ARRC – Acculturation, Romanisation, Roman Culture: Processes of Integration Across the Roman Empire

Edited by László Borhy, Kata Dévai, Linda Dobosi, and Csilla Sáró

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Edited by
László Borhy – Kata Dévai – Linda Dobosi – Csilla Sáró

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Contents

László Borhy 9

Foreword

László Borhy 13

Aspects of romanisation in Pannonia: Introduction and remarks

József Beszédes 21

Integration? Romanisation? Tomb of an auxiliary soldier of Celtic origin

Sorin Ilie Cociș – Vlad-Andrei Lăzărescu 39

Fashion in Roman Dacia: Local production of anchor brooches – the hinged fastening variant

Illés János Darvas-Tanács 51

Coins of a 2019 field survey from the legionary camp of Brigetio (Komárom/Szőny, Hungary)

Charlotte Defer 69

Prestigious Roman homes built in Aeduan territory: The example of the peristyle houses at Bibracte (Mont-Beuvray, France)

Kata Dévai 79

Trends in the use of glass vessels and its ritual connotations at the Iseum Savariense

Linda Dobosi – Tamás Szabadváry 93

Three Roman game boards from Pannonia in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum

Damjan Donev 109

Transformations along the western part of the Via Egnatia in Roman Antiquity

Rachele Dubbini – Barbara Bramanti – Jessica Mongillo – Giulia De Palma 143

Hybrid population in the city of Rome: Funerary customs and practices from the Via Appia Antica 39 burial complex

Evgeniy Gorokhovskiy – Oksana Gopkalo 165

Once again about 'Sarmatian'-type *fibulae* (Almgren Group VII, Form 210 and similar) in the Chernyakhiv culture

Lavinia Grumeza 237

Roman bead workshops at Tibiscum: Twenty years after

Irena Lazar 251

Development and changes in Roman glassmaking during the 1st century AD as reflected in the Roman road station Romula (Ribnica near Brežice, Slovenia)

Mia Leljak – Tino Leleković 289

Roman glass from Ban Josip Jelačić Square in Osijek

Francisco Marco Simón 305

Archaeology and the *interpretatio* of an ancient Iberian sanctuary: From El Cerro de los Santos to Ad Palem

Pierre Mazille – Camille Bossavit 317

Copper alloys in Gaul under the Roman conquest: The *Celtic Brass Coins* project

Dorothea Mildová 327

Sacrificial places in funerary contexts of Roman Thrace: Character and meaning of ritual places in grave contexts of Roman Thrace—evidence from the Yambol region

Zsolt Mráv – Réka Neményi 359

Archaeological excavation of a new Roman-period wagon grave and its adjacent horse burial at Belvárdgyula (Baranya County, Hungary) in 2021: Interim research report

Dimitar Nikolovski 385

ANNI BONI in Stobi: Gold glass in funerary context

Rita Helga Olasz 397

Was there a doctor in Brigetio?

Coriolan Horațiu Opreanu – Vlad-Andrei Lăzărescu 423

Getting to know each other: Examining trade across the Roman *limes* at Porolissum (Moigrad, Romania)

Simone Pastor 441

Romanisation: An evolving historical concept

Laurențiu Radu 453

Callatis: A Greek city in the Roman Empire

Csilla Sáró 465

For old times' sake…: Dress accessories from a north-east Pannonian grave

Hedvika Sedláčková – Dana Rohanová – Pavel Fojtík – Miroslav Popelka – Jaroslav Peška 483

Bohemia and Moravia in the Migration Period — Contacts reflected through glass vessels: A preliminary report on form groups

Katarina Šmid 525

The iconography of the Seasons in Poetovio stone reliefs and its connections to other artistic centres

Eszter Soós – Jan Jílek – Klara De Decker – Viktória Mozgai – Bernadett Bajnóczi 537

Selected Roman bronze vessels from the early Roman period cemetery in Vinár-Cseralja, northern Pannonia

F. Zsófia Sörös 559

New results from the Tihany-Óvár *oppidum*, Hungary: Finds from the so-called 'cellar'

Ádám Szabó 597

The phenomenon of altars named in their inscriptions and an altar with an additional function

Csaba Szabó – Ernő Szabó – Radu Ota 611

The cult of Roman Mithras in Apulum: Glocality of Roman religion in an urban context

Dániel Szabó 657

Becoming Roman? Tracing Mediterranean influences in the archaeological finds of the Hungarian excavations from the monumental complex of the "Grandes Forges" *insula* at Bibracte

Lőrinc Timár 669

The '*basilica*' of Bibracte: A derivative or prototype of Vitruvius' *basilica*?

Pedro Trapero Fernández – André Carneiro 687

Wine and power in Roman Lusitania: Production, epigraphy and the inland economy of the Alentejo

Kristina Turkalj – Elena Perković Gjurašin – Andrej Janeš 705

Painted glass from Osor

Tatiana Votroubeková 713

Continuity and change: The romanisation of Southern Etruria

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Hybrid population in the city of Rome

Funerary customs and practices from the Via Appia Antica 39 burial complex

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Abstract: At its peak in the 2nd century CE, the Roman Empire drew freeborn migrants, enslaved individuals, and freepersons to the capital from across its vast and diverse territories. This cultural plurality is reflected in Rome's funerary archaeology, which offers crucial insights into the identities, beliefs, and daily lives of its inhabitants. This paper presents the excavation of the funerary site at Via Appia Antica 39, situated on the outskirts of the city of Rome and investigated by the University of Ferrara since 2022. The burial complex, dating to the Antonine period, features both cremation and inhumation burials within monumental structures. An integrated, on-site bioarchaeological approach has enabled the recovery of exceptionally well-preserved data—information often lost in other, even renowned, funerary contexts. Burial rituals, skeletal remains, and associated grave goods offer detailed evidence of funerary practices, body treatment, and the biological profiles of the deceased, while also illuminating their possible geographic origins and degrees of social integration. Complementary epigraphic evidence enriches the interpretation, with inscriptions confirming the diverse origins of individuals buried here. Altogether, the site provides a vivid picture of the ethnic and cultural complexity of imperial Rome's population, offering rare insight into the lives of those often marginalized in historical narratives.

