

**Death, disposal and the destitute:  
The burial of the urban poor in Italy in the  
late Republic and early Empire**

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## Abstract

Recent studies of Roman funerary practices have demonstrated that these activities were a vital component of urban social and religious processes. These investigations have, however, largely privileged the importance of these activities to the upper levels of society. Attempts to examine the responses of the lower classes to death, and its consequent demands for disposal and commemoration, have focused on the activities of freedmen and slaves anxious to establish or maintain their social position. The free poor, living on the edge of subsistence, are often disregarded and believed to have been unceremoniously discarded within anonymous mass graves (*puticuli*) such as those discovered at Rome by Lanciani in the late nineteenth century.

This thesis re-examines the archaeological and historical evidence for the funerary practices of the urban poor in Italy within their appropriate social, legal and religious context. The thesis attempts to demonstrate that the desire for commemoration and the need to provide legitimate burial were strong at all social levels and linked to several factors common to all social strata. Existing definitions of 'the poor' are revealed to be inadequate and a more precise definition, formulated on the basis of economic resources, is proposed. The evidence for mass graves at Rome and the previously unquestioned conclusions of Lanciani are critically re-examined and shown to be both unreliable and heavily dependent on ambiguous textual references. Evidence for alternative forms of burial and memorialising activities in the cemeteries of Italy is examined and discussed. It is concluded that the poor did not, under normal circumstances, make use of mass graves. They responded to the same social, religious, legal and practical demands imposed by death as the rest of the urban community. This is reflected in both grave typology and the ways in which they were commemorated by living relatives. The physical manifestations of these practices are notably more modest than those of the elite but, significantly, the desire to properly bury and remember the dead was not absent.

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# Introduction

## i. Mass graves and the poor: introducing the problem

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the eminent Italian archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani uncovered a series of vast pits on the Esquiline at Rome. Describing the contents of each as “reduced to a uniform mass of black, viscid, pestilent, unctuous matter,” and composed of “men, beasts, bodies and carcasses” (Lanciani, 1891: 64), he proposed that the vaults represented the last resting place of the urban poor of ancient Rome. Identifying them as *puticuli* after a reference to “burial pits” in Varro’s *De Lingua Latina* (V.25), Lanciani suggested that the pits were used regularly by the lower classes for the unceremonious dumping of corpses until the area was buried beneath the *Horti Maecenati* during the Augustan period (Lanciani, 1891: 64 – 65; see also Lanciani 1874, 1892 and 1897).

This conclusion was undoubtedly instinctive for an archaeologist working in the nineteenth century when similar features could be found in the urban cemeteries of large cities. Disposal of the dead was a considerable problem for the increasingly overcrowded cities of the early modern world, with the lack of adequate hygiene and squalid living conditions producing large numbers of corpses each month.<sup>1</sup> Cemeteries were frequently unable to cope with the demand, and corpses were often disinterred after only a few months in order to provide space for new burials. At this time, society was also greatly concerned with ensuring that individuals received a decent Christian burial, and clubs or associations emerged in order to allow individuals with limited financial resources to save money for their eventual burial (Harrison, 1990: 136). The poor, according to Cannon (1989: 438), often lived in extreme conditions in order to make sure that they could afford the necessary funeral expenses. Burial was, however, not always enough, and funerals of the period were often elaborate affairs (for example in Hamburg, see Whaley, 1981: 91) and commemoration with a suitable monument was highly desirable. Those who could not afford such burial often found

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Amulree (1973) in *Medical History* has directly compared the hygienic conditions of ancient Rome with those of ‘modern’ London

their way into the communal pauper's graves of urban cemeteries, where large pits were filled to capacity with neatly stacked coffins and left open until they were full. It is unsurprising, given the parallels that can be drawn between the funerary and disposal practices of the nineteenth century and those of ancient Rome, that Lanciani interpreted the Esquiline pits as mass graves for the ancient poor.

These conclusions, however, have very rarely been questioned, and the *puticuli* continue to be interpreted as communal graves in which the corpses of the urban poor were left to rot (see for example Jongman, 2003: 107). As a result, the details and processes of the funerary practices of the urban poor are frequently disregarded in discussions of Roman burial activities or considered to have been very different from those of other members of the community who were interred within or beneath large elaborate tombs or monuments. Amongst the lower classes particularly, functional or practical considerations are often perceived to have overridden those of a more ideological or social nature. Modern studies of ancient Roman burial practice focus largely on the wealthier members of society and the elaborate tombs, funerary processions and inscriptions that they produced (for example, Bodel, 1999; Eck, 2001; Flower, 1996; Koortbojian, 1996; Walker, 1985; and, although very comprehensive in its coverage of the subject, Toynbee, 1971). Much attention has also been paid to the burial activities of the freedman classes, and the attempts of these former slaves to negotiate for themselves a superior or legitimate social position through the manipulation of the material culture of funerals (for example, Hope, 1998; Saller and Shaw, 1984; Woolf, 1996). These approaches and investigations are all essential to understanding Roman funerary practices and their role and significance to wider social processes; however, it is also necessary to examine the activities of those who did not leave evidence for their existence in the form of permanent funerary monuments.

Oliver (2000: 11) has observed that "burial of some sort may have been expected for all people, but the quality and nature of burial was almost certainly affected by wealth and status." To an extent, this observation is entirely accurate and large elaborate mausolea such as those of Augustus and Hadrian or the great pyramid built for the remains of Gaius Cestius outside the Porta Ostiensis at Rome evidently lay far beyond the economic resources of the majority of the urban population. The physical

manifestations of burial practices certainly varied in accordance with wealth and status, but did vast differences also exist between the attitudes of the rich and poor towards these activities and their related social processes? The *puticuli* and the pyramid of Cestius imply, at first glance, that those buried in each held radically different attitudes towards the disposal of their remains and the commemoration of their memory, but was socio-economic status influential enough to create different funerary practices, beliefs and attitudes or were the expressions of these simply different because of economic factors? The *puticuli* are largely without parallel in the funerary sphere of the Roman world (except perhaps for mass graves dug on the battlefield), and their presence at Rome has been interpreted as evidence for an absence of concern for the dead and the existence of alternative ideals of burial and memory preservation amongst the lower class population. They have also been used to support the notion of lower class immunity to the pressures of a competitive society. The widespread absence of other forms of evidence for the burial practices of this socio-economic group and the high mortality rate of ancient Rome have also contributed towards the association of the *puticuli* with the poor. This has been compounded further by a lack of any detailed study of the *puticuli* and their contents since their initial discovery in the 1870s and the unquestioning perpetuation of Lanciani's conclusions.

Studies of Roman burial and commemorative customs are closely associated with discussions of social structure, display, status negotiation and identity creation within urban communities but they largely ignore the place of the free lower classes within these process and their attitudes towards them. It is therefore essential that this vast section of the urban community be taken into account within these discussions in order to better understand ancient urban society. This study therefore re-examines the funerary activities of the urban lower classes, particularly in terms of the disposal of the body and subsequent commemorative activities, in order to increase our understanding of:

- the urban lower classes as a whole, including their place within wider society and the ways in which they established, maintained and promoted their status and identity;



- Roman attitudes towards burial and commemoration, particularly the impact of religious, legal, emotional and social demands, customs and norms, on the funerary activities of the lower classes;
- the attitudes of the urban poor towards the proper religious disposal of the body in comparison with those of wealthier members of the community;
- the *puticuli* and their place within urban disposal practices and funerary activities.

## ii. The urban poor: slave or free?

Definitions of the Roman 'lower classes' frequently group freeborn, freedmen and freedwomen and slaves into a single category, making little, if any, differentiation between them when discussing the impact of particular social issues and pressures on this section of the community (for example, Rawson, 1966: 71). This wide definition is evidently rooted in ancient attitudes towards poverty whereby slaves and free individuals, seen to be working alongside one another, were considered equally contemptuous. This has, however, created a false sense of homogeneity which is particularly unhelpful for an in-depth examination of the burial practices of the urban poor.

It is possible to separate free individuals from slaves in both social and economic terms, with each group holding a different status and position within society as well as experiencing different economic conditions and pressures. Social status, and consequently the ways in which individuals were viewed by themselves and others, undoubtedly affected attitudes towards funerary activities, particularly those aspects closely associated with status and identity display or negotiation. Slaves and free individuals were also distinguishable in economic terms. For members of the free poor survival depended upon securing employment and thus an income to support themselves and their families. As shown in Chapter 3, regular employment was vitally important but expenditure often outstripped income and prevented individuals or families from saving money for inevitable funerary expenses. Slaves, on the other hand, were largely free of these concerns, and the payment of rent, purchase of food

and the unreliability of temporary employment had little effect on their economic position, with Jones (1968: 4) pointing out that slaves were often fed and clothed by their owner. For slaves there were greater opportunities for putting money aside for the future, with Hopkins (1978: 126) noting that “there is evidence that masters paid some of their slaves a regular monthly wage. Slaves could save out of their earnings.” This money eventually may have been used for securing manumission but if the slave died before this occurred his *peculium* could be used to cover funerary expenses. Moreover, if a slave died in service, the disposal of their remains became the responsibility of their master or fellow slaves, thus providing them with a support network which would ensure that, under normal circumstances, they received some form of burial. From the first century AD especially, slaves were increasingly provided with burial space within the family mausolea of their owners and consequently received not only decent burial but also continued commemorative activities essential for providing peace in the afterlife (see Heinzlmann, 2001).

This support network, although certainly absent in some cases, was not available in any form for members of the free poor who depended upon their family and their own unreliable income for burial and commemoration, and for whom there was little prospect of space in a family tomb. The economic position of the free poor was inherently more unstable than that of slaves, and, although their social status may have been marginally better, the prospect of a decent burial was far less likely. The funerary activities and attitudes, customs and beliefs of these groups therefore form two separate areas of study, each requiring detailed examination and investigation within their appropriate legal, social and economic context. This study therefore focuses on the *free* members of the urban lower class population of Roman Italy: those who have been most often associated with the *puticuli*.

The ‘lower’ classes also encompassed a large number of former slaves who had bought, won or been given their freedom. Although these freedmen and freedwomen often became very wealthy and commercially successful after their manumission, this was not true in all cases and many, once they had joined the masses of the free community, faced the same socio-economic demands, pressures and fears as their freeborn counterparts. It is therefore very difficult to separate these less successful former slaves from the bulk of the free community. Where suitable evidence exists

these groups can be separated in other ways, for example where inscriptions provide biographical information, but essentially they were affected by the same economic pressures as freeborn individuals. The desire to display their new status as free individuals certainly affected their desire to be commemorated but in economic terms they were indistinguishable. Any definition of 'the poor' is, by its very nature, an economic rather than purely social definition, and therefore both free and freed have been included within the scope of this study. It is, of course, not possible to completely ignore the presence of slaves in the archaeological record, and many of the anonymous burials examined in Chapter 5 may belong to such people. Without epigraphic evidence it is almost impossible to distinguish between the anonymous graves of slaves and free individuals, but where possible attempts should be made to do so. They formed two separate socio-economic groups and consequently their funerary activities deserve to be studied in their proper context.

### **iii. The burial of the urban poor in Italy**

In order to understand both the *puticuli* and the funerary practices of the urban poor it is first necessary to examine burial and commemorative activities with Roman society as a whole. Chapters 1 and 2 therefore examine these practices in detail, highlighting their social, legal and religious significance and the ways in which their physical manifestations were manipulated in order to satisfy particular social and religious demands made by both the living and the dead. It has been noted here that the 'lower classes' comprised individuals of differing socio-economic status, but in order to examine the responses of these individuals to demands for burial and remembrance, it is necessary to establish a less ambiguous definition of 'the poor'. Chapter 3 reviews ancient and modern attitudes towards the Roman poor and poverty and examines the economic resources of these individuals in order to propose a more precise definition of this significant sector of the population that is directly applicable to a discussion of funerary activities. On the basis of this definition, and in the context of Roman funerary activities as a whole, Chapter 4 critically re-examines the evidence for the *puticuli* in order to gain a more detailed understanding of their function and involvement in urban disposal activities. Evidence for other modest burial activities within the ancient urban cemeteries of Italy forms the focus of Chapter 5, where a

brief summary of the relevant archaeological evidence is presented and examined before some concluding remarks are made.

# Chapter 1

## Memory and Commemoration

*For neither the costly pyramids soaring to the skies,  
nor the temple of Jove at Elis that mimics heaven,  
nor the sumptuous magnificence of the tomb of Mausolus  
are exempt from the ultimate decree of death.  
Either fire or rain will steal away their glory,  
or they will collapse under the weight of the silent years.  
But the fame my genius has won shall not perish with  
time: genius claims a glory that knows no death.*

(Propertius, *Elegies* III. 2. 19 – 26)

Propertius believed that the written word guaranteed him eternal fame and recognition. Literary creations, he argued, were more robust than the most expensive and majestic monuments of the world. Propertius' name and achievements would live forever, and his future reputation could be compared to that of Homer: "I, too, will be praised by late generations of Rome: I myself predict that after I am ashes such a day will come" (*Elegies*, III. 1. 35 – 36). These sentiments are echoed by the *Odes* of his contemporary, Horace, who also suggested that poetry was more enduring than the most awesome monument:

I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze  
and loftier than the Pyramids' royal pile,  
one that no wasting rain, no furious north wind  
can destroy, or the countless chain  
of years and the ages' flight.  
I shall not altogether die, but a mighty part of me  
shall escape the death-goddess. On and on shall I grow,  
ever fresh with the glory of after time.

(Horace, *Odes* III. 10. 1 – 8)

Both writers believed that their names and achievements would be remembered for all time, which, to an extent, has been borne out by the fact that two thousand years later their works are still published, whereas many built structures of the ancient world,

both elaborate and simple, have succumbed to the ravages of time. However, despite their faith in the durability of their words it is unlikely that either man was buried without some form of material memorial to commemorate his existence. Several times Propertius refers to his gravestone, writing: "When, therefore, fate claims back from me my life, and I become a brief name on a tiny marble slab" (*Elegies* II. 1. 71 – 72) and,

Then, when the fire beneath has turned me into ash,  
let a little jar receive my ghost,  
and above, over a tiny tomb,  
let a laurel be planted to cast its shade over the site of the  
burned-out pyre,  
and add a line or so to say 'Who now is buried here as  
gruesome dust,  
once was the slave of a single love.'

(*Elegies* II. 13. 31 – 36)

Although the poet emphasises the modest nature of his future tomb, the assumption is made in both these, and other, instances that he will be commemorated with a permanent monument inscribed with an epitaph. Having compared his fame to that of Homer, Propertius states that "Not neglected shall be the grave where the tombstone marks my bones: so decrees the Lycian god, who approves my prayer" (*Elegies* III. 1. 37- 38), indicating that despite the immortality of his poetry, he would, in addition, have the extra insurance of a more conventional memorial.

The words of Propertius and Horace on the subject of everlasting fame and memorials to their existence and achievements reflect a wider desire within Roman society to be recognised and remembered. Monumental arches, building dedications and personal statues indicate that Roman society was one in which it was considered important to assert, through images or the written word, one's place and status within it. As Keppie (1991: 55) observes, "prominent local families had the most opportunity, reason and funds to ensure that their names received permanent commemoration. The visitor to an ancient town could quickly learn who the important families were." The sponsoring of games, building of fountains and aqueducts, public buildings or distributions of food or money by prominent members of the community often were permanently recorded in inscribed form, the text placed in a public place as evidence of their

generosity and to ensure that their contemporaries and future generations remembered their good deeds. This was frequently carried out by magistrates and other office-holders as illustrated by a sundial in the temple-precinct of Apollo at Pompeii which bears the following inscription:

*L(ucius) Sepunius (Luci) f(ilius) / Sandilianus / M(arcus) Herennius  
A(uli) f(ilius) / Epidianus / duovir(i) i(ure) d(icundo) / d(e) s(ua)  
p(ecunia) f(aciundum) c(uraverunt).*

‘Lucius Sepunius Sandilianus, son of Lucius, (and) Marcus Herennius Epidianus, son of Aulus, joint magistrates with power to dispense justice, had (this) made at their own expense.’

(CIL X 802, cited in Keppie, 1991: 53).

Keppie (1991: 57) highlights several other examples of public displays of wealth, status and beneficence, including that of a former military tribune who, upon retirement and election to *duovir* of the colony of Luceria, built an amphitheatre “on his own private property with a boundary wall round it, in honour of the emperor Caesar Augustus and of the Colony” (EJ 236). Keppie (1991: 57) points out that “some reflected glory doubtless accrued to the tribune and his family” which not only enhanced his position within the contemporary community but also amongst future citizens who used the amphitheatre he generously provided. This desire for self-promotion and display began during the Republic, but gathered pace under the rule of the Emperors in response to social change and increased opportunities for social mobility. The ultimate example of personal advertisement, in terms of the accomplishments recorded and the widespread influence of the text, can be found in the *Res Gestae* of Augustus. Composed in order to record his achievements in expanding Roman rule and culture, it was inscribed on huge bronze pillars situated outside his mausoleum in Rome and on walls elsewhere in the Roman world, including the Temple of Roma and Augusta at Ankara (Brilliant, 1974: 86). Publicising his achievements in written form and their subsequent diffusion to other areas of his Empire allowed Augustus to ensure that they, and by implication, he, would never be forgotten. These displays presented individuals at the apogee of their social status and therefore how they wished to be remembered for eternity (Elsner, 1998: 95). Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist.* 34. 17) regarded this practice as vulgar and his nephew argued that artificial means of memory promotion were unnecessary if a man

was truly great (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 9. 19), but the persistence of such activity attests to its widespread popularity.

Displays of political success and civic generosity often took the form of honorific statues. Flower (1996:70 - 71) observes that statues celebrating great leaders increased in importance from the end of the fourth century BC, although “the right to erect a statue in a public place in the city was carefully controlled because of its political influence.” Although the original purpose of erecting honorific statues was closely associated with political power and influence, she notes (*ibid.*: 71) that these statues also became “memorials serving the glory of that man’s family rather than his personal political ambitions. As a result, Roman citizens were often reminded of ancestors by public buildings, statues, and monuments throughout the city.” The impact of these displays was increased by their location in public places , which Elsner (1998: 44) describes as fluid and “dynamic space[s] where images had their greatest power in antiquity ... where an individual’s self-identity met with the images, views and representations of others.” Here images were capable of negotiating status and identity. As emperor, Augustus was able to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the public spaces of the Roman world and his *Res Gestae* was disseminated to all areas of the Empire. Other members of society were unable to promote themselves over such a wide geographical area but took advantage of public spaces in their own towns and cities to advertise their achievements and heighten their status in the eyes of the community. Ordinary members of society were equally eager to ensure that their accomplishments were advertised to their fellow citizens during their lifetime.

However, despite the number of public building dedications and individual statues that lined the colonnaded walkways of city fora, individuals commemorated in this way during life formed the minority. Most members of society never contributed to the construction of public amenities, largely due to lack of opportunity or financial means, and were thus unable to publicly promote their identity (Hope, 2001: 90). Often the only opportunity for these individuals to register their existence in the memories of their contemporaries and future generations came after their death.



## 1.1 Commemoration in the funerary sphere

Given the diversity of the Roman world, it is unsurprising that its sepulchral monuments are equally varied, ranging from the simple to the complex, the large to the small, the cheap to the expensive. In the context of the present study it is not possible to discuss this assortment of monument types in its entirety, but it is essential to examine briefly the most common forms of tomb and monument at Rome (and surrounding urban areas) during the period under discussion in order to understand urban commemorative practices.

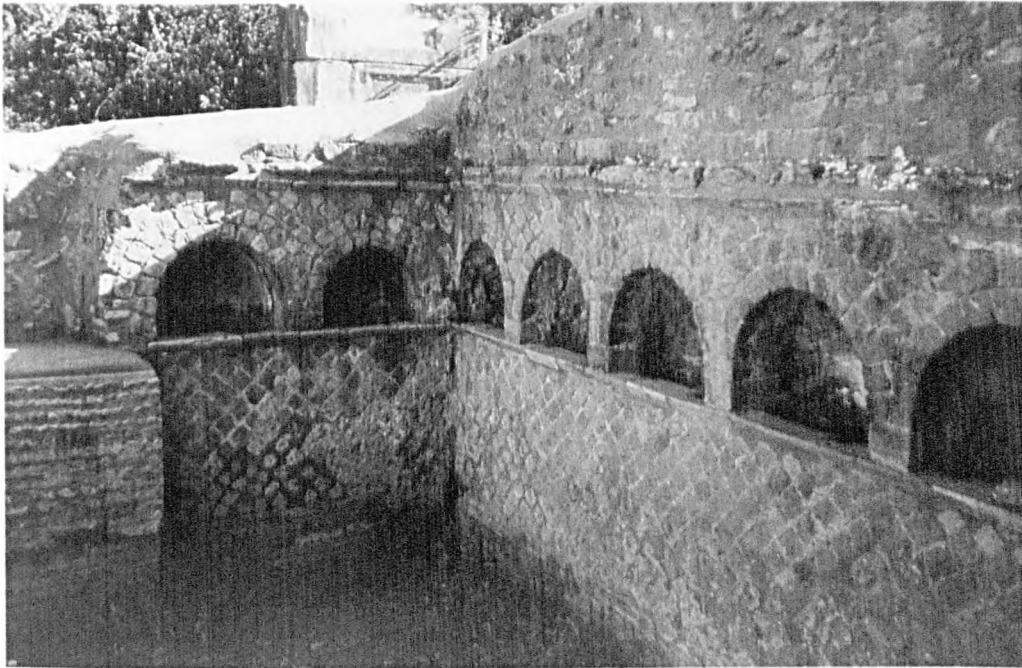
The Etruscans and other early Italian peoples dug elaborate chamber tombs but such matters were of relatively little concern to Romans until at least the mid-Republic.<sup>1</sup> However, excavation has revealed early cemeteries in the vicinity of the Forum and the Esquiline with the latter providing the bulk of information concerning early burial at Rome. This includes simple burials in tufa-lined trenches, a chamber tomb dated to the sixth century BC, fourth century trenches (*fossae*) protected by stone slabs, a single monolithic sarcophagus and twelve chamber tombs (Davies, 1977: 16). It was also in this area that the so-called *puticuli* were dug, possibly during the second and third centuries BC. Purcell (1987: 27) observes a shift, after the fourth century BC, away from modest and functional burial practices which simply satisfied the need to ritually cover the remains of the deceased with at least a symbolic covering of earth (Cicero, *de Leg.* II. 22. 57; see Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion), and cites the tomb of the Scipiones on the Via Appia as the first of the true Roman monumental tombs, designed to attract the attention of passers-by and to glorify the memory and name of the family. By the end of the second century BC it had become very common to erect large monuments commemorating the departed and protecting their remains.

From the mid-Republic to the early Imperial period, a variety of established tomb forms developed. For example, Toynbee (1971: 113 – 114) dates the emergence of the *columbarium*, a partly or wholly subterranean ‘dovecot’ with rows of niches designed to hold cremation urns or chests, to this period, citing the example of the three large ‘Colombari di Vigna Codini’ containing mainly Julio-Claudian freedmen. A variation

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<sup>1</sup> Davies (1977: 16) describes Rome as “a cultural backwater” until the first century BC.

on the large *columbaria* of Rome can be found in the cemeteries of Ostia where the tombs are above-ground barrel-vaulted structures with a decorative frieze around the exterior (*ibid.*: 116) (Fig. 1). The Ostian cemeteries also include a type of tomb described as “a rectangular roofless enclosure, with plain reticulatum walls some metres high and no entrance, ladders being the only possible means of access” (*ibid.*: 115 – 116). The ashes of the dead were buried in urns sunk into the ground along the walls.



**Figure 1.** Interior of cell *b* of the *Columbaria Gemelli* in the *Porta Romana* necropolis, Ostia (photo author).

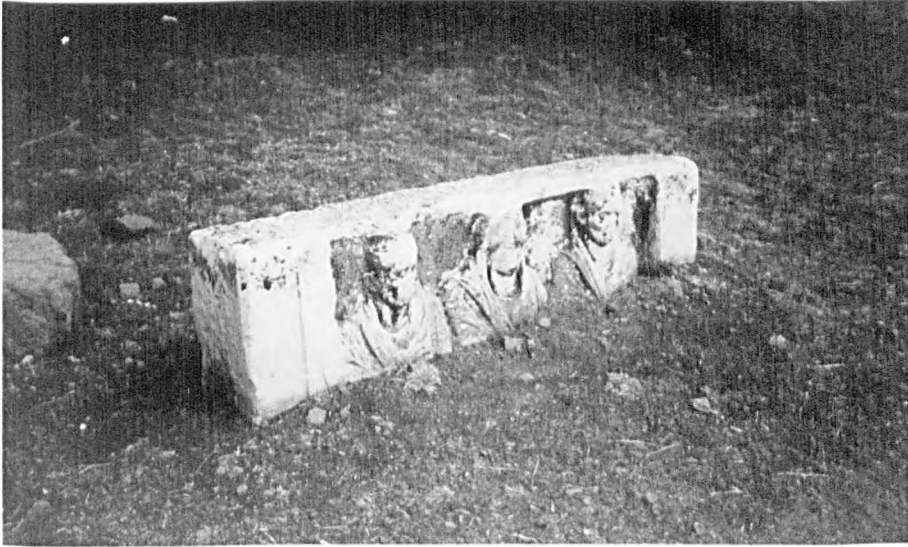
The so-called Street of the Tombs outside the Herculaneum Gate at Pompeii provides an almost unparalleled opportunity to examine the various types of monuments and tombs erected during the late-Republican and early Imperial period (see Koekel, 1983). Toynbee (*ibid.*: 119 – 126) discusses some of the common forms found along this street which include simple unroofed enclosures, such as that of Titus Terentius Felix, an early Imperial aedile (*ibid.*: 119); the more elaborate “sepulchral *triclinium* with painted walls” (*ibid.*: 119) built by the freedman Callistus for his patron Gnaeus Vibius Saturninus; and several other unroofed enclosures with individual burials marked by small stylised busts (*ibid.*: 122). In addition, Toynbee (*ibid.*: 122) describes the niche or *exedra* tomb, consisting of a large monument with a niche containing a

bench (Fig. 2); and the cylindrical drum to the east of the Villa of Diomedes within which a sepulchral chamber contained three niches (*ibid.*: 123).



**Figure 2.** Exedra tomb, Street of the Tombs, Pompeii (photo author).

Finally, Toynbee (*ibid.*: 123 – 124) examines what she describes as the “most homogenous group” of sepulchral monuments at Pompeii – the monumental altars. Surrounded by low enclosure walls, these were placed on a base of varying height, with the ashes of the deceased deposited in the earth below the monument (*ibid.*: 123 - 124). This brief summary of some of the Pompeian tomb types illustrates only a handful of sepulchral monuments. It is important to observe that, although many shared the same basic form, they were elaborated upon in accordance with the wishes of those involved in their creation. Furthermore, different types were in use contemporaneously. Similar monuments were probably to be found at Rome and other urban areas.



**Figure 3.** Family portrait busts on the Via Appia in Rome which would have originally been mounted on the façade of a tomb structure (photo author).

The city of Rome has also produced evidence for tomb structures of this period, specifically late-Republican *cella*-type tombs such as those uncovered during the late nineteenth century along the Via Caelimontana (*ibid.*: 117). These simple structures were cut into the rising ground with façades constructed of tufa blocks and simple vaults. Significantly, the façades of two of the four structures bear relief portrait busts (*ibid.*: 118).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 4.** (a). Tomb of the Rabirii on the Via Appia, Rome; (b). Anonymous tomb with portrait busts, Via Appia, Rome (photos author).

Toynbee (*ibid.*: 118) suggests that “in view of this evidence it would seem to be extremely probable that most of the numerous stone or marble late-republican portrait-busts worked in relief on square or horizontal slabs were originally set in the facades of tombs, similar to those of the group here described” (Figs. 3 and 4). The large number of extant portraits of this type suggests that this was particularly popular during this period (see Zanker, 1975).

Tombs became increasingly important and consequently more elaborate during the late-Republic, and the simple stone-lined *fossa* of earlier periods was no longer considered relevant to the needs of an increasingly status-conscious society. This heightened concern with the architecture of tombs and monuments is best illustrated by a tomb which Davies (1977: 18) has described as belonging to “the lunatic fringe,” although is probably better viewed as the result of an individual’s wish to commemorate himself with a strikingly unique tomb. Located near the Porta Ostiensis and constructed during the late first century BC, the tomb of Gaius Cestius (*septemvir*, praetor and tribune of the people) takes the form of a giant marble-covered pyramid 36.40 metres high (Fig. 5).

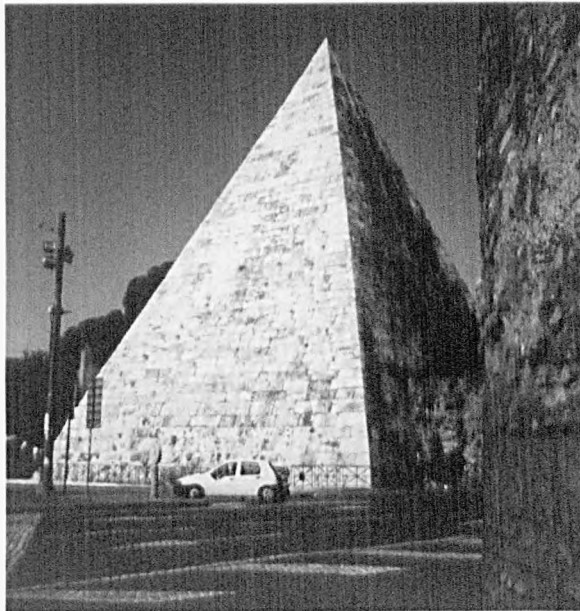


Figure 5. The pyramid tomb of Gaius Cestius, late first century BC (photo author).



(a)



(b)



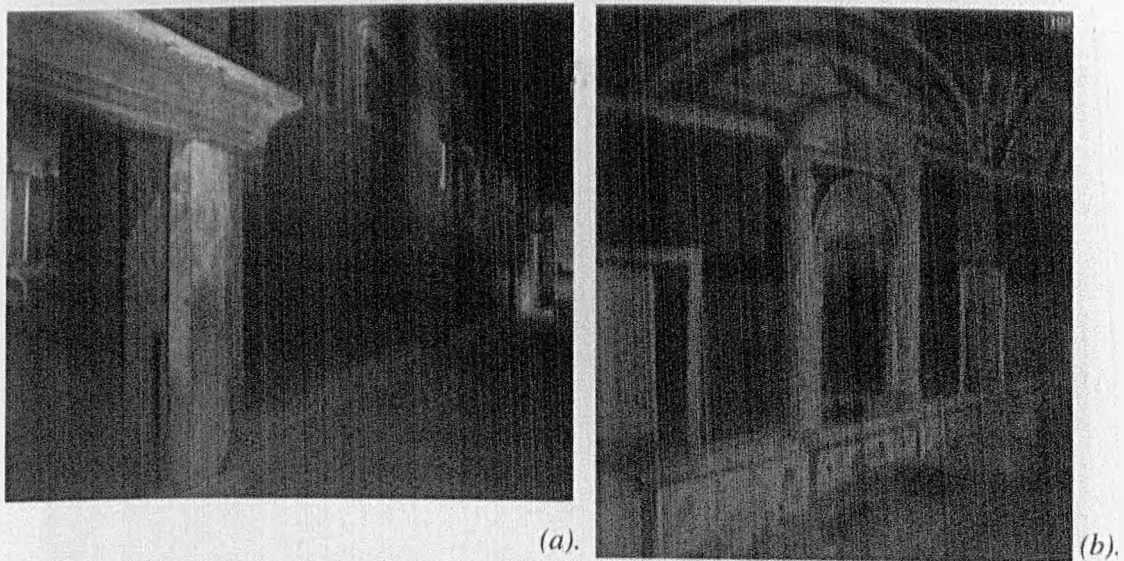
(c)

**Figure 6.** (a). Mausoleum of Augustus (late first century BC) in the Campus Martius, and two tombs on the Via Appia apparently inspired by its circular design: (b). 'Casal Rotondo'; (c). Tomb of Caecilia Metella (photos author).

Inscriptions provide details about Cestius and the offices he held, and describe the circumstances of the construction of the tomb (Toynbee, 1971: 128). As Vout (2003: 181) has observed, "pyramids were commonly associated with royal power and enduring fame," and Cestius evidently wished to associate himself with these qualities and make a specific statement about his position within society. Monuments on such a scale were relatively rare, even at Rome, but this example vividly illustrates the increasing elaboration of Republican funerary structures. This was further influenced

by Augustus' large circular mausoleum constructed in the Campus Martius in 28 BC. The mausoleum affected the design of tombs constructed by wealthy members of society, with other large circular structures emerging, such as the 'Casal Rotondo' (Toynbee, 1971: 155) and the tomb of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia (**Fig. 6**).

The desire for increasingly elaborate tombs was a major influence during the late Republic and early imperial periods, but did not remain so. Patterson (2000a: 266 – 267) observes that “in general, tombs of the empire tended to be more restrained in their exterior appearance and more lavishly decorated inside than their late-republican predecessors; and often they were located away from major roads, suggesting that visibility was less of a priority than in former times.” This is illustrated by the house tombs which begin to emerge during the second century AD at Rome and surrounding urban areas. Those located at the third milestone of the Via Latina, “date from the second century AD and take the form of large rectangular houses, normally with a subterranean burial-chamber and, originally, two storeys above ground containing rooms for funerary cult and family or club reunions” (Toynbee, 1971: 132).



**Figure 7.** The Vatican necropolis. (a). House-tomb facades. (b). Interior of Tomb I with niches and an *arcosolia* (Zander, 2003 figs. 29 and 109)

Similar brick-built house tombs are located under the Basilica of San Sebastiano on the Via Appia. Constructed in the remains of a collapsed quarry in the middle of the second century AD, these three tombs also have subterranean chambers with



elaborately decorated interior walls. The tomb exteriors bear inscription panels (*ibid.*: 133). House tombs contained niches to hold cremation urns, and several have larger arched recesses (*arcosolia*) cut into the walls in order to accommodate inhumations. A group of house tombs which differ slightly from the previous examples were discovered under St. Peter's Basilica on the Vatican. Dating also to the second and third centuries AD, the interiors are decorated to a particularly high standard (Zander, 2003) (Fig. 7).

The Vatican house tombs share their design and construction methods with those of the Isola Sacra cemetery near Ostia and Portus (Fig. 8). These single-storey tombs, dating to 100 – 250 AD, are built of brick and *opus reticulatum* masonry. The door is placed at the centre of the façade and above its travertine frame and sill a decorated inscription panel (usually of marble) provides the names and titles of the tomb owner and his family (Hope, 1997: 75). The tomb façade is usually completed with a cornice and triangular pediment (see Baldassarre, 1996). The tombs of Isola Sacra and the Vatican clearly illustrate the shift from external display to elaborate internal decoration (see Chapter 5).



**Figure 8.** House tombs at Isola Sacra (second century AD) (photo author).



Smaller gravestones, or stelae, were also raised at the site of burial (or, in the case of a *cenotaph*, to honour those buried elsewhere). Stelae are most commonly found in the provinces of the Empire, but many examples have been recovered at Rome.<sup>2</sup> Toynbee (1971: 245) identifies three types of free-standing stelae, the first and commonest of which she describes as “two-dimensional vertical stones, normally taller than they are wide, erected on the ground above the burial. They may have flat, rounded, or gabled tops. Sometimes they carry only an inscription, filling nearly all the field, or an inscription that is accompanied by carved or incised non-figured decorative motifs” (*ibid.*: 246 – 247).



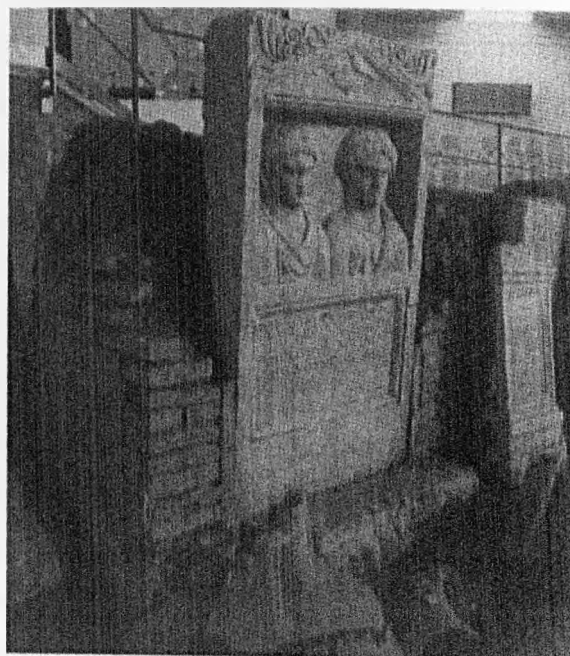
**Figure 9.** First century AD stelae (a). Tombstone of Q. Lartius, a member of the Praetorian Guard (photo author). (b). Tombstone of Publius Sulpicius Peregrinus (Friggeri, 2001 p. 96).

Included within this category are the first century AD tombstones of the Praetorian Guard and *Germani corporis custodes* (Bellen, 1981) which consist of a framed inscription panel and an incised wreath flanked by two rosettes (**Fig. 9**).

<sup>2</sup> As well as local tradition, issues of survival in the archaeological record must also be taken into account. Slabs of cut stone may have been attractive to those looking for ready-made building material, consequently leading to their re-use elsewhere. A clear example of the latter can be found at Ostia where tombstones were re-used as seats for a public toilet (Meiggs, 1973: 143).

Toynbee (1971: 247) also describes more elaborate forms of tombstone, in which “the text is confined to a die or panel specifically reserved for it, while the field or fields above or below it, or both above and below, are occupied by figure scenes.” The gravestone of Publius Sulpicius Peregrinus, in the Museo Nazionale Romano, provides an example of this type, with the figure of an equestrian depicted within the pediment and ornamented with rosettes. The marble stele dates to the late first or early second century AD (**Fig. 9**).

The second group described by Toynbee (1971: 247 – 248) comprises those with relief portraits of the deceased which may take the form of simple busts or full length figures. Such stelae have been recovered from Rome, for example in the Via Triumphalis necropolis on the Vatican, where during the Neronian period a stone bearing portraits was dedicated by *Numnius, Neronis Clau(di) Caes(aris) ser(vus) saltuaris* to himself, his wife and their son (Steinby, 1987: 93) (**Fig. 10**). The final form of free-standing stelae, described by Toynbee (1971: 250), are large four-sided square or rectangular blocks “richly carved with figure scenes on at least one side, often on three sides, and sometimes described as funerary ‘pillars.’” Although these monuments are found in a simple form at Aquileia, they are more commonly known in the western provinces (*ibid.*: 250). Free-standing stelae are less common at Rome than the provinces, but examples, often associated with slaves, freedmen and the military have been recovered.



**Figure 10.** Stele with portrait busts, Via Triumphalis (Steinby, 1987: fig. 12b).

## 1.2 Text and images

Two features of sepulchral monuments deserve closer attention: inscriptions and images. One of the most important elements of the funerary monument, large or small, was the inscription which was essential for identifying the structure as a funerary monument but also for imparting specific information about the deceased. In its most basic form the epitaph included information about the deceased, usually their name and that of the person who dedicated the monument. Occasionally these details included the age of the deceased and their occupation in life, whereas other epitaphs took a more elaborate form, sometimes in verse, and gave additional information about the family of the deceased, their civic or military rank, a description of their virtues and personality, and other biographical information. The written word recorded these details for posterity and communicated them to anyone reading the epitaph. However, although writing was found in all aspects of urban life, on shop signs, public notices and graffiti, Hanson (1991: 159 – 160) observes that, “literate made up only a small proportion of Graeco-Roman populations at most times and in most places.” Furthermore, Koortbojian (1996: 218 – 19) suggests that “many Romans who passed by the facades of these tombs and gazed upon these monuments and their inscriptions were probably incapable of reading them.” The formulaic nature of funerary inscriptions, however, allowed even those with minimal education to understand the nature of their content and their significance. This was heightened by the location of the inscription, in the cemetery, which shaped the reader’s understanding of the text (Hope, 2001: 89). Furthermore, Woolf (1996: 28) suggests that “formulaic elements were developed, like the ligatures that represented groups of letters with a single symbol, or abbreviations like DM, HSE, VSLM, or LDDD, which may in time have been read quasi-pictographically as symbols in themselves, just as we read R.I.P or Q.E.D.” If this was the case, it is clear that the potential audience for memorials was very large, with the reader able to understand the inscription in relation to its context, the familiar formulae and their own experience.

Inscriptions were often supplemented with images; indeed Hope (2003: 118) has suggested that “remembering the dead was a visual feast.” Portrait busts, either accurate representations prepared in advance of death or sculptures representative of the deceased, have been mentioned above. These often took the form of family groups,

as illustrated by the funerary relief of a herald and assignor of seats, dated to the early first century BC, which originally also depicted his wife and child (Friggeri, 2001: 59; see also Bonanno, 1983: 92) (**Fig. 11**). One of the commonest forms of monument commissioned by members of the Roman military in the provinces, for example, portrayed the deceased standing full-length or on horseback (the latter commonly associated with non-citizen auxiliary soldiers) with the insignia of their rank and military decorations clearly displayed (Hope, 2000b). Regardless of the many complex reasons for self-portrayal (see below) the simplest understanding of these monuments revolves around the identification of the deceased as a soldier or veteran, a message that is quickly transmitted by the image and could be understood even by the illiterate.



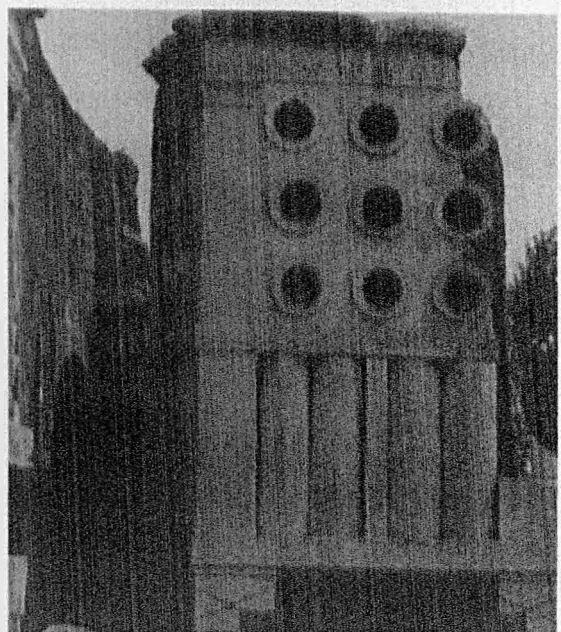
**Figure 11.** Funerary sculpture from the tomb of a herald (*praeco*) and assignor of seats (*dissignator*), Rome (Friggeri, 2001 p.59).

In a similar manner, funerary reliefs depicting the deceased at work provide easily accessible information about that individual. The facades of tombs at Isola Sacra provide examples of occupation reliefs (**Fig. 12**). Tomb 29 (160 – 180 AD) exhibits two terracotta reliefs depicting blacksmiths, surrounded by tools and equipment including scissors, knives, scythes and anvils. On the basis of these the owners are believed to have produced and sold iron tools (Baldassarre, *et al.* 1996: 139 – 141). The neighbouring tomb (Tomb 30) also bears a terracotta relief depicting a waterseller

**Figure 12.** Occupation reliefs from the necropolis of Isola Sacra, second century AD. (a). Tomb 29, relief depicting a blacksmith at work. (b). Relief depicting an *aquatarius* (water seller). (Baldassarre *et al*, 1996 figs. 57b and 58)

(*aquatarius*) surrounded by amphorae (*ibid.*: 142 – 143). On a shelf behind the figure can be seen a large amphora above two jugs hanging from a shelf and two further reliefs depicting amphorae flank the tomb's inscription. The inclusion of these images was probably motivated by several factors, but images were the most direct means of communicating information, and operated on various levels from the identification of the profession of the deceased to a complex assertion of their identity and status.

One final example of the way in which images directly communicated information about the deceased can be found in the tomb of a baker located outside the Porta Maggiore at Rome (**Fig. 13**). Built in the second half of the first century BC by the freedman Marcus Virgileus Eurysaces the tomb bears a frieze depicting various stages of bread making, including weighing the grain, kneading the dough and baking in the oven (Friggeri, 2001: 36). If it was not evident from this frieze that the owner of



**Figure 13.** The *panarium* tomb of Marcus Virgileus Eurysaces, Rome, late first century BC (Friggeri, 2001 p. 63).

the tomb was a baker (*pistor*) this fact was asserted further by the design of the monument itself, which takes the form of a grain silo, described in the inscription as a *panarium*, a bread container (*ibid.*: 63). The entire monument unequivocally displays the occupation (and evident success) of its owner.

### 1.3 *Imagines* and eulogies

Funerary monuments were not the only means available to those wishing to perpetuate their memory, and may actually have emerged as a popular response to the traditional practices of the Republican aristocracy. Two aspects of aristocratic funeral ritual illustrate this point: the eulogy (*laudatio funebris*) and the practice of carrying ancestor images (*imagines*) during the funeral procession. In a comprehensive study of the history and use of *imagines* in aristocratic Roman culture, Flower (1996: 46) assesses the literary evidence for *imagines*, observing that the earliest author to mention their use is Plautus, probably during the 190s BC, but later writers, such as Livy and Sallust, suggest they originated before the third century BC (*ibid.*: 46). The *imagines* comprised life-like wax masks of deceased ancestors, probably made whilst the individual was alive. They were the sole preserve of male office-holders who had achieved the office of *aedile*, and therefore had an intimate association with the politics of the state (*ibid.*: 2). Customarily kept in wooden cupboards (*armaria*) in the *atria* of aristocratic houses, the *imagines* were actively used during funerals, when actors wore the masks and dressed in clothing appropriate for the rank of the ancestor. Polybius (6.53.6 – 9) describes the scene:

“And whenever a leading member of the family dies, they introduce them into the funeral procession, putting them on men who seem most like them in height and as regards the rest of their general appearance. These men assume their costume in addition, if the person was a consul or praetor, a toga with a purple border, if a censor, the all-purple toga, but if someone had celebrated a triumph or done something like that, a gold embroidered toga. These men now ride on wagons, and the rods and axes and the other customary equipment of those in power accompanies them according to the dignity befitting the rank and station achieved by each man in politics during his lifetime. And when they reach the rostra, they all sit in order on ivory stools. It is not easy for an ambitious and high minded young man to see a finer spectacle than this.”

The practice of parading the *imagines* had political significance, and Flower (1996: 120) suggests that they “emerged as the ultimate means for representing a family’s past achievements and consequently also their present claims to pre-eminence.” Focus on the illustrious ancestors of the deceased allowed a family to justify its social position and provided opportunities for advancing this status: “the more previously held offices were associated with a family’s name, the more easily its members might expect to obtain future election victories” (*ibid.*: 63). However, although the *imagines* played a political role in legitimising the status of an office-holding family, they also visibly perpetuated the memory of the deceased. Bodel (1999: 260) suggests that “their role was to make the ancestors come to life again at the funeral, so that “always whenever someone dies his whole family, anyone who had ever existed, was there on hand” (Plin. *HN*. 35. 2. 6).” Not only did the life-like quality of the masks remind family members of the appearance, rank and achievements of their ancestors but their active participation in the procession brought them to life once more, albeit briefly. Flower does not specifically refer to this but acknowledges that the *imagines* were “more than simple markers of rank. They were used as devices to recall individual lives and specific qualities. They promised a glorious and undying memory to those who served the state” (1996: 11). Their revival as active participants in the procession was witnessed by both relatives and onlookers gathered to see these great aristocratic spectacles, a process that can be compared with the stranger encountering a monument and absorbing the information presented. The actors wearing the *imagines* also created an impression of the deceased, thus facilitating their temporary revival in the consciousness of others. There are evident similarities between this practice and the use of the sepulchral monument to facilitate the revival of the deceased in the minds of the living, albeit temporarily, and it is conceivable that the popularity of the funerary monument developed partly as a response to this aristocratic practice and partly as a more effective means of enabling the same process. The *imagines* allowed the dead to appear physically before an audience but this appearance was fleeting and could only occur in public on the death of another family member. The funerary monument was permanent and could be seen by members of the public every day, consequently allowing the memory of the deceased to be brought to life on a regular basis and to have a wider impact.



Dupont (1992: 23) disagrees that the *imagines* were a successful form of commemoration, stating that “if these masks were shut away it was because they constituted only a trace of the deceased and not a monument to his memory, as did, for example, an inscription. A waxen face only disclosed those trivial peculiarities that distinguished one man from the next.” Although her observation that “the honour of a man could not be read in his lifeless face, since his honour was not linked to his facial features” (*ibid.*: 23) is correct, the mask still stood as a representation of an individual who had once existed and whose honour and identity continued to exist in the memories of his family. It formed a physical reminder in the same way that a funerary monument acted as an “aid to memory”(Hope, 1998: 179). That they were not constantly on display did not diminish their significance as a form of commemoration. Even when shut away they continued to exist and people continued to be aware of this existence. Similarly, a funerary monument continued to exist when there was nobody there to see it and this did not detract from its power to perpetuate the memory of the individual to which it was dedicated.

Polybius (6. 53. 1 – 3) also provides an insight into the *laudatio funebris*, the eulogy, the origins of which appear to have been as ancient as the *imagines*:

“For whenever one of the leading men amongst them dies, when the funeral has been arranged the body is brought with the rest of the adornment to the place called the ship’s prows (rostra) in the Forum where it is usually propped up for all to see, but rarely it is laid out. If a grown-up son is left behind and happens to be present, he mounts the rostra with all the people standing around. But if not, then another family member who is available delivers a speech about the virtues of the dead man and his achievements, during his lifetime. As a result of this the people remember what happened and picture it before their eyes, not only those who shared in the deeds, but also those who did not. Both share the same feelings to such an extent that the misfortune does not appear as the private concern of the family, but as a public matter for the people.”

This was again primarily the reserve of the aristocracy for permission was required to address the crowd gathered in the Forum from the *rostrum* (Flower, 1996: 95). However, although the *laudatio*, like *imagines*, appears to have been restricted to the male elite, a fragmentary inscription from Rome provides the text of an oration pronounced at the funeral of an aristocratic woman, often identified as Turia, wife of



Quintus Lucretius Vespillo (Friggeri, 2001: 65; CIL VI 41062). Inscribed around 8 – 2 BC, the text of the eulogy tells of the brave and noble actions taken by Turia in order to ensure the safety of her husband, in addition to listing her virtues and proclaiming her husband's grief (*ibid.*: 65 – 66). This inscription, although reporting unusual circumstances, may be representative of other eulogies and indicates that, at least on occasion, these orations were permanently recorded in inscribed form. Eulogies were probably common at the graveside during the funerals of other members of society but the extra prestige obtained by doing so from the *rostrum* was immense. From this prominent position the family directly addressed the community of the city and praised the achievements of the deceased and the line of illustrious ancestors from whom he was descended. Flower (1996: 128) describes the eulogy as the “high point of the public part of the funeral ceremonies. It also offered a commentary on the procession of *imagines* and enabled the family to present the career of its newly deceased member in the context of the achievements of his ancestors.” The *laudatio* and the *imagines* therefore operated together in order to advertise and promote the political ambitions and successes of important families in front of the wider community.

The impact of aristocratic funeral processions and eulogies upon other members of society can be seen in the fact that the only extant pictorial evidence for these practices derives from the funerary art of freedmen. Flower (*ibid.*: 98) specifically highlights a relief from Amiternum, dating to the late Republic, depicting a procession without *imagines* (Fig. 15). She proposes that these images were not a regular part of Roman iconography and that the art of freedmen “is consistently alluding to elements of much grander funerals” (*ibid.*: 98). The customs of the upper-classes were clearly recognised as a successful means of self-promotion and to depict such an image on one's tomb associated that individual with aristocratic practices and implied that such activity had occurred for the deceased. In addition to the political nature of the *laudatio funebris*, it also perpetuated the memory of the dead, reviving them in the consciousness of those listening by recounting details of their life and achievements. As Polybius (6.53.3) noted, “the people remember what happened and picture it before their eyes, not only those who shared in the deeds, but also those who did not.” These achievements may have been exaggerated but the funerary monument could also be selective in the image it portrayed. Dupont (1992: 24) suggests that this

practice “served to commemorate the glory of the ancestors and to afford them immortality by fixing them in the Romans’ collective memory – for there was little point in striving for glory if it was to expire with the last witnesses to the deeds that have given rise to it.” Not all members of society had the opportunity to do this, and although their ancestors undoubtedly remained important to their sense of identity, they may not have been entitled to an *imago*. However, the funerary monument acted in a similar manner to the *laudatio*, fulfilling “the same human needs” (Kampen, 1981: 49) and inserting aspects of their lives into the collective consciousness of society, even if only temporarily.

