

From Turtura to Alfanus: Funerary Monuments in Early Mediaeval Rome

John Osborne

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Malgré la longue tradition de monuments funéraires qu'a connue la ville de Rome, nous possédons très peu d'information sur les tombeaux qui y furent érigés au haut Moyen Âge, c'est-à-dire entre le moment où l'on cessa d'utiliser les catacombes comme lieu de sépulture et le supposé renouveau de monuments complexes produits par Arnolfo di Cambio et les Cosmati au XIII^e siècle. Toutefois, des fragments dispersés de peinture et d'architecture qui subsistent suggèrent qu'il existait à Rome une tradition continue de monuments sépulcraux depuis la fin de la période classique jusqu'à la fin du Moyen Âge. Cela est surtout évident dans le cas de l'*arcosolium* des catacombes. Grâce à des sources écrites et à des fragments de peinture murale, nous savons que ce type de monument a été repris dans les églises médiévales de Rome, comme l'ont été les autres formes de sépulture des catacombes.

*From Turtura to Alfano: Funerary Monuments in Early Mediaeval Rome**

JOHN OSBORNE

University of Victoria

The city of Rome has a long and exceptionally rich tradition of funerary monuments. Almost every period of western history is represented in the city: from the modest tombs which line the Via Appia and other approach roads, to the monumental mausolea erected for the emperors Augustus and Hadrian; from the simple *loculus* graves of the early Christians and others buried in the catacombs, to the sepulchral architecture designed to honour the princes of the Christian apostles, Peter and Paul; from the countless tombs of citizens and prelates which fill the interiors of the city's churches, to the exquisitely-carved papal tombs executed by such sculptors as Michelangelo or Antonio Canova. Few cities can boast such a heritage. The one area where our knowledge of Roman funerary tradition is weakest is the period of the early Middle Ages, in the years between the decline in the use of the catacombs as places of burial (a phenomenon of the sixth century A.D.) and the apparent revival of the production of elaborate funerary monuments by Arnolfo di Cambio and the Cosmati in the second half of the thirteenth century.¹ Information concerning the intervening seven hundred years is scanty, as is the physical evidence itself. However, the scattered fragments of painting and architecture which do survive point to the existence in Rome of a continuous tradition of sepulchral monuments from the late classical period through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and beyond.

For various reasons, the extramural cemeteries which had existed in accordance with pagan and earlier Christian practice ceased, in the sixth century A.D., to be used as places of burial, and this role shifted to the Christian churches located

both inside and outside the walls of the city. Cemeteries within the walls were already in use by the second half of the sixth century, despite the long-standing prohibition of this practice under Roman law,² and tombs from this period have been found on the Esquiline hill near the church of S. Eusebio,³ in the Castro Pretorio,⁴ at the foot of the Oppian hill near the Colosseum,⁵ and in Trastevere near the church of S. Cosimato.⁶ This transition in funerary custom was essentially one

* I would like to thank Ingo Herklotz for numerous fruitful discussions on the subject of mediaeval tombs in Rome, and for providing me with a number of textual references.

¹ For an introduction to the late-thirteenth-century material and its related problems, see Julian Gardner, 'Arnolfo di Cambio and Roman tomb design,' *The Burlington Magazine*, cxv (1973), 420-439.

² Burial within the city was prohibited by the earliest Roman law code, the law of the Twelve Tables (ca. 450 B.C.), as recorded by Cicero, *De legibus*, II, xxiii. For the shift in funerary custom from cremation to inhumation and the consequent growth of large cemeteries outside the walls of Rome after the second century A.D., see J. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 40. Their ultimate abandonment may have been due in part to the severe depopulation of Rome in the sixth century as a result of the Gothic wars (see Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, VII, xxii, 19).

³ See G.B. De Rossi, *La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana*, III (Rome: Salviucci, 1877), 557. The earliest dated funerary inscriptions from the Esquiline cemetery are those of the years 567 and 571; see *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores*, ed. G.B. De Rossi (Rome, 1857-61), 508, n° 1117, and 511, n° 1121.

⁴ See G.B. De Rossi, 'Sepolcri nel Castro Pretorio,' *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, I (1863), 32.

⁵ See G. Gatti, 'Trovanenti riguardanti la topografia e la epigrafia urbana,' *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*, xxiii (1895), 117-131, esp. 121-123; and idem, 'Nuove scoperte nella città e nel suburbio,' *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità* (1895), 201-206, esp. 203.

