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Roman Columbarium Tombs and Slave Identities

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Abstract: This chapter explores the social identities of slaves through ancient material culture in order to articulate the relationship between ancient and modern slavery. This case study centers on columbarium tombs, collective burial monuments in the city of Rome used during the early imperial period (first century C.E.). Columbaria feature numerous funerary inscriptions, many of which unmistakably identify the deceased as having been a slave or freed slave. The transparency of this information is deceptive since these texts were subject to choice and social convention. However, the choice in wording reveals the voices of slaves and offers glimpses of their social identities. What emerges is that slaves and freedmen used collective burial to reinforce social communities, whereas their descendants tended to assimilate more seamlessly into mainstream society. The evidence illustrates some of the idiosyncrasies of ancient Mediterranean slavery, which leads me to caution against a literal transposition of concepts between studies of ancient and modern slavery. At the same time, there are fundamental similarities that expose rather timeless qualities of slavery. At the most basic level, this case study demonstrates the potential of material culture to overcome the relative silence surrounding slaves and manumitted slaves.

It has recently been observed that “the archaeology of Roman slavery is clearly in the doldrums,” in part because it tends to limit itself to demonstrate the presence of slaves and disregard the question of their experiences. The pervasive conviction that slaves are “archaeologically invisible” has discouraged Classical archaeologists from more deliberately developing an appropriate methodology...
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(Webster 2005:162, 163, 165). If this is the state of the field, it may seem that the kind of cross-fertilization that this volume seeks to establish can only become a one-way street in which Old World archaeologists can learn from the methodological toolkit developed in the New World but offer little in return. I hope to show that this is not necessarily the case by highlighting the close connection between material culture and textual sources that tends to characterize Classical archaeology. This connection can be a disadvantage: If texts are prioritized over material culture, the result may be limited to confirming the one through the other. It can, however, also be an opportunity: The rich and unique epigraphic culture of the Roman Empire that is at the heart of my discussion allows us to push beyond simply determining the presence of slaves and freed slaves and to explore their social identities. On the one hand, these material remains reveal timeless consequences of enslavement that also apply in other historical contexts, but at the same time, some of their characteristics reflect idiosyncrasies of slavery in the Roman world.

The trends in recent scholarship on slaves in the ancient Mediterranean are to highlight analogies between slavery in Classical and later times or to explore the theoretical framework of research on New World slavery for inspiration. A case in point is Monika Trümper’s recent study of Greco-Roman slave markets that begins with a survey of slave markets across space and time, which fulfills the methodological goal of answering “the question of whether purpose-built slave markets existed” (Trümper 2009:2). Ian Morris takes similar inspiration from archaeological studies of New World slave burials and compares the gradual cultural assimilation they seem to exhibit with the “low archaeological distinctiveness” of ancient Greek burials of probable slaves (Morris 2011:187–188; similar approaches are taken by Bell and Ramsby 2012:1; Urbainczyk 2008:1–9; Wickramasinghe 2005:94–96). Jane Webster has developed perhaps the most sustained application of the framework used to study slavery in the New World to the ancient evidence. Taking inspiration from “Africanisms” in the American archaeological record, Webster proposes identifying roundhouses in contexts of Roman large-scale farms as “slave-built plantation houses” that retained the form of preconquest vernacular architecture (Webster 2005:174). Juxtaposing the evidence for and methodologies used to study ancient and early modern slavery, Webster calls for a more active search for the material signatures of Roman slaves and suggests that slaves in Roman Britain may have formed an “internal diaspora” in which enslaved natives sometimes remained in their homeland but became subjected to an external dominant culture (2011:54–57).

Webster’s work reveals the need to include the ancient world in the cross-fertilization between subfields in the archaeology of slavery. As with every bold exploration of new theoretical ground, this proposal is not without problems, however. The most obvious one is the ever-looming problem of identifying slaves through “material correlates” (Morris 2011:179). Webster argues convincingly against the idea that slaves are “archaeologically invisible” (2005:63), but searching for elusive evidence for slaves runs the risk of circular reasoning (Morris 2011:177, 189). For example, the methodology Webster proposes to “quite confidently” attribute material culture to slaves based on the presence of “servile” first names (2005:60) pushes the boundary of overconfidence in the demographic reliability...
of epigraphic data. While names like Felix, Prima, or Onesimus were common in certain locations (e.g., Solin 1996), their popularity does not necessarily make them reliable indicators of servility since these names may easily have been passed down in manumitted families to freeborn generations. Studies of slave names in the New World (Burnard 2001; Cody 1987; Handler and Jacoby 1996; Inscoe 1983) attest to that phenomenon and also suggest that distinctive slave names (e.g., African or Classical ones) are not typically in the majority.

