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A Unique Roman Folding Knife Handle with Eagle Ornament from Philadelphia in Cilicia

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Abstract

Numerous artefacts were discovered inside a pit located in the necropolis of ancient Philadelphia, which belonged to Cilicia from time to time. This study suggests that the pit might be a votive deposit of some kind with objects placed within it in a planned sequence. The folding knife, which is one of the many metal finds discovered in this pit and the subject of this study, is a unique find never recorded before in Asia Minor. Its handle bears an eagle figure, which also makes it unique. Folding knives are found at Roman garrison sites in Germania and Britannia, and the figures depicted on their handles vary. The Philadelphia folding knife is associated with military iconography and also with the cult of the dead.

Keywords: Philadelphia, Gökçeseki, Roman Imperial period, metal object, folding knife, eagle

Öz

Zaman zaman Cilicia sınırları içinde kalmış olan Philadelphia antik kenti nekropolisinde bulunan bir çukur içerisinden çok sayıda arkeolojik buluntu ele geçmiştir. Planlı bir şekilde yerleştirilmiş buluntularından dolayı bu çukurun bir tür adak çukuru olabileceğini düşünülmektedir. Bu çukur içerisindeki çok sayıdaki metal buluntudan biri olan ve bu çalışmanın konusu olan katlanır kesici, Küçük Asya sınırlarında daha önce yayınlanmış örneği bulunmayan ünik bir buluntudur. Bıçağın formunun yanı sıra sap üzerinde bulunan kartal figürü sebebiyle de üniktir. Katlanır kesicilerin benzerleri Germania ve Britannia'da bulunan Roma askeri yerleşimlerinden ele geçmiştir. Ama bunların saplarında bulunan figürler farklılık göstermektedir. Philadelphia katlanır kesicisinin sapında bulunan kartal figürü ise askeri ve ölü kültü ile ilişkili bir ikonografiyle ilişkilidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Philadelphia, Gökçeseki, Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi, metal buluntu, katlanır kesici, kartal

This study will focus on the typology and stylistic assessment of the folding knife found in a pit[1] at the necropolis of Philadelphia (Ermenek, Gökçeseki) in Cilicia.[2] It will also look into its significance as a unique object in Asia Minor.

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1 Aşkın et al. 2015, 357.

2 The remains of ancient Philadelphia are located in Cilicia at the time period in which the folding knife is dated, see Ramsay 1960, 414; Hild and Hellenkemper 1990, 378. The name Philadelphia is associated with Antiochus IV. In 38 BCE Caligula gave Antiochus IV, the king of Commagene, Cilicia Tracheia and parts of Lycaonia. Antiochus IV subsequently founded the city and named it after his wife Iotape Philadelphos.

Folding knives work on the same principle as the modern straight razor and feature decorative elements on the handle. They consist of a handle and a moveable blade. Hence the blade component can fold in and out. A pin is used to connect the handle with the blade. These are rare discoveries among Roman metal objects.

The handle of the Philadelphia example is complete, while the blade part is broken (figs. 1-2). The blade is made of iron and corroded so is fused in a folded position inside its slot in the handle. The bronze handle section features an eagle with folded wings perched on a column. It is so far the only known example with an eagle on these artefacts. The column underneath the eagle is twisted and separated from the eagle figure by the short base on which the eagle stands. The vertical component behind the column is decorated with circles that have dots in their center. There is a notch behind the eagle's head and at the tip of the column made to affix the iron component. The slot of the blade extends up to the back of the eagle's head. Fully unfolded, the blade must have been 19 cm long.[3]

The handle was produced by the casting technique, and polished and retouched after casting. The frontal eagle sitting on the twisted column and the frame adorned with circular grooves behind it have been schematically created with parallel lines on the wings and deep and cross-section lines on the body. The iris ring and pupil of the eagle's eye are indicated with deep circles.

