

Funeral rites and practices of a Roman nature in some Burial sites documented Across Algeria

Nacera Benallel

Rank: Research Professor (A)

Institution: National Center for Archaeological Research – Tipaza, Algeria

Email : nacerabenallel@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT

North Africa, with all its provinces, stands as an undeniable civilizational monument due to the diversity of its archaeological sites of funerary character. Among these, special mention should be made of those dating back to the Roman period, which—through their varied forms and dimensions—are no less significant than residential, religious, or administrative structures. Their importance lies in the wealth of information they contain, whether related to the spiritual and religious aspects or to the commercial exchanges among the peoples settled along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in general, and those of the ancient Maghreb provinces in particular.

These monuments can be regarded as material evidence that holds within them a set of clues closely connected to religious and funerary beliefs. Through them, it becomes possible to reveal certain influences associated with the cultures of the peoples who migrated to the region, as well as the mutual impact they exerted upon one another.

However, despite the richness and diversity of this type of heritage across the national territory, it has not received the attention it deserves from researchers. During the period extending from the beginning of the French occupation to the 1960s, Algeria—like the rest of North African countries—witnessed several intensive excavations that helped to highlight the architectural diversity of these sites. Yet, since those excavations were based on methodologies and objectives inconsistent with the evolution of current research approaches, we deemed it necessary, through this article, to contribute to the field of funerary archaeology by presenting some of the results obtained from excavations we carried out in various burial sites across the country. The focus is placed on a set of observed funerary practices and gestures and their correlation with the accompanying artifacts.

Keywords: funerary monuments, rites, practices, gestures, Roman period.

Introduction

Death is a universally recognized reality in all religions and cultures. While funerary worship is a constant element in the life of peoples, the practices associated with it vary according to the social and religious characteristics of human groups. In this context, Yseron describes funerary rites and practices as traditions and customs performed by ancient peoples in their relationship with the divine, which they then passed down to their descendants. In his Treatise on the Laws, Book II, he states that

funerary ceremonies and rituals serve to atone for the offenses committed by humans against the gods (Plinval, 1959)

Moreover, several authors who addressed the phenomenon of death—such as Seneca, Pliny, and Tertullian—sought through their writings to free humankind from the fear of death, as reflected in their famous saying: “When death comes, we are not; and when we are, death is not.” (Prieur, *La mort dans l'antiquité romaine*, 1986) According to the account given by Pliny the Younger, who wished to portray his uncle in a noble light, **“Pliny the Elder risked and lost his life at Stabiae during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, remaining calm and showing no sign of panic.”**

From the beginning, humankind did not understand the phenomenon of death nor believe in the existence of a blissful life thereafter, attributing it instead to hidden forces that avenged themselves by bringing about diseases and wars. Doubts were also expressed about the possibility of life after death; the only future promised to the souls of the dead was to wander in the world of ghosts (Amrous, 2014).

For this reason, it was considered the duty of the deceased's family to perform a set of rituals and practices intended to ease the passage of the soul from earthly life to the afterlife, such as holding the funeral, organizing the funerary procession, and burying the body (Poux, 2009).

Funerary archaeology has thus emerged to document these practices in the field through excavations, as well as through artistic and archaeological evidence such as wall paintings (see Figure No. ...), funerary sculptures, and ancient texts that have helped shed light on ancient peoples' beliefs concerning the concept of death.

Excavations have significantly renewed our understanding in this area through the growing discovery of numerous tombs in regions once under Roman rule. However, researchers have faced several challenges in documenting the funerary rituals and practices of the peoples inhabiting the Mediterranean shores in general and its southern coasts in particular, given the diversity and complexity of their cultural backgrounds.

From this perspective, through this article we aim to share with specialists in funerary archaeology some of the results obtained from emergency and preventive excavations we have conducted in several documented burial sites across the national territory, focusing on the recorded rituals and practices.

1. Introduction to Roman Funerary Rites and Ceremonies

The Romans believed that an ordinary citizen could not join the world of the gods after death unless he had been a great man during his lifetime, and that heavenly immortality was reserved only for emperors and heroes who had offered their souls as sacrifices for the homeland and the gods. This belief was manifested in the consecration rituals (*Consécration*), which, according to their faith, protected the soul from the torments of the underworld, as death represented one of their greatest fears.

They also thought that souls deprived of proper burial rites would become wandering spirits, restless ghosts disturbing the peace of the living (Jouhadou, 1961). Philosophers of classical antiquity such as Lucretius, Seneca, and Pliny the Elder, when addressing the subject of death, described it as a natural phenomenon and an inevitable result of the vital process that begins with birth and ends with

death. However, this simple concept was far from satisfying the human sentiment that regarded death as a matter belonging to the gods(Prieur, *La mort dans l'antiquité romaine*, 1986, p. 12).

