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## NEGOTIATING THE HERMES OF OLYMPIA

A Short History of Reception

Jyrki Siukonen

Editor in chief:
Petra Pakkanen

Series layout:
Yoon–Hee Choi

Volume editing:
Oona Luiro

Cover design:
Petra Pakkanen

Secretary's address:
Tiina Purola
saatioateena@gmail.com

Kalliolinnantie 4, 00140 Helsinki

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# PREFACE

Jyrki Siukonen

*Only in the little square room at Olympia can the case be argued out.*
Rhys Carpenter 1931

The Archaeological Museum of Olympia opens its doors at eight a.m. I am the first customer of the day. Early hours are to the purpose, for tourist guides tend to bring in large groups by eleven. I walk directly to the farthest room, the one with a single sculpture. For the next two hours I remain its only viewer. The room lacks daylight and the ceiling lamps dazzle my eyes. Conditions are not optimal but at least I can study the work undisturbed. I gaze at the marble wonder from every angle and respect the required distance which denies all closer observation. Clearly no nosing around here. When the clock turns ten, the first individual visitors and couples share the room with me. As far as I can tell, none of them spends more than twenty seconds there. Someone snaps a picture, most can't be bothered. *It's pretty*, observes one person in the doorway and swiftly turns away.

Reactions were likely to be more pronounced when the form of the present statue appeared out of the soil and dirt of Olympia on Tuesday morning, 8 May 1877. A group of German archaeologists unearthed the marble figure in the ruins of Heraion, the temple of Hera, the supposed location where the Greek travel writer Pausanias had seen it seventeen centuries before. *Their feverish delight can scarcely be imagined*, was Lucy M. Mitchell able to imagine.[1] Pausanias's words gave the excavators a good reason to believe that for the first time the modern world could lay its eyes on an original work by the master sculptor Praxiteles. This was a transnational sensation, to say the least, and so, in the following month, even newspapers in faraway Finland were happy to inform their readers that the statue was carved from Parian marble and depicted the youthful Hermes holding the infant Dionysos.[2]

I return from the Archaeological Museum of Olympia to the libraries in Athens. Having seen the real thing I wish to know how others have perceived it. *It's pretty*, I already learned, but given the hundred and fifty years on display there must be a whole variety of opinions regarding the premise of that prettiness. I find them in plenty. Andrew Stewart once remarked, perhaps as a word of warning, that it would be hubristic to claim to control the vast literature on the Olympian Hermes.[3] Be that as it may, on the following pages I attempt to grasp a major part of it and to offer the first historical overview.[4] As a narrative of different ways of looking it may serve students of cultural history and be of interest to people working in the vicinity of art, possibly even with it.

I seek not only to explain the evolution of the arguments for and against the authenticity of the Hermes, formulated most famously in the early 1930s and renewed ever since, but also something of the psychological impact, as it was felt from the moment of the recovery of the statue. *There is an expression of dreaminess, of gentleness which though not in itself emotional has a distinctly emotional appeal*, Gisela Richter wrote in 1929.[5] The physical evidence was strong enough to even inspire poetic explanations and intuitive ideas. Such interpretations, often easier to prove wrong than right, form an essential part of the story of the Olympian Hermes. The not always subtle changes in academic discourse over the past hundred and fifty years also become clear. This stylistic richness has been one of the pleasures of this project, a pleasure which I have tried to share by quoting liberally from different authors. With a view to brevity, however, certain aspects of the story are left out. I will pass over

1 Mitchell 1883, 437.
2 *Wiborgs Tidning* 1877; *Morgonbladet* 1877.
3 Stewart 2011, 51.
4 Some shorter reviews have been written, see Ajootian 1996, 103–110 and Wycherley 1982, 182–188.
5 Richter 1929a, 62.

the history and cultural importance of ancient Olympia and touch only briefly on the modern archaeological activity therein.

To express all this in more general terms, the aim of the present text is to focus on the historiography of classical art history in the light of one exceptional sculpture. The material is arranged chronologically and presented to the reader without any theoretical framework. The selection of texts used in this study does not, of course, tell everything that has ever been said about the Hermes statue, but I believe that the near one hundred books and articles from seventy authors can be considered a representative sample. I had the great pleasure to study most of it in the Blegen Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and in the library of the British School at Athens in April–May 2025, during my residency at the Finnish Institute at Athens, supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Association of Finnish Non-Fiction Writers. The work was finished in October 2025 at Villa Lante, the Finnish Institute at Rome, during my artist residency supported by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation.

To my dear friend Penelope.

The Author

Dr Jyrki Siukonen (1959–),
artist and researcher.
One time Gregory Fellow, University of Leeds, and Professor of Sculpture, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki.

# NEGOTIATING THE HERMES OF OLYMPIA

## A Short History of Reception

Jyrki Siukonen
2025


Hermes by Praxiteles. Undated postcard, ca. 1907–1915. Nicholas Catsimpoolas Collection inv. no. 21_03_004105, Boston Public Library. Open resource at https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/vx0243280

# PROLOGUE

*Hermes rests, but he does not loll.*
Ernest A. Gardner 1910

When the German archaeological campaign in Olympia began in the autumn of 1875, expectations were enormous, the cultural historian Suzanne Marchand remarks. It was thought that Olympia, which Winckelmann himself had dreamt of excavating, would hold the key to Greek greatness. Archaeologists on site and *Grosspublikum* at home all hoped that the Temple of Zeus, at least, would provide a good amount of 'Golden Age' sculpture. After the first three months of systematic and carefully documented work the Germans had found nothing of the sort. Marchand underlines this outcome as typical and argues that modern Mediterranean archaeology in particular is a product not of big finds but of big disappointments.

> Modern classical archaeology was created in large parts by pressures which made it not only possible but necessary to dig up and deal with the mundane and the unappealing, and to apply to a world famed for its free-standing sculptures a range of techniques developed for categorizing stone tools, animal skeletons, and prehistorical pottery.[1]

As well as being disappointed by the small number of masterpieces, the archaeologists at Olympia were indeed overwhelmed by the vast quantity of lesser objects. Against this backdrop, the statue of Hermes arrived in 1877 like a gift from heaven. At least this is how one eloquent orator made it sound five years later.

> If by a stretch of sympathy you put yourselves into the place of excavators in the distant Greece and in the lonely valleys of Olympia, burning with scientific ardour, and conscious of the fact that not only the country that sent them, and whose government defrayed the enormous expenses of these excavations, but also the whole civilized Europe was eagerly watching their proceedings in expectation of great results; and if, furthermore, you bear in mind that the results up to that moment, though considerable, were far below what had been hoped for—then you can adequately figure to yourselves the excitement and joy which thrilled through these men [– –].[2]

According to Marchand, the thrill of the find was short-lived, however. "[– –] the Hermes was to be the last aesthetically satisfying find, and the Olympia excavators now had to justify to themselves, to the German public, and worst of all, to Bismarck and the Reichstag, the continuation of the dig."[3] After five and half years of work, the first project drew to a close in spring 1881. However, we are pleased to note that German-funded research in Olympia has continued to this day; modern classical archaeology managed to prove its case after all.

Marchand's point is not to diminish the importance of the material unearthed during the excavation campaign, but rather to remind us that by the standards of the time the results of the first years' work were dispiriting. Adolf Furtwängler, who witnessed the situation first-hand, recalled in 1882: "One expected to find sculptures in the style of the Parthenon pediments and was astonished to see something quite different before one. Some were so disappointed that they lost interest in the subject as a whole."[4] The Hermes remained an exception and, unsupported by other finds, it soon started to take on a life of its own. To its advantage it was a pedigree sculpture and from the start in far better shape than other Olympian statues. Moreover, it was the most photogenic of them all. A special face makes a special case. Even today, in 2025, the presentation of the Hermes in a separate room, devoid of other objects and information, continues to emphasise

1 Marchand 2002, 148–153.

2 Waldstein 1882, 436.
3 Marchand 2002, 153.
4 Quoted in Marchand 2002, 154. Furtwängler took part in the excavations during the fourth term 1878–1879 and mainly concentrated on inscriptions.

*Fig 1*: Heraion seen from southeast, spring 1879 (?). The man leaning on the pedestal of the Hermes statue is most likely Georg Treu. Photograph by Romaidis brothers, Curtius et al. 1879, pl. 2. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open online resource at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.766#0034.

its special standing and cool distance from the minor finds. It is a setting fit for a spectacle.[5] As if bound by an oath of allegiance taken under the flag of nineteenth-century aesthetic ideals, an unprepared visitor to the Hermes room has little option but to stand in awe of the solitary *Meisterwerk*.

## *The Find*

The great expectations of the Olympia campaign, be it admitted, were founded on diligent homework. The outstanding statue was so quickly named simply because German archaeologists had already read about it. The indispensable if only literary source from the ancient times to guide them on their quest were the fifth and sixth books in Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, where the traveller discusses Olympia and its sights. There was also solid proof that his word could be trusted.[6] The German excavation, although unparalleled in scientific precision, was not the first of its kind in Olympia. A French team had already excavated the Temple of Zeus in 1829 and successfully verified their findings using the measurements and descriptions provided by Pausanias:

5 It has been argued that "the tendency to conceptualize masterpieces as isolated, and often decontextualized from a historical setting, is seldom articulated as bluntly as in this case." Siapkas & Sjögren 2014, 115.

6 This was not always the case. Earlier German scholars had given him a bad name, see Habicht 1985.

> It was in the rear of the temple that most of these bas-reliefs were found, and it was on this same side that the sculptures were placed whose subject and general arrangement Pausanias indicates. Now this subject agrees with that of all the fragments that could be collected. This is new proof, and positive proof, of the identity of these sculptures with those that Pausanias had seen in the temple of Olympian Jupiter.[7]

Pausanias came in useful again when the German dig in spring 1877 proceeded to a new sector, now known as the Heraion. As soon as the exceptional statue was uncovered, it was recognised as being a *Hermes made of stone, carrying the infant Dionysos, by Praxiteles* to which Pausanias had alluded. However, given the importance of the event the first short comment in a scholarly paper reads almost as if nothing much happened. In *Mittheilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Institutes in Athen*, Rudolf Weil describes the cella of the Heraion and sounds rather disappointed with the finds: "Numerous sculptures had been placed between columns, housed there as if in a museum. The bases of three of them are apparently preserved; of the statues, by far the largest part of which was made of gold and ivory, only two marble figures survived, including the Hermes with the baby Dionysos (Paus. 5.17.3)."[8] So far no mention of Praxiteles. The team in Olympia was at first uncertain about the quality of their find, as becomes clear from the excavation diary kept by the archaeologist in charge, Gustav Hirschfeld: "There is no doubt that we have here the statue seen by Pausanias, and we are in the Heraion. [––] But Praxiteles? Unevenness, fragmentation, hair very striking; perhaps after him. Countless things may have gone under his name. Pausanias himself mentions no other artist more often."[9] These same doubts were also openly expressed in Hirschfeld's correspondent report for the cultural journal *Deutsche Rundschau*, which will serve as our point of departure in Chapter One.

The academic excavation report printed in the *Archäologische Zeitung* in Berlin in 1878, however, makes no mention of hesitation. Having noted that the discovery of the statue named by Pausanias confirms the identity of the building, Hirschfeld, this time unnamed, turns to particulars:

> It is a youthful Hermes with the infant Dionysos in his arms, the work of Praxiteles. The statue was found in the cella lying on its face, as if it had fallen, close to the Roman statue of a robed female mentioned in report 17. Hermes's arm and legs below the knees are missing, as is the child's upper body; however, the head was found unbroken. Hermes, standing casually, leans his elbow on a tree trunk covered by his discarded cloak; his right hand appears to have held a bunch of grapes. The height of the figure is 1.80 metres. The composition is vividly reminiscent of the group of Eirene and Pluto in Munich. Part of the robe, hanging in magnificent folds, is made from a separate piece of marble; the surface is, on the whole, immaculately preserved. Minor details, such as the hair and back, have been neglected. Red paint is visible on the lips and in the hair. – As a result of this important discovery, everything is being done to uncover as much of the Temple of Hera as possible before the end of this work period.[10]

As we have already learned, no new finds of the same calibre were ever made. Perhaps displeased, but still serving the public, the excavation team distributed images of the Hermes and the Heraion dig in an impressive semi-academic picture album in 1879.[11] Then, just before Christmas in 1879, one of Hermes's lost feet was found. It came intact, along with a part of the original plinth. In his report to *Archäologische Zeitung* Georg Treu, who was now leading the excavation, argued that the piece was valuable not only as a complement to the most beautiful of all Olympic finds, but also as a true jewel of execution and preservation in its own right.

7 Blouet 1831, 62. All translations are by the author.
8 Weil 1877, 170.
9 Archäologisches Tagebuch 1876–1877, 150–151.
10 [Hirschfeld] 1877b, 94. The work on the site ended on 26 May.
11 Curtius et al. 1879. The large-format album came with a short introduction but the emphasis was on images. Similar albums were published of every excavation term.

> The delicate strap work of the sandal, which is evidence of the loving attention the artist put into even these minor details, still retains light traces of gilding and red colour that served as a base. Bronze, and probably gilded bronze, also seems to have been used to decorate the footwear, judging by a curving stud on the instep of the foot. The noble forms of the foot are completed with a refinement that cannot be further enhanced. One almost believes one can see the white skin shining through the openings of the fine, irregular strap work, and the muscles of the fully planted foot bulging beneath it.[12]

The full scientific documentation and analyses of these and further fragmentary finds were to be published much later in the third text volume of the extensive and exemplary excavation survey *OLYMPIA. Die Ergebnisse der von dem Deutschen Reich veranstalteten Ausgrabung.*[13] By then, the Hermes statue had been the subject of academic and artistic attention for ten years. Starting with Georg Treu's early booklet, *Hermes mit dem Dionysosknaben: Ein Originalwerk des Praxiteles,*[14] a whole body of literature on the subject evolved. Notably, the short first-hand reports by Hirschfeld and Treu already include many of the details that other writers would later expand upon. Moreover, these details were scrutinised again in the following century when the academic world started to question the statue's authenticity. These include the folds of the cloth, the straps of the sandal, and the texture of the back. The iconographic remarks are important too: the alleged grapes in the missing right hand and the family resemblance between the two sculpture groups, Hermes-Dionysos and Eirene-Pluto, the latter being a known work by Praxiteles's father Kephisodotos.

