The long-standing interest of anthropologists and archaeologists in the meaning and variability of mortuary behaviour stems from the important links that are presumed to exist among forms of mortuary treatment, the ideology of death and concern for the deceased, and the structure of differential social status. Despite arguments that the intensity of mortuary expression varies independently of religious or emotional concern for the dead (e.g., Kroeber 1927:313; Childe 1944:88), explanations tend to link declining expression with increasing emotional detachment [e.g., Parker-Pearson 1982:110–11] and increasing expression with increasing concern for the dead [e.g., Hamell 1983:26]. Moreover, despite numerous ethnographic cases that show a lack of predictable correspondence between differential mortuary treatment and differential socioeconomic status [e.g., Ucko 1969; Orme 1981:235], archaeological interpretations continue to equate elaborate mortuary behaviour with high social status [e.g., Tainter 1978:125–28].

Repeated challenges have failed to reduce the intuitive appeal of such “commonsense” archaeological interpretations because exceptional cases lack the support of theoretical explanation [Bartel 1982:47]. One major reason for this is the absence of historical depth in comparative studies [Humphreys 1981a:11; Braun 1984:194–95]. Only in the context of historical development is it possible to explain the variability and elaboration of a particular archaeological burial assemblage or pattern of ethnographically observed mortuary behaviour. Rather than trying to explain specific levels of elaboration at particular points in time, the focus should be on changes in mortuary practices over time.

This study adopts Kroeber’s (1927:314) view that mortuary patterns are in a class with fashions in dress, luxuries, and etiquette. Furthermore, mortuary practice is viewed as a medium for the competitive expression of status and status aspirations, and it is this use that is considered the driving force in patterns of mortuary elaboration and simplification. Temporal developments in different mortuary systems are compared to show the parallel pattern that result from competitive use of mortuary behaviour for social and economic display.

Although competitive display is a major factor in the elaboration of mortuary behaviour, it can also lead to an eventual reduction in its intensity—initially through the reduced effectiveness of differentiating forms of expression in the context of a multiplicity of expressions both past and present and ultimately through social control—as elaboration becomes increasingly associated with lower status categories.

Detailed mortuary data from Victorian-to-modern England and historic Northeast Iroquoia demonstrate similar processes and consequences of competitive mortuary expression in widely divergent cultural and historical contexts. The effects of expressive redundancy and social control on subsequent forms of mortuary expression are clearly illustrated in these two examples and also in the mortuary practices of ancient Greece. As a general principle governing the forms of mortuary behaviour, expressive redundancy in a context of competitive dis-

---

A comparative historical analysis of mortuary behaviour in different cultures reveals that it is explicable in terms of cyclical change in display ostentation. General principles concerning the dynamics of social competition and display effectiveness explain the frequent lack of equivalence among degrees of status, sentiment, and mortuary ostentation. Case studies of Victorian-to-modern England and historic Northeast Iroquoia illustrate the cycle of expressive elaboration, redundancy, decline, and regulation that develops in a context of competitive mortuary display, and ancient Greece provides additional examples. The cyclical nature of display effectiveness therefore warrants consideration as the backdrop for social and ideological interpretations of mortuary variation.

Aubrey Cannon is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology of the University of Toronto (Toronto, Ont., Canada M5S 1A1). Born in 1955, he was educated at Simon Fraser University (B.A., 1979) and at Cambridge University (Ph.D., 1987). His research interests are material-culture studies, zooarchaeology, ethnoarchaeology, and Northwest Coast and Iroquoian prehistory. He has published “The Quantification of Artifactual Assemblages: Some Implications for Behavioral Inferences” (American Antiquity 48:785–92), “Radiographic Age Determination of Pacific Salmon: Species and Seasonal Inferences” (Journal of Field Archaeology 15:103–6), and, with Brian Hayden, “Interactions Inferences in Archaeology and Learning Frameworks of the Maya” (Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 3:325–67), and The Structure of Material Systems: Ethnoarchaeology in the Maya Highlands (Society for American Archaeology Papers 3).

The present paper was submitted in final form 9189.

---

1. The research and writing of this paper were supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship. This financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged.
play also accounts for the typical long-term reduction of mortuary expense and elaboration cited by Childe [1944:87–95] as the basis for his evolutionary theories concerning the meaning, distribution, and disposal of wealth in stable societies.

The case studies show (1) an initial elaboration of mortuary practices as the result of increased affluence, socio-economic flux, and status uncertainty, (2) competitive expression of status and status aspirations that predictably rises to a peak of elaborate display, and (3) subsequent decline and ultimate prohibition of previously sanctioned forms of mortuary expression. It is of general significance to the anthropological and archaeological interpretation of mortuary behaviour that in such different cultural contexts there developed similar historical patterns, independent of changes in social structure and largely independent of changes in religious belief or the degree of emotional concern for the dead.

Case Studies

VICTORIAN-TO-MODERN ENGLAND

English mortuary practice since Victorian times has ranged from the heights of ostentation to relative restraint and even neglect. A parallel change in views is revealed by the shifting debate over the meaning of specific practices and their appropriateness as expression of grief and respect for the dead. Whereas proper concern was once equated with elaborate display, later commentary was increasingly bitter in its denunciation of excessively elaborate mortuary behaviour. This latter view became increasingly common in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, although still more recent views have favourably contrasted the concern for the dead expressed in the elaborate Victorian practices with the perfunctory treatment accorded them in more recent times [Gorer 1967; Ariès 1974:85–103; Stannard 1977:167–96]. The idea that attitudes toward death were more “well-adjusted” in Victorian times has been convincingly dismissed as romantic [Cannadine 1981], but it continues to constitute the basis for the argument that the elaboration and later simplification of mortuary behaviour are expressions of prevailing ideology [e.g., Parker-Pearson 1982:110–12].

Because ideologies and attitudes such as those concerning death and mourning are difficult to define for any period of the past, there is ample room for debate concerning the relationship between mortuary practice and sentiment in recent English history. It is not surprising, however, that there has been no such debate concerning the relationship between mortuary treatment and the structure of English society. English social structure has not changed in direct accordance with changing fashions of mortuary behaviour. Although the occurrence of similar changes in mortuary treatment in an otherwise unknown archaeological context would almost inevitably lead to interpretations of changing social structure, the pattern of change in English mortuary behaviour over the past two centuries is not different from that which might emerge in any cultural context in which mortuary behaviour is a medium for competitive display.

From the medieval period to the present, English mortuary practice has been characterized by cycles of increasing ostentation and subsequent restraint [Puckle 1926]. The most recent cycle developed from the relative restraint of the mid- to late 18th century through the full ostentation of the Victorian period to the restraint that has prevailed to the present. Despite the undeniable ostentation of many 18th-century funerals, it is generally agreed that much of this period was characterized by mortuary restraint [Ariès 1974:78; Gittings 1984:205]. Royal funeral display was much less extravagant than previously [Gittings 1984:216], and there were only the beginnings of elaborate funeral display among the middle classes [Cunnington and Lucas 1972:192–93]. Differences in mortuary behaviour between the rich and the poor were sharply defined [Cunnington and Lucas 1972:196], and the inflationary spiral of display fueled by emulation had not yet developed. Historical explanations for this relative restraint have emphasized a prevailing rationalist attitude and reduced commitment to religion and belief in an afterlife [Ariès 1974:65; Curl 1972:22–25; Gittings 1984:57, 205]. In short, the explanations differ very little from those offered for present practice [e.g., Gorer 1967:x1, 127]; the two periods are considered to have much in common in this respect, especially in contrast to the intervening Victorian efflorescence [Gittings 1984:205].

The Victorian period was one of unprecedented ostentation in funeral pageantry that was the equal concern, if not obsession, of the highest and the lowest extremes of the social spectrum. At the time of an 1843 parliamentary report on burial practices and funeral expense, it could be said that the desire to secure respectful interment was the strongest and most widely diffused feeling among labouring people [Chadwick 1843:55] and would cause them to neglect their well-being and that of their families in order to ensure provision of sufficient funds for a “proper” funeral. Absolute levels of funeral expenditure varied with social and economic status, but the important consideration of the time was the pervasive desire for funeral display among all classes and the relative hardship this entailed for the poor and even the middle classes [Chadwick 1843:197].

Mortuary practices followed a sequential pattern of status association that ensured a qualitative as well as a quantitative differentiation of status. The occasion of death was also an opportunity for social advancement [Morley 1971:11], in which even the poor could aspire to a level of ostentation denied them in life [Cannadine 1981:189]. The pervasive emulation of higher-status mortuary display is well attested by repeated references to the guiding influence of the higher classes on the practices of the poor and middle classes [Chadwick 1843:52, 77–78]. The result was a classic pattern of differentiation and emulation [see Simmel 1904:133–39; see also Miller 1982:89–90; Bradley 1984:72–73] in which innovative forms of expression were adopted first by the
wealthiest and most influential members of society and then gradually at successively lower social levels. Continuing innovation developed because high-status expressions lost this symbolic association once they were adopted within lower social strata, but the result was not ever increasing elaboration. High-status individuals were also the first to abandon particular forms of mortuary expression, thereby maintaining control over and, in effect, reversing the status associations of those forms.

Elaboration and restraint are both intrinsic to the process of display. Restraint in several areas of English mortuary practice was initiated by members of the upper classes, but in every case this followed widespread emulation of those same practices. At the point of widespread emulation, a move toward restraint was as effective an expression of social distinction as elaborate display had been at an earlier date. A fashion shift toward restraint was well under way as early as 1843, and an undertaker at that time could report that it was the disposition of the higher classes to reduce the trappings of funerals and diminish the number of followers to the grave in an effort to reduce expenses [Chadwick 1843:107, 163]. At the same time, the lower and middle classes were being chastised for not showing similar restraint. The tendency among the higher classes to reduce the use of black crape as mourning wear was pointed to as an example for those of limited means [Chadwick 1843:78-79], but the general demand for it did not even peak until the 1870s [Morley 1971:65] and fell sharply only after 1912. Excessive use of mourning wear among the poor remained a subject of criticism well into the 20th century [Puckle 1926:95-97]. Feathers had been an increasingly common feature of funeral display since the 18th century. A gentleman's funeral in 1785 even saw the introduction of a “feather man” whose only function was to bear a tray of black plumes in addition to those adorning the horses and hearse in the funeral procession [Cunnington and Lucas 1972:196]. But an undertaker in 1843 commented that “parties of respectability” were beginning to object to the use of feathers [Chadwick 1843:107]. Nonetheless, the use of black feathers persisted throughout the 19th century, though by 1926 it was a custom only sometimes still seen in the poorer districts and one that the undertaker's trade itself had urged be discontinued on the grounds that the use of plumes on horses' heads caused unnecessary suffering to the animals [Puckle 1926:128].

