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# How to Cope with Death: Mourning and Funerary Practices in the Ancient Near East

Proceedings of the International Workshop  
Firenze, 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> December 2013

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Edizioni ETS



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*Il volume è pubblicato con il contributo di*  
OrMe (Fondazione per l'Oriente Mediterraneo)

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Edizioni ETS  
Piazza Carrara, 16-19, I-56126 Pisa  
[info@edizioniets.com](mailto:info@edizioniets.com)  
[www.edizioniets.com](http://www.edizioniets.com)

*Distribuzione*  
Messaggerie Libri SPA  
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

*Promozione*  
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL  
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884674574-3

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## PREFACE

I am sincerely pleased to present the Proceedings of the workshop held at the University of Florence on December 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> 2013, “How to Cope with Death. Mourning and Funerary Practices in the Ancient Near East” and host it as the 5<sup>th</sup> issue in the series *Ricerche di Archeologia del Vicino Oriente*.

The workshop was organized by Candida Felli in the framework of a research project financed by the Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca (PRIN 2009). It was devoted to discussing the mourning rites performed *post mortem* in particular periods and areas, and was carefully planned by Candida who assessed the main issues for the contributors aiming to pursue a coherent trajectory of analysis and let the debate flow among the participants with their different perspectives and disciplines.

This workshop was not, in fact, an occasional event bringing together specialists in funerary archaeology, but was instead conceived as a crucial step in a personal route of the research which Candida Felli has undertaken for many years with coherence and commitment, and on which she has produced a doctoral dissertation, published in the volume *Dopo la Morte* (Florence 2015). This volume, despite its accurate and in-depth examination of data and the proposed innovative approach, did not exhaust her curiosity and queries on the subject, but rather stimulated new questions opening the way for further investigations. A new focus on rituals as repeated performances and related practices, and the presence of recent data, encouraged her to promote a workshop as a joint effort among scholars for confronting different approaches and various perspectives. It is now clear that the physical burying of the corpse of the dead in a distinct space and in a definite moment was not a final act; it was more often followed by various spatial and temporal activities that had to provide the dead and the living, ancestors and successors with a perennial link and eventually mutual protection. There is a significant trajectory after the death which is composed of rites carried out in and outside the burials which were destined to create a familial and community linkage that extended beyond death.

It is certainly a demanding task to collect consistent textual and archaeological data from the Syrian Bronze Age sources concerning mourning rites and the *post mortem* performances, especially when we confront them with the richer and more vivid data offered by ethnological studies. However, the many contributions in this volume succeed in presenting new evaluations as well as criticisms of this complex and definitely fascinating subject. Despite a certain variety of situations reflecting heterogeneous chronological realities and specific cases, a quite homogeneous funerary, ideological and practical structure of post mortem rites seems to emerge from the discussion of the workshop: corpses were manipulated, treated after time, and eventually moved to spaces either adjacent to or distant

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from the first burial; secondary burials integrated separated corpses in common spaces, and these were also visible, exposed and the object of reiterated rites of remembrance. We ascribe these different cases to the cult of the ancestors and the ideology of identity in a broad term definition, but in fact they testify to a quite generalized need not to cut the threads that linked the members of the family and community after a death. Death was a terminal moment, but the mourning, manipulation and displacement of corpses contributed to maintaining a spiritual and even physical contact between the living and the dead, consequently providing consolation for the loss, shortening the distance from the dead, and relieving the angst of nothingness.

The contributions in this volume are the result of different approaches and present various interpretations which, however, combine in showing the complexity and variety of behaviours in the lengthy Near-Eastern trajectory of post mortem mourning rituals. To the participants of the workshop and the present volume goes my sincere gratitude for their enthusiastic involvement in the debate, and to Candida for her ability to encourage and stimulate discussions on often difficult points. In my memory of the often vivid debates which followed the presentations, the clarity of mind and concreteness of Edgar Peltenburg stand out: we all miss him, but his contribution in this volume will help us to revive his memory.

