

PART I

Fire and the Body

Reframing Perspectives on Cremation

Perspectives—Complexities of Terminologies and Intellectual Frameworks in Cremation Studies

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The study of cremation does not have a single standardized vocabulary. There are many differences, some large and most small, in how archaeologists from across the globe label and describe the social processes and archaeological manifestations of fire and the body. At the Amerind workshop that produced this volume, contributors were asked whether they wanted to create a single set of terms to be employed across the diverse case studies in this book. The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, was “no.” At first glance this decision might come across as sloppiness or as a group of scholars unwilling to critique, evaluate, and possibly change the terms they have used to discuss cremation. It is true that changing terms and definitions would require a series of complex addendums to past research and to connect with previous literature on mortuary and cremation archaeology. At a deeper level, however, this decision reflected the participants’ view that complex terminologies can serve as a tool for fostering dialogue across disciplines and intellectual frameworks. In this brief chapter, we want to highlight some of the reasons why a standard terminology is impossible at this time. Instead of asking whether there *should* be a standard glossary for cremation studies, we would like to use a few examples to explore the potential benefits of the terminological complexities that exist in cremation studies.

Factors in Complex Terminologies

There are many reasons for the terminological complexity when discussing cremations, but we would like to draw special attention to four: (1) cremation is not only an archaeological phenomenon (many

stakeholders must be considered); (2) there are diversities in intellectual frameworks within archaeology; (3) cremation is a complex and diverse social process that produces material remains; and (4) the presence of cremation as a mortuary practice is heterogeneous over time and space.

Many Stakeholders

Cremation plays a part in modern treatments after death, and it has a major role in society today (see Quinn et al., introduction to this volume). It is a process that many people are familiar with, either from knowing people who have been cremated after death or from the many references to cremation in literature, movies, and other media. Cremation has been discussed by cultural anthropologists, historians, forensic anthropologists, theologians, funeral directors, and poets, just to name a few. To expect succinct, commonly accepted, and restrictive definitions of cremation terminology in this context is wishful thinking. The best example of this may be the *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Davies and Mates 2005), in which variable vocabularies of cremation from multiple stakeholders in a global context exhibit why a single, reasonable terminology is not possible.

Diverse Intellectual Frameworks

Within archaeology, cremation has been studied through multiple intellectual traditions, each with its own history, sets of questions, and approaches to data. In particular, geo-disciplinary histories have shaped archaeological discourse in distinct and parallel dimensions (see Trigger 2006). The development of European archaeology (closely associated with history) and North American archaeology (closely associated with anthropology) has contributed to many of these differences. The limited degree of cross-Atlantic transfer and sharing of ideas and approaches to cremations, as well as challenges associated with research in multiple languages (Kristiansen 2001), has led to the establishment of different conventions.

A Complex Social Process

Another source of variability in cremation vocabulary is the incredible diversity of the social practice and material remains of cremations themselves (see Larsson and Nilsson Stutz, chap. 3, and Cooney, chap. 10,

this volume). In many cases, bodies follow different pathways through the cremation process and enter the archaeological record in different ways. Sometimes the body is cremated, while in other contexts only defleshed bones are burned. Sometimes all of the bones are collected; other times, only portions. Sometimes they are then buried; other times they are not. Sometimes objects are burned with the body; other times they are placed with the body only after the cremation. As the case studies in this volume illustrate, there is no “standard form” of cremations and with it, no standard vocabulary to discuss them.

A Heterogeneous Phenomenon

In the past, cremation practices were unevenly distributed across time and space. Researchers who work in areas and times where cremations are more prominent have engaged with cremation terminology differently than researchers in contexts where cremations are rare, undervalued, and often overlooked. In many places, cremations are seen as devoid of information, leading to a lack of systematic study, collection, or curation of cremated remains (see Goldstein and Meyers, chap. 11, this volume). The abundance of European archaeological contexts where cremation is the most common form of mortuary treatment has spurred archaeologists working in Europe to find both methodological and theoretical ways of accessing social information in cremations. This has also resulted in more sophisticated modeling, terminology, and attempts to unpack multiple dimensions of information from cremations. In contexts where the study of human remains has more political and ethical challenges, there have been fewer studies and less of an emphasis has been placed on the social implications of cremation (see Nilsson Stutz and Thomas, chap. 2, this volume).

