Funerary Practice
Rituals and Ideology of the Orientalizing Aristocracies: Pisa and the Origins of the Funus Imaginarium

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The excavation of a large tumulus, built between the end of the 8th and the first decades of the 7th centuries in the necropolis of Pisa has revealed the traces of a very complex ritual that sheds light on the origins of the funeral ceremonies of the Roman emperors. This paper aims to present to an honoured colleague, for the first time, both the monument and the associated rituals.

This volume celebrates a great scholar and, for me, a great friend, to whom, along with her unforgettable partner, I owe an introduction to another unforgettable friend, Giuseppe Sinopoli. Here I offer some observations on a monument, which I had the good fortune to show to Sybille in the field, long ago on the 17th October 1995, a few days after the excavation began, and she was kind enough to recall this, honouring the discovery with a page in her manual of the Etruscan world (Haynes 2000).

On 3 October 1559, Hercules II, fourth Duke of Ferrara died, aged just over 50, from an unexpected and unidentified ‘fever’. From 6 October the corpse, dressed in the ducal robes, was laid in state in a mortuary chapel on a raised catafalque, surrounded by candles. Next, after the body was embalmed, a vigil was kept for the Duke for nearly 50 days in the chapel of the palace. The vigil was broken on 20 November when his heir, Alphonso, secretly returned to Ferrara, from France where he had been when his father died. The following day, in secret, without any pomp and with few companions, the body of Hercules II was buried in the church of the monastery of Corpus Domini, that is to say in the mausoleum of the Este family.

The funeral ceremony of Hercules II did not, however, end here. On the 26th November 1559 the son finally made an appearance in the city with great pomp, in a dramatic and solemn procession through the streets of Ferrara, embellished for the occasion with a series of architectural ephemera: arches, faux architecture, trophies, displays, fountains, allegorical statues and the like. The procession concluded at the cathedral, where a religious ceremony sanctified the coronation of Alphonso as fifth Duke of Ferrara.

The next day, with the public buildings draped in black, the solemn funeral of Hercules II took place. Following a ceremony, first attested in modern times in 1327 for Edward II of England (Litten 1994, 4–5), a ‘plaster statue in the form of an effigy of the Duke, in death’ received the oration of the Ducal Secretary. It celebrated the ancestry of the Este and exulted the virtues of the deceased. Next the funeral procession, with the effigy of the Duke laid on a litter, carried on the shoulders of 14 gentlemen and followed by a riderless war horse, with a brocade harness, set off from the castle to the cathedral, retracing the same route taken by Alphonso the previous day. It continued to the church of Corpus Domini where, with the insignia of the officials of Hercules II laid on the bier, the brothers finally completed the ‘funeral ceremony and the most solemn obsequies’.

The complex ceremonies that were staged in Ferrara – carefully reconstructed in detail and analysed a few years ago (Ricci 1998) – intimately wove together the funeral rituals and the rites of succession. Although it constituted an unicum in the Italian scene, it was completely justified from the political standpoint of the Este duchy. However, it also fits into a long ideological tradition associated with the French monarchy, and it had achieved its definitive structure a few years earlier in 1547, in the funeral of Francis I (Giesey 1987a, 127 s.; Giesey 1987b, 18 s.).

Long ago, it was noted that the ceremony, that originated a few generations earlier, had been modelled, by the Valois, on the apotheoses of the Roman emperors (Kantorowicz 1957). In particular, the complex ritual appears to be a reproduction of the imperial funera of Trajan (Epit. de Caes. 13, 11; Richard 1966a) and Septimius Severus (Dio Cass. LXXVI, 15, 3–4; Herodian, IV, 2, 1–11; Richard 1966b, 789–92) that were described by authors well known to French scholars for a good half century.

The funus imperatorum entailed a set of ceremonies that were surprising and compulsory and were intimately associated with the apotheosis of the emperor (consecratio). These were firmly anchored in the same ideals that underlay the rituals of a triumph (cf. Richard 1978, 1122–5), as shown by, amongst others, a celebrated passage of Seneca concerning the funeral of Drusus the Elder that underlines how the funus might be simillimum triumphi (Sen. Consol. ad Marc. 3, 2).

