From fragments to ancestors: re-defining the role of os resectum in rituals of purification and commemoration in Republican Rome

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LIVING THROUGH THE DEAD
Burial and commemoration in the Classical world

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Recent studies of commemorative practice have highlighted the ways in which such activity was harnessed by all members of the ancient urban community for a variety of ends. Funerary monuments, in particular, have formed the focus of many discussions of the way in which the remembrance of the deceased provided an opportunity for both the living and the dead to assert, (re)negotiate and create a desirable social persona (see for example, Carroll 2006; D’Ambra 2002; George 2005; and Hope 1998, 2000b, 2001 and 2003). It is important to remember, however, that these monuments were not only about public displays of identity or the assertion of individual status; they were also closely linked to strong emotional and religious forces which influenced the desire of the ancients to be remembered by the living. Ancient legal texts define a monument as “something which exists to preserve a memory” (Digest 11.7.2.6), and Varro (On the Latin Language 6.49) informs us that the word ‘monument’ derives from the Latin verb monere – “to remind”. This desire not to be consigned to oblivion was as influential as the wish to use the commemorative process to promote one’s status and identity, and commemoration was intimately entwined with religious fears about the existence of the afterlife – if nothing awaited the soul it was necessary to ensure that the deceased maintained some form of existence in the world of the living. The funerary monument itself was essential to this process. Placed in a highly public location, designed to be eye-catching and to communicate biographical information about the identity and beliefs of the deceased, the funerary monument served to bring the dead to life in the consciousness of the living. Creating a ‘memory’, real or artificial, in the minds of relatives and strangers allowed the deceased to achieve a degree of immortality and to prolong their existence amongst the living, at the same time as making public statements about their personal relationships and sense of identity.

Nevertheless, as Williams (2003, 7) has pointed out, “monumentality is certainly not a pre-requisite for remembrance,” and the creation of a funerary monument was not the only way in which this process could occur. In order to fully comprehend the
commemorative activities of the ancient community it is essential to investigate other ways in which the dead could be remembered and their existence celebrated. This has been explored more generally by Connerton (1989), whose model of ‘inscribing’ and ‘incorporating’ practices of remembrance is particularly relevant to this discussion. Connerton posits two different methods by which the dead might be recalled, remembered and celebrated. On one hand, ‘inscribing practices’, involves the creation of a ‘permanent’ device (in this case a funerary monument or tomb) that “traps and holds information long after the human organism has stopped informing” (Connerton 1989, 72–73). Hence a monument bearing either an epitaph containing biographical information, a portrait bust, or occupational relief depicting that individual at work or the tools of their trade, which was capable of continuously communicating this information to the living, can be defined as an ‘inscribing’ form of remembrance. On the other hand, Connerton (1989, 72–73) defines the active participation of surviving mourners in commemorative activities, ceremonies and bodily practices as ‘incorporating practices’. He suggests that repeated ritual activity allowed the living to recall the dead and to celebrate their memory, without the need for a ‘permanent’ memorial. In a Roman context such ritual activities can be seen to include those which immediately surrounded the death of an individual – the *conclamatio* in which the dead was called repeatedly by name provides a good example, as does the funeral itself, which included a procession through the streets accompanied by the loud wailing of mourners and music. At the pyre or grave other rituals were also performed, including the consuming of a funerary feast; an activity that was repeated nine days later on the *novemdialis* and at other specific times during the year. During all of these activities the dead were actively recalled through the actions of the living, something that was repeated when they performed the same rites for other deceased individuals.

Although ‘incorporating practices’ of remembrance probably held particular significance for the poorer members of the urban community who lacked the necessary economic resources to create a lasting, or personalised, funerary monument (Graham 2006a and 2006b), they played an equally significant role in the remembrance processes of other social groups. In fact, close scrutiny reveals that the list of Roman funerary rituals that can be considered to involve ‘incorporating’ practices of remembrance is long and complex, although often these mnemonically charged activities have not been considered as such. An example of one such mortuary ritual is the rather obscure rite of *os resectum* (cut bone). Its place within funerary activities has rarely been questioned since archaeological evidence for it was recovered during the early eighteenth century, but a reassessment of this rite as an incorporating act of remembrance suggests that it may have played a far more significant role in ancient rituals of purification and commemoration than has been previously thought. This paper will highlight some of the problems with existing understandings of *os resectum* and offer a re-interpretation of the ritual and its place within the funerary process that allows us to appreciate its significant role in both purification rituals and the remembrance process.
Exploring os resectum

