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MARINE ICONOGRAPHY OF CHILDREN'S EPITAPHS FROM ROMAN CATACOMBS*

Latin inscriptions which were founded by Christians from Rome for children up to seven years of age give information about a significant population of almost two thousand children from Rome. For comparison I also used data concerning 412 children from outside Rome collected by E. Diehl. The plaques were made between 3rd and 6th century, mostly from 4th to the half of 6th century¹. The epitaphs contain information about 1962 children from Rome, 12 of whom were less than one month old, 220 up to one year old, 705 up to three years old and 1025 up to less than eight years old, at the same time the differences in numbers were minor in particular age groups, from a few to several percent in favour of boys.

The majority of inscriptions are made quite carelessly as if not by professional masons, with numerous mistakes and a poor arrangement of content and word order. However, the drawings, engraved with a shallow line and generally filled with red paint, similarly to letters, are correct and sometimes quite complex narratively².

The iconography of plaques in their simplest is limited to dots, which were used not as a punctuation mark, but as an embellishment separating numerical data concerning age, date of death and/or burial. In extreme cases each letter was separated in that way. Arrows and small graphical symbols as well as, at least partially, leaves in the middle of the text had a similar function. Higher aesthetic sensitivity and willingness to refer to tradition characterized those who used text framing in the form of *tabula ansata*.

The graphical ways of expressing faith were chrismons and christograms, alone and single, often double, in a circle or wreath as well as crosses (rarely) mostly

* Translated by Tomasz Terpiłowski.

¹ B. Stawoska-Jundziłł, *Vixit cum parentibus. Dzieci w wieku do siedmiu lat w rodzinach chrześcijan z Rzymu III–VI wieku*, Bydgoszcz 2008.

² Characteristics of Christian inscriptions from Rome, see: Zilliacus; *Inscriptiones Sanctae Sedis*, vol. 2: *Le iscrizioni dei cristiani in Vaticano*, a cura di I. di St. Manzella, Città del Vaticano 1997. F. Bisconti (*Mestieri nelle catacombe romane*, Città del Vaticano 2000) describes the drawings on plaques as graffita.

isosceles and small; they appeared late, at the end of the 5th century³. „Apocalyptic letters” – *A* and *Ω* were also popular. Their deep symbolic meaning indicated the belief that everything begins and ends in God. However, the most popular were images of doves and hens (generally identified as doves by the publishers) with olive or palm twigs, which were placed in the text or on the sides, above or below. A lack of possibility to confront the description or a standard image included in ICUR with the picture of the inscription makes it difficult to decide what birds are really presented in the inscription. Nonetheless the motif of phoenix was rarely used. The sprigs were also often used as a decorative and symbolic motif.

Other representatives of the animal world appeared incidentally on children’s epitaphs. Lion, hare, more often horse in the scenes of crowning the winner symbolised features which were desirable in children and were to assure their salvation or they were even a graphic reference to the name (e.g. Leo).

In several cases tools were drawn alone or in sets especially mason’s and fessor’s with an axe, quite popular in Christian epitaphs, as well as instruments used by writers and trainees⁴. *Modius* appeared on several occasions and dishes like the vase, *kantharos*, goblet and some other were almost as popular as the birds. All these elements had a symbolic meaning and surely referred not only to children but also said something about the founders of inscriptions. Sometimes they refer to an occupation although we will never be sure whether they talk about the occupation or symbolism connected with a tool or an object⁵.

Human figures make quite a big group. These are full-figure images of orants, which some researchers believe to be the representation of the soul of the deceased, busts or just heads, but also e.g. a foot. Busts or heads can have the character of portraits of the deceased, which rather does not concern the praying figures because of their schematically drawn faces. It was rare to present several figures together, similarly to groups of objects or symbols although such large sets of motives occurred in every age group several times⁶.

