Emotions and mourning rites in late medieval Sicily*
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The funerary rite
The celebration of a funeral has important social implications. Among the different rites of passage it was the source of greatest concern to the authorities, both lay and ecclesiastical, who were especially reluctant to see it being carried out in an uncontrolled fashion, revealing -on occasions quite explicitly- a genuine fear of unorthodox procedures. In the act of farewell to the deceased the social hierarchy can be seen as being called into question by mourning rituals in many ways characterised by pre-Christian practices, and all at a time when the ecclesiastical authorities were attempting, albeit gradually, to increase their role as custodians of the relationship between the Church and lay society. In my opinion, the concern of the religious authorities was related to (and was indeed a reaction against) expressions of mourning as a cathartic experience which could be understood as a rejection of and protest against the unavoidable nature of death itself.

At the same time, protest coinciding with the funerary rite could be directed in quite different directions. It could, for example, reflect how the death of a family member had upset or threatened a delicate political status quo, which would thus require reaffirmation. In this way, a funeral might become the scene of a display of power, or an opportunity for the expression of resentment and desire for revenge, and this type of potential development was the main cause of concern for the lay authorities.

In general, the period which saw the highest incidence of intervention by the authorities for purposes of social control in questions governing the rites of passage, and particularly funerals, coincides with the late medieval flourishing of civic autonomy. The incidences of funerary protest identified and progressively stigmatised by the Royal Court should not necessarily be understood within contexts of political and economic depression; they also occurred in periods of growth, when the raised expectations and vested interests of different socio-professional groups themselves became a source of conflict. My analysis will mainly focus on Sicily.

Professional mourners
There are diverse factors at work when we talk about the social implications of funerary rites. These rites themselves were not restricted to the period immediately following the death and the consequent realisation of the burial. We should rather think in terms of an extended period of paying tribute to the deceased, encompassing acts taking place after the burial itself, such as those on the ninth and fortieth days after death, as well as the anniversary itself.\(^1\) Further variation lies in the period of public mourning, as expressed by the type of clothing worn, the physical identification of the deceased’s home and in the degree of solemnity of any commemorative acts. To all this we can add the profound differentiation observed in the degree of ostentation and the participation of third-parties in the rite; for example, the number of candles displayed, of crosses borne in procession, or of churches bells tolled.

The possible reiteration of the commemorative acts posed a particular threat to communal harmony if it came to echo internal conflicts or grudges, or if it allowed family members and friends to reaffirm their roles in commemoration of a given group’s founding figure. Thus this rite of passage came to be identified as an element of risk to social harmony, or indeed as a protest in itself, though generally disguised and undeclared, and hence regarded as all the more insidious because of the implications stemming from it. This is why a systematic attempt was made to prevent displays of mourning beyond the confines of the deceased’s home or, at most, the street where this was located.

All of this is related to the presence of professional mourners; women who played an important role in the commemoration of the deceased as protagonists of a rite that followed pre-Christian customs and was capable of emotionally influencing people from a range of different social groups. The authorities perceived a link between the celebration of commemorative acts in the presence of professional mourners, known as *reputantes* or *reputatrici*, and the critique of social order. The *reputantes* were identified as a potential source of trouble, causing passions to be raised and

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grievances to be aired through their uncontrolled expression of emotion, and thus their presence was to be strictly controlled or even completely prohibited. There seems to have been at play here an aspect of role reversal, whereby women of inferior social condition, described as marginal figures of little worth—and in some cases labelled as prostitutes, assumed a central social function directing and propagating practices which would then also be adopted by non-professional mourners. To follow the suggestion for the peasants communities in late Medieval Germany studied by Gadi Algazi, in a confrontation between unequal the subjects could have a leading role.  

The reputantes participated in the funerary rites within the deceased’s home, accompanied the body to its place of burial and were also present in subsequent commemorative acts. They embodied and indeed performed a singularly expressive display of suffering, beating their chests, pulling their hair and accompanying their actions with the repito, reputationes or cantilena, that is, the recital of the accomplishments of the deceased in life. Though the repito, also known as the corrotto in central Italy, was not always accompanied by musical instruments, its presence constituted a typical element of the rite and it is mentioned almost systematically in the accounts of repressive action taken to suppress such scenes. On occasions it would be the local authorities themselves who addressed the Royal Court proposing restrictive policies such as the prohibition of such instruments or of the repito.  

