

KEEP ASKING QUESTIONS

Chris Fowler

Newcastle University
School of History, Classics & Archaeology
Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom
chris.fowler@ncl.ac.uk

I would like to start by congratulating Liv Nilsson Stutz on her impressive, wide-ranging review which weaves some important points into a cogent argument for an increasingly transdisciplinary archaeology of death and burial. I agree with most of her arguments and will take them as grounds for further exploration. I will sound a quiet note of caution about crystallizing (sub)disciplinary boundaries and favour asking questions rather than defining disciplinary territories.

DEATH AND MORTUARY PRACTICE

I want to start by applauding Nilsson Stutz's emphasis on the importance of studying the archaeology of death, including funerary ritual, mortuary practice and mourning, rather than just burials. Studies of burial contexts can, and should, treat them as remains of funerary rituals and related mortuary activities that had important personal effects in the past. To pick an example, studies of patterns and variations in Early Bronze Age burials in Britain have long highlighted "the ritually repeated". Recent work has sought not only to refine empirical detail, chronology and sequence, for the remains of such rituals, but also to fo-

cus interpretation on the significance of patterns, variations and changes in such practice. This includes considering cultural interaction and cultural change, but also understanding funerals and other mortuary activities as emotive, evocative and affective performances in which the precise *sequential* reconfigurations of bodies, objects, substances, funerary architecture (and smells, sounds and movements) had specific social, cultural, personal and political effects (e.g. Appleby 2013; Fowler 2013a; 2015). Considering funerals as rites of passage with different stages is, I think, particularly important in bridging death and burial as we interpret such burials and burial sites (*ibid.*; cf. Garwood 2011). Thinking about the funerary context allows us to think further about processes of coping with certain deaths in the past, and about cosmology, and the presentation of personhood and community in the face of death.

Nilsson Stutz's piece stresses the ethical responsibilities the archaeology of death and burial bears and also gives some crucial examples of why we *should* study death and burials in the recent past. I would like to underline the importance of not only explaining the archaeological value of research into (even prehistoric) death and burial but also actively researching its wider value. For instance, it may be that the archaeology of death, dying and relating to the dead has significant value for contextualizing contemporary experiences of death. An innovative interdisciplinary AHRC-funded project, "Continuing Bonds: Archaeology meets End-of-Life Care" led by archaeologist Karina Croucher in collaboration with palliative care specialists Christina Faull and Laura Middleton-Green, is currently assessing the value of discussing mortuary practices that we know about from the archaeological record or ethnographic study with people in contemporary Britain coping with death and dying, particularly care-givers (<http://www.brad.ac.uk/research/faculties/life-sciences/areas-centres/continuing-bonds/>; <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FM008266%2F1>). Assessing the value and efficacy of uses of archaeological evidence in museums and schools to broach topics such as death and religion seems another important area of research for further developing the usefulness of the archaeology of death and burial.

METHOD AND THEORY

I agree that "growing possibilities in archaeological science broaden the scope of burial archaeology", while sharing some of the concerns Nilsson Stutz outlines in the paragraphs following that statement. I think these concerns are surmountable, and am cautiously optimistic about the role of scientific analyses in archaeology in the near future. Some new scien-

