
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

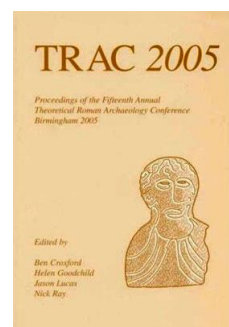
www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: Discarding the Destitute: Ancient and Modern Attitudes Towards Burial Practices and Memory Preservation Amongst the Lower Classes of Rome
Author: E-J Graham
Pages: 57–72

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2005_57_72

Publication Date: 24 March 2006



Volume Information:

Croxford, B., Goodchild, H., Lucas, J., and Ray, N. (eds.) (2006) *TRAC 2005: Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Birmingham 2005*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

Discarding the destitute: Ancient and modern attitudes towards burial practices and memory preservation amongst the lower classes of Rome

E-J. Graham

Introduction

We are fortunate to possess a considerable amount of information concerning Roman urban society. The combination of literary texts, epigraphy and archaeology in particular, has facilitated extensive study of this aspect of the ancient world, and contributed to the emergence of a detailed picture of urban society. Although the activities of the living members of the urban community naturally feature highly in this, studies of ancient burial customs, commemorative activities and the treatment of the body have also contributed significantly towards it. The ways in which these activities, practices, customs and rituals were employed, not only to satisfy the religious demands of the dead but also to facilitate ongoing processes of negotiation for status, recognition, legitimacy and identity amongst the living, have been investigated by a number of scholars (see, for example, Bodel 1994; 2000; Hope 1998; 2000; Morris 1992; and Patterson 2000a; 2000b, which all deal extensively with the social and religious implications of funerary activity). Nevertheless, despite the great wealth of evidence for funerary activities, especially at Rome, including literary accounts of funerals, cremations and festivals and abundant archaeological evidence, epigraphy and sculpture, there remains a definite bias towards the study of the monuments, activities and behaviour of either the more elevated members of society, or individuals who were anxious to advertise their new identity and confirm their legitimacy as respectable members of the community, such as former slaves. There were, undoubtedly, vast numbers of other people, many of whom were probably unable to afford a substantial monument, and who are often missing from these investigations. Consequently, our understanding of the burial and commemorative practices of the ancient urban community in Italy is limited to a relatively small section of the population and can therefore not be considered comprehensive. This is partly a consequence of the elite dominance of the surviving evidence, with substantial and architecturally significant examples of tombs and monuments simply more likely to survive in the archaeological record, and the focus of textual sources on the activities of the privileged classes. However, it is also reflective of dismissive ancient and modern attitudes towards the Roman poor. This paper will highlight and explain these attitudes and show that ancient attitudes towards burial, commemoration and the treatment of the body actually allow us to begin to redress the balance and can help to provide greater insight into the funerary activities of the lower classes.

The poor through ancient and modern eyes

Attention has, of course, been paid to the study of the lower class population of Rome by modern scholars; indeed, several key studies focus on this sector of the community and have contributed greatly not only to our understanding of the poor but also society in general. For

example, Garnsey's (1998) study of the food supply of Rome has allowed for subsequent analysis of the impact of the grain dole system on the lower classes and society as a whole (Graham 2004). Comprehensive examination of the living conditions of the urban plebs by Scobie (1986) has elucidated the unsanitary nature of life for the lower classes in such a vast city and has highlighted the precarious nature of this life, something which is emphasised further by Whittaker (1993) who has also examined the ways in which the poor were classified, described and defined in the ancient city. What is abundantly clear from these studies, and others, is that the lower classes were not only a demographically significant part of the urban community, but were also composed of a diverse range of individuals with different economic, legal and social status as well as ethnic and religious identities. There were successful and less successful merchants, shopkeepers and craftsmen living side by side with unskilled labourers, unemployed/unemployable individuals and beggars, amongst all of whom were to be found both slave and free (or freed) individuals of various origin. These people lived in a constant state of flux, for poverty was certainly not a static state. Fortunes (both economic and status related) could rise and fall on a daily basis and life at the lower end of the social scale was nothing if not unpredictable.

It is necessary to establish some sort of definition of the 'poor' as opposed to the 'lower classes'. The latter is often used as an all-encompassing term for the individuals mentioned above, including those who worked or begged for a living and slaves. The term 'poor' is, by its very nature, an economic definition, differentiating between those with access to differing economic resources; and it may therefore be possible to identify varying levels of poverty. Garnsey (1998: 226), for example, divides the poor as follows:

'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.'

These various levels of poverty were undoubtedly fluid and individuals probably found themselves moving between them as their fortunes improved or declined (although it must be emphasised that these 'levels' are arbitrary and would not have held any meaning or significance for the individuals in question). It is very difficult to identify these changeable groups archaeologically, and it may indeed be fruitless to attempt to do so given their flexibility. Similarly, slaves and ex-slaves occupy an anomalous position within the lower classes, both as a demographically significant section of it but also as an entity unto themselves. Slaves in particular were subject to different social, legal and economic pressures, and despite the slave's legal and social identity as a 'thing' (*res*), they were not necessarily poor in an economic sense, being able to rely on their masters or patrons for food, shelter and often burial. It is, however, difficult to distinguish, in the case of an unmarked grave for example, between slave, freed and free-born, and it is thus inevitable that many slaves and former slaves are included within the scope of this discussion. The truly destitute (beggars, the homeless, outcasts) are even more difficult to locate within an archaeological context and so for the purposes of this paper are largely overlooked, although it must be remembered that economic status in the Roman city was not static and a member of the 'temporary' or 'ordinary' poor could easily find themselves amongst the destitute at any stage of their life. The terms 'poor'

and ‘lower classes’ are therefore essentially different ways of describing the same social group that was regularly affected by shifting arrangements of people. The discussion that follows will therefore use these terms simply as a means to identify the various groups mentioned above in opposition to those who were either completely destitute or economically stable.

