

## **Roman Art and Architecture: Commemorating Death Inscription Project**

### **Spring 2011**

#### **Group 3: Clodia Publia**

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#### **1. Art and Archaeology**

The freeze on the Clodia Publia shows a goddess, appropriate considering the grave commemorates a freedwoman. The female is depicted holding what looks like a cornucopia, suggesting that she represents the season autumn. In fact, this piece is thought to be part of a larger series of the four seasons. Considering the woman was a freed slave, and it's not unlikely that she was not Roman by birth, a theory further supported by the Greek couplet included on this piece, suggesting perhaps she was familiar with Greek. It would make sense then that the subject is not a classical Roman god, but instead a tribute to seasons, a symbol of the humble realities of time.

The art itself doesn't lend a lot of clues as to the time period of the piece, but the text references a festival, "Compitalia" which was cancelled under Augustus' reign, suggesting that this piece dates back to some time in the Roman Republic.

The art relates quite poetically back to the text, lending a visual aid to the theme of the passing of time. There also exists a stark contrast between the gloomy message of the poem and the gentle countenance. Romans viewing and reading this may have felt this juxtaposition of life's beauty and death's bitterness, as was probably the intent of the sponsor of this piece.

#### **2. Visual Epigraphy**

The text on the inscription of Clodia Publia's tomb is large, capitalized, and separated by dots to make the words more legible, demonstrating the deceased's wish to have all passersby understand her inscription. Even though the block letters are very accessible, simplistic and undemanding, the inscribed words actually hold much complexity, or at the least much significance, reflecting the meaning of Clodia's last farewell that she wanted to convey. Instead of the usual attempt to glorify herself or have a large relief of her face that she would not be able to keep in her own home as less than the elite upper class, Clodia delivers some kind of ominous warning to strangers, cautioning them that even when she felt lively and content, she still eventually died when autumn, and thus time, claimed her. Such a message was most likely meant to be performed dramatically, especially with the Greek couplet finishing her tomb inscription that forewarns people that without happiness or the rest of "men's riches," they will live a life of emptiness and dissatisfaction, during which joy is always eluded. Although delivered at the end of the inscription, the Greek proverb is actually given prominence over the Latin words that take up the majority of the message merely because most tombs

had to have the official language displayed first. Yet even though her name appears to be Latin, she could still be of Greek origin because she might have just assumed the name of her master as a former slave; therefore, perhaps she descends into her own language at the closing of the inscription, referencing such Greek mythology as Tantalus, and the relief of Autumn herself appears to be made in almost a Hellenistic style. However, she could just be referencing the classical Greek culture that so many Romans idealized and imitated.

### **3. Historical Analysis**

The inscribed Roman grave of Clodia Publia that our team discovered most likely dates back to the Roman Republic. We discerned this time period from the reference to the Compitalia festival in the grave's inscription. The Compitalia festival was celebrated once a year in honor of the Lares Compitales, the household deities of the crossroads. During this festival, sacrifices were offered at places where two or more roads met. Thus, perhaps the Clodia Publia grave was located at a crossroads. We know that the grave discovered belongs to a woman named Clodia Publia as her name is written clearly on the tombstone. We also know that she is a freedwoman as this title is also appears on the grave. Since Clodia Publia was a slave, this is perhaps not her real name as slaves often took the name of their master. Clodia Publia was most likely a household slave. Her ethnicity is unknown from reading the grave inscription. Since most slaves were brought back as one of the many spoils of war, Clodia Publia could have been from anywhere in Europe or the Mediterranean. The most common ethnicities for slaves in the Roman Empire included Celts, Germans, Thracians, Carthaginians, and Eastern Mediterraneans. The inscription on the grave is in both Latin and Greek. This is not terribly surprising as the Romans incorporated Greek ways and styles into their own culture. Perhaps the person who made the grave had Greek stylistic inclinations. The grave of Clodia Publia serves to demonstrate that not only wealthy, high status Romans had inscribed tombstones but that also freed slaves had this opportunity to have a recognized grave. The relief on Clodia Publia's grave represents Autumn and there are believed to be three other graves which have reliefs of the three other seasons. Perhaps these other tombstones belonged to freed slaves as well.

### **4. Content**

Clodia Publia's name appears with an 'L' to its right on the stone, indicating that she was born a slave but purchased her freedom during her lifetime. The inscription begins with a reference to the Compitalia, an annual Roman festival in honor of the deities who watched over the city's crossroads. The Compitalia festival came to an end under the rule of Augustus, suggesting that Clodia Publia lived during the age of the Roman Republic.

Clodia addresses the reader in the first person, urging whatever “stranger” (line 5) that reads the inscription to bear her death well with the knowledge that she enjoyed a life blessed by harmony and the Fates. The use of the word “stranger” suggests that Clodia was interred somewhere that passersby would see, perhaps along the famous Via Appia; in this way, her private, sepulchral arrangement was designed to speak to the public. The inscription does not merely touch on Clodia’s personal death, it universalizes the passing rather strongly: “The earth will hold you at some time,” (line 6) it states. The inscription’s treatment of death as an inevitable stage of human development correlates nicely with the inferred built form of the tomb, which presumably depicted the four seasons in relief, each with a corresponding inscription. As one of the three surviving portions of the work, this inscription bears an Autumn relief- a prelude, a warning to the coldness of Winter and death.

The inscription is written in two languages; the majority is written in Latin, but the last two lines (the most universal) are in Greek: “Mirth, love, wine, sleep, these are men’s riches. The wealth of the joyless is the life of Tantalus.” In Greek mythology, Tantalus stole ambrosia and nectar from Mount Olympus and gave it to his people. He also revealed the secrets of the gods. Tantalus was most famously known for offering his son to the gods as a sacrificial feast. He was punished for his atrocities and sent to the Underworld. Tantalus had to stand in a pool of water under a fruit tree. Whenever he tried to reach for the fruit, the branches would lift, and whenever he tried to drink from the pool, the water receded.

The treatment of death in the inscription is the most compelling reason to preserve it. It is one thing to know that ancient funeral processions incorporated ancestral masks, that the Via Appia was lined with tombs, and that burials and cremations had to take place outside city walls. The next level of understanding will be obtained by taking a close look at how the Romans emotionally processed, met, and commemorated death. Maliburton, fall back!