



Epitaph for a Jewish child (CIJ I2, 464)

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[1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Funerary.

Original Location/Place: Jewish catacomb, Monteverde, Rome.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Nazionale Romano, Baths of Diocletian, Rome. Inventory no.: 77664.

Date: 201 CE to 400 CE

Physical Characteristics: Marble plaque, broken on its left side; the back is smooth and shows large chipping along the lower and left margins. An ethrog has been incised as decoration in the lower left corner.

Material: Marble.

Measurements: Height: 29 cm

Width: 24 cm

Letter heights: 2.8-3.6 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIJ* I², 464

Noy, *JJWE* II, 608

[EDR138818](#) [2]

Commentary: This inscription was discovered in 1919 in the “Jewish catacomb” in Monteverde, in the city of Rome. It is an unusual monument that employs iconographic motifs and textual formulae most common to Jewish epitaphs, and yet also includes the standard dedication to the spirits of the dead best known from pagan Roman funerary inscriptions; the presence of this dedication to an inherently Roman funerary concept alongside the indicators of Jewish faith has led to a number of theories that have sought to identify and explain the religious beliefs of the deceased.

The inscription begins with what appears to be a dedication to the “spirits of the dead,” the chthonic deities called the *Di Manes*, who were believed to represent the spirits or souls of those who died and were commemorated. Although the right side of the plaque is broken, the restoration of the first line as *D(is) M(anibus)* has been unavoidable, owing to the central position of the extant visible D at the top of the plaque, which follows almost all other examples of this dedication in funerary inscriptions. As David Noy has noted, there is “no doubt that the epitaph began with a formula which has usually been regarded as almost exclusively pagan” (Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, II, p. 492). The apparent presence of this dedication in this inscription, and its inclusion in a number of other epitaphs from the Monteverde catacomb led its excavator, Nikolaus Müller, and later Jean-Baptiste Frey, to dismiss them as Jewish epitaphs at all (Müller, *Die jüdische Katakomben am Monteverde*, p. 87; Frey, “Inscriptions inédites des catacombes juives de Rome,” p. 279-305). Indeed, Frey argued, not unconvincingly, that the few inscriptions that came from Jewish catacombs and which employed the *Dis Manibus* dedicatory formula must have been selected from stonecutters workshops where they were “ready made” with the D M formula already inscribed, using the absence of *Dis Manibus* in graffiti and painting inscriptions as further



evidence that it did not belong in the usual catalogue of formulae for Jewish epitaphs (Frey, "Inscriptions inédites des catacombes juives de Rome," p. 303; Rutgers, *Jews in late Ancient Rome*, p. 269).

Lines 2-4 reveal the person to whom the inscription has been dedicated; Fofos – a name otherwise unknown from the extant epigraphic record, and believed by some scholars to have been a mistake of the stone cutter for Sofos (*Sophos*) (see Ferrua, *Nuove correzioni*, p. 201) – is named as the deceased, a "well-deserving son" (*filius bene merenti*) who lived for two years and seven months (*qui vixit / anno/s II, menses VII*). The "II" indicating the two years of life appears to have been re-cut over the beginnings of an M, but otherwise the age at death follows standard Latin practice (for alternative readings, see Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe II*, P. 493; Negroni, *Le iscrizioni*, p. 228). The final two lines are more interesting, however; they record a blessing to Fofos, stating "in peace, his sleep" (*En irene e cym/isis autou*). This Greek blessing has been transliterated into Latin, modifying the Greek ????????? (*koim?sis*, or "sleep") – with a Latinised spelling. Alongside this is the symbol of the *ethrog* – the yellow-citrus fruit used by Jews during the performance of the *Sukkot* rituals – inscribed to the far left of the last line. The *ethrog*, along with other Jewish cultic symbols such as the menorah and the palm-branch, the *lulavim*, appeared with great frequency in late antique Jewish epitaphs, emphasising the Jewish character of the dedications (for full discussion of these symbols and the texts that they accompany, see Williams, "Image and Text in the Jewish Epitaphs of Late Ancient Rome," p. 328-350). Greek was more common in the eastern parts of the Roman empire and was certainly the most common non-semitic language of the diaspora communities, or at least where inscriptions were concerned (Rutgers, *Jews in Late Ancient Rome*, p. 179). The majority of epitaphs from Jewish catacombs were written in Greek, with more than three-quarters of those from this Monteverde catacomb inscribed in Greek with added statements of "Peace" in Hebrew characters (Rutgers, *Jews in late Ancient Rome*, p. 140; 184-190). Indeed, Leonard Rutgers has noted that the Jews of the city of Rome continued to use Greek as the language of their community long after their initial arrival there in the 2nd century BCE, and that the use of Latin in inscribed epitaphs was "reflects a relatively late stage in the history of this community" (Rutgers, *Jews in late Ancient Rome*, p. 179). Although the presence of Latin is best attested in these funerary inscriptions from the fourth century on, the Latin never fully replaced the Greek, as the Latinised form of *koim?sis* given in this inscription.

