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The Place of the Dead in the Mediterranean. A Sicilian Experience.

Carolina Kobelinsky, Filippo Furri, Camille Noûs

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Abstract: Death during the journey to Europe is both a spectre hanging over border crossers and a concrete reality. It is also a very present issue within the society that finds itself forced to deal with these inert bodies. Drawing on a field study has been conducted since January 2018, we focus here on how the bodies found at sea and taken to the port of Catania (Sicily) are managed, exploring both their itinerary and how a small group of people from the city has become involved in a project to give them a name and a biography.

Keywords: EU border deaths – identification – database – shared humanity – hospitality

‘It gives me no pleasure to know that the last two bodies to arrive in Catania, on 13 June 2018, are now resting in the town cemetery’s cold morgue. Forgotten by everyone and desecrated by a slow technocratic bureaucracy. Nobody kisses them now, they are dead. Such a gesture fills that otherwise often empty vessel that is humanity. A dichotomy between words and truth. The help of colleagues is providential. Silvia’s words are like a lifeboat to me and I save the email Riccardo sent me, a few days after the landing on 8 January 2018, as though it were a relic. On that day, eight bodies were disembarked, now dispersed across different cemeteries on the island. Today, still, I keep the tombs of these bodies within me. I visit them every day. I have so much to ask them, they have so much to tell me.’ Excerpt from notes written by Davide, 27 January 2019.

As a direct effect of hardline securitization policies and techniques of migration control (Albahari, 2015; Weber & Pickering, 2011) deaths have formed part of the landscape around the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas for several years now. The most recent statistics indicate that 50,873 people died or disappeared between 1993 and 2020.¹

For border crossers, death during the journey to Europe is both a spectre hanging over them and a concrete reality. It is also a very present issue – an active, driving force – within the society that finds itself forced to deal with these inert bodies. It leaves behind both symbolic and material traces, marking the space where the Other is welcomed as the disorienting trace of a presence that resists ‘all attempts at classification’ (Sayad, 2000:9). The dead bodies that line the European borders are those of foreigners but they are also very often strangers. They inform and sometimes disturb the collective imaginary of those who take them in. They open up a breach, leading to reconfigurations of meaning and space.

Until 11 August 2013, news of migrants dying at sea echoed back only very faintly to the inhabitants of Catania. On that day, a small boat got stuck in a sand bank not far from the coast, in the middle of the city. Six young men from Egypt drowned only metres away from the Lido Verde beach. A commemorative plaque now reminds passers-by of this tragic event. It reads ‘Catania and its youth remember’. The Mediterranean coastline is dotted with such monuments and plaques, some of them discreet, others more visible, inscribing a form of memory. There is

¹ This calculation is based on data provided by United Against Racism (1993-1999), The Migrant Files (2000-2013), and the IOM (2013-2020). It was put together by the cartographer Nicolas Lambert, who also produced a map of these statistics. <https://neocarto.hypotheses.org/9586>

something arresting about coming into contact with these bodies.

In the following pages, we want to focus on how the bodies found at sea and taken to Catania are managed, exploring both their itinerary and how a small group of people from the city has become involved in a project to give them a name and a biography. We draw here on a field study that has been conducted since January 2018 with the Catania Red Cross ‘Restoring Family Links’ (RFL) programme around which the project in question emerged.

RFL was founded several decades ago to help families searching for loved ones who had disappeared as a result of armed conflicts or natural disasters. Today, it is largely used to help re-establish family contacts that have been severed due to the conditions in which people cross borders without the necessary authorization from nation-states. In Catania, a small group of people volunteering for RFL first drew up a map of migrant graves in the municipal cemetery and then began collecting all the information that had been produced about these bodies by the various institutions involved in dealing with them. Working on the hypothesis that connecting all the data about one body might provide clues to identifying them, the ultimate aim of this project is to devise a technical tool, namely a database, that will allow unknown bodies to be identified and their families to be located. The intention is to make the traces left behind by the deceased ‘speak’ so as to ‘help’ families find their loved ones, given that they themselves are not in a position to search for them. With that aim in mind, Silvia, Riccardo, Davide, and a few other members of RFL succeeded in convincing all the institutions more or less closely involved in managing these bodies of the value of working together. This enabled them to obtain the necessary authorizations to consult the files held about the deceased by various police agencies and municipal administrative institutions.

