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Love, death, and funerals in ancient Rome: on the goddess Libitina

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ABSTRACT

One of the most striking characteristics of Roman funerals, is that they and the related personnel were associated with a suburban grove consecrated to Libitina, whose name can also metonymically mean ‘death’. Several ancient writers talk about this goddess, and occasionally associate her with Venus. In this paper, I shall use metonymy to explore the semantics of the deity, and I shall argue that Libitina was a liminal deity, whose position at the margins of the city was mirrored by her position at the margins of Roman polytheism. This shows the strong interconnection between language, urbanity and religion.

KEYWORDS

Libitina; funerals;
polytheism; metonymy;
death

Introduction

Studying¹ an ancient deity connected with death in a journal issue dedicated to death as an urban phenomenon might appear, at first sight, slightly irrelevant. One could argue that, whereas studying such a deity would have obvious relevance to the conceptualization of death in religion, this would be of limited importance to the study of death as an urban phenomenon. This is, however, far from being the case. Recent work of the ongoing research project *Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations*, based at the Max-Weber Kolleg of the University of Erfurt, has showed the usefulness of focusing on the interconnection between the urban and the religious.² In fact, it will be apparent in the following pages that the place of the goddess under consideration, conceptually and topographically, can tell us a great deal about how the Romans conceived death in and as part of their urban experience.

This paper will focus on an obscure Roman deity called Libitina. Her name is quite striking, because Libitina in Latin can mean, metonymically, ‘death’.³ She was also strongly connected with undertakers (called *libitinarii*) and funerals. Metonymy, far from being a merely literary topos, can show important semantic connections of a deity. When ancient authors give definitions of metonymy, they frequently use as illustrative examples the names of deities (Cic., *De or.* 3.167–168; Trypho, *Trop.* 729.20–24; Quint., *Inst.* 8.6.23–24). The anonymous author of the first-century BCE treaty *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (4.43), defines metonymy as the relationship that associates things that are *res propinqua* et

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finitimae, ‘things close to one another and bordering each other’. The language suggests that space had an important role in the definition of this relationship: spatial proximity can engender semantic proximity, and vice versa. In his recent book on metonymy, Sebastian Matzner has seized on this passage to propose that the underpinning principle of metonymy is semantic contiguity (Matzner, 2016, pp. 48–53). He also argues that this contiguity strongly depends on the ever-changing contextual use of the words: different words might find themselves associated to one another in different contexts and at different times. This is markedly different from older work on metonymy because Matzner’s contiguity shows us in far more detail how metonymic connections work, and how they differ from metaphors.⁴ Within an urban context, this interconnection of space, language, and religion is potentially very fruitful. If deities can be defined by semantic contiguity, this implies that how a deity is placed within urban topography could influence the meanings that are attributed to her, and vice-versa.

Death historiography does not help very much with understanding naming in polytheistic practices. Thomas Laqueur has dedicated over 100 pages to the problem of naming the dead, but the metonymic use of Libitina to signify ‘death’ seems very different, both because of the modern focus of the work and because a deity’s name can hardly be compared with the names of dead individuals.⁵ The contemporary Mexican cult of Santa Muerte (Holy Death), studied by Claudio Lomnitz in a sort of concluding essay of his book, provides a parallel of sorts, but only superficially. According to Lomnitz, the cult of Santa Muerte takes its current shape as late as the 1990s, and it is massively popular in Mexico: the great number of worshippers of Santa Muerte ask the saint for support in all sorts of areas of life, and she intervenes directly to favour them.⁶ As Libitina, Santa Muerte is metonymically associated with death but, whereas she is almost all-powerful, this does not seem to be the case for Libitina. As will be discussed momentarily, Libitina might have not been worshipped at all. In this sense, she is rather unique: even in the Greek world, deities associated with death were worshipped.⁷

Metonymy can be particularly helpful to understand the peculiarities of this deity, as her semantic aspect interacts with her non-linguistic resources, such as her cult place and personnel. Libitina had a sacred grove, attested only at Rome by literary evidence and inscriptions, and in a handful of Italian towns only by epigraphic evidence, but there are good reasons to believe that similar groves were more widespread. The groves seem to have included facilities that were helpful to deal with death, and practically organize funerals and executions. This might have happened in places beyond these lucky epigraphic finds.⁸ As far back as the historical record goes, Libitina has always been associated with the goddess Venus (see discussion below). Moreover, there seems to be a degree of overlap between Libitina and a Venus Lubentina/Libentina (deriving from *libere*, ‘to please’) both in literary texts and in inscriptions, although this never becomes an identification of the two forms, and the form Venus Libitina is never attested.⁹