### *The Praise*

In the emerging literature, most of which was written in German, the Olympian Hermes was wrapped in long descriptive sentences, in keeping with the academic writing style of the time. A certain amount of reserve and comparative skills were required, but, since the evidence in this case was considered indisputable, authors would often find themselves competing in eloquence. Adolf Furtwängler, a leading authority on classical sculpture, closed the case by arguing that "a work of more refined perfection, of intimate familiarity with all the means of marble technique, does not exist in all of antiquity and we cannot even imagine it."[15] For some, the statue set a new standard in aesthetics, "the finest piece of sculpture now known to exist," as one enthusiast called it.[16] After all, what use are superlatives if you never use them?

> Indeed, nothing can exceed the finish of the Hermes. It furnishes us with a new standard whereby to try all other works of sculpture; and shows us how far those of them which we have hitherto considered great and inimitable fall short of what Greek art in its best days was able to accomplish.[17]

Given that it was the only surviving work of Praxiteles, everyone understood that *Hermes carrying the infant Dionysos* could not be anything less than amazing. However, declaring it the pinnacle of the craft was risky when neoclassical fashion was already in decline. The new standard could soon appear kitsch, as it did to the sculptor Aristide Maillol, who famously described the Hermes as a piece carved out of Marseille soap. Furthermore, he saw its saccharine character as the first sign of academicism and refused to believe that the same artist could have created the magnificent Venus, a copy of which is housed in the Vatican.[18] All in all, the rare qualities of the Hermes had little impact on modern art. In the coming decades the less flamboyant Olympian Apollo from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus proved much more influential. But for the art historians the Praxitelean statue was to remain an inspiring riddle.

12 Treu 1881, 44.
13 Curtius et al. 1897, 194–206.
14 Treu 1878.
15 Furtwängler 1893, 533.
16 Davidson 1879, 25.
17 *Ibid.,* 28.
18 Maillol visited Olympia in 1908 or 1909. His comments were printed in Judith Cladel's book ***Aristide Maillol, sa vie, son œuvre, ses idées,*** Paris 1937, and quoted in Blümel 1948, 59–60. By Venus Maillol refers to Aphrodite of Knidos.


*Fig. 2*: The statue before the head of Dionysos and the right foot of Hermes were found. Photograph by Romaidis brothers, Curtius et al. 1879, pl. 8. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open online resource at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.766#0040

The common praise for the Hermes was based on its quality, only half of which could be observed with a trained eye. The other half had always been hearsay from ancient times. Praxiteles of Athens was, it was said, the finest sculptor of his generation, especially in works of marble. Documents to prove the point were scarce, however. If we exclude the eye-witness description of his most celebrated work 'Aphrodite of Knidos' by Pseudo-Lucian (*Amores* 13–14), our knowledge on his marble pieces is mostly based on short comments by Pausanias (e.g. 1.23.7; 1.43.5; 9.27.3) and secondhand information gathered by Pliny the Elder.[19] He could identify some marble carvings of Praxiteles by name and location but failed to describe any of them (*HN* 36.4.20–24). All original evidence was lacking until the find at Olympia, which, again, was known only from the short line in Pausanias (5.17.5). There wasn't much solid to compare the Hermes to, and yet it would have taken a nihilist (or a second Maillol) to question the high standard of the work and its maker. To add to the complication, the texts published in the nineteenth century were not all based on eye contact with the original Hermes. Many writers, including eminent specialists such as Heinrich Brunn, based their verdict on a plaster cast and photographs from Olympia. It was, then, not only poesy but also learned opinion that would now and then resort to the imagination.

### *The Questions*

Historical finds of this magnitude always bring questions in their train. The first was probably asked aloud before the face of Hermes was wiped fully clean of mud: "Is it a work by *the Praxiteles* that we are looking at?" Gustav Hirschfeld, as we saw, expressed his doubts early in the day. It was known from literary sources that in Praxiteles's family line the profession was handed down from father to son,[20] and maybe the name Praxiteles was passed on too? In 1878, the question of authorship is addressed rather vigorously in a learned journal by Otto Benndorf, but two years later even he drops his guard in front of the original work and is convinced of its authenticity. Given the circumstances, who wanted to have found a work by Praxiteles III anyway? Doubts were to wither away, and Heinrich Brunn, who publishes his article on the Hermes in 1882, merely mentions a theoretical possibility of namesake maker and then turns his attention to other issues. Other scholars silently agree that the maker is *the Praxiteles*. The idea of *a Praxiteles* lies dormant till 1940s, when it is given a sudden awakening by Carl Blümel.

A more fruitful ground for academic argumentation was found early on in the iconography of the broken and incomplete Hermes group. Visual representations in coinage and on the walls of Pompeii were compared with the statue, offering models for reconstructions of its full composition. What was it that the missing right hand had held? A bunch of grapes was the most common answer, but Prof. Adler suggested a pair of cymbals or castanets or a rattle, and one Mr. Bötticher thought it was a purse full of chinking money – after all, Hermes was a god of gain.[21] How about the head,

19 For the relevant passages, see Jones 1895, 151–163.

20 On the family of Praxiteles, see Ajootian 1996, 94–95.

21 See Frazer's commentary in Pausanias 1898, 597. Adler edited much of the published excavation material.

was it crowned with a wreath or covered with a hat, as was the opinion of Prof. Wieseler? There was a slight problem with the Dionysos child, for it was argued that the face of the toddler didn't meet the standard. The question of the place of the Hermes statue in the oeuvre of Praxiteles was also unresolved. Was it an early work, as claimed by Brunn, or a late work, as held by Furtwängler? Either way, both agreed that it was now the only genuine extant work of Praxiteles. The statue – and its head especially – quickly became a touchstone against which other marbles could be measured. The prime example was the so-called Aberdeen head at the British Museum.[22] Following an initiative in a German journal, the head was soon saved from anonymity and written into the otherwise short Praxitelean catalogue.[23] But knowledge of the fact that the Olympian Hermes had not been among the best known works of the artist in ancient days – no later copies were known, no mentions found in literature apart from Pausanias – bothered some scholars. How should one define its masterly qualities? And, following this, how would one prove doubters wrong when the time came?

### *The After-effects*

The history that follows is divided in this article into four chapters. The first concentrates on texts published during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Literary style in these cases is often verbose, ranging from factual to extolling. All the writers who appear in this chapter, highly learned without exception, were educated in the atmosphere of German classicism and many of them still warmed themselves in its afterglow. Once the first crucial doubts were overcome, the main scholarly discussion circled around iconography rather than authorship. Despite minor differences in viewpoints, there was a strong consensus that the work was an original piece by Praxiteles. The second chapter covers the first half of the twentieth century. With a new generation of researchers comes a radical shift in attitudes toward the Praxitelean origin of the Olympian statue. First the allegations come from Germany but the main language of the discussion is English and the forum *American Journal of Archaeology*. While some experts disagree, the general outcome of the 'Hermes controversy' is that the work is now seen as a later copy. There are still twists and turns as one European academic follows his own mind and offers another explanation. A further argument supporting the copy verdict is introduced in 1940, however.

The third chapter, covering the period from 1948 to 1970s, follows the way some of the earlier discussants adjust their arguments. No new claims for the authenticity of the statue are made, on the contrary, fresh studies bring out even more evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the Hermes is a copy carved in the Hellenistic age, or perhaps even an original from that time.

The fourth chapter takes a look at the way the arguments are again gradually overturned. While the case for the authenticity seems to be lost for good by the 1980s, alternative views are once more published, giving some academics grounds to review their stance. The extensive Praxiteles exhibition in Paris and Athens in 2007 marks a new phase in the study of the artist, and is followed by novel finds and insights. In the present context many questions concerning the authenticity and authorship of Praxiteles's Hermes are yet again open.

The many voices in this article represent different aspects of learning. However, the question of disciplinary boundaries between classical archaeology and art history goes beyond the scope of my text.[24] My own comments, as well as the brief remarks on the statue in the final chapter, are written from a personal perspective.

Bötticher had worked as a technical leader at Olympia in 1876. The purse lifted up with the right hand was, of course, one of the popular attributes of Hermes.

22 The origin of this head, named after its previous owner, fourth Earl of Aberdeen (George Hamilton Gordon), remains unclear. He may have brought it from Greece around 1803. The British Museum bought the head in 1862.

23 Wolters 1886; Klein 1898, 388–390.

24 For an introduction to the problem, see Siapkas & Sjögren 2014, 5 and ff.

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# I. ABOVE SUSPICION

*The authorship of the great Praxiteles appears to be presented*
*as the only conceivable possibility; and who would not prefer to believe,*
*to hold fast to what they desire from their heart?*
Otto Benndorf 1878

The archaeologist Gustav Hirschfeld (1847–1895) worked on site in Olympia on the day the Hermes statue was – as Lucy M. Mitchell put it – "given back, after centuries of slumbering oblivion in the bosom of the earth."[1] Hirschfeld was also first to verbalise in print the different questions and concerns as they manifested themselves in the marble. Acting as the excavation project's correspondent for the *Deutsche Rundschau,* a journal aimed at the general public interested in matters of culture and science, Hirschfeld basically rephrased his notes from the excavation diary. German readers were thus offered the archaeologist's first impressions in front of the statue:

> In general, the execution of the nude, as well as the clothing, is strangely uneven, something we previously, perhaps not entirely rightly, considered impossible in original works. The thighs are very beautiful, the forms generally softer than we would expect from Hermes. An entire section on the left of the group—the folds of the child's garment and buttocks—is made from small pieces, because the artist apparently couldn't manage with the block. This circumstance would at least argue against the idea that we have here a simple copy after Praxiteles. But another solution remains, also linguistically justifiable: no other great artist in antiquity seems to have had as many works under his name as Praxiteles; Pausanias himself mentions his sculpture so frequently. The pleasing manner of his art makes this understandable. Is this Hermes perhaps merely a work from the school, in the style of Praxiteles? Even under this condition, it enriches the knowledge of ancient art in a gratifying and significant way.[2]

Hirschfeld may now be thanked for his openness. But in 1877 there were also those who would not have shared such doubts in public before the excavation leadership had a say. The resolution to the problem came from the originator of the expensive Olympia campaign, the archaeologist Ernst Curtius (1814–1896), then at Berlin. Soon after receiving the first image of the statue Curtius wrote to his brother and explained the situation:

> The photograph of Praxiteles was our greatest Christmas joy. Unfortunately, it isn't good enough to be distributed as such, but it is sufficient to prove the originality beyond doubt, and in this respect, this find is the pinnacle of all the finds at Olympia. [– –] The day before yesterday I presented the picture to the Emperor and Empress, who were very pleased with it.[3]

The pressure and expectations, already mentioned in the Introduction, were also part of the authorisation process, and once Curtius had delivered the photograph to the *Kaiser*, there was no way to revoke the decision. This is not to say that German archaeologists and art historians lacked competence. Dig or museum, they were leading authorities in modern scientific work who did nothing on a whim. And yet, which of them could foretell what an original sculpture by Praxiteles would feel like? Once in Olympia, most of them were overwhelmed by the presence of the statue. The situation may be compared to the recent case where Michael Bennett (1959–), then curator at The Cleveland Museum of Art, saw another unexpectedly found work and confessed: "It radiated a forceful artistic personality, which I keenly felt was Praxiteles himself."[4]

1 Mitchell 1883, 437.
2 Hirschfeld 1877a, 320.
3 Curtius 1903, 650. The letter is dated 1 January 1878.
4 Bennett 2013, 10. The work in case was the so-called Cleveland Apollo, a version of Praxiteles's ***Sauroktonos*** bronze.


*Fig. 3*: The head of Hermes. Photographs by Romaidis brothers, Curtius et al. 1879, pl. 9. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open resource at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.766#0041

When the archaeologist Georg Treu (1843–1921) came to Olympia to take charge of the 1877–1878 excavation season, inspection of the Hermes was, of course, the first thing waiting on his desk. He published his observations in a twelve-page booklet *Hermes mit dem Dionysos-kind. Ein Originalwerk des Praxiteles,* dated April 1878.[5] Treu first apologises to his reader that the find has not been presented to the public in the way it deserved. The statue was uncovered in the spring, only a few days before the end of the excavation period, therefore there was no time to take moulds or even find a photographer.[6] Following his arrival, Treu had arranged for a Constantinople photographer, who was in nearby Pyrgos, to take first pictures. These were sent to Curtius in Berlin as well as used for the booklet's drawings while high quality photography was to wait for a better moment.

> Anyone familiar with the capabilities of Greek photographers and the great difficulties encountered taking such photographs of half-shattered, complicated marble statues without proper technical resources, will judge this with leniency. And then the complexity of arranging tolerable lighting in the large barn that we must use as a museum![7]

5 The main text is from January 1878, an additional comment from 21. April, 1878.

6 Treu 1878, 5. The excavation term ended two and a half weeks after the Hermes was found. The statue of a Roman woman, which was uncovered inside the Heraion one week before the Hermes, was photographed and published in the excavation album Curtius et al. 1877, pl. 30.

7 Treu 1878, 5. The photographer Pantzopoulos took the first pictures in November 1877. The more successful photographs were taken by the Romaidis brothers. These were published in the excavation album Curtius et al. 1879, pls. 6–9.

