

Dominion in the north-western Alps in the Early Medieval centuries: Settlements and Burials

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Burial; burial goods; Germanic populations; settlement

Summary

The dominion is organised on a given area, where it is testified to by either simple or complex archaeological structures. Transformations in the settlement area, in the population pattern and in the culture itself can be considered as the consequences of conquests. Organisation, development and protection of the ruled territory can be archaeologically assumed through the presence of defence buildings and protection systems along the boundaries, with the settlement of permanent groups of non autochthonous populations. The study of several burial grounds allows us to examine the interaction between the original and immigrated populations and particularly to verify the assimilation and understanding of imported and original traditions.

Introductory Premise

The Alps have always been of great importance in the course of historic events on the European continent although coloured by diversified functions throughout the centuries (Colardelle 1983, 13–15). The Alps create a natural boundary between north-central and southern Europe but have never represented an insurmountable barrier among the different Germanic population groups positioned near this articulated mountainous system (Von Hessen 1997, 193–194).

In the early Medieval centuries, the alpine territory did not represent a single homogenous political body (Martin 1986, 178–179). As a matter of fact, the Burgundian reign formed in western Switzerland on the basis of specific

Roman military needs, was surrounded by Frank populations which defeated and conquered it in 543 (Bierbrauer 1993, 10–11). From northern territories, compact groups of Alemans and Bavarians (Amrein 1997, 239–240) pressed against the barrier of the Alps while the situation on the northern Italic peninsula was quite varied because of the Gotho-Byzantine war (Wickham 1988, 114–115). In 569 the occupation of northern Italy determined the formation of territories which were occupied by distinct Germanic entities with very different political and social structures; particularly, the Franks, the Alemans and the Bavarians were situated over the limits of the Alps, while the Lombards consolidated their presence in the North-central Italic territories (Privati 1983, 10–15).

Traditions and Funerary Customs

As far as funerary uses are concerned, starting from the 6th century a clear and definitive break was defined with the ancient world and the general picture became more organised. Infact, while up to the 5th century a certain rapport was maintained between civil cemeteries and the new burials linked to the Christian religion, between the 5th and 6th centuries a phase of less organised burials compared to the previous ones was discovered (Lambert 1997, 288–291). This period is also characterised by the substantial loss of any attention towards structural or architectural remains from the Roman centuries, with the regular reuse of building and epigraphic elements which are utilised as structural parts of walled burial units. The latter frequently re-utilise older ar-

tefacts and they cut across floors, walls and public streets (Lambert 1992, 149–150).

In this period, the oldest tombs are presented as simple pits dug into the earth with superficial borders to evidence the external edges, with stones and gravel usually collected from dispersed building materials. The shape of the pit, when recognisable, was usually anthropoid with oval rectangular, or irregular perimeter, with headstones or rounded angles. The state of preservation of the site, usually upset or taken away, hardly ever allowed the direct observation of signs of actual use on the surface plane. However, the double weathered top covering or surface mounds posed on the ground and made of various materials, such as roof tile fragments, bent tiles and stones, could have served this function.

Body position was prevalently from west to east, occasionally east to west and rarely south to north (Negro Ponzi 1999, 694–695). Sarcophagi or other wooden caskets were used to contain the body while the walls of the grave were lined in stone, often utilising remains of walls and pavements from the Roman era. Slabs of stone of various sizes were used for covering the grave: small and fragmented in the earthen graves and with larger dimensions in the types with caskets. The corpse was placed supine, even though infants placed on their sides have been documented. In adult burials, the head was aligned with the body, occasionally one finds it turned towards the right or left and in a few cases, lifted and placed on a cephalic alveolus. The inferior limbs, when they are preserved, are constantly together and extended, with rare cases of the feet crossing. The upper limbs are always laid down close to the body but positioned in extremely various ways. Both forearms could be gathered at the pelvis, or the arms were folded directly across the waist, or one arm was placed on the waist while the other at the hips, and finally both arms could be folded across the chest or extended at the sides (Giuntella/Simoni 1992, 128–131).

