

The newly discovered tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio at the Porta Sarno, Pompeii: Neronian zeitgeist and its local reflection

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Abstract: The tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio was discovered in July 2021 in the necropolis of Porta Sarno at Pompeii. This paper contextualizes it against the backdrop of 1st-c. CE burial customs and social history. The inscription on the pediment shows that the tomb owner was a former public slave who, after manumission, rose to the rank of the *Augustales*; he was a “custodian” of the temple of Venus, and he organized “Greek and Latin games/performances.” This is the first archaeological discovery providing direct evidence of Greek musical and/or theatrical performances at Pompeii. Another peculiarity is that Secundio was inhumed, not cremated, a practice so far unique among adults in Pompeii during this period. The inhumation of Secundio and his *titulus sepulcralis* can be read as local reflections of the Neronian zeitgeist and shed light on the modes by which cultural trends spread from the capital throughout the empire.

Keywords: Pompeii, necropolis, funerary rituals, embalming, freedman, Latin and Greek games

The discovery of the tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio is critically important to the study of Roman Pompeian culture. This tomb casts new light on three topics relating to the history of Pompeii – the city “frozen” in time by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE – and by extension the Roman Empire during the reign of Nero (54–68 CE). First, the tomb of Secundio is the only inhumation tomb known in Pompeii from a period in which cremation of the deceased was the typical funerary practice. Second, this burial provides the only known example of preserved organic remains, including hair, cartilage, and internal organs. Finally, it is the only tomb whose inscription testifies to the presence of Latin and Greek games in Pompeii.¹

The adoption of inhumation and bodily preservation during funerary rituals in this period was indeed unusual, but it is possible that it was an imitation of the foreign funerary customs Nero followed when he laid his beloved wife, Poppaea, to rest. Perhaps Marcus Venerius Secundio’s patronage of Greek and Latin games, referenced in his funerary inscription, were similarly inspired by Nero: they took place at the same time Pompeii was undergoing reconstruction after the great earthquake of 62 CE, while many cultural games were simultaneously held in Naples and Rome by Nero.

The funerary area outside Porta Sarno

The necropoleis of Pompeii are located outside the main gates of the city. Six of them are currently exposed: Porta Ercolano, Porta Nocera, Porta Stabia, Porta Vesuvio, Porta Nola,

¹ These works were carried out within the scope of the research project: “Investigating the Archeology of Death in Pompeii, Necropolis of Porta Sarno.” (Concessione MiBAC/DG-ABAP_SERV II_UO1|09/04/2019|0010565-P| Convenzione Reg.52.26/06/2018).

and Porta Sarno. The Porta Ercolano necropolis was discovered and excavated between 1763 and 1838,² revealing a *via sepulcralis* over 200 m long, characterized by monumental mausolea and an adjacent commercial complex.³ Between 1907 and 1910, four tombs belonging to prominent figures were discovered at the Porta Vesuvio, including the tomb of Gaius Vestorius Priscus.⁴ In 1907–1908, two funerary monuments were unearthed in front of the Porta Nola, as well as an enclosure devoid of graves. Investigations continued in 1976 with the excavation of the enclosure of Marcus Obellius Firmus.⁵ Since 2010, there have been further excavations in the tombs of the Praetorians, Marcus Obellius's enclosure, and the wall tombs at the Porta Nola.⁶ Excavations at the Porta Nocera necropolis began in 1952, although intensive excavations of the funerary monuments did not occur until 1954.⁷ Systematic excavations of the Porta Nocera necropolis resumed in 2003, with a focus on the area surrounding the funerary monument of Publius Vesonius Phileros.⁸ A team of archaeologists excavated the tombs of Marcus Tullius and Marcus Alleius Minius at the Porta Stabia necropolis in 2001, although they were first discovered in 1889–1890.⁹ During preventive excavations, a tomb that had already been partially excavated in the 19th c. came to light. It is a monumental tomb that displays the longest inscription in Pompeii.¹⁰ The inscription comprises seven lines, over 4 m long in total. Although it does not include the name of the deceased, it describes their life in detail. The *titulis sepulcralis* recounts the praise the deceased received through wearing the *toga virilis*, an event during which the town offered a banquet for 6,840 diners and a gladiatorial show with 416 combatants. It also records his designation as a duumvir and the donations made to his fellow citizens. According to M. Osanna, the owner of the tomb was Alleius Nigidius Maius, one of the most prominent figures of the Neronian-Flavian era. The presence of an inscription concerning the rental of particular areas of a house owned by him,¹¹ together with the fact that the tomb was unfinished, indicates that Nigidius Maius was probably alive at the time of the 79 CE eruption. This is another example that is similar to the inscription on Secundio's tomb, shedding further light upon some elites promoting the revival of the destroyed city after the earthquake of 62 CE through the patronage of public events, such as games.

The Porta Sarno necropolis was discovered by chance during a preventive excavation in 1999 during construction of a route for the Circumvesuviana near the walls of Pompeii (Fig. 1). This excavation revealed a portion of the suburbium, two extensive funerary areas, and two paved roads.¹² One of these funerary areas lies to the east of the excavated area and was separated from the Amphitheater by a particularly inaccessible sector of the city's moat (*vallum*). The other is located on the edge of the important road that continues

² Kockel 1983.

³ Campbell 2015, 45–57.

⁴ Guzzo 1998.

⁵ De Caro 1979.

⁶ Senatore 1999, 96–100; Kay et al. 2020, 341–42.

⁷ D'Ambrosio and De Caro 1983.

⁸ Van Andringa et al. 2013.

⁹ Emmerson 2010, 77–86; Emmerson 2020, 56–57.

¹⁰ Osanna 2019, 233–41.

¹¹ *CIL* IV 138.

¹² D'Ambrosio 1999, 180–83.

The tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio at Porta Sarno



Fig. 1. Location of the funerary area outside the Porta Sarno. (Parco Archeologico di Pompei.)

from the Via dell'Abbondanza beyond the city in the direction of Sarno.¹³ The second road that was uncovered heads northwest towards the Porta Nola funerary area. On average, these roads are 5 m wide and follow a steep incline towards the city; they are intersected by wide furrows resulting from cart usage over time.

A monumental tomb of the “cube on podium” type in a masonry enclosure was discovered a short distance from the main road (Fig. 2, Area A). The tomb, which is covered with white plaster, has a large niche on its back side that contains a smaller niche, with the deposition marked by a gravestone in volcanic stone. There is another funerary monument partially emerging from the underlying wall in the southwestern corner of the excavation (Area G). It is most likely that this building was being renovated at the time of the eruption, given the evidence of consolidation work and the presence of newly carved building material.

Two small funerary monuments sit along the road (Area H). Both were originally made of a masonry base covered with red plaster painted with geometric motifs. Within each are marble tombstones. One of the tombstones bears the following dedication:

L. METTIVS M. F. POLL(ia) / MARTIALIS CARR(eo) /

SPECVL(ator), / MIL(itavit) AN(nis) X VIX(it) AN(nis) XXX

(“Lucius Mettius Martialis son of Marcus, member of the tribe Pollia, from Carreum Potentia, *speculator*, who had served in the military for 10 years and died at the age of 30.”¹⁴)

The most recent systematic excavations in this area as part of the project “Investigating the Archeology of Death in Pompeii, Necropolis of Porta Sarno” seek to investigate these funerary monuments and the surrounding walled enclosures (Fig. 2). The changing floor

¹³ Di Maio and Stefani 1997, 6–11.

¹⁴ Transl. the authors based on *AE* 2013, 267. From the 1st c. CE, the term *speculator* is used for several well-differentiated categories of soldiers: bodyguards who acted as the emperor’s personal guard or who were in charge of protecting and escorting provincial governors, soldiers used as messengers or spies, or urban guards. See Wolff 2003.