Keywords: Rome, Via Appia, funerary practices, epigraphic evidence

The Via Appia Antica 39 burial complex in Rome

The archaeological excavation at the site of Via Appia Antica 39 (AA39) in Rome started in 2022, under a three-year concession from the Italian Ministry of Culture.[1] The site is located just outside

1 For more information on the project see Dubbini *et al.* 2023, also https://linktr.ee/appiantica39 (last access: 20 February 2026).

✉ Corresponding author

the Aurelian Walls between the first and second miles of the consular road, in the heart of the Almo valley, next to the river and in a critical juncture, where the road undergoes a transformation in physical, legal, and administrative terms (Fig. 1). Near the Tomb of Priscilla, the Via Appia Antica shifts indeed from its earlier configuration as a winding urban path—ascending from the valley of the Circus Maximus to the elevation of the so-called Monte d'Oro, then descending into and fully crossing the Almo valley—to that of the more linear and formally structured *via recta*, the extra-urban road.[2] This transition marks the passage from a *semita* (an urban track) to a fully extra-urban Roman road, laid out along the ridge of a natural rise composed of the oldest volcanic deposits of the Alban Hills and the so-called Capo di Bove lava flows.[3] The Almo River, moreover, marked the administrative boundary of Rome's urban space in the early Imperial period, at a distance of one thousand paces from the city: the first mile defined the legal and administrative limit of the territory belonging to the Urbs.[4] Starting from the Republican period, but especially during the Imperial era, the Almo valley thus marked the transition from the urban to the suburban space. In particular, with the massive urban expansion of Rome from the late Republican period onward, the built-up area of the *continentia* progressively extended outward. As a result, this stretch of the Via Appia closest to the city was increasingly characterised by a concentration of residential settlements and, consequently, by funerary monuments and burial complexes.[5]



Fig. 1. Positioning of the AA39 excavation in relation to the plan of Tav. 57 made by P. Rosa, *Monumenti inediti pubblicati dall'Instituto di corrispondenza archeologica* 5, 1849–1853.

2 Funiciello *et al.* 2006, 46–51 and 293, Fig. 12.33; Di Cola 2020; Marcelli 2022a.

3 Dubbini *et al.* 2023.

4 The Cataloghi Regionari appear to identify the Almo River as the boundary of the first Augustan region, that is, the area of Porta Capena. See Palombi 1999; Gozzini 2012; Dubbini 2015, 27–28. On the first mile in Rome, see Dubbini 2019.

5 Dubbini 2015, 65–71; Dubbini *et al.* 2023. Consular roads like the Via Appia were selected for their prestige, giving honour and distinction to the deceased and their families: here the tombs were aligned along the roads according to a principle of visibility, arranged in several rows and forming networks of paths secondary to the main one (von Hesberg – Zanker 1987).

Within such territorial and historical context lies the burial complex brought to light by our excavations at AA39, which can be dated, in its earliest construction phases, to the mid-2nd century CE. Compared to the broader context of Roman funerary areas that, at this time, were arranged along the major traffic routes outside Rome, showing a gradual shift from the ritual of cremation to that of inhumation between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, AA39 exhibits both shared and distinctive traits.[6] As previous studies have pointed out, between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, *columbaria* were reconfigured into a distinct form of funerary monument, characterised by significant changes in both stylistic features and intended audience. This reconfiguration appears to stem from a renewed desire for individual recognition and the expression of personal cult, prompting new formal choices and signalling a departure from the architectural and commemorative uniformity characteristic of standard *columbaria*. This transformation began gradually, often manifested through exceptional internal modifications of pre-existing structures.[7] This process culminated in a significant architectural transformation: over the course of the 1st century CE, subterranean and semi-subterranean *columbaria* were gradually replaced by smaller, aboveground monuments. The transition began with a shift in internal visual hierarchy—by the Tiberian period, marble cinerary urns displayed on shelves began to supplant traditional terracotta urns, disrupting the symmetrical, axial layouts of earlier structures: increasing emphasis was placed on the wall facing the entrance. At the same time, cremation practices began to decline in favour of inhumation. Monumental complexes were thus gradually replaced by smaller, mixed-use spaces combining *arcosolia* for inhumation with traditional niches with urns for cremated remains. Decorative elements like mosaics and wall paintings reflect ongoing ritual practices and evolving notions of identity and memory, part of wider cultural transformations that included early Christian burial traditions.[8]

At AA39, eight funerary buildings, an enclosure and a platform have been unearthed, arranged in several rows and located along the ridge of the slope that sloped down from the Via Appia towards the Almo River (Fig. 2). The buildings stood without interruption, literally leaning against each other, with a north-south alignment, identical to that of the Via Appia. All these structures were built against an earlier imposing tuff block wall, consisting of blocks laid end to end and on edge, with the upper surface concave, commonly referred to as *dorso di mulo* technique, and decorated with a smooth band on the northern side, which served to delimit an open area to the south of the excavation trench.[9] This wall constitutes the *terminus post quem* for the construction of the burial plot. The presence of the Almo River is fundamental to the history of the site: a slow and inexorable rise in the water level led to a crucial issue, probably as early as the end of the 3rd century CE.

6 See for example the Vatican necropolis along Via Trionfale (Liverani *et al.* 2010); the funerary area next to the Via Aurelia in Villa Doria Pamphilj (Benocci 2005, 22–25); the necropoleis of via Portuense (most recently Fogagnolo 2020, with earlier bibliography) and of Via Ostiense (Marcelli 2022b; Marcelli *et al.* 2023) and Collatina (Buccellato – Catalano 2003; Buccellato *et al.* 2008). As regards the context of the Via Appia, noteworthy are the funerary complex in Via Latina (most recently Cugno 2022, with earlier bibliography) and beneath the Basilica of St. Sebastian (Taccalite 2009) and the series of tombs discovered in Via Cilicia, just north of the Almo valley (Pagliardi – Cecchini 2016). See also the example of the Necropolis of Isola Sacra (Baldassarre *et al.* 2018).