Against this comparatively rich background the set of sea symbols and sea motives is not very complex, despite proximity of the sea, the great port in Ostia and a considerably big group of people in Rome who worked for *annona* and the sea trade, who were employed in the port store-houses on the Tiber and in the city,

³ Review of most motives: P. Bruun, *Symboles, signes et monogrammes*, [in] Zilliacus, 2, 73–166; D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, tł. W. Zakrzewska i inni, Warszawa 1990; *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*, a cura di F. Bisconti, Città del Vaticano 2000.

⁴ Graphical references to professions and types of occupation: Bisconti, *Mestieri...*, *passim*.

⁵ E. g. I. Kajanto, *On the Significance of the Hammer and other Tools Depicted on Christian Funeral Inscriptions*, „Arctos”, 10, 1976, 49–59; Bisconti, *Mestieri...*, 29–70 *passim*.

⁶ B. Wronikowska, *Picturae sacrae. Motywy ikonograficzne malowideł przedkonstantyńskich w chrześcijańskich katakumbach Rzymu*, Lublin 1990, 104–114; Stawoska-Jundziłł, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

servicing and repairing (maybe also building) ships⁷. Undoubtedly, matching the symbolism of the pictures to the narration about the child seemed more important than marking own position and occupation by the founders of epitaphs.

The ship most distinctly represents the marine issues, however, it was drawn only on a few children epitaphs. A ship under sails appeared on an epitaph of a new-born child deceased in the 11th month of life⁸. It is characterised by a large accuracy of the picture, the more so that the content of the inscription is modest: the boy's name and age and his Greek parents' names. Parents call him *dvlcissimvs* and *karissimvs* so they stress the importance of feelings and give the date of death or burial, however, they use abbreviations.

There might be several interpretations of such shape of the epitaph: parents referred to the fact of the trip to Rome, their work on the sea (father), but also to the child soul sailing away to another world. The association of the ship generally with a rough sea voyage suggests that the meaning of the ship for this family had to be special, different from that commonly accepted. It is hard to recognise that in this way they referred to the „hardship” of the baby's life. The symbolism of the plaques generally refers to the deceased children thus the ship may indicate sailing to the final port – heaven, although then the parents would consider this way to be difficult and dangerous. So, maybe it is rather longing for the abandoned homeland, if they were slaves, and coming back to the mythical native soil⁹.

Another presentation of marine elements in epitaphs for boys under one year of age is connected with a special treatment of christogram shown in a rich wreath with small rounded anchors hanging from the crosspiece. An epitaph from 431 A.D. for a four-month-old baby with a non-Roman name additionally contains a picture of two doves with sprigs¹⁰. This epitaph clearly shows the family and the child

⁷ Sea in the Roman Empire and inscriptions among others G. Stuhlfauth, *Das Schiff als Symbol der Altchristlichen Kunst*, RAC, 1942, 111–142; L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World*, Princeton 1986; M. Bonino, *Barche, navi e simboli navali nel cimitero di Priscilla*, RAC, 59, 1983, 277–311; J. Jundziłł, *Rzymianie a morze*, Bydgoszcz 1997; B. Stawoska, *Problematyka morska w inskrypcjach chrześcijańskich – uwagi wprowadzające*, [in] *Morze w imperium Rzymu*, red. J. Jundziłł, Bydgoszcz 1994, 175–187; E. Cander, *Sceny morskie na zabytkach wczesnochrześcijańskich z IV w.*, [in] *Studia z początków ikonografii chrześcijańskiej*, red. E. Jastrzębowska, Warszawa 1998, 59–124. Ostia: *Ostia, port et porte de la Rome antique*, ed. J. P. Descoedres, vol. 1–2, Genève 2001; annona: B. Sirks, *Food for Rome*, Amsterdam 1991.

⁸ 7.18799 and 18780, plaques with almost identical inscription, but the ship presented only on the first one, see Stuhlfauth, *op. cit.*, 118, nr 22; Bisconti, *op. cit.*, 229.

