Of Coffins, Curses, and Other Plumbeous Matters

The Museum’s Lead Burial Casket from Tyre

Donald White

Many have taken voluminous pains to determine the state of the soul upon disunion; but men have been must pedestrian in the singular contrivances of their corporal dissolution; whilst the soberest Nations have rested in two ways, of simple inhumation and burning.

Sir Thomas Browne, Hyrastaphia: Urns-Burial (London 1658)

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he Classical Greeks and Romans shared a common predilection for conferring on the basic metals spiritual properties as well as intrinsic values. The 7th century BC poet Hesiod expresses in his Works and Days a dismal vision of mankind spiraling down from a golden age to one of silver, then brass, and finally iron. From the 5th century BC onwards lead reigned as the preferred medium for written maledictions aimed at hurting or destroying their victims, while gold was used to fashion protective amulets and medical spells intended to cure or heal. In tune gold and lead came to be seen as naturally contrasting opposites, the one “noble,” the other “base.” When Ovid in his Metamorphoses has Capidus shoot Apollo to make him fall in love with Daphne, it is with a golden arrow; but when he pierces Daphne it is with an arrow tipped with lead to insure that she will loathe her divine minor.

In his classic study of gold sheets found in tombs in the south of Italy, Günther Zuntz brings home the essential distinction between the two metals: “The adoption of gold in particular for objects deposited in graves is unlikely to have been a mere ornamentation of riches. The bright and imperishable metal no doubt was chosen to symbolize the perpetuity of life, just as its opposite, the dark and heavy lead, was used to promote destruction and death” (1971: 285–86). It was the allusion of “black lead” (as distinct from “white lead,” or tin) with the darker aspects of magic that may have eventually led astrologers to associate the gloomy planet Saturn with decaying old age and death, while the moon and sun were thought to be of silver and gold.

Lead was extracted, usually at low cost, as a by-product of silver mining in many parts of the ancient world including Spain, Italy, Sardinia, England, France and Germany, the Greek mainland and Macedonia, the Levant, and Asia Minor. Forbes (1971) believes the last was the leading producer of lead and silver in antiquity.

The ancient world was cheerfully ignorant of lead’s potential health hazards. The metal was set to a