

Tomb and Identity.

On the Individualisation of Burials in Collective Burial Spaces in the City of Rome in the 1st and 2nd Century AD

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Rome in 2nd century AD, Euphemus and Nice participated in a large columbarium by buying a couple of niches for themselves and their daughter Cyrilla, someone called Lesbius as well as their freedmen and -women and their descendants. We know neither their reasons for choosing this kind of burial nor what their burial niches looked like. Nevertheless, an inscription slab installed to indicate, which niches belonged to them, has survived. It is a good example of the custom of participating in a large columbarium (fig. 1):¹

A(ulus) Fabius Euphemus et Antonia / Nice emerunt sibi et Fabiae Cy= / rillae, filiae, et C(aio) Oppio Lesbio ol= / las n(umer) XI ab titulo usque ad ostium; / in introitu parte sinisteriori / ab pa(v)imento hordini secundo co= / lumbaris n(umer) V libertis, libertab(us) q(ue) / posterisque eorum. Hae ollae / h(eredem) n(on) s(equetur)

Aulus Fabius Euphemus and Antonia / Nice have bought it for themselves, Fabia Cy- / rilla, their daughter, and Gaius Oppius Lesbius 11 ol- / lae, from this inscription up to the door; / to the left of the entrance, / in the second row up 5 ni- / ches, for their freed men and women and / their descendants; these ollae / no heir will follow.

The type of grave Euphemus and Nice chose was one of many options at that time. In fact, in the city of Rome in the 1st and 2nd century AD, grave types and burial contexts were manifold and heterogeneous. In general, burials could occur in graveyards, used mainly for simple inhumations in the earth, in city-like necropoleis, characterised by smaller and larger grave monuments or grave buildings scattered around or aligned like the houses of grown or planned villages, or in tombs placed along the large arterial roads leading from the city.² Moreover the type of burial varied, as well as the type of tomb regarding shape, size, materials, cost, privacy and visibility. They range from depositions of mortal remains (inhumations or incarnations) in the earth – either directly, wrapped in fabric or inside containers of varying material, type and quality (such as wood, wicker, stone or metal, and sometimes decorated to various extent) – over depositions in small and large grave monuments up to grave buildings of differing size (some only ca. 1 m²; others were monumental houses or extravagant architectural structures several storeys high).

As an ongoing comprehensive research project it is the author's aim to analyse the enormous heterogeneity of the burial sites and types in the city of Rome in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.³ As evident in the study, obviously neither the choice of burial area



Fig. 1: Inscription CIL 06, 17524; from Rome; today: Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cividale del Friuli, IN 2289.

nor type of tomb were dependant on hierarchal position within society. Instead, there seems to have been a broader set of individual motives and reasons for the specific choices made.

This article examines the inhabitants of Rome who chose burials in collective spaces, thus grave monuments shared with non-family members. The intention is to contribute to the discussion on Roman burial practices by offering insights into the decision-making spectrum regarding tomb choice and the herewith connected expenditures and possible individualisations.

When burial in a large monument was intended but no own grave architecture was built, there were three options of collective burial spaces: Accommodation in a mausoleum owned by someone else, participation in a large columbarium or enclosure, or sharing the mausoleum or enclosure costs. These variants are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Accommodation in Mausolea Owned by Someone Else

Being of monumental size and in various cases well preserved along streets of tombs and in necropoleis of Rome, they are probably the most popular examples of Roman burial customs, large house-like tomb buildings often referred to as mausolea. For instance a couple of mausolea of the necropolis under Saint Peter in Rome, under St. Sebastian or at the Via Latina are well preserved.⁴ Grave buildings like these were enormous and featured serene façades but with manifold decorative details or figurative emblemata. The interiors were usually built as columbaria with burial niches spread all over. The most important burials within the tomb were usually clearly recognisable, not only from their inscriptions but also their central position, decorative style or the use of a specific burial container, such as an urn in the form of a cist or grave altar. For instance, the two children of the grave owner of mausoleum C in the necropolis under Saint Peter, Lucius Tullius Zethus, were meant to be buried in two grave altars at the front end of the grave. Even though, in the end, only the son was buried there, with the daughter and her husband placed in a neighbouring tomb (mausoleum F).⁵ The parents were probably buried in a cist being part of the wall between the two altars.

