Economic Strategies in the Collective Tombs of Imperial Rome

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In a congress that focuses on the Economy in the Ancient World, burial and commemoration may not be the first topics to come to mind. After all, these activities are not primarily economic in nature but pragmatic and symbolic, aiming most immediately to dispose a corpse and address feelings of bereavement in the survivor community. Burial and commemoration may even represent an economic net loss because they require an investment, on which normally no monetary return can be expected. However, in the Roman world, there were attempts to generate a profit in the funerary realm. For example, funerary gardens (cepotaphia) were used as productive land and also furnished an appropriate environment for burial. Similarly, funerary bequests were set up to generate an annual return that was, in turn, used to host recurring commemorative gatherings.[1] These examples show that there clearly is an economic dimension to burial: the question is how to define it and how to identify economic strategies from material remains. The economic dimension of burial may be somewhat akin that that of sacrifice. Sacrifice also does not yield an immediate economic return but, as Jörg Rüpke has pointed out, the regular mass consumption of animals "presupposes an entire industry."[2] Likewise, the continuous burial of urban residents in the periphery of Rome must have created a steady demand on burial services that was filled by a burial industry, even though we are only in a position to reconstruct the character and dynamics of this industry within limits.[3]

The focus in this volume is on collective burial, however, and it may be opportune to begin with a definition of what that means. I have advocated in the past for the narrower term organized collective burial, that is burial in communities beyond biological families or households that exhibit some level of formality. This definition emphasizes two characteristics: the community that is united in a burial space and the formality of its organizational framework.[4] It is important to note that the definition makes no demands on these characteristics and the organizational model can range between established organizations, such as domestic *collegia*, to more unofficial interest groups, in which the buried individuals had little more in common than their burial in the same tomb monuments.[5] Such a flexible definition is necessary, because it recognizes collective burial as a phenomenon. The monuments associated with this practice have recurring features that allow us to recognize different typological categories like columbarium tombs, catacombs, or circiform funerary basilicas. Taken as a group, they represent the practice of collective burial, which thus extends to different monuments and moments in Roman history.

The principal historical question about this practice is which conditions led to the construction of collective burial monuments. The most prevalent interpretation in the

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existing literature connects them with demographic pressure in the growing imperial city and the consequent shortage of burial ground in its periphery. Burial in a columbarium tomb or catacomb would then present a cost-effective alternative to the construction of a complete funerary monument.[6] This scenario is plausible, but it is also immediately clear that demographic pressure alone is not sufficient to singlehandedly explain the practice of collective burial. Such a pressure would seem to rise in a linear fashion whereas the burial capacities of funerary monuments oscillate between high capacity underground tombs in the 1st and 3rd centuries CE and much smaller aboveground mausolea in the late 1st and 2nd centuries CE. In other words, while the functionalist correlation between land pressure and tomb capacity is compelling, it is also too one-dimensional to describe a more complex historical reality. There must be other reasons why organized collective burial became an appealing and economically viable form of burial in Rome at various historical junctures.

One of the ways to add nuance to the picture may be to focus less on exterior contingencies like land pressure and the economic capacity of the tomb occupants, and to explore the social and economic benefits of burial communities instead. The question then becomes: can we point to strategies that facilitated the economic viability of organized collective burial to the extent that it became an enduring phenomenon in various historical contexts in the Roman Empire? This is not a purely economic question, because commercial transactions are always embedded in governing institutions and regulatory systems – whether or not it is possible to reconstruct these from the available evidence.[7] Answering this question is necessarily based on two methodological strategies to approach the available evidence: on the one hand, detailed monument studies are needed to furnish reliable information and to enhance the sometimes poorly documented fieldwork of the 19th and 20th centuries. On the other hand, collective burial is a practice that took many different forms and an exclusive focus on individual cases, therefore, risks losing the insight that can be gained from a more comparative perspective. My approach in this first chapter is to highlight a few common characteristics of collective funerary monuments. The subsequent chapters illustrate the variability that this practice could take in particular cases.

