BEYOND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH?*

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Twenty five years ago I co-organised a conference in London and planned a separate publication on what archaeologists could learn from the material traces of the ways in which past societies treated the dead. Trying to think of a title that was both accurate and memorable, I came up with 'The Archaeology of Death' (see CHAPMAN *et al.* 1981). What I did not think at the time was that this title would be viewed as defining a separate field of study, almost a sub-discipline within archaeology. If there was an archaeology of death, then there would have to be archaeologists of death. Nor could I foresee the further debates on archaeological theory, including the interpretation of mortuary practices that were to emerge in the following two decades. The study of death by archaeologists is rather different now and it has been influenced by both changes in theory and in studies of death in a wider range of disciplines than just anthropology. Archaeologists outside the Anglo-American world have also made independent contributions to the study of death, although they have not always received the attention they deserve from colleagues imprisoned in the English language.

In this paper I wish to review the history of the archaeology of death, including the better understanding we now have from other disciplines of the social context of death, followed by the contribution which is being made by colleagues outside of the Anglo-American tradition. Then I will turn to the relationship between theory and practice, and discuss two related problems that we face in studying death with archaeological evidence. What implications do all of these issues and problems have for the definition of an archaeology of death?

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Looking Back

Since the Enlightenment, the remains of the dead, along with their grave goods and monuments, have been a means with which to make inferences about past societies. The principal inferences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were of chronology and culture: what date were they, how could they help to refine the relative dating of prehistoric materials, and to which past cultures did they belong (CHAPMAN–RANDSBORG 1981)? Although social inferences were made, usually of chiefs or leaders, it was not until the advent of processual archaeology that such inferences became central to archaeological research. The studies presented in *Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices* (BROWN 1970) analysed death in a social context, aimed at social reconstruction using cross-cultural, ethnographic analogies and quantitative methods of analysis on mostly prehistoric cemeteries (for a more detailed discussion of this publication, see CHAPMAN 2003c). Of particular importance was Binford's dismissal of arguments that the disposal of the dead was determined by ideas, beliefs and their diffusion. Instead he attempted to test hypotheses linking diversity in disposal methods and social complexity on a sample of 40 non-state societies drawn from the Human Relations Area Files. Even making allowance for the nature of the sample, he generalised that 'the form and structure which characterize the mortuary practices of any society are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organizational characteristics of the society itself' (BINFORD 1971: 23).

While Binford did not engage in the analysis of archaeological data on death in this volume, others such as Saxe, Peebles and Brown did, and in doing so supported one of the central tenets of what was then called 'new' archaeology, namely that there were no inherent limitations to archaeological inferences. We could now reconstruct past societies, usually in the form of neo-evolutionary types such as tribes or chiefdoms. There followed a series of cemetery analyses in North America and Britain in the 1970s that focussed principally on one of the important social changes in prehistory, from achieved to inherited social position (e.g. SHENNAN 1975). My own co-edited volume (CHAPMAN *et al.* 1981) fitted very much in this tradition, although contributors did note the role of ideological and political factors in the disposal of the dead and the need to understand more clearly the extent to which

mortuary practices left preservable material traces in the archaeological record.

If the study of mortuary practices played a critical role in new/processual archaeology, then it is hardly surprising that the first publications of what became known as postprocessual archaeology addressed the same topic. The use of ethnography and ethnoarchaeology led Hodder to argue that the disposal of the dead did not relate 'directly' or 'simply' to the social position of the deceased, let alone the structure of the society as a whole (HODDER 1980; 1982). Under the most extreme conditions, the social position in life was inverted in death. The key to understanding such behaviour lay in the attitudes to death, as expressed in concepts and symbols of purity and fertility. A key criticism of processual approaches to all aspects of past societies and their inference from the archaeological record lay in their neglect of meaning and symbolism.

The role of ideology was further developed by Parker Pearson (PARKER PEARSON 1982), who argued that the disposal of the dead could be used by the living for their own interests. The principal of these interests concerned power relations, which may be expressed or denied in the mortuary rituals. Parker Pearson developed these arguments in a study of contemporary funerals in Cambridge, and extended them on the basis of historical studies of death in nineteenth and twentieth century England. The investment of wealth in funerals did not remain constant through time, as is seen in increasing investment in Victorian England and the subsequent decline in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parker Pearson concluded that 'social advertisement in death ritual may be expressly overt where changing relations of domination result in status re-ordering and consolidation of new social practices' (PARKER PEARSON 1982: 112).

