

Considering Life, Death, and the Hereafter in Tomb Monuments in Early Modern Rome

Review of: Jan L. de Jong, *Tombs in Early Modern Rome (1400-1600). Monuments of Mourning, Memory and Meditation* (Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History, vol. 65), Leiden, Brill, 2022, 422 p., 135 ill., ISBN: 9789004179363 (hardback); 9789004526938 (e-book), € 162,41.

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Early-modern tomb monuments in the churches of Rome have received scholarly attention ever since the appearance of travel guides and epitaph collections in the fifteenth century. Modern studies have mainly taken the form of biographical inquiries or art historical investigations into stylistic features or iconography. In *Tombs in Early Modern Rome (1400-1600). Monuments of Mourning, Memory and Meditation*, Jan L. de Jong instead focuses on the dedicators and the image they crafted to shape or contribute to the remembrance of the deceased. He insightfully explores how the beliefs about life, death, and the hereafter of four categories of erectors were expressed in the tombs.

Chapter 1: '*Nos tegimus cineres, spiritus astra tenet*: Monuments, Mortal Remains and the Soul' introduces the reader to the traditions, regulations, and appearance of tombs in church buildings. Drawing from a diverse array of textual sources, De Jong elucidates that tombs not only served as repositories for the deceased but were also considered a place to await resurrection; keep alive the memory of the deceased; remind the living to pray for the salvation of their souls; stimulate meditation on life and death; and offer exemplars. Underlying these functions, the dedicators had emotional, religious, and societal or propagandistic reasons to erect the tombs.

In Chapter 2: '*(Vivens) sibi posuit*: Cardinals Planning Their Own Tomb Monument', De Jong scrutinizes why cardinals had tombs erected for themselves, consciously risking accusations of vainglory. He supplements practical motives, such as ensuring an appropriate resting place and avoiding burdening a descendant with erecting a tomb, with three more reasons: a desire to be remembered so survivors will keep praying for the salvation of his soul; to provide an *exemplum virtutis*; and encourage the viewer to contemplate mortality. Recognizable by the inscription '*sibi posuit*' (set up for himself), preceded by '*vivens*' (in his lifetime) if the execution was commenced before his passing, most of these monuments are furthermore relatively restrained in size, materials, and decoration and their epitaphs stress the deceased's modesty.

Unlike these cardinals' tombs that evoke mindfulness, papal tombs emphasize the virtues and earthly achievements of the deceased as the Supreme Ruler of the Church. The chapter '*Qui semper vanos tumuli contempsit honores: Directing the Memory of the Pope*' reveals that popes had limited control over their eventual burial sites. Even if they recorded preferences, had designs made, or initiated monument construction, relatives or successors often relocated their remains and erected new, sumptuous monuments. De Jong not only examines completed tombs but also analyzes preparatory drawings and unrealized plans, offering insights into the contemporary beliefs about the Last Judgment and the resurrection.

While tombs for clergymen are generally well-documented and often still intact, facilitating visual analysis, this cannot be said for many monuments erected by the two categories of laypeople discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Their tombs often consist(ed) of floor slabs that have been moved or destroyed, and knowledge about them relies on transcriptions of their epitaphs. The completeness of these monuments and transcriptions remains uncertain, and the potential significance of missing sculptural parts and other tombs in the vicinity of their original location is rightly emphasized. As De Jong suggests, exploring archival material (testaments, last wills, and written instructions for funerals and tombs) will likely provide a more comprehensive view. It is hoped that someone will undertake this challenging task.

Rather than focusing on one type of erector or dedicatee, Chapter 4: '*Optima, prudentissima, infelicissima: Mothers and Monuments*' delves into tombs for and by mothers, a category previously overlooked in scholarly studies. These monuments, though relatively rare, vary significantly in location, size, and appearance, defined by the financial resources and social status of the dedicator. While epitaphs in this category convey genuine grief, they offer limited insights into the beliefs and conduct of mothers in early-modern Roman society, a question De Jong aims to address.

The final chapter, '*Concordes et amantissime: Tomb Monuments for Spouses*', considers another rare type of monument: those where spouses expressly desired to be buried together. To explain their (mainly emotional) motives, De Jong revisits the complex issue of how early-modern people in Rome envisioned the hereafter, concluding that the tombs not only inspired visitors to pray for their souls and provided them with examples, but also demonstrated an implied belief in the consoling thought that spouses (and/or their children) who were united in the grave would still or again be joined in the afterlife.

This book stands out for its innovative and inclusive approach to tomb monuments through the aims and beliefs of their dedicators, presenting well-founded interpretations based on visual analyses, written sources, transcriptions, and translations of those. The author's accessible discussion of complex theological concepts furthermore makes it an invaluable resource to a broad audience. Abundantly illustrated with 135 figures, of which 65 percent are photos taken by the author himself, the volume showcases extensive on-site research, documenting both the richness and variety of the monuments as well as the challenges of studying them *in situ*, such as insufficient lighting and barely legible inscriptions. Thankfully, De Jong addresses these by fully transcribing and translating almost all inscriptions in the text, moreover pointing at the importance of studying word and image together.

While De Jong articulates the aim of crafting chapters that can be read independently, the book is best appreciated as a cohesive whole. Not only would reading Chapter 1 in isolation result in missing many illustrations spread across the book, the interconnected themes and permeable demarcation of the four categories, particularly the reappearance of cardinals as erectors in various chapters, and the complementarity of the final two chapters discourage a disjointed reading. By approaching this study as a whole, the reader is treated to a rich and insightful journey

through the cultural, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of early-modern tomb monuments in Rome.

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