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on Ancient Bronzes

edited by Dávid Bartus, Zsolt Mráv and Melinda Szabó

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Budapest, 20–24 September 2022

Edited by
Dávid BARTUS – Zsolt MRÁV – Melinda SZABÓ

Budapest, 2024

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Bronze figurines of Mercury-Thoth from Albania

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Abstract: Along with other aspects of society, Illyrian religion was influenced by the Roman world during the first centuries AD. As a result, Mercury became the Roman god most represented in bronze figurines found within the modern territory of Albania. This paper will consider two bronze figurines of Mercury-Thoth which represents a god with both eastern and western attributes. The figurines are of a good quality and analogies can be found with numerous others throughout the Roman Empire.

Their presence in Albania can be explained not only by the eastern influence of the empire, but also with the transfer of people and ideas. Both figurines were found near main roads passing through Illyria during the Roman period, the Via Lissus-Naissus and Via Egnatia, which testify for the development of commerce, movement of people, ideas and systems.

The figurines also provide an insight into Illyrian religious life during the Roman period and illustrate their adoption of *interpretatio romana* and eastern gods.

Keywords: bronze figurine, Mercury, Thoth, Albania

The present territory of Albania was an integral part of the Roman Empire, therefore, religion, as with other aspects of the economy and social life, was greatly influenced by this Roman world. Beliefs and religion compose an important aspect for the integration of the Illyrians towards the Roman Empire.¹ The most important sources that testify this process are inscriptions, archaeological vestiges of temples, coins, statues, figurines in different materials, etc. These archaeological sources detail the use of many cults from the Roman world in Illyria. One such cult was that of Mercury, which was one of the most prevalent in the territory of ancient Albania and, during the Roman period, was the most depicted god in bronze figurines. In addition to the classic representations of this god, there are two additional bronze figurines that represent a symbiosis of the gods Mercury and Thoth. The first figurine comes from Kukësi and is kept at the archaeological museum of Tirana which holds the richest archaeological collection in the country.² The second figurine is located at the historical museum in the town of Pogradec,³ which contains a fine collection of archaeological objects in addition to ethnographic and historical collections.

Both figurines are chance finds and hold no accompanying information regarding the exact discovery location, context, or any associated material. Only the general location is known, the first being

1 SHPUZA 2010: for an analysis of the religion during the roman period in Illyria; VESELI 2017, 169.

2 PËRZHITA 2002.

3 VESELI 2015.

found in Brut of Kukës and the second in Potkozhan of Pogradec (Fig. 1). Brut is a village located near Kukës (northeastern Albania), in the vicinity of the Via Lissus-Naissus, one of the most important routes for the Illyrians during the Roman period.⁴ Potkozhan is a village located in the district of Pogradec (southeast Albania) near the ancient city of Selca e Poshtme⁵ and Via Egnatia.⁶ This village is positioned where roads connect the area of Pogradec with Macedonia and where once, ancient routeways linked the province of Desaratia with that of Lynkestes.

