

Grave Expectations: Burial Posture in Popular and Museum Representations

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Laying out the dead body in an extended and supine position is very much a taken-for-granted practice in the contemporary Western world, and it is frequently assumed to be the universal standard posture for the corpse. As we expect corpses to be laid out extended and supine, this portrayal is widely replicated and perpetuated in art, popular media and museums. This chapter reflects on the reproduction of corpse postures in two seemingly very different contemporary environments: film/TV portrayals and museum reconstructions. Contending that our idea of the “ideal” burial position is historically and culturally rooted in the trajectories of burial cultures in Western Europe, this chapter discusses the role of cultural expectations in informing the visual imagination surrounding mortuary practices, and explores the methodological and interpretive implications of such expectations in both academic and public contexts.

Introduction

The extended supine position has dominated burial discourse in Europe for over a millennium, as reflected in burials, funerary commemorations and creative representations of funeral scenes: from medieval manuscript art and tomb effigies to Romantic paintings, Victorian novels and contemporary science fiction. The assumption that the extended supine position is a standard positioning practice is sometimes also reflected in archaeological reconstructions and museum displays of funeral scenes, reinforcing archaeologists’ own expectations and those of the viewers in the wider public. Film studies, as well as many online blogs in recent years have explored popular representations of dying and death in both real and fantasy worlds, and have critically addressed the themes, assumptions and issues of historical accuracy in such representations (Kingsepp 2003; e.g. Killgrove’s *Powered by Osteons* (<http://www.poweredbyosteons.org/>); Meyers Emery’s *Bones Don’t Lie* (<https://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/>); Williams’s *Archaeodeath* (<https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/>) and Medievalists.net (<http://www.medievalists.net/>)). However, the question of the posture of the cadaver has so far escaped discussion. Corpse posture, particularly the extended supine position, has likewise been frequently overlooked by anthropologists, archaeologists and other scholars in death studies, often glossed over or even omitted in consideration in archaeological excavation reports, ethnographic field notes and research literature.

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Nevertheless, the posture of the cadaver plays a central role in framing how the body is perceived and physically interacted with. This chapter discusses the role of cultural expectations in informing imaginative efforts surrounding mortuary practices, through an exploration of burial postures in museum reconstructions and film and television portrayals. In visualizing the funerary corpse, representations draw upon a presupposed understanding of how to appropriately present a dead body. The relationship between visualization and knowledge creation embeds a complex dialogue, where academic and non-academic discourses interact with and shape each other (Moser 1992). As we will see below, the extended supine position is pervasive across archaeological reconstructions, museum displays and popular portrayals. This has profound implications not only for the public conceptualization of death in the past, but also for archaeological methods and interpretations in approaching the cultural vibrancy and nuances of funerary rituals, in the past as well as the contemporary world. As this chapter discusses burial positioning, it will focus largely on representations of articulated burials. It should be noted that the display and representation of disarticulated and cremated remains likewise have significant implications for the visualization of death in the past and the present, but these lie beyond the scope of the present chapter.

Contextualizing burial postures

Laying out the dead body in a supine position with extended legs is a prominent funerary convention in the contemporary West, widely employed in the presentation of the corpse without second thought. Although the extended supine position is also used among some non-Christian communities, such as in Hindu cremation rites, this position is by no means a universal or time-honoured preference. Many contemporary and past Islamic communities, for example, arrange the dead body extended and on its right side, such that the dead person faces *qiblah* (Insoll 2001, 129). In the funerary procession and cremation of Jaina ascetics, the corpse is placed in a funeral palanquin covered with a canopy, and arranged in a sitting position: upright, cross-legged and meditative, which may be an allusion to their rebirth in the upper world as kings (Flügel 2015). Beaker burials of the late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Europe were also commonly associated with flexed or crouched bodies lying on one side, generally accompanied by grave-goods, often including a Beaker pot (Thomas 1999, 157). In some cultures, positioning the corpse in the extended supine position is one option among many: in inhumation burials in early Anglo-Saxon England, for instance, bodies may be placed supine, one-sided, or even prone, and with legs extended, flexed or tightly folded (Mui 2018). Supine burials may even be deployed to connote a “bad death” in some societies, such as in southern Ohio Valley in the Archaic period, c. 5,000–2,000 BC, where it is suggested that a supine position might have particularly been associated with violent death, punishment or human sacrifice (Claassen 2010, 114–120).

