

THE GREEK EPITAPH OF SABINOS, WITH SELEUCID DATE

EL EPITAFIO GRIEGO DE SABINO, CON DATACIÓN SELÉUCIDA

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RESUMEN

En estas páginas interpretamos un monumento funerario inédito, muy probablemente de Seleucia del Éufrates (Zeugma), que circula desde hace décadas en el mercado del arte anticuario. Presenta la particularidad de estar fechado por el calendario Seléucida. Proponemos que el epitafio del joven Sabino se data en el mes de febrero del año 39 de nuestra Era.

Palabras clave: Retrato funerario. Epitafio. *Sabinos* / *Sabinus*. Seleucia (Zeugma). Era Seléucida.

ABSTRACT

In these pages I study an unpublished funerary monument, most likely from Seleucia on the Euphrates (Zeugma), which has been circulating for decades in the antiquarian art market. It has the particularity of being dated by the Seleucid calendar. We propose that the epitaph of the young Sabinus is dated to the month of February of the year 39 of our Era.

Keywords: Funerary portrait. Epitaph. *Sabinos* / *Sabinus*. Seleucia (Zeugma). Seleucid Era.

THE MONUMENT

This is a Roman funerary monument, made of very porous limestone, which is soft and easy to work with. The state of conservation is generally good, except on the right side of the deceased's face, where corrosion has taken effect on the stone to the point of disfiguring it a little.

The measurements are 60 x 45 x 15 cm

In June 2019 the monument has been in the Ifergán Antiquarian Gallery, in Málaga city. From its public database we took the picture². Previously it belonged to the private collection of Mr. Roy Hofheinz (1912-1982),³ in Texas, USA, who had acquired it around the 1970s. More recently, already circulating in the legal antiquities market, the photo was published in the catalogue of Bonhams Antiquities, London, auction 21968 dated October 2, 2014, p. 64, no 69, also in the public domain⁴.

The monument shows us the portrait of the deceased, and below it the epitaph with his name, to which we will pay attention shortly.

The portrait is in a vaulted niche. Everything is in one piece. The sculpture is achieved by roughening the stone to give shape to the human figure. The size is more delicate on the face than on the dresses. It is a young man, with a serious and calm countenance, who looks straight ahead. The eyes retain traces of paint. The nose is somewhat prominent, worn at the tip. The mouth is perfectly outlined, as are the cheekbones, eyelids and eyebrows. Only the shape of the boy's left ear is visible; The right side of the character, as we said, shows clear deterioration due to corrosion of the stone. The wear and tear also affect, although with less damage, the hairstyle: the short hair that falls towards the middle of the forehead, all worked with a burin in equidistant vertical lines that reflect a complex, somewhat effeminate hairstyle.

¹ Consolidated Research Group Res Publica et Res Sacra (GI-19 UNED).

² <http://ifergangallery.com/obra/estela-funeraria-romana-de-piedra-caliza-200-d-c-2/>

³ Lawyer, judge, politician, sports lover (McComb, 2008: 91) and collector of modern and antique works of art that he gathered in Suckster House, a luxurious Victorian-style house built around 1894-1896.

⁴ https://issuu.com/archaeologymatters/docs/bonhams__21968_antiquities__02.10.2



Fig. 1. Funerary monument of Sabinos.

The work of the clothes is not very meticulous; it features the upper part of the Roman toga. The folds are somewhat coarse. The abundance of clothing prevents the arms from being signified. The character does not wear any kind of personal adornment, which clears up the initial doubt that it was a woman.

The sides and back are not worked by the sculptor. This makes sense because the monument is intended to be seen only from the front, attached to a wall, as are the funerary portraits found in other Syrian cities, such as the monuments from the Valley of the Tombs of Palmyra⁵ or those from Seleucia on the Euphrates (Zeugma). Rarely do funerary portraits from Palmyra appear in vaulted niches. The sculpture of this tomb, the typology – bas-relief in niche – is the majority form in the funerary monuments of Seleucia (Skupinska-Løvset, 1987 and 1999), as well as the writing, very similar to many of the epitaphs of the Roman period, written in Greek, found in Seleucia. In its necropolis, all the characters represented in the tombs appear dressed in toga, as a way of affirming their adopted cultural identity, the Roman one⁶.

