Chapter 1

On Mortuary Analysis—
with Special Reference
to the Saxe–Binford
Research Program

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INTRODUCTION

In the debate that has developed over the theoretical program of mortuary analysis presented by Saxe (1970) and Binford (1971) over 20 years ago, great stress has been laid on limitations to their goal of identifying social factors underlying differences in the material treatment of the dead. Critics often raise objection to the search for features of social organization in the archaeological manifestations of ritually dominated practices (Hodder 1982; Pearson 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1982). Ritual is portrayed as obeying different rules, and hence demanding separate lines of argument. Lost sight of is the long-acknowledged effect that the scale of social complexity has on the range and complexity of ritual (Durkheim 1915). The problem is not with the principle, but with the means for secure and credible articulation of material manifestations of ritual to features of social organization.

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Of course, the principle is one thing and the concrete explication is quite another. Even when sociological connections to mortuary practices are observed by social and cultural anthropologists, focus has settled on either theoretical schemata or heavily qualified generalizations (Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Exceptions and counterexamples of common regularities seem to prevent credible generalization, or elicit objections over undue imposition of theoretical bias. Thus, Metcalf and Huntington (1991) dispute the direction of Bloch and Parry's (1982) analysis of the use of funerary ritual "as a device for the creation of ideology and political domination" as a rigid application of a Durkheimian perspective toward the social forces underlying collective action. Although the situational uncertainties inherent in enlisting customary practice as a means for reasserting traditional social order are passed over in Bloch and Parry's perspective, it is evident that if steps are to be taken in identifying relationships between the uses of ritual and social organization, it is necessary to attend to the relative robustness of relationships and to acknowledge the existence of contingent relationships.

After all that has been said respecting the social features operating in mortuary practices, the expansion of ethnological research into this rather underdeveloped area offers tangible promise for extracting propositions that can be used by archaeologists with some confidence.

COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION AND MORTUARY PRACTICES

The cultural universality of mortuary practices opens up a range of expression that is comparable to other rites of passage. Reviews on the subject from cultural anthropological and historical perspectives make it abundantly clear that the variety of practice is so diverse as to defeat easy categorization and facile generalization (Bloch and Parry 1982). Even in the rather apparent manner in which mortuary practices commonly take on expressions that support the existing social order, Metcalf and Huntington (1991:6) cite the cautionary case in which that order was actually subverted by death rites. But on certain matters there seems to be some assent—assent that mortuary practices take on a political role to some degree. For this reason, not surprisingly, mortuary practices (considered in this chapter as equivalent to funeral rites) are strongly associated with economic transactions (Damon and Wagner 1989; Kan 1989; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Pencourt 1984; Weiner 1976). Thus, one archaeologist has stated that "mortuary rituals are amongst the routine, strategic engagements through which people reproduce the conditions of their own lives. Mortuary symbolism is thus employed by mourners concerned not simply with the proper treatment of the dead, but also with the reallocation of rights and duties amongst themselves" (Barrett 1990:182).

By placing the locus of mortuary enactments in the hands of the living as a strategy that the survivors of the deceased must take to solve any number of social problems, a broadened basis for social explanation of material remains is thereby created. The reason for this enhancement will become clear below.

In past archaeological treatments of mortuary analysis, the focus has been upon individual treatments. This direction has been boosted by the ease with which analysis is made accessible. But I also suspect that it has been supported by the domination of individual treatments in contemporary life. However, alternative treatment and its social basis has been brought to the attention of archaeologists by the work on the Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1971, 1981). Collective burial of many individuals entailed a suppression of individual identities for strongly social reasons. Although it is rarely practiced today, collective burial once was far more common. Many of the major rock and earthen tombs known archaeologically were erected with chambers for multiple interments rather than for single individuals. The implications that collective burial have on archaeological analysis are not difficult to recognize. Aside from negating the utility of an individual-oriented analytical perspective, such forms of treatment of the dead call forth distinct modes of analysis.

Hertz (1960) drew the pertinent sociological observation in his brief review of Huron practices:

We find here, in a striking form, a phenomenon already observed among the Indonesians: the final ceremony always has a pronounced collective character and entails a concentration of the society. But here it is not the family or even the village, but the nation, that intervenes directly to re-integrate the dead into social communion. This action thus takes on a political significance: by dealing with all their dead in common the various domestic and local groups that form the higher unity become conscious of, and consequently maintain, the ties that unite them. In establishing a society of the dead, the society of the living regularly re-creates itself. (Hertz 1960:71–72)

In exemplifying a variation upon secondary burial rites that was the primary subject of Hertz's work, the Huron differ from his principle subject matter in the collective scale at which the rites of reburial were carried out. From an archaeological perspective the social collectivity is represented physically by thorough-going commingling of human bone and skeletal parts. The integrity of the individual is lost upon death in these rites.

Comparable treatment of individual corpses is described by Bloch (1971, 1981; Bloch and Parry 1982:34–35). By transforming the dead into indivisible unity the Merina make the ancestors "transcendent and eternal" and thereby create a force that legitimates "the social order and its authority structures." In a direction clearly following Hertz, Bloch and Parry (1982:36) state: "If we bear in mind that there is a sense in which ancestor worship creates the lineage in such societies, it is clear that we are once again dealing with the fabrication of an ideal social order out
of the transformed remains of the dead." But, they proceed further to claim that "in these instances the social group is anchored, not just by political power, but by some of the deepest emotions, beliefs and fears of people everywhere" (1982:36).

In this Metcalf and Huntington (1991) see undue emphasis on the constraining effect of ritual upon human emotion at the funeral. This criticism aside, Bloch and Parry (1982:42) hold out the opportunity for developing propositions of social inference by pointing out that certain simple social groups do not place the dead in the service of creating ideology. For peoples without property the force of the analogy between death and rebirth is entirely missing—"where there is no transcendental authority to be created the dead can be left alone" (Bloch and Parry 1982:42).

