

TARENTINE VICTORY MONUMENT OF POSSIBLY PYRRHIC DATE

Abstract

I have spent considerable time searching in libraries for possible representations of Tarentine *thureophoroi*, partly to argue that it would be possible that the Tarentine *leucaspidēs* phalanx could be composed of troops of this type. Tarentine sculpture of the early third century BC is mainly funerary, and 'heroizing' in its nature. The only depiction of any *thureophoros* which I found in my search is a sculpture dated to the early third century BC which emerged on the art market in Basel in 1972, of which the present whereabouts are unknown. The other equipment and dress used by this *thureophoros* warrior can be identified as of a type used by the native 'Oscan' population of Italy. The figure seems to be only a part of the original monument. The warrior is depicted in defeat, and one assumes that beside him to the left towered the figure of a victorious Tarentine. The monument is uninscribed, and we have no idea of whether the original sculpture was of a public or private nature. Pyrrhus crossed over the Adriatic to the aid of the Tarentines against the Romans in the winter of 281/0 BC, and it is possible that this monument was erected during his intervention. Previously, however, the biggest threat to Tarentum was posed by Oscan peoples, and it is equally possible that the sculpture formed part of an earlier Tarentine victory monument.

Keywords

Tarentum, Pyrrhus of Epirus, Italian armour.

There are now a considerable number of Polish historians making a contribution to our knowledge of the ancient world, but this was not always the case. A generation ago there were very few Polish historians known on the international stage. Adam Ziółkowski was one of them, and I consider it to be an unusual honour to be asked to contribute this short article in his honour. Professor Ziółkowski

is best known for his writings on Roman Republican warfare. The object which I have chosen to write about illustrates what was happening in Italian warfare at the turn of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, and I hope it will be of some interest to the honorand.

In the latter half of the 20th century one question which exercised academic thought was the origin of the (originally) oval-shaped shield used by the Roman Republican legionary: the *scutum*, and its relationship to the shield used by the Celtic peoples of the La Tène culture, called the *thureos* in Greek. It now seems clear, following the work of Eichberg (1987) in particular, but many other scholars too, that these were separate developments, and the *scutum* was used by the Romans from the late 5th century BC onwards. It nevertheless remains the case that depictions of the oval shield in the representational evidence for the Italian peninsula before the late Republican period remain extremely rare. In this short article I draw attention to one that has previously gone unnoticed.

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My search for representations of Italian warriors carrying oval shields (henceforward *thureophoroi*) was first stimulated by a passage in Polybius (18.28.10) indicating that Pyrrhus of Epirus employed not only Italian arms but Italian forces, placing ‘alternately a manipule alongside a phalanx block’ (τιθεῖς ἐναλλάξ σιγμαίαν καὶ σπεῖραν φαλαγγιτικὴν) in his battles with the Romans. This evidence provided by Polybius seems backed up by the manner in which Pyrrhus arranged his troops at the battle of Asculum in 279 BC, as described by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (20.1.1-7). This arrangement I have termed ‘an articulating phalanx’ (Sekunda 2006: 119). The maniples of Italian troops, presumably equipped with *thureos* shields, would act as more flexible hinges to the phalanx-blocks alongside whom they were stationed.

The search for representations of Italian warriors carrying the *thureos* shield was intensified by my growing conviction that the three references to a ‘phalanx of the *leukaspides*’ (*vel sim.*) that occur in the literary sources, refer to formations of *thureophoroi*: ‘phalanx’ being a general word applied to any military formation (Sekunda 2013: 108–127).¹ One of these references is to the ‘*leukaspis* phalanx’ of the Tarentines who fought under the command of Pyrrhus at the battle of Asculum in 279 BC (Dion. Hal. 20.1.1-2; Sekunda 2013: 126–7; Sekunda 2019: 39). The search had narrowed down to representations of Tarentine *thureophoroi*. I have spent several days looking for any such image in Senate London in the Hellenic

¹ According to Johstono, Taylor 2020: 54 n. 21, without giving any evidence in support, this suggestion ‘is almost certainly incorrect’. I hope to give my own reconstruction of Pydna, demonstrating this to, in fact, be the case, in due course.

and Roman Library. I only mention this in order to emphasise the rarity of the object which I will discuss in this short article.

Tarentine sculpture of the early third century BC is mainly funerary, and 'heroizing' in its nature. Realistic portrayals of human figures in day-to-day situations are very rare; this includes realistic portraits of personages carrying military equipment. The sculpture under study in this article is the only representation of a *thureophoros* known to me in the entirety of Tarentine figural representation. Unfortunately, it does not seem to depict a Tarentine Greek but an Italian.