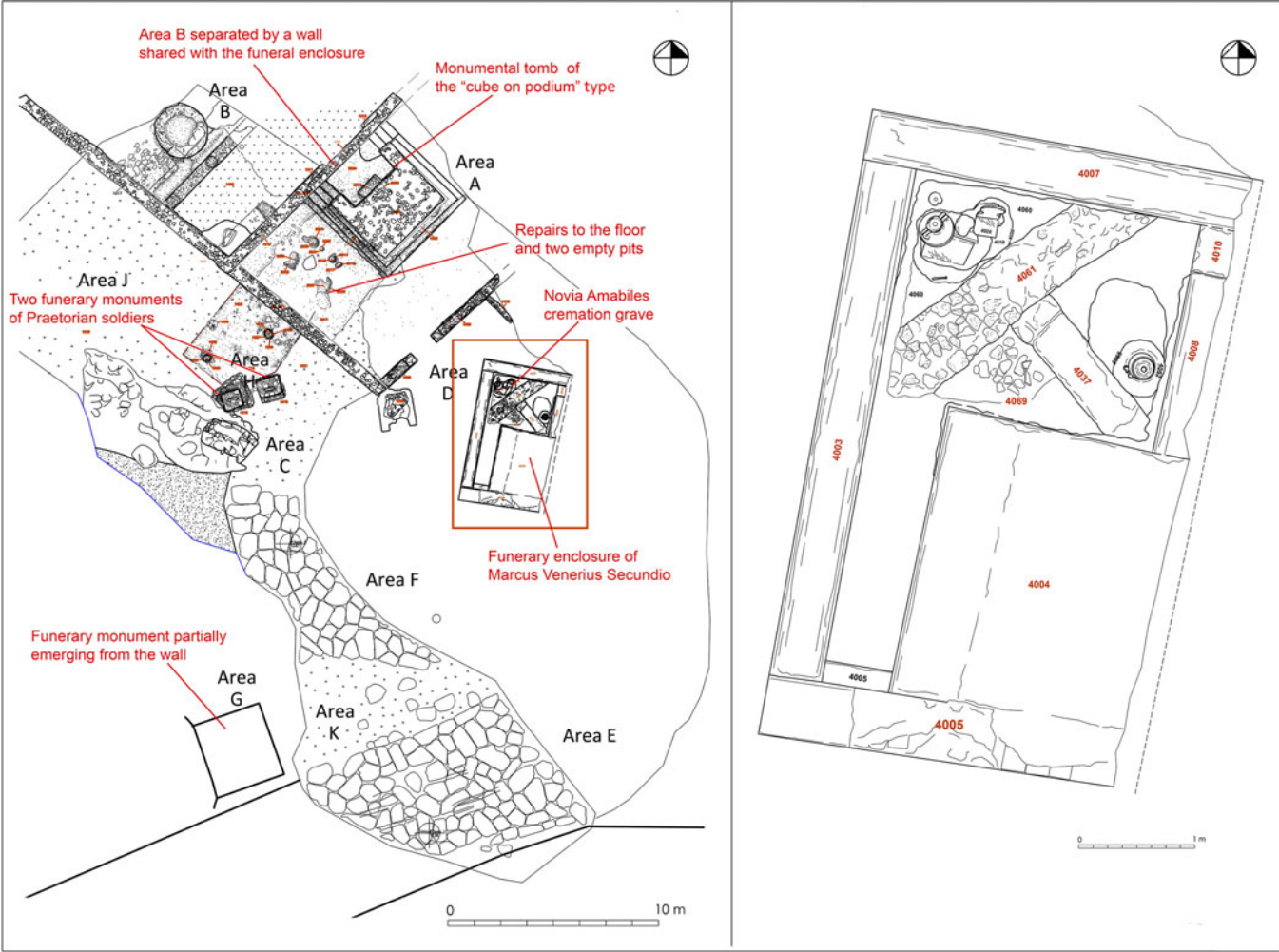


Fig. 2. Plan of Marcus Venerius Secundio's tomb in the funerary area outside the Porta Sarno. (Drawings by P. Mas.)

levels and alterations to the “cube on podium” precinct (Area A) suggest that this enclosure was likely frequented until the years immediately before 79 CE. Interestingly, repairs to the floor seem to correspond with pits where two trees would have grown. In addition, there are two empty pits in the soil that seem to have contained cinerary urns and grave-stones (columellae). We can deduce that this funerary space contained at least two trees and two cremation tombs. Comparable evidence for planting at tombs has been found elsewhere at Pompeii and nearby. According to Annamaria Ciarallo, the cavities left by the roots of cypresses have been found in the funerary enclosure of a tomb of the necropolis of the Porta di Sarno.¹⁵ Similarly, the root cavities of six large trees (perhaps cypresses or boxwoods) have been found in a tomb dating to before the eruption of Vesuvius in the nearby town of Scafati. Four of the six recorded trees were in front of the tomb surrounding the space destined for the cremation of the deceased.¹⁶

In this case, therefore, we can interpret these trees as part of the funerary garden. This means that their functions would have been varied. They would have contributed to creating a pleasant space and environment for the commemoration of the dead; greenery creates an agreeable ambiance providing shade and would have appealed to multiple senses. Funerary monuments and graves should be considered sensorial spaces, since, as has been argued before, the ancient Romans built their tombs as much, if not more, for the living as for the dead.¹⁷ This fact does not mean that the garden had an exclusively ornamental use. Its fruits and produce could also be used for offerings and in funerary banquets, particularly during anniversaries and festivals of the dead.¹⁸ Some inscriptions show that flowers were cultivated to serve as offerings and vineyards to produce wine for libations in some gardens.¹⁹ The botanical study carried out in the funerary enclosure belonging to the Vesonii family in the Porta Nocera necropolis has revealed the remains of three cereal species, four pulses plus cultivated Fabaceae, three nuts, six fleshy fruits, and an ornamental tree (Cupressus). Cypress cones, grapes, figs, apples, dates, and chestnuts were deposited on the pyre, while walnuts, hazelnuts, and olives seem to have been broken up to be consumed during the funerary meal.²⁰ The archaeobotanical study of the funerary “garden” of the necropolis of Plaza Vila de Madrid, in Barcelona, has also confirmed the presence of trees and shrubs whose fruits could have been used in funeral rituals, such as pine, cypress, hazel, olive, and vine.²¹ In the Porta Sarno necropolis, the equivalence between the two pits used to bury the urns and the two cavities for roots suggests a plausible interpretation that the trees represented the spirits of each of the deceased in the enclosure. The association of plant life and graves in mourning is well attested in the Roman world. In the *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid recounts the story of young Cyparissus, who upon the death of a beloved stag chose to die himself, wishing to mourn forever. Apollo transformed him into a cypress tree.²²

¹⁵ Ciarallo 2000, 25.

¹⁶ Bodet, 2018, 199–200; Jashemski 1970–71, 106–10.

¹⁷ Campbell 2008, 31.

¹⁸ Bodet 2018, 221–22.

¹⁹ Graham 2018, 4; Campbell 2008, 35.

²⁰ Matteredne and Derreumaux 2008, 108–9.

²¹ Beltran et al. 2007, 104–6.

²² Ov. *Met.* 10.106–42.

The funerary space in the Porta Sarno necropolis was greatly damaged by the earthquake of 62 CE. It is likely that the urns holding the cremated remains of the deceased were removed (following the completion of all necessary rites), explaining the empty pits. As reported by Cicero, the site of a Roman tomb became a *locus religiosus* after all relevant funerary rites were completed. This denomination made funerary spaces places that were protected by religious principles and therefore unusable in any other way; they could not be moved or destroyed by any force.²³ In addition, the Twelve Tables stipulate that both the tomb itself and access to it are protected.²⁴ The tombs may have been considered inviolate, but for one reason or another they were nonetheless bought and sold, subdivided and enlarged.²⁵ In fact, this is what happened in this funerary space at Porta Sarno after the earthquake of 62 CE. The entrances to areas were walled up and the funeral enclosure was divided into two different spaces. Nevertheless, the exclusion of a deceased from a funerary space required special precautions and compliance with certain rules. A clear example of these practices can be seen in the monument and funerary enclosure of Publius Vesonius Phileros in the Porta Nocera necropolis in Pompeii. In this grave, his former friend, Marcus Orfellius, was deprived of a space for burial and older urns were removed to occupy their space with new burials.²⁶ Seneca describes the deep fear caused by the earthquake of 62 CE.²⁷ In fact, there are multiple examples of archaeological evidence demonstrating people's urge to move away from the city, leaving houses unpopulated. Houses in Regiones VI and VIII, for instance, remained in ruins or were turned into fields after the 62 CE earthquake.²⁸ It is plausible that the owners of the funerary enclosure left the city after the earthquake, taking the urns of their deceased with them after selling part of the enclosure.

