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Flexible phalli: contextualising the magic and materiality of a Romano-British antler phallus from Colsterworth Quarry, Lincolnshire

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ABSTRACT

In 1932 a deer antler carved into the form of an approximately life-sized, three-dimensional, erect human phallus was discovered alongside Romano-British activity at Colsterworth Quarry, Lincolnshire and donated to Grantham Museum. Never previously subject to a discussion in print, this article considers the phallus through the lenses of apotropaic magic and the magico-medicinal and socio-religious significance of deer and deer products in Roman Britain. The original context of discovery is not well recorded, though likely relates to an area of industrial activity with an associated settlement nearby. A variety of potential functional and ritual contexts for the antler phallus are considered: as a fragment of religious statuary, an apotropaic device on a building or vehicle, a votive offering, and as part of a tool or vessel. These discussions explore the highly contextualised applications of embodied and disembodied phallic imagery in Roman Britain, the liminal space between concepts of religion and magic, and the significance of materiality and embodied interaction when considering the socio-religious significance of phallic imagery.

Introduction

While working to improve the storage and cataloguing of the collections of Grantham Museum in Lincolnshire in 2016, the author came across an example of approximately life-sized three-dimensional phallic imagery, discovered at Colsterworth Quarry in 1932. The phallus (Figures 1 and 2), produced from a single antler beam or tine, has not been previously published and does not appear in a contemporary report of Romano-British discoveries at Colsterworth Quarry. Despite being sufficiently recognised as an artefact to warrant donation to the museum, the phallic nature of the object may have led to a reluctance to publicly highlight its existence (see e.g. Johns 1989, 15–35). Though there is no secure dating context, the nature of both contemporary discoveries at the site and the form of the object lead to a presumption that it dates to the Romano-British period.

Phallic imagery is not uncommon in Roman Britain, but such a three-dimensional organic representation appears to be a unique addition to the corpus [(Parker 2019, Parker 2020) has noted a general dearth of surviving organic magical material in Roman Britain]. No direct comparanda for the phallus have been identified, though there are parallels with

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ceramic Romano-British phalli such as those from Ivy Chimneys (Major and Jecock 1999) and Heybridge in Essex (Atkinson and Preston 2015 and Figure 3). Medieval antler representations of stag phalli from Bornais (Outer Hebrides), Lincoln and York (see Wickstead 2020), interpreted as being magical amulets, are worthy of comparative note here. Their sharply tapering forms highlight that the Colsterworth phallus is intended to represent a human appendage and also serve as a reminder that concepts of phallic apotropaic magic and materiality are not restricted to the Roman period.

This article will describe the Colsterworth Quarry phallus and what can be said of the context of its discovery, before presenting a discussion of its significance in terms of both apotropaic magic and the socio-religious significance of deer antler. Through an exploration of the potential original functionality of the antler phallus, I will consider the liminal definitional space between magic and religion and the highly contextualised applications of embodied and disembodied phallic representations.

Description

The antler (Figure 1) has been carved into the form of an erect human phallus and measures 10.5 cm long and 2.5 cm in diameter. A number of cut marks from this manufacturing process are still clearly visible, particularly around the sharply incised glans (Figures 1 and 2), and the original surface of the antler has been mostly removed around the top of the shaft. The entire phallus is hollow (Figure 2), the consistency of the hollow core suggesting that the cancellous bone was deliberately removed, an act which may relate to the phallus' function, as discussed below. The base of the phallus has been more roughly shaped and shows signs of wear, particularly on the dorsal surface in the form of a U-shaped notch. It is uncertain whether this represents damage specifically sustained during use (such as through attachment to another object) or post-depositional, or peri- or post-recovery damage to the friable material.

The retention of the original antler surface along much of the shaft may reflect a desire to present a realistic skin-like texture. Other sections of the shaft of the phallus, particularly those on the dorsal surface, show signs of smooth polish and it is plausible that this represents use-wear stemming from tactile engagement with the phallus. Although the creation of the phallus did not require extraordinary skill or represent significant investment in time or materials, it does reflect an attempt to produce a realistic rather than an abstract depiction. It is likely to be a work of individual creativity produced in response to a specific need, perhaps even an intense and immediate one, as opposed to being a commercial product.

Scientific analysis of the antler, such as collagen testing, has not been conducted but visual analysis has suggested that the antler is most likely that of a native red deer, an animal attested in Iron Age and Romano-British faunal assemblages, including those from ritual contexts. It is impossible to know whether it is the result of butchery or the collection of shed antler, though antler working evidence from across Roman Britain, as discussed below, suggests the latter may be more likely.

