

**Éric Rebillard: Religion et sépulture. L'Église, les vivants et les morts dans l'Antiquité tardive (= Civilisations et sociétés; 115), Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales 2003, 243 S., ISBN 2-7132-1792-x, EUR 22,00**

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Readers of Éric Rebillard's earlier and excellent "*In hora mortis: évolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort aux IVe et Ve siècles dans l'Occident latin*" (Rome 1994) and of his more recent articles on burial, funerary assistance and conversion in late antiquity will be pleased to hear that his "Religion et sépulture" is just as thought-provoking. This is a book for which there was a real need. A concern for death in some recent late antique and early medieval scholarship has an aptness that is at once ironic, macabre and unsettling. What was and is at the centre of the Christian message, and therefore of its popularity - the meaning and consequences of human mortality - is nonetheless a more alien and sinister fact to historians of the anti-biotic generation. Death is just not as prevalent as it used to be, and this may explain its rather worrying absence from some explanations of the expansion of Christianity in the era that Rebillard covers here.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is Rebillard's keenness to attack some hoary shibboleths that still lie behind the study of death and burial in late antiquity. The first is the notion that the Church had its own cemeteries from 200 CE at the latest. First expounded systematically by De Rossi in the 1860s, it is based on a small collection of texts of around that date - 'dossiers' is Rebillard's term - from Rome and Carthage. Principal for the former city is the *Refutatio omnium haeresium* generally attributed, these days, to Hippolytus, in which Pope Zephyrinus appoints the deacon Callixtus, the future pope, *eis to koimeterion*. [1] Most have accepted hitherto that this refers to the catacomb known today as San Callisto. For Carthage, we have the reference in Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* (3, 1), to Christian *areae* in the city. Rebillard is bold enough to challenge the universal acceptance that these texts refer straightforwardly to cemeteries. He prefers to read the terms in their contemporary context: *koimeterion* originally meant an individual tomb and, he argues, by the third century it was equivalent to *martyrion*, and therefore in its collective sense meant a place with martyr tombs, not ordinary graves. This suggestion is most effective in his discussion of the edict of Valerian of 257, which forbade Christians from visiting *koimeteria*. This can hardly mean that the emperor was trying to prevent Christians from burying their dead; much more plausibly, it was aimed at stopping the veneration of martyrs. But this interpretation has not been proposed hitherto,

perhaps because the impressive physical reality of the catacombs has encouraged historians to posit for them administration by a relatively sophisticated church organization. At Carthage, the word *area* was demonstrably applied to the graves of non-Christians as well as Christians. The broader point Rebillard draws from this is an important one: historians have been too preoccupied by the handful of terms in our scant evidence which seem to refer to 'cemeteries'. They have sought definitive meanings, or bundles of meanings, when really these words (like most words) are too adaptable to offer such certainties. This means, of course, that in examples such as that of the *Apostolic Tradition* (40), which refers to a *koimeterion* with staff paid by the bishop, the word *could* mean a cemetery for Christians. But this is not the point: Rebillard quite rightly wants to shift attention from words to concepts and forms.

