

Virginia L. Campbell, *The Tombs of Pompeii. Organization, Space, and Society*, Routledge Studies in Ancient History 7, Routledge Publishing House, 2015. 372 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-80919-2

Pompeii is well-known as one of Antiquity's "crown jewel" being one of the most representative archaeological sites in the world. The site, which was rediscovered in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, produced even then numerous spectacular archaeological structures that were perfectly preserved by the thick layers of lava and volcanic ashes. Its early history was quite turbulent as the site was excavated in numerous campaigns by different antiquarians working for the great powers of the day and it wasn't until Karl Weber's first "scientific" excavations in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that the site was starting to be truly uncovered and understood at its real potential.

It was most surprising to find out that this renowned site, which was intensively researched starting with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had no English language archaeological monograph focusing upon the "world of the dead" (p. 1). The present book managed to fill this gap in the knowledge of Roman archaeology perfectly by offering a comprehensive overview of the tombs of Pompeii and its environs while studying the funerary culture of this population. We are witnessing a holistic approach to the funerary monuments that allowed for the integration of data from five different necropolises as well as of the analysis with great accuracy of topics such as the importance of social class and self-representation in both funerary epigraphy and monuments. The means by which the author is delving into such important topics is represented by the comparative study of all the known tombs associated with the city of Pompeii (p. 2) starting from the observation that there is a compelling need among the members of the Roman society to be actively engaged in the commemoration of the dead by whatever possible means that were available to them. The book addresses very intriguing aspects such as the organisation, space and society in relation with the corpus of funerary finds being very well constructed around four key questions that the author eloquently approaches:

"a) can we establish burial patterns / areas and if so are they related to social, economic, or legal realities?

b) what are the administrative procedures behind funerary practice as organised by the town as an administrative unit?

c) how do monuments reflect individual and / or group behaviour?

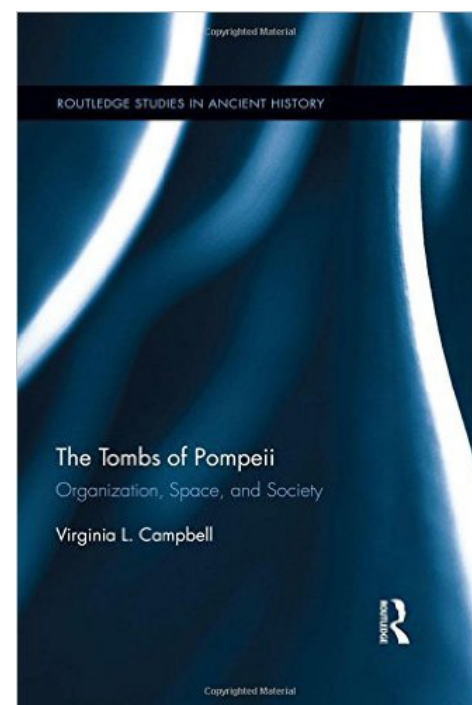
d) is there an identifiable tradition of burial or commemoration that is unique to the population of Pompeii?" (p. 3).

Ancient societies regarded death as a "ritual of passage", the burial being understood correctly only in relation with a well-defined context in time and space<sup>1</sup>. The author stresses right from the beginning (**Chapter 2 - Death in the Roman World**, p. 7-30) the importance of a multidisciplinary approach for the attempt of understanding the context of the funerary ritual (a very complex and powerful rite that is highly significant for every society), as well as the attitudes towards death and the deceased and the process of disposing of, and memorialising the dead since not all the components of such ritual will leave tangible data to be analysed. In doing this, the analysis

<sup>1</sup> ELIADE 1992; GENNEP 1996.

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DOI: 0.14795/j.v3i1.157

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN-L 2360 – 266X

will rely strongly on both archaeological theory as well as on the ancient literary sources that have produced relevant information for this case study such as The Histories of Polybius, who provides probably the best description regarding the funerals of a Roman aristocrat. “Thus, the topics of particular relevance are: 1) the rules and rituals surrounding death and burial and 2) grief, mourning, and commemoration” (p. 7). The analysis of the ancient literary sources provided also a more metaphysical approach to death as revealed by Lucretius and Pliny both mentioning that “in death there is nothing to fear as one cannot feel anything when one no longer exist” (p. 11). While studying the structure and decoration of the tombs, the author argues for a contextual approach as opposed to a global discussion clearly stating that when it comes to the study of the Roman tombs “the most important aspect to keep in mind [...] is the primary role played by individual choice” (p. 15). Such choice was obviously in relation with social and economic factors that determined how the tomb was constructed, where it was placed and most importantly why it was constructed in that particular place. Such a complex analysis proved that in Pompeii, a highly competitive society existed that felt the need to highlight their position also in the afterlife by struggling to obtain the best place of the cemetery as well as the most flamboyant funerary monuments, a reality which implies both a social and economic competition in a thriving and influential city as well as a very serious lack of space for new tombs in the city’s cemeteries. “The juxtaposition of economic and legal status complicates matters further, because even an extremely wealthy individual who was a freed slave could not necessarily achieve the same rank as a free-born citizen of lower economic standings” (p. 19). Such an observation clearly shows that a certain “social equality” existed, making things even more complex and much harder for one to untangle the socio-economic dynamics of the Roman society which relied heavily on a subtle interplay between the economic, social and legal status of each individual / family<sup>2</sup>.

