"who pays the ferryman?": The testimony of ancient sources on the myth of Charon

Article in Klio - December 2013
DOI: 10.1524/klio.2013.95.2.285

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Most likely, we will never entirely understand 'the philosophy of departure': the feelings of those who came in contact with death; the complexity of the imagery about a world where the 'living' cannot enter; the arsenal of gestures to calm and console those in mourning. For the non-literate civilizations the archaeological evidence – in many cases not very exhaustive – is the only way to penetrate in the intimate sphere of personal beliefs and habits linked to the death and 'the surviving' beyond this limit.

We are more fortunate for the period of classical Antiquity. The first flourishing of fictional and scientific literature in the human history offers us the possibility to bring the archaeological research from fumbling in the dark into the light. The numerous sources of Greek and Romans authors are new coordinates that can improve our hypotheses.

Most of the literary sources regarding the Charon figure and the fee for crossing into the afterlife were gathered and analysed by Susanne T. Stevens¹ and G. Thüry.² Their works have the merits to go behind the written lines of the sources and deep in analysing the issue from the individual and collective mentality point of view. The numerous literary sources collected by the two authors – to which we add others unknown at the moment³ – represent the main sources for the present work.⁴

The combination of these literary sources with archaeological and cultural contexts shows the myth of Charon in a new light.

The aim of this study is to identify general and specific patterns of the topic such as tracking the thought process of a person in classical Antiquity with relationship to the traditional concepts of the classical mythology and the rituals during the funerary ceremony.

Susanne Stevens has noted the homogenous analyse of Charon’s obol in the literary sources on the different geographical, cultural areas in various chronological segments

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and literary styles. This scholar arrives at the conclusion that the obol ritual was widely spread in the Mediterranean world.

On the other hand, in her opinion the diversity of coin finds in graves (place of deposition, the coin value) was a sign that 'Charon's obol' was just one of the explanations for the presence of coinage in a funerary context. In order to prove this hypothesis she has suggested a separation between the practice of coin placement in the grave (the analysis of archaeological discoveries) and the myth of Charon (the study of literary sources). To this proposal we would like to demonstrate that in certain cases, the intensity of fulfilling the ritual of paying the tax for the afterlife can also be 'measured' through the analysis of the literary sources (see in the following pages).

From a methodological point of view one can discuss the issue on how these literary sources – written by ancient authors trained in different areas and times – can be used to understand the mentality of the common people in order to enter the group imagery. Is the affirmation that the ancient literary legacy on the cult of the dead and the funerary ceremony is just a small part of reality, expressed by the intellectual elite, still valid? Thus, are the literary sources a poor reflection regarding the variety of superstitions and rituals in each house of mourning? The sceptic attitude regarding literary sources is mainly expressed by J. Gorecki. In his opinion the coins placed in graves may be interpreted only in a very limited manner as the fee for Charon. The scholar comes with other interpretations for these coins such as an apotropaic symbol, jewellery, *marsupium, crumina*, *pars pro toto.* In our opinion, his conclusions may have only a partial validity as the database for his analyse were mainly the inhumation graves of the 4th century AD, a period when many fundamental changes took place in the group mentality. Regarding the ritual practice of placing coins in graves during the Greek-Hellenistic period, G. Hansen – based only on limited and scarce archaeological material, reached the same conclusion. According to this scholar the discrepancy between the information in the literary sources and the coin finds in graves suggests that the interpretation of coins as an obol for Charon is not possible either for the Greek period, or for the Roman one.

In our opinion the total disparagement of literary sources – in large number for the period of the classical Antiquity – can be regarded only as misguided. Each of the literary sources has a different statute that comes from the author’s personality, the literary genre, the environment and the perceptibility and sensibility of the audience. No doubt, the literary work is not a self-conceived product but as it is addressed to an audience, it presumes interdependence between the author and the contemporary reader. Therefore, each literary work may be regarded as a testimony of a group/community that has slipped into individual imagery. The iconic representations (reliefs, mosaics, wall paintings) have a similar meaning. The inscriptions – mainly the funerary epitaphs –, the dedications to divinity have just a more personal side customized by each individual perception of reality. On the same line, the entire funerary complex: the monument, the rite and the ritual (proved by the grave and the inventory) is an occurrence of personal

beliefs. Thus, it takes an interdisciplinary analysis to understand such an abstract concept like 'death' and to identify the various mentalities which coordinate the attitude and the behaviour of a person facing the reality of darkness. At the same time, a critical analysis of all available sources is necessary.

In this study we will carry on the analysis of literary sources combined, where possible, with iconographic evidence. These two primary sources cannot be treated separately for this topic as they are different creations of the same denominator – the dialectic of a civilization.

The 55 ancient authors that mention the ferryman Charon can be relatively well dated. In order to observe the changing image for this mythological figure we have framed the authors within chronological and historical sequences. The comparative reading of sources and their correlation with epigraphic evidence – so, the diversity of literary style and genre – may reveal some directions in the group mentality as well as preferences for certain customs, which, certainly, were valid only for some of the community members.

The pre-classical and classical ancient authors (6th–5th centuries BC)

The Homeric poems either did not know or ignored the figure of Charon although the descriptions on the geography of inferno, the journey to Hades and the rivers surrounding this realm are numerous in the „Odyssey“. The only character charged with the transportation of souls is Hermes Psychopompos, mentioned a few times in the „Odyssey“.

The oldest mention of Charon comes from a poem, Minyad, written towards the end of the 6th century BC. Pausanias points out that in the Minyad it mentions that: „‘Then the boat on which embark the dead that the old ferryman, Charon, used to steer, they found not within its moorings.” – The Minyad, an unknown work.“ In Pausanias view, Polygnotos in „Nekyia from Delphi“ – an assembly hall of the Knidians, painted by Polygnotos around mid-5th century BC – pictured an aged Charon based on the description from the poem Minyad. The same character of Χάρων πορϑμευως is frequently depicted on the lekythoi with a white background dated in the 5th century BC. A detailed analysis on the Greek and Roman iconography of Charon has been already carried out by Sourvinou-Inwood. In a recent work, J. H. Oakley wrote an elaborate study of the representations on the polychrome lekythoi with white background and offered a psycho-sociological interpretation.

The next mention of Charon is provided by an inscription from Teithronion in Phokis dated around 500 BC: „Rejoice Charon: none speaks ill on you, not even when they die, as you untied them from fatigue“. In this case, Charon is the one who frees man from the throes of life, he who is the synonym for death. Charon as the death interference
was noted by L. Torraca. This feature of the ferryman is frequently pointed out in the sources of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, see below. The same idea comes from the lines by Pindar who sings on the happiness of gods saved from illness, ageing, sufferance and the boat that takes you across the deep and howling Acheron.

In Aeschylus’ play *Septem contra Thebas* performed in 467 BC, while mourning Oedipus’ death in battle, the choir crossed over the Acheron with „a dark ship vested in weeds“ towards a world where the light from Apollo never shines. Here, the wailing ritual is practically placed parallel with the passing on symbolised by Charon’s boat. Euripides, in *Alcestis*, performed in 438 BC, is the first to refer to the anxious features of Charon, a *topos* that was emphasized also in later sources. The eagerness of Charon is present in Timotheos’ *Niobe*, fr. 786, 4th century BC; Aristophanes’ *Ranae* and *Lysistrata*. In Roman imperial times, the sophist Athenaeus of Naucratis (contemporary with Commodus) refers to Timotheos’ poem, *Niobe*, in order to resume this topic. Charon, with dark hair, calls Alceste with an anxious tone, suggesting that death is ineluctable. Again, the psychopomp character of Charon is seen as the moment of transition from life to death.

In a satire by Achaios – a contemporary of the poet Euripides – one of the characters cries out: „Rejoice, o Charon, rejoice, o Charon, rejoice, o Charon – does not make him awfully angry?“ As the context is missing it is difficult to know the reason why the ferryman was mentioned, possibly due to the passing of Heracles. It must be noted that the salutation formula for Charon is similar to the one for gods and heroes – χαίρε – as it appears in the epigram from Teithronion. In this way, the supernatural character (demonic) of the ferryman – an angry and anxious character, as in Euripides’ *Alcestis* – was calmed and tamed, as well as one could before asking for his benevolence and protection.

Aristophanes’ comedies can be understood in the context of the Peloponnesian war and the transformations within the society after the tragedy of 404 BC. His plays are parabolas in the sense that the political and military changes, as well as the intellectual discussions in Athens were the sources for his comedies. Through humour they questioned the structures of his day and the traditional values of the *polis*. Aristophanes subtly mocks not only the politicians (Alcibiades), the philosophers (the sophists) and the writers (Euripides), but his irony also targets gods and semi-gods. These are stripped of their traditional seriousness and grandeur.
Charon is present in three of Aristophanes comedies: *Lysistrata* (411 BC), *Ranae* (404 BC) and *Plutos* (388 BC). In the last two plays, the ferryman fee is also mentioned in order to be taken across the Acheron.