7 A notable example is Columbarium I of Vigna Codini, where adaptations of certain niches (e.g., those of Aponia Chia and Aponius Nicia) between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE reflect a broader trend toward increased visual differentiation (Borbonus 2014).

8 The literature on this topic is extensive; see, by way of example von Hesberg 1992; Hope – Huskinson 2011; Borbonus 2014; Marcelli *et al.* 2023. See also Lombardi – Dubbini 2025.

9 This wall is probably a funerary enclosure of exceptional dimensions, which defined an open space, perhaps a garden with a funerary monument in the centre, located south of our excavation area. If this interpretation is correct, the dating of the block wall should not go beyond the beginning of the early Augustan age (Giatti 2023; Lombardi – Dubbini 2025).

Between the 4th and 5th centuries CE, the situation must have become unsustainable, leading to the abandonment of the monuments and a unified obliteration of the structures carried out with considerable filling in, mostly consisting of materials allochthonous to the funerary context, which was thus literally sealed and therefore protected. Traces of later frequentation are faint, consisting only of haphazard re-use of old structures.[10]

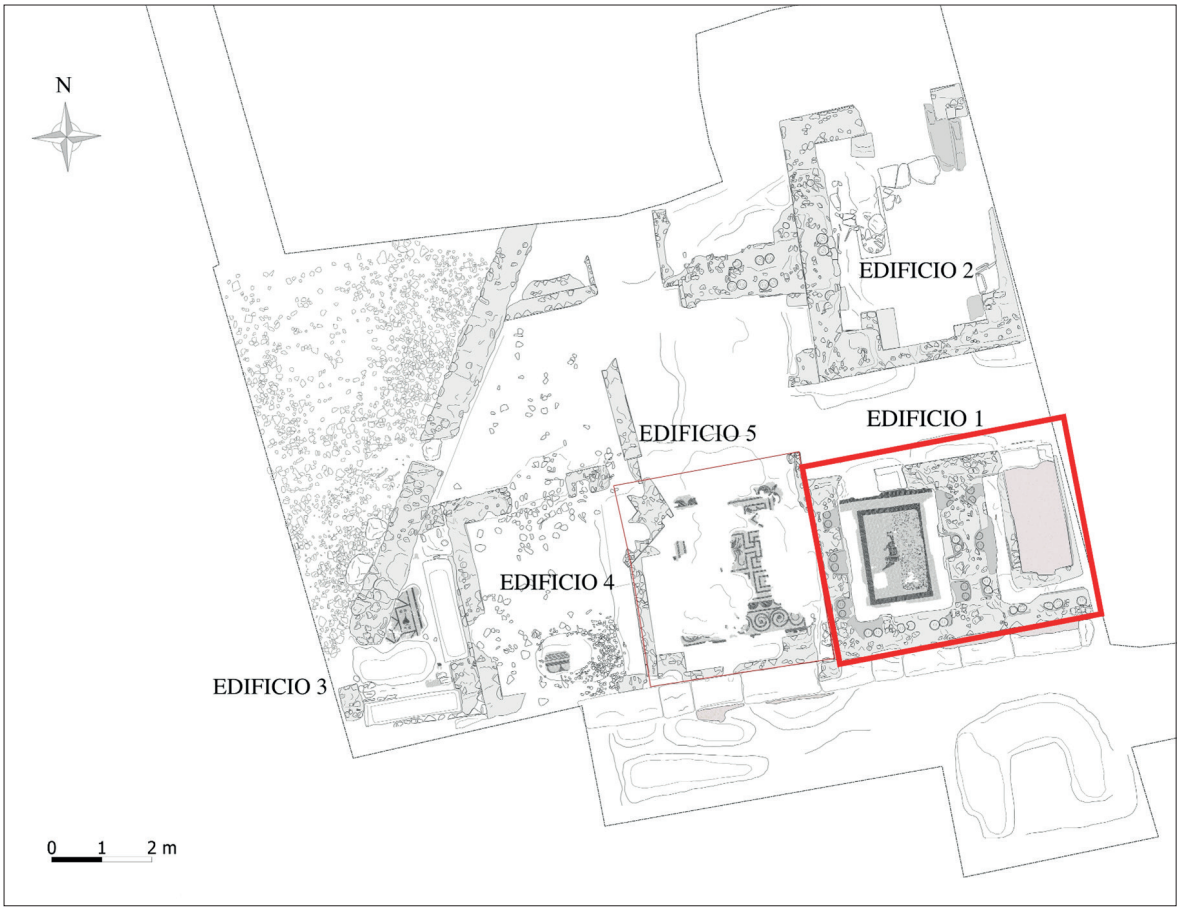


Fig. 2. Plan of AA39 site at the conclusion of the 2024 excavation campaign (elaboration by F. Turchetta and M. Lombardi).

The funerary buildings seem to have been constructed according to a pre-established plan in the same chronological context: they have the same orientation—on an axis with the Appian Way—and are of the same type with a rectangular plan and mixed burial rite (i.e. inhumation and cremation rites), with *arcosolia* opening onto the floor above the *formae* for inhumation burials and several orders of niches to house pairs of *ollae* for cremation. The earliest evidence corresponds to cinerary urns within *columbaria*, while inhumation rites became increasingly prevalent from the second half of the 2nd century CE onwards.[11] The framing of the first construction activity in the middle of the

10 The stratigraphic analysis of the buildings, as well as the study of the materials that emerged from the excavation, is still to be considered at an entirely embryonic stage. The dating proposed for the abandonment of the funerary buildings is based on a preliminary analysis of the materials found in the obliterations of the buildings. We refer to a more advanced phase of the study of the finds to provide more detailed archaeological, stratigraphic and bibliographical references.

11 Indeed, a *columbarium*, of which only two walls remain, forming an obtuse angle that suggests a complex layout, must have preceded the construction of the burial plot. The study of the complex is still ongoing.

