

## **Tombs of the Ancient Poets: Between Text and Material Culture**

**12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Septmeber 2014, Durham University**

A conference funded by the European Research Council, and contributing to

*Living Poets: A New Approach to Ancient Poetry*

<http://livingpoets.dur.ac.uk>

This conference takes inspiration from a recent movement in criticism that investigates ancient representations of the poets — and their biographies in particular — as creative modes of engagement with ancient literature (e.g. Graziosi 2002, Laird 2009, Peirano 2013, Fletcher and Hanink 2014). No longer a question of ascertaining the veracity or otherwise of biographical ‘fact’, recent studies have begun to treat the Lives as a mode of reception. This conference seeks to demonstrate that the ‘encounter between poems and their audiences’ is manifested not only in texts (as Graziosi 2002: 3 argued) but also in material culture. Reading and life-writing might be modes of reception, but so, too, are the tombs of the ancient poets.

The focus on tombs enables an investigation of the material reception of literature. Tombs are ‘sites’ (in Pierre Nora’s sense of *lieux*) wherein a number of responses to literature are crystallized, and which in turn shape later receptions. From the psychogeography of ancient communities to the role of dead poets and their images in the machinations of political culture, from the physical cultivation of tombs mirroring the dynamics of poetic succession to the imaginary inscriptions of funerary epigram, the tomb is a complex site of engagement — a ‘reading’ in the broadest sense of the word — where cultural history and political authority merge with literary history.

An interdisciplinary team of scholars will interrogate, using different methodologies and examples, the tomb as a site of engagement with poetry. The overall aim is to contribute to the growing scholarship on representations of poets as evidence for the reception of their works, making the case for place and materiality in the history of ancient literature.

Papers might, but need not, address the following themes:

**Landscape.** What role does space play in the poets’ material reception? Ancient communities often mapped out a ‘sacred geography’ populated by the traces which poets left in the landscape (Hunter and Rutherford 2009: 5). Is the landscape as depicted in the texts ‘translated’ into the poets’ imagined resting places?

**Material Texts, Textual Materials.** What is the role played by the funerary inscription? Many poets are said to have composed their own epitaphs; others have had epitaphs composed for them. How do these texts relate to the poet’s resting place? Can the tomb be an imagined textual space as well as a material site?

**Archaeological Receptions.** One of the ways in which later audiences ‘discovered’ or appropriated ancient poets was through (real or imaginary) archaeological finds. How do biographical traditions intersect with archaeological quests, discoveries, and interpretations through the centuries?

**Cults of the Poets.** How does hero-cult influence the experience of the tomb of the poet in antiquity? How do ancient traditions evolve in the Christian era? For example, in the middle ages the tomb of Virgil became a quasi-religious site of pilgrimage, where the poet’s bones were said to have magical powers. How do the textual afterlives of the poets become entwined with their material remains?

**Ghosts.** Ennius saw Homer’s ghost in a dream; Chapman met him ‘on the hill/next Hitchin’s left hand’. W. F. Jackson Knight used a medium to contact Virgil when he was translating the *Aeneid*, while Ovid’s disembodied voice was heard by a couple of young medieval scholars wondering near his tomb in Tomis. How have poets appeared beyond the grave?