Death and society: a Marxist approach

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Mortuary practices have been studied by archaeologists from different and sometimes conflicting points of view. This article is a critical review of the dominant approaches to the study of mortuary practices in archaeology. A different approach, based on historical materialism, is presented in this paper.

Key-words: mortuary practices, burial, Marxist archaeology

All the major approaches to archaeology have focused on death, with the intention of giving meaning to the social dimensions of its ritual practices. The aim of this article is to outline briefly the most widely known of these approaches and then to present a perspective to the study of death and society which is based on Marxism. In a sequel to this paper, I will use this perspective to present recent results of research on Argaric Bronze Age society in southeast Spain.

Traditional archaeology’s approach

Burial sites have always been a star attraction in archaeology. However it must be remembered that traditional archaeology considered burial and all its trappings as part of the intangible domain of religious belief (Piggott 1973), and had misgivings as to whether any direct relationship could be established between the burial rites and the world of the living (Ucko 1969). Adherents of this position emphasized the difficulty of evaluating social aspects on the basis of burial sites and preferred to use these data to make inferences on relative chronology and to put forward interpretations in terms of ideology based on historical or anthropological analogies. Finds were also employed to define cultural idiosyncrasies and, in extreme cases, ethnic boundaries.

To sum up, traditional archaeology’s approach can be characterized as follows:

1 Burial remains are an expression of the intangible world of religious belief.
2 There was widespread scepticism with regard to the possibility of finding any criteria for reconstruction of the living society from burial remains.
3 The variability of items found and their patterns of association were usually interpreted through ideological metaphors.
4 Simple and accessible interpretations were made by means of formal analogy drawn from historical and anthropological sources and from the experience of everyday life.
5 Extensive corpora of objects from burial sites were assembled and used for the description and chronology of ‘cultures’, since they were often from closed contexts and generally well preserved.
6 There was an emphasis on formal description and a lack of quantitative analysis.

In contrast, other researchers already felt there was a clear link between burial practices and the world of the living. V. Gordon Childe, for example, considered ritual and its religious references as simple mechanisms that ensured the conditions allowing reproduction of social systems. Thus, in the forties (1944; 1946) he put forward the view that the most stable and progressive societies in terms of social wealth, consumed few goods or artefacts in their death-related rituals due to the institutionalization of private property and inheritance which had by then taken place. His idea was that the more material progress made by a culture, the less social energy it invested in burial; in other words, public investment in the cemetery was inversely related to social and technological development. This first link in the chain of sociological implications from the study of death and burial had been explored 10 years earlier by Soviet

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archaeology (Alekshin 1983) and Childe knew of this work.

**Processualism and the archaeology of death**

No significant new developments in the archaeological analysis of death and burial emerged until the early 1970s (Saxe 1970; Binford 1971; Tainter 1973; 1977), when archaeologists once again began to pay attention to theoretical premises concerning the study of mortuary practices.

The theoretical–methodological approach known as the Archaeology of Death arose from an epistemological debate in the context of the New Archaeology. The new sub-discipline was based on the argument that mortuary practices are an expression of social reality in all its complexity. Saxe, for example, concluded that the variability of burial site forms can be linked to a series of consciously selected distinctions which are in keeping with the social identity held by the deceased throughout his or her life. Since the social persona was determined by the characteristics of each social system, it could be deduced that analysis of a group of social personae (the study of a cemetery) would yield insights into the organization of that particular society.

The concepts employed here generally proceed from role theory (Goodenough 1965). Thus 'social identity' is equivalent to social status and refers to the socially sanctioned roles of every individual, while 'social persona' refers to the set of social identities selected for each person. The concept of 'social persona' is crucial for archaeological inference, given that it assumes that the set of identities that make it up can be determined by the organization of the social system. Burial deposits are not for mere individuals but for 'personalities' linked to modes of social behavior. Therefore the material attributes of burial practices provide us with information on the status of each individual and, in consequence, the social organization in which this status took on meaning.

Binford proposed that 'the form and structure that characterize the mortuary practices of any society are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organisational characteristics of that society' (1971: 235). Counterbalancing the view of Childe, he argues that the more complex the organization of social structure, the more complex the forms and structures of mortuary practice.

In Binford's view, through ritual the society gives symbolic recognition to matters concerning the individual's community identification (sex, age and kinship). His or her social position is defined in terms of recognition of the roles performed by the individual in life. Thus, he argued, there will be a high level of isomorphism between the complexity of status structure in a socio-cultural system and the complexity of the disposal of the dead, in the sense of different procedures for persons occupying different status positions.