Another cautionary point I would add about cross-fertilization that depends on and aims at universalist qualities is to guard against a too literal translation of concepts. The concept of “internal diaspora” borrowed from studies of the Pacific world may work when discussing Roman Britain and perhaps other fringe areas of the Roman Empire where imperial pressure constituted an external force. The Mediterranean basin, however, had long been exposed to a normative material culture in Greek and Roman states, which makes it difficult to distinguish between cultural adaptation by free and unfree agents. For example, that the burial customs of (probable) slaves in the Lavreotiki look so similar to local burial customs may simply result from the “partial hellenisation of material culture all around the Mediterranean” (Morris 2011:188). In the end, I applaud and echo the plea for a more sustained theoretical approach to the material culture of slavery in the ancient world but add the cautionary reminder to take care not to overstate analogies and not to underrate the deficiencies of the available evidence.

This chapter presents a case study that draws on uniquely ancient Mediterranean material in order to explore the social identities and experiences of slaves. The central body of evidence is furnished by columbarium tombs, collective burial monuments in the city of Rome used during the time of the early Roman Empire (first century C.E.). The significance of this material has been overlooked so far (Borbonus 2014). Columbarium tombs have produced an unusually high number of funerary inscriptions that provide more abundant legal status information than any other context. Even though they offer the relative luxury of securely identifying slaves and freed slaves, evaluating this evidence is still fraught with difficulty, especially when it comes to quantitative analysis. The architecture of columbaria and their collective nature, on the other hand, offer a brief but unique insight into the lives of their occupants. What emerges, perhaps predictably, is that there are both similarities and differences between Roman slaves and freedmen and slaves and freedmen from other historical contexts. In a more general sense, a loss of identity and the ensuing social strategy to reestablish a meaningful identity appear to be rather timeless characteristics of slavery. In a more specific sense, the diminished correlation between ethnicity and slavery and the participation of both slave owners and many slaves in the same cultural conglomerate of the Mediterranean seem like idiosyncrasies of slavery in the Roman Empire.

Two areas of research about slavery in the New World are suited to draw comparative links with the material presented here—namely, the material culture of slave burial and the naming practices for slaves. Archaeological discussions of slave burial in the New World tend to revolve around the retention of West African cultural traits and what this retention indicates about the identity of slaves. Mortuary practices—such as night burials, the burial of food with the deceased
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(Genovese 1972:197–198), and house burials of children (Jamieson 1995:46–51)—may reflect the simple observance of traditional activities or the outright resistance against the imposition of external cultural norms (Shia 2011:23). Whatever is true, these “Africanisms” gradually disappeared over time, whereas Euro-American traditions—such as burial orientation with the head toward the West or the use of coffins—proliferated, with the result that African American burials often became “indistinguishable from the burials of any other ethnic group in America” (Jamieson 1995:54; see also Handler and Lange 1978:171–215). The overall pattern of retention followed by disappearance probably reflects the general dynamic of gradual assimilation, but the details of this process and its reconstruction are subject to considerable debate (for representative examples of this debate, see Emerson 1999; Ferguson 1992; Mouer et al. 1999; Posnansky 1999). Aside from the precise reasons for retention and assimilation, what remains is the importance of burial ceremonies for slaves who could feel “like a human community” (Genovese 1972:195). Even if the nature and extent to which the bereaved could mourn depended on the benevolence or fears of slave owners, burial was a social event that expressed the ties within and collective hopes of a community. The correlation between funerals and slave resistance, or suspicion thereof, suggests that mortuary customs directly related to the social consciousness of enslaved African Americans, and confirms that they were “active historical agents in opposition to the dominant culture” (Burrell and Andrien 1997).