Again, the principle enunciated by Bloch and Parry does not admit of direct identification in the material record. Although they make the linkages between the social and ritual, they leave the correspondence to the material world open to the archaeologist:

These various systems—the Dobuian, Tikopian, Laymi, Merina and Lugbara—are all cases where the community in its enduring aspect is constructed by reference to the dead. Whether this is actually accomplished by means of skulls, corpses, tombs or shrines is perhaps of little significance in terms of the overall logic of the ideology—which only goes to show how misleading it may be to extrapolate collective representations about death directly from the evidence of material culture. In all these instances what is created by the mortuary symbolism is a particular group or division of society—a lineage, for example, or a local community. (Bloch and Parry 1982:36)

Just such obvious absence of single object correspondence of symbol, practice, or ideology is what motivated a number of archaeologists to search for categorical regularities rather than ones that depended upon the presence of specific things. The problem became one of devising the means for observing in contrasts and scalar grades of all manner of material things the operation of culturally and environmentally mediated social facts. This particular objective launched mortuary archaeology identified with the research program of Binford (1971) and Saxe (1970).

GENERALIZATIONS AND THEIR SOURCE

Cross-cultural studies establish generalizations that are essential in articulating statements concerning patterns in the ground with actions and behavior that created these patterns. In their favor is the fact that one learns something about their limitations along with their strengths by surveying as many relevant cases as possible. Despite the oft-cited complaint that cross-cultural generalizations are vitiated by their exceptions, the latter are really a source of methodological strength. It is far too much to expect that any single generalization would ever cover all cases, or more to the point that the only generalizations worthy of regard are those that are axiomatic. Such an attitude denies the interpenetration of causes and presupposes a world that is made up of verities on the one side and historical randomness (or chaos) on the other. Without denying the importance of historical antecedents to differences in social behavior, custom, and belief, it is quite another thing to think of the world as divided into such black and white extremes. More realistic is to regard the social and cultural life of humans as occupying various shades of gray. Thus, any particular practice has behind it a combination of systematic and historical causes, some having more of one than another.

Cross-culturally, Finfrock (1971), Goldstein (1976), and others have shown that society's mortuary practices respond to economic conditions and scale of political organization. The utility of this approach has been challenged by Hodder (1980, 1982) and others (Pader 1980, 1982; Pearson 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1982). Certain of these criticisms have stood up. For instance, Precourt (1984:168) showed that "there is a statistically significant relationship between the destruction and/or burial of the deceased's movable property and the presence of predominantly nonreciprocal modes of economic transaction." He found that in four cases such modes of transaction overrode the mode of subsistence, which was otherwise "highly correlated as a predictor of burial and/or destruction of movable property." Thus, Precourt's findings were in keeping with commonly held anthropological thought that viewed mortuary practices as closely tied to economic transactions among the participants of the funeral. As a result of this cross-cultural study the causal emphasis shifts from attributes of the dead to social constructions created by the living.

But to gather a broad perspective on the utility behind the spirit of seeking regularities it is important to acknowledge that Aries (1981) and the French Annales school of historians (Chauru 1978; Vovelle 1973, 1974) have shown rather convincingly that mortuary practices change in response to social, demographic, and even economic conditions—but primarily to the first two. Despite the criticisms leveled at cross-cultural analysis, the overall pattern of regularities points strongly to a small number of factors exercising a dominating influence on the forms that mortuary treatment takes. The relevance of a cross-cultural perspective cannot be questioned. As Precourt's study shows, however, cross-cultural analysis is prone to shortcomings shared by many methods in that a demonstration of a specific relationship does not preclude the discovery of a tighter relationship of a different kind.

The value of discovering the conditions under which a generalization operates is illustrated by Saxe's Hypothesis 6. This proposition summed up his conclusions respecting the information incorporated within the skew toward elaborateness in a minority of practices within a multipractice system for the disposal of the dead. Specifically, "The simpler a sociocultural system the greater
will be the tendency for there to be a linear relationship between number of components in significata, number of contrast sets necessary to define them, and the social significance of the significata; and conversely" (Saxe 1970:112).

In reexamination of this proposition cross-culturally, Goldstein (1976) found that ethnographically this generalization only works within particular social strata or membership groups. In a few societies, relatively low-status groups will differentiate certain of their burial treatments with just as many “contrast sets” as high-status groups—neither holding any obvious edge in the number of distinctions, or exclusive features, necessary to symbolize or set off particular practices from others. It appears that the difference between high- and low-standing groups rests in the relative expense or energy expenditure involved in the kind of distinction chosen. With these conditions in mind one can conceive of situations in which the principles enunciated in Hypothesis 6 could be employed effectively, although for the most part it has retained a rather low standing in mortuary analysis theorizing. The reason is not difficult to understand. O’Shea (1981, 1984) has shown from the practices of Central Siouan peoples from the Great Plains that the variety of distinctions symbolized in the treatment of the dead become differentially conflated through the process of decay. As a result of differential bias in what is preserved among these people’s graves all distinctions tend to appear as ones that symbolize status despite the fact that graves were arranged with a larger number of distinctions given symbols.

Cross-cultural studies are not the only source for generalizations necessary for bridging behavior and material remains. Hodder (1980) and others (Pader 1982) make use of archetypal historical and ethnological examples on which to base their analysis. Further afield, it has been commonplace to cite the unexamined generalization that children are interred with wealth only when their parents were wealthy. The response to the presence of a wealthy child burial has been to leap to the conclusion that ascribed, or inherited, status was a property of the associated social community. Although the generalization behind the conclusion has been critiqued, its popularity as a credible generalization seems to rest more on its internal logic than on any examination of the strengths and limitations of the record, either cross-culturally or historically (Brown 1989; Hodder 1982:197; Peebles and Kus 1977; Shennan 1975). If we were to know more about the conditions under which grave wealth accompanied children holding ascribed status, mortuary studies would be empowered with a conditional generalization; however, for the present moment, the presence of grave wealth among the young cannot be tapped with any assurance.