Despite these identifiable differences there remains a tendency amongst much modern scholarship to regard the lower classes as an undifferentiated mass who made little impact on the society in which they lived and are therefore of minimal importance for understanding that community. For example, Salmon (1974: 64) has suggested that 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.’ This rather dismissive attitude, and the resulting lack of interest in attempting to understand the composition of the lower classes and their attitudes towards life, death, religion, family and society, means that they have often been defined rather imprecisely. Patterson (2000a: 268) for example, observed 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.’ This remarkably vague definition reflects widespread uninterest in integrating the lives, attitudes, beliefs, fears and activities of the lower classes into wider dialogues concerning the urban community.

This attitude manifests itself in many modern works purporting to deal with ‘Roman society.’ A particularly instructive example can be found in the diagram of Roman society published by Alföldy in 1985 (first published in German in 1975).

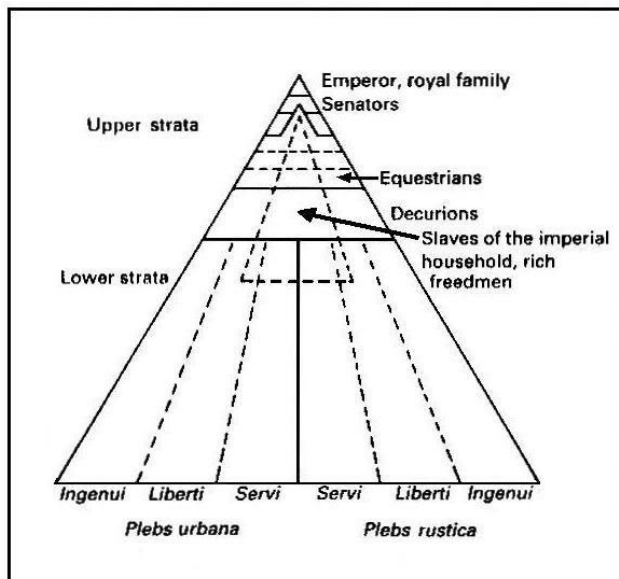


Figure 1: The structure of Roman society (after Alföldy 1985, Fig. 1)

This diagram (Fig. 1) depicts the whole of society divided into various class categories. The main division lies between the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ strata, the former being composed of individuals most likely to experience upwards social mobility and who supposedly had most influence on society. The ‘lower strata’ is divided into two main sections: the *plebs rustica*

(living in the country) and the *plebs urbana* (residing in the city), each of which was subdivided equally into the free born (*ingenui*), freed slaves (*liberti*) and slaves. In this diagram, which, significantly, continues to be reproduced (see Friggeri, 2001 and Morris, 1992), the complexities of social structure at the lower end of the scale are afforded little attention, simply being divided equally into three broad groups. The top of the pyramid appears to reflect a far more complex social situation, illustrating the fluid nature of society and the possibilities and opportunities offered by social mobility. This is something that Alföldy notes (1985: 147), observing that divisions between members of the 'lower strata' were far more fluid than those of the 'upper strata', but that it is not possible to depict this in a pictorial format. However, when the diagram is viewed in isolation this is unclear, and its subsequent reproduction in later works without the accompanying explanation of the complexities of reality creates the impression that society was far more static and less intricate amongst the lower classes. This further perpetuates the concept that the lower classes were distinctly separate from the rest of society.

Our understanding and interpretation of the composition of Roman urban society has advanced in the years since the initial publication of this diagram and it can no longer be considered representative of reality, but it continues to reflect particularly well the general impression of the urban community held by many scholars and is commonly used as a convenient way of depicting ancient urban social organisation (see Friggeri, 2001: 84). This is, however, particularly unhelpful since the pyramid appears to relegate the lower classes to a separate section of society with a clear dividing line between them and their supposed social superiors. Although this may, to an extent, reflect the real limits of social mobility (under normal circumstances the ordinary person could only hope to advance so far) it also intimates strongly that these people were different in some way to the rest of society. Categorising the community into 'upper' and 'lower' strata automatically sets them up in opposition to one another and implies that there were fundamental and identifiable differences between them. However, an examination of the composition, beliefs and attitudes of these groups reveals that the only real difference that existed between them was one of economics, with the 'lower strata' composed largely of the poorer members of society. It is unlikely that there were major ethnic, religious or legal differences between many, although obviously not all, members of each level since the upper echelons of the pyramid include slaves and rich freedmen who presumably once occupied a position lower down the pyramid. Alföldy's diagram cannot be held responsible for the dismissive attitude of modern scholars to the urban poor, but it does illustrate several of the assumptions and problems that have had a serious impact on the investigation of the underprivileged classes; compounded by the unquestioning reproduction of the pyramid in more recent works. On a more positive note, the diagram also depicts particularly vividly the relative size of the lower classes, perhaps comprising two thirds of the city population. Is it really possible that such a vast demographic group can have had no impact on the community in which they lived or have been oblivious to wider social pressures, beliefs and attitudes?

