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Sarah Tarlow

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the late seventeenth century, an elderly Quaker widow called Priscilla Moe was put in prison because she refused to pay a fine for attending a Quaker meeting on the Isle of Wight. Priscilla, weak and unwell, died in prison. The following day, her friends came to take her body for burial according to their principles – in unconsecrated ground and with minimal ceremony – but they were turned away without her corpse. She was instead buried “in a Christian manner”, at the order of the town governor, “with so many Ceremonies and Circumstances of [the Established Church’s] own, prayers and other Acts of such like Devotion, into hallowed and consecrated Ground” (Croese 1696: 180). Priscilla’s friends were terribly upset that her body was subjected to what they saw as the ostentatious and ritualistic burial rites of the established church. They had their own burial ground where Friends’ bodies could be interred in unmarked graves, eschewing the conventions of west–east burial which they would have preferred to use. Yet the treatment of Priscilla’s dead body had become the focus of contestation for a group of religious dissenters and their enemies. Gerard Croese, the seventeenth-century historian of Quakerism from whom we hear this anecdote, was surprised at the strength of Quaker feeling on this matter, given that “according to their Confession the Dead have no sense or feeling, neither is it any matter where they rot” (1696: 181). It seemed instead to him that the Isle of Wight Quakers had “so abhorred the superstition of others, as to favour another Superstition”.

It was not just Quakers in early modernity whose attitudes towards the dead body appeared contradictory to both contemporaries and us. If the body was insensible, why did it matter where or how it was treated? What did early modern people really

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believe about the dead body? This book addresses that question through examining multiple and often incompatible practices and discourses that surrounded the newly dead body.

The research on which this book is built was funded by the Leverhulme Trust as part of a major research initiative examining changing beliefs about the body. My part of the project looks at beliefs relating to the dead human body in early modern and modern Britain and Ireland. By training, I am an archaeologist – that is to say, my Ph.D. is in archaeology and I teach in an archaeology department. The contribution of archaeology to our knowledge of early modern beliefs about the body has not been great up to now. But the archaeology of the last 500 years has become quite exciting and even fashionable in the past 10 years. Increasing numbers of students at all levels are choosing to study this period which is rich in material remains and historical context. In addition, much, if not most, archaeological excavation carried out in Britain and Ireland today relates to historically recent periods, and there is now a large quantity of grey literature on post-medieval archaeology. As yet, however, there is little synthetic literature on any aspect of the period for the student, scholar or interested person to look at. Post-medieval mortuary practices have inspired little interpretive work, and the archaeology of death in this period does not feature at all in recent overviews of later historical archaeology (e.g. Hall and Silliman 2006; Hicks and Beaudry 2006). Zoe Crossland, Ania Cherryson and I have tried to address this problem – at least in a preliminary way – by collating an extensive gazetteer of archaeologically excavated sites in Britain and Ireland containing post-medieval burials and writing a descriptive survey of the evidence. The publication of this part of the research (Cherryson, Crossland and Tarlow forthcoming) also forms part of the background to this book. However, in any project looking at the post-medieval period, the researcher is blessed with numerous sources of evidence which far exceed the traditional subject matter of any single discipline. Therefore, the evidence of belief considered here is not just derived from archaeological research. Other kinds of discourses are and were equally important in defining and illustrating beliefs about bodies in this period. Poetry and drama, scientific writing, state and local legislation, religious tracts and folk practice were all significant kinds of discourse, and an adequate discussion of belief over the last 500 years needs to be aware of all of them. A problem of institutional structures of academic research generally means that the different kinds of belief discourse brought together here are normally analysed separately by scholars in different traditions: the development of anatomy by historians of science; the nature of bodily resurrection by theologians; the form of memorial monuments has been the preserve of art historians and metaphors of the body have belonged to scholars of English literature. This study of belief and the dead body is therefore intentionally inter-disciplinary as a means of highlighting and focusing on areas of overlap and contradiction between different traditions of practice and discourse.

