

Heroic Deities in the Upper Adriatic Hinterland during the Late Iron Age and the Late Republican Period

Mitja GUŠTIN

Abstract

The article presents small votive bronze figurines from the eastern Upper Adriatic region, which allow us to trace, albeit indirectly, significant religious beliefs among the local population from the mid-first millennium BCE to the beginning of the Roman Empire.

Iron Age religious practices on the Apennine Peninsula and the fringes of the Eastern Alps included offerings of bronze figurines – mostly heroic warriors – used in sanctuaries to petition for prosperity, health, and success in battle. Among the Veneti, this belief system is reflected in sanctuaries filled with numerous votive offerings of figurines and plaques that illustrate their society's structure and spiritual life. However, with the establishment of the Roman emporium of Aquileia and the Roman expansion toward the eastern Alps, the 2nd century BCE marks a turning point: in the context of Romanization, the traditional offerings of local communities were gradually replaced by deities from the Roman pantheon.

Keywords: Venetic *ex-voto* bronzes; warriors; Hercules

Izvleček

Junaška božanstva v zgornjejadranskem zaledju v mlajši železni dobi in poznorepublikanskem rimskem obdobju

V prispevku predstavljamo votivne bronaste figurice z območja vzhodnega zgornjega Jadrana, s katerimi lahko posredno sledimo pomembnim verskim predstavam tamkajšnjega prebivalstva od sredine 1. tisočletja pr. n. št. pa do začetka rimskega cesarstva.

Železnodobne verske prakse Apeninskega polotoka in tudi obrobja vzhodnih Alp so poznale bronaste kipce, v največji meri herojske vojščake, s katerimi so v svetiščih priprošnjevali blagostanje, zdravje in srečo na bojnem polju. Pestrost tega verovanja se pri Venetih kaže v svetiščih s številnimi votivi v obliki kipcev in ploščic, ki ponazarjajo tamkajšnjo družbo in njeno verovanje. Z vzpostavitev rimskega emporija Akvileje in prodiranjem proti vzhodnim Alpam pa so v 2. stoletju pr. n. št. v kontekstu romanizacije stare daritve lokalnih skupnosti zamenjala božanstva rimskega panteona.

Ključne besede: Venetski *ex voto* kipci; bojevniki; Herkul

Among the personalities who have had a significant impact on the Slovenian and European historiography of earlier periods, it is impossible to overlook the scholarly legacy of Jaroslav Šašel. This memorial inspires us to choose a topic to which he, had he been able to edit these texts, would undoubtedly have contributed insightful comments that would have enriched and broadened the discussion. It is also important to emphasize his generosity in collaborating with peers and younger generations, and his efforts to integrate archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, and written sources. He often encouraged us to do just this, but because of our narrow or highly specialized approaches, we, his successors, have not sufficiently managed to implement his vision, although it could have accelerated new research through a more collective approach.

For my own contribution to this work, I decided to use small votive figurines from the upper Adriatic region to illustrate how, in sanctuaries and in the context of Romanization, the old *ex-voto* offerings of local communities were replaced by figurines depicting deities of the Roman pantheon.

Collecting these specific bronze figurines has a long tradition in archaeological research.¹ These votive figurines, between 5 to 12 cm high, often lack reliable chronological anchors, and they undoubtedly had a very long lifespan. Moreover, a bronze figurine could be passed down through several generations within the same family before finally being deposited as an offering in a cult site or a sanctuary. Consequently, the dating of individual figurines must consider the general chronological framework for each typology and the historical and archaeological (contextual) circumstances surrounding each artefact.

Although the development of stylistic representations of figurines seems clear, the precise dating of these bronzes often remains elusive for various reasons. Dating is based on the canons of Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic art, which span centuries and do not allow precise chronological determinations, nor do they provide dates for the burial or offering of items. Sanctuaries are also generally of long duration, lasting for centuries, and typically lack chronological stratigraphy.

