

Constructing Roman identity: funerary monuments and social structure in the Roman world

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ABSTRACT *Hundreds of thousands of tombstones survive from the Roman period. This paper explores the value of this source to the Roman social historian, using historical and sociological studies of funerary evidence, particularly of the Victorian period, to provide comparative models. It is argued here that information drawn from Roman tombstones does not allow the development of simple demographic assertions about the population of the Roman Empire. Instead it is suggested that Roman tombstones were a medium for communicating social status and as such had a particular appeal to specific groups within Roman society. To illustrate this the chronological variations detectable in the use and construction of tombstones are described and related to changing patterns in the expression of status and social mobility. In particular the funerary monuments erected to freed slaves and auxiliary soldiers are examined to illuminate how the identity of the deceased was constructed and communicated through both text and images. The memorials of these groups were a medium for expressing integration, both real and aspired to, into the Roman world. But there was no simple or one-dimensional definition of what it was to be Roman, and thus those on the periphery of Roman society were able to negotiate their identity, and the identity expressed in their tombstones, according to flexible concepts.*

Introduction

Yet full oft has a land been destroyed by the vainglory of a few, by the lust for honour and for a title that shall cling to the stones that guard their ashes—stones which may be rent asunder by the rude strength of the barren fig-tree, seeing that even sepulchres have their doom assigned to them (Juvenal, *Satires* X, 142–146 (Loeb translation)).

Funerary monuments, created to immortalize the dead, in their turn die; tombstones decay, inscriptions weather and stone crumbles and falls. Preservation often entails removal and reuse and once isolated from the cemetery the role of the monument, to mark and protect the last remains of a human life, becomes increasingly obscure. The tombstone is an aid to memory but human memory is all too short and every culture ultimately cannot avoid neglecting and forgetting its mounting dead. In the Roman period legislation aimed to protect

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the dead and their final resting-places but abuses still occurred. Tombs might be used as brothels, temporary housing and as impromptu toilets (Ulpian, *Digest*, 47.12.3; Petronius, *Satyricon*, 61–62; Martial, 1, 34). Cemeteries and memorials fell into disrepair and the redevelopment of cemetery land was not unknown (Toynbee & Ward-Perkins, 1956). In the town of Ostia a tombstone was found reused as a toilet seat (Meiggs, 1973, p. 143). Nothing was sacred and protected forever. But thoughts of impermanence did not prevent many Romans creating funerary memorials for themselves and their loved ones. Many were so driven by the desire to be remembered after their death that they created, decorated and inscribed their final resting-places in anticipation of their final demise. High mortality rates must have often meant that investment in the future was investment in death.

Despite contemporary and continuing neglect many Roman funerary monuments survive to the present day, providing us with a unique opportunity to understand why and how people desired to be remembered. Roman tombstones have become established historical artefacts; they are recorded, hoarded and studied even if the cemetery itself has long since vanished. In the western provinces of the former Roman empire such stones proliferate and line the corridors and storerooms of town museums. The tombstone, from Scotland to North Africa, has become one of the most common indicators of the former Roman presence. These stone memorials now function as symbols of a vanished empire and a dead civilization.

It has been estimated that 250,000 inscribed stones survive from the Roman world and as many as three-quarters of these are probably of a funerary nature (Saller & Shaw, 1984, p. 124). These figures exclude un-inscribed fragments and architectural and sculptural components of now incomplete monuments. In addition this total must only represent a small percentage of the memorials which were originally erected (Duncan-Jones, 1982, pp. 360–362). The extent of this surviving evidence, nevertheless, renders it an important and vital source for life and society within Rome and her empire. This paper intends to explore the value of the Roman tombstone to the Roman social historian and to relate the Roman practice of the commemoration of the dead to that witnessed in other societies. How have funerary memorials been studied as a device to illuminate Roman society and the relationship between Rome and her empire? How does the Roman tombstone communicate and to what extent can we understand the messages transmitted? Particular emphasis will be placed on how the changing use of the funerary monument can be related to structures of power and status display.

The nature of the evidence—the Roman cemetery

A Roman cemetery was located at the periphery of the settlement which it was intended to serve. By law all burials had to take place outside of the town gates (Cicero, *de legibus*, 2.23.58) and the necropoleis grew up alongside the radial roads; the thoroughfares were the life source of the cemetery facilitating access



FIGURE 1. Tomb constructed in the form of a semi-circular seating area at the Herculaneum Gate Necropolis, Pompeii.

and communication between the living and the dead. The grave was readily accessible to the family of the deceased but it also confronted the casual traveller since the first and last thing which a visitor to the city would see, on arrival and departure, were the tombs of the dead. The surviving necropoleis of the town of Pompeii, for example, straggle along the roads with the memorials directed at the passer-by. Certain prominent monuments were designed as seats inscribed with the name of the deceased (Kockel, 1983, pp. 18–22); the weary traveller could take a rest and remember the name of a once great Pompeian (Fig. 1). Proximity to the town was sought after and the areas close to the town gate were particularly prized with permission for special burial within the town's sacred boundary (*pomerium*) awarded as a great honour by the town council (Kockel, 1983, pp. 11–14). The relationship between town and cemetery emphasizes how the dead depended on the living for the preservation of their memory and how the living were confronted with their own mortality.