⁶ See G. Gatti, 'Della Mica Aurea nel Trastevere,' *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*, xvii (1889), 392-399.

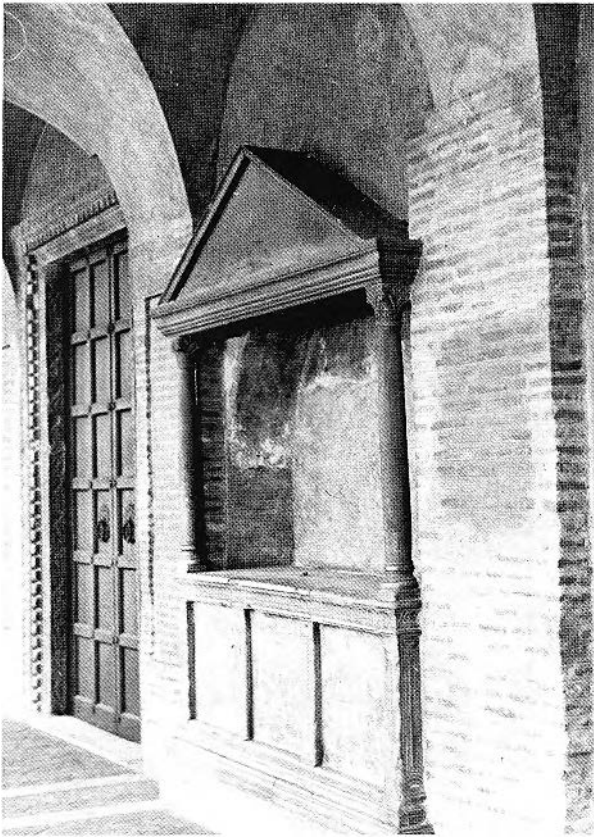


FIGURE 1. Tomb of Alfanus, ca. 1123 A.D. S. Maria in Cosmedin, Rome (Photo: author).

of place, and not one of type. The various forms of burial which had been available in the catacombs, depending upon factors such as one's ability to pay, were continued in Rome's churches with little outward change.

The simplest, and presumably least expensive, form of burial in the catacombs was the *loculus*, a simple shelf in the passage wall into which the corpse was placed. The opening was sealed with a

plaque of marble or terracotta which frequently bore an inscription and religious symbols. Its successor in the mediaeval church was the floor tomb, usually located in one of the peripheral regions of the building such as the atrium, the narthex, or the side aisles. Large numbers of such burials have been found in churches such as S. Maria Antiqua.⁷ In the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance it became customary to mark such graves within the church with pavement plaques bearing inscriptions of a similar nature to their catacomb counterparts. Sometimes these would include effigies of the deceased, for example the mosaic figure of Muñoz de Zamora (a Minister General of the Dominican order who died in 1300) on his grave in the floor of S. Sabina on the Aventine hill.⁸ There are a number of others in stone in the same church and in other Roman churches which were used for burials, for example S. Maria in Aracoeli.

More elaborate burial spaces in the catacombs were provided by the small rooms, or *cubicula*, which opened from the passages, each containing a number of graves surmounted by *arcosolia*. It is this type of monument – a tomb surmounted by an arch which almost invariably encloses some manner of mural decoration – that provides the prototype for the mediaeval wall monuments of Arnolfo di Cambio and Giovanni di Cosma.

The earliest of the mediaeval funerary monuments in Rome to survive intact may be found in the porch of S. Maria in Cosmedin (Fig. 1). The inscription on the architrave identifies it as that of Alfanus, the papal *camerarius*.⁹ This tomb of the early twelfth century demonstrates the same basic elements of construction as the *arcosolia* graves in the catacombs: a burial space surmounted by an architectural framework which encloses a lunette-shaped niche containing a mural painting. Only a small portion of the painting is still intact. It apparently depicted the Madonna and Child flanked by archangels and two popes.¹⁰

Frequently in catacomb burials of the *arcosolium* type the lunette painting over the grave would contain a portrait of the deceased, and on occasion the representation of a saint or saints whose intercession was sought on behalf of the departed soul: for example, the mural over the fifth-century tomb of Cominia and Nicatiola in the Catacomb of S. Gennaro at Naples (Fig. 2). In Rome, a late catacomb example which includes these elements in an expanded composition is the large painting over the sixth-century tomb of the widow Turtura in the Catacomb of Commodilla

7 See G. Rushforth, 'The Church of S. Maria Antiqua,' *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 1 (1902), 1-123, esp. 104-107.

