

For Memoria Aeterna: Approaches to Immortality in Memory in Ancient Roman Funerary Monuments

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Author Biography

Yuanxin Sun is currently a Senior studying at Shanghai World Foreign Language Academy. She is deeply interested in Ancient Rome, especially in their funerary monuments, which is a topic she has researched and written about in both the Stanford Summer Humanities Institute and the Pioneer Research Program. In her free time, she enjoys studying Latin, Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Abstract

When facing death, Ancient Romans attempted to achieve immortality through eternal memory. While the elites sought great achievements as invisible monuments, the non-elite Roman population depended on their tombs to preserve their identity and memory. By analyzing funerary monuments of the non-elite from the Late Republic to the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, this essay explores how their textual and visual components construct images that define and idealize the memory of individuals. The essay also investigates how these elements interact with the living to preserve and strengthen the memories of the dead: by connecting with family and friends from the private sphere in their regular visits as well as luring and informing strangers passing by from the public world. Finally, the essay sheds light on how the most important Roman festival for the dead, Parentalia, provided opportunities to appeal to both types of audiences in the preservation of memory.

Keywords: Ancient Rome, Funerary monuments, Epitaphs, Perpetual memory, Roman freedmen, Offerings, Roadside tombs, Parentalia

Introduction: The Roman approach of facing death with memory

The Ancient Romans had a deep-rooted pursuit of the preservation of memory, which included a perception of fame and its connection to the afterlife. A notion originating from Archaic Greek, fame (*kleos*)—the recognition and remembrance of one's honorable deeds for generations to come—was considered a path to immortality when the belief in a conscious personal survival was yet absent (Nikulin, 2015).

Deeply influenced by Greek culture, the Romans were well aware of the potential for perpetual fame, and it was particularly popular among the elite. Most of the well-known Roman writers—almost all of them wealthy elite men—were uncertain about the existence of a conscious immortality after death, and some even completely rejected the notion (Hope, 2009). Although attempts at perpetual fame for military accomplishment (*gloria militaris*), political success, and literary excellence (*gloria litteraria*) appear frequently in the preserved Roman classics (Sullivan, 1943), it is understood that these works exclusively present the elite perspective, and therefore gaining a spot in written tradition was limited to that social class (Beard, 2015). The route of achieving immortality through fame was not available to the larger percent of Roman society such as plebeians, freedman, slaves, women, etc. Therefore, though the less well-to-do were influenced by the same philosophical notions as the elite, they utilized a different and more modest medium for the preservation of their own memories through their funerary traditions.

Funerary monuments and inscriptions were what the non-elite relied on for their hopes of perpetual memory. Existing accounts of Roman law and excavation of cemeteries in the then peripheries of the city testified that burial or cremation of bodies was banned inside Roman cities and towns for most deaths. Thus, nearly all burials are positioned outside the respective city walls or town's boundaries. The markers for these graves assume a wide variety of forms: from the simplest, perishable wooden or pottery markers to more durable monuments made of different

types of stones and featuring different shapes (Hope, 2009). On many of the markers, epitaphs are inscribed with great insights into the person and Roman society. These epitaphs are often full of formulae, many of which represent themes of grief and consolation contracted into simple phrases and even abbreviations of a few letters, but they also contain more personal, individualized content and themes.

It should be noted that funerary monuments were available to nearly all Romans, but the elite seemed to be inconsistent in their use of this medium, especially when the construction of the Mausoleum of Augustus ended the social competition for larger and more elaborate tombs (Hope, 2009). Some, such as the poet Horace, felt that literature was more durable than stone at preserving their fame; others rejected tombs as monuments for their reputations altogether (Hope, 2009). However, for the vast majority of Romans, the only means they had of keeping their memory alive after their deaths was through funerary monuments. This resulted in clear distinctions of effort put into the tombs by some social groups, such as ex-slaves (*libertini*), that occurred simultaneously with the decline in elites' funerary commemoration scale, as observed by the historian Valerie M. Hope (2009). Thus, their efforts make the monuments worth studying as an insight into their functional roles as media for memory.

This paper argues the funerary monument of the non-elite dating from the Late Republic to the first two centuries of the Roman Empire (circa 133 BCE—201 CE) reveals that non-elite Romans cared about being remembered. Throughout this period—the golden age of stone grave markers in Rome (Hope, 2009)—everyday men and women used funerary monuments to preserve their memories within families, to interact with members of the public, and to strengthen these memories with the most important Roman festival of the dead. Looking at these stones reveals a vibrant but often overlooked world of otherwise silent ordinary Romans who, too, hoped for commemoration through public designs and writings of a different kind for the living.

Interactions within close social bonds

Defining and refining the memory of the dead

For most non-elite Romans, funerary monuments and the accompanying epitaphs were either constructed by the deceased before their passing or by people in close social relations with them after their passing: spouses, parents, children, patrons, workmates, and so on. These relations were therefore responsible for the construction of the dead's image and thus definition of their memory.

The selection of what information to include or exclude differed remarkably among different individuals, but even in the simplest of Roman epitaphs, such as those on the ash-chests packed in columbaria—partly or completely underground tombs with rows of niches for cremated remains in the walls—a name is included. Examples of these include a columbarium plaque:

<i>P(ubli) Septici Dionysi,</i>	[This niche contains the remains] Of Publius
<i>P(ubli) Septici Nuae,</i>	Septicius Dionysius [and] Publius Septicius Nua
<i>Septiciae Anthis.</i>	[and] Septicia Anthe (Campbell, n.d.).

Considering the meager space on ash-chests available for the carving of inscriptions, any words inscribed on them must have been of pivotal significance. The informative nature of Roman nomenclature in one's social status, ancestry, etc., gives names an especially strong defining power in the identity of Romans, and thus it alone was of great significance to the preservation of one's memory.

Larger monuments could hold more space for inscriptions and therefore could afford to include more biographical information. A variety of aspects of the deceased's life could be covered—work, family relations, etc. As the classicist Richmond Lattimore (1962) states, this led to increased freedom for “present[ing] the dead in a favorable light” by constructing a more vivid image of them (p. 285). These glorified images and their focuses are shaped by the perspectives and preferences of the dedicator.

