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Funerary Practices: Their Study and Their Potential

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I Methods

Funerary Practices: Their Study and Their Potential

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This title is based on Lewis Binford's article, which, in 1970, discussed the approaches of studies on mortuary practices, highlighting the philosophical perspectives on death and the anthropological debates on the question[1]. The aim was to emphasise the meaning of dying in human societies and to show the impact of philosophical and sociological interpretations, but without really giving any real importance to archaeological death, death as it can be described by a rigorous examination of archaeological remains and traces. The reason was clearly in those years the absence of extensive anthropological studies and especially, on many sites, the lack of methods likely to reveal funeral practices, gestures or customs. For the Greek and Roman periods, the funeral of Patroclus or the laws of Cicero continued to dominate the study of the funerary customs of the Ancients.

The recent development of funerary archaeology allows the reversal of perspectives. For thirty years now, the study of funerary behaviours in ancient societies has benefited from major advances in methodology[2]. The taphonomy of the corpse and, more broadly, the various approaches developed by archaeothanatology, have provided specialists with more efficient tools to understand the organisation of mortuary practices[3]. If one now pays close attention to the traces and vestiges left after the funeral act, it is undoubtedly thanks to the progress made in biological anthropology, which has encouraged the field archaeologist to make the necessary observations on the bone remains and their interaction with archaeological contexts, graves, necro-soils and cremation areas (fig. 1). The attention was for a long time focused on the funerary monuments or the objects deposited in the tombs, but the development of biological anthropology, placing the remains of the deceased back at the centre of the research, has finally given a new importance to the stratigraphy of structures, taphonomy and the study of material. Archaeological excavation allows us to recognise, sometimes with great detail, how and when the deceased was installed in his/her grave, how and how long the person's memory was kept or celebrated (fig. 2).

When you burn, bury or commemorate a deceased person, it inevitably leaves traces (fig. 3); many traces that, once studied, will allow for the funeral to be restored, from the preparation of the deceased, the time of the funeral to the burial and subsequent commemoration, which, for a time only, keeps the memory of the deceased alive. As Jean Leclerc has pointed out, it is only by the loss of memory that human remains truly leave the funerary time[4]. The funerary time begins with the death of the individual and ends with its oblivion.

As I said, the traces which allow us to restore the funerary time (le temps funéraire) have become widespread. Here, the organic materials trapped in the metal furniture tell us about the clothes of the dead; here the constraint/position of the bones gives information on the position of the shroud and thus on the methods of setting a coffin. The sequence of gestures is deduced from traces and objects recorded on the field (figs. 4. 5).

From the analysis of the cremation residues deposited in the tomb one can deduce the types of deposits

1 Binford 1970.

2 The bibliography is necessarily plethoric: see for example Duday – Masset 1987 and Duday et al. 1990. On the Mediterranean World, Nenna – Huber – Van Andringa 2018.

3 Duday 2009; Tarlow – Nilson Stutz 2013; more recently Knüsel – Schotsmans 2022a.

4 Leclerc 1990.

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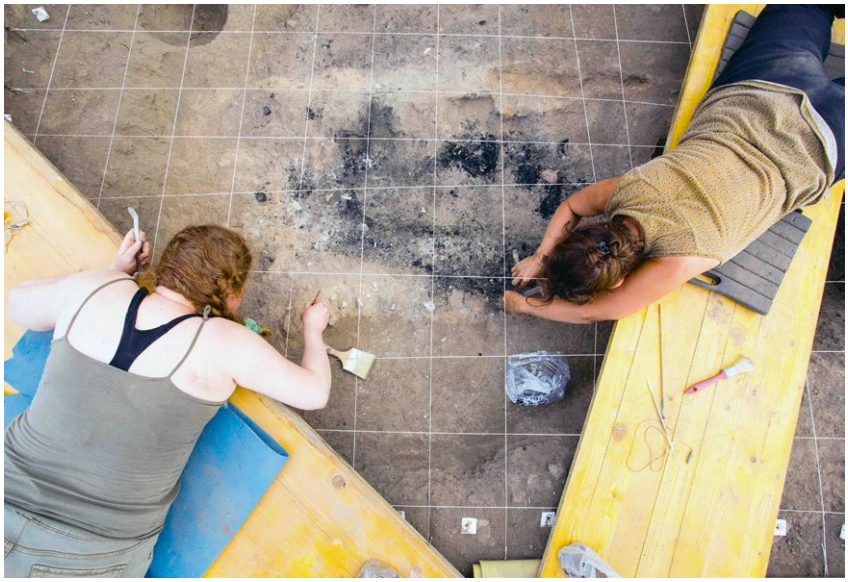


1 A close attention to the traces and vestiges left after the funeral act: excavation of a cremation area in enclosure 3E of the Porta Nocera necropolis at Pompeii. The dynamics of the organisation of the pyre are restored thanks to a rigorous recording

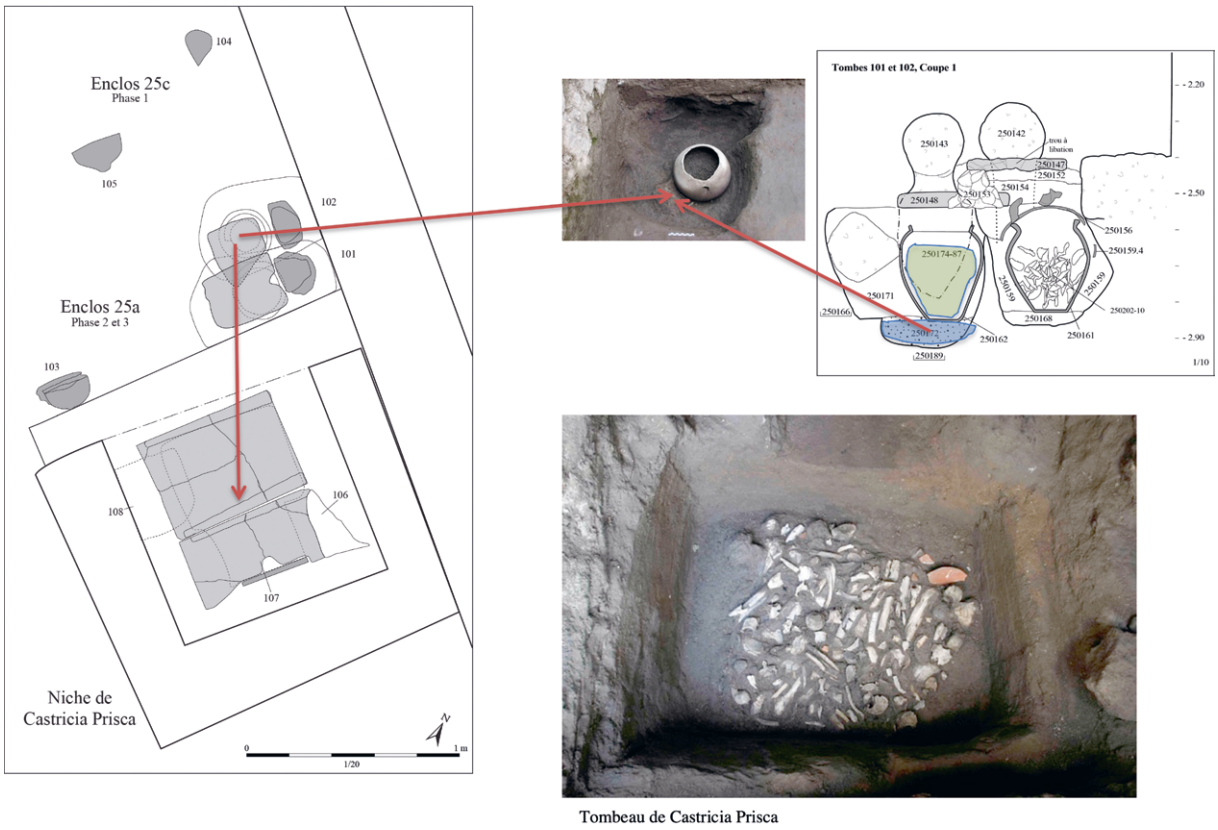
2 Recording of a skeleton in the necropolis of Saint-Just de Valcabrère (France). The burial being excavated is part of a necropolis organised in rows in front of the 4th century AD mausoleums; it documents an unprecedented funerary transition that breaks with the funerary organisation that prevailed in the High Empire