Modern neglect of the lower classes and their role in ancient society has, naturally, been influenced further by the low visibility of this sector of the urban community in literary texts, epigraphy and archaeology. Studies by scholars including Joshel (1992), and more recently Horsfall (2003), have attempted to shed light on the lives, culture and identities of these underprivileged individuals, but the absence of substantial, and impartial, evidence for the ordinary people of Rome has severely restricted these investigations. Members of the lower classes, including slaves and ex-slaves, do appear in epigraphy and often feature in the writings

of the upper classes, but as Joshel (1992: 5–6) has observed, the latter ‘do not truly represent the nonprivileged groups who lived and worked in the city of Rome because, quite simply, these texts were not written by those they describe.’ In archaeological terms, the artefacts, structures, monuments, lives and actions of the wealthier members of urban society are far more durable and, consequently, have provided a considerably greater pool of evidence from which to interpret life and death in the city.

Ancient attitudes towards the poverty-stricken masses of Rome have also contributed towards modern views. Ancient textual sources do not contain a significant amount of information about the lower classes, most probably because their authors (members of the ‘upper strata’) considered them too insignificant. When these writers do refer to poverty it is often romanticised for its simplicity. Seneca (*Ep.* 18.7) for example, writes of bored members of the aristocracy playing at being poor by eating ‘simple’ meals and sleeping on mattresses. Poverty was thought to entail a relaxed and uncomplicated lifestyle free from the daily pressures faced by the more elevated members of the community. Equally, there appears to have been a general lack of understanding of exactly what it meant to be poor. Not only does Martial (*Ep.* XII. 70) suggest that even the poorest citizen took three slaves to the baths with him, but when Juvenal (*Sat.* III. 147–53) describes a beggar he concludes that, ‘Of all the woes of luckless poverty none is harder to endure than this, that it exposes men to ridicule.’ The authors of these texts, and others, evidently had no concept of actual poverty, believing it to entail a simple lifestyle but lived to the standards to which they were accustomed. For example, Whittaker (1993: 7) observes that Juvenal ‘thought a person poor if he had less than 20,000 sesterces a year (9. 140–141),’ and 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.’ Put simply, ‘the poor were the rich who were not very rich’ (*ibid.*: 141). A distinction was made, however, between the poor and beggars, the latter being viewed as idle and contemptuous. The belief that these people relied on the state for free food and entertainment (as Juvenal (10. 78–81) famously stated: *panem et circenses*) heightened these feelings of contempt, even though, in reality, it is unlikely that many members of the poverty stricken masses were actually eligible for the grain dole. There was also no widespread desire to help the poor with acts of charity, evidenced by a Pompeian graffiti which reads: ‘I hate poor people. If anyone wants something for nothing, he’s a fool. Let him pay up and he’ll get it’ (CIL IV 9839b). The grain dole was not means tested and was consequently available to rich and poor alike, and those who did receive any financial support would first have to prove their worth by displaying qualities of mind and character that could be appreciated by their upper class sponsors (Hands 1968: 74). This complete uninterest in the lives, activities and well-being of the poor has been transferred to many modern works, with several scholars content to accept that the poor were sustained by free grain and were therefore content (see for example, Cowell 1961: 143; Carcopino 1964: 78).

Mass death and mass graves

These attitudes have led to the consequent assumption that the daily struggle for survival took precedence in the lives of the poor and, as a result, that they were largely immune to social pressures concerning status, identity and competition and therefore probably also had different attitudes towards life, death, display and commemoration. It has even been stated that the lower

classes had no interest in preserving their memory with a funerary monument since they had nothing worth remembering or advertising (Ross Taylor 1961: 131). High levels of urban mortality have also contributed towards the creation of this image of an apathetic lower class. It has been estimated (Bodel 2000: 128–129) that annual mortality rates in early Imperial Rome were comparable to those in other pre-industrial urban centres, perhaps close to 40 per 1000, or about 80 per day. Bodel (2000: 129) further postulates that five percent of these deaths were those of the truly destitute: beggars, the homeless, those ‘who lacked the means to ensure for himself and his dependents even a modest burial’ (*ibid.*: 129). To this figure must be added a large number of other poor individuals (shopkeepers, traders, artisans, labourers) who occupied an economic level above that of the destitute but who were also vulnerable to economic change and lived their lives balanced precariously on the edge of subsistence. These calculations of urban mortality reflect ‘normal’ circumstances, but mortality soared during the regular outbreaks of disease that ravaged the urban population. The poorer classes were particularly vulnerable to these epidemics given their inability to flee the city for refuge in healthy country estates and the unsanitary conditions of the city slums. Such high levels of mortality inevitably created disposal difficulties and it might, therefore, be assumed that the occasion of death posed a practical problem rather than a time for grief, reflection or remembrance. Regular experience of death has been used to support the theory that the corpses of the poor were thrown into communal graves; a theory derived, for the most part, from excavations conducted on the Esquiline by Rodolfo Lanciani during the 1870s (Lanciani 1874; 1891). Investigating an area immediately outside the Porta Esquilina, Lanciani unearthed approximately 75 stone-lined pits roughly 12 feet square and 30 feet deep, which he described as follows:

‘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!’

(Lanciani 1891: 64–65)

Drawing on a description provided by Varro (*De Ling. Lat.* V. 25) of pits known as *puticuli* which were dug on the outskirts of Roman cities and in which corpses were left to rot, Lanciani interpreted his discoveries as the mass graves of the urban poor; his conclusions seemingly supporting Horace’s vivid description (*Sat.* 1. 8) of this area as once ‘ghastly with bleaching bones.’ Since the publication of these discoveries in the late nineteenth century it has been generally accepted that the corpses of the lower classes were discarded by being thrown into mass graves without religious rites or commemoration (for example, Bodel 1994; 2000; Jongman 2003; Le Gall 1980–81; Whittaker 1993).

