

## CHAPTER I

*‘The Unanswered Question’: Investigating  
Early Conceptualisations of Death*

Colin Renfrew

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.4311)

Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.

(Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, from Diogenes Laertius:  
*Lives of the Philosophers* 10.125)

## INTRODUCTION

The difficulty that each of us faces in seeking to comprehend death is neatly expressed by Wittgenstein in the epigraph at the head of this chapter. A related insight of the sculptor Damien Hirst led him to create the work entitled ‘The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living’, which was first shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1992 (Gallagher 2012; frontispiece). This gives material presence to the enigma that humans have faced since the dawn of measured time and before ‘the unanswered question’ as the American composer Charles Ives expressed it in 1906 (Ives 1953; the first of *Two Contemplations*, the second being *Central Park in the Dark*). It comes with the emergence of that self-awareness that is often taken as a defining quality of our own species, *Homo sapiens*.

One of the principal aims in collecting the papers assembled here was to undertake a fresh look at early human attempts to recognise, to understand, and to conceptualise death. The project may be said to fall within the scope of cognitive archaeology, involving, as it does, the world of ideas and of concepts. Such a project can only be undertaken by relying primarily upon the archaeological record. For inescapably consideration must be given to prehistoric times – that is to say to times when there

is no adequate historical (and therefore written) account or narrative for the periods in question.

The archaeological record is indeed a material record: it is constituted by the surviving material evidence of the human past. But that does not imply that it is concerned only with material things. As D’Altroy points out (this volume): ‘essential features of human affairs are often deliberately not given enduring physical expression ... because of the threat that material existence may pose. ... An approach that assumes a parallel or mirrored relationship between things material and not strikes me as having the potential to confuse key issues’. That observation indicates clearly one of the problems that cognitive archaeology must seek to confront.

## COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

To the extent that our work is unaided by written records we are dependent upon cognitive archaeology – sometimes called the archaeology of mind. This is a fast growing field, which seeks to study in a systematic manner past ways of thought as inferred from the surviving material remains (Renfrew 1994). This does not necessarily give direct access to the ‘meaning’ of the objects, or find complexes and symbols recovered from the past, in the sense of their meaning to those who made and used

COLIN RENFREW

them. That may be too ambitious an aim. But we can hope to develop a secure methodology by which we can seek to learn *how* the minds of the ancient communities in question worked and the manner in which that working shaped their actions.

So while we cannot aspire to establish just how a particular community conceived of death, and what death meant to them, we can investigate what they did in response to death. From the traces of their patterned behaviour we may hope to infer what they considered important and relevant, and appropriate as a response, in the aftermath of death.

#### THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE STUDY OF EARLY RESPONSES TO DEATH

First, however, a word of caution is needed. In modern times the notion of the nature of death is often shaped by contemporary religious faith. The three great world religions that are monotheistic in character – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have views of death that are in some ways similar. This is not surprising, since their origins can all be traced back to western Asia in the first millennium BC. All are respectful of the Old Testament of the Bible and so are sometimes termed Abrahamic. In them the role of the Deity is central, and there are similarities in their perceptions of the ‘afterlife’. For that very reason the focus of attention in the papers invited for the symposium has not been primarily upon the archaeology of death in societies whose beliefs and practices are likely to have been in conformity with those three world religions (see Goodison 2012). Instead our focus of attention here extends back to very much earlier periods and other traditions. It has seemed appropriate in the first instance to look at responses to death in historic or prehistoric contexts where interpretations are not overshadowed by monotheist assumptions.

It is difficult today to investigate the cultures of prehispanic Mexico or Peru, for example, without encountering the assumptions of those early Christian missionaries who were among the first to interpret and report the indigenous attitudes to death at the time of early contact. Clearly the information gained from the archaeological record alone is greatly enriched by the observations of those who were on hand to see and record some of the activities and behaviour that came to create that record. But it is not always easy to distinguish the beliefs of the chronicler from those he is seeking to record.

The problem is not so much easier for earlier periods where monotheistic belief systems can be excluded.

For, at these earlier periods in our time scale, belief in the existence of deities of any kind cannot be assumed. These periods may predate the inception of any religion, if we choose to define religion, following the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Onions 1973), as ‘action or conduct indicating a belief in, or reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power’. It is a matter for discussion when the archaeological record for each region first offers support for belief systems of that kind, which may be termed ‘deistic’. In studying the responses to death in those early societies it is important for us to bear in mind that they may not have had any ‘religious’ component, in the sense of the term employed by the *OED*. It is perhaps not easy for us to imagine a world without religion and without deities, but such acts of imagination may be necessary if we are to do justice to our subject matter.