The extended supine “norm” in Western Europe can be traced back to early Christian burial practices and their place within wider burial traditions of the Roman and Late Antique world. The link between death with sleep has been prominent in Christian funerary rites since the early Church, emphasizing the notion of the peaceful dead at rest until the final judgment (Mutie 2015, 55–64; Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 6). By the second half of the first millennium AD, the preference for the extended supine position had become closely linked with the eschatological anxiety surrounding the treatment of the cadaver in Christian burial practices (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 152). Together with inhumation practice and west–east orientation, the extended supine position might have reinforced the idea that the deceased in the grave may face upwards to the heavenly sky in a prayerful gesture, and may readily rise and face the east on the Day of Judgment. Praying gestures are often depicted in medieval and early modern tombs

and effigies (Ariès 1981, 251–259), and it has also been argued that arm positioning in burials in medieval northern Europe represented gestures of worship and prayer in the context of death (Atzbach 2016).

Although the west–east orientation has declined in prominence along with a growing preference for cremation, particularly in Britain (Jupp 2006), the practice of positioning the cadaver in the supine position with legs extended remains. While the extended supine position is not exclusively used by Christians, the religious dimension implicated in this position appears to have strongly influenced the development of burial cultures in Western Europe. The impact of Christian conversion on the adoption of the extended supine position is evident in the early Christian West (Geake 1992). It can also be seen in European contact with indigenous populations in the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through periods of change, contestation and negotiation between the Christian extended supine practice and indigenous burial traditions (Seeman 2010; Valcárcel Rojas *et al.* 2011). In seventeenth-century southern New England, for instance, the indigenous communities gradually abandoned the traditional flexed burial and adopted the Christian supine fashion introduced by European missionaries (Seeman 2010, 171–174). Thus, rather than a universal “norm,” the contemporary Western preference for the extended supine burial position is historically and culturally rooted in the development of burial rites in Europe and beyond. Meanwhile, our expectation that corpses should be laid out facing upward and with extended legs has become internalized and unquestioned. This expectation shapes the ways we imagine the dead body visually, and the products of such imagination in turn reinforce our presuppositions surrounding funerary conventions and taboos.

Envisioning the dead in the museum

Archaeology has identified differing corpse-positioning practices across different cultures as well as their changes over time, and many museums have taken great care in displaying bodies in positions as when they were excavated, such as the Amesbury Archer and the Shrewton Beaker burial at the Salisbury Museum, which are displayed one-sided or prone with legs tightly folded. However, in other instances, the idealized, peaceful, supine corpse is still envisaged in archaeological representations, even when the archaeological evidence upon which these representations are based is either ambiguous or overtly contradicting this portrayal. This indicates an assumption that the dead body should be laid out extended and supine, even if other burial postures are equally possible. In an artistic reconstruction of the wealthy late Iron Age weapon burial at Vestly, Jæren in Norway, the body is drawn in an extended supine position with arms extended by the side (Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger; Fredriksen *et al.* 2014, 121). The body posture represented in this reconstruction, however, is an idealized image with no basis in direct physical evidence, as no skeletal material survived when the grave was excavated (Møllerop 1961). Likewise, the Street House Anglo-Saxon cemetery exhibition at Kirkleatham Museum, North Yorkshire, displays a reconstruction of the bed burial Grave 42. The mannequin, dressed in costume, is placed on the reconstructed bed in an extended supine position with hands together on the stomach. The original burial position of Grave 42 is not known due to the acidic soil condition at the site which resulted in poor bone survival (Sherlock 2012, 12). In both of these examples, the reconstructed image of the body stands in place of the absent material body and communicates a visual language that is readily understood and largely unquestioned by both the artist and the audience.

In representing archaeological knowledge, museum displays play a significant role in shaping discourses on the past in both academic and public contexts (Moser and Gamble 1997). The Mound 1 ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, yielded no bones when the mound was excavated in 1939, as the acidic soil condition provided a hostile environment for skeletal materials to survive. Although the absence of



Figure 5.1 The full-size reconstruction of the chamber within Mound 1 at the National Trust Visitor Centre at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2016). Reproduced by kind permission of the National Trust.

the body has been a topic of discussion, most writers agree that a body was present but did not survive (Carver 2005, 191–192). A schematic plan in Bruce-Mitford's report depicts a reconstructed skeleton in a supine, extended position with arms extended by the side (Bruce-Mitford 1975, fig 384). The same posture is depicted in one of the reconstructions of the burial chamber in Carver's report, which shows the body as a silhouette (Carver 2005, fig 91). Other reconstructions in the latter report represent the body as hidden from sight in a coffin (Carver 2005, figs 92 and 93). The miniature reconstruction and full-size display at the National Trust Visitor Centre at the site deviate little from the plans in the excavation reports, presenting the body in a supine and extended posture. However, instead of both arms extended by the side, the left arm is arranged extended by the side of the body, and the right arm folded and placed across the waist, while the lower half of the body is covered by a blanket (Figure 5.1).

