Chapter 10

Mortuary practices, society and ideology: an ethnoarchaeological study

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Recent accounts of the investigation of social organisation as reflected in mortuary practices have been based on role theory. If the notion of roles is deemed to be part of an inadequate conception of social systems, then it is necessary to reconsider existing archaeological approaches to burial data. Burial ritual is susceptible to ideological manipulation within the construction of social strategies. An analysis of mortuary practices in modern and Victorian England leads to an interpretation both in terms of the way the dead are seen by the living and in terms of the social relationships between competing groups. Since the Victorian era when burial ritual was a forum for the display of wealth and status, the dead have come to be seen more and more as unwanted matter to be disposed of quickly, without extravagance. This development, involving changes in the use of cremation and in the physical traces of the burial, is part of the increased use of hygiene, science and medicine as agencies of social control, and is related to a decrease in the use of conspicuous wealth consumption for social advertisement. Finally, a series of general propositions are advanced concerning the study and interpretation of mortuary practices.

Introduction

In the last ten years there have been many developments in the reconstruction of past social systems from the material remains of mortuary rituals. There have been several attempts to provide linking principles between the material culture associated with mortuary practices and the form of social organisation (Saxe 1970; Binford 1972; Brown 1971; Shennan 1975; Goldstein 1976; Tainter 1977; Peebles & Kus 1977). Although there is no 'cookbook' on the derivation of social information from burial remains, certain major assumptions are generally shared by workers in burial studies. Firstly, the deceased is given a set of representations of his or her various social identities or roles when alive so that their status or social position may be given material form after death (e.g. gravegoods, monuments, place of burial etc.). Secondly, the material expressions of these roles may be compared between individuals. Thirdly, the resulting patterns of role differentiation may be ranked hierarchically as divisions existing within the society under study. Consequently, the social organisation of any society may be reconstructed and that society can be placed within a larger evolutionary framework according to its degree of organisational complexity. This procedure is very clearly illustrated by Saxe (1970) who uses role theory, componential theory, systems theory, information theory, and evolutionary theory to devise a set of hypotheses linking social complexity with mortuary practices. Studies of available ethnographic information on differentiation between individuals in death do seem to confirm the relationship between dimensions of disposal and the form of social organisation (Saxe 1970; Binford 1972; Goldstein 1976; Tainter 1978). The basic principles originally outlined by Saxe have been modified by later workers; Goldstein (1976) has considered the value of a spatial framework in the interpretation of mortuary differentiation; Tainter (1978) develops Saxe's quantitative

measure of social complexity and introduces the notion of energy expenditure on deceased individuals for determining rank gradings; in their study of the archaeological correlates of 'chiefdom' societies, Peebles and Kus (1977) integrate the burial evidence with other archaeological forms (settlement hierarchy and placing, craft specialisation and society-wide mobilisation); O'Shea's study of nineteenth-century Plains Indians and Early Bronze Age communities in Hungary (1979) emphasises the importance of the specific cultural context and suggests that mortuary studies are most sensitive in the analysis of ranked societies (between egalitarian and advanced chiefdom/state societies).

The reconstruction of social organisation through the identification of roles (whether in burial, craft specialisation, settlement hierarchies etc.) can be challenged by the theoretical stance that social systems are not constituted *of* roles but *by* recurrent social practices.

The theoretical position adopted here comes from a tradition of social theory which considers power as central to the study of social systems. Social relations between humans take the form of relations of dominance and influence between groups of individuals who share mutual interests. These regularised relations of interdependence between individuals or groups constitute social practices. Practice is made up of individual actions which reflexively affect and are affected by explicit or implicit rules of conduct or structuring principles (which themselves are constantly being modified and changed).

These structuring principles, within which systems of domination are formulated, are legitimated by an ideology which serves the interests of the dominant group. Ideology hides the contradictions between structuring principles by giving the world of appearances an independence and an autonomy which it does not have. Larrain puts this simplistically but clearly when he states that 'In capitalist societies class differences are negated, and a world of freedom and equality re-constructed in consciousness; in pre-capitalist societies, class differences are rather justified in hierarchical conceptions of the world. In both, ideology negates contradictions and legitimates structures of domination' (1979, p. 48).

Ideology is a term which has proved remarkably hard to define. It can be seen as a system of beliefs through which the perceived world of appearances is interpreted as a concrete and objectified reality. It is the way in which humans relate to the conditions of their existence; their 'lived' relation to the world as opposed to their actual relation to the world (Althusser 1977, p. 252). As Hirst has pointed out, ideology is not false consciousness or a representation of reality but people's 'imaginary', lived relation to the conditions of their existence (1976, p. 11). In perceiving and explaining their surroundings, humans develop concepts which articulate with systems of signification (both verbal and non-verbal). Ideology is a form of signification, a 'pure ideographic system' where the signifier becomes the very presence of the signified concept (Barthes 1973, pp. 127–8). That signification is carried out through a signifier (word, object etc.) connotating a signified concept.

The notion that material culture (defined here as man's transformed environment – portable artefacts, food, fields, houses, monuments, quarries etc.) is a part of human communication and signification is by no means new in archaeology – Childe stated that artefacts should be treated 'always and exclusively as concrete expressions and embodiments of human thoughts and ideas' (1956, p. 1). Material culture can thus be seen as a form of non-verbal communication through the representation of ideas (Leach 1977, p. 167). It is externalisation of concepts through material expression, a supposedly autonomous force which acts reflexively on humans as they produce it and is thereby instituted as a form of ideological control. It must be stressed that material culture is not a somehow 'objective' record of what is actually done as opposed to what is thought or believed (as in literary evidence or the testimony of the native subject); it does embody concepts but in a tacit and non-discursive way, unlike writing or speech. Archaeologists can study incomplete systems of material culture communication (which itself is fragmentary since it is all that is left of a fuller system of verbal and non-verbal communication) since the relationships and associations embodied by material culture can be reconstructed into a system of relationships between signifiers (see Sperber 1979, p. 28).