3 The richness of the traces: the cremation area AC 615, Porta Nocera necropolis in Pompeii. The pyre forms a small mound of ash and charcoal; it contains objects, notably balsamaria, which testify to the rites celebrated during funerals, but also other objects, loom weights, and tiles, together with burnt bones which, through the examination of bone connections, make it possible to identify the deceased burnt on the structure

4 Cups, balsamaria, a jug, a large unguent and a pot. These ceramic objects from burial 11 in enclosure 1E of the Porta Nocera necropolis allow us to reconstruct a whole series of gestures and sequences, from the removal from the house to the breaking, deposit or taphonomic dispersion

5 A 4th century AD tomb in the Saint-Just de Valcabrère necropolis: the bones of the skeleton have been scattered by an animal, but the tomb preserves the nails of the coffin and the glass flask which testifies to the performance of the perfume rite

6 A lamp turned over and broken on a pyre (enclosure 3E of the Porta Nocera necropolis in Pompeii): the lamp as a rite of inversion, symbolising the opposition of the day of life and the darkness of death. The recording of the deposit allows us to document the gesture (breaking and turning over) that puts an end to the funerary sequence



7 In enclosure 25a dedicated to Castricia Prisca, a freedwoman who died at the age of 25, burial 102 consists of an empty urn resting on cremation residues that contained some burnt human bones. The bone connections highlighted by Henri Duday with the bone deposit of the monument's crypt have shown that burial 102 was a waiting burial, installed during the funeral and before the construction of the monument, which took some time

placed on the pyre: a little meat, some fruits, a box or whatever. The oil lamp left in the cremation area bears the marks of two different funeral times: burns located on the side of the object indicate that it was deposited at the foot of the pyre during the cremation; its (deliberate) inversion and breaking show that the object underwent special treatment at the end of the process of collecting the bones of the deceased (fig. 6).

Recently, the study of burned bones has received a new impetus, informing us about the amount of bones collected, the representation of the dead in the burial, the modalities of the manual collection of fragments to be placed in the funeral receptacle, and the possible cleaning of the cremation area[5]. It is clear that the study of human bones increases our knowledge of the populations concerned and gives us an idea of the deceased, be it only an indication of the age and sex. At Pompeii, in the necropolis of Porta Nocera, Henri Duday is showing that the study of bone fragments can go further: the systematic search for osteological connections between the various contexts, pyre, grave and soils, provides key arguments in ritual and memory approaches: burned bones are indeed fragmented, they are collected, transferred, manipulated, deposited; they disperse easily. Finding the links between the bones gives crucial information to restore gesture sequences, the routes within a funerary enclosure; allow us to identify funerary times unnoticeable until then: in Enclosure 25a, the excavation revealed a particular situation, difficult to understand, which is that of an empty urn deposited on cremation residues. The osteological connections established between the residues deposited in the empty tomb and the funerary monument made it possible to identify the same person and consequently to highlight two distinct funerary times, a more complex sequence. Castricia Prisca died, she received funerals, her burial was constituted while waiting for the construction of the funerary monument. Once the monument was completed, her bone remains were transferred to the *monumentum*[6] (fig. 7).

5 See H. Duday in: Van Andringa et al. 2013; for osteological connections, Duday 2018.

6 Van Andringa et al. 2013, 725–761.

Ritual or gesture sequences, funerary times, family stories, this mass of information now recorded in the necropolis force us to admit that ancient funerary practices, ›the way of death‹ of Robert Garland[7] can no longer be understood in the sole prism of monuments, texts or anthropological studies; the way of death must be restored and understood, in its micro-historical context, by a close examination of traces and objects left in the funerary areas and burials[8]. Of course, the quantity of information collected depends primarily on the conservation of remains, on the conservation of soils and fills that have trapped the traces of activity, on the conservation of the burials themselves which could have been damaged by looting.

I would like to reverse the perspectives and highlight not the theoretical or historical grids or the relevance of anthropological comparisons, but the field phase which is the crucial time of a correct recognition of stratigraphy, that of the establishment of precise protocols for the collection of material, that of the maximum recording of the remains (fig. 8). Fieldwork, which is rightly described by Tim Ingold as an art of inquiry, is a way of knowing from the inside: a correspondence between mindful attention and lively material conducted by skilled hands ›at the trowel's edge‹. It is from this correspondence, and not from the analyses of data within a framework of theory, that archaeological knowledge grows[9].

In other words, excavation is, first and foremost, a full analytical process, an essential starting point for studies made in laboratories and libraries[10]. The relationship between object and context is not made after the excavation, but during the excavation, with the rigour necessary for any art of investigation. The goal is clear: to recognise funerary practices, to recognise funerary times, to recognise rituals or gesture sequences, to recognise the operating system that made the management of death possible. The recording of traces and deposits allows a restitution of gestures, of technical gestures when they concern the construction of the tomb or the pyre, of symbolic gestures when it comes to organising the change of the status of the deceased or when it comes to ›arranging‹ or staging the memory of the deceased. From trace to gesture, field archaeology makes it possible to study funerary behaviours as closely as possible and even to understand their variety. This technical reinvestment in the field, combined with a better knowledge of materials (bones, plants, ceramics, glass, etc.) and pedology, opens up unexpected perspectives on the study of funerary practices.

8 Rigorous recording of the remains is a prerequisite for any archaeological analysis: excavation of enclosure 1F, Porta Nocera necropolis in Pompeii. André Leroi-Gourhan said: »I have got into the habit of thinking that a square metre excavated with care and in which all possible means are tried to collect the materials or traces of the acts of men, a square metre excavated in exhaustive conditions informs us more than the excavation of 100 square metres carried out with an insufficient method« (Leroi-Gourhan 1982, 87)

Let me now cut to the heart of the matter, using the example of the traces left by the Pompeians in their funerary plots[11]. This example will lead us to address the issue of materiality and funerary variability and its interpretation. As Matt Edgeworth recently put it, archaeologists are obliged to *follow the cut* – to ›see where it goes, and in what direction it takes us‹[12]. As I mentioned already, the starting point is to register all the traces and objects left by people in their precise stratigraphic background, so that it becomes possible to track down gestures and ritual sequences performed in the funerary enclosures. Another crucial aspect is that we are working on a short length of time, which is very rare in archaeology. The funerary enclosures were used and transformed between the reign of Augustus and the eruption of AD 79, a period which corresponds more or less to four generations. That's the general framework, but we also have good evidence of quick abandonment of

7 Garland 2001.
8 Duday – Van Andringa 2017; Van Andringa 2021.
9 Ingold 2013.
10 See Van Andringa 2021.
11 For a full study, Van Andringa et al. 2013 and Van Andringa 2021. Some remarks also in Van Andringa 2018 and Van Andringa 2019.
12 Edgeworth 2012, 78.

