

Working in Pompeian Funerary Contexts. Some Notes on Business, Craftsmanship and Customers

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Funerary archaeology is an increasingly discussed topic, generally dealing with the typology of tombs,¹ the inscriptions revealing the social structure of the local communities,² the literary sources on commemoration, and the stratigraphic and anthropological data reconstructing both rituals and societies as a whole.³

Despite this wide interest, scholars generally do not deepen the system linked to the 'death market', because of the lack of literary and archaeological documentation. However, the economy relating to tomb ideation, construction and restoration was certainly important in Roman society, involving many activities and people.

Here we propose to investigate this topic in the ancient centre of Pompeii, focusing on the data relating to business, craftsmanship and customers, as revealed by the characteristics of some examples from its large-scale Roman necropolises.⁴ The specificity of this archaeological context and the possibility to compare different kinds of documentation, allow us to infer the information about funerary economy, which is not always easily perceivable.

The same building materials (lava, *cruma*, Nocera grey tuff, Sarno yellow tuff, travertine, bricks and tiles) are used in public and domestic spaces, and this peculiarity shows that funerary commercial networks were limited to an internal or nearby market. Excluding the Garland Tomb (Herculaneum Gate) and a monument along the Stabian way, marble was either a reused material for inscriptions and gravestones, or replaced by some faux-marble revetments (i.e. tomb 19ES, Nocera Gate; monument of *Vestorius Priscus*, Vesuvius Gate – fig. 1 a).

The funerary building techniques are similar to those used in the city: *opus quadratum*, *caementicium*, *mixtum vittatum* and *testaceum*. The core in *opus incertum* was usually covered by big slabs of Nocera tuff or by plaster and stucco revetments, especially from the Augustan period onwards. Tuff slabs and tuff statues show visible signs of working tools: the slabs are ashlar-worked with saw and different chisels, as it is documented in other buildings dating from the 2nd century BCE (fig. 1 b–c).

The inscriptions record few professions, maybe also involved in tomb construction: a carpenter or a stonemason, testified by a *libella* inserted in the front of the enclosure CN (Nocera Gate), a person measuring grounds, remembered in an epitaph with a *groma*, and a freedwoman heading a company specialized in the sale or production of lime – which were activities strictly linked to the building process – mentioned on a marble grave marker, found near the Stabian Gate.⁵

Tombs with two architectural orders and enclosures, with many differences in wall coverings and decorations, are the most popular typologies in Pompeii. There are only



Fig. 1a: Example of faux-marble revetment (Vesuvius Gate Necropolis). b–c: Tuff slab and tuff funerary statue showing signs of tooth chisel (Nocera Gate Necropolis).

two circular tombs and a monumental exedra, which testify to high quality workers and patterns inspired by Rome and the eastern Mediterranean. Besides these foreign influences, the capitals, in particular the Ionic ones, which are very similar also in the urban spaces, reveal a local manufacture done by craftspeople skilled in tuff working.

The tuff funerary statues are examples of a local or a regional production, assuming patterns and workers moving and exchanging ideas as well as artisanal manners. The stucco decoration shows regional transfers, but it also recalls iconographies documented in Rome.⁶

The themes of the tomb paintings (*gorgoneia*, boar hunting, domestic objects, plants, animals, imaginary gardens) were not exclusively created for funerary contexts, with the sole exception of gladiator fights (Herculaneum, Vesuvius, Stabia and Nocera Gates). Thus, we can suppose the existence of local workshops engaging in the decoration of all types of buildings, which probably drew from a repertoire of common elements shared by paintings, stucco and mosaics.⁷

The customers, who were also women, were generally part of the political and economic elite of the city, or they were freedmen: these groups were able to have funerary monuments built for their self-representation or for the entire family.

In conclusion, the visible standardization of materials, workmanship, building techniques and decoration documented in Pompeian necropolises is certainly due to economic necessities more than to contemporary fashions.

Some specific realizations reveal that there were local workers who used local, regional or inter-regional patterns, but there were also local or foreign craftspeople adopting typologies and decorative patterns inspired by Rome, *Magna Graecia* and the eastern Mediterranean. These data suggest some wider economic relationships and emphasize the information obtained from other contexts in Pompeii.

Thus, a specific study on Pompeian tombs, which considers the entire economy of the centre, permits the investigation in depth of the many aspects relating to the business, which grew around the necropolises, and a better understanding of the trade connections of the entire city, in which many craftspeople and ateliers were active and well-known.

Notes

¹ E.g. Valenti 2010.

² E.g. Eck 1998.

³ E.g. Duday – Van Andringa 2017.

⁴ Cf. Campbell 2015.

⁵ Cf. Castiglione 2017.

⁶ Cf. Castiglione 2012.

⁷ Cf. Ghedini – Salvadori 2001; Iorio 2001.

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Fig. 1 a–c: photos by the author. Courtesy of Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e del Turismo, Soprintendenza Speciale per i beni archeologici di Napoli e Pompei, now Ministero della Cultura, Parco Archeologico di Pompei.

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