#### 1.4 Why commemorate?

The primary function of a sepulchral monument is to mark the location of human remains (Hope, 2001: 3). In addition, monuments prevent disturbance of the ground and provide a focal point to which relatives can return at specific times. However, funerary monuments also function in various other ways.

##### (a) *Memory preservation*

The word ‘monument’ derives from the Latin verb *monere*, “to remind” (Varro, *L.L.* VI. 49) and the *Digest* (11.7.2.6 (Ulpian)) states specifically that a monument is “something which exists to preserve a memory.” The funerary monument therefore acted not only to remind the family where relatives were buried, but also to ensure that the deceased remained alive in the memories of people encountering the memorial, whether they were relatives, friends or strangers. Hope (1998: 179) notes that memorials preserve “the name, gender, age or occupation of the dead individual. Sculpture may similarly capture facial features, while carved tools and equipment may indicate employment.” These details allowed people who had known the deceased to recall precisely who they were, what they were like and what they did, thus keeping their memory alive. However, they also conveyed the identity of the deceased to strangers - a process that brought them temporarily to life in their memory too. Creating a memory of the deceased, either real or artificial, in the minds of relatives and strangers allowed individuals to proclaim their existence. As Keppie (1991: 98) states, “Romans, like most other societies in ancient and modern times, were much

concerned with the permanent recording of the life and achievements of an individual on his death,” and funerary monuments were vital to this process, confirming that an individual had lived, worked, loved, and died – essentially that they had existed. This existence may have been humble and short and may not have involved deeds comparable with those of Augustus and other great individuals of the period, but they had made an impact on the world simply through their existence. The desire to register this may have been greater if they had no specific claims to greatness or anything in particular to distinguish them from the masses.

This practice also satisfied a religious need. It is apparent from Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* that popular belief concerning the immortality of the soul varied and many, including Cicero himself, were undecided on the matter (see Jackson Knight, 1970). Lattimore (1942) examined a wide range of Greek and Latin epitaphs in order to assess popular attitudes towards the nature and immortality of the soul. He sums up the thinking of Cicero and his contemporaries thus: “Cicero inclines to believe, and wishes to believe, in immortality; so the Platonic arguments are rehearsed, together with reasoning from customs and the practice of famous men. Such arguments seem to prove, if they prove anything, only that many of Cicero’s contemporaries, like himself, hoped for an immortality the reality of which they could not demonstrate, even to themselves” (*ibid.*: 48). This lack of conviction concerning immortality contributed to the significance of funerary monuments as a method of memory preservation. Many individuals undoubtedly had firm beliefs about life after death, but there was no common consensus or official doctrine concerning the immortality of the soul and whether it passed to a better (or worse) place after death (see Chapter 2). Widespread uncertainty about existence after death led to a greater desire to continue to exist amongst the living, seen in the wish for immortality expressed by Horace and Propertius. Being remembered by the living allowed the name and identity of an individual to remain alive. As Lattimore (*ibid.*: 126) suggests, funerary monuments were “designed to attract the attention of the wayfarer, to make him at least read the name on the stone, to have some value attached to that name alive in his consciousness for a while. This is a tacit acknowledgement of the finality of death.” This process was aided by the fact that inscriptions were intended to be read aloud (Ireland, 1983: 221). Walker (1985: 62) explains how “in so doing, we are to speak for the dead: ‘Be aware, traveller, that your voice is really mine’ (CIL XIV 356, a marble

tablet found at Ostia).” Monuments allowed the dead to come alive and speak directly to the living. This provided comfort for both the individual contemplating death and those left behind. Mourners were comforted by the knowledge that even if the soul was mortal their loved ones remained alive in their minds and those of strangers encountering their memorial (Lattimore, 1942: 234). Strangers were evidently integral to this process, partly because there remained the possibility that the family would die out or move away and thus be unable to play an active part in perpetuating the memory of their ancestors. Strangers also expanded the sphere in which the deceased could live as a memory. The location of sepulchral monuments along major roads, contributed to this system considerably by introducing the memory of the deceased into the consciousness of travellers from distant locations.

Funerary monuments were clearly considered essential to guaranteeing that individuals did not face oblivion after death and they formed the last link between the dead and the living (*ibid.*: 126). The importance of this link and the fear of annihilation is further illuminated by its occasional use as a punishment, in the form of *damnatio memoriae* (Woolf, 1996: 32). This official decree “condemning an individual to historical oblivion as well as to public disgrace” (Brilliant, 1974: 86) through the removal of their name, titles and images from monuments, was unlikely to affect the sepulchral monuments of ordinary members of society, and was usually inflicted upon disgraced emperors, usurpers, traitors and military or political leaders. Hope (2003: 115) points out that “the damned became infamous rather than completely forgotten; a damned memory was still a memory,” but, the fact that it was considered a particularly fearful punishment and that merely erasing their name damned a person to obscurity and total annihilation, indicates the perceived effectiveness of the inscribed word and significance of memory preservation. As Cooley (2000a: 2) has pointed out, this practice shows that “inscriptions continued to attract people’s attention.”

#### (b) *Self-promotion, identity and status change*

It was not only essential to perpetuate the memory of the deceased but, in addition, it was important to *promote* it in order to enhance their status in the eyes of the living. The desire for self-promotion and display permeated all social levels, and during the late Republic and early Empire social mobility became a particularly influential force.

Woolf (1996: 33) highlights the uncertainty experienced by members of society given that “the early imperial period ... was characterised by a loosening of the bonds of society together with a concomitant rise in individualism. Mobility brought fears as well as hopes, since not all change was chosen or desirable.” Under circumstances in which one’s social status could decrease as rapidly as it could be enhanced, the need for stability was great. As Woolf (*ibid.*: 34) continues, “the desire to fix the past in stone for posterity was an understandable response to the uncertainty of the present.” Cooley (2000b: 7) has also observed that all inscriptions “were concerned with creating history out of the present for the future,” and in this context it is possible to further examine the motives behind funerary commemoration. These included the confirmation of an individual’s place in society in order to minimise challenges against it and an attempt to promote status through the selective use of words and images. Individuals from all social levels and backgrounds were vulnerable to status change, but monuments could be employed either to cement the status of an individual fearing that it may subsequently be lost or one who wished to express a recently acquired higher status. The pyramid tomb of Gaius Cestius, for example, made a specific statement about the individual responsible for its construction, its dimensions and the organisation required for its construction, indicating that Cestius was an important, wealthy man.<sup>3</sup> Encountering such a monument left little doubt about the importance of the man it commemorated and the monument ensured that this was the impression that survived for eternity.

All members of society were vulnerable to status change but it was to those who had recently experienced an improvement in status that the funerary monument was most important. Those commonly finding themselves in this situation were freedmen and freedwomen who, released from the bonds of slavery, experienced a sudden improvement of their legal status (through citizenship) and their position in the wider community. Many extant funerary monuments record freedmen, a fact that might be explained by pride in their new status, as Ross Taylor (1961: 129) explains: “unlike the average man in the freeborn population, they had something to record, something

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<sup>3</sup> His knowledge of the culture of the wider world was also demonstrated by his emulation of the pyramids of Egypt - apparently unaware of the warnings of Horace and Propertius that these structures would not stand the test of time! Perhaps, by specifically mentioning “pyramids”, the poets were actually passing judgement on the arrogance of Cestius rather than referring to those of Egypt. See Vout (2003) for a detailed examination of the role of Egyptian symbolism in Roman society, particularly its association with the afterlife and funerary imagery.

in which they felt as much pride as the men who shared the space along the major roads and in the cemeteries, senators, knights, and soldiers, felt in their titles and honours.” Former slaves were unable to compete with senators and other elevated members of society in many ways, but were nevertheless eager to demonstrate that they were citizens of that society. This could be achieved in a variety of ways, including the direct statement of citizenship conveyed by the *tria nomina*. Treggiari (1969: 6 – 7) throws further light on the significance of this, observing:

“*Libertini* in fact stand out among the *plebs* because they possess a *cognomen*, since the name by which they had been known as slaves remained as surname when, on manumission, they took the *nomen gentile* and (usually) *praenomen* of their patron. *Cognomina*, except for the aristocracy, were of comparatively recent introduction, and although for the upper classes they were regular by the first century BC ... the lower classes seem to have been slow to follow the fashion: among their inscriptions mention of a third name is the exception.”

The name not only asserted the new-found status of the deceased but also that of their family and subsequent generations, Parker Pearson (1999: 193) noting that “the living can also profit as well as they may from both the death itself and from the opportunities presented by holding a funeral.” That it was considered important to advertise citizenship is emphasised by the observation of Ross Taylor (1961: 122) that over time the “decline of the use of *libertus* in the freedman’s name is undoubtedly a reflection of the freedman’s unwillingness to declare his inferior status and his dependence on and obligation to his patron.” The funerary monument displayed *selected* information, thus allowing freedmen to assert their status within it whilst concealing their slave origins. Ex-slaves were proud of their status as citizens and wished to display it. Pride in newfound citizenship was also demonstrated by increased emphasis on the family, to whom their status would be passed. The image of the ideal citizen family advertised the success of freed slaves and their hopes for the future (Hope, 1998: 191). The example of the family portrait of Quintus [J]aelius, a herald and assignor of seats, illustrates this practice (Fig. 11). Not only did the couple flaunt their “superior economic condition with the construction of a pretentious tomb” (Friggeri, 2001: 59) and emphasize their status by depicting the man wearing a toga, but, in addition, they also showed their family. The stone is damaged but a third figure was originally included and probably represented their son or daughter (*ibid.*: 59). The

couple were not only economically successful but were also the proud progenitors of a family of free individuals who would stand as living monuments to their parents and their success.<sup>4</sup>

Meyer (1990: 83, n. 46) points out that it was also possible “to make status claims through a child’s epitaph – if he or she had a citizen name, for example, or special status, titles, literary achievements, etc.” The increased frequency of lower class funerary inscriptions commemorating children has also been attributed to “the desire of freedmen to advertise their newly-gained status as Roman citizens” (King 2000: 122). The monument not only commemorated the deceased but provided an opportunity to advertise the identity of the dedicator, and it has been suggested (Meyer, 1990: 75) that the name of the commemorator was included in approximately 80 per cent of funerary inscriptions from the Western empire. This is illustrated by the tomb of Eurysaces. The tomb was erected by Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces for his wife Atistia, but as Kleiner (1987: 546) observes, it is Eurysaces and his occupation as a baker that takes precedence on the monument: “Atistia is not represented alone in the portrait relief placed above the epitaph plaque on the front of the tomb, but in a group portrait with her husband. And it is Eurysaces alone who is honoured in the larger inscriptions and in the baking frieze that decorates three sides of the structure.” Kleiner uses this to illustrate the status of women on family monuments but it can also be seen as an example of the way in which funerary monuments displayed the status and identity of the living commemorator.<sup>5</sup> Advertising the identity of the deceased was evidently essential for immortality in the consciousness of the living, but those dedicating the monuments also benefited. Their status within the community could be heightened as they reaped the rewards of ostentatious display and honourable piety to the deceased. Kleiner (*ibid.*: 546) concludes: “Eurysaces has ostensibly erected a tomb in honour of his wife, but, in truth it is his name, his profession, his achievements, and his facial features that he hopes will be preserved for posterity.”

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<sup>4</sup> This was particularly the case with sons who bore the same name as their father. The surviving family was as essential to the perpetuation of memory as the funerary monument for it was through them that the status of the deceased was significant in the long term.

<sup>5</sup> Eurysaces probably commissioned the tomb with a view to his own burial there at a later date but the tomb was officially dedicated to Atistia.

Economic status was also significant, particularly in the commemorative practices of ex-slaves. Many former slaves used the skills acquired during slavery to become successful in commerce and manufacture, often aided by the financial support of a patron (Garnsey and Saller, 1987: 124). Funerary reliefs portraying the deceased at work record these successes and the tomb of Eurysaces illustrates the great wealth that it was possible to achieve. The prosperity resulting from a successful professional career after manumission undoubtedly varied but often enabled these individuals to afford a commemorative monument upon their death. Their economic status thus provided the means by which to advertise it and assert their position within society as successful individuals. It is unlikely that all members of the lower classes were able to afford the expense of a memorial (see Chapter 3). Furthermore, Dyson (1992: 202) notes that “occupations also served as a means of personal identity for those individuals who lacked real family traditions and compensated for the lack of other family identities.”

Finally, the funerary monument displayed and celebrated the new status of freedmen through reference to their heir. As Meyer (1990: 77) observes, unless specifically assigned elsewhere, the task of burial was the responsibility of the heir. This legal relationship appears frequently on funerary monuments because “it was a moral duty which the heir or the person responsible for the burial wished to indicate had been discharged” (*ibid.*: 78). However, it also signalled the legal status of the deceased for only those in possession of citizenship had the right to make a valid will (*ibid.*: 79) and it therefore demonstrated that the deceased was a legitimate member of society. Occasionally this was taken further, with the text of the will, either complete or in part, being inscribed on the monument itself. The inscription mounted on the façade of Tomb A in the Vatican necropolis, for example, begins:

Into the hands of the gods. From the three testamentary codicils of Popilius Heracla. Caius Popilius Heracla salutes his heirs. To you, my heirs, I ask, order and give you mandate, in the name of your faith, to erect for me a monument on the Vatican, near the circus, near the monument to Ulpian Narcissus, for a value of six thousand sesterces.

(Zander, 2003: 23)



Meyer (1990: 81 - 83) examines the significance of such displays of citizenship within provincial contexts, emphasising the desire of individuals to advertise their legal status in a particularly Roman manner, concluding, “[t]estamentary privilege, in short, is a documentable and desired consequence of the acquisition of Roman citizenship, if not a verifiably major factor in its pursuit, at a time when citizenship was increasingly sought and acquired.” These concerns were also found amongst the freedmen of Rome and influenced the frequency with which heirs were alluded to on funerary monuments.

To contemporary observers there were various signs that indicated the legal and social status of the deceased freedman and allowed him to assert for posterity that he was a citizen. In addition, other elements highlighted his involvement with Roman traditions and customs; considered particularly important if he was of foreign origin. Amongst these were the use of portraiture and images of the deceased partaking in traditional Roman activities or as they believed a “Roman” should appear. The latter commonly took the form of an image of the stern and serious Roman of the Republic, dressed in a toga as a further declaration of citizenship which represented how “they thought old Romans ought to look” (Ross Taylor, 1961: 132; see also Zanker, 1975). This immediate visual indicator of legal status served to cement their place within society as citizens and celebrated it in public. The desire of ex-slaves to advertise their new status may have been further influenced by previous contact with elite culture. As slaves, they directly witnessed (and possibly took an active role in) the customs of the elite, in addition to observing the dynamic nature of society (Woolf, 1996: 35) which they eventually experienced themselves, through manumission. Woolf (*ibid.*: 36) suggests that this experience “must have heightened their sensitivity to the mutable nature of their social identities. The fact that such mobility was upward, predisposed them to personal monumentalization.” Freedmen received citizenship but this did not release them from the pressures of society and was not a guarantee against further changes in status. The desire to hide their slave origins reveals that citizenship involved several complex status levels and that it was preferable to be a freeborn citizen than one with a past rooted in slavery. Hope (1998: 180) suggests that “for certain groups enduring persistent inconsistencies in their social or legal status, and thus occupying liminal positions, the Roman tombstone had a particular significance

as a symbol of legitimisation.” Freedmen were included within this, for they used the funerary monument to assert their legal and respectable position within society.

Sepulchral monuments not only displayed identity and status but also actively created these identities. Cannon (1989: 438) describes death as “an opportunity for social advancement” and funerary monuments were central to this process. The creation of identities by monuments involved either making claims to a status or identity that was not grounded in reality, or attempting to gain recognition of their existence in a society in which they held an undefined or particularly low status. The first of these has been illustrated by examples of freedmen advertising their citizenship and obscuring their slave origins and can also be seen in reliefs depicting ordinary individuals partaking in upper class activities, such as formal dining. However, freedmen were not the only “liminal” group who wished to legitimise their identity. Hope (1998, 2000a, and 2001) has examined the ways in which funerary monuments contributed to the creation of individual and collective identities, stating that “the cemetery became the ideal display ground for the aspirations of those who struggled for acceptance” (Hope, 2001: 90). She draws upon the example of a group of gladiators at Nîmes to illustrate how the practice and characteristics of commemoration allowed men with virtually no recognised position in society to integrate themselves into the community and gain legitimacy. The shared appearance and standardized epitaphs of their funerary monuments facilitated the expression of “group affiliation in death” (Hope, 1998: 183), which gave the gladiators a sense of legitimacy in the face of social isolation.

Identity was also particularly significant for foreigners or newcomers to the city of Rome. The early emperors, from Augustus to Galba, surrounded themselves with a personal bodyguard of mounted Germans known as the *Germani corporis custodes*. This small group of men (between 500 – 1000) were recruited from the Lower Rhineland, specifically amongst the Batavi and Ubii, between the ages of 17 and 18 and served in Rome for sixteen years (Bellen, 1981: 78). Whilst resident at Rome the *custodes* appear to have retained many of their Germanic traits. Whether this was a conscious decision on the part of the guards themselves or enforced as a means to prevent corruption is unclear, but it is evident that the *custodes* remained distanced from the wider community, apparently not forming relationships with members of the

public or actively participating in social activities. The extant funerary monuments of the *custodes* illustrate that the identity shared by these Germanic individuals was based on several aspects of their lives, specifically their occupation, and was affirmed by the monuments themselves. These take the same form (stelae with rounded gables depicting a wreath and two rosettes) and include the following information always presented in the same order: their name, the name of the emperor, the title of the unit (*corporis custos*), the title of their *decuria*, their origin (for example *natione Bataus*), age at death, *hic situs est*, the dedicator of the monument and that the *collegium Germanorum* was to act as heir. For example, one epitaph reads:

*Paetinus / Ti(beri) Claud(i) / Caisar(is) Aug(usti) / corp(or)is  
cust(os) / dec(ur)ia Pacati / nat(ione) Bataus / vix(it) ann(os) XX /  
h(ic) s(itus) e(st) / pos(uit) Virus dec(ur)ia Pacati / h(eres) eius ex  
col(legio) Germa[n(or)um].*

(CIL VI 8807)

The use of a specific formula stating basic facts about the deceased is reminiscent of the gladiators discussed by Hope (1998) and can be viewed as a statement of group identity. There were many aspects of the lives of the *custodes* that may have contributed to their sense of collective identity, including their shared origins and experiences, their military organisation and their ambiguous status within Roman society, but it is significant that they expressed this through the medium of the funerary monument. Stone funerary monuments were not traditionally erected amongst the Germanic tribes of the provinces (Carroll, 2001: 57 – 59), and that the guards were commemorated in this way indicates a desire for acceptance and recognition of their identity within the community in which they lived but were not really considered to be members. Their lack of contact with the population of Rome provided few opportunities for this to occur during life, but death made it possible for them to negotiate a place for themselves within that society. They did this, however, not as individuals but as a group with standardised monuments and inscriptions. The audience for these monuments not only consisted of the wider Roman community, but the guards themselves and the tombstones served to reaffirm to the unit their shared identity.

(c) *Commemoration and the poor*

This discussion has illustrated the ways in which commemorative monuments were used by diverse groups of society to publicise, promote, create and preserve aspects of their lives and identities. However, although this encompassed all levels of society, substantial funerary monuments were not erected by all members of society. Ross Taylor (1961: 131), discussing the lack of “permanent” memorials dedicated to freeborn members of the “lower population” of the city, suggests that “it would appear that they were little interested in having their names survive,” and that “the social and economic condition of the freeborn is at least partly responsible for this seeming lack of interest” (*ibid.*: 131). These statements are significant for they suggest not only that the lives of the lower classes were unworthy of commemoration, but also that they were uninterested in self-promotion, identity display or immortality. However, although these individuals may have been unable to afford the expense of elaborate tombs this should not be used as evidence of apathy. It is possible to gain further insight into the attitudes of different social groups towards commemoration by briefly examining the situation in Victorian Britain, discussed by Cannon (1989). British urban society of the nineteenth century bore many similarities to that of early Imperial Rome. Society was highly structured and position within it was vital to personal identity. More specifically it was, according to Cannon (1989: 438), a period of “unprecedented ostentation in funeral pageantry that was the equal concern, if not obsession, of the highest and the lowest extremes of the social spectrum.” This situation undoubtedly linked to the fact that “increasing affluence and social disruption created an atmosphere of status uncertainty in which increased efforts were required to establish, maintain, and improve status through material display” (*ibid.*: 444). Competitive display in the funerary sphere was as essential to processes of identity creation and self-promotion during this period as it was in Antiquity. In light of the apparent similarities between these two societies, it may be possible to compare the situation more closely in terms of the desire of the lower classes to compete for recognition and status within a dynamic society. Cannon (*ibid.*: 438) makes the following observation:

“At the time of an 1843 parliamentary report on burial practices and funeral expense, it could be said that the desire to secure respectful interment was the strongest and most widely diffused feeling among labouring people (Chadwick, 1843: 55) and would cause

them to neglect their well-being and that of their families in order to ensure provision of sufficient funds for a “proper” funeral. Absolute levels of funeral expenditure varied with social and economic status, but the important consideration of the time was the pervasive desire for funeral display among all classes and the relative hardship this entailed for the poor and even the middle classes (Chadwick, 1843: 197).”

It is problematic to draw conclusions from this statement and apply them directly to Roman society. However, if, in such a competitive society, the lower classes strove to emulate the practices of the aristocracy, it is possible that the same occurred in ancient Rome. Cannon examines other societies in which funerary display was directly associated with competitive status and identity display, all of which include the lower class aspiring to emulate the upper class in order to obtain recognition. It is therefore not possible to concur with Ross Taylor’s dismissive view that the poor had no desire to commemorate or preserve the memory of their existence.

### 1.5 Why monuments?

For many, the only opportunity available for lasting personal displays and self-promotion was within the funerary sphere. However, the popularity of the medium suggests that there were more complex reasons for its adoption as the most significant form of self-display in Roman society. What were the fundamental characteristics of funerary monuments that made them such an effective means of display?

Both Propertius and Horace implied that monuments were less permanent than literary works, and as late as the fourth century AD, Ausonius (*Epitaphs* 32) expressed doubts about the permanency of stone: “Are we to be surprised that men are forgotten? The stones decay, and death comes to the stones and the names on them.” However, it is the durability of stone that scholars have asserted as the primary characteristic attractive to people wishing to erect a memorial. The survival of many funerary monuments, although clearly only a small percentage, illustrates the suitability of stone as a medium for lasting commemoration. However, the permanency offered by stone monuments extends beyond the physical characteristics of the material. Woolf (1996: 30) suggests that the *knowledge* that stone was robust contributed to the ability

of the monument and its text to assert a particular message, especially if that message was vulnerable to challenges from others, stating that “it is the capacity of monuments to resist time that makes them suitable as vehicles for representing the contingent as permanent and the contestable as fixed.” Once something was inscribed in stone it was difficult to deny its existence or argue against it, the process of inscribing being one in which questionable information or statements could be made fact. This would have appealed particularly to members of society wishing to be portrayed in the best possible light. Furthermore, the power of the funerary monument to present unchallengeable information may have been emphasised by the legal context in which it was erected. The final regulation of Table X of *The Twelve Tables* reads: “A fore-court or *bustum* is to be *religiosus*” (cited in Crawford, 1996: 583). Although this applies specifically to the *bustum* (the place where a body was burned and/or buried (Berger, 1953: 377)) it can be assumed that this was commonly the place where the memorial was set up. Being a *locus religiosus* meant that the site became “subject to divine law and therefore not susceptible of human ownership or possession or alienation of any kind (by sale or gift or legacy or anything else). It is *res nullius*” (Crook, 1967: 133). The legal and religious status of every burial site lent extra weight to the statements made on the monument. The words, by virtue of their location, became *religiosus* and thus virtually incontestable. This authority was enhanced further by the “monumentality of the text” (Woolf, 1996: 28). The use of inscribed text to assert the power of Roman rulers and to convey political and civic information in a formal context lent a significant amount of weight to the practice. For the ordinary, possibly illiterate, member of the urban community, the presence of inscriptions in the city signalled the power of the city authorities. Funerary epigraphy claimed association with this authority through the presence of the inscribed word, drawing on implications of superiority and power to add further weight to their message.

Woolf (*ibid.*: 28) suggests that “both the format and location of an inscription might be said to constitute a claim to authority by association, and an assertion of conformity with the accepted norms,” hinting at a further two points that explain the desirability of memorials. Firstly, the location of sepulchral monuments allowed for superior levels of communication with the living. Roman cemeteries were public places which often lined major highways and they were frequented by members of the public (Graham, in press b). They were so public that Martial (*Epigrams*, I. 34. 8; III. 93. 15)

describes how tramps, beggars and prostitutes took up residence in abandoned tombs. The grave site was also the location for post-funeral celebrations, including festivals such as the *Parentalia* and the anniversary of the birth and death of the deceased (see Chapter 2). Given the public nature of these areas, they can be compared with the fluid and dynamic public spaces within the city and thus as a suitable environment for highly visible display. However, the cemetery differed from other civic spaces in that the ordinary person was not excluded from the events that took place there. D'Ambra (1993: 3), for example, states that "the forum and other civic spaces in Rome provided backdrops for spectacles in which the elite made appearances and maintained the high visibility that designated privilege. Others – the citizens and masses at the bottom of the social hierarchy – took part in these events as spectators rather than players." Competition for prime locations along busy arteries, such as the Via Appia, emphasises the fact that these monuments were designed to be seen by strangers. Furthermore, the cemetery, where there was little competition from civic statues, elaborate temples, inscribed governmental decrees and similar displays found in other public spaces, provided an ideal environment for personal display and the communication of status and identity ideals. Here the funerary monument faced competition only from other funerary structures and the high public visibility was exploited solely by the dead. Woolf also refers to "conformity with the accepted norms," and for an individual of non-Roman origin, a stone memorial indicated their conformity with traditional *Roman* customs, thereby making substantial claims about their allegiances and identity.

There were several options available when setting up a sepulchral monument. Not only could the structure take many forms, but there were also text and images to consider. Undoubtedly financial factors were involved, but theoretically the funerary monument was a clean slate and could be used to express, display and promote a wide variety of issues in multiple ways that operated either separately or together to create the desired image of the deceased. Conventions were nevertheless closely observed. The words *hic situs est* (he/she lies here) are commonly found at the end of funerary inscriptions dated to the first century BC and first century AD (Keppie, 1991: 107) and from the middle of the first century AD it also became customary for the epitaph to begin with *Dis Manibus* ('To the Underworld Gods or Spirits of the Departed'). Keppie (*ibid.*: 107) notes that this was originally written in full but eventually became

abbreviated to *Dis Man* and finally DM. That these became standard parts of funerary inscriptions is demonstrated by the continuance of their use in Christian epitaphs. For example, the epitaph of a third-century AD funerary stele found near the Vatican necropolis and commemorating Licinia Amias, a Christian, includes both the abbreviation DM and the Christian expression *ἰχθύς ζώντων*, 'fish of the living' (Friggeri, 2001: 164). *Dis Manibus*, with its pagan connotations, has no religious meaning in this context but its use illustrates that it was still considered an essential element of proper commemorative practice and signalled that the inscription was related to the funerary sphere. However, beyond economic and traditional constraints, the funerary monument could be as complex or simple as was desired. As Hope (2000b: 155) observes, *everything* about these objects communicated with the living – size, décor, text and location were all used to express various things. The ways in which these elements were manipulated and elaborated (or simplified) were, theoretically, limitless. The fictional example of Trimalchio and the description he provides of his future tomb (Petronius, *Satyricon* 71) demonstrates the almost limitless manipulation of funerary monuments:

"I strongly beseech you to put my puppy dog round the feet of my statue and some wreaths and perfume jars and all the fights of Petraites so that by your skill I shall live on after death. I want the monument to have a frontage of 100 feet and a depth of 200 feet. For I should like to have all kinds of fruit growing round my ashes and a profusion of vines. Most of all I want it stated that "This monument is not to descend to my heir." It will certainly be my concern in my will to provide against any injury being done to me when I am dead. I am making one of my freedmen guardian of the tomb to prevent folk running up and shitting on it. I beg you to put ships too, in full sail, on the monument, and me sitting in my official robes on the official seat, wearing five gold rings and distributing money to the populace from a little purse. For, as you know, I gave them a meal costing two denarii each."

Although this is an exaggerated work of fiction, it illustrates that the individual or group erecting a sepulchral monument could theoretically include *any* aspect of their life, real or created, through the use of text and images. It is unlikely that the tomb described by Trimalchio represented the norm, and Petronius was undoubtedly attempting to illustrate the vulgarity of such ostentatious displays of wealth by "new men." Nevertheless, the passage demonstrates the way in which funerary monuments



were moulded to suit the needs and desires of those involved in their commission, although concerns for taste and decency probably prevented the common occurrence of particularly vulgar displays.

Despite the almost infinite forms that sepulchral monuments could take, they were also a selective form of communication. This is discussed at length by Hope (1998, 2000b and 2001) who states that “the funerary monument was a selective medium ... what was said or left unsaid was part of a deliberate shaping process in the presentation of the deceased” (Hope, 2001: 24). In this way it was possible for the commemorator to promote certain aspects and overlook others, thus shaping the image that was portrayed. Hope (1998: 193) suggests that the funerary monument represents “a limited form of communication,” thus intimating that it was incapable of displaying the vast quantities of information that other communicative structures could. However, these monuments took various forms and information was transmitted in diverse ways on different levels that could be understood by various groups of society. Beyond the fact that an epitaph comparable in length to the *Res Gestae* was, in reality, unlikely to be read, and that shorter texts and interesting reliefs or statuary were more attractive to the traveller passing through the cemetery, the funerary monument was not limited in terms of the options available for display. That the majority *chose* to be limited in their communication is, however, significant. Overlooking or ignoring information and aspects of the identity of the deceased, their personality, lifestyle, occupation or family was a conscious choice made by the dedicators of the monument and not imposed by the nature of the medium. Indeed, Hope (2000b: 155 – 56) also recognises that it was the very variety of memorial forms that allowed the inherent diversity of Roman society to be displayed. The images portrayed may not reflect reality but were given a sense of legitimacy by the finality of their existence in stone form.

## **1.6 Commemoration and emotion**

Social competition was undoubtedly crucial to the creation of monuments but it is equally essential to recognise the emotional context in which they were set up, as Hopkins (1983: 204) explains, “Romans had feelings, and it seems reasonable to ask

what they were.” In her study of *Bereavement and Commemoration* (1999) Tarlow acknowledges the difficulties of attempting to identify the influence and expression of emotion in the archaeological record. However, she repeatedly emphasises the importance of doing so in order to fully understand the material culture of the past, stating that “if archaeologists are unwilling to consider the minds of people in the past, they are powerless to approach areas such as motivation, without which the narratives they produce are two-dimensional and dehumanising” (1999: 26). Tarlow does not consider emotion “a part of some universal and essential humanity” (*ibid.*: 35) and observes that emotions and their expression can be socially constructed, but considers them vital to a study of death and burial: “how can we consider burial (death) without considering grief, fear and other emotions, which inform and structure funerary practices?” (*ibid.*: 30). Furthermore, she notes that individual responses to “emotional” situations vary. However, an inability to identify the specific feelings of individuals does not render the attempt to search for their manifestation in the material record less legitimate. Indeed, despite a rejection of the universalism of emotion, Tarlow proposes that “feelings” were central to increasing levels of commemoration in Orkney between the late eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Hopkins (1983: 223) also highlights the problems inherent in identifying “a single, constant, cross-cultural human nature,” and, most importantly, recognises that “we should not take for granted that our modern patterns and habits of reasoning necessarily linked Roman motives with Roman actions. Their rationality was probably different from ours” (*ibid.*: 204 – 205). Finley (1981: 159), discussing attitudes towards the elderly in Antiquity, agrees, and suggests that in a society in which early death was routine, “the intensity and duration of the emotional responses were unlike modern reactions.” Nevertheless, Hopkins (1983: 222) firmly states that “grief cannot be evaded; it is part of the human condition,” and, despite the difficulties of identifying a universal human nature, “there are some constant human elements or drives” (*ibid.*: 223). Rawson (1966: 80) concurs, asserting that “the desire to care for one’s own dead – both at burial and in commemorative rites at future times – is a primitive and basically human one and is not imposed by law or nationality.” In order to discuss funerary practices it is essential to be aware of the emotional forces of grief, sadness and loss, and to investigate their material expression and impact on the actions of the living.

In simple terms, “to erect a monument is a way of showing how much an individual has meant to you, and showing that to the rest of the community” (Hopkins, 1983: 131). The funerary monument stood as a memorial to a specific relationship, and its ability to display and forge personal bonds has been illustrated by the example of the *Germani corporis custodes*. However, families were also closely involved in the dedication of monuments. Expressions of emotion are not uncommon on Imperial period tombstones, and personal relationships are often signalled through the recognition of the virtues of the deceased which Friggeri (2001: 161 – 162) observes “can be found even in the most concise funerary inscriptions, although only a single adjective may have been used: *pientissimus*, *benemerens* (often abbreviated BM), *dulcissimus* (generally referring to young children) or a sign of affection for that person: *amatissimus*, *carissimus*, which emphasized the sadness felt upon the death of dear ones.” Questions have been raised with regards to the authenticity of these expressions and the use of standardised formulae has been used to argue that sentimentality played little part in the process of epitaph composition. King (2000: 129) proposes that “the influence of tradition implies that the sentiments recorded in stone cannot be genuine,” before suggesting that the stonemason played a more significant role in the choice of monument and epitaph. However, she later observes (*ibid.*: 132) that “the expression of emotions, whether verbally or in written form, always follows a standard, formulaic pattern.” Hopkins (1983: 220) also suggests that “the very act of transforming feelings into words automatically channels them along conventional lines. Language is a set of conventions.” This is supported further by Tarlow’s (1999: 131) proposal that “the significance of the stone was personal and emotional, and the fact that it was publicly visible should not make us cynical about the feelings of bereavement experienced by those who erected them.” In addition, the creation of a memorial provided a formal and standardised outlet for the expression of grief and a response to the uncertainty caused by death and Cannon (1989: 446) notes that “death’s disruption of social and personal bonds creates a powerful medium for expressive response, and this response can take any number of forms, all tied to the emotional and social effects of death’s created loss.” The act of memorialising was therefore directly influenced by the need to cope with an emotional situation in a conventional manner. It was therefore also an ideal context in which to make statements about a relationship or loved one that under other circumstances may have remained private.

In order to understand the impact of the emotional desire to commemorate, particularly amongst the poor, it is necessary to examine the form and extent of relationships experienced during life, particularly those of a familial nature. According to Brunt (1987a: 139 – 140), “craftsmen and landless labourers were unlikely to marry if they had little prospect of being able to provide for a wife and family.” High mortality rates that may have rendered lasting relationships impossible or reduced the emotional investment individuals were prepared to make, have been cited in support of this proposal. Economic factors are also considered integral, Brunt (*ibid.*: 139), for example, suggesting that “there must be a level below which a man cannot afford to take a wife.”<sup>6</sup> However, poverty and emotion are not mutually exclusive and it is important to acknowledge the existence of human relationships. Dixon (1992: 3) argues that, “whatever variations there might be in the constitution and description of the family, it is a universal human institution, and the Romans were human.” Furthermore, without relationships and families, the lower class population would have declined dramatically. Families, however, were probably small at both ends of the social scale, Patterson (2000a: 270) proposing that “many Roman families must have been of the nuclear type (i.e. husband, wife and children), largely because the effects of high mortality rates and consequent low level of life expectancy at Rome would have meant that few families would have had more than two generations living at the same time.” Indeed, during the Empire the state attempted to encourage birth rates by awarding status benefits to families who produced three or more children (Stambaugh, 1988: 158). At the lower end of the social and economic scale especially, the nuclear family unit probably consisted of between two and five people, and acted as a means of both emotional and economic support for the individual (Dixon, 1992: 162 – 163). It is unlikely that larger families could have been maintained on an unreliable wage (see Chapter 3).<sup>7</sup>

The need for economic support was a feature of family life that was of particular importance to poorer members of society who looked to offspring for support in old age and eventually burial. However, a need for material support, much stressed by scholars wishing to demonstrate a lack of emotional investment in family and personal

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<sup>6</sup> These economic constraints are set out in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these relationships and the composition of the Roman family see Rawson (1992), Nielsen (1997) and Saller (1997).

relationships, does not necessarily lessen the significance of emotional relationships. Dixon (1991: 113) proposes that there was a strong sentimental ideal of the family, at least amongst the elite, during the late Republic and early Empire and there is strong evidence to suggest that emotion was central to upper class family life despite the arrangement of marriages on social or political grounds. Lucretius (3.894 – 6), for example, describes the happy home in which, “sweet children race to win the first kisses, and thrill your heart to its depths with sweetness.” It is therefore unlikely that emotion was absent in the lives of poorer classes, especially since “there was no consideration of family interests to prevent [them] marrying for love” (Wilkinson, 1975: 129). Moreover, for those sharing small apartments, constant contact with other individuals and families probably resulted in the creation of extended family networks based not on genetic links but co-habitation. Bradley (1991: 92), discussing the terms “*tata*” and “*mamma*”, suggests they were used by lower-class children as affectionate titles for unrelated individuals who formed part of their “extended family,” possibly “their parents’ co residents, co-workers and neighbours – who at times came to play within their lives a quasi-parental role, even though unrelated.” The family is therefore likely to have provided a significant means of support for members of the poverty stricken classes on the basis that “it seems to satisfy certain constant human needs, especially the need for material aid and the sense of belonging and mutual emotional support” (Dixon, 1992: 162).

Golden (1988: 155) has suggested that between 30 and 40 percent of children died in the first year of life. The frequency of infant death has led to the conclusion that parents limited emotional investment in children, at least until they reached an age at which they were likely to survive to maturity, a conviction that is shared by scholars of other historical periods. Hopkins discusses the work of Stone (1979) on sixteenth and seventeenth century England who argued that, “when mortality was high, frequent death and the expectation that death might at any time rupture close relationships prevented people from investing huge amounts of emotion in loving attachments or intimacy: ‘to preserve their mental stability, parents were obliged to limit the degree of their psychological involvement with their infant children’” (Hopkins, 1983: 222, citing Stone, 1979: 57). Similar attitudes can perhaps be seen in evidence for infant exposure at Rome, particularly amongst the lower classes. However, as Harris (1994: 113) explains, the commonest reason for exposure was an inability to feed an extra

mouth, *not* an absence of attachment to the child. Moreover, exposure was often carried out “in such a way as to make it as likely as possible that the child would be found and rescued, mainly by leaving it in a conventional place for exposure” (*ibid.*: 9). Literature and epigraphy provide additional evidence for emotional attachments and even the use of stock terms can indicate “the strength of ideals of marital harmony, affection for young children, and regret for “children” of all ages who died before their parents” (Dixon, 1992:30). According to Bradley (1991: 117), Plutarch, in the *Moralia* (493 – 497), argued that “human affection for children is a natural emotional response and (contrary to Epicurus) that human procreation is not dictated by hope of material return.” Rates of infant mortality were high and parents presumably experienced the death of children on a regular basis but they were not necessarily immune to that loss (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 133). Indeed, Golden (1988: 154) notes that, under such circumstances, feelings of attachment may be *greater* rather than less. Thus, “far from being indifferent, members of cultures in which children are at risk often make sure that their infants are in almost constant contact with a caregiver, quickly see to them when they cry, and feed them whenever they suspect they are hungry – precisely because they know the danger that they will die if they are not attended to” (*ibid.*: 155). Although children may have been a substantial financial burden, parents eventually came to depend on the support of their children. It thus made sense to invest in them both financially *and* emotionally in order to ensure their own comfort and survival later in life. Golden (*ibid.*: 157) concludes that “the argument that adults in high-mortality populations did not care when their children died fails to convince,” and Hopkins (1983: 218) observes that the prohibitions of the Twelve Tables (X.4) concerning excessive mourning, and later writings advising men and women against “grieving too loudly, too much or too long ... surely imply that uncontrolled or ‘unseemly’ mourning was widespread.” Furthermore, mourners were hired to accompany aristocratic funerals, indicating that public expressions of grief were acceptable. Economic factors may have prevented the purchase of a substantial memorial for a family member but this did not necessarily signal any diminished sense of loss at their death and there is no reason to suggest that the desire to express their bereavement in a permanent form was reduced. Saller and Shaw (1984: 130) point out that in urban centres, such as Carthage and Ostia, the largest single category of inscriptions comprises dedications to children under the age of ten and, “in Rome, from the Republic to the Principate and from the lower classes to the senatorial

aristocracy, a strong urge was felt to perpetuate the memory of the family relationship between the commemorator and the deceased (72 to 78 per cent of commemorators being from the nuclear family)" (*ibid.*: 134).<sup>8</sup> Poorer members of society formed personal, intimate relationships with one another, which they undoubtedly wished to commemorate as much as wealthier members of the same community.

Every member of the Roman urban community had personal experience of death and their responses to funerary monuments was further conditioned by these experiences. As Elsner (1998: 145) observes, "the marking of a death is perhaps the moment at which human beings especially reflect upon the vanished life they are mourning and their own mortality." Funerary monuments were not only expressive in terms of information, but also conveyed and constructed the emotions of those involved. This not only affected the form of the monument but also the ways in which it was perceived by onlookers and strangers enticed to pay closer attention to funerary monuments with which they felt they had more in common than the statues of civic patrons and public building dedications. As Horace wrote:

Whether thou be rich and sprung from ancient Inachus,  
or dwell beneath the canopy of heaven  
poor and of lowly birth, it makes no difference:  
thou art pitiless Orcus' victim.  
We are all being gathered to one and the same fold.  
The lot of everyone of us is tossing about in the urn,  
destined sooner or later, to come forth  
and place us in Charon's skiff for everlasting exile.

(*Odes*, II. 3. 21 – 28)

The common fate of all men, regardless of wealth or age, is a common theme within the *Odes* of Horace<sup>9</sup> and despite his apparent need to remind his audience repeatedly of this fact it is likely that the population of Rome was aware of the proximity of death. Their responses to funerary monuments were conditioned by this knowledge and their personal emotional experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> Their definition of "the lower classes" is, however, rather broad, comprising "those below the curial order" (Saller and Shaw, 1984: 127).

<sup>9</sup> See for example *Odes*, I. 4. 13 – 17; I. 28. 15 – 20; II. 3. 4 – 8; II. 14. 1 – 12; II. 18. 29 – 40 and III. 24. 1 – 8

Sepulchral monuments were evidently an ideal means for the ordinary Roman (or non-Roman) to make public statements about themselves and their loved ones in an accepted and conventional manner. For many individuals there were few opportunities for lasting self-promotion and display and the funerary monument allowed individuals to assert aspects of their lives, emotions and relationships in a publicly accessible format. The truth of these statements was emphasised by the context in which they were made, even if the reality they presented was actually a created ideal.



## Chapter 2

### Funerals and Burial Practice

*“Though thou art eager to be going, 'tis a brief delay I ask. Only three handfuls of earth! Then thou mayst speed upon thy course.”*

(Horace, *Odes*, I. 28(2). 15 - 16)

Before commemoration could occur, the remains of the deceased had first to be disposed of in accordance with the appropriate rites. This process was even more important than commemoration and was similarly influenced by a multitude of factors. Disposal was essentially a practical necessity but became entangled with issues of religion, real and ritual pollution, the law, duty and, inevitably, competition amongst the living.

#### **2.1 The funeral**

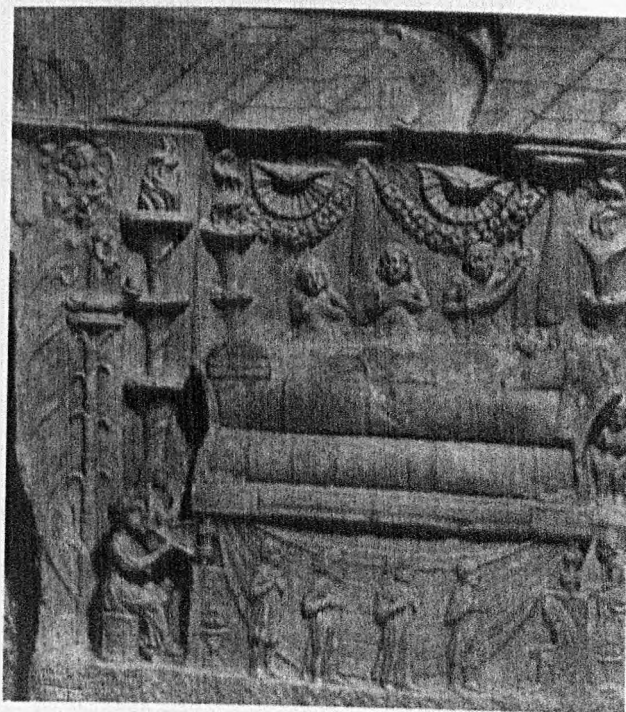
The ritual of the funeral began immediately after death. Reconstruction of these activities is based largely on extant literary accounts recalling the actions of the wealthier classes. It is therefore difficult to establish the extent to which poorer members of society observed these practices and rituals but similar rituals were probably performed on a less extravagant scale.

Toynbee (1971: 43 – 44) describes the death of a family member:

“When death was imminent relations and close friends gathered round the dying person’s bed, to comfort and support him or her and to give vent to their own grief. The nearest relative present gave the last kiss, to catch the soul, which, so it was believed, left the body with the final breath. The same relative then closed the departed’s eyes (*oculos premere*, etc), after which all the near relatives called upon the dead by name (*conclamare*) and lamented him or her, a process that continued at intervals until the body was disposed of by cremation or inhumation. The next act was to take

the body from the bed, to set it on the ground (*deponere*), and to wash it and anoint it. Then followed the dressing of the corpse – in a toga, in the case of a male Roman citizen, the laying of a wreath on its head, particularly in the case of a person who had earned one in life, and the placing of a coin in the mouth to pay the deceased's fare in Charon's barque. All was now ready for the body's exposition or lying-in-state (*collocare* = *προτιθέναι*) on a grand bed (*lectus funebris*), if the family was well-to-do, with the feet towards the house-door."

In addition, Paoli (1963: 128) observes that burning lamps and candles were placed around the corpse, which was strewn with flowers, wreaths and garlands, and that the fire on the hearth was extinguished as a sign of mourning. The body then lay in state for up to seven days, during which the funeral was arranged (**Fig. 14**). Family members were evidently involved in the rites immediately surrounding the death of a loved one, but funeral professionals were also entrusted with funeral arrangements and other activities such as preparing the body and bearing the bier to the place of burial. Although often grouped under the title *libitinarii* (Bodel, 2000: 136) these workers were more specialised than the term implies. Bodel (*ibid.*: 136) defines the *libitinarii* as "funeral contractors and suppliers of workmen rather than tradesmen themselves," with the latter becoming less commonly referred to by their specialist titles during the middle and late imperial period and more often simply as *funerarii*.



**Figure 14.** Relief from the Haterii monument in Rome depicting a body lying-in-state. (Toynbee, 1971 fig. 9).

Examination of the specialised roles played by members of the funerary trade provides further insight into funerary activities and emphasises the importance attached to the burial ritual. Amongst the funerary specialists can be found *pollinctores*, referred to by Plautus as "morticians, who took their name from the practice of covering the face of the corpse with powder (*pollen*) in order to conceal the discolouration of death" (*ibid.*:

138; Plautus *Poen.* 63). Those responsible for carrying the corpses of the poor were known as *vespillones*, and reference is made to grave-diggers (*fossores*) and corpse-burners (*ustores*), plus horn players (*siticines*, *tubicines*), flautists (*tibicines*) and mimes and dancers involved in the funerary procession (*ibid.*: 138). Responsible for organising the cortège was the *dissignator* or funeral director (*ibid.*: 139). Bodel (*ibid.*: 139) suggests that the *dissignator* had a higher status than the others, possibly due to his lack of physical contact with the corpse, and that the title was often associated with that of *praeco* (herald or auctioneer). It is thus possible that the “herald and assignor of seats” (Fig. 11 (CIL 22997a)) who commemorated himself and his family with a monument displaying their portraits was one such individual.<sup>1</sup> An indication of the cost of hiring *libitinarii* can perhaps be gained from a legal text from Puteoli, the *lex Puteolana* (AE 1971, 88), in which it is stated that they were also responsible for executions and other punishments. The total cost of such activity was reportedly no more than 50 – 60 sesterces (Saller and Shaw, 1984: 128, n. 23).

The emergence of funerary specialists during the Republic can be explained in several ways. Firstly, it becomes evident from the events immediately surrounding death that the corpse was considered polluted and activities must be performed in order to ritually cleanse it. This spiritual pollution extended further, and death rendered the entire family unclean until the ninth day after the burial, with a cypress branch placed outside the door in order to warn people of the presence of a dead body within (Bodel, 2000: 141 – 142). Anyone attending a funeral was forbidden from bathing before they did so, with everyone undergoing cleansing with water and fire (*suffitio*) afterwards. As Hope and Marshall (2000: 6) suggest, until it was correctly disposed of, the corpse lay “halfway between the world of the living and the world of the dead; an ambivalence and uncertainty which could affect all of those who came into contact with it.” This was especially true for magistrates and high priests, who must avoid spiritual contamination at all costs (Bodel, 2000: 142). If the corpse was considered spiritually polluted it is possible that certain members of the family wished to minimise the physical contact they were required to have with it, especially upper class office holders. Funerary specialists who, by virtue of their occupation, were already “unclean”, were therefore required. Bodel (*ibid.*: 143) suggests that the

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<sup>1</sup> It is notable that only the latter occupation has been recorded epigraphically, thus intimating that there was indeed a higher degree of prestige (and/or wealth) associated with such a position.

perception of individuals who directly handled corpses as polluted led to increasing segregation, citing the example of Puteoli, where “funerary workers were prohibited from entering the town except on official business and were forbidden to live closer to town than a tower where the local Grove of Libitina was located (*AE* 1971, 88II. 3 – 4).” However, family members who suffered from similar pollution during mourning (*funesta*) lost this status by performing cleansing rituals once the *funesta* had ended. Those who regularly came into contact with the dead by virtue of their profession however, appear to have been unable to achieve spiritual cleanliness.

The words of Martial (*Epigrams* II. 61.3 – 4) indicate that those involved in the funerary trade were afforded little respect: “Now that your sorry head has earned the scorn of undertakers and the disgust of a wretched executioner.” This was largely due to their association with the dead but may also be connected to the fact that they were paid to carry out a job that was traditionally the responsibility of the family itself. Bodel (*ibid.*: 141) observes that “there was nothing inherently ignoble in the activity of burying the dead – on the contrary, laying the dead to rest was a *negotium humanitatis* (*Dig.* 11.7.14.7 [Ulpian]). Ignominy lay in performing for pay what was regarded as a natural obligation of humanity.” Not only were funerary professionals paid for their services (paid employment was considered vulgar, unless it involved large scale commerce) in a context which rendered them spiritually unclean, but they performed duties that rightfully should have been conducted by all pious individuals. Perhaps a concealed sense of guilt lent further weight to the stigmatisation of funerary workers. Nevertheless, any guilt that was harboured by the elevated classes of society had little effect on their decision to employ people to perform the appropriate rituals and preparations. Herein lies a further explanation for increased use of funerary specialists: display of wealth and status. Employing outsiders to cleanse and prepare the body, to play music, to lament loudly the passing of the deceased, to organise the cortège and prepare the place and means of disposal, allowed the family to demonstrate that they were providing the dead with the proper attention, but also to display their status and ability to employ people to do these things for them.

