

Monumental Evidence for Non-Elite Roman Marriage

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Interpretation of images on funeral monuments has focused on three themes in the past hundred years. In the early to middle 1900's, scholars thought that Romans used imagery to express primarily their ideas about religion and death and their conception of the afterlife. For the last quarter of the 1900's, scholars sought to interpret funeral imagery as expressing Romans' concerns about social status and individual and self-representation. More recently, scholars have broadened their focus of interpretation to one that is multivalent, that recognizes the deceased or his/her survivors may view this imagery simultaneously through several lenses, including religious beliefs, personal emotions and views, social rank, and traditions of family and locality.¹

This paper explores one aspect of the personal, that of self-representation, and restricts itself to the self-representation of the deceased and the significant other. We should remember that not all Romans could read inscriptions—or did indeed follow the admonition “*siste, viator, et lege.*” Messages were sent via the sculpted poses as well as the inscribed words. My hope is that bringing this examination of self-representations into the classroom will deepen students' interest in the Romans as individuals and make the Romans live beyond the pages of Latin textbooks.

The non-elite studied in this paper are freedwomen or women a generation or two away from slavery. Our study begins first with recognition of what being freed meant to a woman in terms of marriage, children, and burial. Some slaves, as evidence indicates, formed affectionate relationships, but slaves were not able to marry legally, nor were owners under any obligation to respect that relationship. The owner could assign the use of a slave woman's body to any one the owner wished. At any time one of the couple could be sent away to another estate or urban

property or sold, or even freed. Each of these events could be the end of the affectionate relationship, for a freed woman (or freed man) might find it difficult if not impossible to continue a relationship with their slave companion. The importance slaves did place on their affectionate relationships is revealed by the fact that there was a term for this relationship, *contubernaliū*, “cohabitation,” a term borrowed from the army.² Any children the slave couple had were also slaves and could be sold away from the parents at any time, if indeed the infants were allowed to live. Masters could undertake, but were not obligated to, the burial of slaves in communal tombs (*columbaria*), in cinerary urns bearing the names of each slave. Some slaves therefore joined burial societies (*collegia*), however, though it is not clear how they could afford the rather steep membership fees and required contributions when a member died.³ How many bodies of slaves were simply discarded in communal burial pits (*puticuli*) outside a city we will never know.⁴

The earliest freedmen’s tombs, dating from the second quarter of the first century B.C.E., have their funerary portraits contained in a long “window” placed on a level to make them easily seen from the road. Fefjar points out that they are carved “in a style which attempts to bring them close to the ideals of the free-standing honorific statues and tomb statues of aristocrats of the Late Republic.”⁵

Vecilia Hila

An example is the funerary relief depicting L. Vibius of the voting tribe Tromentina, his wife Vecilia Hila, freedwoman of Vecilia, and their son L. Vibius Felicio Felix, unlucky despite his cognomina, for he deceased before them, which is indicated through his portraiture as a bust (*imago*). (A fourth person, Vibia Prima, freedwoman of Lucius, is not shown.) The freed slave Vecilia Hila is shown in the *pudicitia* pose, head veiled, right arm wrapped in palla, left forefinger to her cheek. Not clearly shown, but certainly to be presumed is her stola, garment of a Roman married woman. As a slave she would not have respectably covered her head nor worn a stola that trailed to cover her feet. Rather, head bare and tunic coming down only to her lower calf, her body would have been “on view” from the point of the Romans, as a public spectacle. As a slave, Vecilia did not own her body; her owner could have put it to whatever use, including sexual, that she wanted and Vecilia’s

children would all have been slaves, liable to be sold or given away to a family member, their mother in all probability unknowing of their fate. Now, married to a Roman citizen, her children would all enjoy the privileges of Roman citizenship. The occasion of erecting a tomb to her deceased son gave Vecilia and her husband opportunity to present themselves as a family united still, a visual genealogy that had been denied her during her slavery and gave her opportunity to present herself as a Roman citizen, respected and respectable *matrona* and *materfamilias*.