Some of the epitaphs focus on the occupations of the deceased. Occupations formed

a crucial part of people's identities among the non-elites, especially in urban Rome, despite the obvious contempt for such labor expressed by elite writers. Depending on the identity of the dedicator, how the deceased's occupation was presented and what it expressed could be drastically different. The historian and classicist Sandra R. Joshel (1992) defines workers in Rome as belonging to two different spheres: “the private environment of the large domestic household headed by an upper-class master” and “the public world” (p. 94-95). In these two spheres, workers interacted with distinct people and formed different social relations, which determined who their potential dedicators would be and thus defined how their epitaphs were shaped.

The private sphere of occupations was defined by domestic servants—slaves or freedmen—who worked for the more privileged. As Joshel (1992) argues, occupation held a particular significance for slaves in the private sphere, as they had “no rights, acknowledged kin, honor, or legitimate standing in society apart from their masters” (p. 121). Therefore, beside the status of their owners, slaves relied on their occupation—if they possessed a professional skill that allowed them to obtain a specific job-title—to define their own identities and therefore their memories. For example, one epitaph records a brief list of information about a domestic servant:

<i>Lucundus</i>	
<i>Posidippi ser(vus)</i>	Lucundus, servant of Posidippus, chamberlain, a
<i>cubicularius</i>	family slave, [lived] 21 years.
<i>verna annor(um) XXI</i> (Meloni, 2011).	

What information we know from this brief inscription about the identity of Lucundus is that he was a slave born in the household belonging to Posidippus, and he worked as a bed-chamber servant. His occupation and relationships in the private sphere of work—two pieces of biographical information that defined his identity in life and implied that he was a skilled servant in the bed-chamber—thus constituted the memory he or the anonymous dedicator wished to preserve.

It is worth noting that, in many cases, owners would choose to reserve burial spaces for their servants in a family tomb, as shown in this example:

*Hoc mihi noster erus sacravit
inane sepulcrum, villae tecta suae
propter ut aspicerem, utque suis
manibus flores mihi vinaque
saepe funderet et lacrimam, quod
mihi pluris erit (Berdús, 2021).*

To me our master dedicated this empty tomb,
near the roofs of his own villa, in order that I
could see, and he could often pour with his
hands flowers and wine and tears, as far as it will
be more than enough for me.

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enough for me.

The epitaph reveals the master's benevolence
to the house servant by stating, in the servant's
voice, that the master dedicated a tomb and promised
constant offerings. In these cases, the owner's
dedication of the epitaph to the servant could have
a two-fold purpose: the servant's identity was
established with the dedication, and the existence
of the epitaph itself as a favor done by the owner
implicitly constructed the owner's image as a
benevolent and kind master. In this way, a single
epitaph established the memory of two individuals of
both the servant who was successful enough to earn a
decent tomb near the villa and of the owner who was
kind-hearted enough to build it for him.

For workers active in the public sphere, the
ancient versions of guilds and trade associations,
called collegia, might be responsible for the dedication
of their monuments and play a dominating position in
stressing their occupations. Some of the organizations
were responsible for funding and conducting burials:
the members regularly contributed financially to
collegia for the guarantee of a decent funeral and
burial after death. With the heavily occupational nature
of collegia and the social bonds formed by its members
based on their common jobs, their role in promoting
the importance of occupation in the identity of the
deceased was evident:

<i>T(itus) Statilius</i>	Titus Statilius
<i>Anoptes,</i>	Anoptes,
<i>pistor de conleg(io) (Meloni, 2011).</i>	baker from the <i>collegium</i> .

This epitaph shows that Titus Statilius
Anoptes, as a member of the presumable collegium
of the bakers, was remembered as a baker and as

a member of this group—the contribution of the
collegium to his burial and epitaph thus defined his
memory.

Generally, regardless of which sphere, public
or private, the dead belonged to, the occupational
identities included in epitaphs were reinforced with
celebrations of their work in their trade. Some of the
epitaphs elaborate on the dead's performance in work
and praise their excellent professional skills. Others
proclaim their financial achievements through their
work. The tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces the
Baker serves as a classic example of both these trends.
His epitaph states:

<i>Est hoc monumentum Margei Vergilei</i>	This is the memorial of Marcus Vergilius
<i>Eurysacis.</i>	Eurysaces,
<i>pistoris, redemptoris, apparet (Ferraro & Gorla, 2022).</i>	baker, contractor. It is apparent (<i>Latin</i> <i>Inscriptions: Epitaphs, n.d.</i>).

The epitaph describes Marcus Vergilius
Eurysaces's identity as not only a baker, but also a
contractor, which indicates that he probably operated
a chain of bakeries, a sign of great success in his
business. It can also be easily inferred from this
immense network of businesses that Eurysaces's
professional achievements must have brought him
immense wealth. The epitaph thus defines Eurysaces's
identity and connects his memory with his highly
successful occupational career. However, the epitaph
represents only a small fraction of the tomb's
demonstration of such success: Eurysaces's financial
achievement and success in the baking industry are
conveyed far more in visual rhetoric of the monument
than in its text.

Family life is also a focus of many epitaphs
and reflects more traces of the dedicators. The dead's
image in the family could be made clear with the
description of their virtues, a theme common in the
epitaphs of women. Especially in Roman epitaphs
that are known for their brevity and conciseness, this
portrayal was accomplished with simple listing, as in
a typical example of this theme, where the virtues of a
woman named Claudia were recounted:

<i>Heic est sepulcrum hau pulcrum pulcrae feminae:</i>	Here is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman.
<i>nomen parentes nominarunt Claudiam.</i>	Her parents called her Claudia by name.
<i>Suom maritum corde dilexit suo.</i>	She loved her husband with her whole heart.
<i>gnatos duos creavit; horum alterum in terra linquit, alium sub terra locat.</i>	She bore two sons; of these she leaves one on earth; under the earth has she placed the other.
<i>Sermone lepido, tum autem incessu commodo.</i>	She was charming in converse, yet proper in bearing.
<i>Domum servavit, lanam fecit</i> (Martino, 2013).	She kept house, she made wool (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

This epitaph constructs an image of Claudia as an ideal Roman woman: elegant in appearance and posture, faithful to her spouse, active in managing her household and domestic chores, etc. It is noteworthy that in Ancient Rome, it was the convention for the husband to dedicate the epitaph to his wife and vice versa. Therefore, the theme of virtue might be the result of the husband's attempt to preserve memories of his deceased spouse with the construction of a perfect image, as in the case of Claudia's memory. In this way, the husband's inclinations and hopes could be reflected in the text.

