

LOST AND FOUND.

Virtual Rediscovery, Digitization and Interpretation of an Enigmatic Fragment from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia

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The temple of Zeus at Olympia and its sculptural decoration were excavated almost one and a half century ago, and the remains have always been studied very intensively and from widely different perspectives (HERRMANN 1987, BARRINGER 2005, KYRIELEIS 2006, REHAK & YOUNGER 2009, WESTERVELT 2009). Recently, latest technological innovations were also applied to create a virtual 3D reconstruction of the pediments and also, to simulate the illumination of the cella's interior containing the famous chryselephantine statue of Zeus by Pheidias, which has perished completely (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2014, DIGITAL SCULPTURE 2021). Some details, including a correct reconstruction and interpretation of the Eastern pediment have still remained controversial (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2015, BARRINGER 2021) but, as the presented case illustrates, unexpected discoveries may also occur even in the 21st century, and VR tools can be used to reconsider old problems.

THE FRAGMENT AND ITS DOCUMENTATION

German excavators in the 19th century documented their findings meticulously, and most fragments belonging to the marble sculptures of the temple were already well-published more than a century ago (TREU 1897). Many photographs of excellent quality were published during the 20th century (BUSCHOR & HAMANN 1924, ASHMOLE & YALOURIS 1967) and, of course, many more were taken and are available in different archives. It is therefore quite surprising that a small but important fragment which already provoked some controversy during the 19th century is only documented by two simple drawings (SAUER 1892, 88 TREU 1897, 47). Both versions have been republished here in *Fig. 1*.

According to the information given by the German Archaeological Institute in 2018, there is no photograph of the fragment in the archives of the Institute. The original find has never been exhibited and, therefore, it does not appear in any photograph. In addition, according to my personal experience from 2009, no one was able to find it in the storerooms of the Archaeological Museum at Olympia, where hundreds of small scraps, most probably belonging to the sculptural assemblage, are still stored in wooden boxes. All of these containers were emptied and examined for hours but in vain, the fragment seemed to be irretrievably

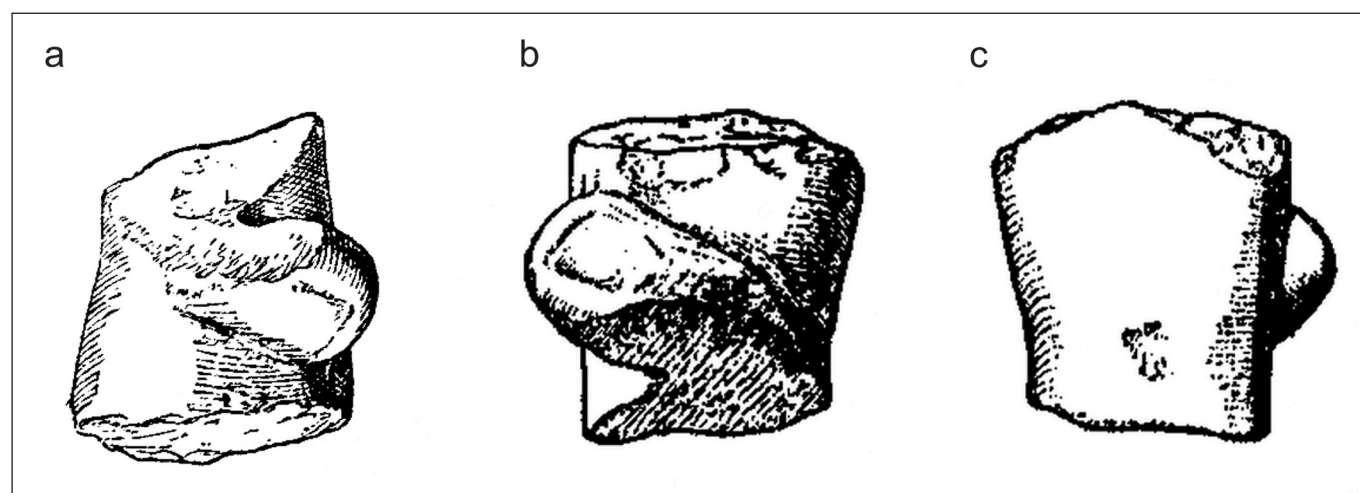


Fig. 1. The first (a) and last drawing (b-c) of the fragment (after SAUER 1892 and TREU 1897)

