

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### *The Archaeology of Death, Memory and Material Culture*

HOWARD WILLIAMS

*Cardiff University*

**Key words:** burial, death, forgetting, remembering, social memory.

**Abstract:** The chapter addresses a range of themes concerning the relationships between death, memory and material culture in past societies. It is argued that while the archaeological investigation of death and burial have been ubiquitous since the nineteenth century, archaeologists have yet to fully theorise and explore the significance of material culture in strategies of remembering and forgetting in the mortuary practices of the cultures they study. It is argued that a fuller engagement with this theme will not only provide a range of new insights and interpretations of death and burial ancient societies, but will allow archaeologists to confidently address inter-disciplinary issues in the arts and social sciences concerning the roles of material culture and the treatment of the dead in 'how societies remember'.

## INTRODUCTION

*"But the inquiry of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids?" (Browne 1658: 77).*

As an introduction to the volume, this chapter aims to address three areas. Firstly, while it will be shown that throughout the history of archaeological research into death and burial in ancient societies, mortuary practices have been regarded as a invaluable window into life and death in the past, the evidence has rarely been used to explicitly theorise and investigate the way this evidence influenced and affected the way ancient people remembered their past. Moving on from this argument, the second aim will be to review the various different strands to recent theories of memory in the arts and

social sciences. Archaeological studies of death, memory and material culture owe inspiration to these, and also may provide important contributions to interdisciplinary discussions in the future. It is against this background that the collection of papers included in this volume needs to be appreciated. Finally, in order to place the subsequent chapters in context, this chapter will review the topics covered in the volume, focusing upon the various ways in which archaeologists have in recent years attempted to address the issue of social memory in discussions of death and burial in both prehistoric and historic periods.

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH AND BURIAL

Archaeological studies of death and burial are as old as the discipline of archaeology itself. In Britain, the study of ancient burial mounds and the discovery of old cemeteries have always been a major focus of archaeological enquiry. When the seventeenth century antiquary, Sir Thomas Browne, reported upon excavations of an early Anglo-Saxon cremation cemetery discovered near Walsingham in Norfolk, the remains were regarded as direct evidence for an ancient pagan communities' attitudes towards the dead and their vain attempts to preserve their memory through time:

*"...sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruines of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted; yet able to out-last the bones long unborn, and the noblest pyle among us"* (Browne 1658: 4).

The act of excavation, seemed to Browne, to endorse the futility of their aspirations to defy time and their ignorance of God and Salvation (see Parry 1995:250-6; Piggott 1988). But memory was also a focus of Browne's enquiry, because it was also the central concern of his time, a period when intra-mural funerary monumentality reached new heights of exorbitant display but also came under increasing criticism (Llewellyn 1996):

*"There is no antidote against the Opium of time, which temporally considereth all things; Our Fathers finde their graves in our short memories, and sadly tell us how we may be buried in our Survivors. Grave-stones tell truth scarce fourty years: Generations passe while some trees stand, and old Families last not three Oaks"* (Browne 1658: 76).

However, with the advent of increasingly organised and serious archaeological enquiry into the material culture of past societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such discussions of memory and time disappear from view. Graves and burial mounds of prehistoric, Roman and early-medieval date were increasingly investigated from the late eighteenth century and particular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century (Daniel 1950; Hudson 1981; Marsden 1999). Also, an interest in medieval church monuments increased apace (Butler 1987: 246; Saul 2001: 3-4). With these studies, overt discussions of the role of graves as evidence for commemoration are hard to find. This is mainly because they were seen as material evidence of Victorian history, rather than statements consciously made by ancient peoples about their perceptions of the past and aspirations of being remembered in the future. Instead, graves and their contents (both artefacts and human bones) were used to identify ancient races, their migrations, chronological relationships and evolution.

This omission of discussions of death and memory is exemplified by the excavations financed and organised by the nineteenth century archaeologist Thomas Bateman who found many early Anglo-Saxon graves inserted into Neolithic and Bronze Age ('Celtic' to Bateman) burial mounds:

*"In North Derbyshire the Saxons have generally taken advantage of the Celtic tumuli, and have interred their dead at an inconsiderable depth in them, in the same manner as the North American Indians have done in the ancient mounds in their country"* (Bateman 1861: xliii).

With no clear understanding of the time-depth separating the late Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds of the fourth to second millennia BC from their re-use in the mid first millennium AD, combined with a belief in the ubiquity of barrow burial in primitive, pagan societies, Bateman and others had little to say concerning this re-use of earlier sites. Even in cases where upon excavation an earlier grave was found to have been disturbed and re-used for a new burial in antiquity, no comment of the significance of this practice would be made (e.g. Bateman 1861: 44). To a modern archaeologist, such a pattern might be the beginnings of a lengthy speculation concerning how early medieval communities in the Peak District had regarded earlier monuments (e.g. Moreland 2001; Williams 1998). When large mounds were found raised over graves, this is sometimes used to discuss the social status of the interred, but rarely the importance, efficacy and meaning of commemoration for that ancient community. Time was something exclusive to this age of progress, the perception of the past *in the past* held little interest.

