

Kreiger, J. R., *The Business of Commemoration: A Comparative Study of Italian Catacombs*, doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 2017.

Abstract

Late antique funerary workers shaped the material forms of burial and commemoration and played influential roles in the social world of the cemetery. In this dissertation, I present a social-historical inquiry into their working practices and interactions with their patrons. In particular, I examine the work of gravediggers, painters, and engravers who labored in catacombs—the massive subterranean necropoleis that developed outside some Italian urban centers in the third to sixth centuries CE. The catacombs of Domitilla (Rome), San Gennaro (Naples), and San Giovanni (Syracuse) furnish the large corpora of architecture, painting, and inscriptions through which I study the late antique funerary industry, using methods drawn from classical archaeology, art history, and philology. Throughout I argue for the application of “network thinking” to the study of these poorly understood workers: where we cannot trace the movements of an individual, we should look for workshops, communities, and other “collective agents” accomplishing funerary labor through social interaction.

The first chapter provides context for this inquiry by outlining its theoretical and methodological approaches, major sources, and datasets. Chapter 2 addresses the Roman *fossores*—the gravediggers who excavated and managed catacombs—and reviews longstanding debates about the extent of the Church’s control over their work. Chapter 3 proposes criteria for workshop attribution in catacomb painting by systematically examining painting of the so-called “red and green linear style” in Naples, a style often overlooked in favor of the figural types employed in catacomb decoration. Chapter 4 approaches engravers from two directions: quantitative analysis of a large epigraphic corpus to find workshop-specific patterns in the use of words and images, and an examination of a small group of inscribed plaques as artifacts, in order to uncover the working practices and trade networks of engravers. Chapter 5 considers the work of *fossores*, painters, and engravers in the social contexts of catacombs, attempting to chart these workers’ interactions with their patrons, with each other, and with members of non-funerary professions.

This interdisciplinary project takes a worker-centered approach to funerary labor in late antiquity, seeking to shed light on the social contexts of cultural production in the catacombs.