

# ◆ Farewell two arms: a Roman bronze body part from Halnaker, West Sussex

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*The nature, and possible significance, of a bronze arm unearthed near Halnaker, West Sussex, sometime before 1970, is here considered in detail for the first time. The find, probably detached from a Roman statue in antiquity, was found close to Stane Street, the main road to London from Chichester, in an area of intensive Romano-British activity. It may represent part of a 1st- or early 2nd-century religious or imperial image, broken up for political or ritual reasons, or for scrap.*

## INTRODUCTION

Sometime before 1970, probably early in 1968, a bronze arm, severed from an original Roman statue, was recovered from land close to Selhurst Park House, Halnaker, West Sussex (CSIR 1.2, 157, Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 43). The find was eventually presented on long term loan to Chichester Museum (accession number 5308) and has been on display on the ground floor of the Novium, Chichester, since 2013.

This report is the first full description and consideration of the artefact to be published and discusses its form, nature and significance, as well as attempting to establish its possible context and contemporary associations.

## DESCRIPTION

The arm, a hollow casting in bronze, is approximately life-size and has been roughly broken from the body just above the elbow (Figs. 1a and 1b). The forearm is bent at right angles to what remains of the upper arm, with the right hand raised and the palm vertical. As far as can be ascertained, it belonged to a youthful figure, the thickened, muscular wrist indicating that it was almost certainly male.

The posture is relaxed and the fingers of the hand are lightly coiled. The modelling shows an incredible attention to detail, especially the musculature, tendons, knuckles and creases in the hand and fingers.

The fingernails are well-represented, being short and neatly rounded, with clearly defined cuticles (Figs. 2a., 2b). However, the palm is unrealistically flattened, almost certainly because the figure was

originally grasping an object or personal attribute, such as a scroll, spear, staff or sceptre.

Prior to display in Chichester, the arm was sent to Southsea Castle Museum, Portsmouth, for emergency conservation treatment. A note preserved in the Novium paper archive accompanying the find (accession number 5308), written in 1970 by Chris O'Shea, who oversaw the consolidation, records that the area around the break was 'crazed with hairline cracks, especially in the region of the elbow', something which was 'probably the result of the innumerable patches previously made and the accompanying applications of heat'.

To better preserve the artefact, the interior was lined 'with thick glass fibre mat' and a 'large, jagged hole' and two 'mineralised patches' on the forearm and the base of the thumb were all 'patched with a bronze, rich epoxide resin paste'. The mineralisation of the two repairs to the arm was, O'Shea speculated, probably brought about by the use of copper instead of bronze for patching material.

The level of anatomical realism apparent in the arm provides a significant clue as to its origin. In Britain, the symbiosis between the classical, Greco-Roman ideal and more indigenous artistic stylings has frequently been commented upon (Haverfield 1923, 48–56; Collingwood and Myres 1936, 249–50; Henig 1995; Johns 2003). The resulting art forms, sometimes referred to as *interpretatio romana*, blend Mediterranean ideas with overtly unRoman execution.

Vigorous native ('Celtic') figures permeate the artistic record of Roman Britain at all levels, most notably in sculpture and mosaic where the human form is often depicted in an unrealistic way, with a disproportionately large head, shortened limbs and rather stubby fingers. The artistic nature of



Fig. 1a. The Halnaker arm, front. Miles Russell, courtesy of the Novium, Chichester.



Fig. 1b. The Halnaker arm, back. Miles Russell, courtesy of the Novium, Chichester.



Fig. 2a. Detail of fingers, showing nails and cuticles. Miles Russell, courtesy of the Novium, Chichester.



Fig. 2b. Detail of thumb. Miles Russell, courtesy of the Novium, Chichester.

the Halnaker bronze establishes that the original statue was not a piece of provincial art but either a well-made foreign import or something manufactured in Britain by an experienced and gifted bronze-worker, brought in especially for the task.

#### CONTEXT

The circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Halnaker arm are unclear, as indeed is the precise nature of the findspot. The Chichester District Heritage Environment Record states that the artefact was recovered in around 1968 from a ploughed field between Halnaker Hill and Stane Street, West Sussex.

