In Life, So in Death

by Phil Kiberd

Introduction

The overall aim of this paper is to raise ideas which examine why people are buried as and where they were. It will therefore explore a range of issues and is not intended as an exhaustive list but rather as a prompt towards a broader view of cemetery studies. Being an attempt to look beyond the purely physical contents of burials, it tries, as Iain Macleod and Trevor Cowie write in the February newsletter of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, "to think further about the people behind the artefacts" (Macleod and Cowie, 1996).

It has been the trend in recent years to view burial and funeral rites as directed by the living for the living, with the dead person being increasingly forgotten (Henig 1980, Philpott 1991). However, once a person dies, they do not become neutral, either in physical or psychological terms. Indeed, in many, if not most, societies, the transition of the deceased to his/her soul state was likely to have been the prime reason for burial, with or without political manoeuvrings behind the scenes. Both today and in the past there were clearly two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead (Frazer 1951, Hole 1995, Morris 1989) and it is the dead as much as the living who direct and directed the burial act. Hence much of the activity seen around the grave was to placate the dead and their spirits and all of these acts created the later stratigraphies which we see as archaeologists.

There are three broad stratigraphic themes which I wish to explore: the stratigraphies visible within the human skeleton; the grave goods and the individual; and, briefly, the grave/tomb itself and its effect on subsequent stratigraphy. All three elements rest on the premise that stratigraphy is not purely the study of superposition, but ultimately the determination of those processes, events and actions in the past which led to the assemblages which we uncover: it represents an attempt to see the thought processes behind the actions.

Skeletal Information

The most notable thing about most burials is the presence of a skeleton. Immediate stratigraphies can reveal how and in which order the body, grave goods, coffin and so forth were placed in the ground and what happened to them taphonomically. Osteological analysis after excavation can take stratigraphy a step further by revealing clues about the environment and conditions in which each individual, and consequently a population, lived.

The presence of disease in a skeleton can provide information on the society and what events occurred to individuals and cemetery populations. This in turn can have a bearing on associated settlement patterns and spatial and structural organisation (Cohen 1989). At an individual level it may be possible to see classes/ranks of people via their teeth wear, general health, and differences in disease types which suggest differential access to resources. The knowledge that there were clearly different classes can help to assess settlement organisation (Manchester 1983, Manchester and Roberts 1995). The bone evidence can also tell something about behaviour. Palaeolithic Hominid studies, for example, which
compare skeletons from Neanderthal and Modern Human specimens can elucidate different behaviours in each group and consequently suggest which site types are likely to be associated with which hominid (Stringer and Gamble 1993, Tattersall 1995). In multi-layered cave sites where both species co-existed over time, this can be very useful in separating out stratigraphies.

Some diseases are visible on human bone, others are not (Manchester 1983, Manchester and Roberts 1995) but the recognition of disease may help in understanding sudden changes in burial or settlement. Severe infectious diseases will kill a person before any bony changes occur, and hence remain invisible osteologically. However, they may be inferred from sudden changes in the burial record - increases in numbers of individuals of the same age or sex, sudden gaps or mass burials. When first introduced into a community, disease can have a devastating effect on a population, both physically and emotionally. Where high levels of death are prevalent, communities may fragment or radically change and burial patterns may also reflect this.

A good example in recent times is the effect of smallpox on populations who came into contact with Europeans in the last two centuries. In 1770, in South Africa, the Xhosa people were hit by such an outbreak (Peires 1989), which radically changed their latent fear of death to one of extreme horror. As these responses were mixed with a recent conversion to an adapted-Christianity, they first interred their dead away from their specific burial grounds and ultimately stopped burying them. Equally in America similar disruption to social and economic life occurred because of smallpox. The outcome of such incidents in the archaeological record would be sudden gaps or changes in cemeteries, and confusion in stratigraphy. Another example can be seen in building styles in those areas prone to malaria in South-East Asia, where houses are raised up on stilts, reflecting the need to keep the cause of the disease at bay (Cohen 1989).

