Open Research Online

Citation

Graham, Emma-Jayne (2024). Death's ritual symbolic performance. In: Erasmo, Mario ed. A Cultural History of Death in Antiquity. The Cultural Histories Series, 1. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 67–82.

URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/96032/

License

None Specified

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from Open Research Online (ORO) Policies

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Chapter Four: Death's ritual symbolic performance

Emma-Jayne Graham

Introduction

One of the most well-known, and oft-quoted, stories concerning the performance of ancient funerary ritual concerns the exact opposite: an occasion on which a corpse is to receive no rites and must remain unburied. The myth of Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, who defies a decree by Creon, ruler of Thebes, that her recently deceased brother Polyneices should be denied burial, was recounted by several Greek tragedians (including a largely lost work by Euripides). However, the version of the story that is best known today is that told by Sophocles, in which Antigone, fully cognisant that her actions will condemn her to death herself, vows that she will not leave the body of Polyneices 'unwept for, unburied, a rich treasure house for birds as they look out for food' (Sophocles, *Antigone* 29-30).[1] Accordingly, as Sophocles tells it, Antigone proceeds with the burial, 'sprinkling thirsty dust on the flesh and performing the other rites that piety demands' (Sophocles, *Antigone* 245), arguing that Creon's mortal decree does not have the power to overrule 'the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods' (Sophocles, *Antigone* 454-55). As Stephen Palmer (2014: 207) observes, Antigone's actions are 'rooted in her faith in [these] sacred "unwritten laws" which, among other things, regulate the relationship between the living and dead'. Even more significantly it is the symbolic act of burial – the very 'sprinkling thirsty dust' on the corpse – which is of primary importance to Antigone. This simple act purifies the corpse of her brother, removing the symbolic pollution which is such an affront to the gods. In fact, it is her performance of these sacred symbolic traditions, as much as the tangible physical disposal of the body, which

Accepted manuscript

ultimately condemns Antigone. With the body of her brother piously interred, Antigone's own story does not end well (this is, after all, Greek tragedy) and she commits suicide as a final act of defiance.

Spotlighting this example of potential 'non-burial' may seem an odd place to begin a chapter dedicated to what happened, and why, when ancient bodies were disposed of. At its heart, the myth of Antigone encapsulates debates about justice, tradition, politics, honouring one's ancestors and the conventional funerary responsibilities of women, but it also captures the key issues that this survey of Greek and Roman mortuary practices will explore. Firstly, Creon's decree that Polyneices should remain unburied is shocking to Antigone and Sophocles' contemporaries, and to an extent also to some modern (Western) audiences, precisely because these measures intentionally disrupt the norm. Behind his actions, and behind the sense of outrage shared by Antigone and these audiences, is a common, deeply-held expectation that the bodies of the dead should be honoured with burial. Removing this right went against the shared ideology that underpinned Greek culture and identity; it was an act which was to be viewed as the epitome of an uncivilised society.

'Proper' disposal of the dead was evidently expected under all but the most extreme circumstances, but what did this actually entail? Was it sufficient to discard a corpse, to move it from the place of death, merely in order to ensure that it did not become an offensive nuisance for the living, or carrion for opportunistic birds and other creatures? Secondly, then, the situation in which Antigone finds herself provides a glimpse of the extent to which disposal of the dead, and the manner in which it was performed, was laden with symbolic significance. Her response underscores the extent to which ancient burial was rarely reduced to a pragmatic matter of removing

Accepted manuscript

a rapidly decomposing corpse from the vicinity of the living (even if this certainly remained one reason for doing it). The corpses of antiquity were spiritually polluted and polluting (Parker 1983: 63–4; although see Emmerson 2020 for a re-examination of this issue; see also Chapter 1). For a body to remain ‘unburied’, lacking even the most token sprinkling of earth, was therefore described as a state that was offensive to mortals, the dead and the divine (Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.22.55–7; Horace, *Odes* 1.28, 10–6; Toynbee 1971: 43).

Finally, this episode serves as an important reminder that at the heart of all burial rituals, past and present, there is always a body, a corpse, a decomposing biological organism that was once animated as a living member of a family and of society. The inanimate bodies of the deceased could be manipulated by the living for their own political, personal, emotional and religious ends, as Creon attempted to do with Polyneices and as Antigone achieved by transforming his body into the focal point of her resistance. But the corpse also exerted its own agency on the actions of mourners, and those responsible for disposing of it, by requiring them to make choices about how this was to be performed and impacting upon their sensory experiences of these activities (Graham 2011b). These bodies, by their very nature, demanded attention but the attention they received was closely entwined with widely held cultural expectations about what constituted the appropriate way to treat the physical remains of the dead. This chapter sets out to examine these three issues – the nature of disposal, the symbolic performances associated with burial, and the centrality of the corpse – in relation to both ancient Greek and Roman contexts.

Burial practice in the Greek and Roman worlds

Accepted manuscript

Despite certain shared practices, any attempt to survey ancient mortuary rites and associated ritual activities in a comprehensive manner is beset immediately by a series of problems. These include the fragmentary and uneven nature of the textual, epigraphic, visual and archaeological evidence for all periods of antiquity and for all places; a lack of consistency with regard to the ways in which this evidence has been published and studied, especially when it concerns antiquarian and early twentieth century archaeological discoveries; and the frequency with which widespread changes in practice, and attempts to identify repeated shifts between cremation and inhumation as the two main forms of disposal, can obscure more subtle localised and individualised rituals and customs. For Greek contexts, for instance, researchers face an overwhelming Athenian bias in terms of evidence, especially with regard to the use of painted pottery as a source of iconographic data for discrete stages of funerary ritual, as well as the vagaries of sporadic and unpublished archaeological data from beyond Athens. Moreover, there remain significant gaps in the evidence and data available for particular periods and places (see Garland 2001, p. x). Most diachronic studies of Greek burial aim to begin their survey at a largely unspecified point during the Early Iron Age (*c.*1000–700 BC, that is, the Dark Ages or Homeric era) and continue through the Archaic into the Classical period, occasionally extending into early Hellenistic contexts. This is a total duration of around 800 years.[2] Inevitably, however, the more detailed discussions within such surveys focus primarily on isolated examples from certain periods (often connected with the political changes of the Archaic and Classical periods) or locations (see below for the example of Lefkandi). What is more, for many scholars of Greek burial, Homer is frequently the first port of call, followed by the text of tragedies (such as *Antigone*) which highlight discrete, often mythological or heroic,

Accepted manuscript

and certainly literary, deaths which raise questions about, or prompt narrative accounts of, burial rites.[3] Archaeological discoveries have traditionally been matched against these sources, rather than providing the starting point for new enquiries. This situation is in many ways unavoidable, even if it is unsatisfactory and limiting. Indeed, Robert Garland (2001, pp. xvi-xvii) fills the equivalent of an entire page of the Preface to the second edition of his highly regarded survey of Greek death with what he refers to as 'some of the most basic areas of ongoing investigation, upon which much work still remains to be done', many of which relate to the study of disposal practices and to the potential of archaeological data.