Sculpture of a *thureophoros* from Tarentum

The sculpture in question was published, for the first and last time it seems,² in an article written in 1975 by E. Coleman Carter (Carter 1975: 98, no. 413, pl. 64 a, b). The sculpture in question was on the Swiss art market at the time (specifically in Basel in 1972). To my knowledge it has never been republished elsewhere, and its present whereabouts are unknown at least to the present writer. In his article Carter attempts to gather all sculptures of Taras / Tarentum known at the time, and to work out a chronological progression for them based on stylistic criteria. Carter allocated this sculpture to his 'Group T', which he dated to *circa* 280 BC. I have no reason to doubt this dating.

In its present preserved form, the sculpture is a fragment coming from what was once a much larger original. This original monument was probably formed from two figures, most probably showing a Tarentine warrior, now lost, depicted in his moment of triumph before death, towering over a defeated Italian foe. The preserved fragment is anepigraphic, leaving us no clue as to whether it once formed part of a public monument, or, as seems more probable, a private one. The preserved fragment shows the kneeling defeated warrior who is carrying distinctively Italian equipment. The details of the sculpture are perhaps shown better in the accompanying drawings, executed by Natalia Kozłowska.

The kneeling figure defends his left side with a narrow *thureos* shield. These shields are oval in shape, and are fitted with a rim, spine and boss, which are generally metallic. As discussed in the introduction, this type of shield was characteristic of the Celtic La Tène culture, but some examples of this type of shield appear earlier in the iconographic evidence of the Iron age cultures of the Apennine Peninsula. The *thureos* appears in warfare in the Greek mainland in the 270s, and there is considerable controversy about the agency of their introduction, whether their

² A drawing of the sculpture appeared in Sekunda, Dennis 2019: 39.



Two views of the broken sculpture in Basel in 1972 (after E. Coleman Carter 1975, pl. 64 a, b) accompanied by two interpretative drawings of the object by Natalia Kozłowska

adoption was due to the Galatian invasions of the Southern Balkan areas in the 270s BC or was due to Pyrrhus' return from Italy in the 274 BC. This controversy need not detain us further, suffice to say that the word *thureos* occurs in descriptions of the armament of Pyrrhus' army at the Battle of Beneventum, or Malventum as it was called at the time.³

³ Dion. Hal. 20.11.1; cf. Sekunda, Dennis 2019: 39.

The Italic Bronze Belt

Other weaponry shown on the relief includes a bronze belt, baldric and scabbard, a recurved sword, and very possibly greaves. The subject of the sculpture is also clothed in a tunic, and possibly a cloak, although this is uncertain. We shall examine the belt first.

This kind of bronze belt, fastened by hooks at the front, was once thought to be characteristic of the Samnites. Reconstructions of Samnite military equipment in modern sources are, however, largely based on 4th century tomb paintings from the city of Paestum. Paestum was originally a Greek colony called Poseidonia. It was seized by the Lucanians in 410 BC.⁴ This did not mean the extermination of the Greek inhabitants, for they continue to be present in the epigraphic record of the city. The triumphant warriors shown in the tomb paintings from Paestum, mostly shown wearing bronze belts of this type, are Lucanians. As well as the tomb paintings, burials excavated in the cemeteries of Paestum contained complete panoplies of armour, including bronze belts (Burns 2011: 224).

The non-Latin languages in use in Italy during the fourth and third centuries BC included not only 'Greek and Etruscan, but also Oscan, Umbrian, South Picene, Messapic and many others' (McDonald 2015: 1). The (southern) Oscan spoken in Lucania, Bruttium and Messana, and was written with Greek characters (McDonald 2015: 3). 'Further north in Campania and Samnium, the "native" Oscan alphabet and the Latin alphabet were the most common writing systems. The texts from Lucania, Bruttium and Messana are conventionally referred to as "South Oscan", and date from the fourth century BC until the Social War (91–88 BC) or shortly afterwards. This grouping is primarily orthographic rather than linguistic' (McDonald 2015: 4).

According to Strabo (6.1.2) the Samnites were the progenitors of the Lucanians and the Bruttians. In fact, the ethnogenesis of the Lucanians is rather more complicated, as has been demonstrated by Elena Isayev (2007: 11–21). On the other hand, the origins of the Bruttians are clearer. In the words of Robinson (1964: 57) they 'do not appear on the scene till the fourth century . . . they were originally an offshoot of the Lucanians, but no less rough and uncultured, but for a long time less important'.

Mike Burns, unfortunately not with us anymore, had the greatest expertise on Italian weaponry of the fourth and third century known to me. Burns (2011: 232) wrote that these 'belts, like the triple disc cuirasses, are often described as "Samnite" by modern scholars, but have been found in burials and depicted in art-work throughout southern Italy'. So, it might be more correct to regard bronze belts of this type, and the armour associated with them, as being used, not exclu-

⁴ Strabo 5.4.13; Isayev 2017: 144–84, esp. 170.

sively used by the Samnites, nor by the Lucanians, but as being used more generally by the Oscan-speaking population of Italy. Nevertheless, a lot of the belts currently in private collections came from illegal excavations on the rich tombs in Paestum.