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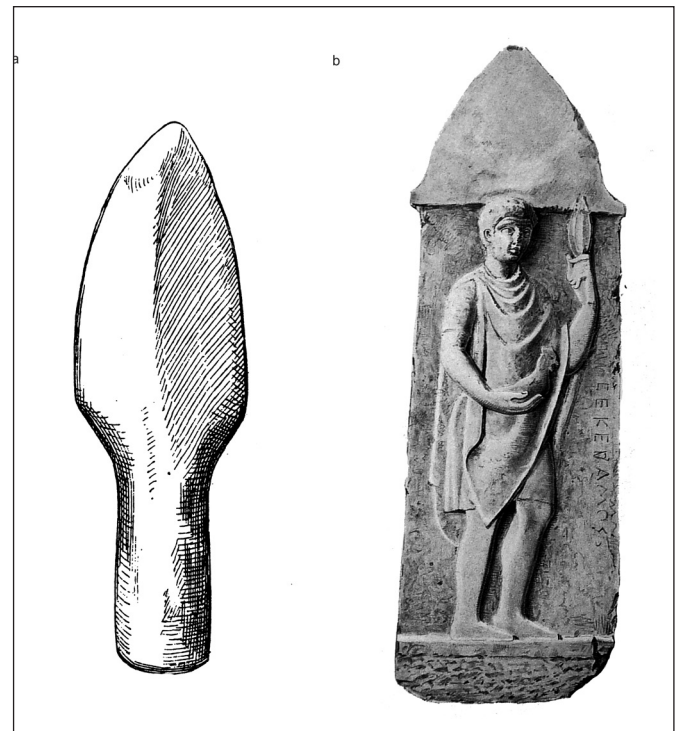
lost. I would assume that it has most probably disappeared (or was simply misplaced and is still awaiting its rediscovery in some other container) during the construction of the new museum in 1970s, when the entire collection had to be moved to its present location.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

In contrast to the poor documentation, the fragment was apparently studied thoroughly during the 19th century. It was mentioned and depicted for the first time by B. Sauer (SAUER 1892, 88), who interpreted it as an ear of centaur P from the West Pediment, held by the left thumb of a Lapith. This interpretation was refuted by G. Treu (1897, 47) who, correctly, observed that there is no cavity or depression on the fragment indicating an ear. He suggested instead that it actually depicts a spearhead held by the right hand of figure G from the East Pediment. He, naturally, felt the need to substantiate this interpretation, which was not self-evident from the published sketch. First, he pointed out that clay spearheads found at Olympia also lacked clear-cut edges (*Fig. 2a*), and suggested that the rounded object held by a human thumb was possibly such a spearhead. In addition, he referred to a grave relief in Thessaly (*Fig. 2b*) to demonstrate that it was not impossible to depict someone holding the tip and not the shaft of a weapon.

In addition, this reconstruction of the fragment and the assumption that it originally belonged to figure G (conventionally, but not necessarily correctly called Pelops) in the East Pediment constituted the basic evidence for Treu's overall arrangement of the pediment's central group. He reasoned that the awkward and highly unusual way of grasping the spearhead was dictated by the lack of space, i.e., that the shaft of the weapon had to be shortened because otherwise it would have reached the slanting cornice and its tip would have seemingly thrust into it.

Later on, no one disputed the fragment or its possible reconstruction. It was only its paramount importance for the arrangement of the central group stimulating my interest in it; but since the fragment was practically lost and there was no hope to find it again, I had to abandon the idea of digitizing it, and had to confine myself to the remark (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2013, 19) that from an iconographic point of view, it was highly unlikely to depict an important hero grasping a spear by its head, since that was normally not the case in Greek art and, furthermore, that the grave relief referred to by Treu was an unusual piece without analogies, hardly comparable in scale and quality with the truly monumental pediment of the temple of Zeus.