The reader is also asked to be lenient regarding the present stage of art history. In the book-poor Olympian valley a thorough investigation of the existing monuments and a detailed study of literature on Praxiteles had to be dispensed with. Treu underlines that Dr. Hirschfeld needed to leave soon after discovering the statue and therefore hardly found time to examine it more closely. In other words, his doubts concerning the authorship of the statue were results of haste and insufficient reference literature. Treu takes a better look at the Hermes in relation to copies of other works by Praxiteles, such as the Apollo Sauroktonos, and gives its measurements with exactness of one millimetre. He is confident that he is facing *Ein Originalwerk.* Treu also offers his own idea about the iconography of the group, arguing that Praxiteles placed a *thyrsus* in Hermes's right hand. With this attribute his identity as the caretaker of the wine god Dionysos would become clear. According to Treu, the *thyrsus* would create a counterweight to the tree trunk and balance the composition but also offer welcome and secure support for the freely projecting, heavy, and fragile marble arm.[8]

The archaeologist Otto Benndorf (1838–1907) from Vienna reviewed Treu's booklet and thought it premature to name the statue Praxiteles's work as long as other options were not properly excluded.[9] Since travel to Olympia was cumbersome, it was clear that all further academic analyses had to wait for proper photographs and moulds taken from the original. As soon as these arrived, the *Gipsformerei* of the Royal Museums in Berlin started to produce and distribute the likeness in 1:1 plaster casts for museums and collections on both side of the Atlantic. The coming of a much awaited copy inspired speeches, lectures and articles, as in the University of Göttingen, where the archaeologist and professor Friedrich Wieseler (1811–1892) in June 1880 explained in full attendance of the academic community the myths of Hermes, his visual representations in Greek art, and the special characteristics of the newly found statue. Standing by the cast he rejected Treu's idea that Hermes had held in his right hand a *thyrsus* staff and supported Hirschfeld's grape hypothesis instead. As an original contribution to the debate, Wieseler asserted that for the sake of iconography Hermes must have worn a *petasos* hat, which he presumed was made of gilded bronze sheet.[10]

The iconography of the Olympian Hermes was discussed in academic papers in the 1880s by archaeologists such as Hermann von Rohden (1852–1916) and museum curators like A.H. Smith (1860–1941), but also by learned amateurs, including the Austrian poet Hermann Rollett (1819–1904). They managed to source from their books and collections over thirty ancient figures of Hermes carrying or protecting a child.[11] But did the Olympian statue match with any of these? Von Rohden believed that a wall painting in Pompeii offered a faithful reproduction of the statue.[12] Even so, there were still many variables, as Otto Benndorf observed comparing photographs of attempted restorations by two different sculptors, one by Karl Schwerzek (1848–1918) in Vienna and the other by Fritz Schaper (1841–1919) in Berlin. Both artists had been guided by leading art historians.

> After various tests conducted on living models, the Viennese artist considered it possible to bend the arm almost to a right angle and to lower the hand slightly inward, so that – in a sharp frontal view – it holds the grapes sideways, close to Hermes's head, not far from the vertical line that would touch the curve of hair above the right ear. Conversely, Professor Schaper, with a much smaller bend, extended the arm diagonally to the top left, and the hand follows this movement, holding the grapes more freely, more upright, and also grasping them briskly in the middle, whereas in Vienna the grapes hang from the closed hand more like a pendulum. It is astonishing how different a meaning this seemingly insignificant variation brings to the depicted action [– –] Here, the fruit which the child longs for is willingly brought to him with a movement of almost feminine grace; the process has acquired something gentle and tame. There, the arm, as if following a moment's inspi-

8 Treu 1878, 6–9.

9 Benndorf, who had not yet seen the original, argued for the possibility that the maker could be an older or younger member of Praxiteles's family. In his view the statue appeared more Lysippian than Praxitelean. Benndorf 1878, 779–783.

10 Wieseler 1880, 14, 20. This hypothesis was rejected by A.H. Smith. He preferred a headband with a pair of wings. Smith 1882, 93–95.

11 See Smith 1882 and Rollett 1884.

12 von Rohden 1888, pl. 6.

> ration, extends resolutely and with the impression of surplus youthful vigor; one would rather believe it is to withhold the fruit from the child.[13]

Benndorf's pondering tells us that statues were 'read' carefully and the psychological effect was of major importance. This aspect gets easily forgotten in later debates where sculptural details are reduced to mere technical evidence. For a learned nineteenth-century viewer the Hermes group of Olympia could still pose intellectual challenges. The plaster cast bought by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts had already given the philosopher Thomas Davidson (1840–1900) good cause to spill some ink in an eulogy of the statue. His article in the first number of *The American Art Review* (1879), already quoted in the Introduction, sings the praises of Praxiteles like no other. Davidson, however, had seen more than a plaster copy. He belonged to the small group of people outside the German excavation team who at that time could cite from first-hand experience with the marble original. Davidson travelled in Greece, knew the language, as well as German, and would later write and lecture on Greek sculpture. His enthusiasm in front of the Hermes was not amateurish fervour but instead an expression of his philosophical and educational views.

According to Davidson, education is the process by which a human being is enabled to transcend his original nature and attain his ideal nature.[14] In Praxiteles's Hermes he saw a fine expression of the Greek education. But he mentions it as belonging to a time when political education and its corresponding assertion in the art of Phidias was effectively overrun by more individualistic philosophical and rhetorical education, as reflected in the works of Scopas and Praxiteles.[15] "Thus, when in the days of Plato and Aristotle, contemporaries of Praxiteles, art retires into private life, it found itself called upon to express, not the ideal forms of divinity and its self-sufficient acts, but the motives and meanings of these acts, and their inner relation to human weal or woe."[16]

We will meet this idea of a philosophical turn reworked later on in Chapter Four, as the discussion around the Hermes after a long period of detail work finds a wider context again.

Hermes's new inward look really spurred questions about his 'motives'. Lucy Wright Mitchell (1845–1888), the first American to publish a book on classical sculpture, was inspired by the fact that the eyes of Dionysos and Hermes don't meet.

> Thus, on one side, the grapes nodding temptingly, but out of reach, and, on the other, the importunate child, draw the beholder's thought and attention back and forth, forming a charming side-play to the main subject, the god Hermes himself, whose gaze, absorbed in dreamy, pleasant thought, passes beyond his charge. [– –] Quietness in the composition of the group is thus preserved; while the momentary withholding of the gift from the child is full of promise for his future gratification, and gives continuity of thought to the action. By this treatment, moreover, how beautifully are contrasted the restless eagerness of the child, and the noble quiet of his divine brother, doubtless the object of veneration. How deep and tender the thoughts expressed![17]

By talking about Hermes's "dreamy, pleasant thought" Mitchell opposed darker readings, such as the one by Charles Waldstein (1856–1927), director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, who had written about the sadly abstracted and reflective mood of Praxiteles's works. Mitchell notes that "a peculiar light must have fallen on the Hermes face, to bring out a predominating element of sadness, and indeed of *Welt-schmerz*,"[18] which Waldstein seemed to cherish:

> But the widely-open eyes of Hermes are not fixed upon the object which vigorously stimulates his senses [Dionysos]; and the half-sad smile round his lips, which are not free from an indication of satiety, is not immediately caused by the infant, though it may be perhaps mediately, namely, by the inner thoughts which were originally suggested by the child. [– –] This element of melancholy, which slowly

13 Benndorf's comment in Rollett 1884, 231. On Schaper's version see also Mitchell 1883, 440. The third and most complete reconstruction was made in Dresden in 1894 by the sculptor Oskar Rühm (1854–1934), Curtius et. al. 1897, 195; Pasquier 2007, 122–123.

14 Davidson 1906 [1894], 4.

15 *Ibid.*, 142.

16 Davidson 1879, 24.

17 Mitchell 1883, 440. Mitchell's over 700-page book was an exceptional work but she was not the only nineteenth-century female authority to write about the Hermes. Eugénie Sellers Strong (1860–1943) also contributed, arguing that the statue is by Praxiteles's father Kephisodotos; see Fowler 1900.

18 Mitchell 1883, 718, n. 836.

> flowed out of the hands of Praxiteles into all his works, must have been the subjective element of Praxitelean art.[19]

Hermes's unfocused gaze also puzzled the Leipzig professor Johannes Overbeck (1826–1895), who wrote that nothing would be more natural than the assumption that Hermes would have to look at the restless child reaching for the grapes; "However, he decidedly does not do so. His restrained look, mildly friendly yet not smiling, is very difficult to describe in words."[20]

If the psychology of the work escaped words, the technical curiosities were more easily described. One peculiarity was the rectangular piece that connected Hermes's pelvis to the tree trunk to his left. It was suggested by Georg Treu that this *Stütze* had no artistic function but was meant to keep the work rigid and intact during transportation. The present situation could be explained by accepting that someone in ancient Olympia forgot to remove it. Friedrich Wieseler argued against this hypothesis, saying that marble statues of this sort always require a supporting piece, and Heinrich Brunn (1822–1894), director of the Münich Glyptothek, thought that Praxiteles utilised it in the composition and left it there on purpose.[21] Brunn had emphasised, in 1882, that five years after the discovery "it may no longer be too early to proceed to an analysis of the individual pieces and to allow critical-historical consideration to take centre stage."[22] He meant to prove that the work, indeed an original by Praxiteles, was from a time when the artist had not yet achieved "that complete certainty in the execution of the Hermes, which can only be the result of long practice."[23] In other words, Brunn declared it as an early work by Praxiteles. This interpretation was challenged by his former student Adolf Furtwängler (1853–1907), who rose to international fame with his magisterial book *Meisterwerke der Griechischen Plastik* (1893, English translation 1895). As if guided by a symmetry, Furtwängler, who was thirty years younger than Brunn, was sure that the Hermes belonged to the artist's late period. Furtwängler based his estimate on the stone material of the pedestal.[24] This proved to be a flawed argument, but his dating for the statue to around 340 BC. was accepted by most scholars towards the end of the century.

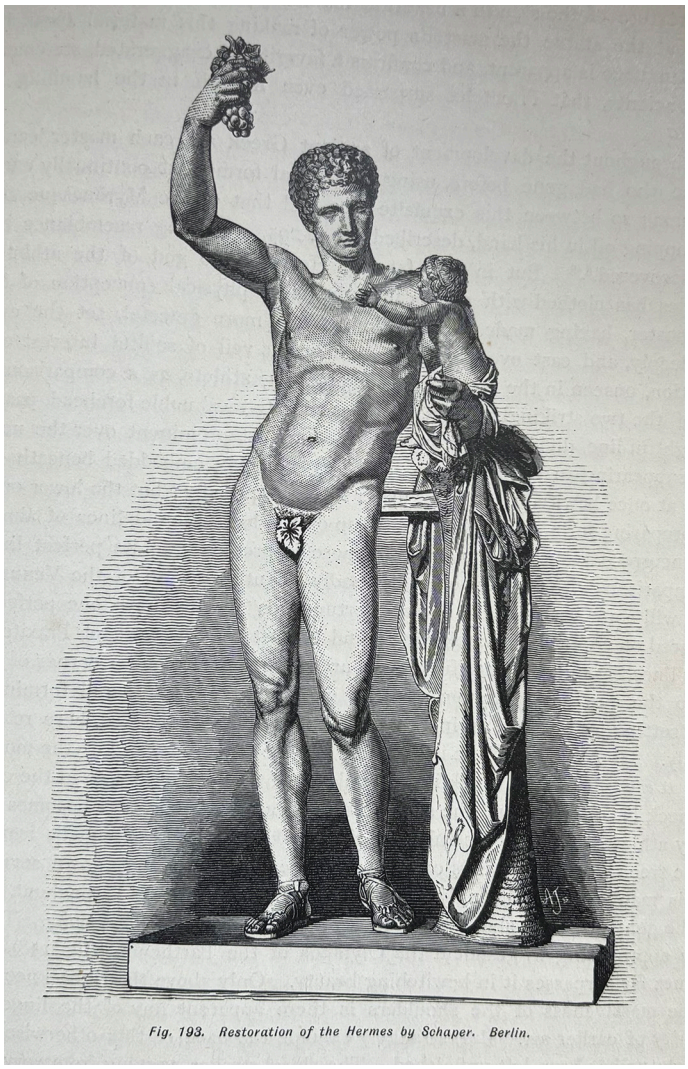


*Fig. 4:* The reconstruction by Fritz Schaper (with a fig leaf put on by the British printer). Illustration in Mitchell 1883, p. 441. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open online resource at: http://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.5253#0475

The results of the research on the Olympian Hermes were finally published in the official excavation report in 1897. Georg Treu gave a most detailed description of the whole process, starting with the find and ending with an updated bibliography. Different viewpoints were carefully discussed even if scholars already had found agreement, as with Hermes holding in his left hand a now lost *kerykeion* staff, perhaps of gild-

19 Waldstein 1882, 458–459.
20 Overbeck 1894, 55.
21 Treu 1878, 11; Wieseler 1880, 13; Brunn 1905 [1882], 385.
22 Brunn 1905 [1882], 379.
23 *Ibid.*, 387.
24 Furtwängler 1893, 529–531. According to Furtwängler (pp. 532–533) some details of the statue (hair, drapery) further confirm his dating, On the base and its dating, see Dinsmoor 1931.

ed bronze.[25] Regarding the right hand and the *thyrsus*, Treu duly acknowledged that he had erred. Wieseler's *petasos* hat was now dropped in favour of a bronze wreath.[26] Comprehensive analysis of the work also revealed unclear features other than missing attributes. Most striking of these were marks of reworking on Hermes's back. But even these were read by Treu as signs of originality.

> Here, an obviously very skilled hand, probably that of the master himself, to whom the back seemed a little too strong, first took off a little of the almost completely smoothed surface with a toothed chisel and then set about forming the shapes of the muscles with a rounded chisel.[27]

As we shall see in the next chapter, these toolmarks will revive interest in the Olympian Hermes thirty years later. What did not interest the next generation, however, was the idea of recolouring the statue or indeed any statue. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts conducted in 1892 an experiment with two plaster copies of ancient sculpture, one presenting a clothed figure, the other a naked one.

> The Hermes was selected partly because of its celebrity would give the experiment an added interest, and partly because, being the most exquisitely modelled of all known statues, it would prove, better than any other, whether form and color are inevitably antagonistic to each other in sculpture, – whether, in other words, the introduction of the one necessarily involves a sacrifice of the other.[28]

Praxiteles was known to have favoured the services of a skilful painter named Nikias (Pliny, *HN* 35.40.133), and scraps of colour still remained upon the Hermes when the statue was discovered, but these were too slight to offer much help. The Boston museum therefore depended upon generalisation from other works. The result was brown hair, brown eyes, and red lips against a suntanned skin. Dionysos was given blue eyes and hair of yellow and gold. The tree trunk was brown, the gods' garments purple and crimson. A thoroughgoing result, the curator of classical antiquities Edward Robinson (1858–1931) observed: "Opinions on matters of art are so strongly controlled by tradition and the force of association, that so radical a departure from accepted principles is almost certain to produce an unpleasant shock at first."[29] Robinson had seen the marble Hermes in Olympia and knew what he was talking about. In his eyes the experiment was a success, however.

