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## The “Head of the Philosopher” from Porticello: Proposal for the Identification

The wreck of Porticello in Villa San Giovanni, near Reggio di Calabria, was discovered by the diver Giuseppe Mavilla in November 1969 [14]. An underwater archaeological mission conducted in the 1970 by the University of Pennsylvania revealed the location of the wrecked ship, which was long between 16 and 17 metres, with a displacement of about 30 tons [7, p. 13]. According to the American studies, it is possible to know that it was a single wreck, sunk between 400 and 375 B. C., the dating of the shipwreck is given by the chronology of the common pottery found between the deck of the ship [12; 1, pp. 182–185]. Moreover, this dating is probably reinforced by the *terminus post quem*, consisting of the presence of lead ingots from the Athenian mines of Laurion, that remained closed in the final years of the Peloponnesian War, due to the presence of a Spartan garrison in the strategic Fortress of Decelea [7, pp. 59–60].

Then, various types of wine amphorae were found in the wreck: Greek-Western, Punic, Solokha II, and Mende amphorae. In addition, the ship was carrying achromatic inkwells, small ingots, grains of an alloy of lead, silver and copper. Together with these materials, there have been also discovered parts of bronze statues that had been systematically cut into pieces.

These statues that have been mentioned are not ancient and ruined by the passage of time: both the “Philosopher’s Head” [8; 2; 9; 17; 18; 20; 3; 10, p. 25; 13; 19; 11, pp. 111–112; 21; 22 p. 109; 15; 5, pp. 86–93] (Fig. 1) and the “Basel Head” [16; 4; 5] (Fig. 2) are true masterpieces of classical Greek art, which do not seem to have been on public display for many decades, because of their conservation conditions. Some details — such as the tenons roughly sawn under one foot and the hammering on the nose of the “Basel Head” to detach it from the trunk — prove the origin of the destruction caused by a war. As a matter of fact, the back of the “Philosopher’s Head”, shows that the statue was affected by a fire: in fact, the liquefaction of some strands of the hair proves that it was subjected to very strong heat. As Ross Holloway [10] already noted, these are undoubtedly the spoils of a conquered *polis*, and the statues were sold by weight as metal.

Regarding the goods found in the wreck, the Eiseman proposed three possible routes where the ship could have loaded them: 1) (the first one is) departure from *Byzantium*, with stops in *Mende*, Athens, a Greek or Sicilian port, and destination beyond the Strait; 2) then the second one: departure from Athens, with a subsequent route identical to the previous one; 3) and the third and last one departure from a Greek or Sicilian port, where all the loaded goods could easily be found.

Given the fact that the diffusion of these types of goods was easily available in any port with a certain notoriety in the Mediterranean, it can be said that none of the three hypotheses can



Fig. 1. The bronze head of "Porticello Philosopher". Museo Archeologico di Reggio Calabria. Photo by D. Castrizio

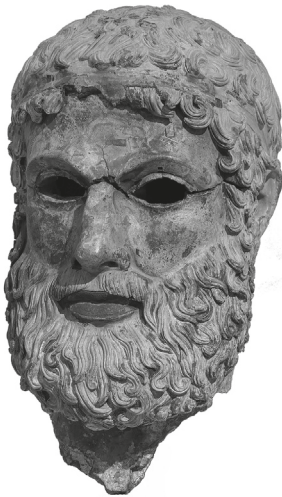


Fig. 2. The bronze "Basel head". Museo Archeologico di Reggio Calabria. Photo by D. Castrizio

be considered more verisimilar than the others. The 3 Western-Greek amphorae and the 15 Punic ones seem to refer to a more local context.

Finally, there is a detail relating to the discovery of the wreck that has never been valorised, as a matter of fact the discoverer Mavilla declared to have found an anchor, which is kept today at the Archaeological Museum of Reggio [14, pp. 81–85]. This anchor was at a short distance from the wreck but not inside the hull. According to this data never taken into consideration, the ship would have been at anchor in the harbour of Porticello, and not in navigation.