In modern scholarship, Libitina has often been discussed with regard to her relationship with Venus. The consensus was that Libitina was probably an independent goddess, who later came to be associated with Venus.¹⁰ Robert Schilling and Gérard Freyburger believed Libitina to have been an originally independent goddess, possibly of Etruscan origin, who was gradually ‘absorbed’ into the cult of Venus, and that this transformation was also marked by increasing associations with the afterlife, whereas Libitina was originally, merely a goddess of funerals.¹¹ The two most recent papers

studying the goddess closely were published by Thomas Köves-Zulauf and John Scheid, both in 2004. Both these papers formulate radical interpretations of the evidence of the goddess Libitina. Köves-Zulauf pushes to the extreme the observations on the strong connection between Libitina and Venus. He argues that the connection of love and death that one finds in the convergence of Venus and Libitina must be explained through an allegedly primordial Mediterranean Mother Goddess of fertility, from whom both Roman Venus and Greek Aphrodite originated, and that could be seen as expression of some sort of reconciliation of opposing and conflicting principles.¹² The interpretation of John Scheid is a strong reaction precisely against this type of metahistorical readings. According to Scheid the goddess of funerals Libitina was forged by late republican Roman antiquarians. Libitina, he argues, was originally just the name of the grove in which undertakers operated, and as a consequence the word metonymically came to mean 'death'. At a later stage, a sanctuary of Venus was created nearby and this Venus became associated with Libitina from the grove. Antiquarian treatises subsequently created this artificial goddess who made her way through Latin literature. This would explain, Scheid continues, why the deity was apparently never worshipped, and why on epigraphic documents her name appears always as a topographical reference. If in the epigraphic expression *ab luco Libitina*, used in two funerary inscriptions to indicate the place where the deceased used to live, Libitina had been interpreted as an abbreviation for the genitive *Libitina(e)*, and consequently translated as 'from the sacred grove of Libitina', according to Scheid the name should be taken as a locative, and the expression translated as 'from the grove called Libitina'.

Scheid's argument has convinced many, but it has not managed to create a consensus in modern scholarship.¹³ It can be argued that his paper exercised excessive scepticism towards a relatively large body of literary sources, and at the same time gave considerable importance to an expression attested in only two inscriptions.¹⁴ Scheid's position was a reasonable reaction against the excessive trust granted to antiquarian sources by part of modern scholarship, which tends to take them at face value. But if Scheid went too far with the assertion that Libitina was an artificial goddess, this important article raises extremely significant questions. His deconstruction encourages us to reflect on aetiologies used by ancient antiquarians and how they should be read by modern scholars, on the issue of metonymy, and on how gods, places, their uses, and the experiences associated with them interact with one another and contribute to the creation of meanings. This association between deities, language, and space has a direct connection with the organisation of urban space. In other words, urban space, language and religion are profoundly interconnected and shape one another.

Libitina has several unexpected characteristics: on the one hand there is the puzzling connection with Venus, on the other, the strangeness that we have no surviving gift offered to this goddess, as if in fact she was not worshipped. In the first part of the paper, I shall discuss some literary references to Libitina as a goddess. They are indeed clear illustrations of antiquarianism, but they also show that the deity could be used to organize complex sets of ideas. In the second part of the paper, I shall discuss the social and historical context of the *lucus Libitinae* and some of the peculiar regulations surrounding the staff who worked in the grove. I believe that this context will be helpful to further

understand some of Libitina's characteristics. I shall conclude the paper by comparing Libitina with other deities with similarly dangerous aspects, and making some general observations on deities, places and metonymy that can help us understand how the urban community relates to death.

A goddess of funerals

The earliest source on the goddess Libitina is a fragment of a work of the second-century BCE historian L. Calpurnius Piso quoted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. This source already shows Libitina as strongly associated with Venus and with death.

