

DEATHS MATTER

Alison Klevnäs 

Stockholms universitet
Institutionen för arkeologi och antikens kultur
106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
alison.klevnas@ark.su.se

Compared to several of the keynote articles which have appeared on these pages in recent years, Liv Nilsson Stutz's essay stands out as decidedly cautious. It is, as the title suggests, aimed at bridge-building rather than debate-sparking or agenda-setting. Insofar as it sets out a programme for the future of burial archaeology, the vision is an inclusive one: it emphasizes collaboration and a widening of perspectives as much as the somewhat muted challenges it defines. This said, both the reflective tone and constructive outlook of the piece are welcome. There is no pushing of the author's own angle as the only way forward; instead care is taken to trace where and why gaps can be seen to have opened up in our practices and to suggest how they might be filled in a variety of future approaches.

Some of the caution in Nilsson Stutz's article I think reflects the wider state of burial archaeology: we are busy. From the field to synthesis and theory-building, there is a great deal of work to be getting on with. Substantial amounts of excavation are currently underway in both Sweden and Britain (the countries where my work is based). As Nilsson Stutz shows, there are many strands to mortuary archaeology, and many practical and theoretical directions are being explored. New techniques and new forms of analysis need testing and developing; projects are being devised to reconnect across the divisions which have opened up between

some specialisms in recent decades. But there is no particular sense of crisis, no urgent cry of “whither?” to be answered.

Within all this activity, Nilsson Stutz points to a wealth of recent publications and identifies several key future directions. I have no substantive disagreement with any of them. However, I will suggest below that some of the strands could be pursued further, including to points with implications which go beyond the cautious. Nilsson Stutz’s central message, that burial archaeology needs to bridge its relationship to the archaeology of death, I agree is crucial to the development of the field. In fact I would contend that it is fundamental enough to require a change in terminology: the term “mortuary archaeology” is increasingly used in place of “burial archaeology”, and I suggest this more encompassing label would better fit the kind of study Nilsson Stutz promotes.

On the need for the shift of focus from burials to death: this has been pronounced in my main research areas, Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian archaeology, in which burials traditionally provide the bulk of material for study, from which inferences about all aspects of society are drawn. It is arguably only with the several major settlement excavations published in recent decades that we are able to acknowledge by contrast the specifically ritual, mortuary nature of evidence from human burials. Exploring early medieval mortuary remains as primarily concerned with death rituals and commemoration has now become a major focus of research (e.g. Carver 2000, Effros 2002, Crawford 2004; Thompson 2004; Williams 2004, 2007, 2013).

Within this frame of seeing cemeteries as cemeteries rather than as proxies for social organization, I would also place the rise of interest in burials outside the expected norm for a given society, to which Nilsson Stutz draws attention. Not least for the early medieval period, both “deviant” and disturbed burials have become significant topics for research and debate recently, and more generally there is a willingness to discuss apparent violence towards the dead and how it may be interpreted (e.g. Zintl 2012; Klevnäs 2013, 2016; Aspöck 2011, 2015; Gardęła & Kajkowski 2013, 2016), alongside discussions of executions and the rise of judicial violence (e.g. Reynolds 2009; Tucker 2014). Here I see a shift away from the pursuit of normative burials, from the often rather functionalist goals of establishing typical rites and social types for a given society, towards a growing interest in dissention, in the complexities of competing motives, and in the roles of damage and destruction as social tools.

This is thus rather different from a move away from pursuit of the spectacular, which continues to play a prominent part in burial archaeology, notably in the “monarch-mining” headlines seen in both Britain and Sweden in the last few years. Greater acceptance of the need for pub-

licity for our discipline may even lie behind some of the increased attention now given to more peculiar finds; when examining cases of ancient grave disturbance from excavations of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the 1960s and '70s, I have often suspected that they remained unpublished or were downplayed in reports because drawing attention to them was felt to risk accusations of sensationalism. Local archaeologists reported finds of robbed or reopened burials for many decades without the phenomenon being taken up as a topic for enquiry by their university-based peers; a combination of issues of authority, class, and a perception that reopening compromised the integrity of evidence led to discussion of the widespread custom remaining off-key for decades.

