

What do the artistic representations of Antinous reveal about his reception in the Roman period?

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Abstract

There are more portrait depictions of Antinous, a country boy from Asia Minor, than of most Roman emperors. Does the relationship between Emperor Hadrian and Antinous explain the high number of representations, or can it be explained by Antinous' deification and flexibility as a hero and god? In this article I have examined a variety of artistic representations of Antinous from different locations around the Roman Empire and discussed why these representations were made, and what they meant for those viewing them. In doing so I show that Antinous was more than just a favourite of Hadrian: in death, to the people who participated in his cult, he became a genuine focus of worship, who had the tangible powers and abilities of a deity.

Introduction

Portrait depictions of Antinous were not reserved to one type or location; instead, these depictions have been found in a variety of settings across the Roman Empire and range from colossal statues and busts, to smaller portable items such as coins and cameos (Opper 2008, 186). The variety of representations of Antinous perhaps explains why there is such a vast quantity of depictions of him from the Roman world. Antinous is most commonly depicted with attributes or poses usually associated with deities, alluding to his deification and subsequent worship in the years following his death in AD 130. The artistic representations of Antinous tell us more about his assimilation with multiple deities and his popularity across the Roman Empire than they do about the relationship between him and the Emperor Hadrian, explored below. Whilst the impetus by Hadrian to deify Antinous after the latter's death may have started the worship of Antinous as a hero or god, this cult was clearly adopted by individuals and groups across the Roman Empire independent of efforts by the Emperor. By discussing specific representations of Antinous, alongside architectural and epigraphic evidence, I will show that, in death, he was worshipped as a deity with tangible divine abilities.

Literary Sources - Antinous' life and relationship with Hadrian

Little is known about Antinous' life before he met Hadrian, and all sources date from after his death in AD 130. The literary sources agree on three facts about Antinous' life: first, he was from Bithynium in Bithynia, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey);

43 second, he had a relationship with Hadrian; and third, he drowned in the Nile (although
44 the exact circumstances surrounding his death are not the subject of agreement).
45 Cassius Dio, who was writing at the start of the third century AD, some 80 years after
46 Antinous' death, is perhaps the most accurate as he is a near contemporary source for
47 a biography of his life (Vout 2007, 54). He states two reasons for Antinous' death in AD
48 130 - accidentally falling into the Nile or, as he himself believed to be true, being
49 offered for sacrifice by Hadrian and subsequently deliberately drowned in the Nile.
50 Accidental drowning is said to have been the reason given by Hadrian himself (Cassius
51 Dio, 69:11). Although there is very little known about Antinous' life, including his age
52 and how he met Hadrian, the artistic depictions of him reveal a lot about how he was
53 received by his contemporaries in the Roman period.

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55 Public Cult

56 The founding of a city in the years following the death of Antinous,
57 Antinoopolis, demonstrates the initial impetus by Hadrian for the subsequent
58 deification and worship of Antinous. The city was founded on the east bank of the Nile
59 close to the site where Antinous drowned, on the one hand facing the important
60 Egyptian city of Hermopolis, and on the other facing the ruins of the ancient Egyptian
61 city, Besa (Galimberti 2007, 106). Although little remains of Antinoopolis, there are a
62 number of monuments and artefacts that attest to the worship of Antinous in the city.
63 One such monument is the Pincio obelisk in Rome, which in hieroglyphic script states
64 the honours afforded to Antinous, is thought to have originally stood in front of the
65 *Antinoeion* (a temple to Antinous) at Hadrian's villa, and was moved to Rome in the
66 third century AD. The inscription seems to suggest that the obelisk served as a funerary
67 marker for Antinous' tomb, which indicates that he was buried at Tivoli, Italy, rather
68 than Antinoopolis. The obelisk dates to between AD 130-137, which means that it was
69 likely created under orders from Hadrian who wanted to honour Antinous with a
70 monumental sculpture for the main position of the *Antinoeion* at his villa in Tivoli. The
71 hieroglyphic inscription also describes, in detail, the original *Antinoeion* at
72 Antinoopolis, of which nothing remains. According to the inscription the temple was
73 built in high quality white marble, with numerous columns and with statues of a variety
74 of gods (Opper 2008, 178). However, the understanding that the obelisk was originally
75 displayed at Hadrian's villa, where it was unlikely to be seen by anyone who could
76 understand hieroglyphs, suggests that the monument itself was more impactful than
77 the inscription.

