CHARON'S OBOL AND OTHER COINS IN ANCIENT FUNERARY PRACTICE

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GREEK AND LATIN LITERATURE from the late fifth century B.C. to the late second century A.D. mentions the custom of placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased as a payment to the boatman Charon for ferrying the soul across Acheron or Styx into the underworld. The sources are sufficiently common and consistent to promote the belief that "Charon's obol" was a widely-practiced funerary custom throughout the Greco-Roman world.[1] Although the classical authors who mention the custom are widely separated in time, space, culture, and literary genre, their unanimity on the subject of coins for the dead should not surprise us since all of them mention the custom in the context of an underworld journey. As a result, their focus is usually on Charon and other proverbial characters of the Greek netherworld rather than on funerary customs *per se*.

Removed as they are from any mythological context, coins found in cemeteries represent the facts of funerary practice. While archaeology confirms that a single low-denomination coin was sometimes placed in the mouth of the deceased at the time of death, the most striking thing about the evidence from ancient cemeteries is how different a story it tells from classical authors. Only a small proportion of burials contain any coins at all; in many of these, multiple coins (sometimes valuable) were placed in various locations on the body, sometimes at the time of death, sometimes at the time of burial. The evidence shows that "Charon's obol" was only one manifestation of a much wider funerary use of coins and suggests a richer and broader context in which it can be understood.

Scholars have attempted to reconcile this apparent contradiction between the literary "obol" and the archaeological evidence by calling the custom "Charon's fee," a rubric which at the same time accepts the mythological motive of ancient authors and acknowledges the many different forms of the practice attested by archaeology.[2] Rather than advancing our under-

[1] A. Mau, "Bestattung," *RE* 3 (1900) 342, 349 and H. Blümner, *Die Römischen Privataltertümer* (Munich 1911) 486; K. J. Marquandt and A. Mau, *Das Privatleben der Römer*[2] (Leipzig 1886) 349; L. Friedländer, *Darstellung aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*[9] 3 (Leipzig 1921) 298; G. Wilke, "Charonspfennig," in M. Ebert, ed., *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte* 2 (Berlin 1925) 302–303.

[2] D. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (London 1971) 163, 166, 211, 331; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (London 1971) 44, 119, 124; R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca 1985) 23; L. Grinsell, "The Ferryman and His Fee," *Folklore* 68 (1957) 257–269.

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standing of the funerary use of coins, however, the rubric tends to restrict interpretation by implying that a single view of the Afterlife motivated the funerary use of coins for the dead throughout classical antiquity and beyond.

While much has been written on the subject of Charon,[3] few classicists have chosen to focus on coins.[4] I suggest that to understand the custom we need to separate it from the myth. To grasp what these coins may have meant, we need to step away from Charon and listen to what authors and cemeteries have to say about money and death in ancient funerary practice.[5]

THE LITERARY EVIDENCE

According to ancient authors, the custom of "Charon's obol" has four characteristics, though there are some variations in their discussions: (1) a single low-denomination coin (2) is placed in the mouth (3) at the time of death (4) to pay Charon's fare.

Aristophanes specifies that the custom involves a single coin. Near the beginning of the *Frogs* Dionysus is on his way to retrieve Euripides from the underworld. When he asks Heracles how he is to cross the fathomless depths of Acheron, Heracles replies, "an old sailor will row you over in a boat no bigger than this for the fare of two obols." This draws from Dionysus the tongue-in-cheek response "Wow! What a lot two obols buys" (lines 140–141). Whether the sum in this passage stands for the traditional daily wage or the cost of a theater ticket, it is shorthand for an insignificant, yet inflated amount of money.[6] The joke would not work unless the audience was familiar with both the custom of providing the dead with one obol for passage to the underworld and the rampant inflation of late fifth-century Athens.

Five epigrammatists of the *Greek Anthology* agree with Aristophanes that the traditional sum of the fare is one obol. Leonidas' sepulchral epigram on Diogenes the Cynic reads:

[3]F. Sullivan, "Charon the Ferryman of the Dead," *CJ* 46 (1950) 11–17, at 12; A. Hermann, "Charon," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 2 (1954) 1056–60; O. Waser, *Charon, Charun, Charos* (Berlin 1898); B. Lincoln, "The Ferryman of the Dead," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 8 (1980) 41–59.

[4]P. Sartori, "Die Totenmünze," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 2 (1899) 205–225; H. Borza, "Le Mythe de l'obole de Charon et le symbolisme actuel de la monnaie dans le cercueil," *Orbis* 4 (1955) 134–148.

[5]I would like to express my appreciation to the Classics faculties of the Universities of Wisconsin, Rochester, and College of the Holy Cross for fruitful discussions of earlier versions of this paper.

[6]L. Radermacher, *Aristophanes' Frösche. Einleitung, Text und Kommentar*[2] (Vienna 1954) 158.