Through an ethnography of the creation of this database,² we were able to observe how the various actors who participated in this project, including the members of the RFL team, worked and negotiated between different relationships to death, operating at two consistently imbricated levels: on the one hand, concrete, mechanical management of the deceased and the files accompanying them, making their mobility possible (Esquerre & Truc, 2011) from the point of their landing to the cemetery where they are buried; on the other hand, active involvement in the identification project, translating the participants’ desire to find out more about the dead and to take them in. These two registers can also be related to Katharine Verdery’s (1999) dual conceptualization of dead bodies, seen as both material objects and political symbols. In this sense, the bodies recovered at borders become a privileged space for rethinking the political order.

We first examine the itinerary of border crossers’ dead bodies from when they are disembarked to when they are buried in the municipal cemetery, as well as the development of an apparatus for dealing with these bodies. We then show that the commitment of the database project’s participants reflects their desire to express a form of hospitality towards the dead: as they

² The ethnographic material was collated over several short stays in Catania, during which we combined traditional observation and interviews with providing active support to the database project, notably by participating, alongside RFL members, in sessions collecting information and in meetings focused on the potential leads hidden in these data that might allow bodies to be identified. We conducted several series of interviews and had informal conversations with RFL volunteers involved in the project, as well as municipal employees (at the civil registry, cemetery, undertakers, etc.), members of various police forces (Squadra mobile, forensic police), and staff at the prosecutor’s office. We also conducted interviews with pathologists, religious authorities, and members of NGOs involved in migrant management. The names of our interlocutors within RFL have not been anonymized, following their wishes. However, we were careful to preserve the confidentiality of any comments with the potential to create tensions in the relationships between different institutions and individuals.

The research was carried out with the support of the MECMI: Morts en context de migration program (ANR-FRQSC- 2). It has also benefited from discussions within the Cortem program (dir. N. Fischer) and the Ecos-Chile program (dir. By V. Bénèi and M. E. Tijoux). A very first draft of this text was prepared for an edited volume in French related to the Ecos-Chile program, *Racismes, corps, attentes* that has just been published (L’Harmattan 2021).

become involved in the project, they form close affective ties with the deceased. Finally, we argue that a particular grieving process emerges as our interlocutors experience what could be referred to as a form of mourning by proxy.

Transporting the bodies

In March 2016, the port of Catania became a mobile hotspot, i.e. a zone where ‘migratory pressures’ are ‘disproportionate’ to use the European Commission’s terms. A national system was therefore put in place to identify and record all migrants entering the territory and direct them towards different national administrative structures depending on whether they could claim asylum, were eligible for particular protection, or were to be deported (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2018). Between 2015 and 2018, Catania became one of the main ports of arrival in Italy for Search and Rescue operations in the central Mediterranean. Several thousand people whose lives were in danger at sea were brought to dry land. Alongside the living, many others did not survive the crossing. Countless dead bodies remain somewhere at the bottom of the sea. During this period, over 250 bodies were taken on to Catania.

The dead are dealt with differently depending on their number, but the process always relies on the powers and means of the municipality where they disembark whatever its economic situation. Most of the time, the police order the living to be disembarked first followed by the dead, in order to ‘protect them from view’ as we were told by the Office in charge of sanitation inspections at the port.

The authorities are warned that there are deceased passengers on board before the boat docks. When the news reaches the municipal undertakers – the only officials authorized to transport corpses – a group of men heads to the port in hearses. During this time, the deputy public prosecutor appoints one or more pathologists who will also arrive on site in order to examine the bodies. This examination generally consists in an external inspection allowing them to determine the cause of death.