Slave naming, the other area that is of theoretical significance for the topic of this chapter, underwent a development that resembles that of burial practices but reflects a slightly different reality because of the influence of slave owners on naming. Originally, slave names in the Americas were quite different from those of the slave-owning planter population: They featured Classical names, English place names, and African names; African naming practices (such as day names); and naming after kinship on both paternal and maternal lines. Over time, African names, Classical names, and place names declined in use, whereas biblical names and common English names increased in concert with the Christianization process among slaves, and kinship naming shifted more exclusively to the paternal line. The biggest change came with the end of slavery, when most ex-slaves took familiar and common Anglo-American first and last names. Opinions once again diverge when it comes to explaining this pattern, especially in regard to where the agency to slave naming lies. If slaves were relatively free to choose their names, the dynamic behind the chronological pattern would be an acculturation similar to that observed with burials (Cody 1987; Handler and Jacoby 1996:724–726). If names were assigned by slave owners, however, distinctive slave names would represent a conscious attempt to isolate slaves onomastically (Burnard 2001). The reality probably lies between these two extremes (Genovese 1972:446; Inscoe 1983). Overall, the changes in naming practice reveal the changing relationship between the slave community and the slave-owning planter population. The converging name pool reflects the gradual (if incomplete) disappearance of categorical divisions between both populations, whereas the greater emphasis on families, and especially on the male line, reflects the increasing importance of emphasizing agnatic ancestry at the cost of a wider collective identity.
Evidence and Interpretation

The following case study considers the funerary culture of slaves and freedmen in the city of Rome; my specific focus is on the tombstones that were recovered from columbarium tombs (Figure 15-1). These subterranean chambers accommodated numerous cremation burials in terracotta urns that were built into the wall in pairs and accessed through arched niches. Because they resemble the somewhat smaller nesting niches for domestic pigeons, they were called *columbaria*, or dovecotes. Columbarium tombs appeared in Rome during the reign of the first emperor, Augustus (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.). Their distinctive architectural blueprint was only in use for a short time, however, and already a generation or two after their appearance they were gradually replaced by aboveground tombs. The chronological coincidence with the transition from republic to empire, one of the most important watersheds of Roman history, suggests that these tombs are products of distinctive historical conditions. Their peculiar physical properties reverse those of all other Roman tombs, which suggests that the social position and identity of their occupants was atypical. The tombstones that identified individual burials within the tomb chamber confirm that implication: They reveal a majority of slaves and freed slaves who sometimes formed tight-knit communities. Exploring social identities through these tombstones may seem "less archaeological" than focusing solely on artifacts without writing (e.g., Morris 2011:176). I would argue, however, that inscriptions have both textual and physical dimensions and occupy an intermediary position between conventional historical texts and purely material artifacts. They do not provide as much specific detail as the textual sources do, but they have the definite advantage of sidestepping the filter of aristocratic writing that characterizes ancient texts.

The paternalistic notions about slaves and freedmen that permeate ancient sources also characterize the standard interpretation of columbarium tombs in the archaeological literature. A common thread in this interpretation is the emphasis on aristocratic agency and on nonelite inertia. The potency of the Roman elite has been a central interest of antiquarians and scholars since the earliest excavations of columbaria. Publications of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries treat their tombstones as little more than supplements to conventional narratives about Rome's leading families (e.g., Bianchini 1727; Brizio 1876; Campana 1840; Gori 1727). In light of such origins, it does not surprise that the more recent discourse continues to assert that powerful aristocrats built columbarium tombs to provide for their slaves and freedmen and to satisfy their ostentation (Hasegawa 2005:7, 29; Purcell 1987:38–40). Whenever the actual occupants of columbarium tombs are considered, the focus tends to be on the imperfection of their social position and their tombs. For example, the architectural design of columbarium tombs is typically described in terms of its limitations: the large number, small size, and reiteration of visually uniform burial niches seem to imply that the sole aim of columbarium tombs was to store human remains (Caldelli and Ricci 1999:66; Hasegawa 2005:4; Hopkins 1983:211–217; Parri 1998:54). This reading assumes that columbarium occupants would have rather chosen a different kind of burial but instead passively relied on elite benefaction. The tombstones that identify individual burials...
Figure 15-1. Burial niches and tombstones in the Columbarium 1 of the Vigna Codini, Via Appia, Rome. (Photograph by Dorian Borbonus.)
have also been interpreted in terms of what they fail to do: Most of them do not specify the legal status of the deceased. The popular interpretation that slaves and freedmen tried to conceal their inferiority by withholding their lower status (Duff 1928:5–8, 56–57; Frank 1916; Hasegawa 2005:79–80; Taylor 1961) assumes that they accepted and endorsed the social stigma associated with their status group. The predetermined and circular nature of this argument is revealed by the fact that it can be turned upside down with much the same result. For example, Dexheimer expresses surprise when freedmen “unashamedly specify their status” (2000:81).