From the 2nd century, that is from when the practice of inhumation was spreading, according to the numerous known literary references, the ceremony had two stages. First, the exequiae during which the mortal remains of the emperor received burial, and then the funus publicum, a complex and articulated ritual, during which a wax effigy of the emperor, dressed in triumphal robes (ἐν ἐπικράτει στολήν: Dio Cass. LV, 34, 1), was carried on a litter and then burnt on a pyre (Bickermann 1929, 5–9; Richard 1966b; Arce 1990).

Apart from some details specifically connected to the imperial deification, such as the custom of flying an eagle above the pyre, that bear a Hellenistic stamp (Arche 1990, 131–40), the funus publicum, simultaneously a political celebration and rite of passage, was chiefly a funus in effigie. As such it has much in common, not only at the level of dramaturical ritual, with what is called the funus imaginarium by the Scriptores historiae Augustae (Pert. 15, 1). This is the funeral ceremony that took place in cases when the body of the deceased was not actually present, and for which a tomb was erected that was destined to remain empty (Chantraine 1980; Kierdorf 1986, 44–5; Arce 1990, 155–7; cf. Dupont 1986).

This ritual is succinctly described in the Aeneid (III, 62–8),
when Aeneas erected a cenotaph for Polidorus, and the Trojans held a funeral for him, poured libations of milk, and spilt the blood of victims, and then, for the last time, following the rites of their fathers, called on him by name at the top of their voices, inviting him to enter into his eternal home. In this way with dues paid and the offer of a place to rest, the spirit escaped a punishing destiny and avoided the danger that it might torment the living in restless wanderings. The ritual of invocation (epiclesis) is also attested in the Greek world (Hom. Od. IX. 65), and equates in some measure to a correct burial that allows the dead to be buried and attain peace, as confirmed by Ausonius even in the 4th century AD (Auson. Parentalia 2, 10).

More details emerge from the account of the funus organised by Septimius Severus for the consecratio of his predecessor Helvius Pertinax. He was assassinated in Rome in AD 193 and buried as a simple privatus after Didius Julianus’ partisans had violated his corpse. The Historia Augusta (SHA Pert. 15, 1), Herodianus (IV, 2, 5) and later Dio Cassius (LXXV, 4, 3) offer quite detailed accounts of the funus imaginarium of this emperor who was cremated in effigie at the end of the ceremony.

The whole ritual of the funus in effigie remains unexplained, even if the rite of cremation – despite other considerations and the possibility of finding an explanation in family traditions and customs (Franciosi 1984, 49–53; 1989, 115–16) – seems to fit with ideological practices documented from the beginning of the Archaic period that consider a passage through fire as an immortalization ritual (Van Liefferinge 2000). It seems to have had its origins in the funeral practices of the late Republican period, when during Caesar’s funeral a wax image of the deceased appeared for the first time, displayed on the bier, decked out with the distinctive signs of a triumphator (Bayet 1961, 47; Flower 1996; Weinstock 1971, 350–1, 360–1).

Closed within the coffin, the natural and mortal body of Caesar, that had been up to then visible, rested invisibly. Meanwhile, his normally invisible political and everlasting body, was made visible thanks to the effigy, the persona ficta. The funeral ritual thus heralded a political theology that took shape with Augustus and became fully developed in the course of the 2nd century AD. These rituals were to have a long history, and can even be traced in the second half of the 18th century AD in the obsequies of the Marchese Filippo Bourbon Del Monte, who died in Livorno in 1780 where he was governor of the city (Bruni 2007, 61 s.). Even if the rituals were assimilated and adapted to the exigencies of the Christian world, incorporating the distinction between the mystical body and the physical body of Christ, the corporeal metaphor of the ‘body politic’ had, behind it, an even more ancient tradition.

Important new evidence concerning this topic has now been discovered in the rituals documented in a large tumulus tomb from the early Orientalizing period, uncovered between 1994 and 1998 on the northern fringes of what seems to be the necropolis of the north-western settlement cluster of Villanovan Pisa. The tomb is defined by a ring of thin slabs of stones set vertically in the earth and regularly spaced, forming a circle 30m in diameter (Figs 1–3). All around, about 2m beyond this perimeter, equidistant pairs of large monoliths were placed, regularly spaced about 7m apart. In the north-eastern sector of the circle two small slabs were inserted perpendicular to the perimeter, which formed the supports for a step, probably of wood, that provided access to the interior of the tumulus.

