

Funerary Practices, Funerary Contexts, and Death in Archaeology

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Abstract

Archaeologists have excavated mortuary contexts and the remains of the dead since the beginning of activity within their discipline. The study of these remains has taken place under different rubrics, including burial archaeology, mortuary archaeology, archaeology of the dead, funerary archaeology, osteoarchaeology, human bioarchaeology, and archaeology of death. The study of mortuary contexts and accompanying artifacts has largely taken place in separation from the study of the human remains. Does the study of the remains of the dead, and the contexts within which these are found, constitute an archaeology of death, or an archaeology of funerary remains, as tacitly implied by the titles of numerous publications focusing on such remains? Recently it has been claimed that we have never had an archaeology of death (Robb). Indeed a search for published archaeological research focusing on the concept of death, and the variation of conceptualizations of death in past societies, currently produces scant results. Archaeological publications with titles that refer to *funerary* remains tend to focus on selected aspect(s) of funerary practice, mostly those related to the disposal of the dead, whether through burial or other means. If we take the term *funerary* to mean that which pertains to funeral rites or burial, it is clear that a wider range of evidence needs to be considered for a comprehensive funerary archaeology to emerge. This essay focuses on the current status and future potential of archaeological research on funerary practices, contexts, and death. Calls for bringing the human body, the corpse, and the skeleton into the center stage in studies of mortuary archaeology have already been made by many, and attempted by a few. Key issues for future archaeological research on death and funerary practice include ensuring a true research emphasis on past conceptualizations of death, considering a wider range of evidence pertaining to death and funerary practice (not just burial or other body disposal contexts), and as necessitated by the latter, finding a way to successfully integrate research traditionally conducted within widely different disciplinary realms.

INTRODUCTION

This essay considers the current status and future potential of archaeological research on funerary practices, contexts, and death. Most archaeological work to date has worked with tacit definitions of death and funerary practice,

taking for granted that we all know what is meant by death and what *funerary* refers to. Yet death is notoriously difficult to define even in modern medical contexts: If we define death as the moment at which life ends, we soon run into the lack of consensus on how to define life. If death is the cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism then is a brain-dead patient on life support successfully gestating a fetus (Miller, 2009) dead or alive? Western historical attempts to define the exact moment of death have relied on cessation of heartbeat and breathing but cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), life support technologies, organ transplants and pacemakers rendered this definition problematic. Subsequently, the medical profession has relied on permanent (vs transient) suspension of consciousness, as indicated by cessation of electrical activity in the brain. As archaeologists we do not need to resolve the question of how to diagnose (the moment, or the process of) death in our own societies, but rather to strive to investigate how different societies in the past may have defined and conceptualized death, and how, and if these conceptualizations can be accessed through the material remains of those societies. Like for studies of gender, the basis for initiating truly challenging and fruitful archaeological research on death is to be founded on the problematizing and (re)definitions of the concept of focus.

Archaeological publications with titles that refer to *funerary* remains tend to focus on selected aspect(s) of funerary practice, mostly those related to disposal of the dead, whether through burial or other means. Such focus is practical in terms of the relatively straightforward identification of contexts involving disposal of the dead, but highly selective and incomplete when it comes to funerary practices as a whole. If we take the term *funerary* to mean that which pertains to funeral rites or burial, it is clear that a wider range of evidence needs to be considered for funerary archaeology. Funerary activity can be said to take place before, at and after death, the latter including both activity taking place within the interval between death and disposal of the dead, as well as activity after the disposal. Research focusing on burial contexts with the aim to understand burial practices may perhaps better be described as mortuary archaeology. Research on questions such as what can grave goods tell us about, for example, long distance trade belongs within economic archaeology. Like other kinds of archaeological remains and contexts, burials and skeletal remains can be employed by archaeologists to address questions within several different subdomains of archaeological inquiry.