It is generally accepted that the context of death is one of ritual action and communication as opposed to everyday practical communication. Mortuary remains have to be interpreted as ritual communication if we assume the existence of ritual in all societies of Homo Sapiens (and probably even before). The definition and explanation of ritual have long concerned anthropologists; it can be very simply defined as stylised, repetitive patterns of behaviour (Keesing 1976, p. 566) in which a society's fundamental social values are expressed (Huntingdon & Metcalf 1979, p. 5). There is no clear boundary between ritual activity and other types of action, although ritual does have a peculiar fixity since it is clearly and explicitly rule-bound (Lewis 1980, p. 7); it is not necessarily 'irrational' and non-technical behaviour (Lewis 1980, pp. 13–16) and may constitute the communicative aspects of any action. Ritual can be seen thus as a kind of performance in the same way as a play where there is a prescribed routine of expression (Lewis 1980, pp. 10–11 and 33). Recent views have challenged the traditional explanation of ritual as the communication of social values which are expressed as unambiguous and believable statements. Bloch sees the formalisation of ritual action as resulting in a rate of change slower than other social actions with a consequent loss of propositional meaning and an increase in ambiguity (Bloch 1974); for Lewis, what is clear about ritual is how to do it but its meaning may be clear, complicated, ambiguous, or forgotten in different societies – it may mystify or clarify depending on cultural context (Lewis 1980, pp. 8, 10–11,

19 and 31). Whether or not the meaning of the performance is clear to the participants, mortuary ritual is a time when roles are clearly portrayed (Goody 1962, p. 29; Bloch 1977, p. 286): 'rites of passage are the rare occasions when it is possible to hear people giving lists of rights and duties, and even quite literally to see roles being put on individuals as is the case of ceremonial clothing or bodily mutilation' (Bloch 1977, p. 286). In ritual communication time is static and the past is constituted in the present:

> The presence of the past in the present is therefore one of the components of that other system of cognition which is characteristic of ritual communication, another world which unlike that manifested in the cognitive system of everyday communication does not directly link up with empirical experiences. It is therefore a world peopled by invisible entities. On the one hand roles and corporate groups . . . and on the other gods and ancestors, both types of manifestations fusing into each other . . . (Bloch 1977, p. 287)

The roles that are portrayed in death ritual are expressions of status which must be seen as relating to, rather than 'reflecting', social position. Roles and corporate groups are, to Bloch, 'invisible halos' which must be appreciated within their specific context of death ritual rather than the wider framework of social hierarchy.

In any rite of passage the subject passes through a 'liminal' stage (Turner 1969) between two socially ascribed roles; in any analysis of status among the dead, the role of those individuals as members of the dead, as apart from the living, must be considered. Goody found that the Lodagaa dressed the corpse in the apparel of a chief or rich merchant, regardless of the person's social position in life (1962, p. 71). Among the Merina of Malagasy individuals are automatically classed as ancestors once dead. Status is expressed through membership of one of three 'castes' (nobles, commoners and slaves) and is manifested in the size and location of family tombs. However the significance of this form of ranking is severely diminished in social life (slavery was abolished in 1896, while the power of the nobles is not political but exercised through minor ritual privileges; Bloch 1971, pp. 69–70) and it has been replaced by a capitalist-influenced economic and political system. The old traditional roles are maintained in death as part of a reaffirmation of the past although the structure of power has shifted and new roles are economically important. Thus in death ritual it is not necessarily the case that the actual relations of power are displayed. It does not follow that those social identities which embody the greatest degree of authority will always be expressed (*contra* Saxe 1970, p. 6); however it is important to understand why certain roles are expressed in death as well as in other spheres of social life (e.g. house form, dress, display of material possessions etc.), and also to understand the extent to which they are used as social advertisements between competing social groups.

The use of the past to orientate the present has long been recognised in social theory: 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1970, p. 96). The past, especially through ritual communication (including the context of death), is often used to 'naturalise' and legitimate hierarchies of power and inequality which would otherwise be unstable. The dead are often an important part of the past in the present especially in the form of ancestors, deities and other supernatural beings. The construction of visible monuments, commemorating them collectively or individually, is one means of giving them material expression and recognition in the affairs of humans. The dead are consequently susceptible to manipulation by certain groups to maintain or enhance their influence over others. This can be done by idealising certain aspects of the past through the dead. Within this framework mortuary ritual, along with other aspects of tradition, ritual and custom, must be accommodated in theories of social and cultural change. The following case study of contemporary British mortuary practices and their development since the Victorian period attempts to place the treatment of the dead in such a framework.

The case study

This two-part study of British mortuary practices was based on data for Cambridge 1977, and involved 270 deceased individuals out of 3000 in that year in Cambridge and the surrounding area (15 km radius). Temporal variation in patterning could thus be controlled and connections between status among the living and status after death could be investigated. In the second part of the study these results were placed within a framework of social change over the last 150 years. Without the historical perspective the correlation could not be understood as relationships which had developed through time between mortuary practices, material culture and social trends.

A random stratified sampling strategy was used with stratification designated by the undertaker hired. In this way a cross-section of different funeral establishments, different disposal areas and the complete social spectrum in Cambridge could be analysed. The records of four funeral establishments were used to provide information on individuals relating to occupation, religion, rateable value of property, age, sex, notification of the death in the mass media, number of cars hired for the funeral, type of coffin and fittings, style of dress and treatment of the corpse, whether inhumed or cremated, place of inhumation or disposal of the ashes, and finally the construction, if any, of a monument. Unfortunately, the data on wreaths and flowers were incomplete and could not be included in the analysis.