9 Ritual burning area in front of funerary monument 26, Porta Nocera necropolis: the memory of a deceased person marked by a succession of ritual fireplaces in which food offerings were burnt

10 The cremation area of enclosure 1E (Porta Nocera necropolis) is indicated by a few logs and charcoal, as well as some bone fragments. On the edge, an oil lamp was broken to mark the end of the ceremony

graves and enclosures, most of the time after one generation, which means that the funerary activities can be followed more or less decade by decade. A good example is this recent discovery of ritual deposits in front of the monument 26: it is possible to say that somebody came back several times and celebrated on the same spot a ritual for one deceased of the funerary plot. That's the time of memory which corresponds exactly to seven ceremonies (fig. 9). After that, memories begin to be lost.

In the necropolis of Porta Nocera in Pompeii, the ceremonies were organised around three events that left specific traces: the cremation of the deceased on a pyre (fig. 10), the setting of the bone remains in the tomb (fig. 11) and the honours made regularly to the dead, once the burial was constituted (fig. 12). Among the material traces left on the floors and in the tombs are two types of objects that allow us to recognise ritual gestures in quite some detail: oil lamps and unguent flasks or balsamaria. And the main advantage of these objects is that they are fragile and break easily: it will be seen that the recording of fragments makes it possible to restore complex and instructive ritual sequences and discuss the importance of materiality in the ritual know-how. I will also consider the so-called Charon's obole which concerns the issue of the frequency of rituals. In fact, the idea of this presentation is to focus on the *objects which were strategically used during the course of funerary rituals and practices*. I propose then to understand mortuary practices through the materiality of funerals, to reconsider *the impact of things on the construction and repetition of mortuary practices.*

The particular shape of the lamp and the decoration of the medallion make it an easily recognisable object in the ground, even when only small fragments remain[13]. During the excavation of five funeral plots (2003–2007) we discovered 465 fragments of oil lamps. The study of this material showed a high fragmentation rate, essentially due to two factors: first the ritual breaking of these objects at a stage of the ceremony still to be determined, and secondly the attendance of people around the graves which led to the fragmentation of objects and the spreading of sherds.

For 64 burials over four generations, a minimum of 135 lamps were used. This figure is consistent if we estimate that a lamp was used for most of the funerals organised for the 64 individuals who received a burial in the funeral area, which is very likely, and that in a certain number of cases the fragments discovered refer to another ceremony, that of the visit made to the deceased once the tomb was constituted.

The observation of the lamps shows that they were taken from the house on purpose, like the cinerary urns, for which they mainly used kitchen pots. The meaning of the lamp in the funeral is known: it symbolised the opposition between the light of life and the darkness of death, marking the necessary change in the status of the deceased[14]. With lamps, we are simply talking about *rites de passage*.

In general, there are two main contexts in which lamps are found and which at the same time reveal

13 The comments made here are based on the exhaustive analysis carried out by Claude Malagoli in the framework of the Porta Nocera archaeological programme 2003–2007: Malagoli 2013.

14 On the rituals of inversion celebrated in the funerary domain, Scheid 1984, 117–139.

11 In Roman times, it was the bone deposit that made the grave and it was the bone deposit that gave the burial its inviolable character, in the legal form of a religious place (locus religiosus). This is represented by an urn containing the bones collected from the pyre and by the cremation residues deposited in the grave (burial in enclosure 23 OS of the Porta Nocera necropolis)

12 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. The broken glass balsamaria left on the edge of the grave bear witness to the honours in memory of Poppaea Cypare

their use: the area surrounding the grave (1) and the cremation area where the corpse was burned (2). On the other hand, there is no example in Pompeii of a voluntary deposit of a lamp in a grave[15].

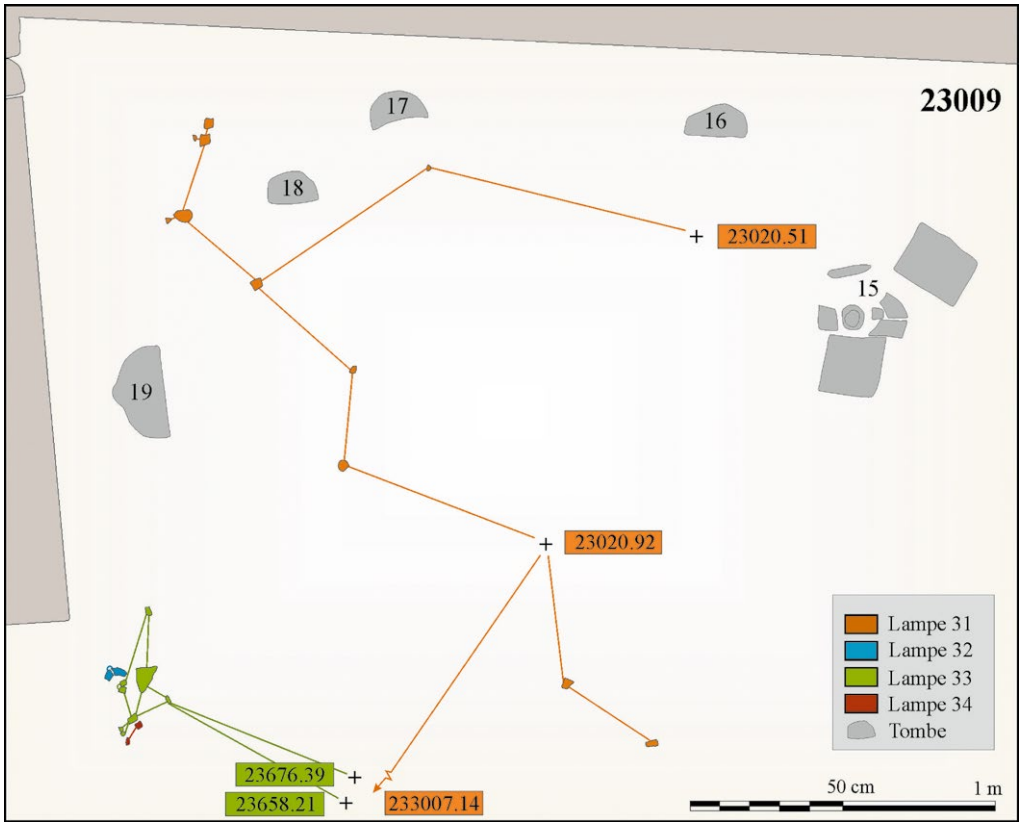
Let's look at a few examples of the first case. Lamp no. 33 (in green) comes from the level 23009, covered by the volcanic materials of the eruption of AD 79, 15 fragments of the same lamp are preserved near grave 19 (fig. 13). The proximity of the contiguous sherds indicates that at least part of it was broken on the spot, which makes it possible to identify a lamp placed near a tomb on a commemorative visit. The object was later removed from the grave area, relegated to the eastern wall of the plot, and then broken. Lamp no. 31 (in orange) is another lamp coming from the same level 23009, but in this case the fragments show a larger dispersion, meaning that this area of the funerary plot was stepped on. 17 fragments belonging to the same lamp, Lamp no. 48, come from a Claudian level (dating from 40–50 AD) and are located near a tomb of the same date, T19[16] (figs. 14. 15). The proximity of the sherds indicates that the lamp was crushed on the spot. Its immediate proximity to the tomb 19 indicates that the lamp was used in honour rendered to the deceased of T19 shortly after the closure of the tomb, something we know because fragments were trapped in the higher level of the filling of the burial of a child associated with it, T27. We find here different gestures related to the commemoration visits or the burial of bone remains, which defines the grave in Roman time. But the most frequent cases concern the cremation area, either that the fragments come from the pyre itself or that they come from the cremation residues transported and deposited in the burial.

