Death Rituals, Social Order and the Archaeology of Immortality in the Ancient World

Modern archaeology has amassed considerable evidence for the disposal of the dead through burials, cemeteries, and other monuments. Drawing on this body of evidence, this book offers fresh insight into how early human societies conceived of death and the afterlife. The twenty-seven essays in this volume consider the rituals and responses to death in prehistoric societies across the world, from eastern Asia through Europe to the Americas, and from the very earliest times before developed religious beliefs offered scriptural answers to these questions. Compiled and written by leading prehistorians and archaeologists, this volume traces the emergence of death as a concept in early times, as well as a contributing factor to the formation of communities and social hierarchies, and sometimes the creation of divinities.

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Death Rituals, Social Order and the Archaeology of Immortality in the Ancient World

“Death Shall Have No Dominion”

Edited by

COLIN RENFREW
MICHAEL J. BOYD
IAIN MORLEY
On Going to a Conference about Death and Immortality
(For Colin Renfrew)

I pass the graves that are houses
On the way. Death has spread
Its dominion into the stories
That we live. Cemeteries have changed
Their form, have become cars,
Or the diminishing trees, but especially
Our offices and careers, where
We pass from living into something
Else, between being and not being.
Often we forget to breathe,
And the flowers remind us in vain.
All the metal we have dug up or made
Are the armature of our open graves.
Once we knew we were alive
Because an ache in the flesh
Sang to the unanswered sky
Or some love that possessed
Us like the ghosts we live amongst
Howls in our sleep when no-one
Hears. We were born with a shaping
Fire, but elude the flame
Meant to burn us into being.
Sometimes we catch a glimpse
Of a ghost in the window,
And wonder at its resemblance
To how we seem. Cities devour
The earth; the dead have changed
Places with the living, and wonder
How easy it is to be alive being dead.

(Ben Okri, 2012)
Contents

List of Illustrations  page xi
List of Tables  xvi
Notes on Contributors  xvii
Preface  xxiii

1. ‘The Unanswered Question’: Investigating Early Conceptualisations of Death
   Colin Renfrew  1

I  INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY

2. Non-Human Animal Responses towards the Dead and Death: A Comparative Approach to Understanding the Evolution of Human Mortuary Practices
   Alexander K. Piel and Fiona A. Stewart  15

3. Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Mortuary Behaviours and the Origins of Ritual Burial
   João Zilhão  27

   Francesco d’Errico and Marian Vanhaeren  45

II  MORTALITY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN SOCIETY: SEDENTISM AND THE COLLECTIVE

5. Gathering of the Dead? The Early Neolithic Sanctuaries of Göbekli Tepe, Southeastern Turkey
   Jens Notroff, Oliver Dietrich, and Klaus Schmidt  65
CONTENTS

6. Death and Architecture: The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A Burials at WF16, Wadi Faynan, Southern Jordan 82
   Steven Mithen, Bill Finlayson, Darko Maričević, Sam Smith, Emma Jenkins, and Mohammad Najjar

7. Corporealties of Death in the Central Andes (ca. 9000–2000 BC) 111
   Peter Kaulicke

8. Mediating the Dominion of Death in Prehistoric Malta 130
   Simon Stoddart

9. House Societies and Founding Ancestors in Early Neolithic Britain 138
   Julian Thomas

III CONSTRUCTING THE ANCESTORS

10. Constructing Ancestors in Sub-Saharan Africa 153
    Timothy Insoll

11. Different Kinds of Dead: Presencing Andean Expired Beings 168
    George F. Lau

    Anthony Snodgrass

    Michael J. Boyd

IV DEATH, HIERARCHY, AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

14. Life and Death in Late Prehistoric to Early Historic Mesopotamia 223
    Karina Croucher

15. The Big Sleep: Early Maya Mortuary Practice 237
    Norman Hammond

16. De-Paradoxisation of Paradoxes by Referring to Death as an Ultimate Paradox: The Case of the State-Formation Phase of Japan 255
    Koji Mizoguchi
CONTENTS

17. Death and Mortuary Rituals in Mainland Southeast Asia: From Hunter-Gatherers to the God Kings of Angkor  
   Charles F. W. Higham  