Within a volume that already seeks to cover a wide range of periods and of societies it was not easy to arrange that other religious traditions (i.e., those beyond the Abrahamic, to which most of the contributing authors are heirs) should be adequately represented. The Indian tradition is represented by the paper by Julia Shaw, dealing with Buddhist mortuary ritual. It would have been useful also to include a paper dealing with early Hindu responses to death. Yet while the inception of Vedic thought can be traced back well before the first millennium BC in India and Pakistan (although not recorded in writing until many years later), Vedic archaeology is not well documented at so early a date. Early East Asian responses to death are represented here by Mizoguchi (where the Yayoi to Kofun periods in Japan were influenced by Buddhist thought) and by Higham (where the kings of Angkor may likewise be seen as working in a Buddhist tradition). China is represented by Li Shuicheng, where the first use of jade for symbolic purposes anticipates by several millennia the earliest records indicating the development of Taoist thought.

One of the challenges facing cognitive archaeology is to deal with such a difficult (although sometimes richly-evidenced) theme as death in contexts where the thought frameworks and mental maps of the people we are considering were so far removed from our own, largely western traditions of thought. This is, of course, where the evidence from Africa may also have so much to offer. I regret that the confined scale of this volume did not leave space to broaden the geographical scope with experiences and responses to death in Polynesia and in aboriginal Australia.

## ‘THE UNANSWERED QUESTION’

ENCOUNTERING DEATH:  
THE MATERIAL EVIDENCE

The inevitable starting point for our consideration of death is the human body. That approach uses the methods and potentialities of archaeological research, with their inherent accompanying limitations. Only when the mortal remains of the human dead are found, along with any items of material culture by which they may be accompanied, is there the necessary primary evidence that death is at hand. That evidence often enters the archaeological record in the form of deliberate burial. It subsequently comes to the attention of the excavator and so achieves notice and publication.

In most cases it is not death itself, but the responses of other humans towards that death, that leads to the formation of the residues that time preserves, and that remain to be uncovered by the pick-axe or trowel of that archaeologist.

Just occasionally the preservation comes about by natural agency. Remains of humans asphyxiated and buried in some cataclysmic volcanic eruption may be uncovered, as at Roman Pompeii or Mayan Cerén. But even Ötzi, the prehistoric alpine iceman, at first thought to have perished and been preserved in a sudden snowstorm, may owe his remarkable preservation more to careful high altitude burial in the course of funerary ritual (Vanzetti et al. 2010) than to a sudden natural event. Similarly in considering the circumstances producing one of the earliest known accumulations of hominid remains in Europe, at Sima de los Huesos at Atapuerca (Zilhão, this volume), there is real uncertainty whether that remarkable concentration of fragmented hominid bone is the taphonomic outcome of natural preservative processes or the result of systematic and patterned ritual action, perhaps the earliest indication of such ritual yet recovered anywhere in the world.

In studying human attitudes to death and the way death has over time been conceptualised, we are essentially studying human *responses* to death, and in particular *human* actions in response to death. Moreover it is only those actions whose traces or results or consequences are in some way preserved or fixed in the material record that can come down to us. If they do not leave some tangible, material trace, then there seems no way that we can have any knowledge of them. That may inevitably leave out of account many things that were said, many speech acts and affective utterances, and many performative actions, such as those alluded to by D’Altroy, as

noted previously. Such words and actions were significant and meaningful to those present, but having no immediate material consequence, they had no impact upon the material world and therefore none upon the archaeological record. That presents us, in studying past responses to death, with problems difficult to overcome.

In trying to give some coherent structure to the symposium that preceded this volume with the rich variety of papers offered, it seemed appropriate to highlight a number of themes. These are just several of the directions that one might take in considering early human responses to death that proved effective in giving focus to our discussions. So they have been used, in much the same way, to give structure to the present volume.

INTIMATIONS OF MORTALITY:  
BEFORE *HOMO SAPIENS*

Before confronting the great diversity of early human responses to death, for instance, in the variety of early forms of burial practice, it is certainly worth going back further, to the earliest beginning. When were such burial practices first developed? That proves to be a difficult question to answer. Even more problematic, perhaps, is the issue as to when, along some long evolutionary time scale, one might place the earliest recognition of death. Is it possible that some other species are capable of formulating some notion of death? That may prove another difficult question. But it can at least be approached by investigating the responses to death as they can be observed today among other animal species.

The first contribution to this volume addresses that fascinating theme of non-human responses towards death. The observations by students of animal behaviour indicate, as Piel and Stewart (this volume) outline, that only a few mammalian species, most notably dolphins, elephants, and chimpanzees, pay particular attention to death, specifically to the dead body of a conspecific.