Different groups of similarly shaped figurines and plaques from Pre-Roman Venetic sanctuaries – for example, in Este and Padua – allow us to identify local workshops specialized in different cults and deities. During the Venetic Iron Age, figurines were found exclusively in places of worship or sanctuaries. Outside this spiritual and cultural area, the two warrior bronzes from Vače and Idrija pri Bači, found in graves, are an exception, as they were most likely used as the tip of a sceptre, a symbol of a leader (*primus inter pares*) of the local community.² In contrast, Roman deity figurines were found not only in places of worship, but also in homes as part of household shrines (*lararia*).

Among the figurines of the heroic deities in the sanctuaries of the Apennine Peninsula during the mid-first millennium BCE, the Etruscan production, developed under

¹ The article is based on the catalogue of bronzes, Guštin 2025, with relevant literature.

² Guštin 2025, 19–22, 27–31, figs. 6; 11: 1.



Fig. 1: Mars of Sanzeno (1; photo Museo del Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trento) and libation figure of San Pietro Montagnon (2; Montegrotto near Padua, photo Musei Civici agli Eremitani, courtesy of the Municipality of Padua – all rights reserved).

strong Greek influence, was very popular in the Italic world between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE. Realistically shaped representations of Mars, equipped with a helmet, composite armour, and greaves, prevailed. It is therefore not surprising that, following the passages across the Alps, we find two valuable Etruscan examples of this deity among the votive offerings in the prehistoric settlement of Sanzeno in Trentino (Fig. 1: 1).³

This expression of power strongly influenced the northern Italic world and the Alpine tribes. A fine local example of Etruscan derivation is a libation figure from the Padua region, holding a patera *mesomphalos* in his right hand and an Etruscan-style spouted pitcher in his left (Fig. 1: 2).⁴

The practice of offering small bronze figurines was widespread throughout the Apennine Peninsula, and it is possible to distinguish between examples belonging, for instance, to the Umbrians, Latins, Sardinians, or Picenes. The sanctuaries of the Veneti in Este, Padua, Montegrotto, and Altino, for instance, are particularly important for our discussion of the fringes of the Upper Adriatic hinterland, known for the rich votive offerings dedicated to numerous local Iron Age deities between the 7th and 4th centuries

³ Roncador 2017, 167–168, fig. 8.3; Guštin 2025, 42–44, fig. 19.

⁴ De Min 1976, 196, pl. 35: 31; Guštin 2025, 11, fig. 2.



Fig. 2: The *ex voto* warriors: 1 Este-Scolo di Lozzo (photo Museo Atestino Este); 2 Padua (photo Musei Civici agli Eremitani, courtesy of the Municipality of Padua – all rights reserved).

BCE.⁵ In addition to their long history, settlements and large necropolises with numerous cremation tombs and grave goods that largely reflect their way of life, the community of the ancient Veneti is also famous for its many sanctuaries with an unimaginable number of *ex-votos*, which give an insight into their sacred rites and the variety of votive objects that are one of the most valuable sources of knowledge about their religious life.

The votive inventory of the sanctuaries consisted not only of bronze figurines – small sculptures: ithyphallic figures, devotees, draped statuettes, warriors, and horsemen – but also of decorated bronze plaques depicting devotees and other various votive offerings such as ceramic vases, cups, bowls, and clay spindle whorls. Some *ex-votos* bear Venetic inscriptions with the names of the offerors and sometimes of the deities. At the same time, plaques depicting eyes or other anatomical parts testify to the healing properties of the sacred or thermal waters around which sanctuaries and places of worship were built.⁶

The Veneti did not include the burial of weapons in their funerary rituals, so our knowledge of their weaponry comes primarily from its abundant representation among votive offerings in sanctuaries (Fig. 2) and depictions on objects decorated in the Situla art style.⁷ Images of warriors equipped with a spear and a shield, either at rest or in the act of throwing a spear, or performing a libation with a bowl, the typical

⁵ Ruta Serafini 2002.

⁶ Càssola Guida 1978; Walde Psenner 1983; Dämmer, von den Driesch, Lazaro 1986; Zampieri 1986; Càssola Guida 1989; Jurgeit 1999; Fogolari, Gambacurta 2001; Chieco Bianchi 2002.

