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on Ancient Bronzes

edited by Dávid Bartus, Zsolt Mráv and Melinda Szabó

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Budapest 2024



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Budapest, 20–24 September 2022

Edited by
Dávid BARTUS – Zsolt MRÁV – Melinda SZABÓ

Budapest, 2024

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The Winged Victory of Brescia

An update on its history and origin after the study and conservation project

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Abstract: The Winged Victory (*Vittoria Alata*) of Brescia is one of the most important Roman bronzes in Italy. Discovered in 1826, it dates back to the 1st century AD. Since the 19th century the statue has undergone multiple conservation interventions. The last one started in 2018 up to 2020. The project was defined with a multidisciplinary approach which made it possible to study and compare the data obtained from the restoration with those deriving from scientific analyses, humanistic studies and other specialist research. For the first time after the discovery, it was possible to explore the internal surfaces of the statue and acquire very important data for the technological study of the work. Particular attention was paid to cleaning the surfaces; once the materials accumulated over time were removed, partly residues of past interventions, it was possible to rediscover the beauty of the face, the refinement of the modeling and the high peculiarity of the wings. New technological solutions have been studied for the internal support that replaced the one inserted in the nineteenth century to hold the arms and wings of the statue, as it was no longer suitable for guaranteeing the safe conservation of the work. Since October 2020, the Winged Victory has been exhibited in the renovated Capitoline temple in Brescia, where it was discovered.

Keywords: Roman bronzes, conservation, Winged Victory, bronzes technology, museography, Brescia, Opificio delle Pietre Dure



Fig. 1. The *Winged Victory* after conservation treatment, on display in the Brescia Capitulum (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia, Fotostudio Rapuzzi).



Fig. 2. The *Winged Victory* in the 19th century Museo Patrio display, with helmet, shield and stylus reconstructed in plaster and wood (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia).

Brescia's *Winged Victory* is one of the few surviving large Roman bronzes that was discovered during an excavation—not found on the seabed or as a result of reuse and cultural recycling, but during an archaeological dig, accompanied by numerous other items in the same context (Fig. 1).

It is a winged female figure, slightly larger than life-size (body height 194.1 cm), whose gestures and posture are incomplete due to the loss of certain features, which were already missing at the time of discovery.

Her left foot originally rested on something, perhaps a helmet, and a shield would have been held up by the (slightly bent) left leg and left hand; in her right hand there may have been a stylus, which the goddess had used to engrave an inscription, commemorating it in bronze before the gaze of admiring onlookers.

The statue was found in Brescia during an unprecedented archaeological campaign conducted between 1823 and 1830 by the Ateneo di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Brescia, at the request of the town council. During these investigations the Capitulum temple was brought to light (1823–1826), which has three large chambers and numerous furnishings.¹

In 1826, on the evening of July 20th, the archaeological excavation resulted in an unexpected and sensational discovery. Between the outer wall of the temple's western chamber and the hill behind it were found hundreds of objects in bronze, of diverse forms and in varying states of preservation: smooth and moulded frames, some gilded, portions of statues, two shoulder belts from equestrian statues, an *applique* depicting a prisoner, six portrait-heads, and the *Winged Victory*.²

The discovery of this deposit—and above all of the monumental statue—ignited and fuelled civic pride so much that the city authorities quickly set up a museum, that was inaugurated in 1830 inside the ancient temple itself, which had been partially rebuilt and equipped for this function (Fig. 2).

The *Winged Victory* became the symbol of Brescia's identity, of its heritage and all its inhabitants,

1 On the excavations and the role of the Brescia Ateneo: PANAZZA 2004; PANAZZA 2018; MORANDINI 2021a.

2 The first reports of the discovery are given in: NICODEMI 1927; BONARDI 1937. About the other bronzes see MORANDINI 2014.

and has remained thus up to the present day.³

From the year of its discovery, the statue was the subject of numerous studies and conjectures.⁴ Where did this bronze statue come from? Where would it have stood in Roman *Brixia*—and why? How was it made? And what was the best way to present it to visitors to the museum?

