

CRASIS

Culture, Religion And Society - Interdisciplinary Studies

in the Ancient World

CRASIS Mortuary Ritual Network CONFERENCE

Photo: Drents Museum



GRAVE GOODS
from Antiquity
to the Modern Era

22-23 October 2026



university of
groningen



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Programme and Abstracts



Welcome

The CRASIS Mortuary Ritual Network welcomes you to the conference

GRAVE GOODS From Antiquity to the Modern Era Theoretical Approaches to the Mortuary Ritual of Gift-Giving

When someone dies, a series of activities is set in motion to bid the deceased a proper farewell. One aspect of this process is providing the deceased with objects to accompany them in death. These objects – commonly labelled as grave goods – can be placed on or with the body of the deceased, in their grave or tomb, or set down at the gravesite. Gift-giving often takes place immediately after a death and during the funeral, but can also continue for years after.

The act of providing the dead with gifts is an age-old phenomenon. Although the specific enactment may differ greatly among cultural, religious or social groups and even in individual cases, gift-giving is always a ritualized act that is imbued with emotion and symbolism, and is given shape within local frameworks of tradition, religion, laws and regulations. It serves, among other things, as a way to maintain and reaffirm the bonds between the living and the dead. Grave goods can be seen as a materialization of identities, of beliefs, and of social values and relationships.

This meeting explores the ritual of gift-giving to the dead from an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural perspective. Scholars and students from various backgrounds partake in a dialogue about the material variations in the practice and the multitude of motivations that may have guided it. With this, we hope to challenge common assumptions about the interpretation of grave goods and gain a more nuanced understanding of how and why people give to the dead.

We wish you all an inspiring conference.

The Mortuary Ritual Network – GRAVE GOODS conference organising committee,

Tamara Dijkstra
Paula Kalkman
Femke Lippok
Janis Oomen
Nina Schreuder
Caroline van Toor
John Turco

Thursday 22 October

Location: Oude Boteringestraat 38, Groningen

Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society (University of Groningen) - Old Courtroom

09.30 - 10.00 Registration and coffee
10.00 - 10.15 Welcome and introduction

Session 1: Personhood and Identity Chair: Janis Oomen

10.15 - 10.45 **Nina Schreuder**
Beads beyond the grave: connectivity through glass beads in the Northern Netherlands and Lower Saxony

10.45 - 11.15 **Nicholas Aherne**
Death, the transfigured body, and personhood at Roman Baalbek-Heliopolis: a shimmering spectacle in the City of the Sun

11.15 - 11.45 **Sam Cleymans**
Grave good assemblages as evidence for the relational and atomised self: a comparative study from Roman Imperial, Late Roman and Middle Byzantine Sagalassos

11.45 - 12.15 **Courtney A. Ward**
The little things she had loved in life: approaching the identity of Roman children through grave goods and gifts

12.15 - 13.30 **Lunch** (organised for speakers)

Session 2: Grave Goods and Society Chair: Tamara Dijkstra

13.30 - 14.00 **Banu Özdilek**
Death and society at Issos–Epiphaneia: sociological structure, beliefs, rituals, warfare, professions, and bioarchaeological insights from Crusader–Armenian burials

14.00 - 14.30 **Jennifer Riley**
“It sounds silly, but...”

14.30 - 15.00 **Christina Holdgaard Schultze**
Pots, people, and practice: a geochemical case study of the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age pottery from the urnfield of Wapse, Drenthe

Poster Lightning Sessions

15.00 - 15.45 Marlis Arnhold
Jonas Frick
Ilvy P. Paierl
Paula Rothmund

15.45 - 16.15 **Coffee**

16.15 - 17.30 **KEYNOTE LECTURE: PROF. MIKE PARKER PEARSON**
Interactions with the afterlife: grave goods in perspective

17.30 - 18.30 **Drinks**
18.30 - 20.30 **Dinner** (organised for speakers)

Friday 23 October

Location: Oude Boteringestraat 38, Groningen

Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society (University of Groningen) - Old Courtroom

09.30 – 09.45 Doors open and coffee

Session 3: Theory and Space Chair: Paula Kalkman

09.45 – 10.15 **Mariusz Gwiazda**

Ritual logic in the deposition of grave goods: evidence from the Blemmyan Cemeteries at Berenike

10.15 – 10.45 **John Turco**

Actions then identity: perspectives on grave goods in the reconstruction of funerary ritual in Roman Pisidia and the Kibyratis

10.45 – 11.15 **Femke Lippok**

A place for everything: spatial symbolism in Early Medieval mortuary archaeology

11.15 – 11.45 **Coffee**

Session 4: Objects for the Dead Chair: Nina Schreuder

11.45 – 12.15 **Matthias K. Kalisch**

Safe travels? The use and function of coins in the funerary practices of a Roman city far from Rome

12.15 – 12.45 **Matthias Hoernes**

Funerary fake food: lead implements, terracotta food, and (im)permanence in pre-Roman Southern Italy

12.45 – 14.00 **Lunch** (organised for speakers)

14.00 – 14.30 **Kallirroi Polymenidou**

Roses for the dead: a funeral rite performed by collegia in Roman Macedonia

14.30 – 15.00 **Min Lin**

Becoming the ancestor: multi-layered identity in Eastern Zhou Jin Burials

15.00 – 15.30 General discussion and conclusion

Keynote Lecture

Interactions with the afterlife: grave goods in perspective

Professor Mike Parker Pearson (Institute of Archaeology, University College London)

In the complex web of relationships that people engage in with each other, with the deceased and with the spirit world, grave goods and pyre goods are just a small and often insignificant yet material component of those varied mortuary transactions. They may be all that remains in the ground of the rich network of exchanges of property, food, titles and obligations that death invites. With often so little remaining, it is no wonder that archaeologists have tried to make much of interpreting those goods, whether accompanying the corpse, adorning it or being placed on or around the tomb. Attempts at reconstructing social status, gender, ethnicity and other aspects of personal identity are further complicated by the understanding that the dead do not bury themselves – signalled identities and status are constructed by the mourners rather than by the dead.