The other area we focused on during the 2021 excavations contains the Praetorian funerary monuments (Area H). Our excavation revealed the cinerary urns and funerary deposits associated with the monuments. One urn was accompanied by many metal nails, a large fragment of charred wood, and a lamp with the symbolic image of a *desultor* (horse jumper). This cinerary urn itself exhibits two interesting features: first, the lid has been placed upon the body of the vessel inversely, which strongly suggests that the lid was meant to serve as libation tube. Second, directly under the lid we uncovered a burned but perfectly preserved bronze coin, struck under Tiberius in 22–23 CE.²⁹ On the obverse is the word "PIETAS," with the profile of the divinity Pietas, veiled and holding a diadem; on the reverse: SC DRVSVS CAESAR TI AVGVSTI F TR POT ITER, which refers to Drusus Caesar and provides a terminus post quem for this burial. Pietas is an attribute associated with Livia Drusilla, wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius. The deity exhibited on the coin is the personification of this Roman pietas; that is, feelings of respect and devotion to parents and the fulfillment of duties within the family. The analysis of the cremated

²³ Cic. *Phil.* 9.14.

²⁴ Cic. *Leg.* 2.64.

²⁵ Carroll 2006, 103; Emmerson 2020, 84.

²⁶ Van Andringa et al. 2013, 161, 833–36; Van Andringa 2021, 139–44.

²⁷ Sen. *QNat.* 6.1.2.

²⁸ Allison 2004, 192–98.

²⁹ Tiberius, dupondius, Rome, 22–23 CE. O/ PIETAS: Draped, veiled and diademed bust of a woman, to right. R/ DRVSVS CAESAR TI AVGVSTI F TR POT ITER, legend surrounding large [S C]. AE, 15.70 gr. Diameter: 30 mm. US1013, 2019. *RIC I*², 97, n. 43.

remains inside the urn revealed that the deceased was a young male individual, between 18 and 20 years old. In the grave containing the cremated remains of the *speculator*, we found a well-preserved glass *unguentarium* just above the urn that provides strong evidence for the rites leading to the tomb's consecration as a *locus religiosus*. For this funerary space, a Dressel 2/4 amphora has, interestingly, been repurposed as the urn holding the burned bones. By studying the remains within the amphora-turned-urn, we have discovered that it contains, in fact, the remains of at least two different individuals: one an adult and the other a child between 8 and 10 years old.

The final area of investigation was the enclosure located to the north (Area B) that shares a wall with the funeral enclosure with a monument on a podium. Area B presents two chronological phases, before and after the 62 CE earthquake. From the stage before the earthquake, there is a floor that aligns with a wall dotted with brick columns that separates this space from a well and associated drainage. This structure would have been connected with the adjacent funeral enclosure. Our hypothesis is that before the 62 CE earthquake, this was a place intended for use in the cremation process. It may have been a cremation facility or simply a facility for cleaning up the *ustrinum* and cremated remains. Funerary wells have been found in other necropoleis.³⁰ The most similar examples are in the necropolis of Isola Sacra in Ostia and in the Via Ostiense necropolis in Rome.³¹ If this hypothesis holds true, it would be the first example of a funerary well found and recorded in Pompeii.

The Tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio: from excavation to the reconstruction of the ritual

The latest excavation season, in 2021, brought to light a funerary structure surrounded by a rectangular enclosure (Area D). The western corner of the tomb enclosure contained a burial chamber, which is to date a unique discovery in Pompeii. Both the walls and the chamber are built of tuff stone masonry bonded with sand and lime mortar, and covered with a cocchiopesto plaster. The tomb's entrance faces south, in the direction of the Porta Sarno. Its façade is of a triangular tympanum style and contains an inscription about the deceased owner of the tomb, Marcus Venerius Secundio, a freedman and former slave of the city. The graves of public slaves in Pompeii have been hypothesized through the relationship of the cremation urns to a series of Greek name inscriptions in the city wall between Porta Nola and Porta Sarno.³²

The front of the tomb was painted with a fresco representing a garden, with trees, shrubs, and a small fountain in the center (Fig. 3). The function of the painting, which is poorly preserved, is to represent Elysium as a beautiful garden.³³ The fresco also recalls the importance of gardens and botanical elements for both living and deceased Romans, as discussed above.³⁴ Images of such gardens are indeed quite common in the houses of Pompeii, even if they are rarely attested in funerary contexts. The closest parallel is the east wall of the enclosure of the tomb of Gaius Vestorius Priscus at the Porta Vesuvio necropolis.³⁵

³⁰ Beltran 2007, 35–36.

³¹ Baldassarre et al. 2018, 4–10; Marcelli and Cicone 2021, 61–68.

³² Kay et al. 2020, 341–42; Senatore 1999, 96–100; *CIL* IV 2494, 2495.

³³ Bodel 2018, 217–18.

³⁴ Bodel 2018, 217–18.

³⁵ Cicirelli 1998, 45–49.



Fig. 3. *Façade of the tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio. (A. Giannotti.)*

In the central field of that wall, we can see the representation of a garden with oleander surrounded by a fence, in front of which there is a fountain.³⁶ Another example is tomb 19ES in the Porta Nocera necropolis, which contained garden paintings on its front.³⁷

The funerary enclosure has an external perimeter of 17.50 m and an internal perimeter of 13.75 m. The internal area of the enclosure measures 10.81 m². The height of the façade with pediment is 2.50 m. The maximum height of the walls is 1.88 m and they are up to 0.46 m thick. The burial chamber has an outer perimeter of 4.31 m and its inner perimeter is 6.43 m. The area of the chamber is 2.50 m². Its walls are 0.46 m (north side) and 0.40 m (west side) thick. The entrance to the chamber is 0.67 m high by 0.61 m wide.

The typology and architecture of our tomb resemble other tombs in Pompeii, in particular, the “house tombs” of Marcus Veius Marcellus in the funerary area of the Porta Vesuvio and of Marcus Obellius Firmus in the funerary area outside the Porta Nola; therefore, its date is perhaps close to that of these monuments.³⁸ Both tombs date to the final decades before the eruption. The tomb of Marcus Veius Marcellus was still incomplete at the time of the eruption in 79 CE. Also recent at the time of the eruption was the nearby tomb of Gaius Vestorius Priscus. It has been dated to 70–71 CE based on his running for aedile and dying while in office (Fig. 4).³⁹

³⁶ Campbell 2008, 37.

³⁷ Jashemski 1993, 369.

³⁸ La Rocca et al. 1981, 280.

³⁹ Mols and Moorman 1993–94, 38.