The Iconography of the Eagle Figurine

Firstly, an iconographic examination of the Philadelphia object will be carried out. The chapter on bird species in Pliny's book *Naturalis Historia* describes eagles as the most noble, powerful and striking of all in the bird kingdom.[4] This is probably why the eagle became one of the most significant attributes of the great god Zeus/Jupiter in the Greek and Roman pantheons.[5]

As the identifying symbol of Jupiter, eagle depictions are frequently found on votive and tomb stelai. In the Roman world, the eagle was regarded as the "symbol and emissary of the *apotheosis* after death."[6] In this context, eagles would be flown over the emperor's funerary fire as an element of the cult of the dead.[7] Besides those for the ruling class, eagles are also seen on depictions on the funerary altars of citizens.[8]

With control over a wide area in the air, it is evident why this bird is closely associated with Jupiter, god of the skies and the sky itself. Eagle depictions are seen frequently as the symbol of Jupiter, next to representations of deified emperors as well as a symbol related to the iconography of the cult of the dead.

During the Roman period, eagles were depicted solitarily with open or folded wings, often perched on spheres, on deer/bull/ram heads, or on columns/pedestals/podiums. Depictions of eagles perched on mountains are also found on *agalma*s.[9] The eagle statue at the summit of

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3 Its dimensions are - length: 9.6 cm, width: 3.1 cm; eagle length: 3.4 cm, width: 1.6 cm; pedestal length: 5.8 cm, width: 0.7 cm. Its weight is 75.10 gr.

4 Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 10.3.1.

5 Toynbee 1973, 240.

6 Hünemörder 1996, 115.

7 Hünemörder 1996, 115 writes that "an eagle flies forth, soaring with the flames into the sky; the Romans believe that this eagle carries the soul of the emperor from the earth up to heaven.…"

8 Toynbee 1973, 242.

9 Weiss 1985, 29, figs. 5, 8.

Mount Nemrud and the eagle statues positioned on the grand column protecting the Karakuş and Sesönk tumuli[10] in Commagene are some of the most well-known examples.

As for the connection between the eagle symbol and troops and legions, it is rather significant that a legion under the command of Caius Marius in 104 BCE adopted the eagle figure as their primary emblem.[11] Silver or gold in color, the legion's emblems portrayed eagles on a flash of lightning with arched wings.[12] Taking a closer look at Roman historic reliefs, the eagle depictions in the *signa* that dominate the background of imperial scenes like an adventus, adlocutio or Rex Datus reconfirm the significance of this symbol in the immortalization of victories.[13] Ultimately, in association with Jupiter, the eagle has symbolic meaning in different contexts ranging from the sky to *apotheosis* and legion emblems.

An Assessment of the Folding Knife with Reference to Similar Examples

Whether purchased or self-made, blades had personal value to their owners. Thus, it is highly possible that the depictions on the handles were chosen specifically. Handles feature various compositions including stylized animal depictions, erotic-themed human figures, gladiator duels, and male busts. However, the only known example of a folding knife with an eagle figure is this one from Philadelphia. It is argued that the three-dimensional figures seen on blade handles date back to the 1st century CE. However, there is still considerable debate on the subject.[14] L. Vass reports that the use of such blades continued up until the 4th century CE.[15]

In terms of form and mechanism, the only comparable examples of the Philadelphia folding knife have been discovered in Germania and Britannia. All similar examples of the form feature different figures on the blade handle, but none bears an eagle. The items discovered at the Roman settlement of Trier in Germania can be mentioned as examples of folding knives. Two specimens of folding knives found there feature erotic compositions on their handles. Like the Philadelphia example, there are cross-hatch lines which border the frame where the figures end. The Trier examples are dated to the Hadrianic period.[16] The folding knife featuring a stylized dog-head figure[17] and the folding knife handle featuring an animal figure found at Augusta Raurica in Germania originate from the military sector. They are dated to the mid-2nd century CE.[18] All of these examples have figured handles made of bronze and blades made of iron. It is known that ivory was also used for the figured section on this folding knife type. An ivory folding knife from the Roman settlement of Köngen in Germania features a figure in the form of an elderly, bearded male bust. It has been dated to the late 2nd century to early 3rd century CE based on contextual finds.[19] Considering the stylistic comparisons of the figure, it has been suggested that this could be the philosopher Chrysippus.[20]

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10 Blömer and Winter 2011, 198-200, 292-94.

