ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH

- The study of tombs, burials and funerary rituals as they can be detected in archaeological remains.
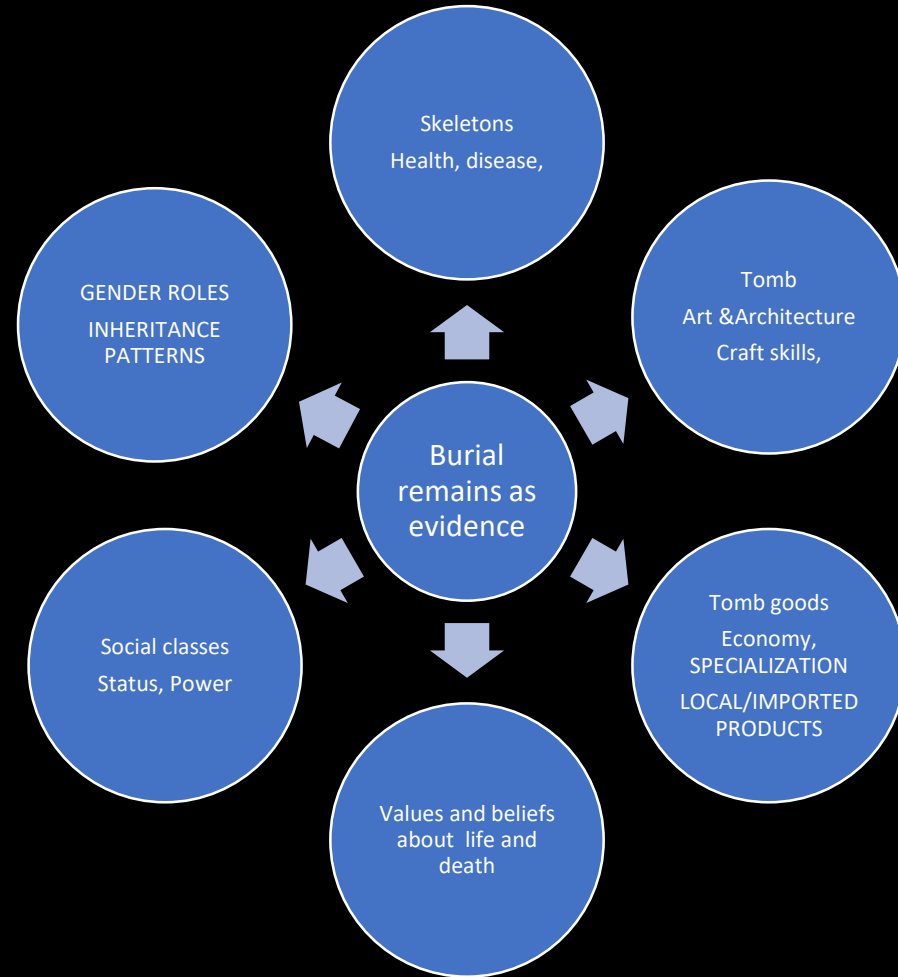
The Tomb, considered as both a structure (type, decorations, etc..) and its content (bones, artifacts, etc.), must be seen as the last surviving evidence of ancient RITUALS.

Dealing with the Dead

- **Burial**: general term for disposal of human remains
- **Tomb**: remains placed in some type of structure. The word *tomb* derives from ancient Greek and was first employed by Homer to describe a tumulus or mound raised over a body
- **Inhumation**: grave burial; disposed of intact
  - Extended vs. Flexed; Coffin, Shroud
- **Cremation**: remains burned, then disposed of
  - Loose or Contained, grave or scattered
- **Bundle**: remains dismembered, defleshed, wrapped
  - May represent secondary treatment
- **Ossuary**: mass burial
  - numerous cremated or dismembered remains buried together
- **Cemetery**: collection of individual burials of any type
- **Exposure**: remains left in open (e.g. "sky-burial")
- **Grave Offerings**: any artifacts or other objects intentionally buried with human remains ("burial furniture", "grave goods", etc.)

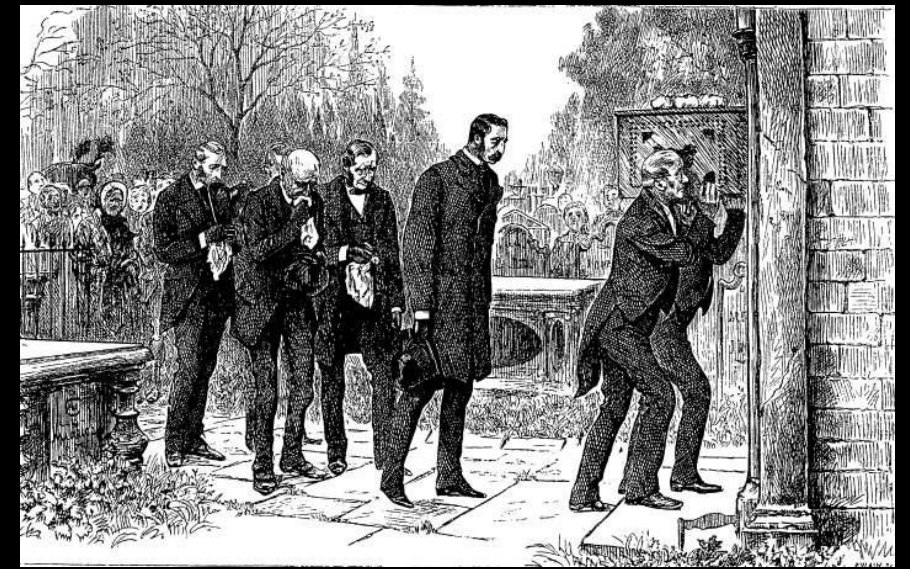# WHY ARE BURIAL REMAINS IMPORTANT AS EVIDENCE?

PROBLEMS OF THE EVIDENCE

Grave goods

PURPOSE
Were they meant as a votive offering to the gods or were they needed in the afterlife?

Were the goods specific funerary ware or were they in general circulation.?

