

The way in which the deceased are commemorated offers insight into the values and self-identification of a community. By analyzing the corpus of Jewish epitaphs from the city of Rome, I will isolate certain characteristics that demonstrate the Jews' divergence from their Roman contemporaries and anticipate later trends found in Christian inscriptions. Over the last twenty-five years, several important studies have probed the vast corpus of funeral inscriptions from the Roman world and advanced a framework from which observations on Roman family life can be drawn. By identifying the dedicators of inscriptions and their stated relationship to the deceased, Richard Saller and Brent Shaw (1984) determined that a high percentage of Roman epithets were concentrated within the nuclear family. In a separate article published in the same year, Shaw isolated inscriptions from the latter Roman Empire and articulated shifting patterns of commemoration that resulted in an even greater emphasis on nuclear family relationships following the rise of Christianity.

In this paper I apply the methods put forth by Saller and Shaw to the Jewish inscriptions, using them to evaluate and explain patterns of commemoration found within them. I began by analyzing the distribution of dedications in two ways: first, through the relationship between the deceased and the commemorator, and second, through the age at death specified on the epitaphs. Shaw demonstrated that the latter indicator could reliably predict the distribution of familial relationships between the commemorator and the deceased. This approach is particularly useful for samples of inscriptions in which the majority of stones do not indicate this relationship, as is the case with the Jewish inscriptions from Rome. These two methods confirm that the rate of nuclear family dedications in the Jewish inscriptions is high and quite close to that found in the later Christian inscriptions. However, it also highlighted the preponderance of stones that did not indicate a commemorator, which among the Jewish inscriptions proved to be nearly twice that found in the general Roman or in the Christian samples.

To explain this peculiarity in the Jewish inscriptions, I looked to other elements included on the tombstones. Following Hanne Sigismund Nielsen's article on the use of epithets in Roman funerary inscriptions (1997), I examined the epithets on the Jewish stones and again discovered a significant divergence from the general Roman sample, both in the diversity and character of the epithets. Finally, I considered elements unique to the Jewish inscriptions, such as the inclusion of certain symbols and the frequency of synagogue titles. This investigation revealed that in comparison to other Roman epitaphs, the Jewish funerary inscriptions reflected considerably less interest in the deceased's family relationships and to accompanying family values. Rather, the Jews chose to emphasize religious values on their funeral inscriptions through epithets, synagogue titles, and symbols.