



1. S.M. Cecchini, S. Mazzoni (edd.), *Tell Afis (Siria). Scavi sull'acropoli 1988-1992. The 1998-1992 Excavations on the Acropolis*, Pisa 1998, pp. 524.
2. T. Pedrazzi, *Le giare da conservazione e trasporto: uno studio archeologico dell'economia del Levante fra Bronzo Tardo II e Ferro I (ca. 1400-900 a.C.)*, Pisa 2007, pp. 501.
3. S.M. Cecchini, S. Mazzoni, E. Scigliuzzo (eds), *Syrian and Phoenician Ivories of the Early First Millennium BCE: Chronology, Regional Styles and Iconographic Repertoires, Patterns of Interregional Distribution. Acts of the International Workshop (Pisa, December 9<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> 2004)*, Pisa 2009, pp. 360.
4. S. Mazzoni, S. Soldi (eds), *Syrian Archaeology in Perspective. Celebrating 20 Years of Excavations at Tell Afis. Proceedings of the International Meeting. Percorsi di Archeologia Siriana - Giornate di studio - Pisa 27-28 Novembre 2006 - Gipsoteca di Arte Antica - S. Paolo all'Orto*, Pisa 2013, pp. 224.
5. C. Felli (ed.), *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*, Pisa 2017, pp. 340.

# 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

*edited by*  
Candida Felli



Edizioni ETS



[www.edizioniets.com](http://www.edizioniets.com)

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

© Copyright 2016  
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

## CONTENTS

Preface.....	7
CANDIDA FELLI “How to cope with death”: an introduction .....	9
ADRIANO FAVOLE Robert Hertz and contemporary cremation: representation of the body and new funerary rituals in Italy and France.....	17
ALFONSO ARCHI Some remarks on ethnoarchaeological and death in the Ancient Near East.....	29
ANNE LÖHNERT Coping with death according to the “Elegy on the Death of Nannā” .....	49
ANDREA KUCHARÉK Mourning and lament in Ancient Egypt .....	67
CANDIDA FELLI Mourning and funerary practices in the Ancient Near East: an essay to bridge the gap between the textual and the archaeological record .....	83
† EDGAR PELTENBURG Mortuary ritual and embodied identity in North-west Syria in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> millennium	133
ANNE PORTER The materiality of mourning .....	157
GLENN SCHWARTZ After interment/outside the tombs: some mortuary particulars at Umm el-Marra	189
STEFANO VALENTINI Vaulted <i>hypogea</i> during the Middle Bronze Age: a perfect example of the intra-muros multiple tomb in Mesopotamia .....	217
PETER PFÄLZNER Royal corpses, royal ancestors and the living: the transformation of the dead in Ancient Syria.....	241

JOYCE NASSAR	
The infra-urban funerary spaces: how the dead interact with the daily life at Mari (3 <sup>rd</sup> millennium-2 <sup>nd</sup> millennium BC).....	271
ARKADIUSZ SOLTYSIAK	
Taphonomy of human remains and mortuary archaeology: three case studies from the Khabur triangle.....	295
JENNIE BRADBURY AND GRAHAM PHILIP	
The Invisible Dead Project: a methodology for ‘coping’ with the dead.....	309

## 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

## Preface

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*



ROBERT HERTZ AND CONTEMPORARY CREMATION:  
REPRESENTATION OF THE BODY  
AND NEW FUNERARY RITUALS IN ITALY AND FRANCE

ADRIANO FAVOLE - TORINO

1. Incipit. *Robert Hertz, the eternal return?*

In 2007, the centennial of the publication of the well-known essay *Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort*,<sup>1</sup> the journal *Studi Tanatologici* dedicated a special issue to Robert Hertz. On that occasion I wondered<sup>2</sup> what remained today in the populations of Borneo, of the funeral rituals described by the French ethnologist. Making use above all of the research carried out by the anthropologist Anne Schiller among the Dayak Ngaju during the '90s, I had discovered that the ceremony of secondary burial, known as *tiwah*, had never actually disappeared from the ritual scene. Or rather, after being forbidden for a long time first by the colonial government and later by the Indonesian authorities, the rituals of second burial were 'rediscovered' in the mid-eighties and re-proposed as a fundamental part of the local cultural heritage. The second burial continued to be for many Dayak an expression of their 'collective representation' of death, although in a profoundly different historical context. This can easily be understood from the declarations with which a village headman took his leave of the National Geographic television troupe that had filmed a documentary on the *tiwah* ceremony:

Today is a sacred and important day in our village [...] I am so proud to be sitting here with this television crew, knowing that my parents went off to heaven with a film crew taking pictures of them [...] Never in any other village were souls going to heaven filmed!<sup>3</sup>

In this article I would like to attempt a different exercise, which requires a brief premise. Hertz's essay can certainly be considered one of the exotic contributions to nascent French ethnology. It is based on material from Indonesia, Polynesia and other parts of the world inhabited by those 'primitive peoples' to which the discipline was progressively consecrating. The entire essay is, however, based on a contraposition at times explicit and at times implicit between those 'others' and 'ourselves'. On closer inspection in Hertz's essay, the Dayak are a sort of self-reflecting mirror for 'ourselves'. By contraposition, they and other primitive peoples make it possible to highlight our 'collective representations' of death. 'We', writes Hertz, act as though death occurred in an instant. The 'others' have a greater awareness of the processual nature of death. 'We' – and here Hertz's study has a prophetic ring to it and for this reason would be re-examined, above all in the anglophone world, only from the '60s onwards – tend to hide the processual aspect of death: the bodies are

<sup>1</sup> HERTZ 1907.

<sup>2</sup> FAVOLE 2007.

<sup>3</sup> SCHILLER 2011, p. 49.

immediately and definitively buried, the soul rapidly reaches its final destination and there is no longer (much) space for mourning and we do not know what to say to the grieving.

Hertz lived in France and in Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and would die in one of the greatest social calamities produced by Western history, the First World War. How much has the way of dealing with death changed since then? How have 'our' funerary rites, the practices relating to the corpse, the concept of the soul and the ways of 'dealing with' bereavement changed, compared to the times and the society in which Hertz lived? The French ethnologist was convinced, like the majority of anthropologists at the time, that the primitive peoples would soon disappear from the world scene. In fact, despite all the transformations, the Dayak Ngaju are still *there* (or *here*, according to the migratory flows). In many ways, instead, it is the ritual forms and practices of mourning of Hertz's own society that appear to be rapidly disappearing.

## 2. *The reasons behind an ongoing ritual revolution*

For at least the last thirty years, a true *ritual revolution*<sup>4</sup> has involved the way in which questions concerning what comes 'after' death are dealt with. The 'funerary practices' are changing rapidly.<sup>5</sup> A growing number of Italians and French, the two national case studies on which I will concentrate in this essay, are enacting, personally – through pre-death declarations – or through their relatives, funerary rituals that in extreme cases *do not foresee any* of the aspects traditionally connected with death: no lengthy wake, no cortege, no ceremony in a place of worship, nor burial or entombment. This revolution, which is more evident in the urban areas, is linked to the surprising spread of cremation, which is very marked and has a greater historical importance in the countries of northern Europe, but also an increasing importance in the south, beyond that 'invisible frontier' that separates northern Europe with its prevalently Protestant tradition from the southern Catholic tradition. In fact, nowadays the Catholic Church permits cremation and has adapted its rites to the new trend,<sup>6</sup> so that the choice of cremation does not always mean reneging the more traditional aspects of the funeral rites. The 'ritual revolution' underway is nevertheless important and deserves a consideration of a sociological and anthropological nature.

The Cremation Societies have a lengthy history in Europe and, in the case of Italy and France, were founded in the second part of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> However, it

<sup>4</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012.

<sup>5</sup> By the expression 'funerary practices' I refer to all those activities of a social nature that follow a death, reserving the term 'funeral rites' to the actual funeral, or in any case to moments of greater symbolic 'density'.

<sup>6</sup> The new edition of the text that governs Catholic rites for funeral rites (which came into force on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2012) contains a lengthy Appendix dedicated to cremation (*Rito delle esequie* 2011, pp. 203-246 – *Guidelines for Funerals and Burials in the Catholic Church*).

<sup>7</sup> In Italy the first Cremation Societies were founded towards the end of the nineteenth century (So-crem Torino was founded in 1883 and in 1888 inaugurated the crematorium Temple); in France, during the Revolution, there was a first attempt to encourage the practice, but the law authorising cremation was only voted in 1887.