FFromHist 9 F 16 = Dion. Hal. 4.15.5: ὡς δὲ Πείσων Λεύκιος ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ τῶν ἐνιαυσίων ἀναγραφῶν ἱστορεῖ, βουλόμενος καὶ τῶν ἐν ἄστει διατριβόντων τὸ πλῆθος εἰδέναι, τῶν τε γεννωμένων καὶ τῶν ἀπογινομένων καὶ τῶν εἰς ἄνδρας ἐγγραφομένων, ἔταξεν ὅσον ἔδει νόμισμα καταφέρειν ὑπὲρ ἐκάστου τοῦς προσήκοντα, εἰς μὲν τὸν τῆς Εἰλειθυίας θησαυρόν, ἦν Ῥωμαῖοι καλοῦσιν Ἥραν φωσφόρον, ὑπὲρ τῶν γεννωμένων· εἰς δὲ τὸν τῆς Ἀφροδίτης <τῆς> ἐν ἄλσει καθιδρυμένης, ἦν προσαγορεύουσι Λιβιτίνην, ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀπογινομένων· εἰς δὲ τὸν τῆς Νεότητος, ὑπὲρ τῶν εἰς ἄνδρας ἀρχομένων συντελεῖν· ἐξ ὧν ἡμελλε διαγνώσασθαι καθ' ἕκαστον ἐνιαυτόν, ὅσοι τε οἱ σύμπαντες ἦσαν καὶ τίνες ἐξ αὐτῶν τὴν στρατεύσιμον ἡλικίαν εἶχον.

But as Lucius Piso records in the first book of his *Annals*, since he [sc. Servius Tullius] wished to know the number of people living in the city, and the numbers of the newborn, of the deceased, and of those coming of age, he assigned the value of the coin which the relatives were to contribute on behalf of each person. For the newborn it was to be given to the treasury of Eileithyia, whom the Romans call 'Hera bringer of light' [sc. Juno Lucina]; for the deceased it was to be given to the treasury of Aphrodite who dwells in a sacred grove, whom they call Libitina; for those coming of age, it was to be given to the treasury of Neotes [sc. Juventas]. As a result he would find out each year how many people there were in total, and which of them were of military age (trans. Pobjoy in *FFromHist*).

This is a good example of the kind of analysis that moderns would consider antiquarian, namely, reconstructing a historical narrative of the reforms of the half-mythical King Servius Tullius from a group of deities, Juno Lucina, Libitina, and Juventas, connected with birth, death, and coming of age respectively. Libitina is called 'the Aphrodite who dwells in the grove', and there is no reference to a proper sanctuary. As Juno Lucina and Juventas are, without question, authentic deities, it would seem to me extremely implausible to imagine that Piso had decided to invent Libitina.

Not that the story is without problems: it refers to a half-mythical king, and it implausibly mentions money in a sixth-century BCE context, that is, over two centuries before the Romans started minting coin, an anachronism that must be connected with the legend that King Servius first introduced coinage in the city of Rome.¹⁵ But the simplest explanation seems to me that Piso started from the deities, assumed they were part of a coherent system, and created a historical narrative around them. This aetiology refers to an imagined organisation of the cycle of life in the early urban community centred around the sanctuaries of the three deities. As Scheid reminds us, 'antiquarians are not colleagues', and one cannot subscribe to this antiquarian reconstruction, but the whole aetiological argument would be invalidated if the basis of the aetiology, i.e. the deities, would be fabricated. Scheid

and Schrupf argued that, according to Piso/Dionysius, the grove (ἄλλος) was called Libitina rather than Aphrodite, thus considering this passage the only literary source endorsing their interpretation that Libitina was primarily the name of a grove, but the text does not justify this interpretation.¹⁶

For the question of the identification between Libitina and Venus it would be helpful to understand how Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who transmitted this fragment in his *Roman Antiquities*, used the work of Piso and translated his terminology and names from Latin to Greek. As Piso was writing in Latin it would seem plausible that the Greek equivalences were all established by Dionysius. So, in the chain Eileithyia = Hera Φῶσφορος = Juno Lucina, Piso probably had only Juno Lucina, translated in a linguistically direct way by Dionysius as Hera Φῶσφορος, and considered equivalent to the Greek deity of childbirth Eileithyia because of the common attributes. Dionysius gives two Greek translations to explain to a Greek reader who Juno Lucina was, one based on language and another on the attributes of the deity. On the other hand, with regard to the chain Aphrodite of the grove = Libitina = Venus, it seems to me that probably both Venus and Libitina were in the text of Piso. It seems unlikely that the equivalence 'Aphrodite of the grove' = Libitina would be introduced by Dionysius because, unlike the previous chain of translations, it has no obvious explanatory value. Interestingly, Dionysius chooses not to employ the metonymy of Libitina as 'death' and translate as Aphrodite θάνατος, or similar. He might have been unaware of the metonymy, but this might also be because Libitina is not attested as an epithet of Venus: so, as far as we can see, Dionysius remained faithful to Roman naming practices. The last translation, Neotes = Juventas, is quite straightforward linguistically (both words mean 'youth' in the two languages) and has at the same time a strong explanatory value.