This general area, close to the line of the main Roman road connecting Chichester with London, is one of significant later prehistoric and Roman settlement activity, some of which is associated with bronze waste and crucible fragments (George Anelay pers. comm.). It has been the focus of intensive archaeological investigation as part of the Selhurst Park Project, a community heritage initiative instigated in Chichester District Council in 2005 (James Kenny pers. comm.).

In a note written on 27 October 1981 to Professor Barry Cunliffe, then compiling information for the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* (CSIR), the Corpus of Sculpture of the Roman World, preserved in the Novium archive (accession number 5308), Alec Down, director of the Chichester Excavations

Committee, observed that the finder of the arm had been able to locate the area where the artefact had been unearthed, prompting Margaret Rule, then curator of Fishbourne Roman Palace, to organise a small excavation in 1970.

Sadly, the investigation ‘revealed nothing at all’ and no additional work appears to have been conducted at the site. Unfortunately, neither the location identified by the finder, nor the details surrounding Rule’s trial trench, appear have survived in the archives preserved by the Novium, Fishbourne Roman Palace or Chichester District Council. In 1970, the bronze arm was donated by the landowner to Chichester Museum, on permanent loan.

There can be no doubt, given the form and composition of the arm, that it is a genuine Roman artefact (Soffe and Henig 1999, 9–10) but, with only a vague archaeological provenance, a degree of caution should be expressed concerning its overall significance and context.

Furthermore, the uncertain and overly vague nature of finds reporting has led some to suggest that the piece may not in fact represent a genuine Romano-British artefact at all but had possibly been retrieved from elsewhere within the Roman Empire. The arm could, for example, represent a souvenir from the Grand Tour, brought to Britain in the 18th or 19th century and subsequently discarded in the general area of Halnaker Hill.

This possibility was first raised in the 1980s. Museum technician Anne Thomas notes in a letter to Barry Cunliffe preserved in the Novium archive (accession number 5308), dated 13 March 1981, that ‘there has been some debate as to its origins and a suggestion has been made that it might be a Grand Tour souvenir’.

The degree of uncertainty was made more explicit when the Wessex volume of the CSIR (CSIR 1.2) was published, where the observation was made that ‘if Roman, it could be an eighteenth or nineteenth century importation’ (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 43).

Although a comparatively large amount of classical Greek and Roman sculpture was indeed brought to Britain and north-western Europe from Italy and Greece throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Michaelis 1882; Scott 2003; Bignamini and Hornsby 2010), with many pieces remaining on display in country estates comparatively near to Halnaker (Raeder 2000; Dimas 2013), it is worth

noting that there is absolutely no evidence for any such material having been randomly distributed across the Sussex countryside (Russell 2016, 115).

Having gone to the effort of locating, paying for and then importing sculptural material to Britain, it would seem strange that a prospective 18th-century dilettante would have either mislaid or deliberately discarded valuable items of statuary some distance from their home. Far more likely is that the piece does indeed represent part of a Roman statue originally displayed within a Romano-British context, albeit one that was forcibly removed from its primary position in antiquity and subsequently buried.

It is further worth observing that, as a genuine piece of Romano-British statuary, the Halnaker arm does not appear all that unusual, at least for this part of Sussex; other sculptured body parts, in both stone and bronze, have previously been recorded.

Probably the most famous piece recovered from the Chichester area is the marble fragment from a life-size statue of a young man (CSIR 1.2, no. 92), discovered during excavations in the north wing of Fishbourne Roman Palace (Cunliffe 1971, 155; Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 24), 10km to the south-west of Halnaker.

Although originally viewed as the head of a local notary (Toynbee in Cunliffe 1971, 156–7; Soffe and Henig 1999, 9), it has recently been identified as a representation of Nero, probably made in AD 50, the time of his formal adoption by the emperor Claudius as heir to the imperial throne (Russell and Manley 2013).

If this interpretation is correct, it is likely that the fragment represents discard from the demolition of the so-called proto-palace at Fishbourne in the latter half of the 1st century. As an image of Nero, the statue would certainly have met an ignominious end in the years after the emperor’s suicide in AD 68, when attempts were made to erase his image through state-sponsored *damnatio memoriae*, or sanctions of memory (Hiesinger 1975; Born and Stemmer 1996; Varner 2004, 67).

