian marble and discovered within the so-called eastern baths at Kissamos in 2005.<sup>7</sup> Another related piece (Cat. No. Λ694), depicting an older, reclining Satyr (or Silenus), was also likely intended for a bathhouse niche. Importantly, the baths at Kissamos are located only a short distance—approximately 6 to 7 km—from the church of Agios Georgios, where the Satyr head was found. This spatial proximity not only reinforces the stylistic and functional parallels between the sculptures but also supports the hypothesis of shared workshop practices or regional artistic preferences in the production of bathhouse statuary during the Roman Imperial period (Manderscheid 1981: 68–73).

Elsewhere on Crete, scattered finds further attest to the island-wide diffusion of Dionysian imagery, particularly

7 This statue is described in the museum exhibit as “young Pan with characteristics of Satyr”.

that involving Satyrs and their companions. At Knossos, a fragmentary marble statue, once interpreted as a Satyr holding a wineskin, has recently been reconsidered as part of a Polyphemus fountain group, suggesting its role in a Dionysian-themed setting, possibly in a villa garden or a nymphaeum (Aristodemou 2024). Excavations at Eleutherna have uncovered deposits including the figure of a Satyr that might have been part of a similar setting (Themelis 2013: 22, 39, Fig. 14: a, b). The Rethymnon Archaeological Museum houses a relief depicting Pan accompanied by nymphs, most likely also from Eleutherna, further affirming the persistence of rustic Dionysian themes (Themelis 2013: 15). The Roman baths at Aptera have yielded architectural fragments, such as niche heads, dripstone moldings, and marble revetments that suggest the former presence of mythological or anthropomorphic sculptural decoration, plausibly including Satyrs or Sileni alongside conventional Roman bath ornamentation.<sup>8</sup>

These Cretan parallels —especially their fine marble and bathhouse contexts— reinforce a broader regional pattern of Dionysian iconography in 2nd-century provincial sculpture. The broader corpus to which the Agios Georgios head may be linked comprises small- to medium-scale statuary and reliefs, often produced in local workshops but drawing on Hellenistic prototypes deployed across bathing facilities from the western Mediterranean to the Aegean (Gensheimer 2018: 44–48, 102–112). These sculptures, including those from Kisssamos, often

featured Satyrs, Sileni, nymphs, and Bacchic processions carved in high-quality marble and placed in *caldaria*, *frigidaria*, *exedrae*, or fountain niches (Manderscheid 1981).

Importantly, the Agios Georgios Satyr head may not have been a solitary element. As noted above, early 19th-century observations by Pashley (1837: 38–39) mention fragments of statues found directly at the site. Although his description is brief, it confirms that figural sculpture was already recognized there well before the modern excavation. Subsequently, during the 2001 excavation conducted by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2012: 418), additional sculptural elements were recovered: a carved snake (possibly connected to Asclepius) and a sculpted bunch of grapes. Together with the Satyr, these sculptures likely formed part of a carefully coordinated ensemble evoking themes of pleasure, renewal, and transcendence — transforming the bath enclosure into more than a site of hygiene, but rather a microcosm of mythological experience. These finds strongly suggest the presence of a symbolic and decorative program within the Roman baths, intertwining typical motifs of nocturnal divinity, healing, and Dionysian abundance. Such imagery might have been associated with the Dionysian cycle, commonly employed in bath complexes across the Roman world. The grapes clearly allude to Dionysus himself; the snake, although traditionally linked to Asclepius and healing, also appears in Dionysian contexts, as a chthonic and transformational

8 Based on the preliminary study available at <https://ancientaptera.gr/en/baths/> (accessed: 20.06.2025).

symbol connected to ecstatic rituals and fertility (Seaford 2006: 41–42, 56–58, 66). In several instances of Greek and Roman art, snakes are depicted entwined around the Dionysian *thyrsus*, accompanying Bacchic participants or appearing in relief scenes with Satyrs and Maenads (Bonfante 1993: 226, Figs 21, 28; Carpenter 1993: 186, Fig. 7; Jameson 1993: 45–50). This dual symbolism —blending mystery and rebirth— finds a coherent visual logic within the environment of Roman baths.

The context clearly suggests that the sculpture should be interpreted as a copy of a Late Hellenistic prototype and probably dates to around the 2nd century AD.

This attribution is supported by comparisons with other Satyr representations that share similar features in both execution and scale. One of the closest analogies is a Satyr head from Porto d'Anzio in ancient Antium (Robinson and Richardson 1951–1952: 66) [Fig. 7:2]. The two heads closely resemble each other in the manner of their execution, their orientation relative to the central axis, and the rendering of individual features, as well as in size.<sup>9</sup> The Antium head, however, shows hair treated in a different style and a tongue clearly protruding from the mouth — a feature absent from the Agios Georgios example. Another Satyr head



Fig.7. Comparison of the sculpture from the site of Agios Georgios, Nopigia, with other examples from the 2nd century AD (1: D. Borowka; 2: Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund, 49.520, Public Domain, modified by the author; 3: after LIMC, Pan, No. 82; 4: Metropolitan Museum of Arts, Rogers Fund, 1914, 14.130.10, modified by the author)

9 The Agios Georgios sculpture stands at 15.1 cm in height, compared to 17.78 cm for the Antium sculpture.

from Antium, likely part of a statuary group, also represents the same iconographic type. Composite groups depicting Satyrs seizing nymphs are well attested across the Roman world.