Once they are on the scene, the team of undertakers recovers the dead ‘humanely, as delicately as possible’, sometimes helps the pathologists handle the bodies, and then takes them to a morgue either at one of the city’s hospitals or at the cemetery. This is where DNA samples are taken and where the forensic examination is carried out, obtaining information such as the deceased’s physical features, any distinctive signs such as tattoos, piercings, or any other identifying mark. Clothes and objects found on the body are sent to the public prosecutor’s department where they are stored in plastic bags.

While the bodies are being transported, a judicial investigation is launched. Its aim is to determine whether a crime has been committed and, if it has, to find the perpetrators. If a crime is suspected, the public prosecutor can request an autopsy and proceed with an investigation allowing the victim to be identified. The autopsy serves to determine the cause of death, but for deaths at sea an external examination conducted on site at the port usually suffices. As for investigations to identify the bodies, if they do take place we have certainly never heard them mentioned in Catania or elsewhere. The reason is simple: no institution is tasked with identifying these bodies that have come from afar. Even when the survivors of a shipwreck provide a name for one of their travelling companions who has died, this does not lead to steps being officially undertaken for the body formally to be identified by the Tribunal, which alone has the power to rule that an identification has satisfied the burden of proof. The dead, negatively mirroring living migrants who are subjected to a range of procedures aimed at identifying them and ensuring their traceability, are almost never the subject of any official inquiry that might allow a name to be given to them.

The bodies remain in the morgue for a variable amount of time, until the official documents delivered by the public prosecutor’s office and the Civil Registry indicate that it is possible to

move them to the cemetery.

An apparatus for managing the bodies

On our first visit, we entered the huge *Cimitero Monumentale di Catania* through a side entrance accompanied by a Red Cross vehicle and parked on a large tarmacked path. A few steps away, where the path opened out onto a square, we saw the *Speranza naufragata* [Wrecked Hope] memorial monument which was inaugurated on 10 March 2015 for the seventeen victims who had drowned the previous year and who were later joined by five more bodies from a shipwreck in May 2015. Plaques surround a sculpture by the artist Pierluigi Portale and each gravestone bears the inscription of a verse from the poem 'Migrations' by the Nigerian author Wole Soyinka. When we arrived that windless day, we saw a flower placed on each grave. We crossed the path, took a small side alley, and spotted a large, *almost* empty space. On one side, there was a square with graves on the verge of falling into abandonment. Crosses or simple metal plaques almost all bore a name, a date of birth, and a date of death. Davide, Silvia and Riccardo explained to us that this was the '*quadrato povertà*' [poverty square], where people with no family or whose loved ones could not afford to pay for a 'private' burial were buried, at the city's expense. On the other side, there was a slightly sloped area with four rows of seventeen mounds, each with a black metal plaque planted in the earth. On each of these alphanumeric codes could be read (sometimes one, sometimes two, three or five), with dates and the names of ships.

Observing the cemetery and engaging in discussion with the people working there, as well as at the undertakers and Civil Registry, allowed us to piece together the various developments in how bodies have been managed. We learnt that the bodies of five of the six young Egyptians who died in the Lido Verde shipwreck in the summer of 2013³ had been identified and returned to their families. Only one body remained in Catania. A few months later, in May 2014, for the first time the Italian Maritime Coordination Centre designated Catania as a disembarkation port for the victims after a Search and Rescue operation conducted as part of Operation Mare Nostrum. This initiative had been set up by the Italian government in order to rescue boats in distress after the shipwrecks of 3 and 11 October off the coast of Lampedusa. The Italian navy ship *Grecale* arrived in Catania port with 266 survivors and 17 dead aboard.⁴ Given that Italian law consigns the management of deaths on its territory to the municipal administration, the municipality had to organize itself as a matter of urgency. The bodies were transported to the morgue and the authorities came up with the idea of erecting *Speranza naufragata* to commemorate the dead.

