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The Unburied Dead

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Abstract and Keywords

The ‘unburied dead’ is a complex topic because the expression carries many different meanings. This chapter discusses the unburied dead from three perspectives: ‘people who are denied funerals’, ‘inaccessible corpses’, and ‘dead bodies on display’. The first category deals with persons who would be eligible for proper funerary treatment, but are refused their right because of circumstances related to their life or death. The second category comprises dead people whose corpses have disappeared as a result of crimes, wars, and disasters. The third category is about the exhibition of human remains and the divergent social responses which displayed bodies and bones can meet. Within each category, ethnographic and historic case studies illustrate some pan-cultural trends in people’s attitudes towards the unburied dead but also emphasize cross-cultural variation. Archaeologists need to consider treatment and material manifestations of the dead as culture-specific and cannot expect uniform archaeological signatures.

Keywords: corpse, exhumation, funeral, mourning, mine disaster, relics

Introduction

When asked to contribute a chapter on the ‘unburied dead’, images of rotting corpses on a battlefield, bloated bodies floating in the water, ghosts haunting the living, and exhumations of massacre victims immediately came to my mind. I associated these images with emotions of disgust, fear, and anger. However, on second thought the images started to transform and convey feelings of sadness, hope, and consolation. I visualized a body immersed in the ocean during a sea funeral, an exhumation of skeletons as part of secondary rites, a woman praying to a saint’s relics in a church, and a room with cryonic freezer units. That was when I started to realize that the ‘unburied dead’ is an immensely

complex topic. Somehow I had to deal with all these meanings of 'unburied dead', for they relate to archaeology in one way or another. In this chapter it is not my aim to determine where and why these divergent hermeneutical connotations arose or to decide which definition is more appropriate. Instead I will provide examples of the varying responses which some of these types of 'unburied dead' evoke in living people and how these behaviours transform in the archaeological record. For a start, I would like to reflect upon the relationship between the different meanings and archaeological interpretations.

From the 19th century on, social anthropologists have defined the unburied dead as people who are denied a proper funeral (Tylor 2010 [1871]: 25, Frazer 1886: 64–5, Hertz 1960 [1907], van Gennep 1960 [1909]: 160). Improper or disrespectful treatment can serve as a means to punish or destroy a person, demonstrate religious and political power, or simply to avert the dangerous dead. In this sense, the unburied dead are often deviant social personae, political enemies, and people who have died a bad death. Although they receive 'non-normative' treatments, the attitudes towards these types of unburied dead are cross-culturally distinctive. They will leave no uniform archaeological signatures because the fate of their corpses can range from abandonment, burning, and mutilation to deposition of complete and articulated bodies in the ground (e.g. Kroeber 1927: 313).

On the other hand, in archaeology a distinction is drawn between burial and 'non-burial modes of treatment' (Schiffer 1987: 81). 'Buried' bodies have a good chance of archaeological recovery. Their remains are usually found in graveyards, beneath mounds, or in buildings. 'Non-burial', on the other hand, may leave nothing one can easily identify as archaeological (p. 282) funerary remains (Chapman and Randsborg 1981: 12, Schiffer 1987: 85). In an archaeological sense, the corpses of the 'unburied dead' have been exposed in trees, on scaffolds, in the water (Fig. 16.1), left to rot, or consumed as part of funerary cannibalism. Some will consist of fragmentary and disarticulated remains; others will leave no trace in the archaeological record.

Unfortunately, quite a few archaeologists consider a 'burial' not only as a deposit with human remains in some type of grave (Childe 1945, Parker Pearson 2000: 5), but also as a 'rite of passage' (Botscharow 1991: 54), a 'part of a funeral' (Morris 1992: 1), and 'a deeply significant act imbued with meaning' (Parker Pearson 2000: 5). This conflation of 'burial' with 'funeral' has fostered ideas that 'non-burial', in the sense of not being disposed in the ground, equals 'non-funerary' and implies a lack of 'reverential' attitudes towards the dead (e.g. Tiesler 2007: 14). A similar line of argument has been chosen by those who request reburial of prehistoric remains from British museums (e.g. Wallis 2000). However, such arguments are totally contradicted by the ethnographic evidence (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 97, Carr and Knüsel 1997: 167–8, Stodder 2005, Weiss-Krejci 2011a: 75–6).



fig. 16.1 Canoe burial in mangrove tree; Tarapaina, South Malaita, Solomon Islands

Source: Photo R. A. Lever; courtesy archive R. Mittersakschmöller.

Yet another meaning of 'unburied' is that of 'exhumed'. Exhumation can happen for many different reasons. In a variety of societies the bodies of the dead are temporarily stored in or above the ground and later unburied for the final funeral rites (Hertz 1960). Although the symbolic meanings underlying these rites differ considerably from one region to another, ethnographers

refer to these reburial rites as 'secondary' or 'second burial', 'secondary disposal' and 'second funeral' (e.g. Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 85, Parkin 1996: 87–121, Schroeder 2001). If, for some reason, the relatives of a deceased person in these types of societies fail to properly rebury the bones of their dead but leave them in pits in the ground, which implies that their funerals are not complete, paradoxically to an archaeologist they would be 'burials', while a social anthropologist may consider them unburied people. As Hutchinson and Aragon (2002: 47) point out, archaeologists run a high risk of entirely misinterpreting these types of burial spaces.