In „The frogs“, Charon is put in a ridiculous situation when he does not behave according to the inferno rules, but like a true ferryman: he refuses to take Xanthias, Dionysus’ companion, because he is a slave,\(^{33}\) and puts Dionysus at the oars, whose protests are useless.\(^{34}\) In the same play, Heracles, an expert in the field of going back and forth to inferno, advises Dionysus on how to descend to inferno and bring Euripides back amongst the living. Heracles mentions a sum of two obols that must be paid to the ferryman. Although there is no previous literary evidence, the circumstances suggests a deviation from the traditional fee of one obol. This deviation is deliberately done by Aristophanes who makes light of it. The author is alluding to the doubling of prices during the Peloponnesian war. Thus, the mentioned sum was the price paid in order to enter the theatre and an average day’s payment for labour.\(^{35}\) The key to this irony is the sarcastic tone of Dionysus when he replies to Heracles: „Be it! The power two obols have, the whole world through! How came they thither!“ – in fact a meaningless sum in the context of high inflation in Athens at the end of the 5th century BC. This irony is addressed to the Athenian society and can be understood only in the socio-cultural and economic context of the time. Certainly, the language humour would have had no impact if the audience were not familiarized with the traditional fee for Charon and the monetary debasement due to the Peloponnesian war.\(^{37}\)

In *Plutos*, Charon is mentioned within a comic reference. Carion is joking with an Attic farmer who is willing to practice some juridical assignments. At the end of the day the jury members receive a „ticket“ which proves their presence in order to get paid. Carion suggests to the farmer to hurry as it is the old Charon who will give him this „ticket“. Thus, through an anagram, the farmer will receive the „ticket“ (ξύμβολον) not from Archon but from Charon. So, instead of entering the court the famer will enter the grave.\(^{38}\)

It is possible that the crossing fee may have been already mentioned in the play *Lysistrata*, performed in 411 BC. In one episode, Lysistrata, influenced by two women, insults a magistrate (*proboulos*). She wishes him a quick death and she offers to bake him an apple cookie. Calonice gives him a ribbon and Myrrhina a wreath – all accessories for burial. The lines 602–3 are ambiguous. If B. B. Rogers is correct then the expression λαβ ταυτί may be translated as „catch it“ which infers a small coin that Lysistrata throws to the magistrate for the ferryman tax.\(^{39}\)

The evidence that the conventional fee for crossing to the afterlife was one obol is confirmed by later sources. The opinion of S. T. Stevens referring to the ambiguity of literary sources regarding the sum to be paid to Charon (one or more coins) may now be amended.\(^{40}\) The sources mention in unanimity one coin for the fee. The exceptions (Aristophanes, Propertius) are only literary instruments, see below. A representation on a

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\(^{33}\) Aristoph. Ran. 175–176.

\(^{34}\) Aristoph. Ran. 184–197.

\(^{35}\) Torraca (1995) 421.

\(^{36}\) Aristoph. Ran. 141–142.


\(^{38}\) Aristoph. Plut. 277–278; Rogers (1955) 386, n. a.


\(^{40}\) Stevens (1991) 217.
white background depicted on a funerary *lekythos* dated around 420 BC\(^{41}\) is one of the few iconographic proofs on the passing fee. A young man is seated on a grave, holding in his right hand an obol to be given to Charon, who is steering the boat on the right side; on the left, is a woman sacrificing at the grave (Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1](image)

The meaning of this illustration is very complex. As Eliana Mugione has suggested, the representation at the same time of the funerary tombstone, the personalized dead and Charon’s boat has an eschatological meaning on the "living dead".\(^{42}\) In this context the depiction of the coin may represent the ‘passport’ for living in the realm of death simultaneously while being remembered in the minds of loved ones. The imagery is following the typology of Oakley: Charon’s boat combined with a scene at the grave, meaning the passing and integration into a new world, in fact an extension of life.\(^{43}\)

In other comedies, those of Antiphanes (approx. 408–332 BC) – of which only a few fragments survived –, the ferocious figure of the ferryman turns up as: "none ever, / master, while dying was not willing to do so. //Those who cannot leave the life he gives them a jerk by hips, / grudging, and takes them to the boat Charon/fed up and having plenty of all. //The hungeriness is the cure for immortality."\(^{44}\)

The message is more than clear: in comparison with those who have nothing to lose, those who hang on to their wealth cannot easily depart from this life. The allegory sug-

\(^{41}\) Oakley (2004) 124, fig. 87.
\(^{42}\) Mugione (1995) 434.
\(^{43}\) Oakley (2004) 141, 144, 225.
\(^{44}\) Antiphanes, 86 *apud* Kassel/Austin (1991) 356.
gests that Charon is more than just a ferryman. He is the executioner who merciless takes care of those who do not want to depart from life.\(^{45}\)

In conclusion, for the pre-classical and classical Greek, Charon received those features which define him in the subsequent periods: a fierce character, eager to do his duty; a name synonymous to death itself (Pindar, Aeschylus, and Euripides). In the group imagery the journey in the boat marks the moment of passing in the shadows’ world, a ritual materialized through the payment of a symbolic fee. At Aristophanes, this gloomy character – a representation of political and spiritual crises of the polis – became a tool for humour. Still, his irony is not a very sharp one as he did not want to mock the mythology and funerary customs. This will happen much later in the 2\(^{nd}\) century AD (see below).

**The ancient authors of the Hellenistic period (end of 4\(^{th}\)–2\(^{nd}\) centuries BC)**

In the context of the decadence and pessimism of the Hellenistic period due to the political, economic and social uncertainty one more attribute has been added to Charon. The poets asked themselves if it is worth being rich when everybody ends up in death. Thus, they eulogize poverty as a release from the paltry things of this earthly life.

Leonidas of Tarent is the first to open a series of funerary epigrams gathered in the so-called *Anthologia Palatina*, with the subject about the equality in death. The cynic Diogenes, aka the Dog, asked Charon, the sad servant of Hades to take him in his dark boat across the Acheron. His entire luggage is a pitcher, a bundle, the cloth he is wearing and the obol.\(^{46}\) In fact a logical presentation of what a man can take from this world: accessories for the journey to the underworld. From this point of view the obol can be regarded as symbol of wealth. Two authors of epigrams in the *Anthologia Palatina* are more expressive in this direction: Antiphanes of Macedonia (1\(^{st}\) century AD) and Ammianos (2\(^{nd}\) century AD), see below. This idea was issued by Theokrit in *Idyllia* 16: „no wealth earned on earth can be crossed over the vast river of the Styx.“\(^{47}\) In an ode dedicated to Ptolemaios, Theokrit praised Aphrodite, the first beauty, who took Berenice and put her in her temple, thus, she was saved from being taken across the Acheron by the gloomy ferryman – an allusion to Berenice’s apotheosis.\(^{48}\)

An individual testimony of the lore regarding crossing the river in Charon’s boat is provided by a funerary inscription from din Miletus dated to the 3\(^{rd}\) century BC: „the tears of mourners pour on you, Polydamantis, father, when you step in the dark boat of the dead.“\(^{49}\) The lines suggest that the mourning of the dead and the passing of the soul in Charon’s boat (symbolizing the final departure to the afterlife) represented simultaneously rituals in the collective mentality. It is very revealing that the author did not have to mention the name of Charon, as those who read the epitaph knew exactly whose boat was mentioned. In the group mentality of the Hellenistic period the concepts such as ‘Charon’ – ‘boat’ – ‘passing’ became complementary and substitutive to each other. The same idea is delivered by an epitaph on a tombstone from Ptolemais (Cyrenaica).\(^{50}\)

\(^{46}\) Anth. Pal. 7, 67.
\(^{47}\) Theokr. *Idyllia* 16, 40–42.
\(^{48}\) Theokr. *Idyllia* 17, 47–49.
\(^{49}\) Peek (1995) no. 195.
\(^{50}\) Oliverio (1936) 257–258, no. 537, fig. 102–102a; Hansen (1989) 132, no. 680.
Although the works of Kallimachos of Alexandria, 3rd century BC, are lost, two fragments which refer to Charon have survived. The author names him πορϑμήνα νεκρῶν, the ferryman of the dead, while the fee is πορϑμήνον. In the poem, Hekale, it is mentioned that „in the town […] the dead do not have to pay the passing fee“. Regarding the others (the foreigners), it is by law – given by divinity, θεσμός, θέσμιος – that they have to bear the coin in their dried mouth. This source is one with several interesting aspects. Kallimachos is an erudite poet par excellence. His poetry is not only one of literary aesthetics but also full of topographic data, myths and local rituals. The mention of a town exempted from the passing fee suggests that this custom was well spread in the Greek world in the 3rd century BC. At the same time, Kallimachos is the first author who speaks on the passing fee like a living funerary custom and for the first time denotes the precise location where the coin should be placed with the dead.

It is probably not just coincidence that parallel with the increase of this topic in the literary sources of the Hellenistic period the incidence of coin finds in graves also became more frequent. Both phenomena suggest a deep penetration into the group mentality of the superstition about Charon. This aspect is supported by the increasing areas of coin offerings in graves. The process may be explained by a detachment of man from public life and his shelter into a safe reality – the individual life.

The ancient authors of the 1st century BC

From many points of view the Greek authors of epigrams in the 1st century BC were epigones of their Hellenistic predecessors. They have developed the ideas of the Hellenistic poets. Archias and Honestus imitate Leonidas of Tarent. They eulogize that life gives up material values in exchange for spiritual liberty. These two authors of epigrams mention again Diogenes – the Dog, who let his soul to Charon and brings only his few earthly belongings. Archias refers to the ferryman as the one who enjoys other peoples’ tears. Honestus wrote with the same tone but was more concise. Curiously, in his enumeration of things needed for the journey in the underworld the obol is missing.