V MATERIALITY AND MEMORY
   Lambros Malafouris  
   Li Shuicheng  
   Bryan Hanks, Roger Doonan, Derek Pitman, Elena Kupryanova, and Dmitri Zdanovich  

VI INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY: Glimpsing Other Worlds
21. Northern Iroquoian Deathways and the Re-imagination of Community  
   John L. Creese  
22. Locating a Sense of Immortality in Early Egyptian Cemeteries  
   Alice Stevenson  
23. Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Mortuary Traditions in Ancient India: Stūpas, Relics, and the Archaeological Landscape  
   Julia Shaw  
24. Killing Mummies: On Inka Epistemology and Imperial Power  
   Terence N. D’Altroy  

VII RESPONSES AND REACTIONS: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS
25. ‘Death Shall Have No Dominion’: A Response  
   Timothy Jenkins  

ix
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Comments: Death Shall Have No Dominion</th>
<th>430</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Paul K. Wason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Muse of Archaeology</td>
<td>436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Ben Okri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Frontispiece ‘The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living’, Damien Hirst, 1991

3.1. The Bouffi a Boneval at La Chapelle-aux-Saints 28
3.2. The Bouffi a Boneval burial 29
3.3. Goya’s Saturn [Greek Cronos] Devouring His Child 30
3.4. Altamura Man 32
3.5. The large carnivore competitors of the Sierra de Atapuerca Middle Pleistocene humans 33
3.6. Two views of the Oase 2 cranium in situ 37
3.7. The Oase passages, with indication of their names, of the position of the cranial remains from different species, and of former entrances 38
3.8. Humans in the Sima de los Huesos 40
4.1. Available indirect (top) and direct (bottom) calibrated 14 C dates for Upper Palaeolithic primary burials (cf. Tables 4.1 and 4.2) 52
4.2. Examples of Gravettian and contemporary primary burials 53
4.3. Geographical distribution of dated Gravettian sites (dots) and primary burials (crosses) 54
4.4. Seriation of grave goods associated with Gravettian burial sites 55
4.5. Principal coordinate analysis of grave goods associated with Gravettian burial sites (a) and with individual burials (b) 56
4.6. Personal ornaments associated with the Saint-Germain-la-Rivière Madgalenian primary burial, as well as a photo and reconstruction of the structure protecting the deceased 57
5.1. Schematic plan of the excavation at Göbekli Tepe and its stratigraphic units 66
5.2. Aerial image of the mound of Gobekli Tepe showing the excavation areas and position of enclosures excavated thus far 68
5.3. View of Enclosure D, the largest and best preserved circular enclosure of Göbekli Tepe 69
5.4. Pillar 31, one of the two central pillars of Enclosure D, illustrating their anthropomorphic appearance, which is due to the depiction of arms, hands, and elements of clothing 70
5.5. Pillar 27 in Enclosure C, showing the sculpture of a predator in high relief above the flat relief depicting an apparently dead boar 71
5.6. Greater than life-size sculpture of a man, the so-called Urfa man 74
5.7. Life-sized human heads made of stone from Göbekli Tepe 75
5.8. The rich decorated Pillar 43 from Enclosure D showing birds, a scorpion, and a headless, ithyphallic man 76
5.9. A stone slab from Enclosure D showing birds, a scorpion, and a headless, ithyphallic man accompanied by a hyena (centre), a vulture (right), and another animal (upper left) 77
5.10. Composition of the avifauna of Göbekli Tepe based on bird bone material 78
6.1. Wadi Faynan, southern Jordan, looking west towards the Wadi Araba and showing the location of Neolithic settlements 87
ILLUSTRATIONS

6.2. Excavation of Wadi Faynan, April 2008, showing exposure of a dense cluster of pisé-walled structures and the large, partly excavated sub-circular structure (O75) in the foreground

6.3. Semi-subterranean, pisé-walled structures at WF16, April 2010

6.4. Plan of WF16, showing dense cluster of semi-subterranean pisé-walled structures, the large sub-circular structure (O75), and the later circular structure O100