After many years of interpretations and hypotheses (some of them contrasting) it recently became possible to propose some answers and bring numerous aspects into better focus, thanks to a detailed interdisciplinary research project—named *Vittoria Alata 2020*—conceived and conducted by Brescia Council and Brescia Museums Foundation, with the Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape Superintendency and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, as well as help from numerous private individuals.



Fig. 3. Brescia's Capitolium, with inscription referring to emperor Vespasian on the pediment (AD 73) (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia).

The starting point for the project's launch in 2018 were some checks carried out on the statue's state of preservation, which led to the decision to transfer it to the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, where conservation treatment was completed in 2020.⁵

At the past edition of this conference, held in Tübingen in 2018, we presented the start of the research project, highlighting doubts and open questions concerning the statue's history.⁶ Today some of these aspects have been clarified thanks to the new data and increased knowledge furnished by the conservation work, scientific analyses and specialist studies that have been conducted.⁷

The results of the scientific investigations are the subject of a poster presented at this same conference by some of our colleagues.⁸

At the time of its discovery, the *Winged Victory* was found with its wings and arms detached; over time this circumstance has inspired a hypothesis that the statue's body originally belonged to a Greek *Aphrodite* of the Hellenistic period, brought to Rome as spoils of war and then transformed into a *Winged Victory* during the imperial era, with the addition of the wings and some changes of posture.⁹

The project enabled specific controls to be conducted that have disproven these conjectures, as well as pinpointing the chronology and illuminating numerous other aspects of this extraordinary work.

The statue's iconographic reference model is the goddess *Victoria in clipeo scribens*, whose origin must derive from the specific Roman habit of giving form to virtues and values, for example Health, Hope and Honour. This deity determined who would be victorious on the battlefield and brought

3 For the story of the statue and its display, most recently: MORANDINI 2021a; MORANDINI 2021b.

4 For the various studies and interpretations of the statue see MORANDINI 2021b with previous bibliography.

5 For the basis of the project and the early stages see PATERA et al. 2018; MORANDINI 2020.

6 MORANDINI et al. 2019.

7 For a brief account of the conservation treatment see: PATERA 2021a; PATERA 2021b.

8 CAGNINI et al. 2021.

9 For this hypothesis: MORENO 2002; MORENO 2003; see also BARBANERA 2021b.



Fig. 4. Detail of the Winged Victory (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia, Fotostudio Rapuzzi).

conflict to an end, restoring peace and equilibrium. The iconography first associates *Victoria* with a shield, a trophy acquired and held up in the battlefield, then *Victoria* uses the shield to record the winner's name by means of an inscription. This iconography is not known before the Julio–Claudian era.

By carefully checking known examples, Marcello Barbanera identified the reign of Vespasian as the period when this iconographic model was most used and widespread.¹⁰

After the death of Nero, Vespasian was one of the protagonists—together with Otho, Galba and Vitellius—of the civil war for the imperial throne. And *Brixia* gave the general crucial assistance in winning his decisive victory in AD 69 between Brescia and Cremona, when he was proclaimed *imperator*.

This chronology also supports the hypothesis, already formulated in the 19th century, that the *Winged Victory* might have been an imperial votive offering placed in *Brixia*'s temple, which was dedicated by Vespasian in AD 73, as recorded by the inscription on the tympanum (Fig. 3).

The gift of the statue would fit well with the significance and chronology of this decisive episode in Roman history.

Further support for the possibility that it was a gift from Vespasian resulted from the careful cleaning and investigation of the diadem that adorns the *Winged Victory*'s coiffure (Fig. 4).

10 Marcello Barbanera, who we remember with affection, dedicated a series of three papers to the *Winged Victory* in which he conducted a reasoned analysis of the history of studies and proposed a new interpretation of the work, partly based on the results of the recent conservation work: [BARBANERA 2020](#); [BARBANERA 2021a](#); [BARBANERA 2021b](#).

