Roman funerary rituals in Mutina (Modena, Italy)

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Introduction

Every society creates models of cultural reference for managing life events. Death is a painful and tragic episode to be faced, and the culture is called upon to manage it. There is a plurality of funerary behaviour, particularly highlighted by different funeral rituals that shape the mortuary landscape.

Birth and death have always been the two pivotal moments of human life, and Roman men and women, like in any other age, experienced the fear of death. However, death represented a moment of family reunion and strengthening of blood ties (De Filippis Cappai 1997). A death, in particular, showed the deceased's social identity and it was also the occasion on which the moral and civil values that strengthen the life of a community were expressed most clearly. In Roman times, then, the funerary ritual becomes an occasion of social communication.

The interest in the funerary rite in the Roman world, and its meaning, has increased over the past decade in an attempt to understand not only the material culture, but also the social being, because funerary ideology is an integral part of an effective system of representation that the society gives to itself. Although it is impossible to draw general conclusions applicable to all areas of the Roman Empire, because of the fragmentary archaeological documentation available, we can observe a commitment to taking care of the sepulchre and the execution of sepulchral rites near the tombs in tribute to the dead and the gods. However, it should not be forgotten that subjective ways of behaviour could exist, because of the residual cultural persistence of pre-colonial foundations or processes of assimilation still ongoing among the several ethnic components.

Formerly limited to funeral inscriptions, or to the architecture of the tomb and to the treatment of the corpse (burial and cremation), analyses of Roman necropolises (Ortalli 2011) are now centered on the practices and funeral rites that accompanied the separation of the living and on the methods of managing funerals protected by the law of the tombs and the religious status conferred on them.

There is a specific reason for this enlargement in perspective, which is first of all taking into account what we are told by the literary or legal texts of the Roman era. The grave was certainly a place of social representation, designed to cultivate the memory of the dead and his rank in local society – hence the disposition of the tombs in suburban necropolises along the roads – but it was mostly defined as an inviolable place and populated by infernal gods. As we know, thanks to the epigraphic documentation, it was believed that the spirit of the dead was absorbed within the community of the *Dis Manes* (Hinard 1987). Keeping this relationship constant and carrying out the rituals, the dead and the *Manes* would have had a *secura quies*.

Project

The aim of the project here presented is to review the archaeological and archaeobotanical remains from roman necropolis contexts at Mutina (Modena, northern Italy), dated from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD. The purpose of the research was to make a wider and complete

framework associated with the deeper aspects concerning post-death rituals, as inferred from graves contexts. The research focused on the foodstuffs and offerings that were common during the Roman Age, the way of thinking they represent, and the symbolism related to death in juxtaposition with life. How did they change in relation to individual, social, and economic aspects?

The archaeological sites analysed provided hundreds of graves, both of the cremation and inhumation type. In addition to traditional methods, such as sieving and flotation, new advanced technologies helped to study the offerings found. For this reason, in order to visualise the internal structure of the burned archaeological samples using non-invasive techniques, CT scans were undertaken for 3D reconstructions of the archaeological samples. To investigate the temperatures reached at ancient cremations, archaeological samples were analysed using small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS). Clearly there is much scope with such material for future analysis once further information becomes available, and at the same time a warning sounded that much important evidence will be lost if excavation attitudes and conditions are not sensitive to fragile archaeological contexts.

Taking into account the central role of funeral rituals, moreover, established by research carried out by John Scheid (2005), one of the objectives of the work done at the necropolis of *Mutina* was to adapt the archaeological and archaeobotanical strategy to identify and interpret rituals and funerary practices. The nature of these remains of meals left at the graves, and of the objects involved in the ceremonies (i.e. ceramics, glass, animal bones, seeds, fruit, etc.), explains that the traces left by these activities are fleeting, and their identification necessarily requires a strategy for their systematic collection during the excavation phase, and focused analysis, to reconstruct the activities carried out around an individual's death, which characterise three important moments: funeral, implementation of the tomb, and visits to the dead.