Some days after the bodies were disembarked, the municipality held an interreligious commemoration ceremony in the city centre in the presence of the authorities, members of civil society, and a number of distressed inhabitants. Since, the investigation has been closed and to this day, the identity of each of the seventeen dead people has not been established. The monument, which was able to offer a dignified resting place for them, was inaugurated, as already mentioned, on 10 March 2015.

A month later, on 18 April 2015, one of the largest Mediterranean shipwrecks claimed the lives

³ See Valisano, C. (2013, August 10). *Immigrazione, in 120 sbarcano alla Playa. Ritrovati sulla riva i corpi di sei migranti*. MeridioNews, edizione Catania. <https://catania.meridionews.it/articolo/9591/immigrazione-in-120-sbarcano-alla-playa-ritrovati-sulla-riva-i-corpi-di-sei-migranti/>; *La strage dei ragazzi in fuga dalla guerra. Così sono annegati a 15 metri dalla riva* (2013, August 11), La Repubblica. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2013/08/11/la-strage-dei-ragazzi-in-fuga-dalla.html>

⁴ See *Naufragio migranti, recuperati 17 cadaveri. Morte anche due bambine* (2014, May 13). Il Fatto Quotidiano. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/05/13/naufragio-migranti-recuperati-17-cadaveri-aperta-inchiesta-dai-pm-di-catania/983109/>; *L'arrivo della nave Grecale con le salme dei migranti* (2014, May 14). Catania Today. <https://www.cataniatoday.it/foto/cronaca/l-arrivo-della-nave-grecale-con-le-salme-dei-migranti/>

of approximately one thousand people.⁵ Catania's public prosecutor was tasked with handling the case. The first bodies were retrieved in the days and months that followed. Their remains were examined in the NATO base in Melilli, near the town of Augusta⁶, but the public prosecutor in Catania then had to find a destination for the bodies. In order to avoid dispersing the corpses throughout Sicily, as had been in the case with the shipwrecks near Lampedusa in 2013, the municipality made space available in the cemetery. This is how the *quadrato migranti* [migrant square] came to be laid out opposite the 'poverty square'. It first took in 13 bodies,⁷ labelled with a new classification: PM39001, which stands for Post Mortem/Italy (39 is the country code) / the number of the body counted in sequence. An exceptional protocol was set up, decided by the national authorities that had released substantial funds to recover the bodies from the sea, even salvage the wreck itself, and examine the human remains with a view to identifying them. The task was entrusted to the forensic pathologist and anthropologist Cristina Cattaneo, director of the LABANOF forensic centre at the University of Milan. The project also involved the Italian Red Cross, the Red Cross International Committee, and the Italian national Commission on Missing Persons (Cattaneo, 2018).

In August 2015, a Norwegian ship docked at Catania; there were 49 bodies aboard, people who had asphyxiated in the hold of a boat.⁸ This time, however, no exceptional national protocol was set in place. It was up to the town to process them. An investigation was opened by the public prosecutor while the Border Sanitary Inspection Office set up a barrier of containers on the port to demarcate and isolate an area where the bodies could be dealt with and processed. The military section of the Red Cross made a refrigerated container available to preserve the bodies. Pathologists were called up by the public prosecutor's office and began working on site. Some of the bodies were transported to morgues of the city's various hospitals, while others were taken directly to the cemetery where their remains were buried on 19 August. The public prosecutor had made arrangements for the burials to be carried out quickly. It was in the middle of a heatwave. The codes given to these bodies by the forensic police—CT01-CT49, for Catania and the number of the body—were then used by the municipality and inscribed upon the metal plaques that we discovered on our first visit to the cemetery.

