Own and be owned

Archaeological approaches to the concept of possession

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Contents

Preface vii
Alison Klevnäs & Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson

Introduction: the nature of belongings 1
Alison Klevnäs

Things of quality: possessions and animated objects in the Scandinavian Viking Age 23
Nanouschka Myrberg Burström

The skin I live in. The materiality of body imagery 49
Fredrik Fahlander

To own and be owned: the warriors of Birka’s garrison 73
Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson

The propriety of decorative luxury possessions. Reflections on the occurrence of kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers in Roman visual culture 93
Julia Habetzeder

Hijacked by the Bronze Age discourse? A discussion of rock art and ownership 109
Per Nilsson

Capturing images: knowledge, ownership and the materiality of cave art 133
Magnus Ljunge

Give and take: grave goods and grave robbery in the early middle ages 157
Alison Klevnäs

Possession through deposition: the 'ownership' of coins in contemporary British coin-trees 189
Ceri Houlbrook

Possession, property or ownership? 215
Chris Gosden

About the authors 222
In a well-known passage of his *De architectura* (written during the last decades BC) Vitruvius describes the Roman domus (house) as a self-evident part of the public image of its owner. To Vitruvius, the house is not a private sphere, at least not in the sense we like to think of our homes today. Instead, Vitruvius emphasizes that the domus serves as the backdrop for at least a part of its owner’s public life, and as such its layout and appearance has a bearing on the owner’s public persona (Vitr. *De arch.* 6.5.1-3; Granger 1934:36–39). But it was not just the appearance of the house itself that was important in this regard: there was a similar relationship between the home-owner and the possessions that he chose to put on display in his house.

During the Late Republican era (133–31 BC), many members of the Roman elite set out to acquire art collections to be displayed in their homes. This paper shows that the decorative luxury possessions acquired had a power and a capacity of their own. The owner’s taste and personality were established through the acquisition and display of these collections.

To illustrate this point, two motifs are discussed: kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers (fig. 1). Within the Roman cultural context, these motifs are primarily represented on decorative luxury items. The paper aims to explore the occurrence of the motifs and to explain why pyrrhic dancers were depicted less often than kalathiskos dancers (fig. 2), and to relate this circumstance to the agency of decorative luxury possessions within the Roman cultural context.
Initially, the historical context within which these two motifs were introduced into Roman visual culture is presented. Next we turn to the media on which the two motifs are represented, i.e. marble, terracotta, bronze, etc., before considering the written sources, which show that a Roman art collector had to be concerned with the propriety of the motifs that were depicted in the artworks he (and perhaps at times she) put on display. Here we discover the Achilles’ heel of the pyrrhic dancers as a motif. In ancient Rome, dance was considered an effeminate practice, a practice to be avoided by every respectable man. With this in mind, it will be argued that displaying works of art representing dancing men was deemed inappropriate within the Roman cultural context.
Introducing the dancers

As mentioned above, this article deals with the occurrence of kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers within the Roman cultural sphere. In the following, depictions of these motifs are classified as Roman if they were made during the last century BC or later, when Rome was a major power in the Mediterranean world. In the cases where the depictions made during these centuries have a known provenance, they were found on the Italian peninsula.

As far as we can tell, Romans seem to have been very fond of kalathiskos dancers as a motif. From c. 100 BC–AD 200 these female dancers were depicted on a wide variety of objects, from opulent marble candelabra to mass-produced pottery (Habetzeder 2012: App. 1, Tables 1 and 2). The dancers wear short chitons, which flutter out around the figures, signalling their movement (figs. 1 & 5). They usually stand on their toes and hold their arms in various distinctive positions. Above all, they may be identified by their distinctive basket-shaped headdresses. The epithet ‘kalathiskos’ derives from the Greek word καλαθισκός, meaning ‘small basket’. Dances performed by females wearing the characteristic basket-shaped headdresses seem to have been tied to the cults of several divinities, for instance...

A male equivalent to the motif of kalathiskos dancers is the motif of pyrrhic dancers, known within the Roman cultural sphere through depictions made c. 100 BC–AD 100. These male dancers are depicted naked, save for shields, swords, and helmets (Figs. 1, 3, & 4). Like the kalathiskos dancers, the pyrrhic dancers are generally depicted in movement, standing on their toes. Both the kalathiskos dance and the pyrrhica are known to have been performed during antiquity, but the pyrrhica is much better attested than the kalathiskos dance (Ceccarelli 1998). It is somewhat surprising, then, that pyrrhic dancers are comparatively rare in Roman visual culture: there are only seven items depicting such dancers (Habetzeder 2012: App. 2, Table 5).

