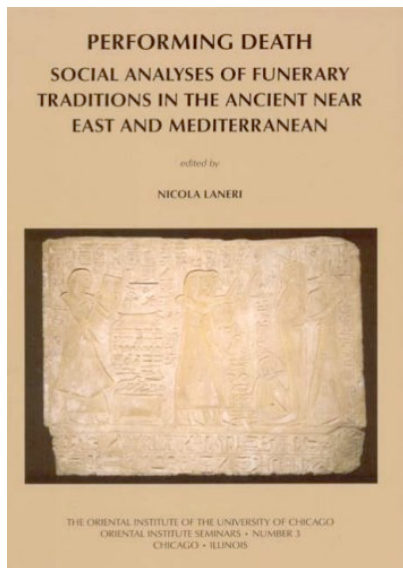


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Laneri, Nicola, ed.

Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean

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The volume under review is a collection of papers that deal with cultural and social aspects of the archaeological and historical evidence of mortuary customs in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean, from late proto-historic periods until the Roman Empire. The volume is the result of a research seminar conducted at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in 2006, with papers by various scholars who participated in the seminar. While clearly aiming to present as wide as possible a survey of relevant examples of the social setting for the archaeological evidence of funerary customs in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean, clearly, due to the extensive time covered (late prehistory through Roman period) and expansive geographic area (from Spain in the west to Sumer in the east), only a sampling of relevant issues and topics are covered. Nevertheless, as will be reviewed below, the published papers offer what is by and large a sophisticated and enlightening view of current archaeological and historical perspectives on the role of burial and funerary traditions in ancient societies. If one adds to this volume various other collections and/or monographs that have dealt with the issue of the archaeology of burial in recent years (e.g., S. Campbell and A. Green, *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East* [Oxford: Oxbow, 1995]; M. Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* [College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999]; I. J. Thorpe, *The Archaeology of Death* [London: Routledge, 2001]; M. Chesson, ed., *Social Memory, Identity and Death: Anthropological Perspectives on Mortuary Rituals* [Arlington:

American Anthropological Association, 2001]), robust research agendas and lively discussions of ancient burial are apparent. As an archaeologist interested in the second and first millennium B.C.E., and for many of the readers of the *Review of Biblical Literature*, the lack of studies dealing with societies in the eastern Mediterranean dating from the early second millennium until the Roman period is a bit disappointing. While clearly there are many issues in these periods that could have easily been included in this volume, they are dealt in other contexts, and with the perspectives raised in this volume in mind, clearly much additional research and interesting directions are yet open for exploration. Following, I will briefly survey the chapters in the volumes.

In the first chapter (“An Archaeology of Funerary Rituals,” 1–13), the editor, N. Laneri, sets the stage for the discussions that follow. Laneri attempts to provide the theoretical background for modern discussions of funerary rituals in archaeological research, stressing the change that occurred in the 1970s, when more and more scholars started studying the social underpinnings of ancient burials.

E. F. Morris (“Sacrifice for the State: First Dynasty Royal Funerals and the Rites at Macramallah’s Rectangle” 15–37) discusses the evidence for royal funerary rituals in First Dynasty Egypt and its social implications. In particular, she discusses the meaning and implications of the many humans who were sacrificed in these early royal burials and the social differentiation that can be seen among the sacrificed individuals.

G. M. Schwartz (“Status, Ideology, and Memory in Third-Millennium Syria: ‘Royal’ Tombs at Umm el-Marra,” 39–68) discusses the very impressive evidence of elite tombs at the site of EB Umm el-Marra in Syria and attempts to explain the role that these tombs played both during the EB and during the following MB period. Stressing both the continued veneration and, at times, desecration of the tombs, Schwartz places the tombs within the context of the emerging polities of third-millennium Syria.

The only chapter that deals with archaeological evidence from the western Mediterranean is by R. Chapman (“Mortuary Rituals, Social Relations, and Identity in Southeast Spain the Late Third to Early Second Millennia B.C.,” 69–79) who discusses the changes seen in the mortuary customs in southeastern Spain with the appearance of the “Agraric” culture in the late third millennium. From previously popular inhumations in collective megalithic tombs located outside of settlements, with the appearance of the Agraric culture, there is a shift to various burials within settlements and a nonegalitarian division of wealth in the tombs. Chapman suggests that this is to be seen as evidence of the appearance of a new system of regional political authority at the time.

