The Large Collective Burial Monuments
of the Tomb of the Scipios in Rome

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The Tomb of the Scipios, one of the most well known monuments of ancient Rome, was finally reopened on December 15, 2011 following 19 years of important restoration works conducted by the Superintendency of Cultural Heritage of Rome. These respected the arrangement of the area designed by A. M. Colini in 1929, when the site was intensely excavated.[1]

This important archaeological area, located on the Appian Way, outside the Porta Capena, is a combination of multiple historical phases.

The site includes not only the Scipios's well-known tomb, but also Republican tombs, funerary enclosures, two columbaria, a big foundation in flint, two roman houses, a funerary building with a small catacomb, a big lime kiln and two productive medieval structures.

In this contribution I will focus on the large collective burials built on the site: the two columbaria, dating back to the 1st century AD and a late antique chamber tomb with a small catacomb, in order to provide some reflections about this type of funerary monuments, their uses and owners (fig. 1).

The Columbarium A

This building is a semi-underground columbarium situated in the western part of the archaeological area with a north-south orientation (fig. 2).

Whereas the underground burial chamber in brick was dug into the tufa bench and has a rectangular plan, probably vaulted, the above-ground part of the building was made in *opus reticolatum.* Access to the columbarium was enabled by the presence of a staircase, made in *opus mixtum* of *cubilia* and tufa blocks. The floor is made in *opus signinum*, much restored in the modern age.

The walls are characterised by the presence of 180 semi-circular niches, arranged in five rows. Each niche hosted two funerary urns. In the centre of the building there are two cylindrical pillars characterised by other semi-circular niches alternating with single niches. The eastern pillar is preserved only at the level of the base. Generally, the columbarium could contain at least 480 urns.