When the dead's identity was described more explicitly through connections to family members, the relationship between the deceased and the dedicator was more obvious. Such texts stress a variety of bonds in Roman family structures. For example, considering the high mortality rate of children in Rome, it was common for parents to dedicate epitaphs to their sons and daughters who'd met untimely deaths:

<i>Quam coluit dulci gavisus amore puella(m)</i>	Here an unhappy parent has laid to rest his one and only daughter Nymphe whom he cherished
<i>[hic locat] infelix, unica quae fuerat</i>	in the joy of sweet love while the shortened
<i>[donec complevit] fatorum tempora,</i>	hours of the Fates allowed it.
<i>Nymphe</i>	
<i>[nunc erept]a domu cara suei tegitur.</i>	Now she is torn away from home - earth covers
<i>[Omne decus vultus et eo laudata figura</i>	her, dear to her own; now her fair face, her form too, praised as fair—
<i>[umbra levis nun]c est parvos et ossa cinis</i> (Ferraro, 2023).	all is airy shadow and her bones are a little pinch of ashes (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

Here an unhappy parent has laid to rest his one and only daughter Nymphe whom he cherished in the joy of sweet love while the shortened hours of the Fates allowed it. Now she is torn away from home

- earth covers her, dear to her own; now her fair face, her form too, praised as fair—all is airy shadow and her bones are a little pinch of ashes (*Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs*, n.d.).

In this epitaph, the dedicator—probably one of the parents—tried to construct the image of a beautiful girl loved by her family during her short life. Not only was this memory based upon the girl herself, but the dedicator was also very much present in the description.

Epitaphs additionally presented the identities of the dead through their relationships—husband and wife, parent and child—especially when the dedicators for the dead were their family members. This testifies to how the dedicator of the epitaph deeply affected the memory of the dead. With the portrayal of the sweet bonds, the immense emotions when facing the death of a loved one are captured by these texts. Through those epitaphs, the dedicators might have intended to propose that those relations and emotions, when preserved on stone, would hold the family together even after death, reuniting them in eternal memory.

Private maintenance and commemoration in tomb visits

After the construction of the tomb, people who were familiar with the dead—mostly their family members—might visit the tomb with the purpose of commemorating and honoring the dead. Beside the Parentalia, which were festivals designated for the commemoration of the dead, families might also choose to visit the tomb on particular meaningful days. Exactly what days were chosen varied among individual families, but common choices included birthdays, anniversaries of deaths, as well as the Kalendes, Nones, or Ides of the months (Toynbee, 1971).

First, the timing and frequency of the visits themselves were significant. Visits to the tombs from time to time ensured their continued existence and prevented their violation. Hope (2009) points out that tombs without living relatives or friends to make offerings and conduct maintenance might be “reused, robbed or demolished” by others, thus dismissing the memory of the dead embodied in these monuments (p. 174-175). In contrast, family and friends who regularly visited tombs maintained the tombs' physical

conditions and therefore preserved the memory inscribed on the tombs.

To have a more detailed inspection of how visitors who know the deceased interacted with the tombs, one significant method was through rituals associated with the cult of the dead. In this cult, the Romans worshipped the Manes—the spirits of “Roman nonimperial deified dead,” as defined by the historian Charles W. King (2020, p. 2). Many Roman tombs were constructed into the shape of small altars, which shows the prevalence and importance of this cult and its rituals in Roman society. Some Romans might choose to assign the person responsible for the rituals during the visits, the time required, the relevant costs, and write out punishments for not fulfilling these requirements in their wills, as inscribed in their epitaph. These meticulously written wills demonstrate the concern of the tomb’s owners for the successful execution of these ritual plans:

<i>ex cuius usuris</i>	Out of whose interest
<i>peto a vobis, colleg(a)e, uti suscipere</i>	I ask from you, colleagues, that you may be
<i>dignemini, ut diebus sol(lemnibus</i>	deemed worthy to undertake, in order that you
<i>sacrificium mi(h)i faciat(s).</i>	might make a sacrifice to me on solemn days,
<i>id est IIII Id(us) Mart(ias), die natalis</i>	that is on the fourth day before the Ides of
<i>mei, usque ad [denarios] XXV,</i>	March, my birthday, up to 25 denarii (silver
<i>parentalis</i>	coins);
<i>[denarios] XII [semis], flos rosa</i>	12 and a half denarii for the <i>Parentalia</i> ; a rose
<i>[denarios] V, si facta non</i>	flower for 5 denarii. If (these) wouldn’t have
<i>fuert, tunc fisco sta(t)ionis</i>	happened, then you ought to give twice as much
<i>annonae duplum funeraticium dare</i>	to the treasury of the office of the yearly
<i>debebitis (Melmeluzzi, 2023).</i>	produce.

Out of whose interest I ask from you, colleagues, that you may be deemed worthy to undertake, in order that you might make a sacrifice to me on solemn days, that is on the fourth day before the Ides of March, my birthday, up to 25 denarii (silver coins); 12 and a half denarii for the *Parentalia*; a rose flower for 5 denarii. If (these) wouldn’t have happened, then you ought to give twice as much to the treasury of the office of the yearly produce.

Still, the Manes worship only offered Romans a partial and uncertain concept of personal immortality; therefore, in order to derive further consolation with the prospect of death, the Romans also pursued immortality through techniques including the preservation of memory.

Both of these approaches were eventually replaced in the fourth century CE. The pursuit of immortality in memory emerged as a theme separate from the belief in personal immortality, and was recognized, among many other themes, as a substitute for the notion. Lattimore (1962) argues that when the firm belief in immortality of the spirit offered by Christianity emerged, the pagan notions about death and immortality—whether the consolation in perpetual memory or the belief in the afterlife as Manes—were quickly replaced, because they were less definite and offered a more incomplete version of escaping the oblivion of death,—if one gains full personal immortality after death (as claimed by Christian doctrine), other alleviations become unnecessary, even redundant, and can therefore be abandoned.