The majority of Roman cemeteries are no longer visible; the earth has consumed the residues and the expansion of modern towns has concealed the remaining traces. There are, however, exceptions to this general pattern. The unearthing of individual human burials, if not whole cemeteries, is not unusual. Containers holding cremated remains, sometimes accompanied by grave goods, are common discoveries and areas of inhumation burials dating to the later centuries of Roman power are often uncovered. These excavated human remains provide insights into the adoption of Roman burial practices in the diverse regions of the empire whilst skeletal evidence may indicate the gender,

age, state of health and cause of death of the deceased (Molleson, 1981; Morris, 1992, pp. 70–102; Parkin, 1992, pp. 42–58). The discovery of markers which indicated the place of interment is also frequent. It is predominantly stone which has stood the test of time and a wide variety of stone memorials survive. Simple tombstones similar to modern headstones abound but more unusual designs are also well attested; tombs in the shape of pyramids, houses and temples; round tombs, tower tombs and stepped tombs (Toynbee, 1971; Walker, 1985; von Hesberg, 1992). Funerary monuments ranged from the small and undecorated to the large and ornate. The memorials evoke the elusive dead. Inscriptions may provide the names, ages, professions and relationships of those commemorated. Sculptural decor may indicate personal appearance or means of employment. Such memorials are, however, rarely found *in situ* still associated with the human remains they were intended to indicate and commemorate. Many examples survive through reuse or were chance finds of the generations before systematic excavation. Exceptions to this general pattern are provided by unusual circumstances of preservation at the Italian towns of Pompeii and Ostia where the ashes of Vesuvius and the sand of the Tiber estuary have preserved many features of the ancient settlements. Here cemeteries have been excavated in comparatively good condition; the memorials are still in place, inscribed and decorated as they would have been in antiquity and they continue to indicate the interment of cremated and inhumed remains (Calza, 1940; D'Ambrosio & De Caro, 1983; Kockel, 1983). For the majority of funerary monuments such full contextual study is no longer an option.

The separation of the memorial and the cemetery is often further aggravated by the diverse subjects which the funerary record is used to illuminate. The academic spheres of epigraphy, archaeology, art history and architecture are fuelled by the diverse remains of death and all tend to isolate the target element of study and relegate the remainder. Epitaphs, in particular, have provided a focal point since the verbal information inscribed on memorials can be readily translated and understood; yet to privilege the written word over other aspects of the funerary medium is potentially misleading and reflects the predilections of our own literate society rather than those of the Romans. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of considering the evidence of death and burial from Classical Antiquity in context (Morris, 1992). The ideal is to replace the funerary monument in its ritual *milieu*. The full realization of this often eludes us but the principle can still be applied to the reintegration of the constituent parts of the memorial. The reconstruction of the entire cemetery may not be possible but its communicative range can still be assessed if for each memorial the epitaph, monument type, sculptural decor, scale and location are considered together. In antiquity all these differing elements co-operated to communicate messages about the deceased to the living. If each monument is viewed as an integrated whole we may gain insights into the functioning of the cemetery and its potential role as the showcase of the associated town which exhibited the diversity of the town's inhabitants through the texts and images of its memorials.

The range of attested monument types, the communicative power of the

memorials and the element of display in the cemetery all appear to suggest that the city of the dead was a mirror for the city of the living. Whereas the houses surviving within the walls of Pompeii rarely provide direct information on the name, status or occupation of their inhabitants (Mouritsen, 1988, pp. 13–23) the tombs lying outside the walls often do through the associated texts and images. Roman tombstones provide an access point into the Roman population like no other surviving source; here, it would seem, we have an insight into Roman life (and death), neatly presented before us are real and ordinary people from every corner of the Roman territory. This impression, however, risks overlooking the distortions that this mirror of death may create. It is essential to question the extent to which the memorials of the cemetery can be regarded as representative. In studies of some modern graveyards the data have been regarded as representative (Young, 1960) but in historical surveys questions are raised as to who is represented, who is absent and why (Brooks, 1989, pp. 28–33). The information communicated by Roman tombstones provides an access point into the town's population, but does it provide access to a cross-section of that population? Studies of epigraphic data suggest this to be unlikely. Attempts to reconstruct the age structure of the Roman population from age statements in epitaphs in particular, have been criticized as failing to understand the true nature of the source (Hopkins, 1966, 1987; Parkin, 1992, pp. 5–19). Isolating age statements from other epigraphic data is misleading since this specific information was not uniformly provided among those commemorated in the inscriptions. The inclusion of certain information such as age was culturally mediated by factors such as gender, relationship to the commemorator and indeed the relative age of the deceased. Thus to attempt to relate the partial epigraphic data to the Roman population as a whole is misguided.