⁷ Cf. Turk 2005; Eibner 2018.

Italic patera in their hand, predominate (Fig. 2). To a lesser extent, figurines of worshippers holding only a cup, as well as athletes or standing male and female figures, also appear.

Votive figures are predominantly male, especially standing warriors – hoplites – and exceptionally horsemen on horseback. They are generally nude and ithyphallic, most of them depicted as ‘attacking warriors’ wearing a crested helmet with a spear in the right hand in a throwing position. Some are depicted as offering warriors in the act of libation, holding a bowl in their right hand. Their ithyphallism is prominently and meticulously represented, unlike situla art, where civilian men wear long tunics and warriors have their ithyphallic features ‘covered’ by a large shield.

Such *ex-votos*, consisting of bronze figurines depicting warriors, primarily from the sanctuaries of the Veneto region and the central Alpine areas, are important votive offerings from the Iron Age. They are crucial for understanding the identity and religious practices of the protohistoric populations that lived along the coast and inland areas of the Caput Adriae.

In this world of prehistoric rituals associated with the Iron Age societies of the Pre-Roman Venetic population and those of the neighbouring regions south of the Eastern Alps, the presence of *ex-votos* of the Hellenistic-Roman world gradually intensified.

Since the beginning of the 2nd century BCE, Aquileia, situated on the banks of the Natisone River, several kilometres from the large lagoons of the northern Adriatic, was undoubtedly a starting point for exploratory and military expeditions towards the Eastern Alps and further to Pannonia and the Balkans. Aquileia was also a centre for producing and distributing Late Republican Italic goods such as jewellery, various bronzes and ceramics, which significantly influenced the material culture of the indigenous communities.⁸ This vast area was gradually Romanized with the arrival of Roman legions and colonists from the central Apennine Peninsula.⁹

The Roman deities brought by the newcomers from their homeland, notably the legendary Hercules, typically depicted in an attacking pose with his club (Fig. 3: 1), as well as the two Beleno-Apollo bronze deities from the Ljubljana River,¹⁰ entered the eastern hinterland of Caput Adriae in full force. They more or less replaced the earlier Venetian warrior votive traditions, and began to appear in local sanctuaries in Carnia, the Soča Valley, and Carinthia (Fig. 4). They penetrated either as products of Italic workshops sent far to the east (Fig. 3: 1) or were produced in Aquileia and distributed in the hinterland of Caput Adriae (Fig. 3: 2) or even as locally produced imitations – clearly reflecting the intensity of Romanization even in the spiritual sphere (Fig. 3: 3).

In Pre-Roman/Roman sanctuaries, such as Kobarid-Gradič,¹¹ or Celtic/Roman

⁸ Zaccaria 2003.

⁹ Horvat, Bernardini, Belak 2023.

¹⁰ Gaspari, Krempuš 2002; Istenič 2002.