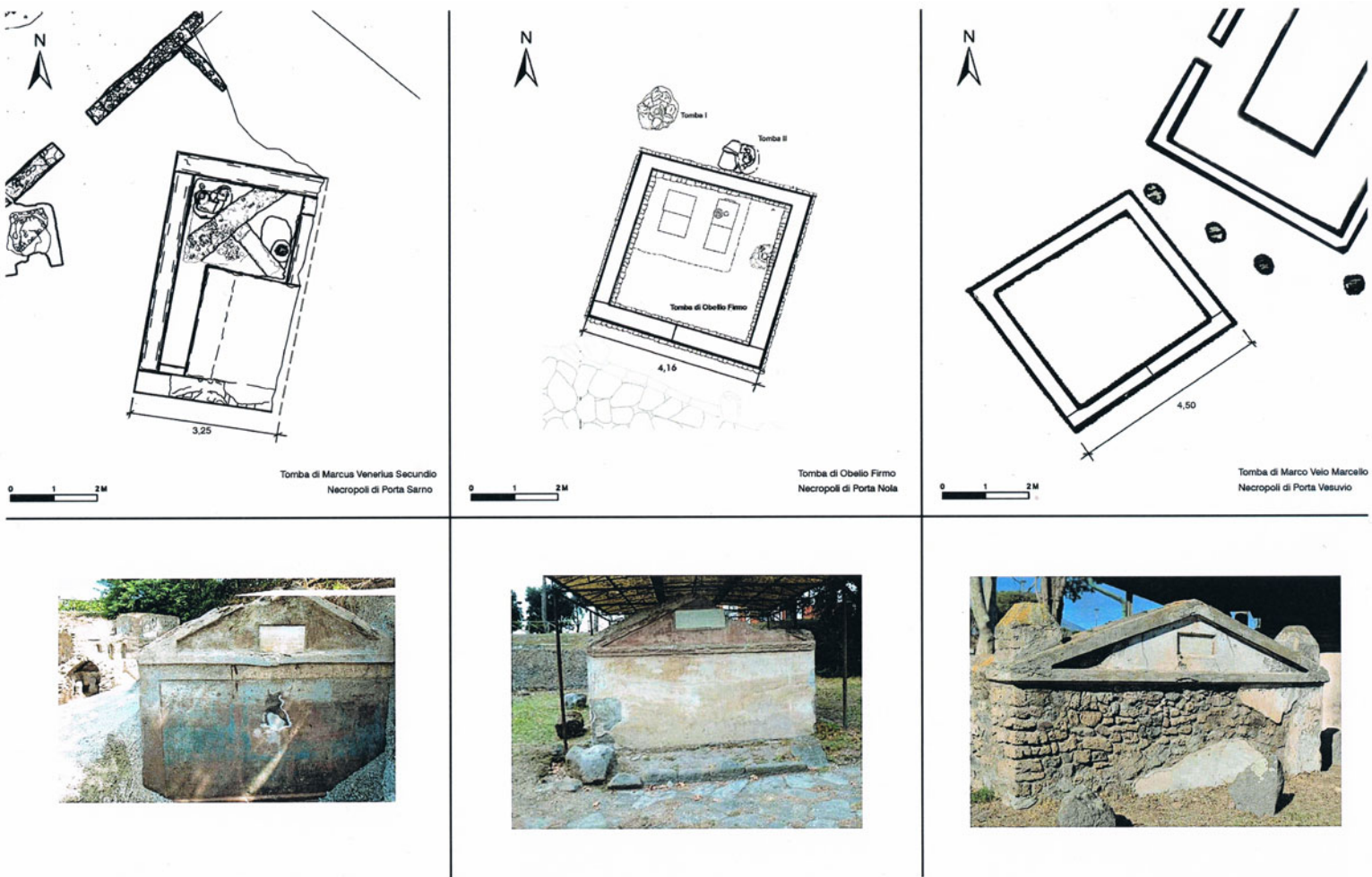


Fig. 4. Comparison of the Tombs of Marcus Venerius Secundio, Marcus Obellius Firmus, and Marcus Veius Marcellus. (P. Mas, Ll. Alapont, Parco Archeologico di Pompei.)

The excavation of the Marcus Obellius Firmus tomb revealed a second cinerary urn containing a coin of the emperor Nero. This coin is a dupondius (66–69 CE) with the following text: obverse: IMP NERO CLAVD CAES[AR AVG GERM]; reverse: PACE P R VBIQ P[ARTA IA]NVM CLAVSIT. This coin could be interpreted as a “coin of the deceased” given the particular typology and the legend PACE VBIQVE.⁴⁰ In sum, the evidence allows us to date this tomb to the last 20 years before the eruption. As in the tomb of Marcus Obellius Firmus, a bronze coin dated to 64 CE, celebrating the Neronia, the quinquennial event that Nero established in Rome was found in the tomb of Secundio and dates it to within the last two decades before the eruption. Furthermore, the name “M. Venerius Sec.” appears in one of the wax tablets found in the house of Caecilius Iucundus on the Via Vesuvio.⁴¹ These tablets date to the years before 62 CE and contain the receipt of a payment for public land, collected by a public slave named Privatus on behalf of the city from Caecilius Iucundus.⁴²

Inside the burial enclosure of Marcus Venerius Secundio, an accumulation of collapsed plaster was found, a consequence of the eruption. Below this was a sandy clay layer, which constitutes the floor of the funeral complex. A white marble gravestone (columella) emerges from the floor level with the inscription NOVIA AMABILES, perhaps the wife of Secundio (Suppl. Fig. 13; 4020).⁴³ In front of the gravestone, there was a small square slab of marble on which offerings could be deposited. Next to the gravestone, in the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, a Dressel 2-4 amphora was found, closed with a lid (Suppl. Figs. 14, 15, 16). It served as a libation conduit extending toward a glass urn, which was protected by two large tegulae (Fig. 5). This urn was placed inside a metal case made of an alloy of tin, lead, antimony, and copper (Fig. 6). A large bronze nail sat on the metal case and the glass urn. It served to seal the urn symbolically and to characterize the tomb as a *locus religiosus*.⁴⁴ Next to the amphora, an intact glass unguentarium came to light. Its presence might relate to a last gesture of pouring perfumed oil onto the bones before closing the urn forever, although unguentaria were also used for libations in events commemorating the deceased (Suppl. Figs. 17, 18, 19).⁴⁵

The glass urn was filled with six liters of a dark liquid that had to be extracted before the cremation in the urn was subjected to micro-excavation. In addition to finding plant remains resembling flowers, the preliminary study revealed the burnt bone remains of

⁴⁰ Kay et al. 2020, 342. Nero, dupondius, Rome, 66–69 CE. A/ IMP NERO CLAVD CAES[AR AVG GERM] PM TR P PP: bust of Nero, left, with radiate head. R/ PACE PR VBIQ P[ARTA IA]NVM CLAVSIT [SC]. View of façade of the temple of Janus, latticed window to left and garland hanging over double door to right. AE, 15.3 gr. Diameter: 28 mm. 180° UE18, 2015, S.F10. *RIC I*², 170 n. 340.

⁴¹ *CIL* IV 3340, n. 139.

⁴² *CIL* IV 3340, n. 139.

⁴³ The inscription spells the cognomen AMABILES. Similar cases are known from Pompeii in *CIL* IV 5417 (comunes), 4812 (fideles), 3149 (omnes), 2185 ff. 2218a (Sollemnes). The latter is clearly a name, just like Amabilis (a frequent female cognomen, attested more than 60 times in the Roman world). Väänänen 1966, 21, 84, explains this by the relatively open pronunciation in Pompeii of the “i,” which thus anticipated the vernacular/Italian “amabile.” As to the nomen “Novius” (see Castrén 1983, 196 ff.), it is attested in Pompeii in *CIL* IV 10136 (Novius) and *CIL* IV 2155 (L. Novius Priscus, fanaticus).

⁴⁴ Ortalli 2011, 202–3.

⁴⁵ Van Andringa 2021, 114–24.

The tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio at Porta Sarno

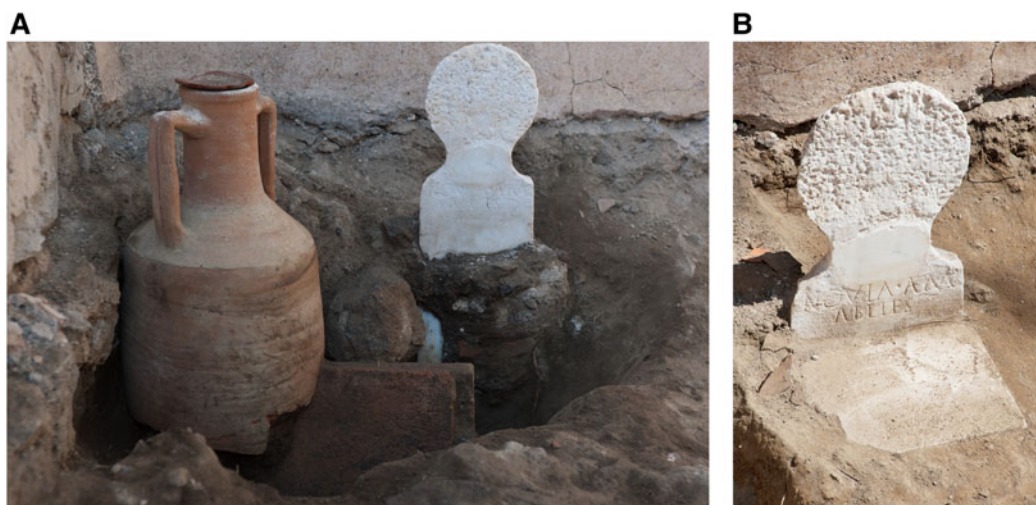


Fig. 5. Cremation grave of Marcus Venerius Secundio's wife Novia Amabiles: (A) marble tombstone beside the amphora that functioned as a conduit for libations; (B) detail of the marble tombstone on which the name Novia Amabiles is incised. (A. Giannotti.)

