History of Modern Cremation in Romania

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By

Marius Rotar

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PREFACE

Dr Marius Rotar is passionate about the study of death. He is enthusiastic about the value of cremation. He proved his commitment to the study of death with his *Moartea in Transilvania in Secolul al XIX-Lea* (2006). In 2011 he took up the even more radical task, the history of cremation in Romania, published as *Eternitate prin Cenuşă. O istorie a crematoriilor şi incinerărilor umane în România secolelor XIX-XXI* (Iaşi, Institutul European). This has now been shortened and revised; and translated into English by Ms Monica Losonti and Dr Helen Frisby.

Dr Rotar has not only encouraged others with his publications; he has founded a very successful annual conference in his native Alba Iulia where each September for four years scholars from Romania and abroad have come in ever greater numbers. A particular feature of these international conferences is the participation of increasing numbers of younger Romanian scholars. Out of the conference he has also founded an academic society to pursue death scholarship, *Asociaţia Română pentru Studii asupra Morţii (ARSM)*. He has founded a new cremation society, Amurg, heir to the inter-war society Cenuşa (1923-1948). Cenuşa was a voluntary society which had opened Bucharest's first crematorium in 1928 but was closed by the Communist Government in 1948. Marius has followed the practice of other pioneering cremationists, that the best way to promote cremation is to build a crematorium. Working with colleagues in the funeral service industry he has helped to build a first crematorium for Transylvania (Phoenix Crematorium in Oradea).

Death, along with birth and marriage, provides a critical lens for the interpretation of human life and society; and their study enlightens the understanding of our human behaviour, individual and communal, intimate and public. In particular, the study of death opens up perspectives on issues of family and kinship structure, gender, occupation, age, social class; and of voluntary societies, party politics, government, nationalism, medicine and health systems, legal systems and religious organisations and beliefs. When individual families face bereavement, the choice they make about the disposal of their dead has been influenced by such key factors. The strength and interplay of these factors reveal national characteristics. In his study of cholera *Death in Hamburg* Richard Evans wrote, "In the epidemic [of 1892], the workings of state and society, the structures of

social inequality, the variety of values and beliefs, the physical contours of everyday life, the formal ideologies and informal ambitions of political organizations were all thrown into sharp and detailed relief." Marius' new book will reveal how funeral rituals and arrangements are a part of the context of continuity and change in modern Romania.

In more traditional – and especially pre-industrial – societies, support for people facing death or bereavement came primarily from family, local community and religious practice. In contemporary (industrial and post-industrial) societies, these once-vital networks have been weakened and separated. Opportunities for work and education, greater gender equality, increasing individual sufficiency – all bringing greater social and geographical mobility and a greater awareness of the claims of different religions and of secularism – have weakened traditional social networks and forced us to seek either the adaptation of old or the adoption of entirely new support systems/strategies to confront death.

So any book of quality which informs us about how beliefs, attitudes and practices around death are maintained, challenged or changed will empower us to make deeper sense of our own mortality, exercise informed choice about our deaths and funerals, and analyse the complex of specialisms and vested interests behind arrangements around the end of life. This is a book of high quality.

Its research question sounds simple, "Why is there only one crematorium in a country of over twenty million people?" Answering this short question takes the author first to the Roman period to establish cremation's Romanian credentials. Then, in four major chapters, he examines the work of pioneers like Iacob Felix in the nineteenth century; the inter-war period and the first crematorium in Bucharest; the Communist period; and the decades since 1989. He has used a very wide range of archival, literary and material culture sources to tell an extraordinary story.

The book is particularly fascinating for the English-speaking world in that it is the first account that discusses the issues about cremation in a society with a dominant Orthodox Church tradition. The Orthodox Church has always buried its dead, with liturgical forms unchanged over the centuries, and with a dynamic understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead. Orthodox Churches have often functioned as a symbol and vehicle for national identity. There is, however, a particularly intriguing issue which the author presents. A Communist government ruled Romania from 1948 to 1989. Now, there is in Europe a close correlation to be observed between the growth of cremation, emergent nationalisms, and governments of the Left. Yet in Romania, the government sided with the church in supporting burial throughout. Marius

Rotar subjects this paradox to a fascinating analysis which sheds a new light upon recent Romanian history. The modern study of death has proved again and again that it offers a critical lens by which human societies may be analysed and understood.

This ground-breaking book will also find a place in the international setting. There is now a growing body of scholarship exploring the origins and growth of cremation in modern society, and this book will play a prominent role in these developments. In the West, there are full-length accounts in English of cremation in Australia, England, the United States and, in preparation, Scotland. There are also full-length vernacular histories for at least Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. In the East there are cremation histories for, among others, India, Japan and Korea. Romania now takes its place in this list, and in handsome fashion.

I highly commend this book both on its own merits as a model of research and as a contribution to the study of cremation and the role of death in society. It is also a great incentive to the work and commitment of future scholars. We are all mortal and this subject requires a line of succession.

