The Materiality of Death

Bodies, burials, beliefs

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Chapter 1

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The Importance of Death

Archaeology, as a humanist science studying the essence of humanity through history, is often faced with the ultimate expressions of humans' perceptions of themselves in society and cosmos: death. The archaeological record consists of innumerable testimonies of how humans in different cultures at various times have solved and given answers to the inevitable. Nevertheless, despite the fact that everyone will die and all humans face the same ultimate end, the solutions to this common destiny are as different and varied as there are traditions, cultures, beliefs and religions. Even to us, in our present modern and presumed enlightened society, death is still something unknown that cannot be perceived, visualised or represented (Bauman 1992:2f). Still, death and the knowledge that our time on earth is limited affect our choices in life in many ways. The importance of death in life is, of course, historically situated and can take many forms (cf. Ariès 1974, Walter 1994): One can be obsessed with the question of how to delay the soul from vanishing while the dead body is dissolving, or how to secure a safe journey of the soul to a proper afterlife. In modern western secular society, some respond to the inevitable fact of death by seeking to prolong life long enough to make their persona indefinite (Taylor 2003:28).

Indeed, death is an analytical entrance to humanity and humans' beliefs and perceptions of what matters most: life. The ideas of the essence of humanity as perceived by humans are manifested in death, and consequently, death highlights cultural values, morals and ethics apart from religious beliefs. Thus, death is more than just a question of the destiny of the deceased. Death lies at the bottom of all facets of humanity, and hence, it is a crucial factor in the development of societies (Parker Pearson 2001:203). "Death is the origin and centre of culture" (Assmann 2005:1) because death is not only threatening society (Hertz 1960, Goody 1962:26), but the solutions and responses to death are socially constitutive and formative for the future in a given society. Of course, death does not necessarily constitute a social problem, but might also offer other possibilities (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). In a personal sense, death can be longed for, and even a relief for people in chronic pain. In a social sense, the death of the Other may open a social space and bring about necessary social change. Moreover, the conceptions of death and the transformations of death into life and new social structures in society, together with beliefs of a life hereafter or realms where the ancestors are living or other transcendental states of being, are not merely spiritual or ideological, but they are materialised by the descendants and the living (fig. 1).

Death, Burial and the Grave

Burial archaeology, or the archaeology of death, is in many respects, not at least in popular beliefs, nearly synonymous with archaeology itself. Indeed, much of our data and material come from funerary contexts, and perhaps in reality we know more about death than of life in prehistory. It could even be argued that archaeologists are *too* occupied with death and burial, blind to the fact that we strive to develop representations or fictions of a living society. When Ian Morris worked with his thesis on Greek Iron Age burial customs he tried to explain to a neighbour, a researcher in modern history, what he worked with. When Morris described the nature of his research his neighbour looked confused and asked: "…what a lot of graves had got to do with history" (Morris 1992:xiii). Morris' neighbour's confusion is quite understandable from a layman's point of view, but to employ burial evidence in order to reconstruct or interpret past social structures, hierarchies, traditions, social identities, or sex/gender relations is seldom questioned by most archaeologists. This is a somewhat remarkable standpoint as making the switch from the realm of the dead to reconstruct the ways and ideas of the living may not be possible in many cases. Either way, any attempt to do so is bound to involve complex and intricate procedures. It is evident that excavating and analysing funerary contexts calls for some special methods and modes of reasoning in order to cope with the possibilities and constraints of complex burial data.

What a grave actually represents, how a burial is performed and by whom, and how we should interpret different properties and interments of a grave are complicated and difficult questions (fig. 2). Although there are a number of general approaches and theories which can be employed, we still need to recognise that
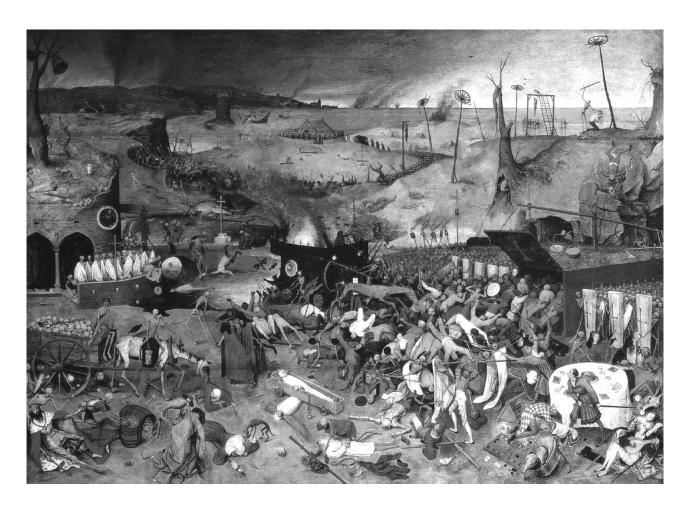
Fig. 1. Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*.

there are no general rules that we can apply for all periods and areas (for discussion, see e.g., Parker Pearson 1999, Fahlander 2003). Still, there is surprisingly little explicit discussion of the most central concepts and aspects regarding death and burial in archaeology. Taylor addresses this phenomenon as the classical interpretative dilemma:

"Philosophers of science recognize the 'interpretive dilemma' in all attempts at archaeological explanation: in order to interpret something, I must have decided that there is something to interpret. Inevitably, by focusing on that something, I will have already formed some idea of what it is. I say I want to investigate the meaning of this or that burial, but I have already decided the most significant thing about it when I called it a 'burial'. The possibility of understanding anything new and surprising is dramatically lessened" (Taylor 2003:37).

If we take a closer look at our most common conceptions we will find that our definitions sometimes restrain us from approaching our data in a less strict manner. For instance, a burial is generally understood as the result of a

series of ritualised practices performed in relation to death. In a similar sense a grave is generally considered as the place or container for a dead body. But how do cenotaphs and other bodily treatments and objects fit in this perspective? Nonetheless even though there seems to be a general way to dispose of the dead in most societies we frequently stumble across examples that are different and call for a more creative perspective.