Evidence for a second portrait of Nero, this time from within the Roman town of Chichester, has been known about for some time. Fragments of an inscribed statue base (The Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB) 1, no. 92) were found at the corner of St Martin’s and East Street in 1740 (Collingwood and Wright 1965, 26–7; Russell 2006, 72–4).

The inscription, which recorded a vow of loyalty to the *princeps*, had been established by prominent

members of the local community in AD 58 or early 59. The statue itself, which presumably stood in a major building, would almost certainly have been removed during the suppression of Nero's memory following his death in AD 68.

To the west of Chichester, a Roman marble head, twice life-size, from the Church of the Holy Trinity, Bosham (CSIR 1.2, no. 90), has been identified as a posthumous portrait of the emperor Trajan (AD 98–117) (Hay 1804, 604; Rouse 1825 392–4; Toynbee 1964, 50; Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 24; Soffe and Henig 1999, 9; Henig 2002, 51; Russell and Manley 2015, 156–60). It was probably set up by Trajan's successor Hadrian, who visited Britain in AD 122.

Additional pieces of Roman sculpture, including a life-size, marble replica of a member of the Julio Claudian family (CSIR 1.2, no. 89), probably Germanicus, brother of the emperor Claudius (Painter 1965, 179; Toynbee 1962, 123–4; Soffe and Henig 1999; Rudling 2008, 108), a life-size stone fragment of a cuirassed figure (almost certainly an emperor in military attire) and a bronze thumb, also from a life-size figure (Soffe and Henig 1999; Henig 2002, 51–54; Kenny 2004; Russell 2006, 216–7) have been identified from in and around the Bosham area. Together, these pieces suggest the presence of a significant building in the immediate vicinity, possibly a temple (Henig 2002, 51; Russell 2006, 217; Rudling 2008, 108–9).

Furthermore, a badly damaged, mid-3rd-century marble bust, probably of the emperor Gallienus (AD 253–268), has been recovered from Codmore Hill, near Pulborough (Russell 2016), 22km to the north-east of Halnaker on the line of Stane Street, while a mid-4th-century portrait of a togate male, quite possibly the emperor Julian (AD 361–3), has recently come to light in the collections of Princeton University Art Museum (Padgett 2001, 80–82; Russell 2013), where it is recorded as having originally derived from the south-eastern fringes of Chichester.

Together, these multiple fragments of statue, although damaged and divorced from their primary context, suggest a significant degree of *Romanitas* among the local population and civic administration of Chichester and the surrounding area from the early 1st century until at least the later 4th century AD.

## IDENTIFICATION

The unstratified nature of the Halnaker arm, together with its general lack of distinctive personal or chronological features, means that it is almost impossible to establish an identity for the piece.

A similar life-size bronze arm and left hand, recovered from London in 2001 (CSIR 1.10, no. 216, Coombe *et al.* 2015, 117), has confidently been identified as part of a statue dedicated to the emperor Nero (AD 54–68), although this is largely due to the perceived date of the artefact, rather than because of any characteristic features or physiognomic peculiarities. It was found in the fill of a feature backfilled in around AD 60–70, the time of the Boudiccan Revolt, when the fledgling city of Londinium was sacked (Bayley *et al.* 2009, 158).

Other bronze body parts from London include a right forearm and hand from Seething Lane (CSIR 1.10, no. 215), a right hand from Lower Thames Street (CSIR 1.10, no. 217), a left hand from Gracechurch Street (CSIR 1.10, no. 218), two fingers from near Fenchurch Street (CSIR 1.10, nos 219 and 220), a sandaled left foot from Tabard Square (CSIR 1.10, no. 223), a right foot from Kingsway (CSIR 1.10, no. 224) and a portrait head of the emperor Hadrian dredged from the Thames (CSIR 1.10, no. 213, Coombe *et al.* 2015, 115–21).