Other authors have used Charon as the passing towards death. Bianor considered him as „insatiable“. Charon is the one who kidnapped young Attalus. These lines also appear on two funerary inscriptions. One is dated to the 1st century AD, the other comes from Tyna in Cappadocia and can be dated at the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd centuries AD. The second inscription has a slightly different text. Instead of young Attalos, Charon took the young man (andron). The allegory of death is suggested by the mention of Charon, the leader of souls into the afterlife. For certain, the funerary inscriptions use those mythological symbols which were understood by a contemporary authors.

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51 Kall. 628 apud Pfeiffer (1953).
52 Kall. 278 apud Pfeiffer (1953).
57 Anth. Pal. 7, 68.
58 Anth. Pal. 7, 66.
59 Anth. Pal. 7, 671.
60 Peek (1955) 475, no. 1587.
61 Peek (1955) 475, no. 1588.
society. Thus, the inscription from Cappadocia demonstrates that at the end of the 2nd – beginning of the 3rd centuries AD the allegoric meaning of Charon was not just an empty poetic formula but a vivid concept in the imagery of symbols.

Diodorus Zonas gave Charon a little child and asked Charon to help him with the embarking, thus, the crossing will be easier for the child.\textsuperscript{62}

Antipater of Sidon describes with tenderness a young mother, Artemias, who is embarking while carrying one of the new born twins.\textsuperscript{63} A similar idea dated in the same 1st century BC can be found in an epigram by Antipater of Thessalonica. In this case it is Niobe who brings the children to Charon.\textsuperscript{64}

Diodorus of Sicily, in his monumental work on the history of the world until Caesar, tries a rational explanation for the origins of Charon’s myth. Diodorus wrote that Orpheus, while assisting the Egyptian funeral ceremonies, invented the story about Hades. On the same line the lake Acherousia, located near Memphis, is „the house of the dead“.

Diodorus even believes that Charon is the name for the real ferryman in the Egyptian language. The one who transports the dead bodies at the funeral ceremonies – the body before burial was placed in a boat.\textsuperscript{65} Some scholars consider that such origins of the coin offering ritual cannot be confirmed on linguistic evidence. More likely we are dealing with a transgression of a Greek myth into an Egyptian environment. O. Waser has considered this statement of Diodorus of Sicily as nothing more than another example for the Greek „Egyptomany“.\textsuperscript{66} B. Lincoln proposes in a linguistic study a proto-Indo-European origin for Charon.\textsuperscript{67} Even if the statement about the Egyptian origins of the myth is an invention of Diodorus, one should not totally ignore the importance of this source. Its significance comes from the fact that for the first time the myth of Charon (spread among the Greeks) and his obol are mentioned in a scholastic way in a non-literary work.

The 1st century BC is the moment when the first Latin literary sources on Charon appeared. The new born Latin literature reached such a level of perfection through works by Vergilius, Horatius, Ovidius, Propertius and Tibullus that it forced the successors to regard this period as the golden era of the Latin lyre. In the works of these authors Charon turned into an instrument to describe the horrors from inferno; to express some abstract concepts such as destiny, the fragile nature of life or the great passage. An accurate analyse of texts and of these ideas offers remarkable information on the Roman perception upon a myth of Greek origins.

In one ode that suggests us to \textit{carpe diem} – „seize the dayâ€, Horatius meditates upon the dried fate of all mankind. The \textit{aeternum exilium} metaphorically expressed by the passing of the ferryman’s boat (although Charon is not named) is Death herself, whom noone can escape.\textsuperscript{68} This idea is also mentioned in another poem by Horatius in which Charon is the merciless accomplice of Orcus, who cannot be bribed with gold to return life back to the canny Prometheus.\textsuperscript{69} The juxtaposition of Charon with the final passage – a con-

\textsuperscript{62} Anth. Pal. 7, 365.
\textsuperscript{63} Anth. Pal. 7, 464.
\textsuperscript{64} Anth. Pal. 7, 530.
\textsuperscript{65} Diod. I, 92, 96; Cantilena (1995) 174, 432.
\textsuperscript{66} Waser (1898) 12.
\textsuperscript{67} Lincoln (1980) 41–59.
\textsuperscript{68} Hor. carm. 2, 3, 28.
\textsuperscript{69} Hor. carm. 2, 18, 32–36.
ception on the irrevocable death when the earthly wealth loses its value – is nothing new.

Similar views have already been noted in the Theokrit poems and the Hellenistic authors of epigrams (see above). The motif that we are all destined to death is a true leitmotif of ancient poetry frequently repeated by the poets in the 1st century BC.

The anonymous author of the Consolatio ad Liviam poem states that we, all, await perdition, and none can return once the ferryman placed him in his boat loaded with souls. The overloading of the boat was another repeated element in the Latin sources. In later periods the debate on how only one boat can carry so many souls was an argument to express a sceptic attitude regarding these myths and rituals.

The most expressive and, at the same time, scary image of the old ferryman appears in Aeneis, song 6: portitor has horrendus aquas et flumina seruat/terribili squalore Charon, cui plurima mento/canities inculta iacet, stant lumina flamma,/sordidus ex umeris nodo dependet amicitus./Ipse ratem conto subigit uelisque ministrat/et ferruginea subuectat corpora cumba,/iam senior, sed cruda deo uiridisque senectus.72

Undoubtedly, the sordid image of Charon portitor, with lambent eyes, who shows a strong force despite his ageing is part of the poetic Vergilian imagery. In approximately the same period, Tibullus' eulogy dedicated to the desire of everlasting rest, describes Charon in similar tints: Cerberus et Stygiae navita turpis aquae:/Illic percussisque genis ustoque/capillo/Errat et obscuros pallida turba lacus.73 Charun, the death demon for the Etruscans could have contributed to the awful reputation of Charon in the literature of the 1st century BC.74

One questions how much these suggestive poetic images of Charon are reflections of a group imagery, of an universal fear about the underworld, the destiny of man in that world and the malefic figures that await for him in inferno? It is possible that the promotion of Charon to the rank of god, mentioned not only by Vergilius but also by Cicero75 is a personalization of the basic fear of death, which could lead at the end to the foundation of a true cult of the god Charon? The votive inscription discovered at Tagsebt (Mauretania) Deo/Charoni/Iulius Anabus/Votum solvit76 is an argument for this theory, although we cannot speak of a general phenomenon. J. Gorecki considers that we deal here more likely with a local god who does not have to be identical with the Greek Charon.77 This hypothesis cannot be excluded but there are other sources which prove that Charon could have been regarded as a god of death, see above. Cicero’s scepticism regarding the divine nature of Charon and other mythological elements can be understood only in the context of a more profound phenomenon. In the communal imagery the over proliferation of gods and spirits of different nature led the homo doctus to question the divine nature gods themselves.78 Furthermore, the wise man created by Ci-

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70 Ps. Ov. Cons. 358; 428.
71 Verg. Aen. 6, 305–310; Petron. 121, 117–118; Claud. In Rufinum, 2, 502.
72 Verg. Aen. 6, 298–304.
73 Tib. 1, 10, 36–38.
74 For Charun iconography see LIMC III, 1, 225–236.
75 Cic. nat. deor. 3, 43.
76 CIL VIII, 8992.
77 Gorecki (1975) 237, n. 205.
78 Cic. nat. deor. 3, 43.
cero in his *Tusculanae Quaestiones* suggests that one way to free yourself from the terror of death is the denial of inferno’s horrors and their perceptions as fairy tales.\(^7^9\)

The feeling of 'everlasting exile' and the irrevocability of death were probably deeply infiltrated in the souls of the ancients. The concept was that a living person can only descend into the underworld in very exceptional cases and that the return is allowed only to heroes with extraordinary qualities – Heracles,\(^8^0\) Orpheus or Aeneas, and later Apuleius’ heroine Psyche. Sybille advises Aeneas to show the „golden branch“ of Proserpina to Charon\(^8^1\) and this will work something like „Open Sesame!“ in front of Inferno’s gate. This observation belongs to J. G. Frazer. In his opinion there are some iconographic marks regarding the power of „the golden branch“: Polygnotos painted Orpheus in Inferno resting his hand on a branch. On a sarcophagus kept in the Lateran Museum, is the unhappy young man, Adonis, leaving Aphrodite, depicted holding a mystic branch.\(^8^2\)

Initially, Charon seeing „the golden branch“ refused to take Aeneas into the boat but as he became impressed turned and picked him up.\(^8^3\) The unfulfilled burial ceremony and the absence of the accessories for the dead to take with him in the afterlife, caused the soul to linger on unknown shores, hunted by beasts and scary spirits.\(^8^4\) The same ferryman charged with guarding the gates to Inferno showed less mercy to Orpheus who wished to descend for the second time to the realm of dead.\(^8^5\) Charon did his duty and sent him away. Could the failure of Orpheus be a consequence of that he had not „the golden branch“ or the obol to pass? It seems that the interdiction for the living ones to enter the Realm of the Dead, first mentioned by Homer, has become a *topos* in the people’s mind, since it is stated in many ancient sources. Although Charon is not mentioned in the „Iliad“, Patrocle points out that the river in front of the entrance to Inferno can be crossed only by the dead.\(^8^6\) In Lucian’s satire, the old, good Charon is kind to the cynic Menippos, whom he thinks to be Heracles, when he noticed the lion skin on his back, and took him into his boat. Even further, he showed him the path to continue his journey.\(^8^7\)