Virtually any serious student reaches either to principles of one’s own choosing or to ones adopted from a particular theoretical stance (O’Shea 1984). The question one should ask is how appropriate examples are chosen and by what logic and what set of priorities. Our problem, thus, is now to identify the determinate factors and the conditions under which they are most likely to operate. Such a task, however, is made messy by the relatively small number of cases that have been made available through history and ethnology, and by the poverty of information on variability within societies when one suspects that several instances were present together. Add to this, the ever-present problem of reflectivity between burial treatment and criteria for selecting any treatment, and one can come to appreciate the shortcomings of the record for the kind of analysis before us (Braun 1981; Kerber 1986). Not only do we need to know that chieft (for example) are treated in a specific manner but that those so treated are always chieft.

All of these difficulties are illustrated by the frequent listing of a single treatment for many non-Western small-scale societies. This single-burial treatment is invariably the most conspicuous (read: elite-oriented), the most likely to be witnessed, and the most readily admitted to outside eyes. Other treatments are less likely to come to the attention of visitors. This shortcoming represents a tough hurdle to overcome because of the limited opportunities that small populations present for observations of all forms of burial treatment (Chapman 1987). One could spend years observing the entire range (Levine 1979). These problems aside, cross-cultural study of the widest range of examples, including modern history, presents the largest range and most convincing basis for establishing the credibility of any argument from historical example.

THE SAXE–BINFORD PROGRAM

As a signal break with the cultural–historical perspective to the study of burials, the efforts of Saxe and Binford represent an experimental approach to the serious use of one of the more common forms of archaeological information as a vehicle for sociological analysis. As with all beginnings it is difficult to separate the shortcomings in the means with the logic of their goals. But such a sorting out is called for if any benefit is to be drawn from their work.

After a flurry of activity, archaeological research drawing upon their theoretical perspective has settled into a specific direction. In the diversity of approaches adopted in subsequent research into mortuary practice, a common recognition of certain lessons to be drawn from applications of the Saxe–Binford approach has been lost sight of. With the benefit of hindsight we are now in a better position to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their theory. Accordingly, I would like to review the principal strengths of mortuary analysis and to advocate what can be termed a regional perspective as holding great promise for future work.

The widespread fact that the Saxe–Binford mortuary analysis program has run into is a testimony to the seriousness of its claims. Criticism has been leveled at various points of their program, some relatively technical or methodological; other criticism that is more important here focuses on warranting assumptions, such as
the usefulness of cross-cultural analysis, and the relevance of social factors for understanding mortuary practices. In fact, it is on the primacy of ritual factors, rather than social ones, that some archaeologists have rejected the Saxe–Binford theory as useful for analysis of prehistoric remains (e.g., Hodder 1982; Pearson 1982). This rejection is somewhat premature, because it is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The dispute over relevant perspective remains critical, however, and it is one that is central to my assessment.

All theoretical initiatives have a way of taking on a life of their own; that is, they move into new research directions and usually produce unanticipated results. This history of use is in many ways dictated by the utility of theory to help explain very specific archaeological, cultural–historical, and cultural–evolutionary problems. Hence, a theory may have been held in great expectation at the outset, but unless it finds at least one explanatory home, it will remain merely a fond hope, rather than part of a useful vehicle for articulating some about-to-be-discovered explanation. Thus, though Binford and Saxe have based their theoretical position on global arguments, what is most attractive is their theory’s utility in articulating specific arguments (O’Shea 1984). Thus, in one of the senses of the term, mortuary analysis becomes a middle-range theory— that is, a body of theory whose generalities are useful for advancing part of a larger argument in favor of some explanation about specific issues. Thus, contrary to original expectations, the Saxe–Binford research program has become useful not for what it claimed to measure directly but for the strength of its postulates in contributing to the building of larger chains of arguments. As will be come clearer below, their work assumes its most forceful utility when nested within very specific arguments concerning equally specific issues.

The names of Art Saxe and Lew Binford are linked to a single mortuary analysis theory because they took a unified theoretical approach to a single kind of subject matter. Although their research tasks differed, Saxe’s information theory approach to the organization of patterned differences in the physical remains of the dead complemented Binford’s focus on the cross-cultural strength of any proposition linking systematic differentiation in the range of disposal-of-the-dead practices with social complexity. Their unified starting point provided complementary parts to a common theory. Although each part tends to be utilized in mortuary analysis for very different reasons, their theory is more unified than usually granted in the literature. The reason for this unity is not difficult to understand. They had interacted on this and other theoretical topics for some time. They were united in their unfavorable reaction to the cultural–historical climate of the time that viewed various treatments of the dead, such as cremation, inhumation, and mummification, as historical vestiges or the result of outside influences. Hence, their interest was in disposal-of-the-dead practices that were full of striking, if not contradictory, treatments. Given this interest in why certain populations maintained relatively uniform treatments of the dead while others produced contrastive ones, it is understandable that they should look upon all treatments as somehow role-defined on an individual basis. Thus, a focus on patterned differences in the way that individuals were treated in death called for an individually oriented theory for linking archaeological remains to behavior. For Saxe and Binford, a problem of individual treatments called for role theory. For this they drew upon Goodenough’s (1965) work that rested on Linton’s (1936) theory of status and role, which has been so prominent in American anthropological theory. Since both were drawn to the subject with a common problem in mind, differences in the way they tackled the problem have become less important as the strengths and limitations of their historically defined perspective have become apparent.

