

Exhumation, from tomb violation to immortality strategy

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Abstract. The exhumation, is the procedure of opening the tomb, unearthing and recovery of the mortal remains from the sepulchre. Despite the reluctance towards the violation of the burials in all cultures and in all historical periods, the exhumation action underlying the study of ancient necropolises and the knowledge that derives from them, took place over time and still occurs in different populations for very sundry reasons. If we exclude accidental causes and the ordinary disinterment practiced today to create space in western cemeteries, it is observed that from an anthropological and historical point of view the exhumation, going against what is an innate principle of human nature, has always been a dense choice of cultural, political, ideological, and religious meanings, charged with serious implications of social and moral order.

Keywords: exhumation; burials; funeral ritual, double burial

Introduction

There is no doubt about the contribution that the excavation and study of tombs and necropolises have provided to the reconstruction of civilizations of every historical era. Nevertheless, it is sometimes forgotten that such research involved the violation and exhumation of burials and, on many occasions, the transport of human remains with their grave goods to medical schools, laboratories of anthropology, museums, and collections in countries often different from their original territory. In several cases anatomical collections are held and sometimes forgotten in university spaces that are now often closed, without dedicated personnel and in a state of neglect (1).

Since these are civilizations distant in time and space, our sensitivity has often not been particularly affected by this reflection. Conversely, this consideration has been raised with more emphasis by American scholars, concerning their history and the fact of having to manage a relatively recent past that is not particularly stratified. The guilt over the treatment of Native Americans was extended to the recognition of missed respect reserved to their burials in the

Vermillion Accord on Human Remains of 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. The Vermillion Accord is a set of six clauses adopted by the World Archaeological Congress [WAC] concerning the science and treatment of bodies. Its development and adoption by archaeologists and indigenous groups was a key moment in the history of the burial movement. This document provides a set of principles to be adopted regarding, decision-making, behaviour and ethical policies in respect of scientific use of human remains by archaeologists and researchers.

The importance of respecting remains of human beings, regardless of their origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition, and the consideration, when reasonable and legally possible, of wishes of the dead or their communities regarding the deposition of remains, has been affirmed (2).

The deposition and the tomb are often at the centre of wishes and recommendations of the deceased. The tomb, in fact, should represent the place where the individual, having reached the end of life, faces eternity in an uninterrupted and undisturbed rest. Despite the reluctance to violate the tomb, present in all cultures

and in all historical periods, the exhumation by which human remains are extracted from burial ground, has taken place over time for very different reasons, from mechanical to natural causes.

The disinterment, extraction, or even only partial exposure of the body can be caused by phenomena such as atmospheric agents, telluric movements, action of animals, or even construction of new roads, of which the emergency archaeology is full of examples.

If we exclude such random motivations, exhumation going against what is perceived as an innate principle of human nature has always been felt as an action charged with serious social and moral implications and consequent responsibility.

Joanne Burke in her study on fear in history has put fright of death first, particularly death in misery that can lead to an unworthy and anonymous burial within a mass grave and, the worst fear, body desecration (3). Exhumation, destruction and dissection of the corpse are terrifying prospects because they attack the sacredness of the physical body. The fear that this eventuality would compromise the soul as well has been widespread in history. Several epigraphs of ancient Rome necropolises offer numerous testimonies of picturesque curses addressed to passers-by to ensure the safety of the tomb and its content (4).

In a totally opposite dialectic, anthropological research has highlighted how in many past and present cultures, exhumation is instead an integral part of a complex funeral ritual, often associated with two different steps/parts funerals (5).