*Stefania Mazzoni*



## HOW TO COPE WITH DEATH: AN INTRODUCTION

CANDIDA FELLI - FIRENZE

Within the PRIN project 2009 headed by Stefania Mazzoni at the University of Firenze I was able to carry out in 2012-2013 a research entitled “Il territorio dei morti e degli antenati come espressione di identità culturale: la trasformazione del paesaggio funerario della Siria tra l’Età del Bronzo e del Ferro e le ricerche di Tell Afis”.

How does death relate to a notion like landscape (in Italian, “paesaggio, territorio”)? It does, in a number of ways: the more obvious is the impact that features like graves, funerary monuments and chapels have on the physical space in which they are placed, their relation to the natural and anthropic environment. All these elements have dimensions which can be measured and plotted on a map, thus giving a spatial rendering of the relationship between the space of the living and the space the living reserve to the dead and the possible points of interaction. The latter include the places in which the dead are looked after, mourned, manipulated and exposed before burial, which are however not always that easy to identify in the archaeological record, as well as those in which the dead are remembered and taken care of after burial.<sup>1</sup>

However, the expression “landscape of the dead” can also evoke the less physical and more fictional space of the dead themselves: the spirit of the dead is thought to leave the body at the moment of the death and to accomplish a journey to the afterlife; uncared for spirits may go back and forth from there. Referring to Adriano Favole, «parlare di “luoghi dei morti” significa anche riferirsi a costruzioni dell’immaginario, a funzioni culturali relative all’aldilà, alle dimore in cui approda il “ciò che rimane” [...] dei defunti».<sup>2</sup> It is exactly this space, this landscape, which has been at the core of my research.

The living’s behaviour is thought to have influence on the dead’s *post mortem* fate. On occasion of a death, in ancient (and also modern) societies, a series of rites characterized by specific, codified behaviours are performed, in relation to the dead and the living, by means of which people try to overcome the crisis and disruption caused by it. This process is generally indicated as ‘mourning’, a word also used to denote its time duration. Mourning rites may vary in complexity and elaboration according to the dead’s role and/or status. Their accomplishment is the condition to guarantee the dead a peaceful rest.<sup>3</sup> As shown by the seminal work by Ernesto de Martino based on a set of case-studies from Southern Italy, lamentation has a twofold purpose, to help the living overcome the crisis caused by

<sup>1</sup> On this theme see FAVOLE and LIGI 2004.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> See for example XELLA 1995, p. 2064: “the history of religions indicates that generally the basis of funeral rites is an anxiety about the possible return of the deceased. Mourning and connected rites tend to place the dead firmly in another dimension. The offerings are intended to be an inducement to prevent a perilous return to the land of the living”.

a death and at the same time help the spirit of the dead leave the world of the living and never come back.<sup>4</sup>

The topic of mourning and related rites has been a favoured subject of a number of ethnographic studies since the very beginning of anthropological research: at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Robert Hertz, a pupil of Émile Durkheim, studying some Indonesian groups, was the first to acknowledge that funerary practices are a product of “*représentations collectives*” and to recognize the existing affinity between the duration of mourning and the period needed for the dead to move “*de la société visible des vivants à la société invisible des ancêtres*”, thus putting funerals on the same level as other passage rites such as initiation and wedding.<sup>5</sup> At the basis of such ideology would be a notion of death not as a punctual, but as a long-lasting, event, which ends only when the corpse stops decomposing, either naturally or through artificial means, and turns into something more stable such as bones, ashes or even a mummy. A few years later, Arnold van Gennep elaborated further on the notion of the parallelism existing between mourning duration and beliefs relative to the passage to the netherworld, within a research which is not limited to any specific study-case and concerns other rites of passage characterized by an analogous tripartite structure, that is to say rites of separation, liminality and aggregation.<sup>6</sup>

