

András Márton, Ruth Megaw and J. Vincent Megaw

# Decorated loomweights in the collection of Classical antiquities of Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary

In the ancient Mediterranean world, loomweights were often stamped, inscribed, or otherwise decorated. Since loomweights are almost undatable by themselves, stamps, graffiti and other decoration are invaluable for dating and possibly provenancing of loomweights, particularly when they come from an unknown context. The two loomweights from the collection of Classical Antiquities of Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, discussed in this short note, provide a good example of the information that can be gained from a detailed study of such decoration.

## I. Truncated pyramidal loomweight (Figs. 1-3)

Inv. No. 50.1108. Find place: Corinth. From the collection of Béla Gerster, the chief engineer of the Corinth Canal. Truncated pyramidal shape, the sides narrower than the adjacent faces. Flat base and top. Weight: 105g. Height: 68 mm. Base: 38x38 mm, top: 20x19 mm. Stamps 14x11 mm. Clay: hard, greenish grey, fine fabric. On the top and one side there are impressions of an oval stamp. Chips are missing. Not only the find spot but the colour of the clay proves that it was manufactured in a Corinthian workshop, where this type was produced from the beginning of the fifth century B.C. onwards.

The stamps (Figs. 1, 3) represent a female figure, probably Thetis riding a hippocampus, bearing the armour of her son Achilles at Troy (Eichler 1964, 101; Boardman 1970, No. 675, 296, Pl. 675; Boardman and Vollenwieder 1978, No. 136, 31, Pl. XXV. 136; Vollkommer 1997). However, we cannot exclude that the female figure represents a Nereid (Chiesa 1966, No. 515-516, 223, Tav. XXVI. 515-516; Zwierlein-Diehl

1973, Nr. 256, 98-99, Taf. 44. 256; Schlüter, Platz-Horster and Zazoff 1975, Nr. 946, 190-191, Taf. 125. 946; Icard-Gianolio and Szabados 1992, No. 400, 813). This was a common motif for finger-rings from the Classical period onwards. It appears to have been



Fig. 1. Loom weight from Corinth, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (inv. No. 50.1108) (Photo by László Mátyus).



**Fig. 2. Front of the loomweight in Fig. 1 (Photo by László Mátyus).**

made from a solid metal bezel rather than a gemstone. Its form indicates that it could have been slightly pointed. This type can be dated to the classical period (Marshall 1968, No. 48-50, 10-11, No. 1241, 196, Pl. II. 48-50, XXX. 1241; Board-

man 1970, 212-214; Philipp 1981, 155). Since the impression of the ring on the upper and lower edge is missing, we can only speculate that it might have been of the elevated bezel type (for example types II, VII, which are the most popular ring types of this period: Philipp 1981, 155; Kilian-Dierlmeier 2002, 121). The representation of the impression fits with this dating of the ring, which can be found in the subjects of John Boardman's Classical Light Ring group



**Fig. 3. Detail of stamp on top of loomweight in Fig. 1 (Photo by László Mátyus).**

(Boardman 1970, 218-219). On these grounds the loomweight can be dated to the second half of the fifth – first half of the fourth century B.C. (cf. Corinth XII, No. 1195, 162, Pl. 76. 1195).

## II. Conical loomweight (Figs. 4-6)

Inv. No. 52.69. Provenance unknown. From the collection of József Delhaes; transferred from the Hungarian National Museum (1952). Weight 178 g. Max. height: 97 mm. Base: max. diam. 45 mm. Relief head: 26x22 mm. Height of amphora stamp: 37 mm, oval stamp: 10x7 mm. Clay: gritty fabric, brick red in colour.

Mould-made conical weight, bottom and top rounded. It bears a decoration in relief; on one side, a human face (Figs. 4-5), on the other side, an amphora with a point enclosed by an oval at the top (Fig. 6).

The form and likely purpose of this unprovenanced piece seem clear: conical weights with a single transverse suspension hole are commonly found on later prehistoric sites where they are interpreted as part of vertical warp-weighted looms (Crowfoot 1936-37).

What is much more difficult to interpret is the decoration on opposing sides of the loomweight. On one side is what appears to be an anthropomorphised amphora, and on the other, a male profile with stylised hair and a beard running along the jaw-line. Both were stamped before firing. The stamp used for the later is roughly square but with rounded corners, as it is clear from the marginal line visible to the left of the head. The stylistic derivation of the profiled head is unclear and deserves attention.

The amphora resembles a slender Hellenistic form, but its exact type cannot be identified. Moving to the opposite side of the loom weight, the head and the stamp used to produce it recall a circular prototype, such as a coin. Other circular objects cannot be excluded, such as cameos or gems, for example. With coinage in mind, the head bears similarities to the head of Zeus or Apollo; however, it is certainly not Greek in character. Another possibility is a crude variant of a Dionysiac mask.

If a coin type was used as a model when the stamp was made it must have been a "barbarian" piece based on a Greek model. At first sight, the head with its highly stylised hair looks not unlike the obverse on some of the 1st century AD coinage of central and northern France, notably coins of the Bituriges Cubi, particularly of the so-called ABVDOS and SOLIMA group (De la Tour 1892, pl.14; Nash 1978, chap. 8, esp. pl. 10; Allen and Nash 1980, 75 and pl. 15:206-8). Not so close but sharing some features are silver coins of the Aluerici (Fig. 7) (De la Tour 1892, pl. 23). These putative parallels are, as on the loom weight, marked by a clearly delineated ear, eye, nose, mouth and chin. There are, however, a number of important differences. On the coinage of the Bituriges, the head

faces left, while that on the loom weight faces right. Perhaps of greater importance is that, while the Celtic coinage is ultimately based on a clean-shaven and wreathed head of Apollo, that on the loomweight has, at best, a vestigial wreath but appears bearded in the manner of the head of Zeus, the other main prototype for the obverse of Celtic coins based on staters of Philip II of Macedon.