2nd century CE is supported not only by the presence of a mixed burial rite, but above all by the chosen architectural model, which was widespread in Rome and the surrounding territory in this period:[12] a medium-sized funerary chamber with a quadrangular plan, with outer facings constructed in accurate *opus latericium*, and, generally, windows on either side of the central epitaph. The roof was probably characterised by a barrel vault or a terraced floor.[13] The interior spaces of these buildings were decorated with painted wall plasters, which—in some cases—also featured figurative motifs. The floors were adorned with black-and-white tessellated mosaics, typically centred around a figurative emblem framed by geometric patterns. In all cases, these floors were modified over time to allow for the opening of new burial spaces, resulting in the partial reconstruction of the flooring—usually with new decorative elements or inscriptions—at the points where the original surfaces had been damaged or destroyed.[14]

Bioarchaeological evidence

A contextualised bioarchaeological approach, integrating social theory and analytical methodologies, provides an effective framework for addressing anthropological questions that extend beyond purely biological description.[15] Within a necropolis, individual and collective identities emerge as dynamic and multifaceted constructions, shaped through the interaction of biological, cultural, and social factors. Although the available dataset from AA39 is still partial and does not yet permit a comprehensive demographic reconstruction, bioarchaeological analysis nonetheless reveals meaningful results. The reconstruction of individual age and sex profiles and unintentional skeletal or dental changes, that may reveal indicators of work-related stress, allow for potential inferences about age and gender identities[16] and social differentiation. Even when working with fragmentary datasets, combining osteological, funerary, and material culture evidence enables the examination of multiple, overlapping aspects of identity[17] and helps to reveal deliberate ritual practices that serve as collective expressions of belonging.[18] Funerary practices, in particular, frequently reflect community or idealised representations of identity.[19]

From an anthropological perspective, the necropolis of AA39 represents a remarkable and complex funerary context: the available community-level data could offer a more nuanced understanding of biological relationships and their role in constructing social identities in the past. The burials exhibit notable variability, including individual, multiple, and collective inhumations. Several burials appear to be reworked primary deposits, indicating deliberate ancient interventions, while secondary burials, particularly ossuary, attest to the long-term and dynamic use of the necropolis. The funerary record encompasses a wide range of burial types: simple earthen graves, sarcophagi, *cappuccina* burials, and graves incorporating *amphorae* to protect the head or torso. Multiple inhumations within *arcosolia* and *enchytrismos* for children are also documented.

12 This dating is further confirmed by a brick stamp from Building 1, which is still *in situ* and can be dated to AD 123 (Eck – Pangerl 2013).

13 See von Hesberg 1992, 47–52.

14 Dubbini *et al.* 2025.

15 Buikstra – Beck 2006; Agarwal – Glencross 2011; Torres-Rouff – Knudson 2017.

16 Sofaer 2006; Agarwal 2012; Agarwal – Wesp 2017; Zuckerman *et al.* 2019.

17 Blaizot 2017.

18 Torres-Rouff – Knudson 2017; Haddow *et al.* 2020.

19 Hodder 1982.

The continuous presence of the bioarchaeologist in the field enables the collection of essential information even prior to laboratory analysis. In the necropolis of AA39 the taphonomic and archaeothanatological analysis does not reveal any clear correlation between the typology and degree of care devoted to burial and the sex or inferred social status of the deceased. To date, over 100 burials, covering both inhumations and cremations, have been documented. Initial osteological and radiocarbon analyses indicate a demographically varied group dated between the second part of the 1st and the 4th centuries CE. Among the inhumations studied, there are approximately 28% of males, and 21% of females, and at least 51% of unidentified individuals, including subadults and fragmentary remains. Age estimates reveal a substantial proportion of subadults (42%), including individuals aged 0–10 years (23%), 10–18 years (5%), and other generic subadults (14%), while adults constitute around 58% of the sample. The cremated remains, generally contained in paired urns, appear to belong predominantly to adults.

Among the tombs discovered in 2023 in AA39, Burial 40, inside Funerary Building 1 in the southeastern area, stands out for its exceptional character. It consists of a ceramic sarcophagus within an *arcosolium*, accompanied by the secondary deposition of a horse's head, positioned perpendicularly to the sarcophagus at its centre. This unusual assemblage invites reflection on local funerary customs and ritual symbolism. The deposition of horses, whole or partial, has long ritual roots in Europe and Asia, generally symbolic rather than alimentary; in Rome, horse meat was excluded from diet and ritual offerings.[20] Instead, the horse was tied to the military sphere and *Mars*, exemplified by the *Equus October* sacrifice, where the right-hand horse of the victorious chariot was ritually slain and its remains used in civic rituals.[21] With the expansion of the Empire, the Roman pantheon incorporated deities associated with horses, notably *Epona*, the Celtic goddess revered as protector of horses and riders, especially within military circles.[22] This religious syncretism and enduring martial symbolism facilitated the appearance of equine remains in funerary contexts, expressing aspects of identity, belief, and/or status.

Although no directly comparable cases to Burial 40 are currently documented, equine burials are attested throughout the Roman world, particularly in the Danubian Basin (Noricum–Pannonia), where they are often associated with auxiliary soldiers of provincial origin.[23] At Halbturn (Austria, Pannonia, 3rd–5th centuries CE), numerous equids remains, mainly from pits and ditches, have been interpreted as refuse deposits, although a ritual function cannot be ruled out.[24] A remarkable case from Ovilava (Wels, Austria, 2nd–3rd centuries CE) revealed two female individuals buried directly above a horse; genetic analyses identified them as mother and daughter, an exceptional example of a human–animal association.[25] In the western provinces, similar practices are known from the necropolis of Barcino (Barcelona), active between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, where a ritual well contained an equine skull interpreted as a votive deposit.[26] In Italy, horse burials became more frequent in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, often linked to non-Roman groups such as the Lombards, as in the warrior grave at Arzignano (Vicenza, 5th–6th centuries CE)[27] and at Vicenne-Campochiaro (Molise, 7th century CE), where horse–human burials reflect military and

20 Colonnelli – Mannino 2012.

21 Plin., *HN*., 28.147; 28.159; 28.265; Rüpke 2009; Tanganelli 2018. On the relationship between the cult of Mars in Rome and the cavalry, see most recently Dubbini forthcoming.