⁹ Ships in Christian art and inscriptions: M. Lawrence, *Ships, Monsters and Jonah*, *AJA*, 66, 1962, 280–296; H. Brandenburg, *Die Darstellungen maritimen Lebens*, [in] *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, Frankfurt am Main 1984, 249–256; Cander, *op. cit.*, 98–118 and *passim*; Stawoska, *Problematyka*, 178 and tab. 1.

¹⁰ 2.6081.

deeply rooted in faith, the purity of the infant's soul overcoming the difficulties of the disease through salvation.

In the group of girls below one year of age there is only one marine motif. It is a fragment of sarcophagus founded by a senatorial family showing a dolphin on the waves on the right side of the inscription and most probably also on the missing left side of the sarcophagus¹¹. Apart from the geniuses holding the plaque there is only one chrismon ending the inscription. Combining the fact that the girl was from a senatorial family and the symbols used shows classical tastes of the founders and rather modest reference to faith through the chrismon.

Although dolphins are a popular motif, both in the Church fathers and in the Christian art, the classical connotations are even stronger. These animals symbolise the joy of life but also rescue in need so in this way parents expressed their belief in the happiness after death and hope that the child would be saved. The parents did not hesitate here to use a ready product i.e. the sarcophagus for someone with classical tastes¹².

Among inscriptions from outside Rome concerning the discussed age group there is also some reference to the symbolism of a ship through the image of a spire with a sphere on top¹³. The mast top was sometimes presented in that way (e.g. graffito from Cucuron), but such a spire was also placed for example on top of obelisk¹⁴. The combination of images on this plaque is as a matter of fact unique: chrismon, Latin cross (in the studied inscriptions there are only isosceles crosses), a deer skull with horns and a spire. It might be a form of forgery although maybe only concerning the graphical symbolism.

In the group of children under three years old the marine symbolism also is not often used. However, in the inscriptions for boys there appear three drawings of ships. On one of them there is a bird with a bunch of grapes in its beak and the founder expresses belief that the soul of the 1.5 year old boy has been taken by God. The graphical message is confirmed by the inscription: the boy's soul „sailed” to God bringing him the fruits of a devout life.

The second plaque (for a three-year-old) is much more modest, containing only the name and age with *in pace*. Besides there is a chrismon on the upper right side. Below, at the end of the inscription there is a ship's hull, expertly presented, with a straight keel, high stern and characteristic side gallery on the

¹¹ 4.9431 from the 3rd c.

¹² Dolphins, for example: *L'animal dans l'Antiquité*, ed. B. Cassin, J. L. Labarrière, Paris 1997; *Animali simbolici. Alle origini del bestiario cristiano*, a cura di M. Pia Ciccarese, vol. 1, Bologna 2005.

¹³ 1.2774.

¹⁴ J. Jundziłł, *Omasztowanie statków rzymskich*, „Nautologia”, 25, 1990, 1/4, 3–12; Casson, *op. cit.*, 175–182, 229 and following.

broadside¹⁵. It is interesting why only the seagoing ship's hull was presented since I disagree with F. Bisconti, who believes it is a river barge. The high stern, the shape of the hull and the galleries on the broadside suggest a seagoing vessel. So technically detailed drawing, apart from its symbolic value – journey to the beyond, referred maybe to the father's profession – most likely a ship builder not a sailor. The last ship from yet another modest epitaph (name and age of 17 months) has a strange construction of the hull, with a rounded keel and the bow in the shape of a bird's neck, hanging on 5 ropes, but without the mast. F. Bisconti believes it to be a ship although it also might be a kind of dish or a lamp. This time it is clearly about the symbolic meaning of the term „ship” and not its real functions.

Yet another motif is an anchor. On one epitaph they are situated on both sides of a modest inscription. Their shape clearly refers to the orant figures (an anchor shown with wavy arms pointing upwards) so it cannot be about a real anchor but a symbol of a man „anchored in faith”, most probably the deceased boy or maybe also his parents since there are two anchors. The second epitaph, for a two-year-old boy, presents a single anchor combined with an image of tools, probably smith's tools, since there are tongs and a hammer (?)¹⁶. Maybe the father wanted to show in this way that he is not only a respected craftsman but that he forged metaphorically strong, iron anchor of faith for his son taking care about his religious duties such as baptism and Christian funeral.

