

Death and Burial - Roman

Key Terms

Funeral club : a social club set up to support the less wealthy members of Roman society

Atrium—the main room of the Roman domus where the family received friends and clients

Funerary mask : a mask made by placing wax on the deceased face to take their image. When it was dry it was removed and stored in the family shrine

Manes : meaning 'the deified ancestors', these were the spirits of the dead in the Roman world



A

Key Knowledge

It was incredibly important that the dead were treated with respect and that everyone, no matter their social status or wealth, received a proper burial.

Like the Greeks it was important to the Romans that the final resting place of the deceased was outside the city to remove religious pollution and reduce risk of disease. In Roman towns, the wealthy were buried in tombs along roads that led into the city or town, which allowed passers-by to pay their respects.

Wealth and Status

As in many aspects of Roman life, status and wealth were important. The same was true in death. Wealthy families would invest heavily in the funerals of their dead with this in mind, the vast majority of our evidence for funerals comes from the rich. However, the majority of the Roman population were working-class citizens, freedmen and slaves. These people did not always have the spare cash or social connections to spend on a funeral and so they sought other ways of ensuring that they were provided for in death. The main option open to the less wealthy were funeral clubs. Those who could afford it would pay a monthly fee to join the club. The club met for meals and gatherings, giving members an opportunity of making social connections. Frequently, workers of the same trade would set up their own clubs, such as the baker's guild or blacksmith's guild. As the names suggest, these were open only to those craftsmen. Upon the death of one of its members, the club would pay for a funeral and provide mourners to ensure the deceased was not forgotten. In the case of larger clubs, members may be buried in a club tomb or burial ground.

Preparation of the body

Much of Roman burial practice was similar to that of the Greeks. If possible, just before the moment of death a relative would capture the last breath of the person with a kiss. If at home those present would then call out the deceased's name. If the person died unaccompanied, this would be done ceremonially afterwards. The body was washed and perfumed then dressed in the deceased's finest clothes. A coin was then placed on the mouth of the deceased to pay the ferryman Charon

If the family was wealthy, the body would then be placed in the atrium for eight days. This would give friends and relatives a chance to pay their respects. During this time the women of the house would lament the deceased while beating their chests.

Funerary procession

The funeral would take place eight days after death and involve a variety of people, including flute and horn players, the deceased's family, slaves and freedmen. Members of the family would wear wax funerary masks of the family ancestors. This was done to symbolise the acceptance of the deceased into the afterlife by their ancestors. If a family was wealthy but small, they would pay for professional mourners to join the procession, mourning and lamenting the dead. Wealthy families would also pay for actors to mimic the deceased as they were in life.

Burial of the body

Once outside the city the body would be either buried or cremated. The Romans followed the same custom as the Greeks with their cremations and burials. Again, the family's wealth determined the size of the tomb. A wealthy person could expect to be buried in the family tomb or an individual monument. The Romans built their tombs along the roads that ran into a town; this ensured the deceased would be remembered. It also meant that people avoided uniformity as they wanted their tomb to stand out. Figure 1 shows one of the main streets that led into Pompeii. The street is lined with tombs that resemble homes and temples. The super-rich would also place their dead in elaborately carved sarcophagi. These would contain reliefs of mythological battles and heroes. Once the dead were buried they were not to be forgotten. To ensure the family member was correctly honoured, a marble bust would be made and placed in the house. The Romans believed that they turned into Manes. They needed to be fed and the deceased's family were expected to leave food and wine offerings at their tomb.

Festivals

The Parentalia

The Parentalia took place over nine days between the 13 and 21 February. During this time people were not permitted to marry, temples were closed and no official business was allowed to take place. Apart from a blood sacrifice by a Vestal Virgin on the first day, the Parentalia was a domestic festival, that is, one centred on the family rather than the State. These offerings were taken to the tombs of the deceased during the first eight days of the festival. On the ninth day the family would meet and share a meal in the home. This gave them an opportunity to undo any wrongs that had taken place.

The Lemuria

The Lemuria was held over three days in May: the 9th, 11th and 13th. Like the Parentalia, people were not permitted to marry, temples were closed and no official business was allowed to take place. Unlike the Parentalia, which was aimed at honouring the family's deceased ancestors, the Lemuria was held to ward off evil spirits.

Possible Questions

1. Source A depicts a funerary procession. Identify two types of participants in this procession. (2)
2. a. Describe where the dead were carried to before they were buried or cremated.(2)
- b. What does this suggest about Roman attitudes to the dead? (1)

Sources

Prescribed

Further

None

Roman sarcophagi