Corporeal concerns: the role of the body in the transformation of Roman mortuary practices

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Chapter 3

CORPOREAL CONCERNS: THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF ROMAN MORTUARY PRACTICES

Emma-Jayne Graham

During the late first and early second century AD the ‘standard’ Roman mortuary rite of cremation was largely abandoned in favour of inhumation; a shift which has been described as ‘the biggest single event in ancient burial’ (Morris 1992, 31). Explanations for this dramatic event have ranged from changing religious beliefs and the rise of oriental cults, to fashion, new forms of ostentatious display and elite competition (Nock 1932; Toynbee 1971). Very little attention has been paid to the possibility of a relationship between this change in practice and attitudes towards, or experiences of, the human body. Indeed, Toynbee’s (1971, 41) vague suggestion that ‘inhumation could be felt to be a gentler and more respectful way of laying to rest the mortal frame which has been the temple and mirror of the mortal soul and enduring personality’ remains the closest any observation has come to considering whether the body itself played a role in determining the nature of this change in practice. Superficially, cremation and inhumation involve different ways of treating the body: cremation brings about the violent destruction of the corpse, whereas inhumation maintains its integrity for longer. In reality, of course, it is not this straightforward, not least because the nature of cremation might vary immensely and, for example, cremated remains might be collected and used to reconstitute the body in some form or another (see Rebay-Salisbury, this volume). Nevertheless, when reduced to its most basic level, an essential dichotomy remains between the intention to transform the corpse with fire or not. So, whilst cremation and inhumation must certainly not be viewed as diametrically opposed, it cannot be denied that they involve distinct choices. It is hard to imagine that the people and communities of Roman Italy did not recognise this. With this in mind, this chapter diverges from traditional arguments and examines the evidence for inhumation in Roman Italy in order to explore how the inhumed body was treated and the extent to which this might reflect, or have created, new attitudes and intentions amongst the living with regards to the treatment and integrity of the corporeal form. It is argued that by foregrounding the body itself it becomes possible to view the broader change from one rite to another from a significant new perspective.
Re-embodying the Roman funeral

Recent studies of mortuary practice in various archaeological and historical contexts have begun to focus on the materiality of the corpse and the embodied experiences of the living (see for example Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008; Kus 1992; Nilsson-Stutz 2003 and 2008; Williams 2004). However, the physical body has tended to be something of an afterthought in Roman mortuary scholarship. Recent work on funerary monuments, tombs, inscriptions, art, cemeteries, and grave goods has revealed the extent to which concerns about death, dying and the dead permeated all manner of social, economic and political activities, and many studies have focused upon the crucial issues of identity, social competition, status, politics and power, acculturation and the importance of personal relationships (see for example Carroll 2006; D’Ambra 2002; Flower 1996; Graham and Hope in press; Hope 1998; and papers in Carroll and Rempel 2011). Moreover, cemetery excavations in Italy have begun increasingly to take account of a wealth of palaeoanthropological and palaeopathological data in order to access the lives and health of people residing within the towns and suburbs of Roman Italy (for example, Catalano et al. 2001; 2006; Cucina et al. 2006). Nevertheless, in much of this scholarship the corpse itself remains something that is talked around, rather than addressed directly (although see Hope 2000 and Lindsay 2000).

In a recent paper (Graham 2011) I argued that if classical archaeologists are ever to grasp the deeper significance of the activities carried out in the face of death by a mourning family or professional undertakers (libitinarii) this must be rectified. In particular, I suggested that the materiality of the corpse itself might act upon the senses, emotions and embodied memories of the living in such a way as to contribute towards the creation or maintenance of particular senses of personal or collective identity. Furthermore, embodied experiences of preparing the body were subject to change, perhaps as a consequence of an apparent increase in the professionalisation of the death ‘industry’ during the first century AD which may have reduced the level of direct contact between the bereaved family and the corpse (Bodel 2000; 2004). For example, the women of a family who could afford the services of an undertaker may have lost their traditional roles in the preparation of the body when funerary specialists were employed – something that not only altered their relationship with the corpse but also affected the way in which women maintained a collective familial identity (Graham 2011, 34). These nuances of experience can only be glimpsed if the corpse is placed back at the centre of mortuary activities and attempts are made to consider how its materiality might have impacted upon the senses, emotions, memories, and identities of those who encountered it.

In many ways this chapter picks up where this earlier discussion left off, investigating whether these changes had a more lasting significance. What was the long term, or more general effect of changing levels of interaction with the corpse, and how might these manifest themselves in the archaeological record? Are there notable changes in burial custom that correspond with the emergence of funerary professionals and, if so, do these suggest that attitudes towards the treatment of the corpse had changed as a result of the altered relationship between living mourner and the materiality of the dead? The most visible
change within excavated cemeteries of this period was noted at the start of this chapter: an increased frequency of inhumation. Could this be a partial consequence of new attitudes towards the dead body or, in turn, might it have contributed to the development of these new ideas?