The custom of *os resectum* is mentioned briefly in ancient literature by three well-known authors: Cicero, Festus and Varro. They fail, however, to provide a consensus of opinion regarding the precise meaning and nature of the rite, and do not provide clear details about how it may have been performed. Despite this, it is largely around these descriptions that our current understanding of *os resectum* has been shaped and it is therefore essential that any discussion of the process begin with them. Festus (*On the Meaning of Words* 62) provides the briefest but most specific reference to *os resectum* and states simply that a corpse may only be legitimately burned once a finger has been cut off and set aside. Cicero (*Laws* 2.22.55) unfortunately elaborates little on this statement in his discussion of burial laws and practices, including it amongst a list of other activities that he feels he has no need to describe:

> It is unnecessary for me to explain when the period of family mourning is ended, what sort of sacrifice of wethers is offered to the Lar, in what manner the severed bone (*os resectum*) is buried in the earth, what are the rules in regard to the obligation to sacrifice a sow, or when the grave first takes on the character of a grave and comes under the protection of religion.

Varro (*On the Latin Language*, 5.23), however, provides a few more tantalising details about the practice, when he tells us that:

> … if on the burial mound of a Roman who has been burned on the pyre clods are not thrown, or if a bone of the dead man has been kept out for the ceremony of purifying the household, the household remains in mourning; in the latter case, until in the purification the bone is covered with soil …

The rather imprecise accounts provided by Cicero, Festus and Varro have led to several interpretations of this custom, the most popular of which centres on the importance that was attached to proper religious burial. Roman beliefs about the afterlife and the fate of the soul were notoriously nebulous and because beliefs largely came down to a matter of personal conviction people often tended to hedge their bets. Even Epicurus, who strongly denied the existence of the afterlife and taught that the soul was destroyed at the moment of death, provided in his will for offerings in perpetuity to his father, mother, and brother (Nock 1972, 286). Such uncertainty naturally led to fears about what the living and the dead might expect if the soul did continue some form of existence subsequent to death and this was reflected in a widespread belief that they were capable of affecting one another’s existence (Toynbee 1971, 34). In particular it was feared that the souls of the dead would terrisise the living unless they received proper funerary rites and a religious burial that provided their remains with a covering of earth. Horace alludes directly to this practice of proper burial in one of his *Odes* (1. 28) during which the corpse of a sailor pleads with a passer-by to help his soul to find rest:
What! Shrink you not from crime whose punishment falls on your innocent children? It may hap imperious Fate will make yourself repent. My prayers shall reach the avengers of all wrong; no expiations shall the curse unbind. Great though your haste, I would not task you long; thrice sprinkle dust, then scud before the wind.

Horace’s words make it quite clear that the restless dead could pose a serious threat to the well-being of the living, even after they themselves had died. Furthermore, he appears to suggest that a token covering of earth, literally a few handfuls, was believed to be sufficient to allow the shade to rest peacefully. If the corpse did not receive these rites then the shade was condemned to a fearful state of existence – unable to enter the afterlife or rejoin the living world, it was compelled to remain trapped between them (Hope 2000a, 120). The fact that denial of burial was, from time to time, used as a form of extreme punishment demonstrates the force of these beliefs (Kyle 1998, 131); denial of burial, real or symbolic, thus entailed eternal punishment and allowed the authorities to extend their powers beyond the grave. Proper burial was evidently considered to be a vital part of the funeral, but how did the most common method of disposal at the time, cremation, align with these needs? How could the body receive proper burial after incineration? Os resectum has been interpreted as the primary solution to this problem (see Becker 1988; Hope 2000a, 105–106; Lindsay 2000, 168; Pellegrino 1999, 11; Toynbee 1971, 49). Removing an element of the corpse prior to burning, in order to provide it with a separate burial in earth, allowed the deceased to receive a proper religious interment and ensured that both the living and the dead remained peaceful and content in their respective worlds. De Visscher (1963, 23) and Simon-Hiernard (1987, 93) have suggested that os resectum thereby legitimised the interment and allowed the grave to receive the legal status of locus religiosus, which ensured that the dead possessed an inviolable place of rest. Such status was bestowed on the site of burial only through the proper inhumation of the corpse; something that the words of Cicero (Laws 2.22.57) appear to confirm when he claims that “… until turf is cast upon the bones, the place where the body is cremated does not have a sacred character….”

