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 most fanciful in the singular contrivances of their corporall dissolution; whilst the soberest Nations have rested in two ways, of simple inquietum and burning.

Sir Thomas Browne, Hyrastrophia: Urna-Burial (London 1658)

The 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 time 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 manor.

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 ostentation 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.

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wide range of practical uses where cheapness and ready availability, combined with properties of great weight and easy malleability, probably played the deciding roles in its selection. These included sheets for writing, water pipes, baptismal tanks in early Christian churches, ampullae or flasks, storage receptacles or boxes, sling bullets, weights, anchors, military dogtags or bullets, toy quivers, and clamps to mend pottery. Lead was also used as a soldering agent or fixative to "lead in place" anything from mosaic clamps to the feet of statues. Such practical considerations may have also governed its choice for certain types of votive figurines and decorative relief plaques that do not appear to be necessarily connected with death and the spirit world.

On the other hand, lead was clearly also used for other purposes where it can be argued that its physical properties and low cost were secondary to its perceived character as gold's opposite in the broadly metaphysical sense. Lead was the material of choice for tablets and nails used for cures and spells, medicinalatory dolls, amulets, casings for akrakhi (astragalii) employed in soothsaying or divination, cremation ash urns and the outer covers for glass cremation urns, and finally body-size coffins. It is apparent that all of these uses were to some degree thought to be cognate to one another through their connections with the spirit world, the grave, and the afterlife.

THE MUSEUM'S LEAD COFFIN

The University of Pennsylvania Museum's coffin originated in the region of Tyre in modern-day Lebanon. (See box on The Acquisition of the Lead Coffin.)

The Latin nomenclature for a casket of this kind was more likely to have been arcu or loculum than the more familiar term, sepulchre. It dates to the later 2nd/early 3rd century AD. What remains of it are the two long sides and most of the two short ends of a rectangular lead box 1.685 meters (or about 5 feet) long and 0.43 meters deep and wide. The floor and what must have been a separately attached, curved or vaulted lid are both missing. Cracks, which may have been partially in-filled by the dealer, run up and down several of the existing fragments.

While in theory the coffin could have been assembled from more than one sheet of lead, it is much more likely that it was made out of a single sheet folded lengthwise to obtain a bottom and two sides (Fig. 1). The occasional nail holes that pierce the edges all appear to be modern.

The box length of 1.685 meters is not evenly divisible by the modular dimension of 0.43 meters, which means it was obviously not considered critical to use a standard measurement unit throughout. With lead weighing in at 710 pounds per cubic foot, I estimate that the coffin originally used 6.6 cubic feet of lead and weighed around 430 pounds, not including the lid. It was big enough to accommodate what is by today's standards the body of a small adult male or an average-sized female adult.

The slightly vaulted lid overlapped the long sides to rest on a narrow ledge 5 centimeters below the rim. In certain other examples, the edges of the short ends were extended to form tongues or luggers that were keyed into slots in the lid and then hammered over to form a nearly air-tight seal. They were not used here.

Because lead is relatively soft and will bend under stress, a coffin put together in the way just described would have had trouble supporting the weight of a dead body. This meant that a lead coffin was often set in a wooden box which was then interred with it, in the ground or inside a masonry tomb. Whether this was done in the case of this coffin cannot be determined with certainty.

THE RELIEF DECORATION

The exterior ends and sides were ornamented with raised relief decorations. Judging from examples found elsewhere, the lost lid would also have been decorated, but the bottom left plain.

Scholars are split over how the reliefs were cast. J. Tornsbee (1964) argues for a sand mold process, while L.Y. Rahman (1992) believes that the molds were made from unfired clay left in a leather-hard state. In either case the molds would not have survived the single initial
casting, which is why no two coffins are exactly the same. The process called for pressing stamps made of wood or some other perishable material (none seem to have survived) into the soft surface of the sand or clay to make the mold. Molten lead was then poured into the resulting impression to create the decorated sheet with its raised reliefs. The stamp designs tended to be highly repetitive, and scholars hypothesize the use of circulating pattern books, although none survive. The entire process was relatively simple to carry out, involved inexpensive materials (the wooden stamps being reusable), and required little or no artistic skill other than by the carvers of the stamps.