Further, disease recognition in individuals may give clues as to how they were treated and thought of in life, and consequently why they were buried where and how they were. A good, if obvious, example concerns those suffering from leprosy. Leprosy is a disease which is not present at birth but which develops steadily through life. It is however very conspicuous in its later stages and thus singles out individuals who may then have been treated differently by society (Manchester 1983, Manchester and Roberts 1995). In Cameroon, for example, three-footed pots for cooking men's meat and the individual's black-burnished eating bowl are smashed on the grave of male lepers (Barley 1991). Consequently a specific stratigraphy for leper graves would be noticed in the archaeological record.

**Grave Goods**

The second theme, that of grave goods, must be understood in the light of fact that attitudes towards those who are different extends to all members of society, not just those who are obviously distinctive physically. Society is a collection of individuals, who react to each other through the cultural interpretation of the society into which they are born. This in turn leads to individual actions, sequential events, which separately create the record we uncover. In human society, the world of the living is also inextricably linked to the world of the dead. People in death do not/ did not simply disappear but carried on their roles in the next or other world.

Variations in grave goods give clues not only to gifts to the dead but to the rôle of the living and the rôle of the dead. As with physical disease, those rôles most visible
through grave goods will relate to individuals who performed specific functions in society. Burials are likely to reflect status in life whether this be determined by rank, from king to slave; by sex, male, female or non-gendered; or in age, from newborn to child, to sub-adult, to adult, to elder. Age in society is not, strictly, a clinical definition but a cultural one. In many societies an adult is someone older than 12-14 years who has undergone initiation. Those who do not partake are considered still to be children and therefore are likely to be buried as such. Equally, different classes or types of people, for example those singled out for shamanism or blood brotherhood, would undergo different initiations, and thus lifestyles or associations which may be reflected later in the grave (Pearce 1985, Vansina 1990).

The status in life may be reflected via the symbols within the grave. Cultural environment effects the clustering of goods and the clustering of people. Equally those with special powers, such as kings or shamans, may be accorded specific burials, often with distinctive goods. In death these individuals become, not neutral bodies, but the temporary resting places of the soul or spirit. People fear the dead more than they fear death and this fear can be observed in burial custom. In South Africa, for example, Zulu warriors are buried resting on their right side so that they cannot reach out and stab passers-by (Werner 1995). In that society warriors carry their assegais in their right hand and their shields in their left, so a left-handed male would be considered unusual or abnormal, and potentially someone to be feared or mistrusted, for example a witch doctor. This distinction may well be recognisable in the grave, if we know what to look for. Also in Zulu graves, pots may be buried which carry bumps and ridges, to represent the scars on the person’s body which reflect status. The pot, in death, expresses the status of the individual in life (Barley 1991).

In Alaska, the shaman was seen amongst the Eskimo as a powerful person, both valuable and dangerous - and perhaps most dangerous in death. Shamans can be detected in the grave by the presence of masks over their skulls, which are part of the burial process and serve to seal off the dangers of the dead from the community (Fagan 1991, Pearce 1985). It is interesting to note that, in many prehistoric societies from Egypt to Central Europe, the mask is often associated with certain individuals suggesting that there was a widespread fear of direct contact with powerful figures in life and death (Hodder 1990).

The stratigraphy of grave goods can be fitted into seen as forming several broad themes. First there is the body itself. People rarely die and become buried as the fell, but are lain out for interment. This body position is therefore important, whether prone or supine, flexed or crouched, complete or decapitated, perhaps in many Roman cemeteries to release the spirit from the shoulders (Philpott 1991 - a tradition which also occurs in New Guinea in the modern day). The arms or legs may also be symbolically positioned - arms across the chest may indicate rank or status, for instance clasped as a symbol of authority, honesty and communication with a higher authority. Secondly the presence of items on the body - clothing, jewellery and so forth - need to be considered. Are they added at burial or do they represent items worn in life? Are they the clothes of the living or of the dead (Glob 1969, 1973)? Grave goods can also occur both in the coffin, and on it, as with the placing of nails, buckles etc. on 19th century black Mississippian graves (Rose 1985). Even the coffin itself might be considered a mystical object in its own right, as evidenced by the spells or name plaques in later Pharaonic Egyptian burials (Rice 1991).
Grave Foci

