

# BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN BURIAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH

Where Is the Archaeological Study of the Dead Going?

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## INTRODUCTION

When invited to write a keynote article on the contemporary archaeology of death and burial, I admit that I struggled to find the focus for such a potentially broad and complex theme. The archaeology of death and burial is a dynamic field that long has held, and probably will continue to hold, a central place within archaeology more broadly. This position is demonstrated by the steady stream of large and/or significant volumes on the topic across different academic traditions since the 1970s (e.g. Saxe 1970; Brown 1971; Chapman *et al.* 1981; O'Shea 1984; Duda & Masset 1987; Anderson Beck 1995; Jensen & Høilund Nielsen 1997; Parker Pearson 1999; Crubézy *et al.* 2000, Knüsel & Gowland 2009; Tarlow & Stutz 2013). It is also girded by the emergence of bioarchaeology, which studies human remains most commonly from burial contexts (e.g. Buikstra & Anderson Beck 2006; Argawal & Glencross 2011). Despite its prominent role within the wider discipline, burial archaeology faces a series of interesting conceptual challenges, most of which reflect very general intellectual trends in this contemporary moment. When deconstructing the archaeology of death and burial in its current state I note three broad categories of problematic and interesting challenges.

First, it must be clarified that *burial archaeology* does not equal *the archaeology of death*. The excavation and analysis of burials and the archaeological sources they constitute relate to research questions extending well beyond the realm of death. In fact, the vast majority of research on materials from grave contexts (be they human remains and/or artefacts) involves questions having to do more with the living in the past, ranging from population and diet to social identity, social rank and relationships, etc., than to issues of death. Only a minority of the archaeology devoted to burials deals explicitly with death, including the realm of mortuary rituals, the treatment of the cadaver, ontologies, religion, and concepts of the afterlife. This is not necessarily problematic in the sense that these rich sources obviously should be studied with a range of questions in focus. Yet, the dominant interest in what the dead can tell us more generally about the living tends to gloss over an important fact. Burials are the material remains of mortuary rituals. Few studies explicitly discuss the relationship between the living world they seek to reconstruct and the specific nature of their archaeological sources. Thus, few works link the realm of inference about living societies and populations with the realm of investigation into death, dying, and the dead in those past societies. I will argue here that if this scholarly gap becomes too dominant, the field will face both scientific and ethical challenges.

Second, and this is hardly a radical suggestion, burial archaeology is fundamentally transdisciplinary. It is characterized by the presence of both the remains of human action – often, but not always, deeply meaningful and ritualized – and of the material remains of human bodies. There, in the very nature of the sources, lies its blessing and its curse. The promise is obvious. The combination of human remains and artefacts, often in well-preserved depositional association, provides unique opportunities for gaining multidimensional insight into the past, including considerations of individual and collective biographies, gender, age, class, etc. Perhaps more than any other sub-discipline within archaeology, work on death and burial encapsulates a remarkable range of theoretical concerns and methods, ranging from approaches concerned with the natural sciences (e.g., genetics, environmental archaeology) to critical concepts and questions debated in the social sciences and humanities. The archaeology of death and burial thus demands an exceptional range of scholarly literacy. Unfortunately, many archaeologists working with burials are not committed to such transdisciplinary dialogue. Archaeologies drawing on burial contexts are often neatly positioned in a variety of subsections of the field. We see, then, an archaeology devoted to social and cultural identity, ritual and religion, and other theoretical explorations of past human experience (e.g. emotional states, ontology,

etc.). Yet, we also see a bioarchaeology firmly ensconced in the natural sciences. At the same time, we see a reflexive archaeology of ethics and cultural heritage. It is argued here that a successful archaeology of death and burial must include literacy and consideration of all these fields. To fully understand these sources we need to be capable of working across the boundaries between the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, both methodologically and theoretically.

A third observation is that an even more critical, and perhaps personal reflection reveals that despite its general relevance, the archaeology of death tends to remain surprisingly cordoned off within the broader discipline, viewed as both a privileged and sometimes even a reactionary space. While it has always been a part of the development of archaeological methods and theories, it has very rarely had a central place in spearheading these. In addition, burial archaeology still struggles with ethical and political dilemmas more than any other archaeological sub-discipline, being drawn into or engaged with various competing heritage discourses. These are often tangled up in political dynamics that also involve religious beliefs, ethnic, and national identities, and minority rights. The issue of whether the excavation, study and curation of human remains from burial contexts still belongs in a contemporary, ethical, scientific discipline is – quite simply – debated. Such debates are likely to appear again and again, on local, national, and international levels. They will not simply fade away. That burial archaeology should be part of archaeology and cultural heritage management more broadly is thus a politically charged notion, not one to be taken for granted. It will be imperative that all burial archaeologists think through their scholarship in ways that allow them to effectively engage with these ideas. This means communicating with various stakeholders outside of the academy, while also working across the discipline of archaeology, in order to define in what ways burial archaeology is valuable and relevant.