The Decoration
The walls of the columbarium are characterised by elegant decorations, that follow a rigid chromatic and thematic subdivision that was not preserved in the lower part of the building where there is now modern cement (fig. 3).
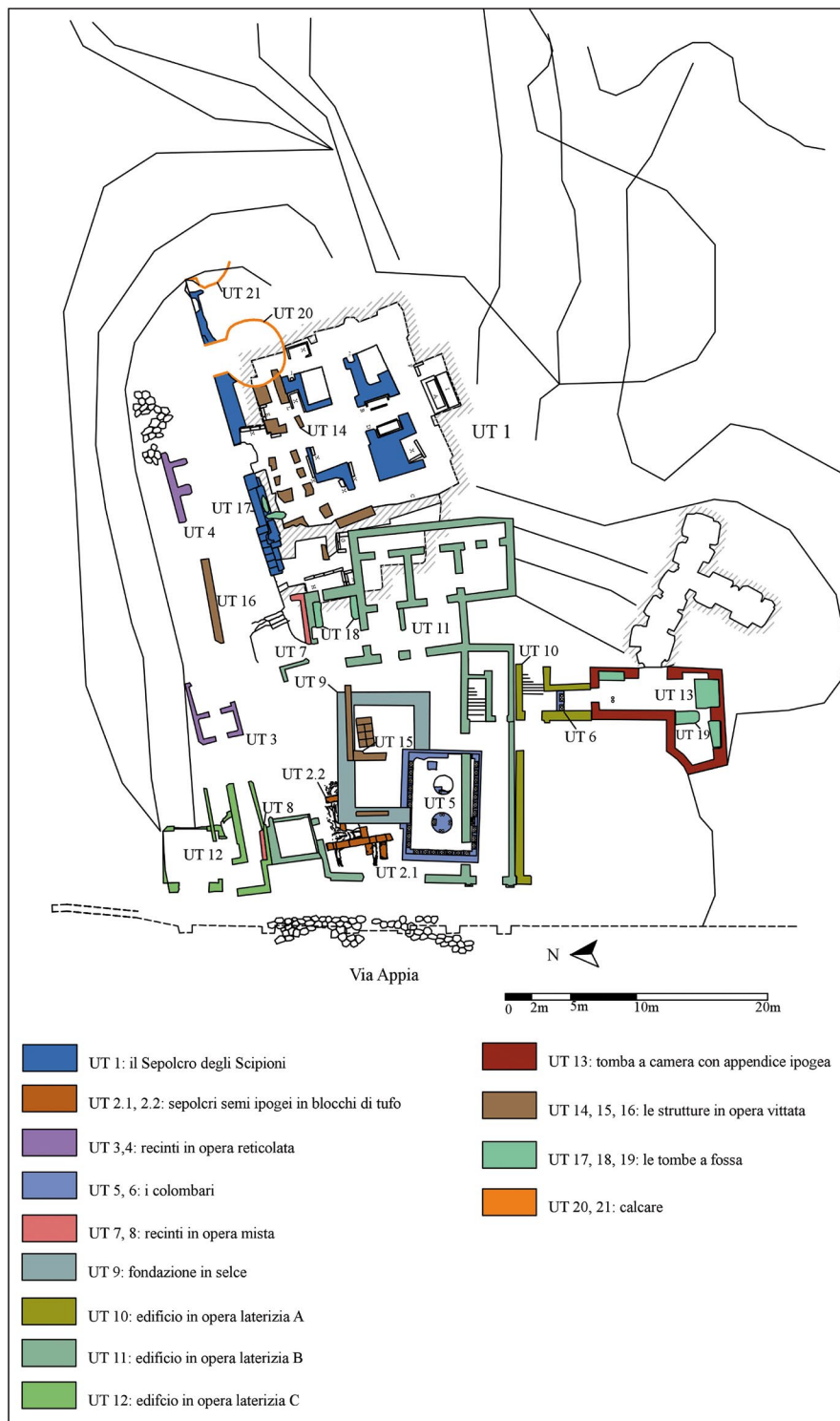
