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# A MAGICAL LAMELLA FROM A ROMAN TOMB IN CAMPOMARINO ATTILIO MASTROCINQUE (Università di Verona) & Alfonsina Russo

# (Soprintendenza per l'Area Metropolitana di Roma e l'Etruria meridionale)

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#### ABSTRACT

The burial of a boy and that of a man have been discovered in a small Roman cemetery at Campomarino (Province of Campobasso, Italy) beneath a square platform which was the base of one funerary monument. Among the funerary goods of the man an iron ax, an amulet against the evil eye, and a gold lamella were found. The Greek text written on the lamella is meant to seek protection from angelic beings in favour of a child. These angels were the magical symbols (*charakteres*) and words themselves which are written at the beginning of the text. Two interpretations of this amulet are presented: it was either worn by the man when he was young, or used by him as a protection for the boy lying in the other tomb, who was a member of his family.

KEYWORDS: GRAECO-ROMAN MAGIC - MAGICAL LAMELLAE - AMULETS.

#### Una lamella magica di una tomba romana in Campomarino

### RIASSUNTO

In un piccolo cimitero romano a Campomarino (Provincia di Campobasso, Italia) sono state trovate le sepolture di un ragazzo e di un uomo; esse erano poste sotto una piattaforma quadrangolare, che probabilmente sosteneva un unico monumento funerario. Tra il corredo funebre dell'uomo sono stati rinvenuti un'ascia in ferro, un amuleto contro il malocchio e una lamina d'oro. Il testo greco iscritto sulla lamina è volto a cercare la protezione di potenze angeliche in favore di un bambino. Questi angeli non sono altro che i simboli (*charakteres*) e le parole magiche iscritte all'inizio del testo. Sono proposte due interpretazioni per questo amuleto: esso era portato dall'uomo quando era giovane, oppure era usato da lui come protezione per il bambino che giaceva nell'altra tomba, che era un membro della sua famiglia.

PAROLE CHIAVE: . MAGIA GRECO-ROMANA, LAMINE MAGICHE, AMULETI.

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# 1) The discovery of a peculiar tomb

The gold lamella which is presented here was discovered in the tomb of a man (tomb 3B) from Campomarino (Province of Campobasso), on the Adriatic shore, in a place called Marinelle Vecchie. This tomb is dated to the first half of the 3rd century CE and was unearthed during the summer 2010, in an archaeological campaign carried

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out by the Università degli Studi del Molise in co-operation with the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici del Molise. A volume with the general archaeological report of the graveyard of Campomarino was published in 2013 by G. De Benedittis<sup>1</sup>.

The site of Marinelle Vecchie is located on the right side of the Biferno river, close to its ancient mouth. At present the coast is far more to the east than in the past. The ancient shore was near the Renaissance watch tower of Campomarino, 30 km from the Roman necropolis (fig. 1). The site of Marinelle Vecchie was thus placed

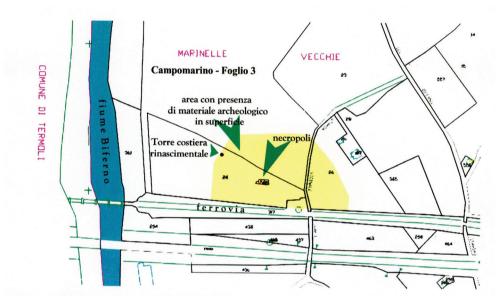


Fig. 1. Plan of the archaeological site

near the Biferno's ancient mouth, close to the sea (fig. 1a). It was a landing place, located in a canal-harbor which is mentioned in several medieval sources, according to which it was mostly frequented for cereal trading<sup>2</sup>.