Take, for instance, the Varna Burials in Bulgaria (c. 4500BC). About 25 percent of the graves at this site are empty, lacking the remains of a body. Nitra, in Slovakia, is another case that also contains numerous empty graves. Do these 'cenotaphs' represent individuals that have died far away, or perhaps at sea, leaving no body to be buried? Or do these empty 'graves' correspond to individuals that died an 'unnatural' death, or are they perhaps even statements for the socially, but not yet physically dead? (cf. Taylor 2003:236, 240). We can continue by question if a cenotaph, situated among other 'proper' burials, is more of a grave than a pit with remains of a dog buried together with grave goods?

Fig. 2. An illustration of a Viking Age cremation (Painting from the museum of Lindholm-Høije, Denmark).

At the Mesolithic site Skateholm, in Southern Sweden, more than 15 percent of the 87 graves contained buried dogs (see Fahlander in this volume). Burials of animals are often conceived in a similar way as cenotaphs, that is, the animals are assumed to represent something human (i.e., a shaman or a non-retrievable dead body). Taking these and similar cases into consideration, we may thus consider expanding our traditional conception of what a grave or a burial is and stop insisting that a dead human body needs to be involved. If we expand the notion of burial and grave beyond the human body we may also consider buried objects. Can we extend the definition of a grave to also include a final resting place for artefacts? Generally such buried materialities are classified as ritual or profane hoards, of which the first category has much in common with a burial (indeed, some dead bodies are disposed of in a similar way as hoards). The question is all about representation rather than symbolism. Ginsburg (2002:72) describes the case of a dead ruler that was buried twice at two different locations. One grave contains the body, while the other holds a material representation of the ruler. The interesting aspect of this case is that it was the grave with the representation that was considered the "real" one.

It may or may not be considered fruitful to relativise the concepts of death, grave and burial. For instance, Robert Chapman (1987:210) once argued that: "No progress towards these goals [a general theory and method of burial archaeology] will be made by negative, particularistic, cautionary tales drawn from ethnology." It is nonetheless difficult to agree with Chapman and others

who strive for a general approach to death and burial in archaeology. One needs not to be a social constructivist or a post-modern deconstructionist to realise that the universal problem of death has an almost unlimited range of solutions. We may paraphrase Chapman and state that "No progress towards a deeper understanding of a particular place in prehistory can be made if drawn from stiff common-sense use of the concepts of death, grave and burial".

The Materiality of Death

Priests in various religions often advocate theological explanations of life and consequently death, expressed in exegesis or recitation from sacred books emphasising the spiritual aspects of the body and being in earthly and divine realms. Such lofty religious perceptions and traditions are important because they influence culture and partly determine religion, but they fail to recognise one of the most fundamental aspects of death, namely its materiality. Whereas the beliefs in cosmological and transcendental spheres and what happens after death may be the same for everyone within a culture, religion or belief system, the way these ideas are understood and expressed by humans are material or involve material elements, and these materialities differ greatly within groups who believe in the same eschatological premises, consequences and Otherworldly realms. Thus, in order to understand death in society and religion, it is not sufficient turning to soteriology or eschatology as explained by priests or presented in sacred scriptures,

rather one has to emphasise *the materiality of death* in its many facets. Moreover, apart from exegesis and sacred scriptures, the beliefs or the places where these beliefs are acted out and transformed into rituals and practices are most often materialised in one way or another. Dialogues with the dead (e.g. Vitebesky 1993, Stylegar 1995) often take place in temples or sacred buildings and places where there are particular ritual objects which facilitate these interactions. Thus, both the places and media for dialogues with the dead have material properties, and spiritual interactions are often impossible without the materiality of death in a broad sense.

It is quite clear that the social world is not simply a matter of differently empowered individuals; people interact as much with materialities as they do with each other. The terminology is important here, and it must be stressed that the concept of materiality is not simply a variation of or synonymous to the concept of material culture. They share some similarities, but also some important differences. Whoever coined the term material culture is uncertain (Buchli 2002:2; Andrén 1997:135), but it is of lesser importance as the contents of the term vary between different research traditions as well as over time (Andrén 1997:151; Attfield 2000:35-41). In the dictionaries we find that material culture is generally defined as those objects manipulated or manufactured by humans. In some, but not all, features, biofacts and manufacts are also included. Without getting lost in details it seems safe to say that the concept of material culture comprises the results or leftovers from intentional and unintentional human practice. It is thus a one-way relationship: material culture is created by humans.

In recent years the term *materiality* has become increasingly popular in archaeology (DeMarrais, Gosden & Renfrew 2004; Tilley 2004; Fahlander & Oestigaard 2004; Miller 2005; Meskell 2005, Tilley *et al* 2006, Ingold 2007). There is nothing new or strange about certain terms that become popular in archaeological texts; for instance, during the 1990s it was almost impossible to find a paper that not contained terms like 'meaning', 'text' or 'context'. The problem with the newfound interest in the concept of materiality, however, is different. The term is just not a substitution for material culture, but embraces a greater variety of things and substances. In basic, the term materiality is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: "the quality of being composed of matter; material existence; solidity; material or physical aspect or character". Such definitions may suffice for the *word* materiality, but the *social study of materialities* goes beyond such lexical definitions.

Post-processual archaeologists generally agree that material culture is *active,* but it is yet unclear what this really means. The active role of materialities in the social process seems not to be about their initiating and modifying agency, but rather about their presumed symbolic function. The general argument of post-processual or interpretative archaeology is rather that material culture is active because it is "meaningfully constituted" (e.g., Hodder 1982:75; 1992:15). What is at stake here is that materialities can be social in other ways than as symbols loaded with meaning. Things and matter may have an almost determining effect on people. One can be constrained or triggered by objects and features, consciously or unconsciously. They may be produced or appropriated with specific intentions and yet influence future actions in an unpredictable way. Indeed, some objects are indispensable for a typical way of social life. Materialities also constitute nodes and steer appropriate or necessary movement within a site. Such a concentration of movement within a limited array of paths certainly affects the numbers and forms of social encounters, and in that way surely have an agglomerated effect of making contact surfaces smaller in number and smaller in size. The built-up environment is as much an active generator of social behaviour as it is constituted by it. Houses, buildings and the local setting of a hamlet or a small village function on different scales as nodes for repetitive action, owing to their inertness and resistance to change (Sartre 1991, Østerberg 1998:29f). Material objects and other fluid or solid matter thus have a *potential* of being active in the sense of stimulating, prompt or determining social action (cf. Gell 1998, Knappet 2002; see examples in Fahlander 2003:57ff, in press).

