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Roman funerary monuments
Funerary monuments

Funerary monuments came in all shapes and sizes. The choice of memorial could say a lot about a person's status and identity. The size and type of monument, the extent of décor or the use of architectural features were all key, as was whether the burial was single or communal.

In many cases people got the tomb they could afford. For the poor this could mean burial in anonymous mass graves or at best in places indicated by simple perishable markers.

At the Isola Sacra necropolis some cremation graves were simply marked with amphora, the necks of which protruded from the ground. Other modest tombs were dotted between the larger constructions. These smaller graves often mimicked the style of the larger monuments.

Tombs might also be built on to existing structures.

In Rome we also find examples of modest stone markers. These are so-called *stele*, which would have marked the grave by protruding from the ground. Funerary altars also marked graves or could hold ashes.

However when we look at such items removed from their original context we need to be careful not to make simple assumptions. A funerary altar, for example, may have been part of a funerary complex, rather than a simple, isolated marker.

These two altars which separately commemorate two women were found together and may well have been held in a substantial family tomb or walled enclosure.

The main tombs of the Isola Sacra were imposing structures. The epitaphs reveal the names of those who had built the tombs as their final resting places. Inside the tombs, the walls were lined with niches to hold urns filled with the cremated remains. There could be row upon row of niches.

These tombs had a communal nature providing burial not just for the wealthy founder but also for those who otherwise might have struggled to attain decent burial.

In Rome, so-called *columbaria*, from the Latin for 'dovecot', operated on similar principles. These large *columbaria* are now mainly lost, but this small example, known as the Columbarium of Pomponius Hylas, incorporates the essential features.

A steep stairs leads into the subterranean chamber. The walls and ceiling are plastered and painted with intricate designs using floral and mythological themes. The walls are lined with numerous niches. Urns containing cremated remains were sunk into these niches. Lids would have covered and protected the remains.

Some niches have inscribed plaques naming those buried. The internal space was probably organised on hierarchical principles. The original founders of the tomb would have occupied this ornate central structure, which holds large urns.

The attached epitaph names them as Granius Nestor and Vinileia Hedone. And painted portraits of a husband and wife adorn the niche. Additional *aediculae* were added to the adjacent wall. Decorated with stucco plaster work these provided prime space for several burials.

In modern times the tomb takes its name from the small memorial in the stairwell. This has a glass mosaic edged with shells that names: Pomponius Hylas.

Columbaria were often sponsored by wealthy patrons, and allowed simple but decent burial for members of large slave households or groups united by a shared trade.

For the wealthy, tomb design held no bounds. Some of the largest and most striking tombs date to the late republic and Augustan era.

The tomb of Cestius, near the Ostian Gate, is still a famous landmark in Rome. It was preserved by being built into the late city walls. At the time of its construction it reflected the taste for all things Egyptian in Augustan Rome.

The pyramid, which stands more than 36 metres high, was constructed of concrete and faced with Italian marble. The inscription reveals how it was the tomb of Gaius Cestius Epulo who was a chief magistrate and tribune of the plebs.

A smaller inscription on the east side reveals that the pyramid was built in accordance with Cestius' will in 330 days.

The tomb of Caecilia Metalla, on the Via Appia, is one of the road's most prominent landmarks. The location and size of the tomb are suggestive of this woman's importance. The inscription reads: 'To Caecilia Metella, daughter of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus, wife of Crassus'.

Her father was consul in 69 BCE and her husband may have been Marcus Licinius Crassus, a good friend of the emperor Augustus. The tomb may commemorate a woman but it also emphasises the overall importance of her family and celebrates their success.

The tomb consists of a cylindrical drum on a square base. The crenellated brick wall was added when the tomb became a part of a fortress in the twelfth century.

The shape of the tomb of Caecilia Metella echoes that of arguably the most famous tomb in Rome – the mausoleum of the emperor Augustus. This survives as a huge circular ruin planted with cypresses. The tomb was completed in 28 BCE many years before the emperor's death. With an outer diameter of 89 metres, it was the largest tomb in the city.

Most of the outer facing of limestone has been robbed and the overall original appearance and design of the tomb is unclear. The geographer Strabo, who saw the tomb in 7 BCE, described it as a great mound on a high foundation, that was planted with trees and topped with a bronze statue of Augustus.

Augustus's mausoleum was the ultimate statement. Such a tomb celebrated Augustus's life and achievements and made it very clear how he wished to be remembered.