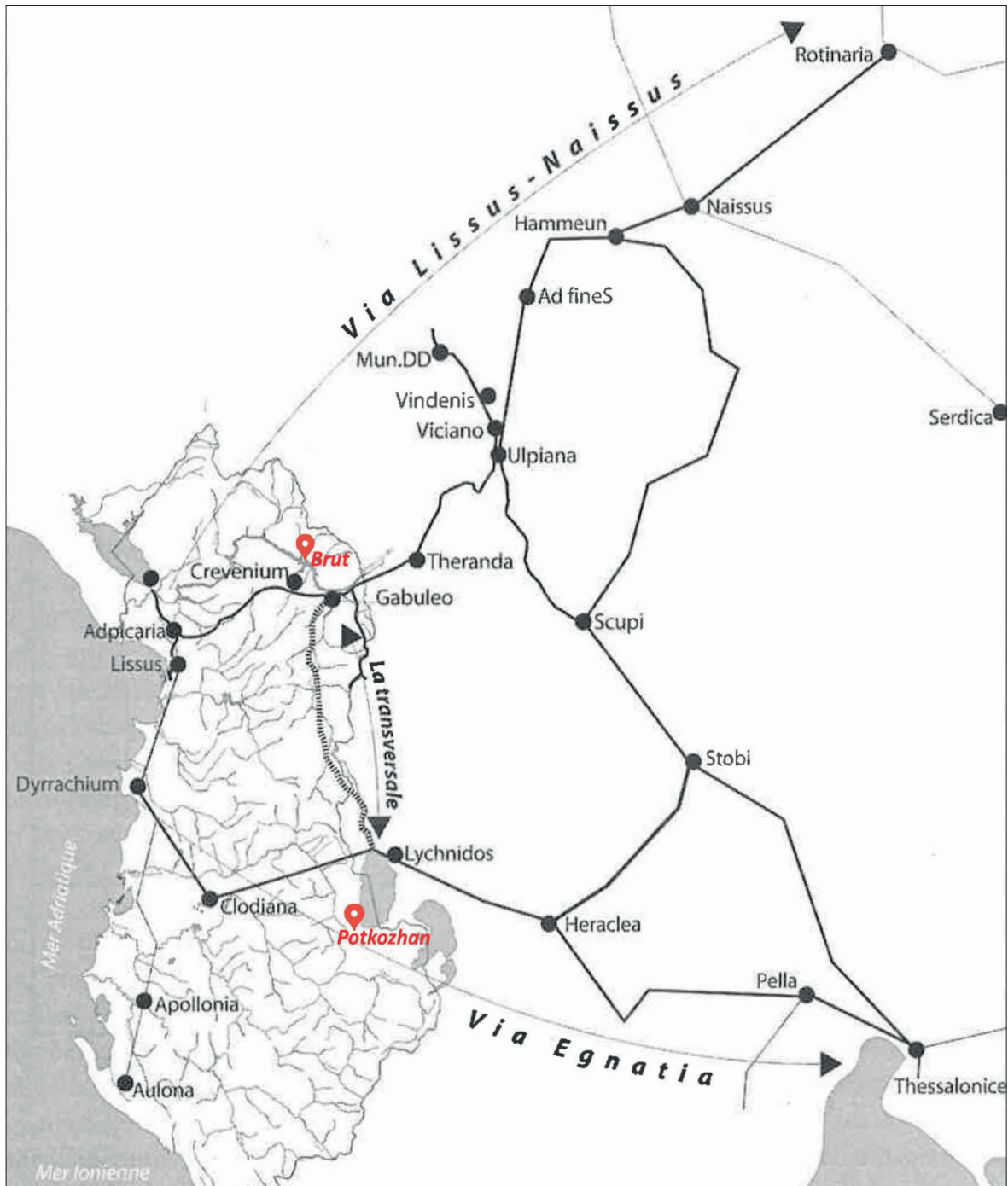


Fig. 1. Albania's Map, Via Egnatia, Via Lissus-Naissus and location of finds (after PËRZHITA 2018).

4 For the importance of this road see PËRZHITA 2007 and PËRZHITA 2018.

5 Ancient city, mostly known for its monumental tombs, see for e.g., CEKA 1985.

6 For the importance of Via Egnatia see: FASOLO 2003.

Both figurines are of special interest as they represent the influence of eastern cults in the territory of Illyria during the Roman period. More precisely the god Mercury-Thoth which comprised eastern and western attributes a symbiosis which happened not infrequently for gods other than Mercury during this period.

The Figurines

The Kukës Figurine

This figurine measures 5.6 cm in height and is presented standing (Fig. 2). The god is represented naked, standing in a frontal position. He leans on the right leg, while the left is bent, creating a contrapposto body pose. The right arm is not fully preserved, meaning it is possible that this hand originally held a purse. The left arm descends to the height of the thigh and his hand holds a large caduceus which is posed on the left shoulder.

The body musculature is well depicted. The thorax is modelled clearly with the navel drawn by an engraved point. The pectorals are emphasized and a firm abdomens in an accentuated inguinal crease. The legs are long and muscular. The chlamys is stapled to the right shoulder, crosses the chest and back at an angle that covers the left and partly the wright shoulder and wraps around the left arm at the elbow.



Fig. 2. Kukës Mercury (Photo: S. Veseli).

The head is turned to the right and wears curly hair. This mass of hair is pulled to the top of the skull where it forms curly locks that fall behind the head to the nape of the neck in a bun. The god had a feather/lotus on his head which is not preserved but identifies the figurine as of the Mercury-Thoth series. The triangular face with a pointed chin is characterized by oval eyes with drooping outer edges capped with thick eyelids. The nose is not accentuated, and the mouth is small and fleshy. The ears are realistically rendered.

This figurine belongs to the type of Mercury-Thoth with the *chlamys in saltire* on the torso. The musculature of the torso and legs also testify to a new vigor, and an unusual care for detail on figurines of small dimensions.

The figurine is produced by full casting and the bronze has a greenish colour. Both casting and cold working appears to be of a good quality and is better than the Pogradec Mercury. The general state of preservation is good despite missing half of the left arm, the right leg and the lotus leaf not being preserved.