Gaetano Messineo (1995, 263; 1999, 111–112) has suggested that the rite may also have been referred to by Plutarch (Matters relating to customs and mores IV.79), who asks,

Why was it permitted to take up a bone of a man who had enjoyed a triumph, and had later died and been cremated, and carry it into the city and deposit it there, as Pyrrhon of Lipara has recorded? Was it to show honour to the dead?

Messineo’s interpretation rests on the suggestion that os resectum was restricted to the elite, in particular to triumphors who were granted the rare privilege of burial within the city. This theory may offer an explanation for the uncertainty of Cicero, Varro and Festus, who may have been describing an infrequent event, but as we shall see, the archaeological evidence for os resectum does not support this interpretation. Furthermore,
Plutarch specifically refers to the *collection* of bone after cremation, whereas the term *os resectum* (cut bone) points towards the deliberate removal of bone from the corpse. Moreover, the ancient laws of Rome, the Twelve Tables (10. 5), state unequivocally that “He is not to collect the bones of a dead man, in order to hold a funeral afterwards.” Alternatively, Messineo (1995, 1999, and 2001) proposed that *os resectum* was used as a means by which to ensure proper burial in situations where it was impossible for the mourners to perform the traditional ceremonies citing, for example, instances of the death of soldiers or travellers in war or foreign lands. There are indeed documented examples of remains being returned to their homeland for burial, and Cicero (*Laws* 2. 24. 60) observed that although it was forbidden to collect the bones of the deceased, “here an exception is made in case of death in war or on foreign soil” (see Carroll 2009). Other examples include the account of Tacitus (*Annals* 3.4) concerning the death of Germanicus in Syria and the subsequent return of his remains to Rome, and a similar, although perhaps less ostentatious instance, recounted by Martial (*Epigrams* 9.30),

Antistius Rusticus has died on Cappadocia’s cruel shores: O land guilty of a dolorous crime! Nigrina brought back in her bosom her dear husband’s bones, and sighed that the way was all too short; and when to the tomb she envies she was giving that sacred urn, she deemed herself twice widowed of her ravished spouse.

The most commonly cited explanations of *os resectum* therefore stress its role as a guarantee of legitimate burial on each occasion of death. However, there are problems associated with all of these interpretations that render each of them unconvincing. This fact becomes clearer still when the primary archaeological evidence for the rite is re-assessed.

**Bones, pots and vineyards: the evidence from San Cesareo**

When, in 1732, a large number of small, single-handled ceramic vessels containing pieces of burnt bone were discovered near the church of San Cesareo on the Via Appia at Rome, it appeared that convincing evidence for *os resectum* had been uncovered. It is almost solely on the basis of a comparison of the ancient sources discussed above with this evidence that *os resectum* is understood today.

The excavations at San Cesareo which recovered the vessels and their unique contents took place amid frenzied archaeological investigations of the area of the Via Appia immediately outside the Porta Capena (Fig. 5.1). This area had long been home to vineyards and agricultural lands belonging to some of the major religious houses of the city, but at the beginning of the eighteenth century it became increasingly evident that the soil concealed a vast wealth of ancient treasures. Antiquarians such as de Vettori, Strozzi, Contucci, Bevilacqua, Frasconi, Baldini and the famous Francesco de’Ficoroni, descended on the area in order to extract as many spectacular finds as possible (Fig. 5.2).
It would not be until the following century that the famous columbaria of both the Vigna Codini and Pomponius Hylas would be found in this area, and the nearby tomb of the Scipios would not be fully explored until 1780, but the fertile ground yielded a great many other funerary structures, sarcophagi, sculpture, metalwork, frescoes (many of which were subsequently destroyed) and other ancient riches. The majority of these structures were destroyed as treasure hunters sought more portable items to add to their collections or to sell on the thriving antiquities market. The same appears to have been true of San Cesareo, an example which demonstrates particularly well the early desire for objects rather than archaeological data and the difficulties that later scholars face when trying to reconstruct the context in which these items were discovered. It is from Ficoroni that we first hear of the San Cesareo discoveries when he tells us that, in 1732, Giuseppe Mittelli
excavated ‘burial chambers’ in the vineyard belonging to the church of San Cesareo that were filled with burnt bone (Montalto Trentori 1937–38, 297). The material recovered by Mittelli was catalogued in the following years by Giovanni Baldini (1738, cited in CIL VI² 1103), who provides a more comprehensive account of the discovery:

In the vineyard of San Cesario, situated on the right side of the Via Appia on the way out of Rome, of the order of the Collegio Clementino, the year 1732 in the month of July as the walls of the ancient tombs were falling into ruin, … is found in a tomb chamber an extraordinary quantity of little earthenware vessels all heaped up together. These little vessels were all of approximately the same size, capacity and appearance. Small bases, wide around the body, slim necked with a wider opening, with a handle … a few of them thinly varnished, some in black, some in a reddish colour, most of them unvarnished, beautifully pristine, almost as if they had just been taken from the kiln (see Fig. 5.3).