With the lack of bone survival, the body portrayed in these reconstructions and displays is created with a certain amount of assumptions and guesswork. Meanwhile, the image of the body takes on an authority of its own. In an illustration of Sutton Hoo Mound 1 in the children's history book *Exploring Anglo-Saxon Times* by Brian Knapp (2007), the body is portrayed in the same manner as the reconstructions at the Sutton Hoo Visitor Centre: extended, supine, left arm extended by the side, and right arm bent across the waist. Rather than an inert visual summary of archaeological information, reconstruc-

tions have the power to influence the perception of the grave, despite the lack of a body. The expectation of the body displayed in an extended supine position is perpetuated through these visual narratives, shaping subsequent imaginative efforts surrounding the burial. Visual representation, therefore, is not only a useful illustrative tool in presenting information about the past, but also a potent agent in informing the production of knowledge and archaeological ideas (Moser 1992).

In his discussion of the use of images of early Anglo-Saxon burials, Williams (2009, 184) argues that reconstructions are skewed towards the wealthiest graves, with the occasional exceptions of the very unusual, “deviant” burials. In other words, those exceptional, non-representative burials are frequently selected for reconstruction, to the exclusion of other more “typical” graves. On the other hand, depending on which end of the spectrum the burial belongs, it may invoke different reconstructive approaches. The reconstruction drawing of Kingston Down Grave 205 until recently displayed in the Liverpool World Museum, for example, is based on the description of the grave by the Reverend Bryan Faussett when he excavated it in 1771, which contains no information about skeletal positioning except that bone preservation was very poor (Smith 1856, 77). In the reconstruction drawing created at the museum, the female burial is represented as a fleshed body displayed extended and supine with arms by the side in a large coffin, while the remains of a child, located at the foot of the coffin and outside it, are represented as a neatly piled heap of bones. Although Faussett considers the child to be an earlier burial and was relocated when the adult was interred, there is no evidence to suggest how much time had elapsed between them (Smith 1856, 78–79). Meanwhile, the decision to represent it as fully and cleanly decomposed bone remains dismisses the unsettling possibility of visualizing partially decomposed remains. Similarly, Walsh and Williams (this volume) points out that the deviant “sand bodies” in unusual positions, displayed at the Sutton Hoo Visitor Centre, are not fully reconstructed and are largely homogenized. This feeds the expectation of a sanitized, glorious version of the past, epitomized in the “ideal death” represented by the Mound 1 ship burial, while harmonizing the more difficult, unsettling, non-ideal narratives.

Popular imagination of the corpse

The role of our cultural expectations in informing visual representations of the dead extends to popular culture. Importantly, historical films and television shows play a crucial role in producing and communicating a vision of life in the past. The expectations of the producers and of the audience create the corpses that are being portrayed, which then perpetuate the expectations surrounding the portrayal of the corpse. Unlike static museum displays or reconstruction drawings, film and television are endowed with the ability to combine movement, sound and visual images in an unfolding performance (Moser 2009, 1069). They provide an immersive experience of the world that is being portrayed, along with its people, costumes, buildings, events, politics, climate, cultural practices and so on. They create compelling visions of the past that become important resources in knowledge creation and communication, where the corpse and associated burial practices are imagined through intense visual and audio performances (James 2001).

Representations of the dead body in the extended supine position are present in popular films, television programmes, animations and even video games. In particular, the position is frequently associated with the positioning of hands resting over the waist. In the popular historical drama series *Vikings* (S1 Ep6, 2013) by the television channel History, Earl Haraldson is positioned in an extended supine posture with hands resting on the upper stomach (Williams, this volume, Figure 11.2a). One scene shows his body laid on a stretcher, proceeded through a crowd of mourners and onlookers, and trans-