Revd. Dr. Peter C. Jupp,
Department of Divinity,
University of Edinburgh, UK

Author of *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (2006)
Chairman of the Council, the Cremation Society of Great Britain, 2001–2009

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION[1]

Cremation: An overview

This is an historical survey of cremation in a predominantly Orthodox country. The qualification is essential since, as is well known, the Orthodox confession strongly rejects cremation. What follows is thus a history of the implementation and development of cremation in Romania over the last two centuries, together with an account of the reactions it has engendered. The starting point for our historical analysis of modern cremation in Romania is the simple fact that present-day Romania still possesses only one functional crematorium for its entire population of approximately 20 million. The historian's task is therefore to explain how this situation has come about.

In recent decades, the increasing worldwide popularity of cremation has prompted a surge of academic interest. Some studies have highlighted, for instance, the historical factors which have favoured the development of cremation (Jupp 2006). Others have emphasised the manifold implications and significance of the expansion of cremation, both collectively and individually (Encyclopaedia 2005). However all discussion of cremation is, ultimately, a discussion about the human body, not only as the culmination of a completed life, but also the body as the focus of ritualised actions and symbols. Therefore the fantasies revolving around the dead body justify the types of treatment for which it works as a support, while it also becomes the object of ritual performances (Thomas 1980, 10).

[1] This research was supported by CNCS-UEFISCDI, Romania, PNII-TE project number 54/5.10. 2011, "Historical Dimensions and Contemporary Perspectives upon Cremation in Romania."

Country	*No. of crematoria*	*% of disposals*
Japan	1,545	99.94
USA (2009)	2,113	40.62
Switzerland	28	85.18
Czech Republic	27	80.87
Sweden	66	76.86
UK	260	73.15
Hungary (2004)	12	36.25
Bulgaria (2007)	1	5.08
Serbia	2	-
Romania	1	0.33

Table 1-1 Cremation worldwide, and as a proportion of disposals (selected countries) in 2010 (International 2011, 24–38)

Within Romanian historiography, the topic of cremation has been relatively neglected. Indeed, very few historical studies have mentioned it at all; with the exception of a small number of articles (Petre, Grancea) and most notably the Romanian edition of this book (Rotar 2011). In other countries the subject has been drawing academic attention for decades, and most especially in recent years. The most obvious explanation for this is, quite simply, the growing popularity of cremation, which in several European countries has now become the predominant means of disposing of the dead. Thus in Britain, the United States, France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Japan, the Netherlands, Australia, Germany and others, there have been articles and even books dedicated to the topic. Since modern cremation is a relatively new practice, dating back no further than a century and a half, it may well be that we are not yet in a position to assess its full meaning and impact. This is of itself a point of some considerable significance. Any discussion of cremation is also highly specific: a particular aspect of the history of death is that every corpse requires disposal, since every deceased person requires attention and treatment (Davies 2005a, 48). In other words, the deceased possess a particular kind of dignity, which is recognised by the living, who act accordingly in relation to the both the body and the memory of the deceased. The historian of death, dying and bereavement therefore carries the very special responsibility of shaping the manner in which the living remember and respect the dead from throughout history (Rotar 2009, 329–349; Baets 2004, 130–152). The historian is in the advantageous position of being able to assess societies objectively and with hindsight, and how "the interpretation they have given to cremation and inhumation" has changed

and varied over time (Davies 2005a, 48). All these elements can be placed into the equation, together with the expansion of cremation in recent decades and, especially, with predictions as to its future development. However, the changes in cremation over recent decades should not only be viewed quantitatively: they should also – and indeed should mostly – be viewed qualitatively. Key themes include the lessening of opposition to cremation – cremation, in the Western world, is no longer a subversive act but a routine, even a logical alternative to burial (Baudry 1999, 192–195). However, the multi-faceted logic of cremation defies explanation through the narrow lens of any one single academic discipline such as history. Given the indefinite, uncertain position of the dead in contemporary Western society, an interdisciplinary approach is essential; particular co-operation is required between sociologists and historians since, as cremation has increased in popularity, so the funeral ritual has become increasingly separated from the actual disposal of the body. This is in sharp contrast with the past, when the dead were necessarily more visible, since burial was the only available method of disposal, and not merely one option amongst others (Howarth 2008, 229).

Another key theme of this study will be the development of cremation: not only in comparison with burial, but internally. There has been a subtle process of transformation, characteristic of all countries where crematoria have been built. Belgium is a relevant parallel in this respect: whereas cremation was initially viewed as an alternative to a Christian funeral, over time it was obliged to borrow, or to create, its own rituals and symbols. This has developed such that today the crematorium should no longer be considered as simply a mechanical space, but one that answers all needs including the social and the symbolic (Vanderdope 2003, 624–625).