Baldini (1738, cited in CIL VI² 1103) was particularly interested in two aspects of these vessels. He explains how each small pitcher was found to contain “a splinter and [a] fragment of a larger human bone burned and calcified and evidently inserted so that when the vase was shaken they fell into the opening, but did not come out.” Despite
using tweezers to remove a few of these fragments for closer examination, Baldini provides no further details about them, although the pieces of burnt bone appear to have been relatively quickly associated with the rite of *os resectum*. The second aspect of the San Cesareo vessels to attract attention was the presence of short texts incised on their exterior (see Figs 5.4 and 5.5). With a few exceptions each of these recorded the name of an individual accompanied by a specific date. For example, one reads: *Q(uintus) Afran(ius) a(nte) d(iem) / IV n(onas) Nov(embris)* (Quintus Afranius, November 2; *CIL VI* 2 8218); and another: *Baebia Q(uinti) l(iberta) a(nte) d(iem) / IX k(alendas) Octobris* (Baebia, freedwoman of Quintus, September 22; *CIL VI* 2 8227). The texts include references to men and women, slaves, former slaves, and freeborn citizens and, on the basis of a general absence of *cognomina*, the use of the pre-Caesarean calendar, and the style and fabric of the pots, the vessels and their contents were assigned to the first or second century BC. Unfortunately the “more than three hundred” vessels originally recovered in 1732 had been reduced to 125 by the time Baldini finished cataloguing them, the missing vessels perhaps sold on the antiquities market by the workmen assigned to their care. The remaining vessels eventually found their way into private collections and today the whereabouts of approximately fifty are known. The majority are housed in the Museo Nazionale Romano, but thanks to Baldini, and Antonio Lupi, we have a record of 186 of the original inscriptions.

It is easy to see why these vessels and their skeletal contents were associated with the rite of *os resectum*. They appear to confirm that a piece of bone was removed from...
the body of the deceased (most probably an easily removable finger bone) for separate burial after the cremation of the other remains. Messineo (1995, 1999 and 2000) has used the names and dates on the small vessels to support his theory concerning the return of a token element of an individual who had died on foreign soil and has argued that the texts served to identify that person and the date on which they died. The texts, he argues, allowed the mourning family to calculate the age at which they died and to mark this occasion with the appropriate annual ceremonies. However, the vessels themselves provide evidence that can be used to counter this argument: the presence of women within the texts throws doubt on his “death in war” hypothesis; the vessels are local Tiber Valley Wares and are not from foreign lands; and the mixture of social levels represented within the texts does not seem consistent with individuals who would have travelled long distances from home. It seems unlikely that the remains of slaves would have been returned to Rome for burial, especially if they were of non-Roman origin. Equally, although family or household groupings can be identified amongst the San Cesareo assemblage, it is evident that not all of the individuals shared a direct or formal relationship and there seems little reason to assume that all token remains returned from abroad were interred at the same site.

There are clearly several problems with existing theories, but perhaps the most significant is the fact that Baldini described the bones he saw as “burned and calcified.”
All of the theories that have been proposed to explain the role of *os resectum* within Roman burial customs assert that the bone was removed prior to cremation in order to act as a representative part of the *unburned* corpse. If we are to understand *os resectum* is time to look at the evidence for it from a new perspective.

**Purifying the living and the dead**

Varro’s words (*On the Latin Language* 5.23), when describing the rite of *os resectum*, provide the key to expanding our understanding of this complex rite. In this passage Varro places more emphasis on the living than the dead and states specifically that bone was “kept out for the purifying of the household,” making little reference to how the soul of the deceased benefited from the subsequent burial of the bone. Furthermore, he actually makes a distinction between *os resectum* (or, as he refers to it, *exceptum*) and the act of throwing earth on the corpse, a fact that suggests the former needs to be placed in a different context.

