



## Roman funerary monuments

### *Constructing identity*

In considering how funerary monuments communicated and noting the range of styles and sizes there is a danger that we make simple analogies and also ignore the possibility of change over time.

Big was not always best and was not always favoured by the wealthy and the élite. The tomb of Augustus represented the height of display. The basic message at that time was simple: the most important man in the city got the most important tomb.

However Augustus's manipulation of the form may have been so successful that other members of the élite simply gave up building extravagant funerary memorials. It was not appropriate to compete with the emperor, and modesty and restraint could also be a sign of good taste.

Thus we rarely find anything as striking as Cestius' pyramid set up to a man of his standing after the Augustan era.

Indeed communal tombs, as epitomised by the columbaria and the house tombs of the Isola Sacra, may have increased in popularity. In these structures the tomb benefitted many rather than a few, and statements of opulence on the inside of the tomb mattered just as much as more visible statements on the outside.

By the beginning of the first century CE, ornate display at death may have ceased to characterise the wealthy and have become more characteristic of lesser social groups – those who had something to prove or who had risen from humble origins.

We can note that freed slaves during the early empire often had comparatively lavish monuments. These could be decorated with distinctive rows of portrait busts. Legal status, and stigma, were revealed in the epitaph; the names reveal these people to be former slaves. But in the images the freed slaves appear as toga clad good Romans, with family members, and thus celebrate relationships that had been denied to them as slaves. One of Rome's most striking memorials commemorated a baker.

The tomb of Eurysaces was built in approximately c.30 BCE, predating the nearby Porta Maggiore, and the aqueducts that it carries.

It is of an unusual design. The lower zone consists of pairs of cylinders interspaced with rectangular piers; the upper zone has three rows of hollow circles.

Exactly what the cylinders and circles of the tomb were intended to represent remains unclear. They have been interpreted as grain measures, bread ovens or machines for kneading dough.

A frieze depicts the bakery in action. The purchasing of grain, the milling, sieving and checking of flour, mixing and kneading the dough, shaping the loaves, and placing them in the oven.

Portraits of Eurysaces and his wife, no longer in situ, were set into the east face.

The inscription repeated on two sides reads: 'This is the tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker, contractor, he serves.'

A second inscription, now in the Museo Nazionale, indicates that the tomb was actually built for his wife Atistia, and describes the tomb as a bread basket.

A man who had made his money through trade, Eurysaces was clearly not a member of the elite and his name is not of Latin derivation. Although the surviving inscriptions do not explicitly identify him as such, he was most probably an ex-slave.

Augustus and Eurysaces had differing backgrounds and moved in very different social circles, yet in planning their tombs they were motivated by similar factors. Both wanted to leave a

lasting impression, both used their tombs to construct an identity. Their tombs were not just simply about displaying wealth and social standing, but were also about selecting certain attributes to celebrate while ignoring others. In this way, they created an image of themselves that they regarded as best suited to posterity.