COLUMBARIUM TOMBS AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN AUGUSTAN ROME

Columbarium tombs are among the most recognizable forms of Roman architecture and also among the most enigmatic. The subterranean collective burial chambers have repeatedly sparked the imagination of modern commentators, but their origins and function remain obscure. *Columbarium Tombs and Collective Identity in Augustan Rome* situates columbaria within the development of Roman funerary architecture and the historical context of the early imperial period. Contrary to earlier scholarship that often interprets columbaria primarily as economic burial solutions, Dorian Borbonus shows that they defined a community of people who were buried and commemorated collectively. Many of the tomb occupants were slaves and freed slaves, for whom collective burial was one strategy of community building that counterbalanced their exclusion in Roman society. Columbarium tombs were thus sites of social interaction that provided their occupants with a group identity that, this book shows, was especially relevant during the social and cultural transformation of the Augustan era.

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations  page viii
List of Tables  xi
List of Abbreviations  xiii
Acknowledgments xv

INTRODUCTION

1 STUDYING COLUMBARIAS AS A HISTORICAL PHENOMENON  17

2 TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN OF COLUMBARIAS  39

3 MAKING AND BREAKING THE RULES: THE USE AND EVOLUTION OF COLUMBARIAS  67

4 READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE VOCABULARY OF COLUMBARIUM EPITAPHS  106

5 FINDING NICHEs IN SOCIETY: THE OCCUPANTS  135

CONCLUSION  157

APPENDIX A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CATALOG  163
APPENDIX B. SUMMARY OF EPIGRAPHIC DATA  209
APPENDIX C. GLOSSARY  215
Notes  219
Bibliography  261
Index  285
**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

1. Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini: central pier  
2. Columbarium 2 in the Vigna Codini: south and east walls  
3. Columbarium near the Sepulcrum Scipionum: east wall  
4. Columbarium "of Livia": cross section of burial niche  
5. Columbarium near the Sepulcrum Scipionum: detail  
6. Columbarium of Pompeii  
7. Villa Corsini Cemetery: plan  
8. Columbarium of Arruntii: perspective  
9. Columbarium of Arruntii: cross section  
10. Vigna Codini: plan  
11. Columbarium "of Pomponius Hylas" at the time of excavation  
12. Porta Maggiore cemetery: plan  
13. Casino del Bel Respiro cemetery: plan  
14. Columbarium "of Livia": east wall  
15. Porta Maggiore cemetery: Monuments L, K, and J under excavation  
16. Columbarium "of Livia": ground plan  
17. Porticus Liviae as it appears on the Severan marble plan  
18. Monument C: south wall  
19. War memorial of Monte Grappa  
20. Alexandria: Hypogeum B1  
21. Rhodes: Hypogeum II  
22. Lefkadia: Tomb of Lyson and Kallikles  
23. Via Caelimontana cemetery: reconstructed elevation  
24. Monument of the 36 socii: reconstruction drawing  
25. Columbarium of the Stertinii: excavation photograph  
26. Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini: location of inscriptions  
27. Columbarium 1 of the Vigna Codini: west gallery  
28. Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini: burial chamber  
29. Urns from Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini  
30. Aediculae and urns in the Columbarium 1 of the Vigna Codini  
31. Aedicula of Pedia Montana in the Columbarium 1 of the Vigna Codini
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

32 Marble cinerary urn of Pedia Montana in Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini 82
33 Niche of Aponia Chia and Aponius Nicia in Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini 83
34 Columbarium 3 in the Vigna Codini: plan 86
35 Niche of Iulius Chrystantus in Columbarium 3 in the Vigna Codini 87
36 Columbarium “of Pomponius Hylas”: northwest wall 89
37 Columbarium “of Pomponius Hylas”: southeast apse 90
38 Columbarium “of Pomponius Hylas”: niche of Pomponius Hylas and Pomponia Vitalis 91
39 Marble cinerary urn of Pomponius Hylas 92
40 Columbarium of the Statilii: plan 94
41 Columbarium of the Statilii: plan 96
42 Columbaria under San Sebastiano: plan 99
43 San Sebastiano: Columbarium 5 100
44 San Sebastiano: Columbarium 9 101
45 Chronological distribution of marble cinerary urns and funerary altars in Rome 103
46 Epitaph of Titus Statiliius Mena 110
47 Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini: painted tabulae 113
48 Typology of columbarium inscriptions: tabula ansata, loculus closer, and podium inscription 114
49 Tabula ansata in the Columbarium “of Scribonius Menophilus” 115
50 Commemoration of legal status in epigraphic samples from Rome 119
51 Corinth: Roman chamber tomb 147
52 Carmona: “Triclinio-Columbario” 148
53 Ostia, Via Laurentina: Tomb VI E 4 149
54 Puteoli: Columbaria in Fondo Caiazzo 150
55 Columbarium of the Circus of Maxentius: plan 153
A.1 Map of Augustan Rome with locations of columbarium tombs 164
A.2 Columbarium near Sepulcrum Scipionum 166
A.3 Ghezzi no. 5 172
A.4 Ghezzi no. 4 173
A.5 Columbarium of Caecili 179
A.6 Columbarium of Claudius Vitalis 185
A.7 Monument L 189
A.8 “Anonymous” columbarium 192
A.9 Monument X 193
A.10 Columbarium of Statili 195
A.11 Columbarium in Via Olevano Romano 197
LIST OF TABLES