**Increasingly distant bodies**

Similar questions to those posed above can, and have been, asked for other historical periods, notably by Sarah Tarlow (1999) who examined changes to both funerary practice and commemoration in the UK during the late medieval and early modern period. For Orkney, she demonstrated how new religious restrictions concerning purgatory, that were introduced during the Reformation, changed the relationship between the living and the dead, reducing the degree of interaction that was deemed appropriate. Under the new rules it was no longer necessary for the living to intervene on behalf of the soul through masses and prayers. This change concerned the fate of the soul, rather than the body, but nevertheless it involved a major change in practice that altered the framework within which the living interacted with the dead and created a need to develop strategies that were in keeping with the new restrictions. In this case funerary monuments were used to ‘extend the social memory of the deceased’ and Tarlow (*ibid.*, 89) suggests that ‘the memorial monument in some measure compensate[d] for the death of the physical body on earth.’ She also observed a trend towards increased sentimentality and expressions of grief on these monuments – perhaps an attempt to maintain a meaningful relationship with the dead in a format which suited the new circumstances, notably the distance between living and dead imposed by the new restrictions. It would be inappropriate to draw direct comparisons between post-medieval Orkney and imperial Rome, but this example suggests that changes to traditional forms of interaction with the dead might bring about new activities and emotions, or at least expressions of those emotions.

Similarly, in a paper concerned with the aesthetic body, Tarlow (2002) examined changing attitudes towards the material corpse during the nineteenth century, particularly the separation of mourners from the dead body against a backdrop of increased professionalisation of the funerary industry. Before this, family and friends had gathered to prepare the body, but this task came to be more frequently carried out by professional undertakers behind closed doors. Once again, a restriction in levels of interaction with the dead, this time involving reduced physical contact, can be shown to have produced new ideas about that body: in this instance the dead came to be laid out to appear as if they were sleeping, with emphasis placed on their beautiful, peaceful appearance in literature, epigraphy and funerary photography (Tarlow 2002, 87–88, 90). At the same time, evidence points towards a strong cultural denial of decay with greater use being made of coffins to conceal the reality of the decomposing body. Tarlow draws attention to instances, particularly in the United States, where windows might be inserted into the coffin lid in order to allow the family to view the deceased but which restricted this view to the
carefully posed face (ibid., 93). These changes are period- and context-specific, but they highlight the extent to which a framework of increased professionalisation could intervene in traditional practices and remove the intimacy that had once existed between mourners and the corpse. In turn, these might be connected with the development of new attitudes and, as a consequence, new practices. In this context one might also highlight Mitford’s (1963) revealing work on the ability of modern funerary professionals to consciously direct popular practice.

In terms of disposal, Tim Flohr Sørensen (2009) provides an instructive example of the embodied significance of a shift from inhumation to cremation in twentieth-century Denmark, arguing that the agency of the corpse – the way in which it compels the living to respond in particular ways – must be accounted for when considering the relationship between mourners and the deceased. Since the 1960s, cremation has come to dominate the cemeteries of Denmark, and Sørensen situates these changing customs in the context of an increasing industrialisation of death, which has removed the materiality of the dead body from the bereaved and placed it in the hands of professionals. He argues that this process has affected the way in which mourners conceive of the materiality of the body and their relationship with it. Traditional inhumation entailed a ‘consciousness of the destiny of the deceased underground – her or his bodily putrefaction – [and thus] create[d] a more intimate spatial bond between the deceased and the relative than the consciousness posed by the ashes of cremation,’ which, he says, ‘could be anywhere’ (ibid., 127). Essentially Sørensen argues that changing disposal practices have established a new relationship between the bodies of the living and those of the dead, bringing about a new way of thinking about corporeal materiality and different ways of interacting with it based on an awareness of the presence or absence of the body. Although Sørensen contends with the Cartesian body-mind distinction of a modern context, many of his observations concerning the impact and knowledge of the materiality of the body are relevant to a study of Roman practice. Of particular importance is his suggestion that an awareness of the fate of the body might influence the way in which it comes to be understood. With these cross-cultural examples in mind we can turn to evidence for inhumation in Roman Italy in order to ask whether the processing and treatment of the inhumed body might reflect, or indeed bring about, altered attitudes and feelings amongst the living with regards to the corporeal form.

To cremate or not to cremate?

The Roman shift from cremation to inhumation has attracted much attention, although there remains little consensus regarding the underlying motivation for it; indeed it may not even have been as dramatic a change as some scholarship has assumed. It is usually dated to the very end of the first and the early second century AD, although as Taglietti (2001) has observed, inhumation actually appears much earlier at Rome and the two rites may well have co-existed for much of early Roman history (Graham and Hope in press). Indeed Vismara (1992) suggests that at Rome the change in rite may not have been that
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momentous, since an ambivalent attitude towards inhumation already held sway within contemporary literature. Late Republican and early imperial writers did not consider inhumation unusual, and instead stressed the foreignness of rites such as embalming (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.45.108; Lucretius, *On Nature*, 3.870–893). Arguments concerning religious stimuli for the renewed popularity of inhumation, notably Jewish or Christian customs which emphasised the need to preserve the integrity of the human body, have been rejected on the grounds that neither possessed the requisite level of influence at this period to bring about such a widespread change (see Morris 1992; Nock 1932; Toynbee 1971, 40). Increased engagement with oriental mystery cults (such as Orphism and Mithraism) may have encouraged inhumation as practised in the eastern part of the empire where it had remained the dominant rite for many centuries, but again the influence of these cults can be questioned. As Nock (1932, 332) points out, customary forms of honouring the dead with traditional offerings continued as before, with no evidence for new influences or altered beliefs about the nature of the afterlife. Morris (1992, 68–69) argues that ‘the switch from cremation to inhumation is, at the highest level of generality, a diffusion from the Greek East to the Latin West’ but admits that ‘this tells us little’ unless we place it in the context of competitive emulation at both the level of the elite (in a time of renewed interest in Greek culture) and the emulative relationship between Rome and the cities of her empire. He notes that although inhumation may have been stimulated by a fashion for Hellenism, its use by the elite and imperial family transformed it into something ‘Roman’ before it spread subsequently to the provinces of the West (although the emperor himself often continued to be cremated, Davies 2000; Price 1987). Morris also suggests that the rite was adopted to bring cohesion to an empire that was heading for a period of crisis (1992, 68). Certainly inhumation came to represent an element of cohesiveness within a fragmented empire of later centuries, but to suggest that it was used directly to promote solidarity in the face of turmoil seems unlikely given that it appears to have become popular as early as the first century AD in some parts of Italy and really took off from the early second century when the empire was at its most prosperous and peaceful. Morris’ arguments for elite emulation chime with that of Nock (1932), who linked inhumation with changes in fashion, particularly an association with ostentatious decorated sarcophagi, the production of which became increasingly widespread from the second century AD. However, Toynbee (1971, 40) stresses that these expensively carved coffins are unlikely to have brought about such a widespread and lasting change in burial practice. After all, fashion is subject to frequent and sometimes unpredictable change but sarcophagi themselves remained popular with the elite, even if their designs varied (see papers in Elsner and Huskinson 2010). Although some sarcophagi have been known to contain cremated remains, and therefore do not have to be linked exclusively with inhumation (Nock 1932, 334 n.61), it seems very unlikely that the extensive sarcophagus industry began before inhumation became popular enough to support the large-scale production and export of such expensive objects, making them a consequence of the change rather than a driving force.