The captive victors

Let us turn to the historical context within which the kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers were introduced into Roman visual culture. From the late third century BC and on, the higher social strata within Roman society became increasingly influenced by Greek and Hellenistic culture. The period saw the birth of Roman literature, modelled on its Greek equivalent. At the same time, works of art came to be considered systematically as war booty by the Romans (Galsterer 1994:858–859). Following successful military exploits in the East, great quantities of Greek works of art were brought back to Rome. Initially, these mainly ended up on public display. Gradually, however, more and more of the imported artworks ended up in private collections. By the last century BC, the Roman elites had set out to lavishly decorate their domestic spaces with spectacular Classical (i.e. made in Greece c. 480–330 BC) and classicizing (i.e. imitating Classical Greek) works of art. By then, the visual culture of Classical Greece had become a token of refined taste (Galsterer 1994:860–861; Hölscher 1994:881 and 884). The Roman poet Horace (65–8 BC) sums up the Roman infatuation with Greek culture in the following, often quoted, sentence: ‘Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium’ (Hor. Epist. 2.1.156; Rushton Fairclough 1929:409).
Fig. 3. Two pyrrhic dancers flank a dancing satyr on a fragment of a Roman marble krater. The fragment is kept in the Galleria dei Candelabri of the Musei Vaticani (inv. V33, 2749). (Illustration by author [after Weege 1926: Fig. 65].)

Fig. 4. To illustrate the close relationship between one of the two Roman marble plaques depicting pyrrhic dancers and the Attic Late Classical base of Xenokles, the fragments of the latter (in grey) have been superimposed on the former (in white), maintaining the correct proportions between the two. The Roman marble plaque is kept in the Sala delle Muse of the Museo Pio Clementino in the Vatican (inv. 321). The two fragments of the Attic base belong to the Acropolis Museum in Athens (inv. 6465 and 6465a). (Illustration by author [after Walter 1923: cat. no. 402; Lippold 1936: cat. no. 489, pl. 28; Kosmopoulou 2002: cat. no. 33, fig. 52].)
It is within this context that kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers were introduced as motifs in Roman visual culture. And both of these motifs can be related to Greek art of the Classical era.

The Roman author Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24–79) mentions a sculpture representing Laconian women dancing (*saltantes Lacaenae*), a masterpiece made by the Greek sculptor Kallimachos, during the fifth-century BC (Plin. *HN*. 34.19.92). Modern scholarship has interpreted this Classical masterpiece – renowned enough in Rome to be mentioned by Pliny – as depicting kalathiskos dancers. It is impossible to reconstruct Kallimachos’ masterpiece with any degree of certainty (Cain 1985:135). Nevertheless, we do know that there was a tradition of depicting kalathiskos dancers within the Greek cultural sphere during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, as some of these depictions are preserved. The most renowned example is the so-called ‘Column of Dancers’, a large votive column set up in Delphi, probably during the third century BC. A large sculpture representing three kalathiskos dancers, now in the local museum, once crowned

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*Fig. 5. A fragmentary terracotta plaque (a so-called Campana-plaque) depicting a pair of kalathiskos dancers flanking a palladium (a statue of Athena/Minerva). The plaque belongs to the collections of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin (inv. 8217 68). (Illustration by author [after Rohden 1911: Pl. 18].)*

Turning to the pyrrhic dancers, it should again be noted that the pyrrhica is a well-attested form of ancient dance (Ceccarelli 1998). In Classical Athens, competitions in pyrrhic dance were held, and in this city three Late Classical (403–323 BC) bases have been found commemorating victories in this form of dancing. These three bases depict troupes of pyrrhic dancers (Agelidis 2009:55–64 and cat. nos. 102, 103, and 105). The iconography of these dancers is closely related to the depictions of pyrrhic dancers created in Roman times. In fact, one of the later Roman depictions of pyrrhic dancers is believed to be a 1:1 copy of one of these Late Classical Attic votive bases, the so-called Base of Xenokles (Habetzeder 2012:23–27. fig. 4).

The point here is that both kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers were classicizing motifs, and as such, they were likely to appeal to the Roman elites who set out to acquire extravagant pieces of decorative art during the last century BC. As we have seen, Classical Greek art had by now been established as a token of refined taste among the Roman elites. Aside from the use of classicizing motifs, these Roman elites also showed a great interest in a certain material, out of which these motifs could be carved: marble.