1 Burial capacity of columbarium monuments  page 19
2 Discovery dates of subterranean columbaria  25
3 Physical dimensions of columbarium main chambers  95
4 Popularity of vocabulary elements  117
5 Estimated legal status distribution in columbaria  121
6 Cluster index of nomina  122
7 Commemoration ratios of epithets and relationship terms  124
8 Relationship terms among commemorators and deceased  125
9 Ratio of occupation commemoration in columbaria  128
10 Recorded ages on columbarium inscriptions  129
11 Collegium officials in columbarium monuments  131
B.1 Inscriptions included in the epigraphic database  210
B.2 All legal status records  211
B.3 Estimated legal status distribution  212
B.4 Number of epithets and relationship terms per tomb  212
B.5 All relationship terms  213
B.6 Number of occupational titles per tomb  214
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

This book follows the bibliographic conventions and abbreviations established by the *American Journal of Archaeology* (vol. 111, 2007, 14–34), *L’année philologique* (vol. 80, 2009, xxi–lvii), and the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2003, xxix–liv), in declining order of precedence. In addition, the following abbreviations are used.

**BollArch**  *Bollettino di Archeologia* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, Libreria dello stato)

**Capitolium**  *Capitolium. Rassegna mensile d’attività del Governatorato di Roma* (Rome: Instituto romano di arti grafiche)

**DialStorArte**  *Dialoghi di Storia dell’Arte* (Naples: Paparo Edizioni)

**Forma Urbis**  *Forma urbis: itinerari nascosti di Roma antica* (Rome: Sydaco editrice)


**RömHistMitt**  *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* (Graz: Abteilung für historische Studien des Österreichischen Kulturinstituts in Rom und der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften)
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INTRODUCTION

Modern visitors to one of the few well-preserved columbaria of Rome would probably agree that they are remarkable and impressive monuments (Fig. 1). Their underground setting creates an otherworldly sensation as one descends steep and treacherous stairs into ominous and cavernous vaults. The design of the burial chambers is unique and substantiates the initial curiosity (Fig. 2): high interior walls are covered with an unbroken grid of little arched niches that give access to terra-cotta urns, usually two, immured in the wall and their occupants are identified by little plaques with brief funerary inscriptions below the niche. This design reverses that of other Roman tombs so completely that it contradicts all expectations and provokes the question why such unusual tombs were built. Beyond first impressions, the urge for explanation is sustained upon deeper scrutiny revealing that columbaria were only built under very specific conditions. Their geographical distribution is limited to Rome and its major ports at Ostia and Pureoli. Their chronological distribution is no less intriguing, because they appear suddenly during the reign of the first Emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E. to 14 C.E.) and were only built for about a generation or two. Furthermore, columbaria were used for burial by a characteristic population: their funerary inscriptions commemorate nonelite Romans, often slaves and freed slaves from one of the great aristocratic houses. Already these general observations suggest that the people who used columbaria for burial are the key to understanding their unique design.
Such a connection between social factors and mortuary behavior is not surprising to find. Social structure and cultural beliefs affect the way that the dead are buried across time periods and cultures. Different varieties of funerary rituals are as abundant as they are diverse, but the fundamental correlation between social conditions and burial is a human constant. What is less certain is the precise nature of this correlation, which is the subject of ongoing debate and theoretical models.¹ It is not my purpose to contribute to these debates, because I am not suggesting that the link between society and burial is precise. Rather, I use this correlation only as a methodological point of departure: if social conditions shape funerary culture, then the material remains this culture produces should in turn mirror these conditions, even if only vaguely. It should be possible to use tomb monuments as a lens to study cultural beliefs, social conditions, and historical change. Applied to Roman culture, this approach reveals a general correlation between historical development and funerary tradition. In the republican period, funerary commemoration articulated traditional aristocratic values and underlined the centrality of elite families and clans.² The turbulent and transformative reign of the first Emperor Augustus produced a different funerary landscape in which a whole spectrum of new monumental forms reflects a spirit of change and new possibilities.³
The tombs of the Augustan era illustrate these new times: Augustus’s own mausoleum forcefully pronounced a new political reality and the pyramid of the senator Gaius Cestius readily embraced the latest fascination with Egyptian culture. Columbaria may be less spectacular than the monuments of Rome’s political elite, but they are no less original. Their underground position and consequent withdrawal from the public sphere pushed the limits of tradition as much as any other Augustan tomb by rejecting the competitiveness of republican funerary culture. In contrast to individualistic elite tombs of Augustan Rome, columbaria constitute a whole new class of funerary monuments, signaling that they are not the result of an individual’s motivation but represent a larger community. Their funerary inscriptions reflect that columbaria were populated by a variety of occupants, diverse in their legal status, profession, age, and familial status. One thing they have in common is that all columbarium occupants are nonelite and no member of Rome’s political elite is ever attested. Most sweeping generalizations about such a diverse social group would probably oversimplify the situation, but on a general level the immediate popularity of columbaria indicates that their design met their users’ needs, providing decent burial but also a social environment. This collective
integration suggests that their nonelite occupants emerged as a discrete social formation during the Augustan reign.

