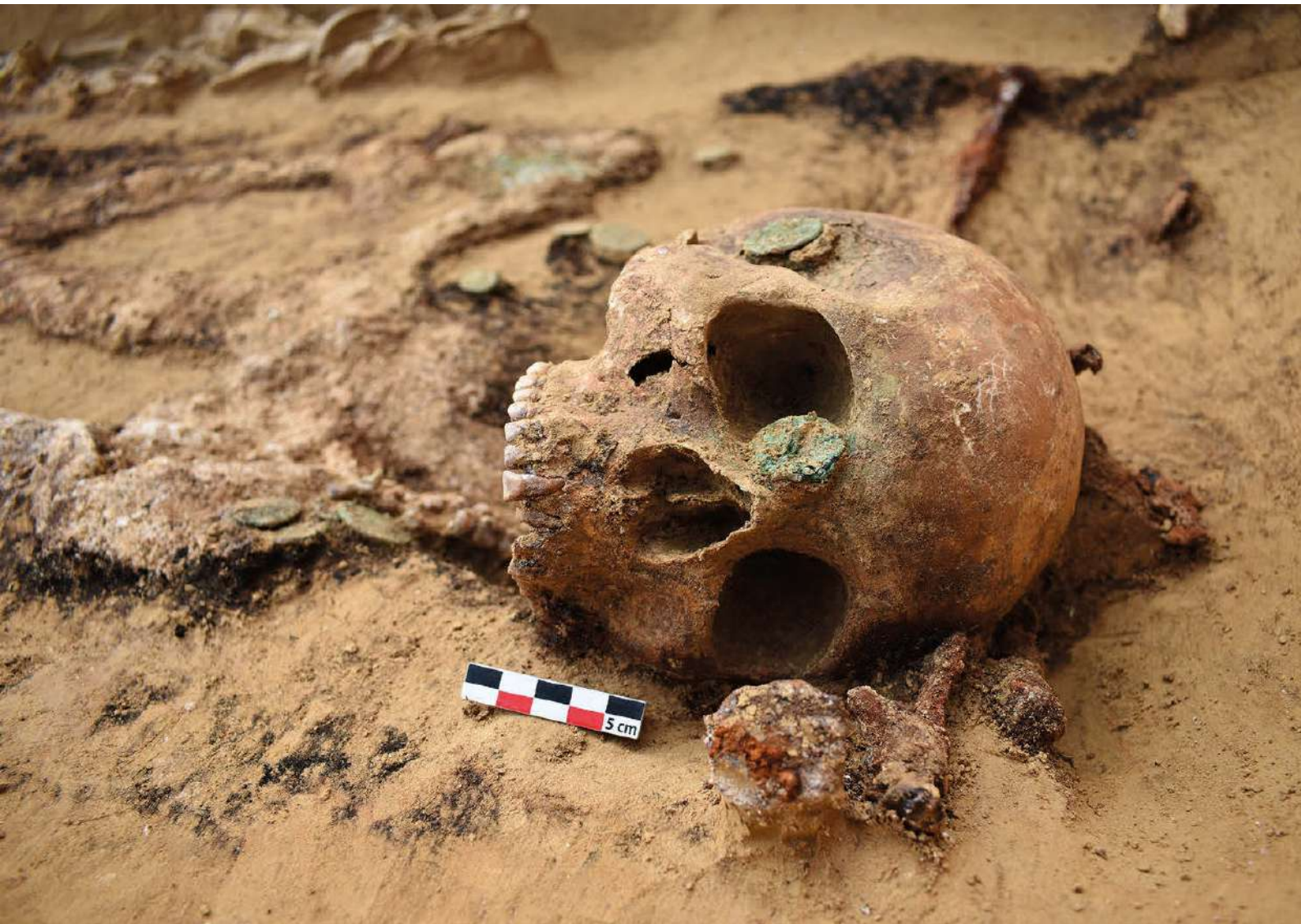
Il valore dei gesti e degli oggetti

Monete e altri elementi in contesti funerari

a cura di
Noé Conejo Delgado



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In quarta: dettaglio della tomba 19 della necropoli tardoantica dell'area degli Uffizi (Firenze) (rielaborazione da foto Cooperativa Archeologica).

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4. COINS IN LATE ROMAN AND EARLY MEDIEVAL TOMBS IN NORTHERN ITALY: SOME NOTES ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NUMISMATIC PROBLEM[1]

Abstract

Historiographical analysis of the ritual use of coins in funerary contexts in northern Italy allows us to examine differing interpretive approaches to the issue, and to highlight possible lacunas which have not been explored further. I aim to identify these gaps, suggesting new avenues of research, and demonstrating that the presence of coins in funerary contexts can yield interesting perspectives for the study of past societies.

Keywords: *numismatics, graves, Late Antiquity, Early Middle Age.*

Riassunto

Monete in tombe tardoromane e altomedievali nel nord Italia: alcune note su un problema archeologico e numismatico

L'analisi storiografica dell'uso rituale delle monete nei contesti funerari dell'Italia settentrionale ci permette di esaminare diversi approcci interpretativi, oltre a evidenziare possibili lacune che non sono state approfondite. L'obiettivo è quello di individuare queste mancanze, suggerendo nuove linee di ricerca e dimostrando che la presenza di monete in contesti funerari può fornire interessanti spunti per lo studio della società del passato.

Parole chiave: *numismatica, tombe, Tardantichità, alto Medioevo.*

1. Introduction

Traditionally associated with Charon, the fierce ferryman that guides souls into the netherworld in exchange for one or several coins, recent studies about the ritual use of coins in funerary contexts in the classical and post-classical periods have, to an extent, superseded some earlier approaches. However, despite this renewal, some aspects of the issue have not been sufficiently addressed and significant interpretive gaps remain. This is largely the result of the quality of data available; many of the existing evidence comes from old excavations, in which the relation between coin/other grave goods, body, and sex were poorly defined. There is, therefore, the need to continue with the excavation of sites that were only partially dug in the course of infrastructure projects.

