

THE FABLE OF APOLLO SAUROKTONOS AND THE BEAUTY OF APOLLO MEDICUS

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Fig. 1 Roman copy after Praxiteles, *Apollo Medicus*, marble, life-size. Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio-Clementino, Galleria delle statue

I must respond to the unconscionable evisceration by Jenifer Neils of the fundamental work of the late Renate Preisshofen (1937-1992).¹ Proceeding at great lengths to define the libidinous interpretations of the so-called *Apollo Sauroktonos* of Praxiteles by Winckelmann and other classicists of earlier times, Neils effectively buries Preisshofen's fundamental and brilliant contribution to the subject by relegating her work to a single footnote, noting only that that it provided "a list of examples."² I feel it necessary to repeat Preisshofen's argument here so that the suppression it suffered under Neils will not be allowed to obscure her important revelations.

Preisshofen resolved at last the traditional but patently anomalous and contradictory interpretation of one of the major monument-types of Greek art, the so-called *Apollo*

Sauroktionos, originally a work in bronze by Praxiteles, famous from the references to it in ancient sources and from the innumerable extant copies and variants in virtually all media (**Fig. 1**). The sculpture showed the god leaning against a tree or tree stump, with a lizard climbing up the trunk. The god carried a bow and arrow, as if preparing to shoot the animal, hence the epithet, *Sauroktionos*, lizard killer, attached to the figure by Pliny, "He also made a young Apollo with an arrow watching a lizard as it creeps up with the intent to slay it close at hand; this is known as the *Sauroktionos* or Lizard-slayer."³ Pliny's interpretation was followed by the poet Martial,

"Corinthian Lizard Slayer. Spare the lizard, insidious boy,
as she creeps toward you; she wants to die by your fingers."⁴

Preisshofen showed that Pliny was simply in error, misinterpreting the meaning of Apollo's gesture, and especially misunderstanding the action of the reptile, which climbs up, up toward the sun, rather than scampering away to hide, as is the animal's wont under such circumstances. Pliny evidently attached the title *Sauroktionos* to a statue-type of the young Apollo observing a lizard on a tree, confusing it with the Delphic Apollo who killed the monstrous Python. While the god carries weapons, they are at rest.

Preisshofen recalls, in fact, a much more widespread manifestation, greatly elaborated in the long tradition of animal physiology, of Apollo the Sun God as the Healer, that is, *Apollo Medicus*, most notably healer of maladies of the eyes. The association is thus medicinal, auguring healing, and most commonly emblemized by Apollo's encounter with the lizard, or Gecko. As it ages and grows the animal molts, shedding its skin and emerging, blind. Sight is restored, however, by the healing rays of sunlight cast upon it by the benevolent Apollo. Far from slaying the lizard, Apollo's luminous arrows actually heal it. In effect, the lizard is reborn. The mythographer Hyginus describes Apollo, the father of Asclepius, as the first to practice the art of treating the eyes.⁵ The point is crucial since it explains why the Apollo of this type is canonically represented as a sweet, nubile, sympathetic youth. Neils grasps none of this. From her text, one would never know that the reliance on Pliny is now obsolete and the true subject has been revealed. So bent on bolstering the current, stylish emphasis on classical "pretty boy" worship (there is no ancient word "homosexual"), she failed to recognize the delicate beauty and poetry, the nobility, of this quintessentially Praxitelean conception of the benevolent deity, associated with restored health.



Fig. 2 Gianlorenzo Bernini, Baldacchino, bronze, c. 94.5' or 28.74 meters, c. 1625. Vatican City St. Peter's



Fig. 3 Gianlorenzo Bernini, workshop, Base of North-East column of the Baldacchino, marble Vatican City, St. Peter's

What is lost in this quagmire is one of the great achievements of Greek culture, already known, surprisingly enough, in the early seventeenth century.⁶ The evidence can be seen on the bases of the great bronze twisted columns that support the canopy (Baldacchino) covering the high altar in the crossing of St. Peter's in Rome (Fig. 2). There Gianlorenzo Bernini, having been commissioned by Pope Urban VIII, represented this very motif, a lizard climbing up toward a radiant image of the health-giving Sun! (Fig. 3) In the mother church of Christendom, overseen by the Barberini pope, there were three major emblematic symbols of the papal reign, each laden with profound meaning. One was the famous Barberini bee (Fig. 4), alliterative to the docile provider of the mellifluous benefits of the church. Another was the sun, which appears in many contexts as divine illumination. And the third was the lizard, whose meaning is illuminated---I use the word deliberately---as it scurries about the columns of the Baldacchino, upward to the sun, and even downward to devour evil in the form of a scorpion (Fig. 5).