Contrary to previous assertions, it is not a wreath of olive, but of myrtle, a crown reserved by the rigid Roman ceremonial of triumph for a victor who had conquered an internal enemy.¹¹ Hence this detail also reflects the emperor's recognition of the help he received from *Brixia*.¹²

Further confirmation that the work was created as a unified whole, conceived by Roman bronze workers as the *Winged Victory*, came during the course of the conservation treatment, which made visible again the statue's internal surfaces, almost two hundred years after its discovery (Fig. 5). Examination of these brought to light details and features pertinent to the procedures employed for the *Winged Victory*'s manufacture, for example the remains of a square pin (Fig. 6) probably connected to the attachment of the shield to the bent left leg, and signs of the joins between the upper and lower parts of the body.¹³

The technological study revealed that the *Winged Victory* was made using the indirect moulding lost-wax casting technique. The body is made up of about thirty separate parts that were subsequently welded together (Fig. 7): the head, arms, part of the torso, and the wings, each made in two pieces, the various parts of the drapery, and the feet.¹⁴

Radiographic investigations conducted during the conservation work greatly assisted the research by providing clear images of significant details (Fig. 8).

The various sections of the statue were made using as the 'principal' model a cast of an already existing work, probably a 4th century BC Greek statue of Aphrodite.¹⁵ Signs of this process are discernible especially in the head and body which show the elegant features and proportions of the original figure, although with some formal inconsistencies and functional adaptations dictated mostly by production requirements and present above all in the rendering of the drapery. In addition, certain inconsistencies with regard to dimensions have been noted in the arms; in particular, the left arm is longer and thicker, with evident alteration of the musculature.¹⁶

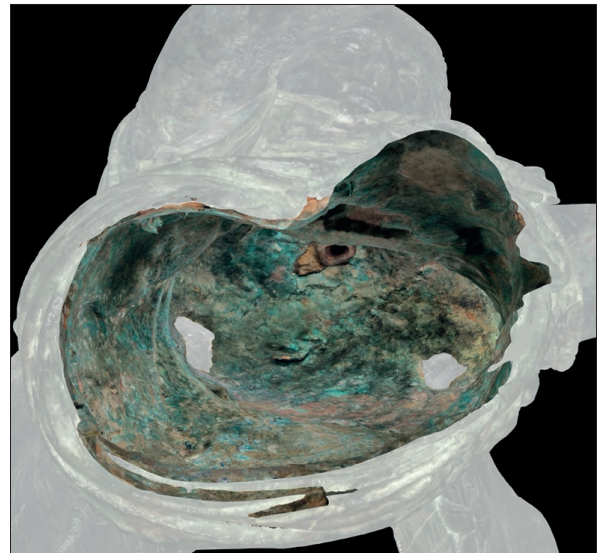


Fig. 5. The statue's internal cavity: photogrammetric image superimposed on 3D image (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri; M. Mercante, D. Occhibove).



Fig. 6. Remains of square pin still visible inside the statue (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri).

11 MASI 2021, 63.

12 MORANDINI 2021b, 35.

13 PACINI 2021b, 173.

14 For the technological study: FORMIGLI 2011; FORMIGLI – SALCUNI 2011 and—when the conservation work was under way—PACINI 2020; PACINI 2021a; PACINI 2021b.