So where does this leave us? We can largely reject widespread or dramatic changes in religious belief although altered individual values are harder to detect, elite competition may
have had a role in spreading the rite but does not satisfactorily explain why it emerged, and the argument for elevated interest in Greek or eastern culture is weakened by the fact that inhumation appears to have become popular prior to its Imperial-period peak. Widespread production of sarcophagi can hardly have begun in earnest until there was a suitable market, which leaves ‘fashion’ – itself a rather ill-defined explanation related to the diffusion of the practice rather than its origins – and Toynbee’s remarks concerning gentle treatment of the mortal frame. Perhaps the latter deserves to be taken more seriously than it has been.

Morris (1992, 33) proposes that we ‘embed the change in body treatment in its ritual context,’ but continues to understand ‘ritual context’ in terms only of tombs, monuments and grave goods, not *embodied practice*, and sees ‘bodily treatment’ as a basic distinction between a cremated or inhumed body. This distinction has been criticised by Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury (2008, 62) who point out that viewing cremation and inhumation as distinct entities ‘pushes explanations towards external or foreign agencies since in their total difference it becomes inconceivable that inhumation can “develop” into cremation’, and presumably vice versa. It might seem that to supplant cremation with inhumation is to simply stop processing the corpse with fire and to begin depositing entire bodies, but of course it is not that straightforward. Not only does this remove the often complex rites surrounding the burning of the body (in a Roman context this might include the spectacle of the pyre, placing the body on it, opening the eyes, ritual lighting and extinguishing of the pyre, collection of remains and their deposition, and processing of the *os resectum*; see Graham 2009; 2011a; Hope 2009), but the corporeal remains deposited in the ground, sarcophagus or tomb, also come to be treated differently. Inhumation may, at first glance, seem a far simpler process but it is naïve for us to assume a reduced level of bodily preparation or ritual. Indeed, burial of an entire body poses a range of discrete issues and may require as much, if not more, interaction with the corpse. Questions to be addressed by those responsible for an inhumation burial might include what the body is to be buried in, if anything – an earthen grave (with or without a tile cover), coffin, amphora, sarcophagus, tomb, catacomb? Will it be dressed, adorned, or wrapped in a shroud? How will it be laid out – crouched, extended, prone or supine? How will the limbs be arranged? What will accompany it and where will any items be placed in relation to the body? Will the body be embalmed or treated in any way prior to its burial? All of these actions distinguish the act of inhumation from cremation and require that those responsible for the burial come into contact with and experience the materiality of the corpse in its entirety. As a result they can also impact upon the nature of the relationship between the living and the dead.

Given its long standing presence as the dominant rite in the eastern part of the empire, the basic ‘idea’ of inhumation may well have been adopted from continued practices in the Greek East (although this is not the same as it being intentionally introduced), but something had to make it appeal to a community with strong traditional rites already in place. Maybe it offered something new at a time when the upper classes (those who could afford the services of *libitinarii*) were beginning to reassess their relationship with the dead body. By considering what ‘bodily treatment’ really entailed it might therefore be possible to examine the nuances of early inhumation in Roman Italy.
Inhumation and the body in Roman Italy

In order to draw these threads together – the popularity of *libitinarii*, the materiality of the corpse, changing forms of disposal and bodily treatment – and ask whether changed experiences of the body might have played a part in determining the manner of disposal, it is necessary to examine how the body was treated in cases of inhumation. Ancient sources have relatively little to say about activities associated specifically with the inhuming of bodies. Rites which took place immediately after death, as well as the washing and preparation of the body with perfumes and ointments, the period of lying-in-state and other preparatory rituals recorded within earlier sources, probably remained much the same given that these activities had no consequences for the final fate of the material remains (Mustakallio 2005). However, there are no descriptions of the activities that took place when an entire body was interred, in contrast to accounts describing the required activities associated with the pyre itself, such as the opening of the eyes, the lighting of the fire and its subsequent extinguishing with wine (Lucan *Civil War* 8, 729–58; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 11.55.150 and 12.41.83; Statius *Silvae* 2.6, 84–93; Martial *Epigrams* 10.97 and 11.54; Tibullus 1.3, 5–8; see Hope 2007, 111–115). As a consequence it is difficult to reconstruct the events that might have occurred at the graveside. For the purposes of this discussion it will be assumed that the traditional preparation of the body as outlined in the ancient sources remained largely unchanged. These rites were concerned with controlling the materiality of the corpse as it began the process of putrefaction, at the same time as being vital to the reorganisation of social and familial identities and senses of personhood; the extent to which embodied experiences of these may have changed in the face of increased professional intervention has been discussed elsewhere (Graham 2011). In order to examine treatment of the body after these preparatory acts we must turn to the evidence for these bodies in the ground.