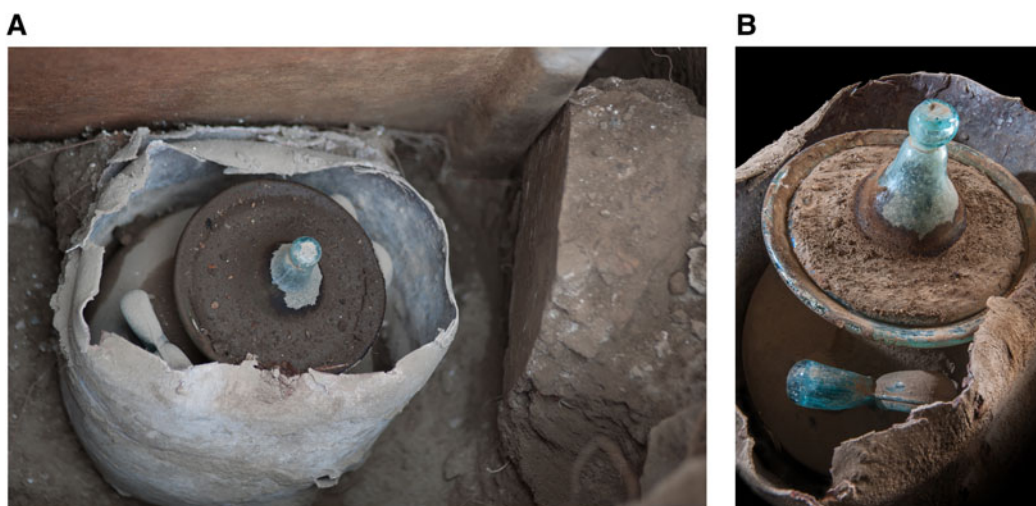


Fig. 6. Glass urn of Marcus Venerius Secundio's wife, Novia Amabiles: (A) glass urn deposited inside a metal case; (B) detail of the glass urn with the lid sealed with plaster. (A. Giannotti.)

four individuals: one adult and three children, aged 6–8 years, 4–6 years, and 3–5 years respectively. The presence of several individuals in the same urn is rare; however, in this same necropolis, the urn of a Praetorian soldier contained the bones of an adult and of a child approximately 8 years old. This phenomenon occurs in several instances at the Via Ostiensis necropolis in Rome, always with the remains of an adult together with those of one or sometimes two children.⁴⁶ This practice of adding the remains of one family

⁴⁶ Alapont et al. 2021, 68–76.

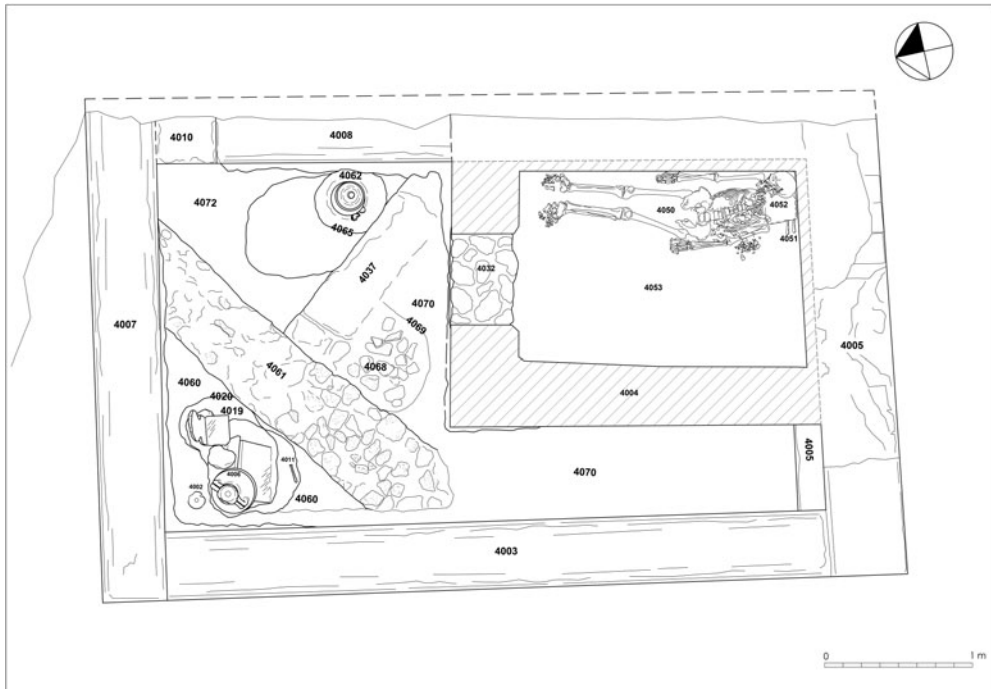


Fig. 7. Plan of Marcus Venerius Secundio's tomb. (Drawing by P. Mas.)

member to the urn of another is reflected in an inscription from Rome in which a man asks that his remains be placed in the urn of his late wife.⁴⁷

A tuff stone sits next to the east wall of the enclosure in front of the burial chamber. This stone indicates another cremation with a closed ceramic urn, containing the burnt bones of an adult individual (Fig. 7).

The burial chamber containing the inhumation of Marcus Venerius Secundio was hermetically sealed by tuff blocks and mortar, and again on the outside by a layer of reddish clay. Inside the burial chamber, on the east side, lay the skeleton of an adult male. The individual was more than 60 years old (as demonstrated by the complete ossification of the thyroid cartilage, as well as signs of wear on the teeth and joints). He had a consolidated right clavicle fracture and appears to have been deposited on his back, with his head resting on a stone slab shaped like a cushion. Next to this slab were two glass ointment bottles, which had probably been used during the funeral ritual to pour oils onto the deceased and consecrate the tomb (Fig. 8).⁴⁸

The skeleton exhibits an exceptional state of preservation, with the individual's white hair and the remains of the left ear still visible (Fig. 9; Suppl. Figs. 20, 21). The body was covered by an organic substance that will be subjected to further analysis (Fig. 10). It appears to have been a shroud consisting of plant elements, bark, leaves, or joined plants impregnated with resin or honey. This mantle covering the body, along with the anaerobic environment caused by the hermetic sealing of the tomb, seems to have contributed to the partial mummification

⁴⁷ *CIL* VI 29460.

⁴⁸ Van Andringa 2021, 114, 124.



Fig. 8. *Funerary chamber with the body of Marcus Venerius Secundio. Three-dimensional image from the photogrammetric record. (P. Mas.)*

of the deceased. Natural mummification can occur when dehydration of the corpse is induced by fluctuating air in a dry environment, which prevents putrefaction. This can occur between six months and one year after interment, or even sooner, depending on environmental conditions. Natural mummification may have occurred as a consequence of the lack of exchange of oxygen and humidity with the outside of the chamber. On the other hand, embalming practices, typical of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, were also employed in the Roman world. Corpses preserved in honey and other fragrant and resinous substances are mentioned by Varro, Lucretius, Tacitus, and Cicero.⁴⁹ What is more, the use of asbestos in funerary contexts for preserving corpses (leading to an appearance similar to rotten wood) is documented in several archaeological contexts of the Imperial period.⁵⁰ Asbestos fabrics have been discovered in some tombs in Italy. The best example is a large sheet of asbestos fabric found in the necropolis of the Via Triumphalis in the area of the Vatican.⁵¹ Cases of embalming and mummification in the Roman Empire are very rare outside of Egypt. Two cases are particularly notable. The first is that of the Hypogaeum of Garlands in Grottaferrata, where, inside a sealed funerary chamber, Aebutia Quarta and her son Carvilius Gemellus, members of one of the most famous patrician families, were

⁴⁹ Varro, *Sat. Men.* Cynus peri taphes, fr. 82; Lucr. 3.1213, “be roasted with fire and flame, or drowned with honey, or chilled, when he lies in the grave”; Tac. *Ann.* 16. 6; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.45.108.

⁵⁰ Bianchi and Bianchi 2015, 83–90.

⁵¹ Steinby 2003, 158.



Fig. 9. The head of Marcus Venerius Secundio, with white hair and remains of the left ear preserved. (Ll. Alapont.)

embalmed and mummified with myrrh, pine resin, and goat's milk, faithfully following Egyptian methods.⁵² The physical, chemical, and histological analysis of the partially mummified remains of a 4th-c. CE Roman woman, with preserved hair and tissue, are also very revealing. The presence of sesquiterpenes in the hair is indicative of the use of essential oils or resins for embalming.⁵³ In this context, molecular analyses carried out in certain Late Roman burials in Britain have shown the use of Pinaceae, *Pistacia*, and *Boswellia* resins for embalming the deceased. Some of these even appeared impregnated in the hair and scalp.⁵⁴ The persistence of the use of resins for embalming has been verified through chemical analysis of burials in the catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus in Rome. The chemical characterization of the amorphous materials from these catacombs has shown an embalming treatment using sandarac mixed with amber and gypsum.⁵⁵ Analysis of white material from funerary contexts has shown that many more bodies than previously believed were treated or embalmed with gypsum, natural gum, resins, and other products.⁵⁶

⁵² Zazzetta 2020.

⁵³ Papageorgopoulou et al. 2009, 35–42.

⁵⁴ Brettell et al. 2015, 639–48.

⁵⁵ Devière et al. 2017.

⁵⁶ Schotsmans et al. 2019, 809–27.



Fig. 10. *Organic substance covering the body.* (Ll. Alapont.)