*Fig. 2. (a) Clay spearhead found at Olympia (after FURTWÄNGLER 1890, 174, no. 1071)
(b) Grave relief from Larissa (after MITT 1883, Taf. III)*

THE VIRTUAL REDISCOVERY OF THE FRAGMENT

Georg Treu pointed out several times and emphasised in his monumental work on the sculptures of Olympia as well that his reconstruction of the temple's pediments was based on a long and intensive experimentation with life-size plaster casts. The casts were more than mere reconstructions of the original fragments, as also contained substantial additional information in the form of replacements and reconstructions of the composition's lost parts. The models were kept in Dresden and were used until World War II. Even if they survived in a relatively good condition the well-known and almost complete destruction of the city

in 1945, they became almost completely ignored afterwards. In 2011, I was permitted to study and scan them, but the enigmatic fragment with the entire right hand of figure G was already missing (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2012). In 2017, I learned that the moulds of the Olympia fragments are still preserved in the *Gipsformerei* of the *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*. A rapid search in that collection revealed that, apparently, the moulds of the reconstructed figures used by Treu and his followers in Dresden were also kept here. In less than half an hour, the mould of the reconstructed right hand incorporating the missing fragment was found (Fig. 3a) and, due to the courtesy of *Werkstattleiter* Stefan Kramer, a new cast was made in a few days, which was digitized instantly. The dividing line between the original fragment and the reconstruction was clearly visible on the plaster cast, thus it was possible to extract the original fragment from the 3D model (Fig. 3b), and to use it as a replacement for the lost original. Of course, the fracture surface became lost, but the undamaged surfaces have been completely preserved.



Fig. 3. (a) Casting mould in the *Gipsformerei* Berlin and (b) 3D model of the plaster cast made in 2017 (model by Péter Gyuris, photo by the author)

RECONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE OBJECT

As it was mentioned above, two different versions were proposed for the fragment's reconstruction. The key problem is, what kind of object was held by the human hand to which the thumb belonged? In addition, it cannot be determined with certainty whether the thumb belonged to a right or to a left hand. Concerning the object, interpreting it as an ear as suggested by Sauer (1892, 88) was already – and correctly – ruled out by Treu based on the lack of any depression or cavity. I think the alternative suggestion (spearhead) is equally unlikely, because the object not only lacks a blade but is rather asymmetrical, i.e., its left and right sides are widening differently. It is reasonable to assume that the four fingers of the hand held something rod- or shaft-like grasped by these fingers and the palm only, and away from the thumb which must have been raised and was possibly just balancing an amorphous and asymmetrically splaying object on the tip of the shafted tool. Therefore, I suggest that the enigmatic fragment depicted the skewed entrails of an animal offering (*splanchna*), and belonged to a figure which can be described as a sacrificial attendant. These boys often appear in various sacrificial scenes standing or kneeling and holding skewer(s) with entrails (TRINKL 1990, GEBAUER 2002, 352–447). They are most often depicted in action, i.e., roasting the *splanchna* above an altar where the sacrificial fire is already burning. Naturally, in these scenes they grasp the skewers by the shaft's middle or end that is farthest from the heat and the roasted entrails. But sometimes they are just standing by, waiting to act or having completed their task, and in these scenes they may be depicted holding shewers in a way that matches exactly the one reconstructed from our fragment: with their hand directly below the entrails, the thumb balancing the weight on the skewer's tip (Fig. 4).