(p. 283) Additionally, there are many examples of bodies and bones that are unburied from their original graves after the final funeral. The reasons range from body snatching, deliberate destruction of revenants, grave robbery, and intentional desecration of tombs during wars, to making room for other bodies, the desire to provide a different and more proper mortuary space, forensic examination, and archaeological investigation (Barber 1988: 6–24, Johnson 1996, Middleton et al. 1998, Weiss-Krejci 2001: 776, 2005: 169, Highet 2005, Williams and Williams 2007). Although reburials which result from these activities are also frequently called 'secondary burials' (e.g. Heessels and Venbrux 2009), they do not involve secondary rites and are not part of mourning rituals. Unfortunately, in archaeology it is not always possible to tell one process from another (e.g. Chénier 2009, Kümmel 2009).

In this chapter I will discuss the unburied dead in the following three—by no means exhaustive—senses: 'people who are denied funerals', 'inaccessible corpses', and 'dead bodies on display'. The first category deals with ethnographic and historic examples of people who would have been eligible for proper funerary practices based on their age, sex, or social status, but lost their right because of the circumstances of their life or death. The second category relates to persons who would have received a normal funeral had their corpses not been lost. As a result of crime, warfare, and man-made or natural disasters, the recovery of the corpse may not always be possible. When bodies cannot be

given proper funerals, the survivors have to find alternative solutions how to mourn and commemorate the dead. The last category includes some cases of body display. Among others, I will reflect upon relics and archaeological collections.

The Consequences of Proper and Improper Rites of Passage

To better understand the unburied dead from all three perspectives, it is necessary to first consider the implications of funeral propriety. The fate of the deceased and the emotion of the survivors often depend on how the funerary rites are performed. The funerary period, following van Gennep's (1960: 146–65) definition, is the period of mourning characterized by a variety of rites of passage. Survivors enter through rites of separation, carry out various rites of transition, and emerge from it through rites of reintegration, which lift the mourning. These rites are usually accompanied by manipulations of the dead body, including its treatment and temporary and final deposition. The mourning period is a time of transition in which the corpse, the soul of the dead, the bereaved, and the community of the living pass from one stage to another (Hertz 1960). Under certain conditions, the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the deceased (van Gennep 1960: 147). Hertz (1960) sees a close connection between dry bones, ideas concerning the soul entering the community of the dead, and the end of the mourning. However, there are many examples of societies where the final deposition of a dead person does not take place at the end of the mourning period but at an earlier or at a later point in time. Neither is there necessarily a direct connection between final disposal and the alleged final destination of the deceased's soul (e.g. Watson 1988: 204, Parkin 1996: 107–13, Weiss-Krejci 2011a: 75). Therefore it is important to consider treatment of the corpse, mourning rituals, disposal, and grave rites as well as ideas concerning the afterlife separately from each other.

(p. 284) During the mourning period, the survivors, depending on their relationship with the deceased, constitute a separate group upon which prohibitions and obligations are imposed (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 297, Malinowski 1926: 48, Gluckmann 1937: 122). Their felt emotions—some consider them of natural origin; others as social constructions (Rosaldo 1984, Spiro 1984, Houston et al. 2006: 181–3)—do not necessarily correspond to the patterns of behaviour exhibited in mourning rituals (Leach 1958: 152, Geertz 1960: 72, Danforth 1982: 72, Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 43–61, Durkheim 2001: 29, Clark-Decès 2005: 1–3). Mourning is characterized by various public symbolic gestures (Leach 1958), whereas grief (Bowlby 1980) is more personal. The survivors of an executed murderer, for example, will probably feel the pain inflicted by the loss. But there will be no public mourning and probably no true loss felt by others. Additionally, mourning rites are no guarantee that grief can be overcome. Sometimes people fail in their efforts to

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deal with disturbing events (Hollan 1995: 434), as I will later show using the example of an Austrian mine disaster.

If the funerary rites are not completed, not performed well or not performed at all, in many societies throughout the world beliefs exist that the dead may haunt the living and turn into malignant spirits (e.g.; Frazer 1886: 64, Arnett 1904: 144, Roscoe 1911: 290, van Gennep 1960: 160–1, Hertz 1960, Goody 1962: 62, Watson 1988: 204, Garland 1998: 115, Zur 1998: 210, Jacobi 2003: 97–8, Hope 2007: 239, Tylor 2010). Anthropologists of the 19th century attributed these anxieties directly to the instinctive fear of the rotting corpse, whereas their successors have rendered the relationship between these emotions more complex and culture-specific (see Goody 1962: 21–5).