In the subsequent century, we find the first testimony of the closeness of the terms Libitina and Libentina in the work of Varro. In his treatise on the Latin language, he writes that 'from *lubere* comes *libido*, *libidinosus*, and Venus *Lubentina* and *Libitina* among the others' (LL 6.47), and in a fragment from Book 4 transmitted by Nonius (F 5 = Non. P. 89.15 L) he writes that '*Prolubium* and *prolubido* (caprice and desire) are thus called from what pleases (*ab eo quod lubeat*). The same goes with the sacred grove of Venus *Lubentina*'. Although they do not state this explicitly, these texts seem to imply that Libitina is a variation of the form *Libentina*/*Lubentina*, which is used as an epithet of Venus. The Augustan antiquarian Verrius Flaccus, as we know from the epitome of Festus, indicated that in the sacred grove of Libitina (lit. 'in the Libitinian grove' *in luco Libitinensi*) there was one of the two temples of Venus whose anniversary was during the festival of the *Vinalia rustica* on 19 August, 'because gardens are under the protection of this goddess' (p. 322 L: *Eodem autem die Veneri templa sunt consecrata alterum ad Circum Maximum alterum in luco Libitinensi quia in eius deae tutela sunt horti*). This is the only source to say clearly that in the sacred grove there was a shrine, which makes this piece of information rather suspect, as this type of anniversary was frequently recorded on epigraphic calendars. It must be remembered, however, that *templum* does not necessarily imply a building, but might also be a consecrated space. That an actual temple was in the grove is made even more suspect by a parallel passage of Varro in which he discusses the *Vinalia rustica*, but only mentions one temple of Venus without giving a location (LL 6.20).

Plutarch discusses Libitina twice in his works. In the *Life of Numa*, he explains that King Numa had the pontiffs supervise funerary rites and honour the gods who receive into keeping dead bodies, 'particularly the goddess called Libitina, who presides over the

solemn services for the dead, whether she is Persephone or, as the most learned Romans maintain, Aphrodite; thereby not inaptly connecting man's birth and death with the power of one and the same goddess' (12.2: ἐξαιρέτως δὲ τὴν προσαγορευομένην Λιβίτιναν ἐπίσκοπον τῶν περὶ τοὺς θνήσκοντας ὁσίων θεὸν οὖσαν εἴτε Περσεφόνην εἴτε μᾶλλον ὡς οἱ λογιώτατοι Ῥωμαίων ὑπολαμβάνουσιν Ἀφροδίτην οὐ κακῶς εἰς μιᾶς δύναμιν θεοῦ τὰ περὶ τὰς γενέσεις καὶ τὰς τελευτὰς ἀνάπτοντες). The second mention is from the *Roman Questions* (23):

Ἰδιὰ τί τὰ πρὸς τὰς ταφὰς πιπράσκουσιν ἐν τῷ τεμένει τῷ Λιβιτίνης, νομίζοντες Ἀφροδίτην εἶναι τὴν Λιβιτίνην; πότερον καὶ τοῦτο τῶν Νομᾶ τοῦ βασιλέως φιλοσοφημάτων ἐν ἔστιν, ὅπως μανθάνωσι μὴ δυσχεραίνειν τὰ τοιαῦτα μηδὲ φεύγειν ὡς μiasμόν; ἢ μᾶλλον ὑπόμνησίς ἐστι τοῦ φθαρτὸν εἶναι τὸ γεννητὸν, ὡς μιᾶς θεοῦ τὰς γενέσεις καὶ τὰς τελευτὰς ἐπισκοπούσης; καὶ γὰρ ἐν Δελφοῖς Ἀφροδίτης ἐπιτυμβία ἀγαλμάτιόν ἐστι πρὸς ὃ τοὺς κατοικομένους ἐπὶ τὰς χοὰς ἀνακαλοῦνται.