The use of instruments was regarded as an expression and indeed amplification of a dangerously emotional implication that needed to be controlled. The measures adopted in this respect could vary. For example, in the early fourteenth century, Frederick III, King of Sicily (1296-1337) prohibited their use on account of their tendency to ‘feminize’ those participating in the funeral. This reference to the feminine nature of such practices is the only one I have found in the dispositions of  

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2 Raffaele Starrabba and Luigi Tirrito, eds., Assise e consuetudini della terra di Corleone (Palermo 1880), pp. 100-103.  
4 Salvatore Giambruno and Luigi Genuardi, Capitoli inediti delle città demaniali di Sicilia (Palermo 1918), p. 359 (Licata).  
5 Francesco M. Testa, Capitula regni Siciliae, 2 vols. (Panormi 1741) capitula XC-CIV 1. 89-95. Uncertainty remains with regard to the dates as there are no indications that are helpful for clarifying whether the seventh indiction referred to is that of the year 1308-1309 or 1323-1324.
the lay legislators; a uniqueness that makes me suspect that the real reasoning here differs from that stated. The pretext of this ‘feminizing’ tendency alongside the supposed influence of the reputatrici on the other mourners is undoubtedly an attempt to stigmatise these women, but in reality it masks a different concern. The concern was that funerary rites involving these professionals tended to run out of control and thus might readily become vehicles for criticism of the established order.

It was not just lay legislators who regarded the ‘protest’ of these professionals with suspicion and trepidation. Religious legislators similarly condemned customs which they did not regard as Christian and which they labelled hypocritical, indicating at best only a superficial spirituality. In my opinion in the rite of passage with the involvement of the professionals, it was not so much a case of rejection of Christian practices, as of a fusion between the Christian and the non-Christian. The latter characterised by rebellion against death as expressed in the most vivid of ways by the convulsive gestures and cries of the reputantes. These women were transformed into an instrument for channelling the family’s sorrow and thus helping to alleviate the suffering that the death might provoke.

As such, it was clearly a way of regarding death far removed from the Christian message of eternal salvation and reunion with God. The religious authorities thus had an important role to play in the suppression of practices quite distant from the principles expounded by the Church; principles which, once rejected or ignored, themselves could come to question the guiding role that ecclesiastical institutions aspired to provide with regards to the rites of passage.

The policy of control was a consequence of, among other things, converging models which facilitated the stigmatisation of non-orthodox rites. The legislators of the period encountered, for example, in the mourning practices of the confraternities an element of inspiration. Silence, devotion and the acceptance of death were the norms governing the funerary code of these brotherhoods, and had little in common with the extravagant behaviour of the professional mourners.6 I wonder if the strong political affirmation of the confraternities in all the Italian peninsula can be also explained because they were tools to guarantee the social order.

Having identified the ways in which the reputantes participated in the funerary rite, the next step is to determine in what terms their presence might genuinely constitute a

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threat to social order and be associated with protest. In this sense it is worthwhile returning to the emotional implication that they were capable of provoking in others, in clear opposition to the political equilibrium so desired by the kings of the Crown of Aragon, or the *pacifico stato* to use a phrase common in the dispositions of the Royal Court. An element of serious concern for the court in reference to dissent was the negation of existing roles and the rejection of the established order, elements which appear repeatedly in the accusations against professional mourners levied by both religious and lay authorities.

In 1322 Frederick III legislated on the question of funerary rites, ordaining that priests and monks should accompany the body of the deceased and control any commotions that might arise during the ceremony. A full correlation between the potential for dissent and the funerary rite was clearly being established. This is the sense in which we ought to understand the decision to enhance the role of the religious authorities, which was normally regarded with suspicion by the participants in the funeral.

