Chapter 7

Ritual and Remembrance at Archaic Crustumerium
The Transformations of Past and Modern Materialities in the Cemetery of Cisterna Grande (Rome, Italy)

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ABSTRACT This article presents some preliminary results from the excavations of the Remembering the Dead project in the Archaic cemetery area of Cisterna Grande (Crustumerium, Rome, Italy). The article discusses the materialities of the tombs and the different postdepositional formation processes affecting them. It is acknowledged that we encounter transformed materialities, and thus, the concept of postdepositional history is introduced in this context. This concept is suggested to incorporate the way in which different postdepositional processes and events have affected human behaviour both in the past and in the present.

The concept of materiality refers to the processes of creating meanings and identities through the active use of material culture in the past (cf. DeMarrais et al 1996:16; Miller & Tilley 1996; Thomas 1996:82; DeMarrais 2004). Through the materiality of tombs people created and recreated symbolic meanings related to a crucial rite of passage, however, different religious beliefs and social conventions were interwoven into the rituals and practices, reflecting shared ideologies and social hierarchies (e.g. Parker Pearson 1999). In past communities the visible structures of tombs were also likely to be used to maintain the social memory and remembrance of the deceased (cf. Jones 2003; Williams 2003). The understanding of different aspects of funerary practices is not made any easier by the fact that in the process of excavation we encounter only partial, and in some cases, transformed materialities. Furthermore, the modern perceptions of past materialities and the discovery of them in the first place through the act of excavation create extra layers of interpretational bias.

The differences in the materiality of tombs and burials have an impact on modern understanding of the past. Rich and more exceptional burials tend to receive more attention than simpler tombs. Thus, when the burial custom of a period is considered poor, this can have a significant effect on the amount of resources that are directed in the study of its tombs. It is possible to argue that in the Latin area in central Italy the archaeologically observed decline in the quality and quantity of grave goods between the Orientalising period (c. 700 – 570 BC) and the Archaic period (c. 570 – 470 BC) has directly affected the study of the latter, both regionally and locally (cf. Colonna 1977). I have presented elsewhere (Rajala 2007) the consequences the modern perceptions of this past material change have for the archaeological knowledge of Archaic Latin burial practices. In this article I want to discuss how depositional and postdepositional processes and the observations made during archaeological work affect our knowledge of Archaic Latin tombs. I will show that these processes can simultaneously both obscure and shed light on rituals and remembrance.

Our project Remembering the Dead has been excavating at Cisterna Grande in one of the cemetery areas of Crustumerium in Rome in central Italy since 2004.
Crustumerium (Fig. 1) was one of the Latin rivals of Rome in Latium vetus. It was located in the Tiber valley about ten kilometres north of Rome. The site of the town was settled during the Early Iron Age, the ninth century BC (Amoroso 2004). By the sixth century BC the whole town area was occupied (Amoroso 2002). The peak of the town was during the Orientalising period around the seventh century BC. Rome defeated Crustumerium and the neighbouring Fidenae in 500/499 BC. After that the town declined rapidly and finally vanished altogether in the early fourth century BC (Quilici & Quilici Gigli 1980; di Gennaro 1999; Amoroso 2000). Unlike Fidenae, Crustumerium has remained rural, providing an excellent opportunity to study its cemeteries and their social, ritual, temporal and landscape contexts.

Figure 2. Crustumerium and Cisterna Grande.

Cisterna Grande (Fig. 2) is the third cemetery area at Crustumerium to undergo proper excavation. The largest excavated cemetery area is Monte Del Bufalo, located immediately outside the settlement in the southeast. Another main excavation area, Sasso Bianco, is located in the north of the ancient town (cf. di Gennaro 1990; 1999). Cisterna Grande lies on a sloping hillside in the northeast of the town near an ancient road cutting. Our area at Cisterna Grande was chosen for the excavations after recent looting suggested the presence of Orientalising tombs. Instead, the first tombs exposed were Archaic chamber tombs, and after realising their potential, the project has been concentrating on them ever since. The excavations in the cemetery area of Cisterna Grande have been carried out in collaboration with the Superintendency of Rome and Dr Francesco di Gennaro, the director of this archaeological area. The main phase of the excavation project ran for four years (2004–2007) and the publication is planned to follow soon after. The main aim of the project is to study the metaphorical funerary representations of a Latin Iron Age and Archaic community. Tombs, with their burials, are physical evidence of past rituals, and as physical structures they form part of a wider ritual landscape. These landscapes are studied at a local level using digital and traditional methods. In addition to digital single context planning, the project makes use of GIS and virtual modeling. However, the limited knowledge of Archaic tombs (cf. Colonna 1977; Ampolo 1984; Naso 1990) makes all new field observations important.

