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## Death, memory and material culture

In a Field of old Walsingham, not many moneths past, were digged up between fourty and fifty Vrnnes, deposited in a dry sandy soile, not a yeard deep, nor farre from one another: Not all strictly of one figure, but most answering these described: Some containing two pounds of bones, distinguishable in skulls, ribs, jawes, thigh-bones, and teeth, with fresh impressions of their combustion. Besides the extraneous substances, like peeces of small boxes, or combes handsomely wrought, handles of small brasse instruments, brazen nippers and in one some kinde of Opale.  
(Browne 1658: 21–2)

Had they made as good provision for their names, as they had done for their Reliques, they had not so grosly erred in the art of perpetuation. But to subsist in bones, and be but Pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves, a fruitlesse continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as Emblemes of mortall vanities; Antidotes against pride, vain-glory, and madding vices. Pagan vain-glories which thought the world might last for ever had encouragement for ambition and finding not Atropos unto the immortality of their Names, were never damp't with the necessity of oblivion.  
(Browne 1658: 74)

### Introduction

This study begins with two quotations from the 1658 work entitled *Hydrotaphia* by the Norfolk antiquary Sir Thomas Browne. Quoting from Browne's eloquent consideration of mortality and the past inspired by the discovery of some cinerary urns has often been deemed apposite for archaeologists dealing with graves and tombs. For this study, it is so because of the dual significance of Browne's writings for early medieval mortuary archaeology. First, Browne is often attributed with uncovering and describing early medieval graves in Britain for the first time in his account of urns found in the parish of Walsingham in Norfolk. While he wrongly attributed them to the Roman period, Browne was to begin the practice of excavating early medieval graves, describing and illustrating them, and making interpretations as to their date and significance, that has continued to the present day.

Yet there is a second reason Browne's text is significant. Browne was concerned with the significance of the antiquarian discovery of ancient graves for understanding memory. For Browne, graves and ancient monuments were the material manifestations of the futility of remembering. By definition, these newly discovered graves were remains from forgotten times and forgotten people. They had been consigned to oblivion by the passage of time and, as such, had been lost to the memory of their descendants, remaining only as a moral caution against aspirations towards immortality and vanity. The process of antiquarian excavation, as well as the graves that were uncovered at Walsingham, is therefore portrayed by Browne as embodying the misplaced aspirations of ancient people to remember through revering and materialising memories in graves and tombs. In doing so, he is also presumably commenting on the continued post-Reformation emphasis on funerary commemoration in his seventeenth-century England. And yet, Browne is recognising the desire for past people to remember through material culture: from large monuments to modest graves, cinerary urns to portable artefacts.

Thomas Browne and modern archaeologists share both of these aspects in common. In studying the graves, cemeteries, tombs and monuments of the early medieval period (here taken as the period from the fifth century AD following the end of direct Roman rule in Britain, through to the mid-eleventh century when the Norman Conquest of 1066, admittedly somewhat arbitrarily, creates a move into the later Middle Ages), Browne and today's archaeologists share a desire for graves to tell us stories about the past. Yet, like Browne, modern archaeologists are concerned not simply with digging up the graves of the dead: they also aspire to understand the motivations and choices of these past people concerning how they use material culture to commemorate the dead, venerate ancestors, and articulate genealogies and mythologies.

Yet if retaining memories is never easy, so the phenomenon of memory in modern academic research is elusive and difficult to define. Memory is difficult to recognise, since it is a process rather than a fixed entity. Memories are constituted through numerous media: texts, images, stories, songs, rituals and also, importantly for this study, material culture. This is indeed the point where Browne and today's archaeologists might disagree. This is because Browne saw perpetuity in bones and objects to be a 'fallacy', because only in 'names', i.e. in texts and words, was memory thought to reside and be reproduced. However, archaeologists are well-placed to explore the centrality of material culture as both the medium and message of social commemoration in early medieval Britain, operating alongside the spoken and written word. Contrary to the view expressed by Browne, 'names' are not the only way of remembering. Meanwhile, memory need not primarily concern the 'preservation' of memories, fossilising the past in perpetuity and thus achieving immortality. Social memory instead involves the selective remembering and the active forgetting of the past. Social memory is therefore inherently selective, active and performative in nature, and can be mediated by material culture and ritual performances as well as by the written and spoken word.