What is required is an interdisciplinary method, involving different disciplines of archeology, to best address the diversity of the evidence resulting from the attendance of the funeral space. This should be particularly useful in the strategy that must be adopted in necropolis excavations for sampling and then the sieving of the collected sediments.

Religious thought

The difficulty of reconstructing Roman funerary rituals through archaeology derives from several factors, such as the fragmentation of the information that has come to us and the very essence of matter, characterised by subjective attitudes, devoid of any precise coding, and variables depending on time and place. Roman funerary thought is a complex issue that does not lend itself to easy generalisations, not only because of the lack of explicit testimonies but also on account of its polytheistic nature, open to the most diverse ideological perspectives, preventing the definition of a precise system of beliefs.

Roman religious thought, in fact, has no rigid theological and doctrinarian system, and thus a broad spectrum of opinion and great tolerance was granted, as we can see from the variety of procedures connected with the funerary cult (Ortalli 2011). Undoubtedly, due to social

habits and conventions, there existed recurrent and standard behaviours, above all in public expression.

The relationship between the Roman individual and death, then, included no refined transcendent speculation; instead, a quite pragmatic approach must have been prevalent, which was based on basic existential worries concerning more the earthly world than the afterlife (Ortalli 2011).

The tenets of the Epicurean school, a doctrine based on skepticism about immortality, with a materialistic concept of life and the adoption of principles inspired by the notion of *carpe diem*, were widespread among the Romans. Similar concepts are visible through monuments, frescoes, sarcophagi, and inscriptions, which transpose the joyful mood of the earthly *otium* into a funerary key.

Rituals

The texts' legal authorities consider burial as a *locus religiosus*, a 'religious place' – by definition inalienable and protected by divine right – which is why rites are included in the definition of a tomb (Gaius, *Institutes* II: 4 and II: 6; Cicero, *De Legibus* 2: 22). The ritual sequences were not limited to the constitution of the grave, they intervened throughout the funeral to ensure proper separation of the dead from the living: these acts re-established the everyday life troubled by death. There were celebrations of a series of acts addressed to the deceased, and these symbolic acts were repeated during the ceremonies of the dead, in which it was necessary to honour them.

During Roman times, ritual offerings were widespread in graves, especially during three principal ceremonies: the libation, the funeral meal, and the gifts to the dead. Indeed, at archaeological sites evidence of raw, cooked, or burnt food within funerary contexts depends on human practices: different kinds of objects and products can potentially provide more information about the dead, their beliefs, and customs. Such evidence is frequently categorised as pertaining to 'secondary rites'.

Plants

Plants have always been important in human history, not only because they provide food, medicines, fuel, and materials, but also for their social uses, including religious ones, i.e. in association with funeral rites. In the Mediterranean, traditions linked to plants can have very ancient roots, which, in many cases, were transferred from Archaic Greece to the Roman World (Bosi *et al.* 2017).

The likelihood of plant remains becoming charred during Roman funerary rituals and surviving within the archaeological context is far from rare. Therefore, with the help of archaeobotanical investigations it is possible to reconstruct some of the funeral rituals in parts of the Roman Empire for which no written evidence is available.

Thus archaeobotanical studies applied to necropolises provides information on funeral rituals and practices (Bouby and Marinval 2004; Rottoli and Castiglioni 2011), and the types of vegetal

offerings for the deceased (Cooremans 2008; Matterne and Durreumaux 2008; Robinson 2002). Plant offerings, therefore, seem to be a substantial and indispensable component of the *convivium*, an act of communion between the partecipants (*Ovidius* II, 535). It is first of all a form of honour for the dead and also, according to beliefs, it has another function: to neutralise the ill-will of the dead through the shared consumption of the meal. The remains of rituals thus become a tool for understanding the different ideological visions of individuals and groups within ancient societies. At the beginning and end of a funeral there were series of acts in which an important part was reserved for the symbolic consumption of food with the dead and the *silicernium*, also known as *cena feralis*, served rather to purify the family. The plant offerings are considered to belong to two different moments of the *funus*: charred remains were   perhaps spread over the pyre and those unburnt were added during the proceeding ceremonies. It is also plausible to think that certain foods were reserved only for the wealthiest classes, as with distinctions made between offerings for the deceased and those for the *Manes* (Riso 2014). More generally, the common use of dried fruits and seeds, therefore available throughout the year, may have facilitated the repetition of ritual gestures.

