

The Boy Strangling the Goose: Genre Figure or Mythological Symbol?

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Abstract

Kunze has suggested that Hellenistic sculpture depicting themes of everyday activities that are traditionally classified as genre subjects may carry very different meanings. This note argues that, in Graeco-Roman terms, the chubby personage in depictions of the Boy Strangling the Goose is not simply a child but the personification of Dionysos/Harpokrates; the goose is not a household pet but an evil spirit over which the Divine Child triumphs. The manner of the representation is Greek and can be read at a superficial level; the deeper content is Egyptian and contains a symbolic message of rebirth and victory.*

In an important article published in 1999, Christian Kunze argued against our traditional understanding of Hellenistic sculptures depicting themes of everyday activities by the lower classes or by representatives of the extremes in age—the so-called old destitutes and the children. Generally classified as unprecedented genre subjects, many of these portrayals, he suggested, did not in fact constitute a break with earlier iconography and, when seen in their proper light, could carry a very different meaning. Stressing the difference, for instance, between Hellenistic and Roman statues of fishermen, he pointed out that the former—unlike the latter—were never shown engaged in the performance of their trade but rather carrying the products of their labors. They were, therefore, no different from the various offering-bearers of Archaic and Classical

times and should be considered votive gifts to be set up in sanctuaries. The sociological implications with which such figures have been endowed are a commentary on our own times and not a true reflection of ancient readings of those visual “texts.”¹ Kunze has now expanded on his basic theme in an extensively documented book that includes many more monuments and stylistic analyses.²

Considered from a different angle, this same emphasis on the appropriateness of a subject for a Greek or Roman context may lead to a revision of some attributions based solely on style and not on actual date of manufacture. I have long advocated a similar position with regard to the so-called Roman copies—works known only in versions datable no earlier than the incipient Imperial period.³ Specifically, it would be advisable to use comparable criteria in our analysis of all the alleged genre sculptures, keeping an open mind, as results may vary from case to case; some may even confirm the correctness of a Hellenistic dating once the defining label has been discounted. In particular, given the international character of the period, this scrutiny should be applied to some monuments in obvious Greek style, which could, however, be more meaningful from a non-Greek point of view. This is a query I wish to raise for a well-known topos, the Boy Strangling the Goose, for which I would suggest a *lectio Aegyptiaca* not only for the individual com-

* I wish to thank Maria Teresa Marabini Moevs for the loan of her photographs, and Dyfri Williams of the British Museum for giving me permission to publish them.

¹ Kunze (1999) argued his position on the strength of three selected examples: the so-called Fanciulla d’Anzio, the Old Fisherman of the Seneca type, and the Old Drunken Woman. Although I fully agree in principle with Kunze’s theory, I wonder why the Drunken Woman and especially the Seneca Fisherman would have been copied more or less exactly in Roman times. If the original Hellenistic monuments represented private or even civic dedications within their respective sanctuaries, they might not have attracted the attention of the Roman clientele and, perhaps, not been available for direct copying. If, however, a specific mythological meaning accrued to them within the embodiment of their generic

type, their precise reproduction would have been significant even in Imperial times. For lengthier discussion of these basic types, see Kunze 2002.

² Kunze 2002.

³ My position is most explicitly stated in Ridgway (1988, 33): “Perhaps the most important questions to be asked of the material have in fact become: Why was it made? Where was it set up? If a work traditionally assigned to the Hellenistic period but known only through Roman copies could be conclusively shown to be out of place—both in function and meaning—in a proper Greek context, the time is perhaps right for revising our notions and asking whether the piece in question could rather be a Roman creation in Hellenistic style.” Comparable thoughts are also expressed throughout Ridgway 1990, 2000, 2002.

ponents, as others have advocated, but also for the very action involved, which has contributed to the genre classification.