Although others took up the theoretical perspective initiated by Binford and Saxe (e.g. Tainter 1973; 1977; O'Shea 1984), for the purposes of this paper, the theoretical premises of the Archaeology of Death can be summarized as follows:

1. Mortuary practices reflect social reality in all its complexity.
2. The form and structure of mortuary practices are conditioned by the form and complexity of social organization. The more complex the social organization, the more complex the funerary treatment.
3. The burial ritual is a criterion for social identification of the individual: it is a 'faithful epitaph' testifying who he or she was. Burial deposits are a material synthesis of the most important features of the deceased as a social person.
4. Processualism depended on various liberal trends in epistemology (role theories, information theories, GST, and so on) and the vindication of the individual as the 'key factor' of society.
5. One of the aims is to achieve a Law of Complexity on the basis of the typologies elaborated by neo-evolutionary anthropology (Service, Fried, etc.) or in accordance with levels of entropy.
6. There is a demand for a quantitative methodology which will allow comparison between individual cases.

**The return of symbolic historicism**

Post-modern archaeologists took the view that archaeological studies should attempt to understand the changing symbolic schemes that underlie material elements, since the essential structure of the social system lies in the symbolic principles which link its various parts together (e.g. Hodder 1982; Shanks & Tilley
1. Given that material culture is understood as a 'text' (Hodder 1986; Shanks & Tilley 1987), the meaning of which is always contextually dependent, burial remains should not be considered as reliable indicators of the organizational norms of a social system. Objects in a given funerary assemblage should be interpreted as 'symbols in action', the meaning of which could only be hinted at by recognizing significant dimensions of variation (spatial organization of skeletal remains; nature and location of grave goods).

This approach takes the view that funerary remains are not a direct reflection of social system norms or recognized individual status. Burial contexts act as 'arenas' in which power struggles or agreements among individuals or groups are 'negotiated' symbolically.

All this subtle theoretical apparatus led to the abandonment of comparative cross-cultural studies, in favour of particularistic idiosyncrasies. Given that individual particularities could not be compared on the basis of general criteria, a hermeneutic approach was taken to interpretation, based on the conflict that is present in all social contexts. The conflict takes place in the realm of ideology by means of symbolic games, that archaeologists could try to 'read' according to his or her own personal capabilities or political preferences. In practice, this constitutes, firstly, a bow to traditional approaches by making use of the example or analogy as a hermeneutic instrument and, secondly, a cynical grimace in the direction of processualism in that it demands the use of instrumental methodologies and quantification.

Post-modern approaches can be summarized as follows:

1. Funerary remains are not a direct reflection of social system norms.
2. Funerary variability does not reflect individual status.
3. Particular funerary patterns cannot be classified into universal levels of social complexity.
4. Burial contexts are particular and historical scenarios in which power struggles are settled symbolically.
5. Individual funerary practices must be analysed in their own terms.
6. Conflict (of gender, class, and ethnic groups) was emphasized as the basis of social dynamics.
7. Continuation of instrumental and data processing methodologies begin by processual archaeology (formalization, quantification).
8. Use of the traditional procedure based on analogy, but now from the hermeneutic/post-structuralist points of view.

The three approaches outlined so far share a subjective idealism, since they emphasize the individual or the symbolic principles in which he/she finds himself immersed. For traditional archaeology, religion establishes world order as a metaphor of supernatural domain or divine revelation. For processualism, burial variations are determined by individual differences in status, which in turn depends on the subjective acknowledgement of other people. Finally, for post-structuralism it is the individual, as the great manipulator, who plays the social game in accordance with his/her own ideological interests.

Death from a Marxist perspective

Although Marxist archaeology in the West has not come up with a theoretical framework for research into burial remains since Childe, I hope that the points presented here will serve to reopen debate in historical materialism and also, marshal arguments in response to other approaches which discard the Marxist perspective.¹

Burials sites are deposits of social labour. Both when the society uses death as a mechanism for achieving integration, and when the ritual is intended to express the collective mentality, what is certain is that the decisive factor is the social labour as opposed to the individual.

The dead take no part in the ritual productive processes that include them, although they consume the fruits of the production. All products, no matter what their symbolic connotations, are the product of labour and take on their meaning in the sphere of economics and their value in the sphere of society. The fact that their connotations enter the ideological sphere, since they act as metaphorically or metonymically expressed symbols, should not distort what the products of work deposited in burial sites actually denote (Lull & Picazo 1988: 19).