In ancient Greece, for example, it was the primary obligation of the survivors to perform the funeral rites as expediently and efficiently as possible. Not only was it the greatest shame to leave a corpse untreated and unburied, but it also put both the deceased and the living at considerable risk. It was believed that the souls of the unburied dead were not admitted to Hades but had to wander up and down the banks of the River Styx (Tarbell 1884: 37, Tylor 2010: 25). In the *Iliad* (XXIII, 71–6), when Patroklos' corpse lies unburied, his ghost appears to the sleeping Achilles and urges that he cremate him as soon as possible so that he can enter Hades. Inadequacies of funeral rites also drive Achilles' ghost out of the grave. When the Greeks prepare to leave Troy, the ghost of Achilles appears and restrains the troops, because they are departing without leaving offerings on his tomb. Achilles demands the sacrifice of Priam's daughter Polyxena. Only after the Greeks cut her throat over his tomb is the ghost appeased (Felton 1999: 10, Tuczay 2004: 101). Both Patroklos and Achilles originally are not afforded proper funerary treatment because of the specific circumstances under which they had died. The reasons why some people are denied proper funeral rites and how they are treated will be subject of the following section.

Categories of Unburied Dead

People who are Denied Funerals

The fate of being denied a funeral frequently befalls specific types of people, such as those who die by violence or accident, and the 'wicked' (Tylor 2010: 25), women who die in childbirth, people killed by drowning or lightning, suicides (Hertz 1960), those bereft of family, (p. 285) people who die on a journey or through the violation of a taboo (van Gennep 1960: 161), those who die from special diseases, as well as the very young and very old (Ucko 1969: 271, Durkheim 2001: 56). There are numerous ethnographic examples from all over the world of how these people are treated (burned, mutilated, fed to animals, discarded, buried in the ground, etc.) and where they are deposited (in the water, at a crossroads, etc.). In the archaeological literature some of these treatments are referred to as deviant, abnormal, unusual, non-normative, or 'special' (Shay 1985: 227, Veit 1996: 17–36, Aspöck 2008, Taylor 2008, Tsaliki 2008). However, which kinds of treatment of the corpse and which places of deposition carry negative connotations and are chosen for those who are not afforded proper funerary rites differs from one society to another. In Binford's (1971: 16) words, mortuary symbols 'may vary independently of their referents and vice versa.' That the same set of symbols may be employed differently was already noted by Kroeber (1927). Using ethnographic data from Africa, compiled by German culture area diffusionist Küsters (1919–20, 1921–2), he concludes:

Thus, river burial is sometimes reserved for chiefs, sometimes for the drowned, sometimes is the normal practice of a group. Tree and platform burial is in certain populations restricted respectively to musicians, magicians, the bewitched, the lightning struck, criminals, and kings; cremation is generally reserved for criminals, but also occurs as the usual practice; exposure is variously in usage, according to tribe, for the corpses of criminals, slaves, children, the common people, the entire population. (Kroeber 1927: 313)

Also within one and the same social group what is normal and what is not is far from clear-cut (Aspöck 2009: 56–7). No society is characterized by one way of dealing with the corpse, but will usually show a variety of treatments and deposition modes and spaces depending on factors such as age, gender, wealth, social status, occupation, ideology, and cause and place of death (Goody 1959: 135, Ucko 1969: 270, Saxe 1970, Binford 1971, Weiss-Krejci 2005: 170). For example, people belonging to different age categories are treated differentially in a large number of societies (Goody 1959: 136, van Gennep 1960: 153, Donnelly and Murphy 2008, Weiss-Krejci 2008: 183–5, Aspöck 2009: 84). In particular, the very young, newly and prematurely born are often discarded without ceremony. Ucko (1969: 271) gives the example of the Nandi of Kenya, who normally put the bodies of the dead out for the hyenas to eat. The hyena is the vehicle by which the spirit leaves the earth. But very old people, who have lost their teeth and the very young

who die before receiving first teeth, are buried in the ground from where they can go straight to spirit-land without the help of the hyenas (Huntingford 1953: 138). Among the Nandi, exposing and burying in the ground are opposite treatments, but both are applied in a positive way. Exposure is not an expression of negative sentiments.

One of the most common reasons for refusal of regular funeral rites is bad death. Which types of death are considered as 'good' or 'bad', and which ones as natural or unnatural, varies from one society to the other (Kluckhohn 1948, Brugge 1978: 311, Humphreys 1981: 261–3, Bloch and Parry 1982: 15–18, Cátedra 1992, Bradbury 1999). Hertz (1960) thinks that the way in which some individuals are torn from this world separates them forever from their relatives. The reason for differential treatment of these kinds of people is not the result of a lack, but of the intensity and suddenness, of emotions. There is no point in waiting for a certain period to allow the deceased to be reunited with the other dead, because their death is eternal. According to Bloch and Parry (1982: 15), to whom funerary rituals in many societies are (p. 286) acts of rebirth and regeneration, bad deaths are those where there is an absence of social control and which do not result in regeneration.