In ancient Rome, the moment of death rendered the family of the deceased, and anyone who came into contact with the corpse, spiritually impure. Lindsay (2000) has examined concepts and ideas of death pollution in the ancient city and provides extensive evidence that spiritual pollution was taken very seriously by members of the community at Rome. There existed many rituals, ceremonies and traditions designed to limit the extent of death pollution given its immense impact on the lives of mourners. The status that ensued from death pollution forbade partaking in certain public activities, including public bathing, and was particularly damaging for priests, magistrates and other office holders. It was removed only once the mourners had undergone a cleansing ritual known as the *suffitio*. Varro’s statement implies that *os resectum* may have been involved in the process of rendering the mourners clean once more. Moreover, the *suffitio* ceremony may have served to mark the final separation of the dead from the living and the creation of new states of existence. It was from this point that the dead were transformed into ancestors.

Various lustrations were performed by members of the mourning household once the initial funeral activities had been completed. These included the *exfir*, which involved the sweeping of the house with a special broom (Lindsay 2000, 166, citing Festus 68L); failure to perform this act would result in a further death. The *suffitio* was another of these important cleansing ceremonies and, although evidence for how it was performed remains rather poor, it is known that it occurred some time after the deposition of the cremated remains of the dead and that it required mourners to step over fire and be sprinkled with water from a laurel branch. These acts would not have been out of place within wider Roman religious practice since the purification of polluted objects, peoples and places with fire and water was a well-established element of religious activity. The *Parilia* festival, for example, celebrated on the 21st April, involved a series
of public purification rituals that involved both fire and water in much the same way as the *suffitio*. Ovid (*Fasti*, 4.735ff) describes his own participation in the festival: “truly I have leapt over the fires, placed three in a row, and the moist laurel has sprinkled water over me.” Equally, during the *Portunalia* festival (August 17), keys that were to be offered to the god *Portunus* were first purified in the hearth (Scullard 1981, 176). The *suffitio* was probably associated with the *novemdialis*, the last day of the nine-day long unclean period of mourning, when the mourners gathered once more for a funerary feast and to offer prayers and gifts to the departed soul whilst continuing to celebrate their memory. The bone that had been removed from the corpse may have been used within these rituals of purification and remembrance, being cleansed in the fire, along with the mourners, and then finally laid to rest. These ceremonies marked the beginning of the ritual commemorative acts that would continue to be performed annually on the deceased’s birthday, the anniversary of their death and during the various festivals of the dead.

The proposal that bone removed from the corpse was retained for use in these ritual activities of purification and remembrance can be supported by the observations of Baldini (1738, cited in *CIL VI*² 1103) concerning the original bone fragments discovered at San Cesareo. He describes these as “a splinter and [a] fragment of a larger human bone, burned and calcified;” a description that does not seem to align with the fact that the ancient literary sources speak of bone being removed prior to cremation. If this was the case we would expect the bones to show no evidence of burning. However, if this information is assessed in light of Varro’s comments on the purification of the household, as well as what is known about the cleansing properties of fire and its use within the *suffitio* process, it can be proposed that the bone fragments were subjected to burning and purification during this later ceremony, before they were then deposited accordingly. Cleansing the bone, the final remaining piece of the dead, may therefore have been essential for the lustration of the entire mourning household.

Initially it is difficult to imagine why it was important to include a token element of the corpse in the cleansing ritual and exactly how this act allowed the family to find a release from their polluted state of existence when they themselves were not being subjected directly to the cleansing properties of the flames. However, when these activities are viewed in the context of Van Gennep’s (1960) theories concerning rites of passage and the separation of the living and the dead, which align particularly well with Roman beliefs and practices, the significance of *os resectum* can be appreciated more fully. The period of mourning known as the *funesta* began at the exact moment of death and plunged both the corpse and the bereaved family into a state of spiritual un-cleanness. During this time they occupied a liminal zone that existed outside of the worlds to which both properly belonged. The living existed outside of normal society; considered ‘socially dead’ they were unable to participate in everyday activities until they were released from this state of existence. The dead were equally unable to move on and be welcomed amongst the community of ancestors awaiting them in the
afterlife until the appropriate rituals, prayers, offerings and ceremonies had been enacted. They were, perhaps, ‘socially un-dead’. In terms of Van Gennep’s tripartite structure of rites of passage (depicted pictorially by Leach 1976, 78; see Fig. 5.6), this period of mourning can be described as involving *rites of transition*, with both parties occupying a marginal zone outside of a defined community. Only once the *rites of incorporation* had been performed, in this case the *suffitio*, could they return to their proper states of existence and begin the process of (re)negotiating their relationships with the other members of that community, whether they were ancestors or the living.