These investigations highlight the importance and necessity of multidisciplinary approaches in order to objectively interpret mortuary practices and rites.

The inhumation of Marcus Venerius Secundio broke with an established tradition, since virtually all of the post-Samnite tombs in Pompeii are cremations. Only one other post-Samnite adult inhumation was found in Pompeii so far, in the tomb of Eumachia.⁵⁷ It is dated to the 1st c. BCE by four pottery unguentaria. The skeleton in that case was lying on its back in a pit dug into the rock, partially constructed of mortar and stone, and covered by a layer of mortar-bound stones. The unguentaria were placed on the left side of the deceased. This instance, however, is completely different from the tomb of Secundio. Most of the other known inhumations are burials of very young children, who were not supposed to be cremated. As Pliny the Elder explains, inhumation burials were the rule for children who died before their first teeth appeared.⁵⁸ Juvenal also refers to the body of a young child being entrusted to the earth and not to the flames.⁵⁹ There are several cases of burials of children inside amphorae in Pompeii, both in the Porta Nocera necropolis and in the Porta Nola necropolis.⁶⁰ However, in contrast to the sources mentioned, we find numerous cases of cremated children, including newborns.⁶¹ A good example is the tomb of the freedwoman Castricia Prisca, in the Porta Nocera necropolis, where the cremated

⁵⁷ Lagi 1998, 77.

⁵⁸ Plin. *HN* 7.70–72.

⁵⁹ Juv. 15.139–40.

⁶⁰ Van Andringa et al. 2013, 322–29; Kay et al. 2020, 341; Alapont and Bouneau 2010, 117–44.

⁶¹ Carroll 2018, 180–83.

remains of a child approximately one year old were found. After the death of Castricia Prisca, the remains of the child were deposited in her grave and perfumed oil was spilled on the bones, as can be deduced from the intact ointment left beside them. Once the pit was sealed, a small gravestone was placed to mark the burial.⁶² The remains of the children found in the Novia Amabiles urn described above, of course, were also cremated.

The burial of Marcus Venerius Secundio is exceptional, given that it departs from established norms and even from the burials of other members of his family in the precinct. Beyond Pompeii, however, there are references to inhumation in this period. Nero's second wife Poppaea Sabina, whom the emperor is said to have killed in a rage but also appears to have loved desperately, was similarly inhumed. Tacitus reports in the *Annales* that "her body was not cremated according to Roman usage, but after the custom of foreign kings was filled with fragrant spices and embalmed, and then consigned to the mausoleum of the Julii."⁶³ The term "foreign kings" (*reges externi*) likely refers to eastern Mediterranean rulers, especially to the Macedonian royal burials. We know that Julius Caesar had admired Alexander's embalmed body in Alexandria and that other Roman emperors followed suit. But inhumation and embalming are also typical of Persian, Egyptian, and Jewish burial rites. According to Flavius Josephus, Poppaea, whose family had property in the area around Pompeii, sympathized with the Jewish religion, although no other source mentions this.⁶⁴ In any case, the fact that she was inhumed is clearly depicted by Tacitus as inspired by foreign, probably eastern Mediterranean, traditions. These traditional aspects of her funeral show that inhumation was able to infiltrate Roman burial standards without upsetting the funerary practices. Poppaea's funeral was traditional in every respect apart from its burial ritual.

Statius provides another example of inhumation, when a man named Abascantus, a wealthy member of Domitian's household, had his wife Priscilla embalmed and inhumed (*Silv.* 5.1.225–31, transl. author):

Here your distinguished husband laid you, Priscilla, covered softly by Sidonian purple on blessed bed; for he was unable to bear the smoking pyre and the clamor of the tomb. A longer age will be unable to consume, the labors of eternity will be unable to spoil: such provisions have been made for your body: the venerable marble inspires great riches.

Priscilla's funeral was celebrated with a lavish funerary procession, as was common for burials of elite Romans. The same holds true for Priscilla's corpse being presented on a funerary bed of the sort usually placed on the pyre. In sum, the description makes it clear that the burial of Priscilla followed traditional Roman funerary ritual except for the fact that she was inhumed and not cremated.

This apparent preference for inhumation among at least some members of the elite of Roman Italy in this period can be contextualized against the backdrop of the Neronian zeitgeist and cultural atmosphere. The unique and extravagant nature of Poppaea's burial is reminiscent of other examples of Nero's love for ostentation and culturally sophisticated distinction. Many of Nero's actions appear to have been inspired by Alexander the Great and other Hellenistic kings, as we know from numerous anecdotes in Suetonius.⁶⁵

⁶² Van Andringa et al. 2013, 747–49.

⁶³ Tac. *Ann.* 16.6.

⁶⁴ Joseph. *AJ* 20.189–96; Oppen 2021, 189.

⁶⁵ Suet. *Ner.* 19, 20, 35, 40, 47.



Fig. 11. Titulus sepulcralis inscribed on a marble plaque in the pediment of the tomb. (A. Giannotti.)

This suggests “royal” aspirations on the part of Nero and helps explain his choice to bury Poppaea *regum externorum consuetudine*.⁶⁶

The inscription

Marcus Venerius Secundio can be identified as the owner and occupant of the tomb discovered in 2021 outside Porta Sarno thanks to the inscription on its pediment (Fig. 11).

M(arcvs) VENERIVS COLONIAE

LIB(ertvs) SECVNDIO AEDITVVS

VENERIS AVGVSTALIS ET MIN(ister)

EORVM HIC SOLVS LVDOS GRAECOS ET

LATINOS QVADRIDVO DEDIT

Marcus Venerius Secundio, freedman of the Colony, guardian of the temple of Venus, Augustalis and minister of these. He alone sponsored four days of Greek and Latin games/performances (transl. author).

Secundio was a public slave who had been freed, a fact that is explicitly mentioned in the inscription (*coloniae libertus*) but also evident from his name. The nomen “Venerius” derives from the official name of Pompeii from the time the city became a Roman colony in around 80 BCE: *Colonia Veneria Pompeianorum*. Freed slaves usually received the praenomen and nomen of their former masters; in this case, it is the name of the city that determined

⁶⁶ Counts 1996, 193–97.

the name of the freedman. The cognomen *Secundio* is probably the name by which he went before being freed.

As noted above, a man with the name “*M. Venerius Sec.*” appears in one of the wax tablets (no. 139) found in the house of *Caecilius Iucundus* on *Via Vesuvio* and dated to 62 CE.⁶⁷ *M. Venerius* is listed as one of the witnesses who signed such documents with their name and seal. Given that this *M. Venerius Sec.*, judging from his name, was a freedman of the city, Mommsen, who first edited the wax tablets, hypothesized that he was identical with a public slave named *Secundus*, who wrote and signed a similar document, no. 138, on behalf of the city in 53 CE, while still a slave.⁶⁸ Based on the inscription from the *Porta Sarno* tomb, it now appears likely that the *M. Venerius Sec.* in tablet no. 139 was actually named *Marcus Venerius Secundio*. But could this also have been the same man as the *Secundus* mentioned in tablet no. 138? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer, although it is certainly possible. If *Secundus* (tablet no. 138) and *Secundio* (inscription from *Porta Sarno*) were the same person, first as *servus publicus*, then as freedman, there are two possibilities for explaining the discrepancy in the spelling of the names. It could have simply been an error at the time of writing the tablets; alternatively, *Secundus*’s name could later have been changed to *Secundio*. We know that the praenomen and nomen of a freedman were not entirely predetermined; for example, Cicero opted to name his former slave *Tiro* *Marcus Tullius Tiro*, according to the general rule, while he chose a different nomen for his slave *Dionysius*, who after his manumission was named *Marcus Pomponius Dionysius* after Cicero’s friend, *Titus Pomponius Atticus*. It is likely that such changes could also be made to the cognomen, which was usually the name of the slave before his manumission – especially since we know that masters frequently changed the names of their slaves.⁶⁹ In Plautus, name change is used as a threat against a slave: “if you don’t behave, you will have your name changed this very day in an ill manner.”⁷⁰ The same practice could also have been used to reward a loyal servant. At any rate, in the case of *Marcus Venerius*, we would not be dealing with a radical change but with a finely nuanced modification of the very common name *Secundus* into the much less frequent *Secundio*. Admittedly, this remains speculative. Likewise, the reasons for which “*Marcus*” was chosen as praenomen remain obscure. *Marcus* might have been the name of the magistrate who, according to the procedure described in the sources, advocated the liberation of *Secundio* before the *ordo decurionum*.⁷¹ We have no possibility of corroborating this hypothesis, however, since an exhaustive list of magistrates in *Pompeii* is missing.