Protecting the body

One of the most noticeable aspects of inhumation across Italy during the imperial period concerns the degree of protection provided for the body. Some were interred within existing monumental tombs designed originally to accommodate cremated remains but subsequently modified; others were placed in new structures built specifically to house inhumations. Leaving aside inhumations within monumental tombs – many of which were excavated in an era when the structure of the tomb was considered more interesting than its human remains and for which we consequently lack detailed data – inhumation burials, like cremation burials, have been recovered in large numbers from the spaces between tombs at sites such as Isola Sacra, Sarsina, Alba, at necropolis sites around Rome such as the via Triumphalis and via Collatina, and from cemetery sites with relatively few monumental structures such as Gubbio, Ravenna, Classe and along the via Nomentana north of Rome (see below and bibliography for full references). In many ways these graves
represent inhumation in its purest form: ‘and because humus ‘soil’ is terra ‘earth’, therefore a dead man who is covered with terra is humatus ‘inhumed’ (Varro, De Lingua Latina, 5.23). They also provide a glimpse of what was considered important in terms of the body itself. Indeed, what is striking about many of these graves is that although they appear modest in comparison with monumental tombs, their form reflects a considerable focus on the protection of the body, with excavation frequently revealing evidence for some form of container into which the corpse was placed, or a structure built around or over the body. These include wooden coffins, wooden boards placed flat across the grave, undecorated terracotta sarcophagi, tiles or stones arranged either flat or ‘alla cappuccina’ (a gabled roof covering the length of the body), tiles used to line the sides of the grave creating an in situ box, fragments of amphorae and other pottery used to cover the body or, usually in the case of infants, the insertion of the body into an intact amphora (Figure 3.1) These structures were largely subterranean in nature, invisible on the surface, indicating that their primary function was related to the body with which they were associated, rather than being part of a wider typology of commemoration.

Into this category fall also the cassone, or barrel-shaped masonry structures, which represent small above-ground monumental structures (Bacchielli 1985; Berciu and Wolski 1970; Bonneville 1981; Julia 1965; Stirling 2007; Tupman 2005). Although these acted as
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substantial grave markers (they might sometimes bear an inscribed plaque), and belonged to a particular tradition of grave monument, they too ensured that the body received adequate protection, not least because the remains with which they were associated were also often covered in one of the ways noted above. Many of the cassone at Isola Sacra were built over tile cappuccina graves (Angelucci et al. 1990; Baldassarre et al. 1996; Taglietti 2001) and at Ravenna, on the north-east coast of Italy, many were found to mark graves containing wooden coffins (Leoni et al. 2008). Indeed, in several cases a body might be provided with more than one layer of protection: coffins or terracotta sarcophagi interred beneath a cappuccina, sometimes with a cassone above.

Why go to such lengths to protect the corpse once it had been deposited? There was certainly a degree of fear about the souls of the unburied dead who might rise up and terrorise the living, as evidenced by a number of contemporary ghost stories, but these fears were largely put to rest by casting a few token handfuls of earth upon the buried remains (Suetonius, Gaius, 59; Pliny, Letters, 7.27. 5–11; Horace, Odes, 1.28). There is no written evidence for heightened fears of the un-dead during this period which might have made it imperative that the body be contained – something that is likely to have provoked comment, and probably derision, within contemporary sources. Nor is there archaeological evidence to suggest that these bodies were feared: they were not confined to the grave or held down with stones. Indeed, most were provided with libation pipes which provided direct access to the world of the living. The discovery in the necropolis of Castellaccio of a female skeleton with her forearm stretched up the libation tube – something that, barring the highly improbable chance that she had been buried alive, was presumably done intentionally – suggests that it was important to maintain a very direct relationship with the world of the living (Buccellato, Catalano and Pantano 2008, 18). If the intention was to bury the dead in order to prevent them rising, it seems odd that the living would provide such an obvious escape route. It also seems improbable that these subterranean structures were designed to prevent accidental or intentional desecration of the grave. An above ground marker would be a far more successful method for preventing accidental disturbance, and the paucity of grave goods throughout this period makes it unlikely that grave-robbing was frequent. Monumental tombs represented more obvious targets: a sarcophagus within Mausoleum 18 of the Viale della Serenissima near Rome, for example, was violated in antiquity but other more modest graves within the same tomb structure remained undisturbed (Buccellato, Catalano and Musco 2008, 77). If not fear of the un-dead or disturbance by the living, then perhaps the body itself had gained a new significance. These Roman communities had not only begun to bury entire bodies, but took care to ensure adequate, sometimes more than adequate, protection for them.