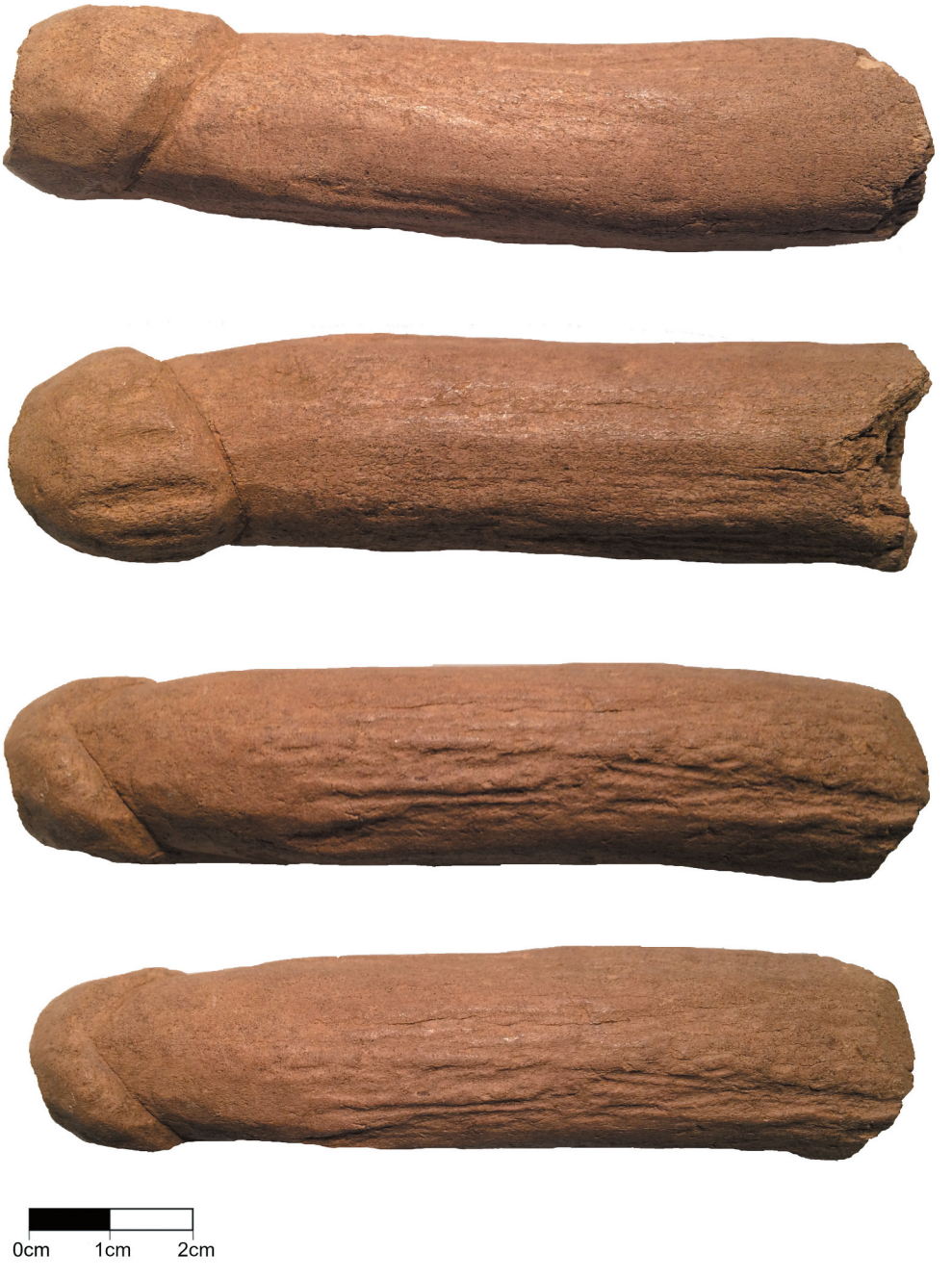

Figure 1. General views of the Colsterworth Quarry antler phallus. Author's photograph.

Discovery and context

In July 1932, the politician and historian Ian Campbell Hannah published an article in the Antiquaries Journal (Hannah 1932) describing a discovery made by miners for the Frodingham Iron and Steel Company at Colsterworth Quarry on Thursday

Figure 2. Tip of the Colsterworth Quarry antler phallus. Author's photograph.

