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Different Reasons of the Cemeterial Vandalism in Georgia: the Robbery, the Revenge and the Dismemberment of Illegally Exhumed Cadavers for the Purpose of Possible “Medical” and Religious Exploitation in the 19th Century

The research is dedicated to the officially investigated cases of illegal exhumations of bodies in the 19th century on the territory of Georgia. A few instances which are proved by archival files, show the range of possible reasons which made people violate moral restrictions as well as legislative limitations related to the burial practice. Documented witnesses of illegal grave-diggers contain explanations of their motives, bizarre religious beliefs and obscure perceptions of “medical” treatment. While lacking an individual comprehension that law refers to their actions also, persons, who were involved in an exhumation, had usually no idea of legislative limitations, which criminalizes their actions.

In one case the widow of the priest exhumed his body to use his hand as an object of religious worship and a tool of magnificent “medical” treatment; she kept on exploiting it until the authorities were forced to get involved in the situation and bury the dismembered part of the body.

In another case a local *aznauri* ordered his peasant to exhume the body of another peasant and get a ribbon to use it for a medical treatment of the disease, which was considered to be incurable by domestic doctors for a long time.

In the 3rd case a grave of a representative of an aristocratic family was opened, which made his relatives consider that the crime was committed by the order of the enemy of their family who might have wanted to humiliate them by this blasphemous action and take some sort of moral revenge on them. Even though the investigation compiled a list of persons suspected in the exhumation, the available archival files show that the punishment was much more merciful than it should have been expected: this person expiated his sinful crime by willingly (or rather mandatorily) working as a “*mortus*” (someone who checks whether families have been infected) during the plague on the territory of Persia.

All these cases are shown in the context of legislative restrictions related to the practice of exhumations. The references to the law are illustrated by a couple of cases of documentarily proven illegal exhumations, which were arranged for the sake of burying the remains in a different grave, the localization of which was considered more prestigious by the relatives of the dead (for example, closer to the domestic church).

The conclusions of this research will enable historians and archaeologists to find reasonable explanations to the lack of body parts in different graves and comprehend how similarly illegal actions were spreading obscure beliefs among illiterate strata of the populations, which might have turned any dead body into an object of exhumation.