In Latium vetus the excavation of an Archaic cemetery is a rare event. Therefore, the project is able to study less well-known burial customs and tomb types. The excavations have also exposed archaeological phenomena, which look unique and unusual at the present moment but may become better known and more commonplace in the future. These observations relating to depositional and postdepositional events and their consequences in the past and present are the topic of this article.

The Shared Ritual in the Archaic Period

In central Italy during the Orientalising period in the eighth and early seventh century BC the deceased were normally buried in trench (fossa) tombs. This tomb type was already in use earlier, during the Iron Age. In the best-known Latial cemetery of Osteria dell’Osa (Bietti Sestieri 1992), northeast of Rome, and at Crustumerium (Belelli Marchesini pers. comm.), it was dominant both during the Early Iron Age (c. 900 – 700 BC)\(^1\) and Orientalising period. Fossa tombs were cut into local volcanic tuff in cemetery areas outside the settlements (e.g. Bartoloni et al 1997). The simplest fossa tombs are modest rectangular trenches, but later types have absidal or lateral niches for grave goods. The so called tomba a loculo have one or two large side niches (loculi) for the deceased and the grave goods. Most tomba a loculo were made for a single inhumation (tomba a loculo tipo Narce) but occasionally one tomb was prepared for a double inhumation.

\(^1\) It is evident that the recent dates derived from dendrochronology will change the absolute chronology of later Italian prehistory. At present the new findings have not resulted in a universally agreed date for the beginning of the Early Iron Age (Latial Period II in Latium vetus). The two suggested dates are 950/925 BC (Pacciarelli 2000:68, Fig. 38), and 1020 BC (Nijboer et al 2002:Table 1). The latter high chronology involves pushing the beginning of the Latial Period III of the Early Iron Age back in time, and subsequently, the beginning of the Latial Period II as well. The changes have significant implications for our understanding of social change. However, since no consensus has been reached and all other dates discussed in this article are based on the traditional chronology, new absolute dates are not applied.
burial (tomba a doppio loculo tipo Monterano), normally for a couple (a man and a woman) or for a woman and a child. Most of these tombs have relatively wealthy grave goods. In the cemetery areas of Crustumurium the deceased have a dozen or more pottery vessels, together with jewellery and/or other personal items (Paolini 1990; di Gennaro 1999). The richest tombs have bronze vessels and whole ceramic drinking sets with wine containers and cups (di Gennaro 1988; 1990a; 1999; 2001; Paolini 1990; Ceci et al 1997).

At the end of the Orientalising period in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BC there was a general transition to chamber tombs in Latium vetus (cf. Bedini 1980; 1981; 1983; 1990; Naso 1990; di Gennaro 1999; De Santis 2002). Like earlier tombs, chamber tombs were cut into tuff, but they generally accommodated more than one or two inhumations and are commonly thought to have been family tombs. Chambers are normally rectangular, room-like spaces, which are entered through an entrance corridor (dromos). The earliest chamber tomb at Crustumurium is from Sasso Bianco; it did not have a dromos but an entrance shaft (Paolini 1990). The first proper chamber tombs with dromoi are somewhat later, from the end of the seventh century if not from the beginning of the sixth century BC (di Gennaro 1999). Those early chambers did not have niches (loculi) carved into their walls although in some later ones and in many other places in central Italy they do (e.g. Santoro 1977; Bedini 1990).

