

The Delphi Antinous (A reconsideration)

On July 1, 1893, at the excavation of Delphi near the Temple of Apollo, archaeologists uncovered a near-perfectly preserved, still-upright statue of Hadrian's beloved Antinous (fig. 1). Théophile Homolle, director of the Ecole Française d'Athènes and principal of the excavations, could hardly contain his enthusiasm for one of the great archaeological finds of the 19th century:

The body is young and beautiful. Its elegance is equaled by its force; its flesh is so supple that it seems to be alive and to pulse, and the chest seems to swell with a healthy and powerful breath. The shoulders are as wide as those of an athlete, but they fill out with softness. The legs are fine and of a charming shape. The head, encircled of a branch from under which the curls of hair harmoniously frame the face, inclines to the side with a grace that is not without a sadness, and the eye, under the shadow of the brow, has a bit of melancholy (Qtd. in van Overbergh 1899, 73).

Several of the tropes traditionally associated with the figure of Antinous are evident in this description: the unparalleled beauty of the *ephebe*, the balance of strength and elegance, the dynamic interplay between masculine and feminine attributes. But it is Homolle's last sentiment, the interpretation of the figure as communicating a certain "sadness" and "melancholy," which especially typifies interpretations of Antinous figures from the Renaissance until today. Where in the statue is this sadness located, and from what sources does such an interpretation arise? How has such a seemingly qualitative assessment become codified in the literature? Is this an appropriate interpretation of the figure or do other readings present themselves? This paper will consider these questions with specific attention to the Delphi Antinous and the problems of interpretation it presents. Specifically, I will question the validity of such interpretations by examining the factual circumstances of the life of Hadrian's favorite. I will also consider the Delphi Antinous within the canon of Antinous figures: I will point to the ways in which it may be seen, on the one hand, to exemplify the canon and, on the other, to depart from its conventions. Finally, I will assess the extent to which alternative and perhaps more satisfying interpretations may be offered under fresh examination of the Delphi Antinous's antecedents in Greek sculpture.

Let us first, then, briefly attend to the biography of the famed subject. Specific biographical detail is in precious little supply for the young Antinous—an especially frustrating situation when one considers that the number of his extant ancient depictions is exceeded only by emperors Augustus and Hadrian, both of whom boast extensive and detailed biographies (Richlin 1992, 223). Not a single image of Antinous nor a word about him can definitively be traced to his lifetime, since his recorded history begins at his apotheosis (Lambert 1984, 47). Antinous hailed from Bithynia, an ancient Roman province in northwest Asia Minor adjacent to the Black Sea (Cassius Dio, Book 69, 11:2). Most historians agree

that Antinous was born c. 110 CE, but this date is pure conjecture based on the apparent age of the boy in his portraits in 130 CE, the date of his tragic and premature death in the Nile. Sometime in the interim, Hadrian visited the city of Bithynium and Antinous was subsequently accepted into the royal entourage. The records of Hadrian's travels around the empire largely fail to mention specific dating, which means that we cannot definitively date the first meeting of Hadrian and Antinous. The circumstances of his death are as shrouded in mystery as his life; Hadrian's own claim, that Antinous fell into the Nile, leaves too much to the imagination. Was his death a suicide, a murder, an accident? The answer to this question is forever lost to history, but what we do know is that upon Antinous's death, Hadrian had him deified—much as Alexander had done for his favorite Hephaestion some five hundred years before (Merriam 1884, 34). It is to this deification we owe the great wealth of images of Antinous scattered across the Roman Empire (Meyer 1991). Further, Hadrian constructed a city on the site of his death and named it Antinoopolis (Cassius Dio, Book 69, 11:3). It has been assumed that the statue of Antinous at Delphi likely dates from the year of his death and subsequent deification.