These observations may actually have some plausibility, but altogether the sole focus on the shortcomings of slaves and freedmen and the material culture that is associated with them produces a rather one-sided interpretation. Its tendency to idealize elite agency and exaggerate nonelite incapacity is not entirely a product of modern scholarship but results from the perhaps unsuspecting adoption of the perspective that ancient texts provide. The most famous example may be Petronius’s hyperbolic inflation of the fictional wealthy freedman Trimalchio, who breaches numerous rules of etiquette and thereby reinforces the stereotype of the successful but uncultivated newcomer. Distrust of successful freedmen was a popular theme in Roman literature and was usually directed at spectacularly successful figures, like freedmen in the imperial administration, whose motives and maneuvers occupy many ancient commentaries, such as Tacitus’s *Annals.*

Given the positivistic reliance of nineteenth-century historical research on the canonical texts, it is perhaps not too surprising that notions of “servile” dishonesty and ignorance found their way into the historical discourse and led interpretations of the material remains concerning slaves and freed slaves in predictable directions. In this context, columbarium tombs and their tombstones acquire a whole new significance; they allow for a correction of this trend because they add a distinctly nonelite perspective and allow for an exploration of the “subjective, embodied experience of enslavement” in Rome during the Augustan period (Marshall, introduction to this volume:2).

**Inscriptions and Identities**

The vocabulary of Roman tombstones (Figure 15-2) allowed the relatively full description of someone’s life and achievements. Initial hints are encapsulated in the elements of Roman names, consisting of praenomen (first name), nomen (family name), and cognomen (surname). The nomen could signify affiliation with one of the powerful aristocratic clans of Rome or the lack of such an affiliation. Another element of Roman names is filiation that articulates a family line by providing the name of the father. Slaves and freedmen could not name a father because legally they did not have one; instead, their names specify pseudofiliation that provides the name of their owner or former owner. Aside from the name formula, Roman tombstones often specify additional personal information, such as age at death, length of marriage, profession, military rank, public position, or the name and relationship of the commemorator who set up the inscription. These data offer both a methodological limitation and an opportunity: They cannot be
used for accurate demographic reconstructions because the information provided in the text was subject to choice and social convention. However, the construction of a social persona on a tombstone reveals a voice behind the few facts of life that were immortalized in stone.

The legal status of individuals as recorded on their tombstones illustrates both the limitations and the opportunities that are inherent in the data. Legal status was one of the fundamental factors that determined one’s position in Roman society, and changes in legal status could be preconditions for social mobility. On funerary inscriptions from columbaria (Figure 15-3), freedmen constitute the most prominent legal-status group, whereas freeborn individuals and slaves are less common. The low count of slaves is partially a result of my practice to record only information that is actually on the tombstone; there are numerous inscriptions in which “servus” (slave) is clearly implied, but they do not contribute to the slave count on this graph. Taking this phenomenon into account, it is possible to reconstruct that slaves and ex-slaves constituted a minimum of 47 percent of the population in columbaria and, hence, probably constituted the majority (Borbonsus 2014:121). The epigraphic evidence thus clearly demonstrates that columbaria were primarily used by slaves and freed slaves, which may be the most direct correlation of material remains to people who have experienced servitude that we can hope to establish (cf. Marshall, introduction to this volume). The usefulness of the epigraphic evidence for demographic reconstructions is, however, severely limited by the number of inscriptions that do not specify legal status at all. Much ink has been spilled about the actual status of those who do not specify it, but the lack of information ultimately highlights the limitations of epigraphic evidence for demographic reconstruction (e.g., Maier 1954:342–344).

Perhaps the more interesting question is, what guided the choice to commemorate or omit legal status in the first place? Given the centrality of legal status in Roman society, its omission from funerary inscriptions may come as a surprise, leading modern commentators to conclude that most of those who failed to specify
their status were, in fact, slaves or ex-slaves who tried to conceal their “dishonorable” status (Duff 1928:56–57; Frank 1916:691–693; Hasegawa 2005:79–80). The chronological development of the formula on Roman epitaphs undermines this interpretation, however. During the late first century B.C.E.—that is, immediately before columbarium tombs started to be built—most funerary inscriptions did, in fact, mention legal status, whether their subjects were slaves, freedmen, or freeborn. These inscriptions were attached to the outside of tombs and identified their owners to the general public. When columbaria were constructed shortly afterward, during the early first century C.E., inscriptions were used predominantly on the inside and, hence, visible to only the limited number of people with access to the tomb’s chamber. The absence of legal status on inscriptions from tomb interiors is, therefore, likely a result of their audience and function. In Rome’s status-conscious society, legal status may have been a label that positioned its bearer within the macroscopic social fabric with sufficient precision to become a standard element of name formulas. However, it largely lost its ability to distinguish its bearer in a community of peers of comparable background. Present or former servitude may simply not have been the most important characteristic to commemorate in an environment in which slaves and freedmen constituted the majority.

