



The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial

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CHAPTER

1 Beautiful Things and Bones of Desire: *Emerging Issues in the Archaeology of Death and Burial*

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Abstract

The archaeological study of death is a multifaceted field of study. Rapidly developing scientific and technical methods of examining human remains allow modern scholars to examine past lives through their effects upon the body. Death is, however, a cultural as well as a biological experience. This chapter introduces some of the important themes in the contemporary archaeology of death, including ritual, the body, emotion, and power. The authors of this chapter, the volume's editors, also consider the complex ethical and political issues surrounding the archaeology of death and explain their decision to include in the volume several chapters considering these. Finally the authors briefly introduce the contents of the volume.

Keywords: [archaeology of death](#), [archaeological science](#), [ritual](#), [the body](#), [power](#), [ethics](#)

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Introduction

On 4 November 1922, after several years of searching, the archaeologist Howard Carter opened up a small breach in the left-hand corner of what appeared to be a royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. In anticipation he shone a candle through the opening, and taken aback by the sight that was revealed in the flickering light he exclaimed: 'I see beautiful things'. The treasures revealed by his excavations of the undisturbed burial chamber of the young pharaoh Tutankhamun became legendary both within the fields of archaeology and Egyptology, and for the public at large. 'Beautiful things' from famous burials fascinate people all over the world, but beyond the sheer beauty and the quality of the work of art, they also provide a foundation from which archaeologists build to tell rich and complex stories about the individual buried with them and about the society in which these ritual practices were carried out. While the tomb of Tutankhamun is exceptional, its contribution to our understanding of the past is typical. While the theoretical interests and questions in the discipline of archaeology have changed since the time of Carter, burials have maintained their privileged position since they allow us to connect an individual that embodies both a biological and a cultural history with a place and time in the past. Archaeology still, in many ways, relies on the information gleaned from burials and the treatment of the dead to recreate life in the past. Cross-disciplinary approaches to burial allow us to unpack sophisticated sociocultural aspects of the human past, including social relationships and identities, social structure, diet and health, population histories and individual biographies, emotional discourses, ritualized practices, migrations and cosmologies. These different strands of evidence all contribute to a better understanding of people in the past in all their complexity. More than anything, the archaeology of death and burial constantly reminds us that archaeology is about more than things—it is about people.

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According to John Robb in his contribution to this volume, 'we have never had an archaeology of death'. This is bad news for the numerous archaeologists who have based books, articles, projects, and careers on the contrary premise. However, Robb's point is that we have rarely made death—attitudes towards it, its management and cultural elaboration—the focus of our 'mortuary' archaeologies. Instead we have used mortuary practices as a window into past social organization, ethnic affiliation, cultural relationships, and so on. The fact that the evidence is drawn from the context of death and disposal has been, if not incidental, then certainly marginal to our research. However, the mortuary context is a specific cultural location. The grave is not a Pompeii (Schiffer 1972) in which past societies are fossilized.

One of the most interesting developments of archaeological theory in recent years is the re-centring of the mortuary context. Edited collections such as those compiled by Beck (1995), Arnold and Wicker (2001), Rakita et al. (2005), Back Danielsson et al. (2009), Sayer and Williams (2009), and Carroll, Rempel, and Drinkwater (2011) all suggest that archaeologists are still choosing to define their research primarily by its mortuary context. In addition, some recent work has taken the archaeology of death in significant, new directions, notably engaging with the actual dead body as a material object (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2003, Sofaer 2006, Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008). Such work takes the growing archaeological literature problematizing 'the body' and its relationships to things, places, and persons (e.g. Joyce 2005, Meskell 1996, Hamilakis et al. 2002, Borić and Robb 2008) and combines it with traditional and emerging methods of archaeological analysis in ways that challenge us to reconceptualize the body, and the person, in death as well as life.

Equally, special kinds of burial, such as the unusual burials of those who seem to have been outside normal society, have excited recent interest (e.g. Murphy 2008), as has the integration of archaeological evidence about death and burial into broader interdisciplinary histories of thought (e.g. Taylor 2002, Wallace 2004).

In this volume we have included both mortuary archaeologies which use evidence from the grave as a basis for understanding something of the living person or living society, and those which ask research questions about death itself, for the grave tells us not only about lived experience in the past, but also specifically about death. Many of the contributions to this volume address specifically past attitudes to death, the conceptualization and

management of the transition from life to death, or from newly dead to ancestor, the emotional and experiential aspects of mortality and bereavement, and the structuring of personal relationships between the dead and those they leave behind.