One of the most noticeable attributes of collective tombs is their substantial capacity. Columbarium Tombs can often accommodate several hundred burials, which obviously exceeds the needs of biological families and even most households in Rome. The capacity cannot have been random, however, but must have been planned to match the projected needs of burial communities. The planning process of collective tombs is poorly known, but a set of inscriptions pertaining to a tomb built by 36 investors (socii) strongly suggests that the capacity was calculated to offer an equal share for each depositor.[8] The capacity of catacombs is theoretically open-ended, since they were progressively extended upon demand.[9] Both approaches secured the crucial resource of burial space and the magnitude of the operation arguably introduced cost-saving measures, such as favorable economies of scale and possibilities to reuse

Fig. 1: Rome, Via Appia, Columbarium near the Tomb of the Scipios.

existing structures like cisterns and quarries.[10] Moreover, the unmodified repetition of the same constructional element (fig. 1) must have resulted in a repetitive sequence of operations in the workflow of the building project. The very nature of the building process thus facilitated rapid construction on a large scale and reduced the need for technical expertise and training.[11]

The resulting architectural layout of both columbarium chambers and catacomb corridors is characterized by a high level of homogeneity, since the burial spots in any given structure were for the most part standardized (cf. fig. 1). There is some variety between different monuments but the burial niche or loculus as constructional elements are uniform templates that could be reproduced as needed to match the required capacity.[12] If the architectural character of the funerary monument provides a "snapshot" of the tomb community, the visual impression suggests a general equivalence of all of its members. This is, of course, not to say that burial communities did not have internal social hierarchies; rather, the uniformity of the architectural layout suggests that burial communities centered on what all members had in common – the ritual of cremation, a career in one of the aristocratic households of Rome, a comparable social experience – to a greater extent than individual distinction. The intensity of such an association must have varied to a great extent, but it does match a concern with an equitable distribution of resources: in columbarium tombs, urns were commonly distributed by lot and the provision of burial for the poor in catacombs suggests the ideal of inclusivity.[13]

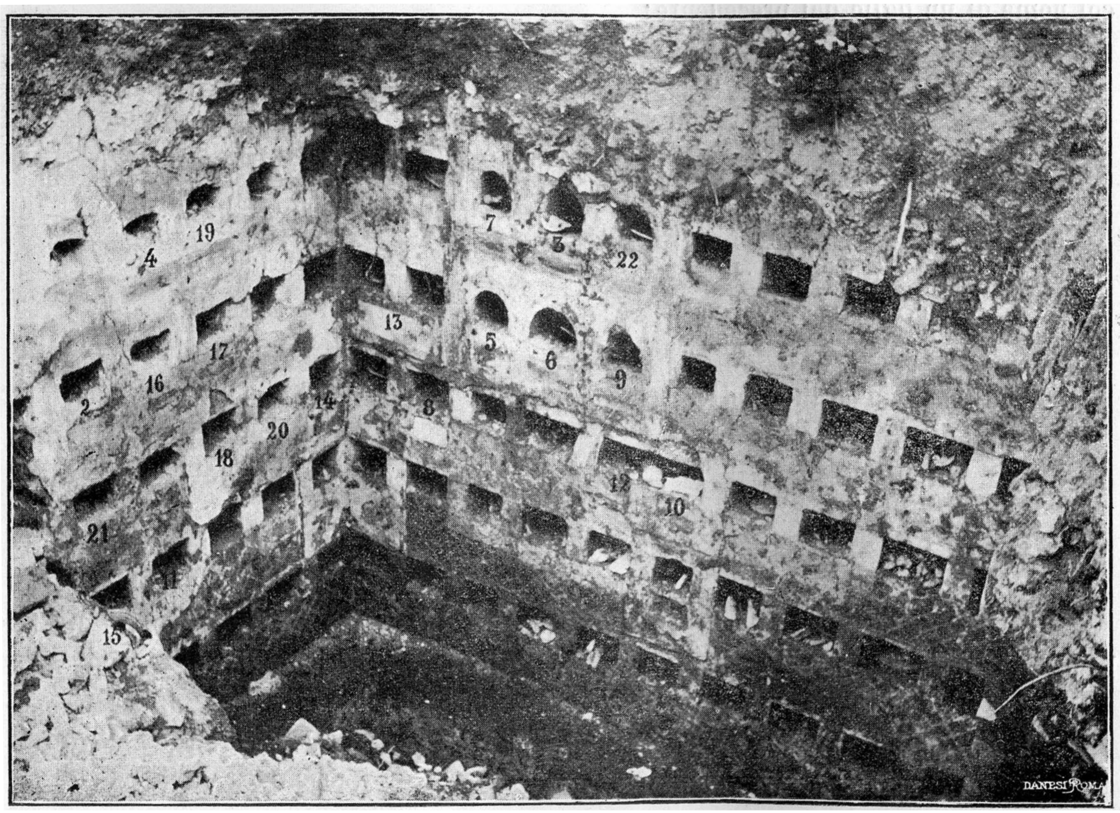

Fig. 2: Rome, Via Labicana, Columbarium of the gens Stertinia.