The *Encyclopaedia of Cremation*, edited by Douglas J. Davies and Lewis H. Mates, provides probably the most comprehensive coverage of the subject to date. However, their coverage of the Romanian situation, particularly with regard to the present day, is limited to only a few pages written by a non-Romanian researcher (Mates 2005b, 364–367). These pages omit some important items: most significantly, the pro-cremation movement in Romania is not mentioned; cremation during the Communist period is addressed only summarily; and there is no reference at all to current perceptions of cremation in Romania. Instead, the article focuses almost exclusively on the activities of the inter-war Romanian cremationists. Such omissions are perhaps inevitable, for several reasons: firstly, the limited nature of the sources available to Mates (a collection of articles from *Flacăra Sacră* journal and a series of reports presented at congresses of the European inter-war cremationists). Secondly, the

encyclopaedia format means that coverage per topic will inevitably be limited. And finally, a non-native author is less likely to be fully conversant with Romanian history, or with the present situation.[2] These issues notwithstanding, the *Encyclopaedia* is exemplary in design, style and for the clarity of its information, standing as the combined efforts of a host of international researchers uniquely arranged in a manner that lends both utility and clarity.

Overall, until the 1990s very little had been written on cremation, lending extra importance to Peter C. Jupp's research in the field (Grainger 2006, 16). One notable exception would be the various references to cremation within the major general histories of death and dying, most of which were published during the 1980s. The works of Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle may be cited in this regard, as well as certain American publications: James Farrell, for example, in his work *Inventing the American Way of Death* (1980), allocated considerable space to the subject, revealing some aspects of the occurrence and effects of cremationist ideas in the United States. According to Farrell, until 1920 the American cremation movement had overestimated the ability and desire of the general public to rationalise death. Hence, although the practice of embalming the corpse as a temporary form of preservation was well established, it was still too early for the idea of cremation: embalming could be regarded as an extension of the older practice of preserving the body prior to burial, while cremation was a sharp departure from tradition. According to Farrell, while Americans prized novelty, genuine innovation was slow to win acceptance. Furthermore the American cremationist movement lacked institutional roots, and also failed to argue persuasively for the economic benefits of cremation. According to Farrell, the appearance of embalming and cremationism in the United States jointly marked the end of the old funerary system: although they represented different processes, with different results, embalming and cremation both brought the post-mortem body under direct human control (Farrell 1980, 164–169). Another, more recent, milestone in the history of cremation in the United States of America is also worthy of particular note: this is the impact of AIDS-related anxieties, which have had a positive impact on the cremation rate, especially within the gay community (Laderman 2003, 143–144, 199). Furthermore, American immigration policy after 1965 favoured the development of cremation, as it enabled easier entry for

[2] It is interesting to note that Mates' work has subsequently been appropriated by Wikipedia under the heading of "cremation in Romania." This has a certain irony, since countries with a much higher rate of cremation than Romania have not received similar attention.

certain southern and eastern Asians (Laderman 2003, 198). However, the most important research on cremation in the United States is that by Stephen Prothero, as set out in his *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (2001).

Sustained academic interest in cremation may be found in Italy, notably under the auspices of the Ariodante Fabretti Foundation, which has published several works on the Italian cremation movement. Four of these are particularly worthy of mention: firstly, *La morta laica* (Conti, Isastia and Tarozzi 1998), a comprehensive history of cremation in Italy from the second half of the nineteenth century until the inter-war period. The cultural and organisational aspects of cremation are analysed, beginning with the emergence of the hygienic ideal and of secular morality. Mention is made of the early associations of Italian cremationists, in particular the creation of Federazione Italiana Per Cremazione (the Italian Federation for Cremation). Connections with the Italian Freemasons and their role in promoting cremation are also investigated, as are the pioneers of the Italian cremationist movement such as F. Colletti, and a series of reflections are provided on the cremations of public personalities, including the "cremations" of Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzoni. Volume two presents a case study of cremation in Turin, between 1880 and 1920 (Comba, Mana and Vigilante 1998). A third work, devoted exclusively to the emergence and activities of the Federazione Italiana per la Cremazione (Novarino and Prestia 2006) covers the origins of the Italian cremationist movement, the campaigns waged by exponents of cremation toward the end of the nineteenth century, the establishment in 1906 of the Federazione and its activities during the fascist period, and further developments with respect to the Vatican, concluding with the Federazione's activities in recent decades. Finally, we may especially note a particularly useful work dedicated to mortuary and funerary policy during the French Revolution, which chronicles the attempt to implement cremation in revolutionary France – including the attempt to build a crematorium (Sozzi and Porset 1999).

Another important perspective is opened up by the articles, historical and otherwise, published in a wide range of international journals and magazines, which help to illuminate various aspects more or less related to cremation; such as Serenella Nonnis Vigilante's call for a history of cremation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy. Here we should particularly note the interdisciplinary nature of Vigilante's research since, due to popular distrust of cremation, historians have frequently been obliged to collaborate closely with other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. In Vigilante's opinion, two factors would

appear to account for popular perceptions of cremation: the abruptness with which the deceased is reduced to ashes, and the lack of ritual during cremation (Vigilante 2004, 88). The great merit of this article is its systematic use of empirical research in order to present the history of cremation within the Italian context. Vigilante takes a similarly empirical approach to his analysis of the status and purpose of cremains in the French health legislation reforms of 2006 (Vigilante 2007, 57–67).