Throughout human history, the past and its commemoration have been a central concern for individuals and societies attempting to secure and express their perceived

rights, aspirations and identities. Memories of the dead and the past in many cultures define the present. The present in turn defines the future. Memory is therefore not only personal, it can be social. To remember is more than to recall events and places: memory operates in a social context and therefore can be regarded, in part at least, as a collective cultural and social phenomenon (Halbwachs 1992). Equally, memory is not a passive phenomenon. To remember is more than to passively recall events and places. Memory in a social sense is a question of active participation and practice: to participate in bodily acts, to perform in rituals (Connerton 1989).

The early medieval period in Britain (c. AD 400–1100) has left us many different sources of evidence for how memories were retained, but also for how they were invented and reinterpreted over time, as a central element of social and religious life. Yet the potential for archaeological evidence to augment this picture, and the centrality of material culture in the production, reproduction and negotiation of social memories, has tended to be underplayed in studies of social memory in the early Middle Ages.

To redress the imbalance, this book aims to explore the ways in which death and burial provided one important context through which social memories and identities were performed and created in this era of social, political, economic and religious transformation. Incorporating the end of the Roman world and the birth of the Middle Ages, the early medieval period was a time of changing commemorative strategies, some coherent and enduring, others innovative and experimental. Some followed traditions that stretched back into the Roman and prehistoric pasts, others were to continue and develop into the later Middle Ages. This diversity and complexity make the study of early medieval death and burial of key importance in the history of death and society, and makes mortuary archaeology pivotal to any understanding of early medieval societies. In addressing this issue, the aim is to develop a richer understanding of early medieval death and burial. Rather than a synthesis of all data, the study is an exploration of selected case studies. On yet another level, the study attempts to show the importance of developing a theorised and imaginative engagement with the early medieval archaeological record.

To introduce the material, ideas and approach of the present volume, this introduction sets the scene in a number of discrete ways. We begin by providing an outline of the history of studying early medieval burial rites, graves, cemeteries and funerary monuments. Next, the chapter introduces current approaches in mortuary archaeology and their potential for providing new insights into death and burial in the early Middle Ages. This appraisal leads us to consider the potential in applying historical, sociological and anthropological perspectives on death, memory and material culture to early medieval archaeology. From these approaches, an archaeological theory is distilled and developed that regards early medieval mortuary practices as technologies of remembrance and mnemonic performances. In the last two sections, this argument is pursued in relation to the archaeological evidence from a single burial site, namely the wealthy, late seventh-century burial from Swallowcliffe Down in Wiltshire. Illustrating many of the themes developed in subsequent chapters, the data demonstrates how mortuary rituals served as memorable events, and how material

culture was employed in commemorating the dead and the past. The penultimate part explores the broad patterns and developments in mortuary behaviour from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, charting how social memories were produced and reproduced in early medieval societies before and after the Swallowcliffe burial.

Drawing these elements together, it is argued that links between mortuary practices and social memory span traditional divisions between Celt and Saxon, between pagan and Christian, and between Germanic and Insular and Roman influences in early medieval societies. The link between death and memory therefore offers an alternative perspective in the study of early medieval funerary behaviour. In combination, the introduction hopes to demonstrate that a focus on social memory in the investigation and interpretation of early medieval death and burial helps us to see burials and other mortuary contexts as more than quarries for information about the living in the past. Instead, mortuary practices can be conceptualised as strategies for remembering and forgetting. Before developing this argument, we must review the character of early medieval archaeology and the archaeological interpretation of mortuary practices.