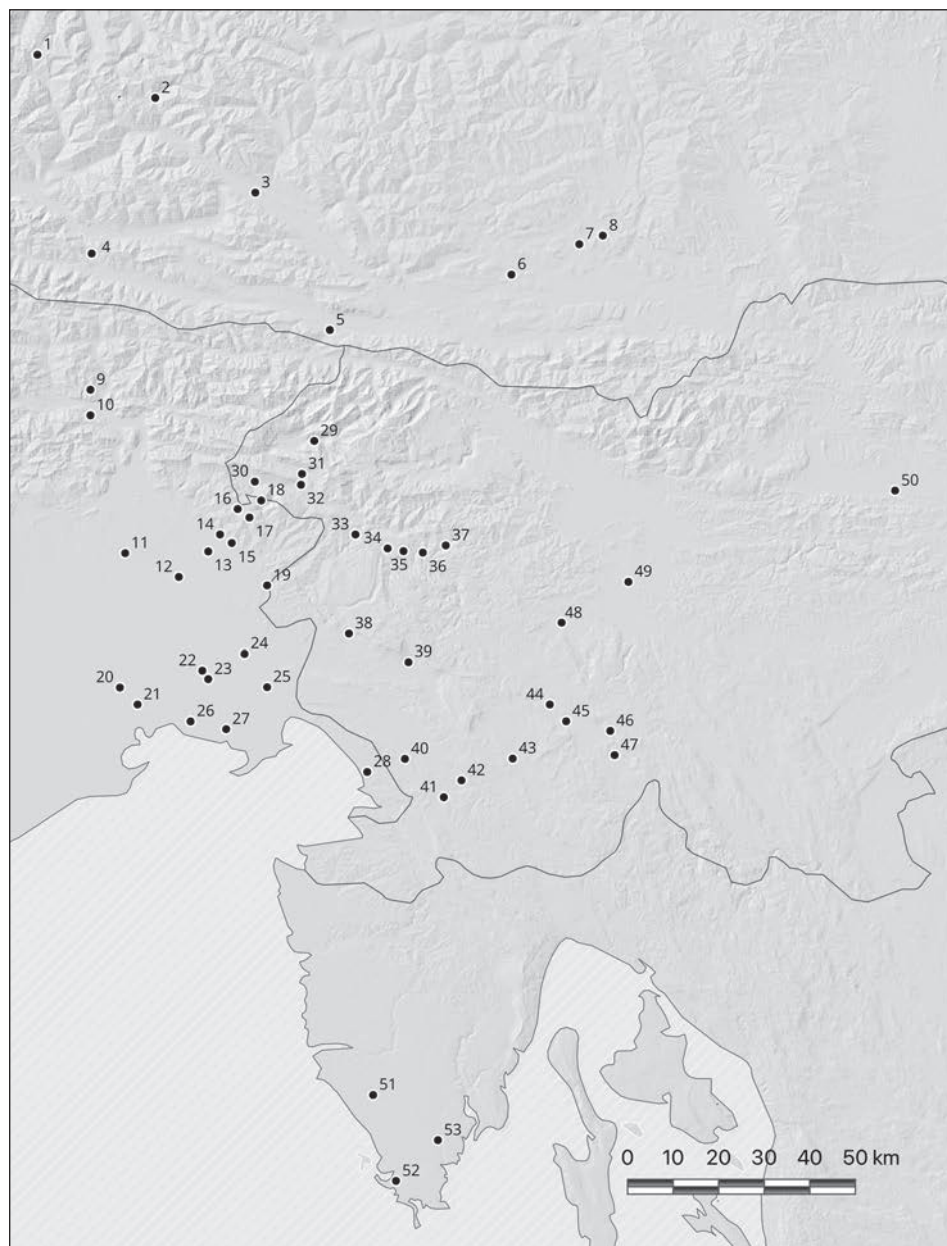
¹¹ Osmuk 1987.



Fig. 3: Hercules: 1 Celje (photo Pokrajinski muzej Celje). Votive donors: 2 Sežana (photo K. Brešan, Goriški muzej); 3 Gradič near Kobarid (after Osmuk 1987).

→ Fig. 4: The map illustrates the distribution of votive bronze representations of Roman deities and other Italic artefacts, found either as isolated discoveries or within the context of sacred places and sanctuaries in the eastern hinterland of Caput Adriae during the last two centuries BCE:

1 Hochtor-Glocknerweg, 2 Mallnitzer Tauern, 3 Teurnia, 4 Gurina, 5 Straßfried-Schloßberg, 6 Moosburg-Gradenegg, 7 Sankt Michael am Zollfeld, 8 Magdalensberg, 9 Raveo-Monte Sorantri, 10 Verzegnis-Colle Mazéit, 11 Fagagna and "near" Fagagna, 12 Udine-San Gottardo, 13 Gagliano-Santa Maria delle Grazie, 14 Lasiz, 15 Torreano di Cividale and agro di Cividale, 16 Monte Barda-Roba, 17 Costne-San Mattia, 18 *Schiavonia* (Valli del Natisone), 19 Prepotto, 20 Teor-Pizzat, 21 Muzzana del Turgnano, 22 Sevegliano, 23 Strassoldo, 24 Medea-Monte di Medea, 25 Redipuglia, 26 Scodovacca, 27 Aquileia, 28 Trieste-stipe di Gretta, 29 Bovec-Ravelnik, 30 Homec, 31 Kobarid-Tonovcov grad, 32 Kobarid-Gradič, 33 Most na Soči, 34 Pečine-Vrh gradu, 35 Šentviška Gora-Berlotov rob, 36 Reka-Grad, 37 Cerkno-Gradišče, 38 Loke-Kolenovca, 39 Lokavec-Kovačevše, 40 Sežana, 41 Rodik-Ajdovščina 42 Stara Sušica-Parti, 43 Slavina-Ambrožovo gradišče, 44 Unec-Stari grad, 45 Dolenja vas-Tržišče, 46 Bločice-Žerovnišček, 47 Stari trg pri Ložu-Ulaka, 48 Blatna Brezovica-Ljubljana, 49 Ljubljana-Grad and Dvorišče SAZU, 50 Celje, 51 Bale-Tujan, 52 Pula, 53 Nesactium (completed after Guštin 2025, fig. 42).



