

A CYCLE OF ONE ? ON THE IDENTITY OF A PUZZLING FIGURE ON THE PRINCETON DIONYSIAC SARCOPHAGUS

To the memory of Warren Moon

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Art does something to us. And in doing something to us, art itself provides a major stimulus for us to deal with it. But while some artworks are 'interesting', others 'challenging' and yet others 'amazing' and the like, there is the occasional piece that, although it often appears to be unassuming when first looked at, strikes a different chord and touches us in an almost personal way. One such item is the so-called Sangiorgi sarcophagus in Princeton,¹ first published by Ludwig Curtius in an article for the "re-austrianized" Vienna 'Jahreshefte' of 1946.² Its gleeful optimism seems almost unreal when viewed against the background of destruction, suffering and uncertainty that had seized Europe and, especially, Germany in the mid forties. This is underscored by Erika Simon's subtle remark, that the scenes on this Dionysiac sarcophagus are replete with life ("mit Leben erfüllt")³ - and it would seem that this plenitude has also informed the warmly reminiscent proem to Simon's article, which is dedicated to the memory of Reinhard Herbig.⁴

I do not intend to further pursue this line of reasoning, which to some might anyway seem to be somewhat out of season.⁵ And neither do I propose to reexamine the Princeton slab as a whole, let alone the other sides of the same sarcophagus in Arezzo and Woburn Abbey.⁶ It is the solitary aim of the present note to suggest a new identification for the one figure in the Princeton frieze whose nature has not been agreed on so far: the baby boy wearing an animal skin and holding two laurel branches, upon whom Curtius had bestowed the stopgap nickname of "Satyrputto" ⁷ (fig. 1) .

The front of the Princeton - Woburn - Arezzo sarcophagus consists of three distinct scenes: the investiture of the child Dionysos on the right; an idyllic tableau capturing the atmosphere of festive merrymaking in the middle; and finally, the erection of a cult image of the bearded Dionysos on the left.

A witness to the latter event, our figure stands at the right edge of the latter.

We already stated that Curtius, being unable to name it fish or fowl, termed the figure 'Satyrputto' and

assumed that both the flowers in the pouch the boy is supporting with his left hand and the laurel branches in his right are intended to decorate the godly image once it is set up.⁸ This interpretation, which does, indeed, seem quite obvious, was accepted by Friedrich Matz - to whom the 'Satyrputto' is a satyrisc⁹ -, Roger Stuveras - who calls it a putto -,¹⁰ and S. Muenzer - who refers to it as a boy -,¹¹ and it is but a modification when Robert Turcan hypothesizes that the branches and flowers are first fruits, or rather primitiae, with which to honour Dionysos Dendrites.¹² As to the boy himself, Turcan is favorably disposed to an identification as Dionysos Pais, as arrived at by Erika Simon in a contextual interpretation of Princeton - Woburn - Arezzo and its companion pieces.¹³ But Turcan leaves the back door open by saying that what we are looking at should be "le petit Dionysos: du moins dans l'archétype, car rien ne nous assure que le sculpteur l'ait interprété comme tel".¹⁴ Or in other, even more guarded terms: it is "un enfant que sa contenance et son équipement initiatique permettent au moins de comparer à Dionysos Mystès".¹⁵ That is hardly any more helpful than Curtius "Satyrputto."

It seems to me that two observations by Simon and Matz are apt to further the cause, the first one being that our figure is an expletive that does not derive from the same Hellenistic context as the other participants in the erection of the herm.¹⁶ For both stylistically and iconographically, that statement is indisputable. But Matz' second point is equally significant. It reads that the little boy "gleicht...bedenklich einem Erotentypus, der auch in einem Jahreszeitenzyklus verwandt wurde".¹⁷ Basically, that notion had been there from the very beginning, though more as an inkling; the 'Putti' of Curtius and Stuveras are fairly close. What if the figure in question were, indeed, the personification of a season?¹⁸

If the objects in the boy's pouch should in fact be flowers, then the season represented by him would doubtless be Spring. The indiscriminate drilling does not permit for certainty, though, while comparative evidence (fig. 3),¹⁹ and the way our friend is supporting

the weight by turning his hand into a basket, do strongly suggest that what he is holding are grapes, which would make him Autumn. The presence of laurel is in keeping with that, for on the garland sarcophagus 90.12 in the Metropolitan Museum,²⁰ where wingless season putti share the heavy festoons they carry, the one personifying autumn has been given half a vine and grapes and half a laurel swag. Nevertheless, the laurel branches Autumn is clasping on the Princeton slab are unparalleled as a prop and do, therefore, call for further explanation.