Lamp no. 29 comes from the pyre attributed to Bebryx, a child dead at six years of age[17]: the 12 sherds are burnt and come from the small ash mound erected after the collection of the bones of the deceased (figs. 16. 17). The fact that they are mixed in the different micro-layers composing the mound indicates that the object was broken at the end of the cremation, during the collection of the bones and the cremation residues intended for the grave. This breakage is attested quite often, but not always.

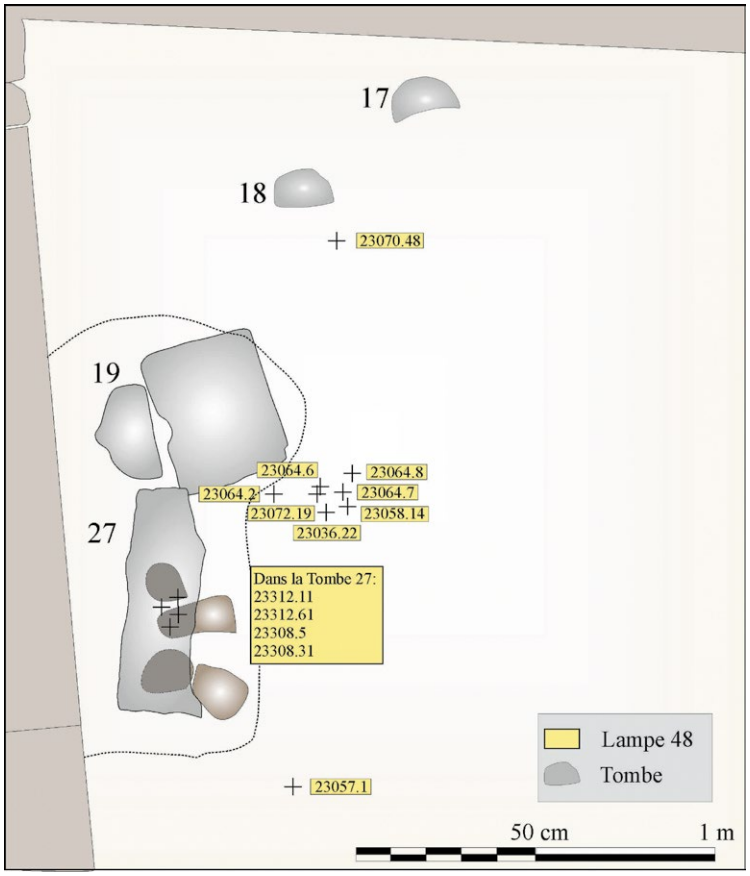
15 Except in one case, revealed during the 2018 campaign. This anomaly, in relation to the hundred or so burials excavated to date, is perhaps due to the age of the tomb in question, dated for the time being to the end of the Republican period.

16 The history of Grave 19 is developed in Van Andringa et al. 2013, 272–285. Also from the vicinity of the tomb are burnt remains of fruit and seeds, from either the occupation levels or from rites performed near the tomb, see Van Andringa et al. 2013, 285. On lamp no. 33, Malagoli 2013, 1150 f.; on no. 31, p. 1150; on no. 48, p. 1153.

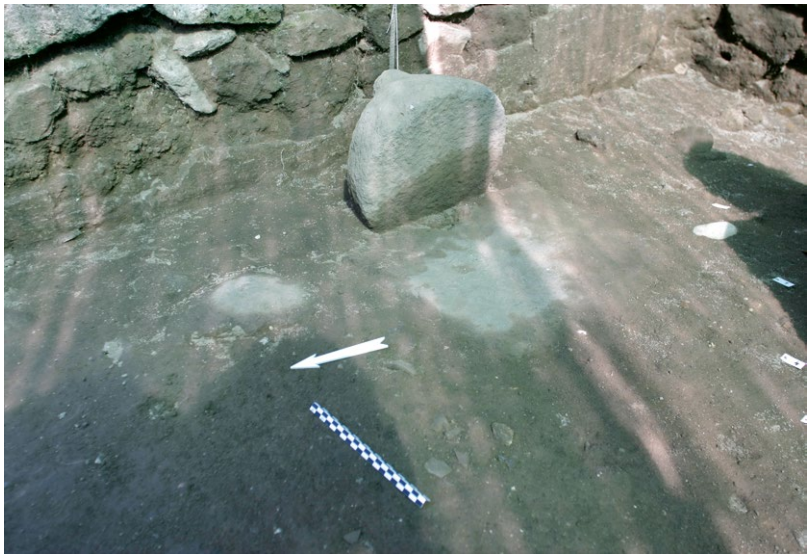
17 On the pyre in Area 210, Van Andringa et al. 2013, 681–696; on the lamp, p. 688.



13 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, Enclosure 23 OS. Distribution of fragments of lamps nos. 31, 32, 33 and 34 in the Flavian occupation level. North: bottom



14 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, Enclosure 23 OS. Scatter of fragments from lamp no. 48 deposited near grave 19. Some of the fragments were incorporated into the fill of child's grave 27, which is slightly later than grave 19. North: bottom



15 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, Enclosure 23 OS. One can see the upper part of the cluster composed of the fragments of lamp no. 48 (in the rectangle delimited by the arrow and the sight). The ground level is just below

16 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Lamp no. 29 from cremation area 210, located behind enclosure 21 OS

17 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, Cremation area 210. Broken material can be seen on the ash mound, including fragments of a thin-walled beaker and the broken and upturned components of lamp no. 29. On the body of the lamp, one can see the heat strokes indicating that the object was placed close to the pyre (or on the pyre?) during the cremation

18 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Lamp no. 40 from multiple burial 14/21/29, enclosure 23 OS

19 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Chest containing the burial of a child (T29). This was reopened to deposit the cremation remains of an adult individual (ref. 21A), perhaps for emotional reasons. The fragments of the lamp broken before the collection of the human remains on the pyre are scattered in the cremation residues. Scale 20 cm

In other cases, the cremation area is not known or has not been excavated, so the vestiges of lamps are found in the cremation residues deposited in the burial. Collection may be accidental as in grave 205: two fragments only were found in the cremation residues, which means that the rest of the object probably remained in the cremation area. In other cases, collection is important because the agent chose to collect a part or even all the residues of the cremation: the lamp no. 40 is representative of this case, the 32 fragments of the lamp originating from both the residues dumped over the inhumation of a young boy (figs. 18. 19) and the bone deposit of the deceased in a common amphora used for three individuals (8 fragments). The picture is not complete as there is a single fragment coming from the floor near the grave, certainly lost during the transfer of bones[18]. In any case, this example indicates that the lamp was placed near the pyre of the deceased, a position deduced from the traces of burning on one side of the object; then the lamp was deliberately broken before the collection of the bones of the deceased (since 8 fragments of the lamp were mixed with the bones). It is also possible to say that the collection of the residues of the pyre was not complete since it lacks a certain number of fragments, which obviously remained in the cremation area. The ten fragments of lamp no. 176 were found in the cremation residues of tomb 31 (fig. 20): their assembly makes it possible to restore the whole of the lamp with the exception of the handle, which was missing already when the lamp was used in the funerals. The traces of wear observed indicate that the lamp was taken from the domestic sphere before being deposited in front of the pyre and then intentionally broken in the cremation area. The reconstitution of the object confirms that the residue sampling was integral; the absence of fragments in the vessel could indicate either a conscious collection of the bones or that the lamp was broken after the bones were collected.