We may thus define the concept of materialities as those material objects and things that are involved in and variously influence social development. That means that there can be no clear-cut boundaries between so called natural objects and culturally modified objects. Materialities can involve a great variety of things, from artefacts, the landscape, layout and material of buildings and settlements, to trees and vegetation, animals, bodies and less evident material matters such as rain, ice and snow. What is socially significant, and to which degree, is thus something that need to be of concern in each given case. One special category of materialities that may suffice to clarify the distinction between the two concepts is the human body. There may be some that actually include the human body in the concept of material culture, but the majority would probably not see it that way. The body is, however, often an important materiality that has great effect on the outcome of social practice. The body as an actant has very little to do with the individual or person, but emphasises the appearance and bodily constitution in the process of subjectivation and categorisation as well as in practical ways of getting certain tasks done. Corporeal aspects such as body posture, sex, age, and variations in hair and skin colour are well documented aspects that certainly have great effect on the individuals' possibilities to do things as well as how they are valued and apprehended by others (Fahlander 2006a). Thus, approaching the material aspects of death has to be an inclusive and incorporative approach which aims to address the totality and the complexity of relations of the dead and the living.

Regarding studies of death, Metcalf and Huntington (1993) pointed out in their *Celebrations of Death* that archaeologists have made significant theoretical contributions (ibid:15), partly because a major part of the archaeological record consists of mortuary remains. Thus, the materiality of death has always been an archaeological source to interpretations and theoretical developments. "The Materiality of Death" has been emphasised by Meskell and Joyce (2003) who analysed Egyptian and Mayan death rituals, but otherwise the material dimension of death has rarely been made explicit. This is somehow natural consequence in anthropology which has a living empirical material (even in death) where it is possible to interview the descendants, participate in the funeral and observe the ancestral rites (e.g. Bloch & Parry 1987, Metcalf & Huntington 1993). In archaeology, the empirical data are material, but this fact has more been an implicit premise than a point of departure for theoretical elaboration with regards to the particular characteristics "a materiality of death" can contribute to archaeology in general and death studies in particular (e.g. Brown 1971; Chapman *et al* 1981; O´Shea 1984; Parker Pearson 1999; Arnold & Wicker 2001, Taylor 2003, Fahlander 2003, Oestigaard 2004a).

Although burials are within the sphere of beliefs transcending earthly and social categories, the archaeology of death tends to interpret funeral remains predominantly in terms of sex, age, and status. However, the important questions of what burials signify and represent in any given case cannot be regarded as being either socially or religiously determined. Neither is it sufficient to simply employ correlations between grave elements and interments in relation to the deceased without considering intra-cultural diversity (diachronic and synchronic variation). Hence, the materiality of death includes most aspects which are concerned with bodies, burials and beliefs, replacing a strict theological analysis of the meaning of death with an archaeological focus on materialities which "consider the implications of the materiality of form for the cultural process" (Miller 1994:400). This is because death is as much a social as it is a religious process, and both of these processes are material and they are actively materialised by the descendants.

Thus, there is a need to discuss and explore other ways of dealing with burial data. By discussing the materiality of death we wish to elaborate the following issues: 1) the materiality of the body – the decaying corpse, 2) the materiality of practice – the rituals, 3) the materiality of the interments – personal belongings and grave-gifts, 4) the materiality of the memory – the monument, 5) the materiality of social change – hierarchies and heritage, 6) the materiality of age, sex and gender, and 7) the materiality of eternity – ancestors and the Otherworld.

The Materiality of the Body: The Decaying Corpse

Death is material by its very nature. Defining death is difficult since it often involves ideas of a soul or other spiritual entities which are believed to continue existing and living in various metaphysical realms, however there is a universal aspect which characterises death: the corpse. The absence of life is physical, material and real; it is a dead body. It is this primary materiality of death which triggers human responses to the inevitable, and all funerals in one way or another solve the problem of the decaying corpse. Thus, the flesh of the dead body, which often is invested with cosmological meaning, requires a special and particular treatment by the descendants if the deceased shall reach the preferable divine or cosmological realms which are believed to exist within a given society or religion.

The treatment of the dead body normally includes two ritual processes; first is the initial preparation of the corpse by washing or anointing the body with oils or other substances such as perfumes or ochre (see Zagorska, this volume) and second, the disposal of the corpse. The first ritual process, which often involves purification rites (e.g. Oestigaard 2005), is difficult to trace in mortuary remains, but sometimes there are evidences of such practices. In a cremation at Winterslow in Britain a small pile of human eyebrow hairs from more than one individual were found together with a bronze razor. This indicates that during the funeral there was some kind of mutilation of the human body (Barrett 1994:123), but it is uncertain whether the eyebrow hairs were from the deceased or not, however at least one or several of the mourners have shaved parts of their body in the funeral, probably as part of a purification process which may have included a ritual shaving of the deceased. Ethnographically, the preliminary preparation of the dead body usually involves washing or some kind of ablutions which purify the deceased, which is a necessary precondition for the successive funeral rites. There might be other rituals before the disposal of the body that are more difficult to detect, although in numerous grave contexts there are remains of huts or enclosures which indicate that there has been a liminal period where the living conducted rituals before the dead were finally buried or cremated (see Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006).