The broader significance of studying death and funerary practices within archaeology could be said to be that understanding death is key to understanding life. Further, burials as a type of archaeological find context are ubiquitous. Archaeologists have excavated mortuary contexts and the remains of the dead since the beginning of activity within their discipline, amassing a

substantial amount of data, finds and remains that need to be analyzed and interpreted. While study of death and funerary practice cannot simply be reduced to the study of burials, understanding death is key to interpretation of burial contexts.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

In the absence of classic foundational research directly on the topic of death in past societies (Robb, 2013, p. 441), or fully fledged investigations of the range of funerary action, detailed studies of mortuary contexts and the artifacts included within these can be seen as classic foundational research relevant here. Scientific studies of archaeological human remains can also be included within this broad category. The study of mortuary contexts and the remains of the dead has taken place under different rubrics, including burial archaeology, mortuary archaeology, archaeology of the dead, funerary archaeology, osteoarchaeology, human bioarchaeology, and archaeology of death. Studies of the mortuary contexts and accompanying artifacts have largely taken place in separation from the study of the human remains.

Some widely accepted findings (it is not possible to be exhaustive within the limitations of space here) from these domains of research activity, practiced separately, include the following, relating to understandings of the nature of burials, of gender, and of the place of skeletal remains in our analyses.

1. Burials are not a direct reflection of society, but rather “the burial of the dead is a powerful arena through which relationships of status, power, and inequality in the living society can be structured” (Nilsson Stutz & Tarlow, 2013, p. 8). Processual archaeologists (see, e.g., Binford, 1971; Saxe, 1970; O’Shea, 1984; Brown, 1971) attempted to infer social organization of past societies from the archaeological burial record focusing on degree of elaboration of mortuary practices, land use, labor cost, and other variables, followed by the post-processualist and neo-Marxist focus on the role of mortuary practices in “constituting, negotiating, and legitimating relationships of power and inequality” (Tarlow & Nilsson Stutz, 2013, p. 8; Parker Pearson, 1999; Barrett, 1990; Chapman, 2013).
2. Gender cannot be assigned according to a binary, universal scheme on the basis of grave goods, nor do these unambiguously reflect the lived gender identity of the deceased. “Now a range of approaches focus on the ways in which funerary rites help to construct gender as a social variable and to structure gendered relationships throughout society” (Tarlow & Nilsson Stutz, 2013, p. 11; Sofaer & Sorensen, 2013).
3. Osteological analyses of human skeletal remains have the potential to contribute to mortuary analyses beyond the classic age and sex data,

with crucial information regarding the primary versus secondary nature of burials, as well as other contextually relevant data (see, e.g., Gowland & Knusel, 2006).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Perhaps the single most dramatic extension to classic foundational research, as to moving forward with archaeological studies of death and funerary practice, are the calls for bringing the human body, the corpse and the skeleton into the center stage in studies of mortuary archaeology. While for an observer outside the discipline it may seem obvious that the dead body and its remains should have occupied a central place in research focusing on contexts the very existence of which is dependent on the dead body, studies of burial and other disposal contexts for the dead have often sidelined, if not completely overlooked human remains. Gowland and Knusel lament the “long tradition in funerary archaeology of overlooking the skeletal evidence and privileging the objects as the focus of analysis” (2006, p. xi). The traditional focus on human made material culture in burial contexts is also challenged by the practitioners of “archaeoethanatology,” and demands are made to centralize the *raison d’être* of burial contexts, the body (Duday, 2009, p. 6). Until now, “the unfortunate impression that the deceased has been placed as an offering to a ceramic vessel or to a flint projectile point, rather than the other way round” (Duday, 2006, p. 30) often prevails when looking at the relative importance afforded to the different components of burials in publications.

Another domain within which advances have been made concerns the understanding of what the find position of the excavated remains of the bodies represents. Through positional analyses (e.g., Duday, 2009; Beckett & Robb, 2006), analyses of intrinsic aspects of bone preservation (Bello & Andrews, 2006), aspects of decomposition of the corpse (Duday, 2006), and bone element representation within disposal contexts (Andrews & Bello, 2006) exciting advances are suggested allowing evidence-based inference making regarding the original positioning of fleshed corpses in disposal contexts (whether burial or other), and their potential subsequent manipulation following the original deposition, as opposed to displacement or loss by taphonomic agents or animal disturbance. Such inferences are crucial for the archaeology of funerary practice, allowing the investigation of the burial context, and the position of human remains within it, as a dynamic system, which changes through time. A large-scale application of standardized methods of this kind has the potential to extend our understanding of cultural variation in burial practices of the past.

