DEATH AND THE SOCIETIES OF LATE ANTIQUITY

NEW METHODS, NEW QUESTIONS?

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New methods, new questions?

Significant developments in the methodologies used both in the field and in the laboratory have paved the way for a renewal of thinking about the populations and burial practices of Late Antiquity. Alongside work done on the period and the role of burial practices (see for example Boissavit-Camus et al, 1996; Boyer, 2019; Cartron et al, 2016; Chavarría-Arnau, 2007; Granier, 2017; Guyon, 2005; Heijmans, 2004; Lambert, 2013; Nissen-Jaubert, 2007; Rebillard et al, 2009), the emergence of the area of study then known as “field anthropology” (Duday, 2005) has been crucial in reshaping the focus of research. Recent studies, aided by a proliferation of archaeological examples, reveal a desire to re-examine and revise data, not only anthropological, but also archaeological and historical (Barbiera, 2012; Boyer et al, 2014; Buchet, 1996; Castex et al, 2015; Chavarría-Arnau, 2019; Kacki et al, 2017; Laubry, 2016; Lauwers et al, 2016). These studies increase our knowledge about the treatment of the dead, the place of death among the living, the location of burial sites, and even the structure of tombs; all these elements are of course variable according to region and culture.

These recent studies, which now tend to be multidisciplinary, help us to re-examine accepted truths and to revitalize our thinking about the way in which these ancient societies envisaged Death and managed their dead in the context of the multiple changes occurring within the Roman Empire and on its margins.

Late Antiquity is marked by its political, social, economic, and cultural evolutions. This period of major societal changes initially saw the coexistence of Roman institutions and new social structures, especially those emerging from the early Christian religion. The societies of Late Antiquity are therefore characterized by a mosaic of political, social, and cultural entities, both in the heart of the Empire's provinces and on their borders.

Can this plurality of situations also be detected in the burial practices of the period? Which elements help us to identify and define this diversity? And to what extent can burial practices really help us to understand the living conditions of ancient communities and their developments? Between the first centuries of the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity, what degree of either continuity or change in demographic and cultural dynamics do these practices reveal?

Specific reflection on the world of the dead, on a large geographic and thematic scale and in all its disciplinary plurality, has therefore become essential. Anthropology and its related sciences (biology, archaeothanatology, biochemistry) are crucial to this, alongside archaeological, historical, environmental, and societal approaches. This call for papers is for a two-day event dedicated to examining this set of questions.

Research themes for proposals may therefore include a wide range of topics, such as:

Relationships between land ownership and land rights and the creation of burial sites
Access to land use and land rights, particularly in an urban context, evolved at the same time as the creation of new burial sites. Did these practices lead to a change in land rights or was it rather the case that the evolution of these rights (brought about by change in the urban framework) facilitated new practices? These questions call for an exchange of ideas between archaeo-anthropological approaches and studies of texts relating, for example, to changes in land use or to the availability of certain areas for use for the dead.
Expressing social identity in death
How was the identity of individuals maintained in death in the communities of Late Antiquity? It is important to understand how various burial choices reflect the social, cultural, or religious beliefs of the different communities. Can grave markings, or indeed the absence of markings, tell us about the position of the individuals in society, or about their beliefs?

Detecting the plurality of cultures and communities in their perception of death, bodies, and tombs
The evolution of thinking and its plurality lead to the emergence of often highly diverse ideas relating to death. This plurality can be seen in the first centuries of the Roman period, thanks to the multitude of communities that each had their own established practices. In the light of changes to the sociocultural framework of Late Antiquity, how were understandings of the body, death, and tombs (as a structure) or burial sites (in terms of location and topography) transformed? How did these transformations translate into burial practices?

Reorganization of the Empire and burial practices
Late Antiquity saw significant changes, both political and territorial. Did the evolution of the political and administrative management of the Empire, the change in the urban framework of many cities, or the reorganization of land in the countryside bring about transformations in burial practices? Or was there in fact a form of continuity within the mortuary gestures adopted? Looking beyond the conceptual framework, there were a number of very specific transformations of an economic, cultural, political, or social nature. Did these changes also influence burial practices?

Relationships between population groups in the expression of burial practices
Both at the wider scale of the Empire and its neighbors and at the smaller scale of the group (civitas, town, community), the relationships between the different population groups may affect the practices adopted by each. Did certain population groups influence others in the implementation and expression of burial practices? If so, which ones and how?

Populations: Composition, evolution, plurality
Exchange between populations took place right from the beginning of the Empire, and even before. Trade routes naturally involved the movement of individuals, changing the composition of human groups over time. How were communities characterized and how did they evolve? What were the burial practices and beliefs of the populations in the territories in the west of the Roman Empire and on their margins? Specific events can also affect the composition of population groups: it is important to assess the impact that incidents of mass mortality—caused by factors related to health, war, or the environment—can have on the composition of human groups and on burial practices in the short and long term. For example, the Antonine Plague, which occurred in the 2nd century AD, directly affected the economic life and indeed the very structure of the Empire during the 3rd century. What are the long-term consequences of a pandemic of this nature?

These themes can be approached from numerous angles, whether archaeo-anthropological, biological, historical, archaeological, topographical, or societal. We especially welcome multidisciplinary papers, whether these are synthetic or based on case studies.
The conference languages are French and English. Proposals for oral communications or posters (in English, or in English and French) must be submitted by January 31, 2021 to mortantiquitetardive@gmail.com. Proposals must include the title of the presentation (in English, or in English and in French), a list of authors with their respective institutional affiliation and contact details, a summary (in English, or in English and in French) of 1800 characters for posters or 3000 characters for presentations, and a biography of the authors (in English, or English and French) of 1000 characters.

Oral communications will be 15 minutes long, followed by 10–15 minutes of discussion time. Accompanying PowerPoints should be in English, even for presentations that will be delivered in French. Posters are to be in English.

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References