For Roman burial customs the territory is even larger and the chronology equally as protracted: at least 1,000 years from the mythological founding of Rome until late Antiquity (potentially longer depending upon where one decides to set the 'end' date of the Empire). The availability of a greater amount of non-literary textual evidence, including inscribed funerary monuments, can also push scholars towards the creation of a composite picture composed of fragments detailing primarily elite practice, and chiefly the customs of Rome itself, between the period of the Republic and late Antiquity. Valerie Hope (2009: 15) refers to this as a 'jigsaw puzzle' composed of 'a piece from here and a piece from there, a few lines from this poet, an epitaph from this province, a grave from that date,' which together 'create a sort of composite Roman who never could have existed in space or time.' This synthesis of funerary customs, in turn, has traditionally informed studies of Italian and provincial contexts which seek to identify typically 'Roman' mortuary customs or to distinguish them from continuing local practices. To really understand how the people of the Roman empire buried their dead it is essential to look beyond the urban elite of Rome to understand these acts in the context of prevailing local customs and

Accepted manuscript

cultures, just as one needs to occasionally step away from the temptations of Homer's elaborate heroic cremations and the unbalancing influence of painted pottery from Attica.

Artificially juxtaposing, or comparing and contrasting so-called 'Greek' and 'Roman' funerary customs, as if they are either clearly distinguishable from one another or part of one long continuum of practice, is also problematic. As this chapter will demonstrate, there is a degree of comparability between some aspects of the mortuary activities performed in Greek and Roman contexts, at least when they are examined superficially, including the favouring of cremation and inhumation over other available disposal options (such as exposure or mummification), the importance of purification through funerary rites of passage, and the making of offerings both during and after the funeral. But there are also significant differences, not only in the ways in which these activities were performed but in the meanings and symbolism associated with them. These can be detected only when evidence is examined in its appropriate cultural context. A purely diachronic approach is therefore unhelpful, not least because a tendency towards generalisation imposes an artificial trajectory on the way in which the body was disposed of, obscuring the dynamic nature of individual circumstances. The burial practices of Republican Rome were not inherited directly from contemporary Classical or Hellenistic Greece, even if some aspects of 'Roman' funerary ritual were perhaps drawn (or at least supposed by Romans to have been drawn) from Etruscan and other Italic engagements with Greek communities (Toynbee 1971: 11–24). Nor were the burial practices of Roman-period Greece in, say, the second century AD entirely 'Roman', divorced from centuries of Greek communities disposing of their dead. Indeed, significant new work on burial evidence from Greece concerns the excavation and

Accepted manuscript

interpretation of Roman-period graves and cemeteries. Examples such as these need to be understood in relation to both the context of developing practices and customs in Greece itself as well as creative responses to the cultural and socio-political expectations of the Roman empire.

This chapter sidesteps these chronological issues to an extent (although inevitably not completely given the demands of surveying practices in different cultural contexts) by focusing upon the three issues identified above in order to exemplify just some of the ways in which Greek and Roman communities disposed of their dead and the ritual significance of their actions. The focus throughout is therefore on the treatment of the dead body itself and key questions include: what happened to the corpse after it had been prepared for disposal (Chapter 1), how was it disposed of, and in some cases where, what happened to it during the disposal process itself and what was the significance of that body within funerary rites of passage?

Accepted manuscript

Cremation and inhumation in ancient Greece

Although alternatives were both known and practised across the ancient Mediterranean (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.45.108; Lucretius, 3, 870–93), the two most popular means of disposal for both Greek and Roman communities were cremation and inhumation. Broadly speaking, these two rites were practised alongside one another for the majority of Greek history until sometime during the fourth century BC, although it is evident that each took its turn as the marginally more favoured rite in certain periods and specific regions (Garland 2001: 34; Whitley 2001: 92–4). Although Homer writes only of cremation (Garland 2001: 34) archaeological evidence reveals that during the Iron Age both cremated remains and

intact corpses were buried, sometimes in modest graves lined with stone or clay, covered with wood or stones and a mound of earth (Retief and Cilliers 2005: 56). Regional practices nevertheless prevailed, with Whitley (2001: 94) observing that regions, rather than individual communities 'seem to share what can only be described as a common culture.' Cremation was certainly practised in the Argolid, for instance, during the early phases of this period, but it was inhumation which came to dominate, often with the bodies of multiple adults placed in a single large grave, whereas at Knossos on Crete the majority of burials were of cremated remains, even though inhumation might also occur (Whitley 2001: 94). Mirto (2012: 84) has observed that during the early Geometric period (*c.*900 BC) inhumations in some parts of Greece entailed the wrapping of a corpse in a shroud before it was placed on a bed of leaves, rather than the use of coffins, with Plutarch (*Lycurgus* 27.2) noting that this was a custom which continued to be observed by the Spartans. This same source notes that Lycurgus permitted burial inside the walls of the city at Sparta, whereas for nearly all other cities (except perhaps Tarentum) regulations and concerns about spiritual pollution seem to have kept graves restricted to areas beyond the walls of inhabited areas, at least from around 750 BC when urban areas began to become more well-defined (Parker 1983: 71). One of the few practices to be shared more generally across all Greek communities, during this period and those which followed, concerns the treatment of children whose bodies only rarely underwent cremation. Children might be interred in large painted and unpainted vessels, as in the Argolid, or buried in trenches or cist graves as in Attica (Whitley 2001: 92–4; see also Chapter 5).