tific techniques are being developed specifically to answer questions we have about the practice of burial and the wider treatment of the dead. One notable example is the study of bone histology alongside contextual information on the positioning of bones and the burial microenvironment to explore the possibility that some of the dead in Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain were artificially preserved or “mummified” (Booth *et al.* 2015). This could have significant implications for how we interpret past treatments of the dead, funerary ritual and mortuary practice, and experiences of death. But Nilsson Stutz levels her critique at aDNA analysis because of a concern that some research treats burials simply as “data mines” and offers nothing to the study of the mortuary sphere or pays no attention to the social context of death and burial. This is certainly a major concern, although I welcome the new data that aDNA and similar scientific analyses can provide because they form vital new strands of evidence for archaeologists to weave into our understandings of the past, *including* death and mortuary practices. It is vital that the methods, results and limitations of these studies are clearly explained and that they do not drive interpretations at the expense of other kinds of archaeological evidence – or other questions and perspectives that archaeologists have (cf. González Ruibal 2014) – but are, as Nilsson Stutz argues, properly integrated with such evidence. Genetic patterns have to be set alongside archaeological patterns, including mortuary practices and the material media deployed therein, if they are to be properly understood (e.g. Hofmann 2015). I do not *necessarily* see it as a problem to use results from funerary contexts to understand other archaeological phenomena and to answer questions other than those about funerary practice – rather, the interplay between different mortuary practices and other features of life seems important to understanding each. Combining techniques (including osteoarchaeology, stable isotope analyses, and aDNA analysis) can improve our understanding of the communities of the dead (including the nature and extent of their biological relatedness to one another) and help contextualize past decisions about how to treat the dead (e.g. how or to what extent biological relatedness and aspects of lived identity related to mortuary practice). Surely archaeologists should assess – and, where possible, integrate – the results of these kinds of studies and other archaeological data, even if that means leaving – or better, extending – our existing areas of expertise? And, crucially, if aDNA results *are* published by geneticists without proper consideration of the archaeological evidence, then it falls to archaeologists to point this out (e.g. Bánffy *et al.* 2012), write critiques, and incorporate that data into a fuller, richer analysis – including through balanced collaborative research.

I do not have the same significant experience of archaeothanatology (or *anthropologie de terrain*) as Nilsson Stutz, and was surprised to read that its adoption has been retarded by a perception that it is less scientific than biochemical analyses. Its methods and results seem to me extremely valuable. Its potential and limitations differ from, say, aDNA analysis because of the conditions needed to carry out the analysis, and I wonder if this is also a factor in its rate of adoption. I can select bones excavated in the early twentieth century AD for aDNA analysis from a museum collection even if the archive accompanying those remains is light on contextual detail (“recovered from one of the three cists containing Food Vessels at...”, for instance). The human remains can be radiocarbon-dated to verify they are indeed from the period in question. It would not be possible to apply archaeothanatology in such a case. I am aware that it can be applied to remains from older excavations where there are good quality records (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2003), and if the potential was there to apply it to material I am studying, I would certainly seek a specialist to work with. New excavations are also repeatedly needed, I think, to progress and practise techniques, including archaeothanatology, to explore the fine traces of mortuary processes, rites of passage, and interactions with the remains of the dead in order to assess theories about these, to ensure physical and chemical analyses of human remains and artefacts have equally rich contextual data from burial sites, and ensure that soils and palaeoenvironmental remains can be properly scrutinized and interpreted. There are of course good examples of such work (in Britain some important ones come from development-led archaeology), and museum collections are currently supporting inspiring new research discoveries about past artefacts and human remains. The ethical questions concerning excavating human remains (and curated monuments) of course need to be addressed, and weighed up contextually case by case. But excavation seems a vital focal point for the archaeology of death and burial of prehistoric Britain, and if this is only rarely practised then the more humanities-focussed interpretative approaches are forced to rely on the excavation reports of yesteryear and whatever techniques can be brought to bear on the remains those yielded. Should that happen, there is a risk of seeming secondary to scientific techniques, rather than setting research agendas which require developments in such techniques. So, again, perhaps we need to outline what the most important questions are here and explain what combinations of techniques allow us to best answer them.

The post-humanist or symmetrical turn may not *necessarily* involve a radical methodological shift (although it does mean rethinking how these methods actually operate to produce knowledge, and it can stimulate methodological change), but I think asking the questions that these

approaches do is not only productive within archaeology; it also offers potential for further engagement with scholars from the humanities (and the arts) *and* the hard sciences where there has also been a resurgent interest in process theories, becoming and relationality. I am being highly speculative here, but perhaps there is fertile ground for further *interpretative and theoretical* developments, not just methodological intersections, across different disciplines – for instance, by identifying and answering shared thematic and theoretical questions about being, becoming and ceasing to be, leaving a trace and being remembered.