The concept of Hellenistic genre has long been entrenched in archaeological literature. A typical and early (1885) explanation of its application to the Hellenistic period, for instance, by Ernest Gardner, states that “people cooped up in large towns and surrounded by the artificiality of city life felt a craving for nature and simplicity” that led them to extol bucolic environments and images of childhood in both their poetry and their visual arts.⁴ A slightly different connotation, with emphasis on the decorative character, is implicit in the term “rococo,” first applied to Hellenistic art by Wilhelm Klein and then codified by Margarete Bieber in her influential monograph on the sculpture of the period. Even Jerome Pollitt adopted the term, although expressing some reservations as to its applicability to ancient times.⁵

One theme accepted by all authors under these various terms is that of a child holding a bird generically definable as aquatic although often specifically called a goose. The main reason for the scholarly attention this subject has attracted is a passage in Pliny attributing to Boethos of Chalkedon the (bronze?) image of a boy strangling a goose.⁶ The original Plinian text is corrupt, and the restoration of the word “*amplexando*”

(while embracing [the bird]) is conjectural. Other possible readings could have stated that the boy was six years old or that the work was excellent, and the sentence, as extant, is ungrammatical. What is certain, however, is the “unfriendly” connection of a child and a bird, by a certain sculptor who was actually renowned as a silversmith.⁷

Boethos’ span of activity and very identity present complex problems with no immediate solution, yet they are largely irrelevant for my purpose here, since a major chronological indication can be derived from a mention in the Fourth Mimiambos by Herodas, datable to between 280 and 265 B.C.E. The poem describes two women visiting a sanctuary of Asklepios and observing some of the dedications at the site, one of which depicts a boy clearly stated to be strangling a *chenalopex*, a type of Egyptian goose of relatively small size. No connection with a specific sculptor can be established on the basis of this allusion, but the poet’s own date is sufficient indication that the topic of a boy throttling a goose, in whatever format, already existed in the early third century B.C.E.⁸ Further support is provided by a fragmentary plaster cast of a wax model intended to make a metal appliqué, as handle attachment, from Memphis, Egypt, and by a silver statuette (fig. 1), probably from a lid, found in a grave near Alexandria, both datable by context to the mid

⁴Gardner 1885, 11. The author admits that “in Hellenistic times, even distinctly mythological subjects received a genre-like treatment,” but “where no religious meaning is obvious, and other explanations are easy to find, it seems quite superfluous to go beyond common life” for the origin of certain themes (Gardner 1885, 10).

⁵Klein 1919; 1921; Bieber 1961, ch. 10, “Rococo Trends in Hellenistic Art.” Bieber (1961, ch. 6.3, “The Art of Alexandria: Subjects of Daily Life,” 95–7) states that Greek artists in Egypt may have been “so awed by its monumental architecture and sculpture that they did not try to rival it. They rather turned to the daily life in the streets of cosmopolitan Alexandria.” Pollitt (1986, ch. 6, “Rococo, Realism and the Exotic”) expresses reservations, e.g., with emphasis on context (127, 131, 139) and where doubts are limited to the precise chronological limits of the phase (141). Pollitt is, however, more positive about the pervasive influence of “realism,” under which term he groups many of the subjects usually considered genre. He attributes the movement to a weakening of idealism, which led to “an interest in the variety of experiences,” focusing “attention on the mutability of the world” (Pollitt 1986, 141).

⁶Plin. *HN* 34.84.

⁷For the various possible readings of Pliny’s text, see Kunze 2002, 144 nn. 797–800. Kunze (2002, 142–53) discusses the entire topic (his no. 1), with further analysis (153–55) of what he considers a Late Hellenistic variant (his no. 1a). See also Bieber 1961, 81–2; Pollitt 1986, 128, fig. 132, 129, fig. 133. See Pollitt (1986, 140–1, 311 n. 9) for the Plinian text. In my first discussion (Ridgway 1990, 232–33, 243 n. 23) of the theme, I

had accepted the idea of Boethos as a sculptor of children’s images because of the alleged connection of the so-called Agon to a signed herm from the Mahdia shipwreck. This connection has now been disproved (*infra* n. 8).

