I must respond to the unconscionable evisceration by Jenifer Neils of the fundamental work of the late Renate Preisshofen (1937-1992).\(^1\) Proceeding at great lengths to define the libidinous interpretations of the so-called *Apollo Sauroktonos* of Praxiteles by Winckelmann and other classicists of earlier times, Neils effectively buries Preisshofen’s fundamental and brilliant contribution to the subject by relegating her work to a single footnote, noting only that that it provided “a list of examples.”\(^2\) I feel it necessary to repeat Preisshofen’s argument here so that the suppression it suffered under Neils will not be allowed to obscure her important revelations.

Preisshofen resolved at last the traditional but patently anomalous and contradictory interpretation of one of the major monument-types of Greek art, the so-called *Apollo*...
Sauroktonos, originally a work in bronze by Praxiteles, famous from the references to it in ancient sources and from the innumerable extant copies and variants in virtually all media (Fig. 1). The sculpture showed the god leaning against a tree or tree stump, with a lizard climbing up the trunk. The god carried a bow and arrow, as if preparing to shoot the animal, hence the epithet, Sauroktonos, lizard killer, attached to the figure by Pliny, "He also made a young Apollo with an arrow watching a lizard as it creeps up with the intent to slay it close at hand; this is known as the Sauroktonos or Lizard-slayer." Pliny’s interpretation was followed by the poet Martial,

“Corinthian Lizard Slayer. Spare the lizard, insidious boy,
as she creeps toward you; she wants to die by your fingers.”

Preisshofen showed that Pliny was simply in error, misinterpreting the meaning of Apollo’s gesture, and especially misunderstanding the action of the reptile, which climbs up, up toward the sun, rather than scampering away to hide, as is the animal’s wont under such circumstances. Pliny evidently attached the title Sauroktonos to a statue-type of the young Apollo observing a lizard on a tree, confusing it with the Delphic Apollo who killed the monstrous Python. While the god carries weapons, they are at rest.

Preisshofen recalls, in fact, a much more widespread manifestation, greatly elaborated in the long tradition of animal physiology, of Apollo the Sun God as the Healer, that is, Apollo Medicus, most notably healer of maladies of the eyes. The association is thus medicinal, auguring healing, and most commonly emblematized by Apollo’s encounter with the lizard, or Gecko. As it ages and grows the animal molts, shedding its skin and emerging, blind. Sight is restored, however, by the healing rays of sunlight cast upon it by the benevolent Apollo. Far from slaying the lizard, Apollo’s luminous arrows actually heal it. In effect, the lizard is reborn. The mythographer Hyginus describes Apollo, the father of Asclepius, as the first to practice the art of treating the eyes. The point is crucial since it explains why the Apollo of this type is canonically represented as a sweet, nubile, sympathetic youth. Neils grasps none of this. From her text, one would never know that the reliance on Pliny is now obsolete and the true subject has been revealed. So bent on bolstering the current, stylish emphasis on classical “pretty boy” worship (there is no ancient word “homosexual”), she failed to recognize the delicate beauty and poetry, the nobility, of this quintessentially Praxitelean conception of the benevolent deity, associated with restored health.
What is lost in this quagmire is one of the great achievements of Greek culture, already known, surprisingly enough, in the early seventeenth century. The evidence can be seen on the bases of the great bronze twisted columns that support the canopy (Baldacchino) covering the high altar in the crossing of St. Peter’s in Rome (Fig. 2). There Gianlorenzo Bernini, having been commissioned by Pope Urban VIII, represented this very motif, a lizard climbing up toward a radiant image of the health-giving Sun! (Fig. 3) In the mother church of Christendom, overseen by the Barberini pope, there were three major emblematic symbols of the papal reign, each laden with profound meaning. One was the famous Barberini bee (Fig. 4), alliterative to the docile provider of the mellifluous benefits of the church. Another was the sun, which appears in many contexts as divine illumination. And the third was the lizard, whose meaning is illuminated—I use the word deliberately—as it scurries about the columns of the Baldacchino, upward to the sun, and even downward to devour evil in the form of a scorpion (Fig. 5).

The Praxitelean statue is not of a type known only from a single, misguided and misleading phrase in Pliny, repeated by Martial, but instead embodies one of the best known and oft-repeated epithets of the god, Apollo the Physician (Iatros in Greek, Medicus and Salutaris in Latin), perfectly embodied in the figure’s tender form, gentle attitude, and benign
expression. Hence the lizard itself became a medication and magical talisman to ward off or recover from eye ailments; and the relationship was explicit, as can be seen, for example, in a gem (onyx) amulet showing a lizard vertically and inscribed LVMINA RESTITVTA, where the translucency of the material invokes the agent of the charm (Fig. 6).


    Sauroctonos Corinthius
    
    Ad te reptanti, puer insidiose,
    
    lacertaeprce; cupit digitis illa perire tuis.