The extent to which professional workers were employed by the lower classes remains obscure. It is unlikely that the very poor (see Chapter 3) were able to afford the expenses involved, although when Festus (*Paul. Exc. Fest.* 368 –9) mentions

*vespillones* he appears to refer directly to the poor. He suggested that *vespillones* bore the corpses of those who could not afford a proper funeral and that their name derived from the fact that these activities occurred during the evening (*vespertino tempore*) (Bodel, 2000: 138). However, questions can be raised regarding the time at which poor funerals occurred and the identification of *vespillones* as professional corpse bearers employed specifically by the poor. On a purely practical level, if those carried to the grave were too poor to afford a “proper funeral” it seems unlikely that they could afford to hire specialist corpse-bearers when family members or friends could easily perform such duties. Bearing a bier requires relatively little specialist expertise. It is possible that these people wished to make a public statement by hiring funeral professionals for one of the most visible aspects of the funerary ritual. However, if Festus is to be believed, these funerals occurred at night when there were few people to witness it. Two suggestions can be made which go some way to explaining this. It is possible that by “those without the means to afford a proper funeral” Festus refers not to the poorest members of society but those unable to afford extravagant displays who were perceived to be “poor” as a result. Alternatively, the term may refer not to a specialist group of funerary workers but *any* individual responsible for bearing a bier.

The statement that the funerals of the poor took place at night by the light of torches is based on three short passages by Servius, possibly derived from Varro (Rose, 1923: 191). Despite Rose’s early twentieth century examination of this assumption, scholars have continued to assert that the tradition of conducting funerals at night in early Rome was eventually abandoned for all but the funerals of children and the poor (Paoli, 1963: 129; Toynbee, 1971: 46; Walker, 1985: 9).<sup>1</sup> Funerals probably were held originally at night, and Bodel (2000: 142) suggests that this was in order to avoid crossing the path of magistrates and high priests. Nevertheless, an adult member of the lower classes was no more spiritually contaminating than an aristocrat, thus implying that there was no specific religious reason for burying only the poor at night. Rose (*ibid.*: 194) points out that “one possible explanation of their nocturnal burials is simply that the mourners would then be likelier to have time to attend.” This may have been the case amongst those required to work all day. However, it is not possible to assert that all the burials of the lower classes took place at night. Roman funerals may

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<sup>1</sup> See also Rushforth (1915) for a discussion of the significance of torches in Roman sepulchral monuments, particularly in terms of their religious associations.

have been conducted originally during the hours of darkness, and the torches which continued to play a role in funeral rituals may either have been a remnant of this custom, or associated with religious ideas of protection (*ibid.*: 194). Nevertheless, it is evident from written descriptions of Republican and Imperial funerals that funerals commonly took place during the day which was when they were most visible. The suggestion that lower class funerals were “hurried nocturnal affairs” (Paoli, 1963: 129) has distanced the customs of the lower classes from those of the elite. However, there is no reason to believe that the lower classes held fundamentally different beliefs with regards to the appropriate time for funerals. They may have been more restricted by the structure of their daily routine and the need to bury the deceased quickly (those living in apartments will have had no *atrium* for lengthy lying in state) but this did not necessarily compel them to conduct funerals at night. Moreover, although Juvenal (*Sat.* III. 232 - 238) complains of being kept awake by the noise of carts and traffic in the city he makes no mention of the loud lamenting and music traditionally associated with Roman funerals.

The funeral procession provided further opportunities for display. Whether the increased funerary extravagance was the cause of, or a response to, the change from night to day, remains unclear. However, holding funerals at night restricted their ability to make public statements concerning the status and identity of the deceased and their family. As McDonnell (1999: 549) notes, “within the world of Roman aristocrats, in purpose and effect the funeral procession was about competition,” and, as noted in Chapter 1, the procession was itself a means by which to create and display a desired image of the deceased. Moving through the city streets, the procession exhibited to the wider community the illustrious past of the family, their wealth and position in society. The power of communication was heightened by the nature of the spaces through which the procession passed. Not only were these public spaces filled with ordinary citizens going about their daily business but the extravagant funerals of the upper classes became a form of public entertainment. As Bodel (1999: 263) states, “funerals were popular spectacles, and like other public entertainments at Rome that drew a crowd, they provided a powerful vehicle not only for elite self-promotion but also for popular expressions of pleasure or displeasure, approbation or censure.” Although originally functional in nature (based on a need to move the body to the burial site) the procession became increasingly integrated with

wider social processes. However, like commemoration, the funeral procession gradually decreased in importance during the Imperial period, with the focus shifting away from extravert displays to more internalised expressions of grief (*ibid.*: 267). Nevertheless, Bodel (*ibid.*: 270) observes that although the focus shifted away from the procession it did so “toward the spectacular finale of the cremation itself” which need not be any the less extravagant despite taking place in “the more personal suburban environment of the burial site” (*ibid.*: 270).



**Figure 15.** Relief from Amiternum depicting a funerary procession.  
(Toynbee, 1971 fig. 11).

Reconstruction of the funeral procession (*pompa*) is again reliant on literary references primarily focussed on particularly ostentatious examples, and one or two funerary reliefs. Toynbee (1971: 46 – 47) uses the marble relief found at Amiternum (**Fig.15**) on which to base her discussion of the procession. This relief, dated to the late-Republican or Augustan period, depicts the deceased reclining on a bier piled with pillows and mattresses and borne by eight men. The scene also depicts other people involved in the procession including the *dissignator* (directing and organising the procession), pipers (*tibicines*), a trumpeter (*tubicines*), two horn-blowers (*cornicines*), two *praeficae* (hired mourners) and the chief mourners, consisting of family members, friends and servants (*ibid.*: 46 – 47). The absence of *imagines* indicates that the relief does not depict the funeral of an office-holding aristocrat, but it provides an opportunity to see the variety and wealth that such occasions could display.

Not all members of society could afford lavish processions. The comment of Martial (*Epigrams* VII.75.9 – 10) that, “Four branded slaves were bearing a corpse of low degree like a thousand that the pauper’s pyre receives,” has been interpreted as a description of a typically simple lower-class funeral,<sup>2</sup> but it is not possible to completely dismiss funeral processions amongst the less wealthy. Family and friends probably followed the bier, however simple and unadorned, on its way to the burial site. This procession may not have been as extravagant as those of the aristocracy but this did not prevent such events occurring. Moreover, unlike events immediately surrounding death or burial, the funeral procession had no specific religious significance. It was thus able to act on a purely secular level to communicate the desired image of the deceased to the wider community and could be manipulated without fear of breaking with religious custom. This absence of religious significance has connotations for the funerary activities of the lower classes. It can be proposed that traditional religious rites, such as the last kiss, were carried out amongst these classes, however, the funeral procession, lacking such associations, was thus less vital than rites connected with religious or superstitious beliefs. Nothing compelled individuals to hold an elaborate (or as elaborate as financially possible) funeral procession, but neither is there reason to assume that the lower classes did not recognise the opportunities this presented for self-display and commemoration. The audience for processions undoubtedly varied in accordance with the status and identity of the deceased. Lavish funerals were probably witnessed by the majority of the urban community, as was suggested in the previous chapter, although those of the less wealthy were probably more low-key. The extent of the audience was largely a factor of the procession itself, with more elaborate displays attracting greater attention. The lower classes may not have expected to draw a large crowd but the procession still provided an opportunity for public expression and communication with their peers and anyone who saw the procession as it passed.

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<sup>2</sup> Martial’s reference to slaves is interesting for it has already been established that those involved in the funerary business were professionals. It is possible that slaves were used for certain tasks, although these are likely to have involved the more unpleasant and less visible activities. The text from Puteoli (*AE* 1971, 88) states that, “the contracting undertaker (*manceps*) is to keep a staff of thirty-two workers, who are to be of sound body and free of marks (*neve stigmat(ibus) inscrip(tus)*)” (Kyle, 1998: 163). These workers may have been slaves. It is also possible that Martial referred not to employed bier bearers but individuals carrying the body of a fellow slave.



## 2.2 Inhumation or cremation?

Cicero (*de Leg.* II. 22.56) and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VII. 187), both state that the primitive rite of burial at Rome was inhumation but that cremation had more recently become the norm, and it was unusual for families to inhume their deceased relatives. Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VII. 187), in particular, notes that the Gens Cornelia continued to practice inhumation at a time when it was more customary to cremate (Davies, 1977: 17). Cremation was probably the predominant burial rite practiced at Rome from 400 BC onwards (Toynbee, 1971: 40). Archaeological evidence displays an increased concentration of cremation between the fourth century BC and the end of the first century AD, and Morris (1992: 45 – 46) concludes that during the first century AD “cremation was probably virtually the only rite used at Rome.” Two textual references shed further light on this issue. Tacitus (*Ann.* XVI. 6), in his description of the burial of Poppaea in AD 65, characterises cremation as the ‘Roman *mos*’, and Petronius (writing around AD 60) refers in turn to inhumation as a ‘Greek custom’ (*Sat.* III.2). There was evidently widespread agreement on what constituted the traditional “Roman” method of burial. Although cremation was the predominant rite during this period and appears to have encompassed all levels of society, the conclusion of Morris requires further qualification. Despite cremation being “the norm”, not all members of urban society were incinerated after their death. No law prohibited inhumation, and cremation was simply a widely observed *custom*. It is therefore unsurprising to find that inhumation continued during the Republic and early Imperial period, albeit to a lesser extent. The *puticuli* (see Chapter 4) clearly demonstrate the persistence of inhumation and continued use of the rite by the Cornelia suggests that they felt little compunction to alter family tradition. Cicero (*de Leg.* II. 22. 56) informs us that Sulla was the first of the Cornelia to be cremated but, as Kyle (1998: 169) points out, “cremation was also appealing because it meant that the body could not be disturbed (by animals or foes).” Furthermore, inhumation is generally considered a cheaper means of disposal (Nock, 1972: 282), requiring no combustible fuel or specialist knowledge and may consequently have remained popular amongst the less wealthy.

Cremation remained dominant at Rome during the early Imperial period, as evidenced by *columbaria* and other tombs built specifically to accommodate cremation urns or chests, but the situation changed once more during the second century AD, as

inhumation began to make a resurgence. Between AD 150 and 300 tombs were constructed specifically to accommodate inhumation burials, either in free-standing sarcophagi, *arcosolia* (arches built into the lower parts of the walls) or *formae* dug beneath the floor. Other tombs were modified, for example at Isola Sacra where house tombs underwent significant alterations to their interior (Fig.16).

**Figure 16.** Reconstruction of the interior of Tomb 16 at Isola Sacra depicting niches for cremation and *arcosolia* for inhumation (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1996 fig. 67).

However, this change from a rite widely considered to be the 'Roman *mos*' to that of "Greek custom" did not occur instantaneously and, for a period of time, the two rites probably existed simultaneously. Inhumation was generally less expensive than cremation and therefore we should be cautious in aligning fully with Morris (1992: 54) who states that "the richer classes at Rome, from the emperors down to wealthy non-magistrates, probably all took up the rite within the space of a generation or so, between about 140 and 180; the lower orders apparently took to it rather more slowly, as did those outside Rome." Many members of the very poor had probably continued to use the less expensive rite of inhumation regardless of so-called "custom" and Morris does not precisely define "the lower orders", which could conceivably include both the destitute and successful freedmen, shopkeepers, craftsmen and merchants. The latter group has been shown to be particularly concerned with the opportunities for social advancement offered by the funeral and may thus have clung to cremation and the high visibility of the luxuriously adorned pyre for longer than wealthier

members of the community. Morris (*ibid.*: 61) also observes that inhumation led to a reduction in the number of burials that could take place within the average-sized tomb: "a tomb built after 175 would inevitably emphasise a narrower kin or professional group than previously." This parallels the change from exterior to internal tomb elaboration by many members of society. Statements about identity and social status could continue to be made but, for freedmen and those whose status had recently undergone significant improvement, the more traditional practices may have held greater appeal.

The reasons behind the change of custom have been discussed at length (for example Nock, 1972; Morris, 1992) and the proposal that it reflected a shift in religious beliefs has been largely discounted, with Nock (1972: 286) observing that, "the modes of honouring the dead man are commonly the same under both customs; we find libation tubes for ash-urns and for burials." Furthermore, he points out that the reasons given by contemporary Romans for inhumation, including clinging affection, were not associated with religion (*ibid.*: 286). Christianity may have strengthened the desire to inhumate during later centuries but had little influence when the change initially occurred during the second century AD. Nock (*ibid.*: 306) also rejects the suggestion that it was brought about by an increase in the cost of fuel on the basis that it appears to have begun amongst the richer elements of society. The reasons for increased fuel costs are also obscure. There also appears to be no legal reason for the change, with legal texts treating the two rites equally (*ibid.*: 306). Morris (1992: 67) concludes that the shift from cremation to inhumation was related to a change of form or fashion, with Nock (1972: 306) suggesting that the evolution of elaborate sarcophagi provided an opportunity for an ostentatious display of wealth by the rich which "might well appear a more solid and adequate way of paying the last honours to the dead." Morris (1992: 67) concurs, stating decisively that diffusion to the less wealthy classes of society was "a matter of competitive emulation." However, the majority of sarcophagi were placed inside tombs and were therefore invisible to members of the public. The conclusions of Nock and Morris imply that the lower classes played little active part in the transformation and were passive recipients of the change. However, inhumation had never completely disappeared amongst these groups and the image of the rite "filtering down" to the less wealthy therefore suggests an apathy that was not necessarily a reality.

Inhumation took several forms. The body could be placed directly into the earth, either wrapped in a shroud or in a coffin made of wood, stone, lead or a combination of materials. Alternatively the body or coffin was placed within a tomb, perhaps in *formae* below the floor or *arcosoli* in the lower parts of the walls. Sarcophagi, sometimes placed outside, against the interior wall of the tomb, squeezed into *arcosoli* or freestanding, were also employed. Inhumation evidently spanned the scale from cheap and simple to ostentatious and expensive, and could be customised to be as economical or costly, as basic or complex as resources and circumstances allowed. Presumably permission had to be obtained to use a piece of land for burial, and the price of plots undoubtedly varied considerably depending on their size and location. Large plots of land were probably bought, divided up and subsequently sold as individual plots for profit. Alternatively, permission may have been granted for slaves and freedmen to be buried in the family plot of their master, suggested by the clustering of burials around the house tombs of Isola Sacra. The *Digest* (11.7.2.2; 11.7.8.2 (Ulpian)) contains regulations against burial in land belonging to another indicating that this was a relatively frequent occurrence.

Cremation was complex and required knowledge of the processes involved in order for it to be successful. The simplest form, the *bustum* type, involved the cremation of the corpse at the site of burial. A shallow pit or trench was dug below the pyre into which fell the ash, dust and bones of the deceased, the fabric of the pyre and the burnt remains of any goods that accompanied the body. These were buried *in situ*. More complex and yet, according to Noy (2000: 186), more common, was the use of a separate site (*ustrinum*) for cremation. Polfer (2000: 31) observes that *ustrina* built of durable materials and capable of being reused "are in most cases though not exclusively to be found on urban cemeteries, where the large number of cremations per year made permanent structures if not necessary then at least useful, as they allowed a more efficient and faster cremation." However, *ustrina* were not all permanent constructions or used more than once. The use of an *ustrinum* required that the burnt remains be collected and placed in a container (an urn, ash chest or bag) in order to be buried (Noy, 2000: 186). Noy (*ibid.*: 186) suggests that "the force of the fire, the raking and collapse of the pyre during burning, and eventual quenching with cold liquid would together normally be sufficient to reduce the bones to small fragments which would fit easily into the container." However, McKinley (2000: 40)

observes that this process rarely resulted in the collection of the entire remains of a cremated individual, with generally only 40-60% of the bone weight recovered. Nevertheless, this seems to have satisfied the requirements for proper burial.

The construction of the pyre and requirements of fuel, temperature and the appropriate attention differed very little. McKinley (*ibid.*: 39) summarises the situation: "there may have been slight variations in form but all pyres would require fuel and needed to perform the same function; to provide a stable, body-sized support for the corpse and any pyre goods, to allow circulation of oxygen to facilitate combustion, and to accommodate enough fuel to give sufficient time and temperature for cremation to complete." There is a scattering of literary descriptions of pyre structures, including the observation that pyres were built with layers of logs laid at right angles (Vitruvius, 2.9.15). Noy (2000: 187) attributes the scarceness of such descriptions to the fact that this information was widely known and it was therefore unnecessary to comment upon it. The temperature of the pyre was essential to ensuring that incineration occurred to a suitable extent. The archaeological recovery of cremation burials demonstrates that complete disintegration of the body was rarely achieved and therefore probably not required, but high temperatures were nevertheless needed and, as Kyle (1998: 170) points out, "the sordid but certain truth is that flesh, being mostly water, is not very flammable by itself. Funeral pyres were stuffed with papyrus to achieve the necessary large, hot fire." Noy (2000: 157) proposes that an initial temperature of 500 °C was required but, later in the process, much greater temperatures must be reached. Modern crematoria operate at an average of 900 °C, a temperature which Wells (1960: 35) indicates could also have been achieved by an ancient pyre. He also observes (*ibid.*: 35) that "it is evident that for complete cremation of the body a pyre of very considerable magnitude would be needed - possibly augmented with stoking as the ritual progressed." Maintaining the high temperature of ancient pyres required taking into account other factors such as the weather, wind direction and the amount of fuel available. Evidently a degree of specialised knowledge was required in order to sustain high temperatures at a consistent level for a considerable amount of time. In addition, the pyre needed periodical stoking and raking in order to prevent a build-up of ash. The term *ustor*, mentioned by ancient writers, is believed to refer to a professional pyre-burner, presumably responsible for overseeing the maintenance of the burning pyre (Noy, 2000: 187). The length of time that a cremation took is also

significant, and Noy (*ibid.*: 187) points out that ancient descriptions give a “misleading impression of speed,” and “according to Varro, quoted in Servius (*In Aen.* 6.216), it was the normal practice for the crowd to remain around the pyre ‘until the body was consumed and the ashes were collected, when the very last word *ilicet* was said, which signified that it was permitted to go (*ire licet*).’ Yet McKinley estimates that a cremation by standard Roman methods would take 7 to 8 hours.” In addition, once the process was complete the remains required collection and, depending on the way in which this occurred, it may have been necessary to wait for the pyre to cool considerably (McKinley, 1989: 73).

The length of time and specialist skills required for cremation to be successful has significant implications for the burial practices of the lower classes. In the context of cremations which took, under proper supervision, up to 8 hours it is difficult to understand descriptions of pauper funerals as “hurried nocturnal affairs” unless these refer *only* to inhumation burials. These events may have lasted even longer if specialist *ustores* were not employed to ensure that the pyre was constructed correctly, suitably supplied with fuel and oxygen and the temperature strictly controlled. Even amongst the wealthiest classes cremations could go wrong; Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VII. 186) cites the example of Marcus Lepidus whose corpse “had been dislodged from the pyre by the violence of the flame, and as it was impossible to put it back again because of the heat, it was burnt naked with a fresh supply of faggots at the side of the pyre.” This raises questions about whether cremation could be carried out without professional assistance. The existence of *ustores* implies that a degree of knowledge was required for an efficient cremation, but rudimentary knowledge of how to construct a pyre was probably common. Evidence from Isola Sacra (see Chapter 5) indicates that the poor *were* sometimes cremated and it must therefore be concluded that either the cost of fuel, the required knowledge, and the time needed were not beyond the reach of all members of the poorer classes, or that these difficulties were overcome in some way. Noy (2000: 186), for example, observes that “the pyre should be built specifically for the deceased; having to use someone else’s pyre was a sign of poverty, or an emergency procedure,” thus indicating that pyres may have been shared by the lower classes.

Toynbee (1971: 50) describes the cremation ceremony:

“The eyes of the corpse were opened when it was placed on the pyre, along with various gifts and some of the deceased’s personal possessions. Sometimes even pet animals were killed round the pyre to accompany the soul into the afterlife. The relatives and friends then called upon the dead by name for the last time: the pyre was kindled with torches; and after the corpse had been consumed the ashes were drenched with wine.”

Paoli (1963: 131 – 132) also provides details, stating that the pyre was “surrounded by cypress trees and decorated with pictures, hangings and statues. Friends and relatives also threw clothes, ornaments, arms and even food on to the pyre, objects which had belonged to the dead or been held dear by him.” Both descriptions are based largely on an amalgam of ancient accounts of luxurious cremations but archaeology reflects the placing of items on the pyre to accompany the dead into the afterlife. Similar goods are found in inhumation graves. Toynbee (1971: 52) examines the goods found in such contexts and lists the common items as, “jewellery and other personal adornments, arms and pieces of armour and other items of military equipment, toilet boxes and toilet articles, some in precious metals, eating and drinking vessels and implements, dice and gaming-counters, children’s toys, small funerary portraits, and small images of other-world deities.” These items are largely functional or personal in character rather than prestige objects designed to impress the living. As Toynbee (*ibid.*: 53) observes, “the purpose of these grave-goods was partly to honour the dead, but mainly to serve them and help them to feel at home in the afterlife.” Commonly, a coin was placed in the mouth in order to pay the fee of Charon to take the dead across the River Styx, an action dictated specifically by traditional religious belief.

The pyre also provided a backdrop for highly visible displays of conspicuous consumption. Friedländer (1909: 212) notes the extravagance witnessed by those attending the cremations of the aristocracy: “the pyre, too, no doubt was a work of luxury. Certainly we only know of those of the emperors, which in the third century consisted of several pyramidal tiers, covered everywhere with gold-braided carpets, pictures and reliefs, all abandoned to the flames. But as Pliny speaks of painted pyres, it is probable that private individuals imitated this extravagance according to their means.” Furthermore, “Lucian makes a widower say that he has proved his love of his

wife by burning all her clothes and ornaments at her funeral. Regulus the orator made an ostentatious exhibition of his grief at the death of a son about 14 or 15 years old, and had all the boy's many ponies, dogs, nightingales, parrots, and blackbirds slaughtered at the pyre" (*ibid.*: 212) These actions are attributed to tremendous grief (although were doubtless viewed as rather eccentric in their zealously), but were also a means by which to display their wealth and status through the destruction of high quality items. The pyre evidently served both a practical and social function that could be manipulated in accordance with the desires and resources of those responsible for the funerary rites.

### **2.3 Religious beliefs**

Opportunities for display and the need to dispose of the corpse were undoubtedly significant forces affecting the burial rites of Roman city-dwellers but there were also other major factors which influenced these activities, including religious belief. The lack of consensus amongst modern scholars with regards to ancient beliefs about the afterlife parallels that of Romans themselves. The dead had no central role within organised religious belief (Walker, 1985: 13) and there was no official doctrine categorically affirming or denying the existence of the afterlife. As a result, it was largely a matter of personal conviction, although there were commonly held ideas. The teachings of the schools of Epicureanism and Stoicism are frequently cited in discussions of ancient concepts of the afterlife. According to Cumont's (1929: 7) comprehensive study of afterlife beliefs, Epicurus "taught that the soul, which was composed of atoms, was disintegrated at the moment of death, when it was no longer held together by its fleshly wrapping, and that its transitory unity was then destroyed forever." This fate, however, was not to be feared for it could be no more painful than the time before one existed. Stoicism held that "souls, when they leave the corpse, subsist in the atmosphere and especially in its highest part which touches the circle of the moon. But after a longer or less interval of time they, like the flesh and the bones, are decomposed and dissolve into the elements which formed them" (*ibid.*: 15). Both philosophies ultimately shared the belief that the soul ceased to exist.



Although these ideas were principally embraced by the more “cultivated circles” of society they also found adherents amongst the lowest classes, who expressed such ideas within their epitaphs (*ibid.*: 9 and 15). For example, variations of the phrase “I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care” are repeatedly found on grave monuments (*ibid.*: 9 – 10). The far reaching influence of these doctrines can, however, be questioned and Toynbee (1971: 34) suggests that “there persisted and prevailed the conviction that some kind of conscious existence is in store for the soul after death and that the dead and living can affect one another mutually. Human life is not just an interlude of being between nothingness and nothingness.” These beliefs were manifested in the idea that the dead resided in or near the place of burial and were capable of moving amongst the living. Toynbee (*ibid.*: 34) proposes that this was “an ancient and deep-seated belief” but acknowledges that the majority of evidence for afterlife beliefs does not predate the first century BC. However, Plautus (c. 250 – 184 BC) provides some details about common beliefs before this date: “His *Mostellaria* implies, of course, belief that the spirits of the dead can haunt the dwellings of the living; and two of its lines convey the notion that the lower world is barred to the souls of those who have died before their time” (Toynbee, 1971: 34 – 35). Ovid (*Fasti*) sheds light on the traditional festivals of the dead during the early- and mid-Republic. During this period it was widely believed that the *Manes*, the spirits of the dead, existed as an undifferentiated mass that should be respected and honoured (Scullard, 1981: 37). By the late Republic the members of this nebulous mass had assumed greater individuality, and ancient sources (such as Cicero, *in Pis.* 16) begin to refer to the *Manes* as separate entities. This might reflect an increasing desire amongst the living to have their individual identity recognised, acknowledged and commemorated during their lifetime and after their death. Use of the phrase ‘*Dis Manibus*’ on tombstones implies, at least initially, a belief in some form of existence after death, although perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that these monuments express *hope* for life after death rather than firm belief in it.

The absence of official doctrine on the issue of the afterlife left the matter open to discussion. The teachings of Epicureanism and Stoicism did not become popular enough to be officially adopted by the state which suggests they were perhaps not as widely held as Cumont believed. Indeed, “Epicurus denied the afterlife, but in his will he provided for offerings in perpetuity to his father, mother, and brother, for

celebrations of his birthday and the anniversaries of others of his intimates” (Nock, 1972: 286). If the founder of a philosophy which denied the existence of immortality was ultimately doubtful it is unlikely that many other members of society were more convinced. The persistence of early Republican traditions during the Empire implies that these exerted strong influence over the population. These customs implied that individuality was retained after death - a far more optimistic view than that of the Epicureans or Stoics. However, beliefs regarding the nature of the afterlife remained hazy, undefined and varied, although were strong enough to influence aspects of burial practice.

That the shade of the deceased might continue to exist after death, either at the place of burial or amongst the living, was considered particularly fearful if the deceased was denied proper burial, a situation alluded to by Horace (*Odes*, I. 28 (2)):

“Me, too, Notus, whirling mate of setting Orion, overwhelmed in the Illyrian waves. But do thou, O mariner, begrudge me not the shifting sand, nor refuse to bestow a little of it on my unburied head and bones! Then, whatever threats Eurus shall vent against the Hesperian waves, when the Venusian woods are beaten by the gale, mayst thou be safe, and may rich reward redound to thee from the sources whence it can, - from kindly Jove and Neptune, sacred Tarentum’s guardian god!

Thou thinkest it a light matter to do a wrong that after this will harm thine unoffending children? Perchance the need of sepulture and a retribution of like disdain may await thyself sometime. I shall not be left with my petition unavenged, and for thee no offerings shall make atonement. Though thou art eager to be going, ‘tis a brief delay I ask. Only three handfuls of earth! Then thou mayst speed upon thy course.”

Horace implies that lack of proper burial had serious repercussions for both the living and the dead. As Cumont (1922: 64) explains, “from the most ancient times the beliefs reigned from all the peoples of antiquity that the souls of those who are deprived of burial find no rest in the other life. If they have no “eternal house” they are like homeless vagabonds. But the fact that the dead had been buried did not suffice; the burial must also have been performed according to the traditional rites.” Cicero (*de Leg. II. 22. 57*) also informs us that:

“...until turf is cast upon the bones, the place where a body is cremated does not have a sacred character; but after the turf is cast, [the burial is considered accomplished, and the spot is called a grave]; then, but not before, it has the protection of many laws of sanctity.”

It was evidently essential to cover the remains of the deceased with earth, a condition that applied to both inhumation and cremation. However, Horace suggests that a scattering of “three handfuls of earth” satisfied the demands of the dead and protected the living. The practice of removing a small part of the body before cremation for burial elsewhere (*os resectum*) also implies that a token gesture was acceptable (see Chapter 5). Without minimal burial the shade of the deceased remained trapped between the world of the living and that of the dead, restless and vengeful (Hope, 2000a: 120). The serious nature of this situation is illustrated by the fact that denial of burial was occasionally used as a form of punishment. Kyle (1998: 131) observes that “denial of even minimal burial was regarded as an abuse of decent humans, as a form of damnation beyond death, but it was acceptable when criminals’ acts put them beyond the protection of any law.” He cites the example of increased suicides during the reign of Tiberius “because, unless there was a suicide, conviction for treason brought confiscation of property (the denial of any will) and denial of burial” (*ibid.*: 132 – 133). Denial of burial entailed eternal punishment for the individual and permitted authorities to extend their power beyond death. For these punishments to act as a successful deterrent there must have existed a widely held belief that lack of burial resulted in a particularly fearful state of existence. Further evidence is found in ghost stories recounted by ancient writers, such as Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 7. 27) who describes how one night the owner of a house haunted by the ghost of a man followed the figure. Watching the ghost disappear in the courtyard he ordered the area searched the following morning, and discovered the remains of an improperly buried individual. He re-buried the remains according to the proper rites and never saw the ghost again. In a similar way, the ghost of Caligula, who was hastily cremated and buried after his assassination, was believed to haunt the area until his remains received the proper rites (Suet. *Calig.* 59; Hope, 2000a: 106). That these stories were perpetuated over both time and space (the haunted house story was old before Pliny committed it to writing) implies widespread belief in the restless spirits of the unburied. It was therefore important for both the safety of the living and the peace of

the dead that deceased individuals received at least minimal burial. There is no reason to suggest that the beliefs of the upper and lower classes differed on this matter, and it is thus possible to propose that for the majority of the population of Rome the appropriate rites were strictly observed.

Belief that the dead could haunt the living also influenced the practice of funerary banqueting and religious festivals. A meal (*silicernium*) was consumed at the grave as part of the funeral ritual on the day of interment and on the ninth and final day of mourning (*cena novemdialis*). These meals were an essential part of the funeral rite, providing sustenance for the departed as they passed to the world of the dead. Cumont (1922: 50) states that “the dead are hungry; above all they are thirsty. Those whose humours have dried, whose mouths are withered, are tortured by the need to refresh their parched lips. It therefore is not enough to place in the tombs the drinks and dishes, the remains of which have often been found beside skeletons; by periodic sacrifices the *manes* must be supplied with fresh food also. If they are left without nourishment they languish, weak as a fasting man, almost unconscious, and in the end they would actually die of starvation.” There was evidently considerable concern for the welfare of the dead beyond or within the grave, which like proper burial, was associated with a desire to make their existence more comfortable and the need to placate the spirits of the dead lest they become troublesome. Belief that the dead required food and drink is also reflected by festivals such as the *Parentalia*. This took place in February (13<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>) and was a week long festival of the family dead, culminating on the last day (the *Feralia*) with public ceremonies (Toynbee, 1971: 64). Ovid (*Fasti*, II. 533 – 542) describes the activities:

“Honour is paid, also, to the grave. Appease the souls of your fathers and bring small gifts to the tombs erected to them. Ghosts ask but little: they value piety more than a costly gift: no greedy gods are they who in the world below do haunt the banks of Styx. A tile wreathed with votive garlands, a sprinkling of corn, a few grains of salt, bread soaked in wine, and some loose violets, these are offerings enough: set these on a potsherd and leave it in the middle of the road. Not that I forbid larger offerings, but even these suffice to appease the shades: add prayers and the appropriate words at the hearths set up for the purpose.”

Offerings, predominantly of food, were made to the dead and the family reprised the meal originally held during the funeral. According to Cumont (1922: 54), "it was believed that at funeral feasts the Manes of ancestors came to sit among the guests and enjoyed with them the abundance of the food and wines." Families could thus satiate the hunger of the dead through the sharing of food whilst honouring and commemorating their memory. These festivals thus acted as a means to placate the dead and to continue the commemorative process. The fact that the *Parentalia* was an officially recognised festival<sup>4</sup> again implies that it was observed by the majority of the population who believed it to be of importance to themselves and the dead. Indeed, Ovid (*Fasti*, II. 547 – 556) tells a cautionary tale about neglecting these sacred festivals:

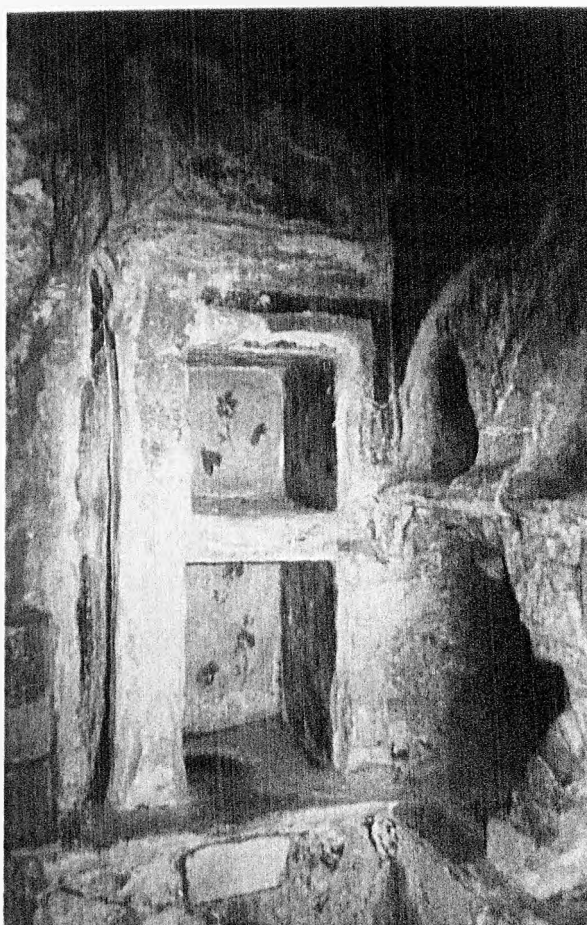
"But once upon a time, waging long wars with martial arms, they did neglect the All Soul's Days. The negligence was not unpunished; for tis said that from that ominous day Rome grew hot with the funeral fires that burned without the city. They say, though I can hardly think it, that the ancestral souls did issue from the tombs and make their moan in the hours of stilly night; and hideous ghosts, a shadowy throng, they say, did howl about the city streets and the wide fields. Afterwards the honours which had been omitted were again paid to the tombs, and so a limit was put to prodigies and funerals."

The *Parentalia* was a family festival and a period in which to personally commemorate and appease one's kinfolk. It therefore had significance to all members of society, regardless of wealth or rank and the tomb became a focus for social interaction (Heinzelmann, 2001: 186; Graham in press a). Hopkins (1983: 233) pictures the scene: "we have to imagine Roman families picnicking *al fresco* at the family tomb, where, according to Christian critics, they often got boisterously drunk, with their dead relatives around them." One of Trimalchio's dinner guests arrives after attending a funeral and is described as "already drunk, and had put his hands on his wife's shoulders; he had several wreaths on, and ointment was running down his forehead into his eyes" (Petronius, *Sat.* 79). During these times the area of the cemetery would have been particularly busy, although this was not the only time of the year that the dead required attention. The family returned to the grave to mark the

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<sup>4</sup> During this time the law-courts and temples were closed and no public business was conducted (Hopkins, 1983: 233).

anniversaries of the birth and death of their relatives by pouring libations directly into the burial via tubes or holes, and consuming ritual meals. Toynbee (1971: 63) also observes that “provision could be made for the lighting of lamps at the grave on the Kalends, Ides, and Nones of every month.” Wills occasionally arranged for items to be offered at the tomb and it can be assumed that some, or a combination, of these were given as libations when the family returned to the grave. Toynbee (*ibid.*: 62) lists the following: “food (*cibus, esca, edulia*), bread (*panis*), wine and grapes (*vinum, escae vindemiales*), cakes (*liba*), sausages (*tuceta*), ceremonial meals (*epulae*) thought of as shared by the living with the dead, incense (*tus*), fruits (*poma*), flowers of all kinds, particularly violets (*violae*) and roses (*roscae, escae Rosales*.” Ovid referred to the giving of “loose violets” as part of the *Parentalia* offerings. There was also a festival specifically associated with roses: the *Rosalia*. This festival took place in May and June and, although “by no means exclusively connected with the dead, the *Rosalia* (*dies Rosalium, Rosariorum, Rosationis*) undoubtedly afforded specific occasions for scattering roses on the grave and decking the funerary portrait with them” (Toynbee, 1971: 63). Images of roses were also occasionally painted on the walls and vaults of tombs, such as those at Isola Sacra (Fig. 17) and were apparently “regarded as pledges of eternal spring in the life beyond the grave” (*ibid.*: 63).



**Figure 17.** Niches painted with flowers in Tomb 77, Isola Sacra (photo author).

The need to return regularly to the grave implies that the cemetery was heavily frequented by the living, a situation which facilitated other social processes, such as those involved in status display and competition (Graham, in press b). Funerary dining

structures at the necropolis of Isola Sacra highlight the ways in which aspects of the funerary ritual acted on multiple levels. Wells and ovens attest to regular ritual dining activities at Isola Sacra. However, the most common provision associated with dining in the cemetery takes the form of two-sided masonry dining couches, or *biclinia* (Fig. 18). These sloping benches flank the tomb entrance and are found outside the house tombs and occasionally the smaller chest-tombs. The only practical function of these structures was to facilitate formal ritual dining within the environment of the cemetery. However, these structures may also have adopted a symbolic or status oriented role by virtue of their location *outside* the tomb. Unlike other cemeteries, such as the *Via Laurentina* at Ostia, where dining provisions are located within the structure of the tomb or enclosure, there appears to have been an overriding desire to place the Isola Sacra dining provisions *outside* the tombs in a highly conspicuous and public location. The owners of the tombs could therefore have used the physical accoutrements of religious festivals and dining activities to advertise their identity and social status (Graham, in press b). This was particularly significant given that the cemetery community was composed largely of members of the freedman class and more humble levels of society whose ambiguous social or legal status led to an increased desire to publicly exhibit, and thus confirm, their legitimacy as free members of society. Visibly dining outside the tombs allowed families to advertise their ability to afford the expense of a substantial banquet.



Figure 18. *Biclinium* outside Tomb 15, Isola Sacra (photo author).

Furthermore, in light of the predominance of non-Roman freedmen in the necropolis, these dining structures allowed them to conspicuously align themselves with Roman traditions and religious beliefs, with the use of a *biclinium* further underlining their familiarity with high status dining habits. For individuals attempting to strengthen or legitimise their position within the community and emphasise a newfound social or legal status, this provided an excellent opportunity for a public display of wealth and embracing of Roman custom. Ritual dining activities and the religious festivals with which they were associated were therefore capable of acting as more than a means by which to appease and commemorate the dead and their impact extended into the world of the living. However, the dead remained the focus of these occasions, the family simply capitalised on the opportunities they offered for competitive display.

One final festival of the dead, the *Lemuria*, took place on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of May. This was a time in which “the apparently kinless and hungry ghosts, the *Lemures*, and the mischievous and dangerous *Larvae*, were supposed to prowl around the house” (Toynbee, 1971: 64). In contrast to the celebrations of the *Parentalia*, the *Lemuria* was an occasion centred on a fear of restless spirits, presumably those who were not placated by the *Parentalia* a few months earlier or who had not received proper burial. The events of the *Lemuria* were of domestic character, and although Toynbee (*ibid*: 64) observes that the festival is entered on some calendars and Ovid (*Fasti*, V. 485 – 490) informs us that temples were closed and “she who married then, will not live long,” any public ceremony that occurred remains unknown. However, Ovid (*Fasti*, V. 429 – 454) describes the activities that took place in the home:

“When midnight has come and lends silence to sleep, and dogs and all ye varied fowls are hushed, the worshipper who bears the olden rite in mind and fears the god arises; no knots constrict his feet; and he makes a sign with his thumb in the middle of his closed fingers, lest in his silence an unsubstantial shade should meet him. And after washing his hands clean in spring water, he turns, and first he receives black beans and throws them away with face averted; but while he throws them, he says: “These I cast; with these beans I redeem me and mine.” This he says nine times, without looking back. The shade is thought to gather the beans, and to follow unseen behind. Again he touches water, and clashes Temesan bronze, and asks the shade to go out of his house. When he has said nine times, “Ghosts of my fathers, go forth!” he looks back, and thinks that he has duly performed the sacred rites.”



The ritual activities of the *Lemuria* were undoubtedly connected with the removal of restless spirits, lending further weight to the proposal that there was a deep-seated fear of the unhappy dead. Alcock (1980: 64) makes the following observation:

“Sir James Frazer once commented that ‘Customs often live on for ages after the circumstances and modes of thought which gave rise to them have disappeared and in their new environment new motives are invented to explain them’ (Frazer 1931, 490). But people would remain attached to practices which possibly seemed dangerous to omit for this omission might bring retribution from the powerful, and perhaps vindictive, spirits of the dead.”

Consequently, the persistence of festivals of the dead, funerary banquets and the giving of libations does not necessarily reflect a direct continuation of the original beliefs that gave rise to them. It is likely that these activities underwent some transformation in order to align with the needs of contemporary society, as demonstrated by dining at *Isola Sacra*. Nevertheless, beliefs concerning the fate of the soul and the afterlife, the need for proper burial and the placating of the dead with food and celebrations in their honour, continued to exert considerable influence over the burial practices of urban society. The physical manifestation of these may have varied in accordance with economic resources, status and ambitions, it is evident that certain beliefs were widely shared regardless of social position.

## 2.4 The Law

A further factor which exerted a particularly strong influence over urban burial practice was the law, which again transcended the boundaries of social class and wealth and, with the occasional exception of the Imperial family, was applicable to all those living and dying in Rome.

The XII Tables, dating to 451 – 450 BC, represent the earliest collection of Roman laws and provide a starting point for both ancient and modern discussions of Roman law. The law of the XII Tables was “largely a statement of long-observed principles sanctioned by immemorial custom,” (Wolff, 1951: 59) and was predominantly based on traditional principles transformed into official laws. Much of the XII Tables has

been reconstructed from references in other, often much later, sources and although many of these appear to be direct quotations from the original tablets (for example, Cicero, *de Legibus*) the possibility of corruption remains high. Wolff (1951: 58) observes that “ancient writers had no strict views about scrupulous accuracy of quotations and saw no harm in adapting the texts of their authorities to the needs of their own time,” and it is probable that what exists today are “the clauses of the Twelve Tables, as they were known in the Middle and Late Republic” (Crawford, 1996: 556).

The wording of the XII Tables may be questioned, but there was a strong sense of traditionalism within Roman law and the recognised importance of the *mores maiorum* (customs of the forefathers) allows a fairly confident reconstruction of their content. The content of the XII Tables probably changed relatively little between their initial formulation and the late Empire, a supposition strengthened by the high esteem in which Roman writers held the code. The first century AD jurist Labeo and his second century colleague Gaius, for example, wrote commentaries on the Tables, Livy (III. 34) described them as “the source of all public and private law” and Cicero (*de Leg.* II.23.59) states that as a schoolboy he was required to learn the laws by heart. The fact that later legal writings, such as those produced under Justinian, incorporate elements of the Tables into their own system and the distinct absence of any further codifications of the law in the intervening period also imply that they were considered relevant. Indeed, Robinson, (1975: 185) writing of the later Empire states that “we are clearly in the same world as the Republic; it is just that in the declaration of sacral law the emperors have replaced the pontiffs and in secular law they are in the process of superseding the jurists.” This, however, highlights one of the difficulties encountered when examining burial regulations: the main sources date to the chronological extremes of the Roman period. Furthermore, lack of evidence for change does not necessarily indicate a static situation. However, the importance of tradition, the lack of direct evidence for radical change and the persistent references to the XII Tables during the late Empire, indicate that these regulations remained both relevant and active for many centuries after their initial codification.

Table X of the XII Tables concerns funerary activities. Crawford (1996: 583) provides the following translation<sup>5</sup>:

- X,1 He is not to bury or burn a dead man in the city.
- X,2 He is not to do more than this: he is not to smooth the pyre with a trowel.
- X,3 ... < three veils > ... a little purple tunic ... ten < flautists > ...
- X,4 Women are not to mutilate their cheeks or hold a wake for the purposes of holding a funeral.
- X,5 He is not to collect the bones of a dead man, in order to hold a funeral afterwards, < but ... >.
- X,6 < He is not to place perfumed liquid on a dead man. > (Prohibition of *circumpotatio*) < He is to scatter a pyre with not more than ??? wine. >
- X,7 Whoever win a crown for himself or his < familia >, or it be given to him for bravery, < and it is placed on him or his parent when dead, it is to be without liability.> ... < incense altars > ...
- X,8 ... nor is he to add gold, < but > for whomsoever the teeth are joined with gold, and if he shall bury or burn it with him, it is to be without liability.
- X,9 <<< He is not to place a *bustum* within sixty feet of another's house >>>.
- X,10 <<< A fore-court or *bustum* is to be *religiosus*. >>>

The first regulation of Table X is the most widely known Roman burial law. The clearest evidence that the rule prohibiting burial within the city continued to be enforced throughout later periods is found in the concentration of tombs beyond the walls of Roman towns and cities. However, as Robinson (1975: 176) points out, "this does not seem to spring from any absolute taboo, for Vestal Virgins and a few others continued to be buried, or to have the right to be buried, within the City," further supported by the observation of Lindsay (2000: 170) that the law "was never applied to children under four days old, who would be buried *sub grundo*, that is under the porch facing into the courtyard (Ful. *serm. ant.* 560.13)." Despite these allowances, the law was reinforced several times after its initial statement in the XII Tables. For example, Lindsay (*ibid.*: 170) notes a decree of the senate dating to the consulate of Duillius in 260 BC, a further senatorial decree of 38 BC in which the distance beyond which burning was allowed was set at two miles, and that Hadrian, "prescribed a pecuniary penalty for those who contravened the restriction on burial within two miles

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<sup>5</sup> The text contained within <<< ... >>> represents "where we believe that a text can be reconstructed with reasonable plausibility, but no source claims to report it" (Crawford, 1996: 557), thus highlighting problems with the reliability of the source.

of the city, as well as for the magistrates who turned a blind eye." The regulation contained within the XII Tables evidently remained relevant for many centuries, albeit with certain refinements. However, the original regulation (with Crawford's translation) asserts that burial or burning should not take place "*in the city*", which Crook (1967: 135) interprets as meaning "no-one's remains must rest within the *pomerium* of the city of Rome." This sacred boundary did not always align with the physical boundary of the city (i.e. the encircling walls) it is therefore unclear which was intended by the original law. Given the close association of sacral rather than civil law with burial regulations it may be suggested that the *pomerium* (as the sacred boundary of the city) originally marked the limit of burial or burning, although as the city expanded and the *pomerium* was extended this may have altered. The rule (X,9) prohibiting the placing of a *bustum* within 60 feet of another person's house, appears closely connected with this first regulation and was presumably influenced by the risk of fire inherent in placing pyres adjacent to buildings.

The final prohibition, stating that a *bustum* became a *locus religiosus*, was equal to the first in terms of continued relevance. Berger (1953: 679) defines *res religiosae* as: "things 'dedicated to the gods of the lower regions' (*diis Manibus* Gaius *Inst.* 2.4) such as tombs or burial grounds," in contrast to *res sacrae* which were consecrated to the gods in heaven. Other sources, most notably Cicero and jurists of the later Empire, provide further insight into this regulation. Cicero (*de Leg.* II.22.55; 57) states that approval of the pontiffs was required in order to officially make a burial place religious, but as Robinson (1975: 177) suggests, this approval was probably implicit in most cases. Cicero (*de Leg.* II.22.58) goes on to explain that the pontiffs had declared it unlawful for a grave to be placed in a public place (a *locus publica* could not be a *locus religiosus*), and any remains buried in such a place must be removed. He cites the circumstances surrounding an area outside the Colline Gate, on which was to be built a temple: "But as there were many graves in that place, they were dug up; for the college decided that a place which was public property could not receive a sacred character through rites performed by private citizens" (*de Leg.* II. 23. 58).

The law was specifically interpreted to mean that the actual *place of burial* became *religiosus* and a cenotaph did not receive such status (Robinson, 1975: 178). This is supported by the observation that "a place where a coffin was left temporarily, as in

the carriage of Augustus' body from Nola to Rome, did not become religious" (*ibid.*: 183). The law concerning the religious status of graves also appears to have remained active during later centuries, with evidence found in the *Institutes* of Gaius (II.3.6 and 9) and summarised by Crook (1967: 133): "the place containing human remains put where they have a right to be is *locus religiosus*, subject to divine law and therefore not susceptible of human ownership or possession or alienation of any kind (by sale or gift or legacy or anything else). It is *res nullius*." Crook (*ibid.*: 134) also notes that, "one text in the Digest says: 'Not the whole *locus* intended for burial is *religiosus*, only the place where remains actually lie,'" (*Digest* 11.7.2.5) reasserting the earlier rule that cenotaphs were not religious, nor could they bestow this status on the place in which they were raised. Berger (1953: 491) observes that *illatio mortuo* made the place "a *locus religiosus* even when the dead was a slave." (*Digest* 11.8).

In light of these regulations, it can be assumed that the interment of bodies in a mass grave also rendered the location *religiosus*, but Bodel (1994: 39) suggests that this was not the case. He examines a passage of Varro (*L.L.* 5.25) in which the writer "states that the pauper's graveyard at Rome was officially designated a *locus publicus*, that is, a parcel of land owned by the *populus Romanus* and intended for the public use of all" (Bodel, 1994: 39). As a result Bodel proposes that the *puticuli* of Rome "were not regarded in law as *loca religiosa*" (*ibid.*: 39). Bodel (*ibid.*: 39) suggests that because the essential element of Roman burial was inhumation, requiring a symbolic covering of earth, and because the *puticuli* on the Esquiline do not demonstrate evidence that they were covered in any way, they may not have been regarded as proper graves. However, he concludes (*ibid.*: 39):

"Whatever the official religious status of the Roman *puticuli*, popular belief seems to have held that any location where a body was consigned to its final resting place was bound by a *privata religio*, regardless of the state's claim to jurisdiction over public land. Similarly, in the case of Roman burials in the provinces, most authorities, according to Gaius, maintained that the land could not be made *religiosus*, because it was owned by the emperor or the state; but, he adds, it was nonetheless treated as if it were."

The implications of these observations are examined more thoroughly in Chapter 4, but they highlight some significant issues. Firstly, ordinary members of Roman

society were apparently not always aware of the specific legal regulations in force and did not always adhere to them. The written law codes can thus not be used as an unquestionable foundation on which to base a reconstruction of ancient burial practice. The example of the *puticuli* also highlights the potential unreliability of the sources used to reconstruct these laws, Varro for example, possibly misunderstood the legal status of the mass graves at Rome, which he terms as "*locus publicus*." It is conceivable that the area *was* intended for public use, but as a cemetery, but that Varro misunderstood either the legal status of the area or the meaning of the legal term.

Funerary regulations were also recorded epigraphically. The following is an extract from the *lex Coloniae Genetivae Iuliae seu Ursonensis* (translation by Crawford, 1996: 424), described by Robinson (1975: 182) as "a model of municipal organisation."

**LXXIII** No-one is to bring a dead person within the boundaries of a town or of a colony, where (a line) shall have been drawn around by a plough, nor is he to bury him there or burn him or build the tomb of a dead person. If anyone shall have acted contrary to these rules, he is to be condemned to pay the colonists of the colonia Genetiva Iulia 5,000 sesterces, and there is to be a suit and claim for that sum by whoever shall wish < ? according to this statute ? >. And whatever shall have been built, a *Ilvir* or *aedile* is to see to its being demolished. If a dead person shall have been brought in or deposited contrary to these rules, they are to make expiation as shall be appropriate.

**LXXIV** No-one is to prepare a new *ustrina*, where a dead person shall not (previously) have been burnt, nearer the town than 500 paces. Whoever shall have acted contrary to these rules, is to be condemned to pay 5,000 sesterces to the colonists of the colonia Genetiva Iulia, and there is to be a suit and claim for that sum by whoever shall wish according to this statute.