> Whatever may be the verdict as to the beauty of these colored casts, one point they have established beyond all question, – and one which I think will come as a surprise to many who have examined the subject only theoretically. This is, that color, even when applied as a coating, instead of diminishing the effect of the modelling, heightens it, and to a very considerable extent. Far from hiding the sculptor's work, it brings out its beauty. [– –] The head of the Hermes [– –] shows the marvelous beauty of the modelling much more effectively under the color than in the white cast. The exquisite modulations are so much more apparent when painted, that by contrast the white cast has a curious, empty look.[30]

Robinson's insights into polychromy of Greek sculpture had little effect on the way the Hermes group was to be seen. If there was something that needed correction, to most minds it was not the white skin of Hermes but the odd looks of Dionysos. The French professor Maxime Collignon (1849–1917) thought that the artist sacrificed the small figure, reduced its proportions and, as it were, avoided the execution.[31] Wilhelm Klein (1850–1924), who held a professorship of archaeology in Prague, published his 400-page monograph on Praxiteles in 1898. In the book he answered those who had found reason to complain about the artist's skill and vision, especially as it is revealed in the baby Dionysos.

25 Curtius et al. 1897, 195–196. The staff hypothesis was questioned, however, in Robinson 1892, 20–21 and refuted, among many other things, in Antonsson 1937, 89–93.
26 Curtius et al. 1897, 197–199.
27 *Ibid.*, 203.
28 Robinson 1892, 7. Similar tests were also conducted in other museums. Georg Treu had advocated these experiments and even hoped to see the Olympian Hermes in colour. Georg Treu, ***Sollen wir unsere Statuen bemalen?***, Berlin 1884, 33–34.
29 *Ibid.*, 21–22.
30 *Ibid.*, 22.
31 Collignon 1897, 293.

> [– –] one may lecture on the deficiencies of this precocious child according to all anatomical rules; as long as one isolates it, all these expositions are justified. [– –] But first, just imagine the experiment of placing a perfectly normally developed little boy in Hermes's arms instead of Dionysos, and one will gladly forgo the execution. Such realistic attempts at improvement tend to turn out quite strangely.[32]

A realistic child had indeed no real place in the context of classical Greek art. Moreover, the Dionysos was treated more as a sign than a living being, as became clear to the archaeologist Heinrich Bulle (1867–1945) in 1922, when he studied the group: "In the Praxitelean Hermes, the child is spatially pushed back so that it almost seems like an attribute, and the god gazes past it into the void."[33] This attribute will be examined again later, but before that, there is some disturbing news.

32 Klein 1898, 386–387. Lucy M. Mitchell had written: "Altogether, in this babe, form, face, and drapery are ungainly and quaint." Mitchell 1883, 443.

33 Bulle 1922, 44. The idea of the child as mere attribute seems to originate from Overbeck 1894, 56; also mentioned in Gardner 1910, 145.

## II. UNDER SUSPICION

*If the Hermes is a Roman copy,*
*henceforth it is Roman copies we must collect, not Greek originals.*
Gisela Richter 1929

*Hermes carrying the infant Dionysos* was a statue made by Praxiteles up until 1927. It had been treated as an original by Germany's leading nineteenth-century scholars such as Brunn, Furtwängler and Overbeck, and this stamp of proof was accepted without question worldwide. "Until now, only copies have provided us with insight into the Athenian sculptor's style. With the Hermes found at Olympia, we can now begin to examine an original marble that still bears the marks of Praxiteles's chisel," Maxime Collignon confirmed.[34] Very few had the possibility to travel to Olympia to see this for themselves but photographic reproductions of the sculpture spread worldwide and made it known to Everyman while the editors of classic 1911 edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* would squeeze its strengths and weaknesses in two sentences.

> The young child can hardly be regarded as a success; he is not really childlike. But the figure of the Hermes, full and solid without being fleshy, at once strong and active, is a masterpiece, and the play of surface is astonishing.[35]

In 1923, the hopeful Finnish art historian Onni Okkonen (1886–1962) travelled to Olympia to see the masterpiece – only to find it in a cold and poorly lit shed to which it had been temporarily moved from the museum. Even the adverse conditions could not diminish the work's radiant beauty and sanctity. Okkonen observed that "the artistic value of the Hermes is so complete that it seems to exist outside our contemporary minds, at a distinct and unattainable height."[36]

The wind of change blew from the ten pages dedicated to Praxiteles's Hermes in *Griechische Bildhauerarbeit*, a book by Carl Blümel (1893–1976), the first modern work on stone carving methods in ancient Greek sculpture.[37] The Hermes served as a test piece for Blümel's hypothesis about the evolution of tools and techniques and their respective marks as a scientific way to date sculptures. Blümel worked in the *Antikensammlung* of the Berlin museums and had studied his material for years. He also practised sculptural work and perhaps knew how to test his theses on stone before putting them on paper. The Hermes interested him because its back showed distinct marks of reworking with different metal tools. These marks had, of course, been known ever since the statue was found, as discussed in detail by Georg Treu in the excavation corpus.[38] Blümel's problem was that they didn't fit his idea of good workmanship: "One wonders how it could have happened that a sculptor could have allowed such a work to leave his studio at all."[39] He rejected the idea that a sculptor with a reputation as good as that of Praxiteles could afford anything like 'ingenious carelessness', and judged that if the work stood out it is mainly because of poor technique. To his eye, the artistic form is bad too. The head of the boy Dionysos is "soft, vague and carelessly modelled" and the much-praised cloak "very lifelike, but certainly not a great artistic achievement."[40] Blümel nailed the work with eight theses and placed it under interdiction; it cannot be a Greek original of the fourth century BC.

34 Collignon 1897, 291. The former director of British School at Athens, Ernest A. Gardner (1862–1939), was equally confident: "undoubted original from his hand". Gardner 1910, 142.
35 *Encyclopedia Britannica* 1911, ***s.v.***, 'Praxiteles'.
36 Okkonen 1924, 15. During Okkonen's visit, in late 1923, the statue was removed from its museum space because of some plaster casting work.
37 For more recent discussions of the marble carving techniques, see Adam 1966 and Palagia 2006.
38 Curtius et al. 1897, 203.
39 Blümel 1927, 38.
40 ***Ibid.***, 42.

The claims in Blümel's book received wider attention only after it was reviewed in 1929 for the *American Journal of Archaeology* by Gisela Richter (1882–1972). As the curator of Greek and Roman department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and author of *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks* (1929), Richter represented authority. First thanking Blümel for invaluable illustrations and valuable observations, she drew a line between the part-time sculptor and herself.

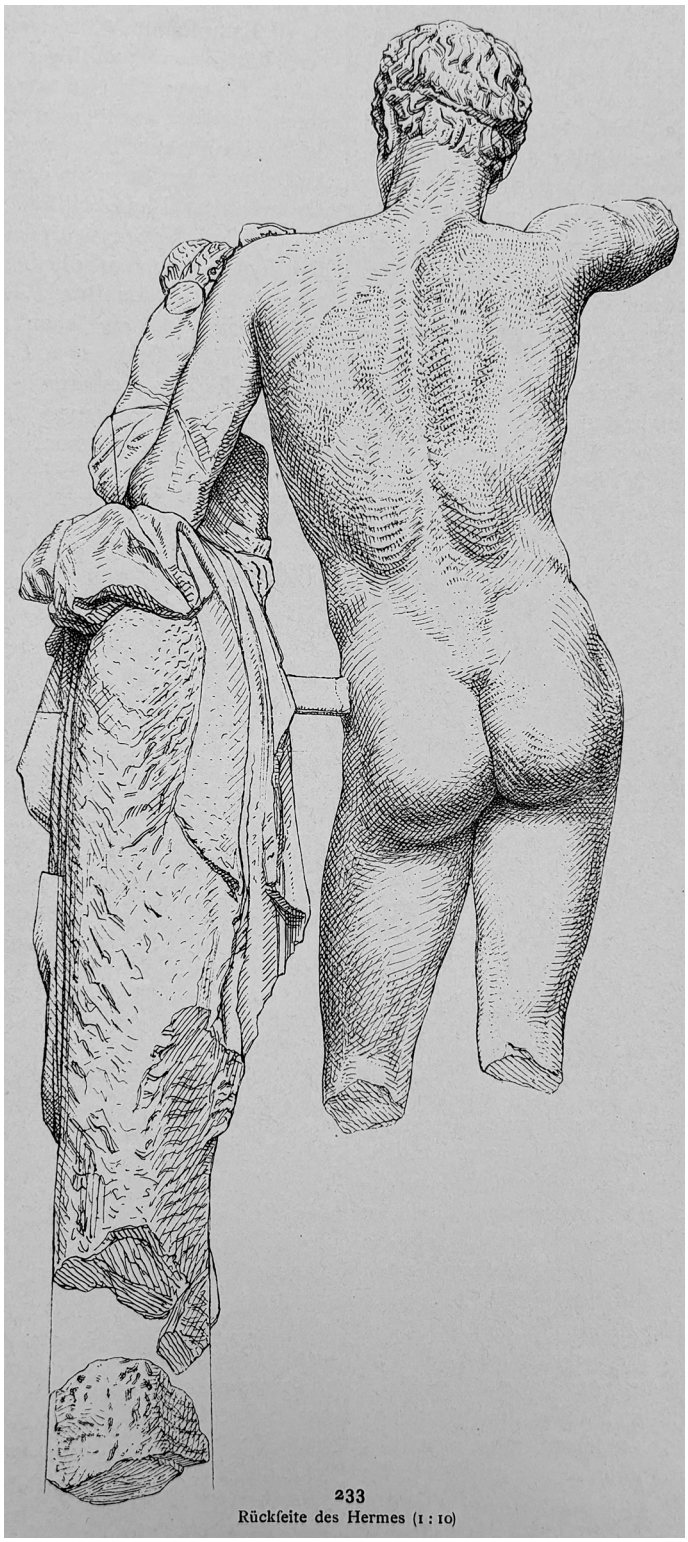


*Fig. 5*: The back of Hermes with signs of recutting. Curtius et al. 1897, 203. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open resource at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.779#0221.

> If Blümel had confined himself to such technical observations, his book would have elicited only praise. Unfortunately he has not been able to withstand the temptation of making certain deductions which mar the value of his work. One of these is the sensational one that the Hermes at Olympia is not an original work by Praxiteles, but a Roman copy. Coming from a "technical" expert the theory may arouse interest and therefore calls for detailed comment.[41]

One can hear an aristocratic tinge in Richter's argument that her own "subjective" reaction to Hermes, in other words the appreciation of quality, transcends any reasoning concerning the use of tools. She firmly refutes most of Blümel's claims, but this only serves as a trigger for a further debate.

European academics now took notice of Blümel's book. Some of them, like the Italian archaeologist G.A. Rizzo (1865–1950), chose his position beside that of Praxiteles and Richter. In his 1932 monograph on Praxiteles, the largest since Wilhelm Klein's work from 1898, Rizzo admitted that a rigidly technical treatment could be very instructive, "but does not seem equally conclusive to those who do not have the itch to agree with the young, so as not to appear old and backward [– –] since everything, in the end, boils down to the observation of the use of the drill in the hair of Hermes, of some special chisels, which although commonly used by copyists of the Roman age, were not unknown to the Greek sculptors of the classical era."[42] More than anything, he saw the 'Hermes controversy' as a battle of generations, where the arrogant young brushed aside the wisdom of the old.

> What an absent-minded traveller that poor Pausanias was, almost as absent-minded and incompetent as the archaeologists and artists of 'the past' – from Heinrich Brunn and

41 Richter 1929b, 334.

42 Rizzo 1932, 70. Gisela Richter reviewed the book and was happy to note that "the author accepts the Hermes of Olympia unreservedly as an original work by Praxiteles, since Pausanias' specific statement and the subtle character of the modelling seem to him more convincing evidence than the various arguments advanced by recent sceptics." Richter 1933, 349.

> Ernst Curtius, to Julius Lange and Salomon Reinach, from Adolf Furtwängler to Maxime Collignon, to Auguste Rodin – to name but a few of the major ones.[43]

Rizzo's ironic comment shows an emotional reaction to a debate that was not for the tender-hearted. After Richter's book review, the anti-Praxitelean theses and their antitheses had been reshuffled and discussed at length on the pages of the *American Journal of Archaeology*. In this occasion Blümel and Richter each were asked for a new comment, other protagonists being Rhys Carpenter (1889–1980), professor of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, and Stanley Casson (1889–1944), lecturer at Oxford. Additional viewpoints came from the architectural historian William Bell Dinsmoor (1886–1973) and the German archaeologist Valentin Müller (1889–1945), who had just accepted a position at Bryn Mawr. Casson, an archaeologist by training, came closest to Blümel in that he, too, had practised old style stone carving and was about to publish his own research on the subject.[44] Furthermore, Casson had already made an appraisal of Blümel's book in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, where he fully accepted the verdict on the Hermes, saying that Dr. Blümel has argued with restraint and with care.