As the disembarkations were now taking place on an almost daily basis, the city needed to deal with the presence in its jurisdiction of many more dead bodies than its administrative infrastructure was capable of handling. More bodies required faster inspections and more efficient transfers, for both public health and administrative reasons. In 2015, a *dispositif*⁹ – or 'apparatus' – for processing dead bodies at the border was thus produced, which has since been activated on several occasions.

'Complete' deaths

⁵ See UN says 800 migrants dead in boat disaster as Italy launches rescue of two more vessels (2015, April 20). The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/italy-pm-matteo-renzi-migrant-shipwreck-crisis-srebrenica-massacre>; Pasciuti, M. (2018, April 18). *Naufregio 18 aprile 2015, le vittime sono 1000. Il ragazzo con la pagella e gli altri morti che la politica cerca di dimenticare*. Il fatto Quotidiano.

<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/04/18/naufregio-18-aprile-2015-le-vittime-sono-1-000-il-ragazzo-con-la-pagella-e-gli-altri-morti-che-la-politica-cerca-di-dimenticare/4294850/>

⁶ Viviano, F. (2016, June 29). *Strage nel Mediterraneo, recuperato il relitto del naufragio del 2015 con 700 morti*. La Repubblica.

https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/06/29/news/recuperato_il_relitto_del_naufragio_del_2015-143050001/

⁷ Today, 64 bodies of people who died during the shipwreck of 18th April 2015 are buried in the 'migrant square'.

⁸ See *Strage di Ferragosto, a Catania la nave con le 49 salme: anche 3 bimbi tra le vittime* (2015, August 17). Giornale di Sicilia. <https://gds.it/articoli/cronaca/2015/08/17/strage-di-ferragosto-giunta-a-catania-la-nave-con-i-312-migranti-superstiti-e-le-49-salme-5f2118c3-d658-4f98-be2e-70c6f4f5f1c3/>

⁹ We use the term '*dispositif*' here in the same vein as Foucault (1980 [1977]: 194-195) as a socio-technical ensemble of heterogeneous elements that carries within itself the means to reconfigure itself in multiple ways.

Among all the bodies of those who have died in the Mediterranean and arrived in Catania since 2015, the only bodies to be identified formally and repatriated – thanks to the mobilisation of family in their home country and members of their extended family in Europe – were three men from Pakistan. They had died from lack of oxygen in the hold of a boat, along with 46 other people. Their bodies arrived two days later in Catania, where they were taken to the morgue and then to the cemetery for burial, after which they were exhumed and began the journey back to their country of origin four months after their death. They were taken to Naples in the vehicle of an agency specializing in funerary transportation, before being flown to Rome and from there to Islamabad. The cost of the operation was entirely borne by the Pakistani government.¹⁰ While the rest of their journey and the accompanying rituals remain unknown, what we do know is that all those who participated in identifying and transporting them still keep their passage through Catania fresh in their memory. This is no doubt because their case was as rare as it was clear. They had a ‘complete death’ explained Mrs Giordano, who, for many years now, has been in charge of the Civil Registry Office for migrants who have died at sea. Their case files have a beginning and an end, their constituent documentation is complete and they can therefore be archived. At an institutional level, these three deaths are complete whereas all the others upon which the Red Cross team is working using the database remain so far incomplete.

However, the ‘completeness’ of these deaths is not simply a question of administration or of the state. It is also the shared aim of those working in the institutions involved in the management of these deceased bodies in Catania. Whether they are forensic police officers, undertakers, pathologists, or civil registry workers, whether they are young or approaching retirement, they all cooperate actively with the Red Cross in the database project. Their participation goes together with a discourse that is empathetic in register when referring to these dead Others: ‘Those poor people, Mrs Giordano said to us in March 2018, when I think about them, I think that they left to find a better life, for themselves, for their families, just as we would do. They’re like us, well... like you [she laughed], they were young, they’re like our young people’. Similarly, Mr Mancini, the head of the undertaker office at the cemetery told us: ‘we treat them like any other body, but to tell the truth, we are distressed by them... the same way that we’re distressed by the death of a young person here, who dies in an accident.’ During discussions with the different people we met within the institutions, we heard numerous statements connecting these Others, about whom they knew little, with an us (Catanians, Sicilians, Italians, Europeans, depending on the interlocutor and the context). Their words frequently had the effect of restoring human dignity to the dead.

