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Introduction : Approaching the Dead

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Finnish Exegetical Society

2020

Valkama , K & de Hemmer Gudme , A K 2020 , Introduction : Approaching the Dead . in K Valkama & A K de Hemmer Gudme (eds) , Approaching the Dead : Studies on Mortuary Ritual in the Ancient World . Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society , no. 118 , Finnish Exegetical Society , Helsinki , pp. 6-10 .

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/326435>

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publishedVersion

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The volume *Approaching the Dead: Studies on Mortuary Ritual in the Ancient World* is about the social interaction of the living with the dead, as reflected in the textual and archaeological records of ancient societies. The authors examine different aspects of mortuary ritual practices, their praxis, pragmatism, palpability, and politics. The examples cover a variety of places and historical periods, from the Late Bronze Age city of Ugarit in modern-day Syria to Late Iron Age Scandinavia. The majority of the studies, however, are focused on mortuary culture in the Levant in the long first millennium BCE.

Even beyond death, the dead play an important part in the lives of the living. The memories of the deceased leave traces in the minds of their fellow humans, in their behavior, the built environment, and material culture. Ironically, these efforts are directed at absent beings – the objects of this intense attention are ultimately dead and gone. Indeed, their departure from this life and the lived reality is the condition that triggers a flurry of activity and responses, a chain of mourning, practices of remembrance, and monumentalizing. Much of this activity can be categorized as mortuary ritual, a diverse set of strategic practices that aim at addressing the death of an individual and negotiating the personal, philosophical, and social challenges that this death creates.

Contributors: professor emerita Diana Edelman (University of Oslo), senior lecturer Dr. Fredrik Ekengren (University of Lund), professor Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme (University of Oslo), Dr., docent Raz Kletter (University of Helsinki), Dr. Joanna Töyräänvuori (University of Helsinki), Dr. Kirsi Valkama (University of Helsinki).

This is a small but interesting and well-designed interdisciplinary collection of seven studies on mortuary practices based on archaeological and textual sources. The evidence is mainly drawn from the ancient Near East, from the Late Bronze through the Roman period, but the volume also includes a contribution discussing a 5th century CE grave in Sweden that fits perfectly with the methodological scope of the collection. The studies consist of illustrative case studies of ancient mortuary practices, which are approached from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives and thus serve to update the study of mortuary rituals and practices, especially with regard to theory and source criticism.

Professor Martti Nissinen,
University of Helsinki

APPROACHING THE DEAD

Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme &
Kirsi Valkama (eds.)

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Studies on Mortuary Ritual in the Ancient World

Edited by
Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme & Kirsi Valkama



Approaching the Dead



This book has received a subsidy for scientific publishing granted by the Ministry of Education and Culture from the proceeds of Veikkaus and distributed by the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies.

Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society

Series Editor: Jutta Jokiranta

Editing Board: Jutta Jokiranta, Petri Luomanen, Susanna Asikainen

Layout and typography: Susanna Asikainen

Cover: Susanna Asikainen

Cover illustration: Mats Vänehem (© Mats Vänehem)

ISSN: 0356-2786

ISBN: 978-951-9217-73-4

Nord Print, 2020

PUBLICATIONS OF THE FINNISH EXEGETICAL SOCIETY 118

Approaching the Dead

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EDITED BY
ANNE KATRINE DE HEMMER GUDME &
KIRSI VALKAMA

The Finnish Exegetical Society
Helsinki 2020

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ANNE KATRINE DE HEMMER GUDME & KIRSI VALKAMA

Introduction

Approaching the Dead

Even beyond death, the dead play an important part in the lives of the living. The dead become a focal point, around which practices of remembrance, regrouping, and continued social interaction revolve. The dead leave traces in our minds, in our behavior, in our built environment and material culture; but, ironically, the objects of all these efforts, the foci of this intense attention, are entirely absent – they are dead and gone. Indeed, their departure from this life and from our lived reality is exactly the condition that triggers a flurry of activity and responses, a chain of mourning, remembering, and monumentalizing that occurs in the wake of a death. Much of this activity can be categorized as mortuary ritual, a diverse set of strategic practices that aim to address the death of an individual and to negotiate the challenges – personal, philosophical, and social – that this death creates. Sometimes mortuary ritual practices serve to construct the presence of the dead in spite of their absence, sometimes these practices attempt to fixate the memory and narrative of the deceased, and sometimes they help the community of the living to cope and to mend the social fabric that has been torn by death. Oftentimes, mortuary ritual practices do all of these things and more.