Material matters

On the Italian peninsula, there was no indigenous tradition of producing decorative items made of marble before the Late Republican era. By contrast, Greece and the Hellenistic East had seen a long tradition of sculpting in marble. The last centuries BC saw an influx of decorative marble items to Rome and its environs. The items included plaques, candelabra, kraters (wide-mouthed vessels), and oscilla (ornamental marble discs displayed hanging from chains), all decorated with classicizing motifs – among them kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers (figs. 1, 3, & 4). These items were dispersed among the large country estates of wealthy Romans (Cain 1985:9–12).

As the Roman social elite acquired its taste for this kind of decorative marble items, the demand for such works of art were satisfied in different ways. Some workshops in Athens appear to have produced decorative marble items intended primarily for export to Rome (Fittschen 2008:327–329). At the same time, both stonemasons and
marble were brought to Rome, and thus a local production of decorative marble items was gradually established (Cain 1985:9–12 and 148; Grassinger 1991:140–144).

With the decorative marble items that were brought to Rome during the last centuries BC came a repertoire of classicizing motifs. Thus, the two motifs discussed in this article were introduced within Roman visual culture on decorative items made of marble in the Greek cultural sphere and imported to Rome.

Both kalathiskos dancers and pyrrhic dancers are represented on items made of marble (fig. 2). Kalathiskos dancers are depicted on fifteen such items: six plaques, five candelabra (fig. 1), two oscilla, as well as on the breastplates of two marble cuirass statues (Habetzeder 2012: App. 1, Table 1). As mentioned above, Pyrrhic dancers can be found on seven items, and these are all made of marble: four kraters (figs. 1 and 3), two plaques (fig. 4), and one oscillum (Habetzeder 2012: App. 2, Table 5).

While pyrrhic dancers do not seem to have been depicted in other materials at all, kalathiskos dancers were soon depicted on a wide array of materials. Where terracotta is concerned, the kalathiskos dancers can be found on 19 plaques (fig. 5) and one amphora. These 20 terracotta items are counted in fig. 2 (Habetzeder 2012: App. 1, Table 1). But it should be noted that this table does not include the many pieces of terra sigillata pottery that depict kalathiskos dancers. Counting each individual shard of pottery that depicts a kalathiskos dancer would have been too great a task. Here it will have to suffice to say that no less than 14 different workshops are known to have produced terra sigillata vessels decorated with kalathiskos dancers (Habetzeder 2012: App. 1, Table 2). These female dancers are also depicted on ten engraved gemstones and six glass pastes (imitations of gemstones made of glass), as well as on two plaster reliefs. In one instance such dancing females are rendered in relief on the back of the cuirass of a cuirass statue made of bronze (Habetzeder 2012: App. 1, Table 1).

The kalathiskos dancers soon began to appear on a wide array of media, and some of these already had a long tradition of indigenous production on the Italian peninsula (fig. 2). For instance, the terracotta plaques (fig. 5) – so-called Campana plaques – can be traced back to the Etruscans (Borbein 1968:20–28). As it would seem, although
the motif was introduced on decorative items made of marble by foreign craftsmen, it did not take long before it had been adopted by indigenous craftsmen producing decorative items in other materials. One might go so far as to say the motif had a universal appeal and achieved a certain ubiquity in this period.

This was, however, not the case for the pyrrhic dancers. As noted above, the pyrrhic dancers are only known to have been depicted on items made of marble (fig. 2). This seems to indicate that this particular motif was never taken on board by local craftsmen working with other materials. How can this reluctance towards this particular motif be explained? Could it be that there was no demand for items depicting this particular motif? And if so, why not?

**Acquiring appropriate works of art**

The famous orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) was a wealthy patron of the arts, and through his letters we can get a rare glimpse of how a Roman art patron reasoned regarding his purchases. From Cicero’s correspondence with Titus Pomponius Atticus we learn that Cicero was eager to acquire sculptures for his house in Tusculum (Cic. *Att*. 1.1.5, 1.3.2, 1.4.3, 1.5.7, 1.6.2, 1.7.1, 1.8.2, 1.9.2, 1.10.3, 1.11.3). His friend Atticus lived in Athens and was asked to purchase sculptures on Cicero’s behalf (Marvin 1989:29–30). Thus, Cicero can be counted among the Romans who imported sculptures from Greece.