When the evidence for the use of *puticuli* is critically examined it becomes clear that the role of these pits in the funerary activities of the poor was probably severely limited. Not only do the dimensions and structure of the pits imply state involvement in their creation, use and regulation (unlikely in the case of the disposal of the destitute), but the capacity of the *puticuli* indicates that if they were used as part of the disposal system of the city that this was relatively short-lived (less than fifty years) and they were not an established means of disposal (Graham 2004). Furthermore, the use of mass graves and the subsequent de-humanising of the

individuals deposited within them, does not align with Roman religious, social, legal and emotional ideals of burial and preservation of memory (see Graham 2004 for a more detailed discussion). However, modern scholarship continues to assert that the poor were unceremoniously discarded into mass graves and that the funerary activities of the lower classes were therefore radically different from those of the rest of society. It is commonly assumed that their lack of wealth and status meant that they were uninterested in publicly commemorating their lives and their burial practices revolved around the need for disposal rather than being perceived as an opportunity to negotiate their social position or celebrate a life. General acceptance of the proposal that the corpses of the poor were dumped adds weight to the theory that the lower classes were immune to the social and religious pressures, demands and fears that influenced the actions of their wealthier neighbours. This, however, contributes nothing to our understanding of the lower classes or ancient funerary practices since it not only relegates the poor to a place of social insignificance but also disregards the attitudes of a significant proportion of the community towards death. Nevertheless, the ancient attitudes and beliefs that are applied to discussions of upper class funerary activities can shed more light on the overlooked funerary practices of the lower classes. Three key themes in particular (religion, commemoration and emotion) are vital to increasing our understanding of the lower classes and their attitudes towards the treatment of the body and the remembrance of the dead.

Burying the dead

In order for a Roman burial to be considered sacred and, more importantly, to prevent the shade of the deceased restlessly wandering the earth, the corpse must receive a proper religious burial. We are informed of this fact by Cicero (*De Leg.* II. 2. 57) who states 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.’

Not only was this act necessary to safeguard the remains of the dead, but also to protect the living who might be haunted by the souls of the unburied who remained trapped, restless and vengeful, between the world of the living and that of the dead (Hope 2000: 120). Horace (*Odes* I. 28(2)) also alludes to this fearful state when he makes the shade of an unburied sailor plead with a stranger for burial:

‘Perchance the need of sepulture and a retribution of like disdain may await thyself sometime. I shall not be left without 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.’

Even a minimal, perhaps only symbolic, covering of earth was apparently sufficient to allow the dead to rest peacefully and had both religious and legal connotations (see Kyle 1998). The belief that minimal burial was essential transcended socio-economic barriers and was very widespread, as attested by annual festivals such as the *Lemuria* and *Parentalia* which were held in order to appease the shades of individuals who had not received proper burial. These

festivals were public holidays recognised by all members of the community and their importance is further emphasised by Ovid's description (*Fasti*, II. 547–556) of the terrible events that had occurred when the rites were once neglected. There is no reason to assume that the underprivileged classes were less afraid of the consequences of improper burial or the neglect of these festivals.

Evidence for these concerns can be found in the few graves belonging to the poor which exist in urban cemeteries such as the Vatican, Via Nomentana, Isola Sacra and Ostia. These modest burials were made with great care and steps were taken to ensure that the interred remains stayed protected and undisturbed. For example, in many of the humble graves dug in the spaces between the larger mausolea at Isola Sacra, near Ostia, the body was placed carefully into the grave, sarcophagus or other receptacle before being protected by tiles raised into a vault (*cappuccina*) or fragments of amphorae. Over 600 humble burials have been excavated at Isola Sacra, all of which demonstrate evidence of proper burial rather than casual disposal (for details of these see Angelucci *et al.* 1990; Baldassarre *et al.* 1996; Taglietti 2001). Although these graves probably belong to the poorest members of the local community (at Isola Sacra the larger mausolea belong to freedmen and members of the 'wealthier' poor such as artisans and tradesmen, and it is therefore likely that the more modest graves belong to less successful members of the same community), they indicate that care was taken in order to minimise disturbance of the body and to provide minimal burial. The materials used to cover the remains (most commonly tiles, stone, bricks and amphorae) may have been inexpensive and readily available, probably purchased second hand or salvaged from existing structures, but nevertheless signal a concern for the welfare of the deceased. Furthermore, at Boccone D'Aste, located a short distance from the Via Nomentana to the north-east of Rome, there were many humble graves either cut in order to accommodate the head of the deceased or furnished with small stone 'pillows' (De Filippis 2001: 58). These graves can be considered as further evidence for the careful deposition of the remains of the dead and indicate that those responsible for the interment were eager to provide a proper burial. There are numerous other examples of well-protected poor graves throughout Italy, for example on the Via Triumphalis at Rome (Steinby 1987) and at Gubbio in the north-east of Italy (Cipollone 2002). The care with which these graves were created and the lengths taken to ensure that the remains were completely covered all suggest that the poorer classes *did* wish to provide the dead with proper burial.

