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3. Death and the craftsman

So far, it would seem that our picture of ancient technology can change depending on whose voice we choose to listen to, and in particular what group of sources we decide to consider a part of our story. Both chapters one and two have arguably showed that representations of technology were and are contested. At the same time, understanding such representations in their complexity is an integral part of our understanding of wider phenomena such as political and social life in classical Athens and the Hellenistic military revolution. I have also argued that, in the face of the marginalization or elision of technicians and their activities on the part of ancient, as well as modern, observers, the available textual sources produced by technicians depict them and their activities in a positive light, as being proud of what they do and aware of its importance for society and for the state.

As we move through time to reach the Roman Empire, these initial impressions appear to be confirmed. Vitruvius depicted architects as thoroughly educated consolidators of Augustan rule,¹ Hero of Alexandria insisted that military engineering was much better than philosophy at achieving tranquillity of mind,² and Galen wrote: “The crucial difference between [so-called ‘dumb’ animals] and man [...] is seen in the great variety of *technai* which this latter animal performs,

¹ See Romano (1987).

² Hero, *Construction of artillery* 71-73.11.

and from the fact that man alone has the capacity for knowledge: he can learn whichever *techné* he wishes.”³

And yet, one could object that Vitruvius, Hero, Galen were not necessarily representative of the majority of technicians. They were rich, well-educated, well-connected, the successful social climbers, the ones who made it. What about the ‘invisible technicians’⁴ who healed, built engines, designed fortification towers, but whose names and voices have not been registered in our written record? Are they lost to history for ever? This chapter will be an attempt to answer that question in the negative, and, by so doing, address the more general issue of how ancient technicians viewed themselves. It will also, I hope, provide an example of how non-textual sources can be used in the history of ancient technology, a field which, I feel, has been hampered by its overemphasis on textual sources.

Writing a history of ‘low’ technicians runs up against similar obstacles to those encountered when trying to recover information about women, children or slaves in Greek and Roman antiquity. The last twenty years of scholarship have shown that, compared to textual sources, material evidence can provide us with a more direct, if no less complex, channel of access to these groups. Particularly fruitful are funerary monuments: tombstones, urns, sarcophagi.⁵ The way women, children or slaves were represented in death has taught us a lot about

³ Galen, *An Exhortation to Study the Arts* I.2, tr. Singer, slightly modified.

⁴ The phrase is from Shapin (1989).

⁵ For reasons of space, I will not focus on funerary epigraphy, but see Geist (1969) 74-83; Joshel (1992); Donderer (1996); van Nijf (1997).

their lives. I shall try to do the same with technicians: given that extant texts express the viewpoint of only a particular section of technical practitioners, I will analyze material remains, especially those linked to commemoration of death, in an effort to reconstruct the wider group.

Luckily for me, there is a vast number of representations of technicians, their activities and their instruments in Greek and Roman art, and a good portion of the Roman evidence, mostly from Italy and dating from the first two centuries AD, has been conveniently collected by Gerhard Zimmer.⁶ Zimmer organizes his evidence by professional category: bakers, smiths, and so on. I have chosen instead to focus on the iconography of one particular instrument: the carpenter's square (*libella* in Latin, *diabetes* in Greek - the main object on the front cover of this book). This because I realized that even the interpretation of individual technical motifs is still at an embryonic stage, and it may be a good idea, before we attempt to read entire sentences, so to speak, fully to understand the individual words of which they are composed.

Preliminary questions

Before starting my analysis of the material, I will discuss three methodological problems: what was the purpose of representations of technicians in funerary art? Can the funerary monuments of technicians be taken to reflect their own

⁶ Zimmer (1982). I shall rely extensively on his work for identification and *prima facie* interpretation. See also the remarks in Feraudi-Gruénais (2001) and Clarke (2003), esp. ch.4.

views? And, should these images be taken to represent the real world of the technician, or an ideal?

The first question is part of the much larger issue of the purpose of funerary art in the Roman Empire. The consensus of scholars is that, generally speaking, tombstones, monumental graves and the like were a strong expression of the identity and status of the dead person and his or her family. Members of the higher orders, including the imperial family, used funerary art to reaffirm and advertise their prestige and power; through it members of the lower orders channelled their aspirations to upward mobility, or celebrated their actual rise in status, acquired wealth, and often hard-earned freedom.⁷ For instance, tomb reliefs of freed-men or -women often emphasize child-parent or wife-husband relationships, this latter in the form of *dextrarum iunctio* (joining of the right hands); modesty for women and dignity for men are signalled by their dress, be it the toga or a veiled head. This has been linked to the fact that having a legally recognized family and upholding the traditional virtues of the Roman citizen marked and celebrated acquired freedom. Again, many people who had gained status or citizenship through the army were pictured bedecked with military paraphernalia. In general, “in reflecting the world of public life, and in representing its subjects’ involvement in that world, art proved a fundamental

⁷ See e.g. Zanker (1975), (1992), (1993); Meyer (1990); Joshel (1992); van Nijf (1997) 31-8 with further references; Mouritsen (2005).

means for identifying, constructing, and negotiating individuals' places in the hierarchy of Roman society".⁸

This kind of historical analysis has become more and more fine-grained. It has been pointed out that different places and different periods saw different modes of change, of continuity and revival in funerary practices (for instance, inhumation *v.* cremation) and styles (ostentatious display *v.* restraint).⁹ Some changes in the quantity and quality of the evidence have been linked to the increased prominence of certain groups within society. The explosion in quantity and quality of highly visible tombs of freed-men and -women through the first and second centuries AD has been linked to the presence, also recorded by contemporary literary sources, of rich, powerful and increasingly vocal *liberti*.¹⁰

Paul Zanker has also charted a change in modes of self-representation in the course of the first and second centuries AD, when images of lower and 'middle class' citizens waned, while identification through one's profession became more frequent. This was due in his view to decreased access to the political arena, and was paralleled by a move in funerary architecture from visible tombs lining the sides of the road just outside the city limits, to enclosure tombs which were only accessible to relatives or work colleagues.¹¹

Zanker's study underlines the fact that several choices of representation were available to a person or family planning to leave a memorial. Often the deceased

⁸ Elsner (1998) 39.

⁹ See e.g. Toynbee (1971); I. Morris (1992).

¹⁰ Zanker (1975); Zimmer (1982); Meyer (1990).

¹¹ Zanker (1992) 352; cf. also Eck (1987) 76-7; van Nijf (1987) 5.

was in effect transfigured after death: there are numerous examples of humble citizens who transcended their actual status, and are depicted on their graves as philosophers, mythological heroes, or even divinities.¹² In those cases, art proved a fundamental means for constructing a place for the individual which was infinitely better than any they might have occupied in their lifetime in Roman society; it provided a celebration, exaltation and perhaps belated recognition of the worth of the deceased and, by association, his or her family.

