Title
DIY, Green Burials, and Mortuary Archaeology

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mx1794n

Author
Morgan, Colleen

Publication Date
2011-05-05

Peer reviewed
After digging up a few people, most archaeologists come up with a burial plan. One of my graduate student instructors back at my beloved alma mater, the University of Texas, was able to eventually date unmarked 19th century graves to within a year by the style of safety pin that was used to dress the body. He was an expert on all kinds of grave fittings, and knew how much each piece (coffin handles, hinges, etc) had cost—they were all listed in the Sears catalog and minor changes in design were easy to detect. He was going to pick a year and kit himself out perfectly in 19th century burial clothes, correct down to the safety pins, then clutch a shiny new penny in one of his hands.
I’ve heard of archaeologists wanting to get excarnated, donate their bones to their department, and of course, the ever-popular viking boat burial. Antiquated Vagaries has a couple of good posts on the graves of archaeologists, which usually allude to the subject that the archaeologist was investigating.

Cornelius Holtorf wrote about this phenomenon in his chapter in *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Societies* wherein he writes about a Neolithic passage tomb in Sweden and the memorial for Wilhelm Ekman a few meters away, who died while excavating the tomb. (While this was in 1915, sadly these things happen even today when proper precautions aren’t taken.)

My specific chosen commemoration style has changed from time to time, but my general interest in “green” burials was piqued back in 2005, in the New Yorker article The Shroud of Marin by Tad Friend. In this he details the growing phenomenon of people wanting to be buried without concrete vaults, coffins, embalming, or even a tombstone. If there was a coffin or a tombstone, enterprising DIYers wanted to make it themselves. I was interested in this expression of the environmental movement made material in burials, and it continues to come up from time to time on sites like Boingboing and the Make Magazine Blog.

These updates emphasize the distance that has grown between the (primarily white, Western) bereaved and their dead. Death is now fully legislated, and permits are required for most steps of the burial process, from moving the dead body to digging the hole and placing the body in the ground.

So it was with avid interest that I read the newest archaeology-themed issue of Mortality, an academic journal “promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying.”

As widely-read as I attempt to be, I hadn’t heard of Mortality–I’ll have to rummage through their back-issues some point soon. In the introductory article, Howard Williams lays out the engagement that mortuary archaeologists have with contemporary death and what they can contribute to our understanding of modern death and death practices. One of the first points that Williams makes is that “the private, individualized and medicalized nature of death in Western
modernity is extensively used by archaeologists as the antithesis of funerals in past, pre-industrial societies” (92). Beyond using modern practice as analogy, Williams also states that “Archaeologists are key stakeholders in current ethical, political and legal debates concerning death and the dead in contemporary society” (93), linking this status to issues of repatriation and reburial. I wonder if there is more to this linkage, this stakeholder status, than Williams allows.

Archaeologists are fairly unusual in the (white, Western) world in that we have a greater intimacy with death and decay. While we certainly deal in lifeways and birth, they are always seen through the yellowed lens of time. Even our contemporary archaeologies are informed by a disciplinary history of studying remains. We count it a boon in many ways—we’ve gained an understanding of materiality that is unparalleled in other disciplines. As contemporary as your archaeology may be, there is a good chance that as an archaeologist, you have dealt more fully with death and human remains than most people.

Our role in handling human remains has been greatly vilified, especially in North America where (white, Western) we are most certainly not handling the bones of our ancestors. We have come under such criticism that a lot of my colleagues will not excavate burials, nor handle them in any way. The intimacy is denied—we will sort through their trash but will not shake their hand. Fair enough. You do not have to brush the dirt off of someone’s pelvic curve to understand their house or their meals. But do we turn our backs on this knowledge entirely?

I wonder if there is a way to use this unusual relationship to death in order to serve (white? Western?) people. In a very specific example, can we help the people that wish to be buried in an environmentally friendly way while not running afoul of very good local laws that protect water tables and prevent disease? Can we use our knowledge of site depositional processes and decomposition, our understanding of burial practices around the world to help people come to terms with the inevitable? Or do we become just another person standing between the bereaved and their beloved? Is there an activist mortuary archaeology?
Is ecological burial a problem archaeology can tackle? My first thought was that dumping a naked body in the wild would be the greenest way to dispose of a body, though not the most human. In fact there are ways the body could be prepared, and a choice of places to leave it that would favour some species over others. That means it's not a simple ecological problem but while archaeologists can say what did happen it doesn’t follow that's what should happen.

On the other hand I think you're right that archaeology could have a lot to say about social practices. I once blogged that a tomb is a machine for remembering. Lin Foxhall, my supervisor, has talked about the idea of Monumental Time in ancient Greece. In some ways the ability to project a presence into the future is a form of immortality. I see that Holtorf also talks about megalithic tombs as being
monuments for the future as much as monuments from the past. It might not have the appeal of a feast in Valhalla but it’s a form of immortality we can see. But as happy as I am with my rip-off of Le Corbusier, it’s not the only way of seeing a tomb.

I’m also reminded of chulpas tombs found in the Andes that were left open so that the ancestor within could play an ongoing social role. Some of this is due to local religious practice that wouldn’t translate to the modern world, but if I remember correctly some of the use was practical. For example a lot of chulpas were associated with llama corrals possibly so the ancestors would watch over them (Lane & Herrera 2005:116-7). The popular assumption is that graves should be closed and the dead rest in peace, but it’s not universal. Some people want to contribute to society after their death, and the organ donor scheme is an example of that. Perhaps archaeologists could discuss the possibilities for people to contribute to social through or after burial.

Something that puzzles me that I can’t think of a user’s guide for death aimed at the public by an archaeologist. The closest I can think of is by the anthropologist Nigel Barley’s Dancing on the Grave. Can anyone point me to a popular book about death by an archaeologist?

---

**Rory Rickwood**

May 13, 2011 at 7:43 pm

Very interesting article. Yes we can help the public bury loved-ones in an eco-friendly way!

For helpful information, visit: [http://www.novaterium.com](http://www.novaterium.com)

---

**Jesse Stephen**

May 31, 2011 at 1:42 am

Styles of safety pins notwithstanding, I couldn’t help but chuckle after viewing this fine promo video after reading this.

So CoMo, perhaps Middle Savagery will follow you to your headstone (or perhaps
an eco-friendly barcode of one sort or another). Oh the joy, the Horror! Ongoing social roles indeed...

Death: There’s an app for that.