The loss of a leading member of a family, and even more so if the family were part of the elite, could have different consequences. On the one hand, it could provoke conditions of intense frustration and thence a violent though essentially defensive reaction in the moments immediately following the tumultuous commotion of the funeral, or, on the other hand, it could provide an opportunity for the bereaved family to benefit from the emotional implication of a broader social circle thus disturbing the delicate social equilibrium and consolidating the position of the bereaved. Such practices were so widespread that in the proscriptive dispositions we rarely encounter references to specific family groups.

It proved extremely difficult, both at local level and through Crown intervention, to reform through disciplinary methods these orchestrated outpourings of grief. While some aspects of the funerary rite were undoubtedly Christian, it was also by definition a form of dissent against the Christian tradition and message. Though it is true that the rite normally consisted of a procession, it was radically different to the normal religious procession, centred as it was on a celebration of the deceased’s life unconstrained by the limits imposed by the Church, and breaking down the barriers between public and private space. The route chosen was not necessarily straight to the place of burial, but rather sought to socialise and exteriorise the sorrow of the

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mourners in streets both near to and far from the deceased’s home. There are two ways of interpreting this dramatizing of the rite: on the one hand, as an unrestrained outpouring of emotion; or, as the desire to celebrate the deceased’s life with the whole community.

**The political equilibrium from the end of the XIV century onwards**

To better contextualize it is important to address the political equilibrium between rulers and ruled from the end of the XIV century onwards. The significant late medieval growth in legislation seeking to regulate the funerary rite is a result of the political protagonism of urban communities during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Over a short space of time, the urban universe experienced a burgeoning presence of craftsmen seeking to consolidate their political status, rapid economic growth, and a generalised increase in different types of violence.

From the late fourteenth century onwards, the communities (*universitates*) forged a formidable common front aimed at pressurising the king into restoring the rights and guarantees which had been so debilitated during the intervening period when, following the death of Frederick IV (1377), Sicily had been controlled by the four main feudal families, known collectively as the ‘Vicars’ (1377-92). The main objective of the petitions emitted by the communities, formulated after a process of intense internal debate following the royal restoration of Martin I (1392-1409), was to put behind them the preceding phase of ‘tyrannical’ government of the feudal families, the expression used to denote a markedly centralised system hostile to participative government and which was reluctant to share out any economic benefits.

The deliberate policy of royal support for the *universitates* worked as a check on the power of the feudal lords, and received in return political support from the communities under royal jurisdiction, an arrangement that ensured political equilibrium. Following the royal restoration, the widely extended ability of the *universitates* to rapidly resume a policy of internal debate and choose their own representatives on whom to confer a mandate for negotiations with the king confirms the existence of a tradition of participative and negotiated politics. A participative tradition that would continue to flourish during the reign of Alfonso V (1416-58). During the first half of the fifteenth century, the intensification of the councils’ participation in local politics stems largely from economic motives, principally a result of increased royal fiscal pressure which had an important effect on both the role
of the king as a coordinator and on the margins of the autonomy of local government. We see a significant increase in the role of local administrators, as the *universitas* decided how to implement the new taxes, over what period, who would be taxed, and whether the community would seek loans in order to meet their fiscal requirements. While the royal policy of allowing the communities to decide for themselves came directly from the Crown itself -although this does not preclude the possibility that there was pressure to do so from below-, both the debate around how the taxes were to be raised and the recourse to open council assemblies were full expressions of the organisational decisions of the *universitas*. The council meetings constituted a political arena in which confrontation between different interest groups gradually gave way to the recognition of the differences and even of some elements of cohesion between the opposing socio-professional groups. It was then a combination of political pressure from both above and below that led to the enhancement of administrative activity in term of its protagonists, questions debated, and strategic decisions taken. A political pattern which—as John Watts as shown- can be identified in many European territories.8

From the late fourteenth century onwards, the economic growth of the communities saw a gradual widening of the role of craftsmen and their corporations as they constantly sought greater political visibility. This led to a state of heightened tension between craftsmen and the powerful groups formed by the richer merchants and landowners. As a result, in the early fifteenth century we encounter a number of attempts, none of which were entirely successful, to form coalitions aimed at excluding political opponents from participation in elections. Communities such as Palermo, Agrigento, Catania, Corleone, Nicosia and Sciacca went through periods of intense political conflict, and in each of them we observe cases of the local authorities attempting to control funerary rites.9