21 January 1932.[1] An irregularly-shaped box of partially fired clay measuring c.3′ (c.91 cm) long, 15–21" (c.38-c.53 cm) high and 22–24" (c.55-c.61 cm) wide was discovered within a shallow circular pit. Hannah describes the discovery of other fired clay fragments in the vicinity, including pierced rectangular bars, lumps of clay with finger and hobnail impressions, ceramic sherds, charcoal, wood ash, ironstone with slag and a small piece of 'almost pure' iron. These led Hannah, perhaps influenced by contemporary iron working in the vicinity, to interpret the find as a blast furnace for iron smelting. The structure has, however, been re-interpreted as a pottery kiln of local type (Todd 1973, 109–110; Swan 1984, 122–3; Whitwell 1992, 113–114).

The remains of the structure and the associated finds were donated to Grantham Museum in June 1932 by Mr Charles Bailey, the engineer in charge of the quarry. The antler phallus was deposited in September 1932 by the same donor and is clearly documented by the museum as coming from Colsterworth Quarry.[2] Though the slightly later donation date and lack of reference by Hannah in his article mean that it cannot conclusively be associated with the January 1932 discoveries, it was most likely unearthed during quarrying works in the vicinity between June and September.

To place the Colsterworth finds in a Romano-British geographical context, Stainby villa[3] is located c.0.8 miles to the south and the Roman small town of Saltersford c.6 miles to the

Figure 3. Ceramic phallus from Heybridge. Reproduced from Atkinson and Preston 2015, Fig 140 under a CC BY 3.0 licence.

north, with the major north-south route of Ermine Street c.0.6 miles to the east. In 1934, further Roman activity was discovered roughly half a mile from the 1932 discovery in the form of a female burial accompanied by the bones of an animal, perhaps a horse, and a well containing animal bone, horn, ceramics and a brooch (Phillips 1934, 154; Lincolnshire HER 33896), though these finds are unfortunately now lost. The Portable Antiquities Scheme records only a single damaged finger ring discovered to the east of the quarry site (NLM4651). This small volume of evidence suggests that the antler phallus is likely to have originated from a small-scale industrial site or an associated settlement rather than an as yet unknown religious or military site,[4] possibly part of the agricultural hinterland of Stainby villa. Ceramic dating by Hannah and of sherds noted on the HER tentatively suggest a first or second century focus of activity.

Phallic magic and deer products in Roman Britain

Phallic imagery in the Roman world is conventionally interpreted as serving a magical apotropaic function, warding off misfortune or other unseen malevolent forces. Graeco-Roman and Egyptian magic have been the source of much academic discourse in recent decades. Magic exists in a complex symbiotic relationship with 'religion' and has often been historically defined in direct comparison to that equally polysemic and anachronistic term (see e.g. Smith 1998). A universally acceptable definition of magic remains elusive, and Sanzo's recent (Sanzo 2020) discussion presents a useful overview of the broad arguments for and against its ongoing scholarly application. Scholars such as Otto (2013, 2017) and Aune (2007, 2014) have argued against its use, preferring instead to categorise ritual acts by their specific outcomes such as healing, exorcism, divination, or cursing. 'Magic', however,

retains a generally accepted validity, mainly due to its use in ancient literary sources. Recognition of the baggage the term carries, not least through the retrojection of later western-centric perceptions of it representing negative or harmful practices, has led to more nuanced and culturally-specific applications.

The term was employed in the ancient world to both decry and praise various practices, something Otto (2013) termed 'discourses of exclusion and inclusion'. These can be seen as reflecting the relative social and cultural relationships between practitioner and observer and contested socio-religious authority, however, rather than defining specific ritual activities and associated beliefs (Otto 2013; Chadwick 2015). One person's solemn religious ritual could be another's deviant heretical magic, and there is a recognised danger of reifying culturally and geographically disparate ritual practices into a homogenised category rather than viewing them as part of shifting and sometimes confrontational socio-religious landscapes. Magic is often distinguished from religion in terms of the immediate and personal outcomes desired by the practitioner and their direct control over ritual processes (e.g. Versnel 1991), yet many acts which might be uncontroversially labelled 'religious' share these characteristics. As Sanzo (2020, 28) observes, simplistic dichotomies of 'religion' as public and supplicatory and 'magic' as private and manipulative are untenable. The material turn in archaeology has seen attempts to bridge the gap between theoretical discussions of magic and the evidence of its application in diverse socio-religious contexts, including its overlap with other spheres of daily life such as medicine, and a recognition that magical practices often incorporated otherwise prosaic objects and places (e.g. Parker and McKie 2018; Parker 2020).

