

# 5.3. Warrior symbols and female beauty

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## Aims of the project

The main aim of the project was to investigate late antique and early medieval funerary rituals in Northern Italy, to understand how they were employed to display and create social identities by different communities in different periods. Particular attention was dedicated to the changes of funerary habits, which occurred during this period and to see whether they could be related to social transformations and political and economical changes. Traditionally, archaeologists have interpreted the early medieval funerary rituals as a means for displaying ethnic identity. In this light, the appearances of new grave goods from the middle of the 5th century have been seen as the expression of newly migrated barbarians. In particular, the deposition of bow brooches and weapons in graves has been considered as a barbarian tradition, introduced in Italy by Goths and Lombards. The project was therefore intended to see whether such new rituals could be really considered as expression of the ethnicity of barbarian groups willing to differentiate themselves from the conquered populations.

## Methods of investigation

For the purpose of this project I collected data from 66 cemeteries excavated in northern Italy, and dated between the first century B. C. and the ninth A.D. A total of 6014 graves could be used for investigation. I considered different aspects of funerary rituals, such as grave goods deposition and their relation with the gender and age of the individuals, with particular attention to chronological and territorial transformations. In particular, weapon burials and deposition of brooches have been analyzed in order to understand the meaning of such grave goods and the way they were used to represent social identities. I also considered the arrangement of graves and space perception in the investigated cemeteries.

## Results

The most interesting result which emerged from this research is that, in spite of the common opinion that early medieval funerary rituals were innovative and that these new trends were introduced by barbarians who had migrated into the Italian peninsula, early medieval funerary habits were quite similar to those documented during Roman times and late Antiquity. In particular, brooches were deposited in the graves without interruption between the first and the seventh centuries A.D. However, the shape and gender meaning of brooches changed during the fifth century. During this period, in fact, a new type of brooch appears (the so called barbarian type bow brooch), which is deposited exclusively in female graves, while the Roman type brooches, deposited in male and female graves gradually disappears from cemeteries. A continuity between late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages can also be found in the way graves were arranged and space was perceived. Graves were

arranged in groups, surrounded by walls, during Roman times. Stone inscriptions testify that these areas were owned by parental groups or by different kinds of associations (trade, religious). A similar arrangement of graves is documented in a great number of early medieval cemeteries. Graves were arranged in groups separated by empty space, though walls were not built to surround them, nor inscriptions have been found. It is possible that during this period, though stone was not employed any more to mark separate funerary plots, the use of burying the dead in separate areas owned by families or other kind of social groups was preserved. However, there is also a group of cemeteries, dated from the sixth century, where graves were arranged in rows and often according to the age or the gender of the deaths. All these cemeteries were related to churches, suggesting how the perception of space changed in relation to Christianity.

However the most striking results have been gained on weapon burials. Weapons, like brooches, were deposited in graves during the entire chronological period considered in this study, though some fluctuations are visible in their frequency. This fact contradicts the common opinion that the habit of burying weapons was introduced by barbarians as a way to define their ethnic identity in the context of cemeteries. In fact, as it emerged from this study, weapons were much more frequently deposited during the first centuries A.D, when no barbarians were invading Italy, than during the sixth and the seventh centuries.

Given these preliminary results I have paid particular attention to the interpretation of warrior grave trends and the meaning of the fluctuation in the deposition of weapons, across the centuries. Research showed that in the period when weapon depositions reach their lowest occurrence, between the third and the fourth centuries, equipped soldiers were frequently depicted on stone funerary monuments. Horsemen, and centurions were usually represented together with the horse and the groom, and the inscriptions confirm their active role in the army. Simple soldiers were depicted standing with weaponry: shield, spear and sax. As soon as funerary inscriptions become rarer, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century on, weapons begin to be deposited again in burial, but their frequency is not as high as in the first centuries A.D. Because of the lack of inscriptions, from this time on, grave goods assumed a more important role in the expression of identities, but at the same time their message was much more fluid. Explicit written labels of the status of a warrior or horseman disappeared; weapon depositions were substituted, but their symbolic meaning seems less clear and normalized than before. This might be linked to a period of fluidity in the role of soldiers, whose status was mixed up or superimposed on that of aristocrats. A new military aristocracy of landowners emerged during this phase, displacing the older senatorial elite, which had possessed very large estates. The instability, provoked by wars, dismantled large proprietries scattered in different provinces of the empire. This brought the emergence of local elites who acquired military, civil and religious power on a regional scale. These changes inevitably lead to a fundamental reorganization of the army. The large costs were no longer paid by the State through taxation; instead, 'private' bands of warriors who were paid through booty and newly conquered lands. The weapons they used were no longer given by the state; soldiers themselves had to provide their equipment. In this way the role of soldiers was transformed from a state career to a privilege for rich people.

## Publikationen

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**Memory of a Better Death. Normative and exceptional grave goods in 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD cemeteries in Central-Europe**, in: Materializing Memory: archaeological material culture and the semantics of the past, I. Barbiera/A. Choyke/J. Rasson (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1977, 2009) 65-75.

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