Can the burial under study be taken as representative of the population as a whole

INTERPRETATION
Do the grave goods reflect the deceased life or merely tributes to the deceased from the attending mourners?

OWNERSHIP
Did they belong to the deceased or to the mourners.?

Death is a constant in human life throughout the centuries. As a moment of crisis and transformation for a society, the attitude towards death are key elements to understand the world-view of a certain culture.

A burial is part of a funeral, and a funeral is part of set of practices or RITUALS by which the men deal with death.

How can we understand a ritual?
4 types of sources

Source	Availability regarding ancient funerals
Direct Observation	Impossible
Written Sources	Limited to specific places and times (usually classical Athens or Late Republican/Imperial Rome)
Artistic representations	Rare and Problematic
Material remains	Often available, but difficult to intepret

Eastern Hellenistic «Totenmahl»

Difficulties in intepreting artistic representations of rituals

- Context?
- Use?
- Meaning?
- Is it really a ritual which is represented?

Wall painting from Ruvo di Puglia

Tomb

- It is the cultural setting of death, through which a society deal with the death transforming the «crisis» of death into «normalcy» by a series of rituals.

- It may be a «house of the dead», although it is not certain if a culture believes it to be so (One must be aware of modern pre-conceptions, like the word «necropolis» = «city of the dead»).

- It is certainly a place to deal with a «passage», whose main actors are the Living rather than the dead. It is the Living which bury the dead and it is the living who perform rituals on the tomb.

- The tomb is sometimes called a place of «auto-representation» but this is not refered to the dead in itself, rather to a society or, more properly for the image of the deceased, as seen by the living.

Chronological Sequence which IN THEORY should be recordable in the remains of an ancient burial.

1 – What happened BEFORE THE DEATH (study of human remains, bones), not just abiut death causes but also about lifestyle.

2 – What happaned FROM DEATH TO BURIAL (Bones and artefact assemblages speak about the ideology, body-treatement, ceremonies to seprarate the living from the dead, etc..)

3 – What happened AFTER THE BURIAL (traces of post-burial activities/rituals, etc.)

But how much of this can really be seen in a tomb?

RITUALS: PROBLEMS of Conservation

Example: the funeral of the «Rus» (Eastern Viking) King on the Volga River, as told by the arab writer Ibn Fadlan.

- SACRIFICE OF SLAVES. Young slaves serving the families are asked to offer themselves in sacrifice.

- FIRST BURIAL, RE-COLLECTION OF THE BONES, DRESSING. Ten days after the death the king was dreses with refined trousers, boots, silk kaftan with golden buttons, silken headress and sable furs.

- ARTEFACT ASSEMBLAGES; ANIMAL SACRIFIES; PYRE/SHIP. The body was now put on cushions abouve a ship, surrounded by alcool, fruits, armoatic herbs, bread, meat and onions. There were also his weapons and animals to be sacrificed.

- THE THRALL-WOMAN RITUAL. A slave girl volunteers to be offered, all the nobles have sexual intercourses with her. At the end she is fed and drunk, intoxicated by both alcool and other substances. She sings in honour of her dead king, saying farewell to her companions. She then climbs on the pyre/ship nearby her dead king. She is then killed.

- PYRE/SHIP. A relative to the King starts the fire. All other people throw a burning branch in the fire.

- SECOND BURIAL: THE MOUND. After thye fire extiguishes the Vikings throw earth on the remains, in order to create a mound.

- According to IbnFalan about 400 human beings were sacrificed wih the king.

OF SUCH AN ELABORATE RITUALS VERY FEW REMAINS SURVIVE, COMPARED TO THE ELABORATION OF THE PRACTICES.
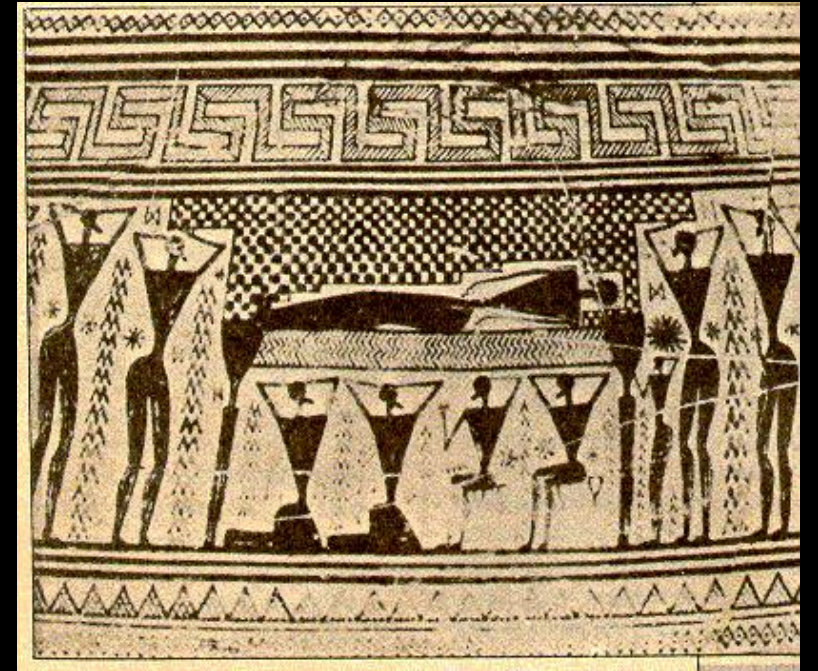
Greek funeral according to the sources

PREPARATION OF THE BODY. The body is washed, annointed with oil and wrapped into a shroud. The deceased was later carried atop a stretcher or bier.

PRÒTHESIS (EXPOSITION). Relatives, singers and friends stand nearby the bier. The women sing the dirge or funerary lamentation, alternating singing and weeping. All the those who are in the house weep and cry. A water-filled vase is out of the house for purification rituals (to purify both the guests and the house). The Pròthesis period may vary, especially in the case of a long expositions (e.g. for kings or nobles).

EKPHORÀ. The body is brought from the house to the tomb with a long procession through the settlement.