8 The use of mosaic for the effigy figure may reflect the Spanish background of the deceased. For the popularity of this type in Spain, see E. Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (New York: Abrams, 1964), 50-51.

9 The inscription reads: +VIR P(RO)BVS ALFANVS CERNENS QVA CVNCTA PERIRENT HOC SIBI SARCOFAGVM STATVIT NE TOTIVS OBIRET FABRICA DELECTAT POLLET QVIA PENIVS EXTRA SED MONET INTERIVS QVIA POST HAEC TRISTIA RESTANT. The chamberlain Alfanus was responsible for the restoration of S. Maria in Cosmedin ca. 1120 A.D. His name appears in various inscriptions inside the church, including the altar which was dedicated by Pope Calixtus II on 6 May 1123.

10 For the architecture and arrangement of the tomb, see G.B. Giovenale, *La Basilica di S. Maria in Cosmedin* (Rome: P. Sansoni, 1927), 172-174. A photograph of the surviving painting has been published by Gardner, fig. 12.

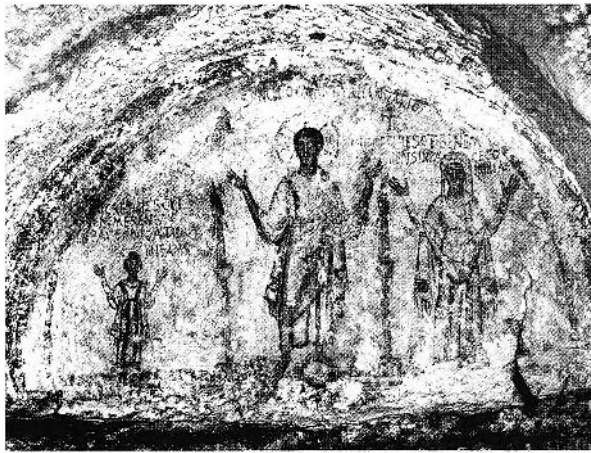


FIGURE 2. Tomb of Cominia and Nicatiola, 5th century A.D. Catacomb of S. Gennaro, Naples (Photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra).



FIGURE 3. Tomb of Turtura, 6th century A.D. Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome (Photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra).

(Fig. 3).¹¹ Turtura is shown being presented to the enthroned Madonna and Child by her 'guarantors,' saints Felix and Adauto, in whose crypt the grave is located. Beneath the mural is an inscription which identifies the deceased and praises her virtuous life. Although in this instance the painting is not enclosed in an arch (its size alone precludes such a possibility), it does serve to establish the iconographic prototype for the mural decorations which were placed above Roman tombs in the Middle Ages. The inheritance can be clearly seen in such late-thirteenth-century examples as the tomb of Guillaume Durand (d. 1296) in S. Maria sopra Minerva, or that of Gonzalez Gudiel (d. 1299) in S. Maria Maggiore.¹² In these examples, both works of the Roman artist Giovanni di Cosma, the sarcophagus is surmounted by an arch which encloses a mosaic depiction of the deceased being presented to the enthroned Madonna and Child by two 'guarantor' saints. The principal intrusion into the traditional Roman tomb arrangement is the presence of a carved effigy figure, a classical concept which was apparently first revived in northern Europe whence it spread to Italy in the first half of the thirteenth century.¹³

Although no complete funerary monuments which pre-date that of Alfanus have survived in Roman churches, there is some evidence to

suggest that this arrangement of a wall tomb represents a survival rather than a revival – and this despite the attraction of the latter possibility in the light of our knowledge of the so-called twelfth-century 'renaissance' in Rome. Information gleaned from the sources and from surviving fragments reveals that the format of the Alfanus

¹¹ The Turtura fresco was published by J. Wilpert, 'Di tre pitture recentemente scoperte nella basilica dei santi Felice e Adauto nel Cimitero di Commodilla,' *Nuovo Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, x (1904), 161-170. It is not precisely dated, but should probably be related to the restoration of this cemetery undertaken by Pope John I (523-526) as recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, 1, 276. For the most recent analysis see Eugenio Russo, 'L'affresco di Turtura nel cimitero di Commodilla, l'icona di S. Maria in Trastevere e le più antiche feste della Madonna a Roma,' *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano*, LXXXVIII (1979), 35-85, esp. 35-49.

¹² The two tombs are illustrated by Gardner, figs. 37, 38.

