Religious identity and perceptions of afterlife gleaned from a funerary monument to a young girl from (late) Roman Melite

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Possibly late during the Roman occupation of Malta, a young deceased girl had a funerary monument set up in her memory by her loving mother. Analysis of both epigraphic content and iconographic elements on this monument would show that the mother, at least, is likely to have been originally a public slave but later achieved manumission, a status which remained to be enjoyed by herself and by her daughter. Moreover, they seem to have adhered to the then commonly held beliefs regarding the nature of death and afterlife. Yet, identifying their beliefs on the nature of death and afterlife did not prove sufficient to determine their religious identity as such beliefs were evidently shared by different religious groups.

Introduction

One particular monument, the whereabouts of which have long been completely lost, may have risked being completely forgotten had it not been documented graphically a few decades after its discovery. Its graphic documentation was not published in its entirety either and had the original preparatory drawing, with its detailed graphic documentation, not been preserved, a useful bit of evidence on funerary beliefs in (late) Roman Malta would have been lost forever.

The surviving preparatory drawing facilitated an analysis of both epigraphic content and iconographic elements on this monument. Through such an exercise, this paper seeks to reveal the social status of both mother and daughter. No less importantly, it tries to gain an insight into their beliefs on the nature of death and afterlife and, through these, attempts to unravel their religious identity.

The monument

An illustration of this monument was published by Hoüel (1787, pl. CCLXI). The monument consists of a female figure seated within a scallop shell flanked by two fluted pilasters and topped by a simple tympanum

forming an aedicular shrine. The intriguing object shown in her hands, and what appears to be a *cista* (cylindrical basket) next to her feet as well as her general outward appearance might have visually represented and communicated personal qualities, virtues, values, or ideals which the person (represented by the depicted female figure) might have been identified with (for similar examples, see Borg 2013, 25-43). The monument occupies the central part of the drawing and is flanked by a funerary monument[1] on the left side and architectural specimens (column shafts, bases, and capitals) on the right side (Fig. 1).

Now preserved at the Hermitage in St Petersburg (Russia), Hoüel's preparatory drawing was, for some reason, not reproduced in full when published. As shown on the original preparatory drawing, the published part of the monument stood above a framed inscription which must have also formed part of the same monument and complemented the sculpted relief figure (Fig. 2).

The monument's provenance

Making reference to Hoüel's published version of this monument but without citing his own sources, A.A. Caruana states that the monument was found in

'Rabato, Notabile' around 1725 and that it ended up in the possession of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. He adds that its whereabouts were, by the time of his writing, unknown (Caruana 1882, 117).

Caruana does not indicate the part of 'Rabato' where the monument came from. However, as it was of a funerary nature (see below), one may safely assume that it originated from the part of 'Rabato' that in Classical antiquity formed the cemetery area beyond the walls of the Roman town of Melite (today's Mdina and part of today's Rabat) in conformity with what was prescribed by Table 10 in the mid-fifth-century BC Law of the 12 Tables which did not permit burials or cremations in a city/town (Toynbee 1996, 48; Mellor 2013, 4). This picture is so far confirmed by the distribution of known burials beyond the confines of the towns of Melite and Gaulos (Said-Zammit 1997).
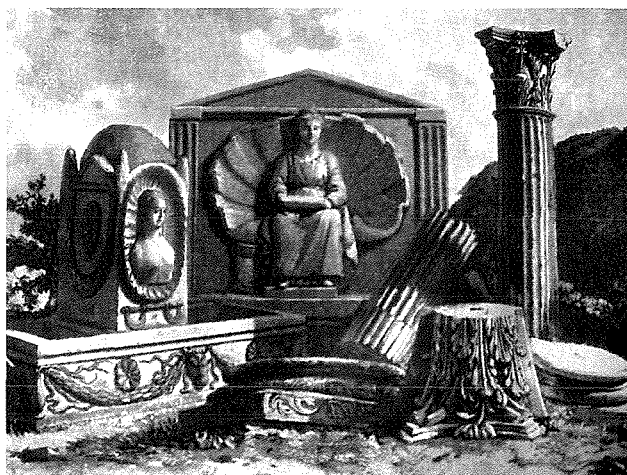
Figure 1. The funerary monument as published by Jean Houël. The monument occupies the central space on plate CCLXI reproduced here from Houël (1787). Courtesy: Malta Libraries.

