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**Symbolic Burials in Roman Imperial Times  
with Special Regard to the Danubian  
Provinces**

Thesis of PhD dissertation

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## **I. Previous research and aims of the dissertation**

In the history of civilizations, like in our modern world, cemeteries almost always appear alongside settlements as death is a natural part of human life, even if it is often considered a taboo even today. We encounter relics with symbolic content that remind us of the death of someone, including the cross of Christ or the tomb of ‘the unknown soldier’. Owing to their symbolism, roadside memorials of casualty scenes also belong to this phenomenon and relatives usually return to them to remember the deceased with a bouquet, a wreath or a candle. Symbolic tombstones or entries of names in the local cemetery or the family tomb of relatives who died and were interred off site may also be mentioned in this connection.

Symbolic burials or cenotaphs are exemplified by empty graves or tombs, in which no remains of the deceased can be found. These symbolic graves are usually made at the request of relatives for those individuals who died abroad (e.g. as soldiers or merchants) and were buried there, or whose bodies had been lost (e.g. at sea or in battles). This custom is not new. It can be found in every historical period in some form or another as attested by historical sources. The present dissertation deals with such an abundantly documented phenomenon, the symbolic burials in Roman Imperial times.

Previous studies usually dealt only indirectly with this relatively frequent and complex phenomenon and it was only in the past two decades that greater attention has been given to it. Three outstanding monographs, published almost simultaneously 15 years ago, were the

starting point for this dissertation. The first is an oft-quoted paper by Marcus Reuter,<sup>1</sup> which does not focus on cenotaphs but examines the epitaphs of Roman soldiers killed in battle as well as the attitudes of the imperial authorities to them.

The written sources were first collected and catalogued by Gabriele Mietke in her lexicon entry ‘Kenotaph’ in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*.<sup>2</sup>

Cecilia Ricci has collected the written and epigraphical sources of cenotaphs and catalogued them according to their religious character as determined by Roman law (type A: real cenotaphs made out of necessity, e.g. because of the absence of bodies; type B1 and B2: tombs of common men or rulers, persons exalted in their honour and remembrance). Her monograph,<sup>3</sup> a systematic catalogue of 130 excerpts from Greek and Latin textual sources and epitaphs collected from the entire territory of the Roman Empire, may well be regarded as the standard work on cenotaphs.

Since the publication of these works many previously unknown inscriptions have been found enabling us to expand the extent of our investigations. Whereas earlier research focused on the tombstones of soldiers, now it is possible to incorporate the epitaphs of civilians into our investigations. A comprehensive archaeological examination

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<sup>1</sup> Reuter, M.: Gefallen für Rom. Beobachtungen an den Grabinschriften im Kampf getöteter römischer Soldaten. In: Visy Zs. (ed.): *Limes XIX. Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies Held in Pécs, Hungary, September 2003*. Pécs 2005, 255–263.

<sup>2</sup> Mietke, G.: s. v. *Kenotaph*. In: Schöllgen, G. et al. (hrsg.): *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. Band XX. Stuttgart 2004, col. 709–734.

<sup>3</sup> Ricci, C.: *Qui non riposa. Cenotafi antichi e moderni fra memoria e rappresentazione*. Roma 2006.

and analysis of all currently known symbolic burials is yet to be done and the scope of this dissertation is limited to *Pannonia Superior* and *Inferior*, as they are copiously documented in recent publications on cemeteries, which contain precise observational data on excavations.

Therefore, the main purpose of this dissertation is to assemble all the sources of Roman imperial symbolic burials in the Danubian provinces and *Dalmatia*, to assess them from an interdisciplinary point of view, and to propose a thorough historical analysis of this cultural and religious ritual that can still be observed even today.

## **II. The sources of research and applied methodology**

This dissertation is built on three source groups as mentioned above: 1) written historical and literary sources, 2) imperial inscriptions, and 3) archaeological sources.

The collection and study of the ancient Greek and Roman textual material about cenotaphs has been accomplished only in part (see the works of G. Mietke and C. Ricci). The present dissertation wishes to supplement and revise the earlier surveys by paying special attention to the analysis of attitudes to and beliefs about the unburied dead as determined by the aspects and details of the custom. According to a widely held belief, the souls of the unburied not only remain restless, roaming about in the underworld but also haunt the living as hostile spirits. Ancient Jewish and early Christian sources, previously used unsystematically, are also investigated. Legal texts (e.g. the *Digesta*)

are our most important written sources. They not only determine the religious character of symbolic burials and graves, but also seem to suggest that cenotaphs are a more widespread phenomenon than they are thought to have been. Legal texts will be used to propose a global (ancient Mediterranean, primarily Hellenic and Italian) assessment of symbolic burials. Since ancient literary or historical sources on the Danubian provinces and *Dalmatia* are unknown, observations made about the territories investigated here are bound to be imprecise as the general customs of classical Greek and Roman culture do not always correspond to the customs of a specific provincial population, particularly to those of the lower classes, according to their degree of Romanization.