The use of tile and masonry structures to protect the body is commonplace across Italy during this period, and use of wooden coffins was also probably widespread. Relatively few complete coffins have survived although a small number were recovered from Isola Sacra (Angelucci et al. 1990, 109–111), and the inclusion of multiple nails arranged around the sides of graves may indicate their use, as seems to be the case for two infant burials at Vagnari in Puglia (Prowse and Small 2008, 5), although in some cases nails may have
served a ritual purpose (Ceci 2001). Excavations at Ravenna produced large numbers of well-preserved coffins, examination of which revealed that nails and other fixings were used sparingly, and in many cases the boards of the coffin were joined using wooden pegs (Leoni et al. 2008). As the authors note, this means that coffins may have been used in other graves and at other sites even when no iron nails are recovered (ibid., 101). This observation is supported by evidence from recent excavations in the suburbs of Rome, where anthropological studies have revealed that a high number of inhumed bodies (90%) underwent decomposition in a void, suggesting that the earth was held away from the body (Buccellato, Catalano and Musco 2008; Catalano et al. 2006; see Duday 2009). Some, such as a well-preserved skeleton in mausoleum M2 in the via Collatina necropolis, seem to have been simply left in open spaces that may have been the result of coffins; others, including an individual from another grave within the same mausoleum, show similar signs of decomposition within a void but also demonstrate evidence for the use of a shroud or wrappings (Buccellato, Catalano and Musco 2008, 69–70). Despite being able to benefit from the protection that the mausoleum provided, both of these bodies were protected further by gabled structures constructed with flakes of tufa, brick and tile (ibid., 69–70). It would appear that the graves were not backfilled with soil but that the bodies lay in open spaces beneath their covers. In such examples, where there is no sign of a protective structure but evidence for decomposition in a void, this may have been achieved either by placing the body within a wooden coffin or by laying a wooden board or leather cover over the body or across part of the grave cut (Buccellato, Musco et al. 2008, 29). As the evidence from Ravenna suggests, the absence of nails should not rule out the possibility of the former. A coffin, a tile cappuccina, and fragments of amphorae would also all have served to hold back the earth from the body.

It would appear that the integrity and safety of the corpse had gained a high level of priority. These subterranean structures not only protected the body from violation but also protected it from the earth itself. This seems at odds with understandings of inhumation presented by earlier written sources which refer to the need for ‘proper’ burial and suggest that a covering of earth was necessary to satisfy the demands of the (usually cremated) dead for proper interment (Cicero, De Legibus, 2.22.55–57; Cicero, On Divination, 1.27.56–57; Varro, De Lingua Latina, 5.23; see also Hope 2000; Kyle 1998). Nevertheless, a mere token sprinkling of earth was enough to ensure the fate of a dead sailor in an ode by Horace (Odes, 1.28, 10–6) and we cannot discount the possibility that a symbolic handful was thrown into these graves that were seemingly not backfilled.

There was certainly awareness, if not full scientific understanding of the process of decay in the Roman world (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 4.21). People would have come into contact with decomposition not only as part of their daily lives, but also as a consequence of their personal funerary experiences. For the elite, the deceased could lie in state for up to a week, during which, despite the best efforts of the family or professional pollinctores to hide the putrefaction process, the body will have begun to decompose. In the context of cremation this was important – it symbolised the decaying and transformed relationship between the living and the dead, followed by the final destruction of the body and its
subsequent remaking during the final purification rites (Graham 2009; 2011a). Cremation rites, with the materiality of the corpse at their heart, allowed the living to reconstitute both their own sense of personhood and that of the deceased. In contrast, evidence for inhumation suggests that this process had changed in favour of increasing denial of decomposition, and attempts to preserve the integrity of the body.

Wrapping the body

In addition to those noted above, evidence for shrouds has been identified within a group of cemeteries close to the via Nomentana to the north of Rome, where the position of the arms, either alongside the body or on the pelvis, points towards the use of wrappings (de Filippis 2001, 60; see also examples in north eastern Italy: Ortalli 2001). Inhumations from the via Collatina were also found supine, with the lower limbs extended and close together, indicating the presence of wrappings (Buccellato, Musco et al. 2008, 29). Indeed, 60% of the skeletons from this site showed signs of compression indicative of a shroud (ibid., 29). Conditions of preservation mean that shrouds themselves are found very rarely, but a recent study of the Roman catacombs has revealed evidence for the use of wrappings made from high quality textiles (Mitschke and Paetz gen. Schieck 2012).

Why are shrouds significant? Certainly they are not a pre-requisite for inhumation, nor are they anachronistic within the context of cremation. However, ancient sources which recount the preparation of the body for cremation usually describe it as dressed, not wrapped, and in most cases the corpse was probably fully attired in their ‘Sunday Best’, which for a male citizen meant a toga (Virgil, Aeneid, 6, 218–20; Juvenal, Satire 3, 171; Petronius, Satyricon, 77; Propertius 4, 7, 1–34; see Hope 2007, 97–98). This was part of the spectacle of cremation itself, not to mention the funerary procession (pompa) which moved through the streets of the town and allowed the family to make statements about the deceased and, of course, themselves (Cicero, De Legibus, 2.24.60). The body may have been wrapped during an earlier stage of its preparation before being unwrapped prior to incineration, as suggested by the recovery of an unburned sheet bearing traces of substances used to treat the body from an urn of the via Ostiense necropolis at Rome (Mitschke and Paetz gen. Schieck 2012). This seems not to have been very common: none of the (very few) sculptural reliefs dating from the late Republic or early imperial period which show bodies lying in state depict the corpse wrapped in a shroud (although it was common in much earlier pre-Roman period as the painted tombs of Lucania attest). If a wrapped body was placed on a pyre it can be assumed that the head was left unwrapped in order for the ritual opening of the eyes prior to the lighting of the pyre (Pliny the Elder, Natural History, 11.55.150). For these reasons, and the fact that dress ornaments affected by the intense heat of the pyre are found within cremation deposits, it seems unlikely that many cremated corpses were encased in a shroud, whereas the absence of dress accessories in many early inhumations from the cemeteries examined here points towards a preference for shrouds rather than clothing for an inhumation burial. A shroud may have had a functional purpose,
to cover the body and hold it together as it decomposed (Duday 2009), and its use therefore supports the observations above concerning greater emphasis on the subterranean security of the body, representing attempts to prevent fragmentation and to keep the body away from the corrupting influences of the soil.