## The inscription[2]

Text:

D(is) M(anibus)

Publiciae Glycerae
F(iliae) Su<a>e carissimae
et Pientissimae quae
VIXIT ANNIS XV DIEBUS XXV VIRGI(NE)
BENE MERENTE FECIT PUBLICIA
IRENE MATER

Translation:

To the gods Manes

Publicia Irene, the mother, well deservedly erected (this monument) to Publicia Glycera, her dearest and most affectionate daughter, who lived as a maiden for 15 years and 25 days.

As shown by its inscription, the monument was erected, presumably over her tomb, by Publicia Irene for her daughter Publicia Glycera who died at the age of 15 years and nearly a month. No date is given for its erection. However, the opening dedicatory formula *Dis Manibus* (abbreviated *DM*), followed by the name of the deceased in the dative case and the name of the dedicator in the nominative case, as on our inscription,
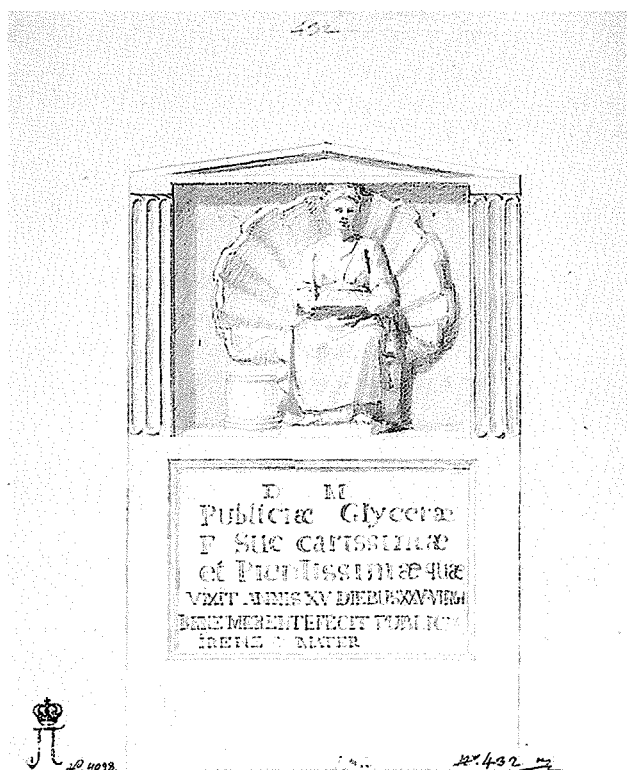
Figure 2. The entire funerary monument as shown on the original preparatory drawing preserved in the album, Series of preparatory drawings for the engraved edition 'Picturesque journey around the islands of Sicily, Malta and Lipari', 1782-1787, kept at the Hermitage in St Petersburg, Russia. Drawing: Black chalk, 21x17.2 cm. Source: http://www.arthermitage. org/Jean-Pierre-Laurent-Houel/Tombstone-with-a-Bas-Relief-and-an-Inscription-from-La-Valletta.html (accessed on 17th November 2014). Courtesy: State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg and Mr Daniel Cilia.

became popular – particularly on provincial funerary inscriptions – after the Julio-Claudian dynasty that came to an end in AD 68. It became more common from the end of the first century AD and during the following three centuries (Calabi Limentani 1968, 176; Cooley 2012, 61, 421). The presence of an *hedera distinguentis* (ivy-leaf motif used as interpunct) integrated before the final word in the inscribed text would also point to the Roman Imperial period as the period during which the monument was erected (Calabi Limentani 1968, 149), but perhaps not before the second half of the second century AD when *hederae distinguentes* became common. The use of such ivy leaf motifs as interpuncts at Rome may have had its origins during the Trajanic period (AD 98-117) although elsewhere in the empire it was found before this period. However, it became common during the second half of the second century AD (Cooley 2012, 432). Nonetheless, a date even as late as the fourth century AD cannot be entirely excluded for our monument and its inscription as the latter seems to betray certain traits that are attributable also to Christianity in this late period (see below).