In the practical operation of collective funerary monuments, things were not always this equitable, however, as subgroups and individuals secured burial space and special privileges. The numerous tabula inscriptions in columbarium tombs reveal a need to commemorate individuals and to personalize individual burial spots. This personalization still adhered to a narrow range of shapes, decoration, materials and vocabulary, but more extraordinary examples celebrated individual privileges and showcase individual achievements.[14] Individuals also acquired "plots" within existing monuments, either to unite relatives or to sell to future occupants, and safeguarded their investment through inscriptions or physical modifications.[15] The latter is the case in the columbarium of the *gens Stertinia* where a group of six niches belonging to the president of a collegium and his relatives stands out from the homogeneity of other burial niches through their difference in shape (fig. 2).[16] In this case, it is not clear if this personalization happened during construction or at a later stage, but in the Columbarium 1 of the Vigna Codini, the enlargement of niches to accommodate cinerary marble urns postdates the construction date.[17] Individual scenarios display a considerable variability, but generally it can be said that the visual character diversified over time and inequality increased throughout the operation of collective funerary monuments.

The burial community was not only a social one, but also an economic union that invested in, organized, and shared a common resource. In some cases, economic collaboration arguably outweighed any group feeling, or at least there are cases in which no overt connection between the buried individuals can be established.[18] No matter how tight-knit burial communities were, their viability depended on a sound financial strategy, which would have secured expected services for individuals and the burial collective's ability to engage the funerary industry.[19] It appears that two models were available to accumulate capital reserves. One method required shareholders to deposit investments in order to raise the funds for the construction of the monument.[20] In other cases, it is clear that support came through patronage. For example, the location of the columbarium belonging to the *gens Statilia* on the edge of the family's gardens on the Esquiline suggests some sort of assistance from the aristocratic patrons of the tomb occupants with the acquisition of the land.[21] The correlation between some of the early imperial columbarium tombs of Rome and imperial and aristocratic households of the city, has led Nicolas Purcell to conclude that the "magnanimity of the rich" is ultimately the economic force behind the construction of collective tombs.[22] Hellström makes a similar point for the circiform basilicas, structures on an imperial scale that communicated a message of dynastic benefaction through their extroverted architecture and the juxtaposition of humble burials with those of the imperial patrons.[23] It is probably impossible to quantify the ratio between crowdfunding and patronage even for individual cases. Both sources of capital are documented and the most intuitive funding strategy may have been to exploit patronage where possible and seek internal investment where necessary.

Economic strategies permeated many aspects of collective burial, but they may not simply aim at maximum efficiency in a simple cost-benefit equation that solely maximizes the body count. Instead, it seems like burial communities of all kinds devised strategies to ensure their financial viability and to distribute funerary benefits to their members. Whether they were organized as collegia or simply consisted of otherwise unrelated stakeholders, sufficient trust must have existed among the members to invest capital and time in exchange for an expectation of future services.[24] At the same time, individuals also pursued their own interests within the framework of larger collectives by securing privileges or uniting their families. The ultimate answer about why collective burial became a successful model may still be elusive, but from an economic point of view, it appears sufficiently clear that this form of burial helped individuals to limit the insecurity that was typically associated with burial in the periphery of Rome.

Notes

[1] On cepotaphia: Gregori 1987–1988, Verzár-Bass 1998, Campbell 2008, Bodel 2018; on funerary bequests: Schrumpf 2006, 107–119.