‘The south Italic belt was made from sheet bronze, 7–12 cm wide and 70–110 cm long fastened by two or more bronze clasps. The belt clasps were usually made separately in moulds and fixed to the band by iron or bronze rivets. There are a huge variety of clasp designs for these belts but the two most common types have either a cicada or a palmette for the body section attached to the belt band while the projecting hook portion is often in the shape of a stylized arrow or wolf-head’ (Burns 2011: 232–3). These ‘south Italic belts’ were in use ‘during the fifth to third centuries’ (Burns 2011: 233). The earlier examples have only two sets of hooks and clasps, but ‘Towards the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century belt clasps become narrower and more numerous’ (Burns 2011: 233).

The belt shown in the sculpture has three sets of clasps and hooks, so the date of circa 280 BC assigned to this sculpture on stylistic and compositional grounds by E. Coleman Carter would be entirely appropriate. Later examples of these belts have as many as seven sets of hooks and clasps.

The ‘Recurved Sabre’

The offensive weapon used by the warrior shown in the relief is what I have termed ‘a recurved sabre’. In Greek examples of this weapon ‘the back of the blade curves forward, and the main weight of the weapon lies near the tip; the concave side forming the cutting edge’ (Sekunda, Hook 2000: 16). The ‘recurved sabre’ is not to be, but frequently is, confused with a second type of blade weapon used by the Greeks, the blade of which was a different shape, resembling the Mediaeval ‘falchion’. This weapon had, in contrast ‘a heavy single edged blade, whose back was either straight or slightly concave. The edge had a pronounced convex curve and broadens considerably towards the point’ (Sekunda, Hook 2000: 16). In the Greek world these two weapons came into use in the late 6th century BC. They are sometimes called either a *machaira* or a *kopis* by modern authors, although there are no grounds for doing this, because the Greeks used these and other terms to describe their bladed weapons almost indiscriminately (Sekunda, Hook 2000: 16–7; cf. Burliga 2012). The ‘Greek falchion’, often termed a *kopis* by the moderns, was imported from the oriental, most probably from the Achaemenid, world (Sekunda, Hook 2000: 16; Verčik 2014).

The question of the origin of the ‘recurved sabre’, often termed a *machaira* by the moderns, is more complex. Variants of this same type of weapon are found throughout the southern and central Balkan Peninsula, the central and southern

Apennine Peninsula, and in the Iberian Peninsula, originally being confined to the south-east, where it was used (originally at least) by people of the Iberian Culture. In Spain this type of weapon was given the term *falx* or *falcata*, a modern term, thought up in the 19th century (Quesada Sanz 1997: 196). Fernando Quesada Sanz (1990; 1992: 197–8) argued for the ultimate origin of the weapon in Illyria, passing into the Iberian Peninsula via Italy. Peter Connolly (1981: 99) pointed out that a forerunner of this kind of recurved sabre comes from Este in a Villanovan context and has suggested that the weapon may have originated in Etruria. Tim Everson (2004: 125) thought that a Thracian origin was most likely.

No chronological typology, to my knowledge, has been developed yet for the Italian version of the ‘recurved sabre’, so it is difficult to say anything about the date of the weapon depicted on the sculpture. In fact, the sculpture is so damaged at this point, and the photograph of it is of such poor quality, were a chronological typology of this type of weapon available, I doubt that it would be of any help in this case.

The Historical Background of the Monument

We have, however, the stylistic dating of *circa* 280 BC given to the monument by E. Coleman Carter, and this dating is supported by the typology of the bronze belt. A victory monument would scarcely be appropriate for the period after the mid-270s when Tarentum lost its independence to Rome. Pyrrhus of Epirus was in Italy, for the most part based at Tarentum, from 280–275 BC, so it is perfectly possible that the preserved figure from the monument represents an infantryman from a Roman allied contingent, over whom a Tarentine would have been shown triumphing. It would seem to be a little strange for the deceased to be depicted as triumphing over an ally rather than a Roman, but we do not know how many figures made up the monument in its original form, and it might have included a Roman as well.⁵ Other possibilities should, however, be considered as well. The Tarentines were in a state of conflict with the Lucanians on frequent occasions previously. One such occasion might be the intervention of Cleonymus in 303 BC, when according to Diodorus (20.104.1) ‘In Italy the Tarantines were waging war with the Lucanians and Romans’. There might have been other such occasions as well, closer to 280 BC: our knowledge of the local history of this period is too patchy.

⁵ I would like to thank Professor Tim Cornell for making this point to me by when I presented this sculpture at the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference in Split in 2022. I would also like to thank Gaius Stern for organizing the conference session on Pyrrhus of Epirus in such a congenial setting.

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