Cutting-edge writing that truly undercuts the bases on which the “archaeology of death,” has rested questions whether the study of the remains of the dead, and the contexts within which these are found, constitute an archaeology of death. Recently it has been claimed that “in spite of a generation of claims to the contrary, we have never had an “archaeology of death”” (Robb, 2013, p. 441). Indeed a search for published archaeological research focusing on the concept of death, and the variation of conceptualizations of death in past societies, currently produces scant results. While we have, as a field, recovered “a staggering number of dead people” (ibid.) and developed theories for making sense of them (e.g., the Saxe–Binford hypothesis and theories on collective burial, monuments, and memory) this does not amount to “seriously theoriz[ing] death itself as an event or process” (ibid.). Studying the remains of the dead, and the contexts within which they were found, for insights into past social organization, ethnic affiliation, cultural relationships, long distance trade and other aspects of past lives does not constitute an archaeology of death (ibid.), but belongs rather to other domains of archaeological inquiry (Duday, 2009, p. 6).

Death remains a “straightforward” biological fact in our current archaeological writing. Robb makes the comparison between a potential archaeology of death and gender archaeology, thereby drawing attention to the need to problematize the relationship between biology and culture when investigating such concepts. He goes on to state that “natural” processes ... take place within the social conditions of existence and in many ways are created through an inseparable interplay of social action and biological potential or response (Robb, 2013, p. 441; Sofaer, 2006). Death as a concept is far from straightforward.

Does the study of the remains of the dead, and the contexts within which these are found, constitute a funerary archaeology, or an archaeology of funerary remains? As discussed above, there has been a selective focus on burial contexts within publications the title of which incorporates the term *funerary archaeology*. Evidence for funerary practices taking place before, at and after death (including the time interval between death and the disposal of the dead body, as well as following disposal) is hardly discussed currently. While there are a number of papers focusing on evidence for funerary action not just at the time of initial disposal, but also during the time following the initial disposal of dead bodies (Chapman, 2010; Lorentz, 2014), it is a rare paper that attempts to find evidence and make inferences regarding the funerary practices and preparations taking place before death (save research on Egyptian contexts), at death, and/or during the time interval between death and the disposal of the body (save the extensive work on Egyptian mummification, and some work on new world mummies).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Arising from the points made so far within this essay we can begin discerning some of the key issues for future archaeological research on death and funerary practice. While it would be challenging to be comprehensive in such an effort, the remit from the editors of this collection of papers absolves the authors from doing so. An agenda of important steps and questions for future research should include at least the following: (i) a true research emphasis on past conceptualizations of death, and the management and cultural elaboration of death; (ii) considering a wider range of evidence pertaining to death and funerary practice (not just burial or other body disposal contexts), and as necessitated by these, and (iii) finding a way to successfully integrate research traditionally conducted within widely different disciplinary realms.

In order to proceed toward an archaeology of death we need to actively focus on death, attitudes toward and conceptualizations of death, and the management and cultural elaboration of death. Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz (2013, p. 5) note “an increasing focus on understanding burials in recent years, not only as a reflection of life, but also as the result of the human encounter with death.” They maintain that such archaeological inquiries have placed death at their center, exploring such dimensions as power, ritual, the dead body, and emotion (*ibid.*). Whether, and if so when, coherent theoretical and methodological frameworks for an archaeology of death emerge from these and the directions Robb (2013) outlines remains to be seen.

Researching death and attitudes toward it, its management and cultural elaboration should not necessarily be restricted to focus on human death only. Death occurs for animals, as well as for plants. Both of these kinds of deaths have been culturally elaborated, as attested by ethnographies. Death may also be seen to occur for material culture items. Full exploration of the cultural conceptualization of death, past and present, requires focus not only on human death, but also on the death of nonhuman entities. It should not come as a surprise that much can be learned of a society’s attitudes toward death in general through a scrutiny of evidence relating to death of other beings than humans. While there seems yet to be no archaeological writing relating to the death of plant organisms, it is not inconceivable that the death of, for example, large or communally significant trees would have been elaborated on culturally. Relevant evidence on conceptualizations of death as regards animals may include separate burials of animals, textual sources, depictions, and remains of dead animals in contexts that are not related to burial or subsistence. Hambleton advocates “taking a biographical approach to the analysis and interpretation of animal remains, exploring the details of the “life” of an animal’s remains after its death” (2013, p. 492).