The Halnaker arm could plausibly have derived from a lifelike portrait of an important landowner, politician, official, tribal leader, local dignitary or city benefactor, being part of an honorific or commemorative statue in bronze. It must be said, however, that private portraits are comparatively rare in Roman Britain, although examples in stone may be cited from Bath, Blackheath, Caerwent, East Meon, Hinckley, Lullingstone, Radwell, Sutton Mandeville, Winterslow and York.

The identification of these sculptured heads as representations of wealthy private individuals is not always certain, however, and the battered female head from Bath (CSIR 1.2, no. 1), portrait busts from Lullingstone (CSIR 1.10, nos 21 and 22) and other pieces from Blackheath (CSIR 1.8, no. 26), Hinckley (CSIR 1.8, no. 24), Radwell (CSIR 1.10, no. 19) and York (CSIR 1.3, no. 38) could alternatively, and perhaps rather more plausibly, all possess imperial associations (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 24–25; Tufi 1983, 45–46; Huskinson 1994, 14–15; Read and



Fig. 3a. Bronze statuette of the emperor Nero in the guise of Mars from Barking Hall, Suffolk; the raised right arm of the figure would have originally held a spear, now missing. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

Burleigh 1995, 3; De Kind 2005; Russell 2013; Russell and Manley 2013).

At Caerwent, an early 3rd-century base for a sadly no longer extant statue commemorating Tiberius Claudius Paulinus (RIB 311, Collingwood and Wright 1965, 107), provides a rare example of a non-imperial, full-figure portrait from Britain.

Paulinus was, according to the surviving inscription, commander of the II Augusta Legion and later governor of *Britannia Inferior* (Lower Britain) and, therefore, a powerful aristocrat with political influence. No doubt the townspeople of Caerwent, who dedicated the statue, had an eye to their own future prosperity.

The Halnaker arm could perhaps have derived from a similar honorific, full-figure portrait of a wealthy private citizen, perhaps erected by the urban community of Chichester, but in the absence of any hard evidence such an interpretation must remain speculative.

It is perhaps more likely, given the general paucity of statues set up to ordinary citizens in Britain, that the Halnaker arm originally formed

part of a life-size dedication, either to a Roman deity or a specific emperor. Similar statues in bronze have been discovered, such as CSIR 1.2, no. 26, from Bath, usually interpreted as the head of a statue to the goddess Sulis Minerva (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 9) and CSIR 1.10, no. 213, from London, a portrait of Hadrian found in the Thames (Coombe *et al.* 2015, 115–6).

The fact that the fingers of the Halnaker arm appear to have been coiled around an object, now lost, seems to indicate that the original figure was in *contrapposto*, its weight largely resting upon a staff, or spear, held in the right hand. Such a pose, subtly suggesting movement towards the observer, was frequently deployed in Roman sculptural depictions of the spear-carrying god Mars and also of the head of state as triumphant general in full military dress (see Figs 3a and 3b).

## DISCUSSION

In contrast to other western provinces of the Roman Empire, relatively few statues in stone or bronze have been recorded from Britain (Stewart 2003,



Fig. 3b. Marble statue of the emperor Trajan, from Ostia, in *contrapposto*, weight resting upon a staff or spear held in the right hand (now missing). Courtesy of Carole Raddato.

174; Croxford 2016, 27–8). It is possible that the relative lack of sculpture across the province was due to a relatively low level of Romanisation, Britain's 1st- and 2nd-century population remaining largely unaffected by Roman culture (e.g. Russell and Laycock 2010, 43–61).

On the other hand, it could be that the survival of Roman statues in Britain is poor because, once their importance had faded, sculptures were simply destroyed, marble images being chopped up for use in building work or consigned to the lime kiln, those in bronze being recycled, with constituent pieces melted down and reused (Stewart 2003, 175; Russell and Manley 2013, 1).

Although many important portrait statues throughout the Roman Empire were fashioned from marble, bronze was the preferred material, its high tensile strength being ideal for ornately attired or elaborately posed figures. To some extent, however, the production methods of ancient bronze statues, sections of metal being soldered together to form the whole, may have aided in their ultimate downfall, it being comparatively easy to detach component body parts at the point of join for removal and reprocessing or disposal elsewhere.