The statue itself is a model of ideal classicizing proportions, while featuring some singular characteristics that allow for a positive identification with the historical figure of Antinous. The general treatment can be likened to that of the so-called "Tiber Apollo" (fig. 2), a Roman copy (also thought to be Hadrianic in date) of an ancient Greek bronze original attributed to Pheidias (Moltesen 2004, 114). The type that this copy represents, therefore, might be considered an inspiration for the Delphi Antinous. Comparing the two, clear affinities emerge. The weight of the figure is largely thrown onto the left leg, with the right leg propelling forward into space. This causes the hip area to be tilted upward and to the figure's left in both sculptures, resulting in the dynamic figural torsion that typifies classical statuary. This mode is also evident in the sharp turn of the head downward and to the figure's left, which creates a complementary motion to the aforementioned hip shift. Of course, it makes sense that we should deduce a classically Greek strain for these figures, since Hadrian's openly articulated philhellenism serves as a hallmark of his reign. Indeed, the emperor's own images indicate his admiration for Greek culture as well, since they feature Hadrian's visage cloaked in a full beard; he was the first of the emperors to picture himself with such a feature, which contemporary viewers would most certainly have recognized as a definitively Greek marker. This philhellenic predilection was likewise indicated in Hadrian's ambitious building program, his support of strengthening the physical infrastructure of the Greek provinces, and Rome's official communication with the provinces, for many of which Greek was the primary language (Boatwright 2002, 14). This devotion to the Greek style will become central to our understanding of the statue of Antinous at Delphi, and will indeed open a frame of interpretation that has yet to be explored with respect to the statue.

Now, with a biographical sketch of the subject, let us turn now to the specific formal characteristics of the statue which have given rise to the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations in the literature. Antinous of Delphi

stands life-sized at 1.84 meters tall, a solid and stable figure of Parian marble. The only pieces missing from the body upon its discovery were the left and right lower arms from the elbow to the hand (Poulsen 1973, 324). The left arm extends farther from the body than the right; because this figure represents Antinous in the guise of Apollo, we might restore an attribute of Apollo in the left hand (Meyer 1991, 37). Such objects might include a bow or perhaps a lyre, as is evident in the statue of Apollo by Apollonius in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek which has been dated to c. 150 CE (fig. 3). As Meyer has noted, the left arm and its attribute were likely engaged with the bracing element (no longer extant) consisting of a tree trunk which also joined the left side of the left leg in two places, once at mid-thigh and again at mid-calf. The raised left arm results in a slight tilt of the shoulders downward towards the right, augmenting the dynamic figural movement we noted earlier in the piece.

The treatment of the torso remains one of the characteristics of this statue which unmistakably mark it as Antinous. The chest swells with a powerful roundness which is nonetheless supple and fleshy—a marked departure from the lean treatment of the breast in the Tiber Apollo (Poulsen 1973, 325). In particular, the ample heft of the prominent nipples lends the pectoral area an aspect that some scholars have termed “effeminate” (Meyer 1991, 37). Moving down the figure, the powerful chest stands somewhat in contrast to the smooth lack of definition in the abdominal muscles. Some delineation between each muscle remains; however, its treatment exhibits a soft pliancy that lacks the overt musculature of the chest. The apparent slackness in the abdominals is echoed and arguably amplified in the legs of Antinous, which extend downward from the torso in a rounded, shapely manner. There is little definition in the transition from thigh to knee to lower leg—much less than one might expect from a strapping adolescent on the verge of manhood. This treatment of the legs is also evident when viewing the statue from behind, where only a slight articulation of the calf muscle can be discerned. Much more apparent, however, are the muscled buttocks, which protrude from the figure rather abruptly in profile. The sheer mass of this part formally recalls that of the chest. Both the chest and buttocks are likewise balanced on the posterior by the massive treatment of the back flesh.

The treatment of the head is likewise somewhat idealized, while still bearing some particularizing characteristics which enable us to identify it with Antinous. The head sits atop a short, strong neck which exhibits an abrupt turn downwards and to the figure’s left, which we characterized earlier as a Hellenistic touch. Besides this striking twist, the head also boasts a full cap of thick curls. The hair gathers in chunky, tactile J-shaped locks falling over his forehead and ears; it gathers similarly around the back of his head, with the strands draping somewhat longer down onto the nape of his neck. Great care has been taken to achieve the high relief of the curls, with the locks around the forehead, ears, and neck receiving the deepest and most intricate drilling. Crowning the hair is a wreath of tightly intertwined branches regularly pierced with several drilled holes. This likely served as an armature for a series of laurel leaves made of gold-plated bronze, now lost (Picard et. al. 1991, 23). The face emerges from