6.5. Distribution of burials at WF16

6.6. Burial O93 from the northeast

6.7. Burial O27 from the south

6.8. Burial O36 from the northwest

6.9. Burial O37 from the south

6.10. Burial O38 from the east showing white residue and linear black markings on the back of adult skull

6.11. Burial O39 from the north

6.12. Burial O28 from the southeast

6.13. Burial O82 from the southwest

6.14. Burial O80 from the south

6.15. Burial O35 from the south showing white residue on the ribcage

6.16. Pierced and polished fragment of human cranium SF538

6.17. Burial O24 from the northeast

6.18. Map showing sites mentioned in the text

6.19. House 100, La Paloma, central coast of Peru

6.20. Cane structure over burial, La Paloma

6.21. Young male under cane structure, La Paloma

6.22. Detail of treated body with mask and sewn wig, Morro I, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

6.23. Detail of treated body with mask and sewn wig, Morro I, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.1. Cover of T-10B, Morro I, Arica

7.2. Young child with mask showing open mouth, Morro I, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.3. Foetus with wig, Maestranza, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa.

7.4. Complete foetus inside a statuette of unbaked clay, Playa Miller 8, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.5. Detail of treated body with mask and sewn wig, Morro I, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.6. Cover of T-10B, Morro I, Arica

7.7. Young child with mask showing open mouth, Morro I, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.8. Foetus with wig, Maestranza, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa.

7.9. Complete foetus inside a statuette of unbaked clay, Playa Miller 8, Arica, Chile, Archaeological Museum San Miguel de Azapa

7.10. Young woman with subadult, E. 13, OGSE-80, Las Vegas, Guayas, Ecuador

7.11. Circular accumulation of human bones E.25B, OGSE-80, Las Vegas, Guayas, Ecuador

7.12. Large ceramic figurine, Valdivia culture, Rio Chico

7.13. Figurine of unbaked clay, Caral, north-central coast, Peru

7.14. (Lost) Representation from Cerro Sechin, north coast, Peru

8.1. The Maltese islands

8.2. The cycle of conception and deconception

8.3. Scale and role of Maltese material liturgical culture

8.4. Plans of the Early Neolithic timber halls of Clach and Balbridie

8.5. The chamber contents at the Fussell's Lodge long barrow, Wilshire

8.6. The chamber of the Cairnholy I long cairn, Galloway

10.1. Midden (at rear) with in the foreground a cluster of ancestral shrines, Bonchig Section, Tong Hills, northern Ghana