## Some observations on the social identity of Publicia Irene and her daughter Publicia Glycera

As was customary in Roman times, a (freeborn) daughter's name was composed of the feminine form of her father's *nomen gentilicium* or *gens*/family name, either on its own or followed (sometimes, preceded) by a *cognomen*/personal epithet. Inheriting, instead, the maternal *nomen gentilicium*, would generally indicate an illegitimate birth (Calabi Limentani 1968, 157, 162; Keppie 1991, 20). Both mother and daughter on our inscription carried the feminine form of the *gens* name *Publicius*. It may seem, therefore, that either both Publicia Irene's father and her husband, who was also Publicia Glycera's father, belonged to the *gens Publicia*, carrying the *gens* name *Publicius* as their second name in their respective *tria nomina*,[3] implying also that Publicia Irene was married within her paternal *gens* of the *Publicii*, or else her daughter Publicia Glycera was of an illegitimate birth.

In addition, both mother and daughter carried a *cognomen*. Though different from each other's, both of their *cognomina* are of a Greek (or Hellenistic) derivation. Irene, the mother's *cognomen*, is derived from the Greek word for 'peace' and is also

encountered on Jewish and Christian epitaphs. On the latter, for example, it seems to have borne an etymological link with the Christian value of peace (Calabi Limentani 1968, 164; Cooley 2012, 234, 268).[4] On the other hand, Glycera (the daughter's *cognomen*) was a popular name for Hellenistic courtesans.

