

Book Review

GRAVE GOODS: OBJECTS AND DEATH IN LATER PREHISTORIC BRITAIN BY ANWEN COOPER, DUNCAN GARROW, CATRIONA GIBSON, MELANIE GILES AND NEIL WILKIN

Oxbow Books 2021 (eBook 2022), 320 pages, 94 figures, ISBN 978-1-78925-747-2 (£50).

Death is an inevitable part of life, and its constant presence unites societies across space and time. The ways in which people have ‘dealt with’ death—both collectively and individually—has much to tell us about past societies (and ourselves); both in terms of their relationships with each other, and their ontological understandings of the world around them. Grave goods are one of the richest and most pervasive sources of evidence for the archaeologist and have, for this reason, enjoyed a long history of study. Initially prized for their inclusion in ‘cabinets of curiosity’, their closed contexts were increasingly valued for the construction of typologies and relative dating frameworks (cf. Worsaae 1849). Reflecting the evolution of the discipline more generally, grave goods have been used to explore many aspects of prehistoric life (and death), from trade networks to perceptions of the afterlife and identity construction. During this time, it has become apparent that the relationships between the living, the dead and the objects entangled in these relationships are complex and diverse.

The more recent material turn in archaeology (cf. Latour 2005) has prompted debates around the perceived distinctiveness of ‘grave goods’ from other kinds of (bodiless) cached objects, such as hoards and structured deposits, with increasing recognition that all of these ‘categories’ occupy the same broad spectrum of depositional behaviour (cf. Cooper *et al.* 2020). This new approach, together with a conscious move away from a focus on the more typologically-distinctive objects (frequently metalwork) central to the construction of relative dating frameworks, has illuminated the more ‘mundane’ objects and materials which accompanied the dead. Furthermore, ‘emotional’ approaches (cf. Tarlow 2012; 2023) have shifted focus from the dead body itself, to the lived experiences of mourners (e.g. Büster 2021), challenging conventional notions of value (both material and symbolic) in understanding grave goods.

It is within this context that *Grave Goods: Objects and Death in Later Prehistoric Britain*—the culmination of an AHRC-funded collaboration (2016–2020) between the University of Reading (Garrow, Gibson), the University of Manchester (Giles, Cooper) and the British Museum (Wilkin)—should be considered. The project sought, via a large-scale *longue durée* study of grave goods from the Neolithic to the Iron Age, to provide a sound empirical foundation from which to re-examine both old and new narratives (Chapter 2) on the (changing) character and role of grave goods across later prehistoric Britain (p. 8).

Two of the key questions for the *Grave Goods Project* were: 1) to examine what kinds of objects people put in graves; and 2) to explore the ways in which archaeologists have used (and abused) the concept of ‘grave goods’ in their interpretation of prehistoric societies (Chapter 1; p. 6). Indeed, many past narratives around grave goods have, perhaps unsurprisingly, been constructed on the basis of particular kinds of object: notably, eye-catching metalwork and/or rare and exotic artefacts. This has, of course, resulted in interpretations that favour a small sub-set of individuals from an already selective ‘buried’ population (Chapter 2). To redress the balance, and mitigate against ethnocentric bias in defining ‘grave goods’, the *Grave Goods Project* included *all* objects (including ‘ecofacts’) interred with an individual in their study. The resultant *Grave Goods* database (GGDB), containing 6044 grave goods in 3129 burials from 1119 sites (Table 3.01), and freely available via the Archaeology Data Service (<https://doi.org/10.5284/10522060>), forms the basis for the current volume (also freely available at https://books.casematepublishing.com/Grave_Goods.pdf) and is itself a valuable open access resource for future studies (p. 9).

The authors have had to be selective of course in their presentation of the many analyses which could have been (and probably were) performed on this vast dataset over the course of the project. They have, however, expertly showcased the potential of the data for addressing research questions at a number of scales: general chronological and regional trends (Chapter 3), previously overlooked categories of object (Chapter 5), single artefact types (Chapter 6: the humble pot) and the use of grave goods as proxies for other aspects of prehistoric life, such as mobility (Chapter 7). The authors also excel in presenting a large amount of material (spatially, temporally and ontologically) in an engaging way, with Chapter 2’s historiography of grave goods serving as a useful platform from which to explore more current theoretical approaches such as materiality, object biographies and relational identities in subsequent chapters.