Roman epigraphic and monumental data are also a largely urban phenomenon. Towns and cities were integral to Roman life but not all the population dwelt in such settlements and it would be misleading to assume that the urban population was indicative of the rural. The majority of surviving monuments may originate from the urban context but this does not mean that they represent all the urban populace. The construction of a memorial with the permanency of stone may not have been the norm. The infrequency of the discovery of such monuments in some excavated cemeteries suggests that many graves remained unmarked or were indicated by perishable markers made of wood or pottery (Jones, 1977; Purcell, 1987, p. 34). In the Isola Sacra necropolis, near Ostia, pottery *amphorae*, or storage jars, were discovered protruding from the ground reused as ash containers (Calza, 1940, p. 44; Toynbee, 1971, pp. 73, 101–103). This was an effective method of indicating the site of interment but lacked the durability of stone. It could be argued that those not represented by the stone memorials were simply the extreme poor, thus reinforcing the impression that the cemetery did reflect the status range (Saller & Shaw, 1984). Extreme poverty must have rendered many unable to provide an adequate or permanent grave marker (Duncan-Jones, 1982, pp. 79–80, 127–130). Large pits (*puticuli*) into which both rubbish and human remains were simultaneously dumped are

attested at Rome (Bodel, 1994, pp. 32–44; Hopkins, 1983, pp. 207–211). But it is impossible to know how many people endured such a fate or received no lasting form of commemorative marker. We do know that wealth was not the only principle governing burial choice, since those who were deemed as polluted by blood or profession such as suicides, prostitutes and gladiators could be excluded from cemetery areas (Hope, 1997a; Wiedemann, 1992, p. 30) while the distinguished and noble could opt for alternative forms of commemoration (Champlin, 1991, pp. 155–168; Hopkins, 1983, pp. 247–255). The population recorded on the stone funerary memorials does not present a cross-section of Roman society since there existed a distinctive culture of commemoration in which not all members of society could or wanted to participate equally.

The difficulties of interpreting the Roman funerary record are enhanced further when it is recalled that the Roman empire was vast in terms of both space and time. The gradual, but nevertheless dramatic, change from the cremation to the inhumation of the corpse initiated during the second century AD illustrates the absence of chronological constants within the Roman cemetery. The reasons behind this change in burial practice are an area of debate and may never be fully understood (Morris, 1992, pp. 31–69; Nock, 1932) but the impact on the organization and appearance of the cemetery and on individual memorial design is evident. The accurate dating of Roman funerary memorials is complex and often impossible; rarely is a date given or even an indirect clue provided. Nevertheless the impact of the passage of time on both the number and the style of monuments constructed has become increasingly apparent. The level of production of inscriptions, most of which it will be remembered are funerary, fluctuated (MacMullen, 1982; Mrozek, 1973) and studies of funerary architecture and design have also indicated that changes in form, shape and function are detectable across time (von Hesberg, 1992, pp. 19–54). The erection of a tombstone inscribed with a Latin epitaph may have symbolized the Roman identity of those commemorated throughout the empire, yet the definition of what it was to be Roman and the significance of the gesture differed in meaning and function at different times and places. The cemeteries of Pompeii are unique in terms of preservation and the insights that they provide, but they capture a picture of a process of development which but for Vesuvius would have continued beyond AD 79. Equally the creation of a funerary monument in Rome during the first century BC may have differed in meaning to one created in Gaul in the third century AD. To view an individual memorial removed from its spatial and chronological framework is to view only a static snapshot.

Queries concerning the value of Roman funerary monuments can seem cautionary and verge on the negative. It is the apparent insights provided into the lives of ordinary people which render the Roman tombstone evidence so exciting. But the sheer quantity of the material should not blind us to its limitations. The funerary record does not facilitate ready and easy access to understanding the demography of the Roman populace nor does it provide a convenient cross-section of the population of Rome or any other city of the

empire. What the funerary record does provide is an indication of the cultural importance of the commemoration of the dead. We cannot reconstruct society from this evidence but insights are gained as to how that society communicated and represented itself in the context of death.

Death and social structure

The Roman funerary monument was an expressive medium the role of which varied across space and time. How can such changes best be explained and to what extent can they be related to the expression of power and status relations prevalent in Roman society? Research on the Roman house, its design, orientation and decor, have underlined how house and home became a status symbol and an area for élite competition (Wallace-Hadrill, 1994). The dwelling of death, it would seem, was just as suitable for social manipulation. Were the messages conveyed by the cemetery oriented by status display or do other factors account for the redefinitions of the appearance and organization of the Roman cemetery?

