The clandestine cemetery: burying the victims of Europe's border in a Tunisian coastal town

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Abstract

The Mediterranean Sea has recently become the deadliest of borders for illegalised travellers. The victims of the European Union's liquid border are also found near North African shores. The question of how and where to bury these unknown persons has recently come to the fore in Zarzis, a coastal town in south-east Tunisia. Everyone involved in these burials – the coastguards, doctors, Red Crescent volunteers, municipality employees – agree that what they are doing is 'wrong'. It is neither dignified nor respectful to the dead, as the land used as a cemetery is an old waste dump, and customary attitudes towards the dead are difficult to realise. This article will first trace how this situation developed, despite the psychological discomfort of all those affected. It will then explore how the work of care and dignity emerges within this institutional chain, and what this may tell us about what constitutes the concept of the human.

Key words: Mediterranean Sea, necropolitics, Tunisia, unknown dead, the human

Introduction

In recent history the European Union's (EU) border has developed into an extensive zone that encompasses seas and lands beyond what is commonly imagined as its geographical perimeter.¹ The Tunisian coastal town of Zarzis, sprawling on a wide strip of sand some 80 km from Libya, exists within this borderland. It is believed that 'under Ben Ali, Tunisia's sea border was the most secure in the entire Maghreb region,'² with EU-funded and equipped patrol boats operating from ports like Zarzis. Yet, despite the changes in political leadership in the country since the 2011 revolution and its transition to democracy, successive Italian governments and the EU have remained constant in the nature of their demands to Tunisia when it comes to border control. Consequently, while in the months following the revolution Zarzis became one of the main points of departure for Tunisians wishing to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa, this period of openness did not last for long. Zarzis soon reverted to being heavily implicated in the production and policing of

Europe's border. The fact that the Strait of Sicily³ is a maritime frontier means that the inhabitants of its shores are drawn into the everyday functioning of the border and have to engage with its effects. As a result, its residents live with the presence of those who die trying to cross it, most of whom are buried without a name.

The question of how and where to bury unknown persons has come to the fore in recent years in Zarzis. Citizens are now able to have an open discussion about how this is being addressed by the authorities, something they were unable to do during the Ben Ali dictatorship. From the early 1990s onwards, as the number of people on the move drowning at sea increased as a result of ever tighter immigration policies in Europe, a standardised sequence of actions developed locally in southern Tunisia with regards to the management of these deceased persons. The unknown dead, usually found by fishermen on or near the coast, are transported on the municipality rubbish truck (or, more recently, in a privately owned minivan), in suitable body bags (or, when they run out, in bin bags), to the emergency ward of the hospital for a summary medical inspection. They are then laid to rest in holes dug by an excavator in a piece of land outside the town that used to serve as a garbage dump, with no funerary rituals. Very few efforts are made to identify these persons, or to facilitate future identification. Everyone involved in this chain of events – the fishermen, police, coastguards, firefighters, doctors, Red Crescent volunteers, municipality employees – agrees that the way in which these dead persons are being buried is 'wrong.' It is neither dignified nor respectful to the dead, as they are laid to rest among rubbish. Moreover, since the area is not enclosed, there are concerns about dogs and other animals digging up the bodies, while the fact that the cemetery is not signed means that passers-by are not aware of the dead's presence and cannot pay their respects to them. How did the bodies of unknown persons end up being buried like this? And how is it that this seemingly uncaring disposal of the dead proceeds apace, despite those involved feeling deep discomfort with it?

These dead bodies do not belong to the family members of those who bury them; they are not their fellow nationals, nor are they the country's war dead. They exist outside the local social sphere, but also outside any other social sphere, since they are rarely found with identity papers and so they remain unplaceable, unreturnable, eternally stateless. These bodies or human remains are also often recovered in advanced states of decomposition, making them difficult to anchor in the world of humans, in the world of matter whose disposal must be ritualised or must at least match that matter's ascribed humanity. On the surface, these unknown dead seem to be inconsequential to life in Zarzis: the deaths of foreign migrants and the presence of their dead bodies do not have a direct effect on social reproduction, they are not 'socially useful', as a functionalist reading would have it. If, as Hertz – cited by Bloch and Parry – argued, the death of an individual member of a community is a social event and not simply a biological one, and thus has an impact on the social order and engenders particular kinds of emotions, then conversely, "the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual".⁴ Such individuals have not been fully incorporated into the social order, which therefore remains largely unmoved by their deaths.⁵ If we zoom out from the local

to the global scale, where black lives and bodies are forever devalued, turned into quintessential others deemed 'ungrievable', in Butler's terms,⁶ and where undocumented migrants are scapegoated and dehumanised in political discourse,⁷ these undignified burial practices might not seem so surprising after all.

The cemetery in Zarzis is not the only one in south Tunisia to be hosting the bodies of unknown persons washed up from the sea, and the dead found in Tunisia make up but a small percentage of those found near other shores of the Central Mediterranean – close to Libya, Italy and Malta. These in turn amount to only a portion of the number recovered on the coasts of other Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Turkey, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt.⁸ Not to mention the number of dead found at other borders where 'nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible denial of blame for any victims the desert may claim.'⁹ De León is referring to the United States, but Schindel similarly argues that the EU border materially and symbolically produces what Agamben terms bare life: subjects ruled through their mere biological existence, instead of as rights-bearing citizens.¹⁰ Control and surveillance technologies push 'unwanted travellers', perceived as 'intruders' and as a 'biological threat', as part of 'an ahistorical and apolitical phenomenon', into more and more dangerous routes, whereby death is not 'produced by assassination, but by abandonment to the elements'.¹¹ Thus all these numbers can only account for the dead that are found: they are not representative of the total number of deaths at sea or in the desert, in the mountain ranges or water channels turned into deterrent, lethal landscapes. Not to mention the deaths of undocumented persons who are underpaid to undertake riskier work than is legally allowed, with no personal or social security, whose bodies are also often disposed of anonymously and uncounted. Death at the border by the border, and the exploitation and devaluing of the lives of non-citizens, has come to demarcate the frontier between lives that matter and those that do not, the world over.¹²