By exploring these three themes – that the archaeology of death often remains too separate from burial or bioarchaeology; the strengths and challenges of a properly transdisciplinary burial archaeology; and the ethical responsibilities integral to burial archaeology – this paper will take a strong stance in favour of the development of a more competent archaeology of death and burial. I will make my case by revealing current trends that I see within the field and argue for the ways in which these can be enriched by greater cross-disciplinary respect and literacy, i.e. the ability to understand and assess scholarly work across the sub-field boundaries, and a recognition of not only the wealth, but also the specificity and complexity of our main sources: the materialized traces of the ritual treatment of the dead.

## PARTS OF THE WHOLE: THE THEORETICAL TRENDS

The archaeology of death and burial is a flexible field, and even a brief retrospective highlights the ease with which it has been adapted to and reflected academic trends within archaeology. The excavation and study of burials has been instrumental for archaeological method and theory since the discipline's early conception. Burial studies provided the closed contexts necessary for the foundational establishment of chronologies based on seriation (Montelius 1885; Gräslund 1987) and were thus instrumental in scaffolding archaeological knowledge. And as a rare source in archaeology – one that allows us to connect specific human beings in the past to the material remains of their culture and society, burials have continued to provide a privileged lens for archaeology. At every step along the way of archaeological theoretical development, burial archaeology has embedded itself, and has been used in epistemological debates in complex and even contradictory ways.

The seminal essay by Christopher Hawkes (1954) warned archaeology not to make claims too far up “the ladder of inference.” He removed the realm of ritual, belief, and ontology from the list of attainable – and therefore legitimate – questions for archaeology. The impact of this work cannot be overstated. Archaeologists started to view burials as social markers rather than ritual deposits. This work was followed in 1969 by the similarly highly referenced essay by Paul Ucko (1969) that used ethnographic evidence to discuss how complex archaeological datasets from burial contexts may be, and rightfully cautioned against any simplification. But even in the light of such scepticism, processual archaeology soon found a way to bring in mortuary evidence into many seminal studies (Saxe 1970; Brown 1971; Binford 1972; Goldstein 1981; O’Shea 1984). Burials and burial archaeology soon became useful when processual perspectives were destabilized by the post-processual critique in the 1980s (Pader 1980). But despite this adaptability, burial archaeology did not necessarily hold onto a central role in the production of ideas, at least not in the way that settlements provided a foundation for processual archaeology in the 1970s, and monuments more broadly affected theoretical trends in the 1990s. We can ask why the archaeology of death and burial has not played a more central role in these intellectual trends. Perhaps it is a matter of the perception of its being, in a way, too obvious, or too easy. For example, it is more radical to propose that a refuse pit may reflect ritual practices, than to make the same argument for a burial.

But despite never being a “trendy material,” burials influenced or even catalysed some of the most significant theoretical developments in the

1990s and early 2000s. The permanent exhibition *Forntider* (translated: “Prehistories”) at the Swedish History Museum is a case in point. Inaugurated in 2007, this exhibition emphasizes humanist and democratic values, placing the human being at the centre, as the past is communicated through the biographies of eight individuals from prehistoric grave contexts (Hejil 2007). This exhibit serves as an effective illustration of the archaeology of its time: using burials to provide insights into the lived experience in the past through the interface of a prehistoric individual. And it is at this point that we, at least in retrospect, can see a golden era for humanistic inquiry into archaeological grave materials. Sarah Tarlow’s work on emotion was grounded in burial studies (Tarlow 1999, 2000) and laid the groundwork for subsequent studies of emotional states such as anxiety, coping, and fear (Fleisher & Norman 2016 more generally, and for applications in burial archaeology see Chesson 2016; Nilsson Stutz 2016a). Similarly, Chris Fowler’s work on personhood, which problematized the use of contemporary categories in prehistoric contexts, took its point of departure in burials (Fowler 2004). A significant part of the focus on ritual practice also emerged from burial studies (e.g. Williams 1998; Gansum 2002; Nilsson Stutz 2003, 2008a) and was later applied to other materials (Berggren & Nilsson Stutz 2010). The understanding of the body (e.g. Hamilakis *et al.*, 2002; Nilsson Stutz 2003, 2008b; Sofaer 2006; Fahlander 2008), religion and belief (e.g. Kaliff & Østigaard 2013; Tarlow 2010), and memory (e.g. Artelius 2004; Williams 2003, 2006) all deeply engaged burials as key sources. In rare cases studies combined social theory with methodological approaches and attitudes such as microarchaeology (Fahlander 2003), bioarchaeological approaches such as archaeoethanatology (Nilsson Stutz 2003; Torv 2016), or more traditional osteology (Sofaer 2006, Larsson 2009), but as a rule the transdisciplinary theoretical and methodological overlaps remained rare.