underneath the cap of curls as a vision of classicizing beauty not unlike the face of Polykleitos's *Doryphoros* (fig. 4). The rigid line of the bridge of the nose balances harmoniously with the fleshy roundness of the jaw. Such fleshiness is echoed in the full, heart shaped lips, which perch pertly above a round, well-defined chin. The eyes, while not large, are prominent in their likewise fleshy treatment: the lower lids exhibit a slight but sensual swelling, while the flesh of the upper eye sockets languorously overhangs the eyes. Atop these eyes sits another of Antinous's singular characteristics: an almost-straight eyebrow with individually incised hairs, which rises a bit on the outer eyes. The treatment of the eyes and eyebrows are truly what set this portrait apart from the *Doryphoros*, aside from the overall fleshier and less muscular treatment of the planes of the face.

The Delphi Antinous, along with a few related pieces, represents one of the uncontested portrait-types of Antinous. Christoph Clairmont has grouped the statue with three other related busts in the National Museum of Athens, constituting a corpus he terms *direkte Kopien vom Urbildnis*, or direct copies sharing a common prototype (Clairmont 1960, 39). Clairmont bases his assessment on close analysis of the patterns of the locks of hair of these four pieces. Hugo Meyer's later, more extensive catalogue makes use of similar classificatory schemes and likewise postulates the existence of an *Urantinoos* of Greek inspiration from which the Delphi Antinous descends (Meyer 1991, 37). Both authors acknowledge, however, that a single overarching typology for all extant depictions of Antinous would be inadequate, since some busts differ radically from the Delphi type. These include a group of Antinous portraits related to the Mondragone bust of Antinous at the Louvre (fig. 5), with its distinctive long locks, as well as a group related to a bust from Hadrian's Villa (fig. 6), with a shorter lock over his left eye. The group of portraits with a shorter lock over the left eye differ from the rest of Antinous portraits in that their lock scheme across the forehead consists of J-shaped curls of consistent length save one lock directly above the left eye, which is a little more than half the length of its neighbors. Despite their manifold differences, these numerous related groups nevertheless exhibit some of the key identifying features of the Antinous type: individually incised hairs in the eyebrow; a voluminous, tousled mane of curls; a fleshy, idealized facial structure; and a sensuously full treatment of the lips.

This last feature is often interpreted to be a pout, which is then read as a sign of Antinous's overriding melancholy. Many authors write on this sadness as though it is simply a given: Cornelius Vermuele waxes poetic on Antinous's "sullen, pouting beauty" (1969, 488), while Eugénie Strong finds his countenance rather "subtle and pathetic" (1911, 251). Taylor Combe claims a "grave melancholy" to be "generally characteristic of the busts of Antinous" (1861, 46), while Lambert goes farther in calling the Delphi type outright "diffident and insecure" (1984, 212). And Jiri Frel, while he confesses to finding a certain "awkward charm" in the figure, nevertheless reads this melancholy as lending the figure a "tired" air (1973, 127). In general, the literature thus presumes an attitude of sadness and melancholy in figures of Antinous. Such florid, romantic interpretations likely stem from Antinous's premature death, in which case the

figure would represent both the sadness of Hadrian (his master and the patron of such images, after all) and the more general melancholy of the *mors immatura*.

We must be wary of such qualitative assessments. Since the reception of images changes radically over time and between the ancient Roman context and that of our immediate milieu, such a melancholy should not be considered as an inherent certainty in images of Antinous, but rather reflective of our own relationship with them. Indeed, more recent appraisals have noted the ways in which fantasy plays a seminal role in governing the reception of Antinous figures—a situation exacerbated by the scant biography of the subject (Vout 2006). It becomes necessary, then, to evaluate the supposed melancholy present in these images in an effort to explore alternative explanations for their formal properties. In which formal properties, exactly, is such a sadness to be found in these depictions? Wilhelm Lübke provides an answer: he declares that statues of Antinous are “characterized by an expression of thoughtful melancholy in the drooping head ... and by a suggestion of sadness in the curve of the voluptuous mouth” (1922, 299). Both of these properties are present in the Delphi Antinous; it is my contention that they can be viewed not as indicative of some underlying sadness but rather in terms of their stylistic connection to some Greek works.