It is surprising how, in the scientific debate on the wreck of Porticello, the history of the site of the discovery has never been considered. Porticello, as the name clearly indicates, denounces its use as a landing place. The study of the sources and the archaeological surface surveys allow us to give an ancient name to the site: the Roman *statio* of *Ad statuam*, *Ad columnam*, called *Stylis* in Greek. The statue and the tower can be recognized in a series of silver denarii minting, aimed at celebrating the victories in the Strait of Sextus Pompey against Octavian [6, pp. 71–82] (Fig. 3).

The history of Porticello, — a bit like that of the history of Roman landing place, still called Porto Forticchio, near the place where the Bronzes of Riace were found — shows how sometimes the superficiality of the archaeological research omits important data for the understanding of the finds. In this case, the fact that the sinking of the ship took place in the ferry point between Italy and Sicily, shed new light on the whole reconstruction of the history of the wrecked ship, it seems more a local transport of goods, rather than a ship that had travelled a long Mediterranean route.

Moreover, a study conducted by the team of the Università Mediterranea of Reggio Calabria, coordinated by the professor Simonetta Valtieri, has definitively ascertained, after an in-depth analysis on the metal, that they are parts of three distinct statues: the "Head of Basel" has no other relevant fragments; on the other hand, the "Head of the Philosopher" shows a greater number of other parts made of bronze with the same characteristics, including a hand and various parts of the *himation*. In the statue of an athlete remained only the upper part of the left thigh, parts of the two feet and a virile member. The research made in Reggio provided also three-dimensional reconstructions of the possible appearance of the statues [23] (Fig. 4).

The “Philosopher’s Head” attracted the interest of researchers for its high technical quality, comparable only to the two Riace statues, and for its “realism”, as a matter of fact, in the statue, it is possible to notice the wrinkles on the forehead, small eyes, unshaven beard and the aquiline-shaped nose. This is not an idealised portrait; in fact, this is one of the first true artistic reproductions of an ordinary man who is getting older.

Many hypotheses have been made by the specialists. Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway hypothesized the pertinence of the statues to a group including Achilles, an unknown character, and the centaur Chiron, with features that are considered “monstrous” [20]. However, this hypothesis has lack of evidence, because it is proved that the fragments belong to three different statues of different workmanship and of different chronology, as has been demonstrated by the research made in Reggio.

Meanwhile, Enrico Paribeni, proposed to recognize in the statue an old man leaning on a stick [17]. In addition, Ross Holloway thought that this man represents *Charondas* of *Katane*, the author of the political constitution of Rhegion, because of the proximity of the site of the shipwreck with Reggio and the pillage of the *polis* by *Dionysius I* in 387/6 BC [10]. Then, the scholar Angelo Maria Ardivino interpreted the character as a generic philosopher [2], while Joseph Frei believed that it was a generic reference to the portraits of the tragedian *Sophocles* [9] and Paolo Enrico Arias proposed that it was the portrait of the poet Hesiod [3].



Fig. 3. Roman *denarius* struck by Sextus Pompey, 38–37 BC. Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., Triton V, Lot 1847