This book studies some of the most important belief discourses about the human body, particularly the dead human body, in the post-Reformation period. In this introduction, I outline some key concepts, including the most challenging and perhaps also the most important: belief. Because different belief discourses in the

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past map quite neatly onto the organisation of academic disciplines in the present, the key problem of how incompatible and even incommensurable beliefs can exist in a society has not often been remarked upon or explored. For example, the rise of anatomical dissection can be studied by historians of science for whom the process relates to the development of modern understandings of physiology, pathology and medicine, by social historians for whom it is part of the history of punishment and a means by which power and class relations are structured, by literary critics for whom it provides a reservoir of imagery and conceit that could be used by writers, by theologians for whom it was a way of knowing God and by art historians for whom it related to the depiction of the human form. Each of those disciplines examines the discourses that relate to its own focus of enquiry. But the separation of these analytical traditions obscures the way these kinds of thought relate to each other and, equally important, sidesteps analytical problems presented by contradictions between them. Efforts were sometimes made to explain or incorporate the beliefs of one tradition within another so that poets might use the latest scientific knowledge as a way of meditating on God as John Donne did, for example (Sawday 1995), or anatomists might introduce their texts with some reflections on divine omnipotence. Moreover, traditions of belief in the past were usually context specific. Thus, in a theological tract a man might say that the fate of the body after death is a matter of indifference, the soul being the immortal and valuable part, but at the same time may regard post-mortem dissection of the body as a dreadful fate and a suitable part of the repertoire of judicial punishment. To take another example, horror of decaying flesh is evident in the changing treatments of the body and the growth of non-utilitarian embalming (i.e. preserving corpses even when they are not needed for research or a delayed funeral), but at the same time, the putrefying remains of executed criminals suspended in gibbets which dotted the British and Irish countryside were the focal point of fairs and excursions (Whyte 2003). One of the central aims of this book is to find a way of thinking about the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory and incoherent practices and texts. The value of the concept of 'belief discourse', outlined in this chapter, is important here.

Death

Many researchers across the sciences, social sciences and humanities have contributed to the study of death in their own disciplines and to the inter-disciplinary area of 'death studies'. In Britain, there is an annual inter-disciplinary meeting and dedicated journal (*Mortality*). Much scientific and sociological study of death has direct applications in policy and practice relating to the care of people facing death or dealing with its aftermath. The ethical implications of such practices are considered by philosophers, theologians and others. In the arts and humanities, more emphasis has been put on elucidating different cultural attitudes to death across space and time, as evident in cultural productions, such as art and literature, or through direct and indirect observations, such as historical documents and ethnographic studies.

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Death, responses to death and treatment of the dead are canonical areas of archaeological study. From its inception, the discipline of archaeology has relied heavily on materials recovered from funerary contexts. For some periods, such as the early medieval period in Britain, the bulk of archaeological evidence comes from graves. The spectacular tombs and monuments of ancient people aroused the curiosity of early antiquarians, and material objects recovered from grave deposits form the core of many museum collections. Grave goods even acted as ciphers for races or peoples in the past, as 'Beaker Folk', for example, were tracked across the continent by their distinctive funerary culture. In later years, the bodies of the dead were studied for what they could tell us about health, activities, demography and race, and later the practices of burial were analysed as clues to past social and symbolic systems.

It is possible to divide the archaeological study of death in a number of ways. The most traditional one is the tripartite division into schools of thought: first a culture history phase, where burial practices and goods were indexical of past cultures; then a processual one elucidating general principles that would relate features of a society's burial practices to its degree of social complexity and kind of organisation; and finally a post-processual period. Post-processualists were interested in what burial practices could tell us about power, ideology and cultural meaning. The utility of this division, as well as the variation it masks and the shared areas of enquiry it fails to recognise, has recently been critiqued by Chapman (2008), who suggests that analysis of mortuary archaeology by period of study, national and linguistic tradition or epistemology might sometimes be a more useful way of dividing the field. Good summaries of the history of archaeological approaches to mortuary contexts are Chapman and Randsborg (1981) and Rakita et al. (2005).