Only one epitaph contains the effigy of an amphora yet combined with a specific set of two other motives: a sickle on the right side and a palm sprig at the end of the text¹⁷. According to the rule I adopted the inscription read from the left side could mean „filling” the boy with faith and goodness (the amphora) during his lifetime, which is related to the child a little over one year old (!). As a result it was possible to have a good crop (the sickle) of salvation and reach victory (the palm). On the other hand, taken literally, the images could mean a family of farmers or seamen transporting corn, but the text contains information (a rare case in epitaphs from Rome) that the boy was *cristianvs*, so it must have been emphasizing faith.

The last one from his group of epitaphs contains the image of dolphins on the sides of the inscription. A two-year-old boy who had two names was warmly and emotionally described as *infans, dulcissimus* and it was believed that his soul exists in eternity (*ispiritvs sanctvs in bono quiescas*). Again, the spirit of religiousness

¹⁵ 4.12654; 8.23600 and 23615d, commentary by Bisconti, *op. cit.*, 227; L. Gambassi, *Nave*, [in] *Temi di iconografia...*, 228–230. Dead in the sea: R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana 1962, 199–202.

¹⁶ 1.2233; 3.7143a, see J. Jundził, *Kotwica w literaturze i sztuce wczesnochrześcijańskiej*, „Nautologia”, 17, 1981, 2, 32–41; G. Schmiedt, *Schiffsanker der Zeiten*, Rostock 1982; L. Gambassi, *Ancora*, [in] *Temi di iconografia...*, 105–106; Bisconti, *Mestieri...*, 211.

¹⁷ 5.14565 (age 1 and 4 months, later age given as 1.4 and similarly), see Bisconti, *Mestieri...*, 177–178.

and deep faith in the salvation of the child is connected with a classical symbolism of dolphins i.e. God or the saints safely guiding the dead person to eternity¹⁸.

In the epitaphs for girls the marine element is only a lighthouse, however, it appears only once in the whole collection of inscriptions¹⁹. The epitaph for the daughter, one year and eight months old, was founded by the father, who also added a wreath, a palm sprig and distinguished with a phrase *bene merenta*. The sea symbolism refers to reaching a port safely and generally safety is connected with a strong conviction about the victory gained by the girl over death and reaching the goal, that is, eternal life. The fact that the father was the only founder of the epitaph may suggest that the mother had already died and he consoled himself with the thought that his nearest were safe and peaceful.

The picture of Noah in the ark as a schematically drawn box was presented on another epitaph formally may be included in the marine category, however, such scenes are only just the Biblical associations with Noah, chosen and saved by God, and not his voyage on the waters of the Flood. There is also no intention to show the ark as a ship²⁰. What really attracts attention is the fact that such symbolism was used twice and that the better preserved plaque is full of other faith symbols: a chrismon, a bird with a sprig and an acclamation *in pace*.

In the group of epitaphs for boys from three up to under eight years of age the theme of sea appeared a little more often. There is a motif of dolphin used three times. One plaque contains an effigy of a dolphin on the side of the text and a leaf on the other. On a sarcophagus of a six-year-old boy with a Greek name dolphins were presented on the two sides of the inscription. Another sarcophagus contains two dolphins on the waves on the side of the inscription for a boy over seven. This text was written using strange spelling, but contained information both about the date of death and funeral (10 days difference!)²¹. It seems that dolphins appear almost exclusively as a decoration of sarcophagi with, I believe, a ready-made ornamentation, which the parents or the caregivers of the child only supplemented with an inscription. However, choosing a particular sarcophagus reflected the founder's outlook on life. In this case a higher level of affluence

¹⁸ 6.16119 beginning of 4th c., see Forstner, *op. cit.*, 256–257.

