INVITED CONTRIBUTION

Interdisciplinarity and the archaeological study of death

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Over the past two decades, archaeological approaches to the study of burial evidence (or, in American terminology, mortuary evidence) have undergone a marked, almost dramatic shift. This may be illustrated with my own shift of perspectives which, although it started later, highlights some elements of the wider trend. In 1998 I joined several colleagues at the University of Reading to set up an interdisciplinary Master’s course in ‘Death and Society’. This course offers modules from several disciplines, notably sociology, archaeology, history, classics, anthropology and health care, but it is underpinned by a Core Module taught jointly by specialists from the first three of these disciplines. It is no exaggeration to say that participating in this venture has been an eye opener for me (as, I hope, it was for our students). Until then, interdisciplinarity had for me meant using in my archaeological analysis skeletal data supplied by physical anthropologists; using information on diet provided by bone chemistry; and looking to cultural and social anthropology for ideas on how to interpret the burials I had been studying. But the aim had invariably been to infer aspects of the living society of the past from the mortuary remains it had left behind. Now, interdisciplinarity means learning from sociologists, archaeologists, historians, and care and bereavement specialists about how individuals and societies deal, and have dealt, with dying, death, grief, bereavement and commemoration.

This shift of research interest, from life in the past (to be inferred from its dead remains) to death in the past, is one that has been observable elsewhere among ‘archaeologists of death’ since the 1980s (Parker Pearson, 1999, reviewed in Mortality, 2000, 5: 325–327). It is part of a wider paradigm shift in archaeology, from so-called processual to post-processual archaeology, but that need not detain us here, not least because it is hoped that this may be the subject of a Classics Revisited piece in this journal in the not too distant future. Of greater relevance here is the fact that this shift has profound consequences for interdisciplinary work (which is, of course, advocated and promoted by this journal): archaeologists are now studying aspects which are of interest to other disciplines and specialists studying, or dealing with, mortality and death. Archaeologists have even begun to tackle the thorny question of how to infer from archaeological evidence human emotion in the face of death (Tarlow, 1999, 2002).
2000), although the methodology of this particular approach is still in its infancy.

So where does this leave archaeology in an interdisciplinary setting? Now that archaeology shares research interests with other disciplines in this field, archaeologists can try again to provide the kind of long-term perspective on death which Childe (1945) sketched more than half a century ago. Archaeological observations on broad geographical and temporal patterns of cremation, inhumation, secondary burial, monument use and re-use, ritual and sacrifice should be of interest to sociologists and anthropologists. And the archaeological study of funerary rituals and of commemoration could make fresh contributions to debates about natural or cultural roots of grief, about rites of passage and the nature of liminality, about attachment and continuing bonds, remembrance and forgetting, individual and social memory, afterlife beliefs, pollution and superstition, about inalienable possessions and grave deposits.

But the future of such a new interdisciplinarity is not all bright. While interdisciplinary research will always be welcome to British university administrators as long as it brings in grants, courses like the ‘Death and Society’ degree at Reading may decrease rather than increase in numbers. In the current financial climate in the UK, heads of departments have to maximize student intake into their own departments rather than into multi-department or self-financing courses, and they are likely to see involvement of their own staff in such joint ventures as an unwelcome diversion from the improvement of departmental income/expenditure ratios and from the financial rewards of five-year research plans. The fault lies not with heads of departments, but with the university and funding systems in which they have to operate. There is now a very real danger that multidisciplinary university teaching may thrive in Britain only where it fits into organizational frameworks (faculties, schools) and promises clear financial returns.

REFERENCES

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Biographical note

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