Why do they sell articles for funerals in the precinct of Libitina whom they identify with Aphrodite? Is this also one of the philosophic devices of King Numa, that they should learn not to feel repugnance at such things nor shun them as a pollution? Or is it rather a reminder that whatever is born must die, since one goddess presides over births and deaths? For in Delphi there is a little statue of Aphrodite of the Tomb, to which they summon the departed to come forth for the libations.

This antiquarian aetiology aimed at creating a historical narrative connected with King Numa rather than Servius Tullius, and with the representation of this king as the founder of Roman religious institutions. Moreover, this aetiology has moralizing and philosophising aspects. However, I do not think that Plutarch gives different explanations of Libitina and Venus because he is expressing reservations concerning the speculative character of this identification (Scheid 2004, p. 15). Plutarch gives different explanations simply because this is what he does constantly in the *Roman Questions*, an aetiological work concerning Roman institutions monuments and customs.¹⁷ When he is writing in a different genre in the biography of Numa, he is quick to point out that 'the most learned of the Romans' (οἱ λογιώτατοι Ῥωμαίων) agree that Libitina must be identified with Aphrodite/Venus.

As with the fragment of Piso, rejecting the historical value of the aetiology cannot entail assuming that Libitina as goddess of funerals and her association with Venus were artificial, because that would invalidate the basis of the aetiology. Just like Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the case of Juno Lucina, Plutarch attempts to translate Libitina to his Greek readers by proposing examples of Greek deities connected with death or the netherworld, such as Persephone and an Aphrodite ἐπιτυμβία from Delphi, only known from this passage. It is worth noting that Plutarch speaks of a τέμενος, 'sacred precinct', an expression that does not necessarily entail the presence of a proper sacred building.

The rest of the literary sources provide occasional references that do not add significant pieces of information with regard to Libitina.¹⁸ I do not think that the material above can be used to argue that the connections between Libitina and death, and Libitina and Venus, were forged by these ancient historians and antiquarians, let alone that the deity itself was invented by them.

It must be underlined that we find these associations with Venus and death in virtually all our sources concerning Libitina. The metonymy Libitina = death suggests that the association with death must have been well established, but if we take metonymy in the broader sense of semantic contiguity, Libitina's presence in the grove becomes both

an attribute of the goddess *and* a defining characteristic of the place. Through this broader use of metonymy, Plutarch and Piso/Dionysius can represent the grove of Libitina as a key element in the organization of death and dying within the early urban community. The passage of Festus concerning the *Vinalia rustica* provides a temporal dimension of semantic contiguity that might reinforce the association between Libitina and Venus. The strangest aspect of our set of sources is the lack of direct evidence of cultic acts addressed to Libitina. In order to explore this point we must consider what happened in the grove.

A business for the undertakers

As observed above, several sources mention a grove of Libitina. Such groves were attested directly at Rome, Puteoli, and Cumae, and might have been at Bergomum and Ligures Baebiani. However, we would know precious little about the activities that took place in the grove were it not for a long and informative inscription from the town of Puteoli in Campania, the so-called *Lex libitinaria Puteolana*.¹⁹ This is a long inscription in stone of which several fragments have survived, found in the 1950s in the proximity of the ancient forum of Puteoli (Camodeca 2004, p. 85). Giuseppe Camodeca has successfully demonstrated that the original location of the inscription must have been a shop where the Libitinarii advertised their activities and perhaps received payments, whereas the main facilities of the business would be located precisely in the extra-urban grove of Libitina (Camodeca 2004, p. 86). Although the text is fragmentary, it is clear enough that the different services offered by the Libitinarii were advertised and priced, including indications of the goods included in the services (for example, in case of a fustigation, the contractor had to provide the clubs, the chains and the ropes necessary for the procedure: Castagnetti 2012, p. 13). These services did not only include the disposal of bodies, but the Libitinarii could also be contracted for the punishment of slaves, and if need be even for capital punishment and crucifixions (detailed commentary in Castagnetti 2012). There are some quite odd characteristics in the job description of the workers (*operae*), which makes clear that this was not considered a job like any other.

