CLASSICS REVISITED

Death, society and archaeology: the social dimensions of mortuary practices

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While the material remains of death and the treatment and commemoration of the dead have been studied by archaeologists since the early nineteenth century, the more intensive and coherent analysis of death in its social context has only been a feature of this discipline during the last three decades. The starting point for this change of emphasis was James Brown’s edited volume *Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices* (1970), which was published in 1971. It originated in a symposium of the American Anthropological Association in 1966, and contained six papers and an introduction: of the papers, one was a major examination of theoretical approaches to death in anthropology and archaeology, four were analyses of prehistoric cemeteries (three of them in the southeastern USA and one in Sudan) and one studied stylistic change in colonial mortuary art in New England. Although seemingly diverse, the papers shared, in various ways, a concern with five themes:

1. the study of death, or, as referred to here, mortuary practices, in a social context;
2. the study of mortuary practices as a means of social inference from archaeological data, moving beyond the use of this data for constructing chronologies (e.g. in what order were the dead interred in cemeteries, what did this tell us about the wider time sequence of grave goods?) and the statistics of past populations;
3. the use of ethnographic analogies for the study and interpretation of past mortuary practices;
4. the use of ethnographic analogies for the reconstruction of types of societies (e.g. egalitarian, stratified);
5. the quantitative analysis of the biological and cultural data from excavated cemeteries to determine patterns that might be interpreted using (3) and (4).
The bellwether paper of the volume was by Lewis Binford on ‘Mortuary practices: their study and potential’. Binford’s paper was divided into two halves. He began with a critical appraisal of past interpretations of mortuary practices in both archaeology and anthropology (in north America, the former is a sub-discipline of the latter). Binford was particularly critical of any approaches based on idealism, as for example in the studies of primitive religion by E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer, in which mortuary practices were determined by different ideas and beliefs. He also rejected the assumption that variations in human culture were only attributable to ‘patterns of transmission and communication among peoples’ (p. 9), so that if there were two cultures, A practising inhumation and B cremation, and A adopted cremation, this had to be the result of a movement of people or ideas from B to A. Ethnographic evidence also supported the rejection of A.L. Kroeber’s proposal that the treatment of the dead could be understood in terms of styles, or fashions, rather than social practices. Instead Binford emphasized the social context of mortuary practices, going back to the L’Annee Sociologique school of Durkheim and the key works of R. Hertz and A. Van Gennep.[1] This led him to propose, through survey of the ethnographic literature, the following hypothesis: ‘other things being equal, the heterogeneity in mortuary practice which is characteristic of a single sociocultural unit would vary directly with the complexity of the status hierarchy, as well as the complexity of the overall organisation of the society with regard to membership units and other forms of sodalities’ (pp. 14 – 15).

The second half of Binford’s paper was an attempt to evaluate this hypothesis. Using role theory he argued that our understanding of the social aspects of mortuary practices had to consider the social persona of the deceased (‘the composite of the social identities maintained in life and recognized as appropriate for consideration at death’, p.17) and ‘the composition and size of the social unit recognizing status responsibilities to the deceased’ (p. 17). The main ‘dimensions’ of the social persona that were expressed through mortuary rituals were age, sex, social position, sub-group affiliation, cause of death and location of death. Binford then tested his hypothesis against a sample of 40 non-state societies drawn from the Human Relations Area Files. He recognised that this testing was somewhat problematic, given the nature of the ethnographic sample (e.g. the difficulties of measuring social complexity with the available data), but was still sufficiently confident of the results to conclude that ‘these findings permit the generalization that the form and structure which characterize the mortuary practices of any society are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organizational characteristics of the society itself’ (p. 23).