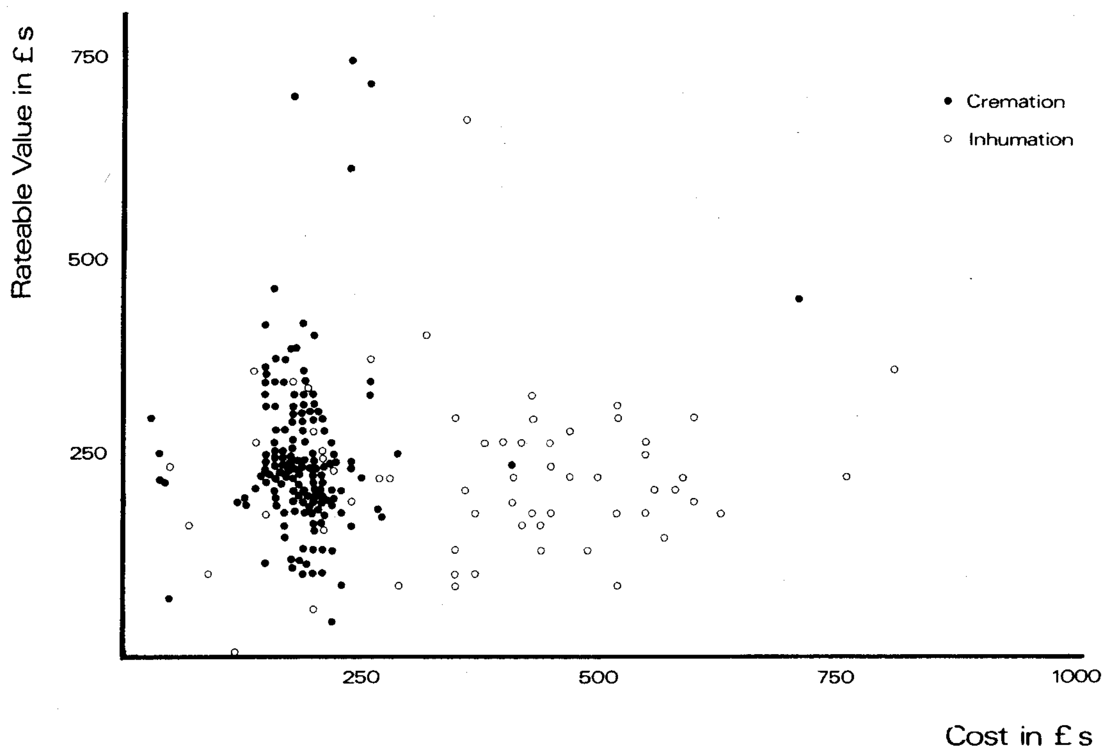
Although a scale of income groupings has been devised for classifying professions within Britain (see Goldthorpe & Hope 1974), this could not be applied since the records of the profession of the deceased only permitted a two-fold

division between males into blue-collar and white-collar workers. The funeral directors' information was given in the strictest confidence and I was expressly asked not to make enquiries with the bereaved families; consequently any more complete information on job and family background was unobtainable. There are a number of ways in which status may be expressed: through ownership of private wealth, type of occupation, family background and accent, and through material expression such as type and number of cars, size and location and internal decoration of houses and style of dress. In other words status should be regarded not as an innate quality inherited or achieved by individuals but as a collection of different forms of social expression and advertisement between groups as well as between individuals. For example, there need not be any correlation between class accent and ownership of private wealth yet both are important expressions of status. The most reliable measure of status which could be used in this study was another form of material expression – rateable value of private residential property. This is a measure of house size, type of neighbourhood and range of internal amenities. There were certain problems in relating this measure to 'status' – influential families might shun the ostentation of living in a large residence, elderly people might move into smaller, more manageable properties than those they had been living in, certain individuals might own several residences, and type of property owned might be different for different age groups.

The information gained from funeral directors, the council rates office and from graveyards and cemeteries was encoded as twenty-one variables which were divided into three groups; social position of the deceased, the form and expense of the funeral and the form and expense of the memorialisation of the deceased. These variables were cross-tabulated using the SPSS statistical package (Nie *et al.* 1975). However, there were very few correlations between the twenty-one variables. In correlating property value with funeral cost, memorial cost and total cost, r^2 equalled 0.002, 0.018 and 0.005 – there was no correlation at all, with rateable value accounting for little or none of the variance (fig. 1). Although the use of only one measure of status cannot be relied upon too heavily, this evidence ties in with statements made by funeral directors and other investigators regarding the simplicity and lack of ostentation involved in the purchasing of a 'funeral package'. Undertakers do not always agree on which classes of clients spend most on a funeral – one Cambridge funeral director denied any class differentiation (supporting the results above) and other undertakers have stated that members of the lower class often spend most on a funeral (Farthing 1977; Toynbee 1980, p. 8). Since it was considered that Cambridge might not be a representative sample, interviews were carried out with members of a London undertaker's firm who also stated that expenditure at funerals and on monuments did not correspond with social position.

There were however certain indications of class differentiation. Different funeral establishments catered for different classes of people even though fees were very similar – this was confirmed by the location of these establishments

Fig. 1. The cost of funerals in Cambridge in 1977 as compared with the rateable value of residential property inhabited by the deceased.



within certain areas of the town. One dealt with clients from the university and also with people from the more select areas of town. Two dealt mainly with middle and middle/upper class housing areas and two with the lower and lower/middle class housing areas on the east side of Cambridge (see fig. 2). Although the same basic materials were used by all funeral services (coffins, coffin furniture, hearses) and monumental masons (gravestones), there were certain differences in their use. One of the establishments in a lower class area apparently maintained the distinction of more 'delicate' O-ring coffin handles for women and bar handles for men. In 70% of the cases handled by establishments associated with the upper classes cremations took place, while these only accounted for 50% of cases handled by one of the firms employed by lower classes (in 1977 the national average of deceased cremated was 62%). This would suggest at least some degree of class distinction in choosing between cremation and inhumation, although that relationship has become more complex and blurred. Financial outlay probably had little influence on this decision since at the time cremation was no cheaper. However, it would be more likely with inhumation to place a monument over the final resting place of the deceased and therefore to incur extra expense.

Religious affiliation did not directly match any class groupings although certain ethnic and religious minorities tended to go to certain undertakers and live in the less affluent areas of town (according to undertaker's remarks). Whereas all Roman Catholics have RIP inscribed in their nameplates and a crucifix attached to the lid, those Catholics that were members of the Polish, Italian and Irish communities in Cambridge displayed certain idiosyncratic characteristics; cremation was rare and burial monuments often

Fig. 2. Class distinctions in the choice of undertaker by households in Cambridge. • Residence using services of middle/upper class undertaker. ✯ Residence using services of middle class undertaker. ☼ Residence using services of lower/middle class undertaker (a). ○ Residence using services of lower/middle class undertaker (b).

ornate and expensive. The stone type selected was mainly polished black or grey granite (two of the most expensive types) and decorative motifs were either religious 'pictures' cut into the stone or small marble angel statuettes (under 60 cm in height). Italians and Poles might also mount a small photograph of the deceased on the stone. Catholics, Jews and Moslems were buried in certain areas of the city cemetery which were separated from the main area (fig. 3). Moslems are also buried on a different orientation (northeast–southwest), diagonal to the closely packed, well-ordered rows of graves. Burials of members of nonconformist churches are not spatially differentiated within the city cemetery although certain graveyards separated from their churches in the rural centres around Cambridge were specifically for nonconformists (e.g. Melbourne URC burial ground, Cottenham Dissenters' burial ground; see fig. 4).

