



Book Reviews

ENGAGING WITH THE DEAD. EXPLORING CHANGING HUMAN BELIEFS ABOUT DEATH, MORTALITY AND THE HUMAN BODY EDITED BY JENNIE BRADBURY AND CHRIS SCARRE

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This glossy hardback volume was born out of the results of the Durham University based 'Invisible Dead' project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, which took place from 2013–2014 and brought together specialists from archaeological and non-archaeological disciplines to examine and compare funerary approaches in Britain and the Levant, creating a database of information spanning the Neolithic to Roman periods. The aim of the project was ambitious: to create a greater understanding of 'being human' through an examination of the archaeological record and to study the development of religious belief: as the editors outline in their introduction, 'big questions'. *Engaging with the Dead* answers the aims of the project by bringing together papers by on a variety of topics revolving around the subject of how the human response to death can be understood through the archaeological evidence and poses the question of when the dead are invisible because funerary practices have made them so, and when are they just missing, because we have not yet found them.

In Chapter 2, Mandy Jay and Chris Scarre provide a useful introduction to the project database, using the quantitative information collected to test current hypotheses on the British Neolithic. They examine collective burial practices in long barrows and cairns, using spatial (GIS) plots, and the thoroughness of a method which sees data gathered from both current and antiquarian sources is to be commended. The 'time slot' approach they adopt to enable the comparison of monuments that have been dated with different levels of precision is an interesting one, and by refining the model through an examination of only those monuments with secure radiocarbon dates, the transition from long to round barrows can be picked apart, challenging the circular logic that sees barrows assigned an early Neolithic date based on shape alone. They also provide a clear assessment of the difficulties resulting from preservation differences, development pressures and the availability of radiocarbon dates, together with an outline of the problems in determining how many people are represented by the fragmented dead.

Chapters 3 and 4 (Jacqueline McKinley and Alexander Smith) see, what is for me, a welcome championing of the important role that commercial archaeology has to play in furthering our

understanding of the dead, focusing on Late Bronze Age and Romano-British evidence respectively. McKinley highlights the frighteningly small datasets available for the period, drawing on just 18 identified sites. She outlines the excavations at Cliff's End, Kent that revealed a highly enigmatic mortuary feature, and the discussion of its longevity, use and meaning is a fascinating one, reinforcing the complexity of burial rites and the need to reflect on our assumptions about the usefulness and significance of disarticulated human remains. This chapter also raises the spectre of how excavation strategies influence not only the visibility of the dead but also our interpretation of them, a theme which is returned to in subsequent chapters.

In common with McKinley, Smith's examination of rural Roman burial practise in the south-east struggles with the issues of sample size, phasing and representativeness, whilst referencing another big data venture – the Roman Rural Settlement Project. In examining intra-regional statistics, he raises the question of how small the patterns are that we can see within big datasets. Grave goods associated with eating, lend themselves to comparison with Roman texts that emphasised the importance of funerary feasts and tracking their frequency from the Late Iron Age to the 4th century provides some intriguing patterns. Smith also proposes that further work is needed on disarticulated remains and it will be interesting to see the final results of an examination of this data.

David Ilan's discussion of Iron Age burial practices in the Southern Levant looks at the concepts of the 'good' and 'bad' death, the afterlife and whether behaviour, as reflected in the archaeological evidence, signifies religion. Looking at tombs as houses for the dead, he acknowledges that monuments may perform several social functions. The use of biblical texts to help interpret funerary practice is interesting and he clearly presents the difficulties in teasing out regional differences, temporal change and hierarchical variation. He suggests that a materialist explanation is best for the dearth of grave goods in the Iron Age, preferring this to a purely ideological one. The importance of maintaining a connection with the dead through memorialisation and location is also discussed, a theme which is again returned to in later chapters. In contrast to the preceding chapters there are few supporting numbers or frequencies given and demographic information is sometimes vague. This appears to be a reflection of the source material and is not a criticism of the author but is frustrating as it prevents any real understanding of exactly who here is invisible.