¹⁹ 2.4616, see H. Leclercq, *Phare*, DACL XIV, 1, 1932, 671–688; Bruun, *op. cit.*, 149; M. Reddé, *La représentation des phares à l'époque romaine*, MEFRA, 91, 1979, 845–872; S. Ducin, *Sztuka nawigacji w starożytnej Grecji i Rzymie*, Lublin 1997, 163–178.

²⁰ 1.1590 (a girl aged 2 years 3 months) and 4.10389 only a fragment left, not possible to determine the sex of a child under 2, see G. B. Ladner, *God, Cosmos, and Humankind. The World of Early Christian Symbolism*, tr. T. Dunlap, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1995, 267–268; B. Mazzi, *Noe*, [in] *Temi di iconografia...*, 231–232; Forstner, *op. cit.*, 387–388; Wronikowska, *op. cit.*, 155–158; Cander, *op. cit.*, 103–104.

²¹ 9.23773 leaf, *anima merenti*; 5.13459 from 4th c. (sarcophagus, age 6.9.9 years); 5.13503 (sarcophagus, age 7.3.13 years).

was supported with a sign that the founder was connected with a higher, classical culture. Apparently, it was not at odds with declarations of faith and caring about the salvation of the child.

An anchor is another motif, presented on three or four epitaphs (on one of them at the bottom it might be a fish, according to ICUR), it was founded by a father for his son *bm*, who was three years and a few months old. A fragment of sarcophagus founded for a four-year-old contains a modest inscription with a name and age, but it is in the form of a traditional *tabula ansata*. In the left corner there is an anchor with sharply bent arms pointing downwards and a crosspiece, so it resembles a cross. In the right corner of the plaque there are six circles divided into six pieces, but their symbolism is unclear for me.

Another epitaph for an *alumnus* with Greek names was founded by a caregiver, who placed, at the end of the inscription, a graffito of a real anchor with strongly rounded arms, as an expression of belief that her charge is already safe in the spiritual world. The last plaque for a boy six years and two months old was founded by the parents *bm* and contains a bird with a bunch of grapes on the left side and two christograms – at the beginning and the end of the text, so the emotional charge of religious feelings is strong. An anchor with sharply bent arms, an ear and a crosspiece, may also resemble a cross and it begins the text, so its function is significant²².

A helm is to be found on an epitaph for a five-year-old together with several other elements: a large christogram with two birds holding palm sprigs above it and two sheep. Below, there is a chrismon in a circle made up of *Ω* and *A* (so they mean an end of earthly life, but the beginning of eternal life), a large *ascia* and a helm. It was drawn in a horizontal position as a big, wide board with a long, narrow handle and an ear at the bottom. The „helm” might also be a hammer as it is believed by I. Kajanto, which seems rather unlikely because of the long, narrow handle²³.

There is also one graffito with a ship above the inscription on an epitaph for a boy 6 years 8 months and 5 days of age. The ship was connected with a chrismon and a religious motto *qvescet in pace*, which in combination with a Christian name *Refrigerivus* has a strong religious significance²⁴.

Epitaphs for girls from the discussed group contain almost the same set of symbols and depictions, which makes them more abundant in such contents since there were fewer epitaphs (533 for boys and 477 for girls). On an urn from 355 there

²² 3.7947 (age 4.3.28 years); 9.25720 (age 4 years); 9.25074 (*alumnus*, 4.5 years); 1.2309 from 4th–6th c. (age 6.2 years); 8.21842 (or fish).

²³ 7.18989, 4th–5th c. for a boy aged 5 years, see Kajanto, *op. cit.*, 45.

²⁴ 6.17120 from 4th–6th c., epitaph in a copy, no image of a ship in ICUR, see Bisconti, *op. cit.*, 228 also without a picture.

are dolphins frolicking in the waves presented on the two sides of the inscription for a girl with a Greek name²⁵.