These same religious beliefs also dictated that ritual banquets were held at the grave during the abovementioned festivals and at other times of the year when the dead were remembered. These events held not only religious significance but also played a crucial role in processes of competition and negotiation, as well as identity display, creation and legitimacy and provided an opportunity for social interaction with a diverse range of people (see Graham 2005). The importance of these rituals is signalled by the installation of equipment and furniture, including dining couches, ovens and wells, in many larger mausolea. The dead were believed to play an active role in these banquets by joining their living relatives at the feast. They required sustenance in the form of food and drink in order to maintain their peaceful existence in the afterlife and, as a result, offerings were made to the deceased in the form of libations. That these ritual activities and offerings were also important to the underprivileged classes is attested by the libation devices associated with modest graves. Many of the graves at Isola Sacra, for example, were equipped with pipes and cut amphorae which provided direct passage to the interred remains. In some instances the apparatus was more complex and evidently

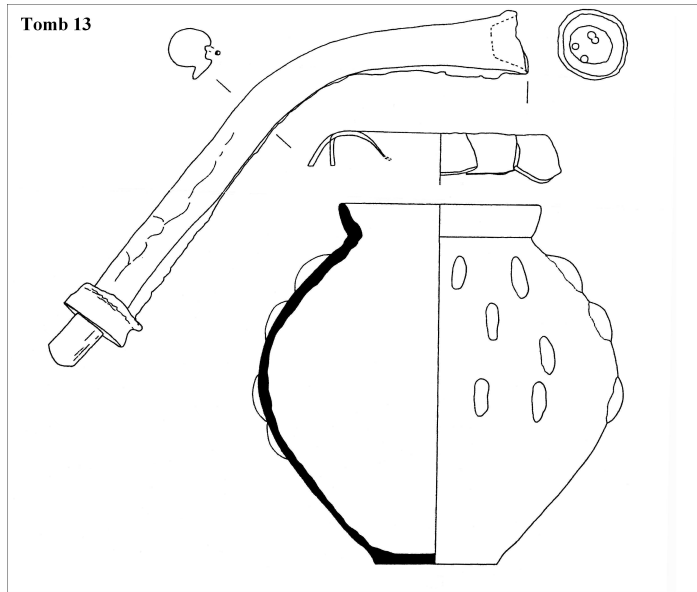


Figure 2: Cremation urn with lead libation pipe and lid from Tomb 13 at Gubbio (after Cipollone 2002, Fig. 26)

designed specifically for this function. At Gubbio cremation urns were often sealed with lead and fitted with moulded lead pipes which emerged at the surface (see Fig. 2; Cipollone, 2002). The presence of these devices signals the intention of those responsible for the burial to return to the grave in order to observe specific religious rites; something that appears quite at odds with the supposed apathy of the lower classes outlined above.

There are obvious problems with the direct equation of modestly furnished or constructed graves with members of the lower classes simply on the basis of their apparent ‘poverty’ and it remains possible that the humble nature of these burials is the consequence of different religious sensibilities or a matter of personal choice. However, the examples discussed here are all located amidst pagan tombs and display the same range of grave goods and provisions for post-funerary ritual activity (libations and feasting) as the more substantial mausolea, thus indicating that there was no significant religious disparity between them. Furthermore, several of the modest graves appear to have an association with the larger mausolea, perhaps suggesting that they were less wealthy dependents of those interred within them.

Remembering the dead

It is evident from literary sources, epigraphy, sculpture and extant funerary monuments that there was a strong desire at *all* levels of society to commemorate the dead (see for example Hope 1998). It was widely considered important for an individual to advertise the details of their status, wealth and identity to the wider community in order to ensure that their memory remained alive in the minds of the living. The reasons for these beliefs are extensive but can be summarised as being principally connected with a desire for status and recognition within the community and a fear of annihilation after death that led to a consequent wish for immortality

in the world of the living. A tomb built at Rome during the Augustan period by a baker named Eurysaces provides an excellent example. Built to resemble a giant grain silo and ovens and bearing a frieze depicting Eurysaces at work, the tomb makes a clear statement, not only about the extent of his economic (and presumably social) success, but also the means by which this was achieved. The inscription (CIL I² 1206) reveals that the tomb was dedicated to his wife, but it is Eurysaces who takes centre stage on the monument and presumably accrued certain social advantages from still being alive when it was created. Widespread fear of oblivion after death was particularly instrumental in determining the importance of commemoration and led many individuals to seek immortality in the world of the living by erecting monuments that celebrated their lives and allowed at least a memory of them to remain alive. It has been demonstrated above that religious beliefs were largely unaffected by economic status and members of the lower classes are therefore likely to have been equally afraid of the possibility that their soul would be annihilated. Unlike wealthier members of the community who were often honoured with statues in the Forum and commemorated themselves by virtue of their public works and generous gifts to the community, the lower classes lacked significant opportunities to publicly memorialise themselves during their lifetime. Not only did such activity require significant economic resources but these individuals were also incapable of holding the requisite public office that entitled them to such public commemoration. Consequently the commemorative properties of funerary monuments and activities assumed particular importance.

The grave markers and funerary monuments belonging to members of the lower classes undoubtedly took various forms, although the archaeological evidence for many of these is limited. On occasion a stone monument was erected, although it is notable that most examples of such memorials belonged to slaves or former slaves, perhaps erected with the financial support of their owners. Stone tombstones probably ranged in price and although the lowest recorded price in Italy is 120 sesterces (Duncan-Jones 1982: 128) this is more likely to represent the lowest figure worth recording than the cheapest stone available. For individuals with little or no regular income this remained a considerable expense and precluded the purchase of a tombstone for the majority. There were, however, evidently other options available for permanent or semi-permanent forms of memorial. At Isola Sacra, and in other cemeteries in Italy, such as the Vatican (Toynbee and Ward Perkins 1956) and Pianabella (Carbonara *et al.* 2001), chest tombs (*cassone*) were often built over the interred remains of the deceased (Fig. 3).