The Pogradec Figurine

This figurine measures 10 cm high and is presented standing (Fig. 3). The weight of the body rests on the right leg, while the left leg, slightly bent at the knee, is shifted forward and rests only on the toes, thus creating a contrapposto body pose. The right arm is extended along the length of the body and holds a bag in its hand. The left part forms an indistinct mass with the caduceus worked in a very schematic manner and the chlamys placed on the right shoulder.

The body is presented naked, except for the chlamys thrown on the left shoulder, with boyish muscular features; long, shapely legs are shown with elevated and distinct muscles. The rear of the figurine has been worked with the same care, presenting in detail the back and leg muscles.

The face is oval-shaped, but features are not clearly visible, only sunken eyes, a depressed nose and a small mouth can be distinguished. The hair is shown short and wavy with a raised lotus leaf located in the central area above his forehead, an element that classifies the figurine as Mercury-Thoth.

The figurine is wearing sandals which are equipped with two small wings, and it rests on a 2 cm high cylindrical base.

The figurine was produced by full-casting and the bronze has a greenish colour enclosed in browns. The casting presents many errors, particularly in the right arm area, which forms a vague mass with the chlamys and the caduceus. The cold work appears very neglected as can be seen from the very poor representation of the facial features. This is also visible on the thighs which remain joined from the casting process. Likewise, the cold process seems neglected in the endromids.

The general state of preservation is good, although signs of corrosion are present on the back of the figurine, on the chest, and across the facial features.

Hermes/Merkury-Thoth

The figurines that represent the god Hermes/Mercury are defined by the presence of attributes that include the caduceus,⁷ a typical money bag, and the winged endromids. Figurines with an absence of the winged petase and the presence of a feather or a lotus leaf on the head classify the god as being within the Mercury-Thoth typology.

7 The caduceus did not only signify Mercury as a messenger, but it was also a symbol of commercial transactions. SIEBERT 1990, 373–374; FISHWICK 1991, 88: in the Roman period it would also be a symbol of peace and prosperity.



Fig. 3. Pogradec Mercury (Photo: S. Veseli).

Hermes was one of the most familiar gods of the popular strata starting from the Classical period. This was evidenced by Pausanias who described the presence of many Hermes Agoraios representations located in the agora of Greek cities. It is thought that some of these stone or marble Hermes statues served as a model for products made in small plastic bronze such as the Hermes Agoraios seen in Athens, Sikon or Thebes.⁸ During this time, the god Hermes had a growing level of popularity which was also seen in the territory of Illyria.⁹

The god Hermes became known as Mercury during the Roman period. According to Caesar's definition, Mercury was the patron god of travellers and merchants as his name is related to the Latin word *merx* meaning merchant and inventor of arts.¹⁰ But Mercury/Hermes is also a *psychopomp* god charged with accompanying souls to the afterlife and was replaced by the Archangel Michael after the introduction of Christianity.¹¹ However, the identification of the Greek god Hermes with the Roman Mercury remains an open debate among archaeologists, as to whether they carry the same attributes and qualities in both periods.¹² Mercury was one of the most venerated gods in the Roman Empire and was viewed likewise in Albania.¹³

The iconography of the figurines from Kukës and Pogradec belong to one of the most studied types of Hermes/Mercury, which, thanks to the lotus leaf on its head, are identified with Mercury-Thoth.

This iconography was popular from the Hellenistic period. Hermes-Thoth or Hermes *Trismegitus* was the founder of Hermetic philosophy and the reincarnation of universal thought. He represents a mixture of the attributes of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. These qualities become increasingly mixed during the Roman period, due to the similar functions of the two gods, who were both messengers of the gods, inventors of the alphabet, study, and astronomy.

In the III century BC an image of Hermes-Thoth appears, perhaps for the first time, bearing all the attributes of Hermes with a lotus leaf on his forehead.¹⁴ As seen on the two figurines from Albania, the main feature that identifies Hermes/Mercury-Thoth is a feather or a lotus leaf placed above the forehead. This forehead element was first taken into consideration by A. Furtwangler, who identified it as part of the feather belonging to Thoth, an attribute which is taken by Hermes in Greco-Roman Egypt, as an assimilation with the Egyptian god Thoth.¹⁵ In this way, he also took on some of Thoth's attributes and became the god of knowledge and science.

