

Introduction

Cemeteries as sources

The main source of archaeological information for the Migration Period (the Early Middle Ages) is cemeteries, which provided the basic data for this paper. The results of the research project based on this data and described in the pages which follow represent an attempt to answer two basic questions: what is it possible to learn about social groups from the cemeteries they left behind? What are the limitations and potential inherent to the study of cemeteries?

First of all, from cemeteries we can obviously acquire information about funerary practices and disposal of the dead. For instance, some communities or groups traditionally cremated their dead while others practiced inhumation; some societies placed burial offerings in graves and some built stone chambers in which to inter their dead. By observing these phenomena, it is possible for us to formulate hypotheses about their perceptions of death. However, even at this first level of interpretation we lack essential information, if all we have at our disposal are the archaeological finds from a cemetery. In fact, for some societies, direct or written information is totally lacking about funerary rites, the concepts of death and psychological or stereotypical behavior in the face of death. This is the case not only for prehistoric societies but also for Germanic tribes, and for the populations of the Early Middle Ages in general.

Strictly associated with this first level of information, which is an expression of what people believed in or wanted to convey while burying their relatives, there is a second type of data which can be acquired from cemeteries (UCKO 1969). For instance, we can learn about the production and exchange of grave goods, because graves represented the most common method of hoarding wealth in ancient societies; or, we can attempt to discover the consequences of a particular social structure or of relations between living people as reflected in their cemeteries. A few examples from my own direct experience can provide an idea of what I mean. In the small Italian village where a part of my family comes from, the cemetery lies on a hill with a beautiful panorama. Entering the cemetery, next to the church, there is a line of very large stone tombs; they are family graves, and everyone in the village knows that they belong to families with old traditions and possibly aristocratic origins. Further on, there is a part of the cemetery where there are individual marble tombs located among some trees. A little bit farther on down the hill, in a less scenic place, lies the new part of the cemetery where coffins are placed in a columbarium. This kind of burial naturally costs much less than the pleasant garden location, which, however, not everyone can afford. Another example comes from a cemetery in Budapest. Here, for reasons of space, most of the dead are cremated. In order to have an inhumation burial, you have to pay more, as the coffin requires more space. A third, very interesting example from present day Hungary is represented by the graves of some gypsy chieftains, in the area of Győr. Their graves are definitely not typical of the 21st century; in fact, the deceased is buried in a sort of room created under a hearth by digging a large hole in the soil. The walls are covered with tiles and a bed

is displayed in the room, together with a television, and a wardrobe containing the clothing of the deceased. Food offerings are also provided. The upper part of the grave is covered with a large plate of glass so that it can be displayed to the public for some time.

Consequently, we may conclude that even today funeral rites and the burials themselves represent a means of establishing relations within a community or even the wider society. This has always been the case, in ancient societies as well as modern ones (LA ROCCA 1986b). However, the most important point to bear in mind when dealing with archaeological material of this type is the extent to which burial practices are the result of conscious behavior, and how they are perceived within a particular group (METCALF, HUNTINGTON 1991, pp. 5-23). For instance, to use another example from our modern experience, cremation is not generally practiced in Italy, while in Hungary it is one of a number of options, and this is due to the different social and religious traditions in the two countries.

The second point that must be considered is that societies change constantly, developing new values, needs, relationships, and so on, as a result of new contacts or economic and social changes (UCKO 1969). The result of all these elements combined is that different societies develop different burial traditions. For instance, the Roman custom of placing cemeteries along roads, and marking the graves with carved marble tombstones telling the name and the profession of the deceased was related to their evolved concept of towns. Roman towns, in fact, have been defined as "*Ville vitrine*" since public buildings and inscriptions were a means for public display of power and status (CRACCO RUGGINI 1989). The meaning of funerary inscriptions should be interpreted in this context.

Thirdly, single graves represent individuals, who played different roles at different levels, and who had different identities, each of which must be displayed in an appropriate manner (HALSALL 1998). Therefore, gender, age at death, social status and social relations may have effected the way in which the deceased was treated at the funeral. However, factors such as taste, emotions and individual choices can all play a role in determining the type of grave or the location of the burial (HARKE 2001). All these factors can determine the differences between the types of burials of individuals or groups within the same society.