> Defenders of the Hermes of Olympia (and they will be numerous) will be hard put to it. The case for the prosecution is overwhelming. Dr. Blümel has made a contribution of the very highest value towards a scientific reconsideration of ancient sculpture on a basis of hard fact.[45]

In the debate Casson mostly concentrated on judging between Blümel's smashes and Richter's powerful returns of serve. He noted moments where Blümel indulged in subjective argumentation and got his facts wrong, and gathered: "If we value subjective arguments more than technical ones then the Hermes can be kept as Praxitelean, for Miss Richter has the more convincing declaration of faith. But, in each case, I fear it is only faith!"[46] Casson's final decision was that Blümel wins on points.[47] Blümel maintained that most of his original theses still held, thanks to Casson's backup, and concentrated on answering the critique written by Eduard Schmidt (1879–1963), one of the last students of Furtwängler and professor of archaeology at the University of Kiel.[48] Rhys Carpenter had locked his view from the start, convinced that the Hermes was a Roman copy of a bronze original. He dismissed most of Blümel's theses but found truth in the claim that the drapery of the Hermes is not Greek, not even a copy of Greek work, but fundamentally and unambiguously Roman.[49]

Gisela Richter, now the flag bearer of connoisseurship, had no option but to take on all three adversaries. She found her guiding-spirit in Adolf Furtwängler's book *Meisterwerke der griechischen Plastik*, naming him "the man who may be considered the genius of the last generation of artistic appreciation."[50] As for the debate, she admitted that the issue was important:

> Our one original statue by an outstanding Greek sculptor—will that, too, be taken away from us? And will there be left in its stead just another Roman copy, stripped even of its drapery?[51]

The use of 'us' here clearly indicated a group different from those who 'take away' things, but Richter would not stress the point further than that. The situation was already confrontational enough. Casson, who said he was offering his

43 *Ibid.*, 72.
44 'Some Technical Methods of Archaic Sculpture', *JHS* 50 (1930) 313–326, and *The Technique of Early Greek Sculpture*, Oxford 1933. Casson also advocated direct carving in contemporary sculpture: *Some Modern Sculptors*, London 1928.
45 Casson 1929, 281–282.
46 Casson 1931, 264.
47 *Ibid.*, 268.
48 Blümel 1931. Schmidt had just reviewed in *Gnomon* the catalogue of the Greek statues in the Berlin collections by Blümel, and used the opportunity to question his stand on the dating of the Hermes. Schmidt 1931, 11–13.
49 Carpenter 1931, 250. This was a critical claim, for Richter had in her book used the drapery as a prime example of the fourth–century stylistic change: "It is now possible to mistake a sculptured garment for a real one, as was the case with Hermes of Praxiteles, of which a photograph was sent to a well-known archaeologist soon after its discovery; the archaeologist admired it greatly, but asked why they had left the mantle hanging on the the tree trunk when they took the photograph." Richter 1929a, 79–80.
50 Richter 1931, 278, n. 2.
51 *Ibid.*, 277.

comments "as impartially as possible,"[52] had intentionally misunderstood her ironic comment in the book review (copied above as a motto for this chapter), so this time Richter used less spice. Maintaining that the identification of the Hermes as a work by Praxiteles rests on the combined evidence of Pausanias's statement and the excellence of the statue itself,[53] she went on to tackle a long list of stylistic, linguistic and technical charges. Holding her head high she concluded:

> The evidence in favor of the identification is too strong to be affected by a few unusual features for all of which explanations or parallels can be found.[54]

But the single line from Pausanias was still as short as it ever was and the excellence of the statue was not apparent on all. Instead of a masterpiece it was seen as some kind of bluff. Blümel called its celebrated sfumato "really nothing more than a rather cheap trick"[55] and Casson announced that should the Hermes be an original then Praxiteles is a disappointing sculptor (he gave credit for the tricks, though).[56] Carpenter admitted the very perfect lustre finish but saw the case as so conclusive that "we can only wonder why the Hermes was ever mistaken for an original."[57] Richter's defence didn't seem quite as solid as the walls of the Metropolitan Museum. The two final commentators came to her help, however. According to Dinsmoor, the architectural evidence (concerning the pedestal) favoured the theory that the Hermes was original rather than a copy of Roman imperial date.[58] Müller, for his part, complimented Blümel on the inauguration of a new field of research but reminded his readers that technical criteria are no proof in themselves: "they are criteria to be proved, and are open to discussion in exactly the same manner as stylistic arguments; they are, therefore, neither better nor worse than these, nor do they eliminate them."[59] Müller concentrated on the drapery of the Hermes, the critical evidence in Carpenter's copy theory, and stated that it supported the view that the statue was a Greek original.[60]

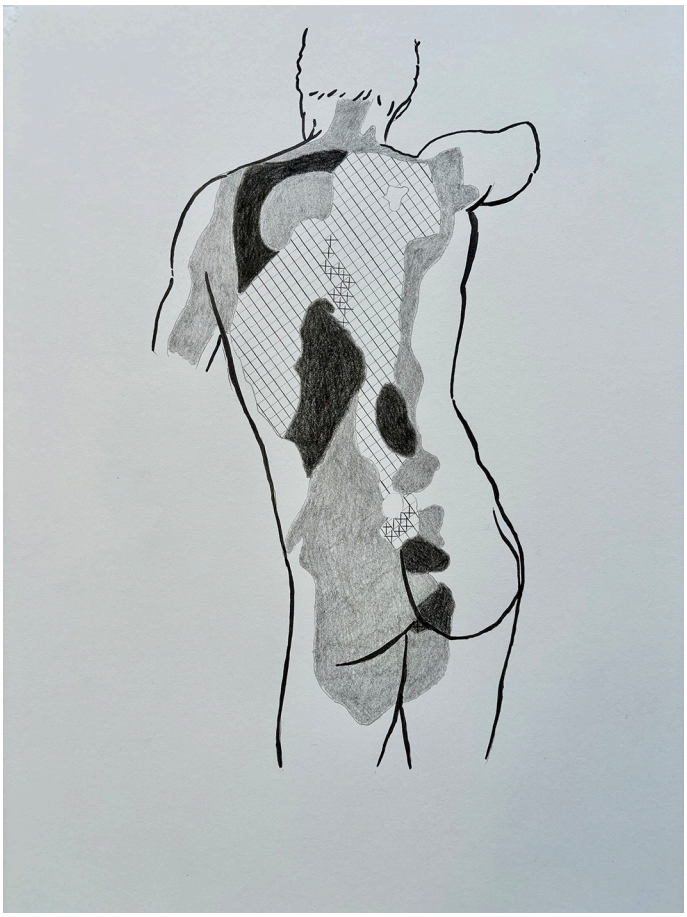

*Fig. 6*: A map of different tool signs on Hermes's back. Rendered by the author, following Antonsson 1937.

To summarise the outcome of the debate, W.L. Cuttle (1896–1958) in his article in 1934, paraphrases Blümel's 'disturbing claim' and Richter's 'trenchant reply' as well as the arguments of their supporters and opponents. He points out that the controversy has served a good purpose: "it has stressed the need for a re-examination of our critical apparatus."[61] Cuttle, a Classics tutor from Cambridge, is not clear about his own opinion but with a few snappy lines he shows the mood of the discussion.

52 Casson 1931, 262.
53 Richter 1931, 278.
54 *Ibid.*, 290.
55 Blümel 1931, 271.
56 Casson 1931, 268
57 Carpenter 1931, 259.
58 Dinsmoor 1931, 296.
59 Müller 1931, 291.
60 *Ibid.*, 295.
61 Cuttle 1934, 166.

> One last word: it makes no difference to the argument whether we like or dislike the Hermes: yet those who maintain its originality are generally those who like it, and vice versa. The first class have more logic on their side: they say, in effect, 'We admire Praxitelean art: and we admire this statue which is in his style. It is so good that we think it must be by that great sculptor'. The second class might well say: 'We dislike Praxitelean art, and we dislike the Hermes: Praxiteles may well have made it'. But they prefer to say: 'We do not think so badly of him as that'.[62]

The 1931 debate may have ended in a 3–3 draw but the general attitude towards the Hermes had permanently changed. Henceforth, a question about the value of the statue for art history would loom over its pensive head. The positions taken during the debate were not easily changed but the coming decades did see some surprises. Gisela Richter was never going to let the Hermes be taken away from 'us', and always introduced it in her books as the work of Praxiteles, even in the face of new contradictory evidence. We shall return to her standpoint once more in the following chapter. Carl Blümel's observations and their later correctives produced much good for an understanding of ancient sculptural practices, but they also managed to narrow the field of vision. His treatment of the Olympian statue effectively repelled all those psychological aspects which had played a role in the nineteenth-century discussions. It was now of no interest what the inward gaze of Hermes aimed to say. As the eyes of the beholder were turned to grooves and surface marks even the subject matter of the work became irrelevant. This radical reductionism was to dominate the readings of the Hermes statue for the next half a century. Important details were brought forward but the image of the complete work grew dim.

A whole new leaf in Praxitelean studies was turned over in 1937, when Oscar Antonsson (1898–1960) successfully defended his doctoral thesis in art history at the University of Stockholm. The main objective of his research was "to remove the last doubts as to the genuineness" of the Praxitelean sculpture.[63] The thesis did not lack in originality, for its author wanted to prove that the work was nothing but a reworked version of a larger three-part group which had depicted Pan and the baby Dionysos in company of a nymph. The radical changes made in Imperial Roman times thus explained the odd tool marks on the main figure's back and on the tree stump. According to Antonsson, the work was indeed a genuine Praxiteles, but remodelled by a later hand after the group had suffered extensive damage, possibly due to a collapsed roof or wall, or both.[64]

Antonsson was inspired by Carl Blümel's technical insights and had met him at least twice during his research. He doesn't quite explain how he came to his surprising idea, or learned to see more in the tool marks that anyone before him, but in his book he works it to the full and offers his readers a proposed reconstruction of the lost original. In doing so he also argues that the legs of "Pan" should be five centimetres shorter.[65] The academic world met Antonsson's results with polite bafflement. The man had a steady job at the Swedish National Museum, he was no eccentric outsider. Like Blümel and Casson, he too was drawn to the practise of sculpting, but to no avail. In her review in *AJA*, Mary Wallace (1912–1965), from University of Colorado, was plain-spoken about the book: "[—] its faulty logic and remarkable flight of fancy make it worthless as serious argument, and interesting chiefly as an example of the danger of proceeding to artistic or archaeological criticism in the grip of a fixed idea."[66] Stanley Casson, this time on site in Olympia, admitted that the author is

62 *Ibid.*, 167. Gisela Richter had written about the tenderness and charm of the art of Praxiteles, albeit admitting that "what we have gained in grace we have lost in greatness". Richter 1929, 195. Blümel and Casson did not express similar admiration.

63 Antonsson 1937, 16.

64 *Ibid.*, 22–23.

65 *Ibid.*, pl. 23

66 Wallace 1938, 435. According to W.L. Cuttle, Antonsson "[—] chooses what he likes to suit his purpose, and discards what he has no use for." *Antiquity* Vol. XIV (1940), No. 55, 341–343. Antonsson's arguments were also strongly criticised by the Swedish art historians Ernst Kjellgren and Gregor Paulson. *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* Vol. 7 (1938), No. 1–4, 41–50.

industrious, honest and filled with enthusiasm, "but he evidently has no experience in technical studies of Greek sculpture, and has been badly advised to proceed with his enquiry."[67] Contrary to what Antonsson promised, the book proved neither this nor that of the sculpture's maker. Sixty years later, however, one can find an occasional mention that his comments on re-cutting and tool marks are worth reading, if nothing else.[68]

By the end of the 1930s, the question of the maker of one old sculpture was probably the smallest of Olympian concerns. The 1940 Summer Olympics, first awarded to Tokyo, then to Helsinki, were cancelled. The outbreak of war did not – not yet – hinder academic work and despite the bleak times new contributions in our field of study were also made. There were at least two new blows directed against Praxiteles's defence. One proved weak, the second felt heavy. In 1937 Charles H. Morgan (1902–1984), director of ASCSA, published a paper "entirely with the drapery in mind," suggesting that the Hermes group belonged to early second-century and that its sculptor was a younger man named Praxiteles, known to have worked at Pergamon; "[—] it was his signature which Pausanias saw on a now missing part of the plinth or tree trunk of the Olympia Hermes."[69] Morgan's conjecture had a short life: soon after the war Rhys Carpenter pulverized his whole evidence for the existence of a Pergamon Praxiteles.[70] Mary Wallace knew better how to keep her feet on the ground when she in 1940 decided to return to the fray and take a look at Hermes's footwear. In her article, building on the point that "divinities of all sorts wear sandals" and then zooming into their distinctive characteristics across centuries, Wallace came up with five-point criterion which, if valid, proved that the Hermes was not carved by Praxiteles or by any other fourth-century sculptor, for there was "an unmistakable incurving in the sole of the sandal."[71] As if that was not enough, she cobbled together more evidence to prove that the correct dating for the sandal is in the Hellenistic period, probably in the second century BC.[72] It seemed that Gisela Richter and her allies were now put on the back foot.

67 Casson 1938, 105. A verdict from Germany reads that Antonsson's proposed reconstruction is the most outrageous misunderstanding and distortion of the artistic spirit of Praxitelean composition. Kreuzer 1943, 136.
68 Ridgway 1997, 281, n. 66.
69 Morgan 1937, 68. Another comment on the Hermes and its plinth from the same year, see Casson 1937.
70 Carpenter 1954, 4–6. In general, Morgan's argument was found unconvincing, see for example Bieber 1941, 62.
71 Wallace 1940, 218. In the following year, Margarete Bieber challenged the five points of Wallace and was answered by her a year later. See Bieber 1941, Wallace 1942.
72 Wallace 1940, 220.

## III. NEARLY RESOLVED

*But why did the copyist choose to eliminate the chlamys from the back of the statue?*
Rhys Carpenter 1969

Reading through the documents of the 'Hermes controversy' of the 1930s, one cannot avoid the strange feeling that some people would have been pleased to prove the statue a Roman copy. There were unforeseen 'objective' comments from Blümel and Casson even belittling the technique of the sculptor. Both men had tried stone carving and should have known better.[73] But, of course, the virtuosity of the Hermes corresponded to *Meisterwerk*, the burdensome concept that typified the aesthetic outlook of nineteenth-century sculptural archaeology. Perhaps it wasn't just a statue that the younger generation wanted to topple. The debate made no waves in Germany, except that in 1938 the director of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome, Ludwig Curtius (1874–1954), who had been forced to early retirement by the Nazis, now publicly called the Hermes an outstanding Roman copy.[74] Blümel had said the same thing, but his professional reputation was not comparable to that of Curtius. The results of earlier German scholarship were thus called into question and Teutonic pride was put to the test. In the Institute's 1943 *Jahrbuch*, an article by Albert Kreuzer turned the tables and reaffirmed that the Hermes was an original work by Praxiteles.

> The positive result achieved will, I hope, protect the Attic master's only surviving original sculpture in the round, the last representative of the idealistic art of free Hellas, from further denigration and misunderstanding, as well as free the German researchers and art scholars, to whom we owe the precious find from Olympia and the discovery of its significance and value, from the accusation of error.[75]

Such an error, if actual, was likely one of the smallest in recent German history. On the sixth year of the disastrous war the Hermes question was taken up again by Carl Blümel, who lectured on the subject in bombed Berlin in November 1944. Four years later he published his thoughts in the booklet *Hermes eines Praxiteles*. Blümel was still convinced that the Hermes was not made in the fourth century BC. but in other respects he had changed his mind.[76] Instead of a Roman copy of a fourth-century original he now saw the work as an original made in the Hellenistic era. In other words, Blümel argued that there never was a Hermes group by the famous Praxiteles. What Pausanias saw in Olympia was a piece invented and executed by a younger sculptor also named Praxiteles two centuries later. Something of the sort had been speculated already in the 1880s, so idea was not entirely new. The fresh impulse may have been Morgan's article of 1937.