This is a recurrent issue in Italian numismatic and archaeological research, which has attested numerous examples dated to the Roman and medieval periods. The intensity of this research, however, has been geographically uneven, as the dearth of data from the northern regions of the Italian Peninsula illustrates. This stands in sharp contrast with the progress of Roman and early medieval funerary archaeology in the region in recent decades, where the inclusion of bioarchaeological analysis and the compared study of rituals and grave goods have greatly contributed to a better understanding of the human groups living in the region from the collapse of the Western Roman state to well after the turn of the second millennium AD[2]. The situation is also at odds with the large number of monetary finds, many in funerary contexts, published, especially, in the eastern areas of the region[3]. Nonetheless, this is not a bad starting point to improve our understanding of this ritual funerary practice.

A critical reading of existing studies about coins in funerary contexts can help to define areas in which more attention is needed and to establish new interpretive

[1] This work was undertaken within the framework of project MORTI (Money, Rituality and Tombs in Norther Italy during Late Antiquity), funded by the EU through a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions scholarship: H2020-MSCA-IF-2020-101025031-MORTI. https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101025031).

[2] The bibliography is abundant but is for the most part only of secondary interest for the purpose of this paper. The most significant publications about late antique and early medieval funerary archaeology in the region are Brogiolo, Cantino Wataghin 1998; Heinzelmann *et alii* 2001; Possenti 2014; Riemer 2000; Rinaldi, Vigoni 2015; Giostra 2011, 2017, 2019; Chavarría 2018; Marinato 2019; Valenti 2021.

[3] See *Ritrovamenti monetali di età romana nel Veneto* (RMRV), promoted by the Historical Heritage Department, Università degli Studi di Padova; this is a wide database organised by municipality and province, which compiles all monetary finds in the Veneto region, with references about provenance and other data (Asolati 2019, pp. 211-212). In recent years, the model has been replicated in nearby regions, leading to the publication of the multi-volume collection *Ritrovamente monetali di età romana nel Friuli Venezia Iulia*, led by the Università degli studi di Trieste. The availability of these large region-specific datasets has allowed several numismatic issues to be tackled from a wide territorial perspective, which also takes into consideration other variables such as settlement typology, archaeological conditions, and associated contexts. To an extent, this explains the regional differences in the quantity and quality of the data. In this way, the large number of studies about the Roman and post-Roman periods in Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Iulia, based on the above noted database, stands in sharp contrast to the much thinner publication record in such regions as Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Piedmont, where, probably because of the lack of precise finds, the issue has been paid little attention. This is interesting, because other related issues, such as funerary ritual, have been intensively studied in these regions in recent years (Riemer 2000; Heinzelmann *et alii* 2001; Bassi 2010; Francisci 2017 with earlier bibliography).

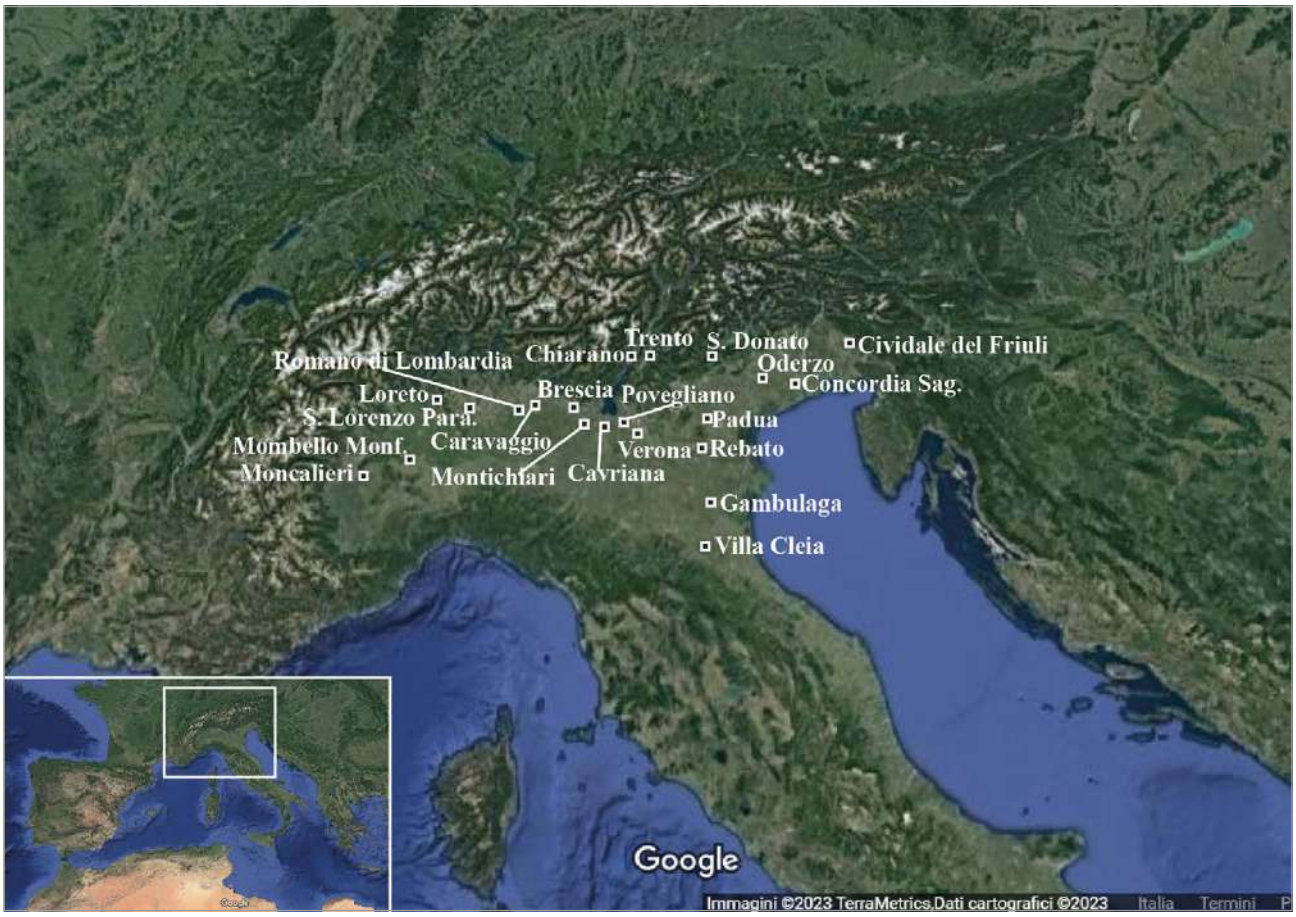

fig. 1 – Location of the archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