The backbone and the most important source base of the present dissertation consists of imperial epitaphs which can be interpreted as symbolic graves. The epitaphs are examined here according to three criteria: 1) philological considerations, 2) Roman law classification, and 3) the probability of interpreting them as cenotaphs. This part of my work uses epigraphical methods. The catalogue of 81 epitaphs is based on electronic databases (LUPA, Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg, Epigraphische Datenbank Clauss–Slaby) and on recently published material not included in established corpora of inscriptions (e.g. CIL, RIU). The provenience of each gravestone has been taken into consideration because it cannot be ruled out that some epitaphs were relocated from the place of death indicated on them to another spot (which in some cases was close to their original location).

The third group comprises the archaeological source material of the two Pannonian provinces, which had many uncertainties due to their interpretation, therefore, it is the most complicated category. There are features in usually smaller amounts in the cemeteries which fit in the order of burials. In most cases they are undisturbed, additionally, according to the local practices shaped features could be interpreted as grave pits which did not contain human remains or their traces but certain types of objects (e.g. pottery) can appear in them. These empty tombs are inseparable from observations made at the excavations and the context in which they were found. It must be mentioned that some epitaphs (CIL III 15159; TitAq II, 682.; ILJug I, 271–274) were found presumably *in situ*, i.e. at the place of their setting up, but the methodology of excavation and the incomplete observations made were insufficient to recognize further coherences at that time. From the point of view of source criticism I call these features ‘cenotaph-like’ because their emptiness could be related to several, not always obvious, causes and using archaeological methods it can only be assumed that they were genuine cenotaphs.

Relying on an overview of the effects (primary and secondary human factors, e.g. shape of the grave, tillage, grave plundering, and other biological factors, e.g. unfavourable property of the soil) I have intended to describe the features which could be studied. In my work I have used earlier publications, also data of unpublished grave pits, which were submitted to me, and I also collected the archaeological features of 21 cemeteries or details of cemeteries, which did not contain mortuary remains and can be interpreted as symbolic graves.

All these were included into two catalogues according to the extent of disturbance, furthermore, the classification of these features have been supplemented by short analyses (e.g. shape, orientation, place in cemetery, types of grave goods occasionally interred in the grave pit and their position in it).

### III. Results

As it was settled before, the majority of Greek and Roman sources mainly mentions cenotaphs established for mythological actors, rulers and their family members, generals and illustrious persons. However, the outlook of the cenotaphs can be deduced from literary sources (e.g. the *Aeneid*) together with a three-step ritual when in the end the name of the deceased was acclaimed thrice at the symbolic grave. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that more sources, especially legal texts, refer to the wide-spread practice of symbolic burials,<sup>4</sup> the replacement of the body of the deceased with a (wax) effigy,<sup>5</sup> as well as the transference of the corpse (*translatio cadaveris*). The latter could have determined the religious character of a tomb, namely its *locus religiosus*. A tomb can also be symbolical if the dead body was buried somewhere else or if it was relocated to some other place; in these cases the monument was not under religious protection. The gravestones of disappeared persons could have been exceptions in

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Appian. *Mithr.* 443.; Dig. 3, 2, 25, 1.; Dig. 11, 7, 42. A special group composed the source places and epitaphs linked with persons who were lost in the sea.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Liv. VIII, 10, 12.; CIL XIV 2112=ILS 7212. as well as Hérod. IV. 1–2.

the last case. Contrary to Greek and Roman beliefs in an afterlife and according to the early Christian belief (e.g. Tertullian, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix, Augustine) the resurrection of the body is not influenced negatively by its unburiedness because God can recreate anything; therefore, the establishment of empty tombs was not even mentioned although the cult of saints is an exception because the point was the presence of the mortal remains of the revered dead.

In the area researched the inscriptions are regarded as the most obvious sources of cenotaphs where definable and typical phrases were used. Examining the inscriptions, I have separated those cases which refer unambiguously to the fact that the deceased was either buried somewhere else or simply disappeared. Moreover, I have made a classification according to the use of verbs and participles in order to investigate groups by circumstances of death: in group one inscriptions refer to violent deaths and group two contains inscriptions which simply declare the death. As a result, it can be determined that six tombs can be considered cenotaphs and only one deceased was a soldier. The majority of the inscriptions (62 items) mainly state the fact of death (possibly the circumstances and place of it) and nothing indicates whether the remains were buried on the spot or were relocated to another place (*translatio cadaveris*). Regarding the precariousness of the interpretation, these epitaphs are classified as 'cenotaph-like' tombstones. Considering the controversial nature of the interpretation of 3rd-century military inscriptions containing the *desideratus* participle (12 items), which is mostly current in Danubian provinces, they were classified as an intermediate category



since instead of the formerly accepted interpretation as ‘missing’ in a military context it was probably used in the meaning of ‘killed/fallen in battle/campaign’. In sum, cenotaph-related epigraphs usually occur in a military environment: approximately 62% of the 81 inscriptions fall indisputably in this group on the area investigated.