Geo-magnetical surveys in 2007 and 2008 detected some remains of large walls close to the river, which were hypothetically interpreted as parts of the harbor<sup>3</sup>. Subsequent field surveys and excavations in 2007 allowed it to be established that this area was frequented from the 4th century BCE to the 7th CE. We can suppose

G. DE BENEDITTIS (ed.), 2013. On this site in antiquity see G. DE BENEDITTIS, 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> L. Giustiniani, 1797, 73-74; G. De Benedittis & M. Pagano, 2010, Folder-186

V. Compare, M. Cozzolino & P. Mauriello, 2008.

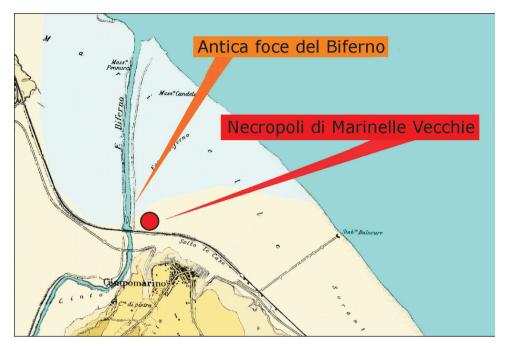


Fig. 1a. Site of Marinelle Vecchie

that this landing place depended on the economy of the Frentanian city of Larinum and its territory, where many Roman villas and agricultural and livestock breeding centers flourished<sup>4</sup>.

During the 2008 campaign a small necropolis was discovered. In 2011 a sector<sup>5</sup> of this graveyard was excavated, where twelve tombs came to light, whose orientation is always NW-SE and whose grouping probably reflected the organization of two familial groups. According to the published burial finds<sup>6</sup>, these tombs can be dated between the end of the 2nd to the middle of the 3rd century CE (fig. 2).

The first burial group, wherein also the lamella was discovered, was apparently composed of five individuals: two men, one woman, and one boy.

The tombs were shaped according to two main types: either "alla cappuccina" (i.e. covered by tiles arranged as a two-sided roof) or "a massetto". In this latter type (also used for the tomb with the lamella) older pieces of buildings were re-used, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> G. DE BENEDITTIS (ed.), 2013, pp. 9-14.

Dimensions of this sector: m. 6 x 13; G. DE BENEDITTIS (ed.), 2013, p, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> G. DE BENEDITTIS (ed.), 2013, pp. 52-74.

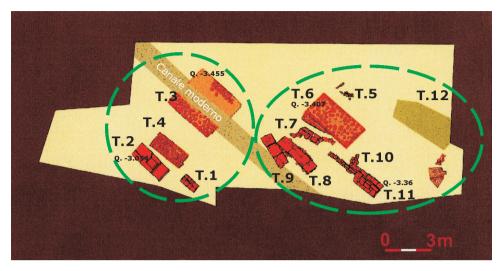


Fig. 2. Tombs of the Marinelle Vecchie Site

namely *pilae, tubuli*, and *tegulae mammatae*, taken from termal baths, which could have been part of a large abandoned villa in this area.

A funerary inscription dating between the second half of the 1st century CE and the first half of the 2nd had been re-used to covering one of the tombs (tomb 5) of the 3rd century, and it testifies to an early burial place.

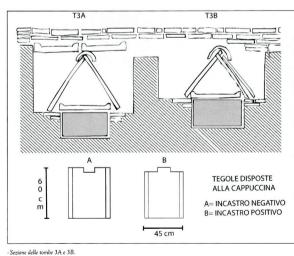


Fig. 3. Tomb 3B

The tomb 3B (fig. 3), where the gold lamella was laid, was shaped as a rectangular pit, whose perimeter was consolidated with tile sherds, and whose roof was made with two horizontal tiles, placed over the dead's legs and some objects. Over this tomb a "cappuccina covering" was made, consisting of three tiles on each side, cut in order to fit together. Close to this tomb another similar one was discovered (tomb 3A), placed at a deeper level than tomb 3B. Both were placed under one single square

hard covering, consisting of mortar, tile sherds, and other re-used elements. This square of 3 x 4 meters was probably the base of a funerary monument.

This single covering shows that the two buried persons were somehow related to each other, probably by a familial link. These two deceased were recumbent, with the burial gifts close to their feet<sup>7</sup>, lying in a wooden coffin, 40 iron nails of which came to light in the tomb 3B (that of the lamella) (fig. 4).

In this tomb, between the "alla cappuccina" roof and the horizontal tiles, which sealed the wooden coffin, a peculiar bronze pendant was discovered (fig. 5). It was decorated with concentric circles, consisting of tiny circular raised edges filled with

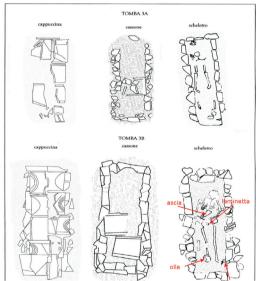




Fig. 4. Tomb 3b

Fig. 5. Bronze pendant from T3b

glass paste or enamel. This form recalls that of the magical eye. This pendant could be interpreted as an amulet against the evil eye, laid to protect this special deceased<sup>8</sup>.