It is not the place of this article to resolve such disputes, but they demonstrate the difficult conceptual landscapes within which phallic imagery and its applications operated. The ongoing value of the term 'magic' is perhaps not as a definitive label to be applied to certain ritual acts or objects but rather as a subjective value judgement placed upon them by the practitioner and other observers both emic and etic, ancient and modern. As Versnel (1991) observed, 'Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts'.

A liminal zone between religion and magic might be perceived at the point where the phallus attaches to the human body. Depictions of engorged phalli embodied as part of anthropomorphic representations of deities (such as Priapus [Figure 3], macro- and poly-phallic Mercury[5] or various native horned gods [see e.g. Aldhouse Green 2004, 121–123]) are generally perceived to relate to the wider sphere of influence of that deity, such as agricultural fecundity or commercial good fortune. It is unclear whether disembodied phalli, referred to as 'fascina', drew their agentic power from association with such deities or whether the reverse was true, the deities appropriating the power of the phallus (Parker 2020, 95). The interpretation that an obscenely engorged phallus, particularly one positioned un-anatomically such as around the neck, on horse harnesses or attached to a structure, served to distract (literally 'fascinate') malign forces is one referenced in classical literature (see discussions in Dasen 2015, 181–187; Whitmore 2017, 48–50).

Distinguishing embodied phalli as 'religious' due to the presence of an anthropomorphic deity and disembodied phalli as 'magical' is surely to project contemporary definitions onto the ancient world, as discussed above. Despite this, for the Romano-British practitioner seeking to solve their particular problem through supernatural engagement, distinctions in the contextualised application of phalli surely existed. The chosen form and material of

phallic imagery and the situation of its deployment were clearly significant; driven by the individual's needs and desired outcomes, and likely guided by certain principles of accepted cultural practice. The varied potential interpretations of the Colsterworth phallus, discussed below, centre around whether it was an embodied or disembodied representation. They therefore offer an opportunity to explore the liminal space which exists between our perceptions of religion and magic, and the wide variety of situations in which phallic imagery may have been seen as beneficial.

Research into phallic imagery in the northwestern provinces has increasingly explored such contextualised use, whether architectural, as an amuletic device on a fitting or item of jewellery, and in various materials. This has included discussion of the associations between phalli and related imagery such as the evil eye, vulvae, scallop shells, fists or horns (see e.g. Plouviez 2005; Parker 2015, 2019, 2020; Whitmore 2018), whether the potency of phallic imagery depended upon public visibility (Parker 2017, 2020; Collins 2020), and how the embodied movement of a worn phallus may have been perceived to influence efficacy (Whitmore 2017). These studies share an increasing recognition that individual magical acts corresponded to the specific intent of the creator, and that nuanced individual choices could both reflect and influence the desired outcomes. It is also important to consider that magical acts did not exist in a vacuum, but had potential social implications; what networks were involved in procuring magical knowledge and materials? Who was sanctioned to perform or witness magical acts and by whom? What reactions might others have had to the display of amuletic devices and other ongoing or residual traces of magical acts, and would their physical engagement with it affect its potency? How did the use of one magical item interact with others in the same space or with a user already well protected by other spells, rituals, and apotropaia?

Embodied engagement with the Colsterworth antler phallus is particularly apposite considering both the form of the object and the possible use-wear evident on the surface. It is crucial to recognise that the antler does not represent the iconographic application of phallic imagery to an otherwise decorative or functional object; it is definitively a phallus, depicted at approximately life-size, three-dimensionally, and in an erect state. To take hold of the antler is to grasp the shaft of the erect phallus, and this is essential to any attempt to understand embodied, emotional and ritualised engagement with it. The phallic form is not the only aspect of the object requiring consideration, however, and before exploring its potential contextualised functionality it is necessary to examine the socio-religious materiality of deer antler in Roman Britain.

A specific relationship between antler and phallic imagery can be seen in the phallically-adorned sub-types of the antler 'roundels' known from Britain and the wider northwestern provinces (Greep 1994). Made from the burrs of shed red deer antlers, the context of these roundels is not sufficiently understood (Parker 2020, 106), though it has been suggested that they were positioned on the chests of horses (Nicolay 2007, 227, 233). While bone is well-attested as a material deemed suitable for phallic amulets, particularly 'fist and phallus' pendants (see e.g. Greep 1983a, 139–140; Deschler-Erb and Božič 2002; Parker 2015), antler does not seem to have been used for such objects. The combination of antler and phallus on the roundels therefore appears to have been contextually specific, and we can perceive an equally deliberate selection of the material and magical affordances of antler in the creation of the Colsterworth phallus. The relative choices of specific parts of the antler (burr and tine) may directly reflect the differing intended function of the finished objects.