This window of the discussable, of what topics may be included within academic discourse, is also related to more practical concerns. Nilsson Stutz mentions the vexed question of exactly which kinds of features constitute the burials that burial archaeology is supposed to study. Robbed and reopened graves have suffered here: failing to represent the expected category of find, they have frequently been recorded to a lower standard than apparently intact burials. More generally, as Nilsson Stutz notes, there is now much less expectation that human burials should be either well-defined or separate from other forms of deposit. More attention is now paid to reconstructing parts of mortuary practices which may leave only ephemeral traces or even be archaeologically invisible. A recent thesis by Anna Röst from Stockholm University explores these issues for the Swedish Bronze Age, where the category of burial and the expectations it rouses still hamper excavation and interpretation of often highly fragmentary cremated remains. But the underlying problem remains: if a disciplinary field defines itself based on an archaeological classification as culturally specific and nebulous as burial, there can only be problems with the terminology. For all these reasons and more, the term mortuary archaeology is to be preferred as shifting attention from the archaeological gaze to the behaviours and beliefs of past societies.

Remaining on the practical front, I would suggest that much of this recent research emphasizing the non-normative and unexpected also exposes the weaker side of research-question-led excavation. It has become more or less an axiom of archaeological teaching that excavation should be carried out to answer questions, with clear ideas about the evidence being sought. However, the researcher working on disturbed, deviant, or ephemeral burials – indeed probably any topic which involves reassessing substantial amounts of archaeological data (see also Sörman forthcoming) – soon comes upon the flaw in this proposition: excavation which is firmly directed towards a set of defined goals risks producing data which is remarkably difficult to work with for any other purpose

than that which was prescribed at the time of excavation, processing, and presentation. In particular, there was a regrettable fashion in Swedish site reports a decade or two ago for publishing only highly digested information in the form of discussions of then-topical subjects, with raw data left on CDs or microfiche. There is a role for excavation which produces data between these two poles, recognizing that it is going to be source material for analyses and discussions as yet unanticipated. If we have learnt anything from the proliferation of new analytical techniques, it is surely that each burial holds far more potential information than was dreamt of even a few decades ago, and excavation must be carried out in a way that retains as much capacity for future utility as possible, rather than limiting itself to the goals visible at present.

Turning to these new forms of analysis, Nilsson Stutz emphasizes the transdisciplinary nature of burial archaeology, a point which is surely uncontroversial in itself, and is by no means confined to this field of the discipline. Yet the practical consequences of this diversity of ways of working and thinking continue to haunt Swedish archaeology in particular – perhaps for reasons of institutional arrangements more than as true philosophical dilemmas. In his response to the CSA keynote on this topic written by Lidén and Eriksson in 2013, Andrew Meirion Jones argues that many of the problems and also their solutions lie in the design of archaeology's higher education programs. As someone who has switched between national university systems and currently finds herself teaching in Sweden, I feel strongly that early specialization is a mistake. While realistically students may only develop competence to carry out one form of analysis, it is imperative that they recognize the range of analytical approaches now available, and have at least some awareness of their applications and limitations. An open approach which recognizes the variety of archaeological evidence and ways of investigating it can only prove fruitful for both teaching and research.

Burial archaeology investigates many facets of human experience, some of which are undeniably hard to discuss in mutually comprehensible academic paradigms. Yet many of the dichotomies set up between modes of thought within the discipline seem to me false. Nilsson Stutz's discussion of the reluctant uptake of Duday's archaeothanatological reasoning (indispensable in understanding the dynamics of burial disturbance) reveals some of the complexities of which practices come to be labelled as "hard" or "natural" science within the discipline. But whatever labels are used, problems only arise when science is presented as holding the potential to provide solid answers which will rescue us from the tangled complexities of humanistic reflection. Further, I would be incautious enough to say that in my experience, criticisms which are taken

to be of “science” and its use in burial archaeology are often actually of poor scientific reasoning. Nilsson Stutz mentions the context-free use of human remains for aDNA testing; I find it problematic that we are still seeing discussions of very small numbers of individuals posited as representing or standing out from wider populations in aDNA studies, without the populations being convincingly defined, and when there is every reason to expect them to prove highly heterogeneous. These are arguments for *better* science, especially better-informed about the nature of the sampled evidence, not for *less* science.

As part of this better science, I suggest that there is a need for another turn of humanistic reflection of a type commonly seen in other branches of archaeology, but still largely lacking within archaeological mortuary studies. This concerns consideration of how our studies of past death relate to death today. For other key archaeological topics – gender, ethnicity, divisions of labour, social hierarchy – it is commonplace to recognize that discussions of past conditions are always to some extent contributions to debates about the present. For death itself, however, this remains a major lacuna, with reflective engagement with our practices and attitudes to dying and death still largely avoided within mortuary archaeology.