It is generally common practice to make a sharp distinction between the living subject and the dead object. This is, however, not necessarily always true. The dead can very well continue to be individuals, or even agents, after death (see Gansum and Fahlander, this volume). It is also questionable to view the dead body as a single constant materiality. In some societies the *process* of the dead body, from being cold to stiff, to decayed and swollen by gases, to the dissolving of soft tissue where only the bones remain, is considered an important one, of which some stages require certain practices or rituals. The

dead are often regarded as unfriendly and possible hostile entities (Fuchs 1969), but the dead body does not necessarily need to be regarded a cadaver or horrible abject (Nilsson Stutz, this volume). It may be highlighted, venerated or simply trashed like any other broken object (Fahlander 2008b).

The two most common ways to dispose of corpses are inhumation and cremation, but there are many other ways of disposing of a corpse within a religious or cosmological context. Air-burials and sea-burials have frequently been performed, but the flesh may also be 'smoked', 'roasted' or 'toasted' (e.g. Oestigaard 2000a), or it may be eaten as part of an endo-cannibalistic practice (Hertz 1960, cf. Taylor 2003:14, 57). Regardless of which treatment the flesh is given, the problem of the decaying materiality of the corpse is solved and ritually transformed because a mere human cadaver is in opposition to cultural and religious values as well as a threat to life in other existences. Hence, a funeral as a social and ritual practice prepares and transforms the flesh of the deceased whether this preparation involves consumption by fire (cremation), preservation of the flesh (mummification), fast or slow destruction of the body (air-burial or inhumation), or other forms of body treatments (Oestigaard 2004b).

The Materiality of Practice – The Rituals

The literature concerning ritual, its purposes and functions is vast (e.g. van Gennep 1960, Turner 1967, Bell 1992, 1997, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, Rappaport 2001). However, it has been more difficult to detect rituals archaeologically, and 'ritual' or 'ritualistic' is often applied to practices which we do not understand or of which we cannot make sense (Insoll 2004a). This is not satisfactory and thus it is necessary to trace and analyse the material manifestations and remains of religious practices and rituals (Insoll 1999, 2001, 2004a, 2004b) because although studies of beliefs and eschatology are complex, the material implications of an archaeology of religion are profound and can encompass all dimensions of material culture (Insoll 2004b).

Ian Morris once stated that: "A burial is a part of a funeral, and a funeral is a part of a set of rituals by which the living deal with death" (1992:2). It follows that, although there often are connections with ordinary life, ritual ought to be analysed through a religious spectre and not from a social one. This standpoint has dominated Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian archaeology for the last two decades, but is lately being questioned. For instance, Bell (1992) argues that the concept of ritual, religion and myth often are loaded with modern western Christian contents and concepts which have little or no relevance to prehistoric situations and even other contemporary societies (see Oestigaard & Kaliff, this volume). Insoll (2001:10) hints that ritual and religion are often related in complex webs with the material and the social context.

Just recently, Richard Bradley (2005) has pointed out how archaeologists often are blind to the many circumstances where ritual and profane are mixed rather than being exclusive.

Most archaeologists would probably concur that burials are mainly an outcome of specific rituals. Mortuary variability suggests that such rituals can have multiple material effects, that is, that the material outcome of rituals varies. The importance is hence to address the close relationship between performed practice and the material effects and remains. In many cases we are dealing with multiple rituals, each with typical material traces, or perhaps different rites are employed for different groups or categories of individuals. Rituals are thus likely to change over time, although the alterations may not be recognised by all participants. One example is the Stone Age grave field of Ajvide on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The burial area expanded from the north to the south and it was possible to discern four different phases of burials with quite different accent on ritual over a period of a few hundred years. If all burials were grouped together as a whole under the cultural umbrella 'Pitted ware culture', these differences would have been masked and rendered invisible. Indeed, the material culture did not change much during this period of use at Ajvide, but analysed in terms of phases a number of inter-cultural changes in rituals and attitudes to death and dead bodies could be established (Fahlander 2003, 2006b).

Although beliefs are spiritual or ideological in essence, in practice they often materialise in rituals, albeit there are numerous rituals which are impossible to trace in the material culture such as prayers, dances etc. Nevertheless, following Pierre Lemmonier, who has focused on the social representations of technology, some rituals are possible to trace as technological activities (Gansum 2004a, Goldhahn & Oestigaard 2007). Lemmonier emphasises that technological activities 'always bring into play a combination of four elements: matter on which an action is directed; objects ("tools" or "means of work", including the human body itself); gestures and movements organized in operational sequences; and a specific "knowledge", conscious or unconscious, that may be expressed or not' (Lemmonier 1989:156). The materiality of rituals where they are parts of technological processes is particularly evident in death and the construction of mounds. A mound, for instance, is constructed by a series of intentional actions, and it is possible to analyse the purposes of the different strata. Since the constructions of mounds are crucial in those funerals which employ such monuments, one may expect that the way this is done is not coincidental but that the participants constructed the mounds based on religious and ritual principles, and hence, it is possible to follow these ritual sequences. The construction of huge grave-mounds was a very time consuming process, which could last for at least five years (Olivier 1999). The construction itself was a part of the funeral rite, which the

stratigraphy often bears witness to because mounds were not accidental heaps of earth and turfs, but meticulous constructions with different layers containing remains of fire, burnt human bones, ceramics, food offerings, huts, totem poles, etc. In some cases the mounds were ritual arenas where rites were conducted and subsequent rituals took place for a long period of time. Hence, it is possible to de-construct the ritual scenario and trace rituals through sequences in the stratigraphy, which contain distinctive material remains of practices (Gansum 2004b, 2004c, Gansum & Oestigaard 1999, 2004, Gansum & Risan 1999).

"By a de-construction of a mound into different rituals or actions within stratigraphic sequences, faces and time-sequences, it is possible to illuminate some of the practices and religious perceptions of the past. Each stratigraphic unit from the bottom to the top of the mound represents a distinctive and special ritual practice with its own meanings, prescriptions and performances" (Gansum & Oestigaard 2004:69).