A further close analogy is a marble Satyr head [Fig 7:3] housed in the Vatican Museum, dated to the late 1st or early 2nd century AD, whose dynamic curls and deeply incised eyes echo the Agios Georgios example (Amelung 1908: 514, Pl. 3). A further compelling comparison is a Satyr head in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, dated to the 3rd–1st centuries BC (Richter 1953: 121, 259, Pl. 99b) [Fig. 7:4]. This piece likely reflects a Hellenistic sculptural idiom that remained influential into the Roman Imperial period. The head is characterized by similarly fleshy features, exaggerated expression, and incised pupils framed by arched brows, paralleling the features of the Agios Georgios sculpture. The beard and hair are likewise rendered in pronounced, curling locks, reinforcing its affinity with the broader visual tradition of Satyr heads used in symbolic and decorative roles. Although earlier in date, the Metropolitan Museum example underscores certain physiognomic and stylistic conventions that persist across time, sug-

gesting that the Agios Georgios head may have drawn on Hellenistic prototypes still circulating in Roman workshops.

The variety of features in the sculpture under study—particularly its expressive modeling, exaggerated physiognomy, and intricately rendered hair—reflects the creative adaptation of a Hellenistic prototype within a Roman idiom. The head, carved in fine-grained marble with a sugary texture, is suggestive of Parian marble, though the absence of isotopic analysis leaves open the possibility that it was crafted from a high-quality local Cretan source. Regardless of exact provenance, the marble's refined finish and the sculpture's detailed execution point to the production in a trained workshop. Given the archaeological context and the increasing recognition of local sculptural production on the island during the Roman period (Karanastasi 2016), it is plausible that the work was executed in a Cretan workshop. Such workshops often assimilated imported models and materials while expressing regional aesthetics. While stylistic affinities with metropolitan centers like Aphrodisias are present, the sculpture's interpretative freedom and provincial flair suggest a local reworking of canonical motifs.

## CLOSING REMARKS

The interpretation of the sculpture, while possible through the lens of art history, remains constrained by the limited archaeological data from the site. The lack of systematic excavations around the bath complex of Agios Georgios at Nopigia, along with post-depositional processes—including the construction of a later

Christian church atop the Roman remains—makes it difficult to determine the sculpture's original context. Based on current evidence, the most plausible destruction phase of the bath complex dates to the 3rd or 4th century AD, likely in connection with the catastrophic earthquake of AD 365 (Stiros 2001; 2010;

Stiros and Papageorgiou 2001; Stiros, Papageorgiou, and Markoulaki 2004). The sculpture's fragmentary preservation may be partly due to this event, as well as to subsequent disturbances. Notably, Pashley (1837: 38–39) already reported the presence of sculptures at the site and mentioned ongoing amateur or illegal excavations around the area of the Agios Georgios church. Although he did not conduct formal archaeological work himself, his observations suggest that significant disturbances may have occurred prior to any modern documentation, further complicating efforts to reconstruct the sculpture's original context.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the artifact's original context, it is difficult to determine whether it served a religious function or was purely decorative. Considering its placement within a bath complex, it most likely formed part of a broader decorative and symbolic program typical of the Roman bathing culture. Comparable representations of Satyrs and Sileni are known from other Roman baths (see above), where such figures frequently evoked themes of leisure, rejuvenation, and Dionysian pleasure. In western Crete, the eastern bath complex at Kissamos offers a closely related example. Located just six kilometers from the Agios Georgios church, it yielded a group of sculptures from the 2nd century AD. Lucian (*Luc. Hip.* 5), in his elaborate sketch of a bathing complex, describes sculptural representations of divinities placed next to spacious locker rooms in a high and brilliantly lighted hall. Inside are “three swimming pools of cold water”, suggesting layered meanings that bridge the playful and the therapeutic.

Within this framework, the Agios Georgios head may be interpreted as a visual element central to the creation of meaning within the bath environment, blending motifs of vitality, nature, and ritual purification. Its stylistic execution reflects broader provincial artistic trends, including adaptation of Hellenistic prototypes in the Roman period. The high quality of carving—particularly in the facial modeling and treatment of the beard—suggests the work of a skilled sculptor. Based on macroscopic analysis, the marble most likely derives from Paros or a local Cretan quarry. The carving style shows significant parallels with works from Antium and a piece from the Vatican Museum collection; all are dated to the 1st–2nd centuries AD. This interpretation integrates stylistic comparisons and material assessment to contextualize the head within both local production and the broader iconography of Roman baths.

Recent scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the sophistication of Cretan sculpture during the Roman period, much of which remains unpublished. Ongoing efforts to document and assess this corpus—led by researchers such as Pavlina Karanastasi, Michael Milidakis, and Anna Kouremenos—have highlighted Crete's role not merely as a recipient but also as an active participant in the Roman world (Milidakis and Papadaki 2014; Kouremenos 2014; Karanastasi 2012; 2016; 2018; Borowka 2022). As such, the find offers valuable insight into the ornamental and symbolic programs of Roman Crete's bathing culture and the enduring appeal of Dionysian myth in provincial contexts.

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