11 Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 10.5.16.

12 Toynbee 1973, 241.

13 Koeppel 1986, 66, 68-70, figs. 32, 36.

14 Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 32.

15 Vass 2011, 298.

16 Faust 2004, 190-91, cat. nos. 68-69.

17 Riha 1986, 30, pl. 11, no. 87.

18 Kaufmann-Heinimann 1998, 115, S213.

19 Rüsch 1981, 542, fig. 2.

20 Rüsch 1981, 543.

The figure of a hound hunting a rabbit is featured on a folding knife found in the Roman settlement of Upham in Hampshire, Britannia. There are no available suggestions about the date of this piece. However, the discussion of this object mentions the existence of a similar folding knife featuring a hound hunting a rabbit dated to the 4th century CE among the finds from Winchester.[21] Another solitary example from Britannia with a different composition was found at Venta Silurum. Contextually dated to the 3rd century CE, the handle of this folding knife portrays two gladiators in battle.[22] Another folding knife handle depicting a hound hunting a rabbit from Britannia was found in Springhead. Based on the motif featured on the handle of the folding knife from a Roman-period context, it has been suggested that this object was intended for cult practices.[23]

Considering the concentration of different examples of folding or fixed blades in the same region, it might be that these items were predominantly produced at or for the legionary and other military bases from Germania and Britannia.[24] Blade handles with similar forms have been identified in military strongholds in Germania and Britannia. However, there are no reported similar examples from Asia Minor. It might be, of course, that these items only seem to predominate in military regions because most detailed reports on such metal finds are for these very regions. Even so, the existence of this unique example from Asia Minor of a possibly military-related item found at Philadelphia raises some interesting possibilities. It is well-known that small Roman garrisons and units were deployed in mountainous areas and even into the hinterland of the Euphrates *limes*.[25] Could the find represent a military presence of a serving or retired soldier at Philadelphia?

Context and Dating

The find was discovered inside a pit at the necropolis of Philadelphia along with several different objects.[26] Considering the entire context, the majority of these diverse finds date from the 1st to 3rd century CE[27]. The fact that the finds were arranged in an orderly fashion before refilling the pit could be related to the campaign of Shapur in 260 CE which caused tremendous destruction in the region.[28] Following the closure of the pit, the area was used as a necropolis for a long time, as is evidenced by the nearby rock tombs and sarcophagi.

In this context, in a historical evaluation of the area from which the aforementioned folding knife originated, the attachment of Isauria (including Philadelphia) and Lycaonia to the province of Cilicia stands out as a significant event.[29] As a matter of fact, Cilicia's significance grew especially around the middle to second half of the 2nd century CE. During and after this period it enjoyed a period of prosperity seen across the Empire.[30] The downfall of the region coincides with the campaign of Shapur in the second half of the 3rd century CE.

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21 Worrell 2002, 91-92, fig. 4.

22 Bartus and Grimm 2010, 323.

23 Schuster et al. 2011, 258, cat. no. 242.

24 Kauffmann-Heinimann 1998, 32.

25 Kurt 2018, 818.

26 These objects, which are studied in other publications, include various pottery forms, coins, bone objects and busts.

27 Canlı 2019, 80.

28 Dodgeon and Lieu 1994, 49-50.

29 Ramsay 1960, 418.

30 Ergin 2009, 21-22.

Consequently, with regards to both the analogical comparisons and the context assessment, it is possible to date the folding knife from Philadelphia to the 2nd-3rd century CE.