More generally, Binford and Saxe shared expectations of what the field of mortuary studies was useful for and how arguments could be constructed that would allow sociological information to be extracted from patterns in the treatment and final disposition of the dead. Essentially, both saw cemeteries and their contents everywhere as having a structure—in the systems sense—that had potential for informing the observer about certain organizational principles underlying the associated community, hence their focus on levels of social complexity, inherited status, and the like. Whole communities, rather than the study of isolated practices, constituted an essential focus. Part of the appeal of their research program was the prospect of making sociologically informed distinctions between societies for whom no textual material survived and for whom one was in the dark as to whether they were organized hierarchically or whether they possessed inherited political office—features of social organization that were hotly debated in certain quarters at the time (Braun 1979; Brown 1981; Peebles and Kus 1977; Tainter 1978, 1983). Although these issues were ones that mobilized initial interest, the theories of Saxe and Binford made wider claims. Theirs was a program for utilizing the material remains of both past and present disposal-of-the-dead practices to inform on certain features of associated societies. Since the Saxe–Binford program was born out of systems thinking, it was logical for them to make use of distinctions inherent in definitions of “levels of complexity” as the focus of their vision of mortuary analysis. Hence, in contrast to “reconstructionist” perspectives toward material culture, they were more concerned with determining useful “parameters” of complexity. Because of the commonly held perception among many anthropologists (including some archaeologists) that the real job of archaeology is cultural reconstruction, the work of Saxe and Binford frequently has been miscast as simply that (Metcalf and Huntington 1991:14–18). Although certain passages in both Saxe and Binford’s works are suggestive, this characterization neither applies to the aim of their work nor to the thrust of any of principal works that have followed their lead. The telling fact that denies the role of cultural reconstruction is the systematic disregard for status assignment of the very burials that were the subject of analysis. With no step toward assignment, it is difficult to visualize how any concrete interest in
reconstruction could ever have been present. Instead, Saxe and Binford emphasized the social source for patterned variability in mortuary treatments. The misinterpretation judges them according to criteria that were never meant to apply. And, while obscuring areas that have the greatest analytical power, the reconstructive label glosses over some basic weaknesses in their position that call for comment.

Role theory was held to be the analytical vehicle for expressing the differences in the way individuals behave toward each other. Accordingly, these differences formed a calculus for marking individuals in both life and death as well as forming the basis for allocation of emotion and obligation. The former is clearly delineated by Saxe's position that mortuary ritual is a medium in which social relationships entered into during life are represented at death. The limitations of this position for social analysis of archaeological remains have been aptly characterized by Kerber who states:

Saxe's theory has been called "representationist" because it takes essentially all the non-random variability in mortuary ritual to be representative of the dead ego's role in the social structure. In this model, the mourners are motivated by obligations owed the deceased, and are moved to symbolize the deceased's status in traditional ways. Implications of the model include the notion that a finite number of social identities exists to be symbolized; that the symbols employed have a univocal significance; and that obligation to the deceased is a sufficient cause for the ritual work to be done. (Kerber 1986:35)

Binford (1971:17) developed a second line of useful reasoning with his argument that differences in social response to the dead are a direct response to the size of the circle of individuals having some social obligation ("duty-status") to the deceased. Inevitably, this mode of reasoning returned to its atomistic theoretical foundations, in which the allocation of mortuary treatments was regarded as a mirror image of the structural features of the associated society (O'Shea 1984; Saxe 1970; Tainter 1977a, b, 1978). However, by unduly focusing on the specific theoretical vehicle for making their bridging arguments between a social theory and material culture, the shorthand characterization of the Saxe-Binford approach as one in which "cemetery organization equals social organization" loses sight of the strength of the underlying "economic" type of thinking they espoused. This very form of argument is one that has a great deal of undeveloped potential outside of the vehicle they chose to express their arguments. In fact, others have engaged in economic types of arguments, albeit very tentatively (Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). The theoretical reliance upon role theory warranted a set of arguments for viewing all kinds of interindividual interaction within a social environment of differential allocation of resources to alternative ends. This model, which quintessentially underlies all economic thought, points to a latent strength of their perspective.

On Mortuary Analysis

LATER APPLICATIONS

Follow-up work within the program established by Saxe and Binford took several distinct directions. Principle among these was the investigation of the implications of Saxe's Index of Componential Complexity, as developed by his hypotheses 5, 6, and 7. This principle states that the simpler the system the more the number of recognizable burial forms will match the number of variable contrasts necessary to define them, and conversely. Other principles respecting status differentiation have been advanced, but their robustness has yet to be adequately explored.

The occasion of death involves a reciprocity from the alters involving many identity relationships simultaneously. Death calls forth a fuller representation of ego's various social identities than at any time during life. Therefore there is also the greatest probability of conflicts in compatibility occurring between social identities at death. . . . (A) choice between incompatible social identities must by made. Those involving rights/duties counterparts with the greatest degree of influence, authority, and/or power by virtue of that set of relationships will be chosen. (Saxe 1970:6)

Hodder (1982:199) criticized Saxe and Binford's complexity argument. He argued that where "age, sex and hierarchical divisions were not expressed in graves, it could not be assumed that the society had become less complex. A change to a less complex or less differentiated burial rite does not necessarily entail a change to a less complex society." This argument shows a confusion over the distinctions that Saxe and Binford have drawn between the funeral rite as a whole and the material remains in the grave. Neither Saxe nor Binford has represented the latter as having a simple correlation with the former.

