

Self-Presentation as a *Mensor Aedificiorum*: The Case of T. Statilius Aper

The funerary altar of T. Statilius Aper commemorates its honorand's untimely death at the age of twenty-two years. His family chose for Aper a togate portrait in high relief, with a dead boar at his feet and a document container by his side. The tools of his trade as a *mensor aedificiorum* decorate the sides of the monument, and two epitaphs – one poetic and the other more conventional – completed the ensemble.

While much commentary about Aper's monument has focused on the manifold ways that the deceased's portrait and the poem play on his name, *Aper*, "boar," and link him to the myth of the Calydonian boar hunt, the funerary altar grants greater attention to Aper's occupation. This paper follows the monument's lead to assess the representations of the deceased's work, and it does so in three sections. The first takes stock of Aper's monument and its presentation of his work as a measurer of buildings; the second then contends that Aper's family sought to distinguish his labor from fellow artisans by emphasizing particular responsibilities inherent to, and skills required of, this occupation; and the paper closes by revisiting the poetic epitaph in light of Aper's work, which reveals additional dimensions of its content.

First, the monument draws distinct attention to the deceased's profession both epigraphically and visually. The first line of the non-poetic epitaph names Aper, gives his voting tribe, and then identifies him as a *mensor aedificiorum*, a measurer of buildings. Each visible side of the funerary altar advances and deepens this characterization. The front depicts Aper alongside a documents case that is conspicuously locked, on top of which rests either a large rolled-up piece of parchment or a tube for safekeeping it. On the left side appear two measuring devices – a *decempeda*, or ten-foot measure, which appears at one-third scale and a life-sized Roman foot measure – as well as a writing board and a spool of rope. Meanwhile, the right side depicts an ink well and a case to hold several styluses. Sandra Joshel and others have underscored the critical role that work played in identity and self-presentation among Rome's non-elite classes, yet the case of Aper's funerary

monument suggests that a more-carefully honed message was also possible, as I discuss in greater detail below.

Second, the representations of Aper's work distinguish his occupation from mere artisanship and emphasize the skills and judgment required of a *mentor aedificiorum*. The scattered sources mentioning this profession by name point to its practitioners' important role in the construction industry. Near the end of the building process, Aper and others functioned as post-facto assessors of whether the amount of materials and labor supplied by a contractor aligned with a pre-construction contract agreed to by the builder and client. In other words, a great deal of responsibility fell on the shoulders of *mentores aedificiorum* and talents/knowledge across several spheres (construction, law, calculations, etc.) were required. The depictions on Aper's monument contrast with the funerary commemoration of other skilled workers in the building trade. T-squares, plumb-bobs, the *groma*, and other practical tools tend to decorate the tombs of architects and surveyors. Aper's collection of instruments certainly speak to the practical aspects of his work, but notably also differentiate him from these others by emphasizing additional traits, among others his precision (multiple means of measure), literacy/numeracy (writing instruments, contents of documents), and trustworthiness (locked case).

Finally, the poetic epitaph on Aper's tomb, when read in light of his profession, takes on additional meanings. Much of the poem differentiates Aper from the Calydonian boar, addressing the young man and claiming that he was not struck down by Meleager's weapons, but that "silent death crept in and suddenly brought about ruin which stole your youthful form while you were still growing" (*mors tacita obrepit subito fecit(que) / ruinam quae tibi crescenti rapuit iuvenile(m) figuram*). Sources of all stripes deploy *crescere* and *ruina* to describe, respectively, building construction and collapse – the sort that might take people by surprise if inspectors like *mentores aedificiorum* fail in their work.

In the end, careful examination of Aper's funerary monument offers twin lessons: that articulations of the value(s) of labor among the Roman non-elite might be more sophisticated than

we have previously appreciated, and that drawing on a fulsome array of evidence and methodologies is necessary to draw out those subtleties.