It would be a grave mistake (pun initially not consciously intended) to assume that recent insights about lived experience in the past were constructed exclusively through engagement with philosophical or critical social theory. Methodologically driven or empirical approaches in bioarchaeology and forensic science have provided the foundation for scientific studies of disability (Hubert 2000), illness (Martin & Osterholtz 2016), and mortality and violence (Martin & Frayer 1997; Martin *et al.* 2012). Where scientific bioarchaeology has productively yielded detailed results, we can see that it has not been necessary to frame questions about lived experience in a more developed, general theoretical argument about bodily affect, identity, and power, for example. Still, I want to point out that the divide between the humanities and natural

sciences in burial archaeology continues to constitute a problem. While interest in method and theory overlaps between “bioarchaeologists” more focused on natural science and “burial archaeologists” more interested in discussion and debate about theoretical arguments, the difficulty or lack of communication across academic networks is still striking. Bioarchaeologists rarely show up in the same conference sessions, or even at the same conferences, as those working on death and ritual in the more humanities-driven scholarly traditions described above. This division within the archaeology of death and burial has been – and remains – a lasting challenge.

## REDEFINITIONS: NEW PATHS

The archaeology of death and burial seems to have several interesting invitations to redefine itself. At this moment it is unclear what will happen, but I suggest that a few interesting directions stand out. In this section I focus on trends in how the archaeology of burial is intersecting with the archaeology of death and the dead. The following section takes up developments in the meeting between burial archaeology and archaeological science.

One important trend going forward is the reconsideration of the exceptional and the normative. Burial archaeology tends, implicitly, to be viewed as spectacular. As a privileged material source in archaeology – often involving empirically well-defined closed contexts and intricate associations of artefacts, structures, and trace residues with human remains – burials tend to be rare in many periods. When we find them, we tend to “make the most of them”, through both laboratory analysis and interpretation. Perhaps this is why scholars and the public give the exceptional more attention than the less spectacular normative find or feature. Rich, well-preserved and monumental burials are chosen to represent the past, while the masses of less spectacular remains are overlooked. But systematic and professional contract archaeology, as well as explicit theoretical frameworks (Nilsson Stutz 2003, 2008a), invite us to reconsider the *ritually repeated* and *socially non-negotiable* in the more common burials within our samples. Normative ritual practices may in fact be just that because they are so deeply and extensively structuring (Nilsson Stutz 2003:322ff).

As a part of this reassessment of the important current – and possibly future – developments in archaeological scholarship devoted to burials, I point out another growing trend – one that also brings together methods and social theory perspectives emphasizing how the living handle death

and the dead. This trend involves bringing to the fore previously understudied archaeological materials. These are sources that we have tended to marginalize, because they seem to pose unusual methodological or theoretical challenges to analysis and interpretation. These include “deviant graves” (Murphy 2008; Reynolds 2014) and cremations (Kaliff & Østigaard 2013; Kuijt *et al.* 2014; Thompson 2015). While deviant burials may be spectacular – and at the very least interesting because they are exceptional by definition – their place within recent archaeological efforts to capture a broader range of mortuary practices is crucial. Deviant burials have been overlooked – left in boxes in storage facilities – precisely because they pose unusually stubborn difficulty for fitting them into the expected hypotheses or “big stories”. The opposite challenge has affected cremations. Through their seeming banality and less-than-spectacular appearance (which probably affects their visibility in museums when compared to inhumations), cremated remains and their archaeological contexts have simply suffered from being overshadowed by other burial categories in archaeology. Now, a surge in scholarship deliberately shining a light on traces of cremation practices is currently making up for past omissions, as we more seriously consider diversity in how the living ritually respond to death.