As we have already seen, commemoration of the deceased frequently served as a form of protest. It might consist of the rejection of death, by means of a cathartic outpouring of grief; it could mean the reaffirmation of a family’s role in society, silencing any doubts arising from the death of one of its members, or it could channel the emotional implication of the mourners into a challenge of the socio-political status

Take, for example, the case of Agrigento, a community in the south-western coast of Sicily riven by political conflict, and one of the universitates which, during the second half of Alfonso V’s reign, most often suffered attempts by certain political coalitions to exclude antagonistic socio-professional groups, above all craftsmen, from particular administrative posts. Though the political strategy failed, it is in itself evidence of a particularly highly charged political context, and it is in Agrigento too that we encounter funerary practices as the target of particularly repressive policies. Thus, in 1426, the employment of reputari—as I said the recital of the accomplishments of the deceased in life—was forbidden in the city, even though they were close relatives of the deceased. In an extraordinary piece of legislation proposed by the local authorities a great deal of attention is paid to the question of mourning practices. The prescribed intervention was wide-ranging, in an attempt at social control that reached as far as the strict sanctioning of improper language, i.e. blasphemy, with punishments applicable to all classes and sexes. The objective was to avoid practices, alongside frictions arising from economic interests, that might threaten the prevailing social harmony.

In the 1426 text, of all the subjects related to religious questions, such as intervention in religious festivities, blasphemy and funerary rites, it is the latter which seem to constitute the greatest concern with regard to social order. A long section is dedicated to a series of rules controlling every aspect of the funerary rite, in a precise examination of the limits between legal and illicit grieving. In a quite extraordinary descriptive passage, different types of permitted grief were outlined, allowing both relatives and non-relatives, irrespective of gender, to mourn, weep, sigh, lament, even strike themselves. However, under no circumstances reputari was allowed, even if they were relatives of the deceased, and the sanction for contravention was set at 10 onze. Moreover, following commemorations of the memory of the deceased, on the ninth and fortieth days after death or on the anniversary, were similarly prohibited: as such occasions all too readily lent themselves to pre-arranged airing of grievances and score settling.

With regard to the intensity of grief for loss and the reactions to that loss, Alberto Tenenti suggests that from the mid-1300s death was increasingly upsetting whether

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10 Giambruno and Genuardi, Capitoli, pp. 272-273.
for those preparing to go to the Great Beyond or those anchoring themselves more firmly to their life on Earth. He also for example, analyzes verses by the poet Pietro Nesson (1383-1439) to highlight how lamenting the destruction that death causes in both the dying and those left behind is an expression of compassion for the family and friends, as is the expression of the love of life on Earth. The interesting aspect of this interpretation, the chronology of which is no longer accepted in the historiographical debate, lies in the emphasis on the desire to live that emerges in opposition to death. The rejection of death, as described in the mourning rituals in Agrigento, testifies to this anxiety and attachment to life. This fact documents prior needs and traditions in which professionals and non-professionals, men and women alike, sought to rid themselves of the grief/memory that otherwise risked imprisoning those who survived the deceased.

For the Dogon people of Mali, it is interestingly maintained that the women’s convulsive movements for expressing grief, such as striking the ground, were intended to express the absurd and chaotic nature of death. At the same time, the ritualization of mourning can be considered a means for containing the crisis of grief. In the 1426 text, though no explicit reference to professional mourners is made nor to the risk of disorder stemming from political tensions, the allusion to the activities of the professional mourners is clear, and elsewhere they were specifically denounced as the source of social unrest. The absence of pre-defined roles, the desire to commemorate the deceased ostentatiously rather than in silence, and, lastly, the expression grief without inhibitions were questions that left indifferent neither the civil nor the ecclesiastical authorities.