This has important consequences for the issue at hand. If anyone could in principle be consecrated in stone into a Hercules or a Venus, or at least an elegant lady of leisure or a gentleman reclining at a banquet, why didn't everybody choose to be so represented? If there was a strong bias in antiquity against technical activities (as the 'mainstream view' outlined in our introduction maintains),¹³ why do we find funerary representations of smiths, tanners, cloth-makers at all? Especially if we subscribe to another widely-shared view, namely that the artistic taste of the lower classes was heavily influenced by that of the upper classes? The fact remains to be explained, then, that at least some technicians chose to be identified and remembered through their activities, rather than in other ways.

Some historians have suggested that the representation of labour was a plea for reward in the afterlife: having toiled in this world, the deceased expected a better

¹² Wrede (1981); D'Ambra (1988), (1989); Zanker (1995b).

¹³ Kampen (1981) 25.

life beyond it.¹⁴ Most scholars, however, see the depiction of work scenes or instruments as a sign of pride in one's activities, and of the desire to acknowledge what may have been one's primary source of wealth, status or even (in the case of slaves who bought themselves out) freedom.¹⁵ At the same time, many have denied this type of funerary art a more specifically political dimension, and work scenes have almost been characterized as a flight from politics towards the comforts of an audience restricted to one's family and at most professional peers: "one finds no symbolic layers, no specifically religious or political content."¹⁶

Whether or not representations of technicians in funerary art had a political, as well as social and cultural, function, will be discussed in the conclusion. For now, a second question presents itself.

If they are an expression of pride, can the funerary monuments of technicians be taken to reflect their own views? In many cases, we can answer in the positive.¹⁷ Access to self-expression through funerary art was of course open to only a fraction of the population: those who could afford it, and who had enough authority in their familial group to make choices about the way members of the family were publicly represented. That left out the poor, children and many women. Yet, even with all these qualifications, significantly more people, and

¹⁴ Prieur (1986) 126. In support Zimmer (1982) no. 136.

¹⁵ Burford (1972); Reddé (1978); D'Ambra (1988); Joshel (1992) 5-7; Elsner (1998) 92; Clarke (2003) 111, 117-8.

¹⁶ Kampen (1981) 63; Pannoux (1985) 303; Zanker (1992).

¹⁷ See Zanker (1975); Kampen (1981); Joshel (1992) 19; Elsner (1998) 92-3.

from a wider section of society, were able to access the medium of funerary art than that of, say, literature. At least in some cases, testamentary dispositions, even detailed ones, were left stating one's choice of funerary representation,¹⁸ and it is plausible that the person in charge of the burial would have tried to meet the wishes, actual or guessed, of the deceased (especially when this latter was a male adult) even when no detailed dispositions existed. The most straightforward scenario is when the person had the monument or grave made while they were still alive.¹⁹ This was indicated by such formulae as *sibi fecit, se vivo/a* or *vivus/a*. The data collected by Saller and Shaw²⁰ reveal that, for instance, in the city of Rome throughout the imperial period free citizens belonging to the lower orders were rather more likely to take care of their own funerary commemoration than equestrians and definitely more likely than senators. Throughout the empire the likelihood that people would make provisions for their own grave does not seem to have been strictly correlated to status, and varies widely from region to region: for instance, it was quite high among imperial slaves in the city of Rome, but practically 0% for imperial slaves at Carthage. As for this chapter's sample, a good portion of the tombs examined were explicitly set up following the dead person's wishes.²¹ Thus, while the evidence does not allow strong claims, and more research is needed on this

¹⁸ The *locus classicus* for this is Petronius, *Satyricon* 71-2.

¹⁹ Kleiner (1977); Eck (1987).

²⁰ Saller & Shaw (1984) appendix.

²¹ This compares well with Zimmer (1982): more than a third of his examples explicitly indicate that the person provided for the burial while still alive.

aspect, it would seem that, in parallel to the high significance of funerary self-representation for members of the lower orders and for upwardly mobile elements of society, those groups were also more likely personally to ensure that they would be remembered by posterity, rather than leaving it to family, associates, or the state itself, as was primarily the case, for instance, for senators.

The degree of actual intervention on the funerary monument was a function of financial resources, and of the desire to spend them. It is well known from the case of sarcophagi that some funerary art was mass-produced. Standard sarcophagi were carved with scenes appealing to general taste; the inscription and portrait of the deceased would later be made to specification. Given that work scenes do not seem to have figured among standard mass-produced decorations,²² their presence often indicated a strong degree of positive decision, and sometimes a willingness to spend more money in order to express oneself in a particular way. Not all tombs in our sample were rich – some of them are products of inferior quality.²³ On the other hand, some are quite expensive, and for several of them the instruments appear to have been rendered with accuracy and care.

Given, then, that work scenes or tools were often the direct expression of the technician's self-image, should they be taken to represent the real world or an ideal? Once again, this is part of a much larger question: the relationship between

²² Susini (1960): in some cases work tools may be a sort of workshop signature; Amedick (1991) 117.

²³ Koortbojian (1995) 14 with further references.

art and reality, especially in cases where one of the main purposes of art was the construction and reinforcement of public identity.

As we have already said, funerary representations were often idealized rather than realistic, and realistic funerary representations have too often been taken as unproblematic. With an approach similar to the one traditionally held towards ancient technical texts, the artistic renditions of *techne* or *ars* have traditionally been seen as down-to-earth, straightforward snapshots of everyday life.²⁴ More recently, different trends both in the history of science and in the history of art have led to a re-evaluation of technical texts on the one hand and representations of technical objects on the other. The presence in this type of evidence of rhetorical strategies and multiple levels of meaning has been recognized, as has its symbolic significance.²⁵ In other words, we can look at depictions of work scenes and tools in funerary art and argue that they could both reflect reality *and* convey some symbolic meaning. In this sense, work imagery is not different from other kinds of imagery common in Roman funerary art: military *insignia* or symbols of office worked in the same way.²⁶ Many freedmen who reached the rank of *sevir Augustalis*, i.e. became members of a municipal organization which seems to have been in charge of the imperial cult, advertised it by having its *insignia*, the *fasces* and the *sella curulis* (a folding stool upon which senior magistrates were entitled to sit), engraved on their tombstones. In at least one

²⁴ Bianchi Bandinelli (1967).

²⁵ Elsner (1998) 92.

case, these symbols of civic respectability are juxtaposed with those of the profession of the deceased: the funerary stele of the freedman Lucius Aebutius Faustus has a relief with a dismantled surveyor's *groma*, and a *sella curulis* and *fascēs* just above it, albeit on a slightly smaller scale.²⁷ Is the arrangement of the two sets of objects an indication of their respective value for the deceased? And are the *membra disiecta* of the technical instrument itself a symbol of mortality?