In the interior of the monument, at the centre, a complex structure was located. It consisted of a large rectangular pit, 4m long and about 1m deep, cut into the ground beneath the man-made layers. Within this had been placed a large wooden casket (2.50m x 1.50m x 0.70m). Inside, only a few remains of vases and some sheep bones were found – probably the traces of a funeral ceremony. The pit was then filled with carefully laid, small stones. Above these, sherds of impasto vases, an amphora and a bronze ribbed cup were found. The pit was then covered with fine soil up to the level of the top of the stone perimeter of the circle, apart from a triangular hole filled with sterile clay, upon which were deposited a large iron trident with a ritually broken handle. The ground conditions, blighted by a high water table and acidic soil, prevented the recovery of the iron trident that was highly corroded.

Next, above this, a large stone altar was constructed. It was found, partly dismantled, and on its upper surface were a large iron knife and four iron skewers alongside the jaw bone of a horse. To the south east of the altar, a large storage jar (dolium) had been deposited, set in a rectangular pit. It was carefully sealed with a cylindrical lid. Inside, a large quantity of ashes were found, mixed up with numerous small copper tacks, tiny fragments of bronze sheeting, deformed by fire, and a thin gold wire, possibly part of an earring.

Figure 1 Tumulus tomb in via San Jacopo, Pisa. Photo: the author
It appears that once the funeral ceremony was over the altar was dismantled and some parts were ritually broken by blows from a sledgehammer and then deposited in a rectangular pit excavated to one side, about 5m from the altar, within the stone circle. After this the mound of the tumulus was raised.

The few finds found in the pit appear to confirm a quite early chronology for the monument, within the first quarter of the 7th century. Both the bronze patera, and the amphora, probably Phoenician, date to this time.

For now, the monument is unique among the Pisan necropoleis. Because there were no human remains in the interior it is a tumulus inanis, a cenotaph for someone who died in a foreign field, or more likely, at sea. We will return to this point, but for now we will focus on the strictly architectural features of the tomb.

The tumulus provides evidence for how monumental architecture appeared for the Pisan burials in the early Orientalizing period, just as in other centres of ancient Etruria. This was a departure from the earlier burial customs. At Pisa the appearance of this new type of burial appears to be connected with the emergence of a powerful aristocratic social class, for which there is also good evidence in the settlement (Bruni 1998, 99–105). It is, however, difficult to trace the original source of the architectural form of the tumulus.

Unlike the monumental architecture of coastal Etruria, which despite various influences, shows signs of Eastern and Levantine architectural models, the Pisan structure seems to find its roots in local traditions of constructed tombs that use tumuli to cover inhumations in a grave (tombe a fossa). In these tombs the earthen mound forms the grave marker (sema) on the surface with a diameter of a few metres and a similar height. The novel features of the Pisan monument are its monumental form and the complex internal articulation that is functionally related to new-style funeral ceremonies. The monumental form appears in the increased dimensions of both the tumulus and the cut of the deposition place, but can also be seen in the perimeter of the tumulus, carefully built of uniform slabs, and in the definition of a space for a funerary cult with an access ramp to the interior of the tumulus. The forms of the ritual strongly influenced the internal organisation and it is only through the reconstruction and analysis of the rituals that the architectural choices can be understood. Above and beyond these considerations, the exterior aspect of the Pisan tumulus – a burial marked by a circle of stones crowned with a low earthen tumulus – can be compared with similar monuments from the same period that are a feature of the necropoleis of Vetulonia and its territory, Populonia, Marsiliana d’Albegna (Colonna 1986, 401 s.; Bruni 2000, 169) and even, exceptionally, Bisenzio (Colonna 1973, 67–8) and Tarquinia (tomb 65/8 in the necropolis of Macchia della Turchina (Bruni 1986, 224)). In Tarquinia, tomb structures defined by circles of stone already existed in the early Iron Age, for example tomb 23 at Poggio dell’Impiccato where a pit burial was discovered, according to the site notebooks, in the centre of ‘a circle of irregular nenfro stones’ (Florence, Soprintendenza Archeologica Archives, 1904, pos. F/9, of 1–3 February; see also Zifferero 2006).

