

Roman era gravesites with unusual funerary rites

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Georeferenced orthophotography from the middle imperial primary cremation (east) and two (stratigraphically later) middle imperial individual tombs (west), showing two different phases of excavation: before (left) and after (right) removal of the covering bricks. © Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project. Credit: *Antiquity* (2023). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2022.171

A team of archaeologists from KU Leuven and the Royal Belgium Institute of Natural Sciences, both in Belgium, reports unusual funerary practices by early Roman Empire–era people living in what is now a southwest part of Turkey. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, the group describes the burial site and the artifacts found there.

The studied a site located at Sagalassos, and [artifacts](#) there have been dated back to approximately AD 100 to 150. Prior research has shown that it was occupied by the Romans from the fifth to 13th centuries, and had a Roman-style culture, including building in the style of Roman architecture. The site has a theater and a bath complex. The archaeologists were part of the Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project and were working on the outskirts of the dig site when they came across evidence of Roman-era cremations.

The artifacts revealed that the people of the time had performed cremations differently than others of the Roman era—instead of using a funeral pyre, collecting the remains and moving them somewhere else, the people in Sagalassos performed their cremations in place. Thus, there was no need to move them. They also found that items, such as intentionally bent nails, buried with the remains were unique. Also, unlike most other [cremation](#) sites of the time, the one at Sagalassos was sealed beneath a covering of lime and brick.



Upper left) bent and twisted nails from the primary cremation at Site F; lower left) nails from an ash pit with cremation remains at the same site; right) examples of coffin nails from two individual separate inhumations from the same site. © Sagalassos Archaeological Research Project. Credit: *Antiquity* (2023). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2022.171

The research team suggests that unique burial rites were performed that were meant to prevent the person that had died from escaping. Those burying them were apparently afraid of retaliation of some sort, and thus used all means at their disposal to keep the deceased person safely in the ground.

The bent nails, for example, were likely used as a sort of "magic barrier"—they were placed all the way around the charred bones and ashes of the remains. Those involved in the burial appeared to have used lime as a means of keeping the person, or their spirit, from escaping from the ground, rather than for aesthetic reasons.

More information: Johan Claeys et al, Magical practices? A non-normative Roman imperial cremation at Sagalassos, *Antiquity* (2023). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2022.171](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2022.171)

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