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ROMAN FUNERAL STELE OF A BOY *CHRYSANTHUS*

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A gravestone stele from the Dan Lifshitz collection¹ is kept in the storeroom of the Kibbutz Nir David Museum (Israel). Its inventory number is 72-5697.

The stele is made of white marble (width 21.5 cm., height 67 cm., thickness 6 cm.). The left and right edges are broken at the bottom. Plaster is evident in the lower edge. The back is smooth.

The upper part of the stele has a rounded niche (11 cm. in diameter and 3.4 cm. in depth), in the centre of which emerges a portrait bust, carved in deep relief. Both the haircut and garment make it clear that the bust represents a boy. The cast of his features is highly individual: the ears are comparatively large; his chin is marked by a dimple; the slightly pouting lips are tightly pressed. The hair is set in wispy asymmetrical curls.

The portrait is flanked by two attributes. Over the right shoulder of the boy a *caduceus* (approximately 3.5 cm. height) is clearly recognizable. On the opposite side a slightly damaged object (height 3 cm. at least) is visible. Its upper part consists of a bottle-like neck. The rubbing yielded a horizontal notch at the point where the neck spreads out into an oval object. Its upper outlines are still existent, whereas its lower section is partly damaged. This object can be, with a great deal of certainty, identified as *marsupium*, its neck being the upper part of the purse and the notch serving the purpose of fastening its content by a cord.

The writing field is within the following borders: width 18 cm., height 14 cm. The letter forms are serified and well-cut. Letter heights: line 1: 2 cm., line 2: 1 cm., line 3: 0.7 cm., line 4: 1 cm., line 5: 1 cm., line 6: 1 cm. The punctuation: *hedera* in line 1. The interline space is 0.5 cm.



The inscription:

D(is) · M(anibus)
Chrysanto fecit
Zosimus pater
bene merenti vi
xit ann(os) V me(n)s(es) VIII
dies XXI

The stele was erected by *Zosimus* in honour of his son *Chrysantus* who died at the age of 5 years and 8 months. It is difficult to determine exactly the legal status of father and son. The persons commemorated in the inscription have only Greek *cognomina*, which in most cases indicates servile origin.² The 269 persons with *cognomen Zosimus* on Solin's list are represented as follows: slaves and freedmen 92, *incerti* 172, and only 4 freeborn.³ The cognomen *Zosimus* was in favour among slaves and freedmen in the period 50–150 AD.⁴

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¹ R. Last, Five Unpublished *tituli sepulcrales*, ZPE 125, 1999, 249.

² H. Solin, Probleme der römischen Namenforschung. Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom, BN 5, 1970, 276–300; esp. 290. On the studies of the social distribution of Greek names in Roman onomastics see: R. Je. L'ast, Quelques problèmes de l'ononastique romaine dans la littérature récente (en russe), VDI 137, 1976, 185–194.

³ H. Solin, Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom, Berlin and N. Y., 1982, 819–822.

⁴ H. Solin, Die stadtrömischen Sklavennamen, Stuttgart 1996, 438–439.

Regarding *Chrysantus* it is possible to say with certainty one thing only: he was not freeborn. Children born from two freedmen were freeborn persons.⁵ The status of these children is usually confirmed by the *sepulcrales inscriptiones*⁶ as well as by funeral reliefs.⁷

It is possible to assume that *Chrysantus*' mother (who is not mentioned in the inscription) received the status of a freedwoman before her son's birth. In that case (even with a slave father) the son would have had the status of *libertus*.⁸ However, when the mother is unknown and the father may be either a slave or a freedman (the situation presented by our inscription), the probability that the son had the status of *libertus* is very low. Such a conclusion is supported by the research of S. Treggiari.⁹ According to her data concerning the family life of the slaves and freedmen of *Volusii*, the majority of children of a "father slave" and "mother unknown" were slaves. The children of a "father freed" and "mother unknown" were either slaves or freedmen in the proportion of roughly 50% to 50%. These data lead to the conclusion that the probability of *Chrysantus* being a freedman is low, but not low enough to ignore this possibility altogether.