O grim minion of Hades who plies the waters of Acheron in a dark boat, take me, the dog Diogenes aboard, even if your horrible craft is weighed down by those who have died. My luggage is only a flask, a wallet, an old cloak, and the obol that pays the passage of the departed. (*Anth. Pal.* 7.67.1–6)

In this context, the obol is an *exemplum* of a convention, the fulcrum on which the reversal of the poem turns. The philosopher who flouted convention in life, finds himself following convention in death. The point of Archias' companion piece (*Anth. Pal.* 7.68) is the same. The poignancy of the poems lies in their picture of the impoverished Diogenes who still has too much luggage to take on his underworld journey.

Closely related to Leonidas' and Archias' poems are sepulchral epigrams by Ammianus, Antiphanes, and Lucilius. Ammianus' poem is for an anonymous individual with a voracious appetite for real estate.

Even if you remove your neighbor's boundaries all the way to the Pillars of Heracles, a portion of earth equal to that of all men awaits you, and you will lie like Irus, with no more than an obol, dissolving into earth what is no longer yours. (*Anth. Pal.* 11.209)

The obol in this poem is the great equalizer, the symbol of death that makes rich men and poor men equal. The point of Antiphanes' poem (*Anth. Pal.* 11.168) on a miser who never enjoyed life is similar to that of Ammianus'. Of the vast fortune he had amassed by the time of his death, he could take only an obol with him to the underworld. Lucilius' miser Hermocrates (*Anth. Pal.* 11.171), after making himself his own heir, refused to pay the doctor the extra drachma fee it would cost to save his life because it would cut into his inheritance, even though he could take only one obol with him.

A passage in Lucian's dialogue *Charon* makes the point that Charon's fee is to be paid in base metal. As Charon tours the upper world in the sixth century B.C., he observes Croesus offering gold ingots to Apollo at Delphi. He asks his guide Hermes whether that "pale yellow substance with a cast of red" is gold, because it is the first time he has ever seen it. He knows bronze, of course, because he collects "an obol from everyone who makes the downward journey." Hermes' response is that bronze is plentiful and therefore less prized than gold which is rare (*Charon* 11).

In his elegy for Cornelia, Propertius contrasts the upper world where the gods can be swayed by prayer, with the hopelessness of Hades where "once the collector (*portitor*) has taken his toll (*aera*), the murky gate encloses the overturned pyre" (4.11.7–8). In this passage, the toll is the final separation of the living from the dead. *aera* can be either the general term for money or the plural of the specific monetary unit *aes*. In either case, it carries the sense of pocket change, low denomination bronzes, and, like Lucian's passage, emphasizes the base metal character of the fare over its exact

amount. Propertius is one of several Latin authors who, in contrast with the Greeks, are ambiguous about the number of coins given to Charon.

The second characteristic of the custom of "Charon's obol" described by ancient authors is that the coin was placed in the mouth of the deceased. Fragment 278 of Callimachus' epic *Hecale* describes a city, identified by Strabo as Hermione in the Argolid,[7] in terms of the special privilege granted to its inhabitants. "In this city alone even the dead receive no fare (πορθμήιον) which it is the custom for others to carry in dry mouths."

One episode of Juvenal's third satire on the noisomeness of the city of Rome also mentions the fact that the coin is traditionally placed in the mouth of the deceased. The poet presents us with the image of a man crushed to death under a cartload of Ligurian marble when the axle of a nearby cart breaks. At home, the man's slaves are busily preparing a banquet against their master's coming, unaware that he is:

> already sitting, a new arrival upon the bank, shuddering at the grim ferryman: he has no copper (*triens*) in his mouth to tender for his fare, and no hope of passage over the murky flood, poor soul. (*Satires* 3.265–268)

Juvenal's passage underscores the irony of the master's predicament. A rich man is left unprovided for in the underworld, deprived of the coin he surely could have had by the circumstances of his accidental death. The passage thus introduces the third salient feature of the custom of "Charon's obol," that the coin was placed in the mouth of the deceased at the time of death. The *triens* in this passage reminds us that the coin was the mark of a death anticipated and prepared for.

The two most detailed passages about the custom of "Charon's obol" make a point of the timing of the offering. Lucian's essay *On Funerals* satirizes the custom of putting a coin in the mouth of the deceased as one of many funerary customs and beliefs relating to the underworld:

> So thoroughly are people taken in by all of this that when one of the family dies, immediately (πρῶτα) they bring an obol and put it into his mouth to pay the ferryman for setting him over, without consideration what sort of coinage is customary and current in the lower world and whether it is the Athenian or the Macedonian or the Aeginetan obol that is legal tender there, nor indeed that it would be far better not to pay the fare (πορθμήια), since in that case the ferryman would not take them and they would be escorted to life again. (*On Funerals* 10)

Besides giving all the features of the custom mentioned by other authors, this Lucian passage, like Leonidas' and Archias' epigrams, emphasizes the conventional character of the custom.