In an evolutionary perspective such behaviour seems likely to have preceded the practices of deliberate burial of the body by humans, which can first be documented at some point in the Palaeolithic period. It is interesting that elephants seem to react more noticeably to the death of a conspecific than do some of the great apes, where such behaviour has been observed particularly among chimpanzees and bonobos, but not among gorillas. Reacting attentively to a dead body need not, however, be the same as formulating a concept for ‘death’ or a category of ‘dead’. Such a concept might be thought

## COLIN RENFREW

to require the use of language and the formation of an adjectival category and word for 'dead'. Alas it is still by no means clear just when in the human evolutionary story a spoken language, involving a vocabulary and syntactical use of words, first developed. Such use of language is sometimes assumed to be a defining attribute of our own species, *Homo sapiens*. But to what extent our hominin predecessors, such as *Homo erectus*, or our early contemporary *Homo neandertalensis* in reality shared that attribute remains to be established.

To speak of the conceptualisation of death does however imply more than the manifestation of a different reaction towards an apparently sleeping individual who refuses to wake up than towards one who awakens. It requires the formulation of a category, 'death', which can only become sufficiently general to be meaningful if applied to more than one individual. This has obviously been achieved when a word for 'death' has been formulated. So the issue of the origin and development of spoken language does inevitably arise. But such linguistic issues do not necessarily need to derail the archaeological discussion. Great apes, like many other animals, clearly differentiate in their responses between different animal species. It is perfectly possible that a chimpanzee may, after encountering dead chimpanzees on a number of different occasions, develop through experience a learned response to 'dead chimpanzee'. One can even imagine a specific signal to draw the attention of other conspecifics to the presence of 'dead chimpanzee'. That, like the repertoire of other specific signals, may indeed be regarded as constituting a simple language, albeit a non-verbal one.

Such possibilities are by implication raised in the paper by Zilhão (this volume) in his discussion of the emergence of burial in the Middle Palaeolithic in Europe, prior to the arrival of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*, and indeed in the much earlier accumulation of human bones found at the Lower Palaeolithic site of Sima de los Huesos at Atapuerca in Spain. He then deals with that fascinating period when hominin responses to death were developing alongside the speciation process that led to the emergence of our own species *Homo sapiens*, between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago. Zilhão then covers the period following the out-of-Africa expansion of our species some 60,000 years ago.

This is the crucial time, discussed in more detail for Europe by d'Errico and Vanhaeren (this volume). In Europe it is termed the Upper Palaeolithic and it lasts until the onset of a warmer climate with the Neothermal

period around 11,000 years ago. It is generally assumed that by the time of that out-of-Africa expansion, all members of our species, *Homo sapiens*, were capable of speech, employing a rich vocabulary and quite complex syntax. That assumption may be justified by the argument that it was at this time that the different lineages diverged, populating the different continents. Since all descendent lineages share these linguistic capacities it seems logical that their common ancestors at this time themselves already did so. With this speech capacity, it is argued, arose a new degree of self-consciousness and of self-awareness. It is tempting to link this self-awareness with the first use of personal decoration in the form of jewellery, seen in the shell beads that form the principal evidence in the study by d'Errico and Vanhaeren. They are found in the burials that are a particular feature of the European Upper Palaeolithic, well reviewed in a recent study by Paul Pettitt (2010). As he points out, well-organised cemeteries are also found in Europe at this time.

The practice of systematic and deliberate burial shows a coherent response to the phenomenon of death that must derive from inherited experience. It is a social response, and one that must be dependent on the shared experience and shared memory that the use of developed language makes possible. Interestingly this practice of burial is seen in the aboriginal communities of Australia already at Lake Mungo as early as 40,000 years ago. But to complicate the picture, burials of our related species *Homo neandertalensis* are found in Europe before the appearance there of our own species (Renfrew 2009). This too is suggestive of self-awareness and of some linguistic capacity.

The first evidence for major places of assembly also arises at the onset of the Neothermal period. Several insights are offered to us by the study by Notroff et al. (this volume) of the important site of Göbekli Tepe in southeastern Turkey. There the great monolithic pillars, arranged in a circle enclosing a still larger pair of stelai, may be compared with those at the village of Çayönü, some 150 km away. There they are in a general sense associated with funerary rituals. The precise connection has not yet been demonstrated at Göbekli Tepe. But the excavators are surely right to propose the association. This was clearly a place of assembly, a focal point for the still mobile communities of the surrounding territories, dominating a terrain of at least 10 to 20 km, or perhaps 50 to 100 km. Certainly the obsidian found there, albeit in small quantities, had travelled up to 650 km (Le Bourdonnec 2008). It is the insight of the excavator

## 'THE UNANSWERED QUESTION'

(Schmidt 2012, 122) that 'Göbekli Tepe must be considered a monument of a cult of death'. It is tantalising that direct material links, for instance in the form of burials, or at least deliberate depositions of human bone, have not yet been located at the site. For here human societies were on the very threshold of sedentary life in permanent settlements.