When we extend our attention even further beyond the constructed disciplinary expectations and favoured categories, burial archaeology is further nourished and becomes increasingly complex. Inquiry into grave robbing in the past (Klevnäs 2015), along with other forms of post-depositional manipulation of mortuary deposits (Weiss Krejci 2001), extends burial archaeology into a more encompassing discipline of engagement with the dead and with death. Amy Gray Jones’s work on burning and cut-marks on Mesolithic human skeletal elements or fragments from the Netherlands and the UK focuses on remains deposited or discarded in a range of mixed contexts that are anything but formal graves (Gray Jones 2011). Similarly the systematic study of isolated human bones in archaeological period associated with primary inhumation, like the Mesolithic (e.g. Torv 2016) challenge tacitly accepted, longstanding archaeological categories. We can expand our understanding of the treatment of the dead in significant ways, as we push ourselves to reflect on and perhaps even deconstruct our definitions of what a grave is, how to identify and understand it archaeologically. While this kind of scholarship has been present in archaeology for a long period of time, I suggest that the time is now ripe for more systematic consideration of the small, difficult, diffuse, and deviant traces of the dead – and how the living dealt with death and the dead in the past. I predict that such scholarly concern will have a lasting impact on the field, both methodologically and conceptually.

Linked to this expansion of the field and its definitions, another new subfield is emerging from the archaeology study of death and burial – one that focuses on human suffering, often in contexts extending well beyond interments or bone deposits. Material traces of atrocities, suffering, and structural violence have been studied in Zoe Crossland’s work on the disappeared in Argentina (Crossland 2000) and Layla Renshaw’s investigation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (Renshaw 2011). This kind of archaeological inquiry addresses death in an urgent way. It further expands our notions of the archaeology of death and burial, and not just because archaeological methods are applied to recent mass grave contexts – and the human remains that bear witness to large-scale violence that can also be evidence for war crimes. Archaeological work on the Holocaust has stressed the need for the collection and curation of the physical evidence of sites of death, without necessarily excavating graves (Sturdy Coles 2013). Archaeological approaches have also been used to document the otherwise-invisible deaths of marginalized people, in situations of structural violence that are not only historically recent, but also contemporary. Jason de Leon’s work on the migrants who move across and sometimes perish in the Sonoran desert, on their way into the United States, provides the opportunity for archaeology to take on an important role in discourse over social justice (de Leon 2012, 2013). The emerging archaeology of the refugee crisis in Europe provides a similar pathway to a social-justice-oriented discipline, where the realm of death serves to underline the urgency of the suffering and the reality of structural violence shaping and reshaping contemporary nation states, their relationships, and the identities of the people living and dying on their soil, shores, and waters. It is possible that it has never been more urgent than in these contexts to develop theoretical and methodological approaches that formulate questions, to collect, present, and evaluate archaeological or forensic evidence dealing with structural violence and death, while also providing an account that is accessible to the public. This can only be done within a transdisciplinary archaeology of death. Beyond the political urgency – we are seeing that archaeological methods can contribute to studying ongoing political developments – it is also theoretically vital to reflect on how the archaeology of death can expand outside the realm of the place of deposit, and instead build a competence to approach the process of death.

A final thread in ongoing development within burial archaeology connects to the emerging field of archaeological theory: the move away from the human-centric perspective, towards what in different forms has been labelled the post-humanist (Fahlander 2014) or symmetrical archaeology (Witmore 2007; Olsen & Witmore 2015, Lindström 2015;



Flohr Sørensen 2016). Some of these points of departure are beginning to be implemented in the study of burials by placing humans in a more balanced social relationship with other animals (Overton & Hamilakis 2013, Fahlander 2014). Decentring or broadening our focus – from human practices, individuals, and societies to a wider view of ecological or material relationships and interactions – may require us to recalibrate our approaches to burials more broadly. Yet, as we ponder the “symmetrical turn” in the archaeology of death and burial, it is important to also consider how radical a post- or transhuman shift may actually be, at least on a methodological and implicit theoretical level. While many burial archaeologists have taken it largely for granted that our inquiry focuses on humanity – with neither a balanced view nor one in which people are on the margins of the story – it would be a mistake to assume that the dead human being(s) in the grave were necessarily their focus of attention. In many situations quite the opposite has been true. The focus on the dead human being has actually been quite rare in burial archaeology, and as a dominating theme it caught on for a relatively short period of time in the archaeology of the 1990s and early 2000s. A quick look at the ways in which burials are often documented reveals that archaeologists in the past and still today have a much greater interest in the architecture, features and artefacts that constitute the burial context than in the human remains, which define the burial context as such. In Sweden, at least, this may be due to the fact that few Swedish archaeologists are also specialized in the study of human remains, and therefore, they continue to pay more attention to the traces that interest them the most.