The case of Germanic groups

During the Early Middle Ages and in particular for Germanic populations, the use of different kinds of grave goods represented a peculiarity which has been studied and interpreted in various ways.

Some scholars, especially over the last decades, have tended towards an ethnic interpretation of data from cemeteries, trying to identify different behaviors as expressions of specific tribes. In particular, different styles and artifact decorations have been ascribed to different migrating groups. This approach, which was promoted by a group of archaeologists during the Nazi period, and which was clearly related to the political propaganda of the time¹, is still debated today.

If style can be seen as an expression of identity for large prehistoric groups (SACKETT 1990), the case is more complex for the Germanic tribes

¹ See SCHWANTES 1921; KOSSINNA 1936; WEGEWITZ 1937, just to mention some of the better known examples. For a critical analysis of the influence of political attitudes on the interpretation of archaeological finds, see HARKE 1997.

moving through Europe during the Early Middle Ages. In this context, historians are currently investigating the problem of how these groups perceived themselves and what was meant by the names given to these peoples such as Avar, Lombard, Gepid, etc. The general idea which has emerged, is that they were not rigidly defined ethnic groups, maintaining a perfect cohesion while migrating, but rather open micro-societies, whose identity was fluid and adapted to circumstances (GEARY 1983; GASPARRI 1997; POHL 1991; POHL 1998a; HUMMER 1998a).

As mentioned above, cemeteries are a reflection of the social position of the deceased and their families, but it is important not to oversimplify such interpretations, especially in regard to ancient burials. The grave goods of the migrating groups of the Early Middle Ages have often been taken as obvious symbols of rank and status. For instance, weapons deposited in graves have always been interpreted as signifying that a warrior was buried within, however a cross-checked study on this problem has shown that this is not necessarily the case (HÄRKE 1990). The quantity and type of goods in graves have also been interpreted as expressions of status². Again in this case, the utmost caution must be used; in fact, what we find in a grave may not correspond to the original display since time and oxidation may have destroyed precious artifacts made of perishable materials³. Moreover, the value of the objects is determined not only by the materials employed but also by the techniques that were used to produce them, and how labor intensive they were (DAIM 1998). Objects also gain implicit value if they are presented as gifts, for example, by an important personage (HÄRKE 2000; THEUWS, ALKEMANDE 2000). Also, the display of grave goods does not seem to be determined by rigid rules. There are no written sources on this subject, but individual choices, tastes and beliefs must also have played an important role⁴. Furthermore, the placement and types of graves may also have had a special meaning for particular communities⁵. Thus, graves cannot and should not be considered as precise reflections of the social status of the deceased.

It should be remembered that depositing objects in graves obviously meant their permanent loss to society. Consequently, the deposition of grave goods must have had a counterpoint – a public feast during the funeral in which the grave was open to the public and the grave goods were visible to the participants. It follows that the selection of artifacts was clearly meant to transmit, and to impress on the minds of those present, the particular identity of the person being buried. But what identity?

Besides ethnicity and status, another component which clearly influenced the display of grave goods, and to which scant attention has been paid over the last few decades, is gender. Clearly, there are some grave goods which can be ascribed to the male or female spheres, like weapons or jewelry. Consequently, the sex of individuals in most cases has been determined on the basis of grave goods, when possible (EFFROS 2000; EISNER 1991). Apart from the

² For instance, an attempt to calculate the value of grave goods was carried out on the basis of artifact type frequency in the cemeteries of Castel Trosino and Nocera Umbra. The rarer the artifact, the higher its value. See JØRGENSEN 1991. This calculation can be very misleading as it does not take into consideration the fact that different objects considered to be the same artifact type, might be produced differently, implying different values. For this problem see DAIM 1998.