15 BARBANERA 2020; BARBANERA 2021a; BARBANERA 2021b; BATTAGLIA 2021b.

16 Concerning the figure's construction see BATTAGLIA 2020, 167–174; BATTAGLIA 2021a, 164–165; BATTAGLIA 2021b.

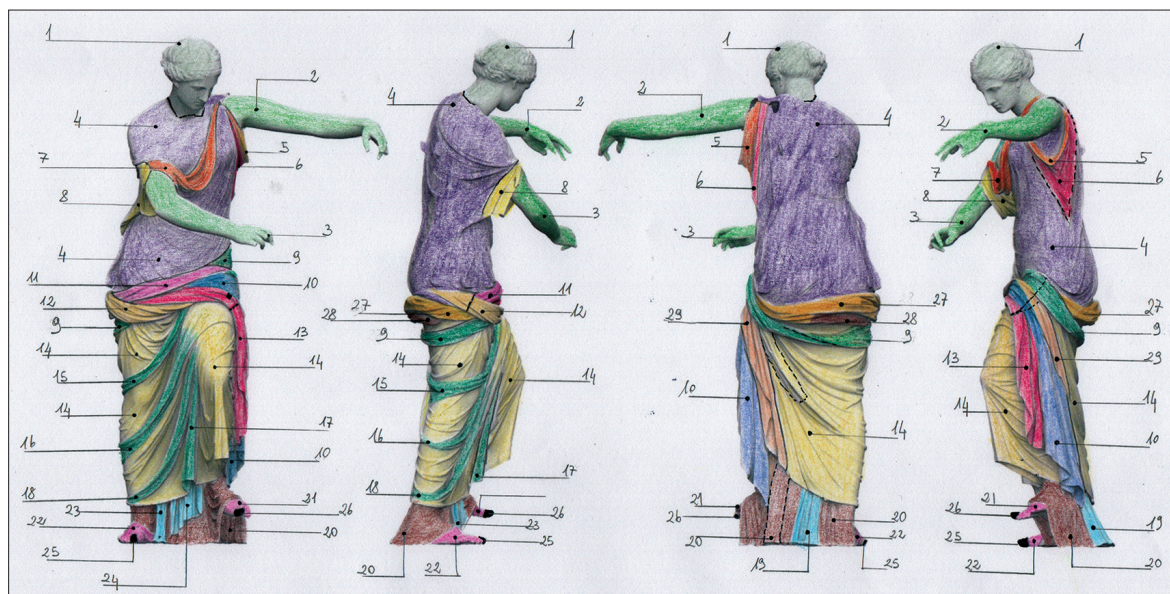


Fig. 7. The statue's component parts: technological study by A. Pacini (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri; A. Pacini).

The study also demonstrated that the openings on the back for attachment of the wings were created in the wax model. Although they have been improperly modified in recent times, they are of ancient origin, as are the two underlying protrusions that served to keep the large wings in place.

These details are of particular importance for the statue's interpretation, since the proposal that the wings were added later—based on disputed interpretations of scientific analyses¹⁷—in the past gave rise to the hypothesis (mentioned in the introduction) that the statue was originally conceived as *Aphrodite* and subsequently transformed into a *Winged Victory* through the addition of wings and other attributes.

