

Why piglets? The Sperlonga Circe and the Problem of its Iconography

While adult pigs may be the default animal for Odysseus' men to be turned into in Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art, they are not such in the literary accounts. The Sperlonga Circe is unique in its portrayal of piglets in place of the adult swine into which Odysseus' men were transformed. This paper proposes an answer to why small piglets as found in the Sperlonga Circe statue group since those are unsupported by any of the textual references.

In all other examples of the myth in art the animals, whether pigs or not, are life-size. In literature life-size and of a variety, for example, in Homer a stag, lions, wolves, and swine are named. In Pseudo-Apollodorus some men are turned into wolves, some pigs, some asses, and some into lions. In Athenaeus it is lions and wolves. It might be argued that the Sperlonga Circe follows the Roman tradition, the most common version of which is found in Ovid, where bears, lions, and wolves are mentioned along with swine. But the swine are adult as indicated by the description and the vocabulary. There are no literary accounts of the transformation that specify smaller animals and certainly none that mention piglets. Their use here must derive from something other than an attempt to create a work that follows the literary tradition.

In *Courtesans & Fishcakes* Davidson (1998) notes that the Greek slang term for women's shaven genitalia was *choiros*, meaning piglet or piggy. Aristophanes uses the term at the end of *Wasps* while it appears elsewhere as well. I propose that the application of this term added a level of meaning to the humiliation of Circe turning men to swine. Rather than making men appear as their 'true' or animal nature by making them swine (as commentators generally have concluded), the meaning could be an even more emasculating one. The men become this characteristic of female physiology. This is significant in art when the men are reduced to

piglets, such as in the Circe statue group from Sperlonga. This further reinforces her behavior later in attempting to emasculate Odysseus in bed and his reliance on his sword to defend himself.

There is other evidence for such a bilingual or Greek pun in Roman domestic art. In room e, the supposed winter dining room in the House of the Vettii at Pompeii, a wall painting showing Eros wrestling with Pan has been understood to represent such a pun. The figures' names translate into Latin to give us the result of the wrestling match, amor omnia vincit. This sort of sophisticated visual and word play in combination would be expected to be understood by the audience found in the grotto dining room of the emperor. Particularly an emperor such as Tiberius, famous for quizzing his dining guests on Greek mythology. If correct, this helps us to understand how the ancient audience would have viewed this work with a layer of gendered insult towards those men turned into animals by Circe.

Bibliography

Davidson, J. 1998. *Courtesans & fishcakes: the consuming passions of classical Athens*. London: Fontana Press.