

American Classical League 2010 Institute

Latin Funerary Inscriptions: Texts for Retrieving Women's Lives



"Illustrating the Case for Funerary Monuments"

Ann R. Raia, The College of New Rochelle

In this panel we focus on the evidence funerary monuments provide about Roman women of the lower classes who lived during the late Republic and first two centuries of the Empire. I will introduce the topic of the panel and in my PowerPoint presentation I will share with you some examples of monuments from *The Online Companion* you might use in your Latin classroom. Judith Sebesta will demonstrate what inscriptions can teach us about the lives of Roman girls. Anne Leen will tell you about her experiences using funerary inscriptions with her Latin class; her student, Alexander Rice, will describe his completed inscription project. Keely Lake's response to our presentations will open the floor for questions and discussion.

Slide 2: Death of family, friends, or dependents was a common experience in Roman life, Saller tells us.¹ Responding to the human impulse to honor and memorialize their dearly departed, Romans of every class erected monuments according to their means. These have survived in great numbers, even if we know only a small fraction of the total in Bodel's estimate!² On them, Romans present themselves and their sentiments, giving us information that other sources ignored as uninteresting, trivial, or common. Modern historians and archaeologists, on the other hand, attend closely to burials and their artifacts which offer insight into Roman society, culture, and economy.

Like ancestor masks in elite homes, funeral monuments kept the dead among the living. Janus-faced, they not only housed the dead metaphorically -- **Slide 3:** in fact, some tombs are in the shape of houses --, they also engaged with the living, both loved ones who visited on festal days and strangers, curious about the status and identity of the deceased. Many tombs seem designed to attract the attention of passers-by.

Slide 4: Banned from within the city walls as early as the Twelve Tables, burials lined the roads leading out of Rome and filled the suburbs. The Via Appia was a prime venue. Ironically, its grandest monuments did not survive the depredations of time and looters

risking punishment under Roman law. The monument of the aristocrat **Caecilia Metella**, stripped of its marble, survived only as a medieval fortress.

Roman tombs show great formal diversity. Unlike Roman society, distinction was based not on class but on wealth. **Slide 5:** The wealthy freedwoman **Naevoleia Tyche** commissioned this sumptuous marble altar with money from her family business, placing it prominently outside Pompeii's Herculaneum gate. Its exterior was intended to impress; its simple interior held her cremated remains and those of her husband, C. Munatius Faustus and her freedpersons.

The period from the end of the Republic saw burial by inhumation as well as cremation. Tombs of the 2nd century CE show both types, but by the end of the 3rd century Romans settled on inhumation. Archaeology has revealed the extremes of burials: at the lowest end the penniless and infants were interred directly in the earth in a cloth wrap or a broken amphora without a permanent marker.

Those who could afford it built free-standing monuments for their nuclear family and heirs (*sepulchra hereditaria*). **Slide 6:** This marble tomb on the Via Appia (the plaster cast of their portraits is in Rome's Terme Museum) was dedicated by Hermodorus and his wife Demaris, probably fellow slaves from Egypt who were owned and freed by the family of the Rabirii. Beside them is possibly a descendent whose image was added later, a Priestess of Isis, Usia Prima, flanked by her symbols of office (the *sistrum* and *patera*) in low relief.

Slide 7: Brick chamber tombs like this one on the Via Appia, were intended for burials of the family, dependents and their descendants (*sepulchra familiaria* or household tombs); their inside walls were lined with niches for cinerary containers.

Slide 8 (multiple): At the end of the Republic, senatorial families began to build large structures separate from their own monuments to hold the ashes of their slaves. Called *columbaria*, they were the private property of their owners who often accommodated dependents as well as other petitioners. These multi-storied complexes featured open areas within, where families could gather to visit their dead on anniversaries and festal days.



Livia erected a *columbarium* that offered 1100 spaces for double burials, which proved insufficient for her households; she herself, however, was buried in Augustus' tomb. This small *columbarium* in Ostia on the Via Ostiense bears evidence that free lower-class Romans also sought to secure an eternal home at a price they could afford by joining burial associations (*collegia funeraticia*).