is only since the nineteen-eighties that the practice of cremation has begun to spread beyond the narrow lay and masonic circles in which it originated. In 1980 in France only 1% of deaths was followed by a cremation; in Italy the data on a national scale is precise only from the nineteen-nineties onwards, but we know that in 1987 only 3,600 cremations (equal to about 1.5% of deaths) were carried out.<sup>8</sup> At present France has a percentage of cremations close to 32%; Italy has more than 14%. The internal differences (large cities/provinces, north/south, towns/rural settlements) are considerable: in Paris and the larger French cities more than 45% of deaths are followed by cremation. In Milano alone almost 10% of the cremations carried out in the peninsula take place, and 90% of Italian cremations are carried out in the six regions of central-northern Italy (Liguria, Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Toscana and Lazio), above all in the regional or provincial capitals.<sup>9</sup> In southern Italy cremation continues to be a decidedly minority practice: of the fifty-eight crematoriums present in the country, only three are in southern regions (one in Sicilia, one in Puglia and one in Campania). The distribution of crematoriums in France is more homogeneous, although Paris and the north-eastern area (which has a strong Protestant tradition) have a greater number.<sup>10</sup> A glance at the diffuseness of cremation in Europe shows a considerable difference between northern and southern countries: the data supplied by the Cremation Society of Great Britain<sup>11</sup> shows that in many European countries cremation is equally or more common than other forms of funeral (Belgium 50%, Czech Republic 80%, Denmark 78%, Netherlands 58%, Portugal 50%, Slovenia 80%, Sweden 78%, Switzerland 85%, United Kingdom 74%), and in some greater than 30% (Austria 34%, Finland 42%, France 32%, Norway 36%). The 'exception' represented by Ireland, where cremation stands at 11% shows the importance of the religious factor in the choice of cremation (similarly, in Romania, the aversion of the Orthodox Church explains the almost total absence of cremations): although the Catholic church declared the admissibility of cremation in 1963, there is no doubt that the countries with the strongest Catholic traditions still show greater resistance. Extending our survey to the rest of the world, we discover that the most committed cremationist countries are Japan (almost 100%), Hong Kong (90%) Taiwan (90%), Singapore (80%), New Zealand (72%), China and Australia (50%). In the United States cremation stands at about 42%. Returning to Europe and specifically to Italy and France – without neglecting the differences between the two countries – I would like to consider the reasons that explain why, after almost two thousand years of burial and entombment, the cremationist revolution is 'attacking' traditional funeral procedures also in these countries. Why, over the last thirty years, has a constantly increasing percentage of people chosen a different way of treating the corpse, infringing a millenary and deeply-rooted tradition? Why, in both France and in Italy, does a growing number of people (maybe nowadays the majority) wish that after death their body should be reduced to ashes and then scattered, or in some cases preserved in a familiar place, outside the cemetery?

<sup>8</sup> [www.funerali.org](http://www.funerali.org), consulted on 30.7.2013.

<sup>9</sup> [www.EuroAct.net](http://www.EuroAct.net), consulted on 30.7.2013.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.crematorium.eu/les-crematoriums-de-france.html>, consulted on 30.7.2013.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc5/Stats/Interntl/2011/StatsIF.html>, consulted on 30.7.2013.

The complexity of the reasons that explain the spread of awareness of and the choice of cremation is considerable and few authors have dealt with the topic.<sup>12</sup> Starting from the most recent work by Michaud Nérard<sup>13</sup> (2012), I would like to review, without the hope of being exhaustive, some of these factors which I consider crucial in understanding this ongoing revolution.

1) In the first place there is a *demographic* factor. The longer life expectancy in western countries means that often death arrives many years after a process of social death that leads to retirement and a reduction in the closer affective relationships: it is *The loneliness of the dying* of which Norbert Elias spoke many years ago in a well-known essay.<sup>14</sup> As Michaud Nérard observes, often these deaths at a later age arouse nostalgia rather than pain.<sup>15</sup> The prolongation of life expectancy has equally transformed the etiology of the ‘terminal illness’: degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s, or cardiac and vascular problems often lead to chronic suffering that lasts for years, causing the slow physical and social death of the person. Imagining that they will live for a long time, dying when their children or even their grandchildren are old, many persons see in cremation (and in the scattering of the ashes) a ‘reduction in the burden’ of their death. It is significant that, both in France and Italy, children and young people are rarely cremated. The need for a tomb, a gravestone before which to linger, with the ‘weight’ of a bereavement still to be worked, seems more suitable to what the historians have called ‘bad deaths’<sup>16</sup> – the deaths that come unexpectedly, at a relatively young age. On the contrary, the almost intangible ‘weightlessness’ of the ashes and, not infrequently, their scattering, are desirable in bodies that have already experienced in life a slow process of physical decline. We can indeed ask ourselves whether, in the societies of western well-being, characterised by long life expectancy, the process of mourning does not begin long before biological death occurs. It is rather as if the dying were already partly assimilated with their ancestors, as in those societies that use the same term for very old people and the ancestors.<sup>17</sup>