Crematoria, and the modern cremation, have also been addressed by the *Annales* school of historical analysis. Although they did not produce any dedicated studies of the history of cremation, the great works of Michel Vovelle and Philippe Ariès do touch upon the subject, explaining it with reference to shifts in attitudes to death and the treatment of the body over the last two centuries. The topic is also included in the researches of anthropologist Louis-Vincent Thomas, whose research covers a much longer period of time: starting from the basic definition of cremation as the destruction of the corpse by fire, Thomas has emphasised the plurality of symbols engendered by the multifunctional nature of fire; in the context of cremation, and on a purely practical level, fire is destructive, but in the imagination it also possesses the power of purification. In this sense, according to Thomas, fire has a liberating power, which is relevant to an understanding of cremation during certain historical periods, incorporating as it does the idea of rebirth and the promise of regeneration: through fire it becomes possible to achieve a higher level of existence. Particularly significant are the origins of cremation in prehistoric times, which Jean-Thierry Maertens (Thomas 1980, 82) articulates in three ways: (i) cremation as an expression of nomadism, compared to (ii) burial as an expression of sedentarianism; and (iii) the relationship between cremation and war, where the practice of burning the bodies of warriors was a recognition of heroism – thus cremation was traditionally a rite reserved for men. However Maertens omitted a further, essential point, which archaeologists have covered extensively: the connection between the solar cult and cremation, and the origin of the latter in the former.

An excellent interpretation of the emergence of cremation issues in the second half of nineteenth century can be found in the work of Thomas Laqueur. He considers that "there is an isomorphic relationship between cremation on the one hand and changes in other domains on the other: neoclassicism, waste disposal, socialism, spiritualism, occult, heterodox Christianity, sanitary engineering, city planning, medicine, and modernism to name a few – and, more generally, to the work of the dead in the making of culture broadly conceived" (Laqueur 2008, 54).

However, as already noted, there are significant differences between

traditional and modern cremation. For the former, according to the French anthropologist Louis-Vincent Thomas, the ritual burning was typically conducted in the open air, lasted up to ten hours and would have been witnessed as a spectacle; the fire was made of wood, and the combustion was long and imperfect, leaving remains that then became the focus of offerings or other rites. During "modern" Western-style cremation, the body is burned within an austere crematorium building, using a concealed oven and the combustion itself is finished quickly. Moreover, modern cremation is characterised by the omission of preparatory rites and symbolism (Thomas cites the Moscow crematorium as a case in point). In his view, industrialised death has replaced the symbolic power of the traditional cremation ritual: the gas or electric fire replaces wood; the corpse is burned quickly and odourlessly. Furthermore the modern cremation is silent, for the benefit of the deceased's family. Thomas's discussion of the functions of cremation begins with the idea that cremation accentuates the solid over the rotten, and is consequently a way of overcoming the fact of putrefaction, although this is interpreted differently by traditional and modern societies. For the former, cremation is a symbolic rite, a sacrament required by the deceased in order to attain immortality, leaving non-perishable remains to his survivors to honour. In the second case, cremation is a necessary technique for the removal of decay, and also a means of preserving the medical, social and psychological comfort of the relatives of the deceased (Thomas 1980, 43). While Thomas's ideas are useful for an historical analysis, his theories are questionable. Thus, I do not consider the example of the Moscow crematorium to be the most appropriate for verifying certain hypotheses, because the inauguration and usage of cremation in the Soviet Union was prompted by different reasons to those which were operative in Western Europe. Besides, it is inaccurate to say that modern cremation totally excludes ritual and symbol. Moreover, the manner in which the pronouncements of Vatican II have gradually changed the Catholic Church's position with regard to cremation is another track that challenges Thomas's radical views.

A review of the academic debate on cremation within the French academy is also found in a 1997 article by Paul Pasteur, which highlights the neglect of this topic by French scholars. French historians of death have been largely silent on cremation, the work of Michel Vovelle being illustrative – Vovelle mentions the establishment of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, but does not touch upon the subject in his chapter on death in the present day. Philippe Ariès, too, writes only a few sentences on cremation. Exceptions to this tendency are Daniel Ligou, Jacqueline

Laloutte and, to a lesser extent, Edgar Morin and Thomas himself. There is a certain irony here, since France has played a key role in the revival of cremation as a modern practice (Pasteur 1997, 59–61). Jacqueline Laloutte published an article devoted to cremation, but followed a different line of analysis, namely the role of free-thinkers, of the Church, and of cremation as a topic (Laloutte 1997, 81–91). Thus, the actions of the former, who played a key role in spreading the practice, relied not only on the actions of individuals, but also acted collectively through their various associations. Their actions were part of a broader current of new sensitivities about the corpse, in which burial and putrefaction were regarded as a humiliation. Laloutte concluded that the rise of cremation also constituted a moment of rupture with the Catholic Church.