Considering the kinds of death and the treatments in the context of the normal funerary practices of each society, it becomes apparent that certain deaths are regarded as a direct intervention of the supernatural and therefore the dead are treated differently or with special precaution (Middleton 1960: 202, Parry 1982: 87–101, Aspöck 2009: 88). They are not fit for proper rites of passage. Among the Ibo of Nigeria, there is no lamentation for suicides. Poor people are hired to carry the body away and no one follows (Thomas 1917: 166; see also Hope 2007: 80 on ancient Rome). Among the Vaqueiros of Asturias, suicide is frequent and, although not considered a sin or crime, in the past suicides were not deposited in sacred ground (Cátedra 1992: 228). Among the Navajo there existed a taboo against touching anybody whose body had been struck by lightning, or who had been killed by a tornado or drowned (Ward 1980: 8, Jacobi 2003: 98).

Throughout history, denial of proper funerary treatment has also been used as a post-mortem punishment for those who have done wrong. One of the oldest stories is that of Polyneices, the son of Oedipus, who died during his attack on Thebes. King Creon forbids the removal of his corpse. However, Polyneices' sister Antigone defies Creon's decision and recovers the body of her dead brother and buries him as required (Sophocles 2001). In England, from the 7th century onwards, execution cemeteries began to appear. These were usually located away from normal cemeteries. The cemetery of Walkington Wold, which dates to the mid to late Anglo-Saxon Period, contained decapitated people with variant body orientations and positions (Buckberry 2008); another execution cemetery is the medieval graveyard St Margaret in Combusto in Norwich, where the hanged were thrown in fully clothed (Daniell 1997: 149). In late medieval England, criminals were also hung up and left to rot with the heads stuck up on poles (Daniell 1997: 120). From the 16th century onwards, the bodies of executed criminals were turned over to anatomists for dissection (Richardson 1987: 32, Delaney 1988: 75, Crossland 2009: 105).

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Not only serious crimes but also lesser evils sometimes see post-mortem punishment. European folktales abound with stories about people who are guilty of some wrong behaviour and therefore refused deposition in a proper space. In a French folk tale a young man sees an unburied body on a dung heap. He is told that the man had owed money when he died. The young man decides to pay the debts so that the corpse can be buried. The moral of this story is about fulfilling the duty to bury a corpse in the graveyard, but it also shows that not paying debts was a sin, punished with refusal of proper burial (Galley 2005: 105).

Not just punishing the person, but weakening or destroying a person's soul, can be a reason for improper treatment of the corpse (Durkheim 2001: 49). In ancient Greece it was believed that cutting the extremities from the corpse could prevent the vengeance of a murder victim on its murderer. Clytemnestra mutilates Agamemnon after killing him (Tuczay 2004: 101). In medieval and pre-modern Europe witches and heretics were burned at the stake. People believed that this would inhibit the chance of resurrection (Finucane 1981: 7–58, Davies 2005: 191). In the past the Andaman islanders cut their killed enemies into pieces and burnt them. The goal was to get rid of their blood and fat so they could ascend to the sky and were no longer a danger to those who had killed them (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 166). Among Native Americans of the southeast, the corpses of those who were potentially malevolent after death were dismembered and displayed (Jacobi 2003: 103).

(p. 287) Apart from damaging the body and the soul, improper treatment of enemies has various other effects. Where there is pride and honour, there will be their opposites, shame and humiliation (Houston et al. 2006: 203). Taking and displaying human trophies can be a way to punish the recipient and demonstrate power over an enemy (Jacobi 2003: 103). In the *Iliad* Achilles drags Hector's corpse around the walls of Troy. After the downing of a US helicopter in Mogadishu in 1993, Somalis dragged the dead American soldiers through the street and paraded them with their dismembered body parts (Gray 2003: 218).

Dead people are also denied a final funeral for economic purposes. In southern China, it is customary to wait a while for the final deposition of the corpse. The dead are usually buried in a temporary grave. After several years, the bones are exhumed, cleaned, and put into a large urn. Years later, the bones may be buried in a permanent tomb (Watson 1988: 208). In Taiwan, some families store the urn at some secluded location and prefer to delay the final deposition. The reasons for the delay are manifold: some lack the money to build a respectable new grave; others wait until a geomantically perfect site can be located. One family left the urn unburied on a spot rumoured to have been marked for development because they would receive handsome compensation for the removal of the urn (Tsu 2000: 20).

Quite often those who have been denied proper funerals are given their proper rites at a much later point in time, as Frazer's example of a Chinese superstition illustrates:

The Chinese are convinced that when human bodies remain unburied, the souls of their late owners feel the discomfort of rain, just as living man would do if they were exposed without shelter to the inclemency of the weather. These wretched souls, therefore, do all in their power to prevent the rain from falling, and often their efforts are only too successful ...Hence it has been a common practice of the Chinese authorities in time of drought to inter the dry bones of the unburied dead ... (Frazer 1963 [1922]: 82-3)

When the unburied dead, who were denied proper funerals, go through a process of exhumation, they become 'unburied' in a double sense. Some of these reburials should not be confused with 'secondary burials' in Hertzian sense because they are not embedded in a tradition of secondary rituals. This especially applies to political victims who are killed, their corpses maltreated and hidden, but later discovered and exhumed. The list of political unburied dead lasts long. On it we find Imre Nagy, the hero of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, who was reburied on 16 June 1989; Che Guevara and his companions, reburied in Cuba in October 1997; the Romanovs, reburied in St Petersburg 17 July 1998; hundreds of 1995 massacre victims, reburied in Srebrenica on 11 July 2005; Khmer Rouge victims of Cambodia; massacre victims of Guatemala; and the *desaparecidos* of Argentina. In some instances exhumation and forensic examination provide consolation and relief to the survivors because the truth about the victims' deaths is revealed. Through reburial the dead bodies are relocated to proper spaces. Yet, reburial can also be exclusively politically motivated since it rewrites the history of relations between political and ethnic groups (Zur 1998, Verdery 1999, Robben 2000, Ballinger 2002, Dosal 2004, Weiss-Krejci 2011b).