Within the city cemetery there were two groups of monuments which were not physically bounded from the other graves but were easily distinguishable by the style of monument. These were the gypsies and showmen (the latter are fairground owners and workers, often with kinship links to gypsies). They are generally recognised as occupying the lower levels of the British class system despite their often considerable accumulation of money stored as ready cash or converted into moveable valuables such as Rolls Royces, expensive china, large caravans and brasses (see Okely 1979). Both groups use brick-lined graves and vaults for interment (only very rarely are they cremated although this will increase now that vaults may no longer be built). One showman's vault was decorated with bath tiles. Showmen and their families favoured the distinctive and expensive polished red granite monuments standing up to two metres high in cross or block form (fig. 5). The gypsies commemorate their dead with large white marble angels which also stand to two metres or more (fig. 6). These groups hold the most expensive funerals in Cambridge with funeral director's fees and monument costs sometimes amounting to over £3000 (expenditure above £500 by anyone in Cambridge is rare). Costs of flowers, food and drink may also be more substantial than other Cambridge funerals. They are some of the few groups in our society where death is regarded as an acceptable area for overt, competitive display between families.

Class differences are also reflected to a certain extent in variation between burial areas. St Giles' cemetery is strongly connected with members of the university while the city cemetery holds the majority of the deceased town dwellers. The surrounding village churchyards and their extensions now contain the remains of many commuters and retired people who have moved into the countryside. This movement by wealthier elements of the urban population has resulted in major changes in the structure of village communities; in the nearby village of Foxton only 25% of the

Fig. 3. The Roman Catholic part of the Cambridge City Cemetery.

community are still residents from birth (Parker 1975, p. 234). The class differences are also apparent in the undertakers' use of different churchyards and cemeteries. The two firms associated with the lower classes carried out thirty-four of the fifty-eight inhumations in the city cemetery as opposed to nine out of thirty-eight inhumations by the upper class establishment.

The majority of the Cambridge population are cremated (64% in the 1977 sample, just higher than the national average of 62% for that year). In 1979 at the Cambridge Crematorium, out of 2943 cremations, 2255 were scattered in the grounds, thirty were interred at the crematorium, four were placed on shelves in the Columbarium, one was placed in a temporary deposit and 655 were taken away for burial or scattering elsewhere. By 1969 one tenth of Catholics in Britain were receiving cremation rites (Ucko 1969, p. 274), six years after the ban was lifted by the Pope in July 1963. The decision to cremate or inhume the deceased is not as arbitrary as has been suggested elsewhere (Clarke 1975, pp. 51–2). The trend in cremation since the Second World War has been one of extremely even growth (see fig. 7) with a rate of increase of 1–2% p.a. Furthermore the cremation movement has spread to a large extent as a class-associated phenomenon through the emulation of upper class preferences in the twentieth century.

There are very few studies of modern western death rituals. Gorer's study of death, grief and mourning (1965) is useful for his attention to religious observance as well as to the treatment of the dead. His questionnaire survey covered the whole of Britain with a sample of 359 cases and was aimed at understanding how people coped in mourning their dead rather than how status and other factors might account for variability in funeral ritual. One study was carried out thirty years ago in America and was specifically concerned with the manifestation of status in funerals (Kephart 1950). Although he had little quantitative data relating to status during life, Kephart noted that in Philadelphia there were class differentials in the relative cost of funerals, frequency of cremation, elapsed time between death and burial, viewing the body, flower arrangements, public expression of grief, mourning customs and placing within the cemeteries (Kephart 1950, pp. 639–43). Despite funeral cost being status-related, he suggested that a reversal was taking place, with display in death becoming more and more a dwindling upper class phenomenon (1950, p. 636). This, and the frequency of cremation and placing within cemeteries, seems to match the Cambridge data for 1977, but cost of funerals in Britain is no longer a clear indication of social position.

Trends in mortuary ritual in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Changing material culture forms, and relationships

Fig. 4. The Nonconformist cemetery at Cottenham near Cambridge.

between these forms, are here divided into four categories; the siting of burial areas, the placing and marking of burials within these areas, cremation and subsequent treatment of the ashes, and the material culture associated with the funeral and treatment of the corpse. This is an essentially 'archaeological' description which will be followed by a 'social' explanation of these patterns as relations between living and dead and social relations between the living.

The growing industrial and urban centres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used churchyards of parishes subsumed under urban growth for the burial of the majority of the population. These churchyards had been grossly over-crowded since the seventeenth century (Curl 1972, p. 33). By the nineteenth century, the crowding and filth of living conditions in industrial towns and cities resulted in cholera outbreaks and a high mortality rate (Morley 1971, pp. 7–10 and 34–40). The construction of larger burial grounds in areas of open ground on the outskirts of cities from the 1820s until the early twentieth century was part of a massive onslaught against the insanitary conditions which existed (Curl 1972, pp. 22, 131 and 139–40; Morley 1971, p. 48; see Chadwick 1843; General Board of Health, 1850). These cemeteries were planned as large parks for the public to use as leisure areas in which the achievements of the dead were glorified and consequently where the moral education of all classes could be improved (Morley 1971, p. 48; Rawnsley & Reynolds 1977, p. 217). Whereas members of the upper classes had been buried on their estates (Curl 1972, p. 359) or within churches, the Public Health Act of 1848 disallowed intra-mural interment and consequently traditional members of the gentry and aristocracy, as well as new members of the upper classes, shared the new burial areas with the rest of the population. The dead were no longer buried at the centre of society but removed from their immediate association with the church to a location separate from the focus of the community. In the new burial grounds space was allocated according to accessibility and view (Rawnsley & Reynolds 1977, p. 220). Consequently spatial patterning within the cemetery was a visual representation of the emerging hierarchy. This was further enhanced by the types of memorials constructed over the graves.