In a late source, 5th century AD, the grammarian Servius wrote that Charon was en-chained for a year because he transported Hercules alive to Inferno: *Lectum est in Orphea, quod quando Hercules ad inferos descendit, Charon territus eum statim suscepit, ob quam rem anno integro in compedibus fuit.*\(^8^8\)

The poet of eulogies, Propertius, presents in two concise lines a profound eschatological conception. In the obituary of Cornelia (ex-consul L. Aemilius Paullus’ wife) the passage ritual is simultaneously symbolized by three overlapping images: the act of paying the ferryman, the cremation, and the closing of the grave: *vota movent superos: ubi portitor aera recepit,/obserat herbosos lurida porta rogos.*\(^8^9\)

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79 Cic. Tusc. 1, V, 10.  
81 Verg. Aen. 6, 136–137.  
82 Frazer (1955) 295.  
83 Verg. Aen. 6, 417–425.  
84 Peres (2003) 50.  
85 Ov. met. 10, 73.  
86 Hom. II. 23, 71–72.  
88 Serv. Aen. 6, 392.  
89 Prop. 4, 11, 7–8.
These elements seem to be complementary and at the same time a \textit{sine qua non} condition for the permanent incorporation into the Realm of the Dead. Vergilius informs us that in the cases of those who did not pass the burial ritual, divine law states that they cannot be taken by Charon across the Styx.\footnote{Verg. Aen. 6, 325–328.} These are further arguments that the coin, the symbolic payment for Charon, was another indispensable element for the passage ritual. Certainly, the poetic symbolism is not a proof for generalizing a superstition but it is a tool to understand the irrational way the pious mentality worked.

In the paragraph by Propertius \textit{aera}, the plural for \textit{aes},\footnote{Prop. 4, 11, 7.} must be understood in a poetic sense. The term \textit{aera} refers to money as a general notion, in fact to the payment of Charon for transportation and not to the small bronze coin – \textit{aera} = \textit{numerus pluralis nominis aes}; \textit{aes} = 1. metal, copper, bronze; 2. copper or bronze coin; 3. money; 4. payment.\footnote{TLL 1900, I, 1052.} Propertius is not the only author who uses this word. Apuleius names the fee for the ferryman with a series of terms: \textit{stipes, naulum, viaticum, aes}. The meaning of the word \textit{aes}, mentioned in the story of Psyche, is very clear: a coin.\footnote{Apul. met. 6, 18, 16–23.} The \textit{Tower} advises the girl in love – who has decided to descend into Inferno to save her lover – to take with her \textit{duas stipes} (two fees), to use them as \textit{naulum} – road money = das Reisegeld, das Fährgeld\footnote{Georges (1918) 3465.} – to cross in the boat back and forth from Inferno.

**The ancient authors of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD**

The Greek authors of epigrams of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD included in the \textit{Anthologia Palatina} were under the influence of those from the Hellenistic period. The message in their epigrams is based on the known themes of the 3\textsuperscript{rd}–1\textsuperscript{st} centuries BC (avarice, \textit{vanitas vanitatum} equality in death) but the contents are more explicitly described. The opinion of Antiphanes of Macedonia is similar to the one of Theokrit, three centuries earlier, on wealth and death. The savings are in vain as the riches are not eternal: whatever luxurious life style we lived, no matter how much wealth we leave to our successors, only one obol can be taken with us.\footnote{Anth. Pal. 11, 168.} Lukilios’ irony targets the sin of avarice thorough a suggestive story: the stingy Hermocrates, ill in bed, counts how much the doctors will cost him and when he finds that the price is more than a drachm, he rather prefers to die. He will take with him only the obol while the heirs will be happy with his wealth.\footnote{Anth. Pal. 11, 171.} In this case the obol is not mentioned as the fee for crossing because this aspect is automatically implied. The story’s context points out another aspect of superstitions linked to the function of the coin in the funerary context. The obol is not only the symbol of equality in death, but can also be interpreted as \textit{pars pro toto}, a symbolic parting of wealth. This is the first time that the hypothesis of the obol as a symbol of wealth was issued.\footnote{Rhode (1898) 306–307, n. 3.}

In the Latin literature of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century AD, both lyrical and epic literary genres enjoyed presenting the image of Charon in various poses: horrible, scary, greedy, or to the contrary, gentle and kind, according to the message contents. Overall, this character remained a poetic tool to suggest the passage into the afterlife, a moment with a terminal
consequence. In Lucan’s *Pharsalia* Pompei dreams on Julia, who tells him about the funerary pyre and the scorched ferryman who prepares numerous other boats. In this way the author outlines the tragic perspective of the conflict between father and husband. In another paragraph, Lucanus affirms that in the aftermath of Pompei’s death, his wife prays to Charon: [...] *flagrantis portitor undae, iam lassate senex ad me redeuntibus umbris, exaudite preces*.99

Valerius Flaccus, a contemporary with Lucanus, in his monumental epic poem *Argonautica* describes the preparations for death by Aeson, Jason’s father. He dedicates a prayer to the spirits of the river Styx. Without their help Charon cannot cross any souls and is forced to wait at Hades’ entrance. Thus, the prayer sounds like a *sine qua non* ritual for a ‘successful’ journey to the underworld. Complementary to these literary images is a piece of information provided by the historian Flavius Josephus at the end of the 1st century AD. He affirms that the inhabitants from Caesarea and Sebaste enjoyed liberty after the reign of King Agrippa and made libations to Charon and celebrated the death of the king.101

Apart from the dedication to *Deo Charoni* coming from Tagsebt (Mauretania) there is an altar or a funerary *cippus* dedicated to Charon and kept in the Archaeological Museum at Milan. Without a doubt we face a cult representation. On the front side is sculptured a bearded Charon, steering the boat, dressed in a short *exomis*. On the wing sides are Hermes and Dionysus. The images are joined by an inscription dedicated to the chthonian gods, *ΘΕΟΙΣ ΚΑΤΑΧΘΟΕΙΟΙΣ*, in fact, the three depicted characters are Hermes – the souls’ guide, Charon – the crossing symbol and Dionysus – the symbol for triumph over death. Thus, such a complex eschatological conception suggests the possibility of surviving in the other world and a happy life beyond the grave. There are other representations that suggest this idea for the Roman period, as well. The aforementioned sources (literary and iconographic ones) are complementary to each other and, thus, can offer different indices on the divine perception of Charon in certain circumstances. Not only Vergilius and Cicero call Charon *deus*, Apuleius and Lucian, mid-2nd century AD, call him *δαιμον*.104

Charon appears also in Petronius *Satyricon*. After a storm, Encolpius and his friends, including Eumolpus, arrive in the vicinity of the city of Crotona. Eumolpus teaches poetry and offers a sample on how a poem of the civil war should be recited (Lucanus *Pharsalia*). *Arbiter elegantiarum* mentions that the “tired sailor” (*vix navita Porthmeus*) can hardly embark so many souls in one boat, an entire fleet is needed. In this way Petronius satirized the illusive character of this myth.105

In many of his poems, Statius used Charon metaphorically. In each case his reference suggests the crossing ritual. Not only in *Silvae* – a collection of poems on various subjects: lamentations of father or wife or favourite slave – but also in the poem *Thebais* the ferryman is a repetitive character. Statius, without mentioning a name, portrays him as: „the

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98 Lucan. 6, 14–17.
99 Lucan. 6, 704–705.
100 Val. Fl. 1, 783–784.
101 Ios. ant. Iud. 19, 9, 1 (358).
104 For the divine/demonic perception of Charon in the Classical Greek see Sourvinou-Inwood (1995) 312.
105 Petron. 121, 117–118.
horrible sailor“ (*trux navita*) or „Avernus servant“ (*sukator Averni*). At the same time, the poetic image of Charon gently placing the dead in his boat, is a way to show care for a loved one, hoping for an easier passage – this idea was previously issued by Diodorus Zonas (see above). A new feature of Charon appears in the work of Statius: *insontes animas nec portitor arceat, nec durae comes ille ferae* („the pure souls nor the ferryman, nor his ferocious beast can oppose“) – could this be an allusion to the idea that for the innocent souls the crossing is much easier, thus, they may be exempted from paying the fee?

Seneca in his *Hercules furens* offers a detailed and scary image of Charon, close to that presented by Vergilius one century earlier (see above). The ferryman although very old is still vigorous (*durus senio nauta crudo*), only Hercules, the mighty hero, can defeat him. For Seneca, Charon’s boat is big enough to carry all nations (*cymba popolarum camax*).

On the contrary, for Silius Italicus, who wishes to exacerbate the disaster during the Punic war, considers that the boat, although very big, cannot possibly carry the large number of those who fell in battle (*nec sufficit improba puppies*).

The real size of the boat transposed in group mentality as the way of crossing the souls to the underworld seems to be the weakest link of the myth. This detail is used by the sceptics who do not believe in the „story of Hades“. Later, in Lucian *Dialogi mortuorum*, Alexander the Great boasts of his victories in which so many died that the boat was not big enough to carry all of them. Therefore, they built themselves some rafts – thus, the mocking of Charon is complete.

Silius Italicus conventionally calls Charon *portitor*, who is known for being greedy in *Punica* and who enjoys preparing places for the new arrivals: *laxabat sedem in veturis Portitor umbris*. In a metaphor of Lygdamus the presence of the boat on the Lethaea waters is enough to suggest death, meaning that the readers knew very well whose boat the author was referring to: *Elysios olim licet cognoscere campos/Lethaeamque ratem Cimmeriosque lacus*.