Advantages of Multiple Terminologies

It is clear that currently there is no set terminology for cremation studies. It is also clear that creating such a set of terms would be potentially misleading, potentially undesirable, and not easy. So what, if anything, is gained by having multiple terminologies of cremation? We believe that understanding the discrepancies in terms, definitions, and uses can actually inform our understanding of cremation as a complex process of transformation, negotiation, fragmentation, and integration. Here

some examples are discussed of how comparing the variable terms used across different intellectual frameworks can inform the larger study of cremation as a social process.

Bodies

The material remains of burnt bodies are described in many ways. Terms such as *cremated remains*, *cremains*, and *ashes* are often used interchangeably to describe the remains of burnt bodies. The term *ashes* is particularly complicated. It reflects the material output of modern techniques of cremation (see Quinn et al., introduction to this volume). It also does not adequately reflect most non-Western and past cremation practices where relatively large and recognizable fragments of human bone are preserved after the completion of the cremation. The use of the term *ashes* may have contributed to the preconceived notion that no bioarchaeological or social information can be recovered from cremations. However, the term *ashes* does a better job than *cremains* or *cremated remains* of invoking the dynamic process of fiery transformation from a recognizable individual into a set of material remains that are no longer recognizable as a single person—a process that is integral to the social processes of making and unmaking identities, negotiating new relationships, and characterizing the link between life and death that can be seen in all of the case studies in this volume.

Archaeological deposits with different quantities of bone can be an important source of information about treatments and conceptualizations of the body (see Brück, chap. 6, Cerezo-Román, chap. 8, and Cooney, chap. 10, this volume). The term *token* has been used to describe burials with low bone weights (see McKinley 1997). However, there are questions as to the specific formation processes that lead to variations in bone weight and the implications for conceptualizations of identity, gender, and personhood (Brück, chap. 6, and Cerezo-Román, chap. 8, this volume). They could reflect loss over generations of curation, a change in what represents an individual, or the potential deposition of a single individual in multiple locations. The use of *token* as a descriptive term might unnecessarily prescribe specific social meanings to an archaeological phenomenon. This is not problematic when those meanings are appropriate, but it may become problematic when applied in different cultural contexts. As several authors in this volume

demonstrate, challenging the baggage that comes with terminologies associated with cremation can reveal new insights into the social processes of cremation.

Schurr and Cook (chap. 4, this volume) use the terms *accidental cremation* and *incidental cremation* to describe bones burned in situ in a tomb rather than on a pyre. One of the possible scenarios posed by the authors is that the burning was not part of the original funerary practice. Instead, the burning of bodies may have taken place generations later, by a different community. This challenges traditional perspectives that mortuary rites were fully conducted by the community from which the dead came. In this way, this form of fire and the body is not part of the coherent mortuary program of the treatment of bodies, but it is part of the ritual action of the later community. Complications in describing these phenomena remain, however, as the burning of these mortuary structures and the bodies inside are likely deliberate actions for which terms like *accidental* or *incidental* may not fully account. This case does highlight the need to consider the full range of peoples and practices that produced the material mortuary record.

Goods

The terms used to describe artifacts found with cremated remains have significance. For example, the term *pyre goods* has been employed to describe artifacts that were cremated along with the body on a pyre (see McKinley 1997; Williams 2008a). This is in contrast to *grave goods* which were placed in association with the human remains in graves only after cremation. Distinguishing pyre goods from grave goods has provided a line of evidence that has been employed within several archaeological studies to understand the multistage process of cremation and different social factors associated with different steps in the mortuary rite (e.g., Polfer 2000). In archaeological terms, it is very difficult to distinguish between material culture items burned during cremation with the body and those burned in a separate context only to be later reunited with the body in the grave (see Sørensen, chap. 9, and Brück, chap. 6, this volume).

Special terms for ceramics—in particular, *urns*—are often linked with cremations. The link between cremation and ceramic production as fiery technologies (Larsson and Nilsson Stutz, chap. 3, this volume)

and the link between bodies and pots as vessels (skins) (Williams, chap. 5, this volume) are made because ceramics are commonly found with buried cremated remains, and often as containers for these remains. Terms like *urn*, which is often more associated with burial deposits than living deposits, can reference specialized ceramics for the dead. In many cases, however, this may obscure the links between domestic and mortuary contexts and uses. Some containers holding cremated remains may have originally been used in domestic contexts or are of a form that is common outside of graves. The presence or absence of similar ceramics in noncremation contexts is important for understanding how people conceptualized the practice of cremation, life, and death. The link to wider material culture, beyond grave assemblages, is a necessary part of mortuary archaeology—it is not something that can be studied without any reference to or awareness of the social contexts of the living. Cremation, as a process of movement and transformation, creates opportunities for bodies to pass through a series of social contexts prior to burial, and terminology associated with ceramics provides a reminder of those links.