From the perspective of the killers, mutilating corpses and making them disappear not only conceals death. In specific circumstances, disappearance can be a strategy, because the absence of a corpse can have a strong psychological effect on the survivors, as I will show in the next section.

(p. 288) Inaccessible Corpses

Corpse loss as a result of terror, warfare (Fig. 16.2) and accidents was probably as common in prehistoric and early historic times as it is today (e.g. corpse loss at sea; see Pollard 1999). Yet we cannot be certain how people of a prehistoric past reacted to the absence of corpses. As ethnographic examples show, not every society considers the corpse equally important to the mourning process (e.g. Woodburn 1982). Negative emotional responses to the absence of corpses are not universal. In addition, the reasons for corpse loss come into play. Many societies consider death in battle positively (e.g. Straus 1978). So even if the practices that relate to emotional group values leave traces in the archaeological record, we may not be able to recognize them. Examples from the modern world show how variably groups can compensate for missing corpses. In England, following World War I, memorials and days of remembrance were established to commemorate the missing dead (Tarlow 1999: 153-9). Japanese World War II Kamikaze

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pilots would cut their hair and finger nails before going into battle. These were sent home to their families after their death because there would not be a body to cremate in a funeral service (Hill 2006: 31). In Angola, in times of war, it is believed that when a corpse is missing, the spirits of the dead will come with the wind to join their kin for the funeral ceremony (Honwana 2006: 236).



fig. 16.2 Capture of Tunis, AD 1535

Notes: After the capture of Tunis in AD 1535 by Christian troops, the corpses of the fallen Turks were left to rot on the battlefield and in the water. Not shown in this image but also part of the same tapestry is a depiction of a priest holding a funeral for a dead Christian warrior on the beach. The shrouded corpse is disposed in an earth grave.

Source: 'The Conquest of Tunis, tapestry 12, Departure from La Goletta' (detail), W. Pannemaker, based on a cartoon by J. C. Vermeyen; Palace of Charles V, Alcázar, Seville, Spain. Photo E. Weiss-Krejci.

In societies where it is considered important to have a corpse in order to hold a funeral, missing corpses may deprive survivors of rituals which help them through the mourning process. Relatives are forever left with nagging questions and uncertainties regarding the (p. 289) final fate of the deceased. Some may even contemplate a person's survival unless a dead body turns up.

The deaths of abducted persons in Argentina during the rule of the military regime were not publicly acknowledged. If assassinated, the victims

were either cremated or interred secretly as unidentified bodies in municipal cemeteries, abandoned at roadsides, thrown in rivers, or flung from planes at sea (Robben 2000, 2004: 7). Without bodies to mourn, dead to commemorate, or epitaphs to read, there was no possibility of reconciling oneself with the death of a relative. It also decreased the probability of creating political martyrs. After the fall of the regime, many of the disappeared were exhumed, identified, and reburied. Robben (2000) observes that the Argentine military had underestimated the political and emotional force of people's desire to bury and mourn the dead. Through their violent death and subsequent exhumation and reburial, these political martyrs had a continuing impact on Argentine politics.

The absence of corpses had a similar effect during the times of *La Violencia*, the genocide among inhabitants of the highlands of Guatemala, because it was difficult for the relatives to bring out emotions without a corpse. Women report that they felt dirty, as if embodying the pollution of the bodies of the dead (Zur 1998: 290). To have the bodies later reburied in the cemetery meant that the spirits had a chance to make the journey to the world of the dead and allowed the relatives to visit the graves on the Day of the Dead (Zur 1998:

204, 284). However, not all bodies were discovered and reburied. The survivors of those whose corpses could not be recovered were even worse off, feeling a growing anxiety about their relatives' fate (Zur 1998: 293). This is in line with Brison's (1995: 474–5) observation that the very same beliefs that under normal conditions give consolation and help people surmount suffering, can inhibit complete psychological—and social—recovery. The Merina of Madagascar's worst nightmare, according to Bloch and Parry (1982), is that one's body will be lost. A lost body cannot enter into the communal tomb during the reburial ceremony, the *famadihana*. 'Without this reburial not only is a potential source of regeneration lost to the group, but the death of the individual is truly terminal' (Bloch and Parry 1982: 15).

Declarations of death and the knowledge about the approximate whereabouts of the dead are not always sufficient substitutes for corpses. I will use the example of a mine disaster. These types of accidents are man-made, strike without any warning, and usually affect an entire community with stable ties (Couto 1989: 310).