Thus, one may follow and analyse the internal ritual sequences of a funeral through the stratigraphy of a burial and the different ritual practices which have been performed in a time sequence. Moreover, apart from the construction of the monument itself, a fundamental part of the funeral rites consisted of rites where the descendants gave gifts to the deceased. Although rituals per definition are intentional (albeit not necessarily understood by all participants), rituals concerning death and burial can still bring about a number of unintentional or unforeseen results. One interesting case is the Late Bronze Age cremation urn burials of Cottbus, Germany (Gramsch 2007). Through careful excavation of the contents of the urns it was possible for the researchers to understand that the fragments of burned bone were actually deposited in correct anatomical order (i.e., feet down and head up). These data suggest that the body was re-assembled again after the cremation - or perhaps that the way of picking up bones was highly ritualised (always beginning with bones at the 'foot-end' of the remains of the cremation pyre picking up remains successively). Of course, further and more precise studies of the data can probably indicate that one of the scenarios is more probable than the other, but the case nonetheless emphasises the need for both creativity and caution in studies of ritual.

The Materiality of the Interments: Personal Belongings and Grave-Gifts

During the funeral a large quantity of material objects are necessary both for the actual performance of the ritual and for the successful outcome of the rite. Although it is difficult to identify the inventory which was used by the descendants in the funerals as ritual equipment unless they are left in the grave (which would then be difficult to distinguish from other grave-gifts), there are two categories of artefacts usually described as "grave-goods" which we find archaeologically; the deceased's body items such as clothes and jewellery on the one hand, and grave-gifts on the other hand. These two categories are not absolute and may overlap since there are prescribed cultural and religious norms for how the deceased can appear in death during the funeral and what might be given as gifts to the dead. The deceased might be cremated or buried naked or with a certain type of clothing, from a simple blanket covering the body to the most costly and elaborate outfits which the deceased wore when he or she was alive. Or the funeral clothes may have had to be new and unused for the last rite and in some cases particular clothing has been prescribed which is only used for funerals. The personal items following the dead such as jewellery or weapons will always be a selection of his or her possessions, and hence, the descendants choose those objects which were mandatory or preferable for the fulfilment of the rite in accordance to cultural, ritual and religions norms.

Still, the distinction between personal items and other things placed beside the body is important. In the previously referred to example of Ajvide, it was possible to conclude that the eight cenotaphs never included a human body. They are almost identical to the 'normal' graves at the site in respect to shape of the grave pit, grave-gifts, orientation etc, but with the exception that none of them contained any pierced seal-teeth or hollow fowl-bone which was associated with personal adornments of dress (Fahlander 2003). In general, intentionally deposited materialities in the grave have been seen to mirror or represent the dead individual's social persona. Binford (1971), building on Saxe (1970), explicitly formulated the theory that the wealth in graves corresponded to the deceased's social identity and position in life. In some cases this will reflect the actual situation, but it neglects the participants' ritual obligations and restrictions; not everyone is allowed to perform all parts of the rituals or be in a position to give any kinds of gifts to the deceased. The living participants may therefore be separated into two categories, the mourners and the opposites, because their roles in the ritual are radically different (Kas 1989:125). This implies that there are different groups of actors involved in a funeral with defined roles, which prescribe and limit their ritual commitments and possible participation (cf. Fahlander 2003, 2006b).

Hence, the objects following the dead either as personal objects or gifts may relate to different social relations various persons and groups had with the living. The first and primary group is generally assumed to be the descendants and closest family. In Hindu tradition the widow disposes off all her jewellery she received from her husband during their wedding if he died before her, and she marks her new social and derogatory social status by placing her jewellery on her husband's chest on the cremation pyre. Hence, the gifts to the deceased are not only his or her personal belongings, but also objects

Fig 3. The old man Tei Tetuna by his grave, which he constructed for himself. Tei Tetuna had no one to bury him when he died and had a cist ready in his hut to crawl into when his time came. The bronze cross on top of the cist was a gift from a missionary. Whether Tei Tetuna was a Christian is uncertain (Heyerdal 1974:275).

Fig. 4. The pyramids at Giza. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

which mark the descendant's new social status (Oestigaard 2000b, Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). Thereafter will different persons and groups such as more distant relatives, villagers and acquaintances with various social and economic relationships pay their respect and perform their parts of the ritual in accordance to the existing hierarchies and prescribed norms. We need, however, to also be open to other scenarios in which only one or a few actually knew what happened to a dead body after the point of death. The intermediate phase between death and burial may be hidden from the major part of the population. Even the burial procedure itself can be a matter only for a few, excluding even the next of kin.

It can thus be a bit difficult to see how we can possibly relate meaning and cosmology to the practices of the disposal of the dead. There may be multiple layers of relations, for instance, one for the living and one for the dead. There may also be a third layer for the intermediate phase between death and actual burial. These different systems may or may not be reflected or related to each other. At least, they ought to be parts of a way of thought, that is, if we assume that death is always meaningful and that all individuals have access to what happens to the dead. Hence, by separating 'grave-goods' into different groups and spheres of social relations the living had with the dead, the materialisation of death extends beyond the dead to the social relations of the living (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006, Fahlander 2006b).

The Materiality of the Memory – The Monument

It has often been said that 'the dead do not bury themselves' (e.g., Bradley 1989), something that is not necessarily totally true (fig 3). However, cases in which the deceased had 100% control over what happens with the mortal remains after death are few, although some people seem to have had quite a great deal to say about the burial and burial act (e.g., Fahlander 2003). Notwithstanding the differing degree of involvement in ones own burial, it is safe to say that the largest archaeological monuments ever made in history are 'monumental memories' (Brown 1998:79) of the dead, which were intended or believed to last for eternity. Although religion is spiritual in essence, "ideology needs architecture for its fullest expression" (Kemp 2006:248), which includes both the manifestation of religions as well as manifestations of social order and hierarchies, which transfer the divine and cosmic order and laws to profane spheres. Thus, apart from eschatological beliefs, the most important religious ideas with cosmological con-sequences for people's future on earth are materialised, of which the materiality of death in general and funeral monuments in particular are the most splendid, extravagant and colossal.

