Sharing Tombs: Forms, Practices and Contexts of Tomb Reuse in Pre-Roman South-East Italy

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PhD Dissertation, Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Innsbruck (Austria), 2014–2019
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From the fifth century BC onwards, and especially in the fourth century, many tombs in pre-Roman south-east Italy, i.e. present-day Apulia and the Melfese in northern Basilicata, were repeatedly reopened and reused for successive inhumations. Tomb reuse, as a distinct social and cultural practice, was as ubiquitous as it was multifaceted. It occurred in both humble graves and ‘elite’ burials, in northern Apulia as well as on the Salento peninsula, in both urban centres and rural settlements, and not only in larger tomb types, such as chamber and grotticella tombs, but also in smaller ones, otherwise primarily intended for individual burials. However, the manifestations of this practice, in terms of time sequence and intensity of reuse, chronological and depositional patterns and, above all, the way in which the bodies and artefacts of the ‘older’ dead were dealt with, vary between sites and sometimes even within one necropolis.

The PhD thesis aims at providing the first integrated overview of the forms and practices of tomb reuse in pre-Roman Apulia and neighbouring regions. It focuses on (1) where and when tomb reuse occurred as well as diachronic shifts and synchronous differentiations on a local–regional level, (2) how the material body and the grave goods of preceding depositions were addressed, i.e. depositional dynamics and post-funeral practices, and (3) the systemic and social contexts within which tombs were reopened and reused. Based on eighteen case-study sites with more than 200 funerary assemblages, the dissertation combines a broad regional overview of tomb reuse with an in-depth analysis of its local characteristics.

Countering the assumption that post-funeral practices were primarily pragmatic and circumstantial, it is argued that tomb reuse was a highly complex procedure that forced communities into performing funerary practices for the recently deceased and, at the same time, negotiating and formalizing, or even ritualizing, the way in which bodies and objects of ‘older’ dead were manipulated. As for the use life of tombs, practices in pre-Roman south-east Italy ranged from simultaneous double burials or tomb reuse after a short time span to temporally distant reuse; in terms of funerary space, treatment of the remains of previous depositions ranged from reduction within the original tomb to external secondary deposition to complete removal from the funerary context, and in terms of the material body, from preserving its integrity to effectuating its disintegration. As for grave goods, unlike objects from single burials in ‘closed finds’, which were deposited in one depositional act, relate to one deceased and pinpoint one moment in time, objects in repeatedly reopened tombs were subject to discontinuous processes and practices. Tomb reuse obscures, or even dissolves, the nexus of grave goods, their relation to the deceased and the date of burial. The dissertation tries to convert this methodological challenge into an analytical opportunity by focussing on the ‘biographies’ of objects and categories of objects over the dynamic use lives of reused tombs. For instance, distinct ‘individual’ sets of grave goods may have been added, existing ones supplemented with new objects, or previously deposited objects selectively incorporated and re-contextualized within later ensembles, as older items, such as body-related adornments, may have followed the remains and stayed with them, been disassociated from them and re-deposited both inside or outside the grave, or completely removed from the funerary context to be replaced by new ones within the tomb, as in the case of pottery. From a practice-based perspective, tomb reuse thus opens up a path for differentiating between the ways in which different categories of objects were handled and probably also perceived, and highlighting the intricate temporality of objects in multi-phase funerary contexts.
Multi-deposition tombs are a privileged but potentially problematic source of evidence for social models that draw on the formation and representation of social identities, groups and communities. The thesis aims to provide an overview of interpretative approaches, pointing out that heterogeneous cases of reused tombs have sometimes been normalized and homogenized in archaeological narratives, e.g., those that rely on family and kinship notions, while analogous cases have been put into divergent social-archaeological frameworks. The dissertation aims to be sensitive to the social dimension of tomb reuse without squeezing it into a catchall explanation that would fail to do justice to the variability of reuse practices and the social dynamics that informed them. To this end, anthropological and archaeological data are dovetailed in order to outline social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion wherever possible. Above all, the case studies are contextualized within the respective necropoleis, tomb groups and settlements. On the level of local communities, tomb reuse and post-funeral practices were part and parcel of a highly complex 'life with the dead', manifested in the blending of settlement, funerary, and religious spaces that deeply characterized the non-Greek communities of south-east Italy. It is argued that reused tombs constituted a socially and symbolically charged arena for a prolonged, active relationship with the deceased and for mobilizing, mediating, and maintaining inter-generational memories as well as for anchoring collective belonging. On a regional level, the dissertation tries to demonstrate that various forms of multiple deposition, tomb reuse, and post-funeral practices intensified in the fourth century, immediately prior to, or at the same time as, the introduction of larger tomb types in both the coastal cities and inland centres. It is argued that these processes complemented each other and were due to the same effort to express social belonging and togetherness in funerary representation. In the context of this formative period, the analysis of tomb reuse may amplify and deepen our understanding of the communities in pre-Roman south-east Italy, providing an indicator for processes of regionalization and the increase of social complexity.

In terms of methodology, the dissertation combines a practice-based perspective with a comparative approach. For analysing the funerary evidence, a methodological framework is elaborated which differentiates forms of deposition, manipulation and re-deposition, drawing on French archaeothanatology. On this basis, the dissertation develops a practice-oriented perspective on funerary assemblages which does not prioritize tomb types, funerary architecture and grave goods but focuses on the dynamic history of use and reuse of tombs. This perspective is sensitive to the natural processes and past practices, or series thereof, which underlie the material patterns in reused tombs, and allows the material record to be unpacked in order to reconstruct the ways of engagement with bodies and objects in post-funeral practices, routines and rituals. With these analytical tools, the funerary evidence of the individual case-study sites is evaluated, both separately and within the context of local necropoleis and settlements, and then brought together in order to devise comparative perspectives on the regional level. Advocating a holistic approach, the dissertation aims to give a comprehensive overview of forms, practices and contexts of tomb reuse in pre-Roman south-east Italy and, by pointing out gaps and limitations of present research, to provide a methodologically sensitive and theoretically informed contribution to future fieldwork.