Early work on the archaeology of death often focused on 'grave goods' found in association with the body. In fact, every aspect of disposal of the body is interesting and potentially informative, including the position and orientation of the body and the grave, its form and location and, of course, the human remains themselves. Grave goods can tell us about economic relationships and also about status within a community, as well as how gender and age were understood in particular contexts. Grave goods, along with other features of the burial, may provide clues to a society's eschatological beliefs. By examining the body using scientific techniques, including anatomical examination and chemical and DNA analysis, we can find out probable age and sex of the individuals, what they ate, what diseases and accidents they may have suffered, who they might have been related to and perhaps even where they grew up. Heinrich Harke (2002: 340) has noted a recent move in archaeology from a focus on life in the past, which can be inferred from study of the burial and the human remains themselves, to death in the past, so that the actual mortuary context is more than just incidental to the recovery of archaeological material. Processual archaeologists of death tended to see the preoccupation of anthropological and historical work on the emotional and symbolic elaboration of death as indirectly relevant to archaeologists. Their position was that archaeologists needed to know about these things to screen them out, to correct skewed pictures presented by "devious societies" (Chapman 1987: 205) or to relate the observed

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mortuary practice to truth about the organisation or structure of the society which produced it. But in recent years, many archaeologists have chosen to see things such as ritual and religion, symbolic and structural meaning and emotion and experience as being of interest themselves.

The Sources for This Study

The focus of this book is the cultural history of death and the dead body. Evidence is drawn from archaeology and from a range of textual sources. The questions asked are about death rather than about what burial and the study of the body itself can tell us about social organisation in a past society. I have not attempted to study demography or pathology of past populations from the osteological evidence, concentrating instead on the post-mortem treatment of the corpse. Human remains can be valuable sources of evidence about many aspects of life in the past, but the archaeology discussed in this book treats the disposal of the body as the focus of enquiry rather than a source of evidence for other questions.

The archaeological sources in this book are largely details of the disposal of the body itself, although features of the memorial monuments and cemetery context are also sometimes considered. The history of commemoration in Britain over the post-medieval period is much better understood now than it was a few years ago, thanks to works such as those of Finch (2000), Tarlow (1999a) and Mytum (2000, 2004). Our knowledge of the excavated archaeology of burial is currently far less complete, although good publications of single sites (e.g. Reeve and Adams 1993; Brickley and Miles 1999; Adams and Colls 2007; McKinley 2008; Miles and White 2008; Miles et al. 2008) are now augmented by a major survey and gazetteer (Cherryson, Crossland and Tarlow forthcoming). To date, however, there is no sustained attempt to analyse and explain the differences between the below- and above-ground archaeology of death, such as the different rates of change and range of variation in commemorative and burial practices.

There remains considerable scope for archaeological studies that unite commemorative evidence with details of the preparation and deposition of the corpse. Mytum (2007) laments the general failure of archaeologists to bring together above-ground commemoration and below-ground archaeology in their studies of post-medieval burial practices. Some sites, such as St Pancras, London, have produced both human remains and memorial monuments, although the memorials from that site do not relate to excavated remains (Emery 2006). To my knowledge, there is no published site in Britain or Ireland where large numbers of skeletons have been clearly related to extant commemorative monuments. Only Mytum's own paper (2007) comparing rates of change in decorative motifs on gravestones and in coffin fittings unites the two kinds of evidence. In his examination of coffin fittings and memorial monuments, Mytum found that below-ground material culture was much more conservative and changed little over long periods, whereas the design of standing monuments was more susceptible to changing fashions which could spread rapidly. He suggests that because coffin fittings were chosen at a time of

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stress and under time pressure, undertakers probably assumed greater control than relatives of the deceased in decision making. Monuments, by contrast, were commissioned in a more leisurely way and with a greater eye to fashion. In addition, the memorial monument would be on display far longer than the coffin, and therefore a greater investment in money and care would be made in the selection and creation of a monument. As this book discusses, burial practices in most of Britain and Ireland changed slowly over the period examined here, and the most radical changes (the replacement of urban parish graveyards by municipal cemeteries; the rise of cremation) did not occur until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Change in memorial monuments, however, is easier to periodise. Trends in material, position, commemoration style, nature of epitaph, phrasing and language are all observable, and variation can usually be understood chronologically. By contrast, variations in the use of particular coffin type, burial attire and location of burial occur synchronically as well as diachronically.