In parallel to emblems of participation in public life for men, we often find weaving or spinning tools engraved on the tombs of women,²⁸ together with frequent references in women's epitaphs to the fact that the deceased was utterly devoted to those feminine tasks. It has been argued that these representations may hint less at an actual main activity (clothes in the Roman Empire were often produced outside the household) than at a traditional role, that of the virtuous, retreating matron. In at least one case, a wool basket makes a startling accessory for a woman who is naked and reclining on a couch in a Venus-like pose, seamlessly combining the qualities of home-bound femininity and unabashed beauty and grace.²⁹ Yet another example of the polysemantic role of funerary

²⁶ Franzoni (1987); Schäfer (1989); Devijver & van Wouterghem (1990) 74; Hope (2000); Clarke (2003) 272-5.

²⁷ Zimmer (1982) no. 141; Schäfer (1989) 342n721. A possibly related example in Schäfer (1989) 396-7, table 100.6. Zimmer (1982) 61-2, has examples of funerary representations where the emblems of office dominate over tools of the trade, and examples where they are presented as roughly equivalent.

²⁸ D'Ambra (1993).

²⁹ The tomb of Ulpia Epigone, see D'Ambra (1989), also D'Ambra (1998) fig.109.

images is religious symbolism.³⁰ Not only did emblems of Christianity, Judaism, Mithraism and other religions and cults indicate the affiliation of the deceased, but they offered interpretations of the meaning of life (the dove as peace, the fish as rebirth) and protection for the dead in their journey through the underworld. In sum, given the (as we argued) pretty high level of intentionality and the close link between art and identity, the depiction of work scenes and technical instruments should not be taken as simply a snapshot of the life of the deceased. These images point at actual activities while carrying other meanings; they are symbols as well as descriptions. But let us turn to our specific example; we will further explore the symbolism of technical instruments in the third part of this chapter.

The iconography of the carpenter's square

The carpenter's square is one of the oldest technical instruments to have been used in the Mediterranean area. Along with other tools, it was found in the tomb of the Egyptian architect Sennedjem, dating to the 20th dynasty (between 1340 and 1084 BC).³¹ The *libella* (as I shall henceforth call it for brevity) when used with a plumb line enabled the person using it to draw straight lines and perpendiculars. Moreover, because a *libella* in fact incorporates a square (*norma*), which in its turn incorporates a short measuring rod (*regula*), it might also have been used to measure lengths and check if a line was level. Thus, the *libella* was

³⁰ Cumont (1942).

³¹ Cairo (1980) no. 2005; also a frequent shape for small Egyptian amulets: Deonna (1932) 465.

useful as an instrument in building on all scales, from carpentry to architecture to engineering, and in surveying.³² While some of its applications must have been straightforward, a certain expertise would have been required to use it for the solution of the so-called 'mechanical' problems, such as for instance the duplication of the cube. In sum, the *libella* was a versatile instrument: it could perform both simple and complex tasks, and its use involved degrees of skill ranging from a modicum of technical experience all the way to a superior level of craftsmanship.

I have come across around twenty images of *libellae*, mostly datable to the first and early second centuries AD. They are predominantly from Italy or the city of Rome itself, with several examples from Gallia Narbonensis (Southern France) and one from Germany.³³ This may reflect the present state of scholarship and of data-collecting rather than the actual archaeological record.³⁴ There does not seem to be any explicit correlation between one's status and having a *libella* on one's grave; the *libella* is generally accompanied by other tools, and its position in the visual economy of each piece varies from being in the main body to being at the very bottom. Quality and costliness of the items vary, as does their typology, although the majority are funerary stelai. Most items with a *libella* have no

³² Lewis (2001).

³³ I have not taken into account items whose description is not satisfactory because they are no longer extant or too fragmentary: Armellini (1880) 219-20; Hettner (1893) no. 194; Espérandieu (1907), I 225, I 501, I 510, I 730, I 781, VII 5498; Lugli (1957) II, table 25.5; Zimmer (1982) nos. 93, 108, 109, 110, 170.

³⁴ Reddé (1978) 47.

portrait or other 'organic' element, by which I mean, containing representations of living beings *qua* living beings (e.g. symbolic animals do not count). I will describe some of the pieces first, to give the reader an idea of the material under examination.

The first example is a funerary stele now in Reggio Emilia. According to the inscription, it was set up by the freedwoman Pettia Ge for herself, her *patronus*, himself a freedman, another freedman who is described as a *marmorarius*, and two more freedwomen, whose names (and remains) may have been added to the inscription and to the burial at a later stage. The stele has a full-figure portrait of a man and a woman holding hands in a gesture known as *dextrarum iunctio* and denoting marriage – whether Pettia's husband is her *patronus* or the sculptor is disputed.³⁵ In higher relief at the bottom, sharing the same space as the last words of the inscription, are two hammers, a plumb line, a square and a *libella*.³⁶

[Fig. 3.1. The Pettii stele]

The second example is a funerary relief from Verona, for which no inscription is extant.³⁷ It depicts a *sella curulis*, heavily decorated with objects typical of the *seviri Augustales'* ritual and flanked by two men bearing *fasces*; under the chair we see a rabbit or hare on top of a box engraved with a seahorse, in its turn resting

³⁵ See Zimmer (1982) 167.

³⁶ Zimmer (1982) no. 91: found in Reggio Emilia, dated by Zimmer to the first quarter of the first century AD on grounds of typology and hairstyle; Pflug (1989) 177, fig. 13.1, dates it to the first century BC.

³⁷ Mansuelli (1964) I table 103.208, II 224.340; Zimmer (1982) no. 86: found locally, first century AD.

on a pediment or altar on which are engraved a *libella*, a see-saw, a square, compasses, and a small axe.

[Fig. 3.2 The Verona relief]

Finally, a sarcophagus found near Arles, with an epitaph which reads: “Tomb of Quintus Candidus Benignus, master builder of the Arles association. He had the full extent of the building art, dedication, knowledge and discretion; great technicians on any occasion declared him head of the association; nobody was more knowledgeable than that; nobody could defeat him; he knew how to make instruments and direct the flow of waters, he was a cherished guest here; he knew how to nurture friends with ingenuity and dedication, mild and good-natured, Candidia Quintina for her sweetest father and Valeria Maximina for her dearest husband”. The text is flanked by D(is) and M(anibus) (to the gods of the afterlife) and above them, in small-scale relief, by an axe and a *libella*.³⁸

Each of these three pieces is representative of different degrees of realism. The funerary stele of the Pettii and others like it – the stele of the Aebutii (also

³⁸ The description in *CIL* 12.722 (published in 1888): “Q Candidi Benigni fab tig corp Ar ars cui summa fuit fabricae studium doctrin pudorque quem magni artifices semper dixere magistrum doctior hoc nemo fuit potuit quem vincere nemo organa qui nosset facere aquarum aut ducere cursum hic covviva fuit dulcis nosset qui pascere amicos ingenio studio docilis animoque benignus Candidia Quintina patri dulcissimo et Val Maxsimina coniugi kar”. See Brunt (1980) 87, on *fabri tignarii*, with some references; Gaggadis-Robin (2005) and below note 53.

liberti),³⁹ the funerary altar of the Cossutii,⁴⁰ that of the Statii,⁴¹ a pillar-shaped tomb from Augsburg,⁴² the stele of the soldier and architect Q. Valerius Seius,⁴³ and two stelai now in Altino near Venice (one concerns a freedwoman)⁴⁴ seem to lend themselves to straightforward interpretation. They depict instruments because those instruments were typical of the profession of the deceased or of the person in charge of the burial. The *libella* is always accompanied by tools,

³⁹ Zimmer (1982) no. 105: now in Rome, original site unknown, end of the first century BC. The tympanum has a ruler with two kinds of subdivisions, a *libella* with plumbline, a square, a plumbline, and straight compasses.