Staying the in Near East, the next three chapters address taphonomic influences on interpretation, the introduction of cremation and the multiplicity of beliefs in the Levantine Bronze Age. Arkadiusz Soltysiak and Rafal A. Fetner examine the potential of post-depositional processes to shed light on burial customs in a region where complex rites and excarnation were practised, providing a good basic introduction to taphonomic variables, and drawing on archaeological and forensic references, though I found some of the tabulated data a little

confusing. They argue that examining the distribution and frequencies of bone might make it possible to distinguish primary, disturbed, and secondary burials in earth cut graves, rock cut tombs and chambers.

In Chapter 7, Candida Felli sets out to show that cremation was more common in Syria than generally suggested. She discusses the parallels between the two-stage funerary process of cremation and that of secondary inhumation and touches on the subject of mourning as a key part of ensuring the dead a peaceful rest. She makes the important point that changes in funerary ritual do not need to be the result of incomers and examines the suggestion that status has a relationship with the duration and complexity of funerary rites. I must admit that I remain sceptical of the suggestion of heating the body to preserve it for transport (also mentioned by Soltysiak and Fetner), but Felli also highlights that she is having to draw conclusions without osteological examination of much of the remains. This paper challenges preconceptions and should be a springboard for further studies.

Examining the idea of what constitutes a 'proper' burial in Bronze Age Levant, Jennie Bradbury and Graham Philip emphasise the importance of legacy datasets through their use of the project database and spatial distribution information that again shows the value of big data. The fact that up to 99% of the expected dead for the Middle Bronze Age are concluded to be 'missing' shows the difficulties they face when interpreting funerary practice. The authors identify that work is needed to look at the correlation of grave goods and demography and importantly note no clear chronological change from single to multiple chambers in tombs.

Although focused on understanding prehistoric burial practices, the chapter by Amanda Murphy and Andrew Chamberlain presents a comparison with historic burial grounds to challenge assumptions that prehistoric life was 'nasty, brutish and short' by re-evaluating the position of non-adults in Neolithic collective burial. This approach, working like any good field archaeologist from the known to the unknown, is surely to be encouraged. They use documentary and historic cemetery data to create a model for loss of non-adult remains from the burial record and, although limited to two samples, this seems a beneficial piece of work. Whilst there are undoubtedly (acknowledged) potential problems in drawing conclusions from small numbers of sites, the authors conclude that non-adults are not severely underrepresented in Neolithic populations.

In Chapter 10, Charlotte Roberts provides a short history of bioarchaeological studies for the non-specialist, providing examples of other big data projects, and emphasises the importance of contextualisation. She uses the examination of the medieval cemetery of St Mary Spital as a positive case study of what can be achieved (incidentally within a commercial environment) and outlines concerns that reburial and the reducing space in museums may limit our future opportunities.

Mike Parker Pearson also undertakes comparison between modern and ancient burial practices looking at those who do not 'rest in peace' and taking us back to the Upper Palaeolithic in a discussion of social stratification, ancestor worship, and material inequality. He raises the apposite point that most modern western people probably only encounter the dead in a museum context. He sees the invisible dead as truly invisible and proposes disposal in water (mentioned earlier by Bradbury and Philip) as a possible answer.

Looking at the dearth of burial evidence in later Bronze Age Britain, Joanna Brück's thought-provoking chapter looks at the importance of 'broken things' and discusses the process of deliberate body fragmentation. She highlights that maintaining the integrity of the body is now considered paramount but that this was not so in the Bronze Age, a point reinforced by Julie Rugg in Chapter 18, when she reflects on medieval relics. The interesting case of a sherd of Middle Bronze Age pottery from Itford Hill, Sussex that may have been part of a vessel found in a cremation cemetery 90 m away is outlined and although I would be cautious in using, as she does, a low weight of bone in cremation burials to draw conclusions without a clear understanding of the influence of post-depositional truncation, well-preserved urned burials are cited in an interesting discussion of where the missing bone may have gone. The author calls for a synthesis of developer-funded work on the Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age, and it will be exciting to see the results of her ongoing radiocarbon study.