Grave goods have been deposited in burials for over 100,000 years of human history – a claim, however, not without controversy – and continue to be so today, often regardless of religious belief. They may be gifts from grieving relatives, provisions and containers for the deceased on their journey to the afterlife, equipment for their survival in the afterlife, tokens of love and esteem from the survivors, personal items polluted by death removed to protect the living, and even amulets to protect the dead from demons and dangerous spirits. Very occasionally, they have been recovered as stupendous collections of valuables that have boosted archaeology's reputation for wonder and adventure: the tomb of Tutankhamun and the royal graves of Ur are just two such exceptional discoveries. Lavish grave good assemblages prompt us to consider their role in strategies of legitimization of power and value-enhancing removal of wealth from circulation.

There is much to be learned from grave goods: their spatial arrangement and orientation in the tomb; whether they were possessions of the deceased; or votives offered by the mourners; or items made for the newly dead. Immanentist perspectives in anthropology and the history of religion further emphasise how seemingly mundane artefacts may be imbued with spiritual power as various forms of 'person', alongside souls of the dead who remain in this world, transformed as beings, ancestors, ghosts and even other humans, not simply removed to a transcendent afterlife.

This talk will summarise what archaeologists have learned from grave goods and how we might develop better understandings of their role in constructing relationships among the living as well as between the living and the dead.

Mike Parker Pearson is Professor of British Later Prehistory at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL). After gaining a BA in European Archaeology at Southampton University in 1979, he was awarded a PhD at Cambridge University in 1985. He worked as an Inspector of Ancient Monuments for English Heritage until 1990. From then on, he lectured in the Department of Archaeology & Prehistory at Sheffield University where he was given a professorial chair in 2005, which he held until moving to UCL in 2012. He is a Fellow of the British Academy.

Abstracts: paper presentations

Beads beyond the grave: connectivity through glass beads in the Northern Netherlands and Lower Saxony

Nina Schreuder (University of Groningen)

This paper discusses early medieval glass bead assemblages from the northern Netherlands and Lower Saxony, exploring regional variations in their composition and connectivity within the framework of the Silk Roads. Preliminary results suggest that assemblages from the northern North Sea coasts differ from inland assemblages, possibly indicating varying exchange networks within a relatively small geographic area. The study highlights glass beads from the sites of Zweeloo (Drenthe) and Rasquert (Groningen) in the Netherlands, and combines typological classification with portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) analysis. Particular attention is given to beads typologically identified as Indo-Pacific, of which the base glass composition is associated with South and Southeast Asian production. Compositional results in this research, however, indicate that some of these Indo-Pacific types are made from Mediterranean-type glasses. This suggests a complex relationship between bead exchange, as well as possible technological transmission, which could have us re-evaluate existing knowledge on bead production models. By integrating chemical analysis with typology and archaeological datasets that cross boundaries of modern-day countries, this research contributes to broader debates on glass circulation, technological transmission, and the archaeological visibility of Silk Road connectivity at Europe's northwestern edge.

Nina Schreuder is a PhD candidate in Archaeology at the Groningen Institute of Archaeology, University of Groningen. Her research focuses on early medieval glass beads (c. 450–900 CE) from the southern North Sea region, particularly the northern Netherlands and Lower Saxony. Using portable XRF analysis, she investigates the chemical composition of glass beads to study production, exchange networks, and the circulation of raw materials.

Death, the transfigured body, and personhood at Roman Baalbek-Heliopolis: a shimmering spectacle in the City of the Sun

Nicholas Aherne (University of Groningen)

In the Lebanese summer heat of 1996, excavators at Baalbek-Heliopolis finally removed the weighty lid of a stone sarcophagus, revealing the remains of a scintillating Roman-period funeral: a skeleton accompanied by a wreath, facial coverings, and figural appliqués all made of gold, a gilded ring, coin, and ten glass vessels—glistening in the sun as they would have in antiquity. In this paper, I reconstruct how through such acts of adornment, the deceased's body, identity, and personhood were reconfigured in death, both its biological and social processes, encompassing funerary preparations, ritual display, and concealment. Furthermore, I trace the sensorial and emotional experience of those crafting, adorning, treating, and viewing the body, with attention to sight, touch, smell, sound, and environmental conditions. Throughout such performative yet intimate ritual, the corpse, centred within an artistic choreography by loved ones and professionals tending to the deceased, became simultaneously objectified and elevated. Accordingly, I frame the deceased as an artwork and divine-like being, where boundaries between living, dead, statue, and god become destabilised. Thus, my definition of grave goods transcends objects deposited on or with the corpse; rather, they are (integral parts of) the dead. Post-burial, physical and symbolic transformations continued. As decomposition progressed, shifts in personhood amongst the deceased and the figural decoration became more critical, until eventually the constructed illusion dissolved. More broadly, I demonstrate how my theoretical and materiality-centred approach can be applied to funerary masks from prehistoric America, prehistoric–Hellenistic Greece, the Roman Empire, and ancient Western and Eastern Asia.