### **Chapter 3 - The Funerary Evidence of Pompeii.**

**An Analysis** (p. 31-60) takes a thorough look at the layout and development of the necropolises which requires both the examination of the way in which the available funerary space is used and the urban design, but also problems such as accessibility or visibility. This chapter heavily relies upon the study of the design of the tomb types and decorations having in mind the “social and legal status (if known) of the occupants, as a means to determine a pattern in the development of the various necropolis” (p. 31). Important changes can be seen also at the funerary level after the town was raised to the rank of *colonia* affecting mostly the older funerary rites and rituals that started to evolve in a more complex manner. Changes were observed also in the variability of the funerary monuments, but the main evolutions that occurred refer mostly to a change in the way of displaying and positioning of the funerary spaces that focused more on the visibility and traffic flow than previously documented (p. 38). As such, the spatial analysis of these monumental tombs has led to the conclusion that “contrary to the belief that being closer to the city walls brought greater

status, the earliest monumental tombs do not adhere to the expected use of extra-mural space” (p. 40). However, besides the changes that produced a great variety in the typology of the funerary monuments, virtually all burials incorporate the same regional style of “headstones and *columella* that is exclusively found in southern Campania” (p. 39; 51). The individual variability between different monuments types should be seen as a personal choice based more likely on the role played by the financial capabilities of each individual rather than the role played by the social or legal status (p. 45). Such an assumption is sustained also by the observation that there is “no defining tomb type or necropolis locations for members of a specific group: even within one family there is a broad range of individuality in commemoration” (p. 52).

The epigraphic analysis of the epitaphs recorded in the funerary corpus of the site will account for the possibility of studying the social status of the deceased (**Chapter 4 - Epigraphy in the Pompeian Funerary Context**, p. 61-83); as the epitaphs that will be examined both in terms of what they actually say and most importantly based on how the information is presented to the public. We are made aware right from the beginning that the “importance of epigraphy in the funerary context cannot be overstated” (p. 61) hence the need of a thorough analysis of such written evidence. Even though the funerary inscriptions can be regarded in a way as technical texts, they were supposed to reflect the *substantia* and *dignitas* of the family, having in their turn an important part of preserving the memory of the deceased. As such, individual choice can also be documented here as in the case of the type of tomb constructed or the location of the funerary monument (p. 63). The more metaphysical way of relating to death as well as to the recently departed member of the family can be seen also in the text of the epitaphs as previously mentioned in the case of some ancient literary texts since “the use of epithets and other adjectives are used to indicate loss, but [...] since those most common references to the character and nature of the deceased are in fact stock phrases that reflect social values, it is difficult to infer whether the surviving person felt any true loss” (p. 66). An aspect that seems to give a local trait to the funerary inscriptions in Pompeii, which can be also regarded as a bit unusual, is the high number of women present in the primary inscription meaning that they would have had great influence and were involved actively in socio-political and economic aspects of the daily life, thus being equally present in the burial record (p. 75). Another aspect highlighted by the epigraphic texts of the funerary inscriptions documented at Pompeii reflect the way in which the entire community functioned and how the tombs were used by the entire population, such aspects being suggested especially by the secondary inscriptions found here (p. 79).