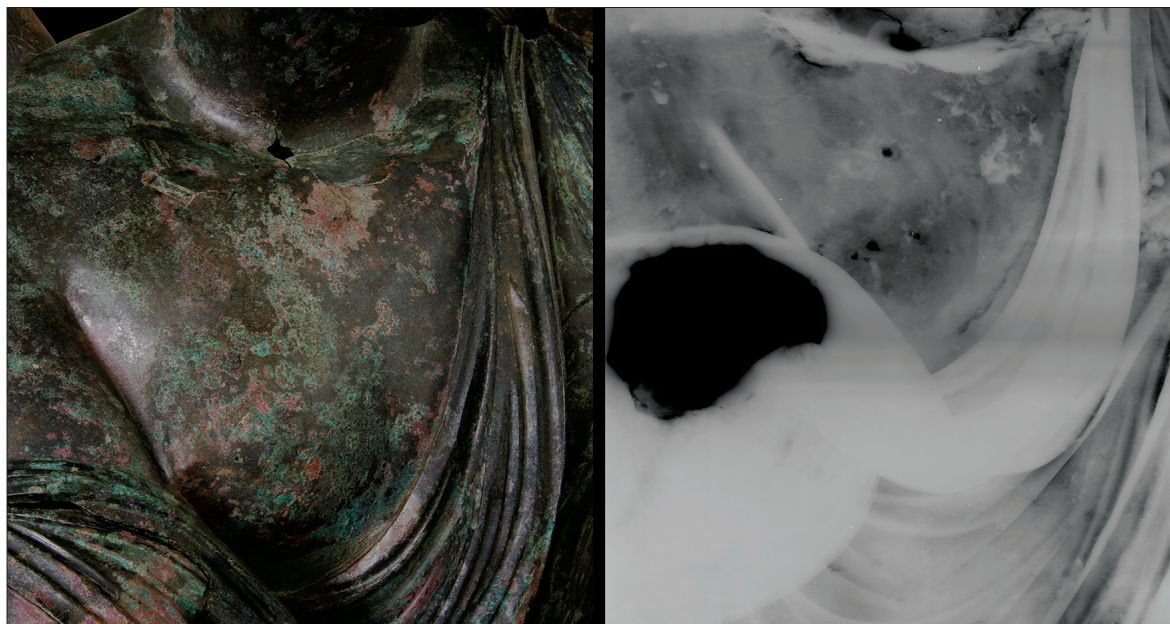


Fig. 8. Detail of joint line at the base of the neck and repair dowels (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri; RX T. Radelet).

17 On the origin of the misunderstandings see MORANDINI 2011, 11–12.



Fig. 9. The Winged Victory before conservation treatment (left) and afterwards (right) (left – Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri, right – Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia, Fotostudio Rapuzzi).

The work's originality, conceived and created by Roman bronze casters as a *Winged Victory* writing on a shield, appears also to be confirmed by the results of recent analyses carried out on the composition of the alloys. Notwithstanding a few differences, the proportions of the different elements present in the alloys used for the various parts of the statue are compatible with it having being a unitary creation.¹⁸ Thus it seems that the supposed marked differences between the body and wings—that gave rise to a century-long misunderstanding—do not in fact exist.

With regard to identification of the statue's place of production, examination of some fragments of mould material that were fortunately found in crevices in the internal cavity revealed that (given its geological characteristics) this might possibly have come from the Brescia area.¹⁹ This information reopens the prospect that the *Winged Victory* may have been made by craft workshops in ancient *Brixia* itself, which had in the past been suggested and now seems more likely.²⁰

The results obtained from analysis of these same samples using the thermoluminescence dating technique²¹ indicate a Roman period chronology, and are not in contradiction with the proposed 1st century AD date, probably in the years immediately after Emperor Vespasian came to power, as also suggested by the recent iconographic studies outlined above.²²

18 For the composition of the alloys: [PORCINAI et al. 2021](#), with discussion of previous bibliography.

19 For the mould material: [PORCINAI et al. 2021](#), 281–282.

20 [FORMIGLI – SALCUNI 2011](#), 108.

21 [FANTINO 2021](#).

22 [BARBANERA 2020](#); [BARBANERA 2021a](#); [BARBANERA 2021b](#).

Archive research, combined with data deriving from analyses and conservation work, have deepened our knowledge of the statue's conservation history, although unfortunately we were unable to discover the name of the architect or craftsman behind the first 19th century reconstruction.²³ An improved understanding was also acquired of several hitherto poorly documented repairs, involving the base of the statue and its left wing (which had suffered further damage, probably in the 1950s) after the 1948 intervention conducted at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome.²⁴

The cleaning operations carried out during conservation work yielded an unprecedented vision of the sculpture. Already the first trials conducted when the statue was still in Brescia had shown that after the conservation treatment the *Winged Victory's* appearance would have changed—due both to the greater visibility of its features, and the changed chromatic perception of the statue overall.²⁵

As is clearly evident from the rapid sequence of accompanying images (Figs 9–10), the pre-treatment generally greenish appearance with widespread yellowish zones (mainly due to alterations produced and procedures adopted in previous interventions), has been replaced by a decidedly darker shade after conservation treatment (and the removal of extraneous products).



Fig. 10. Right wing of the statue, before (left) and after (right) conservation treatment (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri).

23 For research into the statue's reconstruction conducted while conservation work was under way: PATERA 2020; PATERA 2021b.

24 BORRELLI 1950.

25 For the work's preservation state prior to conservation treatment: BRINI – PUCCI 2021. For the various phases of conservation work: CASU – BRINI 2021; GENNAI et al. 2021; PUCCI – BRINI 2021; CASU et al. 2021; PUCCI et al. 2021.