Nicholas Aherne is a PhD researcher at the University of Groningen, specialising in material and visual culture of the Graeco-Roman world, particularly funerary. His thesis comprises the first catalogue and analysis of sarcophagi of Roman Phoenicia within their funerary ritual. He consistently participates in international conferences and discussion, where he demonstrates strong presentation skills. In addition to numerous papers on sarcophagi, he is also publishing papers on lived experience in Roman domestic and religious space. In this selected paper, he focuses on grave goods within a sarcophagus burial, specifically in relation to objecthood, personhood, rites of passage, and sensory experience.

Grave good assemblages as evidence for the relational and atomised self: a comparative study from Roman Imperial, Late Roman and Middle Byzantine Sagalassos

Sam Cleymans (KU Leuven)

Personhood, or the state of being a person, varies across culture, time, place, and the stage in a person's life. The past two decades it has been a hot topic in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, law, history, and archaeology. Personhood during life, however, can differ from the personhood projected upon the deceased after death. This paper will focus on the latter, and aims at developing a new methodology to explore how people in antiquity enacted and negotiated their personhood through materialized funerary practices and how these reflected a person's identity and self. This methodology avails itself of a quantitative analysis to calculate a coefficient of unalikeability. A comparison of Roman Imperial (1st-3rd century CE), Late Roman (3rd-5th century CE) and Middle Byzantine (11th-13th century CE) grave good assemblages at Sagalassos (Pisidia, SW Asia Minor) will serve as case study.

Dr. Sam Cleymans is Research Fellow at the department of archaeology at KU Leuven (Belgium) and exhibition development officer at the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren (Belgium). As a member of the Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project, his main research focuses on the funerary culture and health at Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Sagalassos.

The little things she had loved in life: approaching the identity of Roman children through grave goods and gifts

Courtney A. Ward (Independent researcher)

This paper examines the jewellery and dolls deposited as grave goods with Roman children and young adults. Childhood was a distinct period within the ancient life-cycle and one that was accompanied by distinct objects of personal adornment and play. The paper will look at material associated with the graves of children from across the Empire to understand how representative this material is of what children wore and played with in life. Were these gifts given to the deceased, perhaps as symbols of *mors immatura*, or death before achieving their anticipated role in society? Or were they the actual jewellery and dolls of the deceased? We hear from Pliny (Epist. 5.16.1-6) that his friend, Fundanus, used the money that he had saved for the clothing, pearls, and jewels of his daughter's approaching wedding for her funeral, suggesting that not every unmarried maiden was buried with her intended dowry jewellery. What then can we learn about the inclusion of this material within funerary contexts? This funerary material will be compared to the adornment found with children fleeing the eruption of Vesuvius, as the latter most closely represents what the individuals would have worn in life. Obviously, as Fundanus's example makes clear, there was no one way to honour the dead – especially the young; however, this paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the adornment and playthings chosen to be gifted to and/or laid to rest with the deceased.

Courtney A. Ward is a Roman archaeologist, who is currently working as a field archaeologist in Munich, Germany. Her research focuses on various aspects of the ancient world, including Roman jewelry and craftsmanship, gender and identity studies, and the archaeology of the Vesuvian region. Her recent publications on these topics include "Ornamenta Muliebria: Jewellery and Identity in the Roman Period" in Dress in Mediterranean Antiquity: Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Jews (2021) and "Rethinking the 'Spectrum of Luxury': Roman jewellery from the Bay of Naples" in ACTA (Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia) (2023).

Death and society at Issos Epiphaneia: sociological structure, beliefs, rituals, warfare, professions, and bioarchaeological insights from Crusader–Armenian burials

Banu Özdilek (Hatay Mustafa Kemal University)

Issos Epiphaneia, located in the Cilicia Pedias plain, functioned as a key agricultural and commercial center linking Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Its harbor, Catabolos, played a vital role in Roman grain supply networks and later served as a stop along medieval pilgrimage routes. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, under Crusader and Armenian control, the city gained renewed regional importance. Excavations in the reused bouleuterion-odeon, transformed into a cemetery during this period, have revealed burials and grave goods that illuminate the sociological structure, belief systems, and daily life of the community. The analysis of grave goods such as bronze belt buckles, knives, axe, earrings, spindle whorls, and a mother-of-pearl cross pendant, agate bead, terracotta cross plaque and coins indicates clear connections to identity, profession, and religious affiliation. Martial items suggest the presence of soldiers, while textile tools point to gendered labor roles. The cross pendant reflects Christian belief and spiritual symbolism. Bioarchaeological data further contribute to this reconstruction, providing evidence on gender distribution and diseases. Together, these findings demonstrate how burial practices at Epiphaneia reflect a synthesis of Christian traditions and medieval Christian rituals, offering a comprehensive insight into the social, economic, trade and spiritual dimensions of Crusader–Armenian society.