The most well-known early Iron Age burial was excavated in the Toumba cemetery at Lefkandi on the west coast of Euboea, but it is a burial which is far from

Accepted manuscript

typical, even if it has come to be recognised as largely representative of so-called ‘warrior’ burials of the type immortalised in epic. At least six early Iron Age cemeteries, containing several hundred inhumation and *in situ* cremation burials, have been excavated close to the settlement at Lefkandi, but it is two of the especially rich graves of the Toumba cemetery which have attracted most attention.[4] Here, during the middle of the tenth century BC, a large apsidal building (around 50 metres in length, oriented east to west) was constructed over two burial pits. Referred to sometimes, if perhaps erroneously, as a *heroon*, this structure was most likely never inhabited, instead it was subsequently filled in and transformed into a tumulus. Into one of the burial shafts covered by the tumulus was deposited a bronze urn, originating from late Bronze Age Cyprus (*c.*1225–1125 BC), which contained the cremated remains of a man wrapped in a linen cloth (Mirto 2012: 87). Close by were the inhumed remains of an adult woman wearing a substantial amount of jewellery and with a bone-handled iron knife deposited close to her head, whilst the other pit was found to contain the remains of four horses. As well as the antique cinerary urn, a gold pendant worn by the woman was also revealed to be an ‘heirloom’ artefact, dating from a period at least 800 years before her burial occurred (Mirto 2012: 87). The valuable objects, the extent of memorialisation via the elaborate tumulus and the presence of the horses, as well as the fact that the man was cremated and the woman (perhaps his wife, concubine or even an enslaved person?) was inhumed, have led many to argue that this represents the burial and commemoration of an aristocratic warrior hero (Popham et al. 1982a). The remains of the man were certainly treated in a manner not dissimilar to that recounted by Homer (Hector’s ashes collected in a purple cloth: *Iliad* XXIV.796) and Herodotus (the sacrifice of horses: *Histories* IV 71,4). The presence of the knife may suggest that the woman

Accepted manuscript

was also sacrificed in order to accompany him into the afterlife, and her body apparently did not merit cremation. Despite a slight preponderance of cremation across the excavated cemeteries at Lefkandi, it is therefore not possible to write simply of 'cremation' as the norm at this location, or indeed for the period more generally, without examining the nature of the different *types* of cremation burial that were available. Indeed, the so-called 'warrior' burial beneath the tumulus was amongst the first to make use of a burial urn, whereas many other bodies within the multiple cemetery areas were cremated and buried *in situ*, and, unlike the warrior, contemporary cremation burials within the Toumba cemetery itself often comprise only a portion of the entire remains that could have been recovered from the pyre. At Lefkandi disposal practices and specific ways of treating certain bodies were evidently used to express (or indeed to create) gender identities, but were also manipulated to make statements about power, wealth and status (see Chapter 5). The evidence from this site has been studied largely through the lens of grave goods and what they reveal about the nature of society and economic connectivity. Future studies might assess the choices made about the treatment of individual bodies in death and their relationship to both hierarchies and different types of identity within this particular community, as demonstrated by recent bioarchaeological work focused on the examination of marginalised groups within Archaic and Classical Greek society (Sulosky Weaver 2022).

Children continued to be inhumed, but cremation was certainly the more dominant rite for adults across Greece during the early Archaic period, at which time it became more customary to perform cremations within the grave itself, the remains falling directly into the grave-pit in the manner in which burial had been practised earlier at Lefkandi (Retief and Cilliers 2005, p. 56).[5] Evidence from the Keremeikos

Accepted manuscript

at Athens suggests that these graves might be accompanied by 'offering trenches' into which were deposited various items, including burnt pottery, figurines, animal remains, shells and metal items including mirrors and jewellery, sometimes perhaps placed on wooden planks supported on posts set within the trenches (Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 75–79; also Garland 2001; Closterman 2007). Moreover, excavation reveals that the early eighth century BC saw a substantial increase in the overall number of graves, the interpretation of which has proved controversial. Ian Morris (1987) argued that this growth could be explained by the burial of greater numbers of non-elites associated with the expansion of community boundaries and the creation of 'citizen cemeteries' which he connected with the emergence of new political forms of organisation and the polis. This interpretation, which has continued to prove popular, has nevertheless received criticism in recent years with, amongst others, Cynthia Patterson (2006: 48–9, 54–6), arguing that 'It is simply not the case that burial was ever an exclusive privilege of citizenship in Athens,' or indeed that it is possible to identify an area set aside as a *demosion sema* (public cemetery) within the multi-purpose area known commonly today as the Kerameikos of Athens. At Athens during the seventh and sixth centuries BC cremation continued but was no longer the clearly dominant rite, and grave trenches become less frequent at the same time as the popularity of ceramic grave-markers also declined (Whitley 2001: 258).

The Classical period witnessed a continued return to inhumation in some instances, with the two practices seemingly of equal popularity, even if sumptuary legislation served to decrease the elaborate nature of grave goods and the graves themselves (Retief and Cilliers 2005: 57). It can be conjectured that the spectacular display of a burning pyre may also have fallen victim to these regulations, resulting in

Accepted manuscript

the more frequent use of inhumation. Garland (2001: 34) notes that during this period Greek tragedy continued to speak of cremation as 'the usual form of burial', although Mirto (2012: 84–5) has drawn attention to exceptions necessary for dramatic plot purposes, as in the instance of Alcestis who must by necessity 'rise again'. By the Hellenistic period cremation continued but inhumation was predominant, although 'the choice between inhumation and cremation seems to entail no fundamental difference between the funerary ceremonies nor a change in belief about the body after death' (Mirto 2012: 85).