These different scenarios or sequences allow us to restore the rituals involving an oil lamp during funerals. Three distinct actions can be distinguished, showing that the lamp was involved in every funerary sequence:

- The first action concerns the transportation of the deceased from the house; a lamp is taken from the house and is carried with the deceased to the funerary plot.
- The second gesture brings us to the heart of the ritual act: the lamp is placed near the pyre, which is demonstrated by the partial traces of heating, sometimes intense, discernible on the side of the object. The number of lamps discovered (which corresponds to the number of graves) indicates that this gesture is very frequent and constitutes a *structuring gesture* of the funeral ceremony (even if its systematic implication of course cannot be demonstrated).
- The last gesture takes us to the end of the ritual sequence; the voluntary breaking of the lamp puts an end to the smooth transformation of the status of the deceased, symbolised by a flame embody-

18 Van Andringa et al. 2013, 489–552. On lamp no. 40, Malagoli 2013, 1132. 1151 f.

20 Balsamaria are very present in Pompeian funerary contexts. Perfume was used in reversal rituals and was a determining element in the passage to death

ing the opposition of the light of life to the darkness of death[19]. The cross-checking of the various observations makes it possible to place the action very precisely: the intentional breaking of the lamp takes place before the collection of the bones of the deceased in the cremation area, which is indicated by the recurring finding of fragments in the bone deposit.

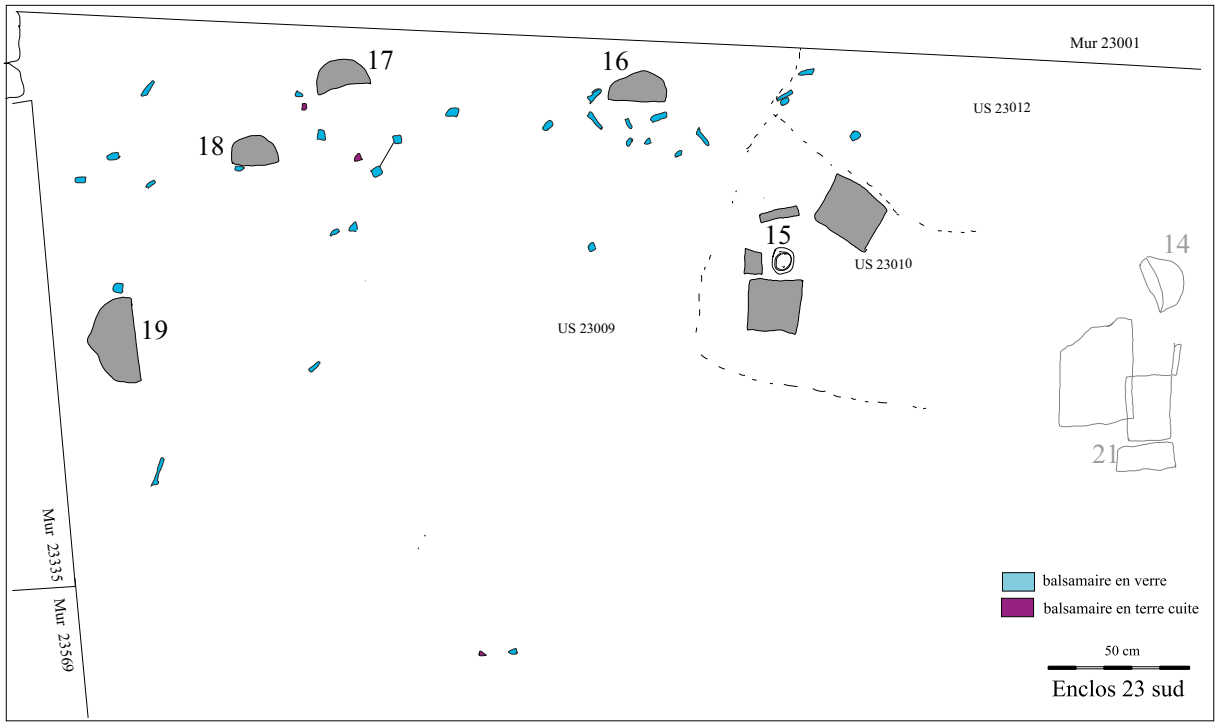
On the other hand, the diversity of the archaeological contexts encountered, as well as the large and systematic dispersion of the fragments, indicate that once used and broken, the object has lost all its value: picked up with the bulk of the cremation residue or the bone deposit, sometimes being left in the cremation area, the fragments are never *the object of a specific collection*. What is certain is that the lamp is never part of the deposition, which defines the burial. *It is never an offering*. It's an object which participates, *makes possible the change in status of the dead*.

The ritual of the lamp is repeated with roughly the same frequency and importance, after the closing of the tomb, in the ceremonies intended to honour the deceased. The fragments found around the graves show that a lamp was lit on the tomb, so as to reactivate the memory of the deceased by a reminder of the fundamental opposition of light and darkness. *The memory of the dead is then reactivated* through the reuse of an object which *made possible the change in status of the dead.* We can here identify a very similar sequence, since the lamp was once again taken from the house, lit on the grave and then broken or abandoned on the spot. And as in the funerals, the object once used was obviously not taken back to the house. The lamps were crushed on the spot and the fragments quickly dispersed.

Are these rituals specific to a place, Pompeii in this case, or are they found elsewhere? Can we link the debris to a particular tradition, specifically Pompeian or more widely spread? If the latter, how are the rituals or ritual knowledge transmitted from one place to another? A comparison with the necropolis of Voghenza, near Ferrara in northern Italy, shows that the same light-darkness ritual, marked by the same object, the oil lamp, was performed there, more or less in the same time[20]. But there is a major difference: the systematic practice of placing one or many lamps in the tomb, as if emphasis were placed not on

19 This usage is also attested by some texts, e. g. CIL II 2102; CIL VI 10248 and 30102, also an article of the Digest, Dig. 40, 4, 44: Maevia asks that her freed slaves light a lamp on her grave and celebrate the funeral rituals (*solemnia mortis*).