⁵ It has been calculated that several thousand funerary portraits have come out of the necropolises of Palmyra (About these: Gawlikowski, 1970; Sadurska, 1975 and 1982; Stierlin, 1987: 158-164; Sadurska and Bounni, 1994; Kropp and Raja, 2014; Raja, 2017). A European project (*The Palmyra Portrait Project*) now aims to catalogue all Palmyrene funerary portraits around the world, led by Andreas J. M. Kropp and Rubina Raja, and funded by the Ny Carlsberg Foundation, Copenhagen (Project information in Kropp/Raja: 2014). Palmyrene portraits are practically mostly funerary, either round or in relief, inscribed in the local language (Gawlikowski, 1974: 90-10, repertoire of epitaphs in the Palmyrene language).

⁶ Klaver, 2019: 223: "In general, people in the Roman Empire are portrayed in a wide range of dress on funerary monuments, either dress of the new and/or dominant culture, or local/regional dress, or hybrid dress showing influences of several cultures... This new dress type did not involve the adoption of Roman dress elements; it was a solely native ensemble but created under Roman rule". In addition to funerary portraits (where all the characters appear in toga), this clothing is exhibited by all the male characters in round sculptures. *Vid.* Wagner 1976: Taf. 57-58 (Nr. 155-163). About the sculptures of gods, mythological characters, and important people of Palmyra, Wielgocz-Rondolino, 2023: 523-562. Absence of funerary portraits of ordinary people. The same, for Seleukia, see Raja, 2019: 95-110, and Koçak, 2023: 566-570). In general, on the art of portraiture in Roman Syria, Blömer and Raja (2019: 7-26). Rumscheid (2019: 65-83) has paid particular attention to the dress of the women in the funerary portraits of Seleucia, which show the same artistic and workshop style as the epitaph of Sabinus that we are studying. See, Rumscheid, 2019: 67 (fig. 5.6), 68 (fig. 5.7), 70 (fig. 5.10), 71 (fig. 5.12), 72 (fig. 5.13, 5.14, 5.15). These examples reinforce the hypothesis that it came from Seleukia. See also, Skupinska-Løvset, 1987:101-29. In none of these studies, attention is paid to the epigraphic texts of the epitaphs.



Fig. 2. Seleucia. Tomb of *Heraeis*. 57 x 44 cm
Adana Archaeological Museum.



Fig. 3. Seleucia. Tomb of *Sosipatra* 60 x 46 cm
Adana Archaeological Museum.



Fig. 4. Seleucia. Tomb of an anonymous woman, daughter of
Marcus. 57 x 48 cm. Archaeological Museum of Adana.



Fig. 5. Seleucia. Tomb of *Flavius Telegonus*, his
wife and son. 108 x 54 cm.
Archaeological Museum of Adana.

This city, Σέλεύκεια πρὸς τῇ Εὐφράτῃ, was founded by Alexander the Great himself in 305, is in northern Syria, near the border of Commagene⁷. She is also called Zeugma⁸. To the west, about 200 km away, is the Mediterranean (see map). It is a city oriented more to the Greek world than to that of inland Syria. A few years after the date of our epitaph, in 41, Seleucia was the scene of a massacre of 5,000 Jews who had taken refuge there from Babylon, as Flavius Josephus indicates (Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII. 9, § 9). In the epitaph we have studied, noth-

⁷ Str. XIV 2, 29 and XVI, 1, 22-23; XVI, 2, 3. About Seleukia, Wagner, 1976: passim; and Invernizzi, 2010: 366-369.

⁸ Str. XIV, 2, 29; Ptol. *Geog.* V, 4, 10; Pausan. X, 29, 4; Cass. Dio XL, 17, 3; XLIX, 19, 3.

ing suggests that we are dealing with a Jewish man⁹. Seleucia's funerary portraits are of lower artistic quality than those of Palmyra, and are more homogeneous in their style, the result of a local workshop with a long history and profuse production. A small photographic selection allows us to compare some tombs of Seleucia with the relief we are studying.