The most intense academic interest in cremation, however, appears to have come from Britain. The work of Peter C. Jupp, for example, provides plausible explanations for the growing popularity of cremation after the First World War, as well as for the emergence of Britain as a pioneer in the field (Jupp 2006, 46–124) and the differences between the Protestant and Catholic attitudes to cremation (Jupp 2006, 6–7, 9–20). More recently, Liza Kazmier has also attempted to explain Britain's predominance in the field of cremation (Kazmier 2009, 557–579).

Also worthy of remark in the British context are the works of Hilary Grainger (Grainger 2006) and Brian Parsons (Parsons 2005), as well as Douglas Davies's indispensable contributions (see for example Davies 1995; 1996, 83–94).

The subject of cremation has also been addressed by German researchers. In a relatively recent contribution, Simone Ameskamp (Ameskamp 2008, 93–111; 2006) has analysed cremation within the German Empire and during the Weimar Republic, well prior to Hitler's seizure of power. However, German historians of cremation have mainly concerned themselves with perceptions of death and disposal after 1945, arising from the country's traumatic experiences associated with the Nazi regime and the war. As Monica Black has commented, this historical background has long influenced German perceptions of and attitudes toward cremation (Black 2009, 14–19).

Cremation has also been addressed in less well known research on Orthodox countries, such as Aleksandra Pavicevic's study of Serbia (Pavicevic 2006, 251–262), which locates cremation within an urban context. The most significant aspect of this study was its history of cremation in Yugoslavia and Serbia, which suggests a number of similarities between Romania and Serbia, especially in view of the fact that Orthodoxy is the dominant confession in both. The most striking point

concerns the gap between society coming to support cremation and the zero moment of the opening of crematoria, which is short for Romania and long for Serbia (1923/1928 in Romania; 1904/1964 in Serbia). Also of relevance are the positions adopted by the Serbian Orthodox Church against cremation: a sort of selective permission for the celebration of religious services for the cremated – but only in cases where the family has opted for cremation, not necessarily where the deceased had chosen cremation independently (Pavicevic 2006, 258).

Greece must not be omitted from the discussion, for it has been the scene of some of the most heated debates in recent years on the topic of cremation. Worthy of particular mention is the research of Dargentas Magdalini (Dargentas 2005), whose chapter on the history of cremation was included in the *Encyclopaedia of Cremation*. Thus, we discover that the topic of cremation was first addressed in Greece in 1912 and called into question only in 1941, then for medical reasons; the first legal prohibition was in 1943. A pro-cremation association was formed in 1946, only to be disbanded in 1960, and in 1972 two councils of the Greek Orthodox Church once more condemned the practice. In summer 1987 the subject became prominent once more, due to high mortality and a consequent shortage of burial spaces (Dargentas 2005, 223–225). Dargentas has analysed the debate within the Greek press about this issue over the following thirteen years (Dargentas 2008). The anti-cremation arguments noted by Dargentas include: opposition from religious institutions; the invocation of religious texts against cremation; the suggestion that cremation was motivated primarily by financial concerns; tradition and religious identity; the importance of burial for the soul of the deceased; the importance of inhumation; burial as an important part of Greek identity; the conflict between the Church and its opponents; and the importance of burial for the family of the deceased. Meanwhile, pro-cremation arguments included: the issue of burial space; the relativity of religious positions and practices; the need for freedom of conscience; legislative and democratic dimensions; concerns about hygiene and pollution; and the need to modernise society. Other arguments less commonly used were: the citing of examples of countries already practicing cremation, social necessity; the importance of cremation for the "being" of the deceased; theological arguments; examples of famous people who had been cremated; and the cost of burial. These sets of arguments delimited, respectively, the conservative and liberal attitudes to cremation in Greece. The Greek case will be especially relevant for the present study, as a number of similarities may be identified between it and the Romanian situation, in particular the fact that both countries are

dominated by the Orthodox religious tradition.

The practice of cremation in South Africa has also been the object of academic analysis, for instance in an investigation of cremation in Johannesburg between 1910 and 1945, which included an account of the emergence of cremationist ideas within the white population around a local Hindu community (Dennie 2003, 179–192).

Research on cremation has also been carried out in Australia, thanks to the efforts of Robert Nicol (Nicol 2003), as well as in South Korea, where Chan Won-Park has written a series of very important observations about the topic in this part of the world (Park 2010).

In the same category may be included a series of articles on the extent of modern cremation in Mexico and Thailand. But, if in the first case (Mexico) these actions developed under the tutelage of nineteenth century novelty, as both ideology and action (i.e. the propagation of the idea of public health) (Ramos, Ávila, González, and Pérez 2002, 581–586), in the second case (Thailand) the research concerned the analysis of certain traditional practices of cremation (Olson 1992, 279–294). Similarly, there had been discussion of current issues relating to cremation in Japan, a country where the practice is almost universal. It is, for example, the subject of an article published in 2004 which addressed the question of the spreading of ashes, and ways in which to harmonise this with tradition (Kawano 2003, 233, 248). However, perhaps the most significant research into the history of modern cremation in Japan is that of the American Andrew Bernstein (Bernstein 2000, 297–334).