By tracing how, in southern Tunisia, this particular way of burying the unknown dead came to be adopted, this article will attempt to uncover why it is that these dead persons continue to be buried in ways that are locally felt to be undignified, despite great psychological discomfort on the part of those involved. The foreignness and apparent non-significance of the unknown dead for the lives of locals in Zarzis seems to account for part of the reason why they end up being excluded from 'normal' burial places and practices. This reading, however, does not consider the fact that the presence of these dead bodies and human remains also calls for actions aimed at humanising them. These result in the development of particular attachments and imaginations on the part of those who come into contact with them, or who simply inhabit this borderland. The materiality of these bodies and human remains results in their oscillating between being considered and related to as 'things' and as 'people', respectively, making individuals question – and make efforts to produce – the very concept of the human. As the physical integrity of human bodies crumbles at sea, dissolving individual stories and identities, they conjure up moral dilemmas for those who come into contact with them and have to negotiate a way of relating to them, as this work could dignify and humanise these remains,

or could do the very opposite. Thus, the work of care and dignity emerges within an institutional chain of tasks and responsibilities that have developed as a result of a practical problem: what to do with the rotting human remains of unknown persons in a context where death is managed by families and the authorities don't have the means to face up to the task.

The clandestine cemetery

Leaving the port behind, head south. Keep to the main road as it advances, flat and straight, in the direction of Libya. The two-storey houses, abandoned construction sites and busy commerce characteristic of the *centre-ville* will gradually become more scattered, allowing glimpses of sea to the left and desert to the right. Watch out for the eight kilometre marker, then turn right between the alcohol depot and the new football stadium. Drive along the side of the stadium, past graffiti praising the much-loved Esperance de Zarzis team. Once to the back of it, take the first dirt path snaking through mounds of sand and rubbish. From here on there is no more signposting. The only vehicles you might meet as you negotiate this narrow, off-piste route are those of petrol smugglers carrying their barrels back from Libya, or of farmers driving their tractors back from the olive groves. They will most likely be unable to help you with directions. Eventually, two imposing brick pillars will appear in the distance (Figure 1). Park next to them: you have arrived.

The bumpy terrain in front of the columns is a burial site hosting the bodies and human remains of unknown persons who died in the Mediterranean Sea while on their way to Europe. It came to be located in this isolated area known as Al Gatt'aya, on land which previously served as a garbage dump, because, according to the local authorities, it was the only plot that they could devote to the task (Figure 2). The municipality of Zarzis does not own much land within its catchment area, and since the bodies are usually found by fishermen close to Al Gatt'aya, on the swampy beaches of Lemsā, this patch of land seemed to be a convenient choice. In 2006 the local authorities bought this land from the Ministry of the Environment, since by then another site was being used for waste disposal, and repurposed it into a makeshift cemetery. This location was selected despite its being a *sebkha*, a marsh, and so particularly unsuitable for providing a stable resting ground for the dead. The cemetery is not signed, nor is it enclosed by a fence, and the two brick pillars that have become essential for identifying its location have in fact nothing to do with it, their purpose being to mark the entrance to a neighbouring private property. If a visitor were to go look for the cemetery unaccompanied by someone who knows where to go it would be difficult to find, as it is visually indistinguishable from the continuum of olive trees and rubbish that surround it.

Yet this solution had originally been envisaged as only temporary: in the words of a municipality employee, this is a 'clandestine cemetery'. No official papers were ever produced to convert the plot of land into a cemetery; it thus doesn't feature as a cemetery in the town's urban planning cartography, and it is not clear whether the municipality holds any records of the number of persons who have been buried there over the years.¹³ When the first unknown dead were starting to be found near

Figure 1 The cemetery of unknown persons in Al Gatt'aya. (Photo: Valentina Zagaria)

the shores of Zarzis some twenty years ago¹⁴ – coinciding with the strengthening of the Schengen Zone in the EU, and thus with the simultaneous abolition of internal EU borders and imposition of ever stricter visa regimes on non-EU citizens – local authorities buried them in the cemetery closest to the *centre-ville*, the Jabbana Lazrag. That cemetery, however, is not the town's main cemetery: like all of the innumerable other cemeteries characterising the geography of Zarzis, it is family and neighbourhood run. The municipality therefore had trouble burying unknown persons there and ultimately had to resort to burying them in the remote ground at Al Gatt'aya.

The management of the dead in Zarzis, like in many other Tunisian towns, is not centralised in any one or select few cemeteries, and it is not municipally run. Each family and *huma* – small cluster of streets and businesses, one category below that of neighbourhood – has its own cemetery, built on land originally donated to the close-knit community by wealthier, land-owning members as *sadaqa* – religiously motivated charity. While in Zarzis these land donations have recently been formalised and officially registered as public municipal domain, if you were to ask the municipality for the total number of cemeteries in Zarzis they would be unsure of the answer and would have to refer to town planning maps to count them one by one. Similarly, if you were to ask the municipality for the exact placement of a deceased person in a specific cemetery, they would not be able to provide you with the information, since they do not produce documents attesting to the allocation of burial plots. In fact, burial plots cannot be bought and sold – as they are in some parts of the world, where the state has taken over the management of death, thereby often commercialising it¹⁵ – and there is no predetermined plot designation: deceased

Figure 2 Traces of the land's past use. (Photo: Valentina Zagaria)

persons are buried in the ground one after the other in the order of death, in succeeding horizontal rows. Thus, the municipality's role in the burial of its citizens to this day – despite the government passing laws to gain more control over both the land and the organisation of cemeteries – is restricted to providing them with death certificates and burial permits. It is the family of the deceased who take care of digging the grave and contributing to the maintenance of their local cemetery, and who also guard the knowledge and memory of who has been laid to rest where.