BURIALS. Cremation or inhumation. Food offerings (fruits, eggs, small animals) and libations. The funerary assemblage is composed by objects which were dear to the deceased, as well as by objcets who may have ritual/religious/superstitious/magical meanings (nails, pomegranates, rattles, Astragaloi, etc.), vases hosting parfumes, weeping figurines, coins to be used for Charon.

PERIDEIPNON. After the return to the house a small banquet is held (perideipnon) and ritual purifications are performed. Other ceremonies are held for a few days after the burial and each year in the anniversary of the burial date, when wreathsn food and libations re offered on the tomb.
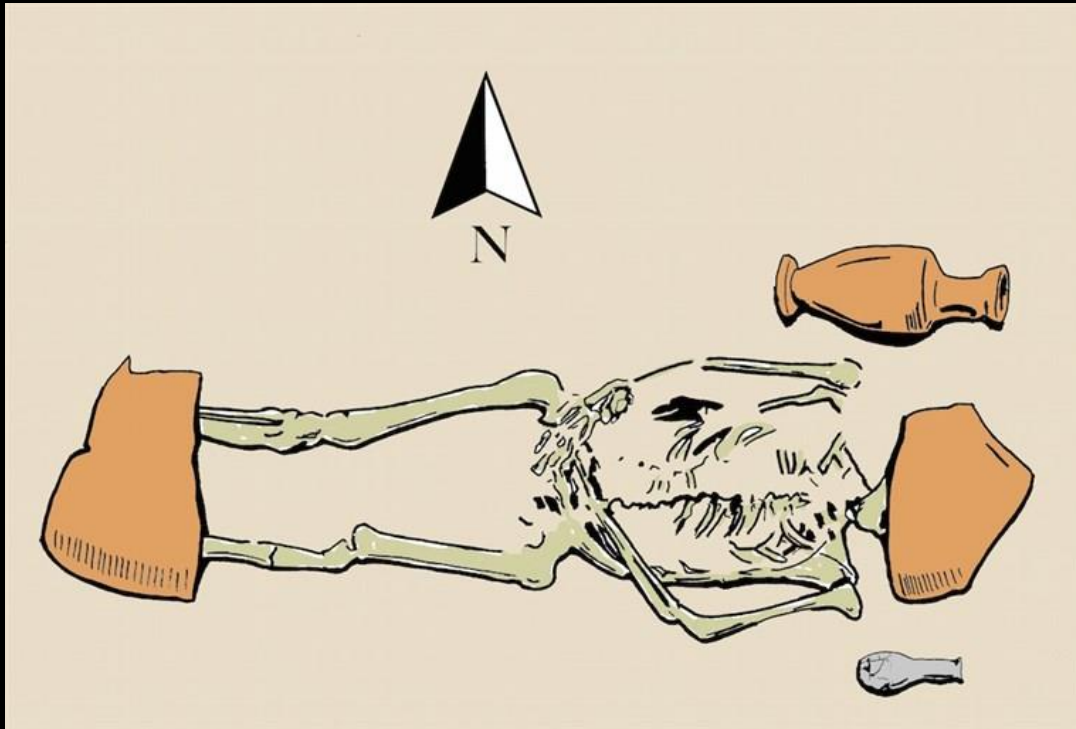
What remains?

Not so much and what is there is difficult to intepret

WHAT IS CERTAIN?

The only certainty is that the archaeological record was shaped by a specific ritual, performed according to a specific ideology.

RITUALS ARE MADE OF SYMBOLS.
AND A SYMBOL IS A BEARER OF
MEANINGS.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THEM?
- Cultural differences = Difficulty to apply our preconcepts.
- MOST COMMON ILLUSION: To directly apply the data from the sources to the context.

SOLUTION? Contextual analysis and acceptance of the modern scholar's limits in intepretation.
Burials are created according to speficic religious beliefs, but to understand them must not be given for granted. Nevertheless, the presence of an ideological/religious side acting tin the creation of the remains must be taken into account, even if it cannot be understood.

Broken Handle

Cup without a handle

Hertz saw three relationships in death-rituals:
- The Living/Mourners AND the Corpse/Burial
- The Living/Mourners AND the Soul of the Deceased
- The Corpse/Burial AND the Soul of the Deceased

Hertz R. (1960) *Death and the right hand.* Aberdeen.

Due to the wide range of iconographic and literary evidence, past scholars of the Classical World have been particularly interested in the identification of the last two relationships. Attention has mainly focused on finding afterlife belief systems and evidence for one-dimensional interpretation of funerary symbolism. In other words, too often Classicists have searched for interpretations like "if I have found an egg I have a sign of rebirth" without any consideration of the system of relationships in which the symbol is found, but simply on the basis of a text, produced in a different site, in a different time-period.

Given our limit in understanding ancient beliefs just from tombs, it is clear that a more fruitful approach is to investigate the first of Hertz's relationships (the living/mourners and the burial): the dead are buried by the living and what we see in burials is something left by them. This relationship can be analysed in multiple ways, for example from the point of view of pollution/purity and the manners in which a burial can or cannot be approached. Connected to this issue (and usually more investigated by archaeologists) is the social value of the relationship, the link "living-burial-other living," in other words the ways in which people want their dead to appear to the eyes of other people.

If religion and ideology are difficult to grasp, HOW MUCH CAN WE CONSIDER THE TOMBS AS GOOD SOURCES FOR ANALYSING THE ANCIENT SOCIETIES?.

- Burials show the way in which the mourning LIVING wanted the deceased to appear.
- Therefore the burials represent the society only through the FILTER of ideal models.

HOWEVER, there are also OTHER FILTERS which must be taken into account when studying tombs

In a study of the relationship between mortuary remains and social relations Pader used the classical anthropological division between *Social Structure* and *Social Organization*.

Social organization: empirical division of roles and relationships in everyday life

Social Structure: the ideal model of placing the individuals in life.

EXAMPLE. The strange position of Imperial *liberti* in Rome during the first two centuries AD: ideally they were ex-slaves but in reality they had a lot of power.