Fig. 1: The archaeological area of the Tomb of the Scipios. The UT 5, 6 are the two columbaria, the UT 13 is the chamber tomb with the catacomb.
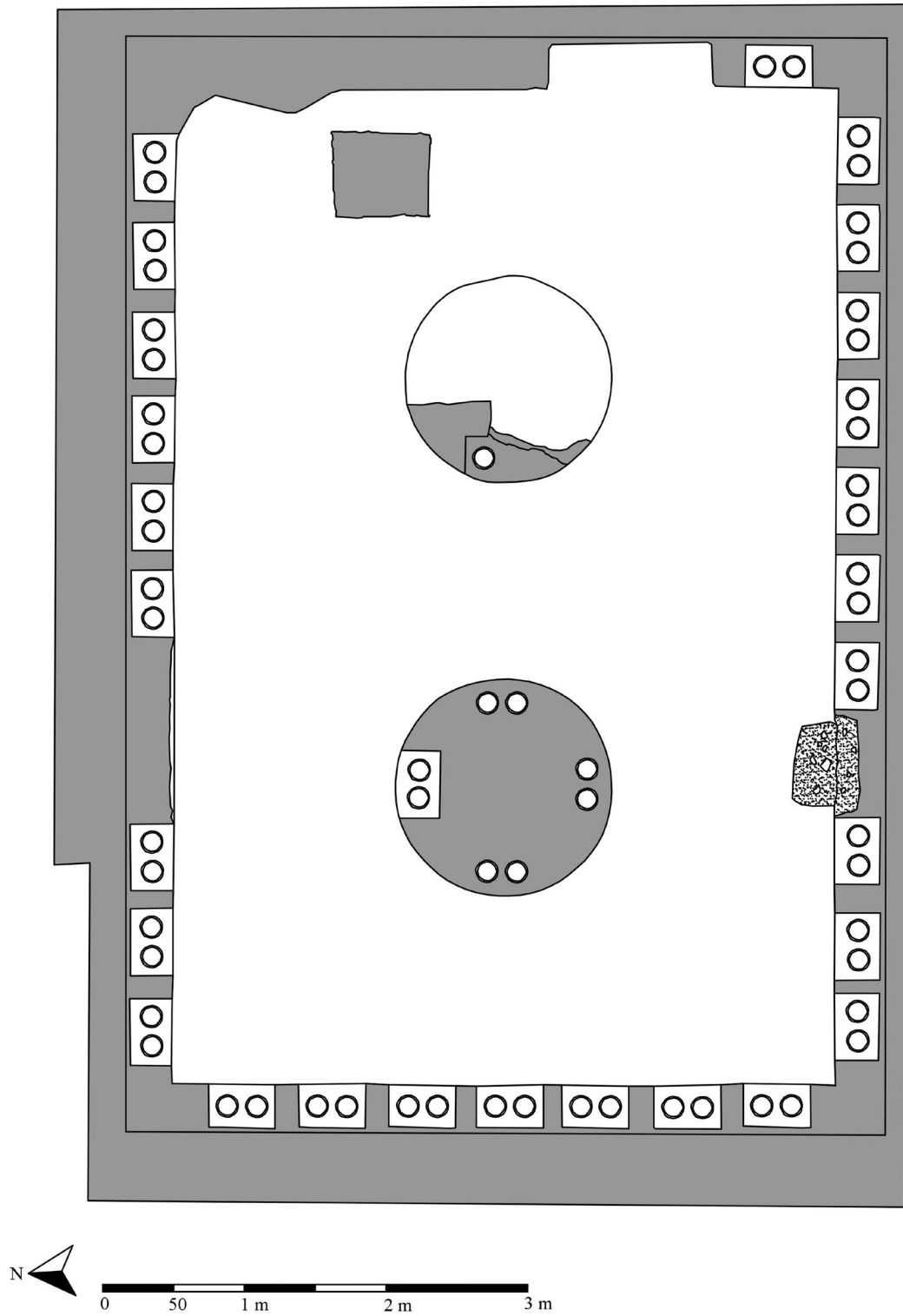
Fig. 2: The plan of the columbarium A. The white part is the reconstructed portion.