Concealing and containing the body

Shrouds and coffins were also both capable of hiding the essential materiality of the body, at the same time as drawing attention to its presence and stressing its newly peculiar character. In fact, concealing the body could actually bring its nature to the fore by signalling that there was something to hide. Once again, this contrasts with cremation practice. Cremation in ancient Rome, as in many other cultural contexts, was about making the corpse (either visually or sensually) into a recognisable ‘object’ from which the living could ‘separate’ during the cremation ritual (Graham 2009; Nilsson-Stutz 2003; Sofaer 2006). Inhumation, on the other hand, appears to have centred less on an objectified corpse, and more on the body that it had been when still animated by the living subject. Knowledge of its dynamic materiality persisted, but the living appear to have been concerned with allowing the body to retain its original identity whilst making attempts to conceal the transformations that it was undergoing (and certainly not hastening them with the violence of cremation). In many ways this is reminiscent of the avoidance of decay and more frequent use of coffins observed by Tarlow (2002) for nineteenth-century contexts.

As a result, we can expect this to have brought about different embodied experiences of the funeral. In instances of cremation the body, dressed in its finery, was on display. Exposure of the body, even if heavily anointed and perfumed to mask the scent of decay and powdered to hide the discolouration of death (Lucian, On Funerals, 11–15; Plautus, Poenulus, 63), evoked particular embodied memories, emotions and experiences for both the mourners and onlookers (Graham 2011). If the body was hidden within a coffin or beneath a shroud the impact on all concerned could have been very different. Firstly, the body may now have lain in state inside the coffin, as it might in some post-medieval and modern contexts (Hallam and Hockey 2001; Roach 2003; Tarlow 2002). This would alter the relationship between the bereaved and the corpse, given that its putrefaction, which previously was masked with perfumes but not completely hidden, was concealed still further. The body may no longer have decayed visibly in public, but that did not mean that those who encountered the coffin were not aware of what was happening inside, meaning that the coffin or shroud itself drew attention to the dynamic nature of the body by visibly highlighting the need to conceal both it and the transformations it was undergoing. Perhaps this was a further way of denying the realities of decay. By removing the corpse from view, the coffin enabled the mourners to perform the traditional rites, including allowing it to lie in state, but made it possible to maintain a distance from it. But, we might ask, why the need to do this now and not before? The changes brought about by use of funerary professionals and the distance that had been established between the bodies of the living
mourners and that of the deceased may be significant here. As Sørensen (2009, 125) suggested for Denmark, ‘as the proximity and contact with corpses decrease, the familiarity and intimacy with them also diminish.’ Once the compulsion to come into direct contact with the corpse was removed, Roman families may have become increasingly reluctant to interact with its decaying corporeality. This feeling may have been reinforced by the presence of the *libitinarii* themselves, who were widely considered to be polluted by their profession and were socially stigmatised (Valerius Maximus, 5.2.10; Bodel 2000, 140–141). As these professionals became frequent actors in the funeral, mourners may have become increasingly less eager to associate themselves with activities performed by polluted social outcasts. Consequently, they may have removed themselves still further from the (now) sordid corpse, seeing it as the domain of the undertaker and not the family, leading to a stronger desire to keep the dead body at arm’s length.

When the coffin was moved through the streets of the city during the funerary procession (*pompa*), death and the family continued to be on display in the traditional manner, but the body was not. Nevertheless, onlookers and those involved in the procession would have been aware of the contents of the box, or what lay beneath the wrappings of a shroud, so neither served to completely conceal the body. Indeed, they probably drew greater attention to it by inviting onlookers to speculate on what was inside, what it looked or felt like, and to associate it with their own embodied experiences and memories of death. This anonymous body may have actually facilitated the latter more efficiently, allowing people to abstract those emotions and experiences without them being tied to the particular identity of the body in front of them. The wrapped body would have still resembled the human form, even though its identity remained hidden, encouraging onlookers to confront and contemplate the corpse, whilst it remained concealed from view. In this sense it allowed the body to be both present and absent, visible and invisible. The coffin and the shroud concealed the reality of the dead body, whilst drawing carefully managed attention to it.

These observations point towards a greater need to *control* the body and people’s interaction with it; to keep it from view but maintain it in such a way as it would remain an entire body – the body that it continued to be in the minds of the mourners, even if in reality decomposition would eventually render it unrecognisable. Perhaps then, we can glimpse a denial of the process of decay and a desire to preserve bodily integrity in order for it to match up with an idealised image of the deceased.