After the name, the inscription lists the offices *Marcus Venerius Secundio* held: *aedituus Veneris* (guardian of the *Venus* temple), *Augustalis* (member of the collegium of the *Augustales*) and “minister of these.” This last office is certainly the humblest one, which *Secundio* probably held while still a slave. In fact, the *ministri* (“assistants”) usually were slaves. After his manumission, he rose to the rank of the *Augustales*, an office only the most successful freedmen could aspire to. Given the importance of this office, it appears curious that the inscription seems to pay even more attention to the fact that he

⁶⁷ *CIL* IV no. 139.

⁶⁸ *CIL* IV no. 138; cf. n7.

⁶⁹ Bryant 2016, 9.

⁷⁰ Plaut. *Asin.* v. 373–74.

⁷¹ Luciani 2017; Cheesman 2009.

was *aedituus Veneris*, as this is mentioned before the other offices. In this context, it must be stressed that the nature of the *aeditui* in Roman Italy greatly varied. In some cases, it was an office akin to that of a caretaker or custodian, and therefore held by slaves and/or freedmen. However, we also know of cases in which the *aeditui* evidently had relatively high status, as for instance in Tusculum.⁷² Since the inscription from the Porta Sarno puts much emphasis on this office, it appears that, in this case, we are dealing with a relatively respectable sort of *aedituus*. It is also worth mentioning that Secundio was responsible for the temple of the most important divinity of Pompeii in this period – the goddess from which the colony, and the freedmen of the colony, took their names (*Venerius* > *colonia Veneria* > *Venus*). In addition, it is important to stress that the Temple of Venus was not just a sanctuary for religious devotion but also a center of identity and power. The temple and its sacred grove stand as an ideological symbol of both political and divine identity.⁷³ It is clear that being the custodian of the temple of Venus conferred influence and reputation, as demonstrated by the fact that it was the custodian of the temple of Tellus who invited Varro and the patricians to the *Feriae Sementinae*.⁷⁴ The importance and symbolism of the temple of Venus is also shown by the graffito from the kitchen of the house of C. Iulius Polybius that mentions a visit of Nero to Pompeii after the earthquake of 62 CE.⁷⁵ The text praises Nero for offering a “countless weight of gold” to the temple of Venus, where Secundio served as *aedituus*, presumably contributing to its reconstruction.

The inscription concludes by mentioning the “Greek and Latin games/performances” that Marcus Venerius Secundio offered for the duration of four days. According to Wissowa, performances known as *ludi graeci et latini* were first introduced in Rome in 240 BCE, as part of the important annual festival of the *Ludi Romani*.⁷⁶ Wissowa assumes that in this context *ludi graeci* referred to Latin plays inspired by Greek authors and subjects, such as the plays of Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Plautus, Terentius, and so on, while *ludi latini* referred to the Roman farces known as *praetextae* and *togatae*, as well as to other traditional performances. The same distinction might have applied to the *ludi graeci et latini* offered as part of the *Ludi Saeculares* organized by Augustus in 17 BCE. On that occasion, *ludi graeci thymelici* were staged in the theatre of Pompey, while *ludi scaenici latini* took place in a temporary wooden theatre near the Tiber.⁷⁷

There is actually little evidence, however, to support Wissowa’s view that *ludi graeci* originally referred to Greek-style plays in the Latin language. What is more, even if this were the case in the Mid- to Late Republic, there is clear evidence that the expression *ludi graeci et latini* had a broad meaning and that it changed significantly over time, as Beaujeu has argued.⁷⁸ Beaujeu lists a variety of performances that could have been described as *ludi graeci*; drama, dance, and poetic performances in Latin inspired by Greek models,

⁷² Gorostidi 2008, 860–63.

⁷³ Carroll 2010, 63–110.

⁷⁴ Varro, *Rust.*1.2.1.

⁷⁵ Opper 2021, 188–89. The graffito reads: “Poppaea sent as gifts to most holy Venus a beryl, an ear-drop pearl and a large single pearl/When Caesar came to most holy Venus and when your heavenly feet brought you there, Augustus, there was a countless weight of gold.”

⁷⁶ Wissowa 1912, 462–63.

⁷⁷ Beaujeu 1988, 10–11.

⁷⁸ Beaujeu 1988, 13–16.

pantomime and athletic performances (maybe with musical accompaniment), and also Greek plays and musical performances in Greek.

As early as 55 BCE, in a letter to his friend M. Marius, Cicero refers to *ludi graeci* as something clearly distinct from Latin plays with Greek subjects; at the same time, he seems to associate “Greek games” with athletic performances (*Fam.* 7.1.3).⁷⁹

It should also be noted that if the *ludi latini* were originally traditional *praetextae* and *togatae*, as opposed to *ludi graeci* in the sense of Greek-style Latin plays like the *Clytemnestra* by Accius or the *Equus Troianus* by Livius Andronicus, as hypothesized by Wissowa, by the Late Republican/Early Imperial period this distinction would no longer have been clear. Not only does the use of the term *ludi graeci* in Cicero and in other authors of the period point in a different direction, but the performances traditionally associated with the *ludi latini* had also by then undergone a profound change. As a matter of fact, in the 1st c. CE, the *togatae* that, according to Wissowa, were traditional Latin farces and therefore labelled *ludi latini* were sometimes described as a Greek invention.⁸⁰ There was some confusion and controversy among authors of this and later periods on the meaning and history of this expression. The point here is not to discuss which theory on the origin of the “Latin plays” is right, but to underscore the fact that, by the date Marcus Venerius Secundio was buried, the Latin nature of *togatae* and *praetextae* was no longer universally acknowledged. This suggests that the expressions *ludi latini* and *ludi graeci* by then referred to something very different from what Wissowa argues they may have meant in the late 3rd and 2nd c. BCE. By the Early Imperial period, the finely nuanced differentiation between Latin plays in the Greek tradition and Latin plays in the Latin tradition, if such a difference ever existed, was evidently outdated.

The same holds true for the (equally hypothetical) association with the *Ludi Romani* that the *ludi graeci et latini* might once have had. At Caere, a group of 12 men, probably all *liberti*, organized “Latin and Greek plays/games” in 25 CE.⁸¹ After listing the names of the organizers, some of which are partly fragmentary or completely missing, the inscription, now in the Musei Capitolini, concludes: “they organized Latin and Greek plays/games on February 24, 25, 26 and 27 and offered cakes and honeyed wine to the people in the consulship of Marcus Asinius Agrippa and Cossus Cornelius Lentulus.” The text is interesting for several reasons. First, as in Pompeii, it is freedmen who are organizing the games. Second, the games last four days, just as in Pompeii. The title of the inscription is missing, but one can read two big letters: “AV”. It is quite possible, therefore, that the freedmen named acted as Augustales, given that this was one of the few public offices accessible to them. This provides another parallel with Pompeii, where Marcus Venerius Secundio was also a member of the collegium of the Augustales. While the four-day duration of the event at Caere coincides not only with the *ludi* Secundio sponsored in Pompeii but also with the duration of the *Ludi Romani*, the dates of February 24–27 do not conform with those of the *Ludi Romani*, which were held in September, nor with the dates of any other known Roman festival.⁸² Thus, the *ludi* in Caere were either part of a local annual

⁷⁹ Beaujeu 1988, 13–14.

⁸⁰ Rallo 2021.

⁸¹ *CIL* XI 3613.

⁸² That on February 24 the Romans celebrated the *Regifugium* probably had no significance in a town like Caere.

festival that is otherwise unknown, or they were a one-off festivity. This clearly shows that by the time of the reign of Tiberius, *ludi graeci et latini* was a generic expression that could be applied to all kinds of festivals and was by no means limited to the context of the *Ludi Romani* and the specific form they might originally have had in that context. In 25 CE, in a provincial town of Italy, the term “Greek and Latin games/plays” simply referred to some kind of performance that involved both Greek and Latin parts.