However, before the rapid spread of Christianity, the Romans—both the elites and non-elites—did not hold a widespread belief in guaranteed personal immortality, as even those who believed in the Manes showed many variations and even contradictions in their perception of the idea concerning the degree of individuality and consciousness the spirits possessed; therefore, the belief in Manes coexisted quite smoothly with the preservation of memory as different approaches to immortality. This balance was evident in the cult of the dead, which the archaeologist and art historian J. M. C. Toynbee (1971) describes as providing “that the dead survived in the memories of relatives, descendants, and friends,” as well as ensuring “comfort, refreshment, and perennial renewal of life to their immortal spirits”—a double purpose that existed in private and public circumstances alike (p. 61-62). The statement clarifies that in religious contexts, the remembrance and preservation of the dead’s memory was equivalent to the subsistence of the ancestral spirit as kept alive by living relatives.

Evidently the offerings and other private rituals conducted in this cult honored and commemorated the dead. As the conductors of these rituals, visitors to the tombs of their acquaintances might bring food and drinks as offerings, as well as flowers for decorations. The exact type and amount of offerings varied for individual graves, but the practice generally showed the visitor’s recognition of the dead’s importance. Lattimore (1962) states that, apart from their religious meanings, these actions reflected a “general respect for the grave” and “a strong concern

for its appearance and the preservation of its identity” (p. 140-141). He therefore illustrates that offerings not only appeased the Manes, but also honored the dead’s memory through the gesture of respect and attention towards the dead’s spirit.

The process described above occurred repeatedly in visits conducted by family and friends. Regular visits to the tomb, whether required by the festivals or decided by individuals, guaranteed that the memory of the dead was constantly refreshed when the visitors interacted with the tomb in ways including giving offerings and re-reading epitaphs. The more frequent the visits, the more the families and friends could evoke these memories of the deceased firmly entrenched these memories in their minds through repeated exposure in the visitor’s minds. This effect was further demonstrated when visitors interact with the tombs through viewing visual components, namely portraiture, on the monument. Roman funerary portrait busts were often life-size, stressing the facial features of the dead and depicting them as vividly and realistically as possible.

One example is a marble bust of a man in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, presumably a freedman who’d earned enough wealth for the construction of a lifelike portrait with an expensive material (Marble Portrait of a Man from a Funerary Relief, n.d.). The portrait’s extremely realistic style is evident in its baldness and deep wrinkles. The portrait has been removed from its original monument, and there is no known information of that monument, but the back of its head is flat, which presumably means this is where the bust was originally connected with the tomb. This structure implies that it was originally carved in a position looking forward and facing visitors. Another example that provides more context for the position and use in the tomb is Vigna Codini’s columbarium II. Among the packed ash-chests, several busts depicting the faces of the occupant are deliberately positioned at eye level, facing visitors (Ackers, 2018).

Such life-size and lifelike portraits held particular significance for visitors, especially those who know the dead well. There were many examples of this design in columbaria, where the tombs were positioned with high density in a room, meaning that most visitors who came to the columbaria were associated with one or more of the dead buried in the space and came purposefully to visit particular tombs.

With the busts positioned as mentioned, Romans might come into eye contact with the faces depicted on the busts and even choose to talk to them. For the Romans, the stone figures of their deceased family and friends therefore acted as cues for commemoration. As the cues were visual ones, the effect was especially strong, constantly reminding them of the presence of the dead and their bonds with the dead, therefore consolidating their presence in their minds.

Interactions with a public audience

At first glance: visual constructions and design

In addition to interactions with loved ones, Roman tombs might also be constructed to face the public world, provoking significant interactions with strangers unfamiliar with the dead.

What preceded any in-depth interaction between the epitaphs and the passerby was attracting their attention; in other words, luring audiences to the tombstones. Then the tombstones could convey their contents to the approaching visitor. The visual construction and design of tombs performed both functions: engaging audiences and conveying information.

A competition for attention: position and size

Both the position and size of the tomb played a role in deciding how visible the tomb was and how much attention from viewers it received. The Romans, well aware of this fact, strived to maximize their benefits when they built their own monuments.

Tombs that were intended to draw in a public audience of strangers were consciously constructed in regions with regular streams of travelers, leading to the emergence and widespread usage of roadside tombs. The type of tomb originated from the Greeks, and it later became a popular convention in the Roman empire, especially along major roads. Around the city of Rome, Via Appia was a particularly popular position for tombs because of its prominent status among ancient Roman roads, with thousands of tombs established along it from the Late Republic to the end

of the second century CE. Moreover, clusters of tombs in the suburbs of Rome became organized together into necropolises. Just as a school of fish attracts more attention than an individual, forming necropolises allowed the tombs to become more visible.

Additionally, unlike modern cemeteries, Roman tombs were not strictly separated from other facilities in the suburbs; rather, they were interspersed between shops, inns, villas, etc. in the countryside (Hope, 2009). The fact that the funerary areas coexisted with sites of activities for living inhabitants further increased their chance of being seen.

In terms of size, when tombs in the same area competed for the attention of wayfarers, a larger one stood out among smaller monuments. Size was also a demonstration of the dead's success. It was acknowledged that the larger the tomb, the greater the wealth or status of the deceased. Therefore, the size of the tombs themselves conveyed importance, which attracted the attention of passersby. Larger tombs could also be advantageous for preservation. When, despite the protest and curses from epitaphs, the plots of land were used for other purposes and the tombs removed in later years, it was less likely that a large tomb would be completely demolished.

One of the best examples of ancient tombs that effectively boosted their visibility to visitors using these measures is the tomb of Eurysaces the Baker, a monument built between the Late Republic and the early empire. On first impression, the Baker's tomb is very different from the majority of modest Roman tombs because of its unusual shape. Still, its difference demonstrates the strategic decisions behind the position and size of Roman funerary monuments more generally.