In a poem of pseudo-Vergilius a sudden death is suggested by an allegory: „it is the boat of Charon kidnapping youthfulness before it has time to blossom.“ The same feeling comes from an epigram on a funerary inscription dedicated by an aggrieved father for his daughter, Theodusia, who died at 18 years old. In the last lines her father addresses the merciless Charon: „why did you like so much this dear girl, and so to wreak an everlasting pain to father. “ This inscription was found in Rome. On the basis of the girls’ name, the scholars speak of a Jewish family settled in Rome during the imperial period (Horbury/Noy [1992] no. 141). In this context Charon appears as a threatening element, synonymous to sudden death, which keeps an eye out for all living creatures, people and animals alike (see below).

112 Sil. 11, 760–761.
113 Iuv. II, 149–153.
115 Sil. 9, 250–251.
118 CIG III, 6239 = IG 14.1648 = IGUR III 1231.
Another suggestive paragraph is provided by a 1st century AD poem, *Culex* („The Mosquito“) – a comedy assigned to Vergilius but written by an epigone, which completes this interpretation. In humour style (a mosquito saved a shepherd and went to Hades), *Culex* expresses the idea that dead souls are nothing but *praeda Charonis* (even the mosquito’s soul), and are forced to pass the area of flames through Inferno.119

An excellent source during the period of Augustus-Tiberius is Strabo’s *Geographica*. This work is not only a geographic description but also a true „Kulturgeographie“ on the education of the Empire’s elite. Strabo travelled the entire Mediterranean world: Asia Minor, Greece, Egypt and Italy and became acquainted with the customs of the ancient *oikumene*.120 In book eight while mentioning a small town in Argolis, Hermione, Strabo points out a unique custom: „And it is commonly reported that the descent to Hades in the country of the Hermionians is a short cut; and this is why they do not put passage money (ναύλον) in the mouths of their dead.“121 A local legend tells that even Hercules used this „shortcut“ to enter Hades and bring up Cerberus.122 This privilege of the Hermionians was previously mentioned in the 3rd century BC by Kallimachos (see above). This was probably a *topos* well circulated within the Mediterranean world and it will appear again in a later *epopee*.123 Although it is a repetitive motif in the Greek literature one thing must not be ignored. Strabo has considered this local curiosity from the area of Hermione worth mentioning. Still, he did not offer further explanation of the ritual for a specific reason: everybody knew that aspect. In other words, in the Mediterranean world, the custom of placing a coin in the mouth of the dead was well-known and practiced at the beginning of the 1st century AD.

**The ancient authors of the 2nd century AD**

Continuing the tradition of the authors of epigrams, Ammianos – who lived in the time of Hadrian – drew attention upon the uselessness of wealth. His message is very clear: no matter how many estates you have you the only piece of land you receive in the end is the same for everybody – the grave. When you die all you can carry with you is the *obol*.124 In this context the small value of the coin is understood as the symbol of the earthly wealth and not as the fee for Charon. An idea also met in the work of Lukilios. Thus, the coin represents the transposing of philosophic-materialistic concepts into a concise motif: *death* (its universal and abstract way to be), while the *coin* (with its omnipresent and practical features) is the great equalizer.

Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* is one of the most important sources for understanding the mentality of the ancient person surrounded by real and unreal figures, lost in a world of magic and rituals. In the top story of Lucius who turns into a donkey there are some digressions. The longest and the most famous one is the love story between Amor and Psyche. This episode offers some interesting details about Charon’s character and the obligation to pay the crossing fee. According to „the Tower’s advice, the secret to entering and exiting Hades are the two coins and honey cookies which Psyche must give to

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121 Strab. 8.6.12.
122 Paus. II, 35, 10.
123 *Argonautica Orphica*, 1136–1141.
124 Anth. Pal. 11, 209.
Charon and Cerberus. In one paragraph it is specified that Charon has to pull out the coin from the girl’s mouth with his own hand.\textsuperscript{126}

One can ask, what is the meaning of this detail?

One of the Romans eschatological conceptions said that the soul leaves the body through the mouth. In this way a definitive breaking occurred with the earthly world when the soul begins its journey to the Realm of Orcus or other alternative names such as \textit{Dis Pater}, Pluto. Psyche, as she is still alive, must avoid any contact with death itself.

Apuleius considers Charon as a senile old man (\textit{seni dabis}), greedy for money: \begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{Ergo et inter mortuos avaritia vivit, nec Charon ille vel Dis Pater, tantus deus, quicquam gratuito facit, sed mortiens pauper viaticum debet quaerere, et aes si forte prae manu non fuerit, nemo eum expirare patietur.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{127} In other words, regardless if you are poor or rich, if you do not hold the \textit{viaticum} – das Reisegeld, das Fährgeld = the journey money\textsuperscript{128} – none will let you die, as neither Charon, nor Pluto (\textit{Dis Pater}), no matter that they are gods, will do anything for free.

The total number of churls in \textit{Inferno} seems to have increased in the mid-2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD. In one of Lucian’s satires, Hermes \textit{psychopompos} warns Charon not to stay too long on earth, because Aeacus – the inferno’s keys keeper – will be angry for not earning even an obol!\textsuperscript{129}

In another work of Apuleius, \textit{Apologia}, there is further testimony on the ‘popularity’ of Charon in that period. The ugliness and ferocity of Charon must have been already proverbial – the expression \textit{avarus portitor} appears at Pseudo Ovidius, \textit{Consolatio ad Liviam}, 357–358 – as only in this way can it be explained that Apuleius’ competitor, Aemilianus, was nicknamed „Charon“: \begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{igitur adignomenta ei duo indita: Charon, ut iam dixi, ob oris et animi diritatem – for his truculence of spirit and his countenance.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{130}

How much credence should we give to Apuleius? The answer comes from Apuleius himself. His biography – he studied philosophy and religion at Cartago, Athens and Rome; he travelled in Asia Minor and Egypt; was initiated in more mysteries, including the one of Dionysus; he was a priest of Asclepios, and possibly \textit{sacerdos provinciae Africai}\textsuperscript{131} – is argument enough to establish a person with strong religious beliefs. A person for whom the most horrible sin was to mock the sacred – \begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{atque ego scio nonnullos et cum primis Aemilianum istum facetiae sibi habere res diuinus deridero},
\end{align*}
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{132} –, and to neglect your duties to the divinities (prayers, offerings, visiting the temples). His honesty toward Divinity is doubtless, thus, his testimony should be regarded as one coming from a true religious mind set in which superstition and ritual walk hand in hand. His attitude towards divinity is not an exception but one representing a large part of the Roman society of that time.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{125}] Apul. met. 6, 18, 6–9; 6, 19, 20–23.
\item[\textsuperscript{126}] Apul. met. 6, 18, 16–23.
\item[\textsuperscript{127}] Apul. met. 6, 18, 16–23.
\item[\textsuperscript{128}] Georges (1918) 3465.
\item[\textsuperscript{129}] Lukian. \textit{Charon}, 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{130}] Apul. apol. 56, 21.
\item[\textsuperscript{131}] Aug. epist. 138, 19.
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] Apul. apol. 56, 21.
\end{itemize}
The other parties, the sceptics and those who question the religious beliefs and society’s principles, have fewer members for a certain reason: the critical spirit is obtained through a higher level of education and culture, which was the privilege of a restrained number of persons. In this group, for instance, we can include Cicero, two centuries earlier who expressed his doubts on the terrifying underworld in his *Tusculanae Quaestiones*. It is no coincidence that the members of this party were increasing in number right in the middle of the 2nd century AD when the occult rites and rituals reached the highest level. Apuleius shows his indignation toward those like Aemilianus, who, in his opinion, are valueless as they do not respect the sacred things. Only in such context can we understand the works of Juvenal and Lucian. Their strong irony is targeting a society dominated by hypocrisy and credulity. Therefore, from this point of view these works can only be used as a primary source to know and understand the mentality of the 2nd century AD. G. Thüry sees in Lucian’s work a living testimony for the practice of this custom but he believes that the number of non-believers must have been greater as the coin finds in graves are very infrequent. This observation is not valid for the 2nd century AD. In fact, the comparative reading of sources shows a large diversity. Although, we agree with the scholar that a coin offering in the grave was not a compulsory rule we must emphasizes that during the lifetime of Lucian, Charon was a more popular figure than either before or after this period.

Juvenal was active in the first half of the 2nd century AD while Lucian wrote in the second half of the same century. Juvenal’s work was an implacable critic of Roman society. As he mentioned: „in my days, it is hard not to write satires“. His satires, with *loqui communes*, were destined to the educated levels. In his second satire his targets were hypocrites of various categories. The lines 149–152 deride the human credulity and placed under the rational sign the terrifying picture of the underworld realm. Only those children who were not old enough to pay the entrance to the baths would still believe that one boat could transport thousands of people: *esse aliquos manes et subterranea regna, Cocy-*

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134 Friedländer (1923) 120–121, 141.
135 Cic. Tusc. 1, V, 10.
tum et Stygio ranas in gurgite nigras/atque una transire uadum tot milia cumba/ nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum aere lauantur.137

The subject of the second Satire is the patron-client relationship. Umbricius, the fictional friend of Juvenal, gives a speech on his reasons for going to Rome. During this speech he mentions the following episode. A man was crushed by a chariot load of marble from Liguria. At his house the slaves prepared the funerary banquet which was totally useless. That person died suddenly, thus, he has no coin in his mouth to pay for the passage. He is waiting on the shore and shivers because of the ferryman. In this paragraph the coin is the weakest link of the myth which does not stay a rational investigation: so, if you have no money with you when you die, Charon will not take you? Some decades later this rhetorical question will be the center of humour in Lucian’s work. The author wrote that it will be better not to pay for the passage, thus, Charon will escort you back to life.138 It seems certain, Apuleius would not be laughing at these scorns!

