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Beyond Priapus: A Call for a Feminist and/or Queer Theory Archaeology of Roman Masculinity and Phallic Iconography

Ashley J. Barnett

Abstract: Phallic iconography is ubiquitous throughout the archaeology of the Roman world and has raised questions about sexuality in ancient Rome. Dominant modern Western discourses privilege heterosexual male frameworks which many not adequately correspond to ancient Roman culture. Thus, the application of Feminist and/or Queer theory may expand academic insight into not only Roman sexuality, but also into the power and politics of the Republican Period.

Introduction

Roman classical archaeology has provided many fabulous artifacts that have raised questions about ancient Roman society. Perhaps the most flummoxing are the copious examples of phallic iconography uncovered throughout the Roman world, from Egypt to the British Isles, which have raised many questions and theories about Roman sexuality. This paper suggests that classical Roman archaeology could benefit from further applications of feminist theory and Queer theory in order to gain deeper insight into the social realities faced not only by the ‘others’ of Roman society, but also by Roman citizen males.

Relevant Background History

During the Republican Period (500 BCE to c. 31 BCE), though the Roman government was elected by citizen males, greater attention and influence were imparted upon aristocrats. Strong class divisions had developed, with nobles monopolizing almost all power within the society. These nobles were hereditary landed aristocracy.
who usually had great wealth and owned large amounts of land (from which much of their income came, as they leased the land out to others). With growing inequality between the wealthy and the 'lower classes,' plebeian Romans grew agitated, particularly over the rigging of elections which rendered lower class citizen males' votes null. The Senate was eventually forced to enact reforms to aid the poorer classes in order to avoid internal instability, though they enacted these reforms slowly and grudgingly.

Additionally during the Republican Period, Rome conquered many of its neighbors and grew extremely wealthy. During this period, monumental architecture, patronage of the arts, and establishment of many festivals blossomed. It was also a period during which many Romans began to fear that traditional Roman values were eroding, causing tension within Roman society. Eventually, several warlords began to rise out of the ranks of the Roman army, signaling a breakdown of the traditional Roman political system. Rather than rising slowly through the political ranks by being elected, talented military commanders began making fortunes off of battle and, when they returned to Rome, began calling for their own increased political power. The first century BCE was violent and tumultuous, culminating with the assassination of one of the warlords, Julius Caesar, in 44 BCE.

In 31 BCE, Julius Caesar's adopted heir, Octavian, won the Battle of Actium and became the first Emperor, renaming himself Augustus. The subsequent Imperial Period (31 BCE to c. 580 CE) was actually a monarchy in everything but its name. Augustus proved to be a competent and popular leader who ruled for an extended period. At his death, questions concerning succession arose, followed by a series of dynasties. During this period, the political practice of 'adult adoption' became common, whereby younger, politically promising adult men were 'adopted' by older, politically influential men. At the height of the Empire, Rome's territory stretched as far as the British Isles and Egypt. When the size of the Empire grew unwieldy for one ruler to oversee, it eventually split into two administrative units, one in the east and one in the west. 580 CE is the last known written reference of the Senate, which had been reduced to a 'rubber-stamp' body during this period, and this may arguably be considered the end of the Imperial Period.

Masculinity in the Roman World:

It is fairly difficult to clearly distinguish many aspects of Roman culture from that of the Greeks, Etruscans, and other peoples of the immediate region, as they all maintained, to some extent, a shared
Greco-Roman worldview (Skinner 2005:192). A few characteristics of Roman culture, however, were quite distinctive from those of their neighbors. The Romans were highly nostalgic about their shared Roman past, convinced that life was better in the past ‘glory days’ of Rome (regardless of the period). Each generation lamented the bygone eras of Roman power and toughness, and each predicted further decline in the future. The Romans seem to have espoused the idea that, in the past, the hard work of farming and soldiering had given the Romans a tough exterior, that they had not been drawn to arts and culture, and they constantly bemoaned the apparent fact that they had slipped away from their toughness. They, like others, liked to blame their decline on outsiders, particularly the Greeks, whom they viewed as an effeminate people who spent too much attention and energy on their various arts. Additionally, Roman society was simultaneously somewhat prudish yet hyper-masculine. Rather than the nude sculptures of their Greek counterparts, Roman sculptures generally portrayed individuals clothed or partly clothed. At the same time, images of the phallus are ubiquitous throughout Roman art. This may suggest that the phallus was used not to represent a literal, physical portion of the human body but, rather, that it served as a symbol for something else, such as power or protection.