The dawning of the early modern period: towards a radicalisation of the policies of social control

12 Tenenti’s important study cannot be set aside; having said that, the historiographical debate has opened discussion on the theory of a new attitude toward death that parallels a slow emergence of the individual from the 12th to 13th centuries, or between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance; see Michel Lauwers, *Morte/i*, in Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds., *Dizionario dell’occidente medievale*, 2 vols. (Torino, 2004) 1. 782-800.
I would like to consider a detailed pragmatic of 1538 against funeral rites directed to the whole reigns and as well a specific expression of confidence of Charles I (Charles V as emperor from 1519) directed to the community of Piazza in central Sicily. I should add two important aspects to better contextualize the reality: first of all Piazza had suffered important phases of social unrest in the years before, so it was a community we might say under special control by the rulers. Second from the end of the XIV century to the end of the XV century the political royal strategy had in the cities a strong support which created a limitation of power for the feudal families. By the early sixteenth century the previous equilibrium between rulers and ruled started to be challenged, and in this sense the revolts of 1516-17, immediately after the death of Ferdinand the Catholic, are particularly symbolic.14 The period between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries has until now been relatively little studied, and in this context I will limit myself to outlining an hypothesis for the period. The early sixteenth century saw a difficult political situation as, amongst other reasons, the kingdom was emerging from a period of onerous kingship by Ferdinand. As a result, there were a number of uprisings on the island, especially, although for different causes, in Messina and Palermo. The aim of the uprising was, in my opinion, a major shake-up of the relationship between crown and kingdom increasing the aristocracy’s influence over royal policy. Nor was this an isolated case. In July 1517 there was to be another rebellion in Palermo.

In such a context of political turmoil, Charles I addressed the community of Piazza (a community in central Sicily) in September 1517, writing that the Captain General of the realm had informed him of their decision to opt for peace rather than replicate the disorder in Palermo; in other words, they had not abandoned their traditional loyalty.15 The disorder in Palermo had clearly worried the crown, hence the royal interest in checking where the king’s peace was at risk and its satisfaction where it held firm; he expressed his confidence in being able to count on the loyalty of the community in the future.

This was not, however, the end of the period of disorder in Sicily. In the 1520s there would be more political unrest, as well as simmering local disputes in places like Sciacca. In the latter, in 1529, there was a case which we can consider paradigmatic.

15 *Consuetudines terre Platee*, Biblioteca comunale de Piazza Armerina, fols. 254-255.
of the risk of unrest that accompanied the funerary rite. Here we encounter both men and women taking part in the funerary acts led by professional mourners after the violent death of Baron Perollo, a murder which was the result of a long-standing conflict between two eminent families, the Perollos and the Lunas. The screams and sobbing of the women, and the shouts, breast-beating and hand-clapping of the men fused together in homage to the deceased; both men and women highly and emotionally implicated in a scene which was clearly a possible source for future desires for vengeance.  

On another occasion, I outlined the relevance of a manuscript from the community of Piazza which represents the memory of the community, packed with information about the city’s privileges and the negotiations between the universitas and the crown, but also with royal dispositions valid throughout the realm, all of such relevance to the community as to be recorded separately. One of the longest texts in the collection refers to funerary rites, and more specifically, super prohibitione vestium lugrubium (‘on the prohibition of mourning clothes’). The pragmatic of 1538, signed by Viceroy Ferrante Gonzaga and referring to the whole realm, echoed the complaint of the island’s representatives about the damage caused by funerary rites.  

The pragmatic was directed at all mourners irrespective of their social status, and the general strategy was to limit all visible expressions of mourning with a series of very detailed prohibitions that grew progressively more radical for non-members of the grieving family. The limits were particularly strict with respect to the period during which the deceased could be commemorated through the wearing of clothing considered typical of the funerary rite, within an overall strategy of limiting the expression of emotions and the participation of non-family members in the grieving of the family itself. The main target of the policy was the expression of sorrow in any form, and thus condolences were also to be given without displays of grief. 