22 Toynbee 1973.

23 Lauwerier – Hessing 1992.

24 Kunst – Doneus 2013.

25 Hagmann *et al.* 2024.

26 de Heredia Bercero 2007.

27 Reggiani – Rizzi 2007.

identity-related rituals.[28] Beyond the imperial frontiers, in the Baltic regions, equine burials played a central role in elite warrior identity from the 2nd to 4th centuries CE, with partial depositions, typically heads or forelimbs, serving as markers of status and transition.[29]

Burial 40 is defined as a 'plural' burial in this study,[30] as it appears to be both multiple (almost contemporaneously depositions) and collective in nature (reopening of the grave for new depositions over a more or less extended period of time). The deposit contained the remains of four individuals arranged in a multi-layered sequence. On the uppermost level, the most recent deposit, lay a disarticulated and partially rearticulated subadult, placed secondarily, indicating that the grave had been reopened for additional interments. Beneath this layer, an adult female oriented north–south rested above an adult male oriented south–north, both lacking the skull but partially anatomically connected. At the lowest level was a subadult (probably female) positioned north–south. No evidence suggests a significant interruption between the depositions of the two lowest individuals, nor was any intermediate soil layer observed that would indicate a chronological gap. Only the individual at the bottom retained the skull *in situ*; its slight westward displacement may reflect a deliberate repositioning, while the body was still intact, to accommodate the subsequent burials.

Archaeologists face the challenge of distinguishing between reopening to accommodate a new corpse or reopening for complex funerary rituals, or necromancy, or ancestor worship.[31] Re-use and gathered, disarticulated remains *(réductions)* are frequent as a result of over-crowding, and at this stage of research we do not exclude the desire to regroup the deceased in the afterlife. Grave reopening has been identified globally and across all archaeological periods.[32] The possible sequence of actions has been reconstructed based on the analysis of bone positioning and the direction of their displacement.[33] In the case of Burial 40, we suggest at least three episodes of reopening. The first for the burial of the female adult individual, that caused the movement of certain skeletal elements, such as the feet, and the disarticulation of the ribs of the adult male individual. The second for the reduction of the subadult remains, that caused the disarticulation of female adult individuals. We also suggest a further reopening of the burial for the removal of the skulls. Of the four individuals, only one preserves the skull. The absence of decapitation traces, together with the presence of mandibles, isolated teeth and some signs of disturbance also evident in the cervical area, indicate intentional removal after the skeletonisation of the body. The removal of the skulls probably took place at a later moment, while the final closure of the burial seems to have been accompanied by the introduction of scattered bone elements, possibly intrusive, and the deposition of the horse's head. The horse's radiocarbon dating will provide further insight into the sequence. Furthermore, two secondary cranial deposits were identified deliberately arranged on cinerary urns in the final row of the *columbarium* within the same chamber, and an additional *cranium* was recovered adjacent to the horse's head, incorporated within the fill layer sealing the structure (Figs 3–4). The three skulls correspond to two adult and one subadult individuals; however, it remains undetermined whether they derive from the same adults interred within Burial 40 or from other individuals, given the widespread occurrence of ossuary deposits throughout the necropolis. Only further analyses may help clarify potential associations.

The removal of skulls is documented in Italy between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE, as well as in Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon contexts. Such practices have been interpreted in relation to nec-

28 Bocchini 2011; Ceglia – Marchetta 2012.

29 Bliujienė *et al.* 2017.

30 Following the terminology of Boulestin – Courtaud 2022.

31 Knüsel – Schotsmans 2021.

32 Aspöck *et al.* 2020; Aspöck *et al.* 2022.

33 Aspöck 2018.

rophobic beliefs, intended to prevent the return of the deceased, or as forms of magical and ritual activity associated with transformation or protection. These behaviours reflect the persistence of complex interactions between the living and the dead in the Roman and post-Roman world. The deliberate removal of selected skulls and bones and their relocation to other places has been linked to magical or necromantic practices.[34] Comparable evidence comes from northern Italy, notably from the Spilamberto necropolis (1st–2nd century CE) and Baggiovara (6th century CE), both in the Modena area, where the absence of skulls and upper cervical *vertebrae*, together with the partial disturbance of the tomb covers, suggests post-depositional removal of the heads.[35]



Fig. 3. Burial 40. Ceramic sarcophagus accompanied by the secondary deposition of a horse's head, positioned perpendicularly to the sarcophagus at its centre (photo: J. Mongillo).

From the Roman period onward, irregular or 'anomalous' burials, such as prone inhumations, decapitations, amputations, or cases in which nails were driven through the body, are widely attested across Europe and have been interpreted as responses to fears of revenants or as expressions of necromantic ritual.[36] Surveys of atypical burials in Italy show that most examples involve prone positions, decapitations, or the placement of heavy stones on the body, with similar phenomena observed in France, Switzerland, and Roman Britain.[37] Within this wider context, the reopening of Burial 40 and the systematic absence of skulls may therefore point to intentional ritual manipulation of the dead body rather than accidental post-burial disturbance, possibly reflecting apotropaic or necromantic practices. Practices such as the display of enemy heads, post-mortem decapitation, and 'head-hunting' are attested in various contexts, often linked to themes of dominion, protection, and ritualised violence.

Within this symbolic continuum, the case of AA39 appears to constitute part of a hybrid ritual repertoire, expressing complex and possibly syncretic beliefs regarding death, transformation, and the permeability of the boundary between life and the afterlife.

Osteological analyses of the four individuals from Burial 40 provide important insights into their body composition and health (Tab. 1).

