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Q&A

How did you become involved in doing research?

I first approached Professor Gerry in the fall of 2011 when she was teaching the survey course; I asked if I could complete an extra credit paper on the cult of the saints. After that, my interest continued to grow. In August 2012, I approached Professor Gerry about creating a more long-term project that would enable me to delve deep into my interests. Together we came up with my Undergraduate Research Award project. However, this is really only one aspect of my larger research goals.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

The research process can be draining! Every article I read leads me to numerous other relevant articles. Sometimes it's difficult for me to stay on track for my specific paper, and not get carried away reading everything I come across. It involves a lot of narrowing down, and even then, I feel like my research is never done. There is always something more to learn.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

My favorite part of research is reading and absorbing so much interesting information. I also love taking notes from readings because I am a visual learner and cannot process things without physically recording them with my hands. I love to write as well, especially when I have so much to talk about.

Remnants of Ritual: A discussion of burial practices and material remains of Pompeian tombs

Jennifer Geller

ABSTRACT

As scholars, it is important to remember our own folly and the cultural biases we may be inadvertently projecting upon our scholarship. Nineteenth century excavators were appalled by piles of charred bones, terracotta and architectural fragments that were found near and in the tombs at Pompeii. It appeared to these excavators that Pompeians neglected their tomb sites and allowed rubbish and trash to pile up; they used this as evidence for a theory that Pompeii was experiencing a societal decline

previous to the tragic destruction in the Vesuvius eruption of 79 AD. In my paper, I explore the tombs as multi-functioning centers of active ritual and retreat. In my opinion, these material remains are likely remnants of these rituals and banquets, and their existence should be expected in such active and often frequented venues. These piles of so-called rubbish should not be taken as evidence of a societal decline; rather they exemplify the dynamic and important role that tombs played in daily life at Pompeii.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, burying the city of Pompeii and its inhabitants under feet of volcanic ash and lava debris, where the city remained until its rediscovery in the eighteenth century. Excavators at Pompeii in the nineteenth century noted the presence of what they assumed to be graffiti and ancient trash in and around the tombs and concluded they were in a state of disrepair long before the catastrophic eruption. The excavators interpreted the condition of the tombs as a sign of neglect, theorizing that the earlier

earthquake of 62 AD had left society at a decline.¹

The piles of butchered and charred animal bones, broken clay pottery, and bricks² should not be interpreted as signs of a society uninterested in or incapable of caring for these sacred spaces. In fact, these tombs were an integral space in daily life, from public holidays to personal contemplation. The presence of these materials is evidence of the tombs functionality as a venue for banquets, offerings, processions, and other rituals. In this essay, I will explore the beliefs and practices of burial in Pompeii after the Roman colonization.

The architecture of the tombs and artifacts found in tomb sites demonstrates their interactive role in society, and helps us understand their function in daily life. From this, I interpret the piles of bones, clay pottery and bricks as remnants of a well-used and often frequented space, rather than evidence of neglect.

II. THE VENUE OF THE TOMB

After the Roman colonization of Pompeii in 80 BCE, the Pompeians rapidly adapted Roman customs, structure, and visual culture, which is visible in the burial practices and tombs of Pompeii. Before the Roman colonization, we have evidence of plain, largely unadorned inhumation burials from the Samnite period.³ However, the Romans practiced cremation and brought their customs to Pompeii; grand tombs were erected along the main roads leading out of the city, oriented to Rome.⁴ These monuments fulfilled a symbolic role, and the cinerary urn containing the ashes would be buried in the ground or placed in a niche on the outside or inside of the tomb. These street tombs are characterized by their diversity in styles,⁵ ranging from elevated aedicule tombs, resembling temple architecture, to altar tombs, to semicircular benches

called *schola* tombs, to tombs with exterior or interior niches for urns and *columellae*, burial stelae.⁶

