

Preface

This volume sets out to explore relationships between death, memory and material culture in the past through the study of the material remains of mortuary practices. Archaeological data has a central role to play in understanding the importance of material culture in coping with, orchestrating and communicating remembering and forgetting of the dead in many societies, both in the past and in the present. By engaging with the materiality and practices surrounding death in past societies, archaeologists are in a strong position to make important contributions to the burgeoning inter-disciplinary debates on death, material culture and social memory in the arts and social sciences.

The idea for the volume developed from a conference session entitled 'Death, memory and material culture' organised by the editor at the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference held at St Catherine's College, Oxford in December 2000. While many conferences, sessions, books and papers have been dedicated to aspects of mortuary archaeology in recent years, this particular session was aimed at bringing together both young and established scholars to discuss the role of mortuary rites in the ways ancient societies constructed and reproduced the past. Subsequently, it was hoped that papers would address importance of the dead and ancestors in socio-political, economic and religious life, as well as the specific role of material culture in connecting death to social remembrance.

Some papers addressed the roles of monumentality and the afterlife or re-use of monuments in the construction of social memories. These have been popular topics of debate among archaeologists in the last decade, particularly in later prehistory and early medieval archaeology. In this regard, the session

developed upon two earlier TAG sessions that I organised. The first, held at the Bournemouth TAG in 1997, focused on the re-use of ancient monuments in early medieval landscapes. The proceedings were subsequently published in a revised form as volume 30(1) of *World Archaeology* co-edited with Richard Bradley. The second at the Birmingham TAG in 1998 (organised with Richard Hingley) investigated the roles of remembering and forgetting in the use and re-use of monuments in both prehistoric and historical archaeology.

Yet the Oxford session was a departure in two ways. Firstly, the aim was to move beyond discussions of monumentality and monument re-use to address other ways in which material culture helped to build perceptions of, and engagements with, the past in the past. It is possible to conceive of a whole range of practices, technologies and performances before, during and after funerals in which memories could be communicated, inscribed and incorporated. These might include the management, transportation and methods for disposing of the corpse (i.e. by cremation, excarnation, inhumation etc), the location and spatial organisation of burial sites and cemeteries, and the material culture placed with the dead. Secondly, rather than perpetuating opaque and abstract discussions about ritual, monumentality and ancestors that have become commonplace in archaeological research, the aim was to focus specifically on the importance of death rituals in the process of linking the living with the dead and the past. In turn, it was hoped that the research presented would address the crucial role of mortuary remembrance in building social, political and religious structures in ancient communities. Consequently, we can begin to regard mortuary practices in many past societies as a primary focus through which past people came to understand their social memories and group identities - their sense of personhood, community and history - through the deployment of material culture.

I believe that the success of the session can be gauged by the nature of this volume. Many of the papers presented at the conference are included (chapters by Cummings, Jones, M. Williams, Petts, Thompson & Holtorf). Meanwhile, other papers were commissioned specifically for the volume to address issues and evidence that were not forthcoming in the TAG session itself (chapters by Fowler, Hope, Eckardt & Williams, Longden, H. Williams & Effros).

The volume as it stands incorporates a broad geographical and chronological range encompassing very different societies from the Neolithic to the twentieth century. Equally, the papers explore and identify

numerous strategies for commemoration including monument building, the re-use of objects and monuments, the use of place and space, technologies of transformation and fragmentation, ritual sacrifice and the provision of grave goods. Finally, the role of archaeology as a practice is itself identified as a means of deploying material culture in the construction of social memories in societies from the nineteenth century to the present day. Perhaps more importantly, the book demonstrates the range of theoretical perspectives and themes that can be employed in interpretations of burial archaeology by drawing upon recent debates in archaeology as well as those from across the social sciences - particularly in social anthropology and sociology.

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