MORTALITY AND THE FOUNDATIONS  
OF HUMAN SOCIETY: SEDENTISM,  
THE COLLECTIVE, AND THE HOUSE

Death changed with the beginning of food production. The origin of farming was more than a shift in subsistence strategy. It made possible, effectively on a world-wide scale, the establishment of settled communities, of sedentism. And with a settled community, the dead are always with you. The cemetery or communal tomb or place of deposition is always there. Usually it is close at hand, but sometimes located at a more remote spot in the territory of the community. In rare cases it may be more distant, in a notional ancestral land.

Territory and community may be strongly influenced, indeed shaped, by the obligations that accompany death. In northwestern Europe, in the Neolithic period, the stone monuments that are generally referred to as megalithic chamber tombs, or more concisely as 'megaliths', were clearly constructed by the combined efforts of a number of families who came together to construct what became a marker and monument on a fitting scale. They have been termed 'territorial markers of segmentary societies' (Renfrew 1976). The more interesting point here is the manner in which the very act of going together to construct the monument created a permanent focus for what became a community. The monument became that focus for a group of persons that may earlier have had much weaker ties between them. This suggests 'how a particular form of engagement with the material world – the construction and varied use of a burial cairn – could help promote the emergence of a coherent new social unit' (Renfrew 2001, 109). Nor is this process restricted to times as early as the European Neolithic. John Creese (this volume) sets out in his study of the Northern Iroquois of southern Ontario to approach deathways as a vital creative field for the reconstitution of social orders – and the ideologies of body and person, community and cosmos that support them. This approach is developed further for the British Neolithic by Julian Thomas (this volume), who emphasises that the mortuary deposits

found in the chamber tombs and long barrows of the British Neolithic may have been generated very quickly over a few generations. Yet such monuments clearly retained their importance over much longer periods. He develops the idea of a 'house' society and suggests that the tombs and barrows were not 'houses of the dead' but just 'houses', in the sense that they provided the material anchors for people who were developing new relationships with the material world.

Perhaps a process of the same kind was taking place in the villages of Pre-Pottery Neolithic Jordan and Israel, which are among the oldest known permanent settlements anywhere, dating from around 8,000 BC. They are broadly contemporary with settlements located farther north in the Fertile Crescent, for instance at Çayönü, not far from the great hunter-gatherer site of Göbekli Tepe, mentioned in the last section. In their paper Mithen et al. (this volume) show that the settlements in Jordan were accompanied by some of the oldest known cemeteries. They argue that it was partly in the practice of the rituals following death that communities of residents dwelling there were formalised. They describe how in these early villages the 'dead' remained a key source of inspiration and power for the 'living'. This was in part effected by the recycling of their physical residues through their incorporation into the building of structures used for habitation and for other activities.

This is seen for sites like Jericho, at around the same time. There the funerary rituals materialised the memory of the deceased person by the production of a plaster image, which was based directly upon the actual skull. This was a very special form of the materialisation of death, producing an enduring (although certainly not permanent) representation of the deceased person.

In coastal Peru, at a broadly comparable stage in the transition towards sedentary communities, abundant marine resources were encouraging sedentism. This was accompanied by a transition to the intensive exploitation and subsequently the domestication of terrestrial plant resources. Closely related themes are taken up by Peter Kaulicke (this volume) in his treatment of mortuary practices in the Central Andes of Peru from ca. 9000 to 2000 BC.

In many cases in the early days of sedentism it was indeed the community, rather than the individual, that was celebrated in the rituals and ceremonies pertaining to death. That was the case in northwestern Europe, as noted previously. It was sometimes the case also in coastal Peru, where some of the earliest settlements, such as

## COLIN RENFREW

Caral (Shady Solís et al. 2001), have large congregational plazas and other monumental constructions that were clearly the product of well-organised collective labour. This point is emphasised by Stoddart (this volume) in his treatment of the 'temples' of prehistoric Malta and their accompanying underground burial places or hypogea. He draws on a Melanesian analogy (Mosko 1983), in which, following death the deceased are understood to undergo a process of 'deconception' that in a sense mirrors or reverses the conception or bodily union that preceded their birth. He suggests that the Maltese mortuary practices appear to follow processes of deconception resembling those celebrated in ritual by the Bush Mekeo of Melanesia. The aim of these social practices was to dissolve the individuality of the deceased into one common clan membership.

The parallel is an interesting one, and certainly could account for much of the Maltese evidence. These may be described as 'group-oriented' societies (Renfrew 2001) where the personal ranking of the individual is emphasised less than the affiliation to the corporate group. This collective social unit is often emphasised in the rituals of death and in the construction of major commemorative monuments.

## CONSTRUCTING THE ANCESTORS

Sometimes the dead are personified in a different way. Here the personality and identity of the individual does not recede after death into the anonymity of the social collective. Instead the ancestors of the living individual, the forebears of his or her specific lineage, have a particular significance. The lines of descent can be well remembered and remain particularly clear, often figuring in narrative and in song. So it can be that the persons of the ancestors are commemorated, and sometimes they are represented in effigy. Very often also their material remains are carefully curated. In such cases they are not necessarily assimilated into the more general collective ancestry implicit in the amassing together of the bones of all the deceased persons of the community, as was the practice in some communal or collective tombs. It should be noted here, however, that the concept of 'the individual' is not so straightforward as it might at first sight seem (Knapp & van Dommelen 2008).

