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Cemetery

(6,185 words)

The study of ***cemeteries*** involves a wide set of aspects, ranging from geographical location, architecture, and how graves were made to grave goods, the manner of burial, and the analysis of the skeletons.

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Most researchers today agree that, between the end of the west Roman Empire and 1000 CE, an individual might be buried in diverse locations, either in or around towns and in the countryside. There was considerable topographical continuity with respect to previous Roman burial areas, which were located outside settlements (cities and villages) and near main roads. From the 4th century CE, churches were built over some of these ***cemeteries***, a development that attracted not only the graves of religious and civil élites but also of common Christians. In the countryside there is also a substantial continuity of Roman burial practices until the 6th and 7th centuries CE, when open-air ***cemeteries*** with non-Roman grave goods linked to new forms of settlements appear, possibly attesting to barbarian presence (see Giostra, 2017; Possenti, 2014, for recent archaeological evidence). In both urban and rural contexts archaeologists also find from the 5th century CE several scattered burials occupying public or private buildings, a feature that increases from the 7th century CE onward (Chavarria Arnau, 2019).

Graves in postclassical ***cemeteries*** can take numerous forms. Plain earth graves of varying shapes and sizes are common. Their sides may be shored up with wooden revetments although these are rarely preserved and identifiable. Stone-lined graves, often referred to as cists, are of various types, from a token stone at the head and foot of the burial to elaborately faced and mortared masonry walls. Graves could also be built with bricks and tiles, floored, and covered with tiles sometimes imitating a “roof” (*capuccina*). Where no roof has been found, it is likely that a plank covering originally existed. Expensive types include sarcophagi, which could be plain or lavishly decorated. These were generally made of stone, but lead sarcophagi have been also identified. Sometimes late Roman and early medieval graves reused Roman sarcophagi.

Monumental tombs and mausolea did not disappear but started to be built closer and in direct connection to suburban funerary churches. In Ravenna, King Theoderic (r. 493–526 CE) ordered the construction of a monumental mausoleum in one of the suburban ***cemeteries*** of the city. Lombards, as did other barbarian groups, had their own characteristic grave typologies. These were mainly "house graves" with wood monuments overlying the tombs (identifiable by traces of post-holes) or tree-trunk coffins. Scholars have created chronotypologies of these different ways of building graves for certain regions (see e.g. Colardelle, 1983, for the western Alps; Ripoll, 1996, for Spain), but they cannot be applied in a global way as they change considerably according to the availability of materials, local traditions, and other variables that require in depth study.

Characteristically, ***cemeteries*** are laid out quite neatly in rows or small groups, reflecting possible family units. From the 4th century CE, a common form of inhumation places the body in the supine position (with variation in terms of the arrangement of limbs), with the head to the west, facing toward the east.

The term "grave goods" denotes anything found in a grave in addition to human remains. It can include a wide variety of artifacts, from dress items and jewelry, keys, and knives (probably as part of the dress) to cooking vessels, household items, musical instruments, games, and horse harnesses. The corpse was frequently covered with a shroud, following the example of the burial of Jesus Christ, a custom revealed by the discovery of bone or metal pins found in graves as well as by the compressed disposition of the skeleton. Although Christian authorities recommended undressed burials, both material and written sources show that people (Christian or not) were frequently inhumed wearing fine clothing, sometimes bordered with gold brocades or with other types of dressings, such as belts, metal buckles, brooches, buttons, tabs, and buckled shoes (Martorelli, 2000). Miniature copies of artifacts occur, for example, in Anglo-Saxon graves, which scholars believe were made specifically to accompany the dead, perhaps to represent a pars pro toto. The deliberate destruction of artifacts before their deposition has also been detected in some ***cemeteries***. Literary sources also mention this practice, such as in the will of the *vir magnificus* Rottpert (d. 745 CE; CDL 82) in relation to Lombard funerals. Horses and dogs are found in, or next to, Lombard graves and in northern European ***cemeteries***.