The topographical organization of the Pisan site, with a large tumulus at the centre of a distribution of much smaller tombs ringed the larger monument may indicate that a hierarchical social structure existed within the Pisan community of the early Orientalizing Period. This society may have been divided into kinship groups within which some principes gentis emerged alongside a gentilitial elite. Just as in other centres of Tyrhennian Etruria, the power of these aristocracies was firmly rooted in ownership of the land. Furthermore, some of the evidence recovered during the excavation can help to clarify the rôle of the Pisan prince for whom the tumulus was constructed. The iron trident, ritually broken, and deposited above the grave cut, has a particularly important rôle in this reconstruction. First, the nature of the deposition brings to mind the heroic rites of the Homeric tradition, finding a good analogy with the funeral ceremonies of Elpenor described in the Odyssey (12, 11–5) where an oar was set up on his tumulus, a symbol of his rôle in the hierarchy of Odysseus’ companions. Secondly, the trident is an object with
strong symbolic power.

Tridents are documented in central Italy from the late Bronze Age and they are relatively frequent in Near Eastern contexts, where they are associated with the triple thunderbolt of the storm god and are a royal attribute (Rossini 1998; Sciacca 2004, 272–8). Finds of three-pointed harpoons are rather rare in the West: apart from Pisa, in Etruria there are only the over-sized bronze example from Vetulonia which gives its name to the tomb — the so-called Circle of the Trident (Cyggielmann and Pagnini 2006, 72–4, pl. VII f) and, possibly, an iron example from the Circle of the Fibula, the richest tomb in the necropolis of Marsiliana d’Albegna, from the middle decades of the 7th century BC (Minto 1921, pl. 48; Bruni 1998, 164). This trident was seriously damaged when the flood of the 4th November 1966 struck the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence. Nevertheless a careful examination of the surviving fragments seems to confirm that it must have been a standard in the form of a trident having non-functional points that were tipped with small spheres. The hypothesis that it should be identified as a type of stand (sostegno) (Cyggielmann and Pagnini 2006, 74) therefore seems unlikely. In addition to these tridents, a bronze two-pronged fork could be included: it too is over-sized and was found in the tomb of Vigna di Mezzo at Rondineto near Como and dates to the end of the 8th century (Gambari and Colonna 1988, 159, fig. 21).

An extensive series of images, all from a later period, illustrate the meaning of the trident as a symbol of royalty. Examples from Greece are the iconography of Poseidon (Walters 1892–1893, 13) or the appearance of a similar object as the sceptre of Arcesilas, ruler of Cyrene, on a celebrated Laconian cup (Boardman 1998, fig. 420). In the Etrusco-Italic world there is the well-known relief from Bormio (Egg 2000, 324, fig. 5) and, as far as can be distinguished from the surviving paintwork, a possibly female seated deity on one of the painted slabs from the temple of Portonaccio at Veii dating to the central decades of the 5th century (Stefani 1951, 139, pl. 30; 1953, 79–80, fig. 54a-b; Colonna 1987, 444; Lubtchansky 1998, 139–41, fig. 17). In addition, both of these provide evidence connecting this type of harpoon with the sea: a fish figure above the central point of the Lepontine sculpture and an aquatic scene filled with fish adjoins the scene on the Veiente slab.

Indeed, if we exclude a few rare Attic representations from the mid-6th century that show a trident being used by Meleager and Mopsos for the heroic hunting expedition par excellence, the hunting of the Calydonian boar (Schnapp 1997, 286–98, figs 237–8, 248, 250, 254, 257, 260, 271), the trident is the weapon of choice for heroic fishing activities, particularly for catching tuna or swordfish, species of fish that must have had a particular ideological significance in the Greek world. The heroic nature of this kind of fishing which required a complex strategy and specific rituals also stands out because it is the only type of fishing permitted in Platonic paideia (Pl. Leges VII, 823b–c; cf. Soph. 220).

