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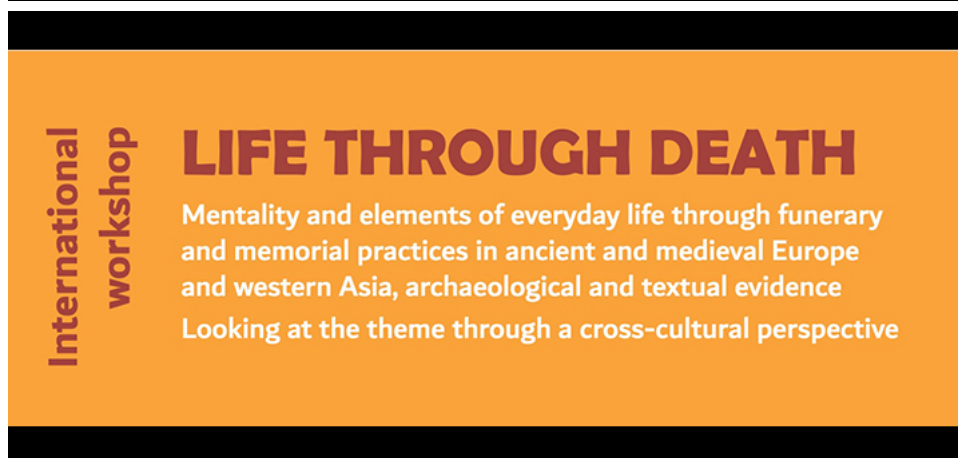
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A Report on the International Workshop on Life Through Death in Ancient West Asia and Medieval Europe

Zahra Kouzehgari et Virginie Muller :



The international workshop titled “Life Through Death: Mentality and Elements of Everyday Life through Funerary and Memorial Practices in Ancient and Medieval Europe and West Asia, Archaeological and Textual Evidence. Looking at the Theme from a Cross-Cultural Perspective” was held on April 29-30, 2024, at the Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée (MOM), Lyon, France (Fig. 1). The initiative for this scholarly gathering was spearheaded by Iryna Teslenko, a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study Collegium of Lyon and an associate researcher at the ArAr laboratory. The workshop, which has been endorsed by the institute’s director Dr. Vincent Rene, aimed to dig into the multifaceted funerary practices of the ancient and medieval worlds. Collaborating with three collegium fellows from three units of the MOM. Iryna Teslenko represented ArAr, Zahra Kouzehgari represented Archéorient, and Nicolette Pavlides represented HiSoMA. The organizational team was further strengthened by the contributions of Anne Baud (ArAr), Anne Flammin (ArAr), and Virginie Muller (Archéorient), ensuring a robust and comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. This was the first time that three laboratories of MOM organized an international event addressing a unique research question.



Fig. 1: The program of the workshop

Unveiling Funerary Practices: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Prehistoric to Medieval Burials

The workshop focused on understanding death as both a biological and cultural experience. It offered profound insights into past lives through the examination of burial practices, associated rituals, funerary objects, and epigraphic documents. These studies revealed ritual practices, beliefs, emotional responses to death, and social relationships, including identity, gender, and social status. The rapid development of scientific and technical methodsexamining human remains enabled scholars to analyze past lives with greater precision, demanding a synthesis of temporal depth and rational analysis. The workshop facilitated intensive multi-disciplinary investigation into these complex themes.

The primary themes addressed during the workshop included:

- What do we learn about elements of everyday culture through mortuary practices?
- In what ways and why do life and the living feature in burial practice and commemoration?
- How did the living communicate with the dead?
- Equality and inequality in male and female burial ceremonies.
- What were the gender markers in burials, and how did they change over time?
- What role did ordinary household utensils, such as ceramics and glassware, play in the funeral rituals of ancient and medieval times?

Special attention was given to new ways to approach artifacts related to burial practices, including symbolism, decoration, status attributes, gender specificity, apotropaic and sacrificial objects, memorial steles, and inscriptions. The workshop also examined the changing functions of everyday utensils in burial rites and the methodologies employed in burial studies, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of funerary and memorial practices in archaeology.

Structure of Workshop:

The workshop was divided into two sessions, each focusing on distinct historical periods.

The first session, titled “Life and Death through Context and Text in Southwest Asia and East Europe from Neolithic to the Iron Age”, addressed the Neolithic to Classic and Pre-Roman periods. It consisted of two separate sections due to the extensive periods and diverse topics covered.