Scholars have identified a wide range of possible motives for the deposition of grave goods, with marked regional differences and considerable change over time. It is important to remember that the interpretation of artifacts found in grave contexts is based almost entirely on items made of durable materials, while objects made of wood, textiles, and so on, are only preserved in rare cases. Grave goods have been interpreted as equipment for the hereafter; inalienable parts of the deceased's property; symbols of social prestige linked to the ostentatious destruction of accumulated wealth; signs of the deceased's social status; and reminders of events in the life of the deceased. Any set of grave goods is likely to have been created in response to a composite of motives (Haerke, 2014).

The custom of depositing grave goods disappeared from the various regions of Europe at different times and for different reasons. While this disappearance often coincided with the spread of Christianity, it is by no means certain that Christianity was the cause of its disappearance in every single case (Schuelke, 1999).

The great variety of funerary practices (in terms of location, funerary architecture, grave goods, etc.) certainly mirrors different social entities resulting from the many periods of transformation and instability, in contrast to stable societies (such as the Roman, Islamic, or late medieval epochs), which had funerary norms and traditions with largely unified burial rites. The diversity evident in the early medieval period also reflects how funerary rites depended largely on familial groups and local initiatives. The preference for one type of tomb or another, the presence and range of grave goods, the existence of burial monuments over the graves, and their location all served to mark the different social, economic, and ethnic status of the deceased, but these preferences varied locally depending on multiple factors. This variety is also undoubtedly linked to the political fragmentation that the Roman Empire in the West. Further, elements of ideological distinction between Catholics (who were divided by the Three Chapters Controversy and other controversies), "Arians" (Arianism), and (during the early period) pagans, can be added to the significant socio-cultural differences between Romans and immigrant populations. In sum, the political fragmentation probably had consequences in terms of local realities, based on bonds of solidarity, different ethnic and ideological identities, and existing hierarchies.

Christian *Cemeteries* and Cities

The death of a person, the fate of the soul, and hopes for salvation and the Last Judgement were dramatic aspects of early Christianity and are essential to understanding the earliest Christian archaeological evidence (Stancati, 2006). The oldest archaeological evidence for Christianization in the West relates consequently to funerary cults and, in particular, to sarcophagi, mosaics, paintings, and objects used in ***cemeteries*** (such as lamps) depicting Christian subjects, symbols, and formularies relating to death and the life beyond (Bisconti, 2006; 2007).

Archaeologically the first clear evidences of Christian burials appear at the end of the 2nd century CE and at the beginning of the 3rd century CE (e.g. at the Vatican cemetery in relation to the grave of St. Peter and in cemeterial areas by the Via Appia; Fiocchi Nicolai, 2006; Spera, 2009, 774–776). ***Cemeteries*** owned and used by the Roman Christian communities developed not only in the southern suburbs of the city (cemetery of Callixtus) but also in the northern area (the catacombs of Priscilla, Bassilla, and Agnes), in the west by the Via Aurelia (catacomb of Calepodio), and in the east (***cemeteries*** of Hyppolitus and Novatian). These ***cemeteries*** were filled with an extraordinary number of graves in a very short time: the cemetery founded at the time of Zephyrinus and traditionally believed to have been managed by his collaborator Callixtus counted at least 1,500 burials placed there over a period of around 230–240 CE years; in the middle of the 3rd century CE, the region of the Arenario at the catacomb of Priscilla and the adjacent areas of Heliodorus and Tyche housed 1,200 burials; and in the so-called Scala

Maggiore and Scala Minore areas of the cemetery of Praetextatus about 600 have been identified. In a few decades, therefore, many thousands of possible Christians had already been interred in these cemetery areas (Fiocchi Nicolai, 2006, but see below for other points of view). According to our sources, there are numerous factors that motivated the faithful to create dedicated ***cemeteries***. There was, for instance, the need to provide a burial place for the poorest of the poor as stated by Tertullian, in a famous passage of the *Apologeticus* (39.5–6); the numerical growth of the community at the beginning of the 3rd century CE, which demanded adequate space for burials; an intense sense of religious community which led to various efforts to increase group unity, even in the place of repose of the dead; and the desire to conduct burial rites, such as prayers for the deceased and funeral masses (see Fiocchi Nicolai, 2019, 67–69, with references to corroborating ancient textual evidence).