In the early 20th century, Robert Hertz wrote a piece of pioneering work on the practice of double burial among the Dayak of Borneo. Inside the funeral ceremony the corpse was buried for the first time in a given burial place and then exhumed after a period destined to decomposition. Subsequently, bones were recovered, cleaned, becoming the protagonists of a second funeral, more important for intensity and content than the first. Hertz theorized a procedural equation of dying in which death did not take place in an instant but required a relatively long period in which the soul and body transformations went through parallel destinies. Physical transformations of decomposition were a mirror of the journey that the soul performed to the kingdom of the deceased and was related to the pro-

gressive processing of grief by the survivors. The long process of metamorphosis of the deceased towards the condition of ancestor was conceived as a liminal period. The second burial marked the moment of aggregation of the deceased to the world of ancestors and the union of the grieving family to the rest of the community (6-7).

The double burial, where it is practiced, implies that the exhumation, from a sacrilegious act, becomes a cathartic passage.

In the double funeral, there is intense attention to the body and its physical processes of decomposition. However, this characteristic is common to all human societies (8-9).

The arrival of death and decomposition introduce an element of crisis into the relationship that societies established with their bodies. In fact, death threatens to put an end to the continuous interventions on the body that represent essential aspects of the process of "anthropopoiesis", that is, the construction of the human being (10).

Interventions of tanatometamorphosis and the attention to the human remains are mechanisms that extend the symbolic potential of the body even beyond death. The body of the deceased is hardly ever considered a simple "biological shell" (11)

An example of the complex relationships among the elements mentioned is given by the sequence of funeral rites among the Merina of Madagascar, studied between 1989 and 1991 by David Graeber. The *fam-dihan* is a complex ritual in which human remains of a forefather and several minor ancestors are exhumed. After being recovered from the tombs, the bodies are manipulated without much regard: they are fed, tied up and are engaged with the living in a tumultuous dance. The most important step of the ritual, which takes place six or seven years after the death and can be repeated many times afterward, consists in wrapping the exhumed corpses into a new shroud.

Through the attention to the remains, the Merina restore the memory with the ancestors. Although the *famdihan* is not only a ritual of memory, but it can also be interpreted at the same time as a practice of oblivion. It should be noted that the body of the great and minor ancestors are wrapped together, so that the shroud contains dozens of bodies whose personal identity is

being pulverized along with remains. Through ritual action, what is left is the collectively and the ideal of continuity among parental groups, while what disappears is the individuality of the deceased. A Malagasy proverb says that the dead threaten the living since they want to become numerous and the living respond by breaking and compacting the bodies of the dead to keep their number low (12).

It is also possible to find ritual practices associated with exhumation in Europe. In 1954, the Institut za Slovensko Norodpisje at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences in Ljubljana investigated the form and frequency of the double funeral custom. It emerged that in eighty-five locations in Slovenia, the use of washing the bones of exhumed persons and wrapping them in a new piece of white cloth was either still in force, or the memory of it was preserved in living people (13). In these rituals the relationship of souls with living beings ends only with the complete decomposition. It is interesting to note that some curses as “may the earth not devour you”, “may it reject you”, “may it not receive you”, acquire an eloquent meaning related to the rites of exhumation (14).

The practice of exhumation is therefore considered the norm only in cultures where the double burial system is in force. On the contrary, in the past as in the present, the extraction of corpses from the grave has always had exceptional features, which allude to reluctance and even repugnance in the face of this procedure, even in the presence of reasonable and legal reasons and that involve ethical-anthropological aspects. In approaching this topic, in fact, the strong symbolic dimension that the body takes on in all cultures cannot be overlooked (15).

The exhumation of the remains of a deceased or many burials has been in several historical occasions determined by the desire to strike and humiliate the figure of an individual or the roots of an entire people. Often, after a violent political upheaval, an ethnic conflict, or after a military conquest, the new rulers proceeded in a macabre and punitive manner with the violation and dispersion of the mortal remains of one or more individuals, to eliminate the memory and to break the thread of memories. Bodies of others, whose radical otherness allowed the exercise of post-mortem violence conceived as one of the worst atrocities that can be committed

against another human being. The punitive aspect of the exhumation of the corpse is well illustrated in a passage from the prophet Jeremiah: “[...] the bones of the kings of Judah will be extracted from their graves. [...] They will no longer be collected or buried but will become like manure on the ground” [8, vv.1-2].