Also in mausoleum C, the burial places of Zethus' core family were surrounded by at least 56 ollae in niches, possibly burials under the mosaic pavement (there are libation holes in marble slabs included in the floor) as well as burials in two arcosols. The titulus crowning the door to the mausoleum reads:

L(ucius) Tullius Zethus fecit / sibi et / Tulliae Athenaidi, coniugi bene / merenti et Tulliae Secundae et / Tullio Athenaeo filis et libe[[r]] = / ris eorum libertis liberta= / busque, quos hì, qui supra scrìpti / sunt, manumìsissent. / In front(e) ped(es) XII, in agr(o) ped(es) XVIII.

Lucius Tullius Zethus has made it / for himself and / Tullia Athenaidis, [his] well- / merited wife and Tullia Secunda and / Tullius Athenaius, [his] children, and their free- / borns, freedmen and freed- / women, who had those, named above / let free. / Front 12 feet, depth 18 feet.

It is reasonable to assume that most people buried in Zethus' tomb were, in addition to Zethus and his closest relatives, their freeborns, freedmen and freedwomen mentioned in this main grave inscription at the building façade. A connection to the master and his family gave them the advantage of an assured burial place in a high-quality monument. What they lack, however, is an individual mention in the titulus and thus being visible to passers-by. Moreover, usually they were unable to adapt the niche according to individual wishes.

In fact, masses of freed slaves and possibly also slaves were buried in this way. However, many of them had the possibility, permission and also money for their own tombs and chose this option for their burials. Mostly, they had inhumations or cremations placed with or without a wrapping or container in the earth, small grave monuments or relatively small grave buildings. Furthermore, there were large and extravagant tombs designed to attract attention. Most of the latter, from simple burials in earth to ostentatious grave buildings, have something in common: their inscriptions here addressed to the passers-by indicated their own names since they themselves were the grave-owners.

For example, there are several cremations of freedmen and -women crowned by simple marble slabs with inscriptions – such as for Epigone, liberta of Cocceia L. – or more elaborate slabs – such as for Nunnius, his wife Ma and their son Crescens showing portraits of mother and son framed by an aedicula. Both examples were set up in the “Autoparco” section of a necropolis near the Via Triumphalis in the Vatican.⁶ However, the tombs owned by slaves and freed slaves could also be larger, such as the one for Alcimus and his family built by his wife Fabia Philtate. It has a square plan of 1.5 × 1.5 m and was built like a small family columbarium.⁷ This, however, was fake for passers-by. No niches with ollae were embedded in the walls. Instead, the burials were placed solely under the floor. Nevertheless, the slave, his wife and family had their own tomb. Moreover, their names and thus their family was visible to the public even beyond death.

With regard to the extent of visibility and independence, there was another tomb type in between the variant of having an urn inside a master's tomb and a separate burial in a graveyard or necropolis. It was a burial within larger columbaria shared by various people as discussed in the following section.

Participating in a Larger Columbarium or Grave Enclosure

Columbaria were tomb buildings, which, as their name suggests, were reminiscent of dovecots. This is based on burial niches with each one to three ollae embedded in the walls during construction. Tombs of that type ranged from small ca. one square meter with one niche per wall (or perhaps a second above), to medium with 50 niches and ca. 100 ollae, up to large with more than 500 niches and 1000 ollae.⁸ The smallest

were used by single small families; the largest were built by the emperor or other members of the imperial family to be used by their slaves and freed slaves. Medium-sized columbaria were often built and used by one individual family. Regularly, however, we find medium-sized columbaria shared by different families. Euphemus and Nice, whose inscription has survived and had been mentioned above, must have used some niches in one of these columbaria. That is why they installed the inscription so that it clearly marked their burial niches as a unit and identified the interred to visitors.

In the case of Euphemus and Nice, 16 niches were bought in advance to secure burial places for the family and their freed men and women. Since the original context of their inscription is lost, we do not know what their niches looked like. The grade of individualisation of the niches in jointly used columbaria varied.

A columbarium next to the grave of the Scipiones, for instance, followed a homogenous design of the niches and surroundings. The tomb chamber was probably once characterised by five rows of niches (the upper end of the building is in ruin and only four rows of niches are well preserved; a fifth row is recognisable in one of the corners). The walls were painted white and each niche was framed with a stucco border. The rows of niches were separated by two lines, with a different colour for each row. Above each niche a tabula ansata in polished paint was placed, the colour of which was consistent along a row. The paint of the lowest and the uppermost row is not preserved. The tabulae of the second row were green, of the third yellow, and the fourth red. Of importance for the overall layout of the tomb chamber is light decoration of the space between the niches. In the second row painted slim, tall abstract herms were placed between the niches; in the third and fourth row tender plants were painted growing from the decorative lines as if from flower pots. We do not know who was buried in this columbarium. However, we can recognise that it was prepared for use by a large group of people not necessarily being related. The niches were readily prepared and the tabulae were waiting for the names to be incised or painted on.⁹ It is of significance that in this case, the users of columbarium did not decide to individualise their niches.

