

**Funerary Stele of Aurelius Hermia and his Wife, Aurelia Philematium
(CIL I².1221 — ca. 80 BC)¹**



<http://artsandscience.usask.ca/antiquities/collections/items/roman-items/roman.php#Inscriptions>

L AU]RELIUS L L		AURELIA L L	
[H]ERMIA		PHILEMATIO	
[LA]NIUS DE COLLE		VIVA PHILEMATIUM SUM	
VIMINALE		AURELIA NOMINITATA	
H]AEC QUAE ME FAATO	5	CASTA PUDENS VOLGEI	20
PRAECESSIT CORPORE		NESCIA FEIDA VIRO	
CASTO		VIR CONLEIBERTUS FUIT	
C]ONIUNXS UNA MEO		EIDEM QUO CAREO	
PRAEDITA AMANS		EHEU	
ANIMO	10	REE FUIT EE VERO PLUS	25
FI]DO FIDA VIRO VEIXSI[T]		SUPERAQUE PARENS	
STUDIO PARILI QUM		SEPTEM ME NAATAM	
NULLA IN AVARITIE		ANNORUM GREMIO	
CESSIT AB OFFICIO.		IPSE RECEPIT XXXX	
AU]RELIA L L	15	ANNOS NATA NECIS POT[I]	30
		ILLE MEO OFFICIO 4 O[R	
		ADSIDUO FLOREBAT AD O[MNIS]	

*L(ucius) Aurelius L(uci) l(ibertus) Hermia
lanius de colle Viminale*

*haec quae me fato praecessit, corpore casto,
coniunx una meo praedita amans animo, fido
fida viro vixit studio parilicum.
nulla in †avaritie† cessit ab officio.*

Aurelia L(uci) l(iberta)

Aurelia L(uci) l(iberta) Philematio

*viva Philematium sum Aurelia nominata,
casta, pudens, vulgi nescia, fida viro.
vir conlibertus fuit, idem, quo careo, eheu.
re fuit e vero plus superaque parens.
septem me natam annorum gremio ipse recepit,
quadraginta annos nata necis potior.
ille meo officio adsiduo florebat ad omnis*

¹ = ILLRP 793; CIL VI.9499; ILS 7472; CLE 959.

Commentary

Commentaries:

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Introduction

This stele (British Museum 1867: 0508.55) tells the touching story of two former slaves who had shared their lives for over 30 years prior to the wife’s death. As their names show, L. Aurelius Hermia and Aurelia Philematium had originally been slaves of one L. Aurelius. At some point they were each given their freedom. Hermia (who was a butcher with a shop on the Viminal hill) clearly did quite well for himself given that he could afford so elaborate a memorial, with sculpted figures and verse inscriptions, all of which he would have had to commission (Koortbojian 93).

On the stele, the pair are presented as a legally wedded citizen-couple: Hermia refers to Philematium as his *coniunx* (8) and the two are attired in the garb of respectable citizens. Moreover, the virtues for which Philematium is repeatedly praised (6-14, 20-21, 31-32) are those of the traditional elite *uxor*, a characterization that is confirmed by her attire (traditional tunic [*chiton/tunica*] and mantle [*himation/palla*]). The intimate gesture which the couple share (the wife kissing her husband’s hand in farewell) vividly proclaims the loving harmony that characterized their union while also confirming Philomatium’s subordinate role (Koortbojian 92, Stewart 182-83). (It also likely suggests a pun on Philomatium’s name: cf. below ad 16-17.)²

The stele is dated largely on the basis of the style of toga worn by Hermia (the Late Republican *toga exigua*) and, e.g., the manner in which long vowels are indicated: Koortbojian 92.

