

Charon's *Obol* or Death-Coin? A Review of the Various Influences on the Deposition of Coins in Roman Burials

Charon's *obol* is a well known as the fee that the dead must pay for passage into the underworld. This funerary custom relies on living relatives to supply the deceased with a coin by placing it in their mouth at the time of death. This fee is detailed in Greek and Roman literature from the late fifth century BCE to late second century CE in which the sources agree that the purpose of this coin is related to the underworld (Stevens, 1991). This has led to a widespread scholarly theory that coins placed within Greek and later Roman and Roman provincial graves were intended to pay Charon (Grinder-Hansen, 1991). A review of the current archaeological evidence does not support Charon's *obol* being the sole influence of these depositions.

This is displayed through only a small portion of burials containing any coins, and the placement of these coins varies (Stevens, 1991). The coins have been found in the mouth, on the forehead and arms, on or near the shoulders and feet, within hands and even in small bags or boxes. Additionally, this practice appears to be more popular in cemeteries of the Roman period (Stevens, 1991). These deviations in placement and popularity require a reevaluation of the influences on this practice to determine all possible factors driving this custom.

The aim of this paper is to analyze Roman death practices to posit other possible influences that align better with the archaeological record on the practice of coin deposition in Roman burials. In order to do this, I will review the ways in which the Romans viewed souls and what rites were performed immediately after the passing of a relative or family member (Hope, 2018). I will consider the possible relationships between Greek and Roman funerary customs, specifically concerning coins in burials, and evaluate the extent to which these practices may have influenced each other. In addition to the potential overlap between Greek and Roman

customs, I will also review the custom of grave goods in non Greco-Roman contexts focusing on the Etruscans and the Egyptians to demonstrate any possible influences that may explain variations in coin deposition in funerary contexts. Finally, I will review the idea that coins may possess the power to control communications between the living and the dead to evaluate if coin deposition is primarily for the living or a funerary practice completed for the sake of the deceased (Stevens, 1991).

Bibliography

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