On 17 July 1998, water started to leak into the talc mine of Lassing, Austria. Following the collapse of a tunnel, one miner was trapped in the lunch room 60 metres below ground. A squad of nine miners and one geologist was sent into the mine to help in the rescue, but was also trapped after a massive mud collapse. After nine days of intense search, the first miner, who had been trapped on the morning of 17 July, was found alive. The fate of the other ten men remained unclear and the search for them was halted on 14 August. Once survival was no longer a possibility, the relatives wanted two things: recovery of the bodies and an explanation for the event (Blatt 2001–2: 39). Since neither was delivered to their satisfaction, their anger started to build and serious accusations were levelled at the Mining Company, including an underlying sentiment that illegal mining activities had been the reason for the collapse. Following the official statement two years after the accident that recovery of the dead bodies was not possible, the large crater which had opened during the collapse was filled in and a memorial was erected on top (Fig. 16.3).



fig. 16.3 Ten empty graves for ten miners 'buried' alive during 1998 Lassing mine collapse, Styria, Austria

Source: Memorial of the Lassing mine disaster, Styria, Austria. Photo E. Weiss-Krejci.

(p. 290) The location and form of the monument is an attempt to comply with the emotional and ritual requirements of the survivors. Ten individual grave slabs, which are arranged in a circle, bear the names of the ten victims. Although devoid of bodies, these individualized graves provide a chance for the relatives to carry out specific ritual actions and follow Roman Catholic

mortuary customs, such as bringing fresh flowers, lighting candles, and visiting the grave on All Souls' Day. Following Williams (2006: 10) on the agency of objects, one could argue that the physical absence of the bodies has influenced the way in which the mourners interact with the dead. Had the dead miners been recovered, the corpses would have been laid to rest in the local graveyard.

Like other disaster monuments, the Lassing monument is more than just mnemonic. It marks the space of the disaster and indicates that the dead are present in some regard. Yet, the attempt to facilitate mourning and remembrance of the tragic event by means of a monument was not successful. In Austria a proper funeral requires disposal of a corpse. Despite being 'buried' by the collapsed debris, the erection of a memorial, and commemorative ceremonies held for them, the Lassing mine disaster victims remain unburied dead. The lack of bodies, in combination with the unanswered questions concerning the last hours in the victims' lives, has inhibited the completion of the survivors' grief work. In a public statement issued in 2008 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the disaster (Die Presse 2008), the victims' relatives plead with the public to leave them alone because to talk about the incident would renew the pain and cause emotional stress. In an interview with an Austrian magazine, the mother of one of the victims admits that she is still tormented by not knowing where, how, and with whom her son rests (N.N. 2008).

The problem of the missing dead has also been recognized by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Their guidelines stress the necessity to recover corpses after disasters. (p. 291) Disaster victims should be treated as persons, not bodies, because the inability to perform rituals would condemn the family to a second death (Eyre 2006: 446).

That memorials are often inadequate substitutes for graves is also shown by Walls and Williams (2010) in their analysis of Torcross Tank Memorial in Devon. The monument was erected by a local man in order to commemorate US-American soldiers who had died in

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battle training ahead of D-Day. During 'Exercise Tiger' German torpedo boats sank two American landing boat tanks and damaged another. The attack resulted in the loss of over 700 lives (Walls and Williams 2010: 52). Although the tank, which was raised from the seabed in 1984, commemorates the collective 'body' of the dead, the interest of the media and the public centred on the whereabouts of the physical bodies (Walls and Williams 2010: 60).

The obsession with missing corpses directly leads us to the changing perceptions of the relationship between personhood and the corpse. Not only are late-modern and postmodern wars increasingly characterized by 'an absolute mania' (Gray 2003: 218) to retrieve the dead and bury their corpses, but throughout the western world today one can observe a growing concern with all kinds of 'unburied' human dead. The dissemination of US-American attitudes towards the dead body is slowly creating a new ideology in which proper burial is equated with permanent and individualized disposal in the ground. Thus, exhumation and collective reburial due to the clearing of grave lots (e.g. Heessels and Venbrux 2009), the retention of dead bodies for the purpose of scientific investigation, and the display of the dead during exhibitions are increasingly encountering criticism from the public.

Dead Bodies on Display

The relationship between the person and the corpse is one of the many issues raised by the discourse revolving around the plastinated bodies in the exhibition 'Body Worlds'. This exhibit is regarded 'as a fantastic success' by some and 'a moral scandal' by others (Hirschauer 2006: 26). What causes uneasiness among the spectators is probably a combination of elements such as the way in which these bodies are displayed, their commodification, their depersonalization, and the fact that they have not been 'properly' buried in the ground.

Not only the recently deceased but also much older human bodies have become the subject of a polarized public discourse. While in North America museum collections with human remains have been at the centre of debates over repatriation for decades (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006), the keeping of anatomical collections as well as display of prehistoric skeletons in Europe has also come under scrutiny (see Sellevold 2002, James 2008, Moshenska 2009, Sayer 2009). One argument, raised in connection with the exhibition of human remains, is that their display is disrespectful and unethical (CoBDO 2008: 2).