Besides the legal-status formula, bare names could, by themselves, convey a certain amount of social information. The most common slave names are auspicious designations, like Felix or Fortunata; simple counters, like Primus or Secunda; or names of Greek gods or kings, like Eros, Hermes, Alexander, or
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Antiochus (Table 15-1). Such popular slave names may have carried a suggestion of servility, but they were probably not unambiguous signs of servitude (Huttunen 1974:195–196; Saller 2001:109–110; Weaver 1972:84–89). The more important aspect may be the identity that was imposed through these names. It is poorly understood who chose slave names and which principles guided such a choice, but it is abundantly clear that slave naming was arbitrary enough to render slave names useless as indicators of ethnicity (Scheidel 2001:14).

Table 15-1. Popular Slave Names in Imperial Rome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Eros</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Onesimus / -e</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Antiochus</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Trophimus / -e</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Apollonius / -i a</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dionysius / -i a</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Helpis</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from Solin 2001:312.

What strikes me as significant about the most common slave names is that they were almost devoid of concrete meaning. These generic names may have been similar to Classical names, like Cato or Caesar, when applied to African slaves. They negate the slave's origins and substitute it with a meaningless or at least nondescript identity. Roman slaves held a single name but acquired the triple name of citizens upon manumission. The praenomen and nomen that needed to be added replicated that of their manumitting owner and signaled a freedman's continued affiliation to the household in which he or she had served. In the largest columbarium tombs, the nomen of a single clan often dominates the name pool, sometimes to the extent that almost everybody had the same one. Such tombs were clearly designated for the enslaved and manumitted personnel of aristocratic or imperial families. We must imagine the walls of such tombs to be literally covered with the same name; in such an environment, the name likely came to symbolize membership in a community of similar background.

Aside from names and legal-status formulas, the biographic information on tombstones from columbarium tombs extends to relationships, ages, and professions, but only sporadically. One may be inclined to take the shortage of information as a deficiency, concluding that columbarium occupants did not have anything
worthwhile to commemorate and dismiss their inscriptions as mere “name tags” (Eck 1987:65). However, the functional social environments that emerge in the cases in which information does exist counter this first impression of social poverty. About every fifth inscription from columbaria specifies the relationship between the deceased and a commemorator. Most of these are from the nuclear family and the remainder pertains to more distant relatives or social contacts beyond the biological family. This does not necessarily mean that the nuclear family was, in fact, more prevalent than the extended family (see Harrington 1994; Hope 2001:66; Mann 1985; Martin 1996; Saller and Shaw 1984), but it does suggest that many columbarium occupants had intact families. Age at death is recorded in 12 percent of all inscriptions (Figure 15-4). The resulting age curve shows a lot of children and young adults, which corresponds well with the age structure of preindustrial societies. Given the choice in recording this information, it cannot be taken to be demographically accurate, however. The very fact that young ages were commemorated so often evokes a caring environment in which premature death was perceived as such and caused an especially heartfelt response (see Nielsen 1997:198–202). About every sixth inscription records a profession, ranging from service jobs, like attendants (pedisequus) and valets (cubicarius), to administrative and skilled posts, like property manager (insularius) and physician (medicus). In general terms, these records reflect a certain professional pride. Many of them stem from inscriptions for slaves, which reflects the centrality of work in their lives and, consequently, for their commemoration (Huttunen 1974:139–140; Joshel 1992:28–32, 49–56; van Nijf 1997:42).