¹³ For the northern development of the effigy figure, based on classical prototypes transmitted either through Spain or the city of Rome itself, see Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 51ff, and Kurt Bauch, *Das Mittelalterliche Grabbild* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 11-44. On the basis of a textual source, the *Candelabrum Eloquentiae* of Boncompagno da Signa, Julian Gardner, 423, has suggested that effigy tombs were known in Italy by the first quarter of the thirteenth century. However, it is only from the second half of that century that examples survive, among the earliest being that by the sculptor Pietro di Oderisio for Pope Clement IV (d. 1268) now in S. Francesco, Viterbo. The effigy figure was popularized in Italy by Arnolfo di Cambio who adopted it for the papal tombs of Honorius IV (now in S. Maria in Araceli) and Boniface VIII (St. Peter's).

tomb and its later counterparts had a number of early mediaeval ancestors. The principal evidence is provided by the ninth-century tomb of St. Cyril, the Byzantine missionary to the Slavs (d. 869), in the lower church of S. Clemente in Rome. The sarcophagus and arch no longer survive, presumably having been removed when the lower church was abandoned ca. 1100 A.D., but the lunette-shaped mural originally enclosed by the arch is still *in situ* (Fig. 4), and it demonstrates that this formula was indeed in use. The painting depicts the Anastasis, a subject particularly appropriate to a funerary monument, and the figure of a Byzantine monk in the left corner can probably be identified as the portrait of Cyril which is known to have been placed over his grave.¹⁴

A lunette-shaped painting is also known to have been situated over the tomb of the tenth-century pope John XIII (965-972) in S. Paolo fuori le Mura. The composition in this instance comprised a medallion portrait of the pope flanked by his guarantors, saints Peter and Paul. The tomb itself has not survived, but the mural is known from a seventeenth-century copy preserved in the Vatican Library (Fig. 5).¹⁵ In both cases the lunette shape of the painting can only be explained by the existence of a semi-circular arch over the tomb. Another papal tomb of this type is described by the twelfth-century author Petrus Mallius in his account of the interior of St. Peter's. With reference to the sepulchre of Gregory III (731-741), Mallius writes:¹⁶

Hic itaque sanctissimus papa Gregorius III requiescit in loco illo, ubi nunc felicitis memoriae beatus Eugenius



FIGURE 4. Tomb of St. Cyril, 869 A.D. S. Clemente, Rome (Photo: author).

papa III requiescit. Ubi etiam ad honorem eiusdem Gregorii papæ fuit erectus arcus, optimo musico depictus, et permansit arcus ille usque ad tempora domini Eugenii III papæ. De quo habemus in epitafio eius hunc versum: Tertius hic papa Gregorius est tumulatus.

One can presume that some of the other early mediaeval papal tombs in Rome (all now lost) would also have been of this type.

As with their predecessors and successors, this arched form of funerary monument was apparently reserved for persons of religious or political importance – and not only in Rome itself. The Carolingian historian Einhard describes the burial of the emperor Charlemagne at Aachen in these terms: 'In hac sepultus est eadem die, qua defunctus est, arcusque supra tumulum deauratus cum imagine et titulo exstructus.'¹⁷ Closer to Rome, early mediaeval funerary monuments of the same type have been discovered in the important central Italian monasteries of Farfa (Fig. 6)¹⁸ and S. Vincenzo al Volturno.¹⁹ Its use was apparently widespread.

The painting or mosaic over the grave, which usually included some representation of the deceased, was not invariably semi-circular in shape although exceptions to the lunette form are rare. In the tradition of the tomb of Turtura in the Catacomb of Commodilla, there existed as well the possibility of a square or rectangular painting which depicted the presentation of the deceased to Christ. One such example from the eleventh century is the painting in the narthex of the lower

14 See J. Osborne, 'The Painting of the Anastasis in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome: A Re-examination of the Evidence for the Location of the Tomb of St. Cyril,' *Byzantion*, 11 (1981), 255-287. A depiction of the Anastasis is also to be found over the grave of Theodora, the mother of Pope Paschal I (817-824), in the San Zeno chapel of S. Prassede, Rome.

15 Bib. Vaticana, cod. Barb. lat. 4406, fol. 141^v.

16 Petrus Mallius, *Descriptio Basilicæ Vaticanæ*, cap. 8. The text is published in the *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma*, ed. R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, III (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1946), 388.

17 Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. G. Waitz (Hannover, 1911), 35. For further bibliography, see J. Deér, *The Dynastic Porphyry Tombs of the Norman Period in Sicily* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 27, n. 15.