The former Soviet Union should also be included in this survey, and the relevance of the Soviet model to the present survey is obvious due to the establishment of communism in Romania. However, there are also some important differences between the Soviet and Romanian experiences, which help explain the current profile of cremation in Romania – thus to talk of a simple takeover of cremation practices would be completely wrong. Whereas in the Soviet Union the practice of the communist state was to cultivate the development of a series of habits, in Romania the route followed was a more natural one: the early appearance of cremationist ideas, the founding of a cremationist society, followed by the building of a crematorium. But for those sections of the Romanian population who resist cremation, the situation is similar to that of the former Soviet Union. As Catherine Merridale has pointed out, in areas where traditional practices hold sway, cremation means a brutal, too-fast destruction of the body. Thus there are psychological factors involved, with the burning of the corpse functioning as a violation of traditional belief and ritual – for example, the belief that the soul of the deceased does

not leave the body immediately after death, and the effect upon commemorative practices of the total annihilation of the bodily remains. The practice of cremation as propagated by the Bolsheviks was, therefore, a foreign ingraft into Russian society, a deliberate attack upon traditional practices (Merridale 1996, 1–18).

A truly comprehensive overview should include comparison of cremation in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. In the first instance, as has been noted by Marina Sozzi, the cremationists justified their support for cremation in terms of anticlericalism, and of scientific and hygienic positivism, seeing their movement as a necessary force for modernisation and secularisation. The early cremationist movements therefore include hygienists and physicians, Masons, freethinkers, atheists, positivists, liberals, socialists and religious minority groups, all of whom shared a common position against the ritual monopoly of the Church (Sozzi 2004, 39). It should be noted that in Romania, doctors were the first to introduce and support cremationist ideas, and it was not until much later that they were joined by other socio-professional groups. But whatever their professional or ideological background, the Romanian cremationists were always anxious to maintain a distance from Christianity and the Orthodox Church.

The fact that the Czech Republic is currently the leading European country in terms of its cremation rate has not entailed academic neglect, and Czech researchers have undertaken important research in this field. They have sought to explain how cremation has developed to a point where it has overtaken burial as the most popular method of disposal (Nešpor 2010, 273–292).

Sources and methods in the present study

The sources employed in the present study are quite diverse. They can be schematized in various ways according to their provenance in different forms of media. For example, there are visible lines of development for the medical discourse justifying the practice, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and similarly we may also trace the lines of a religious discourse strongly counter to cremation. The problem, however, is that because cremation was not widespread in Romania during the period covered by this study, often these sources appear to focus upon cremation as an exception, and upon the personalities who opted for it.

This leads us to another problem with the sources: in order to be truly comprehensive, any historical investigation should encompass the quantitative aspects of its subject. But given that only two crematoria had

been built in Romania, and that both were located in Bucharest, in this case the value of statistical data is limited; the number of cremations in Romania during the last century arguably tells us little about wider Romanian attitudes to cremation, except that where they existed such establishments were concentrated in Bucharest. Despite these limitations, statistics on cremation in Romania can still be of use, and they are an excellent means of revealing certain aspects of the practice.

Looking at things in the round, once notes that the sources are characterised by a certain "fickleness." This concerns a certain concrete reality, specifically the point at which politics emerges as a direct influence on the wider social landscape: if, up to 1947, the sources on cremation in Romania are found to have a certain tenor and to be concerned with certain specific activities, after this point their profile changes. Thus, the major difficulty in gathering the documents underlying this analysis concerned the communist period; but the source that is perhaps most comprehensive with respect to this analysis, at least for the inter-war period, is the organ of the contemporary Romanian cremationists, *Flacăra sacră* (The sacred flame). This includes statistics, cremationist propaganda, and articles that countered the criticisms more widely expressed. However, if we consider the great controversy born around the building of the "Cenuşa" crematorium, the expressions of religious discourse also emerge as fundamental sources. Among the most vehement anti-cremation "voices" of the time, and I should mention here *Glasul Monahilor* (The Monks' Voice) newspaper, or publications of the official body *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* (The Romanian Orthodox Church), and works of specific theological analysis, all of which have metamorphosed into important historical sources. Along the same lines can be located the epoch's press, which, with its role of expanding upon issues of public interest, could not avoid the subject – first because of its exotic potential and later as a "scandal."

Romanians writers generally avoid the topic, given the diversity of attitudes on cremation, and irrespective of the fact that some, for various reasons, do practice it. This emphasizes even more strongly the variety of views that have been expressed within the literary environment on cremation in Romania during the last two centuries. But it is not just writers or literary critics who have turned to the practice: cremation has also become an option for others, such as artists, actors, doctors, professors, and military and political figures (even some ministers and members of Parliament), etc. We have so far identified over 1,400 public figures in Romanian life who have agreed to cremation. One may therefore refer to the existence of considerable sympathy for cremation among the

Romanian elites. As I will highlight, this can be explained by appeal to various reasons: religious and personal, and by reference to cremation's aesthetics and ethics.