According to this reconstruction, the fragment has to be assigned to Figure B in the East Pediment (Fig. 5), a man already interpreted by various scholars as a sacrificial servant (SÄFLUND 1970, 55–57). His kneeling position is in perfect harmony with our interpretation since sacrificial attendants are often depicted in a similar crouching position (Fig. 6). The controversy concerning the reconstruction of the

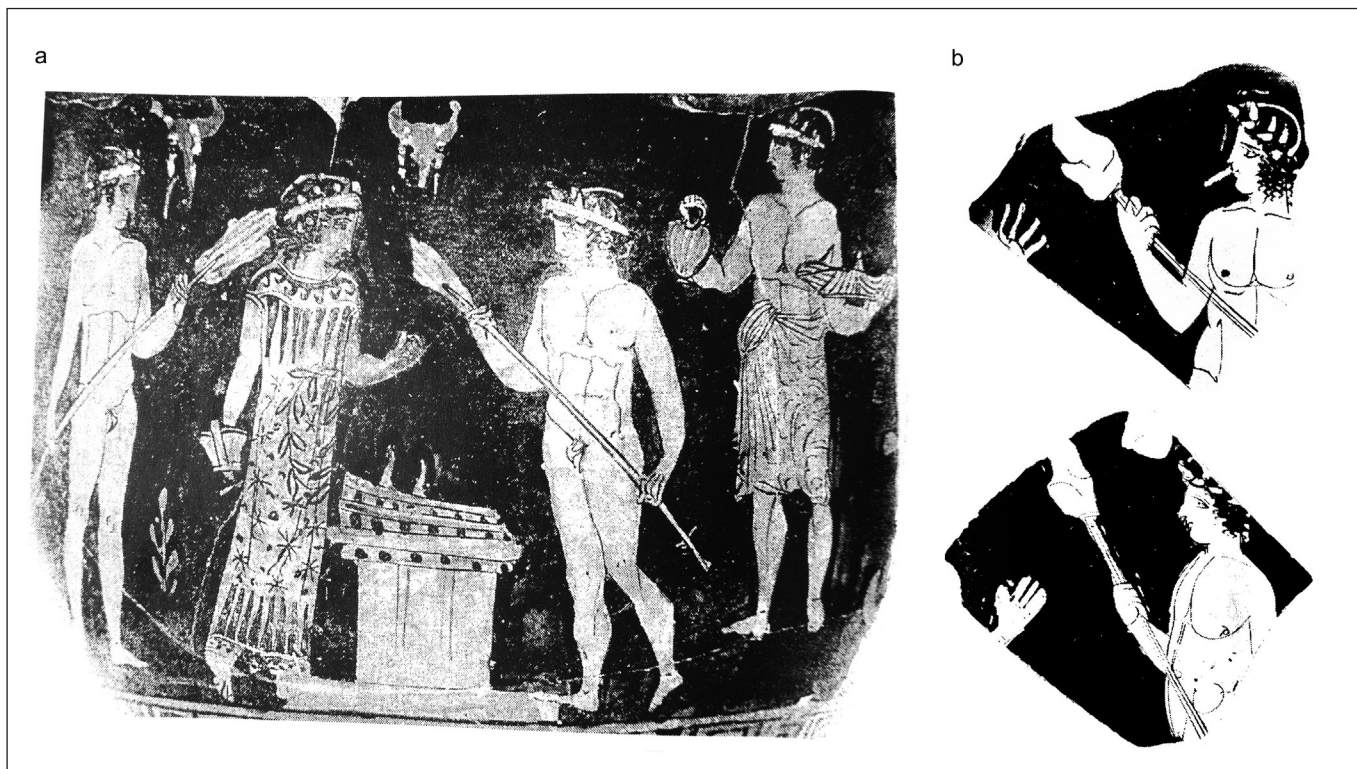


Fig. 4. Attic red-figure vase-paintings from the 5th century BC (a) Laon, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie (after GEBAUER 2002, Abb. 292) (b) Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum 1216.44 (after CVA BONN Taf. 34)

central group and the interpretation of the entire pediment is only partially affected by this new suggestion: both the preparations for the chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos (an interpretation given by Pausanias 5.10.6–8 and accepted by most scholars today) and the reconciliation between Agamemnon and Achilles, suggested by the present author (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2015) may involve a sacrifice. However, since no altar is included in the pediment and the preparations for the chariot race were generally depicted as taking place around an elaborate altar, while the Homeric scene (*Iliad* 19.254–266) does not mention any altar, an alternative interpretation seems to be more appropriate. The scene is usually interpreted as Oinomaos proclaiming the rules of the chariot race for the wooers of his daughter, but the hairstyles of the female figures and the armor (shield and cuirass) of Pelops seem to speak against this view and fit much better the Homeric or Trojan scene, i.e., the reconciliation between Agamemnon and Achilles and the returning of Briseis. This specific scene is not depicted on any ancient artefact that has been preserved for us to see, but written sources attest that exceptional works of art produced at the same period as the pediment of the temple of Zeus were sometimes illustrated with scenes of the Trojan war which otherwise were never chosen for such purposes. The reconciliation scene between Achilles and Agamemnon can be thus seen as a plausible or even more attractive alternative compared to the chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos.