The Jabbana Lazrag's location next to the city centre made it seem like a more intuitively municipal cemetery, as compared to others, yet this association relied on specific historical developments that had not translated into a change in people's relation to the cemetery. Under French colonial rule Zarzis played an important role, due to its port and strategic position close to Italian-ruled Libya. The French had thus settled close to the port and had built military barracks, French gender-segregated schools and a Christian cemetery next to the existing Lazrag Muslim cemetery and the adjacent Jewish cemetery – the Jewish community having historically resided in this part of town. As a result, this neighbourhood developed into what is now known as the *centre-ville* of Zarzis. Prior to French rule, though, Zarzis was neither considered nor inhabited as a city, but more as an area populated by small villages closely connected through trade and kinship. The city of Zarzis developed in the absence both of a particular vision of town planning and of a will to centralise the management of death. Its inhabitants have continued burying their dead themselves in small, family- and *huma*-run cemeteries, and the municipality has continued to have little to do in death matters. As a result, when the victims of the EU border began to be found on the coast near Zarzis, the legitimacy

of the municipality's decision to bury them in the Jabbana Lazrag was open to contestation. The old rubbish dump site later emerged as a temporary, last resort solution.

Equality in death

The family-based approach to caring for the dead works smoothly for locals, who overwhelmingly feel the business-oriented management of death in Europe to be deplorable. An uncle of my host family, who has lived in France since his history degree studies in the 1970s, was a union leader fighting for the rights of migrant workers and remains a committed man of the Left. He often liked to point out to me that, unlike in Europe, 'here in Tunisia all tombs look the same, because everyone is the same when it comes to death. The richest man in town could be buried next to the poorest and there would be no way of telling the difference.' A more religious reading of the same belief that in Tunisia one does not carry one's class, economic or social status to the grave – and which I was told by people from diverse backgrounds – would be that in Islam everyone is the same in the eyes of God, who judges individuals for their deeds rather than their riches. As Hertz argued in the case of Indonesia, 'death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation'.¹⁶ In Zarzis, ideas surrounding sameness in the eyes of God and the relative absence of the category of class to stratify society and create inequality were evoked in different conversations aimed at highlighting the distinctive features and moral worth of the 'Akkara – the name of the tribe that originally settled in the Zarzis peninsula.

This uncle and his middle-aged to elderly friends, most of whom lived in France or received French pensions, often dwelled on memories from their childhoods when sharing with me their concerns for the present. In the old days, they recalled, both men and women wore loose, monochrome clothes and lived in one-storey, white-washed houses whose windows faced only towards the inner courtyards. This made everyone appear to be living in the same way, and minimised envy and animosity among neighbours: what was inside the clothes and houses was not flaunted but was only privately and modestly enjoyed. The uncle and his friends contrasted these noble virtues of the past with the (in their view) immoral attitudes of younger generations of emigrants to France. They criticised the ways in which they returned to Zarzis in the summer in shiny cars full of gifts, spending money, making their peers who had not migrated feel inferior and jealous. Their showy displays of European wealth were what encouraged others to follow suit and attempt the *harga*: the potentially risky 'burning of the frontier' by crossing the Mediterranean Sea undocumented. Thus, older generations of 'Akkara, who had been able to travel to France legally and safely under more lenient mobility regimes, believed these younger men's ostentatiousness was at the core of the persistence of the *harga* appeal in Zarzis. They also felt that the capitalistic culture of exhibiting one's wealth, and the tangible goods and cash brought back by the large diaspora residing in France, had ultimately eroded the values of equality that had been dear to their forebears. Now people sought to stand out by wearing the latest fashions from Paris, and families strove

to build ever larger and more extravagant villas – which often remained unfinished for years. The principles of the past, referred to with nostalgia by these middle-aged men who had witnessed that world of simple sameness disappear and become more like the one they had come to know in France, could nevertheless still be found in the cemeteries.

For these men, the ideal of equality is reflected and embodied in the extremely simple appearance of the graves in the cemeteries, and in the fact that all tombs resemble each other. In older cemeteries it was common to just use rocks found nearby to mark the positioning of a grave (Figure 3). More recently, people have started pouring cement over the tomb, painting it white and writing the person's name, dates of birth and death on a slab of stone or marble, and in some cases also a verse from the Qur'an. Despite these changes, the appearance of tombs is still homogenously simple. Since graves all look similar, and since people are not accustomed to visiting cemeteries often – most visit only for the two 'eid – family members may find it difficult to identify exactly where a relative who isn't part of their immediate family circle might have been put to rest. A strategy that is sometimes used to remember the exact location where a person is buried is to place a plastic bottle cut in half or a small bowl filled with water on the sand or cement covering the grave, for the birds to come and drink. Birds coming to drink at a tomb are interpreted as a sign that the soul of the deceased person has ascended to heaven – a belief that is not shared by everyone, as some more religiously conservative members of the community view these gestures as superstitions. Still, these markers are deemed acceptable because they are quite subtle and they have a purpose other than demarcation, thereby not causing the tomb of any one particular person to stand out too much from the others. The values of equality and sameness in death and in the eyes of God are also reflected in the clothes that the dead wear to the grave: after the ritual washing of the body, the deceased, whether they be men or women, are wrapped in a white cotton cloth, the *kfan*, and are interred on the same day, without a coffin. Everyone thus looks the same and carries no earthly clothes or possessions to the grave.