It is clear that by 1843, when the majority of Victorian funeral and mourning customs were just reaching their peak, they were already being abandoned among the highest classes of English society. But mortuary display was a dynamic process that continued to develop through new media. In the mid-19th century, the new urban cemeteries and traditional rural churchyards became the last focus of mortuary expression to yield a competitive cycle of display elaboration and restraint. My study of 3,500 19th-century grave monuments from 50 villages in rural Cambridgeshire (Cannon 1986, 1987) revealed that (1) the diversity of monument shapes increased until the middle of the 19th century and subsequently declined [figs. 1 and 2]; (2) the pattern of increasing and decreasing monument-shape diversity was matched by rural economic trends, as measured by the size of the locally supported population [consisting largely of agricultural labourers and their dependents] [fig. 3]; (3) the decline in monument-shape diversity toward century's end occurred despite an increase in the number of monuments erected [fig. 4]; (4) higher social classes had greater access to the monument medium at an earlier date and tended to utilize styles prior to their peak of popularity, while lower-status individuals tended to be commemorated by monument styles that were well past their peak of popularity [see, e.g., table 1]; (5) there was a tendency to use attribute channels of expression within the monument medium [e.g., lettering, shape, and material] according to the economic means available and the extent to which such use had pervaded lower levels of the social order [e.g., elaborate lettering was less in use among higher-status individuals by the time it was appropriated for use on the monuments of the lowest class of agricultural labourers], and (6) with the century's-end decline in the diversity of expression in monument shape and lettering, expressive distinction was achieved through the use of a diverse array of new monument materials, as exemplified by the rapid increase in monuments of white marble [3.6% in 1871-80, 14.2% in 1891-1900].

The growing affluence of large-scale farmers in Cambridgeshire and other parts of rural England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries found expression in the emulation of the gentry in fashions of houses, household goods, and clothing [Cobbett 1853:272-74; Holderness 1981:240-42; Horn 1984:12-13]. The elaboration of Victorian funerals is also attributed to increasing middle-class affluence and emulation [Morley 1971:11], and the correspondence between agricultural prosperity and monument-shape diversity is a further indication of this effect. As successively lower classes of rural society improved their status, their increased social aspirations and real improvements in disposable income were also expressed through material differentiation and emulation. By century's end, the conditions of even agricultural labourers had improved substantially, and they too were more and more oriented toward emulation [Horn 1984:12-13]. Grave monuments and mortuary behaviour in general were simply aspects of this wider process.

An economic depression in the late 19th century helped to put a ceiling on the further elaboration of monument forms, but to explain the subsequent decline in diversity it is necessary to consider the effect of expressive redundancy in the context of mid- to late-19th-century churchyards and cemeteries. By the mid-19th century, the differentiation of monument expression and the increasing frequency of monuments had created a visual context in which further differentiation [within economically and ideologically acceptable limits] was increasingly difficult. Some further differentiation was possible through attributes such as material, but the expressive potential of the medium was ultimately lim-
The result was progressive abandonment of the monument medium initiated among the higher strata and eventually followed in descending order of status. The ultimate outcome was a simplification and standardization of grave monuments that has continued into this century (Burgess 1963:127, Lindley 1965:37). Aesthetic considerations had earlier led critics to advocate smaller and less ambitious monuments (e.g., Trollope 1858), but a move in this direction developed only much later as the outcome of the process of competitive display.

Regulation of monument expression, always ostensibly under clerical control in regard to churchyards at least, has only recently come into widespread effect as the result of a social power shift toward the side of restraint. Civic authorities have moved to prohibit large and elaborate monuments, which are now favoured only among a minority of the socially least powerful (Parker-Pearson 1982:104, 107), and the church has moved against the use of white marble, which had been the favourite material (Burgess 1963:46, 127). Critics had long objected to white marble on the grounds that it was "foreign" and in clashing contrast to the fabric of the churches, but its prohibition came into effect only when its use was within the means of the entire social spectrum and long after it had ceased to provide a mark of high-status distinction. In the case of monuments, as with other aspects of mortuary display, the meaning of display changed in response to pervasive emulation and expressive redundancy. It was this changing pattern of meaning that determined whether elaborate mortuary display was ideologically appropriate or proscribed.

In summary, English mortuary behaviour over the past two centuries has been a product of the social process of competitive display. Increasing wealth in the 18th and 19th centuries and a progressive dissemination of relative affluence created individual opportunities for challenge to the prevailing social order. The resulting social flux and status uncertainty engendered a need for symbols to express status and status aspirations. The occasion of death, because of the attention it draws, was simply one of a number of forums open to symbolic status expression. The various media of funerals, mourning, monuments, etc., and attribute channels such as
FIG. 2. Monument-shape diversity by decade (heterogeneity index calculated as mean richness [number of types] exhibited in 500 subsamples of size 50 randomly selected with replacement from the decade assemblage of recorded grave monuments).

FIG. 3. Monument-shape diversity and size of the locally supported population.

FIG. 4. Monument frequency by decade.

TABLE I
Characteristics of the Post-1850 Monuments of Large-Scale Farmers and Agricultural Labourers in Three Cambridgeshire Villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fashion Lead/Lag*</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Median Date</th>
<th>Shape/Material</th>
<th>Lettering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmers &gt;100 acres</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td>-16.68</td>
<td>6.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Average difference between the monument date and the median 19th-century date recorded for each type.

monument shape, lettering, and material all followed a use pattern that was a function of the principles of effective display (i.e., the ability to draw attention and communicate a distinct message). Innovative mortuary expressions capable of conveying high status lost this capacity when they were rendered redundant through a multiplicity of competing and emulating forms. Gradually, various media and attribute channels were abandoned, and as mortuary behaviour ceased to provide opportunities for the expression of social distinction higher-status individuals took less interest in it and became among the first to advocate cremation [Morley 1971:98; Curl 1972:162–67; Parker-Pearson 1982:103, 105].

Overt efforts to control ostentation through ridicule,
institutional persuasion, and regulation gained general support only long after restraint was first noticeably exercised among members of the higher classes. Despite signs of upper-class restraint as early as 1843, national associations aimed at the promotion of funeral restraint were not founded until 1875 [Morley 1971:76], and it was many more years before there was even the beginning of a consensus on the subject. Following the fashion lead toward restraint, elaborate mortuary display became increasingly associated with individuals with the least status in society. The last vestiges of elaborate expression, once again capable of drawing inordinate and at this stage socially inappropriate attention by virtue of their rarity, were increasingly the subject of ridicule and regulation. This control was ultimately aimed at the elimination of the expressive capacity of mortuary behaviour, thereby drawing the display cycle to a close.

The pattern of English mortuary behaviour was clearly grounded in the dynamics of fashion. Forms of display, their elaboration, and the intensity and ubiquity of their use over time were reflections of social phenomena and not of standards of sentiment or belief. Neither were they the static reflections of the structure of status relations, since display associations were continually changing. Early elaboration of mortuary practice was led by the highest-status members of society, but it was not because they were the first to develop feelings of grief and reverence in the face of death. And ostentation was not an unchanging measure of social status but followed a cycle of status associations from high to low.

The pattern so clearly seen in this example was not unique and is not the exclusive product of Western capitalist society and economy. The cycle of mortuary display is a function of fundamental principles that govern the effectiveness and social control of overt status expression in any medium. Under similar conditions of social flux and utilization of the mortuary medium for competitive display, the same pattern has been the result in very different cultural contexts.

HISTORIC NORTHEAST IROQUOIA

Historic Northeast Iroquoian mortuary practices followed a long regional tradition characterized by periodic elaboration and restraint. Material expressions with burials indicate an elaborate Northeastern mortuary complex from the Terminal Archaic through the Middle Woodland period, a precipitous decline during the Late Woodland, and a renewed utilization of this expressive medium during the protohistoric period [Tuck 1978:332–33; Hamell 1981:26; Trigger 1976:139, 147]. Early 17th-century records attest to the subsequent spiraling increase of mortuary elaboration among the Huron [e.g., Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:301], while recent ethnographies document the culmination of the cycle in the prescribed restraint of 20th-century practice [Shimony 1961:235–36, 243]. Current mortuary restraint is an extension of practices that date back to at least the time of Handsome Lake, the Seneca prophet of the late 18th century. Little information is available for the period between the mid-17th and the late 18th century, and a measure of regional continuity must be assumed in combining early data from the Huron with later data from the Six Nations Iroquois [Fenton 1978:296]. Nevertheless, there is sufficient information to reconstruct the historical development of Iroquoian mortuary behaviour and demonstrate its foundation in the process of competitive display.

In their recording of a common zeal for mortuary display, early 17th-century missionary accounts of Huron burial ceremony echo 19th-century accounts of English practice. The Franciscan Sagard and the Jesuit Brébeuf describe the material sacrifices undertaken by some Huron in their provision of gifts to the dead and to those in attendance at interment ceremonies. In the same terms used in the English parliamentary report of 1843, the early Huron ethnographic descriptions highlight the burden of mortuary display on the poor and stress this point with examples of lifelong deprivation and impoverishment for the sake of procuring “proper” provision for the dead [Wrong 1939:213; Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 8:121; vol. 10:265; vol. 24:173]. In the Huron case, proper concern was measured by the extent to which beaver-skin robes, shell beads, axes, kettles, and other items of value were provided for interment with the dead and distribution to friends and relatives in attendance. That there was an element of competitive increase in the extent of Huron mortuary display and largesse is attested by contrast with the late-prehistoric absence of grave goods and the statement by Brébeuf in 1636 that the excesses and superfluous expense connected with the Huron Feast of the Dead “are even now beginning to be a burden to them” [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:301]. Archaeological evidence attests to a similar elaboration and increase in grave goods among the New York Iroquois during the protohistoric and historic periods [Tuck 1978:332–33; Sempowski 1986].

Brébeuf [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:301] expressed the hope that the Jesuits, by means of divine inspiration, would bring an end to ceremonies such as the Huron Feast of the Dead, but he also clearly recognized the economic limits to further elaboration. By 1724 it was noted that the Iroquois had cut down a great deal on the amount of wampum enclosed in graves and that some individuals had begun to raid their ancestors’ graves for the wampum that they contained [Fenton and Moore 1977:252]. Current Iroquoian mortuary practice is described as restrained in its use of material display and adornment of the deceased [Shimony 1961:235, 243], and 19th-century New York Iroquois funerals were described as hasty affairs of the simplest character [Beauchamp 1897:111]. The interpretations of this change that have come from observers and others are a mix of often conflicting assessments of the relationship between specific mortuary practices and the depth of sentiment and pious concern. For example, Sagard favourably compared Huron concern and liberality with the common lack of Christian European acts of piety on behalf of the dead [Wrong 1939:213]. Brébeuf, in contrast, described Huron funeral ceremonies as foolish and useless and emphasized their ostentation over any indication of piety [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:301]. Recent comment
has described the protohistoric rise in mortuary ceremonialism as evidence of renewed concern for the dead [Hamell 1983:26]. A contrasting lack of concern might therefore be inferred from the description of a 19th-century New York Iroquois cemetery as having nothing to indicate love for the dead and as a place where burials were carried out with little show of feeling [Beauchamp 1976 [1892]:111]. But current Iroquois ethnographies show that in spite of their simplicity, funeral customs are a topic of major concern [Shimony 1961:234]. The mutual contradictions of these assessments indicate that the elaboration of mortuary practice cannot be read as a reflection of the depth of sentiment or piety. Adequate explanation must account for systematic change in the ideology of mortuary expression, and this change is directly tied to questions of Iroquoian acculturation.