The dynamics of disposal in Roman Italy

For most of its early history, the city of Rome witnessed similar subtle shifts between the rites of inhumation and cremation. Writers such as Cicero (*On the Laws* 2.56) and Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 7.187) claimed that their forebears had practised inhumation, even though the laws of the Twelve Tables, first set down in the mid fifth century BC, do not differentiate between the two (Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.58). Archaeological evidence also throws doubt on their professed certainty, with excavations in the Forum Romanum producing evidence for both inhumation and cremation burials dating from the eighth to sixth centuries BC (Toynbee 1971: 39). Cremation was certainly the more favoured means of disposal at Rome during the mid-Republic but inhumation never entirely ceased. The famous example of Sulla's (enforced) cremation bringing about the end of the Cornelii family tradition of inhumation provides evidence for this (Cicero, *On the Laws* 2.56). However, by the Julio-Claudian period cremation was so dominant that it could later be described by Tacitus (*Annals* 16.6) as *the* Roman custom (*Romanus mos*). This was eventually true not only at Rome but for the entire Italian peninsula, where the custom may

Accepted manuscript

have been adopted by local communities as part of the colonization process (Ortalli 2001).

By the end of the first century AD inhumation was becoming increasingly more popular once again. Nonetheless, rather than the re-adoption of inhumation being 'the biggest single event in ancient burial' (Morris 1992: 31) it appears to have begun gradually, with minimal fuss, and to have taken some time (Graham 2015; Borg 2019). Indeed, Roman authors continued to comment only on inhumations that were especially unusual. Thus it was that Poppaea, wife of Nero, was 'embalmed by stuffing with spices' which led to the observation that she 'was not cremated in the Roman fashion', not just that she was inhumed (Tacitus, *Annals* 16.6). Elsewhere in Italy a similar ambivalence and gradual change is attested by excavated sites such as that at Fiano Romano, north of Rome which provide evidence for the continued use of both rites, even by members of the same family group (Bianchi et al. 2004). From this period onwards, however, inhumation became the new *Romanus mos* and remained so, at Rome and in Italy at least, until Late Antiquity and beyond. The situation in the Roman provinces, which each had their own complex local customs and traditions was inevitably more complicated, and attempting to pin down 'Roman' practice across the empire must necessarily occur on a site-by-site basis that cannot be comprehensively surveyed here.[6]

To cremate or to inhume?

Superficially, inhumation and cremation appear to involve little more than different practical means of disposing of a body. In one case the corpse is interred within the ground in order to decompose gradually over time, in the other this

Accepted manuscript

process is accelerated artificially through the application of flames and heat. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the decision to cremate or inhume might be far from an arbitrary choice, nor was it always a decision based purely on economic or status concerns. In Greek Hellenistic contexts, for example, where both rites prevailed there is no evidence for a difference in the rites or offerings made at the tomb to suggest that one or the other was associated with greater wealth or status (Mirto 2012: 85). Cremation was certainly expensive and time-consuming in any period, requiring a large amount of fuel in the form of wood and other flammable materials, as well as specialist knowledge in order to reduce a corpse successfully to the type of remains that could be collected for burial in an urn, bag, box, pit or other container. But, equally, expenditure on offerings, funerary banquets, an elaborate coffin, or in later Roman periods, an elaborately carved sarcophagus could certainly match this should the occasion demand. So how might we explain the decision to use one means of disposal over the other and, especially, the tendency to favour one particular rite for a more protracted period of time? Roman contexts provide a considerably wider range of evidence than Greek ones, and the shift in practice that occurred around the turn of the second century AD makes it possible to examine the possible motivations associated with one such change.

In 1932 Arthur Darby Nock made a first attempt to explain why cremation 'went out of fashion' at Rome (Nock 1932: 321). He concluded that new religious stimuli introduced from Jewish or Christian customs and which emphasised the integrity of the body in death were not sufficiently influential at this time to cause such widespread change.[7] Nor did he consider the influence of so-called 'oriental mystery cults' a likely solution to the conundrum, pointing out that grave goods remained largely unchanged with no evidence for different beliefs about the nature of

Accepted manuscript

the afterlife (Nock 1932: 332). Staying with the theme of outside influences, Ian Morris (1992: 67–8) noted that inhumation had remained popular in the Greek East and may have been caught up with a host of other cultural symbols of Greece as part of the so-called Second Sophistic, when elite Romans became increasingly interested in emulating Greek culture. He noted, however, that this does not explain why this particular cultural element should be selected or how it came to be subsequently 'spread' to the provinces as a distinctively *Roman* practice. It has also been proposed (Ortalli 2001) that the uneven adoption of inhumation in regions further from Rome might be explained by the greater availability of Eastern influences in some cities such as Ravenna, compared with those which experienced less direct trade contacts with the eastern Mediterranean. Morris stressed the role of elite emulation in the change of practice, echoing Nock's conclusions that it was as much a case of fashion, connected especially with the new availability of ostentatious marble sarcophagi from the second century AD, as it was anything deeply religious. However, as others such as Jocelyn Toynbee (1971: 40) have stressed, these sarcophagi are more likely to have been developed as a consequence of people looking for ever more elaborate containers to hold inhumations than the other way around. Indeed, there must have been a market for them before large-scale production and specialist workshops were economically viable, with Barbara Borg (2019) suggesting that changes in imperial funerary practices, perhaps associated with Hadrian or Antoninus Pius, most likely contributed to spread of the inhumation habit among social groups beyond the elite.

Reviewing the archaeological evidence from the cemeteries of Italy compels us to move away from approaches which seek to identify one single moment of change or a single motivating factor to explain the re-emergence of inhumation as

Accepted manuscript

the *Romanus mos*. Indeed, despite most general texts stating that burial practices changed from the late first century AD, evidence from areas such as Brescia, where cremation continued uninterrupted at some sites from the late first to mid third century AD (Massa 2001), and Gubbio in Umbria where at least one cremation burial dates from the mid third century (Cipollone 2002: 26–9), suggest that changes in practice were more complex and less immediate. This impression is supported by evidence from other sites like Sarsina, with 89% of burials involving cremated remains up to at least 200 AD (Ortalli 2001, 226). At Fralana (Malafede, Ostia) only a short distance from Rome itself, the two rites co-existed during the second century AD, with no apparent difference in grave goods or expressions of different status (Pellegrino, Falzone, Olivanti 1999). Moreover, in some areas cremation did not disappear at all, it just took new forms: at Classe, in the northeast of Italy, *in situ busta sepulchra* burials became more favoured than traditional urned cremations over the course of the second century AD (Maioli, Ortalli, Montevecchi 2008).[8]