CEMETERIES AND CONTROL OF CRITICAL RESOURCES

Saxe's Hypothesis 8 has taken on an independent existence. It states that groups are more likely to maintain formal disposal-of-the-dead areas rather than dispersed grave sites when control of restricted resources is crucial (Saxe 1970). "To the degree that corporate group rights to the use and/or control of crucial but restricted resources are attained and/or legitimized by means of lineal descent from the dead (i.e., lineal ties to ancestors), such groups will maintain formal disposal areas for the exclusive disposal of their dead, and conversely" (Saxe 1970:119). The principle has been restated even more emphatically; to wit, the more that certain restricted resources are crucial to the system the more likely that formal burial areas will be used to maintain claims to those resources. This hypothesis is a development of Meggitt's (Lawrence and Meggitt 1965) modeling of New Guinea
practices and has found independent support in the recent shift to formal cemeteries that Malaysian swidden farmers made when they were forcibly settled in permanent villages (Saxe and Gall 1977). Other examples abound in the anthropological literature (Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Archaeologists continue to apply what appears to be a stable proposition (Chapman 1987; Charles and Buikstra 1983; Goldstein 1980, 1981).

Although this proposition has been criticized, the examples placed in evidence dispute a connection that was never claimed—that of the association between residence and control of resources (Hodder 1982:198; Pader 1982; Pearson 1982). Indeed, the emblematological example, that of the placement of the Merina tombs, appears to be an outstanding instance of confirmation rather than the opposite. Uncertainty here is due to the absence of detailed information. But what has been described by Bloch (1971, 1981; Bloch and Parry 1982) leaves little doubt that the Merina tombs are a conscious symbol of the continuity of the corporate property-holding kinship group—conceptually eternal and indivisible. The ossuary treatment of the corpses is described as an emblem of the ongoing concern that property rights to highly productive lands not be dissipated through exogamous marriages. As postulated by Saxe’s proposition, these lands are environmentally circumscribed. Gradients in social prestige characterize these tomb-anchored kin. Significantly, proximity to what must have been the principle village of these bilateral descent groups (called demes) was regulated by custom, the ordinary tombs being restricted to the edge of settlement, whereas noble tombs had the right to placement in the village. This logic of location was carried further by the placement of the royal tombs within the palace itself. Competition over critical resources (rice-producing irrigated lands) seems to have led to the very result that Hypothesis 8 would lead one to expect—the use of the ancestors to validate claims to critical resources. The logic was carried into the architecture of the Merina kingdom in an attempt to appropriate the local-level logic within the rationale for the state.

Here, as in Hodder’s counterexample of the Nuba practices, it is the apparent dispersion of deme members beyond the bounds of a single village that has been cited as the problem with Saxe’s proposition. But this is a relatively small problem since residence was never at issue in the first place. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess the effects of two factors on dispersion of deme members. First, the stone or concrete tombs are massive investments intended for long-term use that may extend well beyond the settlement arrangements of the founding generation. Second, the process of dispersion must have been accelerated in recent times due to the stepped up tempo of commercial life attendant upon modern transportation and communication. These forces could easily swamp customary social arrangements that were geared for an entirely different scale of social activity.

A detailed restudy of Saxe’s thesis has necessitated some reformulation (Goldstein 1976:61). The maintenance of a permanent, specialized, bounded area for the exclusive disposal of their dead was not invariably observed under the conditions stated in Hypothesis 8. Instead, the corporate rights of a lineal group were reaffirmed more generally by popular ritual. She observed

that one of the basic components of Saxe’s hypothesis generally does prove to be true. Economic and environmental pressures, resources, and inheritance do tend to structure the disposal domain. However, Saxe’s hypothesis was not found to be universally applicable, since a lineal corporate group controlling critical resources does not always have a formal disposal area. If the area does exist, however, the reason does seem to be corporate lineal control. Further, the less formal the disposal area, the more alternative possibilities are available in terms of types of social structure. (Goldstein 1976:88)

Hence, if there is a formal bounded disposal area, used exclusively for the dead, then the culture is probably one which has a corporate group structure in the form of a lineal descent system. The more organized and formal the disposal area is, the more conclusive this interpretation. (Goldstein 1976:62)

Here, we have a common limitation to generalizations that works conservatively to understate the likelihood of correct inference.

Charles and Buikstra (1983:119–120) elaborated on these modifications:

1. Utilization of formal cemetery areas will correlate with sedentary subsistence strategies employed by the group(s) using the cemetery.
2. The degree of spatial structuring present in the mortuary domain will correlate with the degree of competition among groups for crucial resources.
3. Within the larger society, corporate groups will be distinguished by inclusion in separate cemeteries or in spatially distinct areas within a single cemetery.
4. Inclusion of individuals in the cemetery implies inclusion of those individuals in the corporate group.

With these additions Saxe’s proposition moves into archaeologically fruitful territory, leaving behind the original componental framework with which he initially set out.

THE LIMITATION OF BURIAL AS STANDING FOR THE FUNERAL RITE

In the foregoing reevaluation of Saxe’s proposition respecting the archaeological signature for the existence of lineal corporate assertion of rights to critical resources, it was plain that the total funeral rite, not the physical disposal of the dead, is the appropriate frame of reference for generalization. Observed regu-
larities apply to this rite and not to the component visible archaeologically as the physical disposal of the corpse. By implication, the componential structure of treatment-of-the-dead categories does not constitute the proper domain of inference as well.