According to Giddens social structure is neither something static nor an extra-human experience that the society passively accepts; it is merely a mental template, the group of assumptions of what we should do and how we would act. It is not something that forces our behaviour and is transmitted by people to other people and, during the years, through everyday activities and social rituals, the little input that each one puts in the structure, although minimal, tends to change the structure gradually: over the years completely different ways of thought appear.

Returning to Imperial Rome one sees how everyday life changed an old social structure (in which slaves and *liberti* were people of a lesser rank) into a new structure (in which Imperial *liberti* had a power unknown to many "normal" citizens).

Funerals reflect the social structure but, at the same time, they cooperate with other rituals in changing it because they are moments in which identities and roles are negotiated and re-evaluated.

For example often funerals provide "ideal opportunities to make political dominance seem legitimate and natural through ancestral association," therefore funerals are not passive reflections of society but they are active elements in the formulation and evolution of social structure.

COMPETITION IN FUNERARY OSTENTATION

- The funeral is an IMPORTANT SOCIAL MOMENT for the ostentation of specific rletuinship inside a comunity.
- Tombs are NOT just passive reflections of a social structure but also ACTIVE elements in the negotiation of social relationships.
- These considerations are true for both actual burials (which represent singular moments of deposition) and for funerary moments (mounds, stelai, rock-cut tombs, etc..) which are designed taking into consideration the idea of being seen by passerbyes for the eternity.

EXAMPLE OF FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE AS MEANS OF ESTABLISHING SOCIAL ROLES

"Tombs may function as symbols of power, but one should not isolate them completely from a more personal world of emotion and sentiment" Valerie Hope

Before the Roman colony was established, Pompeians buried their dead in simple stone or brick cists (caskets or containers), but after 80 BC cremation became the norm and wealthier Pompeians started to build more monumental tombs, sometimes including an upper storey that featured statues of the deceased between columns. One particularly elaborate tomb built for a woman named Naevoleia Tyche boasts relief sculptures showing the good works performed by her husband, a freedman, as well as a ship representing trade, the source of her wealth. Another tomb features a wall-painting showing the family silver

POMPEII, THE NECROPLIS AT THE NUCERIAN GATE

- The Tomb of Naevoleia Tyche, Pompeii has a portico giving access to an upper mortuary chapel, which contained, besides the cinerary urns, statues of deities and portraits or busts of the deceased members of the family ; while surmounting the tomb is the sarcophagus with sculptured relief and inscription tablet. The walls have coloured reliefs in stucco, as in the Tomb of the Pancratii on the Via Latina, Rome. There was often a subterranean chamber for the sarcophagi and niches in the walls for cinerary urns

Tomb inscriptions
ILS 6373. Naevoleia L.l. Tyche for herself and C. Munatius Faustus, Augustalis and paganus [countryman?], for whom the city council by public consent decreed a bisellium [honorific seat] on account of her/his merits. Naevoleia Tyche made this monument during her lifetime for her own freedmen and freedwomen and those of C. Munatius Faustus.

Front of the tomb of Naevoleia Tyche, with the inscription. The scene below the epitaph presumably represents the family's business activities
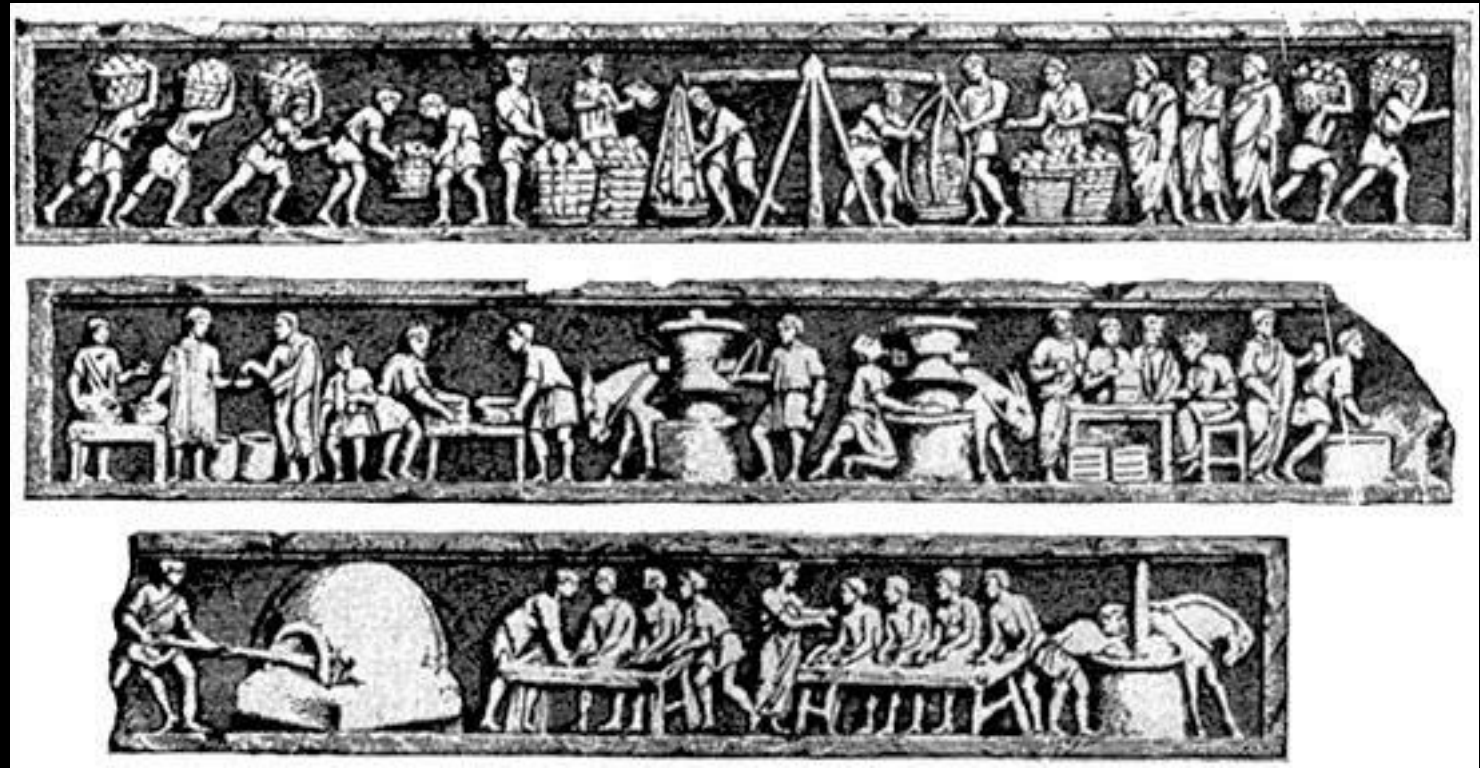
The figure above is probably a funerary mask, something which would normally be associated with aristocrats rather than ex-slaves like these.