The data from Italian cemetery sites suggests that this period of change was directed by the choices and needs of individual communities and families. Whilst the earlier use of cremation can, in some instances, be connected with Rome's colonization of the Italian peninsula, as something adopted and adapted alongside other aspects of cultural identity deemed important to each community, the prevailing political climate had changed by the end of the first century AD. The impetus to emulate the latest trends most probably waned in the face of the political and cultural stability of the imperial period (Graham and Hope 2016). Other factors may also have been at play. Inhumation's increased popularity also coincided with a new expression of concern for the protection and integrity of the dead body, although not necessarily because of new religious convictions (Graham 2015). This period saw,

Accepted manuscript

for instance, increasingly complex grave typologies designed to cover and protect the interred remains, including tiles, stones or fragments of amphora laid flat over the body, or raised into a gable to produce distinctive *alla cappuccina* burials. Inhumed bodies might also be provided with pillows made from tiles and stone, and, in some remarkably well-preserved instances, made from wood (Leoni, Maioli, Montevecchi 2008). Coffins and other subterranean structures, as well as the use of shrouds also point towards an increased desire to keep the earth away from interred bodies. Indeed, palaeoanthropological studies of remains excavated from a series of cemeteries in the suburbs of Rome demonstrate that 90% of bodies decomposed in a void (Buccellato et al. 2008; Catalano *et al*. 2006). Even bodies interred within monumental tombs might be placed beneath *alla cappuccina* structures which offered still more protection for the corporeal remains (Buccellato, et al. 2008: 69–70). Such evidence seems to indicate that the adoption of inhumation was accompanied by a greater level of concern for the integrity of the corpse, a concern which contrasts strikingly with the results of cremation burials which were designed to break the body down quickly and violently, to render it inert before the remains were subsequently buried. The increasing denial of decomposition, and the attempts to preserve the integrity of the body which this points towards, offer a new way of thinking about the wider change in mortuary practices attested for the imperial period. Perhaps these were connected with a range of more personal, family-centred concerns related to the relationship between mourner and deceased, rather than overarching political or cultural concerns (Graham 2015).

Disposal and rites of incorporation in Classical Athens

Accepted manuscript

Disposal of the dead was not just about the end result, in other words the ultimate deposition of the deceased in the ground or lodged in a tomb. Interred remains are certainly of importance to archaeologists because it is these that can be recovered through excavation and from which the mortuary process is reconstructed. Only very rarely are bodies recovered that appear to have been abandoned part way through the ritual procedure of burial. It is difficult, for example, to identify in the archaeological record the remains of Roman cremations that, for some reason, left a body incompletely burnt or which 'went wrong', even though David Noy's (2000) examination of textual accounts has made a convincing case for this happening on occasion. In this case this is primarily because cremation burials which do not occur *in situ*, allowing the entire remains and anything else placed on the pyre to fall directly into a grave-pit ready to be covered over with soil and perhaps a commemorative monument, regularly do not contain sufficient remains to account for the entire body anyway. Sometimes only a sample was collected from the extinguished remains of the pyre for subsequent burial, either of token elements of the key areas of the body (head, limbs, thorax) but more frequently a largely random 'scooping up' of remains seems to have taken place, making it difficult to determine whether this was because some were insufficiently burned or simply unrecognisable as skeletal elements amongst the pyre debris.

This serves as an important reminder that the very last act of deposition, of a body or its processed remains, took place as part of a much more protracted series of rites (Pearce and Weekes 2017). Lighting the pyre and watching a body burn and fragment, or placing a corpse or coffin into a grave did not instantly bring an end to the funeral. There were further acts to be performed in order to complete the process which had begun in the home and during the transportation of the deceased to the

Accepted manuscript

cemetery or the site of the pyre (see Chapter 1). This was a process which continued throughout the course of the act of disposal itself. Most studies of this entire funerary process, whether for Greek or Roman contexts, frame these acts in terms of the three distinct stages of rites of passage as established by Arnold van Gennep ([1909] 1960): separation, liminality and incorporation. Acts of burial or cremation are often viewed as rites of incorporation, or in other words as the activities which brought about the end of the stage of mourning during which family members were considered to be tainted by spiritual pollution and therefore in a state of liminality. These acts rendered the corpse 'clean' and finally broke the bonds which marked the deceased and the living mourners out from the rest of society. In general terms this model holds true, but that act of disposal itself involved more than simply discarding the dead. It also involved a series of activities which, both in turn and collectively, played a role in bringing about complex rites of incorporation. The moment of interment for the cremated remains or intact body did not necessarily end the period of liminality immediately and, like the rites of separation which took place as part of the preparation of the body, incorporation was also a protracted process involving a number of steps.

Reconstructing exactly what happened at the graveside during a burial at any period of Greek history is notoriously difficult. We are well-informed about other elements of funerary ritual such as the *prothesis* and procession to the grave site (*ekphora*) (see Chapter 1), as well as later visits to the tomb or grave in order to perform further acts of commemoration, in large part thanks to the abundant iconography of painted pottery, most notably the white-ground *lekythoi* of Classical Athens (Vermeule, 1979; Oakley 2004). There are, however, no written accounts detailing precisely what happened on the occasion of a (non-mythical) cremation or

Accepted manuscript

inhumation, nor are we provided with the same rich array of visual evidence for these activities. The subject of disposal itself was evidently not one which attracted the interests of the makers of painted pottery, or perhaps more accurately their customers did not wish to purchase vessels displaying scenes of this type. There is, however, one tantalising piece of evidence which offers a glimpse into a graveside scene at the moment of deposition. It appears on a black-figure *loutrophoros* amphora attributed to the Sappho Painter, active in the early fifth century BC (National Museum of Athens 450; Closterman 2007).[9] The vessel, pieced back together from fragments, shows various traditional scenes associated with the funeral: a *prothesis* scene depicting a man lying on an ornate couch, attended by six mourning women and a small child, a procession of four women, incorporating two who carry on their heads long flat baskets containing offerings, a tumulus surmounted by a *loutrophoros* much like the one on which these scenes are painted, with a snake in front and mourning women to the sides, as well as a frieze of four-horse chariots around the lower part of the vessel. Unusually, however, these scenes are accompanied by another which depicts four bearded men lowering a coffin into a grave, their movements watched by three women, one of whom adopts the typical mourning posture with her head in her hands whilst the other two raise their hands in the air. Two of the men stand outside the grave, lowering the coffin down to the other two who stand within the grave itself waiting to receive it (only their heads and upstretched arms are shown at the level of the feet of the other figures). One of the men standing outside the grave holds a white cloth over the central part of the coffin, although it is unclear whether he is removing it from the coffin itself or depositing it within the grave (or indeed both). Studying the detail of the scene, Wendy Closterman (2007) has noted its value for reconstructing aspects of Athenian