Fig. 3: General view of the South wall of the columbarium A. AF-MonAS – MSCD 145-434.

The walls and the interior of the niches are covered with white plaster painted with fresco and tempera.

The niches, underlined by simple plasters frames, are surmounted by a *tabula ansata*, made in tempera, designed to host the inscription painted with the names of the dead, in this case missing, probably because it has never been painted.

These *tabulae ansatae* are made in green for the second row, in yellow for the third row and in red for the fourth row. At the corners and in the lower part of the *tabulae* there are decorative ovoid and vegetal elements, and some triangles.

The fresco decoration located in the space between the niches represents in the second row herms alternating with theatrical masks, in the third and fourth rows representations of plants. There are two exceptions to this rigid division; in the second register of the western wall is a garland, instead of the usual masks, and in the fourth register of the same wall, there is a column with a red festoon, instead of the vegetal shoot.

The herms are represented with quadrangular section pillars, placed on brown bases, with slight perspective, surmounted by the representation of a human head. All the herms represent frontal female characters, with loose long hair and a vegetable crown.

Only one, in the south wall, is a herm of a male figure, represented in profile and distinguished by the presence of a short beard and hair arranged behind the neck (fig. 4).
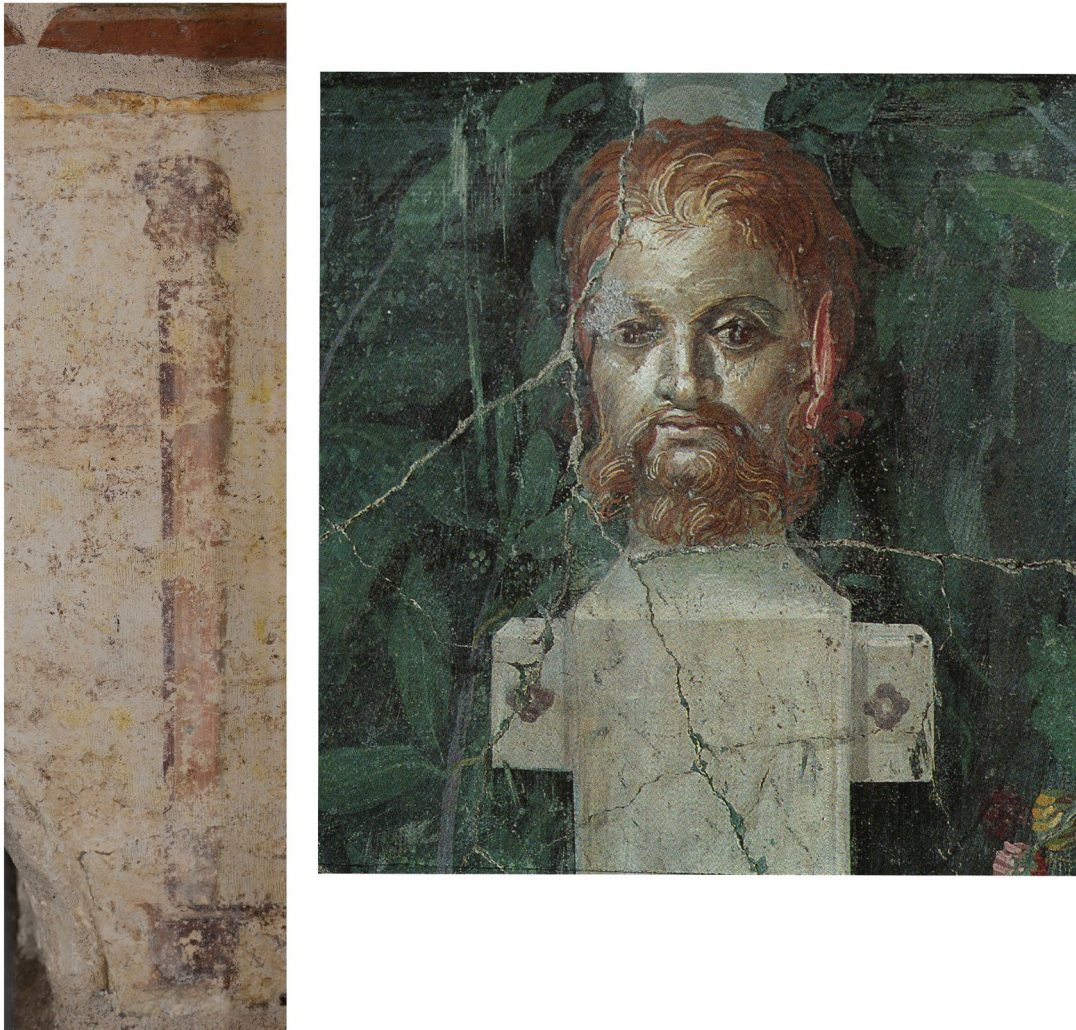
Fig. 4: The male herm of the columbarium A on the left (AF-MonAS – MSCD 145-1387), and one herm of the Casa del Bracciale d'oro in Pompeii on the right.

The female hermes can be identified by the maenads painted in some Pompeian pictorial cycles, such as the Casa del Bracciale d'oro, of the 1st century AD, that show the same characteristics.

The same Pompeian house also provides a comparison for the male herm. The figure, with a short beard and hair gathered behind the neck, presents, in fact, some similarities with the representation of the face of one herm of the painted garden, distinguished by reddish hair, beard and the presence of feral ears, that make it possible to identify the character as a *silenus*[2], also linked to the Dionysian sphere (fig. 4).

The masks, in shades of green and brown, are represented as *oscilla.* Some are characterised by a vegetable diadem and others by the presence of animal ears (fig. 5). Presumably, such as for the herms, the masks with the vegetable headgear can be

Fig. 5: Two masks of the columbarium A characterised by a vegetable diadem (on the left) and animal ears (on the right). AF-MonsAS- MSCD 145-1385, 1388.

identified as maenads, while those with animal ears as satyrs. Also, for the masks a good comparison is with the masks of the painted garden of the Casa del Bracciale d'oro in Pompeii.[3]

The plant decor, which decorates the spaces between the niches of the third and fourth rows, are painted with the representation of a central plant element, from which branches grow.

In the third row the decor represent *Hedera Helix* (ivy), with rhomboidal leaves and sometimes blackberry fruits.[4] By contrast, in the fourth row fruit trees are represented, such as the *Punica Granatum* (pomegranate) the *Cydonia Oblunga* (apple quince), identifiable through the accurate yield of the fruits, and a plant characterised by flowers with a yellow corolla, perhaps always identifiable with *Hedera Helix* (ivy), which can sometimes also be characterised by flowers with 5 yellow-greenish petals.[5]

In the second row of the western wall there is, in place of the herm, a vegetable wreath, from which two apples hang, and in the same wall, at the forth row, there is a green column with a red festoon.