10.2. Complete anthropomorphic figurine from Yikpbongo, Koma Land, northern Ghana

10.3. Plan of a Yin shrine in abandoned compound, Bonchig Section, Tong Hills, northern Ghana

11.1. Map of north central Andes and sites mentioned in text

11.2. View of chullpa at Honcopampa

11.3. Flexed interment, from Mashconga, Cabana region, Ancash

11.4. One of the large interior interment chambers of Katiamá, a large chullpa near Caraz, Callejón de Huaylas, Peru

11.5. Photographs of ceramic vessels, representing ancestor bundles

11.6. Photograph of stone sculpture effigy of mummy bundle, ca. 0.90 m tall
11.7. Four vertical slab sculptures documented at Chinchawas 179
11.8. Small figurine, depicting a seated ancestor bundle, found at Chinchawas; measures 64 mm tall 180
11.9. Camelid figures from Recuay tradition site of Chinchawas 180
11.10. Three huancas overlooking the city of Huaraq (middle ground) 181
12.1. A sector of the Boeotia survey, including two nucleated settlements and the intervening scatter of small rural sites (squares and circles), with occasional burials (triangles) in the interstices between these. 188
12.2. Sector Δ of the West Cemetery at Eleusis 190
12.3. Plan and cross sections of a typical Mycenaean chamber tomb 192
12.4. Distribution of the Mycenaean chamber tombs at Prosymna by period of construction 193
12.5. Plan of the Late Helladic IIIC chamber tomb cemetery at Perati 194
12.6. The Submycenaean 'Pompeion' cemetery in the Kerameikos at Athens 196
13.1. Tumulus at Ayos Ioannis Papoulia, Messenia 203
13.2. Multiple-tholos mound at Kaminia, Messenia 204
13.3. Scale in chamber and tholos tombs at Mycenae 206
13.4. Clustering of tombs at Nichoria, Messenia 209
14.1. Woolley's sketch of tomb 789, British Museum 229
14.2. Woolley's sketch of tomb 1050, British Museum 230
14.3. Woolley's sketch of tomb 1054, British Museum 231
15.1. The Maya Area, showing important sites 238
15.2. The subpyramid burial vault of Janaab Pakal of Palenque, with the carved sarcophagus lid raised to show the inner lid of the fish-shaped cavity containing the corpse 239
15.3. The carved lid of Janaab Pakal's sarcophagus, showing the deceased ruler as a youth rising from (or falling into) the jaws of the Underworld 240
15.4. Aerial view of part of the Cuello site from the northwest during the 1980 excavations, showing Platform 34, centre, and Platform 39 under vegetation at upper left 243
15.5. The Cuello Main Trench from the south, with the early Middle Preclassic Str. 326, ca. 900–800 BC, exposed in the foreground and penetrated by a later grave 244
15.6. Cuello Burial 186 246
15.7. Cuello Mass Burial I, ca. 400 BC, detail showing remains including a skull with unhealed frontal puncture (at right) and a partial humerus (in the pottery vessel at left) and a (probably) deer long bone carved with the woven-mat (pop) motif 248
15.8. Cuello Burial 10, 450–350 BC 249
15.9. Cuello Burial 79, part of Mass Burial II, in a semi-recumbent position with crossed legs 250
15.10. A cut and perforated human frontal bone, perhaps part of a ‘skull mask’ for ancestor veneration 252
15.11. Pendant cut from a human parietal, with openwork eyes and mouth, found on the chest of Burial 160 252
15.12. Depiction of Sika deer, granaries, and human on burial jars 260
15.13. Dotaku bronze bells with human, animal, and insect depictions 261
15.14. Depiction of a human figure with a head decoration and a weapon (possibly halberd) and a shield on a Dotaku bronze bell-shaped clay implement from Kawayoriyoshihara, Saga prefecture 262
15.15. Distribution of jar burials with Chinese grave goods or iron weapons 264
15.16. Human figures depicted without facial features, but apparently with a handle-attached halberd and a shield held in their hands, inscribed on pots, dating from Yayoi IV 265
15.17. Temporal change of the Dohoko bronze spearhead and the Dotaku bronze bell 267
15.18. Stone artefact inferred to have been excavated from the Tatetsuki tumulus of Late Yayoi V 268
15.19. Sendoyama site and its residential segments 269
16.10. The location of the Japanese archipelago in East Asia (a) and ancient provinces as ‘nodes’ networked though exchange activities and interaction (b) 270
16.11. Depictions of tattooed or painted faces in the Middle and Late Yayoi and Early Kofun periods 272
16.12. Hashihaka (Hashinakayama) tumulus 273
16.13. Clay cylindrical vessels (Haniwa) decorated with characteristic complex curvilinear band motifs 273
16.14. The placement of different categories of artefacts with distinct symbolic meanings: the Yukinoyama tumulus 275
17.1. Map of Southeast Asia showing the location of the sites discussed in the text 281
17.2. The reconstructed genealogy of two descent groups at Khok Phanom Di, showing individuals with a precondylar tubercle 282
17.3. The second to the sixth mortuary phases at Khok Phanom Di 284
17.4. Khok Phanom Di, burial 15, a woman wearing more than 120,000 shell beads 285
17.5. The mortuary building from Khok Phanom Di, mortuary phase 6 286
17.6. Ban Na Di, burial 28, a male jar burial from Neolithic phase 1 287
17.7. The layout of the Bronze Age cemetery of Ban Non Wat over the five phases, 1000–420 BC 288
17.8. Ban Non Wat burial 106, BA2, showing reburied human bones and a pool of red ochre 289
17.9. Ban Non Wat burial 532, BA2 289
17.10. The layout of the Iron Age phase 1 cemetery of Ban Non Wat 291
17.11. The layout of the four Iron Age mortuary phases at Noen U-Loke 292
17.12. Two elite males from IA3 Noen U-Loke: burial 69 on the left has four bronze belts, burial 14 has three, together with 150 bronze bangles 293
17.13. Temple mausolea of Angkorian kings 296
18.1. Associative mnemonic enchainment 309
19.1. Gold thread jade suite (jinlü yuyi 䞥㓩⥝㸷), Han Dynasty, from Mancheng, Hebei Province 316
19.2. Jade cicada (yuhan) in the Baiyinchanghan burial of the Xinglongwa Culture, Inner Mongolia 316
19.3. Jade dragon, Hongshan Culture, Sanxingtala site, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia 317
19.4. Jade hooked cloud-shaped ornaments, Hongshan Culture, Narisita site, Balinyouqi, Inner Mongolia 318
19.5. Jade burial of Hongshan Culture, No. 1 tomb of the No. 1 stone mound at the No. 5 location at the Niuheliang site, Liaoning Province 319
19.6. Jade burial of Songze Culture, No. 90 tomb, Donghansun site, Jianging province 320
19.7. Jade burial of lingtitan cemetery, No. 23 tomb, 2007, Hanshan, Anhui province 320
19.9. The No. 20 tomb, Fanshan, Zhejiang Province. 321
19.10. The largest Jade cong with carved designs of supernatural figures with animal faces, from Fanshan cemetery of Zhejiang Province 322
19.11. Jade burial found in the Central Plains with human sacrifice, Qingliangsi Cemetery in Ruicheng, Shanxi province 322
19.12. The No. 5 tomb at Xiaotun, Anyang, Henan Province 323
19.13. Jade face covers (eye masks) 323
19.15. ‘Jade suits’ (nine orifices seals), Han Dynasty, tomb of Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province 325
20.1. Map of the southeastern Ural Mountains showing location of middle Bronze Age fortified settlements (black dots) and identified late prehistoric copper mines (black stars) 329
20.2. Aerial photo of Solntse II cemetery showing fenced contemporary Muslim cemetery and prehistoric kurgan mounds surrounding it (photo taken from the north, looking south) 330
20.3. Plan of Solntse II cemetery complex 331
20.4. Left, Eponymous Sintashta settlement and Sintashta Mogil’nik (SM) mortuary complex indicating graves with evidence of chariot vehicles, right, Grave 30 from SM cemetery showing wheel impressions of chariot vehicle, cheek pieces, and associated weaponry 332
ILLUSTRATIONS