Blümel's new thesis was reviewed but not supported by Margarete Bieber (1879–1978), a German professor of archaeology who had been expelled in 1933 from her post in Gießen by the Nazis. Bieber, now retired from Columbia University, was sure that contrary to what Blümel thought the Hermes remained an original by Praxiteles and belonged to his late period around 340 BC. "At that time Praxiteles

73 As their books prove, Blümel and Casson had a taste for more archaic sculpture. They were never keen on high polish.

74 Curtius 1938, 379. Curtius (no relation to the originator of the Olympia campaign Ernst Curtius) does not define his argument but he seems to accept Carpenter's theory of an original statue that stood without a support. He thinks (p. 406) the copyist spoiled the outline of the figure by adding the tree stump and the garment which are "too loud".

75 Kreuzer 1943, 152. I have not found information about the author. Curtius's dismissal in 1937 was due to the fact that the Institute had employed Jewish researchers under his leadership.

76 Blümel 1948. During the war, Blümel had published *Griechische Bildhauer an der Arbeit* (Berlin 1940, reprinted 1941 and 1943), a popularised version of his 1927 research, where he still mentions the Hermes as a Roman copy.

was rich and famous and his works very much in demand."[77] In her own book, in 1955, Bieber showed how to carry on the descriptive and ebullient style of the nineteenth-century German scholars:

> The exquisite modeling of the surface of his marble statues can only be appreciated in an original. Fortunately the Hermes in Olympia, despite recent doubts, is such an original [– –] The light plays on the highly polished surface of the strong body. The nude parts are treated with wonderful subtlety and delicacy in the transitions. Technical skill and mastery of execution are combined with an inspired spiritual expression to fill the face with life. The refinement of the features is in contrast to the hair, which is only roughly blocked out in irregular tufts of considerable depth which create shadows. When the hair was painted and seen from a distance it must have given the impression of reality. Even in the foot, with its subtle swelling, there is a feeling for organic form, which is contrasted to the elegant but sober forms of the leather sandal. One can feel that this foot is a strong and able carrier.[78]

As for Germany, Carl Blümel's name is barely mentioned in the footnotes of compendia from the 1950s. It seems that his German colleagues, by then divided between East and West, were equally sceptical of his arguments.[79] Georg Lippold (1885–1954), one of the last students of Adolf Furtwängler and professor of archaeology at the University of Erlangen, simply adopted his teacher's dating of the Hermes and wrote in *Griechische Plastik* (1950) that Praxiteles's work had been wrongly described as a Roman copy.[80] Ludger Alscher (1916–1985), a leading authority on classical archaeology in the DDR, where Blümel resided, admitted in his *Griechische Plastik* (1956) that the execution and marble carving of the Hermes is unprecedented among surviving statues from the fourth century. He argued, however, that the number of remaining original masterpieces from that time is too small to provide credible evidence of the supposedly extraordinary and, for the time, impossible character of the brilliant, even virtuoso formal language of the Hermes. On the other hand, the number of surviving copies, whose execution is almost universally inferior due to the mechanical manufacturing process, is too large to convincingly compare them with such a masterfully crafted work as this one. According to Alscher, the demonstrable developmental connection of the statue with statues from the second half of the fourth century rules out the possibility that it is an original by a later Hellenistic master.[81] The problems regarding the drapery and the odd sandal were happily overlooked.

*Fig. 7*: Photograph Max Hirmer, before 1956. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, inv. no. fm1894655. Open resource at https://www.bildindex.de/document/obj20323016?medium=fm1894655

As a spin-off from the 1931 debate, Blümel's post-war booklet was to awaken the interest of Rhys Carpenter, now professor at Bryn Mawr. But having studied this new theory, Carpenter,

77 Bieber 1950, 282.
78 Bieber 1955, 16.
79 An exception was the former student of Ludwig Curtius, Friedrich Muthmann (1901–1981), an active member of the Nazi Party and museum director who participated in the "Degenerate Art" campaign. In his 1951 book on the statue supports of Roman copies, he agreed with Blümel's earlier copy thesis. Muthmann 1951, 33–35.
80 Lippold 1950, 241–242.
81 Alscher 1956, 91.

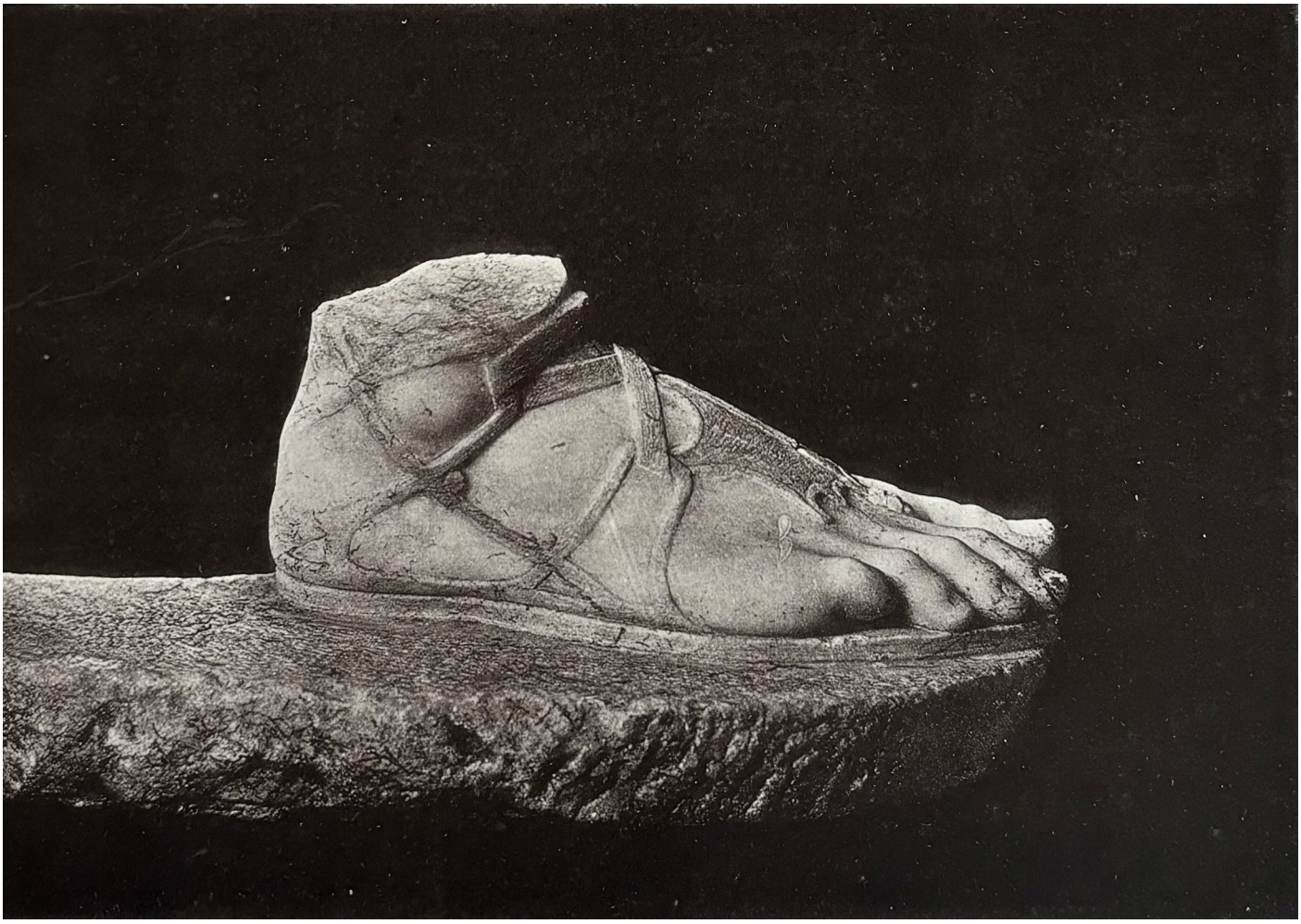

*Fig. 8*: The right foot of Hermes and the disputed sandal. Curtius et al. 1881, plate 10.Universität Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open electronic resource at https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.769#0060

like Bieber before him, came to a negative conclusion: "On careful scrutiny I find it everywhere faulty."[82] Both critics had their reasons for rejecting Blümel's idea and sticking to Praxiteles. The difference lies in the fact that while Bieber simply referred to her own scholarly opinion, similar to that of Furtwängler and Richter, Carpenter spared no effort in attacking Blümel's argument. The amounts of detailed information poured on the pages of *AJA* cannot be repeated here, so we have to content ourselves with the result:

> The Olympian Hermes must therefore remain with the great Praxiteles, even though the execution of the hair, the texture of the surface, the use of an extraneous strut, the crudely recut back, the type of tree-trunk support, the mass on pendent drapery, the baby's head, cannot be his work. On Blümel's own evidence we are obliged to call the statue a copy.[83]

This is a positive outcome for Carpenter who will not let go of his own darling, the idea that the Olympian marble statue is a copy of Praxiteles's bronze original: "After nearly a quarter century of intermittent debate, I am more than convinced that this explanation offers the correct, and indeed the only viable, solution to the controversy."[84] He then uses several pages explaining his own train of thought, and at the end joins the company of Oscar Antonsson by drawing his own proposed reconstruction of the lost original: "lost, I imagine, along with a thousand other masterpieces in that great graveyard of glory which was Greece, [in] the fire

82 Carpenter 1954, 3. Mary Wallace wrote a short review and was of different opinion: "Dr. Blümel has assembled all the evidence, and, in this reviewer's opinion, said the last word." ***Phoenix,*** Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 1952), 29.

83 Carpenter 1954, 6.

84 ***Ibid.***

swept and careless city of Rome."[85]

The word 'copy' is also newly voiced from Paris. The eminent professor of archaeology and ancient art history, Charles Picard (1883–1965) had already in the 1920s rejected the idea of Praxiteles's Hermes as original. Now as Picard's lifetime work *Manuel d'archéologie grecque: La sculpture* is nearing its conclusion he gives special attention to the disputed sculpture. In his meandering way Picard delivers an answer to the question of Hermes's status and Praxiteles's authorship:

> Let us say right away that this kind of fame is now, nonetheless, contested, even debatable, and that the question – since Hirschfeld's time – who had already thought it possible to speak of a simple 'Roman copy' – in any case increasingly raises a thorny controversy, constantly renewed. [– –] But what is not in doubt is that, if the Hermes is only a copy, which we will no doubt have to believe from now on, it at least remains for us a faithful 'double', a duly authenticated tracing of the original and classical work that it replaced. It cannot be the *Hermes eines Praxiteles*, as has been wanted. Except for the very trace of Praxiteles's chisel –– which, it seems, the unfinished and renewed work has not been able to give us –– this composition, which is not a work of old age, remains among the most masterful, and, by its religious meaning, as we will see, the most moving there is.[86]

The opinion expressed by Picard and others, that there was actually nothing wrong if the Hermes belonged to a category of copies, was gaining ground. The fact that apprehension of freestanding sculpture of the Greek classical era was possible only because of active replication made it all the more difficult to hold on to the nineteenth-century idea of *Meisterwerke*. Instead of hailing rare masterpieces researchers began to speak in favour of a broader landscape of sculptural practices. The new paradigm, if not battle cry, was formulated in the opening words of Rhys Carpenter's 1960 book *Greek Sculpture. A Critical Review.*

> The present volume contains singularly little comment on the lives, reputations and accomplishments of the old Greek masters and, instead, pays what may seem undue attention to sculpture as an anonymous product of an impersonal craft. Nor will there be found much consistent appreciation of the beauty of Greek sculpture as something unique created by the genius of the individual artist striving for self-expression of an inner vision of his own.[87]

In this new context, part of a larger sociological turn in history studies, Richter's and Bieber's often subjective and suave arguments in support of master Praxiteles were deemed to look old fashioned, perhaps even elitist. Carpenter's copy-hypothesis appears fittingly modest and impartial: "If the *Hermes* [– –] has been polished to reflect rather than to absorb light, this is one of several indications that the statue is a copy made in Roman times to replace an original bronze deported to Italy."[88] The opposing side came back with nothing new to say. Gisela Richter had ten years earlier put out a new revised edition of her 1929 book *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks.* In the preface she mentions having been allowed to make the alterations that seemed essential.[89] Not a word is changed in the Hermes chapter where she gives testimony to the original beauty and finish of the modelling which "surpasses the Roman copies."[90] We may perhaps note that by moving to Rome in 1952 she accepted a life practically surrounded by such copies.

85 *Ibid.*, 12; the drawing on pl. 3.

86 Picard 1954, 252–254. In her book review, Gisela Richter "takes up the challenge" and once again refutes the arguments against the authenticity of the Hermes. She also points out Picard's tendency to search for mystical, symbolical interpretations: "Even Praxiteles, heretofore considered a great humanist, becomes a religious mystic." Richter 1955, 78.

87 Carpenter 1960, v.

88 *Ibid.*, 171.

89 In the revised edition (1950) Richter mentions in a footnote the debate articles published in 1931 in AJA.

90 The same text also in the 4th, newly revised edition (1970), with Adam 1966 and Carpenter 1969 added in the footnote.

*Fig. 9*: An idea of the form of the original Praxiteles's Hermes in bronze. Rendered by the author, following Carpenter 1954.

Created by genius or not, the ghost of the Olympian Hermes did not leave Professor Carpenter alone. In his often overlooked article from 1969, he comes up with a new solution. This time the first source of inspiration was the recent book *The Technique of Greek Sculpture in the Archaic and Classical Periods* by Sheila Adam, where she devotes the last pages to the drapery of the Hermes statue.[91] Adam continues the work started by Blümel and Casson and also inherits a similarly confident voice. Technical details are independent of taste and therefore offer firmer evidence in cases like this: "[– –] the style and technique of the drapery of the Hermes confirm the suspicions aroused by other features – the hair, the polish, the child, the sandal, the pedestal – that the statue cannot have been carved in the fourth century."[92]

On its own this verdict offers nothing new, notes Carpenter. We still don't know if it is a late creation or a copy of Praxiteles's work, and, if the latter, what was the exact form of the original. Carpenter has systematically turned down all other options than there being a bronze original but hasn't been able to explain the anomalies of the marble version. Now he takes a new look at Oscar Antonsson's book and finds his answer there.