As the transportation of human remains seems to be connected with the cenotaph-like inscriptions, it is reasonable to consider the phenomenon of *translatio cadaveris* a special type of spatial mobility. The transportation of the remains was regulated in detail by Roman law, which reinforces the view that it was an everyday act. Nevertheless, greater distances could increase the costs and practical difficulties which could have been an obstacle to the relatives; for this reason, symbolic graves were made in the homeland of the deceased. Based on the known distances between the two ends (the place of death and that of burial) recorded in Hellenistic and Roman epitaphs (70 items), I calculate with a 2500 km radius of action, which in turn defines the maximum distance of the phenomenon. The calculation of the distances can be made by cenotaph-like graves – in these cases the places of deaths and the places of the tombstones are known – hence the probability can be more precise whether these gravestones were cenotaphs. This radius of action is exceeded only in 8 epitaphs, characteristically inscriptions of private soldiers serving in a legion. Similarly to the case of *translatio*, the decrease of distance caused an increase in the number of inscriptions and the focus is on the distance which was less than 1000 km (60,5%) – this fact reinforces the theory that the transportation of the remains could

mostly occur in these cases. The majority of the latter – especially when the distance is under 500 km – belonged to civilians.

I have examined the cenotaph-related archaeological source material applied to *Pannonia Superior* and *Inferior*. It can be claimed that cenotaph-like graves are present throughout the Roman Imperial period and the majority of the features can be related to the inhumation burial rite which are mostly simple rectangle shaped graves. The features which occurred in the cremation details of cemeteries usually contain grave goods which are mostly artefacts for daily use. Only one-third of the inhumation grave pits comprised funerary equipments, furthermore articles of wear also occurred. Five categories can be defined according to the position of the grave goods in the grave pit. The symbolism has been suggested in the following cases: the grave goods are in the middle of the grave pit (2nd group), they are placed in a pile (3rd group), they are placed according to the imaginary position of the deceased person (4th group), and undisturbed grave pits with a sidewall niche and pots in it (5th group). No single type of funerary equipment could have been identified to clearly signal whether the grave is a cenotaph. Although in extreme soil conditions the disappearance of bones (especially in the case of infants) cannot be excluded, due to the sources mentioned above the use of an effigy is likely. However, whether these phenomena are real cenotaphs or not is impossible to decide using archaeological methodology only, therefore research might be carried ahead by applying scientific methods.

The last chapter of the dissertation deals primarily with the general question of why people created cenotaphs for relatives who died and were buried in distant places, why this was important, and to who. The answers to these questions span several disciplines and these complex correlations (religious beliefs, pietas, spatial identity, social psychological factors, making possible the work of mourning, thanato-psychological factors, ensuring the memory of the deceased, religious festivals for the dead) are discussed in the summary. In this chapter the need for grief or a grieving process has been particularly emphasized in the case of a failed burial, when establishing a spatial object can help those left behind to cope with their sorrow.

#### **IV. Publications in the subject of the thesis**

Ein besonderer Bestattungsbrauch: „Leere“ Gräber in der Avarzeit. *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 51 (2011) 99–113.

Kincs, ami nincs. Egy különleges temetkezési szokás: üres sírok az avar korban. [A Special Burial Custom: 'Empty' Graves in the Avar period] In: László G. – Toronyi A. (hrsg.): *Helytállás. A XII. Eötvös Konferencia történeti ülésének válogatott tanulmányai*. Budapest, Eötvös Collegium Történet Műhely, 2012, 47–91. (Acta Historica Collegii de Iosepho Eötvös Nominati. Series I. Nr. 3.)

Megjegyzések Senio Comatonis f(ilius) dunapentelei sírkövéhez. *Studia Epigraphica Pannonica* VII (2015) 109–115.

A jelképes temetkezések helye és szerepe a kulturális emlékezetben. In: Bojtos A. – Novotnik Á. (szerk.): *Eszmetörténeti tanulmányok. Dolgozatok a 2012. november 10-én, Piliscsabán rendezett konferencia előadásából*. Budapest, Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Bölcsész- és Társadalomtudományi Kar, 2016, 75–84. (Doktoriskolai konferenciák 1.)

Kenotáfiumok a sírfeliratok tükrében. *Studia Epigraphica Pannonica* IX (2017) 96–105.