The disruptions and changes in Iroquoian cultures that resulted from European contact and the effects of disease, war, trade, and missionary activity are undeniable, but these changes developed within the context of dynamic cultures and were not simply imposed from the outside. Acculturation is therefore not sufficient explanation for them. Jesuit missionaries clearly had a move toward restraint in burial practice as part of their long-term objectives in the conversion of the Huron [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:301]. In the early 18th century, the Jesuit Laflatau [Fenton and Moore 1977:252] could claim that display in honour of the dead was being abolished under European influence as natives were made to understand its uselessness. But the European provision of enlightened understanding is inadequate as an explanation for the changes in native practice.

Similar problems of European influence surround the code of Handsome Lake and many of its specific provisions. In this case, the potential for Quaker missionary influence is particularly important, since Quakers reject material display in commemoration of the dead. But the compatibility of the code of Handsome Lake with Quaker beliefs is generally seen as no more than that, the code being firmly grounded in Seneca tradition [Deardorff 1951:89–103; Wallace 1978:447]. It may be impossible to separate native tradition from acculturative effects entirely, but if the problem is to explain changing native ideology and practice influence is irrelevant. Explanation is required for either the internal development of change or the internal consistency maintained in the acceptance of outside influence. In either case it is necessary to account for the relationship between mortuary restraint and the historical development of Iroquoian culture. That relationship has clear parallels to the situation in Victorian England that justify the application of a similar explanation, based on affluence-engendered competition and the changing effectiveness of expressive displays.

Some understanding of the context of Iroquoian mortuary practice in 1636 can be gleaned from the views of the missionary Brébeuf on Huron burial rites [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 10:265, 303–5]:

You might say that all their exertions, their labors, and their trading, concern almost entirely the amass-

ing of something with which to honor the Dead. They have nothing sufficiently precious for this purpose, . . . for this is a point of honor. It is on such occasions they wish above all to appear magnificent.

. . . it is only the rich who lose nothing, or very little, in this feast [of the dead]. The middle classes and the poor bring and leave there whatever they have most valuable, and suffer much, in order not to appear less liberal than the others in this celebration. Everyone makes it a point of honor.

This is precisely the same type of situation that is alluded to in the parliamentary report cited earlier [Chadwick 1843]. Common to the two cultural contexts was an obsession with mortuary display as a competitive expression of social position and aspiration. Increasing affluence and social disruption created an atmosphere of status uncertainty in which increased efforts were required to establish, maintain, and improve status through material display. Iroquoian display in the early 17th century was developing toward the same type of peak that was witnessed in England in the mid-19th century. Subsequent to this peak in both cases there was a sharp decline in mortuary display. The lack of Iroquoian information makes it impossible to demonstrate a systematic abandonment of ostentation among successively lower-status individuals. Only the most indirect evidence suggests this possibility, as in the example of high-status neophyte Christian Huron’s surprising the missionaries with their announced desire not to be interfered in the manner of their people [Thwaites 1896–1901, vol. 23:31]. The ultimate outcome of the process was, however, strikingly similar to that in the English example; perfunctory burial, simple rites, and mourning restraint became the norm. Iroquois social regulation of mortuary display also followed the English pattern in the explicit prohibition of former symbols of status expression. Contemporary Iroquois prohibit burial with glass beads or anything red [Shimony 1961:235]. As in the English ban on white marble monuments, the rationale for the ban on glass beads is their foreignness. But in both cases it was the exotic nature of the materials that had made them appropriate symbols of high status. Being foreign assumed a negative connotation only during the end of the display cycle, subsequent to the overuse of and general access to foreign material expression.

The Iroquoian move toward mortuary simplicity and the specific ban on beads and the colour red can only be understood as a deliberate contrast with earlier ostentation. In the context of competitive display, such contrast initially serves the interests of those seeking to set themselves apart. The pervasiveness of 17th-century Iroquoian mortuary display, the consequent redundancy of ostentation, and the social direction of emotive display would all favour an initial impetus for contrasting restraint among high-status individuals. Emulation of this restraint would then serve to end the practice of display via the medium of mortuary behaviour.

This cross-cultural explanation is more comprehen-
sive than the many particularistic accounts of changes in Iroquoian mortuary practice. An attribution of increased grave goods to increased affluence (Tuck 1978:333) is not an explanation unless it accounts for the social purpose behind the display. It was the social opportunity and status uncertainty created by Iroquoian affluence (Trigger 1984) that found expression in a mortuary medium that at the time was open to increasingly elaborate expressive display. The inherent limits to the effectiveness of social distinction through elaboration make it unnecessary to invoke acculturation as the reason for the subsequent decline in mortuary display. Native revivalism is insufficient to explain the ban on Euro-American goods such as glass beads [e.g., Hamell 1983:21], especially since similar regulation is equally applied to purely native expression [e.g., the colour red] and is not applied to certain other Euro-American goods [e.g., metal coffins] (Shimony 1961:127). Explicit social regulation of former status expressions is better understood as a denial of the opportunity to attract socially inappropriate attention at the end of the mortuary display cycle.

The cyclical pattern of mortuary display accounts for the extent of elaboration at any one point in time. In the context of competitive display, ostentation and subsequent restraint are inevitable because, depending on the background level of display in effect, each in turn is effective as an expression of social distinction. Against a background of relatively simple and homogeneous mortuary practice, elaboration attracts attention and conveys social distinction. But emulation of differentiating forms of expression yields a context of general ostentation in which even innovative elaboration fails to attract attention or convey distinction. Against a background of ostentation, restraint is the only available avenue of distinction. Sumptuary regulation is an initial attempt to preserve the distinction of ostentation, but pervasive emulation driven by competition will tend to resist such control. Subsequent social control of status expression requires a manipulation of mortuary symbols and their meaning that eventually culminates in a shift to mortuary restraint. The cycle is effectively ended when emulation of restraint yields sufficient social power to regulate against the renewed but inappropriate distinction of lagging ostentation among the socially less powerful.

Competition and the rules of effective display are therefore sufficient to explain the historical pattern of mortuary behaviour in Victorian England and historic-period Iroquoia, and elements of these processes can be observed in other historically documented patterns of mortuary behaviour.

ANCIENT GREECE

Ancient Greece from the Dark Age to the Classical period provides further historical examples of cyclical change in the ostentation of mortuary practice. Changing Greek observances for the dead and their meanings have been the subject of recent comprehensive review and analysis (Garland 1985, Morris 1987). It is neither possible nor necessary to attempt a re-analysis of such a large and complex body of material here, but selected examples do help to illustrate the principles and processes just outlined.

A variety of evidence suggests long-term continuity in a Greek ideal of mortuary ostentation in proportion to the status of the deceased, and there is also ample indication of continuity in basic Greek attitudes toward death (Morris 1987:44–52, Garland 1985:37). Therefore, it is from a base of ideological continuity that the social interpretation of variation in Greek mortuary behaviour has been developed. Examining temporal variation in numbers of graves and cemeteries, Morris (1987) convincingly argues that much of the Greek Dark Age and Archaic period was characterized by the exclusion of the non-elite from formal burial. His case for status homogeneity during periods of exclusion is flawed by his use of frequency-dependent measures, but his study of changes in grave goods and burial treatment does provide an excellent basis for identifying trends in the popularity of specific mortuary practices. These trends follow consistent patterns of expansion and subsequent restraint in status-related expressions that are clearly the function of rules governing effective display.

The inclusion of metal grave goods is just one example of temporal change in the usage and meaning of Greek status expressions. Morris (pp. 147–51) presents the following summary of the use of metal in adult graves during four periods of Dark Age Athens: [1] Submycnean (1125–1050 B.C.), metal restricted to a small proportion of graves; [2] Protogeometric (1050–900 B.C.), access to formal burial more restricted but metal grave goods more widely distributed; [3] Early and Middle Geometric (900–760 B.C.), continued restricted burial access and extensive use of metal but more intensive competitive display as the average number of metal objects per grave reached a peak 57% above earlier periods; and [4] Late Geometric (760–700 B.C.), precipitous decline in the proportion of graves with metal and in the frequency of metal objects per grave but an apparent increase in the social extent of access to formal burial. During the following Archaic period in Athens, metal grave goods were virtually absent.

Setting aside the question of the actual status of burials during each of Morris’s Dark Age periods, the pattern of distribution of metal grave goods is precisely what would be expected in a context of competitive display. Access to Submycnean burial may have been relatively unrestricted, but status distinctions based on metal grave goods were clear and highly differentiated. During the Protogeometric, while burial exclusion may have defined a basic social division, within the group granted access to formal burial there remained a range of differential status expressions. The increase in the average frequency and range of metal grave goods during the Early and Middle Geometric indicates a more active use of metal as a medium of competition, but a shift away from this practice had already begun, as is indicated by
the relatively poor grave goods included in certain high-status graves [p. 124]. Principles of competitive display would suggest that the Late Geometric decline in metal grave goods represents emulation of an earlier high-status restraint that developed in response to intense competitive display via metal goods, the dramatic rise in access to metal in the second half of the 8th century B.C. [Snodgrass 1980:54–55], and the potential for still more extensive display as a result of expanded access to formal burial. Late Geometric graves with metal would be expected to be of lower status than those without, and the Archaic absence of metal goods may indicate regulation brought into effect once the practice was restricted to the socially least powerful of those with access to formal burial.

Complementary historical trends are observable in the use of grave markers. The earliest [ca. 900 B.C.] Athenian ceramic vase grave markers were ostentatious [Morris 1987:151], and their introduction likely represented a response to the ubiquity of metal grave goods and the consequent need for new symbols of status differentiation. For more than a century thereafter, a very high proportion of graves had markers. Garland [1985:124–25] outlines the differentiating responses engendered by the near ubiquity of grave markers during the Archaic period. From 700 to 650 B.C., earth mounds surmounted by vases and of increasing size became the most common form of grave marker. Thereafter followed a reduction in the size of mounds [ca. 640 B.C.] and a transition to mudbrick tombs [ca. 610–600 B.C.]. Stone steiae, which began to replace ceramic grave markers ca. 600 B.C., represent a further switch in expressive channels at a time when evidence for slowly increasing access to formal burial at Athens [Morris 1987:73] suggests an enhanced need for distinction in status display. Grave monuments had become much more lavish by 550 B.C. [Morris 1987:132], though within decades privately erected steiae began a decline that preceded their outright banning during the period ca. 500–430 B.C. [Humphreys 1981b:270]. The meteic rise in the number of Athenian graves that began around 500 B.C. suggests much broader access to burial [Morris 1987:98–99], and, given the ubiquity of grave markers as status expressions, expansion in the potential base of display likely favoured the regulated end to a mortuary display cycle already in decline.