Castagnetti (2012) p. 12: *Oper(ae) quae at eam r(em) praeparat(ae) er(unt) ne intra turrem ubi hodie lucus est Libit(inae) habitent laventurve ab h(ora) l/noctis neve veniant in oppid(um) nisi mortui tollend(i) conlocand(i)ve aut supplic(i) sumend(i) c(ausa) dum ita/quis eor(um) veniat quotiens oppid(um) intrab(it) in oppid(o)ve erit ut pilleum color(atum) in capit(e) habeat(n)t et/dum ne quis eor(um) maior ann(or)um L minorve ann(or)um XX sit nive v[a]let(udinarius) nive luscus nive manc(us) nive clodus/nive caec[us] nive stigmat(ibus) inscript(us) sit et ne pauciores manceps oper(as) habeat quam XXXII (. . .) item si unco extrahere iussus erit oper(a) russat(a) id cadaver ubi plura/cadavera erunt cum tintinnabulo extrahere debet.*

The workers which shall be provided for this task are not to live on this side of the tower where the grove of Libitina is. They are to take their bath after the first hour of the night. They are not to enter the town except to collect or dispose of corpses, or to inflict a punishment, and then when they enter or are in the town, each of them must wear a colourful cap on his head. None of them is to be over 50 years of age or under 20, nor have any sores, nor be one-eyed, maimed, lame, blind or branded. The contractor should have no less than 32 workers. (. . .) If he is ordered to remove the corpse with a hook, the workers are to be dressed in red and ring a bell while dragging away the body, or bodies if there are several (Trans. Hope 2007, p. 92).

Jack Lennon has convincingly discussed these strange regulations in connection with ideas about purity and pollution in Rome, and argued that death, dead bodies, and the likes were considered dangerously polluting. Undertakers, who had for professional reasons daily contact with dead bodies, might also have been considered a source of pollution (Lennon 2014, p. 150). The text of the inscription shows that undertakers were admitted to the urban space only to do their job, and when they did so they were marked out by a conspicuous piece of clothing. Moreover, when they were transporting a body, on top of this visual marker they had to ring a bell to announce their presence to passers-by, presumably so that the people who lived in the city could keep their distance from them. These regulations cannot be justified with the mere nuisance of seeing a dead body, otherwise it would be unclear why these workers were not allowed to live in the city when out of duty. The people who work for the *Libitinarii* do a necessary job – but there is something undesirable about them because they have continuous contact with death. Their access to the urban space is limited and tightly controlled.

We do not know if and to what extent similar regulations were also followed in Rome and in the other places where *Libitina* and the grove are (certainly or plausibly) attested, but I shall assume that it was the case, at least partially. The sources related to Rome are, markedly antiquarian in character, and it is unlikely that undertakers would still operate in the grove in the Augustan period, when the *Esquiline* necropolis was slowly converted into gardens. However, references to funerals in *Piso/Dionysius* and *Plutarch* make it likely that a similar business also took place in the Roman grove of *Libitina*, at least at some point. I believe that the characteristics of those who lived in the grove of *Libitina* explain the absence of direct evidence of worship. *Libitina* was metonymically associated with the activities that took place in the grove. Like the job of the undertakers living in her precinct her powers were necessary, but also unwelcome and undesirable.

Troublesome goddesses

Libitina was not the only ancient Roman deity whose powers had sinister implications. We know of several such deities. As with *Libitina*, we do not have any direct physical evidence of their cult, and no sacred gift to them is extant. Literary sources, however, refer to them in order to argue that they should not be worshipped, primarily in philosophical and theological discussions of the necessity of gods to be benevolent and useful to mankind. The earliest such discussion appears in *Cicero's* treatise *On Laws* written in the late 50s BCE.²⁰

2.28 (Powell): *Bene vero quod Mens Pietas Virtus Fides consecratur {manu} quarum omnium Romae dedicata publice templa sunt, ut illa qui habeant (habent autem omnes boni) deos ipsos in animis suis collocatos putent. Nam illud vitiosum Athenis, quod Cylonio scelere expiato, Epimenide Crete suadente, fecerunt Contumeliae fanum et Impudentiae; virtutes enim, non vitia consecrare decet. Araque vetusta in Palatio Febris, et altera Esquiliis Malae Fortunae detestando, atque omnia eiusmodi repudianda sunt.*

It is right that *Mens*, *Pietas*, *Virtus*, and *Fides* should be deified: and in Rome temples have long been publicly dedicated to those qualities, so that those who possess them (and all good people do) should believe that actual gods have been set up within their souls. At Athens,

after atoning for the crime against Cylon, on the advice of the Cretan Epimenides they built a shrine to Contumelia and Impudentia. That was a misguided act; for virtues, not vices, should be deified. The ancient altar to Febris on the Palatine, and the other to Mala Fortuna on the Esquiline must be refused recognition, and all things of that kind are to be rejected (Translation N. Rudd modified).