The press has been an excellent source for this book, because cremation as a practice was and still is a subject that sells, given that most people are not familiar with it; while on the other hand the Orthodox press has recorded many reactions to cremation over the years.

The documents regarding the Cenuşa crematorium in the archive of the Cemeteries and Human Crematoria Administration in Bucharest, are again an excellent source for details on the internal problems of the cremationist movement in Romania. Unfortunately, these documents are not inventoried.

But while we talk only about these categories, we remain at the level of the exception, taking into account only the key personalities and missing the much wider class of ordinary people. This handicap can be mitigated through use of another source: the obituary. Although it may indeed seem somewhat stereotyped, it is able to bring the analysis closer to everyday life and to the common person who chooses cremation. Thus, the obituary has a special relevance, which determines its character and makes it essential for the analysis at hand. It reveals, as Eliecier Crespo Fernandez remarked, humanity's weakness in front of death, where advertising, information, emotion and an objective eye can all coexist. When we turn to obituaries for their literal content, they lay open the manner in which death is conceptualized, slightly parting the veils which society places between itself and the reality of death (Fernandez 2006, 101–130). But several obstacles still confront the use of the obituary for analysis. For the communist period, there is a prominent discontinuity in the use of the personal column. For example, *România Liberă* (The free Romania) newspaper only restarts publishing small-scale advertisements, including obituaries announcing cremation, in April 1966.

The folklore around cremation has been the subject of an article by Venetia Newall (Newall 1985, 139–155). This paper is important because it demonstrated that, despite the practice's increasing popularity in the British space, the rumours and anecdotes related to it persisted. The line of analysis represented by Newall's research can be valuable for the analysis of contemporary perceptions of cremation in Romania. Equally important are the sources of legal regulations on cremation that has been recorded since the inter-war period. They have great significance because they placed cremation on the same level as inhumation – although this was not sufficient to allow the practice to develop in Romania.

An analysis of cremation and crematoria in Romania between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries cannot omit the use of comparison

as a fundamental method of investigation. This involves comparing the development of cremation in Romania with neighbouring countries, and also with developments worldwide. This type of comparative approach highlights another key question for our investigation: if Romania was a pioneer in the practice of cremation during the inter-war period – notably by being the first country in the region to acquire a crematorium – how are we to explain its subsequent stagnation – regression, even – relative to its neighbours. Things become clearer if we consider that in Hungary, the first crematorium was inaugurated only in 1951 despite having been built in 1930, or that in Bulgaria the first such establishment was opened only in 2004. Another good example would be a comparison with the situation in the Netherlands: in the inter-war period there was only one crematorium there, opened in 1913, as in Romania, whereas today cremations average over 50% of all deaths. In a broader context, the analysis of cremation is a true delight for the historian (Prothero 2001, 10), involving as it does controversy, vested interests (Prothero 2002, 492–504), and even a kind of special state of conflict within society. The emergence of modern cremation, from the initial concept to its (various) degrees of embodiment, has always triggered debate and controversy. Historically, as Simone Ameskamp has highlighted, the study of cremation includes both its material aspects, and those of the ideas on dying and death, but also other dimensions such as attitudes toward the body or corpse, funerary ritual, and social and legal trends (Amsekamp, 2006, 1). To this list I would also add political history, if we consider cremation as a means of enacting political power – as indeed happened in Romania in 1939 and 1989.

Given that until 1994 there was only one crematorium in Romania, any investigation of certain questions – questions which have been the subject of detailed study in other countries – is bound here to be partial: such questions include changes in the architectural style of crematoria, the reasons for their increasing number, and their regional distribution. Studies of this kind are most notably available for Britain (Grainger 2000, 53–73), although they have also been conducted in respect of other European countries (Pursell 2003, 233, 250).

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I dedicate this book to my daughter Mălina Rotar,
and to all the Romanian cremationists.

CHAPTER TWO

CREMATION IN ROMANIA BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY[1]

The practice of cremation in the ancient Romanian lands is well documented. While there are of course significant differences between cremation practices in the ancient and early medieval periods and those in more modern times, the purpose of this chapter is simply to emphasise that cremation was practised in Romania long before the nineteenth century. It is known to have been practised by the peoples who inhabited the Romanian Lands during the Bronze Age (Schuster, Comşa and Popa 2001). Indeed, it is known to have been practised even earlier than that: cremain deposits dating from the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods have been found. Although these deposits are not numerous, and are geographically concentrated in north western Romania, they are very similar to examples from the Starcervo Cris and Zau regions (Lazăr and Băcueţ 2011). Recent studies have shown that cremation was not an isolated phenomenon during prehistoric times, but that it was in fact more widespread than has been previously realised. Remarkably, burial and cremation appear in some cases to have coexisted, their relative significance shifting as new populations arrived or as religious beliefs gradually changed. It may be, as has been suggested by Lazăr and Băcueţ, that cremation was employed selectively in order to create social differentiation within communities; it may also have been assigned other meanings at different times. It may have been carried out as a symbolic deviation from the usual burial rite or as a traditional custom: for instance, shamans, as spiritual leaders, were required to be cremated as a means of setting them apart from the rest of society.