20 Bandini Mazzanti – Berti et al. 1985.



21 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Fragments of glass perfume bottles on the Flavian floor of enclosure 23 OS. These attest to commemorative ceremonies held at the graves. The bottles were broken (probably on the stele) after the perfume was poured on the ground. North: bottom

the time of funeral, the transformation of the dead, but on the installation of the deceased in the grave. This type of deposit never appears in Pompeii. In fact, this difference probably reflects the forms of funerals in Pompeii, where the dead were cremated on a pyre, and Voghenza, where the dead were buried or cremated directly in the grave. The adoption of primary burial structures explains that the symbolic use of the lamp took place directly in the open grave, resulting in the deposition of lamps in the tomb with the deceased. We have here different sequences conditional on the forms of funerals, but the same ritual of opposition is performed.

This observation has a strong methodological impact: it relegates to the second level the significance of the deposits made within the tomb, which is often considered central in archaeological discourse. Whether the lamp is placed carefully in the sepulchral grave or broken and scattered in the cremation area, the ritual responds to the same archetypal gesture, or even to the same ›tradition‹ that can be considered here as Roman, which was to accompany the installation of the deceased in the tomb by a ritual showing the opposition between the light of life and the darkness of death. One same ritual embodied in one object but with different archaeological expressions or contexts. That's the diversity we're recording every day in archaeological fieldwork.

Let's now take a look at another example, involving another central object of mortuary practices: the balsamarium or perfume bottle. The perfume bottles are another important artefact involved in rituals[21]. These bottles contain perfume, well known to have been used, sometimes in abundance, at funerals and commemorative ceremonies. Their significance lies – once again – in an opposition; this time between the good smell of life and the stench of death and the decomposing corpse.

In the analysis of contexts, three types of deposition are recorded[22]. The first concerns the ground around the graves: here again, the most representative level is undoubtedly the layer 23009, which trapped the traces of the last gestures made before the eruption of AD 79. The survey indicates a high density of fragments of glass balsamaria around the tombs, notably in front of graves 16 and 17 and be-

21 See Fontaine 2013.

22 See again the detailed archaeological descriptions of Van Andringa et al. 2013.

22 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Once the perfume has been poured into the libation tube of the tomb of Bebryx, the bottle is placed behind the stela

23 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, Enclosure 23 OS, Grave 18. In this particular case, the officiant placed the terracotta bottle in the urn after use, together with the bones of the deceased. The gesture is recurrent, but not frequent in the burials of the Porta Nocera necropolis

hind grave 15 (fig. 21). The staged display of fragments of several flasks in front of grave 16 indicates that they were deliberately broken after use. The breaking is not, however, systematic, as evidenced by the complete glass flask deposited behind the Bebryx stela after use (fig. 22). A similar situation is attested behind Veranius Rufus' stela. On other occasions, the flask is thrown into the libation tube. There were clearly different ways of getting rid of the empty bottles.

The second type of deposition concerns the cremation areas. On the pyre of Bebryx (a slave child already mentioned), an incomplete glass flask was discovered, two fragments having been slightly altered by heat, the last having melted, indicating that the flask was broken on the still hot ashes. In this case, the balsamarium must have been deposited at the end of the cremation of the body, while the ashes were still hot.

The third and last type of deposition concerns the inside of the graves. This kind of voluntary deposit is found in the form of one or two flasks deposited in the vessel, on the surface of the bone deposit, or beside the vessel (fig. 23).

A great variety of deposits and anthropic or taphonomic actions has been recorded. *However, every context refers to the same gesture, which is repeated at different times of the funeral*. The first gesture, which opened the process of cremation, was the pouring of perfume over the body. This gesture was repeated at the end of the ceremony, and the bottle could then, sometimes, be placed on the still warm ashes, sometimes broken deliberately, sometimes thrown away without special consideration. During this double process, the times for ritual action always seem to be respected: i. e. at the beginning and at the end of the cremation. The change concerns the handling of the flasks after use, after pouring the perfume. Sometimes the bottle is broken, sometimes just thrown away, and sometimes thrown on the pyre, sometimes deposited in the cinerary urn with the bones.

Thus, regardless of how the bottles were deposited or the fragments scattered, the Pompeians knew they had to structure the ceremony using the perfume that was poured at the beginning of the ceremony, then at the end of the cremation and then during the transfer of bones in the burial[23]. This ritual sequence was known to all and people did not in fact need to know the exact meaning of the rite ›pouring perfume‹: the obvious opposition of the smell emitted by the corpse and the smell of the perfume was enough to make clear the otherness of death. The repetition of the gesture was sufficient to render the change in the status of the dead tangible, and the deceased was soon received in his or her new home. These very simple gestures constructed, in a *logical and adapted* sequence, the otherness of death. The other gestures, intentional and unintentional, diverse in their expression, constructed and completed the ritual archetype ›pouring the perfume‹, from the

23 Detailed work is currently being carried out on the balsamaria from the Porta Nocera necropolis by Adrien Malignas, which shows that the uses of the flasks are even more varied than previously thought.

24 The urns must be excavated in 2 to 3 cm passes. These reveal the organisation of the deposits and any anatomical logic. The money appears in the upper part of the bag, indicating that the monetary deposit constitutes the last ritual gesture before the grave is closed

throwing of the flask into the brazier to the systematic breakage – or not – of the bottles.

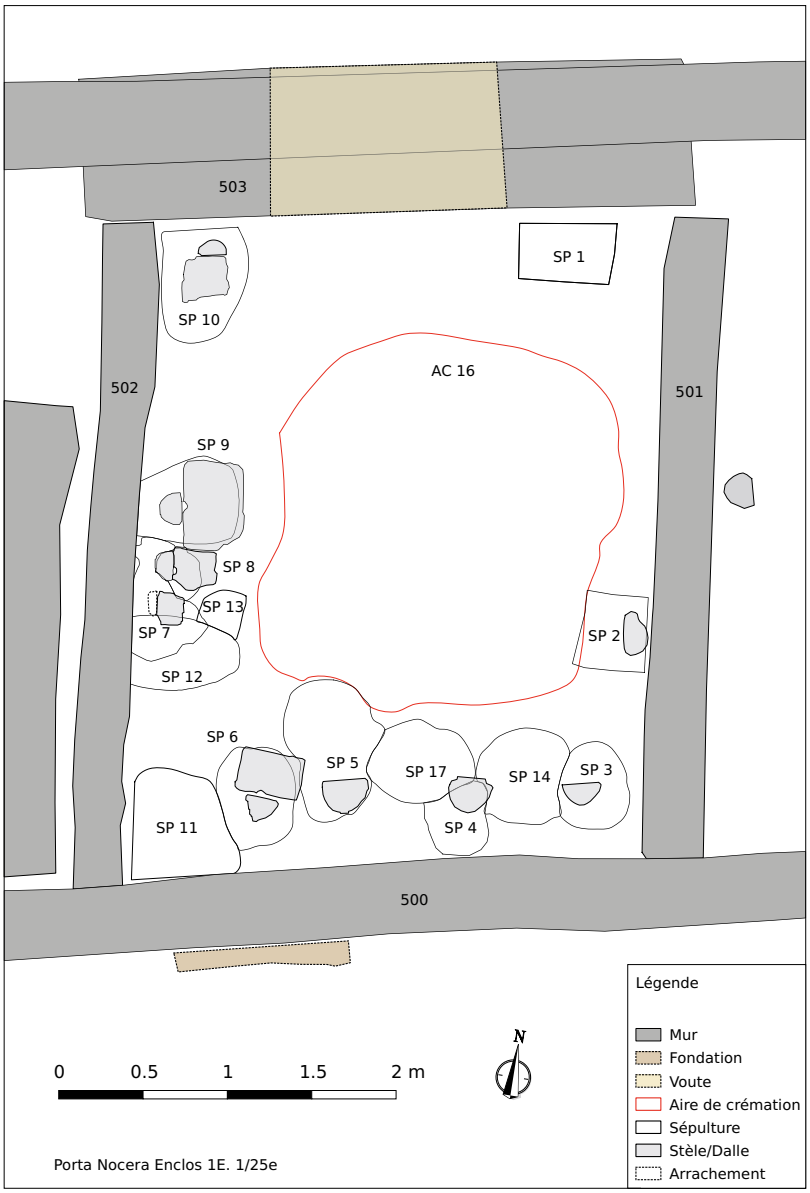
The use of perfume, central in the management of death, was repeated during the commemorative ceremonies. It was directly aimed at the deceased, either in a libation device with which the perfume could be poured directly onto the bone remains, or poured onto the slab which covered the grave. The visitor followed the ritual according to the existing equipment, eventually completing the gestural sequence, the move according to what he had observed within the same family circle. This would explain the repetition recorded from a single individual or the same family group, of a similar gesture: the peculiar and intentional disposal of the unguentaria, lying and exposed to the southeast in front of the stele of the two neighbouring tombs 16 and 17. In fact, the ritual was not just supposed to be executed according to the rules, but *tirelessly reinvented, each time as a new object*, as if the meaning lay in this unique expression and not only in the repetition of a general structure.