The anthropological analysis of osteological remains established that he was a man 45 to 55 years old<sup>9</sup>, whose tendon-to-bone attachments are small, and this fact suggests that he was not engaged in hard and long lasting works. This man suffered from either

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> G. DE BENEDITTIS (ed.), 2013, pp. 54, 61-67.

A. Alvaro Nuno, 2009, pp. 77-122. Specimens in the Altes Museum in Berlin are particularly similar to that from Campomarino.

S, Guglielmi, B. Marracino, S. De Vincenzo & A. Minelli, in G. De Benedittis (ed.), 2013.

osteoarthritis or arthrosis. This latter is a degeneration of bone tissues, depending rather on age than on a true disease. Also the noteworthy traces of rubbing on the teeth depended on age, but could depend on alimentary habits as well, or even on special use of teeth.

The individual in the tomb 3A died young, between his 18 and 25 years; he was small (150 cm. tall) and slender, and suffered from a periostitis of the leg bones, possibly due (or due also) to the thin sole of his shoes. His bones are in a bad state of preservation and therefore it is impossible to recognize her/his gender.

# 2) The grave goods

The man in the tomb 3B held the shaft of an iron ax in his right hand, whose wooden part is lost.

This tool could have been intended as a testimony to the man's job (fig. 6). G. De Benedittis<sup>10</sup> supposes that it was a tool to cut wood for barges; however, due to its shape, it should rather be interpreted as a tool to cut stones (a mason's ax), for it is similar to those of the *fossores* depicted in the catacomb of Domitilla and on funerary stones such as that of the *fossor Iunius*<sup>11</sup>.



Fig. 6. Grave goods from the T3B

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> G. De Benedittis (ed.), 2013, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *ICUR* II, 4629.



Fig. 6a. Grave goods from the T3B

On the other hand, this individual was not submitted to hard work during his life, and this fact could suggest a more symbolic meaning of his ax, which could be compared with those on funerary reliefs and deprecatory inscriptions such as *sub ascia*, *ab ascia*, *ad asciam dedicare*. They were aimed to prevent the violation of a tomb<sup>12</sup>.



The gold lamella (fig. 7) was folded up and lying on the pubes; it was probably kept in a bronze case (traces of greenish stuff were noticed on the lamella's surface)<sup>13</sup> and tied with a string hanging from the neck or from a belt. Near his feet, under the tiles, other accompanying gifts were placed, among

Fig. 7. The gold lamella

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> P. Prigent, 1997, pp. 91-92.

A gold lamella kept in a silver case has been found in the Roman Villa of San Giovanni di Ruoti (Lucania): R. Reece, 1997, pp. 83-87; A. M. Small, 2008, p. 448 and fig. 28.

which one small single-handled cooking pot, pertaining to the class of "Corrugated cooking Ware" and containing a coin of Severus Alexander, laid as a Charon's obol (fig. 8).

It is a dupondius (double aes): RIC IV.2, (1938), 111, no. 519; gm. 11,35, diam.



Fig. 8. Coin of Severus Alexander

mm. 26<sup>15</sup>:

Obverse / Bust of Severus Alexander looking right; a small part of a mantle is visible on the left shoulder. IMP SEV ALE XANDER AVG

Reverse / Annona standing and looking left, steering a rudder with her left hand and holding two wheat ears with her right hand. A modius is placed at her feet. P M TR P X COS III P P and, on the field: S C

Because of Severus' 10th tribunicia potestas, this coin is datable to the year 231 CE.

Furthermore a lamp was lying, pertaining to the "Firmalampen", with open channel and mouldmark, whose reading is hard 16, problably *Fortis*. Furthermore there

Specimens of this class have been found in Central and Northern Italy: Cosa (type Cosa LS/100, S.L. Dyson, 1976, p. 153, fig. 62) and Settefinestre (A. Ricci (ed.), 1985, p. 123, pl. 33, no. 16). A similar single-handled cooking pot is part of the collection of the Samnite Museum of Campobasso (A. Di Niro (ed.), 2007, p. 143, no. 270).