Insoll (this volume) stresses the importance of ancestor concepts in sub-Saharan Africa, and the role of the notions of 'good' and 'bad' death. The precise form of burial was often a significant factor in the in the effective

'creation' of ancestors through the emphasis on specific lineal predecessors and their commemoration. As he shows, the construction of the ancestors could be a complex process.

In the case of Peru, Lau (this volume) emphasises that specific ancestors were often regarded as esteemed progenitors who were thus different from the general dead. They were remembered and celebrated, in return for which they bestowed benefits upon the living. He emphasises that there were many types or categories of ancestor. The position of any specific dead being, with reference to its rank, its status and its social engagements, was in perpetual mediation. In the case of the Recuay culture which he discusses, there was strong emphasis upon anthropomorphic representation. Much Recuay imagery was made to commemorate specific individuals and to recall their networks of social relations through funerary ceremonies and in public festive events.

In an influential study by the anthropologist Arthur Saxe (1970) the practical economic implications of burial practices were set out, with wide-ranging worldwide examples. He was able to formulate a number of generalisations, some of which have been found widely relevant (Chapman 2003) in a wide range of contexts. They have been widely applied in the archaeology of the Americas, as well as to early Greece (Morris 1991). One of Saxe's 'hypotheses' on this theme is worth quoting:

To the extent that corporate group rights to use restricted resources are attained ... by means of lineal descent from the dead (i.e. lineal ties to ancestors), such groups will maintain formal disposal areas for the exclusive disposal of the dead ...

(Saxe 1970, 119).

The lineal ties to the ancestors, their association with property rights and the visible maintenance of the material remains of those ancestors are pertinent to several of the papers discussed here. Indeed corporate group rights are relevant also to some of the papers discussed in the previous section. But here we are dealing with individual or at least lineage burials, where ancestral links are more clearly emphasised. In his paper here, Snodgrass discusses the idea of the cemetery in prehistoric and early classical Greece, with Saxe's generalisation very firmly in mind.

In his study, 'Becoming Mycenaean?', Boyd (this volume) likewise examines the transformations in burial practices in prehistoric Greece. But he (and others in this volume) notes that the concept of 'ancestor' has, in the wake of Saxe's influential work, often been used rather loosely, a point well made recently by James Whitley in

## 'THE UNANSWERED QUESTION'

his paper 'Too many ancestors' (Whitley 2002). Whitley argues that 'ancestorhood is an achieved status' (Whitley 2002, 122) emphasising that not all the dead were regarded as having attained that status. Yet Boyd points out that, in the Mycenaean cases which he considers, the physical remains of the funeral rites, including the human bones, were curated over several generations by the subsequent users of the tomb who respected and found meaning in the material remains, as is reflected in the commemorative and ritual activities which they carried out in the tomb.

The consideration of parental lineage, sometimes associated with emphasis upon the ancestors, has been brought vividly to life again by archaeogenetic studies (Renfrew & Boyle 2000; Jobling et al., 2004). Archaeologists and molecular geneticists think in very clear lineage terms when they discuss the transmission of mitochondrial DNA or of Y-chromosome haplotypes, transmitted respectively through the female or the male line. The concerns and preoccupations of the prehistoric genealogist are thus rekindled, in a sense, in some modern molecular genetic studies.

## MATERIALITY AND MEMORY

As communities grow and develop, questions of identity are presented in new ways. Death in itself effaces memory, just as it can efface identity. Yet societies need to remember and to remember for longer than the single lifespan. In the previous section we have seen how the device of formalised burial, often in well-defined cemeteries, can maintain memories that are relevant to continuing survival, notably the right to access and exploit land for farming and for grazing. Rights to land tenure are important, and they can be maintained by claiming descent from the ancestors.

Material objects can also be good for remembrance. Heirlooms can be powerfully evocative. Memorials and images of the inherited past act as reminders and verifiers of a recollected story. In some cases the substance of which the heirloom is made can also be powerfully significant. Standing as it were opposite to death in the material record are those several materials which can serve directly to symbolise life. They often do so for a particular reason. Gold is a noble metal which does not tarnish: it can symbolise the incorruptible. Amber, in Greek *electron*, from which the modern word for electricity is derived, has indeed special electric qualities and can thereby symbolise vitality and longevity. Jade, in China

as in Mesoamerica, had associations with immortality, which go right back to Neolithic times. In his paper, Li (this volume) notes the very early occurrence of jade artefacts. The *bi* discs and *cong* tubes are a *leitmotiv* of the Chinese Neolithic. And the importance of jade does not decline. In the Han period jade 'suits' are an impressive feature of some aristocratic burials.