The argument here is that useful concepts must be worshipped whereas harmful ones, such as Fever and Bad Luck, should not. Moreover, we learn that Fever had an altar of the Palatine and Bad Luck one on the Esquiline (Miano 2018, pp. 189–192). We can add to the list Bereavement (Orbona) who had a shrine in Rome, as we know from another Ciceronian passage with the criticism of this type of deities formulated by the character Cotta in the treatise *On the Nature of Gods* (3.63 with the list later relaunched by Pliny *NH* 2.16). Cotta makes a radical argument, claiming that the worship of these dangerous deities demonstrates that, as these harmful powers cannot be considered goddesses, the useful ones are not really divine powers either, but originate from human qualities. This argument responds to one formulated by the character Balbus in Book 2, quite similar to the one presented in the passage quoted above. Interestingly, Balbus includes *Lubentina Venus* in the list of useful deities with transparent names (2.50.61): how the goddess is interpreted is made clear by the fact that she is listed together with *Cupido* and *Voluptas*. Therefore, in order to be included in a list of useful deities, Lubentina had to be made into a goddess of sexual attraction and distinguished from Libitina, who would rather belong with Orbona.

Whether these Ciceronian characters liked it or not, at Rome there were deities such as Fever, Bereavement and Bad Luck. These deities are only known from passages condemning their cult. But they provide meaningful parallels to Libitina, and an explanation as to the lack of documentation of rituals and acts of a cult. In this context, the lack of ritual evidence for Libitina depends on her unwelcome, undesirable, and potentially harmful powers. If Libitina ever received cultic acts, we can imagine that these were so marginal that they did not leave any tangible trace.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have reconsidered the documents concerning the goddess Libitina to challenge some reconstructions formulated by modern scholarship. A part of this paper has been dedicated to the discussion of the lack of evidence for a cult of Libitina, and I have argued that, like the undertakers who worked in her grove, it is reasonable to assume that the goddess had several undesirable connections that justify the absence of cultic evidence. I have also contextualized this within a discussion of other Roman deities with unwelcome semantic connections, and for whom likewise we do not have direct evidence of a cult. I have showed that the antiquarian character of many sources concerning this deity does not allow us to consider her an antiquarian invention. If these aetiologies cannot be taken at face value, they have a consistency and a coherence over time, which can hardly justify such radical criticism. Information transmitted by the antiquarians cannot be taken at face value as historical data, but it also cannot be rejected altogether without an attempt to identify the arguments and the aims of the specific passages. This process inevitably leaves space for different interpretations

and disagreements. The fact that John Scheid could make the argument that *lucus Libitina* was just the name of a district in Rome is in itself a good illustration of how places, their names, deities and the meanings and experiences associated with them are closely entangled in a semantic contiguity, which is the same principle on which metonymy is based. This shows that an approach to polytheism based on spatial rhetoric can be useful. I do not think that one should go back to older reconstructions of the origin of Libitina as a Mediterranean goddess of love and death. The historical record of Libitina is far more interesting and compelling than formulating unprovable hypotheses on her origins.

The connection of Libitina with Venus might or might not be archaic, but it is certainly widely attested already from our earliest source (Piso). It does not need to pose problems: ancient deities were not straightforwardly connected with a single semantic field unexpected semantic connections could be gathered around a popular deity such as Venus. For example, in Pompeii, we have an inscription from the sanctuary of Venus in which the ‘Manliness of Venus’ is celebrated (AE 2008 324: *Virtus Veneris*). If it is somehow unexpected, the connection of love and death that we find in the contiguity of Venus and Libitina is far from occasional, as it is recurrently attested over centuries. One could take up Plutarch’s romantic suggestion that it expresses the truth that whoever is born one day must die or, more simply, embrace the unexpected and chaotic aspects of the semantics of polytheism that make studying these ancient deities so fascinating.