Face to Face with the Past

p. 3

The close encounter between modern people and past people is part of the emotional appeal of the archaeology of death and burial. Indeed, mortuary archaeology and the excavation of a burial is one of the few moments when we as archaeologists come literally face to face with a person from the past. This privilege offers us unique possibilities to rewrite that person ↵ back into history, to lend them a voice, and to tell a story about their life by drawing on a wide variety of approaches, methods, and perspectives. More than reading their writings or even handling their things, gazing upon the bodies of our ancestors has a powerful visceral impact. This realization of shared humanity is often a particularly potent point of departure in relating what we do to non-archaeologists. This may explain the great public appeal of TV programmes like *Meet the Ancestors* where figurative and actual ‘flesh’ is put on the bones of an archaeologically recovered set of bones. Australian anthropologist Colin Pardoe notes in this volume that this programme is very popular also among the Australian Aborigines with whom he collaborates. This is especially remarkable since Aborigines as a group, through the activism for reburial and repatriation of human remains, have claimed a certain cultural sensitivity and even objection regarding the excavation and study of human remains.

The presence of the human body places mortuary archaeology at the threshold between the natural sciences, which study the biological remains, and the humanities and social sciences, which see the individual within a historical, cultural, social, and ritual context. The physical remains of the body, often bones and teeth, and more rarely preserved skin, hair, and soft tissue (see Giles, this volume), offer the possibility of identifying features of the biological individual, and based on these insights we can proceed to create a more full image also of the social and cultural life of the person and the society in which (s)he lived. The osteological analysis can inform us about the biological age and sex of the buried individual. In combination with other archaeological data, such as grave goods or variation in mortuary ritual, this allows us to reconstruct social identities, gender roles, and social status of the dead. Through a reconstruction of demography and mortality based on this assessment of biological sex and age, we can also explore health status in a population. At what age did people die, and what does this tell us about their health and lifestyle? We can also reflect on the composition of a buried population. Was everybody who died buried in the same place and in the same way, or do the people at a particular site only represent a selected group? What can that in turn tell us about social relationships in the community?

It is crucial here that we understand that human bodies, and what remains of them, are not only biological entities. They are also cultural products, shaped by the lived experience of social and cultural practices. The analysis does not simply inform us about a biological reality in the past. Beyond that it also tells us a story about a lived life. The skeleton is constantly reshaped by bodily practices, which are usually informed by aspects of personal identity such as gender, status, and ethnicity. Palaeopathology can thus deepen our knowledge of the health and lifestyle of the individual. Stress on particular muscles will result in growth of the muscle attachments, stress on joints can result in arthritis, which is evident on the skeleton; and regular exposure to the risk of particular types of trauma can result in patterns of bone breakage and repair that are evident at population level. Thus social identities as, say, a farmer, a soldier, or an oarsman may well be evident in the biological remains of an individual. It is not possible to make a clear distinction between the evidence of ‘natural’ life, signified in the biological remains, and ‘cultural’ or social identity, signalled in material practices. Culture shapes biology.

But pathologies can also at first glance be misleading. In anthropology we talk about the osteological paradox (see Roberts, this volume), which teaches us that a skeleton with many pathologies evident in surviving bone

actually demonstrates relative health in life. In order for an individual to develop these diagnostic characteristics, they must have survived the onset of the disease. From this perspective we can therefore conclude that traces of, for example, arthritis, tuberculosis (Roberts and Buikstra 2003), and syphilis (Stirland 1991, Mays et al. 2003) in medieval populations actually show us that people were healthy enough, or cared for enough, to develop these pathologies. Dental hypoplasia, i.e. lines developing on tooth enamel when the teeth temporarily cease to grow during periods of stress during childhood, most often due to starvation, will only develop in individuals that actually survived these childhood ailments. Similarly, traces of healed wounds or injuries show us that society was organized in a way that allowed for people to care for each other. The most striking case of this phenomenon can be seen in one of the Neanderthal burials in Shanidar (in contemporary Iraq), where an old man had several healed injuries and pathologies that would have been severely debilitating (Trinkaus and Zimmerman 1982). The analysis clearly indicating a society in which Neanderthals cared for their sick, injured, and aged has had a tremendous impact on how Neanderthals are viewed by both specialists and the public.