However, one must consider that in the first centuries of the early Middle Ages the different positioning of these articulations did not represent an absolute chronological order: all the typologies described above appear in a single necropolis from the 5th to the 7th centuries in the Frankish-Provençal region (Pouyé/Allouis/Bonifay/Bouville/Calvet/Lopez/Lopez

1994, 71–75). It is plausible that, given the persistence of preferential or alternative uses in time, the position had a ritual value in the Roman-Christian tradition that was consolidated starting from the 10th and 11th centuries (Negro Ponzi 1999, 693–694).

In the north-western alpine area, notwithstanding the great difficulty in distinguishing each case, especially referring to the oldest recoveries, for which complete and reliable data is not always available, one can affirm that burials were not documented only rarely in the urban centres (Crosetto 1998, 214).

The overview of the rural world appears more organised also because the territory, with its peculiarities that distinguish its respective sides, was at the centre of a phenomenon with trivalent characteristics: presence, occupation and input, with diversified times and modalities, of Germanic ethnic groups that came into contact with the pre-existing substrata represented by the populations that had completely assimilated the Roman culture by this time. The input of new cultural components determined the acquisition of funerary uses and customs directly linked to the Germanic pagan world (Colardelle 1983, 20–24).

The presence of burial goods represented an important element of novelty compared to the more traditional overview of the funerary culture formed between the 5th and 6th centuries. It must be acknowledged that the grave goods offer a reading potential that though complex could provide important information about the channels and the specific modalities implemented for cultural integration. For the burial outfits, present in both simple and elaborated forms, it is possible to propose a chronological order up to the first half of the 7th century. An issue which necessitates further study and investigation is the possibility of correlating sepulchre areas of small dimensions distributed throughout the territory and their relative settlements (Crosetto 1998, 214). Archaeological research has been able to verify that the same phenomena previously revealed for urban centres also existed in rural zones: the interaction among the inhabited areas and burial spaces highlights the profound cultural change in regards to the previous period when the dead were rigidly separated from daily life.

Other cases allow the observation of the organisational dynamics of burial areas, in which

the placement of the single graves appears to be an important indicator of the existence of a precise social hierarchy (Crosetto 1998, 215). Finally, cemeteries exist that can present common burials but which are deliberately distinct and set apart from a central nucleus and which are recognisable for their superior building technique and quality. This usually regards earthen pits that are supported by one or more brick masonry structures and that frequently contain elements of personal goods, that have often caused hasty and unfounded ethnic interpretations (Picard 1990, 12–14).

The combination of structural elements and quality of the burial outfit is evident for both male and female individuals in both cases belonging to dominant groups, already assimilated into the local population but still tied to their Germanic cultural traditions (Crosetto 1998, 216).

The search for a privileged burial position serves to emphasise the continuity with the pre-eminent role held as much in life as in death and is definitely legitimised with the progressive conversion to the Roman Catholic doctrine. This process determined the use of places of worship as an internal point of reference around which to organise the burial place assigning to the corpse of each component of the community an eternal space which corresponded to his or her position in the society of the living. The same funerary cult, still tied to a pagan cultural matrix, underwent significant changes that determined a progressive abandonment starting from the second half of the 7th century, which later became more or less a general fact in the following century (Crosetto 1998, 217). One of the habits deeply modified by the adhesion of the Germanic populations to the Catholic religion regards the *post-mortem* bequest. In fact, in the original legal conception, the idea of belonging to a group made the testament institution futile: the right of the group prevailed over those of the individual, therefore the wealth of the defunct was directly assigned to the heirs. The idea that an individual's will was to be respected even after death, typical of the legal Roman conception, modified the original concept (Dall'Aglia 1993, 14–15).