ported to the funerary ship. At the funeral of Queen Aslaug (S4 Ep14, 2016), the cadaver is similarly placed in an extended supine position with hands together, resting over her waist (Williams, this volume, Figure 11.9b). *Vikings'* claim to historical authenticity is notable, as the series draws upon Old Norse poetry, sagas and contemporary historical sources, and develops fictional accounts of legendary as well as historical people and events. The funeral of Earl Haraldson, for instance, draws heavily on the tenth-century Ibn Fadlān account of the funeral of a high-status man, including the appearance of a slave girl who volunteers to accompany her master in death (Price 2010, 132–137). On the other hand, our contemporary expectation that the corpse should lie facing up with extended legs influences the creative efforts in portraying funeral scenes. Variation in burial postures is not entirely absent in *Vikings*: notably, in a multiple grave of four men (S1 Ep4, 2013), the bodies are displayed in a variety of positions: supine and one-sided, with legs extended as well as flexed (Williams this volume, Figure 11.1). The extended supine position, however, is still mostly preferred despite the variety of corpse positioning practices that is attested in the burial record (such as the seated and flexed burials from Birka, Vendel or Kaupang, with varying arm positions [Gräslund 1980; Stolpe and Arne 1912; Skre 2007]) and the academic reconstructive efforts thereof (such as the reconstruction drawings of seated and flexed burials in Price [2002]). The popular representation continues to perpetuate our assumption that our standard corpse posture is also the standard corpse posture in Viking-Age Scandinavia.

The implications of popular portrayals of dead bodies are not limited to historical films and drama, but the extended supine position also pervades the science fiction and fantasy genre. Although representations of cadavers in the science fiction and fantasy genre claim no historical authenticity, such fictional worlds are always reflecting, critiquing and experimenting against the society from which they came and in which they are consumed (Jackson 1981). It is perhaps beyond archaeologists' power to decide how corpses are represented in popular films and television, but the science fiction and fantasy genre provides an excellent context for archaeologists to assess the power of representational images. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and *Game of Thrones*, for example, are set in "pseudo-medieval" worlds which directly or indirectly reference northern Europe in the medieval period (Chance 2001; Flieger 2003; Larrington 2016): the barrows near Tom Bombadil's house are said to have been inspired by Bronze Age burial barrows (Sabo 2007, 97–101); the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros resonate with the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses (Larrington 2016, 2); and Boromir's funerary boat mirrors Scyld Scefing's ship funeral in the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. In designing *The Lord of the Rings* films, Peter Jackson's team acknowledged the influence of medieval literature on J.R.R. Tolkien's creation of Middle Earth, and they drew upon a wide range of historical sources to invoke a sense of genuine historical realness of the Middle Earth stories, such as designing the Golden Hall of Rohan based on the literary description of Heorot (i.e. Hrothgar's hall) in *Beowulf* (Sturtevant 2010, 106–108). Even with no apparent "medieval" pretence, many science fiction writers and filmmakers also draw upon past societies and cultures, as well as myths and legends, for inspirations. The *Star Wars* saga, for example, is inspired by a wide variety of historical and cultural sources, from the "pseudo-Roman" institutions of the Senate, Republic and Empire to the chivalric Jedi reminiscent of Japanese Samurai, Shaolin monks or medieval knights (Reagin and Liedl 2012).

Examples of bodies positioned supine and extended, with hands resting over the waist, in science fiction and fantasy films and television are wide-ranging. For example, Count Orlok in *Nosferatu* (1922) lies extended, supine, with hands on the stomach in his coffin. Valeria in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) similarly lies extended and supine on her pyre, with hands on the upper stomach clutching her sword. In Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), Boromir

of Gondor lies in the same manner in a boat. His arms are folded and placed on the stomach, and his hands grip a sword. Padmé Amidala at her funeral procession near the end of *Star Wars: Episode III* (2005) also lies facing upward with extended legs, her arms are folded, with hands resting on her upper stomach. This arrangement is similar to that of the tragic Rue in *The Hunger Games* (2012), with flowers around her. Thorin Oakenshield, Fili and Kili are displayed in the same manner in the extended edition of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014). The same position appears in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, in the funerary displays of Joffrey (S4 Ep3, 2014), Tywin (S5 Ep1, 2015), Maester Aemon (S5 Ep7, 2015) and Myrcella (S6 Ep2, 2016).

The extended supine burial posture with hands together on stomach also recurs in animations. Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) shows Snow White in a glass coffin in an extended supine position with hands resting over her waist. Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) adopts the same position (although she is not dead but in a death-like coma), which is recreated as Aurora reappears in *Once Upon A Time* (S2 EP1, 2012) and *Maleficent* (2014). The same position is used by Megara in *Hercules* (1997) and, more recently, Moana's dying grandmother in *Moana* (2016). An example of this position in video games is Aerith in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), where her body is laid to rest in the lake, extended, supine, with hands together over the waist.