The decorations applied to the ends and long sides, while not distinguished for their originality and artistic excellence, have their own particular interest. Each of the decorative elements carried what were for most ancient observers universally recognizable, if not always explicit, symbolic meanings. The two long sides, C and D, are decorated with a series of six similar but not identical panels separated by columns topped with a variant of palm capitals, the lower third of whose shafts were left unfitted (Fig. 2). Alternating panels are decorated with either a small Medusa head surrounded by four dolphins in the corners and ivy leaves in between (Fig. 3a) or sphinxes crouching right, enclosed by triple laurel leaf clusters and ivy leaves (Fig. 3b). Zones above and below the panels are marked off by parallel horizontal cable or rope moldings laid down by a rolling (roulette) stamp. The top zone is filled with triple laurel leaf clusters and berries (Fig. 4), while the bottom one is filled with a rouletted leaf and vine design. The widths of each panel vary in a way that makes it clear that the dividing columns were applied by a separate stamp. This enabled the artisans to narrow or widen the panels at will and thus, one can only suppose, to adapt the coffin to the dimensions of the deceased.

Short end A (Fig. 5) consists of four intersecting lines of twisted rope interspersed with ivy leaves. While the design superficially suggests an eight-spoked star, the spoke ends terminate in ivy leaves which rule out an astral significance. Short end B (Fig. 6) repre-
sends the facade of a tetrastyle (four-columned) Corinthian temple. The lower thirds of the column shafts are again unfluted. The cornices of the pediment are filled with olive leaves, while the center of the floor of the pediment breaks into an arch following the fashion associated with pediments found on 2nd and 3rd century AD buildings, particularly in Asia Minor (Fig. 7), Syria, and Palestine.

It is difficult to be certain, but the two short end compositions could have been applied from two single wooden stamps. If, on the other hand, the eight-spoked "star" motif was created by a roulette stamp, the individual ivy leaves must have been added by means of a separate stamp. Lids decorated with a vine trellis framed by two running laurel wreath motifs normally went with lead coffins of this type (Fig. 9).

Scholars largely agree that Morusa heads and crouching sphinxes function in their setting here as apotropaic signs (from Gk. ἀποτρόπειον meaning "turning away") or "aversors of evil." Guardian sphinxes were placed on top of Greek grave steles centuries earlier for the same reason. Because of their powers to protect and appease, laurel wreaths, leaves, berries, and branches are a common feature of Roman funerary altars and appear as garlands over tomb entrances. Olive leaves carry a funerary association because the dead are occasionally shown bedded on a couch of olive, bay, or vine leaves. Grape leaves, ivy leaves, and vines, as well as dolphins, are all loosely tied to the worship of Dionysus, as indeed are all of the vegetal motifs just listed. The cult of Dionysus was centered in later antiquity on the pleasures of a fruitful Afterlife.

The single columns used to separate the long sides into six panels may be designed to remind the viewer of the architecturalized fronts of tombs, but this is hardly certain. The motif of the tetrastyle Corinthian facade with its pediment breaking into an arch has been much studied. It appears in pagan, Jewish, and eventually Christian contexts. Where attached to Jewish ossuaries, for example, it has been interpreted as representing Torah shrines in synagogues. Since the remaining iconography of our coffin is clearly neither Christian nor Jewish, it may represent here the idealized facade of an architecturalized pagan tomb or heroon honoring the dead as a hero (Fig. 8).

Unlike the other decorative motifs, that of the cable or rope has not received much attention, although it may hold an important key to unraveling the meaning of the coffin. Despite the strikingly different ways the motif is deployed on the short and long sides, I would argue that in both contexts the rope symbolizes the act of binding or tying up the coffin. In other words, what looks like a rope should be read as a rope even when—as on end A—it has been arranged like an eight-spoked star. This interpretation is strengthened by the more explicit use on other examples (mostly found in the Levant but some as far afield as Britain) of ropes that crisscross the lid and occasionally the two long sides to form rhomboidal patterns (Fig. 10). These, for Rahmani (1987:116), create the impression, "perhaps intention—of a box securely tied with cord." Other coffins use molded, raised strips instead of ropes to achieve much the same effect (Fig. 11).

THE RESTRAINT OF SPIRITS

What was the point of tying up a coffin? Surely nothing so banal as keeping the body from tumbling out during transportation to the grave site! We are in any case dealing here with symbolic bonds, not actual ropes or straps. For all of that, when considered along with the container's tightly sealed joints and locked-down lid, the motif of a rope (see box on Ropes) must symbolize a wish to prevent something from either entering or escaping the coffin.

The inscribed curse tablets already mentioned as one of the cognate uses to which lead was put may provide a clue for what is going on. According to the latest tally reported in 1992 by J.G. Gager, over 1,500 tabellae have been found in a variety of contexts and
Ropes: Candles or Magical Restraints?

