

# FUNERARY ALTAR FOR PUBLIUS NOVIUS THIASUS

ROMAN, CAEND OF THE 1ST-BEGINNING OF THE 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY AD  
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 121 CM.

WIDTH: 72 CM.

DEPTH: 64 CM.

*PROVENANCE:*

*DISCOVERED IN MAY 1861 ON THE  
APPIAN WAY IN ALBANUM (PRESENT-  
DAY ALBANO LAZIALE).*

*FORMERLY IN THE COLLECTION OF  
THOMAS SHIELDS CLARKE (1860-1920),  
AMERICAN PAINTER AND SCULPTOR, AT  
FERNBROOK ESTATE, LENOX,  
MASSACHUSETTS, ACQUIRED AT THE  
END OF THE 19TH-BEGINNING OF THE  
20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY; THE ALTAR REMAINED IN  
SITU AT FERNBROOK UNTIL THE 1970S,  
WHEN THE PROPERTY WAS PURCHASED  
BY AVALON SCHOOLS.*

*WITH THE BRADFORD AUCTION  
GALLERY, SHEFFIELD,  
MASSACHUSETTS.*

*PRIVATE COLLECTION OF LEE ELMAN  
(1936-2022), ACQUIRED FROM THE  
FORMER AT AN AUCTION TOWARDS THE  
MIDDLE OF THE 1970S AND INSTALLED IN  
ASTON MAGNA, GREAT BARRINGTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS.*

*THEN PASSED DOWN BY DESCENT.  
THEN IN AN AMERICAN PRIVATE  
COLLECTION UNTIL 2023, ACQUIRED  
FROM THE FORMER.*

This Roman funerary altar presents a rectangular structure surmounted by a triangular pediment adorned with stylised floral motifs, probably foliated scrolls and rosettes, as well as spirals. The flat main face is framed by sculpted pilasters and bears a funerary inscription in Latin, carefully

engraved within a rectangular frame. The inscription, dedicated to Publius Novius Thiasus, also mentions its commissioner, Publius Novius Callistus, and attests to a posthumous act respecting testamentary provisions.



*P. NOVIO  
P. L. THIASO  
P. NOVIUS  
CALLISTUS  
FECIT  
EX TESTAMENTO  
VS SVB A FRONI*



This inscription can be translated as follows: “To Publius Novius Thiasus, freedman of Publius. Publius Novius Callistus had [this altar] built according to the testament [and] on the order of his patron”. This means that the first person referred to was a freedman, *i.e.*, a former slave, of the Novii family, who adopted the name of his former master. Publius Novius Callistus, who commissioned the altar, was, himself, a freedman, having probably belonged to Thiasus before being freed. As a *patronus*, Thiasus perhaps included in his testament the obligation for Callistus to erect the altar in his honour. The last line of the inscription is incomplete and open to interpretation, but it could designate a use clause or a specific location linked to the monument.



The lateral faces of the altar are decorated with various plant motifs such as rosettes and stylised foliate elements, which add to the ornamental, sacred dimension of the altar,

attesting to the care that went into its construction and the importance accorded to the memory of the deceased. One of the sides presents a Latin inscription added at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by its owner. The posterior face, often less visible, nevertheless displays meticulous decoration, a sign that the altar could have been placed in such a way that it could be viewed from several angles. There again, there is a moulded frame, perhaps intended for another inscription or a painted element, as well as volutes and geometric motifs, contributing to the aesthetic balance of the piece.