The investment made by society in the treatment of death should not be seen as a mere accessory which recognizes only the status that

¹ The proposals presented here include ideas shared by other colleagues (Castro et al. 1995; Lull & Riseth 1995).
the deceased had when alive. Funerary practices, offerings and rituals, denote the material conditions of society and provide information on the forms taken by it, whether in the form of homage, payment of tributes or a covering up of inequalities between individuals or groups of individuals, which can only be made explicit by means of parallel archaeological study of settlements. For this reason, the first materialist premise warns that the study of death cannot be conceived as independent from the study of living contexts. It is only through study of the dialectic between both domains that we can establish the degree of accuracy of the social hypotheses put forward on the basis of burial remains.

If we consider tombs as deposits of social labour, the values assigned in burial to different people or groups will be directly proportional to the community’s economic capacity, expressed in terms of the development of the productive processes and the social relations of production (that is, private or collective property structure). To see death as exclusively pertaining to the ideology is equivalent to presupposing that the work invested in it by society is with the sole aim of recording ethical and moral values of individual identification which, while possible, ignores the material conditions on which all ideologies are founded.

For this reason, the opposition of Binford and Childe is meaningless, since in the same set of objective material conditions a class-based community could invest various amounts of surplus depending on self-imposed obligations of the ritual (Binford’s premise of complexity/rational development) or, on the other hand, it could avoid this investment if ruling class(es) can maintain the desired social order with the help of other ideological mechanisms (Childe’s premise). On the other hand, a society that does not have a production surplus will resort to mutual support to build its tombs and the grave goods will be easily replaceable ones.

From this perspective, Hodder’s Islamic (counter-)example can be seen to be opportunistic, given that in that case burial isomorphism becomes a highly coercive ideological norm if we take also into account the archaeology of the settlements. This once again leads us to the fact that it is impossible to approach the archaeology of the dead without having an archaeology of the living.

I believe that if we cannot carry out evaluative calculation of the work reflected in the tombs and, at the same time, we are not able to develop instrumental methods for establishing the relative social value of the deposited products, we will continue to navigate metaphysically as opposed to realistically.

The value of burial products cannot be calculated without study of the work processes involved in their manufacture, and this heightens the complexity of the task. Nevertheless, if we do not have sufficient palaeoeconomic data, we could put forward estimations that can account for that value (Lull & Estévez 1986).

Therefore, I believe that three points must be considered in approaching the study of funerary practices. The first is that research should be aimed at evaluating the ‘container norm’ taking into account the dimensions and constructive characteristics of the burial containers, the source of raw materials and the technology by which they were produced. Second, a systematic study of human remains is needed, since we can obtain a large body of crucial data of the living conditions (diet, pathologies, demography, etc.). Third, archaeological research should establish the relative social value of the grave goods. The combined results will enable us to formulate a hypothesis with regard to the social structure, that can then be tested in the light of the archaeology of the settlements, which is the only means capable of defining economic and political conditions (who produces what and who benefits from it?).

Given that a corpse cannot organize its own burial, the burial is a means of evaluating the state of society: it is society’s interest groups that manifest themselves through the ritual and not the deceased. Therefore, burial remains associated with individuals do not constitute a synthesis of its most important social dimensions, but rather they are an expression of the material possibilities that prevailed. Differences in burial treatments, far from differentiating among individuals as ethical or political subjects, are an expression of socio-economic or socio-ideological groups, which we have termed social categories elsewhere (Lull & Estévez 1986). These categories can only be translated in terms of class through study of the social structure of the settlements.

A Marxist approach to the study of mortuary practices can be summarized as follows:
Burials are deposits of social labour. The dead consume what is produced by society.

There is no necessary isomorphism between the individual's condition in life and the social recognition afforded post mortem. A corpse cannot carry out its own burial.

Burial remains are an indirect expression of the existence or absence of interest groups.

Asymmetries between burial sites denote asymmetries in social consumption. Differences in burial treatment are not a reflection of differences between individuals but rather of socio-economic and socio-ideological groups.

Every social product supposes a unit of value between what is socially produced and individual access to its consumption.

The social value of burial products should be calculated on the basis of the socially necessary work established by the social relations of production.

A balance of production and consumption must be drawn up to detect social asymmetries. This is why the 'Archaeology of Death' will always remain incomplete without a clear commitment to an 'Archaeology of Life'.

All the points which we have expressed in this article lead us to consider that the materiality of death in all social contexts bears little relation to the pain, appreciation and relief which are always part of its presence. The materiality of death is as far from such sentiments as the desires that we feel from the reality that we live.

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