Binford’s paper used ethnographic data to search for a cross-cultural generalization that would link social organization to mortuary practices in such a way that archaeologists could then think about the reconstruction of that social organization from the material traces of mortuary practices preserved in the archaeological record. He did not analyse any archaeological data. That task was undertaken in four of the other papers in the volume. Arthur Saxe searched for structure in the buried population of a hunter-gatherer cemetery in the Wadi Halfa region of the Sudan, probably dated to c.11 000 – 8000 BP. His analysis of the age
and sex of the deceased individuals led him to conclude that they formed a random sample of the original, living population. The positioning of the interments supported the evidence of egalitarian treatment, although the greater variation in the positioning of females allowed Saxe to propose that patrilocal residence was practised after marriage. Saxe’s analysis was clearly informed by his training as an anthropologist, and this became especially clear at the very end of the paper when he briefly discussed the significance of cemeteries: why are they present in some (kinds of) societies and not in others? Using selected ethnographic examples, Saxe provided a preliminary answer to this question (which was to be developed more fully in his PhD dissertation): cemeteries appeared in societies in which social groups used mortuary rituals to legitimize control of critical resources (e.g. land) by reference to their ancestors. Saxe clearly recognized that these were preliminary arguments, and that the results of the analysis of one cemetery could not necessarily be generalized to a whole society.

Ethnographic analogy also permeated the three papers on burial mounds from the so-called Mississippian period of the first half of the second millennium AD in the southeastern United States. The approach adopted by Binford and Saxe to situate mortuary practices in a social context was the basis of the papers, although it was most explicitly presented by Christopher Peebles. The assumption behind his analysis of Moundville and its contemporary sites was ‘that persons who are treated differentially in life will be treated differentially in death’ (p. 68). He also used Binford’s distinction between artefacts that were more or less symbolic (‘socio-technic’ vs. ‘technomic’) to structure his analysis of grave goods. The distance between cemeteries such as Moundville and the sources of such artefacts underlined differences in their value: the more ‘exotic’ artefacts were assumed to have held greater value for local communities. This assumption was also made by Lewis Larson in his analysis of the Etowah burial mound in Georgia and by James Brown in his analysis of the Spiro ceremonial centre in eastern Oklahoma. In each case quantitative analysis was used to define structure in the empirical record of the cultural and biological records of burials (e.g. age, sex, orientation, grave goods, burial location, degree of articulation of the body, etc.). Once defined, that structure was interpreted in terms of different social groups and the degree of ranking of such groups in a kind of society similar to that which was known in the ethnographic literature (both locally, from post-contact times, and cross-culturally). Larson interpreted the burials from Etowah as representing a high-ranking descent group, with inherited social position, in a stratified society, while Peebles reconstructed Moundville as the centre of a ranked or chiefdom society and Brown proposed the existence of ranked statuses at Spiro.

The remaining paper in the volume, by James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, adopted a rather different approach, namely the use of ‘controlled’ data, in this case gravestones from colonial New England, as part of a programme to investigate the social context of mortuary rituals. This programme was based on evidence for age, sex, social status, wealth, community affiliation and inter-marriage in gravestone art. Deetz and Dethlefsen plotted the chronology and diffusion of gravestone designs in urban and rural Massachusetts’ cemeteries.
during the eighteenth century in terms of stylistic traditions and local status groups. Here it was historical rather than ethnographic contexts that provided the data to develop arguments linking mortuary practices to their social contexts.

Taken together, the themes addressed in this volume can be seen as part of a wider movement in the Anglo-American archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s, called the ‘new’ and later ‘processual’ archaeology, mostly closely identified in North America with the work of Lewis Binford and his students at Chicago (e.g. Binford and Binford, 1968). As in other disciplines, such as the ‘new’ geography, archaeologists debated the need for greater attention to the process of interpretation, of giving meaning to their data, making greater use of explicit theory and methodology and turning to the philosophy of science for guidance on how to do this. The use of quantitative methods of analysis opened the way for multivariate pattern searching in larger bodies of data, such as cemeteries. The analysis of such cemeteries was part of a more wide ranging attack on the notion that past social organization was beyond the range of inference from archaeological data. The issues raised by processual archaeology were highly contentious and ferociously debated, but they gained acceptance among a younger generation of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

The *Social Dimensions* volume had an immediate and widespread effect on archaeological analyses of death in the 1970s. Binford’s paper was widely cited as providing the theoretical bases for such studies, although he himself only regarded it as a starting point. In fact he has not written another word on the topic in his subsequent career. Saxe’s ideas on the origins of cemeteries were further developed in his PhD thesis (Saxe, 1970), which became the most widely cited archaeological thesis of the last three decades, in spite of the fact that it was never published. The case studies in *Social Dimensions* provided models for cemetery analyses using quantitative methods such as cluster analysis and principal components analysis to search for evidence of social ranking and status, and hence measures of inequality in past societies (e.g. Shennan, 1975).