In another paragraph Juvenal mentions the crossing tax with the word *triens*, a bronze denomination of the Roman republican monetary system – 1/3 of *as* (4 ounces): *infelix nec habet quem porrigat ore trientem*.139 The using of this term is not accidental; the poet found a perfect word for rhyme and, at the same time, suggests that the ‘traditional’ fee was plainly a coin of low value.

The denial of life after death was a fashionable concept in some circles of Roman society.140 Not only the poets but also some commoners were espousing that the stories of the underworld are lies. This pessimistic eschatological perspective is mentioned on some inscriptions from the Early Roman Empire. One case is the marble plaque found in Vila Pamphilia in Rome, dated to the first half of the 3rd century AD. The inscription is a will referring to the *ius sepulcri* of M. Antonius Encolpus who built the grave (a mausoleum?) for himself, his wife, his freed slave Athenaeus Antonius and the heirs of the freed-slave except for M. Antonius Athenio. The reason for the exception was the inappropriate behaviour of Antonius Athenio, who was forbidden to enter the grave. All those who will not respect this will be fined 50,000 *sestertii*. The lines in Latin are followed by 14 lines in Greek which can be translated as: „Traveller, do not just pass near my funerary inscription; Stay silent and read, then leave. //In Hades there is no Charon, no boat.//Neither Aiakos, the keeper of the keys, nor Cerberus. //We all, those who are dead in the grave beneath/Are only bones and ashes, nothing more. //I say this openly. Now, traveller, leave. //Otherwise you may think that I remained a rattler even after death.“141

It is clear that Encolpius chose these lines as they expressed his feelings about death. Still, it is interesting that the nihilist philosophy is joined by a strong care regarding the grave and his loved ones. Through this aspect certifies not a true survival after death but the memory of the deceased. The scepticism of the world below is not a new idea – it appears in the 3rd century BC in some Greek epigrams – but the Romans interpreted this as an excuse for a decadent life.142 A similar concept appears in Ovidius’ *Metamor-
phases when Pythagoras affirms that words like „Styx“ and „darkness“ are simple poetic images and the people should not be scared of them. In this eschatological concept everything is in a permanent change, the body knows no pain because it is just decomposing material while the soul never dies. The message from Ovidius is clear: live your life, put piety away, and do not be scared of death as the underworld does not exist. Similar ideas were expressed some centuries earlier on a funerary inscription which Kalli-machos wrote for the generations to come:

„Tell us, is Charidas resting in grave? – , certainly, if you think the son of Arimmas from Cyrene, he is resting beneath me.‘ – 
,Charidas, how is it down there?‘ – „Very dark!“ – „how is it with the return‘ – 
,A lie!‘ – , and Pluto?‘ Just a story!‘ – „Then everything is over.‘ – 
This is the truth with no gold cover but if you want (to hear) it in a nice way: „Here, a strong ox cost one pellaios – a small value coin from Pella, Macedonia.„

Lucian lived approximately between 125 and 180 AD and was born in Samosata (Commagene). He was a brilliant rhetorician and travelled to Greece, Italy and Gaul, becoming famous in the erudite circles. Lucian presented Charon in 8 of his 82 works. In three of them – Cataplus, Charon and Dialogi mortuorum – the ferryman is even one of the main characters. This aspect suggests an increased interest for Charon by contemporary society. One can easily note that the majority of Roman representations of Charon (sarcophagi, altars) also date from the 2nd century AD. No doubt that Charon became a central character in the folk superstitions, an aspect confirmed by the increased frequency of coin finds in funerary contexts in this period.

Lucian’s works reveal interesting details regarding the perception of Charon in the imagination of the common man in Roman society – in this context the term „Roman“ defines all inhabitants of the Roman Empire. In Heracles, Lucian describes Heracles Ogmios as a Celtic god. This Heracles is portrayed as a very old man, with a bald head except for a few white strands, his skin is ridged and burnt black: „You would take him for some infernal deity, for Charon or Iapetus, – anyone other than Heracles.„ These lines suggest that in the time of Lucian the image of Charon was conventionally known to everyone as a disgusting and freighting character. The parallel with Heracles Ogmios, an unusual depiction of the hero, indicates that Charon’s figure was a standard reference, something that came immediately to mind. His brutality must have been one of the loci communes of Antiquity. An argument along this line can be retrieved in the humours essay of the philosopher Demonax. The shrunken shanks of old age are commonplace; but when his reached this state, someone asked him what was the matter with them: „Ah,“ he said with a smile, „Charon has been having a bite at them.„

143 Ov. met. 15, 153.  
144 Beckby (1957) 310, no. 524.  
148 Lukian. Heracles, 1.  
149 Lukian. Demonax, 45.
In *Cataplus* („The Downward Journey/The Tyrant“), Charon complains to Clotho that he earned no obol because Hermes was late. His avarice seems to be another specific feature of the ferryman in the Roman period (see above at Apuleius).

And the irony of Lucian goes even further. In his work *De Luctu* he mentions the Acheron Lake which is so wide and deep that no one can cross it by foot or swimming. Not even the bird can fly above from one shore to another. One can ask if this picture is a simple poetic image or can it be interpreted as a reflection of a group mentality? This aspect is elucidated by another paragraph from Lucian’s *Cataplus*, whimsically, mentioning that Charon must turn back the boat in order to also pick up the cats, dogs, horses and other animals. The rule of humour states that the joke would never have worked if not for a clear target – a present superstition in this case. A similar case can be found in Aristophanes „The Frogs“. G. Thüry considers that there are numerous arguments of the Roman belief in the survival of animals in the underworld. He raises the question if the payment rule applied also to them. Support on this line could be the discovery from the necropolis of Heidelberg where the horses and the donkeys were inhumed and coins were found near the maxillaries.

Reading between the lines in the works of Lucian we can extract some information on various aspects connected to coin offerings in the grave. The passage fee as a *sine qua non* condition is one of them. In *Cataplus*, Charon behaves like a true ferryman. Just after embarking a boat full of souls he asks each of them to pay the tax mentioning that this is the first thing he has to do. Charon is extremely revolted when he finds out that Micyllus cannot pay. He is so poor that he even does not know if the obol is round or squared. Another non-payer, the cynic philosopher Cyniscus, is punished by Charon who puts him at the oars, like Dionysus in „The Frogs“, because he does not have with him the obol. In *Dialogi mortuorum* Charon and Menippus quarrelled with each other over paying the fee, as „there is no other alternative“ and ended up threatening to fight.

Another important detail turns up in Charon’s dialog. The ferryman comes up for a day into the world of the living to see what life is like; what men do with it, and what these blessings are of which they all lament the loss when they come down to him. He asks Hermes to be his guide. In paragraph 11 Charon and Hermes are on Mount Parnassus and watch as a man carries gold bars on his back to offer them to Apollo at Delphi. Charon sees gold for the first time. Hermes explains to him how many troubles happen because of this metal. Then, Charon asks Hermes how much difference there is in value between bronze and gold: „I know the bronze, as you know that I collect it from each one who comes in the underworld“.

Unfortunately, the literary sources do not record other explanations for the presence of coins in the grave, except as the fee for the ferryman. Most likely, Charon’s myth was one well-spread in the Mediterranean world. In the folk imagination the expenses in the
underworld could have been numerous. Within the local beliefs, in individual mentality there could have been other frightening characters of the inferno whose kindness must have to be bought as: ergo et inter mortuos avaritia vivit.\textsuperscript{158} The only possible argument on this direction comes from a paragraph in Lucian’s \textit{Charon}. Hermes warns Charon that they cannot stay longer, otherwise Aeacus,\textsuperscript{159} the keeper of the keys for Hades, will be very angry if he does not earn even an obol.\textsuperscript{160} On this line we may issue the following hypothesis regarding the presence of more than one coin in graves (separately from the use of other coin as a medallion, talisman button: the second coin in the grave may reflect this belief in paying also Aeacus to open the gates of Inferno? At the same time, even Hermes who leads the soul downwards may have collected his tax, too. It is well-known that Hermes played a double role in the funerary psychology: he led the souls downward and controlled their access to Inferno.\textsuperscript{161} And Lucian makes it very clear that Hermes, too, was extremely eager to get his money: „That is just as well, though it does keep me waiting for my money […] you can’t blame me if I am somewhat urgent for payment.“\textsuperscript{162} Some support for this theory comes from Apuleius. As we recall he mentioned that even in Inferno nothing is for free!\textsuperscript{163}