These barrel-like masonry structures were covered with red plaster, sometimes painted with green vegetation, and bear small inscribed plaques providing basic biographical information. Others have small brick facades which appear to emulate the architecture of more substantial tombs. The remains of the deceased, either cremated or inhumed, were placed below the masonry structure, often contained within other receptacles such as urns, coffins and sarcophagi or protected by tiles and amphorae. As a result, it is clear that despite their appearance, the *cassone* were not burial *containers* but were designed primarily as a form of commemorative monument. They communicated with the living through the inscribed text and the design of the monument, and provided a focus for ongoing family remembrance activities. The *cassone* thus indicate a concern for both commemoration and proper burial and, furthermore, many were fitted with libation conduits and therefore provide additional evidence for continued ritual activity. Other types of memorial include *cappuccina* burials and vertical amphorae, both of which not only protected the remains but also marked the place of burial (Fig. 4).

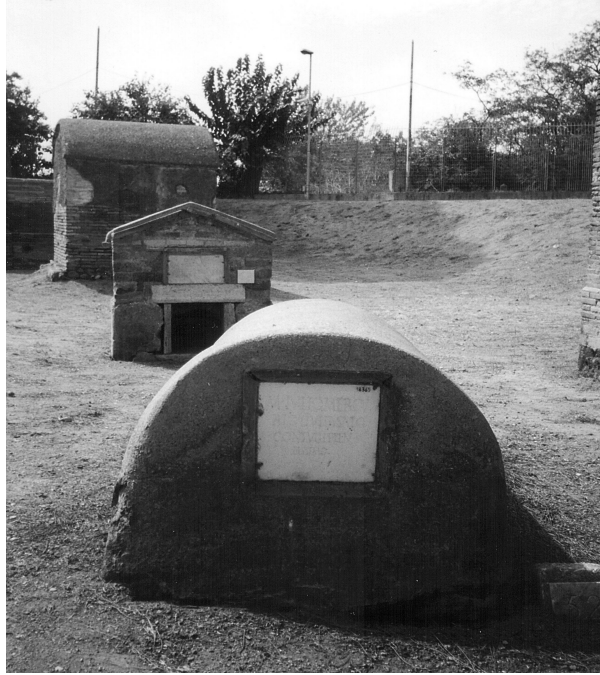


Figure 3: Cassone tombs at Isola Sacra (photo by author)

These structures may have been painted with biographical information although no evidence for this survives. However, even without such information, these simple markers demonstrate a concern for commemoration. Not only does marking the location of a grave in order to minimise disturbance signal concern for the welfare of the deceased, but these markers also provided a focus for continued activity. Pipes or broken amphorae were often installed as libation conduits for *cappuccina* burials, whilst the amphorae were pierced at the base, thus providing further convincing evidence that the people responsible for the burial intended to return and perform specific rites. What is more, these rites themselves functioned as a form of commemoration. Through repeated ritual activities the dead could be recalled, celebrated and at least temporarily saved from oblivion. As Williams (2003: 7) has observed, ‘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.’ Furthermore, Connerton (1989) has made a clear distinction between ‘inscribing practices’, in which information is trapped and subsequently communicated by a device such as the inscribed monument, and ‘incorporating practices’, or the active participation in commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices – essentially remembrance through repeated ritual acts. The amphorae, *cassone*, *cappuccina* burials and other humble grave markers provided a focus for these ‘incorporating practices’ and the process of experiencing the regular ritual acts held in conjunction with them allowed the living to commemorate the dead and negotiate or re-affirm relationships between one another and society in general. The regularity with which Roman religion dictated that ritual activities be held at the grave (during festivals, the funeral, the anniversary of the birth and death of the



Figure 4: The remains of vertical amphorae burials at Isola Sacra (photo by author)

commemoration. Similar activities undoubtedly occurred in association with more substantial tombs, as attested by libation pipes and formal dining facilities, but these rituals may have assumed even greater importance where circumstances dictated that the physical signs of remembrance (i.e. substantial monuments; which could continue the commemorative process once the ceremonies were over) were less elaborate. The living could also benefit from these social interactions within the cemetery (Graham 2005), just as Eurysaces profited from his wife's tomb, and there is likely to have been as much competition for status, recognition and position amongst the lower classes as any other socio-economic group.

Grieving for the dead

In her 1999 publication on *Bereavement and Commemoration* Sarah Tarlow acknowledges the difficulties inherent in 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. Emotions, and the forms in which they are expressed, can of course be socially constructed but despite this they remain essential for understanding material responses to death and burial; as Tarlow (1999: 30) states: ‘how can we consider burial (death) without considering grief, fear and other emotions, which inform and structure funerary practices?’ Direct expressions of emotion can be found on many extant Roman funerary monuments. These often focus on describing the character of the deceased and the grief of the monument’s dedicator at their death. The validity of these emotions has often been called into question on the basis that many take the form of only single adjectives and use standardised formulae rather than being spontaneous emotional statements. However, Hopkins (1983: 220) argues that, ‘the very act of transforming feelings into words automatically channels them along conventional lines.’ In simple terms, there are only so many words with which feelings can be expressed. Furthermore, the creation of a funerary monument of any form can be considered a public acknowledgement of a personal relationship and a means by which to display and express its importance (*ibid.*: 131). There were few opportunities for such public expressions of emotion in the Roman city and the funerary sphere thus provided a formal and socially acceptable outlet for these expressions, heightened, no doubt, by the emotional aspects of death itself. The funeral, burial and subsequent commemorative activities therefore provided a means by which to cope with the emotional, social and economic uncertainty caused by death.