What purpose is served by the presence of Autumn in the idolatrous scene? It is hard to imagine that he is there only to mark the time of year. For if that were so, why then are there no seasons standing by in the other scenes? The answer, I believe, is that Autumn here acts as proxy for a whole cycle of seasons indicating the perennial bliss of the reign of Dionysos.²¹ Excerpts like that are by no means uncommon in Roman funerary art. On the altar of Telesina, for example, as many as three different myths have been crammed into the limited space of the frontal lunette by using pictorial narrative shorthand.²²

But what about the Princeton Autumn's laurel branches? Is there a special meaning attached to them, too, in the context under consideration?

What Autumn is grasping is exactly one pair of laurel branches, although the fact that, in addition to the stems, he is also clutching a somewhat sturdy twig, is obscuring this in most available illustrations. Returning to Curtius' idea that the boy is standing

ready to decorate the cult image, it seems natural to assume that, eventually, there would be one laurel branch put up on either side of the statue. One cannot help but think back to the laurel trees of the emperor Augustus that flanked doors, altars, candelabra and the like.²³ Occasionally, they appear in combination with Dionysiac elements.²⁴

In his detailed study of the phenomenon, Andreas Alföldi established that these symbols of monarchic sublimation disappear from the sign system of state art under the Flavians.²⁵ But long before that time, they had begun to lead a life of their own as pieces of popular stock imagery available for sundry purposes.²⁶ But without a doubt, the original notion of "grandeur" or "magnificence" could readily be reactivated by inserting those elements into an appropriate context. It does not seem impossible, therefore, to interpret the laurel branches clasped by Autumn and displayed so ostentatiously as amplification of the statement already made by introducing the pars pro toto figure of Autumn itself: the eternal regimen of Dionysos is commensurate with its majesty and vice versa. And so it may indeed seem tempting to surmise that Dionysiac religion was a heartfelt issue with the person that commissioned the Princeton sarcophagus. Considerations along these lines are beyond the scope of this article, though, but the contributions by Simon, Matz and Turcan, along with P. Blome's remarks on the transfiguration of Greek myths in Roman sepulchral contexts,²⁷ provide ample ground for further inquiry.

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¹ Princeton University Art Museum 49-110; L 1,150m; H 0,385m. - F. MATZ, ASR IV 3 = *Die dionysischen Sarkophage* 3 (1969) 354 ff no. 202; bibliography in C.C. VERMEULE, *Greek and Roman Sculpture in America* (1981) 242 no. 202; add: *The record of The Art Museum, Princeton University* 8 II, 1949, 12 (where the sarcophagus is merely noted as a recent acquisition, though); E. SIMON, JAI 76, 1960, 169 note 130; A. ROSENBAUM and I.F. JONES, *Selections from the Art Museum, Princeton University* (1986) 42; To bid farewell: images of death in the ancient world, exhibition *Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design 1987*, fig. 3 (gallery handout); W. WHITE, *Peter Paul Rubens: man and artist* (1987) 91 pl. 104; LIMC III 351 no.11 fig. 262 s.v. Daphnis (G. BERGER-DOER); 554 no. 178 s.v. *Dionysos/Bacchus* (C. GASPARRI); cf. the following footnotes.

² L. CURTIUS, *ÖJb* 36, 1946, 42ff.

³ E. SIMON, *RM* 69, 1962, 137.

⁴ *Lc* 136f.

⁵ I do not share that opinion but believe that, although the history of scholarly research to a large extent is a history of errors and preconceived ideas, a lot can be learned from it in terms of Kulturgeschichte. Cf. my second contribution in A. GRIMM D. KESSLER and H. MEYER, *Der Antinoosobelisk. Eine kommentierte Edition* (forthcoming); see also my article in *Mannheimer Berichte* 40, 1992, 51 ff on the Hellenistic type of the drunken old woman.

⁶ cf. MATZ as in footnote 1.

⁷ CURTIUS, *Lc* 72.