Sextia Psyche

Our next example is Sextia Psyche, a free or freed woman; the uncertainty of her status results from the way she visually depicts her relationship with Helius Afinianus, a *servus publicus* of the augurs. This funerary urn is an interesting example of how some Romans tried to present themselves as having somewhat higher social status than they really did. Sextia Psyche describes Helius as her *coniunx*, though even the *servi publici*, as “prestigious” among slaves as they were, could not legally marry. Her use of *coniugi* is, therefore, a way of claiming more status than she and her husband had. Helius is shown wearing a toga, the garb of a Roman male citizen, which, as a slave, he is not entitled to wear, and so is shown “dressing up” the social scale and also claiming more status than he had. Because not all Romans were literate and not all passers-by would read this epitaph, Sextia Psyche and Helius Afinianus could get by with “dressing up” on the social scale: any one quickly glancing at their images would assume they were legally married citizens. As another way of claiming more status than she actually had, Sextia Psyche may have omitted from her name mention of her former owner.

While she or he or both of them selected a pre-made funerary urn for his ashes, it is interesting that they chose this particular scene. Sextia Psyche and Helius Afinianus clasp hands over an altar in front of an *aedicula*, a small shrine appropriate for a funerary marker because any place of burial became a *locus religiosus*.⁶ While there is a tendency today to assume that a man and woman clasping hands are shown in the *dextrarum iunctio* motif, there is good reason, Glenys Davies cautions, to see this gesture as likely to have a more general meaning or rather “built-in ambiguities.” In her study of this motif in Roman art she finds

that it can symbolize being parted by death, or expressing a hope of being reunited in the afterlife, or “expressing the idea that the strength of their feeling for one another can cross the barrier of death itself.”⁷ Reinsberg too concludes that a handshake is not to be assumed as part of the marriage ceremony itself.⁸ Hersch points out that, in definitely marital situations, the handshake may signify the *concordia* (mutual bond of affection) of the marital union.⁹ Or in the case of Sextia Psyche and Helius Afinianus, the affection they had in their pseudo-marital union. Because legally they could not marry, if we follow Davies’ more generalized interpretation of this type of scene, the scroll in Helius’ hand is not the *tabulae nuptiales*, but the “usual attribute of a togate figure.”¹⁰

Aurelia Philematium

Our next example is the first century BCE inscription of Aurelia Philematium and her husband, the butcher Lucius Aurelius Hermia, who erected it in loving memory of his wife.¹¹ Theirs was a long relationship, for she states that Aurelius Hermia took her to his *gremium* when she was only seven years old. As she died at age forty, they were in some sort of affectionate relationship for thirty-three years. As both were freed by Lucius Aurelius, it is very possible that they met while slaves in the same house. Though it is difficult to tell from the portrait of Hermia how much older he is than his wife, his greater age is indicated by the wrinkles alongside his mouth, while Philematium’s face is smooth, certainly a possibility for a forty-year old woman. We can imagine some possible scenarios: that Philematium, newly purchased, came into the *familia* of slaves at the tender age of seven, or that her slave mother was sold or died, leaving the young girl alone in the household. Whatever the situation, Philematium was befriended by a male slave, Hermia, a good many years older than she. The couple do not clasp hands, but the inscription Hermia erected stresses their mutual devotion: he states that she failed him only in dying, but she died without meanness (*avaritia*), a sentiment expressed in some other funerary inscriptions. He acknowledges that his life flourished due to her uxorial virtues, while she emphasizes that she was a wife who attended to her home (*volgei nescia*) and that he flourished because of her constant attention to him (*officio adsiduo floreat*).¹² We may interpret the sentiment ascribed to her, “I am

stronger than death" (*necis potior*), as indicating that her love for him will exist beyond the grave.

How they are posed as a couple is unusual for grave reliefs. We cannot know whether they selected the stele and/or pose in anticipation of the death of one of them, or that Hermia alone determined the pose after Philematium's death.¹³ Like the poses of Sextia Psyche and Julia Saturnina and their spouses, both Hermia and Philematium are dressed as a married Roman couple, he in his toga of citizenship, she in her matronal stola with palla pulled over her head. However, rather than clasping hands as in the examples I showed earlier, she lifts his right hand to her lips and kisses it, while bowing her head.

The act of kissing occurred among the Romans in a number of ways, beyond the romantic and sexual. In greeting her husband, a wife could take him by hand and give him a kiss, according to Plautus, though this kiss seems to have been on her husband's face and not his hand.¹⁴ Spouses also kissed one another in parting, but, again, the kisses were face to face.¹⁵ Philematium's kissing her husband's hand falls into the category of kissing to show respect and deference. A son would kiss the hand of his father, and soldiers the hand of their commander.¹⁶ A petitioner kissed the hand (or knees) of the person of whom he or she was making a request.¹⁷ Kissing the hand of someone was also a sign of submission.¹⁸ A worshipper kissed his right hand and bowed his head when adoring a deity.¹⁹ The verb *osculari* was used in the sense of "to praise." For example, the senate kissed the boy Papirius Praetextatus in praising his loyalty and ingenuity in keeping secret the senatorial discussion he had heard.²⁰ We can, as a result, interpret Philematium's gesture of bowed head and kissing her husband's right hand as showing her submission to her spouse, and her great respect for him, and also as a sign of farewell. This multivalent interpretation is born out by Hermia's words praising her for her loving unanimity with him (*meo praedita amans animo*) and her attention to her uxorial duty (*officium, meo officio*).

