

In archaeological or historical contexts, as in very contemporary contexts, human remains have been found inside features containing waste deposits: rubbish bins, landfills, rubbish dumps and middens. The association between corpses and rubbish dumps, which has been documented in a wide variety of socio-cultural contexts, seldom occurs by chance. It raises immediate questions about the logic behind the deliberate disposal of dead bodies or human remains in the rubbish. At the same time, it forces us to question the status of the individuals who are treated like detritus, or who at least undergo a dehumanising process. The five articles presented in this thematic issue represent a contextual and temporal spectrum covering more than 300 centuries and several continents, allowing us to approach these questions on a large scale.

Against the backdrop of contemporary Brazil, the contribution of the social anthropologist Claudia Fonseca and biologist Rodrigo Grazinoli Garrido thus explores the ultimate fate of biological materials of human origin that have undergone forensic analysis for the courts: too human to end up in a rubbish bin, but not human enough to be buried in a cemetery. This article examines how boundaries are drawn in this regard between what is human and what is not.

The same question is the focus of the article by social anthropologist Valentina Zagaria. Faced with the bodies of dead migrants washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean in the Tunisian town of Zarzis, local communities chose to bury them in places reclaimed from former public landfills after transporting them in refuse lorries. The deceased are unidentified and their deaths have occurred under tragically violent circumstances. In addition to the impact on local financial (and especially property) considerations, the paper questions the status of a person who has been driven by social and/or political insecurity to flee his or her country and who suffers a final act of symbolic violence in death.

Observing the context of democratic Argentina in the 2000s, the social anthropologist Mariano Perelman discusses two cases of bodies found in a Buenos Aires dump that give concrete expression to more structural political and social violence. The first case bears witness to a disqualification that had already occurred during the lifetime of the deceased, and this status continued after death. The second case relates the femicidal violence suffered by a teen who was raped and killed and whose

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body was hidden in a wheelie bin, but who did not suffer social disqualification. While the treatment of the corpses is similar, the two cases express very different social outcomes.

These three studies of contemporary instances reveal the social dysfunction that leads to the disqualification of certain individuals.

Some 6,000 years earlier, other detritic spaces received other bodies, some of which had been killed, and other human remains resulting in part from mutilation. The article written by the archaeologists Philippe Lefranc and Fanny Chenal proposes an analysis of pits dating from the fifth and fourth millennia BCE, pits that were used for refuse and in which entire skeletons and parts of mutilated bodies were found (a series of amputated left arms). Interpreted as the remnants of rituals, especially warrior rituals but also funeral rites (human sacrifices), these human remains manifest physical violence but are not necessarily related to social dysfunction.

The same is true of the contribution from archaeologist Erik Trinkaus and his collaborators. It examines the presence of several human fragments and also three pairs of hands and feet in domestic debris dating back 30,000 years. This case sheds light on the potentially extreme and violent characteristics of behaviour that relates to the voluntary dismemberment or mutilating of the human body.

In the end, these five contributions demonstrate the ancientness and persistence of the association of human remains with detritic spaces. They show how the symbolic violence carried out on cadavers often follows physical violence suffered by the body while alive. They question the status of the body, living and dead, as well as the logic behind the disqualification of a body as waste.

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Guest editors

Notes

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