

PERFORMING DEATH: SOCIAL ANALYSES OF FUNERARY TRADITIONS IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the analysis and interpretation of ancient and modern funerary rituals has been the aim of anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians interested in defining the role played by burial practices within the construction of a common heritage by living communities. Ritualistic performances, as well as the creation of funerary monuments and complexes and the writing of mythological stories, constitute the founding framework for a collective memory of a given society's culture ("kulturelle Gedächtnis"; Assmann 1992) and subsequently reinforce the social boundaries of the community in which these ritualistic performances are enacted.

With this perspective in mind, I believe that a cross-cultural approach to the analysis and interpretation of ancient funerary practices is fundamental for obtaining successful results from this type of research (Brown 1971). In fact, through comparisons of the symbolic role played by the material culture in the construction and enactment of certain aspects of funerary rituals in different socio-cultural and geographical contexts, scholars can speculate on the conception of general traits of cultural representation by ancient communities, as well as the embedding of burial practices in more complex forms of religious belief. Moreover, this epistemological method is driven by the need to identify the reasons behind the religious dimension of ancient and modern societies and its relationship to the societies' social dynamics. Such a cognitive approach towards the evolution of religious thought and the rituals connected to it can potentially support scholars in defining a universal language of the mind, which, as pointed out by Giambattista Vico (1977: 247–363), is recognizable in every society. This approach can support archaeological, textual, and anthropological research for the definition of a similar framework of scientific inference applicable to the available data. Furthermore, I believe it is important for archaeologists to analyze and interpret the funerary practices of ancient communities as a symbolic/projective sub-system (Renfrew 1972: 35–45) acting within the broader scenario of the entire social, cultural, and economic dynamics of a given society, also reflected in Susan Pollock's insightful interpretation of third-millennium B.C. funerary practices in southern Mesopotamia: "death [becomes] a contested

realm in which various elements within society competed for control of the dead just as they competed for control of the labor and products of the living” (1999: 216–17).

Thus, the two-day Second Annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar, *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean*, held at the Oriental Institute February 17–18, 2006, was a helpful step towards recognizing the importance of the role played by burial practices as a means for understanding the social structure of ancient communities of Mediterranean and Near Eastern regions. The principal aim of this two-day seminar was to interpret the social relevance resulting from the enactment of funerary rituals within the broad-reaching Mediterranean basin as a point of cultural interconnection and exchange between diverse ancient communities from Egypt, France, Greece, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Palestine, Spain, Syria, and Turkey. Fundamental to the successful realization of this research process was the active dialogue between scholars of different backgrounds. These exchanges provided the opportunity to integrate different approaches and interpretations concerning the role played by the performance of ancient funerary rituals within a given society and, as a result, helped in defining a coherent outcome towards the interpretation of ancient communities’ behaviors. Thus, in my role as the seminar organizer, my efforts were concentrated on creating a panel composed of scholars with diverse backgrounds (anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, art historians, and philologists), knowledge, and expertise to enrich the discussion through the presentation of case-studies linked to both textual and archaeological evidences from the Mediterranean region dating from prehistoric periods to the Roman age. As this region has been characterized by a long-term process of evolution in its burial practices since prehistoric periods, my overall intent in developing the seminar was to establish a forum in which a broader perspective could be acquired as a first step towards understanding how the transformation of burial practices has affected the social dynamics of the communities populating this vast geographical area during ancient times (Bloch 1989).

Following these premises, the seminar, divided into three sessions, dedicated the first day to the presentation of case-studies, while the second day focused on theoretical papers and the concluding discussion. The three sessions were chaired by Jonathan Hall (University of Chicago), David Schloen (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), and Theo van den Hout (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago). More specifically, day one of the seminar was divided into two main sessions (*A Powerful Death: Exercising Authority Through the Enactment of Funerary Rituals* and *Memorializing the Ancestors: Death as Form of Cultural and Social Transmission*) during which Meredith Chesson (Notre Dame University), Robert Chapman (University of Reading, UK), Massimo Cultraro (Ist. per i Beni Archeologici – CNR, Italy), Michael Dietler (University of Chicago), Stephen Harvey (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), Dina Katz (NINO, Leiden University, The Netherlands), Ellen Morris (Columbia University), Alessandro Naso (Università del Molise, Italy), John Pollini (University of Southern California), Susan Pollock (Binghamton University), Glenn Schwartz (Johns Hopkins University), Seth Richardson (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago), and Ian Rutherford (Florida State University) presented numerous case-studies from ancient contexts within the Mediterranean region. As a whole these participants successfully linked funerary data to a broader discourse about defining, interpreting, and reconstructing ancient performances of funerary rituals and how they affect the construction and development of ancient social and cultural behaviors within a broad chronological period in a given geographical scenario. Furthermore, the presented papers brought to the discussion numerous elements concerning art historical, textual, and archaeological interpretations of data related to ancient funerary practices, and received brilliant comments from the two respondents, Adam Smith (University of Chicago, Session 1) and Emily Teeter (Oriental Institute, Session 2).

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Performing Death seminar participants and organizers

During the second day of the seminar, which focused on the use of theoretical approaches for the analysis of funerary rituals, the three participants — Maurice Bloch (The London School of Economics and Political Science, UK), James Brown (Northwestern University), and John Robb (Cambridge University, UK) — brought to the forefront interesting approaches to the study of the relationship between the community of the living and the realm of the underworld. It is also interesting to note that while during the first day of the seminar the papers were delivered from a diachronic perspective to strongly emphasize the role played by the enactment of funerary rituals in the construction of the political and ideological knowledge of the involved actors in a given ancient society, day two of the seminar instead highlighted the importance of the ancestors in framing the collective memory of the community through the use of different media (i.e., visual, verbal, and non-verbal forms of communication).

In conclusion, the papers successfully achieved the goals of this two-day event due to the fact that in their analyses all the participants considered the practice of funerary rituals as part of a broader social scenario in which the related actions produce and re-produce the ideological and political arena of a society throughout a given span of time. Moreover, the studies presented at the seminar also demonstrated how these ritual actions are deeply grounded in a long-standing mnemonic process that links them to a mythological past constructed within the cultural memory of the society itself. The proceedings of the seminar will be submitted for publication in the Oriental Institute Seminars series (OIS) within the next academic year (2006/2007).

I would like to thank the Director of the Oriental Institute, Gil Stein, as well as all the scholars of this institution for having allowed me to organize such an important seminar, which has been both an exciting challenge and a great honor. I would also like to thank Olivia Boyd, Tom Urban, Maria Krasinski, Bike Yazicioğlu, Laura Wangerin, Kathryn Grossman, and Justine James for their hard work and practical support in all matters concerning the seminar. I would also like to extend my thanks to the students of the course on funerary rituals in the ancient Near East for their bright and helpful discussions during class that have stimulated new ideas related to the topics that were touched on during the seminar.

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