It is generally accepted that the elaboration and shifting modes of Greek mortuary expression were the result of competitive display [Morris 1987:182; Garland 1985:107, 121]. Yet the decline and prohibition of mortuary ostentation are considered less an integral and inevitable part of the same process than an inherent cultural reaction to excess, reinforced by shifts in Greek political and economic ideology. Classical-period regulation was aimed at curbing excessive funeral display and expenditure, and, though it is more problematic [see Morris 1987:50–51], it is generally accepted that similar legislation was introduced in Athens during the Archaic period. But although the purpose of Greek funerary legislation was clear and consistent, its explanation requires more than the tautological assertion that because regulation curbed excess, it must have developed as a reaction to excess. Furthermore, even though ideological shifts toward equality or thrift are consistent with mortuary restraint, they also require explanation, and their manifestation in the control of mortuary expression must be consistent with ongoing display trends.

According to the explanation outlined in the English and Iroquoian case studies, Greek mortuary display regulation should represent a curb of lagging lower-status ostentation in the aftermath of a higher-status move toward restraint. Since it generally followed periods of pervasive mortuary elaboration and was not specifically directed, the Greek legislation could not have been designed to limit emulation. The pervasiveness of mortuary display at the time of regulation also suggests a previous social power shift toward restraint, since the greatest power to enact and enforce curbs would otherwise have been in the hands of those most affected by them. The incorporation of Archaic grave monuments into an Athenian defensive wall in 479 B.C. [i.e., within a generation of their apparent banning] also suggests that those in positions of greater authority had fewer immediate ties to standing monuments.

It has been suggested that the destruction of monuments was in part a political action to mask status differences among the recently expanded citizenry of the Athenian state [Garland 1987:122], and a similar leveling ideology is held to account for the Archaic decline in grave goods in other parts of Greece [Morris 1987:184–86]. In addition to the general problems in basing an explanation of symbolic restraint on leveling ideology [Hodder 1986:65–67], there are specific problems in its use to explain the Classical ban on steiae. Because sumptuary regulation is held responsible for earlier limited access to grave markers that were economically accessible to the bulk of the population [Morris 1987:154], the expression of a subsequent leveling ideology should have been the complete removal of restrictions and not their more complete application.

Ideological change alone fails to reconcile decline and regulation with earlier competitive elaboration. Unless it is assumed that inherent cultural limits determine how much display is acceptable, there are no circumstances to account for reversal in the ideology of display. But if the acceptability of display is seen as a function of its effectiveness as a high-status expression, then restraint, regulation, and shifts in ideology are all part of the same continuing process of symbol manipulation that is initially responsible for mortuary elaboration.

The mortuary display cycles illustrated in the cases of Victorian-to-modern England and historic Iroquoia have clear parallels not only in the mortuary expressions of ancient Greece but also in mortuary trends in prehistoric contexts as widely divergent as Bronze Age Wessex [Braithwaite 1984:102–6] and Iron Age Denmark [Parker-Pearson 1984:78–86]. However, the pattern and pace of mortuary change may vary, these contexts clearly share a historical pattern that must have reference to common social processes and common patterns of change in symbolic meanings and associations.
Mortuary Expressions in Time

Historical change is the context in which ideological and social meaning is established. Yet the ideological or social interpretation of variation in mortuary behaviour typically requires that one or the other of these meanings be held constant. This need for constants in mortuary analysis may partly explain the view that either the intensity of personal concern and religious piety or the range of social distinction is a simple function of mortuary elaboration and/or investment. Counterexamples erode the interpretive framework provided by comparative constants but offer no substitute, therefore, to consider them anything but exceptions threaten to render mortuary variation uninterpretable. If social structure does not change but the intensity of mortuary expression does, then the change is attributed to changing ideology. If the ideology of death remains constant, then the varied intensity of expression must have a social meaning. (This is an oversimplification but represents the essence of comparative mortuary analysis.) The problem is that because all meaning is generated within a historical context, rather than assuming constancy the interpretive process must begin with determination of the patterns of meaning generated at various stages of diachronic development. In other words, one must accept that meanings change, determine whether there are historical regularities in this change, and then use these regularities as the contextual constant against which variation is interpreted. The case studies presented above demonstrate a pattern of historical development, and the meaning inherent in this pattern forms the backdrop for the ideological or social interpretation of mortuary behaviour.

Death’s disruption of social and personal bonds creates a powerful medium for expressive response, and this response can take any number of forms, all tied to the emotional and social effects of death’s created loss. Given the universality of a death-created medium and the culturally specific meaning of symbolic responses, the comparative study of mortuary behaviour is largely left to focus on the degree of expressive response and its relationship to the nature and extent of emotional and social loss occasioned by an individual’s death.

Interpretations of synchronic and diachronic variation in mortuary behaviour typically adopt the premise that the intensity of expression is a direct measure of the basis of expression—that a more intense mortuary response reflects either a greater social loss, proportional to the status and social roles of the deceased and family, or a greater emotional loss and degree of personal sentiment and religious piety. Exceptions to this rule of positive expressive association are accommodated by reference to specific historical and cultural circumstances. For example, the failure to maintain levels of expressive distinction despite continuity in social structure and the ideology of death has been attributed to changes in the availability and/or cultural conception of wealth (e.g., Childe 1944:87), a masking of social inequality (e.g., Morris 1987:184–86), and symbolic drift (e.g., Kroeber 1927:313; Adams 1968:203). These are all more ad hoc accounts of deviation from expectation than systematic explanations.

Childe’s (1944:87; 1945:17) contention that grave goods diminish because possessions come to be regarded more as commodities does not explain why this should occur. The same is true of explanations that link mortuary elaboration to increased affluence (e.g., Tuck 1978:333). The defusing of social tension and potential conflict is the contextual link between mortuary restraint and the masking of social inequality, but that inequality can be masked through symbol manipulation is an undemonstrated assumption that contradicts the demonstrated historical tendency for low status to pursue and high status to resist or evade emulation. Furthermore, because symbols both express and create status distinctions, it may be impossible to mask status distinctions symbolically (Hodder 1986:65–67). If inequality is itself a symbolic representation, then its perception will persist through some other focus.

Yet the active manipulation of symbols does underlie variation in mortuary behaviour, and this fact serves to stress the contextual poverty of symbolic drift as an explanation. Mortuary practices do not change because they float free of social and historical circumstance and are therefore more subject to external influence (Kroeber 1927:313) or the less consistent consciousness of tradition that is born of infrequent application (Adams 1968:203). They change because they serve as media for social expression and because they derive meaning through contrast with contemporary and past expressions. The ability to perceive contrast is therefore the key to understanding the general rule of positive expressive association while systematically accounting for exceptions to it.

Mortuary elaboration can represent an increase in the number and range of measurable distinctions in status and sentiment, or it can develop as an expressive response to ambiguity in perceptions of distinction. For an outside observer, particularly an archaeologist restricted to the observation of symbolic expressions, it may be impossible to differentiate these two cases. Mortuary expressions are actively manipulated in the context of competitive display, and it is only that process that is clearly revealed as mortuary symbols change and become more elaborate.

Structural change or expressive challenge to the social order yields differentiating forms of expression that are increasingly elaborate so long as change or challenge is vertically directed and elaboration is effectively communicated. Creation of new distinctions or challenge to the structure of existing ones creates the same need for symbolic adjustment, which is only exacerbated if the available means of expression is also undergoing rapid expansion. Growing affluence provides opportunities for individual challenge and enhances the means for expressing or responding to that challenge. Affluence-engendered competition is therefore a common cause for expressive elaboration. A similar process is also the basis for the often-cited correlation between the elabora-
tion and diversification of material expressions and the process of social disruption and change (e.g., Simmel 1904:138, 151; Childe 1945:17; Richardson and Kroeber 1940:147–50; Martin, Lloyd, and Speebr 1938:295–96).
Any ambiguity in the perception of social distinction is sufficient to begin a cycle of expressive elaboration via any of the channels available. Death is simply a more common and generally effective forum because of its emotional and social significance.

Ambiguity and its expressive counterpart can occur on a vast range of social scales, either within or between broadly or narrowly defined social groups or classes. The extent of expressive challenge and response is one factor determining the pace and extent of the elaboration spiral. Other factors include the magnitude and diversity of expressions. If mortuary expressions are of sufficient magnitude, diversity, and/or ubiquity, then further expression, however elaborate or divergent, will fail to convey proportionate distinction. The point of expressive redundancy varies with the context, but it is an inevitable consequence of competitive mortuary display that status expression eventually reach either a magnitude that cannot be exceeded or a diversity that obscures further divergence. It is expressive redundancy that accounts for the common historical circumstance in which mortuary elaboration reaches a plateau that is followed by mortuary restraint.

Childe [1944:87–96] observed that in the 6th century B.C. a barrow tomb on the Eurasian steppe might contain as many as 230 horses, while the tombs of the wealthier 5th-century Scythians generally contained only 2–4 horses each. To account for this and other examples of decrease in grave goods through time, he proposed a theory based on the perception of goods as commodities and the consequent reluctance with increasing affluence to sacrifice them in mortuary display. But basic principles of display effectiveness explain this trend without recourse to changes in the ideology of wealth. In the case of horse sacrifice, it is easy to see elaboration as an expression of continuously enhanced status perceptions. A tomb with 10 horses indicates twice the wealth and prestige as a tomb with 5 horses. But further differentiation of similar scale requires a geometric increase in display investment. If contrast is to be made with a tomb containing 150 horses, the addition of 5, 10, or 20 horses will not convey a distinction proportional to the added investment. A point is quickly reached at which proportionately greater display is prohibitively costly and restrain the only available means of display contrast.

Archaeologists have had particular difficulty in accepting mortuary restraint as continuously linked with the causes and course of earlier trajectories of mortuary elaboration. As a result, they have often invoked fundamental change in ideology or circumstance as explanation for such reversal. But if expressive restraint is seen as part of the same trajectory as expressive elaboration, then such ideological change as does occur must be considered as much the consequence as the cause of shifts in mortuary symbolism.