Slide 9: The large *columbarium* of Villa Doria Pamphilj on the Via Aurelia retains its wall decorations, which may have been a regular feature of *columbaria*. Here the rows between the niches were enlivened with colorful scenes from nature and daily life. Above each niche a placard (*tabula ansata*) was painted for the name of the deceased.

Slide 10: The *columbarium* of the influential Statilius family was among the three largest in Rome. Its niche labels (*tituli*) are rich sources of information about slave occupations in a wealthy household. Two examples illustrate the diversity of *tituli* in this *columbarium*:

[CLICK] **Logas** was a companion (*pedisequa*) to the grandmother of the empress Messalina. As she was only 16 at her death and presumably unmarried, her mother **AP[h]RODISIA** dedicated this simple stone marker for her niche. Labels could be made of wood, terracotta, plaster, or marble; their letters could be incised, as this is, or painted in carbon or red.

[CLICK] **Nothus** was a secretary. This marble niche cover dedicated by his wife is one of the more elegant memorials in the *columbarium* of the Statilii. It bears a 6-line poem [see #1 in your handout for the transcription and a literal translation] expressing her grief at her husband's premature death. Her pride in him was so self-effacing that she did not inscribe her name -- only the word *coniunx*. While it is doubtful she composed the elegy herself, she allowed the sentiments and the added expense of a versifier, indications of both wifely devotion and status.

Slide 11: Cinerary urns that filled the niches in tombs and *columbaria* also show great diversity. The simplest were unadorned, of terracotta or marble [2 examples].

Slide 12: Their shape, design, and customized decoration were determined by the buyer's ability and willingness to pay. [6 examples]

Slide 13: Those with greater means assuaged their grief with creative urns such as these: **Aurelia Vitalis'** small urn for her grandmother, pictured reclining on the lid of a small sarcophagus-like container.

[CLICK]

Publius Nonius Zethus, a baker at Ostia, commissioned a large marble block to be carved with an inscription and the tools of his trade on the front like a sarcophagus; the eight cavities on the top were designed to hold cinerary urns for himself, his wife, and workers.

Slide 14 (multiple): Women were frequently memorialized with funerary altars; space was provided on the top for a cinerary urn, while the façade contained an inscription and often a relief portrait.

Sarcophagi contained inhumation burials of the wealthy; these were situated beside a road, inside private gardens, or within a family tomb. **Slide 15 (multiple):** The facade and lid of the sarcophagus offered a large field for displaying scenes from the life of the deceased or from mythology. The so-called Biographical Sarcophagus presented often generic episodes in the life of males, progressing through a cycle from birth, surrounded by women, to development and adult achievement, surrounded by men, to marriage (this example can be found in Rome's Massimo Museum). The 2nd century CE sarcophagus of Metilia Acte, a freedwoman and priestess of Magna Mater in Ostia, and her freedman husband Euhodus, is decorated with the myth of Alcestis and Admetus. Although the myth is a frequent choice for the burial of a *matrona*, in this case the faces are portraits of the deceased. This late Republican sarcophagus portrays on its lid draped portraits of a freedperson couple, **Aurelia Agrippina** and Publius Aelius Myron. Typically, both women are celebrated for their piety as *sanctissima*.

Slide 16: A favorite theme on all types of funerary monuments was the defining moment of the Roman citizen marriage, the *dextrarum iunctio*. These four examples from the 1st-3rd centuries illustrate important aspects of the ceremony, such as fertility symbolism (pomegranate, *erotes*), the bride's *stola* with its Heracles knot belt, the *Pronuba* presiding. Note the greater intimacy expressed in the poses of the couple on the last two monuments (the wife's hand is on his shoulder; their exchange of glances).