Just how we are to envision the couple’s story is unclear. The reference to Philomatium being taken into Hermia’s care at the age of seven likely does not allude to marriage or engagement but to some particular circumstance that saw them joined. Was it at that time that Philomatium was first purchased by Aurelius and taken under his wing by Hermia? Were Philomatium’s father and/or mother (themselves slaves) sold at that time, or did they die? Did Aurelius die and grant Hermia and Philomatium their freedom, charging the older man to look after a young slave to whom he was attached? One can only speculate, but the story that Philomatium presents is clearly meant to reflect her loving gratitude and devotion.³

Here we must recall that, although “Philomatium” speaks, the inscription was commissioned and dedicated by Hermia (Koortbojian 96-97). A modern reader is likely to bridle at the degree to which the flesh-and-blood woman has been replaced by a stereotypical set of gendered virtues sanctioned by the Roman patriarchy — the victim of a post-mortem *Stepford Wives* scenario, if you will. There is no denying this feature of Roman funerary commemoration, but the picture is a bit more complex than this, esp. in the case of this particular monument.

One needs to give further consideration to the position of Hermia, who himself is subject to a number of constraints. If we take the memorial at its word and assume that this man did in fact love his wife and wished to celebrate both

² For a detailed account of the style, iconographic elements, and physical features of the monument, see Koortbojian.

³ Philomatium likely would have been classed as an *alumna*. (On the challenge of defining the status of *alumni*, see, e.g., Rawson 173-86 (esp. 176-77); Bellemore/Rawson; Massaro 293-94.) Koortbojian 94 n. 35 cites Weaver (see esp. 174-79) and compares *CIL* VI.12652 (where the deceased Homonoea speaks [in elegant Greek elegiac couplets] of the grief that she has left behind for her *conlibertus* Atimetus, “to whom she was dear from the time when she was a little girl” [τῷ πέλον ἀσπασίῃ βαίῆς ἄπο]).

her and the life that they had led together, we have to ask (following Koortbojian) just how much of this monument he actually authored. Apart from lines 2-3, the two *tituli* are dictated by legal convention: they are boilerplate — and even lines 2-3 are highly traditional. The rest of the text is composed in verse and, for all of its occasional clumsiness, was likely beyond the capacity of the typical butcher (Koortbojian 97). We must assume that these verses were composed by a scribe, under Hermia's direction, and then handed to a (likely semi-literate) mason to inscribe — a process discussed in some detail at Koortbojian 97-99. The other principal feature of the monument — the visual depiction of the couple — is in a neo-Attic style that indicates familiarity with a foreign (Greek/Hellenistic) artistic tradition (Koortbojian 92-93). In all of this, Hermia's input could only have been of the most general sort.

However much Hermia might have wished to celebrate his wife, he had only limited control over the particular manner in which his feelings were given tangible form. But there were still other constraints. As a freedman who wished to honor his spouse, Hermia took great care to recall the tropes of aristocratic funeral monuments: in the attire associated with the engraved figures, in the formal manner in which he referred to his wife (*coniunx*), and in the virtues that he ascribed to her. There is no reason to assume that Philomatium herself would not have shared in this project and appreciated the dignity and grace with which her past life is here portrayed. In opting for epigram over a more straightforward prose epitaph, Hermia once again selected an elevated, elite form of commemoration, but one that, again, limited his options. Roman funerary monuments offer some truly touching personal vignettes,⁴ but such effects are more difficult to achieve in a text that is attempting to adhere to the traditions of conventional elegy — esp. one composed by a low-level scribe.⁵

Given these circumstances, it is striking just how personal a memorial this is: in the repeated emphasis on the reciprocity inherent in the relationship; in the manner in which Hermia is more than once associated with a loyalty and fidelity toward his wife of a sort normally praised in women; in the physical depiction of the couple and their gestures; in the vividness and emotive force with which the dead Philomatium is allowed to speak on her “own” behalf. Both Koortbojian and Massaro — whose works are required reading for anyone who wishes to come to terms with this monument — highlight features of this artifact that, for an ancient viewer, would have been striking for their very personal emotive force, but which a modern reader is likely to discount or to miss altogether.