In the context of this discussion it is important to observe that both the living and the dead who occupied this liminal, polluted zone required purification before they could leave it. For the deceased to begin their new existence in the next world their physical remains had to be cleansed in order to release the bonds that tied them to the society of the living. Perhaps more importantly, both the living and the dead had to move into their respective new roles and leave the liminal zone at the same time, since the existence of the zone was defined only by their co-presence within it. It was therefore essential that an unclean element of the dead was retained for this cleansing ritual, and the *os resectum* provided a token element of the polluted persona of the deceased that could be purified in the final stages of the funeral. Only once the *suffitio* had been performed, and the living and the dead released from their impure state, could the bone be laid to rest and covered with earth – a symbol of both parties being assimilated into the appropriate community and establishing new relationships with other members of that community.

**Identifying os resectum**

This hypothesis has immense implications for the way in which the San Cesareo vessels are interpreted. It is most probable that, once the *suffitio* ceremonies were complete and the bone purified, the family reunited the bone with the other incinerated remains of
that individual in the cremation urn itself, perhaps with a token handful of earth to ensure that it constituted a legitimate interment. If this was the case, and the *os resectum* did not normally receive a separate receptacle, then it implies that the bone-filled pots from San Cesareo do not represent the norm. This perhaps is not surprising given that, despite an estimated 80 people dying each day at Rome (Bodel 2000, 128–129), only approximately 300 such examples of *os resectum* have been recovered, and all from a single site. Perhaps the wrong questions have been posed; instead of looking for other graffitied pots containing bone we must ask why they were employed for the separate burial of *os resectum* here and not elsewhere? What was it about this group of people or the context in which they were acting that led them to perform the ritual in this way? It is not possible to answer these questions here but this new approach offers an opportunity to move forward with our understanding of *os resectum* and San Cesareo and makes it possible to examine the pots and their inscriptions as a distinct group of artefacts connected with a variation of a common ritual practice, rather than the primary evidence for that practice. We must look for *os resectum* elsewhere too.

Although it is largely impossible to identify bones that were burnt at different times, scientific studies have shown that it is possible to differentiate between bones subjected to different temperatures (Fig. 5.7). Experiments have shown that bone subjected to heat undergoes changes in colour, as well as at the microstructural level, that can help to identify the maximum temperature that the specimen was exposed to (Buikstra and Swegle 1989; Holden *et al.* 1995; Shipman *et al.* 1984). Although these colour changes are deemed insufficient to identify temperature precisely, they can indicate a range within which the temperature falls (Shipman *et al.* 1984, 312–314). Importantly, in the context of this re-assessment of *os resectum*, it has been observed that when heated for a relatively short duration “bones are likely to survive intact or mostly intact and cannot be expected to have reached the maximum temperature of the heating device” (Shipman *et al.* 1984, 322–323). This may explain the good preservation of the bones recovered from San Cesareo, for if the *os resectum* was burned during the suffitio, and was not subjected to the very high temperatures (approximately 900°C) of the funerary pyre, it must be assumed that it was placed in a smaller fire for a shorter period of time. Campfires ordinarily reach temperatures of around 400°C which is a temperature, and a type of fire, that is conceivable for that used within the suffitio. If the mourners were required to leap over the flames it is unlikely that a larger, or hotter, fire was built for this purpose, and any blaze would certainly not have been required to burn for as long as the pyre, probably only for the duration of the ritual and perhaps also the accompanying feast. Unfortunately, the bones from San Cesareo have been lost since Baldini’s initial observations and it is therefore not possible to assess the degree of burning to which they were subjected. However, if this data was applied to other cremated remains recovered from Rome, and indeed elsewhere, it may be possible to identify other instances of *os resectum* that may have been overlooked (Graham, Sulosky and Chamberlain, in preparation).
Figure 5.7 A cremation burial from Lincoln, England with a possible example of os resectum in the form of differentially burnt finger bones (number 11) (photo, Andrew Chamberlain, with permission).
Os resectum as a ‘technology of remembrance’