Although engraved during the Flavian period, the original charter was probably of Caesarian date (Crawford, 1996: 395) and is very similar to sections X,1 and X,9 of the XII Tables. In this context the original regulations have been expanded and defined more precisely, with fines established for individuals breaking the rules. The

*lex coloniae Genetivae* therefore further indicates that the content of the XII Tables remained relevant and that areas outside Rome adapted them to local circumstances.

During the 1870's two travertine cippi inscribed with a late Republican praetor's edict (Edict of Sentius) that prohibited certain activities (cremation, dumping and corpse abandoning) were discovered *in situ* near the Esquiline Gate at Rome (Bodel, 1994: 42). A third stone inscribed with the same text was recovered in 1942.<sup>6</sup> Bodel (*ibid.*: 44) suggests these were:

“intended to mark off not only the section of the *campus Esquilinus* destined for pauper burial and the disposal of unclaimed corpses, but also the surrounding areas; especially to the north, where more prominent and wealthy Romans, including even some members of the nobility, continued to be buried in individual tombs down to the final years of the Republic.”

This interpretation supports the suggestion that this was public land and that action was taken in order to ensure that this area did not receive the status of *locus religiosus*. The protection of a specific area on the Esquiline from burial activities and dumping was later reasserted by the *senatusconsultum de pago Montano*.<sup>7</sup> This text was inscribed on a large travertine block outside the Esquiline Gate and assigned to the first century BC (*ibid.*: 47). Bodel (*ibid.*: 48) argues that this *senatusconsultum*, protecting the area against illegal dumping, was issued *after* the Edict of Sentius, given the fact that it does not specifically mention the dumping of corpses, suggesting that because the area was no longer used for this purpose no such prohibition was required. However, it is possible that the *senatusconsultum* was issued first, but that the public continued to dump beyond it and began to introduce corpses to the region, which led to the need to be more precise, leading to the Edict of Sentius. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding these regulations they highlight the use of specific

<sup>6</sup> Bodel (*ibid.*: 44) provides the text from the second stone recovered (CIL I<sup>2</sup> 839) as:

*L. Sentius C. f. praetor* | *de sen(atus) sent(entia) loca* | *terminanda coer(avit)*. | *b(onum) factum*.  
*neiquis intra* | *terminos propius* | *urbem ustrinam* | *fecisse velit neive* | *stercus, cadaver* | *iniecissee velit*.

<sup>7</sup> Bodel (*ibid.*: 48) provides the fragmentary text with the tentative restoration of Mommsen:

...*eisque curarent tuferenturque* | *ar* | *bitratu aed[i]lium pleibeium* | *[quei] comque essent; neive*  
*ustrinae in* | *eis locis recionibusve nive foci ustri* | *nae[ve] caussa fier-e-nt; nive stercus terra[m]* | *ve*  
*intra -ea- loca fecisse coniecisseve veli[t]* | *quei haec loca ab paaco Montano* || *[redempta habebit;*  
*quod si stercus in eis loceis fecerit terramve* | *in ea] loca iecerit, in ... [uti HS ... | ma]nus iniectio*  
*pignorisq(ue) ca[pio] siet.]*

rules for certain locations that were more precise than the overarching laws of the XII Tables on which they were ultimately based.

A final inscription, the *lex Lucerina*, parallels those examined above and,

“records a local ordinance prohibiting three activities – dumping dung (or refuse), abandoning corpses, and performing sacrifices in honour of the dead – and prescribes a statutory fine to be exacted from transgressors, either by a private party on behalf of the *populus* or at a magistrates discretion.”

(Bodel, 1994: 3).<sup>8</sup>

The *lex Lucerina* also appears to have been intended to mark off a public area, probably within an existing graveyard, which was no longer to be used for burial or dumping activities (*ibid.*: 4).

These examples indicate how local authorities limited the extent and location of burial around the outskirts of towns and cities but that these restrictions continued to be influenced by the original rules of the XII Tables. Robinson (1975: 181) writes: “the law at the end of the Republic seems essentially the same as that of the early Republic,” although it is clear that it has become more precise in its limitations.

Even more specifically directed were the prohibitions and formal notices occasionally placed on tombs or monuments as part of the epitaph. Frequently inscriptions record the dimensions of the burial plot in terms of its frontage (*in fronte*) and depth (*in agro, retro*) (Toynbee, 1971: 75), in order to assert legal ownership of the land (for example, Thylander, 1952, A83, A149, and A263). In addition, inscriptions often included the phrase *H(oc) M(onumentum) H(eredem, -eredes) N(on) S(equitur, -equeter)* or *H(oc) M(onumentum) H(eredem) E(externum) N(on) H(abebit)*, which was “designed to prevent the property from passing to the owner’s heir or heirs or to the heir or heirs of someone else” (*ibid.*: 75).

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<sup>8</sup> Bodel (*ibid.*: 2) provides the following text:

*in hoc loucarid stircus | ne [qu]is fundatid neve cadaver | proiecitad neve parentatid. | sei quis  
arvorsu hac faxit, [in] lum | quis volet pro ioudicatod n(umum) -L- | monum iniect<i>o estod, seive |  
mac[i]steratus volet moltare, | [li]cetod.*



The passage cited above by Petronius (*Sat.* 71), in which Trimalchio states that “It will certainly be my concern in my will to provide against any injury being done to me when I’m dead. I am making one of my freedmen guardian of the tomb to prevent folk running up and shitting on it,” demonstrates the widespread fear of disturbance after death. Trimalchio relied on the living to safeguard his tomb but on occasion the supernatural was called upon to punish those who defiled or damaged a place of burial. For example, an epitaph from Rome ends with the lines:

“...Stranger, so may the earth rest lightly upon you after death as you do no damage here; or if anyone does damage, may the gods above not approve of him and the gods below not receive him, and may the earth rest heavily upon him.”

(CIL VI 7579, cited in Lewis and Reinhold, 1966*b*: 286)

Another reads:

“To the spirits of the departed. Gaius Tullius Hesper built [this] tomb for himself, where his bones are to be placed. If anyone do violence to them or removes them hence, I wish for him that he may lie a long time in bodily pain, and that when he dies the gods below may not receive him.”

(CIL VI 36467, *ibid.*: 283)

The great fear of disturbance can be understood in the context of beliefs about proper burial and restless spirits, but the presence of these warnings on tombs and monuments is also revealing given the fact that it was already a criminal offence to disturb buried remains. Toynbee (1971: 76) remarks, “*Violatio sepulcri* was, indeed, a criminal offence and the subject of repeated imperial enactments, as the legal compilations testify,” and Hope (2000a: 123) states that “those accused of deliberately violating graves suffered *infamia*. Anyone who despoiled a corpse could endure the death penalty or the mines (*Digest* 14.12.3.7).” The fact that many individuals considered it necessary to reassert such regulations on their tombs may indicate that the law was not successfully enforced and consequently they felt the need to take the matter into their own hands. Although not legally recognised, these phrases were regarded as official declarations of ownership and indicate a desire for control over one’s last resting place. However, as Hope (2000a: 124) points out, “we can only

speculate how long such measures were honoured and thus effective” and it is probable that they were disregarded within a few generations. Subdivision of tombs at Isola Sacra into smaller units by people unmindful of the original inscriptions forbidding use of the tomb by non-family members illustrates the short-lived effect of these provisions.

The reasoning behind these laws and regulations is as important as their existence for understanding burial practice. Practical issues or concern for public safety may have played an important role, especially in the establishment of regulations concerning the location of graves or pyres. Fire was a major concern for the inhabitants of urban areas, the devastation that could be caused vividly illustrated by the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. Cicero believed that this was the reasoning behind the rules on cremation (*de Leg.* II.24.61), although Bodel (1994: 33) asserts that it was more likely to reflect the reality of his own day than that of the XII Tables. Concern for public health and safety was probably partly responsible for the regulations limiting the dumping of corpses and rubbish on the Esquiline which, according to Bodel (*ibid.*: 34), “was treated on a par with public rowdiness and other forms of littering as a general problem of public order rather than a matter of religious taboo.” As Rome expanded the availability of land on which to build became increasingly important. Cicero’s description of the activity outside the Colline Gate reflects these concerns. This highlights two other possible motives behind Roman burial legislation: hygiene and religion. The existence of the *puticuli* and the need for regulation of dumping activities implies that hygiene was generally considered unimportant, and although its significance may have increased over time, Robinson (1975: 176) believes it unlikely that at the time of the XII Tables hygiene was a motive for prohibiting burials within the city. The religious character of the XII Tables is unquestionable and it is probable that many of the regulations were influenced by religious beliefs. The pontiffs were vital to the process of making a grave religious, indicating the influence that such attitudes had on early funerary regulations. Fear of ritual pollution may also have been responsible for keeping burial at a distance (Lindsay, 2000: 152). However, the religious reasoning behind these regulations was gradually replaced by concerns for civil law and practical considerations. The Edict of Sentius and the *senatusconsultum de pago Montano* provide little indication that superstition was involved in their creation and appear to be primarily concerned with issues of public safety and land

availability. Various motives probably co-existed, especially during later periods when the reasoning behind the original restrictions of the XII Tables had been forgotten or were no longer considered relevant, even if the laws themselves remained in use.

Continued observation of tradition was of the utmost importance to burial legislation. Long-observed customs shaped the original XII Tables which subsequently became the traditional source of all law and formed the basis, albeit with alterations and refinements, of Roman funerary law for many centuries. The fundamental rules governing the disposal of the dead at Rome were evidently applicable to all members of society and would thus have influenced the practices of both rich and poor, particularly in terms of how and where corpses were buried. That the place of burial received the status of *locus religiosus* is particularly significant, for it conferred both a legal and religious status on even the simplest burial, thus legally protecting it from damage and legitimising its existence as the spiritual home of the deceased.

## 2.5 Burial clubs

The desire for commemoration, proper burial in accordance with the correct rites and the subsequent continuance of ritual activities, were evidently of great importance to all levels of society. However, not all members of the urban community had access to the resources required to adequately satisfy these demands, and it has been suggested that these pressures led to the creation of funerary clubs or *collegia*. Paoli (1963: 129), for example, claimed that “men dislike death almost as much as they dislike the idea of not having a decent funeral after death. In every age men have toiled laboriously all their lives merely to save enough to pay their funeral expenses. This human sentiment gave birth to the *collegia funeraticia* in Rome.”

A *collegium* consisted of a group of individuals who shared a common profession, trade, religious belief or who were the dependants or slaves of a single household. They engaged in various social activities and met regularly for banquets, meetings and festivals. Many of these associations owned burial plots or monuments (often *columbaria* which allowed for the burial of large numbers of individuals in one place)

with space in which to hold funeral feasts and celebrate religious festivals, in addition to a separate place in which they met to dine on other occasions (Patterson, 1992b: 20 – 21). Associations were regarded with suspicion by authorities fearing political rebellion, and the legal situation surrounding such organisations consequently fluctuated. According to Kaser (1965: 79) “the formation of an association for any lawful purpose was allowed by the XII Tables,” but during the first century BC the situation varied considerably. Crook (1967: 265) summarises the legal situation:

“... a *senatusconsultum* of 64 BC suppressing *collegia* and a law put through the assembly by Clodius in 58 restoring them; a *senatusconsultum* in 56 suppressing *sodalities decuriatique* (which sounds like the pressure-groups of the aristocracy) and a *lex Licinia de sodaliciis* of 55, apparently again directed against mass bribery; and finally a *lex Iulia* which seems to have settled the law fairly effectively for the future.”

The *lex Iulia* permitted the existence of certain societies provided they were licensed by the Emperor (*ibid.*: 265). These laws were concerned with regulating *all* forms of association, in particular those with a political agenda but a shift in policy during the first century AD related specifically to burial clubs. Crook (*ibid.*: 266) continues: “the innumerable small groups of the humble folk who paid small sums for an occasional beano and a proper burial were permitted to enlist unlicensed, by a *senatusconsultum*.” Increased numbers of associations during the first century AD may be attributed to this change in the law which allowed for the easy creation of informal societies. An examination of the surviving charters of these *collegia*, however, highlights the extent to which they were frequently highly structured rather than *ad hoc* groups of friends or colleagues.<sup>9</sup> The extant constitution of a burial club at Lanuvium dedicated to Diana and Antinous and dating from AD 136 (CIL XIV 2112) provides an excellent insight into a *collegium*. In addition to regulations concerning the dates and conduct of feasts (including those responsible for their organisation and the provision of the appropriate food), specific religious festivals and the celebration of the birthdays of Diana and Antinous, the charter makes specific reference to the process of entry to the *collegium* and its response to the death of a member:

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<sup>9</sup> More informal *collegia* no doubt existed and the surviving charters simply reflect the organisation of clubs structured enough to produce one.

“It was voted unanimously that whoever desired to enter this society shall pay an entry fee of 100 HS and an amphora of good wine and shall pay monthly dues of 5 asses (1 ¼ HS) ... If anyone has not paid his dues for six consecutive months and the common lot of man befalls him, his claim to burial shall not be upheld ... It was voted further that upon the death of a paid-up member of our club, there will be due to him from the treasury 300 HS ... from which will be deducted a funeral fee of 50 HS to be distributed at the pyre ....”

(CIL XIV 2112, cited in Hopkins, 1983: 215).

Following these regulations are instructions on the appropriate action to be taken should a member die whilst away from town, if a slave's owner refused to hand over his body for burial, or if a member committed suicide. Several significant details emerge from this document, including an insight into the members of *collegia*. Freeborn, freedmen and slaves were all permitted to join, and in the case of the *collegium* of Lanuvium, “if any slave who is a member of this club should be freed, he shall be bound to pay an *amphora* of good wine,” which Patterson (2000a: 278) attributes to a desire to collectively celebrate the good fortune of the former slave. However, although the majority of *collegia* members belonged to the lowest classes of society, Patterson (1992b: 21) demonstrates that they were unlikely to have included the poorest members of the community, stating that “the evidence available for the cost of funerals in Roman Italy suggests that the 250 HS received by members of the association of Diana and Antinous at Lanuvium was on a par with the cheapest recorded funerals from elsewhere in Italy, again, this suggests a comparatively exalted position for members of the clubs, as anonymous funerals will have been much cheaper.” In addition, there were entrance fees to pay, ranging from 125 sesterces for the college of Aesculapius and Hygia on the Via Appia, to 100 sesterces for the ‘familia Silvani’ at Trebula Mutuesca, or 100 sesterces and an amphora of wine at Lanuvium (Duncan-Jones, 1982: 131), plus monthly dues and the provision of banquets. Furthermore, some *collegia* owned large tombs and meeting places in which they held regular events implying that the members had access to a certain amount of financial resources, although these may have been financed by wealthy patrons. This evidence is vital to understanding the *collegia* for it highlights that although their members derived from the lowest groups of society, the destitute and poorest members of the community, who would have benefited most from the services of the *collegia*, could not afford to join.

Although Patterson (2000a: 279) states, "in some cases it seems that wives and children of club members were themselves buried in a club's monument," there is a widespread absence of female *collegium* members. The constitution from Lanuvium, for example, does not refer to women or children and the names listed are male. Women and children were generally excluded from these organisations (Price, 2000: 301), and, although they may in some cases have received burial if their husbands or fathers belonged to a *collegium*, this is unlikely to have occurred regularly. The Lanuvium charter asserts strictly that only fully paid-up members are entitled to financial assistance for burial. That few families are recorded within the monuments of *collegia* may be due to the fact that men with families experienced a reduced fear of being left kinless and alone upon their death and therefore did not require a socially created family to assist them.

A large proportion of the population (women, children, and possibly married men) were therefore unable to obtain, or did not seek, burial assistance from *collegia*, and although these organisations have been interpreted as a means by which the lower classes ensured good company in life and a decent burial in death, it is clear that their effect in this regard was limited. Nevertheless, although the observation of Hopkins (1983: 214) that *collegia* "saved men from the anonymity of mass graves and guaranteed each man's individuality in death" may not have been a comfort to all those facing the prospect of an ignominious burial without proper rites, it certainly eased the minds of those who did join an association. Moreover, as the Lanuvium constitution reveals, *collegia* operated as more than a burial club, providing opportunities for social interaction and friendship. *Collegia* have been described as "characteristically urban institutions" (Bassett *et al.*, 1992: 6) and their development within urban environments has supported the interpretation of these clubs as a reaction to the loss of individuality experienced by members of large communities (Hopkins, 1983: 214). Patterson (1992b: 23) suggests they were "a means of 'humanizing the city,'" and "a remedy against the anonymity of life in a city of a million people." Brought together by a common profession, religious belief or other shared interests, the members of these clubs met regularly for meetings and dining activities, allowing them to create an artificial extended family on which they could rely after death. Consequently, the *collegia* cannot be viewed primarily as "burial clubs" but rather as social institutions which allowed members of the lower classes, with access to the

necessary resources, to interact and socialise whilst ensuring that their remains received proper rites after death.

## 2.6 The *funeraticium*

Towards the end of the first century AD, Nerva instituted a funeral grant (*funeraticium*). Evidence for the grant is limited to a reference from AD 354, stating that he gave “*funeraticium plebi urbanae instituit* of 62 ½ denarii,” plus a small number of inscriptions and a reference in the *Digest*.<sup>10</sup> The precise meaning of the term and the process that it entailed consequently remain obscure. Degrassi (1962: 698) rejects the interpretation of Mommsen that Nerva provided 250 HS (62 ½ denarii) in his will for each member of the *plebs urbana* who attended his funeral, and also that of Sutherland who associated the grant with the funeral of Domitian. Although conceding that money was distributed to those attending the funerals of the rich,<sup>11</sup> Degrassi (*ibid.*: 698) observes that specific terms describing this (*sportula* and *exequiarium*) already existed. After an examination of inscriptions which refer to the *funeraticium* and those stating the amount granted by city councils for burial of prominent individuals,<sup>12</sup> he states that it is impossible to deduce the precise cost of a funeral, suggesting that it was probably modest compared to attested figures (which probably included the cost of the monument and donations to those in attendance) (*ibid.*: 701). Degrassi (*ibid.*: 701) therefore proposes that 250 HS was sufficient for a “modest” funeral at Rome and that the *funeraticium* was thus granted at times of need to members of the *plebs urbana* in order to cover burial expenses.

Eligibility for the grant is equally unclear. On the basis of reference to the *plebs urbana*, Degrassi (*ibid.*: 701) suggests that only Roman citizens resident at Rome and eligible for the grain dole were included within the scope of the *funeraticium*. Numbers receiving the grain dole were strictly controlled (see Chapter 3) and eligibility was not determined by need, thus many of the poor found themselves

<sup>10</sup> Chron. 354, Mommsen *Chronica Minora* 1, p.146; CIL III p.924; VI 9626, 10234; XII 736, 4159; XIV 2112; *Digest* 11, 7, 30.

<sup>11</sup> He points also to the charter of the *collegium* from Lanuvium which stated that out of the 300 HS provided for the funeral, 50 HS was to be distributed at the pyre (*ad rogos*) (Degrassi, 1962: 698).

<sup>12</sup> At Pompeii 2,000 HS appears to have been the standard amount granted to important members of the community, for example CIL X 1019, 1024.

excluded. This is particularly significant for it suggests that many of the urban poor were ineligible for the funerary grant and thus those who would have benefited most from assistance with burial costs were denied it. The *funeraticium* cannot, therefore, be interpreted as a funeral grant distributed to the “poor”, for many members of the *plebs urbana* lived well above the poverty line. The system appears not to have continued after Nerva’s death. Degrassi (*ibid.*: 702), observing the impact that such a scheme would have on the state (an annual cost of approximately 1,000,000 HS), suggests that it was essentially a popularity seeking measure quickly revoked by Trajan. The *funeraticium* therefore existed for less than two years, a fact which explains the scarcity of textual and epigraphic references. In addition, whilst the grain dole became an established symbol of poverty within Latin literature, the *funeraticium* did not, further hinting at the short-lived nature of the scheme and the absence of direct association with the very poor. A grant that was theoretically available to all members of the urban plebs was unlikely to become a symbol of destitution. Whether the *funeraticium* represented awareness on the part of the state of the problems facing those unable to afford decent burial or was simply an attempt to curry favour with the masses can be debated. Had Nerva ruled for longer the burden placed on the state may have forced a change in policy, the results providing evidence for the motives behind it. However, that it was quickly revoked by Trajan,<sup>13</sup> suggests that its success as a vote winner was outweighed by the financial pressure it exerted on the state. The scheme appears not to have been revived during subsequent centuries. The *funeraticium* was evidently not active for long enough to become an established means by which the poor financed burial.

Proper burial and commemoration were evidently fundamentally important on social, religious and legal levels to all groups of Roman society, and there is little reason to assume that opinions differed widely on these matters. The law applied to rich and poor alike, and wealth or class did not significantly influence religious beliefs about disposal. The physical responses to these factors doubtless varied in accordance with status and wealth, but essentially all members of urban society were influenced by the

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<sup>13</sup> Something which occurred apparently without significant complaint on the part of the recipients – perhaps implying further that they did not consider it an inalienable right.



same pressures, needs and fears surrounding the death of a relative or friend. They were not, however, all affected by the same economic constraints.

## Chapter 3

### The Urban Poor

*“It is no easy matter, anywhere, for a man to rise when poverty stands in the way of his merits: but nowhere is the effort harder than in Rome, where you must pay a big rent for a wretched lodging, a big sum to fill the bellies of your slaves, and buy a frugal dinner for yourself.”*

(Martial, *Epigrams* III. 164 - 167)

The importance of commemoration and proper religious burial during the late Republic and the early centuries of the Imperial period has been vividly illustrated. These concerns transcended boundaries of wealth and social or legal status and affected the lives, deaths, attitudes and actions of a variety of individuals within that society. Although the evidence used in the reconstruction of these beliefs and reactions focuses largely on the upper echelons of the urban community, it has been demonstrated that this evidence can be used to make inferences regarding the practices and beliefs of more humble members of society. However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances, emotional responses and activities surrounding death amongst these poorer groups it is necessary to define in more precise terms who “the poor” members of that community were. In Chapters 1 and 2 the phrases “the lower classes”, “the less wealthy” and “the poor” have been used indiscriminately to refer to what was, in reality, a heterogeneous conglomeration of people. It is highly inaccurate and particularly unhelpful to continue to describe the bulk of the population of Rome using such vague and indiscriminate terminology. It is essential to identify to whom the term ‘poor’ can be applied and the economic implications this entailed.

#### **3.1 Roman attitudes to poverty**

Defining “the poor” can be approached in several ways, utilising various terms of definition, including social and legal status, economic wealth, and living conditions. It

is also essential to examine contemporary definitions of poverty in order to understand the ways in which both upper and lower classes conceived of "poverty." Unfortunately there is no extant account of ancient poverty composed by those who directly experienced such a condition and one is therefore compelled to rely on the writings of elite members of society in order to gain an impression of contemporary attitudes to, and definitions of, poverty. However, these sources reflect the attitudes and biases of the wealthy elite who held particular views and opinions of the lower classes and were unlikely to have fully understood the realities of urban poverty or have experienced it first hand. Nevertheless, although these attitudes may be divorced from reality, they remain essential to an understanding of poverty in the Roman urban world. Such attitudes cannot be used as a basis on which to construct a definition of "the poor" but to illuminate contemporary opinions and definitions that contribute toward a thorough examination of this social group and the factors that shaped their identity.

The lower classes were generally considered too insignificant to play a major role in ancient literary or historical texts, unless involved in political activities as "the mob", but certain texts do refer to poverty. A cursory glance at these writings (especially those by Cicero, Seneca, Horace, Juvenal and Martial) leads to two conclusions. Firstly, the writers of these texts (and, by implication, their intended audience) did not understand the hardships of true poverty, often idealising and romanticising its simple and frugal lifestyle; and, secondly, they despised those stricken by it in its most desperate form – beggary.

According to Seneca (*Ep.* 18.7, cited in Whittaker, 1993: 20), bored members of the aristocracy would often "play at living like the poor in their small cells, eating simple meals and sleeping on mattresses." As Whittaker (*ibid.*: 20) observes, Seneca claimed that this gave no real insight into the hardships of poverty but even his own attempt at simple living involved a carriage of slaves and food that took only one hour to prepare (*Ep.* 87). Furthermore, Juvenal, who exerts considerable effort to complaining about his own wretched poverty-stricken state and miserable living conditions, was not actually "sorry for the very poor or working-class; he is sorry for the middle-class men like himself who cannot get advancement" (Hands, 1968: 64). Juvenal provides further confirmation of this:

“And what of this, that the poor man gives food and occasion for jest if his cloak be torn and dirty; if his toga be a little soiled; if one of his shoes gapes where the leather is split, or if some fresh stitches of coarse thread reveal where not one, but many a rent has been patched? Of all the woes of luckless poverty none is harder to endure than this, that it exposes men to ridicule.”

(*Sat.* III. 147 – 153)

To suggest that to be mocked for a shabby appearance was the most unbearable aspect of poverty clearly indicates a lack of understanding or experience of poverty on the part of Juvenal. Fear of ridicule more accurately reflects the anxieties of elevated members of the community concerned about social position, rather than the hungry individual worried about the source of his next meal. Juvenal’s words highlight the way in which wealthier members of urban society defined poverty using their own frame of reference. Whittaker (1993: 7) also observes that Juvenal, “thought a person poor if he had less than 20,000 *sesterces* a year (9. 140 – 41),” which, in reality, represented a fortune to the majority. Furthermore, Veyne (1987: 141) spotlights the example of Horace who “said he was prepared to see his ambitions come to nought, for his poverty would serve as his life raft. This “life raft” consisted of two estates, one at Tivoli and the other in Sabine, where the master’s house covered some 6,000 square feet.” For the wealthy (and moderately well-to-do) member of urban society, the concept of “poverty” clearly entailed being unable to live in splendour and luxury yet remaining comfortable, well fed and with at least a single roof over their head. Occasionally this “poverty” was equated with honour and “would be praised as the teacher of good and honest living, and equated with virtues such as *parsimonia*” (Hands, 1968: 63). Individuals constantly concerned with social position and the future of their name and fortune were envious of this apparently simple and uncomplicated life. They did not, however, envy the beggar, of whom they spoke only rarely. Essentially, in the eyes of the elevated sector of society, or at least those who have left textual evidence of their opinions, “the poor were the rich who were not very rich” (Veyne, 1987: 141). The rich were not necessarily blind to the plight of the many poorer members of the urban community but they were simply uninterested in understanding or discussing the existence of people who made little or no direct impact on their lives.

This vague acknowledgement of true destitution did, however, evoke strong *opinions* amongst ancient authors and a clear distinction was drawn between “the poor” and “beggars”. Unlike those perceived to be “poor”, who were essentially slightly unfortunate versions of themselves, the truly destitute were considered contemptuous, vile and unworthy of assistance, illustrated by Martial’s comment (*Ep.* XII. 57. 13) that begging was something which Jewish children were taught by their mothers to do. It was a commonly held belief that the destitute chose to be unemployed and live idly, leading to the related conviction that the poor were content with their lot (Whittaker, 1993: 2). Paradoxically, however, those that did find employment were considered equally dishonest, sordid and untrustworthy. Brunt (1987: 714) points out that to the elite “a man was not truly free if he depended on wages,” and Cicero (*de Off.* 1. 150) states unequivocally that, “wage labour is sordid and unworthy of a free man, for wages are the price of labour and not of some art,” suggesting that “all retail dealing too may be put in the same category, for the dealer will gain nothing except by profuse lying, and nothing is more disgraceful than untruthful huckstering.” It was not so much the work that was despised, but the “ties of dependence which it creates between the artisan and the person who uses the product which he manufactures” (Mossé, 1969: 27). Hands (1968: 85 – 86) suggests the rich were “accustomed to seeing the poor free man and the slave at work together, so it would be easy for them to think of their dealings with both in much the same way,” but their attitudes were seemingly shaped by more than such visual association. The close working relationship between slaves and lowly freemen may have confirmed their opinion of the latter as sordid and worthless but it was the fact that these individuals opted to work for somebody else, thus degrading themselves, which led to the contempt and scorn evident in the textual sources.

More sordid and vile than those compelled to find paid employment were those who, in the minds of the rich, actively chose not to. Balsdon (1969: 268) remarks that “one of the most striking features of our extensive literary evidence about life in ancient Rome is that it hardly ever mentions a beggar.” This was evidently partly due to the fact that beggars were of no interest, politically or socially, to the upper classes, and although their presence on the streets of Rome was presumably unavoidable, those believing themselves to be superior could easily ignore their outstretched hands. Furthermore, there was no desire or compulsion to help the indigent through the



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support for, in order to benefit from donations of money or food, the recipient was required to demonstrate that he was worthy (Whittaker, 1993: 2). However, the qualities required by the upper class were, as Hands (1968: 74) observes, “those qualities of mind or character which could either serve or be appreciated by that class, qualities which could scarcely be possessed unless the approved recipient had at some time enjoyed comfortable circumstances and the education which made these possible.” Former slaves, who had acquired certain skills and observed the practices and manners of their upper class masters, were therefore more capable of securing support than homeless freeborn beggars. Furthermore, freedmen generally had patrons to whom they could turn in times of need.

The perception of the poor as contemptuous parasites is reinforced by the concept of “*panem et circenses*” (bread and circuses). Juvenal’s statement (10. 78 – 81) that the Roman people looked forward only to bread and games was reasserted in the second century AD by Fronto (*Princ. Hist.* 17), who suggested that “Trajan knew that the Roman people was held fast by two things, the free corn distribution (*annona*) and the shows (*spectacula*)” (cited in Balsdon, 1969: 267). The frequency with which this phrase was used to characterise the lower class population of the city indicates a commonly held belief that the majority of the population depended on the state for food and entertainment and were consequently of bad character. These conclusions led to a decreased desire to assist the very poor and reinforced the conviction that they chose to be poor and were adequately fed and entertained.

Certainly there were varying degrees of indifference to the plight of the destitute and whereas Sallust, writing during the late Republic, described the poor as “those who “envy the good and praise the bad”,” (cited in Whittaker, 1993: 3), during the later Empire “a pagan did pity “the mendicant poor, covered with rags and sunk in the calamity of their wretchedness”” (MacMullen, 1974: 87; Firm. Matern., *Math.* 4.14.3). The latter example may reflect later Imperial attitudes, but it remains probable that individuals were aware of the plight of the very poor in earlier periods. There was no common sense of duty to help the poor and, any assistance that occurred did so on an *individual* basis. The wealthier classes were certainly aware of the presence of impoverished people with Seneca (*Ad. Helv.* 12.1) observing “how great a majority are the poor,” but they displayed little active concern for their welfare.

Ancient literary sources should therefore not be relied upon in order to establish a definition of “poverty.” Those whom they described as “poor” were very different from those they considered vulgar and idle. This renders their accounts relatively unhelpful for gaining an insight into the *conditions* in which the latter struggled to survive.

### 3.2 Modern definitions of “the Roman poor”

Similarities can be detected between the attitudes observed in ancient literary sources and modern scholarly treatments of Roman society. Modern discussions, dealing primarily with politics and social competition amongst the elite, often pay scant attention to the lower classes. In many cases it is considered unimportant to provide a more precise definition of “the lower classes” because they did not feature highly in social or political negotiations. This approach has led to unspecific descriptions of the poor, such as Patterson’s (2000a: 268) observation that “the vast majority of the population must of course have occupied a position somewhere between the wealthy political class on the one hand and the destitute on the other.” Whilst this may suffice for a general discussion of urban society, it has led to the lower classes being repeatedly viewed as a single entity, or, to use the words of Garnsey (1998: 250), “one monolithic block.”

On occasion ancient descriptions of idle and lazy poor individuals concerned only with “bread and circuses” have been adopted unquestioningly by modern scholars. Such dismissive attitudes are most evident in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s, including Salmon (1974: 64) who suggested the *plebs* “made little contribution to the civilisation in which they were living; they were scarcely a part of the living organism of the Empire.” Both Cowell (1961) and Carcopino (1964)<sup>1</sup> assumed, like Juvenal two thousand years before them, that the grain dole was the most significant element in the lives of the poor, and Paoli (1963: 122) takes the words of Martial (*Ep.* XII. 70) at face value when he suggests that “even the poorest took at least three slaves with them

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<sup>1</sup> Cowell (1961: 143): “thousands seem to have survived on the charity of the rich, supplemented by free wheat and water supplied by the state.” Carcopino (1964: 78): possibly one-half of the population of the city lived on public charity.”



to the baths. Not to have one slave was a sign of the most degrading poverty." As noted above, these "poor" were actually the "less rich," a distinction that Paoli does not make. The unquestioning perpetuation of these ancient attitudes has generated an image of the lower classes as a vague homogenous group of people living in wretched conditions, yet well fed and entertained.

More recent literature has challenged this perception by attempting to examine this group of people in more detail and highlight various levels of status and wealth within it. Veyne (1987: 133 – 134), for example, distinguishes between three grades of economic status:

"(1) A plebeian owned nothing, simply earning his daily bread day after day ... (2) A poor shopkeeper (a cobbler, say, or a tavernkeeper) disposed of so little ready cash that every morning he had to buy the merchandise he would sell during the day. If a demanding client asked for a good bottle of wine, the tavernkeeper would have to go out and buy that wine from a wealthy wine merchant in his neighbourhood ... (3) A wealthy merchant was one who could afford to keep on hand several barrels of wine or sacks of flour or sides of beef. He was not a wholesaler but a merchant who sold to private individuals as well as to lesser merchants."

This description highlights the existence of varying levels of economic success amongst the "lower classes," an observation with particular significance for a study of access to the resources required for burial and commemoration. Divisions such as these suggest that status competition may also have prevailed between these various levels, perhaps being manifested in funerary activities as seen amongst wealthier groups.

More revealing is the distinction made between the "permanent poor and the temporary poor" by Garnsey (1998: 226), who also subdivides the former into "the very poor and the ordinary poor":

"The very poor were the truly destitute: they spent their lives in search of food, work and shelter. The ordinary poor lived at the edge of subsistence; they had some kind of lodgings, and provided unskilled, part-time or seasonal labour, when they could get it. By the temporary poor I mean small shopkeepers and artisans, who enjoyed a somewhat higher social and economic status, but were

liable to slip into poverty in times of shortage or at difficult points in their life cycles.”

(*ibid.*: 227)

These subdivisions hint further at the fluidity of life in the city. It was evidently possible to move from one level of poverty to another, depending upon economic circumstances, and these groups should certainly not be regarded as fixed or static. Indeed, Purcell (1994: 657) suggests that true destitution was a highly fatal state not long endured at Rome, and survival depended upon bettering oneself. This need not imply that death quickly followed economic deterioration, for the comments of Martial and Juvenal imply that beggars did survive, but it does indicate a certain degree of movement within and between these levels. These groups were not real in the sense that poor people identified themselves as belonging to one and were anxious to progress to the next. They should be viewed simply as a means by which to understand poverty at Rome and to emphasize the existence of fluid gradations of wealth and status within the lower classes similar to the rest of society.

### 3.3 An economic definition of the Roman poor

Although ancient Roman concepts of poverty have been shown to be of limited value they highlight the existence of a large community living precariously on the edge of poverty. Similarly, modern definitions such as those of Veyne and Garnsey illustrate the various levels of poverty *within* the “lower classes” and allow us to understand the fluidity of wealth and status within this sector of society. However, in order to understand the impact of burial costs on the attitudes and actions of the poor it is necessary to examine the economic resources available to the ordinary poor person of Rome that may have influenced their decisions regarding burial and commemoration.

Evidence for the economic resources available to poorer members of society is limited to Cicero’s statement (*Q. Rosc.* 28) that during the late Republic an unskilled labourer earned 12 *asses* (3 HS) per day.<sup>2</sup> Wage levels doubtlessly varied in relation to the type

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<sup>2</sup> Comparison has been made between this amount and that of wealthier members of society by Whittaker (1993: 6) who observes that “Seneca tells us that one of Caesar’s contemporaries, the younger Cato, who sang the praises of simple living, had property valued at four million sesterces,

of work and season and presumably did not remain static throughout the Imperial period, but this information can be used to provide an insight into the resources of ordinary workers. For individuals lacking particular skills or craft, employment could probably be found on public building projects at Rome, and “the narrow entrances and multiple levels of Roman warehouses demonstrate that goods were transported by manpower alone without the use of carts or draft animals. Such a system would have required an enormous number of labourers employed solely as porters” (Mattingly and Aldrete, 2000: 148). This demand was doubtless high at busy ports such as Ostia where, increasingly during the summer months, “one could readily suppose that it was supplied partly by the casual labour of persons normally resident in Rome” (Brunt, 1980: 93). DeLaine (2000: 132) suggests that some 12,000 – 20,000 men were employed in the construction industry at Rome. 3 HS cannot be confirmed as the daily wage of *all* unskilled labourers at *all* periods of Roman history. However, in light of the absence of other information pertaining to such matters and because Millett (1999: 1615) suggests that “wage rates were fixed more by custom than by demand and supply and were slow to change,” the following discussion is based on the assumption that it represents a plausible average income.

Assuming the unskilled labourer in question found employment for 365 days each year, his annual income would have totalled 1095 HS. However, there are several other variables that require consideration when calculating annual income. It is highly unlikely that employment was secured for every day of the year, not least because of the unreliable and temporary nature of unskilled employment, which was probably seasonal or dependent upon the availability of public building projects. As Brunt (1980: 93) observes, public building was by no means a continuous process: “under Tiberius, for instance, there was very little. Indeed building was always in some degree a seasonal business: Frontinus says that it was best done between April and November, subject to intermission in a time of great heat, which had as bad an effect as frost (*de aquis* 123).” Furthermore, public holidays must be taken into account, with business suspended on *dies nefasti*. Although Balsdon (1969: 74) argues that “it is absurd to exaggerate the impact of festival days on the working life of Romans and to imagine that on all these days shops were shut and work ceased ... workers had

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which would have yielded him an income of 550 – 650 sesterces a day.” The difference is considerable, with Cato potentially earning more in a day than a labourer could in a year (see **Table 1**).

simply to down tools and stand about if a sacred procession was passing, since holy days were polluted if priests caught sight of men at work," it is likely that certain public holidays *were* observed in such a way, in addition to days on which games were held. Examination of the theoretical impact of public holidays on the wage earning capabilities of the unskilled allows greater understanding of the effects of the *unreliability* of employment and how *not* working 365 days a year influenced annual income. Before the time of Sulla there were apparently 59 public holidays each year but this rose to 159 under Claudius, before being reduced to 135 by Marcus Aurelius (*ibid.*: 75). Taking into account the various numbers of festival days during different periods, the annual income of an unskilled labourer can be calculated (**Table 1**).

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of working days</i>	<i>Annual income (HS)</i>
Pre-Sulla	306	918
Post-Sulla	272	816
Caesar	215	645
Claudius	206	618
Marcus Aurelius	230	690

**Table 1.** The effect of public holidays on the annual income of an unskilled worker.

It is unlikely that Rome could have continued to function with only 206 working days each year and therefore these figures can not be considered an accurate reflection of the reality of wage earning. However, they provide an adequate illustration of the impact that temporary and casual employment may have had on the wages of unskilled workers and are therefore used in the following discussion as a means of quantifying *unreliable* employment.

The average unskilled worker would have required this income largely to purchase food. Wheat or grain generally formed the basis of the ordinary Roman's diet (see Cowell, 1961: 76 – 77; Robinson, 1992: 144; Garnsey, 1998: 229), and Shelton (1988: 81) explains how this was "either crushed and boiled with water to make porridge or *puls*, or ground into flour and baked as bread ... Boiling was probably more common than baking because few poor people would have their own oven." At various periods grain was distributed free of charge (the *frumentario*) and has consequently led to the conclusion that those at the lower end of the economic scale had access to a regular

source of nutrition. However, the circumstances surrounding grain distribution require closer examination.

In 123 BC Gaius Gracchus fixed the price of grain at  $6\frac{1}{3}$  *asses* (about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  HS) per *modius*, for a maximum of 5 *modii* per month for each individual.<sup>3</sup> This system continued until 82 BC when Sulla abolished all subsidised grain distributions. However, the 70s BC witnessed a re-establishment of subsidised distributions and although the *lex Aemilia* of 78 BC, supported by the consul Lepidus, was perhaps annulled relatively quickly, the *lex Terentia Cassia* of 73 BC ensured the continued provision of 5 *modii* per month at the Gracchan price. These prices were evidently in effect in 62 BC when Cato's *lex Porcia* maintained the price but reduced the number of individuals eligible to receive (or, more accurately, to purchase) subsidised grain to approximately 200,000, the previous figure having presumably increased to an unmanageable level. A mere four years later, in 58 BC, P. Clodius Pulcher, as part of an attempt to gain political support for Julius Caesar took the unprecedented step of making grain distributions free, although the number of recipients was again reduced by Caesar to 150,000 (Cowell, 1961: 137 – 138). From this period onwards free grain distributions remained, although the number of recipients fluctuated (Augustus reduced the number from 320,000 to 200,000 in 5 BC) and with a short-lived hiatus after the Great Fire of AD 64, when Nero was compelled to discontinue free distributions but imposed a low maximum price of 3 HS per *modius* on grain available to the entire urban population (Dio 62.18; Robinson, 1992: 155). During the late second century AD Septimius Severus added free olive oil to the dole received by 170,000 individuals, and Aurelian introduced free pork and cheap wine, in addition to replacing the grain with bread.

Several significant factors emerge from this brief history of the grain dole. Firstly, it provides useful information regarding the prices at which grain was sold. Furthermore, it highlights the fact that limitations were imposed on the number of recipients with those not receiving subsidised or free grain forced to purchase it elsewhere. The grain-market appears to have been largely unregulated (Garnsey, 1983: 63) and the actions taken after the catastrophic fire of AD 64 illustrate how the availability and price of

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<sup>3</sup> For the reasons behind this action and its implications, see Garnsey and Rathbone (1985).

grain was also dependent on external factors and that disasters severely disrupted the dole. This presumably occurred at other undocumented times as a result of poor harvests, military activity or epidemic disease that affected the production, transportation or distribution of the grain. The dole should thus not be considered a reliable source of nutrition for all members of the population.

The circumstances surrounding eligibility for the dole remain relatively obscure, although it is known that citizenship was essential and women were excluded at all times. It is also known that freedmen were eligible, for, as Cowell (1961: 138) notes, "a number of slave-owners freed their slaves, so that they no longer would need to feed them," and residency at Rome was essential. Caesar and Augustus compiled lists based on the sub-division of the city into *regiones* and *vici*, "with vacancies filled by a lottery procedure, *subsortitio*" (Purcell, 1994: 648). Augustus also seems to have reduced the age of eligibility to ten years of age (Cowell, 1961: 138 – 139). It is evident, however, that the dole was restricted to a small section of the population, on the basis of adult male citizenship and residency at Rome, and that there was no means test, thus rendering it unlikely that those most in need of free or cheap food received any assistance. It was apparently considered an honour to be eligible, and this was occasionally alluded to on funerary monuments as a mark of status (*ibid.*: 139; ILS 2049, 6062 – 6070; see also Veyne, 1990: 243 – 44). The system operated within the context of ideas about the "good" and the "bad" poor, with those of "bad character" deemed unworthy of support. As a result, the poor were not necessarily the recipients of the dole; indeed, senators and equestrians seem to have been included until the time of Augustus (Robinson, 1992: 153). Market prices also inevitably fluctuated in reaction to political, economic, military and social circumstances, as the actions of Nero attest. It rose to extortionate levels in times of shortage, with Eusebius noting that in AD 6 prices rose as high as  $5\frac{1}{2}$  *denarii* (HS 22) per *modius*. Such prices presumably were not sustainable but highlight the instability of prices at Rome; a city whose food supply was largely at the mercy of external events. It is, however, generally accepted (Duncan-Jones, 1982; Garnsey, 1998) that, under normal circumstances, a *modius* of grain cost 6-8 HS at Rome during the early Imperial period.

A further significant point that emerges from this discussion concerns the amount of grain distributed. Whether sold at a reduced price or given away free there appears to

have been a standardised amount of 5 *modii* allocated to each individual. Garnsey (1988: 229 – 230) examines the nutritional value of the corn distributions and states that:

“Wheat scores well as a source of food energy. Operating with the figure of 1,625 – 2,012 kcals per person per day as a minimum requirement (Clark and Haswell (1970) 58) and taking 3,330 kcals as the food energy of 1kg of soft wheat, we can estimate that basic needs, if met completely by wheat, would be satisfied by consumption of 490 – 600gm of wheat, or, at a high extraction rate, 650 – 800gm of wholemeal bread (or 2 – 2.4 Roman lbs). A side-glance at the *frumentario* shows the recipient of 5 *modii* (about 3,700 kcals per day) was getting more than 1 kg of wheat per day or more than double his basic requirement.”

He also observes that, despite the fact that grain distributions provided a maximum of 60 *modii* per annum, assuming an individual obtained 25% of their calorific needs from other foods, their *minimum grain requirement* was approximately 22.5 *modii* per annum, with the *average grain consumption* likely to be approximately 30 *modii* (Garnsey, 1998: 191 – 192). This indicates that the grain dole was sufficient to provide a married couple with the calorific intake they required, although it evidently could not provide sufficient nutrition to support children without the parents considerably reducing their own intake.

On the basis of these observations the following prices can be calculated for the period during which the Gracchan prices (6½ *asses* per *modius*) were in effect (123 – 58 BC):

<i>Minimum Consumption Rate</i> (22.5 <i>modii</i> pa):	35.6 HS per annum
<i>Average Consumption Rate</i> (30 <i>modii</i> pa):	47.5 HS per annum
<i>Family Consumption Rate*</i> (60 <i>modii</i> pa):	95 HS per annum

(\* i.e. based on a married couple sharing)

Assuming an unskilled labourer, employed for 365 days a year, earned 1095 HS, these expenses would leave that individual with between 1047.5 HS and 1,000 HS for other essentials (other food, clothing, fuel, rent). However, if the unreliability of employment is considered in conjunction with these rates of consumption, the remaining income would be significantly reduced (Table 2).

These figures are hypothetical, but it is clear that even the benefits offered by subsidized grain could seriously impact upon the economic resources of the very poor, perhaps leaving a family with as little as 523 HS per annum after the purchase of grain. The introduction of free grain was undeniably beneficial to those who received it but it must be emphasized that this was restricted to between 150,000 and 200,000 members of the population and did not necessarily include those most in need.

<i>Number of working days</i>	<i>Annual income (HS)</i>	<i>Consumption rate</i>	<i>Remaining income (HS)</i>
306	918	Minimum	882.4
		Average	870.5
		Family	823
272	816	Minimum	780.4
		Average	768.5
		Family	721
215	645	Minimum	609.4
		Average	597.5
		Family	550
206	618	Minimum	582.4
		Average	570.5
		Family	523

**Table 2.** The effects of grain expenditure at Gracchan price levels (6 *½*asses) on the annual income of an unskilled worker experiencing unreliable employment.

Garnsey (1998: 236) suggests that grain received from the state was not necessarily suitable for consumption in its entirety. He writes (*ibid.*: 236):

“The grain had travelled far; if of Egyptian origin, it was at best the grain of the year before. More likely it was older than this by the time it reached the consumer, having been stored in warehouses for some time. Not all of it would have been fit for human consumption. It would have deteriorated further after distribution, while stored in some dark corner, waiting to be processed and eaten. Wheat easily deteriorates if not stored in optimum conditions (such as were not available in the crowded tenements of Rome), and it is prone to attack by sundry pests and diseases.”

This may not have prevented the desperately hungry from consuming unsuitable grain it does imply that a certain amount of the 60 *modii* per annum was inedible and



perhaps required supplementing with grain purchased on the open market. For those who did not receive the dole they presumably also purchased it in the market. **Table 3** shows the expenses that a price range of 6 – 8 HS would have entailed for various rates of consumption.

<i>Consumption rate</i>	<i>Grain price</i>		
	<i>6 HS</i>	<i>7 HS</i>	<i>8 HS</i>
Minimum (22.5 modii pa)	135	157.5	180
Average (30 modii pa)	180	210	240
Family (60 modii pa)	300	420	480

**Table 3.** The cost of market priced grain at various consumption rates.

Factoring in the unreliable nature of unskilled employment these grain expenses would have had a significant impact on the casual labourer's annual income. **Table 4** demonstrates that an unskilled labourer, potentially earning only HS 3 per day, may have been left with minimal financial reserves with which to purchase commodities other than grain. Indeed, if such an individual was required to feed a family, or a wife, in the time of Caesar (or at least only able to secure employment for approximately 215 days per year) he could expect to spend only 25 – 53% of his earnings on non-grain items if he was unfortunate enough not to receive a free dole.<sup>4</sup>

Once grain was purchased it required processing, which again resulted in expense for the consumer. Unfortunately there are no extant references to the costs of processing, or storing grain either purchased or received from the state. Cowell (1961: 139) suggests that people “must have been compelled to entrust it to some baker-miller to turn into food,” and it is highly likely that the latter accrued considerable profit in the process, perhaps retaining a portion of the grain. The original owner of the grain would have been forced to rely on a considerable degree of trust that he would receive what he was due. Although it is impossible to discuss in detail the costs of grain processing it is evident that this entailed further expense for those with already limited financial resources. Coupled with the original cost of the grain the whole process consumed a substantial portion of an unskilled labourer's potential income.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly individuals required to feed only themselves, were at an advantage but the extent to which people remained “dependent free” in order to save money remains doubtful.

Working days	Income (HS)	Consumption rate	Money left after grain			Remaining income (%)
			6 HS	7HS	8HS	
365	1095	Minimum	960	937.5	915	88 - 84
		Average	915	885	855	84 - 78
		Family	795	675	615	73 - 56
306	918	Minimum	783	760.5	738	85 - 80
		Average	738	708	678	80 - 74
		Family	558	498	438	61 - 48
272	816	Minimum	681	658.5	636	83 - 78
		Average	636	606	576	78 - 71
		Family	516	396	336	63 - 41
215	645	Minimum	510	487.5	465	79 - 72
		Average	465	435	405	72 - 63
		Family	345	225	165	53 - 25
206	618	Minimum	483	460.5	438	78 - 71
		Average	438	408	378	71 - 61
		Family	318	198	138	52 - 22

**Table 4.** The impact of unreliable employment (holidays), various grain prices and consumption rate on the income of unskilled labourers.

Garnsey (1998: 239 - 240) assumes that grain represented only 75% of the food energy requirement of an individual's diet, and that for a reasonably balanced diet the remaining 25% took the form of other foods such as vegetables. He (*ibid.*: 241) continues: "wine, oil and dry legumes are commonly regarded as staples throughout the Mediterranean region, and special reasons have to be found for denying their presence to some degree in the diet of the ordinary people of Rome." There is again little extant evidence for the price of these foodstuffs and it was not until the reigns of Septimius Severus and Aurelian that oil and wine respectively were provided free to residents of Rome (*ibid.*: 241). Before this, such items had to be purchased at market prices, with Garnsey (*ibid.*: 242) noting that an average of 20 litres of oil were probably consumed per person each year but that mass production of oil in the Mediterranean region presumably resulted in relatively low prices for low quality produce. Similarly, wine was probably available at a wide range of prices, with Warde Fowler (1908: 39) suggesting that "rough wine ... was at times remarkably cheap," and Stambaugh (1988: 154) proposing that prices varied from an *as* to a *sestertius* (although this may have reflected the quantity rather than the quality). Garnsey (1998: 241) reasons that wine could be purchased at Rome for 1 - 2 HS per litre (half the

daily wage of an unskilled labourer). Although it is tempting to view wine as a luxury, especially in light of the plentiful water supply provided by aqueducts, it would have contributed to the maintenance of a balanced diet. Moreover, although free water perhaps did form a large part of the liquid consumption of the poorer members of society, the complaints of the *populus* on one occasion that the price of wine was too high and was in short supply (Warde Fowler, 1908: 40; Suet. *Aug.* 42) implies that wine was generally preferred.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, Garnsey (1998: 242) also remarks that:

“lentils, chickpeas and broad beans, were the main source of protein as of calories in the Mediterranean basin as a whole ... Beans are associated by Martial with artisans (*faba faborum*, 10.48.16), chickpeas are the food of the humble section of the theatre audience, according to Horace (*Ars. P.* 249), and a would-be politician is depicted by the same poet as having impoverished himself by showering the Circus crowd with chickpeas, beans and lentils (*Sat.* 2.3.184).”

