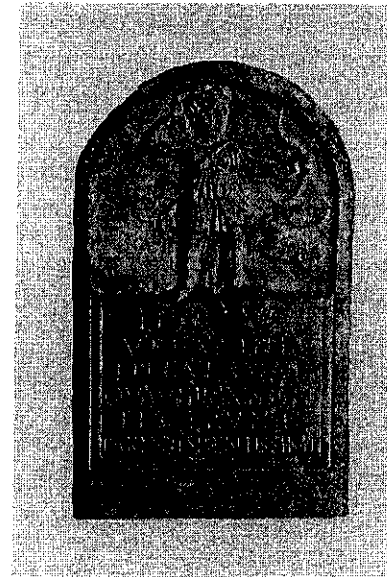


**A MARBLE GRAVE-MARKER
IN THE ANTIQUITIES MUSEUM
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND**

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In the Antiquities Museum of the University of Queensland, artefacts are primarily used as aids for the teaching of ancient history and the Classics. These objects, the exquisite and the mundane, provide a great deal of information and may be used as a basis for a more indepth study of certain aspects of the ancient Mediterranean world. One such artefact is a marble grave-marker of a young Roman girl, catalogue number 78.004.¹ This tombstone provides the stimuli for many debates about artistic styles and Roman society as well as the use of inscriptions and, of course, the application of Latin. The following examination of this artefact is an example of such a discussion.

Like the Antiquities Museum's grave-marker, many stelae and epitaphs are unique. But such objects are certainly not rare and are often used to reconstruct Roman society.² Indeed, funerary art and inscriptions are potentially enlightening because they deal with personal loss at a time when such a loss to a family and community is on a level often passed over by the literary sources. At the very least, these monuments reveal the social conventions placed on people when burying their dead, and at best, the attitudes and emotions of the Romans in their bereavement.



D·M
VITALINI
FILIAE SVAE
Q·V·A·VIII·M·XI·D·III
FECERVNT
PARENTES PIENTISSIMI

The University of Queensland grave-marker was dedicated by her 'most loving parents' to Vitalinis who was eight years, eleven months and three days old when she died.³ The front face of this arch-shape memorial has two main registers: the top depicts a child in the guise of the goddess Diana who is distinguished by her hunting bow and hound, whilst the lower register carries the inscription above and marks the death of the young girl. Because the deaths of children were often sudden, many parents would have bought pre-made sarcophagi and memorials and added the personalised inscriptions.⁴ This seems to have been the case with this tombstone. Although charming, the figurative relief is relatively mediocre and appears to have been cut by a different hand from that responsible for the neat letters of the inscription.

The appearance of the stele itself suggests a date sometime in the earlier part of the Empire for it seems that the child was cremated. The back and sides of the tombstone are unworked indicating that it may have sealed a niche in a *columbarium*. But it may also be that the actual date of the piece is earlier than that assigned to it, AD50-150,⁵ as the style and technique of the lettering suggest a date as early as the Augustan period. Although the palaeographical

¹ It can be viewed online at the Antiquities Museum website: <http://www.exstaff.uq.edu.au/antig/>. We wish to thank Prof. Tim Parkin for all his help and guidance.

² R.P Saller and B. D. Shaw (1984) 'Tombstones and Roman family relations in the Principate: civilians, soldiers and slaves' in *The Journal of Roman Studies* 74, 124 n.1 estimated that of the two hundred and fifty thousand extant inscriptions from the Imperial period about three quarters were epitaphs.

³ The nature of the child's name is discussed below.

⁴ See J. Huskinson (1996) *Roman Children's Sarcophagi: Their Decoration and its Social Significance* Oxford.

⁵ *Writing and Lettering in Antiquity*, VI, Charles Ede catalogue, May 1978, No. 21.

techniques have not been completely substantiated, the lower horizontals of the L and E, the curve of the P which does not connect to the vertical line and the centred text all indicate a date from Augustus to Nerva, while the non-serifed horizontal stroke of the T, which slants slightly on the right hand side, suggests a date prior to Claudius.⁶ The lettering is similar to another piece in the Antiquities Museum (catalogue number 91.001) which dates from AD 50-75.