Professor Dr. Banu Özdilek, a classical archaeologist, has been teaching at Hatay Mustafa Kemal University since 2012. She earned her BA, MA, and PhD in archaeology from Akdeniz University, with her master's focusing on the Neapolis necropolis in Pisidia. She has published on rural sarcophagi in Pisidia, Pamphylia, and Lycia, and continues to study newly discovered examples in this field. Her research broadly explores funerary cult and tomb architecture across the Mediterranean. Since 2022, she has directed the excavation and research project at Issos–Epiphaneia in Cilicia Pedias. Her work on tombs and funerary practices is highlighted by her MARE 2025 Publication Grant, “Between Mountain and Memory: The Necropolis of Neapolis and the Funerary Landscape of Roman Pisidia.” She also presented at the NRN Annual Meeting VIII in Chania, Greece (24–26 October 2025) with the talk: “The Necropolis of Neapolis, A Military-Rural Settlement from the Peripolion of Termessos: An Evaluation Based on Local Workshops; Tomb Types, Iconography, Funerary Cult, Inscriptions”. Her interests include ancient architecture, theatres, Hellenistic and Roman ceramics, cult practices, Roman mosaics, and funerary practices and tomb architecture.

“It sounds silly, but...”

Jennifer Riley (University of Aberdeen)

To most modern ears, it sounds illogical or irrational- silly, even -to give food to people who cannot eat; to write letters to someone who cannot read; to wrap up those who cannot feel cold. Yet exactly that happens ahead of over half of British funerals. It ‘sounds silly, but’...many modern Brits pick out grave goods for dead loved ones anyway, finding them meaningful and consolatory.

This presentation reports on *Baggage for the Beyond*, an ongoing, multi-method (survey, interviewing, elicitation, public engagement) study of contemporary British grave goods amid the absence of widespread literal or material afterlife beliefs.

The presentation explores multiple, overlapping explanations for grave goods’ ongoing significance, drawing on theorising relating to continuing bonds, distributed personhood and funerary personalisation. Novelty, it proposes that part of the explanation lies in ludism - that is, the human propensity to ‘play’ simultaneously with two or more different ways of ‘seeing’ reality. Grave goods can thus be simultaneously ‘silly’ and significant. Framing this apparent contradiction as ludic, rather than ‘irrational,’ reclaims the lived, complex emotionality of human engagement with death and grief.

The presentation then closes with a question: if ludism helps explain contemporary British grave goods, might it also help explain historic and archaeological equivalents?

Dr Jennifer Riley is a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow in Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen. Much of her award-winning public engagement work and publication is situated in the field of death studies. Her current research explores contemporary grave goods and their relationship(s) to mourning and unsettled afterlife conceptualizations. She worked previously on the (ESRC) “Care in Funerals” project, and the “Educating for Inclusive, Caring Communities” project (Kirby Laing Foundation, Sir Halley Stewart Trust). She has a PhD in Theology and Religious Studies from Durham University, for a thesis exploring identity among English evangelical medics.

Pots, people, and practice: a geochemical case study of the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age pottery from the urnfield of Wapse, Drenthe

Christina Holdgaard Schultze (University of Groningen)

Traditionally, the Dutch urnfields have been viewed as expressions of egalitarian societies with very few wealthy graves. However, recent work suggests that the mortuary processes vary even within the same urnfield. There are noticeable differences in how many vessels there are within one interment, the style of the vessels, and if an urn is used at all. Are these differences just random, or are there patterns to be found that can be explained by expression of style, identity, or traditions within groups that used the burial sites?

At the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age urnfield of Wapse in Drenthe, 217 interments were revealed and about one third of them contained ceramic urns. This makes the Wapse burial site an ideal case study for a multimethodological and interdisciplinary investigation of pottery deriving from a distinct local area, and for exploring what a combination of archaeological and geochemical methods can reveal about a well-defined group of pots and people. This study applies non-destructive portable XRF analysis to the ceramics from the Wapse urnfield to explore the material and look for compositional groups that, in combination with form, ornamentation, context, and further archaeological attributes can reveal information on group identity and pottery production.

Christina Holdgaard Schultze is a PhD candidate at Groningen Institute of Archaeology. She obtained her Master's degree in Archaeology at Aarhus University where she focused on the production and possible exchange of Danish Iron Age ceramics. Her research area is ceramic analysis in prehistoric societies of northwestern Europe, and she has experience in archaeometry within the fields of petrology and XRF analysis.

Ritual logic in the deposition of grave goods: evidence from the Blemmyan Cemeteries at Berenike

Mariusz Gwiazda (University of Warsaw)

Archaeological research on funerary assemblages from the post-Roman Eastern Desert (late 4th–early 6th c. CE) has typically emphasized the typology, chronology, and provenance of grave goods. Less attention has been paid to the internal logic that structured their deposition within graves. This paper examines this aspect through a contextual analysis of mortuary assemblages from the cemeteries N1–N2 at Berenike, associated with Blemmyan groupness inhabiting the region.

Rather than treating grave goods solely as indicators of status or exchange networks, the study approaches them as elements of a structured ritual practice. By analyzing the orientation, spatial placement, and functional condition of artefacts, the paper demonstrates that objects were deposited according to recurrent and meaningful conventions. Distinct patterns can be observed in the treatment of vessel types: bowls and amphorae were frequently placed upside down, whereas flagons were consistently deposited upright and in a functional position.

These patterned choices suggest deliberate ritual actions rather than casual placement. Their significance is explored through comparison with deposition practices in contemporary shrines at Berenike, other Blemmyan burial contexts in the Eastern Desert, and selected ethnographic parallels. The resulting patterns point to a coherent “ritual grammar” governing the giving and positioning of objects for the dead.