These divine entities were personified through mythical figures bearing various names such as Hades, who, according to Roman belief, ruled the underworld (Prieur, *Death in Roman Antiquity*, 1986), and Mors, Orcus, and Fatum, who were associated with bringing death. Yet these deities were not objects of worship, and no altars or temples were dedicated to them.

As for the cult of the dead, it was essentially a practice of honoring and appeasing the souls of the departed through offerings and gifts during the Parentalia festival. At other times, these spirits were feared and repelled through exorcistic rituals performed during the Lemuria festival (Prieur, *La mort dans l'antiquité romaine*, 1986).

The social status of the deceased played an important role in funeral ceremonies, especially among the wealthy, who displayed their opulence through elaborate rituals. The remains of the deceased were exhibited publicly for several consecutive days before burial. Most of these rites took place within the family home, where the dying person's last breath was received with a kiss, based on the belief that the soul left the body through the mouth)Edouard(1896 ‘.

Ancient funerary sculptures and texts describe in detail the actions performed by the relatives after the death of a family member: washing the body, anointing it with perfumed oils, wrapping it in a shroud¹, and laying it opposite the entrance of the house upon a bed adorned with flowers)Edouard ‘ (1896 to receive condolences from relatives and friends (see **Figure No. 1**). At the entrance of the house, lamps and torches were placed as a sign that the household was in mourning (see **Figure No. 2**).



Figure No. (1)
Sarcophagus of Amiternum, National Museum of
Abruzzo (Les Abruzzes)
Source: Page support@meisterdrucke.com



Figure No. (2)

Sarcophagus of the Haterii, Vatican Museum, Rome

Source: Ch. Daremberg & Edm. Saglio, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, Vol. 2, 1896, entry "Funus," p. 1389, Fig. 3360.

To confirm the actual death of the deceased, the name was called out loudly at different intervals (Jobbé Duval, 1924), followed by prayers wishing the departed a blissful afterlife and that "the earth may be light upon him." A coin was sometimes placed near the head or the shoulders, a practice symbolizing payment of the fare to Charon (Thomas, 2002), the ferryman who conveyed souls across the River Styx (Ndiayé, 2022). One of the archaeological evidences of this practice is the stele of Iulia Modesta Benenata (Boyancé, *The Epitaph of Iulia Modesta and the Symbolic Exegesis of Virgil*, 1952), discovered in the Mactar necropolis.²

A public mourning was declared for important state figures, with a funerary procession organized from the deceased's residence to the burial site. The procession usually took place at night, illuminated by torches to light the path to the cemetery and to prevent the city from being defiled by the funeral's presence (Boyancé, *The Epitaph of Iulia Modesta and the Symbolic Exegesis of Virgil*, 1952).

The funerary cortege was accompanied by a *Neniae* procession, composed of professional mourners paid to lead the funeral march (see **Figures No. 3–4**).



Figure No. (3)

Funeral Ceremony

Sarcophagus of Amiternum depicting a Funerary Procession, 1st Century AD,
National Museum of Abruzzo, Italy.

Source: Page support@meisterdrucke.com.



Figure No. (4)

“Preparation for the Cremation Ceremony on the Pyre”
Sarcophagus Lid, Capitoline Museum, Late 2nd Century AD.
Source: Koch, 1975.

Before beginning the burial ceremony, one of those present at the funeral would deliver a speech (Panegyric) before the attendees to recall the virtues and good deeds of the deceased. This was followed by rituals consecrating the burial site through the sacrifice of a sow, a practice documented in Rome and in most Roman provinces located north of the Mediterranean (Scheid J. , 2008).

As for the ritual offerings of the funerary meal, various types of sacrifices were chosen such as rams (caprines), poultry, fish, and birds often depicted on the façades of stelae and funerary tables. Other dry offerings included bread, vegetables, and fruits of all kinds (**see Figures No. 05–06**), while liquid offerings, such as wine, were poured into the tomb through ceramic or metal channels (**see Figures No. 07–08–09–10**).