It is unclear what these *cognomina* truly reflect of their respective holders' true personal identities. Apart from other information they may provide (see below), their Greek *cognomina* may reveal that they were *libertae*/freedwomen after having previously been slaves. Freedmen and freedwomen (i.e., ex-slaves or freed slaves) carried the *gens* name of their former master in their official nomenclature, generally adding, from the first century BC, a Greek (or non-Latin) *cognomen* that could be the same name by which they were known as slaves (Calabi Limentani 1968, 157, 161, 163; Cooley 2012, 410-11; Harvey 1984, 398; Verboven 2013, 90, 93, 102 notes 18, 21). If so, rendered in the feminine form as *Publicia* in their respective names, the *gens* name *Publicius* (see above) would have not been that of their respective fathers but that of their former common master who would thus have belonged to a *gens Publicia*. But *Publicius* (or *Publicia*) was generally the *nomen gentilicium* of the *liberti* (or *libertae*) who had been previously public slaves employed in the public service of the state and the municipalities. Public slaves of municipalities used to be freed by a decree of the local senate (Buckland 1921, 66-67, 82; Calabi Limentani 1968, 161). Thus, the *gens* name *Publicia* common to both mother and daughter may rather suggest that, before being manumitted, both of them had previously been public slaves presumably employed in the public service of the Maltese *municipium* by whose local senate's decree they are expected to have achieved manumission. As the *cognomina* amongst families of the *liberti*/*libertae* and of the inferior classes were not inherited (Calabi Limentani 1968, 158), the different *cognomina* of the mother and daughter (namely, Irene and Glycera) would also seem to indicate manumission.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether Publicia Irene and her daughter were *libertae* (freedwomen) or first-generation *ingenuae*/freeborn women from previously freed parents but who still carried nomenclature typical of the *liberti*/*libertae* (see Lee 1956, 50; Keppie 1991, 20; Borg 2013, 41). While the former may be more likely, it might have also been the case that only Publicia Glycera was freeborn
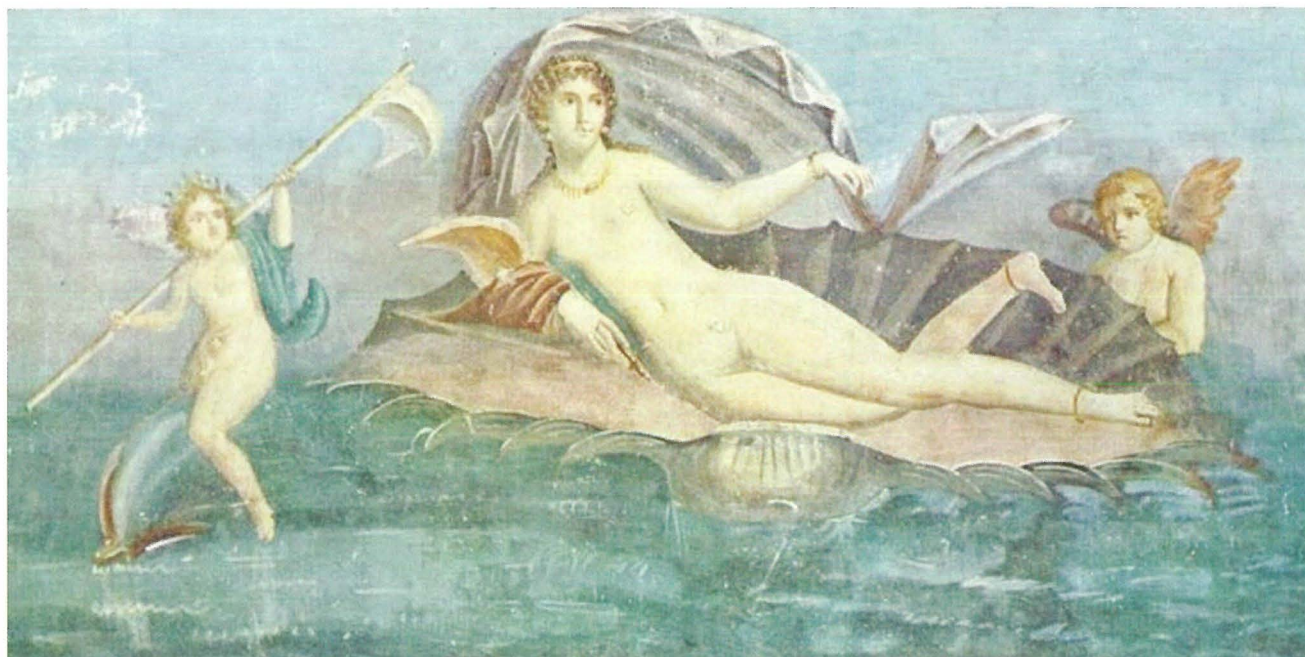
Figure 3. The birth of the goddess Venus shown on a scallop shell rising above the sea waves. Mural on one of the walls of the House of Venus in Pompeii. Source: http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/paula_chabot/house/pchouse.38.jpg (accessed on 17th November 2014). Courtesy: VRoma Project's Image Archive.

(*ingenua*) and carried nomenclature typical of the *liberti/libertae*, while her mother Publicia Irene had been freed (*liberta*) from her servile status earlier, before the daughter was born.

In any case, two important ingredients seem to stand out: the free status (whether as *libertae* or as *ingenuae* with nomenclature typical of the *liberti/libertae*) of both dedicator and deceased and the moral virtues of the latter epitomised by her maiden status. This seems to correspond with what one would usually find expressed on tomb reliefs and inscriptions of freedmen/freedwomen in particular (Borg 2013, 29) even if one cannot fail to note the contradictory nature of the deceased's *cognomen* Glycera on the inscription of our monument in respect of her attributed maiden status (see below).

Furthermore, while they could sometimes have also been used by the freeborn population, sculpted reliefs (commonly in bust form, less frequently as complete figures) like the one we have on our monument are rather typical of freedmen/freedwomen funerary art (Borg 2013, 26, 41-42).

The funerary nature of the monument

The inscription starts with a dedication to the gods Manes (see above). These were the deified spirits of the dead ancestors and, thus, every family had its own Manes. It was customary for funerary inscriptions to start with such a dedication.

But, apart from this dedication which is, itself, a sufficient criterion for the identification of the funerary nature of the monument, the scallop shell within which the female figure, supposedly representing Publicia Glycera, is shown seated forms another useful criterion.