Still, while in Zarzis 'everyone can afford to die', as the uncle put it, and everyone will be given the same ritual treatment regardless of their social standing while living, the lack of a centralised system for organising burials did make it difficult for the municipality of Zarzis to continue burying unknown persons in *huma*-run cemeteries. After the number of unidentified dead found near the beaches of Zarzis began to rise, locals began voicing concerns that their *jabbana* (Tunisian dialect word for cemetery) was filling up quickly, and that soon there might not be enough space to bury loved ones close to their other deceased relatives. In the Jabbana Lazrag – the cemetery closest to the *centre-ville* where unknown persons were at first buried – a patch of land had begun to be used solely for the unknown dead and came to be referred to as the Jabbana al Ghorabé – the Cemetery of Strangers (Figure 4). Subsequently, when more bodies were found, the municipality tried to diffuse the issue by burying them in other cemeteries in the neighbourhoods of El Mouensa and Dhouiher. But the families living close to those cemeteries too voiced similar worries concerning future lack of space for their own dead. While class and wealth

Figure 3 'In the old days, a stone placed on top of the grave would suffice.'
(Photo: Valentina Zagaria)

might not matter when it comes to how a person is to be buried in Zarzis, belonging to a local family seems to be a significant condition for being admitted into one of the town's innumerable cemeteries. As Scheele remarked of the graveyard of a Kabyle village in Algeria, being 'central to notions of identity and belonging, it easily becomes a site of social conflict and criticism'.¹⁷ Local iterations of the values of equality, unity and solidarity of villagers were here too felt to be reflected in their cemetery, which, despite being a single site, was also thought to be organised along familial divides. Therefore, similarly to Zarzis, it mattered 'what kind of person'¹⁸ could be admitted for burial there: it mattered who was perceived to belong.

Religious anxieties

Anxieties also rose among the citizens of Zarzis surrounding the impossibility of determining the religion of the unknown dead, and whether it was therefore appropriate for them to be buried in Muslim cemeteries. When asked whether they felt that this was a problem, a few people to whom I spoke hastily claimed that it didn't matter to them personally whether people of other religions were buried next to Muslims in their cemeteries – distancing themselves from a view that they perhaps worried might sound discriminatory to a foreign researcher. Some asserted that it had been mainly 'Akkara working in the Gulf states who, influenced by a more conservative reading of Islam, had been vocal about it being inappropriate for Muslims to be buried next to potential non-Muslims. Others stressed that these concerns were only secondary to the more pressing fear of running out of space in family cemeteries, the latter being the main issue that resulted in the exclusion of the unknown dead from the local cemeteries.

Figure 4 In the Jabbana Lazrag, this bare plot of land in the middle of the white graves came to be known as the Jabbana al Ghorabé – the Cemetery of Strangers.
(Photo: Valentina Zagaria)

For the municipality employee mentioned above, not being able to ascertain the religion of an unknown dead person felt problematic not because he or his fellow citizens were racist or wished to discriminate against people of other religions, he emphasised, but because ‘God values Muslims differently from others’. He explained that God’s judgement begins as soon as the body is laid to rest in the ground, which happens within twenty-four hours of the person’s death. ‘We cannot know exactly what happens below, but it is God’s will that Muslims be buried with Muslims.’ The fate of the body in the grave was a subject of apprehension for most religious people whom I spoke to, who took care that children didn’t hear them when they explained to me the interactions in the grave between the deceased person and the two angels Munkar and Nakir, for fear of the children getting scared and having nightmares. The two angels are believed to question the deceased person in the grave about their faith in Islam, in Allah and in his prophet Mohamed as soon as male relatives leave the cemetery after the funeral. If the dead person’s answers are correct, then their grave enlarges slightly and becomes a ‘little paradise’, but if they are not the grave shrinks, crushing the dead person’s body, and a double-headed serpent appears, subjecting the deceased to unimaginable pain. Thus, the municipality employee reasoned, ‘you might have made as many mistakes as there are waves in the sea throughout your life, but still it matters to God whether you believe in him and only him, and so he prefers that Muslims be buried separately.’

A European woman in her fifties married to a man from Zarzis once told me that her husband didn’t mind her being an atheist, and never tried to get her to convert. However, she knows that the thought that they will not be buried in the same cemetery because she is not a Muslim greatly upsets him. Burying persons

who are not Muslim in Muslim cemeteries is simply not considered appropriate, despite the personal feelings of sadness or discomfort people might hold in relation to this generally recognised state of affairs. People often recognised that there is something about feeling awkwardness with the issue of Muslims being buried alongside non-Muslims. Nonetheless, especially when considering the doubts and fears of what might happen to the body underground, burying people according to religion seemed best: Muslims with Muslims, Christians with Christians, Jews with Jews, and people of unknowable religious affiliation separately. Consequently, the idea that the unknown dead might be buried in the Christian or Jewish cemeteries in Zarzis was also not contemplated. These same logics were projected onto other religious communities, as it was felt that the tiny Christian and Jewish communities would have similar concerns about future lack of space for their own, and would also deem it inappropriate to bury persons of unclear religious affiliation in their cemeteries.