Instability within the funerary sphere was not a unique feature of the Roman era. It is possible to identify parallel patterns from other cultures and societies which may provide insights into the evolution of the Roman cemetery. This is not to suggest the existence of a universal model for funerary behaviour, but interpretations of similar developments in the funerary practices of other societies may be informative. An interesting case study is the changes which have been identified in the type, style and quantity of monuments erected in British cemeteries from the early 19th century to modern times. The Victorian period was marked by high expenditure in the burial and commemoration of the dead (Brooks, 1989; Gittings, 1984, pp. 94–100; Litten, 1991; Morley, 1971). The funeral and the memorial were an indication of the status of the deceased and, by association, that of the surviving family. But by the end of the 19th century the flamboyant use of the funerary record was already in decline. It is suggested that the movement away from extravagance had its origins among the educated élite and the upper classes (Cannon, 1989, p. 439; Leaney, 1989, pp. 130–133). The elaborate funeral gradually became the prerogative of the lower classes, who spent disproportionate amounts of money on death (Morley, 1971, pp. 22–25; Roberts, 1989, pp. 188–191). By the 1970s Parker-Pearson was able to note that the most elaborate recent memorials in the cemeteries of Cambridge were associated with gypsies and showmen (Parker-Pearson, 1982, p. 104); groups who were often wealthy but occupied a liminal position in relation to much of society. Display in death had been redefined; rejected by the majority, it continued to be a mark of high status to marginal or minority groups (Parker-Pearson, 1982, p. 109).

Various explanations can be offered for this transition. It is impossible to dispute the manifold changes which have affected society over the last 100 to 150 years and these have clearly influenced practices surrounding death just as much as they have influenced life. Advances in medicine, decline in religious

belief, the shift from inhumation to cremation, the impact of two World Wars, the breakdown of the family and the undermining of the class system are all possible influencing factors (Ariès, 1981, pp. 560–601; Brooks, 1989, pp. 77–79; Jupp, 1990; Parker-Pearson, 1982, pp. 110–111; Walter, 1994, pp. 11–15). Parker-Pearson has explored the ideology of funerary practices and suggests that the dead have now lost their power as symbols manipulated by the living (Parker-Pearson, 1982, p. 111); death and burial are no longer an arena for conspicuous consumption. The cemetery increasingly reflects the modern ideal of equality and a classless society, although, as Walter has indicated, there is a certain irony that in a society of individuals, individuality is now lost in death (Walter, 1994). Cannon has explained the same process of change in terms of the dynamics of funerary display, its gradual elaboration through competition and how eventual over-consumption of elaborate rituals or items can lead to an opposite reaction of restraint (Cannon, 1989). Cannon argues that the grandeur of the Victorian funeral petered out because it simply became too commonplace; over-use leads to expressive redundancy and ultimately to decline. The changes from the Victorian way of death to the modern way of death are recent, ongoing and well documented, yet the reasons underlying such changes and what they signify remains an area for debate. The Roman way of death is chronologically distant, spatially diverse and the documentation is comparatively weak. Can the explanations postulated for the more recent changes assist in the analysis of the evolution of the Roman cemetery? First of all we need to consider the chronological changes in the character of the Roman funerary record and then to explore the explanations used to account for these changes.

The quantity of inscriptions erected in the Roman world was not constant across time. MacMullen identifies the inherent fluctuations in the 'epigraphic habit' by drawing upon several graphs which illustrate that the number of inscriptions set up increased during the first century AD, reached a peak during the second and declined during the third (MacMullen, 1982). Why this should be the case and what drove the rise and fall of the act of inscribing has become an area of debate among Roman historians who seek explanations in terms of changes in Roman politics and society. It must be noted, and once more the priority given to the written word can obscure this dimension, that an inscription was always associated with a monument or structure and indeed many of these were funerary. Thus changes in the epigraphic habit cannot be divorced from potential changes in the construction of monuments and, by association, the organization and function of the cemetery. Von Hesberg has delineated a scheme of increasing display in the funerary context which reached its epoch during the final years of the declining Republic (first century BC). The first century AD saw a shift from large self-glorifying memorials which focused on the individual to an increasing emphasis upon communal tombs oriented around the household or common work and employment (von Hesberg, 1992, pp. 19–54). The early second century AD saw a simultaneous increase in bequests to towns and the establishment of charitable foundations as alternative forms of memory preservation (Champlin, 1991, pp. 155–168; Hopkins, 1983,



FIGURE 2. The remains of the tomb of the Emperor Augustus, Rome.

pp. 247–255). By the third century the erection of permanent funerary monuments was increasingly rare.

How can these alterations in use be accounted for? Explanations have mainly focused on the value of funerary memorials in status display and the reassessment of this value according to alterations in the political and societal organization of Rome and the empire. In Rome of the late Republic overconsumption of the élite, including in the funerary arena, was symptomatic of the tensions of the time and the increased and destructive competition of the ruling nobility. With the advent of the new imperial political system which created one man virtual monarch the relevance of competition declined or, at least, was shifted from Rome to the towns of Italy and the provinces (von Hesberg & Zanker, 1987, p. 10; von Hesberg, 1992, pp. 26–37). This change was epitomized by the mausoleum erected in Rome by the first emperor Augustus (Fig. 2) which involved everything on a massive scale, from the length of the epigraphic biography to the highly visible location and the sheer scale of the design and decor (von Hesberg & Panciera, 1994; Zanker, 1988, pp. 72–77). This monument reflected and symbolized Augustus's dynastic pretensions and, although his own immediate blood connections failed to succeed him, the mausoleum fulfilled the burial requirements of the Roman emperors down to the death of Nerva. For more than 100 years no emperor constructed a tomb; thus this method of élite display and competition was both monopolized and redefined by the Imperial household.