Until recently, the below-ground archaeology of death in the post-medieval period was less developed than the archaeology of standing commemorative monuments. In 2003, Roberts and Cox lamented that “only a handful” of post-medieval mortuary sites had been archaeologically excavated, compared to the dozens commercially cleared by cemetery clearance contractors (see Reeve and Cox [1999]) for a fuller discussion of this issue); they also complained that at the time of writing, few of the excavated sites had been properly published and most of those published had not been comprehensively analysed (Roberts and Cox 2003: 289). In fact, Cherryson, Crossland and Tarlow (forthcoming) found more than 600 post-medieval mortuary sites in Britain and Ireland, but it is true that the levels of publication for most of these are far lower than for earlier periods and only a very small number are well known and accessible to students of the period. However, several well-excavated and studied sites have been published in the last five years, and the situation is definitely looking up.

Because clear chronological trends are more difficult to observe and interpret in below-ground archaeology than in memorials, this book is structured by belief rather than by period. Within each tradition of belief discourse, however, there were trajectories and events that changed beliefs or, at any rate, changed the way people expressed their beliefs over time.

The period studied in this book is early modernity – from the sixteenth-century religious reformations of Europe until the early eighteenth century. However, sometimes the best evidence we have for particular practices or attitudes comes from the later eighteenth or even the nineteenth century. Where that evidence casts useful light on the subjects of study, I have included it despite its later date.

The Body, and the Dead Body

‘The body’ has been a hot topic in the humanities and social sciences for about twenty years. The philosophical and theoretical recognition that ‘the body’ is not universally experienced and described the same way has enabled the development

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of traditions of study that analyse cultural meanings that shape the body in various contexts.

Historically, in Western thought the body has often been considered half of a complementary duality (Haila 2000). In medieval and early modern philosophical thought, the body was completed by the soul – an explicitly divine and eternal counterpart to the earthly and finite flesh. Enlightenment thought often preferred to contrast the body with the mind, emphasising human capacity for reason and, again, mastery of the flesh. The mind is a more humanistic, but not atheistic, ruler of the body than is the soul. Rather, early twentieth-century thinkers tended to speak of ‘consciousness’ – the locus of awareness with which the body is in a more equal relationship. In more secular, modern times the order of priority is often reversed – the body considered the primary fact and consciousness, an overlay upon a universal body. To complete the history, post-modern body theory renders problematic all dualisms of previous centuries, breaking down and blurring divisions between biology and culture, between male and female, between human and non-human and between living beings and machines.

The significance of the cyborg or the transgendered individual is not relevant to the history of the body considered here, but the critique of binary understandings is important to the theme of this book. When the body is contrasted with the mind or consciousness, as half of a two-part constitution of self, the unspoken paradigm is the opposition of nature (body, biology) and culture (awareness, ‘nurture’). Such an analysis supposes the body is capable of existing outside of and prior to culture. This idea has been critiqued most cogently in recent years by Ingold (2000, 2003), who discussed the impossibility of separating and prioritising ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘culture’ in this way. For the early modern period, however, it is not the mind but the *soul* that complements the body, and the soul stands in a different relationship to the physical self. The soul is neither cultural nor environmental, but divine. It could be argued that recent body histories underplay the significance of theology (Shaw 1997; Smith 1997) and do not recognise sufficiently that early modern souls were not the same as modern minds. Although modernist thinkers saw the body as essential and the mind as a cultural superposition upon it, in early modern thought it was the soul rather than the body which was the more stable and universal fact, as explored in Chapter 2.

In the early 1990s, sociological studies began to discuss the way the body in modernity is understood as a ‘project’ (Giddens 1991, 1992 and especially Shilling 1993), a malleable, self-constructed form which is made to demonstrate such modern virtues as discipline, youth, vigour and so on. By contrast, a body that exhibits age, slackness, illness or ugliness, especially in the case of female bodies (Wolf 1990), is culturally devalued. In the constitution of the modern ‘individual’, then, the body is a key referent.