- The 1st century tombstone of the freeborn couple from Aquileia, dedicated by their children, is unusual: on the bottom are portraits of the deceased at the time of their marriage; at the top they appear in old age: TVRPILLAE M[arci] F[iliae] / TERTIAE / MATRI (right) C[aio] ACVTIO / C[aii] F[ilio] / PATRI.
- A beautifully sculpted cinerary urn of the 1st century dedicated to the freedman Hermes by a friend.
- A 2nd century tombstone of a couple from Ostia, without identification.
- A 3rd century sarcophagus of an unidentified but important couple, surrounded by personifications of civic fertility and prosperity (Portus, Annona, Concordia, Genius of the Senate, Abundantia, Africa).

Sociologists and demographers use funerary inscriptions to extrapolate statistics about the people and society of ancient Rome, such as life expectancy, ratio of male to female, numbers of slaves and freedpersons, varieties of relationships, family connections. When inscriptions accompany images, they are rich sources for reconstructing the lives of non-elite women, who appear in great numbers on funerary monuments, as survivors and dearly departed.

Slide 17: Claudia Prepontis commissioned this wall plaque and funerary altar for her former master, Tiberius Claudius Dionysius. She celebrates him in words as her patron and in image as her husband. Such testimony -- even if it is formulaic-- furnishes information beyond the mourner's intent. The simplest inscriptions offer one or more elements: name and status, dedicator's name and relationship, conventional words of praise -- sometimes age is included, but rarely date or cause of death.

Lengthy inscriptions were not rare, even though they would be costly. **Slide 18:** On this tablet [see #2 on your HANDOUT for the transcription and a literal translation] Furia

Spes memorializes her relationship with her husband Sempronius Firmus, as well as the emotional bonds that prompt her to pray for their swift reunion in death, a not unusual request.

Slide 19: Let me conclude by introducing you to three women who can be found in *Companion*, where women are presented up close and as individuals -- in glossed Latin passages, in images, and as research options. They invite the reader to probe beyond statistics, stereotypes, and formulae to imagine what women's lives might have been like.



Slide 20 (multiple): Julia Capriola was a freedwoman of the Julian *gens*. Her image and inscription can be found in *Companion's* World of Marriage, together with an essay that explains what her monument can reveal about her. Reclining comfortably at the banquet of life or perhaps at her 9-day funeral feast, this stern 35 year old *matrona* survived childbirth and disease to earn the traditional accolades of women: *carissima* and *sanctissima*.



Slide 21 (multiple): Julia Secunda and her mother **Cornelia Tyche**, a freedwoman, were members of the family of the freedman Julius Secundus. They appear in *Companion's* World of Family. A 16th century drawing shows what their hugely expensive tomb looked like originally. One of its walls contained a 14-line poem in hexameters commissioned by the grieving father and husband that movingly narrates their death in a shipwreck off the

Spanish coast. In the inscription below their portraits he bears witness to their excellence: Julia, almost 12 years old, was dutiful as well as intelligent beyond her peers; Cornelia, 39 and married to him for 11 years, was unmatched in her affection for him and exceptional in her devotion to her children.

Title: Slide 21: I hope that you will visit *Companion* with your students in order to better know these women and the many others who can be found there.

Thank you for your attention. And now I will ask Judith Sebesta to step to the podium.

The images reproduced here are from the VRoma Image Archive <http://www.vroma.org>

¹ In his introduction to *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, Richard Saller writes: "The death of a family member, friend, or dependent was a far more common experience in the lives of Romans than for us today." in a foot note he adds "The mortality rate in developed countries today is under 15 per 1,000, in contrast to the Roman mortality rate of nearly 40 per 1,000 per year" (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 1.

² In Chapter 6 of the same work, "From *Columbaria* to Catacombs: Collective Burial in Pagan and Christian Rome," John Bodel writes: "During the three and a half centuries of pre-Christian imperial Rome between the reigns of Augustus and Constantine, when the population of the city numbered between 750,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants, the suburbs of the city must have accommodated between 10,500,000 and 14,000,000 burials. Of these we have traces of perhaps 150,000 or less than 1.5 percent of the total," p. 179.