This omission of the human being in the grave may also contribute to burial archaeology’s ongoing ethical challenges, a topic to which I turn in the following discussion of scientific methodologies in the archaeology of death and burial.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCIENCE

In recent decades, burial archaeology has found a new welcoming partner in the expanding field of archaeological science. Bioarchaeological and laboratory methods can yield detailed observations and information, helping to expand the inferences that can be drawn about chronology, environments, human populations, and societies. The potential of ancient DNA analysis, isotope and trace element analysis, and high-resolution accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon dating has added to biological anthropological analyses of demography and life history patterns. This has simply led to an increased focus on and demand for

human remains and associated burial materials. However, this increased demand and attention has not systematically resulted in a focus on death and burial in the questions asked, since this research tends to use burials as the source, but not as the object of study *per se*.

How new scientific methods are received within the broader discipline of archaeology varies. The most important measures appear to be how useful archaeologists perceive a method to be for their own purposes, and to what extent they feel that it requires specialization. Archaeoethanatology (Duday *et al.* 1990; Duday 2009) is an example of an archaeological science method that – so far – has received a relatively lukewarm reception, in Sweden and in many other archaeological communities. Developed since the 1970s in France, this taphonomic approach combines detailed observation and documentation of the position of the human remains in the field with knowledge in biology about how a human body decomposes after death. It requires specialist training in human skeletal anatomy, field documentation, and description, providing a protocol for excavation, recording, and interpretation. Similar to taphonomic methods used to study how deposits of lithic artefacts formed in Palaeolithic depositional contexts (Dibble *et al.* 1997; Villa 1982), the archaeoethanatomical analysis focuses on reconstructing what happened from the moment of death of the individual up until the moment of excavation, separating out natural processes of decomposition and decay from the effects of the cultural practices of mortuary ritual. Holding photographic resolution equal, the archaeoethanatomical approach always allows for a more detailed and secure reconstruction than traditional archaeological methods, although bioarchaeological methods of anatomical element siding and analyses of size asymmetries are important laboratory complements for studying features with commingled remains. Using anatomical articulations as a baseline, archaeoethanatology records information retrieved from considering the three-dimensional position of individual human skeletal elements and their (three-dimensional) associations with each other and artefacts and features in the burial context. The result is that interpretations of how the dead body was handled are founded on a careful evaluation of evidence, supported by comparisons with other documented burial contexts. Often, taphonomic indicators support one hypothesis to the exclusion of others. Of course, sometimes alternative explanations cannot be discriminated. (For example, were the positions of the ribs, clavicles, and humeri influenced by wrapping with now-decomposed leather or textile, or were they influenced by the body's placement in a particularly narrow grave pit?)

While the method has been successfully implemented in French archaeology over the past several decades, including within salvage ar-

archaeology, it has only slowly been introduced in northern European archaeology (Nilsson Stutz 2003; Peyroteo Stjerna 2016; Torv 2016). Even in cases of very successful applications, non-specialists often seem to consider archaeothanatological results to be more interpretive or speculative than thoroughly deductive. This is often the case when archaeothanatological results contradict previous interpretations. I suggest that archaeothanatology provides an important example of a thoroughly transdisciplinary approach – in method and theory – linking bioarchaeological and other burial archaeology traditions – where an added layer of observation (in this case, anatomical aspects of bone element orientation) requires specialization but adds substantially increased scientific information. In comparison, results generated by laboratory methods requiring expensive equipment and similarly specialized competence are often met with less ambivalence by a more general archaeological audience. Perhaps the difference in attitude lies in the fact that, as opposed to most other scientific archaeological approaches to archaeology, archaeothanatology is focused specifically on reconstructing mortuary practices. This is a focus of burial archaeology that – since Hawkes’ “ladder of inference” – has not been considered an object for scientific archaeological inquiry. This misunderstanding, deliberate or not, is extremely unfortunate. It holds back the impact of training, methods, and results and that could greatly improve both excavation and interpretation protocols in Swedish burial archaeology.