The ideal Roman man was expected to be socially dominant and thus the ‘penetrator’ in any relationship. While this was similar to Greek ideals, the Roman ideal took this to an extreme. The Romans did not share the Greeks’ ideals about moderation, including (but not limited to) concepts of the ideal male body. Roman men were to be big and hard, in every sense of the word, and they seemed to picture true masculinity as something which one had to work vigorously to achieve (Skinner 2005:212). Anyone who failed to live up to these standards of a vir, or ‘real man,’ could be deemed mollis or a cinaedus (the opposite of vir) (Voss 2008:324). Mollis referred to ‘softness,’ whether it was “in conduct, dress, or demeanor,” and Roman literature hints that some men may have chosen to be ‘soft’ (though debate continues concerning whether or not this was purely a literary device or if there was an equivalent in actual Roman society) (Skinner 2005:212). These high standards placed Roman men in perilous positions, always in danger of slipping into mollitia, or softness (Skinner 2005:212).

Roman men were not only to be mentally and physically strong, but they were also expected to be the penetrators in their sexual relationships (Skinner 2005:212). Thus, while it was entirely acceptable for a Roman man to have a sexual relationship with another man, such a relationship was acceptable only as long as he was the penetrator. This, therefore, dictated that no Roman citizen male be
sexually passive (or penetrated), which meant that a same-sex sexual relationship was acceptable for Roman citizen males only when it was with a non-citizen male, someone of lower social status, and when the Roman citizen was the penetrator. Marilyn Skinner (2005:212) noted that any passivity on the part of Roman men had much deeper implications in Roman society. Passivity meant not only that a man was not dominant, but also that he had "a failure of will power" (Skinner 2005:212). This emphasis on dominance, hardness, and size of the Roman citizen male may be interpreted as an analogy for the Roman Republic and Empire themselves: if Rome's full citizens were all big, hard, and dominant, this meant that Rome itself was not only big, hard, and dominant, but also unified and strong as a political power in the Mediterranean and beyond.

Archaeological Examples of Phallic Iconography:

Roman phallic imagery was undoubtedly filled with social meaning when it was produced and used. First and foremost, however, it is startling. Phallic (and sexual) imagery, as socially-loaded as it may be, may have frequently served as an outlet for tension. Images uncovered in ancient baths, such as those in Pompeii (Skinner 2005:262), may have allowed Roman citizens to laugh and dispel tension they might have felt over their own bodies when bathing in public or private baths with others. Skinner has argued that "a Roman passerby" or guest may have experienced "startled amusement" when they encountered a phallic or sexual carving or image (2005:261-262). Ancient Romans possibly, even probably, laughed at these images, just as we often do today.

Laughter, however, functions not only as a form of tension relief, but is also apotropaic (Skinner 2005:262; Voss 2008:323). In other words, it was (and is) used to ward off evil and danger. Besides inciting laughter, phallic imagery itself also seems to have been imbedded with apotropaic power in ancient Rome, as the phallus was used as a symbol to protect various persons and places (Henig 1984:245; see also Johns 1982:77, 94). Phallic pendants were worn by the male infants of Roman citizens, serving not only as a status symbol but also as a protection against the evil eye and disease (Greep 1994:83-84, Skinner 2005:213). Often, phallic imagery was combined with bells (which provided additional apotropaic power) to create wind chimes (tintinnabula), with the chimes used to protect a home or other place from evil (Skinner 2005:261). Phallic carvings were also probably used to protect other places from evil, and such imagery was
often placed at location associated with danger, "such as corners, bridges, and entrances" (Greep 1994:84).

There is also evidence that Greeks and Romans may have regarded "the deity Priapus as a protector and patron of mariners" (Neilson 2002:248). Priapus, most frequently "associated with fertility and the protection of gardens" and orchards appears also to have been associated with the accumulation of wealth (Neilson 2002:248). The fresco at the entrance to the Vettii house in Pompeii is an infamous example of the association between Priapus and wealth, with Priapus depicted weighing his penis counterbalanced with "a large sack of coins" (Skinner 2005:260). This suggests not only that "the phallus is worth its weight in gold" but also that "money and potency – sexual, social, or political – amount to the same thing" (Skinner 2005:260). The association of Priapus with wealth may have led to his association with merchants; that association may have, in turn, lead to his association with sailors, who transported trade goods via ship.

Harry R. Neilson III (2002:248) noted that the Palatine Anthology contains numerous references to "Priapus as the god of harbours and of those who 'engage in every kind of seamanship' (AP 10.4, late first century BC).” Images of Priapus, or simply phalluses, were placed on wooden stakes and used as channel or obstruction markers to keep sailors and ships safe through dangerous passages and to mark "specific landing place[s]” (Neilson 2002:249). There is also evidence for the use of phallic iconography aboard ships, possibly to protect the ship and its sailors during their journeys. A terracotta phallus, which appears to have been attached to a panel of some sort, was uncovered amongst the wreckage of Pisa Ship E (Neilson 2002:250). Within the wreckage of another ship (Planier A, dated to early first century CE), a figurine that has been interpreted as Priapus, with a socket where a phallus would likely have once been attached, was also uncovered, and a secondary ram emblazoned with a phallus and crescent moon was discovered within the wreckage of a third ship (dated late first to early second century CE) (Neilson 2002:250-251). Though not conclusive, this evidence does point to the use of phallic iconography as protection for sailors and ships traveling throughout the Roman world.