Recently research into actual human remains has expanded into the molecular realm. DNA analyses potentially allow us to distinguish kinship between individuals in a cemetery or burial ground (see Bramanti, this volume). Once again we see how the biological and the cultural are intimately linked. Heinrich Härke (1992) was able in this way to trace probable relationships within an Anglo-Saxon cemetery in England that suggested that elite warrior status in that society was based, at least in part, on family lineage. Studies such as these complement the understanding of genetic relationships based on studies of physical characteristics of the skeleton, so-called discrete traits. The analysis of stable isotopes extracted from human remains (see Eriksson, this volume) provides us with the opportunity to look into diet in the past, which in turn is intimately linked to cultural practices (Eriksson 2003, Fornander 2011). Besides telling us about subsistence strategies, these indicators can also be informative about the relationship between humans and other predators, and may in fact provide an insight into the cosmology of the human groups. Differential nutrition identified by isotopic signatures can also be the result of socially constructed identities (Hastorf 1991). Finally, the variable mineral composition of groundwater in different parts of the world can leave isotopic signatures in the developing teeth and bones of individuals so that their individual journeys are written into their remains. The human remains themselves thus tell us not only about non-voluntaristic aspects of human experience in the past, such as disease, nutrition, and growth, and characteristics of populations such as life expectancy, but also about the personal and cultural life experiences of an individual.

The great potential of archaeological study of human remains is that it straddles and unites biological and cultural approaches to life and, of greater relevance for present purposes, death. In this way, archaeologists are uniquely well-positioned to negotiate between what are often conceived as social constructivist and biologically determined approaches to the living and the dead body. Jo Sofaer points out (2006) that transdisciplinary body theory—which has lately been fashionable among archaeologists—actually doesn't always address the kinds of bodiliness with which we archaeologists come into contact. Although some excellent work has been done on the 'embodied' person in the past—sensual, experiencing, occupying space, and enabled and constrained by its corporeal form, in fact we are more used to engaging with bodies as things—or more precisely—with the remains of bodies in the form of bones, or mummies. Tracing a pedigree through sociologists, historians, and literary critics for the study of the body ignores our own deep and solid tradition of human osteoarchaeology. Others (Hamilakis 2002, Oestigaard 2004, Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008, Nilsson Stutz 2008a, Fahlander 2009) have argued that these recent archaeological approaches to the body have remained too abstract and removed from the actual physicality of the biological body, especially the problematic liminal dead body and the transformations it undergoes.

Mortuary Practices: Death at the Centre

There has, in recent years, been an increasing focus on understanding burials, not only as a reflection of life, but also as the result of the human encounter with death. This archaeology has tended to put death at the centre of the inquiry, while exploring dimensions such as ritual, the dead body, emotion, and power.

The Remains of Ritual

The archaeology of death and burial explores the remains of ritualized practices relating to dealing with death and the dead in the past. They are above all *ritualized* remains and thus allow us to get a glimpse into a more abstract world of ideas and belief about life and death and about how people viewed their place in the world: what we could call cosmological beliefs. As burial archaeologists we most often encounter the final, or at least one of the final, depositions of the human body. That is how we archaeologically identify a burial, and while we are aware of the fact that the image we have is only a fragment of what actually happened in the past, the ritual character of these remains still allows us to reflect over the place and dynamics of mortuary ritual and the structures it reproduced in the past.

From the ethnographic record we know that mortuary rituals can take on a wide variety of forms; they can be immediate or drawn out, they can involve one single, or many sequential phases, they can involve one or many of a large variety of treatments of the body, they can be exhibitions of fear, anger, supplication, self-aggrandizement, grief, or celebration. What all these different rituals have in common is that they provide a mechanism for people and societies to cope with death—both the loss of a social being, and with the emergence of a dead body, which creates a new and practical situation to be dealt with by the survivors. Like any life crisis ritual, mortuary rites provide a culturally prescribed and socially accepted passage from one defined social identity to another equally defined social identity, in this case the passage from living person to dead, or some form of afterlife. Van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969) have noted that by providing a passage out of social structure, through a liminal phase and back again, the ritual is structured to connect the participants with a sacred realm recalling and reproducing a cosmology that gives form to central concerns of the community. Beyond providing a vehicle for the transition, the ritual thus also very effectively reproduces cosmology and social structure and provides a framework in which the death of a person can be framed socially, culturally, and emotionally as it is given a place in the view of the world. Mortuary ritual can be seen as a way in which the survivors control and produce death in a way that is culturally acceptable. Through ritualized practices the dead body is controlled, and in the process it is also redefined from the social being it used to embody into an object of death, or perhaps an abject (*sensu* Kristeva 1980), produced through ritual and eventually disposed of. The actual transition of this rite of passage can take on a variety of forms but it aims at ultimately healing the rupture of the social fabric, allowing the survivors and society as a whole to move on.