The price of these foodstuffs remains obscure but their association with the poorer elements of society perhaps suggests they were inexpensive and readily available. Their purchase would, however, still have had an impact on the “shopping budget” of the ordinary Roman. Similarly, fruit and vegetables are vital to maintaining a balanced diet and “[c]heap vegetables such as cabbage, leeks, beet, garlic and onions, are associated in imaginative literature with the poor (cf. *Juv.* 1.134; 3.293; 5.87; *Pers.* 3.114; *Mart.* 13.13.1; *Plaut. Poen.* 13.4; etc)” according to Garnsey (1998: 242). These may have been relatively cheap and could possibly have been obtained cheaper still as they neared the end (or exceeded) their “best before date.” Opportunities to grow fruit and vegetables were doubtless denied to many as a result of their occupation of small upper storey apartments.

In order to maintain a degree of balance in their diet, the poorer city-dweller (whether a recipient of the corn dole or not) was compelled to purchase commodities in the market to supplement the grain that formed the basis of their diet. These may have

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<sup>5</sup> The expenses involved in the purchase of wine could presumably have been lessened by considerably watering it down prior to consumption.

been relatively inexpensive but in light of the very low income of these individuals and families, they consumed a substantial amount of the resources at their disposal. The extent to which people were concerned with ensuring their diet was nutritionally balanced is unclear, and we should be wary of transferring modern scientific concepts of diet to the situation in ancient Rome. However, a lack of knowledge does not negate the need for a balanced diet and malnourishment was probably widespread. It is evident, as Brunt (1966: 18) noted, that “it is an illusion that in the late Republic the urban plebs was usually well and cheaply fed by the state.”

In addition to expenditure on food, the ordinary Roman had to clothe himself and his family. Prices for everyday clothing are not forthcoming from ancient textual sources, with the exception of the Price Edict of Diocletian (AD 301). The prices outlined within the latter are unfortunately not applicable to this discussion because they reflect a later economic situation but the Edict demonstrates the way in which clothing prices varied in relation to the quality and style of the garment. Traditionally the women of the household were responsible for spinning and the production of clothing and although this may have become no more than an upper-class ideal by the time of the early Empire it does suggest that many garments were produced in the home. It is likely that unprocessed wool was less expensive than “ready made” clothing, but this would still have to be purchased. Clothing may have been worn for long periods, being constantly repaired and patched, as Juvenal’s (*Sat.* III. 147 – 153) description cited above demonstrates, and therefore perhaps does not represent a regular expenditure.

Fuel, in the form of oil (for lighting) and wood (for heat and cooking) was also required. The price of fuel is unknown (although, as noted above, oil could apparently be obtained inexpensively), but could probably be readily obtained in small quantities from a variety of sources at minimal expense.

Finally, an individual may have equipped himself (and family) with clothing and fuel, and prevented starvation through the purchase of adequate food supplies on a basic and unreliable wage, but as Yavetz (1958: 517) points out “the heaviest monetary burden from which the urban plebs suffered was the necessity to pay their rents.” Many of the truly destitute inhabitants of Rome, those that Garnsey (1998: 226)

defines as the “permanent” or “very poor”, were homeless, sheltering in doorways or narrow alleyways between buildings. Scobie (1986: 402 – 403) observes that:

“Several ancient sources refer to huts erected against or on top of public buildings, or between the columns of porticoes in front of shops. Such structures were likely to be demolished from time to time by city officials. The destitute also found refuge in tombs which also served on occasion as improvised brothels and lavatories. Others slept in spaces under the stairs of *insulae* (*subscalaria*), in underground cellars (*crypta*), vaults (*fornices*), or in the open air.”

It is evident from a discussion of the gradations of poverty within Roman society however, that other poor people could, and did, afford more permanent accommodation. Not all of those stricken by poverty were homeless, and large numbers seemingly resided in small apartment rooms in high-rise *insulae*. Information concerning the cost of renting a room or apartment at Rome during the late Republic and early Empire is scarce, with the majority of house price references relating to the large houses of the wealthy or the more expensive ground floor apartments of individual buildings.<sup>6</sup> The only direct reference applicable to this discussion concerns the actions of Julius Caesar in 48 BC (Suet. *Caes.* 38.2; Dio 42.51.1). Returning to Rome triumphant after the Civil Wars, Caesar “remitted all Roman rents up to HS 2,000 a year, all Italian rents to HS 500 a year” (Frier, 1977: 34), a fact that has led to several scholars suggesting that “the humblest tenant had to pay a rent of 2,000 sesterces” (Carcopino, 1964: 56). A glance at the earnings of an unskilled labourer (even one who successfully secured regular employment *and* received free grain) reveals that this amount was beyond the capabilities of the ordinary person. It is thus unlikely that 2,000 HS represents the lowest level of rent in Rome, especially as Caesar remitted rents *up to* 2,000 HS, implying that accommodation could be secured for less. Frier (1977: 34) proposes that minimum rent was perhaps closer to the figure of 500 HS, although “Tenney Frank suggested HS 360 a year, or about 1 HS a day.” Even this latter figure represented a significant financial investment for those with an unreliable income. It is possible that temporary accommodation could be secured for as little as 1 *as* per night, but as Frier (*ibid.*: 34) points out, “for those who demanded conditions of

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<sup>6</sup> The *aedile* and praetor Caelius reportedly paid 30,000 HS per annum for a ground floor apartment during the mid first century BC (Carcopino, 1964: 37).

even minimum decency, the price swiftly rose.” Table 5 illustrates the effect that rent payments of 1 HS per day (365 HS per annum) could potentially have on the income of a casual labourer experiencing varying levels of employment.

<i>Working days</i>	<i>Income (HS)</i>	<i>Annual rent (HS)</i>	<i>Remaining income (HS)</i>
365	1095	365	730
306	918	365	553
272	816	365	451
215	645	365	280
206	618	365	253

Table 5. The effect of rent prices on variable income.

A brief examination of the urban rental system leads to a greater understanding of how the very poor may have dealt with the situation. Frier (1977: 28) explains how “it was legally permissible for the owner of an entire housing unit (or lessee from the owner, acting as an entrepreneur) to rent out portions of that unit to various tenants ... the tenant of the *cenaculum* might have in turn the right to sublease parts of the flat to various subtenants; this practice, which he could use for his profit, was called *cenaculariam exercere*.” It is therefore conceivable that poorer tenants shared apartments or rooms, either as a sub-letting tenant or the sub-tenants; a system that reduced the rent owed by an individual. It was therefore not surprising to find several individuals or families sharing small rooms. According to Frier (*ibid.*: 29), “the rental contracts envisaged in the legal texts concerning *locatio conductio rei* (leasehold) of urban dwellers normally run for a year or multiples of years, and the shortest payment-period envisaged is for a full half-year payable *at the conclusion of the period*.” As he points out, this indicates a degree of trust on the part of the landlord and payment in a single lump sum may have posed problems for those with an unstable source of income (*ibid.*: 29 – 30). As a result, landlords were probably unwilling to rent property on a long-term lease to poorer members of society, thus further rendering their lifestyle unstable. Short term leases were presumably more common than literary sources attest, perhaps with payment on a daily basis, such as suggested above. What is more, sharing an apartment or room allowed the poor not only to reduce the amount of rent they owed but also to gain an extra degree of stability. Scobie (1986: 428) writes: “An unskilled worker who paid rent on a daily

basis, might not be able to find employment for every day of the year, a circumstance which could cause eviction through default if he rented a room by himself. However, this consequence of temporary unemployment would not be so likely to occur when a room was shared, and a degree of privacy afforded through subdivision by means of wooden partitions." Presumably sub-tenants supported one another in times of financial crisis. The conditions may have been unhygienic and cramped but sharing at least provided them with a roof over their heads and those living in such conditions probably developed close relationships.

<i>Consumption rate</i>	<i>Working days</i>	<i>Annual income (HS)</i>	<i>Annual rent (HS)</i>	<i>Annual grain (HS)</i>	<i>Income after deduction of rent and grain (HS)</i>
Minimum (22.5 modii pa)	306	918	365	35.6	517.4
	272	816	365	35.6	415.4
	215	645	365	35.6	244.4
	206	618	365	35.6	217.4
Average (30 modii pa)	306	918	365	47.5	505.5
	272	816	365	47.5	403.5
	215	645	365	47.5	232.5
	206	618	365	47.5	205.5
Family (60 modii pa)	306	918	365	95	458
	272	816	365	95	356
	215	645	365	95	185
	206	618	365	95	158

**Table 6.** The effect of both rent (HS 365 pa) and grain purchases on unstable income during period of Gracchan prices (123 – 58 BC).

The data gathered and discussed above concerning financial resources and sources of expenditure can be drawn together into a single table for each period (Tables 6 and 7). Although these figures do not take into account other foodstuffs, clothes and fuel it is evident that many members of society dependant on unreliable or temporary employment for a low wage lived their lives balanced precariously on the edge of subsistence. A sudden increase in prices, major disaster or lack of employment was likely to lead to complete destitution. As Garnsey (1998: 239) observes, "employment was crucial. Tacitus says that the flood of AD 69 deprived the common people of food and the jobs with which they might have earned the money to buy it (*Hist.* 73)."

Consumption rate (modii)	Working days	Annual income (HS)	Annual rent (HS)	Annual grain (HS)			Income after deduction of rent and grain (HS)
				6	7	8	
Minimum (22.5 pa)	306	918	365	135	157.5	180	418 - 373
	272	816	365	135	157.5	180	316 - 271
	215	645	365	135	157.5	180	145 - 100
	206	618	365	135	157.5	180	118 - 73
<b>Total expenditure: 500 - 545 HS</b>							
Average (30 pa)	306	918	365	180	210	240	373 - 313
	272	816	365	180	210	240	271 - 211
	215	645	365	180	210	240	100 - 40
	206	618	365	180	210	240	73 - 13
<b>Total expenditure: 545 - 605 HS</b>							
Family (60 pa)	306	918	365	360	420	480	193 - 73
	272	816	365	360	420	480	91 - -29
	215	645	365	360	420	480	-80 - -200
	206	618	365	360	420	480	-107 - -227
<b>Total expenditure: 725 - 845 HS</b>							

**Table 7.** The effect of both rent (HS 365 pa) and grain purchases on unstable income during the Imperial period.

There are many factors that have not been considered here, including higher (or lower) wage rates for different jobs or at different times of the year.<sup>7</sup> The size of the families, which required food, shelter and clothing, has also largely been ignored.<sup>8</sup> Other expenses have not been considered, including the purchase of household utensils, equipment and furniture, luxuries for special occasions and religious festivals or the repayment of debts. The discussion has also focused predominantly on the male "breadwinner" of a family due to the scarcity of references to female employment, and as Garnsey (*ibid.*: 238) points out, other members of society were at more of a disadvantage, including widows who "must have been in a particularly precarious

<sup>7</sup> 3 HS has been used consistently because it is the only attested figure available but should not be viewed as necessarily fixed.

<sup>8</sup> A large family will have placed added pressure on economic resources, at least until any sons became eligible for the dole or old enough to find employment, at which time the fortunes of the family may have improved.



position,” being ineligible for state grain and unlikely to find regular employment, if any.

However, despite these problems and the fact that the calculations made above cannot be viewed as totally accurate, it has been demonstrated that large numbers of people in the city of Rome lived dangerously close to the boundary between destitution and basic subsistence. Life was inherently unstable and fortunes could rise and fall on a daily basis. As a result there was little room for lavish expenditure or personal savings.

### 3.4 The cost of burial

The figures calculated above highlight the financial constraints imposed by daily survival on the poorer members of society. The expenses involved in conducting a proper funeral and erecting a commemorative monument are commonly cited to support the suggestion that these members of society were unable to bury or commemorate their dead. But what did these expenses entail? A comprehensive study of costs during the Roman period has been conducted by Duncan-Jones (1965 and 1982), during which he examined the range of epigraphically recorded burial costs from Italy and North Africa. Although his investigation largely ignores evidence from Rome itself, it remains a useful insight into the varying amounts spent on tombs and monuments. Duncan-Jones (1982: 128) lists the distribution of burial costs as follows:

	Italy	Africa
HS 500,000 – 100,000	10 (11%)	-
99,000 – 50,000	7 (7.7%)	2 (3.9%)
49,000 – 20,000	13 (14.3%)	5 (9.8%)
19,000 – 10,000	17 (18.7%)	2 (3.9%)
9,000 – 5,000	13 (14.3%)	4 (7.9%)
4,000 and below	<u>31 (34%)</u>	<u>38 (74.5%)</u>
	91 (100%)	51 (100%)

Within these figures he observed (*ibid.*: 128) a degree of standardisation at both 20,000 HS and 2,000 HS, with 11 and 10 recorded instances respectively. Further support for standardised prices exists in the funerary grants awarded to distinguished citizens of Pompeii which he observes were also 2,000 HS (*ibid.*: 128). However, he points out that “one of the Pompeian magistrates who received the grant was buried in

a fortress-like tomb whose cost must have been much more than HS 2,000" (*ibid.*: 129). Using the example of several known military salaries and tombstones stating both the rank of the deceased and the price of the stone, Duncan-Jones proposes that an insight can be gained into the relationship between income and the amounts spent on funeral costs (*ibid.*: 129). He suggests that the greatest outlay involved not less than 1 ¼ year's pay for a *primipilii* and the lowest, about one-fifth that of a *tribuni militum* and *optio praetorianorum* (*ibid.*: 129). There would therefore seem to be little standardisation in this respect and the sums expended presumably depended upon individual circumstances, and, in the case of military personnel, the length of service.<sup>9</sup>

There are also noticeable differences between the Italian and African samples, with an absence of very expensive monuments (between 500,000 HS and 100,000 HS) in the latter but a higher concentration of "inexpensive" burials (4,000 HS and below). Duncan-Jones (*ibid.*: 128) proposes that these differences "are partly accounted for by social variants." Furthermore, it is to be anticipated that prices were higher in Italy than the provinces, with those in Rome probably being even greater than those of surrounding towns. Certainly there is evidence for particularly expensive burial at Rome: "The cost of burying Vespasian was anticipated as HS 10 million, according to a jocular anecdote in Suetonius. The tomb of Sulpicius Similis at Rome cost HS 400,000. And the burial of Nero, now a fugitive, cost HS 200,000" (*ibid.*: 128). These examples may be rare (and exaggerated) but prices were generally higher in the capital and the evidence from Italy and Africa supplied by Duncan-Jones should be used only as a guideline for discussions of burial and commemoration at Rome.

Other factors must be taken into account when using these figures. Firstly, as Duncan-Jones himself remarks (1965: 199), the practice of epigraphically recording the expenses involved in the burial and commemorative process were "always very much a minority practice" and there are strict chronological limits within which it occurred. The largest concentration of recorded costs is found during the first century AD, with the practice "beginning to die out completely in Italy by the beginning of the second century AD" (*ibid.*: 199). Furthermore, often it is unclear whether the sum represents only the monument or whether it includes other burial expenses. Saller and Shaw

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<sup>9</sup> Those who had progressed further in their career presumably had more opportunity to save their salary for such an occasion than newer recruits.

(1984: 128, n.21), for example, observe that in one inscription (CIL VIII, 3079) the funeral is mentioned as an additional item of cost, although the price is not given. The cost of funerals probably varied considerably and, in addition to the cost of a commemorative monument or tomb, money was required for funerary professionals (possibly 50-60 HS), disposal costs (fuel for cremation, for example), banquets and the purchase of a burial plot. The sums recorded epigraphically may not reflect the *entire* cost of the burial process and there remains the possibility of number rounding.<sup>10</sup>

Most importantly, when using the costs recorded on gravestones or tombs to reconstruct the expenses involved in the commemorative process, it is essential to consider the context in which they were erected and the motives behind the recording of this information. The practice of recording costs was not extensive, indicating that it was not widely considered an essential part of the commemorative process. However, stating the cost of a tomb may have played an active role in establishing or displaying the social status and wealth of those responsible for the memorial. Advertising one's economic success by stressing the amount spent on commemoration may have been particularly important amongst freedmen who, as has been demonstrated, often wished to display their success in life on their funerary monuments. Duncan-Jones (1965: 201) notes that higher tomb costs often belong to freedmen and cites the example of L. Numisius L. lib. Agathemerus, "a *sevir Augustalis* of Ostia who described himself as a merchant from Hispania Citerior, [who] spent the large sum of HS 100,000 on his tomb." It was only beneficial to the display and promotion of the status and identity of the deceased and their family if the sum recorded could be considered indicative of success. In the case of Agathemerus, HS 100,000 represents a considerable sum for a former slave and merchant and consequently advertised his success through a display of economic resources. The natural corollary of this is that it is unlikely that the amounts recorded in this context represent an accurate cross-section of the costs of funerary monuments. Although sums as low as 120 HS (in Italy) and 96 HS (in Africa) are recorded, these are very uncommon compared to those in the 10,000 – 49,000 HS bracket. There was nothing

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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, although Duncan-Jones provides details of the identification, date, location and reference for examples of stones recording expenses, he discusses no other aspects of the stones. Thus the statement that the lowest recorded price was 120 HS, found at Cremona (dating to the period after AD 161), is limited by the fact that the dimensions and decoration of the stone remain unclear. Exactly what could be purchased for 120 HS is obscure.

to be gained by recording the cost of very cheap memorials. Finally, if a statement of expense can be viewed as a status symbol or indicative of economic success there remains the possibility that some figures may have been exaggerated.

Despite the limitations of the evidence provided by Duncan-Jones, it can be concluded that various amounts were spent on funerary monuments and burial of the dead. It is possible to suggest that whilst 100 HS may have been the lowest amount worth recording, lower prices were available. The cost of such activity is, however, likely to have been greater at Rome than elsewhere in light of the fact that prices generally were higher in the capital (*ibid.*: 251). Saller and Shaw's (1984: 128) broad definition of the lower classes allowed them to assert that "the cost of modest memorials was not so high as to be prohibitive for working Romans ... memorial stones were within the means of modest men," but in light of the economic data above, even a simple funerary monument costing less than 100 HS may have been beyond the reach of poor members of the urban community. However, an inability to afford a permanent stone monument need not imply a disinterest or lack of concern for the processes of commemoration and proper burial.

## Chapter 4

### The Puticuli

*“Outside the towns there are puticuli ‘little pits’, named from putei ‘pits’, because there the people used to be buried ....”*

(Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, V.25)

Death is inevitable and some form of burial or disposal is necessary for the remains of all members of society, regardless of the economic resources at their disposal. There were evidently varying degrees of wealth and status amongst the urban poor of Rome and, although for many the prospect of a funerary monument, even of the simplest type, undoubtedly lay out of reach, disposal of their corpses was essential. In order to understand the responses of the poor and city authorities to these demands it is firstly necessary to examine the scale of mortality at Rome. The evidence for these responses can then be considered in light of the significance of commemoration and the observance of strict religious regulations concerning proper burial outlined above, in addition to practical issues of disposal.

#### 4.1 Mortality at Rome

The population of Rome during the late Republic and early Imperial period has formed the focus of much scholarly discussion (for example Oates, 1934; Hermansen, 1978; Brunt, 1987*a*; Lo Cascio, 1994; Storey, 1997), with the figure being commonly placed between 750,000 and 1,000,000. Calculating more precise figures is difficult given the instability of a population that fluctuated in response to the seasons, levels of employment and a variety of external factors. Furthermore, Purcell (1994: 649) has suggested that, “the urban population was probably not a huddle, however huge, of lifelong urbanites, inhabitants of a Rome around which a tight boundary could be drawn.” Bodel (1994 and 2000) favours a conservative approach, suggesting that approximately 750,000 people resided within the city around the time of Augustus.

Within this 750,000, Bodel (1994: 41; 2000: 129) further proposes that 1 in 20 (5 per cent) fell into the category of those who “lacked the means to ensure for himself and his dependents even a modest burial,” people who can be equated with the “truly destitute” identified in Chapter 3. Bodel admits that the figure of 5 per cent is “pure guesswork” but is unlikely to overestimate the situation (1994: 41). In light of the fact that no definitive figures are forthcoming from either ancient sources or modern examinations of the subject, the numbers suggested by Bodel represent plausible estimates. In the context of this data, Bodel (2000: 128 – 129) suggests that “if we further postulate an annual mortality rate comparable to that of other preindustrial European urban populations of roughly 40 per thousand ... we must figure that some 30,000 residents died in the city each year, or (on average) more than eighty a day.” On the basis of this, approximately 5 per cent (1,500) of these deaths were those of the “truly destitute”, those without the means to afford proper burial and commemoration, a figure that aligns with parallels from early-modern and modern cities (*ibid.*: 129 – 130). It is also important to note that a large proportion of infants aged 0-1 years (30 percent of total mortality) and young children aged 1-5 years (15 percent of total mortality) would also be included within this figure (A. Chamberlain, pers. comm.).

These estimates reflect urban mortality under ‘normal’ circumstances but during the epidemics that ravaged the urban population they would have risen considerably.<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive record of major epidemics during the Republic was written by Livy who regularly documents the occurrence of plague at Rome and elsewhere. According to Duncan-Jones (1996: 111) these references “occur in Livy’s earlier narrative roughly once every eight years (a mean of 8.25 between 490 and 292 BC). In Livy’s later narrative, presumably because it is much fuller, mentions are twice as frequent (a mean of once every 4.8 years between 212 and 165 BC).” Severe epidemics were evidently a familiar occurrence at Rome, to the extent that “all surviving adults and most adolescents would typically have experienced serious epidemic at least once, and the old several times” (*ibid.*: 109). Some ancient texts report the number of deaths that occurred during specific epidemics, although the accuracy of this information can be questioned. The statement that almost 10,000 people died every day over a period of several weeks during AD 77 (*Chron.* 2096I, p.188 Helm, cited in Bodel, 2000: 129)

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<sup>1</sup> See Littman and Littman (1973), Jackson (1988) and Scheidel (2003) for discussion of the diseases.

is doubtful, especially as it would have quickly decimated the population, but Cassius Dio's claim (72.14.3-4) that the plague of AD 189 was "the worst he ever knew" and sometimes killed 2,000 people per day is perhaps more reliable (Duncan-Jones, 1996: 115). Regardless of their accuracy these figures demonstrate that disease claimed large numbers of lives and it is probable that the majority of these deaths (although it must be stressed, not all) were among the lower classes. Not only were the wealthy able to flee the city for comparatively healthy country estates during times of plague, a luxury denied those whose daily survival was itself precarious, but they also had access to superior nutrition and, to a limited extent, hygiene. Precise figures can not be calculated for the ratio of rich to poor who succumbed to epidemics but it can be surmised that large numbers of the poor were severely affected. Livy (41.21.5 - 8) provides an account of a plague at Rome in 174 BC, which vividly illustrates the results of pestilence:

"The slaves especially died, and along all the roads there were piles of their unburied bodies. Libitina did not suffice even for the funerals of free men. The corpses untouched by dogs and vultures, were consumed by decay; it was generally observed that neither in this nor in the previous year, in spite of the great mortality of cattle and men, was a vulture seen anywhere ..."

Purcell (1987: 32 – 33) has shown that a population of approximately 1,000,000 within Rome and its surrounding area put considerable pressure on space for burial, even under 'normal' circumstances. He estimates an "average burial-space demand" each year of almost 8 tombs in every square kilometre of the suburb (*ibid.*: 32 – 33) and, as Livy shows, this pressure rose dramatically during times of disease. However, not every member of the population could afford to be buried in their own individual tomb. In addition to the approximately 1,500 destitute individuals who died in the city every year (150,000 each century) there were thousands of "ordinary poor" who also required burial.

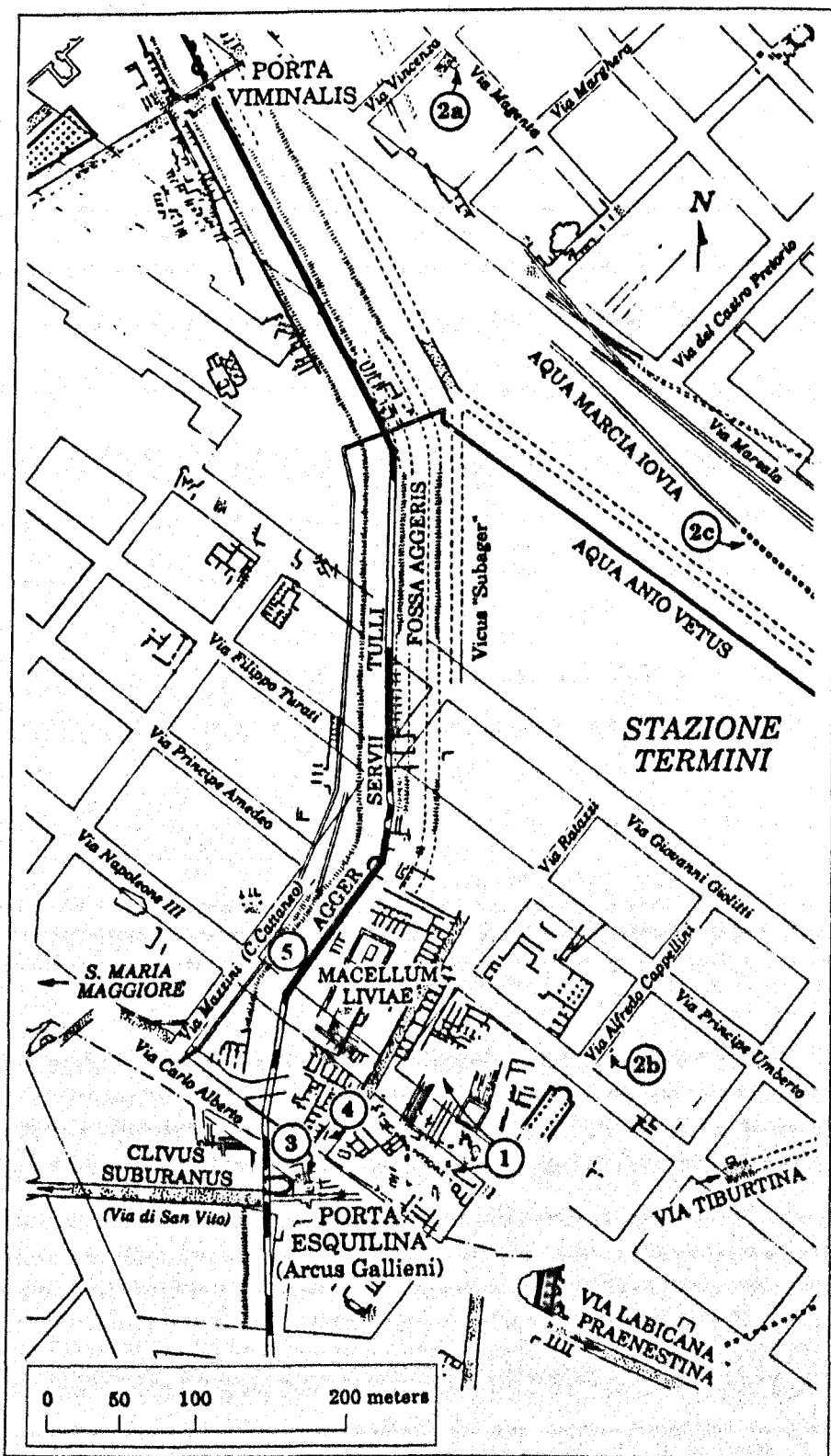


Figure 19. The Campus Esquilinus between the Viminal and Esquiline gates (modified from Bodet, 1994 fig. 1).

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|------------------------------|--|
| 1 Lanciani's <i>puticuli</i> | 3 The <i>sc de pago Montano</i> (CIL I <sup>2</sup> 591)                     |
| 2 The edict of L. Sentius    | 4 The inscription of the <i>collegium tibicinum</i> (CIL I <sup>2</sup> 989) |
| 2a = CIL I <sup>2</sup> 838  | 5 Section of <i>agger</i> filled with corpses                                |
| 2b = CIL I <sup>2</sup> 839  |  |
| 2c = CIL I <sup>2</sup> 2981 |  |



## 4.2 The *puticuli*: the evidence and their traditional interpretation

Modern scholars have suggested that communal graves were created as the primary response to the disposal problems posed by large numbers of “unclaimed” corpses and those of individuals unable to afford proper burial. The evidence on which this proposal is primarily based was provided by excavations in Rome by Rodolfo Lanciani during the late nineteenth century during which he uncovered “many hundred” large pits, subsequently identified as *puticuli*: ancient mass graves.

The *puticuli* were discovered during the construction of the Via Napoleone III between the churches of St. Antonio and St. Eusebio on the Esquiline in the 1870s (Lanciani, 1874: 48) (no. 1, Fig. 19). In his initial report, published in the *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale de Roma* in 1874, Lanciani was reticent to reveal too much information, stating that it was unnecessary to make public the section drawings and photographs of his finds because the excavations continued to bring new discoveries, promising to publish the full details at a later date. Unfortunately, apart from his popular (and frequently reprinted) 1888 publication, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries*,<sup>3</sup> this more detailed publication never appeared. The modern scholar is thus forced to rely on a preliminary report and a popular volume in order to recreate the circumstances surrounding the discovery of these mass graves.

Lanciani (1874: 48) describes the *puticuli* as a series of rectangular cells of various sizes forming an angle of approximately 52° with the axis of the Via Napoleone III, their walls lined with an irregular mass of *cappellaccio* stone. He suggests that the area was surrounded by a “channel of travertine of which we have found one well preserved part that does not seem to be the remains of a wall” (*ibid.*: 51, my translation). Further details concerning the dimensions of the pits and their contents, can be found in his later publication where he states that the vaults were “twelve feet square, thirty deep” and that he had “brought to light and examined about seventy-five” (1891: 64). There then follows his infamous, and much quoted, description of the fill of the pits:

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<sup>3</sup> The 1891 edition is used in the following discussion.

“In many cases the contents of each vault were reduced to a uniform mass of black, viscid, pestilent, unctuous matter; in a few cases the bones could in a measure be singled out and identified. The reader will hardly believe me when I say that men, beasts, bodies and carcasses, and any kind of unmentionable refuse of the town were heaped up in those dens. Fancy what must have been the condition of this hellish district in times of pestilence, when the mouths of the crypts must have been kept wide open the whole day!”

(*ibid.*: 64 – 65)

In a letter to *The Athenaeum* (November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1880) Lanciani describes the discovery, also on the Esquiline, of a *cappellaccio* quarry near the church of St. Bibiana in which had been cut several galleries (Lanciani, 1988: 87). Some square blocks had been cut and were awaiting transportation, others had either been cut on two or three sides or their dimensions marked by grooves (*ibid.*: 87). Lanciani identified this as “the archaic stone quarry from which the materials for the *Puticuli* of Horatian fame, have been taken,” and which was seemingly abandoned “in the first or second century of the Republican era” (*ibid.*: 87).

The application of the term *puticuli* to the Esquiline pits is based largely on a passage from Varro’s *De Lingua Latina* (V.25), composed between 47 and 45 BC, in which he writes:

“From *putei* ‘wells’ comes the town-name, such as Puteoli, because around this place there are many hot and cold spring-waters; unless rather from *putor* ‘stench’, because the place is often *putidus* ‘stinking’ with smells of sulphur and alum. Outside the towns there are *puticuli* ‘little pits’, named from *putei* ‘pits’, because there the people used to be buried in *putei* ‘pits’; unless rather, as Aelius writes, the *puticuli* are so called because the corpses which had been thrown out *putescebant* ‘used to rot’ there, in the public burial-place which is beyond the Esquiline. This place Afranius in a comedy of Roman life calls the *Putiluci* ‘pit lights’, for the reason that from it they look up through *putei* ‘pits’ to the *lumen* ‘light’.”

The designation of an area outside the Esquiline Gate as a public burial ground in which the corpses of lowly members of the community were left to rot in pits is further supported by the words of Horace (*Sat.* 1.8.8 – 16) who describes the area around the Servian *agger* before its reclamation in the late first century BC:

“Hither in other days a slave would pay to have carried on a cheap bier the carcasses of his fellows, cast out from their narrow cells. Here was the common burial-place fixed for pauper folk, for Pantolabus the parasite, and spendthrift Nomentanus. Here a pillar assigned a thousand feet frontage and three hundred of depth, and provided that the graveyard should pass to no heirs. Today one may live on a wholesome Esquiline, and stroll on the sunny Rampart, where of late one sadly looked out on ground ghastly with bleaching bones.”

It was on the basis of these two passages, which imply that the Esquiline was a place in which unclaimed corpses and the bodies of the humble members of society were dumped without ceremony into *putei* ‘pits’, that Lanciani interpreted his discoveries.

Lanciani makes no attempt to establish a precise date for the pits, assigning them only to the Republic. He does, however, refer to the closure of the burial area during the late first century BC at which time (possibly around 35 BC) Maecenas was invited by Augustus to redevelop the space beyond the Esquiline Gate and transform the burial ground into the famous *Horti Maecenati*. Lanciani recovered evidence for this redevelopment which appeared to suggest that the entire area was buried in order to construct the gardens. He describes a deep layer of limestone blocks and bricks with carbon and pottery fragments overlying the *puticuli*, perhaps materials transported to the site from structures that had been destroyed by fire (Lanciani, 1874: 52) (Fig. 20). Above the layer of demolition rubble virgin soil was deposited, again presumably transported from elsewhere, within which he was unable to identify any organic remains or industrial products (*ibid.*: 52). He later described this embankment as “twenty-five feet high and a third of a square mile in area” (Lanciani, 1891: 67). Lanciani also records the recovery of three square travertine *cippi* from the Esquiline each inscribed with the text of the Edict of Sentius stating that the dumping or burning of corpses, carcasses and other rubbish was strictly forbidden in the region (*ibid.*: 66) (no.2 Fig. 19). He (*ibid.*: 67) describes the discovery of one *cippus* in characteristic style:

“On the day of the discovery of the above-mentioned stone, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1884, I was obliged to relieve my gang of workmen from time to time, because the smell from that polluted ground (turned up after a putrefaction of twenty centuries) was absolutely unbearable

even for men so hardened to every kind of hardship as my excavators.”

The discovery of mass graves on the Esquiline did not, however, cease with the *puticuli*. The Servian *agger*, a defensive embankment comprising an external ditch (100 feet wide, 30 feet deep) and a huge bank supported by a wall of large stone blocks with a smaller wall along its interior slope (Lanciani, 1988: 30 – 31) passes through the area of the Esquiline in which Lanciani uncovered the *puticuli*. During extensive development of the region in the years following his initial discoveries, workmen stumbled across another site of mass burial associated with this feature (see no. 5, Fig. 19). Lanciani (1891: 65) describes the events of that day in 1876:

“In building the foundations of a house at the corner of Via Carlo – Alberto and Via Mazzini, the architect, deceived by the presence of a solid bed of tufa on the northern half of the building-ground, began to lay his masonry and fill up the trenches to the uniform depth of twelve feet below the level of the street. All of a sudden the southern portion of the ground gave way, and one half of the area fell through into a chasm thirty feet deep.”

Reporting this in a letter to *The Athenaeum* (November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1877) he identifies the chasm as part of the ditch (*fossa*) of the Servian *agger* which was “used in process of time as a burial-ground for slaves and domestic animals – a supposition confirmed by the discovery of a stratum of fossil bones nineteen feet six inches thick” (Lanciani, 1988: 44). These remains crumbled when brought into contact with the air but he was able to calculate that there were “thousands upon thousands of corpses” deposited within an area measuring 160 feet in length, 100 feet wide and 30 feet deep (Lanciani, 1891: 65 – 66). Allowing a more than adequate average space of twenty cubic feet per corpse he postulated that, “there were not less than twenty-four thousand bodies in a comparatively small space” (*ibid.*: 66). Beyond the proposal that these depositions took place “on the occasion of a stupendous mortality,” (*ibid.*: 65) Lanciani advances no specific theory to explain the presence of such a large quantity of corpses (and rubbish) in this area of the ditch, simply linking them to the wider use of the Esquiline for dumping of corpses and general refuse.

### 4.3 A critical examination of the *puticuli*

Since the publication of these discoveries at the end of the nineteenth century few scholars have seriously questioned the validity of Lanciani's conclusions. The vaults remain commonly interpreted as pits into which "paupers and abandoned slaves – in short, all those who had failed to provide a last resting-place for themselves, or who had no relations, friends, or burial clubs to secure them proper interment, were thrown by thousands and by tens of thousands, to rot in the company of dogs and cattle" (Thomas, 1899: 165). Attempts have been made to examine the use of the *puticuli*<sup>3</sup> but there persists an unquestioning perpetuation of Lanciani's statement that the pits are those described by Varro into which the corpses of all the poor and enslaved members of the urban community were left to rot amongst animal carcasses and rubbish. For example, despite suggesting that "Rodolfo Lanciani's gothic and repulsive account of what he took to be the communal *puticuli* of the Republican cemetery has perhaps led to misrepresentation of the cemetery," Purcell (1987: 34, n. 40) proposes that the area did indeed represent the primary response to the demands of mass mortality (*ibid.*: 37). Despite a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms in place for the disposal of unclaimed corpses, Bodel continues to perpetuate the conclusions of Lanciani, stating that "it is in any case clear that, except in times of plague, when extraordinary and frequently inadequate measures were taken to dispose of diseased corpses in the Tiber and the public sewers (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 10.53.2 – 3; 9.67.2 ...), the bodies of Rome's indigent, wherever found, wound up in the same place" (Bodel, 2000: 131).<sup>4</sup> However, in order to understand the ways in which the various poverty-stricken groups described in Chapter 3 disposed of their dead and responded to the need for commemoration and proper burial, it is essential to critically examine the archaeological and textual evidence for the *puticuli* described by both Lanciani and Varro.

#### (a) *Chronology*

Regular dumping of household waste on the Esquiline is attested by the epigraphically recorded efforts of the state to bring about the cessation of such activities. The Edict

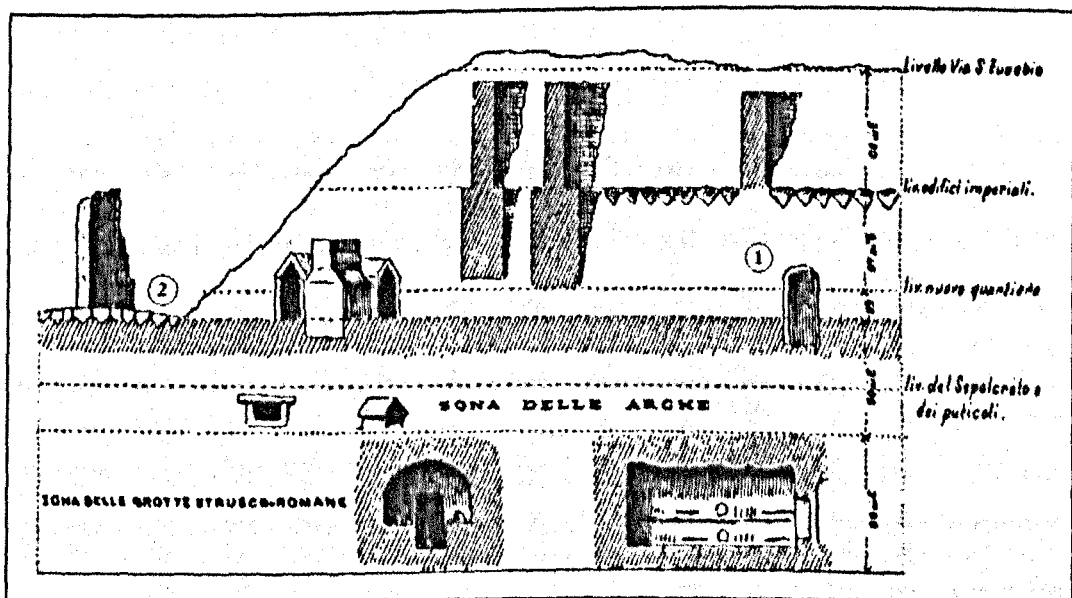
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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bodel (1994 and 2000) who, despite an in-depth examination of the *puticuli*, is primarily concerned with the mechanisms of disposal rather than the legitimacy of Lanciani's claims; and Kyle (1998) who examined the possibility of a link between the pits and arena spectacles.

<sup>4</sup> See also Le Gall (1980-81), Heinzelmann (2001: 180 – 181) and Jongman (2003: 107) for other recent examples.

of Sentius and the *senatus consultum de pago Montano*, both prohibiting the abandoning and burning of refuse and corpses on the Esquiline, have been discussed in their legal context (Chapter 2) but these regulations also elucidate the chronology of the use of the region for burial and/or dumping.

Two travertine *cippi* bearing the edict issued by the praetor L. Sentius during the early first century BC were discovered *in situ* and delineate an area approximately 200 metres from the *agger* in which the dumping of corpses and refuse was forbidden (Wiseman, 1998: 15). These can be linked with another stone discovered during construction of the Stazione Termini in 1942.<sup>5</sup> This *cippus* was no longer *in situ* but Bodel (1994: 42) points out that its estimated weight of almost a ton makes it unlikely that it had been moved far. He interprets these boundary stones as an attempt to regulate dumping activities within a much wider region than the 60m<sup>2</sup> occupied by the *puticuli* (*ibid.*: 42).



**Figure 20.** Schematic section drawn by Lanciani showing the archaeological strata of the Esquiline burial ground. 1. the *senatus consultum de pago Montano* (CIL I<sup>2</sup> 591). 2. the Republican “via consolare” leading from the Esquiline Gate. The level of the *puticuli* is also indicated (after Bodel, 1994, fig. 2).

This information facilitates the establishment of a chronology for the exploitation of the region for disposal during the later Republic. Examining Lanciani’s limited

<sup>5</sup> Edict of Sentius: CIL I<sup>2</sup> 838, 839, 2981.

stratigraphic records, Bodel (*ibid.*: 45 – 47) concludes that the *puticuli* were sealed by the charred debris and rubble during the pre-Augustan period *before* reclamation of the region by Maecenas. He suggests that the *cippi* bearing the Edict of Sentius (including one recovered only 120 metres from the *puticuli*) were contemporary with this levelling and reflect an attempt to control the use of the area (*ibid.*: 45 – 47). He proposes that this pre-Augustan levelling and regulation was directly associated with the construction of a new “*via consolare*” which emerged from the Esquiline Gate and can be seen in the section drawn by Lanciani (*ibid.*: 45 – 47) (Fig. 20). The disposal ground of the Esquiline therefore appears to have been closed *before* Maecenas took action to transform the area. This is supported further by the fact that the large travertine block, inscribed on both sides with the text of the *senatus consultum de pago Montano* forbidding the dumping of refuse but, significantly, not corpses, was embedded *in situ* in the pre-Augustan layer (see Fig. 20).<sup>6</sup> Bodel (*ibid.*: 47 – 49) interprets this as evidence for successful regulation of burial but continued widespread use of the area for dumping and burning refuse. He connects the *senatus consultum* with the *libitinarii* at whose headquarters he postulates the *cippus* may have been posted (*ibid.*: 49). However, the *senatus consultum* makes no reference to burial or corpses, which would be expected if it was directly linked with the activities of the *libitinarii* whose primary function was to dispose of the dead. It is possible, therefore, that the activities of the *libitinarii* also extended to the disposal of rubbish (see below).

Despite this, Bodel’s argument for the chronology of the Esquiline is convincing. Although the *puticuli* may have been closed prior to Maecenas assuming control of the area, the region probably continued to be used for the disposal of refuse and therefore required further regulation. That the area employed in this capacity was relatively large is indicated by the fact that the measures taken to prevent dumping encompassed an area much wider than that containing the *puticuli*. The *Horti Maecenati* have been definitively located to the south of the Esquiline Gate, between the *Via Labicana-Praenestina* and the eastern slope of the *Mons Oppius* (Wiseman, 1998: 13, citing Häuber) and although not directly associated with the area of the *puticuli* this was perhaps an area in which general disposal had continued and consequently required further regulation by Maecenas (Fig. 21).

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<sup>6</sup> *Senatus consultum de pago Montano*: CIL 1<sup>2</sup> 591.

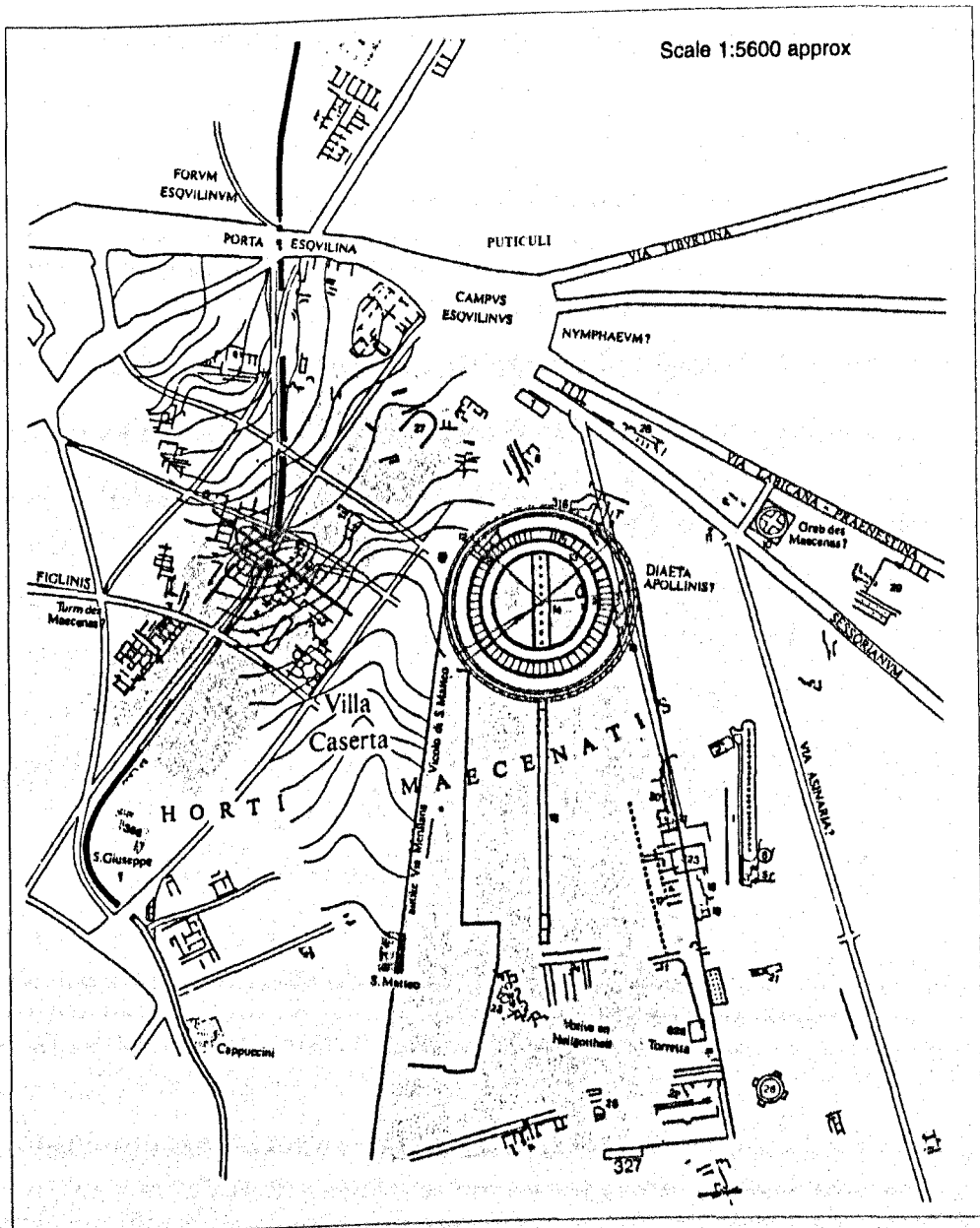


Figure 21. Map of the Esquiline showing the area believed to contain the Gardens of Maecenas (after Purcell, 1996 fig. 46).

(b) *Topography*

The text of Horace's *Satire* 1.8 points strongly towards the presence of a legally and religiously recognised cemetery in the vicinity of the Esquiline Gate and the Servian *agger*. The first half of the *Satire* is concerned with the area around the *agger*, both before and after its transformation by Maecenas. Allowance must be made for extensive poetic license, but this passage permits several observations about the region. Firstly, Horace describes the area as "the common *burial-place* fixed for pauper folk" and states that "the *graveyard* should pass to no heirs" (my italics). His use of the past



tense indicates that burial no longer occurred there, and importantly he specifically refers to the area as a *graveyard*, not a rubbish dump. The image of slaves carrying their fellows to the site for burial also implies the existence of a recognised burial site, further supported by the statement that “a slave would *pay* to have carried on a cheap bier the carcasses of his dead fellows” (my italics). If the intention was to unceremoniously dump the corpse in a pit, incurring the expense, however small, of *paying* for a bier is difficult to understand. Horace also puts into verse the information commonly found in funerary inscriptions concerning the size of the burial plot and whether or not it was to pass to subsequent generations, perhaps indicating that this area was a graveyard in which the poor strove for recognition through modest commemorative activities and attempted to emulate the traditions of the wealthy. His description of “ground ghastly with bleaching bones” implies that bones were strewn over a wide area, perhaps the result of disturbed shallow graves which can be readily understood in the context of a graveyard used predominantly by the poor who dug graves themselves rather than incur the expense of hiring a professional *fossor*. This is further supported by the second half of the *Satire* in which the poet describes witches digging easily into the earth and disturbing the souls buried within it. The absence of any reference to *puticuli* in the area during previous years is also particularly striking given that Horace intended to praise the actions of his friend Maecenas in turning a pestilential region into a wholesome park. That he should ignore evidence which could further promote the achievements of Maecenas is curious. Finally, Horace states that, “You might see serpents and hell-hounds roaming about, and the blushing Moon, that she might not witness such deeds, hiding behind the tall tombs” (*Sat.* 1.8.34 – 36), again implying the existence of an official cemetery in the vicinity, the “tall tombs” indicating that it was of significant size and that people of note (or at least wealth) were laid to rest in substantial tombs within it.

Archaeological evidence reinforces this interpretation of the area outside the *Porta Esquilina*. The Esquiline was used for burial for much of its history, beginning with the simple trench or *fossa* graves of the very early Republic (Davies, 1977: 16). Chamber tombs dating to the fourth century BC have also been located in the region, in addition to a “transitional type of tomb” taking the form of an open vault constructed with blocks of tufa laid in courses (*ibid.*: 16). Furthermore, Cicero informs us that, like the *Campus Martius*, the *Campus Esquilinus* was a favoured location for the burial of

notable members of the community who were awarded an honorary monument or place of burial (Cicero, *Philippics* 9.17). Use of the Esquiline as a cemetery also continued subsequent to the reclamation of a section of it by Maecenas despite Bodel's proposal (1994: 47 – 49) that such activities had ceased by this time. Lanciani (1891: 102 – 103) reports the discovery of several *columbaria* which were not buried until "the second century of the Christian era." The archaeological evidence for both substantial and modest tombs in the vicinity of the Esquiline Gate, in conjunction with Horace's description of "tall tombs" and the pauper's "graveyard" strongly indicates that this region comprised a vast cemetery. Lanciani (1874: 46 and 1891: 64) suggests the cemetery was divided into two separate areas, accommodating graves of differing status in each, but it is significant that the *puticuli* were located within a *graveyard* rather than part of a rubbish dump. It is, of course, possible that sectors of the cemetery were later converted into rubbish dumps, but originally the *puticuli* existed within a cemetery.