Another scene from the tomb. It probably represents the family's involvement in overseas trade,

although some people have claimed that it symbolizes the voyage to the after-life.

ROME, tomb of Eurysaces, the bread-maker

Multiple, interrelated meanings can coexist and be seen in the same material remains.

One can see tombs as:

1) systems of functional interrelationships (e.g. "displayers of status"),

2) structured contents of ideas and symbols (e.g. ideal structures like ethnicity, adulthood, sentiment, etc. which underlie the symbols),

3) just as tombs appeared to the actors who built and physically experienced them.

4) There is also the "meaning for archaeologists" since it is obvious that much interpretation depends on the context of the scholar

Given this complexity it is obviously ingenuous to think that a "social" interpretation of burials can include all the possible meanings present in tombs.

EXAMPLE: In the study of Greek burials between the Dark Ages and Archaic times Morris' views have been particularly focused on the "social side" while Sourvinou-Inwood has stressed the importance of detecting changes in the attitudes toward death.

SOCIAL SIDE vs EMOTIONAL/IDEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION?

According to Hope this "polarization in modern thinking between emotions and individuals on the one hand and society and social structure in the other" should be not un-bridgeable, and certainly was not so in antiquity.

Consequently the ancient response to death must be taken in consideration, even if one may never know the details of that response.

NEW ARCHAEOLOGY and the Archaeology of Death

In the 1960s appeared a new wave of scholars: the New Archaeologists or "Processualists".
They were interested in quantification of data, usually with a materialistic approach to interpretation in which anything can be measured.
In their interpretations they were more interested in the functions of the objects, rather than in their meanings.

In order to bring order to the "bits and pieces" approaches to the archaeological record (e.g. the one used by old-style Classicists) they attempted a more SCIENTIFIC APPROACH:
1) formulated hypotheses
2) Checked the hypotheses with ethnological parallels, trying to find regularities and generalisations among different cultures in different times.
3) Created models or rules to be applied/checked elsewhere

QUANTIFICATION was also important for New Archaeologists: development of Statistics applied to Archaeology

New Archaeological Example: BINFORD AND THE "Mortuary Variability"

Social Persona: a composite of the social identities, the roles, that the dead person maintained in life and that, after his death, are recognized as appropriate for consideration by the living who are doing the burial and are given symbolic recognition in the ritual of the burial/funeral.

Binford's Theory: a high degree of isomorphism between the complexity of status-system in a society and the complexity of mortuary ceremonialism.

PROBLEM: Binford went straight from burial to social structure without any reference to that filter of reality which is the ritual.

Ritual could show a rank that the defunct never had in life but that was implied in the social structure; furthermore, what is shown in tombs depends on which attitudes a society has to death.

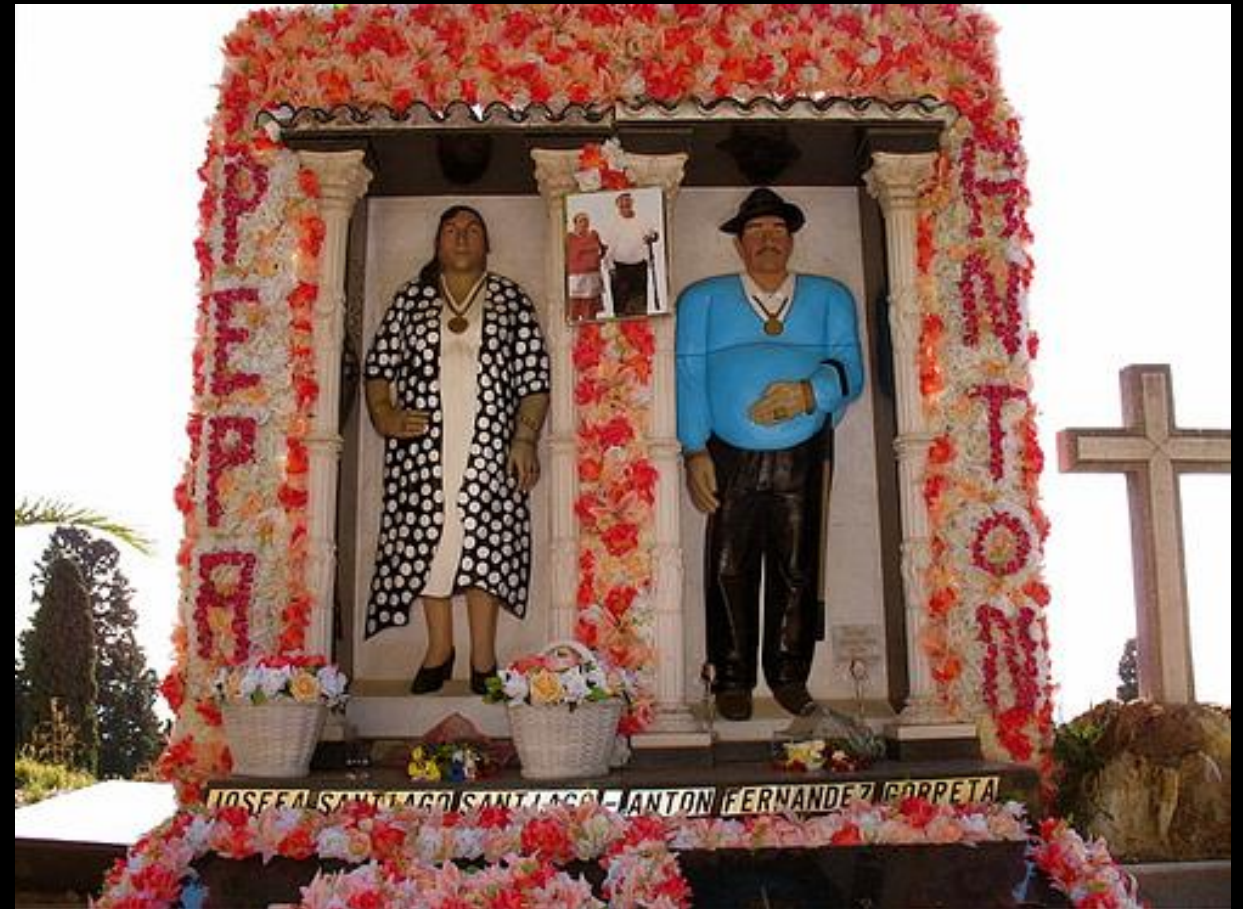# New Archaeological Example: TAINTER AND THE "ENERGY EXPENDITURE"