The biological profile was reconstructed following standard bioarchaeological methods. Age at death for younger individuals was estimated through the assessment of epiphyseal fusion[38] and dental eruption.[39] In adult individuals, age estimation was based on the degree of ectocranial suture

34 Graf 1999; Bailliot 2015.

35 Pancaldi 2009; Mariotti *et al.* 2010a; Mariotti *et al.* 2010b; Milella *et al.* 2011; Palazzini 2011; Pergola *et al.* 2023.

36 Taylor 2008; Mariotti *et al.* 2010a; Mariotti *et al.* 2010b; Milella *et al.* 2011; Milella *et al.* 2015.

37 Cavallini 2011; Taylor 2008.

38 Brothwell 1981; Buikstra – Ubelaker 1994; Scheuer *et al.* 2009.

39 Ubelaker 1989; AlQahtani *et al.* 2010.

obliteration, dental wear, and the morphological changes of the pubic symphysis, auricular surface of the *ilium*, and sternal end of the fourth rib, as well as the degree of ossification of the sternal end of the clavicle.[40]

Tab. 1. Biological profiles of the four individuals from Burial 40 (*Ubelaker 1989; **AlQahtani 2010; + stature/bi-iliac breadth (Ruff et al. 2005).

ID	Sex	Age at death in years (± SD)	Stature in cm (± SD)	Body Mass in kg (± SD)
272	M (?)	8 (±2)*; 9.5**	112.2 (±2.9)	23.6 (±2.3)
280	F	45–58	153.4 (±2.9)	58.7 (± 4)+
281	M	45–55	157.8 (±3.2)	59.3 (±6.4)
282	F (?)	12 (±30)*; 12.5**	146.1(±3)	42.7 (±7.4)



Fig. 4. A – Burial 40 after the removal of the equine head and overlying soil layer. The secondary position of the two most recent individuals is clearly visible, B – the first individual interred in Burial 40 (photo: J. Mongillo).

40 Todd 1920; Brothwell 1981; İşcan – Loth 1984; İşcan – Loth 1985; Lovejoy *et al.* 1985; Meindl – Lovejoy 1985; Brooks – Suchey 1990; Buckberry – Chamberlain 2002.

Sex determination followed a combined approach based on the morphological study of the skull and pelvis,[41] and, for younger individuals, on features of the *humerus,*[42] mandible, and *ilium.*[43] Body size reconstruction was carried out using the equations proposed by Ruff *et al.* (2012)[44] based on *femur* and *tibia* for stature estimation and on *femur* head for body mass. In one case stature and bi-iliac breadth was used for body mass estimation following Ruff *et al.* (2005).[45] The equations of Ruff (2007)[46] were employed for subadult body size reconstruction.



Fig. 5. A – enamel and dentin hypoplasia of mandible incisors of Individuals 282, B – complete *spina bifida occulta* (Individual 281) (photo: J. Mongillo).

Palaeopathological analysis was conducted in accordance with the principal reference works in the field.[47] Here we provide a brief description of the individuals from the more recent burials (Tab. 1):

- Individual 272 was a subadult aged approximately 8 ± 2 years, showing hypervascularization of the thoracic vertebral body and two episodes of linear enamel hypoplasia (LEH) suggesting episodes of physical stress at around 2.5 and 3.5 years.[48] A slight discrepancy between dental and diaphyseal age suggests possible growth disturbance.
- Individual 280, an adult female aged 45–58 years, exhibited a stature slightly above the contemporary average.[49] Dental and skeletal evidence included occlusal caries, mild calculus, periodontal disease, osteoarthritis of the cervical and lumbar *vertebrae*, and eburnation of the upper left sacral joint.[50] The *sternum* was markedly convex with straight mid-ribs, and the *sacrum* showed inward curvature at S4–S5, consistent with a compression fracture.[51]

41 Broca 1875; Acsádi – Nemeskéri 1970; Ferembach 1980.
42 Rogers 2009.
43 Schutkowski 1993.
44 Ruff *et al.* 2012.
45 Ruff *et al.* 2005.
46 Ruff 2007.
47 Ortner 2003; Buikstra 2010; Grauer 2011; Brothwell 2012; Appleby 2022.
48 Goodman – Rose 1990.
49 Giannecchini – Moggi-Cecchi 2008.
50 Rogers *et al.* 1991; Waldron – Rogers 1991; Rogers – Dieppe 2016.
51 Ortner 2003.

New bone formation on the tibial shaft indicates localized inflammation or trauma.[52]

- Individual 281 is an adult male aged 45–55 years (cal. ^{14}C 123–238 CE); he displayed mild dental disease, cervical *hyperlordosis*, and mild *scoliosis*. Additional conditions included complete hidden *spina bifida*, thoracic disc herniation with Schmorl's nodes, and ossification of both the thyroid gland and costal cartilage. Enthesopathy changes were observed at the insertions of the Achilles tendon, *gluteus maximus*, and *iliopsoas* (Fig. 5.B).[53]
- The last individual, 282, a probable female subadult aged 12–15 years (cal. ^{14}C: 126–240 CE), presented active *cribra orbitalia*,[54] lytic lesions on the left parietal bone, and multiple dental stress markers (severe enamel and dentin hypoplasia along with other lines of LEH) reflecting physiological stress episodes during early and late childhood. Postcranial lesions included osteolytic and enthesopathic changes at several muscle insertions, proximal tibial thickening, Harris lines, and vertebral cavitations (Fig. 5.A).

Future isotopic, DNA, and kinship analyses will aim to clarify their eventual biological relationships and mobility patterns.

The bioarchaeological investigation demonstrates how the integration of osteological, funerary, and cultural data can shed light on complex expressions of identity, belief, and ritual practice within Roman society. Burial 40, in particular, represents a rare intersection of collective interment, ritual manipulation, and symbolic animal deposition, revealing the persistence of multifaceted relationships between the living and the deceased. The presence of pathological conditions and advanced age among some individuals may, in future studies, allow inferences about care and social roles within the community. Furthermore, the youngest individual, presenting severe pathological alterations and positioned at the base of the grave, was the only one whose *cranium* remained *in situ*, possibly reflecting deliberate funerary choices or ritual practices requiring further investigation. Taken together, these findings contribute to a broader understanding of social dynamics, ritual behaviour, and cultural transformation in the Roman world.