Cicero neither specifies which motifs he wants the sculptures to represent, nor asks for artworks produced by any particular artist or workshop. In fact, Cicero gives Atticus a rather free hand. But what he does emphasize, time and again, is that the sculptures acquired must be suitable for the location in which they are to be displayed (Cic. *Att*. 1.4.3, 1.5.7, 1.6.2, 1.8.2, 1.9.2, 1.10.3; Marvin 1989; Zimmer 1994:871–872).

Cicero was at this point acquiring sculptures for the two gymnasia (Latin: *palaestra*) in his villa in Tusculum, one referred to as the Lyceum, the other as the Academy. Originally, gymnasia were places where athletes trained, but by Cicero’s day the gymnasium had also become known as places where young men went to study philosophy. The Lyceum and the Academy were two gymnasia in Athens, renowned at this time because Aristotle (384–322 BC) had taught
in the first mentioned facility and Plato (427–347 BC) in the second. As Cicero had, in his youth, studied philosophy in Athens he knew both the Lyceum and the Academy. Following Hellenistic precedents, wealthy Romans often named parts of their gardens after Greek building types, and among these the gymnasia were particularly popular, due to their aristocratic and philosophical associations. It is therefore not surprising that Cicero refers to parts of his own gardens as a Lyceum and an Academy. Furthermore, Atticus, living in Athens, would have known which the models were for Cicero’s gardens (Marvin 1989:30–31).

In the letters between the two friends, we learn that Cicero has received a herm statue depicting the goddess Athena (the Roman Minerva), purchased and sent to Italy by Atticus. Cicero is very pleased with this sculpture, it is just what he had in mind for his garden (Cic. Att. 1.1.5, 1.4.3). Although he does not mention it specifically, one of the reasons why this sculpture was considered so suitable is most likely that, as both he and Atticus were well aware, there was a sanctuary dedicated to this goddess in the Academy in Athens, as she was one of the tutelary deities of that institution (Marvin 1989:31).

The items acquired had to bear motifs considered appropriate to the area in which they were to be displayed. This becomes even clearer in a letter written by Cicero to another friend of his, Marcus Fabius Gallus. Much like Atticus, Gallus had provided sculptures for Cicero’s palaestra, but in this case Cicero was not satisfied with the works of art he received:

‘For I often buy the sort of figures that would adorn a place in my palaestra, and make it look like the gymnasia. But a statue of Mars! What do I, the advocate of peace, want with that?’ (Cic. Fam. 7.23.2; Glynn Williams 1928:68–69).

Not only did Cicero find Mars, the god of war, an inappropriate motif for his palaestra, the motif was also rejected because it did not reflect Cicero’s personality. From the passage quoted above we can deduce that the artworks purchased should render motifs that were both suitable to the environment in which they were to be displayed and representative of their owner’s preferences and beliefs. As it would seem, a Roman collector could not be indifferent to which motifs he put on display. Knowing what was suitable in different contexts was clearly important. This can be illustrated by an anecdote, mentioned
by Vitruvius, regarding the people of Alabanda:

[T]he inhabitants were shrewd enough in politics, but they had the reputation of being stupid because of one not very great fault, inconsistency. In the gymnasium, the statues were all of politicians; in the public assembly, they were of quoit-throwers or runners or javelin-throwers. Thus the unsuitable disposition of the statues added a blemish to the city in public estimation. (Vitr. *De arch.* 7.5.6; Granger 1934:106–107)

Cicero’s letters and Vitruvius’ remark suggest that decorative luxury possessions had to display appropriate motifs that were a testimony of their owner’s good taste and sense of propriety, and that this was not something to be taken lightly. As pointed out in recent scholarship, the notion of propriety was of great significance within the Roman cultural context. Ellen Perry has argued that the concept of decorum set the ground rules for what could be depicted in Roman visual culture. She describes decorum as a principle that applied to most realms of public life. Decorum denoted that which was appropriate, as established by tradition. What was appropriate was determined by social consensus. Within Roman visual culture, a decorative depiction should always be appropriate, it should follow decorum (Perry 2005:28–49).

**Appropriate and inappropriate dancers**

Let us return to the motifs introduced initially. While depictions of kalathiskos dancers became rather common in Roman visual culture, the pyrrhic dancers were scarcely depicted. This is, I argue, a consequence of the concern described above regarding the propriety of motifs put on display. For reasons outlined below, kalathiskos dancers were considered an appropriate motif while pyrrhic dancers were not.