What made the Baker's tomb noticeable in the first place was its highly advantageous position. The plot of land used for the tomb combined many features that allowed it to be passed and therefore seen by more people. It was built at the spot where two major Roman roads—Via Labicana and Praenestina—joined, and between two thoroughways into the city (Petersen, 2003). This special positioning meant that the monument was right at a bustling junction and could be seen by travelers passing along either road, thus maximizing its visibility. To accommodate the angles of view on the two sides offered by this location, unlike regular tombs that faced the road on

only one side and thus contained information on that facade only, the Baker's tomb was built with displays on multiple facades, thus allowing travelers from all sides to perceive its information (Petersen, 2003).

The Baker's tomb was not the only monument that made use of its prominent position. Rather, the tomb was part of a densely packed group of monuments. Its dimensions—approximately ten meters high (Madsen, 2017) and eight meters wide at the widest side of its trapezoid base (Platner, 1929)—greatly benefited it and allowed it to attract more attention, as it was gigantic for a tomb of a non-elite. This size also served a role in its preservation. The monument was integrated with the Aurelian wall centuries later; it was then built into a tower of Porta Praenestina-Labicana, thus destroying the monuments' east façade (Petersen, 2003). However, it is still well preserved compared to the groups of smaller tombs in its proximity. This might be because the tomb is difficult to completely demolish considering its size, to the extent that the builders of the new tower only chose to cover it instead of replacing it, while other tombs have been removed over time.

Telling the story: the meaning of visual designs

Besides its prominent position and size, the Baker's tomb has a strange appearance: its facades consist of circular patterns aligned into a regular grid. The historian and archaeologist Lauren Petersen (2003) states that this contributed to attracting visitors to the monument, as it was distinct from the regular shape of tombs. But she also points out that this appearance held meaning in relation to the Baker's life for passersby who would have been able to understand. This reflects another way visual components of tombs functioned to inform an audience unfamiliar with the dead: instead of developing on textual epitaphs as media, these tombs conveyed memories of the dead to the strangers through visual rhetoric, which would occasionally reference or echo elements of the inscribed information. Compared to texts, visual elements more easily gained notice from travelers, especially those passing by the road in a hurry. They could also be understood more broadly, as reading the text required some degree of literacy, while the information from images could be universally recognized.

The Baker's tomb is an extremely elaborate example of this communication through visual elements. It puts little stress on the textual elements of the monument, including only an extremely brief epitaph that lists Eurysaces and his wife Atistia's identity. Much more effort was put into the tomb's visual component. Beside the monument's sheer size and use of marble to showcase the wealth of the owner, there are also visual symbols that celebrate the occupation of the deceased. Circular recesses resembling kneading machines make up the monument's third story (Petersen, 2003), and a relief on its upper half depicts the entire bread baking process, from the grinding of flour to the selling of the bread (Platner, 1929). These visual elements echo the brief content of the epitaph, stating that Eurysaces was a baker and contractor (Ferraro & Gorla, 2022).

It is clear that through further emphasizing his occupation and success, Eurysaces's tomb attempts to celebrate both his position as a baker and the baking profession as a whole with his name attached to it. As Petersen (2003) suggests, the style of the friezes was probably "a purposeful adaptation of triumphal friezes" found in monuments celebrating military success. Just as military leaders celebrated their success through depicting scenes of military victory, Eurysaces's tomb expressed "a triumph...of bread making" to the audience through friezes with scenes of bread-making (p. 244-245). With the overwhelming stress on baking, this monument encourages the viewer to gain interest in Eurysaces's identity, thus allowing his presence to be remembered for eternity.

Few tombs could match the lavishness and extravagance of the Baker's tomb; however, many smaller, more modest funerary monuments also made use of visual rhetoric with art forms including friezes and reliefs. Some of these tombs used these visual elements to focus on people, rather than occupations. Their reliefs often showed a simple carved figure of the deceased. The young Laberia Auxime, a ten-year-old girl, was depicted on her own gravestone dedicated by her father (Campbell, n.d.). Viewers looking at that figure could get a better understanding of who the girl was in life. Considering how young the girl was at her untimely death—a common but nevertheless sad incident in Roman society—the small figure in the relief powerfully arouses viewers' sympathies and grief over the unfortunate event, thus imprinting the memory about the girl in their minds.

More commonly the reliefs depict relationships between multiple figures, most frequently husband and wife. For example, on the funerary stele of Lucius Aurelius Hermia and his wife Aurelia Philematium, the husband and wife are shown looking at each other (British Museum, n.d.). The figures' intimate gaze creates the impression of strong familial bonds and marital devotion, which demonstrates to viewers the presumably loving relationship between them in life. This sentiment is supported by the inscription of the tomb, which expresses the perspective of both Aurelius Hermia and Aurelia Philematium:

<i>corpore casto, (c)oniunxs una meo</i>	my one and only wife, chaste in body, a loving
<i>praedita amans animo (f)ido fida viro</i>	woman of my heart possessed , lived faithful to
<i>veixsit studio parili qum nulla in avaritie</i>	her faithful man; in fondness equal to her other
<i>cessit ab officio.</i>	virtues, never during bitter times did she shrink
	from loving duties.
<i>vir conleibertus fuit eidem... ree fuit</i>	My man was a fellow-freedman... he was also in
<i>ee vero plus superaue parens.</i>	very truth over and above a father to me. Seven
<i>septem me naatam annorum gremio ipse</i>	years old was I when he, even he, took me in his
recepit (Butini, 2023).	bosom (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

The intention of moving its audience with the devotion between the couple and the untimely loss of the beloved wife was therefore conveyed through the collaboration of both visual and textual information. Moreover, in the image, the wife is bowing her head and kissing her husband's hand. The classicist Judith Sebesta (2011) points out that it is far more common in Roman funerary reliefs for couples to be depicted clasping hands, rather than wives being depicted kissing their husbands' hands. Therefore, she proposes that the unusual action depicted in the relief holds special meaning: it was a display of Aurelia's respect and submission to her spouse, as well as a gesture of goodbye. In addition, I understand this gesture as a play on the wife's personal information, since the accompanying inscription states the wife's name as Philematium, meaning "little kiss." A literate Roman viewer would associate the "kiss" in the inscription with the visual representation of a kiss in the relief, thus forming a deeper impression about the woman named "little kiss" and her devotion to her husband.