—Tomb of *Heraeis*, with inscription Ἡραεῖς ἄλυπε χῆρε. (**Fig. 2**)¹⁰.

—Tomb of *Sosipatra*, with inscription Σωσίπατρα ἄλυπε χα[ί]ρε. (**Fig. 3**)¹¹.

—Tomb of Marcus' daughter, with inscription [...]α Μάρκου [ἄλυπε χαίρε]. (**Fig. 4**)¹².

—Tomb of the daughter of *Flavius Telegonus*, *librarius*, and her family, with inscription Φλά(υιος) Τηλέγονος λείβραρις χαίρε. (**Fig. 5**)¹³.

Note in this last tomb the lower register, with the portrait of the boy, with a Roman toga held with fibula, and a very careful hairstyle. The portrait, like that of the parents, is naturalistic. In this workshop or workshops the sculptor tries to make real, exact portraits. Except for the image in Fig. 5, the others (Figs. 2-4) the tombs are of bad art, an aspect aggravated by the deterioration of the stone¹⁴. Sabino's tomb is of finer carving. Common to all these examples is the brevity of the epigraphic texts, the repetition of topical formulas, as well as a totally careless of *ordinatio*, with inharmonious lines of writing, with a tendency to accumulate words in the right margin due to a calculation defect. The parallels established with the tombs of Seleucia on the Euphrates (Zeugma),¹⁵ in their form and the arrangement of the text, allow the tomb of Sabinus to be assigned to a Roman necropolis in this Syrian city. In the Archaeological Museum of the current Turkish city of Gazantep it houses several epitaphs with portraits of the same style; and the visitor can also visit the magnificent Zeugma Mosaic Museum in the city. It is true that the funerary monuments mentioned are sculpted on a different type of stone from the monument of Sabinos, in whitish limestone. But in the ascription -for my part- of Sabino's epitaph to a workshop in Zeugma-Selukia, the artistic style and the epigraphic form prevail over the type of stone, since it cannot be ruled out that the same epigraphic workshop worked with blocks from different quarries. Obviously, and in the absence of better information about the origin of the monument, Zeugma's proposal is provisional.

THE INSCRIPTION

It is presented in three lines of writing. No lyrics are missing. The incision of the lettering is very deep (facilitated by the porosity of the stone, which is soft). The pencil calculated the text to be inscribed on two lines, but the calculation failed, and he had to bring the final two letters of ΠΕΡΙΤΙ/ΟC to a forced line 3. The calculation error in the drawing of this line comes from not having aligned the first letter of ΧΑΙΡΕ, chi, with the first letter of the upper line. The text does not present clear punctures. The high point at the end of the first line looks more like a defect in the stone. In the second line, after the figure ΓΥ, there are two colons that do seem to be the work of a drill bit. In the absence of interpunctuations, the words present intentional separation.

⁹ If this had been the case, the date of the tomb would have varied a few months with respect to the date we have established, since in Babylon the Seleucid year begins in April (on April 2-3, coinciding with the first day of Nissan. *Vid.* Samuel, 1972:142), and not in October as in the rest of the kingdom.

¹⁰ Wagner, 1976: n° 108; Klaver 2019: 367-368.

¹¹ Wagner, 1976: n° 110; Klaver 2019: 388.

¹² Skupinska-Løvset, 1987: fig. 27; Klaver, 2019: 389.

¹³ Wagner, 1976: Taf. 50 Nr. 127; Klaver, 2019: 408-409.

¹⁴ More images of Zeugma funerary stelae, with niche and portrait, in Wagner, 1976: Taf. 43 (Nos. 86, 87), Taf. 44 (Nos. 101), Taf. 45 (Nos. 105, 108, 109, 110), Taf. 46 (Nos. 104, 106, 114, 115), Taf. 47 (Nos. 111, 113, 116), Taf. 48 (No. 121), Taf. 49 (Nos. 122-125), Taf. 50 (Nos. 127, 128, 131), Taf. 51 (No. 129).