In contrast to the columbarium near the tomb of the Scipiones are those shared columbaria, the niches of which were slightly or heavily adapted to mark out the property and meet personal needs. A first example are niches in the so-called tomb of Pomponius Hylas at the Via Latina. As can be taken from the names in the various grave inscriptions, the here buried shared the columbarium without any clear relationship. It is likely that they individually bought the niches for their burials.¹⁰ The underground chamber was approximately square shaped and ended on its southeastern side in an apse with a central aedicula keeping two ollae. The two rows of niches along the walls were embedded in a two-storey architectural front including pillars between the lower niches, columns between the upper ones and pediments completing the structure from above. The lower row of niches was crowned by tabulae in red and



Fig. 2: Columbarium of Pomponias Hylas. Niche with nail-holes in the corners above.
Picture taken by C. Blume-Jung.

yellow serving the names of the deceased. The upper niches were crowned by box-like shelves. Despite the prepared layout of the tomb, some of the burial places were altered according to personal wishes. Simple rearrangements of the settings include, for instance, the attachment of nails above the niches, which might have served for the hanging of garlands (fig. 2) or the placing of marble tabulae for the inscriptions showing the deceased's names. In addition to the users who took the niches more or less as they were, there were obviously users who intended to have a more impressive



Fig. 3: Columbarium XII at the necropolis at the Via Ostiense near S. Paolo fuori le mura.
Picture taken by C. Blume-Jung.

place of burial. Their wish resulted in two further aediculae, set up later in front of the northeastern wall of the chamber altering sections with niches, which might have already been used.¹¹ The most individually organised burial place in the columbarium was that of Pomponius Hylas and Pomponia Vitalinis. Their niche was opposite the stairwell, visible at eye level when descending the stairs. It was shaped like a large cubic hole with a vaulted ceiling. The latter was covered with stalactites in stucco to make the niche resemble a cave and framed with murex shells on a red-painted band. The hole itself had a marble-slab floor with a painted incrustation pattern on its walls. Beneath the niche was a mosaic depicting the names of Hylas and Vialinis, and a lyre flanked by two griffins.

The individualisation of single niches in shared columbaria can be found on a regular basis. In tomb XII in the necropolis at the Via Ostiense¹², for example, the first niche to the left of the door was at some point supplied with a large table-like marble slab, protruding far beyond the niche itself and restricting access to a neighbouring niche (fig. 3). The slab was possibly used as a table for setting up an urn instead of the provided ollae. Its size, however, makes it reasonable to assume that preparations were carried out on it for ritual activities as well as depositions placed on it for



Fig. 4: Columbarium of Scribonius Menophilus, Room B. Picture taken by C. Blume-Jung.

the deceased, such as lamps, flowers or bowls with libations or food. Similarly, a table-like slab was attached to at least three niches in the so-called columbarium of Scribonius Menophilus at the Via Aurelia (fig. 4).¹³ In one case the niche was even framed with a stucco pediment. The same columbarium serves as an example for the unification of two niches placed side by side in the corner of the chamber. By removing part of the wall between the two niches at right angles, their top surfaces now merged and clearly belonged together. Apart from architectural changes to the niches themselves, others were made in regard to the tabulae. In fact, some of the niches in this columbarium were equipped with marble slabs covering the opening



Fig. 5: Columbarium of Scribonius Menophilus, Room A. Picture taken by C. Blume-Jung.

of the niche or placed beneath it to show the name of the deceased buried in the related olla (figs. 4. 5). These marble slabs vary in type of stone and size and the names inscribed on them were more striking than those written in the tabulae that were painted beneath each niche as part of the original layout of the burial chamber.¹⁴ In the columbarium of Scribonius Menophilus, the adaptations of the niches, however, went beyond architectural changes. Even the artificial painting of the columbarium was covered in several cases to clearly individualise the appearance and sometimes to visualise the connection of some niches. One niche, for example, had a thick red outline and a new garland dominated by other elements and colours (red, brown

and yellow) than the green garlands originally painted above all of the niches in this row. Two other niches, one directly above the other, were surrounded by a red framing line, decorated in between with a bust-like image (possibly a portrait of one of the deceased) looking out of a painted window and applied with two newly painted tabulae (fig. 5).¹⁵ In fact, by choosing red for the frame and outlines of the tabulae, it was intended for the new decoration to match the main decoration of the chamber. However, the new paint overlapped the old and the skill of the previous painter was not matched. Obviously, the owners of the repainted areas accepted the lower quality of the painted result in order to have their preferred iconography.