The comparison of the Pompeian contexts with Voghenza in northern Italy confirms the importance of the use of perfume and the existence of an archetype that structured the funeral ceremony in the Roman cultural context[24]. At Voghenza, in the case of primary burials (inhumations or cremations made in the grave), the glass bottles, like the lamps, were placed inside the graves. In the absence of studies of bone deposits or cremation residues that may contain fragmented and burned elements of the flasks, some dispositions confirm the existence of two distinct gestures at the beginning and end of cremation. In burial 4, in fact, we find numerous intact unguentaria and a melted flask indicating its use at the beginning of the cremation. The same observation was made in tomb 23 (an intact flask and a melted one). Be that as it may, the general and even systematic characteristic is the deposit of the intact bottles inside the tomb, once the perfume had been poured over the body, whether burned or buried. One important comment is again the gap between the same general function of perfume in Voghenza, Pompeii and many places of the Roman world and the variety of gestures and archaeological contexts. The same conclusion can be made with the so-called Charon's obole, a very common rite in the Roman world[25] (fig. 24).

If we take the example of the enclosure 3E (necropolis of Porta Nocera Est), we notice that the ritual of the coin is not attested for all the graves within the same funerary plot: there is no coin in tomb 4, while the coin is present in the adjoining burials 3, 14, 17, 5, 6 and 11 (fig. 25). In the western part of the same enclosure, there is a group of 5 burials all without coins: 7/8/9/12/13. In fact, the last burials are children's graves, except the older grave 13, which was recut by grave 12. It is then possible that in this case it is the status of the deceased, child or adult, which prevailed in the exercise of the rite. And indeed, in a number of cases, child burials are most often without coin. However, this observation does not mean that we have a rule: some children are accompanied

24 Bandini Mazzanti – Berti et al. 1985.

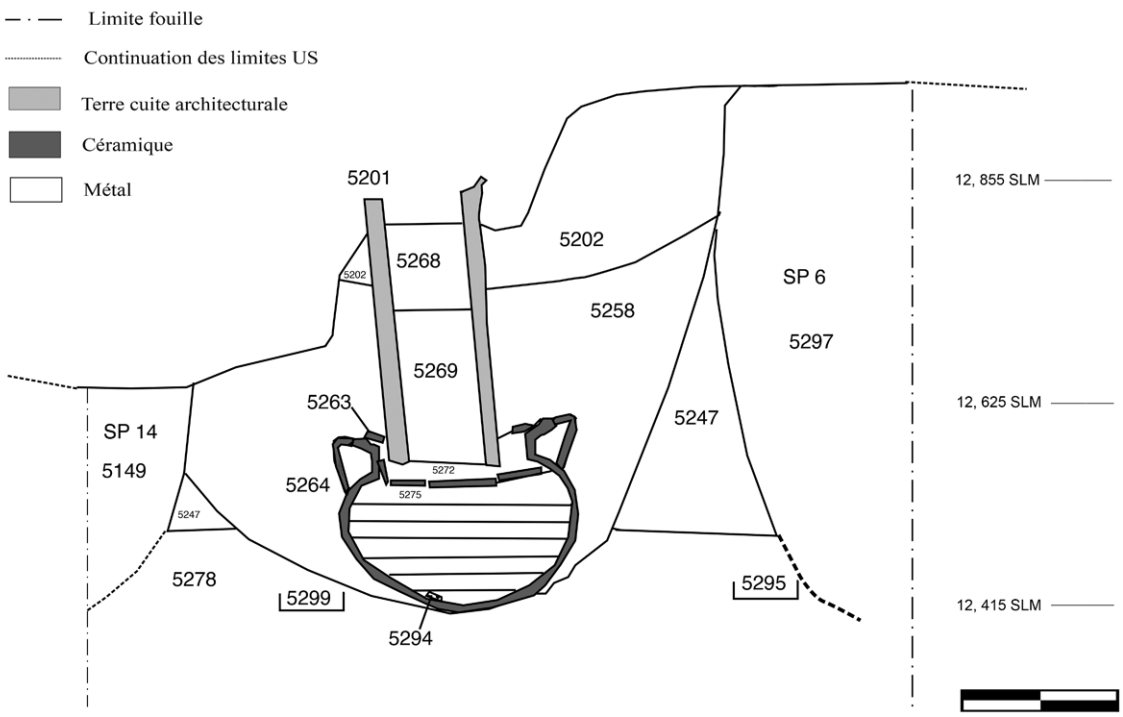
25 For a correct interpretation of this rite, see now Duchemin 2021; also Doyen – Duchemin – Iossif 2019.



25 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis. Plan of enclosure 3E: 15 burials and a central cremation area

by a coin, for example in burial 10 of enclosure 23 OS, more or less of the same period. On the other hand, we can see that burial 13, an adult, has no coin, but one can notice that it belongs to a previous generation. In a similar way, in the alignment of the seven burials along the south wall, we notice that tomb 4 does not have any coin either: here, it is the personal choice of the agent that seems the most plausible interpretation.

We go further on the condition of a rigorous stratigraphic recording that allows the coin deposit to be placed in the sequential sequence of the grave constitution. Then, we notice that the deposit presents a particularity for the group of tombs 3/14/17/15: in these cremation graves, the coin is localised in the bottom of the vessel containing the bones and not at the top of the bone deposit, which is by far the most common practice (fig. 26). This feature can be explained in two ways: either the coin was deposited at the bottom, before the bone deposit, or, and this is the most likely interpretation, the coin was placed in the bag, on top of the bone deposit, but the bag itself was introduced upside down in the vessel, which explains why we find the coin at the bottom of the vase. Another crucial piece of information is that we know that in a short period of time, burial 17 was installed, then 14, then 3: the deduction is therefore that this peculiar gesture was repeated by *the same agent* who has seen and adopted the same gesture, intentionally or not. The nearby burials 5 and 6 constitute another group,



26 Pompeii, Porta Nocera necropolis, enclosure 3E. Section of burial 17. The coin, found at the bottom of the vase, bears the number 5294

the pits intersecting the AC16 cremation area: in this case, the coin is placed in the middle of the bone deposit, either because the coin previously deposited at the top has slipped between the bones, or and this is perhaps the most likely hypothesis, because the celebrant chose indeed to insert the coin inside the bone deposit.