The most magnificent monuments were mausolea – actual houses of the dead. There was a myriad of changing fashions in smaller monumental forms: urns on pedestals, broken columns, obelisks, crosses, sarcophagi and caskets, and the more common and more traditionally English horizontal or vertical slabs. Interestingly, archaeology was a major factor in the design of funerary architecture (Curl 1972, p. 23) with Classical, Ancient Egyptian and Gothic styles copied for all sizes of monument. This re-interpretation in miniature of the huge monuments of man's past can be

Fig. 5. The Showmen's monuments in the Cambridge City Cemetery.

seen as an association with the dignity and splendour of past civilisations and an implicit legitimation of the current social order in terms of those values.

There appear to be few regional variations in funerary monuments today although styles have changed in several major ways. The amount of individual variation has always been large but reducible to several common themes. The major trend has been one of the simplification and reduction in size – monuments were replaced by headstones with stone kerbs delineating the grave plot (mainly between the 1910s and 1960s) and recently monumentalisation has become restricted (in both cemeteries and churchyards) to small headstones without kerbs. This latest phenomenon, the lawn cemetery, was introduced in Cambridge in 1957 and allows easier maintenance of the cemeteries since bereaved families can no longer be relied upon to maintain their individual plots. Since the First World War styles have been simple, plain and 'modern', without any of the fancifulness of Victorian monuments. There have been a number of associated changes in gravestone fashions. Traditional English building stone has been replaced by foreign white marble and red, black and grey granites. In the last twenty years the cheaper Portland Stone and white marble have become less popular than the more expensive granites, although the association of taste with simplicity helps to explain the new trend in plain slate or sandstone headstones. It is extremely rare to find the profession of the deceased mentioned on gravestones in the last fifty years but this was quite a common occurrence among the upper and middle classes of Victorian society. Today the epitaph symbolises the role of the nuclear family member although designs on the stone can represent profession, hobby, manner of death or religious affiliation. In the 1977 study there were six religious scenes and eighteen flower designs out of seventy-nine headstones – the former were generally associated with Catholics and the latter with Anglicans. No other design symbolism was apparent on any of the other stones.

Fig. 6. A Gypsy monument in the Cambridge City Cemetery.

The construction of bricked graves and vaults was banned by the Cambridge City Council in 1978. The wealthier company owners abandoned their family vaults after the Second World War and have since opted for cremation (Wilson, pers. comm.). The showmen and gypsies were among the last to keep up the use of vaults or bricked graves. Before 1974 the burial plots in Cambridge could be sold in perpetuity but now the Council plans the recycling of cemetery land within the next hundred years with 99% of the population being cremated by the year 2000, thus making cemeteries redundant. Apart from the religious and ethnic divisions apparent in the cemetery, there is a distinction between privately owned and Council owned grave plots. The latter may not have any markers on the grave and are reused every fifteen years. They were traditionally for the poorest section of the community after the cemetery was opened in 1902 but that distinction has since become blurred. The stigma of a pauper's grave has largely vanished and been replaced by the desire for simplicity and lack of ostentation in death among all classes, although welfare burials are still arranged and financed by the Council for those too poor to pay. The giving of bodies to anatomy schools was legalised in 1832 (Polson & Marshall 1972, p. 61) and has become a growing trend in the last 30 to 40 years. In the 1950s and 1960s this was connected with members of the upper and middle/upper classes but has since spread to all classes (Hindley, pers. comm.). Until the 1970s most anatomy donations, after use, were buried in the 'poorer' area of the cemetery but now most are cremated at no expense to the bereaved. The marking-off of the 'paupers' area' is similar to a tradition found in churchyards of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where the south side was generally preferred for burial and the north side reserved for the bodies of murderers, suicides and unbaptised children (Johnson 1912, pp. 335 and 350–1). Today there are no distinctions in death for the mentally ill, criminals, suicides or still-borns, despite the Victorian tradition of

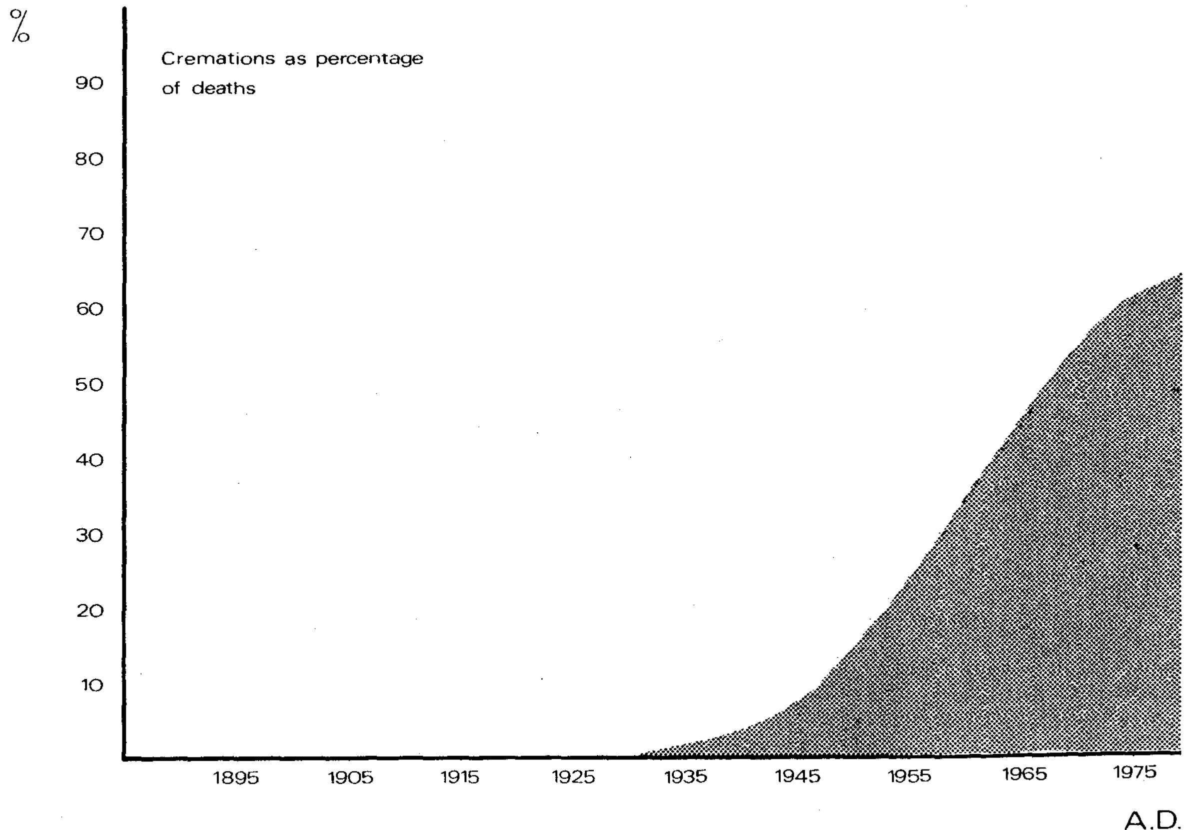
burial in the prison or asylum, or outside the burial ground or even in certain parts of the churchyard (where they still remained 'out of sanctuary'; Johnson 1912, p. 359).