Figure 3. Tombs 12 and 17 at Cisterna Grande

The chambers excavated to date at Cisterna Grande (Fig. 3), although limited in number, have introduced a higher level of variability than expected. The chambers have different shapes, sizes, depths, orientations and designs, and the quality of finishing differs significantly. In addition, the dromoi differ in their lengths, widths, depths and the quality of finishing. Most of the tombs had door slabs and other blocking features still in situ at the entrance. Many were only blocked with irregular stones but others had large single slabs closing the doorway. On the basis of the varied architecture one can recognise at least two, if not three, chamber tomb types that were used simultaneously. Nevertheless, the cemetery was not exclusively Archaic since our excavations have discovered one Late Orientalising trench tomb belonging to the later tomba a loculo tipo Narce type, preliminarily dated here to the late seventh century BC. However, the remaining six tombs are chamber tombs.

The first chamber tomb type consists of fairly large rectangular chambers with one or more loculi on the walls and additional burials in coffins or trunks on the floor. These chambers tend to have longer and deeper dromoi than the other type. Among these larger chambers there is one which may be viewed as more ‘monumental’, with its three-metre deep dromos and tent-like ceiling still intact. The second chamber tomb type is more modest with a low semicircular chamber, two slightly irregular loculi on the opposite sides of the chamber and a shallow, short and relatively narrow dromos. The stone surfaces were left relatively uneven, with clear pick marks visible. The latter type would have required much less manpower for its construction. Preliminarily, the hypothesis is that these different types reflect different economic and social standings of the families or individuals buried in the tombs. However, the scale of the differences seems to be subtle.

All burials recovered to date from our excavations at Cisterna Grande are inhumations. Most age groups and both sexes are represented. The deceased normally have one or more pieces of jewelry and/or weapons or tools with them. Interestingly, there is evidence for dis-articulation and redeposition of bodies. On the basis of our excavations the reuse of loculi seems to have been common-place. The loculi tend to have been closed with tiles or with stones or the deceased were put into coffins although some were simply wrapped in shrouds.

Transformed Materiality and Postdepositional Histories

The local characteristics of the geology at Cisterna Grande make the chamber tombs quite exceptional. The bedrock of the hill is formed by numerous relatively thin, soft volcanic stone layers that cannot properly support the weight of tuff ceilings over the voids of the chambers. The ceilings of the chambers are normally of so-called tufo giallo and cappellaccio, the latter layer positioned below the former (cf. Fig. 4). The chambers have been dug through a layer of breccia tufacea, a loose mix of pumice, angular pieces and sandy matrix, into volcanic clay. The loculi are usually cut into breccia tufacea so that their benches are of volcanic clay. When volcanic clay is moist, this ‘stone’ can be cut like butter. This weakness of underlying breccia tufacea and volcanic clay has resulted in many chambers collapsing. As a consequence, excavators have to remove thick layers of stone.
The tombs, even if still intact, are not empty. Cisterna Grande lies in a slope with visible effects of water erosion resulting from episodic torrential rainfall, typical for the area in winter or during thunderstorms. During the excavations we have also exposed ancient gullies carved in tuff. Some of the water was definitely absorbed in soil and infiltrated into the chambers through structural cracks in stone. When the tombs lie relatively deep and there are no collapses, the clay forms annual ‘varves’. This clay matter, when dry, is hard, shiny and toffee-like but mud-like when wet. It is called limo, which actually means silt in Italian, but the term is generally used in archaeological contexts to describe certain clayey fills in chamber tombs (di Gennaro pers.comm.). Most of the tombs at Cisterna Grande have collapsed, and additionally, there seem to have been mudslide-type events filling in the voids; therefore, only in very few occasions any remains of varve-like formations have been observed. In the case of the smaller tomb type the chambers are filled with only a few massive layers of clay. On the other hand, larger tombs may only have one two fills together with a massive collapse fill of clay and volcanic clay (cf. Fig. 4). No matter if the tomb has collapsed or not, the result is that the excavators have to remove a large amount of clayey soil that has infiltrated into the chambers.