20.5. Burial of adult male from Krivoe Ozero cemetery, Kurgan 10, Burial Pit 3 336
20.6. Top, Soviet period air photo of Stepnoye settlement and associated kurgan cemetery; centre, bubble plot of copper readings (measured in parts per million through HHpXRF analyser) across Stepnoye settlement area based on a 10 m grid; bottom, grid sampling with HHpXRF analyser 338
20.7. Sintashta plate slag showing form and underside impression made by copper ingot 339
20.8. Relative abundance of alloy from the Stepnoye cemetery by alloy types and chronological periods 341
20.9. Relative consumption trends of each type of copper alloy in mass (g) at the Stepnoye cemeteries 341
20.10. Stepnoye 7, Burial 17 illustrating ‘face to face’ burial of male and female (S-2 and S-3) with additional female skeleton (S-1) and grave goods including copper battle axes, ‘necklace’, headdress and pottery 342
20.11. Left, composite headdress from Stepnoye 7, Burial Pit 17; right, composite ornament, perhaps to frame the face 342
21.1. The Wendat ‘feast of the dead’ 356
21.2. Moatfield Ossuary, late thirteenth century AD 357
21.3. Intact bundle within the Moatfield Ossuary 358
21.4. Flow chart for a chaîne opératoire of post-mortem bodily treatments 359
21.5. Artist’s rendering of a typical Ontario Iroquoian flexed primary burial 365
21.6. Artist’s rendering of a typical Ontario Iroquoian ‘complex’ intra-mural bundle burial, containing incomplete secondary remains of multiple individuals 365
21.7. Frequencies of aged individuals interred at Iroquoian sites in southern Ontario by burial context, stage, and type 366
22.1. A Naqada IIC burial from Mahasna containing a body encircled by pottery 374
22.2. Map of Cemeteries B and U, Umm el-Qa’ab, Abydos 376
22.3. Map of the tombs of the First Dynasty rulers at Abydos 378
22.4. An above-ground funerary stela from around the tomb of Den 378
23.1. Sūpā at Andher, near Sanchi (second century BC) 383
23.2. Distribution of urban centres and Buddhist sites in ancient India 384
23.3. Sanchi Survey Project study area: site distribution 393
23.4. Sanchi Survey Project study area: Buddhist sites and rock-shelters 394
23.5. Andher stūpa from below 396
23.6. Monastery platform at Morel Khurd 398
24.1. A deceased Inka ruler being carried on a litter 405
24.2. The Inka empire, Tawantinsuyu, at the time of the Spanish invasion of 1532, showing the road system, the main provincial centres, and (inset) the four parts (suyu) 406
24.3. Drawing of living descendants making offerings to their deceased ancestors in the southeastern part of the Inka empire (Kollasuyu) 412
Tables

