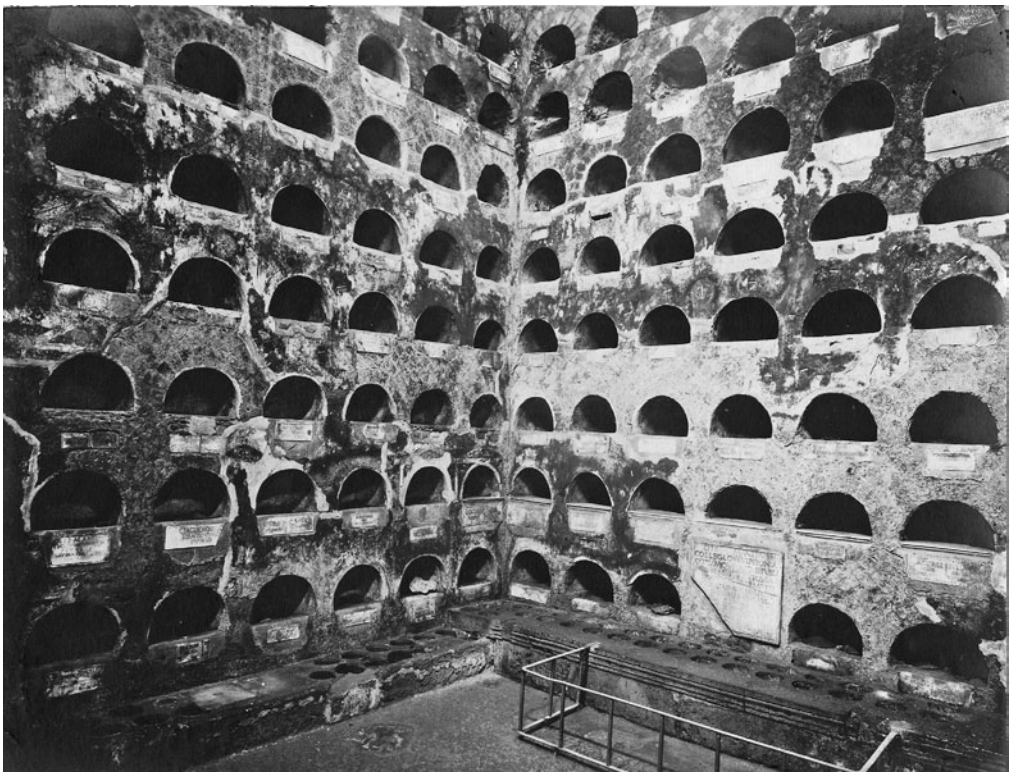
INTRODUCTION

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 Puteoli. 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.

1. Columbarium 1 in the Vigna Codini: central pier. Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma.

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]



2. Columbarium 2 in the Vigna Codini: south and east walls. American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive.

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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6] 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 canonic historical reconstruction, any revision of which requires a fresh analysis of concrete remains.[7]

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.[8] 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.[9]

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.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12]

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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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.[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.[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.[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.[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 *romanità* but also nicely illustrates its suitability to express collective notions.[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.[24] 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.[25] The Augustan program was no systematical 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.[26] 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.[27] 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.[28] 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 funerary 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.[29]