The inclusion of *Dis Manibus* in what has otherwise largely been accepted as a Jewish epitaph has generated some discussion, particularly concerned with the extent to which it may, or may not, indicate the particular religious beliefs of the deceased. Frey's point regarding the lack of *dis manibus* references in Jewish graffiti does appear to support the idea that adherence to the pagan practice of honouring the spirit or soul of the deceased did not find regular presence in Jewish funerary dedications; Erwin Goodenough later suggested that *DM* could have been misunderstood – perhaps even misappropriated – by the Jews as an abbreviation for *Deo Magno* ("to the great God"), but I find this hard to follow (Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, p. 137-140). Leonard Rutgers has argued persuasively that the presence of *Dis Manibus* in Jewish funerary inscriptions is, in fact, a result of the reuse of the plaques on which they are inscribed – he notes a number of archaeological contexts in which marble inscriptions with *DM* were re-purposed to close Jewish graves, and that the presence of the *DM* formulae did not indicate any relationship between the record of the deceased also on the stone, or their Jewishness (Rutger, *Jews in late Ancient Rome*, p. 269-272). However, one example cited by Ross Kraemer does somewhat problematise the argument; she cites an inscription from Siklos in modern Hungary in which *DM* is given in line one, followed by a commemoration of one Septimia Maria, who is also given the epithet *IUDAEA* – "Jew" (CIJ 678; Ross Kraemer, "On the meaning of the term 'Jew'," p. 41-42). The inscription was set up by Septimia Maria's mother, Actia Sabinilla, who does not refer to herself as a Jew, leading Ross Kraemer to conclude that the dedication was set up by a mother for a daughter who converted to Judaism. This suggestion is not possible to prove with any certainty, but it is certainly feasible that if neither woman began life as Jews, the inclusion of *Dis Manibus* in the funerary dedication "would not have seemed in any way incongruent" (Ross Kraemer, "On the Meaning of the Term 'Jew'," p. 41-42).

In the case of the present inscription from the Monteverde catacomb, the inclusion of the *ethrog* and the Greek blessing common to many Jewish funerary inscriptions appear enough to confirm it as a Jewish epitaph, in spite of the debates over the dedication to the "spirits of the dead" that is given in the fragmentary first line; indeed, given that references to the *Manes* were also made in Christian inscriptions, it may in fact be the case that the formula *Dis Manibus* was understood to carry with it some kind of guarantee that brought the tomb under the protection of Roman law, and which was free from any connection with the original value or religious significance of the pagan dedication (Negrone, "Le iscrizioni," p. 228; for *Dis Manibus* in Christian epitaphs, see Testini, *Le catacombe e gli antichi cimiteri cristiani*, p. 538).



Keywords in the original language:

- [dis manibus](#) [3]
- [bene](#) [4]
- [merenti](#) [5]

Thematic keywords:

- [Jewish epitaph](#) [6]
- [Jewish catacomb](#) [7]
- [Rome \(city\)](#) [8]
- [Diaspora](#) [9]
- [diaspora community](#) [10]
- [Roman burial practice](#) [11]
- [funerary practice](#) [12]
- [ethrog](#) [13]
- [Jewish symbols](#) [14]

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