Burial goods were therefore the expression of the conception of the unearthly world and important indicators of the social position of each defunct. The objects of the outfit consist-

ed of costume elements, which were put in the tomb as functional accessories of the clothing worn by the dead (buckles, pins, belt parts) and real and actual burial offerings, which goes to say objects deposited on purpose such as cavalry equipment and weapons for the men, and ornamental objects for the women, to which ceramics and utensils can be added, placed as a funeral offering for either men or women. The composition of the outfit followed fixed rules and a study concerning burial goods and the combinations of funeral offerings allows the extrapolation of the rules that were followed with regularity in funerary practices.

The long, double-edged *spatha* appears in adult men's tombs and is completely absent in the burials of infants and adolescents. This type of weapon represents a fixed component of the adult male burial goods and appears with much regularity in all the necropolises examined in the two different contexts.

In almost all of the male tombs the remains of shields, usually the umbo and the handle, are also found. Along with the helmet and armour, the shield is the most common weapon of defence. It could be considered the necessary companion to the *spatha*, a weapon that could be used in close combat or in individual fights. Its missing in certain tombs where the *spatha* is present could be justified by the fact that the shield was made of entirely organic materials and therefore had deteriorated.

The lance was placed in the burial goods with less frequency while the supplementary armament with armour, helmet, reflex bow with reinforcements in bone and arrows should be considered a 'hyper-armament' and must therefore be interpreted with a prevalently sociological eye.

A subordinate role in the necropolises pertaining to the southern alpine strip of territory is attributed to the *sax*, being that this weapon is found in only a very limited number of graves. The quantitative data on its diffusion is in strong contrast with that of the contemporaneous transalpine graves, where the *sax* was the most frequently documented weapon found in the male burials.

Ceramics were not deposited in adult male individual tombs, but were reserved for women, and children and adolescents of both sexes. In the transalpine regions the funeral use of placing bronze ware is found without distinction

in both masculine and feminine tombs, while in the southern territorial areas it is found only in those of adult men. Finally, for specific funerary customs, some forms of conditioning existed linked to age and sex: the placing of clothing components, the utensils, foods and coins or other personal effects were not subject to fixed rules but constitute variable elements (Rupp 1997, 26–27).

The goods most documented in the feminine tombs were clothing accessories. In a particular way, belt buckles show with a certain regularity a number of typologies that in some cases one can define as standardised while in other examples they are peculiar to an ethnic group in an individual and characteristic sense. Other important components are fibulae, in particular arch-shaped and disc-shaped ones and other pins utilised as both hairpins and to close robes on the front side. Shoe accessories are also quite frequent, such as the decorations on the ties and the shoes themselves.

An analysis of the female burial goods based on clothing accessories produces, at first glance, an image of their class costume. A time-ordered typological examination on a significant number of necropolises pertinent to both territories has allowed us to recognise those burial complexes where important transformations occurred in the fundamental components of feminine dress from those that did not register any change. This has allowed us to identify the populations that abandoned traditional funerary customs and embraced the local uses of placement. Notwithstanding these limitations, the feminine burial outfit seems to follow precise canons. As a matter of fact, two distinct types have been recognised: the first group includes those tombs with richer ornaments and with a quantity of various grave offerings, while the second burial grouping has a reduced outfit. However, this reduction does not seem to have a sociological origin. In fact, the simplification of the outfit constitutes a successive development, because only the burials with pins can be considered chronologically reliable. In the southern region, in particular, the tombs with reduced burial goods do not demonstrate any temporal relationship to the generation of immigrants already emerging from the beginning of the 7th century, while the burials with fibulae, ornaments of high artistic quality and many various

objects are pertinent to both the immigration phase and the following one. In necropolises with very similar dating and positioned close to each other, funerary customs were practised that differed in a few fundamental aspects: women presumably of the same rank were buried with a common funeral composition, yet prepared in different ways (Rupp 1997, 27–28).