The Praxitelean statue is not of a type known only from a single, misguided and misleading phrase in Pliny, repeated by Martial, but instead embodies one of the best known and oft-repeated epithets of the god, Apollo the Physician (*ἰατρός* *iatros* in Greek, *Medicus* and *Salutaris* in Latin), perfectly embodied in the figure's tender form, gentle attitude, and benign



Fig. 4 Gianlorenzo Bernini, workshop, "Lizard Crawling Up toward the Sun," bronze relief, detail, column of the Baldacchino, c. 1625. Vatican City, St. Peter's .



Fig. 5 Gianlorenzo Bernini, workshop
"Lizard devouring Scorpion," bronze relief,
detail, column of the Baldacchino, c. 1625.

expression.⁷ Hence the lizard itself became a medication and magical talisman to ward off or recover from eye ailments; and the relationship was explicit, as can be seen, for example, in a gem (onyx) amulet showing a lizard vertically and inscribed *LVMINA RESTITVTA*, where the translucency of the material invokes the agent of the charm (Fig. 6).⁸



Fig. 6 *Lumina Restituta*, antique intaglio onyx ring, 15.8 x 19.1 mm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, Frederick the Great Collection.

1 Jenifer Neils "Praxiteles to Caravaggio: The Apollo *Sauroktonos* Redefined," *The Art Bulletin* 99 (2017): 4, 10-30.

2 Neils note 19 says merely: "A list is provided in Renate Preisshofen, 'Der Apollon *Sauroktonos* des Praxiteles,' *Antike Plastik* 28 (2002): 41–115, pls. 21–64." Preisshofen also cites all the bibliography antecedent to her own interpretation of the theme. On Winckelmann's homosexuality and its vast sequel see W. Davis, "Founding the Closet: Sexuality and the Creation of Art History," *Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, XI, no. 4 (1992): 171-175; D. M. Sweet, "The Personal, the Political, and the Aesthetic," *Journal of Homosexuality*, XVI (1989): 147-162.

3 NH 34, 70: "Fecit et puberem Apollinem subrepenti lacerate comminus sagitta insidiantem quem sauroctonon vocant" (*The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. K. Jex-Blake, New York, 1896, 56.

4 Martial, Epigrams, 172 (*Epigrams / Martial*, ed. trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, 3 vols. Cambridge MA, 1993, III, 292):

Sauroctonos Corinthius
Ad te reptanti, puer insidiose,
lacertaeprce; cupit digitis illa perire tuis.

5 Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 174, M. A. Grant, *The Myths of Hyginus*, Lawrence KA, 1960, 173; P. K Marshall, ed., *Hyginus. Fabulae*, Munich and Leipzig, 2002, 196: *Apollo artem oculariam medicinam primus fecit.*

6 I have already called attention to Preisshofen's insights in another context: I. Lavin, *Bernini at St. Peter's: The Pilgrimage*, London, 2012, 105-06.

7 The epigraphical evidence for the Greek term has been collected by H. von Staden, "'The Oath', the oaths, and the Hippocratic Corpus," in *La science médicale antique : nouveaux regards : études réunies en l'honneur de Jacques Jouanna*, eds. V. Boudon-Millot, A. Guardasole, C. Magdelaine, Paris, 2007, 425-466.

8 T. Panofka, "Gemmen mit Inschriften in den königlichen Museen zu Berlin, Haag, Kopenhagen, London, Paris, Petersburg und Wien," *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (aus dem Jahre 1851)*, no. 109, Berlin, 1852, 474f. The many physiological and medicinal sources may be traced through the citations in Preisshofen 2002, 51-3.