All these *cimeteria christianorum* ("Christian ***cemeteries***") were located outside the city of Rome in continuity with previous funerary areas as was customary and established in Roman law. New ***cemeteries*** also developed during the 3rd century CE in suburban areas previously occupied by residential or industrial quartiers that had been abandoned (in Italy Verona and Milan, in Hispania Tarragona or Mérida, around Marseille or Arles in Gaul, among many other examples). Traditionally these abandonments have been linked to the insecurity caused by Alammani and other barbarian raids. This hypothesis finds support in the construction of defensive walls that even used spolia from the funerary monuments of these earlier ***cemeteries***, which were at least partially destroyed, perhaps to clear the areas close to the fortifications. Profound transformations were affecting the function of the suburbia of Roman cities and the organization of funerary areas (Cantino Wataghin & Lambert, 1998, 103).

The characteristic evolution can be seen at Tarragona (Spain) where some 700 m west of the city walls a large suburban residential quarter was reused as a funerary area in the 3rd century CE and included the burials of the martyrs Fructuosus, Augurius, and Elogius (López Vilar, 2006). During the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the cemetery developed with thousands of tombs, including mausolea, sarcophagi, mosaic slabs, and inscriptions, all with a strong Christian character. A church with a baptistery was constructed by the year 400 CE and in the 5th century CE a larger funerary basilica (24.00 by 15.20 m) with a monumental atrium (20.75 by 17.50 m) and a number of subsidiary buildings were built to the north of the first Christian church, possibly becoming the 6th-century CE monastery mentioned in the sources. The characteristics of this enormous Christian complex and its sequence – residential suburban area, Christian cemetery from the mid-3rd century CE, funerary church in the 4th century CE, and new Christian buildings in the 5th century CE – mirror those of other suburban martyrial complexes in cities such as Rome, Cimitile, Tours, and Arles.

The presence of martyrs and their relics attracted not only the favor of the highest urban elites, from bishops – who throughout the Early Middle Ages were mainly buried in suburban "basilicas" and *ad sanctos* (near the earlier graves of martyrs) – to the secular elite, but also of a high number of Christian citizens. These funerary sites developed later into "villages of the Christians" (*vici christianorum* in the texts) during the Early Middle Ages due to the bishops' emphasis on Christian burial areas and the cult of relics. In many cases, large monasteries

developed in relation to these Christian ***cemeteries***, as has been documented at Tours (around the tomb of St. Martin), Cimitile (where St. Felix and then Bishop Paulinus were buried), Cagliari (the tomb of St. Saturninus and monastery of Fulgentius of Ruspe), Mérida (area of St. Eulalia), and, of course, in Rome (for a synthesis see Chavarría Arnau, 2018a, 162–171).

In general, therefore, we see a continuity of funerary practices at least with respect to topography or location of ***cemeteries*** in relation to the previous period, as the majority of the urban population continued to be buried outside the urban area as Roman law had dictated since the Law of the XII Tables (for an overview for France and Britain, see Lorans, 2016).

Intramural Burials

Archaeology reveals that during the late Roman period scattered burials were placed inside the original limits of most of the ancient cities (see Lambert, 1997; 2003). These burial "plots" were typically very small (between one and ten burials) and can often be related to abandoned private and public buildings. Although the dating of these burials is not always easy to establish, they seem to start from the end of the 5th century CE and become more frequent from the end of the 6th century CE (an overview in Lambert, 2003). These burials tend to be quite simple, constructed with earth or stone and brick structures, sometimes with covers *alla cappuccina* ("with tiles") and with very few or no grave goods. Select bioarcheological analysis shows signs of malnutrition and a very precarious state of health (see Bedini & Bartoldi, 2008, for the 18 burials found at the Capitolium of Verona dated between the 6th and 8th cents. CE). Twenty years ago G.P. Brogiolo suggested that examples discovered in Brescia belonged to a low status, possibly servile, population working for Lombard elites (Brogiolo, 1994, 560), as they were located near sunken huts in an area belonging to the Lombard royal court. A total of 65 scattered tombs are now known in late antique – early medieval Brescia and anthropological analysis seems to confirm this interpretation (Brogiolo, 2011, 49–50, with wider discussion on the uses of urban spaces for burial, see 139–146). Comparable data have been recently synthesized and reviewed at other north Italian cities such as Pavia, Cividale, Piacenza, and Alba (Giostra, 2014).