Gold, like jade, had a conspicuous role in early America, as the *conquistadores* knew too well. In Mycenaean burial practice it was used conspicuously for ornaments. Their juxtaposition of precious material with the human body, seen in the gold 'face masks' of Mycenae, has an evocative if perhaps superficial analogy with the analogous use of jade in China (documented in the jade burial suits of the Han dynasty) and among the Maya with the jade mask of Pakal, ruler of Palenque, as described here by Hammond. But, as Malafouris shows (this volume) the 'enactive sign' materialised in gold, the costly material, can be figuratively explicit. The gold signet ring and the gold seal depicting the 'lion hero', found in a rich burial in Grave Circle A at Mycenae (which were buried, and so not visible to a later visitor) carry a message which was also publicly made manifest in the relief carved on the grave stele which surmounted the burial. The iconography in this case is vibrant with life. It does not allude directly to funerary ritual but rather to the remembered vitality of the deceased, and no doubt to the continuing vigour of his successors. Heroic deeds of valour are recollected and recounted in this iconography, in gold and in stone.

Military valour is relevant too to the funerary practices documented in the Russian bronze age burials discussed by Hanks et al. (this volume). They draw attention to the association between artefacts connected with warfare and with metal working. The military equipment included chariots, as well as cheek pieces and other accoutrements for the horses that were pulling them. These burials, like those of the Mycenaean shaft graves discussed by Malafouris, with their rich panoplies of bronze weapons, are evocative of a heroic age. In the Mycenaean case the heroes were celebrated also in the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There the funeral games were remembered by which the fallen warriors were celebrated. In many such it was death itself which established the status of the hero, just as later it was death which could confirm the sanctity of the martyr. The warrior's beauty, to use the apposite term applied by Treherne (1995) to the European bronze age, was made eternal by his glorious death.

COLIN RENFREW

## HIERARCHY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

Where there is a well-defined social order, as in any 'ranked' society, to use a standard anthropological terminology, a death holds significant consequences for the lives of others. Death turns princes into kings, and transforms heirs into persons of wealth. It leads to changes of office and of fortune. The inheritance of status is often clearly seen in the archaeological record, even in prehistoric times. Symbols of status are frequently buried with the dead. A particularly persuasive indicator of the inheritance of high status is the burial with rich grave goods of children who have died young. In most such cases, it may be inferred that these were children who were 'born great'. Too young to achieve greatness, they did not live to see the fulfilment of the expectations due to their rank or class, but yet were buried with clear indications of their status.

Such societies often have marks of distinction, symbols which express and convey the high status of their bearers. Often they bury their dead with a public extravagance, which certainly marks an event in the life of the successor and inheritor of the deceased (to recall the epigraph from Wittgenstein) even if not in the life of the dead person.

The wealth of the Royal Graves at Ur (Croucher, this volume) offers a striking example of conspicuous consumption in a funerary context. Among the 600 graves investigated from the Early Dynastic period by Sir Leonard Woolley was a group of 16 tombs which he described as a royal cemetery. He interpreted these as inhumations of a group of elite persons. In her reinterpretation of Woolley's excavations at Ur, Croucher confirms the very special nature of these tombs as representative of individuals of high class in the social order.

It is important to emphasise that such conspicuous burials are not simply reflective of the high status of the deceased persons. Such sumptuary magnificence has also an active role, by asserting their pre-eminence in confirming and naturalising the pre-eminence of their successors. The magnificence of the rituals and of the grave goods played an active role in both the constitution and the subsequent perpetuation of the dynasty, just as the monumental burial practices of the more egalitarian societies of the Neolithic period (for instance northern Europe) served to establish and perpetuate the communities for which that burial place was the principal monument and memorial.

This point is well made by Hammond (this volume) with reference to the Classic Maya. His description of

the burial of Janaab Pakal, ruler of Palenque from 615 to 683 AD, as revealed in a series of monuments at the site, documents the enormous labour involved in the funerary arrangements. The wonderful relief-decorated stone depicting his descent into Xibalba, the destination of the dead, is one of the richest and most elaborate depictions pertaining to death that we have (Fig. 15.2).

The analysis by Mizoguchi of the burials in Japan of the Kofun period (3rd to 6th century AD) offers a further instance of this process of aggrandizement. He examines in detail the transition from the funerary practices of the preceding Yayoi period. This can be regarded as the time of early state formation in Japanese society. The great keyhole-shaped tumuli of the Kofun period in which the ruler was interred appear to have been designed to serve as symbolic loci for nothing less than the creation and reproduction of the order of the world. Mizoguchi suggests that the elite groups and the members of the communities who were involved in the formation of the new social order emerging at this time and who participated in the wide exchange networks which sustained it, may themselves have volunteered to construct the tumuli. He draws upon the paradox alluded to by Wittgenstein in the epigraph to this chapter (that death comes to everyone, but no one has first-hand knowledge of it). Here the commemoration of the deceased, and what one might also term the celebration of the death, played a significant role in the promotion of the status of the deceased (and his or her successor) to that of the ruler of a state society.