He says that a "higher social rank of the deceased will correspond to greater amounts of corporate involvement and activity disruption, and this should result in the expenditure of greater amounts of energy in the internment ritual."

Although the link between rank and energy expenditure could seem valid, the theory received extensive criticism since its assumptions CANNOT BE TAKEN AS A UNIVERSAL LAW.

An obvious one is that Tainter concentrated too much on the vertical dimensions (status), not evaluating the possibility that horizontal differentiations in a society (clans, ethnics, burying clubs, etc.) could be responsible for differences in energy expenditure.

For example it is noteworthy that in many places gypsies are the ones who spend the most on funerary monuments despite their position in the lower levels of society.

One must remember that for a group it is more important to maintain a <u>distinction</u> from others than to spend as much money is possible.

EXAMPLE 1. Display competition could make two groups of similar status appear in different ways because one of the groups (the one that built the sepulchre later) has spent more resources on tombs in order to distinguish itself.

EXAMPLE 2 the elite, in order to distinguish itself, could expend energy in fields other than the funerary one.
For example it has been often noticed that in 8th-century BC Greece there was a decline of grave goods that roughly corresponds with an increase of dedications in sanctuaries, demonstrating in this way how elites changed their strategies of display and energy expenditure Cannon 1989. See below for the discussion of the theory.
.

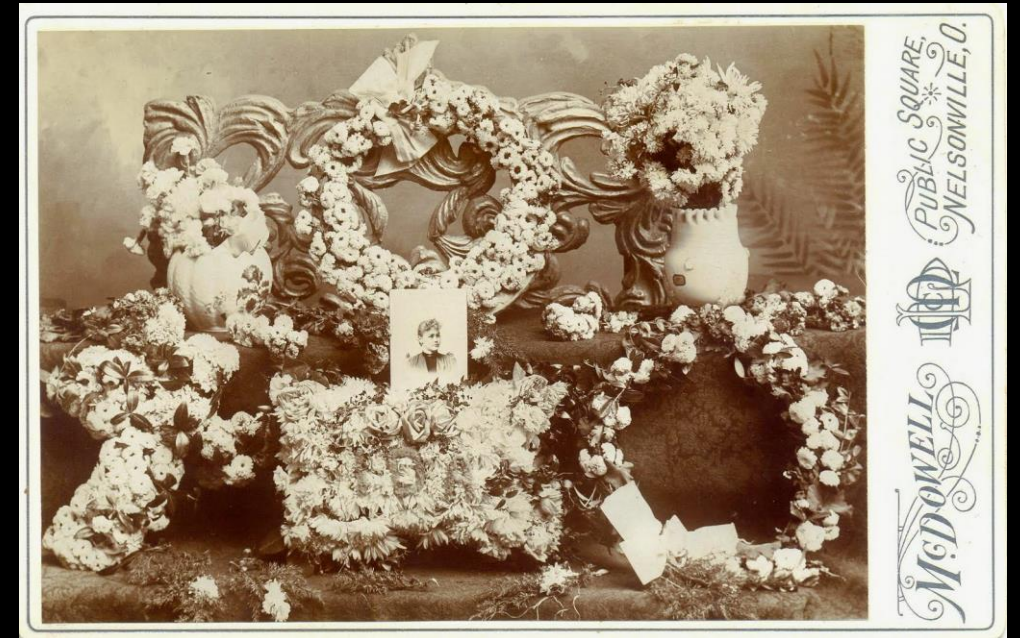Mantiklos' Apollo: an example of 8th century dedication in a sanctuary

To explore the concept of DISTINCTION, one can use the "MODEL OF CANNON".

For interpreting changes Cannon suggests a model in which competitive display could cause both an augmentation of elaboration or a simplification. Checking the model in three societies (Iroquois, Victorian England and Classical Athens) Cannon always found three phases:

1) Because to be distinguished is in its interest, the elite uses forms of funerary display that are more elaborate than the normal;

2) Because it is in the interest of the lower classes to hide their low status, they try to imitate the more complicated funerary forms;

3) Competition creates a saturation of the tendency when the elaboration ceases to have its impact on the viewers (when there is "too much" elaboration). The elites still need to be distinguished and so they come back to more restrained forms of display. The old, elaborated forms are then, usually, classified as "bad taste."

This cycle has received various criticisms; for example Bartell was sceptical about the applicability of such theory to the archaeological record because many signs of such display (e.g. in the funerals) are today lost.

However, the cycle could still provide inspiration for thought.

POST-PROCESSUALISM and the Archaeology of Death

With time, New Archaeology/Processualism was accused of being mechanistic, reductionist and de-humanising.