There is a chronological development in the commemoration of these biographic details, which tended to become more personal over time. Inscriptions

![Figure 15-4. Distribution of age records from columbarium inscriptions by gender and age group (N = 322).](image-url)
from the middle to later first century C.E., about 50–75 years after columbaria first appeared, tend to commemorate the social environment of the deceased by recording their relationships to others more often than inscriptions from earlier periods did. At the same time, they increasingly describe the deceased with epithets, affectionate but generic terms like “well-deserving” (benemerens), or superlatives like “dearest” (carissimus/a) or “sweetest” (dulcissimus/a). This development is neither as clear-cut nor as dramatic as the afore-mentioned reversal in legal status commemoration. Its existence is, however, substantiated by a contemporaneous transformation of funerary architecture that replaces the homogeneous architecture of columbaria with a more hierarchical design that visually elevates some tomb occupants above others. From the mid-first century C.E. onward, columbarium architecture started to be individualized by the tomb occupants and their families, similar to the way in which inhabitants altered standardized slave housing to meet their particular needs (Singleton, this volume). Eventually, the architectural blueprint of newly constructed tombs switched from subterranean homogeneous tombs to aboveground tombs with hierarchical design (Caldelli and Ricci 1999; von Hesberg 1992:19–54; Wallace-Hadrill 2008a). Both concurrent developments point to a changing perception of individuals and their relationships to groups. Hierarchical tomb architecture suggests that tomb communities declined in importance, whereas individuality was celebrated. The language of inscriptions that increasingly used relationships and epithets similarly highlights individuals by replacing the earlier homogeny with more personal language. The commemoration of deceased slaves and freedmen with funerary inscriptions may allow only a cursory view of their identities. What emerges clearly, however, is that they underwent changes as a community that manifest themselves in the evolving design of their collective tombs and the vocabulary used on their tombstones.

The changing vocabulary of columbarium inscriptions suggests two consecutive social strategies that were used by the slaves and freedmen who were buried in them. When columbaria were initially built at the beginning of the first century C.E., the language used in their inscriptions was brief and homogeneous, consisting mainly of names with the occasional indication of legal status, age, social relationship, and profession. These are characteristics that most occupants of the tomb tended to share, like manumitted status, common family name, or professional position in the same household. Inscriptions did not distinguish individuals from their peers but instead delineated a common identity. In this environment, inscriptions did not commemorate individual achievement but rather affiliation with a burial community. This atmosphere of collective belonging did not last, however; it started to disappear a generation or two after columbaria were first built. Mirroring this development, the language of funerary inscriptions became more detailed, and the overall length of the texts increased. The focus was on individuals, who were commemorated in more detail and increasingly praised in superlative terms. The changes in language are subtle but accompanied equivalent developments in funerary art and architecture. The initial homogeneous design that assigned equal burial niches to all occupants was replaced with a hierarchical layout that visually emphasized a few spots through location, size, and decoration. These changes in material culture reveal a changing social strategy of slaves
and freed slaves in Rome: The collective identity of tight-knit burial communities with strong horizontal ties gradually disappeared when differences started to outweigh common background and introduced hierarchies within the group.

Slaves and Freed Slaves as Marginalized Social Groups

The evolving funerary culture of slaves and freedmen in Rome mirrors the changing historical conditions that governed their lives and social experience. The Augustan period, during which columbaria started to be built, brought about a cultural (Wallace-Hadrill 2008b) and urban (Haselberger 2007) transformation of Roman society that produced a contradictory situation for slaves and especially freedmen. To consolidate their position and maintain the operation of the imperial capital, the emerging imperial elite required sizable service and administrative staffs that needed to be manned with skilled slaves, similar to the analogous demand for and value of skilled labor in African state-level societies (Robertshaw and Duncan 2008:71-72; Stahl 2008:40). Not only did this demand attract talent and ambition from Rome’s entire Mediterranean empire but it also enlarged a privileged subgroup of Rome’s coerced workforce. Urban slaves who possessed skills and talent had always been in a more favorable position to establish personal relationships with their owners and to receive better treatment and more opportunities than the vast majority of rural slaves, a situation mirrored perhaps in the divide between requests for manumission made by urban and rural slaves in nineteenth-century Zanzibar (Croucher, this volume). The new demand for labor and talent created a substantial population segment that operated close to the center of power (Bendlin 2002:32-33; Jongman 2003:116-119). The potential opportunities, like early manumission, creation of a family line, or cooperation with influential business partners, did not always materialize, however, in part because Augustan legislation weakened the position of slaves and freedmen. The precise purpose of these laws is somewhat controversial (Atkinson 1966:366-368; Bellen 1987:308-321; Bradley 1984:86-87; Eck 2007:107; Yavetz 1988:96-97), but there is little doubt that they could present stumbling blocks to social mobility by limiting the ability of freedmen to gain full autonomy, attain Roman citizenship, and protect their assets.