In the end, the biographical vignette presented on the stele offers such a touching picture of intimate devotion that we moderns are likely to miss one oddity. Nowhere in this account is there any allusion to children, living or dead; instead, Hermia focuses solely on the wife whom he has lost (Koortbojian 95-96, Massaro 275). It might be that the couple could not in fact have children, but it is tempting to regard this feature as yet another untraditional feature of this monument — a final indication of the grieving husband's desire to focus on the memory of his beloved spouse.

Text

lines 1-2: *Lucius Aurelius Luci libertus Hermia* — identifies the deceased as Hermia (Ἑρμίας), a former slave of L. Aurelius who was freed by his master and so assumed the name L. Aurelius Hermia.⁶

de — indicating his origin, place of residence [OLD s.v. 11]

line 4: *Viminale* — the smallest of the famed seven hills of Rome, located NE of the forum. [The inscription itself was found in a tomb near the Via Nomentana, which leads NE from Rome to Nomentum.] [*Viminale* is treated like a noun: hence the abl. in *-e*]

⁴ E.g., *CIL* 13.1983 (Lyons): a husband grieving for the death of his eighteen-year-old wife and longing nostalgically for the times when they would go together in the afternoon to bathe in the baths of Apollo (*tu qui legis vade in Apol(l)inis | lavari(?)*), *quod ego cum coniun|ge feci. vellem si ad(h)uc possem*).

⁵ To take one clear instance: contrast the use of *Philematio* in the *titulus* at lines 16-17, vs. the more formal *Philematium* in verse at line 18.

⁶ On the names of freedmen, see <http://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/CourseNotes/RomanName.html> (ad fin.).

lines 5-14 (cf. 18-32): elegiac couplets. These are effective, despite some awkward touches: there are a number of places *passim* where one feels the poet packing things in.⁷ Note the care with which the long vowels are often designated (but not consistently): *ā* (*aa*: 5, 27), *ē* (*ee*: 25), *ī* (*ei*: 11, 20, 21, 22, 23).⁸ In 5-14, note, e.g., the somber tone of the first line (5-7), with its preponderance of spondees. The mason has worked with the space he had, highlighting key words and respecting the unity of particular phrases. (In instances where a syntactic/metrical unit is simply too long to fit into a single line, he centers the overflow in the following line, creating the impression of a paragraph: 2, 4, 7, 10, 17, 24.)⁹ In 5-14, he manages to respect the metrical structure of the verse; he is less successful in the latter sections of 18-32 due to considerations of space (Koortbojian 97-98).

line 5: *haec* — following the initial *titulus* that introduces Hermia, the focus is immediately directed toward the departed Philematium and remains there throughout. Hermia's contribution (5-14) speaks of his own affection for his wife but principally celebrates the dead woman's virtues and her devotion to her husband. "Philematium" will speak of her husband's tender care, but the vivid first-person nature of her account, along with its much more emotional tone (22-29), place her center-stage throughout (Massaro 275, 278).

fato praecessit — "has preceded me in death" (*fato* = *via mortis* [Massaro]) or (taking *fato* as a causal abl.) "has preceded me (in death) through the workings of fate" [Massaro: "per volere del fato"]

lines 6-7: *corpore casto* — abl. of description

lines 8-10: *coniunx* — on the formal nature of this term, see Treggiari 6

una — best taken with *praedita* (Wordsworth): *una meo praedita ... animo* = *unice mihi amata* [Massaro and others take *una* directly with *coniunx* (*una* = *sola*): a touching statement of continued devotion of a sort usually celebrated in widows (*univira*). Cf. Koortbojian 95] [Koortbojian 97 notes that this word is carved over some pre-existing damage to the stone]

amans — "loving," "devoted" (pred.: "in her love/devotion") [Note the effective interlacing of *amans*, which underscores the reciprocal nature of the relationship]

meo ... animo — abl. of instr. (with *praedita*) [*animo* — heart, devotion]

line 11: *fido fida viro* — the reciprocity that defined the relationship is nicely emphasized by the juxtaposition as well as the interlacing. [As Massaro notes, the virtue of *fidelitas* is more commonly celebrated in a wife than in a husband.]