The above-described continuous processes, the infiltration of the limo clay and the erosion of the original surface, are two examples of postdepositional processes (e.g. Schiffer 1987; Goldberg et al 1993; Thorpe 1998). Even if their origins are different, one being natural and the other at least partly anthropogenic, they both change the state of the structure. In addition, the contents of the tombs alter in other ways when the bodies of the deceased are consumed and the materials of grave goods are partly or totally corroded. The infiltration of clay affects this process as well. The metal objects may have broken when the clay matrix shrunk during the dry season. The organic materials may have discoloured the clay and be replaced by it through time. Similarly, clay has replaced most of the bone and only a thin sheet of white surface remains of the bone matter. This replacement and the resulting deterioration of bone material are characteristic to the local geology and have direct consequences in the difficulty of sexing the deceased.

If infiltration and erosion are examples of processes, collapses in their turn are an example of postdepositional events (cf. Thorpe 1998:Figure 16). Naturally, if one wishes to be pedantic, a single act of ploughing results in a cutting event. However, some of the collapses are singular events whereas others are episodes in a series of events. Since not all the tombs have collapsed, and since every collapse is unique, the tombs at Cisterna Grande have different postdepositional histories.

Postdepositional history has been briefly mentioned earlier in archaeology in the connection of site formation processes (e.g. Conkey 1980:626; Hassan 1995:559). Naturally, the detailed descriptions of postdepositional processes at singular sites (e.g. Farrard 1993) or affecting a group of sites (e.g. Bar-Yosef 1993) can be seen as postdepositional histories even if the concept has not been used. Occasionally, processual archaeologists have also referred to different site building processes (Sullivan 1978) and pedoturbatory histories (Wood & Johnson 1979). In these contexts, however, postdepositional history is not used to describe a specific chronological narrative of one archaeological structure but to analyse generalised categories or to recognise possible disturbances which skew distributions or alter objects and assemblages.

Since the tombs at Cisterna Grande have been transformed by different events and processes during their postdepositional histories, we encounter only transformed materiality (cf. Edensor 2005:326). At Cisterna Grande decay and deterioration continues during the excavations. Since the walls of the chambers tend to be cut into soft volcanic clay, they are prone to crack and erode when exposed to the sunlight and dry heat of an Italian summer. The chambers continue to expand whilst the outmost layer of volcanic clay peels away. The resulting, slightly uneven, wall looks exactly like the
‘original’ walls of the tomb. Luckily, in most cases it is relatively easy to demarcate different transformations due to the distinctiveness of different fills resulting from the events.

Postdepositional history is part of the biography of a tomb. Biographical metaphor (Holtorf 1998; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Gilchrist 2000; Jones 2002:83-4, 86-9) emphasises the importance of interpretation and temporal change. In the case of funerary archaeology, it also underlines the necessity of creating the narrative of the transformed materiality of a tomb and the need of interpreting all field observations. Since a ‘life history’ includes the changes caused by the postdepositional processes (Schiffer 1987:13), it incorporates the transformations of the tombs as well as changing cultural meanings. These life histories seem to be all lightly different at Cisterna Grande although clear similarities can be observed between certain tombs. As a whole these narratives create a body of life histories that are part of the landscape history of the site. The full life history of the site (cf. Rajala 2002, 2003) includes firstly the use life of the cemetery during the pre-Roman period and then the long phase of deterioration while the area was under plough. Finally, in the present, tomb robbers and archaeologists transform the site for different purposes.

In this context of postdepositional history, postdepositional processes and events can be understood to relate to the life history of a tomb in two different ways. Firstly, formation processes can take place after a tomb’s proper use life without any human observation and awareness. However, postdepositional events can affect human actions directly both in the past and in the present. In this second case a postdepositional event may lead to the abandonment of a chamber or to the modification of its use. In the present, tomb robbers who try to find profitable objects to be sold illicitly may consider the shear amount of physicality related to reaching the sparse grave goods and decide to leave them in peace. Archaeologists, on the other hand, have to consider different research strategies. The modes of digging and the time dedicated for recording different accumulation and collapse layers are factors to be taken into account. In addition, postdepositional processes and events affect the preservation of the chamber and its burials, and thus ultimately, our interpretations.