H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, C.H.V. Sutherland, 1930, no. 642; R.A.G. Carson, 1963, no. 817;
 A.S. Robertson, 1977 vol. III, p. 170.

Type Dressel/Lamb5d, Ponsich Va/Loeschke 10A. The name-stamp Fortis (CIL XV, 6450) is widely attested in lamps of the Firmalampen – Dressel type 5-6 (H. Dressel, 1899), Loeschke IX - X (S. Loeschcke, 1919); cf. D. M. Bailey, 1980, 96, stamp Fortis, Q 1172: Fortis was the trendiest of all pottery brands, the workshops was probably in Modena and Gallia Cisalpina and its products were used

were also some glass fragments of one glass, of a type (Calvi, group B) which can be dated from the second half of the 1st century CE to the 4th. The quality of the glass suggests a dating to the 3rd century<sup>17</sup> (fig. 9).

The boy in the burial 3A was accompanied by a similar series of objects, which can be dated to the 3rd century CE. They are a small pot<sup>18</sup> containing a bronze coin, whose state of preservation is very bad; a "Firmalampe" with open channel and mouldmark *Crescens*<sup>19</sup>; an iron nail and a glass unguentarium<sup>20</sup>.



Fig. 9. Objects from the burial 3B

The funerary goods from tomb 3B, and in particular the ax and the lamella, show that this deceased was a peculiar man, and his burial testifies to different influences from many peoples of the Mediterranean sea area in this harbor on the Adriatic sea shore.

up to the end of the second century A.D. Its stamp was copied and reproduced throughout the empire. See also C. Gualandi Genito, 1977, 114, no. 122; S. Fioriello Custode, 2003, p. 118, no. 109; E. Buchi, 1975, pp. 65-93, pl. XXIII-XXXIII; G. L. RAVAGNAN, 1983 (55 lamps have been found in Altinum).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> C. ISINGS, 1957, pp. 46 ff.; M.C. CALVI, 1968, p. 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Type Luni I 213 9K

Lamp with open channel (Buchi X). See also E. Buchi, 1975, p. 194; C. Gualandi Genito, 1977, pl. 59, nos 438, 440; G. D'Alascio, 2002, p. 146, no. 376, pl. XXIV, no. 6; M. Salvani, 2002, p. 30.

The glass ampulla from T3A-1 could be compared with Isings 26 (1st century A.D.) and Calvi groups I - H (from the end of the 1st century A.D. to the end of the 3rd century A.D.): C. ISINGS, 1957, p. 40; M.C. Calvi, 1968, pp. 37-38, pl. 3, nos 1 and 2, pl.4, nos 1 e 8; See also the glass ampullae from the incineration tomb of Piane di Falerone (Augustan age), they are similar but smaller than this: "Marche-Piane di Falerone", *NSc* 1974, 140, fig. 65/a-e.

# Attilio Mastrocinque

# 3) The magical lamella

Thanks to the fundamental work by Roy Kotansky<sup>21</sup> on ancient protective metal lamellae the knowledge and the understanding of those intriguing finds is now easier and deeper. Furthermore, recent discoveries, especially in Italy, have expanded our knowledge in this field<sup>22</sup>.

One should not confuse these amulets with the *defixiones*, which are cursing spells mostly written on lead lamellae and placed into tombs, pits, springs, cisterns or other emplacements which were supposed to be in communication with the world of the dead. The *defixiones*, dating from the 5th century BCE, preserve spells which are aimed at entrusting living people to the gods of the dead or causing a punishment of some enemies. On the contrary, the gold lamella which is published here, pertains to the category of protective gold or silver amulets, to be kept in a small case and hung on the neck. Their use was spread among many cultures of the Mediterranean sea from an archaic age, and now they are still used in the Islamic world to bear verses of the Koran and thus protect people. In the past as still today they were also written on papyrus, parchment or paper, and inserted into silver cylindrical cases. Amulets are known with Greek, Latin, Aramaic, or other semitic writings. Many amulets had been lost because of being written on perishable leaves. They were mostly discovered in some tombs, where they were left as personal objects of the deceased, but specimens were also discovered in sanctuaries or houses.