If members of urban society with access to the economic resources required to commission an inscribed memorial were often strongly motivated to do so by their feelings of grief, it is very probable that these emotions also affected the actions of the underprivileged. The family unit was an important source of emotional and economic support for all levels of society, including the very poor, and there is therefore little reason to assume that the death of a family member was any less traumatic for the lower classes. The examples of careful burial and attention to the protection of the corpse discussed above provide some evidence for these emotions. A body could be easily disposed of without ceremony so why go to so much effort to carefully bury the dead if they were unaffected by their death? The continuation of ritual activities attested by libation conduits and the presence of grave markers also illuminates not only the importance of the religious beliefs on which they were based but also the strength of personal relationships. An absence of direct emotional expressions on the amphorae or *cappuccina* does *not* signal an absence of emotion and does *not* mean that the poor did not care when a family member or friend died.

Conclusions

These observations have significant implications for our understanding of the funerary practices of the lower classes. The casual, unceremonious dumping implied by the use of mass graves clearly does not align with the evidence discussed here and highlights the anomalous position of the *puticuli* in discussions of ancient funerary practices. This can perhaps be further supported by parallels drawn between the situation in ancient Rome and early modern England, where mass graves were commonly used for the disposal of the destitute. A text from 1721 describes the ‘large holes or pits in which they put many of the bodies of those whose friends are not able to pay for better graves’ (cited in Gittings 1984: 61). These pits, however, were the resting places of the very poor; the destitute, not the lower classes in general. Indeed, there was considerable fear amongst the latter of the dehumanising pauper’s grave, described in 1774 as

‘the greatest evil’ (*ibid.*: 64). Cannon (1989: 438) observed that during the 1800s, ‘the desire to secure respectful interment was the strongest and most widely diffused feeling among labouring people ... 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.’ This deep desire to avoid the mass grave was based largely on the same concerns highlighted above for ancient Rome: religious concern for the fate of the deceased, the dehumanising nature of mass disposal, the preservation of the memory of the individual and public negotiations for status, identity and social position. In addition to convincing evidence that mass graves did not constitute a regular or practical means of disposal for the corpses of the lower classes (Graham 2004), the arguments presented here strongly suggest that mass graves should no longer be considered the normal or preferred means of disposal for their remains.

Current attitudes towards the study of the burial and commemorative practices of the poor evidently require some revision. It can no longer be assumed that the economic and social constraints imposed on life at the lower end of the social scale led to the urban poor formulating radically different attitudes towards life, death and disposal that meant that they were content to unceremoniously dispose of the bodies of their family and friends in communal graves. In order to fully comprehend the funerary activities of the poor it is essential that they are examined within their proper context and we acknowledge that, although economically distinct, they were subject to the same demands, pressures, beliefs, fears and hopes as the rest of the urban community. This will not only enable us to further our understanding of the social and religious importance of ancient funerary customs but also urban society as a whole, allowing us to see the social interactions and negotiations that took place at *all* levels of society and, indeed, between these levels. The lower classes did, after all, comprise the bulk of the urban community and it is essential that we acknowledge their impact upon it as well as their own attitudes towards life and death.

Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield

Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my thanks to Maureen Carroll for her assistance with the preparation of the thesis from which a part of this paper was drawn, and Sue Moss.

Bibliography

Ancient sources

- Cicero, De Legibus (Translated by C. W. Keyes 1966). *Cicero in Twenty Eight Volumes, vol. 16: De Re Publica; De Legibus*. London: William Heinemann.
- Horace, Odes (Translated by C. E. Bennett 1927). *Horace, The Odes and Epodes*. London: William Heinemann.
- Horace, Satires (translated by H. Rushton Fairclough 1929). *Horace, Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*. London: William Heinemann.
- Juvenal (Translated by G. G. Ramsay 1918). *Juvenal and Persius*. London: William Heinemann.
- Martial (Translated by D.R. Shackleton Bailey 1993). *Epigrams*. London: William Heinemann.
- Ovid (Translated by J. G. Frazer 1989). *Ovid in Six Volumes, vol. 5: Fasti*. London: William Heinemann.

- Seneca, Ep. (Translated by R. M. Gummere 1917 – 1925). *Seneca in Ten Volumes, vols. 4, 5 and 6: Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*. London: William Heinemann.
- Varro, De Lingua Latina (Translated by R. G. Kent 1938). *Varro, On the Latin Language*. London: William Heinemann.