This conclusion is borne out of the difficulties with Tainter's (1977a,b, 1981, 1982, 1983) and Braun's (1979, 1981) analysis of the Middle Woodland period Klunk and Gibson mound groups (Brown 1979, 1981). Tainter's work represented one of the more direct extensions of the Saxe-Binford program. The two Havana Hopewell mound groups constitute splendid examples of highly differentiated mortuary practices, with some of the dead being interred collectively in log crypts, while others were interred either in simple pits or in mound fill. This brief statement hardly does justice to the variability. Tainter approached the problem by raising the question of social stratification's presence here. The striking differences in matters of elaborateness in burial treatment, tomb investment, and scarceness of grave goods appeared to support such a judgment. Key to his approach to the problem was to regard each burial as a terminal treatment in which each was directly comparable to the other and that the objects found near the dead were truly associated with individuals. The analysis then became one of measuring differences in the componential space embracing all of the burials. He employed information statistics and an unexamined principle of energy expenditure to measure these differences. His reading of the results led him to advance the rather unlikely thesis that the graves were differentiated into six social strata. Braun challenged Tainter's measures and his analytical procedures, but accepted the assumption that each burial was directly comparable to another. Braun (1979) showed that the mortuary crypt burials were a collective treatment in which grave goods were not as conclusively associated with nearby skeletons as were the encrypt burial associations. Moreover, the crypt burials were merely a phase in a program of mortuary treatment that included exhumation. Remains were re-deposited on the crypt ramp surfaces and probably in the earthen fills of nearby decommissioned mounds. Not only did grave goods have different contexts but the greatest contrast in the presence of grave goods was merely a reflection of the number of times the skeleton was moved, not a matter of social standing. The social strata conflated to a single level, in which the remaining differences could be more satisfactorily explained as horizontal differences between those having rights to crypt burial and those that did not.

In the process of establishing arguments over the existence of ascribed (inherited) status, Braun (1979) was able to demolish Tainter's argument in favor of such a hierarchy of status at Klunk and Gibson as well as to offer some useful rules of thumb for recognizing the existence of petty chieftdoms in general. These rules have proved useful in subsequent analyses (e.g., Brown 1981; Gilman 1990; Peebles and Kus 1977). But the attempt to apply the rules of componental analysis to a system of collective mortuary rites was doomed since it ignored some important operating assumptions—the equivalence of graveyard associations and the conceptual representativeness of the sample.

Representativeness is critical. Because of the collective treatment of the dead according to unknown and arbitrary rules, the real number of individuals processed through the crypts is unknown. Those that remained behind for archaeologists to study constitute an artificial set, perhaps created deliberately by the mourners. In Havana Hopewell mounds it is common for some crypts to be empty, while others may contain only a single skeleton. The remains of the population that was presumably served by the crypt are nowhere in sight. Too many uncontrolled factors exist to regard the similarities and differences among the individual funerary events as an adequate base of social inference. Although important conclusions could be reached by Braun (1979, 1981) respecting the contrasts provided by the graves, the level of sociological analysis that Tainter sought from the Saxe-Binford program could not be achieved from this type of data set.

The difficulties raised by graveyard collections with obvious, but uncontrolled, biases may be overcome by taking a different tack, one that examines the distribution of treatments among a biologically modeled population of graves.

THE PROBLEM WITH OBJECT-ORIENTED CLASSIFICATION

The most common approach to mortuary analysis is to classify burials into categories (e.g., Pader 1982). This object-oriented classification has disadvantages. It has all of the limitations of artifact classification by object-clustering, as Cowgill (1982) has demonstrated in a comparison with analysis by variable clustering. Even more damaging is the methodological lack of fit with an appropriate theoretical position as stated above. To be effective in studying differential wealth disposal—a commonly stated goal of mortuary analysis—Orton and Hodson (1981) have demonstrated that the case size has to be enormous by archaeological standards. We have to remember that when, for example, economists examine income of households, the Gini Index produced, in order to be mathematically robust, draws upon thousands of cases. Much more effective is an attribute analysis and one placed within the biological context of a mortality profile. Buikstra's (1981) approach to Koster Archaic burials is the first application of the "R-mode" analysis cast within the expectations of a mortality distribution.

This approach starts from expectations generated by specific types of mortality profiles. Depending upon whether one is working with an attritional profile or a catastrophic distribution of age at death, one has specific expectations about the distribution of age categories. Where there is a significant shortfall in any one age group, Buikstra (1981) showed how one could argue that the gap in the sample in hand defined a portion of the population given alternative mortuary treatment.
Asymmetry and differential distributions of grave goods, skeletal processing, and other mortuary attributes multiply the possibilities of the same fundamental strategy of analysis. In the Koster Archaic analysis the use of three locationally distinct age and sex samples formed a complementarily complete mortality profile that led to the identification of a differential set of treatments of the dead, each with different formal characteristics.

The greatest success of mortuary analysis has been at the regional scale. As will become clear in the following—this success is borne out of emulation with a biological perspective that is inherent in a multisite approach. This tie to the human biological perspective is not a casual analogy but has everything to do with the economic budgeting perspective that is a cornerstone of mortuary analysis logic today.

Analytical approaches on a regional basis have been particularly successful (Beck 1990; Kerber 1986; Mitner 1984). By pooling cases over a series of samples, these investigations have identified rare, but significant, treatments. Such analyses are also more sensitive to subregional variations that would be difficult to identify with confidence otherwise.

Although the number of studies is growing apace—over 200 alone have been entered into a bibliography I have been compiling—a relatively small number are regional. Most studies take as their object of analysis the mound, village, or cemetery. The result is to tether their analysis to peculiarities in the sample recovered and to site formation processes. Hence, it is not surprising that many analyses, in contrast to the kind of regional studies described here, are often equivocal and highly dependent upon initial assumptions respecting the completeness of the sample.

BEYOND THE REPRESENTATIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Returning to the problem of identifying the factors responsible for variability, the most important advance in our thinking since Binford and Saxe has been certain adjustments to our epistemology. Saxe's thesis treated mortuary behavior as dependent upon variation in individual persona—an aggregate "social personality." Although this proved to be a good starting point to thinking about variability in mortuary treatment internal to a society, subsequent analysis has directed our attention to the primacy in use of the dead by the living.