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY:  
GLIMPSES OF OTHER WORLDS

And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep-swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them.

Hesiod *Works and Days* 170

The changes in burial process in Kofun Japan and the concomitant elevation in the status of the ruler may profitably be compared with the evolution of society in Southeast Asia at about the same time. Higham (this volume) traces the development of mortuary practices in Southeast Asia from early hunter gatherer times onwards through a broad sweep of time. This reached its culmination in the Chenla period (500 to 800 AD) when the progressive deification of rulers may be seen to have taken place. In the kingdom of Angkor in the immediately succeeding centuries temple mausolea were constructed for

## 'THE UNANSWERED QUESTION'

what had by then become god kings. The mortal ruler was now regarded as a divine being that, after corporeal demise, went on to a condition of immortality. As Higham puts it, 'Angkor Wat should be seen as the preserve of the immortal sovereign merged with Vishnu, in a heaven populated by celestial *apsaras*'. It is interesting to contrast this status or condition of immortality with that accorded posthumously to various Roman emperors by the ceremonial declaration, usually by a successor, of their *apotheosis*. In the Classical world Philip II of Macedon was the first ruler to declare himself divine during his own lifetime.

The belief system seen at Angkor was derived from the earlier traditions of Hindu India. So too, were the Buddhist mortuary rituals discussed by Julia Shaw (this volume), which originated in earlier Brahmanical practices. It was during the time of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka that Buddhism developed into a pan-Indian and subsequently into a pan-Asian phenomenon.

State society emerged very much earlier in Egypt, however, and with it came conceptions of divinity and of immortality, as Stevenson (this volume) notes. She surveys how, from the late Neolithic to the early bronze age, 'social relationships were dramatically reconfigured over an interval of some 1500 years, from pastoralist communities to a state society headed by divine kingship'. This anticipated the transition to statehood seen in Southeast Asia (where pastoralism was not significant economically) by nearly three thousand years. She develops the concept of 'experiential immortality', where, following Hodge (2011), she indicates that: 'it is possible to argue that a sense of immortality emerges not from people's natural propensity to imagine their own survival after death, but from people's intuitive sense of the continued existence of others'. This social perspective on the concept of immortality in a sense answers the observations of Epicurus and of Wittgenstein placed as epigraphs to this chapter.

She addresses here a problem in cognitive archaeology pertaining there in a general way to the first emergence of symbolic concepts. This she applies appositely to the very notion of immortality. One very concrete case of symbol construction, operating at a much more mundane and material level, and already extensively discussed in considerations of cognitive archaeology, is the emergence of the concept of weight. This came about through the shared (and in that sense social) experience of encountering and working with heavy objects (Renfrew 1982). In such a context and, in the presence of a balance pan,

a weight becomes a constitutive symbol, itself acting both as signifier and as thing signified. Another, in some ways analogous, case of concept formation is offered by the emergence, in a rural population, of the notion of a specific group. This emergence was based on the shared experiences of a number of persons coming together to construct a funerary monument, as discussed above in the section 'Mortality and the Foundations of Human Society'. There the social unit, in effect a very small polity, develops and comes to be an enduring social reality through the shared social experience of constructing a funerary monument, and in its continuing use. Stevenson refers, following Seremetakis (1991, 7), to the concept of *poesis*, to the marking of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked. This is a term which can be applied to all three of these instances of the initial formulation of an important new symbolic concept: weight, social unit and immortality (see also Malafouris 2013). In the present discussion, mortuary practices are seen not as directed only by pre-existing beliefs about death but as themselves contributing to the very appearance and development of new concepts of belief. It is in this way, she argues, that in Egypt the notion of immortality first emerged and could develop. It is precisely within the context of transformative mortuary ritual that alternative existential realities may be formulated and be reinforced, and where the concept of immortality may have been constructed. She shows how at the First Dynasty cemetery of Abydos, it came about that different forms of the hereafter were envisioned for the king, as a divinity on earth, so constructing a notion of the hereafter for the king that was very different to the fate of the rest of society.

Stevenson situates this 'dramatic reorientation of the collective experience of time and space' in the area known as Umm-el Qa'ab at Abydos, and specifically in Cemetery U. This was a crucial focus in late Predynastic Egypt for the emergence of divine kingship. It is remarkable that the evidence available in the archaeological record for the early pharaohs is so clear. It is of great interest that the cult of specific deities apparently does not, in Ancient Egypt, precede these elaborate indications of respect for the first deified rulers.