Another key element expressed in visual presentations of Roman tombs is the celebration of free status, especially for libertini, freed slaves, who'd gained a limited form of Roman citizenship. This

notion was conveyed through the depicted figures' choice of clothing and the marital relationships. In the friezes from the Baker's tomb, for instance, Eurysaces is depicted wearing a toga, a dress typical of Roman men with citizenship (Petersen, 2003). Similarly, in the relief of Lucius Aurelius Hermia and Aurelia Philematium, the couple wear a toga and a matronal stola with a palla respectively, also clothing typical of Roman citizens (Sebesta, 2011). Another relief portrait showing a couple in Roman citizen dress was excavated from the Baker's tomb's east façade. It might be part of the original tomb, or it might belong to another tomb of a baker next to it. Either way, the portrait likely depicts a freed family (Petersen, 2003). It is noteworthy that both family portraits depict marriage, a relationship only acknowledged legally between Roman citizens. These details from the reliefs show that, though freedmen did not gain full citizenship and were considered as a lower social class, they nevertheless identified themselves, and wanted others to recognize them, as now free members of Roman society. The message was celebrated and conveyed through the choice of dress in all these monuments: any viewers with basic knowledge of Roman citizens' clothing and marriage conventions would understand the connotation of these portraits and what they implied about the social status and values of the dead.

Engaging in converse: calls, demands and good wishes

However, most tombstones were plainer in their appearance and focused instead on the textual element for interacting with strangers. When travelers approached the tombs to take rests from their journey, for example, the inscriptions, which they could see at this closer distance, became essential for conveying the memories of the dead. A significant characteristic of Roman epitaphs on roadside tombs is the address to wayfarers. This strategy dates back to Archaic and Classical Greece, but it was further developed and spread among the epitaphs of the non-elite in Rome (Carroll, 2008). In inscriptions that include this strategy, the text is most commonly composed in the voice of the deceased, but it may also be done in the voice of the tomb's dedicator. Regardless of the identity of the speaker that takes up this first-person narration in the inscription, it creates the effect of "speaking" with the unfamiliar reader; the resulting sense of a personal, conversational connection with

readers then strengthens the memory of the dead that the writers of the epitaph wished to preserve. These direct address inscriptions are often much more varied than the combinations of fixed expressions commonly found in other Roman epitaphs. Lattimore (1962) argues that epitaphs which "address to the wayfarer" show "a rather surprising amount of variety and even originality of expression," allowing them to stand out from the vast majority of Roman themes in epitaphs that are condensed into simple formulae (p. 232).

Indeed, the exact wording of the "speaking" epitaphs differ greatly and multiple expressions were used in individual epitaphs to indicate similar meanings. However, despite these superficial variations, as the Roman archaeologist Maureen Carroll (2008) states, the epitaphs of this type follow an "already fully developed" structure that "continued in use throughout the Imperial period" (p. 50). This underlying logic and basic structure can be broken down into several key components, all of which play an important role in promoting the purpose of the "speaking" epitaphs: building connection with the reader and thus conserving memory.

An opening greeting was usually included at the very beginning of these epitaphs, calling out to the wayfarer and asking them to stop by. There were multiple ways to refer to the reader—stranger (hospes), traveler (viator), passer-by (praeteriens), you who hurry (qui festinas), or whoever reads (quicumque legis). Some of the epitaphs also stated a simple request: for example, asking the reader to stop (resiste), stay (morare), or read (lege) (Carroll, 2008). A single epitaph might integrate many of these greetings and call on the reader repeatedly, as in this 1st century BCE example:

<i>Hospes resiste et hoc ad grumum ad</i>	Stranger, stop and turn your gaze towards this
<i>laevam aspice... Rogo te, viator...</i>	hillock on your left... Wayfarer, I ask you...
(Gabrielli, 2022)	(Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs, n.d.)

Just as orators call to their audiences, epitaphs call to their readers: greeting them to establish an intimate connection. As in orations, the connection formed between the passerby and the dead provides the basis for conveying the content of the epitaph, namely the memory and identity of the dead, as its existence allows for further interaction between the

text and the reader.

Apart from offering an account of the dead's identity and life, the "speaking" epitaphs might further interact with readers. Some attempted to unleash the power of pathos—especially with a sad story of the dead—to leave an emotional impression on the reader. One epitaph describes the mourning of the household for the deceased after his death and, in the voice of the dead, concludes:

<i>Si me vidisses aut si mea <u>funera</u> <u>nosses</u>.</i>	If you had seen me or if you had known of my funeral,
<i>fudisses lacrimas, hospes, in ossa mea</i>	You would have shed tears, stranger, on my bones.
(Meloni, 2020).	

Some attempted to evoke grief of the reader more directly, by telling them to weep.

<i>Quicumque es puero lacrimas effunde</i>	Whoever you are, shed tears for the boy, traveler.
viator (Lupo, 2024).	
<i>Sei quis havet nostro conferre dolore(m)</i>	If anyone cares to add his own grief to ours, here
<i>adsit nec <u>parveis</u> <u>flere</u> <u>quead</u> <u>lachrymis</u></i>	let him be; and with no scanty tears let him
(Ferraro, 2023).	deign to weep (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

It is almost universally understood that weeping is an act of sorrow and in these cases, sympathy for the dead. The emotion is intensified when the deceased are described as youths that died before his time. When the request intertwines feelings with memory, it has the capacity to imprint it deeper in the reader's mind.

Besides asking for tears, there are myriad other demands or requests the epitaphs might address to readers. For example, they might ask readers to not violate the tomb or use the land for other purposes without permission. The same epitaph mentioned above states:

<i>monumento huic nil male feceris...Ex</i>	Do no harm to this memorial...By last will and
<i>testamento, in hoc monumento neminem</i>	testament: it is not permitted to convey into or
<i>inferri neque condi licet nisei eos</i>	bury in this memorial anyone other than those
<i>lib(ertos) quibus hoc testamento dedi</i>	freedmen to whom I have given and bestowed
<i>tribuique</i> (Gabrielli, 2022).	this right by last will and testament (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

These epitaphs thus warned against external forces damaging the tomb marker and thus disrupting its objective of preserving the dead's memory.