Variations in burial posture in television or film portrayals are often limited to arm positions, while bodies are invariably laid out extended and supine. For example, Darth Vader and Qui-Gon Jinn are both positioned extended supine on their pyres, in *Star Wars: Episode VI* (1983) and *Star Wars: Episode I* (1999) respectively, although the positioning of their arms is unclear. At his fake funeral in *Futurama* (S3 Ep17, 2002), Bender lies in the coffin facing upwards with extended legs and arms by the side. A brief appearance of Jon Arryn in the *Game of Thrones* (S1 Ep1, 2011) shows his corpse lying extended supine with hands together on the upper chest. The limited variation in corpse postures in popular portrayal reflect the funerary preference of the contemporary filmmakers and audience. Bodies, fictional or not, are reproduced within the expectations of western society, perpetuating the supine and extended standard: a fundamental but taken-for-granted aspect of our ideal corpse. Meanwhile, the corpses of villains are often denied "peaceful" death, let alone appropriate positioning (for example, in the extended edition of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), Saruman suffers a gruesome death as he falls off from the tower of Orthanc after being stabbed by Gríma Wormtongue and is pierced by the spiked wheel below. Notably, this is different compared to how the character dies in Tolkien's original, and it certainly adds an element of drama to the death scene). This may reflect an underlying presumption that the ideal corpse position accompanies a "good death," while a "bad death" is associated with unusual, unsettling, "deviant" treatment of the body.

As Lincoln Geraghty succinctly puts it, these filmic representations "not only take historical facts and make compelling stories from them, they also use culturally inherited myths and symbols synonymous with the very roots of Western civilization" (Geraghty 2005, 191). Although the writers and production teams have developed vibrant worlds with creative settings, technologies, races, characters and stories, the notion of the ideal burial posture still very much adheres to our contemporary western standard, resulting in a remarkable consistency in corpse-positioning practices across all the fantastical and science-fictional worlds discussed here.

Importantly, the relationship between history and fantastical alternate history is not a one-way giving and receiving process, but a complex dialogue. Historical and fictional narratives constantly shape each other, creating, contesting and negotiating knowledge. It has been previously pointed out that contemporary popular culture, historical and fantasy alike, contributes to the public imagination of the past

by reproducing particular sets of ideas about past cultures, religions and warfare (Sturtevant 2010). In his study of the representations of polytheism in *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*, Saunders argues that the changing portrayal of paganism in popular-culture representations has contributed to the invention of traditions and practices among contemporary Pagans and shaped their political and religious identities (Saunders 2014). Furthermore, Stephanie Moser has pointed out that popular representations have significant epistemological implications as, “rather than simply being derivative in nature, ‘popular’ representations of knowledge feed back into, and often shape, academic ideas” (Moser 2009, 1050). The popularity of *Game of Thrones*, for example, has inspired a number of academic books and essays, an academic conference at the University of Hertfordshire (2017), as well as a new generation of undergraduate students to apply for medieval studies (Waxman 2017; Finn 2017; Larrington 2016; Carroll 2015; Błaszczewicz 2014). Despite their fictive, fantastical settings, representational images in science fiction and fantasy are no less powerful in shaping public and academic understanding of the past than historical representations. Further studies are needed to examine the connection between popular culture and academic ideas and practices, and explore how images of funerary bodies in science fiction and fantasy may also inform understanding of past funerary practices in both public and academic contexts.

Conclusion

Whether in museum reconstructions or filmic portrayals, the representations of funerary bodies are powerful visual symbols, replicating and shaping our expectations and understanding of burial practices, in the past and in the present, real or imagined. Thus, it is neither a sheer coincidence nor a reflection of a universal standard, that the bodies discussed above—from Grave 42 at the Street House cemetery to Padmé Amidala in *Star Wars*—are displayed in the same supine, extended, hands-on-stomach manner. Instead, this pointedly tell us that what we define as the ideal burial position is a product of our expectations, rooted in centuries of burial practices and preferences. On the other hand, archaeological record has the unique strength to emphasize and appropriately address the full range of mortuary variations, particularly the things that might seem alien to present-day experience and practice. Recognizing the diversity of burial practices in past and present societies, archaeological publications and museums can hope to tangibly communicate past mortalities and rewrite our narratives of the extended supine posture and other burial nuances that we have long taken for granted.

As Elphinstone remarked, “the archaeological narrative is itself a work in progress” (Elphinstone and Wickham-Jones 2012, 534). Where the archaeologist does not know and can only speculate, the writer has to give answers based on probabilities. Assumptions and guesses are inevitable in creating any form of archaeological reconstructions, due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence. Nevertheless, in taking these liberties, archaeologists have an ethical responsibility to address our own cultural situatedness, as well as the complex relationship between the ambiguity of archaeological data and the authority of representational images. In acknowledging and examining the knowledge-making mechanisms of such representational narratives, archaeologists may responsibly communicate the nuances of past funerary practices to the academic audience, as well as excite the public with a vision of bodies that is vibrant, compelling, strange, yet familiar.

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