The Dead Body

Whether the body is buried, cremated, exposed, or treated according to some other ritual practice, the dead body itself sits at the centre of mortuary practices. Even when the body itself is, exceptionally, not present, as at a cenotaph (empty tomb such as those commonly dedicated to the remembrance of war dead), it is an 'absent presence', and the material reality is in fact emphasized by its unusual absence. The newly dead body is universally a cultural problem. It retains the appearance of the living person, and many aspects of their social identity, but its agentive power is much compromised. Worst of all is the problem of putrefaction and decay, by which material personhood is negated. This is both a social and an emotional problem for the survivors. It is a social problem because each death leaves a social hole, which needs to be filled or covered before it becomes the centre of social turbulence and a focus of unrest and tension between competing interest groups. It is an emotional problem for the survivors both because it is a reminder of their own mortality, and because it marks the dissolution of an individual with whom an emotional relationship had developed. In cultural contexts where individual personhood is strongly linked to a body, the sensually repellent decay of that body—its transformation to a place of stink and maggots—is particularly traumatic for survivors.

Social actors have developed a range of often ritualized strategies by which the problem of the dead body could be addressed. Many of these can be identified as denial of death, often linked to the preservation of the corpse in order to prevent decay; or the avoidance of decay through accelerating the process of dissolution, primarily through cremation; or thirdly, 'bracketing' the period of decay through a two-phase rite in which the decay of the body takes place between the primary rites of separation following a death, and secondary rites to mark the reconstitution of society. A final strategy, explored by social anthropologists Bloch and Parry (1991), is to channel the power of the dead and decaying body to further the fertility of their communities and their land. In this way the dead can still exercise agentive and bodily power to affect their environment. Other strategies include the denial of bodily death through mummification or embalming. An extreme case of this is the Incas, whose deaths did not prevent them from owning property and participating in ritual life, as their mummified bodies were paraded through the streets, given places of honour at feasts, and served with food and drink (Sillar 1992).

Tony Walter (1993) notes that the physical decay of the body presents serious emotional problems in the contemporary West, but that the UK and the US have responded by adopting different strategies to try and circumvent it. In the modern US it is normal practice to embalm the dead body, thus delaying the onset of decay. At the same time the corpse is dressed, made-up, and its bodily appearance managed in order to maintain an illusion of 'still life' where display in an open casket is still widespread. In the UK, by contrast, cremation is the dominant form of disposal of the dead, a practice which accelerates the annihilation of the body. As Oestigaard (this volume) points out, however, cremation in non-modern contexts is not an easy way to avoid dealing with the corporeal realities of the dead body or to carry out a hygienic disposal. Instead, achieving its combustion and reduction to ash can involve considerable labour and potentially unpleasant encounters with the flesh of the dead.

Emotion and Experience

The body of the deceased gains much of its cultural significance because it is a place of emotional investment. Until fairly recently the emotional and experiential dimensions of archaeologically attested mortuary contexts were generally considered to be beyond the purview of archaeological analysis. Instead archaeological explanation tended to revolve around issues of social power, economic structures, and ritual action, without attempting to understand the internal and personal aspects of the encounter with mortality. However, from the 1990s increasing numbers of archaeologists have drawn attention to the importance and the cultural variability of emotion surrounding death (e.g. Tarlow 1999, 2000, Harris and Flohr Sørensen 2010). Precisely because emotional responses to death are so variable it is not possible either to assume that we know what they were in any particular context, or to use our own emotions as an adequate empathetic basis for understanding the emotional experiences of others. None of this means, in our view, that archaeologists should not study the emotions of past people. Rather, we need to be imaginative in identifying the role that fear, or grief, or guilt might have had in shaping material practices and dominant metaphors of death. Taking inspiration from the sophisticated examinations of emotion that had been developed across other social science disciplines, archaeological analyses have sought to identify the ways that emotions can be, and have been, socially constructed. Death represents a particularly rich context for the identification and theorization of the significance of emotion in archaeology. As well as the archaeological evidence of mortuary ritual which can provide a good understanding of the emotional values and beliefs surrounding death and bereavement in the past, human remains themselves have been considered as constituting evidence for emotional practices, although the interpretation of physical disability in the past as evidence for compassion has been critiqued for its unexamined projection of modern assumptions about what constitutes ability or disability (Dettwyler 1991).