The second session, titled “Funeral Rite of Eastern and Western Pre-Christians and Christians, Similarities, and Differences”, covered the Classic to Hellenistic periods.

The collaborative endeavor involved the participation of a total of 25 contributors, delivering 20 lectures, hailing from diverse geographical locations worldwide. Representing a spectrum of academic institutions, these contributors came from esteemed universities and institutions spanning France, Germany, Greece, and Turkey.

The first section of the First Session

Due to the extensive array of topics and the considerable volume of presentations within the scope of this brief discourse, the present review will focus solely on providing a concise overview of the initial segment of the opening session. The section was arranged and overseen by the authors of this blog, Zahra Kouzehgari, a research fellow affiliated with Collegium and Archéorient laboratory, and VirginieMuller, the co-director of the research team Axe 4 on funerary practices at Archéorient laboratory. In the subsequent part, we aim to provide only brief reports of six contributions from the first part of Session 1.

The lectures in the first section of the first session covered a broad range of topics, including daily life and funerary rituals in the Neolithic period (Cyprus), cohesion and legitimization around the dead based on Sumerian-Akkadian texts, an overview of burial traditions in Eastern Anatolia from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age, observations on the burial traditions of the Kura-Araxes culture in mountainous Eastern Turkey, Kurgan burial traditions in Northwest Iran, and gender-related prestige markers in elite graves from the North Pontic region in pre-Roman and Roman times.

Françoise Le Mort (Archéorient) presented the first and insightful lecture on “Daily life and funerary rituals in the Neolithic: the case of Khirokitia (Cyprus, 7th-6th mill. BC)”. The site has yielded one of the largest series of burials in the Near Eastern Pre-Pottery Neolithic, with a minimum of 243 individuals identified, providing a rich source of data for understanding the community’s social and cultural practices. All burials were primary, with bodies placed in a contracted position within pits dug into the floors of occupied houses, indicating a close relationship between living spaces and burial sites. The burials included individuals of all ages and both sexes, suggesting a uniform burial practice across demographics. Grave goods were rare and typically consisted of rough or shaped stones or querns covering part of the body, and occasionally stone vessels, which were always broken or placed upside down, a practice observed across all age groups and genders. Some burials included faunal remains, particularly caprines and fallow deer, and caprine burials mirrored human burial practices. A significant finding was a building floor that, before its abandonment, contained several objects associated with funerary practices, suggesting a possible symbolic connection between human death and the abandonment of buildings. Dr. Le Mort concluded that these burial practices reveal a close relationship between the living and the deceased, uniform treatment in burial regardless of age or sex, and specific cultural and symbolic practices. The study of Khirokitia’s burial practices provides insights into the community’s social structures and relationships, emphasizing the significant role of the deceased, the importance of immature individuals, the villagers’ close relationship with caprine, and the complex cultural practices surrounding building abandonment. This lecture underscored the intricate relationship between daily life and funerary rituals in this ancient Neolithic society.

The second lecture was delivered by Virginie Muller (Université Lumière Lyon 2 and Archéorient) entitled: “Cohesion and legitimization around the dead: some thoughts from Sumerian-Akkadian texts (2nd-1st millennium BC)” (Fig 2). The lecture examined the pivotal role of the deceased in Ancient Near Eastern societies, particularly through the lens of Sumerian-Akkadian texts from the 2nd and 1st millennia BC. The discussion emphasized how the dead served as

a source of social cohesion among the living. Muller explained that mortuary ceremonies, such as funerals and commemorations, played a crucial role in reaffirming social bonds and forging collective unity. These ceremonies were pivotal moments for reunion and sharing, where connections between the living and the dead, as well as among the living themselves, were strengthened. The lecturer highlighted that funerals and commemorations were not just about honoring the dead but also about reinforcing the social fabric of the community. These ceremonies provided opportunities for individuals to come together, share experiences, and reaffirm their connections, both with the deceased and with each other. Through these ceremonies, intricate interactions between the worlds of the living and the dead were highlighted. These events served as moments to remember and honor the deceased, thereby maintaining a continuous connection between the two realms. Dr. Muller pointed out that Akkadian texts from the 2nd and 1st millennia BC are important sources for understanding the multifaceted impact of the deceased on everyday life. These texts provide glimpses into the societal contacts and beliefs of Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, shedding light on how the dead influenced various aspects of life. In conclusion, the lecture underscored the significant role of the deceased in creating social cohesion and legitimizing social structures in Ancient Near Eastern societies. The mortuary ceremonies were crucial for reaffirming social bonds and collective unity, demonstrating the intricate relationship between the living and the dead. The study of Akkadian texts provides essential insights into the societal dynamics and beliefs of these ancient civilizations.