There are five depictions of anchors. A father who lost two daughters, two and three years old, wrote their and his names and age together with an anchor. Maybe he wanted to show in this way that he did not lose faith after such a loss. Another epitaph for a girl 4 years 3 months and 28 days of age includes only some basic data about the girl and one epithet *dulcissima*, however, on both sides there are doves and below there is an anchor with wavy arms and a crosspiece, which might be associated with an image of an orant, although in a rather untypical, horizontal position.

Another plaque, for a girl 4 years 7 months and 12 days of age, was ordered by the parents and has a rich iconographic content. On the left side there is an olive branch or a grapevine nibbled by a hare and on the right side an anchor with rounded arms without a crosspiece so as to avoid the symbol of a cross. This means it is a real anchor as a symbol of safe end of the journey through life and the hare motif means a happy life on earth or in heaven where the girl safely anchored.

An anchor is also to be found on an epitaph founded by a father for his two daughters, 3 years 7 months and 5 days of age and 5 years 2 months and 21 days of age. The sisters have Greek, Christian names: Irene and Agape and the inscription does not contain any other elements. The next epitaph for a girl 4 years 3 month and 28 days of age includes an anchor and two doves on the sides of the inscription. The last epitaph for a daughter with a Greek name was founded by parents with traditional beliefs since they called the burial *dormitio*, but the daughter *ancilla dei* and *bm*. On the right side there is an anchor with wavy arms, pointing upwards, with a small crosspiece and ears at the bottom and top, which again resembles an orant.

The next two plaques are devoted to the same girl called Apvleia Crysopolis. On one of them there are the girl's names written in Geek and Latin with an anchor in the shape of an orant on the left side. On the second plaque the parents inform that it is about their daughter, who is *karissinma*, and also include her age. On the left side there is also a tree and on the right an effigy of the Good Shepherd. This suggests that the girl at the age of 7 years and 2 months knew the principles of faith (the tree) and was under God's supervision. The family had eastern and Roman roots since the inscriptions were in Latin and Greek. The publisher suggests that the plaque with only names and an anchor was supposed to be the first grave, but there also might have been two different persons²⁶.

²⁵ 5.13905, copy, no picture of dolphins in ICUR.

²⁶ 6.17138 (hare and anchor); 10.26996; 3.7947; 6.15629; 4.9384 and 4.10561.

There might be a ship presented on a plaque for a girl 5 years 8 months and 4 days of age but the way of depicting makes it difficult to decide whether it is a lamp or some other hanging dish or maybe even a sculpture of a bird. An argument against the ship is the lack of mast to which the ropes could be attached. Maybe it is the result of a careless description since the plaque did not survive. F. Bisconti does not hesitate to classify this graffito as a ship²⁷.

An amphora from an epitaph for a three-and-a-half year old girl *bm*, combined with a chrismon in a wreath, a dove and a leaf may also be included among the elements of the marine iconography, however, only as one of many different associations. The whole set of icons could be deciphered as a short life (leaf) which thanks to the purity of the soul (dove), gained wealth (the amphora) on account of God's victory over sin²⁸.

In the group of inscriptions from outside Rome for boys and girls from 3 up to the age of 8 there is a common epitaph for some siblings, who died in the sea. It shows a boy and a girl on a boat, so it might be a depiction of a real incident, although it could also be interpreted as a journey into heaven²⁹. The motif of a dolphin was used only once in an epitaph for a boy³⁰.

The sea motives in children epitaphs did not appear very often. Dolphins make quite a large group of motives from sarcophagi of classical decoration. Other motives, apart from an anchor and a ship, are rare. I believe it proves there is a tight link between the age group of the deceased and their life situation. The dolphins well reflected the character of children's existence, however, their happy frolicking in the sea did not really coincide with the death of such young beings. Thus, images of birds with sprigs or branches, as a reference to victorious souls of children staying with God, were chosen more frequently.

²⁷ 3.9186, copy, Bisconti, *op. cit.*, 228.

²⁸ 1.3583 (Lavrentia 3.5.17 years).

²⁹ Diehl 4360, Dalmatia, boy *pm* 4 years, sister *pm* 8 years.

³⁰ Diehl 4142 A, 5 years.