The inscription on the lamella (mm. 37 x 28) probably originated within a Jewish or Christian culture, for it bears an invocation to the angels, in order to obtain their protection. One must notice, however, that also many pagans called "angels" the lower rank deities<sup>23</sup>. Sometimes texts on lamellae show magical symbols or names, which are labeled "angels". These *charakteres* and magical names are the gods themselves, whom the practitioners recurred to in order to prevent diseases, demons, and other evil.

The text of this lamella (fig. 10) presents many difficulties and can be read in this manner:

<sup>21</sup> R.KOTANSKY, 1994.

Cf. my survey in A.Buonopane - & A.Mastrocinque, 2005. See the interessant specimen on a terracotta sherd: L.D'Amore, 2005; and one on lead: D.Giannobile & D.Jordan, 2006; D.Giannobile, 2008.

Cf. Giuliano l'Apostata. Discorso su Helios re. Testo, traduzione e commento di A.MASTROCINQUE, Nordhausen 2011, footnote 131.



Fig. 10. Gold magical lamella,

ΦΑΥΦαωΑΦΘΦΑω
ΦΦΑΥ ΦΡηΝ ΦΙΙΙΙΙΙηηηηη

CΙωωωωFFFFFΑΑΑΑΑ

ωΙΑωΚαΚΚΧΙ
ΑΓΙΟΙ ΑΝΓΕΛΟΙ CωCATE
ΤΟΝ ΠΑCΧΟΝΤΑ ΤηΚΝΑ

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άγιοι άνγελοι ςώς ατε τὸν πάς χοντα τῆκνα

We would have, in a more correct spelling: ἄγιοι ἄγγελοι cώcατε τὸ πάςχον τέκνον

Phauphaô Aphaô Aphthphaô Phphau Phrên Ph iiiiii êêêêê Si ôôôô FFFFF AAAAA ô Iaô Kakkchi.

Holy angels, save the suffering son (or child)!

Concerning paleography, we notice the following features:

ω: ω but  $\r$  as a magical *charakter*<sup>24</sup>; α: $\r$  but  $\r$  as a magical *charakter*; ε: $\r$ ; η:  $\r$ ;  $\r$  AY in ligature, Ἰάω in ligature.

The names of angels consist of variations of the name Phaphaô, of the Egyptian god Ra (written as Rê preceded by the article ph and followed by an euphonic -n, i.e. Phrên, as often occurs on magical texts); series of vowels follow, which were voices of the planets. The name Kakkchi was not yet documented.

The angels are the *charakteres* themselves. Many magical texts provided us with this interpretation. We read, in fact, on a magical lamella<sup>25</sup> purchased in Damascus: κύριοι ἀργάνγελοι θεοὶ καὶ θῖοι γαρακτῆρες ἀπελάςατε πᾶν κακόν...(Lords gods archangels and holy charakteres, avert every evil!). On another amulet from Phthiotic Thessaly one can read<sup>26</sup>: δύναμις τον χαρακτήρον δότε νίκην...(power of archangels and of *charakteres*, give me victory!). On a magical papyrus<sup>27</sup> we see some charakteres, which are thereafter invoked as θεοὶ κραταιοί, "mighty gods". A magical inscription on stone from Acrae (Sicily)<sup>28</sup>, meant to protect the fields, bears many charakteres, and says: ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ Κ(υρί)υ Ἰ(ηςο)ῦ Χ(ριςτοῦ) ἄγιοι ἄγελυ ο(ί) ἐπιγ[ρ]άφοντες<sup>29</sup>... (in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; holy angels drawn...). On one of the so-called "Sethian lamellae" (which were actually defixiones from Rome, Porta S. Sebastiano) one can read: "and you, holy Eulamon, and holy symbols, and holy assistant spirits from the right and from the left side, and you, very holy Symphony written on this lamella which makes people freeze...". 30 In this case, the symbols are the *charakteres* and the Symphony is the series of vowels which are inscribed on the lamella. On a *defixio* from Apamea<sup>31</sup> we see 36 *charakteres*, which are addressed in this manner: κύριοι ἀγιώτατοι χαρακτῆρες δήςατε... (very holy Lords charakteres, bind...). In this case, the 36 charakteres represent the 36 Decans. On a defixio discovered

On the *charakteres* and their relationship with the alphabet: R.Gordon, 2011. On invocations to *charakteres*: A.Mastrocinque, 2001; A. Buonopane & A. Mastrocinque, 2005; Mastrocinque, in A. Mastrocinque (ed.), 2003, Introduzione, § 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> R. Kotansky, 1994, no. 57, 12-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> R. Kotansky, 1994, no. 41, 47-9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> *PGM* VII, 421-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> G. Pugliese Carratelli, 1953, pp. 184-189; Id., 1956, p. 170, no. 50; M. Burzachechi, 1959, pp. 408-10; G. Manganaro, 1994, p. 497.

