

Between Material Culture and the Immaterial

The translation of past identities

Archaeologists base their theories about identities on artefacts, the material culture left behind. Grave assemblages are a selective reflection of an individual's various identities (e.g. gender or status), but also of the shared identities of the community. With cultures that have left no or only few written sources such burial contexts are often the only 'message' left behind.



The pre-Roman and early Roman communities of the Lomellina, an area in northwest Italy, represent such a culture. The study of their cemeteries is the only way to 'interview' them about the cultural influence of the expansion of the Roman empire (between c. 300-50 BC) on their identities. Theoretical concepts are the 'dictionaries' we have to use to 'translate' their 'material language' into a language we can understand. Agency concepts view artefacts and human individuals as actors in an interplay of communication. They can be applied to understand 'messages' about the identity about the deceased individual and their community expressed through the selection of grave goods.

Material language

"Material culture represents the materialisation of the relationships between people and thus of their identities."

(Popa 2014: 109)

communication

Weapons and tools (knife, shield boss, shears, sword, spearhead) and a razor blade indicate that this burial belongs to a male person. The individual is member of a warrior elite (weapons are rare in cemeteries of the region). Coins in the burials could point at religious beliefs about afterlife (in the Hellenistic world a coin is given to the deceased for the journey into the afterlife). However, they could also represent wealth (quantity of coins)



clockwise: Vallengio Lomellina, Cascina Tessera t. 189; between 150-100 BC Dorno, Cascina Grande t. 186 & Tromello, Cascina Negrina t. 41; both between 50-1 BC

All burials are on display at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale della Lomellina, Vigevano.

Three Iron Age burial assemblages from the Lomellina give a good impression of how the selection of grave goods changed within a century. Which 'message' about the deceased's identities can we deduce from the burials?



These two burials are c. 100 years younger. Many things have changed during this period: the Lomellina is now not only part of the Roman empire but also part of Augustus' *tota Italia*. The burials belong to a woman (top) and a man (bottom). The female burial is very rich in pottery and exceptional in the amount of metal objects.

The male burial is more common for this period. Weapons have now completely disappeared and gender identification relies on the tools only. The wealth of the female burial might indicate a high social status; but does the lack of weapons indicate a lack of the warrior status in society, or do weapons only vanish from burial rites? Concepts of agency in combination with our historical knowledge help us to 'translate' archaeological contexts: in 49 BC all inhabitants of the Lomellina became Roman citizens. Maybe the men of the Lomellina made the intentional decision to be not portrayed as warriors any longer.