There are different ways in which to materialise and monumentalise eschatological beliefs, and archaeo-

logically the Pharaonic mortuary cult in ancient Egypt was a watershed in Egypt and world history (fig. 4). The building of pyramids started at the beginning of the 3rd Dynasty during the reign of Djoser (ca. 2650 BCE). Djoser built a six-step pyramid 62,5 metres high. During the reign of Sneferu, the first king of the 4th Dynasty (ca. 2625-2585 BCE), new impulses and ideas emerged. Sneferu constructed three major and two minor pyramids, which together contained more cubic metres of stone than the Great Pyramid of his son Khufu (ca. 2585-2560 BCE). Khufu's pyramid is the world's largest pyramid; the sides are 230,37 metres and the height originally measured 146,59 metres. His successor Khafre (ca. 2555-2532 BCE) built the second largest pyramid at Giza. The development of the pyramids was a colossal statement of divine kingship. Three generations in the 4th Dynasty did the bulk of pyramid building, and later the pyramids became smaller and more standardised. From the Old Kingdom (ca. 2675-2130 BCE) 21 of the 23 major pyramids stand like sentinels in a 20-km stretch, including those at Giza (Lehner 1997:14-15).

Although monumental structures were built earlier than the Egyptian pyramids, monumental architecture has never witnessed a more intensive materialisation of death than what took place within some few centuries in Egypt almost five thousand years ago. However, regardless of the mere size of the monumental memories, the importance of materialising death and the dead in these ways puts the emphasis on the monuments as places of divine and cosmological interaction which facilitates that the dead become ancestors or takes place in heavenly realms and that the ancestors, gods or divine powers intervene among humans on earth or in this worldly sphere. The monuments are as much for the living as they are for the dead and the gods because they work and function in society. Through the monuments and ritual practices some humans attain divine legitimacy and become the gods themselves on earth.

Architecture gives shape to space because monuments of the past integrate the past and the present, and buildings are primarily the context of life (Gadamer 1997:134). The Monumentality is eternal because it transcends death and seems to have escaped time (Lefebvre 1997:139). "A spatial work (monument or architectural project) attains a complexity fundamentally different from the complexity of a text, whether prose or poetry…what we are concerned with here is not text but texture" (ibid:140). Hence, the materiality of monuments conveys different meanings of death, life and power than those presented in sacred texts. Materiality matters, and "the actions of social practices are expressible, but not explicable, through discourse: they are, precisely, *acted* – and not *read*" (ibid, original emphasis). In consequence, a religion materialised in monuments differs in essence and function from the same religion presented in written sources. Although the monuments are allegedly for the dead, their main role is for the living.

9

The Materiality of Social Change: Hierarchies and Heritage

Hegel wrote once that history is the record of "what man does with death" (Whaley 1981:1). Death creates society. Geertz has argued that a state funeral "was not an echo of a politics taking place somewhere else. It was an intensification of a politics taking place everywhere else" (Geertz 1980:120). Political rituals construct power and they are elaborate and efficacious arguments about power and how it is made. Display and even destruction of material wealth is one of the most prominent strategies within the frame of political rituals. Divine legitimacy is established through rituals since social and political order normally is seen as coming from divine sources (Bell 1997:129). Following Geertz;

"The state cult was not a cult of the state. It was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine" (Geertz 1980:102).

Hence, although the dead is the alleged focus point of the funeral, the social changes and establishment of new hierarchies are often the most important outcomes of funerals, which directs the focus from the dead to the living (Fahlander 2003, Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). The descendants and the living may have had their own interests and agendas. Those who built big monuments, controlled them, and then "the past was a cultural womb" (Kemp 2006:69) for the future and successive hierarchies. Death concerns not only the dead, but often more important, the living, who use the dead as a necessary and inevitable means for social change and recreation of society and hierarchies. It must be pointed out, however, that seldom are there any direct links between the life of the living and the way in which they dispose of their dead. Social differentiation in a society may look quite different than the materialisation of it (Leach 1979:34).

It may thus be questionable if burials are the best source of approaching social structure and stratification. O'Shea (1996:vii) argues that despite 20 years of refining and applying the Binford-Saxe approach, surprisingly little substantial has emerged. O'Shea argues that the focus has been to narrow, while emphasising questions of rank and ethnicity. There are so many different ways in which we may try to discern social distinctions through burial data and unfortunately some of them are not compatible with each other, which may lead to contradictory results. For instance, one may choose to find differences in variation of different things (number of artefact types), the weight of precious substances, the quantity of objects and their quality in terms of handicraft. And, of course, we must consider the possible importance of perishable materialities that may not be recoverable. To these aspects we also may add spatial differentiation or substantially different burial construction. It is not above all doubt that we find the chief or big man in the greatest tomb and the most despised without 'proper' burial. One interesting example is the huge Bronze Age burial cairn of Kivik in southern Sweden. Due to its exceptional size and monumental appearance it has since the 19th century been believed to be the grave of a powerful chief. However recently performed osteological analyses and C14 determinations prove that theory wrong. It turned out that the chamber of the cairn hosted four to five different individuals, all in their early teens except for one adult. The carbon determinations also reveal that the individuals were deposited on at least three different occasions (c. 1400-1200, 1200-1000 and 900-800BCE). Interestingly is the adult individual who was the only one buried during the last phase and hence has little to do with the construction of the monument (Goldhahn 2005:224-54).

This leads to a paradox in social sciences which are mainly concerned with structural and societal change (e.g. Bourdieu 1990, Giddens 1984). Most analyses of social structures and changes place the emphasis on the most static aspects of society, that is, when people are alive. In general, the fastest, most drastic and lasting changes take place when a person dies because the social and political vacuum of the deceased has to be filled and society restructured regardless whether it is kings or commoners who have died. The deceased's rights and duties have to be reallocated, which involve two aspects of the materiality of death. One is the recreation or allocation of power and social identities which can legitimately be done as part of the funeral or by materialising monuments which give hierarchies authority; the other is the reallocation of the material heritage and wealth in itself, and often these two are combined in the actual funeral rite.