¹⁵ On the various types of funerary stelae in Zeugma, see Wagner, 1976: pp. 156-160 and fig. 19 (catalogue drawn of the edicules).

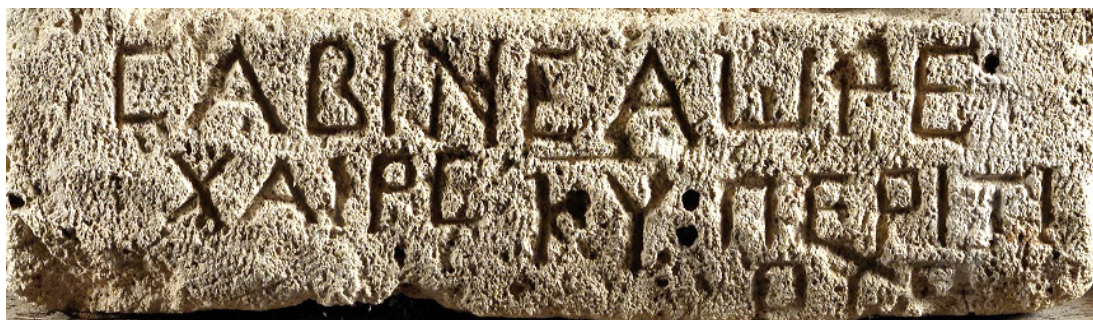


Fig. 6. Inscription. Detail of the tomb of Sabinus (vid. Fig. 1).

Text that I interpret as follows:

CABINE AΩPE	Σαβῖνε ἄωρε
XAIPE ΓΥ ΠΕΡΙΤΙ	χαῖρε γυ΄ Περίτι-
ΟΥΧΕ[Θ?]	ος [θ' ?]

Translation:

**Sabinus, died prematurely,
goodbye! (year) 350 (month of) Peritios [(day) 9?]**

Σαβῖνε is vocative singular¹⁶ of the masculine personal name Σαβῖνος, the deceased to whom the monument is dedicated. The fact that only his name is mentioned (without *praenomen* or *cognomen*) seems to indicate that he may have been an adolescent¹⁷, or simply due to local epigraphic custom (see texts and images in Figs. 2-5). The simple text of the epitaph does not allude to any member of his family, who usually appear as dedicators of the tomb, for example parents or husband. This is not the case.

This personal name is also inscribed in a sepulchral epigram inscribed on two couplets: a *tabula ansata* found in Batanea, Syria¹⁸: Ὕπνος ἔχει σε, μάκαρ, πολυήρατε, διε Σαβῖνε, καὶ ζῆς ὡς ἦρας, καὶ νέκυς οὐκ ἐγένου· εὐδεις δ' ὡς ἔτι ζῶν ὑπὸ δένδροισι σοῖς ἐνὶ τύμβοις· ψυχαὶ γὰρ ζῶσιν τῶν ἄγαν εὐσεβέων. («In the power of sleep you are, blessed, divine, and dearly beloved Sabinus. As if you were a hero you live, and you have by no means died. Under the trees you sleep in your grave as if you were still alive. For the souls of the godly live eternally»).

It is a personal name of Latin-Sabine origin, common in Italian Latin epigraphy, and rare in Greek, which alone adds little about the origin of the deceased. This name is not documented in the Greek funerary inscriptions of Zeugma from the 1st-3rd centuries¹⁹.

The following words (ἄωρε χαῖρε) form a very frequent tandem in epitaphs from the Roman period in the province of Syria, especially in tombs of Seleucia, as recently evidenced by the study by Sanne F. Klaver²⁰.

The word ἄωρε is an adverb formed from ἄωρος -ον (“what happens before time, in haste”), so that it can be translated as “unexpectedly”, “surprisingly”, “prematurely”, “before maturity”, etc., which simply indicates that the deceased died young, as the face of the portrait also shows. Age is not indicated, as is customary.