Examples of dismembered upper body parts from Romano-British bronze statues may be cited in the fingers, thumbs, hands and forearms recovered from various contexts in London (Bayley *et al.* 2009, 157–8; Coombe *et al.* 2015, 116–120; Croxford 2016) together with two famous imperial heads, one from the river Alde near Saxmundham in Suffolk (CSIR 1.8, no. 23), originally thought to be a representation of Claudius (Huskinson 1994, 13) but recently reinterpreted as Nero (Russell and Manley 2013), the other from the river Thames (CSIR 1.10, no. 213) depicting Hadrian (Toynbee 1964, 50–51; Coombe *et al.* 2015, 115–16).

The Halnaker arm was undoubtedly part of a high-status, full-figure statue, possibly imported at great expense from the continent. Whether it depicted an emperor, imperial candidate, important politician, benefactor or deity, it is highly likely that it originally stood in a key and prominent location, possibly at the centre of nearby Roman town of Chichester (*Noviomagus*), seven kilometres to the south-west, or within (or close to) an urban temple or rural, roadside shrine. At what point, and for what reason, the figure was damaged and broken up must remain unknown, if not unknowable, given

the lack of contemporary artefactual associations for the arm.

The defacement and mutilation of Roman statues in antiquity took many varied forms. In the 1st and 2nd century, certain imperial images were removed or overthrown, as unpopular leaders were subjected to post-mortem memory sanctions (Varner 2004) while the chaos of provincial revolt or border incursion often resulted in the toppling and decapitation of statues, the heads being taken as trophies of war (Opper 2014).

Throughout the 3rd century, the rapid turnover of imperial candidates further resulted in the state-sponsored recarving or modification of stone and bronze statues, sometimes to the degree that individual portraits became almost unrecognisable (Prusac 2011). In the 4th and 5th centuries, a new form of religious intolerance asserted itself, non-Christian cult objects sometimes being removed or violently attacked (Sauer 2003).

The overthrow of statues throughout the Roman period sometimes resulted in the removal of sculptured body parts, most often the head and hands, and subsequent disposal in a ritualised context (Croxford 2016). The decapitated bronze heads of the emperors Nero and Hadrian, for example, found in the rivers Alde and Thames, might well have been symbolic deposits, combining native reverence for the head with the desire to place an important metal object into a riverine context as an offering to a subterranean, aquatic or regional deity (Merrifield 1977, 390; Russell and Manley 2013, 405).

There is certainly a pattern discernible in the deposition of bronze body parts, in which detached heads, arms and hands of Roman statues were placed in a way which evidently 'overruled normal self-interest, which would have suggested the melting pot for the disposal of valuable scrap metal' (Merrifield 1987, 103).

Studies of iconoclastic activity in Roman Britain appear to show that an abnormally high number of bronze statues are represented today by only hands and individual fingers, the predominance of these body parts being 'higher amongst the bronze statuary than those of other materials' (Croxford 2003, 89).

Whatever the reason, and it could be that arms, hands and fingers were simply easier to remove than other parts of a statue, it would seem that there was a process of selection at work, with certain sculptured

elements receiving differential treatment and being placed in pits or deposited in watery locales ‘with no apparent regard for the obvious monetary value of the metal for which, we are led to believe, they were being melted down’ (Croxford 2003, 89).

Whether or not these pieces were perceived to possess special or supernatural powers is impossible to say, but it is clear that the arms and hands of toppled statues were not just casually discarded in the Roman period, their special placement within ritualised contexts suggesting that they may have been used ‘as apotropaic amulets or as personal objects of veneration’ (Croxford 2003, 93; 2016, 36–38).

Only more detailed fieldwork within the area of the discovery at Halnaker will perhaps determine whether the bronze arm recovered there in 1968 was a votive deposit or offering to the gods, a dismembered body part, perhaps taken from the statue of a disgraced leader or deposed deity and placed in a roadside or rural shrine, or, more simply,

a carefully curated piece of scrap metal hidden away for safekeeping until it could be recycled.

Until such time, and despite the contextual and chronological uncertainties that unfortunately still surround the artefact, the arm nevertheless remains an important and nationally significant find, one which not only helps better understand the degree of Romanness of the Chichester district but which also, potentially, provides a window into Romano-British religion and ritual practice.

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