There is an emergent body of archaeological writing about death and animals, in comparison with and contextualized with human burial data. Losey *et al.* link the mortuary treatment of animals (dogs and wolves) to the treatment of human dead, and argue that at death particular animals with specific life histories required mortuary rites similar to those of their human counterparts (2011, p. 174). Burials of dogs within grave cuts of their own (and not as inclusions to human burials) have been found in widely diverse ancient societies in different parts of the world, ranging from fourth-century Athens, to Early Neolithic Siberia, and to a Chribaya context in Peru (AD 900–1400). A cat burial was found at Neolithic Parekklisha-Shillourokambos in Cyprus (Vigne, Guilane, Debue, Haye, & Gerard, 2004). Changes in the treatment of a wide variety of dead animals in ancient Egypt, through time, provides an opportunity to explore not only sociocultural understandings of death in particular cultural contexts, but also the question of how we as archaeologists should and could go about exploring conceptualizations of death in the past. As in the case for humans, the evidence on which explorations of the concept of death as regards animals in past societies can be based on is not limited only to burial evidence, but should also include other contextual, textual (where available), and pictorial evidence, such as in the case of the death of animals within Roman arenas (Lindstrom, 2010). If we accept that, as Hambleton (2013, p. 492) suggests, “the transition between the death of an animal and the deposition of its remains” may involve “many changes in meaning and identity, with parts of the animal taking on roles as commodities for consumption, economic, political or social currency, and as objects of functional and/or symbolic importance,” what can this tell us about sociocultural concepts of death, and the death of (different species of) animals in particular? Such questions remain unexplored, and may prove to be fruitful avenues of exploration in the future.

Another aspect that can be explored when focusing on past conceptualizations of death is the death of material culture items, be it structures or artifacts. Molloy *et al.* (2014, p. 307) refer to the *death of a Bronze Age house* accompanied by decommissioning of household objects in an Early Minoan site. Peltenburg (1991) discusses the destruction of a Cypriot Chalcolithic ceramic house model and the accompanying anthropomorphic figurines in similar terms. The intentional manipulation, destruction, and burial of anthropomorphic cruciform picrolite figurines in Chalcolithic Cyprus (Goring, 1992) can also be seen as actions possibly relating to the “death” of these artifacts. Ethnographies illustrate how it is possible for items of material culture to die. It is necessary to scrutinize the contextual archaeological record for potential evidence of such concepts—decommissioning, destruction, modification, and (burial) treatment in similar ways to human or animal

dead may give clues to allow their identification in contexts without texts or sufficiently detailed depictions.

While the focus of archaeological funerary studies has indeed been grossly incomplete without the proper integration of human skeletal studies (Gowland & Knusel, 2006)—a phenomenon hopefully soon of the past—archaeological studies of funerary practice can be seen to suffer from another kind of exclusion also: their standard focus on reconstructing the practices relating to the disposal of the dead, rather than considering all possible evidence for the full range of funerary behavior (including funerary actions taken before and at death, and between death and disposal, as well as following disposal). The use of the term *funerary* has been very narrow, excluding all but the obvious data sources: human remains and burial contexts. Instead, future studies in funerary archaeology should set out to evaluate what other kinds of evidence there might be for a fuller range of funerary behavior. This may admittedly be easier in archaeological contexts with text or depictions, but this should not mean that funerary archaeology can simply abandon all effort to look beyond burials. The disposal of the body, be it through burial or otherwise, is only a part of the succession of events and processes involved in funerary practices. A potential starting point for exploring the range of different kind of material remains that may result from funerary ritual at different points in the succession of events and funerary action is to scrutinize existing ethnographies for relevant information, in combination with the extensive writing on death within anthropology and other disciplines—or better still, instigate a program of collaborative research with social or cultural anthropologists, ensuring that data relevant to funerary material culture and physical remains of funerary action is both observed and recorded in required detail and in context. Such information can serve in extending our imaginations as to what aspects of the material remains in the archaeological record may be relevant to the exploration of funerary practices, and how material culture forms an active part of funerary practices—or at the very least make us aware of the scale of what we are unable to retrieve.