The fresco of Priapus from the Vettii house in Pompeii is worth reconsidering in a discussion of male gender roles in ancient Rome. The fresco was on the wall of the house's entryway, where it must have been visible to all who visited the house, which implies that the fresco was intended to be seen, and did not exist solely for private use or admiration. The house was owned by a pair of wealthy freedmen brothers, the Vettii, who had amassed significant wealth,
which they displayed prominently in their home (Skinner 2005:260, after Williams 1999:93). The image of Priapus weighing his abnormally-large penis, counterbalanced with the money, sends a message of status acquired by wealth accumulation. These brothers were not the landed aristocracy, but had gained their freedom and worked hard to accumulate their fortunes, and they were not timid about showing it off. By displaying their wealth, they cemented their status in Roman society, thus challenging the status of Roman citizen males.

Though images of Priapus are not examples of phallic depictions disembodied, they can and should be included in a study of Roman phallic iconography because of the preposterous nature of the images. Clearly, depictions of Priapus are not intended to convey the actual physical form of a person (this is, after all, a deity), but rather to draw attention to the size, and thus power, of his (or the) phallus. The image of the phallus in Roman archaeology should thus be considered not only as an apotropaic symbol, but also as a symbol representing the strength and power of Rome's male citizens, as well as the challenges to their social positions by up-and-coming freedmen who were amassing wealth and becoming key economic, and thus possibly political, players in Roman society.

Queer Theory: A brief Introduction:

Queer theory developed in the early 1990s, primarily out of feminist theory and heavily influenced by Foucault (Turner 2000:5). William Turner (2000:5) traced the first major academic use of the term “queer” to 1991, when feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis questioned the feasibility of using male-dominant language to describe feminine experiences. Researchers like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler expanded the concept, arguing for the interrelatedness of gender, sexual identity, and sexual activity (Turner 2000:3-5).

Queer theory encompasses a broad range of concepts throughout the social sciences and is, often purposefully, hard to define. Queer theory involves the acknowledgement of the existence of multiple views and experiences, arguing and accepting that experiences vary from person to person, from place to place, and throughout time. It rejects the dominant Western view that sexuality and gender are (and should be) tied to biology, arguing instead that sexuality and gender are socially constructed and, therefore, have and do vary among and within cultures. Conversely, this line of inquiry also acknowledges that it is impossible to fully extract oneself from the dominant discourse (Namaste 1996:199). This is not necessarily a negative position in
which to be, because any discourse, dominant or subaltern, provides an individual with a position from which to compare the outside world. This line of inquiry insists that no single individual can ever fully experience the world as another experiences it, but encourages researchers to accept that their own experiences of the world likely differ significantly from those whom they study. Furthermore, Queer theory acknowledges that academic language itself is often constricting and political, constructed by dominant society (Turner 2000:5). Queer theory is, thus, simultaneously variable, arguable, and subaltern and can be applied to a wide spectrum of disciplines.

Multiplicity of Male ‘Gender’ Roles in Ancient Rome:

While sexuality did play a role in male gender roles in ancient Rome (specifically in that adult Roman citizen males could have socially-acceptable sexual relationships with other men, as long as the other men were not other Roman citizen males), the role of sexuality in Roman male gender roles was not a primary aspect of these gender roles. The crucial characteristic, this author contends, was the Roman citizen male’s social, economic, and, thus, political standing within Roman society. Therefore, one may further argue that gender roles in ancient Rome were not limited to simply “male” and “female” or even “transgendered,” but were actually much more varied and were only minimally dictated by sexual roles. While the Roman citizen male was situated, ostensibly, at the apex of Roman social hierarchies, others, including non-citizen males, wives and daughters of citizen males, prostitutes, and slaves (and even, arguably, cinaedii, if they truly existed as a separately-identified group) also occupied various social and gender roles. Thus, the author further contends that Roman gender roles were more closely tied to class than to sex or sexuality.