It is not my intention here to build a case against repatriation of museum specimens to their legal owners. I would like to demonstrate that the display of dead bodies is neither restricted to modern society nor necessarily a sign of disrespectful treatment of the dead. The difference between what is disrespectful and what is honourable sometimes merely lies in the underlying intentions and strongly depends on the context. In modern times, the corpses of famous individuals such as Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, or Eva Peron were

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embalmed in order to be viewed and venerated by the living shortly after death. These dead bodies strengthened the legitimacies of the ruling parties (Tumarkin 1983, Robben 2000: 100–2). (p. 292) These relic bodies were never physically removed from the world of the living. In no way was the display of these dead meant to be disrespectful.

The mummified Inca kings, according to historic sources, were also brought into the public domain in order to play active political roles. They carried on daily domestic lives in their Cuzco palaces, attended state ceremonies, spoke, ate, drank, and asked questions. The dead bodies continued to own private property and the estate which they had possessed in life (Brundage 1963: 179, McEwan 2006: 140–1). Headrick (1999) argues that mummies also fulfilled a specific purpose in ancient Mexico. Teotihuacan's Street of the Dead was probably lined with unburied mortuary bundles, which played a prominent role in the politics of competing lineages. The bundles were placed in accessible locations, where their presence was tangible and they were capable of oracular speech to advise the living.



fig. 16.4 Roman citizen and presumed martyr Saint Coelestina

Notes: Exhumed and transferred from the Roman catacombs to southern Germany in the 18th century.

Source: Altötting, Bavaria, Germany. Photo E. Weiss-Krejci.

Throughout history, people have displayed the dead bodies not only of those they have personally known, but also from a more distant past. Let's take the example of Christian relics. Apart from the belief that relics hold apotropaic and healing powers, among people of Catholic faith the display of relics promotes intense emotional experiences. The material remains of saints and martyrs can serve as a

source of inspiration and consolation. While most of the early Christian reliquaries obliterated a view of the bones, in the early 14th century mass displays on Gothic shelves and altars of bones—sorted by type, for example, by postcranial bones and skulls—became common (Legner 2003: 72–6). Between the 14th and the early 16th centuries, in central Europe periodic celebratory exhibitions of entire relic collections for pilgrims became customary. Books with printed woodcuts were published and served as catalogues for pilgrims, who used these exhibitions to reduce their time in purgatory by buying indulgences (Angenendt 2002: 34). The public display of containers holding (p. 293) relics as well as relic skulls, so-called 'holy heads', was brought to an end in the first part of the 16th century as a result of the Reformation.

The Counter-Reformation (AD 1560 to 1648) saw the revival of the relic cult and the display of human remains started to play an even stronger role. During this period, new types of relic bodies emerged in the Catholic areas north of the Alps. The bones derived from the Roman Catacombs, which were ransacked for the remains of potential Christian martyrs (Johnson 1996, MacCulloch 2003: 401–4). These ‘holy bodies’—endowed with fictive names and identities—were presented as complete skeletons and did not exist in more than one place at a time (Fig. 16.4). They were dressed in padded robes, adorned with pearls and beads by women from convents, and mounted in glass display cases in reclining, seated, and standing positions. The very concrete material remains of the Catacomb saints had a strong mnemonic character. Not only did they serve as *memento mori*, reminding people of their inevitable death, but they also made people think of the early days in which Christians had been persecuted and killed for their religious beliefs. The Catacomb saints helped to reforge communities and encouraged pilgrimage (Johnson 1996). Their public display supported the Catholic Church in its claim to represent the true religion.

Final Remarks

The unburied dead is an inexhaustible topic. There are many more categories, which would have merited consideration: sacrificial victims, cryonic suspension, or the manufacture of human corpses into artefacts. In this chapter I could only deal with a few aspects. I have discussed the treatment of individuals who die bad deaths, who receive post-mortem punishment because of some wrongdoing, and who are considered dangerous in a spiritual or political way. I have also addressed ‘unburial’ and reburial of persons who never received a proper funeral in the first place. I have shown how, under certain circumstances, corpse loss can inhibit successful working through of grief. Finally, I addressed various ways in which the dead have been exhibited and used to legitimize religious and political authority.

As I have mentioned before, the detection of any type of unburied dead in the archaeological record will not be easy. So how can prehistorians utilize these insights to discern the nature of the archaeological evidence? In order to identify those who were not treated according to the norm it is necessary to determine the range of mortuary representations in any group under investigation (e.g. Weiss-Krejci 2008: 171–3). This can only be achieved through careful reflection upon the data's representativeness and an awareness that most likely the mortuary record will consist of a mixture of funeral, extrafuneral, and post-funeral deposits (Weiss-Krejci 2011a). Clearly, in some areas this task will be easier than in others, but, no matter which time period and region, in order to succeed we need to distance ourselves from our own cultural standards. The meaning of the mortuary record, including human remains and monuments, entirely depends on the nature of the society that produced it and its ideas relating to the body, to death, and to proper deposition. As I mentioned in the first part of this chapter, in societies that

practise second depositions as part of funeral rituals a complete corpse in a grave can be evidence of an incomplete funeral. On the other hand, fragmentary and disarticulated remains may be evidence that the funeral has been completed.

