

Bodicia's Tombstone – window to the past

Commercially popular major motion pictures and television series depicting Rome and Romans, such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ben Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), *I Claudius* (1976 miniseries), *Masada* (1981 miniseries), *Gladiator* (2000) and *The Passion of Christ* (2004) have provided us with certain popular images of ancient Rome: a sprawling Empire led by pretentious mercenaries masquerading as agents of civilization (ripped off from the Greeks) who went everywhere throughout the known world imposing Roman “law,” i.e. power, at the point of a sword, that is, when they weren't indulging themselves in the bathes, plotting to murder each other, or entertaining themselves at the arena by watching helpless captives, convicts and Christians (at least until the reign of Constantine) being butchered in staged shows. In short, it is an image of a society that was corrupt and oppressive, utterly depraved, totally merciless, sexually perverse, completely materialistic, spiritually hollow, and detested, with cause, by the rest of the world.

Yet there had to be a socially redeemable side to Rome. There is no way that such a thoroughly rotten society could have survived a thousand minutes, much less a thousand years. Roman culture had to be richer, more nuanced and more substantive than what is depicted in the popular mass media. Hence, through careful analysis of one ancient Roman tombstone memorializing the death of a woman named Bodicia, this paper will provide a fairer, more balanced and more accurate depiction of Roman culture. That the ancient Romans left behind

elaborate tombstones is in itself evidence that they had attained a certain level of cultural sophistication.

My paper will first discuss the materials used to construct the tombstone. That will be followed by a discussion into the tombstone's style and what that style meant. It will conclude with a discussion about the inscriptions – the purpose they served, what they said, and what they revealed, not only about the interred, but about Roman culture and the Roman people in general.

In 2015 an “incredibly rare” Roman tombstone was discovered in Cirencester, England. Near the tombstone were skeletal remains (Woollaston, 2/26/15). The tombstone is believed to date back to between the first and third centuries. Photographs of the tombstone and the remains, which for technical reasons are not included in this paper, can be found online. According to archaeologist Neil Holbrook it is the only example in Roman Britain of a tombstone that had someone's name on it with their remains underneath. It is believed that the skeletal remains are that of a 27-year-old woman named Bodicacia whose name is inscribed on the tombstone. The tombstone is 4-feet tall and 2-feet wide and made of limestone (Hetter, 2/26/15; Gannon, 2/26/15).

The discovery of this tombstone reveals much about Roman civilization. First, it is evidence that Roman culture had extended at least as far as England. This means that the Romans had a navy and could build ships capable of crossing the English Channel. Second, it is proof that the Romans had the technological capability to sculpt limestone, a rock that requires a great deal of time, effort and skill to quarry, cut and shape. Third, it is evidence that the

Romans appreciated art and had the ability to translate abstract concepts into tangible forms. Fourth, it shows that they knew how to work limestone which is a basic ingredient for the production of cement.

The ability to make cement was a key factor in the development of the Roman infrastructure. Without cement, the Romans would not have been able to make concrete, which was the basic material used by the Romans to construct buildings and other structures such as the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the aqueducts and public bathes. This brings us, then, to a discussion about concrete.

According to archaeologists, the Romans started using concrete over 2,100 years ago (TEN-ITB, 2016). To better appreciate the significance of this technological achievement, let us briefly review the process involved in creating concrete. Unlike limestone, concrete does not exist in nature. It has to be manufactured. Concrete consists of three ingredients: water, cement and sand. Cement is a substance that is used to bind other substances together. For cement the Romans used crushed volcanic ash mixed with lime. This produces mortar, which is the term for concrete in its liquid form. The key to making quality concrete is the water. Too much water results in weak concrete; too little produces concrete that is unworkable, that is, cannot be poured into a mold. In either case it has to be discarded. Certain specially designed utensils are needed to mix, pour and shape the mortar. They also require workers with sufficient skill to use these tools properly.

