

## Coming Out: Acknowledging Antinous in the Apotheosis of Sabina

The relief panel of the Apotheosis of Sabina (inv. MC1213) was produced in the short interval between the deaths of Sabina in 136/137 CE and Emperor Hadrian in 138 CE. The scene depicts a triangulated tension between three separate focal points: the seated Hadrian to the far right, the newly deified Sabina riding on the winged Genius at the top of the frame, and an unknown male figure in the foreground. He is lying on his left elbow with his hand raised, his mouth agape, and his gaze firmly fixed on the emperor. This relief was repurposed in the fifth century to decorate the new Arco di Portogallo—a move which scholars have identified as odd for a triumphal monument (VanderLeest, 1995). Finally, this relief was removed and restored in the seventeenth century and now stands at the top of the stairs on the second floor of the Capitoline Museum in Rome.

While Sabina and Hadrian are clearly identified, the identity of the third figure, the one lying in the lower-left-hand corner, remains contested among modern scholarship: Brennan (2018) claims he is merely an attendant to the emperor; Barrow (2018) believes that the figure is the personification of the Campus Martius. Consequently, this ambiguous figure remains ripe for further examination. We believe that the semi-nude man is none other than the deified Antinous, the deceased youth of Bithynia and favorite of Hadrian, who famously died in the Nile in 130 CE.

In the eighteenth century, Johann Winckelmann established criteria for identifying Antinous and other “effeminate” men that still permeates scholarship today. Defining these men based solely on their erotic appeal, Winckelmann declared that “sexy boys” have soft bodies, provocative downwards glances, and stylized curls (Bartman, 2002). From this broad genre,

Antinous has been identified by his prominent brow, straight nose, downward gaze and, most importantly, by his curled J-shape hair (Vout, 2005; Meyer, 1991). We believe that scholars have hesitated to link the emperor's favorite with the Apotheosis of Sabina because the figure does not perfectly conform to all known Antinous-criteria. However, Antinous is not just another "sexy boy" — he is the third most depicted Roman in the material record, behind only Augustus and Hadrian (Vout, 2005). We argue that this abundance of examples lends itself to a greater variety of Antinous imagery— particularly in the formative years after his death— that modern scholarship has ignored. Drawing upon this more expansive collection, we consider depictions of Antinous across media to expand the criteria for identifying the Bithynian youth.

Ultimately, our argument for including Antinous in the Apotheosis of Sabina has a threefold purpose. First, we challenge and question the relationship between the three central figures: Antinous, Sabina, and Hadrian. Second, we re-examine the political implications for Hadrian to depict his deified lover (Antinous) in conjunction with his deified queen (Sabina) in imperial Rome rather than in the provinces – where the cult of Antinous flourished and was memorialized in monuments such as the Obelisk of Antinous in Antinoopolis. Finally, we call into question the reductive nature of categorization that has been applied to Antinous and his cohort of "sexy boys"; namely, when scholars overlook the agency of these historical subjects, they commit the same voyeuristic reduction of the eighteenth century– merely classifying these men along arbitrary lines of "sexy enough."

## Bibliography

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