Pearson (1982) has detailed the obvious weakness of the representationist formulation—specifically, its inability to explain contemporary Western mortuary practices. He focused on recent changes in monumental memorializing of the dead in England. Although the local Cambridge record was drawn upon, he might as well have used any one of a number of examples throughout the Western world since the changes registered in his study community conform to a well-known modern trend (Aries 1981). Specifically, he discovered that funeral expenditures and outlays for monuments did not correspond with social status. The value of residential property did not correlate with the cost of the funeral of the deceased. Contrary to the elaborations the Index of Componential Complexity would have us expect, wealthy individuals were provided with cheaper funerals on the average than nonwealthy. Furthermore, cremation, the burial treatment registering the fewest contrast sets, was more common among the upper classes, where one would expect greater monumental investment if not more expensive funerals. This finding does not contain any surprises, but in Pearson's hands we are led to focus on a larger field of mortuary practice that enables us to bring contemporary Western practices into a unified theoretical perspective.

Trinkaus (1984) and others have amplified Parker-Pearson's counterperspective by showing that economics and politics are more appropriate conceptual models upon which to base a mortuary theory than social personality theory. Her argument, drawn from practices influenced by Muslim rites, returned to the point developed by Goldstein (1976) that the physical treatment of the burial is frequently not the locus at which the generalizations operate but rather at the more inclusive arena of the funeral rite as a whole.

The expression of rank is indeed present but in an "inverted" sense in which high rank and lavish possessions during life are expressed in death with much nonmaterial symbolism and lavish nonpermanent display (feasting, elaborate hearse, flowers, presence of significant persons, etc.). The emphasis is heavily shifted from mortuary remains to mortuary ritual. (Trinkaus 1984:675)

There is a convergence between the politically oriented theory presented here and the Saxe-Binford position of cemeteries as individual status representations, as Kerber (1986:62-63) has concluded:

In order for the Saxe-Binford model of mortuary behavior as representation to work reliably, one of the assumptions that must be met is that the statuses to be represented be finite and defined. Thus, the degree to which the expectations of the Saxe-Binford model may be expected to fit a given set of mortuary data is itself a function of the political structure of the society which produced them. The greater the transmissibility of power, the more likely it is that the dead are buried in a manner befitting their former status.

Hence, the representationist position focuses on a specific range of mortuary systems. In this sense it is targeted to a special case of the position of funerary rites as politics. While this conclusion remains unexamined in detail, there are encouraging reasons to think that this linkage has some merit.

Let me sketch such a linkage. Burial treatment can be visualized as an act of allocation that survivors confer upon the dead. This is an economy of mortuary ritual, in which funerary treatments are allocated to alternative ends. Binford (1971) set this line of thinking in motion by arguing that a relationship adhered
between the size, expense, or duration of the funeral and the number of individuals participating in the funeral. So if we visualize burial treatments as a stock out of which are drawn some but not others, then the size, effort, or duration of the funeral selected can be said to respond to budgeting considerations measured in terms of time, effort, and resources.

In respect to time, effort, and resources there is a fixed upper limit set by every society, and in small-scale societies with low energy budgets this limit is relatively low. It follows from the budgeting model that disproportionately large withdrawals from the stock of treatments have to be balanced by lesser withdrawals. Hence, the disproportionately large treatment one individual receives, the less the remainder of the dead can receive. In other words, we have a situation in which allocation guides differential treatment.

In this light, extravagant display can be interpreted as the consequence of an escalation in the limit of labor and resources available for deployment in funerals. In societies that encourage economic accumulation, competition has the potential for producing extravagant funerals. But any rise in the total pool of labor and resources does not alleviate the burden of economic principles to the allocation of resources among the dead. At the other end of the scale, in nonaccumulating societies, Binford drew attention to the relative importance that the circumstances of death and the number of individuals drawn to the funeral have in determining form and size of the mortuary treatment.

The relationship to the nonrepresentationalist perspective can be gleaned by the statement of Bloch and Parry (1982). They observe in their overview that many mortuary rites have an underlying premise that can be expressed as a limitation of resources. How these limited resources are allocated was made great use of in their comparative analysis of several societies. Their analysis is particularly pertinent to nonrepresentationist topics in the present sense. For example, many rites among societies throughout the range of social complexity embody eschatological ideologies that can be said to have an underlying "vision of the limited good." Recast in economic terms, this vision implicitly recognizes that life is a limited resource. Although not a startling notion in itself, of interest here is the extent to which a wide range of mortuary practices can be restated structurally as allocation problems. It does not take much imagination to realize that the multiplication of separate allocations of limited resources could create competition among different social and ideological dimensions for symbolic representation. Potentially, the outcome of such a competition would be a subordination of some dimensions to others.

In sum, acts and behavior that can be categorized as either representationist or nonrepresentationist are alike in being subject to differential allocation among a burial population. As such, this differential allocation expresses symbolically qualities among the deceased or political uses of the deceased. Precisely which aspect is being expressed depends totally on the values the analyst assigns to the allocated symbol, whether it is a material object category or some patterned behavior.

The position taken in this chapter is that the controversy over the use of burials as symbolic representations of the social order or as objects symbolizing political manipulation is not a problem of the exclusive legitimacy of one or the other perspective in mortuary analysis. Instead, they are two perspectives to symbolic representation that are potentially coextensive. The economy of symbols framework adopted here helps place the two views on an equivalent footing by revealing the effects of the economy of differential allocation of scarce resources on modeling symbolic patterns.

MORTUARY PRACTICES IN REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY ATTIC STATE

I want to close with a review of Ian Morris's (1987) analysis of Dark Age Attic Greek burials spanning a period of over 600 years. I have singled out this study from many exemplary ones because it made use of mortuary analytical principles to advance a series of arguments that drew from very unevenly recorded old burial data.

