



A Figurine Wearing a Sleeveless Coat from Sandy, Bedfordshire

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, the AOC Archaeology Group unearthed a unique Roman figurine in Sandy, Bedfordshire, likely an offering in a domestic shrine or lararium. The figurine features a distinctive Gallic cloak, similar to those found on copper-alloy figurines in Trier and Cambridgeshire and on numerous relief sculptures. It may be related to the hooded garment known as the birrus mentioned in Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices of A.D. 301, including the expensive Birrus Britannicus.

Keywords: *Birrus Britannicus*; sculpture; figurine; Sandy; Gallic coat

In 2018, AOC Archaeology Group discovered an unusual Roman figurine during excavations at Sandy Cemetery, Bedfordshire.¹ The site was situated immediately south of the modern settlement of Sandy within the northern extent of a Roman defended *vicus*. During the mid-first to early second century A.D., the northern part of the site was occupied by a cemetery, while evidence for settlement, ranging in date from the mid-first to the fourth century A.D., was present to the south.² By the later second or third century A.D., the edge of Roman Sandy was defined by a defensive wall, identified within the confines of the site.³ Early Saxon activity was noted to the north of the wall in the form of an inhumation, radiocarbon-dated to the sixth century A.D., and a sunken-featured building of probable early Saxon date was also present.⁴ The primary depositional context of the figurine is unknown as the object was recovered from subsoil which had been machined off.⁵

The male figurine is fashioned in bronze. It is incomplete, lacking the head, and wears a highly distinctive cloak (FIG. 1). The figurine is hollow and features a visible projection at the neck meant to hold the missing head, which would have been attached separately. The arms extend outward from the chest and are incomplete, measuring 19.8 mm in surviving length. Similarly, the legs of the figurine are incomplete. It stands at 58 mm in height, 31 mm in width, and weighs 53.50 g.

The majority of these attributes are not in themselves unusual. For example, of the 1,000 objects incorporated within a catalogue of Roman metal figurines from Britain, 947 (94.7 per cent) were

¹ Capon 2023; Chittock 2023, 148.

² Capon 2023, 10–15 and 18–44.

³ Capon 2023, 10.

⁴ Capon 2023, 45–8.

⁵ Chittock 2023, 148.



FIG. 1. The figurine from Sandy, Bedfordshire. (© AOC archaeology group)

fashioned from a form of copper alloy, while 61.5 per cent took the form of a male deity, as would appear to be the case for the Sandy bronze.⁶ Like the Sandy figurine, examples have been found that were cast in pieces for subsequent assembly. At least two such examples come from the nearby Roman town at *Verulamium*, where evidence was recovered to suggest the existence of figurines with arms cast separately for insertion through the use of dowels or solder.⁷

A noteworthy attribute of the Sandy figurine is its attire, which comprises a long sleeveless cloak extending to knee level and seemingly made of heavy woollen cloth which is seamless. It has openings at the shoulders for the arms and vertical folds are depicted to the front. As the head is missing, there is no clear evidence of a hood but the variation in corrosion seen on the reverse suggests that a hood perhaps extended around a quarter of the torso. The garment is smooth to the reverse with no visible folds.

⁶ Durham 2012, 2.2, 3.

⁷ Durham 2012, 2.1

A similar figure, lacking its head but with protruding wrists and hands, was found in the Neustrasse, Trier. The garment on this figurine is simply described as rustic.⁸ Among bronze figurines, the closest parallels depicting figures in a one-piece garment with sleeves are found in a figure of a man measuring 230 mm in height from a cache of bronzes discovered in 1861 at Neuvy-en-Sullias, Loiret in Gaul.⁹ This figurine wears a long, shift-like garment reaching just above the knees, with sleeves down to the wrists. He is described as an orator and an adorant, holding out his arms in a manner similar to the Sandy figure. These depictions of Gallic coats with sleeves find parallels in a figure from Earith, Cambridgeshire, which is 147 mm in height. However, here, the simple form of the garment is obscured by a cloak gathered around the figure's waist and draped over his left shoulder.¹⁰

The same garment is worn by numerous male figures on limestone reliefs from Neumagen and Trier in Gallia Belgica. A more local parallel can be observed on the central figure on a sandstone votive relief from Sandy who holds a *patera* and is perhaps making an offering to the semi-nude figure on the left, almost certainly a deity, holding a sword, which would normally indicate a god although there is a billowing veil over the figure's head, so it could be the goddess Venus, as Venus Victrix.¹¹

Variant forms of such garments, frequently with hoods and sometimes clearly over-garments which completely covered the arms, were widely worn by rural-based males. A figurine from Roxwell, Essex, now in Chelmsford Museum depicts a hooded huntsman wearing a hooded coat,¹² somewhat similar to the figure of winter depicted on a mosaic at Chedworth, Gloucestershire.¹³ An actual named example is Philus, a Gaul from the tribe of the Sequani, who is depicted on his tombstone from Cirencester.¹⁴ Votive reliefs from the Cotswold region, carved in local oolitic limestone, depict male figures, typically in groups of three, venerating a seated female deity, likely a goddess called Cuda.¹⁵ The majority of these reliefs come from the central Cotswolds, with some found further south, including Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire.¹⁶