The critics, the Post-processualists, can hardly be defined as a school; as a part of the "post-modern" culture their most important common characteristic seems to be their particularly critical attitude; nevertheless Hodder indicates three particularly important points:

1) "material culture is meaningfully constituted" (it plays an active role in shaping social relationships and it is not a passive reflection of society);

2) "agency needs to be part of theories of material culture and social change" (the role of individual and individual choices must be taken into consideration, even if single individuals cannot be identified);

3) "despite the independent existence of archaeology, its closest ties are with history" (historical contexts are important and archaeology must consider them).

Post-Processualists emphasize the importance of interpreting the symbols inside the cultures that created them.
They are particularly interested in the actors that performed the rituals: in this sense an important factor is the *agency* (the intentions behind the actions).

New Archaeologists were wrong to treat burials as simple mirrors of societies, nor did they consider the ritual filters through which society is reflected in burials. Hodder, in particular, emphasized the potential of ideology in burials for "distorting, obscuring, hiding or inverting particular forms of social relationships."

New Archaeologists forgot the importance of *IDEOLOGY* and the *MINDS* that form the rituals and that are reflected in the social practice. Because the investigation of such minds is situated in the consideration of particular cultural contexts, Post-Processualists rejected New Archaeology's generalizations, substituting them with contextual analyses.

Regarding burials there are also further criticisms of New Archaeology:
- the insufficient consideration of other aspects of the social structure other than the vertical one
- the too simplistic application of ethnographic parallels to archaeology,
- the formulation of too strict laws and the insufficient linkage with other aspects of ancient society.

Example of AGENCY, working BEYOND the social structure
LOVE AND AFFECTION

It is also important to understand that when anaylising human remains we do not see just reflections of social practices but also signs of love and affection which may result in otherwise unexplicable behaviours.

However, even Post-Processualism has its problems

1) It has also been criticised for the risk of too much subjectivism in interpreting data.

2) It has been noticed that "the emphasis on philosophy and sociology sometimes makes it seem that a detailed study of the actual archaeology has become almost irrelevant" and that while broad perspectives are attempted the "detailed evidence…may become pushed to one side."

New Archaeology and Post-Processualism are two opposite tendencies:

New Archaeology: is a *theoretical* mode of understanding history (generalizations between various cultural systems)
Post-Processualism is a *configurational* mode (a number of things could be comprehended as elements of a complex of relationships).

However, without being dogmatically critical of one or other tendency, one could try to gain some profit from both considering their limitations but applying them in combination.

Although Post-Processualism has warned us that the social complexities shown by burial data can be misleading, there is still a need to "study the physical data itself to determine what type of society is represented."

Furthermore, even if some ethnographical parallels demonstrate that the evidence could be misleading, this does not mean that we cannot attempt analyses and therefore it is still useful to trace the patterns shown by the burials and then check them within their wider archaeological contexts.

Example of a combination of the two approaches: the SAXE/GOLDSTEIN HYPOTHESIS.

ARTHUR SAXE (1970, a New Archaeologist) formulated eight hypotheses and checked them with cross-cultural comparisons in order to evaluate general rules regarding the cemeteries of multiple societies.

Hypothesis n.8 was the most influential one.
It states that corporate groups maintain formal disposal areas for the dead in order to legitimize through descent from ancestors their rights over crucial but restricted resources.

This does not mean that people not belonging to the corporate group do not bury their dead. It simply means that they use forms of burial that are not formal like cemeteries and that, probably, are archaeologically invisible.
The idea has been postulated by Morris for Dark Age Greece.

Goldstein (1981) re-formulated the hypothesis rectifying an unintentional implication of Saxe.
She admitted that

- different cultures could ritualize their social structures in different ways, implying that not all the societies use cemeteries to affirm the transmission of rights.

- Consequently the absence of a formal disposal cemetery does not exclude the transmission of rights to the heirs.
Furthermore, if a formal disposal area is present, "the culture is probably one which has a corporate group structure in the form of lineal descent system.»

Regarding the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis, according to I. Morris, the NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL Hypothesis can be combined with the POST-PROCESSUAL consideration of ancient cultures.
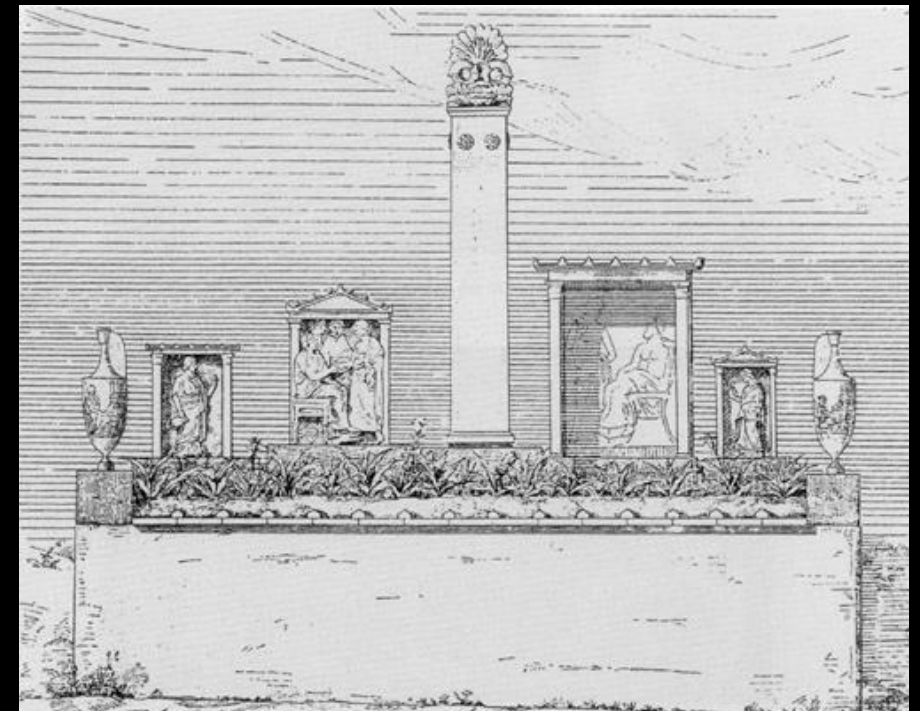
Although Humphreys denied the familiar value of Greek tombs, according to Morris the Greek evidence suggests the validity of tombs as means to express inheritance of rights from ancestors.
1) The importance of tombs for the heirs in Greek literary sources like Homer (*Iliad* 14.113-114) and the importance of descent (although not specifically of tombs) in archaic poets (Archilochus, Sappho, Theognis and Alcaeus).
2) the frequent presence of patronymics in archaic gravestones suggests links between tombs and descent groups.
3) Aristotle explicitly says that an aspiring magistrate would have been able to point out his family tombs.