A similar idea may be discernable in outline behind the rare representations of fishing in the Etruscan world, where this type of fishing must have had a particular importance since some ancient authors note lookout points for tuna, if not real and proper tuna fisheries, at Populonia and around Monte Argentario (Strabo, V, 1, 6 and 8). It is no coincidence that as late as 520-10 BC fishing with a trident appears in the heroic paradigm of sea fishing in the second chamber of the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing in Tarquinia (Roma 1989, 133–6). Furthermore, scenes of fishing for large prey are the only form of fishing found in the art of the Orientalizing period as shown by the representations on an impasto oinochoe from tomb I in the Casallaccio cemetery at Veii, dating to the beginning of the 7th century (Cristofani 1983, 29, fig. 16; Bruni 1998, 108, 261), and also, probably, the representation on a Caeretan heron plate from the Laurentina necropolis, dating a little after the mid-7th century (Martelli 1988, 263 n. 39; Lubtchansky 1998, 135–8; Cerchiai 2002, fig. 1).

Fishing with this type of venabula, is even today considered ‘caccia di onore e di vittoria’ (honourable and victorious hunting). It is a practice that has a distinctly heroic association, and seen this way, corresponds to the significance of the spear in terrestrial hunting. Just like the spear, the trident — or rather sea-spear — is a symbol of royalty and consequently of the power its bearer holds over the sea.

In the same way as the Vetulonian prince buried in the Circle of the Trident, the Pisan prince seems to have derived his prestige and personal wealth from activities related to the control of the sea. This was seafaring, not necessarily with a military intention, in the form of both aristocratic trade and piracy, that the Etruscans already carried out before Greek colonization started in the West. This is not surprising and fits very well with the overall picture of Pisa as set in a framework of relationships with the sea, and having a strong Tyrrhenian and marine component from its origin.

The absence of human remains in the tumulus cannot be accounted for by the acidity of the soil, since the same soil preserved the animal bones already described. Nor can it be explained by disturbance of the funeral deposits since they were found intact, beneath the base of the altar, a huge stone weighing hundreds of kilogrammes. This means that the Pisan monument, as has been mentioned, was a tumulus inanis, a cenotaph (Bruni 1998, 109–13; Bartoloni 2000, 169–70; Ricci 2006).

This situation is not often encountered (or rather not frequently recorded) in archaeological finds but it is not an isolated instance. It is related to the Homeric géras thanántom (Homer Iliad 23, 70–9) the conception of death, and what is due to the dead, common in the Classical world. This was made manifest in the funeral ceremony, the gifts, the construction of the tomb and the burial of the dead. The tomb and the grave marker that go along with the ceremony needed to be appropriate to the rank and achievements of the deceased, only in this way could everlasting fame among the living be achieved. In cases where an individual may have died in a foreign field, or at sea, and it was not possible to gather the remains and complete the burial rites, then, in the Greek world, a kolossós would be substituted, that is an image, that was treated as a cadaver and laid in the tomb in place of the physical remains (Vernant 1970, 343).

Something similar must also have taken place in Etruria. If we leave aside aside the difficult case of the slightly older tomb 7 in the Guerruccia necropolis in Volterra, where a blackish large storage jar sealed with a stone, and laid in a pit, contained only ashes, without any cremated bone or grave goods (Ghirardini 1898, 157), there is significant evidence from the
necropoleis of Vetulonia. Here, according to the excavator, some tombs enclosed in a circle of stones containing two or more pits yielded stone ‘grave-markers’ (cippi), together with the remains of vessels used in the funeral banquet in the central pit, that is in the space specifically reserved for cult practices associated with the burial (Circle of the Sphinx, Circle I of Sagrona, Circle of the Two Cones: Bruni 2000, 168–9). The grave-markers clearly represent an image of the deceased, following the ideology that sees the grave marker as the monument to the deceased (αμμα), an image as a substitute for the deceased. There is a long series of parallels in both Greece and Etruria where there is evidence of the phenomenon in the form of a relatively rich set of Archaic and Hellenistic inscriptions that clearly illustrate how the monumentum, whether a stele or cippus, did not only serve to mark the burial place but also represented the presence of the deceased in the world of the living as if by a form of metonymy (Bruni 1998, 150–1).

The ritual documented in the Pisan finds reveals an extremely elaborate set of funeral beliefs. However, their reconstruction is severely limited by the lack of written sources relevant to the rituals and beliefs of the Etruscan world. Nevertheless some aspects of the evidence available enable us to identify analogies with what is known from the Greek and Roman worlds.

The most striking observation is the inverse relationship between the scale of the tomb structure and the absence of tomb goods. This feature seems to indicate a close adherence to customs analogous to those of the Greeks that can be detected behind the story of the funeral ceremonies of Patroklos, who was buried in a tumulus without any accompanying grave goods (Hom., II, XXIII, 107–257; cf. Schnapp Gourbellion 1982, 77 s).