⁸The term “*χηνάλωπηξ*” is usually translated as fox-goose or Nile goose (*Chenalopex Aegyptiaca*) (see also Hdt. 2.72). Herodas’ Fourth Mimiambos, set in an Asklepieion where some of the artworks mentioned by the two women were by the sons of Praxiteles, was originally thought to refer to the sanctuary of the god on Kos. It has now been asserted that this localization is unwarranted. The chronological bracket may be further narrowed by the fact that Herodas’ First Mimiambos mentions Temples of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe, as well as the Museum in Alexandria. It is thus datable after 272/1 B.C.E. Mime 2, in turn, is set on Kos (before 266), thus suggesting a circuit and period similar to Theokritos’. Finally, Mimes 6 and 7 are localized in Asia Minor. See Cunningham (1971, 80, 128) on the dates of Mimiambi 2 and 4. Cunningham (2004, vii) brackets production of the Mimiambi between 275 and 265 B.C.E. Kunze (2002, 149 n. 828, 248 n. 1477) accepts the terminus post quem of 272 B.C.E. for poem 4, while assuming that it does not refer to actual monuments and certainly not to the original of the Boy with the Goose represented by the Munich type, named after a marble (Glyptothek 268) from the Villa of the Quintilii (his pl. 19, figs. 60–3). Two more replicas from the same villa are now in the Louvre and the Vatican Museums. On the many sculptors named Boethos, see Ridgway 2000, 247–54 (the Boy Strangling the Goose is discussed again on pp. 252–54).



Fig. 1. Two views of the Boy Strangling the Goose, silver object from an Egyptian grave, ca. 240 B.C.E. (courtesy British Museum).

third century B.C.E. Indeed, the silver figurine, now in the British Museum, in London, was the occasion for Gardner's article cited above, which includes a classification of six distinct groups of depictions of children with birds, each representing a specific type and its variations.⁹

There is no question that some of the items listed by Gardner simply portray friendly interaction with pets. In fact, as Kunze argues, the Child-with-Bird theme was well known since the fifth century B.C.E.,

as attested by numerous gravestones.¹⁰ The bird in those reliefs is frequently a dove, but the basic idea is comparable and the intended meaning may have been to strengthen an image of childhood and premature death. By the Hellenistic period, as is often the case, the two-dimensional renderings were converted into figures in the round, but no great change in conception may have been implied. Kunze, in fact, considers the best-known composition, the so-called Munich type, a typical votive offering for Greek sanctuaries of

⁹ In the silver group, the bird reacts to its predicament by biting the child's left ear, causing him to turn his head in the opposite direction. Gardner (1885) gathers 52 items within six categories; the British Museum silver object, in Group VI (the least homogeneous of the groupings), is his no. 51, and listed are the various coins found with it (Gardner 1885, 9 n. 1). They date from the reigns of the first three Ptolemies, providing a *terminus ante quem* of ca. 240 B.C.E. Gardner's Group IV, comprising item nos. 25–32 and variation nos. 33–8, is the largest and most popular because it was often turned into a fountain by a water pipe running through the bird; the boy is shown seated, pressing down on the goose with his left arm (Kunze's no. 1a). Group V (nos. 39–42 in marble, 43–44a–c in terracotta, and 45 in bronze, with variation nos. 46–8) is the Munich type (Kunze's no. 1), traditionally associ-

ated with Boethos: the boy, standing, struggles with a goose as big as himself, whose neck he grasps with both arms. Both the Memphis plaster and the Alexandria statuette are mentioned by Reinsberg (1980, 92–3, 315), esp. cat. no. 43, fig. 77 (the cast), and n. 340 listing other examples of boys "holding" geese. See also Kunze (2002, 147–48 n. 820) for the silver statuette and additional bibliography; he interprets the more interactive composition as a variation typical of the minor arts. Kunze (2002, 142–43 n. 791) lists 12 items attributable to his Munich type; he (2002, 153 n. 850) lists six or seven replicas of his Borghese type (no. 1a) with the child sitting on the ground, which he considers a Late Hellenistic decorative group.