Apuleius' second-century novel *Metamorphoses* is the source of the latest classical Latin passage on "Charon's obol." In the Cupid and Psyche story

[7] Strabo 8.6.12. Other cities have similar privileges; see R. Pfeiffer, *Callimachus* 1 (London 1949) 262.

in Book 6, the last trial that Venus sets for Psyche is to go to Hell and return carrying a box with enough of Proserpina's beauty in it to last a day. As the despairing Psyche goes to a high tower to commit suicide, having decided that is the easiest and quickest way to the underworld, the tower speaks to her. It tells her not to jump because, once dead, she cannot return to the upper world. It instructs her to go to the gates of Hades at Taenarus prepared for her journey with two sops of honey and barley in her hands (to pacify Cerberus) and two coppers (*stipes*) in her mouth. The tower continues:

> You will come to the river of the dead where Charon is ferryman who demands his fare (*portorium*) in advance, before he carries the soul over to the further bank in his patched boat. Hereby you may see that avarice lives even among the dead; neither Charon nor the father of Dis, powerful as he is, does anything for free. A poor man on the point of death must make provision for his journey (*viaticum*); if by chance he does not have a coin (*aes*) at hand no one will allow him to pass on. You will give one of the coppers (*stipes*) you have to that foul old man for your passage (*naulum*), but make him take it himself from your mouth with his own hand. (6.18.4–5)

By proffering the example of a poor man on the point of death, Apuleius emphasizes that the obol is, first and foremost, a preparation for death. The tower's instructions to Psyche continue. After she gets the box from Proserpina, she is to retrace her steps to the upper world, and give the second sop to Cerberus and the second coin to Charon for her return passage. This is a precious explanation for the double fare, in the vein of Aristophanes' alteration of the standard fare for humorous effect. The second coin will bribe Charon into performing a forbidden task, taking her back across the river.

Finally, all the Greek and Latin authors, whether they mention Charon by name or not, are unanimous in explaining their coins for the dead as payments for the ferryman's fee.

These are the bare facts of the custom as each author reports them, but there is more to be gleaned from these texts than the four characteristics of "Charon's obol." The shared themes and vocabulary of these passages help to tie them together and suggest a broader motive for the practice of giving coins to the dead which may underlie the notion of the ferryman's fee.

In the first place, the low value of this coin for the dead is clearly important, whether expressed by a single coin or more than one low denomination bronze. Our sources make the connection between death and poverty, suggesting that the low value of the coin is a symbol of the poverty of death. The epigrammatists in particular play on this point. In Leonidas' and Archias' poems, even the Cynic philosopher Diogenes who is proverbially poor in life has more than he can take with him in Charon's boat.

In other words, however poor Diogenes may have been in life, he was richer than when he is dead. Ammianus, Antiphanes, and Lucilius make a similar point using rich men instead of a poor one as their subject. The point of their epigrams is that rich men are transformed by death into poor men. While Lucilius' Hermocrates was miserly by choice in life, he became poor by necessity at death. For these characters, the obol is *pars pro toto* of their living wealth (Borza [above, note 4] 142). Juvenal takes this theme a step further. As he dies, Juvenal's master is deprived of his wealth. He did not even have the coin for his passage to the other world because his death was sudden and unexpected.

Apuleius' *duas stipes* for Psyche are another measure of the symbolic character of the single coin fare to the underworld, but the passage is markedly different in tone from the epigrammatists' interpretation. Rather than the expensive one-way ticket we saw in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Psyche's two coins, as the sops for Cerberus clearly show, are a payment for a round-trip ticket. As the first coin is a symbol of her "death," so the second is a symbol of her "rebirth," a powerful message in the *Metamorphoses* whose hero Lucius is to become a devotee of Isis. By doubling the mythical fare Apuleius transforms the final journey into a passage of the soul from this world to its rebirth into the next.

The prologue from Plautus' *Poenulus* suggests another way in which coins for the dead are symbolic. A rich and distinguished Carthaginian whose seven-year-old son has been kidnapped has died of a broken heart some six years after the event. Before his demise, however, the father made his cousin his heir. As result the rich man "departs for Acheron without the fare for the trip" (*sine viatico*, line 71). This turn in the plot plays on the same reversal of fortune as that at the center of Juvenal's scene. When Plautus' rich man dies he is so poor that he does not even have the fare for his passage, because on the point of death he gave his fortune to his cousin, a proverbially stingy heir. This is the fate that Lucilius' miser Hermocrates strove to avoid.