⁴⁰ Zimmer (1982) no. 92: Rome, first or early second century AD. One side of the altar has a *libella*, a ruler, a square, a hammer, curved and straight compasses, and a chisel. Rawson (1975): the Cossutii included architects over more than one generation; Donderer (1996) 58.

⁴¹ Zimmer (1982) no. 95: Aquileia, first half of the first century AD. The middle has a ruler, square, *libella*, straight compasses, plumbline, hammer and a bundle of styli.

⁴² Kellner (1971) fig. 128; Wagner (1973) no. 29: probably second half of the second century AD, the tomb has a graffito of *libella*, axe and carpenter's plane at the very bottom of the pediment. The inscription specifies that it was set up by T. Flavius Martialis for himself and his parents while all still alive, and for his dead brother, who was a soldier.

⁴³ Swoboda (1958) 41, table 4.2: near Vienna (Carnuntum), late first century AD, it has at the bottom a graffito-like relief of a *libella* and straight compasses.

⁴⁴ For the first, see Zimmer (1982) no. 106 (no picture); Pflug (1989) 225-6, fig. 26.4: first quarter of the first century AD, no inscription, busts of two women, perhaps wife and daughter, and a man, at the bottom a relief of a plumbline, laid horizontally, a ruler and a *libella*. For the second, see Zimmer (1982) no. 106a: a stele pediment, second half of the first century AD, on its sides a *libella* with plumbline, and straight compasses and a ruler, respectively. The inscription commemorates a Q. Sicinius Quinctellus, who took care of the stele, and his wife, a freedwoman.

including writing implements, such as could have been found in the workshop of a sculptor, a carpenter, a builder or a surveyor.

The arrangement of the instruments with respect to each other and to the rest of the monument should also be noted: in our 'realist' examples they are indifferently in the tympanum, the bottom, or the sides, and are laid out in no obvious order, with the partial exception of the Aebutii stele, where the plumb line bisects the top corner of the tympanum, and especially of the Pettii stele, where, as you can see in fig.3.1, the two hammers are symmetrically flanking the plumb line, which again vertically divides the space into two, with *libella* and square facing each other. One would be hard pressed to read into these pieces of material evidence anything more than reference to a profession, and perhaps pride in its practice. Symmetrical arrangements, however, insinuate the idea that the objects were not bare 'indexes' of the technician's activities, but essential elements in the way the whole monument was to be viewed.

Indeed, far from lending themselves to straightforward readings, some depictions of *libella* cast doubt on the possibility itself of simple interpretations. For instance, the funerary stele of L. Magius Primio, his wife and daughter, with a relief of two chisels and a hammer symmetrically flanking a rather large-scale *libella* resting on a base, has been seen by Zimmer as an "emblematic graphic representation with symmetrical distribution of the objects against the surface."⁴⁵ The emblematic character of tools, and of the *libella* in particular, can also be detected in a funerary stele from Bologna, whose most prominent visual

⁴⁵ Zimmer (1982) no. 97: Brescia, mid-first to second century AD. Magius Primio set it up *se vivo*.

elements are a Medusa head in the tympanum, flanked by rosettes, and a *libella* with plumbline plus a pair of straight compasses at the bottom. The mythological and technical motif which dominate the picture mirror each other, the triangle of the *libella* an echo of the shape of the tympanum. Such attention to symmetry makes the tool more than just an indicator of a profession perhaps shared by the three men mentioned in the inscription (were they all builders?).⁴⁶

The superposition of objects and levels of meaning is at its most complex in the funerary relief from Verona in fig. 3.2. While there is no inscription, it seems evident that the deceased was a *sevir Augustalis* and possibly a carpenter, so the instruments are *prima facie* a simple pointer to his profession and to his membership of the order. Yet, the use of objects in the relief is far from simple. The two apparently organic elements, the *fascies*-bearers, are in fact themselves objectified: rather than real people, they are emblems of the affiliation and consequently, of the respectable freedman's status of the deceased. On the other hand, their pose, flanking the main panoply of objects but also looking at it, directs, and identifies with, the observer's gaze. The whole constellation of things that define the life and the career of the deceased is layered: we have a picture of objects bearing pictures of other objects; its multiplicity of levels inviting a

⁴⁶ Susini (1960) 117 ff. no. 131, table 11; Zimmer (1982) no. 103: second half of the first century AD. It was set up by L. Statorius Trophimus, a *sevir*, and his wife for L. Statorius Bathyllus, his patron, also a *sevir*, and for his friend P. Messius Calvio. See also Zimmer (1982) no. 85: found in L'Aquila, late first or early second century AD, probably tympanum of a funerary monument, it has a *libella* with plumbline occupying the central position, hovering above a smaller-scale carpenter's plane and what looks like the head of an axe.

multiplicity of semantic levels as well.⁴⁷ The hare on top of the sea-horse (the picture of a real hare on top of the picture of a sea-horse) connects the two worlds of labour and civic duties. Both the hare and the sea-horse can be seen as auspicious funerary symbols, the former perhaps representing fertility, the latter immortality.⁴⁸ As for the tools, they appear subordinated to the *insignia* of the *seviri* order, placed as they are in an inferior position. They are at the basis, however, possibly also in a metaphorical, and slightly different, sense: the deceased started from his profession, perhaps purchased his freedom thanks to the profit from his work, and rose to a new order of objects and emblems, the ritual and religious world of the *seviri*.

Again, a house- or temple-shaped sarcophagus from Rome bears a relief of technical instruments (*libella*, ruler, straight compasses, chisel and a hammer) in the tympanum on one of the shorter sides.

[Fig. 3.3 The 'house-shaped' sarcophagus]

Because of the tools, this object has been seen as the burial of an architect or a builder, an interpretation that makes perfect sense but does not exclude other meanings.⁴⁹ In fact, especially if the deceased *was* a builder, the sarcophagus is

⁴⁷ Two more examples of self-referential technical tombs are the funerary stele of the Longidieni: Zimmer (1982) no. 62, (cf. Pflug (1989) 152-3, fig.2.1-2; Mansuelli (1967) 127) and the tomb of the Haterii: Zimmer (1982) no. 83.