Lazăr and Băcueţ have used osteological evidence, together with funeral inventories, to show that corpses were carefully and methodically

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prepared before being cremated. The oldest documented archaeological evidence of cremation is the group at Gura Baciului (Shepherd's Mouth), which has been dated to the early Neolithic period (c.6600–5500 BC) and consists of seven deposits of cremated remains. Overall, the gradual replacement of burial by cremation during that period indicates that a profound change of spiritual belief was taking place. Furthermore, the Eneolithic period witnessed an interesting synthesis of different types of disposal practices, for example in the Eastern Carpathians, where the raised grave (tumulus) was combined with cremation (Lazăr and Băcueț 2011).

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of Romanian archaeologists there have been few discoveries to confirm that either burial or cremation was the normal method of disposal during the Roman period. Although there has been a considerable amount of assertion and speculation, very little in the way of conclusive proof has been forthcoming. Even for the early Classical period, both burials and deposits of cremains are relatively few in number. Various hypotheses have been proposed, for example that the Dacians scattered their ashes in rivers or that excarnation was practised. Although both of these are plausible suggestions, the lack of archaeological evidence makes it difficult to state with any degree of certainty how extensive any such practices might have been.

What can be said is that from the Bronze Age onwards, cremation became the norm in Romania. It arrived due in part to central European influences, but also as a consequence of internal developments within the indigenous communities. Indo-Europeanisation played a significant role here. The solar cult was highly influential on prehistoric funerary ritual, cremation being a clear and straightforward means of separating the soul from the body and raising it to heaven. According to contemporary belief, this led to an increased sense of direct contact with the divine. Fire thus acquired divine attributes; it was viewed as a means of making direct contact with the divine, and it was a convenient means of conveying the soul to the afterlife, helping to separate it from the body and also fulfilling a purifying role. The prominence of skulls may be explained by the popular belief that the soul was located in the head. Pyres were of several types: those belonging to the community (the largest); to families; or to individuals (these latter two occurring quite rarely). Oils were frequently used to facilitate the cremation process. The link between the solar cult and cremation is clear: academic studies have established that the Dacian religion was centred on this cult, which emerged in the Eneolithic period and replaced the older fertility cult from then onward. These studies have proposed that this new religion included a sun god, whose name could not

be read. Archaeological excavations in the sacred area of the enclosure at Sarmizegetuza Regia, the Dacian state capital, have uncovered a complex of rectangles and round sanctuaries of the andesite solar disc, which represents the sun, indicating the Uranus-solar character of the Dacian religion. Thus it has been shown that the Dacians, who were important ancestors of the modern Romanian people, practised cremation on a large scale (Crişan 1986). The Dacians were a branch of the Thracian people, who inhabited the lands to the north of the Danube. Therefore between the eighth and seventh centuries AD, cremation was dominant in this region. Burial did not disappear entirely, however, but was reserved especially for royal tombs and also for children. Archaeologists have also identified a series of isolated necropolises where burial dominated; these have been attributed to native populations, such as the Scythians in Transylvania. Within the Dacian lands cremation is characterised by a multitude of forms, which varied not only from region to region, but even within the same region.

According to Dumitru Protase, the Dacians had two types of grave for cremated remains: those where the cremation was conducted on the spot (usually a tumulus), and those where the cremation was carried out elsewhere and the ashes transferred to another site for burial (ustrinum) (Protase 1971, 79, 113). A communal pyre, which was often physically located outside the cemetery, was used. The Dacians did not make urns especially for the purpose, but normally used everyday vessels instead. The urns were generally buried, usually at a depth of less than one metre. Sometimes the ashes would be deposited in stone boxes in order to emphasize the wealth and status of the deceased. According to Herodotus, before the cremation took place a funeral banquet would be held and the vessels used were then thrown onto the pyre. Flat tumular graves have also been identified, those of the fourth century BC being reserved for warriors only. In such cases the cremation was performed immediately, with the tumulus then being constructed above the pyre. One of the most impressive examples is that of Cugir in Transylvania, where the deceased was burned on a chariot drawn by two horses, and dressed for battle. The fire was fuelled by fir. Also found deposited in the grave was a large decorated golden fixtures (Protase 1971; Crişan 1984, 112–132). Cremation graves are of two types: either with the urn, or with the ashes directly deposited in the pit. The range of objects found in Dacian cremation graves is generally poor, including jewellery, personal items, clothing and accessories, but rarely gold or silver objects or tools. Unlike those of the Celts, there is no careful, deliberate arrangement of goods within the grave. The absence of cemeteries which feature burial as the