Thus in his second chapter, "Sepulture et identité religieuse - Les groupes religieux et la sépulture", he challenges another idea with wide currency: that the catacombs of Rome were created by the city's larger minority religious communities, Christian and Jewish. Traditional interpretations have accepted that families must have played the principal role in acquiring and administering the smaller collections of graves, like the smaller *hypogaea* (burial vaults) around Rome, but that the collections of huge numbers of graves - hundreds, and in some cases thousands - in the catacombs must have been organized by the Church. Taking his cue from a theory that suggests that the Jewish catacombs were organized not by any community-wide body, but by entrepreneurs who sold tombs to individual families, Rebillard shifts attention to the only group mentioned in the context of the administration of catacombs in the sources, the *fossores* (as already pointed out, to seek a single definition of this term would be invidious, but one of their duties was certainly grave-digging). Charles Pietri showed some time ago that these men were emphatically not members of the clergy. Rebillard's is not the first attempt to draw out the implications of this observation, but it is the most systematic to date. The evidence for the *fossores* points towards the *collegia*, the originally pagan associations which appear frequently in late Roman legal texts and which, among other things, could provide for the burial of their members. These Rebillard considers in his third chapter, "Associations et sépulture collective. L'Église, les chrétiens et les collèges". Here he shows usefully that no *collegium* was an association exclusively for burial. Rather, members were affiliated for bundles of reasons, among them profession, region of domicile and religious belief. They could choose to have their burial arranged by the *collegium* rather than their own family, but there was no compulsion. Christians could therefore find their way into groups of burials of *collegium*-colleagues, rather than family plots. This he puts forward as an alternative explanation for the arrangement of burials within the catacombs, which after all comprised different sections, with different characters and different entrances: each, he suggests, was owned or controlled by a different *collegium*. This may not account for every case - it has still been hard to find identifiable pagans in groups of Christian burials - but it points the way to less universalist explanations of the catacombs' configuration.

In his fourth chapter, "Violation de sépulture et impiété - Pratiques funéraires et croyances religieuses", Rebillard seeks to interpret third-century laws about the violation of tombs, which made it a crime to damage the body, and not simply the tomb, as in earlier laws. He explicitly acknowledges that his conclusion feeds into a wider recognition of the reconfiguration of ideas of 'the body' in late antiquity, based above all on the work of Peter Brown. Grave violation was an affront not to Scripture, nor to the authority of the Church, but to the integrity of the corpse.

In his fifth chapter, "Piété chrétienne et devoir de sépulture - Du devoir d'inhumer les morts à l'organisation de la sépulture des pauvres", Rebillard argues that when it came to burial the Church's overriding concern was with the tombs of martyrs - central nodes in the liturgical practices that in this period bound together and to some extent defined the Church, as simulacrum of the Christian community. Beyond the martyrs, the Church's main intervention in the field of burial was sometimes to organize the burial of the poor. This was a response not to any sacred duty but more to Christian notions of charity. It did not therefore develop into a uniform attitude towards funerary provision, but varied according to the assistance provided by other civic or imperial organs.

This lack of uniformity in the Church's attitude to burial extended to the liturgy, as Rebillard shows in his sixth chapter, "Funérailles chrétiennes et funérailles de chrétiens - Église et rituel de la mort dans l'Antiquité tardive". There was absolutely no requirement for a specifically Christian funeral liturgy, nor any specifically funerary liturgy on offer. The family could, if they wished, have prayers or a Eucharistic celebration during an act of burial: the initiative - and the power over the body and its disposal - rested with them. This brings Rebillard neatly to his final chapter, on commemoration of the dead. Here he notes that the Eucharistic prayer made no mention of specific deceased individuals, but remembered the dead collectively - and then only those who were baptized Christians who did not die in sin. The Church offered nothing to those Christians - doubtless many, at this date - who wanted to commemorate those dead relatives who did not enjoy such a privileged status in Christian terms. In not turning its attention fully towards such an inevitably central feature of society as death and its practical implications, the late antique Church resembles to some extent those modern historians who have had a similar blind spot. It is a measure of the limits to Christianization in this period that the funeral - the central point of which was the banquet held, usually, at the grave side after burial - was entirely the preserve of the family. A funeral controlled by the clergy, and led by it to a cemetery generally right next to a church, was still some centuries away.

This book will perhaps not convince all those traditionalists who prefer to think of a relatively early intervention by a more coherent Church, at least in burial and at least in cities (Rome in particular). Its focus,

explicitly acknowledged, on literary and legal texts, with forays into archaeology being largely confined to Rome and its catacombs, also means that it cannot claim to be comprehensive. But it is the most elegant of recent attempts to take our view of the Christianizing of death in late antiquity onto a new level.

Note:

[1] Refutatio omnium haeresium IX, 12 (ed. M. Marcovich: Patristische Texte und Studien 25, Berlin 1986).

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