The stag was a symbol of strength, virility and hyper-masculinity across many ancient societies (see Mykhailova and Garfinkel 2018) and possessed overt religious connections in Iron Age and Roman northwestern Europe, for example through association with the goddess Diana and her mythology,[6] Bacchic menageries, or the antler-adorned Cernunnos. Deer were animals of socio-political significance in Iron Age and Roman Britain, symbolic representations of the tension between wild and domesticated natural environments (see e.g. Aldhouse Green 2001). Restrictions in herd management, hunting, and the consumption of their meat were intrinsically connected with elite social status (e.g. Cool 2006, 114; Allen 2014; Miller and Sykes 2016). Hilary Cool has noted a disparity between the artistic prevalence of hunting imagery and the presence of the bones of deer and other game animals in archaeological assemblages (Cool 2006, 111–114). Bones and antlers from red, roe and fallow deer are represented in limited quantities in ritual assemblages at a number of religious sites,[7] perhaps reflecting selective sacrificial offerings or restricted feasting activity. Though connections may exist between such ritual deposition and the worship of anthropomorphic deities,[8] conclusive associations are difficult to attest. It is likely that the selection of deer for feasting or sacrifice was guided by other socio-religious stimuli such as the elite-dominated act of hunting[9] and the regenerative life-death cycle it represented. A burial in London's eastern cemetery of a dog, horse and deer positioned in a 'endless' circle, thought by the excavators to represent a preparatory sacrifice for the cemetery, aptly demonstrates this concept (Barber and Bowsher 2000, 19–20).

Literary evidence for the varied magico-medicinal uses of deer products reinforce the significance of the animals, associated in part with symbolic concepts of regeneration through the annual regrowth of antlers, and the aforementioned life-death cycle. Pliny the Elder records in his Natural History (see Miller and Sykes 2016, Table 1) the value of various deer products (whether burned, consumed or worn as amulets) in the treatment of ailments including epilepsy, toothache, and fertility and gynaecological issues (Miller and Sykes 2016). Miller and Sykes (2016, 14) have noted the widespread belief[10] that deer trampled snakes, and that the wearing or ingesting of deer products could therefore serve as apotropaic protection against such threats. That snakes were themselves potent symbols of regeneration seems to have only enhanced this symbiotic relationship. Miller and Sykes (2016, 10) have further argued that the breeding of fallow deer across Europe was as much driven by such medicinal and socio-religious factors as by a demand for venison, the restricted British consumption of which has been noted above.

This is not to suggest that antler was an unduly rare or restricted material, nor perceived as possessing these magical properties by all people, throughout the Roman period and in all contexts. Antler working waste is found at numerous urban and rural sites (Allen et al. 2017, 217) and the material, often sourced from shed antlers rather than butchered animals, used to produce various prosaic objects such as tool handles, needles and discs. The ritualised use of antler cannot be detached from shifting social and economic networks of (cyclical and calendrical) collection, trade and processing. It has been suggested, for example, that the later and post-Roman periods saw increases both in venison consumption and the working of red deer antler acquired from butchered animals rather than as shed antler (Cool 2006, 237; Greep 2014; Hrnčiarik 2017, 19). Though we must be careful not to homogenise perceptions of the properties of antler across Roman Britain either diachronically or geographically, we equally should not assume that cognitive distinctions existed

between its practical and magical properties, for example through a belief that an antler knife handle might confer longevity, strength and durability to both the tool and its user.

In the Colsterworth phallic antler we can perhaps therefore perceive a powerful conflux of iconographic and material apotropaic and/or healing power: the potent masculine virility of the stag, the regenerative properties of the antler, and the combined apotropaic efficacy of both deer product and phallus. With this complex situation in mind, I will now discuss how it may have been practically applied, using the morphology of the Colsterworth antler and existing comparanda to suggest various hypothetical contexts, demonstrating the versatility and contextual specificity of phallic imagery.

Flexible phalli – interpreting potential contexts

The lack of a detailed find context makes it unwise to propose a definitive interpretation for the original function of the antler phallus. As discussed above, key to its interpretation is whether it represents a discrete, disembodied phallic image or was embodied as part of a larger anthropomorphic image. It is also important to consider its situational context, that is to say how it was perceived to variably benefit the individuals or groups who created, encountered or touched it,[11] or the thing to which it was attached. The size of the antler in comparison with phallic amuletic devices such as bone or copper alloy pendants (e.g. Merrifield 1987; Plouviez 2005; Parker 2015; Whitmore 2017) and the lack of a clear means of suspension suggest that it was not intended to be worn on the body.