Two facts can be deduced from these observations: the first is the crucial importance of the recording of stratigraphic data which is the only way to recognise and reconstruct ritual sequences. The second observation is that the variety, in funeral matters, is explained by *the importance of personal or individual initiative* in the exercise of the rite. The choice to deposit a coin inevitably comes from a personal or family initiative, sometimes dictated by wider customs, but never established as a rule. This is why, in the necropolis of Porta Nocera, we often, but not always, observe the absence of a coin in the child burials; this is why we often, but not always, observe the deposit of a coin on top of the bone deposit. In any case, it is the agent in charge of the ritual or the family group who decides: 1. whether the gesture or archetype ›depositing a coin‹ is necessary, and 2. that one must deposit the bag containing the bones of the deceased upside down in the vessel, like in the graves 3/14/17/15.

These precisely, albeit not systematically, repeated gestures that can be attributed to local customs, or these varied gestures, motivated by personal initiative or personal will, belong to the very structure of the rite. Indeed, and this is a crucial point, rituals are not fixed, alienating or repetitive behaviours. On the contrary, and this has been noted by anthropologists for a long time, rituals are above all characterised by *the plasticity of their form*, plasticity of their content, of their conduct, of their function; this explains the flexible modes of behaviour, reproduced with great inventiveness. The structure of a rite is thus composed of a repeated norm, which is part of a particular, let's say Roman, culture. This norm is modelled and transformed by the individual initiative that sets the action over time, the precise time of the funeral of a family member, and in the specific context of family relationship, of a more or less strong trauma described in a poetic way by funeral inscriptions. In other words, the individual part of the rite is a strong structuring element of the funerary rite. This individual or personal dimension may be accentuated by the deposit of several coins or the deposit of the same coin in two different tombs, but located side by side.

Whether one has the tale of Charon in mind or not, the final deposition of an object made to circulate

and exchange was an adapted act for symbolising the opposition between life and death, like the lamp which symbolised the opposition between the light of life and the darkness of death, like the perfume which symbolised the opposition between good smell of life and the bad smell of the dead body. But there is a difference between lamps, perfume and coins. The very discrete, secondary act of depositing a coin (or even two), can be opposed to the central place given in a Roman context to the oil lamp, perfume, drink, food offerings, objects and products that build the norm and construct the otherness of death by a symbolic game of opposition and honour paid to the deceased: these objects and products articulated and framed ritual sequences, being used not once but repetitively during the funeral, the burial and during the commemoration days.

This investigation leads us to emphasise the importance of a few gestures, involving significant items and food in the conduct of local funerals. In Pompeii, an oil lamp, one or several bottles of perfume, a little meat or some fruits taken from the family kitchen were enough to construct the otherness of death, to structure the ritual sequences, necessary for a proper installation of the deceased in their last abode. The meaning of the rituals celebrated at the funeral resided first in a precise list of objects and products and in a series of repeated gestures that made up the funeral ceremony. The description of the gestures that archaeology provides probably gets us close to the meaning of the rites. *I would assume that the meaning of the rites, for a good part, can be found in the objects themselves and in their handling*[26].

The objects deposited or broken, the light of the lamp, the poured perfume and the few quality foods deposited on the pyre could certainly be interpreted in the light of general knowledge transmitted by Roman culture, written and oral (about the purification, the transformation of the deceased or the belief in the hereafter), but the essential thing resided in *the intrinsic power of these objects, in their capacity to generate an experience*, a sensual, emotional framework and obviously in their manipulation at different times of the ceremony in order to build and organise the funeral. The meaning was constructed from material data rather than given. Part of the meaning of the funeral resided in a set of oppositions that realised the passage into death. And this set of oppositions was created not by thought, but by using the domestic oil lamp and the perfume at certain times of the ceremony; death was thus constructed, in the context of a funerary monument presenting the social and family background. The rites, as long as they respected a general and cultural framework recognisable by all, did not of course require the strict observance of material rules: a torch could replace a lamp, and perfume could be poured only once without the bottle being broken. In contrast, one would take great care, because one had seen it done by a member of the family, to break the flasks and to align the fragments in front of the stela, finally giving as much importance to one personal gesture as to the common act of pouring perfume. This gestural enrichment of the archetype ›offering of perfume‹ finally completed the primary sense of the rite by giving it a personal or a family meaning. The aim was to celebrate the memory of the deceased and mark their passing by a personal gesture or a personal honour. We speak about funeral practices, resulting from the dialectical relationship between a situation and a habitus, understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions transmitted by education[27].

This intrinsic power of the objects involved in the funerary rituals and their role in the funeral ceremonies contributed to the development of a common funerary culture, shared by a large number of communities according to common features, pointed out at Pompeii and Voghenza. The Roman tradition resided in the recognition of a body of common practices in the face of death, which can be summarised by the use of opposition rituals or linked to the transformation of the deceased, incarnated in many places by *the same objects and products* of everyday life, lamps, perfume, wine, pork or chicken meat. The strength of this common ritual knowledge was that it could be embodied by specific objects and products, much more than by complex philosophical or religious precepts on the hereafter.

26 Boivin 2008, 13.

27 Bourdieu 1972, 178–181.

Abstract

The recent development of funerary archaeology allows a reversal of perspectives. For thirty years now, the study of funerary behaviours in ancient societies has benefited from major advances in methodology. The taphonomy of the corpse and, more broadly, the various approaches developed by archaeothanatology, have provided specialists with more efficient tools to understand the organisation of mortuary practices. If one now pays close attention to the traces and vestiges left after the funeral act, it is undoubtedly thanks to the progress made in biological anthropology, which has encouraged the field archaeologist to make the necessary observations on the bone remains and their interaction with archaeological contexts, graves, necro-soils and cremation areas. The attention was for a long time focused on the funerary monuments or the objects deposited in the tombs, but the development of biological anthropology, placing the remains of the deceased back at the centre of the research, has finally given a new importance to the stratigraphy of structures, taphonomy and the study of material. Archaeological excavation allows to recognise, sometimes with great detail, how and when the deceased was installed in his grave, how and how long his memory was kept or celebrated. When you burn, bury or commemorate a deceased person, it inevitably leaves traces; many traces that, once studied, will allow for the funeral to be restored, from the preparation of the deceased, the time of the funeral to the burial and subsequent commemoration, which, for a time only, keeps the memory of the deceased alive.

The study of one of Pompeii's necropolises provides an opportunity to show the full potential of rigorous funerary archaeology in the field and in the questioning of the gestures and practices that can be reconstructed from the traces left in funerary contexts. Such an archaeology of the funerary gesture, as well as informing us about the conceptions of death in Antiquity, reveals the thousand and one ways of dealing with a human tradition.

Keywords: funerary practices, archeothanatology, methodology, burial culture, Pompeii

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