78 Inscriptions illustrating the strength of the cult of Antinous have been found
79 across the Roman world, and in a variety of settings and circumstances. From
80 Pausanias we are given an account of the beginnings of the worship of Antinous in
81 Mantinea, Greece, as Hadrian established his honours there with a festival and mystic
82 rites every year and games every four years. These were clearly celebrations and
83 honours which were intended to be regular and long-term events in the calendar of
84 Mantinea (Pausanias, 8.9.8). The only description of a statue and other representations
85 of Antinous in their original ancient context are also provided by the second century

86 writer Pausanias (Vout 2005, 83). He states that although he never saw Antinous alive
87 that he saw him 'in statues and in pictures', indicating that images of Antinous could
88 be found in a variety of settings across Greece (Pausanias 8.9.7). He states that the
89 portraits of Antinous from Mantinea resemble Dionysius - a resemblance and
90 assimilation which is often found in his portraiture (Pausanias, 8.9.8).

91 The Antinoeion in Mantinea has, I believe, one of the best examples of how the
92 cult of Antinous evolved from the implication by Hadrian to the worship of Antinous
93 as a divine being capable of divine acts. An evocative inscription from Mantinea
94 addressed to 'Antinous' is by a father asking that the god care for his son (Vout 2007,
95 64). This inscription indicates that the residents of the city had a fervent belief in
96 Antinous as a deity who was capable of divine protection. This demonstrates that in
97 the years following his death, Antinous had become more than simply the young and
98 beautiful lover of the emperor, and instead, was regarded as a powerful individual in
99 his own right. The connection between Mantinea and Antinous' birthplace, Bithynium,
100 no doubt strengthened his cult in this city, but it is also clear that the cult was
101 perpetuated by the residents of the city due to their genuine belief in Antinous as a
102 god. In Antinous' home city of Bithynium a small limestone altar indicates that he was
103 worshipped as a god: 'to the new god Antinous, Sosthenes (dedicated this) as a prayer'
104 (Smith 2018, 53). The formula of the inscription indicates that Antinous had answered
105 the prayer, confirming, that for Sosthenes, Antinous had tangible divine powers. At
106 Lanuvium, some 20 miles south of Rome, a burial club based around the worship of
107 Diana and Antinous is evidenced from an inscription (Beard, North and Price 1998,
108 272). The inscription, dated to June AD 136, was located on the wall of the Antinoeion
109 and sets out the rules for those in the burial association. Diana had a cult at nearby
110 Nemi, whilst Antinous was a new god with associations with the underworld - an
111 appropriate deity for a burial club. These examples show that Antinous was considered
112 by many to be a legitimate deity or hero with divine abilities.

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Figure 1:Antinous-Osiris. Villa Adriana, Tivoli. (Vatican Museums, Rome).

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117 Private Cult

118 Of the sculptures of Antinous that have been found, the number associated with
119 private or domestic settings is more than double that those found in public locations,
120 with the majority of the former category being found at Hadrian's villa in Tivoli (Vout
121 2007, 92). The depictions of Antinous from Hadrian's private residence suggest that
122 Hadrian himself had input in how Antinous was depicted in artistic representations,
123 thus having direct influence on how Antinous was received in his afterlife as an object
124 of worship and desire. The volume of statues and the possible presence of an
125 *Antinoeion* indicates that Hadrian privately participated in the cult of Antinous (Smith
126 2018, 86). The discovery and identification of the *Antinoeion* at Hadrian's villa was
127 through the remains of Egyptian style sculpture and sculpture from ancient Egypt itself
128 (Opper 2008, 181).

129 One of the most striking depictions of Antinous is the statue of Antinous-Osiris also
130 believed to be from the aforementioned *Antinoeion* (Figure 1). The association of
131 Antinous and Egypt is significant as it not only connects him to his place of death and
132 conflation with Osiris, but it also adds a layer of mystique and exoticism. The
133 identification of this figure as Antinous does not rely on his signature hair which is
134 covered by the *nemes* (headdress), but rather on the physiognomy which is near
135 identical to the standard Antinous portrait face (Smith 2018, 86). The standardised
136 physiognomy suggests that portraiture of Antinous were organised and modelled
137 from an original portrait, perhaps authorised by Hadrian himself and modelled when
138 Antinous was still alive.