Mariusz Gwiazda is an archaeologist and Assistant Professor at the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, where he serves as Deputy Director for Field Projects. His research focuses on the archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea regions, particularly during Late Antiquity and the Early Islamic period. He currently directs research on post-Roman cemeteries at Berenike on Egypt's Red Sea coast, combining archaeological excavation with bioarchaeological and spatial analyses. He has also led the Marmora Bizantina project, investigating marble provenance, distribution networks, and consumption in the Early Byzantine southern Levant.

Actions then identity: perspectives on grave goods in the reconstruction of funerary ritual in Roman Pisidia and the Kibyratís

John Turco (University of Groningen)

Grave goods are semantically rich objects that are able to contribute to a wide array of topics such as identity, eschatological beliefs, and ritual practice. Contextual approaches to grave goods highlight the spectrum of factors that can influence an object's meaning in the grave and emphasize its role as an active participant in funerary performance.

By considering the full sequence of action of a burial, these forces can be more clearly seen. This includes details such as the procurement and spatial organization of the grave goods. The spatial arrangement of a grave assemblage is not only the materialization of the actions surrounding deposition but it can also form a component of the ritual itself. Through a selection of detailed case studies from Roman and Late Roman Sagalassos and Kibyra this paper shows the patterned choices made in the spatial arrangement of grave goods and their role in the structure of funerary ritual. The analysis shows that not only were certain objects put in designated places but also that an emphasis on their role in the ritual sequence provides insights into the norms of the site.

John Turco is a PhD candidate in archaeology at the University of Groningen and a member of the MARE Project. He obtained his Master's degree from the University of Glasgow where he studied the role of performance in the deathscapes of Roman Anatolia. His PhD project, "Rituals in Space: Reconstructing Funerary Rituals through Gifts and Bones", studies the actions and beliefs in, and around, tomb spaces in the Roman East. He is particularly interested in attitudes towards the body, grave goods, and theoretical approaches to ritual.

A place for everything: spatial symbolism in Early Medieval mortuary archaeology

Femke Lippok (Leiden University)

This paper investigates whether the placement of objects in early medieval graves in Northern Gaul was shaped by shared norms, and what such patterns can tell us about ways of caring for and remembering the dead. Rather than treating grave goods simply as objects present or absent, it considers where they were positioned in relation to the body and how these choices varied between cemeteries, over time, and according to age and gender.

The analysis reveals striking regularities. Many objects were placed in comparable positions across different cemeteries during the later fifth and sixth centuries, while others changed their position over time in broadly similar ways. These patterns are difficult to explain through practical considerations alone and suggest that ideas about appropriate object placement circulated among burial communities. Placement could therefore contribute to an object's meaning: a comb placed near the head, an axe beside the hand, or a vessel positioned beside a child potentially created different relationships between object, body and mourners.

At the same time, coins, combs, purses and some vessels display considerable local variation, while certain placement practices were structured by age and gender. Rather than reflecting a rigid funerary code, the evidence points towards shared conventions that communities could selectively reproduce, alter or reject. Object placement thus provides a means of exploring how locally distinctive burial practices operated within wider networks of shared mortuary ideas.

Dr Femke Lippok is an early medieval archaeologist currently working on the ERC-funded CoCo project at Leiden University. Together with colleagues, she investigates how communities across fifth- to ninth-century Europe cared for their dead in, sometimes regionally distinctive and sometimes surprisingly similar, ways. Her research focuses on how shared practices developed, circulated and changed across early medieval Europe. In her previous work, Femke examined changing burial rites in fifth- and sixth-century Northern Gaul from a bottom-up perspective, focusing on the choices made by local communities and their connections to wider developments. She has also researched early medieval jewellery within the Mero-Jewel project, exploring the circulation of materials, motifs, techniques and ideas, and has worked on the relationship between cremation and inhumation practices in the Early Middle Ages.

Safe travels? The use and function of coins in the funerary practices of a Roman city far from Rome

Matthias K. Kalisch (University of Tübingen)

Burial sites defined Roman cities from the eastern Mediterranean to the Rhine. While cemeteries were prominently located along major roads, coins deposited in those graves remained hidden from public view. The analysis of those coins offers a rare insight into the everyday practices of the local population. According to ancient authors, coins used as grave goods were intended to secure safe passage to the afterlife. This practice is still referred to today as the myth of the so-called “Charon’s obol”. However, since coins were not found in every grave, their specific function and selection criteria remain unclear.

In Roman Cologne (Germany), analysis of Roman graves and their coins is further complicated by urban development, wartime destruction, and often fragmentary documentation. Nevertheless, the large number of coins found enables a contextual study of Roman burial practices. Drawing from numismatic approaches, this presentation interprets coins from burial sites in Cologne as ritualized objects that express social identity and religious beliefs whose meaning emerged through acts of deposition. Focusing on patterns of selection, circulation, and placement within graves, as illustrated by selected case studies, the analysis reveals how everyday objects like coins can be vessels of ritual significance, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of funerary practices and everyday ritual behavior.

Matthias K. Kalisch is a PhD candidate in the Department of Classical Archaeology at the University of Tübingen (Germany). His focus is on ritual coin use and the contextual analysis of archaeological coin finds. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD thesis with the title: “Coins for the Gods? Ritualization of money and its archaeological evidence in Colonia Agrippina and the Lower Rhine region (RoMAE)”.