A fragment of an ithyphallic statue?

The first consideration is that the antler may represent a fragment from an anthropomorphic, ithyphallic statue, perhaps partially or entirely of organic materials. Though the antler might invite connection with Cernunnos, anthropomorphic depictions of that deity are extremely unusual in Britain[12] and examples from Gaul and Germany show that they are also not usually ithyphallic; the deity is generally seated cross-legged as seen on the 'Pillar of the Sailors' from Paris, a relief from Reims or the Gundestrup cauldron (see Kiernan 2020, 105–112). An association with a figure such as Priapus therefore seems more feasible. Priapus is attested in Britain anthropomorphically through stone sculptures such as at Vindolanda (See Figure 4 and Birley 2007) and in the form of copper alloy statuettes and herms. Emma Durham (2012, 3.17) noted 13 of these from Britain, and others have been subsequently recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme. A stone relief depiction of a horned god from Birrens (RIB2106) with an accompanying inscription reading '[P] riapi m(entula)', 'the phallus of Priapus', is of particular note as, despite not being an ithyphallic depiction, it specifically combines a horned deity with the phallus of Priapus.

It is worth noting that although the phallus is broadly life-sized, the whole statue need not have been; the deliberately outrageous visual disproportion of Priapic imagery represented a key aspect of its apotropaic power. The polished sections of the phallus might therefore represent embodied interaction with an in-situ statue, touching it perhaps perceived as activating or maintaining its power, or transferring some of it to the toucher.[13] Such contact invites comparison with the rubbing of apotropaic devices such as jet gorgoneia pendants or amber amulets (Parker 2016; Davis 2018), the texture and

Figure 4. Priapus figure and disembodied stone phallus on display at Vindolanda. Author's photograph.

warmth of the antler providing haptic feedback which mimicked a biological phallus and might have been perceived as a physical manifestation of its apotropaic efficacy.

The lack of evidence for attachment (such as perforations) suggest that the phallus might have been held in place with bindings or resin. Alternatively, the socket of the hollow antler might have been fitted onto a projecting 'bolt' which may even have been viewed as an inverted act of penetration.

A disembodied apotropaic device on a building or vehicle?

Such an attachment method would also have enabled the phallus to have been used as an independent apotropaic device, perhaps placed upon or within a building or other structure. In this scenario it presumably served a comparable function to the numerous examples of phalli inscribed or relief-carved in stone: protecting a structure, fort or even a whole town and its occupants from malevolent misfortune. The use of antler rather than more durable stone may suggest that it occupied an interior or covered position, and the use of phalli has been particularly noted at places of transition such as doorways and boundaries (Johns 1989, 64).

Unlike depictions in stone which were usually two-dimensional, the antler would have projected dramatically (even aggressively) into the space, and Rob Collins has suggested that an unusual, sculpted stone phallus discovered near the west gate at Vindolanda (Figure 4) may have been similarly positioned (Vindolanda SF6000. See Collins 2020, 288, 292, cat. 44; Parker 2017, cat., 40). Such a juxtaposition, turning the phallus from wall decoration to an active presence projecting into 'human' space, may

have represented a powerful reminder of its presence and ongoing agency. The possible use-wear in this scenario may reflect engagement with the phallus to activate or maintain its power in the same manner as discussed above.

The light weight and versatility of the antler phallus would also have made it capable of being fitted to a vehicle, perhaps mounted onto the end of a pole or yoke, or suspended using the hollow core from the side or even underneath to mimic an anatomical positioning.[14] Apotropaic imagery associated with wheeled vehicles is not well attested archaeologically but has been particularly noted in association with linchpins (e.g. Bird 1997; Parker and McKie 2019) and the need for such magical protection, particularly for the wheels, can be easily envisaged in a landscape where damage on a journey must have been a constant threat. Whitmore (2018, 23–4) has noted a particular connection between phallic imagery and pack animals and we might therefore envisage the phallus positioned to particularly protect the animals pulling the vehicle, perhaps mounted on the yoke where it might also face the unknown dangers of the road ahead.

An anatomical votive offering?