Concrete is heavy, but it requires more than just brute strength to create a workable product. It also requires an ability to accurately mix ingredients. This means being able to use weights and measures which in turn requires a knowledge of mathematics. This in turn requires a society that has the economic and educational resources necessary to recruit and train workers to perform this skilled task as well as develop the logistical support system needed to obtain the necessary raw materials and transport them and the finished products to their final destinations (MYOH, 3/16/15; TBM).

It is doubtful that the Romans could have relied on slave labor alone to work limestone or manufacture concrete. Given the complexity of the process and resources needed to create a quality product, it is reasonable to surmise that the work would have had to been done by skilled craftsmen. True, slaves could have been taught how to make concrete and then be directly employed in the process. But by acquiring such knowledge, they would have gained a skill that was worth something on the market place. Slaves could then use their skill as leverage to negotiate their freedom, enter the market place and transition into the mainstream of Roman society. This is a plausible because any society that was engaged in the construction of major capital projects, including some that were massive even by modern standards, could not have relied on barter to facilitate the securing of resources and services needed to complete such undertakings. Nor would brute force alone have been sufficient to ensure a consistently high level of productivity. That would have required the use of money.

There is also another reason why Rome could not have been founded exclusively or even primarily on slave labor. The costs necessary to maintain a large permanent underclass of slaves would have been prohibitive. It would have meant having to support an entire class of people whose productivity would have quickly eroded over time while costs associated with their maintenance skyrocketed.

Given the economic disadvantages associated with the use of slave labor, the image of a Roman society populated by hordes of slaves doomed to a permanent life of servility could not be accurate. For if it were, then Rome would have never been able to build the monuments, temples, buildings, roads, aqueducts and other edifices that gave Rome its special character. Being treated as an object would have provided the slave with little incentive to live, much less to function as a skilled laborer in perpetuity. Hence, inside Rome there had to have been a system whereby slaves could attain their freedom and enter the labor force. It also meant that Rome had an economic and social system fluid enough to allow such transitions to occur. This explains why Rome lasted so long. It was able to accommodate to change.

Bodicacia's tombstone is constructed in the form of a rectangular tablet, the ratio of its height to width approximately 2:1. The top portion is bordered by a series of ruffles and contains a carved relief of a certain figure which could be the god Oceanus. To create this artifact, the artisan would have required the following tools: a mallet, chisels, and stone rasps. Also required would have been sandbags to support the stone and absorb the shock of the hammering so that

the stone did not crack or break. Finally a substance would have been needed to sand the stone. In modern times sculptors use silicon carbide and diamond paper (LCUP, 7/13/16; HCML).

From this, certain characteristics about ancient Roman society can be inferred. First, Roman artisans were proficient in the use of cutting and carving tools. This meant that Rome had vocational schools that taught specific trades. Second, their tools were made of metal. This meant that Rome had forges and a tool and die industry. Third, the Romans had a deity named Oceanus.¹ This meant that the Romans revered the seas and probably were a maritime power. Fourth, Roman society remembered its dead. This meant that the ancient Romans had a sense of history. Fifth, the Romans did not trivialize death. This meant that the Romans took death seriously and when a Roman died, that loss was felt. Sixth, Romans wanted to be remembered after they died. This meant that Romans were conscious of their legacy. Seventh, Roman society appreciated art. This meant that the Romans had a sense of esthetics.

Bodicacia's tombstone suggests that in Roman society women were not necessarily relegated to a subordinate role. That someone invested the time and resources to construct such an ornate object for a deceased woman suggests that in Roman society the status of women was not unconditionally inferior to that of men. It also meant that the Romans honored women and that women and men were afforded equal respect when it came to commemorating their passing.

The tombstone is further indicative of a society that valued principles such as honor, integrity, and justice. The goal was to live a righteous life, the reward

¹ Oceanus – Roman god of the seas.

for which being a burial with honor. In such a culture, the tombstone would have served a dual purpose, first, as a symbol of veneration and second, as a landmark denoting the location of deceased. The process of interment would have been accompanied by an elaborate ritual, perhaps one not too much different than those that exist today. Religion therefore played an important role in Roman life. Concepts such as eternity, afterlife, heaven and hell would have been part of a theological belief system that gave meaning to their lives.