Cérémonies commémoratives pour les particuliers

Fig. 1 : Arbre généalogique de la famille de Sin-nâsir (d'après WILCKE 1983 p. 50)

. Noms de 27 ancêtres (père, mère, oncles...)
 . “La famille (*ki-im-ti*) de Sin-nâsir, fils d’Ippu-Annunitum, laisse les librement venir manger leur pain et boire leur eau ([u]š-še-ra-am-ma [NIN]DA-[š]u li-ku-lu u₃ me-e-šu li-iš-tu-u₂)”
 (BE VI/2 111: 34-36)

Fig. 2: A slide from the presentation of Virginie Muller (credit: Virginie Muller)

Aynur Özfirat (Mardin University, Turkey) presented the next lecture on “An Overview of Burial Tradition of Eastern Anatolia: From the Middle Bronze Age (Araxes painted ware culture) to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age (pre-Urartians)”. This lecture provided a comprehensive overview of burial practices during these periods, drawing on extensive excavation results and surveys conducted in the basin of Lake Van and Mount Ağrı. The study highlighted the proliferation of cemeteries from both the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age, revealing that findings from eastern Anatolia mirrored similar burial traditions observed in southern Caucasia and northwestern Iran. Two primary burial types were identified: Kurgan burials, prevalent in the Lake Van basin and northeast Anatolia, featured mound-like structures, while stone-built chamber graves, found in the east of Lake Van and the Hakkari region, were constructed using stone chambers. Dr. Özfirat’s lecture underscored the rich and diverse burial traditions in eastern Anatolia during these periods. The similarities with burial practices in southern Caucasia and northwestern Iran provide valuable insights into the cultural interactions and influences across these regions. The study of these burial types enhances our understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of ancient Anatolian societies.

Mehmet Işikli (University of Erzurum, Turkey) presented a lecture on “The Burial Traditions of Kura-Araxes Culture in Mountainous Eastern Turkey: Observations and Comments Based on Recent Findings from Erzurum Plain”. The lecture emphasized the significance of this culture, which thrived in challenging geographies from the Late Chalcolithic Age to the end of the Middle Bronze Age, encompassing regions such as the South Caucasus and Northwest Iran. Despite extensive studies, the scarcity of systematically excavated cemetery sites has limited our understanding of this culture. Dr. Işikli highlighted the importance of examining grave data, particularly from expansion areas like the Erzurum Plain, with a focus on findings from Alaybeyi Höyük. The lecture addressed various theoretical elements, including gender, social inequality, warriorship, and social status, within the context of burial practices and cultural implications. Incorporating recent data from the Erzurum Plain, the lecture provided new perspectives that enrich our understanding of the complex cultural phenomena associated with the Kura-Araxes Culture. This comprehensive analysis enhances our knowledge of ancient burial traditions and cultural dynamics in Eastern Anatolia and beyond.

The next lecture, delivered by Zahra Kouzehgari (Collégium de Lyon-Université LumièreLyon 2, Archéorient), on “Kurgan burial traditions in Northwest Iran; a lost puzzle of the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age studies”. The lecture emphasized how Kurgan burials, characterized by distinctive practices and material culture, offer valuable insights

into socio-cultural dynamics, belief systems, and interregional connections during this transitional period. Kouzehgari highlighted that the analysis of archaeological remains associated with Kurgan burials provides a deeper understanding of community interactions, the evolution of burial customs, and the influence of external factors on local societies in northwest Iran (Fig. 3). This study provided a unique perspective on the social and cultural landscape of ancient Iran, revealing the complexities of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age transition, while also contributing to a broader understanding of the archaeological record and its implications for Eurasian cultural interactions and exchanges during this pivotal historical period.