patterns. Part of this review has been undertaken in the context of project MORTI (Money, Rituality and Tombs in Northern Italy during Late Antiquity), which aims to systematically study the funerary use of coins in tombs between the end of Antiquity and the end of the Middle Ages, and to identify chronological, geographical, ethnic, and community regularities, as well as other patterns related to status, gender, and age of the dead.

2. A starting point: an obol for Charon?

The scientific meetings held in Naples and Nauchâtel in 1995 can be regarded as the launching pad for a novel approach to the study of coins in funerary contexts in Italy. These conferences were inspired by previous philological and historical works that challenged the traditional link between coins in funerary contexts and payment to Charon. Hansen[4] and Stevens[5] had observed that mentions to the Charon-related ritual in the written sources did not quite match the archaeological record: not all tombs had coins in them, and those that did not always fitted the descriptions of Classical authors, who claimed that the coins were deposited in the hand or the mouth of the dead. Furthermore, these authors argued that the association of coins in ritual contexts with the myth of Charon was a literary construction not mirrored by ritual practice, in which coins could be part of the *viaticum* given to the dead for their trip to the netherworld.

These arguments caused a significant stir in the scientific community, and many of the ideas that had previously gone unchallenged began suddenly to look shaky. This is perfectly illustrated by the above-noted conference in Naples, called "*Caronte. Un Obolo per l'adilà*", which led to the reformulation of traditional interpretations of Charon. Numismatics began asking totally new questions, for instance in the contribution presented by R. Cantilena, who was also the conference's organiser; she asked whether there was a real relationship between coins deposited in a tomb and the payment of the ferryman's fee, or whether these coins were simply markers of status, family offerings, or had other meanings about which the archaeological record is silent[6]. Other contributors to the conference

[4] Grinder Hansen 1991.
[5] Stevens 1991.
[6] Cantilena 1995.

asked similar questions, and many case-studies were presented, especially from southern and central Italy. The north, however, was not represented, at least for the Roman period; Peduto and D'Angela presented some northern examples, but these were dated to the Middle Ages. The former questioned the deposition of coins in medieval tombs as a sign of continuity of the myth of Charon, arguing for other ritual explanations, such as the prophylactic value of the Christian symbols engraved in the coins and/or of their emission by authorities legitimised by God[7]. The latter was the continuation of a previous work[8] in which the author argued that the deposition of coins in Germanic-style early medieval tombs was a marker of status, rather than the offshoot of Classical practices. Moreover, D'Angela did not rule out that these coins also played the role of *viaticum* and as prophylactic tokens supported by the antiquity and iconography of the pieces.

In parallel, the Nauchâtel conference also meant a rupture with existing ideas, this time from a more openly archaeological perspective[9]. This is made explicit in the organisers' introduction[10] and in Thüry's contribution, which argued, with the support of more substantial evidence, that the practice cannot always be associated with the myth of Charon[11]. Northern Italy was much more abundantly represented in this conference, with the presentation of several studies that focused on the Roman period: Gorini presented a study of the use of coins in tombs in Veneto in the turn of the era and introduced the notion of "numismatica della morte", later to be used by his disciples[12]; E. Arslan presented his work about the necropolis of Cavriana (Mantova), which he followed to analyse the use of coins in Roman tombs in Lombardy more broadly[13]; Morelli presented some contexts in Emilia Romagna, following a diagonal line that allowed him to examine patterns (or the lack thereof) in ritual uses in the region[14]; and, finally, Perassi argued that the coins deposited in tombs were carefully selected based on typology and, especially, the motifs represented in obverse and reverse, many of which are eschatological and/or prophylactic in nature[15].

These conferences resulted in the formation of two interpretive trends, which are still going strong today, in the study of roman coins in Roman and medieval funerary contexts. First, those[16] who think that coins did not lose their economic value after they were used for funerary ritual purposes, that is, that the coin was used as payment for passage – not necessarily to Charon – or as a symbolic expression of the wealth of the dead, especially in tombs in which coins where the only grave goods, acting as *pars pro toto*. These authors quantify the known examples and try to establish coin deposition patterns and the sex and age of the dead with which they were deposited; they also examine if the types used were simply those in circulation at the time of interment or whether they were especially selected based on the material and antiquity of the pieces. The other trend argues that coins played a talismanic/magic role because of their metallic nature, circular shape, and iconographic representations in obverse and reverse[17]. This could be related to the protective character of some of the gods represented in coins and the possible eschatological value of legends and/or motifs. Both approaches have many points in common and are highly permeable, as demonstrated by the fact that they are used together to study the same assemblages in later publications.

Finally, I must also mention the results of the recent conference *A coin for the dead. Coins for the living. Charon's obol: the end of a Myth?*, held in Athens in 2018[18], in which new approaches, based on the renovated paradigm of *Archéothanatologie*, were put forward. Especially interesting were the works presented by Doyen[19] and Duchemin[20], who stressed the potential of carefully studying coins deposited in tombs. They presented analytical numismatic protocols to examine the typology of the ritual and the way coins were deposited, with attention to details which, rather than to the 'use' of the coin by the dead, point to the message that the living wished to convey. Doyen[21], especially, thinks that depositing coins in tombs responds to a '*mise-en-scène*' that must be read with caution, addressing many aspects that often go unnoticed, such as the moment of deposition (before, during, or after the ceremony); the way it is done (position in relation to the body, orientation, relation to other items); and the way coins are treated (selection of monetary types and/or possible manipulation). These protocols are applicable to all periods and imply an interpretive reformulation of ritual in many territories, for instance in northern Italy.