That Bodicacia warranted a tombstone suggests that she meant something to others. From this it can be inferred that the Romans were capable of forming deep emotional attachments. Death was something that brought sadness. It meant losing a loved one. For the Roman, death would have been a time for mourning. It was anything but a trivial matter. The presence of the tombstone confirmed the solemnity of the event.

Finally, let us examine the inscriptions on the stone. Carved into the face of Bodicacia's tombstone are these words:

DM
 BODICACIA
 CONIUNX
 VIXITANNO
 XXVII

English translation: "To the spirits of the departed/Bodicacia/faithful wife/died age 27." (DM may also be an abbreviation for *Dis Manibus* – "To the Underworld gods" or "To the memory of ...") (Bosworth, 8/3/11; DCI; RT). From this text much

can be inferred. First, in addition to showing that the Roman lexicon included beautiful names, it is evidence that the Romans had a deep appreciation for the sound of words. The name Bodicacia has a musical component. It is five syllables long. Saying her name produces a sound akin to a melody. Judging from that alone, it is possible to surmise that ancient vernacular Latin may have sounded like music.²

Second, the letters “DM” meant that the Romans had a religion, believed in deities, and valued prayer. From this it can be surmised that the Romans were a god-fearing people who maintained a personal relationship with their gods. It further meant that Rome had religious institutions. Although pagan, these institutions probably served a social function not much different than that performed by monotheistic religions today.

Third, it indicates that the Romans were a literate people. From that it can extrapolated that they possessed a body of literature and had a deep appreciation for the written word. This is evident not only in the beauty of words on the stone, but in their actual placement on the stone and the style of the writing, which takes the form of a poem or perhaps a ballad. Those words were composed by someone who was deeply in love with Bodicacia. (Compare that image to the boorishness of the Romans depicted in the mass media.)

Fourth, from the phrase “faithful wife,” it can be deduced that the ancient Romans understood and valued the concept of fidelity. For them, marriage meant a personal commitment to another. Hence, when a spouse died the loss would

² Latin can still be heard today. The liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church includes several prayers that are chanted in Latin. – PWW

have been felt intensely. The picture of a bereaved Roman man subsumed in grief, mourning for his deceased wife would not have been an uncommon occurrence. It suggests a people for whom death and loss were more than just words. They took it personally.

Fifth, the words “died age 27,” meant that the Romans understood numbers and the concept of time. For them, time was something to be measured. It also meant that they recognized the finite nature of existence. Bodicacia had died; she was gone. Her life was over and she had become a part of eternity. The tombstone does not reveal the cause of her death, but at that time to die at age 27 was probably not uncommon. The Romans did not welcome death.

Finally, Bodicacia’s tombstone is proof that, like living things in nature, cultures are finite. They are born, grow, flourish, degrade, and eventually die. Bodicacia was part of a culture that is long gone but in her time was very much alive. It also differed significantly from ours. First, unlike our world today which is dominated by monotheistic religions, she lived in a world that was pagan. Second, she spoke a language that is virtually extinct today. Third, on a developmental time scale she lived in an epoch not that far removed from the Stone Age. Fourth, she lived at a time when much of Europe was still wilderness and populated by indigenous peoples many of whom, like the ancient Romans themselves, no longer exist.

Yet, despite the huge cultural and chronological gap that separates us from Bodicacia, it is still possible to relate to her as a person. She was a woman, a spouse, a Roman (at least she possessed a Latin name), lived to adulthood, and

resided in a geographical location that still exists today. She probably was literate and possessed verbal communication skills. Finally, she was loved by others.

As for the ancient Romans in general, it is apparent that far from being callous and profligate, they possessed a spirituality that transcended their material lives. They revered their gods and venerated their dead, qualities indicative of a caring, thoughtful, intelligent, and honorable people, and built magnificent edifices and statues, including beautiful tombstones such as Bodicacia's which inspire admiration, both as religious relics and as works of art. For these reasons, ancient Rome deserves our respect.

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