As to the study of the ancient world and, specifically, the archaeology, of the whole ritual cycle revolving around death only burial, or, better, its archaeological residues found in excavations, has been the most exploited avenue of research since the very beginnings of archaeology as a discipline, and the path of evolution and progress in this realm closely follows the theoretical development over time characterizing this field of studies, from the mere interest in graves as repositories of goodies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to the most recent approaches within the archaeology of cult and ritual and the ‘archaeoethnology’.<sup>7</sup>

At least up to the 80s of the past century, and even beyond, grave analyses have been conceived as the most appropriate tools for the identification of hierarchy and social stratification within a certain group and in general for the reconstruction of social structure, and very limited attention has been paid to any other aspects that might be involved. More recently, ritual has become a focus of interest in the study of funerary practices: in particular, specific attention has been given to aspects such as meaning, symbolism, power and ideology which can shape differently ritual practices in death and provide information on the living as much as on the dead.<sup>8</sup> It is also to add that development in fieldwork activities has brought about a growing awareness of the need for special care in burial excavation

<sup>4</sup> DE MARTINO 1958, *passim*, esp. pp. 102, 103; see also p. 195 on the magical character of lamentation in ancient societies such as Egypt and Near East (more recently KATZ 2010, pp. 116-120 and note 33). De Martino was however more interested in the psychological implications of this practice: MIRTO 1990. On the difficult, when not existing, reception of de Martino outside Italy see the collection of papers in GALLINI and MASSENZIO (eds) 1997 (esp. those of D. Fabre and G.R. Saunders).

<sup>5</sup> HERTZ 1906. On this work see DAVIES 2000.

<sup>6</sup> VAN GENNEP 1909.

<sup>7</sup> An overview on some recent trends in funerary archaeology is offered by the collection of papers in NILSSON STUTZ and TARLOW (eds) 2013.

<sup>8</sup> TAYLOR 2011.

techniques and post-excavation treatments of the finds which has gradually caused, on one hand, an improvement in quality of the retrieved data and, on the other, a considerable increase of detailed information provided in archaeological reports, allowing more thorough and multifaceted analyses of the evidence. Much progress in this direction, as far as the Near East is concerned, has been made by means of a number of workshops organized in order to discuss specific issues related to burial interpretation, stimulated not only by the advance of theoretical studies on the topic but also by the increased evidence made available by archaeological excavations.<sup>9</sup> In the past twenty years there has been a series of remarkable discoveries which have brought to light a relevant amount of new funerary evidence, ranging from the Early Bronze Age graves of the Middle Euphrates valley to the extraordinary study-case offered by the almost intact hypogeum discovered at the site of Qatna in Syria.

In the face of that, mourning practices remain on the whole a very underrated topic in the Near East, in comparison with other areas, such as Egypt, Greece and Etruria, for example, where the fairly abundant textual and/or figurative evidence have allowed in-depth investigations of the question;<sup>10</sup> in our area, the subject has received not as much attention and when so, it is almost exclusively in the realm of philological studies.<sup>11</sup> The reason for that is quite self-evident: while description of or even mere references to funerals, although rare, are indeed found in the texts,<sup>12</sup> very few visual attestations of the latter are actually known and traces of rituals are on a whole difficult to be found in the archaeological record.<sup>13</sup> It appears however difficult to accept, for example, the idea of so little figurative attestation of a practice, that of funerary lamentation, which the textual evidence reveals very widespread in the area and as important as burying the dead. On the whole there seems to be the need for a more in-depth investigation of the phenomenon.

The idea of the workshop of which I here introduce the proceedings, came then out of that need, in order to bring attention to this subject addressing the question of mourning, not in isolation but in relation to the funerary practices with which mourning is certainly linked. A task neither banal nor obvious. The underlying assumption was an understanding of the ritual cycle starting at one's death as a whole, in which each activity is connected with the others and all have the fundamental function of easing the change in state of that person both in the world of the living and in that of the dead. Already Hertz's hypothesis, mentioned above, of a connection between secondary burials and concepts of death among certain societies, in which the dead is recognized as such only when the mourning period is elapsed, had made a case for a strong correlation between belief and practice and sug-

<sup>9</sup> LANERI (ed.) 2007; PFÄLZNER *et al.* (eds) 2012; 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Egypt: ASSMANN 2005; Kucharek this volume. Greece: ALEXIOU 1974; CORDANO 1980; PEDRINA 2001. On Greek funerary rites in general see D'AGOSTINO 1996. Etruria: TAYLOR, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *Inter alia* ALSTER 1983 as to literary sources; CHARPIN 2006 in relation to second millennium evidence.