Hodder and Parker Pearson were not the only members of the postprocessual school in the early 1980s to develop these arguments about meaning, symbolism, ideology and power relations and their importance in the design and practice of mortuary rituals. But for the purposes of this paper I will not present a detailed account of such studies (for examples, see PARKER PEARSON 1999). However it is important to note that those scholars identified as 'postprocessualists', like earlier 'processualists', did not necessarily agree among themselves about all the key tenets of the school. Note that Parker Pearson, like

Binford before him, produced a general hypothesis about death rituals and social relations, while other postprocessualists eschewed any such cross-cultural generalisations. This diversity, as well as the historical situation of this school's key tenets in a specific period of time (the early 1980s), means that there is more to the development of archaeological theory in general, let alone the study of mortuary practices in particular, than just its classification into these two warring schools (see CHAPMAN 2003a: 12-15).

A good example of this can be seen in Brown's acceptance that what he calls the 'representationist' position of Binford and Saxe did not have a universal validity. Taking on board the post-processual critique, Brown (BROWN 1995) recognises the central part played in the disposal of the dead by the living, who do not sit down and work out graded funerals according to the relative social position of the deceased. Instead decisions are made within a wider context of ideological constraints, political manipulation and economic transactions: for example, decisions about the time, effort and resources to be devoted to funerary rituals have to be taken in relation to what could be mobilised, at that time, from the social groups to which the deceased and their living relatives belonged. Funerary rituals are a means of social representation, not direct social record, although social inference from the material traces of such rituals is still a legitimate aim of archaeological research. Brown argues that the 'processualist' and 'postprocessualist' positions on death are not mutually exclusive: '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 other perspective in mortuary analysis (…) they are two perspectives to symbolic representation that are potentially coextensive' (BROWN 1995: 21).

It is worth noting that Brown draws upon historical examples to support his arguments about the representation of social relations in death. The growth of historical analyses of death did not take place until the 1980s and 1990s (for examples, see CHAPMAN 2003b). While ethnographic analogies provide detailed studies of individual rituals and symbolic representation, mostly in small-scale societies, the historical record combines contextual detail with time depth. One area of great interest, both for historians and archaeologists, is the extent to which social and political relations are revealed or concealed in funerary rituals,

in other words the role of ideology. Enough is now known to demonstrate that the relationship between ideology and funerary rituals is not a deterministic one. For example neither Puritanism in seventeenth century England nor Quakerism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enacted their distinctive ideologies to the extent that material and social differences were erased from the historical and archaeological records (CHAPMAN 2003b). Where both written and material records are present, we can work back and forth between these two categories of evidence to develop our understanding of the representation of social relations in death. Where written evidence is absent, as in prehistory, we examine the relationship between cultural and biological evidence in the same way. In some cases we may have written sources as well as the archaeological ones. For example Härke (HÄRKE 1990) has used skeletal pathologies in Anglo-Saxon weapon graves in southern England to argue that the interred individuals could not have been warriors, as they would have been unable to lift and use these weapons! Instead he proposes that the weapons were placed with the dead to mark out their shared ethnicity, not their individual roles in life. While the cultural evidence may be symbolically manipulated by the living, the biological evidence has a more independent existence that makes it so valuable for the archaeologist.

Archaeological approaches to death have changed a lot in the last three decades. Although the processual/postprocessual debate played a key role in these changes, it does not account for all of them. The wider context has changed, as death has been more intensively studied in disciplines such as history, ancient history, art history and sociology. The potential of the material evidence, especially biological data on health, diet, biological distance and population movement, has increased our range of well-founded inferences on the dead.

It does not make sense now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, simply to judge all analyses of cemeteries and burials as being examples of one or other of two Anglo-American schools of archaeology. Such a classification also neglects approaches to the disposal of the dead made by archaeologists outside the Anglo-American world.

Other Traditions

Contemporary archaeology is dominated economically, intellectually and linguistically by the major English speaking nations. Even in countries such as Spain, where local resources, skills and equipment have increased and improved to reduce dependence on the Anglo-American world, the ability to interact on an equal basis with scholars in North America and Britain is restricted by opportunities for publication (e.g. for translation into English) as well as by the ways in which the agenda for debate on theoretical issues is set in those countries. Elsewhere Politis (POLITIS 2003) notes how North American scholars use archaeological data from Latin America but not interpretations by local archaeologists. Moving into the area of mortuary practices, Härke (HÄRKE 2000) traces a history of study in German protohistoric archaeology since the 1920s and shows how concern with inferences of social distinctions using grave goods, measures of energy expenditure, the integration of settlement and burial evidence, and multidimensional analyses of cultural and biological data, have been shared with the Anglo-American tradition. However the lack of communication between the two traditions, and exploration in detail of similarities and differences, has meant that they have tended to exist in what Härke calls 'parallel universes' (HÄRKE 2000: 369).