18 The tomb has been ascribed to the twelfth century by Beatrice Premoli, 'La chiesa abbaziale di Farfa,' *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, XXI-XXII (1974-75), 5-77, esp. 32, but an earlier date appears more likely.

19 See A. Pantoni, *Le Chiese e gli Edifici del Monastero di San Vincenzo al Volturno* (Montecassino: Abbazia di Montecassino, 1980), 116-121.

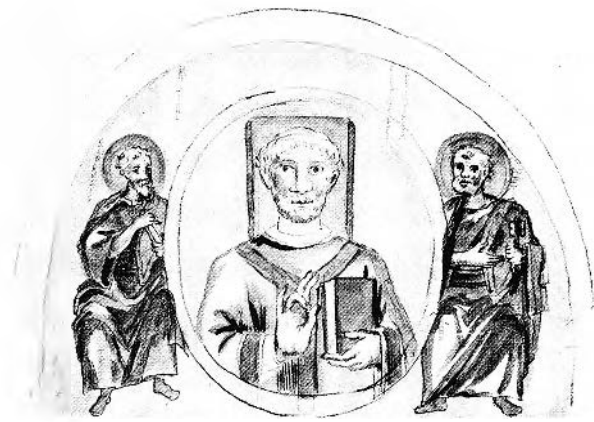
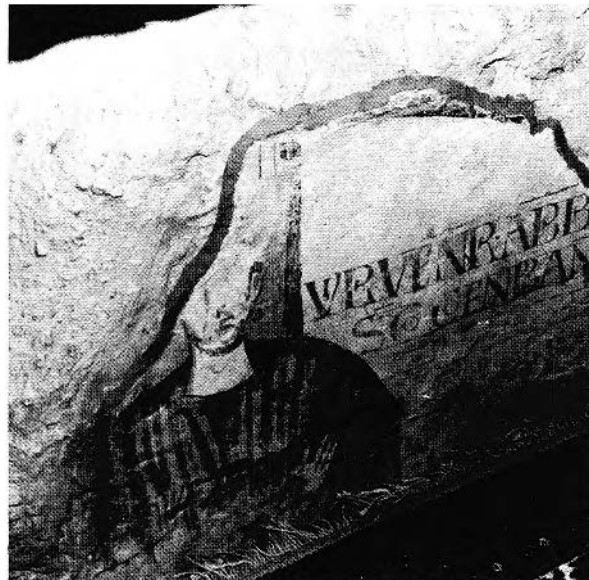


FIGURE 5. Tomb of pope John XIII. Bib. Vaticana, cod. Barb. lat. 4406, fol. 141r (Photo: Bib. Vaticana).

FIGURE 6. Tomb of an abbot, 9th century A.D. (?). Farfa abbey, Lazio (Photo: author).



church of S. Clemente (Fig. 7) which portrays two diminutive figures being recommended to the enthroned Christ by two archangels and saints Clement and Andrew. The mural should probably be associated with the grave which was discovered beneath it,²⁰ and the comparison with the Turtura model extends to the lines of painted inscription beneath the figures. Unfortunately the letters were only partially legible when the painting was discovered in 1863, and subsequently their condition has deteriorated significantly. Thus the exact nature of the inscription and the names of the deceased are not known.²¹ In this instance there is no evidence that the monument incorporated an architectural surround, but the mural artist was evidently aware of the tradition for he has supplied the missing columns in paint.

The *arcosolium* tombs in the catacombs generally made use of burial spaces carved from the actual *tufa*. Alternatively, the remains of the deceased could be placed in a sarcophagus beneath the arch. When this model was transferred to churches situated above ground, some modification was required. As it was now necessary to construct a place in which the remains could be deposited, the former possibility was no longer feasible, and, as a result, sarcophagi were employed.

While it is known that stone-cutters were active throughout the Middle Ages and that sarcophagi continued to be carved (for example the Merovingian royal tombs in the abbey crypt at Jouarre or those of the archbishops of Ravenna in

the church of S. Apollinare in Classe), the practice of re-using existing classical or Early Christian sarcophagi can also be documented from an early date. The custom was also popular in Rome, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²² It is uncertain whether this was done because the marble sarcophagi of antiquity were considered to be of higher quality workmanship or made of more precious materials than those being produced at the time, or because the use of an antique coffin with its associations of ancient grandeur lent a sense of dignity and importance to the deceased.²³ The twelfth-century popes Innocent II (d. 1143) and Anastasius IV (d. 1154), who commandeered the porphyry sarcophagi said to be those of the emperor Hadrian and Constantine's mother, Helena, respectively, were

20 See J. Wilpert and others, 'Per la scoperta di un sepolcro nella basilica di S. Clemente,' *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, VI (1929), 241-245.