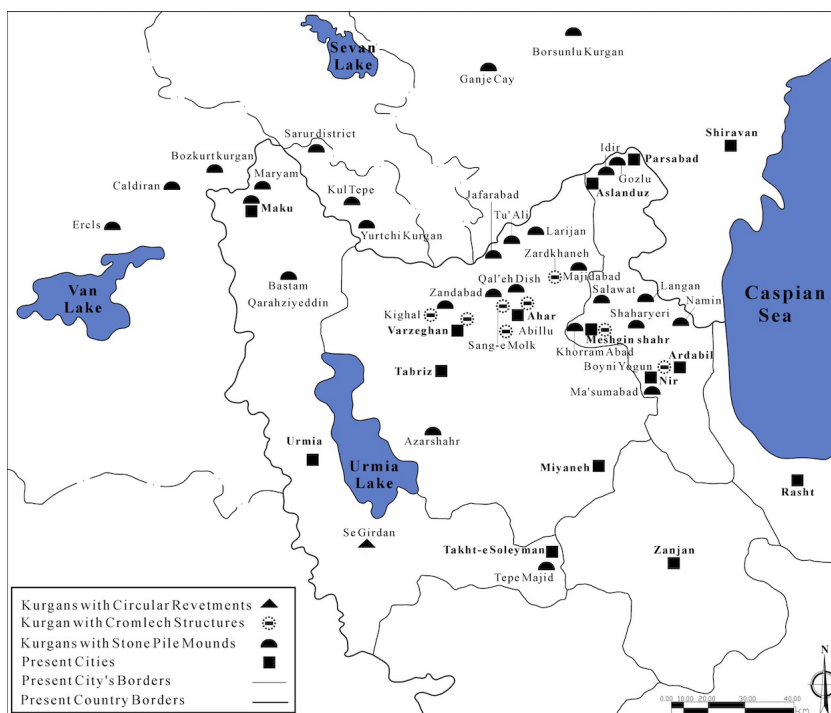


Fig. 3: Map showing the distribution of different kurgan burials in northwest Iran (credit: Zahra Kouzehgari)

The last lecture of this session was delivered by Valentina Mordvintseva (Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, Germany), on “Gender-related prestige markers in elite graves as part of a cultural identity (based on materials from the North Pontic region in pre-Roman and Roman times)”. The lecture addressed several issues concerning the peoples of the Northern Black Sea region as depicted in ancient written sources, highlighting their portrayal as warlike tribes engaged in activities such as brigandage and mercenary work, yet provided limited ethnographic details, making it difficult to delineate boundaries between local political entities or understand their ideologies and forms of self-identity. Despite this, there is a prevailing belief that the region was culturally unified due to the dominance of the Sarmatian archaeological culture from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD. The lecture proposed the analysis of prestige items in elite burials to identify regions with different self-identifications. By examining the burial goods according to gender and chronological periods, it was possible to categorize prestige items into ‘common’ and ‘gender-conditioned’ groups. Further analysis of these items based on their probable applications, such as costume jewelry, weapons, vessels, and symbolic objects, allowed for the identification of regional patterns and the delineation of areas with specific combinations of prestige goods in ‘male’ and ‘female’ graves. This approach shed light on the potential factors driving regional and chronological differences in burial practices and self-identification among the local elites. Dr. Valentina Mordvintseva’s lecture provided valuable insights into the complex interplay between gender, cultural identity, and prestige markers in elite graves, enriching our understanding of ancient societies in the North Pontic region during pre-Roman and Roman times.

In Summary:

The workshop’s discussions and presentations provided deep insights into the cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions of death and burial rituals across various historical contexts. Through the examination of archaeological findings, textual evidence, and interdisciplinary approaches, scholars illuminated the multifaceted nature of funerary practices, shedding light on themes such as identity, gender, social status, and community cohesion.

Notably, the workshop’s structure facilitated the in-depth exploration of distinct historical periods, allowing for comprehensive analyses of burial traditions from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Scholars presented diverse perspectives on topics ranging from daily life and funerary rituals to gender-related prestige markers in elite graves, enriching our understanding of past societies and their beliefs surrounding death.

The collaborative spirit and intellectual rigor demonstrated throughout the workshop underscored the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue in advancing research on ancient and medieval funerary practices. By fostering international cooperation and sharing diverse methodological approaches, this event laid a solid foundation for future investigations into the fascinating intersection of life and death in human history.

Acknowledgments

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The booklet of the abstracts of the workshop can be [downloaded via the link below](#).

Les auteurs

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