Given that this article is being published in Spain, I want to take my main example of 'other' approaches to the disposal of the dead from this country. I use it not because I think that it is 'typical'- it is not, but it develops a detailed argument and it ties in neatly with some of the issues being discussed in this paper. Lull (LULL 2000) criticises equally processual and postprocessual approaches to the relationship between death and society. In particular he criticises the focus on the individual, whether it is the representation of his/her specific status or 'the individual, as the great manipulator, who plays the social game in accordance with his/her own ideological interests' (LULL 2000: 578). Using historical materialism Lull argues that the mortuary rituals are the products of social labour, not of the action of individuals: such labour is allocated by interest groups in the context of productive processes and the social relations of production, and in the context of social reproduction. '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' (LULL 2000: 578). Labour investment in such things as grave goods and burial containers (e.g. urns, cists) is used to define groups among the available dead population, but these groups are what Lull calls 'social hypotheses', which have to be compared with evidence for production and the social relations of production. For example, these groups may be classes, but that can only be evaluated by study of the production evidence contained within the settlements of the living.

I find this approach attractive because of its materialism (rather than idealism), its focus on groups (rather than individuals), and its recognition that the social distinctions seen in death require evaluation in the productive relations of life. Although coming from a different theoretical tradition, there are some resonances with Brown's recent placing of mortuary rituals within the context of time, effort and resource allocation (i.e. economic processes, see above). When it comes to practice, we are required to break away from our exclusive analyses of cemeteries and tombs and try to understand death in life. It is to this practice that I turn next.

Theory and Practice: Matters of Scale

Archaeologists have drawn on a full range of theories from the social sciences during the last four decades. Some of that range has been discussed in this paper in relation to the study of mortuary practices. However it is now time to move on to consider how we 'do' archaeology rather than social theory. The normal assumption would be that different theories would determine the adoption of different archaeological practices, for example different analytical concepts and units of analysis, different scales of study, and different methods. We might also assume that changes of theory might lead to changes in the questions that are regarded as appropriate for study using archaeological data. How are these assumptions borne out in the study of the dead?

For the purposes of this paper I am going to discuss two of these related assumptions, the units of analysis and the scale of study. Whatever the theoretical approach, the unit of analysis has remained the cemetery: these have been analysed qualitatively and quantitatively to study relative chronology and cultural affiliation ('traditional' archaeology), the kind of society to which the dead belonged

('processual' archaeology) and the definition and manipulation of identity and gender ('postprocessual' archaeology). The cemetery may be broken down into cultural phases and radiocarbon dating may be applied to give a time range for interment, whether directly on human bone or charcoals or indirectly by extension of absolute chronologies established for the region in which the cemetery occurs. Inevitably this means that the temporal scale may vary from a generation to a millennium or more. To take examples from the Central European Copper/Early Bronze Ages, the Branč cemetery in Slovakia analysed by Shennan (SHENNAN 1975) contained 308 graves over a period of 200-400 years (up to 12 generations) and there were no C14 dates, while the Tiszapolgár-Basatanya cemetery in Hungary studied by Sofaer Derevenski (SOFAER DEREVENSKI 1996) contained 156 graves spanning the period 4500-3600 BC (27 generations). Other cemeteries also have these 'coarse' chronologies, often in the range of several hundred years: Weglian (WEGLIAN 2001) is quite clear in referring to the six hundred year Early Bronze Age cemetery at Singen am Hohentwiel as 'belonging to one mortuary archaeological phase'.

But how can we be sure that the cultural phasing within cemeteries accurately tracks major changes in mortuary rituals? What about situations in which the symbolism of different groups, whether they be gender, kin, class etc, changes through time but the groups remain unchanged? Or could there be real changes in these groups which are masked by the coarse chronologies? Following Lull (see above) can we really expect that mortuary rituals will remain unchanged in the face of wider changes in production and the relations of production? The tradition in recent decades has been to undertake (quantitative) analysis on the large-scale. As O'Shea noted (O'SHEA 1984: 14) 'a short use-life minimises the potential for diachronic change, but may provide an insufficient sample for meaningful analysis, whereas the large cemetery, ideal for social analysis, often has the greatest potential for diachronic distortion'. It is this potential that makes the use of larger-scale independent dating a must for mortuary analysis. If we are to evaluate Lull's 'social hypotheses', based on mortuary analyses, against the archaeological record of production and productive relations, then the chronological scales of both records, of the dead and the living, need to be comparable to each other.