In contrast to this, P. Perdrizet recognized the element above the head as a representation of the lotus leaf, which gave Hermes/Mercury power as a god of vegetation and a stimulator of growth within agricultural production.¹⁶ This argument is further strengthened in cases where the figurine of Hermes/Mercury is presented with a lamb standing at the deity's feet, a feature that gave him the attribute of a patron god of livestock.¹⁷

8 Pausania 1, 15, 1; 2, 9, 8; 3, 11, 11; 7, 22, 2; 9, 17, 2.

9 See for e.g., GJONGEČAJ 2011; CABANES – DRINI 1995, Fig. 2.

10 BRUNAUX 1996, 16–18; COMBET FARNOUX 1980, 464–466.

11 SIEBERT 1990, 384–385: when Hermes is represented with the petase, the caducei and winged sandal he symbolizes Hermes psychopompe.

12 Not mentioning every possible theory, just the two more important: the first theory accepts the fact that Mercury as part of the *intepretatio romana* is identified with Hermes; while representatives of the second theory accept the fact that the Roman god Mercury, which only takes the iconography of Hermes, is an indigenous Roman god: LEGRAND 1904, 1802–1803; BONFANTE 1986, 265.

13 VESELI 2014, 259: with extended bibliography.

14 CUTLER 1990, 3–5.

15 FURTWANGLER 1906, 199.

16 PERDRIZET 1911, 29.

17 FRANZONI 1973, 51–52, no. 32.

During the Roman period, the iconographic type of Mercury-Thoth was very well-known, particularly in the form of small bronze figurines that were found throughout the territory of the empire and present numerous similarities with the figurines discovered in Albania.

The iconographic type

The iconographic type finds its inspiration in the bronzes of the Hellenistic period and more specifically of the Alexandrian environment.¹⁸ This typology became very popular during the Roman period and became generalized, simplified, and lost many details in comparison to Hellenistic counterparts.¹⁹ The figurines are defined by the *Polyclethian* rhythm which requires a balanced form between static position and certain dynamism.²⁰

These figurines are distinguished by the dynamic pose and the pathetic appearance of the face as well as a reduced finesse in their realization. These details define a provincial style that differs from the Hellenistic canons thus making it possible to distinguish those that date to the Roman period.

This Mercury typology is thought to be a product of central Italy or the regions of Gaul from around the first centuries AD.²¹ Thus, the type created in Egypt, distributed across the Mediterranean, and generalized in Italy and the provinces,²² would have their greatest distribution in the early imperial period, as noted by their presence in the *Lararia* of Campania.²³

Analogies of the Albanian figurines can be found throughout the Greco-Roman world²⁴ and find a very wide distribution, particularly during the Roman period and are seen across the territories of the Balkans.²⁵ As a peculiarity, the Pogradec figurine has the chlamys posed on the right shoulder like other figurines,²⁶ whereas most representations of this type of Mercury-Thoth have the chlamys passed on the right shoulder around the neck and hanging on the left shoulder, as seen on the Kukës Mercury.²⁷ Both figurines have similarities on the contrapposto of the body pose, the position of hands and legs, and the good quality of production, although the Kukës figurine is characterized by a better manufacture. In both cases it is worth mentioning that we are dealing with a careful working of the body anatomy (especially the Kukes figurine), whereas the facial elements are presented in a superficial manner with almost schematic features. Both specimens are dated around 1–2 centuries AD and find numerous analogies with other bronzes of this period.

18 CHAMOIX 1959, 34–36.

19 BOUCHER 1979, 96, Tab. 43.4–5; KAUFMANN HEINIMANN 1994, 15–16.

20 FRANZONI 1973, 36.

21 CHASSAING 1959, 234, Tab. 15.2: according to an unconfirmed hypothesis, this iconographic type had a great success in the Gallic world, thanks to assimilation with Merkur-Silvan.

22 KAUFMANN HEINIMANN 1994, 15–16; GSCHWANTLER 1994, Fig. 1.

23 ADAMO MUSCETOLA 1984, 25–26, Figs 23–24.

24 BABELON – BLANCHET 1895, 157, no. 357–358, 158, no. 359; PERDRIZET 1911, 27–31; ESPÉRANDIEU – ROLLAND 1959, 31, Tab. 11.28; BOUBE-PICOT 1969, 200–201, no. 216, Tab. 144.1: very good quality, with extended bibliography; COMSTOCK – VERMEULE 1971, 105, no. 111; FRANZONI 1973, 51–53, no. 31–32; DI STEFANO 1975, 17–18, nos 25–28: with extended bibliography regarding the alexandrin origin, no. 27; OGGIANO-BITAR 1984, 98, no. 195; BOLLA 1997, 43, no. 9.

25 VELIČKOVIĆ 1972, 125–128, no. 23–25; OGNENOVA-MARINOVA 1975, 110–114, no. 119–121; TADIN 1975, 79, no. 57; COCIŞ 1994, 129–130, Fig. 3, with long chlamys; GEORGIEV 1994, 168.