⁴⁸ Cumont (1942); Mansuelli (1964) II 225; Toynbee (1973).

⁴⁹ Gütschow (1938), 101-12, tables 21-2; Zimmer (1982) no. 96, 171: Rome, found in the catacombs of Praetextatus, perhaps end of the third century AD. Gütschow (1938) 108: at least two other

revealed as a multi-semantic object: it represents both what the person himself made, and the means through which he, or his family, were able to provide him with such a lavish burial.⁵⁰ It also stands for the deceased, is an emblem of his public identity, as are the building tools: they have helped make the edifice on whose side they now stand as decorations. The sarcophagus, with its tiled roof, columns and a door slightly ajar,⁵¹ is itself is a symbol of the afterlife, the new space whose door the deceased will have to go through, the enclosure which will now separate him from the world of the living.

Sometimes, the information from visual and epigraphic elements seems to clash. Thus, a funerary stele set by the wife and son of Q. Appeus Augurinus for him while they were all still alive has a relief of of an axe, a *libella*, a flute, and a ruler. The inscription specifies that Appeus Augurinus was a flute-player. But why the technical tools? They may refer to the profession of the son (a possibility which Zimmer sees as more likely).⁵² Or then again, if the tools were not simply an identification device but also carriers of meaning about death, the combination *libella/axe/ruler* could refer to the way death operates on people: it cuts their lives off, equalizing them and giving the real measure of someone's life through the

fragments of funerary monuments from the same site bearing images of work tools, in one case of a *libella*. I thank Glynis Davies for the suggestion that this is a temple rather than a house.

⁵⁰ Gütschow (1938) 109. A similar case is the tomb of the baker M. Vergileus Eurysaces: *CIL* 12.1206; Ciancio Rossetto (1973); Joshel (1992) 81.

⁵¹ A common funerary motif: Toynbee (1971).

⁵² Zimmer (1982) no. 164, 213: Este, late first or early second century AD.

way they are remembered. The flute, as well as a pointer to the activity of the deceased, could thus be seen as inserting a note of reassurance or hope.

Another case of apparent mismatch between identity of the deceased and motifs on his tomb is the funerary altar of an association of firemen. It was dedicated by a Locius Patroclus to the members of the *collegium centonariorum*, together with a gift of the use of gardens; on the right-hand side it has the relief of a tree with birds, a lizard and a hare, and the now half-erased figure of a man with an axe – perhaps cutting down the tree, a reminder of mortality? On top of this, an axe and a ruler and, superimposed on them, a *libella*. Was Locius Patroclus a carpenter or a builder? Are the building instruments perhaps a reference to demolishing work that the firemen may have engaged in? Or could the tools themselves be an intimation of mortality, juxtaposed with a metaphorical working scene where the axe is put to work in more senses than one?⁵³

The possibility of the *libella* being more a symbol than a depiction of reality presents itself most insistently in a group of graves from Gallia Narbonensis, all of which are engraved with a small-scale pair of instruments: an axe and a *libella*.⁵⁴ There is the stele of the Novianii,⁵⁵ set up by a military trumpet-player

⁵³ Zimmer (1982) no. 165: now in Venice, original site Altino, second half of the first to the early second century AD. For bequests to professional associations, see van Nijf (1997) 48, 59, 177, 196-7. He casts doubt on the identification of *centonarii* with firemen.

⁵⁴ *CIL* 12.571, 12.689, 12.722 (tomb of Benignus, see above), 12.813, 12.815, 12.927. According to the *CIL*, several other graves at Arles and Aix had a relief of an axe (without a *libella*). To these one can now add Gaggadis-Robin (2005) no. 57, no. 58, no. 59, no. 60, no.63 and no. 68=*CIL* 12.689. All the sarcophagi in Gaggadis-Robin (2005) are from local workshops. Most of the

for his mother, two brothers, two sons and wife. The bottom has a relief with an axe and a *libella* – was Novianus Honoratus a technician and, perhaps like Appeus, also a musician in his spare time? Were any of the other people mentioned in the burial involved in carpentry or building? Or are the tools simply an emblem of mortality?⁵⁶ And the sarcophagus of Benignus, described above, again points to the possibility that the instruments depicted are not merely indicators of profession, precisely because plentiful information on the activity of the deceased is given by the epitaph. The axe and *libella* on Benignus' tomb are devoid of context, including the context of other objects. Visually, they are the equivalent of the consecration to the gods of the underworld, signified by the *D* and *M*. I think that they are simultaneously symbolic and literal. In other words, their immediate referent may indeed be Benignus' *ars*, but they also suggest the caducity of life and the fact that death is the great equalizer. The epitaph is resonant with linguistic metaphors and symbols, and with words which are simultaneously literal and allusive. The deceased was called Benignus and was in fact *benignus*, "good-natured"; he knew how to build things and achieve powerful effects, but also how to nurture friendships. His achievements

material in *CIL* does not straightforwardly match that in Gaggadis-Robin (2005) and may now be lost.

⁵⁵ Espérandieu (1907) VII 5875, drawing only: Mayence, date unspecified. The inscription is *CIL* 13.11862.

⁵⁶ A similar problem is posed by Espérandieu (1907) VII 5858, where both deceased and commissioner were women.

are described in terms of comparisons and asymmetries – fittingly, the emblem of levelness marks his grave now that all competitions are over.⁵⁷

To summarize, our sample presents a full range of uses for the *libella* as a funerary image, from relatively straightforward pointer to the profession of the deceased, to carrier of symbolic meanings. Let us explore, at increasing levels of speculation, what those meanings may have been.

The meanings of the carpenter's square

Identification through profession was only one possible way of having oneself represented after death, and not everybody chose it. Some people opted for a different type of group-orientated identification, or for greater individuality. Of course, shared skilled knowledge was not the only way a number of people could be constituted as a group: religion would be a common example of non-professional unification. In fact, professional identification was often characterized by shared religious rituals. Take the festival in honour of Daedalus and his nephew Perdix, who apparently discovered the saw and the compasses, making Daedalus so jealous that he killed him. The festival is depicted in a fresco from a carpenter's workshop in Pompeii: men are carrying a canopy with statues of Daedalus and Perdix, and of men at work with a seesaw and a carpenter's plane. Notice again the superposition of levels: images of carpentry depicted in

⁵⁷ My reading is based on the *CIL* text; Waltzing (1899) III.529 agrees with the *CIL* text and points out the Benignus/benignus pun. Competition is a *topos* in epitaphs of technicians, see Burford (1972) 208-10.

an image on the wall of a carpenter's workshop to be viewed by, among other people, carpenters.⁵⁸ Or take the cult of Athena/Minerva on the part of craftsmen in general. A relief of the goddess, from Rome, dating to the first century AD, depicts her ostensibly visiting a carpenter's workshop; the most remarkable visual element are the work instruments hanging from the wall and reproduced to a larger scale than the organic figures, including the goddess herself.⁵⁹

The presence of professional associations,⁶⁰ often active in procuring a proper burial for their members, is well documented and reinforces the belief that the possession and practice of shared expertise was an important way for people to construct their identity as individuals and as part of a group within society. Some groups seem to have had a stronger professional identity than others, usually depending on their social status and/or the level of complexity of their work. While the literature on specific professions is not vast, studies exist on, for instance, soldiers, who seem to have strongly identified with a job which involved special practices and knowledge, and enabled the people involved in it to rise financially and economically. Looking at their funerary habits, while not

⁵⁸ Ciarallo & De Carolis (1999) 121; Frontisi-Ducroux (1975). The fresco dates to the first century AD and is in house VI 7, 8-9, which also had a fresco of Daedalus and one of Fortuna, a divinity typically associated with craftsmen and traders, see Pugliese Carratelli (1993); Clarke (2003); cf. also Wrede (1981).