Cannon stresses that it is a common fallacy that elaborate mortuary behaviour is always associated with those of high social status (Cannon, 1989,

p. 437) and indeed this would be a false assumption for the city of Rome after the early first century AD. The reign of Augustus may have marked a change in the power structure among the élite, symbolized by the construction of Augustus's tomb which dominated the landscape of the capital city, but for the majority of the empire's inhabitants the change in control may have had little practical impact. Indeed the first century AD saw an overall increase in the number of funerary monuments erected rather than a decline (MacMullen, 1982). The consolidation of the geographic empire in an environment of general peace and stability allowed settlements to adapt and adopt Roman forms; everything from the amphitheatre to the tombstone. In Rome the political power of the funerary memorial may have been diminished among the élite but it gained a new significance among other strata both in Rome and in the empire. Status was still being displayed through the funerary medium, but the definition of that status had changed.

The type of status display for which the tombstone became relevant during the early imperial period has been explored by Meyer who focuses on the value of Roman citizenship and its promotion at peripheral settlements of the empire (Meyer, 1990). Prior to AD 212 citizenship was not held by all inhabitants of the Roman realm. Citizenship, which entailed legal and financial privileges, could be awarded both to individuals and to whole communities or settlements *en masse* (Gardner, 1993). Meyer notes that the production of epitaphs increased according to the number of citizens present within a community and declined once a general grant of citizenship had been made to all. The funerary memorial functioned as an advertisement of status advancement until that achievement ceased to have value. When citizenship was given to all the inhabitants of the empire at the beginning of the third century the role of the epitaph was fatally undermined.

Woolf has expanded the work of Meyer to investigate further why the production of inscriptions and monuments, funerary and other, went into decline during the third century (Woolf, 1996). Woolf emphasizes the public side of Roman life and the urge to express individual identity in public rather than private contexts. Building on the display of the acquisition of citizenship through the epigraphic medium Woolf suggests a more general theory of the expression of social mobility. The early empire saw increased opportunities for the individual to advance his/her status whether as a slave gaining freedom or as a provincial joining the army. When such distinctions ceased to have value the general urge for individuals to set their names in stone declined.

Parallels in the evolution of the cemeteries of modern Britain and of the ancient Roman empire are apparent. The construction of funerary monuments and their degree of elaboration increased at times of re-definitions and restructuring of society, whether caused by the industrial revolution or the consolidation of Roman power. Once a level of stability had been reached the relevance of display and conspicuous consumption in the funerary sphere reduced (Childe, 1945; Parker-Pearson, 1982, p. 112). These similarities should not, however, be pressed any further. Modern England is characterized by at

least an ideal of equality which finds expression in death: the Roman Empire of the third century, by contrast, was far from equal. Cross-cultural comparison is beneficial in the identification of trends and influences but its suitability and applicability have to be monitored. It is interesting to note, however, that in both cases it is in many ways easier to explain the initial escalation in funerary display than to explain the later decline. Cannon's theory of expressive redundancy has a certain appeal; yet identifying the exact turning-point or trigger and its nature remains, in both cases, problematic.

Emotional and spiritual dimensions

To describe the act of funerary commemoration in terms of structures of power and display is convincing because it unites the rituals of death with the society of origin. Such explanations, however, isolate the act of remembering the dead from its emotional and spiritual context. The actions surrounding death and burial are motivated by diverse factors; to speak solely of status display is potentially to ignore the mourners, the family and the sense of loss. But above all it removes the dead from death itself and the beliefs and reactions which a particular society associates with the fact of mortality. It is impossible to categorize and summarize Roman attitudes to death and any beliefs in an afterlife. We gain occasional insights into such attitudes through surviving literary texts, but these most often represent intellectual and publicly-expressed opinions and it is impossible to know the extent to which such attitudes penetrated the private common sphere. This, coupled with the geographic and chronological diversity of the empire, makes generalizations impossible. This is not to deny that epitaphs can indicate spiritual beliefs, or the lack of them, or that grave goods and offerings may suggest the existence or absence of tomb cult, but repeatedly greater emphasis is placed on the living than on the dead. The burial and commemoration seek to capture the identity of the living person by stressing aspects such as social status and family connections rather than the identity which may be assumed beyond the grave. Nevertheless it is possible that the changes which have been identified in the manner of commemoration should be explained not in terms of status but in terms of changes in attitudes to death itself (compare Ariès, 1981). Recent research on death in ancient Greece has focused on the emotions associated with death and the collective response to it; the burial record is viewed not as an implement for illuminating social structure so much as a reflection of the ideology of death (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1995).