These changes in burial customs that accompanied Roman colonization were highly visible; the tombs were ostentatious structures, and their placement along main roads meant they were a prominent element of the visual landscape.⁷ The presence of bench tombs demonstrates that these monuments were built as much for the living as for the dead. These tombs fulfilled new roles as the inhabitants of Pompeii adopted Roman practices and beliefs; they were spaces created in accordance with the Roman cult of the dead.⁸

The Roman cult of the dead refers to the belief and practice of honoring departed ancestors. Much of the ritual occurred at the tomb, although *larariums*, small shrines, and *imagines*, waxen death masks,⁹ were found in the atriums of many houses, showing that honoring ancestors was also an important part of domestic life. The tomb was the site of various festive events, including the banquet after the funeral in addition to occasions like anniversaries, birthdays, and publicly celebrated holidays such as *Parentalia*, or All Souls.¹⁰

The architecture of many of the tombs at Pompeii demonstrates that the tombs were conceived to be interactive and functional spaces for the rituals and celebratory events associated with the cult of the dead.¹¹ Alastair Small points out the open air *triclinium*, or dining room, at the tomb of Gnaeus Vibius Saturninus, was a structure that clearly indicates events were being held.¹² Wilhelmina Jashemski also remarks on its similarity to *triclinia* built for outdoor dining in the gardens of the living. She details the evidence for tomb gardens, a commonly-recorded feature in Rome, in Pompeii,¹³ citing enclosures adjacent to the *schola* of Marcus Tullius and the *schola* of Aesquilla Polla as probable tomb

gardens, among others. The presence of tomb gardens demonstrates that the tomb sites were venues for rituals and planned gatherings, but could also be a space for meditations of a spontaneous and personal nature.¹⁴ This suggests how these spaces were conceived as a pleasant spot, *locus amoenus*, to spend leisure time. The bench monuments further this understanding, as these spaces were intended to invite the relaxation of passers-by.

The Street of Tombs outside the Herculaneum Gate demonstrates that tombs were located beside villas and shops,¹⁵ further indicating that the tomb spaces were interactive, functional retreats for both the living and the dead. As Jashemski writes, "Nothing of sadness pervaded a Roman cemetery."¹⁶

III. MATERIAL REMNANTS

As such frequented venues, a wide range of objects would be present at different events. Sometimes prized possessions, a bronze coin for the ferryman, or other grave goods were buried in tombs or urns.¹⁷ During the Roman feast of *Parentalia*, families brought flowers and food to their ancestors' tombs. Wreaths of dried or artificial flora are occasionally found in tombs at Pompeii; the bodies and funeral urn were often decorated with flowers at death. During *Violatio*, there would be a feast for the relatives, who would light lamps and make offerings to the dead.¹⁸ Thomas Dyer records an instance where urns and lamps were both found in carved niches inside the funeral chamber of Navoleia Tyche in Pompeii.¹⁹ Inside the urns were a liquid of water, wine, and oil, evidence of the ceremonial libations poured into the urn through a tube in the burial stelae, or *columella*.²⁰ Some also contained fragments of burnt bones, in the tradition of *os resectum*, where a small part of the body was separated to remain whole, then buried with

the cremated ashes, in order for the purification and end of mourning to be valid.²¹

Dyer also describes a spot, behind two tombs,²² where the excavators found skulls and partially burnt bones of sheep and oxen, as well as an ornamented altar. There were apparently enough skulls and bones to prompt the excavators to refer to the spot as the “sepulcher of animals.” This is clear evidence of ritual offerings and activity occurring at the tomb site. In addition to these offerings, the family would often have banquets on special occasions at the tomb site; while much of the material would be consumed or brought back home, some bones or other material remnants of their feasts likely remained.

