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Pagans, Christians, and the *Domus Aeterna*

From the third to the fifth centuries AD, Christians in Rome decorated the catacombs with more than painting and carved sarcophagi. A widely practiced yet little studied phenomenon was the insertion of complete and fragmentary domestic objects into the cement that sealed individual *loculus* graves in these underground cemeteries. This practice is attested in catacombs on all of the major roads leading out of the city. While seventeenth- and eighteenth-century catacomb explorers remarked on the presence of these objects, which include fragmentary furniture mounts, daily-ware vessels, and objects of personal adornment and enjoyment, their poor state of preservation discouraged systematic examination of the material.

The condition of the objects found affixed to the graves determines their inclusion in one of three categories: objects that are complete and still functional, such as an upright lamp; objects that are complete yet non-functional because of the way they were inserted, such as a spoon or necklace; and objects that are both fragmentary and non-functional given the manner in which they were affixed to the tomb, such as a fragmentary ivory decorative furniture mount or a bone articulated doll that is missing a limb. In the majority of cases, when only a fragmentary object was included, it was the decorated portion that was reserved and included on the grave.

This paper addresses the types of objects affixed to the grave, their origin in the domestic realm, and their meaning in a funerary context. It argues that the inclusion of domestic objects was tied to the early Christian notion, borrowed from their pagan predecessors and counterparts, of the tomb as a *domus aeterna*. The paper further argues that the appropriateness of these objects is directly related to their function within the domestic realm. Just as decorated and undecorated objects performed a variety of functions within the home, so too in their transfer to the grave were they able to behave in a multitude of ways: as prophylactic devices, or as indicators of the deceased's position in the social hierarchy through the expression of their wealth, erudition, virtue, or devotion. Pieces of the deceased's identity were carried with them, in this manner, into death, providing a tangible link between daily life and afterlife on the late antique Christian grave.