Lucian was also a moralist following the line of the Hellenistic authors of epigrams. The human vices: the avarice, the uselessness of wealth, \textit{vanitas vanitatum} all echo in his writings.\textsuperscript{164} In this context, the obol can be interpreted as \textit{pars pro toto}. Lucian also uses it to express the motif of equality in death.\textsuperscript{165} In Lucian’s \textit{Dialogi mortuorum}, two cynic philosophers, Diogenes and Crates, discuss the true fortune that a man takes with him to the underworld. These are the universal values of philosophy: wisdom, frankness, truth. Still, these values do not count for those interested only in the material fortune. „Result: our wealth [the spiritual values mentioned above] will still be ours down here; while they will arrive with no more than one penny, and even that must be left with the ferryman.“\textsuperscript{166}

In the time of Lucian, stories of the supernatural were favourite subjects at banquets and other assemblies – see Apuleius’ \textit{Metamorphoses} and the story from Lucian’s \textit{Asinus}. Although Lucian did not believe these stories he liked to narrate them and make fun of those who believed.\textsuperscript{167} The \textit{Philopseudes sive Incredulus} (The Lover of Lies, or The Doubter) is such a conversation on the supernatural, told in the house of Eucrates. One of the attendants, Cleodemus, confesses that once when he was ill in bed with a high fever he went through an experience close to death, when he saw Hermes leading him to Hades. When he entered „the Judgement-hall, there were Aeacus and Charon and the Fates and the Furies. One person of a majestic appearance – Pluto, I suppose it was – sat reading out the names of those who were due to die, their term of life having lapsed.“\textsuperscript{168} This evidence can be seen as a proof that these frightening characters were not just mythological figures, simple instruments for poets or expressions of an empty cult. They are

\textsuperscript{158} Apul. met. 6, 18, 16.
\textsuperscript{159} LIMC I, 1, 311–312.
\textsuperscript{160} Lucian. \textit{Charon}, 2.
\textsuperscript{162} Lucian. \textit{Dialogi mortuorum}, 4.
\textsuperscript{163} Apul. met. 6, 18, 16–23.
\textsuperscript{164} Lucian. \textit{Charon}, 22.
\textsuperscript{165} Lucian. \textit{Dialogi mortuorum}, 1, 3.
\textsuperscript{166} Lucian. \textit{Dialogi mortuorum}, 21, 4.
\textsuperscript{167} Harmon (1960) 319.
\textsuperscript{168} Lucian. \textit{Philopseudes}, 25.
Fig. 3: Roman lamp from Perugia. The dead led by Hermes Psychopompos embarks the boat and pays the crossing fee to Charon.¹⁶⁹

presences in the subconscious of the ancient man which manifested themselves in dreams, delirium or crisis as an expression of a primary fear. Suggestive evidence for this concept comes from the work of Artemidoros of Daldis, a professional dream interpreter at the end of the 2nd century AD. In Oniricitica, Artemidoros groups the dreams by subject and gives various ways of interpreting them. For example, a man dreams about Charon with whom he plays dice, the demon – named so by Artemidoros – losing the game got angry and follows the man, in this way he predicts death.¹⁷⁰ In this context Charon

¹⁶⁹ Müller/Wieseler (1836).
¹⁷⁰ Artem. Oniricitica, 1, 4.
is a synonym to death, a frightful demon, similar to the Etruscan Charun, who can trouble people’s dreams. Charon is not described at all in the time of Artemidoros, just saying the name of Charon was enough to produce fear.

The instruments of Lucian are irony and humour. With their help Lucian entirely desacralized the character of Charon and makes a total mockery of the obol custom. Lucian’s work is important not only for the topic of this study but also because he questions the whole network of funerary customs practiced in the ancient societies. His verdict is quite clear: the funerary practices are totally useless, they are simple repressions of those in suffering. Not only the work De Luctu („On Funerals“), but Charon, too, present in detail the funerary ceremony and accessories used in the Mediterranean world (perfumes, garlands, food offerings), as well as mentioning the belief regarding the dead returning to the grave to consume them. Charon (and through him Lucian) talking to Hermes gives his opinion on this aspect: „there are idiots those who believe that they can return on earth from the shadows’ world, as there is only one passage! A sinister question – why the dead need drinks [as an offering] when their brain is totally dried out? – lays stress about the futility of funerary practices“.172

In the essay on funerals, Charon’s fee, present through placing a coin in the mouth of the dead, is also considered a worthless act. An ironic comment, à la Lucian, makes us smile: „So profoundly have the common people been impressed with these doctrines that, when a man dies, the first act of his relations is to put a penny into his mouth, that he may have wherewithal to pay the ferryman: they do not stop to inquire what is the local currency, whether Attic or Macedonian or Aeginetan; nor does it occur to them how much better it would be for the departed one if the fare were not forthcoming,— because then the ferryman would decline to take him, and he would be sent back into the living world“173. The pronoun „they“ makes it clear that it is not an isolated case but a wide-spread custom amongst naïve and superstitious people whom Lucian and those of his kind detested. No doubt, Lucian criticised and mocked an active phenomenon in his time!174

The late ancient authors (4th–6th centuries AD)

The absence of literary sources in the 3rd century AD is not surprising. It is a general phenomenon caused by political and social uncertainty following the civil wars and barbarian raids. The society was less interested in literature and history, and the patronage is almost absent. At the same time the Christian literature (mainly, the theological and apologetic works) was an alternative to the development of Latin literature in the following centuries.175

Claudianus was a poet at the court of emperor Arcadius and Stilichon, a general of Vandal origins. Although he wrote in Latin, his works were inspired by Greco-Roman mythology, the models were the personalities of the pagan literature. The poems were addressed mainly to the court with great success in front of an educated audience: senators, imperial clerks, etc. In his De Raptu Proserpinae, Claudianus presents a detailed de-

172 Lukian. Charon, 22.
174 Friedlaender (1923) 129.
175 Albrecht (1992) 1018.
scription of inferno, in which, traditionally, the ferryman cannot be absent. Charon is mentioned at the moment of Pluto’s wedding with Proserpina, when for a short time death and sufferance take a break in Hades. Charon is the same old man with wild hair: *Impexcamque senex velavit barrundine frontem/portitor et vacuos egit cum carmine remos.*\(^{176}\)

In the invective work by Claudianus, *In Rufinum*, the loaded boat of Charon, *portitor alno*, has numerous victims of the northern war (caused by Rufinus).\(^{177}\) Although Claudianus does not mention anything about the custom of Charon’s obol, the paragraph shows that the poetic picture of Charon is still alive at the end of the 4th century AD. Such a theory is supported by a commentator of Vergilius, Servius, who refers to a lost work on Orpheus.\(^{178}\) This aspect is certified by the work of a contemporary poet from Egypt, Nonnus, who wrote about the river of Charon on whose shore one can hear the groans from Tartarus.\(^{179}\)

Another important source is a commentary on Juvenal’s works dated at the end of the 4th-beginning of the 5th centuries AD. The anonymous author while commenting on the episode of the man crushed by a chariot\(^{180}\) mentions that the custom to place a coin on the dead is still practiced in his day in Athens to assure that Charon will take the dead in his boat and not to get lost in Inferno like all those who are unburied.\(^{181}\) Remarkable is this author’s style of observation, a kind of ‘by the way …’, which lets us consider that the custom was indeed in practice in Athens in the 4th century AD. As a demon of death the figure of Charon survived over centuries and became known in the Greek folklore as Charondas.\(^{182}\) Another aspect is one of a conceptual nature. As in the case of body inhumation, the coin offering continued to be a fundamental condition for the soul to find its peace.\(^{183}\)

Another source, *Argonautica Orphica* is an epopee written probably at the beginning of the 5th century. Orpheus tells the story of the Argonauts in Kolchis return trip. On their journey they meet Hyperboreans, Macrobians and Cimerians and Hermionians. The privilege of Hermionians, a *topos* known from the 3rd century BC (see above at Kallimachos) is recalled and new details are added. The most righteous people from Hermione are free of the passage fee (ναύλω). In this region is an abyss where the souls cross the Acheron with a boat and then enter the inferno.\(^{184}\) This shortcut is mentioned by four Greek authors who wrote at different times and areas (Kallimachos, Strabon, Pausanias and *Argonautica Orphica*). We do not know how much this story was spread through all common people but the hypothesis that such stories or local legends of shortcuts which could have existed in other areas, too – in order to avoid paying taxes – cannot be entirely ignored.