In Classical iconography, the scallop shell was a symbol of birth or re-birth (Werness 2004, 359). It seems to be within this symbolic context that scenes showing the birth of the goddess Venus depict her on a scallop shell rising above the sea waves. The best known ancient representation of this theme is perhaps the mural, executed before AD 79, preserved on one of the walls of the House of Venus in Roman Pompeii (Fig. 3).

But, when associated with burials, the scallop shell could have symbolised re-birth in the context of death as illustrated, for example, by the portrait of a deceased person within a scallop shell shown, with another deceased person, on a funerary monument now in the Museo Capitolino, Rome (monument no. 17 in Calabi Limentani 1968, 206-208). In funerary contexts, therefore, the scallop shell might have signified re-birth, through death, to a new life. It is presumably with this meaning that scallop shells are

Figure 4. Relief portrait of a deceased couple within a scallop shell on a sarcophagus (inv. no. 31535) of the first half of the fourth century AD from the cemetery of St Calixtus in Rome. Apart from the portrait of the deceased couple, the sarcophagus carries also biblical scenes. Source: http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/couple_sarcophagus.jpg (accessed on 17th November 2014). Courtesy: VRoma Project's Image Archive.

sometimes found deposited in burials as part of the funerary repertoire accompanying the deceased (see, for example, Ciurana *et al.* 2013). This same meaning or belief is evidently manifested in the execution of our monument and in the symbolism it employs. Thus, one can more easily comprehend why the female figure, evidently representing the deceased Publicia Glycera, is shown in close relation to a scallop shell on our funerary monument.

Finally, without implying that it was necessarily inspired by it, one cannot fail to note a degree of iconographic similarity between the figure of the deceased girl on our monument where she is shown seated within a scallop shell and the figure of the newly-born Venus on the Pompeii mural where she is shown reclining on a scallop shell.

Possible Christian elements

In late Roman times, Christians would also adopt the scallop shell symbolism evidently to express the same belief which they also shared since, for them, death was, and still is, regarded as the moment of true birth (see Cooley 2012, 62, 231). In fact, the scallop shell motif is sometimes found on Christian sarcophagi where it is often seen in close relation to portraits of the deceased, almost as seen on our example. Fine examples, with biblical scenes, of the first half of the

fourth century AD are to be seen at the Museo Pio Cristiano, in the Vatican. Their respective portraits shown within scallop shells (Fig. 4) range from those of deceased couples (e.g. inv. nos 31532, 31535, 31551) to those of deceased brothers (e.g. inv. no. 31543) and individuals (e.g. inv. no. 31431). The scallop shell motif is also seen in window tombs in presumed Christian catacombs in Malta. Examples are found in the Tal-Mintna catacombs (c. fourth century AD) near Mqabba, and in one of a group of hypogea at Il-Magħlaq, in the vicinity of Mnajdra prehistoric temples (see Adams 1870, 253, pl. VIII (fig. 2), pl. IX (fig. 9); Bonanno 2005, 336). One particular example coming from a small hypogeum at Ix-Xagħra ta' Santa Duminka, Kalkara, is seen lightly scratched on a window tomb in close relation to a rudely engraved stylised portrait of an orant figure – presumably the deceased as in the examples on the early Christian sarcophagi mentioned above – whom it frames (see Buhagiar 2005, 5). The same motif still maintains its presence – though less frequently – on tombstones in modern-day Christian cemeteries (Fig. 5) where it seems to retain the same message of belief in re-birth, through death, to a new life.

But the use of the scallop shell and the belief it conveyed are not the only elements encountered on our funerary monument that were common to Christians and to the Graeco-Roman world. The formula *bene merente fecit* on our inscription is

