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Baubo on the Pig: Travel across Disciplines

Abstract In the mid-nineteenth century, the Altes Museum in Berlin acquired a small terracotta statuette of a nude woman riding on a pig. Although it is likely from Ptolemaic Egypt, little can be said for certain about the object—which makes its name, “Baubo,” particularly curious. The object, after all, resembles a character by the same name in Goethe’s *Faust*. But was, in this case, Goethe inspired by antiquity, or rather antiquity inspired by Goethe? By untangling Baubo’s modern biography, this chapter critically illustrates the mutual influences between ancient studies, literature, and collecting in the nineteenth century.

Keywords Faust I Walpurgis Scene, Baubo, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, James Millingen, *Instituto di corrispondenza archeologica*

In the depot of the Altes Museum in Berlin is a small terracotta statuette featuring a nude woman riding sidesaddle on a pig. The object is likely from Hellenistic Egypt, although little can be said with certainty about its ancient and modern history. It is filed as TC4875 but known as “Baubo on the Pig,” named after a mythical Greek woman said to have exposed herself to the goddess Demeter. Although the object itself is stored away and largely forgotten, it continues to exercise an indirect influence in literary studies and archaeology. A similar pig-riding Baubo appears in Goethe’s *Faust I* and the statuette in Berlin has given name to a type of ancient figurines often found in excavations in Egypt. How these modern and ancient manifestations of Baubo relate to each other, however, is far from obvious. This brief essay will not attempt to uncover the ancient history of Baubo on the Pig—despite all efforts, this remains impossible—but rather examine the object’s modern afterlife and how modern interpretations have come to be ancient truths. Mapping the influences and associations of Baubo leads us to the entangled and mutually influential histories (► **Entangled Histories**) of creative and scholarly approaches to antiquity and confronts us with a possible instance not just of antiquity inspiring poetry but also, indeed, of modern poetry shaping antiquity.

Baubo on the Pig appears in the museum’s ledger in 1848 where it is registered as “Baubo.” As is common for objects acquired in the early to mid-nineteenth century, there is no information about the seller or provenance. The statuette is a mold-made terracotta figure in the form of a woman, nude save for a veil, riding a pig with her legs spread wide. Her right hand supports her lifted leg while her left hand holds an unidentified object with vertical slats. Similar squatting figures (with or without pigs) have been found in Egypt, where Greek craftsmen had introduced small-scale terracotta production in the fourth century BC. The statuette in Berlin likely comes from this tradition. The name associates the female figure with a myth first attested by late antique Church Fathers. Claiming to recount a pagan tradition, Clement of Alexandria, Arnobius, and Eusebius write that Baubo was one of the locals who welcomed Demeter at Eleusis as the goddess was searching for her abducted daughter Persephone. In her grief, Demeter refused all offers of food and drink until Baubo eventually managed to cheer her up by lifting her robes and exposing herself. Today, the museum’s catalogue expresses reservation about the pig rider’s identity. This is understandable, since the statuette does indeed have little to do with the myth. Baubo cannot reasonably be naked if she is also lifting her clothing, and although pigs did play a role in the cult at Eleusis there are no accounts about them being ridden. More than any ancient account, the Berlin Baubo recalls a modern literary counterpart, a witch mentioned in Goethe’s *Faust I*.

Towards the end of the first part of *Faust*, Faust and Mephistopheles travel to the Blocksberg to take part in the annual Walpurgis night fest, where witches gather to dance with the devil. As they are finding their way there, they hear the storm of witches gathering to fly to the mountain.



Figure 1: *Baubo on the Pig*. Provenance unknown. Terracotta; 11.8 × 8.5 × 3.5 cm. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, TC 4875.

WITCHES' CHORUS

The witches ride to Blocksberg's top,
The stubble is yellow, and green the crop.
They gather on the mountainside,
Sir Urian comes to preside.
We are riding over crag and brink,
The witches fart, the billy goat stinks.

VOICE

Old Baubo comes alone right now,
She is riding on a mother sow.

CHORUS

Give honor to whom honor's due!
Dame Baubo, lead our retinue!
A real swine and mother too,
The witches' crew will follow you.
(Goethe 1808: 3962–3967. Translated by Kaufmann, 1962)

Heading the witches' procession in Goethe is the venerable Dame Baubo, riding on a pig. The passage is curious for several reasons. Although Goethe often incorporates ancient figures in his work, *Faust I* is firmly set in a medieval Germanic context. Baubo is an exception, a VIP guest invited from ancient Greece to lead the party of German witches. Moreover, Goethe wrote the Walpurgis scene in the final years of the eighteenth century and the first part of *Faust* was published in 1808, about fifty years before the terracotta statuette appeared in Berlin. To bridge this time gap, we must acknowledge at least the possibility that, in this case, Goethe did not borrow from antiquity but, instead, shaped the interpretation of this ancient object through his fiction.

The relationship between the Berlin pig rider and Goethe's witch is further complicated by the fact that neither resembles ancient accounts of Baubo. This riddle, however, has not been much cause for concern in Goethe scholarship (the exception being Otto Kern who, like me, cannot offer a conclusive explanation of which Baubo inspired which; Kern 1897). Commentaries on *Faust* treat Baubo as one of the many Greek figures borrowed by Goethe. The explanations consistently stress her association with sexuality. It is explained, for example, that Baubo is, "a bawdy nurse and 'personified vulva'" (Schöne 1994, 349), a "Greek goddess of a phallic cult" (Swanwick 2013), or "a form of personification of the vulva as a symbol of fertility" (von Wilpert 1998). The notion that Baubo is a personified vulva, however, does not fit with the ancient accounts. Yet this characterization is derived, via a detour, from the Berlin pig rider and Goethe's text.