One of the reasons for such a conclusion may be the form of the name *Chrysantus*. The *cognomen* *Chrysantus* is rare in Rome. Among the 9 persons on Solin's list¹⁰ with the *cognomen* *Chrysantus* there are 6 freedmen, one son of a freedman, one *verna Caesaris*, one slave. The ending *-tus* of the *cognomen* *Chrysantus* (contrary to *-thus* of *Chrysanthus*) was used, probably, by parents in order to emphasize that their children were free. As has been mentioned before *Chrysantus* of our inscription could be a freedman due to his mother's freedwoman status. He also could have been freed later either by his parents or by other owners.

The freedman status of *Chrysantus* is also confirmed by the iconography. *Caduceus* as well as *marsupium* rank iconographically as attributes of the god *Mercurius*. The employment of those attributes classifies the funerary monument as *consecratio in formam deorum*. This is the term H. Wrede uses to define sculptures and reliefs of private citizens *post mortem*, who are iconographically assimilated to gods or even identified with them.¹¹ The *caduceus* appears on nearly all monuments of this kind related to *Mercurius*.¹² The *marsupium* is occasionally employed. It should be noted that *Mercurius* figures highest in this category of deceased likened to various divine figures. He is especially conspicuous with regard to children who were immortalized in this way. The reason is to be sought in the multifunctionalism of the god *Mercurius*.¹³

Recent studies of Roman funerary reliefs, urns, and altars show that divine allusion on the Grabreliefs and altars are common for deceased children of freedmen.¹⁴ In particular freedmen or descendants of freedmen chose to portray their deceased children as *Mercurius*.¹⁵ Because of the well

⁵ On status of freedmen children see G. Fabre, *Libertus*, Rome 1981, 174–195, in particular pp. 176 and 180 for *enfants légitimes*.

⁶ Ibid. 120, ref. 108 and 109.

⁷ Fabre (note 5) 204–205; on *insignia ingenuitatis* of freedmen's children on Grabreliefs see P. Zanker, *Grabreliefs römischer Freigelassener*, *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Instituts*, 90, 1975, 286–297.

⁸ Fabre (note 5) 174–175; S. Treggiari, *Family Life among the Staff of the Volusii*, in *Trans. Am. Phil. Ass.*, 105, 1975, 398–399.

⁹ Treggiari (note 8) 399.

¹⁰ Solin (note 3) 168–169.

¹¹ H. Wrede, *Consecratio in formam deorum*, Mainz 1981, 3.

¹² To list a few examples only: *Sextus Rufius Achilleus* in Wrede (note 11) Kat. No. 222; portrait herm of a boy, Kat. No. 213; *M. Turranius Benedictus* in *LIMC* 6, 1, pp. 516–517.

¹³ F. M. Heichelheim, *RE* 15, 1, 1011–1012.

¹⁴ D. E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Imperial Funerary Altars with Portraits*, Roma 1987, 87, 88, 92; Kleiner, *Women and Family Life on Roman Imperial Altars*, *Latomus* 46, 1987, 550, 552, 553; Wrede (note 11) 105, 114.

¹⁵ Kleiner (note 14, "Roman imperial ...") 88, Cat. No. 46; Kleiner (note 14, "Women ...") 548; Wrede (note 11) 114, 125, Kat. No. 216–218, 222.

known commercial properties of the god, Wrede interprets those *consecrationes in formam Mercuri* as the parents' wish to commemorate their wealth and social position by associating their children with the god of wealth and success.¹⁶

The interpretation of the epitaphs of children "*in formam Mercurii*" on Grabreliefs and altars leads according to Wrede to the conclusion that the deceased were either sons of freedmen, *vernae Caesaris*, or freedmen.¹⁷ In the case of *Chrysanthus* and *Zosimus* there is no certainty that they were freedmen. Both of them may also have been slaves.