(p. 294) To write about the unburied dead is of course also a welcome opportunity to contribute some thoughts to the reburial issue concerning European prehistoric collections. Archaeology itself can be considered a kind of post-funeral mortuary practice, which contributes to the creation of new environments in which to engage with the dead (Williams and Williams 2007). In pre-modern Europe, post-funeral exhumation was never considered illegal or unethical. At no time were there prohibitions against moving remains (McGuire 1994: 175). The bones of aristocrats and the wealthy were frequently relocated from one tomb to another (Weiss-Krejci 2001, 2005) and for centuries the bones of those belonging to the poorer strata of society were disinterred from overcrowded graveyards and re-deposited in charnel houses (Daniell 1997: 123). This was not a desecration or sign of disrespect, but followed practical reasons. In many parts of modern Europe it is still customary to exhume the bones and even demolish the grave monument after the grave licence has expired (e.g. Heessels and Venbrux 2009). Seen from this point of view, there are 'worse' fates for dead bodies than ending up on a museum shelf or in a glass vitrine.

As in the Middle Ages (Brown 1981: 24), present-day groups often use expressions of loyalty to the memory or to the tombs of the dead as a lever to legitimate religious identity and political power (Flynn and Laderman 1994: 67). In light of the intercultural variability in conceptions of proper and improper treatment and disposal, it is probably an illusion to think that we can ever truly understand how people of a very distant past felt about their dead and what they would have considered improper. The sanctity of human remains is always a matter of renegotiation by the living.

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Suggested Further Reading

Suggested Further Reading

Brandes, S. 2001. The Cremated Catholic: The Ends of a Deceased Guatemalan. *Body & Society* 7(2-3): 111-20.

This piece tells the story of a lawsuit against a funeral parlour and Californian county morgue by family members of a Guatemalan from Nahualtenango, who was accidentally cremated in the US.

Ceruti, C. 2004. Human Bodies as Objects of Dedication at Inca Mountain Shrines (North-Western Argentina). *World Archaeology* 36(1): 103-22.

The article compares the archaeological evidence from offerings of human victims on mountaintop sites in Argentina with the chroniclers' accounts.

(p. 295) Chacon, R. J., and Dye, D. H. (eds) 2007. *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians*. New York: Springer.

An edited book with 23 contributions on head-hunting and trophy taking in North and Latin America.

Conklin, B. A. 2001. *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press.

This book presents an ethnographic account of funerary cannibalism among the Wari' Indians of the western Amazonian rainforest.

Evans, C. A. 2005. Jewish Burial Traditions and the Resurrection of Jesus. *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 2005(3): 233-48.

A paper on burial customs and implications of non-burial among the ancient Jews.

Hope, V. M. 2003. Trophies and Tombstones: Commemorating the Roman Soldier. *World Archaeology* 35(1): 79-97.

Among other things this paper discusses the attitudes towards dead warriors in ancient Greece and Rome and the consequences for the unburied dead.

Kyle, D. G. 1998. *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*. London: Routledge.

This book describes how gladiators, criminals, and Christians were killed in ancient Rome and how and where their bodies were disposed of.

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Lagercrantz, S. 1991. *The Dead Man in the Tree*. Uppsala: Förutvarande institutionen för allmän och jämförande etnografi vid Uppsala Universitet.

This work summarizes deposition of the dead in trees in Africa.

Layton, R. 1994 (ed.) *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions*. New York: Routledge.

This edited book contains several papers on the disturbance of indigenous cultures by the exhumation and reburial of human skeletons for research.

O'Shea, J. 1981. Social Configurations and the Archaeological Study of Mortuary Practices: A Case Study. In: R. W. Chapman, I. Kinnes, and K. Randsborg (eds) *The Archaeology of Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 39-52.

This article provides ethnohistoric examples for normative and non-normative mortuary practices among the Plains Indians.

Quigley, C. 2001 *Skulls and Skeletons: Human Bone Collections and Accumulations*. Jefferson: McFarland.

This book examines various motivations for the collection of human bones. It provides an overview of diverse collections and covers issues of repatriation.

Reynolds, A. 2009. *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book deals with unusual burial customs in the Anglo-Saxon and Christian world.

Sanford, V. 2003. *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

The author who participated in the exhumation of mass graves in Guatemala tells the story of massacres among the indigenous population through the voices of the rural survivors.

Walker, W. H. 1998. Where are the Witches of Prehistory? *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 5(3): 245-308.

The article discusses ritual violence and evidence for terminating witches in the prehistoric American Southwest.

Williams, M. 2003. Tales from the Dead: Remembering the Bog Bodies in the Iron Age of North-Western Europe. In: H. Williams (ed.) *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Society*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers: 89-112.

This paper provides a review of Iron Age bog bodies and interprets bog bodies as the remains of ritual specialists, whose grisly deaths were part of public performances.

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