¹⁰ Kunze 2002.

kourotrophoi, or healing deities, datable on stylistic grounds to the mid or late third century B.C.E.¹¹

It seems to me, however, that both the Memphis plaster and the silver statuette, as well as the larger, probably later, version of the standing boy struggling with an equal-sized goose, convey an attempt to subdue the animal, which is being grasped by the neck—indeed, being strangled, as clearly described by both Herodas and Pliny. This rendering makes the animal unlikely as a simple attribute of childhood; yet Kunze discounts the possibility that a specific game is being depicted or an otherwise unattested cult legend. He is equally dismissive of early theories (e.g., by Salomon Reinach and Ioannes Svoronos) that would see in the child a mythological figure, such as Ianiskos, son of Asklepios.¹²

A more recent identification of the Munich-type child as Harpokrates may have escaped Kunze's attention. The boy is considered the personification of Horus the Child on three grounds: his lock ("the Classical version of the Egyptian braided sidelock" of childhood); the overly large animal (big enough for the child to be riding it, as common in representations of "at least one other divinity, Dionysus, who was syncretized with Horus in Classical Egypt"); and the choice of the goose, sacred to Geb (father of Osiris and Isis) and to Amun (supplanted by Osiris). Although the animal "is probably simply one of the innumerable geese given to Isis or kept by her," it could also be Osiris himself, who "could not be shown in living human form." Yet this interpretation rests on the allegedly friendly interaction of the two.¹³

¹¹ For derivation from Classical gravestones, see Kunze (2002, 150): "Die Ganswürgergruppe im Typus München bietet also von ihrem Thema wie auch von ihrer Funktion her nichts Neues." For fifth-century examples, see also Girl with Doves, New York, Metropolitan Museum inv. no. 1927.27.45 (Richter 1954, no. 73, 49–50, pl. 60a); stele from Nea Kallikrateia, Thessaloniki Museum inv. no. MA 6876 (Despines 1997, no. 9, 25–6, figs. 21, 24, 27). Many stelai of girls and boys holding doves or other birds can be found in Clairmont 1993; for geese (or ducks), see esp. nos. 0.911 (Athens NM 892, stele of Choregis) and 0.912 (Athens NM 895, stele of Kallistion); also nos. 0.834 (Dresden, Albertinum, ZV 1771; Telekles with duck) and 869a (Munich Glyptothek 199; Plangon with bird in hand and duck nearby). Relevant stelai and statuettes are discussed by Thompson (1982, esp. 159; cf. pl. 23 for a bronze figurine of a boy with a dove from Dodona). For a marble statue in the round, from Brauron, see also Ridgway 1990, 338, pl. 176 (girl with dove). Many of these types in the round undoubtedly go back to the fourth century B.C.E.

¹² Kunze (2002, 148–49 nn. 825–26), with bibliographic references to such mythological interpretations, including those as Eros. He acknowledges, however, the presence of a "Harpokrates lock" on the child of his Borghese type (no. 1a), which he dates to the late second–early first century B.C.E. by comparison with the children from Sperlonga and the Mah-

The Harpokrates/Dionysos syncretism has now been more extensively reviewed from a Greek/Ptolemaic angle. The British Museum silver object has been connected with a series of representations of the child Dionysos squatting on an altar and occasionally characterized further by the presence of satyrs, vines, and other attributes of the god. This depiction, in turn, has been explained as the subject of the fourth and last Dionysiac cart mentioned by Kallixeinos of Rhodes as part of the *Pompe*, or Grand Procession, of Ptolemy Philadelphos in 275/4 B.C.E. The theme of the float as described, "Dionysos at the Altar of Rhea," did not include a clear indication of the god's age, but the unusual form of the representations suggests the connection. In addition, Dionysos is linked to the theme of rebirth, and hence, in Egypt, to Harpokrates. As Dionysos-Zagreus, according to the Orphic mysteries, was dismembered by the Titans and restored to life from his heart, so Harpokrates was considered Horus the Child, divinely born from Isis and Osiris after the latter's dismemberment by his brother Seth and his recomposition by his loving wife. This Egyptian interpretation of the Greek god is confirmed by the fact that depictions of Dionysos/Harpokrates show him with the typically Egyptian sidelock of childhood. In turn, the identification of the living Pharaoh with Horus/Harpokrates in Ptolemaic times is supported by the fact that some of these images wear a diadem and can be seen as part of the assimilation propaganda pursued by the successors of Alexander in Egypt.¹⁴

Dionysos/Harpokrates appears on a plaster mold from Memphis, rising from a flower calyx. Har-

dia wreck.