Finally it has to be remembered that *Mercurius* was also labeled "god of travel and conductor of the souls".¹⁸ His functions as guide of souls to the nether world is eloquently described in Augustan Roman poetry.¹⁹ Since funerary art does not *stricto sensu* merely elucidate the past life of the deceased, but likewise engages in speculations on after-life, one should also look for the implied eschatological significance. As a chthonic divinity, *Mercurius* could assist the deceased in the transition from this world to the realm of the *manes*.

This concern for a safe passage was of poignant interest to the bereaved, especially in the case of those who died in the prime of youth. Prematureness of death stands out in Roman conceptions of death with regard to the length of mourning and the ceremonies relating to the *funus acerbum*.²⁰ One should add the concern about the final location of the *immaturi* in the abode of the dead: a special place awaited him outside the ordinary community of the *manes* – "*in limine primo*".²¹ The natural grief over the death of a child was thus augmented by anxiety about his ultimate fate. Who was more suited to facilitate the dangerous passage to the beyond than *Mercurius*, god of earthly affairs as well as heavenly guide, the Psychopompus?

On an iconographical level, two qualifications are possibly illustrated in the stele from the Lifschitz collection. The first one – the father's wish to assimilate his son to the god of wealth and success. This wish is illustrated on the stele by the purse on the left side. The second one – the father's wish to assimilate his deceased son to the god of travel, who would eventually also lead him to the other world. This wish is illustrated by the *caduceus* on the right side.

Funerary steles of the kind considered here were popular throughout the Roman Empire, but most of all in Rome and its surroundings, especially in the second century A.D.²² According to modern studies most of the Grabreliefs with private deifications (in particular the *Mercurius* deification) of children of Roman freedmen date from the Flavian to the Hadrianic period.²³ As has been mentioned before the hair of *Chrysanthus* is set in wispy asymmetrical curls. It strongly resembles the hairstyle of the four year old *L. Mussius Pinus*. His funerary bust was dated by Wrede to 115–135 A.D.²⁴ Hence the iconographic data point to the first part of the second century A.D.

On the basis of the palaeography the precise dating of the stele is very difficult, particularly due to the cursive style of the epitaph. Some criteria, however, allow us to determine roughly an appropriate historical period. Thus the abbreviation *D.M.* indicates that the inscription cannot predate the Augustan

¹⁶ Wrede (note 11) 70–71.

¹⁷ Ibid. 69, 70, 96.

¹⁸ Kleiner (note 14, "Roman Imperial ...") 88.

¹⁹ Hor. Carm. 1, 10, 17–20; Verg. Aen. 4, 242–244.

²⁰ Plut. Numa 12; Sen. Epist. 122, 10; Servius, Aen. 6, 224; Fragmenta Vaticana 321: *lugendi autem sunt parentes anno, ~ liberi maiores X annorum aequae anno. quem annum decem mensuum esse Pomponius ait; nec leue argumentum est annum X mensuum esse, cum minores liberi tot mensibus elugeantur, quot annorum decesserint usque ad trimatum; minor trimo non lugetur, sed sublugetur; minor anniculo neque lugetur neque sublugetur.*

²¹ Verg. Aen. 6, 426–429; J. T. Vrugt-Lentz, *Mors Immatura*, Groningen 1960, 70–71.

²² R. Brilliant, *Roman Art*, Newton Abbot 1974, 96.

²³ Kleiner (note 14, "Roman Imperial ...") 85; Wrede (note 11) 67–73.

²⁴ Wrede (note 11) 69–70, Kat. No 218.

era.²⁵ The *hedera* (line 1 of the inscription) rarely appears before the second century A.D.²⁶ It follows that the palaeography of the inscription does not contradict the dating made by means of the iconographic analysis.

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²⁵ J. S. & A. E. Gordon, *Contributions to the Palaeography of Latin Inscriptions*, Berkeley 1957, 216–217.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 184, 216.