⁵⁹ D'Ambra (1993), (1998) 79-80. See also Colini (1947); Morey & Ferrari (1959) no.96.

⁶⁰ E.g. Waltzing (1899); De Robertis (1973); van Nijf (1997); Bollmann (1998); Mennella & Apicella (2000).

all soldiers chose to be represented as such,⁶¹ the great majority of them, from all over the Empire and throughout its history, preferred to be depicted with military *insignia*, or sometimes through the military *insignia* only.⁶²

For an example which is closer to our interests, Hillert has studied ancient representations of doctors.⁶³ He indicates that most doctors advertised their professional identity in their epitaph or through (often idealized) funerary portraits as medical men at work, rather than through inorganic images of tools of their trade. Indeed, there are several examples of doctors in heroic poses, or portrayed simply as good citizens, while one fourth-century AD sarcophagus depicts the doctor in his study – some tools are visible on top of a cabinet, but the central objects are scrolls, in the hands of the man himself and carefully stacked on a shelf in the same cabinet.⁶⁴

Many people seem to have enjoyed multiple or combined identities in a completely unproblematic way. Three notable examples are the altar of Titus Statilius Aper,⁶⁵ the tomb of Verrius Euhelpistus and his wife Verria Zosime,⁶⁶

⁶¹ E.g. tombstone of M. Valerius Celerinus, in Fremersdorf (1957) pl. 9.

⁶² See e.g. Anderson (1984); Franzoni (1987); Rinaldi Tufi (1988).

⁶³ Hillert (1990), cf. also Berger (1970); Donderer (1996) for epitaphs of architects.

⁶⁴ Hillert (1990) no. 29, from Ostia.

⁶⁵ Zimmer (1982) no. 142: Rome, early Hadrianic times.

⁶⁶ Calza (1940) 26-8, 176, 251-3, 303-4, fig.18, 27; Zimmer (1982) no. 117; D'Ambra (1988). Probably freedmen, in Ostia, Isola Sacra number 29, late Hadrianic to early Antonine.

and the relief of Publius Curtilius.⁶⁷ *Aper* was a *mentor aedificiorum*, and is portrayed in full-figure, wearing a toga, with some tools of the trade, including what looks like architectural plans, on his left and a dead boar with a putto on his right. The sides of the altar are engraved with measuring rods and writing implements. The inscription clarifies the presence of the boar and transports the *mentor* into a mythological dimension: “Here, harmless *Aper*, you lie; not a maiden’s wrath nor fierce Meleager pierced your body with iron. Silent death stole upon you unexpectedly”. *Aper* is ‘boar’ in Latin, and a boar was killed by Meleager in an episode which of itself was a very popular funerary motif.⁶⁸ As in some of the graves we have looked at above, layers of meaning are conveyed here: the young man is both the boar killed by Meleager and Meleager himself, prematurely deceased. The architectural plans and the closed box which visually dominate one side of the main relief could hint at a life that was never fully accomplished and was interrupted when still at the planning stage – projects never to be realized.

The second example, the tomb of Verrius Euhelpistus and his wife, seems to present two quite different faces to the viewer. Outside the funerary building, which was a sort of small cottage, hang three terracotta reliefs with smithy scenes, flanking an inscription just above the door. In all three reliefs humans are present, but each picture is dominated by instruments: a grindstone, featuring

⁶⁷ Kockel (1993) 174-5: origin unknown, mid-Augustan period. For another example of ‘mixed’ symbolism see Turcan (1999) 84.

⁶⁸ Koortbojian (1996) 229-31; Elsner (forthcoming).

twice, and a vast array of knives, blades, and sickles. The floor mosaic inside the funerary enclosure repeats the grindstone as central motif. On the other hand, the sarcophagus where Verrius Euhelpistus was buried, which originally would have been inside the tomb, accessible only to relatives and close associates, was carved with the story of (again) Meleager. In other words, the 'private' and 'public' sides of the burial follow two different modes of commemoration, which may indicate different commissioners (wife for the sarcophagus and husband for the plaques and the mosaic?). The former is mythology-orientated, and possibly less unusual (rather than specially commissioned, the sarcophagus appears to have been pre-produced, with blank portraits to be carved in after sale); the latter profession-orientated and, for all its lack of a portrait, of a more individual stamp.

Thirdly, a relief to remember Curtilius Agat[honis?], a silversmith. The man, wearing a toga, holds what look like a scalpel or engraving tool and an object which could be an example of finished product of his art, in its turn engraved with the figure of a naked man. As well as the now familiar multiplicity of levels of representation and production (an artefact representing a man holding an artefact representing a man), the relief is notable for its combination of *insignia* of labour and of leisured civic life (the toga) in the very person of the deceased, who activates them both, by explicitly displaying what could have been seen as a duality of identities.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Kockel (1993) finds this unusual, but there are similar examples: Espérandieu (1925) IX 7012; Braemer (1959) no. 34, 39, 59, 66; Zimmer (1982) no. 54. Cf. also Kampen (1981).

If we go back to the question raised at the beginning - how did ancient technicians, in particular the kind that did not leave written evidence, view themselves, a first answer is that, although the majority of them did not leave funerary monuments that have survived, or did not choose a strong professional identification for their funerary representation, a significant number of lowly technicians did view themselves primarily, or co-primarily, as technicians. They viewed themselves as people who produced artefacts, worked with particular instruments, and whose knowledge and role in society were distinctive. Moreover, no sign is detectable that for these people professional and public roles were at odds with each other - being a technician was presented as an important part of, when not *the* main, social persona. We can be more specific and ask, why identify the profession through tools?