While archaeothanatology sometimes suffers from a lack of confidence among Swedish archaeologists, lab-based analysis has the opposite problem. I call this “White Coat Syndrome”. The term traditionally refers to the phenomenon of spiking blood pressure in the doctor’s office – something that is interpreted as a physiological manifestation of anxiety or stress in patient settings. Sometimes this fear and anxiety even prevents patients from seeking care. I propose here to extend this expression to encompass the contradictory combination of veneration and disrespect (see Lidén & Eriksson 2013) that archaeologists and the public exhibit in their relationship to archaeological sciences. Non-specialists may yearn for highly detailed, technical laboratory results. Yet, they may also view lab-based archaeological sciences as too objective, and thus rigid, not able to theorize and not able to nuance and problematize. This is unfair. Thus, human remains – with their physico-chemical traces of biological life histories and ecological contexts – allow “new and improved” assays that can reveal previously inaccessible information about diet, migration, and genetics. All of these new data feed into our knowledge about the past. They can potentially be used to discern a range of biosocial patterns in the past, from individual life

histories and mobility (e.g. Eriksson 2007) to social and demographic changes on broad geographic or chronological scales, including genetic relationships among archaeologically defined groups (e.g. Malmström *et al.* 2009, Malmström *et al.* 2015, Skoglund *et al.* 2012), speciation and populations (Simonti *et al.* 2016; Vernot *et al.* 2016), and cultural food practices (e.g. Lidén *et al.* 2004, Eriksson 2004; Fornander *et al.* 2008), including breastfeeding (Lidén *et al.* 2003). In the face of “White Coat Syndrome”, the transdisciplinary collaboration that would make best use of laboratory methods and encourage source-critical consideration of a range of analytical results often falls by the wayside. The gaps between burial archaeology networks more focused on natural science and those situated in the humanities (any post-human turn notwithstanding) are reproduced.

There is no doubt that growing possibilities in archaeological science broaden the scope of burial archaeology. As Lidén and Eriksson (2013) point out, good scientific inquiry is driven by research questions, dependent in turn on transdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. Scientific research should not be driven simply by access to specific materials curated in various collections. The results of laboratory or field analyses allow us to place burials within a broader context and intersect with themes of social organization (including age, class, gender, etc.), subsistence, identity, population dynamics, and environment more broadly. While archaeological science approaches widen the scope of burial archaeology, they do have a tendency to reinforce the bias against focusing on the study of death and dying. With a few notable exceptions, the context of death is almost invisible in isotope or genetic studies of human remains. Here, the dynamics of knowledge production is not necessarily driven by a conscious strategy or standpoint. It is partly the result of how funding agencies and “citation politics” drive academic careers today. Whether we like it or not, the natural science fields have been much faster and much better at adapting to the new metrics and results-oriented academic landscape than have the humanities. The impact and reach of natural (and often laboratory-driven) science research is greater than that of theoretical discussions about structural violence or the semiotics of ecological relationships. And since scientific studies superficially appear to provide clear answers (a view not necessarily shared by their authors, many of whom have highly nuanced, critical views about knowledge production), they enjoy an aura of the high-status, highly competent researcher. The public may privilege orderly, clear scientific knowledge over uncertain, tangled theoretical debate. Yet, archaeological colleagues may also privilege laboratory scientific results, glossing over the complicated transdisciplinary theory neces-

sary for its coherence, in order to advance their own theoretical claims and arguments.

The cost of allowing the natural science-humanities gap to persist – paying only lip service or ignoring the importance of transdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration – is substantial, coming into focus in the area of ethics. Some laboratory scientific methods can yield reliable results from human remains, without critically considering the archaeological context, broader theoretical questions, or general archaeological competence at all. Genetic analyses provide the most conspicuous examples, where it seems that a study – involving exhumation and destructive sampling of human mineralized tissues – may be carried out just because it can be. Discussion of such work is relevant here, because these analyses rely on material recovered and documented in archaeological burial contexts. Ancient DNA (aDNA) work is currently being supported by large grants, with the results published in prestigious journals. On balance, the research questions may be entirely worthwhile (e.g., the demographic history of Late Pleistocene Europe as discussed in Fu *et al.* 2016; Qiaomei *et al.* 2016; Poznik *et al.* 2016), but aDNA studies tend to ignore the expertise and scholarship in archaeology even for background and framing purposes. (In this respect, the Swedish ATLAS project provides a welcome contrast, as it includes multiple archaeologists in collaboration with geneticists.) In claiming new knowledge – rather than confirmation of existing hypotheses using independent lines of observation and evidence – aDNA studies seem to be carried out in a monodisciplinary bubble, while exploiting archaeological materials – and specifically burials – as a raw material for study. This kind of research is no longer archaeological science, but rather genetics based on archaeological sources. But it has a tremendous impact on archaeological practice and research production at the moment. This practice of mining burials for material may also cause ethical challenges to the field of archaeology down the road.