Funerary altars make up a distinct category of Roman funerary monuments, between the simple stele and the monumental sarcophagus. Very common during the Roman Empire, they were mainly dedicated to the memory of the deceased and served as commemorative points for family rites. They were often placed on tombs or in *columbaria*,

places where funerary urns were stored. Generally rectangular, they were sometimes surmounted by a pediment and decorated with lateral pilasters, imitating secular and religious architecture. They mostly displayed figurative reliefs (deities, funerary scenes, ceremonial objects, etc.) and foliate motifs (garlands, foliate scrolls, etc.). Some extant examples feature portraits of the deceased. The main face always displayed an inscription mentioning the deceased and their origins (citizen or freedman) and sometimes including a text expressing a dedication or an appeal to passersby. The type of our funerary altar was thus quite common; many similar examples can be found in various museums, such as those preserved at the Louvre (Ill. 1 and 2). The characteristic form of the Latin inscription engraved within a rectangular frame and surrounded with architectural elements such as spirals can be recognised in many other altars (Ill. 3-7). These comparisons enable us to place the altar of Publius Novius Thiasus within Roman tradition. Moreover, it reflects the importance of social status in Rome, where freedmen formed a large class, between slavery and citizenship, and sometimes retained obligations to their former masters. Thiasus, as a patron, had freed Callistus through manumission, and the latter had then taken care to execute his testament. Funerary dedications are of surpassing importance, as they make it possible to learn more about the family structures and social practices of ancient Rome. They also illustrate the ties between freedmen and former masters, as well as the latter's preoccupation with ensuring their memory lived on in their community.



Our funerary altar was discovered in May 1861, during the excavation of a Roman villa on the Appian Way in Albanum (present-day Albano Laziale, in Italy). It was found with a cippus bearing the inscription of Publius Novius Symphorus, probably a member of the same house. This discovery is documented in the Catholic review *La Civiltà Cattolica* ("Catholic civilisation" – Ill. 8). Shortly after its discovery, the altar was acquired by Thomas Shields Clarke (1860-1920 – Ill. 9), an American painter and sculptor, who installed it on his property of Fernbrook in Lenox, Massachusetts. In around 1910, Clarke turned the altar into a sundial by adding a short Latin inscription on one side: "*Sol redit. Tempus numquam.*" ("The sun returns. Time, never.") A series of photographs and a drawing of the altar *in situ* at Fernbrook are preserved at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Ill. 10-11). Another photograph of the altar, published in Louise Shelton's work



*Beautiful Gardens in America*, tells us that it was still in the garden of that property in 1915 (Ill. 12). The altar remained there until the 1970s, when it was sold by the Bradford Auction Gallery in Sheffield, Massachusetts. It was then acquired by Lee Elman (1936–2022), the co-founder of the music festival of the same name, who installed it on his property in Aston Magna, Great Barrington, Massachusetts. It stayed there until it was passed down by descent. It was then acquired in 2023.

### Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Altar dedicated to Cybele by Julius Italicus, Roman, 13 April 305, marble, H.: 104.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. Ma 1369.



Ill. 2. Funerary altar dedicated to the deities of the underworld by Cupitus Atticianus, Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 59 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Ma 2200.



Ill. 3. Altar dedicated to Augustus, Roman, 20 BC–AD 37, marble, H.: 148 cm. Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, inv. no. 60.1.1.



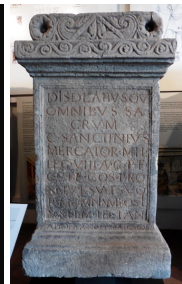
Ill. 4. Funerary altar dedicated by Valeria Donata to her husband Tiberius Claudius Corinthius and to herself, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 73 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1914.0627.2.



Ill. 5. Funerary altar of Clodius Blastus, Roman, ca AD 100–120, marble. Vatican Museums, inv. no. MV.790.0.0.



