

# Sculptures of dogs licking their wounds in Roman period. A proposal for interpretation

## Abstract

The present work analyzes an iconographic model, relatively common during the Antiquity, used in various environments with divergent functions, such as the peristyles and gardens of private or residential spaces, tombs or buildings of a religious nature. This theme and morphological characteristics are repeated in an analogous way in very varied content and meaning places. This fact has led us to propose a series of reflections that help us to resolve the possibility that there was a general content, a symbolic value or a common original message in this typology that was adapted to different environments depending on the needs of each one. The figure of the dog licking a wound could go, in many cases, unnoticed or be interpreted as a piece of little relevance, with a pleasant and recreational nature, which gave a certain affable, funny and everyday meaning, recognizable and appreciated by a large part of Roman society. However, the preserved archaeological evidence of this model and the written sources lead us to think that it contained a transcendental and symbolic meaning that invited to meditation and turned the animal into a cathartic element.

**Keywords:** Ancient Rome, dogs' sculptures, symbolic sculptures, temples decoration, Roman ornamental figures

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## Introduction

Due to their large number, quality and decorative success, animal sculpture and, specially, representations of canids had great appreciation in Antiquity, including some of these pieces, among the works of the highest artistic level of classical art. The ambivalence that the figure of this animal had in the Greek and Roman civilizations meant that two considerations coexisted towards it; a positive one, related to man's faithful companion in life, guardian and protector of cities, buildings, homes and livestock, brave warrior, and optimal hunter; and another refusal, linked to an immodest character related, on many occasions, to death.<sup>1-5</sup>

There are many representations that testify the interest that these

works achieved as elements of decorative function in the peristyles and gardens of *domus* and *villae* (Figure 1A-1D). On the other hand, there are also numerous figures of canids that, following the tradition of Hellenic origin, appear linked to the funerary environment. In this case, they developed functions of an apotropaic, psychopomp or custodian type (Figure 1E).<sup>5</sup> The idea of the dog as an element of protection in the sphere of death was widespread in the ancient world and it is explained, in part, by the natural habit of this animal of scaring away creatures with bad intentions for their owners. The importance of the dog in the ritual sphere of the classical world is also known. In its conception as an impure animal, it was used as a sacrifice in numerous rituals whose main objective was to redeem the moral stains of those involved or of a particular group.<sup>6</sup>



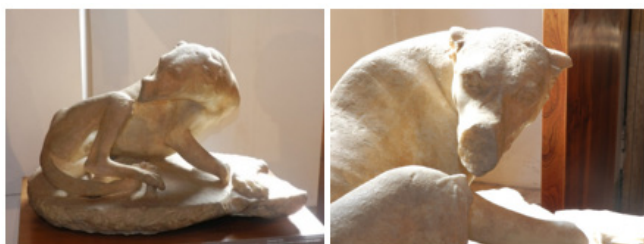
**Figure 1** A. Statue of a crouching dog, Naples Archaeological Museum. Roman imperial age. (Author photo). B. Crouching dog's statues. Naples Archaeological Museum. Inv. Numbers: 6216 and 6219. Roman imperial age (Author photo). C. Dog. Serpentine marble. Capitoline Museum (Rome). Inv. Number: 1110. From the *Horti Maecenatiani*. The sculpture was meant to decorate the entrance to a pavilion (Author photo). D. Base with sighthound dogs. Luni marble. Capitoline Museum (Rome). Inv. Number: 2785. From the *Horti Maecenatiani*. This base must have supported a decorative element, probably in bronze. Early Roman imperial period. (Author photo). E. Funerary statue of a dog. Pentelic marble. Found in Piraeus. The dog was probably a self-contained monument, symbolising the faithful guardian of the tomb. Athens Archaeological Museum. 375-350 B.C. (Photo Belén Vázquez).