[7] Peduto 1995, pp. 314-315.
[8] D'Angela 1995.
[9] Dubuis *et alii* 1999a.
[10] Dubuis *et alii* 1999b.
[11] Thüry 1999.
[12] Gorini 1999.
[13] Arslan 1999.
[14] Morelli 1999.
[15] Perassi 1999.
[16] Gorini 1999; Arslan 1999; Morelli 1999; Thüry 1999.
[17] Perassi 1999.
[18] Doyen *et alii* 2019.
[19] Doyen 2019.
[20] Duchemin 2019.
[21] Doyen 2012, 2017.

3. Coins in tombs in the Roman and late Roman period: continuity or new interpretive approaches?

As noted, these interpretive approaches, currently *en vogue* in Italy, have affected the methodology and results of later works, which adopt them and bring them together in some aspects, while coming forth with new proposals.

Within the 'school' that holds that coins did not lose their economic value after being used in funerary ritual, the works of Gorini's disciples stand out. These works continue, to an extent, Gorini's observations in several necropolises in Veneto. He concluded that, regardless of the sex and age of the dead, the as was the most common denomination in funerary contexts around the turn of the era, and he tentatively drew connections with pre-Roman rituals[22]. Gorini's disciples targeted the same region, either focusing on specific necropolises or using wider databases, sometimes combining the evidence of several urban necropolises. For instance, C. Rossi examined the coins found in the Roman necropolis of the city of *Patavium*, modern Padua. She observed that coins were used as a *viaticum* for the person's trip to the netherworld, but not necessarily in relation to the myth of Charon, because few of these coins were deposited in the mouth or the hands of the dead[23]. Stella reached similar conclusions in his analysis of the Roman necropolis of Rebato, in Este, province of Padua[24]. Several instances could be linked to the myth of Charon, but, despite the methodological caveats (the necropolis was excavated some time ago), it was attested that few coins, which often were the only grave goods, were not deposited according to a defined pattern. This has led Stella to argue that these coins were a symbolic token of the wealth of the dead at the time of burial[25], following the notion of *pars pro toto* noted in the previous section.

Stella's arguments were followed by authors working in other necropolises, also in Veneto. Callegher undertook the numismatic analysis of the necropolis of Piasentòt, San Donato di Lamón, province of Belluno, where he examined a large number of tombs in which coins were the only grave goods[26]. He established clear differences by sex, as coins were chiefly deposited in male burials. The types chosen are characterised by long circulation, and therefore many were very worn. At first sight, it could be thought that these were chosen after they had lost their economic value, but Callegher in fact demonstrated that they were coins in use at the time of burial. This means that they were simply those available, in a context in which distance from major trade and supply routes in *Regio X* hampered the renovation of the monetary mass, forcing coins to remain in circulation for a long time. This, along with the dearth of other grave goods – i.e. ceramics or imported goods – led Callegher to adopt the *pars pro toto* interpretation; coins would then be a symbolic representation of the dead's wealth or of grave goods that were difficult to come by in the region. However, Callegher does not rule out the notion of *viaticum* in all instances, especially coins that do not meet the criteria to be related to Charon's obol. For instance, concerning several necropolises in the city of *Opitergium*, modern Oderzo, province of Treviso, Callegher undertook a diachronic analysis of the ritual use of coins[27], arguing that the practice was replicated by a, by then, highly Romanised population, and that the deposition of coins could be an autochthonous expression of the concept of *viaticum*.

Outside Veneto, other authors have reached similar conclusions. For instance, Martini's[28] analysis of the coins found in the necropolis of San Lorenzo di Parabiago, near Milan (Lombardy), which was inspired by Arslan's work in the necropolis of Cavriana[29], argues that the interpretation of coins in burials must consider several variables, emphasising symbolic meanings that had nothing to do with Charon, the evolution of ritual by region and chronology, and/or the selection of coins based on availability and territorial distribution. For Martini, San Lorenzo presents important data concerning the adoption of rituals that are more common in central Italy by poorly Romanised groups. He argues that this ritual use responds to a conceptual change, which lent coins a religious meaning that must be complementary to their economic value. Similarly, he rules out that coins in burials in the Julio-Claudian period in this region were an expression of status, because their presence is less relevant than that of other grave goods. To further argue this point, Martini notes earlier examples, in which bodies are buried with groups of coins of some value, which have indeed been interpreted as a sign of social distinction[30]. The lack of connection between coins and status has been argued by other authors too, such as Barello, after his analysis of the numismatic record of the necropolis of Loreto (Oleggio, Novara), which was intermittently active between the 2nd century BC and the 4th century AD. Barello also notes that the use of coins appears to be

[22] Gorini 1999.
[23] Rossi 2014.
[24] Stella 2016.
[25] Stella 2016, pp. 130-131.
[26] Callegher 2019a.
[27] Callegher 2019b.
[28] Martini 1996.
[29] Arslan 1999.
[30] Martini 1996, pp. 232-233.

unrelated to the status of the deceased, because in Loreto coins are used regardless of the richness of the other grave goods. Like Martini, Barello suggests that the presence of the coins reflects a projection of their everyday use with a religious and eschatological meaning, which is in no way incompatible with their economic value[31]. As such, in both necropolises the coins are interpreted as a *viaticum* to be used by the deceased to travel to the netherworld.

This interpretation is equally recurrent with late Roman burials, where the deposition of coinage undergoes interesting changes. This has been pointed out by Asolati, who examined several tombs found in the late Roman necropolises of *Iulia Concordia*, modern Concorda Sagittaria, also in Veneto[32], and the coins found in Via Esterle, one of the funerary areas of ancient *Tridentum* (modern Trento)[33]. Asolati again confirms that coins were deposited in many different ways, which is interpreted as evidence for the coexistence of different rituals that perhaps reflect family or even individual choices. Similar observations were made in other coeval contexts – see for instance the numismatic study of the necropolis in Casa di Cura "Eremo" in Chiarano (Arco, Trentino)[34] – which presents significant continuity with earlier periods. Asolati also attests a decrease in the use of coins in funerary contexts from the late 3rd and, especially, during the 4th century, in sharp contrast with the early imperial period. This decrease is interpreted as a result of the influence of Christianity, and this is supported by some texts in which the Church Fathers criticise the practice, which they directly associate with paganism. However, the practice did not disappear completely, suggesting the survival of non-Christian beliefs or the Christianisation of the custom, perhaps related to the notion of *viaticum*[35].