In recognizing that emotions are socially constructed, archaeologists need not abandon any attempt to understand the experiential dimensions of mortuary practices. These may include the effect that mortuary monuments in a landscape had on those who carried out their everyday practices in those places, or made special and ritualized journeys to or through them. Other sensory experiences such as eating and drinking or encounters with special sounds or smells can give additional power to the funerary context, and have a role in creating and shaping memories and, through ritualized re-enactment, promoting particular understandings of time. Experiential archaeologies have been strongly influenced by the phenomenological trend in archaeological theory, especially as it has shaped the study of landscape (see Wright, this volume).

Power, Status, and How the Dead Shape Society

p. 8

As several of the chapters in this volume note, the burial of the dead is a powerful arena through which relationships of status, power, and inequality in the living society can be structured. Hayden (2009) argues that it is precisely the magnified emotional significance of the funeral, and its capacity to be memorable, that make it such a suitable arena for the negotiation of relationships of power. In a similar vein, Ann Swidler has argued that ritual practice in general might have a privileged role, at least in certain circumstances, in anchoring the social and cultural structure, by reinforcing constitutive rules—especially if they ‘define socially central but informally structured social relationships’ (Swidler 2001: 91).

Hayden draws particular attention to the common association between mortuary rites and feasting behaviour, which he argues give additional sensory force to the occasion. Processual archaeologists such as Lewis Binford (1971), Arthur Saxe (1970), John O’Shea (1984), and James Brown (1971) began the investigation of the relationship between mortuary treatment, status, and power several decades ago, and Chapman (this volume, Chapter 4) traces some of the main trends in their work. The cross-cultural regularities that they observed between the degree of elaboration of mortuary practices, land use, labour cost, and other variables formed the basis of a set of methodologies by which they hoped that social organization of past societies could be inferred from the archaeological record. Later, post-processual and neo-Marxist theorists moved their focus away from

mortuary practices as reflective of social organization to their role in constituting, negotiating, and legitimating relationships of power and inequality. Such approaches, as pioneered by Mike Parker Pearson, John Barrett, and others, nevertheless kept the resolution of their analysis at the societal level rather than on individual experience.

Disturbing the Dead/Ethics

The context of the archaeological study of death and burial has changed considerably over recent decades in response to new, or more forcefully articulated, ethical and political concerns about the exploitation of human remains and intentionally deposited burial materials; at the same time, the origins of existing archaeological and museum collections have been subject to closer scrutiny. Scarre (this volume) reminds us that Mortimer Wheeler famously dismissed claims that archaeological research on excavated human burials presented any kind of ethical problem, announcing that after his own interment he could be dug up ‘ten times, for all I care’. For Wheeler the dead body was only material—it had no emotional or spiritual significance. But his view is not universally shared. For a variety of reasons, both political and religious, many groups and individuals felt deeply unhappy about the disturbance of the dead. In his contribution to this volume, Scarre goes on to explore the possibility that by disinterring burials and carrying out work on the remains of past people, we wrong them in some way. Many other commentators have focused more on the outraged feelings of modern populations who claim descent from or affiliation to the buried people whom we study. This has increasingly led to antagonism between archaeologists and others, which has in turn been met by the examination and re-evaluation of the sometimes arrogant attitudes and shameful actions of archaeologists and physical anthropologists in the past. Antagonism between archaeologists and some local communities is further complicated by political histories of domination and inequality in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Ethical concerns about the appropriateness of excavating, studying, and displaying burials have reshaped the discipline considerably. In many parts of the world it is now unthinkable to excavate human remains for research purposes; even when they are disturbed by development, their removal and study requires the sanction of descendant communities. This has not only affected bioarchaeology, but also the study of other material removed from graves: if somebody in the past was buried with a ceramic jar, for example, perhaps for use in an afterlife, it might legitimately be asked, what right do we have to take it away?

