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Ash Chest of Sextus Pompeius Lapeius

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Published in:
Greek and Latin Inscriptions at New York University

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2014

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kuin, N. (2014). Ash Chest of Sextus Pompeius Lapeius. In M. Peachin (Ed.), *Greek and Latin Inscriptions at New York University* (pp. 116). L'Erma di Bretschneider.
<http://www.lerma.it/index.php?pg=SchedaTitolo&key=00012814>

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44. ASH CHEST OF SEXTUS POMPEIUS LAPEIUS

Description: Inscribed surface 14.5 cm in width, and 7.4 cm in height. The inscription is mounted on an ornate ash chest of unknown provenance, dated to the second half of the first century AD. The chest is of a medium-grained white marble and measures 39 cm in width, 36 cm in depth, and 39 cm in height. The inscription is not cut very deeply, and is organized around a central axis. The letters are without serifs, and very plain. These are between 0.5 cm and 0.7 cm. The center strokes of the letter *m* meet far up in the letter, and do not come all the way down to the bottom. The letter *s* is consistently very narrow. Some word divisions are marked with horizontal dashes (lines 1, 3, 5). The inscription was added to the urn in the modern period (see below).

Bibliography:

HRYCHUK in BONFANTE and FOWLKES 2006, 158-161 no. 53.

Dis - Manibus
Sexte Pompe Lapei.
v(ixit) - a(nnos) XXXX.
Munatia Pofhine
con(iugi) - suo.

2: There are no word divisions between the names, whereas they do occur in the other lines. 4: As in line 2.

Translation:

To the divine shades of Sextus Pompeius Lapeius. He lived 40 years. Munatia Pofhine (has dedicated this urn) for her husband.

Comments:

Before saying anything else, it is imperative to realize that the text inscribed on the face of this ash chest is certainly a modern confection. The main reason for arguing that the inscription is modern is the style of the writing. The shape of *m* is entirely uncharacteristic of genuine Roman inscriptions, as are the interpuncts – that is, the dashes in lines 1, 3, and 5. A further indication is that there are some odd grammatical mistakes (lines 2, 4). Most strikingly, though, our inscription is quite similar to the forged inscriptions in the collection of Henry Blundell, which are well documented by Glenys Davies (DAVIES 2000). As it turns out, some of Blundell's authentic Roman ash chests had been embellished with inscriptions in modern times. Our inscription is so similar in style to, for instance, the inscriptions on the Euphrosyne chest (fig. 9.4) or on the Antonia Gemella chest (fig. 9.8), that it is not impossible that it was added in the same period, the late eighteenth century, and even perhaps in the same workshop, namely, that of Antonio d'Este in Rome. Many Roman ash chests have survived to the present day with uninscribed panels: in such



cases, the original text could have been painted and have faded away, or the urn might never have been inscribed at all, perhaps because it was placed in an already marked tomb, or was never purchased. It is important to realize, though, that some of the inscriptions cut during the modern period onto genuinely ancient urns, which eventually came into the Blundell collection, were in fact copied (albeit poorly) from (published versions of) genuinely ancient inscriptions. The same is very likely the case for our inscription; that is, an ancient epitaph very likely was the model for ours. The text is standard, and the names, some mistakes aside, are not unusual. Although I have not been able to locate an original, from which this text might have been copied, working on the supposition that a truly ancient document stands behind this inscription, I will make comments here as though we were dealing with a reliably ancient epitaph.

2: It would appear that *Sexte* is a mistake for *Sexti*, and *Pompe* for *Pompei*. There are a few dozen instances of the combination *Sextus Pompeius* in *CIL VI*, and a few in *PIR*, making it a relatively common full name. *Lapei* is odd. The cognomen *Lapeius*, as such, does not occur in *CIL VI*, indeed, does not exist (cf. SOLIN and SALOMIES 1994, 349). The roughly similar names, *Labeus* and *Laberius* are better attested, with 7 and 61 instances in *CIL VI* respectively. Or, perhaps we are dealing with a confused attempt to write *Sexti Pompei Apri*.¹

3: *Pompeius* died at 40, which is, by all accounts, reasonably old. The issue of Roman life expectancy is fraught with controversy, but it is now generally put between 20 and 30 years at birth (SCHEIDEL 2007, 38-41). The fact that his age is neatly divisible by five, may point to the not uncommon practice of age rounding (BODEL 2001, 35).

4-5: *Munatia* is a fairly common name, with 55 occurrences in *CIL VI*, who are mostly freedwomen, and three in *PIR*. *Pofhine*, which does not occur in *CIL VI*, must be a mistake for *Pothine*, which has eleven occurrences. Once again, a mistake was probably made in copying the stone from its original. Note the shift from the genitive of the first line into the dative of *coniugi suo*. This is not wrong or unusual: the genitive denotes possession and goes with *Dis Manibus*, the dative is the indirect object of the implied *fecit*. For the wife to set up the tomb for her husband was quite common among the lower orders in imperial Rome, and especially among freedmen, who, due to the late age of manumission and legitimate marriage, would often not yet have children of sufficient age to commemorate them when they died (SALLER and SHAW 1984, 138).

Date:

The inscription that perhaps served as the original, from which our inscription was copied, would probably be dated to the first, or the very early 2nd century AD. This is indicated by the unabbreviated *Dis Manibus*.

INGER NEELTJE IRENE KUIN

¹ Many thanks to Manfred Schmidt for this suggestion.