[2] Rüpke 2007, 152.
[3] On the funerary industry in general see Schrumpf 2006 and, for Puteoli, Bodel 2000 and 2004.
[4] Borbonus 2014, 18–24.
[5] The literature on collegia is vast: the historiographical overview by Jonathan S. Perry (2011) provides a useful orientation about the major trends and protagonists in the relevant scholarship. Examples of collective tombs, in which the occupants did not have any obvious ties to each other are discussed by Thomas Fröhlich and Silke Haps (in this volume).
[6] For columbaria, esp. Hopkins – Letts 1983 and Purcell 1987 and for catacombs Brandenburg 1984, esp. 217–227, Reekmans 1986, esp. 35–38, Pergola 1986, 339–342 and a different explanation by Zimmermann 2001, esp. 118 f. A similar case has been made for the switch to the burial custom of cremation as a space saving measure during the 1st century BCE (Hellström 2017).
[7] This is the central notion of New Institutional Economics that emphasizes the political, social or religious contexts in which economic systems operate (Ruffing 2016; Korn 2016; Bresson 2015 with review by Erickson 2018).
[8] CIL 6, 11034.
[9] Pergola has emphasized this "open" design (1998, 60–62).
[10] An example is the reused pozzolana quarry under the Basilica of S. Sebastiano, which is treated by Borg (in this volume).
[11] See the contribution of Fröhlich – Haps (in this volume) for a reconstruction of the total construction outlay for several monuments.
[12] The Basilica di Pianabella in Ostia is an intriguing parallel: here a recinto funerario was installed beneath the basilica floor to provide for one hundred burials (see Ruotolo, in this volume).
[13] Aside from the already mentioned monument of 36 socii (above in n. 8), references to lots and distributions by lot are also evidence in other inscriptions from Rome (e. g. CIL 6, 5242. 5290. 5353. 10329. 10332. 33263). For this practice in detail, see Schrumpf 2006, 215–218.
[14] Privileges include immunity from collegium dues (e. g. CIL 6, 10332 that celebrates the perpetual exemption of the curator Lucius Licinius Alexa) and individual achievements could involve a position in a collegium (e. g. CIL 6, 5183b that celebrates the career of Gaius Iulius Chrysantus).On the individualization of niches within columbarium tombs, see the contribution of Blume-Jung in this volume.
[15] One method to indicate ownership was to add a painted inscription in the genitive outside the proper tabula ansata (e. g. CIL 6, 4959). Several inscriptions that have been attributed to a monument of the gens Abuccia describe the precise location of various lots of niches (CIL 6, 8122–8138).
[16] The monument is briefly described by Ghislanzoni 1912.
[17] Borbonus 2014, 75–84. Manacorda has questioned the proposed date and suggested a lower chronology (2017, 60 f.). Even in this case, however, there remains a gap between construction of the tomb and the modification of its niches. A similar distinction between two levels of embellishment developed in catacombs, where lockable cubicula contrast with the often undecorated and anonymous loculi (see the contribution of Zimmermann in this volume).
[18] For example, no evidence points to family connections or the organization as a collegium in the Colombario Maggiore in the Villa Pamphili (see the contribution of Fröhlich – Haps in this volume).

[19] It is noteworthy, for example, that the inscriptions in collective tombs often show iconographic and paleographic similarities that point to specific workshops (Manacorda 1979 and Felle in this volume), which may reflect common purchasing choices or bulk orders.

[20] Such a process is documented in the already mentioned tomb of the 36 socii (CIL 6, 11034) and was probably also used in a monument of 13 socii on the Esquiline (CIL 6, 6150). Other inscriptions simply refer to collective funds (CIL 1, 2519. 10409. 11034. 11035. 12058; CIL 9, 5076), which are clearly distinguished from each shareholder's own capital in the inscriptions: for example, CIL 6, 10332 specifies that Lucius Licinius Alexa "built this monument using gathered funds (pecunia collata)" but "completed the roof and furnished this triclinium of the associates with murals using his own money (ex sua pecunia)."

[21] On the columbarium in general: Caldelli – Ricci 1999 and more recently Mouritsen 2013. A case that suggests a donation of burial space by a patron in the catacomb of Domitilla is described by Nobert Zimmermann (in this volume).

[22] Purcell 1987, 38 f.

[23] Hellström 2015, esp. 303–307.

[24] The notion of trust as a precondition for successful collaboration was developed by Vicent Gabrielsen in a recent paper, in which he argued that collegia of various types facilitated economic growth through their ability to foster generalized trust. The sources of this trust were an ethic of friendship that is concomitant with economic interest and a public display of religious piety which certified the "trustworthy habitus of their members" (Gabrielsen 2016, 103).

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Fig. 1: by the author. – Fig. 2: Ghislanzoni 1912, fig. 1.

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