My claim is that the contradiction between opportunities and limitation (Kleijwegt 2001:185; Leppin 1996:89) raised the status consciousness of slaves and freedmen in Rome. The awareness of the talent within this group and the continued denial of it from without must have been frustrating for all its members. At the same time, the only way to overcome such exclusion, or at least to sidestep it, was collective organization and mutual support. The appearance of collective burial, complete with sophisticated buildings to accommodate it and formal organizations to coordinate it, is not surprising at this time. This reconstruction of the Augustan social transformation plausibly explains both the appearance of egalitarian tomb architecture and the language of tombstones that highlights group association over individual distinction. However, no dramatic social transformation exists in the mid-first century C.E. that would straightforwardly explain
why this mode of burial fell out of use so soon after its initial popularity. The answer to this question may not lie in dramatic historical events but rather in the generational turnover in manumitted families. The descendants of freedmen may have continued to experience discrimination, but the legal restrictions that had put their parents in a contradictory position largely disappeared. The new situation created a different set of interests that aligned with mainstream society’s emphasis on social advance and individual achievement. This is perhaps the reason freedmen never crystallized into an outright social order in Roman society despite their demographic weight, and it also explains the fragmentation of burial communities into smaller, more hierarchical social units.

This reconstruction counters the way freedmen are typically portrayed in ancient sources. These sources tend to highlight the social stigma linked with present or former servitude and the moral and cultural immaturity that befits a servile past or ancestry. Such notions may reveal the underlying value system of mainstream society, but they do not produce a constructive framework for the historical understanding of mute social groups. The material culture that slaves, freedmen, and their descendants produced complements and corrects the picture: Even though it is difficult to identify and provides a cursory impression at best, it effectively changes the perspective and allows us to trace their situation and response over time. The social strategies that were used by the slaves and ex-slaves who used columbarium tombs resemble those of marginalized groups in other historical contexts. The same switch from initial collective unity to subsequent reorientation toward mainstream society also characterizes modern immigrant communities in societies in which the first generation maintains a distinct subculture whereas subsequent generations align their interests more completely with those of the host society (López Barja de Quiroga 2010:340). A particularly close parallel can be found in practices of the landsmanschaft, or societies of Eastern European Jews, in New York City, who maintained collective burial grounds for their members, the use of which declined during subsequent generations (Soyer 1997:87–93; Weisser 1985:163–173). A parallel can also be drawn to African slaves in the United States, whose naming practices reflect a similar switch from segregation to assimilation (Burnard 2001; Cody 1987; Handler and Jacoby 1996; Inscoe 1983).

**Conclusion**

As in other historical contexts, slavery is not easily identifiable in the archaeology of Roman society. Among the few secure signs of present or past servitude are funerary inscriptions that unmistakably identify their subjects as slave or freed slave. The transparency of this evidence is deceptive, however, since only a minority of inscriptions includes this information. Generating demographic reconstructions on the basis of this evidence is, therefore, only possible within limitations. However, the language of funerary inscriptions offers an alternative reading: Their texts may be cursory and formulaic, but they nonetheless offer clues about the social identities and experiences of the slaves and freed slaves they commemorate. Their very names are signposts: Slaves bore only a single
name, which distinguished them from people with citizenship, designated by the standard Roman triple name. In addition to marking them as social outsiders, the correlation of certain names with unfree status suggests that these “slave names” were among the mechanisms that deliberately upheld a slave identity. The evidence also suggests that slaves did not necessarily succumb to this imposition passively but developed a social strategy that highlighted their community. At least in the relatively privileged environment of aristocratic households in Rome, the tombstones of slaves and freed slaves emphasized this community by omitting information that distinguished individuals and by highlighting characteristics that everyone had in common, like work (in the case of slaves) or clan name (in the case of freedmen).

