CHAPTER TWO

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JEWISH ROME: A CASE-STUDY IN THE INTERACTION BETWEEN JEWS AND NON-JEWS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Jewish Funerary Architecture in Late Ancient Rome

It is generally agreed that among all cultural phenomena burial customs are among those least susceptible to sudden change. Examples which illustrate this assertion abound. Studying the Romanization of Etruria, Kaimio observed that around the turn of the Common Era, Etruscan burial customs were still very similar to those practiced several centuries before—even though parts of Etruria had been subjugated by Rome as early as the fourth century B.C.E. and Latin had completely replaced local languages in the late Republic.¹ That there was noting unusual about these developments in Etruria becomes evident when we turn to Roman Britain. There, as late as the early third century C.E., burial practices were still very similar to those documented for pre-Roman times. During this period, Romanization was confined to the inclusion a new range of grave-gifts deposited in the graves.²

Yet, for all the conservatism surrounding death, burial, and mourning, from time to time burial customs do change. Sometimes, as in early fifth-century B.C.E. Athens, legislation triggered or speeded up such changes. At other times, as in second century C.E. Rome, changing practices accompanied changing attitudes towards the disposal of the dead. In antiquity Jewish funerary customs formed no exception to such patterns of continuity and change. The following survey of Jewish tombs shows that Hecataeus of Abdera was correct when he observed that Jewish burial customs were transformed after the Jews had come under foreign rule. In fact, Hecataeus’ observation

holds equally for Late Antiquity as it does for the early Hellenistic period.3

One of the most consequential changes to transform Roman burial practices under the Empire was a general shift from cremation to inhumation. In the city of Rome itself, this occurred in the second century C.E. and led to profound changes in traditional tomb construction. Ultimately, as the Christianization of Rome's city populace intensified in the course of the fourth century C.E., the change resulted in the construction of large underground cemeteries commonly known as catacombs. These were situated in the suburban areas that circled the city on all sides.

As a result of the intensive archaeological investigations over the centuries (see Chapter 1) the development that culminated in the excavation of large underground cemeteries can be reconstructed with a fair amount of detail. The practice started in and around Rome in the late first century C.E. Then the large *columbaria*—the most characteristic tomb type during the early Imperial period—were increasingly replaced with freestanding, masonry family graves. The size of such masonry structures suggests that they were primarily used by extended families or by *collegia funeraticia* of moderate size. From the second century C.E. onwards, when inhumation increasingly gained popularity, many such constructions of modest dimension were enlarged, sometimes repeatedly, to accommodate extra burials through the construction of additional burial chambers. Such chambers were normally excavated underground. Usually they accommodated graves that were of a less representative nature than the ones located in the original tomb above ground. Discoveries in the necropolis of the Isola Sacra show that such underground extensions could hold up to 150 burials.

Not all graves constructed during this period, however, consist of a mausoleum above ground and galleries underground. Some tombs lack the architectural arrangements *sub divo* and consist exclusively of subterranean galleries and/or rooms. The walls of these subterranean burial complexes have been hollowed out with graves, the majority of which are rather unostentatious. Only occasionally—as in case of the so-called Villa Piccola in the catacomb of Sebastiano or the hypogeum

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