Another potential interpretation is that the phallus was an anatomical votive, a representation of a fragmented body part offered either in the hope of healing or in thanks for healing already received. Such an interpretation need not, of course, be independent of any other previous function and might represent a secondary use of an existing object. A ceramic phallus found at the Heybridge temple site in Essex, for example, was seemingly broken off from a larger object, perhaps a statue (Atkinson and Preston 2015 and Figure 3), and we might presume that its previously demonstrated efficacy may have led to its selection for this secondary use. The regenerative properties of antler and potential associations with the fertility deity Cernunnos, as discussed above, might have made the combination of phallus and antler a powerful fertility offering, and Aldhouse Green (2004, 90–102) has suggested that the affordances of organic materials might have made them a suitable substitute for human sacrificial offerings. We should be cautious of overly-literal interpretations of the relationship between fragmented anatomical votives and illness or injury to that body part, however (Shörner 2015, 399; Graham and Draycott 2017), and a phallic offering might symbolically represent more abstract desires for strength, virility or regeneration. Though the efficacy of votive deposition does not seem to have required a formal healing shrine (Smith 2016), the lack of a detailed find context for the phallic antler unfortunately makes such a formal depositional act impossible to demonstrate.

The handle of a tool or vessel, or a spout?

Antler was a common material for handles and the form of the antler phallus is accommodating to such an interpretation. Knife and razor handles, whether of fixed or clasp form, could be vehicles for a varied and intriguing array of iconographic motifs including apotropaic, hunting and sexual imagery (Crummy 2011, 112; Pearce, Bolton, and Worrell 2020; Pearce 2020), and therefore offer interesting comparanda.[15] Phallic iconography is present, though often subtly, on handles of antler (e.g. Sollas, North Uist [Campbell 1991, 158, Illus.

Figure 5. Phallic knife handle on display at Corbridge Roman Museum. Author's photograph.

21:637]), bone (e.g. Corbridge [Figure 5]), and wood (e.g. a sickle handle in the Blackburn Mill hoard [Piggott 1952–3, 9; National Museum of Scotland online ID 000–100-034-901-C]). A copper-alloy dog-headed knife handle from Claxby with Moorby, Lincolnshire (PAS: NCL-864495) has the head of a phallus 'hidden' as the dog's jawline.

The majority of fixed bone and antler knife handles in Roman Britain were attached via a spiked tang driven into a solid tine or were bone or antler plates rivetted to a broad tang (Mould 2011, 168). Though the hollow core of the Colsterworth phallus presents a large cavity, a tang could have been secured with wooden wedges or through the use of a ferrule and washer (Greep 1983b, 375–376; MacGregor 1985, 168–169), though no traces of metal fittings are detectable. The handles of paterae, however, are well-attested across Britain and offer a better visual parallel in terms of their cylindrical form and wide socket. Although most commonly of copper alloy, bone examples are known, such as that bearing a lion's head from Mursa, Croatia (Kovač 2019, 114 and Figure 5), and antler examples remain plausible. A common form of patera handle consisted of a plain or fluted shaft with an animal head (particularly a ram or dog/wolf) terminal,[16] a morphology which broadly parallels the antler phallus. These vessels have been shown to have had ritual connotations (Cool 2006, 47) which would befit the presence of apotropaic imagery. A patera from Faversham, Kent, now in the British Museum (1882,0405.1) bears apotropaic gorgon imagery, and a carving of a similar object can be seen on the side of an altar from Vindolanda (RIB1685), now in the Clayton Museum at Chesters Roman Fort.

As discussed above, the embodied act of grasping the phallus would necessarily be overt and deliberate, transforming its usage from a casual to a focused act; perhaps serving to heighten the ritualised nature of the pouring of a libation. Apotropaic protection may have been deemed valuable to avert any inauspicious event which might affect the correct performance of the ritual, and serves to further blur the definitional distinction between magical practices and more formal religious rites.

Before leaving the idea that the antler represents part of a tool or vessel, the possibility that the fully hollow core might have served as a spout of some kind must also be considered. A ceramic phallic spout is known from nearby Lincoln (Darling and Precious 2014, 159) and it remains feasible that the antler might have been used for the pouring of liquids. A possible connection might be made here with reliefs which depict erect phalli 'attacking' the evil eye by ejaculating on it (Parker 2017, 117–118; Parker); the pouring of liquid through the phallus perhaps perceived as providing additional apotropaic cleansing or the conference of virility to whatever it was poured upon. The question of what type of vessel it might have been attached to, however, remains uncertain. The entire vessel may have been of an organic material such as leather, or indeed the phallus independently used in such a manner without attachment.

A sexual implement or ribald joke?