### **Death and burial in the early medieval period**

The early medieval period is known to archaeologists through many sources of evidence, from surviving texts and architecture (e.g. Biddle 1986; Carver 1999) down to pot-sherds and pollen grains (e.g. Fyfe & Rippon 2004). Archaeological sites take many forms and include the dwelling-places of early medieval people, from farmsteads and villages, high-status 'manors', fortifications, 'wics' (early markets and trading-places) to towns, minsters, monasteries and (by the end of the period) parish churches. Portable artefacts are derived from many of these sites, from houses, huts, rubbish pits, ditches and wells, and also from deliberate deposits, such as hoards. Few early medieval remains survive as above-ground features, although there is a range of fragmentary elements, such as linear earthworks, stone sculptures and crypts preserved in later church architecture (for introductions to early medieval archaeology, see: Hinton 1990; Reynolds 1999; papers in Wilson 1976). Moreover, much of the character and form of the later medieval landscape itself was formed in this period. The patterns of settlements, fields, routes, boundaries and territories of later centuries can often be shown to owe their roots to the period between the end of Roman Britain and the Norman Conquest that saw dramatic changes to land-use, tenure and economy (e.g. Fyfe & Rippon 2004; Hooke 1999; Rippon 2000). Furthermore, the landscape of early medieval Britain inherited and incorporated elements of the past, including the ruins and monuments of earlier times, such as the ruins of Roman buildings to the burial mounds, ceremonial monuments and hillforts of prehistory. Many of these sites attracted early medieval interest and activity for both ritual and more prosaic reasons (Eaton 2000; Williams 1997).

Among this rich body of archaeological data are burials, cemeteries and mortuary monuments. Indeed, graves have loomed large in the development of early medieval archaeology because they often provide secure contexts for dating and studying early

medieval communities through the evidence their inhabitants left behind – their own bodies, the artefacts placed with them, the structures used to contain them and the monuments raised over them. From such contexts, the history of the early medieval period has often been written and rewritten (recent reviews include Carver 1999; Hadley 2001; Lucy 2000; Lucy & Reynolds 2002). A number of pervasive themes have dominated the interpretation of graves by archaeologists and historians. These have tended to focus on six inter-related themes: (1) the collapse of Roman control and culture; (2) barbarian invasions, including Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century and Scandinavians in the ninth; (3) conversion to Christianity; (4) the formation and development of early medieval kingdoms; (5) the Viking presence and influence; and (to a lesser extent) (6) the Norman Conquest. The burial evidence is often thought to chart this narrative history of the ‘origins’ of medieval society through socio-political fragmentation, ethnogenesis, religious change, socio-political evolution, colonisation from Scandinavia and the Norman take-over.

As we shall see, although archaeologists have had very different approaches to the study of graves, one thing they agree on is that graves are the intentional outcome of mortuary rituals. In the material remains left to us we can glimpse many aspects of early medieval life and attitudes to death, as well as how these ideas and practices changed over time and between localities and regions. Outside the western world, funerary rituals and subsequent ‘ancestral rites’ can be highly visible, theatrical and multi-sensuous series of actions and performances in which material culture can have prominent and profound roles (Metcalf & Huntingdon 1991).

If seen in this way, early medieval graves are not simply an indirect way of finding out about the living in past societies. Graves first and foremost provide direct insight into the responses, attitudes and practices surrounding death. As such, the portrayal of the dead can be devised as intentional statements or ‘discourses’, relating to world-views, ideologies and concepts of personhood, rather than a reflection of living society (see Barrett 1994). Moreover, these statements, often both social and sacred in character, are made to promote ways of thinking and being related to contemporary society, but they are also intended to evoke links with the past and aspirations for the future. They are therefore intended to be memorable in themselves, and mediate the production and reproduction of social memory: how groups envision their pasts and futures, and hence their identities.

If this argument is accepted, then how can we develop archaeological theories for the study of early medieval mortuary practices that help us to approach and explore the relationships between death and memory? Before developing a perspective, it is necessary to review past and current approaches towards early medieval mortuary data.

### **Early medieval mortuary archaeology – new approaches**

Ancient graves, including those of early medieval date, have been uncovered since the Middle Ages itself. Early discoveries were often attributed to the Romans (Browne 1658; Smith 1856). They were first recognised as pertaining to the early Middle Ages by the late eighteenth-century barrow-digger James Douglas (Douglas 1793).