Probably instead of ἐπιγραφόμενοι; cf. the *defixio* from Carthago which will be mentioned soon, on which the *charakteres* are described as: "ἐγραμμένοι" ("written").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> R.Wünsch, 1898, no. 16; cf. also no. 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> W. van Rengen, 1984, 213-6.

near the amphitheater of Carthago one can read: ὑμεῖς ἄγγελοι οἱ ἐπιγραμμένοι, δόται ἀςθένιαν... ("you, angels, who are drawn here, cause exhaustion...) $^{32}$ .

The invoked angels could bring either evil or good. On the theater of Milet one can see an inscription<sup>33</sup> and seven *charakteres*, accompanied by series of vowels; each group of one *character* and the vowels is labeled ἄγιε (holy), and followed by this sentence: "Archangels, protect the city of Milet and its inhabitants!". Sometimes the *charakteres* are described as ῥυστικοί, "saviors"<sup>34</sup>.

According to Salustius<sup>35</sup>, the *charakteres* were imitations of the powers of superior gods, and the emperor Julian wrote<sup>36</sup> that they induced the gods to be present.

The spell in the lamella from Campomarino recalls that on a lamella from Beroea, Macedonia: κύριοι ἄνγελοι σώσετε...Εὐφήλητον<sup>37</sup>.

It is difficult to define the social milieu wherein this magical spell has been produced. τὸ πάσχον τέκνον probably corresponds to the request of the individual who asked for the amulet, who said in Latin: sufferentem filium or patientem filium or sufferentem / patientem puerum. The masculine τὸν πάσχοντα τῆκνα<sup>38</sup>, instead of the neuter, probably depended upon the Latin filium. But Greek was the language of magical arts, even if in latinophone milieus, and the magician who conceived of this amulet did not speak a good Greek.

The mechanics of the sought magical protection is puzzling, because an amulet for a child has been found close to the corpse of an adult. More than one hypothesis could be conceived in order to explain this find.

- 1) The first hypothesis could be that the lamella was written for the buried man when he was a child and then he preserved it as a personal amulet. The comparison with the lamella from Beroea could be used to reinforce this hypothesis.
- 2) Roy Kotansky suggested to me a second hypothesis: the deceased could have been a medium between the suffering son and the angels. This man could have been

<sup>32</sup> D. Jordan, 1996, pp. 116-119.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> CIG 2893; H.Grégoire, 1922, no. 221; F. Krauss, 1973, pl. 137.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> *PGM* I. 266.

<sup>35</sup> Salust., De dis et mundo 15.2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Iulian., Or. VII.11 = 216 c.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> R. Kotansky, no. 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> I think it is less probable that the word is a plural; in this case the mistake would be in the article.

supposed to have some special power in order to communicate with angels. The use of inserting texts into tombs is documented in Egypt since the times of the pharaohs, for either protective or aggressive magic. The soul of some deceased men was supposed to be an agent among the gods and to serve as a medium in favor of living men.

A similar hypothesis could be put forward because a boy was actually buried close to the tomb of the man. The protection, in this case, would have been sought for the boy, and the man was supposed to act in the netherworld in favor of the boy. It is impossible to know the chronological sequence of these two burials, but they should have taken place in a short period of time, because the funerary monument was built on their twin tombs. On the other hand, the child is defined as "suffering", and this fact suggests that he was still living. If truly the protection concerned him, and not the man, this latter was supposed to act from the netherworld in favor of the boy.

It is impossible, as well, to establish the aim of the ax. From the point of view of this second hypothesis, it could have been a weapon to avert demons and other evil from the child.

This intriguing find preserves indeed a part of its mystery and we can only guess what kind of familial tragic events occurred at some time during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in this Italian harbor.

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