

Pietrasanta's Greek Warriors

The Bronzes of Riace are two life-size warrior statues dating from about 460 B.C. In 1972, they were discovered and raised from the Ionian Sea, a short distance from the coast.

After restoration, the statues were placed in the nearby Museo Nazionale della Magna Graecia at Reggio-Calabria, where I was fortunate to be able to visit them in 1986. Previously, in the summer of 1981, they had been shown in Rome and Florence, but concerns about possible damage meant they would no longer travel.

Between 1990 and 1995, the Massimo Del Chiaro Art Foundry at Pietrasanta made copies of the bronzes.*

For the 50th anniversary of their emergence from the sea, art historian Vittorio Sgarbi proposed taking the bronzes on tour, but the museum custodians decided against this, again citing the risks involved. Instead, last month, in a project known as *Rewind* (by Roberto Del Chiaro and Federica Rotondo of *Once Extraordinary Events*), the Del Chiaro copies were ceremoniously placed into the waters of the Versilia coast at Tonfano, near the Lido di Pietrasanta pier. To keep them from drifting away, the bronzes were moored to large concrete blocks at a depth of two meters. In this way, they are visible from above the water and represent a permanent connection between Magna Graecia and Pietrasanta.

Why are these bronzes so famous?

Very few complete human statues from classical Greek culture still exist, since they were often melted down to make coins, or perhaps destroyed as a way of diminishing the cultures they represented, as is occurring in wars even today. These examples of lost wax casting represent the highest level of aesthetic beauty. Despite spending 2500 years in seawater, they were found in extremely good condition, although accessory items such as head coverings, shields, and swords, or any sign of a shipwreck, have not yet been found in the area.

These beautiful, idealized figures surely represented warrior-gods of their time, in the heroic, Homeric tradition. Statue A, standing 198 cm (6 foot 6 inches), appears the younger of the two. Statue B seems to be older, and is just a bit taller. They seem poised yet ready for combat. According to classical archaeologists Salvatore Settis (from Pisa) and Vinzenz Brinkmann (from Frankfurt), they could be representations of Erechtheus, son of Athena, and Eumolpos, son of Poseidon. Pausanias in his *Description of Greece* says they were shown on the Parthenon. Another theory is that they are of Tydeus and Amphiarus from the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.), cited in the play by Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* (the expedition of Argos against Thebes). Since classical Greek history and mythology are so closely intertwined, with characters shifting shapes and identities, it is difficult for us to know for sure.

According to the archaeologists, Statue A is Greek and B is Thracian. Based on analysis of the soil found inside Statue A, it was probably made in Argos. The shape of their heads adds more evidence. Statue A would have had a bronze helmet, while B would have had a typical fox-skin cap known as *alopekis*. They could have been brought from Argos, Delphi, or Olympia, since these areas were plundered after the Roman occupation (146 B.C. to 330 A.D.). Among the sculptors proposed as creators of these masterpieces are Myron and Alkamenes (a student of Phidias).



Many questions still exist concerning the Riace bronzes. According to some reports, a third statue may have been stolen shortly after the time of discovery, as well as items such as spears, shields, and headgear. The mystery adds intrigue.

As lovers of classical antiquity, we can spend many hours deepening our understanding of these statues and their origins. Or, we may simply go down to the coast, peer into the water, and let our musings guide us.

– by Norma Jean Bishop

*NOTE: Copies made in Frankfurt by the Leibighaus Polychromy Research Project are currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of New York (until March 2023).

Below, an experimental reconstruction of the bronzes as Erechtheus & Eumolpos (Frankfurt Liebieghaus Polychromy Research Project, Brinkmann & Koch-Brinkmann.) Photo from Wikipedia site *Bronzi_di_Riace*.

