

The paper examines the transformation of associations of funeral professionals from the imperial period to late antiquity in terms of their status, organization, and role within Roman society. Funeral groups were mediators between the world of the living and the dead, and as such, occupied a liminal position within society (Lindsay 2000: 156-8). Perhaps due to the pollution that they were contracted to manage, imperial-era funeral directors (*dissignatores*), undertakers (*libitinarii*), executioners (*carnifices*), and numerous other funeral workers could incur *infamia* or social disabilities while engaged in the profession of handling the dead. The *Tabula Heracleensis* (CIL I² 593=ILS 6085=FIRA I, no.13) indicates that a Julian law excluded funeral directors and undertakers from municipal office, and both legal and literary sources associate these professionals with other *infamis* persons such as gladiators, pimps, and town criers. As Bodel (1994; 2000) has shown, funeral professionals provided an essential service for cities within the Roman Empire, one that municipalities often contracted out (cf. *AE* 1971, 88). This paper ranges beyond Bodel's focus on the regulation of Italian funeral workers in order to investigate the associative identity of undertakers, their networking with other *collegia*, and the increased importance of funeral associations during periods of plague, famine, and disaster.

Moreover, the paper identifies a shift in the social status, organization, and political role of funeral professionals. The glorification of the early imperial *fossores*, who stole Christian martyrs from Roman authorities so as to provide them a Christian burial, initially transformed the perception of undertakers among Christians. Together, the role of the early *fossores*, the Christian ideological emphasis on death, and the church's provision of burials to its congregation promoted the systemization and empowerment of funeral directors (*decani*) and gravediggers. By the fourth century, these professionals would form the lowest clerical order, receive tax exemptions, and be controlled by the state. The growth of Christianity improved the social and economic stature of funeral professionals and essentially transformed them from private associations to a state-regulated order overseen by bishops. As the Christian church bought up increasingly larger tracts of land for cemeteries in Constantinople, Rome, Antioch, and other large cities, bishops patronized increasing numbers of funeral workers to sell plots, bury members, and to serve as personal bodyguards (*Collectio Avellana*, 1.7=CSEL 35.3)—to the extent that their numbers had to be regulated (*Cod. Iud.* 1.2.4). The ideology that every Christian deserved a proper burial had widespread ramifications for funeral professionals, and established a new outlet for influence and status that, prior to Christianity, had not existed for these workers. The evolution of funeral associations from the imperial period to late antiquity illustrates many social changes within Roman society, but also demonstrates that *infamia* was in the eye of the beholder.