Given their apparent phonetic similarity, how does the Latin word for "rope" (fonsit) relate to "corpse" or "burial" (faunos)? The answer is that it probably doesn't, even though some late (4th to 6th century AD) commentators claim that the two words were related because ropes coated with wax (i.e., candles) were burned before corpses. A more useful, albeit non-linguistic connection is to be found in the early practice of magically binding or shackling images of destructive gods, demons, and ghosts that were popular in Etruria, Roman Italy, Greece, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East during times of danger or crisis, viz., the lead curse effigy bound, mutilated, pierced, and then buried in an Athenian grave (Fig. 13). The ritual of binding was understood by its practitioners to be a form of defensive magic, was even extended to full-scale statues, and normally concluded with their burial in the earth. In other words, when applied in the proper way, ropes could restrain the power of a hostile god inhabiting a statue. (For more on the subject of spiritually empowered statues, see White 1992.)

![Image of a lead curse figure from a pre-Christian grave in Attica, Greece. The figure, with bound hands and feet, has lost its head and is pierced with two iron nails.](image)

**Fig. 13. Lead curse figure from pre-Christian grave in Attica, Greece.** The figure, with bound hands and feet, has lost its head and is pierced with two iron nails.

places, including the cemeteries at Tyre. They date from as early as the 5th and 4th centuries BC down into later antiquity, and many were buried in graves. A high percentage were made of lead or lead alloys.

The meaning of their names (in Greek, kata-
demone, “bound up,” “tied down,” and in Latin, definiones, “fastened” or “nailed down”) suggests how these tablets were thought to function: by binding or restraining the objects of the curses inscribed on them through magical means. Folded over and in some cases nailed together, their opening preambles frequently urge the infernal gods “to restrain” or “to bind” the targets of their male-
dictions. Gager (1992) has a particularly relevant example from Rome (Fig. 12). Written on both sides, it pictures on the bottom of one side a human figure (apparently the curse’s instigator), joined by a bird-like demon, roving up a certain Artemis. Artemis, who was apparently a rival charioteer, is portrayed without his head or feet. Part of the curse reads:

(I appeal to you, Phrygian goddess and nymph goddess EIDONEA in this place that you may restrain Artemis . . . and make him headless, footless and powerless with the horses of the Blue colors [i.e., a rival racing club]. (Gager 1992:72; emphasis added)

Another way of attaching a curse to its victim was to drop into a grave a doll or figurine fashioned sometimes of mud or wax but more often of lead. These effigies, which often survive with the names of their vic-
tims scratched on their surfaces, either have their heads
trussed up their backs or are shown mutilated. One such lead figure, found minus its head in an Attic grave (Fig. 13), was pierced with iron nails and then had its hands and feet bound with lead straps for good measure.

The frequency with which the lead tablets and dolls end up in graves stems from their donor’s need to place the curses in as close physical contact with the avenging gods of the Underworld as possible. Since the persons being cursed are almost always living, it follows that the tablets and figurines are not aimed at the ghosts of the dead. So how then do they relate to persons already dead?

**LATER ANTIQUE BELIEFS IN THE AFTERLIFE**

Rather than subscribing to the older Greek poetical vision of a neatly compartmentalized Under-
world made up of Hades, the Elysian Fields, and “limbo,” pre-Imperial Roman eschatological belief seems to have pictured the collective spirits of the dead—the Memes—as simply residing underground or near their burial place where they could be placated with food and drink. By the early 3rd century BC this gave rise in Italy to a complicated schedule of offerings and funeral meals con-
sumed at the grave site by the survivors for the benefit of the departed. (The souls of the dead were presumably sufficiently sentient to enjoy the ceremonies taking place above ground in their honor.) This could even lead to “force-feeding” the dead through tubes run into the graves, and laying out attractive garden enclosures next to the tombs. According to such beliefs the grave was in some sense the place in which the dead continued to reside. This is why tombs often recall either external-
ly or internally the houses of the living (Fig. 14).

The spirit universe of the Mediterranean world under Roman domination swarmed with a host of supern-
natural beings. This was nowhere more evident than among the coastal Levant, where Greek, Oriental, Egyptian, Jewish, and, in time, Christian beliefs all converged. In addition to the traditional gods this company of apparitions included a broad array of demons, incubi, succubi (Fig. 15) and other terrifying female bogies; angels, cherubim and seraphim; the seven astrologically charged planets and various magically pulsant stars; and, of special relevance to the present discussion, the Larves or ghosts of the dead. According to popular belief, the ghosts of persons with lives cut short by accident or by acts of violence hovered near their buried bodies to seek retribution from the living. Some of the angry dead were classified as lemures, who were, according to Tychaea (1971), kinless and hungry ghosts, others as larves, dangerously mischievous spirits that left the grave site to prowl round the house. Beyond this, any burial containing a freshly interred body, whose intact flesh was believed to block the soul from flying free to its eternal destination, was the potential haunt of ghosts and other malignant spirits. (The word sarcoph-

gue, incidentally, derives from a type of limestone quar-
TWO VIEWS OF A ROMAN IMPERIAL STONE SARCOPHAGUS OF A wealthy lady from Simpelveld, replicating the interi or of the deceased’s house. (Object now in Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, Netherlands.)