Expressive elaboration and contrasting restraint are attempts to preserve a correspondence between the symbolic representation of status relations and individuals’ perceptions of their positions in the structure of social relations. Because an individual’s status is ultimately defined by the perceptions of others, it is in the interest of high status to maintain symbolic distinctions and in the interest of low status to obscure them. In the limited contexts in which they can be applied, sumptuary rules are the most explicit means for exerting control over symbolic status representations. But unless class membership is rigidly defined, inequality within classes will create sufficient ambiguity at class boundaries to maintain emulation. The continuous manipulation of symbols and their meanings is therefore a more effective means for the control of status expression. Positive expressive association initially fosters increasing ostentation, but the overriding need for high-status distinction ensures the eventual shift to contrasting restraint as ostentation becomes expressively redundant. As emulation of restraint shifts the social power balance, restraint becomes the subject of regulation designed to prevent the re-emergence of ostentation as a contrasting symbol of positive expression in an inappropriate low-status association. Regulation therefore ends one cycle of display but establishes a new base from which mortuary behaviour can once again emerge as an effective medium for expression.

Conclusions

Cycles of mortuary elaboration and restraint are examples of the continuous transformation of culture through the symbolic expression of social aspirations. Historical cycles in the intensity of mortuary display are the result of social tensions and status comparisons among individuals, and they develop as the function of common processes of human social and expressive behaviour. Archaeologists and anthropologists must recognize in mortuary change the operation of these historical processes, which apply beyond particular social and cultural circumstances. Only then will it be possible to determine the social and the ideological meaning of the mortuary expressions that emerge in specific temporal and cultural contexts.

Comments

BRAD BARTEL
Department of Anthropology, San Diego State University, San Diego, Calif. 92181, U.S.A. 15 III 89

Cannon’s work is illuminating but only loosely applicable to archaeology. Contrary to his assertion, modern archaeologists, having been exposed to a series of ethnographic “cautionary tales” over the last two decades, are certainly wary of rigid interpretations link-
ing, for example, elaborateness of mortuary behavior and high social status of the deceased. Furthermore, 50 years of seriation studies and analysis of material-culture style have amply demonstrated tendencies toward cycles of use-disuse-use or simple-complex-simple in the archaeological record. His exercise is, however, welcome in reminding us that diachronic analysis of mortuary practice can be part of a research design for understanding social and economic change and that there is a tendency for change to be directed from high-status innovators to lower-status adopters.

Areas in which I find specific fault with Cannon’s research or in which the emphasis needs to be shifted are the following:

1. The most obvious component of mortuary practice, corpse disposal, is only one of many elements in a chain of ceremonies (Bartel 1973, 1982). Each of these elements (e.g., body preparation, ritual services, mourning, postdisposal visitations) needs to be studied as Cannon has for a realistic portrayal of change.

2. Archaeologists working within a prehistoric framework are rarely able to excavate enough sites to be able to identify cycles of mortuary behavior. Cannon does not touch upon the very important questions of sample size, regional variations, and chronological refinement of the archaeological data.

3. It is rare for archaeologists to have the decade-by-decade temporal control over their mortuary data that is evident in Cannon’s data on Victorian England. Thus a pattern of mortuary innovation among high-status individuals being gradually adopted by lower-status ones is difficult to identify in the archaeological record. In my experience, moreover, burials often contain heirloom artifacts that, taken by themselves, would date the body to a period several hundred years earlier than its actual disposal.

4. Cannon makes very little mention of mortuary practice relative to gender and age differences of the deceased. I find these variables to be important in an overall analysis, especially as they relate to the representativeness of the sample being studied.

5. Although I tend to agree with him about the change in burial in ancient Greece, too much emphasis has been placed on the urban settlements of this period. Until we have a better sample of burials associated with villages and towns, full confidence in his conclusions is premature.

6. My own research on prehistoric mortuary practices from the Neolithic through early Bronze Age of western Turkey (Bartel 1974, 1981) shows the changes in complexity and simplicity to which Cannon points, but the trigger mechanisms of population growth, subsistence diversity, and changes in kinship relations that I believe caused the mortuary change are not adequately discussed here. He mentions that the complexity of mortuary practice is directly related to the intensity of social tension and status comparison. In general, I would agree. The archaeologist must first make sense of the material culture relative to whatever categories of kin relations may have existed and then attempt to understand the dynamics of kin and community relationships in terms of subsistence or population size before the mortuary situation can be fully interpreted. It is in its lack of depth of analysis and interpretation that Cannon’s article fails.

RICHARD BRADLEY
Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, Whitknights, P.O. Box 218, Reading RG6 2AA, England. 2 III 89

For too long archaeological studies of mortuary practices have been conducted in a vacuum. This paper makes a refreshing change. It places proper emphasis on the status and aspirations of the mourners rather than the social position of the deceased individual. The dead did not bury themselves, yet attempts to read social position from grave goods often seem to suggest otherwise. Now the provision of funerals can be viewed in terms of the strategies of the living, and mortuary practices take their place among other forms of public consumption. Each of Cannon’s case studies provides powerful support for this contention.

Three wider points arise from the arguments in this paper. First, it becomes more important than ever to define the circumstances that set off the kind of cycle that Cannon is describing. As he notes, there is already a considerable literature on this subject, but often the issues are not addressed sufficiently explicitly. Clearly, this is a field that would repay much fuller investigation.

The second implication is more methodological. If Cannon is right in suggesting that changes in mortuary practices reveal a process of competitive emulation, it follows that the objects employed as grave goods did not possess a fixed value—they might first be adopted as high-status grave goods but lose that status as they became too widely available and ultimately be dropped from the funerary record altogether. This probably accounts for the changing frequency of particular items, as revealed by seriation, but as their value was unstable, we no longer have any objective basis for calculating “wealth scores” or even for comparing the “richness” of different graves (Bradley 1988). By revealing the processes affecting the provision of grave goods, Cannon undercuts one of the most popular methods of inferring social organisation from burials.

Lastly, the final stage in the cycle described by Cannon, which he calls “restraint,” makes no allowance for the possibility that consumption by an elite moved into a different sphere once lavish funerals become too widely distributed. This may have happened in two of Cannon’s own case studies. In Greece, it is well known that the decrease in grave goods in the 8th century B.C. corresponds to a massive increase in the deposition of votive offerings at sanctuaries (Morris 1987:190–91). The study of 19th-century funerals may be interpreted in a similar fashion. Whilst Cannon documents important changes in the provision of funerals, nowhere does he ask whether the restraint shown in mortuary practices might have been offset by consumption in a different
sphere. During the period in which high-status funerals became less elaborate, church building provided another focus for lavish expenditure. In his study area the decade between 1860 and 1870 saw more new churches than any other, whilst most of the major programmes of church restoration took place between 1870 and 1880 [Pevsner 1954].

I began by suggesting that a strength of Cannon’s paper is his willingness to see mortuary practices as only part of a broader social process, but when he discusses the final stage of his cycle he still adheres too closely to the traditional confines of the archaeology of death. In doing so he has overlooked an equally striking arena for competitive consumption. That is the one flaw in a valuable paper.

R. W. CHAPMAN
Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P.O. Box 218, Reading RG6 2AA, England. 21 III 89

Cannon’s paper highlights the important contribution which analyses of historical data can make to the understanding of variation in mortuary practices. The archaeological interest in this variation dates from the 19th century, but more recently it has stemmed from the seminal works of Binford [1971] and Saxe [1970], with their analyses of the ethnographic record of mortuary practices as a means to develop stronger inferences about social organisation and structure in the past. The historical record allows us to monitor social change and to understand how change may be symbolised in cultural behaviour such as mortuary practices (or domestic architecture, or other forms of material culture). With mortuary practices, we can observe the changing contexts of the decision-making processes by which time, energy, and labour are allocated to the differential disposal of the dead. Good examples of the use of historical data are the studies of O’Shea [1984] on the mortuary practices of the Pawnee, Arikara, and Omaha on the North American Great Plains ca. A.D. 1750–1850 [surprisingly not cited by Cannon] and Morris [1987] on the archaeological record of mortuary practices in Greece ca. 1150–500 B.C.

Cannon’s concern is with style [although he does not place his work within the wider context of recent archaeological debates on this topic, e.g., Binford 1989; Davis 1985; Hodder 1982; Sackett 1982, 1986; Wiessner 1983, 1984] and its expression in the material culture associated with the disposal of the dead. His central claim is that “mortuary practice is . . . a medium for the competitive expression of status and status aspirations, and it is this use that is considered the driving force in patterns of mortuary elaboration and simplification.” His intellectual ancestor is Kroeber [1927], although, in contrast to Kroeber, he does not divorce style from its social context.

What appears ambiguous to me from Cannon’s discussion is how far he views variation in mortuary practices as a whole as derived from the operation and determinants of style. In some parts he refers to “mortuary practice,” elsewhere to “elaboration,” and elsewhere to “display.” The mortuary practices of a society relate to all the cultural behaviour associated with death, whether these practices have material-culture correlates or not. Thus there is a wide range of variation in mortuary practices, within and between societies, and it is not at all clear to me how such variation may be reduced to one cause, namely, style. While grave markers and material culture such as pottery may convey stylistic information, what of the position of the interment in the grave, the location of the grave goods within that grave, the location of the grave within a cemetery, and so on? Even before Kroeber, the influential discussions by Hertz [1907] and van Gennep [1909] on rites of passage viewed variation in such practices as the result of relationships between the corpse, the soul, and the survivors [see the clear discussion in Huntington and Metcalf 1979:61–67]. Add to these causes of variation factors such as ethnic affinity [e.g., O’Shea 1984] and the discussion of style as a determinant seems overly restrictive. From an archaeological point of view, further variation is introduced by depositional and post-depositional factors. It may be that I have misunderstood Cannon’s argument, but I would like to see him address himself to this point.

MARY LOU CURRAN
Archaeology Department, Peabody Museum, East India Square, Salem, Mass. 01970, U.S.A. 15 III 89

Cannon convincingly demonstrates a cyclic pattern of elaboration and simplification of mortuary ceremonialism among such disparate groups as the Victorian-to-modern English, the historic Iroquois, and the ancient Greeks. It is in his principal assumptions that I disagree with him.

Cannon states that “the competitive expression of status and status aspirations” is “the driving force in patterns of mortuary elaboration and simplification.” He argues that funeral pageantry was “the equal concern, if not obsession, of the highest and the lowest extremes of the social spectrum” during the Victorian period in England and that “the desire to secure respectful interment was the strongest and most widely diffused feeling among labouring people . . . and would cause them to neglect their well-being and that of their families in order to ensure provision of sufficient funds for a proper funeral.” “The occasion of death was also an opportunity for social advancement . . ., in which even the poor could aspire to a level of ostentation denied them in life.”