The provenance of the Vitalinis tombstone is unknown. Nevertheless the Latin specifies it as belonging to the Roman world, possibly from the areas surrounding Rome (e.g. Rome, Ostia etc.).⁷ The fact that at least two artisans worked on the memorial, one on the figurative detail and the other on the inscription, combined with the suggestion that it was bought pre-made from a workshop implies a larger town centre as its provenance.

The inscription is in a standard arrangement, opening with an invocation *Dis Manibus*, then giving the name and age of the deceased, and finally, the commemorators, the child's parents, are identified.⁸ Commemorations were most commonly dedicated by members of the nuclear family; that is, husband to wife, wife to husband, parents to children or offspring to their parents.⁹ This suggests that the nuclear family may have been the basic unit in Roman society, a concept supported by the literary evidence, such as by Cicero.¹⁰ Children had an important role in both in the family structure and the wider community of ancient Rome in that they represented the future: socially, economically and spiritually.¹¹

In the ancient world, mortality rates were high, especially in the first year of life. It has been estimated that twenty to thirty percent of all children died at birth or soon after.¹² Yet the under-one age group is the least represented in

⁶ J. Gordon (1957) and A. Gordon *Contributions to the Palaeography of Latin Inscriptions* Berkley/Los Angeles 124, 208ff.

⁷ Most children's tombstones come from urban centres. See Saller and Shaw (above, n. 2) 130.

⁸ It uses the most common form of abbreviation: V (*vixit*); A (*annis*); M (*mensibus*); D (*diebus*). See M. King (2000) 'Commemoration of infants on Roman funerary inscriptions' *The Epigraphy of Death: Studies in the History and Society of Greece and Rome* G. J. Oliver (ed.) Liverpool 130 n.52.

⁹ Saller and Shaw (above, n. 2) tables 1-4.

¹⁰ Cicero *de Officiis* 1.58.

¹¹ See B. Rawson (2003) *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* Oxford ch.2 and 350-63. Some children might also have had a ritual role. See S. Puttock (2002) *Ritual Significance of Personal Ornament in Roman Britain* Oxford chs.4 and 5.

¹² King (above, n.8) 123.

memorial stones, with only 0.4 percent of the entirety.¹³ In addition, knowledge of the practice of infanticide, or child exposure, has prompted some modern scholars to argue that Roman parents did not care for their children.¹⁴ But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that parents were indeed distraught when their children died and they did mourn them. Pliny notes that Fannia was very distressed at her son's death, but that she hid it well.¹⁵ The emperor Nero was also reported to be 'excessive in his grief' at the death of his infant daughter.¹⁶ An epitaph from Arcadia, however, suggests that parents may have felt more affection for their older children.¹⁷ It was dedicated to twelve year old Julia Pothousa by her parents who wished that she had died younger because they had become so attached to her as she had grown older¹⁸ while the parents of Markos Ortorios Eleutheros, aged 19 years, 3 months and 3 days were full of grief for their 'sweetest child'.¹⁹ Cicero also suggests that grief at the death of a child may be relative to the age of that child at death for he says: 'if a child dies young, one should console himself easily . . . if he dies in a cradle, one doesn't even pay attention'.²⁰

Therefore it appears that when a Roman parent decided to raise a child, that child was highly valued. In fact in Rome children under the age of ten were more likely to receive a memorial stone than any other age group.²¹ The Vitalinis tombstone is an example of this. The use of the word *pietissimi* on the stone is very revealing. Occurring in ten percent of epitaphs with epithets, the superlative form of the adjective *pius* suggests that the parents were distressed at her death.²² *Pietas* is often understood as filial obligation or

¹³ T. Parkin (1992) *Demography and Roman Society* Baltimore 6; King (above, n.8) fig. 5.1.

¹⁴ T. Wiedemann (1989) *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* London. Cf. M. Golden (1988) 'Did the ancients care when their children died?' *Greece and Rome* 35 no. 2, 152-63. See also King (above, n.8) 118 n.2-5 for more references.

¹⁵ Pliny *Ep.* 3.16. cf. Seneca *Ep.* 99.

¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.23.

¹⁷ According to Plutarch (*Numa* 12) the laws of Numa Pompilius dictated that a child over 10 years of age could be mourned for 10 months, the same as an adult, whereas children under 3 years should not be formally mourned at all.

¹⁸ *IG.* 5.2.413.