In chapter 5, M. Cultraro (“Combined Efforts Till Death: Funerary Ritual and Social Statements in the Aegean Early Bronze Age,” 81–108) very nicely ties together the evidence for energy investment that is seen during the Early Helladic period in the Aegean, along with other archaeological evidence for the emergent of rising levels of sociopolitical differentiation during this period, which includes fortifications, the wide appearance of prestige goods, and so forth.

M. S. Chesson (“Remembering and Forgetting in Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices on the Southeastern Dead Sea Plain, Jordan,” 109–39) once again discusses the archaeological evidence for mortuary customs at the sites on the southeastern side of the Dead Sea (in particular, Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira). Using a “practice theory” perspective, Chesson presents an almost incomprehensible discussion on the types of burials seen and the roles that they supposedly fulfilled in a society’s memories of the dead and their reflection on this society’s social worldview. While being very sophisticated from the perspective of the jargon of modern social science, having read the paper several times, the limited cranial capacity of this reviewer could but conclude that the paper was a bit fuzzy and perhaps even nebulous, particularly when trying to turn this into real evidence and real implications for archaeological research. Postmodern narratives are very nice—but at times one can but wonder whether there is any substance behind them.

A. Naso (“Etruscan Style of Dying: Funerary Architecture, Tomb Groups, and Social Range at Caere and Its Hinterland during the Seventh-Sixth Centuries B.C.,” 141–62) discusses the changes in Etruscan burial practices at the site of Caere during the late sixth and early seventh centuries and shows how these changes reflect the changes from a rural to urban society at this time.

Chapter 8, by A. T. Smith (“The Politics of Loss: Comments on a Powerful Death,” 163–66), is an overview of some of the papers presented to this point with some comments.

D. Katz (“Sumerian Funerary Rituals in Context,” 167–88) provides a beautiful reconstruction of several Sumerian funerary rituals, based on the epigraphic evidence from Sumer. She notes the different types of rituals performed for various social levels and their importance for the relevant “players.”

In “Death and Dismemberment in Mesopotamia: Discorporation between the Body and Body Politic” (189–208), S. Richardson presents a fascinating argument that in ancient Mesopotamian cultures the actual burial of the dead was less important. More important was the role that the dead had in “protecting” the living, whether through ritual protection of the living by the dead or through the perpetuation of the names of the dead through the living. The actual, physical burial, in his opinion, was not of cardinal importance.

S. Pollock (“Death of a Household,” 209–22) attempts to explain and understand the very difficult to comprehend evidence of the wholesale killing in the Royal cemetery at Ur. Not only the royal personages were buried; along with them were killed and interred an entire entourage. Pollock tries to explain this as a method by which society attempted to assert that neither the property nor the offices of the royal figures were to be inherited. From an ideological point of view, which in practice was probably not actually followed, this was an attempt to state that too much wealth and differentiation was not accepted (even if, *de facto*, it was!).

I. Rutherford (“Achilles and the Sallis Wastais Ritual: Performing Death in Greece and Anatolia,” 223–36) very nicely compares Hittite funerary rituals and the funerary ritual of Achilles as described by Homer. He argues, quite convincingly, for a strong influence from the Hittite rituals on the Greek, in particular, that relating to the use of cremation.

John Pollini (“Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition’s Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture,” 237–85) is the only venture in this book into what can be seen as a “classical archaeology” perspective on mortuary rituals in Roman culture. In what is the longest contribution in the volume, Pollini discussed the very unique and quite fascinating custom of the Roman elites of making a wax mask for the deceased before his death, which, after being given to the family, was passed down to posterity. In addition to discussing the phenomenon in itself, Pollini demonstrates the influence that this had on the realistic portraits seen in other Roman artistic media.

In chapters 14 (J. Robb, “Burial Treatment as Transformations of Bodily Ideology,” 287–97) and 15 (J. A. Brown, “Mortuary Practices for the Third Millennium: 1966–2006”) are overviews of the role of burial in society in general and in archaeological research. Of particular importance is Brown’s overview of the analysis of mortuary remains in archaeological research, particularly in light of the fact that his research in the 1970s was one of the main engines behind the deep change in the understanding of the significance of burials and their social implications.

The final chapter (“Concluding Discussion,” 309–17) is the transcripts of the discussions that were held during the conference relating to the various papers.

All told, this volume contains a very interesting and stimulating collection of papers that deal with death, burial, and mortuary customs in the ancient Mediterranean. While not covering all periods, cultures, and relevant evidence, the various perspectives, stimulating discussions, and “cutting-edge” approaches will undoubtedly serve as an important

starting point for further research on the social dimensions of mortuary customs in ancient societies in general.