21 Attempts by Wilpert to relate this mural to the tomb of St. Cyril are clearly erroneous. For its dating to the eleventh century, see J. Osborne, 'The Particular Judgment: an Early Medieval Wall-painting in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome,' *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXIII (1981), 335-341.

22 Surviving Roman examples are discussed by R. Krautheimer, *Rome. Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 212-213.

23 This last motivation was presumably responsible for the production of imitation Early Christian sarcophagi in later mediaeval Venice; see Otto Demus, 'A Renaissance of Early Christian art in thirteenth century Venice,' *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Matthias Friend Jr.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 348-361, esp. 351-52.



FIGURE 7. *Christ enthroned with saints*, 11th century A.D. S. Clemente, Rome (Photo: Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale, Rome).

certainly fully aware of the tradition which restricted the use of porphyry to those of imperial rank.²⁴ However, if material alone had been the decisive factor, presumably they would have employed sarcophagi freshly carved from the rich supply of porphyry still available in the city, as did the Norman kings of Sicily and many others in years to come.²⁵ Clearly their choice was based on broader considerations, and among these the direct imperial connections must have

24 For the use of porphyry as a symbol of rank by the mediaeval papacy, a practice which culminates in the tombs of Innocent II and Anastasius IV, see J. Deér, 136-154. Deér argues convincingly that Innocent's tomb should be seen as 'a monument not only to himself but also to the papal-imperial idea which he represented' (p. 153).

25 For the role of Rome as a source of porphyry in the Middle Ages and beyond, see Deér, 117-125.

26 For bibliography, see R. Montini, *Le Tombe dei Papi* (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1957), 199.

27 The tomb of Clement IV was moved to S. Francesco, Viterbo, in the nineteenth century.

28 For a general discussion of the mediaeval re-use of classical art, see Arnold Esch, 'Spolien. Zur Wiederverwendung Antiker Baustücke und Skulpturen im Mittelalterlichen Italien,' *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 11 (1969), 1-64. For the Fieschi sarcophagus, see E. Albertini, 'Note sur le sarcophage à scène nuptiale de Saint-Laurent-hors-les-murs,' *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, xxiv (1904), 491-512.

figured strongly. The presumed sarcophagus of Hadrian which Innocent II brought to the Lateran from the Castel Sant'Angelo was lost in the fire which damaged the basilica in 1308. The sarcophagus of Helena, brought by Anastasius IV from her mausoleum on the Via Labicana, is now in the Vatican Museum.²⁶ One can only speculate as to the motives of other prelates, for example Cardinal Guglielmo Fieschi (d. 1256) or Pope Clement IV (d. 1268) who employed classical sarcophagi for their respective tombs in S. Lorenzo fuori le Mura (Rome) and S. Maria in Gradi (Viterbo).²⁷ The answer probably lies in a combination of factors.²⁸

Whatever the rationale, it is clear that the formulae which were employed for tombs in mediaeval Rome owed much to the long tradition of funerary monuments in the city. The fragmentary remains of the wall tombs in S. Clemente and at Farfa, and the lost papal tombs from S. Pietro and S. Paolo, provide ample evidence of a link between the catacombs and the thirteenth century. They serve to demonstrate that the Roman tradition of sepulchral art did not wither and die in the early Middle Ages. Rather, it was continuous.

RÉSUMÉ

Malgré la longue tradition de monuments funéraires qu'a connue la ville de Rome, nous possédons très peu d'information sur les tombeaux qui y furent érigés au haut Moyen Âge, c'est-à-dire entre le moment où l'on cessa d'utiliser les catacombes comme lieu de sépulture et le supposé renouveau de monuments complexes produits par Arnolfo di Cambio et les Cosmati au XIII^e siècle. Toutefois, des fragments dispersés de peinture et d'architecture qui subsistent suggèrent qu'il existait à Rome une tradition continue de monuments sépulchraux depuis la fin de la période classique jusqu'à la fin du Moyen Âge. Cela est surtout évident dans le cas de l'*arcosolium* des catacombes. Grâce à des sources écrites et à des fragments de peinture murale, nous savons que ce type de monument a été repris dans les églises médiévales de Rome, comme l'ont été les autres formes de sépulture des catacombes.
