

THE BROKEN LAMP

William Van Andringa – We have been working for fifteen years on one of the Roman necropolises of Pompeii. It lies south-southeast of the town; outside the walls, since the dead were not buried inside the city. And as we do a lot of recordings, as we search for traces that we record permanently, we are always with our files and with our measurement drawings, all the time! We need then to be protected from the sun or the rain. We cannot do the recording otherwise. I tried to work without in the beginning, before Henri puts up the roofs, and we had a hard time. What's very interesting is that once we have these roofs, these tarps and these covered structures, it allows us to work in the shade and so we can think and concentrate on what we do continuously, and therefore not to work mechanically, but to always think, follow the thread of the trowel ...

That's why I compare it to a lab work. And in addition the interest here is that we have thousands of traces that were left by Pompeians in the 1st century AD, when they came to burn their dead, when they came to collect the bones of the dead, when they buried them, when they built the burials, and when they later returned to the graves to celebrate the rites of commemoration. All this in an atmosphere of strong emotion, because funerals are not a trivial thing, which makes people leave a lot of traces, in fact. This is what is absolutely remarkable: thousands of traces are left, meaning that the mourners bring an oil lamp, bottles of perfume, then they break the bottles, they push them away, they walk, they step on, all that generating a multitude of activities, traces rather, and that's what we record.

And it is the cross-checking of information, the repetition of the observations, which makes it possible to reproduce the gestures. For example, when we find a lamp broken at the end of the cremation, the lamp had been broken intentionally and we find it fragmented, on the spot. In this case, we are able to say that the breakage is ritual, that the breakage is voluntary. You're going to tell me, yes, but the *ustor*, the person who sets the pyre could have stepped back and walked on it inadvertently. But, it is the repetition of the same gesture that allows us to be sure that the gesture is intentional. This broken oil lamp is broken at a key moment in the funeral sequence. The breakage is the visible sign that the rite is accomplished. And we can even say that the lamp is broken before the collection of the deceased's bones and the placement of these remains in the urn. Because in the urn and in the cremation residues that are deposited in the tomb, we find fragments of the lamp. So obviously the lamp was broken just before.

Why does a necropolis finally give much more information about human action, than what could be recorded in kitchens, inside the city, on culinary practices, for example? Inside the city, the floors are cleaned, so the reason is

that simple. That explains why we find much fewer traces in the city, and much fewer remains in context! Here, objects are broken on the spot! There are no trash bags and all that is not evacuated, everything is left in place. In fact, we are looking for gestures, something intangible, but we realize that what structures a part of our actions is precisely the material. The ritual gesture is oriented by the material, and by its use. It is finally the lamp, and the flame that comes out of the lamp, which symbolizes the opposition between the darkness of death and the day of life that will finally give the meaning of the ritual! Meaning of action doesn't come by the thought ... We do not realize how much our everyday gestures are impacted by our material environment ... The archaeologist works however on the material and the environment of the objects. We're right on track in fact!

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