If the *ludi graeci* were not, or not anymore, “Greek plays,” in the sense of Latin adaptations of Greek subjects, their Greek character must have consisted of something else, most likely the use of the Greek language during dramatic or musical performances. It makes no sense to label a performance “Greek” just because it derived from, or was inspired by, Greek performances if at the same time even the ancient Roman *togatae* were considered somehow Greek. Furthermore, we have evidence of Greek actors performing in Rome during the Early Imperial period. Suetonius (*Iul.* 39.1) informs us that Caesar called on “actors of all languages” for the *ludi* he organized in various quarters of Rome (*edidit spectacula varii generis: munus gladiatorium, ludos etiam regionatim urbe tota et quidem per omnium linguarum histriones*) and that Augustus did the same (Suet. *Aug.* 43.1). Nero himself performed in Greek, as can be inferred from Suetonius (*Nero* 46). Tellingly, Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.15.1) laments that when Nero constituted the *Ludi Iuvenum* in 59 CE, Greek play-acting became the occupation of the entire Roman people:

Still, not yet wishing to disgrace himself on a public stage, he instituted some games under the title of “juvenile games” (*ludos Iuvenalium*), for which people of every class gave in their names. Neither rank, nor age, nor previous high promotion hindered anyone from practicing the art of a Greek or Latin actor (*Graeci Latine histrionis*) and even stooping to gestures and songs unfit for a man.⁸³

In this context, it is evident that the term *ludi* referred to, among other things, theatrical performances in Greek and Latin language, for the “Greek actor” (*histrion Graecus*) is clearly a Greek-speaking actor and not a Latin actor performing Latin plays with Greek subjects.⁸⁴

A coin that was found in one of the cremation burials in the tomb precinct of Marcus Venerius Secundio provides a hint of how the fashion of organizing such performances reached places like Pompeii. The burial of Novia Amabiles contained a bronze coin dating to 64 CE (obverse: NERO CAESAR AVG IMP; reverse: CER QVINQ ROM CO S C) that celebrates the *certamen quinquennale* that Nero had established in Rome, also known as the Neronia (Fig. 12).⁸⁵ Like the *Ludi Iuvenales*, the Neronia were inspired by Greek festivals, especially those of Delphi and Olympia. They consisted of musical games, athletics, and horse races. Not only does the coin reflect the spirit of the Neronian age; it also captures the modes by which that spirit was transmitted and perceived throughout the empire. The *ludi graeci et latini* organized by Secundio can thus be seen as an emulation of the Neronian *ludi*, involving Greek and Latin actors and musicians.

While the funerary inscription of Secundio puts much emphasis on the fact that the games he had offered included both Greek and Latin performances, it does not specify

⁸³ Transl. Fisher 1906, 306, slightly altered by the author.

⁸⁴ Beaujeu 1988, 13–16.

⁸⁵ Nero, semis, Rome, 64 C.E. O/ NERO CAESAR AVG IMP: head of Nero, laureate to left R/ CER QVINQ ROM CO S C. Table decorated with two facing sphinxes or griffins, in bas-relief; above, urn and crown; round shield resting on table leg, value mark S. AE, 6.35 gr. Diameter: 18.5 mm. US4025, 2021. *RIC* I², 164, n. 235 var.



Fig. 12. Bronze coin dating to around 65 CE that celebrates the certamen quinquennale established by Nero in Rome. (Ll. Alapont).

where these performances took place (in the theater?), nor on what occasion they were held. The *ludi* were usually part of public holidays and cultic festivities, the names and dates of which are known for Rome but much less so for the provinces.⁸⁶ As a result, we can only speculate about the occasion on which Secundio offered the *ludi graeci et latini*. There was, however, at least one moment in his life when such an initiative would have been expected of him: when he became an Augustalis. From a number of inscriptions referring to Augustales being elected gratis, it can be inferred that normally admission was not “for free.”⁸⁷ The “admission fee” often consisted of games/performances. When we hear of other acts, these are often presented as exceptional; at Luceria, for example, two Augustales had a road paved *pro munere*, that is “in place of the (usual) offering/obligation.”⁸⁸ Usually, it seems, the Augustales offered *ludi*, either during annual festivals or on special occasions. A typical case is known from Puteoli in 53 CE.⁸⁹ Here, three freedmen and (freshly nominated?) Augustales *ludos fecer(unt) XIII XII K(alendas) Mart(ias)*, that is, “organized games on February 17 and 18” in honor of Nero and his mother Agrippina.

That the *ludi* mentioned in his funerary inscription were offered on the occasion of Secundio’s nomination as Augustalis is purely conjectural. We cannot exclude the possibility that they took place in a different context; for example, during a festival in honor of Venus, given that Secundio was the *aedituus* of the goddess’s temple, or perhaps even upon his manumission. Luciani has argued that the evidence of freed public slaves financing festivals or public works suggests that many of these offerings were made in place of the fee that had to be paid to the public treasury on the occasion of manumission.⁹⁰ The fragments of the Lex Irnitana found in 1981 near the small town of El Saucejo in southern Spain show that the sum

⁸⁶ Sheppard 2019, 219–45.

⁸⁷ E.g., *CIL* IX 5301; *CIL* XI 1344.

⁸⁸ *CIL* IX 808.

⁸⁹ *CIL* X 1574; cf. De Ruggiero 1886, 839.

⁹⁰ Luciani 2017, 45–64.

a public slave had to pay for his or her manumission (*pecuniam dare*) was determined by the *ordo decurionum*, and that the payment could also be made in kind (*pecuniam satis facere*).⁹¹

It appears that the philhellenism of Nero, who recited Greek and staged Greek plays, fell on fertile ground in Pompeii. Scholars like Marcello Gigante, Cristina Pepe, and Paolo Poccetti have collected evidence testifying to the presence of Greek-speaking people in Pompeii.⁹² They are found in all social classes and include both native and second-language speakers. At the lowest level, there were slaves, sex workers, craftsmen, and merchants from Greece or other parts of the eastern Mediterranean where Greek was spoken. At the same time, the elite learned Greek. The Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum, as well as houses like the House of Menander in Pompeii, suggest that the upper class invested considerable time, energy, and resources in studying Greek texts and collecting Greek works.⁹³ The ambition to participate in elite culture also prompted the less wealthy to invest in Greek education. There is epigraphic evidence of schoolchildren being taught Homer and other Greek poets in Pompeii.⁹⁴ On these grounds, scholars have wondered whether Greek was used in theatrical and poetic/musical performances in Pompeii.⁹⁵ As Pepe has stressed, an engraved ivory tablet from Pompeii makes this idea plausible: on one side, this object carries an image of the theater building of Pompeii, and on the other, the name *Aischylos* in Greek letters.⁹⁶ The tablet is thought to have served as an entrance ticket – arguably for a work by Aeschylus in its original language. Against this backdrop, the inscription from the tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio can be interpreted as a confirmation of Pepe's hypothesis that Greek plays were staged in Pompeii. This is also likely since we know that Greek actors lived and performed in the nearby city of Naples, an old Greek colony where Greek was still spoken.⁹⁷

Conclusions

When combined, the epigraphic and archaeological evidence from the newly discovered tomb at the Porta Sarno provides a rare insight into the complexity that characterized the emulation and transmission of cultural and ritual models between Rome and Roman Italy. What we see here are social groups below the uppermost elite level, such as freedmen, participating actively in promoting new trends that would a few decades later become the new norm.

The choice to inhumate the skeletal remains of members of the elite in Roman Italy can be contextualized against the backdrop of the Neronian zeitgeist and the wider cultural climate. The burials of Poppaea, Aebutia, Carvilius, and Priscilla, like Marcus Venerius Secundio's, represent a clear sign of distinction and exclusivity. This extravagance was the prerogative of privileged people of not only high social rank but also a high cultural level. The influence of the Hellenistic world and the cosmopolitan spirit of the Neronian era ultimately represent the most likely motivations for the use of inhumation and

⁹¹ Luciani 2017, 46.

⁹² Gigante 1979; Pepe 2017; Poccetti 2017.

⁹³ Pepe 2017.

⁹⁴ Pepe 2017, 17–31.

⁹⁵ Poccetti 2017, 312.

⁹⁶ Pepe 2017, 298; *CIL* X 8069.

⁹⁷ Poccetti 2017, 302–3.

embalming during the 1st c. CE, alongside a possible desire to satisfy personal tastes or to flaunt a privilege that was fashionable among the wealthiest classes.

The “Greek and Latin games” organized by Marcus Venerius Secundio can also be read against the backdrop of a new form of philhellenism thriving under Nero, who seems to have enjoyed popularity especially among the middle and lower classes. Furthermore, it is possible that Secundio might have even met the emperor Nero and his second wife personally. We know that Nero and Poppaea visited Pompeii, maybe as part of an inspection tour following the earthquake of 62 CE, and offered a series of gifts to Venus, in whose temple Secundio served as *aedituus*.

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Supplementary Materials: The Supplementary Materials contain section and detail drawings of the tomb of Marcus Venerius Secundio and the grave of Novia Amabiles (Suppl. Figs. 13–21). To view this material, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759422000459>.

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