The presence of objects in burials has a very long history. In several civilizations across the Mediterranean, it was customary to be buried together with objects of common use, so that the deceased could continue what they did in life in its aftermath.⁷⁰ Even pictures of objects could serve the function of the objects themselves, the way portraits of the deceased functioned as the person him- or herself.⁷¹ In the imperial period, the practice of burying objects seems to have become rare, but is not unheard of: for instance, an abacus has been found in a grave in the region of Aosta, and surgical instruments have turned up in doctors'

⁷⁰ For funerary representations of work instruments which perhaps fulfil the same function, see the report on graves in the Dorylaion area in Turkey by Noack (1894).

⁷¹ Gütschow (1938) 108.

burials.⁷² Much more frequently we find representations of objects accompanying and marking the burial, in basically three forms, sometimes combined: tools only, work scenes with someone clearly recognizable as the deceased at work, and work scenes with the deceased not at work but in a supervisory role or even out of the picture. Incidentally, the *libella* only ever appears as a tool on its own, and never as part of a work scene. Some areas or burial sites seem to display a preference for one type of representation: several of the graves in Neumagen, for instance, bear reliefs with work scenes, but hardly any have inorganic work instruments. Some of the graves in Ostia's Isola Sacra, on the other hand, have work scenes juxtaposed with inorganic tableaux of instruments.⁷³

Because they make a more immediate reference to the lifetime activities of the deceased, work scenes might be said to be more realistic than instruments in isolation, which instead display, I would argue, a more immediately symbolic function. As I have mentioned, in our extant examples the *libella* is found predominantly in inorganic contexts – although its direct reference value should not be discounted, the fact that it does not appear in work scenes reinforces its significance as an emblem or a symbol. Also, if on a tomb the inorganic prevails over the organic, it is as if the person itself in a sense becomes his or her trade, i.e. his or her instruments, and an element of complication enters the realism of the image. Ultimately, the distinction itself between realist and symbolic must be

⁷² For the abacus: Mollo Mezzena (1981), who dates it to the late first century AD; Fellmann (1983). For doctors: Jackson (1990).

⁷³ Von Massow (1932); Kampen (1981), respectively.

problematized, and a corresponding iconography of technical instruments must be articulated. The only tool whose complexity of meanings has long been recognized is the axe, perhaps the most common technical funerary icon of them all. Especially in conjunction with other tools, images of the axe may have referred simply to the profession of the deceased; yet, its appearance as a small device, almost an amulet, on the graves of people who do not obviously seem to have been builders or carpenters, has prompted the reflection that its use was symbolic, perhaps linked to religious affiliations – Pythagorean at first, Christian later. Interpretations of the specific symbolism of the *ascia* have involved its role in digging graves, and its similarity with death, which fells down lives as the axe does with trees.⁷⁴

Thus, the ancient viewer read the representation of the technician through his or her instruments at several levels. The border between what the image referred to in the real world and what it signified in the world of symbols was blurred. Work instruments and scenes functioned as identification devices – they both explained what the person did and how important it was for them, or how important they thought what they did should be for society at large. Work instruments and scenes could be both a narrative of the life of the deceased and an emblem of it. We could say that tools on tombs were a metonymic pointer to the life of the technician, and also that they function as quasi-totems. By totems here I mean objects which characterize someone's activities and identify their

⁷⁴ Carcopino (1957); Susini (1960) 119-20; Pannoux (1985) 298-9; Gaggadis-Robin (2005) 193 with further references. For other objects, Zimmer (1982) no. 128, no. 129, no. 130, no. 131.

role to the point of embodying their (divinely regulated) fortune or their life itself. Take a non-funerary item from Pompeii: the plaque in fig.3.4, found in the so-called *Casa del Marinaio* (House of the Mariner, VII 15, 2), a large building which was further enlarged and modified several times in the course of its existence. The house is well decorated and has several nautical motifs, hence the name; the plaque itself, in tufa, has been dated to the end of the first century BC or the beginning of the first AD.⁷⁵ The top border has a short graffito-like inscription, “Diogenes structor”, and the main space is occupied by a *congeries* of tools: there is a plumb-line, an upturned jar, a chisel, perhaps a carpenter’s plane, and what looks like a propitiatory phallus pointing upwards, right above a *libella* which occupies the central position.

[Fig. 3.4 The Diogenes plaque]

The plaque was not part of a burial and it does not seem to have marked a shop, because it was placed high up on the outer wall of a very wealthy house. It has been suggested that it was left there by the builders engaged in one of the house’s enlargement phases, perhaps as a memento or, in my view, as a propitiatory object, a kind of amulet-cum-totem to protect against the hazards of

⁷⁵ Zimmer (1982) no. 99; Pugliese Carratelli (1990) VII 765. Another example of phallus pointing upwards on a shop plaque from Pompeii in Zimmer (1982) no. 134. Another plaque with technical tools, including a *libella*, perhaps to be placed in a funerary context, in Zimmer (1982) no. 104. Phalli as iconographic motifs in funerary art are found at Ghiza in Tripolitania, see Brogan & Smith (1984).

the profession while the works were carried out and to protect the finished artefact afterwards.⁷⁶

'Totemic' displays of objects are not infrequent in Roman art: a well-known example are the Republican reliefs from Piazza della Consolazione, which show Roman weapons juxtaposed with war spoils, with the latter depicted on a smaller scale.⁷⁷ Moreover, historians have remarked on the "fascination with objects" which is part of a tradition dating from the first century BC;⁷⁸ on the emphasis on inorganic forms over organic ones,⁷⁹ and on how work instruments, tools of the trade, could become "humble insignia or artisanal heraldry" for ancient technicians.⁸⁰

Conclusion

If being a technician was at least sometimes denoted by means of quasi-totemic tools, several consequences can be drawn in terms of how ancient technicians viewed themselves and their shared knowledge. Firstly, as we have already said,

⁷⁶ Pugliese Carratelli (1990) VII 765. A parallel can be found in the reliefs on the ceiling of the large underground crypt of Monte di Cuma: a mallet, two axes and four wedges. The crypt could have been dug in late Republican times, and restored in Augustan times, cf. Maiuri (1947) 119-22; Donderer (1996) 32. Similar remarks in Clarke (2003) 109 about the fullery scenes in Verecundus' shop in Pompeii.

⁷⁷ D'Ambra (1998) 34-5.

⁷⁸ Kampen (1981) 81.

⁷⁹ D'Ambra (1998) 47.

⁸⁰ D'Ambra (1998) 48. Cf. also Felletti Maj (1977) 324-5 and Franzoni (1987) 104-7 for similar observations on the representations of weapons on soldiers' tombs.

at least some of them will have identified strongly with their *techne* or *ars*,⁸¹ and advertised their profession as the main, or a significant, part of their social persona. Secondly, the identification through specialized knowledge will not have been primarily with a set of notions or ideas such as would traditionally be contained in a text. The emblem of technical knowledge as seen by its practitioners was not necessarily or not primarily a scroll or writing implements, as was generally the case for philosophical or literary knowledge⁸² - not a canon of texts or the capacity to interpret them, but an instrument. Technical knowledge was explicitly seen as concerned with making something, with material rather than literary, or purely 'abstract', culture.⁸³ Although several technicians did make the transition into literate culture, *techne* and *ars* remained inevitably non-literary, also given the economic and social status of most practitioners. In fact, we could go one step further and claim, on the basis of the funerary evidence, that the 'materiality' rather than literariness of technology, its residing in instruments and tools rather than in texts or theories, was not only acknowledged, but celebrated and displayed.