The examination of charred remains from burial pits at a Gallo-Roman cemetery at Faulquemont in Moselle, France, may give us insight into material deposits around 1st century Roman graves. The graves were mostly pits, with a few glass and ceramic urns found near or in the central building. Ceramics found at the site date from the end of the 1st century to the beginning of the 3rd century. In addition to various fruit and plant remains, the pits contained large quantities of charcoal, burned animal bones as well as human bones, “burned ceramic shards, textile fragments, white and colored glass fragments (green and blue), nails and metal artifacts, including precious metals such as copper, gold, and alloy partly composed of gold.”²³

Preiss, Matteredne, and Latron analyze the carbonized remains of seeds of fruit found in 70 graves, identifying around 20 plant species varying from cereals, pulses, fruits, bread, and tubers. They classify the plant remains into three categories: “inedible plant parts, leftovers of partly consumed plants, and burned whole fruits.”²⁴ The differences in degree of carbonization, specifically the consistently poorly preserved cereal grains, suggest that cereals and pulses

were exposed longer to the fire, perhaps implying prior cooking.²⁵ Offerings like perfumes, clothes, oil, breads and pastries, grapes and other fruits were often placed on the pyre during the cremation of the deceased. From here, they suggest the remains can be classified into two groups: remains of offerings made at the pyre, and remains of funeral banquets and meals.²⁶

The fact that artifacts, metals, and various personal objects of the deceased were found in pits alongside cremated human and animal bones and plant remains demonstrates that what could have been interpreted in the nineteenth century as “trash” are in fact standard remnants from an active site of funerary rituals and meals. The charred bones from Pompeii are likely either from sacrificial offerings or remnants of funerary banquets.

The clay pottery fragments and bricks could have several explanations. They could be objects related to or owned by the deceased, left as symbolic grave goods. They could be part of ritual offerings or related to the vessels used to house these libations. They could be *fulga*, objects struck by lightning that needed to be ceremonially buried, as Alastair Small explains is inscribed by a small pile of broken tile and building rubble buried shallowly in the earth at the House of the Four Styles.²⁷ They could have unknown magical or ritual significance, related to the two lead curse tablets (*defixiones*) found buried at the Tomb of Epidii. Their inscriptions are not fully understood, but one seems to devote an enemy’s body parts to the underworld.²⁸

There is still much to understand about specific religious and funerary rituals of Pompeii, but my interpretation is that piles of charred bones, clay ceramic ware, and bricks, as found in and around the tombs, can not be taken as evidence of an increasingly neglectful society. While original excavators may have

been surprised at the presence of such rubble near burial sites, the Pompeians did certainly not see it as disrespectful or neglectful. On the contrary, tombs were conceived of as interactive spaces that functioned for the living as much as the dead. As such, material evidence of rituals, offerings, banquets and gatherings should be expected for these frequented spaces.

Allison Emmerson, a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, began excavating at Pompeii in 2009. In 2012, at the Meeting of the Archeological Institute of America, Emmerson presented research called “Repopulating an ‘Abandoned’ Suburb: The Case of Pompeii’s Tombs.” A copy of her presentation is currently unavailable, but its abstract indicates that Emmerson explains the so-called “trash” around the tombs as unremarkable vestiges from an active center of mixed activity.²⁹ Emmerson reports it is a demonstration of the Pompeians’ casual attitude towards trash, discussing this as one element in her larger refutation of the prevailing idea that the tombs were abandoned. I look forward to reading publicly available research from Emmerson.³⁰ My paper does not attempt to comment on Emmerson’s larger refutation; I only wish to detail why these materials found near the tombs should not be used as evidence for a theory of decline or abandonment.

IV. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Taking into account my language limitations for accessing scholarship, it seems this issue would benefit from greater examination. Firstly, if there are available detailed accounts of the original excavation of the tombs, we could determine what has been since removed or otherwise changed. It is possible that there were originally greater quantities found than what is present today. I would

be interested to know if there were any other residual materials found besides bones, clay, and architectural materials, like remains of fruit, cereals, and other foods as seen in the Faulquemont cemetery pits. I would also like to do further research on grave goods and artifacts found inside the urns and tomb chambers.