In other circumstances, the exhumations took place following manifestations of violence or massacres resulting from collective hatred. In these cases, the exhumation rites were the only ones effectively reserved to the victims. Among the most dramatically current examples are the bodies of the genocide in Rwanda. Here there is a clear contrast between the northern and southern parts of the country. In the south of Rwanda, where most of the places of worship are concentrated, the remains of the victims have been unearthed and exposed, being the object of veneration and visit aimed at memory reconstruction, but also at reconstruction and overcoming the wounds left by the conflict. In the north, the scene of much of the armed conflict, the mass graves have never been opened and today it is unknown how many corpses they contain nor to whom they belong (16).

Different is the case of exhumation made prior to the transfer to national territory, or in a more dignified burial reserved to remains of an individual or a group, usually soldiers who died in battle and far from home. In this case, the exhumation, in addition to paying tribute to the deceased, it is necessary to obtain consensus among public opinion and, while maintaining a character of exceptionality, it is seen as a meritorious and necessary action (17). An example is the incessant flow of bones that crossed eastern Europe after 1989. In the aftermath of the fall of communist regimes, the repatriation of the remains of politicians and intellectuals began, but also of unknown individuals who were sent into exile or had escaped from capture. The post-socialist states of eastern Europe entrusted to these remains, carrying a symbolic sacredness, a delicate role in the politics of building of identity (18).

The history is full of examples of exhumations and subsequent burials intended to bring together or separate individuals linked by political, familiar or sentimental bounds. Although, this ritual has always been connected to mechanisms of collective emotion rather than episodes of pity towards the deceased.

Some remains are the custodian of a force capable of restoring well-being for some community, think of Christian relics. During the Middle Ages, the desire to bury loved ones near a relic led to the usage of exhumation of bodies in order to set them in niches, cells or ossuary. In fact, the desire to place loved ones in physical connection with the remains of a saint was stronger than the need to give a character of exclusivity to the family tomb (19).

Therefore, the exhumation, although experienced as an act of violence, paradoxically appears to have been reserved to persons of great notoriety, rather than to ordinary people. Indeed, history records many cases of exhumations aimed at locating the burial place of a famous person, at reconstructing the physiognomy of an individual whose somatic features were not known, at attesting the real existence of a legendary figure and reconstructing his history and state of health (20).

Among the cases of exhumation in the past, we also find those sadly linked to cases of vilification or necrophilia and we should remember the circumstances aimed at verifying the apparent deaths [Koehler 2008]. The fright of being buried alive in the 18th and 19th centuries led to the introduction of safety coffins, provided with openings from the inside and equipped with a bell to ensure communication with the outside (21). Literature, for its part, has exploited this tremendous image: the premature funeral of Edgar Allan Poe, in 1844, recounted the various cases attested and the terror that Poe himself, suffering from catalepsy, had of being buried alive (22).

In addition to motivations, the practice of exhumation has often been dictated by medical reasons, though over the centuries medicine has resorted to exhumations at the limit of morality and legality to conduct research and experiments. Between the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century in England, the scarce presence of corpses for anatomy studies favoured the formation of a black market of bodies, since 1752 a law allowed dissection for medical purposes only on corpses of criminals sentenced to death. Only fifty years later, the “escort” of executed criminals was too low to meet the demand for corpses from universities and anatomy faculties. In 1810, a Society of Anatomy was created in Edinburgh, whose members had the purpose of urging the government to

urgently amend the law; but in the meantime, someone found another way. The protagonists were the so-called corpse predators who gave life to real gangs specialized in stealing buried bodies to resell them to the schools of anatomy (23). In a short time, the obsession towards the “resurrection men” spread. Some guarded all night around new graves, and those who could afford it built heavy stone sarcophagi; the poorer ones were content to bury branches and sticks around the coffin, to make the exhumation more complex and long. In 1816, Mortsafes were invented, huge iron or stone cages, planted around the coffins that could be opened only by two people who possessed keys for the padlocks. They were left in position for six weeks, when the corpse had been buried long enough not to be more tempting (24).