Among the merits of a wide ranging sample of societies such as are considered here, despite the inconvenience of discontinuities in context and in time period, are the opportunities to consider such abstract concepts in very different communities and locations. So it is that the rich burials of the Moche of the first millennium

## COLIN RENFREW

AD of north Peru can certainly be compared for their wealth and display with the burials in some early state societies, such as those of the Royal Graves and Ur or the burials of Anyang in Shang period China, even if they do not quite rival the magnificence of the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs. So it is tempting to see them as inhumations of rulers, exercising authority over their local states. But as other authors have argued (Quilter 2002), they may rather be the burials of priests, and the status of Moche polities as state societies may not yet be regarded as securely established. There is much diversity in northern Peru, but certainly it would be difficult to deny the status of deity to the remarkable image known as the *lanzón* which is still preserved in its original position in the temple at Chavín de Huantar (Rick 2008, 16).

The last paper presented at our symposium before the more spontaneous discussions which followed, 'Killing Mummies', serves to emphasise how the notion of death was very differently conceptualised in different societies at different times. D'Altroy examines informatively the very special treatment accorded to the remains of the deceased ruler, the Inka, in Peru at the time of the Spanish conquest. The distinction between mortal body and divine spirit is not so clear there as in the Egyptian case. In Peru the mummified body of the deified ruler was venerated and respected, and sustained by libations. As he outlines, 'Andean peoples did not recognise death as the separation of an eternal soul from its body... Bodies did contain a spirit, but that departed shade flew back to its society's place of origin, usually a fixed place in the landscape. Even though death was a permanent state, it did not imply the loss of vitality and the capacity to interact with the living'. He goes on to outline what may be conceived as a rather different ontology of being from that of western culture, with space-time considered as a unified entity. Space and time were constituted in each other through language and performance. The Inkas 'did not so much live on the land as engage with it, since every notable topographic feature – mountain peak, spring, outcrop, plain, river confluence and the like – was considered to be a social being, with its own name, history, personality, and will'. D'Altroy emphasises that the material element within the Inka intellectual project was not dominant over the intangible element, or indeed over the performative aspect. For speech acts and ritual could ratify and reinforce the principles expressed through the material realm. He summarises the claim of the Inkas, as conceived within the Inka world view, to a legitimate right to rule humanity, and to provide in

doing so an irreplaceable interface between people and all other powers of the cosmos, including the Sun itself.

D'Altroy shows how the mummified body of the deceased Inka had an enduring presence and power, so that the destruction of the mummified remains was an unfortunate event with significant consequences. The paradox implicit in his title – 'Killing Mummies' – reminds us that the simple duality of mortal body and immortal soul, with which so many of us are familiar, simply represents one philosophical possibility, and one which in the contemporary western world is often assumed. Both Epicurus and Wittgenstein were acutely aware that the nature of death is less readily understood.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Le Bourdonnec, F.-X., 2008. Rapport sur le projet EU-ARTECH 07: Towards a materiality of pilgrimage? [www.eu-arteche.org/files/ReportCarter.pdf](http://www.eu-arteche.org/files/ReportCarter.pdf) (accessed 20/1/13).
- Chapman, R., 2003. Death, society and archaeology: the social dimensions of mortuary practices. *Mortality* 8, 305–12.
- Diogenes Laertius, trans. R. B. Hick, 1925. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers (Loeb Classical Library)*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Gallagher, A., 2012. *Damien Hirst*. London: Tate.
- Goodison, L., 2012. 'Nature', the Minoans and embodied spiritualities, in *Archaeology of Spiritualities*, eds. K. Rountree, C. Morris & A. A. D. Peatfield. Berlin: Springer, 207–25.
- Hesiod, trans. H. H. Evelyn-White 1936. *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric Epics (Loeb Classical Library)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hodge, K. M., 2011. On imagining the afterlife. *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 11, 367–89.
- Ives, C., 1953. *The Unanswered Question: for chamber orchestra (performable also as chamber music)*. New York: Southern Music Publishing.
- Jobling, M. A., M. E. Hurles & C. Tyler-Smith (eds.), 2004. *Human Evolutionary Genetics: Origins, Peoples and Disease*. New York: Garland Science.
- Knapp A. B. & P. van Dommelen, 2008. Rethinking individuals and agents in archaeology. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 18, 15–34.
- Malafouris, L., 2013. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Morris, I., 1991. The archaeology of ancestors: the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis revisited. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 1 (2), 147–69.
- Mosko, M., 1983. Conception, de-conception and social structure in Bush Mekeo culture. *Mankind* 14 (1), 24–32.
- Onions, C. T. (ed.), 1973. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pettitt, P., 2010. *The Palaeolithic Origins of Human Burial*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Quilter, P., 2002. Moche politics, religion and warfare. *Journal of World Prehistory* 16 (2), 145–95.