There is a flaw in the logic here. How does death provide an opportunity for social advancement of the deceased? Instead, excessive display appears to have reversed the fortunes of the families involved. What, then, motivated them to such display? The occasion of death clearly provides an opportunity for social and economic displays, and the lower class generally emulates patterns
established by the upper class. The upper class undoubtedly seeks to reinforce its social position through distinctive displays and changes display symbols as they are adopted by the lower class. Why, however, did it take nearly 70 years for the fashion shift toward restraint in the use of black craque to reach the lower class? According to Cannon, this lag occurred in spite of considerable criticism of ostentation by the upper class, the very group that the lower class presumably sought to emulate.

Unless one argues that persistence was due to competition within the lower class, the lag must have reflected a more deeply rooted concern. I would argue that death is more a threat to the existing family order than an opportunity for competitive status expression. Emulation of upper-class practices becomes a safeguard; the upper class is presumed to know best what is proper and right. Showing proper respect for the dead may therefore be important in alleviating feelings of vulnerability created by the loss of a family member rather than reflecting a belief that copying symbolic behaviors will enhance status.

It is indisputable that mortuary displays contain social and economic status information. A long prehistoric record of mortuary display, as well as historic evidence from nonindustrialized societies, suggests that very strong emotional and social needs are met through funerary activities. The utilitarian grave goods commonly included in prehistoric Indian graves represent a concern for the future welfare of the deceased. Gift giving to relatives and friends, as observed among the Huron, strengthens community ties and possibly enhances the status of the donors (rather than of the deceased). Displays of magnanimity may also be aimed at masking the vulnerability felt by the immediate family. Historically, women in the Western world have been especially vulnerable to economic decline upon the loss of a husband. The continuation of practices well after their rejection by the upper class may thus be interpreted both as an effort to forestall the lowering of status and as a conservative response to a threatening situation rather than merely as a lagging response to innovation.

Cannon may be commended for providing a fresh view on a long-standing topic of fascination for archaeologists and anthropologists alike. His study should spur new interest in rethinking past interpretations of mortuary ceremonialism.

DAVID W. J. GILL
10 II 89

Cannon's case studies come as a welcome balance to widely held views in classical archaeology (although see, e.g., Morris 1987). It is surely right to emphasise that mortuary practice is "a medium for the competitive expression of status and status aspirations." Richter's (1988 [1961]) approach to the study of archaic Attic gravestones, for example, is more in keeping with the idealised view of Greece. For her "the erection of important tomb monuments" is not an expression of wealth by the social elites of Attica but a reflection of "the well-known reverence of the Greeks for their dead" [p. 1]. Similarly, Kurtz [1975:xix], writing on a type of Athenian figure-decorated pottery frequently associated with funerary contexts, sees "the monuments of stone and clay" not only as "memorials" to the dead but also as monuments "to the honour with which the Athenians buried them."

One should, however, sound a note of caution about linking the three case studies. Cannon's work on 19th-century grave monuments in rural Cambridgeshire can be supported by documentary evidence such as parish registers on the status of the deceased, and the contemporary descriptions of Huron mortuary practices by Roman Catholic missionaries allow us to differentiate between "the rich," "the middle classes," and "the poor." The evidence for the "Greek world" (or, better, Attica, as that is the source for much of the evidence) is not as straightforward. It is clear that the funerary record, perhaps some 1.7% of the resident population of Athens in the 5th century B.C., does not give us a cross section of Athenian society [Morris 1987:100]. It is also clear that in the Athenian context grave offerings such as painted pottery need no longer be equated with high social status, since cremation seems to have been the funerary rite used by Athenian elites [Gill 1988:737-38]. Thus there must be a question mark over the actual status of the deceased whose tombs are identified, and this itself causes problems if changes need to be interpreted. Some indication of status may be provided by inscriptions. For example, the plinth which seems to go with a monumental marble youth [kouros] from Anavysos in Attica records the name of the deceased as Kroisos, a possible aristocratic choice recalling the name of the king of Lydia [561-547 B.C.] [Richter 1960:118-19, no. 136].

Osborne [1988] has reminded us that different types of Attic funerary monument need not reflect a difference of class. The marble stele of Aristion [again the name is suggestive of high status] from Velanideza in Attica shows in relief an armed warrior [Richter 1961:47, no. 67]. Unlike Kroisos's monument, which records death in war, only the role of the deceased as a hoplite may suggest Aristion's end. Osborne thus argues that the lack of similarity between monuments is due to "a difference in attitude to death": Aristion's urges the viewer to imitate his life in the service of the "state" [polis] and Kroisos's to consider living in the face of death [Osborne 1988:8-9].

The funeral was a time to express wealth or at least give the impression of wealth to enhance status in the society. The growing realisation that Attic pottery evokes luxury vessels of gold, silver, and ivory has led to the suggestion that the funerary offerings are themselves only symbols; the real wealth [if one possessed it] was inherited by the next-of-kin [e.g., Hoffmann 1988]. The poor could thus give the impression of wealth by offering cheap vessels of clay which would suggest the life-style of their wealthier fellow-citizens. Finally, the idea of
legislation to curb the display of wealth at the funeral in Attica during the Archaic period is no more than a "hypothetical" construct [Kurtz and Boardman 1971:90] and should be used with caution.

S. C. HUMPHREYS
Department of History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48109, U.S.A. 16 III 89

This article is a valuable contribution to the study of the dynamics of culture, and not merely the dynamics of fashion or conspicuous consumption (it’s a pity that Veblen has not been given a place in the bibliography). What it lacks is adequate recognition that changes in strongly emphasized cultural patterns such as prestigious mortuary rituals are likely to be legitimated by complex discourses that necessarily refer to principles other than the disutility of expressive redundancy or escalating expense and are not likely to be restricted to questions of taste (though those can be complex enough). Such discourses then become available to justify changes in behaviour which may be influenced by a wide variety of practical considerations.

For example, in Victorian England at least one attack on elaborate funerals came from the pious High Church upper middle class, which was seeking to assert a privileged status for itself in contrast to the casual traditionalism of the landed gentry, on the one side, and the emotional revivalism of the nonconformists, on the other, by stress on the priesthood as a profession and ritual correctness in public and personal devotion at home. Their discourse drew on powerful symbolic oppositions—genuine feeling versus formal convention, nature and faith [white lilies] versus artifice and grief [black crepe], emotional control versus abandon. Parts of this symbolism were also available for elaboration by groups with an equal interest in restraining mortuary rites but different motives: feminists who wanted women released from lengthy and oppressive mourning regulations, rationalists, educators, and the spatially mobile. Since the upper middle class was increasingly specializing in communications—writing, preaching, teaching—its role in changing mortuary behavior in this case has to be given serious consideration, and in more general terms it may be worth asking whether intermediate classes or class segments may not have just as much interest in restraining competitive consumption as those at the top of the pyramid.

In the study of ancient Greece, too, it is essential to try to reconstruct a holistic picture in which funerals, burial, grave goods, and the discourse on death elaborated in poetry, laws, and ritual treatment of past burials identified as those of "heroes" are all analyzed together. The primary aim of the ambitious man in the Archaic period [8th—6th century B.C.] was a magnificent funeral in which the whole community would take part. The large mound that made a tomb conspicuous was primarily a sign of the number of men who had helped to make it, although it would also preserve the memory of the deceased in future ages. As the state developed, an increasing distinction came to be made between "public" burial, formally approved by its organs and representatives, and "private" displays, which could be repressed as displays of illegitimate ambition. This development reached its peak in Athens ca. 490–430, after which private monuments started a second cycle of elaboration. Morris’s argument, quoted by Cannon, fails to recognize the essential role of the developing concept of "public" burial in the dynamics of this process and the extent to which Greeks before the 6th century B.C. thought in terms of funerals rather than graves. His analysis of the very fragmentary and inadequately published archaeological data is also highly controversial; it should particularly be noted that the criteria for recognizing a "burial plot" [a central concept] are never spelled out (although this is a notorious problem in mortuary archaeology), while his account of the groups who would have used such plots slides from bilateral kindreds to descent groups and thence to lineages with clients, as if all these would differ only in size.

CL. MASSET
Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, Groupement de Recherche "Méthodes d’étude des sépultures," 39, rue Blomet, (F)-75015 Paris, France. 7 II 89

May I contribute to the commentary on Cannon’s excellent paper with an anecdote? Near my village lives a noble family, the earls of Latour de Geay. Their castle has stood for several centuries in the parish for which they are named, but in the local churchyard, among tombs decorated with marble stones or even monuments, their burial place is a mere patch of earth marked with an inscription. Why should they strive to show off a status acknowledged by all and sundry? There is no denying that wealth allows increased spending on burials, but burials are also phenomena of fashion and as such sometimes poorly understood, especially among people alien to our ways. The most spendthrift in tomb building may actually have been so because he felt looked down upon by others and was trying to make up for it.

IAN MORRIS
Department of History, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill. 60637, U.S.A. 16 II 89

Criticizing recent views, Cannon proposes that ideological change is “as much the consequence as the cause of shifts in mortuary symbolism.” He sees emulation as a human constant, though varying in intensity, and identifies a principle of “expressive redundancy” which gives cycles of mortuary elaboration and restraint their own developmental logic.

This important paper will inspire much further work. At times, however, its position is overstated, as in the claim that “competition and the rules of effective dis-
play are therefore sufficient to explain the historical pattern of mortuary behaviour." Cannon emphasizes historical context but is less interested in accounting for actual situations than in providing a lawlike generalization. His theory may become a necessary part of explanations for mortuary changes, but it is by no means sufficient. A ceiling in consumption may be met by restraint, as in his Scythian example, but at other times it may lead to a shift to new media of display. In some places, the cycles are short, in others very long. The lack of discussion of other types of deposit is striking. An interesting case study would be Anglo-Saxon England, where the use of grave goods and barrows shifted for different age and sex groups in complex patterns against a background of spatial changes in cemeteries, the rise of monumental architecture, and new prestige goods (Arnold 1988). Cannon’s thesis is a better starting point than the “coming of Christianity” approach but by itself would not get the most from the material.

This also applies to Cannon’s own case studies. He comments that 18th-century English burial was restrained but based on a rich/poor distinction, while 20th-century display is also muted but creates an impression of unity. This cannot be reduced by a stylistic roundabout. Cannon is right to say that “the [cyclical] pattern . . . is not the exclusive product of Western capitalist society and economy” but does not stress that the formal similarities mask structural differences. The cycles give an interesting twist to the old Weber/Tawney debate; Cannon’s ideas enrich but do not overturn Parker-Pearson’s [1982] links between burial and ideology.