The idea of *viaticum* is also shared by some of the authors that, in different degrees, associate protective talismanic/magic properties to coins. Notably, Perassi doubles down on the theses presented in Nauchâtel to argue for a strong relationship between iconography and legends, eschatological beliefs, and the sex and age of the dead[36]. Ceci, without abandoning the idea of the *viaticum*, relates the talismanic value of coins to the presence of nails in the tomb, especially in late Antiquity, when it is common to find one or two of these objects next to the body[37]. Concerning northern Italy, Bonini studied the coins found in tombs in the Roman necropolises of Brescia[38], and M. Pavoni analysed the ritual use of coins in the north of the region of Verona[39]. The former examined a large volume of evidence from old excavations and is aware of the methodological limitations and data quality implications that this entails. Nevertheless, he undertook a quantitative study of coin use by type of tomb, sex, and age; his data were later compared with those yielded by other similar necropolises. Bonini also draws a connection between iconography and the sex and age of the dead, with special emphasis on women and children. He argued that these pieces could act as talismans and/or *viaticum* for the dead's trip to the netherworld[40]. Most of his conclusions were seconded by Pavonni, who studied the RMRV corpus and accidental finds to address the issue in several Roman necropolises in the region of Verona[41]. Further south, the interesting works of Morelli on the burial complex of the *Fadieni*, in Gambulaga (Portomaggiore, Ferrara), Emilia Romagna, are worth commenting on. Morelli, whose earlier work in the region has already been cited[42], analysed in this instance the tombs of different generations of a single family and observed their predilection for a series of numismatic iconographies, namely apotropaic allegories such as health, peace, and fortune. According to Morelli, this strongly suggest the careful selection of the coins to fit the individual to be buried[43]. In this way, Morelli not only argues for coins in burials having a magical/talismanic function, but emphasises the role of family choices, following her previous publications[44].

This interpretive current gained some traction after the Athens conference, in which Doyen's concept of *mise-en-scène* emphasised the importance of iconography and its relation to the sex and age of the dead. However, other authors have challenged this based on the recurrent use of some monetary types; although it is true that they could be read in eschatological terms, the fact remains that they were also the most common types in circulation[45]. Recently, A. Stella has confirmed this for the main Roman necropolises in *Regio X Venezia e Istria*[46]. According to Stella, the most usual type is the Tiberius' *Divus Augustus Pater* as; this coin features an altar associated with the imperial cult, and a ritual symbolic value is therefore not out of the question. However, he established that the proportion

[31] Barello 1999, p. 379.
[32] Asolati 2015.
[33] Asolati 2023.
[34] Oberosler, Bonato 2017.
[35] Giovannetti 2007.
[36] Perassi 1997, pp. 52-54, 2001, 2011a, 2011b.
[37] Ceci 2005a, 2005b.
[38] Bonini 2003.
[39] Pavoni 2003.
[40] Bonini 2003, p. 24.
[41] Pavoni 2003, p. 80.
[42] Morelli 1999.
[43] Morelli 2006, p. 122; Morelli 2010a, pp. 285-286.
[44] Morelli 1999, p. 177.
[45] Morelli 2010, p. 287.
[46] Stella 2019.

of these coins found in tombs matches more or less tightly with that in the monetary mass in circulation, leading to the conclusion that the ritual use of the type was not only motivated by an eschatological interpretation of the iconography but, simply, by availability[47]. These conclusions are easily reconciled with the interpretive approach inaugurated by Perassi. The concepts shared by both trends have led to a better understanding of the issue in recent years, leading to interpretations that, drifting away from Charon-related views, argue for the coexistence of a wide range of rituals within a single community. However, other aspects have not been sufficiently addressed, and these can open new interpretive avenues in the future. One is potential differences in ritual practices in cities and the countryside. This, however, can be severely hampered by the quality of data available, as there are many tombs in the available dataset that have not been excavated stratigraphically. This idea was presented some time ago by Gastaldo, along with a systematic examination of late Roman tombs in northern Italy[48]. His quantitative analysis compared grave goods found in tombs in rural and urban settings, but the presence of coins in them was not examined in sufficient depth. However, there is still much work to be done, especially concerning Late Antiquity, for instance following Peduto[49] and D'Angela[50], who argued that ritual persisted over time because rural areas were less accessible to ecclesiastical doctrines[51]. Other works have examined the issue for Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in a greater territorial scale[52], but these studies have not taken these possible city/countryside differences into consideration as might have been expected. The work, therefore, remains to be done.

Similarly, existing studies have failed to pay sufficient attention to gender, although many of the works cited thus far have mentioned the issue[53], mostly from a quantitative perspective. This is interesting in itself, because we can establish patterns in coin deposition according to age and gender. To an extent, it can be argued that the quality of data has hampered this aspect to be examined more in depth, as the excavation of some necropolises in northern Italy was not followed by anthropological analysis, and the age and gender of many of the bodies remain unknown; this is especially the case in age brackets in which bone remains are less eloquent in terms of age and sex. In other instances, especially for later periods, the sex of the dead was established simply with reference to the grave goods, and this can introduce significant bias to quantitative analysis.

Along with these 'shortcomings', it is worth mentioning other potential future research avenues, such as the methodology used by Doyen's to analyse some Roman and late Roman funerary contexts in northern Italy. More attention needs to be paid to the different types of coin deposition, which can help to better understand the full range of meaning that the practice may have embraced; as noted, the custom did not follow a widespread belief in the myth of Charon and can respond to rapidly changing family-based ritual choices.

