



## Epitaph of Licia Amias

### stele\_licinia\_amias\_terme\_67646.jpg



[1]

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

**Original Location/Place:** Near St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** Vatican Museum

**Date:** 2nd CE to 3d CE

**Physical Characteristics:**

A pedimented slab with acroteria (ornaments), inscribed with an epitaph to a certain Licia Amias, and decorated with images of two fish and an anchor, in addition to a wreath and ivy which is found between the common Latin invocation "D M" at the top of the epitaph. The letters are between 2.3 and 3.4 cm in height. The lower half of the epitaph is missing.

**Material:**

Marble

**Measurements:** Height: 30.3 cm; Width: 33.5 cm; Depth: 7 cm

**Language:** Latin, Greek

**Category:** Roman, Christian

**Publications:**

Cooley, Alison E., *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 233

**Commentary:**

This somewhat famous epitaph, which combines both Latin and Greek, and appears to appeal to or symbolise elements of both Roman and Christian religion, raises many questions. It was originally part of an open air necropolis, and is interesting in that it shows the juxtapositioning of the traditional Roman formula committing the deceased to the *di manes* (the spirits of the dead) with what appears to be Christian imagery of two fish. The fish became a popular symbol for the early Christians, not only because of the biblical notion of Jesus promising to make his disciples 'fishers of men' (related imagery became popular in the decoration of Christian tombs; see the commentary on the [Tomb of the Julii](#) [2]), but also because the Greek word for "fish," ????? (ichthus), was adopted by early-Christians as a way of symbolising their beliefs without drawing excessive attention, as the fish was commonly used in pagan art (the letters of ????? were used as a representation of the formula "?????? ??????, ??? ???? , ?????," *I?sous Christos, Theou Yios, S?t?r*, meaning "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour"). It has been argued, therefore, that this epitaph commemorates a Christian woman, perhaps one whose family were keen to ensure that they still outwardly indicated their adherence to traditional Roman religion by including the common inscription of "D M" ("to the departed spirits") on the deceased's grave (Christianity at this point was still viewed by the Roman authorities, and the Roman people more broadly, as a superstitious, and potentially dangerous movement, and not accepted as a legitimate *religio*, "religion"). The Greek inscription itself indeed raises questions in this regard, as the phrase "fish of the living" can certainly be read as having Christian connotations of Christ as the giver of life after death. It is entirely possible, then, that this inscription bears witness either to an attempt to disguise a Christian grave as one which did not conflict with state-sanctioned Roman religion, or possibly that the family members who erected the memorial still felt connected to Roman religion in some way, despite the Christian



beliefs of the deceased.

However, not all agree that the epitaph should be read this way (see Alison Cooley, *Latin Epigraphy*, p. 234; Daniel Lynwood Smith, *Into the World of the New Testament*, p. xviii-xix). The Latin text commemorating Licinia Amias unfortunately breaks off, meaning that we have little information with which to reconstruct who she was or how her family intended to tell us that she lived. However, it is true that the word “amias” in Greek means “tuna” (?????), which has led some to hypothesise that the images of fish are actually a play on her name. This is of course entirely possible, but it does seem a slightly strange choice of commemoration. Closer examination of the marble slab, however, indicates that the epitaph has actually replaced an earlier text, and so the fact that we have present both Latin and Greek in our inscription may mean that the Greek text and the images of the fish were added at a later date. As Cooley explains, it could be that the stele was modified in stages, with the “D M” and the images of the fish and anchor (which as stated above, were not uncommon in Roman and Greek art) being from an earlier epitaph that was erased when Licinia Amias’s was added. In this case, perhaps the Greek letters did not originally accompany the fish and anchor, but were added later to give the epitaph a more distinct Christian character (*Latin Epigraphy*, p. 234). It remains inconclusive, but if this epitaph can be identified with Christianity, either that of Licinia Amias or another inscriber from a different time, then it may provide us with a fascinating example of how Christian symbolism was integrated with that of Roman religion, in order to provide a discreet witness at a time when Christians could not safely enjoy freedom of expression in the empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [manes](#) [3]
- [?????](#) [4]
- [???](#) [5]

Thematic keywords:

- [Roman religion](#) [6]
- [Christian symbolism](#) [7]
- [syncretism](#) [8]
- [fish](#) [9]

**Bibliographical references:** Lynwood Smith, Daniel, [Into the World of the New Testament: Graeco Roman and Jewish Texts and Contexts](#) [10] (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)  
Cooley, Alison E., [The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy](#) [11] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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[2] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/tomb-julii-mausoleum-m>

[3] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/manes>

[4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%E1%BC%B0%CF%87%CE%B8%CF%8D%CF%82>

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