

CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

A Reply

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I want to warmly thank Richard Bradley, Chris Fowler, Ali Klevnäs, Chris Knüsel and Terje Østigård for engaging with my paper about the current state of the archaeology of the dead. I am grateful for their thoughtful and stimulating responses and valid points, and I am sorry to admit that I may not deliver the controversial response and vigorous debate the editorial board of *Current Swedish Archaeology* is seeking. Instead I believe we are starting a conversation that uncovers some deeper lying, and previously unproblematized issues within the discipline – and some ways forward.

In her introductory remarks, Ali Klevnäs claims that my paper is cautious, even decidedly so. I disagree. It may not be polemic, but the propositions it makes are bold as it exposes a set of overlooked tensions and potential conflicts within a field, that has become so broad that most disagreement is diffused by its mere expansiveness. Klevnäs claims that it is because we are too busy. I argue that the issue runs a lot deeper than that. Like highly mobile hunters and gatherers, mortuary archaeologists tend to pick up and leave camp if things get too heated, only to congregate amongst our like-minded colleagues around our respective metaphoric water holes (be they conference sessions, professional networks, or publications) at which we can slap each other on the back and ignore

the others. Periodically tensions might flare up as we go after the big game grant money, but other than that, we can make do by simply fissioning. The result is a disciplinary field marked by low-intensity conflict, some tension, but most of all radically divergent interests, which leaves it surprisingly lacking in profile. This kind of diversity and broad range may end up being a strength, but before we get there, we need to identify the inner conflicts, so that we eventually can articulate the divergent directions into a fruitful relationship that is mutually beneficial. In my response here I will first clarify some positions made in the paper. I then move on to engage the valuable points made by the discussants on the themes of absence of evidence, the relationship between archaeology and the natural sciences, and the potential role of the field beyond archaeology itself.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BURIAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH

In this paper I make a distinction between burial archaeology and the archaeology of death. The distinction is made for rhetorical purposes in order to define the boundaries between two radically different lines of inquiry into the same archaeological category: mortuary remains. Because both take their departure in graves and other mortuary features they are often considered as the same thing, but the distinction made here stresses the fact that they ask very different research questions. What I call burial archaeology is an archaeology that uses archaeological data from burial contexts to ask questions about life in the past: who were these people? What was society like? What did they eat? What was the state of their health? Can we distinguish social identities, professional groups, performance of gender, etc? Was the society stratified? And so on. The archaeology of death, by contrast, focuses on the unique nature of the mortuary context to seek answers to how people in the past handled death. This scholarship seeks to reconstruct cosmologies, ritual practices, evidence for emotional states, etc. In her comment, Klevnäs suggests that they should be gathered under the term mortuary archaeology, and while that is certainly practical in many instances (as when discussing the field as a whole), my whole point here was to draw attention to a fundamental distinction that is often overlooked.

Knüsel warns that the division could carry the trappings of the “Two Culture Divide.” While I understand the concern, I believe this

risk is broadly overcome by the fact that the distinction is research-question-driven, and not linked to methodologies or theoretical models, which more effectively tend to separate scientific communities. Burial archaeology and the questions it encompasses has historically dominated the field and still does. Almost all bioarchaeology is focused on burial archaeology and not on the archaeology of death (a few exceptions to this rule obviously exist, archaeoethnology being an example), but so is more traditional archaeology. Burial archaeology is still the norm, but the archaeology of death is growing and has incredible potential for further development, especially in the direction of connecting archaeology more broadly with death studies in other disciplines, something that is suggested by both Chris Fowler and Ali Klevnäs in their comments as they share several interesting examples of this kind of work.

ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE AND EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

A common theme addressed in all the comments in interesting and thought-provoking ways is the fragmentary nature of our sources and the ways in which this not only implicitly shapes our understanding of the past, but also creates an implicit bias in how we approach it methodologically and theoretically in the first place.

Richard Bradley makes a strong argument to drive home the point of just how fragmentary our archaeological record is when it comes to mortuary remains. Through a range of examples from British prehistory he eloquently points to evidence of complex mortuary practices that may or may not leave any material traces that survived archaeologically. This kind of presentation of the range is in and of itself an extremely valuable contribution as it prompts us to rethink some of our fundamental categories. Similar points are made by both Klevnäs and Terje Østigård who, in different ways, raise questions about what we can even consider to be the remains of mortuary practices. What happens when our limited implicit expectations and norms are challenged? Are we able to recognize the unexpected? All these points are incontestable, but they lead further. How can we as archaeologists deal with the absence of evidence other than by explicitly recognizing the fragmentary nature of our sources? Besides acknowledging that we do not know much at all, and besides remaining open – to the best of our limited ability – to seeing evidence as it presents itself to us even when we don't expect it – what can a good archaeologist do

besides that? This has implications for how we reconstruct the past, and also, as pointed out by Bradley, Klevnäs and Østigård, it also has an ethical dimension.

