



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 10.

The sarcophagus containing the bodies of this couple depicts them both together in the central medallion and looking towards each other on either side.

DEATH RITES

Just as upper class Romans planned elaborate marriages, so they conducted extravagant funerals. Not much information survives about the nature of funeral ceremonies for the lower class. The plebeians commonly joined burial clubs and, when they died, the members of the club provided them with a modest funeral. Funeral rites for infants of all classes were brief, and slaves had no ceremonies at all. What follows is a description of the funeral of a typical Roman senator. Other members of the upper classes, including women, might have had a simplified version of this type of funeral.

The senator died at home and his oldest son confirmed his death by leaning over his father's body and calling his father's name. He had already kissed his father on the mouth in an effort to catch his father's last breath. The senator's body was now prepared for burial. First, his eyes were closed. Next, he is bathed and a wax impression of his face is taken. Then his body was dressed in his finest toga with all the insignia of his rank and office visible. His corpse was now arranged on a funeral couch (or seated in a chair) in the entryway of the house and surrounded with flowers and incense. His feet were pointed toward the door, which was festooned with pine or cypress boughs as a warning that the house was polluted by death. (The custom of placing a coin on the dead person's mouth to pay Charon, the ferryman in the Underworld, was rarely practiced in the late Republic and early Empire.) The body remained on view at home for three to seven days. If the body had been embalmed, it would remain on view longer. Embalming, however, was a rare and expensive procedure.



Fig. 11.
A funeral monument on the Via Appia with portraits of those commemorated.

Since corpses had to be buried or cremated beyond the city limits, even a poor man could expect some sort of procession to his tomb. No matter how elaborate or simple the funeral procession was, it served as a notice to the community that someone had died. After a crier announced that the senator's funeral procession was about to begin, his corpse was removed from the house, feet first, so that his ghost would not be able to find its way back inside. Neighbors often joined in the mourning or avoid the pollution of contact with death.

The funeral procession featured musicians and singers of sad, slow songs called dirges. Female professional mourners, who were trained and hired to wail, beat their breasts, scratch their faces, and tear out their hair, stirred the emotions of the attendees. Jesters and mimes performed and relieved the tension. Actors wearing death masks and insignia of the senator's ancestors preceded the body in the procession. The senator himself, with his face exposed, was carried on his couch. Behind him marched his family, including his ex-slaves and slaves. At the end of the procession were torchbearers, reminders of the earlier tradition of burial at night.

The senator's procession entered the Forum and halted in front of the *Rostra*, a stage-like structure used as a speaker's platform. The senator's brother, at the invitation of the family, delivered a funeral oration in the senator's honor.

At the burial site three things occurred. First, the area was consecrated with a sacrificed animal, usually a pig. The mourners consumed the roasted remains of the sacrificed animal and other food provided by the family. Second, earth was placed on the senator's remains. Romans, like people today, practiced both bodily inhumation and cremation. (If the senator had been cremated, a symbolic piece of bone was buried at this point. His ashes were cooled, dried, and preserved elsewhere.) Third, the mourners were sprinkled three times with water for purification.

The family then returned home and made sacrifices to the household gods to request them to purify the house from the taint of death. There followed a nine-day period of grieving, ending with a sacrifice, a banquet, and the distribution of the senator's inheritance.

Funeral games were traditionally held in honor of important citizens. They often included contests similar to track-and-field events. Sometimes slaves, trained as gladiators, fought to the death. These games and contests were held immediately or could be delayed and held as a memorial service several years later.

The period of mourning usually continued for the next ten months. The family continued to commemorate the senator's memory by bringing flowers and food to his tomb on his birth and death days, but especially during the festival of the *Parentalia*, the feast in honor of the ancestors, that was celebrated during the month of February.