Accepted manuscript

burial ritual, including the presence of women who had presumably taken part in the funeral procession and therefore remained within the cemetery for the burial itself. She has also drawn attention to the significance of the white textile shown at the centre of the scene. Pointing out that this type of offering so rarely survives in the archaeological record, Closterman (2007: 55) has argued that fabrics and textiles might have offered an additional way of presenting wealth to onlookers: 'The use of textiles for funerary display serves as a reminder that Athenian burials may have been richer than they appear based on surviving materials, since the use of textiles was one means of exhibiting wealth. Whether the Sappho Painter's vase shows the removal or deposition of a piece of material, possibly a shroud cover, the attention paid to the cloth in the scene makes a status statement about the deceased and survivors.'

The deposition of offerings within, or associated with the grave certainly seems to have been a key part of the rituals surrounding the moment of interment, for both cremation and inhumation burials, as the excavated contents of offering trenches and other examples noted above confirm. *Loutrophoroi* like that of the Sappho Painter, which had no base, were often used as grave-markers, placed atop burial mounds and perhaps used as conduits for the pouring of libations of water, milk, wine, honey, oil and other liquids during post-burial commemorative activities as depicted on other white-ground *lekythoi* (Closterman 2007: 53).[10] Libations were also incorporated into the rites surrounding the moment of burial itself, as attested once again by the story of Antigone who poured three libations over Polyneices as she buried him (Sophocles, *Antigone* 431). Funerary pyres, including that of Hector, are described by Homer as being doused with wine (*Iliad* XXIV 791) before the transformed remains are collected, and painted pottery shows scenes of libations

Accepted manuscript

being poured onto pyres (Garland 2001: 144). Other food and drink offerings seem to have been made as part of the interment ritual for both cremated and inhumed remains although the amount that this could involve was limited by the legislation of Solon to no more than one obol in value (Plutarch *Solon*, 21). These same regulations forbade the sacrifice of an ox, but excavated remains of animal bones provide evidence for other meat being used as a food offering and, along with the presence of tablewares, it is probable that food was both given as an offering directly to the dead as well as being consumed by living mourners at the graveside (Closterman 2007: 52). A funerary banquet (*perideipnon)*, with the deceased as the honoured guest, may also have occurred in the house before or immediately after the *ekphora* (Mirto 2012: 89–90). The exact timing of the *perideipnon* is unclear but if it occurred before the burial we might suppose that in some instances food was brought from there to be deposited subsequently in the grave.

Interment of the remains of the deceased did not, however, signal the end of the rites of passage surrounding death and over the course of the following thirty days mourners would return to the grave to perform further sacrifices and ceremonies and to hold additional ritual banquets (known as *triakostia*, *triakas*, or *triakades*) which were believed to ease the passage of the dead into the world of the dead. These took place on the third day (*trita*) after burial, as well as the ninth (*enata*). Similarly, although cremation might be thought to 'cleanse' and remove the pollution embodied by the corpse itself, mourners also required ritual cleansing in order that they might leave their liminal state and return to society once more. It was also important to remove the stigma of pollution from the house itself and this may have been done using seawater (when possible) to ritually cleanse the house three days after the removal of the body for burial, as well as through the purification of the

Accepted manuscript

water supply and the hearth, perhaps, as in Argos, with 'new fire' brought from another location (Parker 1983: 35; see also Chapter 1). These rites brought about the end of the liminal period and the incorporation of both living and deceased into their new worlds. The living would return to the site of burial once a year in order to commemorate and remember the deceased, a scene depicted consistently on Attic white-ground *lekythoi* (Oakley 2004: 145–214). At Athens this event took place annually on the fifth of September and was known as the *Genesia* (Mirto 2012: 91). All of these acts were most probably carried out by members of the deceased's family rather than by ritual specialists. Figures shown on painted pottery are clearly intended to be mourners and as Parker (1983: 36) pointed out, the stigma of pollution surrounding the corpse and the entire funerary process probably kept priests at a distance.

Funerary professionals at Rome

The pattern of rites performed for the burial or cremation of the dead at Rome were not dissimilar to those of Greek contexts, involving a public procession (*pompa*) from the home of the deceased to the cemetery outside the city where the body was to be interred in the ground or in a tomb or mausoleum, or where a pyre had been constructed for the purposes of cremation. Some Roman sources claim that burials, especially of children, were to take place only at night but it seems unlikely that this tradition was maintained given the importance that was placed on the public nature of both the *pompa* and the presentation of a eulogy in the forum for men who had held public office (Polybius, *Histories* 6.53–4; Hope 2009: 74–7; Chapter 1). In terms of ritual specialists involved in these activities we are a little better informed than we are for other parts of the ancient world, at least for Rome and some Italian cities. We

Accepted manuscript

learn from inscriptions and texts about the existence of *libitinarii* (funerary professionals) who were certainly involved in some aspects of the funeral (*AE* 1971, n. 88; Horace, *Epistles.* 1.7.3–7; Martial 1.47; Valerius Maximus 5.2.10).[11] This included the preparation of the body itself, with specialists such as *pollinctores* to treat the corpse with perfumes and unguents designed to mask the smell of decay (Plautus, *Poenulus* 63) and a *strator* responsible for laying out and possibly dressing the body (*leges Cumanae* b,I.5; b,I.11). The mid-first century BC funerary procession of a freedman depicted in a relief from Amiternum includes the figure of a man leading and directing the *pompa* who can be identified as a *disignator*, the man responsible for organising this event (effectively the undertaker). Some of the mourners in this scene may also have been women hired for the occasion. The *libitinarii* themselves were tainted with pollution from their contact with the dead and, no doubt, from the fact that they made a living from such a 'sordid' trade, and it is largely from inscribed regulations about where they could reside and the times at which they could enter the city that their existence is known (Bodel 2000). At Rome itself the *libitinarii* may have been based in the Grove of Libitina, a short distance outside the city, but this remains uncertain, as does their place of residence or even their existence in other Roman cities, especially those outside of Italy where there is no definitive evidence for funerary professionals taking a role in mortuary practices (Bodel 2000: 136–8). Although they may have existed in earlier periods, the role of the *libitinarii* seems to have increased during the first century AD and the taking over of roles performed traditionally by members of the mourning family, especially by women, may have impacted upon experiences and understandings of the corpse which in turn contributed to the increased use of inhumation discussed above (Graham 2011b; 2015).