Fig. 11. Detail of the right hand with square trace of overlapping gold leaf (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri).

Details of the modelling that before were not so evident have emerged, such as the locks of the hair and some details of the face, the thick folds of the dress, the richly modelled cloak that covers the goddess's hips, and the hatched plumage of the wings (Fig. 10).

The conservation work brought to light further traces of gilding, on the right hand and the big toe of the right foot—which had never been observed before because they were hidden beneath layers of various substances. The rectangular patch revealed on the right hand was clearly gilded using the technique of application of gold leaf (Fig. 11).²⁶

As mentioned above, the conservation work also brought to light details that were difficult to perceive regarding the refined polychrome decoration of the diadem. Some dark coloured details are now visible once more, permitting the proposed identification—with the help of an expert in botany—of the plant decoration as a variety of myrtle recognizable by the particular shape of the elongated berries (Fig. 12).²⁷

The leaves of the diadem were made of inlaid silver, while the dark colour would seem to be due to a patina or some particular treatment of which the exact mechanism has not been fully understood, partly because attestations of this kind on large bronze statues are not always preserved and recognizable (Fig. 13).²⁸

At the same time as this work was being conducted on the statue in the laboratories of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, an important part of the project concerned the adaptation of one of the chambers of the *Capitolium* temple in Brescia as the location for its display when it returned from Florence.

In the past the *Winged Victory* had generally been on show in the *Capitolium*, except for a period when it was inserted in the archaeological itinerary in the Museum of Santa Giulia (1998–2018), and on several other occasions when it was moved for security reasons (for example during the two world wars) and for conservation treatment.

The selection of the statue's current location resulted from of a joint evaluation made by the institutions concerned with the conservation and enhancement of Brescia's archaeological heritage. The design related to this choice was entrusted to the architect Juan Navarro Baldeweg, whose work embodies and interprets its various aspects, ancient and contemporary.²⁹

The *Capitolium* constitutes an exceptional display of the Roman remains discovered in the early 1800s; soon afterwards its large chambers were reconstructed and the ancient building housed the very first Brescian museum, the *Museo Patrio*.

