

# **The Power of Hands: Decoding non-verbal Knowledge Transfer on Roman Provincial Tombstones**

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the transfer of the gestural language within the funerary art from two western provinces of the Roman Empire, Noricum and Pannonia. Contemporary scholarship often has seen these gestures on Norican and Pannonian tombstones as signs of Roman citizenship, intellectual superiority, or social status, and often accredits them with being attention-getting. The present paper suggests, in contrast, that some gestures may not have been Roman in nature but a consequence of previously-established un-Roman gestures coming from the Near East, which were appropriated into the local set of values and norms.

The survey of gestural language on various tombstones from across the Roman world has revealed that particular gestures are essentially absent from Britain, Gaul, and Germany but are extremely common in Noricum and Pannonia with some presence in Roman Dacia. Around 500 tombstones have been recorded from Noricum and Pannonia, which exhibit the various gestures and combinations of them. The following hand gestures and gestural combinations of lower arm have been detected: extended index and middle fingers of either right or left hand; extended index and middle right hand fingers touching a scroll; extended index finger; extended pinkie with or without a ring; ‘horns-of-the-bull’ gesture; *benedictio latina*.

In general, both the right and left hands on the funerary monuments in Noricum and Pannonia were held in a variety of gestural combinations; portraits of individuals suggest that they could mix and match gestures that they thought were appropriate (fig. 1). A vital and overlooked aspect in this sense is the necessity to depict a particular gesture on a rather expensive monument to emphasize its importance. Images were carefully carved and fingers were carefully arranged in specific ways. This indicates that these gestures were more than conventions and there was a deliberate choice made by the customers ordering the tombstones to have their hands depicted in specific gestures.

It is notable that similar hand gestures and combinations occur massively in the Near East. Correlating gestures and gestural combinations are seen in the funerary art of Syria, particularly in the city of Palmyra. There the individuals were portrayed holding their right and left hands on the funerary monuments in similar gestural combinations.<sup>1</sup> The connection between Syria and Pannonia lies in the presence of the Syrian soldiers and their family members at a few Roman military forts along the Danube corridor. Some scholars intriguingly call this community either a ‘Syrian colony on Danube’ or a truly ‘Syrian enclave’.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the gestural language on Norican-Pannonian tombstones had its origins in Syrian funerary art, but it is unlikely that the messages expressed through the gestures had anything to do with being Syrian or Palmyreni. This



Fig. 1: Funerary monument from Sirmium (modern Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) depicting a family of three, with both the man and woman holding their right hands in the gesture of an extended index and middle finger, and their left hand in the 'horns-of-the-bull' gesture.

Syrian gestural funeral language may have emerged in Noricum and Pannonia as a new regional cultural form embedded with socially constructed meanings specific to these two provinces.

One also needs to keep in mind that in the Roman West, hands and various gestures feature prominently in public and private art, as well as in material culture. For instance, the index and middle finger extended gesture is analogous to the copper alloy votive hands devoted to the god Sabazios, a Thracian-Phrygian deity. Bronze hands were also used as cult offerings across the Roman northwest in the cultic symbiosis of the Northern Syrian storm god Dolichenus with the Roman god Jupiter: bronze hands were made in a palm-out gesture. In the material culture of the western Roman provinces, the right hand features prominently on objects of material culture. For instance, there are hairpins made in copper alloy and bone that have heads in the shape of a right hand with the thumb and index finger bent to hold a spherical object (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 2: Cast copper alloy hair pin in the form of a hand with fingers holding a circular object (now lost), late first – early second century AD. Found near Horncastle, East Lindsey, Lincolnshire, UK.

Therefore, the depiction of the human hand or making a decorative object in a form of a hand in the provinces were undoubtedly dynamic representations imbued with multiple meanings, which served as a powerful means of symbolic communication. These gestures were not passive things to be looked at or consumed as attention-grabbing conventions. Each culture or tribal entity seems to have deliberately used the gestural language in art and material culture media to project and emphasize aspects of their socio-cultural systems that were unique to them.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Heyn 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Fitz 1972, 128–197; Spaul 2000, 413.

<sup>3</sup> Eckardt 2014.

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### References

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