One would imagine that such a fascinating class of monuments is well studied, especially in light of the insight they can provide about one of the most elusive categories of Roman society. The nonelite urban population is almost never accurately represented in the textual sources, but ridiculed and stereotyped from an elite perspective. Despite their historical value, no comprehensive treatment of columbaria exists, probably for a variety of reasons such as their poor state of preservation, their typological diversity, and the traditional archaeological focus on elite culture. As a result, their significance has been underappreciated. Columbaria are not only distinctive in appearance, but they are the first tombs in Rome to accommodate organized collective burial that extends beyond biological families and households. The emergence of a nonelite burial culture during the Augustan reign surely mirrors the social and cultural transformation of that period. The notable deficiency of research on the historical significance of columbaria not only contrasts with the passionate attention that catacombs receive but also with the casual interpretation of columbaria in handbooks and other overarching treatments. Such interpretations have solidified through reiteration into a canon of historical reconstruction, any revision of which requires a fresh analysis of concrete remains.4

Correcting the inadequate historical interpretation is complicated by the fact that most columbaria were discovered between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries in excavations that were not guided by scientific inquiry but rather by antiquarian pursuit. Not only did these early projects fail to meet modern standards of excavation technique and conservation, but they are also poorly documented. Current archaeological scholarship on columbaria mostly consists of monument studies that compile find lists, artistic drawings, and occasional site photographs. Such studies rarely attempt to interpret columbaria and consequently fail to provide the logical framework that is necessary to grasp their significance. Nonetheless, they make available much of the evidence necessary to reconstruct and analyze columbarium architecture. Only a fraction of the recent reexaminations has seen the light of publication, sometimes because they are university theses and in other cases because they are still ongoing.5 It is all the more disappointing that the excavation of the columbarium “of Scribonius Menophilus” (cat. 34) on the premises of the Villa Doria Pamphili is still unpublished thirty years after its discovery. The preliminary reports provide documentation that is comparable to that of other tombs in this study, but the eventual publication of the full report will provide a level of detail that does not exist for any other columbarium.6

The purpose of this monograph is to describe the development, design, and use of columbaria in order to revise the somewhat generic historical interpretation that they have traditionally received in archaeological scholarship.
To this end, my concrete objectives are to document, analyze, and interpret columbaria. The documentation of architectural and epigraphic evidence is collected in two appendixes and more detailed descriptions and comparisons appear throughout the text. The analysis of tomb architecture tracks its chronological evolution and places columbaria in the overall framework of Roman funerary culture. The interpretation explains why columbaria appear during the Augustan reign and what they can tell us about the people who used them for burial. This combined approach closes the gap between monument studies that rarely address the historical significance of columbaria and the more sweeping historical readings that rarely treat the physical evidence in detail. Beyond solely illustrating the social experience of those who used columbaria, the close connection between historical conditions and burial make them a particularly instructive case study in Roman funerary culture. Critical to the success of this study is to strike a balance between breadth and detail. Accordingly, my analysis concentrates on subterranean columbaria, which are of similar design and date, but links this homogeneous group to the broad development of Roman funerary culture where possible.

The comprehensive approach of this book makes columbaria accessible as historical sources for the changing position and concerns of their occupants. The relevance of columbaria for historical phenomena depends on their demographic magnitude. If they were only used by a group that was “a few hundred or a few thousand strong” they may well be dismissed as a curious but ultimately inconsequential episode. Even a cautious estimate indicates that their usership was much larger than that, however. No actual population figures for columbaria can be reconstructed with any reasonable amount of accuracy, because all the relevant factors are highly speculative. However, it is possible to determine the magnitude of the population by estimating the original capacity of all columbaria, the total length of time they were used, and the average mortality rate. Using conservative minimum estimates produces a range of about eighteen thousand to forty-five thousand or about 2 to 7 percent of the total population of Rome. It is important to reiterate that this figure does not represent the actual columbarium-using population, but only the magnitude of that population. It shows that columbarium users did not count only a few hundred or thousand, but they were a substantial minority of Rome’s urban population.

The question is what collective tombs can possibly tell us about the social experience of this minority. The architectural design of columbaria provides burial niches of similar or equal shape and size, thus placing each recipient of such niches on the same level visually. One of my central claims is that this visual parity does not simply result from deficiencies in resources or individuality, but reveals an active tie within the group that shared a tomb. Usually, such burial collectives also established organizations that ranged from formal
associations (collegia) to more informal interest groups. Depending on the precise nature of these organizations, the link between their members will have varied in intensity. Collegia united members from similar professional, religious, or social backgrounds who met and interacted frequently, whereas more informal burial collectives appear to have united solely to pool their economic resources. No matter how closely connected these groups were, the voluntary nature of membership makes their survival dependent on an active interest of their members. The visual character of columbaria provides a snapshot of the communities that used them. The uniformity of their design suggests that social cohesion within burial collectives outweighed any desire to elevate oneself, socially or visually, above others in the tomb.