It will be helpful at this point to remind the reader that the Delphi Antinous presents the subject in the guise of Apollo, and was excavated adjacent to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. As an iconographic depiction, the Delphi Antinous thus exhibits many of the features which characterize earlier depictions of Apollo in the East. Earlier, we explored the way in which the Delphi Antinous owes much in its treatment of weight distribution to the Tiber Apollo, which itself was modeled on an ancient Greek bronze. It likewise exhibits the same twist of the head downwards and to the left. In fact, this formal quirk is hardly endemic to depictions of Antinous: several examples of generalized Apollo figures of Greek origin demonstrate this same downcast gaze. Consider, for instance, the so-called Adonis Centocelle (fig. 7), an Apollo figure of unknown provenance with the attributes of a bow and arrow from the mid-2nd century CE. The statue is a Roman marble copy of an ancient Greek bronze which shares several affinities with the Antinous from Delphi. The two exhibit similar postures, with the weight situated primarily on the left leg with the right leg bent forward. The Adonis provides us with an excellent model for restoration of the arms of Antinous, since the Adonis likewise keeps his right arm down at his side while the left extends outward from his body. In the right hand, he holds an arrow pointed downward, while the left holds the limbs of a bow, which are attributes of Apollo. With his ancient attributes still intact,¹ the Adonis's downcast glance suddenly becomes legible: he looks downward not out of sadness or melancholy, but rather in the direction of his attribute. In this way, the statue directs the viewer's eye to those formal structures which positively identify the figure. If the left arm of the Delphi Antinous were likewise restored, we would find that his gaze would similarly fall upon his attribute.

¹ Mawson, T.J. “God's Body.” The Heythrop Journal, Vol. 47 Issue 2. 174.

A second parallel we might find for the Delphi Antinous is in the *Diadoumenos* from Delos (fig. 8), today housed in the National Museum of Athens. This particular representation, one of many copies of the original, is a Hellenistic copy in marble of the bronze original by Polykleitos of approximately 430 BCE. The image shows a young athlete in the first flush of victory, tying a *diadem* or headband of victory around his forehead. At his right side is a tree trunk, on which rests his garment and a quiver. The quiver may be seen to align this figure with Apollo, as in our previous examples. The figure exhibits all of the bodily ease and languor which we earlier found in the Delphi Antinous: the *Diadoumenos* throws most of his weight onto one leg (the right, rather than the left), resulting in the right hip positioned higher than the left. This movement is countered by the dynamic quality of the chest and shoulders, which are engaged in the act of tying the diadem. The right shoulder, in conjunction with the right arm, sits lower than the left, balancing the position of the hips. Of course, most importantly for our argument here, the head of the *Diadoumenos* demonstrates an extreme tilt downwards and to the right, a movement we can associate with the action of tying his *diadem*. The face, like that of the Delphi Antinous, exhibits a good deal of idealization in the depiction of its forms and reveals very little emotion. Further, the soft treatment of the facial features echoes that of Antinous from Delphi.

I contend that these examples point to an alternative method of interpretation for the statue of Antinous at Delphi. Rather than relying on inherited and intensely personal interpretations of the figure based on emotion, we can read the figure in relation to its progenitors in the Greek tradition, where it becomes legible in the context of depictions of the figure of Apollo. Instead of imagining the twist of the head to be “drooping” in “thoughtful melancholy,” we can view its position in relation to the restored attribute or action of the left arm. Likewise, rather than reading “a suggestion of sadness in the curve of the voluptuous mouth,” it would make far more art historical sense to relate the treatment of the lips to other idealizing figures, like that of the *Doryphoros* or the *Diadoumenos*. Such a method provides a more satisfying interpretative framework because it lends less credence to intimations of sadness, which are always personal and subjective, and instead emphasizes formal affinity in light of historical relationship.

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Figures

Figure 1: Antinous as Apollo
Archaeological Museum of Delphi



Figure 2
Tiber Apollo
Palazzo Massimo alle Terme (Museo Nazionale Romano)



Figure 3
Statue of Apollo
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek



Figure 4

Doryphoros, Polykleitos

National Archaeological Museum of Naples



Figure 5
Antinous Mondragone
Louvre



Figure 6
Bust of Antinous found at Hadrian's Villa
Vatican



Figure 7
Adonis Centocelle
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



Figure 8

Diadoumenos from Delos

National Archaeological Museum of Athens