Focusing now on the Roman world, of all the types of representations of the figure of the dog, we are interested, in this case, in analyzing the iconography of dogs that lick their wounds, since they constitute a relatively widespread type that come from spaces of different kinds. As we pointed out previously, this circumstance has led us to consider that there was a possible meaning that could fit and be understood in all these environments.<sup>7-8</sup>

## Materials

The sculpture of the *Cagna ferita* and its significance.

Among the wide set of representations that follow this iconographic model, the famous *Cagna ferita* stands out above all the others, currently preserved in the Giovanni Barraco Museum in Rome (Figure 2). The original of this work made of Pentelic marble and signed by the sculptor Sopatros, dates back to the end of the 4th century BC and has been attributed to Lisippo. It was a bronze piece that we know thanks to the testimony of Pliny the Elder (*NH*, XXXIV, 38), who claims to have seen it in the Juno *cella* of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus prior to its destruction by the Vitellians. It must be remembered that the temple burned down in the year 83 BC, so the location of this sculptural piece would have been made between the reconstruction of the building carried out by Quintus Lutatius Catullus in 69 BC and the second destruction of 69 AD.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2** *Cagna ferita*. Giovanni Barraco Museum (Rome). Roman copy signed by Sopatros of a Greek original by Lisippo. End of the 4th century BC. (Author photo).

This piece is described by Pliny with special fascination and enthusiasm, referring to it as a work of great artistic quality, value and naturalism, so much that it was publicly established that, if something happened to it, the custodians of the temple would respond with their own life. This sculptural model will be repeated later with a series of pieces that adopt the same or similar positions, always with the attitude of licking a wound. Among them, the example from Tuscania

## Discussion

### Proposal of meaning

We do not intend to state here, in a categorical way, the motivations that led to the creation of this iconographic model, nor to clearly declare a single meaning for this type of representations. It is not our intention to question the ornamental appeal of these pieces, nor their aesthetic quality, but it seems reasonable to ask ourselves about the meaning of this theme, apparently popular and pleasant, but present in as diverse spaces as the funerary, the religious or the domestic. Our attention is especially drawn to the presence of this model as a prop and part of the figurative decoration of the interior of a temple. Furthermore, it is not just any religious building, but one of the most famous and renowned in classical Rome, the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter.<sup>13-26</sup> In this area, the dimensions of the piece are remarkable. The change of the monumental scale in favor of a much smaller format is one of the features that stand out in this work, in particular.<sup>9</sup>

and preserved in the Vatican Museums is remembered.<sup>10</sup> It is a terracotta urn from the 2nd century BC that represents the theme of Adonis dying (Figure 3). At the front of the piece, there is a lying dog that turns its head slightly to lick a wound on its back, analogous to the piece in the Barraco Museum. Adonis is very frequently represented alongside his faithful hunting companions.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the dog represented on the urn could be licking one of the wounds inflicted in Adonis' last hunting adventure, or it could contain a metaphorical meaning with a transcendental message,<sup>12</sup> much more in line with a funerary-style representation.



**Figure 3** Urn from Tuscania. Dying Adonis. Vatican Museums. Second half of the 2nd century BC.

(Bianchi, R.; Torelli, M: 2000, f. 178).

Likewise, we must highlight a piece with identical characteristics from the Farnese collection and preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, which turns out to adopt the same position (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** Dog statue. Naples Archaeological Museum. Roman imperial age. (Author photo).

In terms of composition and in a generic way for this iconography, the wound becomes the true starring of the figure and the center of the piece. The animal's body twists and contorts with the sole motivation to alleviate the damage, heal and reduce the pain of the injury. On the other hand, we can observe that all these representations show us domestic animals, they are not stray or wild dogs, since they wear their identification collar and, therefore, they are creatures close to man, to whom they provide innumerable benefits, such as loyalty, fidelity, unconditional love and protection. Thus, it would be possible to think about the meaning of this representation based on the specimen that was located in the Juno's *cella* of the Capitoline temple. Following Paolo Moreno,<sup>9</sup> this sculpture could have been created as a tribute to a particularly appreciated animal, a faithful friend that the client intended to remember in this place. This author proposes that this piece could have been one of the oldest Lysippean models adapted to Roman decorative taste.