Hopkins has attempted to gauge the emotions surrounding Roman death (Hopkins, 1983, pp. 201–255) and, despite the complexities of interpreting the frequently moralizing literature and the diverse spiritual beliefs, such an approach raises significant questions. How did changes in religious attitudes, such as a growing belief in individual salvation, affect the treatment of the dead (Ariès, 1981, pp. 29–31; Hopkins, 1983, pp. 226–232)? Did the growth in other forms of commemoration, such as bequests to towns and charities, reflect

diminished family and kinship ties (Hopkins, 1983, pp. 253–254)? Was the increased emphasis on more introverted forms of display during the second century indicative of greater dependence on the status of the group, familial or corporate, rather than the individual (von Hesberg, 1992, pp. 42–45)? Such issues provide valid areas of study, but it is often felt that such emotional and spiritual dimensions are in themselves insufficient explanations for the empire-wide changes in funerary practice; thus, for example, the advent of Christianity is not a sufficient motive to explain changes in the treatment of the corpse or the organization of the cemetery (Morris, 1992, pp. 32–33). Nevertheless, the potential impact of such factors cannot be ignored as they are complementary parts of the same process. The display of status and social mobility may have been the dynamic which controlled the global pattern of funerary commemoration but an individual's identity could be defined in terms of his familial relationships or religious beliefs as much as by his position in the overall status hierarchy. The primary purpose of the tombstone to promote and preserve the memory of the deceased should not be forgotten. The tombstone communicated by representing the social persona of the individual. Yet the aspects chosen for representation and how they were represented could vary. The next section will explore the expressiveness of the funerary medium by considering how individual identity was constructed in specific cases and how the memory of the deceased was promoted. The tombstone was a public item and its relevance was thus dependent on whether memory was regarded as belonging to the public or private domain.

Marginal groups

If status advancement and social mobility were manifested in the funerary record how were the details and features of social difference articulated through the funerary monument? Independent of the work on chronological distributions of epitaphs and memorials, research on funerary sculpture has focused on portraiture and those physically represented on their monuments. Funerary portraiture is particularly evocative; a picture is more captivating and more instantaneous in the information and impression it conveys than words. Facial expressions, dress and associated equipment and props can communicate significant information about the relative status of those depicted. It needs to be emphasized that not all Roman tombstones incorporated decorative sculpture and only a minority were adorned with portraiture. But this very partiality in use raises questions as to why portraiture was relevant to some and not to others. Analysis of the portraits located on funerary memorials from the city of Rome has established a distinctive type associated with a distinctive group. In the late Republic and early empire many memorials were constructed with rows of portrait busts incorporated into the facades (Fig. 3) which were reminiscent of faces looking out of house windows (Zanker, 1975). The design was particularly favoured by freed slaves who were depicted in family groups, wearing traditional

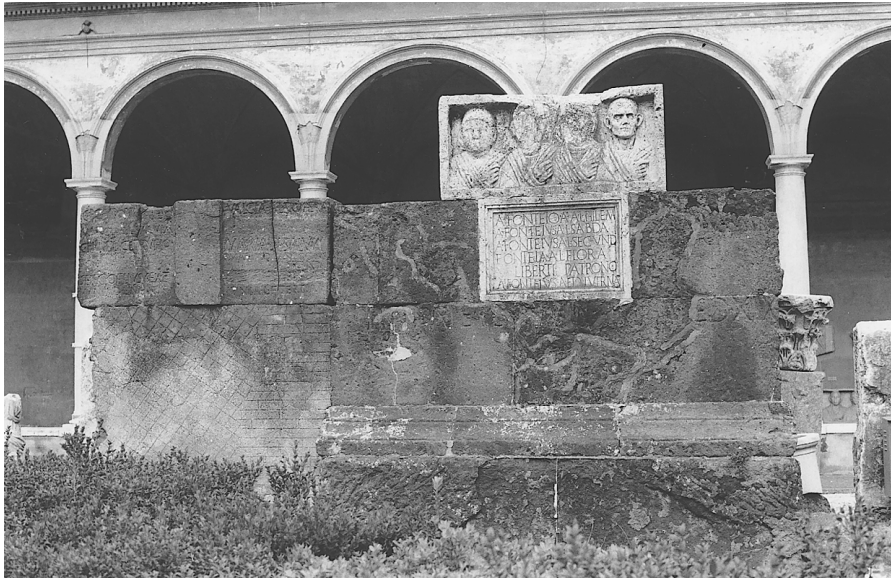


FIGURE 3. A row of funerary portrait busts, depicting four freed slaves, built into the facade of a tomb found at Rome.

Roman dress with identifying Latin inscriptions which revealed their new-found citizenship (Kleiner, 1977; Kockel, 1993; Zanker, 1975).

This choice of a specific memorial design by the freed slaves has been related to the ambiguous position they held within society. Freed slaves could become financially successful but the stigma of their servile past prevented them from attaining high office; there were social barriers that wealth alone could not overcome (Gardner, 1993, pp. 7–51; Treggiari, 1969, pp. 37–86). These monuments advertised the material and social triumphs of the freed slaves involved. The creation and design of the memorials emphasized that the ex-slaves had gained their freedom, that they had become Roman citizens who could proudly wear the toga, marry legally and have legitimate children (Taylor, 1961, p. 132). However, by drawing attention to these achievements and by their association with a group-specific form of commemoration the freed slaves also, perhaps inadvertently, stressed their social failings; what they were and what they could never be. The freed slaves occupied a liminal position within Roman society and the funeral memorials associated with them attempted to legitimize their position and compensate for the inequalities of life.