The transmission of material heritage can take place *post mortem* or *pre mortem*, but the important is that it occurs within the total context of intergenerational transmissions (Goody 1962:273-280). Inheritance includes both sexual rights (access to wives and lineages) and physical properties. The living gains the dead person's properties (ibid:311) for the better or worse, which also include debts, social obligations and asymmetrical power relations. Social aspects may therefore be emphasised in funerals because they are the outcome of the rites. On the one hand, the funerals re-define social relationships and reaffirm certain relationships of exchange (Strathern 1981:206), but on the other hand, death may also be used to challenge the continuity of former relationships. Hence, the materiality of death is an active medium by which the social structure is transferred, restructured, reallocated or even challenged, and monuments which represent the memories and authority of the dead are an effective means in this process.

The classic question of how to relate the particular and the general, or in social terms, the individual practices and the general normality, is a tricky one. Can we discern

the "norm" from the "queer" proper and how do we deal with 'inter-cultural' variability? One example that tries to come to grip with this issue is Chapman's (2000) analysis of burials in later Hungarian prehistory. He argues that burial analyses are generally "heavily under-theorized", especially concerning agency-structure relations (ibid:162). Chapman's approach is in some respects similar to microarchaeology (Fahlander, in this volume) as he argues for detailed analysis of smaller groups of graves within a cemetery rather than analysing cemeteries as closed entities. In this way, Chapman wants to illuminate differences between local *microtraditions* and regional structures and norms (ibid:28). The local is not simply a reflection of the global or vice versa; small-scale actions can form microtraditions which are related to general structure/culture (ibid:69). The global structure is thus a 'post-hoc etic statistical summary' of a variety of local microtraditions (i.e. agencies). By contrasting a general and a particular analysis of the same material (burials of the Hungarian Copper Age), Chapman finds great variability locally between "households" but also general trends of global structures. Chapman seeks to show how global structures are actually results of "emic decision-making", that social actors actually are the "creators" of their "culture specifics" by their active decisions and by their daily practices (ibid:161). Another approach to such complexes is through the concept of "death myths" (see Kristoffersen & Oestigaard, this volume) where each funeral is specifically designed and composed of different myth-themes which will secure for the deceased and the descendants the best possible cosmic outcomes.

The Materiality of Identity – Age, Sex & Gender

It is no surprise that burial studies foster questions of social identity. When we excavate graves we actually meet our foregoers, or what is left of them, and it is not strange that this encounter should evoke questions of who he or she once was. As discussed above, it is not an easy task to use burial data to reconstruct societal or individual identities. The dead are buried by others and there might be great differences in their view of the deceased and that of others. An individual identity is also generally a complex issue of varying situated roles and identities that transect each other in time and space. It is thus never certain that it was the individual's profession or status that was considered most significant. The only truly individual materialities left in a grave are the deceased's own bones. From a material perspective of burial it is thus difficult to speak in terms of gender and social status when the data only provides us with estimations of sex, height and age, and in special cases information on nutrition, diseases and possible cause of death (Russel 2004). One category of graves that illustrates the problem of social identity is the one of children. In archaeology, children's graves have generally been displaced and neglected, and often regarded as insignificant. The lack of care and grave interments in child burials are often taken as evidence of their low status or that the parents do not want to be attached too much emotionally before they have passed the most critical stages. But many graves of children are quite plentiful, in fact containing too many artefacts, which shatters the image of burial goods as representing the buried individuals profession and status. We can, for instance, consider those graves that contain tools that are too big for a small child to use. How do we explain that? A popular explanation is that dead children may inherit the prestige of the father and consequently be buried as if the child was an adult. Others have instead argued that such items may have been meant to be used by the child later on in its life 'on the other side'. Child burials are a fascinating social category to explore because they make us look differently at familiar material. Most researchers agree that the category of children and the concept of childhood are diffuse and varied, changing through time and space as well as horizontally between sex, class and ethnicity. If we want to discuss 'children' in prehistory we need to do that in relation to adults and recognise that any category of age need to be analysed in relation to other social variables such as sex, class, corporality (bodily-mental) and ethnicity (cf. Heywood 2001:4-7, Fahlander 2008a).

An interesting study that does take the complex relations between age status and sex seriously is Nick Stoodley's analysis of an Anglo-Saxon (400-600 AD) burial field (Stoodley 2000). His general perspective on burials is rather simple; he asserts that the function of the burials were to signal the position the deceased had in each household. This assertion allows him to identify a number of social thresholds of the life cycle that also reveal some differences between the sexes. Among the boys the presence of spears in the grave is the main signifying attribute of the first two stages. Spears are generally found among individuals older than the age of 3-4 (1st threshold), but it is first around 10-14 years of age (2nd threshold) that the majority of boys are buried with a spear. Related to the spears are knives, which are not present among boys younger than 3 years. The third threshold in a boy's life cycle is reached by the age of 20-25 when they are buried with a 'warrior-kit' consisting of two or more weapons. The female children seem to reach similar stages in life, but differ in some respects in relation to the boys. The first threshold for girls is reached at the age of 5, and is symbolised by a single broach. The second threshold occurs at the age of 10-12, which corresponds to the one of the boys. At this stage, the child is buried with two or more broaches along with an increasing number of pearls. The third threshold also differs from the boys and is reached by the age of late teens. Now the females are buried with a full kit of jewellery, keys etc. Unfortunately, not all burial grounds are suited for this kind of elaborate analysis as very few contain both well preserved bones and a sufficient amount of interments or grave properties for analysis. However, as a methodological approach, Stoodley's analysis is nonetheless inspiring.