Assessment and Conclusion

As a typical Roman object, opinions on the function of the folding knives with figured adornments are quite consistent. According to E. Riha, they were most often used as razors.[31] G. C. Boon names them as *cultellus tonsorius* (barber's small knife), suggesting that they were used as razors, or as *onychisterion lepton* (light nail trimmer). They should be regarded as small, multi-purpose pocketknives like their modern-day counterparts.[32] Considering their dimensions and fragility, they must have been used as razors or pocket knives. Besides everyday use, some scholars suggest that those examples with superior quality handles may have been used solely for cultic purposes.[33] Indeed, it is very likely that these finely crafted and fragile blades could have been used for specific rituals. The general class of examples, such as that from Philadelphia, is in fact associated with Roman troops and fits in with the form suggested for razors. However, it also bears features which seem suitable for cultic purposes.

A possible military origin for the Philadelphia folding knife should not be discounted. In fact, it is known that conflicts in the region continued, even in the period of prosperity in the 2nd century CE. There were further military interventions during this period. In any case, three of the limited number of legions - namely Legio I Isaura Sagittaria, Legio II Isaura and Legio III Isaura - were stationed along the imperial frontier during the Roman period, thus in the region which included Philadelphia, This confirms military activity in this area prior to the establishment of the legions.[34] If there was no obvious threat to the legion before the Diocletianic period, then there was no need for a permanent military presence there. It was usual for members of the Roman military, other than those stationed at the legionary bases and the forts along the frontier system, to be deployed and travel within the wider frontier zone. Although military equipment used at various locations along the imperial frontier featured local characteristics, there was a basic standard in production. This is shown from the recovery of similar examples in quite distant areas. A possible explanation for the discovery of such solitary military-related and personalized finds in unexpected places, that is, in a non-military context, is that they arrived with a serving or veteran soldier.

Future archaeological excavations could change our knowledge regarding the uniqueness of this example from Philadelphia and in Asia Minor as a whole. However, from a representational perspective, it is currently clear that the majority of similar examples originate from the western provinces of the empire, particularly Germania and Britannia. The interaction of these regions with Asia Minor is predominantly of a military nature.[35] The discovery and identification of this unique folding knife within its context is therefore an important find for its contribution to local archaeological research and studies on metal objects.

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31 Riha 1986, 28.

32 Boon 1991, 23.

33 Vass 2011, 298.

34 Kurt 2018, 819-20.

35 For example, note the finds related to European military-related brooches - a cross-bow type and an Aucissa type - and other materials found at the Roman fort at Gordion; see Bennett and Goldman 2009, 36-37.

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FIG. 1
Folding blade.

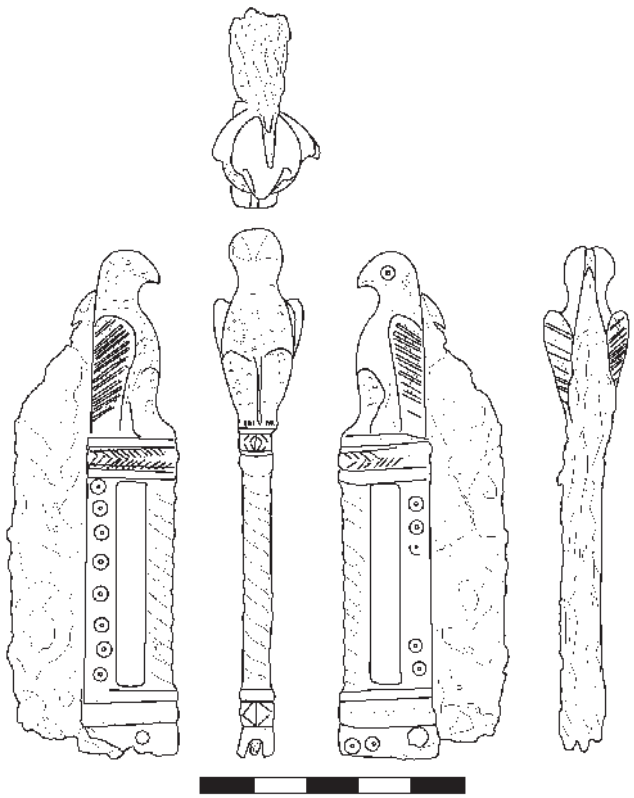


FIG. 2
Drawing of folding blade
(drawing by H. Canlı).