⁸ *Lc*

⁹ MATZ as in footnote 1 p.355 r; IDEM, *Dionysiake Telete* (1963) 61. MATZ realized that the figure does not have satyr ears, but tried to solve the problem by a somewhat dubious binominal equation: since a similar figure on a sarcophagus in Naples (ASR IV 2 no. 176) has satyr ears, our candidate too is a satyr. Contrary to that, R. TURCAN, *Les sarcophages romains à représentations dionysiaques* (1966) 415 claims that

neither the Princeton nor the Naples boy have satyr ears.

¹⁰ R. STUVERAS, *Le putto dans l'art romain* (1964) 24.

¹¹ S. MUENZER, in: *Copies as originals. Translations in media and techniques*, exhibition Princeton 1974, 98 no. 22.

¹² TURCAN, *Lc* 416.

¹³ SIMON, *Lc* 138-144; TURCAN, *Lc* 415; IDEM, *Latomus* 24, 1965, 118; against this interpretation Matz as in footnote 9.

¹⁴ TURCAN, *Lc* 118.

¹⁵ TURCAN as in footnote 9 p. 416.

¹⁶ SIMON, *RM* 69, 1962, 154f; MATZ, *ASR* IV 3,355 r. SIMON first drew the attention to a lost third century A.D. lamp known through BELLORI, *Lc* pl. 44,1, and emphasized that our figure is not represented. A very late 17th/early 18th century engraving in Princeton, *Art Museum* 51-143 (fig. 2), apparently a calling card (6,0 x 7,5 cm), seems to have been derived from BELLORI, MUENZER, *Lc* 99f no.22 fig.2.

¹⁷ MATZ, *Dionysiake Telete* (1963) 61.

¹⁸ For bibliography on the iconography of the seasons cf. R. POLACCO AND G. TRAVERSARI, *Sculture romane e avori tardo-antichi e medievali del Museo Archeologico di Venezia* (1988) no.5; also P. KRANZ, *Jahreszeiten-Sarkophage* = *ASR* V 4 (1984) 89 ff. Important for the early imperial period TH. LORENZ, in: *Thiasos. Sieben archäologische Arbeiten = Castrum Peregrini* 132/133, 1978, 113 ff; IDEM, *AntPl* XIX (1988) 49 ff and, specifically, 55 ff. - The grave altar of G. Iulius Atimetus - *EA* 3668; POLACCO and TRAVERSARI, *Lc* 23 - is listed as no. 696 in D. BOSCHUNG, *Antike Grabaltäre aus den Nekropolen Roms* (1987).

¹⁹ For our figure 3 (height 9,6 cm), see L. POLLAK and A. MUÑOZ, *Collection du Comte Grégoire Stroganoff à Rome I. Les antiques*, par L. POLLAK (1912) 76 pl. 46,2; mentioned by POLACCO and TRAVERSARI, *Lc* 26; published as a museum acquisition by F.F. JONES, *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, 17 II, 1958, 51 ff Fig. 3; cf. typologically G.M.A. HANFMANN, *The Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks* (1951) II

pls. 58.60.123. 10

²⁰ A.M. MCCANN, *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (1978) 25 no.1 fig. 11.

²¹ cf. HANFMANN, *Lc* I 165.169 and passim; II pl. 127.128; H. MEYER, *Antinoos* (1991) Kat. I 19.55.71; p.232.

²² cf. H. MEYER, *Boreas* 12, 1989, 123 ff with further examples.

²³ See the material assembled by A. ALFÖLDI, *Die zwei Lorbeerbäume des Augustus* (1973).

²⁴ *Lc* 55 pl. 21; 54 pl. 26,2;27,2; the latter also in P. ZANKER, *The power of images in the age of Augustus* (1988) 118 f fig. 99a-c.

²⁵ ALFÖLDI, *Lc* 17 pl. 3,5-8.

²⁶ ALFÖLDI, *Lc* 56f with bibliography; in broader terms cf.

also ZANKER, *Lc* 265 ff; see also MEYER, *Lc* 130 f.

²⁷ P. BLOME, *RM* 85, 1978, 435 ff; cf. MEYER, *Lc* 131.

List of Illustrations

1) The Art Museum, Princeton University. Museum purchase, John Maclean Magie and Gertrude Magie Fund; acc. no. y 1949 - 110.

2) As above. Gift of Marie Barsanti; acc.no. x 1951 - 143.