Exceptions are appearing: work by Tim Flohr Sørensen (e.g. Flohr Sørensen & Bille 2008, Flohr Sørensen 2009), for example, integrates archaeological methodologies with nuanced understandings of contemporary practices and attitudes, and the rapid changes they have recently undergone. Debates over the excavation and display of human remains invite reflection on modern beliefs (e.g. Sayer 2010), while archaeologists increasingly deploy their expertise in the social handling of death in wider networks, such as the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath, UK. Conversely, the breakdown of traditional norms for the disposal of the dead seen recently in Britain in particular has led to a search through past practices for inspiration for the future, as in the newly constructed long barrow at All Cannings, Wiltshire (<http://www.thelongbarrow.com/>). A newly released volume on *Archaeologists and the Dead* edited by Howard Williams and Melanie Giles addresses several of these issues. And more widely within academic archaeology, the growth of interest in diverse ontologies is to be welcomed as opening up room for a new breadth of understandings of what exists, lives, and may die.

However, the aspect of this critical reflection I wish to develop here is the place where the archaeology of death meets Nilsson Stutz’s third point: the need for researchers to acknowledge and explore their own ethical positions. For me this is where what she writes becomes potentially challenging – and thus exciting. This is where it is possible to see

the limitations of some traditional modes of inquiry and to enter areas where ethical and political stands become necessary. Nilsson Stutz gestures in this direction in her mention of the mass deaths of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, arguing that burial archaeology must connect with understandings of structural violence and death. This is a line of thought that could and should be taken much further in several ways. From the millions fleeing the war in Syria, to #BlackLivesMatter, to controversies over conflict death counting (see Burnham *et al.* 2006 and replies), to the disparities in media coverage given to western and non-western victims of terrorism, there are no more contentious issues on international and national stages at the moment than whose deaths, and thus whose lives, are seen to matter. Death as a political tool has featured on the world's front pages on a near-daily basis in recent months. In a mass-media age, issues of whose deaths should be given prominence, whose dying bears meaning, who can be killed without consequence, and which ways of killing grab global attention have never been more prominent.

There is a clear link here back to the archaeological studies of deviance and execution mentioned earlier: this is the realm of necropolitics, where archaeology has a great deal to contribute to understandings of the deep cultural histories of death in state and non-state violence, of the killing of others and self-killing, of how deaths are remembered, forgotten, re-enacted, and used by the living. We begin to explore these questions in studies of war commemoration, for example, or sanctioned violence in the rise of early states, but this is still an area in which past people are typically accorded a comfortable passivity, with questions of who faced an early demise generally ascribed to more or less inevitable conflict, disease, or hunger.

One reason for this relative lack of interest in questions of whose lives mattered in past societies is perhaps that, in both modern and past communities, risk of death is so intimately linked to the provision (or rather non-provision) of social care. And care-giving is a fundamental aspect of human sociality which has featured remarkably little in archaeological discussions of either life or death, compared to the attention given to forms of labour such as metal or craft production, fighting, or trade. Yet to understand the significance of past deaths, we need an approach which delves into the mechanisms by which humans keep each other alive – or fail to do so.

Such an approach is starting to appear in discussions of the deaths of neonates and infants: a category so manifestly dependent on the care of others that the most individualistic conception of society would struggle to deny their needs. The 2013 edition of *World Archaeology* on “The Beginnings of Life”, for example, is largely concerned with the deaths

of children and infants, along with women in childbirth. Papers explore how these deaths are caused and avoided, and their significance for the communities in which they take place. Yet for the most part, these seem to have been considered too intimate, almost certainly too feminine, fields for inquiry. In this context it is notable that marriage customs are traditionally of central interest for anthropologists and archaeologists; why are not the customs of social care around birth and infancy? Deaths in early life are part of a nexus of questions about social structures, emotion, persons and their valuations, some of which are undoubtedly difficult for archaeologists to access, but which these new studies show should not be beyond inquiry.

This call to recognize the role of care-giving in questions of whose lives and deaths matter is by no means intended to emphasize a more cooperative side of past societies. Inter-personal care is a brutally contested social arena, with far higher stakes than the costume displays or funerary monuments on which burial archaeologists traditionally focus. Issues of physical dependency, of neglect, of the costs forced on groups who are required to care for others, have a mortal urgency which luxury goods display simply lacks. This, then, is my answer Nilsson Stutz's appeal for burial archaeologists to confront death, and to consider the ethical challenges in their work: I find in myself a brewing dissatisfaction with some of the boundaries of the game, and I realize that my interest in death is in truth an interest in life, its precariousness and maintenance, and the ways that its taking matters.

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