As freedmen gained economic and, thus, social and political power, they strove to attain equal (or more-equal or near-equal) status to Roman citizen males. Their newly acquired wealth gave them financial and social access to the artists and/or artisans who produced phallic representations observable in the archaeological record. For example, consider the Vettii described above. Their house, well-preserved by the volcanic eruption that destroyed the city, is filled with examples of phallic iconography, including the painting of Priapus weighing his penis. The Vettii’s (and other freedmen’s) financial success provided access to such iconography; such iconography thus offers archaeologists glimpses into the symbolization of power encapsulated by the phallus in Roman archaeology.
This is not to say that phallic iconography did not serve apotropaic or tension-relieving purposes, as it almost certainly did. It is, rather, to emphasize that phallic iconography had multiple functions in ancient Rome. Besides serving apotropaic or tension-relieving functions, phallic iconography may also have had a symbolic function, which is suggested by the fact that the phallus was often depicted alone, disembodied. In other words, it contained meaning beyond its existence as a portion of male anatomy and sexuality. It also contained meaning beyond its apotropaic value. It was a status symbol and a symbol of power (Voss 2008:323, after Richlin 1992). That citizen male children wore phallic pendants suggests that it was also associated with status. Beyond Roman citizen male status, however, phallic imagery eventually became accessible to freedmen, who were certainly not equals to Roman male citizens. Freedmen had, however, demonstrated significant social mobility, not only by earning their freedom but also by accumulating, in some instances, substantial wealth. This social mobility and appropriation of a symbol generally associated with Roman citizen males corresponds well with Foucault’s argument that Roman citizens became even more status-obsessed as the emperor’s power increased and their only ways of gaining political power came from gaining favor among their peers. Freedmen’s newly acquired status allowed them to use a symbol that had previously been accessible primarily to citizen males, and they then used the symbol of the phallus to conspicuously denote their newfound wealth and power.

Conclusion: A Call for Feminist and/or Queer Theory Archaeology of Roman Phallic Iconography

Significant advances in gender-conscious archaeology and the archaeological studies of sexuality have taken place in the last few decades. As Barbara Voss (2008:317, 322) has pointed out, no longer are all phallic images immediately interpreted as fertility symbols, and phallic (and other ostensibly sexual) symbols themselves may offer greater insight into politics and state formation, subsistence and settlement, identity, and more. More, however, can and should be done in relation to classical Roman archaeology. Feminist theories ought to be more frequently applied in order to understand non-dominant ideologies and identities of ancient Rome. If, as Voss (2008:323) stated, studies of female sexuality tend to “trace historical continuities in pattern of sexual violence and objectification,” then a feminist archaeology of Roman masculinity might also trace continuities in political subjugation, evidenced by the use of the phallus to represent the strength and power of those ‘in power’ over non-dominant portions
of Roman society. Furthermore, Queer Theory could be applied to gain insight into Rome's multiplicity of gender roles, by acknowledging that classical Roman gender roles do not correspond particularly well with modern Western gender roles. Rome seems to have had a much more diverse perception of appropriate gender roles which were tied less to sex and more to status, with adult citizen males at the social and political apex. Each of these positions fulfilled specific roles in Roman society, but when social and political roles began to change and some freedmen began to grow wealthy, access to symbols of power, such as phallic iconography, became part of their realm, not just that of the citizen males. Their inequality and their differing social roles did not exclude them from the desire to counter their social superiors and, in fact, they clearly did so.

Footnote
1 For a fascinating look at the way phallic-related symbology has continued to be used throughout the ages in Italian (particularly Neapolitan) communities, see Joan Acocella’s “The Neapolitan Finger,” (Sign Language Studies vol. 2 No. 2 Winter 2002, pp 197-211) a book review of Andrea de Jorio’s 1832 text La mimica degli antichi investigate nel gestire napoletano (republished in 1964 and translated into English and republished in 2002). The original book, written by a Neapolitan priest, archaeologist, museum curator, and prolific writer in the early-mid 19th century, encyclopedically outlines and describes thousands of Neapolitan hand gestures in existence during his life. De Jorio meticulously recorded the ways the hand gestures were formed and used, as well as their meanings. Though he refrained from discussing overt sexual or obscene meanings of any gestures, de Jorio made allusions to such meanings by referring the reader to the chapters and page numbers of other sources which described the act. (Fortunately or comically, or both, Adam Kendon, the translator and editor of the English publication, found all of the references de Jorio made and included them in the 2002 publication!). Most interestingly for this paper, de Jorio outlined the uses and meanings of a gesture called “mano cornuta,” in which the hand is formed into a fist, with the index and pinkie fingers extended, resembling pair of horns. He described twelve separate meanings implied by the gesture, including “power,” “pride,” “phallus,” “hardness in the physical sense,” “hardness in the moral sense,” and “amulet, against the evil eye” (204). Acocella noted that “the most important meaning is the last” as “the jettatura, or casting of the evil eye...was actively feared in Naples at the time of the original publication” (204). She further noted that the evil eye “is not altogether forgotten” nowadays, and is even evident in
“northern New Jersey today” (204). Using this hand gesture was and is intended to deflect the power of the evil eye, even if it wasn’t seen by the person suspected of casting the evil eye.

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