Modern sources

- Alföldy, G. 1985. *The Social History of Rome*. (Translated by David Braund and Frank Pollock). London: Croom Helm.
- Angelucci, S., Baldassarre, I., Bragantini, I., Lauro, M.G., Mannucci, V., Mazzoleni, A., Morselli, C., and Taglietti, F. 1990. Sepolture e riti nella necropolis dell'Isola Sacra. *Bollettino di Archeologia* 5–6: 49–113.
- Baldassarre, I., Bragantini, I., Morselli, C., and Taglietti, F. 1996. *Necropoli di Porto. Isola Sacra*. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico E Zecca Dello Stato, Libreria Dello Stato.
- Bodel, J. 1994. Graveyards and Groves: A study of the *Lex Lucerina*. *American Journal of Ancient History* 7: 1–133.
- Bodel, J. 2000. Dealing with the dead: undertakers, executioners and potter's fields in ancient Rome. In V.M. Hope and E. Marshall (eds.) *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*. London: Routledge: 104–127.
- Cannon, A. 1989. The Historical Dimension in Mortuary Expressions of Status and Sentiment. *Current Anthropology* 30 (4): 437–458.
- Carbonara, A., Pellegrino, A., and Zaccagnini, R. 2001. Necropoli di Pianabella: vecchi e nuovi ritrovamenti. In M. Heinzelmann, J. Ortalli, P. Fasold, and M. Witteyer (eds.) *Römischer Bestattungsbrauch und Beigabensitten in Rom, Norditalien und den Nordwestprovinzen von der späten Republik bis in die Kaiserzeit* (Culto dei morti e costume funerari romani. Roma, Italia settentrionale e province nord-occidentali dalla tarda Repubblica all'età imperiale). Rome: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom: 139–148.
- Carcopino, J. 1964. *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire*. London: Penguin Books.
- Cipollone, M. 2002. Gubbio (Perugia). Necropoli in loc. Vittorina. Campagne di scavo 1980–1982 (1). *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità*. Serie IX, Volume XI–XII: 5–371.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cowell, F.R. 1961. *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- De Filippis, M. 2001. Ricerche in sepolcreti suburbani tra Salaria e Nomentana. In M. Heinzelmann, J. Ortalli, P. Fasold, and M. Witteyer (eds.) *Römischer Bestattungsbrauch und Beigabensitten in Rom, Norditalien und den Nordwestprovinzen von der späten Republik bis in die Kaiserzeit* (Culto dei morti e costume funerari romani. Roma, Italia settentrionale e province nord-occidentali dalla tarda Repubblica all'età imperiale). Rome: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom: 55–61.
- Duncan-Jones, R. 1982. *The Economy of the Roman Empire – Quantitative Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friggeri, R. 2001. *The Epigraphic Collection of the Museo Nazionale Romano at the Baths of Diocletian*. Milan: Electa.
- Garnsey, P. 1998. *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity – Essays in Social and Economic History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gittings, C. 1984. *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*. London: Croom Helm.
- Graham, E-J. 2004. *Death, disposal and the destitute: The burial of the urban poor in Italy in the late Republic and the early Empire*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield.
- Graham, E-J. 2005. The quick and the dead in the extra-urban landscape: The Roman cemetery at Ostia/Portus as a lived environment. In J. Bruhn, B. Croxford and D. Grigoropoulos (eds.) *TRAC 2004. Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference. Durham 2004*. Oxford: Oxbow Books: 133–143.
- Hands, A.R. 1968. *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome*. London: Thames and Hudson.

- Hope, V.M. 1998. Negotiating identity and status. The gladiators of Roman Nîmes. In R. Laurence and J. Berry (eds.) *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*. London: Routledge: 179–195.
- Hope, V.M. 2000. Contempt and respect: the treatment of the corpse in ancient Rome. In V.M. Hope and E. Marshall (eds.) *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*. London: Routledge: 104–127.
- Hopkins, K. 1983. *Death and Renewal – Sociological Studies in Roman History, Volume 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horsfall, N. 2003. *The Culture of the Roman Plebs*. London: Duckworth.
- Jongman, W. 2003. Slavery and the Growth of Rome. The transformation of Italy in the second and first centuries BCE. In C. Edwards and G. Woolf (eds.) *Rome the Cosmopolis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 100–122.
- Joshel, S.R. 1992. *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A study of the occupational inscriptions*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kyle, D.G. 1998. *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*. London: Routledge.
- Lanciani, R. 1874. Puticoli. *Bullettino Della Commissione Archeologica Comunale Roma* 2: 42–53.
- Lanciani, R. 1891. *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries*. London: Macmillan and Company.
- Le Gall, J. 1980–81. La sépulture des pauvres à Rome. *Bulletin De La Société Rationnelle des Antiquaires de France* 1980–81: 148–152.
- Morris, I. 1992. *Death Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patterson, J.R. 2000a. Living and Dying in the City of Rome: houses and tombs. In J. Coulston and H. Dodge (eds.) *Ancient Rome: The Archaeology of the Eternal City*. Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph 54: 257–89.
- Patterson, J.R. 2000b. On the margins of the city of Rome. In V.M. Hope and E. Marshall (eds.) *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*. London: Routledge: 85–103.
- Ross Taylor, L. 1961. Freedmen and freeborn in the epitaphs of Imperial Rome. *American Journal of Philology* 82(2): 113–132.
- Salmon, E.T. 1974. *A History of the Roman World – 30 BC to AD 138*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- Scobie, A. 1986. Slums, Sanitation, and Mortality in the Roman World. *Klio* 68(2): 399–433.
- Steinby, E.M. 1987. La necropolis della Via Triumphalis pianificazione generale e tipologia dei monumenti funerari. In H. von Hesberg and P. Zanker (eds.) *Römische Gräberstraßen. Selbstdarstellung – Status – Standard*. Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften: 85–110.
- Taglietti, F. 2001. Ancora su incinerazione e inhumazione: la necropolis dell'Isola Sacra. In M. Heinzelmann, J. Ortalli, P. Fasold, and M. Witteyer (eds.) *Römischer Bestattungsbrauch und Beigabensitten in Rom, Norditalien und den Nordwestprovinzen von der späten Republik bis in die Kaiserzeit* (Culto dei morti e costume funerari romani. Roma, Italia settentrionale e province nord-occidentali dalla tarda Repubblica all'età imperiale). Rome: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom: 149–158.
- Toynbee, J. and Ward Perkins, J. 1956. *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Tarlow, S. 1999. *Bereavement and Commemoration. An Archaeology of Mortality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Veyne, P. 1987. The Roman Empire. In P. Veyne (ed.) *A History of Private Life. I. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. (Translated by Arthur Goldhammer). Massachusetts and London: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press: 5–233.
- Whittaker, C.R. 1993. The poor in the city of Rome. In C.R. Whittaker (ed.) *Land, City and Trade in the Roman Empire (Vol. VII)*. Aldershot: 1–25.
- Williams, H. 2003. Introduction: The Archaeology of Death, Memory and Material Culture. In H. Williams (ed.) *Archaeologies of Remembrance. Death and Memory in Past Societies*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers: 1–24.