His comments on ancient Athens are excellent and show the value of his approach. The abandonment of metal grave goods after 700 B.C. had indeed been preceded by a period when they were excluded from the “best” graves [Morris 1987:143]. However, limiting explanation to expressive redundancy impoverished the data. The inclusion of metal in graves has a complex cyclical history [Morris n.d.a] and must be analyzed against changes in monuments and the burial group. The “restraint from above” approach also illuminates changes around 500 B.C. Athenian nobles’ tombs were grander than ever in the 520s [see, e.g., Herodotus’s account 6.103-3] of Cimon’s funeral], but the Peisistratid tyrants [ruling on and off from 561 to 510] monopolized political and cultural leadership. Their graves may be a rather modest group [Morris 1987:68]. This is, however, only part of the pattern. There are clear cycles in Athenian display, with peaks ca. 1100, 850, 725, 550, and 325 B.C. and great restraint ca. 1050-925, 825-750, 700-600, 500-425, and 300-200. But expressive redundancy does not exhaust their significance. The 7th-century restraint was, I believe, an aristocratic phenomenon, underwritten by an elite/commoner distinction analogous to that of 18th-century England; 5th-century restraint was very different, being an element of a radical democratic culture which extended surprising powers to all citizens. Restraint was part of a system in which the state monopolized the power of monumental tombs for the war dead and appropriated their glory for the community [Loraux 1986]. When monumental tombs returned around 425 the wealthy took back for family use what had for three generations been democratic, state symbols. The ban on lavish tombs in 317 was, however, imposed from above by Demetrius of Phaleron [Morris n.d.b: chap. 6]. The reuse of grave markers in the city wall in 479 may indicate a lack of aristocratic interest, but Thucydides [1.89–91] explains events as a combination of popular resistance to Sparta and the political machinations of Themistocles, both viewed with suspicion and hostility by many of the elite.

Cannon’s paper has powerful implications for sequences like this and for theories of alternating periods of “individualizing” and “communalizing” monuments [e.g., Renfrew 1984: pt. 3; Bradley 1984]. Despite the overstatements attributable to its brevity, particularly with regard to the extent to which expressive redundancy is a sufficient explanation for mortuary changes, it remains a major contribution to the archaeology of death.

JEFFREY QUILTER
Department of Anthropology-Sociology, Ripon College, Ripon, Wis. 54971, U.S.A. 10 II 89

This paper is important in its insistence that burial practices be viewed as a dynamic component of sociocultural systems. The treatment of the dead does not simply mirror the organization of societies but is subject to social forces, including the manipulation of symbols such as funerary displays. Cannon points to specific historical circumstances that result in similar cyclical trends of ostentation and restraint, and the cycles are linked to the interplay of social forces rather than floating free in a realm of pure stylistic ether.

What lessons, then, are archaeologists to draw from this essay? Are attempts at detecting social structure through mortuary studies worthless for prehistory? The implication of Cannon’s essay is that such endeavors are tricky, that without the historical documentation for the three cases he cites archaeologists following the precepts established by Saxe [1970], Binford [1971], Tainter [1978], and others during the heyday of the New Archaeology might draw the wrong conclusions. I would be interested to know exactly how far Cannon’s critique extends. Is this a call for modification and adjustment of the theories regarding the study of mortuary practices mostly developed in the 1970s or a challenge to the theoretical foundations on which they rest?

It is my opinion that the critique of Cannon and others [e.g., Hodder 1986] must temper and modify some of the findings of processual archaeology rather than overthrow it. While many valid criticisms can be and have been raised regarding the recently dominant theoretical school of North American archaeology, its attempts at creating generalized models are of great value. The simple fact of the matter is that for many societies we do not have adequate documentary data with which to compare our archaeological conclusions. We can at best draw
upon known historical circumstances which appear analogous to prehistoric cases and hope that through such comparisons some better perspective on past cultures may be gained. With enough ethnographic and historical examples we can build models of the way in which our defined categories of behavior interact. The unique, idiographic, and eccentric are commonly lost in the coarser-grained view of the past based entirely or mainly on the study of material culture and related data. Cannon’s thesis and examples highlight the need to continue building theory and caution us to not rest too easily on current assumptions. A more historically informed prehistory is certainly called for. For many ancient societies, however, the likelihood of writing their histories is remote. Thus, crude scales of measurement of the past, including mortuary practices, are sometimes the best tools available, and the choice may be whether to use them or none at all.

All three of Cannon’s cases represent complexly organized sociopolitical entities. Not only was Victorian England capitalist, urban, stratified, and industrialized, but the Iroquois were affected by the fur trade, colonial encroachments, and other effects of the world system. The periods covered for Greece also represent increasing stratification, urbanization, and all-round complexity. No society is without a history or immune to outside influences, and no society is necessarily “simpler” or more static than another, in that people continually manipulate, reinterpret, subvert, and challenge the prevailing rules of the game. But just as a social system may never be truly uniform and static and mortuary practices may never simply mirror social systems with complete fidelity, it is unlikely that oscillations between ostentation and simplicity recur with predictable frequency. There does seem to be a fundamental difference between state societies or those under their influence and more “simply” organized polities. One must question how well Cannon’s hypothesis applies to nonstratified prehistoric social systems.

While I accept Cannon’s argument that the Victorian upper class curtailed the elaborateness of its monuments while the middle classes continued with ostentation, I would think that the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie were still more frequently buried in family vaults on country estates or in the “better class” of cemeteries or even in the better sections of cemeteries than members of the lower classes. While some of these things may not be easily detected archaeologically, they still manifest a ranking of society and have the potential to be detected with careful study.

Cannon’s essay is a cautionary tale for all archaeologists, and I welcome it. Studies of mortuary practices will be enriched by taking his warnings into account. The task of archaeology, like that of any discipline, is to bring as much critical analysis as possible to bear on the subject at hand, and understanding how mortuary practices have been articulated with other aspects of society will surely help sharpen our wits. It is the fact that archaeology is tricky that makes it challenging, fun, and sometimes rewarding.

Cannon’s article offers a new perspective on a significant class of archaeological materials. It makes several important points, but it also makes some assumptions that seem to be unwarranted. Part of the difficulty lies in the attempt to generalize from disparate material.

I agree with Cannon that elaboration in mortuary ritual has little to do with sentiment. He suggests that elaboration is used in status competition between component groups of the political economy. In a more general sense, differences in mortuary behavior are tied into systems of cultural classification, and while there may be instances in which sentiment appears to be relevant, this is because we do not understand the classificatory system. For example, infants in some systems in which status positions are “achieved” are considered as extensions of their parents rather than as the lowest-ranking members of society. From this perspective we can see that the elaboration of mortuary ritual may have more than one source and that cultural concepts of appropriate mortuary (or any other) behavior may change over time.

Another important idea in the article is that what has been manifest in some studies as changing stylistic patterns may represent the pursuit of elite status, through the manipulation of symbols, by “the masses.” Even classic studies using seriation techniques may be monitoring this process, since they make no assumption about the social pathways that innovations follow in a cultural system.

Two major points are more problematic. Richardson and Kroeber, cited by Cannon, demonstrated that change was cyclical and oscillating rather than unilinear and directional. [It is worth noting that Cannon does not employ Kroeber’s ideas about the way in which change occurs. In the latter’s view it comes almost autonomously from “culture,” not from conscious group actions.] Mortuary data from sites in the Midwestern and Southeastern United States seem to fit a model of oscillating or cyclical elaboration in a number of mortuary dimensions (e.g., provision of grave goods, construction of graves) as we move from Archaic to Woodland and Mississippian societies [Rothschild 1975]. It is unclear whether Cannon believes in cyclical movements or a consistent trend toward “simplification,” which I suggest would be an artifact of the time scale selected for analysis. Following his model, one can imagine an alternation in funeral styles, moving from simple to elaborate to simple, etc., as elites define their position and non-elites imitate elite style, followed by the redefinition of elite status by opposition along some dimension.

A second but less important problem lies in the composition of Victorian British and Iroquois societies. The latter is described through the eyes of missionaries who clearly misunderstood the type and degree of Iroquois social hierarchy. Cannon may have other information
that attests to the existence and definition of the hierarchy, but it is not presented here. One would have to know what the status system was and how mortuary behavior was structured to understand variation in grave goods among the Iroquois. Certainly for the Huron, cited by Cannon, reburial was a ritual that reinforced group cohesion rather than fragmenting it as competitive behavior would (Heidenreich 1978). In addition, not all burial furniture is equivalent, and there may be different reasons for the inclusion of certain items in graves. Some objects, being more visible (e.g., tombstones, grave posts, funerary urns, or special ceramics), may be more closely tied to status display (Wobst 1977), whereas small personal objects and food offerings may have other functional identities. The inclusion of objects in graves is, after all, influenced by things other than competitive display. Religious convictions, including ideas and beliefs about the afterlife, are involved, as are notions of role or persona. It is a mistake to assume that all societies are similar with reference to the primacy of economic variables.

In summary, the article represents a positive contribution to mortuary studies by urging a historical approach to the analysis of this set of behaviors. The basic premise needs to be examined empirically, in carefully chosen data sets, to see in what contexts simplification and elaboration emerge.

Curtis Runnels
Department of Archaeology, Boston University, Boston, Mass. 02215, U.S.A. 22 II 89

This paper deserves careful attention, perhaps more for the wide utility of its theoretical position than for the comparative studies it presents. Cannon argues that the recurrent pattern in the archaeological record of increasing elaboration of mortuary practice followed by simplification is a cycle that results from the operation of certain universal principles. The changes in mortuary practice are, in his view, the result of the competitive expression of high social status and status aspirations and owe little or nothing to changes in attitudes, beliefs, or standards of sentiment concerning the dead. This model has at its center a materialistic and essentially economic explanation of mortuary practice in terms of the dynamics of competition and display that appear in complex societies. In short, it reduces the elaboration of mortuary practice to a matter of fashion. To those archaeologists who see ideology as significant for explaining mortuary behavior, this explanation is unlikely to be of much interest. It is, however, a hypothesis that deserves careful testing.

Cannon tells us that "growing affluence provides opportunities for individual challenge [to the social order] and enhances the means for expressing or responding to that challenge. Affluence-engendered competition is therefore a common cause for expressive elaboration" (my italics). If affluence is the cause of the initial competition and emulation, then well-defined status divisions and some degree of social complexity must exist wherever recurrent cycles of mortuary elaboration are found. Mortuary elaboration in the archaeological record could therefore be a marker for the emergence of elites and increasing wealth. This correlation is often assumed in archaeological writing, but there has been relatively little effort to establish the theoretical underpinnings for it.

Economic factors in mortuary practice are implicated, for instance, in the work of Childe, but Cannon’s study differs in its predictions. One wonders, for example, if his thesis might be extended to suggest that mortuary behavior is only likely to become archaeologically visible when there is a sustained cycle of expressive elaboration. From this it would follow that mortuary elaboration is only likely to be associated with hierarchical, status-differentiated societies. Its absence would not, however, imply the absence of status competition, because elaboration may be actively repressed in reaction to lower-status emulation, nor would the absence of elaboration imply the existence of less highly organized societies in which status and competition are features thought to be absent or only weakly developed. Therefore the presence or absence of elaboration in mortuary practice would not correlate with any particular type of society or level of development. The cycle has its own logic and is dependent on specific historical circumstances.

