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Review: 'Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices'

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Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2015.07.23

J. Rasmus Brandt, Marina Prusac, Håkon Roland (ed.), *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices. Studies in funerary archaeology, 7.* Oxford; Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2015. Pp. xix, 456. ISBN 9781782976394. \$70.00.

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Preview

The fourteen conference papers in this collection explore chronological changes in funerary rituals and advance theoretical approaches that help explain such changes. The case studies range from the Mesolithic to the Early Modern periods and concentrate on European contexts. They are arranged chronologically, with four contributions on prehistory, one Etruscan, three Roman imperial, two late antique, three medieval and one early modern. The opening chapter briefly sets out five themes that characterize, to varying degrees, all subsequent contributions: change versus continuity, the relationship between practice and belief, the treatment and deposition of bodies, burial location and grave goods, and ritual and commemorative processes.

Overall, there may be more variety than commonality between the chapters, not only in terms of the broad coverage, but also in terms of the level of detail, the favored interpretive approach and theoretical perspective, and the emphasis on eschatological versus secular aspects of funerary ritual. It is difficult to navigate among the different positions, because the authors rarely reference other contributions in the same volume. There is no concluding chapter and the aforementioned introduction sets out rather general connections. The lack of cohesion is not necessarily a problem, because the collection still provides a wealth of information, on both specific scenarios and the methodological challenges of funerary archaeology. It does mean, however, that this book does not advance a unified message and readers will be likely to consult it for individual contributions. This is why the remainder of this review treats each chapter on its own terms.

Liv Nilsson Stutz rehearses a theoretical model that visualizes mortuary ritual primarily as a practice. This approach attempts to capitalize on the ability of archaeological research to document “people’s actions” (5) rather than symbolic meaning. The Victorian cremation debate and American open casket burials are

used to illustrate this theory and Mesolithic Baltic cemeteries constitute a prehistoric test case. The author acknowledges that the “rich historical record” (11) is missing in the latter scenario, and the explanations for ritual change necessarily offer only tentative suggestions on their meaning.

Andrea Dolfini’s chapter traces the switch from Neolithic intra-settlement burial to Copper Age extramural cemeteries. Countering processual models that explain this change with increasing social stratification, the author proposes that nucleated cemeteries articulated a group identity at a time when increasing mobility and scattered habitation undermined group feeling in villages. Many of the new practices actually preserve “the basic tenets of the Neolithic burial programme” (35) and, consequently, changes in ritual do not necessarily imply changes in meaning. Overall, the historic reconstruction is quite plausible, but it also ventures into speculative grounds, especially when it comes to the cosmological significance of rituals.

Chris Fowler reviews van Gennep’s theoretical model of rites of passage and applies it to final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age burials in Northumberland. The chapter successfully demonstrates that the switch from inhumation to cremation was part of a much wider transformation of funerary rites that probably mirrors an emerging sense of community. The chapter’s exhaustive treatment of the material evidence obscures the trends and correlations in the data, but the theoretical insight that funerary rites are not solely reflective of identities but actively transform identities is valuable.

Heinrich Härke and Andrej Belinskij summarize the fascinating history of a Caucasian cemetery over almost two millennia. They provide a few hypothetical speculations about eschatological changes, but their main argument clearly demonstrates that ritual changes correlate to ethnic, economic, and social parameters of the different historical phases. The conclusion that these factors are all interrelated leads to the important reminder that single-cause explanations are usually too simplistic to account for complex historical changes. The discussion privileges an “elite plot” (96) of the cemetery; hence, the chapter does not cover the ways in which the observed historical changes affected other sectors of society.

J. Rasmus Brandt traces a switch in Etruscan tomb paintings from earlier scenes depicting funerary rituals to later scenes of the otherworldly passage to the underworld. The argument is a systematic application of van Gennep’s theoretical model of rites of passage to the ritual actions that the paintings imply. This leads to the conclusion that the rituals and beliefs that shaped responses to death did not fundamentally change over time and the switch towards otherworldly scenes merely represents the dissolution of a taboo against such scenes (which, consequently, already existed in the Etruscan imagination without a need to depict them).

Sven Ahrens presents a comprehensive survey of cremation in Asia Minor through a detailed table and corresponding distribution maps. The survey reveals fluctuations in cremation over time, from a low during the Classical period, through a comeback during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods, to a general decline in the second and third centuries CE. The overall pattern is explained through external phenomena, such as Persian purity laws, Macedonian

migration, and Roman cultural preferences, but the author also points out that broad trends can be overshadowed by individual circumstances. In contrast to previous chapters, Ahrens makes little use of anthropological theory and focuses more on social change than beliefs.