Postdepositional Events and Burials

In this section I will give some examples of the importance of postdepositional events and show how they have affected human behaviour. Since these are preliminary interpretations, the future analysis by my assistant Heli Arima (University of Helsinki) as part of her PhD work or further contributions by trench supervisor Maija Helamaa may arrive at different conclusions. Nevertheless, the narratives presented here serve as an example of the kind of postdepositional histories the project can tell.

Tomb 12 (Fig. 3) lies in the middle of our excavation area, between Tombs 11 and 17. It is oriented northwest – southeast and it is an example of the larger tomb type. Its chamber was excavated over two seasons due to its numerous stone and limo layers. This suggests that Tomb 12 seems to have collapsed as a result of a series of postdepositional events. The consecutive collapses seem to have started early, already during or immediately after the use life of the tomb. This can be assumed on the basis of the location and condition of the skeleton 31241 (Fig. 5) and the remains of a coffin 31226. The skeleton lay on its stomach, totally articulated, next to the empty coffin on the chamber floor. On top of the coffin there were some smaller stones suggesting that a brief collapse event may have knocked the coffin. The fact that the skeleton was articulated with no anatomic parts missing shows that this event happened when the body had not yet been consumed.

Figure 5. Skeleton 31241 in Tomb 12 (photo by H. Arima).
The situation in Tomb 12 was totally unexpected. The observations made about the coffin, the skeleton, the stones and the fills all contributed to the conclusion that we were facing an unusual, individual case. The uniqueness of the situation was acknowledged in recording, and the resulting narrative shows how the tombs can testify of their distinctive postdepositional history. However, we cannot be certain if the members of the family noticed that the tomb had started to fall into pieces or if the start of the postdepositional sequence affected their behaviour in any way. In any case, the skeleton remained on the floor unmoved and the blocking stones outside where all in place.

Tomb 12 and its many consecutive layers of collapsed tufo and accumulated limo also highlight the physical effort needed to reach the find layers. This also points to the extent which the structure of the chamber has transformed. It is impossible, therefore, to know the original form of the space where the final part of the burial ritual took place. Similarly, the same is also true of any of the collapsed tombs. None of them can be experienced as they originally were. We can only reconstruct their structure and create reconstructed materialities as the end product of our interpretation process. Their pristine architecture is forever lost, but we can infer it from the undamaged chambers at Crustumerium and elsewhere in central Italy.

Tomb 17 (Fig. 3) lies higher up in the slope, north of Tomb 12. Its orientation is west-northwest – east-southeast and like Tomb 12 it belongs to the larger tomb type. The massive stone deposits in its chamber suggest that its ceiling collapsed as a result of one devastating episode. When the dromos of the tomb was excavated, it contained a series of fills instead of the normal single fill. Some of them were rubble sloping to the blocking slab of the tomb. In addition, there were numerous layers of irregular tufo blocks lying on stratified limo clay. From the outside and inside of the chamber it became apparent that the arch of the doorway had collapsed and part of the material had slipped into the dromos.

In this case, the postdepositional event seems to have affected the behaviour of the members of the past community. This is shown by the discovery of an inhumation at the beginning of the excavation. The burial and its blocking and/or marking stones were clearly placed into the uppermost fill of the dromos. Since the single fills of the dromoi are usually relatively findless, they are usually removed as swiftly as possible. This time the excavators had removed only twenty centimetres from the end of the dromos when they encountered a skeleton. The finding of the buried remains was totally un-anticipated.

This skeleton 31707 (Fig. 6) was buried with some grave goods. The bronze fibulae and bullae discovered date the burial to the Archaic period. The inhumation is very similar to the Archaic ones found at Casale Massima (Bedini 1980; 1983). Digging simple trenches was not entirely unusual during this period but digging one inside a filled dromos of a chamber is unheard of. The existence of an Archaic burial on a level over a metre higher than the floor of the dromos above a series of layers of collapsed material testifies that the arch had collapsed already during the Archaic period and the dromos remained covered by soil.