At the same time, the growing influence of feminist thinkers across the humanities, the intellectual move away from high-level explanation towards localised and contextual experiences and the maturity of constructivist thinking (i.e. questioning the universality of many aspects of human life and experience that had previously been assumed to be ‘natural’ and prior to any cultural ‘overlay’) all affected academic

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approaches to ‘the body’ (Hamilakis et al. 2002: 2–4). In the 1990s these related intellectual developments were promoted across many disciplines to a paradigm of ‘embodiment’ – the experiential aspects of having/being a body. The influence of embodiment theory was also felt in archaeology, with emphasis on sensory experiences in the past (e.g. Hamilakis 2002; Houston and Taube 2000; Morris 2004; Watson and Keating 1999) and the great popularity, in British archaeology at least, of phenomenological approaches to landscape (discussed by, among others, Brück 2005; Johnson 2007; and Fleming 2007). However, for those of us studying death and the dead body, embodiment may not be the most useful approach. The bodies we study are no longer subjects. The dead do not experience the world as embodied selves; instead they are the objects of others’ interpretation. For archaeologists they are also the vehicles of evidence that can help us build our knowledge of human practices, relationships and societies in the past. For this reason Sofaer (2006) emphasises the materiality of the body rather than ‘embodiment’ as a useful foundation for research. We approach bodies from the outside – bodies as material culture, in Sofaer’s phrase. While it is undoubtedly valuable and necessary to consider that those bodies have been sentient, thoughtful, physical and experiencing subjects, our analytical approach to them is based on the material study of human remains. It is therefore the *material* rather than the *experiencing* body that requires more theoretical consideration in our discipline. This is not to say that the embodiment paradigm is not useful; its utility depends on the focus of study. The recent switch in archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological studies from examining ‘subsistence’ to the cultural practices of ‘consumption’, for example, has benefited from an approach that makes us consider what it means to eat and drink. Similarly, a number of archaeological theorists over the last ten years or so have tried to emphasise the importance of human experience in the past (Meskell 1999; Tarlow 1999a; Nilsson Stutz 2003; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005); experience has sensual, bodily meanings as well as other aspects like emotions (e.g. Tarlow 2000; Inomato 2006) and ways of thinking (e.g. Ortman 2000; Bradley 2005).

In this book, it is the body, as understood and practised upon by others, rather than the experiencing self that is the focus of our analysis. In a period where the agency and individuality of the self was expressed in large measure through the body, the impotence of the dead body – and its physical decay – proved particular crises for understanding the self. One key question considered here will be how far the individuation of the body survived death: that is, what do the writings and practices (the ‘belief discourses’) of the early modern period reveal about the dead body and the self? Was the body, when deprived of the animating divine spark of the soul, effectively meaningless meat? Or was it a mnemonic of the person to be used in commemorative practice? Or was it a metaphor of the self, exhibiting characteristics of the individual it had been? Or was it actually still the same person, even endowed with sentience, agency and power? As I will try to explain, the body, in the various belief discourses that surrounded it, was all of these.

Hallam et al. develop interesting implications of this multiplicity of understandings for the dying, dead and bereaved in contemporary Britain. In writing of

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the dead, they pick out categories of “vegetables” and “vampires” (1999: 1–2). “Vegetables” are persons who are biologically alive but in some senses socially ‘dead’. They include many inhabitants of residential institutions, whose social roles have been reduced as their interaction with a broad social world is progressively curtailed. People suffering from slow terminal diseases, for example, may be sequestered from daily life, circumscribed in their choices of occupation, food, clothing and so on, may lose personal property and play a much smaller role in the conversations and plans of others. “Vampires”, by contrast, are those whose social life continues beyond the point of biological death. This might include not only those whose death has had such an impact that the bereaved maintain a bedroom or set a place for them at meals, but also those whose opinions, creations and tastes continue even after death to shape the living. “Vegetables”, on the other hand, will be hard to see in the archaeological or historical past: by definition they are those whose footprints are half-erased even before death.

While “vegetable” and “vampire” are lively and attention-grabbing shorthand terms for the kind of personhood that arises when biological death is uncoupled from social expiry, the terms are too crude to capture the complex relationships existing between the living and the dead in early modernity.