These different expressions of a ‘shared humanity’, to take up Davide’s words at the beginning of the paper, as well as the frequent connection made between the ‘unfortunate’ (*mischini* in Sicilian patois) young migrants and the youths from ‘here’ speak to a possible familiarity for my interlocutors (Mirto, 2018). This familiarity was expressed with even greater clarity when Silvia, Mr Mancini, or Mrs Giordano spoke of some of the dead using the first names or surnames that were mentioned in the testimony of their fellow travellers or in one of the documents concerning them, which were not the result of a finalized identification process but nevertheless allowed them to set aside administrative classifications, humanize the dead, and somehow give them a name.

A new way for these deaths to be socially enrolled has therefore arisen – in Catania, among Catanians. Our interlocutors’ practices and discourse serve as ‘acts of extension’ that allow the dead to exist (Despret, 2015: 88) in their lives, both in a set of actions directed towards them (to commemorate them, to help identify them) and in conversations with their friends or in their dreams. Extending their lives in this way responds to a desire to ‘complete’ the dead by giving

¹⁰ One of the rare countries, to our knowledge, that systematically takes responsibility for the transport costs of repatriating deceased migrants attempting to reach Europe.

them back their civil identity and their filiation within their family, but also to enable a form of ‘accomplishment’ (Despret, 2015: 89), by giving them a place within the local society.

Tears for the dead

‘The dead should be mourned, but who mourns for these dead people, are they mourned?’ asked Riccardo after a day of disembarking bodies. In the context of a reflection upon the value of life in the contemporary Western world (Butler, 2012), Riccardo’s question can be seen as echoing the ‘ungrievability’ of the almost inherently precarious and vulnerable lives led by migrants, who are devalued and undesirable on European soil. However, our ethnography in Catania leads us to argue that these deaths in the Mediterranean do in fact produce a grieving process. One that takes place vicariously, as it were, but that has political meaning.

All the people we spoke with were engaged in processing the bodies and, as such, initially approached them from a technical, material perspective; however they all soon expressed forms of empathy towards the deceased whose bodies became a vector for affects and thoughts connected to receptions of the Other and shared humanity. The modalities whereby connections were made to these bodies expressed a need to extend a kind of ‘hospitality’, albeit in death. The importance of *accoglienza* and *ospitalità* towards the dead – terms that our interlocutors used time and time again in both discussions and interviews – finds a clear echo in Brightman and Grotti’s analysis of recovery operations and mortuary practices, including burials of dead migrants, in Calabria and Sicily as acts of hospitality (Brightman and Grotti, 2019). Hospitality implies material treatment that is considered to be “respectful”, but our interlocutors also highlighted an affective dimension that they experienced in their daily lives. Indeed, each person involved with these dead people, by processing their case files, by gathering together their remains, made a place for them in his or her life. Many shed tears for them.

Dead border crossers are present within the city of Catania, marked physically by the funerary monument and the commemorative plaques, but also by the flowers placed on graves and the little pictures that passers-by attach to the black plaques of the “migrant square”.¹¹ They exist in the array of experiences and practices shared by those involved in the project run by the local Red Cross. Some of our interlocutors dream of these dead people, whose lives they imagine. Others talk about them in their families, to their children or during family suppers. It is as though it were possible to ward off oblivion and hold the deceased close by giving them a home in this world.

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¹¹ Placing flowers in front of the grave of an unknown migrant is a practice that has been observed in many Spanish cemeteries and elsewhere along the southern EU border. See the chapter on commemorations in the volume on border deaths by the Babels collective (2017).

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