Antonsson had spend much time mapping the tool marks on Hermes's back, arguing that it wasn't originally naked at all but had a garment on it.[93] The marks were result of re-cutting from the time when the figure was transformed from Pan to Hermes and the unnecessary clothing removed with chisels and rasps. No-one had previously bought the Pan-hypothesis but Carpenter is now convinced that in matters of clothing Antonsson got it right. Using the well known Pompeii wall painting as a reference Carpenter argues that Praxiteles's bronze original was wearing a short *chlamys* cloak but the copyist working on marble could not reproduce it successfully and had to remove the whole thing.[94] The slightly forced conjecture about a haphazard copyist who can conjure an anatomic miracle but not a piece of cloth has found few mentions in literature.

Approaches like Carpenter's had consistently highlighted several problems with the Hermes. However, an alternative perspective was at hand. If the statue was indeed a faithful copy of a fourth-century original, as Charles Picard had claimed, shouldn't it be studied as it stands, as an accurate expression of unique sculptural ideas? This was the viewpoint chosen by the archaeologist Adolf Borbein (1936–) in his 1973 habilitation thesis entitled *Die griechische Statue des 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* The work focuses purely on formal analysis of sculptures and contains no speculation about their authorship. Borbein discusses neither Praxiteles nor other sculptors and simply calls this particular

91 Adam 1966, 127–128. The book was basically her 1962 PhD thesis at Cambridge. I have not found any further information.

92 *Ibid.*, 128. Oscar Antonsson had refuted Carpenter's 1931 *chlamys*-argument but Adam leaves this unmentioned. Gisela Richter reviewed Adam's book (Richter 1968) but refrained from arguing anything about the Hermes.

93 Antonsson 1937, 24–26.

94 Carpenter 1969, 467–468. The now faded fresco in Casa del Naviglio, Pompeii, which showed a satyr with baby Dionysos in the same position as the Olympian group, was seen as a depiction of the statue already in 1888 by von Rohden.

statue Hermes at Olympia. For his argument, the question of the markings on Hermes's back is irrelevant, as the back has little independent significance in the statue's composition. The tilted head and neck, the rounded shoulder blades, and the direction of movement of the arms tend forward – all relate to the frontal view:[95]

> The body of Hermes at Olympia stretches upward in a bold swing; in the frontal view – the main view – any impression of heaviness or burden is avoided. The figure is held upright by optical means; the original purpose of *contrapposto* has been reversed: the supporting right leg is eccentrically positioned and, combined with the strong rotation of the hip, appears to swing sideways, while the free left leg, although raised and set back, supports the figure's centre of gravity, which is approximately at the level of the pectoral muscle insertion. Since the face and the free leg are also located on a vertical axis, and on either side of this axis the bunch of grapes held aloft in the right hand and the Dionysos child seated on the god's left arm create a fluctuating balance, it appears as if the figure could stand without supporting itself.[96]

Borbein concludes that the supporting motif in the Hermes statue is merely a citation of the classical standing motif.[97] The tree trunk is almost covered by a masterfully crafted garment: the support has not only lost its purpose, but also its important quality, its solid consistency. Meanwhile Hermes's body appears to be gripped by opposing impulses of movement – no longer as a reaction to gravity, but rather imposed on the figure as a visual representation: "The individual limbs therefore do not stand like building blocks in a tectonic formation, but are held together by spherical curvatures. Furthermore, gliding contour lines in the main view also illustrate the depth of the figure."[98] Was this not the hallmark of Praxiteles's mind and hand? The archaeologist and Leipzig professor Arthur Schneider (1861–1905) had already in 1893 discussed the peculiar pose and argued that the purpose of the support is not to relieve the body as much as possible, but rather to relieve it as beautifully as possible: "In any case, I would like to see in our group the most successful possible solution to the artistic problem posed above, one that, despite all its regularity, avoids any rigidity and is all the more highly valued because it is not merely an arbitrarily posed act, but a specific artistic task, which has also been masterfully carried out in terms of content."[99] Regardless of whether the statue was a proven work of Praxiteles or not, Schneider and Borbein seemed to agree that it conveyed his ideas perfectly.

95 Borbein 1973, 159.
96 *Ibid.*, 163.
97 Gisela Richter (1931, 280-281) had argued that the posture of the Hermes absolutely demands a support, i.e. it certainly was part of Praxiteles's original design, not something added by a copyist, as was the opinion of Rhys Carpenter. .
98 Borbein 1973, 164.
99 Schneider 1893, 95.

## IV. YET UNDECIDED

*The question is not after all so very important, since the quality of the statue is so outstanding that even if it were a copy it could without more ado stand in for the original.*
R.E. Wycherley 1982

For those who wanted to see the work as made by Praxiteles the puzzling tool marks were still a minor problem. The real catch was that while it had proved impossible to show the authenticity of the Olympian Hermes with evidence drawn directly from its high artistic quality, the work had been used since 1880s as a reference point for other works thought to be Praxitelean enough to represent originals, such as the Aberdeen head in London. But now it was suggested by the Cambridge professor Robert M. Cook (1909–2000) that the Aberdeen head, being an original from the hand of Praxiteles, proves the Hermes a copy.[100] The situation of the 'for' –party remained hermetic. The 'against' –party did not even need to reason like Cook. They could still invoke the technical material published by Blümel (1927, partly revised 1948) and Adam (1966), both confident that the work at hand is not an original by Praxiteles or by anyone from that time. This reasoning had also found support from the footwear study of Wallace (1940). One could expect someone to blow the final whistle when another shoe gazer came to the same conclusions. The book *Greek Footwear and the Dating of Sculpture* by Katherine Dohan Morrow (1954–) was published in 1985. She went deeper in sandal details and after a comparative analysis announced: "If the Hermes is indeed a fourth-century original, his sandals display features that are unparalleled at that time and that do not regularly appear until two centuries later. On this basis, it is difficult not to assign the Hermes at the earliest to the Hellenistic period."[101] As always, these assessments were based on existing material evidence and remained valid until new contradictory finds were made.

The generation of the 1931 debate was gone and younger scholars had very little that was new to argue about. The Hermes question remained formally unresolved, if only waiting for the official answer. This was also the line taken by Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway (1929–2024), former student of Carpenter and now professor at Bryn Mawr, who published her *Roman Copies of Greek Sculpture. The Problem of the Originals* in 1984. In Ridgway's view the Hermes statue was an eclectic creation, a composite piece based on a formulaic body, an idealised head and footwear of latest fashion.[102] In other words, done in a time when the elongated and curvy figure was already an established model, the work replicates a generic style rather than a Praxiteles original. Ridgway took her point further in *Fourth-Century Styles in Greek Sculpture* (1997) questioning not just Hermes's body but the whole Praxitelean body of work:

> Regrettably our entire approach in fleshing out the master's oeuvre has been based on presumed similarities to the Hermes among the iconographic types listed by the sources; the results are numerous but unsound, and the modern literature is equally voluminous but misleading.[103]

As if to accompany his elder colleagues, Andrew Stewart (1948–2023), professor of Greek studies at University of California, Berkeley, also reminded us of the problematic fact that the attribution of the Aberdeen head rests on its pronounced similarity to the Hermes, the face of which "seems to blur and 'freeze' the features of the Aberdeen head." Taken together with the

100 Cook 1977, 77. Cook's very brief and subjective contribution is based on study of plaster casts of the two heads.
101 Morrow 1985, 83–84.
102 Ridgway 1984, 85–86. Here Ridgway already points to the research done by Morrow, her student at Bryn Mawr.
103 Ridgway 1997, 261.

anomalies already discussed in earlier research, this allows but one conclusion. As Stewart wrote in his book *Greek Sculpture. An Exploration* (1990):

> The logic of all this is unpleasant but inescapable: Pausanias saw, and we have, a statue by an imitator, perhaps one of his [Praxiteles's] sons or grandsons. The head, even the entire composition, may derive more or less directly from the master, but in the present state of our knowledge it is safest to consider it where it apparently belongs, within the Hellenistic period.[104]

What Stewart offered was in practice a rerun of Carl Blümel's 1948 *Hermes eines Praxiteles* –argument and Rhys Carpenter's counterargument combined in one. Lacking new evidence and fresh viewpoints the whole discussion had started to loop around itself.

The first voice to stand out from the choir was the British archaeologist R.E. Wycherley (1909–1986). He knew his Pausanias, having edited the companion volume to *Description of Greece* for Loeb Classics, and his short article 'Pausanias and Praxiteles' from 1982 can be read as an afterthought on the book's Olympia section. Wycherley begins with a backward glance or potpourri of old arguments, most of which we have already discussed. Only halfway into his article does Wycherley reveal his own tactic: to measure Pausanias's expertise against ours.

> Pausanias mentions over 160 sculptors, most being of the Classical period. Of how many do we have one single authenticated statue? Of not one do we have the kind of solid *oeuvre* which historians of art in other periods very rightly require before they presume to attempt stylistic analysis, or attribution and rejection.[105]

Wycherley then questions the criteria of technical evidence, on which authors like Stanley Casson and Sheila Adam often seem to disagree, and underlines that Pausanias is a reliable author whose testimony stands and carries great weight. To challenge and disprove a statement by him, says Wycherley, one needs to be sure of one's ground, to have clear, solid, ancient evidence and agreement about it.

> What we have before us is not simply a dispute between modern technical experts. The opposition is rather between a plain statement by Pausanias and half a dozen divergent modern theories, of which all but one are bound to be mistaken. Of course I accept that it may be Pausanias who is wrong. But the case against him is certainly not proven. [– –] he had a colossal advantage over us who have never stood before an ancient statue and been able to say, with knowledge, with true confidence, "This was made by the hand of Kalamis" – or Myron, or Pheidias, or Alkamenes, or Polykleitos, or Skopas, or – if we take from him the Hermes – Praxiteles.[106]

Wycherley did not prove anything, only expressed his opinion. But in doing so he managed to get the discussion back on the rails and point out that Pausanias, the only eyewitness, has been kept out of the courtroom for the past fifty years. Even so, there still remained a problem, as had been pointed out over eighty years earlier and repeated thirty years later: "In fact it all rests on a chance note of Pausanias."[107] Was there any prospect of finding something else?

Even as another decade passed, all news about the Olympian Hermes remained retrospective. The idea of an impersonal craft and its anonymous products, as argued in the studies of Carpenter and Ridgway, was politely questioned in 1996 in the anthology *Personal Styles in Greek Sculpture*, edited by Professors Olga Palagia (1949–) and J.J. Pollitt (1934–2024). The book could be read as a centennial tribute to Adolf Furtwängler and his highly influential *Meisterwerke der griechischen Plastik*.[108] The essay on Praxiteles is from the hand of Ridgway's former student Aileen Ajootian (1951–). She writes that the artist's style has a peculiar emotional quality wherefore it is essential to "disentangle the actual style of Praxiteles from our perception of it."[109] To do this without the help of a single authentic piece is not an easy assignment, and she is forced to conclude that traits we usually consider

104 Stewart 1990, 177.
105 Wycherley 1982, 186.
106 *Ibid.*, 190–191. Fifty years earlier, in his monograph Prassitele, G.E. Rizzo had in a similar way underlined the value of Pausanias and promoted the use of common sense. Rizzo 1932, 71–72.
107 The quote is from Stanley Casson 1929, 281. The same point earlier in Fowler 1900, 45.
108 See especially the book's introduction. Pollitt 1996, 1–15.
109 Ajootian 1996, 91.

"Praxitelean" may actually not derive directly from works by the sculptor.[110] As for the Hermes, Ajootian's clear analysis of the work and her recapitulation of the discussion are impartial and offer no surprises: she concludes with "reasonable certainty" that it is not a fourth-century work.[111] At about the same time, the Oxford Professor Emeritus John Boardman (1927–2024) delivered a similar verdict and offered it to the general reader in *Greek Sculpture. The Late Classical Period* (1995).[112]

The largest ever exhibition devoted to the art of Praxiteles was arranged in Paris and Athens respectively in 2007. The Hermes was not allowed to leave Olympia and the work was presented as a plaster cast reconstruction. No new research on the work was conducted, so the Louvre curator and initiator of the exhibition Alain Pasquier (1942–) could but represent the old pros and cons and then perform a kind of balancing act without falling on either side. He writes in the catalogue that unlike most German scholars of the previous generation, he felt unable "to overcome the accumulation of obstacles that stand in the way of the idea that this is an original statue by Praxiteles." But he also failed to embrace the scepticism represented by Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway and her followers, which is to ignore or correct Pausanias, "or to place this superb work of marble sculptor on the same rank even with a Roman copy of exceptional quality."[113] This was stalemate, or aporia, as Pasquier called it. He admitted that the situation was serious because the Hermes of Olympia in Praxitelean research stands as a sort of touchstone of the master's style: "If we remove all virtue from this stone, is there not a risk that a shadow will spread over the whole field of study?"[114]

The prestige of the Louvre may partly explain Pasquier's cautious approach. As the exhibition moved to Athens, the Hermes statue was discussed in a slightly more passionate tone by the archaeologist Nikolaos Stampolidis (1951–). He was less bothered with old arguments and let his eyes follow the lines of the sculpture from the feet of Hermes up to the head, which, he writes, brings together the opposites of human nature, disorder and order (disorder of the hair and perfection of the face). Tracking then the gazes of the two gods Stampolidis proclaimed:

> If this triangle [– –] is not a composition of a great artist, and if the attribution of plasticity to the individual details of the naked body and the slightly contrasted volumes on Hermes's face, which are subtly mocking, does not reveal the sophistication and sensitivity of conception of a great creator who lives and acts within the bliss of youth and beauty, just as Aristippus and Cyrenaic philosophy understood in the second half of the fourth century BC., then what else would the great Praxitelean art be [– –].[115]

110 *Ibid.*, 129.
111 *Ibid.*, 110.
112 Boardman 1995, 53.
113 Pasquier 2007, 102.
114 *Ibid.*
115 Stampolidis 2007, 11.