This scenario not only reflects the special circumstances of slaves in the Roman capital but it also reveals the idiosyncrasies of slavery in the Roman Empire. Two fundamental characteristics of modern chattel slavery on American plantations are lacking in the Roman example: There was no clear-cut correlation between slavery and ethnicity, and there was no one-directional diaspora. This is not to deny the targeting of certain ethnic groups and the dislocation of slaves, but overall, ancient slave culture did not emerge as a distinct phenomenon, perhaps because slaves largely originated from and remained in the cultural halo of the Mediterranean. There was, thus, no coherent counterculture, like that revealed by African religious practices in the New World (see Brown, this volume; Ferguson 1992:110–120). The apparent lack of a viable alternative to the Greco-Roman value system and its material manifestation may also result from the absence of any sustained critique of slavery as an institution, which is one of the most difficult aspects to fathom for modern observers. Finally, there may be no need to even postulate a distinct culture for those in positions of social dependency (Croucher, this volume). In any case, this homogeneous cultural environment allowed the descendants of the relatively privileged slaves and freed slaves of my case study to assimilate into Roman society over the course of a few generations, similar to the relatively quick acculturation in the “open” slave systems of East Africa (Croucher, this volume; Robertshaw and Duncan 2008:73–74). The lack of somatic differences between enslaved and free, coupled with the cosmopolitan nature of Rome’s population, probably facilitated this seamless transition. It may, thus, be a phenomenon that mostly applies to the descendants of metropolitan slaves, but even so, the closest modern parallel to this dynamic is the experience of immigrants, not that of urban slaves.

These differences and idiosyncrasies lead me to caution against a literal transposition of concepts from New World slavery to the ancient world (and vice versa), which may produce problems similar to standard definitions of and approaches to slavery that poorly address local situations (Croucher, this volume; Gijanto, this volume; Norman, this volume). The links that I see between subfields in the archaeology of slavery, at least when bridging a cultural and temporal diversity that is as vast as that between antiquity and modernity, are more general but no less real. Most important, the questions and primary goals are similar: namely, to highlight people who have been left out of the contemporaneous sources and to reconstruct their cultural impacts, social identities, and
experiences through material culture (Marshall, introduction to this volume). These aspects were all shaped by rather timeless consequences of enslavement, such as the asymmetrical power dynamic that slaves are subjected to and the loss of identity that enslavement generates. The social exclusion of slaves could be (and perhaps needed to be) counterbalanced through social strategies, such as community building, collective action, and shared identity, which can leave traces in the material record. Analyzing material remains presents challenges, since they are not easily documented and attributed to slaves. However, there are some definite advantages: above all, the possibility to visualize long periods of time. Anecdotal written sources cannot match this continuity, and the social ideals of a slave-owning culture that tend to permeate them can impede our ability to reconstruct slave experiences. The greatest potential of material culture then may be its perspective. It may not present a “truer” reconstruction than the ones derived from conventional historical texts, but it sidesteps and complements the voices of slave-owning elites to reveal those of the slaves themselves and thereby penetrates the silence that often surrounds them.

The model of community building and gradual assimilation that I have proposed in this chapter may not be as detailed as those possible in other cases. In part, this results from the nature of the available evidence from antiquity, which is typically much less comprehensive than anywhere in the modern world. However, it also illustrates the risk of comparative approaches, which I have highlighted in this contribution. If comparative archaeology has to bridge vast contextual differences, it has to resort to the lowest common denominator and inevitably lose the distinctiveness of unique scenarios. More sophisticated reconstructions that capture a higher level of complexity, on the other hand, may overemphasize the comparability of underlying concepts and processes. This cautionary note is not meant to deny the viability and value of comparative archaeology however. Indeed, perhaps valuable lessons can be learned not only from parallels but also from the differences between various contexts (see also Croucher, this volume) that serve to highlight the unique features of particular slave systems.

Notes

1. The term *columbarium* is not attested in ancient literature but only occurs on funerary inscriptions that make reference to the purchase of a certain number of urns (*ollae*) and *columbaria* (*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, vol. 3: 1733–1734, s.v. “*columbarius*.”). The number of urns is usually twice as high as that of *columbaria*, indicating that *columbarium* refers to a single niche with two urns. Applying this term to the entire tomb is technically a misnomer (a more precise term would be *columbarium tomb* or the like), but this usage has nonetheless become conventional.

2. Frank (1916) not only adopted ancient prejudices against freedmen but also combined them with a preoccupation with “blood” that was typical of the time. An outright racist perspective characterizes Duff’s monograph on freedmen, which suggests that they “disguised” their “ignominious name” and “posed” as “ingenious citizens” (1928:56–57).
3. These name categories do not have direct equivalences in modern naming practice, and the English translations are thus problematic. The biggest difference is the nomen, which designates affiliation with a gens (clan) or cluster of originally aristocratic families, a feature that is absent from modern social structure. I take the translations of the Latin categories from Carroll (2006:129).

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