2.1. Species and observed responses to dead conspecifics

2.2. Behaviours seen in wild chimpanzees, dolphins, and elephants in response to dead conspecifics, under the realms of 'communication', 'social theatre', and 'morbidity'

4.1. Indirect ¹⁴C radiocarbon ages of Upper Palaeolithic burials

4.2. Direct ¹⁴C radiocarbon ages of Upper Palaeolithic burials

6.1. Table of burials at WF16

7.1. Chronological table for Ecuador, Peru, and Chile

8.1. Ability of prehistoric inhabitants to register sea level change

10.1. Colour use on corpses in southern Nigeria

11.1. Recuay subterranean funerary buildings

11.2. Burial spaces and group affiliations, Otuco, Cajatambo

13.1. Phases and dates in the second millennium BC Aegean

14.1. South Mesopotamian chronology

20.1. Table illustrating regional chronologies and archaeological culture phases

20.2. Comparison of archaeological materials from the middle Bronze Age settlement of Arkaim and the late Bronze Age settlement of Gorny

20.3. Metal artefact inventory recovered from the Stepnoye (MBA) and Stepnoye VII (LBA) cemeteries analysed with HHpXRF instrumentation

20.4. Mass (g) of the metalwork from the Stepnoye cemetery excavations by dominant alloy and by relative cultural phase (metal objects noted as 'Bronze Age' come from burial contexts where relative dating was not established)

20.5. Data showing the consumption trends of different alloy types at the Stepnoye cemetery split among ornaments, tools, and weapons (g)

20.6. Models used to characterize the nature of Sintashta metal production and use

21.1. Non-ossuary interments from Late Woodland southern Ontario from Early Iroquoian (AD 900–1280) sites, demonstrating variation of burial contexts, stages, and positions with individual age and sex

21.2. Non-ossuary interments from Late Woodland southern Ontario from Middle Iroquoian (AD 1280–1400) sites, demonstrating variation of burial contexts, stages, and positions with individual age and sex

22.1. Absolute and relative periods for early Egypt
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Preface

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone;
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.


Death provides archaeology with much of its raw material, and publications dealing with the archaeology of burial certainly already exist. But there has been little emphasis in them upon the emergence of death as a concept in early times, and insufficient on the different ways that death is used in human societies in a manner that favours the formation of communities, and of social hierarchies, and sometimes the creation of divinities.

The present volume seeks to move such considerations to the fore, drawing upon the papers prepared for the symposium held at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge from 11–14 April 2012. The papers, circulated before the meeting, were discussed after brief oral presentations. The revised papers are published here together with the three discussion papers that followed.

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João Zilhão was unable to attend the meeting in person and his paper was introduced by Francesco d’Errico, while that of Li Shui Chong was kindly presented by Xinyi Liu. The editors are grateful also to the McDonald Institute for its hospitality, and to Patricia Duff, Evi Margaritis, Magda Matczak, and Paula Pugsley for their assistance at the meeting.