My core argument is that columbaria are products of their immediate historical environment. It is no coincidence that they first appear only a few years after the inauguration of the imperial regime, arguably the most significant watershed in Roman history. During the reign of the first Emperor Augustus, Roman society and the city of Rome underwent profound social and cultural transformations. At the top level of society, a new aristocracy had to recast its inherited value system while carefully negotiating its relationship to the imperial center of power. A similarly contradictory situation presented itself to those in the urban population who enjoyed new opportunities while continuing to face old stereotypes. Such an ambiguous position is most characteristic of manumitted slaves who acquired new rights but also remained under partial control of their former owners. The same dilemma characterized others in liminal social positions, such as imperial slaves, foreigners, or provincial elites who addressed it in various ways, depending on their interests and abilities. I argue that collective organization and burial was one solution to status inconsistencies in Rome’s urban population. An atmosphere of belonging and mutual support, which was perhaps most important during times of bereavement, could sidestep persistent social obstacles and disrespect. Columbaria are physical manifestations of this collective solidarity and, therefore, quintessential products of the Augustan time period.

The argument developed in this book intersects with four major debates in classical archaeology and ancient history, regarding the historical interpretation of funerary architecture, the transformation of Augustan Rome, the position of slaves and freedmen in Roman society, and the social function of collegia. The nature of these debates characterizes my argument that builds on previous positions and acknowledges established conventions. In turn, my analysis of columbaria contributes to all four debates by providing a concrete case study that qualifies previous positions and shifts the frame of reference. It adds the dimension of funerary commemoration to the growing body of scholarship about Rome’s urban population and a nonelite perspective to studies of Rome’s Augustan transformation that traditionally approach the topic from an
elite point of view. Beyond their concrete and highly specialized substance, all four debates touch upon larger themes that are not only of interest in ancient history and classical archaeology, but potentially relevant to a wider range of subjects such as the acculturation of socially marginalized groups, the social significance of death, and recruitment of popular support by imperial regimes. The remainder of this chapter relates my argument to these four debates and highlights their relevance for overarching themes.

FUNERARY CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Any investigation of nonelite tombs eventually runs into the basic methodological dilemma of how to interpret physical structures for which historical information is very limited. The consensus among archaeologists and art historians is that the main social function of Roman tombs is to embody and publicize the social status of their owners. This is suggested by the layout of Roman cemeteries in which tombs present striking views toward the streets along which they were lined up. This model aptly addresses the atmosphere of intense civic competition that is one of the central features of Roman funerary culture, but where it perhaps falls short is in considering the dimension of time. An unbroken "street of tombs," for example, is only the product of a long formation process, which is disregarded if only the final product is considered. In order to determine the social function of any Roman tomb, it is therefore important to consider the circumstances of its owners and occupants, the conditions of the time period in which it was built, and the interconnected coevolution of tomb architecture and funerary art. Public funerary commemoration along extraurban roads is a practice that concentrates in the centuries between 100 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. and peaks in the late republican period. During this time, funerary culture was used to celebrate aristocratic ideals like military and political glory.

As a result, republican funerary culture sustained this value system and became a public arena for the competitive senatorial elite. Aristocratic funerals showcased the cumulative accomplishments of clans through reenactment, status symbols, and state endorsement. Funerary monuments perpetuated the symbolism of these one-time occurrences. The tomb of Caecilia Metella, for example, dwarfs everything in its immediate environment and presents a *tropaion* in the frieze that probably commemorates the modest military successes of Metella's husband. The symbolism and competitiveness of this funerary culture was also appropriated by patrons outside of the senatorial elite. The continuous line of façades that the late republican tombs of the Via Statilia present toward the Via Caelimontana (cf. Fig. 23) replicates the publicity of contemporary elite tombs on a smaller scale. The inscriptions with family names in large letters, group portraits of the deceased with the symbols of Roman
citizenship and occasional reliefs depicting professional success articulate an emphasis on family and achievement that is compatible with the contemporaneous aristocratic value system.\textsuperscript{19} The ridicule targeting such appropriations of elite culture that permeates written sources reveals concerns about diluting its exclusive status. However, demonstrations of "cultural competency" by those asserting their participation only affirmed this exclusive culture and reinforced its dominance in the long run.\textsuperscript{20}

Columbaria reverse the design principles of republican funerary architecture, which suggests that their function was not to publicly assert social status. In fact, the subterranean position of columbarium chambers effectively shields the burial niches and their inscriptions from public view. The unassuming outside appearance of columbaria squarely inverts the keen demand for attention that characterizes most republican funerary monuments.\textsuperscript{21} The lack of competition with surrounding tombs continues on the level of individual burials within the burial chamber where niches were of similar shape, size, and embellishment. The egalitarian atmosphere of this arrangement counters the intense rivalry of republican tombs. The brevity of columbarium epitaphs and the minimalism of their decoration indicate that the integration into a group of peers outweighed the aristocratic emphasis on individual and family achievement. Altogether, the limited audience, noncompetitive mode, and nonaristocratic content of commemoration in columbaria signal a break with republican funerary culture. The visual parity between individual burial niches suggests that columbaria were used by groups with a relatively egalitarian internal structure. On a more general level, the break with the competitiveness and publicity of elite funerals characterizes collective burial as a truly nonelite phenomenon that departed from a sole orientation toward aristocratic social values.