line 12: *studio parilicum* — abl. of manner [Note how *parili* once again emphasizes the reciprocity that defined the relationship.] [Massaro notes that *studium* is not generally celebrated as a wifely virtue; cf., however, below ad line 14.]

cum — Massaro makes a convincing case that this must be *cum* the preposition (postpositive [A&G 413 R.1], with *studio parili* – cf. *mecum*, *tecum*, etc.) rather than *quom* the conjunction. (*Qum* for *cum* [prep.] can be paralleled elsewhere in inscriptions.) This allows us to avoid reading *quom* [= *cum* (A&G 544)] + *cessit* in a causal sense (which entails a rather curious turn of logic and a problematic use of the ind., as well as presenting the one case of syntactic enjambment in this inscription, via an awkward use of the conjunction). Massaro's case is strengthened by the lack of an interpunct betw *parili* and *cum* (also displayed in a prep. phrase in the next line: *in avaritie*). In terms of the meter, the conclusion *parilicum* also avoids the thumping monosyllabic ending. Against Massaro's reading is the oddity entailed in the postpositive position of *cum* with an adj. rather than a noun and the breaking up of what, on the other reading, is a single powerful statement. [Earlier edd. suggest *quin*: "indeed, in fact" (introducing a clause that amplifies and corroborates Hermia's preceding statement)]

line 13: †*avaritie*† — many edd. regard this as a slip. The consensus is to read *amaritie* (a somewhat recherché term that appears elsewhere only once, in Catullus).¹⁰ "bitterness." (I.e., no matter how unpleasant things might have

⁷ See Massaro for a detailed and sensitive evaluation of the poetic features of the text.

⁸ The inscription occasionally employs the "I-longa" to indicate the long form of this vowel: a longer "I" that rises above the line of the other letters (presumably representing two "i"'s stacked on top of one another). Thus *flda* (line 11), *vIva* (line 18). [Ranjan 12]

⁹ Koortbojian 97, Massaro 275-76.

¹⁰ Cf. Massaro 284 n. 49.

become?) Massaro rightly objects to this line of argument. He suggests that *nulla in avaritie*, in conjunction with *officio* (and, one might add, *studio* [line 12]), points to a whole-hearted devotion to the joint enterprise of ensuring the financial success of Hermia's household. Massaro compares, in particular, Columella, *De Re Rustica* 12 *prae*f. 7-8:

erat enim summa reverentia cum concordia et diligentia mixta, flagrabatque mulier pulcherrima diligentiae aemulatione studens negotia viri cura sua maiora atque meliora reddere. nihil conspiciebatur in domo dividuum, nihil, quod aut maritus aut femina proprium esse iuris sui diceret, sed in commune conspirabatur ab utroque, ut cum forensibus negotiis matronalis industria rationem parem faceret.

For the utmost reverence for them ruled in the home in an atmosphere of harmony and diligence, and the most beautiful of women was fired with emulation, being zealous by her care to increase and improve her husband's business. No separate ownership was to be seen in the house, nothing which either the husband or the wife claimed by right as one's own, but both conspired for the common advantage, so that the wife's diligence at home vied with the husband's public activities. (E.S. Forster / E.H. Heffner, tr.)

On this reading, Hermia is careful to ground the couple's mutual affection, not in erotic passion, but in a shared concern for the harmonious prosperity of the household as a whole. (As the passage from Columella demonstrates, however, one need not assume that Philematium worked by Hermia's side in his shop: cf. lines 31-32. In fact, the general terms in which the couple is presented tell against this interpretation: see my introduction.)