In addition to these studies, anthracology can sometimes help us to visualise the setting up of the funeral pyre and better understand the motivations influencing the gathering of wood for its construction. Analyses of charcoals from burials show that human beings interact with their environment and adapt to it according to needs related to use and customs (Salvayre and Durand 2011).

Gardens

The construction of 'garden tombs' was another means for creating a visual impact. These provided settings for the living to use and enjoy on a regular basis, as well as creating monuments for the deceased. There is both archaeological and literary evidence pertaining to such garden tombs throughout Italy and in other parts of the Roman world. Their occurrence within city cemeteries at places such as Pompeii, where they are often associated with *schola* or bench tombs, further suggests that these tombs were created as areas to be utilised regularly by the public, and not just by family members on specific days of ritual. Such monuments imply that a certain amount of interaction between the living and the dead was not only acceptable, but fully expected (Campbell 2008).

The most famous of all freedmen, Petronius's Trimalchio (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 71), when outlining the plans for his tomb to dinner guests, makes known that 'In front, I want my tomb to measure one hundred feet long, but two hundred feet deep. Around it I want an orchard with every known variety of fruit tree. You'd better throw in a vineyard too.' Although this was meant as satire, inscriptions from surviving tombs evidence that this was not such a far-fetched idea. It is thought that, rather than being strictly ornamental, grave gardens were often used to provide – from the land around the monument – enough produce to sustain the shade of the departed (Campbell 2008). One inscription (*CIL* XII 1657; *ILS* 8367) states that vineyards were planted specifically to provide wine for libations. Other evidence suggests that there was profit to be made from the sale of produce grown in garden graves, including fruit and vegetables. One asks (*CIL* V 7454; *ILS* 8342) that it should be his own plants 'from whose yield my survivors may offer roses to me on my birthday forever'. In an inscription on a

tomb built outside Rome by the freedmen Gaius Hostius Pamphilus (*CIL* I2 1319; *ILS* 8341),[1] the enclosure of the tomb is referred to as both a farm and garden. Another tomb in Rome (*CIL* VI 10237; *ILS* 7870) describes itself in the inscription as being planted with vines, fruits, flowers, and greenery, as well as having a sundial. It is not at all unusual to hear of large grave gardens, beautifully landscaped with all the embellishments that decorated the gardens of the living: shaded triclinia, statues, sundials, pools, fountains, formal plantings, and homes for caretakers (Von Hesberg 1994). Evidence from Ostia (Pellegrino 1999), Isola Sacra (Baldassarre *et al.* 1996), and Pompeii (Lepetz and Van Andringa 2008) includes *triclinia* and *biclinia* as parts of a tomb complex, which can also contain provisions for cooking and supplies of fresh water. Many funerary items actually contain depictions of drinking and dining. These images, often of the deceased reclining on a couch, are found in tomb paintings and in reliefs on altars, cinerary urns, and sarcophagi. As there is a tradition of both garden and graveside dining in the Roman world, it is therefore likely that these two activities were combined. Some researchers have suggested that 'poorer members of the community should be imagined conducting feasts in the form of picnics' (Von Stackelberg 2009). For those unable to afford a large peristyle house, garden tombs could have provided the sort of green space needed for a picnic. The dead may have been gone – but they were certainly not forgotten by the ancient Romans. In addition to festivals and anniversaries that celebrated the dead, and required visits to, and sacrifices made at the grave site, the practice of burial along the roadside ensured that the dead were a constant in the daily lives of anyone entering or leaving the city. As the primary motivation in constructing a grave was remembrance, the key was to attract the attention of those passing by. Including lavish gardens, sweet-smelling flowers, or simply providing shade on a hot day under a single tree for the weary traveller, would assure one's continued place in the thoughts of the living (Campbell 2008).

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[1] 'Haec est domus aeterna, hic est fundus, heis sunt horti, hoc est monumentum nostrum.'