¹⁹ Although from Via Tusculana, near Ponte Lungo, this inscription is in Greek and probably dates to the end of the 1st Century AD. G. Patriarca (1933) 'Epitaffio Greco recentemente scoperto a Roma' *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale* 61 (1933) 211-15. See also J.M.C. Toynbee (1971) *Death and Burial in the Roman World* London 96.

²⁰ Cicero, *Tusc. Disput.* 1.39.93.

²¹ King (above, n.8) 123. Another reason for the high percentage of grave-stones for children may be the high mortality rate in the city.

²² Naturally this is an assumption as the use of such sentiments followed convention. In fact, as R. Saller (1994) *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* Cambridge 96

obedience owed by children to the *pater familias*. But in fifty-four percent of cases, Nielsen found that the word was used by parents to commemorate their children.²³ Despite the formulaic nature of such inscriptions they describe the 'reciprocal bonds of duty and affection' between family members during life.²⁴ It has also been noted by Nielsen that the average age of the children who have this word used on their tombstones was fifteen.²⁵ As a result it occurs more commonly on tombstones where the child has reached an age at which he or she was expected to outlive his or her parents.²⁶ Therefore it may have been even more painful for them to see their child survive the rigours of infancy and early childhood, only to have their hopes for the future unfulfilled, and indeed Lattimore notes 'the thought that it is, not merely pitiful, but a dislocation of the proper and natural order of life, for a child to die before his parents'.²⁷

Saller and Shaw estimate that the cost of grave memorials was 'not so high as to be prohibitive for working Romans',²⁸ but the piece dedicated to Vitalinis would not have been the cheapest on offer for it not only has an inscription, but also a relief carving. Although the quality of the workmanship of the figure is rather mediocre, the parents have chosen to use a good quality material, marble. The size is also notable. It is more than three times the height of another epitaph in the Antiquities Museum, catalogue number 91.001.²⁹ The latter has no pictorial representation, only the inscription:

D·M | D·IVNIO·VENERIANO | POMPEIA·PRIMITIVA |
 FILIO·BENE·MERENTI·FECIT | ET·SIBI·ET·SVIS·LIBERTIS·LIBER |
 TABVSQVE·POSTERISQVE·EORUM | IN·FR·P·II·IN·AGR· P·II·S

points out, we may not know the actual meaning assigned to such things as Roman epitaphs.

For a fuller study of the word, see H.S. Nielsen (1997) 'Interpreting epithets in Roman epitaphs' *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, Space* B. Rawson and P. Weaver (eds) Canberra 193ff.

²³ Nielsen (above, n.22) 194.

²⁴ Saller (above, n.22) 98; for a discussion on the meaning of *pietas*, 'natural devotion', 105-114. See also Cicero *Inv.*2.161. *Pius* is a word that is often connected with death and burial in literature: a person commemorating and grieving for a dead relative is often called *pius*. See Ovid *Heroides* 15.113-16.

²⁵ Nielsen (above, n.22) fig. 8.5.

²⁶ Nielsen (above, n.22) 197.

²⁷ R. Lattimore (1962) *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* Urbana 187.

²⁸ Saller and Shaw (above, n.2) 128. This is also a moot point. See King (above, n.8) 121.

²⁹ Vitalinis' tombstone is 45cm tall compared to 91.001 which is 14cm. Both tombstones are 28cm wide.

There is also a difference in the number of people commemorated on these memorials: the larger one is for one eight-year-old child while the smaller is for 'her [Pompeia Primitiva's] beloved son Decimus Junius Venerianus, and for herself and her household, her freed slaves, male and female, and their descendants.' Yet it appears that the little girl's parents cared enough to purchase a relatively expensive and individual tombstone. It is also possible that the sentiment behind the dedication may be of benefit to the surviving adults too.