Following his precedent, from the Victorian period early medieval graves discovered during barrow-digging or during agricultural or industrial activities were increasingly reported amidst the pages of the publications of the burgeoning antiquarian and archaeological societies (e.g. Smith 1848; 1856; Wylie 1852). For instance, at Chessell Down on the Isle of Wight the local antiquarian George Hillier excavated part of an early medieval cemetery and illustrated the richest grave (Arnold 1982a; Smith 1868; fig. 1.1). Since these discoveries there has been a tendency to use the burial evidence to compensate for the fragmented and problematic historical and linguistic evidence for the ‘barbarians’ who succeeded Rome, their racial and religious affiliations, and the progress of their conquest and settlement of Britain. Consequently, burials have been used to write the history of peoples, kingdoms and their conversion to Christianity. Developing upon these Victorian precedents, early and mid-twentieth-century approaches took the form of ‘culture-history’: charting the history of tribes and ideas, and their origins, movements and evolution through burial rites and the artefacts contained within graves (Childe 1945; Trigger 1989; see Leeds 1913; 1936; 1945; Myres 1969; 1977).

Alongside these interpretations, the data-set of early medieval burials has continued to grow over the last century, and the range of methods and techniques employed in their study has burgeoned (Dickinson 1980). This applies both to research excavations intended to explore them, as well as ‘rescue’ excavations aimed at recovering them before their destruction by development. Therefore, while the historical evidence for the period has remained static, and can even be regarded as diminishing, since sources once deemed reliable have been increasingly regarded as fanciful myth, the archaeological evidence has dramatically increased (fig. 1.2). This rise of new evidence has enabled new perspectives to be developed in how we interpret early medieval graves. While the primary focus of popular interest in these graves remains the stories they are thought to tell us about the origins of ‘peoples’ such as the ‘Saxons’ or the ‘Picts’, over the last thirty years archaeologists have adopted alternative perspectives from traditional culture-history, witnessing the influence of new theoretical paradigms employed throughout archaeology.

With the ‘New Archaeology’ or ‘processual’ archaeology that became popular both in America and England by the 1970s, the focus changed from using graves to chart the history of peoples and the spread of ideas towards the use of mortuary data to reconstruct social structures and their evolution. In this context, burial evidence was seen as a means of identifying changing social and economic complexity (Binford 1971; Chapman & Randsborg 1980). Early on, difficulties were identified in focusing purely on social stratification and the many problems with its identification (e.g. Brown 1980), and the integration of vertical differentiation in mortuary behaviour with horizontal variation was deemed essential, including age, gender and kinship (e.g. Shennan 1975).

The ‘social’ and ‘economic’ approach applied to burial data by the ‘New Archaeology’ came under sustained criticism during the 1980s by various ‘post-processual’ critiques that focused on the problems with such social analyses. These included the lack of consideration of symbolism, power and ideology in past mortuary