2) A second factor influencing the rising choice of cremation is of a *scientific-technological* nature. Contemporary western society is characterised by the attempt to control the biological life of the body in an increasingly detailed and invasive manner. To use a sporting metaphor, we could say that we live in ‘doped-up’ bodies, since – above all in later adult years and in old age – there is an extensive use of medicines, prostheses, biomedical interventions. Despite the rhetoric of the ‘naturalness’ of life and the desired ‘naturalness’ of death,<sup>18</sup> it is increasingly evident that the body is culturally and technologically con-

<sup>12</sup> The bibliography on cremation in Italy and France includes numerous texts of a historical nature, but few analyses with a sociological or anthropological slant relating to contemporary times. Amongst these I recommend: BELHASSEN 1998 and MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012.

<sup>13</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012.

<sup>14</sup> ELIAS 1982.

<sup>15</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> ARIÈS 1997, VOVELLE 1983.

<sup>17</sup> On the island of Belep (New Caledonia), for example, the term *ulayama* indicates both the old and the ancestors.

<sup>18</sup> SOZZI 2009, pp. 92-95.

structed. Death remains an inevitable fate, and yet it often occurs at the moment in which it is *decided* to suspend the biomedical interventions: we have moved «from awaiting death to awaiting the decision to allow the person to die».<sup>19</sup> The idea of a body that naturally and slowly decomposes in the ground or in a concrete tomb, gives way to the desire for a body whose destruction is controlled by a sophisticated technological procedure that, at 800° centigrade, transforms it into ashes. From this point of view it must be said that contemporary cremation is based on a procedure that has little or nothing to do with cremations practiced in previous eras or in societies that do not use the technological systems of the western world. The ‘traditional’ cremation (basically, a funeral pyre) consumes the soft parts of the body, leaving the skeleton almost intact. Traditional cremation is a procedure designed to ‘accelerate’ decomposition, as already pointed out by Hertz,<sup>20</sup> while the cremation practiced nowadays in Europe<sup>21</sup> includes the trituration of the bones, dispersed in ‘ashes’ that look like greyish sand formed essentially of mineral salts (estimated in two to three litres per adult body). In this manner, the body loses all individuality, even that ‘symbolic substance’ so often mentioned nowadays, the DNA: only the presence of those fragile remains that are the ashes mark a permanence, a weak resistance to what Michaud Nérard calls the «*néantisation du corps*», the ‘cancellation’ or ‘nullification’ of the body. From a scientific-technological point of view, cremation appears to be a *choice* that is particularly congenial to a society that increasingly fabricates and controls the biological life of the body.

3) A third factor linked to the current cremationist revolution concerns precisely the idea of *choice*. Burial and entombment do not involve any prior instructions: cremation on the other hand, in both Italy and France, requires an explicit choice regarding the fate of one’s body after death. In both countries, that choice can be expressed by means of registration with a Cremation Society, by a leaving a will or by informing the next of kin or the future executor of one’s intentions. From this point of view, cremation is in my opinion a phenomenon that presents many links with the questions of the ‘biological will’ or ‘living will’, and with the spread of palliative care. The fear of ‘apparent death’ that was particularly acute in some periods of European history – the fear, that is, of being declared dead prior to cardiac arrest or all the termination of all vital functions<sup>22</sup> – has left room for a sort of specular fear, that of ‘apparent life’. A life prolonged by biomedical technologies at the cost of suffering, unconsciousness and absence of social relations. Given the risk of excessive invasiveness or futile prolongation of treatment (what is known in Italian as *accanimento terapeutico*, a term that has no precise translation in English), in many European countries there is a call for laws that offer the possibility of expressing personal preferences in relation to disease and the end of life. The effort, to some extent, is to be able

<sup>19</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> FAVOLE 2003.

<sup>21</sup> It might be interesting to note that in Japan (a country in which almost 100% of the population are cremated) cremation does not foresee the trituration of the bones. The rite of *kotsuage* consists of taking the fragments of bone still intact, starting with those of the feet and moving upwards to the skull and placing them in the urn (MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, p. 165).