Let us start by the process of making sense of the past. By acknowledging diversity and the non-normative, the archaeological record reveals a richer and multi-vocal past. By remaining more open in the interpretative process we will more likely grasp this wealth. This is true for all scientific inquiry, but perhaps it is worth stating with emphasis anyway. One way of illustrating this variation is by looking specifically at remains that are non-normative. This attention to the unexpected is especially valuable as a long-term work of filling in the blind spots of our understanding of the past, and not, as Klevnäs wisely points out, a focus on or even fascination with the spectacular (as in recent cases of monarch mining). This kind of careful recording and deep understanding of the many ways in which people deal with death and their dead allows archaeology to become a very valuable partner in the broader intellectual discussions about death, dying, and mortality.

Chris Knüsel makes a series of similar points by taking a more concrete approach. He stresses that our implicit assumptions about what we believe we see in a field situation sometimes lead us to forego interesting analyses that may allow us a much better insight into the past. As a comparison he discusses how carefully burials predating anatomically modern humans are scrutinized and documented in order to provide evidence of intentional burial. Again, the careful collection of evidence potentially would allow for the fragmented fabric of insight into the past to grow, and by carefully considering it, we would, ideally, realize its actual complexity.

The incomplete record also carries an ethical dimension. Bradley and Klevnäs make a plea for the invisible dead, for all the past lives that matter – even if we are unable to tell their stories for lack of preserved evidence (which in part at least may be linked to systems of oppression, structural violence, and lack of representation). Is it enough for us to recognize these silences in history by building them into our understanding as explicitly incomplete? Or, should we follow Østigård in opening up our understanding to an even more radical approach of recognizing that all we think should “matter” may not “matter” at all, not because it is not preserved, but because it never did matter. This longing to transpose our own cultural obsession with our particular kind of care and respect may in the end just be a self-gratifying exercise in a colonialization of the past for our own purposes. And then again, what other choice do we have? Is there a reading of the past beyond its imperfect interpreter? None of the discussants delivers a solution to this question.

THE PRIDE AND PREJUDICE OF CROSS-DISCIPLINARY ARCHAEOLOGY

In his comment Chris Fowler rightly points to the risk that my position of drawing boundaries within the field may create further entrenchment of the subdisciplines. I see his point, but I want to reassure him that this is not my intention. I simply want to make these boundaries and tensions visible in the spirit of ultimately overcoming them. Being a trans-disciplinary archaeologist I have often been frustrated by the lack of true engagement between bioarchaeology and what we, for lack of a better term, can call interpretative archaeology. The rift may have been at its most extreme in the 1990s, but while we have seen considerable rapprochement since then, some of the issues still remain.

It used to remind me of the relationships of the protagonists in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, who initially are guided more by the preconceived ideas they have of each other, than by any actual understanding, a positioning that led them down a path of conflict, misunderstanding and lost opportunities. In archaeology this is often translated into a mutual disrespect and a lack of understanding of the sophistication of "the other side". The interpretative archaeologists tended to treat bioarchaeologists as people skilled in methods that would deliver data for them to use in their more problematizing interpretative work, while the bioarchaeologists viewed their interpretative colleagues as touchy-feely talkers with no empirical grounding. Yes, I exaggerate of course, but even in less extreme forms, this resulted in a string of lost opportunities for true collaboration. To bridge the gap at the time was also a rather lonely business. It is with great satisfaction that I see the pendulum swing back to a more empirically grounded interpretative archaeology, ultimately leading to collaboration and a strengthening of both sides of this disciplinary equation. That being said, old habits do die hard, and as mentioned in the keynote, a lot of the boundaries are still visible in university training, conference sessions, citation habits, publication style, and funding politics.