The word *viaticum* is crucial. In the Plautus passage it is used in its specific meaning of the fare for the underworld journey, but the word itself also carries the general meaning of provisions for any journey. This is certainly the case in the Apuleius passage where he uses first the general term, then refers to it as *aes* in a later clause. In both cases the word implies a conscious and orderly preparation for death. Furthermore, this use of the word *viaticum* suggests that coins for the dead, at least in the Roman world, may well have been perceived of as replacing alimentary goods in the grave, a symbolic provisioning of the soul for its journey to the underworld. The word has an interesting and suggestive later history, since it carries into Christian Latin a meaning of nourishment for the soul during its journey after death. *viaticum* is the eucharist, the *communio Dei*

which was placed in the mouth of the faithful at the moment of death to provide for the soul in its passage to eternal life. This Christian deathbed rite has been thought by some to replace the classical "Charon's obol."[8]

Thus, where Latin authors use the word *viaticum* for "Charon's obol" they suggest that coins may have been placed in the mouth because the offering was perceived of as nourishment. On a more basic level, by placing the coin in the mouth of the deceased, the living signalled that it was intended for the soul. The head was commonly believed to be the seat of the soul which passed out of the body through the mouth as the dying breath. This belief is probably also the source of the rite of the last kiss.[9]

The importance of placing "Charon's obol" in the mouth in order to touch the soul is closely linked to the time of placement. The coin was placed at the time of death, when the soul began its journey to the other world. This fact is crucial to understanding the custom, because it makes placing the coin a rite of passage rather than a burial practice. In the lead-in to the Juvenal passage, the author emphasizes the importance of the moment of death when the "wretched man's crushed corpse disappears, just like his soul" (lines 260–261). The placing of the coin, as we saw in Propertius, marks the closing of the doorway between the living and the dead. In fact, one of the first acts after a death was to close the mouth of the corpse, sometimes with linen or gold bands, to insure that the soul did not return again to the body.[10] Seen in this light, the coin may have been seen as a payment to the dead to keep them from returning to this world.[11]

Finally, the authors are unanimous in their explanation that the coin is intended as a payment to Charon for the soul's passage to the underworld. Yet, in the process of describing the custom of "Charon's obol," both ancient authors and the characteristics of the practice themselves suggest that several different motives might underpin it. How seriously are we to take the mythological explanation of the practice? The tone and context of the passages hold the key. Excepting Callimachus and Propertius, the custom of "Charon's obol" is mentioned for humorous, as in Aristophanes, or ironic effect, as in the epigrams and Plautus. Other authors, notably Lucian and Juvenal, use the custom as a proverbial example of the vanity

[8]A. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, DC 1941) 93–94, *contra*, G. Grabke, "Christian Viaticum: A Study of Its Cultural Background," *Traditio* 9 (1953) 1–43.

[9]R. B. Onians, *The Origin of European Thought* (Cambridge 1951) 97–102, 132–134, explores beliefs about the head as seat of the soul, *contra* Kurtz and Boardman (above, n. 2) 211, Grinsell (above, n. 2) 262, and D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus 9. Necrolynthia: A Study in Greek Burial Customs and Anthropology* (Baltimore 1942) 205.

[10]Sartori (above, n. 4) 217–219, Garland (above, n. 2) 23, E. Stommel, "Bestattung," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 2 (1954) col. 202.

[11]E. Samter, "Hochzeitsgebräuche," *Neue Jahrbücher* 19 (1907) 134 ff.

of conventional views of the underworld. Apuleius too is critical, though he proposes an optimistic alternative to the traditional model.

Lucian introduces his dialogue *On Funerals* 1 by saying: "when a loved one dies, they simply commit their grief into the charge of custom (νόμος) and habit (συνήθεια)." Lucian sees the custom of "Charon's obol" as part and parcel with the characters and geography of the poetic underworld. In his caustic description, Lake Acheron "cannot be crossed or passed without the ferryman, for it is too deep to ford, too wide to swim across; indeed, even dead birds cannot fly across it" (*On Funerals* 2). Lucian is not alone in his skepticism. Epitaphs remind us that the poetic view of the Afterlife was not necessarily accepted at face value. In fact, they often employ the motif of the underworld journey to discount the poets' view. One reads:

> There is no boat in Hades, no ferryman Charon, no janitor Aeacus, no watchdog Cerberus. All of us beneath the ground in death have become bone and ashes.[12]

The point of this poem is that the underworld fantasy of the poets is only a mask for the grim reality of death. This is the spotlight that Lucian focuses on the custom of an obol for Charon. By using the practice as an example of blind superstition Lucian forces his audience to see it as a futile response to a cataclysmic and unalterable event. In *Charon*, Lucian bases the title character's criticism of gifts for the dead on the fact that the chasm between the living and the dead is impassable. In his opinion, coins for the dead fall into this chasm.