Whether shared by many or a few, these anxieties ultimately contributed to the municipality's decision to search for a separate piece of land to bury unknown persons. Whether wilfully or unwilfully, the unknown dead were *de facto* excluded from 'normal' cemeteries, exposing the limits of the uncle's assertion that 'everyone is the same in death'. The unknown dead being locally family-less, state employees had to step into the shoes customarily filled by family members in caring for their dead. The unknown dead being religion-less, the authorities were obliged to get involved for the first time in death matters, and not having a municipal cemetery that was not affiliated to a particular religious group, they had to find a new piece of land for these dead. The Al Gatt'aya area was thus taken up as a provisional solution, with those involved in the burials wishfully assuming that deaths in the Mediterranean would soon end, or that these dead persons might eventually be claimed. Over the years, though, as the Central Mediterranean has turned into even more of a mass grave, this temporary fix has become a permanent one, and the different authorities viewed as being responsible for the burial of unknown persons have developed a depressingly normalised set of procedures.

Normalised procedure

Today, when a dead body or the human remains of an unknown person are found – either at sea or on the shores of Zarzis – they trigger a well-rehearsed chain of actions and roles. If the body is found at sea, the Garde Nationale Maritime (a maritime police force linked to the Ministry of Interior) are tasked with retrieving it. The Protection Civile (firefighters) – who are instead responsible for putting the body in a body bag if it is found on the beach – are then in charge of moving the body from the coastguards' motor boat to the pier. By this point, Chamseddine, a fifty-something volunteer with the Croissant Rouge Tunisien (CRT) who has been following these burials since before the revolution, joined occasionally by another member of the local branch of the CRT or more regularly by me, will have arrived on site. Officially, as Mohamed – head of the Zarzis CRT Committee – often liked to remind both Chamseddine and me, 'we are auxiliaries to the state, our task is to help

when needed but not to replace the authorities.' Chamseddine's role is nevertheless quite central, since, unlike the coastguards, firefighters and municipal employees, who rotate in their job posts, he has years of experience and is a constant presence when a dead person is found. He thus knows whom to call when, and often ends up coordinating the action between the different groups, as well as acting as the chief public relations person of the cemetery when foreign journalists come to town.¹⁹

From either the pier or the beach the body then needs to be transported to the emergency ward of Zarzis's public hospital for a medical inspection. Since there are no forensic doctors working in either Zarzis or in the Medenine Governorate²⁰ (the closest legal medicine unit being in Gabes, 140 km away), the mandatory inspection is usually carried out by whichever doctor is on duty, regardless of their specialisation. The Garde Nationale are by law required to accompany the dead body wherever it needs to go, but may not drive it in their duty cars. Whenever possible, a doctor is brought to the site to carry out the inspection, to minimise the movement of the body. However, doctors are not always able to leave the hospital, and so the municipality is designated to provide a vehicle to transport the body to the hospital and later to the cemetery in Al Gatt'aya. Once again, though, the municipality claims that it doesn't have the necessary means and that the only vehicle it can put to use for these cases is the open-backed mini-van used for the collection of rubbish. The most poignant memories of the unknown dead for those citizens of Zarzis who have not witnessed at first hand the recovery of a body either at sea or on one of the town's beaches were of the smell of the dead bodies being carried through town to the hospital on the open-backed mini-van. This smell, which is a recurring sensorial trace also in fishermen's narrations of encountering lifeless bodies at sea, reminds the inhabitants simultaneously of their city's position within the larger tragedy of people dying at sea and of their own state's lack of the means to face it in more dignified ways for both the dead and the living.

In 2017, after receiving criticism from the press and from the international organisations present in Zarzis (IOM, MSF, UNHCR²¹ all stationed in Zarzis because of the town's proximity to Libya, resulting in occasional arrivals of so called 'mixed flows' of migrants and refugees), the municipality decided that since it didn't have alternative vehicles to offer, it would simply stop providing the rubbish van to transport these bodies. Local authorities thereby washed their hands of the responsibility to provide a vehicle, and delegated it to whoever could step in. However none of the international organisations present was able to offer one of their vehicles for the job, since the scope of the cemetery of unknown persons seemed to fall outside of their mandates. Due to a lack of alternatives, the regional head of the CRT stepped in and lent Chamseddine his private white Berlingo mini-van to drive the dead to and from the hospital, and finally to the cemetery. In the absence of adequate infrastructure, and unable to summon the means to change the situation, local authorities started to progressively unload their responsibility for the care of the unknown dead to the local and international organisations who took an interest in the matter. State and non-state actors started passing the buck to one another, with the result of making these burials even slower and more anxiety-producing for those directly involved.

Unenvisaged identifications

In May 2017, police authorities feared that two bodies that had been found at sea near Ben Gardene (the neighbouring town) might be those of Tunisian fishermen who had been reported missing for some time. On this occasion, Chamseddine was summoned as a CRT volunteer to drive the two bodies to Gabes in the privately owned Berlingo for an autopsy. Some weeks later, when their DNA was found not to match that of the missing Tunisian fishermen's families, exposing these bodies as belonging to unknown foreigners, Chamseddine was asked to drive them back to Zarzis in the Berlingo for them to be buried with the other unknown persons in Al Gatt'aya. The forensic pathologist doctor in Gabes recalled that before the revolution, at the discretion of the local and governorate-level authorities of the time, a lot more bodies were sent to Gabes for a proper medical cadaveric inspection than today, and they would then usually be buried in a cemetery close to the hospital in Gabes. However, with the Zarzis cemetery gaining more and more media attention and notoriety from 2015 onwards, the municipalities of other towns, perhaps guided by the reasoning of ordered belonging described above, have tended to send the bodies of unknown persons that were found near their area to be buried in Al Gatt'aya. They have done this despite the hygiene concerns raised by travelling back to Zarzis from Gabes with the body in an unrefrigerated vehicle. The smell of that three-hour drive in the white Berlingo on a spring day that felt like full-blown summer still haunts Chamseddine and the young policeman who accompanied him. Nevertheless, Chamseddine reads some logic into this new practice: if a family come looking, the bodies of unknown persons will at least all be in one place.