Funerary Archaeology and Settlements

The interpretative picture, which archaeology is called on to contribute to, basically responds to two orders of closely connected queries. On the one hand, the modifications that happened to the Germanic population following their insertion into new contextual groups and the definitive abandonment of the nomadic culture with the economical consequences of robbery. And on the other hand, the mode in which the process of culturalisation and assimilation into the managing Roman class occurred, whom they substituted. Such a transformation, however, was always attributed to the initiative of the Germanic groups which did not contain Roman elements, except perhaps a few women associated with them by marriage (Delogu 1997, 425). Finally, further considerations can be made about the problem of the impact of the groups' moving and its consequences on the process of continuity and survival of the old Late Antique order and also the settlement modalities.

Regarding the first issue, the principal modifications of the Germanic customs emerged from the masculine and feminine tombs have caused a crisis in the traditional interpretative model strongly based on the concept of cultural impermeability (Melucco Vaccaro 1996, 841) and on the graves arranged in rows as an element of ethnic identification, documenting the acquisition of symbolic objects of Roman politic power. The growing number of luxury objects found among the grave goods, instead, such as glass, ivory, bronze ware and fine ceramics, renders a plausible hypothesis of a new surge of craft clientele for luxury objects from Italian and Mediterranean workshops, distributed along the traditional commercial points of purchase at great distances (Ricci 1997, 268–269).

As to the second issue, recent attempts have been made at interpreting the presence of Late Antique goldsmiths in the main Germanic burial grounds or a diverse composition of the same grave goods as significant elements of the process of acculturation, instead of considering them in a chronological sense or as an evidence of commercial exchanges. Following the modern line of historiographical debate, it would not be correct to speak of phases or processes of acculturation because historical sources prove that the Germanic populations had maintained their laws, their language and their traditions for a long period of time as distinctive elements of a culture of major importance compared to the ways of dressing or arming themselves. This abandoning of custom and traditional production and the acquisition of a 'local' fashion may be considered as a process of osmosis between two diverse ethnic components that slowly blended with each other, helped and sustained by a productive and commercial network much more widespread than it could be imagined (Ricci 1997, 270).

The critical re-examination of the necropolises has demonstrated the impossibility of applying a univocal interpretative model to the burial grounds sepulchres and of always considering the allochthonous presences as phases of the process of successive culturalisation caused by the relocation of the original settlements. In many cases, as a matter of fact, it has been verified that the Germanic burials were placed on top of and modifying precedent cemetery sites utilised by the local community of "romanised" individuals (Melucco Vaccaro 1996, 842).

The influx of new ethnic groups with a very different social composition from the traditional one did not only cause a territorial military occupation fragmented into distinct areas of influence, but also determined a direct comparison with the local culture and in a particular way with the Mediterranean one. When such movements occurred, the southern regions had already been widely Christianised and therefore the immigrant population came into contact with a settlement strongly rooted into the territory that had preserved the Roman cultural traditions but had lost its political capacity following the military conquest (Delogo 1997, 425).

The tombs of these individuals are characterised by the total lack of burial goods, or in a very limited quantity with an absence of weapons. The accessories of the vestments were organised in a position that was characteristic only of such costume; the corpse is laid down in sepulchral graves with dry walls lined with slabs of stone. Head supports appear as well as multiple depositions.

Different cultural traditions often coexisted in the necropolises that, within certain limits, are also reflected in the same spatial distribution of graves. Here, burials that faithfully mirror the Germanic component, and generally a dominant social position, develop from the late 6th century and through the first half of the 7th century with very limited superposition. In the latest phase, from the middle of the 7th century and on, Christian religious buildings started to be built by the initiative of a socially superior family group. The burials of this phase include only few burial objects, which demonstrate all in all unequivocal signs of social differences: gold fabrics, fans, jewellery boxes, combs made of bone of high artistic quality and glass artefacts; the only indication of never forgotten military tradition are spearheads and stirrups (Profumo 1995, 209–210).