¹³Kozloff 1980; the suggestion acquires additional strength from the fact that the author is an Egyptologist. She stresses, however, that "the animal's life is not at stake" and "the gleeful expression on the child's face is the reflection of his playful, if somewhat rough, intentions." Stewart (1990, 306), in discussing the Boy with Goose under T[estimonia] 162 (an ancient reference to a child by Boethos), states: "Kozloff (1980) plausibly interprets the Munich boy as Harpokrates." For both the Kozloff and the Stewart references, I am indebted to an anonymous *AJA* reviewer.

¹⁴For extensive discussion of all these points, see Marabini Moevs 2005; the British Museum silver statuette is her fig. 7.6, which she describes as wearing "the Harpokrates lock" (81–2). In turn, the child on the Memphis plaster, despite having short hair, seems to wear a fillet or diadem. The syncretism Dionysos/Harpokrates is confirmed by the commentary in *LIMC* 4, s.v. "Harpokrates" (esp. p. 444); see nos. 323–30 for Harpokrates Riding a Goose. The Egyptian god is defined as the protector of childhood and fecundity, for both the human and the animal world; he is assimilated also to Herakles and even to Amon whose sacred animal was the goose. Harpokrates' association with animals is said not to be a creation of the popular fantasy, because of finds of animals in the same context.

pokrates' iconography includes depictions of the child on a lotus blossom. This rendering is traditionally explained as symbolizing the sun rising from the primordial waters, a solar connection strengthened by the child's association with the goose sacred to Amon, the sun god.¹⁵ Given the definite mingling of the two traditions, the Greek and the Egyptian, it seems possible to assume that a specific Egyptian symbolism may underlie the portrayal of a boy throttling a goose rather than simply holding or playing with it. Beyond its meaning as Amon's sacred beast, the goose, or even the duck—since the two animals are often interchangeable—occurs under three forms as a hieroglyph with two quite separate symbolic messages. One of them has erotic connotations and alludes to the teeming wildlife of the marshes; the other views the marshes as the refuge of evil spirits, thus identifying the duck itself with such dangerous elements.¹⁶

Could depictions of the Boy Strangling the Goose be read in Graeco-Egyptian terms? If so, the chubby personage is not simply an infant but the personification of Dionysos/Harpokrates; the goose is not a household pet or a common barnyard animal but an evil spirit over which the Divine Child triumphs. The manner of the representation is Greek and can

be read on a superficial level; the deeper content is Egyptian and contains a symbolic message of rebirth and victory over Chaos.

This same assumption has been made for another composition at present known only in statuette format: two wrestlers, one standing and the other down on one knee in a clear position of submission. Because two of the bronze replicas of the type show the winner with the *ureus*-snake diadem of a Pharaoh and the Harpokrates lock, Helmut Kyrieleis has identified him as Ptolemy V, who, in the guise of Harpokrates, fights Seth. This identification may not apply to all the eight extant examples of the bronze group (one of them clearly shows Herakles as the winner) but the basic idea—that a Greek message of victory could be translated into Egyptian terms to serve a mixed ethnic population—is quite convincing, and is made even more plausible by the fact that the position of the two pankratiasts does not correspond to any known move of that form of wrestling. It may also be noted that the intricate interrelation of the two figures corresponds, in general terms, to the interlocking limbs of child and goose in the better-known version of the theme.¹⁷

Herodas seems to have lived in Egypt, or at least to have been acquainted with it. The goose he mentions

¹⁵For Dionysos on a flower calyx, see Marabini Moevs 2005, fig. 7.8; for Harpokrates on a lotus blossom, see Marabini Moevs 2005, col. pl. 5; for Amon syncretism, see *LJMC* 4, 443 (supra n. 14). Cf., e.g., no. 127b for a terracotta figurine of Harpokrates seated with a goose on his leg, and no. 129 for Harpokrates seated with a bird under his right arm.