The strategy to maintain collective identities through burial was used in other historical circumstances as well. In Roman catacombs, the burial collective is "spread out" over vast subterranean networks that necessitate visitors to pass by dozens or hundreds of similar burials. Catacombs originated simply as a new construction technique for subterranean tombs, but the common experience of traveling to the suburb and collectively entering an otherworldly sphere no doubt added to the shared identity of those buried here and those caring for them.\textsuperscript{22} Other examples for the use of funerary architecture to reinforce collective identities are further removed in time and space, but no less intriguing. The war cemeteries that were built across Europe after World War I, for example, emphasize suffering and equality of fallen soldiers through vast fields of identical crosses and exhaustive name lists. Some Italian war cemeteries specifically implement columbarium architecture, which is probably a reference to \textit{romanitas} but also nicely illustrates its suitability to express collective notions.\textsuperscript{23} These forms of collective burial are obviously products of their
respective times, and the visual range to articulate commonalities is, naturally, great. The very fact that collective burial appears in vastly different historical contexts, however, suggests that it is a social strategy that was used whenever it was important to elevate collective notions over personal attributes.

THE POPULAR RESPONSE TO AUGUSTUS

The immediate historical environment that produced collective burial in columbaria is the reign of the first Roman Emperor Augustus, when Rome famously underwent a major urban transformation. This transformation has been extensively studied and the emerging consensus presents it as a deliberate makeover of the Kaiserstadt that was centrally orchestrated in a comprehensive building program. Imperial fora and other urban ensembles gave architectural expression to Rome’s claim of leadership by matching the splendor of existing power centers in the Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean. These isolated interior spaces blocked outside vistas and focused attention on commemorative sculpture and inscriptions that articulated the imperial ideology. In addition, the Augustan renewal went beyond the built environment that determined Rome’s urban image and extended to its popular organization and civic administration. Most importantly, republican associations were replaced by hierarchical community organizations and services that shifted loyalty from aristocratic leaders to the emperor. The Augustan program was no systematic implementation of a preconceived master plan, but the new political reality it symbolized is nonetheless hard to miss. The temporal junction of this unambiguous signal with the appearance of a new mode of burial poses the question of how columbaria responded to the paradigm that the Augustan transformation established.

The standard treatments of Augustus’s building program emphasize the strategy of the emperor and the role this urban transformation played in the transition from one political order to another one. This approach clarifies how the imperial regime attempted to generate the popular support that was crucial to its survival. What remains to be explored is the popular response to this initiative. Juvenal’s famous cynical quip that the populace anxiously holds out for bread and circuses indiscriminately assigns submissive compliance and passive consumption to the urban population. Columbaria (and other tomb monuments) allow qualifying such blanket condemnations by grasping the interests and experience of those who built and used them. Private tombs were not under the direct influence of the emperor and thus shift the focus from the Campus Martius and other epicenters of imperial activity to Rome’s topographical and social periphery. Their design and development nevertheless illustrates the transformative period, because the individual decisions that produced the overall type spectrum transpired in the environment of an
official program. The degree to which private construction projects tally with the philosophy of this program provides a measure for the willingness to participate in the system and, in turn, the ability of the system to encourage such participation.

The architectural design and organizational structure of columbaria suggests that they embraced several concepts that are central to the Augustan transformation of Rome. Columbarium architecture reiterates at least two concrete design principles of Augustan architecture. Their isolation from the surrounding suburban landscape parallels the isolation of Augustan fora and porticoes from the surrounding cityscape. The inscriptions that identify niches in columbaria cover their entire interior walls with writing, evoking the Augustan city that was similarly covered in monumental writing. Taking care not to overstate the significance of these parallels, the emulation of architectural forms that embodied imperial ideology may suggest a consensual attitude toward the political realities of the time. A more abstract concept of the Augustan transformation of Rome that reverberates in columbaria is the social organization of their occupants. The associations that often administered tombs formalized more casual ties between their members, similar to Augustan institutions such as neighborhood organizations and urban service squads. The popularity of such associations over the next two centuries shows that their appeal goes beyond simple compliance with new legal requirements. The success of this social model perhaps lies in the fact that it was mutually beneficial to the new regime and the nonelite population, because it could equally exploit aristocratic patronage and sidestep aristocratic control.