EXPERTISE, COLLABORATION AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

Another key theme in the article is transdisciplinarity. Nilsson Stutz is concerned about death and burial being “cordoned off” from other subjects, and notes that while “we cannot do everything” we should each be literate in as many of the (sub)fields that intersect with what we do as possible. I agree. Already interdisciplinary, archaeology expands continually as it absorbs new ideas, practices, techniques and technologies. Enticing experts from other disciplines into archaeology (or from other sub-fields into studies of death and burial) and entering unknown waters ourselves are key. And to paraphrase Eddy (2005), we do not only need interdisciplinary teams combining existing specialisms, we also need “single interdisciplinary people inventing new ways to look at the world”. Otherwise, collaboration between specialists with clearly-defined territories of responsibility can reinforce disciplinary boundaries and restrict exploration (*ibid.*). There might be a risk that the “bridging” of burial archaeology and the archaeology of death that Nilsson Stutz calls for could create another set of specialists, and another discrete sub-discipline of “the archaeology of death and burial”. Rather than transdisciplinarity this could create another boundary to work across when appreciating death and mortuary practice in wider context (e.g. the routines and technologies of daily life or long-term changes in landscapes). If this happens the process of “fissioning” that Nilsson Stutz identifies would continue with “the archaeology of death and burial” becoming the latest particle thrown out by the chain reaction. But I think Nilsson Stutz’s prescription for what we actually need to do to promote transdisciplinarity is convincing: broader, more eclectic reading (prehistoric archaeologists rarely seem to cite work from the journals *Mortality* and *Death Studies*, for instance (cf. Fowler in press)), attending conferences and sessions outside of our specialisms, as well as more discussion with

colleagues working in areas outside of those we are already familiar with. A broad-spectrum, open, and diverse approach, in which we can shift from considering one technique, one perspective, to others, and see what can be gained from that process, seems most useful to me. Perhaps we need to define our questions, and seek new ways to answer them – to be flexible and explore new avenues – more than we need to firmly define our specialisms? Weighing up the challenges we need to overcome, as Nils-son Stutz does here, is a necessary step in forming such new questions.

REFERENCES

Literature

- Appleby, J. 2013. Temporality and the Transition to Cremation in the Late Third Millennium to Mid Second Millennium BC in Britain. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23(1):83–97.
- Bánffy, E., Brandt, G. & Alt, K. 2012. ‘Early Neolithic’ Graves of the Carpathian Basin Are in Fact 6000 Years Younger – Appeal for Real Interdisciplinarity between Archaeology and Ancient DNA Research. *Journal of Human Genetics* 75:467–9.
- Booth, T., Chamberlain, A. & Parker Pearson, M. 2015. Mummification in Bronze Age Britain. *Antiquity* 89(347):1155–1173.
- Eddy, S.R. 2005. ‘Antedisciplinary’ Science. *PLoS Computational Biology* 1(1), e6. Doi: 10.1371/journal.pcbi.0010006.
- Fowler, C. 2013. *The Emergent Past: A Relational Realist Archaeology of Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, C. 2015. Continuity and Change in Northumbrian Early Bronze Age Mortuary Rites. In: Brandt, R., Prusac M. & Roland, H. (Eds.). *Death and Changing Rituals: Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices*. Pp. 45–91. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Fowler, C. in press. Personhood, the Life Course and Mortuary Practices in Mesolithic, Neolithic and Chalcolithic Europe. In Nizzo, V. (Ed.). *Archaeology and Anthropology of Death*. Proceedings of the III congress of Anthropology and Archaeology in comparison, Rome 20–22/05/2015, E.S.S., Rome.
- Garwood, P. 2011. Rites of Passage. In: Insoll, T. (Ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*. Pp. 261–84. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- González Ruibal, 2014. Archaeological Revolution(s). *Current Swedish Archaeology* 22:41–5.
- Hofmann, D. 2015. What Have Genetics Ever Done for Us? The Implications of aDNA Data for Interpreting Identity in Early Neolithic Central Europe. *European Journal of Archaeology* 18(3):454–76.

Internet sources

- Continuing Bonds: Archaeology meets End-of-Life Care. [online] Available at: <<http://www.brad.ac.uk/research/faculties/life-sciences/areas-centres/continuing-bonds/>>
- Continuing Bonds: Exploring the meaning and legacy of death through past and contemporary practice. [online] Available at: <<http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2F1008266%2F1>>