16 Cf. Luc. Apol. 1.1: Πάλλαι σκοπῶ πρὸς ἑμμαντόν, ὦ καλὲ Σαβῖνε, ἀτινά σοι εἰκὸς ἐπελθεῖν εἰπεῖν ἀναγνόντι ἡμῶν... (“I have long been wondering, oh my dear Sabinus, what it probably occurred to you...”).

17 Klaver, 2019: 225: “Regarding the phrase ἄωρε χαῖρε, two interpretations are possible. According to some scholars, the expression ἄωρε (untimely; before his/her time) was used when the deceased was young. However, Yon, 2003, p. 154, argues that the phrase ἄωρε was not necessarily used for people who died as a young child”.

18 Cougny 1890: n° 554; cf. SEG 41, n° 1596 (Pleket & Stroud). Translation by Del Barrio Vega, 1992: 359, n° 514.

19 In Wagner’s epigraphic catalogue, 1976: 169-171 (list of names), and 173-273 (catalogue of 169 texts). A Latin inscription from Zeugma names an *Aurelius Sabinus*. ILS 7207 = Yon, 2015: 14 n. 15): *Aur(elio) Maximo civis / Surus ex regione / Zeugma vico Hennia / an(norum) XXV Aur(elius) Bassus Barath(a)e / vivus fecit frat(ri) et Aur(elio) Sabino / civis Surus ex regione Zeugma / vico*.

20 Klaver, 2019: pp. 224: “In general, the funerary inscriptions from Seleucia give the name of the deceased followed by a standard formula such as ἄλυπε χερε, ἄλυπε χαῖρε (who caused no grief, farewell), or ἄωρε χαῖρε (who died untimely, farewell). Most funerary inscriptions are written in Greek and Greek names are dominant”.

DATATION

Year. In a first analysis we thought that the figures ΓΥ that appear later (they are undoubtedly numerals, since the horizontal line above these letters is perfectly perceived, thus turning them into a number) could correspond to age. But it is meaningless when the number indicated is 350 (τρειςπεντήκοντα), which can only correspond to one year, 350, and – in Roman times and in an inscription from the East – only to one calendar, the Seleucid. Many Greek epitaphs from Syria, from Roman times, are thus dated to the Seleucid Era for monuments produced in the province itself, which even in Roman imperial times was still governed by this Hellenistic calendar for internal and local affairs. The Seleucid Era or Macedonia begins in 312 B.C. (Bickerman, 1968: 146-153; Samuel, 1972: 139-145; Schürer, 1985: 767-770), so that the date of the epitaph would have to be taken to 38 AD.

Month. However, the month of death is also indicated, *Expert Witnesses*. This is the fifth month of the Macedonian year (Reinach, 1885: 493). The Seleucid year begins on October 1, so that, knowing that Sabinus died in the fifth month, the date must be harmonized and brought to the month of February of the year 39 of the Common Era.

Day. In the third line, after OC, it appears, barely sketched, or rather deteriorated by its position on the edge of the base, a single letter, on which there is a thin but perceptible horizontal stroke, which indicates that, once again, we are dealing with a figure, which placed here, after the month, can only indicate the day of death of the deceased. It is a single letter, so it can only be one of the first ten digits of the Greek alphabet, a day between 1 and 10. The problem lies in knowing which letter (number) it is, since the upper stroke of this sign is angular and has two vertical lines, very short, but visible, which limit the possibilities of identifying this letter. Hypothetically, I propose that it is a Θ with the upper angles excessively angled, as can also be seen in the *omicron* that is, shortly before, on the same line, as well as in the upper strokes of the letters *rho*. Follow the *zeta* as a figure equals 9. This is the proposal we have made above in the reconstruction and general interpretation of the epigraph.

Therefore, Sabinus died on an imprecise day (perhaps the 9th) of the month of February in the year 39 A.D. (Julian calendar), which is the date of the monument. In that year, Gaius Iulius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, called Caligula, ruled in Rome.



Location of Zeugma (Seleucia on the Euphrates) on the map of Syria and the East

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