Claudia Prepontis

Our final example is a woman who was not legally a wife, nor, unlike Sextia Psyche, in a position to call herself a wife. How she chose to portray herself on the steles of her un-husband, however, does reveal how she valued the relationship they she had and the marriage relationship she did not have.

Beginning in the second half of the second century CE, a new type of grave representation began to appear, depicting one or both spouses sitting or reclining on a *lectus*. An example is the relief commissioned by Claudia Prepontis to honor her deceased former owner, and her *patronus* once he freed her, Claudius Dionysus. The inscription contains the formulaic “for herself and their posterity and their freedmen,” but as Claudia identifies Claudius as her *patronus* and not *coniunx*, their relationship was not as married couple but as man and concubine. She sits on the *lectus*, mournfully regarding his body. Her pensiveness expresses her grief and loss at his passing.

There are other types of *lecti* that appear in funeral reliefs. One is the *lectus convivialis*, the banqueting couch. In funerary contexts the deceased, if male, reclines on the couch, with his wife participating in the meal, but sitting modestly—though women began reclining on such couches during the time of Augustus—near his feet. If the deceased is female, she reclines on the couch; I have not seen any reliefs of this variety with the husband in attendance. In either case the deceased person is depicted as though alive, participating in the funeral banquet that was held at the grave upon burial (*silicernium*) and subsequently on the ninth day after the burial (*cena novendialis*), on the deceased’s birthday (*dies natalis*), in celebration of the *Floralia* or other funerary festivals. At Pompeii and Isola Sacra there are a number of tombs that have permanent banqueting couches in front of the entrances for such commemorative banquets.

Another kind of *lectus* shown in a few funeral reliefs is the *lectus genialis*, the marriage bed. In her recent study of the Roman wedding, Karen Hersch examines all the textual evidence for this kind of bed and finds reason to suggest that the married couple may used it as their personal bed every night thereafter.²¹ In this relief from a sarcophagus, the couple shows affection, even mutual attraction, for the wife lays her arm around her husband’s neck, and he seems to lift his hand as

though to unpin her tunic and so bare her arm. Ovid remarks that a woman's bared arm is erotic, writing "Let the lowest part of your arm and the upper part as well be uncovered, so as to be seen from the left hand side...When I see this, I delight to press kisses on an arm as far as it is exposed."²²

Claudius' *lectus*, however, is the bed on which the body is laid out. Eyes closed, Claudius is clearly dead and is propped up on pillows and dressed in his toga, as his body would be in preparation for his funeral. Unlike scenes showing a wife participating in the funerary meal, Claudia sits on the couch, in a pose of contemplation. Perhaps she is posed not as a wife (*uxor*) because Claudius is not her *coniunx*, but her *patronus*. Yet they seem to have had a quasi-marital relationship as the inscription mentions their posterity (*suis posterisque eorum*). The identification of Claudius as *patronus* is generally interpreted as his having been her master. Yet her name in the inscription does not include the phrase *Tiberii liberta*, possibly because *patronus* makes clear their relationship. Ann Raia has suggested that during his life she was his slave concubine and he freed her in his will. If so, Claudia may have chosen this pose of being seated on his couch in order to present herself as something more than just his freedwoman, though she could not claim the status of *uxor*.

Concluding Remarks

We have looked at only five examples of non-elite funerary reliefs, but I hope I have shown how these reliefs can be read as revealing some of the attitudes these women had of their marriage—or some of the attitudes they were supposed to have. We do not know, after all, whether the words ascribed to Philematium really expressed her assessment of her marriage to Hermia—but then we really do not know that today's messages inscribed on tombstones "Beloved Spouse" or included in newspaper death notices really reflect the attitudes of the surviving spouse. Yet, from these and other reliefs and their epitaphs we can deduce from the poses what the individuals wanted to express.