<sup>12</sup> In fact only Hittite texts preserve a description of the 14-days king's funeral: KLINGER 2012 with reference to earlier literature. See also Archi in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> Felli this volume.

gested that archaeological evidence could be further exploited beyond the more customary analyses applied to it. Though aware of the risks in the application of models derived from ethnography and of the existing criticism to Hertz's reconstruction,<sup>14</sup> it seemed to me nonetheless worth exploring further this issue, even if there was nothing like the Borneo double funeral in the Near East. Indeed, in an increasing number of cases, an accurate and thorough analysis of human remains in graves, at least in the area of interest of the workshop, Syria, has led to the identification of secondary burials, until recently a rather underestimated phenomenon in itself, which would attest the existence of a practice of protracted funerary rites that still need to be quantified and fully understood. It has been through the work of the archaeologists of Tell Banat, in the Tishreen Dam area, Anne Porter in particular, who has also taken part in this workshop, that the existence of protracted funerary rites at that Early Bronze site has been postulated already in the 90s on the basis of the evidence recovered from a variety of both intra- and extra-mural grave structures, culminating in the White Monument, i.e. an artificial, imposing mound, close to the settlement, where selected human bones and other objects were finally redeposited.<sup>15</sup> This pattern appears specifically linked to the cult of ancestors, as clearly indicated also by the evidence found in the later Royal Hypogea at Qatna.<sup>16</sup> Leaving aside the question of interpretation, what seems relevant for our concern here is the number of elements suggesting the existence of a certain degree of ritual emphasis accompanying not only the first interments, as expected, but also the following dislocations of bones, an interesting parallel, at least at a formal level, to the situation described in Hertz's study.

It is thus on these premises that, thank to the opportunity generously given to me by Stefania Mazzoni, whom I warmly thank, I decided to organize this workshop. Having in mind a comprehensive approach to the question of death and funerary practices in the Near East in which death is understood as a fundamental "cultural theme", in Jan Assman's words, of that world and all factors involved are eligible for consideration, a number of specialists were invited to illustrate different facets of both mourning and funerary practices in an attempt to create an interdisciplinary venue for communicating data and confronting ideas: more people could of course have been involved but my concern was to keep the number small in order to allow more in-depth treatment of individual topics and real confrontation among scholars. I contacted each of them suggesting an aspect to develop in accordance with their own expertise and background and I want here to thank all of them not only for having accepted my invitation but also for the enthusiasm with which this burden of extra work has been received as well as for the original contribution given.

The paper of Adriano Favole, to whom we owe one of the most recent reappraisal of Hertz's essay,<sup>17</sup> opens up the collection providing an overview of new funerary rituals in contemporary Italy and France as well as insights in the actual perception of Hertz's study in the realm of anthropological studies.

<sup>14</sup> FAVOLE this volume.

<sup>15</sup> PORTER 2002; this volume.

<sup>16</sup> PFÄLZNER 2007; 2012; this volume.

<sup>17</sup> FAVOLE 2007.

Near Eastern textual evidence has been specifically addressed in the contributions of Alfonso Archi and Anne Loehnert, from the perspective of, respectively, Ebla and Early Mesopotamian texts, providing critical and new insights on the question of funerary practices.

Focus on mourning including also the archaeological record is opened up by an excursus to Egypt, where funerary rituals in general and mourning are so abundantly documented, by Andrea Kucharek, and is continued by the presentation of the present author which concentrates on the Near East, specifically on northern Syria, where the evidence is much more meagre, but nonetheless significant, trying to delineate the state of the question by bringing texts and archaeological evidence closer.