Figures No. (05–06)

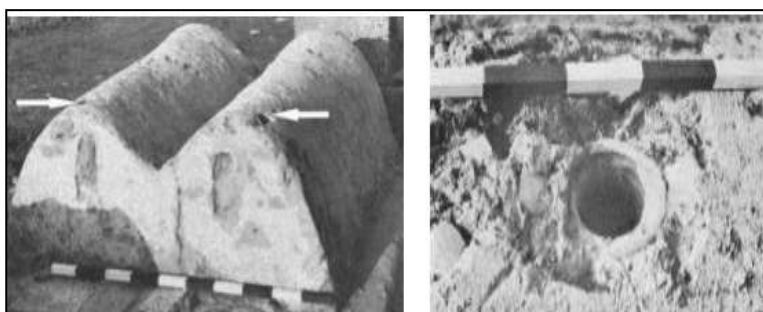
A type of stone funerary tables found in the Wilayas of
Khenchela and Timgad.
Source: The researcher.



Figures No. (07–09)

Offering channels recorded in the tombs of the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa.

Source: The researcher.



Figures N° (10)

Facilities dedicated to funeral offerings in the necropolises of ancient Tipasa (1st–3rd century Ad Hakim Idirène

Additionally, other types of funerary tables were recorded at the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa, made of brick slabs and bearing no inscriptions (see **Figures No. 11–12**).



Figures No. (11–12)

Ceramic funerary tables recorded in the tombs of the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa.

Source: The researcher.

Funerary Rites in Ancient Maghreb

The topic of funerary rites represents one of the fundamental pillars of funerary archaeology. Through archaeological excavations, researchers aim to explore the beliefs of ancient peoples and to understand how they treated their dead and cared for them through various practices and rituals performed by the family, each according to its faith and religious affiliation. Excavation results have confirmed the existence of both burial and cremation practices, with burial being the most widespread among local communities, performed in several positions supine, lateral, fetal, and others (Camps, *Inhumation*, 2001).

When examining the historical development of burial practices, excavations in the necropolises of Carthage and Jijel revealed an alternation between burial and cremation from the 8th to the 2nd century BC in Carthage (Bénichou Safar, 1982), and from the 6th to the 4th century BC in Jijel (Alquier, 1930). Archaeological data from excavations at Cherchel (Leveau, *Trois tombeaux monumentaux à Cherchel*, 1970), the Western Necropolis of Tipasa (Bouchenaki, 1975), and the Tiddis and Sétif necropolises (Février, 1991) confirmed a noticeable decline in traditional burial practices between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD.

This period in the history of the ancient Maghreb marked the arrival of a new cultural influence — the Roman civilization, which exhibited a simultaneous presence of both burial and cremation, with a clear preference for cremation. This practice, however, gradually disappeared by the beginning of the 3rd century AD.

Excavation findings also indicate that cremation had been practiced since prehistoric and protohistoric times. Gabriel Camps (2001), in his article published in the *Berber Encyclopedia*, mentioned examples from Mechraa Safa, Bordj Bou Arreridj, Aïn Safra, Maghnia, and Tifrit, among others (Camps, *Incinération*, 2001). The prevalence of this practice varied between the eastern and western regions of the national territory (Debruge, 1910).

In this regard, the excavation conducted by Vuillemot in the Punic necropolis of Rachgoun, dated to the 6th and 5th centuries BC, revealed a wide spread of cremation practices, with 101 cremation burials recorded, alongside four inhumations reserved for children (Vuillemot, *The Punic Necropolis of the Lighthouse on Rachgoun Island (Oran)*, 1955). (Camps, *Incinération*, 2001)

Archaeological evidence also shows that cremation was practiced by local populations from the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 3rd century BC, continuing alongside burial until the first two centuries of Roman settlement. It gradually declined with the spread of Christianity toward the end of the 3rd century AD (Camps, *Incinération*, 2001).

However, minor exceptions were noted, such as the continued practice of cremation up to the 4th century AD in the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa, Wilaya of Guelma (Excavation of the Cemetery of the Ancient Fortress of Bou Sbaa: An Archaeological and Analytical Study, 2021). There, both practices coexisted from the 1st to the 4th century AD, as evidenced by the discovery of several oil lamps of types CVII2, DIII1, EII2EV.2, EV.3, and Atlante VIII.B-4.

Among the necropolises where primary cremation was documented is the Western Punic Necropolis of Tipasa (Leveau, *Trois tombeaux monumentaux à Cherchel*, 1970), followed by secondary cremation, which appears to have been older and more widespread during the 2nd century AD (Leveau, *Trois tombeaux monumentaux à Cherchel*, 1970). Some isolated cases of simple burials,

mostly reserved for children, were also recorded (Idiran, *The Evolution of Burial Rites in the City of Tipasa from the First Century BC to the Third Century AD*, 2018).

In the Sétif necropolis, cremation and burial practices coexisted. The early phase, dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, was dominated by burial in hypogaea, later replaced by simple inhumations (Guery, 1987). This coexistence of practices, starting from the mid-2nd century AD, was attributed by Février to new populations settling in the region (Février, 1980).