Nevertheless, burial inside the city should not be viewed solely as a sign of marginalization or low social status, for it can sometimes denote privilege. At Verona, for example, the burial place of the first Lombard king, Alboin was placed under the staircase of his palace (P.Deac. *Hist. Lang*. 2.28); and in the same city a very high-status female tomb dated to the beginning of the 7th century CE was discovered not far from Palazzo Miniscalchi/Cortalta (*Curtis alta*) (Cipolla, 1907). At Cividale a sarcophagus containing rich mid-7th-century CE grave goods was recovered in 1874, in this instance possibly associated with some form of public or elite building (Brogiolo, 2001; Lusuardi Siena, Giostra & Spalla, 2000, 277–278).

One must underline the extreme variability of the data on intramural burials as well as the many possible interpretations of this data, which indicates multiple ideological, social, and economic traditions. The occurrence of formal burial activity inside cities in this period (end of the 6th cent. and first decades of the 7th cent. CE) is not, therefore, necessarily an indicator of

Christianization or evidence for the establishment of a church, but more probably relates to the change in ways of conceiving and using urban space in the post-Roman period. In fact, it is noticeable that intramural churches, and in particular cathedrals, in Italy and Gaul did not attract formal burial grounds until a later date and never before the 7th century CE (for Italy, see Chavarría Arnau & Giacomello, 2014; for France, see Jourd'Heuil, 2009; Margue, 2006). Some of the earliest burials that have been found close to cathedrals rather seem to be linked to previous contexts, and therefore pre-date the construction of the church or even a period in which the church could have been destroyed or temporarily abandoned.

It is also interesting to underline that the earliest 7th-century CE graves that can be reliably linked to cathedrals probably belonged to lay elites and not to ecclesiastics. At San Salvatore in Turin, inhumations, radiocarbon-dated to between 660 and 770 CE, were identified by anthropological analyses to be members of the military aristocracy of the city (Pejrani Baricco, 2003, 316). At Mantua, two monumental urban baptisteries that were in use during the 7th century CE were both linked to burials with weapons and particular gold grave goods that likely mirror high status (Manicardi, 2015, 38–39, 56–61).

In Spain, two of the archaeologically better known late Roman episcopal areas (Barcelona and Valentia) seem to have attracted privileged burials from the 6th century CE (Beltrán de Heredia, 2008; Alapont Martin & Ribera i Lacomba, 2006), a period when both cities were possibly already under Visigothic authorities. Whether this diversity also relates to a different conception of ancient laws or (perhaps) the different Christian confession ("Arian") of Goths and Lombards is a subject that deserves further attention.

Burials in Churches

The motivation that led Christians to be buried in a church was twofold: on the one hand, because they were convinced that a power emanated from the bodies of the saints and their relics, which permeated the walls, the floors of the churches, and the bodies of all those who were buried inside, so that, at the time of the resurrection and the presentation at the Last Judgment, they would have enjoyed a "privileged intercession" (*conresuscitatio*), a concept that is frequently used in funerary epigraphy. Additionally, since the time of Constantine, there existed the idea that the prayers of the living were fundamental to guarantee eternal salvation, an idea insisted upon by many church authorities, including Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great (see Fiocchi Nicolai, 2016).

From the 8th century CE on, the value of the saint's intercession gives way to prayers and, above all, to eucharistic celebrations that become decisive for the salvation of the dead. The growing penitential character and the strengthening of the concept of salvation through prayer made the proximity to relics less indispensable and a position closer to those who prayed preferable. The identification of the burials and the presence of inscriptions that acted as a reminder of the dead and, consequently, to pray on their behalf also became fundamental. At the same time, the idea arose that the deceased would ideally participate in the masses and therefore continue to acquire merits for his eternal well-being (Pietri, 1986, 137). The creation of

large spaces with a predominantly funereal function below the presbyterial areas (the crypts) could be linked to this relationship between the dead and the celebration of the Mass. In this context, monasteries become the ideal and favorite burial place for élites.