Burial evidence, especially, though not exclusively, under the form of secondary interments, and their interpretation, is the topic of a series of presentations given by the archaeologists who have been directly responsible for some of the most remarkable discoveries of funerary evidence in sites of Syria from the point of view of wealth of data and quality of documentation, spanning a time period between the third and the second millennium BC: Edgar Peltenburg on Jerablus Tahtani, Anne Porter on Tell Banat, Glenn Schwartz on Umm el-Marra, Stefano Valentini on Tell Barri and Peter Pfälzner on Qatna.

A bioanthropological perspective on funerary customs is offered in the presentations by Joyce Nassar and by Arkadiusz Sołtysiak. The former provides a most welcome updated review of the funerary evidence at the site of Mari spanning the third-second millennium BC; the latter, dealing with a number of cases from sites in northeastern Syria (Tell Barri, Tell Arbid, Tell Brak), induces caution in drawing conclusions in the interpretation of archaeological funerary attestations even in the presence of accurate osteoarchaeological analyses.

Finally, Jennie Bradbury, who joined the workshop offering a brief presentation of the project “Invisible dead”, concludes the volume, along with Graham Philip, co-investigator, by describing some of the results of the project which ended in 2014. They provide a critical approach to, and further food for thought on, the basic notions on which our interpretations are based and the methodologies used.

Unfortunately there has been no way to incorporate here the lively discussion that took place at the end of all papers. Though acknowledging the importance of mourning in the area, one aspect that has come out of that debate is the actual impossibility at present, in the face of an increase in data on secondary burials in Syria, of identifying a clear pattern which could be explained in terms of a common funerary behaviour such as the one described by Hertz for the Borneo communities, apart from the strong case made by Pfälzner at Qatna, due to the extreme variability of the phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> Difficulties still encountered in the interpretation of both textual and archaeological data were discussed at length in relation to the actual cases presented, addressing for example the concept of death as a transition and the important question of the distinction between pre-interment and post-interment rituals. A main outcome of that confrontation was certainly the recognition of the

<sup>18</sup> On the variability of the treatments of the dead in different societies see REMOTTI 2006,

centrality of the long-standing dialogue of the living with the dead as a fundamental trait in the social and cultural history of the area, as emerges from most of the published papers.

I wish to thank once again Stefania Mazzoni for the opportunity granted to my project; the Department SAGAS for giving me support and providing location for the workshop venues; the OrMe Foundation for covering the expenses of the publication.

It is here necessary to mention Alfonso Archi, Edgar Peltenburg, Anne Porter and Glenn Schwartz who were asked for advice at a very early stage in the planning of the workshop and functioned as scientific committee of the event. My warmest gratitude to Anne Porter in particular who also reviewed the language of some of the non-native English-speakers' papers (Joyce Nassar, Stefano Valentini and myself).

Marina Pucci very kindly helped me very generously in some practicalities of the organization. It is also a pleasure to thank all other colleagues and friends who came to the workshop giving support and taking part into the discussions: among them Samer Abdel-Ghafour (who also kindly announced the event on the social networks and took the photo of the participants on the inside back flap of the volume), Silvia Alaura, Marco Bonechi, Ida Oggiano, Tatiana Pedrazzi, Paola Sconzo, Sebastiano Soldi and Maria Vittoria Tonietti.

I wish also to mention that professor Marten Stol, who could not join us as desired, very generously sent an, at the time, still unpublished contribution on *kispum* to circulate among participants and stimulate discussion.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Marco and Leone as always.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Eddie Peltenburg, whose loss has left our field of studies devoid of one of its most sensible and broadminded exponents.

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<sup>19</sup> NOW STOL 2015.



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Edizioni ETS  
Piazza Carrara, 16-19, I-56126 Pisa  
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Finito di stampare nel mese di febbraio 2017