For Romans, dance was seen as an effeminate practice, unsuitable for men. This notion is expressed in the written sources. Here we can return to Cicero, who is perhaps the most insistent Roman critic of male dancing (Wille 1967:192–195). A well-known passage from Cicero’s *Pro L. Murena oratio* illustrates his attitude towards male dancing:
Cato calls Murena a dancer. Strong language from a forceful prosecution, if there is any truth in it; slanderous abuse, if it is false. A man of your stature, then, Marcus Cato, should not pick a piece of dirt from the street corner or from parasites’ invective or lightly abuse a consul of the Roman people in this way. You should look around for the other vices with which a man must be tainted before you can sustain this charge. Hardly anyone dances except in his cups, either by himself or at any respectable party, unless of course he is out of his mind. Dancing comes at the end of a seasonable meal, in attractive surroundings and after a wealth of sensuous enjoyment. You are seizing upon this climax of debauchery but leave out those attendant vices without which it cannot exist. You do not produce any disgraceful party, any love-making, riotous behaviour, loose and extravagant living, and since there is no sign of behaviour that goes by the name of pleasure but is really vice, do you think that you can find the shadow of debauchery where you cannot find the substance? (Cic. Mur. 13; MacDonald 1976:200–201)

This is, of course, just one example of many, testifying to the uneasy attitude that prevailed toward male dancing in Rome. A recent and extensive article by Edith Hall discusses the manner in which male dancing is described in the ancient sources (Hall 2010). She demonstrates that, in these texts, dance is generally associated with unmanliness, decadent pleasure-seeking and the arousal of sexual desire (Hall 2010:168). The picture painted in Cicero’s speech, quoted above, can be said to reflect the general attitude towards male dancing in Roman times.

As we have seen, a Roman art collector had to be concerned about the propriety of the motifs displayed on the fine, decorative items he chose to put on display. Considering the notion of dancing as an effeminate practice, unsuitable for honourable men (such as, for instance, the Roman consul Lucius Murena), it seems quite natural that a Roman collector would be hesitant to purchase and display decorative items depicting male dancers. Merely to possess such items could be seen as an indication that their owner indulged in male dancing for pleasure.

While depictions of pyrrhic dancers were rare, one has to acknowledge the abundance of depictions showing dancing satyrs within Roman visual culture (fig. 3). Obviously, a Roman patron of the arts was free to display items depicting dancing satyrs. Bacchic motifs
in general were immensely popular during the Roman era, and the notion of dance and revelling was intimately tied to the Bacchic entourage (Dräger 1994:102–107). But satyrs were mythological creatures, and they were closely linked to aspects such as pleasure-seeking and the arousal of sexual desire – traits also seen to be connected to male dancing in general. Aspects such as these marked satyrs out as reflections of ‘the other’, of traits that should not be found in a decent Roman man (Schneider 2000). Furthermore, with their pointed ears and tails, satyrs were clearly mythological beings. They could not be mistaken for representations of actual human males dancing for pleasure. This explains why a Roman patron of the arts was free to possess and display items depicting dancing satyrs.

I would argue that the situation was different for depictions of pyrrhic dancers because these referred to a weapon dance performed in reality. As noted above, the pyrrhica was a well-known form of ancient dance, and within the Greek cultural context competitions in pyrrhic dancing were held (Ceccarelli 1998). This probably made the motif of pyrrhic dancers problematic, because anyone who chose to purchase and display a decorative item depicting this motif could be said to appreciate and promote male dancing for pleasure.

While the notion of dance as an effeminate practice made the depiction of actual (as opposed to mythological) dancing males problematic to the Romans, no such stigma applied to depictions of female dancers. Just like the depictions of pyrrhic dancers, the depictions of kalathiskos dancers referred to dances actually performed during antiquity (Metzger 1942:233–245; Schauenburg 1960:99–102; Burr Thompson 1963:100; Froning 1971:22–23). Nevertheless, this did not prevent the motif from becoming widely used within Roman visual culture. Purchasing and displaying depictions of female dancers did not pose a threat to the masculinity of the (generally male) Roman collector. This is, as I have demonstrated, the reason why kalathiskos dancers could become a popular motif within Roman visual culture, while the pyrrhic dancers could not.

These decorative luxury possessions had a power and capacity of their own: they were inextricably intertwined with the plays of recognition and knowing that unfolded among the Roman elites. The collections were often meant to be seen by all who visited their owner’s residence, and therefore these possessions played an active part in the shaping of their owner’s public persona.
References


*Ancient sources:*