In the *Downward Journey*, Lucian tells us more about the custom by using it to illustrate the miserliness of the wealthy. The main characters in the dialogue are the tyrant Megapenthes who tries to run away from the underworld and has to be clubbed into submission, the cobbler Mycillus who is so poor he does not know if an obol is square or round, and the cynic philosopher "Little Dog" who died, like Diogenes, from having eaten raw squid. The dialogue follows the progress of their souls into the underworld. In the end, the rich man Megapenthes has to pay his own fare and is forced to carry Mycillus on his back because the latter cannot pay. Cyniscus, though he cannot pay his fare either, works his way across by helping to row the boat. Lucian's point seems to be that the cobbler and the Cynic both fare better in death than the tyrant. Men already poor in life fare better in death than the rich and powerful who have more to lose. This is the same theme we have seen linking many of our other sources to each other and to Lucian.

Apuleius explains the connection between money and death that other authors only hint at. The tower tells Psyche that the moral she will learn

[12] *Epigrammata Graeca* 646.3–6, translated and discussed by J. Ferguson, *Among the Gods: An Archaeological Exploration of Ancient Greek Religion* (London 1989) 135.

from her underworld journey is that avarice rules. Even the gods will do nothing without being paid in advance. The poverty of the world of the dead is personified in the venality of Charon. He only has to be paid one pitiful coin to be bribed to do what is forbidden, to take her back across the river. In fact, it is money that makes the underworld go around. Apuleius explains that the custom of "Charon's obol" in essence is the only logical response to avaricious death. Money is the only effective commodity in dealing with the underworld.

THE ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Like the testimony of ancient authors, the archaeological evidence of coins for the dead has its own peculiar focus—on where, when, and what coins were found—and its own blind spots—it offers little insight into why and in the case of cremations where they were placed. Nevertheless by comparison with the literary evidence for coins for the dead, the archaeological record is both rich and varied. While the cemeteries most helpful to this study are generally large and have been systematically excavated and recorded, and while their excavators have considered the implications of their coin finds, these are only a small fraction of the total record. The survey that follows is therefore impressionistic rather than comprehensive. Furthermore, it has a narrow focus on the location, quantity, and value of coins in burials which does not allow for variables unique to particular cemeteries. Nevertheless, it can identify broad patterns among cemeteries.

Like the literary mentions of "Charon's obol," the distribution of coins in burials is temporally and geographically wide. The earliest coins in Greek burials date to the fifth century B.C.[13] and the custom continues sporadically throughout the Roman period into the late fifth century A.D. when pierced coins appear in graves as jewelry rather than currency.[14] Geographically, the evidence of coins in burials comes from all over the Greek world, and during the Roman period coins appear in burials in virtually every province of the Empire where coins are in daily use, even as far north as Britain. Taken together the number of coins found in burials is impressive, but this abundance has strict limits. The number of tombs with coins in each cemetery is small suggesting that even when the practice was most popular, it was only customary for a small part of the population.

At Olynthus 10.2 per cent of the tombs contained coins, while among the hellenized Lucanian population represented in a cemetery at Poseidonia

[13]E.g., Corinth; see C. Blegen, H. Palmer, R. Young, *Corinth. Results of Excavations 13: The North Cemetery* (Princeton 1964) 83–84.

[14]E.g., C. Pilet, *La Nécropole de Frénouville* (Oxford 1980, BAR International Series 83) 1.164 and 3 pl. 196.

in the fourth century B.C., the percentage drops to 4.5 per cent of the total.[15] These figures are comparable with those at sites as disparate as Ampurias, Syracuse, Argos, and Myrina.[16] Coins appear to be more popular in cemeteries of the Roman period, though the percentage of tombs with coins varies widely between a high near 50 per cent of individual cremation burials in the first- and second-century A.D. cemetery at Tipasa (Algeria) and 42.2 per cent in the cemetery of a first-century B.C. Celtic community of S. Bernardo di Ornavasso[17] and lows of 9 per cent of cremations of the first and second century A.D. at Ampurias and 11.3 per cent at the same period at York.[18]

In Gaul and Belgium coins for the dead are continuously attested in the first through third centuries A.D., but are most popular in the late fourth and early fifth century.[19] In a Gallo-Roman cemetery of Flavian date at Solre-sur-Sambre 24 per cent of cremations and 29 per cent of Roman inhumations of the third century A.D. at Krefeld-Gellep in the Rheinland have coins.[20]

The second important feature of the archaeological record of coins for the dead is the variety of practices it demonstrates, in the quantity, quality, and placement of coins. A single bronze coin in the mouth of the deceased, the "Charon's obol" of literature, is just one manifestation of a rich use of coins for the dead. Of the 136 coins found in burials at Olynthus, almost all were bronze, but a few were silver. Most were single coins, but tombs with pairs or groups of four coins were also quite common. The coins were most often found in the mouth or head of the skeleton, presumably placed there at the time of death. The excavator suggests that multiple and silver coins were intended as a "tip" to Charon to ensure that the deceased would have a safe journey to the other world (Robinson [above, note 9] 205).