In this volume, we approach the dead from different angles by examining different aspects of mortuary ritual practices, their praxis, pragmatism, palpability, and politics. The focus of the volume is historical, and the individual contributions analyze either historical sources or archaeological data, or both. The majority of the contributions are studies of Levantine mortuary culture in the long first millennium BCE, but one contribution travels north and forward in time to Scandinavian burial

practices in the mid-first millennium CE. The contributions each zoom in on different aspects of mortuary ritual in different cultures and times, but they share a common focus on and interest in the phenomenology of these practices, and a common methodological reflection on how far we can press our sources, historical and archaeological, in our attempt to make them “talk.” We hope that readers of this volume will find inspiration in the combination of diversity and convergence that the contributions embody, and which is so characteristic of the mortuary ritual practices that we study in this book. Across time and space, mortuary ritual emerges as both strikingly distinctive and remarkably uniform. Mortuary ritual practices are represented by a wealth of specific manifestations worldwide, and yet there is also a repetitiveness to their structural patterns and strategies. Therefore, we hope that a broad group of students and scholars of both contemporary and historical mortuary cultures will read and benefit from this collection of essays, just as we have read broadly and gained insights from many scholarly fields in our work on this topic. In a way, thanatology is fully cross-disciplinary field by nature, as it unites the natural, social, and human sciences in an endeavor to illuminate death, the fundamental condition that unites us all, and humanity’s response to it since the dawn of time. We have thoroughly enjoyed taking part in this endeavor, and we are looking forward to participating in the ongoing conversation.

We have chosen to order the contributions chronologically, starting in Late Bronze Age Ugarit and ending in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. In the following, we shall briefly introduce each chapter in this order. In the remainder of our introduction, we shall point to shared themes and perspectives that tie the individual contributions together across chronological, cultural, and geographical boundaries.

In the first contribution, “The Cult of the Royal Dead at Ugarit: Poetics, Politics, and Praxis,” Joanna Töyräänvuori assesses the archaeological and textual evidence pertaining to the cult of the royal dead in Late Bronze Age Ugarit. She then goes on to discuss the ideological rationale behind these practices. Töyräänvuori argues that a stable and secure royal succession was the most pressing concern when a king of ancient Ugarit died. Therefore, the ritual performances occasioned by a royal death were designed to stress the power and legitimacy of the dead

king's successor, and to underline the divine and royal ancestry of this new king.

In the second contribution, "Graves, Missing Graves, Ideology and Mortuary Rituals: A Mixed Salad in the Archaeological Bowl," Raz Kletter investigates the boundaries of what funerary archaeological remains can tell us about the practices and thought worlds of the past. Kletter uses the archaeological record of the Iron Age kingdom of Judah in ancient Palestine as an example, and he looks into both the "missing" graves of Iron Age I Judah and the so-called Bench Tombs of the Iron Age II period. With these two examples, Kletter demonstrates the methodological challenges posed by using the Hebrew Bible to interpret the material culture of Iron Age Palestine.

The third contribution, "The Functions of Inscriptions in Iron Age II Judean Burial Caves," is written by Kirsi Valkama, and concerns a few of the Iron Age II tombs from ancient Judah, which are also treated in Kletter's contribution in this volume. Valkama analyses the epigraphic and iconographic evidence from the burial caves at Jerusalem, Khirbet el-Qom, and Khirbet Beit Lei. The evidence from Khirbet Beit Lei has long been interpreted as engravings made by refugees hiding in the burial cave during an invasion, and as such as being detached from the funerary context of the space. Only lately has this interpretation been challenged. Valkama takes these recent interpretations of the Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions as specifically *mortuary* inscriptions as her starting point, as she investigates the different functions ascribed to the engravings in Judean burial caves.