Cemeteries have outlived their Victorian function as leisure amenities for the display of the achievements of the dead and have become storage areas for the disposal of dead bodies; graves are tightly packed in well regimented ranks and oriented east–west or north–south to make maximum use of space. This is summed up by Polson and Marshall writing on laws relating to the disposal of the dead in Britain:

> In principle, ground consecrated for burial or unconsecrated ground, set apart for burial, may not be used for any other purpose. Considerable modification of this principle has become inevitable during the present century, owing to the growing demands of an increasing population for living space. Land in cities and large towns is at a high premium. The community cannot afford to ignore the potential uses to which disused burial grounds can be applied and the needs of the living have priority over consideration for the dead.
> (1972, p. 247)

The development of cremation was in direct opposition to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The campaign for cremation was started in Britain in the early 1870s primarily to introduce a more sanitary precaution against disease and also to make funerals cheaper, keep the ashes safe from vandalism, have the ceremony completely inside and to prevent premature burial (Cremation Society Pamphlet 1975, p. 1). Early cremations were placed in caskets and buried under small memorial tablets within the crematorium grounds. In the 1920s and 1930s ashes were stored in the Columbrarium and marked by small plaques. After the Second World War the numbers of cremations greatly increased and ashes were strewn in the crematorium's Garden of Remembrance to save space. At first, trees, shrubs, birdbaths and sundials were set up as memorials to the deceased individual. These were followed by small bronze plates but now the only feasible means of memorialisation is considered to be commemoration of the name in the Book of Remembrance kept in each crematorium (Polson & Marshall 1972, pp. 192–4). In 1972 65% of cremations were strewn in the Gardens of Remembrance and 12% were taken away for burial or strewing in a churchyard or cemetery, scattering at sea or in the country. Interestingly, in Cambridge in 1977 many more ashes were scattered or interred in local churchyards rather than in the city cemetery. There are over 200 crematoria in Britain, centralised disposal areas burning over 400,000 corpses each year, pulverising and then scattering the ashes or collecting them in plastic containers. Crematoria have been criticised for their poor design (Curl 1972, p. 186); many look more like suburban houses with outsize chimneys rather than places of religious ritual (fig. 8). The emphasis is

Fig. 7. The gradual increase in cremations in the twentieth century.



very much on disposal rather than on ceremonies of remembrance and respect to the dead. The whole disposal sequence associated with modern crematoria allows for the saving of space for the living, with the remains of the dead closely concentrated in an area of 1–8 hectares well away from residential areas and with a minimum of memorialisation for the individual or even collective dead.

The pomp and ceremony of the Victorian funeral has recently attracted great interest from historians (e.g. Curl 1972; Morley 1971). Much greater a percentage of personal income was spent on funerals then than today. In 1843 the average cost of a funeral was £15, a considerable sum for many people, with the most lavish costing £1500 and the cheapest £5 (Morley 1971, p. 22). The funeral was a conspicuous display of wealth consumption, and expenditure was closely graded according to one's social position (Morley 1971, pp. 22 and 112–13). Families competed with each other so as not to be outdone in respectability (directly equated with wealth and with salvation; Morley 1971, p. 11). This social competition was manifested by all classes and even the poor would spend comparatively large sums of money on a funeral rather than suffer the shame and loss of dignity connoted by a pauper's burial (Lerner 1975, pp. 99–100; see Bosanquet 1898). The specialist profession of undertaker (along with associated trades of monumental masons, cabinet maker and draper) developed in the early nineteenth century both making possible and encouraging such lavish expense. Formal mourning costume (crepe and black jewellery) and all the paraphernalia of death (black ostrich feathers, large ornate horse-driven hearses, 'mutes' or attendants accompanying the procession, a solid wood coffin, expensive handles and plates, mourning cards) were part of the huge quantity of material culture produced specifically to honour and remember the dead. In the twentieth century, despite the undertakers and stonemasons having a strong economic interest in maintaining the role of the funeral, there has been a gradual but marked decline in the ceremony of death ritual. Even as early as the 1840s and 1850s funerals were made more simple (Morley 1971, pp. 27–31) and today only royalty and major national heroes and some ethnic minorities receive expensive ceremonies in death. The minorities are the only groups that can still be said to actively compete between themselves in death ritual. Although undertakers have received some criticism for their commercial and exploitative attitude (Mitford 1963, pp. 186–7), it must be remembered that the change in public attitudes towards the celebration of death has made funerals appear as unnecessary expense when previously much more was expected to be spent on them. No longer is the context of death a platform for overt self-advertisement between family groups.

The First World War was a watershed between Victorian and 'modern' funerals (Lerner 1975, p. 91). The massive scale of death, the government decision not to bring bodies home and the large number of unidentified corpses were major factors in bringing this about. Mourning clothes and elaborate processions became more and more unfashionable. Monuments became smaller and more regimented and more simple in decoration, and the coffin and coffin fittings were increasingly of much poorer quality. Although coffins are a major part of the undertaker's bill (on average £100

Fig. 8. A crematorium in Yorkshire. Note the plain and 'functional' style of the architecture.

out of £200) they are mostly chipboard with oak or elm veneer. Traditional styles of handles and plates are retained but these are of thin brass, chrome plastic or plastic, a far cry from the ornate gold, silver and brass decoration of Victorian coffins (Curl 1972, p. 2). Coffins were considered luxury items not available to the poorer classes until the seventeenth century (Cunnington & Lucas 1972, pp. 156–7). By the Victorian period they were universal objects for display as well as containers for preserving their contents as long as possible (Curl 1972, p. 29). Since then they have become temporary receptacles for corpses before final removal from society. One funeral director commented on this change:

> Strangely the public accept the veneered coffins quite happily, the desire for a simple and inexpensive funeral overcoming any traditional thought of a solid oak or elm coffin. It is a personal observation that where traditional thoughts as to the coffin occur, these are frequently found in the less well-off section of the community who will spend more on a funeral than the affluent.