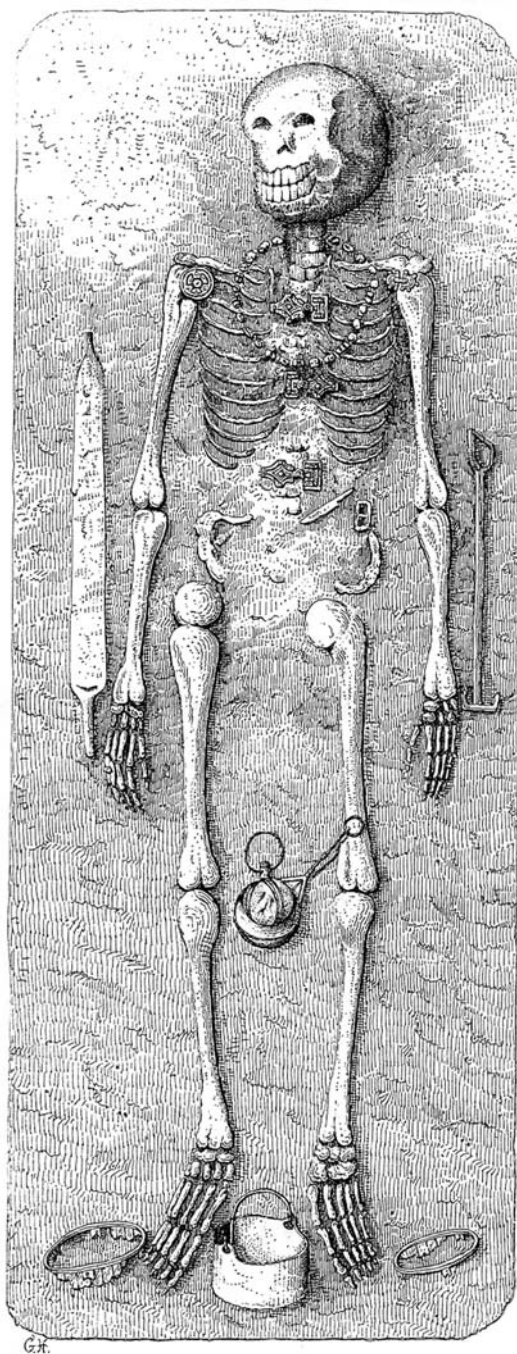


Figure 1.1 Drawing of grave 45 from Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, containing an adult skeleton, furnished with female-gendered artefacts and dating to the late sixth century AD. The grave was uncovered by the Victorian antiquary George Hillier (after Smith 1868).



Figure 1.2 Three seventh-century inhumation graves pictured during excavations directed by Mark Stedman and Nick Stoodley at Shavard's Farm, Meonstoke, Hampshire in 1998 (photo by the author).

contexts. Burials were not a direct reflection of living society or a means of charting directly the 'history' of peoples. The meaningful and 'active' role of burials and the material culture they contain was emphasised, and a more 'contextual' approach was advocated. Rather than a direct window onto social structure, burials have been seen as comparable to written sources in the sense that, although they contain messages, they require an awareness of source criticism to understand them, as well as a self-critical awareness of one's own biases as a reader. With careful consideration, symbolic statements, and the ideologies of which they formed a part, can be inferred from burial contexts (Hodder 1980; Parker Pearson 1982; 1999c; Shanks & Tilley 1982). While initially developed as a critique of the New Archaeology's social approach to burial data and the cross-cultural use of ethnographic analogy, many studies were developed that incorporated post-processual elements within a primarily 'social' study of mortuary evidence (e.g. Carr 1995; Morris 1992).

For early medieval archaeology, processual and post-processual archaeologies have only been slowly and partially adopted (see Austin 1990; Bradley 1987; Carver 1999; Driscoll 1984; 1988; Hedeager 1992a; Moreland 1997; 2001; Pader 1982). Yet early medieval mortuary archaeology has often played a central role in both the processual and post-processual debates about how to read evidence from graves. As a classic 'case study' in which methods and theories can be developed and tested, early medieval burials were deployed in processual and 'social' studies of mortuary



archaeology (e.g. Alcock 1981; Arnold 1980; Härke 1997d; Hedeager 1992a; Ravn 2003; Shephard 1979). They have equally involved critiques of the traditional explanation for the introduction of furnished burial rites as evidence of migration (Hallsall 1992; James 1980; 1988; Lucy 2002). Similarly, ‘post-processual’ critiques of the social approach have focused on the active roles of mourners in burial ritual (i.e. the grave may say more about the mourners than the deceased) as well as the symbolic and historical context of mortuary expressions (Cannon 1989; Lucy 1998; Pader 1980; 1982; Samson 1987). Interpretations of mortuary symbolism have been developed through the study of early medieval burial data, although in terms of methodology they have tended to share much in common with processual approaches (e.g. Härke 1990; 1997a and b; Richards 1987). These perspectives have also inspired studies that focus upon graves as materialised ideology (e.g. Carver 1995; 2000; 2001; 2002) and self-dubbed ‘contextual’ studies that combined social and symbolic perspectives (e.g. Lucy 1998; 2002). Alongside these approaches, the older themes of using graves as quarries for cultural and religious history can still be identified (e.g. O’Brien 1999; Taylor 2001; Welch 1992; Wilson 1992).

Yet a key criticism of early medieval mortuary archaeology over the last decade has been that a number of further theoretical approaches have yet to be explored in relation to the data. These approaches – explored more fully in prehistoric contexts – have sought to escape from the polemic of either a purely ‘social’ or an overtly ‘symbolic’ approach, focussed neither solely on the material itself nor the meanings behind burial rites. Instead, a theme linking them is a concern with the active and performative role of mortuary practices – both structuring and structured by past social structures and associated cosmologies in which the living actors engage and interact with the dead (e.g. Barrett 1994; Parker Pearson 1993). Mortuary practices are considered simultaneously a religious, a social, an economic and a political realm, rather than parcelled into one single category. The rituals can affect and direct past societies’ and individuals’ views of themselves and the world around them, their links to the past, aspirations for the future and links with the supernatural. There is no single theme in these approaches; instead there is a constellation of related issues and debates which we need to explore in turn to appreciate their significance for developing new perspectives on early medieval graves and cemeteries.