← Fig. 4

sanctuaries, such as Gurina,¹² Straßfried-Schloßberg bei Thörl-Maglern (Slov. Vrata-Megvarje)¹³ and Magdalensberg¹⁴ in the Eastern Alps, we also find locally produced, simple male and female figures, as well as the Roman deities. These artefacts represent local craftsmen's responses to the precious, high-quality Italic bronze statuettes. It is evident that some simply formed Roman deities were made much earlier and dedicated centuries later in sanctuaries, constructed long after the figurines were made.

The noble Hercules Dexiomenos, adorned with a rich crown of leaves from Gurina,¹⁵ is an example of the work of high-quality workshops, undoubtedly of Italic origin, and perhaps even from Aquileia, dating to the Augustan period prior to the destruction of the Roman settlement of Gurina in the earthquake of 14 CE.¹⁶ The stylized lion's head on the left shoulder resembles that of certain Hercules figures from the sanctuary at Gradič near Kobarid (*Fig. 3: 3*), and may have served as a model for their local production.

The Gradič hill in the Upper Soča Valley, now covered by a monumental ossuary for the fallen of the First World War, was used as a cult place from the end of the Early Iron Age onward, with intense sacral activity between the 2nd century BCE and the mid-first century CE. Among the 28 Hellenistic-Roman bronze figurines, products of different workshops, various deities are represented: Jupiter, Minerva, Diana, Venus, Mercury, Mars, Apollo, and multiple figures of Hercules Dexiomenos wearing a lion's skin and a crown of leaves.¹⁷ This sanctuary differs from other sanctuaries of the period in the hinterland of *Caput Adriae* due to the composition of its votive offerings and the complete absence of weaponry. It contains many Italic goods, such as pottery, bronze objects, and, above all, characteristic local depictions of Hercules holding out his right arm. This strong presence of Roman votive offerings is undoubtedly supported by the nearby Roman settlement and cemetery at Most na Soči, the graves containing Roman weapons in the Idrijca Valley and, from the mid-first century BCE onwards, also by nearby Roman outposts, later settlements such as the ones of Tergeste, Forum Iulii in Friuli, and Iulium Carnicum on the fringes of the Carnic Alps.¹⁸

Bronze figurines did not travel the world on their own. The Veneti brought them to sanctuaries and placed them in designated locations to be seen – both by the gods and the offerors. In the Late Republican period, merchants, legionaries, and travellers carried them, trusting in their power and hoping for a successful future – perhaps in battle, trade, or the colonization of new lands. In this way, each bronze figurine was a sign of the spirituality of its offeror, combining both fear of the unknown and hope for a good start in a new life.

¹² Jablonka 2001.

¹³ Schuchter 2023.

¹⁴ Gleirscher, Hinterfelder 2014.

¹⁵ Jablonka 2001, 209, pl. 138.

¹⁶ Gamper 2012, 81.

¹⁷ Osmuk 1987; see also Horvat 2018, 343–347.

¹⁸ Guštin 2024, 15–18.

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Mitja Guštin
Univerza na Primorskem
Titov trg 4
SI-6000 Koper
mitja.gustin@upr.si