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. DEFANTI 2007, pp. 48-52.

to choose the *conditions* of one's own death. Also in this case, cremation is coherent and in continuity with these socio-cultural aspects of western society: the emphasis on the *choice* of the final fate of the body is in keeping with the need to halt the medicalization of the body. There is no longer blind trust in the 'dogma' of healing at all costs, biomedicine and its professionals are asked to include death in the scope of the treatment; in extreme cases simply adopting therapies against pain. At the same time there is no passive reliance on funerary rituals consolidated by tradition, rather the possibility of choice is invoked, also in relation to the performance of the rites and the final destiny of the body. As Peppino Ortoleva noted,<sup>23</sup> the processes of secularization have led the western countries not so much towards a lack of faith, nor towards the disappearance of the ritual dimension of death, but rather towards the acceptance of a multiplicity of options, the widespread experimentation of new forms of rituality and treatment of the body.<sup>24</sup>

4) The notion of choice leads us to the heart of another factor, that of *individualism*. It is, obviously, a wide-ranging debate, deriving from a long tradition of studies in the humanistic field. I will simply make a few considerations strictly relating to the question dealt with in this essay. One of the greatest European scholars of contemporary death, John Douglas Davies, speaks of cremation and scattering of the ashes in terms of a «retrospective fulfilment of the [individual] identity».<sup>25</sup> In a post-modern world in which «the widely shared beliefs or the ideologies count for little, and where identity consists of a few personal relationships»,<sup>26</sup> the collocation of the ashes in places important for the deceased and for some of those close to him is an action that somehow 'completes' or ratifies *post-mortem* the personality of the deceased. At the same time the English sociologist Tony Walter observes, «The tendency [...] appears to be that of a funeral that recalls a life rather than grieving for a death».<sup>27</sup>

Counterposing a religious tradition (the Catholic one) which has given rise to a widely shared rite, in which there is little room (or there is *no room at all*) for the celebration of the *individuality* of the deceased, the choice of cremation, above all when it is accompanied by the expression of precise wishes with regard to the performance of the rite and the possible place for scattering or preservation of the ashes, clearly expresses the importance of the individualistic factor. Above all the request that one's ashes be scattered in a symbolically important place (the peak of a mountain, a romantic bay on a lake, a golf course...) makes cremation a last act celebrating one's individuality, a fulfilment of identity that precedes the *néantisation*, the disappearance of self.<sup>28</sup> Unlike other historical periods, the individual celebrates him/herself by looking back, without a glance at the future: the scattering of the ashes indicates the renouncement of the tomb with the name, the surname and often the photograph. The funeral rite thus becomes an ephemeral triumph of 'self' before the nullification.

<sup>23</sup> ORTOLEVA 2011.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> DOUGLAS DAVIES 2000, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> WALTER 2001, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, p. 41.

As we already said, nowadays the Church allows cremation and quite a few believers choose it as the final fate for their body. Nevertheless, the estrangement from Catholic rituals seems to be linked precisely to this resistance of the Church towards the celebration of the *individuality* of the deceased. It is no coincidence that cremation took root much earlier, and much more easily, in the Protestant countries, a religious confession more open to a «personalised commemoration of the deceased».<sup>29</sup> In support of this theory, it is important to recall that also in the most recent of edition of the *Guidelines for Funerals and Burials in the Catholic Church* previously mentioned, the priest taking the service is reminded that:

brief words of Christian memory may be added with regard to the deceased. The text should be previously agreed with the celebrant priest, but not spoken by ambo. Recorded texts or images should be avoided, as should the performance of songs or music not relating to the liturgy.<sup>30</sup>

The choice of cremation is clearly linked to many other factors that are not dealt with here. The ecological reasons linked to the concept of an excessive occupation of land by the dead ('The land for the living' is a traditional motto of the Cremation Societies); the horror provoked by decomposition and the contemporary practices of exhumation; the awareness of the fact that the resting places of the dead and the tombs require care (almost always entrusted to the women) which is not always compatible with current lifestyles; the anticlericalism that gave rise to the founding of the cremation societies at the end of the nineteenth century: all these factors and many others come into play with the cremationist choice. For the moment, however, we will set aside the causes that are leading countries like Italy and France to assert themselves in this new funeral procedure, and delve into the terrain of the new ritual forms.

### 3. *The new rites of cremation*

The studies of cremation in Italy<sup>31</sup> and in France<sup>32</sup> converge in emphasising how this new way of dealing with the bodies of the dead has not eliminated the request or the desire to *ritualize* death. The disaffection towards the Catholic rites; the increasing presence of persons whose existence is no longer marked by the traditional *rites de passage* within the walls of the Church (baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage...); the multi-ethnic composition of the contemporary cities and societies, have led to a widespread demand for *new* forms of funerary rituals. Cremation Societies, associations that fight for the secularism of the institutions, psychologists and health workers who observe the consequences of the lack of ritualization of the pain caused by a loss, insistently ask for

<sup>29</sup> SOZZI 2009, p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> *Guidelines for Funerals and Burials in the Catholic Church* 2012.

<sup>31</sup> SOZZI 2004.