### Caring for the body

Recent work has begun to identify a heightened degree of sentimentality concerning the dead within literature and epigraphy of the later first and second century AD, including greater emphasis on the deification of the dead who sleep, rather than rot, in the grave (Valerie Hope pers. comm.). It might be argued that, like the Victorian example explored by Tarlow, this description of the dead using increasingly sentimental terminology was not linked with changing religious beliefs or secularisation, but diminished contact with the
corpse that necessitated an altered relationship with it. At the same time we find evidence that indicates a concern for the well-being of the material body of the deceased in the grave. Libations were associated with cremation burials, as evidenced at Gubbio by urns fitted with customised lead covers and pipes (Cipollone 2002), but facilities associated with offerings to the deceased increase in frequency at this time, with many designed in such a way as to maximise direct communication with the dead. Pipes were commonly located in order to deliver offerings directly to the head (and presumably the mouth) of the deceased.

Amongst the wooden coffins recovered from the via dei Poggi necropolis at Ravenna two were found to contain tiles, and four contained pieces of wood, all of which acted as pillows for the head of the deceased (Leoni et al. 2008). The wooden pillows varied in size from 30–40 cm in length and 10–30 cm in width, and were generally not very thick (around 3 cm). One particularly well preserved coffin, made using very substantial boards of oak (6 cm thick) locked together using wooden pegs and iron nails and resting on top of a laurel branch placed on the base of the grave, was found to contain a wooden pillow made from a slightly concave board propped against the end of the coffin (ibid., 98–100). Wooden pillows are rare but probably existed in other cemeteries where there is evidence for pillows made from less perishable material. The cemeteries associated with the Boccone d’Aste estate, close to the ancient via Nomentana, and dated to the second century AD have not only produced evidence for the use of shrouds and coffins but also for particular care and attention to the ‘comfort’ of the body (de Fillippis 2001). Here the presence of coffins is suggested by the recovery of eight iron nails arranged symmetrically along the sides of a grave in the Southern Cemetery (ibid., 59). The excavators suggest that coffins were more frequent within the cemetery but point out that evidence for pillows placed directly into the grave indicate that this was not always the case (ibid., 59). On the base of two graves in the Southern Cemetery, and two graves in the nearby cemetery of the Vigne Nuove, a pillow made of a piece of stone (local volcanic tufa) was placed at the head end of the grave, and in five further cases a tile was used as a pillow (ibid., 58). What is more, the Southern Cemetery contained a group of 13 graves in which the head end was curved, and a further 15 in which the grave narrowed at the neck before widening to provide a niche for the head (ibid., 58). At least five graves at Vagnari (Puglia) had imbrex (curved roof tile) ‘headrests’, in two of which the body was also placed on a row of tegulae (flat tiles) (Prowse and Small 2008, 5) (Figure 3.2). The latter may have represented some sort of funerary bed. Pillows are attested in other cemeteries of the same period (see for example a child burial at Fiano Romano: Bianchi et al. 2004) and even when evidence for them is absent it remains possible that perishable materials were used for this purpose – wood, cloth and perhaps even feather pillows (Leoni et al. 2008, 102; Duday 2008, 215).

Pillows, and the attention that appears to have been paid to the head of the deceased, add an additional dimension to a discussion of attitudes towards the inhumed body. Aside from the libation facilities, these features served no ritual, religious or social function and appear to be entirely associated with the welfare of the body. Pillows might have been used to prop up the head of the deceased and make them appear more alive, or to give the impression that they were merely sleeping by preventing the head from falling backwards.
3. Corporeal Concerns

and looking lifeless – something that aligns with literary evidence concerning the sleeping dead (Hope pers. comm.; for the grave setting as a tableau in early medieval contexts, for example, see Halsall 1998 and 2003). It may not have mattered that these provisions could not be seen once the grave had been backfilled – the knowledge that this is how the body appeared, and that it was ‘comfortable’, was probably enough. In some respects this is reminiscent of the Danish situation described by Sørensen (2009), for which he argues that inhumation burial and the knowledge of the materiality of the unseen body can enable the living to maintain a particular understanding of that body. Pillows were not relevant in instances of cremation, but neither were they really essential for inhumation – a body can be placed in a grave without one – so it cannot be assumed that they were part of an incoming ‘inhumation package’. Instead, they seem to indicate that choices were being made on an individual level to place these bodies into the ground with particular care.

This concern for the well-being of the dead can also be set against the broader medical backdrop of the imperial age. This was a period in which medical writings flourished, with rich descriptions of symptoms, diseases, treatments and the actions of doctors and other health-related actors (Flemming 2000, 65). To these can be added more personal accounts
including, ‘the long list of complaints and symptoms, the harping on health and its loss, that characterises, for example, the correspondence of Fronto, the orator and tutor of the future emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the autobiographical writings of another of his pupils, Aelius Aristides’ (ibid., 65). A discernible intensification of interest at this time in the state of the body, and particular concerns about its physical health, was described by Foucault (1988, 103). This seems to parallel the concerns outlined here for the security and wellbeing of the body in death, pointing towards changing relationships with the corporeal form across contemporary society more widely, including those with the bodies of the dead. It suggests, moreover, that changes to the state or nature of the body were increasingly becoming the focus of scrutiny, attention and debate, not only within health-related discourses, but also within the observations and experience of ordinary individuals.