There is, in fact, a possibility that the head has indeed been modelled on the bearded Zeus head, which forms the obverse of silver tetradrachms, one of the key types of the Eastern Celtic and Dacian series (see Pink 1939, 58-59. Taf. 7.18; Kolníková 1978, tab. 40-42; Torbágyi 2000 for Hungarian examples). It must also be noted that all the coins cited as possible parallels have diameters not exceeding 25 mm. The size of impression in the mould of the loom weight fits well into this category (height: 2.6 cm; width: 2.2 cm). It is, of course, unfortunate, that we know virtually nothing of the provenance, let alone possible associations of the loom weight.

To sum up, the loomweight was most probably decorated with a human representation deriving from a head of Zeus or Apollo. The details of the face suggest that it was not made by a Greek hand; on the other side, the amphora indicates connections to the Mediterranean. The master of the loom weight worked probably in the periphery of the Mediterranean world and might have had a Celtic coin in mind. However, we know of no similar stamp based on the design of

what is, in effect, a coin obverse, nor do we have any clear idea what the stamp might have looked like. We are therefore unable to localize the workshop of this piece.

Conical loomweights were known all over the Mediterranean (e.g. Wilson 1930, Fig. 284. 6, 8; Davidson and Thompson 1943, 73-78, M. 82, 74; Watrous 1980, 278-281, N. 51, 281, Pl. 29.5; Davidson 1952, 1471; Barbieri 2005, No. 117, 84) and non-Mediterranean Europe as well (Jacobi 1974, 61-2, Nr. 1713-5; von Kurzynski 1996, 10-14). In spite of the uncertainty of its provenance and the place of manufacture, it certainly dates to the Hellenistic period.

### Discussion

There is a question to be raised — why were loomweights stamped at all? Looking at other products of pottery workshops, in the centres of production where they were produced on an industrial scale (as at Corinth), stamps were used in relation to the workshop's internal and external affairs and in the course of trade, for example in the case in the Roman Samian ware industry (Fülle 2000; Dannel 2002; Mees 2002). They were used to identify the objects produced by a potter, whether fired in a communal kiln or made for a specific commission. They could be used simply as a control of the production of each potter, or to mark the loomweights made for a particular owner or merchant. At Corinth the marks on the products support this idea. The workshops producing bricks and tiles



**Figs. 4-6. Loom weight, unprovenanced, with stamps on two sides. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (inv. No. 52.69) (Photo by László Mátyus).**

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**Figs. 4-6. Loom weight, unprovenanced, with stamps on two sides. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (inv. No. 52.69) (Photo by László Mátyus).**

also made loomweights as a secondary product (Davidson 1952, 146). In these workshops stamps were used concurrently for different purposes by owners as well as potters (Felsch 1979, 18-19). We may suppose that some of the numerical and other symbols reflect the internal production system as well (Davidson and Thompson 1943, 74). Some of the stamps on goods indicate the weight and contents of commercial trade, others were certainly "trade marks" or potters' stamps, for example, the MEA and MEΛΙΣ stamps (Davidson 1952, 158-159). The first is known from Corinth and Athens, the second from Corinth, Athens, Delphi and Aradus. In a few cases, the alphabetic stamps can be connected with non-alphabetic stamps. For example, the Corinthian weights stamped with NIKO are frequently associated with an impression of a gemstone decorated with a satyr's head. Weights signed by NIKO within and outside this secondary stamp and made of Corinthian clay, can be found at Athens as well (Davidson 1952, 158). Might the NIKO stamp have been the symbol of the master or the owner of the workshop, and the gemstone with the



Fig. 7. Silver coin of the Aulerques Diablintes. AR d. 22 mm, wt. 4.80 g, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris cat. no. 6489.

satyr's head that of the potter who worked for him? Unique stamps and signs might have been used for other reasons. The different types of yarn and the different fineness of cloth needed loomweights of different, but quite standard weights (Barska 2004, 47, 53). It is difficult to produce a number of fired clay objects of the same weight. At Olynthus, loom weight give evidence of accuracy and precision during the weaving process, the loomweights decorated with the same stamp being all of the same weight, so it may be assumed that the stamps and signs were used as well to distinguish sets of loomweights (Wilson 1930, 120-121, 127; see also Davidson and Thompson 1943, 74;

Caronna 1983, 329, Fig. 125.4-5, 126.4-5, 330-331; Barska 2004, 50-51, 53). We must emphasize the fact, however, that not all loomweights employed on the same loom would have been signed. For example, signing the first and the last one was enough to distinguish the set during the different stages of production, as is the case for the bricks and tiles (Hübner 1973, 87; Felsch 1979, 19). This may explain the question, already raised by L. M. Wilson, as to why only a small percentage of the loomweights were stamped (Wilson 1930, 122).

To summarise, some of the loomweight stamps can be interpreted as owner's marks, or to determine the order in which they should be fixed or to determine the type of cloth (for a summary of the evidence in Pre-Roman Italy, see Gleba 2008, 134-137).

The two loomweights briefly discussed here can be classified into two categories. That found at Corinth was certainly signed during its manufacture following internal workshop organisation practice. The second, unprovenanced example, produced most unusually in a mould, bears a unique representation, and might be considered as a votive offering, evidence for which is not unknown at least in the Classical world (on the loom weights dedicated to divinities, see Gleba 2008, 137-138).

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