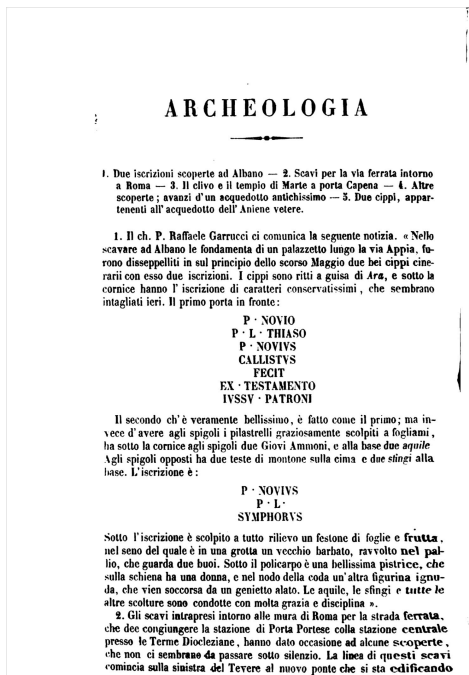
Ill. 6. Votive altar dedicated to Cybele by Aulus Flavius Athenio, Roman, 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, marble, H.: 76 cm. Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse, inv. no. Ra 220.



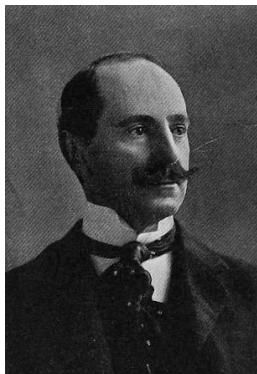
Ill. 7. Votive altar of Caius Sanctinius Mercator, Roman, 13 January 191, sandstone, H.: 128 cm. Rörmuseum Obernburg, Obernburg am Main.



## Provenance:



### Ill. 8. *La Civiltà Cattolica* ("Catholic civilisation").

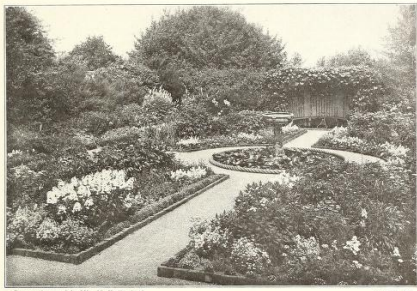


### Ill. 9. Thomas Shields Clarke (1860–1920).

Ill. 10. Drawing by Thomas Shields Clarke, "Sundial Roman Altar – Fountain", end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black ink and graphite on cream laid paper, H.: 15.9 cm – W.: 12.7 cm. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, inv. no. 1985.X.16.

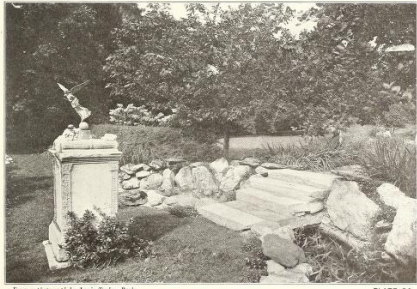


Ill. 11. Autochromes of Thomas Shield Clarke's garden, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



From a photograph by Miss M. H. Scotland  
"Overlook," Wrentham, Mass. J. A. Burnham, Esq.

PLATE 23



From a photograph by Jessie Tucker Hall  
"Fernbrooke," Lenox, Mass. Thomas Shields Clark, Esq.

PLATE 24

Ill. 12. L. Shelton, *Beautiful Gardens in America*, New York, 1915, pl. 24.

### Publications:

- "Archeologia" ("Archaeology"), *La Civiltà Cattolica* ("Catholic civilisation"), twelfth year, Vol. XI, Ser. IV, 1861, p. 732.
- H. Dessau, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* ("Collection of Latin inscriptions"), Vol. XIV, Berlin, 1887, p. 228, no. 2360.

**2360** cippus marmoreus. Albani rep. una cum  
n. 2359 GARR., extat eodem loco quo ille.

P • N O V I O  
P • L • T H I A S O  
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C A L L I S T V S  
5 F E C I T  
E X • T E S T A M E N T O  
I V S S V P A T R O N I

Descripsimus Brunn Helbig Gatti ego. Edidit  
Garrucci *Civiltà cattolica* ser. IV vol. 11 (1861)  
p. 733.

- L. Shelton, *Beautiful Gardens in America*, New York, 1915, pl. 24.