John Pearce takes up the question of how Roman rule affected iron-age funerary rituals by surveying assemblages of grave goods in elite burials that were deposited between the first century BCE and the third century CE. Taking issue with interpretations that emphasize the conservative nature of funerary ritual, Pearce highlights the functionality of grave goods and observes “a more culturally specific perspective” (237) in the assemblages that date to the period of Roman rule. The interpretation of objects in their original ritual context undoubtedly enables a nuanced consideration of subtle cultural associations, but I also wonder if the observed cultural specificity stems from our better historical knowledge of the period in question.

Marina Prusac studies the effects of Roman rule on indigenous burial practice along the Illyrian coast, but her study is also inspired by Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory and by post-colonial theory. Observing both indigenous and Roman “cultural traits” (250) in the material, the author maintains that this “hybrid” (263) burial culture offered individuals more options to express their social and cultural identities. This is a useful observation, but the way in which the author envisions cultural interaction remains unclear to me, especially the repeated assertion that burial customs were “imposed” (251) “by force of arms” (265).

Éric Rebillard’s paper documents the change from sacrifice to banquet in North Africa during the third century CE. The author makes a strong case that tomb-side dining continued among Christians and others, but gradually evolved from a sacrificial to a purely commemorative event. The material record from at least one North African cemetery confirms this switch, since offering tables and libation conduits give way to mensa tombs that accommodated banquets. The paper is less infused with theoretical perspectives, but it is in line with the others in that it interprets the change in funerary ritual as a “shift in trends” (279), rather than a profound religious transformation.

Irina Achim’s chapter explores the shifts in burial locale in the northeastern periphery of the Roman empire. The chapter successfully traces the two inter-related phenomena of intramural burials and the increasing association between graves and churches during the “crucial period” (328) of the 5th century CE. Most of the essay provides an exhaustive description of the evidence for these two phenomena, but the conclusion also highlights the resulting “Christian topography” (287) of cities and the “Christian sociology” (329) of privileged burials. These are promising lines of analysis, but it would also be useful to relate these trends to contemporaneous changes elsewhere in the empire, like the decline of catacombs in Rome.

William Bowden analyzes a group of post-Roman cemeteries in northern Albania that exhibit a sudden re-appearance of grave goods. The author rejects the interpretation of Albanian nationalist archaeologists who see this phenomenon as the re-mergence of pre-Roman cultural practices and instead emphasizes the variability among the burials belonging to this group. This degree of diversity

suggests "that 'normative behavior' was ill defined" (351) and that the burial practices related less to broad cultural groups and more to localized practice and individual interests. It is difficult to determine which factor was determinative in specific cases, but despite its internal diversity the overall group undoubtedly correlates to the end of Roman rule and its repercussions for the local population.

Terje Oestigaard describes and interprets a burned ship burial in the historical context of the growing Norwegian kingdom. The burial constitutes a reinvention of earlier tradition, or a "ritual mobilisation" (374) that rejected Christian practice and resisted Norwegian unification. The chapter thus proposes a fairly concrete historical reconstruction of the scenario that produced the burned ship, but its greatest contribution on a theoretical level may be what it implies about the concept of tradition, which emerges as a malleable tool that can be used to create connections to the past to create cultural meaning, moral value, and social legitimacy in the present.

Roberta Gilchrist argues that burials of the transitional period between early and later Medieval times in England reflect the spread of Christian eschatology. Especially the practices that articulate both grave and body more clearly are attributed to beliefs in resurrection, bodily continuity, and the transubstantiation of the body. The chapter successfully illustrates changes in ritual practice and it also judiciously emphasizes practices that are rooted in earlier traditions, such as the increasing use of amulets. It may go a little too far in explaining the observed practices in purely religious terms, however, which seems to downplay the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which religious practice is embedded.

Sarah Tarlow highlights inconsistencies between Protestant eschatology and burial practice in sixteenth to eighteenth-century England and Ireland. While official theology emphasized the insignificance of the body for salvation, the actual perception of bodies depended on social status and sometimes involved sacred or curative qualities. The author uses these discrepancies between doctrine and practice to suggest that rituals are more continuous than beliefs. While I am not fully convinced that the scenario of rapid dogmatic change in this chapter can really be generalized on such a broad level, the argument powerfully demonstrates that the notion of "belief" cannot be reduced to a single official principle.

The volume is richly illustrated, although the quantity and quality of images varies between chapters (fig. 1.1 is missing altogether), and a substantial index provides detailed access to individual contributions. The volume is carefully edited and only a few harmless typographical errors have slipped through (aside from Rebillard's first name, which is printed without an accent throughout).

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