The decorative system can be traced back to the so-called III Pompeian style: a pictorial system started in the last twenty years of the 1st century BC and characterised by a progressive disintegration of all the typical architectural elements of the "II style". The walls in neutral tones host elegant floral motifs, garlands, candelabras, herms, or figurative motifs, both animal and vegetable, which appear as "hanging" on the walls and which seem to lose their plastic consistency.[6]

The decorative elements present in the columbarium are part of the figurative repertoire linked to Dionysus, frequently used in the decorations of burial monuments,

being a divinity closely connected to the underworld, and to the concept of rebirth and survival in the aftermath.

In fact, not only the maenads and satyrs, symbolised by the herms and masks, refer to the Dionysus, but also the plant decoration. The ivy and the pomegranate have a clear symbolic value referring to the divinity,[7] and the apple tree assumes an auspicious and protective value compliant to the funerary context.[8]

In the burial context, the combinations of all these figurative elements, in addition to the evocation of the concept of death and rebirth, could also recall the true rites celebrated in honour of the dead and to the garden paintings, which are very widespread, both in the domestic and funerary areas, starting from the 1st century AD. In the burial context, they probably recalled the idea of the tomb like a sort of *locus amoenus*.[9]

The decorative system of the columbarium finds a direct comparison with the nearby columbarium of Pomponius Hylas, whose vault is entirely decorated with vine decor and pomegranate[10]. In addition, two more precise comparisons consist of the I Vigna Codini colombarium, especially for the decoration of the central pillar with doves on pomegranate branches and, also, of the II Vigna Codini columbarium, founded around 10 AD, whose wall decoration is made up of vegetable scenes, from which, in this case, various objects hang, such as syringes, cymbals and masks.[11]

Since we have no inscriptions or data from stratigraphic excavations, the dating of the columbarium is based on the analysis of the building technique and decoration, previously described, and based on the architectural typology.

Among the architectural features that suggest a dating limited to the first decade of the 1st century AD we must consider the fact that it is a semi-underground structure. In fact, the underground or semi-underground columbaria spreads from the early Augustan age up to the first quarter of the 1st century AD. The columbarium of the slaves and freedmen of Livia, the three columbaria of the Vigna Codini, the columbarium of the Statilii and the Caecilii, are all semi- underground and all dating back from the 1st century BC to the first years of the 1st century AD.

Moreover, the most ancient columbaria are characterised by a great uniformity regarding to the treatment of the dead. They are made of homogeneous niches, as happens in this columbarium, where there are no architectural and decorative innovations, made for remark a certain category of dead. This practice starts generally from the Tiberian age.

The Columbarium B

The other columbarium is located in the south side of the area and presents a south-north orientation. Only a small portion of the north and south walls is still visible and a portion of a counter, without burials (fig. 6).

Fig. 6: The North wall of the columbarium B. AF-MonAS – MSCD 145-2671.

The Decoration

The walls and the internal part of the niches are covered by fresco white plaster.

Below the niches are the *tabulae ansatae*, painted in tempera, designed to host the inscriptions painted with the names of the dead, unfortunately absent, as previously. The short sides of the *tabulae* are characterised by the presence of triangular wings.

The fresco decoration consists of a vertical green coloured plant element located in the space between the niches, from which brown branches develop in the space above them.

It is possible to identify the vegetal decor with a branch of *Hedera Helix* (ivy), because of the presence of rhomboidal leaves and blackberry fruits.[12]

This decoration is comparable with the decoration of the II Vigna Codini columbarium, dating back to the beginnings of the 1st century AD,[13] and with the columbarium N. 5 located in the necropolis under the Basilica of San Sebastiano, dating back to the Neronian age.[14]

Fig. 7: The plan of the chamber tomb with the small catacomb (on the left) and the entrance to the catacomb (on the right). AF-Mons MSID 146-6186.