*Fig. 10*: Oskar Rühm's reconstruction of the Hermes group from 1894. Curtius et al. 1894, plate 53. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Open online resource at: https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.782#0055

Stampolidis's interpretation the statue as an expression of ancient hedonistic philosophy may seem surprising, but the idea that the Hermes group should be approached as a philosophical work was not entirely new. Already in 1879 Thomas Davidson had argued for its relation to the intellectual changes in fourth century Athens. In the 1950s, Charles Picard had emphasised the statue's meaning as a religious piece and suggested a Platonic reading of the Dionysos myth.[116] These ideas also surface in Andrew Stewart's 2008 book *Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art*. As we have seen, two decades earlier Stewart, as a sculpture historian, believed that the work was most likely a Hellenistic copy. Now he takes a different path and writes accordingly. Like Stampolidis, Stewart also studies the interplay of the two gods whose eyes do not meet, and the way "our own eyes travel endlessly round the oval path generated by these gestures and glances."[117] He sees the two immortals as souls far removed from our world.

> So like Plato's heavenly beings in his late dialogue the Timaeus, these two Olympians are now "able through their surpassing excellence to keep company only with themselves, they need no–one else and are completely self-sufficient as acquaintances and friends." And as one of Aristotle's pupils shrewdly remarked, "it is eccentric to love god, for who can love what is remote and unknowable?"[118]

Proceeding then to the philosophy of Epicurus, according to whom "god dispenses no benefits, he is self-sufficient, needless of us, indifferent to the world, untouched by rights or wrongs" (Diog. Laert. 10.139), Stewart concludes:

> So this was how one brilliant practitioner of sculptor's art – Praxiteles himself? – ultimately solved the paradoxes of Greek anthropomorphic religion. As the gods withdrew into solipsistic self–sufficiency, all that remained for mortals was to contemplate their bliss and attempt to as far as possible to imitate it here on earth.[119]

It seems that as soon as Andrew Stewart let go of the Hermes as an art object of an unclear date he began to see the work in full. This broader cultural context and possibility of aestheticism, which were part of the discussions of the 1880s and 1890s, were absent from the twentieth–century debate from Blümel to Carpenter and Ridgway. The fascination for hard facts, as Stanley Casson named them, did not support metaphysical speculations.[120] They also had little to do with Gisela Richter's museal connoisseurship. It is maybe fair to say that people on both sides of the debate were looking at their own simplified, formalistic version of the Hermes.

By admitting philosophy a place in the discussion nothing was proved, though. In the eyes of art history the Hermes had not moved an inch. But when it came to his sandals, a new step forward was taken. The footwear research conducted by Wallace (1940) and Morrow (1985) had supported the theory of Hermes's Hellenistic origin ca. 200 BC. but the article by Heide Froning (1943–), professor of archaeology at Marburg, introduced in 2007 new evidence which suddenly overturned their estimate. Rechecking first rebuttals of Praxiteles's authorship, such as the strut, and finding it not as conclusive proof as thought, Froding turns to sandals. She argues against the theses of Wallace and Morrow by showing clear examples of incurving soles from the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries BC., i.e. hundred and fifty years earlier than previously thought.

> Let us be clear: The shape of Hermes's sandals does not constitute an obstacle to considering the group an original work by Praxiteles from around 330 BC. Furthermore, the assessment of the sandals as copies of late classical works such as the Apollo of Belvedere and the Artemis of Versailles should be reconsidered.[121]

If Froning's article unlocked a small door, Andrew Stewart's short article four years later pushed it slightly open. He drew attention to the infant Dionysos, who was mentioned in the research literature, if at all, mostly because of his

116 Picard 1954, 291–299.
117 Stewart 2008, 264.
118 The author refers to *Plato, Tim.* 34B and *Aristotle, Ethr. Mor.* 2.11.7 (= *Mag. Mor.* 1208b31).
119 The philosophical point made, Stewart also notes (2008, 253) that Greek artists depended upon the traditional religion for their livelihood and serviced a largely nonintellectual clientele.
120 Writing on the Hermes, Richter (1929, 195) had only argued that the greatest work an artist can produce "must be a spiritualization, so to speak, of the concepts and feelings of his time".
121 Froning 2007, 99.

attribute status and poor looks. Stewart pointed out that Dionysos's characteristics – structure, modelling, surface treatment, and features – can be found in works made in the second half of fourth century BC., whereas during the third century sculpted children evolve rapidly: "They become cute and sentimentalized, with bulbous double chins, chubby cheeks, pert, focused expressions, and artfully tousled hair."[122] Based on this Stewart concluded that a Roman copy is the least likely possibility and that manufacture by Praxiteles himself is not impossible. Funny as it may seem, John Boardman had reasoned exactly the opposite: "the poor proportions of the baby help support the idea of fairly close copying of the original figure, since Hellenistic babies are frequently better managed."[123] But Stewart also noted Professor Olga Palagia's observation that all Roman statues in Olympia are made of Pentelic marble, whereas the Hermes is Parian – a fact which seems to speak against the Roman copy option.[124]

Heide Froning's and Andrew Stewart's articles were welcomed by the independent scholar and archaeologist Antonio Corso (1955–), likely the most consistent defender of the original Hermes in the twenty–first century. Already in 1996, Corso had published an article where he discussed the history of the statue and supported Praxiteles's authorship. In 2013, in the fourth part of his Praxiteles monograph, he returns to the subject. Corso now argues that it is thanks to his article and the recent contributions of Froning, Stewart and Stampolidis that earlier doubts about the originality of the Olympian Hermes are overcome.[125] Not a moment too early, one could say.

> [– –] it is one of the very few masterpieces at least partly carved by one of the greatest masters of antiquity which still survive and thus give an idea of the extremely high level of his art.[126]

The problem remains that Corso's collected arguments will only satisfy the like–minded. Opinions have remained as divided as ever. The Italian professor of archaeology Luigi Todisco (1950–) concludes in his 2017 book *Prassitele di Atene. Scultore e bronzista del IV secolo* that the Hermes is a fairly faithful copy of the original, which was perhaps also carved in marble and belonged to the same time as the Aberdeen head, which he now counts as authentic.[127] Two years later, in *Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, Iphigeneia Leventi is mildly positive towards the possibility that the statue could be an original.[128]

If Antonio Corso's assertion sounds familiar, it is perhaps because it brings to mind the words of Gisela Richter, who wrote of the Hermes in 1929: "This is the only original statue by a known Greek sculptor of the first rank which has survived."[129] Stanley Casson once called her subjective argument a declaration of faith, and it certainly could be read as a credo. But Richter's and Corso's words can also be seen as an expression of elation at the existence of something special – after all, Richter stated that "we are in the *happy position* of being able to judge his style by an original statue."[130] It is a position that recalls the history of the first sighting, as it was verbalised by the German archaeologist Reinhard Kekulé (1839–1911), who was not there but was willing to share the joy.

> They suddenly found themselves under the sunny spell of a work that came from the hand of the great master himself, and understood the charm of later antiquity; but they were astonished by the uniqueness of what appeared so unexpectedly before their eyes.[131]

122 Stewart 2011, 52. Sheila Adam, for one, had been of different opinion. She found the closest parallel of the infant Dionysos in a work which is dated c. 100 BC. Adam 1966, 126.
123 Boardman 1995, 53.
124 Stewart 2011, 53; Palagia 2006, 278, n. 128.
125 Corso 2013, 170.
126 *Ibid.*, 169.
127 Todisco 2017, 17–18, 31–35. Todisco had already argued the same about the Hermes in his book ***Scultura greca del IV secolo***, Milan 1993, 75.
128 Leventi 2019, 379–380. As for the Archaeological Museum of Olympia, it seems to have accepted Corso's stance. In 2025, the museum webpage explains: "The statue is a work of the renowned Athenian sculptor Praxiteles who achieved to convert a large piece of Parian marble into a masterpiece of harmony and eurhythmy."
129 Richter 1929a, 195. She, in turn, is echoing the words of Adolf Michaelis (1835–1910): "[– –] the only original work of art we possess of a Greek artist of the first rank." Michaelis 1908, 131.
130 Richter 1929a, 194. Emphasis mine.
131 Kekulé 1881, 7.

# INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

*"And now that you've tracked the artful thoughts in my marble,*
*step into the arena with me and show how you wield the chisel."*
Ernst Curtius 1877

According to one version of the myth, Hermes's father Zeus asked him to convey the new baby son Dionysos – conceived by Zeus outside marriage and born from his thigh – to the nymphs of Nysa, who would guard the child from the anger of Zeus's wife Hera. The statue in Olympia depicts Hermes and Dionysos taking a break on their way to that mysterious mountain. It is difficult to judge how much the mythical story meant to those who met the statue in the temple of Hera in the fourth century BC. or later. Pausanias, who saw it in the first century AD., says nothing of the myth but mentions the maker. If the statue originally had a story to tell, the artist's name now meant much more.

Praxiteles had found great renown in his lifetime. But could his posthumous reputation have guarded the Hermes group during the years when Olympia fell into decay, up to the time when the Heraion was stripped bare? If it is true that Lausos, the hoarding collector of pagan art from Constantinople, had in the fourth century obtained Praxiteles's famous Knidian Aphrodite and, moreover, the Olympian Zeus by Pheidias, why is it that he did not snatch this Praxiteles statue?[132] The location of Nysa is not the only unsolved mystery in the present story. For some reason Hermes, a deity of thieves among other things, was left standing in the near-empty Heraion. The statue was only mildly vandalised before it fell down in mud and was covered by it. The valuable metal parts, all of them likely gilded, were stolen and the penis was snapped but the face was saved from harm.[133] He was found smiling.

> Is that just a smile of joy at being together, of loving trust, of friendly benevolence? I think: not at all. Why isn't Hermes looking at the little one? It's the smile of a trickster [*Schalk*] who is, after all, genuinely devoted to the child. Just look at the profile of the head from the right side and you won't fail to recognise the expression of playful creativity. Hermes, as if by chance and in thought, lets the child see a bunch of grapes that he would like to have. But Hermes acts as if he doesn't notice anything, as if he were truly lost in thought, gazing into the distance. In short, he's playing with the little one.[134]

Lecturing beside a freshly made plaster cast of the Olympian find at the University of Göttingen in 1880, professor Friedrich Wieseler looked at the Hermes as a character rather than a piece of carved stone. He took Praxiteles's authorship as given, or course, but understood the statue as a complex amalgam of myth, psychological insight and extraordinary artistic skill. The academic outlook was much different half a century later when the work was studied from a narrow technical – or should we say rational and modern – viewpoint. Doubts about the date of the statue were justified, although not always impartially presented.[135] Or is it, rather, that all the nineteenth-century psychologising that followed the day Ernst Curtius met the *Kaiser* in December 1877 was but sweet talk to keep away the difficult question: What does it mean if we say that the hand of the famous Praxiteles never touched this piece of marble? A century and a half of scholarship has not provided us with a simple answer. On the contrary, the case of the statue looks even more tangled. It has been

132 On Lausos and his famous collection, see Bassett 2000.
133 One might have expected to find the head of Dionysos underneath the fallen Hermes, but it was located far outside the temple ruins. To me this suggests that the head of the little one was severed already before the statue toppled over.
134 Wieseler 1880, 24–25.
135 This shows especially in the 1931 debate. I think Gisela Richter was right in answering Stanley Casson, who, like Carl Blümel, had openly belittled the sculptural qualities of the Hermes: "Or are we only subjective when we praise and objective when we blame?" Richter 1931, 284.

suggested that the Hermes is "the limit case of the seamless continuity between copy and original" – whatever that means.[136] Perhaps the absence of "copies" may signify that there was no "original", as Aileen Ajootian formulates the dilemma.[137] The Olympian Hermes resides as if in a class of its own.

After all the pages I have read, I still cannot form a sound opinion for myself. I would like to think of Praxiteles as an innovator who excelled in works of marble.[138] For me, the Hermes could very well be something he worked on. And yet I admit that the history of the work is full of contradictions. Two of these I would like to point out. One is the complexion of Hermes. We know that his back is not pretty, but looks as if it had been whipped; large areas of the smooth skin had turned into open wound. How would you colour this? Or, if we turn to the front, what is the use of the slippery polish of the belly and the chest if they were originally to receive a cover of matte paint? Was this statue ever fully painted? Did it undergo fashion changes? The cleaning done in the years following the find is not documented and we don't know how much "the luminous quality of flesh" (Richter) owes to modern hands. The first photographs prove that the face at least received a good scrubbing afterwards.[139] This leads to my second point. The problem with the literature, in my view, is that so many commentators have thought it possible to celebrate the statue and argue about it as if it was produced by one pair of hands – by those of Praxiteles or someone else. But the famous tool marks make sense only if we accept that they are not a guaranteed signature of the artist/copyist. Everything we know about workshop practices and the movement of the statues suggests that the Hermes, original or replica, was treated by many hands before it landed in the Heraion.[140] The altered pedestal clearly indicates a change of position; we cannot say whether the work was made for Olympia in the first place. In theory the Hermes may have come there from another location and may been reworked by someone other than the originator, who may have been someone other than the famous Praxiteles – that is, if we exclude the possibility that the Hermes with all its odd details is his work.

It has proven difficult to preserve the originality of the Hermes, but it has not been "taken away" from us, as Gisela Richter once feared. No-one, to my knowledge, has ever called it a fake. The statue we meet at Olympia stands unresolved and genuine at once. Praxiteles has always been part of its story – be he the maker, a shadow behind the maker, or a mere name to mark the many makers – it is Praxiteles's Hermes, not anyone else's. While looking for a satisfying answer we remain, as it were, the little ones Hermes is playing with.


*Fig. 11*: An unforced error. Undated postcard, first half of the 20th century. Nicholas Catsimpoolas Collection inv. no. 21_03_004669, Boston Public Library. Open resource at https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/tb09mr771

136 Beard & Henderson 2001, 102.
137 Ajootian 1996, 110.
138 I take my cue from Charles Waldstein, who wrote in 1914: "Compared with the treatment of hair in the Archaic period this work shows the introduction of innovation as bold as is, in some respects, the work of Mr. Rodin by contrast with that of his predecessors and some of his contemporaries." Waldstein 1914, 13.
139 Eduard Schmidt had already in 1931 suggested that the high gloss is modern and created by cleaning the surface with acids. Carl Blümel objected, saying that acids alone can achieve a greasy shine but never a polish. Schmidt 1931, 11, see also Blümel 1931, 272.
140 As Adolf Michaelis noted early on (1908, 133): "The Hermes was certainly not made in Olympia by Praxiteles, and owes its place there to an accident unknown to us."

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