Burial Taphonomy and Post-Funeral Practices in Pre-Roman Italy – an Introduction

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In the recent past, funerary taphonomy has become a fundamental pillar of the archaeology of death[1]. Its goal is to reconstruct funerary behavior in premodern societies by analyzing the taphonomic evidence, with regard to both the decomposition of the human body and the degradation of other material objects associated with it in the grave. Moreover, the "biography" of graves themselves has more and more become a focus of research, which attests to a growing interest in the post-funeral history of monuments in more general terms. In accordance with this broadening view on funerary and post-funeral practices, archaeologists have become increasingly aware that burials are not necessarily closed and permanently sealed contexts but can be subjected to a variety of changes and alterations from the moment of the funeral up to the present day. Investigating the treatment of the body in the grave, its arrangement and presentation at the funeral, and the process of its decomposition thereafter contributes to a better understanding not only of a specific archaeological context but also of the cultural and religious ideologies involved in funerary behavior in general. Moreover, careful study of the archaeological record in combination with taphonomic observations makes post-funeral interventions in and around graves visible. The reuse of graves is perhaps the most prominent expression of such a practice, but the extraction and redeposition of grave goods in secondary contexts are equally frequent. In both cases, the intentional dislocation or disassembling of human remains and of grave goods attest to an intentional redefinition of the deceased's social and personal identity by human agents of later periods.

The present volume unites a series of articles that were presented at a workshop held in Basel on January 12, 2021—albeit in an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic—and is supplemented with a study by *Norma Lonoce, Serena Viva, Stefano Vassallo*, and *Pier Francesco Fabbri* on cremation burials in the Western necropolis of Himera. Starting from our own archaeological research in the early Iron Age and Archaic necropolis at Francavilla Marittima in Northern Calabria, the workshop aimed to exchange insights and firsthand results from recent excavations regarding taphonomic and post-funeral processes in pre-Roman burial contexts in Italy[2]. In addition to specific case studies from throughout the Italian peninsula, the volume also contains more general discussions of transformational phenomena involved in funerary and post-funeral practices in pre-Roman Italy. We thereby hope to contribute to the growing awareness of the importance and explanatory power of archaeothanatology with regard to both taphonomic processes and post-funeral practices.

1 See the introductions to archaeothanatology and funerary taphonomy by Duday 2009; Duday 2006; Knüsel – Robb 2016. For a discussion of the relationship between ancient funerary taphonomy and forensic human taphonomy, see the introductory remarks by Vincent Varlet and Negahnaz Moghaddam in this volume.

2 Due to the workshop's integration in our SNF-funded research project "Investigating Colonial Identity: Greek and Native Interaction in Northern Calabria (800–500 BC)" (grant number 175613: https://francavilla.philhist.unibas.ch/de/home/), its focus was deliberately set on the archaeological aspects of funerary taphonomy. Anthropological and bioanthropological research—which are, of course, crucial to the success of archaeological analyses and feature as a basis in most of the contributions—could not be integrated in due form because of time and space limitations.

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The initial article by *Vincent Varlet and Negahnaz Moghaddam* provides an anthropological introduction to human taphonomy. While the following articles focus on an archaeological-anthropological perspective and are largely written from an archaeological point of view, specialists from the field of anthropology were recruited for the first article to offer insights into forensic taphonomy.

Despite the large geographical, cultural, and chronological area covered by the case studies presented in this volume, several corresponding lines emerge with regard to the treatment of the body both at the moment of death and during its deposition in the grave as well as in later stages of the funerary "biography." It is tempting to assume that these congruences reflect corresponding concepts of death and the way it is pragmatically and ritually confronted by the burial communities in different periods of time and in different cultural settings. Among these congruences, two aspects that are closely interlinked seem crucial: the function of the grave as a space of memory and the perception of the decomposition, disintegration, and fragmentation of the body in funerary ideology.

Due to our lack of evidence and historical information, assessing both these aspects is difficult, as most of the authors emphasize in their studies. In most cases, it is difficult if not impossible to pinpoint the precise motivation for a specific treatment of the body in the grave. As an example, we would like to refer to the case of a densely packed bundle of bones in grave Strada 7 at Francavilla Marittima, which *Martin Guggisberg and his co-authors* interpret to be a reburial on the basis of anthropological and taphonomic observations. The fact that we are dealing in this case with an isolated phenomenon in the necropolis supports the idea of an intentional event. The reasons for the unusual treatment of the body remain, however, in the realm of speculation.

Funerary ideology certainly plays an important role in the way a dead body is treated. We must be aware, however, that practical or economic needs can also be responsible for specific arrangements of corpses. The complexity of the issue becomes best apparent at Megara Hyblaea. In her study, *Reine-Marie Bérard* underlines the difficulties involved in classifying the motivations for the frequent attestation of "collective" burials (meaning graves in which several persons were buried *successively*). In cases where several children or adults were buried at close intervals in one single grave or sarcophagus, family ties might be an argument. In cases where the preserved grave goods attest to a longer time span of use, economic considerations could be involved. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that a grave was reused because of some specific memory of the original owner(s) of the grave. Whatever the motivation was in each single case, one gladly follows the author in her statement that the reuse of graves is situated "halfway between post-funeral and funerary practices" (p. 147).