Accepted manuscript

The *libitinarii* may also have provided specialists to take care of, and to oversee, the construction and burning of pyres in a manner not too unlike those who perform the same role for open-air pyres in parts of the modern world. To efficiently burn a human body, which is composed predominantly of water, requires some manipulation, and in places such as modern Nepal and India, for example, those who oversee cremations are often equipped with a long, heavy stick which can be used at the appropriate moment to smash the skull in order for its contents to burn and the life-force to proceed on its way. Well-constructed and adequately fuelled ancient pyres could reach temperatures of up to 900 degrees Celsius and it might take anywhere up to eight hours for a cremation to be complete. Although we remain ignorant of the existence of any cremation specialists, there are occasional references to *ustores* ('corpse-burners') even if their responsibilities are unclear (Cicero, *Pro Milone* 33; Catullus, 59.5), as well as *fossores*, that is 'grave diggers' (CIL VI 7543 and 9655). Unfortunately, however, who these men were, how their business was managed and their relationship with the wider group of *libitinarii* remains unknown. For the majority of the non-elite members of Roman society and of smaller towns elsewhere across the empire, and especially rural areas, these specialist roles were most likely taken on by family members or other members of the household.

Accepted manuscript

At the Roman grave

In terms of the ceremonies themselves, written texts indicate that cremation pyres might be scented heavily with perfumes and spices, with personal belongings or offerings from mourners added to them (Martial 11.54; Persius 6; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 12.41.83; Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 4.2.3–4). Although, of course,

this will have depended upon the wealth and resources of the deceased's family and humble unscented cremations were more likely to be the norm. According to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 11.55.150), when the body was placed on the pyre its eyes were opened because it was deemed 'wrong for the eyes not to be displayed to the heavens.' As attested for Greek contexts, the pyre might be extinguished with wine before the remains were collected for deposition (Statius *Silvae* 2.6, 84-93; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.226-28) or, in cases of *busta sepulchra*, covered over where they fell.

No written accounts of Roman inhumations survive meaning that the specific details of the rites performed in those instances remain obscure. However, in cases of both cremation and inhumation it was customary to deposit offerings into the grave itself. During the imperial period these were often rather standardised and remarkably modest in nature (Graham and Hope 2016). The most common find in Roman graves from Rome and across Italy is a low denomination coin such as an *as*. These are frequently thought to represent a payment for passage across the River Styx (a custom which may have its origins in Hellenistic Greece: Garland 2001: 23) but others have suggested a more general connection with ideas about good fortune and new status (Ceci 2001: 91). Coins may be frequent, but they were far from essential, as their absence from many graves attests and their inclusion, as with all grave goods, was a decision made by those responsible for the burial. Mourners might also choose to deposit lamps which may have been intended to provide a light for the deceased as they journeyed to the afterlife, oil and perfume vessels made from glass (the contents perhaps used at an earlier stage of funerary ritual), small ceramic jugs and iron nails (possibly intended to fix the shade of the deceased in the grave). In one unique instance, the remains of a laurel branch were identified beneath a wooden coffin in the Via dei Poggi necropolis at Ravenna (Leoni

Accepted manuscript

et al. 2008). As in Greece, facilities were also provided for the ongoing pouring of libations, including the use of amphorae and other vessels with cut bases, but also terracotta and lead pipes. At Gubbio cremation urns were fitted with carefully sealed lead lids and pipes which led above ground ensuring that libations would reach the cremated remains directly (Cipollone 2002). Animal remains may also have served a ritual function. According to Cicero (*On the Laws* 2.22.57) 'places of burial do not really become graves until the rites are performed and the pig is killed.' Pig remains are known from some Italian cemeteries, although certainly not all (Graham and Hope 2016). Horses and cows covered both cremation and inhumation burials at Voghenza (Ferrara), perhaps as a symbol of status, and dogs were also common in some cemeteries, acting either as faithful companions or guardians of the tomb (Buccellato, Catalano, Musco 2008: 85).

Once the remains of the body and any grave goods were deposited and covered with at least a token sprinkling of earth, Roman mourners took part in a funerary meal (*silicernium*: Festus 377L). Nine days later they returned to the grave in order to celebrate the *cena novemdialis*, another meal shared with the dead (Petronius, *Satyricon* 65), along with an additional purification ceremony (*suffitio*) to lift the pollution which had affected them since the moment of death or their own contact with the corpse (Varro, *On the Latin Language* 5.23; Graham 2011a; Emmerson 2020). Paralleling Greek customs once again, albeit with different religious associations, were the continuing commemorative activities which took place subsequent to the burial itself, most notably ritual meals celebrated at the graveside during the annual festivals of the dead known as the *Parentalia* and *Feralia* (celebrated during 13th–21st February; Ovid, *Fasti* 2. 533-542) and on the anniversary of the death, with offerings made in the form of libations or flowers.

