



Roman funerary monuments

Cemeteries in the Roman world

In the first century BCE and first century CE bodies were mainly cremated. The remains were then placed in a container that was either buried in the ground or housed in a tomb.

During the second century CE there was a gradual shift away from cremation. Now the body was buried in the ground or placed in a sarcophagus.

Cremation and burial were not allowed within the city walls and cemeteries developed along the roads that radiated from Rome.

Tombs faced the road and so road frontage mattered. Cemeteries had an elongated appearance with burials placed alongside the road rather than clustering back into the fields. A reasonable impression of a Roman cemetery is given by the tombs and memorials that survive along the Via Appia. The straight road has tombs dotted along its sides. Many monuments are lost, damaged or heavily restored, but it still evokes the relationship between road and tomb.

The Isola Sacra cemetery is also well preserved. This was for the inhabitants of Portus, which prospered after the construction of a new harbour to serve Rome, built by the emperor Trajan. Here we find rows of house-like tombs aligned with the road. The linear arrangement and the desire to catch the eye of the passer-by are striking.