A great deal of effort seems to have gone into the attempt to dedramatize funerals with such strikingly uncompromising policies as the one which suggested that the

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18 Consuetudines terre Plateae, Biblioteca comunale de Piazza Armerina, fols. 255-264.
parents of dead children should have less emotional implication in the death the younger the child was. Only widows were free to decide how long they would wear mourning clothes for. It was even suggested that the period of time that the deceased’s house could be identified as such by displaying a black cloth on the door. It was in fact common for crowds to gather at the deceased’s home, thus blurring the boundaries between private and public space. This in turn led to the implication of others, particularly when the cries of sorrow, the search for catharsis, the desire to maintain alive the memory, and the rejection of the inevitability of death were not confined within the house’s walls.

About display of power, I would like to recall Michel Foucalt’s suggestion: to talk in spatial term is thus to talk about the effects of power. 19

Relatives and friends were to offer only condolence and support to the immediate family and were in no sense to augment the feeling of sorrow and grief. Probably the harshest of all the clauses was the prohibition of the repito during visits to the deceased, on pain of flogging or a fine of two hundred onze (when in Agrigento, in 1426, the equivalent fine had been set at ten onze). In case of repetition, the punishment was the amputation of the ears or the payment of a four hundred onze fine, the choice between the two punishments being the Viceroy’s. Finally, in accordance with the sumptuary laws, limits were set on the number of candles permitted, as well as on silver plate and candelabra that could be displayed during the funerary rites.

In a context within which both the expression of grief and the confrontation of death were strikingly independent of religious conventions, there seem to have been two questions which were regarded as most in need of control: the exteriorising of emotions and the ostentation of the deceased’s social status. In a political context which seems to have been characterised by the gradual affirmation of the new system promoted by the aristocracy, of the all potential forms of dissent one of the most difficult to control, the funerary rite, became the object of the most detailed legislation imaginable, according to which the display of a piece of black cloth on a private house was strictly limited to a given number of days. The 1538 pragmatic failed to eliminate these practices, but it confirmed how uncomfortable they made the island’s rulers feel.

Conclusion

Protest is at times disguised, and at times quite explicit; it is not necessarily planned in advance, and can indeed be quite spontaneous. The funerary rite accommodated all of these possibilities. The emotional outbursts were the aspect most difficult to control, while the repito was the single most risky phase of the rite, whether as part of the funeral itself, or incorporated into following commemorative acts, often taking place some time later. Music was also a source of concern for the legislators, since it was regarded as a catalyst for the externalisation of emotions, and most worryingly of all, the involvement of people from outside the family circle.

It has been maintained by Adriano Prosperi that in codified social rituals there is no room for expressions of the individual’s feeling about death, but I argue that the professional mourner’s intervention can reveal the opposite, namely that it has the ability to become the vehicle for expressing the most intense sentiments of grieving. I believe that the use of music in the funeral ritual gives a voice to the most intimate feelings of suffering. A beautiful passage in Piovano Arlotto’s *Facezie* (second half of the 15th century, reference area the hinterland of Florence) speaks of a woman who asks that bagpipes be played since bells are forbidden, so that her son might not be buried as if he were an animal.

Judging by the methods of the professional mourners, true escape from the sorrow of death and from the sense of persecution provoked by bereavement was possible through the open and public outpouring of grief, not just within the walls of the family home, but outside the house too, in streets near and far, up to the place of burial and beyond. The cries of the bereaved also served as a tribute to the deceased, and thus should be at once solemn and resounding, hence also the recourse to the peals of bells, with the display of crosses as a further ostentatious part of the rite. The professional mourners were experts in their way of representing the expectations and needs of the situation, so skilled that their talents came to be recognised by non-professionals, even breaking down gender-roles as family members came to imitate the reputantes performances.

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21 Passage mentioned by Giuseppina De Sandre Gasperini, *La morte nelle campagne bassomedievali*, in *La morte e i suoi riti*, 76-77. Piovano Arlottos’s passage does not mention the reputatrici.
Above all, the funerary rite was never neutral. It could become an expression of identity of a given faction, a rejection of injustices suffered, a statement of the desire for revenge, and was carried out in ways radically different to the silent acceptance and devotion promulgated by the brotherhoods. The progressive toughening of the sanctions against all this by the legislators culminating in the drastic pragmatic of 1538 can be ascribed to different motives, but it shows the incapacity of the rulers to put an end to the practice of protesting against death itself.