

THE BONES SPEAK VOLUMES

Henri Duday – Its fragility is... frightening... All these bones come from within a little glass urn... This one is the skull, this is the spine, there we have the ribs, the scapula, that is probably the humerus, that in any case is the ulna, the metacarpus, there we have the pelvic bones, that is the femur, that is the tibia, that is the fibula, and then there is the talus, calcaneus, the metatarsal...

The obvious interest of Pompeii in historical and archaeological research that also has a methodological aspect is that we have the chance to explore the function of different levels of the cemetery, that is to say the soil of the cemetery. Most of the time in funerary archaeology, we have the chance to study the bottom part of tombs but not the levels at which were written things like acts of remembrance, all the commemorative worship and all the visits made to the tomb. In Pompeii we have that and we also have the remains of various pyres that we call cremation zones on which the dead were burnt. And what we have been able to develop is research on the correlation between burnt fragments of bone found inside an urn or found in different strata. We can get a positive correlation: affirmation that this bone fragment and that other bone fragment belong to the same individual, or on the contrary, a negative correlation, that is to say an incompatibility. Of course if you have two right mandibular condyles, matters dictate that you have at least two individuals.

And from that point on, we try to understand actions, or the significance of actions. For example, we have found in the tomb of a child, a child of six or seven years, here we have found a fragment of the tibia of an adult. And for this adult tibia fragment, we have had to try to match it with all the tibia fragments found in all the tombs of the necropolis; in total, this search has covered ninety eight thousand bone fragments. Now that's not ninety eight thousand tibia fragments... each discovery is classified, but if we cover everything... from the sector that we have studied, there were ninety eight thousand samples. So it's a big job, a painstaking job, but I have been able to find a link with the tibia of another tomb, tomb 9, which is an adult's tomb and the fascinating thing is that the presence of this fragment isn't anything to do with ritual, it's probably a collection error. The pyre of the adult in tomb 9 was erected at a precise spot, after the fire went out the bones were collected, but a few bones were left behind at the cremation zone. If, later on, the pyre of the child was erected at the same spot, then obviously by mistake, a bone belonging to the previous subject might get gathered up. In this way, it has been possible for example also to establish links between the interior of a tomb, what is in an urn, and bones lost in the transition between the cremation zone and the tomb since people were carrying them around. Obviously, this tells us a much richer history. I reckon it really is something... entirely novel. We can now follow actions and then all this... this religious thought that is

communicated via the cremation, the collection and the transport of bones then of their deposition in the tomb. We are on a roll.

So that is... that is what I would call my contribution to the program at Pompeii which is all about burnt bones, but of course the research coordinated by William Van Andriaga includes all structures, all excavations and all objects because we plan also to establish liaisons and to piece together etc. fragments of lamps, of ceramics and of glass objects. All this is complementary. Bones... The dead is still the main character of a tomb, so the bones talk a lot, but bones cannot be left to speak alone. It really is something that gets integrated in... a global understanding of structures and of funerary deposits, with the ultimate aim of trying to develop an archaeology of ritual.

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