The position of the burials inside churches (esp. in the internal part of the buildings and in their annexes) shows that their spatial location was not accidental but dictated by the position of the deceased in the local Christian universe. This symbolic position was underlined by the typology of burial, sometimes by funeral deposits but rarely through epitaphs, and almost always by a location with respect to the liturgical areas of the church. This verification presupposes the existence of an authority who controlled access to privileged burial spaces. This was primarily based on merit, but it was also possible to increase the possibility of being buried in a church through an economic contribution (Scholkmann, 2003).

Bioarcheological analysis (not only for determining sex and age, but also for physical stresses that potentially indicate the deceased's occupation) can be very useful to understand these aspects. The most desirable spaces in proximity to the presbyterial area and therefore to the altar and the relics were reserved for the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but the interpretation may change in the case of later 7th- and 8th-century CE private churches with a different arrangement of internal spaces. In some cases the osteological analysis can reveal particular situations such as the Church of San Pietro in the suburbs of Canosa in Puglia, where the anomalous large number of chronical pathologies detected in the skeletons has been linked to the particular function of the church as "a sort of Lourdes" of late antiquity, frequented by seriously ill people who were buried there (Volpe et al. 2007).

Closely linked to the graves in the churches and possibly reflecting its privileged position is the phenomenon of the graves reused for successive deceased. Generally, they are interpreted as relating to family groups or particularly linked personages (as in the case of Bishops Paulus and Fidel of Mérida, who were buried in the same sarcophagus), although sometimes reuse may respond to other issues that we cannot currently identify.

Cemeteries in the Countryside

It is important to remember that churches were only one of the possible locations for ***cemeteries*** after the Roman period. More often than might be expected, isolated or very small groups of burials are found dispersed in the countryside with no apparent relationship to any settlement. While these are traditionally interpreted as the tombs of marginalized communities, their frequency suggests a rather different explanation, as proposed in other parts of Europe, notably Anglo-Saxon England (Petts, 1992; Reynolds, 2002) or late Roman Gaul (Gleize, 2007). Such burials could, for example, be linked to particular features of the landscape, such as property boundaries, secondary paths, or points of assembly – whether for trade or even for justice. But this cannot be the only interpretation. Y. Gleize has hypothesized that they could also be identified as dependent farmers of free or unfree status (Gleize, 2007, 206). In many cases, they probably demonstrate the persistence of dispersed settlements

throughout the period and the possibility that farmers and their families were buried on their own land, not far from their habitations. Further research is also needed on this subject (as suggested for France by Pecqueur, 2003).

So-called *Reihengraeberfelder* ("open- air ***cemeteries***" organized in rows) appear from the 6th century CE and seem to be connected to land routes and river networks, sometimes at the strategic control point in the area, such as a bridge or in territories located near the frontier with other groups. In northern Italy, their distribution clearly reflects the advance of Lombards from east to west and the occupation of the fertile plains of the *pianura padana*, especially close to the main political and strategic centers such as Verona, Brescia, Bergamo, and Torino but also at the frontier between the Lombard territories and the Byzantine areas. Recent research has led to the discovery of settlements (village-like areas built generally of perishable materials) linked to these ***cemeteries*** (Possenti, 2014; Giostra, 2017). These ***cemeteries*** could also have been located on fiscal properties once related to the emperors or highest Roman aristocracies as the presence of large late Roman villas seem to indicate.

Historiography

The study of Christian ***cemeteries*** originates in the 16th century in the context of the controversies between Reformation and Counter-Reformation communities, when the vestigia of early Christians were researched. To this period belongs the discovery of the first Roman Christian catacombs by C. Baronio (1538–1607), author of a history of the church from its origins to 1198, and by A. Bosio (1575–1629), who wrote the volume *Roma Sotterranea*, a study that was critically revised in the 19th century by G. Battista de Rossi (1822–1894). For a history of catacombs see V. Fiocchi Nicolai (2019), and for a general review of the history of Christian archaeology, see W.H.C. Frend (1996), V. Saxer (1998), and H. Brandenburg (2006).