Similar findings were observed in excavations at the Pupput necropolis, where burial was predominant from the end of the 1st century AD (Ben Abed, 2004). This is understandable, given that the local community practiced cremation only during the late 2nd century AD, continuing until the 3rd century AD (Ben Abed, 2004, p. 187), and abandoned it during the first half of the 3rd century AD (Ben Abed, 2004).

2. Practices and Rituals Marking the Transition Between Earthly and Afterlife Worlds Recorded in Certain Burials

In light of the recent developments in funerary archaeology, and whereas earlier researchers had primarily focused on the study of funerary inscriptions and grave goods, modern scholars have increasingly turned their attention to all the contextual data recorded during excavations, paying closer attention to burial practices and the gestures and interactions performed by the living when dealing with their dead whether during the funeral itself or in commemorative ceremonies dedicated to the souls of the departed.

In this regard, Cicero (Plinval, 1959) mentioned that his ancestors believed that every deceased person leaving the world of the living became one of the Manes deities, from whom the living sought protection and compassion by performing rituals such as sleeping near their graves and seeking their blessings while awaiting signs through dreams (Al-Asha, 2008). Since the tomb was considered a consecrated place that reflected the deceased's memory and social rank, the family — during and after the funeral — performed a series of symbolic rituals that transformed the burial site into a sacred space devoted to the worship of the Manes deities (Van Andringa, 2006).

Similarly, John Scheid emphasized the importance of rituals and their role in Roman religion, addressing the challenge of the lack of precise sources explaining how these rites were performed, and the similarities between those practiced in Rome and those observed in its provinces. He also pointed out the scarcity of information concerning the funerary customs of modest families, suggesting that, based on a few literary accounts, their ceremonies were likely simpler than those of the elite (Scheid J. , 2008)

Specialists in modern funerary archaeology now increasingly rely on excavation data, which in recent years have provided highly detailed reconstructions of the sequence of events that occurred during and after funerals. These excavations have shown that families offered different types of sacrifices and offerings, which contributed greatly to reinterpreting rituals by clarifying their literal meaning. In some cases, this new evidence has confirmed or refuted ancient textual sources by providing new data that allow for a deeper analysis and interpretation of Roman funerary practices (Van Andringa, *For an Archaeology of Death in the Roman Era: Excavation of the Necropolis of Porta Nocera in Pompeii*, 2006, p. 7).

Among the examples illustrating these observations are several funerary practices and gestures recorded in various documented burial sites across Algeria:

- Wrapping the deceased in a linen shroud (lintéolum): examples of this practice were identified in the cemeteries of Safel El Ouedan (Souk Ahras) (**Figures No. 13–14**), Oued El Mellah (Bordj Bou Arreridj) (Idiran, Preventive Excavation Report on the Cemeteries of Safel El Ouedan (Souk Ahras) and Oued El Mellah (Bordj Bou Arreridj), 2008), and the Columbarium of HenchirBelkaitan (Khenchela) (Idiran ‘Report on the Excavation of the Belkaitan Cemetery, Wilaya of Khenchela(2008 ‘(**Figures No. 15–16**). In the latter case, the shroud was found attached to a layer of lime or gypsum solution.



Figures No. (13–14)

Traces of the shroud attached to the tomb of Safel El Ouedan, Souk Ahras.

Source: The researcher.



Figures No. (15–16)

Some traces of the shroud in the tombs of Belkaitan, Wilaya of Khenchela.

Source: The researcher.

Researchers have traced this practice to foreign origins, possibly intended as protection against diseases and epidemics. It has been noted in several necropolises throughout North Africa in general, and the ancient Maghreb in particular. Examples include Sétif, Tipasa,

Rusicade, Constantine, Tébessa, Batna, Pupput, Haidra, Sousse, and Rabat, among others (De Larminat, 2022)(**Figure No. 17**).



Figure No. (17)

Mosaic of Cornelia Urbanilla depicting the shrouding of the deceased, Museum of Ancient Art, Algiers.

Source: Solenn de Larminat.

- The Practice of Anointing the Remains of the Deceased with Perfumed Oils:

Careful excavations in tombs have made it possible to reconstruct the sequence of a complex ritual in which perfume was used at several stages beginning with the funerary banquet, during which the deceased received offerings in the form of aromatic oils, and continuing at the funeral pyre, where these oils were poured over the flames. This is evidenced by the perfume bottles discovered in both inhumation tombs and cremation urns. This act was considered essential for the consecration of the tomb.