<sup>32</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012.

the identification of new *places* and *funerary rituals* for individuals of varying ethnic and religious origin, for atheists and lay people who do not belong to the Catholic church or to other major religious confessions. Many of them opt for cremation which, moreover, redefines the moments of the ritual, bringing for new '*symbolic*' moments, such as the handing over of the coffin to professional staff charged of the ceremony; the collection of the ashes from the crematorium; their scattering or collocation in the cemetery or in domestic spaces.

As Marina Sozzi points out, it is not the first time that in Europe the need to invent new funerary rites has been felt. In the early nineteenth century, in France, the lay and republican values imposed by the Revolution led to a profound re-consideration of the forms of the ritual: «It was a question [...] of overcoming the crisis, the emptiness, the desolation of the funerary customs by inventing new rituals, that were coherent with the new reality of the post-revolutionary French society».<sup>33</sup> The inspiration for the construction of new rituals and spaces for the deceased (in particular the new cemeteries built outside the walls of the cities) came from classical civilisations. The modern context, nevertheless, appears to be profoundly different. In the final pages of this essay I would like to reflect on some of the problems raised by this need for a renewed funerary rituality: for the sake of brevity, in this paragraph I will also divide my reasoning into five points:

1) *Personalisation vs. shared rituality*. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, one of the reasons for choosing cremation is linked to the request for personalisation of the ritual and for recognition (or 'completion' as Douglas Davies would say) of the individuality of the deceased. On this matter, we can ask ourselves how far personalisation can be reconciled with the concept of 'ritual'. Ritual demands the presence, participation in and, inevitably, a certain degree of fixity and predictability. Also when – and numerous ethnographical and historical examples support this – the ritual does not consist of a rigid and unchanging scheme of gestures and words, but of a canvas that allows improvisation and innovation, there is no doubt that the predictability and the sharing are essential aspects. To what extent, therefore, is it possible to personalise a ritual? The notion of a private ritual is almost an oxymoron.

2) *Ignorance of ritual vs. need to invent new rituals*. The need to give life to new funerary rituals also clashes, in our society, with a general 'impoverishing' of the symbolic and ritual dimension and an equally strong 'ignorance' of ritual. Working in Oceanic cultures that, even now, mark the various phases of life with elaborate and careful ritual forms, I am always struck by the poverty of the rituals in the society that surrounds us. Whether it is a scholastic *fête*, the presentation of a degree thesis or Christmas, our culture appears particularly lacking when organising collective rituals. Recent literature reports many experiences of invention of funerary rituals: the lay ceremonies that is offered to the grieving who choose cremation at the well-known Paris cemetery of Père-Lachaise;<sup>34</sup> the funerary rituals that take place at the crematorium in Torino<sup>35</sup> are two excellent examples

<sup>33</sup> SOZZI 2009, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, pp. 111-133.

<sup>35</sup> VERGA 2003-2004.



of invention of ritual, which nevertheless stand out in their exceptionality. It must be said in fact that, many of the cremations that take place in Italy and in France – apart, obviously, from those who choose a Catholic or religious ritual – are nowadays in effect de-ritualized. *How* to organise a lay funeral is anything but an easy question to answer.

3) *Rituals 2.0*. As Ortoleva<sup>36</sup> observed, the ‘enhanced reality’ of the Web offers fertile terrain for the birth of new rituals, also linked to death. They are, according to his definition, «low intensity» rituals. Facebook pages or other social media left open after the death of an individual, become ‘places’ frequently visited to leave messages of condolence, but above all for direct and intimate communications with the deceased. Videos and collections of photographs from YouTube, often accompanied by music that arouses memories and emotions, tell the life of the deceased, referring to moments of joy and sharing of experiences. These new forms of funerary ritual, particularly common amongst the younger generations, are characterised by being ‘homemade’ or even makeshift and above all by the fact that they are directed at the present (or at the past) but with little propensity to look towards the future. The latter is a very important characteristic in understanding the contemporary collective representations of death. Can these new ‘2.0’ rituals which are taking root not only in the West, but also in many diasporic societies in the South of the world, meet the need for ‘presence’ that, as Ernesto De Martino noted, is at the heart of every funerary ritual?<sup>37</sup> Are existence and presence in the world guaranteed by a ‘like’? Does the virtual presence through a ‘click’ allow us to speak of ‘rituals’?