On the other hand, the use of the archaic noun *avarities* (vs. *avaritia*) seems a bit odd. In either case, *in* here has a causal force (Massaro).

line 14: *cedo ab* — to give way before, fail in

line 15: this would seem to be a false start, repeated in 16. See, further, Koortbojian 98-99, Massaro 285-86.

lines 16-17: *Aurelia Luci liberta Philematio* — as a freedwoman, the former slave Philematium would have adopted a feminine form of her former owner's *nomen* (*Aurelia*), followed by her own former name ("Kissy," "Snuggles")

Philematio — note how the (more intimate?) Greek version of Philematium's name (Φιλημάτιον) is employed in the heading (pronounced without the final *nu*, as was the norm), while the Latin version is adopted in the formal elegiacs (18): Koortbojian 91. [The name Philematio appears frequently in the Latin inscriptional record; Massaro seems to exaggerate the scarcity with which the name appears in Greek.]

lines 18-32: elegiac couplets

line 18: *viva* — pred. ("while alive")

line 19: *nominitata* — the vb. *nominito* is employed (vs. the more common *nomino*), *metri gratia*

line 20: *vulgi* — objective gen. [*vulgi nescia* — i.e., she remained dutifully at home: cf., e.g., *CIL* VI.11602 (*lanifica pia pudica frugi casta domiseda*); *CIL* I².1211/VI.15346 (*domum servavit lanam fecit*).] [For a more nuanced unpacking of the phrase *vulgi nescia*, see Roller.]

[Note the chiasmus: *vulgi nescia* — *fida viro*]

line 22: *conlibertus* — i.e., they were both former slaves of the same household (as is evident from their names)

lines 23-24: *idem* — resumptive use of the demonstrative (emotive)

[The conclusion of this line is moving, as the speaker allows her grief to overwhelm her (reflected in the emotive and unusual elision betw the fifth and sixth foot). The vivid first-person expression of her sorrow sets Philematium vividly before the reader, as if it were *she* who were grieving for a dead spouse. (Massaro 275 and 290-92)]

line 25: *re* — "in fact" (more often *re vera*)

e vero — truly [Wordsworth argues that this phrase is superfluous after *re*, but Massaro demonstrates that *e vero* is often employed as the equivalent of Engl. “in the true sense of the word” (to be taken with *parens*)]

line 26: *supera* = *supra* (“beyond,” “exceeding”)

plus supraque parens — following *plus*, *minus*, *amplius*, and *longius*, the relative adv. *quam* is often simply understood (usually in constructions involving measure or number: A&G 407c): “over and above a parent” [Massaro suggests, by contrast, “he was much more than a *conlibertus*: he was a parent”] [See Massaro for interesting reflections on the use of *parens* in preference to *pater*]

lines 27-28: *septem ... natam annorum* — seven years old (Contrast the construction in 29-30 and see Massaro ad loc.)

gremio — abl. of location (sc. *in*) [“he received me in his lap/bosom” = “he took me to his heart/under his protection”] [Massaro notes that this term is predominately employed in funerary inscriptions in reference to mothers, but that it is occasionally employed in the case of fathers or father-figures]

lines 29-30: *quadraginta annos ... nata* — 40 years old. [Scan: *quādrāginta*] [The mason employs numerical notation here, likely for economy of space: Koortbojian 98-99]

necis potior — “I am in the power/hands of death” [*potio* — to put X (acc.) in the power of Y (gen.). Others restore the perfect: *potita* (*sum*).] [Wordsworth notes that *nex* is normally employed of a violent death, which is unlikely to be the intended sense here. Massaro argues that it was likely selected to enhance the alliterative effect in this line.] [Massaro notes how Philematium’s autobiography opens with *viva* (line 18) and concludes here with *necis potior*] [The *-or* of *potior* appears at the end of line 31, preceded by a Grk. *sigma*.]

line 31-32: *meo officio adsiduo* — abl. of instr. (“thanks to my diligent services/care”) [Cf. 13-14: like Hermia, “Philematium” concludes by focusing on her wifely duties.] [Notice how the repeated elisions draw the reader on to the hephthemimeral caesura.]

ad omnis — “in the eyes of all” (although there is a possibility that *omnis* was picked up by a noun in the lost final line

[The final pentameter does not survive. Massaro 277 notes that the mason, having run out of space, likely inscribed it on the base of the monument (now lost), but nothing in the preserved artifact indicates that this was the case (Koortbojian 98).]

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