The modern ethical climate of archaeological research is determined by legislation and political pressures from outside the discipline and by enhanced awareness of the social role and responsibility of archaeologists and the voluntary surrender of the scientific privilege that previous generations of archaeologists and anthropologists had often assumed. As well as questioning our practices in the present, we have also looked more closely and critically at the provenance of materials we have already accumulated. In some parts of the world, notably North America and Australia, this has led to large-scale repatriation and reburial programmes (see Fforde, Pardoe, and Watkins, this volume). Similarly, archaeological materials that might have been illegally removed from their contexts by looters and/or traded illegally have been returned and their continuing retention and study is now widely deemed unethical. In some parts of the world and for some periods or kinds of material, the removal of all dubiously acquired artefacts from the legitimate scope of archaeological analysis has had a devastating impact; equally, the continuing demand for illegally acquired and traded archaeological artefacts leads to the destruction or distortion of archaeological sites. The problems of researching extensively looted burial grounds, and a possible approach to the complexities of looting, are discussed in the chapter by Kersel and Chesson.

While there is no comprehensive international legal framework regulating these interests (the UNESCO convention only regulates the relationship between nation states, but not necessarily taking into consideration the interests of minorities within those nation states), several states have independently developed their own legal instruments. One of the most striking examples is the Native American Graves Protection and

Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States which, since its implementation in 1990, has radically transformed archaeological practice in the US (see Watkins, this volume). Another example is the 1984 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act in Australia (see Fforde, this volume). An important positive outcome of these changes supported by laws is a change in the relationship between professional archaeologists and museum curators on the one hand and representatives of indigenous communities. In the United States most archaeologists today agree that NAGPRA has created a level playing field and laid a foundation for the democratization of the discipline. Public archaeology has simultaneously gained increasing attention worldwide and collaborative projects have often led to a better understanding of the archaeological record. At the same time it is also clear that the repatriation movement now has gained a maturity and momentum that allows it to withstand critical examination. Critics have pointed out that exclusive claims to the past can be used for a variety of agendas and that we need to maintain the right to critically examine these claims. Research has also become limited as specific groups impose new regulations on what questions are possible to ask (Pardoe, this volume). The debate also tends to rely on essentialism, which reproduces a dichotomy between indigenous peoples and the West that is neither correct nor, usually, productive (Nilsson Stutz 2008b).

Organization of this Volume

p. 10

The archaeology of death and burial is a huge part of the discipline. For that reason it is not possible, even in a handbook of this length, to be comprehensive. There are numerous kinds of archaeological burial sites across the world and from different periods; we cannot hope to include them all. Instead the strategy of this volume is to identify themes, traditions of study, theoretical approaches, and areas of current concern, and to invite contributors to address them where relevant through case studies which are grounded in the material they know best. Our contributors come from North America, Europe, and elsewhere, and their chapters are informed by the national and linguistic traditions in which they participate. However, all contributors have written in English and are thus acquainted to varying degrees with Anglophone traditions of archaeology (which themselves vary from country to country and across subdisciplines).

Some themes re-occur in a number of chapters: for example, Sofaer and Stig Sørensen contribute a review chapter on the archaeology of gender in burial, but gender is also an important consideration in the chapters by Yao on Chinese archaeology and identity, and Carroll's survey of Roman commemorative practices. Similarly, although cremation is the main focus of the chapters by McKinley (who focuses on scientific aspects) and Oestigaard (whose focus is more cultural), it is also considered by several other contributors, including Gramsch, Giles, and Fowler. In fact, the cultural analyses of cremation, enabled by modern scientific techniques, are among the most exciting of recent developments in mortuary archaeology. Oestigaard's discussion of the use of human bodies in the smelting of metal makes remarkable connections between technology and cosmology, persons and objects.

The first part of the volume deals with the history of the archaeology of death and burial. The early study of burial contexts and their interpretation in France and England are considered by Richard and Stout, respectively. Chapman and Kus then move the historical focus into the later 20th century. What is clear from all these contributions is the extent to which archaeological approaches to death and burial respond not only to academic fashions in theory and new analytical possibilities enabled by technical innovations, but also to political and social currents in wider society.