Finally, once filled, the grave may be a focus for certain ceremonies. Recent pollen analysis at Beaker graves indicates the presence of plants, all of an hallucinogenic nature (Richmond, pers. comm.). Could this evidence the family of the deceased returning to communicate with the dead, a form of prehistoric seance? Equally pots and other items may be used to show off the prowess of the dead or to mark the graves. For example, pottery is impaled on graves of the Tonj Bongo people of Sudan, recalling the heads of animals killed by the man and the pots used to make hunting medicine (Barley 1991).

Alternatively the presence of the tomb or grave can affect later stratigraphy above the ground. As a monument, it is incorporated into the landscape and becomes a factor determining subsequent activity, so long as memory or political expediency allows. How this happens depends on whether the tomb is held in honour or in fear, or some combination of the two. An honoured tomb may attract satellite graves wishing to bask in reflected glory. A feared tomb such as that of a shaman or young child may be avoided, until such time as memory fades. Hence later intrusive activity on such a site might imply either a significant span of time or change in society. Memory of ancestors has been estimated as lasting, on average, for three generations, but areas such as a visibly large tombs associated with fear may continue to be avoided simply because of subsequent folklore. The reuse of prehistoric burial mounds by Anglo-Saxons is a good example of the use of the past landscape to instil status, parallelling the status derived from the underlying passage grave by the original inhabitants.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is perhaps easy to forget, when dealing with archaeological assemblages, that the artefacts which we encounter were made by individuals and that societies were composed of these individuals, who saw and reacted to each other as such. Unlike documentary history, archaeology often sees not the broad strokes of social activity but small-scale, even single episodes. By viewing skeletal populations as the remains of people who fulfilled distinct roles in the past, we may be aided greatly in interpreting that past. The burial act can be a very complex procedure and the examples I have given of what went on and, in some cases, still goes on, were chosen to suggest ideas and as a reminder that in most societies the preparation for death is a life-long occupation. Hence graves are not simple holes or refuse dumps.

Ethnographic evidence of people and their actions can help determine a middle range theory which elucidates the “how and why” of cemetery studies. It is this which will aid us in approaching, and perhaps understanding, physical stratigraphies. Finally, if this paper can have any moral, it would be this: Remember the Dead, But Do Not Forget the Living.

Post-script:

The conference raised two points that I would like to address. Firstly, there is a cynical belief amongst most archaeologists, based, I feel, largely on a western secular background, that is not prepared to see the merits of taking into account the wishes of the dead. This ignores the reality of strong beliefs regarding the spiritworld, both existing and having existed, beliefs which clearly caused the actions which created and amended the archaeological record. A belief in the immortality of the soul and the world of the dead is noted in Caesar and other
Roman writers, in Homer, in Egyptian, Chinese, Amer-Indian tales, amongst the Khoisan, and throughout Europe. The knowledge of an ‘after-life’ is alluded to in most societies and can be seen in actions ranging from awaiting the bubbling of a dead woman’s spirit in a fermenting pot in Zambia, to taking tea with deceased relatives in Highgate cemetery, or to the ghost of Ivy Brennan in Coronation Street (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 7.30pm Granada TV (ITV) January-February 1996).

Secondly, my paper does not seek to determine every individual in the past. It merely suggests that communities, both now and in the past, are ultimately made up of congregations of individuals, whose separate relationships both economically and politically, physically and emotionally, are the foundations of the archaeological record. Evolutionary biologists are aware that life is the struggle of individuals, not species (or groups), and that populations are made of few or many individuals. Like evolution, archaeological assemblages are not species- or period-generated but the product of many small-scale encounters and struggles, representing the needs of the moment.

Bibliography

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