Figure 6. Skeleton 31707 in Tomb 17 (photo by U. Rajala).
chambers cut into two earlier trenches, and thus, made the group unusually densely spaced. Alternatively, this could be interpreted as a sign of forgetting the existence of the earlier tombs and their location. Therefore, this group cannot be taken as an ultimate manifestation of the existence of family burial plots. On the other hand, the act of exceptional interment in the dromos of Tomb 17 can be interpreted as evidence for the Archaic ownership of funerary plots. This illustrates the will to maintain rights to the liminal space around the town area.

The example of Tomb 17 shows how the past postdepositional events have affected contemporary behaviour at Crustumerium. The collapse of the arch has denied a family any further use of the tomb. However, the people who have known about the event have wanted either to preserve or claim the rights to the plot or to show remembrance and affiliation. During the excavations in 2007 it became clear that the chamber was from a relatively early period, and the original burials were deposited in the end of the Orientalising period. Thus, the exceptional character of this burial is highly suggestive of being a consequence of the latter intension.

Conclusions

The results from the excavations of the Remembering the Dead project at Cisterna Grande at Crustumerium have encouraged a review of the importance of the postdepositional processes and events and their effect on human behaviour. The Archaic chamber tombs here belong to at least two different types and they have also had different postdepositional histories. Some of the tombs have collapsed as a consequence of local geology. The collapses have either been rapid or occurred in stages over a longer period of time. All these alternatives can be induced from the material remains of the chambers and their fills.

As a consequence of these observations, the concept of postdepositional history has been used to describe and narrate the different fortunes of the tombs. Postdepositional history is thus a part of the life history of a tomb. Postdepositional histories consist of different postdepositional processes and events that can be either natural or a result of human agency. Together different histories of the tombs at Cisterna Grande make up a part of the biography of this site. Different histories have changed the outlook of the tombs and their original deposits, and therefore, they result with the transformed materialities of these tombs.

Different transformed materialities and postdepositional histories have affected human behaviour in different ways, both in the past and in the present. In the present the archaeological practices of the excavations reflect the physicality of removing deposits from the filled chambers and the importance of recording different collapse and accumulation layers. The investment in digging Archaic chamber tombs also reflects the awareness of the importance of the findings regardless the time and effort involved. Nevertheless, the realities of removing spoil seem to deter looting.

The archaeological examples presented in this article demonstrate both the early occurrence of the postdepositional events and the actions they caused. In the case of Tomb 12 the collapses seem to have started immediately after the burial in the coffin was made during the Archaic period. The event that resulted with the momentarily overturned coffin was also the first in a long series of episodic collapses. We do not know if these episodes affected the past behaviour but in the present the existence of multiple consecutive collapses and accumulation layers slowed down the excavation of the tomb.

Tomb 17 in its turn is remarkable in many different ways. Not only does the existence of the Archaic inhumation in the uppermost part of the dromos fill show that the chamber collapsed during the use life of the cemetery but it also gives evidence for the application of burial ritual in the case when the burial chamber was not available. The co-existence of the chamber tomb and the exceptional inhumation as an entity is a proof of both remembrance and ownership. Its sheer fragile materiality affected our work and enabled unparalleled interpretation.

The current project at Cisterna Grande will continue, unexpectedly, for one more short season in early 2008. During this coming season we will expose the earlier use life of our final tomb (Tomb 18). After that, we will be able to summarise those unique narratives the excavated chamber tombs allow us to tell.

Acknowledgements

The interpretations presented here could not have been made without the joint efforts of all team members. I would especially like to thank the trench supervisors FM Heli Arima and HuK Maija Helamaa who were responsible for Tombs 12 and 17. Naturally, I am grateful to Francesco di Gennaro and Soprintendenza archeologica di Roma for the collaboration, which has made these excavations possible. The Academy of Finland (grants n. 211057 and 213324), the British Academy, the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Niilo Helander Foundation have generously given funding to the excavations. In addition, we have got assistance from the Fourth Municipality of the city of Rome, Muuritutkimus ky, Instituto Romanum Finlandiae, the British School at Rome, Gruppo Archeologico dell’Associazione del Dopolavoro Ferroviario di Roma, University of Cambridge, and University of Oulu. Dr Phil Mills and Francesco di Gennaro kindly commented on the earlier draft of this article.
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