To continue to mend the relationship between the sub-disciplines we must start by addressing our expectations. In his comment, Bradley discusses how burials often combine two types of sources. On the one hand we have the objects – the artefacts, and on the other we have the subject – human remains. Traditionally these are approached within different scientific paradigms, they deliver in Bradley's words "strikingly different accounts" and are a challenge to unite. He uses the many interpretations of the "Amesbury Archer" to illustrate the multiple possibilities of interpretations and claims rather critically that

the “truth” of these explanations “are neither helped nor hindered by the findings of archaeological science. To my mind that is disturbing.” While I share the conclusion that no bioarchaeological study provides the “truth” any more than the traditional archaeological approaches can, I hardly find this disturbing. Archaeological science is not a black box into which we insert our questions and then distil them into empirical truths. Archaeological science too, has its limits and must be deployed in exploratory inquiry. To return to the initial statement about the two lines of inquiry, my point is that it is not necessarily that difficult to unite them, but we need to identify the research questions that will bring them together and then conceive of the process as a true collaboration. That being said, in the current landscape of scientific publishing, citing and – perhaps most importantly – grant politics, the questions risk becoming moulded onto the needs of the natural sciences rather than engaging in a dialectic relationship between the two sub-fields. There is nothing by definition limiting in what kinds of questions can be addressed with empirical evidence (my own work that combines archaeoethnology with ritual theory is a case in point), but a shallow engagement with the methods and theories in the quest for publication in highly ranked journals that favour results over interpretations, or funding from granting agencies that are comforted by the inclusion of lab results, can, if we are not careful, lead, not only to an undermining of the humanist and social science driven questions in archaeology, but also to poor-quality science over all. We see this in projects that prioritize delivering data over articulating this data with a broad and deep understanding of the archaeological context. I referred to some ancient DNA work to illustrate this particular type of weakness. I want to reassure several of the discussants and readers that this does not equal a rejection of all ancient DNA work. Here I agree with Knüsel, who argues that while it should not be seen as the most recent Holy Grail, it is a powerful complementary tool. As Klevnäs states, these are arguments for better science, not less science. I could not agree more.

THE VAST REACH OF NEW CROSS/TRANS-DISCIPLINARITY

In his comment Fowler paraphrases Eddy and emphasizes the importance of individuals working across disciplines *who can invent new ways of looking at the world*. This is a perfect statement that I wish we can hold on to and truly value as the spirit of what it really means to

be a transdisciplinary researcher. This leads to a further reflection on the potential for cross and transdisciplinarity in mortuary archaeology.

It is probably not an overstatement to claim that all archaeologists are transdisciplinary in some sense. Our field is constantly reaching for skills, methodologies, and theories from others. Just as our excavation gear consists of tools initially made for construction workers, dentists, and cleaners, our conceptual toolbox overflows with concepts borrowed from critical literature, geography, demography, medicine, geology, art history, ritual theory, human ecology, social theory, philosophy... the list goes on. We are happy to have affairs with a range of other disciplines, and most of us move on to new partners as the next new thing comes along, leaving many of us as rather unfaithful players. The upside is that we are interested, flexible, and competent across a range of fields. Where does that leave mortuary archaeology then? The previous sections outlined the connections to the natural sciences, but the discipline needs more than that. Fowler and Klevnäs both call for an archaeology of death that engages with death studies outside of the field of archaeology. While we are quite good at reading from other fields, we are less successful at making ourselves relevant to them. This is work that we can practically accomplish by making strategic choices about what we teach, where we publish, what conferences we attend and what our public scholarship looks like. Let's just get to work on that!

Østigård's fascinating comment brings back the relevance of cultural anthropology for archaeology in full force. The relationship between archaeology and cultural anthropology could be much more developed than it is today. In Sweden at least, archaeology is far more likely to turn to social theory and philosophy to analyse mortuary practices than it is to approach cultural anthropology. Anthropology, it seems to be argued, can only provide ethnographic analogies, which present some well-known, if not insurmountable challenges. Similarly, in the United States where I currently work in a department of anthropology, cultural anthropologists tend to view archaeology as a methods-based discipline that digs up stone tools and counts calories. Our relationship seems to be stuck in a distant memory of the processual archaeology era of the 1960s and early 1970s. But contemporary cultural anthropology and archaeology are in large part significantly overlapping, sharing paradigms, canons, references, and even research questions. Østigård's paper shows the potential of this kind of work. The "experiment" described is brilliant in that it confronts archaeologists with their own invisible boundaries and assumptions – assumptions that structure our approach to the past. But, of course, there is a catch. Østigård could be reassured of his approach being acceptable through access to the emic perspective

through his living informants. This is not an option for archaeologists working in a distant past. The experiment, and the questions it pushes us to examine, inspires much larger questions about the subjectivity of archaeology and archaeological knowledge and evidence. We should keep those challenging questions and thoughtful experiments coming!

At the beginning of this response I rejected the characterization of my paper as cautious. However, as I write my closing remarks I find myself cautiously optimistic about the direction of the field. This exchange inspires me to believe in a more dynamic and inspiring future for the archaeology of the dead. The points of views expressed in this debate exhibit a wide range of expertise and perspective, but crystallize around an agreement in embracing creative transdisciplinarity, thinking large and creatively, and exploring the data to its fullest potential. Thank you all!