

“*Euoi Saboi!*”: A New Look at the Cosa ‘Snake-Vessels’

In this study I will explore whether cult vessels found at the Roman city of Cosa display Sabazian iconography, and what audience they may have served. Confirmation of the mystery god’s attributes may elicit review of a shrine in the forum, which some suggest advertised the *dii patrii* of the Severan emperors (Dionysus and Hercules). Much scholarship concedes that Cosa was abandoned by the mid-second century CE, received a brief period of revival in the third century, and then became a ghost town in the fourth. This picture of the town offers a mysterious and appropriate venue for a shrine used by pagan worshippers of Liber Pater as late as the fifth century. Collins-Clinton’s (1977) monograph describes the shrine’s eclectic furniture, broken statuary, and cache of late Roman coins.

The materials are reused, and they spark interesting interpretations on the structure and larger motives for third century activity at Cosa. A broken statue of youthful Bacchus, a herm of bearded Dionysus, an inscription to Liber Pater, drinking vessels wrapped in snake decoration, and late antique lamps point to worship of Liber Pater or a related variation of Bacchus. R.T. Scott (1992) suggests, however, that a pottery fragment depicting Hercules *cubans* belongs to the shrine’s corpus of ‘snake-vessels.’ Fentress et al. (2003) then cite this fragment, along with a bearded head they identify as Hercules, as evidence for worship of the *dii patrii* of Leptis Magna and the Severan household. This supports their hypothesis that restorations in the forum during Caracalla’s reign were isolated incidents of imperial benefaction after a long period of fiscal failure and disuse.

Because the cult objects are reused, Collins-Clinton (1977) ponders synchronistic worship at the shrine. She mentions how lizards and snakes on the vessels could suit Sabazius but hesitates as Sabazius scholarship at the time of publication was scarce. Lane (1989) asks in

their later study on Sabazius that snake-vessels from other sites like Augustua Raurica and Vindonissa (Switzerland) be seriously considered in future research. Rescigno (2011) then proposes that the Cosa corpus could demonstrate Sabazian rituals because they resemble other ‘*vasi magici*,’ thus deserving another look. I will discuss a possible hand-drum, a table with two bread offerings, and a *bucranium*, all of which are sometimes found on Sabazian bronze hands (cf. Lane 1980). Sabazius has appeared in Mithraic contexts where similar vessels have been discovered (Rescigno 2011), and the Cosa forum has a Mithraeum during the second or third century CE (Henriques 2018), so I will consider whether these vessels could have served in a Mithraic context, too.

Central to this paper will be the figure identified by Scott (1992) as Hercules *cubans*. I will consider any other evidence for this claim. Scott argues that the figure, under which runs a snake, is Hercules *cubans* because he appears reclining, holding a pinecone in one hand with his club laying before him. Scott then links the unique *pasta vitrea* embedded in the clay, and their number, to representations of Hercules in the zodiac. While fascinating, I argue this figure closer resembles a bronze of Sabazius from Bolsena (Cat. 12158, Musei Vaticani). The bronze is bearded, his head thrown back as on the vessel, and he holds a pinecone in his right hand. Instead of a club, the mass in front of him full of glass may be his drapery, which falls across his torso and only covers one shoulder. Scott’s observation of the glass as stars may yet hold true in Sabazian and Mithraic imagery.

#### Bibliography

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