However, another series of reasons could be put forward that would justify the presence of the mentioned model in this space. One of them could be the curative or healing motivation, but, in this case, we do not refer to the physical sphere and the medical field, since this would find greater meaning and convenience in other types of sanctuaries, such as those dedicated to the figures of Apollo, Asklepios or Serapis.<sup>15</sup> In other order, the archetypal value of guardian and protector of spaces, especially temples,<sup>13</sup> could perhaps explain the location of the figure of the animal in Juno's *cella*. However, this sculpture does not adopt, at all, the position and attitude of a dog in the act of surveillance and guardianship, as we can see in other types of effigies (Figures 1C-1D), so it is not possible to relate it to this meaning. In our opinion, the animal here becomes a metaphor to tell us about the wounds of the soul. It is illuminating that the piece was placed in the space dedicated to the goddess Juno, almost constantly damaged and humiliated by the promiscuity of her husband Jupiter.<sup>11</sup> The goddess's desire for her husband's loyalty becomes a key point in understanding this work.

The dog, representative of fidelity above any other figure, tries to heal its pain, writhing and searching for the crack to relieve itself with its own saliva, to which healing properties have traditionally been attributed<sup>16</sup>. The piece could then evoke this feeling, the suffering of the faithful figure due to the amorous misdeeds of his *cella* neighbor. It is remembered that Pliny the Elder (*HN*, VIII, 146) referred to canids as the most faithful animals, highlighting their qualities and ability to recognize their master, respond to their name and their magnificent memory. In the case of the urn that represents the death of Adonis, in addition to the apotropaic connotations or ritual nuances linked to death that could exist in it, the presence of the iconographic model of the dog licking its wounds could be in line with the meaning that we have explained previously. In this case, the wound would evoke the recklessness and disobedience of the young hunter in the face of Venus's warnings not to catch certain beasts that, finally, the handsome young man avoids, resulting in his own death.

## Conclusion

If we observe the use of this theme diachronically, we notice its presence in very different locations, such as in the funerary field, in the case of the Tuscania urn; inside a temple, in the case of the Juno's *cella*, or in recreational environments such as gardens and pavilions, such as the piece kept by the Archaeological Museum of Naples.<sup>9</sup> The main question would be to find out why this iconography is used for spaces so diverse in functions, uses and meanings.

Perhaps the success achieved by this archetype, whose testimonies we have already spoken about, could be explained by its polysemic or polyvalent character. It is possible that this representation contained a general concept of a certain transcendental nature, related to the wounds of the soul in its broadest spectrum and that this deep character, but of a varied nature, could be transferred to different scenarios. In this way, the association of this idea would acquire a certain ductile and malleable meaning that would allow its identification with a wide range of situations, feelings and experiences lived by Roman society. Since it was the association of a generic concept, individuals could recognize it and identify, each one, with those desires, regrets or damages suffered during their lives. In this sense, we could understand that the animal would have a didactic and moral function, in the same way that it would happen later in the Medieval period and that we can trace in symbolic zoohistory and, very particularly, through the Bestiaries.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to highlight, in this sense, one of the main purposes of Claudio Eliano when writing his famous *History of Animals*, such

as showing that animals can become models of moral virtue for man.<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, Eliano highlights the dog above any other animal as an example of ethics and kindness, constantly highlighting its qualities in numerous episodes. Perhaps the dog, understood as a role model, is that affable and benevolent figure that points out to us the sorrows, represented by the wound, which himself tries to heal and dissipate, through the act of licking. Without dismissing other possible contents and valences, we consider that this kind of allegory, perhaps, found meaning in a kind of catharsis whose main objective would be to cleanse and purify the wounds inside individuals.

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## Conflicts of interests

Author declares there are no conflicts of interests.

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