Places

There are many terms used to describe the places and spaces associated with cremation. The place of burning of the body is described alternatively within this volume as a *crematorium*, *pyre*, or *primary cremation*. When compared, *crematorium* and *pyre* appear to be terms of scale, with pyres being suggestive of small-scale and infrequent burning and crematoria as an almost industrial area. These terms, however, have not been standardized and often refer to the same features regardless of scale. Linking these terms to the issue of scale might make them more useful in typifying cremation social practice.

The term *primary cremation*, as used by Cerezo-Román (chap. 8, this volume), references the place of burning, while *secondary cremation* is used to describe contexts where burnt remains are deposited following the burning, collection, and transport of the body. While these particular terms may be problematic given the common use of *primary* and *secondary* to describe full inhumation burials and all burials of disarticulated human remains, respectively (e.g., J. Brown 2010; Hertz 1960 [1907]; Kuijt 1996; Å. Larsson 2003; O'Shea 1984, 1988, 1995), there is

an important distinction to be made between human remains found at places of burning and those found separate from burning. This distinction, often unrecognized, can reveal important social information, such as what parts of the body may be most important for representing the individual, or who does and does not get to be moved from pyre to grave. Further complicating the issue is the use of *primary* to describe the first burials in cemeteries, often the central burial in a tomb (see Brück, chap. 6, this volume), and *secondary* to describe more peripheral or subsequent burials. While the use of *primary* and *secondary* in these contexts may overly complicate contexts where multiple mortuary treatments (including inhumation and cremation) are employed, these terms highlight the diachronic nature of mortuary context formation, a fact that is often overlooked in mortuary studies (see Quinn and Kuijt 2013).

Goldstein and Meyers (chap. 11, this volume) discuss the complexity associated with *accretional mounds*, *crypts*, and *charnel houses*, which are commonly used in the literature of the eastern United States. As they highlight, there is often real significance in both the archaeological pattern and social processes that lead to their formation. Add to this other terms for tombs used elsewhere (such as *court tombs* and *passage tombs* in Ireland [see Cooney, chap. 10, this volume]), as well as terms like *ossuary*, *burial*, and *grave*, and there are clearly a lot of terms used to describe the final resting places of cremation deposits. While *mounds* is one of the most widely used terms in European archaeology, the dichotomous split between *accretional mounds* and *mounds* is not common in European literature and might prove useful in European cases.

Moving Forward

The discussion of the potential advantages of multivocality in the terminologies of cremation studies should not be taken as a license for terminological sloppiness (see Whitley 2002 for a discussion of the perils of terminological sloppiness for *ancestors*). Rather, it is a call for archaeologists who study cremation to be self-aware of the terms they choose to use or avoid, even if not agreeing with the use of terms by others. Variable terminologies, which are often contextually specific, are both a hindrance to, and a vital part of, cross-cultural cremation studies. Attention and careful consideration should accompany the terminological

choices authors make, with recognition of the potential for new methodological and theoretical insights that arise from interdisciplinary and interregional research.

Whether a restrictive, common, and shared cremation terminology *should* exist remains unclear. The fact that we do not employ a single terminology throughout this volume should not be taken as attesting that such a venture is not worthwhile. As the examples above illustrate, however, we believe that there can also be advantages in the multivocality of terminologies associated with cremation. Archaeologists must be aware of terminological variability across cremation studies when attempting cross-cultural comparisons. As such, researchers must make efforts to explicitly define the terms used to describe social processes and archaeological features so that comparisons may be made. Being able to draw upon the global variability and diverse terminologies will open up new methodological and theoretical research avenues in specific cultural contexts. Ultimately, cremation terminologies, whether standardized or multivocal, remain tools to be used to articulate and explain patterns and variability in social and archaeological contexts. Employing different tools to recognize and characterize the variability within terms and the processes and features they aim to describe will continue to be an important part of the ongoing development of cremation studies.