



Roman funerary monuments

Family tombs

In their tombs freed slaves often focused on their marriage partners and their children – they looked to their present and to some extent their future as good Roman citizens. After all, these ex-slaves could not look to the past since legally they had no parents.

Established citizen families could take pride in their family past or ancestry. Part of this idealisation could be the family tomb.

The mausoleum of Augustus focused on the emperor, but also played on dynastic symbolism. The massive structure was designed to house the remains of many people. And the emperor's direct successors were buried here. The right to burial in this tomb came to symbolise connections to the seat of power.

In many ways the family tomb was more of an ideal than a reality. Most people could not afford large tombs and even those that could may have found that they fell rapidly into disuse. Families died out or the next generation wished to build something new and fashionable. Yet all funerary monuments gambled on the future; that people would continue to be interested and keep the name of the dead alive.

Family was important, but it was more often the nuclear family of parents and children, rather than a multi-generational one, that we see recorded in epitaphs and who probably shared a tomb or burial space.

Epitaphs often contained statements of family relationships – due to the fact that they record the name of the commemorator and their relationship to the deceased. So many epitaphs say that the husband, or wife, or mother, or father of the deceased made the monument.

Rarely do we find mention of grandparents or more distant relations.

Sometimes separate memorials or inscriptions may have been placed together to create family groupings that could span the generations. However when we do see tombs in operation they rarely appear to have been long-lived or to have stayed in use by one family for long.

If we look at the titular epitaphs from the Isola Sacra we can see that very few people are named. For example, Tomb 54 names Attia Psyche and Caius Attius Alexander; tomb 79 Quintus Appius Saturnus and his wife Annia Donata.

The tombs, however, were often intended for the burial of many people. Who were these people? Were the founders looking to the future and creating family tombs?

The titular epitaphs do not name all those who are to be buried there. But general provisions and references are made.

Children are sometimes allowed for. Quintus Appius Saturnus refers to his *liberis* or children, although they are not named.

But more often, it is freed slaves that are granted permission for burial in the general statement *libertis libertabusque posterisque eorum* – the freedmen and freedwomen and their descendants.

The founders of the tombs were then looking to the future. There was a hope of continuity in use and maintenance of the tomb. But they looked to anonymous freed dependants as much as blood relatives.

To us this may seem strange, but we need to remember that freed slaves bore the family name and that in some respects they were regarded as part of the family, or at least the household. The ties of patronage between ex-slave and ex-master could also be strong. A free born son might marry and build another tomb, but freed slaves and their descendants might have had a greater need to use the burial space.

At the Isola Sacra there was an ideal that the tombs would continue to be used, and there is evidence that in some tombs this was the case.

However the wishes of the tomb founder may not have been strictly followed. Once they were dead they had little real control over who would share their final resting place.

At the Isola Sacra we see tombs being divided, and burial spaces within them being sold onto others.

Tombs 75 and 76 were originally one tomb built by Marcus Cocceius Daphnus, and intended for his family and those of two other specifically named men.

However following his death one of these men, who was the heir to Daphnus, built a dividing wall creating his own separate tomb complete with entrance and epitaph.

In tomb 94 Valeria Trophime sold off various parts of the tomb and then some burial spaces were sold on or given away to a third party

Tomb 89 was built between two existing structures and the epitaph makes clear that the owner Messia Candida bought the space from people on either side – these were presumably the heirs of the original tomb founders.

Such changes show that the Isola Sacra necropolis was an evolving and changing space.

The next generation did not necessarily respect the wishes of their predecessors. Marcus Cocceius Daphnus may have been turning in his grave at the alterations made by his heir, but at least these were formally recorded in a new inscription avoiding any future disputes about ownership.

Tombs did continue in use, often adapted and divided and occupied by others whose presence had not been anticipated by their founders – but if nothing else this meant that the tombs were not immediately abandoned and forgotten.