

Ambitious Antinous: More than Hadrian's Lover Boy

Scholarship on the mysterious death of Antinous, Hadrian's beloved companion, tends to de-emphasize the fact that it occurred at a critical juncture in the young man's life, just as he was outgrowing the normative age for an *eromenos*. This paper argues that a fragmented, epic-style poem written by the Alexandrian poet, Pancrates, contains previously unrecognized hints about Hadrian's plans for a more mature Antinous. The writer is thought to have known the pair personally and travelled with the imperial party during Hadrian's tour of Egypt in 130 CE, a few months before Antinous' death. The surviving section of the poem mythologizes a lion hunt by Hadrian and Antinous in Egypt's Western desert, an event to which the poet may have been an eyewitness as it likely transpired on that tour. Pancrates portrays Antinous not as a coy lover, but a trusted hunting companion engaging in a royal pursuit that carries intercultural associations with Egyptian, Macedonian, and Roman right to rule.

In particular, the Egyptian context of Pancrates' epic lion hunt resonates with the Sphinx Stele, indicating that Hadrian may have been grooming Antinous for an imperial office in Egypt, perhaps even as its prefect. The Sphinx Stele, erected by Pharaoh Tuthmosis IV (c. 1397 to 1387 BCE), claims that, as a young man not directly in line for power, Tuthmosis fell asleep under the Sphinx while hunting lions in the Western desert, the same area Hadrian and Antinous conducted their lion hunt. The Sphinx appeared to Tuthmosis IV in a dream, promising that if he cleared sand covering the monument he would become pharaoh. The inscription indicates that Tuthmosis did so and duly rose to rule Egypt. Pancrates' poem would undoubtedly brought this episode to the minds of his ancient audience, connecting Antinous' participation in an imperial lion hunt with the right to rule gained as a result of this pharaonic one.

Panocrates' poem also evokes other cultural associations between lion hunts and the right to power. Alexander the Great set the precedent that lion hunts proved the strength of Macedonian kings. Furthermore, the Alexander Sarcophagus in Istanbul depicts Alexander engaging in one with his bosom-companion, Hephaestion, potentially identified accompanying him. This is similar to how a figure on one of the Hadrianic roundels on the Arch of Constantine, which portrays a lion hunt, is often identified as Antinous. Panocrates' lion hunt connects Antinous to pharaohs, Macedonian kings, and Roman emperors. Though he could not have aspired to such lofty positions, Antinous must have been considering his future at this liminal stage of his relationship with the emperor. His involvement in Panocrates' lion hunt provides a new socio-political context for his relationship with Hadrian, just prior to his suspicious demise. It supports the idea that Hadrian considered him fit to take some sort of power in Egypt as his time as the emperors' lover drew to a close.