Debate on the ideas contained in *Social Dimensions* continued through this time. Some concerns were expressed about the extent to which social types such as ‘chiefdoms’ could be seen in the ethnographic record, let alone archaeological data. The extent to which social differences were directly or unambiguously marked out in the disposal of the dead was shown to vary according to the effects of ideological and political mechanisms (for example the sumptuary laws of ancient Greece, or the Islamic emphasis on death as a levelling force). This in turn led to greater concern with the symbolism of mortuary practices, especially their location in the landscape of the living. Lastly it was argued that archaeologists needed to devote more attention to understanding the nature of their data on past mortuary practices before proceeding to its interpretation through ethnographic analogy. Many of these concerns were raised in an edited volume published exactly 10 years after *Social Dimensions* (Chapman, Kinnes and Randsborg, 1981), as well as in other sources (e.g. O’Shea, 1984).

More trenchant criticism of the approach exemplified in *Social Dimensions* appeared within the context of what was to become known as ‘postprocessual’
archaeology. Ian Hodder used the example of burial customs among the Mesakin Nuba of Sudan to criticise the proposal that ‘patterns in death directly and fairly simply reflect patterns in the life of a society’ (1980: 163). Nuba burial customs were, he argued, an ideal, not directly reflecting where people lived or what their social groupings were. As elsewhere, what he called ‘practical social relations’ could be inverted or distorted. The principal cause of this idealization was attitudes to death shown in ideas and symbols of purity and fertility. Such symbolization had been neglected in processual archaeology as a whole, as well as in the studies published in Social Dimensions and elsewhere in the 1970s.

Parker Pearson (1982) developed these criticisms in his focus on the role of ideology in expressing or concealing the real relations of power within society. Rather than mortuary practices directly reflecting such relations, he argued that the living could manipulate the dead for their own interests. This could lead to situations in which, for example, the costs of the funerals bore no relation to the wealth or rank of particular interest groups. Analysis of a sample of 270 out of 3000 funerals in Cambridge in 1977 showed that there was no correlation between the costs of the funeral and the value of property of the deceased; the most expensive funerals were organised by gypsies, members of the lowest class. Parker Pearson went on to study overall trends in mortuary rituals in Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular he noted the changes in the amounts of wealth invested in funerals and funeral monuments, reaching a peak in the Victorian period and declining in the twentieth century. The reasons for these changes had to be sought in the wider relations of power in society: ‘social advertisement in death ritual may be expressly overt where changing relations of domination result in status re-ordering and consolidation of new social practices’ (1982: 112). These arguments gave the living an active role in the design and practise of ritual activities such as mortuary practices, and placed the decision making process within wider economic and political contexts.

The criticisms of both Hodder and Parker Pearson fitted within a wider critique of processual archaeology (Hodder, 1982). Postprocessual archaeology made wider use of theories drawn from European social science, from neo-Marxism to structuralism and structuration, looked at society from the bottom up rather than the top down (e.g. from the active individual to different genders and struggling classes) and put attitude, meaning and symbolism at the centre of human experience. Once again, internecine warfare broke out in Anglo-American archaeology during the 1980s as a largely younger generation asserted its intellectual independence.

The response to the postprocessual critique was not necessarily a negative one. Within the so-called archaeology of death, James Brown, the editor of Social Dimensions, agreed that the arguments proposed in that volume needed to be revised. He accepted that the ‘representationist’ position, whereby treatment at death was determined by status in life, might only apply in situations in which social strategies were geared to the maintenance of inherited rights and positions in society and he cited historical examples where this was the case (Brown, 1995). He also accepted the thrust of Parker Pearson’s argument that the dead could be
used in the political strategies of the living and that expression of social difference might not appear in mortuary rituals. Such rituals had to be studied within the broader contexts of ideological constraints, political manipulation and economic transactions (e.g. the allocation of time, wealth and effort in the rituals in relation to what could be mobilized from social groups).