This would imply two diverse interpretations: on the one hand, the possibility of sparse settlements with a very organised and complex social structure and a managing class that not only occupied a predominant position in the organisation of the cemetery site, as in earthly life, but was also intended to evidence a strongly Christian religious component. On the other hand, the acquisition of characteristic cultural models typical of the whole new dominating class, independently from the original superior social rank of those buried (Brogiolo 1997, 422–423).

There seems to emerge with particular evidence, at least relatively to this aspect of the problem examined, that formulating the analysis on a territorially wide basis, also through a rereading of all of the available data, keys to new interpretations could be attained by way of an adequate reconsideration of all urban and rural burials and the cultural components that distinguish them from each other.

Conclusion

The present contribution represents the first phase in constructing a comprehensive picture of the available data and of the recent acquisitions regarding the progressive occupation of the Germanic populations in the northern and southern Alpine area, also including the cases where their influx was not spontaneous but planned, and the first overlapping of the elements of their material culture. An important function has certainly been plaid by the maintenance and the persistence of road connections between the two opposing sides, with a consequent topographical organisation and chronological diversification of the Germanic penetration into the various areas of the indicated regions. This observation implies a tendency to the continuity of life in the territorial settlements between the late Roman period and the following early Medieval period. This was probably first due to the ease of supply on the part of the new occupants, and successively to the stable settlement and consolidating of the Germanic nobility and monarchy of their land holdings, with the necessity of controlling trade routes, production and agricultural harvests (De Marchi 1997, 380). With the beginning of the 8th century, the two areas seemed to be normalised and divided into respective territories of influence. The progressive absorption into the 'Romanised' culture also seems to have already come to a certain level of very thorough permeation. The process though, had to have started very rapidly, as is evidenced by the fact that many of the burial goods documented in the graves examined can be linked to the late Roman tradition. An interesting fact is that these elements reappear in the burials, as part of the proper funeral outfit of the period between the second half of the 6th and 7th centuries, which coincides with the progressive Germanic occupation of the territory.

A few burial grounds of particular importance appear in the southern alpine area, in which the presence of significant artefacts in burial goods seems to signify more than the related ethnicity, a prominent position of the social group to which the dead belonged, dominant positions that in that period could be attributed only to groups of Germanic origin (Negro Ponzi 1999a, 52–53).

Independently from the ethnic group of the dead, the presence of these elements in the graves examined and the apparent decline of every component of the grave goods after the middle of the 7th century constitute a significant evidence of the dramatic political events happening between the second half of the 6th and 7th centuries with the stable settlement of peoples of Germanic ethnic origin, and finally their precocious nearly inevitable 'Romanisation'. The comparison between the materials of funerary goods and burial typologies shows a complex social picture that allows us to visualise the process of assimilation between the local populations of Roman-Christian tradition and Germanic individuals. Such a picture also indicates the presence of social groups with different characteristics: mercenary soldiers, probable landowners, people of low rank holding various rights on the lands and farmers (sharecroppers, husbandmen, servants). One cannot exclude a priori the presence of religious figures (De Marchi 1997, 386). The collection of data revealed makes it plausible that in the interpretation of the Germanic culture, a disorganised-continuous model could provide a better understanding of the reality of historical events than the static-linear model. Processes of composite nature, origin and tendency not always being coherent seem to co-exist and overlap with different characteristics in the interested regions and in the same local situations (Perinetti 1988, 336–378; Micheletto/Pejrani Baricco 1997, 312–325). The role of ethnic cultures in these processes is therefore re-dimensioned, not because they did not exist, rather because they seemed to be transformed until they no longer expressed what originally identified them. From this point of view, it would be necessary to adjust the direction of research from the definition and acknowledgement of diverse ethnic regroupings to the mode of construction of new social structures where the territorial organisation and hierarchical stratification where also implied a reorganisation and transformation of cultural traditions (Delogu 1997, 430).

These conclusive observations open up new prospects of research in the rapport of reciprocal influence among diverse territorial areas which can not be developed here at this time because of space limitations, but we promise to return to these arguments in upcoming contributions on the topic.

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