Traditionally, a key development of ***cemeteries*** in late antiquity has been identified as a large-scale introduction of graves inside the city walls or more generally with a closer relationship between the dead and the living population. This phenomenon has been linked to the introduction of Christianity and to new attitudes of a Christian population toward the body of the dead and to the presence of churches with sacred relics and saints' corpses, which provided a desirable setting for the burials of clergy and élites (Ariès, 1974). However, a closer look at the archaeological evidence nuances this interpretation and shows a much more complex picture that reflects the manifold nature of late Roman and early medieval society.

Another discussion developed in the 1990s was concerned with the influence of the church on burial practices and the origins of Christian ***cemeteries***. In light of archaeological and epigraphic documentation, the doubts raised by É. Rebillard on the communitarian Christian character of some ***cemeteries*** in Rome (Rebillard, 1997, based on a lexicological discussion about the word *caementerium* in early sources) have been rejected and, as already pointed out by J. Guyon in 2005, the collective character of the first Christian cemeterial areas of Rome has been re-emphasized (also Duval, 2000, 448–457). It is possible, however, that while first bishops were making provisions for the acquisition of special funerary areas for the

community, they were later increasingly less interested in the manner and place where ordinary people were interred. In the Early Middle Ages when Christianity had extended it appears that their main concern was to ensure that only ecclesiastics and civil élites (i.e. patrons) were buried in ecclesiastical buildings.

Today, many researchers agree that the diversity evident in the postclassical period mirrors a situation where funerary rites depended very much on familial groups and local initiatives and is also linked to the fragmentation that the Roman Empire experienced after its end, which triggered major fragmentation at the social and cultural-religious level (e.g. Lorans, 2016; Chavarría Arnau, 2018b, among many others). Only from the 8th century CE onward, with the alliance between Carolingian kings and the church, was a certain political and spiritual stability achieved, leading to a greater unity in burial practices, and the creation of blessed cemetery areas near churches which slowly but definitively became the primary, designated places of burial for the population in both town and country (Treffort, 1996). Graves in churchyards were to become more anonymous, as shown by the frequent cutting into graves by later burials and the multiplication of ossuaries. However, elites did not lose their visibility in death since they continued to express their distinctiveness by the position of their tombs inside the church, by funerary inscriptions, and by ceremonies of remembrance.

During the last decade, and thanks to the development of a fruitful relationship between archaeology, anthropology, and biology, ***cemeteries*** have become an important source of information for the physical characteristics, health status, occupation, and diet of individuals belonging to past populations, as well as information about the dynamics of economic exploitation of the surrounding territory. Molecular analyses of DNA or stable isotopes, for instance, are revolutionizing both the history of migrations and the history of disease by detecting the ancient genomes of lethal illnesses (such as *Yersinia pestis*, tuberculosis or malaria) that affected ancient people without leaving any traces on the bones (Pinhasi & Mays, 2008). Unfortunately, these sorts of studies depend on the preservation of the bones (and their collagen), which in many cases is very poor due to the acidity of the soils, post-depositional processes, or the way in which the skeletons were preserved after excavation.

Future research will need to solve some of the other problems faced by archaeologists who are concerned with postclassical ***cemeteries***. These problems have to do with the difficulty of dating the burials (particularly when there are no grave goods), although radiocarbon dating is today more frequently applied than before. The recording and publication of ***cemeteries*** is still frequently inadequate, and the data and vocabulary used in such reports are often too heterogenous to compare with different sites. Moreover, single graves or small necropolises are rarely published. Similarly, existing anthropological and paleopathological studies tend to be written in a highly specialized jargon, which further complicates their connection to other data. Online databases cataloguing ***cemeteries*** in all their aspects and complexity, using standard vocabularies, are thus urgently needed.

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