[15]Robinson (above, n. 9) 202 and G. Prisco, "Tra economia e società: La moneta e la tomba a Poseidonia," *Annali, Istituto Italiano di Numismatica* 27–28 (1980–81) 49, n. 67.

[16]Four per cent at Las Corts (M. Almagro, *Las Necropolis de Ampurias* [Barcelona 1953] 257 f.), about ten per cent of graves at Argos (P. Brunneau, "Tombes d'Argos," *BCH* 94 [1970] 528), and about ten per cent in a random sample at Myrina (E. Pottier and S. Reinach, "Fouilles dans la Nécropole de Myrina," *BCH* 6 [1882] 412).

[17]S. Lancel, "Tipasitana IV," *BAAlg* 4 (1970) 166–168; P. Agostinetti, "Corredi funebri e gruppe sociali nella necropoli di S.Bernardo di Ornavasso," *Studi di paleontologia in Honore di Salvatore M. Puglisi* (Rome 1985) 897.

[18]Almagro (above, n. 16) 27–29; L. P. Wenham, *The Romano-British Cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York* (London 1968) 87–91.

[19]H. Böhme, "Germanische Grabfunde des 4. bis 5. Jahrhunderts zwischen unterer Elbe und Loire," *Münchener Beiträge zur vor und frühgeschichte* 19 (1974) 149–150.

[20]R. Brulet, *La Nécropole gallo-romaine de la Thure à Solre-sur-Sambre* (Brussels 1972) 82–90; R. Pirling, *Das Römisch-Fränkische Gräberfeld von Krefeld-Gellep: 1964–1965* 1 (Berlin 1979) 21.

In tombs of the Hellenistic period in the Kerameikos cemetery in Athens coins most often appear in the mouth of the deceased, but there are also graves in which a coin or coins were in the hand, loose in the fill of the grave, or even in a vessel, and therefore were placed there at the time of interment.[21] The coins are usually bronze, but there are occasional silver and even gold coins, even "ghost money," gold plaques sometimes bearing the imprint of a real gold coin.[22] It seems likely that gold and silver coins were offered for their intrinsic use in the other world rather than symbolic value.[23]

At Poseidonia there was one silver coin among 155 bronzes, and single coins were overwhelmingly favored. Among the 68 tombs with coins, however, there were also 15 with two coins, 4 with three, 3 with four, 2 with five, 1 with six, and 1 with ten. Given the funerary ideology of the community, these coins are more appropriately connected with the prestige of the individual than with the character of Charon. In fact, the only tomb at Poseidonia with a painted Charon on the wall did not contain a coin (Prisco [above, note 15] 49–50).

At S. Bernardo di Ornavasso, 16 of the 74 tombs with coins contained a single bronze; the others combined silver and bronze, from two to five coins. Their placement, not around the head but elsewhere, together with other valuable objects in the tombs suggests that they were placed at the time of burial as symbolic affirmation of the deceased's social role and prestige rather than a ferryman's fee (Agostinetti [above, note 17] 896).

From the third century new patterns emerge among the coins in burials which appear to differentiate some traditions from practices in the classical period. In the latter half of the third and fourth century, 60 per cent of the burials at Turnacum that contained coins had more than one coin, including four burials with 11, 13, 23, and 31 in a little box. The placement of coins was quite variable as well: many single coins were in and on the head, but they were just as likely to be on the arms, near the shoulder, even at the feet, or randomly distributed in the coffin.[24]

The location of coins on the body in the fourth-century cemetery at Lankhills (Winchester) shows a similar variability. While 63 per cent of the graves with coins had single coins, in 58.4 per cent of the graves, the coins were placed elsewhere on the body than in and around the head. In the late

[21]Kurtz and Boardman (above, n. 2) 163–166, Hermann (above, n. 3) 1044–45.

[22]C. Boulter, "Graves in Lenormant Street, Athens," *Hesperia* 32 (1963) 113–137, at 126 f.

[23]Kurtz and Boardman (above, n. 2) 211, E. Pottier and S. Reinach, *La Nécropole de Myrina* (Paris 1887) 105–109, classify the coins among *kterismata*.

