Wearing Apollo's Guise:
Gender and Representation on the San Simeon Muse Sarcophagus

In 2014, a third-century Roman Muse sarcophagus was returned after conservation to its outdoor display at Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California. While recent scholarly attention has focused on its condition and the Thasian marble, its highly unusual imagery has not yet received its full due (Marinov & Barov 2002, Wegner 1966). This paper reexamines the central portrait as an unparalleled special commission, which commemorated the individual *in formam deorum*, or "into the form of the gods" – in this case, Apollo (Wrede, 1981). Although the depictions of the Muses on this relief are similar to their standardized representations on the approximately 230 other known Muse sarcophagi, the attributes and dress of the Apollo figure diverge dramatically from the god's traditional funerary iconography. This remarkable sarcophagus invites proper consideration of this heretofore overlooked individual – his atypical identification with the god Apollo, his genderfluid representation, and his demonstrated interest in music.

The San Simeon sarcophagus prominently features the deceased in the guise of Apollo Kitharoedus, flanked by Minerva and the nine Muses. The sides of the chest, one of which was damaged and has been extensively restored, display scenes from the Odyssey, including one of Odysseus strapped to his ship's mast and listening to the music of the sirens – the only instance of a sarcophagus that includes this narrative on its short sides. The sophisticated chest's provenance from the eighteenth century Barberini collection in Rome suggests that it originated from metropolitan Rome or its environs, presumably from an elite large-scale chamber tomb (Borg, 2013).

Images *in formam deorum* of Apollo are vanishingly rare; the only other known case in which a portrait head was added to the body of Apollo is on a third-century child sarcophagus (Birk, 2013). The San Simeon relief also breaks with the gender norms of other Muse sarcophagi, in which men were typically rendered with a scroll to emphasize their learnedness, while women were

portrayed with musical instruments as attributes of their feminine pursuits (Huskinson, 1999). Romans were highly ambivalent about men performing music; while music was a standard component of an elite young man's education during the Second Sophistic, to pursue virtuosity or to play professionally was to unacceptably cross the line into Greek effeminacy (Raffa, 2020). How should we understand this kitharode garment, given that this type of clothing was described by Aulus Gellius as *chiridotae* and unbecoming for anyone except for a *cinaedus*? (Olson, 2014)

This presentation suggests that this portrait was commissioned to honor the life of a cultured member of the elite with a clear interest in music. Was it commissioned by a senatorial family to honor the musical interests of their son, who likely died prematurely? Or did the portrait commemorate a highly successful kitharode, depicted with the youth and garb of Apollo? Presumably, the lost lid provided identifying information. The sarcophagus of Titus Flavius Trophimas, which depicts a genderfluid person playing music and dancing, offers an instructive parallel; made for a shoemaker rather than a member of the elite; the inscription describes Trophimas's virtues and names his friends who commissioned the sarcophagus. Although the individual depicted on the San Simeon sarcophagus is likely to remain anonymous, this singular commemoration allows us to glimpse the plausible biography of an individual with an unusual dedication to music and a marginalized gender expression.

Works Cited

Birk, S. 2013. *Depicting the Dead: Self-Representation and Commemoration on Roman Sarcophagi with Portraits*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Borg, B.E. 2013. *Crisis and Ambition: Tombs and Burial Customs in Third-Century CE Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clarke, John R. 2006. *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Huskinson, Janet. 1999. “Women and Learning: Gender and Identity in Scenes of Intellectual Life on Late Roman Sarcophagi.” In *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Koch, Guntram, Hellmut Sichtermann, and Friederike Sinn. 1982. *Römische Sarkophage / von Guntram Koch Und Hellmut Sichtermann ; Mit Einem Beitrag von Friederike Sinn-Henninger*. Beck.

Marinov, Todor, and Zdravko Barov. 2002. “The Nine Muses Roman Sarcophagus at Hearst Castle: Identification of the Geological Provenance and Characterization of the Marble during the First Phase of Conservation.” In *Triennial Meeting -- ICOM Committee for Conservation*. London: James & James.

Olson, K. 2014. “Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23 (2):182–205.

Raffa, Massimo. 2020. “Music in Greek and Roman Education.” In *A Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Music*, edited by Tosca A.C. Lynch and Eleonora Rocconi, 311–22. Newark: John Wiley & Sons.

Wegner, M. 1966. *Die Musensarkophage, ASR 5, 3*. Berlin: Mann.

Wrede, H. 1981. *Consecratio in Formam Deorum: Vergöttlichte Privatpersonen in Der Römischen Kaiserzeit.* Mainz am Rhein: Von Zabern.