Such perspectives have been discussed in some detail not only because they explain the silence of antiquarian and early archaeological reports concerning the past in the past, but also because a similar attitude has pervaded archaeological studies of death and burial almost until the present day. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, burial rites were regarded in many different ways by scholars as evidence of ancient migrations, prehistoric and historic 'races' or 'cultures', or as a mirror of the social organisation, complexity and evolution of ancient civilisations (see Chapman, Randsborg & Kinnes 1981; Childe 1945). In all these early perspectives, ancient graves were employed as a mine of information; yet while graves were used to write the history of both prehistoric and early-historic societies, they were not regarded as evidence for how these communities remembered their dead and perceived their own pasts.

The rise of the overt use of theory and methodology in funerary archaeology from the 1970s onwards, while making many significance improvements to both theory and practice, did little to alter this situation. The self-proclaimed 'New Archaeology' consisting of 'processual' approaches to ancient societies frequently focused on the burial evidence as a resource from which social complexity, stratification and change were thought to be reflected and modelled, bolstered by the rich use of ethnographic evidence used in establishing cross-cultural models relating burial to society (Binford 1971; Chapman, Randsborg & Kinnes 1981; Morris 1992). While these approaches have since been subject to sustained criticism (e.g. Hodder 1986), their immediate successors that drew from neo-Marxist, symbolic and post-structuralist theories can be criticised on the same grounds. The development of these 'post-processual' and interpretative archaeologies during the 1980s and 1990s in Britain often regarded burial data more as a mask than a mirror of society, or perhaps as a 'text' that needs to be 'read' with caution (Pader 1982; Parker Pearson 1982; Shanks & Tilley 1982). Material culture was regarded as meaningful and active in social reproduction. Despite this, data continued to be frequently used to construct timeless models of symbolic systems and cosmologies rather than to study the relationship between the evolution of burial sites and the reproduction of concepts of history and memory. Even with recent studies focusing in issues of identity and emotional responses to death, commemoration is taken for granted, regarded as a 'given' and used as the backdrop to, rather than the primary focus of, archaeological enquiry (e.g. Parker Pearson 1999; Tarlow 1999). But it seems that this engagement with the subjective experience of time and space in past societies, rather than the creation of unilinear 'histories' from an objective perspective, opened the doors to studies of death and memory through the study of material culture. The interest in the

subjective, experiential and the performative in past societies, including the role of burial rites in building a sense of the past through the accretion and development of burial sites and the use of monumentality provides the background to this volume (e.g. see Barrett 1994; Holtorf 1997; Mizoguchi 1993). It seems ironic that given the fact that archaeologist constantly dig up, record and publish the material remains of death and mortality from the past, the key questions of how past populations engaged with their mortality and attempted to deal with, and commemorate their dead, are rarely addressed.

Therefore, the premise of this volume is that explicitly theorising the nature of social memory and its relationship to identity and mortality in the past, is pivotal to an appreciation of past mortuary practices. It represents a topic that archaeologists can no longer side-track by making their burial data discuss everything and anything – from migrations to cosmologies – but avoid dealing with death, dying and the dead. If we are to extract ourselves from the legacy of culture-historicism, empiricism and structuralism towards an understanding the significance of material culture in past engagements with mortality and the practices surrounding the disposal of the dead, then engaging with how past peoples constructed their pasts through engagements with mortality can provide a valuable starting point. Furthermore, although the coming of age of archaeology as a discipline over the last thirty years has seen many interactions with other disciplines, from the physical sciences to the visual and performing arts, the engagement of archaeology with the materiality of past death rituals has the potential for archaeologists to contribute to, and draw upon, wider debates about the nature and role of memory in past societies, and in particular, the relationships between death, memory and material culture. In order to place this volume in the context of these discussions, let us now move on to discuss how archaeology can learn from discussions of death, memory and material culture in other disciplines.

## **DEATH, MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE – ANTHROPOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

While a full and extensive review of the inter-disciplinary study of death and memory is beyond the scope of this volume and the capabilities of this author, some cursory comments need to be made about the value of studies of other disciplines to inter-disciplinary dialogues with archaeological studies of the materiality and mnemonics of mortuary practices. These can be crudely separated into at least three areas of study, anthropological, sociological and historical, although many studies can be regarded as



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-47451-4>

Archaeologies of Remembrance  
Death and Memory in Past Societies  
Williams, H. (Ed.)  
2003, XIV, 310 p., Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-0-306-47451-4