As seen in the virtual reconstruction (Fig. 7), the figure is focusing exactly on the entrails. The precise length and position of the rod cannot be determined as most parts of both arms are missing. There is only a fragmentary right hand, with the

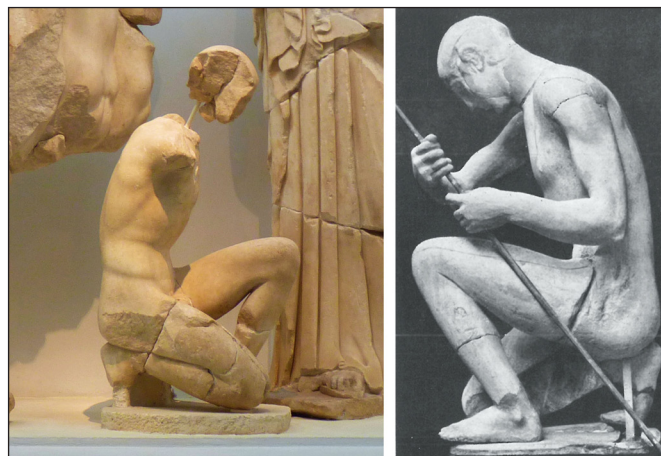


Fig. 5. Figure B from the Eastern pediment of the temple of Zeus (a) fragments on display in the archaeological museum at Olympia (photo by the author) (b) plaster reconstruction (after BULLE 1939)



Fig. 6. Attic red-figure vase-painting from the 5th century BC (Gotha, Schlossmuseum 51, after CVA GÖTTA 2, Taf. 56)

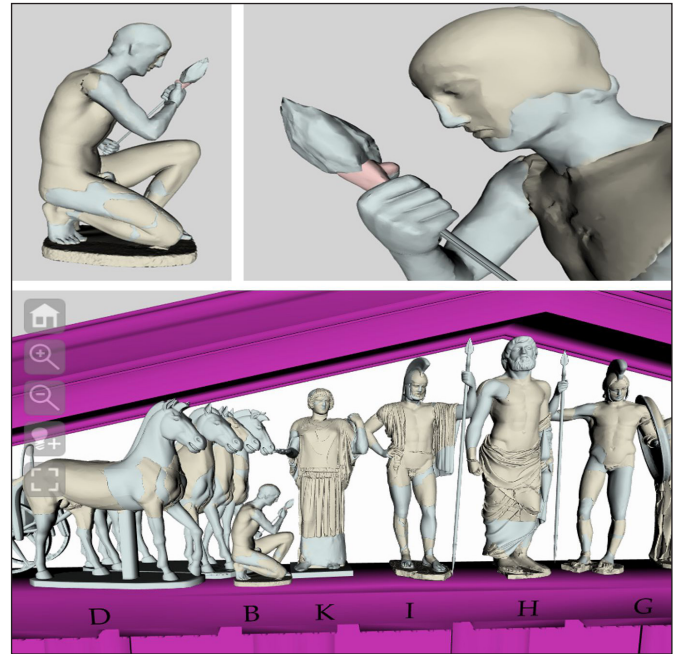


Fig. 7. New reconstruction of figure B (Fig. 5) from different views (model by Leif Christiansen, photo by the author)

thumb missing, which has been tentatively associated with this figure (BULLE 1939, 169, Figs. 23 and 24). An attempt to join the two fragments would be certainly interesting, but such an experiment could only be done when the original fragment has been found again, since its fracture surface would be needed to see if they fit.

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