

Death and Afterlife in Rome

Like the Greeks, the Romans believed that the souls of a person went to the underworld (Hades) after death. Sometimes a coin was placed in the mouth of the corpse as the fee to Charon, the ferryman of the river Styx, who carried the person to Hades. The coin was placed in the mouth as both hands would have held cakes for the three heads of the dog Cerberus, guardian of the underworld.

The souls whom the Gods would not consider worthy would not be admitted and they were destined to wander for eternity. Consequently, it was thought that a proper burial was essential; so many Romans belonged to funeral clubs to ensure that this was carried out.

Grave goods were placed near the burial sites, and often included refreshments for the journey to the underworld, shoes for traveling there, and the person's most valued possessions.

A note of interest: Roman laws forbade interment of bodies or cremated remains within the boundaries of a town or a fort, except for children under ten days old, who, according to Roman law, had no legal existence. Thus cemeteries were usually built along the main roads just outside the towns, and funerary monuments were erected so that they could be seen from the roads.

Lastly, there was no generally accepted view of the afterlife, but many felt that the dead, placed in their tombs, could influence the fortunes of the living in vague, undefined ways. Therefore, just to be safe, gifts and offerings were made to the deceased and celebrations were held at tombs.

Prepared for the SBMA Docent Council by Gabriella Schooley, April 27, 2006

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