There have been a number of changes in the treatment of the body. Embalming has become more and more common as a temporary means of arresting decay – about 75% of corpses are embalmed in London (W.G. Garstin & Sons, pers. comm.) although under 30% in Cambridge receive this treatment (embalming is a process where a formalin-based red liquid is substituted for the blood and a green solution is pumped into the stomach). The corpse's shroud is very similar to a nightdress – the same basic form since the nineteenth century. Among European immigrants (Poles, Greeks, Ukrainians, Italians), gypsies and showmen there is a tradition for burial in best clothes although this is less strong than it used to be. Until just after the Second World War, toys were sometimes placed in children's coffins and females were dressed in their best clothes with jewellery in northern England (Hindley, pers. comm.). In the rural parts of the British Isles in the nineteenth century, beer mugs, jugs, bottles, candles and coins might be placed in the grave (Johnson 1912, pp. 294–5) but this tradition seems to have long died out.

In conclusion, the funeral can be seen as changing from its role as a celebratory rite of passage into more of a consumer package deal where low expense is a major factor in deciding the nature of the funeral. This is clearly highlighted in the magazine *Which?* for February 1961, pp. 43–5, which gives advice on funerals purely as commercial products where cheapness is a major concern.

Towards an explanation of British mortuary practices

It has been proposed that two interconnected relationships have to be investigated in order to explain the symbolism of mortuary ritual. The first is the categorisation or 'placing' of the dead by the living. The second is the way in which the dead may be used as one of many modes of social advertisement between competing groups. Mortuary practices should be regarded not as a microcosm of social organisation but as the material expression and objectivation of idealised relationships formulated about the dead by different individuals or groups within society.

All archaeological evidence is made up of relationships or associations within different symbolic systems. These associations, expressed in material form, are social constructions of category classification. In any society symbolic links are expressed as specific associations between material forms. The treatment of the dead can be studied in terms of these relationships. Some of these can be outlined as follows: the spatial and topographical positioning of the dead in relation to the living (what kinds of boundaries exist to separate the places of the living and the dead – not just rivers, fences etc. but also spatial distancing, e.g. burial under the settlement, burial on a hill overlooking the settlement), the relation between the physical abodes of the living and the dead (the place of the dead in the form of a bed, a house, a settlement, a rubbish pit; how much energy is invested in the places of the dead as opposed to those of the living), differentiation among the dead (what groups and roles are expressed and idealised in death ritual and why (e.g. why might all dead have the status of chiefs?)), what artefacts are expressly associated only with the dead, what artefacts from the living are 'hidden' with the dead (e.g. why might weapons be buried but tools inherited?), the relation of disposal contexts to other forms of death-related expression (e.g. ancestor shrines, cenotaphs). All of these factors will affect the way in which death is seen as the context for social advertisement; which social groups compete against each other (families, sodalities, neighbourhoods etc.) and in what ways is that competition acceptable (how does it compare with other expressions of personal wealth or power such as house design, clothing and jewellery, ownership of possessions etc.).

Some of these issues have been explored in the previous section but an explanatory framework is still needed to interpret the changes in the symbolism of mortuary ritual. Our changing relation to the dead can be explained in terms of the replacing of traditional agencies of social control, notably religion, by the new agencies of rationalism, science and medicine within the framework of modern capitalism. The reduction of ceremony and monumentalisation as well as the increase in cremation may be partly explained within this framework. Available studies of patterns of religious belief indicate an increase in secular ideologies of death; no assumptions need to be made about life after death (in 1965 50% of Britons were likely not to believe in or to be uncertain about an afterlife; Gorer 1965, p. 33) and the corpse is seen more and more as a piece of unwanted matter which should be disposed of in as hygienic and efficient a way as possible. Many writers have commented on the effect of this attitude in causing psychological problems among the bereaved who are unable to cope effectively with the death of their loved ones without the aid of imposed ritual sanc-

tions (Curl 1972; Hinton 1972; Kastenbaum & Aisenberg 1972; Parkes 1975; Gorer 1965; Schoenberg *et al.* 1975). The dead are no longer seen to exist in the material world of the living. Cremation in our society solves two supposedly uncontentious problems; the efficient and hygienic disposal of the dead and prevention of any wasting of space in the storage of those disposed remains. However it is just as hygienic to inter a corpse in a cemetery as it is to burn it (see Curl 1972, p. 167). Also the notion of saving the land for the living presupposes a shortage of land yet there is plenty available for leisure activities. In 1951 a mere 0.13% of the land surface was used for burial – hardly a massive use of space (Curl 1972, p. 162).

In the Victorian period public health and hygiene, sanitation and medical services became integral features of everyday life and became incorporated with religion and scientific and technological progress as a means of power legitimation. There was a direct equation of class with hygiene, health, cleanness and neatness of residence (Morley 1971, pp. 7–10); the dirtiest members of society were naturally the lowest. Victorian attitudes to hygiene and health have been well documented elsewhere (see Dubos 1965; Salt & Elliott 1975; Sigerist 1944, 1956). Interestingly, the approval of cremation came at a time when major advances were being made in drainage and water supply, refuse and sewage disposal and production of frozen and tinned foods (see Salt & Elliott 1975, pp. 37–8, 42, 56–7 and 60). There have been numerous studies of the role of medicine as a form of social control (see Ehrenreich 1978; Illich 1975; Navarro 1976, 1978; Zola 1975). Death can be said to have been appropriated by the medical profession since hospitals and nursing homes are the main places of death, with doctors as important as undertakers and clergy. In their attempts to prolong life as long as possible, doctors are involved in a self-frustrating war against death. It has become a medical failure rather than a natural process. Death is invariably associated with old people who are increasingly removed from their family environments. Most deaths occur in hospitals or nursing homes (*c.* 60%) and the likelihood of deaths of children or young people has become far more remote. What was in the Victorian period a natural process of transition is now the end of a living person whose recognition after death is more and more slight.