The clearest examples of men wearing one-piece garments are the central figure on a relief from Wycomb, Gloucestershire, now in Cheltenham Museum,¹⁷ and another depicted on a chalk relief from Rushall Down, Wiltshire.¹⁸ Somewhat similar groups of hooded figures are recorded from Hadrian's Wall, including examples from Housesteads and Carlisle, as well as a single figure from Birdoswald, but these have an opening down the front and no arm openings.¹⁹

In later periods, the Cotswold region was renowned for its wool and woollen garments. It may have been a major centre for the production of such seamless coats, although there is more evidence for wool production in East Anglia and the southeast, including the vicinity of Sandy, which provides to date the only example of a votive relief from the region.²⁰ Such a garment would have been more expensive to make than shorter and seamed examples which required less wool for their manufacture. A hooded version of this cloak was perhaps known as a *birrus* and a particularly expensive type was famed as the *Birrus Britannicus*. Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices of A.D. 301 fixed the price of the British hooded cloak at 6,000 denarii,

⁸ Menzel 1966, 41–42, Taf. 41 no. 87.

⁹ Boucher 1976, 41 and pl. 11, fig. 53; Kaufmann-Heininmann 1998, 257–8, Abb. 211.

¹⁰ Green and Henig 1988, who suggested it represented a votary holding offerings.

¹¹ Wightman 1970, 150 and 245, pls 14, 15; Huskinson 1994, 11–12, no. 22, pl. 10; Appleton and Dawson 1995.

¹² Worrell and Pearce 2015, 375–6, no. 17.

¹³ Cosh and Neal 2010, 54 and pl. 59, lower left.

¹⁴ Henig 1993, 49, no. 141, pl 36.

¹⁵ Henig 1993, 95–108, pls 26–28.

¹⁶ Hawke 2020.

¹⁷ Henig 1993, 35–6, pl. 27.

¹⁸ Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 28, pl. 27, no. 103.

¹⁹ Coulston and Phillips 1988, pl. 43 no. 152, 154 and pl. 109 no. 485.

²⁰ Wild 2002; Brindle and Lodwick 2017, 221–5.

making it one of the more expensive items of its type and a garment of particular quality.²¹ There was some variation in native dress in north-western Europe, and the best-known bronze depicting a peasant in regional dress, also from Trier, shows a man wearing a hooded cape reaching to his waist and a short tunic below.²² The same garment is worn by a figure in a wall painting from Trier depicting life at a villa, but these clearly differ from that worn by the Sandy bronze.²³

One additional feature to note is that the head of the figurine was almost certainly attached separately, similar to the figure of a man seated in a basket chair from Nismes, Belgium, where both the head and arms were detachable.²⁴ It would be very interesting to know whether it was provided with a hood like the figure from Trier or indeed the Roxwell bronze. The garment on this new figurine and the example from Neustrasse, Trier appear to be sleeveless with two openings below the shoulders through which the arms can project and thus provide insight not only on dress in Roman Britain and Gaul but a variant in the form of such garments.

Associating figurines with specific deities can be difficult, particularly if certain body parts are missing and no attributes associated with a particular god or goddess are obvious.²⁵ Consequently, we can only speculate on the subject and meaning of the Sandy bronze, which was presumably housed in a domestic shrine, a *lararium*, or produced as an offering to a shrine. It may well represent a votary, as suggested for the Neuvy-en-Sullias and the Earith figurines.²⁶ The ‘*Genii cucullati*’ on the Cotswold reliefs are evidently servants to their goddess. Alternatively, our figure might be seen as a representation of a local godling or spirit of place, a *Genius*, as proposed for a figurine found near a villa at Badbury, Wiltshire, evidently dressed in a similar manner to the Earith bronze, with a coat and mantle and arms held wide.²⁷ In addition to the Wiltshire example, copper-alloy figurines wearing hooded cloaks have also been found in Buntingford, Hertfordshire, and Coningsby, Lincolnshire, which were similarly interpreted as *Genii*.²⁸

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²¹ *Edictum Diocletiani* xix.48.

²² Menzel 1966, 41; Wightman 1970, 185 and 196, pl. 21.

²³ Wightman 1970, 87 and 145.

²⁴ Faider-Feytmans 1979, 89–90, pl. 56 no. 92.

²⁵ Durham 2012, 2.3.1.

²⁶ Boucher 1976, 41; Kaufmann-Heininmann 1998, 257–58; Green and Henig 1988.

²⁷ Phillips and Henig 2003; Phillips 2021, 86–7.

²⁸ Durham 2012, 3.9.

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