Accepted manuscript

Accepted manuscript

A Roman rite of incorporation

The Roman *suffitio* (purification ceremony) seems to have been the occasion which brought to an end the series of rites which moved the dead from the world of the living to that of the afterlife but this event may have been more complex than the opaque phrase 'purification ceremony' implies. Indeed, we gain an insight into the nature of this final act of incorporation by looking more closely at one specific part of Roman funerary ritual as practised at Rome during the late Republic and early Imperial period: the rite of *os resectum*. This rite is mentioned by Festus (*On the Meaning of Words* 62) who notes that a corpse may only be legitimately burned on a pyre once a finger has been cut off and set aside; by Cicero (*On the Laws* 2.22.55) who includes burying 'the severed bone' in the earth amongst his list of activities that should take place in order to 'end the period of family mourning' but which he feels it unnecessary to explain at length; and by Varro (*On the Latin Language* 5.23) who writes about it in more detail: '… 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.' Remarkably, archaeological evidence for this rite involving a severed finger is known, including a large collection of small inscribed jugs containing single fragments of bone exposed to fire but not fully cremated found in the vineyard of San Cesareo immediately outside Rome on the via Appia in the eighteenth century, similar remains in a small underground space beneath the columbarium tomb of Pomponius Hylas not far from San Cesareo on the Via Latina, beneath the inscribed commemorative altar honouring Marcus Nonius Balbus the patron of Herculaneum located on the seafront

of the coastal town, and even as far from Rome as Lincoln, in the province of Britannia (Graham 2009; 2011a; Graham et al. 2019). Traditional interpretations of this seemingly bizarre rite have focused on the burial of individuals who died far from home, allowing an intact part of their body to be returned for proper burial, or as a means of making sure that at least part of a body otherwise consumed by fire in the course of cremation would receive a ‘proper’ religious burial, that is a covering of earth which lent a grave both legal and sacred status (Toynbee 1971: 49). Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence itself, and the comments of Varro and others, have prompted alternative explanations which emphasise the role of this small piece of ‘severed bone’ in completing the rites of passage surrounding death. If the *os resectum* was retained until the occasion of *suffitio*, during which mourners were cleansed with fire and water (Ovid *Fasti*, 4.735), it too may have been cleansed in this way before being laid to rest with the remainder of the cremation remains of the deceased. It was the co-dependent presence of both the living and the dead within the liminal zone at the heart of funerary rites of passage which gave it that status, meaning that they must both leave it at the same time in order for it to cease to exist. In instances of cremation, the corpse had already undergone purification during its burning but by retaining a small element of it which could be purified along with the living mourners during the final act of incorporation, both could be released from their impure state (Graham 2011a: 102). The comparative scarcity of archaeological evidence for this rite in regions further from Rome, or indeed in periods when inhumation was the more dominant means of disposal, suggests that *os resectum* was a rite which served a specific purpose, for certain individuals at discrete moments in time when cremation was popular (Graham 2009; Graham et al. 2019). It also, however, serves as an example of how dynamic and creative Roman

Accepted manuscript

funerary ritual could be and how closely connected the means of disposal might be to the performance of other rites associated with the dead. Cicero felt that there was 'no need' for him to explain *os resectum*, perhaps because it was so common that his audience needed no further instruction, but within a century or more, and with inhumation becoming the more favoured form of disposal, it seems to have no longer had any relevance.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at only a small fraction of the evidence available for the mortuary customs of antiquity and has focused primarily on the heartlands of Classical Greece (Athens) and of the Roman empire (Rome and Italy). There remains much work to be done to synthesise the bigger picture, not least of burial practices across and beyond the culturally diverse world that was the Roman empire. Although it has not been entirely possible to avoid taking a chronological approach in order to review the burial practices and ritual activities associated with both the Greek and Roman worlds, it is evident that there were two major influences which shaped the ways in which ancient communities and families disposed of their dead. The first was the manner in which the corpse was to be treated in terms of its ultimate fate. Cremation and inhumation were the favoured rites, but those responsible for dealing with the remains of the dead could make a range of decisions about exactly how to proceed, and there were several options available for displays of wealth, status and identity which also enabled them to safely and successfully negotiate the rites of passage surrounding death. It was perhaps less a matter of choosing to cremate or inhume and more a decision about *how* to cremate or inhume. These mortuary activities were, moreover, closely associated with a second

Accepted manuscript

influence: the importance of rites of passage which took account of both the need to perform (often a series of) rituals which would purify the living and the dead but which would also enable the dead to pass safely from one world to the next, just as the living were required to pass in and out of a liminal phase which separated them from the rest of society for the duration of the funerary period. Nevertheless, the manner in which these rites were performed could vary from location to location, period to period, and even family to family. It is this diversity and the opportunities that funerals offered which ultimately lies at the heart of understanding why and how mortuary customs changed in subtle ways and could be personalised to suit individual circumstances, whilst always remaining true to the essential need to dispose of a corpse in a manner that was satisfactory to both mortal and divine communities.

---

[1] All translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.
[2] Illustrative examples of such studies include those by Kurtz and Boardman (1971); Garland (2001); Mirto (2012).
[3] Mirto (2012: 84) provides a good example.
[4] The bibliography on Lefkandi is extensive but for the detailed excavation reports see Popham et al. (1980).
[5] In Roman contexts these types of *in situ* cremations and subsequent burial of the remains in a pit dug beneath the pyre (into which it and anything placed on it collapses) are referred to commonly as *busta sepulchra* or *bustum* burials.
[6] Despite empire-wide surveys of commemoration practices, there exists no equivalent publication concerning burial practices across the Roman world. Toynbee's (1971), still classic if somewhat dated, overview of 'death and burial' is selective in its coverage with the emphasis falling primarily on funerary monuments and commemorative practices rather than the evidence for burial itself. Surveys of burial practices – many of which no longer reflect the most recent discoveries – have tended to focus on particular provinces or regions, most notably Britain (e.g. Philpott 1991) but also North Africa (e.g. Stone and Stirling 2007). The useful collection of case studies collated by Pearce et al. (2000) covers examples largely from sites in Italy, Britain and the western provinces as well as slightly further afield in Asia Minor. See also Pearce and Weekes (2017) for studies of Roman cemetery evidence that seek to generate accounts of mortuary activities that emphasise the extended ritual process and which are 'more sensitive to variation in time and space'.
[7] His arguments have since been reinforced by, amongst others, Toynbee (1971: 40) and Morris (1992: 32).
[8] For more detailed discussion of these sites and their importance for unpicking the context of changing burial rites in imperial period Italy see Graham (2015) and Graham and Hope (2016).
[9] For more on the *loutrophoros* see Kurtz and Boardman (1971: pl. 36); Vermeule (1979: 21, fig. 17); Kurtz (1984: 310, fig. 4).

Accepted manuscript

[10] For examples see Oakley (2004: 205–9).
[11] Studies of Roman funerary professionals include those by Bodel (2000).

Accepted manuscript