

Flaming Torches: the Materiality of Fire on Roman Cinerary Urns

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The Roman proclivity for erecting funerary monuments in stone provides a canvas upon which attitudes towards grief and mourning can be explored. The appearance of torches or flames on funerary monuments is often interpreted as a symbol of a life ended prematurely, but a closer look at the monuments with torches reveals particular patterns, and their relative prominence as framing devices on cinerary urns suggests that there is a connection between funerary torches, cremated bodies, and stone vessels as eternal containers of the body. This investigation will focus on the materiality of marble cremation urns from the first and second centuries CE with depictions of torches, since these cinerary urns reflexively allude to their status as vessels and containers of the body after its physical transformation by cremation.

Fire has certain affordances and properties which make it an exceptional metaphor for both life and death. As a framing device, torches act as metaphor for life by framing, encapsulating, and punctuating. Like the process of mourning, fire represents a state of transition, mutability, and ultimate volatility; it can be ignited or quenched with decisive suddenness. The movement and heat of flames cannot be captured adequately in still form, and it becomes unmoving and cold when sculpted in marble, creating a tension between the materials and materiality of the receptacle. Once ignited, flames have anthropomorphized qualities: they breathe, move, grow and diminish; they give off heat, illuminate darkness, and have the ability both to destroy and purify. By exploring the connections between representational strategies and the materiality of fire, both for its own properties and on the stone monuments that depict it, this paper will illuminate the subtle ways in which the sculptural content on Roman cinerary urns demonstrate an awareness of their function as receptacles for bodies as well as the role of fire as a signifier of transformation.