³ This is the case for the Merovingian cemetery of Oberflacht, where particular conditions have preserved all the organic materials. In fact, some of the deceased were found placed on decorated wooden beds and different kinds of wooden vessels were also found. See SCHIEK, 1992.

⁴ Consider, for example, the case of Gertrude, Abbess of Nivelles, who deliberately decided to be buried with a very simple cloth and nothing else, in EFFROS 1996.

⁵ See HÄRKE 2001. An example of the sources on this problem can be found in EFFROS 1997.

fact that this attitude was again an a priori categorization, gender has only recently been considered as a phenomenon to be investigated in the context of Early Medieval graves⁶. In fact, even if a certain number of graves contain artifacts like weapons or jewelry which are clearly related to gender, other graves do not. What possible reason could there have been for distinguishing graves choosing or not choosing gender specific artifacts? The problem of gender construction in cemeteries will be the initial issue of my essay. I will give a more detailed explanation in the paragraphs below of the area, the methods and the aims of my research.

Scope of the investigation

I intend to consider cemeteries used during the 6th-7th centuries AD in two regions: part of Pannonia and a region in northern Italy, Friuli. I have chosen these areas and this period because, according to documentary sources, they represent, respectively the last territory the Lombards controlled before moving to Italy and the first region they occupied after arriving in Italy; the time just before the arrival of the Lombards in Pannonia, the period of their occupation (AD 510-567/68), the time they moved to Italy and their settlement there.

The cemeteries in Pannonia which will be analyzed are Hegykő, Szentendre, and Tamási, excavated by István Bóna. They are presently unpublished, but I was fortunate in being allowed to work with the drawings of grave goods and the artifact types preserved in various museums in Hungary.

The cemeteries of the Friuli region studied here are S. Stefano (Cividale), Romans d'Isonzo and Liariis, which are partially published.

In particular, for this research project, the cemeteries to be analyzed were selected according to their size (they had to contain at least 30 graves) and the completeness of the documentation provided for each. The minimum documentation had to include: descriptions of the grave goods (in the form of publication or through direct analyses), body and grave goods placement in all the excavated graves, a map of the cemetery, anthropological analyses or the existence of anthropological material available for analysis.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph and, as we will see in more detail later in this paper, the concept of ethnic identity has lately begun to be reviewed by historians and archaeologists. Recent archaeological research shows that graves are not merely a passive mirror of an individual's ethnic origins. Therefore, the traditional identification of cemeteries as Lombard versus Roman or autochthonous should be treated with caution. For this reason, the cemeteries were selected exclusively on the basis of their chronology, location and completeness of documentation, ignoring the labels they were given on the basis of artifact types and styles. Consequently, cemeteries such as Liariis, (CONCINA 1992) in the Friuli region or Hegykő in Hungary (BÓNA 1997), not traditionally considered "Lombard", on the basis of the artifacts found there, were included in our research. The idea was to examine the cemetery organization found in such cemeteries and to determine if and how they differ from the cemeteries where "typical Lombard" artifacts were deposited in graves.

⁶ In particular, attention has been paid to the study of gender in archaeology since the Nineties, with the contribution of feminist theories. See, CONKEY, SPECTOR 1984; DAMM 1991; GILCHRIST 1991, CONKEY, GERO 1997. For the more specific case of Medieval archaeology see GILCHRIST 1997. An interesting case study is presented in HALSALL 1995 and in HALSALL 1996.

Cemetery taphonomy

For the cemeteries which were investigated, we possess almost all the above mentioned data, although there are some exceptions or they are limited in some way. We therefore need to clarify their *taphonomy*, a term which refers to both the cultural and natural factors which can effect the preservation of a site

The three Hungarian cemeteries, excavated during the 1950s and 1960s, have not yet been published. In any case, I was permitted to see all the artifacts, the drawings of the artifacts and their arrangement in the graves. Maps were also available as well as the anthropological material. I was also able to personally discuss some important questions with Professor Bóna, although I did not have access to the excavation diaries or reports.