26 PUCCI – BRINI 2021, 157–158; PUCCI et al. 2021, 187–189.

27 MASI 2021.

28 PUCCI et al. 2021, 184–187.

29 BALDEWEG 2020; BALDEWEG 2021; CROSET 2021; MORANDINI 2023.

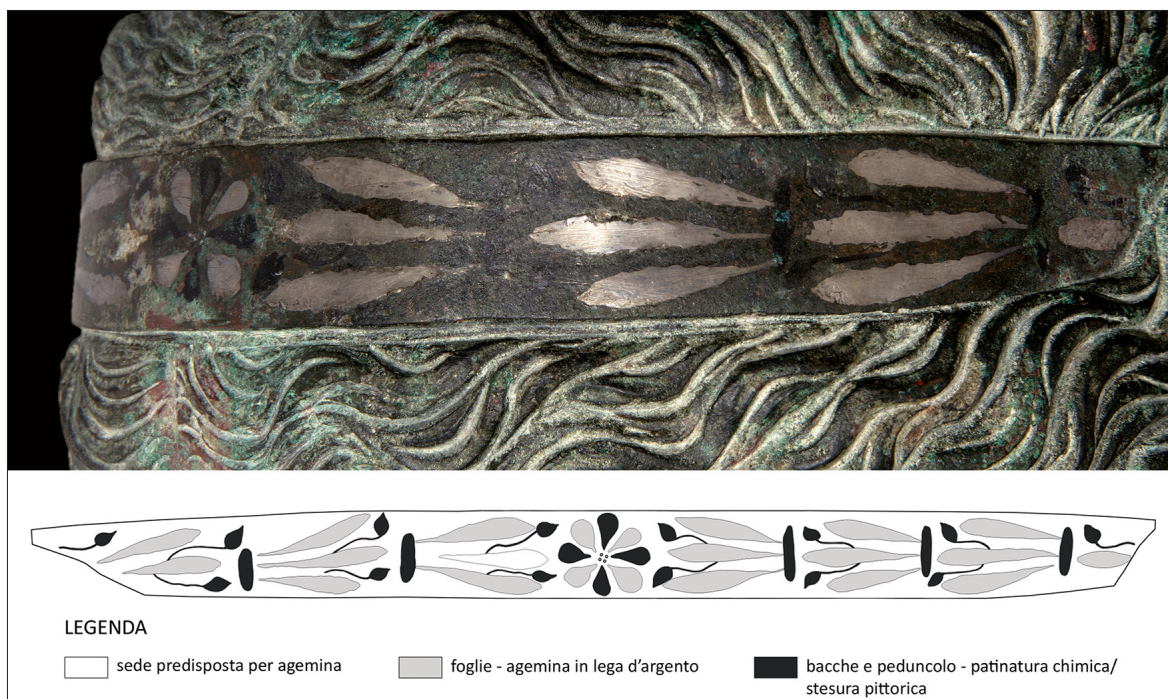


Fig. 12. Detail of the diadem after conservation treatment, with drawing by Elisa Pucci below (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri).

The western chamber floored with slabs of coloured marble contains the remains of three cult statues, two of Minerva and one of Silvanus, and the central chamber houses numerous inscriptions built into the 19th century walls, the remains of a statue of Jupiter, and three monumental altars.³⁰ The handling of the Victory was planned with great care, given the statue's delicacy and the presence of a new internal support.³¹

The *Winged Victory* has been placed in the eastern chamber of the *Capitolium* (in which the original flooring in *opus sectile* was less extensively preserved), in order to keep it near where it was found, in an appropriate setting that enhances its form and evokes its *aura*, so that instead of viewing the statue as a museum exhibit, visitors experience it as an integral part of a public monument (Fig. 14).

Although it is not known in which chamber it originally stood, nevertheless the size of that chosen seems appropriate for the solemn and visible location that the work presumably had in ancient times. The possibilities offered by the space available, to be able to raise the statue sufficiently from the ground and have 360-degree vision of it, allow a new and more complete appreciation of the work, also outlined by studies conducted by Stella Battaglia in parallel with the conservation treatment.³²



Fig. 13. Detail of the central rosette of the diadem before conservation treatment (Credits: MiC, Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Archivio fotografico e dei restauri).

30 Most recently: MORANDINI 2021c, with previous bibliography.

31 BICI et al. 2021.

32 BATTAGLIA 2021a; BATTAGLIA 2021b with previous bibliography.



Fig. 14. The Winged Victory in the Capitolium (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia, Alessandra Chemollo).

The statue is accompanied by many other notable bronze items that were found with it, consisting of numerous smooth and moulded frames, as well as functional elements of architectural ornaments. Some are in a horizontal showcase, while most of the frames are mounted on the wall, outlining geometrical surfaces similar to the ancient ones they would have framed, for example marble slabs or inscriptions. This selection of the group of bronzes evokes especially both the context of discovery and an abstract, hypothetical context of origin, maintaining the visual dialogue between the statue and part of the deposit it belonged to (Fig. 15).³³

The rest of the bronzes, those which would not originally have had an architectural function, are on display in the Roman section of the Santa Giulia Museum, which was reorganized in early 2022.

The chamber is equipped with the most advanced devices for microclimate control and to ensure the statue's preservation even in the event of natural disasters.³⁴

The formal composition of the exhibition space and the carefully studied, allusive and dynamic lighting³⁵ offer visitors a unique experience in an abstract atmosphere that make this symbol of archaeological discovery quite contemporary.

33 BALDEWEG 2021; CROSET 2021.

34 BONFANTE – GALEOTTI 2021; BONFANTE et al. 2021; CICALDO et al. 2021; CIGADA et al. 2021.

35 GUZZINI 2021.



Fig. 15. The Winged Victory in the Capitulum (Credits: Archivio Fotografico Civici Musei di Brescia, Alessandra Chemollo).

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