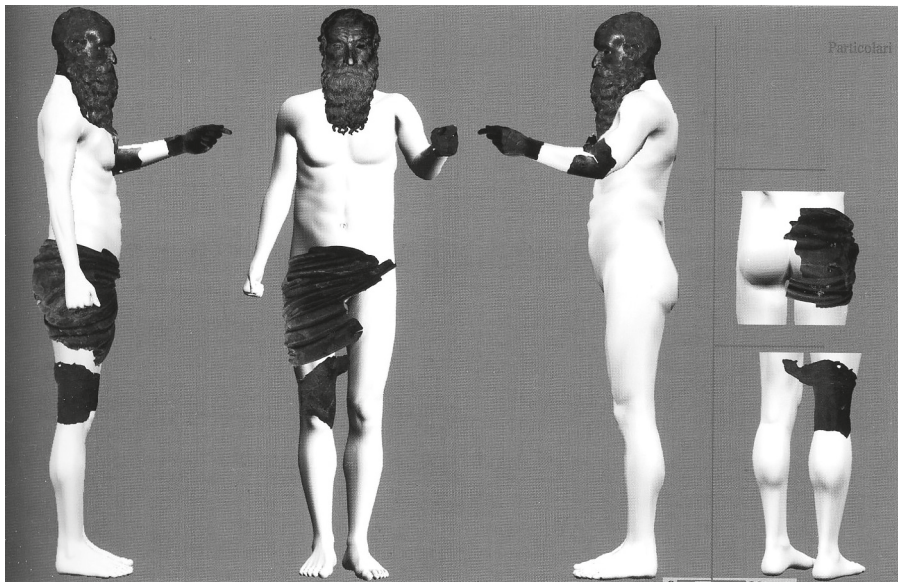


Fig. 4. Three-dimensional reconstructions of the “Philosopher” statue, by S. Valtieri — L. Mavilia

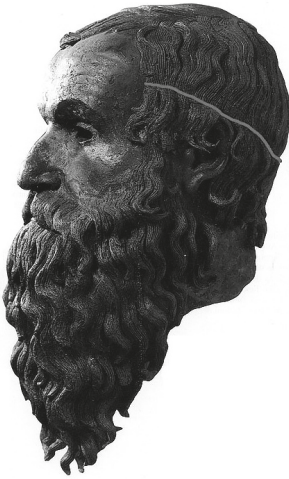


Fig. 5. The “Head of Philosopher” with the signs of a turban.  
Photo by D. Castrizio



Fig. 6. The “Head of Philosopher” with the signs of a turban. Fragment.  
Photo by D. Castrizio



Attempting to give a name to the philosopher portrayed with such physiognomic precision, our research began with a reading of the signs left in the bronze in order to give each one an interpretation and then to integrate what in the past was present on the statue that today has been lost. A clear sign, which revolves around the head at temple height, has been interpreted as the presence of a crown, perhaps a laurel, a priestly bandage, or a royal diadem. But, if we extend the signs as far as the forehead, we can see that this element should have reached just above the eyebrows (Fig. 5).

This is impossible: the laurel wreath and the diadem are placed much higher up. In addition, only the hair below the supposed crown is wavier, while all the hair above it appears flat and almost without mass (Fig. 6). This unnatural detail suggests that the hypothesis of a crown or diadem should be objectively discarded. Therefore, this element must cover almost the whole head, but not all of it, since it is precisely at the top of the head that the hair is finished with greater care. The detail of this band that covered a part of the head from the temples to upwards and that left the upper part of the head uncovered, led us to compare our work with other survivors of the shipwreck of Greek sculpture. The research led us to the famous bust of Pythagoras of the Capitoline Museums in Rome, a Roman copy of a Greek original (Fig. 7). This type of statuary was traced back to Pythagoras of Samos, depicted with a turban on his head in

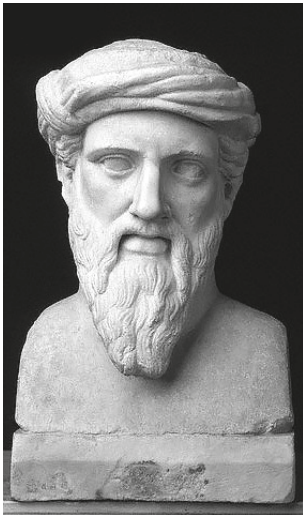


Fig. 7. The portrait of Pythagoras with turban in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. Photo by D. Castrizio



order to recall his study and training in the East. Closer autopsy examinations carried out by the Soprintendenza Archeologica della Calabria, which were made thanks to the 3D model realized through the usage of laser of the original in bronze, showed a bulge in the back of the head just above the mark left by the added element, whose presence is on our opinion, because of the need to fix the turban well on the hair.

The three-dimensional reconstruction of the entire statue, with all the relevant fragments, carried out by the Università Mediterranea of Reggio, is very similar to another Greek statue, which came to us in a much-altered Roman copy: the so-called *Poète en marche* exhibited at the museum of Louvre, characterised by a short *himation*, held by the right hand at the thigh level, and the presence of a lyre in the left hand (Fig. 8). The statue has been identified as Archilochus of Paros, Alcaeus of Mytilene, Semonides of Amorgos or Pindar of Cynoscephalae, near Thebes, or the bronze of the cantor Cleon, attributed to Pythagoras of Rhegion<sup>1</sup>.