In order to illustrate these points, I will focus on a Bronze Age cemetery, Gatas, in its regional context, southeast Spain. I use this example because it is central to my collaborative research and it is located in the country of this publication. It has also been the subject of a number of published monographs and papers, one of which (CASTRO *et al.* 1993-94) deals with the results of our major radiocarbon dating programme but which is strangely absent from several recent discussions of Bronze Age chronologies in Spain!

The Early Bronze Age Argaric group, with its characteristic (although not exclusive) hilltop settlements and their intramural burials, has been known for over a century (SIRET–SIRET 1887). Inequalities in the deposition of grave goods such as gold and silver ornaments, and arsenical copper weapons have led to speculations on the existence of 'chiefs' or a stratified society. The typologies and associations of artefacts from the 366 burials published by Siret and Siret (SIRET–SIRET 1887) from the type site of El Argar were used to define two periods, Argar A and B (BLANCE 1964), with disposal in artificial caves and cists in the first period and in urns in the second period. Absolute dates of c.1700-1500 BC and 1500-1400 BC were assigned to these periods on the basis of cross-dating of grave goods with Central Europe and the East Mediterranean. Occupation levels and tombs within Argaric settlements were assigned to one or both of these periods according to the types of artefacts and burial containers found in them.

If we accepted this chronology, then analysis of the burials would begin by grouping those within a settlement into period A or B. However our criticisms of the periodisation, along with contradictions in the first C14 dates for the Argaric (mainly for occupation levels), led us to argue that a finer, independent, absolute chronology was needed for the Argaric. This required direct dating on human burials in sealed contexts, as well as the dating of longer-lived charcoals from occupation contexts. The stratigraphic linkage of occupation deposits and burials in Argaric settlements means that it is also possible to identify those long-lived samples that have been displaced by structural remodelling. This dating was a main aim of the Gatas project, beginning in 1985, based on the excavation of one Argaric settlement in the Vera basin, Almería (e.g. CASTRO *et al*. 1999a, 1999b). At present we have carried out AMS C14 dating on 42% of all the tombs at Gatas. In addition we have taken samples of human bone for dating from museum collections and modern

excavations in both Almería and Murcia. Of the 117 C14 dates for the Argaric analysed by Castro *et al.* (CASTRO *et al*. 1993-1994), 36% were from Gatas.

Instead of two Argaric periods, the C14 chronology, coupled with stratigraphic data, allows the definition of at least three main periods over a period of some seven hundred years (2250-1950 BC, 1950-1700 BC and 1700-1500 BC). While some artificial caves are very early in the sequence and some urns very late, for the period c.2100/2000-1700/1600 BC, both these containers and pits and stone cists were used. Although we cannot yet measure the relative frequencies of different burial containers through time, given the comparatively small number of C14 dates, they were socially selected for burials during most of the Argaric. There are also regional differences (inland vs. coastal) in the frequencies of urns and pit burials. Urns were initially used for infant burials: the absence of both urns and infant burials before c.2000 BC needs further dating, but could suggest that infants and children were not given social recognition by intra-mural burial in the first two centuries of the Argaric.

The dating of grave goods, associated with the human burials, has produced mixed results. While copper halberds are consistently dated to c.2000-1800 BC, early in the Argaric, as proposed by Blance (BLANCE 1964), and the pottery chalice type 7 occurs late in the Argaric, other artefacts, such as silver ornaments, occur throughout the Argaric and are not limited to one period. For further details I refer the reader to Castro *et al.* (CASTRO *et al*. 1993-1994). What is so far clear is the consistent application of C14 dating has enabled us to define a more refined absolute chronology for the Argaric. Some grave goods clearly do have restricted periods of deposition, but others are present throughout. The main burial containers have regional differences of frequency, as well as being available for selection at the same time as each other and through at least four or five centuries. Such selection involved individuals distinguished by age and/or social position. All age groups may not have been selected for intra-mural interment at all times. There also appear to be further distinctions in the grave goods selected to mark out individuals of the same social position at different times (e.g. the most important adult males, marked by halberds c.2000-1800 BC and then by the long sword –see CASTRO *et al*. 1993-1994). Not only is this a finer scale of resolution, but it also permits the more complex analysis of

changes in actual social distinctions and/or symbolic representations through time.