In Chapter 13, Peter Pfälzner also tackles the role of curation in Bronze Age burial practices at the Royal Palace of Qaṭna, looking at the role of old objects as a proxy for past events and people. He examines evidence that maintaining the integrity of the graves of the ancestors was important and looks at commemoration as a dynamic process. Ian Armit then takes us back to Britain and into the Iron Age providing an introduction of ideas rather than a holistic discussion of the evidence for the period. He suggests caves as environments for excarnation and looks at ethnographic evidence from head hunting communities, not to suggest direct parallels but rather to investigate the archaeological visibility of remains in cultures where the head is considered to have special significance.

In Chapter 15, Sarah Lange returns to the subject of 'proper' burial, this time looking at evidence from across prehistoric Syria and focusing on food offerings: the Epic of Gilgamesh suggests that if you did not care for the dead, they came back to haunt you. Again, we revisit the problem of estimating the representativeness of the buried population and the author is unfortunately somewhat limited by a lack of osteological data to tease out possible demographic patterns. She cautions us that the presence or absence of grave offerings needs to be separated from the concept of care for the dead. In contrast, Sarah Yurkiewicz focuses on a single Syrian site and makes the important point that commonality of practice need not equal commonality of belief.

In Chapter 17 Karina Croucher examines the close physical relationship between the living and the dead in the Neolithic burial practices of the Near East, focusing on the interpretation of plaster skulls. She includes an interesting discussion of grief, bereavement, and the changing relationship between the living and the dead on an emotional level. The paper references forensic literature to examine the timescale for decomposition, shortening the commonly perceived duration of the transformation from fleshed body to plaster skull. Croucher also emphasises the importance of challenging our modern assumptions of the 'best' way to grieve.

The volume draws to a close with a change of tack, as Julie Rugg investigates modern attitudes to the body via the controversial subject of grave reuse. She delves into our uncomfortable relationship with the dead and discusses the commodification of 'famous' bodies.

So, does the reader come away with a greater understanding of what makes us human? Perhaps not, it was an ambitious aim after all, but I certainly came away with new knowledge (a new-found curiosity about Zoroastrian burial practices) and a great many new questions. As with all ensemble volumes, it is likely that the reader will find some chapters more interesting and/or useful than others, but the volume is an admirable outcome of the Invisible Dead collaboration, with an underlying narrative illustrated by what may initially seem to be disconnected papers. Each chapter is thematically linked to the next and the editors are to be applauded for bringing the volume together in this way. It is clearly presented, thoroughly referenced and generally well-illustrated, providing a good grounding in the current issues facing prehistoric funerary studies.

The authors recognise that there are inherent difficulties in trying to compare information from different datasets, created in different ways and at different times, by researchers with different aims, but the cross-disciplinary, big data, approach is a useful one and though the emphasis is perhaps towards a traditional, archaeological approach, scientific advances (in particular the use of isotopic studies to identify population mobility), and sociological and theoretical frameworks are brought into the dialogue.

Key messages include the importance of radiocarbon dating (and the need for more), examining context, looking beyond the geographic boundaries and synthesis. The volume also provides different perspectives on the same evidence with several authors examining the same sites. In their closing remarks, Bradbury and Scarre emphasise the need to look at this subject on both the big and the small scale and touch on the continuing cultural importance of the ancient dead.

I found the discussion of commemoration (particularly by Croucher) surprisingly thought-provoking, making me reflect on my own experience of, and response to, death; professional and personal, whilst watching a zombie film. Prehistoric burial practices are fascinating, many and varied and understanding human motivations and emotions through material remains is a

captivating subject, but this volume also emphasises that our modern relationship with the dead is equally complex.

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