From Tomba 1973: figs. 91–92. Reproduced courtesy, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

FIG. 15. GRECO-ROMAN MARBLE RELIEF DEPICTING A WINGED SUCCURUS or female bugy having sex with a sleeping man; Hellenistic. Protection from such evil spirits was considered essential in antiquity.

From Coomacka and Vernacle 1976: fig. 115. Gift of Edward Perry Warren; photo reproduced courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. H. 6 40 in

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEAD COFFINS

By the time of the later Roman Empire, coffins for inhumation burials could be made of wood or clay, as well as various types of stone and lead. Coffins of the first two materials were cheap to manufacture and were available to persons of no great means. The truly destitute were routinely dumped in the ground without a receptacle of any description or with at best a hastily improvised cover of discarded roof tiles.

In terms of the costs of quarrying, transportation, and, perhaps most of all, final artistic finish, the standard Roman stone sarcophagus, sculpted in deep relief on either three or four of its sides as well as on its lid, was a definite cut above a conventional lead casket. The richly carved exterior scenes on stone sarcophagi were intended to remain visible to the living, a fact that seems to be borne out by the way in which they are often displayed inside of tombs (Fig. 16).

Tomb of the Roman Imperial age have been described as "retrospective" on their exteriors, while "prospective" on their interiors. Thus, the past achievements of their occupants were usually recorded on the tomb facades, while the world to come was anticipated in scenes on the tomb interiors and in the iconography and contents of the individual coffins (Fig. 14). But does this past formula apply to lead coffins? Unlike their stone equivalents, lead coffins were seldom inscribed, and their occupants nearly always remain anonymous; even references to the decedent's sex are missing, apart from what the grave gifts can tell us. Also, the repetitive cast reliefs on lead coffins, themselves often boxed in outer wooden containers before being shoved into long, nar-
row compartments cut in the bedrock, were clearly never intended to be seen by the living once burial had been carried out. Instead, it seems virtually certain that their symbolic messages were directed toward the spirit world alone.

It is here where we return full circle to lead. If it is correct to view the cast symbols on the coffin exterior as forms of magical incantations to insure, on the one hand, a happy existence after death and on the other, to fend off evil spirits hovering around the grave, what part is played by the coffin's material? We have seen how lead, the dark, placid element, had been used as the chosen medium for delivering curses to the powers of the Underworld, as well as to restrain or bind the targets of their incantations long before its use for coffins. Centuries later in medieval times, according to the Encyclopaedia of Magic and Superstition (p. 211), "religious relics were often encased in lead caskets to keep their sacred force within an effective boundary and prevent it from dissipating into the air" (presumably echoing the same impulse that led the Greeks to wrap their fortune-telling astragals in lead). In the case of the coffins, the metal's menacing link with the powers of the Underworld seems to be prophylactic as well as preventative, since the tightly sealed coffins were often themselves tied with symbolic ropes or straps which worked both to keep out, as well as to hold in, malignant spirits. "Prophylactic" implies that the objective behind the use of lead was to shield or protect the dead from the powers of evil before their admission to a blessed Afterlife (a wish that also led to the practice of encasing the ashes of the dead in lead urns). The use of lead was also to prevent the ghosts of the deceased from escaping their coffins to haunt the living.

Either way, the Museum's coffin permits the alert observer to penetrate into the murky substratum of popular religion, superstition, and magic of later antiquity.  

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No Longer the "Pitcairn Nike"
A Minerva-Victoria from Cyrene

Irene Bald Romano

Until about ten years ago, visitors to the University of Pennsylvania Museum were greeted at the top of the stairs leading to the Greek gallery by the striking half-scale marble statue of a goddess clothed in swirling drapery (Figs. 1-3). The statue was loaned to the Museum in 1935 by its owner, Raymond Pitcairn. During its residence in the Museum, Rhys Carpenter, the eminent specialist in Greek sculpture, studied the statue and argued that it was a Roman copy of the winged, chryselephantine (gold and ivory) Nike, the Greek personification of Victory, that stood on the hand of the 5th century BC cult statue in the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens (Carpenter 1953-54, 1959). This colossal Athena Parthenos had been made by the famous Greek sculptor Phidias (see Fig. 8).