This particular case was the only time during my two years of fieldwork in Zarzis (from 2015 to 2017) that I heard of unknown dead being sent to Gabes for cadaveric inspection and DNA sampling. In most cases, police authorities assume that the dead found at sea or on beaches belong to *africains* rather than fellow nationals, setting up a distinction between themselves and other natives of the continent, despite there being a big community of black Tunisians in the region. 'If I ever decide to kill someone, I'll lure them to come to Zarzis on holiday, take them on a boat trip, and then dump the body at sea. You'll just assume it's a migrant and will never catch me,' I would tease the Garde Nationale men as we waited beside the Berlingo for the prosecutor in Medenine to give us the burial permit. The two or three Garde Nationale men sent on these burial missions tended to be the younger ones from their teams, usually in their twenties, and, as sometimes it would take the whole day to go through all the procedures, they got used to the company of myself and Chamseddine and we would often chat and joke to pass the time. Their response to my provocation was that if a Tunisian citizen had been murdered or had gone missing then they would know and would be looking for him, while almost always when these bodies are found the police don't have any on-going cases that could form the basis for 'claiming' or 'identifying' the dead.

What is more, policemen have learnt from the often-hasty cadaveric inspections carried out by general practitioners in Zarzis that to determine a drowned person's origin one should not rely on the dead body's skin colour if it has been in the water

for several weeks or months. Skin loses its pigment after having been in water for long periods of time, and so most body parts of drowned persons that have not turned to skeleton – skulls, hands and feet often do quite quickly after months in sea water – are white, or have a patchy, bleached or rusting appearance. One must therefore look for the remaining bits of skin with hair still attached to it, either on the skull or around the pubic area, to ascertain whether a dead body belonged to an *africain* or to a Tunisian. Other clues, like clothes, might also help to give away the origins of the dead person. Generally, though, unless the police have a pending missing person or homicide file, any sign found on the dead body – be it remaining chunks of curly black hair, bleached skin colour or soaked clothes – are interpreted as signs of non-Tunisianness, signs of foreign Africanness, regardless of how objectively unknowable this supposed origin may be from these deteriorating clues.

As a result, in the majority of cases the *procureur* in Medenine does not demand that the bodies of unknown persons presumed to have been migrants be brought to Gabes for the autopsy and DNA sampling. He almost always decrees from the doctor's report that the cause of death was drowning and gives the Garde Nationale and the municipality the authorisation to bury them directly. When the burial permit comes through, which sometimes takes several hours (and is the dulllest and most frustrating part of the experience for both myself, Chamseddine and the Garde Nationale men, as we are all stuck waiting) – a municipality employee is called to operate the digger to excavate the hole, and the dead person is buried. When several bodies are found at the same time they are usually buried together. Since no records are kept, if it were not for Chamseddine being relentlessly present when new holes are dug, the municipality employee on duty on a given day would not know where to dig.

Usually nothing permanent is placed on top of these burial sites to signal that a person is buried underneath. Depending on the initiative of Chamseddine or of one of the Garde Nationale men, sometimes a rock found nearby is placed on a new mound, following the tradition of the old cemeteries in Zarzis. Only very recently, after a wave of foreign journalists, researchers, photographers and video-makers made their way to Al Gatt'aya, did local Red Crescent volunteers start making numbered metal plates to be planted in the sand to indicate the presence of a dead person, with a matching numbered bracelet to be tied around the arm, leg or any other body part of the deceased buried underneath. However, just one of these plates had been installed by the time I left Zarzis in the autumn of 2017. This one grave with a metal plate on top became the protagonist in the photograph of the cemetery that is most widely used by international media – perhaps because, being marked with a number, it was the only grave that vaguely resembled a European imaginary of the anonymous tomb. Apart from that one case, though, no link exists between the police file and the exact place of burial of a particular person. Thus, not even the most basic measures are taken to make future identification possible. The idea that this might take place is often brushed off – despite individuals involved in the burials thinking about the families of the dead, like Chamseddine above – as both policemen and authorities feel that the families of the *africains* won't realistically come asking after their loved ones here, in Tunisia.

Humanising acts

Whereas local authorities are understood by the citizens of Zarzis as having little means and much bigger priorities than to focus on changing the situation at the cemetery of the unknown dead, for now they remain the only ones who can intervene when an unknown person is found. When I discussed the way in which unknown persons were being buried in Zarzis with the uncle mentioned above, he was shocked, and hoped to galvanise civil society into perhaps raising money to build a fence around the cemetery and to pay somebody to dig the graves with a shovel, according to tradition. These were small gestures, as the uncle didn't feel that citizens could intervene in more complicated matters such as DNA sampling, but he did feel that they could still make a difference to the dignity of the dead. After all, fifteen years ago the uncle had raised money among the 'Akkara diaspora in Paris to build a wall around their *huma* cemetery in the neighbourhood of Souihel so that dogs wouldn't be able to enter and so that people wouldn't go drinking there at night. They had also built a water well, and a hut for family members to stand in the shade during funerals. Similar initiatives to improve *huma*-run cemeteries, and so to respect the dead, had been taken up in other neighbourhoods in Zarzis, often financed by men working in France. The uncle therefore felt that he and his friends were in a good position to do something about the cemetery in Al Gatt'aya. But on further reflection he concluded that in the case of a cemetery of unidentified persons who were unrelated to them they had no legal basis upon which to act, and he was afraid that by intervening they might get tangled up in potential lawsuits. An organisation with an established role like the Tunisian Red Crescent should intervene, he reasoned, but it was ultimately up to the Tunisian authorities to step up, and if they didn't have enough money to do it properly then they should ask the EU and international organisations to help. Interestingly, this view on who should be responsible for the unknown dead was shared by officers at the municipality, who felt frustrated by the fact that they had to deal with the deadly effects of the EU border without any financial and material support from the EU. Municipal authorities agreed that to some extent the Tunisian state should be responsible for these dead bodies, since they were found in Tunisian waters, but they were very clear as to who was responsible for their deaths, and who should therefore offer compensation to families and pay for burials.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, municipal authorities and the Tunisian state have, as of yet, done little to change the situation of these burials, nor have international organisations or the EU. Those who are left to care for them are the fishermen, municipality digger drivers, Red Crescent volunteers and young Garde Nationale men, who with little means make do with a situation they most likely hadn't envisaged being part of their work lives. Chamseddine, who used to work as a fisherman and has seen at first hand the boats of migrants headed for Italy and the human and material remains of shipwrecks, has made dignifying these burials his mission: even when he feels discouraged by the lack of plastic gloves to handle the bodies or of body bags to put them in, or by the slowness of the process and the undignified conditions of work, 'something pushes me to go', he says. He often recites the Qur'an