The epitaphs might also ask the reader to conduct a simple kind act for the dead, and these requests would be particularly effective if the text assumed the voice of the dead. For example, the epitaph might ask the reader to give a physical offering, such as pouring a libation or leaving flowers:

<i>sit si gratus homo es, misce, bibe, da mi</i>	Let it be that if you are a pleasant man, mix,
(Martino, 2024).	drink and give me (the wine).

Others made requests for non-material actions. For example, they might ask the passerby to read out a formulaic expression, a shortened phrase, as a favor, especially the phrase *sit tibi terra levis* (may the earth be light on you). It is one of the few occasions in which formulae appear in the address to wayfarers. Carroll (2008) noted the prevalence of the formulae *D Q L S T T L* and *T R P D S T T L*—two formulae where the letters present mean, "I ask you to say in passing by 'may the earth be light on you'"—in the "speaking" tombstones of Hispania Baetica and the city of Rome between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. One example from Rome states:

<i>H(ic) c(onditus) e(st); t(e) r(ogo)</i>	He was buried here; I ask you to say passing by:
<i>p(raeteriens) d(icas): s(it) t(ibi) t(erra)</i>	may the earth be light on you.
<i>l(evis)</i> (Carapellucci, 2016).	

The phrase itself and its content are typical of Roman epitaph formulae, which became so commonly used that whether it still contained enough personalized meaning became doubtful; Nevertheless, when the reader does as the epitaph says, the formula's full cultural weight revives temporarily: a kind blessing for the alleviation of the burden on the dead's spirit.

With these requests, the epitaphs convert a one-way communication into a two-way conversation. Through these interactions, they further strengthen the memories of the deceased by reinforcing the connections formed previously with the reader. In return for the favor done, or simply for the readers' willingness to spend time reading the monument's content, many of these epitaphs state the response of the dead to the living. Often, they impart good wishes

for the reader. For example, this epitaph from 140 BCE that Lattimore (1962) identifies as one of the earliest Latin verse epitaphs and therefore one of the earliest cases known of a blessing for the wayfarer's attention, states:

<i>hospes gratum est quom apud</i>	Thank you, my dear guest,
<i>meas restitistei <u>seedes</u>,</i>	for stopping at my abode.
<i>bene rem geras et valeas,</i>	Good luck and good health to you.
<i>dormias sine qura</i> (Licordari, 2022).	Sleep without a care (<i>Latin Inscriptions: Epitaphs</i> , n.d.).

In later times, variations on this theme also occurred. Some include blessings for the reader's journey, since many of the audience members for these epitaphs were travelers:

<i>salvi eatis, salvi redeatis, et</i>	May you advance safely, may you return safely,
<i>vos qui me coronatis vel flores</i>	and you who crown me or often throw flowers to
<i>iacatis multis, annis faciat^{is} (C.</i>	many, may you make it for years!
Gabrielli, 2024)!	

Or epitaphs might include a simple parting greeting that also imparted a wish for health and good luck:

Vale, salve (Crimi, 2017). Be well, goodbye!

These benevolent wishes in exchange for the reader's simple actions make it seem as if the voice of the dead is bribing the reader in exchange for remembrance of the dead's presence.

Some other inscriptions assume the role of an experienced tutor and give their advice to the living, on matters as trivial as the type of wine to drink to greater issues like their love lives (Carroll, 2008). The gravest of these are lessons on life and death. They warn the living about the brevity of life, the inevitability of death, and the oblivion after death. They remind the traveler that they will one day join the deceased as a heap of bones, dust and ashes, as in these two epitaphs inscribed on the same ash-chest:

<i>Quod fuit <u>hoc</u> sumus, quod nunc iacet</i>	What this was we now are, what lies here now
<i>hoc erimus.</i>	we will be.
<i>Tamen omnia mors adimet tibi, alius tuis</i>	Yet death will take away everything from you,
<i>dominus bonis et possessor erit et ille</i>	and another would be the master and owner for
<i>tamen morietur. Nihil perpetuum natura</i>	your good things and yet he would die. Nature
<i>dedit mortalibus</i> (Gregori, 2019).	gave nothing lasting to mortals.

Lattimore (1962) states that such epitaphs could help console the grieving by reminding them of the philosophical potent concept that death awaits them all. The first epitaph quoted above is one such example, as this precedes the statement:

<i>Ultima dum <u>requies</u> fatis me <u>traxerit</u> ad</i>	While the last requiem has drawn me to more by
<i>plures,</i>	fate,
<i>ubi nemo est, ne lacrumate meos cineres</i>	where there's no one, do not weep on my ashes,
<i>et vos</i>	and load yourselves
<i>onerate mero et dicite: homo bellus abit</i>	with unmixed wine, and say: a fine man goes
(Gregori, 2019).	away.

Meanwhile, Lattimore (1962) singles out the epitaphs that reminds the readers of their mortality without an explicit aim of consoling the grieving as similar to the "malignant types" in modern epitaphs that express hostility towards the living (p. 257). Yet, I maintain that, despite seeming grim on its surface, this philosophical lesson of memento mori—even without direct consolation—usually expresses a positive message that people should live life to the fullest before their ultimate end. This notion often coexists with and is magnified by the pessimistic lesson, as suggested by what follows the second epitaph on the ash-chest mentioned previously:

Dum licet utamur (Gregori, 2019)! Let us enjoy (life) while it is permitted!

This life lesson linked with the knowledge of inevitable death might play a role in the convention of preserving memory and fame itself: that living one's years fully with virtue and accomplishments—according to these epitaphs' implicit carpe diem message—would not only bring happiness and satisfaction in life, but also leave more memories worth commemorating after death.

Overall, the giving of lessons appears to be a phenomenon that specifically occurs in epitaphs using the voice of the deceased, as a friendly wish for the reader to capture the joys of life that the dead can no longer experience. Interestingly, these lessons are usually expressed with an ardent tone characterized by an abundance of imperatives and hortatory subjunctives, as if the dead wanted the living to enjoy the things they cherished for them. The writers of the epitaphs might have hoped to convey wisdom to living readers, so that those readers might remember the dead whenever applying their advice.