All of these images emphasize the importance of the union, whether legal marriage (*matrimonium*), *contubernium*, or concubinage. Slave women lived a life of insecurity, not knowing when they might be sold, whether they might be expected to

sleep with their master, his sons, and his friends, or how long they and any child they bore would be together. These women did gain status from their husbands or male companion as well as a financial security to the extent that such security did exist in the Roman world. Those who were slaves gained the opportunity, when freed, to determine to whom they gave their body and fertility and gained also the assurance that their children and children's children would be lost to them only through death, and not through an owner's decision to sell or otherwise separate slave parent or child or grandchild. They valued the strength of their marriage or relationship, emphasizing in pose and, sometimes, in inscribed words the ideals of marital concord, loyalty, and trust, ideals that rarely were possible in a slave's life. Perhaps they valued their marriage or quasi-union all the more because, as slaves, it was something they could not have had.

¹ Jane Fefjar, *Roman Portraits in Context* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) 106.

² The adjective form "cohabitant" is *contubernalis*.

³ An example is the *collegium* described in the *Lex familiae Silvani* (AE 1929, n. 161), the society centered on the cult of Silvanus, in Rome. Several of the seventy-eight members seem to have been slaves. For the inscription, see http://webu2.upmf-grenoble.fr/Haiti/Cours/Ak/Negotia/Silvani_AE.htm. Visited May 27, 2011.

⁴ Lanciani describes the *puticuli* he excavated thus: "*The Esquiline cemetery was divided into two sections: one for the artisans who could afford to be buried apart in Columbaria, containing a certain number of cinerary urns; one for the slaves, beggars, prisoners, and others, who were thrown in revolting confusion into common pits or fosses. This latter section covered an area one thousand feet long, and thirty deep, and contained many hundred puticuli or vaults, twelve feet square, thirty deep, of which I have brought to light and examined about seventy-five. In many cases the contents of each vault were reduced to a uniform mass of black, viscid, pestilent, unctuous matter.*" Rudolpho Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1891) 64

⁵ Fefjar, *Roman Portraits*, 115.

⁶ Fefjar, *Roman Portraits*, 4.

⁷ Glenys Davies, "The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art," *AJA* 89.4 (1985) 635.

⁸ C. Reinsberg, *Die Sarkophage mit Darstellungen aus dem Menschenleben: Vita Romana* vol. 1 pt. 3 (Berlin: Gerb. Mann Verlag, 2006) 81.

⁹ Hersch, *The Roman Wedding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 211-212.

¹⁰ Davies, "The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art," *AJA* 89.4 (1985) 635.

¹¹ The part of the inscription containing his praenomen is missing, but we know that he would take the praenomen of his former owner, Lucius Aurelius.

¹² On the role of the wife as *custos domi*, see Judith Sebesta, "Women's Costume and Feminine Civic Morality in Augustan Rome," *Gender and History* 9.3 (November 1997) 529-541 and T. Pearce, "The Role of the Wife as *Custos* in Ancient Rome," *Eranos* 12 (1974) 16-23.

¹³ I assume he picked out the funerary stele when Philematium died and that the pose was carved at his request. An alternate possibility is that anticipating that one of them would die before the other, they picked out the stele and pose and the inscription was then carved upon Philematium's death. See also Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 82-83.

¹⁴ Plautus, *Amphitryo* 715-716: *salutavi et valuissesne usque exquisivi simul, mi vir, et manum prehendi et osculum tetuli tibi.*

¹⁵ Lucretius, *de rerum natura*, 3.894-896; Ovid, *Heroides*, 3.14.

¹⁶ Calpurnius Flaccus, *Declamationes*, 10. Tacitus, *Annales*, 1.34; *Historiae*, 1.45.

¹⁷ Ammianus 28.4.10: *ex his quidam....adulatoribus offerunt genua savianda vel manus.* Epictetus states that there were those who kissed the hands of slaves of higher status whose favor they wished to gain: 3.24.49, 4.1.148. See also Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 2.28 (hands and knees); 4.26 (hand). Valerius Maximus (2.10.26) recounts that when some pirates came to visit Africanus in admiration of him, they bowed and kissed their hands to his doorposts as they would to a temple or altar and then kissed his right hand for some time.

¹⁸ Lucan, *Pharsalia* 2.114.

¹⁹ Jerome, *In Rufinium* 1.19: *qui adorant, solent deosculari manum et capita submittere.*

²⁰ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.23.13.

²¹ Karen K. Hersch, *The Roman Wedding*, 214-219.

²² Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3.307-310.