These observations are particularly significant for understanding the context of the *puticuli*. The pits should legally have been designated a *locus religiosus* if located in a graveyard. However, as noted in Chapter 2, Varro (*LL*. V.25) refers to them as a "*locus publicus*", implying that deposition within the pits did not satisfy religious burial requirements. That this was ignored by the local community who perhaps treated the burial site as if it were a *locus religiosus* regardless of its official status has been discussed above. The possibility that Lanciani's *puticuli* represented a specific *locus publicus* situated within the *locus religiosus* of a wider cemetery also has significant implications for their interpretation. If this was the case, and the mass graves were not officially recognised burial sites, it lends considerable support to the theory (discussed further below) that they were originally constructed for another function before being appropriated for disposal purposes once they had gone out of use or when demand for burial-space rose dramatically. Furthermore, did the act of burial in a pit constitute proper religious burial? Discarding a body, even into a pit, did not fulfil the requirements of religious burial and the possibility that the *puticuli* remained open for a considerable length of time also suggests that the corpses were denied proper burial. It is possible that each corpse was sprinkled with earth when deposited in order to ensure that the shade did not become troublesome, and the pits

may have been covered lightly with soil at regular intervals.<sup>7</sup> That this probably constituted only a symbolic covering is suggested by the fact that Lanciani did not observe layers of bodies separated by substantial deposits of soil which are unlikely to have been disturbed (especially at depth) and should therefore be archaeologically visible.<sup>8</sup>

(c) *Lanciani's evidence*

When Lanciani's account is examined it becomes apparent that his conclusions are based on relatively limited evidence. He briefly describes the form of the pits, their structure and location, before providing some basic details concerning their deposits. In addition, he states that there were "many hundred *puticuli*" but he only "brought to light and examined about seventy-five" (Lanciani, 1891: 64). It is therefore pure speculation that there were "many hundred" with Lanciani simply assuming that more existed in the surrounding area. There may have been originally more than the 75 pits that Lanciani excavated, especially as he identified the travertine channel that surrounded the *puticuli* on one side only, although there is no positive archaeological evidence for these. This figure of several hundred, however, has been perpetuated in modern discussions. It is also important to recognise that it is highly unlikely, given the logistical demands of removing approximately 250-500 tons of fill from each pit, that he fully excavated all 75. It is probable that one, or possibly a few, of the pits was emptied completely with the upper levels of the others uncovered in order to confirm that they were similar. His conclusions were therefore probably extrapolated from evidence derived from a handful of the pits and should therefore not be considered entirely reliable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This appears to have occurred in medieval Paris where mass graves had "a few handfuls of dirt thrown on top" (Ariès (1981[1977]: 56).

<sup>8</sup> It is also significant that the *puticuli* appear to have offered no obvious opportunity for permanent commemoration – it was impossible to mark the location of an individual burial within a mass grave and there is no evidence for the presence of a communal monument either for each individual pit or the area as a whole. This does not align with the importance that memory preservation and commemoration held in the minds of all members of society (described in Chapter 1), and perhaps indicates that the *puticuli* were used predominantly by city authorities, concerned about disposal rather than commemoration, for the burial of the truly destitute (see below). It is also possible that the memory of these individuals was perpetuated by their family and friends in other ways (see Chapters 5 and 6 for a discussion of alternative commemorative acts amongst the lower classes).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting here that some secondary descriptions of the *puticuli* by twentieth century scholars also appear to include additional information not contained within Lanciani's original reports. For example, Davies (1977: 17) states that the pits contained "the remains of burned and unburned bodies together with numerous ordinary vases and lamps." Lanciani records pottery finds from the surrounding region but *not* from within the pits themselves and does not comment upon the state of the bodies other



both *cappellaccio* (BCAR 2 (1874) 48; id., *The ruins and excavations of ancient Rome* (1897) 33) and *sperone* (BCAR 3 (1875) 43) tufa" (*ibid.*: 108 – 109, n. 163). Bodel also finds it perplexing that only a handful of *puticuli* are marked in a small area on Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae* (Fig. 22) and yet he claimed to have excavated at least 75. Furthermore, the location Lanciani identified as the section of the ditch of the *agger* filled with corpses ("the corner of Via Carlo-Alberto and Via Mazzini" (1891: 65)) can be seen on the *Forma Urbis Romae* to be *inside* the rampart and *not* part of the ditch (see no. 2, Fig. 22). This may be due to a misrepresentation of the course of the *agger* on the map but again highlights the questionable nature of the evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Lanciani's description of the *puticuli* and his conclusions regarding their identification can also be demonstrated to be heavily reliant on ancient texts. It is entirely on the basis of Varro's (*LL. V.25*) statement that "Outside the towns there are *puticuli* 'little pits', named from *putei* 'pits', because there the people used to be buried in *putei* 'pits'," that Lanciani adopts the term *puticuli* for his discoveries. That the excavated vaults were not "little pits" but very deep and substantial structures appears to have been overlooked. Similarly, Lanciani describes the area in which the pits were located as follows: "one thousand feet long, and three hundred deep" (Lanciani, 1891: 64), which appears to have been derived directly from Horace's *Satire* (1.8) in which he describes a pillar within the pauper burial-ground which "assigned a thousand feet frontage and three hundred of depth" (*Sat.* 1.8.12). Horace's information may be correct, but Lanciani, who excavated only a limited area, provides no evidence to suggest that these dimensions were archaeologically attested.

It is also difficult, on the basis of Lanciani's evidence, to assign a specific date to the features he describes. As noted above, the presence of a *cippus* bearing the *senatus consultum de pago Montano* in the "pre-Augustan" levelling debris of the area indicates that they were closed prior to the rule of Augustus. However, beyond the suggestion that the *puticuli* were used predominantly during the third and second centuries BC (Bodel, 1994: 50) no precise date has been proposed for their construction. Lanciani (1874: 49) observed that the pits were superimposed upon an earlier necropolis assigned to the period when Rome "was still a conglomeration of

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<sup>10</sup> The dimensions of the chasm strongly suggest that this discovery was associated with the *agger* and it must thus be assumed that Lanciani was mistaken in identifying the location.

small villages” (my translation). The Esquiline pits have therefore been dated only loosely to “the Republic”. Lanciani identified the quarry near St. Bibiana as the source of the stone lining of the *puticuli* and claimed that it was abandoned in the “first or second century of the Republican era, because the pottery found within the galleries is of a primitive workmanship, and contemporary with the pottery found within the early tombs of the Esquiline” (Lanciani, 1988: 87). If his interpretation is correct, then the vaults originally must have been dug, or at least lined, during the early centuries of the Republic. Lanciani probably linked the quarry with the *puticuli* on the basis of their location. However, the stone extracted from the quarry could have been employed elsewhere in the city without incurring serious transportation difficulties and therefore need not be directly associated with the *puticuli*. Moreover, Lanciani describes the pits as constructed with “an irregular mass of stone” (Lanciani, 1874: 48, my translation) rather than the regular-sized blocks extracted from the quarry. It is therefore not possible to assign the pits to a specific period on the basis of the available archaeological evidence.

(d) Varro, *De Lingua Latina* V.25

An examination of the ancient textual sources that refer to the *puticuli* sheds further light on their date. Horace (*Sat.* 1.8) informs us that by the time in which he was writing the vicinity of the Esquiline Gate was no longer used for burial. His silence regarding the *puticuli* may indicate that their existence had faded from public memory and they had not been in use long enough to become established as a specific characteristic of the area. Varro (*L.L.* V. 25) also uses the past tense to describe the *puticuli* and, as Richardson (1992: 323) points out, he appears unfamiliar with this type of burial, perhaps confusing them with the place of public execution outside the Porta Esquilina. Varro states that, “there the people used to be buried in *putei* ‘pits’,” and “the *puticuli* are so called because the corpses which had been thrown out *putescebant* ‘used to rot’ there, in the public burial-place which is beyond the Esquiline” (*L.L.* V. 25). The text suggests that the *puticuli* had been out of use for long enough for their origin and the manner in which they were used to become obscure. Unfortunately neither text provides direct evidence for the period in which the *puticuli* were actively used. Bodel (1994: 107, n. 154) points out, however, that “Varro’s reference to his master Aelius Stilo and to the playwright Afranius shows that the *puticuli* at Rome were in use already during the second century BC.” At the present

time it is not possible to assign a more precise date to these features and it can only be assumed that they were in use during the third and perhaps the second century BC, although they may have originated earlier.

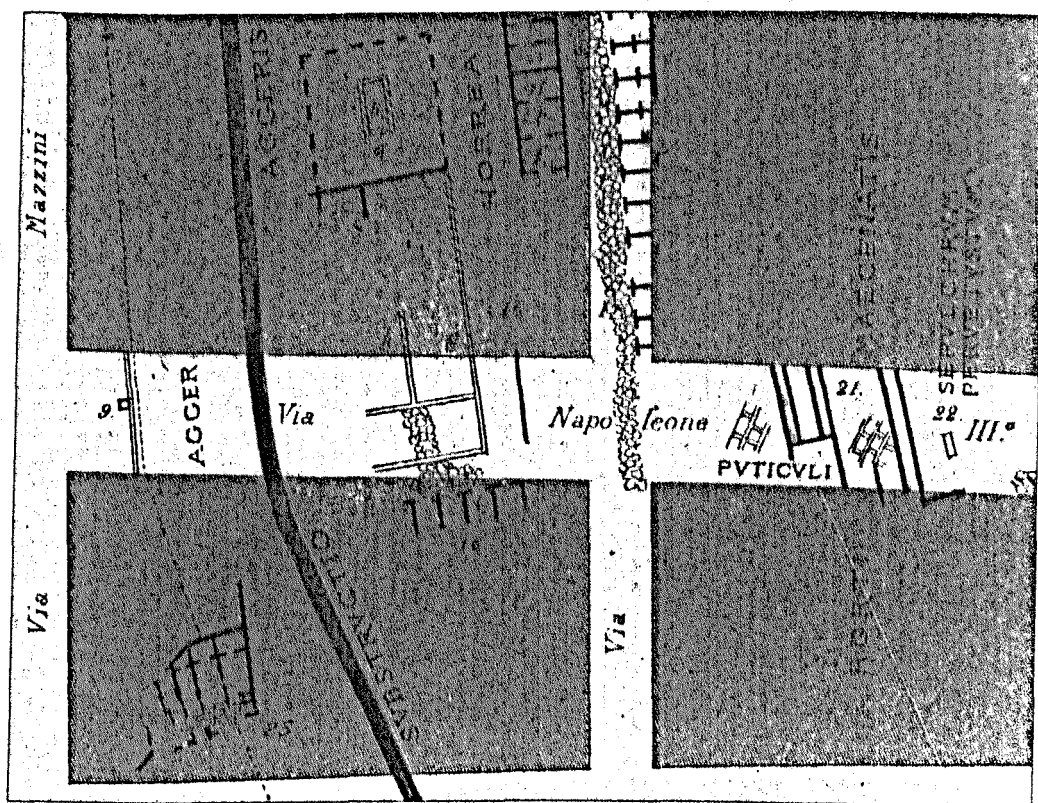
(e) *Structure and dimensions*

The dimensions recorded by Lanciani are particularly significant. Measuring approximately 12 feet square and dug to a depth of 30 feet, the pits represent a considerable outlay of labour and investment, a fact that sits uneasily with their interpretation as the place where the corpses of unwanted slaves and the poor were unceremoniously dumped. The examination of the economic resources available to the lower classes outlined in Chapter 3, suggests that they probably took personal responsibility for the burial of dead friends and family. It is highly unlikely that the poor could afford, or were concerned enough about long-term issues of disposal, to dig vast pits or line them with stone. If those dumped in the pits were to be left to rot, it is curious that those responsible should be sufficiently concerned to dig substantial, regular and stone-lined pits. The evidence reported by Lanciani therefore strongly suggests that the pits were constructed by an authority with access to the economic resources and manpower required for such an immense undertaking. Each pit had a capacity of approximately 4,320 cubic feet and Lanciani claims to have identified at least 75 (324,000 cubic feet in total), although the maximum capacity may have been greater if, as he suggests, there were many more. Such an undertaking can not possibly have been attempted by poverty stricken members of the community. Furthermore, the description provided by Lanciani, and the map he produced to accompany his initial report (Fig. 23), indicate that many of the *puticuli* had common walls, which implies that they were dug contemporaneously.<sup>11</sup> This is emphasised further by the “travertine channel” which appears to delimit the area of the *puticuli* and implies that they were designed and built as a single unit. The poor members of society were incapable of organising or affording construction on such a scale. In addition, permission for such a project would have been required and funds were needed to purchase the land in which the pits were to be dug. Suburban land at Rome

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<sup>11</sup> This suggestion is not fully supported by the depiction of the *puticuli* on Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae* (see Fig. 22), but both maps show only a handful of the reported 75 pits. This is perhaps another example of his inconsistent reporting.

was very expensive (see Champlin, 1982), and Purcell (1987: 38) cites the example of a slave who paid 120 HS for a plot just  $1\frac{1}{2}$  *pedes* square.



**Figure 23.** Section of the map accompanying Lanciani's first publication on the *puticuli* showing the location of the pits and their adjoining walls (Lanciani, 1874).

That the vaults were probably dug contemporaneously is also very significant. Given their use, one would expect the pits to have been created on an *ad hoc* basis as the need arose. That this was not the case reflects a remarkable example of forward planning on the part of the poor and may therefore be better understood in the context of official state involvement. It is possible that the senate, recognising the need for organised disposal facilities to deal with the remains of the indigent, ordered the construction of the pits. Their location on the Esquiline may have been dictated by its long established history as a graveyard, continued use of the area by the poorer classes for burial and its proximity to the slums of the Subura where the majority of those who required such disposal resided. Furthermore, Patterson (2000b: 93) has observed how noxious industries and "other activities considered hazardous or detrimental to the well-being of the citizens" were confined to the suburbs. State involvement may also explain the stone-lining of the pits. Bodel (1994: 103, n.119) observes that "Livy



39.44.5 mentions the lining with stone of public cesspits (rather than fountain basins, as commonly supposed) by Cato during his censorship in 184.” The reasons for this are not stated. Unless the stones were well mortared or covered with impervious cement or plaster the lining would not have effectively prevented the leakage of fluids, especially given the irregularity of the lining and the use of porous tufa. Indeed, Lanciani (1874: 48) describes the soil surrounding the pits as blackened by the decomposition of the organic material originally deposited within them. It is more likely that the stone was intended to provide greater structural stability. The same may have been true for the *puticuli*, with their considerable depth necessitating some form of structure designed to prevent their collapse.

The extant sources are silent on the matter of state involvement, but Bodel (1994 and 2000) has observed the direct involvement of the state in wider funerary activities, particularly the conduct of undertakers. He points to the *demarchoi* of fourth century Athens, who were responsible for the burial of abandoned corpses, as a possible model for the Roman system, suggesting that “at Rome the removal of dead bodies from city streets was considered a part of the *cura urbis*, a charge that normally fell to the *aediles*” (Bodel, 2000: 130).<sup>12</sup> Further evidence for state involvement in funerary activities is provided by a *lex locationis* from Puteoli in which the duties of public undertakers are described alongside the cost of their services and restrictions concerning their movement.<sup>13</sup> Kyle (1998: 163) summarises part of the text:

“A prohibition against abandoning corpses is to be enforced with a fine of 60 HS per corpse (I, 29 – II, 2). The contracting undertaker (*manceps*) is to keep a staff of thirty-two workers, who are to be of sound body and free of marks (*neve stigmat(ibus) inscrip(tus)*). Forbidden to reside within a certain distance of town, the workers may enter the city only on official business (II, 3 – 4) and they must wear a special cap in town ....”

The Puteolan text is believed to reflect common practice at Rome and, as noted above, the Grove of Libitina where the undertakers were probably based, has been tentatively identified on the *Campus Esquilinus*. Wiseman (1998: 13 – 15) concurs with Bodel’s

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<sup>12</sup> Nero encountered an abandoned corpse as he attempted to escape from Rome (Suetonius, *Nero* 48) and a stray dog deposited a human hand at the feet of Vespasian (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 5), perhaps indicating that the abandoning of human remains was a common problem in the city.

<sup>13</sup> *AE* 1971, no.88.

conclusions regarding the location of the headquarters, pointing out that these were “close to those of the fluteplayers (*tibicines*), whose guild is also identified by the find-spot of a late-republican inscription ... fluteplayers, as Ovid pointed out, were much in demand at funerals” (*ibid.*: 13 – 15; Ovid, *Fasti*, VI. 660, 663) (no. 4, Fig. 19). Bodel (2000: 130 – 131) also suggests that the passage instructing undertakers to remove the bodies of executed criminals, suicides by hanging and slaves to a place on the outskirts of the city, implies the existence of a mass grave or disposal ground that can perhaps be equated with the *puticuli* of Rome. Finally, it is possible that an official death register was kept at the Grove of Libitina. Originally instituted by King Servius Tullius, the register may have persisted into later periods<sup>14</sup> and indicates further state interest in funerary and disposal issues, implying that the senate was aware of the problems posed by mass death and the demands consequently placed on burial space. Their response may have been to construct large pits on the Esquiline that were controlled by the state-employed *libitinarii* whose headquarters were nearby.

The regularity with which the *puticuli* are dug and lined with stone remains curious, despite the possibility of the official involvement of the senate. Large unlined holes of irregular size could have been dug at minimal expense (both financial and in terms of time and labour) and would have sufficed for unceremonious dumping activities. It is unlikely that the urban authorities were sufficiently concerned about the fate of the corpses to expend resources on providing stone-lined pits in which they could be dumped. It is possible that the pits were dug for some other purpose and were appropriated for burial either once they had gone out of use or during a period of particularly high mortality. The structure of the pits, the archaeology of the region, and ancient textual sources do not, however, provide an explanation for their original function. Their dimensions and regularity, in conjunction with the tufa lining of their interior, possibly indicates an industrial function.<sup>15</sup> Given Livy's reference to the

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<sup>14</sup> Suetonius' statement (*Nero*, 39.1) that during a plague “thirty thousand deaths came into Libitina's account” has been taken as evidence for the continued use of a death register in the city, as have other scattered references in ancient texts (Bodel, 1994: 14).

<sup>15</sup> It is possible that the pits were involved in the water supply system, perhaps acting as large reservoirs, although there is no evidence attesting the presence of such structures on the outskirts of the city during the Republican period and the pits were not sealed. It is also possible that they functioned in a storage capacity, perhaps for grain. The pits may also have been used for the storage of snow, used by wealthy members of society to cool their drinks. Their remarkable depth (30 feet) would have helped to preserve the snow in its frozen state. Similar pits, dug on the outskirts of Rome during the eighteenth century, reached a depth of about 50 feet. Although this interpretation may initially appear rather

lining of public cesspits during the early second century BC, it is also possible that they acted in a similar capacity and may provide an explanation for the “travertine channel” which was perhaps used for draining the pits or controlling overflow. The blackening of the surrounding soil may have occurred as a result of the leaking and decomposition of the refuse deposited within them. It is, however, unlikely that cesspits were dug on a hill because of the need for gravity to aid flow into them. The lining of the cesspits may have also extended to general rubbish pits, into which a variety of refuse, excrement and household waste was thrown. Patterson (2000b: 93) points out that the *aediles* were responsible for the cleanliness of city streets and “made arrangements for the removal of all kinds of rubbish from the urban centre to the periphery; special privileges were in force to allow wagons carrying *stercus* (whether this means specifically ‘excrement’ or ‘refuse’ in a more general sense is debated) to circulate within the city during the hours of daylight (*Tabula Heracleensis* 66 – 7).” He proposes that this rubbish was deposited on the outskirts of the city where facilities may have been built to accommodate vast amounts of refuse. The presence of large rubbish pits in the centre of a cemetery is difficult to explain however, unless the *libitinarii* were also involved in general disposal activities.

Despite the unquestioning acceptance by modern scholars of the mixture of general rubbish, animal cadavers and human corpses in the context of the burial of the poor, it does not naturally follow that rubbish pits were also mass graves. The corpses of beggars who died on the streets were possibly thrown into these pits (the removal of their bodies being, presumably, part of the *aediles* responsibilities) but that they formed the last resting-place for *all* the lower classes is unlikely. The *aediles* were not responsible for the disposal of all corpses, only those abandoned on the streets.

#### (f) *Contents*

An examination of the contents of the *puticuli* and the manner in which they were filled is also essential. In his initial report Lanciani writes that “the base of the cells or pits are filled with bones, ashes and organic detritus, the decomposition of which has

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fanciful, the structure and depth of the pits strongly aligns with the type of structure that would have been used for this purpose. The *puticuli* were (according to Lanciani) open to the skies and Plutarch (*Symposium* VI, *Quaest.* 6) describes how the open snow pits were covered only by straw and coarse cloth.

blackened the surrounding soil” (1874: 48, my translation). In his later publication he provides the following description:

“In many cases the contents of each vault were reduced to a uniform mass of black, viscid, pestilent, unctuous matter; in a few cases the bones could in a measure be singled out and identified. The reader will hardly believe me when I say that men, beasts, bodies and carcasses, and any kind of unmentionable refuse of the town were heaped up in those dens.”

(Lanciani, 1891: 64 – 65)

It is only the ditch of the *agger* which Lanciani describes as “filled up with thousands upon thousands of corpses” (*ibid.*: 66), and his descriptions of the *puticuli* provide relatively little information regarding their deposits, which he appears not to have examined in detail. The lack of comprehensive information concerning the contents of the pits can be partly explained by the period in which the excavations occurred, but may also indicate the presence of few human corpses. Lanciani refers to identifiable “corpses” when writing of the *agger*, leaving little doubt about the use of the ditch as a communal grave. However, he seems unable to identify individual corpses within the *puticuli* and it is only as a result of his comparison of the pits with those referred to by Varro which leads him to the conclusion that they were communal graves. Lanciani states that only “in a few cases” could the bones be “singled out and identified.” This may indicate poor preservation or that there were few human corpses and the pits were largely filled with other refuse. This, of course, cannot be verified on the basis of the available evidence, but in light of their possible use (either originally or consistently) as rubbish pits it is conceivable that there were few corpses within the *puticuli* deposits. Lanciani may also have been unable to distinguish between human and animal bones and it is therefore difficult to establish the proportion of human bones present. Only a detailed examination of the contents using modern scientific techniques can provide any insight into the actual quantity of human remains in relation to animal bones and other refuse.<sup>16</sup>

The capacity of the *puticuli* and the manner in which they were filled also sheds light on their use. Bodel (2000) has examined the implications of their capacity for the

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<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately it is not known whether Lanciani kept the contents of the pits or re-buried them. If any samples were retained their whereabouts is uncertain.

number of “burials” that could be made in them (assuming they were filled predominantly with human corpses) and has drawn parallels between similar communal graves from later periods (Table 8). Allowing 7.5 – 8 cubic feet per corpse, Bodel postulates that Lanciani’s *puticuli* could each have contained 540 - 830 bodies, although this number may have been reduced by the presence of other refuse and animal carcasses (*ibid.*: 132). He concludes that under normal circumstances the pits “remained open for several weeks or even months before being filled to capacity” (*ibid.*: 132).

<i>Dimensions (feet)</i>	<i>Capacity (cubic feet)</i>	<i>Bodies</i>	<i>Cubic feet per corpse</i>	<i>Location (and date)</i>
15×40×20	12,000 [8,400]	1,114	[7.5]	London (1665)
15×18×30	8,100	1,200 – 1,500	[5.4 – 6.75!]	Paris
15×18×20	5,400	600 – 700	[7.7 – 9.0]	Paris, Les Innocents (1763)
15×15×18	4,050	500	[8.1]	Paris, Rue de Bagneux (1746)
12×12×30	4,320	[540 – 575]	(7.5 – 8)	Rome, Lanciani’s <i>puticuli</i>
13×16× (30)	6,240	[780 – 830]	(7.5 – 8)	Rome, Lanciani’s <i>puticuli</i>

**Table 8.** Size and capacity of mass burial pits in London, Paris and ancient Rome (Figures in square brackets are deduced; those in parentheses are hypothetical) (after Bodel, 2000: 132, Table 10.1)

On the basis of this, and the figures cited above for urban mortality, it is possible to calculate approximately how long the pits remained open. If it is assumed that four (5 percent) of the approximate eighty deaths per day in the city were those of the indigent, this would have resulted in approximately 1,500 corpses requiring public disposal each year.<sup>17</sup> Bodel (2000: 132) distinguishes between two sizes of *puticuli*

<sup>17</sup> Although infants (30 percent of total mortality) may not always have received normative burial rites until they reached a certain age this would have had little effect on the issues and figures discussed here. Firstly, it has been established that disposal in the *puticuli* did not constitute proper religious burial and

(12×12×30 feet and 13×16×30 feet) with a capacity of 4,320 and 6,240 cubic feet respectively. If 4 corpses were deposited per day it would take approximately 5 to 7.5 months to fill one pit (depending on its size), although this would again be affected by the amount of other refuse deposited.<sup>18</sup>

It is also possible to calculate approximately how long the pits as a whole were in use on the basis of the total number of corpses *theoretically* capable of being held within them. Lanciani claimed to have excavated 75 pits, each capable of holding between 540 and 830 corpses, leading to a maximum of 40,500 - 62,250 corpses. Assuming these were deposited under normal circumstances at an average of 4 per day, it would have taken 30 - 46 years to fill 75 pits (if only human corpses were deposited). These numbers are only approximate and would have been significantly affected by other factors, including the use of the *puticuli* for the disposal of other rubbish and animal carcasses.<sup>19</sup> However, they provide an indication of the relative speed with which the 75 pits uncovered by Lanciani were filled, given the fact that they are believed to have been in use for centuries. The calculations assume that only the destitute were deposited within the pits but they would have been filled even more rapidly if *all* lower class burials were made in this way.

These calculations imply that the pits were a relatively short-lived response to the burial demands of the city and at least three, if not four, times as many would have been required in order to have been in use for two centuries as Bodel suggested (1994: 50). Bodel (*ibid.*: 50) proposes that the *puticuli* were filled rapidly and that the authorities were compelled to use a section of the nearby ditch of the Servian *agger* as an "overflow" burial space. Similar calculations to those outlined above can be made for this feature. Lanciani (1891: 66) estimates that there were 24,000 corpses within this space but his allowance of 20 cubic feet per corpse is, as he himself admits, "more than sufficient." Bodel (2000: 150, n.3) suggests a figure closer to 60,000 - 64,000

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therefore there was no reason to exclude infants from them. Furthermore, if the corpses of the destitute were dumped alongside the general refuse of the city the responsible authorities are unlikely to have made a distinction between the body of an adult and that of a child which both required disposal.

<sup>18</sup> Assuming 7.5 - 8 cubic feet per corpse the calculations for this are as follows:

12×12×30 = 540 - 575 bodies ÷ 4 corpses per day = 135 - 144 days (approx 5 months) to fill.

13×16×30 = 780 - 830 bodies ÷ 4 corpses per day = 195 - 208 days (approx 7 - 7.5 months) to fill.

<sup>19</sup> If the bodies were buried in coffins the capacity of the pits would have been considerably reduced.

However, the use of coffins seems unlikely given the fact that the bodies were discarded and not buried and would have represented an additional and unnecessary expense.

corpses for an area with a maximum capacity of 480,000 cubic feet. If the ditch was filled at the same rate as the pits it would have taken approximately 45 – 48 years to fill the ditch to capacity (the approximate equivalent of 75 individual pits). The ditch may not, of course, have been filled to capacity but notwithstanding this possibility and the presence of other refuse, 48 years represents a considerable length of time for a single mass grave to have been left open. Bodel (2000: 132) observes that even a few weeks or months would have been sufficient for putrefaction to have set in and “the unpleasant symptoms of decay (stench and putrid air) would have emanated into the environs.” In addition, with the involvement of the *aediles*, state funds and the official control of the site implied by the structure of the pits it would have been possible to have dug new pits once the existing ones reached their limits. This suggests not only that the ditch was filled under abnormal circumstances but also that the *puticuli* do not represent the normal method of disposal for the lowly members of society. It is unlikely that the “ordinary poor”, even if they were unable to afford a substantial funerary monument, would have found their way into these pits if they had family and friends to take care of their remains. The “four corpses per day” represent the “truly destitute” and thus the minority.

(g) *The real ‘puticuli’?*

Before examining explanations for the function of the *puticuli*, it is important to consider strong evidence to suggest that the pits discovered by Lanciani are not *puticuli* at all. Lanciani himself provides the most convincing evidence for this proposal. In a letter to *The Athenaeum* (November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1877) he reports the discovery of a “new type of tomb” (Lanciani, 1988: 44) and provides the following details:

“Their position *within* the walls of Servius Tullius testifies of their extreme antiquity. They are built in the shape of a well, 0.8m in diameter, and from ten to twenty feet deep. The ‘cappellaccio’ through which they are sunk being very soft and porous, the shaft is coated with slabs of Gabinian stone. This was done before the construction of the walls by Servius Tullius, when the ground surface of the ground was level with the mouth of the pits. Afterwards, when the ground was raised the shafts were prolonged also by the addition of colossal cylinders of terracotta, nearly three feet in diameter, on which the names of the deceased is scratched with a sharp point. Many ex-votos or funeral offerings were picked up in the neighbourhood of the wells, some in the shape of an ear, some like half-pyramids, all bearing archaic inscriptions.”

The editor of his letters, Anthony Cubberley, suggests that these vaults might be “more appropriately called *puticuli* than those which generally go under that name” (*ibid.*: 45, n. 7). This conclusion is also reached by Coarelli (cited in Bodel, 1994: 41) who compares the wells of the Esquiline with similar structures at Fregellae. According to Varro (*L.L.* V.25) the term *puticuli* came from *putei* ‘wells’ or ‘pits’; a derivation that aligns more closely with the early graves described as “wells”. The location of the wells within the Servian wall dates them to a period prior to the construction of the embankment in the fourth century BC; a fact that again aligns with Varro’s use of the past tense and the lack of detailed understanding of their function and origin. Bodel (1994: 41) agrees with the parallels drawn between the wells of the Esquiline, Fregellae and the text of Varro but points out that these appear to have “contained only individual burials (if any) and one of which (from the Esquiline) was capped by an inscribed terracotta disc, [and] are not easily reconciled with Varro’s description of a place where corpses were casually abandoned and left to rot (*cadavera proiecta ... putescebant*) or with Horace’s evocative allusion to an expanse of ground strewn with whitening bones.” However, Horace was probably referring to a graveyard outside the Esquiline Gate comprised largely of the shallow, modest and easily disturbed burials of the humble classes of Roman society. He makes no direct reference to “mass graves” or *puticuli*. Bodel’s (1994: 31 – 32) explanation of the use of the term *proicere* in conjunction with words for corpses, meaning “to abandon” or “to leave unburied” during the time in which Varro was writing is convincing. However, when first referring to the *puticuli* Varro suggests they were so named “because there the people used to be *buried* in *putei* ‘pits’” (*L.L.* V. 25, my italics) and only when referring to the interpretation provided by Aelius does he speak of “*cadavera proiecta*”. It is therefore highly probable that these early wells were *puticuli* in the true sense of the term.

Several conclusions can be drawn concerning the so-called *puticuli* of the *Campus Esquilinus*. Evidence for the use of these vast pits is obscure but it is unlikely that they represent the last resting-place of the majority of the urban poor. This is particularly important because many modern scholars continue to refer to Lanciani’s *puticuli* as the “preferred” means of disposal for the lower classes as a whole. Not only were the pits evidently open for a short period of time but they were also incapable of meeting



the demands imposed by high mortality. Although it remains possible that the truly destitute were discarded in pits or disposal areas such as these, there were vast numbers of “ordinary poor” residing in the city. If Lanciani’s *puticuli* were designed to accommodate the remains of *all* these individuals this would require many more pits than the 75 he said he excavated (or the hundreds he predicted).

#### 4.4 Other explanations

##### (a) *Victims of the arena*

Kyle (1998) investigated the possibility that the Esquiline pits were used for the disposal of the many corpses produced by arena spectacles. These spectacles involved two groups of people: gladiators and criminals/condemned individuals (*noxii*). Gladiators often received individual burial, and Kyle (*ibid.*: 160) points out that “inscribed tombstones, many with carved reliefs, show that professional gladiators were generally allowed and sometimes provided with decent burial. Corpses could be claimed and buried by owners or editors, relatives, burial clubs, or fellow gladiators.” Given the superstitious character of many gladiators and the imminence of their death it is probable that they were eager to make arrangements for suitable burial in advance and it is unlikely that large numbers found their way into mass graves. Hope (1998) has demonstrated how proper burial and the erection of a funerary monument allowed these socially stigmatised individuals to negotiate their place within society and assert their identity (Chapter 1). This contrasts greatly with the fate of the *noxii*. These victims of the arena were criminals, often condemned for treason, a crime which brought “infamy, ignominy and denial of even the most basic rites” (Kyle, 1998.: 162). The corpses of *noxii* were unlikely to be claimed, leaving their disposal either in the hands of the spectacle organisers or city undertakers. Given their lack of status and contaminated nature, it is highly unlikely that they received proper religious burial. Disposal of these corpses in mass graves may have been one solution but, as Kyle notes (*ibid.*: 163), there were others, including burning and use as food for animals employed in the spectacles. Alternatively, Kyle (*ibid.*: 213) observes that, “Roman history and religion point to the Tiber River, more than to pits, beasts, and fire, as a traditional means of ultimate disposal (and of denial of burial) for victims. Examination of early executions and later spectacles, often taking place close to the

river, indicates that the Tiber was repeatedly used to dispose of corpses.” Moreover, “neither ancient texts nor Lanciani connect the Esquiline to arena spectacles” (*ibid.*: 168).

The number of corpses produced each year by spectacles is difficult to calculate but was probably large and continued to rise as spectacles grew more lavish. The *puticuli* would have been quickly overwhelmed if this was the usual means of disposal for arena corpses. As Kyle (*ibid.*: 168) observes, “the Esquiline and the suburbs had enough problems without the addition of arena victims.” Furthermore, the Esquiline pits were closed before the huge arenas of Imperial Rome were established. Although gladiatorial bouts associated with aristocratic funerals began at Rome during the third century BC and became a form of popular entertainment in their own right after the contest organised by the consuls P. Rutilius Rufus and C. Manlius Maximus in 105 BC (Jacobelli, 2003: 6), the lavish spectacles witnessed by audiences in the Colosseum were not seen until the first century AD, at which time mass disposal on the Esquiline was no longer possible. Some arena victims probably found their way to the Esquiline, but it is not possible to suggest that Lanciani’s *puticuli* were specifically created, or frequently used for, this purpose.<sup>4</sup>

#### (b) *War victims and executions*

The Esquiline had a long established association with the execution of criminals and captives. Its location on the outskirts of the Republican city made it ideal for such activities which appear to have continued even after the redevelopment of the area. Kyle (1998: 165 – 166) outlines the textual evidence for execution on the Esquiline:

“Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.32.3, Loeb) ties the Esquiline to traditional forms of execution: under Tiberius the senate expelled astrologers and magicians from Italy; one was thrown from the Rock, another was executed ‘by the consuls outside the Esquiline Gate according to ancient usage (*more prisco*) and at the sound of the trumpet.’ Under Claudius foreigners who usurped the rights of citizens were to be executed in *campo Esquilino*, and Nero ordered the execution of a consul-elect in ‘a place set apart for the execution of slaves (*locus servilibus poenis sepositus*),’ which Hinard takes as the Esquiline.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, mass graves have not been identified at other cities known to have frequently staged gladiatorial games, such as Pompeii. Other disposal mechanisms must have been in place.

<sup>5</sup> Claudius: Suet. *Claud.* 25.3; Nero: Tac. *Ann.* 15.60.2.

The remains of victims were probably disposed of nearby, and given their condemned status this is unlikely to have involved proper burial. Denial of burial was a further punishment and mass graves offered a simple solution to the demand for rapid disposal. However, how many criminals were executed each year on the Esquiline rather than in the arena? The *puticuli* and the ditch of the *agger* could accommodate thousands of corpses and it is unlikely that sufficient numbers were executed before the closure of the area during the late Republic to fill them. Moreover, the victims of executions which took place after the reclamation of the Esquiline could not have been buried in the immediate vicinity which now lay within the city limits. This suggests that it was not necessary, even if it was certainly more practical, to dispose of corpses at the site of execution. Hinard (1987, cited in Kyle, 1998: 179, n.69) links several textual references describing denial of burial and exposure, with the Esquiline, but, as Kyle asserts, it is neither necessary nor possible, to associate every unspecific reference with this area of the city. Execution probably occurred in other suburban areas where visibility was high and the punishment could be witnessed by large numbers of people. The executed followers of Spartacus, for example, were crucified and exposed along the road from Capua to Rome.

The presence of large numbers of corpses in an area traditionally associated with execution may be explained as the mass grave of the victims of war – either captives or those killed in battle. However, it is unlikely that there were ever so many captives awaiting execution in Rome at any one time. It is also difficult to link the corpses to any specific battle. According to Kyle (*ibid.*: 179, n.69) Hinard suggests that “the rebel soldiers executed in 270 BC in the Forum and exposed ‘outside the city’ were dumped on the Esquiline, but this seems logistically unlikely. Again, Hinard, 113-14, feels that those executed and denied burial on the return of Marius in 87 (*App. B. Civ.* 1.73) ended up on the Esquiline.” However, despite its association with execution and exposure, it can not be assumed that the Esquiline was the only site used for such purposes. The Tiber may have been used for the disposal of criminals and prisoners of war, allowing for both convenient disposal and denial of burial.

### (c) *Epidemic/plague victims*

During pestilential periods mortality soared, resulting in an increased need for fast and efficient disposal of large numbers of corpses. Kyle (1998: 178 – 179, n.69) proposes

that communal graves may have been integral to the disposal process: "Hopkins (1983), 208-9, discusses the practicality of using pits during epidemics, and notes that, 'In such circumstances, cremation was too costly, because it consumed expensive fuel'...[and] mass graves were space- and labour-efficient; they were a common response in Europe in times of mass death when normal methods of disposal were insufficient." The Esquiline pits may have been dug in order to facilitate the disposal of those affected by an outbreak of plague. This may have occurred in advance and at state expense, thus also explaining the regularity and structure of the pits. The stone lining of the pits implies that they were left open for some time before they were filled.<sup>22</sup> On one occasion these purpose-built pits were probably filled too rapidly, leading to the use of the nearby ditch as an overflow. However, although mass graves were time- and labour-efficient, and epidemics, although unpredictable were inevitable, ancient accounts emphasise the inability of city authorities to cope with high levels of mortality and refer to desperate measures:

"Dionysius writes of the corpses of the very poor being thrown into the Tiber in the plague of 463 BC, and again in 451, when corpses were thrown into the sewers as well. Diodorus describes corpses being left unburied for fear of contamination during the plague in Sicily in 396 BC ... Orosius claimed that the plague of 142 BC killed so many undertakers that corpses had to be left to rot in their beds, eventually making Rome uninhabitable ... Procopius describes corpses being thrown down pell-mell inside fortifications during the plague at Constantinople in AD 542."<sup>23</sup>

(Duncan-Jones, 1996: 113)

The example of Constantinople is reminiscent of the corpses deposited in the ditch of the Servian *agger*, implying that this was an extreme measure taken during a period of very high mortality. In addition, the frequency of epidemic outbreaks at Rome would have required many more than the 75 pits uncovered by Lanciani.

If the Esquiline pits *were* created as a response to an epidemic it is difficult to establish when this occurred. Why similar pits were not used more often as a response to the disposal difficulties caused by disease is also curious. What happened to the victims of previous and later epidemics? Are there other mass graves lying

<sup>22</sup> Land was set aside for mass graves in advance of the Black Death in England (1348 – 50). See Hawkins (1990).

<sup>23</sup> Dion. Hal. 9.67 and 10.53; Diodorus 14.70 – 71; Orosius 5.4.8 – 9; Procop. *Wars* 2.22 – 23.

undiscovered on the outskirts of Rome? The "greatest" plagues of Rome, such as those which ravaged the population under Nero and Commodus, took place when the limits of the city had been extended beyond the Esquiline Gate and do not seem to have led to the creation of state organised mass graves.

André (1980) charts the progress of ancient concepts of epidemic disease and Roman ideas of pestilence, recording an increased awareness of their association with public hygiene and sanitary conditions. As a result it is difficult to conceive that the pits would have been left uncovered for any great length of time. In addition, Varro, Horace and other sources make no reference to the use of the Esquiline for the disposal of plague victims or official mass graves. It is therefore probable that during an outbreak of plague the ready-dug facilities of the ditch of the *agger* were used to receive the vast number of corpses, but the *puticuli*, although possibly created in advance of such an emergency were not commonly dug in response to such a situation.

(d) *Unwanted slaves*

Other explanations have also been proposed, including the disposal of deceased household slaves to whom the owner felt little or no attachment and therefore no desire to provide with decent burial, or who had been punished and deemed unworthy of proper burial rites. It is, however, again difficult to understand the structure of the pits in such a context. Why go to such lengths simply to dispose of the body of an unwanted or condemned slave?

(e) *A new theory?*

It can be asserted confidently that substantial tombs existed in the vicinity of the Esquiline Gate; however, the poorest classes of Roman society were unlikely to have been in a position to afford such structures. The graves of these individuals probably took the form of simple depositions. This possibility, and the archaeological evidence for such practice, forms the subject of Chapter 5. For the present purpose it is sufficient to note that modest burials, marked only by an amphora, a ceramic fragment, a wooden marker or a row of tiles, are likely to have been scattered amongst the more substantial tombs of the cemetery. When the *Campus Esquilinus* was reclaimed, the authorities (either the senate or Maecenas) would have faced the task of clearing the site of built structures (including the most humble grave markers) and re-landscaping

the area. The eradication of the visible signs of burial, however, represented only superficial clearance. *Total* reclamation of the land may have been required by those responsible for its reorganisation and would have necessitated the removal of any burials deposited within it in order to negate its status as a *locus religiosus*. A similar process occurred outside the Colline Gate when the site was to be used for the Temple of Honour with the Pontiffs declaring that burials must be removed: “for the college decided that a place which was public property could not receive a sacred character through rites performed by private citizens” (Cicero, *de Leg.* 2.23.58). Although in a different context, this incident provides a precedent for the removal of interred remains in order to reclaim a site and change its legal status. According to Robinson (1992: 126) “Marcian quotes a decree of the *divi fratres* forbidding disturbance of a corpse, but permitting the transfer of a coffin with its contents to some more convenient place if circumstances required.” Although this belongs to a later period and may refer to a provincial case, together with the example provided by Cicero it suggests that such activities occurred in Republican Rome. A similar incident took place during the construction of the Basilica of St. Peter on the Vatican where it was necessary to level the cemetery on which the church was to be constructed. Toynbee and Ward Perkins (1956: 12 – 13) suggest that Constantine’s position as *Pontifex Maximus* may have allowed him to circumvent the laws on *violatio sepulchri*, although the fact that the cemetery was largely pagan may also have been significant. However, a precedent for such action had been set several centuries earlier outside the Colline Gate and possibly also at the burial ground between the old and new Via Salaria which was covered by earth removed during the creation of Trajan’s Forum (Robinson, 1992: 125). Toynbee and Ward Perkins (1956: 13) describe how on the Vatican “Constantine’s builders took care to respect the dead themselves, carefully stacking in sarcophagi bones from those burials which they could not avoid disturbing.”

If the authorities proceeded with a similar course of action on the Esquiline, either out of a desire to release it from its current legal status or in order to re-landscape the area, they may have completely emptied the land of burials. They would therefore have faced the problem of what to do with the disinterred remains and were probably faced with three options:

- rebury, burn or dump the remains elsewhere;
- rebury the remains using the ditch of the *agger*;
- rebury the remains in purpose-built/newly dug pits.

The regularity of the dimensions and structure of the *puticuli* may be explained by this process of clearance and reburial. Maecenas or the senate would have had access to sufficient funds and labour to create these pits, although structural stability would have been unimportant if they were to be filled immediately and there is unlikely to have been any other reason for lining the vaults with stone.

#### 4.5 Other parallels

It is also important to note the existence of early modern parallels for the so-called *puticuli* in other parts of Europe. Ariès (1981) describes the communal graves of late-medieval France. The dimensions of these pits (Table 8) bear a striking similarity to those discovered by Lanciani, although appear to have been dug directly into the ground without any form of lining or support. Ariès (*ibid.*: 56 - 57) suggests that the use of these pits “became habitual during the epidemics of plague that ravaged the towns,” citing an occasion in October 1418 when “according to the *Bourgeois de Paris*, “so many people died in such a short space of time that it was necessary to dig pits, in each of which were placed thirty or forty persons, piled like bacon, with a few handfuls of dirt thrown on top.” It also speaks of big graves in which about six hundred persons were placed: “They had to dig some more big pits, five at Les Innocents, four at la Trinité, and in other places.”” These pits were created as a measure designed to cope with a sudden high demand for disposal rather than an established type of burial. However, Ariès (*ibid.*: 64) suggests that eventually the pits, which seem to have been left open until filled to capacity were “no longer reserved for times of high mortality. After the fifteenth century, and until the end of the eighteenth century, they were the usual place of burial for the poor and for those who died in modest circumstances” (*ibid.*: 57). This, however, cannot have been the case at Rome for the number of pits required to accommodate the dead of many centuries and a vast population would have been enormous.

Large communal burial pits existed in other early modern European cities, including London and Hamburg. The pit from London included within **Table 8** and dated to 1665, can be directly associated with the burial of plague victims, but non-epidemic related communal graves also existed in urban churchyards. Gittings (1984: 61) suggests that prior to the early eighteenth century, even the most miserable pauper, condemned criminal and epidemic victim could expect to be buried in accordance with the customary religious rituals, receiving a Christian burial often at the expense of the local parish. However, a population explosion during the early eighteenth century appears to have enforced a change of practice, with communal graves increasingly employed in urban contexts. Gittings (*ibid.*: 63 – 64) provides the following quotation from a text written in 1721:

“It is well known that several out-parishes ... are very much straitened for room to bury their dead; and that to remedy in part that inconvenience, they dig in their church yards or other annexed burial ground, large holes or pits in which they put many of the bodies of those whose friends are not able to pay for better graves, and then those pits or holes (called the poor’s holes) once opened are not covered till filled with dead bodies.”

The creation of pits appears to have occurred primarily due to lack of space rather than an excessively large number of corpses, a situation that was largely due to the requirements of Christian burial within consecrated ground. Burial at Rome took place outside the city and was therefore comparatively free from such constraints, with space at less of a premium than in the crowded churchyards of early modern London. Gittings (*ibid.*: 64) also provides an account from 1774 which describes the burial of the poor in a churchyard in central London:

“The greatest evil is what is called parish or poor’s graves: these are pits capable of holding three or four coffins abreast and about seven in depth; are always kept open till they are full, then the tops are covered over with earth; and another pit about the same size is dug on the side of it, leaving the sides of the former coffins always open.”

Although the “poor’s graves” could be extended, their individual capacity of approximately 28 coffins was considerably less than the 830 of the Roman *puticuli*, perhaps a reflection of a situation in which individual parishes were responsible for burial rather than the city. In England the pits were commonly referred to as “poor’s



graves" which indicates an association primarily with urban paupers rather than plague victims. However, it was noted in Chapter 1 that even the poorest members of early-modern society were anxious to provide decent burial for themselves and their family, often putting aside the little money they possessed for burial expenses, and Gittings (*ibid.*: 65) notes the existence of burial clubs designed to aid this process. As a result, the "poor's graves" of eighteenth and nineteenth century London cannot be viewed as the last resting-place of *all* the humble members of society, rather the desperately poor who were unable to provide burial for themselves.

This situation is paralleled in seventeenth and eighteenth century Hamburg, where an increase in population and consequent overcrowding of churchyards eventually led to the removal of burial to new cemeteries outside the city (Whaley, 1981: 104). Funerals in Hamburg during this period were lavish social affairs displaying the wealth and popularity of the deceased. Whaley (*ibid.*: 91) points out, however, that the really indigent were excluded from such social rituals: "the 'Nose-squeezer', a plain cramped box, deposited without ceremony in a communal grave, marked the end of many a miserable life on the margins of subsistence." However, he also observes that "the emphasis was on real indigence rather than mere poverty. The *Leichenbitter* often boasted that they provided their services free to the poorer sort" (*ibid.*: 91). A difference can again be detected between levels of poverty, with only the corpses of the truly destitute finding their way into the anonymous common graves. During times of epidemic in London and Hamburg, other lowly members of society were probably also disposed of in this way, but in both cities it is evident that not all of the poor were regularly buried in mass graves.

These early modern parallels shed useful light on the situation in ancient Rome, especially given the perceived importance of decent burial and the social opportunities offered by the funerary ritual in both societies. The processes surrounding communal graves are evidently more complex than has been assumed and the presence of a large pit does not necessarily indicate indiscriminate dumping of all the poor members of society.

#### 4.6 After the *puticuli*

In order to comprehensively assess the place of the Esquiline pits in the disposal practices of the Roman urban poor it is important to investigate the manner in which their remains might have been disposed of subsequent to the closure of the area during the late Republic. Bodel (2000: 133) notes an absence of references in the ancient sources to mass burial pits elsewhere in Rome during the early Imperial period,<sup>24</sup> an absence that is paralleled by a dearth of archaeological evidence for such pits, pointing out that not until the Christian period can similar features be identified (*ibid.*: 149, n. 4). Shaw (1996: 102) describes a series of pits (*pozzi*) in the Christian cemetery of Commodilla, each capable of containing approximately 50 corpses. It is unclear whether these late Imperial *pozzi* represent the graves of the lower classes or those of plague victims. However, they were not constructed on the scale of the *puticuli* and were incapable of accommodating the vast number of poor corpses produced each year by the city.<sup>25</sup> There is no other archaeological or textual reference to communal graves in the vicinity of Rome, strongly suggesting that the pits of the Esquiline fulfilled a specific role during a short period of time and were not established as the “normal” method of disposal for the lower classes of the urban community.

Bodel (2000: 133) postulates a shift from mass inhumation to mass cremation at public crematoria, where corpses were burnt on a communal pyre. He cites ancient literary texts as evidence for the use of public crematoria, including the remark of Martial (8.75.9 – 10), after his description of *vespillones* bearing a pauper’s bier, that “the unlucky pyre receives a thousand such.” He also draws attention to Plutarch’s comment (*Quaest. Conv.* 3.4.2) that it was common practice to stack one female corpse with every ten male bodies on the pyre (Bodel, 2000: 133). He rejects the suggestion that such crematoria would be inefficient, pointing out that once burning the pyre would have reached a higher temperature and burned much faster than a single pyre (*ibid.*: 133). Kyle (1998: 169 – 170) disputes the claim, pointing out that although Martial refers to a *rogus* (funeral pyre) he may have been using the term

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<sup>24</sup> It could be suggested that there is a lack of reference *anywhere*, for even Varro does not specifically mention “mass graves” and there is no current archaeological evidence for similar pits elsewhere in the Roman suburbs.

<sup>25</sup> The rise of Christianity and its resultant change of attitude towards burial may also be partly responsible for changing burial practices but the mechanisms for disposal of the indigent are unlikely to have altered significantly.

figuratively. He also observes that the evidence for mass cremations of the poor is very limited (*ibid.*: 170). No site has been identified archaeologically that can be associated with cremation on a scale required to replace the *puticuli*. Cremation on such a large-scale would have required vast amounts of fuel at great expense in addition to a considerable degree of regulation to prevent the spread of fire. It is therefore unlikely that these services would have been provided free of charge like the *puticuli*. The absence of any direct replacement may be interpreted as evidence for the relative *unimportance* of the *puticuli* within the wider burial practices of the urban poor at Rome.