4. Coins in early medieval tombs: approaches and challenges

Some researchers have analysed the ritual use of coins in northern Italy, and they have put forth interesting proposals that complement some of the existing interpretations about the issue. Most research efforts have focused on the study of Lombard tombs, for which the evidence is particularly abundant. Like with Late Antiquity, several interpretive avenues have been followed and some gaps can be identified, of which more later.

In general, the use of coins in Lombard tombs presents some continuities with regard to the preceding Roman period. The practice was relatively rare, like in Late Antiquity, as is attested for only a small proportion of known tombs. In terms of materials, gold and silver are found in a greater proportion of graves than in the previous period, although bronze remains the most common choice. Most of the coins deposited in tombs were considerably old by the time they were buried and are sometimes dated to the 3rd or 4th century, or even earlier, although the use of contemporary coins is not rare, including Byzantine pieces[54]. Concerning the mode of deposition, the period is also characteristic: they were either used as 'regular coins', and in the company of other, grave goods, directly in association with the body or otherwise, or were incorporated to personal adornments, such as bracelets, necklaces, and pendants, in which pearls and glass beads were also common. These coins always present one or two perforations to attach them to the rest of the piece.

Unsurprisingly, these features have led to different interpretations, especially by Arslan, who is the main reference in the field[55]. He has tried to identify

[47] Stella 2019, pp. 126-128.
[48] Gastaldo 1998.
[49] Peduto 1995.
[50] D'Angela 1995.
[51] Ceci 2005b, p. 413.
[52] Giovannetti 2007; Fiò 2011-2012.
[53] Gastaldo 1998; Bonini 2003; Pavoni 2003; Callegher 2019b.
[54] Brozzi 1974.
[55] Arslan 2004, 2010a, 2014.

and compare patterns in several necropolises, using his own ample database[56]. Arslan thinks that the coins used in Lombard tombs can be divided into three non-exclusive groups: personal adornments; markers of status; talismans with magical properties. Concerning personal adornments, Arslan argues that coins were not only used in funerary contexts as part of other items, but can also be found, perforated, on their own[57], suggesting their use as overlays in the garments worn by the dead. These coins come in both precious and common metals, and Arslan points out the potential social signification of this; gold could have been used for significant members of the community, and bronze for people of lower status, perhaps in imitation of the gold used by their betters[58]. The social difference was not only signalled by the material, but also by the way the coins were manipulated. Gold coins were mounted on necklaces and bracelets with delicate fittings, whereas bronze/copper coins were simply perforated somewhere near the edge. This treatment suggests that, by the time they were used as personal adornments, the coins were no longer in circulation, especially bronze/copper coins, because precious metal coins were less liable to lose value and could potentially be 'remonetised' because of their intrinsic value, like in the Roman period[59].

However, the non-monetary use of coins could also be related to more abstract and complex meanings. Arslan argues that the manipulation of these pieces could be motivated by the association of magical/talismanic value to the coins[60], something that, moreover, is not totally foreign to the notion of *viaticum*, understood as a protective element that accompanies the dead on their journey, as suggested by other authors[61]. Arslan further argues that this practice was widespread among German peoples[62], which often sacralised coins and used them as markers of wealth[63]: This must have been compounded by the antiquity of the oldest coins, which, as noted, were struck centuries earlier. Antiquity must have added value to these coins, which could well have been seen as relics of the past, as has been argued for later periods[64]. This is not incompatible with the association of magical and prophylactic properties to the iconography of the manipulated coins; the associated meanings could be eschatological, as has been argued for late Roman coins, or Christian, especially in coins featuring crosses or relevant figures of Christianity, such as some late Roman types and the coins issued by Lombards and Byzantines, in which the cross often occupies a prominent position[65]. Some pseudo-coins, personal adornments in gold crafted in imitation of coins, documented, for instance, in the necropolis of Collina di San Mauro, Cividale del Friuli, could be interpreted in the same vein. According to Arslan, these pieces carry iconographic elements that could be related to the Christian creed[66].

The selection of pieces to be turned into personal adornments or, simply, deposited as grave goods, has also triggered an interesting debate. One hotly debated issue is whether the pieces used were those in circulation or, as Arslan suggests, whether old coins found accidentally, and therefore especially liable for reuse, were preferred. Arslan also argues that the use of gold, silver, and bronze/copper coins in Lombard tombs means that these were available, but that, because of the prevalence of practices such as hoarding, this does not necessarily mean that they were in circulation[67]. This is contested by other authors, notably Callegher, who argues that the use of gold coins in personal adornments suggest that these coins were indeed circulating, especially in the region of Friuli[68]. This conclusion is shared by Barello in his analysis of the coins used in the necropolises of Montebello Monferrato (Alessandria)[69] and Villa Lanzia di Testona (Moncalieri, Torino)[70], and by Saccocci[71] and Passera[72], who sees a close relationship between coins as markers of prestige and use value, which encouraged both hoarding and circulation. In line with this, Calomino analysed an interesting necklace adorned with five bronze coins – three Roman, one Ostrogothic, and one Byzantine – and a metal disc, in a child's tomb, dated to the late 6th or early 7th century, found in the city of Verona[73]. Calomino argues that these coins were in circulation when they were chosen, based on the wear shown by the pieces and on numismatic data from contemporary archaeological contexts in the city, which suggest that the monetary

[56] Repertorio dei ritrovamenti di moneta altomedievale in Italia (489-1002), published by the Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto (Arslan 2005). Updates are available in Arslan's online fora.

[57] Arslan 2014, p. 342.

[58] Arslan 2014, p. 347, also Passera 2017, p. 59.

[59] Serafin Petrillo 1993, p. 367.

[60] Arslan 2010a, p. 186, also considered by Morelli 1999, p. 179.

[61] Peduto 1995, D'Angela 1995.

[62] Arslan 2010a, p. 186; Arslan 2014, p. 389.

[63] Saccocci 1997, p. 383; Bursche 2001, p. 81; La Salvia 2011, p. 73; Passera 2017, pp. 532-533; Valenti 2021, p. 90.

[64] Saccocci 2018, pp. 363.