The adaption of niches in shared columbaria as seen in the previous examples could go even further to encompass major changes in architecture and decoration so that the original homogenous layout of the columbarium was heavily altered to a heterogeneous differentiation between the sections belonging to the various users. One of the most striking examples is columbarium 8 in the “autoparco” section of the necropolis near the ancient Via Triumphalis in today’s Vatican. Here for instance, some of the niches were surrounded with a red frame. At the left hand wall (the southern wall) two niches were framed together and decorated with a classicising ornamental band consisting of opposing S-shaped lines and heart-like volute-pairs. Opposite to these two jointly framed and decorated burial places were three niches left without a frame but grouped by another homogenous decoration.¹⁶ It is composed of pairs of Uraei crowned, seed heads of lotus flowers above the Uraeis’ tails and further single Egyptianising motives. Moreover, in the same columbarium two niches were enlarged at some later point. In one case, two niches lying side by side were united; in the other case, two niches laying one on top of the other were connected to a tall one. The vault above the broadened niche was coated with a mosaic and framed with seashells, while the now-taller niche was painted with plants, the middle of which depicted in a plant pot.

Even though columbaria were the most common type of shared tomb, participation within a burial space also existed for grave enclosures. In contrast to the pre-prepared grave chambers of the columbaria, here solely the enclosing wall was built whilst the tomb itself was inserted by the participator. In contrast to erecting the tomb individually somewhere within a necropolis, the advantage of a shared grave enclosure probably lay in logistics and possibly shared costs for the plot. One example survived in the necropolis at the Via Ostiense (grave precinct IV, fig. 6).¹⁷ Its enclosing wall dates back to Augustan times, but frames tombs from the following two centuries. It comprised of at least five grave aediculas holding ollae, one grave altar for holding ashes, one olla placed in the earth and a burial within a clay sarcophagus. Here however, not only was the enclosure shared, the preserved grave altar served as an example that even the smallest grave types could be used for shared burials. Even though it is not clear how many individuals were buried there, the inscription suggests that it



Fig. 6: Burial enclosure IV at the necropolis at the Via Ostiense near S. Paolo fuori le mura. Picture taken by C. Blume-Jung.

was more than three. In fact, there were three holes in the altar, which might have served for father, mother and daughter mentioned in the inscription at the front of the monument. However, the text seems to open the grave altar also for burials for their freed ones. It reads¹⁸:

Dis Manibus / Iuliae Fortunatae / vix(it) ann(is) XIV m(ensibus) XI / et matri eius / Ti(berius) Iulius Arsaces / filiae piissimae / fecit et sibi et / Pontiae Euhodiae / coniugi suae et / libertis libertabus / posterisque eorum.

Dis Manibus. For Iulia Fortunata. / She lived 14 years and 11 months. / And for her mother. / Tiberius Iulius Arsaces / has made it for [the] most pious daughter / and for himself and / Pontia Euhodia / his wife and / for their freedmen and freedwomen and their descendants.

Shared grave precincts do regularly though not often appear in Roman burial contexts. Since the cost for the individual grave itself must have been the same as in the open space of a burial ground, there must have been special advantages of shared precincts. If the users joining the plot of a grave precinct were not directly related, it can be imagined that there was another financial or logistical benefit of choosing this solution.

Conclusions

As this article could only touch on the variety of burial types and locations in the city of Rome, which were very heterogeneous in the 1st and 2nd century AD, a broader and more comprehensive approach is part of a large research project of the author. However, the focus here was on questions of how tomb architectures for a large number of burials were used, what the alternatives were and what the advantages and disadvantages of the decision for the larger shared architectures might have been.

Focusing on who was buried where in Rome in the 1st and 2nd century AD, it is of significance that the choice of tomb, location, size and layout was not related to the individual's position in the social hierarchy. Instead, the reasons a certain type of tomb and location was chosen were manifold and included, for instance, financial aspects, the desire for visibility after death, a possible wish for self-presentation, or the wish to remain together as a family beyond death.

Looking at the various examples in this article it becomes clear that the decision for a burial within a grave building meant to serve many burials could have been made to save money. However, firstly, there were other cheap burial options for individual graves and, secondly in contrast, there were many grave settings in large funerary structures, such as columbaria, which have been expensively re-arranged to meet personal needs.