before sand is poured onto the body or body bags by the digger machine. Chamseddine and the Garde Nationale men also often try to make sure that when the body is lowered into the hole, it is buried with the head facing Mecca. This involves them trying to remember where the skull was in the body bag and turn it around to place it properly in the hole. Everyone involved also tries to make the procedure as speedy as possible, despite the bureaucratic slowness of getting the response from the state attorney in Medenine. This is because in 'normal' circumstances, burials are meant to happen the same day that someone dies, following a line in the Qur'an that says that dignity for the dead is to be buried under the earth as soon as possible. This is also why it is particularly unpleasant for everyone involved to have to wait long hours before being able to bury these unknown persons: it is lived as yet another disrespectful act toward people whose lives have ended violently and unjustly. People who find themselves involved in the burials thus do a minimum of 'officiating' at them: they take on some basic religious roles with an aim to providing some respect to the dead while carrying out otherwise bureaucratic tasks.

Concluding thoughts

I wonder what future archaeologists will think of this plot of land in Al Gatt'aya, this cemetery of unknown persons. What puzzles their dig might conjure up, and how they might attempt to piece it back together. Loose human bones, human bones in plastic bags, human bones in body bags, loose animal bones, among and mixed with plastic, glass, metal and any other bits of discarded scrap that might have survived the passage of time. What they will make of finding human remains in the midst of layers of debris. What they might read into the difference in appearance between the skulls found there and those found in the myriad of sites in the region that are recognised as cemeteries. What tentative conclusions they might draw about the ways in which the lives of these particular human beings were (under) valued by the societies that buried them between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Unless a costly exhumation intervention or building project comes to the cemetery, its contents may reach future archaeologists as they are now, letting their bare materiality speak for itself.

But placing too much focus on this bare materiality or attempting to read meaning into it through the lenses of its necropolitical²² context might overshadow what is more subtly at stake in people's relations to the unknown dead in Zarzis. It would fail to capture the anxieties, discomforts and awkwardness that their simultaneous presence and unknowability conjure up, as well as those private acts of humanisation and remembrance that have also characterised the interactions between the unknown dead and those living on the EU's border. It would thus obscure their 'aporic' status. Drawing on Derrida and applying the concept of 'aporia' to witchcraft in Indonesia, Bubandt argues that 'Aporia marks an impassable situation, where understanding and the will to knowledge fail; aporia is a "not knowing where to go"... Experience therefore remains, painful and troubled.'²³ Commenting on this work, Pelkmans notes that 'Witchcraft, Bubandt suggests, is a mystery that cannot be solved, a puzzle that is "without a path," an aporia. To me, the connotation is that of

a “black hole” that sucks life and meaning out of this world and gives back nothing. A black hole, also, because in spite of its meaninglessness the *gua* is “awfully significant”,²⁴ consuming the villagers’ reflexive energy.²⁵ The bodies of the unknown dead in Zarzis are similarly ‘meaningless’, and on the surface inconsequential to the lives of the inhabitants of Zarzis, and yet they are a conundrum, one that pushes people to think about life and death.

Or, following Laqueur, it is perhaps the dead body itself – who ‘notices nothing, cares for nothing, feels nothing’,²⁶ and whose fate beyond death, in the view of the people of Zarzis, is not something they can work to improve, as it is between her and God – that nevertheless ‘enchants’. The dead body, despite being ‘disenchanted’, inanimate organic matter, cannot be treated as such, as that would be ‘to deny the existence of the community from which it came, to deny its humanity.’²⁷ In his ‘timeless view’²⁸ of the history of the dead in Western Europe and North America, Laqueur, as Engelke notes,²⁹ brackets a career focused on the ‘refusal of grand narratives and an emphasis on cultural fashioning’ to argue that care for the dead matters, and that human corpses enchant ‘everywhere and across time.’³⁰ In Zarzis too, unknown dead bodies and human remains demand to be ‘a thing to be reckoned with’,³¹ not through other agentic modes of presence, such as in the form of ghosts – of which there are no traces in Zarzis when it comes to these dead – but through their material presence. The visual and olfactory impact of their corpses leave their marks in the memories and dreams of citizens of Zarzis who encounter them long after their interment in Al Gatt’aya. Despite their upfront materiality, and despite the terrible symbolism of burying these bodies among waste, the unknown dead continue to be ‘enchanted’: they are still powerfully understood to be human.

