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Epitaph for Caecinia Bassa
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<http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/caeciniabassa.html>



Seated statue in marble of an elegantly dressed girl gazing pensively at the ground. Hadrianic copy of a Hellenistic original dating back to 280-270 BCE. □Rome, Museo Montemartini (Capitoline Museums). Credits: Barbara McManus, 2004.¹

So many things could cause a young person's death in ancient Rome: an infected wound today easily cured by an antibiotic, an injury that turned gangrenous, a disease like tuberculosis that, in western nations at least, is now eliminated from public consciousness. This inscription does give a clue to the possible cause of Caecinia's death. The reference to unfair Fates is not uncommon in funerary inscriptions of young people. The concluding curse, however, is unusual, as Ceres is rarely invoked in a curse. As curses may express a retaliatory wish that a person is cursed with whatever befell the deceased, we may plausibly hypothesize that Caecinia perished because of a famine at Rome.

If so, Caecinia's inscription leads to consideration of several things. First, the causes of this famine.

Famines are caused by the breakdown in the system of production, distribution, and consumption of foodstuffs. Famine is not a food shortage, but a catastrophic breakdown that results in a sharp increase in mortality rates. The surrounding agrarian territory of large urban centers such as Rome could not supply sufficient food year-round and so developed a network of offices and bureaus that estimated the holdings of the granaries and cared for the distribution of foodstuffs whether grown locally or at some distance. Rome began doing this in the third century BCE and in 132 BCE began making monthly distribution of grain to citizens, though free distribution to most of its citizens began only in 58 BCE. In 22 BCE Augustus was begged to take on the office of commissioner of the food supply. Seneca the Younger (*Epistula* 77.1.2) describes the arrival of the Alexandrine fleet off Puteoli: Today suddenly the Alexandrine fleet appeared...the sighting of the ships was pleasing to all Campania, the crowd at Puteoli stood on the docks....ⁱⁱ One can still sense the relief that the sighting brought to the eager inhabitants, for the granaries of Egypt were so essential to public calm and welfare that Augustus had made that country a province under the control of the emperor---Italy had long ceased to be able to supply enough grain to its cities.



Porter unloading amphora onto riverboat □ Italy, Ostia, Square of the Guilds. Second century CE. Credits: Susan Bonvallet, 2002.

What were causes of famine? As for production, weather,ⁱⁱⁱ crop diseases, insect predation (flocks of locusts, denuded Apulia in 188 CE), for one thing, but we must also remember that famine can be caused by breakdowns in the transportation and distribution. Such causes include war, of course, and stormy weather that might

sink one or more grain ships. And as regards distribution, a contributing cause of famine could be the molding of grain stored in the *horreae*.



Model of the back of the Horrea Galbana. from ground level; modern (plastico of fourth century CE city) □ EUR (Rome), Museum of Roman Civilization. Credits: Barbara McManus, 2007.

Tacitus records that in 62 CE Nero threw grain that had molded in the *horreae* into the Tiber, and that 200 grain ships were lost when a storm hit the port of Ostia, and 200 more grain ships burned in a fire at Rome.^{iv} Two years later the Great Fire at Rome burned up all the stocked grain; fortunately grain could be shipped from the province of Moesia. The year of the Four Emperors, 68-70 CE, again threatened the food supply at Rome, and bad weather at sea delayed the shipment from Egypt, while local grain supplies were destroyed by a terrible flood in 69. Epidemics could also exacerbate a shortage of food to famine proportion if enough people involved in the distribution died. For example, Cassius Dio states that widespread disease in 23-22 BCE caused the neglect of agriculture in Italy.

The style of the lettering suggests a second or third century CE date. Second century famines in Rome occurred possibly under Hadrian (his biographer mentions famines occurring in the Empire); under Antoninus Pius, for reasons unspecified in sources; and under Marcus Aurelius due to a Tiber flood that caused a very severe food crisis shortly after 161. In 189 (a year after the Apulian locust plague) a serious food crisis occurred in Rome, accompanied by an epidemic. Herodian, however, attributes this food crisis to the political scheming of Cleander, the powerful freedman of the emperor Commodus. Cleander bought up most of the grain supply and then prevented its distribution, thinking that by causing a food shortage and then distributing grain gratis to the people when they were seriously distressed, he would gain their loyalty. Cassius Dio, however, states that the *praefectus annonae* planned the shortage to turn people against Cleander. A third source, the biographer of Commodus, argues that Commodus was so careless about the distribution of the food supply and the men who were in charge of it, that he ignored their plundering of the grain until there was a shortage; he then killed them

and confiscated their property. Afterwards he proclaimed a reduction of prices in grain, which caused the shortage to get worse.^v

Obviously we cannot know for certain if our conjecture that Caecinia Bassa died in a famine is correct, much less which famine, but if I were to conjecture, then I would lean towards the Commodian famine, and wonder whether Sextius Caecinius had in mind the rejoicing (surely short-lived) of Cleander or the *praefectus annonae* in how successfully they plotted a shortage of food!