These changes have reduced the power of the dead as symbols manipulated by the living, and we are losing a language of death celebration (Curl 1972, p. 337). A further factor in this change is the general context of social advertisement in twentieth-century Britain. The Victorian conspicuous consumption and display of wealth was not limited to burial ritual but occurred in other rites of passage, dress, housing, diet and all forms of social interaction. The reason for such ostentation in death has been interpreted as the result of mass urban migrations and the development of a new mode of production with its re-ordered social structure. In this 'world of strangers' the demonstration of financial power was achieved through conspicuous consumption both at the funeral and in the monument construction (Rawnsley & Reynolds 1977, p. 220). During the twentieth century the expression of social position seems to have become less overt in all spheres. In our post-industrial technocratic society the upper classes define themselves less by property and money ownership and more by education and managerial control (Giddens 1972, p. 346; Tourraine 1974, pp. 41 and 206). The symbols of class allegiance are progressively less clear and less numerous (Tourraine 1974, p. 37) while the managerial classes shy away from conspicuous consumption, controlling by manipulation rather than imperiousness (Tourraine 1974, p. 49). In a society of supposed equality of opportunity there are large differences in inherited and earned personal wealth ownership. In 1960 12% of British adults owned 96% of the personal wealth of Britain (Revell 1966); the identification of the members of this elite is not an easy task, with symbols of class often being ambiguous and confusing. Various attempts have been made to recognise this elite; the monarchy, members of Parliament, directors of large firms, top civil service officials, the heads of the military, TUC council members, bishops and archbishops, directors and large shareholders in mass media, vice-chancellors of universities and judges have all been listed as belonging to this group (Giddens 1972, p. 361). With the exception of the monarchy and some MPs, these individuals do not make themselves socially conspicuous as public figures to the mass of society. Indeed it is only the monarchy and certain individuals of national acclaim who still receive a ceremonial funeral of major proportions. Instead of symbolising the hierarchical differentiation of British society, these state funerals are symbols of national identity to the people of Britain and to the rest of the world. The fact that state funerals are lavish and well-attended does suggest that the relationship between living and dead does not completely account for the decline in death ceremonialism but that changing attitudes of social display are also important.

A major class of memorials commemorating the dead are the war memorials – the Cenotaph in London and cenotaphs scattered all over Britain. They are similar in style and design to other kinds of twentieth-century funerary architecture and yet are not disposal contexts for corpses. They are foci of ceremonies held annually to commemorate the British dead of two world wars. The war dead are commemorated as 'warriors' who died fighting for their country and the ideals of freedom and equality which it enshrines. Nationalism as an ideological means of control is thus legitimated through remembrance of the war dead of Britain (as opposed to the dead of all countries involved in the World Wars). The fact that the soldier buried in Westminster Abbey is named the 'Unknown Warrior' further advances the cause of nationalism since he is related solely to his country, transcending all kinship, regional and class connections.

In summary two main processes can be held to account for the major changes in mortuary practices in nineteenth-

and twentieth-century Britain. The social context of death affects the way in which it is used as a platform for social advertisement – what is considered 'tasteful' is no longer directly related to expenditure of monument size since religious beliefs and medical and hygienic attitudes have changed the status of the dead as a part of our society. Also there is some evidence that social advertisement is no longer accomplished through such conspicuous wealth consumption as was the case in Victorian Britain. In this way class categories as represented and objectified through all forms of material culture may be less pronounced.

Conclusion

This study has been concerned with deriving theories of material culture associated with death ritual from a wider perspective of social theory and an ethnoarchaeological investigation of changing practices and their social correlates. It is hoped that the results can be used in studying societies where only the material culture exists or be re-examined in further ethnoarchaeological analysis.

A number of propositions can be advanced:

(1) The symbolism of ritual communication does not necessarily refer to the actual relations of power but to an idealised expression of those relations.

(2) Relations between living groups must be seen as relations of influence and inequality where deceased individuals may be manipulated for purposes of status aggrandisement between those groups. Ideology as manifested in mortuary practices may mystify or naturalise those relations of inequality between groups or classes through the use of the past to legitimise the present.

(3) The relationship between living and dead should be integrated in studies of mortuary practices; in particular the new role of the deceased individual and the context of death as a platform for social advertisement must be accounted for.

(4) Social advertisement in death ritual may be expressly overt where changing relations of domination result in status re-ordering and consolidation of new social positions.

Proposition (4) is similar to a rule developed by Childe which is worth quoting in full here:

> in a stable society the gravegoods tend to grow relatively and even absolutely fewer and poorer as time goes on. In other words, less and less of the deceased's real wealth, fewer and fewer of the goods that he or she had used, worn, or habitually consumed in life were deposited in the tomb or consumed on the pyre. The stability of a society may be upset by invasion or immigration on a scale that requires a radical reorganization or by contact between barbarian and civilized societies so that, for instance, trade introduces new sorts of wealth, new opportunities for acquiring wealth and new classes (traders) who do not fit in at once into the kinship organization of a tribe.
>
> (Childe 1945, p. 17)

Exceptionally wealthy tombs are cited as support for this argument since Childe notes that they occur at the transitional stage of early state formation in Early Dynastic Egypt, Shang China, Mycenaean Greece, Late Hallstatt Europe and Saxon England.

In conclusion, the ideological dimension of mortuary practices must be considered as a major line of enquiry in studies of all human societies. For the contemporary British material more needs to be done on the relationships between capitalism, nationalism, secular beliefs and attitudes to medicine and hygiene as ideological principles manifested in the material culture associated with death. Secondly, material culture from other contexts (transport, residences, personal possessions, dress, food etc.) should be integrated in a broader study of the degree and direction of social advertisement. Mortuary ritual can no longer be treated as a field of archaeological enquiry which is based on intracemetery variability since the treatment of the dead must be evaluated within the wider social context as represented by all forms of material remains. In this way the archaeologist can investigate the social placing (or categorisation) of the dead as constituted through the material evidence of the archaeological record by developing general principles which relate material culture and human society.

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