These parallels suggest that core principles of the Augustan system soon radiated to the urban population of Rome that embraced the new realities manifest in the city's urban image and the ideology it embodied. Rather than solely being imposed from above, it seems that Rome’s urban transformation was equally driven by an enthusiastic popular response. This response was certainly not universal, but concentrated on those who wished to partake in the “golden age” or benefited from the new system. The implementation of imperial inspirations does not, however, mean that those who organized themselves in associations and buried each other in columbaria simply followed blindly. Rather, it signals their cooperation and social integration while their tight-knit organization and unique burial style confidently affirms their collective identity. Columbaria suggest that the response to the urban transformation of Rome was ambivalent, neither capitulating to the dominant culture and social structure nor presenting a wholly independent alternative. Other forms of itinerant culture that adapt conventional forms and concepts to articulate unique social identities, such as late republican group portraits or the laudationes of imperial freedmen, indicate that this social strategy was not limited to columbarium occupants but characterizes the urban population more generally.
THE FREEDMAN EXPERIENCE

The ambivalent cultural response of columbaria suggests that those who used them for burial and commemoration were in a similarly ambiguous social position. Reconstructing the composition and experience of nonelite groups is notoriously difficult, because it is not easy to divorce them from ancient fears of foreign infiltration and the relevant evidence is controversial.10 However, even general considerations suggest that Rome must have been full of people who found themselves in contradictory situations between success and limitations. Both the city and its newly established imperial administration required a substantial population of service personnel to operate, making Rome the primary magnet for talent and opportunism in its empire.11 Most of this demand for service labor would have been filled through forced relocation of slaves, and the constant reduction of this population through death and manumission produced a constant slave migration into the city.12 Funerary inscriptions confirm that a substantial part of Rome’s urban population in the early imperial period consisted of manumitted slaves, many of whom were probably not born there. It was a highly diverse group, ranging from the service staff of the imperial household (familia Caesaris) and of aristocratic households, to free or manumitted citizens who flourished in the booming Augustan metropolis.13

What unites their experiences is the inconsistency of their social position in the force field between their ability for success and inability to overcome certain social boundaries.14 For freedmen, the path to liberty was not complete upon manumission, but autonomy over family and property continued to be restrained. The right to marry (coniubium) and transmit property through a testament (testamenti fætio activi) only came with full Roman citizenship and depended on formal manumission and an age of at least thirty years. Most children in libertine families would have been born before their mother had reached that age, hence adopting her probable Latinity. These families typically transitioned to free status within two or three generations, however, and the automatic generational turnover makes manumitted legal status a transient one.15 Romans with limited privileges and abilities were no doubt aware of them, but that does not necessarily mean that they embraced the discriminatory stigma that their social position was associated with.16 Instead, their ambitions and strategies to overcome or sidestep social barriers depended on their individual circumstances. The ability to establish a family legally was a modest goal that was undoubtedly of great significance to anyone who had experienced slavery. In contrast, the exceptional cases of former slaves who reached positions of great power created a narrow privileged class within their status group. Social commentaries in ancient sources usually target this “talented tenth” whose interests should not be equated with those who had nothing in common with them aside from their formal legal status.17
The contradictory experience of manumitted slaves and other nonelite Romans is aptly reflected in a funerary culture that was as distinctive as it was diverse. The practice of funerary commemoration centers on freedmen and symbolizes the confidence and diffidence that their paradoxical circumstances produced. Some aspects of this nonelite funerary culture referenced elite models, but this does not make them a clumsy forgery because these inspirations are always adapted to fit distinctive identities. Burial in columbaria is a wholly new and characteristically nonelite mode of burial. Burial collectives that shared tomb monuments are umbrella organizations that place bereaved families in a supportive environment. This organization is not just a compromise but embodies the collective solidarity of those united in burial and mourning. The burial collective does not necessarily substitute the family circle as the primary center for funerary commemoration, but embeds it in a broader social network that could strengthen its social integration. If it was not able to prevent the unpredictable outcomes that a death in socially dependent families could trigger, such a network may at least have provided reassuring camaraderie. Similarly, the deliberate investment of personal resources into grassroots organizations may have returned some measure of economic control to individuals whose property was methodically targeted.

Columbaria are unique in the history of Roman culture, but their social strategy resembles that of marginal status groups in other historical situations. The status inconsistency and generational turnover of columbarium occupants resembles the condition of immigrants in modern industrial societies: their hopeful pursuit of new opportunities contradicts the actual exploitation and discrimination they often experience. In the second generation, immigrant families typically start to assimilate more completely into host societies echoing the social advance of the children of manumitted families. The experience of modern immigrants is interestingly also reflected in their funerary behavior, where the cemetery often becomes a focal point for the perpetuation of national customs and networks. While the analogy should probably not be pushed too far, it does make the nonelite experience in Roman society tangible to modern observers. Many urban residents of Rome of all status groups were immigrants and faced similar cultural dilemmas as their modern counterparts. Perhaps more importantly, this analogy is an intriguing case of historical hindsight. The sudden appearance of columbaria and their subsequent transition to other architectural forms allows tracing the complete sequence of cultural assimilation from the time that the community first comes into view to the point where it dissolves in a mainstream culture.