The second consideration concerns the wealth of Sextius Caecinius. Clearly he is somewhat (at least) wealthy, for such a monument is not a cheap one. Caecinia's inscription mentions three *vernae*,^{vi} who died before her; given the masculine gender of *alios*, at least one of these "home-born" slaves must have been male. Were any or all of these three *vernae* particularly associated with Caecinia perhaps as her companions and playmates? Hanne Nielsen has noted that women more often commemorated female *vernae* and theorizes that this custom is due to the women's desire to train girl *vernae* for work, and, as a result, this close association gave opportunity for some degree of affection, or at least, interest to arise.^{vii}

If the supposition that Caecinia died because of a famine is correct, then it must have been a severe famine. We would suppose that slaves, *vernae* or otherwise, would be on shortened rations during a famine, with what food there was being reserved primarily for the owners. Wealth is of no help if food is not there to be bought. And so, even in an apparently somewhat wealthy family an eleven-year old mistress of slaves could also die.

Eucharis

ILS 5213

Her epitaph is found in the textbook, *The Worlds of Roman Women*.



Wall painting, Pompeii, first century CE. □ Depicts female playing cithara, lover, and standing woman. □ London, British Museum. Credits: Barbara McManus, 1986.

Eucharis is one of ten female mimes that we know of.^{viii} At first glance she seems to have had it made for when she died at the young age of 14, she was already a

freed slave, learned and accomplished in all the arts (title), as though the Muses had been her teachers (line 10). Eucharis also knew who her father was, for the epitaph states that he provided this stela. (Presumably her mother was a slave of Licinia, her father a free Roman or a freedman.) Eucharis had renown as an actress, and had risen to glory (line 7) and had at least twice performed before an audience of members of the nobility (line 11). Lastly, Eucharis was the first female *archimima* to play Greek roles on the stage (line 12).^{ix}

In reality, her life was probably much sadder than the words reveal, for there is no reason to believe that her life would have been different from that of other mimes, and particularly female mimes. In the first century BC mimes were slaves or freed persons. Like gladiators and others in “professions” of low social approval, actors were *infamis* and so did not have certain civil rights.



Note the mask the woman (second from the left) is wearing; it is painted white as is traditional for women’s skin color. The two dancing men wear masks painted a darker color; in Greek and Roman art men’s skin color is darker, by convention than a woman’s. From the so-called “villa of Cicero” in Pompeii; signed by Dioskurides of Samos; Roman, first century CE. □Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Credits: Barbara McManus, 2003.

The plots of mime included mockery of the gods and current events as well as love, adultery, and sexual innuendo and display. Perhaps the statements that she performed before members of nobility (*ludus nobilium*) and acted in Greek scenes indicate, however, that Eucharis was not required to act in plots involving adultery and sexual innuendo. Yet, though fourteen is young to us, many *puellae* of whatever social rank were married by that age, and so it is likely that a fourteen-

year-old actress might participate in risqué or obscene performances. Her name, Eucharis “charming” may contain a double entendre: it may mean she charms the audience, but also perhaps “charms” sexually on the stage—or off it?



Mosaic from Aventine Hill in Rome, depicting dancing entertainers and musicians; Roman, third century CE. Rome, Vatican Museum. Credits: Barbara McManus, 2003.

The career of another mime, Volumnia Cytheris (aka Lycoris) during the time of Cicero and Caesar gives a picture of what Eucharis’ life might have entailed, as she grew older. Though a freedwoman, Cytheris (whose name is an epithet of the goddess Aphrodite) was under obligation to her former owner and was required to give free performances for him and his guests and become the mistress of his powerful friends such as Mark Antony. Mistress, prostitute—both were possibilities for a female mime as were acts of violence: Cicero mentions in the *Pro Plancio* that a *mimula* was raped in Atinia—but he refers casually to this rape as though it were unimportant.^x Perhaps it was the possibility of violence, “free” performances, and other constraints that led actresses to organize into a *collegium* during the last decades of the Republic.^{xi}



These three women characters also wear masks. Two women consult a sorceress; from the so-called “villa of Cicero” in Pompeii; signed by Dioskurides of Samos; Roman, first century CE. □Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Credits: Barbara McManus, 2003.

Eucharis’ epitaph gives no clue to the cause of her death, but death at an early age was not uncommon for girls of any rank. But she died truly regretted, having enjoyed Licinia’s goodwill, care, love, praises, and honor before her charming voice was silenced by death.

ⁱ All illustrations are courtesy of VRoma. <http://www.vroma.org>.

ⁱⁱ All translations are my own.

ⁱⁱⁱ Epigraph Heidelberg HD 025894. This inscription of a prefect in Galatia mentions a famine, caused by winter dryness, under Domitian.

^{iv} Peter Garnsey. *Famine and Food-supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 223.

^v Garnsey, *Famine*, 225- 227.

^{vi} Beryl Rawson, “Children in the Roman *Familia*,” in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) 186 ff.

^{vii} Hanne Sigismund Nielsen. “*Ditis Examen Domus?* On the Use of the Term *verna* in the Roman Epigraphical and Literary Sources.” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 42 (1991) 221–239.

^{viii} Charles Garton, “A Republican Mime-Actress?,” *Classical Review* n.s. 14 (December, 1964) 238-239.

^{ix} Roman Actors Author(s): G. Kenneth G. Henry Source: *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Oct., 1919), pp. 334-382 Published by: University of North Carolina Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4171757> Accessed: 5/01/2010.

^x Cicero, *Pro Plancio* (12.30): *ductum esse ab eo in provinciam aliquem dicis libidinis causa, quod non crimen est, sed impunitum in maledicto mendacium; raptam esse mimulam, quod dicitur Atinae factum a iuventute vetere quodam in scaenicos iure maximeque oppidano.*

^{xi} For information on Lycoris and actresses of the late Republic, see Giusto Traiana, "Lycoris the Mime" in Augusto Frascetti, *Roman Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.