

Roman law called for the burial of bodies so that "no bone showed through the ground". Whether bodies were burnt to ashes or buried uncremated, this practice was necessary to cut the dead off from the heavenly gods and to consign the deceased to their proper zone, the underworld. In the countryside burials were scattered and isolated, but in the cities the grave areas were more concentrated. Often the grave zones ran for miles along major highways, beginning at the city walls. Some tombs even contained benches on which travellers could rest while reading the epitaph, the grave inscription. Sometimes cities had one or more necropolis, or city of the dead, just outside its walls, with proper streets and avenues, and tombs of the dead (instead of houses of the living) lining its boulevards. The elaborate tombs of the wealthy were quite prominent in these necropoleis, just as the monuments of the rich are in our own cemeteries.

The Romans of the early republic both burned (cremation) and buried (inhumation) their dead, reflecting the complex racial inheritance of the Roman people; but by the late republic most corpses were burned. The Cornelian family, however, clung to the rite of inhumation, while the poor and unidentified were thrown unburned into open trenches in the civic garbage area. Because burial was so important many poorer Romans joined burial societies which gave them, in return for small regular contributions, social companionship throughout life with fellow members and a cheap, but decent burial upon retirement from this life. With the high cost of modern burials there has understandably been some revival of this ancient practice.

By the second century A.D. the burning of the body and the gathering of ashes or burnt bones and ashes into cinerary (ash filled) urns or chests began to give way to burial in a coffin, a capulus. For those who could afford them, elaborately carved stone sarcophagi became the vogue. If the body of the deceased could not be found (lost at sea for instance) then a dummy would often be buried in a cenotaph. The tomb would act as a centre for the family's religious practices toward the dead. Drink and food offerings poured onto the ground, rather than our flowers, were common tributes to the departed at grave sites.

Tombs themselves differed widely according to period and were also dependent upon the wealth and social class of the dead. The poor might have to put up with a simple hole in the ground with no subterranean structure, and only an upright stone or perhaps a large jar to mark the spot. In slightly more elaborate burials the ash-filled clay pot or glass jar would be placed, together with some inexpensive grave-goods, in a tile or brick box, and a stele, or tombstone with a brief inscription, raised over the site. For an inhumation of little cost the body would be laid in the earth and covered with curving roof-tiles, or laid out in a rough, narrow chamber of crude stone.

For the wealthy, more elaborate structures were the norm, one of the most famous of which is the tomb of the Scipios, just off the Appian Way, south of Rome. The tomb complex is dominated by a building which has within it a number of galleries with burial niches (loculi) on either side into which stone sarcophagi would be inserted. This is very much like our mausoleums. Quite often these wealthy tombs were elaborate affairs, shaped like altars or small temples, and able to contain many burials of the same family. They were enclosed by a wall and often had gardens surrounding them with trees and flowers; there were wells and cisterns, benches for visitors, and sometimes even a small dining building for commemorative meals in honour of the deceased. The whole pleasant

complex would resemble in miniature the Elysian Fields of the afterlife which, again, is something which the best of our cemeteries try to recapture with their rolling lawns and neatly tended evergreens.

The columbarium was a different kind of tomb, one especially favoured by the burial societies, and often provided by the wealthy for their slaves, clients and freedmen. The tomb is completely or partially subterranean and has in its walls hundreds of circular or rectangular holes for cinerary urns or chests, thus the name columbarium or "dove pen".

Of Roman graves the most impressive were the great tumuli, grave mounds of Roman rulers starting with Augustus. These were modeled on the circular, subterranean, Etruscan tombs which resembled conventionalized living quarters complete with sleeping shelves for the eternally resting. Only the rounded, earthen top of the Etruscan tomb was prominent on ring-walls of masonry. This is essentially the form which Augustus copied for his own and his family's final resting place, making the whole edifice on a lavish scale, 87 meters in diameter and 45 meters from floor to crown, with a statue of the emperor on the apex. Some restorations show the rounded, circular crown of the earthen top planted with cypress trees, the trees of the dead. Related by descent from this type of structure is the more complex, all stone and masonry Mausoleum of Hadrian (died 138 A.D.); this great cylinder, 64 meters in diameter, still stands as one of Rome's great classical monuments, although taken over by the popes in the middle ages and now known as the Castello di San Angelo.

Romans of a single family would often bury their dead in underground passages, sometimes up to three levels deep. The early Christians collectively, as a community, used the same practice, and their graves were called catacombs. They appear to be more irregular in design with haphazard galleries over a wide area and with a number of levels. Usually the poorer Christians were inhumed (not cremated) here in loculi, with some side passages set apart for the better off among them. Paintings and sculptures of a religious nature often decorated these networks.

I should like to close this account with an inscription from a Roman tomb which exemplifies the light sleep of those who even in death are anxious for their security:

*Gaius Tullius Hesper made for himself  
this altar in which his bones are to  
be placed. If anyone disturbs them or  
removes them from here I pray that he  
may, while alive, endure prolonged  
pains of the body and that, when he  
dies, the gods of the lower world  
will reject him.*