Although the Louvre's cithara player appears to have been altered, probably to make it suitable for use in the interests of the client, it also allows us to ideally reconstruct the entire statue of the philosopher. According to the copy, the comparison between the fragments of Porticello and the statue of the Louvre is made certain by the presence of two unique iconographic details. First of all, we can see the right hand, a closed fist in the act of grasping a ripple in the himation, a detail found in a fragment of the statue from Porticello, where the fold is used as a point of attachment of the hand (Fig. 9). Moreover, we can note the perfect similarity between the left hand of the *Poète en marche* with that of Porticello, which also presents the reproduction of the leather band that allowed to hold the lyre (Fig. 10).

Regarding the identification of *Pythagoras* of Samos as the character depicted in the statue by Porticello, various proofs seem to demonstrate this hypothesis (Fig. 11). The turban, as we have already said, is attested in the most ancient iconography of the philosopher, referring to his studies in the East.

The presence of the hand in the act of grasping the *himation* on the right hip is attributable to the tradition which attested that the philosopher's right thigh was made of gold. As a matter



Fig. 8. The statue of the “*Poète en marche*” in the Museum of Louvre, creative commons

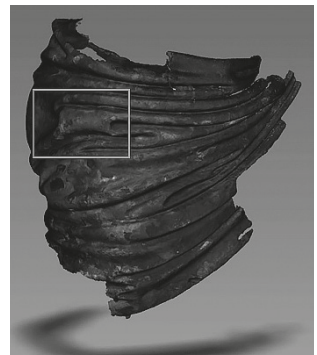


Fig. 9. A fragment of the statue from Porticello, where the fold is used as a point of attachment of the hand

<sup>1</sup> Achat, 1884 Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines. N° d'entrée MNC 703 (n° usuel Ma 588).



Fig. 10. Comparison between the left hand of the statue of Porticello and that of the Louvre Bronze



Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the Statue of Philosopher. Graphic reconstruction by Saverio Autellitano

of fact, according to Elian, “*Pythagoras* taught men that he was born from better seeds than those from which mortals are born; they say that he was seen in Metapontum and Croton on the same day and at the same time. And in Olympia he showed that he had a golden thigh” [18]. *Apollonius* confirms this news: “Aristotle also tells that once, in a theatre, he stood up and showed the spectators that his thigh was golden” [19].

Finally, let us recall how the attribute of the lyre also refers to the Pythagorean environment, since, as is well known, Pythagoras learned to play this instrument when he was young, and from the sources we know that the philosopher used it to soothe the pains of sick people. Then, the lyre implies the philosopher’s great contributions to the mathematical theory of music.

In our opinion, the identification of Pythagoras brings along with it one last necessary consequence, on which experts should reflect: at the time of the sinking of the ship at Porticello, Pythagorism was essentially characteristic of the *Magna Graecia*, meaning that the *polis* that was plundered should be sought in this area, as evidenced unequivocally by the bronze fragments found inside the ship.

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**Title.** The "Head of The Philosopher" from Porticello: Proposal for the Identification

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**Abstract.** The history of the accidental discovery of the Porticello wreck in Villa San Giovanni is long and complex. The wreckage was found fortuitously in 1969 by a local diver, and the following year it was studied by an underwater excavation mission of the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Thanks to this research, we know that the ship sank in the waters of the Strait between 400 and 375 BC. We also know that it carried various amphorae types, as well as achromatic inkwells and small ingots. Together with these materials, the archaeologists recovered parts of bronze statues, demolished, and systematically broken into pieces. They are not ancient statues ruined by the passage of time: both the "Porticello Philosopher" and the "Head of Basilea" are real masterpieces of Greek classical art, which, given their conservation conditions, have not been exhibited for a long