In the volume's fourth contribution, "Possible Rituals Involving the Dead Reflected in Isaiah 65:3–5, 66:3, 17," Diana Edelman shifts the focus from archaeology and epigraphy to the texts of the Hebrew Bible, specifically three select passages from the Book of Isaiah. Edelman argues that these texts offer us an insight into the mortuary ritual practices of Persian period Yehud, where veneration of the ancestors was part of household religion. The texts are too brief to enable us to reconstruct a cohesive ritual sequence, but these practices seem to have entailed incense offerings and shared meals in or by the tomb, and they seem to reflect an understanding that the spirits of the dead could grant blessings and

protection, and that they could act as intermediaries between the deity Yahweh and his (living) worshipers.

The fifth contribution, “Visiting the Dead: Traces of Mortuary Ritual Practices in Roman Palestine,” is written by Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, who uses the necropolis at Beit Shearim as her case study. Gudme examines different kinds of interactions with the dead at Beit Shearim through an analysis of grave goods, funerary architecture, and inscriptions at the site, and she uses a focus on material agency to consider how the dead were enacted in various ways at Beit Shearim.

In the volume’s sixth and final contribution, “Death and Display: The Visual Analysis of Mortuary Practices,” Fredrik Ekengren demonstrates how a combination of visual social semiotics, cognitive science, and ritual and performance theories can help the interpreter to outline the visual and sensory engagement with graves and their materiality. Ekengren’s case study is a Late Iron Age burial chamber from Mound 2 at the Högom grave field in Sweden. Ekengren shows how paying attention to visual communication and to distinct processes of visibility and display can illuminate the ritual “logic” related to burial practices.

Although the individual contributions in this volume focus on different aspects of mortuary ritual and work with different case studies, they share a number of common themes and challenges. One challenge in particular is taken up by all the authors: how to reconstruct mortuary ritual practices on the basis of material remains and ancient texts. How do we move from the sources that we have – artefacts, architecture, inscriptions, and literary texts – to reconstructing and understanding the actions and gestures that are now long gone? Töyräänvuori and Edelman focus mainly on literary textual sources, whereas Valkama, Gudme, and Ekengren’s primary focus is the materiality of the tomb. Kletter’s point of departure is also material evidence, but his discussion includes a critical reflection upon how to responsibly combine both textual sources and material culture in an analysis of mortuary ritual.

Another shared theme is the relationship between mortuary ritual and memory, and how responses to death are often to a great extent attempts to seize control of a narrative and to construct a particular memory of the deceased. This is particularly evident in Ekengren’s and Töyräänvuori’s case studies, where an important aspect of elite burials is

to preserve a certain image of the deceased and their descendants. Edelman's and Kletter's contributions are both examples of how mortuary ritual can become the object of polemical and ideological manipulation, albeit in quite different ways. In Edelman's case, descriptions of mortuary ritual practices are used to "other" and denounce their practitioners, because their actions do not conform to the biblical authors' view of proper religious behavior. Interestingly, these brief polemical passages preserved for posterity the very practices that they wished to abolish and condemn. In Kletter's study, it is rather the agenda of contemporary interpreters that influence their approach to ancient societies and determine the kinds of cultural memories that they seek to find there.

Finally, three of the volume's contributions share a strong interest in the perception of and interaction with the dead after death. Valkama's, Edelman's, and Gudme's studies all detail aspects of what is commonly known as the ancestor cult, and they show how feelings of adoration, care, petitioning, and fear are all communicated through mortuary ritual practices.

In these ways and more, the contributions in this volume approach the dead through their material culture, through their aesthetics, and through the tales that were told about them in order to make them divulge their secrets about the lives they led – both as living and as dead – and about the ritual responses that their deaths elicited.