Epigraphic evidence

The study of the epigraphic material unearthed during the excavation at AA39 has shed light on the identity and socio-cultural profile of the individuals buried in the area. These finds, currently under study,[55] can be dated between the first and the mid-3rd century CE, a period corresponding to the peak development of the urban necropolises across the entire city.[56]

Alongside *ingenui* such as C. Ofilius Ianuarius and Avidia Priscilla, attested respectively by a funerary altar[57] and a slab, both in marble, the necropolis was also used by several individuals of servile origin. Their presence is revealed both by the dedicatory *formulae* employed by the two *ingenui* mentioned above—who extended their funerary dedications to their freedmen and freedwomen and their descendants through the customary expression *libertis libertabusque posterisque eorum*—and by a substantial corpus of epigraphic evidence directly referring to persons of servile or libertine status or presumed to be such. Two women, both slaves, buried their children who had died at a very young age: Proba, mother of Secundianus, a child aged two, and another

52 Nikita 2016.

53 Mariotti *et al.* 2007.

54 Rinaldo *et al.* 2019.

55 The epigraphic finds are currently under study by the author, with the exception of a Greek metrical inscription, which has been examined by Raffaella Cantore (Università degli Studi di Ferrara).

56 For an overview of the urban necropoleis, see Manacorda 2012.

57 Lombardi – Dubbini 2025, 10, Fig. 9.

woman, whose name has been lost, mother of a *verna* of the emperor. A servile background may also be inferred for the woman commemorated by a mosaic inscription, Iul(ia) Chreste, who was likely the owner of the tomb. In this case, her status is suggested by the Greek *cognomen* Chreste, which is widely attested in Rome between the Augustan period and the 3rd century CE.[58] Similar observations apply to another *ingenuus* bearing a very common Greek *cognomen*, M. Cornelius Antiochus,[59] known from an inscription engraved on a marble slab. It is evident that among these individuals (distinguished by Greek and non-Greek *cognomina*) there were foreigners; however, in the absence of explicit indications derivable from the onomastics (*origo*), it is impossible to identify them based on the *cognomina* alone, given their wide diffusion, and even less possible to determine their geographical origin.

In one case, however, the cognomen itself offers a potential clue to the individual's origin. In the inscription of Aurelia Iabaranis (Fig. 6.A–B), we encounter the exceedingly rare surname Iabaranis (Iavaranis), a variant of which is attested twice in Numidia, in masculine form (Iavarius)[60] and feminine form (Iavarinis).[61] The rarity of this cognomen, a unicum in Rome, allows us in this case to consider it as a possible marker of the deceased's geographic origin, in addition to her servile background. Her *gentilicium*, Aurelia, may further suggest the acquisition of Roman citizenship following the *Constitutio Antoniniana* promulgated by Caracalla in 212 CE.[62] The inscription is carved on two adjoining fragments (26.9 × 7.8 × 2.5 cm; letter height 1.5 cm), corresponding to the raised portion of a low sarcophagus lid,[63] truncated at the sides; the back is smooth, except along the lower edge, where the rough surface marked the attachment to the lid's base; at the sides, along the line of fracture, the two holes for the insertion of metal clamps used to secure it are visible.. On the front, the two fragments preserve the upper and lower mouldings. At the centre lies a rectangular panel, framed by a moulding whose profile aligns at top and bottom with that of the raised portion. Within the slightly recessed epigraphic field, the following inscription is engraved:

D(*is*) *M*(*anibus*).
Aurelia`e´ Ia=
barane.

On either side of the panel, the upper and lower mouldings of the raised portion extend vertically along the panel's edges, forming circular arcs at the corners (of which only three are preserved). This is followed by two pairs of semicircular elements, separated at the centre by an ovoid element, visible only on the right side, whose surface is better preserved but presumably mirrored symmetrically on the opposite side. The motif, forming a sort of bracket shape, is uncommon in the design of sarcophagus epigraphic fields, which generally favoured linear forms defined by moulded frames. It is attested in Rome and other regions of Roman Italy in at least four examples (all with marine-themed decoration) dating to a period between the very end of the 2nd century and the mid-4th century CE.[64] Its presence is also observed at Cherchell, in Algeria—a possible area of origin

58 Solin 1996, 471.

59 Solin 1996, 244–247.

60 CIL VIII, 18409.

61 ILAlg II.3, 9779.

62 Salway 1994, 134.

63 Other examples of raised portions with a height between 7 and 8 cm: Giuliano 1988, no. 195, featuring a putto holding a garland (7.5 cm).

64 See the raised portion of the lid of the sarcophagus of T. Prifernius Crispinus, physician of the fourteenth urban cohort, from the Via Casilina, Marranella (L: 158 cm, maximum H: 21 cm, thickness: 2.2 cm); the lid, decorated with a marine-themed motif, is dated to the first half of the 4th century CE: Giuliano 1981, 106, no. 14 (L. Musso – R. Friggeri) = EDR072791 (M. Giovagnoli). See also Rumpf 1969, nos 70, 75, and 210.

of the deceased—on a strigilated sarcophagus of uncertain chronology.[65] The two fields to the right and left of the panel, also slightly recessed, present a smooth surface, except on the right, where, interrupted by the fracture, a raised curvilinear element of S-like shape is preserved, corresponding to the decoration that presumably ran along the sides of the panel. This element could suggest the spiralled tail of a marine creature—a motif particularly appreciated in sarcophagus iconography—and, as already noted, it appears in all examples featuring a panel framed similarly to that of the present sarcophagus. It is therefore within this urban production that the sarcophagus of Aurelia Iabarane should be placed. The epigraphic features, in particular the onomastics of the deceased, the frame motif, and the limited surviving decoration of the raised portion allow us to propose a preliminary dating back to the mid- to late 3rd century CE.[66]



Fig. 6. The raised portion of the lid of the sarcophagus of Aurelia Iabarane, A – front, B –back (photo: C. M. Marchetti).