**ORGANIZED COLLECTIVE BURIAL AND COLLEGIUM**

One of the most characteristic aspects of columbaria, apart from their architectural design, is the collective organization of burial. Columbaria were often
administered by collegia, but even beyond this particular architectural form, burial is known to be a central function of these social clubs. The question that the legal nature of the epigraphic documentation does not answer is whether that was also the primary motivation to join collegia. Their popular nineteenth-century interpretation as “burial clubs” prioritizes this function, perhaps in anachronistic association with the similar societies that were popular across Europe at the time. More recent scholarship instead stresses the functional variety that is suggested by the spectrum from professional and religious to domestic and funerary associations. It may be impossible to cleanly distinguish these types by their main purpose, but it is probably fair to say that various functions or combinations thereof motivated people to organize. What associations of all functions have in common is their focus on a community that is constantly reinforced through rituals of social cohesion. The regulation of one collegium to hold an imaginary funeral for slaves whose bodies could not be retrieved suggests that this ritual was at least as important as the actual burial. Social cohesion rituals operate on different scales in different circumstances, but unanimously tie individual members to formal and informal groups through recurring joint activities.

Collective burial is a social cohesion ritual that fulfills more than one purpose. On a pragmatic level, it disposes of a corpse and fulfills the obligation of decent burial and remembrance, as numerous inscriptions seeking to guarantee a lasting commitment to the tomb demonstrate. Beyond serving the interest of the deceased, burial and commemoration delineate a community of survivors and strengthen the bonds between them. The legal documents of various collegia illustrate these rituals. The funeral of one of the members constituted the most immediate occasion to convene and various regulations were used to ensure that they were well attended. But there were also purely convivial meetings, suggesting that sentiments of solidarity and companionship are at least as important as the funerary rationale of the collegium. The occasions for festive days were usually birthdays and other anniversaries, which could be multiplied as needed. The fullest representation of the activities during such convivial meetings is the operating license of the “Worshippers of Diana and Antinous” (cultores Dianae et Antinowi) that specifies six annual meals of wine, bread, and sardines; a collective visit at the baths; and sacrifices of wine and incense. The cultores also cooperated during their monthly meetings, during which the regular business of the collegium was conducted. The centrality of regular meetings suggests that they provided collegium members with practices that institutionalized their solidarity and camaraderie.

Connecting such detailed evidence to the material culture of collective tombs is difficult, because it risks generalizing too broadly from idiosyncratic circumstances. The regulations of collegia date to the first and second centuries C.E., which prohibits drawing direct conclusions for columbaria of the Augustan period and early first century C.E. The safest inference may be that
the centrality of regular assembly and interaction suggests a rather timeless characteristic that was likely important for columbarium occupants as well. Columbaria, in turn, produced material evidence for ritual activity, but the lack of accurate documentation and archaeological context makes explanatory connections to the literary sources equally hazardous. Convivial facilities that would accommodate sizeable gatherings, such as triclinia (dining halls) or solaria (terraces), have not survived in direct connection with extant columbaria but they are attested epigraphically. There was no need to hold meetings without direct funerary connection in the tomb chamber where space constraints would limit their appeal and viability. The great number of terra-cotta tubes and lamps that emerge in every excavation of a columbarium suggest that libations (liquid sacrifices) were common, as may have also been the ritual lighting of lamps. These rituals are suitable for individuals or groups of various sizes, but their performance in a collective tomb would embed even individual performances in a collective environment. The capacity of larger columbaria would result in multiple anniversaries on each given day and on commemorative holidays the narrow tombs would likely be crowded with visitors.

Frequent encounters at the tomb site probably complemented more formal gatherings and reinforced the ties to other members of the burial community. Collective burial and commemoration must have been essential in a society in which bereavement was an everyday experience. In social circles in which death could easily terminate a lifelong struggle to overcome persistent status boundaries and have similarly detrimental consequences for survivors, the affirmation of shared experiences must have been especially important in times of bereavement. An intriguing modern parallel for the social dynamic of Roman collegia are the landsmanschaft of New York City that maintained collective cemeteries for Eastern European Jews. Fenced-off burial grounds with elaborate gates articulated the collective identities of associations with members from particular shtetls who also participated in communal events such as dances and picnics. Tellingly, these cemeteries eventually faded as subsequent generations assimilated more completely in American society. The concrete historical circumstances of Jewish Americans obviously differ from those of Augustan freedmen, but the underlying similarities are striking. In both cases, the tension between new opportunities and persistent constraints was addressed by creating umbrella organizations that offered tangible benefits while maintaining collective solidarity. This fundamental parallel stretching across millennia characterizes collective action and group solidarity as enduring mechanisms to negotiate the identity adjustments necessitated by social change.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