The few fragments of jar and pyxis recovered from the bottom of the pit have burnt surfaces, as do the sheep bones, and seem to derive from the funeral ceremony. Although the high water table made the excavation of the pit extremely difficult, carbonized material found in the bottom suggests that a fire was set in the northwest corner, upon which would have been burned a sheep, some storage jars and also a simulacrum of the deceased, to which we shall return. The types of ceramic jars appear rather run-of-the-mill, but not coincidentally, jars of honey and oil were also amongst the gifts destined for the gods and for the heroes, the agalmita (Hom., Od. IV, 589–90), and on the other hand it makes the rite conspicuous, because of the rarity of the horse as a sacrificial victim (Capozza 1963, 251 s; Bruni 2005, 24–5). Once again, the mythical connection is with the funeral of Patroklos and the four horses sacrificed by Achilles on the pyre (Hom., II, XXIII, 171–2). However, there is no shortage of archaeological evidence for the sacrifice of horses, known from the 8th century in Euboea, Eretria, and Lefkandi, as well as at the princely tombs of Salamis in Cyprus. In Etruria this practice appears, exceptionally, in the final decades of the 8th century, and despite the gaps in the available evidence, seems to continue, albeit limited to a few coastal cities, at least until the early Hellenistic period in particularly important and prestigious contexts (Bruni 1998, 112–13; 262). In the case of the so-called ‘Fossa della Biga’ at Populonia a passage from Herodotus (VI, 103) comes to mind that relates how in Athens, around 524 BC, the four mares from the chariot with which Cimon, the father of Miltiades, thrice won at Olympia, were buried in front of his tomb after the sons of Pisistratus had him killed.

However, the killing of a horse is not the sole distinctive feature of the ritual ceremony that marks the funus found in the tumulus in via San Jacopo. Other features also attract our attention. During the ceremony a pyre, which analysis has shown to have consisted exclusively of oak wood, was set alight and the ashes from the fire were carefully collected into a large storage jar placed at a higher level to the side of the altar. Numerous, shapeless scrapels of sheet bronze and small rivet heads found mixed with the ashes, indicate that something made of sheet metal was also burnt on the pyre.

In addition to the possible association of oak with royalty and heroic virtues, the exclusive use of oak again brings to mind the cremation of Patroklos, for which the Achaian warriors felled numerous oaks from Mount Ida (Hom. II. XXIII, 116–22). However, the interpretation of the ideology behind the cremation and the object burnt in the fire is more complex. Although it has turned out to be particularly difficult to identify the object in question from what survived, some suggestions can be made. It was most likely a sphylaret, perhaps not unlike the anthropomorphic bust from the Circle of the Fibula at Marsiliana d’Albegna (Venice 2000, 586 no. 136), or the human figures from the complex scenographic group from the Tomb of the Bronze Chariot from Vulci (Venice 2000, 568–9, no. 81), or indeed to some bronze lids of funerary urns from the area of Vulci (Viterbo 2004, 225 s. no. III.a.24).

However, even if parallels with these finds may be made because of their three-dimensional nature, shared with the Pisan simulacrum, the ideology behind this creation seems to have been different. The series of sphyrelata were anthropomorphic images designed to be part of the setting for funereal cult practices of particular importance that took place within the tomb, or perhaps even in the case of the urn lids they were intended to recreate something of the physical presence of the incinerated corpse. In contrast to these, the Pisan simulacrum would have acted almost like a double of the dead person, a substitute for the absent corpse, or to use the Greek term, a kolossos. Just as with the other sphyrelata the emphasis is placed not so much on the reproduction of the features of the deceased as on the desire to create a reference to their physical form. The real presence, the effigy, the imago, substitutes for the cadaver that it was not possible to recover, and this becomes the focus of the funeral rites.

For the moment, the find is unique for such an early period. The kolossos, and its incineration, relate to aspects of ritual that were probably already common in the archaic period. These, along with other aspects of the ideological heritage and related ceremonial and practical equipment of the Orientalizing aristocracies, were revived because of their potent significance by Imperial ideology.
Kantorowicz, E., 1957, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Princeton.