The broad phases of the Argaric are now seen to last some two hundred years each. When we combine this phasing with the stratified sequences of burials and occupation deposits excavated at sites such as Gatas and Fuente Alamo (SCHUBART *et al.* 2000), then the chronology can be further refined to the level of the life span of individual households, with their successive floor levels, structural remodelling and interment. Given our experience at Gatas, the dating of the contemporary occupation and burial sequence at Fuente Alamo, on the north of the Vera basin, now becomes critical. The Argaric stratified deposits here have been divided into four 'horizons', two each in Argar A and B. The excavators report on 20 conventional C14 dates for these deposits, but only in horizon IV do they form a coherent pattern in a consistent order, and they do not clearly support the proposed chronology (compare SCHUBART *et al.* 2000: 48 fig. 1 and 96 fig. 3). This appears to be due to a number of factors, including the clearance of areas and structures for new buildings, the absence of stratigraphic links between different occupation terraces, and the pooling of charcoal samples from the same levels. Shorter-lived samples from sealed contexts, such as the human bone from artificial caves, urns, cists and pits, are needed to test and refine the absolute chronology for this site. Only then will a more secure analysis of death, production and the life-span of households be possible at this site, as well as a more detailed comparison with life and death in the same periods of time at Gatas. A working hypothesis has been proposed already on the organisation and intensification of production during the Argaric in the Vera Basin (CASTRO *et al.* 1999a, 1999b) and this will require evaluation on new data from site such as Fuente Alamo, as well as from future excavations at Gatas.

This case study from southeast Spain is important for three reasons. First it shows how our understanding of Argaric chronology and society has been increased, given the focal position of this area in Iberian Bronze Age studies. Secondly it does, I hope, provide a model for the creation of independent, smaller-scale, absolute chronologies for cemeteries, whether these be intra- or extra-mural. Thirdly it gives an example of how the chronological scales of burial and occupation deposits can be refined together to enable an evaluation of the 'social hypotheses'

produced by study of the dead on the evidence for the productive activities and relations of the living.

At the same time we have to recognise that factors of site formation and preservation are going to affect the ability with which the agenda followed at sites like Gatas can be pursued elsewhere. Our sample combines good preservation of human burials in sealed contexts in stratified deposits that link tombs and occupation deposits over seven centuries of the Early Bronze Age. Such a combination of factors is rare for any period of prehistory on the European continent, especially north of the Alps. Where there are extensive open-air cemeteries containing burials in the low hundreds, as cited earlier in this paper, then more refined independent chronologies ought to be possible by designing programmes of AMS C14 dating in combination with close studies of horizontal stratigraphies and typologies and associations of grave goods. Where organic materials are preserved on metalwork, there are opportunities for the evaluation of dating in contexts other than burials, thereby contributing to a wider evaluation of the chronology of key artefact types that are deposited in a variety of Bronze Age contexts (NEEDHAM *et al.* 1997). Where settlements are poorly preserved and have limited stratigraphic deposits, such chronological refinement may not match that which is possible for cemeteries. These are issues that are going to have to be worked out at a local level. In some regions, such as central and northern Italy, larger-scale programmes of AMS C14 dating are now being undertaken on Copper and Bronze Age cemeteries, but I do not know their research design and methodology.

Looking Forward

Where does this leave the archaeology of death? The study of the material remains of past mortuary rituals is still alive and kicking in archaeology! There has been three decades of debate on theoretical issues relating the social position of the living to their treatment in death. In spite of polarised debate, most scholars recognise that this relationship is more complex than was proposed on the basis of limited ethnographic research, and the publication of detailed studies from other disciplines has undoubtedly helped our understanding of it. Scholars outside the Anglo-American tradition are also beginning to make a contribution to debate, and this needs to be encouraged in a more systematic and

consistent way. However there needs to be more attention given to the practice of studying death, to the relationship between our theories and questions and the data that we analyse, and to its chronological refinement. Unless it is of short duration, the cemetery as a whole can provide too coarse a scale for analysis. Whether one argues that all social treatments of death provide some kind of ideological mirage, or alternatively that they allow archaeologists to propose 'social hypotheses' to be evaluated against data on production and the relations of production, it is clear that the dead cannot be studied by themselves. In this sense the definition of an 'archaeology of death' is rather arbitrary, but the experience of the last twenty five years suggests that we still need to give more attention to the 'archaeology' part of this title and to the relation between the theory and practice of what we do.

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