If historical circumstances influence funerary culture, as postulated at the outset of this introduction, tracing the visual development of tomb monuments
over time allows writing social history through tombs. The appearance and disappearance of columbaria is a particularly illustrative case study because they are such unique tombs reflecting particular social conditions. Their secluded, isometric architecture breaks with republican tradition by shifting the focus from individual achievement to collective uniformity. Their design is inspired by the Augustan urban transformation but its originality also reflects the non-conformity of their occupants. The social transformations of the Augustan reign encouraged collective action, because they benefited urban residents while reinforcing traditional status boundaries. Community support helped negotiate the resulting contradictions of their social experience, especially for freedmen. Collective burial and commemoration are social cohesion rituals that complemented other ones in perpetuating the ties between members of collegia. In Rome, where these collegia reached a sufficient size and level of formality, the subterranean columbaria was the architectural manifestation of this phenomenon. The concrete connections between historical setting and funerary culture open a panorama of new questions about existing scholarship, the architecture of columbaria, the behavior they encouraged, and the people who used them. The potential of these questions, and the detailed analysis they inspire, not only allows one to understand these fascinating monuments more accurately, but also embeds them in the overall development of Roman funerary culture and the social experience of Rome's urban residents during the early imperial period.

Why has the potential of columbaria as historical sources not been realized?

Chapter 1 of this study suggests that existing scholarship continues to be haunted by anachronistic notions that originated in the early days of antiquarian pursuit in Rome. Inconsistent terminology and imprecise use of chronological clues further undermine a holistic reading of columbaria as a phenomenon in funerary culture. My new definition and chronology attempt to correct these shortcomings. As a result, subterranean columbaria emerge as a distinctive type of funerary architecture that started to be built toward the end of the Augustan reign and continued to be built for a generation or two.

How do columbaria compare to other forms of funerary architecture?

Chapter 2 identifies innovative and traditional aspects of columbarium architecture and explores the origins of organized collective burial in the Mediterranean. One of the most innovative aspects is a commemorative strategy that downgrades the public representation of the burial collective in favor of a concentration on egalitarian solidarity within that group. This principle is absent from Roman funerary culture up to this point, but may be inspired by precedents in the Hellenistic shipping centers of the Eastern Mediterranean.

How did individuals use columbaria for burial and commemoration?
Chapter 3 analyzes the visual impact of individual burials and demonstrates that the use of columbaria gradually changed over time. Subtle and more remarkable modifications of existing architecture suggest that the original egalitarian approach lost appeal and was replaced by a more individualistic commemoration. Eventually, this preference was implemented in the architectural design of columbaria that consequently evolved into a different kind of tomb, namely aboveground columbaria. This development exemplifies a broader change in Roman funerary culture altogether, which is also reflected in the growing popularity of marble cinerary urns and funerary altars as well as the changing language of funerary inscriptions.

Who was buried in columbaria and how did their occupants view themselves?

The analysis of the tombstones from columbaria in Chapter 4 characterizes their occupants as urban slaves and freedmen who belonged to collegia, grassroots organizations that provided them and their families with a supportive social environment. The solidarity within this group is reflected in the language that these epitaphs use, which repetitively highlights aspects that all group members had in common while only recognizing individual distinction infrequently. This language illustrates the internal cohesion of burial communities and tallies with the egalitarian architectural layout of columbaria.

Why did collective burial appeal to freedmen during the Augustan reign, and why did it cease to do so shortly thereafter?

Chapter 5 foregrounds the social experience of columbarium users and suggests that new possibilities for success during the Augustan period contradicted enduring limitations. This status inconsistency was addressed through collective organization that gave rise to collective burial in columbaria. The social integration of subsequent generations was more complete, which resembles the acculturation process of immigrants and is among the reasons why the columbarium model did not last. This chapter also treats columbaria outside of Rome and suggests that the architectural blueprint of columbaria radiated to other cities in Central Italy. However, the social conditions that produced subterranean columbaria were not reproduced until another nonelite group in a contradictory social position used collective burial once more in the Roman catacombs.
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Columbarium Tombs and Collective Identity in Augustan Rome

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Chapter

1 - Studying Columbaria as a Historical Phenomenon pp. 17-38

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Every encyclopedia of the ancient world features an entry about columbaria and every guidebook of ancient Rome describes the most famous tombs on the Via Appia and Via Latina. This coverage creates the impression that they are well known but also hides the fact that they have never been studied as a phenomenon. Existing literature on columbaria is disconnected between archaeological reports, unpublished monument studies, and casual historical interpretations. This disjointedness allows misconceptions to continue and devalues the potential of columbaria as a historical source and case study in funerary behavior. The resulting variety and inconsistency of previous definitions, interpretations, and chronologies requires a holistic reconsideration. This chapter sets the interpretive framework of my study by critiquing these parameters and proposing initial modifications. My new definition of the term *columbarium* subsumes all tomb monuments with cremation niches and allows one to grasp their distinctiveness while tracing their architectural development. The subsequent review of early scholarship on columbaria identifies the anachronistic notions that continue to loom powerfully in more recent treatments. Finally, a new chronological reconstruction characterizes columbaria as Augustan innovations and correlates the habit of organized collective burial with a specific historical setting. Overall, these revisions decode columbaria as a distinctive type of funerary architecture that were emblematic for their time period and mirrored the experiences of those who used them.