The development and establishment of *columbaria* has also been attributed to the closure of the Esquiline pits (Davies, 1977: 17; Hopkins, 1983: 211 – 212). These tombs, capable of containing large numbers of cremated remains, began to emerge in the early Imperial period, indeed one of the first, dated probably between 55 and 35 BC, was constructed in the Esquiline cemetery itself. However, as Tupman (2002: 33) points out, such tombs are unlikely to have provided a solution to the problem of where to bury large numbers of the Roman lower classes. She notes the relatively small numbers of free men recorded on inscriptions from within *columbaria* in comparison to the large numbers of slaves and freedmen, and concludes that they do *not* represent the new resting-place for the free poor previously interred within communal graves (*ibid.*: 33). Furthermore, Purcell (1987: 39) suggests that “there are simply not enough *columbaria*, even though their chances of survival are excellent,” and Heinzelmann (2001: 184) points out that most of the *columbaria* of Rome were erected by individuals for themselves and their dependants, with only a few built by *collegia* or other, freeborn, groups. If the *puticuli* were the burial places of members of society unable to afford proper burial, it is highly improbable that these same people would have been buried within *columbaria* from which they would have to purchase a burial niche *and* pay for cremation. If the Roman authorities did provide public crematoria where the indigent were cremated free of charge it is highly improbable that they would also have constructed substantial *columbaria* to receive their remains when they could be disposed of with minimal expense and ceremony elsewhere (for example in the ground or the Tiber). *Columbaria* should therefore not be directly linked with the closure of the Esquiline pits.

It has been demonstrated above that the evidence for regular burial of the urban poor in large pits on the Esquiline is not as definitive as scholars have assumed. The data provided by Lanciani is not only limited by the manner in which it was collected and reported, but the heavy reliance on an ambiguous passage of Varro also renders his initial conclusions untenable. The Esquiline pits were incapable of coping with the long term burial demands imposed by high levels of mortality at Rome, and can thus no longer be directly associated with the normal disposal practices of the lower classes. They also cannot be directly linked with the disposal of arena victims, executed criminals or large numbers of slaves as has often been suggested. The structure and dimensions of the *puticuli* allow various proposals to be made with regards to their intended function, including the possibility that they were constructed for industrial purposes or as part of a wider urban sanitary system that was supervised by the *aediles*. Alternatively, the need to reclaim the area of the Esquiline in order to create the *Horti Maecenati* during the late first century BC, may have forced the removal and subsequent symbolic reburial of any human remains (of all social classes) that had been interred within the region. It remains possible that the pits uncovered by Lanciani were closely associated with one of the many significant epidemics that ravaged the urban population during the late Republic, although it is currently not possible to assign them to a specific event. Although the corpses of the truly destitute who lived and died on the streets of Rome may have found their way into these vast pits alongside the general refuse of the city, it is highly unlikely that large numbers of the “ordinary poor” were buried in this way. There is no evidence to suggest that the urban poor regularly made use of mass burial pits and consequently the *puticuli* should no longer be described as the communal graves of the lower class inhabitants of Rome. However, in light of this conclusion, how, and where, were the remains of these people actually buried and what does the archaeological evidence for their disposal tell us about common attitudes to commemoration and proper burial?

## Chapter 5

### Identifying Lower Class Burial Practices in Italy

*“Let the bawd’s tomb be an old wine-jar with broken neck, and upon it,  
wild fig-tree, exert your might.”*

(Propertius, *Elegies* IV. 5. 75 - 76)

Repeated interpretation of the *puticuli* as the common burial place of the urban poor is largely a result of the absence of alternative textual or archaeological evidence for the funerary practices of the lower classes. However, it has been shown that the Esquiline pits were not designed as mass graves for the remains of humble members of society, and comparable structures have not been identified at other Italian urban centres, thus indicating that other disposal mechanisms were used by the poor. If, therefore, the *puticuli* were not used for such purposes, it remains to be asked where and how the bodies of the poor were buried and the implications of these practices for the observance of commemorative and burial traditions. Given the scarcity of evidence for these activities at Rome, it is necessary to examine also the limited data provided by various sites within both the immediate vicinity of Rome and Italy as a whole. One site, that of Isola Sacra, which displays the most comprehensive set of data for such funerary activities, can perhaps be considered a “type site” with which other smaller, more distant cemeteries can be compared.

#### **5.1 The necropolis of Isola Sacra, Portus**

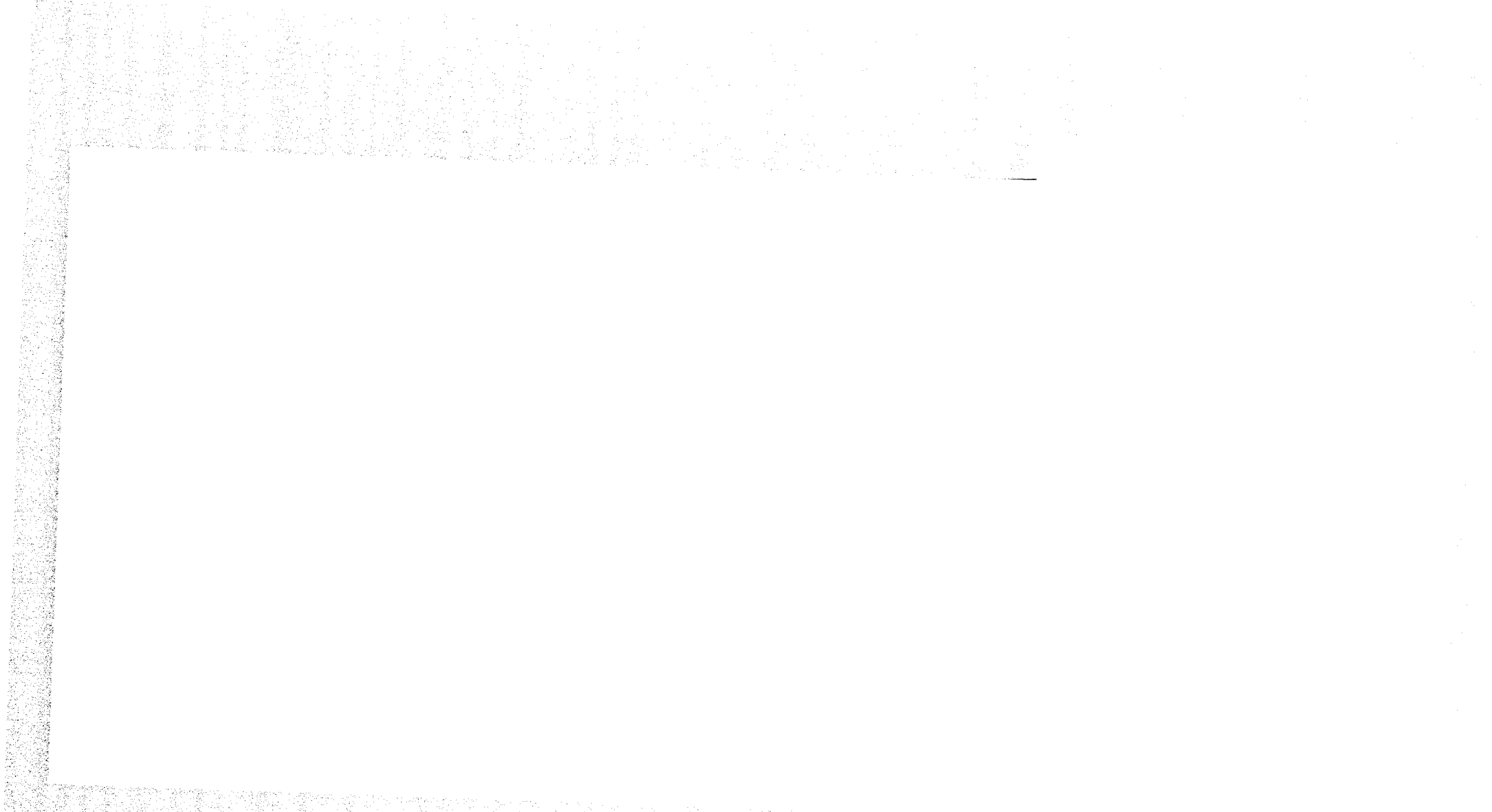
##### *(a) The site and its excavation history*

The necropolis of Isola Sacra, situated approximately 23km from Rome, can be considered representative of the type of urban cemetery that existed in the suburbs of the capital during the Imperial period. In AD 103 a canal (the *Fossa Traiana*) was created in order to directly link the harbour town of *Portus Romae* with the Tiber and thus form a direct communication and transport link with Rome. Consequently an

island was created between Portus and the other major port of Ostia, which was bounded to the north by the new canal, to the east and south by the Tiber and the sea to the west. Across this island, first referred to as 'Isola Sacra' by Procopius in the sixth century AD (*de bello gothico* 1. 26), ran a busy highway linking Portus and Ostia, along which was situated an extensive cemetery. The excavated section of this cemetery stretches for approximately 250m, although the discovery of outlying tombs suggests that it originally extended for at least 1.5km. Composed largely of tombs dated to AD 100 - 250, the site appears to have remained actively used during the fourth century.

The largest concentration of structures occupies the western side of the highway where tombs arise in rows roughly aligned with the main thoroughfare (Fig. 24). The mausolea take the form of brick-built barrel-vaulted house tombs; their facades commonly crowned with a triangular pediment (Fig. 8). Above the low doorways was often placed an inscribed plaque, occasionally flanked by two narrow slit windows. Some of the tombs are located within enclosures, many of which were added subsequent to the construction of the main tomb structure, and others have masonry *biclinia* flanking the doorway and are associated with ovens and wells. The decorated tomb interiors are lined with niches for cremation urns, and *arcosolia* recesses, designed to accommodate inhumations, were later cut into the lower walls (Baldassarre, 1987: 136 - 137). Similarly, *formae* were often dug beneath the floors of existing tombs in order to receive inhumations as the latter became the more popular rite. In many instances this involved lifting and then replacing the mosaic floor of the tomb each time a deposition was made below. Libation conduits have also been identified in the floors of the tombs.

The epigraphic evidence associated with the monumental tombs reveals that they were built predominantly by freedmen for their families, friends, and their own freed slaves. Occupational reliefs occasionally mounted on the tomb facades depict these individuals participating in various occupations. The oldest tombs, dating to the Hadrianic and Trajanic periods, were built furthest from the road with later structures occupying the spaces in front of them, although excavation has revealed that these often overlie earlier burials (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1985).

The image shows a plan of the Isola Sacra necropolis in Portus. The plan is mostly blank, with a few small red markings indicating the locations of cassone tombs. The markings are scattered across the site, with a notable concentration in the lower-left quadrant. The plan is enclosed in a simple rectangular border.

**Figure 24.** Plan of Isola Sacra necropolis, Portus (cassone tombs marked in red)  
(after Baldassarre, et al., 1996)

**Figure 25.** Photograph taken during Calza's excavations of the "field of the poor" at Isola Sacra (Baldassarre, *et al.*, 1996 fig. 4).

(b) *Evidence for poor burial*

The cemetery of Isola Sacra was initially excavated between 1925 and 1940 by Guido Calza during which the majority of the tombs were uncovered. Calza described an area behind the main rows of house tombs and free of monumental structures as the "field of the poor" due to the presence of more modest burials signalled by small masonry chests (*cassone*), tiles (*cappuccina*) and amphorae (Calza, 1940: 80) (**Fig. 25**). Calza (*ibid.*: 80) concluded that these "have to be considered as burials of the very poor" and the area in which they were found a space specifically set apart for the lower classes (*ibid.*: 44 and 55). Further excavations were conducted during the 1970s and 1980s by the Istituto di Archeologia dell'Università di Roma. The first of two projects focused on the chronological development and structure of the monumental tombs with the second (1988 – 89) comprising an intensive investigation of the open spaces between and in front of the house tombs.

These excavations revealed that the seemingly empty areas between the house tombs were also occupied by non-monumental burials, bringing to light a further 627 examples (Angelucci, *et al.*, 1990) (**Fig. 26**). Investigation of these spaces has demonstrated conclusively that there was no segregation between social, legal or economic classes within the cemetery. The 627 burials are not confined to specific



**Figure 26.** Plan showing some of the non-monumental burials recovered during the 1988 – 89 excavations in the area outside Tombs 57, 58, 46, 43, 42 and 55 (cassone in red, cappuccina in blue and horizontal amphorae in green) (after Baldassarre *et al.*, 1996 fig. 46).

areas and occupy *all* the free areas around the larger tombs. As a result, the suggestion that the poor were separated in death from other members of the community appears unfounded.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the most recently discovered burials there were 580 instances of inhumation, which may reflect the widespread dominance of the rite during the second

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<sup>1</sup> Morris (1992: 45), for example, suggests that “[t]he poor probably had separate cemeteries.”

century AD, perhaps also attested by the scarcity of *ustrinae* within the necropolis. Cremations are also present amongst the humble graves, although only three take the form of *busta*. This phenomenon may also be linked to the economic status of the deceased for inhumation could be substantially less expensive than cremation and was therefore probably favoured by those at the lower end of the economic scale.

(i) Cassone

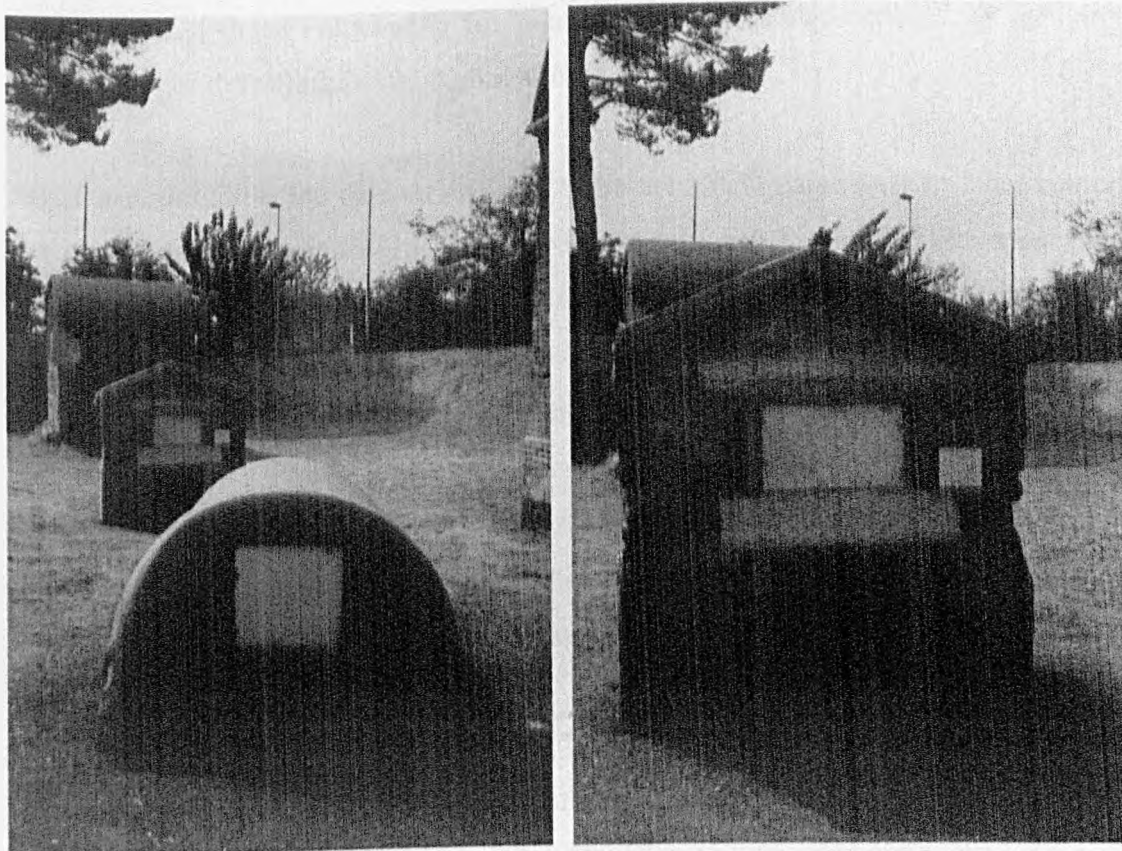
Within the necropolis 43 examples of cassone (chest burials) have been identified. Measuring up to 1 metre in height and between 2.40 × 1.25m and 1.50 × 0.80m in size (Calza, 1940: 78), these take the form of semicylindrical masonry chests constructed directly on the sand above a deposition (Fig. 27). They consist mainly of inhumations, although cremation urns have been found in association with some cassone (Angelucci *et al.*, 1990: 75 – 77). A thick layer of red plaster covered the cassone, occasionally painted with green vegetation (Calza, 1940: 76; Baldassarre *et al.*, 1996: 21). Baldassarre *et al.* (1996: 21) propose that the painted vegetation was intended to evoke the image of a tumulus of earth covered with plants, although the cassone also appear to emulate the architecture of the larger red brick mausolea amongst which they are located. The barrel vaults of the cassone parallel those of their neighbours and the placement of an inscribed plaque on one of the shorter sides also mirrors the design of the house tombs. Furthermore, structures with a small triangular pediment and inscription are occasionally attached to the cassone, often with a niche located below (*ibid.*: 21; Calza, 1940: 78) (Fig. 27). Such forms have led to the suggestion (Angelucci *et al.*, 1990: 71) that the cassone reflect abbreviated forms of house tombs and thus a shared ideology of display. However, despite structural similarities, the cassone were designed to accommodate only single depositions with the introduction of further remains necessitating significant modification of their structure.<sup>2</sup>

The inscriptions belonging to these small monuments provide a small amount of information concerning the people with whom they were associated. Taglietti (2001: 155) observes that freedmen, slaves and a small number of freeborn individuals are

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that some cassone were occasionally reopened, with the thick plaster reapplied to the exterior in order to conceal damage inflicted on the main structure in the process. In instances of cassone with small additional niches, original depositions could be made beneath the cassone with the niche providing the location for a future deposition.

documented among the dedicants of the cassone. This is unsurprising given the predominance of freedmen within the inscriptions of the house tombs and aligns with the general belief that the population of Portus was largely composed of former slaves capitalising on the commercial opportunities on offer (Prowse, *et al.*, 2004: 260). However, although the cassone are generally regarded as monuments of the lower classes it is evident that a degree of economic investment was involved in their construction (*ibid.*: 155).



(a)

(b)

**Figure 27.** Cassone at Isola Sacra: (a) Tomb 52 (reconstructed); (b) Tomb 53 (cassone with façade structure) (photos author).

The cassone should therefore perhaps be considered indicative of the funerary monuments of slightly less successful freedmen, slaves and freeborn individuals who occupied an economic level below that of those who owned the large house tombs. These people were incapable of affording the expense of a house tomb but evidently wished to display their identity and success to other members of the community.

Indeed, it has been observed (Baldassarre, *et al.*, 1996: 22; Angelucci *et al.*, 1990: 82) that the cassone were primarily directed towards communication with the living rather than the protection of the remains of the dead, with the latter task often entrusted to other structures including terracotta sarcophagi and cappuccina placed below the cassone. The cassone, despite their appearance, were not substantial burial containers or sarcophagi but commemorative monuments concerned with communication, display and social negotiation. The commemorative function of the cassone is further attested by the presence of libation conduits in the form of pipes or amphorae, indicating that those responsible for constructing the tombs intended to regularly return in order to fulfil their ritual obligations.

Structures similar to the cassone of Isola Sacra are found commonly in other coastal regions of the Mediterranean, including North Africa and Spain,<sup>3</sup> and examples have also been identified elsewhere in Italy (Angelucci, *et al.*, 1990: 77). The presence of cassone at Isola Sacra is therefore fully coherent with the cosmopolitan nature of the community of Portus which was in regular commercial contact with these other regions (*ibid.*: 77). The epigraphic data does not, however, indicate direct association with particular ethnic groups (*ibid.*: 77) rather that their construction was linked to social and economic factors and thus that the cassone perhaps represent the less commercially successful freedmen of Portus or Ostia.

#### (ii) Cappuccina

The cappuccina of Isola Sacra take the form of depositions covered by pairs of large tiles (*tegulae*) arranged gable-wise (Fig. 28). The burials, sometimes placed on an artificial platform of bricks or tiles, include both inhumations and cremations (Angelucci, *et al.*, 1990: 83 – 84). Depositions were also occasionally placed within additional containers, including wooden coffins and terracotta sarcophagi and the junction of the tiles was occasionally covered by pieces of cut pipe (*ibid.*: 84). The excavation photographs of Calza (Fig. 25) suggest that these simple structures stood above ground but it is possible that they were originally completely or partially buried. Cappuccina burials occupy the spaces between the major tombs throughout the cemetery (Fig. 26) and on occasion a semicappuccina was constructed by resting the

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<sup>3</sup> The Spanish examples, known as *cupae*, often resemble wooden barrels and may therefore be closely associated with individuals involved in commercial activities.

tiles against one wall (usually the back or side) of a house tomb. The individual buried within the *semicappuccina* may have been affiliated with the owner of the adjoining mausoleum, possibly as a slave or former slave. Angelucci *et al.* (1990: 66) suggest a more functional explanation, pointing out that burial in this way offered greater physical protection for the remains deposited below and reduced the chance that the tiles would be damaged or disturbed. It is also possible that these burials were made in order to allow the deceased to benefit from the ritual activities carried out on behalf of the tomb inhabitants. Libation pipes sunk into the floor of the house tombs seem to have served the needs of all those interred within the tomb, including those occupying niches or *arcosolia* in the wall and thus not reached directly by the liquid offerings. It is possible that these ritual activities also extended to external burials in contact with the tomb structure. The attitudes of the house tomb owners to encroachment upon their property remains unclear, although they may have overlooked these burials given the positive effect it may have had on their public image to have large numbers of people associated with them.

**Figure 28.** Excavated *cappuccina* at Isola Sacra (Baldassarre, *et al.*, 1996 fig. 7).

The relative simplicity and inexpensive nature of the *cappuccina* and the materials used within their structure points towards an association with the lower classes. Tiles are unlikely to have been expensive in such small numbers and could be salvaged from old or demolished buildings. The *cappuccina* evidently reflect a wish to protect the interred remains, emphasised further by the use of coffins and other subterranean structures. These also represent additional expense and the use of sarcophagi, for example, may reflect a higher economic status. Despite this, however, there appears to have been little incentive or desire to externally advertise this economic status and the

subterranean receptacles were directed primarily towards ensuring greater protection for the remains and were invisible on the surface.

The cappuccina are completely devoid of inscriptions and thus communicate no direct information concerning those either interred or responsible for their construction. These graves probably represent an economic and social level below that occupied by those who constructed cassone, reinforcing the concept of varying poverty levels outlined in Chapter 3. However, they also signal a significant investment in the protection of the remains of the deceased and thus a degree of concern about the provision of proper burial.

### (iii) Amphora burials

Two types of amphora burial have been identified at Isola Sacra. The first involved the direct deposition of the cremated remains of the deceased with an amphora, its base cut or pierced, sunk vertically into the soil above (Calza, 1940: 54) (Figs. 25 and



29). It is unclear from Calza's description whether the remains he uncovered were contained within urns, other receptacles such as bags or deposited directly into the ground. The amphora served a double function, marking the position of the interred remains and acting as a libation conduit (*ibid.*: 80). The external body of the amphora may have been painted with the names of the deceased and other biographical information, although no evidence for this survives.

The vertical amphora burials again reflect an investment in burial and concern for the dead. The amphorae

**Figure 29.** Vertical amphorae at Isola Sacra  
(photo author).

allow, and are designed specifically to facilitate, the pouring of libations, indicating an intention to return to the grave and perform ritual activities. The desire to protect the interred remains is often reduced to an above-ground signal of their presence with little evidence for subterranean physical protection. In economic terms these vertical amphora burials represent minimal investment since they required only an amphora (not necessarily completely intact) and possibly a simple container for the cremated remains.



(b)

**Figure 30.** Horizontal amphora burials at Isola Sacra: (a) fragments of amphorae used to cover the body; (b) fragments of amphora and tile covering a burial with libation tube (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1996 figs. 8 and 10).

The second type of amphora burial documented at Isola Sacra was more commonly associated with inhumation. For the burial of infants an amphora was split vertically into two sections in order to serve as a receptacle for the body and a cover (Angelucci,

*et al.*, 1990: 85). For adult burials several amphorae were required, often broken into several large fragments that allowed greater manipulation of the cover (*ibid.*: 85) (Fig. 30). These covers were occasionally accompanied by fragments of brick, tile, stone and pottery (*ibid.*: 86), indicating that any material available at the time of the burial was used to construct the grave. The horizontal amphora burials bear many similarities to the cappuccina in terms of providing a protective cover for the inhumed remains but the use of old and broken amphorae and other fragmentary material suggests that they were possibly less expensive.

Toynbee (1971: 102) suggests the amphora fragments projected above the surface, although this remains doubtful given that the various fragments were not cemented in position and could therefore be easily disturbed. Like the cappuccina, these burials were primarily concerned with the protection of the remains of the deceased rather than signalling the presence of a grave. Nevertheless, even if they were fully buried a mound would have been created above thus marking the location of the grave.

Excavations have revealed the presence of both types of amphora burial throughout the necropolis and identified an occasional clustering around the larger mausolea and their associated structures. For example, the small masonry blocks and dining facilities located outside tombs 80 – 77 are surrounded by amphora burials (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1985: 288).

Examination of the vessels used for both types of amphora burial has indicated that they do not correspond to a specific commercial activity but appear to have been selected largely on the basis of their physical properties. Thick-walled vessels were especially favoured (*ibid.*: 85), again emphasising the existence of considerable concern for the protection of the body. Portus and Ostia were major commercial centres where complete and fragmentary vessels were probably available in large numbers. The artificial mound of Monte Testaccio, near the Aventine in Rome, illustrates the extent to which amphorae were discarded once they had fulfilled their original function. Reaching a maximum height of 35m and covering an area of 20,000 square metres Monte Testaccio is composed mainly of broken olive oil amphorae discarded between c. AD 140 and 250 (Mattingly and Aldrete, 2000: 148). Similar dumps of unwanted amphorae undoubtedly existed at other urban centres and access



to these broken vessels may have been relatively straightforward. Mattingly and Aldrete (*ibid.*: 148) note that the inner surface of oil amphorae tended to absorb the oil, subsequently becoming rancid, and were thus often broken up and discarded once their contents had been removed. Although many of these fragments were probably abandoned at sites such as Monte Testaccio, others were certainly reused. Fragmentary amphorae were employed, for example, in the construction of the *Castra Praetoria* at Rome where they were placed one on top of the other separated by a layer of earth in order to form a damp-course, and in various other construction contexts throughout the Empire (Callender, 1965: 34 – 35). Intact oil amphorae may have been unsuitable for further storage or transportation of foodstuffs but they were occasionally employed in other contexts, for instance within the architecture of the Circus of Maxentius at Rome (Mattingly and Aldrete, 2000: 148). Other types of intact amphorae were used for secondary purposes elsewhere and Callender (1965: 30) observes that “[i]t appears to have been a fairly common and widespread practice to use empty amphorae as *pissoirs*. Their employment as such at Rome is mentioned by Macrobius (*Sat.* iii.16.5); at Pompeii they were placed at street-corners and then removed full of urine for use by the fullers of the city....” Amphorae employed in this capacity have been identified on Hadrian’s Wall where they were also used to construct hearths (*ibid.*: 34). In addition, amphorae were used as planting pots at Pompeii, water-butts in Britain, and Seneca (*Quaest. Nat.* vi.19) speaks of their role as acoustic devices (*ibid.*: 36).

The processes involved in acquiring previously used amphorae are largely unknown. It is likely that vessels which were broken and discarded, like those forming Monte Testaccio, could either be purchased at minimal expense or collected free from the place in which they had been abandoned. Complete amphorae, such as those required for vertical amphora burials, could be reused for a variety of purposes, including further storage or transportation, and were therefore probably sold second-hand, at a reduced price, by the merchants responsible for importing their contents. Prices probably varied according to their condition and perhaps also form, with different shapes and sizes required for different purposes. That approximately 53 million vessels could be accumulated at Monte Testaccio over a period of only 110 years (Mattingly and Aldrete, 2000: 148) indicates the vast number of amphorae in circulation throughout the Roman world and it is therefore likely that second-hand

fragments or intact containers could be obtained relatively easily and with little expense. The amphora graves of Isola Sacra therefore do not represent a major economic investment and probably belong to poorer members of the lower classes, perhaps those occupying an economic level below that of those buried within cappuccina.

(iv) Other burials

According to Toynbee (1971: 101), “[t]he simplest tombs of the Roman world were holes in the ground, unadorned by any form of structure, in which were placed either the receptacle containing the deceased’s burnt bones and ashes or his or her unburnt skeleton.” Many burials of this type were uncovered during the course of the 1988 – 89 excavations (Figs. 26 and 31) and many more were probably removed or destroyed in the course of earlier investigations (Taglietti, 2001: 157).

(b)

**Figure 31.** Simple graves at Isola Sacra: (a) terracotta sarcophagus burial; (b) burial in a pit (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1996 figs. 6 and 5).

Amongst these graves were found examples of cremations and inhumations placed directly into the ground without a receptacle, in terracotta sarcophagi typical of the mid-Imperial period and at least 6 wooden coffins (Angelucci, *et al.*, 1990: 85). Nails and dark stains in the sand indicate the presence of further wooden receptacles. The recovery of coffins, preserved by the waterlogged conditions, is particularly significant given their rarity elsewhere. They were evidently modest structures, especially compared with the sarcophagi, and the simplicity of their construction indicates a lack of specialist production (*ibid.*: 85).

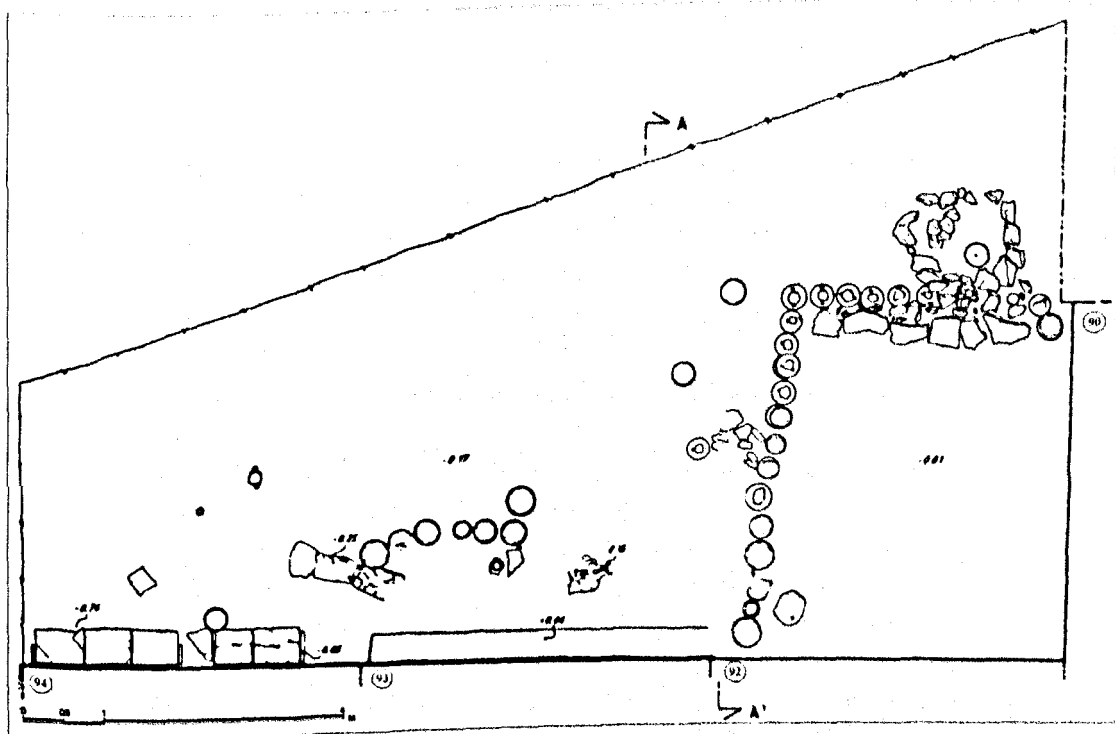
(v) Grave goods

During the investigation of the house tombs of the necropolis a widespread absence of grave goods was recorded and attributed to a general indifference toward the individual, and the transfer of the symbolic content of grave goods to the tomb as a whole (*ibid.*: 74). However, the phenomenon has been shown subsequently to be more widespread within the cemetery, with the humble graves also lacking significant quantities of grave goods. Single coins were most commonly attested, usually within the mouth of the corpse, although one was identified in an orbital cavity and another in the hand of the deceased (*ibid.*: 74). These coins, ideologically associated with the need to pay a fare to cross the River Styx in the afterlife, further signal concerns for the fate of the deceased and a desire to provide them with an appropriate religious burial. Oil lamps were also deposited within graves, with one deposition accompanied by 5 individual lamps (*ibid.*: 74), but generally they contained few items. This parallels the situation recorded within the larger tombs and should therefore *not* be considered a sign of poverty but a conscious decision on the part of those responsible for burial.

(vi) Grave markers

Although few stone stelae have been recovered from Isola Sacra this does not indicate a lack of concern for commemoration. The cassone embody a strong desire for commemoration with the above ground structure concerned primarily with communication. In addition, the vertical amphora served a double function as both libation conduit and grave marker. Similar grave markers possibly existed above many of the other graves but may have been damaged, destroyed, or removed in order to improve access routes (the open spaces in which they were located also functioned as

pathways).<sup>4</sup> The same may be true of other, more perishable markers that may have taken the form of low tumuli, pots, urns, wooden markers or hedges.



**Figure 32.** Plan of the area behind Tomb 92, Isola Sacra showing an area clearly delimited by vertical amphorae with an adjacent enclosure of flint flakes (Angelucci *et al.*, 1990 fig. 6).

One further indication that the most humble graves were probably marked on the surface is the remarkable absence of intercutting within the cemetery, despite a large number of depositions within a restricted area (Angelucci, *et al.*, 1990: 57). **Figure 26** clearly illustrates the intensive occupation of space within the cemetery and strongly suggests that graves were distinguishable on the surface. It has been proposed (*ibid.*: 57) that perishable wooden enclosures or hedges defined specific areas, thus forming 'family' groups. Calza (1940: 80) also recorded vertical amphorae arranged in groups of 4, 6 and 8, which may have defined a specific group of burials or an area belonging to a particular group of people. More permanent enclosures also existed, including that located behind Tombs 92 and 90, which comprised a continuous series of amphorae

<sup>4</sup> The fragility of these markers is illustrated by the fact that although several vertical amphorae remained *in situ* after Calza excavated the site, many have subsequently been damaged or removed and continue to be damaged by visitors to the cemetery and the weather (see **Fig. 29**).

driven into the ground, supported by slivers of flint, delimiting an area that was approximately square (*ibid.*: 55 – 57) (Fig. 32). A total of 8 depositions were excavated within this enclosure, including 3 simple graves, 3 cappuccina, 1 semicappuccina and 1 terracotta sarcophagus (*ibid.*: 57). The enclosure, constructed from readily available, inexpensive materials, represents the intentional reservation of an area for use by a particular group of people. Unfortunately there is no epigraphic evidence to indicate who belonged to this distinct group (a family? group of friends? slaves associated with one of the adjacent tombs?) but it can be proposed, on the basis of its form and the burials within it, that they were members of the poorer levels of society. The typology of the burials varies, perhaps indicating changing fortunes or the availability of different materials. This may also indicate that grave typology was unrelated to identity groups or ideological factors.

Adjacent to this enclosure was a second, within which an apparently unmarked cappuccina was signalled on the surface by an enclosure of large pieces of flint, within which was also located the cut base of an amphora (*ibid.*: 57) (Fig. 32). Similarly, a continuous line of 15 vertical amphorae emerges in front of the *biclinium* of tomb 78 and between tombs 83 and 84 (Baldassarre *et al.*, 1985: 288). Taglietti (2001: 157) has suggested that these groupings, seemingly associated with the monumental structures, represent the graves of individuals with a relationship to the owners of the larger mausolea, possibly slaves, clients or friends. However, the extant house tomb inscriptions indicate that freedmen and slaves were usually granted permission to be buried within the tomb. Taglietti (*ibid.*: 157) also suggests that these groups imply the extension of the *locus religiosus* of the tomb to the area immediately outside the built structure. The simple structures would, however, have received this status by virtue of their deposition and so they should perhaps be viewed instead as further attempts to benefit from religious activities occurring in and around the mausolea, possibly additionally influenced by the extra physical protection offered by the latter.

### (c) Discussion

The community who used the cemetery of Isola Sacra employed a variety of burial and commemorative methods, the form of which was perhaps closely linked to their economic status. There was a strong desire to protect the remains of the deceased and

to ensure that they received the appropriate religious rites subsequent to the burial itself. Precise identification of these individuals is not possible given the absence of epigraphic data but these humble graves probably represent members of the free poor of Portus.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that burial at Isola Sacra occurred from the late first century AD onwards, the evidence that it offers concerning the burial of the poor may be relevant to a discussion of late Republican and early Imperial Rome. The harbour towns of Portus and Ostia offered cosmopolitan environments not dissimilar to that of Rome, and the necropolis therefore developed in a similar, if somewhat demographically reduced, context. Furthermore, the burials at Isola Sacra appear to represent well-established typologies with later tombs constructed over cappuccina, cassone and other graves dating to the early phases of the cemetery's use, perhaps even associated with the first harbour created by Claudius. Although the interior arrangement of the house tombs was altered to accommodate changing customs of burial, this does not appear to occur amongst the poorer graves. The various forms of humble burial may reflect chronological changes or different ethnic or religious groups, although there is little evidence to support this and there appears to have been close adherence to traditional Roman religious beliefs concerning burial. As a result, the evidence suggests that they correspond more closely to different economic levels. The predominance of amphorae may be partly explained by the association of the cemetery with the harbours of Claudius and Trajan where such vessels would have been very readily available.

## **5.2 Other evidence for the burial practices of the poor**

### **5.2.1 The Vatican necropolis, Rome**

#### *(a) The site and its excavation history*

Ancient and modern development of the Roman suburbs has obliterated many of the cemeteries that once lay within them. Scattered individual tombs have been identified

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<sup>5</sup> Some slaves may also have been included among their number, although this is impossible to verify.

but there exists little evidence for concentrated cemetery areas such as that of Isola Sacra or those immediately outside the city gates of Ostia and Pompeii. However, the construction of the Basilica of St. Peter has preserved a section of one such cemetery. Toynbee and Ward Perkins (1956: 5) describe the Vatican, in the northern part of the transtiberine region, as a “thoroughly suburban, not to say rural, district, noted for its clay, from which earthenware vessels and bricks were made....” Despite its almost rural character the Vatican retained important links with the urban centre by virtue of the location of several major monuments and parks in the area in addition to three major highways which passed through the region: the Via Triumphalis, the Via Cornelia and the Via Aurelia (Basso, 1986: 7) .

Excavations beneath the basilica during the 1940s revealed part of a necropolis running for approximately 70m from east to west in alignment with the Via Cornelia which passed to the south (Zander, 2003: 3) (Fig. 33). Tombs have subsequently been located further downhill in the area of the abandoned Circus of Nero (*ibid.*: 3 – 4). The cemetery, composed largely of house tombs, was constructed between AD 125 and the end of the second century (Toynbee and Ward Perkins, 1956: 28), although it remained in use throughout the third and early fourth centuries (*ibid.*: 33). Two rows of tombs have been identified but others, possibly built behind or in front of these, may have been destroyed during the construction of the Basilica or remain undiscovered beneath its foundations. The tombs are comparable to those of Isola Sacra and accommodate both inhumations and cremations (*ibid.*: 30), although those of the Vatican lack large enclosures and external *biclinia* - perhaps a result of the higher price of land at Rome (*ibid.*: 70). The interior of the Vatican tombs are more elaborately decorated than those of Isola Sacra and there is a distinct absence of occupational reliefs and few epigraphical references to the daily lives of the deceased. Toynbee and Ward-Perkins (*ibid.*: 106) therefore suggest that “in the Vatican cemetery we are moving less in commercial and manufacturing circles than among the lower clerical and administrative grades of the public services.” The community who erected these tombs was, however, composed largely of freedmen and freedwomen, and very similar to that frequenting Isola Sacra in terms of social, legal and economic status.

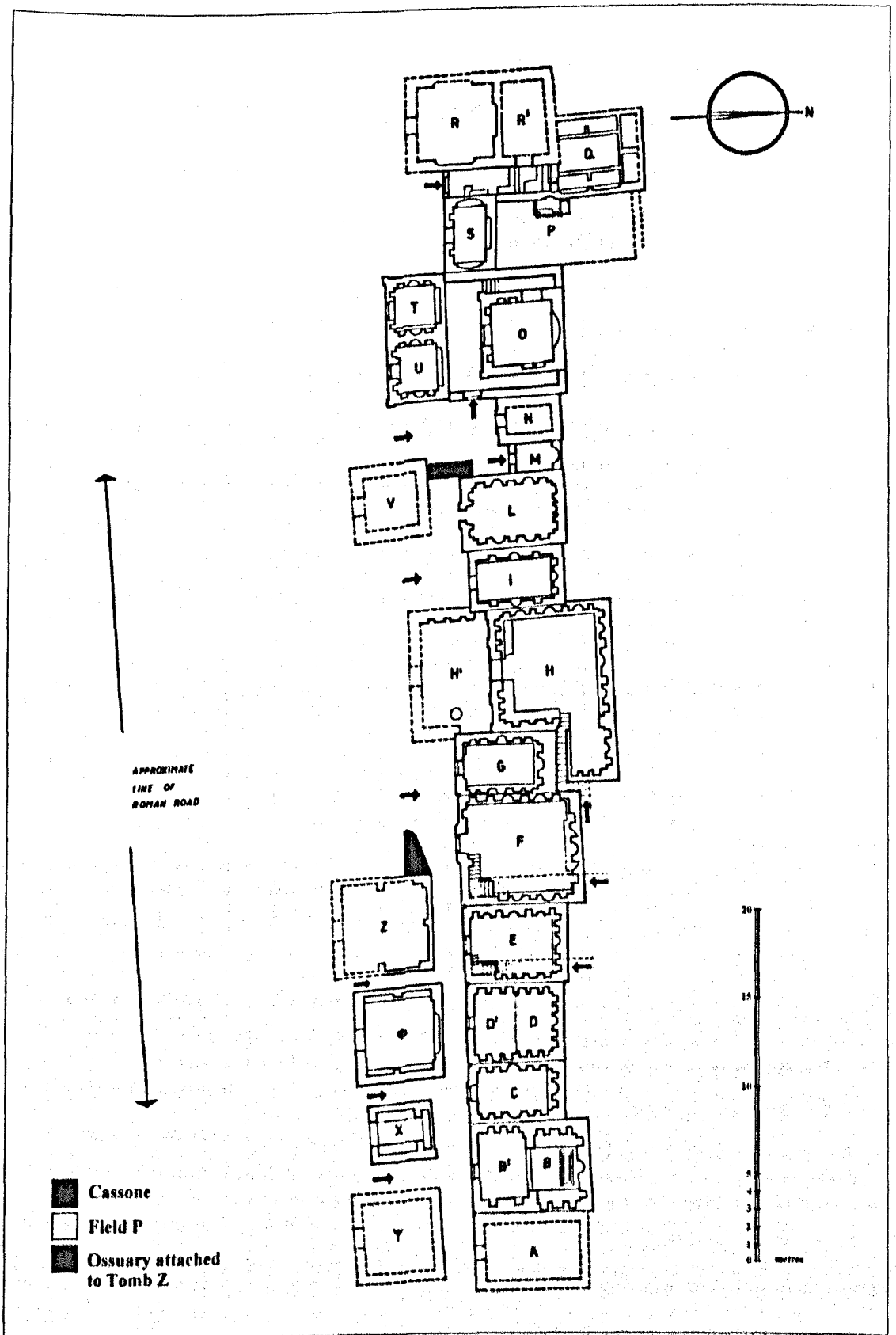


Figure 33. Plan of the Vatican necropolis, Rome (after Toynbee and Ward Perkins, 1956 fig. 3).



(b) *Evidence for poor burial*

Toynbee and Ward Perkins (*ibid.*: 36 – 37) suggest that most of the simpler burials of the cemetery were destroyed during the construction of the Basilica or by excavations focused on the more substantial tombs, but the cemetery provides some evidence for the burial of the poor.

(i) Cassone

The term *cassone* is not used by the excavators of the Vatican to describe any of the burials in the cemetery, but tombs of this type were certainly present and Toynbee and Ward Perkins (*ibid.*: 36) describe a “bench-like tomb of masonry with a semicircular coping which once spanned the corridor between [tombs] L and V, and another similar tomb at right-angles to it” (Fig. 33). These tombs appear to be of the *cassone* type and similar structures are recorded elsewhere in the cemetery. The area known as Field P, where Saint Peter is believed to have been interred in a simple poor grave (Zander, 2003: 58), appears to have remained largely free of substantial structures (Figs. 33 and 34). Several simple burials were recovered from Field P (Fig. 34) including the grave of a child (Grave  $\gamma$ ) which appears to have taken the form of a *cassone*:

“The terra-cotta coffin was protected above by pairs of large flat tiles, laid gable-wise, and for some two-thirds of its length, towards the head, it was encased within a rectangular mass of masonry, which housed a vertical tube for the pouring of libations to the dead beneath. The upper part of this masonry mass, which was faced in brick as a basis for marble veneer ... was originally visible above ground ....”

(*ibid.*: 145).

The structure of Grave  $\gamma$  is reminiscent of the *cassone* at Isola Sacra and is indicative of a desire to both protect and commemorate the deceased. It is possible that the terracotta coffin protected by tiles represents the initial burial with the *cassone* structure built at a later date, possibly when the family could afford the additional expense. The stamped sarcophagus provides a date of AD 115 - 123 (Zander, 2003: 59). Grave  $\eta$ , also in Field P, consisted of “a chest, built up of tiles, which was protected above by a layer of mortared brick and rubble and the whole covered by a marble slab” (Toynbee and Ward Perkins, 1956: 146). Although the structure of these tombs varies they evidently correspond to the same general typology as those of Isola Sacra and they display a concern for protecting and commemorating the deceased with

libation tubes, which indicate the performance of post-funeral activities. The absence of inscriptions, however, prevents further speculation on the nature of the social, legal or economic status of the deceased and their family.<sup>6</sup>

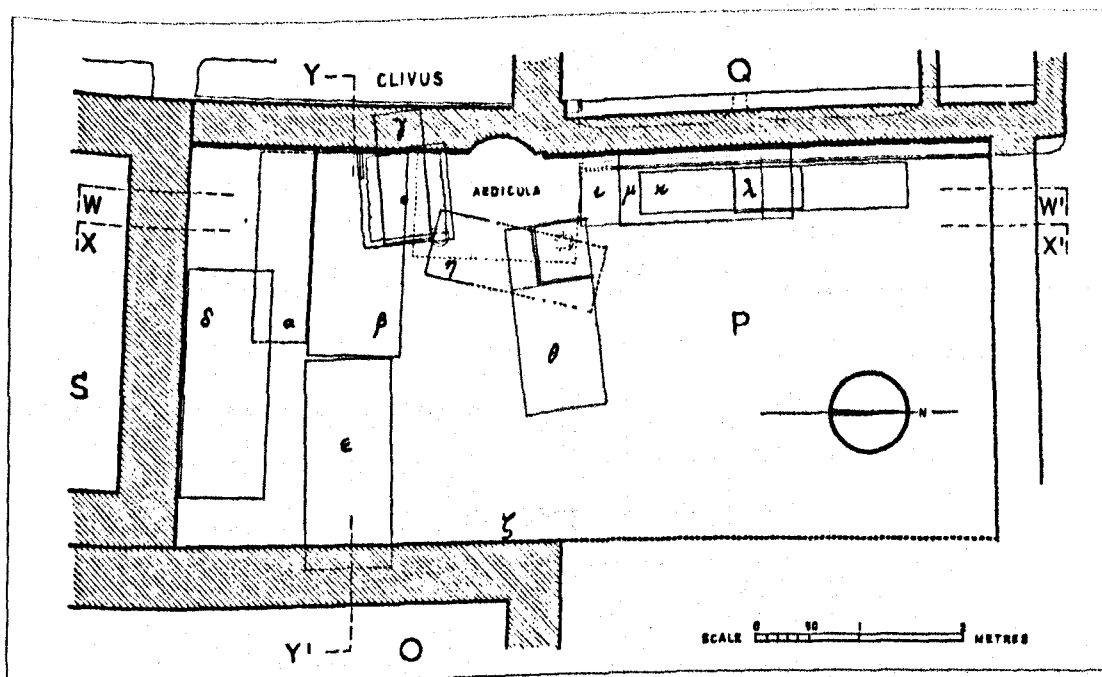


Figure 34. Field P, the Vatican necropolis. Graves referred to in the text are highlighted (modified from Toynbee and Ward Perkins, 1956 fig. 11).

### (ii) Cappuccina

In addition to the use of cappuccina beneath cassone, graves of this type have also been identified within Field P. For example, in Grave  $\theta$ , lying slightly to the north-east of Grave  $\gamma$ , the body was deposited directly into the ground and covered by pairs of tiles set gable-wise (*ibid.*: 146). One tile, bearing a makers stamp, indicates that the burial was not made before the reign of Vespasian (AD 69 – 79) (*ibid.*: 146). Graves  $\zeta$  and  $\iota$ , can also be identified as cappuccina graves of approximately the same date (*ibid.*: 146 – 147). The number of cappuccina is much reduced in comparison with Isola Sacra. This may be partly explained by limited excavation of the open spaces of the cemetery and the restrictions imposed on further investigation by its location. The comparatively small space of Field P was used for simple burials and suggests that

<sup>6</sup> In the case of Grave  $\gamma$  it can be assumed that the family, rather than any form of burial association, was responsible for the burial because the deceased was still a child.

others, including access routes, may have been used in the same way regardless of their size.

### (iii) Other burials

Further non-monumental burials are attested by a small structure associated with Tomb Z (**Fig. 33**). Attached to the eastern face of the tomb, an irregular-shaped chest-like masonry structure contemporary with the building of the mausoleum was filled with human bones (*ibid.*: 53). The structure is pre-Constantinian in date preventing any association with the clearance of the site prior to the construction of the Basilica. As a result, “the probable inference is that these are the remains of earlier burials, found and carefully reburied when the tomb was built” (*ibid.*: 53). This discovery has led to the proposal that the early Vatican cemetery was composed largely of very modest burials gradually replaced by more substantial tombs (*ibid.*: 145). However, simple inhumation (and possibly cremation) burials probably continued to occur within the cemetery subsequent to its development as attested at Isola Sacra.

### (c) *Discussion*

The notable absence of amphora burials within the Vatican necropolis can be explained in several ways. It is possible that grave markers or above-ground indicators were either removed during the construction of the Constantinian Basilica in order to provide access to the site or destroyed during the process. It is also possible that few amphora burials existed within the cemetery, maybe a reflection of local taste and tradition or the availability of material. It is clear, however, that on the Vatican modest burials occupied the spaces between the tombs again representing varying social and economic levels and Toynbee and Ward Perkins (*ibid.*: 145) suggest that this is “what one might expect to find on excavating any early-imperial Roman roadside cemetery.”

## 5.2.2 The Via Triumphalis, Rome

### (a) *The site and excavation history*

Another of the ancient highways which crossed the Vatican region was the Via Triumphalis, along the length of which have been identified scattered tombs, *columbaria* and individual burials. During the construction of a new car park for the

Vatican in 1956 part of a more concentrated necropolis was uncovered. Approximately 240m<sup>2</sup> of the cemetery was excavated under the direction of F. Magi in 1956 – 58 but it has never been comprehensively published (Steinby, 1987: 92).<sup>7</sup> The monumental tombs of the cemetery are arranged in relation to two pathways which pass through the necropolis parallel to the Via Triumphalis, but open areas exist between them (Fig. 35). The tombs take the form of family *columbaria* and enclosures of the Neronian or Flavian periods. Freedmen and freedwomen are found in large numbers within the inscriptions from the cemetery, as are slaves, and the architecture of the tombs is noticeably more modest than those of Isola Sacra or the Vatican. The cemetery was in use primarily from the mid-first century AD to the early third century, although frequent landslides in Antiquity have significantly altered its topography (*ibid.*: 104 – 105). Libation tubes are very much in evidence within the cemetery and although there are no *biclinia* or other permanent provisions for funerary rituals, these presumably took place in the open spaces around the tombs using portable furniture.