Issues with the local system of managing death, and cracks in the ideal of equality amongst people who ‘belong’ to Zarzis or who are foreign, and equality in the eyes of God, thus surfaced with the finding of unknown deceased persons. Belonging to no family locally, displaying few clues as to their identity or religion, these dead fell by default under the care of local authorities who were unprepared to face up to the task and had little means to deal with it in a dignified way. Burying unknown persons in a remote, rubbish-ridden field was not a premeditated act instilled with any particular intention, but more of a pragmatic and wishfully temporary, turned permanent, response to an uncomfortable situation which exposed the limits of people’s sense of categorisation and attribution of meaning. On one level there seems to be a threshold to the capacity to have feeling for people with whom one has no relations, a sort of exclusion of these dead persons from being our own, relegating them as a result to the realm of subjects/objects to be dealt with by the authorities. Yet people do feel pity. They feel that this is a wrong way to die and that there is something unjust and undignified in the way this issue is being dealt with, and with the way in which people are categorised in life and death more generally in Zarzis. While there is no expectation of returning the unknown dead to their families, these bodies and human remains are still assigned humanity. These dead may be unclaimed, but they still matter to those who inhabit this borderland.

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Notes

- 1 Andersson's 'extended field site' ethnographic approach to the study of the European business of illegality unveils its operation in territories well beyond the EU's jurisdiction: R. Andersson, *Illegality Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2014).
- 2 Pro Asyl, 'In the Shadow of the Citadel. The Impact of the European Migration Regime on "Third Countries"' (2014), www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/fm-dam/q_PUBLIKATIONEN/2014/In_the_Shadow_of_the_Citadel.pdf (accessed 28 May 2015).
- 3 Between Tunisia and Sicily, also known as the Central Mediterranean.
- 4 R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1960), p. 76.
- 5 M. Bloch and J. Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 4.
- 6 J. Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York, Verso, 2009).
- 7 Some European far-Right political discourses go as far as equating migrants with waste: C. Thorleifsson, 'Disposable Strangers: Far-Right Securitisation of Forced Migration in Hungary', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 25:3 (2017), 318–34.
- 8 For ethnographic work on the retrieval and burial of people on the move along the EU maritime border see S. Green, 'Absent Details: The Transnational Lives of Undocumented Dead Bodies in the Aegean', in Σεβαστή Τρουμπέτα (ed.), ΤΟΠΡΟΣΦΥΓΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΤΑΝΑΣΤΕΥΤΙΚΟ ΖΗΤΗΜΑ ΔΙΑΒΑΣΕΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΛΕΤΕΣ ΣΥΝΟΡΩΝ. Εκδόσεις Παπαζήση (2012); C. Kobelinsky, 'Les vies des morts de la migration', *Plein Droit*, 2:109 (2016), 6–9; G. Mirto, 'Between Exclusion and Familiarity: An Ethnography of the Mediterranean Missing Project', *Practicing Anthropology*, 40:2 (2018), 28–31; G. Perl, 'Uncertain Belongings: Absent Mourning, Burial, and Post-mortem Repatriations at the External border of the EU in Spain', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 37:2 (2016), 195–209.
- 9 J. De León, *The land of open graves: living and dying on the migrant trail* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015), pp. 29, 30.
- 10 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 11 E. Schindel, 'Bare Life at the European Borders. Entanglements of Technology, Society and Nature', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 31:2 (2016), 219–34, at 230, 224, 223.

- 12 In one of the earliest academic studies of 'border-related fatalities', Weber and Pickering took this category to include not just deaths that happen at external borders, but also those of people who die in detention centres within states, and those resulting from illegalised living conditions: L. Weber and S. Pickering, *Globalization and Borders. Death at the Global Frontier* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 13 During my fieldwork in Tunisia between the summer of 2015 and the autumn of 2017, different municipal officers told me that they believed no records of these burials were being kept in the municipality of Zarzis, and that they could not give me an exact number of how many people had been buried in Al Gatt'aya over the years. In 2018, after several years of heightened media interest in the cemetery, another researcher, whose family is originally from Zarzis, received more information on the matter from newly elected officers – the first post-revolution municipal elections had been held in April 2018. It seems that the municipality was then able to produce a precise number of unknown persons buried in Zarzis, and thus that it had been keeping records over the years.
- 14 Part of the story of this article is the lack of care, counting and memory regarding the unknown dead. It is impossible to be precise in terms of dates and numbers; for example, there was no way verify dates on official documents.
- 15 In France, for example, the state started taking an interest in the fate and administration of dead bodies in the nineteenth century. As the management of death became a state affair, church cemeteries were turned into municipal ones, gradually allowing for the development of death-related businesses. See P. Trompette, *Le marché des défunts* (Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2008).
- 16 Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, p. 28.
- 17 J. Scheele, 'Algerian Graveyard Stories', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12:4 (2006), 859–79, at 861.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 862.
- 19 The recovery of unknown dead persons did not often feature in local or national media in Tunisia until after the 2011 revolution, when the international media also started taking a keener interest in the fate of the border dead.
- 20 A forensic expert was appointed in the summer of 2017 in Medenine after pressure on the government from the International Committee of the Red Cross, who have over the years taken a particular interest in pushing for the identification of unknown migrants in the Mediterranean region. However, until the end of my research in October 2017 the doctor still hadn't carried out any autopsy, since no new suspicious death cases or unknown persons had been found.
- 21 IOM: International Organisation for Migration; UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières.
- 22 A. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11–40.
- 23 N. Bubandt, *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 6.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 25 M. Pelkmans, 'The restlessness of doubt, and the tenacity of belief', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6:1 (2016), 499–503, at 500.

- 26 T. W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead. A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 5.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 29 M. Engelke, 'The Revenant in Representations', *Anthropology of this Century*, 20 (October 2017).
- 30 Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, p. 1.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 4.