

The sacrificial implements on Roman Temples

The objects in the illustration from Colonna (and those in further lines and further illustrations from the Poliphili) are copied in part from the remains of friezes of Roman temples which were extant in the Renaissance and still are. That shown on the second page is one piece of a frieze which is now in the Capitoline Museum to which it was removed in the late Renaissance from the Church of San Lorenzo fuori le mura where it had been displayed. There are five other pieces. Four of the sections are illustrated in Herwath's *Thesaurus Hieroglyphicorum* of 1607 and the other two are illustrated in the classic essay on Renaissance hieroglyphics by Karl Giehlow¹. In view of the obvious naval references the frieze is reckoned to originate from a Temple of Neptune. These pictures have to be used with caution since some or all of them are truncated at the ends and thus missing some of the rebuses. The missing parts can be reconstructed from the Capitoline Museum's catalog² although this also is not entirely accurate; it omits some of the objects and puts others in the wrong order. Another similar frieze shown here also extant in Rome is to be found on the remnants of the Temple of Vespasian in the Forum.



Sacrifice was at the center of Roman religion and the ritual of sacrifice had to be followed precisely. Here is a description extracted from the *Mythologiae* of Natalis Comes.

“The priests began their prayers and poured wine between the horns of the victims...., then a grain of barley mixed with salt was sprinkled on the victim's back with water...Then there were more prayers by the priests and the knives for slaying the victims or the axes were prepared as well as a jug of water for washing the hand of the assistants...Hairs were plucked from the victim and tossed onto the fire that was kindled on the altar.... They added incense to the flames and wine from the libation saucers.”³

In this brief extract several of the implements displayed on the friezes are mentioned and in view of their importance in the principal function of the temple it was entirely appropriate they should be displayed on the temple walls.

¹ Karl Giehlow *Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance, besonders der Ehrenpforte Kaisers Maximilian I. Mit Nachwort von A. Weixlgärtner* in *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerh. Kaiserhauses*, Bd XXXII, Heft 1 Wien und Leipzig: 1915 pp. 51 and 59.

² *Nuova Descrizione del Museo Capitolino* Rome: 1888 p. 208 no.99 sqq.

³ Natalis Comes *Mythologiae* Padua: Tozzi, 1616 Book 1 Ch. 10 p. 15. The *Mythologiae* have been translated into English by J. Mulryan and S. Brown as *Natalis Comes's Mythologiae* Tempe: ACMRS, 2006. The greater part of Book 1 of the *Mythologiae* is devoted to a description of various sacrificial rituals..

The ox skull or bucranium is perhaps the most common feature of the temple decorations and thus of these rebus texts. Originally they were actual skulls of animals which had been sacrificed within the temple and put up on the temple wall after the ritual, just as today hunters adorn their houses with the heads of stags and similar trophies. Later sculptures of the skulls were deemed adequate and these became permanent architectural motifs. The hangings from their horns were the garlands which the sacrificial animals were draped with during the ritual. The bucrania with their garlands can be seen on the surviving friezes.



Other such implements were the *praeficulum* or ewer, the *patera* or libation-plate, the *aspergillum* or holy-water sprinkler, the *securis* or axe and *culter* (also called the *secespita*) or knife both used for dispatching the victim, a *cochlear* (also called the *simpulum*) or spoon for pouring the libations of blood, a *galerum* or priest's woolen cap surmounted by the apex or wooden spike at its tope and the *lituus* or crozier. This latter which has been adopted by the Christian clergy was supposedly used by the priest to mark out the position in the sky where the god was to be found.⁴ The importance and ubiquity of these sacred objects are confirmed by their frequent depiction on Roman coins.

Many of them are also used by Colonna in his rebus (hieroglyphic) writing and here I will just parse the first line shown in the illustration. He translates the bucranium as 'Work'. Whether he added the hoes to account for this translation or just mistook the garland with its tassel as a hoe is impossible to tell but the translation makes little sense without it. The ox was an especially sacred animal no doubt reflecting its usefulness as a draught animal but had no other symbolic associations with work. One of the sources that Colonna might possibly have read, Alberti's brief discussion on hieroglyphs in the *De Architectura* (Book 8, Ch. 4) interprets the ox as meaning peace.



The next rebus used by Colonna is the altar which derives from the chest shown on the Capitoline frieze. Colonna has transformed what is described in the Capitoline catalogue as an incest chest (or *acerra*) into an altar and the oak branch behind the chest into a fire thus emphasizing and confirming his translation. Again it is impossible to say whether he mistook the branch for what it was or took advantage of it for his own purposes. It is odd to see an altar on four feet and Pozzi⁵ draws attention to the difference between the illustration and Colonna's translation. The first shows leonine feet but the description has goat-like feet. Pozzi cites a reference to a description of a table in Ferrara from the 15th century which had leonine feet

⁴ This paragraph has been largely adapted from J. H. Middleton's *The Remains of Ancient Rome* 1892 Vol. 1 p. 340.

⁵ Pozzi G. and Ciapponi L. *Hynertotomachia Poliphil/Francesci Colonna edizione critica* p. 69.

although it is difficult to understand why Colonna's illustrator would need to go back to such a reference for what is a relatively minor detail. As for the oak branch, Comes in the same passage given above cites Porphyry as telling of early sacrifices in which branches of trees were offered to the Gods and this perhaps reflected the worship of the sacred trees of which the oak was the mightiest of all.

The eye on the altar was a common and easily understandable reference to God. It is given as such in Alberti's discussion of hieroglyphs referenced above and in the trope of Cardinal Cusa the brilliant early 15th century theologian who in his *De Visione Dei* describes how the eye of God follows us at all times just as the eye on a portrait follows us as we move around it. The eye of God is also a Masonic symbol and is displayed as we know on the one dollar bill. Also on the altar is a vulture which according to Colonna symbolizes nature. The origin of this reference is the *History* of Ammianus Marcellinus' a fourth century Roman historian and it is confirmed again by Alberti where Colonna perhaps found it.

Next in the rebus from Colonna we see the *patera* which he uses from his own imagination to symbolize 'freely' so that the first sentences can be rendered: "From your labor sacrifice freely to the god of nature." He continues with the *praefficulum* again fabricating the meaning 'slowly'. The skein obviously comes from the myth of Ariadne following the thread back to freedom in the Labyrinth of the Minotaur and means 'leading back' and the vase as a container for the soul is a trope used by both Cicero and by St. Paul. The final rebus for this sentence on the next line and thus not in the illustration above shows the eye of God this time on the sole of a shoe so that the whole sentence reads "Gradually you will make your soul subject to God."

An interesting variation of Colonna's message is given by Geoffrey Tory, in the *Champ Fleury* of 1526, his masterpiece on the proportion of letters, describing pictures in a house near the Palazzo Orsini on Monte Giordano in Rome (p 183). Tory could have seen this picture, according to Giehlow, during a visit to Rome in 1512. Tory's description is quite to Colonna's rebus text.

"an ox's head with two horns and a hoe hanging from each horn⁶ and above it an eye; and next that a kettle full of fire, a man's face, a vessel from which water is flowing, violets in a jar, an eye over a shoe, a ship's anchor, a crane holding a stone with one of her feet and a dolphin on a lamp which is held by a hand."

The slight differences between this and Colonna are intriguing. Presumably the artist wanted to convey by his rebuses a similar message to that of Colonna but it has not yet been deciphered.

⁶ George B. Ives in the English translation of the *Champ Fleury* published by the Grolier Club in 1927 mistranslates this phrase 'a hoe hanging from a horn' as 'a frog hanging from each horn'.