

# Roman drunkard found on Danish island

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A new archaeological find on the Danish island of Falster can be traced back to the first Roman Emperor, Augustus.

A bronze figure representing the Greek figure Silenus, from the time of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, has been found on the south-eastern Danish island of Falster.

This find suggests that there was close contact between the Roman empire and Scandinavia, before and after the emperor's reign.

## A Roman on Falster

The tiny bronze figure represents an elderly, bearded, balding man with thick lips and a plump nose. The find, just 4.5 cm tall, was found using a metal detector.

At first sight the figure seemed so finely detailed that the finder took it home in the belief that it was a modern object. Later she handed it over to the National Museum of Denmark. Here experts were quickly able to ascertain that the figure represented not a man, but Silenus.

In Greek mythology, Silenus (Greek: Seilenos) was a companion and tutor of the wine god Dionysus. He appeared together with satyrs and other creatures in the wine god's entourage, resembling a satyr, although, he was considerably older. The character Silenus ended up as a very special genre of figure creatures known as sileni.

In Roman art Silenus is also seen together with satyrs, here accompanying Bacchus, the Romans' equivalent of Dionysus. He is usually seen in a drunken state and either has to be carried by others or hangs over the back of a mule.

## Couch ornamentation

According to Roman custom, people lay down to dine on special occasions on a lectus tricliniaris, a special couch with a headrest. These lecti were decorated with figures related to food and wine.

The small Silenus figure from Falster was originally a fitting from the headrest of such a lectus. Sileni were standard motifs on these couches.

The Silenus bust would typically sit, rather like a medal, on one end of the s-shaped fulcrum that formed the side of a headrest. The other end of the fulcrum was shaped like the head of a mule, the mule that carried the drunken Silenus.

## The way to Falster

But how did the Selinus figure finds its way to Falster?

It is hard to imagine actual Roman villas on Falster, even though a good many finds suggest that the neighbouring islands had quite close connections with the Roman empire around the time of the birth of Christ.

### War trophy?

The miniature Silenus figure from Falster is the first find in Denmark of a lectus fitting.

However, among the many Roman bronze fittings which, like the Silenus figure turned up in Danish soil, there have been many furniture fittings and those from tools and other equipment.

The fittings are known from grave finds and single finds, such as the Selinus figure.

The uncertainty as to whether they came to Denmark as loose objects or actually adorned furniture makes it difficult to determine why they were brought.

A find has actually been made of a burial outside the boundary of the Roman empire. Here the person was buried together with their couch. However, for the time being, we believe it is most likely that the bronze artefacts were brought to Denmark solely as curiosities or objects of art, as gifts, war trophies or traded goods.

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 [The 4.5 cm tall Roman bronze figure represents Silenus, a mythological creature based on the Greek figure of the same name. The bronze figure was found recently on the island of Falster and can be dated back to the late Roman Iron Age. It is unknown how the figure ended up on a Danish island. \(Photos: National Museum of Denmark\)](#) [9]

 [Bronze Roman fulcrum with a mule's head and satyr, probably from Campania, 20-60 AD, now at the British Museum. \(Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum\)](#) [10]

 [Bronze Roman fulcrum with a mule's head and satyr, probably from Campania, 20-60 AD, now at the British Museum. \(Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum\)](#) [11]

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Side story

Side story

### Drunkard, but a wise man

Parallel to his voluminous consumption of alcohol, Silenus also possessed great wisdom.

As legend would have it, the Phrygian king Midas hunted down Silenus in an attempt to achieve the

same learning. When, by great cunning, the king finally manages to get his hands on Silenus, he asks what was the most desirable thing among mankind. Initially, Silenus is obstinately silent, declaring that knowing is unlikely to be of any use to Midas.

The king would not stop pressuring him and in the end Silenus replied, "it is best for humans not to be born at all; and next to that, it is better to die than to live!"

Silenus's rather pessimistic wisdom has found a place throughout history in the thinking and works of prominent philosophers and writers, including Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heine.

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