26 Between others see: FRANZONI 1973, no. 33; DI STEFANO 1975, no. 29; OGNENOVA-MARINOVA 1975, no. 121; TADIN 1975, no. 55b.

27 Between others see: BABELON – BLANCHET 1895, 157, no. 357–358 and 158, no. 359; PERDRIZET 1911, 27–31; ESPÉRANDIEU – ROLLAND 1959, 31, Tab. 11.28; COMSTOCK – VERMEULE 1971, 105, no. 111; FRANZONI 1973, 51, no. 32; DI STEFANO 1975, 17–18, Tab. 7.25; TADIN 1979, 80, no. 59, Pl. 28.57; OGGIANO-BITAR 1984, 98, no. 195; BARTUS 2015, 55–56, no. 28: with extended bibliography.

Closing remarks

Within the territory of ancient Albania, religion composed an important aspect for the integration of Illyrians into the Roman Empire. Many new cults were introduced and adopted by Roman influence which used old and new deities with new depictions and iconography. The most venerated gods were Jupiter, Victoria, Diana, Artemis, and Mercury.

One of the most worshiped god in Illyria was Mercury who represents the best-known deity produced in bronze material, which reflects a common practice seen in other parts of the Roman world.²⁸ The great number of Mercury bronze figurines found within the context of the Roman Empire has led researchers S. Boucher and E. Poulsen to consider there had been an industrial-level production of bronze figurines.²⁹ Although, representations of Mercury within the Albanian framework are seen beyond cast bronze figurines with the god also depicted on coins, inscriptions, reliefs, and sculptures.³⁰

Mercury was also represented as a hybrid god with western and eastern attributes, known as Mercury-Thoth. At present, only two figurines of this type are known in Albania, although there is evidence for the worship of other gods with eastern origins.³¹ These include Isis-Tyche and Hermanubis, both gods with eastern and western attributes like Mercury-Thoth, from the coinage of Apollonia of II century AD,³² Isis in Durrës, Apollonia and Phoinike,³³ Men in Lezha and Kavaja,³⁴ Jupiter Sabazios in Bylis,³⁵ Mithras in Durrës and Apollonia,³⁶ Sabazios in Elbasan and Shkodra,³⁷ Cybele in Apollonia³⁸ etc. The presence of eastern cults links to the influence of the eastern Roman Empire but also to the presence of Orientals in Dyrrachium and Apollonia. These were probably traders installed within the main ports of Illyria meaning the presence of eastern cults can also be linked to the mobility of people and ideas.

The two bronze figurines of Mercury-Thoth under discussion have numerous parallels within the Balkans, particularly in Macedonia, but also more widely across the Roman Empire. The first Mercury figurine from Kukës was found in the village of Brut which is located close to the Via Lissus–Naissus, one of the most important roads that passed through northern Albania during the Roman period. Both the geographical position of this find and the good quality of the figurine indicate that this item was likely imported.

The second figurine from the village of Potkozhan near Pogradec shows that the location was positioned on trade roads that connected Desaretia along the Via Egnatia with Macedonian territories and beyond into the eastern Roman provinces. Also in the vicinity of this area another Mercury figurine was found and in the region a lot of metallic vases and other objects are numerous. These finds testify to a rich tradition of metalworking in this area of Albania, but also to a place where trade with the Mediterranean world and the Balkans was highly developed.

28 VESELI 2014, 259.

29 BOUCHER 1976, 278; POULSEN 2002, 334–335.

30 VESELI 2014, 259: with extended bibliography.

31 SHPUZA 2010, 37–40.

32 GJONGEČAJ – PICARD 2004, 135–148.

33 SHPUZA 2010, 40, Fig. 9; SHEHI 2015. A sculpture of Isis was found recently from the recent excavations at Phoinike.

34 ANAMALI et al. 2009, 21, 146; EHMIG – HAENSCH 2012, 155; CIL III, 603; SHEHI 2015, 315.

35 CIL III, no. 194; SHPUZA 2010, 37.

36 CIL, III, 604; ANAMALI et al. 2009; EHMIG – HAENSCH 2012; SHPUZA 2010, 38.

37 EGGBRECHT 1998, no. 318; VESELI 2014, 265: with extended bibliography.

38 POJANI 2002, 143–144, Fig. 19.

In conclusion, these two figurines have many analogies in the wider Roman world and probably form part of an industrial production that dates to 1–2 centuries AD. They provide an important insight into Illyrian religion during the Roman period. The find location of these figurines with their proximity to two main ancient roads of Illyria means they were most likely imported goods, however, with numerous metallic objects also being found in both regions the possibility that they were produced locally cannot be discount.

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