Funerary fake food: lead implements, terracotta food, and (im-)permanence in pre-Roman Southern Italy

Matthias Hoernes (University of Salzburg)

Grave goods embody a fundamental tension between permanence and impermanence. Removed from circulation, these items accompany the deceased, materialise aspects of their identity, and establish a tangible connection for the living. In the face of death and loss, they attempt to capture a moment in time while remaining subject to decay. As acts of commemoration, they produce memory through deliberate materialisation, yet with the awareness that such creations are themselves transitory. This paper examines this tension through food-related grave goods from fourth-century BCE southern Italy. It focuses on non-functional lead feasting utensils – such as spits, firedogs, knives, and forks – and terracotta models of food, including fruit, eggs, cheese, and pastries. Widely attested across Basilicata, Campania, and Calabria, these items occur across the social spectrum, often following local or micro-regional patterns, and range from full-sized objects to miniature models. The paper analyses these categories of objects within their grave assemblages, examining their associations with one another and with other artefact types, including additional feasting equipment and real food offerings, to form multi-material assemblages. It argues that these faux-food items translate the ephemerality of food, feasting, and consumption into durable symbolic forms, rendering perishable practices materially persistent while foregrounding their inherent impermanence.

As a Mediterranean archaeologist, Matthias Hoernes is mainly interested in the funerary archaeology of pre-Roman southern Italy, especially in the early Hellenistic period. He has worked on funerary and post-burial practices in Apulia, subadult burials and the archaeology of childhood, and funerary landscapes co-evolving with settlement dynamics in the 4th century BCE. Matthias is also passionate about transcultural dynamics in the Iron Age-Archaic Mediterranean, particularly in Sicily and southern Italy, social archaeology and archaeological methodology and theory in general, as well as archaeological university collections, their history and cultural heritage management.

Roses for the dead: a funeral rite performed by collegia in Roman Macedonia

Kallirroï Polymenidou (University of Zurich)

Expressions such as ἀποκέηται or παρακαύσουσίν μοι ῥόδοις likely refer in Macedonia to a ritual involving the burning of roses (rosae, escae rosales) at the grave of the deceased during the Rosalia, a festival originally associated with the arrival of spring. Rosalia had been widespread among religious and trade associations (collegia) in Italy since around the 1st century A.D. who were often responsible for taking care of the funerals of their late members.

Roses, symbolizing eternal spring, were mentioned by Ausonius at the end of the 4th century A.D. in one of his epitaphs. In the Greek world, flower festivals were nevertheless common, such as the Anthesteria as well as the offering of flowers during sacrificial rituals and at annual memorial rituals for the dead. Outside the Italian peninsula, the festival of Rosalia is attested in the Balkans, in the Roman provinces of Macedonia, Thrace, Moesia, Dacia, and Pannonia, as well as in Bithynia and Phrygia. It is an imported festival, probably around the 1st century A.D. that was most likely introduced by veterans, soldiers, and merchants.

In addition to their function as tombstones or commemorative inscriptions, it's important to consider the aspect of self-representation of those testimonies. Given that substantial sums of money are bequeathed annually for the funeral rites in honor of the donor and for the benefit of various thiasoi, the act of gifting roses transforms into a symbol of social status.

The connection between Rosalia, worshipping the dead, and Dionysos lies more in the eschatological aspects of the cult of the god, as well as in the fact that associations were often linked to Dionysos and that sacrifices at the grave were best performed by a group. Dionysos is not the ruler of the Underworld, but he guarantees the initiate's well-being in the Afterlife.

In western Macedonia, a festival similar to the Rosalia is still celebrated today, bearing the name "Rusalia"; during this festival, roses are placed on graves, demonstrating that Rosalia has also taken root in a Christian context. The gifting of roses serves, diachronically, as a means of preserving and strengthening the bonds between the living and the dead, and is thus perceived as an embodiment of identities and beliefs.

Kallirroï Polymenidou is a doctoral candidate in Classical Archaeology in the University of Zurich, whose PhD research focuses on an interdisciplinary and systematic examination of the Cult of Dionysos in ancient Macedonia including the publishing of a grave-sanctuary as a case study. She obtained her BA and MA degrees at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and completed academic stays at the University of Cologne. She participated in various excavations in Greece and Germany, being an assistant at the University Excavation of Dion and Vergina. Her Master thesis examined the Votive Reliefs of Lower Macedonia, while her research interests encompass the study of religion, cult and mortuary practices and the sculpture especially of Northern Greece.

Becoming the ancestor: multi-layered identity in Eastern Zhou Jin Burials

Min Lin (British School at Athens)

This paper explores the construction of individual social identity in the mortuary sphere of Eastern Zhou China (770–256 BC), using the Jin region as a case study. By examining the raw material, type, and assemblage of body adornments, it asks how the corporeality of the deceased is modified by costume, and considers how this actualises the concept of the ancestor. This study reveals that body adornments in Jin elite burials form two separate assemblages, constructing two different layers of social identity: the idealised representation of the deceased in their lifetime and an identity concerning solely the afterlife. Moreover, the two layers construct gender differently. Adornments used during the tomb owner's lifetime mark gender differences in hairdos and garments, whereas burial jades cover, decorate, and alter the corpse, thus concealing bodily differences between the two sexes and transforming the deceased into the deified, genderless ancestor. Lastly, the two layers develop divergently. The colourful lifetime adornments are open to new elements, be it exotic materials, new styles, or emerging technology, while the almost monochrome burial jade appears conservative, remaining unchanged throughout the period. This paper thus presents the construction and development of the multi-layered identity of the ancestor.