[65] Brozzi 1974; Maguire 1997, pp. 1037-1038.

[66] Arslan 2010a, pp. 186-187.

[67] Arslan 2010a, p. 176.

[68] Callegher 2001, pp. 680-681.

[69] Barello 2007, p. 160.

[70] Pantò *et alii* 2013, pp. 115-116. In this instance, it is interesting that the grave goods of tomb 5, the burial of a young warrior, includes a small bag with several items inside, including a *follis* by Constantine I and a Lombard imitation of a quarter *siliqua* by Justinian I. This led Barello (Pantò *et alii* 2013, pp. 117-118) to argue against a ritual use, as they were circulating currency used in small transactions.

[71] Saccocci 1997, p. 386.

[72] Passera 499-510.

[73] Calomino 2008.

mass in circulation was heterogeneous, including late roman, Ostrogothic, and Byzantine bronze coins[74]. Moreover, Calomino argues that the choice of coins may have been motivated by a deliberate attempt to recover relics from the past, a typically Lombard cultural feature, which other authors relate to the long interaction of Lombard and Roman cultures[75]. Although I do not wish to enter this debate, it is necessary to define the limitations that hamper our ability to establish whether the coins used in tombs were circulating at the time of burial or not. Some of these are methodological and hard to overcome, as Arslan admits[76]. First, the equivalence between the numismatic record in tombs and other contexts is far from clear, so comparative studies, such as those made for the Roman period[77], are difficult. Second, not all regions in northern Italy underwent the same economic dynamics between the late 6th and the 8th centuries[78]. In this instance, geographically broad approaches are made harder by the methodological shortcomings noted above, and it is easier to tackle the issue for more restricted geographical and chronological horizons.

Another interesting aspect are the sex and age differences. Again, Arslan is the primary reference[79]. He has attested that coins are used more often as grave goods in female than in male graves, also pointing out that the practice was relatively common in infantile graves, especially in comparison with the preceding period, in which this was rare[80]. Quantitively, the predominance of female graves is clear[81]. This is, however, chiefly due to the association of perforated coins, and the personal adornments of which they were part, to women; the magical/protective value associated to these coins during the Lombard period is also often linked with women and children[82], which explains the presence of these pieces in infantile and pre-adult graves[83]. In any case, as Arslan suggests, these gender attributions must be approached with great caution, especially when they are only generic in character, because, although the coins found in male tombs are generally unperforated, some of them were part of personal adornments[84]. This caution should also apply to infantile and pre-adult graves, in which the sex of the dead is often hard to establish. This notwithstanding, the find of perforated coins leads directly to the identification of the occupier of the grave as a woman, without further confirmation, for instance by DNA analysis. For this reason, I think that, in order to gain a better understanding about childhood and youth in the Lombard period, infantile and pre-adult tombs containing perforated coins should be re-examined using other resources.

Finally, the attention paid by academia to the use of coins in Lombard tombs is inversely proportional to that invested in Gothic tombs. It is true that, until recently, most analyses of Gothic material culture, especially those concerning funerary practices, were based on decontextualised finds. However, new excavations and the re-examination of older ones are helping to better define different aspects about these societies[85]. Without delving too deep into this issue, which is beyond the scope of this paper, I must mention the important role played by preconceptions in the interpretation of the use of coins in graves during this period. As noted, Peduto[86] and D'Angela[87] argued that the decrease in the use of coins in funerary ritual among the Ostrogoths was a response to ecclesiastical pressure; according to Cassiodorus, Theodoric passed a rule against the deposition of objects made in precious metals and coins inside graves[88]. Although the measure allegedly targeted pagan practices, other authors have suggested deeper economic and social motivations. For instance, La Rocca argues that Theodoric was trying to reduce tomb profanations, as well as avoiding coins being taken out of circulation when money was scarce[89]. This interpretation follows Cipolla, who argued that the increase in the use of precious metal in graves was an indication of abundance and not only to the wish to convey status[90]. Cassiodorus's text can lead to interesting reinterpretations of the role of coins in Gothic graves. Especially if we analyse some archaeological examples in which very different behaviours can be attested within the same community. One significant instance is the late antique necropolis of Villa Clelia, west of Imola (Bologna), former *Forum Cornelii*. The earliest tombs date to the Roman period, and in Late Antiquity a basilica was built, in association with a large number of tombs dated from

[74] His arguments were supported by later stratigraphic analyses of the composition of the monetary mass in circulation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Arzone 2018.

[75] Brozzi 1974, p. 223.

[76] Arslan 2014, pp. 342.

[77] Stella 2019.

[78] Several works analyse the circulation of coinage in this period in several Italian regions: Gorini 1989; Callegher 2001; Asolati 2005, 2006; Carlà 2007; Arslan 2010b, 2011a, 2011b; Arzone 2018.

[79] Arslan 2004, 2010, 2014.

[80] Also Giovannetti 2007, p. 216; Fiò 2011-2012, pp. 21-22.

[81] The presence of perforated coins use as adornments in female graves has been attested in Mombelo Monferrato (Alessandria) (Barello 2007); Caravaggio, Varicelli and Romani di Lobardia (Bergamo) (De Marchi 1988, pp. 37, 96); Montichiari (Brescia) (Breda 2005); and Povegliano Veronese, Loc. Ortaia (Verona) (Giostra 2014).

[82] Maguire 1997, p. 1039; Travaini 2007, p. 261.

[83] Arslan 2014, pp. 346-347.

[84] Arslan 2014, p. 344.

[85] Giostra 2011; Aimone 2010, 2012 with earlier bibliography.

[86] Peduto 1995.

[87] D'Angela 1995.

[88] Casiodoro, *Variae*. Lib. IV. 34. *Dudae Saioni Theodericus Rex.*

[89] La Rocca 1988, pp. 238-241.

