

Terminology at the service of the characterisation of funerary practices: the Pactols Thesaurus

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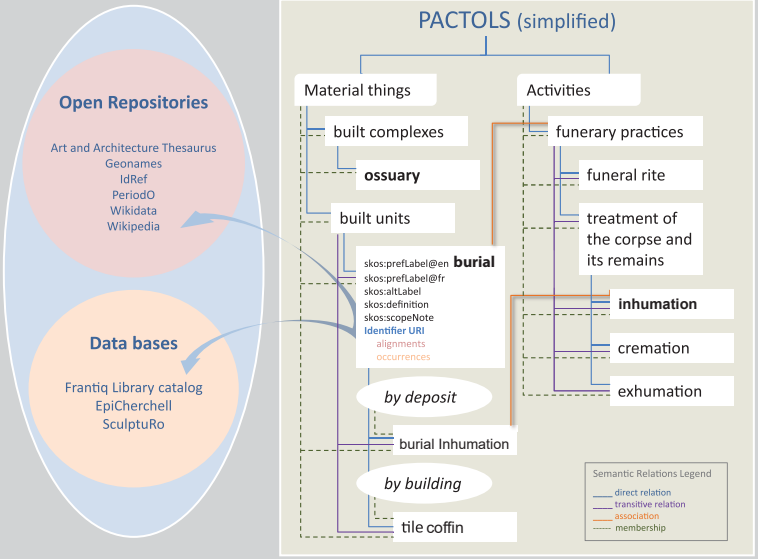
Terminology at the service of the characterisation of funerary practices: The Pactols thesaurus

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PACTOLS Thesaurus

The PACTOLS thesaurus is a repository of about 60 000 keywords or 'concepts', dedicated to archaeology and sciences of Antiquity. These keywords are organized in 7 thematic collections: Peoples and cultures, Anthroponymy, Chronology, Toponymy, Works, Places, Subjects. PACTOLS is available in 7 languages; normalized and interoperable, it follows the ISO 25964 norm and integrates the SKOS language (Simple Knowledge Organisation System). As shown on the adjacent simplified drawing, concepts are described at least by a label with variations and identifiers. The specificity of the thesaurus relies on the richness of the semantic relationships that link the concepts together, within the collections or through virtual facets. Direct or transitive hierarchical relationships define the concepts' dependency tree, while association relationships indicate a semantic proximity without a dependency. Relationships also extend outside the thesaurus by matching the concepts with items from various Web data repositories. This complex and evolutionary structure allows the management of a terminology such as that which derives from archaeology.



Reorganizing PACTOLS

As part of a reorganization program designed to consolidate the semantic structure and update the vocabulary of the thesaurus, Death specialists in archaeology and anthropology studied and discussed around 150 concepts related to that topic. Mindful of the recent evolution of the field and with the aim of promoting good terminological practices, they reviewed the labels, definitions, translations, and positions of the terms within the framework of a new organization of the thesaurus. This work sometimes led to depreciating inappropriate terms or creating new concepts to compensate for misuses or deficiencies. This revision is presented here through four concepts used as examples for Late Antiquity.

Some examples from Late Antiquity

Burial



Funerary stele with epitaph of Eutropius, Marble, 2nd quarter of the 4th c. AD, P69'1974.4, Musée départemental Arles antique © R. Bénali

The term 'burial' has been one of our primary focus since it appears crucial for funerary archaeology.
- What is a burial?
- Are any buried human remains to be considered as such?
- Does a burial necessarily imply interment in the ground?
- What are the differences between a burial and a grave, two words often used indiscriminately in archaeology?

In the thesaurus, we chose 'burial' over 'grave' as the main concept because a burial designates both a concrete and symbolic fact whereas a grave is only the tangible expression of the burial.

Ossuary



Glass ossuary vase placed in a lead trunk and containing the burnt bones of the dead (end of the 1st c. AD). Richaume XIII, Puylaudun. © L. Damelet, Centre Camille Jullian, AMU-CNRS

This term actually refers to different things according to the time frames. It designates in Antiquity a vase containing the burned remains of an individual, forming his grave. For more recent periods, the term effectively indicates facts that are not strictly funerary, but it is sometimes mistaken for the term "secondary burial". To clarify this situation, we decided to distinguish two concepts: the first one (ossuary vase) is linked to funerary practices implying cremation; the other one (ossuary) describes the result of the displacements and manipulations of unburnt human remains in the context of funerary spaces management, from Late Antiquity onwards.



Modern ossuary (16-17th c. AD). Cemetery in the courtyard of the Hotel-Dieu cloister, Lyon © Service Archéologique de la Ville de Lyon

Paleochristian



Saint Césaire's reliquary in the shape of a sarcophagus showing Christ holding a volumen with both hands between two pannels decorated with strigils (mid. 4th c. AD). Marble, 42 x 121 x 52 cm. Musée départemental Arles antique © M. Lacanaud

This notion originates from arts: it was created to designate the paintings, sculptures, mosaics, etc. displaying themes or symbols from the Old and New Testament and the prior Roman tradition. But a shift in meaning happened during the 20th c., mainly due to funerary archaeology: the word came to characterize anything related to Late Antiquity, presuming of the religious beliefs of people and communities.

Employing this term in archaeo-thanatology and archaeology in general is thus problematic since it implies an unverified prejudice; it is a typical example of an epistemological misuse linked to the history of the research field. While revising the thesaurus, we thus rejected its usage as a concept to encourage good practices. Reflecting on such terms is particularly interesting since it goes beyond mere formulation to examine the notion itself. In this case, it questions our definition of what a Christian burial is.

Inhumation



Individual primary burial of an immature in a reused African amphora (mid 3rd-end 4th c. AD). Rescue excavation of 1, rue rue Neyret, Lyon. © Service Archéologique de la Ville de Lyon

While the concept 'cremation' already existed in PACTOLS, we had to create 'inhumation', which used to be considered as the default form of burial. Such a conception reveals an ethnocentric bias and the term, problematic, raised much discussion. Indeed, the notion of inhumation remains strongly associated with burials said to be 'in plain ground' whereas it actually refers more generally to any type of entombment (in the sense of hiding away from sight) of a dead body or part of it.

Besides, in informal language, inhumation is often used as opposed to cremation whereas, etymologically, the word does not designate a mode of treatment of the corpse. Our discipline should thus embrace in the future the problem of finding an adequate term to replace it in this regard.



Individual primary burial of an adult in a shroud and composite casing (5th c. AD). Saint-Pierre 2, Thorame-Basse © L. Roux, Centre Camille Jullian, AMU-CNRS

Prospects for the future

The work conducted by the team needs to be continued by revising the translations of the validated concepts. This will raise other issues, notably the difficulty of translating different methodological perceptions in different countries and languages, which the possibility of adding variants to the main label should, at least in part, help to resolve. Multilingualism is also an essential issue for the interoperability of metadata, to which Frantiq has been committed for a long time. Finally, the approach adopted in the context of updating this vocabulary is replicable to other specialties.