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Speaking of the dead. Returning to funerary customs and grave goods from late Roman military burials

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Session Abstract: Fifty years after the publication of the late Roman graveyard at the Oudenburg fort by Mertens & Van Impe (1971), and nearly as long since the influential publication by Böhme (1974) on Germanic grave goods in the Late Roman period, it is time to reassess our ideas of late Roman burial customs, grave goods and their chronology (period c. AD 250-450).

During the past half century, our understanding of the Late Roman period has developed significantly, mainly because of the increasing archaeological evidence of its military population. Nevertheless, many of the chronologies for grave goods published in the 1970s are still used as standard references to date late Roman artefacts and their contexts. However, many of these typo-chronologies and interpretations have become outdated, often tied up in biases based on circular reasoning related to traditional notions of the Germanic immigration. Since the 1970s and '80s burial archaeology has gradually become less prominent, allowing outdated knowledge to persist into the present-day identification and dating of late Roman military burials (cf. cremation versus inhumation; the uncritical use of numismatic evidence; the correlation between weapons as grave goods and Germanic people). Fortunately, recent studies and techniques can bring new data to the table and allow us to take a fresh look on the identity of late Roman soldiers at the frontiers (e.g. isotopes and DNA) that can be paired with a reinvestigation of the material culture and burial customs.

Given that the most prominent late Roman burials are military graveyards and that they serve as a basis for much of the material chronologies (e.g. Krefeld-Gellep), a re-evaluation of them would not only adjust our understanding of the late Roman military communities at the frontiers, but would also have implications for the dating and interpreting of many late Roman (military) sites across the Empire.