Dr. Min Lin is a Research Associate at the British School at Athens. Her research examines the mortuary sphere as a site where gender, status, and religious belief intersect, with a particular interest in cross-cultural comparison between the ancient Mediterranean and early China. She completed her PhD in Archaeology at the University of Cambridge in 2025. Her PhD thesis compares the construction of social identity in Early Iron Age Greek and Eastern Zhou Chinese burials. She also holds an MA in Comparative Art and Archaeology from University College London.

Abstracts: poster presentations

Between individual and family: the social significance of recurrent objects in the tombs of Macedonian grave clusters

Marlis Arnhold (Kiel University)

From the mid-4th century BCE onwards, several changes in the composition of grave goods can be observed in Vergina/Aigai, as well as at other sites within the Macedonian Kingdom; among these, the recurring presence of certain objects in individual graves within a cluster of tombs is particularly striking. Viewed in the context of the individual clusters and the other characteristics of the graves in question, the phenomenon can most likely be linked to the emergence of family traditions. However, this raises the question of why (at least some) families, particularly in the second half of the 4th century BCE, sought greater visibility within the material record of their graves. This contribution outlines the temporal and spatial distribution of this phenomenon and attempts to situate it from a social perspective. The paper thus addresses the issue of how grave goods can be interpreted and, in particular, their relationship to issues of social change and social dynamics.

Marlis Arnhold is currently working on two projects: Images of gods between transcendence and immanence (since 2015), and Bestattungskultur Makedoniens (since 2015, in completion). She has held a fixed-term lectureship at the University of Bonn's department of classical archaeology (2013-2019), and a six-month fellowship at the University of Erfurt, in the "Kolleg Research Group Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations", directed by Prof. Dr. Jörg Rüpke und Prof. Dr. Susanne Rau (2021-2022). Since July 2025 she has been a postdoctoral researcher at Kiel University (department for classical archaeology) in the ERC-Project 'Fragile images. The fragility, instability, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity of images in Roman art' (Grant No. 101141247), directed by Prof. Dr. Annette Haug.

Self-referentiality in Attic white-ground lekythoi

Jonas Frick (University of Vienna)

Attic white-ground lekythoi represent one of the most significant sources for understanding the Greek cult of the dead in the 5th century BC. This paper examines the phenomenon of self-referentiality, in which these oil vessels appear as image-within-an-image motifs on their own painted surfaces. The objective of this study is to decode the iconological meaning of these depictions within the tension between practical burial rituals and artistic fiction. Methodologically, the study is based on interpreting the iconographical elements on white-ground lekythoi and comparing them with literary and archaeological evidence. This analysis employs an ambiguity-oriented approach that integrates empirical observations, the painter's perspective and overarching meta-concepts. Using the Beazley Archive, recurring patterns are categorized and interpreted. The results demonstrate that the depicted lekythos serves different functions depending on the context: while early depictions visualize ritual use, later works mark a shift toward purely representative prestige objects. In particular, the motifs of suspended lekythoi stand out for having ambiguous meanings, some of which can be attributed to the fact that material loss alters the perception of their original appearance. The artistic play with the medium creates space for more abstract interpretations – placing the lekythos between domestic and funerary space, as well as between present reality and memory. These findings underscore the importance of the lekythos as a medium that does not merely document rituals but reflects the boundary between reality and fictitious pictorial space mirroring the broader iconographic themes typical of white-ground lekythoi.

Jonas Frick holds a Bachelor's degree in History and is currently completing his studies in Classical Archaeology at the University of Vienna. The present paper is based on his undergraduate thesis in Classical Archaeology. His research focuses on iconography in Attic vase painting as well as provincial Roman fine ware ceramics. His academic interests extend to digital humanities, specifically the application of GIS mapping and oral history within his historical studies.

»Ἄψυχ' ἐμψύχων ἄδε κέκευθε κόνις« – A quantitative study of the Archaic and Classical grave inventories of the Kerameikos in Athens

Ilvy P. Paierl (University of Vienna)

With more than 600 documented burials dating to the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, the Tritopatreion area of the Kerameikos constitutes one of the richest bodies of evidence for Attic funerary culture. This bachelor's thesis approaches this corpus through quantitative statistical methods, examining the Archaic and Classical grave assemblages of the area for recurring structures, patterns, and forms of social differentiation. The dataset comprises 642 burials recorded during the Kerameikos excavations of the 1930s and published in 1999 in the finds catalogue by Kunze-Götte, Tancke, and Vierendeis. Methodologically, uni-, bi-, and multivariate procedures are combined: frequency distributions, chi-square tests, and descriptive measures are complemented by mixture distribution modeling, cluster analysis, seriation, and (detrended) correspondence analysis, alongside a purpose-built social index.

The results indicate a markedly homogeneous funerary practice: Inhumations in simple pit graves and supine position predominate, grave goods are concentrated at the extremities, and four-fifths of all offerings consist of ceramics, within which Lekythoi are overwhelmingly dominant. The assemblages can be read as expressions of a culture of conformity, in which distinction is achieved primarily in cumulative terms – through the multiplication of a shared standard repertoire – and only rarely in categorical terms, such as elaborate funerary architecture or rare materials. Lekythoi emerge as the principal medium through which the collective funerary language of the area is materially articulated. The study thus provides an empirically grounded structural description of Attic funerary culture in the Archaic and Classical periods, rigorously demonstrated through advanced statistical modelling.