Often freed individuals and possibly slaves could have been easily buried within their master's tomb. This naturally had the advantage of everything being organised, a low-budget or even free solution, and a nicely constructed tomb or grave monument as the interment site. However, as we have seen in all of these examples, choosing this option meant no longer being visible to passers-by. Since solely the grave owners were mentioned in the titulus of the mausoleum, such as in the example from the necropolis under Saint Peter, or even at the front of the grave altar mentioned at the end of the article, the names of all freed ones and maybe slaves were, if at all, visible solely at the burial niches within the mausoleum.

In contrast to having a family mausoleum, buying a niche in a shared columbarium offered greater visibility. Moreover, there is clear evidence that families, regardless of social or financial level, wished to remain together after interment. Looking at shared columbaria or grave enclosures, in contrast to family mausolea, it becomes clear that only in the less private, shared columbaria and enclosures did participants have the chance to decide for themselves whether and how they wanted to adapt their purchased niches. As a result, they had the possibility to clearly mark the family's property, make architectural changes – for instance for the deposition of gifts for the deceased – and decorate the grave as they pleased.

Furthermore, considering the bereaved's desire to visit the tomb and follow various rites on different days throughout the year, it must be considered that the desired contact with the individual burial site might have been easier in a shared columbarium than in a family mausoleum.

Nevertheless, looking at the number of shared columbaria and burials within shared columbaria, it has to be realised that all in all most niches were differentiated solely by the addition of the names of the deceased on the provided tabulae or, at most, inscribed in or painted on added marble slabs. Otherwise, the overall layout of shared columbaria often remained as initially planned. However, in the examples, where niches were differentiated, the changes made varied from attaching garlands, adding marble shelves and re-painting the area to re-shaping the architecture. Consequently, we have to differentiate the observation on how consistent the anticipated use was with the actual use. While the planned layout and use of family mausolea remained by and large as planned.

The role economics played in the use of large funerary buildings in the city of Rome was the main focus of the conference section, to which this article belongs. Returning to this overall question, it can be concluded that economics did generate a strong interest in sharing grave buildings. However, the strong desire to keep the family together beyond death, to have an own tomb to the tastes, intentions and needs of the deceased and bereaved, to have a tomb visible to passers-by and easily accessible for grave visits made shared tombs one significant option in the heterogeneous spectrum of Roman burial types.

Notes

¹ CIL VI, 17524, EDR 144317.

² See the following examples (with exemplary references) of the city of Rome for a simple graveyard (at Via Serenissima / Via Collatina), a necropolis (at Via Ostiense) or a street of tombs (at Via Appia): Buccellato et al. 2008; Lugli 1919; Zocchi 2009.

³ It is the "Habilitation" project of the author.

⁴ For an image see: Liverani et al. 2010, 44 f. fig. 24 – see, for instance: Mielsch 1986; Tacalite 2009; Rea – Egidì 2001.

⁵ Eck 1989, 62 f.

⁶ Väänänen 1973, 29 f. no. 7. pl. 7, 2; 43–45 no. 32. pl. 20; Steinby 2003, 70 f.; Liverani et al. 2010, 176 f. fig. 133 f.

⁷ Liverani et al. 2010, 232 f. fig. 192, 193; 235–240; Duday et al. 2013.

⁸ For small and medium columbaria see examples in the necropoles "autoparco" and "Santa Rosa" near the Via Triumphalis. See for instance columbaria 8 and 9 in the area "autoparco": Steinby 2003, 94–96. – For large columbaria see the following publication: Borbonus 2014.

⁹ At least one inscribed name could be recognised by the author. When entering the columbarium it is on the long wall to the right on the middle of the three preserved green tabulae.

¹⁰ Newton – Ashby 1910, 465.

¹¹ Newton – Ashby 1910, 466.

¹² For more information on this necropolis see, for instance: Lugli 1919.

¹³ The columbarium has recently been carefully studied by Silke Haps and Thomas Fröhlich and will be published by them in detail. See for instance these previous publications: Fröhlich 2009; Catalli 1999; Fröhlich 2009. – The marble slab can be seen in: Fröhlich 2009, 384 fig. 5.

¹⁴ The various tabulae and stone slabs can be seen in the following images of the columbarium: Fröhlich 2009, 382–384 fig. 2–5.

¹⁵ For an image of the wall see: Fröhlich 2009, 382 fig. 2.

¹⁶ For an image see: Liverani et al. 2010, 174 f. fig. 132.

¹⁷ For the necropolis at the via Ostiense see for instance: Lugli 1919.

¹⁸ Lugli 1919, 306 no. 29.

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