Pending further investigation, it should be noted that the section of the Appian Way under study has already yielded traces of individuals of provincial origin, reflecting both the mobility of people and communities across the Empire and the multicultural character of the population of Rome. Of particular relevance to the theme of the conference is the presence, in the otherwise unknown vineyard of Giovanni Battista Leni—which Pighius situates near the second mile of the Appian Way—of the burial of a sixteen-year-old boy, M. Manlius Saturninus, originally from Segobriga.[67] He was an *ingenuus*, but likely of servile origin, as suggested both by his cognomen and by the status of the dedicator, Callistus, a freedman. The inscription, known only from a 16th-century

65 Baratte – Metzger 1985, no. 160; https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010275737 (last access: 20 February 2026).

66 The area from which the raised portion originates has yielded several fragments of marine-themed and strigulated sarcophagi, currently under study; analysis may reveal new elements useful for reconstructing the sarcophagus of Aurelia Iabarane and for refining its chronology.

67 CIL VI, 21956 = EDR100515; Ricci 1992, 114, H.a,15.

edition, can be provisionally dated to a period broadly spanning the mid-1st to the end of the 2nd century CE. Moreover, it is worth noting that the investigated area has yielded Greek-language inscriptions, reflecting a Greek-speaking population: in addition to the aforementioned metrical inscription uncovered during the excavations, currently under study, we should also mention the 18th-century discovery of the *kline* monument of the young Saturninus, originating from the 'vinea Bernardi Oliverii', located outside Porta San Sebastiano[68] and situatable near the excavation area (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Sarcophagus of Saturninus, after a drawing by Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (Bottari 1782, 301; IGUR III, 1324 = EDR126769).

The epigraphic evidence uncovered during the research at AA39 offers a reflection of the multicultural character of imperial Rome; the picture that emerges is consistent with epigraphic data recorded along the extramural stretch of the Appian Way over the centuries.

Conclusions

The necropolis of Via Appia Antica 39 (AA39) exemplifies the dynamic processes of cultural negotiation and transformation that shaped Imperial Rome. Situated in the liminal zone between the urban and suburban areas of the city, the site offers a unique case study in funerary hybridisation—the intersection of multiple ritual, architectural, and symbolic traditions within a single mortuary context. Dating primarily to the Antonine period, the complex features both cremation and inhumation burials, elaborately decorated funerary architecture, and a range of ritual practices that blend Roman, provincial, and potentially non-Roman elements. The integration of archaeological, bioarchaeological, and epigraphic data reveals how cultural plurality and social mobility materialised through death. The site's mixed funerary rite, combining cremation and inhumation within the same monuments, situates it within a transitional phase in Roman mortuary practice between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. This coexistence of rituals marks a period of ideological and cultural redefinition. The reuse and adaptation of *columbaria* into smaller, more individualized burial chambers demonstrate a gradual shift from collective to more personal forms of commemoration.

68 IGUR III, 1324 = EDR126769.

Over one hundred burials have been documented, representing both cremation and inhumation and encompassing a wide demographic spectrum. The assemblage displays a remarkable diversity of burial types reflecting flexible and evolving ritual practices. Among the most striking discoveries is Burial 40, located in Funerary Building 1. This deposit contained the remains of four individuals—two adults and two subadults—interred sequentially within a clay sarcophagus and accompanied by the secondary deposition of a horse's head. The stratigraphic sequence indicates repeated reopening of the grave, deliberate rearrangement of skeletal elements, and post-depositional removal of skulls. The absence of trauma on the cervical *vertebrae* suggests intentional removal after decomposition rather than decapitation at death. Comparable phenomena are attested elsewhere in Italy and the western provinces, where post-depositional manipulation of human remains—particularly skulls—has been interpreted as part of apotropaic or necromantic rituals, possibly intended to control, honour, or protect the deceased. The inclusion of equine remains further supports an interpretation in which the hybridisation of rituals drew upon multiple cultural traditions. Osteological analysis reveals variable health conditions and physiological stress markers, including growth disturbances, degenerative pathologies, and evidence of labour-related trauma. These data underscore the diversity of lived experiences and social roles within the AA39 community.

The epigraphic evidence provides equally valuable insights into the social and cultural identities of those buried at AA39. Several inscriptions attest to the presence of enslaved or freed individuals, such as the dedication by C. Ofilius Ianuarius. Others, such as that of Aurelia Iabaranis, reveal more specific indicators of geographic origin. Her rare *cognomen*, Iabaranis, is otherwise attested only in Numidia, suggesting a North African provenance. In the blending of Roman onomastic structures with provincial names, the funerary epigraphy thus mirrors the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Rome's population. The use of the Greek language in certain inscriptions further attests to the cosmopolitan composition of the community interred along the first suburban stretch of the Via Appia.

In conclusion, the case study of AA39 epitomizes the hybrid character of mid-Imperial Roman funerary culture, both materially and symbolically. Architecturally, the coexistence of cremation niches and inhumation *arcosolia* within the same buildings demonstrates the simultaneous practice of multiple rites, perhaps reflecting the presence of families or groups of diverse origins and beliefs sharing the same funerary space. Ritually, the evidence from Burial 40 stands as a paradigmatic expression of hybrid practice: the combination of collective interment, skull removal, and equine deposition reveals a fusion of Roman, provincial, and potentially 'folk-religious' elements. The deliberate reopening of graves and manipulation of remains suggests ritual performances concerned with the transformation of the deceased, their containment, or their continued influence among the living. The AA39 necropolis—a space where difference was continuously redefined, ritualized, and made visible through the material culture of death—reflects broader dynamics of social change, mobility, and identity formation in the Roman Empire. This site embodies a world in which social boundaries were porous and ritual traditions fluid, where new cultural forms emerged through the interplay of continuity and adaptation. Thus, the AA39 excavation contributes to a broader understanding of Imperial Rome as a culture of synthesis, in which the boundaries between Roman and non-Roman, life and death, individual and collective, were constantly negotiated and remade, standing as a material expression of the plural identities that animated both the living and the dead at the heart of the Roman Empire.

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