Morris's thesis is that the Attic "citizen state" founded at the end of the sixth century B.C. was the product of long-term changes in political and social structure during the preceding Dark Age. The challenging part of his thesis was the position taken from his multipart analysis of burials—to wit, that the dramatic political changes inaugurated by Cleisthenes' reform were but the formal recognition of a process already well entrenched. This argument is important because of Morris's use of middle-range mortuary theory to advance his thesis in combination with demographic, settlement, and literary evidence.

The mortuary side of his argument is based on an extensive, though uneven, record of cemeteries, burial plots, and fragments of cemeteries recovered from both large block excavations and salvaged bits. What is remarkable is how an effective argument can be mounted, even when the data are so uneven in quality. To add to these problems, periods of burial by inhumation are punctuated by a period of several generations of rather thorough-going cremation. Understandably, different kinds of analyses were undertaken on a regional scale (all of Attica) to secure reasonably robust patterns that could overcome the obvious shortcomings of individual graveyard excavations. Morris anchors the beginning of the Dark Age burial sequence in a social context in which graveyards are placed near crucial resources, and during a period when a large segment of the population had access to graveyard treatment, albeit in segregated plots. Treatments and grave goods were made according to social rank. In the succeeding Dark Age this structure changed, but Morris advanced a convincing argument that the proportion of
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adults receiving burial contracted to the highest ranks only and that children and subadults were age groups that declined in graveyard representation during the period in which rights to formal burial shrank.

What makes this thesis particularly convincing was Morris’s demonstration that an earlier evolution to city-state occurred around 750 B.C., followed by a return to the previous condition before the final, dramatic change led by Cleisthenes. The dramatic expansion to a balanced age structure that took place before Cleisthenes set the stage for a typical Classical period treatment of the dead. This change can be connected with certain social and political changes described in literary sources. This transformation is of great significance because just such a change took place earlier around 750 B.C. as well. Furthermore, this earlier expansion was accompanied by an equally dramatic expansion in the diversity of burial treatments using Saxe’s Index of Componential Complexity in the mortuary treatment domain. Attica was not alone in this shift. Corinth and Argos also saw a similar shift although no Attic-type relapse occurred afterward. The significance of this shift is indicated by the increase in regionalism of mortuary treatment after a long period of relatively homogeneous burial form throughout Greece. This period of uniformity was one in which grave wealth, particularly in metals and commonly in the form of armor, expressed the wealthy, elite stratum of the adult dead.

Several problems that have bothered Greek archaeologists had to be overcome. These are the up-and-down shifts in the number of burials prorated per decade, shifts in treatment of the dead, poor and unreliable aging and sexing of skeletons, generally small and dispersed burial plots, and abrupt changes in the grave form and the use of grave goods from period to period. Against these hurdles, a regional approach was the only sensible solution. Given the size and scale of the region, the demography of burial had to be analyzed first. The quality of the data led to calculating only the ratios of children to adult burials, including the use of proxy variables such as the relative size of graves in order to estimate this ratio for cremations. Graveyards were classified into age-balanced and child-poor. After the demographics were established, then the diversity of body treatment, number of burials per plot, the size of plots, and the diversity of grave wealth could be fruitfully examined within the framework established for a six-century period.

In sum, under Morris’s guidance the principles of mortuary analyses demonstrated that they have much to contribute to the shaping of persuasive arguments respecting Attic state formation, to take one particular case study. To be successful, problems on such a regional level require multiple, intersecting arguments drawn from the widest range of principles.

For years archaeologists have identified burials as the prime material for access to past social and ideological domains (Chapman, Kinnes and Randburg 1981; O’Shea 1984). This faith has supported a great deal of particularistic analysis proceeding from unexamined premises. The Saxe–Binford research program led the shift away from such ad hoc use of burial information. At first, research focused on intrasite variability and lately it has gravitated toward examination of mortuary variability on a regional scale. It is with this regional perspective that burials as reservoirs of information have made their greatest contribution to the study of the archaeological past.

CONCLUSION

In the period since Saxe and Binford first introduced their research program, mortuary practice research has grown considerably in archaeology and sociocultural anthropology. The research agenda for the social analysis of mortuary practices has expanded along with this growth. The fumbling beginnings in this endeavor have been replaced by increasing confidence in the tools for analysis with each new exploration of different data sets. However, certain problems remain to be adequately resolved. Chief among these is the satisfactory incorporation of the benefits of the Saxe–Binford programmatic perspective. This chapter has offered a solution to the problem of seating the individualist and representationist positions they represent in a broader conception of mortuary practices as a kind of “politics of ritual.” Central to my working out of the problem has been to sketch an “economy of symbols” framework within which to see the allocation of ritual tasks represented by differential mortuary treatments of individuals and collectivities alike. Although areas of disagreement remain, certain issues can be more clearly delineated than they have been in the past.

REFERENCES


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**Part II**

**Landscapes and Mortuary Sites**

Landscape analysis of mortuary data emphasizes the spatial arrangement of mortuary sites relative to other aspects of regional dynamics. Models of subsistence settlement systems, craft specialization, exchange, economics, labor, and patterns of broader material culture are analyzed in conjunction with the communal dialogue of symbols incorporated in the mortuary sites themselves.

The regions discussed in the following chapters are diverse and have been studied using a variety of models. However, in each case the mortuary site and not the individual burial is the unit of analysis used. In the cases discussed in this section, the mortuary sites include megalithic architecture, earthworks, effigy mounds, or other highly visible markers as to their location. In each case the highly visible nature of these mortuary sites has produced a plethora of interpretations as to their function. Such interpretations have included mortuary monuments as communal meeting places, boundary markers, political statements of equality (or of inequality), and vacant ceremonial centers. Although many of these alternative explanations will continue to be debated, it seems that the perspective gained by adding mortuary data to regional analysis takes us a step further in building more powerful models with which to examine the dynamics of change in the geocultural landscape.
Regional Approaches to Mortuary Analysis

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