In any ‘big data’ project there are necessary compromises and difficult decisions around data collection, and the authors are honest and explicit about this (Chapter 1). One such compromise was

limiting data collection to six case studies regions—Cornwall/Isles of Scilly, Dorset, Kent, East Yorkshire, Orkney/Outer Hebrides and Gwynedd/Anglesey—chosen, to some extent, for their favourable soils, archaeologically-visible funerary rites, accessibility of archival records and well-established traditions of archaeological investigation. This is an entirely understandable position given the ambitious nature and limited resources of even this substantial project. The factors which led to a focus on these study regions in the GGDB, however, are exactly those which have, arguably, led to their prominence in existing narratives. Two of the case study areas (East Yorkshire and Kent) are, for example, among only a few regions in Iron Age Britain with normative visible mortuary traditions and have therefore, unsurprisingly, enjoyed a long history of study. Exploring the more elusive mortuary traditions of other regions of Iron Age Britain, beyond catalogues of known human remains (Davis 2017; Wallace 2011), may have been an alternative (and fruitful) avenue of research for the project team.

The focus on ‘grave goods’ themselves brings other challenges. As previously noted, the team took an inclusive approach to recording *all* objects interred with the deceased, not just those traditionally assigned ‘grave good’ status (p. 6). But even this involves an interpretative leap, since before we ask what archaeologists mean by grave goods, we first need to consider what archaeologists (or perhaps more importantly, what prehistoric people) perceived as a ‘grave’. In certain times and places in later prehistoric Britain (e.g. the Late Neolithic, the Late Bronze Age, the Iron Age), the dead and their funerary monuments all but disappear from the archaeological record. In Iron Age Britain, the ‘elusive’ dead (Harding 2016, 4) are occasionally glimpsed through isolated bones in structured deposits on settlement sites (Armit 2017), suggesting ritualization of the domestic sphere at this time (cf. Bradley 2003). Indeed, recent research (e.g. Büster 2021) has begun to question the theoretical underpinnings of the distinctions between grave goods and structured deposits based on the presence/absence of a human body in periods where dominant funerary rites, such as excarnation (cf. Carr & Knüsel 1997), left *nobody* to bury. Similar kinds of object (i.e. possessions of the deceased, gifts by bereaved mourners) must still have existed, but without a body they are presumably hiding in plain sight.

Adopting the long-held and fairly restrictive definition of grave goods as those objects ‘*buried with the dead*’ (p. 2, emphasis added) undoubtedly influenced the choice of case study regions and will also have biased focus towards certain chronological periods within them. It will also have skewed the narratives *within* these regions and periods towards those normative, archaeologically-visible mortuary rites which most closely mirror our own. This artificial constraint of the potential diversity of the later prehistoric mortuary record creates a somewhat circular argument by reinforcing

traditional narratives of ‘what archaeologists mean by grave goods’ (p. 6). However, and in fairness to the project team, every study needs to start somewhere, and exploring those regions and periods in which there is no visible normative burial rite is, of course, easier said than done! At the very least, the *Grave Goods Project* has helped to flush out some of these interpretative conundrums, which are explored in spin-off publications (i.e. Cooper *et al.* 2020) that complement the current volume. Only by focusing on what is and is *not present* can we begin to recognise what is *absent* from our current interpretative frameworks.

With these caveats in mind, the *Grave Goods Project* and the eponymous volume under consideration here represent a formidable body of research, the likes of which are rarely attempted. Synthesising archaeological data for one period is challenging enough, let alone collating and presenting a spatially and temporally dynamic dataset covering roughly 4000 years. The devil is, of course, in the detail, and later chapters (e.g. Chapters 5 and 6) discussing the biography of specific objects demonstrate the sheer volume of work that lies behind the more generalised data and broad trends presented in Chapter 3. In the closing remarks of Chapter 1, the authors cite that their final aim was ‘to make a small but substantial contribution to the understanding of different kinds of past humanity, and how people have faced and dealt with mortality, in part, through ‘things’’ (p. 9). They have certainly achieved this, both through the current volume and the large body of freely accessible data that underpins it. Though it signals the end of the *Grave Goods Project*, this volume is an essential starting point for studies of prehistoric mortuary practice and lays important groundwork for the future of the field. As such, it leaves an important and valuable legacy for exploring not only the ways in which people dealt with death in prehistory, but how we navigate this ubiquitous rite of passage today.

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Review submitted: April 2023

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