The second part deals with scientific methods and techniques in burial archaeology, especially as they affect the study of human bone. Some well-established techniques, such as macroscopic examination of bone, for basic identification of biological characteristics or disease, reviewed by Roberts, have nevertheless seen not only technical refinements, but also a broadening and re-orientation of the research questions in response to

which they are mobilized. Thus, for example, Roberts notes that recent applications of palaeopathological techniques have been applied to the study of nutrition and diet as social practice in the past. Other techniques, such as the analysis of DNA (reviewed by Bramanti) or isotopes (Eriksson), are more recent and are constantly being refined and developed. Their potential is yet to be fully explored. Ekengren's contribution to this part problematizes the category of grave goods in an essay that draws on ritual theory to discuss this classic category of evidence in burial archaeology.

p. 11 The chapters that follow begin the review of the human experience of death and burial. Ritual and religion are explored by Williams and Edwards, with particular reference to the Middle Ages of northern Europe and to African archaeology. The particular legacies of Buddhist and Islamic burial practices are reviewed by Fogelin and Petersen, and O'Sullivan examines the Christian traditions in late medieval European burial archaeology. All the chapters that look at the archaeology of burial in major world religions make clear the extent of variation in practice over time and across local traditions. This problematizes the old notions both that burial directly reflects religious belief and that it was intended or should be interpreted as an unambiguous cultural signature. Weiss-Krejci's chapter further illustrates the variability contained within different cultural contexts, exposing both pan-cultural trends and variation.

Understanding burial archaeology in contexts which lack any written history presents particular challenges, but the contributors to this volume are generally optimistic about the extent to which even 'difficult' aspects of prehistoric societies such as cosmological beliefs, social relationships, and symbolic understandings of life and death are amenable to archaeological interpretation. These are explored in the chapters by Hovers and Belfer-Cohen, Riel Salvatore and Gravel-Miguel, Coneller and Brown, and in Chapman's second contribution to the volume.

Peter Kaulicke's discussion of Inca burial practice unites a rich archaeological record with historical accounts and ethnohistories to explore a society whose attitude to death and the dead throws into question some of our own assumptions about what death and dead might mean. Wright in turn asks how the dead and the living inhabit landscapes, focusing on the underexplored (in the Anglo-American tradition) archaeological landscapes of Mongolia.

The next few chapters, by Midgley, Robb, Gramsch, Giles, Oestigaard, and Fowler return to the subject of prehistoric mortuary ritual in Europe, considering how far lived identities and dead bodies overlap. Several of them, perhaps especially Fowler and Gramsch, challenge us to reconceptualize personhood and its relationship to a single body. While referring to modern interdisciplinary literature of bodies, selves, and persons, they also draw on a long-recognized archaeological distinction between individualistic and collective forms of disposal and commemoration which may help to characterize the constitution of the self in past societies.

Stig Sorensen and Sofaer review the role of mortuary archaeology in developing the archaeology of gender, a topic which is directly relevant to kinds of identity considered by Shepherd, Carroll, and Yao in the following chapters. We have gone well beyond the naive assumption that gender can be assigned according to a universal and binary scheme on the basis of grave goods which unambiguously reflect the lived gender identity of the deceased. Now a range of approaches focus on the ways in which funerary rites help to construct gender as a social variable and to structure gendered relationships throughout society.

The human experience of death is central to the next section, which reviews themes from emotion (Hill) to belief (Tarlow) in contexts from deep prehistory (Hovers and Belfer Cohen) to pharaonic Egypt (Naeser).

A final group of chapters situates the archaeology of death and burial in a modern philosophical, ethical, and political context. After Scarre's review of the philosophical question of what constitutes 'harm' to the dead, Kersel and Chesson explore the ethical and practical issues involved in working on burial sites that are subject to extensive illegal excavation. Watkins's and Fforde's chapters open the discussion by setting out the case 'against' what unconstrained excavation of and research into human remains. Pardoe's chapter should be read

p. 12 as a personal response to the sorts of concerns raised in those two chapters. Renshaw ¹⁴ and Nilsson Stutz both deal in various ways with how buried and recovered bodies can be locations of cultural contestation or negotiation, and through which painful pasts and disputed presents are discussed.

This final part of the book is one of the longest, but reflects the current reality that the ethical and political context of burial archaeology constitutes, for many contemporary practitioners, more than simply a set of boundaries for research or a legal stricture to be complied with: it profoundly affects the future direction of the discipline.

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