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Figure 2: Inscribed bust of Antinous. Syria. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

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This bust (figure 2) is thought to be from the town of Balanea on the Syrian coast (modern-day Baniyas). This bust is an important example of a representation of Antinous as it combines the standard depiction of Antinous as a classical beautiful youth with an inscription confirming his status as a hero and an object of worship. The marble itself is from the Greek island of Thasos in the Aegean Sea - as were many second century portraits (Smith 2018, 21). The foot of the bust is inscribed in Greek: '*to (the) hero Antinous, Marcus Lucceius Flaccus (dedicated this)*'. The inscription is interesting as the two lines of text differ in the size of letters and spacing, respectively - the lines were carved at different times by different people. The first line, '*to (the) hero Antinous*', was likely carved at the marble workshop before it was shipped to Syria (Smith 2018, 21). The second line, '*Marcus Lucceius Flaccus (dedicated this)*', was likely carved when it arrived in Balanea and was in the ownership of Flaccus (Smith 2018, 21). The presence of the second line suggests that this bust was not for a private, domestic cult but rather for a public cult space where the dedication by Flaccus could be seen by the community. As an inscription naming the individual dedicating the artefact does not make sense for a bust which was displayed in Flaccus' house.

The only monument which depicts Hadrian and Antinous together is a bust of Hadrian found at Loukou, Greece (Smith 2018, 65). Discovered in the villa of Herodes

161 Atticus, a known acquaintance of Hadrian, it depicts Hadrian in a cuirass on which the
162 Medusa head is replaced by that of Antinous. Antinous is represented with wings in
163 his hair, an assimilation with Apollo (Smith 2018, 65). Apollo, as a youthful and beautiful
164 god, shares attributes with which Antinous was synonymous. This representation of
165 both Hadrian and Antinous is important; not only because it is the only monument
166 that depicts them both, but because it is from a private space and was likely made
167 after the death of Hadrian. There are no depictions of Hadrian and Antinous together
168 from state monuments or even found at Hadrian's villa. Dating to around AD 140-160,
169 it shows that the worship of Antinous, and possibly of Hadrian and Antinous'
170 relationship, continued after the death of both men (Smith 2018, 65). Hadrian and
171 Antinous are not equally represented in this monument, although Antinous takes on
172 the role of Medusa and is represented as Antinous-Apollo, Hadrian is still the main
173 focus of the bust. As this is the only monument depicting the two together it indicates
174 that the cult of Antinous became separate from Hadrian as if the cult were intertwined
175 then we would expect to find depictions of the two together as well as statues of
176 Antinous near those of Hadrian. Thus Antinous, as a figure who was assimilated with
177 many deities, took on a new meaning from the worship that started with Hadrian in
178 AD 130.

179 In the same villa a seated statue of Antinous was found in a room which is
180 thought to have been a private shrine room to his cult (Smith 2018, 65). This is evidence
181 of a private cult space which may have been built under loyalty to Hadrian but
182 remained in use after his death. At Loukou the monumental statue of Antinous is
183 evidence of the worship of both his contemporary whilst Hadrian was alive,
184 but also continuing after the death of the emperor. This suggests that, as with the
185 evidence from elsewhere in the Empire, the worship of Antinous was initially connected
186 to Hadrian but soon became separate as Antinous became an idealised hero and god.

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188 Conclusion

189 I believe it is clear from the variety of depictions of Antinous from across the
190 Roman Empire that he became more than just the lover of Hadrian and, in death, to
191 the people who participated in his cult, he became a genuine object of worship, who
192 had the tangible powers and abilities of a deity. Through assimilation with familiar
193 deities such as Apollo and Dionysius he was given immediate recognition within the
194 guise of the Roman pantheon. The choice of representing Antinous as hero or god,
195 and the choice of which mythological figure or deity with which to assimilate him with,
196 was dependent on the context and needs of the community or individual who used
197 the representation of Antinous as a sacred object. By assimilating Antinous with deities
198 such as Apollo and Dionysus, he is portrayed as an idealised and beautiful youth whose
199 death warrants his deification and worship.

200 From studying depictions of Antinous it can be seen that his relationship and
201 connection with Hadrian became secondary to his mysterious death and subsequent
202 deification. So, whilst the genesis of the cult of Antinous can be traced, to a degree, to
203 Hadrian himself, Antinous soon became an important figure in his own right across

204 the Roman Empire. Thus, although Antinous' reception in the Roman period was likely
 205 framed by his relationship with Hadrian and untimely death, he was quickly received
 206 as a deity and hero by those who participated in his cult - a cult that does not seem to
 207 be reserved to one part of the Empire, nor to a specific group of people. His worship
 208 and reception was as varied as the artistic representations of him, of which I have
 209 discussed but a selection.

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212 **Figures**

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214 Figure 1: Antinous-Osiris. Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Vatican Museums, Rome. Accessed via
 215 [http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-](http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-gregoriano-egizio/sala-iii--ricostruzione-del-serapeo-del-canopo-di-villa-adriana/statua-di-osiri-antino.html#&gid=1&pid=1)
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219 Figure 2: Inscribed bust of Antinous. Syria. Modern cast. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
 220 Photograph authors own.

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223 **Primary Sources**

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