This example stresses the communicative power of sculptural decor and its symbolic value to a specific group at a specific period in Roman history. In other regions of the empire, where slavery was less extensive, other groups similarly used sculptural reliefs to make specific claims and statements. The Roman army was a highly stratified organization yet it was also an enclosed and self-contained society (MacMullen, 1984). The military cemeteries which developed across the

empire reflected this unity by a certain level of standardization in the monuments that were erected. The repetition of similar information in the epitaphs of the soldiers and the use of a few similar designs, and in fact the general simplicity of the soldiers' memorials, reiterated in death the group connections of life. This is not to suggest that these cemeteries were the ancient equivalent of the 20th-century cemeteries maintained by the British Commonwealth War Graves Commission (Longworth, 1985). The Roman military cemetery did not consist of row upon row of identical monuments which were funded by the state and commemorated service for the state. Each Roman military memorial was an individual creation and this becomes apparent when those monuments which broke from the general pattern of standardization are considered. The memorials erected to auxiliary cavalymen during the first century AD were differentiated through design and decor. The epitaphs inscribed on such monuments did not differ greatly in format to those of their legionary counterparts but the visual impression created by the memorials was enhanced by the inclusion of detailed sculptural reliefs. Many of the memorials erected to auxiliary cavalymen were adorned with scenes depicting the deceased upon a rearing horse about to spear a fallen enemy (Fig. 4). On one level such pictures simply served to distinguish the skills of the cavalryman and to contrast his military role with that of the foot soldier. However, the majority of these auxiliary horsemen were not Roman citizens, unlike the legionary soldiers, but non-enfranchised provincials who were enrolled for service in the Roman army with the promise of citizenship on their discharge 25 years later (Holder, 1980, pp. 47–48). The elaborate reliefs present the deceased as the heroes of Rome, trampling the vanquished enemy. There is thus a certain irony that those recorded were themselves recruited from the inhabitants of the recently-conquered territories of the empire; the identity of the auxiliary soldier lay between Roman and barbarian (Hope, 1998b). The memorials of the auxiliary soldiers erected on the frontiers constructed a Roman identity for those commemorated in a similar way to the memorials of the freed slaves of the city of Rome.

The memorials of the freed slaves and auxiliary soldiers communicated through both words and pictures but special emphasis was placed on the visual aspect of powerful images to capture the attention of the viewer and to encapsulate certain values. This, however, was not the only method for ordering and controlling the response of the viewer. Ornate sculptural reliefs were not a feature of tombstone design in all areas of the empire. At Nîmes in Gallia Narbonensis portraiture adorned only a few memorials; nevertheless an alternative method was utilized by freed slaves to draw attention to their earthly success. Once more the key was a visual one; the freed slaves were not depicted as ideal citizens but instead verbal emphasis was placed on the attainment of office. Membership of the priesthood of the imperial cult, the highest office which could be held by a freed slave, was given visual prominence within the epitaph, centrally located on the first line (Fig. 5). The office symbolized the success and was given precedence over all other information, including the name (Hope, 1998a).

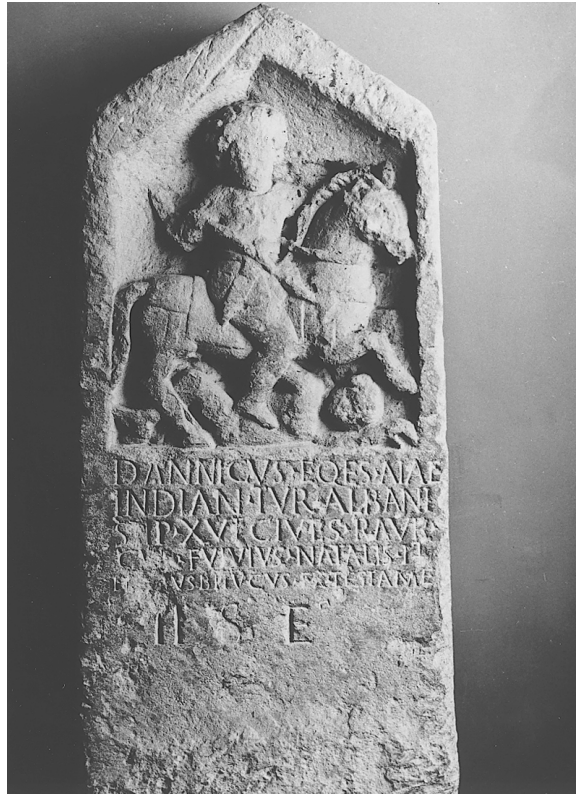


FIGURE 4. The tombstone of an auxiliary cavalryman, Dannicus, found at Cirencester. (Reproduced with the permission of the Corinium Museum, Cirencester).

