



Roman funerary monuments

The living and the dead

It was the living who had the power to keep the memory of the dead alive. In planning their memorials the founders of the Isola Sacra tombs were very aware of this. The tombs were designed with the needs of the living as much as the needs of the dead in mind. The living were supposed to honour the dead, to visit the tombs of their relatives regularly and observe certain festivals associated with the dead.

The dead had to be accessible to receive simple offerings of food and wine. Simple amphora burials may have been a sign of poverty but the necks of the vessels were convenient conduits for liquid offerings. The niche lined walls of the larger tombs allowed easy access to the remains, and epitaphs may have originally identified individual burials.

The larger niches held the remains of the most important people; these were often in line with the door – drawing the eye and thus the attention of any visitor straight to them. Tomb 87 was constructed by two ex-slaves for themselves and their former owner. In the epitaph they declare their ownership of the monument by placing their names first. But within the tomb the place of honour – opposite the door – was awarded to their patron. Even in death they subordinated themselves to a superior.

The tombs recall the household by holding its inhabitants and reinforcing the hierarchy. But they also suggest the actual houses of the living. Doors, windows, mosaic floors and painted walls recalled house interiors.

Tombs could feature upper-floors, some for extra burials, while other stairways gave access to flat roofed terraces for the use of visitors to the tomb. Such a stairway is adjacent to Tomb 34.

The tombs could also incorporate features that actively encouraged the living to visit and tend their dead.

Tomb 34 also has a well for the drawing of water.

Tomb 16 has a well, a mosaic floor with a Nile theme and a structure that may have been used for heating food.

Other tombs, including tomb 15, have benches near the doors, which may have been used as seating during feasts held at the tomb.

So much in the cemetery is aimed at the living, to encourage them to stop, to look, to read, to stay awhile and to remember the dead.