It has been noted that the intrinsic sexual connotations of phallic imagery should not be viewed as of greater significance than their symbolic meaning and ritual functionality (Johns 1989, 75; Greep 1994; Ivleva and Collins 2020b). However, the dimensions of the antler phallus mean that its potential function as a sexual implement cannot be dismissed as easily as with smaller amuletic phallic devices. Similarly, the potential for the phallus to represent an example of casual, ribald, whittling intended to amuse must also be recognised. However, as such interpretations are impossible to either prove or disprove, they will not be explored any further here and, as referenced above, cannot in any case be entirely detached from the symbolic significance of phallic imagery.

Concluding thoughts

The socio-religious networks existing between those who created, used and subsequently encountered phallic imagery, wider socio-economic factors relating to the availability of antler, and materio-medical and materio-magical concepts of its properties were complex, varied and shifting. Through consideration of these complex relationships we might explore our definitions of the comparative concepts of religion and magic, and whether these definitions accurately reflect the practical application of apotropaic magic in Roman Britain.

The potential contexts for the Colsterworth antler phallus explored here demonstrate the versatility of embodied and disembodied phallic imagery in Roman Britain and the difficulties inherent in adopting homogenous interpretations, such as attempting to consider it solely within restrictive frameworks of sexuality, fertility or generic 'good luck'. The selection of antler for the creation of the phallus was likely not entirely due to the mechanical affordances or availability of the material but a deliberate choice reflecting beliefs in its medico-magical properties, and its manufacture conducted with defined and

tangible, though now obscure, outcomes envisioned. The options discussed here, despite not being exhaustive, demonstrate the variety of contextualised applications to which phallic imagery might have been applied, and how these depended on the object being used in combination with other objects, specific places, or ritual words or movements.

This unusual addition to the corpus of antler objects from Roman Britain reinforces the need for consideration of the significance of the materials employed in magical acts, and of the potential ongoing social and ritual implications of embodied engagement with such objects. Just as we should be cautious of homogenising 'magical' practices, we need to recognise the subtle polysemic nature of phallic imagery as it was applied in differing contexts and with different intended outcomes. Every depiction of a phallus in Roman Britain represents an attempt to meet a specific and defined spiritual need and should be approached accordingly as a unique ritual act with myriad potential implications for its creator and those who subsequently encountered it.

Notes

1. The Lincolnshire HER (33894) notes the grid reference as SK926241
2. The phallus is accessioned as LCNGR: 1995.4472 and the other finds under LCNGR: 1995.3682 and LCNGR: 1995.4471
3. Lincolnshire HER (33881). The villa was discovered in 1815 but its form and dating are not well understood
4. Associations between phallic imagery and Roman military sites have previously been noted, as has their presence at quarrying and other non-domestic locations. See e.g. Greep (1994, 87 and Figure 3); Parker (2015, 14, 2017); Collins (2020)
5. Attested in numerous examples in Italy and perhaps also in a relief carving from Maryport in the form of a figure with a multi-phallic head or item of headgear (Coulston 1997, 116–117, Fig 8.8)
6. Such as the Ceryneian Hind or Actaeon
7. King (2005). Allen (2018,131, 189–190) notes a consistent but low-level presence of antler in both Iron Age and Roman period rural structured deposits, but that it appears in deposits at religious sites with slightly increased frequency. Some religious sites, such as Heybridge, have also produced copper alloy deer figurines (Henig 2015)
8. E.g. the worship of Cernunnos suggested at Lamyatt Beacon, see King (2005). As Smith (2016, 646) has noted the depositional context of animal bone is as significant as the quantity and species present
9. Hingley (2018, 204–5), for example, suggests that deer bone deposits in wells at Southwark may represent ritual feasting to mark an individual's change in social status
10. Even suggesting from literary sources that the belief may have spread to the Graeco-Roman world from Han Dynasty China
11. This includes an acceptance that although the phallus is definitively masculine, those who created or benefitted from its iconographic representation need not have been
12. A copper alloy spatula handle possibly depicting the deity has been recently excavated at Wimpole Hall, Cambridgeshire (Lyons 2019, 431–432)
13. Though other ritual performances such as the recitation of words or specific gestures might also have been required
14. Pliny the Elder (Natural History 28.7) references a phallus being suspended beneath triumphal chariots to ward off the effects of envy directed towards the victorious general
15. The example Pearce discusses is from Syston, only c.10 miles north of Colsterworth
16. E.g. Moore (1973), who discusses a dog-headed patera handle discovered only c.15 miles from the antler phallus

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