Interpretation

The columbaria are one of the most typical burial forms of Roman society, characterised by a number of architectural and decorative variations. Generally, these buildings can be underground and above-ground, characterised by the presence of niches on the walls containing the cinerary urns and covered by a barrel vault.[15] These funeral buildings spread from the Augustan period and continued to be used until the 2nd century AD, when the ritual of cremation was progressively supplanted by the ritual of inhumation.

As regards the owners, the columbaria were usually used by a community of people, in fact, they were commissioned by a family, trade associations, or by slaves or free slaves[16].

In this case, the columbarium A, because of the size and the large number of urns, can be compared with the great columbaria from the Augustan period and the early Imperial age, such as the columbarium of slaves and freedmen of Livia and of Augustus and the three large Codini columbaria.

However, the columbarium B, given its small size, can perhaps be compared to the smaller columbaria, usually consisting of a single square or rectangular room, such as the columbaria found at the necropolis under the Basilica of San Sebastiano.[17]

So, in the first Imperial age, the destination of the archaeological area of the Tomb of the Scipios remains the same as in the Republican age: a funerary area. But, there is a substantial change in the type of burial structures that reflects the political transformation of Roman society.

In fact, the centralisation of political power in the figure of the *princeps* limited the competition between the members of the upper-classes and consequently the expression of luxury within their funerary monuments, which began to be expressed

in the internal space. Therefore, the simplicity of the outside part of the tomb contrasts with the splendour of the interior, as we have seen in the two columbaria, which since the Augustan age became the typical form of collective burial of slaves, freedmen and people of average social background, spreading capillary throughout the suburb of Rome, in relation also to the demographic increase that characterises this period. That probably involved the necessity of exploiting more and more the underground spaces, for which we see a wide diffusion of semi-underground or underground structures.

The Chamber Tomb with a Small Catacomb

The other collective burial monument in the site is a chamber tomb with a catacomb (fig. 7). This building is located in the south side of the area, which has an unusual "L" shape, consisting of two orthogonal arms, probably vaulted. The arm B has a convex wall, perhaps because of the presence of other structures.

The access to the building was located on the north wall of the first arm, but only one element in moulded travertine is visible, perhaps part of the architrave, and at the lower part a travertine block, possibly belonging to the threshold.

The east and south walls of the two arms present a series of niches covered by arches in bipedals and separated by semi-pillars in brick.

The lower niches are divided into four parts by some bricks that come out from the wall about 5 cm, and where above them other bricks were placed, used as a floor for depositions (fig. 8). The upper niches are smaller but present the same construction technique.

The western wall of the arm B is irregularly constructed, with a rectilinear and convex section and does not have niches, unlike the western wall of the arm A. The masonry is characterised by the presence of numerous holes that were probably related to furnishings or decorative elements.

On the eastern wall of the arm A, instead of the niche, there is a small catacomb, with a rectangular entrance, that was extant or planned in the construction.

The *hypogeum* consists of two tunnels, excavated in the tufa bench, one with an east-west orientation, and another, smaller, with north-south orientation. The floor consists mostly of tufa bench. The walls of the catacomb are characterised by the presence of single graves, for adults and infants, with a parallelepiped shape, an almost rectangular front and a flat bottom. In total there are 56 graves, some with traces of slabs or mortar used to seal the burials. Unfortunately, almost the slabs were all removed. The entire building, like all the other structures in the archaeological area, was restored between 1926–1929.

Fig. 8: Detail of a single niche and its deposition floors. AF-Mons MSCD 146-1174.

Interpretation

The structure can be interpreted as a chamber tomb with a small catacomb.

The funeral typology of the simple chamber tomb is very widespread in the Roman necropolis from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Numerous examples of chamber tombs of this period are situated in the necropolis of the Isola Sacra at Portus.

Generally, they are burial chambers in *opus mixtum* or brickwork, covered by a vault and with a façade in brickwork, usually without decoration. The access to the tomb consisted of two jambs surmounted by a travertine lintel, where the funerary inscription was.[18] We have all these features in this building, except for the funeral inscription. The internal part of the tomb was usually made up of a single room, generally decorated, which had marked, walls, first by niches for the cinerary urns, then during the 3rd century AD, from arcosolia to accommodate sarcophagi.[19]

In addition to the building technique, the burial system used in this structure suggests a rather late date. The practice of laying the dead on top of each other in spaces of about 30 cm, delimited by bricks, can be found in some burials dating back to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, in the necropolis near the Basilica of San Paolo.[20]

The building has also a small *hypogeum* on the eastern side, pre-existent or planned in the construction phase, which is not characterised by any kind of decoration that could indicate a Christian or pagan nature (fig. 8).