In terms of our current knowledge of Pompeian burial practices and spaces, more excavation around the tomb sites would likely prove fruitful. Dr. Squarciapino has identified several enclosures around tombs as *busta*, the place where the body was burned and the ashes were buried.³¹ The *bustum* is differentiated from the *ustrinum*, the location of cremation in cases where the ashes were taken to be buried elsewhere. However, Jashemski thinks that the identification of *busta* does not exclude the possible existence of a public *ustrina*, standard by the Flavian period as the more efficient and economic option.³² She thinks a public *ustrina* could possibly be the rectangular enclosure at the apex of the road division outside the Herculaneum Gate,³³ as well as identifying other specific tomb sites that would benefit from further excavation.

Discoveries at related sites may further our understanding. At Ostia, a number of tombs have permanent *triclinia* similar to those found outside the Herculaneum and Nuceria Gates at Pompeii. Ovens and wells have also been found at those sites in Ostia for the commemorative banquets, as well as water for cleaning the tomb.³⁴

According to Jashemski, a discovery at Scafati demonstrates that a walled enclosure might include a garden and an *ustrina*.³⁵ At the Faulquemont cemetery, the

funerary pits contained remains of cremated bodies, organic materials and offerings, but there has been no *bustum* or *ustrinum* found.³⁶

Emma-Jayne Graham devotes much thought on the subject of the monuments of M. Nonius Balbus, the *patronus* of Herculaneum.³⁷ She suggests that the altar³⁸ commonly referred to as his tomb altar is not the burial site of his ashes. The urn buried beneath it, identified by Small as his “funerary urn,”³⁹ contained a human finger bone in a layer of carbon and sand, sandwiched in the middle of compact ashes. The finger bone is accepted as the *os resectum* of Balbus, referring to a documented practice common from the mid-republic to the early imperial period⁴⁰ in which a fragment of the body was separated before cremation, kept by the family during the mourning period of nine days, at the end of which it was involved in a ritual purification with fire and water called *suffitio*.⁴¹ Graham suggests the ashes inside this urn that surround the *os resectum* are the remains of the *suffitio* pyre, which would explain why researchers were unable to find any other bone fragment in the ashes.⁴²

If the altar monument marks the *os resectum* burial, the rest of Balbus’ ashes would have been buried elsewhere and marked by yet another inscribed marble altar. For a direction of research, Graham offers the knowledge that members of the Nonii household were buried in a *columbarium* on the south-east edge of town; I agree with her that it is unlikely to contain the ashes of the prestigious senator, but knowledge of the possible family plot could begin to narrow down an area where his sepulchre might be found.

V. CONCLUSION

There are still many questions left unexcavated at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Hopefully, further exploration will uncover the locations of *busta* and *ustrina*; the actual sites of cremation could provide rich analysis as to the various objects included in the ritual pyres. No actual burial, that is to say an urn containing ashes as opposed to an ornamental urn, has been found yet for any of the *schola* tombs at Pompeii,⁴³ a very curious instance that begs further examination. The phenomenon of *os resectum* at Pompeii and Herculaneum should be studied to determine differences in location patterns, ritual, and visual constructions between *os resectum* burials and primary funerary burials. All of these gaps in our knowledge make it clear that there is much to learn about these ancient burial practices.

It is important as scholars to remember our own folly. Excavators at Pompeii in the nineteenth century likely misinterpreted materials found near the tombs, unable to think beyond their own cultural norms. Charred bones and broken architectural material are not abnormal findings near ancient Roman tomb sites, which were designed as interactive retreats for the living and the dead. It is most likely that these materials are remnants of rituals or banquets. Now, as we study Pompeii, we should be critical of these early conclusions and reinvestigate in order to discern what is truly material fact and what has been projected from nineteenth-century ideals.