The first issue of debate concerns the meaningful, active, ritualised and symbolic nature of mortuary practices. The symbolic role of material culture from funerary contexts has often been addressed, and it is generally accepted that mortuary practices are a symbolic medium, compared by some to language (e.g. Richards 1992), texts (Pader 1980; 1982) and even to poetry and theatre (Carver 2000). This has led to two perspectives. First, symbolism is often seen as purely social in focus, i.e. symbolism is seen as subservient to the role of mortuary practices in communicating the social identity of the deceased, and, in turn, mortuary variability is perceived as indicating social structure (e.g. Richards 1987; Härke 1997d). Alternatively, there has been the tendency to restrict discussions of the symbolic to those artefacts and practices that defy a ‘prosaic’ or ‘practical’ explanation, such as amulets and the decoration upon objects, rather than broader patterns in burial data (e.g. Meaney

1981; Wilson 1992). Yet symbolism has many forms, and complex chains of signification can embody mortuary events and their material culture. Symbolic, iconic and metaphorical messages can all be made through monuments, artefacts and the body in death linked to the social identity of the deceased but also to cosmology, mythology and ideology. For example, the issue of pervading metaphors in mortuary contexts is one explored by Chris Tilley (1999) and addressed in relation to early medieval monuments by Anders Andrén (1993). Andrén considers how Gotlandic picture stones of the first millennium AD can be understood as metaphors of otherworld journeys as well as socio-political statements through the scenes depicted upon them, and through their shape and monumental scale. In other words, mortuary practices can be concerned as much with cosmology as with the representation of society, as Oestigaard (2000) has discussed for first-millennium AD cremation rituals and Price (2002) for Viking-period artefacts and graves. Similarly, drawing upon historical and archaeological information, Bonnie Effros has demonstrated the complex early medieval social and metaphorical significances of food and drink in mortuary contexts (Effros 2002a), as well as the numerous symbolic associations of clothing when used to adorn the early medieval dead (Effros 1996; 2002b: 13–39). While it may not always be possible to reconstruct cosmologies any more than it is possible to reconstruct social structure from mortuary variability (*pace* Gräslund 1994; see Jennbert 2000), the possibility that metaphors and symbols relating to cosmology may have been as important as signalling social identity in mortuary practices is now widely considered (Williams 2001b).

A theme closely connected to ‘the meaning of things’ concerns the social agency of mortuary practices and the artefacts, structures, bodies, monuments and spaces they incorporate. ‘The dead do not bury themselves’ is a constant point of emphasis in recent studies: burial rites are the contrivances and media for the survivors, and it is their role in mortuary performances that, it is suggested, should be emphasised. A focus on the agency of participants in mortuary ritual leads us to appreciate how mortuary traditions develop and retain their consistency, but also to how they evolve and transform over time through collective and individual decision-making and negotiation. This is a theme explored in a series of prehistoric studies of burial data (see Barrett 1994; Chapman 2000; Gillespie 2001). However, it is also an issue to consider the agency of non-human agents in mortuary contexts, since, in many societies, death and the dead are regarded as continuing to have a presence and agency, as well as being transformed through the agency of supernatural powers, after the cessation of vital signs (Williams 2004b). Indeed it could be argued that identities in mortuary practices (of both the dead and the living) are mediated by the ‘agency’ of objects, rather than any symbolic meanings they hold or evoke. The agency inherent in non-human materials and beings that are present in early medieval funerals has similarly received limited attention. By this it is meant that the material presence of bodies, objects and indeed monuments, architecture and spaces influences the ways in which mourners interact with each other, with the dead and with the supernatural. For instance, a key guiding idea behind the sacrifice of animals in many societies is the expectation that their spirits might serve as guides for the