**Chapter 5 - The Regulation of Burial Space** (p. 84-109) represents the most “archaeological” part of the book since it deals with the manner in which the funerary areas are organised, making use of the spatial analysis of the discoveries as an appropriate method of investigation. The analysis is conducted at two different levels (epigraphic and archaeological) both pointing to the same conclusion of the existence of a certain regulation of the extra-mural space destined to the burials. The epigraphic argument refers to

<sup>2</sup> PAYNTER 1989; MIZOGUCHI 1993.

a specific formulation *ex decreto decurionum* that was used “contra to previous interpretations, to indicate permission to use public land” while the archaeological one is expressed by “the use of lava *cippi* as boundary as boundary markers delineating the area of a burial plot” (p. 84). Although the general Roman law does not specifically discuss the problem at hand it seems that the distinction between private and public land is not as static as one might think having in mind the modern realities that surrounds us. A very interesting aspect in this respect is the situation of the cenotaphs that weren’t regarded as *locus religiosus* and therefore there shouldn’t have been any prohibition as to their location, meaning that they could have technically very well be placed within the *pomerium* of the city (p. 92-93). On the other hand one could very well discern the concern for regularisation of the land destined to the funerary world that is yielded both by the ancient literary sources presenting the activity of the *agrimensores* as well as by the strict placing of the boundary stones (p. 99-100). This need of regularisation can be regarded on one hand as a consequence of the urbanisation process but should also be understood by their sacredness as they would have regulated the sacred space as opposed to the public or private property. Urban life in a Roman town was very complex, having different facets that should be interpreted as a whole in order for one to attempt a correct interpretation of the date that he would deal with. “Taken as a whole, the epigraphic evidence indicating the granting of permission to build on public land, in conjunction with the archaeological evidence illustrating that burial land was demarcated clearly, indicates that there was a strong tradition of regulating how and by whom the extramural territory was used” (p. 106). It is quite clear that the funerary ceremony can be regarded as a ritual during which the society of the living is not just organising itself, but the society of the dead as well, through the strictly rules that represent the funerary ideology<sup>3</sup>.

The ways in which the social status of the deceased will have influence or not upon the funerary practices documented for each case, namely how the elements of variety in terms of tomb type, decoration, positioning or epigraphic habit are manifested by various individuals, are largely discussed in **Chapter 6 - Class, Style, and Self-Representation** (p. 110-141). It is with this occasion that we are presented with a modern way of approaching a highly theoretical aspect of archaeology in which the accent is put upon the way in which the manifestations of the funerary practice would have illustrated the way in which different individuals or groups have chosen to present themselves. One should take into consideration that the burial itself, as a process, represents the social death of the one for whom the action is performed and thus we can easily see the paradox that graves and funerary contexts in general do not tell us as much about the deceased (simply because he could have not buried himself), as they do about the beliefs of the ones who attended the burial directly and participated actively to the burial rituals<sup>4</sup>. Several local aspects concerning this reality were identified especially in the way that the freedman

<sup>3</sup> METCALF 1981; TRINKAUS 1984; PARKER PEARSON 2003.

<sup>4</sup> BRAUN 1981; CHAPMAN 1981; O’ SHEA 1996; GAMBLE ET ALII 2001.

understood to commemorate their patrons (p. 132). Although the general trends of self-representation common for the Roman world can be identified also in the case of Pompeii, it seems that here, the “social status and class are not necessarily indicative of how an individual behaves in regards to establishing their place in the funerary realm” (p. 133).

**Chapter 7 - Conclusions** (p. 142-146) has a summarising role, synthesising all the previously presented data and trying to put together the entire author’s thoughts on the development and meaning of the funerary record at Pompeii. The author would concentrate all her efforts for the reader to grasp the complexity of such an intriguing topic of the funerary universe as revealed by a site like Pompeii in the very fluid conclusions that she presents. A certain surprise is revealed after the study of all the approximately 200 tombs noticing that we are dealing with an unexpectedly great variety in the burial record for a relatively homogenous and small Roman community that was building tombs over a fairly short period of time of almost 160 years. Three main conclusions could be drawn after the thorough analysis of this site that to a certain extent I believe should be considered as valid for the entire Roman world: 1) the most obvious dividers of class, sex, legal status, or ethnicity are manifested in the burial records of Pompeii, but not necessarily in a predictable manner; 2) the unifying factor found amongst different groups was the desire to commemorate their dead with whatever means available to them, the one aspect that was most influential on this ability was not legal status or social class, but the amount of money was either willing or able to spend on a monument; 3) individual choice cannot be ignored as perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the variety documented (p. 143-145).

The book ends with a consistent part destined to the persons willing to deepen themselves even more into the mysteries of the “funerary life” of Pompeii comprising three different appendixes that make the catalogue of finds discussed in this book: **Appendix 1 - The Tombs of Pompeii** (p. 147-312); **Appendix 2 - Boundary Markers in Pompeian Necropoleis** (p. 313-332) and **Appendix 3 - Additional Funerary Inscriptions** (p. 333-340) as well as a special consistent and up to date chapter dedicated to the **Supplemental Bibliography** (p. 341-350) and an alphabetically organised **Index** (p. 351-355).

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