Referring as it does to cyclical or recurrent processes that are best explained by historical generalizations, the thesis is of little use to those who would see evolutionary “stages” in the archaeological record. Societies with similar mortuary elaboration will be found to be linked by common historical circumstances rather than through evolutionary descent.

Reply

Aubrey Cannon
Toronto, Ont., Canada. 17 IV 89

I am pleased with the generally favourable response to my paper, but the commentators raise a number of interesting and important issues that require placing the paper within a wider theoretical and methodological context. In response I can clarify the paper’s intended purpose and expand discussion of the historical approach, its scope and relevance, and the implications it has for programs of further research.

I am concerned that the paper not be perceived as simply cautionary (e.g., Bartel, Quilter) in admonishing archaeologists to heed the complications of historical change in mortuary representation. Nevertheless, I must disagree with Bartel’s assertion that modern archaeologists are no longer in need of such caution. Recent work in which the effects of time and fashion on mortuary
representation are either explicitly denied (e.g., Mainfort 1983) or not considered (e.g., Pearson et al. 1989) illustrates the persistence of a synchronic typological approach to the study of mortuary expressions and social status distinctions.

The archaeological tradition of direct translation from mortuary differences to status distinctions is also evident in several of the comments, which seem to indicate some misunderstanding of the positive contribution of an explicitly diachronic approach to the analysis of status expressions. For example, Bartel and Rothschild seem to feel that my study is no more than an isolated exercise with limited relevance to most archaeological situations. They point to the difficulties in recreating it in a purely archaeological context. I entirely agree, but I cannot understand what would be the purpose of reproducing the study in a prehistoric context except as a further test of the validity of its results and implications. I have tried to highlight the value of a historical approach to mortuary analysis, but I do not claim that my case studies should stand as models for archaeological research.

I had substantial information relating to the nature of status differences and the meaning of material expressions in Victorian England, but the study of cultural dynamics certainly should not require this level of prior information. Rothschild implies a need for considerable foreknowledge in saying it would be necessary “to know what the status system was and how mortuary behavior was structured to understand variation in grave goods among the Iroquois.” Similar views are expressed in Bartel’s suggestion that archaeologists must first make sense of material culture relative to categories of social relations before attempting to understand the dynamics of those relations and Gill’s contention that questions concerning individual status would cause problems in attempting to interpret changes in mortuary representation. These views represent what I would consider to be an inverted approach to the study of mortuary behaviour. They assume that social status can or should be unequivocally matched with particular mortuary expressions before attempting to understand social change and the variable expression of status.

In contrast, I contend that an understanding of social dynamics and the changing meaning of particular symbolic expressions must first involve determination of a historical context of change in mortuary expression. The status values of particular expressions change through time in relation to their point of introduction, the extent of their social diffusion, and their capacity for drawing attention and communicating a distinct impression. It might still be a challenging task to assign individual status even with an adequate understanding of historical context, but I cannot see the task as being anything short of impossible without such understanding.

Further, I do not believe that archaeology can or should necessarily pursue the definition of social categories or structures in the prehistoric past. A number of the commentators express a concern with placing individuals in social categories or a hierarchical structure of status relations. Bartel is concerned to define the relationship to kinship categories, Rothschild views elaboration as the result of competition between groups of the political economy, while Runnels sees a need for well-defined status divisions and some degree of social complexity wherever cycles of mortuary elaboration and restraint are found. In fact, a major reason for the inclusion of the Iroquoian example was to demonstrate the operation of similar principles within a society that was not stratified or hierarchically organized. Such structural differences are not necessary for the emergence of mortuary or other forms of status expression.

All that can be inferred from differential expression is the individual perception of status distinctions, which may or may not have a structural basis that can be identified apart from the individuals involved. And all that can be immediately inferred from change and elaboration of expressions is some measure of flux and competitive adjustment within the perceived social order, not what that social order was. As I have suggested, status differences can be perceived on a vast range of scales within, between, or without strict social divisions. That is why it is the historical process of status comparison and competition through material media and not the nature of status differences that is most readily accessible through the study of cycles of expression in the archaeological record.

I do not see it as within the realm of archaeology to define social structures and groups for particular moments in time or necessarily to be able to place every individual within even an ordinal ranking of status differences. Two reasons for this are that social relations and their representations change and that individuals do not necessarily express their positions within a system of social relations. The first of these reasons has been considered at length in the paper, but the second requires further explanation.

Archaeologists can avoid the problem noted by Bradley of seeing the dead as burying themselves and expressing their own status. The death of an individual simply creates a potential forum for the expression of status positions and aspirations that exist among the living. But creation of this forum does not ensure its consistent utilization. My study of English grave monuments showed an extremely poor correspondence between individual or family status and monumental expression. Even on a village scale there was a poor correspondence between the degree of status difference among the living and the extent of monument differentiation present in village cemeteries and churchyards. Greater wealth, status, and status aspirations gave some families the potential and the motive for material differentiation, but only a proportion of these took full advantage of the display opportunity afforded by a family member’s death. Other studies in very different settings have also shown that it is common for individuals to avoid or decline material expression of their true social and economic status position [e.g., Hayden and Cannon 1984:133–35, 190]. Therefore, making grave-by-grave assignments of individual status to create an imagined so-
social structure cannot provide a basis for the analysis of social change. I found the greatest differentiation in monument form in the Cambridgeshire village of Comberton, where competition among a few moderate-scale farming families of comparable status accounted for the diversity of large and ostentatious status monuments in the village churchyard. As Masset’s anecdote also shows, it is not the existence of status differences of a particular degree or kind that necessarily finds expression in mortuary or other material media. To the contrary, the most ambitious attempts to create material impressions of status appear to arise where there is potential uncertainty in relative status reckoning. It is the historical process of social challenge and adjustments that is played out in the material expression of status and not the static structure of social relations that is being materially recreated.

All of these points could be perceived as further cautions against the attempt to assign status to individual graves in order to glimpse the structure of past social differences. But there is a need to ask whether that ever was the ultimate goal of mortuary analysis. Can or should archaeology attempt to create ethnographies of the past when even the best ethnographies of living cultures only provide a brief multiyear glimpse of synchronous social relations? Archaeology deals with a minimum of decades of time, and we must monitor centuries or even millennia of cultural development. Should we expect structures of society and their material expressions to remain constant over even the briefest of time spans?

This is not to urge abandonment of mortuary studies (Quilter) or to demand the level of control available for recent English history (Bartel). It is simply to point to a need to redirect methods to what is archaeologically available (historical change) and use this to gain some insight into the meaning of individual expressions and, more important, an overview of social (prehistoric). The pace, degree, and extent of social tension and change can be monitored through the changing variety, elaboration, and shifting media of material status expressions. It should be possible to relate this process to change in economic, political, and ideological circumstances to begin to understand the (prehistoric) histories of past cultures. This in itself is of enormous value and interest, and no less for the failure to produce ethnographic snapshots of particular cultures through time.

As Bradley is correct to emphasize, my approach has implications that go well beyond a narrow concern with mortuary studies. Death can provide a significant forum for expression (in people’s lives and for archaeologists), but it is only one forum among many. The important challenge to archaeology is to trace all the shifting pathways of material expression as these develop over the course of time. It also remains an open question how much of culture history can or should be explained entirely in terms of the basic principles outlined in this paper.

Many of the commentators stress dimensions of mortuary behaviour and material expression that exist beyond the influence of social competition and fashion. Humphreys, for example, raises a number of considerations important for the detailed analysis of mortuary behaviour within particular cultural contexts. Although many of the questions she raises may not be accessible to studies of prehistory, their investigation in any context can only be enhanced by first determining whether there exists a backdrop of cyclical fashion change in mortuary expression. Rothschild also notes many further dimensions of specific mortuary practices, and Chapman and Runnels are correct in questioning how far variation in mortuary practice can be reduced to considerations of fashion or style. The answer, of course, is uncertain, but the demonstration of a common base pattern of change in mortuary expression among my three case studies certainly does not demonstrate equivalence among their social, historical, or ideological circumstances.

The cycle of fashion simply establishes a baseline, which in itself does not require specific explanation. In making a case for the important role of fashion, I would not deny a role for additional influences on specific forms of mortuary expression [e.g., the complex symbolic history of metal in Greek graves, cited by Morris]. I also would not minimize the potential for multiple and even contradictory social dimensions in mortuary behaviour [e.g., the Huron Feast of the Dead, which provided opportunity for individual social competition while it also, as Rothschild points out, symbolized community integration].

My aim was to separate culturally specific expressions from general historical patterns. Morris is right to suggest that I emphasize the general over the particular, but I also agree with his assertion that material display cannot simply be reduced to a stylistic roundabout. As Quilter and Runnels observe, I have highlighted specific historical circumstances that yield similar cyclical trends; there is clearly further need to investigate the particular historical circumstances of individual cases and a need for comparative analysis of cyclical patterns of expression under a variety of circumstances.

Finally, a number of commentators point to further research that should stem from the ideas presented in this paper. I see this additional work as falling into two main areas: the further testing and modification of the basic premises outlined here and the application of a diachronic approach to the archaeology of stylistic expression. Rothschild and Runnels both call for further empirical investigation and testing of my ideas. I concur, and would particularly like to see such testing within a prehistoric context. One possibility would be to trace independent criteria of status through a temporal series of burials. If the status associations of material expressions change through time, then it should be possible to see a divergence between material expressions of status and nutritional status, for example. Malnutrition is certainly not beyond the realm of fashion, but it is reasonable to expect that fashionable malnutrition would not coincide with changes in material display. Testing could also determine whether expressive display through alternative
media expands as mortuary expression undergoes restraint.

The most exciting prospects for further research concern the investigation of similar cycles of material expression in a variety of different contexts. As Bartel and Bradley observe, it is important to determine the kinds of circumstances that trigger display cycles such as I describe. And as Bradley and Morris suggest, it will be important to trace the nature and circumstances of shifts to different media of material expression. This is the subject of my present work with Iroquoian archaeology. There is also, as Morris notes, variation in the length of cycles to investigate, and I would add the intensity and diversity of expressive elaboration as further subjects for study.

Rothschild and Bradley make an important point when they suggest that the social processes I describe are partially responsible for the patterns that allow archaeological seriation of material culture. I agree, and suggest that seriation techniques provide valuable tools for monitoring social prehistory as well as cultural chronology. A similar interpretive role for seriation was a major part of Plog’s (1973) call for archaeology to serve as diachronic anthropology. By highlighting the social dimensions of history and the historical dimensions of social expressions, I hope I have contributed toward making archaeology an explicitly diachronic discipline.

References Cited


ARIÉS, PHILIPPE. 1974. Western attitudes toward death: From the Middle Ages to the present. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.


—. 1945. Directional changes in funerary practices during 50,000 years. Man 4:17–19.