In light of this apparent increase in attention to the wellbeing of the body, inhumation may have served as a more culturally appropriate means of disposal. Cremation was a violent event, not only as a result of the destructive action of the fire itself, but also the methods taken to manage the pyre and to facilitate the adequate disintegration of the corpse. The amount of water contained within the human body means that it is necessary to maintain the pyre and physically manipulate the cremation process in order for the body to burn and the bone to mineralise (Weekes 2008, 151; Williams 2004; see Rebay-Salisbury this volume). Ethnographic parallels suggest that part of this process might involve the use of a large stick to break up the burning material and, given the high water content and absence of fat associated with the head, to smash the skull (for examples of this in action in modern Nepal see, Pashupatinath cremation site 2012). Evidence from Romano-British bustum burials in which the remains were found to be dispersed, rather than in their correct anatomical position, provides some indication of the amount of violence involved in the cremation process (McKinley 2000; Weekes 2008, 151). The careful and close attention paid to the treatment of the head in imperial-period inhumation burials contrasts markedly with the forceful and brutal attention that the same body would have received on the pyre. If we wish to seek an element which might be emblematic of the changed values associated with the corpse we need look no further than this; indeed the two actions might almost be viewed as the antithesis of one another. To act so forcibly to bring about the public transformation of the corpse was evidently no longer aligned with cultural values.

Conclusions

There was a change in Roman burial practice beginning in the first century AD, and the factors which influenced this development are complex and multifaceted. It has been suggested here that amongst these were new attitudes towards the treatment of the corporeal body, including a new desire to ensure adequate, sometimes more than adequate, protection for a body which was now kept increasingly away from view. The integrity of a body seems to have gained special significance at this time, and it is unlikely that this was brought about entirely by a change of disposal practice, even if continued
use of inhumation acted subsequently to give these attitudes and practices greater clarity. Was it brought about because intimate interaction with the corpse in the early stages of the funeral had diminished? Certainly there was a different relationship with the corpse that was played out increasingly in the context of the grave rather than through contact with the body prior to its deposition. Perhaps there was felt to be a need to make up for reduced contact with the corpse during its preparation by paying particular attention to the body in the ground, something that may have been made easier by the fact that it was no longer visible and mourners were not compelled to deal directly with its decomposing appearance, unpleasant smell and unsettling nature.

It can be argued that by becoming distanced from the preliminary treatment of the body, Roman mourners began to develop new perceptions based on the fact that they no longer possessed the same embodied experiences of it: as the corpse became unfamiliar, it consequently became necessary to conceal it. Not only were embodied understandings of bodily treatment no longer based on the feel, smell or sight of the corpse, but such experiences had become the domain of the sordid, stigmatised *libitinarii*, which encouraged mourners still further to maintain a distance from the processing of the body. At the same time, this distance made it easier (maybe even necessary) to create or express a more sentimental relationship with the dead. Perhaps the fact that people no longer had to confront its physical decay directly meant that the immediate need to objectify the body was removed or reduced and it could retain something of the essence of the original subject or person that it had once been. Since mourners would not witness (or bring about) its violent destruction by fire and the forces involved in pyre management, and thereby ‘separate’ from it, a situation might have arisen in which subjective emotional connections could be maintained for longer. Physical distance might actually have heightened feelings of emotional closeness, as mourners attempted to find a way to fill the emotional gap that their previous preparations (and objectifications) of the body had fulfilled. Together these factors may have brought about new understandings of the corpse which stressed its putrefaction, unclean nature and strangeness, and as a result, shifted attention away from the body as it was prepared towards its final deposition.

Mourners were required to negotiate a new framework that suited this changed relationship with the dead and maintaining the integrity of the body offered one method of doing this. By making attempts to ensure that the body remained as intact as possible, by trying to reduce the potential for corruption and hiding its decay, and ensuring that the body (when it was seen) seemed to be sleeping peacefully, the living could feel happy that the dead lay comfortably in the ground. Even if it was not on view, the mere knowledge of the nature and arrangement of the body in the ground, as Sørensen has argued, might be sufficient. Through inhumation and the use of these particular strategies, the people of Roman Italy could create an idealised and sentimentalised body with which they could continue to interact during the on-going memory activities that are attested by the frequency of libation facilities. In this respect, their memories were far less embodied with experiences of the material bodies of the dead as they had been during the period of cremation, and instead were charged with a denial of that dynamic materiality.
Of course, the change from cremation to inhumation did not occur overnight; indeed the two rites appear to have co-existed for some time. Existing interpretations have tended to view this as indicative of a time lag in emulative activity (Canon 1989), with lower classes altering their practices more slowly, in emulation of their wealthier counterparts. This argument works particularly well for other aspects of Roman mortuary practice – epigraphic formulae, monument design, statuary and so forth – and, in the broadest possible sense, can also be proposed in the context of the arguments presented here. The elite were the first to have access to undertakers and their staff, and it would be those in Rome who were the first to make the most of their services. The funerary experiences of the upper classes would therefore have been the first to be affected by these changes in practice and perception, with those further down the socio-economic scale changing more gradually, perhaps as funerary professionals became more common outside the upper class community of the capital, or as the resulting practices were themselves emulated. Embodied experiences of the dead body would consequently have varied considerably across the social spectrum, and indeed throughout Italy and the empire.

What is not yet clear yet is whether inhumation was adopted because it was seen to suit these new attitudes, or whether it became popular for other reasons and its specific features were then used and developed to resolve the issues they raised. Indeed, the argument presented above points towards multiple factors operating in tandem. This question cannot be answered here, but, along with an investigation into how attitudes towards the living body might also have changed at this time, it perhaps forms the next step in this process of re-embodying Roman experiences.

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