

NOTES

A STATUETTE OF MERCURY FROM ILCHESTER

In 1963 Masters and Sons (builders) had mains drainage installed at Kingshams House, Ilchester, which involved cutting trenches to the north and west of the house. In the course of this work Frederick Masters discovered a Hamstone figure. The exact find spot of the statuette is unknown and it lacks any kind of archaeological context. The significance of the carving was not recognised at the time and it was placed outside, adjacent to the front door of the house. Following the death of Mr Masters in 2000 the figure attracted the attention of Mr Gerry Masters who, via Roy Scutchings, sought more information on the piece through the Somerset County Museum, Taunton. The statuette has been donated to Ilchester Museum.

Carved from a piece of Hamstone, the statuette shows a male figure complete apart from his head and feet but badly weathered and abraded (Fig. 1). It has a total height of 260mm. While the feet may have broken off subsequent to burial, the position of the head is marked by a socket 58mm in depth and of oval cross-section, 20mm by 16mm, showing that at one stage at any rate the head was separate from the body and affixed by means of a pin which presumably went through the neck of the figure as well as the body. Whether this was always the case or a modification following damage is not known. A sandstone head of a woman in Rowley's House Museum, Shrewsbury, has a piercing underneath suggestive of similar affixture (Henig forthcoming). Another smaller hole on the left side of the Ilchester figure, some 8.5mm in depth and 6mm in diameter, also seems to be deliberate and was almost certainly primary; its significance is discussed below.

The figure is nude apart from the garment enveloping his shoulders and hanging down on his left side in a series of attractive folds. He sits upon a throne with a plain straight back and a pronounced moulding on the right side, the left being obscured by the hem of his cloak. This is, properly speaking, a paenula, or travelling cloak, as worn by the god Mercury. A standing figure of Mercury is shown wearing a paenula on a limestone statuette from Cirencester (Henig 1993a, 24–5, no. 71 and pl. 17; 1996, 99–100, fig. 11.4) as are two near identical images of the god from Old Ford and Moorgate, London (Henig 1996, 99–100, figs. 11.2 and 11.3), both likewise of limestone and attributed to Cotswold sculptors.

Seated figures of Mercury in stone are not so common and of the little statuette of the god, seated next to his consort 'Rosmerta' from Swalcliffe, Oxfordshire (Henig 1993a, 28 no. 82, pl. 23), only the legs remain. However, a splendid statue of Mercury, seated and wearing a paenula in the manner of the Ilchester statuette, was found in the Mithraeum at Stockstadt in Germany (Baucchhenss 1992, 544, no. 459; pl. 302). He is holding an image of the infant Bacchus in the very position of the hole on the left side of the Ilchester Mercury and maybe such a miniature figure could have been attached here, though a perhaps more likely attribute is the herald's staff or caduceus almost invariably carried by Mercury.

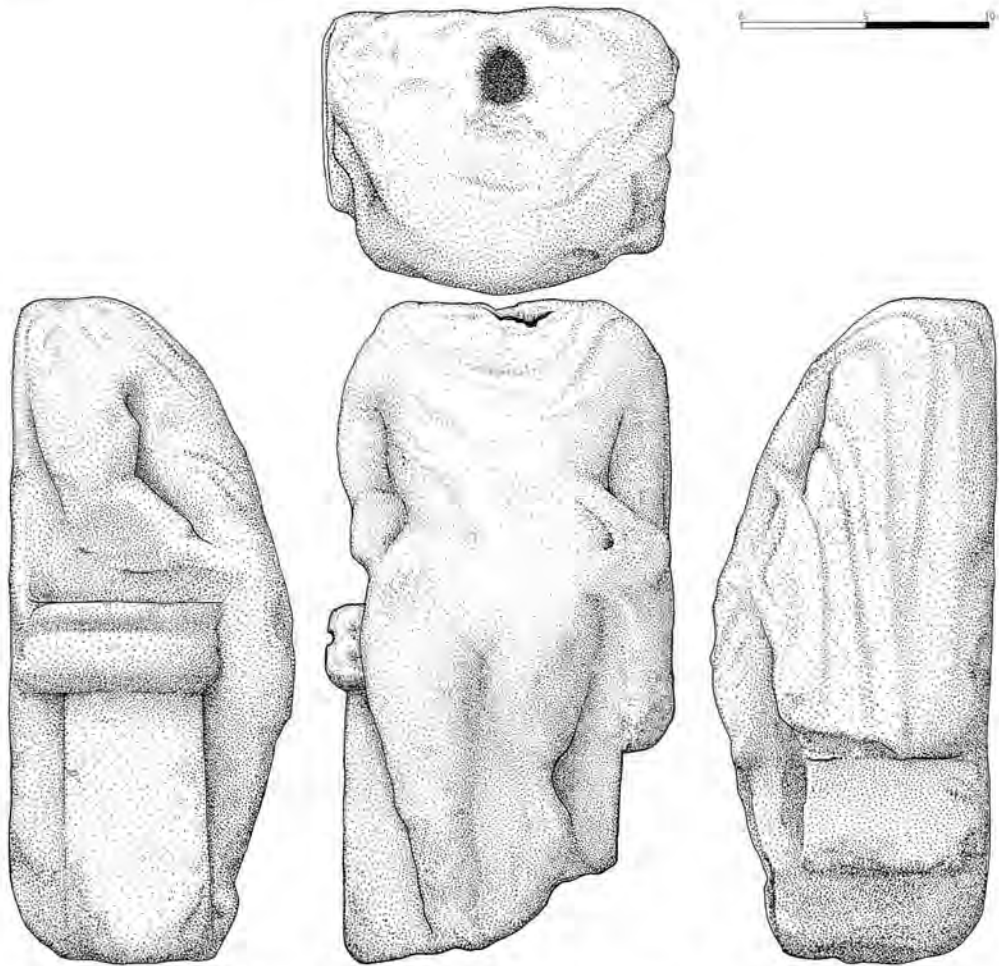


Fig. 1 Hamstone statuette from Ilchester; scale 1:3

The veneration of Mercury was widespread in the north-western provinces including Britain where a temple dedicated to him and containing a considerable quantity of sculpture was fairly recently excavated at Uley, Gloucestershire (Henig 1993b). It would not be surprising if the Ilchester carving likewise came from a temple though, as the god most friendly to man in his daily life, a statuette of Mercury would not be out of place in a house shrine either. In general terms the statuette under discussion may be related stylistically to Cotswold work and is a very important addition to the sculpture corpus of south-western Britain both because Roman sculpture is relatively rare in Somerset (apart, of course, from Bath) and because it is a significant addition to the iconography of Mercury in Roman Britain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Gerry Masters and Roy Scutchings for bringing the statuette to their attention and allowing and assisting in its recording, Dr Catherine Johns for discussing it with us, and Michael Trevarthen for the drawing.

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