4) *Who do the rituals belong to and who do the bodies belong to?* The wide-ranging ethnographical literature on rituals teaches us that the latter are not exempt from inventions, transformations and manipulations. However, rather like a language, the ritual is generally the result of a lengthy historical stratification, of compromises and adjustments that make it a widely shared tool. Many people who choose cremation nowadays set out in detail the procedure for their own funeral – or, on the contrary, state that they do not want a funeral at all. They choose readings, music, images and sites for the scattering of the ashes. Nevertheless, the funerary rituals are above all a question that concerns the bereaved: what happens if for most of the latter the gestures and the rituals chosen by the deceased have no meaning? Who do the rituals belong to and who should carry them out? The personalisation of the ritual can go beyond its ‘privatization’, thus preventing the ritual from carrying out many of its duties. The assembly taking part thus risks seeing the symbolic importance of the ritual compromised and, like an empty shell; it simply becomes the custodian of the emotions raised by the loss.

A similar reasoning is true for the bodies. Many persons registered with the Cremation Societies hope that their body will be burned and the ashes scattered in meaningful places, without leaving any trace. This desire is not always shared by those who remain and who would like to have a place in which to weep for or remember the dear departed. Who do the bodies of the deceased belong to? Do they continue to ‘belong’ to the subject that inhabits them, whether living or not? The scattering of the ashes in the environment and their preservation in very private places (the home of a child or a spouse, for example)

<sup>36</sup> ORTOLEVA 2011.

<sup>37</sup> DE MARTINO 2008.

raise a number of problems, because in effect they deprive the bereaved, or at least some of them, of the possibility of a contact, if only symbolic, with what remains of the deceased.

5) *The return to the cemetery.* «The problem consists of knowing how to symbolically consider the deceased: as belonging to or having belonged to the social body, in which case his place would be in a public place in the city like a cemetery or in a place for scattering [the ashes] open to all; or like the ‘private property’ of only one person – the spouse or one of the children – in which case we could speak of a privatisation of death».<sup>38</sup> The complex questions relating to ‘who the bodies and the rituals belong to’, redirects us in conclusion to the question of the *places* of the dead.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the nineteen-nineties, when cremation and the ‘fad’ for scattering of the ashes reached a peak in many countries of northern Europe, it seemed that the cemetery as a collective place of death might be destined to disappear.<sup>40</sup>

On this matter, it is interesting to note that recently, in both France and Italy, there has been a rethinking with regard to the ‘total freedom’ in scattering the ashes. In France, the new law approved in 2008<sup>41</sup> is more restrictive because it allows the scattering *en pleine nature* only if the place, the date and the identity of the deceased are previously declared to the municipality in which the latter was born (this makes the application process more complicated). In Italy, the law in force since 2003 authorises the scattering in the environment, but for bureaucratic reasons not all the Regions have enacted the regulation. The Cremation Societies now encourage scattering in the ‘remembrance gardens’: areas specially set aside for the purpose within the cemeteries. The same trend is evident in France: the scattering of ashes in places not known to all or their preservation in private places clashes with the need of the bereaved to gather, in private, close to ‘what remains’ of the deceased. A proposal for the reform of the funerary laws recently drawn up by certain Italian Cremation Societies, foresees that the crematoriums can only be built in proximity to the cemeteries, in order to avoid that – as has happened in France – they are situated in anonymous, squalid, suburban industrial areas, becoming more ‘corpse disposal units’ than places with ritual connotations. Amongst the results of the upsurge in cremation there would seem to be also that of a return to the cemetery as a collective place of memory and recollection of the deceased.

#### 4. *Conclusion. Are we too exotic for Hertz?*

So, in conclusion, let’s return to Robert Hertz. What remains of his work after the incursion we have made into late modernity, in which technologically controlled cremation has become established, even in southern Europe, as a widespread choice? Hertz’s central intuition has been confirmed: the interventions on the bodies of the dead reflect the ‘collective representations’, modelled by social and cultural dynamics. Nowadays, our

<sup>38</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> FAVOLE, LIGI and VIAZZO 2004.

<sup>40</sup> DOUGLAS DAVIES 2000.

<sup>41</sup> MICHAUD NÉRARD 2012, pp. 57-61.

principal theory is that, although it is not (or *not yet*) majoritarian, cremation appears to be in strong continuity with the social practices and the cultural representations of western society. Culture, in an anthropological sense, is not expressed only in beliefs and abstract ‘thoughts’, but is *incorporated* and *acted out*. The *work* on the body is guided by the collective representations. The acceptance and diffusion of cremation in our society thus allows us to understand the profound transformations that we are experiencing. Hertz was right in his theory of collective representations!