Renegotiating identity: The grave as a space of memory

Memory clearly plays an important role in many cultures with regard to the reuse of graves and the treatment of the remains of former grave owners. While the case of Megara Hyblaea is rather exceptional for Greek cities in the Magna Graecia, the relocation of bones and grave goods in floor cavities and niches inside as well as outside of graves is a common feature of Italian burial traditions. The custom is largely attested in South-Eastern Italy from the fifth to the third centuries BC, as well as in Campania (Pontecagnano) and Etruria from the Orientalizing period onwards. *Matthias Hoernes*, *Carmine Pellegrino*, *Antonella Massanova*, *Anna Rita Russo*, *Luca Cappuccini*, and *Giulia Peri* present ample evidence of this widespread custom, a tradition that all the authors agree in identifying as a sign of a conscious culture of remembrance.

In his paper, *Matthias Hoernes* underlines the fact that the relocation of older burials in a new place was often accompanied by a careful selection of the human remains to be redeposited and the grave goods that followed them. He convincingly concludes from this observation that the reduction of human remains and grave goods followed a deliberate choice to renegotiate the status of the deceased sometime

after their death by reinforcing certain aspects of their social identity and personhood while dissolving others. Similar ideas might be involved in other cultural areas too, where redepositing corpses was generally accompanied by a reduction of human remains and grave goods. In this regard, we would like to refer to the famous grave 4461 at Pontecagnano, which is mentioned by *Carmine Pellegrino and his co-authors* and has received much scholarly interest for its exceptional composition and the absence of the skull. Similar selection practices are also attested in Etruria, where bone assemblages consisting primarily of long bones and skulls were deposited in cavities in the Tomba dell'Iscrizione of the Poggio Renzo necropolis near Chiusi as well as in the well-known Tomba dei Demoni Azzurri at Tarquina, as is pointed out by *Luca Cappucini and Giulia Peri*.

Skulls and long bones might have been chosen for special treatment simply because they are the most easily recognizable and manipulable remains of a human corpse. However, their respectful relocations—sometimes in pots and vessels—in several graves at Pontecagnano (e.g., graves 788, 8396, and 8398) and the careful treatment of the skull in grave Strada 7 at Francavilla Marittima may point to some deeper meaning related, perhaps, to a respect for death, its symbolic power, and the identity of the deceased.

Decomposition and fragmentation: The grave as a space of transformation

Another aspect that we would like to mention—one that is related in some respects to the phenomenon of reduction discussed in the previous paragraphs—concerns the fragmentation of objects and skeletal remains. In his paper dealing with the post-funeral practices in Picenum, *Joachim Weidig* refers to a big impasto container from cenotaph grave 410 at Bazzano, which was ritually broken and carefully arranged around the body of a presumed eminent warrior. Similar cases of ritually broken pottery are attested in funeral contexts all over Italy. The reasons behind this phenomenon may vary. Still it is tempting to compare the intentional fragmentation and defunctionalization of objects in a funerary context with the transformation of a person from a living being to a dead corpse, a transformation that may also be partly reflected in the ritual of cremation adopted at different times and places in pre-Roman Italy. *Norma Lonoce and her co-authors* present a case study from the Western cemetery at Himera that is a good example of the latter. Despite considerable variation in the technicalities of cremation, on-site incineration of corpses in burial pits prevails. Contrary to what we know from other sites, incinerated remains were only collected entirely in urns in exceptional cases. In most cases, they were left untouched in the burial pits. To a certain extent, this reflects the integrity of the human body that was generally respected in inhumations, which also exist at Himera.

Beyond the past: Taphonomy and modern intervention

Of course it is not possible to address all the issues discussed in the articles included in the present volume. However, among them, one specific issue should be briefly mentioned here. It concerns the impact of modern land use on the preservation and transformation of ancient funerary landscapes. In the case of the Monte Del Bufalo necropolis at ancient Crustumerium, *Barbara Belelli Marchesini and her co-authors* from the Dutch–Italian research team investigating the site rightly insist on the severe damages that the funerary landscape has suffered from centuries of (deep) ploughing and from more recent illicit excavations. In particular, Early Iron Age graves, which were dug as shallow trenches in the topsoil, are almost completely gone. Similar developments are threatening many archaeological sites. As they have an immediate impact on the preservation of funerary remains, both agricultural and illicit interventions into ancient burial grounds form an important though easily overlooked part of a holistic approach to funerary taphonomy.

In conclusion it must be stated that the taphonomic study of burial customs in pre-Roman

Italy is still at its very beginning. Many peculiarities presented in the papers of this volume remain isolated phenomena and cannot be fully interpreted. Hopefully, however, intensified archaeothanatological research in combination with anthropological, archaeological, and bioarchaeological studies will lead to a better understanding of the treatment of the deceased. Considering the complexity of the issues involved in this debate, the contributions of this volume are hardly more than a drop on a hot stone; if they provide, however, an impetus for intensive research in the field of archaeothanatology and for the development of new approaches toward the conception of death and how it was dealt with in pre-Roman times, a major goal of the editors would be achieved.

As mentioned above, the workshop from which the present volume evolved was inspired by our current research on the necropolis of Francavilla Marittima in Northern Calabria. It was, however, Claudia Gerling's and Céline Zaugg's idea to dedicate the volume to the topic of funerary taphonomy, and we would like to thank them for proposing this particular emphasis. Further inspiration is owed to the anthropologists Laura Rindlisbacher, Jessica Fäh, and Sandra E. Pichler, who are working on the project in Calabria with us. In order to make the results available to a worldwide readership as quickly and easily as possible, we decided for the open-access format offered by Propylaeum eBooks as a suitable medium. We would like to thank Katrin Bemmann, Frank Krabbes, and their team for their efficient and inspiring collaboration and support. Special thanks are due to Simone Hiltscher for the careful ediotorial supervision of the volume. Last but not least, we would like to thank all the colleagues that helped improve the scientific quality of the publication by anonymously reviewing the papers.

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