[90] Cipolla 1961.

the mid-5th century to the early 6th[91]. The grave goods in some of the tombs suggest the integration of and coexistence with Gothic population elements[92], who incorporated coins to their funerary ritual as grave goods or/and as elements of personal adornment. The first option was attested in tomb 274, which has yielded a total of eight small bronze coins struck by Goths, in different positions. Five were found in the fill of the tomb, which contained several individuals buried at different times, so it is possible that these were grave goods disturbed by later burials. Three, however, were found in their original position, that is, under one of the slabs that covered the tomb, on top of one of the walls[93]. The position of these are clearly intentional. It is interesting to note that the last individual to be interred in the tomb was a child, and one of the three coins that could be identified is a 10-*nummi* piece of the Ravenna type, an Ostrogothic type with a royal portrait on the obverse and a monogram and a cross on the reverse. Based on this iconography, it is plausible that the coins were put in the tomb as a protection element before the grave was sealed, following the notion that the emperor had a sacred character for some individuals, which favoured the use of coins with him on them in tombs and elements of jewellery[94]. As previously noted, the latter were also present in the necropolis, specifically in tomb 185, corresponding to an old woman who had was interred with a veil with gold thread, a ring, a cloisonne fibula, several earrings, and two coin-mounted fibulae, one with a *solidus* by Honorius and one with a *solidus* by Valentinian III[95]. In the Lombard period, the choice of these monetary types could respond to multiple reasons. Without forgetting the magical/apotropaic significance and the easily convertible value of these types, jewels in this context are a clear marker of status, signalling the high social standing of the deceased[96].

Although the examples of Villa Cleia are significant, they can only be a starting point to address a wider problem, because the monetary finds data available in northern Italy remain insufficient to address the issue of the use of coinage in Ostrogothic funerary ritual. This gap must first be filled with the revision of old excavations of 5th- and 6th-century tombs, which are often described merely as "late Antique", and with the results of ongoing excavation projects. It is to be hoped that this will allow us to establish more precisely whether coins were used as grave goods and, should that be the case, whether the practice can be regarded as Gothic or can be interpreted as a result of cultural interaction with Rome; in other contexts and periods, coins have proven to be an excellent gauge to determine the nature of cultural interaction between Romans and other cultural groups[97].

5. Some considerations

The review of the most significant works on the ritual use of coinage in Roman and early medieval northern Italy presents us with an open numismatic and archaeological problem. Recent interpretations have helped to resituate older preconceptions and to set the foundations for the revision of older excavations. This exercise demonstrates that funerary ritual forms a complex amalgam of meaning, in which community, family, and individual choices played a primary role.

The review also suggests that the gap is especially wide in northern Italy, and that the study of tombs in these periods is anything but free from methodological shortcomings. Therefore, any attempt to re-examine the issue must rely on a thorough documentation process: published data and excavation reports must be carefully compared, as it is not rare for important data to be overlooked; coins found in tombs must be re-examined (they are often simply described as "illegible coin"), and their position in the tomb and orientation, and their relationship with the body and other grave goods must be precisely established; finally, the sex and age of the body, the composition of grave goods, and the spatial relationships of the tomb with other tombs in the necropolis must also be clarified. Only when we are in possession of this wide array of data can we aspire to further develop existing interpretive avenues.

The same can be said about age and sex patterns. Often, anthropological studies are lacking, and generic denominations – infantile, sub-adult, adult, senile – are used, which limit the field of interpretation, not to mention attributions that are exclusively based on the composition of grave goods. Only by clarifying these aspects can we tackle the social interpretation of the use of coins in graves, also shedding light on population groups whose trace in the archaeological record is faint, such as children and adolescents, as well as on gender-related dynamics.

Finally, revising materials, confronting bibliography and excavation reports, and compiling data will also contribute to fill one of the most interesting gaps in

[91] Curina *et alii* 1990, pp. 122-124.
[92] Cavallari 2009, p. 176.
[93] Curina *et alii* 1990, pp. 140, 142-143.
[94] Maguire 1997, p. 1039; Travaini 2007, p. 261; Arslan 2010, pp. 186-187.
[95] Cavallari 2009, pp. 176-178; Morelli 2010b, pp. 152-154; Mancelli, Pinar Gil 2017.
[96] Morelli 2010b, pp. 152-153.
[97] La Salvia 2011, pp. 84-87.

the study of the ritual use of coins in Roman and early medieval tombs, which are potential differences between rural and urban contexts. As noted, the quality and quantity of our evidence is very uneven, but the issue must be tackled nonetheless. We need to understand if the practice was followed in both contexts, if the same criteria were adopted to choose the coins, and if there were age and sex differences. In conclusion, the different, but complementary, interpretive approaches described demonstrate that the study of the ritual use of coins in tombs is a promising line of research, which can greatly contribute to a better understanding of the beliefs of ancient and medieval societies.

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I rituali funerari delle società antiche e medievali sono ricchi di piccoli gesti che non possono passare inosservati. Negli ultimi anni, molti ricercatori che si dedicano all'archeologia della morte hanno concentrato la loro attenzione sulla traccia di questi comportamenti, analizzando in dettaglio molti dei materiali rinvenuti nelle sepolture. Monete, gioielli, ceramiche, ossa, cibo e fiori sono alcuni degli oggetti che venivano frequentemente utilizzati per dare l'addio al defunto. L'analisi dettagliata di questi materiali in ampi contesti funerari dimostra che la loro scelta e collocazione nelle tombe era ricca di significati che variavano a seconda delle epoche, delle regioni e delle comunità. Questo volume riflette proprio su questi ultimi aspetti, studiando in dettaglio la scelta, la collocazione e il valore ideologico di piccoli oggetti tradizionalmente associati a concetti ormai superati. È per questo motivo che gran parte dei lavori presenti in questo volume sono dedicati all'analisi delle monete nelle tombe, poiché si tratta di un oggetto utilizzato con una certa frequenza nei riti funerari di varie culture. Accanto a questi studi numismatici, altri contributi sono dedicati all'esame, secondo approcci aggiornati, degli elementi di decorazione e consumo personale in contesti funerari, fornendo così nuovi dati che permettono di ricostruire e di ripensare con maggiore precisione le concezioni della morte in epoca antica e medievale.

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a cura di
Noé Conejo Delgado