[24]R. Brulet, *La Nécropole gallo-romaine de la rue Perdue à Tournai* (Louvain 1977) 18, 36 f.

third- through early fifth-century cemetery of Frénouville, of the 15 tombs with coins, single or pairs of coins predominated, but one tomb also had 23 coins. More striking is the fact that coins were more likely to be found in a purse or vessel than in or around the head.[25]

The use of coins in the burials of late antiquity in Africa has analogies to these European examples. In the fifth- and early sixth-century Theodosian Wall cemetery at Carthage 19 per cent of the graves have coins, but in only 32 per cent of these are single coins present and in only a third of these is the coin associated in any way with the head. The cemetery at Carthage also has ten graves with large numbers of coins from 10 to 153 wrapped or folded in a cloth, including one grave with four gold *solidi* and 24 small bronzes.[26]

Thus, single coins and small groups of coins still predominate in late antiquity, but added to this is a small but significant series of groups of coins in purses, most often placed at the waist of the deceased.[27] Clearly, these groups of coins, like other coins not in the mouth, must have been placed at the time of interment. In general, bronze coins are most common but in some Germanic regions coins are as likely to be silver or gold as bronze. Both of these features have been attributed to barbarian influence (Böhme [above, note 19] 150–152). Along with changes in the archaeological record, however, there is also remarkable continuity. A single coin in the mouth is not uncommon in Christian graves, in fact the practice may have been spread by the church, a hint that the custom had long since been severed from its classical myth.[28]

The patterns and variability in the funerary use of coins militates against the simple model of a single custom, "Charon's fee," unique to the classical world, with origins in underworld mythology, essentially Greek, inherited, altered, and continued by Rome. While interpreting coins in cemeteries without this model is perhaps more difficult, it opens the door to understanding them on a case by case basis as something more than evidence of hellenization, romanization, or a pagan survival.[29] It frees us from the urge to look at the uniformity and continuity of the Classical tradition in

[25]G. Clark, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* (Oxford 1979) 165–167; Pilet (above, n. 14) 1.162.

[26]S. Stevens, "Burial Practices in Vandalic Carthage," in G. Markoe (ed.), *Carthage Reexplored: Papers of the Symposium at the Cincinnati Art Museum March 30–April 1 1990* (forthcoming) and M. Garrison and S. Stevens, *A Vandalic Cemetery at Carthage*, in process.

[27]B. Young, "Paganisme, christianisation et rites funéraires mérovingiens," *Archéologie médiévale* 7 (1977) 40–43.

[28]H. Steuer, "Zur Gliederung frügeschichtlicher Gräberfelder am Beispiel der Münzebeigabe," *Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschung in Niedersachsen* 6 (1970) 148–149, 156.

[29]E.g., J. Macdonald, "Religion," in Clark (above, n. 25) 409 and Agostinetti (above, n. 17) 899–920.

favor of considering variety and change in the ancient world. Furthermore, looking at the "Charon's obol" of literature in its archaeological context helps us recognize the details which both link it to and distinguish it from other funerary practices involving coins.

Historians of Greek religion have long recognized that the custom of giving coins to the dead antedates the mythological ferryman Charon.[30] Cemeteries appear to provide evidence that the custom of placing some kind of currency or symbolic property in Greek burials as a provision for the dead may also antedate the development of coinage. Some Geometric period graves at Argos and on Cyprus were furnished with spits (*obeloi*) which may have served as early forms of money. Similarly some archaic period skeletons from Olbia on the Black Sea had so-called "fish coins" in their hands, though the association of these pre-monetary objects with the tradition of coins for the dead remains obscure (Robinson [above, note 9] 205). There is even a hint, in the fifth-century A.D. lexicographer Hesychius' entry "δανάκη," that a coin in the mouth of the deceased is of Persian not Greek origin.[31] Furthermore, scholars have noted that while coins are routinely found in Roman graves, Charon was foreign to Roman religion and may not have been directly associated with the practice.[32]

If we assume, as archaeology suggests, that Charon is not the tie that binds these disparate practices of coins for the dead together, what does, besides the coins themselves? What ties all these practices together is the religious-magical significance of coins rooted in the intimate connection between money and the other world.

CONCLUSION

Ancient authors in addition to those who mention "Charon's obol" offer insights into this fundamental connection between money and the underworld. Classical Greek theories of money recognize that the power of coinage lies both in the intrinsic value of its material and a conventional value based on circulation (Aristotle *Politics* 1.6.14–16). More importantly, money has an almost magical quality because its power is abstract or "invisible."[33] A man with money is granted its power of invisibility, the power to do evil

[30]E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*[8], tr. W. Hills (New York 1966) 306 and E. F. Bruck, *Totenteil und Seelgerät im Griechischen Recht* (Munich 1926) 145, 337 f.

[31]A. Körte, "Kleinasiatische Studien IV," *AM* 24 (1899) 5, proposes an origin in Asia Minor for the custom on the basis of Hesychius.

[32]F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris 1942) 382; *id.*, *Lux perpetua* (Paris 1949) 57.