Indeed, when predicting the future of the field, I would argue that the archaeological sciences have grasped the trophy of funding, citation rates, and public attention. Work emphasizing natural science frameworks and methods will continue to dominate the field in the coming years. But I want to add a note of caution, and an invitation to transdisciplinary collaboration. In general, more thorough, shared theoretical and methodological understanding will make research questions more innovative and resonant with a wider scholarly community and public. Moreover, while the research questions that focus on the living past are important and highly interesting, we have to resist the kind of methodological bias that laboratory archaeology can favour, in glossing

over the important fact that burials are the material remains of mortuary rituals. With the dominating position of archaeological sciences in contemporary burial archaeology, I would look forward to seeing this work incorporate a more explicit interest also in questions of the archaeology of death and bring forth an ever more convincing, diverse transdisciplinary archaeology.

## GRAVESIDE MANNERS: ETHICS

As I have discussed above, there remains a tension between a burial archaeology that focuses on the living societies and lived experiences in the past and an archaeology that considers death and the dead, and I have suggested that resolving this tension can help to address ethical challenges to studying burials. I take up that point in this section. The influence of activists and community stakeholders, along with broader public attitudes, continue to challenge what archaeology had long taken as an unquestionable right to excavate, study, curate, and exhibit remains from burial contexts. This shift has been going on now for several decades. The calling of burial archaeology into question is part of a larger post-colonial discourse, in which oppressed and marginalized peoples claim the right to control their cultural heritage and treat the remains of their ancestors according to their cultural values. In fact, many today view this as a human right and a matter of social justice (Barkan 2002). The movement has grown over the past several decades and is partially regulated by laws in several countries, including the United States and Australia. But even in countries where no such legislation exists, these positions are starting to affect archaeological and anthropological practice, as well as museum policies. Up until quite recently, Swedish archaeology was only marginally affected, but in the past decade the debate has gained momentum, especially with regard to Sami burials (Harlin 2007; Nilsson Stutz 2007; Ojala 2009, 2010; Svestad 2009), ethnographic collections (Sjöstrand 2008), and occasionally the rights of other minorities, reflected by the case of the remains of the Jewish man Levin Dombrowski (Orrenius 2005). All of these topics have been featured in stories carried by national media. But questions of ethics have also been raised more discretely in local media regarding, for example, medieval burials of the majority population, where the removal and excavation has been questioned (e.g. Hammar 2011; Nilsson Stutz 2012). The unease about what we do as burial archaeologists is therefore present among many different publics and community stakeholders. At the same time, it is also clear that

nation-level public attitudes tend to respond positively to the exhibition of human remains from archaeological contexts in Swedish museums (Nilsson Stutz 2016b). The situation is thus complex and occasionally contradictory.

Complex or not, the ethics of burial archaeology cannot – and certainly should not – be ignored in any corner of the world where archaeology is carried out. The *questions* asked in this debate by non-archaeologists are very reasonable. Why disturb burials and ritual deposits? Why should finds and human remains be stored, sampled, and analysed? Under what circumstances, if any, should human remains be displayed to the public? As archaeologists we must be able to meet these questions in ways that are respectful, intelligent, informed, and nuanced. While we don't have to agree, we must figure out for ourselves exactly how we, as ethically driven scholars, justify our work and make it accessible and valuable also to other stakeholders. This process should start with the research design and rationale, that is, long before the encounter with an antagonist. Part of this reflection must be the recognition that these remains are not any old rubbish pit from the past, but the materialized traces of meaningful ritual practices. This kind of awareness does not have to mean that anyone involved in burial archaeology research should shift their scholarly focus to an archaeology of death. But taking professional responsibility to understand why ritually handling death and the dead stands at the centre of politically questioning the legitimacy of burial archaeology will shore up the ethical foundations of the field. There would be scholarly dividends, too, as a wider academic consideration of mortuary ritual, death, and the dead would help to loosen up the subdisciplinary boundaries with which we are already struggling in burial archaeology.

I have sought to problematize the debate over repatriation of human remains and associated burial artefacts in Sweden and internationally (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2007, 2013). I refer to those papers for a more detailed discussion of ethics and complex stakeholder interests in cultural heritage – including that represented by human remains – but for purposes of emphasizing the issues brought up in this essay, I want to bring to the fore the importance, yet again, of recognizing the burial context of our source materials. When archaeologists and other scientists use burial contexts to mine data – without paying explicit attention to the fact that these are materialized traces of ritual treatment of the dead in past societies – they risk ignoring valuable insight into the complexity of their material, but they also risk reproducing an image of burial archaeology as treasure hunting or grave looting. This will affect our results and our ethical standards negatively.