(b) *Evidence for poor burial*

(i) Cappuccina

Large numbers of cappuccina burials were excavated within the cemetery in addition to several semicappuccina, such as those attached to Tombs 4 and 11 (Fig. 35). Steinby (*ibid.*: 95) proposes that these belong to the later phases of the cemetery (the late second century AD), when the mausolea had gone out of use. However, the tombs may have remained in use with the semicappuccina reflecting the same concerns proposed for those at Isola Sacra – greater protection, a relationship with the owner, or the extension of ritual activity.

Steinby (*ibid.*: 95; 108) observes that several stone stelae were directly associated with cappuccina burials, pointing, for example, to stele NA 51 in the north eastern sector of the cemetery which was aligned with the end of a cappuccina. The dimensions of the burial plot provided by the inscribed text correspond to the dimensions of the

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<sup>7</sup> Steinby (1987: 92, n.47) points out that the documentation concerning these excavations consists only of a 59 page excavation journal and 453 accompanying photographs. Her discussion of the site is therefore based on an attempt to interpret these preliminary observations in conjunction with the photographic record. It is also observed (*ibid.*: 92, n. 47) that the excavation was not conducted stratigraphically.

cappuccina (*ibid.*: 95). This evidently signals access to greater financial resources than the structure of the cappuccina suggests and a desire for permanent commemoration.

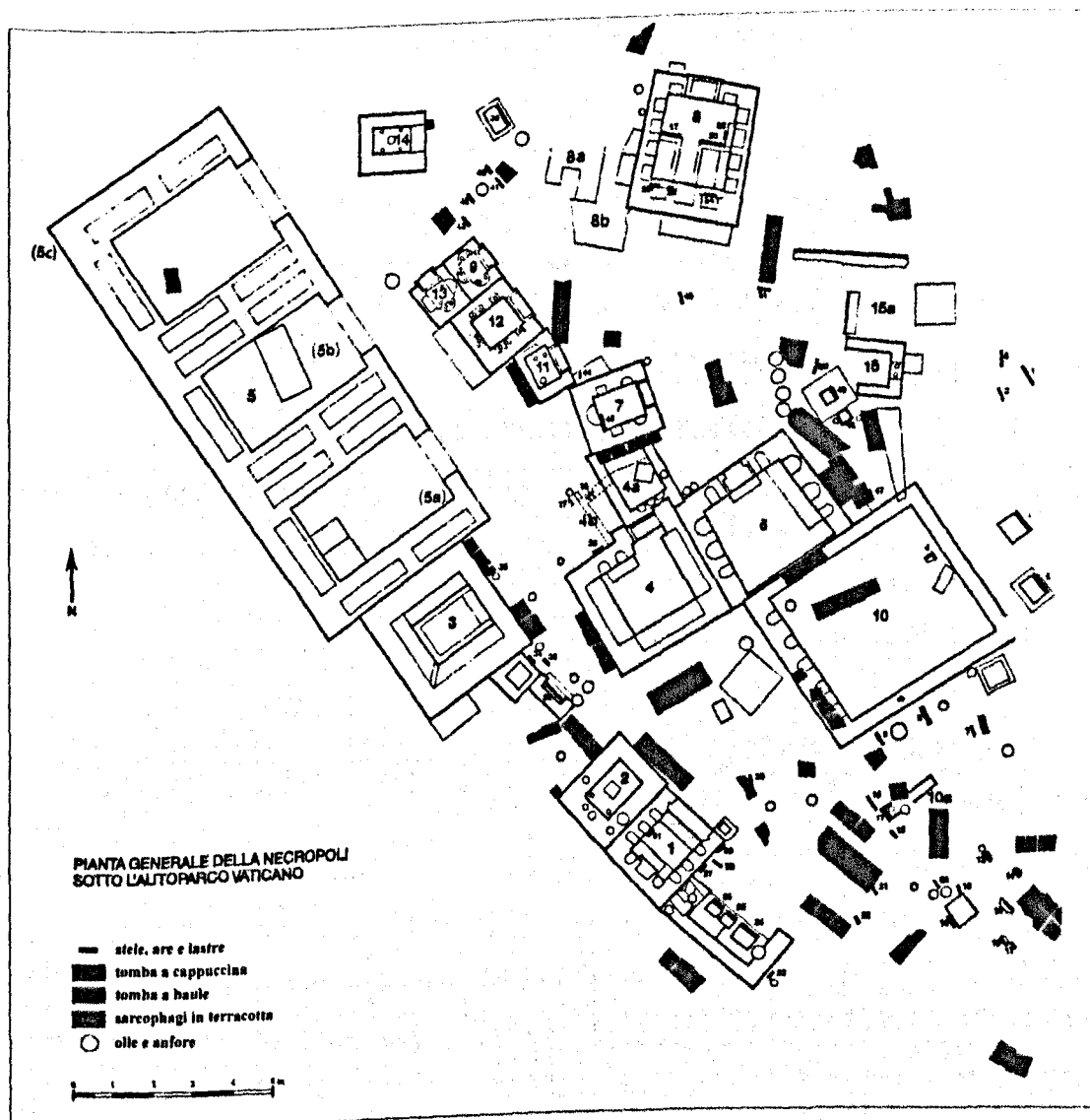


Figure 35. Plan of the Via Triumphalis cemetery, Rome (after Steinby, 1987 plan 1).

### (ii) Amphora burials

Vertical amphorae have been identified in the cemetery which Steinby (*ibid.*: 95) suggests served as protective containers for the urns holding the cremated remains of the deceased, although only one urn containing ashes was recovered. Several of these amphorae were placed in front or clustered behind stelae (*ibid.*: 96). For example, stele NA 50, erected by Ti. Claudius Aug. L. and his free son to his wife (a freedwoman) can possibly be associated with the 5 amphorae aligned behind it (plus a

sixth visible in the embankment) (*ibid.*: 94). This may represent a family group, the amphorae protecting (in addition to marking, and facilitating libations) the cremated remains of the three named individuals in addition to other family members, slaves or freedmen. These 'family' plots are reminiscent of those postulated for Isola Sacra. Not all of the amphorae were associated with inscribed stone markers; a situation that Steinby (*ibid.*: 108) explains as the result of destruction or a lack of attention to proper documentation during the initial excavations. Alternatively, the amphorae themselves may have provided the only visible indication of the presence of a grave.

### (c) Discussion

Cassone have not been specifically identified within the cemetery, although the "tomba a baule" shown on the plan (Fig. 35) may correspond to this type of burial.<sup>8</sup> The quantity of inscribed stelae within the Via Triumphalis cemetery indicates that many of those buried within it had greater access to the economic resources required for permanent commemoration. However, this evidently did not allow the construction of a more substantial family mausoleum and the stelae may signal the upper limit of their resources. Individuals buried within cappuccina or amphorae marked by stone stelae may have exhausted their financial resources on the purchase of a substantial marker, perhaps not erecting it for some considerable time after the burial. Steinby (*ibid.*: 109) proposes "an air of poverty" for the necropolis, emphasised by the absence of a regular plan, the high number of small tombs and the modest artistic quality of their decoration and design. The cappuccina and amphora burials should be included within this, for although some were associated with inscribed stelae, there remain many more that were unmarked. Given the circumstances surrounding the original excavation, it is possible that many other non-monumental burials existed within the cemetery. However, the Via Triumphalis necropolis illustrates the varying levels of poverty within urban society and the various burial options that were available.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Steinby does not provide specific details concerning this feature, although its designation as a "trunk tomb" (*tomba a baule*) hints at a relationship with cassone (chest tombs).

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note here a short article by Sophie Arie published in *The Guardian* (Tuesday March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003) in which it was reported that in the process of clearing space for a new car park for the Vatican, tombs and graves dating to the reign of Nero were discovered. Amongst these was "the tombstone of Nero's secretary, along with well-preserved urns and amphorae." This perhaps indicates that a particularly large area of the Vatican hill was used in Antiquity as a burial site and that there may have been more amphora burials than excavations in the region have previously recorded. No further details concerning the location or nature of these discoveries have been made available.

### 5.3 Lower class burial in Italy

The nature and composition of the evidence for lower class funerary practices at the sites examined above has made it possible for them to be discussed in terms of grave typology. In order to place this data within its widest context there now follows a less detailed summary of the evidence for poor burial found at various other sites in Italy (see also **Table 9**).

Immediately to the north-east of Rome, a short distance from the course of the **Via Nomentana**, lie three suburban cemeteries. Dating to the Imperial period, the northern and southern cemeteries of the estate of Boccone D'Aste and one located along the road of Vigne Nouve, comprise approximately 137 individual graves (Filippis, 2001: 55). Amongst these were isolated examples of *busta sepulchra* (4 in the southern cemetery), terracotta sarcophagi (3 in the northern cemetery) and a single marble sarcophagus (northern cemetery), although the majority of burials were simple inhumations overlain by a protective covering of tiles or bricks (*ibid.*: 58). De Filippis (*ibid.*: 58) distinguishes between two types of tile cover – those risen up into cappuccina and others placed level with the top of the grave, noting that varying numbers of tiles (between 2 and 8) were employed in each case. Almost all of the materials used in the construction of grave covers within these cemeteries, including the variety of broken ceramic vessels used to seal gaps and joints, show traces of previous use, except for a handful of cappuccina in the southern cemetery which appear to have employed material purchased specifically for the purpose (*ibid.*: 58). De Filippis (*ibid.*: 59) notes, for example, that 14 graves dated to the second century AD use ceramics and tiles that can be attributed to the Republic and that the 30 stamps found on tiles and bricks within the southern cemetery imply that material was recovered from a nearby villa built during the late Republic or early Imperial period. The reuse of readily available second-hand building material parallels the situation identified at Isola Sacra and suggests that grave cover typologies were dictated more by the availability of material than religious, ethnic or traditional customs.

It has also been observed (*ibid.*: 58) that although wooden coffins and other receptacles are rare, the depositions within these three cemeteries were made with considerable care. De Filippis (*ibid.*: 58) identifies at least two examples of graves

with small tufa 'pillows' and 15 instances in which the grave was cut in order to accommodate the head of the deceased. He also proposes (*ibid.*: 55) that the spatial organisation of the southern cemetery, the most densely occupied of the three (80 graves), and the use of similar grave typologies and materials, indicates the presence of probable family groups. Agricultural activity has largely destroyed any above-ground grave markers although traces have been found of terracotta libation pipes positioned vertically above the head of the deceased in both the southern and northern cemeteries (*ibid.*: 60). Similarly, damage to the graves themselves has often destroyed evidence for grave goods, although these appear to have been scarce in general (*ibid.*: 60). Ceramic vessels were occasionally deposited within the graves, in addition to lamps, glass perfume vials, coins and nails. The presence of ceramic vessels outside or on top of the tile cover of the grave provides further evidence for continued ritual activity once the grave was sealed (*ibid.*: 60). De Filippis (*ibid.*: 60 – 61) concludes that the individuals interred within these cemeteries belonged to a relatively low socio-economic level, perhaps slaves or farmers, who were dedicated to the agricultural exploitation of the land on which they resided. The isolated examples of *busta* and terracotta or marble sarcophagi may represent members of the community who possessed a higher economic status or position within it (*ibid.*: 60).

A similar cemetery has been located in the area of **Malafede-Fralana** in the locality of Ostia. Believed to be associated with the late Republican-early Imperial villa of Fabius Cilo, this necropolis consists of 30 burials dated between the second and fourth century AD (Falzone, *et al.*, 2001: 129). Inhumation was the dominant burial rite within the cemetery, although at least 9 cremation burials were present, including 3 *busta sepulchra* with clay-lined pits (*ibid.*: 129). The cremated remains of the latter were protected by cappuccina and provided with libation conduits of various materials. At least 2 other cremation graves had cappuccina erected above them and a further 2 had tiles placed flat across of the top of the grave (*ibid.*: 129). Similar flat grave covers were employed for inhumation burials and several variants of cappuccina have also been identified, including those making use of *bipedales* and amphora fragments to cover and seal the joins (*ibid.*: 130). Only 3 instances of horizontal amphora burials have been located, each using fragments from different amphorae placed side by side (*ibid.*: 130). Although these burials have no grave goods, they have been dated to the second century AD onwards on the basis of the amphora types, with the presence of



African vessels of the third to fifth century AD indicating that these burials were amongst the last to be made in the necropolis (*ibid.*: 313). Grave goods are scarce within the cemetery, with only 13 objects recovered, including oil lamps and small jugs containing coins or nails, usually placed at the feet of the deceased but sometimes deposited outside the cappuccina (*ibid.*: 131). The grave goods show traces of use, thus indicating that they were not made specifically for funerary purposes (*ibid.*: 133). The cemetery was used primarily during the second century AD and sporadically during the third, by a community that appears to have been socially modest, probably the inhabitants of the nearby villa and other neighbouring residences (*ibid.*: 133).

Also near to Ostia lies **Pianabella**. Located to the south-east of the city, this region was employed as a necropolis for a considerable period of time, at least up to the fifth century AD (Carbonara, *et al.*, 2001: 139). Unlike the previous two examples however, this area was closely connected with the urban centre itself, and lies close to the excavated cemetery of the Via Laurentina (see Floriani Squarciapino, 1958). The composition of the necropolis bears many similarities to the other cemeteries of Ostia (and to an extent, Isola Sacra), and it contains substantial structures, generally of the *columbarium*-type or open enclosures similar to those in the Via Laurentina and Porta Romana cemeteries (Carbonara, *et al.*, 2001: 141). Carbonara *et al.*, have examined two cemetery areas within this region, the first of which lies to the south-west of the modern cemetery of Pianabella and consists of at least 6 structures aligned with both a major road and an internal cemetery access route (*ibid.*: 140). Between the simple unroofed enclosures, dating from the first century AD, were located isolated cassone, one of which contained the body of a child inhumed at the end of the first century AD and provided with 2 small common ware jugs and a libation conduit (*ibid.*: 141). Other cremation and inhumation graves have been identified within the open enclosures, including a cinerary urn with libation tube, a cremated neonate placed within an amphora and a cappuccina built above an adult inhumation (*ibid.*: 141). During the Imperial period the free spaces between the mausolea also become increasingly occupied by burials in earthen graves, semicappuccina, cappuccina and amphorae (*ibid.*: 141). In the second area of investigation, near to the Christian basilica of Pianabella, 15 structures of variable size were aligned with the edge of a road. Behind these structures were two plastered cassone with libation devices, both built above a cappuccina which protected the remains (1 inhumation, 1 cremation)

(*ibid.*: 143 – 144). It has been concluded (*ibid.*: 148) that although only partially excavated, the two burial areas reflect a community of mid- or low social status (probably slaves and freedmen) where the rites of cremation and inhumation were used contemporaneously. This conclusion is based largely on the paucity of grave goods, a situation reflected by all the cemeteries discussed in this chapter.

Similar cemeteries and grave typologies have also been identified in the north of Italy. Cipollone (2002: 5) reports the discovery of two distinct burial sites (one of Republican date, the other Imperial) comprising 237 graves at **Gubbio (Perugia)** in Umbria. The graves were, “arranged in a regular manner and at times grouped inside an enclosure or marked by inscribed stelae and markers. There is evidence of both cremation – in pots and other vases or in pits – and burial – in graves, in “tombe alla cappuccina,” in amphorae and in jars” (*ibid.*: 5). The arrangement of the graves, respecting the orientation of one another, suggests that many were recognisable on the surface either through the presence of a grave marker or libation device. This is supported further by an absence of intercutting or grave superimposition within the cemeteries, leading Cipollone (*ibid.*: 8) to propose that perishable materials such as fences or hedges may have delimited burial plots. The Imperial-period graves have been attributed to the first and second century AD, particularly between the Claudian and Antonine periods (*ibid.*: 10). Discovered amongst these graves were several cremation urns deposited within stone-lined pits, occasionally also covered with fragments of tile. Examples were also identified of cremation urns sealed with lead moulded around the rim of the vessel, often with an accompanying lead libation conduit (up to 50cm in length) inserted at the centre of the lid (**Fig. 36**). The cremation burials have been dated predominantly to the first and second centuries AD and the inhumation graves largely from the second century AD onwards. These were often made using wooden coffins or funerary stretchers (attested by a linear arrangement of nails) placed directly into the grave and covered by a tile cappuccina. For example, three flat tiles, covered with a fine layer of soil, were arranged on the base of Tomb 89 prior to the deposition of the body, contained within a coffin or placed on a stretcher, which was protected by a cappuccina of 5 fragmentary tiles and a re-used urn lid, with 2 tiles used to seal the open ends of the structure (*ibid.*: 118). There was a limited range of grave goods within the cemetery, often restricted to a single deposit of an oil lamp, coin, glass vessel or ceramic cup.

Substantial mausolea are absent but the cemetery displays a considerable degree of variety amongst its simple graves. Libation conduits indicate that continued ritual activity was considered important, and the design of the devices ensured that the offerings reached the remains of the deceased. The use of cappuccina, and in some cases the reinforcement of graves with tiles or stones, testifies to the care with which the dead were buried and a desire to protect the interred remains.

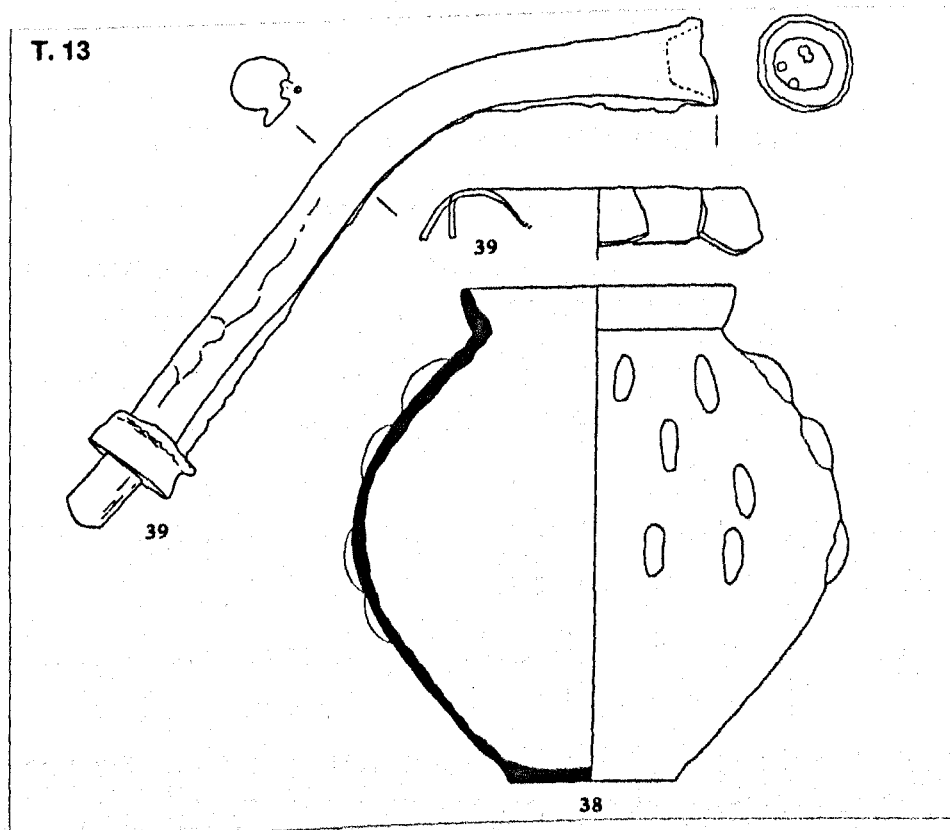


Figure 36. Cremation urn (38) and lead libation pipe and cover (39) of Tomb 13, Gubbio (after Cipollone, 2002, fig. 26).

Similar grave typologies are encountered in the modern **Emilia Romagna** region in the north-east of Italy, including both direct (*bustum*) and indirect cremations and inhumations dating to the Imperial period (Ortalli, 2001: 228 – 229). Ortalli (*ibid.*: 229) observes that protective structures were frequently built in the graves once the remains had been deposited. These often consist of inverted amphorae, bricks, cappuccina or tiles laid flat across the grave. Preparations for continued ritual activity take the form of libation devices. Ortalli (*ibid.*: 231 – 232) notes the use of vertical amphorae for this purpose and proposes that instances in which the base of the vessel was not pierced suggest that the custom of giving offerings occasionally assumed a purely

symbolic nature. Examples of true libation devices in the form of a cut amphora inserted into the cappuccina or brick cover of graves have been recorded at Sarsina, Riccione and Rimini, and lead pipes were fixed either into the tomb structure or directly into the ground in the Via Flaminia cemetery at Rimini (*ibid.*: 232). Traces of funerary meals (including animal bones) have also been identified in conjunction with graves, in addition to offerings of lamps and ceramic or glass vessels made after the grave was sealed (*ibid.*: 230 – 231).

At **Sarsina** (ancient Sassina), within the Emilia Romagna region, two small burial areas have been identified immediately outside the hypothesised line of the city walls to the south and east of the urban area (Ortalli, 1987: 155). Both areas are documented only by occasional discoveries but appear to have been composed largely of Imperial-period cappuccina without any significant monumental structures (*ibid.*: 155). Although Ortalli (*ibid.*: 156) suggests that the location of these graves appears to exclude the presence of a *pomerium*, the same situation occurs at Pompeii where Mau (1899: 421) suggested that space in the public strip of land around the town was granted to the poor for burial purposes (see below). The main concentration of tombs at Sarsina, however, lies approximately 1km from the city at Pian di Bezzo, the flat plain bordering the river at the bottom of the valley, where an inscribed cippus of the mid first century BC was discovered (Ortalli, 1987: 157). The text of the cippus reports a donation made by Horatius Balbus to the less well-off citizens of Sarsina, providing each person with an area of land 10 feet square within which they were not permitted to raise monuments until the death of the addressee (CIL 1<sup>2</sup> 2123) (*ibid.*: 157). Ortalli (*ibid.*: 157) notes that this not only presupposes the existence and official recognition of a significant and definitive under-privileged class within the population of Sarsina during the late Republic, but also that wealthier members of the community carried out acts of benefaction. However, it is unlikely that *every* member of the community was granted a burial plot, and ancient concepts of 'poverty' and those worthy of charitable acts probably excluded those most in need of assistance. Furthermore, the dimensions and time restrictions imposed on the use of these plots indicate that they were intended to contain monuments of significant size and expense. The cappuccina adjacent to the city walls suggest that even when burial space was provided free of charge not everyone was capable of affording the construction of a substantial memorial within it. It is therefore likely that the "less well-off" intended by the

inscription corresponded to ancient concepts of 'the poor' rather than socio-economic reality.

	<i>Cassone</i>	<i>Cappuccina</i>	<i>Vertical amphorae</i>	<i>Horizontal amphorae</i>	<i>Terracotta sarcophagi</i>	<i>Wooden coffins</i>	<i>Urns</i>	<i>Earthen graves</i>	<i>Busta sepulchra</i>
Isola Sacra	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Vatican	•	•			•				
Via Triumphalis		•	•		•		•		
Via Nomentana		•			•				•
Malafede-Fralana		•		•					•
Pianabella	•	•		•			•	•	
Gubbio		•		•		•	•	•	
Emilia Romagna		•	•	•				•	•
Sarsina		•							

**Table 9.** Summary of the grave typologies identified at the sites discussed in the text.

This brief examination of evidence for lower class burial activities elsewhere in Italy has highlighted the following:

- Similar grave typologies were in use in all areas of Italy and do not appear to correspond to local customs (possibly with the exception of cassone which are largely confined to the area of Rome and Ostia) (**Table 9**).
- The availability of materials was often the dominant factor in determining the typology of the grave's protective cover.
- Cremation and inhumation often coexisted without apparent religious or ethnic associations.
- Provision for ritual activities and offerings to the deceased were highly important and even once buried the deceased were not forgotten by their surviving friends and family.

- Protection of the remains of the dead and the provision of a proper burial were highly significant.

Although many of these sites were not purely urban in nature, they were all associated with local urban centres (Rome, Ostia, Gubbio, and Sarsina) and it is unlikely that considerable differences existed in terms of attitudes and burial traditions between the inhabitants of a city and its suburbs. The only real difference that existed between these sites and Rome itself was one of scale and the number of individuals who required disposal.

#### 5.4 Other poor burials?

The problems inherent in the archaeological identification of lower class burial activity can be illustrated by two further examples. Both instances involve apparently simple or modest burial and commemorative activities which on closer examination prove to be unrepresentative of the funerary practices of the lower classes.

##### (a) *San Cesareo and Via Salaria, Rome*

In 1732 approximately 300 small ceramic pots were discovered in the vineyard of San Cesareo on the Via Appia, close to the Porta Capena (Purcell, 1987: 34, n.40) (Fig. 37). These vessels, in the form of single-handled pitchers, contained ashes and pieces of burnt bone, and the body of each was inscribed or painted with a name and a date (Friggeri, 2001: 67). For example, a pear-shaped common ware vessel measuring 6cm in height, bears the following inscription:

*Iunia C(ai) f(ilia) / A(nte) d(iem) IX k(alendas) Nuem(bres).*

(CIL I<sup>2</sup> 1082)

The pots date to the second century BC (Purcell, 1987: 34, n.40) and their common interpretation focuses on a probable connection with *os resectum*, also known as *os exceptum* (Friggeri, 2001: 67). The rite of *os resectum* was closely linked with religious beliefs concerning proper burial, allowing the deceased to receive symbolic inhumation in instances where their remains were cremated. Both Varro (*L.L.* V. 23)

and Cicero (*De Leg.* II.xxii. 53 – 56) refer to the practice, which involved the severing of a bone of the deceased prior to cremation, often a finger. Examples of this rite have been identified in Imperial Gaul, including at Civeux (Vienna) where an entire unburnt right foot and the toes of the left were deposited alongside an urn holding the cremated remains of the same individual (Simon-Hiernard, 1987: 93). Messineo (2001: 35) also reports the discovery of several small vessels in the cemetery on the Via Salaria at Rome, on the lids and bodies of which were written names and precise dates (possibly the *dies natalis* (birth date) or date of death of the deceased), occasionally accompanied by reference to a *cohors*. Similar examples have been identified at Capena and on the Esquiline (*ibid.*: 35), and Carbonara *et al.* (2001: 147) note the presence of a single bone within an urn at Pianabella near Ostia.



**Figure 37.** Two of the small vessels with rough inscriptions and associated with the rite of *os resectum* from the San Cesareo vineyard, Rome (Friggeri, 2001 p.67).

Varro (*L.L.* V. 23) explains that the process of *os resectum* was carried out in order to purify the family who otherwise must remain in mourning. It remains unclear, however, at which point of the funerary ceremony either the cutting or burial of the bone took place. Simon-Hiernard (1987: 93) has suggested that this took place on the day of the funeral as part of a single ceremony. However, Messineo (2001: 36) points

out that Tibullus (I, III, 15 – 22), in his description of the collection of cremated remains and their subsequent interment, makes no reference to the specific selection of individual bones or a double burial involving the burnt and unburnt remains. Furthermore, the San Cesareo vessels are reported to have contained *burnt* bone, thus implying that the severing of the bone occurred after or during the incineration process. The frequency with which this rite took place is also unknown, Messineo (2001: 36) suggesting that the few archaeological attestations and the scarcity of textual references to the process indicate that it was not very common, although in certain periods and perhaps under specific circumstances it may not have been unusual. He also proposes a link between the vessels of the Via Salaria and individuals who died away from home, pointing out that references to *cohors* may indicate a military context (*ibid.*: 37). However, as he subsequently notes, both these vessels and those from San Cesareo often bear female names and therefore cannot be exclusively connected with the military (*ibid.*: 37; see also Carroll, forthcoming). Moreover, the remains may have belonged to individuals who died in foreign lands and were returned to their families for burial, but this does not satisfactorily explain why they were all buried together, unless they had some form of personal or official relationship with one another during life. The names recorded on both sets of vessels recall those of the lower classes, including freedmen, slaves and freeborn individuals but it is unlikely that the remains of slaves would be regularly returned to Rome should they die elsewhere.

The frequency of these names has led to the association of the pots with lower class funerary practices (Friggeri, 2001: 67), but this assumption can be questioned on the grounds that cremation was an expensive activity, made considerably more complex by the need to remove a piece of bone at some point during the proceedings. It is possible that the individual bone was selected from amongst the least destroyed cremated remains once the pyre had been extinguished, although the frequency of finger bones in the San Cesareo pots implies the selection of a specific part of the body. The fate of the cremated remains of the deceased is also unknown, Messineo (2001: 36) observing that Plutarch (*Rom.* 79) explicitly states that the rite of double burial was reserved for heroes of the state. Furthermore, the scarcity of archaeological attestations of *os resectum* implies that it was not a regular part of every cremation and that burial of the ashes was usually considered sufficient guarantee of proper



religious burial. Both the vessels of the cemetery on the Via Salaria and San Cesareo were discovered amongst the remains of larger tombs, in the case of the former a first century AD *columbarium* (Messineo, 2001: 35). The relationship between the pots and the tombs is difficult to establish and it is unclear whether they originally occupied niches within them or were interred in the ground outside. If the vessels were directly associated with the tombs they may therefore represent the remains of members of an early *collegium* or large household with the rite of *os resectum* being specific to that particular group (the seventeenth century scholar of the San Cesareo vessels (cited in Messineo, 2001: 36) proposed a single religious or ethnic community although there is no direct evidence to support this claim).

In order to fully understand the context of the San Cesareo and Via Salaria vessels the process of *os resectum* requires significant re-investigation. Although these pots evidently belong to ex-slaves, slaves and other members of the lower classes it cannot be concluded that this practice was widespread amongst the more humble levels of the urban community. The simplicity of the containers and their inscriptions mask what may have been a particularly complex, and possibly expensive, process.

#### (b) *Pompeii, Campania*

Despite the excellent preservation of several Pompeian cemeteries,<sup>10</sup> there exists a surprising lack of evidence for the presence of lower class burials. However, in the late nineteenth century, Mau (1899: 421) made the following observation:

“No part of the highway leading from the Nola Gate has yet been excavated. In the year 1854, however, excavations were made for a short distance along the city wall near this gate, and thirty-six cinerary urns were found buried in the earth. In or near them were perfume vials of terra cotta with a few of glass. Here in the pomerium, the strip of land along the outside of the walls, which was left vacant for religious as well as practical reasons, the poor were permitted to bury the ashes of their dead without cost. In some cases the place of the urn was indicated by a bust stone; often the spot was kept in memory merely by cutting upon the outside of the city walls the name of the person whose ashes rested here.”

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<sup>10</sup> For a variety of descriptions of these cemeteries and their monuments see Brion (1960), D’Ambrosio and De Caro (1987), Dyer (1875), Kockel (1983), and Maiuri (1929).

Mau's claim that the poor were buried free of charge within the *pomerium* is interesting, especially given the parallels that can be drawn with the simple cappuccina adjacent to the city walls at Sarsina. Maiuri (1929: 107) claimed that regulations concerning the use of the *pomerium* at Pompeii were greatly relaxed during the Imperial period and houses and gardens were constructed within its limits. That this was, however, considered problematic is attested by a series of inscribed regulations erected outside several of the gates of the city (Porta Nocera, Porta Ercolana, Porta Vesuvio, Porta Marina), that bear the following text:

'By the authority of the Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus, Titus Suedius Clemens, tribune, made an inquiry into public lands appropriated by private individuals, carried out a survey, and restored them to the Pompeian state.'

(CIL X 1018)

One of these inscriptions remains *in situ* 29.35m outside the Porta Nocera (see Sertà, 2001 – 2002, and Cooley and Cooley, 2004), and its location at the furthest limit of the *pomerium* indicates that it was this strip of public land in particular that concerned the authorities. The *pomerium* was evidently not intended to be used for private purposes but people had begun to disregard this in order to construct houses and gardens in the empty spaces at the edge of the city. Tombs were probably also excluded since burial of human remains rendered the ground no longer public but religious, although exceptions could presumably be made in instances where burial space within the *pomerium* was granted to individuals by the city authorities. The inscribed regulations cannot, however, have been in force for more than ten years (the survey was conducted under the authority of Vespasian) and it is therefore difficult to assess their true impact on activities within the *pomerium*.

Mau's observation also remains important as an illustration of the desire to record the name and existence of the deceased regardless of their status as well as the transient nature of some forms of commemoration. The names inscribed upon the city wall have been erased by exposure to the elements, something that would also have occurred in Antiquity had the eruption of Vesuvius not preserved them.<sup>11</sup> This perhaps reflects the fate of other forms of commemoration employed by the lower classes,

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<sup>11</sup> A search of the city walls immediately outside the Porta Nola failed to find any trace of these inscriptions and the bust stones have been removed.

their perishable nature rendering them vulnerable to destruction or decay. It also further illustrates the exploitation of diverse materials for funerary purposes.



**Figure 38.** *Columellae* at Pompeii, Campania (photos author).

Since Mau's initial observations, the "bust stones" have been re-examined and reinterpreted. Known as *columellae*, these take the form of small stelae resembling a human head, neck and upper torso (**Fig. 38**). Male and female *columellae* were often differentiated by the back of the head which was left smooth for males but carved with various stylised hairstyles for females. Made of limestone, lava, local tufa and, in later periods, marble (De'Spagnolis, 2001: 176), the face, or more rarely the trunk, is often inscribed with a name although many were also anepigraphic. These *columellae* are found within a restricted geographical region, comprising Pompeii, Nocera, Stabiae, Sorrento, Herculaneum and Sarno, and they date from the second century BC to the time of the eruption in AD 79 (*ibid.*: 176).

Mau (1899: 421) interpreted these simple stelae as the commemorative monuments of the poor, given the simplicity of their design and inscription. However, recent

excavations suggest that his interpretation is incorrect. Excavating the Porta Nocera cemetery, D'Ambrosio and De Caro (1987) uncovered several enclosure tombs containing *columellae*. Several of the enclosures were defined only by the arrangement of *columellae* in an angular inverted U-shape (*ibid.*: 215) and have been interpreted as belonging to family or household groups, with the *columellae* recording the names of both the enclosure owners and their freedmen and slaves (*ibid.*: 218). A further group of 11 *columellae* was revealed in the locality of Calcarella at Castellammare di Stabia, all but one (anepigraphic) of which bear inscriptions relating to freedmen/women and slaves of the *gens Poppaea* (Magalhaes, 1999: 224). The majority of the cippi were accompanied by simple burials (generally cremations) which were either contained within, or protected or marked by amphorae and other ceramic vessels, or small cappuccina. Libation conduits linked several of the burials with the surface and provide evidence for continued ritual activity. To the south-east of the main concentration of *columellae* lay a circle of limestone containing evidence of burning, interpreted as the remains of an *ustrinum* (*ibid.*: 231). These *columellae* clearly represent a distinct group of slaves and former slaves from a single *familia*. In addition, *columellae* were incorporated into the façades of the more elaborate tombs of Pompeii (Hope, 1997: 82) where they represent various significant members of the household and the family. It is therefore impossible to regard the *columellae* as grave markers belonging exclusively to the lower classes for they formed part of a local commemorative tradition with strict geographical limits and Hope (*ibid.*: 83) states that “[a]s these stelae are generally of uniform size and shape, it seems unlikely that status and identity were stressed through design.” This highlights the difficulties inherent in the identification of lower class burial activity and demonstrates that simple graves and grave markers do not necessarily reflect a low social, legal or economic status.

The relative absence of large numbers of lower class burials at Pompeii is intriguing. Although this lack of evidence may be attributable to the context in which many of the cemeteries of the city were excavated, it is unlikely that this is entirely responsible. Pompeii was a large, thriving city with a not inconsiderable population (estimates vary between 8,000 and 12,000 at the time of the eruption (Lazer, 1997)), not all of whom are represented within its cemeteries. It is possible that many of those who worked within Pompeii resided outside the city and were perhaps buried closer to their place

of residence or traditional family home. There is little evidence for lower class housing at Pompeii, for example, and although it is probable that much of this existed in the upper storeys of buildings destroyed during the eruption there were evidently no major apartment blocks such as those of Ostia and Rome (see Robinson, 1997). Equally, it is conceivable that urban centres such as Pompeii simply did not have a considerable population of poverty stricken individuals. It is likely that the population density of the city was determined by its economy, with a limited number of opportunities for employment beyond established limits. Unemployment levels were probably low, and, although beggars and those at the lowest end of the economic scale undoubtedly existed, they were undoubtedly in the minority. Individuals finding themselves out of work may have moved elsewhere, possibly to Rome where there were believed to be greater and more varied employment opportunities. Rome was therefore likely to have had a larger population of unemployed individuals and casual or temporary workers than a smaller city such as Pompeii and thus greater levels of poverty.

## 5.5 Discussion

In Chapter 3 it was suggested that varying unstable levels of economic poverty, and consequently social status, existed within the urban lower classes. To an extent these differing degrees can be detected within the modest burials discussed here. The diverse types of graves encountered (including cassone, cappuccina, vertical and horizontal amphorae, sarcophagi, earthen graves and *busta*) cannot, however, be directly equated with specific groups within the lower classes due to the absence of epigraphic data. The grave typologies appear to have been largely dictated by the availability of inexpensive building materials, and the characteristics of the grave may not necessarily be a direct reflection of the economic, legal or social status of the deceased. The cassone do, however, reflect a considerably greater financial investment and, as a result, can possibly be loosely associated with the “temporary poor”, described by Garnsey (1998: 227) as “small shopkeepers and artisans, who enjoyed a somewhat higher social and economic status, but were liable to slip into poverty in times of shortage or at difficult points in their life cycles,” which might explain their ability to afford a more substantial above-ground structure.

One of the most significant details to emerge from this discussion is the attention that was paid to the protection of buried remains, seen in the use of multiple containers, terracotta sarcophagi interred below cappuccina or cassone, and cremation urns placed within amphorae. This wish to ensure that the remains of the deceased were not disturbed may have been influenced, in part, by the location of these graves in highly frequented areas of the cemetery, but it also implies the existence of strongly held beliefs concerning proper religious burial. The emphasis that has been placed on the *puticuli* in modern scholarly literature has created an image of the poor as unconcerned with the fate of the body but the burials discussed here indicate that this was certainly not the case. These concerns extended also to ritual activities designed to care for the shade in the afterlife, and libation conduits are a common feature within all the cemeteries examined. The living evidently intended to return regularly to the grave and ensured that facilities were in place in order to assist the efficient observance of rituals. Commemoration was also important, although substantial evidence for this does not often survive. Modest graves were probably signalled by above-ground markers of varying elaboration and different materials, including vertical amphorae which may have been painted with personal information. Perhaps most significantly, commemoration also occurred through the process of ritual activity and the regular visits made to the grave by surviving family and friends to make offerings.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Regardless of their wealth, rank or identity, the majority of Roman urban society evidently considered it essential to be commemorated after death and, particularly during the late Republic, did so in increasingly elaborate ways. Commemoration not only provided the deceased with immortality by preserving their memory in the face of its potential annihilation in the afterlife, but also operated amongst the living to establish, promote and negotiate the social position of the dead and their surviving family. Through the public display of identity (and the often related issue of wealth) the funerary monument also acted to create and legitimise the identity of the deceased. The inherent instability of urban society during this period heightened the significance of these processes to individuals with an uncertain or relatively new status that might be vulnerable to challenge or change, and the funerary monument allowed them to make public statements that affirmed their identity in a permanent and socially acceptable format. The importance of these processes was therefore not confined to the wealthy but encompassed the entire social spectrum. Poorer members of the urban community were equally affected by fears of the afterlife and the consequent desire for immortality, and thus also wished to publicly display their identity. Although identity was frequently closely linked to social status and wealth, the absence of either did not decrease the desire to be seen to be part of society and to have that identity recognised. Occupational reliefs for example, demonstrate a wish to display an identity centred on commercial success. Equally, commemoration and the desire to preserve memory were influenced by forces of emotion, which although difficult to define, affected the lives of all members of the community and were particularly powerful on the occasion of death. Economic constraints compelled poorer members of society to express these emotions through more modest forms of memorial and funerary activities. A simple memorial was not indicative of an absence of emotion, affection or grief, with the act of memorialising itself signalling a degree of emotional investment.

The need to provide the remains of the dead with proper religious burial was also highly influential in shaping the funerary activities of all social groups. Religious beliefs concerning legitimate burial were firmly established and their strength is indicated by their persistence through time and the role they played within legal contexts. Radically different beliefs were not held by members of the lower classes, indeed, superstitions often persist most strongly amongst lower levels of society and it is therefore probable that the fear of restless spirits, responsible for the need for proper burial, was particularly acute amongst these groups. The funeral was also essential to the maintenance of an individual's social position and the expression of their identity, allowing direct communication with the populace. The funerary ceremonies of the poor were undoubtedly more modest than those of the aristocracy but the desire to partake in such activities and the recognition of the opportunities they offered for personal advancement, legitimacy and immortality, was not diminished. Even the simplest procession could provide the deceased with temporary immortality and make public statements about their identity and the important relationships of their life.

Contemporary views and opinions on the subject of 'the poor' and 'poverty' were varied and many have been subsequently perpetuated by modern examinations of Roman urban society. The subject is fundamentally economic in nature, essentially involving the definition of a group of people on the basis of differences in wealth. Social status and identity are also integral to determining the composition of this social group but the basis of any definition must focus primarily on economic resources and constraints. As it stands, the term 'poor' is too ambiguous to be of value to a study of urban society and an attempt has therefore been made to provide a more comprehensive economic definition of 'the poor'. It has been demonstrated that amongst the lower levels of society there were varying fluid degrees of poverty that were subject to diverse pressures and that 'the poor' were not a single homogenous entity. The absence of firm evidence for income and expenses renders this investigation of the economic resources of the lower class population of Rome rather speculative but it adequately illustrates the precarious and varied nature of life at the lower end of the social scale. It also demonstrates that the fortunes, identities and status of these people were equally liable to change (for better or worse) and that the opportunities for stability, expression and negotiation offered by funerary activities are therefore likely to have been considered important. Few other opportunities were



available for public display by the poor or for them to register their existence in the communal consciousness. Although life was hard and fortunes uncertain the desire to commemorate and, more importantly, to provide the remains of the deceased with proper burial, were not reduced. Familiarity with death did not necessarily result in indifference; indeed it may have increased their awareness of the significance of funerary activities.

The general absence of sepulchral monuments commemorating members of the lower classes has, however, often been equated with a lack of concern for the dead and consequently used to interpret the *puticuli*. However, the evidence for the *puticuli* has been critically re-examined and placed within its relevant social, legal, religious and economic context, during the course of which it has become evident that Lanciani's conclusions are seriously flawed. The evidence on which these were based has been shown to be inaccurate and heavily reliant on an ambiguous textual reference by Varro, which does not specifically state that *puticuli* were mass graves nor satisfactorily explain the mechanisms of disposal with which they were associated. The reassessment of the chronology, structure, dimensions, location, number and contents of the *puticuli* has also suggested that the interpretation of Lanciani is incorrect. The corpses of the destitute, abandoned on the streets, may have been dumped in these pits as part of the responsibilities of the *aediles* for keeping the city streets free from refuse but the *puticuli* do *not* represent the graves of the urban poor as a whole. The pits uncovered by Lanciani may have been employed on a single occasion, perhaps during a period of particularly high mortality caused by one of the many epidemics that struck the city. They were *not*, however, a regular form of disposal, as evidenced by the rapidity with which they would have been filled and the absence of any direct replacement once the Esquiline was closed and re-landscaped.

It is evident from sites such as Isola Sacra that modest burials occurred within regular cemeteries where inexpensive and readily obtainable materials were used as grave markers and that close attention was paid to the physical protection and careful deposition of the remains. The urban poor were undeniably concerned with the provision of proper burial for their relatives and friends, and through repeated ritual activities (including the pouring of libations and the observance of specific funeral festivals) the commemorative process was actively continued after the funeral.

Williams (2003: 7) points out that “monumentality is certainly not a pre-requisite for remembrance and societies can construct complex ways of negotiating the dangers and the advantages of remembering without creating enduring cemeteries or graves.” Repeated ritual activities at the site of burial should therefore be included amongst these alternative forms of remembrance. Connerton (1989: 72 – 73) distinguishes between ‘inscribing practices’ which involve the creation of a device that “traps and holds information long after the human organism has stopped informing” (i.e. a funerary monument), and ‘incorporating practices’ taking the form of active participation in commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. As a result, Williams (2004: 52) argues that “both during the funeral itself and in post-funerary rituals, remembrance can be manifest through the transformation, fragmentation, destruction and disposal of artefacts and the orientation and movement of the human body.” It was therefore possible, through repeated ceremonial activities, to recall the rites that were performed during the original funeral and thus the memory of the deceased, in order to celebrate their existence, identity and personal relationships. It was the process of experiencing these ritual acts on a regular basis that allowed the living to commemorate the dead and negotiate their own relationships with one another and society as a whole. As Barrett (1993: 237) suggested, “the material world makes sense when memories are recalled through experience.”

Hope (2003: 117) has questioned the extent of “real remembering” that occurred during these graveside rituals, suggesting that they were “more about the present than the past; they brought people together and celebrated the ties between the living as much as ties between the living and the dead.” However, this was an equally significant part of the commemorative process and the repeated observance of funerary rituals allowed the living relatives and friends of the deceased to negotiate and affirm their own identities within society and in relation to one another, whilst actively remembering the deceased (see Graham, in press a). These processes occurred amongst the families and friends of those buried within more elaborate monuments, but may have held particular significance to groups without substantial visual reminders of the identity of the deceased. It is therefore not possible to differentiate between the activities and attitudes of the lower and upper classes; the latter were simply able to produce more elaborate, substantial and, importantly, lasting memorials to their existence. These monuments were, however, only one of the many

ways in which the dead could be commemorated and their memory perpetuated. Cicero himself commented on this fact when he wrote: “what do the procreation of children, the propagation of the name, the adoption of sons, the care taken about wills, the very burial monuments and epitaphs mean, if not that we also think about the future?” (*Tusc. Disp.* 1.31).

One issue, however, requires further explanation. The humble burials discussed in Chapter 5 belong predominantly to the Imperial period, particularly from the early second century onwards. Furthermore, many of these relatively late graves were dug in cemeteries that had been established much earlier. For example, at Sarsina, the anonymous cappuccina burials of both the Pian di Bezzo cemetery and the small concentrations of graves immediately outside the city walls date to the first century AD despite the fact that construction of monumental tombs began in the area during the late Republic (Ortalli, 1987: 161 – 163). The *puticuli* have been shown to be unconnected with normal disposal practices amongst the lower classes and it is therefore unnecessary to explain the time gap between the pits and the emergence of cappuccina, amphora burials and other modest grave types. However, the reasons for the sudden visibility of these graves in the urban cemeteries of Italy during the Imperial period must be investigated in order to understand both their absence in earlier contexts and their significance within wider lower class funerary practices.

A possible explanation for the comparatively late emergence of these graves may lie within wider burial trends. Heinzelmann (2001: 181 – 182), examining the place of the *familia* within funerary practices, observes that during the late Republic competition between wealthy members of urban society led to the creation of increasingly elaborate tombs emphasising the individuality of the owner (see Chapter 1). These structures, such as the pyramid of Cestius, were designed to be used on a single occasion and once the remains of the owner had been interred they were sealed. No facilities were provided for libations or other funerary rituals (*ibid.*: 182). Heinzelmann (*ibid.*: 183 – 186) notes that this situation altered during the Augustan period with new tombs built in order to accommodate members of the *familia*. Although several tombs of earlier periods had provided burial space for these individuals, for example at Porta Romana (Ostia) where simple burials were made inside family enclosures, these graves remained anonymous (*ibid.*: 183). The new

tombs, in the form of *columbarium*-type mausolea, provided burial for all members of the *familia* in ash urn niches accompanied by inscriptions or name plaques which rendered the dead identifiable (*ibid.*: 187). Heinzelmann (*ibid.*: 186) suggests that these tombs adopted a new quality as places for social interaction where funerary rituals, banquets and other activities took place. *Triclinia*, wells and hearths were installed to facilitate these activities and libation conduits were provided in order to make offerings directly to the dead (*ibid.*: 185). The tomb owners retained their position of importance within the "grave community" by virtue of the location of their remains in the most elaborate niche of the tomb, usually in direct alignment with the doorway (see also Eck, 1987) but group activities had now assumed considerable importance.

Several aspects of this model contribute towards understanding the emergence of visible poor burials during the Imperial period and the form that these took. During the late Republic funerary practices appear to have been largely dictated by social competition, the large tombs of Cestius and Eurysaces attesting to the desire for individuality and display. The majority of the urban population, unable to produce such elaborate structures, were consequently probably all buried without any form of substantial grave monument or tomb. Minimal commemoration was therefore the norm for all but the very wealthy. This does not necessarily indicate, however, that religious concerns for proper burial were not of great significance and undoubtedly the appropriate rituals were closely observed. There was thus little external social differentiation between levels below the elite, with different socio-economic status probably signalled through the presence of grave goods of varying quality and quantity and the funeral itself. Furthermore, the large individual tombs of the aristocracy and wealthy dictated the topography of urban cemeteries. These tombs were usually arranged along the edges of major highways in order to capitalise on high levels of visibility and opportunities for communication and display, each structure built within its own individually owned burial plot. In essence the cemeteries of the late Republic were composed of a series of individual blocks placed side by side with strict regulations against the burial of remains in land belonging to another individual. There was therefore little opportunity for modest burials of the lower classes and the rest of the population to be made alongside these monumental tombs. As monument typologies began to change during the Augustan period concentrated

nuclei of *columbarium*-type mausolea arose, such as those of Porta Romana and Via Laurentina at Ostia, and later at Isola Sacra. Although laws concerning plot ownership remained the same, these new cemeteries provided an officially recognised space in which burial could occur on a more modest scale. Simple burials of the lower classes could be accommodated more easily within the confines of the cemetery which now existed as a concentrated entity rather than a linear arrangement of individual tombs.

The ideological nature of the cemetery space also changed, with tombs now the focus for social interaction and frequent post-funerary activities. This may have heightened the desire of poorer members of the community to be associated with such occasions and to be seen partaking in certain traditions and rituals (Graham, in press b). The provision of facilities for libations and religious rituals also began to increase in importance and prevalence at all socio-economic levels at this time and, as noted above, these devices are commonly found in association with humble burials. The increased importance of returning to the site of burial in order to provide offerings to the deceased and partake in commemorative ritual activities may have affected the typology of the graves with greater emphasis being placed on the physical protection of the remains in order to ensure that libations and offerings reached them.

That these modest burials began to appear in large numbers during the late first and early second century AD, some time after the initial change in tomb typology and cemetery topography, may be attributed to emulative delay. Both Cannon (1989) and Miller (1985) have examined processes of emulation within archaeological contexts and emphasise the importance of an established social hierarchy to the processes involved. There is clear evidence within Roman funerary and commemorative practices for what Cannon (1989: 447) describes as the "cycles of mortuary elaboration and restraint" that signal emulative practices. The emergence of cappuccina, amphora burials and other modest graves provided with devices to aid continued ritual activities may be part of this process. Emulation of the customs or material culture of social or economic superiors is not, however, a particularly rapid process, for these must first become established as socially desirable norms. This delay may explain the slightly later appearance of humble lower class burials provided with protective covers and libation devices within urban cemeteries.

These suggestions for explaining the comparatively late appearance of recognisable lower class burial are purely speculative and many questions remain to be asked. Where and how, for example, were these individuals, possibly the bulk of the population of an urban centre, buried during the late Republic when urban cemeteries were less concentrated and social competition was at its peak? Did these graves make use of similar materials within their structure and if so why have so few been archaeologically identified? These questions, and the absence of definitive archaeological evidence for the burial practices of the lower classes at this time, go some way to explaining the emphasis that has been placed on the *puticuli* as a mechanism of disposal for the corpses of the poor.

All members of Roman urban society, rich or poor, were clearly influenced by the same social pressures, religious beliefs, law and tradition in relation to funerary behaviour and although substantially less material evidence exists for the responses of the poor, they should not be disregarded in discussions of funerary practice or urban society as a whole. The perpetuation of Lanciani's interpretation of the *puticuli* is a symptom of modern perceptions of the Roman urban free poor as a differentiated and anomalous social group detached from the rest of the community and consequently immune to the forces at work within it. The poor were certainly economically distinguishable but belonged equally to a society in which individuals and groups were eager to display, negotiate and legitimise their existence whilst strictly observing religious traditions and expressing their varied identities.

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