Between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, probably because of the exclusive use of inhumation and the high employment rate of the necropolises, the frequency of digging small catacombs became widespread, very often in the form of an appendix to main monuments.

These small structures were probably related to small family groups, while the larger ones were connected to religious communities.[21]

Some of these are simple underground chambers, originating from monuments on the surface, like some *hypogea* present in the western side of the II mile of the Appian Way.[22]

The most common type consists of very short galleries with niches on the walls, which usually have an "L" or "U" planimetry.[23]

Therefore, the building can be compared to the burials found in the north side of the Basilica of San Sebastiano, dating back to 3rd and 4th centuries AD. The structure, which originates from an overlying mausoleum, consists of a small gallery and two rooms with niches on the walls.[24]

A further comparison can be proposed with the group of tombs predating to the catacomb of Vibia, which have the same planimetric conformation, characterised by the arrangement of three "U" galleries that originate from an open air monument,[25] and with the three hypogeal chambers found in the necropolis near the catacomb of Callisto.[26]

The large number of depositions that this building hosted suggests that it may be connected to a funeral college or large community, which could all afford to support the expense of building this type of tomb.

Furthermore, the absence of decorations inside the monument indicates clearly that in Late Antiquity, the desire to exhibit luxury inside the funeral monuments suffered of a general reduction. Besides, the tomb documents the return, between the 3rd and

4th centuries AD, to the use of inhumation that resulted in the increased exploitation of underground areas.

Conclusion

In closing, these two types of collective burial monuments belong to two very different periods of the Roman history, but both, in my opinion, are the expression of the middle social class and the bearer of the same message: the importance of the communal identity that lead to the same form of collective burial and commemoration.

Unlike the Republican tombs, whose purpose was to exhibit the social status of the owner, these monuments did not share that aim. In fact, this type of structure appeared in two great periods of transformation of Roman society, characterised both by the reinforcement of the Emperor's power, that necessitated an introspective use of the burial space, and by the population increase that provoked the exploitation of underground areas.

Therefore, we are in presence of two different, but in the same time, very similar funerary buildings; both are underground structures, have a great capacity, the same equal treatments of the dead and, beyond these affinities, they are the expression of particular social conditions that brought a groups of common people to find a similar manifestation in the realization and use of their funeral spaces.

Notes

[1] Canina 1853; Hülsen 1885; Colini 1927; Platner – Ashby 1929; Colini 1929; Lugli 1930; Castagnoli 1969; Lugli 1970; Castagnoli et al. 1972; Quilici – Quilici 2004.

[2] Conticello 1991, 20.

[3] Conticello 1991, 20.

[4] Caneva 2010, 80.

[5] Caneva 2010, 80.

[6] Borda 1958, 58–63; Moorman 1988, 25.

[7] Caneva 1999, 72 f.

[8] Caneva 2010, 64–66.

[9] Taccalite 2009, 173.

[10] Pavia 1996, 9 f.

[11] Astolfi 1998, 20–22.

[12] Caneva 2010, 80.

[13] Astolfi 1998, 20 f.

[14] Taccalite 2009, 64–76.

[15] Borbonus 2014, 20.
[16] von Hesberg 1994, 95 f.
[17] Taccalite 2009.
[18] Calza 1958, 63–67.
[19] Calza 1958, 68.
[20] Lugli 1919, 297.
[21] Spera 1999, 375 f.
[22] Spera 1999, 153 f.
[23] Spera 1999, 376.
[24] Spera 1999, 223 UT 376.
[25] Spera 1999, 174 UT 294–296.
[26] Spera 1999, 103 UT 155.

Image Credits

Figs 1,2: M. Stefani. – Figs 3,5,6,7: Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali. – Fig. 4: Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali, Conticello 1991.

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