While this debate over the nature of the relationship between death and its social context raged within the archaeology of the Anglo-American world, it is fair and relevant to ask whether this represents debate in other regional traditions of world archaeology. Two examples suggest that insufficient notice has been taken of these other traditions. Within German protohistoric archaeology, the study of cemeteries to provide inferences of ethnicity, religious and social distinctions goes back to the 1920s, while social inferences were developed in the 1960s by study of the distribution of grave goods, the energy expended in the disposal of the dead, the integration of settlement and burial evidence and the evidence for biological distance and skeletal pathologies (Härke, 2000). Although these were similar to the kinds of inferences and approaches discussed in Social Dimensions and in processual archaeology, they were largely unknown in the language-bound Anglo-American world.

The second example comes from Spain, where Lull (2000) has rejected the ideas of social representation in and individual manipulation of death rituals, arguing that such rituals are the products of social labour, which is allocated by social groups in the context of productive processes and the social relations of production and reproduction. Such an approach requires the labour invested in the rituals, as far as can be determined from the archaeological data, be compared with that invested in productive activities in everyday life. How were such activities organized and who controlled them? Were surpluses being produced and was there evidence for exploitation? Such questions require the archaeologist to examine the evidence of settlements and domestic structures, as well as burials and cemeteries. Such a strategy gives the archaeologist the opportunity to compare what Hodder (1980) called ‘practical social relations’ with representations of those relations in death. In other words, archaeological insights into past societies are not gained from looking at cemeteries alone.

How then do we evaluate the position of Social Dimensions in the history of archaeology? Does it still have any relevance? Clearly it was a volume of the archaeology of its time and the context today is very different. Rather than follow conventional wisdom that processual archaeology has been replaced by postprocessual archaeology, I would argue that the discipline as a whole (and not just its Anglo-American branch) is highly fragmented: archaeologists use a wide range of theoretical approaches drawn from the social and natural sciences, some attempt to build bridges between such approaches, others adhere rigidly to theoretical purity, a wide range of problems are under study and philosophical perspectives range from relativist idealism to deterministic materialism. Opinion is divided on approaches to society, with one branch continuing to measure social complexity in the form of types of society such as chiefdoms and states, and the other focussing on the everyday practices of social agents. Much has changed in
our views of the relationships between mortuary practices and their social (not to mention political and economic) contexts. Important insights have been drawn from disciplines other than the ethnography on which Social Dimensions depended: the last two decades have seen an explosion of research in sociology, classical studies, art, history of art and history. It may come as a surprise to practitioners of these subjects that archaeologists are scouring their publications, especially the historical records of long-term change in the relationship between the ideologies and material practices of mortuary rituals. But we have to give credit to Social Dimensions for initiating this tradition of research in the Anglo-American world.

Archaeological analyses of death now occur at a variety of scales, from the individual body through to the cemetery and the regional landscape. Problems under study range from the body and its representation of identity, to differences of age, gender, social position, health, ethnicity, the long-term roles of the ancestors, symbolism and cosmology in the delineation of social landscapes and social reproduction, and even discussion of emotional responses to death. Interestingly the majority of studies still focus on the cemetery as the unit of analysis, as in Social Dimensions, and use quantitative methods to define patterning in the cultural and biological data. Indeed it is this study of the relationship between culture and biology in large samples of individuals and over long time scales that is one of the strengths of archaeological research. What is needed now is greater control over the measurement of time in these cemeteries, using radiocarbon dating on human bone to divide the burials into generations within cemeteries. Where the dead were disposed of within the settlements of the living (e.g. under house floors) we may have even finer scale chronologies. We also need more studies of both burial and domestic contexts to compare social representations in death and life. While some may now dismiss Social Dimensions as an intellectual dead end, a relic of the optimistic, generalizing, scientific archaeology of the early 1970s, a kind of paradise lost, none of the subsequent approaches to the study of death would have become possible without it.

Note

REFERENCES


**Biographical Note**