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- ³ Forty-four inhumation graves were discovered outside the Porta di Stabia in an enclosed cemetery, placed either in a simple trench or covered with tiles. Cormack, Sarah. "The Tombs at Pompeii." Trans. Array. The World of Pompeii. Routledge, 2007. 585-599. Print.
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- ⁵ Cormack, 585-599.
- ⁶ *Columellae* are the burial stelae characteristic of Pompeian burials; they were an indigenous tradition that was continued and adopted by the colonists. Cormack, 585-599.
- ⁷ Zanker, 76
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- ⁹ Erasmo, 31-43. These wax ancestor masks were worn by younger boys in the family during the funeral processions.
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- ¹⁶ Jashemski, 99
- ¹⁷ Small, 195; Jashemski, 99
- ¹⁸ Jashemski, 100
- ¹⁹ T. Dyer, Pompeii, its history, buildings, and antiquities (London 1868), p. 519-531. Print.
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- ²¹ Small, 196; Graham, Emma-Jayne. "Becoming persons, becoming ancestors. Personhood, memory and the corpse in Roman rituals of social remembrance." Archaeological Dialogues 16.1 (2009): 57-58
- ²² The tombs are near two separate inscriptions, one dedicating land to M. Porcius, and one dedicated to Mamia, daughter of Porcius, but it does not seem overtly evident which tomb matches which inscription. Dye, 519-531
- ²³ Preiss, Sidonie, Veronique Matteredne, and Frederic Latron. "An approach to funerary rituals in the Roman provinces: Plant remains from a Gallo-Roman cemetery at Faulquemont (Moselle, France)." Vegetation History and Archaeobotany. 14 (2005): 365. Print.
- ²⁴ Preiss, Matteredne, Latron 369
- ²⁵ Preiss, Matteredne, Latron 368
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- ²⁷ Small, 196
- ²⁸ Small, 196
- ²⁹ Emmerson, Allison. "Repopulating an 'Abandoned' Suburb: The Case of Pompeii's Tombs." (2012): n. page. Academia. edu. Web. 24 May 2013. <http://www.academia.edu/1726617/Repopulating_an_Abandoned_Suburb_The_Case_of_Pompeii's_Tombs>.
- ³⁰ Emmerson's 2011 Preliminary report on the excavations also describes a very interesting structure found by the Porta Stabia that dates from early to mid-3rd century BCE, long before the Roman colonization. She identifies the small (1.40m x 2.24m) structure as a sacred zone due to a square shelf of large stones in the eastern portion, which she suggests may be identified as an altar, as well as the objects found: a large number of votive cups, supports used for separating vessels in a kiln, and fragments of tiles and pottery. She also writes that the structure collapsed most likely due to unintentional burning, after which the worshippers dug a pit into the collapsed rubble to deposit a burnt offering. Here, along with charcoal and ash, Emmerson found carbonized foodstuffs such as bones of fowl and small mammals, various nuts, and small round cakes. (Ellis, Steven J.R., Allison L.C. Emmerson, Amanda K. Pavlick, Kevin Dicus, and Gina Tibbott. "The 2011 Field Season at I.1.1-10, Pompeii: Preliminary report on the excavations." Journal of Fasti Online. (2011): n. page. Print. <http://www.academia.edu/2376984/The_2011_Field_Season_at_I.1.1-10_Pompeii_Preliminary_report_on_the_excavations>.) ; see also Reilly.
- ³¹ Jashemski, 103; M.F. Squarciapino, I. Gismondi, G. Barbieri, H. Bloch, and R. Calza, "Scavi di Ostia." Le Necropoli. 3:1 (1958): 113. Print.
- ³² Jashemski, 104; Meiggs, 459
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- ³⁴ Jashemski, 100; R. Meiggs, Roma Ostia (Oxford 1960), 461.
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- ³⁶ Piess, Matteredne, Latron
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- ³⁸ What is commonly thought to be his burial site, the altar adjacent to the Suburban Baths just outside the city gate. Graham, 56-60.
- ³⁹ Small, 196
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- ⁴³ Jashemski, 103