[33]L. Gernet, "Things Visible and Invisible," *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Hamilton and B. Nagy (Baltimore 1981) 343–351.

without harm to himself, Plato's point in the story of Gyges the Lydian.[34] This is the source of the enormous religious significance of money. The tyrant Cephalus states that money is good because with it one can act justly by "paying one's debts" to gods and men. He believed that money would protect him from punishment in Hades because "he who has done unjust deeds 'must pay the price' in Hades."[35] In fact, money granted individuals dispensation from various religious duties: acts of thanksgiving, offerings, expiatory rites. Fines could even be substituted for punishment.[36] In *Cratylus* 403a, Plato specifically makes a connection between Pluto who rules the "invisible region below" and Plutus, the god of the "invisible" power in the upper world.

As tangible symbols of the abstract power of money, coins were a way for the living to touch the "invisible" world of the dead. This view of money is not exclusively Greek. In an independent tradition Romano-Celtic monuments demonstrate money's chthonic connection iconographically by depicting the underworld deity Cerumnos with a sack of coins.[37]

In the Roman world, there is another ritual that links coins and the underworld. It was customary for Romans every year to throw coins into the Lacus Curtius, a place revered as an opening to the underworld.[38] This practice is formalized as the vow recorded by Suetonius of a *stips* for the emperor's safety, thrown into the Lacus Curtius annually by the Senate (*Augustus* 57). This ritual confirms that coins were regarded as a source of wealth and power in and of themselves and therefore appropriate offerings to promote health and fertility. The fact that the offering was made at a *mundus*, a "port of communication" with the underworld, links it to the custom of giving coins to the dead. The tomb, like the Lacus Curtius, was perceived as an opening between the worlds of the living and the dead.[39]

A similar connection can be made between coins and the dead in Christian funerary practice of late antiquity. In A.D. 392 Augustine wrote to the bishop of Carthage (letter 22). Aurelius objected to the practice of feasting the dead in Christian cemeteries because it was reminiscent of pagan *parentalia* and promoted drunkenness and riotous behavior. Augustine responded that although rowdy behavior should be suppressed, the custom of bringing food offerings to graves need not be. Indeed, properly regulated,

[34]*Resp.* 359e–360a, discussed by M. Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore 1978) 26.

[35]Plato *Resp.* 330d, Shell, *op. cit.* 21.

[36]Gernet (above, n. 33), "The Mythic Idea of Value," 105–106, "Some Connections Between Punishment and Religion," 247.

[37]A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London 1967) 138–139, fig. 96 discussed by Macdonald (above, n. 29).

[38]R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy Books 1–5* (Oxford 1965) 75–76.

[39]As demonstrated by the Larentalia; see G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*[2] (Munich 1912) 234.

the custom was a form of Christian almsgiving. He concluded his discussion of offerings at the grave with the remarkable statement that coins are also appropriate as alms if they are distributed to the poor on the spot. Giving alms, like visiting the sick, burying the dead and caring for widows and orphans was a way for Christians to put merit into the bank for the hereafter. In practice, almsgiving resembled a transfer of capital from the uncertainties of this world to the security of the next.[40] Alms given at the tomb, particularly a saint's tomb, would be especially efficacious, imbued with the *potentia* of the place.[41]

Augustine's world was a very different one from classical antiquity but the efficacy of giving coins at the tomb survived with a new purpose. Money offered on the tombs of the dead worked chiefly on behalf of the almsgiver, but it also benefited the poor who were quasi surrogates for the dead. In Augustine's scenario, though he stated earlier that only ignorant people think that these offerings honor the martyrs and comfort the dead, the dead also receive merit from the act of giving. What this ritual entails is money as a medium of exchange, a symbolic means of transferring power between the living and the dead, between this world and the next, a firm link to the custom of coins for the dead in classical antiquity.

Whether coins were intended as offerings of the dead to the gods or offerings of the living to the dead, all of the practices are based on the conviction of the intrinsic value of money and the importance of the tomb as the threshold to the other world. Coins offered at the time of death or at the time of interment were a way for the living to communicate with the dead, to promote life among the dead, while the door to the other world was still open. This view of coins in tombs accommodates many different views of the Afterlife as well as the forces of cultural and religious change. In the final analysis "Charon's obol" and other coins for the dead are typical of ancient funerary practice with its interplay of dogged persistence and rapid response to changing environments.[42] The tenacity of the practice lies in variety and adaptability, the key to the power of coins for the dead through 1100 years of antiquity and beyond.

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[40]W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia 1984) 421, 509; for letter 22, see Saint Augustine (Eng. tr. J. H. Barker), *Select Letters* (Cambridge, Mass. 1930, Loeb Classical Library), 8.1.6.

[41]On the *praesentia* and *potentia* of saints, P. Brown, *Cult of the Saints* (Chicago 1981) 120; on the motive for *ad sanctos* burial, Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme* (Paris 1988) 86–98, 133–169.

[42]R. Jones, "Burial in Rome and the Provinces," in J. Wacher, *The Roman World* 2 (London 1987) 831.