The monuments erected to freed slaves and auxiliary soldiers illustrate the integrated communicative power of the funerary memorial. Each monument through images and text indicated the upward mobility of those commemorated and the restructuring of their identity in Roman terms. Hodder has stated that ‘in death people become what they have not been in life’ (Hodder, 1982, p. 146). People’s aspirations for life may often be captured at death and the tombstone may construct an identity for the deceased which is selective in its formulation. To view these memorials, however, as a symbol of the integration of the individual into the collective Roman empire is to suggest that it is straightforward to identify the components of Roman identity. In reality, to define what it was to be Roman is extremely complex as the Romanization of the empire was not a one-way process but a dialogue between the proponents of differing cultures. A tombstone inscribed with a Latin epitaph may represent a Roman act but the details and the significance of that act could vary, as is well illustrated by the diversity of monument types found across the empire. Indeed the memorials described in detail here capture well the fluidity and adaptability of *Romanitas*. The freed slaves and auxiliary soldiers were people whose identi-

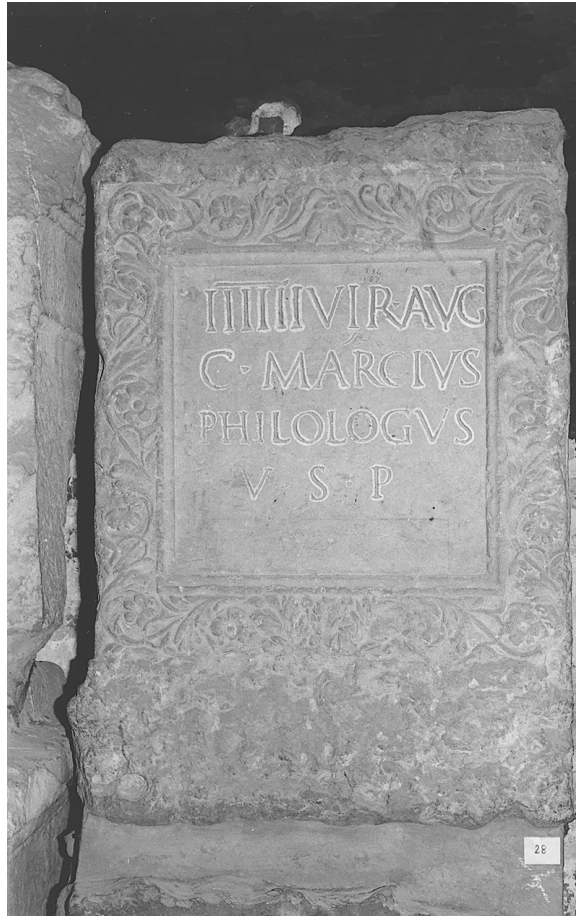


FIGURE 5. A funerary altar commemorating a priest of the Imperial Cult (*IIIIIVIR AVG*) from Nîmes.

ties were variously influenced; they were betwixt and between slave and citizen, or barbarian and Roman. The tombstone, which on one level was a Roman symbol, was taken, adapted and recreated to encapsulate the divergent aspects of their identity.

Conclusion

The Roman Empire was physically vast and chronologically long-lived and within its territories were Gauls and Britons, Egyptians and Greeks. To what extent the inhabitants regarded themselves, or were regarded by others, as Roman is an area of uncertainty. Tombstones and funerary monuments are among the few types of evidence which provide an access point to the vast and diverse population of this empire. As such they have been viewed as a gauge of

Romanization and the adoption of Roman practices. The reality is, however, that each tombstone is a select construct of how an individual chose to be represented, or was represented by others, in the context of death.

To erect a tombstone inscribed with a Latin epitaph was a Roman act. It symbolized the attainment of citizenship or at least a claim that such citizenship was deserved. Yet in the multi-cultural Roman world there was no simple definition of what being 'Roman' entailed. Thus at different places and different times the value of the act of commemoration was variously defined. The élite of Rome who set up elaborate memorials during the late Republic, whose Roman identity was self-evident, were advertising wealth and status. Eventually the potency of the medium became diverted in other directions and for many the tombstone was a method for expressing social success in a diverse society where contrasts existed between the centre and the periphery and between insiders and outsiders. When such contrasts declined in importance then so too did the relevance of the tombstone.

In identifying such patterns in the function of Roman memorials it remains important not to lose sight of the dead and their memory, the preservation of which was the primary purpose of every funerary monument. Material remains are more readily accessible than emotions and in addition it is always uncertain to what degree grief and sentiment can be isolated from the cultural environment. Close analysis of specific social groups and their funerary memorials allows insights into the expressive power of the medium; each memorial communicated through its words, pictures and location and thus contributed to the overall impact of the cemetery. Yet those named are not just part of the collective Roman Empire but individuals with families, friends and employment which could all contribute to the identity constructed. The information supplied may be formulaic and controlled by conventions but deciphering the messages reveals significant insights into how people perceived themselves, their own identities and their relative position and role within Roman society.

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