For the Italian cemeteries, the documentation is a bit more problematic. As I will explain in more detail for each cemetery, the documentation was not complete for any of the three cemeteries from Friuli. The cemetery of S. Stefano was located in an inhabited area of the town, partly under a school, therefore even if the publication is complete and detailed, a significant part of the cemetery is probably missing. This means that the partial data we have at our disposal does not permit definitive conclusions to be drawn. In any case, the cemetery will not be more extensively excavated, at least in the next few decades, so that this is the only data we can rely on. What one can hope is that new excavations, as for instance, those at the S. Mauro cemetery, will promote a further understanding of funerary customs in Cividale.

The cemetery of Liariis has never been published; I was allowed to examine all the available data, but unfortunately some important material, like the map, had mysteriously disappeared from the museum.

Romans d'Isonzo was found in the countryside but half of the cemetery has not been systematically published, and therefore I could work only on that half of the material. Clearly, definite conclusions concerning this significant cemetery cannot be drawn at the moment. Still, the material is very interesting and, even if incomplete, will make a contribution to research in this field.

Aims and methods

Different funerary practices will be investigated and analyzed. Comparisons will be made through space and time between the two territories in order to explain the meaning of multiple behaviors and to find an answer to the following questions: how did these people perceive death and funerals? How were gender, age and social status symbolized in the graves (if they were)? Why do we find different funeral behaviors in different areas? Is it possible to single out the Pannonian cemeteries of those who moved into the area from the north and later left for Italy? If these cemeteries are indeed individual, do they display different levels of integration between newcomers and natives first in Pannonia and then in Italy?

Various types of grave goods and assemblages, combined in different ways, have been found in Early Medieval graves. Why were these objects put into graves? What meaning did these objects have for those people? What did the objects symbolize for them? It should be possible to answer these questions by studying differences in grave goods distribution in graves and cemeteries.