There is abundant evidence in early modernity, however, that the recently dead had a continuing and active presence in the world of the living. The dead person, and the dead body, was a source of power that could be beneficent or dangerous. As such, terms like ‘vampire’ have connotations that are probably too negative. The newly dead body was not one from which the force of life was entirely absent – in fact that life force could be channelled towards socially useful or morally appropriate purposes. By switching our focus to the body itself we can trace the ongoing social role and cultural meaning of deceased individuals, not only in the ways they are remembered by the living but also through the very materiality of their bodies. Whether sought out as a source of medical power or retained and treated as the object of love, punishment, mockery or fascination, the dead body participated in a variety of social situations in the post-medieval period.

Hallam et al. criticise the fashionable ‘embodiment’ paradigm for its inability to help us understand frail or dead bodies and its failure to consider ‘disembodiment’, promoting a notion “that the death of the body means that the individual has ceased to be” (1999: 8). When the focus of study is on dying and dead bodies embodiment, as discussed previously, is not a helpful paradigm; the context requires us to rethink ideas of agency and self-determination. As produced through the dead body, power and identity require us to pay more attention to intersubjectivity and collective understandings than to internalised personal experience (Hallam et al. 1999: 19–20). As archaeologists, encountering bodies mainly in the form of skeletal remains, we also need to develop theories of the body which take account of its materiality.

A key starting point for the consideration of the social and cultural role of the dead person, then, is that people are socially constituted. People gain their social identity in the way they are acknowledged by others. I am a university academic

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because I am treated as such: students come to my lectures and write things down; the university assigns me an office, a computer and a salary; I am allowed to write books and papers and a university press will publish them. Thus, an identity is as much enabled by other people's practices as generated out of some personal core.

This point has been made most forcefully by contemporary feminist theorists. A woman gains her culturally female identity not through any inborn feminine essence, but because she is understood and treated by others as a woman. The same applies to other sorts of cultural identity: not only gender but also age identity, family position and social statuses like criminal, bishop, eccentric and so on.

The same applies to those we would call 'dead'. Because social existence is relational, social existence is not co-terminous with life. While others remain to treat you as a person, you retain some personal identity. This means that when you die, the corpse that is buried is still in significant ways 'you', that your identity does not leave your body with your last breath. This is at odds with two philosophical views of personal identity: first that identity is psychological – i.e. you are not you unless you are thinking, so before birth or in a persistent vegetative state you are not yourself but some other entity altogether; and the biologism which holds that personhood is identical with the biological life of the body (Scarre 2007). Adopting a relational view of personhood and social existence means stepping away from the very atomised, individualised modern understandings of self and recognising that a person is more than a single living, conscious body.

Archaeologically and ethnographically there are numerous examples of the ways in which people actively participate in the social and cultural life of their community after the moment of death. We might think of the Malagasy dead, described by Maurice Bloch (1971), or the deceased Incas who continued to own property and participate physically in processions and festivals (Sillar 1992). Even in less clear-cut cases where the dead body is not itself physically involved in ritual, the wishes, attitudes and personal attributes of the death person are often still significant in the rituals surrounding death and remembrance. Personal relationships do not cease at death. Specific and emotional factors continue to structure relationships even after the death of one party. Igor Kopytoff (1971) describes relations between the living and the dead among the Suku of southwestern Congo as an extension of the hierarchical customs of respect and deference that structure social relations among the living. People will go and visit the grave of the dead, pour the deceased's favourite kinds of food and drink into a hole there, speak to them as one would speak to a living elder – a conversational monologue including questions, appeals, rebukes, gossip and so on. Kopytoff's observations suggest that we should not assume that the line between living and dead is as sharply drawn in non-Western cultures as we are accustomed to in our own. A detailed study of early modern beliefs about the dead body in Britain and Ireland shows that even Western attitudes were not straightforward.

What this means when we are thinking about the death of the body is first that the dead body is not as inert as sometimes represented. It is an archaeological commonplace that it is the living who bury the dead; this particular aphorism is used