¹⁶For this interpretation of the hieroglyphic symbolism of the duck, see Wilkinson (1992, 95), who adds that “the heads of ducks which often adorn the legs of seats and footstools are perhaps intended to show the suppression of the spirits symbolized by these creatures.” More pertinent comments occur in the context of fishing and fowling scenes in 18th-Dynasty tombs (Robins 1990, 49–50), where Spell 62 of the Coffin Texts is cited. In it, Horus addresses the dead Osiris promising to ensure the availability of waterfowl in great abundance, to be killed by his throwstick: “The wild life of the marshes represents the forces of chaos, so that by bringing down the birds with his throwstick, the king and the deceased overcome these forces and reestablish order.” I owe both these references to my colleague Mehmet-Ali Ataç.

¹⁷Kyrieleis (1973, esp. 141–45) has suggested that all the bronze statuettes ultimately derive from a possible original monument at large scale, symbolizing Ptolemy III Euergetes as Hermes and commemorating his victory after the Third Syrian War of 242/1 B.C.E. The two small bronze groups that he identifies as Ptolemy V fighting Seth in the guise of Horus are those in Baltimore and Athens, and since the Epiphanes is there depicted with the Horus lock, they should date before his coronation in 197 B.C.E. Kyrieleis (1973, 144) states that a fundamental trait of Egyptian art during the Late Period consists in the use of prototypical, canonical forms for specific content. Thomas (1999) has discussed at length the

same bronze groups and has returned to the subject in her 2001 monograph on representations of Hellenistic rulers with divine connotations (see esp. Thomas 2002, 39), where she suggests that the original monument may have instead commemorated Alexander the Great fighting a Barbarian. She does not entirely agree with Kyrieleis, who interprets a projection on the head of the Hermes/Ptolemy III version in Istanbul as a lotus leaf, thus stressing the equation Hermes–Horus–Thot. Because of the group's Hellenistic date, she reads the same emblem as a victory fillet comparable to that worn by the so-called Marathon Youth in Athens (cf. Thomas 2002, 51 n. 594). Thomas (2002, 43) does, however, accept the basic equation Ptolemy V/Harpokrates and even Triptolemos/Harpokrates, as indicated by coins. On the lack of correspondence between the pankration moves and the bronze compositions, which therefore must carry a metaphorical meaning, see Thomas 1999, 200. Kunze (2002, 155–65) discusses the Istanbul group as a corollary to the Boy–Goose topic (as his no. 2, with Excursus on 165–68, on the aesthetic aspect of the Hellenistic ideal of the king) but only as a further example of a momentary situation. The identification as Horus fighting Seth is mentioned only in n. 874, with some skepticism—a connection with Hermes is considered most plausible under Ptolemy II (Kunze 2002, 163 n. 874). I (Ridgway 2000, 266 n. 67) have analyzed the composition of the Boy with the Goose, Munich type, as a highly artificial, four-sided pyramidal structure resting on two “legs” per side and probably created first in marble or another medium unable to withstand the stresses possible in bronze. This specific formula may, therefore, be an adaptation or a development of later Hellenistic times, from an initial third-century concept.

is an Egyptian animal. The plaster mold and silver statuette come from Egypt. It seems plausible to suggest a positive Egyptian symbolism for a representation that must otherwise be read as a child's perhaps unconscious act of cruelty. As already mentioned, the theme of child with pet existed long before in Greek art, where it was appropriate for funerary and religious contexts; it may have been modified to acquire a rococo character only in Roman times, when it was considered suitable decoration for villa gardens and when it lost its initial underlying meaning. But it is now worth attempting to decode a cryptic "text" that might once have signified a divine victory over chaos, death, and the forces of evil, in its land of origin, at the threshold between the Greek and the Oriental worlds.

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