The Berlin statuette is first mentioned in an 1843 article by James Millingen. Millingen was a Dutch-British citizen who had settled in Italy

after a career in banking in France. In Italy, he began collecting and publishing antiquities, some of which he sold to museums in northern Europe. There is no mention of the statuette before this article and Millingen's argument for why it should be identified as Baubo gives the clear impression that this had not been suggested previously. This, together with the fact that Millingen was well connected with the Berlin museum establishment, makes it likely that Millingen not only sold the statuette to Berlin himself but also named it. Millingen's argument for why the statuette depicts Baubo is circular and relies on unsupported assumptions about the cult at Eleusis. His argument revolves around the unidentified object in the woman's left hand. Millingen identifies it as a comb, reminding the reader that the Greek word for comb, κτείς, like the corresponding Latin word *pectin*, was used as a euphemism for the female genitalia. The object, he suggests, is a symbolic vagina and, therefore, this statuette proves that such an object was displayed at the Eleusinian mysteries in reference to Baubo's meeting with Demeter. Together with the obscene posture, he concludes, the symbolic vulva identifies the figure as Baubo. It also—and this is where Millingen's argument becomes circular—reveals that Baubo was represented as a vulva at Eleusis. Being the seller of the object, Millingen would have had ulterior motives for holding the object up as a key to the rituals at Eleusis and his argument has been refuted at least since the early twentieth century (for example, by Perdrizet). More than any ancient narrative about Baubo, Millingen's Baubo recalls Goethe's *Faust*, a work that Millingen, who moved in the circles of German intellectuals surrounding Goethe himself, was most certainly familiar with.

The similarities between Goethe's and Millingen's Baubo and the holes in Millingen's argument make it likely that Millingen recognized Goethe's Baubo, rather than any ancient figure from the myths surrounding Eleusis, in the pig rider. Yet despite being incorrect, Millingen's article has had a lasting impact that continues to this day. The statuette in Berlin is still known as Baubo and, even more important, following the publication of it by Millingen, "Baubo" has become a label denoting a large group of ancient statuettes. These so-called "Baubos" are small figurines in the form of female figures squatting or spreading their legs and gesturing towards their vulva. They are often found in archaeological excavations and mostly date back to Ptolemaic Egypt (similar ones have also been discovered across the Mediterranean, above all in southern Italy). Their findspots are either unknown or too general to allow conclusive or general arguments about their function: living spaces, rubbish heaps, and occasionally graves. While there is no reason to believe that these objects were known as Baubo in antiquity, they continue to be denoted as Baubo figurines in excavation reports and museum catalogues. Yet since it is agreed that they do not depict a mythical figure named Baubo, the label is deployed as a conscious misnomer, often applied with reservations expressed in square brackets or prefaced by "so-called." In the case of these objects, "Baubo" is not a name

denoting a mythical figure, but a label identifying a certain iconographical type. This type, however, is not clearly defined. Similar Egyptian figures show squatting clothed females or naked males, but the label “Baubo” is reserved for those figures that gesture towards or otherwise are considered to draw attention to their vulva. The label identifies these figurines as a discrete type and has solidified the association between the name Baubo and the vulva. Thus, Millingen’s argument is repeated, even though his conclusion has been rejected.

Millingen’s name for the pig rider has become an iconographic label defined by the sexual gesture. The ubiquity of these “Baubo figurines” and their interpretation has been so influential that the name Baubo is often explained as a personification of the vulva rather than as a reference to an ancient mythical narrative. This is the ancient Baubo described in commentaries to Goethe’s *Faust*, but it now becomes clear that Goethe, in fact, helped fabricate the ancient tradition that the commentaries uncritically infer he borrowed from. While the commentaries assume a linear relation of influence, a past uncovered by ancient scholars and borrowed from by art, a closer look reveals a more complex relationship that is circular rather than linear. Goethe creates Baubo as much as he borrows her.

Goethe’s and Millingen’s roles in shaping the associations linked to the name Baubo have been largely forgotten. This is in part because their contributions are not considered scholarship: Goethe’s use of Baubo is fictional and Millingen’s misidentification is attributed to him being a “mere” collector and autodidact. Their work does not fit into a narrative of increased understanding of the past. However, as this brief outline of Baubo’s modern history shows, the interdependencies between investigating and shaping the past are rarely linear. This was especially true in the early nineteenth century, when academic fields as we know them today were still taking shape and the methods of, and rationales for, knowing the ancient past were being negotiated between art and scholarship. This symbiotic relationship was reflected in the first international archaeological society, the *Instituto di corrispondenza archeologica* in Rome, of which Millingen was one of the founding members and Goethe an honorary member. The institute would develop into the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), but at its inception it included artists and collectors alongside renowned philologists and archaeologists such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Eduard Gerhard.

Today, the *instituto’s* efforts to bring together scholarly and creative approaches to antiquity might be labeled cross-disciplinary, but for the members of the early institute, understanding ancient culture was inherently a creative endeavor. To the generations of Goethe and Millingen, the objective of studying the past was to shape the present and future culture. This necessarily involved not just objective knowledge of antiquity, but also a creative shaping of it. The Berlin research group *Transformationen der Antike* (SFB 644) has coined the term Allelopoiesis (▶**Allelopoiesis**) to describe the process by which modernity and antiquity define each other.

For Goethe, and to some extent also for Millingen, the active process of selecting and shaping the ancient referent was seen as inherent to the engagement with the ancient past. Baubo on the Pig stands in the contact zone (► **Expanded Contact Zone**) between various disciplines as we understand them today and tracing the object's history takes us back to their intertwined and interdependent histories.

Figure

Fig. 1: © Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Photo: Johannes Laurentius.

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