time. It is surprising how, in the scientific debate on the Porticello wreck, the history of the discovery site has never been considered. The name itself, Porticello (in Italian: "small port") makes us understand its ferry landing function. The study of the sources and the surface archaeological investigations allow us to give an ancient name to the locality: the Roman statio of Ad statuam, Ad columnam. There were many hypotheses made by specialists: Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway has hypothesized a group including Achilles, an unknown character, and the centaur Chiron (the "Porticello Philosopher"), with features considered "monstrous". Enrico Paribeni proposed a statuary group, with an old man leaning on a stick. Ross Holloway speculated a portrait of Charondas of Catania, author of the political constitution at Rhegion. Angelo Maria Arduvino identifies in the bronze head simply a philosopher. Joseph Frey was thinking of the portrait of the Greek tragedian Sophocles. Paolo Enrico Arias thought to a portrait of the poet Hesiod. Other hypotheses speak generically of a prophet, remembered in one of the ancient epic cycles. Aiming to give a name to the philosopher depicted with such physiognomic precision, our research will begin with a reading of the signs left in the bronze statue, trying to give each one an interpretation. Our goal is to provide the integration of what was present on the statue, but which has been lost. In the end, the comparison with other ancient statues allows us to hypothesize the portrait of the philosopher Pythagoras of Samos.

**Keywords:** Greek archaeology, iconography, Greek art, Porticello's wreck, Greek bronze statues

**Название статьи.** «Голова философа» из Портичелло: Предложение по идентификации

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**Аннотация.** История находки остатков кораблекрушения в Мессинском проливе близ Портичелло и Вилла Сан Джованни долгая и непростая. Обломки корабля были случайно обнаружены местным ныряльщиком в 1969 г., а годом позже были обследованы отрядом подводных археологов из Университетского музея в Пенсильвании. Благодаря этому исследованию, стало известно, что судно затонуло в водах пролива между 400 и 375 гг. до н.э., а также, что в состав груза, который оно перевозило, входили амфоры разных типов, бесцветные чернильницы и мелкие слитки. Наряду с этими находками археологи извлекли части бронзовых статуй, которые были разрушены и фрагментированы. Это не просто античные статуи, подвергшиеся разрушению временем: и «Философ из Портичелло», и «Голова Басилевса» — это подлинные шедевры греческого искусства эпохи классики, которые, находясь в особых условиях хранения, долгое время не выставлялись. Удивительно, как получилось, что научная полемика вокруг кораблекрушения в Портичелло обошла вниманием историю обнаружения места находки. Само название Портичелло (итал. «маленький порт») указывает на то, что это было место, где находился причал для паромов. Изучение источников и археологическое обследование территории позволяет охарактеризовать это место как римскую якорную стоянку Ad statuam, Ad columnam. Специалисты выдвигали различные гипотезы относительно найденных скульптур. Брунильда Сисмондо Риджуэй предположила существование скульптурной группы, включавшей статую Ахилла, неизвестного персонажа и кентавра Хирона («Философ из Портичелло»), наделённого чертами, которые она сочла «звероподобными». Энрико Парибени высказал мысль о существовании статуарной группы, включавшей фигуру старика, опирающегося на посох. Росс Холлоуэй допускал, что мы имеем дело с портретом Харонда из Катании, автора «халкидских установлений» и политической конституции в Регии. Анджело Мария Ардувино считает, что бронзовая голова должна называться просто головой философа. Джозеф Фрей полагал, что её допустимо признать портретом греческого драматурга Софокла, а Паоло Энрико Ариас — портретом поэта Гесиода. Согласно другим гипотезам, её следует называть обобщенно «голова прорицателя», о котором упоминается в одном из античных эпических циклов. Имея задачей определить имя философа, изображённого с такой физиономической точностью, исследование следовало начинать с прочтения всех знаков, оставленных на бронзовой статуе, и дать объяснение каждому. Дальнейшее состояло в необходимости совместить полученные данные с теми, которые изначально были на статуе, но оказались утрачены. В конце следовало провести сопоставление с другими античными статуями. Это позволило выдвинуть предположение о том, что мы имеем дело с портретом философа Пифагора Самосского.

**Ключевые слова:** греческая археология, иконография, греческое искусство, кораблекрушение Портичелло, греческие бронзовые статуи