frequently encountered on Christian epitaphs but is not necessarily exclusive to these (Cooley 2012, 231). Along with elements indicating family roles (in our case, mother and daughter), verbs like *fecit* that indicate the dedication of the tomb/funerary monument, and epithets of affection like *carissima* and *pientissima*, the formula *bene merente* made gradual appearance on Christian funerary inscriptions between the mid-third and the beginning of the fourth centuries AD, having already been present on non-Christian funerary inscriptions of the third century AD (Calabi Limentani 1968, 201-202; Carletti 1986, 15-16) from where they may have been borrowed and retained. Likewise, the use of the opening dedicatory formula *Dis Manibus* persisted even amongst Christians, albeit to a lesser extent, in Rome until the mid-fifth century AD, while amongst Christians in North Africa it persisted until the sixth and seventh centuries AD (Calabi Limentani 1968, 202; Cooley 2012, 232-34). Early Christians may have kept resorting to this formula in the hope that it would help protect the inviolability of the tomb (Cooley 2012, 232). An example is provided by a fifth- to sixth-century AD inscription from Via Portuense, Rome (inscription no. 117 in Carletti 1986, 127).

Christian epitaphs became increasingly distinctive during the fourth century AD with details relating to the deceased's age at death amongst others and epithets qualifying his/her lifestyle in relation to the Christian faith (including emphases on maidenhood) while, by the end of the same century, individuals' names began to increasingly reflect Christian ideals, values, and beliefs. Such names often comprised a new baptismal name (*cognomen*) adopted alongside the former one (Calabi Limentani 1968, 200-201; Carletti 1986, 17-18; Cooley 2012, 234-35).

Perhaps, one may observe traits possibly similar to the above ones even on our monument's inscription. Being also etymologically linked with the Christian value of peace, Publicia Irene's own *cognomen* Irene may have been added to her other name Publicia to reflect a Christian identity (see above). However, this *cognomen* could also have been added simply to reflect her status as freedwoman (see above) leaving us, in this case, with no clear identification of her religious identity. Other possibly similar traits are detailed information of the age of Publicia Glycera at the time of her death, and the importance apparently afforded to her claimed maiden status. Nonetheless, it would seem difficult to reconcile Publicia Glycera's own *cognomen* Glycera with any Christian ideals,

Figure 5. A nineteenth-century tombstone from St Oswald's church graveyard in Durham (England) displaying the scallop shell motif on top. Photograph: the author.

values, and beliefs and, particularly, with the maiden status attributed to her on the inscription. Unhappily, this would leave us again with no conclusive views about the latter's true religious identity.

Concluding remarks

Along with its inscription, our funerary monument seems to present a juxtaposition of elements that are equally attributable to different religious groups, including Christians, thus making the precise religious identity of both dedicator and dedicatee all the more difficult to establish. At least, however, we know that they seem to have embraced the common belief of an afterlife following the termination of the earthly one.

In addition, the picture so far attained seems to confirm the scenario marking the period to which our monument is tentatively dated: a period of transition during which religious traditions (including Christianity) co-existed on the Maltese islands (Azzopardi 2007, 24) to such an extent and in

such a way that, as confirmed by the case studied, the co-existing religious identities could hardly display any distinctive characteristics or elements enabling the positive identification of any particular religious group.

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Notes

1 This monument (labelled *n* in Höuel 1787, pl. CCLXI) was seen by Höuel near the Citadel (in Victoria), Gozo but he was informed that it originated from a tomb or sepulchral chamber (Höuel 1787, 108-109).

2 This inscription does not feature in the tenth volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* published by Mommsen (1883), indicating that, by then, the inscription (and, presumably, the entire monument) was probably already lost.

3 As required by the Gracchan *lex repetundarum*, Roman official nomenclature of male citizens consisted of three main elements in the following order: 1. the *praenomen*: forename or the name given on birth; 2. the *nomen* or *nomen gentilicium* (usually ending in *-ius*): the *gens* (or family) name followed, first, by the patronymic (or father's name) and, then, by the name of the voting-tribe to which, as a Roman citizen, the individual was ascribed; and 3. The *cognomen* (sometimes, two *cognomina* and, rarely, even more): a sort of a nickname or epithet which served as a distinguishing factor.

4 As if to underscore the Christian value of peace, from the first half of the third century AD, the 'peace' salutation (itself of biblical derivation and already in use amongst the living Christians) was also resorted to by Christians to address their deceased, at first in combination with and then substituting earlier non-Christian/secular expressions of salutation. By the mid-third century AD, the same Christian form of salutation assumed a more eschatological dimension (Carletti 1986, 13-14).