So far we have focused on re-defining os resectum as a complex purificatory rite, but it is also essential to acknowledge its significant mnemonic role within mortuary activities. Successful commemoration does not depend solely on the creation of a lasting monument, and we have seen how Connerton (1989) has demonstrated the effectiveness of ‘incorporating’ practices of remembrance. The practice of os resectum and its relationship with the suffitio can also be understood in this context. The suffitio was one of many activities that took place between the time of death and the end of the official period of mourning which involved the perpetuation of the memory of the deceased through ritual or bodily performances. As a result, it should perhaps be considered a mnemonic process as much as a purificatory one. As the mourners placed the os resectum in the fire and performed the required ceremonial activities, including stepping over the fire and being immersed in its cleansing smoke, they would have brought a memory of the deceased to life in their minds. In the process, the experience would have recalled all of the other times, and individuals, for whom they had performed the same rituals, thus continuing the remembrance process for each of these people. This process is something that Williams (2004, 282) has observed for Anglo-Saxon cremations where “each new cremation rite would recall events at previous funerals.” Such observations need not apply only to the cremation of the corpse itself but can be extended to encompass the other funerary activities in which the mourners participated. Placing the os resectum into the fire, with its evident parallels with the primary cremation, will have reminded the participants of the earlier incineration of the corpse and evoked the emotional responses they had experienced at the time. By this stage the os resectum was only a part of the corpse but it continued to be a powerfully emotive embodiment of the deceased; the last physical part of it to remain amongst the living. The main purpose of the rite may have been to release the participants from their spiritually polluted state, but at the same time the activities allowed the living to gather together in order to recall and celebrate the memory of the deceased, and to create new memories of that process.

Furthermore, the rites of the suffitio represented, and indeed facilitated, the final separation of the dead from the world of the living. Once both parties had been cleansed and the os resectum had been burnt and buried, or reunited with the other cremated remains of the deceased, the liminal zone ceased to exist. The living subsequently returned to ‘real life’ and the dead finally became ancestors. It was from this point onwards that the process of lasting and ongoing commemoration began. Until this point the corpse itself had formed the focus of commemorative activity but after the suffitio this role was adopted by the grave or funerary monument. It was to here that the family returned on special occasions to offer libations and prayers and, most importantly, to bring the memory of their dead relative alive once more through these activities. The suffitio thus signified the end of the relatively short-lived corpse-centred processes in
which the deceased was honoured, celebrated and finally separated from the living, and the beginning of the all important long-term remembrance process that was to continue, ideally for eternity, although in reality only for as long as the grave held meaning for the living. This transition built on the memories that were created during the funerary activities – each time a funerary feast was consumed, certain prayers muttered or other funerary rites performed, the living would recall the experiences and emotions of this earlier event and thus collectively continued to memorialise their ancestors.

The retained bone fragments were not forgotten within these continuing ritual commemorations and this can be seen in the early Imperial columbarium of Pomponius Hylas, also near the Via Appia at Rome. A marble slab, equipped with a terracotta libation tube, was inserted into the floor of the subterranean burial chamber. When the original excavators lifted the slab in 1831 they discovered in the space below a large quantity of small bone fragments that belonged to many individuals (Pavia 1996). It is very probable that the assemblage represents another way in which the os resectum could be deposited once it had served its purpose and further indicates that the San Cesareo vessels do not necessarily reflect normal practice. Significantly, the presence of a libation pipe also signals that some form of post-depositional ritual activity occurred in relation to these retained bone fragments and that mourners returned to the place of deposition in order to perform acts that were designed to appease the souls of the departed, but that were also a vital element of the ongoing ritual commemorative process.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented here sheds important new light on the rite of os resectum and its role in the funerary ritual. It is clear that os resectum can only be truly understood within the context of ritual purification ceremonies, and that current interpretations of the process are too reliant on uncritical readings of ambiguous ancient literature and archaeology. San Cesareo has been viewed as the os resectum ‘type-site’ since its discovery in 1732, but when the evidence for the rite is re-assessed it becomes evident that deposition within a small inscribed ceramic jug was probably not a required element of the ritual. It is also apparent that os resectum played an essential role within a complex ritual that was considered particularly important for purifying the household and its members after a death; without it the dead remained trapped outside the realms of the living and the dead where they could find no peace. What is more, the rite was closely bound up with recurring rituals of commemoration, and it was these ‘incorporating’ technologies of remembrance which marked the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor.
5. From fragments to ancestors: Re-defining the role of os resectum

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Bibliography

Abbreviation

CIL Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum

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