The evidence shows that burial in the family plot was proof of descent, descent meant membership of the citizen estate and with it access to landholding, political rights and more.

A confirmation is given by gravestones of non-Athenian citizens in Classical Attica. Very few gravestones are associable with slaves (non-citizens) and all the gravestones of *xenoi* (non Athenian Greeks) explicitly indicate citizenship of other poleis. In this sense even these non-Athenian citizens confirm in Attica the tomb-citizenship link."
In 317/316 BC Demetrios of Phaleron promoted sumptuary laws against funerary display. The result was the decline of Attic gravestones and of elaborated tombs: they did not reappear even when Demetrios' rule ended. According to Morris the explanation lies in the incorporation of Athens into the Macedonian and Roman empires: the right of citizenship lost importance and, therefore, the need to show it through tombs ended

Ostia, Porto Necropolis

In Imperial Rome the citizen body was more permeable than in Classical Athens: children of freed slaves usually became citizens while in Classical Attica they were simply non-citizen resident aliens.

This difference is testified by the huge number of Roman gravestones erected to slaves and *liberti*. The real elite were the rich, whatever they were (free men or *liberti*) and they displayed it through more sumptuous tombs and funerals.

More people in Rome accessed the formal disposal areas (cemeteries) but the descent rights of the elite were assured through a greater variability in death rituals.
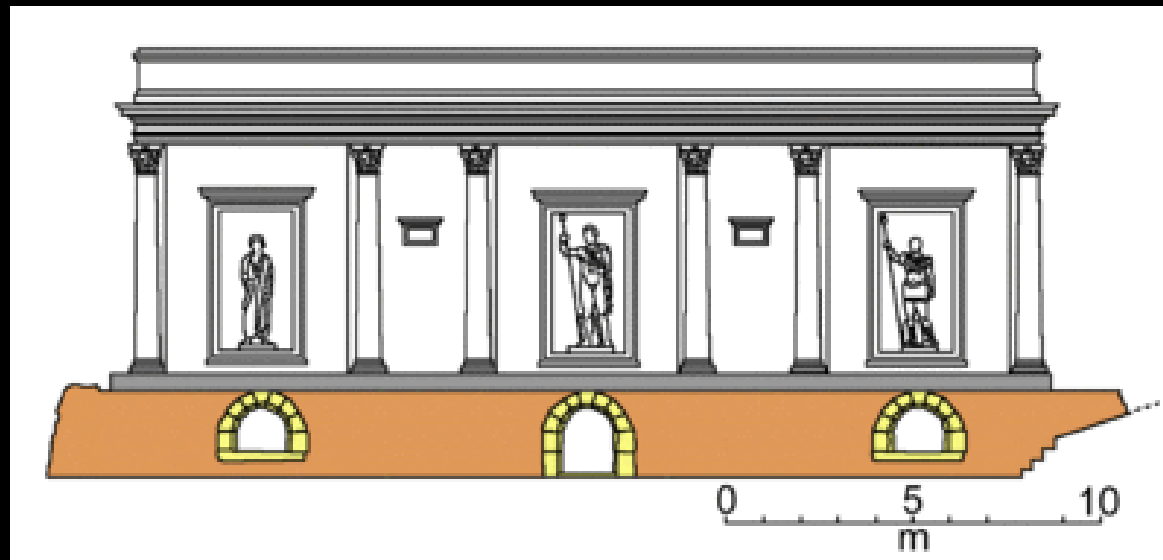
Morris is convinced that, in respect of Saxe's hypothesis, both tendencies (New Archaeological generalizations and Post-Processual consideration of the contexts in which phenomena happen) could be applied since one approach does not exclude the other.

He demonstrated it through the consideration of Saxe's hypothesis in Classical-Hellenistic Athens and in Late Republican-Early Imperial Rome. In both cultures there is an argument linking cemeteries and property (New Archaeological approach) but the argument itself is implicated in the archaeology of mind of the two different cultures (Post-Processual approach).

This means that we can use Saxe's hypothesis but it must be treated in terms of the actor's own perceptions. Consequently one must first locate the idea of transmission of property within the broader concerns of the people who created the archaeological record.

Tomb of the Scipioni, Rome

In the majority of cases one does not have evidence supporting the investigation of the ancient mentalities (e.g. Literary sources, inscriptions, etc.).
HOW CAN ONE INVESTIGATE THE MINDS OF THE ANCIENTS?

Did we come back to subjective use of literary sources?
Do we really still need «generic theories» like Saxe/Goldstein Hypothesis 8?
AREN'S THE THEORIES CONTRADICTING?
HOW CAN WE APPLY ALL OF THEM?
ISN'T ALL THIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY USELESS?

Archaeological theory is important because it open the scholar's eyes, but it is not a substitute for critical thought.

It is rather FOOD FOT CRITICAL THOUGHT

- It warn us about the limits of our interpretation
- It give suggestions of possible solutions in terms of models to be checked
- It suggest us to focus on contextual analyses
- It suggest to use all the available evidences (material, literary, epigraphic, ethnographic, etc.) but with sensible consideration of the limits of each source
- Warn us about considering the archaeological remains as complicated records, produced by real human beings with all their complexities
- Etc.. Etc..