Those components, in addition to the essential content of all epitaphs and supplied with personal variations in use, form the countless varieties of epitaphs addressing the wayfarer. Considering that reading the inscription out loud was the norm in ancient Rome, the reader would mimic a real, voiced recount of the “speaker” when facing an epitaph. This reading habit holds particular significance when the epitaph is written in the dead’s voice. In such circumstances, the reader “assumes the voice of the deceased” and thus “returns the power of speech to the deceased” (Carroll, 2008, p. 54). In this manner, the dead are revived for a brief moment, allowing them to live on in the memory of the reader.

Convergence of private and public commemoration in the Parentalia

The Romans held multiple festivals in memory of the dead, among which the Parentalia was the most important: an official festival lasting nine days, from 13th to 21st of February. The first few days were for private rituals among the family; the last day, the Feralia, was a day reserved for ceremonies of commemoration in public. Ovid states in his *Fasti* that the name of the last day came from the Latin word *ferre* (to bring). Though this is likely not etymologically correct (King, 2020), Feralia indeed was when people brought offerings, decorated, and dined by the tombs of their deceased family and friends, activities that occurred throughout the Parentalia but reached a climax on the particular day (Dolansky, 2011). Though commemoration activities in the Parentalia were still largely conducted by people with intimate social bonds to the deceased, they also facilitated the process of strangers interacting with tombs, making the festival’s function in memory preservation a double process.

As the historian Fanny Dolansky (2011) pointed out, when the Romans set out to their destinations during the Parentalia, the first significant change they would notice compared to most days outside the festival was how the tombs they encountered on the way were cleaned and adorned. The major offerings that contributed to this brand-new appearance were flowers. The Romans favored flowers, commonly roses and violets, in the cults of the dead; Roses in particular were so deeply connected with funerary traditions that the festival Rosalia

became an occasion for scattering these flowers on graves. For people who gave flowers as offerings and decorations, they held the meaning of eternal spring (Toynbee, 1971) and memory of the spirits’ living presence (Lattimore, 1962). For people passing by, the crimson roses were visually appealing, thus attracting more attention to the graves.

Another important custom during the Parentalia was graveside dining. During the festival, family and friends gathered around the tombs of the deceased they knew and had feasts. It was believed, according to Ovid, that the spirits of the dead wandered in the living’s world during the festival:

<i>nunc animae tenues et corpora functa</i>	Now do the unsubstantial souls and buried dead
<i>sepulcris</i>	wander about,
<i>errant, nunc posito pascitur umbra cibo.</i>	now doth the ghost batten upon his dole (Ovid’s
	<i>Fasti</i> - With an English Translation, 1931).

Therefore, dining by the grave during the festival could be equated to sharing a meal with the dead, strengthening bonds between the living and their deceased loved ones. For a stranger passing by the tomb, the preparation and consumption of food by a group of people added to the amount and diversity of sensory stimuli and therefore attracted more attention. When these passersby were attracted, either by the flowers or by the feasts, they’d then read the epitaphs on the tombs, thus taking on the memory of the deceased as well.

In addition, the scale of the offerings or the feasts could convey information about the dead, just as the size of monuments showcased their owners’ financial success: if a tomb hosted large feasts with diverse food offerings, it was likely that the dead had been quite rich (Dolansky, 2011).

Moreover, the Parentalia was a festival of great importance and of nearly universal participation in the Roman world, which meant that nearly every tomb would receive visitors to perform rituals. Especially on the last day Feralia, offerings were conducted simultaneously to end the festival. Areas with densely packed tombs, such as necropolises, would be bustling and crowded on these days, filled with people visiting and commemorating the dead. Thus, during the Feralia, as the art historian Regina Gee (2008) states, those who encountered the tombs

were probably not random passersby, but part of a community that had one of their relatives' or friends' tombs located nearby. The density of the crowd during the Feralia brought this community together: while Romans were honoring the tombs of their own loved ones, they would likely catch sight of the activity at tombs nearby, which might encourage them to visit these tombs as well and learn about the dead from their inscriptions. In turn, the monuments they commemorated themselves would receive unfamiliar readers from other tombs. The result was a mutual preservation of the memories of the dead.

Conclusion

Death and facing the emotions surrounding death have been the concerns of countless civilizations, and the Romans were no exception. On the Greek notion of long-lasting fame and memory as a path to immortality after death, the Romans made many developments of their own. While the elite Roman writers, about whom scholars know the most through their preserved works, sought grand accomplishments such as renown in literature as their eternal monument, the non-elite recognized and applied similar ideas with the approach of preserving and communicating memories on tombstones—one of the few types of sources that recorded Roman life in their perspectives and thus reflected their consciousness of this version of an afterlife to modern scholars. The methods to achieve this goal surrounding the funerary monument were incredibly diverse, utilizing both visual and textual elements, facing the private relations of the dead, a public audience, or both.

People who knew the dead personally in life and sometimes the deceased themselves were responsible for devising and dedicating the images of the dead, defining their existence in posterity. A variety of aspects were sought in the process to polish such images. After the construction of the tomb, families were also responsible for its maintenance with frequent private visits and thus prolong the tombs' function of preserving memories.

For tombs that were built with additional features facing strangers, the elements of the tombs utilized were more extensive. To attract that audience and tempt them to examine the information, these Roman tombs competed for more prominent positions

and strived for more visible sizes. When the passersby stopped in their steps to view the tomb's details, visual and textual elements conveyed the memories they contain to them and strengthened those memories. The two fields—personal commemoration and remembrance from a public audience—were combined in the Roman festival of Parentalia, especially on the last day of Feralia.

Given how profoundly the Western culture is shaped by the Roman tradition, it is not surprising that the Roman perception of death and their approaches to it were also inherited by modern Western society: "To live on in memory" is still a piece of consolation that lingers on many people's lips, graveyards reminiscent of the roadside necropolises are still widely distributed, and tombstones constructed with either elaborate visual design or sincere pieces of epitaphs are highlighted by visitors on social networks. Therefore, the funerary monuments of the Roman non-elite were not merely a window to the past and a view of life and death shared by the Roman society, it was also an insight into what lies behind the funerary traditions in the contemporary Western world.

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