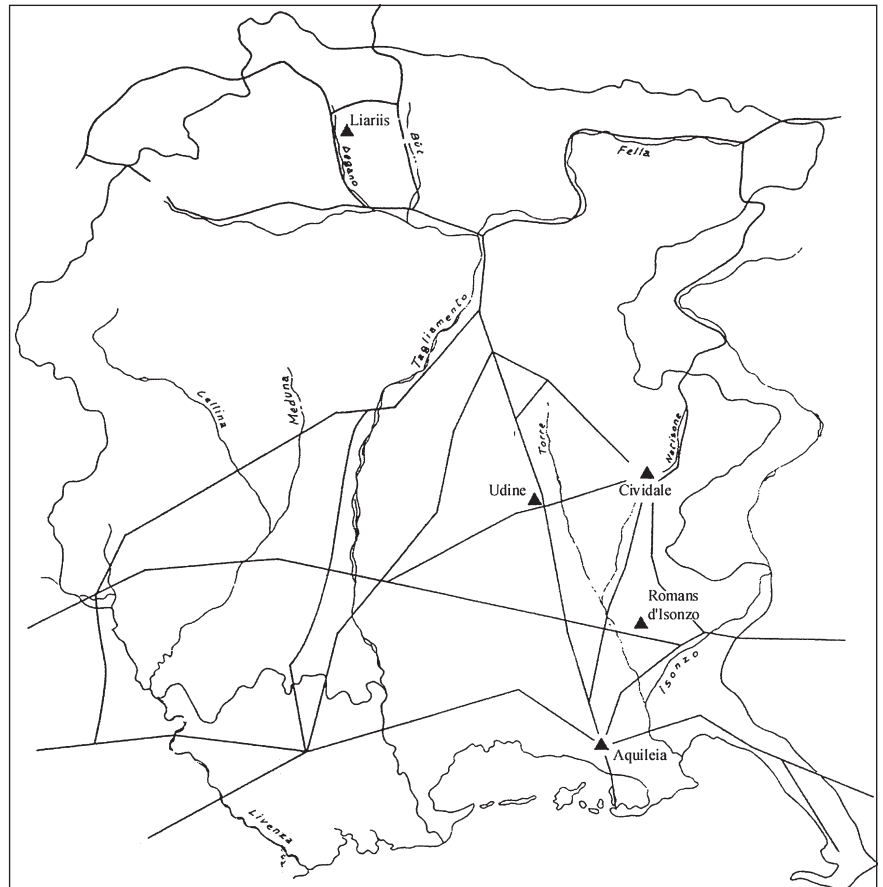
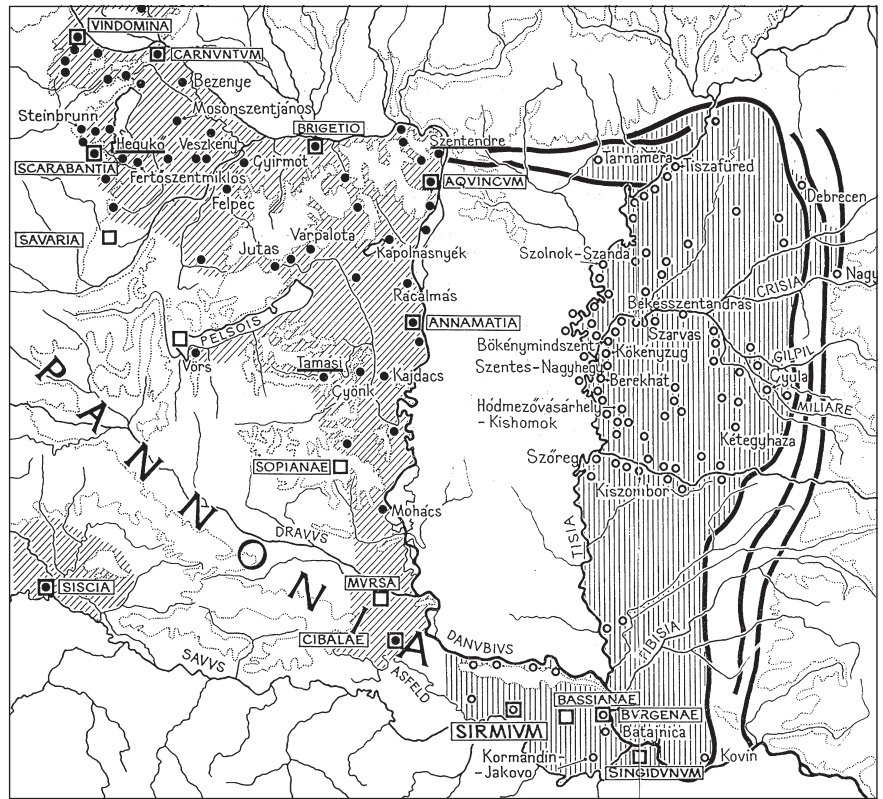
The approach to the cemeteries which were investigated focused on the construction of gender and its relation to age classes, cemetery organization, and body disposal. For this purpose, I have used a method introduced by Guy Halsall in his analyses of Merovingian cemeteries in the Region of Metz⁷. It is particularly interesting as it explores the artifactual construction of gender and its relation to age groups. It allows researchers to verify the common assumption that some objects had gender specific meanings. Secondly, it takes into account the overlaps between categories of artifacts deposited with different age/sex groups, trying to find a possible explanation for individual inclusion and exclusion in or from gender groups. In fact, Halsall's results from the region of Metz have shown the way age classes were at the base of grave good distribution from a gender perspective.

What about the cemeteries in Hungary and Italy? Do we find the same kind of gender construction in the grave goods? And if not, why?

We should bear in mind that "categorization relies for its effects upon principles of inclusion and exclusion" (CHAPMAN 2000, p.33) according to a behavior, which is typical for each social group and is symptomatic of its social construction. Therefore, differences in this sense can reveal something about the groups' perceptions of individual roles and positions within that particular society.

⁷ HALSALL 1995 and HALSALL 1996. A similar sort of analyses on gender construction has also been suggested by BODDINGTON 1986.

Map 1 – Pannonia (after BÓNA 1976).



Map 2 – Friuli region (adapted from AHUMADA SILVA 1999).