In the field of forensic medicine, exhumation has represented a way of investigation of non-natural deaths and within humanitarian research groups to restore identity to individuals found in mass graves of contemporary wars. Several examples that come from the mass graves of the Spanish Civil War, many of which are still under study, can be cited (25).

In these cases, the use of exhumation for forensic medical reasons has been intricately linked to the progress of medical knowledge. In fact, today, it is possible to obtain satisfactory results even on corpses that have been buried for a long time (26). In the past, such exhumations and the consequent autopsies were carried out directly in the cemetery open to the sight of graveyard visitors, reminding us of the daily presence of death, even in its most terrifying aspects. The perception of death has changed in contemporary society, with the rejection of all the phenomena connected to it, including that of exhumation, which, deprived of any cultural investment, is now a necessity dictated by environmental, hygienic, bureaucratic and socio-economic needs.

As it is easy to deduce, these needs have become more pressing with the growth of urban populations and now fall under today’s legislation under the name of ordinary exhumations”, usually practiced ten years after burial, at the end of the cycle of mineralization of the corpse. It is necessary to underline the European dimension of this phenomenon, as the use of ordinary exhumation does not belong to all cultures. Jewish law

generally forbids, except in special cases, the removal of a corpse or of remnant bones from one grave to another, even when it is to a more respected site (27). According to Muslims law too, in general, one cannot exhume graves. However, there are several exceptions and some differences in views. In addition, Jews and Muslims do not allow the burial in a single pit of several bodies and the reuse of the burial space. When a Jewish or Muslim cemetery has no longer space, the only possibilities are the expansion or construction of a new area.

As far as legislative aspects regulating exhumation are concerned, the issue has always been to consider, on the one hand, the feelings of pity towards the deceased and, on the other hand, the superior requirements of health and hygiene protection. In many European countries it is only since the 19th century that the State has taken care of these interests, creating the so-called mortuary police.

In conclusion, in this contribution we have observed the ambivalent aspect of the practice of exhumation. This action presents a profound chronological dimension and an equally vast geographical spread, devoid of ritual investments in today's western society, full of meanings in different geographical and temporal areas, where in individual and collective terms it implies a selection of what will be preserved and what will slowly go into oblivion. Brutal action carried out to strike an enemy at different historical moments, but also necessary in opposite contexts to denounce the horror of violence and transform the remains into political relics.

Having said that, the approach in the historical and archaeological studies is different. The study of the past civilizations and the analysis of those of the present has always happened through testimonies offered by the burial sites, grave goods and funeral rites, as well as the examination of human remains (28).

However, some old questions remain open and urge a continuous attention.

Should we excavate burial sites at all? Do the dead have rights? How should they be treated and the remains handled? Which destination to give them? Who has, or should have, the power to make decisions on these questions? The formulation of ethical guidelines to ensure a proper respect and reverence for the sym-

bolic value of the human remains and a strong responsibility on their management are aspects evaluated as ethically essential. Even the body of the deceased, while presenting itself as a purely physical object, maintains a symbolic dimension in the collective imagination that goes beyond the life of the person to whom it belonged and that involves the whole of society. Consequently, the respect that we feel towards the dead body is respect for the dignity of the person, which is evident from that body.

It is enough to recall in this sense the words of Eugène Emmanuel le Duc, who, with his extraordinary ability to penetrate the spiritual reasons of art and architecture, wrote in the mid-19th century: "among all the monuments, the tombs are those that offer perhaps the widest field of research for the archaeologist, the ethnologist, the historian, the artist and even the philosopher. Civilizations, at any level, manifest their belief in another life precisely through the way they treat the dead" (29).

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