The picture on the cover of this book is another non-funerary item from Pompeii - a small mosaic, originally used as a table top in the outdoor *triclinium* of a large house which was at least partially occupied by a tannery.⁸⁴ The startling image it

⁸¹ Cf. also Pannoux (1985) 295.

⁸² Wrede (1981); Zanker (1995b).

⁸³ Joshel (1992) 24.

⁸⁴ Now in the Archaeological Museum of Naples no. 109982; found in house I.5, 2 (h), dated to mid-first century BC. Cf. Deonna (1932) no. 61; Ferrari (1989) mosaics 27; Pugliese Carratelli

presents is that of a skull (possibly modelled after the skull of a monkey) hanging from a carpenter's square, in the guise of a piece of lead hanging from the plumb line. The skull rests on a butterfly which in its turn rests on a wheel; the *libella* is supported on one side by a draped piece of purple cloth and a crown, and on the other by a travelling cloak with stick and satchel. The various objects have been read as symbolising the poor on the one hand and the rich and noble on the other, who are united and levelled in death. The wheel is the wheel of fortune, and the butterfly is a common image for the soul.⁸⁵ The association is, as one historian has said, "easy to grasp": the carpenter's square conveyed the idea that death is the great equalizer.⁸⁶

Similar messages of *memento mori* are often found both in ancient art and literature as part of philosophical and high-brow literary reflections on the afterlife, and on the fragility of life's pleasures. The Pompeii mosaic has generally been seen in the same light. Note, however, the deliberate accuracy with which the Pompeii *libella* is reproduced (metal cappings, tiny bolts). Note also that the Pompeii mosaic is not unique: apart from other small objects,⁸⁷ a strikingly

(1990) I 185. The identification with a tannery is due to the presence of tanks for the treatment of hides, substances used for the treatment, and knives to cut hides.

⁸⁵ Thus I. Bragantini in Pugliese Carratelli (1990) 192.

⁸⁶ Brendel (1934); Gütschow (1938) 110-1 (quotation).

⁸⁷ There are similar images: see Fossing (1929) no. 1639: a first or second century AD fragmentary gem engraved with a skull and a small *libella* above it. Deonna (1932) no. 62: a medallion, no longer extant, with a skeleton sitting on an amphora, holding a cornucopia, its feet on a wheel and a carpenter's square on its head. Cf. Dunbabin (1986) for related examples.

similar image is preserved as a bronze weight for a steelyard in the shape of a skull with a butterfly on top of it.⁸⁸ The functioning of a steelyard requires in fact an equalizing operation between weights and wares.

[Fig. 3.5 The skull-shaped bronze weight]

As we have suggested, some reflections about death had been formulated by technicians, and expressed through tools of the trade that functioned not only as pointers to a profession, but as repositories of symbolic meaning. If we bring the iconography of the *libella* we have articulated so far to bear on the traditional interpretation of the Pompeii mosaic, a further, and more unsettling, possibility emerges.

A statement acquires meaning from the context in which it is communicated, and a statement which has a particular meaning in its original context can acquire a different meaning if its context is changed, perhaps through appropriation or copying.⁸⁹ No matter where the idea that death is the great equalizer originated: once it is inscribed on the grave of a carpenter, or embodied in a steelyard weight used in commercial transactions, or placed a few metres away from tannery vats, their smell occasionally making its way to the outdoor *triclinium*, that message becomes something else. For a Seneca to proclaim the eventual equality of all men may be rather patronizing. But if a carpenter does it, it takes on a different, dangerous, edge. That the rich and the poor will be the same does not pack the

⁸⁸ Petit (1980) no. 95, probably late first century BC, now in the Louvre, origin unknown (but it might be Italian or even from Campania).

⁸⁹ Beard & Henderson (2001).

same menacing punch when uttered by a wealthy senator and by an ex-slave – even a wealthy one. Thus, some of the meanings of the *libella* may have been polemical, even subversive, and can be related to discourses on the ethical, social and political significance of expert knowledge, as voiced by the technical writers – Vitruvius, Hero, Galen - mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.⁹⁰

In other words, the iconography of the *libella* suggests the possibility that at least some technicians, albeit mostly ‘invisible’, upheld values which, while superficially similar, were at odds with those of the upper classes. This goes against the deeply entrenched postulate of the marginality of ancient technicians (what I have characterized as the ‘mainstream’ view). More than that: Zanker and others have seen the increasingly expensive and visible graves of technicians, in the period from the first century BC to the early second century AD, as a function of the increased status, wealth and visibility of new groups of people, in particular former slaves whose profession had made them socially mobile. Some art historians have seen the ‘upwardly mobile technicians’ and freedmen in general as bearers of a particular stylistic signature (the so-called *arte povera*), more intent on realistic depiction of everyday pursuits than on conveyance of symbolic meanings. In both cases, the underlying assumption

⁹⁰ Joshel (1992) 56, 161, 165. Clarke (2003) 98-105 has the interesting example of a frieze frescoed with cupids carrying out various tasks, including fulling cloth. The fresco is in the House of the Vettii, who were wealthy freedmen. I think this presents different interpretative possibilities than Clarke’s conclusion suggests: “it was a way of sanitizing the viewers’ servile past” (105), especially since “the notion of overturning expectations – especially those of the ruling elite – constitutes an important theme” (271).

appears to be that the upwardly mobile groups had no or little political import, were basically happy to conform, and that they had to borrow their symbolism from the upper classes when they wanted to express anything other than a realistic description of their circumstances.⁹¹

I think our analysis of funerary art, and in particular of the iconography of one technical instrument, may offer a glimpse into possibilities other than marginality and depoliticization. By expressing pride in their activities, strongly identifying them with making and practising, and finally by using a symbol of technical activities to convey a message of equality, some technicians at least were going against the grain of what some historians have seen as the mainstream view. They celebrated a form of knowledge which was alternative to other forms of knowledge, and a social role, that of the expert, the skilled maker of things and producer of results, which again, perhaps deliberately, posed itself as an alternative to other social and public roles, such as those determined by birth, connections, or a literary education.

How did the ancient 'invisible technicians' see themselves? Much further research is needed in order to give an exhaustive answer to that question. For now, however, we can definitely conclude that their invisibility is not an objective fact – ancient technicians were not invisible to themselves, or to their immediate peers – but, once again, a consequence of selective blindness on the part of some observers, both ancient and modern.

⁹¹ Cf. e.g. van Nijf (1987) 38; Clarke (2003) who makes this point particularly strongly.