3) As above. Museum purchase, John Maclean Magie and Gertrude Magie Fund; acc. no. y 1958 - 32.

Captions:

Fig. 1: Donysiac sarcophagus, Princeton; detail of raising of the herm.

Fig. 2: Raising of the herm of Dionysos; anonymous, Italian, early 18th century, cf. Footnote 16.

Fig. 3: Autumn with grapes and hare; ivory. - The Art Museum, Princeton University.

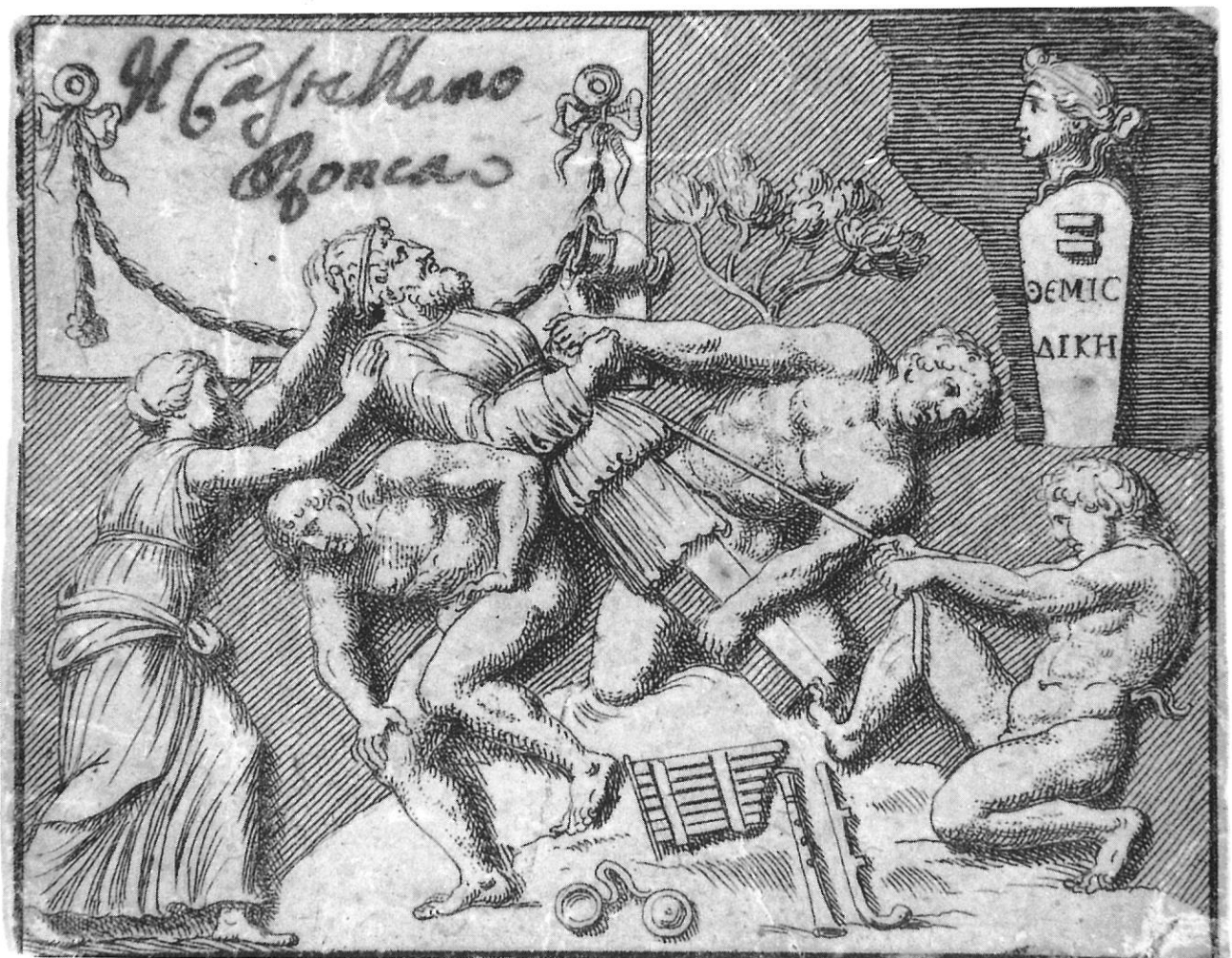


Fig. 1 2



Fig. 3