## CONCLUSION: BUILDING A COMPETENT ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH AND BURIAL

Burial archaeology continues to be a dynamic field that captures all the complexity of archaeology more broadly, ranging from the natural sciences to the humanities, continuously evolving to adapt to new and urgent research questions, even as it faces and has the potential to be transformed by especially urgent ethical challenges. In general, burial archaeology can be likened to a concentrate of archaeological scholarship, and as such it also reflects a remarkable range of current problems and possibilities. At the outset of this article I identified three partially intertwined challenges for burial archaeology today, and going forward, I propose that we address them head-on, in order to develop a more competent burial archaeology.

First, we need to understand and articulate the relationship between burial archaeology and the archaeology of death. The former uses archaeological sources from burial contexts to enrich our understanding of the past, while the latter specifically seeks to understand how people handled death and the dead. Both of these fields of research are important and valuable. What I emphasize is that they inform one another. While the archaeology of death has always built on burial archaeology, burial archaeology has not always explicitly considered the archaeology of death. In Swedish archaeology we are currently witnessing the pendulum swing back, from a post-processual theoretical dominance in the 1990s, to a more recent, growing longing for hard science, often seen as an antidote to balance the scales of theoretical exploration and interpretation. The archaeological sciences have provided much balance and are bringing invaluable data to burial archaeology. But this now brings a risk of overshadowing other research. This work almost exclusively focuses on “hard results” at the expense of the more elusive issues of religion, belief, and emotion. Ultimately, through the academic practices that shape our discipline, we reproduce an archaeology that remains very tied to both Hawkes’ ladder of inference and the more-broadly applied value system in society that too easily writes off humanities and its questions as less reliably answered and less important. A healthy dose of empiricism will do us good, but we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Wanting solid science and empirically grounded research does not necessarily mean retreating to the lower steps of Hawkes’ ladder. But the success of one approach is not to blame for the retreat of another. Questions reaching into the higher levels of inference can be posed with systematic approaches that carefully scaffold methods, materials and theories in a way that is synchro-



nized (Nilsson Stutz 2003). It is our responsibility to do this work. The relationship between burial archaeology and the archaeology of death must be levelled. Only by recognizing that the material we work with is unique and complex, and that this complexity relates to the specific mortuary practices, can we fully understand and evaluate it.

This first ambition of bridging burial archaeology and the archaeology of death, leads us to the second recommendation, which is to aim for more successful transdisciplinarity. While we cannot all do everything, we must develop a literacy across the subdisciplines and truly respect one another's theoretical and methodological competence. A broader cross-disciplinary literacy seems to be countered assiduously by increasing fissioning and specialization within archaeology. This can be seen in the practice of the scholarship, including the training of future specialists in different academic departments, in the distribution of papers relating to burial archaeology and the archaeology of death across different conference sessions and scientific journals, which in turn have surprisingly little overlap in audience, not to mention terminology and epistemology. The problem is not the diversity *per se*. The greatest challenge is that while there is a considerable and constantly growing competence within these different fields, there is too little overlap. This mirrors a general state within archaeology, often involving growing division between natural science and humanistic traditions, a theme treated with great insight in a recent keynote paper with comments in this journal (Lidén & Eriksson 2013, and comments therein). In practice, this recommendation means reading broadly, attending each other's sessions and conferences, and ultimately initiating collaborations. This may sound very basic, but the current state of affairs suggests that it needs to be stated.

The final and necessary step for a competent burial archaeology is to bring to the fore professional ethics. Each archaeologist working with burials or with material from burial contexts needs to formulate their ethical position after carefully reflecting on the different arguments and the complicated, often competing claims from community stakeholders. This work should be done explicitly at the fundamental levels of professional training and education, workplace policies, and research proposals. Mortuary deposits, in whatever shape they may come, must be considered as potentially ritual, emotional and meaningful features. This does not mean that we cannot conduct research on them, but when we do we need to be mindful of just how powerful they are at producing emotionally charged identities, relationships, and narratives about the past. Burials should not be taken in practice as simply scientific data mines.

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I want to thank the editors for extending this honour and inviting me to write this keynote. I took on this massive topic from a personal angle, and it reflects my interest and passions more than it necessarily represents the entire field accurately. Most of all I want to state with clarity that I am bound to have missed recognizing impactful work of many colleagues within the field, and I want you to know that I acknowledge this fully as *my* shortcoming and *not theirs*.

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