John Scheid emphasized that the use of perfumes and incense formed part of a broader strategy to resist the decomposition of the corpse and to eliminate the unpleasant odors emitted from burial or cremation pits. Moreover, this practice symbolically marked the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Thus, the perfume bottles buried with the deceased were not ordinary objects; they were personal items believed to possess the power to repel evil spirits, serve as a symbol of happiness, and define the spiritual connection linking their owner, after death, to the person who had offered them(Dominique, 2012).

Among the archaeological evidence of this type of ritual are several balsamaria (small perfume flasks made of glass or pottery) uncovered during the excavation of the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa (Ben Allal N. , 2021) (**see Figures No. 18–19–20**).



Figures No. (18–20)

Some grave goods related to the practice of anointing the deceased with perfumes, documented in the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa, Wilaya of Guelma.

Source: The researcher.

- Among the evidences symbolizing the severing of ties between the living and the dead is the practice of intentional breaking (*le bris intentionnel*) of pottery vessels, which has been documented throughout the Roman world (Alexia Lattard, 2021), including the African provinces. Examples of this ritual were identified in two cases at the Sétif necropolis, in multiple graves at the Pupput necropolis (Delarminat, 2011), as well as in the Cemetery of the Fortress of Bou Sbaa.
- As for practices associated with magical beliefs, intended to bind evil spirits within the tombs to prevent them from disturbing the peace of the living, one example is the inclusion of metal objects, such as iron nails, which served to protect the living from wandering souls. These were found embedded in tombs, both in inhumation and primary cremation burials, notably in the Cemeteries of Bou Sbaa and Sour El Ghazlane (Ben Allal N. , 2024) (see **Figures No. 21–22**).

Another related practice involved driving lead rods into certain ceramic vessels (Berthon, 2009), including two Campanian and Sigillata pottery plates, documented in the Bou Sbaa necropolis (see **Figures No. 23–24**).

Likewise, the burial of the deceased in lead containers was observed — a practice believed to confine the spirit within and prevent its return. This type of burial has been noted in both the Tipasa necropolis (Baradez, 1969) and at Tiklat, Béjaïa.



Figures No. (25–26)

Some grave goods related to the practice of fixing spirits inside and outside the tombs (the mirror).

Source: The researcher.



Figures N°. 27-28)

Some attachments related to the practice of fixing spirits
inside and outside tombs. **Source:** The researcher

Among the unusual practices in burying the dead is the burial in the prone position (Procobitus), which is considered an atypical practice. Some researchers have interpreted it as one of the illogical burial positions known as “relegation burials” (Relégation), associated with individuals who died violent deaths through suicide, crime, accident, or lightning strike (Barrand, 2012)

Among the examples of this type of practice are graves No. 176, 187, and 152, which are pit-type burials prepared in the soil containing three individuals.

The first was laid face down, with the head positioned on the western side of the pit, facing north. The upper limbs were bent, and the hands placed under the pelvis.

In the second case, the deceased was also laid on the chest, with the head directed southward, facing east. The upper limbs were extended, and the hands placed beneath the pelvic bones (**Figures No. 29–30**)(Ben Allal N. , 2021).



Figures N° 29-30

Examples of chest burial practices
Ancient cemetery of Guelaat Bousbaa
About the researcher

CONCLUSION

From the results we have reached through the archaeological evidence cited in this article, it becomes clear that despite the noticeable diversity in burial types, funerary rituals, and practices recorded across different geographical areas and historical periods, the local populations attached great importance to beliefs concerning the afterlife. They believed that such rites ensured the salvation of their deceased souls on one hand, and a prosperous and peaceful life for the living on the other. They also held a firm conviction in the role these rituals played in appeasing and honoring the departed spirits, so as to avoid their anger and vengeance against the living.

Their faith in life after death and in the immortality of their ancestors' souls in the other world was deeply rooted, similar to that of other societies with which they were in contact — whether through trade exchanges or wars in which they took part. This contact led them to adopt the architectural styles and funerary customs of those peoples, which they refined in accordance with their own beliefs, means, and social status. Such adaptation reveals the depth of interaction between local beliefs and those of the peoples who migrated from the northeastern or western shores of the Mediterranean, from prehistoric times up to the ancient periods.

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¹ Among the inscriptions referring to the anointing of the deceased's bones, we cite the epitaph of **Lucius Omedius**: "You alone rest within your tomb. We have buried your ashes and anointed your bones with perfume. You lived thirty-two years and six months. Lucius Omedius lies here; may all who pass by this tomb read these words." (CIL, VIII, 22971)

² "I knew glory until my final hour; I saw the temples of the gods of the underworld; I faced without trembling the greedy Charon. I, who lived in a virtuous body, have obtained my place in the Elysian Fields. I lived in peace for eighty-three years and ten months."