We have however encountered a characteristic of the contemporary funerary procedures and the new funerary rituals that distances us considerably from Hertz: the lack of the ‘future’. What remains of the processuality of death? Why are the bodies, through the cremation and the trituration of the bones, ‘nullified’ – except for the residual ashes – immediately after death? The ‘low intensity’ rituals<sup>42</sup> that characterise contemporary society seem to mark a lack of future. The journey of the ‘soul’, whatever we mean by this, is somewhat uncertain and, above all, it does not give rise to great narrations. Certainly, also today «the stay of the soul between the living is somewhat illegitimate and clandestine»,<sup>43</sup> for this reason we continue to feel the need for rituals that facilitate the separation and the caesura between the living and the dead. But the souls (or what remains of them) appear to be destined to wander continuously: the dead are no longer inhabitants of this world, but – rather like the so-called ‘illegal immigrants’ (*clandestini*, in italian) – they do not even become fully-fledged citizens of some afterlife. Our society, as many intellectuals have observed, seems to have lost sight of the future, being focussed on the present and the past. The same thing happens, it seems to me, at the moment of death. After death, writes Hertz, the individual enters this mythical society of souls that *every society constructs in its own image*. Indeed, above all when we look at it from the point of view of those who choose cremation, the afterlife appears to be today a ‘non-place’, lacking strong identifying and community references, a bit like the non-places that populate the *surmodernité*.<sup>44</sup> A society locked in its crisis and tormented by the migratory flows that ‘disturb’ the established order of the West, is producing an afterlife, or rather a non-afterlife, without a future. Destined to be clandestine, the souls move towards a *nèantisation*, in the same way as their bodies. A very ‘hertzian’ picture, if read from the standpoint of the relationship between the ‘collective representations’ and death. But certainly, to Hertz and to those of his era, it would appear as a very exotic and very distant picture, even more than the Dayak of Borneo!

### *Bibliography*

ARIÈS, P., 1977. *L'homme devant la mort*, Seuil, Paris.

AUGÉ, M., 1992. *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Seuil, Paris.

BELHASSEN, P., 1997. *La cremation: le cadavre et la loi*, Lgdj, Paris.

<sup>42</sup> ORTOLEVA 2011.

<sup>43</sup> HERTZ 2007, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> AUGÉ 1992.

- DEFANTI, C.A., 2007. *Soglie. Medicine e fine della vita*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.
- DE MARTINO, E., 2008. *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.
- DOUGLAS DAVIES, J., 2000. *Morte, riti e credenze*, Paravia Scriptorium, Torino (ed. or. *Death, ritual and belief*, Continuum International Publishing, London, 1997).
- ELIAS, N., 1982. *Über die Einsamkeit der Sterbenden in unseren Tagen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt.
- FAVOLE, A., LIGI, G. and VIAZZO, P. (eds), 2004. Luoghi dei vivi, luoghi dei morti, *La Ricerca Folklorica* 49.
- FAVOLE, A., 2003. *Resti di umanità. Vita sociale del corpo dopo la morte*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.
- FAVOLE, A., 2007. Robert Hertz e i Dayak Ngaju del Borneo, un secolo dopo, *Studi Tanatologici* 2, pp. 125-135.
- HERTZ, R., 1907. Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort, *Année Sociologique* 10, pp. 48-137 (Republished in *Studi tanatologici* 2, 2007, pp. 27-107).
- MICHAUD NÉRARD, F., 2012. *Une révolution rituelle*, Les Editions de l'Atelier, Paris.
- ORTOLEVA, P., 2011. Tutoyer la mort? Médias et sécularisation à l'âge des rituels improvisés, *Le Temps des Médias* 17, pp. 131-142.
- Rito delle Esequie*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Roma, 2011.
- SCHILLER, A., 2001. Talking heads: Capturing Dayak deathways on film, *American Ethnologist*, 28.1, pp. 32-55.
- SOZZI, M., 2004. Luoghi e non-luoghi dei morti: la cremazione in Occidente in età moderna e contemporanea, *La Ricerca Folklorica* 49, pp. 37-43.
- SOZZI, M., 2009. *Reinventare la morte. Introduzione alla tanatologia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari.
- VERGA, F., 2003/2004. *Il rito del commiato presso il tempio crematorio di Torino. Verso una nuova ritualità funebre*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Torino.
- VOVELLE M., 1983. *La mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours*, Gallimard, Paris.
- WALTER T., 2001. I funerali alla svolta del millennio, in M. SOZZI (ed.), *La scena degli addii*, Paravia Scriptorium, Torino, pp. 37-42.

Edizioni ETS  
Piazza Carrara, 16-19, I-56126 Pisa  
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com  
Finito di stampare nel mese di febbraio 2017