This argument has important consequences for understanding death as an urban phenomenon in ancient Rome. If we assume that the metonymic relationship between the goddess, the *lucus* and the undertakers is based on semantic contiguity, we can see a meaningful pattern between the topographic location of the *lucus* outside of the urban space, the limited, controlled access that the *Libitinarii* had to the city, and the marginal place of Libitina within urban religion, evidenced by the lack of evidence on rituals addressed to her. As burials were strictly outside urban space, so were Libitina, her *lucus*, and her people. They were at once a way to conceptualize death and a way to control it, expelling the dead as neatly and efficiently as possible from the urban community of the living.

Notes

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2. See Rüpke (2020) for a not-so-preliminary discussion of the research programme.
3. Freyburger (1995), 214, cfr. Hor., *Od.* 3.30.6–7 and Juv. 12.122, Mart. 8.43.4; but also, for example, in the *Senatus consultum* from Larinum AE 1978, 145 = AE 2006, 27 = EDR081989.
4. Compare with Lakoff and Johnson (2003, pp. 36–41).
5. Laqueur (2015, pp. 363–488).
6. Lomnitz (2005, pp. 483–496).
7. Even Thanatos might have been worshipped in Sparta, and it can be argued that he is closely connected with Hades by means of iconography. On this see Sekita (forthcoming).

8. Outside of Rome, groves of Libitina are attested at Cumae and Puteoli (Castagnetti, 2012), perhaps at Bergomum (CIL 5 5128 = EDR092038), and Ligures Baebiani (CIL 9 1455).
9. Radke (1965) thought that Libitina and (Venus) Lubentina should be considered two wholly separate deities. As a Venus Libitina is not attested in primary sources, it is puzzling that there is an entry for a grove of Venus Libitina on LTUR (Bodel, 2000b; Coarelli, 1993, 2000). But in fact, the terms Libitina and Lubentina seem to be interchangeable in inscriptions such as CIL 6, 33,870 = EDR071756: *ab luco Lubent(inae)* and AE 2001, 266 = EDR001217: *ab luco Lubentin[a]*. This is most likely the equivalent of the expression *ab luco Libitina*, found in CIL 1² 1268 = ILLRP 822 = EDR126391; CIL 1² 1292 = ILLRP 941 = EDR170699. The alternative would be to think that there are two districts named after Libitina and Lubentina, which is unlikely. In literary texts, the overlap appears primarily in etymological discussions. See the discussion below concerning Varro.
10. Wissowa (1912, pp. 245, 289; Libitina and Lubentina were two independent deities eventually absorbed into Venus). Also Latte (1926) and Radke (1965, pp. 183–184).
11. Schilling (1984, pp. 202–206; Freyburger, 1995; Schilling & Freyburger 2017, p. 291).
12. Köves-Zulauf (2004, p. 207 ff.): “Hinter dieser Venus verbirgt sich die große alte orientalische und mediterrane Liebes- und Muttergöttin, die unter verschiedenen Namen erscheint und die die Griechen als Aphrodite, die Römer als Venus, die Etrusker als Turan interpretiert haben”.
13. Schrupf (2006, pp. 239–245) endorses in full Scheid’s argument. Lhommé (2012) agrees with Scheid, but does not engage with the argument, Marcattili (2017) only references Scheid in passing without taking a position. Marroni (2010, pp. 140–157) disagrees with Scheid and rather follows Coarelli (1988, pp. 283–284).
14. See n. 5 above.
15. This tradition was included in the work of the Sicilian historian Timaeus (*FGrHist* 566 F 61).
16. They translate ἦν προσαγορεύουσι Λιβιτινήν as: (bois sacré) “qu’on appelle Libitinensis” (Scheid, 2004, p. 15), “den (referred to Hain) man Libitina nennt” (Schrumpf, 2006, p. 244). The pronoun ἦν cannot refer to ἄλλος, and the correct translation is clearly that offered by Pobjoy.
17. Scheid demonstrated this splendidly in Scheid (2012).
18. They are Ps.Acr., *In Hor., Sat.* 2.6.19; *In Hor., Epist.* 1.7.6; Obseq. 12; Ascon., *In Milon.* 34.
19. There is also a similar inscription from Cumae, in two redactions, but it is even more fragmentary than that from Puteoli. Castagnetti (2012) provides editions and commentaries on both texts. On Roman graveyards see Bodel (1994, 2000a, Bodel 2004).
20. For the dating of the work, see the discussion in Dyck (2004, p. 5–7).

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