The author of epigrams, Iulianos, prefect of Egypt in the first half of the 6th Century AD, is the latest source that mentions Charon. By style and subject he can be considered an imitator of the Hellenistic authors of epigrams, Leonidas of Tarent and Antipater of

178 Serv. Aen. 6, 392.
179 Nonn. Dion. 36, 204–205.
181 Scholia vetustiora, 3, 266.
182 Schmidt (1871) 222–224.
183 Prop. 4, 11, 7.
184 Argonautica Orphica, 1136–1141.
Sidon etc. In a dialog on death as the destiny of all people Charon is used as a poetic figure to suggest death. He is a wild man who broke youthfulness before it’s time but at the same time a kind character who freed people from life’s sufferance.\(^{185}\) In another funerary epigram, Iulianos laments the premature death of a young girl. The ferryman is mentioned here as one who also sighs over the sad fate of the girl.\(^{186}\)

An epitaph on a marble plaque from Rome dated in the 4th century AD\(^ {187}\) suggests a personal philosophy on life and death. The dead eulogizes a happy life. He, Alexander, and his wife, Valentina, who rest together in the grave, had a peaceful death, and their beloved daughter, Paulina, gave birth to three grandsons, thus, the house will be well looked after. The epitaph continues in an allegoric style transmitting a universal message, a profound faith in life and youthfulness which cannot be defeated by death and caducity. The evocation of Thanatos and Charon means imminent death. No matter how ferocious they were they cannot destroy faith. The death that came too late has no power upon elders and ill men who are „a pathetic assembly for Charon“. The similarity of the concepts ‚death‘ – ‚Charon‘ is obvious. As mentioned above, through the centuries these elements became interchangeable with each other. The metonymy is complete in the Byzantine encyclopaedia *Suidas*, s. v. Charon: Χάρων: ὁ θάνατος, where the two concepts have the same meaning.\(^{188}\)

Two more sources deserve our attention as they mention the figure of Charon. The *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecum* is a compendium of Greek proverbs gathered over centuries. In one proverb, assigned to Aesop, Charon appears as an allegory of the non-existence, of death itself, in contrast with Zeus who is the symbol of life: „May be Zeus, may be Charon: may be merry life, may be the end.“\(^ {189}\) This expression where the two gods make a contrasting pair contains a fundamental Greek conception upon death and life.\(^ {190}\)

Apostolius, who wrote in the 15th century and used many ancient and Byzantine references,\(^ {191}\) noted the following proverb: „The door of Charon: is the one where those condemned to death pass through“.\(^ {192}\) Charon has become the symbol of an eschatological concept: the lintel towards death (inferno?), that those condemned (the sinners?) must cross. If these proverbs circulated orally, as nowadays, it means that for the ancient man the image and the signification of Charon were indelibly impregnated in his psyche.

**Conclusions**

The ancient literary sources that mention Charon can be organized in three categories:

A. The literary works in which Charon is evoked in an allegoric style, where he is a synonym to imminent death; to the ritual of crossing and incorporation into the afterlife. In the poetic style this crossing fee, paid with a coin of low value, became a method to express a philosophical and moral concept: the worthless act to save material fortune and the equality in death. Here we can include the series of epigrams from *Anthologia*
Palatina; the dramas by Aeschylus and Euripides; the works of Hellenistic poets and those from the golden and silver eras of Latin literature. In the few late literary sources Charon appears with classical features.

B. The ferryman, as an instrument of irony and humour, is present in the works of some ancient authors: Aristophanes, Juvenal, Lukillios, Petronius and Lucian of Samosata. Their intention is to present a mirror of the society they live in and to this aim they ridicule not only Charon but, especially, the custom regarding the passage moment and the placing of a coin on the body. Certainly, their irony would not hit the target without an audience aware of this practice.

C. This category includes those who mention the myth of Charon without a poetic, philosophic or moral purpose. We can enumerate here the historians Diodorus of Sicily, Flavius Josephus, the geographer Strabo and the clairvoyant Artemidoros of Daldis. Whatever the style: anecdotal, description of an ancient topos, a ‘scientific’ or occult explanation, these sources speak ‘openly’ and authentically on a character with a well-defined appearance and duty in the group mentality. Significant on this line is the testimony of Apuleius in his Apologia combined with the fictional story of Amor and Psyche in which the greedy Charon becomes the ‘locker’ itself for Hades’ gates. The Scholia Vetusiora is the latest source that mentions the placing of a coin in the mouth of the dead as a practicing custom in Athens in the 4th century.

These sources are completed by personal testimonies on funerary inscriptions from the Greek through the Roman periods. The collective memory kept the image of Charon, with changes or not, from the beginning of the 5th century BC until late Antiquity.

D. There are defining and constant features of Charon (e.g. lack of patience, frightening appearance, synonymy with death, the low value of the coin for the tax) but also some variables according to the historical period, writer’s personality and the literary message to be transmitted (e.g. overloading the boat, exemption from tax payment, ‘bribing’, the avarice of the ferryman, and, sometimes, his kindness).

E. The fear of annihilation and the desire for life are some of the most powerful and primary instincts of human beings. This ascertainment may elucidate the ‘success’ of Charon’s myth over centuries. His picture articulates this fear and through him death is not something unexpected. Therefore, despite the fact that in the collective mentality he is depicted as a sinister character, as death, still it has a calming effect because his boat assures the journey to another world where the further existence is guaranteed. At the same time, Charon is the warrant for the inviolability of the border between the worlds of the living and the dead. From this perspective one can understand the necessity of materialization of the relationship between the dead and Charon through an intermediary object, the crossing fee – during the funerary ritual this is present by placing the coin in the mouth. Susanne Stevens has ingeniously defined this aspect, „in essence is the only logical response to avaricious dead. Money is the only effective commodity in dealing with the underworld.“

F. There was also a sceptic attitude regarding the myth of Charon and the practice of coin offerings in the graves during the Roman period. Some scholars were convinced that the Roman sources were simply echoes empty of contents of the old Greek cus-

193 Friedlaender (1923) 315.
The detailed analysis of literary and iconographic sources demonstrate that for the Roman period Charon's myth underwent an increasing process of popularity. Furthermore, there are aspects that suggest a divine character of Charon in this period – this aspect was also noted by G. Thüry196 (votive inscriptions, authors that call him god – Vergilius, Cicero, or demon – Lucian, Artemidoros). Flavius Josephus wrote about the libations to Charon while Lucanus wrote a prayer for him.

G. Thüry drew attention to the fact that the majority of literary sources are dated in the Roman imperial period,197 but did not note that the most important of them regarding coin offerings, are grouped in the 2nd century AD. Here must be pointed out the negative testimony of the sceptic authors, such as Juvenal and Lucian. We may say that there are two antagonistic parallel phenomena. As the beliefs and funerary practices were gaining ground in the collective mentality, the same was happening with the need of the educated to ridicule these superstitions within society, fighting with the weapons – irony, humour – mocking and criticizing at the same time.

Was the 2nd century AD a favourable one for the strong development of superstitions at various levels of society? This was a period when the cults of various gods and spirits intertwined leading to a non-homogeneous syncretic amalgam. Is the high frequency of coins issued in the period Antoninus Pius – Commodus and their discovery in the graves a reflection of this explosion of superstitions? It seems that the spiritual environment of the 2nd century AD was one that encouraged the increase of religiosity and the spread of folklore. Some scholars have mentioned a restoration of faith that may be reflected in the literary legacy of this period.198 The emperors of the Antonine dynasty were regarded as true examples of piety. It must be acknowledged that the ancient authors unanimously glorified the important emperors of the Antonine dynasty (Trajan – Marcus Aurelius) and the piety they showed to the gods.199 No doubt, stoicism – a philosophic movement of great influence in the 2nd century AD – offered spiritual support to the folk beliefs as it attempted to conciliate faith with philosophy. In the stoic philosophy the divine force is present everywhere, as everything, said Epictetus, is full of gods and demons.200 Not only the mob but also the educated need the protection and the guidance of gods. Marcus Aurelius confesses that he does not want to live in a godless world, [...] quid mea refert vivere in mundo vacuo diis aut providentia vacuo?201

Practically, the folk beliefs have a strong conservative character. The 'enlightened' ideas in Lucian’s works and epitaphs denying a life beyond death did not penetrate and find lodgement in the mob mentality. Doubtless, the funerary inscriptions that expressed a materialist conception are numerous in the Roman time,202 but, still, they are a minority when compared with those issuing a profound faith, either by language or iconography. The most significant testimony on this conservative character is represented by the thousands of graves full of offerings specific to the cult of dead in the Mediterranean world: pitchers, lamps, unguentaria, and coins. These artefacts have become the standard
offerings not only in Rome but also in the provincial necropolises belonging to the Romanized communities from Britannia to Dacia.203

The contractual feature of Roman religion is a framework which life’s key moments must pass through and this means services that must be paid/fulfilled (rituals, offerings). In exchange the environment is a peaceful life because everything is running according to the religious prescriptions and a calm existence beyond death for the loved one who has passed away. One element with a consolation power was a coin of small value that by its presence represents all the material wealth left behind. The coin could be designated to Charon, as well as Aeacus or any other characters of the inferno according to each individual fantasy.

Those who consider that the variety of coin finds in graves (the placement, the ritual style of the offering – burnt/not burnt, denomination, etc.) does not show a common acceptance of this belief – the ferryman myth – are only partially correct. The reality proves that there can be different explanations for the presence of coins inside the grave (linked to local customs, personal superstitions, fashion, etc.), but these are exceptions and must be studied case by case. The role played by the coin offering in the classical antiquity cannot be understood without taking into account the impact of the Charon’s myth upon the ancient society.

Summary

This paper proposes to analyse different features of the well-known Greco-Roman myth of Charon, the ferryman, who transported souls from this life to the underworld. The popularity of the boatman in ancient times can be demonstrated in the literary sources which evoke his figure through 12 centuries (from the 6th century BC to the 6th century AD).

The research is focused on the analyses of written sources (Greek and Latin authors and some epigraphic evidence) supplemented by figural representations, in order to penetrate the collective mentality of the society, to understand the imaginary world of the ordinary people and the relationship between myth, superstition and ritual acts.

The works of 55 ancient authors were sorted in six chronological and cultural sequences aiming to follow the changes which took place in the approach of the topic through the centuries: 1. Pre-classical and classical authors (6th–5th century BC); 2. Hellenistic authors; 3. Authors from the 1st century BC; 4. Authors from the 1st century AD. 5. Authors from the 2nd century AD; 6. Late Roman authors 4th–6th centuries AD.

Key words: Charon der Fährmann, Übergangsritual, Gruppenmentalität, Aberglaube, Fährgeld.

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