The Materiality of Eternity – The Ancestors and the Otherworld

The materiality of death is not limited to the dead, their personal belongings, monuments and heritage, but it also includes their memory, powers, blessings, everlasting return and dialogues as well as the very physical properties of the places they inhabit in the Otherworld, which may have material correlates or actual presence in this world. Ancestors and spirits possess particular qualities from which the living may benefit or be harmed, and which cause a topography of death materialised in this world.

Cemeteries, temples and sacred places. The dead are often believed to live at the cemetery in a shadow existence in parallel with a life in other realms. Some persons have been unable to cross to the other side and live as ghosts and malignant spirits haunting the living; others rest peacefully in their grave, but ethnographically, cemeteries are generally seen as dangerous places which the living avoid. A common belief is that the dead are not dead, but they are alive, although not as a fully fledged human being, but nevertheless real and present (see Gansum, this volume). Thus, the dialogues and interactions with the dead may take different forms (see Gee, this volume). The living may interact with their ancestors for the benefit of the family or lineage, the descendants may conduct further rituals which will enable the deceased to finally cross to the Otherworldly realms if something went wrong during the funeral, or the living may please the dead by sacrifices or offerings aiming to avoid misfortunes and troubles caused by the dead. Apart from the burial place itself, communication with the dead may also take place in consecrated areas where there are either relics of the dead, statues representing the dead and their qualities, certain objects with supernatural powers, or shrines or altars which enable interactions with the ancestors and divinities. Temples and sacred buildings such as churches share the same common feature of being places where dialogues with the Other side are rendered possible regardless of whether this includes prayers or sacrifices and involves the ancestors or the gods. This materiality of death is not limited to cemeteries or monumental architecture in various scale, but it also includes natural places (Bradley 2000) where certain topographic features are links to the Otherworld which enable interaction with the dead.

Pilgrimage sites. Some temples and sacred places attain a particular position among devotees, which illuminates the complex process between *place* and *process*, as with the case of a widow-burning in India which became a pilgrimage site. Although widow-burning was abandoned by law as early as 1829 in India by the British colonialists, the practice has continued. The most 'famous' widow-burning or murder in the name of *sati* in recent times was, however, the one of the eighteen-year-old Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in India September 4th 1987. According to the priests, she 'chose' death as an obedient wife, but even when the *sati* took place there were people who doubted that this was a 'true' widow-burning because she was not burnt on the pyre together with her husband, but the cremation took place at a separate pyre a week later witnessed by thousands of participants. There are strong indications that this was a murder by her father-in-law, who built a temple at the spot where she was burnt. This temple became a popular pilgrimage destination, and it was her father-in-law who controlled the temple and received the donations, which made him rich according to local standards (Kumar 1993, Narasimhan 1998). Thus, her death became a reference point for thousands of others who have had no relation to her previously. This is a common feature of pilgrimage sites. The places where holy persons died or where saints conducted miracles become focal points for the living. The power of the holy enables the devotees to receive blessings, become healed or attain divine presence and interaction through material relics of the dead themselves or other materialised objects such as statues or shrines, which function as substitutes for the actual dead.

The Otherworld in this world. Although the divine abodes and spiritual realms of the dead often are perceived as being in an 'Otherworld' beyond this world, the dead may also live in this world. The eschatology and cosmology of a belief system may have earthly correlates or the dead may exist in different parallel worlds. Analysing a Christian context, Sarah Tarlow described the problem as such:

"Beliefs about death are rarely coherent, consistent and orthodox. People combine elements of theological teaching with superstitious or traditional folkloric belief and personal invention. Thus when we die we are variously understood to go directly to Heaven, await the Day of Judgement, rot in the ground, become ghosts, journey to another place, fall asleep and meet up with friends and relatives who have died before us. These different versions might be logically incompatible, but it is nevertheless possible for a single person to hold many of them at the same time" (Tarlow 1999:103).

In some religions or belief systems there is no other existence for the dead after death, but in most traditions there are beliefs of a physical place where the dead are living. Although heaven normally is seen as a transcendental sphere beyond this world, in the Jewish-Christian tradition it was believed that Hell or Gehenna had an earthly origin. Gehenna was seen as the place where sinners were punished. The name Gehenna – or Gehinom – is commonly believed to derive from "Vale [Hebrew: *Gei*] of Ben Hinom", which was a place south of Jerusalem where a child-sacrificing cult had been prevalent during the First Commonwealth (Oestigaard 2003, 2004a).

Concluding Remarks

The materiality of death is without doubt a complex field of research and we have only touched upon a few aspects concerning the body, death, burial and beliefs: 1) the materiality of the body – the decaying corpse, 2) the materiality of practice – the rituals, 3) the materiality of the interments – personal belongings and grave-gifts, 4) the materiality of the memory – the monument, 5) the materiality of social change – hierarchies and heritage, 6) the materiality of age, sex and gender, and 7) the materiality of eternity – ancestors and the Otherworld. Of course, the list of themes and aspects can be made much longer but these examples will suffice to point out the complexity of burial analysis in archaeology. The following papers in this volume all further elaborate and extend the issues and questions raised in this introductory essay as well as contributing with fascinating case-studies from the Mesolithic to present day.

The majority of the texts in this volume were presented as working papers at the session, *The Materiality of Death – Bodies, Burials, Beliefs,* organised by Fredrik Fahlander and Terje Oestigaard at the XIIth European Association for Archaeologists annual meeting in Krakow, Poland in September 2006. The data and issues concerned in the papers of this volume range from the Mesolithic of Southern Scandinavia (Fahlander, Nilsson Stutz) and the Late Mesolithic and Neolithic of Latvia (Zagorska), to the European Bronze Age (Aasbøe, Bettencourt) and a number of texts concerning various Iron Age examples of Scandinavia (Gansum, Grön, Johansson, Kristoffersen & Oestigaard, Lindgren, Wickholm), but also the British Iron Age (Duffy & MacGregor) and Roman Italy (Gee, Rajala) are represented. One paper also presents a modern day example from Asia (Oestigaard & Kaliff).

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