I am currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Classical Archaeology at the University of Vienna and have been awarded multiple merit scholarships. Alongside my studies, I have gained practical experience in archaeological fieldwork, as well as in finds management and documentation and in archival work. This includes participation in excavations and surveys in Austria, Italy, and Spain, as well as involvement in citizen-science and museum projects and in teaching support at the Institute of Classical Archaeology. My research is particularly shaped by an interest in interdisciplinary approaches within archaeology – especially those grounded in the natural sciences – and in the archaeology of ancient Greece and Rome; this perspective informs my use of digital and analytical methods, above all quantitative approaches and visualisation.

Death of a Doctor - identifying the burials of Roman medical professionals

Paula Rothmund (University of Groningen)

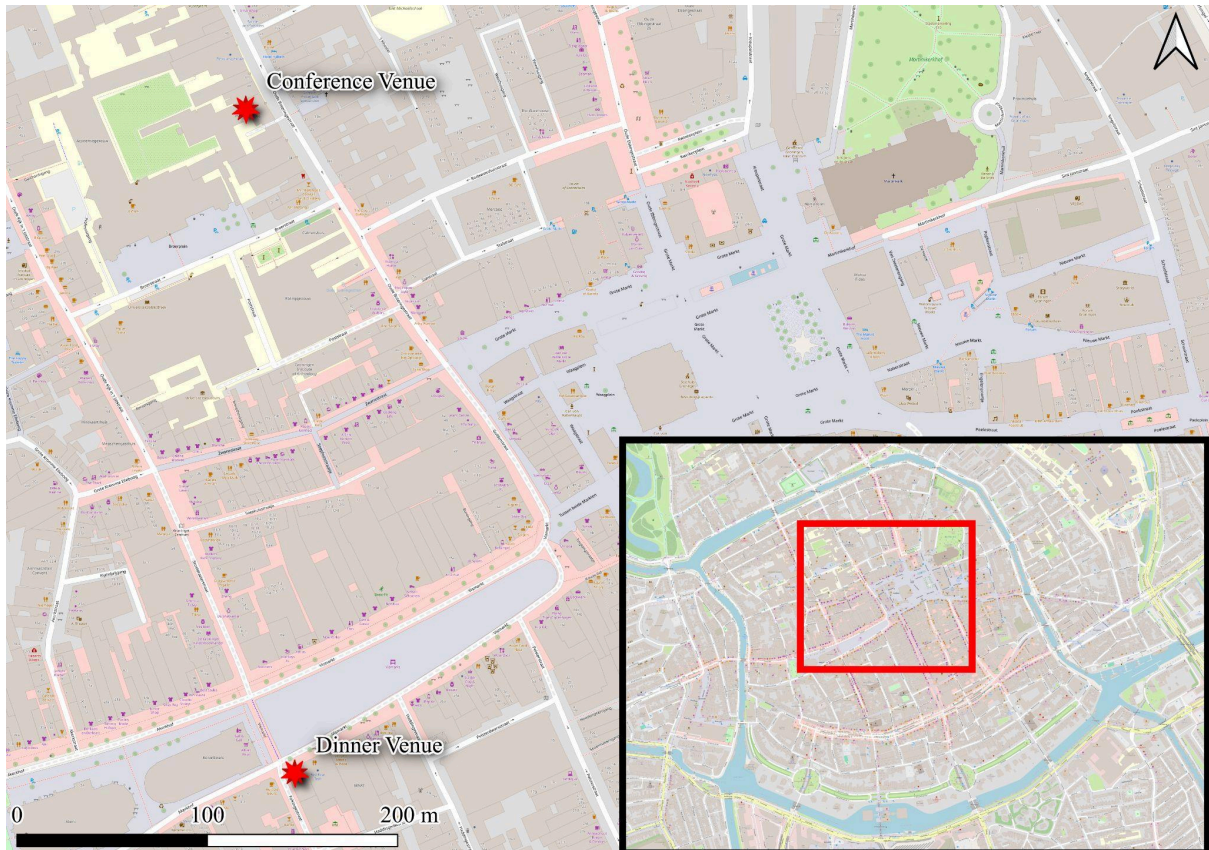
This poster would focus on a topic I stumbled upon during my bachelor thesis: how were jobs and specifically the medical profession signified in the burial context and how does this custom differ across the Roman Empire?

Identifying the burial of a medical professional in the Roman period can be done in two ways. The grave can be marked as belonging to a physician through inscriptions of relief depicting the deceased. Numerous gravemarkers like this have been found in central Italy and especially in Rome. The second way of determination is through the grave goods which need to include surgical instruments like scalpels, pliers, hooks or more specialized instruments like trepanation implements. These tools could be in usage for over 100 years, range from plain bronze to elaborate status symbols of gold and silver and were essential to the physician profession. Graves with medical equipment have been found in the Roman provinces and multiply closer to the borders of the Empire.

No burial has been found yet that contained both a gravemarker and surgical tools. This brings into question the role of the instruments as an identity signifier especially in the context of their importance as tools available to the community.

Paula Rothmund is a Research Master Archaeology Student at the RUG. She has a Bachelor in classical and early christian archaeology and cultural and social anthropology from the University of Münster, Germany. Currently she is specializing in osteoarchaeology and is interested in all things sepulchral.

Conference and dinner venue



Conference venue

Oude Boteringestraat 38, 9712 GK Groningen
(Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society)

Dinner venue

Vismarkt 56, 9711 KV Groningen
(Stads- en Terrascafé Pronk)