Finding a way to successfully integrate research traditionally conducted within widely different disciplinary realms, pertinent to the exploration of death and funerary practice in the past, may not be easy as it is not simply a question of collaboration of different specialists working on different kinds of source data, but rather necessitates an active desire to venture over disciplinary divides and engage in building theoretical frameworks and methodologies. This requires archaeologists, human bioarchaeologists and other human remains specialists, social and cultural anthropologists, sociologists of death, historians and art historians, zooarchaeologists,

archaeobotanists, and philosophers focusing on death, willing to collaborate, and most importantly of all, willing to communicate and translate across disciplinary divides, and to find ways to resolve issues with different terminologies and disciplinary prioritizations. Disciplinary fields have their own conferences, journals and other fora of dissemination and discussion—creating new fora within which discussions on integrated research on death and funerary practice could take place frequently enough and with critical mass, would be costly. Challenges as to successfully engaging with such research in the future also include reaching a better understanding of death (and life) in our own society, and scrutinizing how our own concepts of death and funerary practice may tint or even discolor the images we so painstakingly set out build of the past.

Scope and scale of the required studies for an archaeology of death to begin emerging therefore varies from the ontological exploration of death and life in our own societies to bring better awareness of our own starting points as researchers, to large-scale, fully interdisciplinary, and better still, integrated studies of conceptualizations of death in a wide range of past societies (based on detailed individual studies of each) from different periods and geographical settings. For funerary archaeology, both small-scale (context and site specific) and large-scale (landscape, regional, and chronological approaches, building on the small scale) studies should be undertaken, with focus on exploring the full range of funerary practice and its material remains. The magnitude of the required resources, in both time and funds, is substantial.

It is possible to envisage that one of the key debates to emerge will focus on the efforts to construct a consistent body of theory, as well as systematic methods, for investigating death in past societies. As regards research on funerary practices, debates focusing on whether or not we can hope to recover and/or identify evidence for funerary practices other than disposal (e.g., burial) contexts in archaeological settings with no textual evidence are likely to emerge. The search for evidence for the full range of funerary practices and ritual requires a probing approach specific for each context. What is available as relevant evidence in one place may be absent in another.

Further issues driving debate forward may involve questions such as how to investigate change in conceptualizations of death, how to approach the interplay of the ideal versus reality in terms of funerary action (negotiations of cultural ideals of death and ideal funerary processes in the form of actual processes and events that took place), and how to investigate these phenomena materially through the archaeological record.

Methods of archaeoethanatology (highly detailed observation of human remains and their relation to each other, their position within the disposal context and in relation to any anthropogenic feature, such as a tomb cut,

undertaken in the field) have been deemed too time consuming by some at this age of restrictions on the timeline available for excavation (Cannon, 2007, p. 252)—digital recording through, for example, 3D laser scanning in the field could be explored to see whether such a technological approach would provide a timeline advantage, as well as an opportunity for post-excavation comparisons with other contexts at a level previously not feasible.

The emerging issues from archaeological exploration of conceptualizations of death and funerary practices will likely have relevance to several different subdomains of archaeology, including the archaeologies of body, gender and age, as well as archaeologies of the individual, personhood, and cosmology, to mention just a few. As understanding death involves understanding life, archaeology of death, when and if it truly emerges, will inform many aspects of archaeologies dealing with a variety of facets of life. It may also reasonably be expected that any advances and debates within the emerging archaeology of death, and a newly expanded funerary archaeology, will have relevance to anthropology, sociology, and history of death, dying, and funerary practice.

In conclusion, although the terms *funerary archaeology* and *archaeology of death* have been around for quite some time now, they are yet to emerge in a truly comprehensive manner, especially so for the latter—a full exploration of death in all its variety in ancient societies encompasses much more than analyzing the remains of dead humans and the material culture that accompanies them. To begin on the road toward understanding the vast variety in human conceptualization and approaches to death in the past, we need to explore the variety in human conceptualizations and approaches to life in the past—the life and death of humans, but also of animals, plants, and material culture.

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