The absence of a complete name which may denote some form of status in Roman society makes the identification of both the child's and her parents' social status difficult. Nevertheless other evidence may indicate their class. The most common group of people to erect epitaphs in the early imperial period are freedmen.³⁰ Freedmen also had a vested interest in their children, particularly if they were freeborn: they commemorated these offspring because of the desire to advertise their children's status as Roman citizens. In fact, it was more prevalent for children born after their manumission to receive a memorial.³¹

The name Vitalinis is unusual and possibly unique.³² It is very likely that it is a diminutive of the fashionable name Vitalis.³³ Vitalis is described by Kajanto as a 'wish name': the parents gave their child a name which seemed to contain their hopes for her as it implies that she 'should be viable, to live long'.³⁴ This type of name appears to have been used mainly by the 'common people'. Based on the fact that Vitalinis' tombstone was of an average artistic quality and so would have been only moderately expensive, it may be that the commemorators were financially secure to some extent but certainly not at

³⁰ Although it is often debated, L.R. Taylor (1961) 'Freedmen and Freeborn in the epitaphs of Imperial Rome' in *American Journal of Philology* 82 no. 2, 118 notes that for every freeborn person there are three freed people and Nielsen (above, n.22) 203 says that sixty-two percent of the three thousand epitaphs studied were of the freedmen class.

³¹ See Rawson (above, n.11) 29-31; S. Treggiari (1969) *Roman Freedmen During the Late Republic* Oxford ch. 6.

³² Other extreme suggestions for the nominative form of the name may be *Vitalin*, *Vitalen*, *Vitaline*, *Vitalo* or even the masculine form, *Vitalinus*. Greek or Celtic forms such as *Vitalin*, *Vitalinos* or *Vitalinix* may also be ruled out.

³³ Known diminutives are *Vitalianus/na*, *Vitalicus/ca* (*Vitatica*), *Vitalinus/na*, *Vitalinianus*, *Vitalinia*, *Vitalio*, *Vitalissimus/ma*, *Vitalius/ia*. I. Kajanto (1982) *The Latin Cognomina* Rome 24 and 274.

³⁴ Kajanto (above, n.33) 72. Cf. P. Garnsey (1975) 'Descendants of Freedmen in local politics' B. Levick (ed) *The Ancient Historian and his Materials* Farnborough 172.

the level of the wealthier members of the Roman world.³⁵ Arguments, albeit from silence, indicate that they were freed people.³⁶ By not naming themselves, the parents may have been attempting to remove the stigma of their freed status which would have been demonstrated by their names.³⁷ They have also used a typical Roman sentiment and a traditional image on the grave-marker,³⁸ and given their daughter a Roman name suggesting that they were trying to imitate Roman culture.³⁹ This argument is not conclusive but it was characteristic, in the status-conscious Roman social order, for freed people to try and remove their stigma from their children.

But her parents also ensured that Vitalinis achieved what many Romans desired. Her name has survived for posterity. Even though we do not know what she looked like or even the cause of her death, her name and her status are now known, and although she was never seen as an important person in her town or city, her name is proudly displayed in the Antiquities Museum. Her tombstone is a fascinating object.

³⁵ Of course this assumption disregards any suggestion that Vitalinis' parents were wealthy but not prepared to spend a lot of money on their daughter despite the sentiment expressed on the memorial.

³⁶ It may be the case that Vitalinis was a slave as the use of a single name was often used to denote a slave, although in this case Vitalinis was a child. The use of the word *parentes* also rules this out as 'legally slaves had no parents'. S. Treggiari (1975) 'Family life among the staff of the Volusii' *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 105 394 and 397 n.15. See also R. Saller (1998) 'Symbols of gender and status hierarchies in the Roman household' S.R. Joshel and S. Murnaghan (eds) *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture* London/New York 86.

Status indicators other than filiations were often omitted from Roman tombstones during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. P.R.C. Weaver (1991) 'Children of Freedmen (and Freedwomen)' B. Rawson (ed.) *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome* Oxford 188.

³⁷ The stigmata attached to slavery included 'moral inferiority' and persisted even in freeborn children. P.R.C. Weaver (above, n.36) 177.

³⁸ A similar image, although of superior artistic quality, of a deceased child in the guise of the goddess Artemis/Diana can be seen on the 2nd century funerary altar of Aelia Procula. S.B. Matheson (1996) 'The divine Claudia: women as goddesses in Roman art' in D.E.E. Kleiner and S.B. Matheson (eds) *I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome* (New Haven 1996) 189-90.

³⁹ Taylor (above, n.30) says that those with Greek names, whose parents were not named, were definitely freed. It seems highly likely that a Roman name could imply the same status, although it is not conclusive.

An example of a possible slave giving his daughter a Roman name can be seen in *CIL*7371 (c.40-60AD) which commemorates Sabina, the 13 year old daughter of Pancarpus. See Treggiari (above, n.36) 394 and 396.